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EU Danube Macro-Regional Strategy and 16+1 Initiatives: Serbia Case Study

Abstract

Despite the EU's and Germany's growing suspicion that China's influence in Europe is competitive and, therefore, harmful, it is necessary to stay optimistic and find mutual interest. In many ways, the initiatives adopted by the 16 + 1 format are in line with the EU's strategic priorities. The implantation of the EU Danube Macro-regional Strategy is one of the points of mutual interest. The Danube strategy is more important in every aspect and it is based on three pillars: (a) establishing a system of safe navigation, development of transport and supporting infrastructure (river ports, canals); (b) protection of environment and sustainable use of natural recourses; (c) economic development and further strengthening of cooperation and partnership in the macro-region. Danube was declared continental Corridor 7 by the EU. This corridor should connect the Black Sea in the east with Atlantic shores in the west with the transversal Constanta-Rotterdam. Ten EU members take part in the Danube strategy – Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, and four countries that are not EU members - Serbia, Montenegro, Ukraine and Moldova. At the moment, 95% of the Danube river transport goes on between the German port Passau and Budapest and only 5% in the lower reaches of Danube, from Budapest to the Black Sea. Undoubtedly Corridor 7 has a huge development potential and its mechanisms can be used for achieving some of the goals laid out by OBOR. In this paper, using the synthetic-analytical method, the possibility of implementing the EU Danube Macro-regional Strategy through the format 16 + 1 on the Serbia case study will be considered. The paper consists of four parts. The first part is devoted to the analysis of the current positioning of the EU and Germany according to Chinese initiatives in the CEE. The second chapter describes the Danube Strategy and its main objectives. The third part is reserved for the case study of Serbia or

the question of how and in what way the EU and China objectives overlap in this case. The fourth part includes final considerations.

Keywords:

16+1, OBOR, EU Danube Macro-regional Strategy, Serbia

1. EU AND CHINA: COOPERATION OR COMPETITION

“The German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel appealed to the EU members to pursue a common foreign policy vis-à-vis China to counter Beijing’s tactics: *If we do not succeed, for example, in developing a single strategy towards China, then China will succeed in dividing Europe*, he said. China is perceived by the EU as an increasing threat. There are two reasons for that. First being that the economies of Western Europe are afraid of Chinese competitors in the CEEC. While the Chinese people in CEEC sold textile products and opened restaurants, there were no problems. Today, when China exports sophisticated products to CEEC, usually cheaper than their West European counterparts, China has become a threat. Furthermore, joint ventures by Chinese investors and CEEC governments are creating companies ready for competition in Western European markets. Secondly, better political relations between China and the CEEC are affecting these European countries, changing their views on China. When defining a relationship with China, the EU insists on issues such as human rights, media freedom and democratic elections, which often leads to disagreement between Brussels and Beijing. The CEEC countries do not have political disagreements with Beijing, or have minimized them. This endangers the implementation of a Common EU Foreign and Security Policy. Germany and France are the ones most affected because those two countries invested a lot in the making of a common EU policy. That’s why Sigmar Gabriel’s statement should not come as surprising. Such actions of senior EU officials, and the leading EU countries officials will become more frequent. From the Brussels’ point of view, China-CEEC cooperation will be acceptable only with EU supervision. And that will open up a number of different issues and bring us new problems“¹.

In the eyes of key West European countries, Germany and France above all, China is a competitor, rather than a party with which it is possible to

¹ Dusan Prorokovic, “China – CEE relations need new strategies“, *China Daily*, November 27 2017, p. 9.

define a framework for future cooperation. Thus, amongst other things, in the analysis of Chinese growth, four groups of arguments are most often brought up to explain the “fear of the rise of China”: “1) China’s military budget has grown even faster than its GDP, averaging over 12 percent for over a decade. The 2.3-million-strong People’s Liberation Army is developing high-tech weaponry, from stealth fighters to precision missiles and nuclear submarines. Its first aircraft carrier is due to enter service in August. Clearly, the goal is a show of power at a time when Beijing continues to cast a covetous eye over Taiwan and is locked in territorial disputes with neighbors in the South China Sea and beyond; 2) China’s vast pool of cheap labor, its absence of social or environmental restraints means it can undercut the rest of the world. Its unfair practices are killing jobs around the globe. Failure to protect intellectual property rights means competitors are cut out of the profits and consumers swamped with substandard counterfeits. China’s insatiable demand is raising oil and mineral prices in the world. The world’s biggest polluter is also destroying the planet, its carbon emissions have gone up 171 percent since 2000; 3) China uses its immense economic power to get other countries dependent on handouts. Chinese aid and investment have secured an unhealthy hold over nations across Africa, enabling it to harvest their mineral resources and exploit their workforces. Its grip on \$1.261 trillion of American debt looms over the US economy. Now, this cloaked colonization has reached Europe, as China grabs Portuguese power companies, Greek ports and whatever other bargains appear in the euro-crisis fire sale; 4) China is a direct threat to European and US hopes of spreading democratic values. Beyond its repression of domestic dissidence, China has been a consistent barrier to UN efforts to curtail despotism from Burma to Sudan and Syria. Beijing’s Africa policy runs counter to EU attempts to link development to human rights and China’s very economic success undermines the West’s aspirations to be a model for others to follow.”²

