

INTERNAL TENSIONS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES: EXPLAINING THE HETEROGENEOUS STANCE OF EU MEMBER STATES TOWARDS THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

TENSIONES INTERNAS Y OPORTUNIDADES ECONÓMICAS: EXPLICANDO LA POSTURA HETEROGÉNEA DE LOS ESTADOS MIEMBROS DE LA UE RESPECTO A LA NUEVA RUTA DE LA SEDA

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Summary: I. INTRODUCTION. II. BRI: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION. III. COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES, EU INTERNAL TENSIONS AND STATE MEMBERS' BEHAVIOUR. IV. THE BIG CONSEQUENCE OF DIVERGING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS: LACK OF COHESIVENESS. V. CONCLUSIÓN

ABSTRACT: The European Union is one of the key destinations of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), officially announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013. Nevertheless, the EU has mixed feelings about it: while recognizing the initiative's capability to foster economic growth, it is still reluctant to participate, regarding the BRI as a challenge to European unity, norms and values. Regardless of the official stance of the European Commission, the EU member states have adopted a wide range of heterogeneous stances towards the BRI, ranging from an enthusiastic acceptance of the initiative to a refusal to join it. This paper will shed light on the driving factors behind this wide range of attitudes towards the BRI, focusing not only on the economic opportunities posed by the initiative to the main member states, but also on their relationship with the EU and the possible internal tensions with the European Commission. The joint examination of these two variables will provide a better explanation of EU member states' stance towards the BRI than those analyses based merely on the explanation of economic factors. In fact, the main finding of this paper is that political factors outweigh the economic ones: there is no correlation between the economic opportunities offered by the initiative and the support it gets from beneficiary member states, while internal tensions inside the EU are encouraging some member states to join the initiative even though there might not be many economic benefits granted by their participation.

RESUMEN: La Unión Europea es uno de los destinos clave de la Nueva Ruta de la Seda, anunciada oficialmente por el presidente chino Xi Jinping en 2013. Sin embargo, la Unión Europea tiene una actitud

Fecha de recepción del trabajo: 10 de marzo de 2020. Fecha de aceptación de la versión: 9 de noviembre de 2020.

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contradictoria hacia ella: aunque reconoce la capacidad de la iniciativa para fomentar el crecimiento económico, es todavía reacia a participar, al considerarla como un desafío a la unidad, normas y valores europeos. Independientemente de la postura oficial de la Comisión Europea, los estados miembros de la UE han adoptado una amplia gama de posturas heterogéneas respecto a la iniciativa, yendo desde su aceptación entusiasta hasta la negativa a participar. El presente artículo arrojará luz sobre los principales factores detrás de esta variedad de actitudes respecto a la Nueva Ruta de la Seda, centrándose no sólo en las oportunidades económicas ofrecidas por la iniciativa a los principales estados miembros, sino también en la relación de éstos con la Unión Europea y las posibles tensiones internas con la Comisión Europea. El análisis conjunto de estas dos variables aportará una mejor explicación de la actitud de dichos estados miembros respecto a la iniciativa que aquellos análisis basados únicamente en la explicación de factores económicos. De hecho, el principal hallazgo del artículo es que los factores políticos tienen más peso que los económicos: no hay correlación entre las oportunidades económicas ofrecidas por la iniciativa y el apoyo que recibe de los estados miembros, mientras que las tensiones internas dentro de la Unión Europea están llevando a algunos estados miembros a unirse a la iniciativa independientemente de que su participación no vaya aparejada a beneficios económicos considerables.

KEYWORDS: Belt and Road Initiative, European Union, China, Euroscepticism, International Cooperation

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ruta de la Seda, Unión Europea, euroescepticismo, cooperación internacional

I. INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was officially announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013. China has pledged to allocate US\$ 1.25 trillion to the initiative by 2025, involving a huge investment in infrastructures as part of a vision of ‘harmony, peace and prosperity, and not a geopolitical conspiracy to change the existing international order’¹. Nonetheless, the European Union (EU), one of the key destinations of the initiative, has mixed feelings about it: while recognizing the capability of the initiative to foster economic growth, it is still reluctant to participate, regarding the BRI as a challenge to European unity, norms and values.

However, the European Commission attempts to forge a common response to the Chinese initiative have often resulted in the evident inability of the EU to produce a regional strategy. This lack of cohesiveness among EU states’ stance towards the BRI is certainly influenced by their diverging economic interests, but political considerations also stand out in a moment in which the EU is facing internal and external challenges, such as tensions in the transatlantic relationship with the USA, the refugee crisis and Brexit. Among European governments, those frequently labelled as ‘populists’ have shown a strong willingness to cooperate with China under the BRI framework, in sharp contrast with the majority of Western European countries. Not surprisingly, those countries have been at odds with the European Commission because of budgetary, legislative and/or migratory reasons, and their enthusiasm for taking part in the initiative can be regarded as part of a political message intended to stress that they are sovereign countries, in contrast with an EU accused of endangering the national sovereignty of its member states.

¹ CAMERON, F., “Can OBOR Bring the EU and China Closer Together?”, 2017. Available at «http://eu-asiacentre.eu/pub_details.php?pub_id=209».

An explanatory analysis of this situation is especially important, given the determination of Chinese leadership to implement the BRI, the internal and external challenges that the EU is facing, and the fact that the China-EU relationship is one of the most important bilateral relations around the globe. Besides, this approach is needed in order to fill the research gaps in this issue. Even though think tanks and academicians have carried on in-depth research about the BRI and its impact on the EU, those studies have mainly focused on the challenges and opportunities posed by the initiative², its impact on Sino-European relationship³ and the perspective