However, despite these attitudes, it is important to underline that European countries (both Western and Eastern) have two important reasons for deepening and expanding cooperation with China.

The first reason is that “The 16 + 1 mechanism, established in 2012, has produced spectacular results. Today, China is more present in CEEC in every respect. Furthermore, businessmen, scientists and artists from the CEE countries are discovering China at high speed. For them, this is a

² „Arguments for and against fearing the rise of China”, *Debating Europe*, June 2018, <https://www.debatingeurope.eu/focus/infobox-arguments-for-and-against-fearing-the-rise-of-china/#.W19QcFhR-Ul>

huge market, a source of ideas and a generator of cultural impulses. Logic tells us that dynamic co-operation should continue. It is of mutual benefit. It would also be a contribution to reaching the goals set out in the idea of *Building a Community with a shared future for Mankind* proposed in the 19th Party Congress of the CPC.”³ The second reason is that relationship between Western Europe and the USA is at its worst it has been since 1945. Europe sees the protectionist measures of the US President Donald Trump’s Administration as the beginning of a trade war. The counter measures will follow as the EU is angry with President Trump. Undoubtedly, there will be even more tension between Washington and Brussels. This can no longer be prevented. The problem for the EU is not that relations with the USA are worsening; this had to happen sooner or later. Hence the USA is creating numerous divides in Europe. The latest in the series is an American geopolitical initiative - *Intermarium*. The USA would like to connect CEE countries into one functional block, emphasizing the issue of energy security and thus breaking the EU’s strategic plans. The two summits have already been organized. Third one is planned for this year. How can the EU shape its own foreign and security policy if the USA is initiating the creation of new sub-continental and regional blocs within the EU? The answer is simple: France and Germany cannot do this on their own. “If the EU wants to be independent in the contemporary world politics, then it has to completely redefine its current position. The precondition for the EU to get out of the very unfavorable framework of cooperation with USA, where it is always seen as a younger partner or minority shareholder, is to improve relations with Russia and China.”⁴ The EU must stop looking at China as an aggressive competitor that disturbs its economic interests in CEE. Instead of loudly expressing their dissatisfaction with ambitious plans that are being discussed in the “16 + 1” format, the EU leaders should join them. A strong and fruitful relationship between Brussels and Beijing can be created by harmonizing EU macro-regional strategies and their strategic goals with plans that China and CEE countries have set in the „16+1” formate. Cooperation and no confrontation with China is the way for the EU to strengthen its influence in the world. China has its own economic interests in Europe but this does not undermine regional security nor will it in any way destabilize the EU⁵.

³ Dusan Prorokovic, “China – CEE relations need new strategies“, *China Daily*, November 27 2017, p. 9.

⁴ Dusan Prorokovic, “EU must adopt new approach toward US“, *China Daily*, July 5 2018, p. 9.

⁵ More about this in: Liu Zuoki, “16+1 cooperation in the context of The One Belt One Road Initiative“, In: Vladimir Cvetković (Ed.), *The One Belt, One Road: The Balkan*

2. THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION (EUSDR)

“The Danube Basin extends over an area larger than the territory of France, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg together. Together with the Rhine, Elbe, Oder and Wisla basins, the Danube Basin enriches the Central European geopolitical space, a continental space that lies between the Black Sea in the east, the North Sea to the west, the Baltic Sea in the north, and the Adriatic and Aegean seas in the south. After the completion of the Rhine-Main-Danube Channel in 1992, the Danube became *a spine* of European geopolitical horizontal, and the Rhine and Danube basins form the most important geostrategic space on the Continent, with enormous geo-economic potential.”⁶

This is one of the reasons why the European Commission adopted the Macro-regional strategy for the Danube region in 2011. “The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) was created as the second EU macro-regional strategy after the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The Aim of the Strategy is to set a framework for cooperation in order to address common challenges in region through projects and closer cooperation.”⁷ In the EU documents macro-regional strategies are presented as projects with synergetic potential that should bring added value and impact on the development of the countries that participate in them. Using the experience gained thus far, the EU used several things in order to define macro-regional strategies: 1) promotion of transnational projects; 2) including non-member countries of the EU in the projects; 3) encompassing large territorial units in one strategy.⁸ These are the unique documents that show the EU’s desire to form macro regions at the continent that will also encompass countries that are not members of the EU⁹.

Perspective. Political and Security Aspects, Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, 2016, pp. 45–70.

⁶ Dušan Proroković, „Bitka za kontrolu Dunava i uticaj na geopolitički položaj Srbije“, *Međunarodna politika*, LXV, 1153–1154, 2014, pp. 114–115.

⁷ “The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)”, Government of the Czech Republic, 2.12.2016, <https://www.vlada.cz/en/evropske-zalezitosti/evropske-politiky/podunajska-strategie/the-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-eusdr-151489/>

⁸ More about this in: Dühr, Stefanie “Baltic Sea, Danube and Macro-regional strategies: a model for transnational cooperation in the EU”, *Notre Europe*, 26.09.2011, Jacques Delors Institute.

⁹ When it comes to the EU macro regional strategies, one should mention Baltic strategy (that includes Russia), and idea of an Alps strategy (that would include Switzerland, Monaco and Lichtenstein, as non EU countries).

The Danube strategy is more important in every aspect and it is based on three pillars: (a) establishing a system of safe navigation, development of transport and supporting infrastructure (river ports, canals); (b) protection of environment and sustainable use of natural resources; (c) economic development and further strengthening of cooperation and partnership in the macro-region¹⁰.

Danube was declared continental Corridor 7 by the EU. This corridor should connect the Black Sea at the east with Atlantic shores at the west with the transversal Constanta-Rotterdam. There are ten EU members participating in the Danube strategy – Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania and four states that are not EU members - Serbia, Montenegro, Ukraine and Moldova¹¹. At the moment, 95% of the Danube river transport goes on between the German port Passau and Budapest and only 5% in the lower reaches of Danube, from Budapest to the Black Sea. Undoubtedly Corridor 7 has a huge development potential and its mechanisms can be used for achieving some of the goals laid out by OBOR.



Map 1. Danube: Pan-European Corridor 7¹²

¹⁰ According to: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/danube/

¹¹ According to: <http://euobserver.com/regions/32175>

¹² Dušan Proroković, „Bitka za kontrolu Dunava i uticaj na geopolitički položaj Srbije“, *Međunarodna politika*, LXV, 1153–1154, 2014, pp. 116.

The third goal of the EUSDR is fully compatible with OBOR objectives. It is still necessary to underline that “Macro regional strategies are not funding instruments. A macro-regional strategy is an integrated framework (endorsed by the European Council), which may be supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds among others, to address common challenges faced by a defined geographical area relating to Member States and third countries located in the same geographical area which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion. They rather seek to create synergies and coordination between existing policies, funding instruments and initiatives taking place across a given macro region.”¹³

An excellent mechanism for the development of the entire Danube region can be established by harmonizing the objectives of EUSDR and OBOR.

3. SERBIA CASE STUDY

Although a lot was expected from the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, the results are not satisfying for two reasons: (a) internal crisis in the EU has caused other issues to become a priority; (b) smaller countries and weaker partners in this project (such as Serbia, for example) have no political power or financial resources nor the administrative capacity to initiate activities. This is especially true of the Adriatic-Ionian strategy where almost nothing has been done.

Serbia has harmonized two development strategies with the EUSDR: (a) the development of tourism; (b) the development of rail, road, inland waterway, air and intermodal transport. The first one analyzes the whole range of activities and facilities in the Danube region, with the aim to increase overall economic growth¹⁴. In line with the ongoing project of modernization of the Belgrade-Budapest railway and a potential increase in the number of Chinese tourists that will visit these two cities, it will be interesting to follow the further initiatives for the development of tourism in the Danube region, and the contents that can be offered to tourists.

The second strategy is considering the issues of establishing intermodal transport on Corridor 7, the development of river ports and related infrastructure. It involves linking the river ports on the Danube with modern railways, increasing their capacity, the construction of new

¹³ “The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)”, Government of the Czech Republic, 2.12.2016, <https://www.vlada.cz/en/evropske-zalezitosti/evropske-politiky/podunajska-strategie/the-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-eusdr-151489/>

¹⁴ *Strategy of tourism development*, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2006, pp. 143–152.

facilities for the transshipment of various goods as and attracting investors in this geographic zone¹⁵. River Sava can be included in this development concept (Sava flows into the Danube in Belgrade), since it is navigable in part of its course through Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Four countries from the Sava basin (the three mentioned and Slovenia) have established the International Sava River Basin Commission, whose task is to establish an international regime of navigation on this river and its navigable tributaries, including the establishment of conditions for safe navigation¹⁶. The strategy of development of intermodal transport is completely in line with the OBOR objectives.

However, it is noticeable that further initiatives are missing. By themselves, these strategies cannot influence long-term development without new initiatives. *“Putting the fate of the Danube into the hands of the EU is not a solution for underdeveloped countries from the lower flow of the river. Comparison with the Rhine region is adequate. The five states through which the Rhine flows are at roughly the same level of development, with traditionally large interchange and interdependent economic and scientific systems. The Danube countries are at different levels of economic development. For example, GDP per capita of Germany is six to ten times higher than that of Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia.”*¹⁷

Table 1: *GDP per capita at the Danube region countries (in US dollars)*¹⁸

| | | | |
|----------|--------|----------|-------|
| Germany | 41,513 | Serbia | 4,943 |
| Austria | 47,083 | Bulgaria | 7,033 |
| Slovakia | 16,899 | Romania | 7,935 |
| Hungary | 12,736 | Moldova | 2,037 |
| Croatia | 12,972 | Ukraine | 3,877 |

¹⁵ *Strategy of development of railway, road, inland waterway, air and intermodal transport in the Republic of Serbia 2008–2015*, Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2008, pp. 5, 11. Available at: www.putevi-srbije.rs, also at: www.gs.gov.rs.

¹⁶ *Strategy of water transport development for the period 2015–2020*, Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2015, pp. 2–8.

¹⁷ Dušan Proroković, „Bitka za kontrolu Dunava i uticaj na geopolitički položaj Srbije“, *Međunarodna politika*, LXV, 1153–1154, 2014, pp. 122–123.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

By combining EUSDR with OBOR objectives, this can be achieved. More active involvement of China in the implementation of EUSDR for Serbia is a part of the solution. First of all, since 2016, two large Chinese companies are present in Serbia: (a) the construction of a casting factory for company Mei Ta Europe began in March; (b) in April, the company Hesteel Group Tangsteel Company purchased the Smederevo steel factory¹⁹. In addition to already implemented investments, several major Chinese companies have opened their offices in Serbia. In September 2015, the company CWE (China International Water and Electric Corporation) has established its branch in Serbia. This company is interested in participating in projects in the field of renewable energy and road infrastructure on the territory of Southeast Europe, especially in Serbia which is considered to be the center of the region.

In early 2016, CEFC (China Energy Company Limited) and the CBI (China Balkan Investment) also opened their branch offices in Serbia. These companies are interested in privatization of large state-owned Serbian companies, projects in agriculture, traffic and energy infrastructure, financial sector and telecommunications. The arrival of CEFC can be interesting because of the potential privatization of the Electric Power Industry of Serbia (EPS) in the coming decades.

The first infrastructural project implemented by China in Serbia, agreed upon in 2009, was the building of a bridge in Belgrade across Danube. After the 16+1 Summit in Bucharest in November 2013, further Chinese investments were agreed upon: (a) investment of 642 million euro in road infrastructure – building the Corridor 11 that connects Montenegro and Serbia; (b) investment of 999 million euro in the energy sector – reconstruction of the thermal power plant Kostolac.

All these investments and initiatives are being implemented in the Danube Basin. Also, it is necessary to keep in mind the long-term project - the idea of linking the Danube and the Aegean Sea²⁰.

¹⁹ Chinese investors pledged to invest at least 300 million EUR, and not to lay off any of the 5000 workers. The privatization of Smederevo Steel plant differs from most other privatizations done in Serbian since 2001. Purchase of Serbian companies is usually followed by a number of layoffs and various corruption scandals. Depending on how they continue to act, these two major Chinese investors are likely to affect the attitude of Serbian public opinion on Chinese companies in the future.

²⁰ The possibility of building the Morava-Vardar Canal was first mentioned in 1907 when the American government established the American engineering commission for the observation of the Morava-Vardar waterway in New Jersey. After the outbreak of the war in 1914 this project had been put aside until 1961 when it reemerged as one of the options for spatial planning of the economic development of Serbia. In the late 20th and early 21st century, this plan was presented as one of the key elements of the

Based on the initiative of the Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić, in 2012, the possibility of building the canal between Danube and the Aegean Sea was considered. This canal would connect the sea port in Thessaloniki with the river port in Smederevo and would stretch along Serbia, Macedonia and Greece from north to south using the hydro potential of Morava and Vardar. Ministry of natural resources, mining and space planning of Serbia published the Feasibility Study on Morava Canal done by China's Gezhouba Corporation Limited in 2014. In the conclusion of this study it is said that the project of Morava Canal through Serbia is doable and profitable and would have positive effects in the following areas: 1) navigation (since it connects Western and Central Europe with Aegean Sea it lowers the costs of transport and improves mobility, security and quality of life); 2) production of electric energy (it increases the quantity of renewable energy in the system that brings economic benefits and positively affects the optimization of the energy structure in Serbia); 3) industry, agriculture, tourism, traffic (the land is arable and therefore is suitable for growing different sorts of plants – wheat, corn, fruits etc); 4) irrigation (it is making it possible to create the irrigation systems that positively affects agriculture); 5) more stable supply of drinking water; 6) flood protection. After meeting with Serbian officials in 2015, the president of the Chinese company Bon Project Zedong Jang repeated that this project is still very attractive. Estimates on the costs of this project differ.

According to the analysis by Internal Navigation from Europe (INE) average external marginal costs of the road traffic are 24.13 euro / 1.000 tons per km; average external marginal costs of the railway traffic are 12.35 euro / 1.000 tons per km; average external marginal costs of inland navigation are 5.0 euro / 1.000 tons per km.

It is obvious that within the disposable traffic system, external marginal costs for inland navigation are the lowest. In addition, the idea of connecting the waterways along the Morava River and the construction of a new channel from the river Vardar to the Aegean Sea is in accordance with the European strategy for the promotion and improvement of river navigation. To enhance mobility, safety and quality of life, it is necessary to establish inland waterway transport in the context of multi-modal

spatial planning and a very significant segment of the national program of Serbia. The preliminary project has been done in 1908, and in 1961 the governments of Greece and Yugoslavia developed another project. In 1973 UN experts confirmed the validity of this project finding it to be economically justified. Based on this assessment EC funded the Study of Water Management Planning of Vardar in 1990. The distance between the Danube and the Aegean Sea is 650 km. The fall is 1.25 m per kilometer, making it possible to carry out this project from the technical standpoint.

transport policy. When it comes to the energy, following the completion of the planned cascades, installed capacity will be increased by 360.1 MW, and the production capacity will be increased by 1427.8 GWh. Serbian energy system will be further optimized, and pollution will be decreased.

The use of coal will be more economical and more rational. Based on the calculation of prices for electricity at 0.06 euros / (kW • h), the annual income from electricity production would amount to 85.67 million euros.



Map 2. Danube-Aegean Sea Canal (the existing waterways; required enlargement and regulation of river basin; necessary building of dams and canal)²¹

4. CONCLUSION

European Commissioner for Regional Policy Johannes Hahn warned of China's role in the Western Balkans and the possibility that Beijing will transform the region's countries into *Trojan horses* that will one day be members of the EU.²²

²¹ Dušan Proroković, „Bitka za kontrolu Dunava i uticaj na geopolitički položaj Srbije“, *Međunarodna politika*, LXV, 1153–1154, 2014, p. 123.

²² Ryan Heath, Andrew Gray, “Beware Chinese Trojan horses in the Balkans, EU warns”, *Politico*, 27.07.2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-beware-chinese-trojan-horses-in-the-balkans-eu-warns-enlargement-politico-podcast/>

This approach by the EU officials is extremely bad. In such a way, the countries of the Western Balkans will sooner or later be forced to choose: the EU or China! This could jeopardize the regional security of the Western Balkans, and would also inflict irreparable damage to the EU itself. The EU is at the beginning of a trade war with the United States. In this context, China could be a useful ally, and not a rival for the official Brussels. What is shown in the case study of Serbia is that the EU has no overreaching concerns. Instead of insisting on a geopolitical confrontation with China, it is necessary to look for points of possible collaboration and future cooperation. One of these points is certainly the EU's macro-regional strategy. The EUSDR is an ambitious project, which includes EU members, EU candidates and states such as Ukraine and Moldova. However, due to the internal crisis of the EU, and due to the lack of funds, the results of this project have not been seen so far. OBOR objectives are fully compatible with the third goal of EUSDR. Hence the conclusion that the Chinese participants in the implementation of the EUSDR are not only useful, but also necessary in order to fully implement it. For Serbia this would mean the possibility of planning long-term development in a new way. The "exploitation" of the Danube is of great importance for Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Moldova and Ukraine. And for the whole of Europe, it is important to consider implementing strategic projects such as the Danube-Aegean Sea Canal. This would strengthen European geopolitical horizontal, and China-European relations would be elevated to a whole new level.

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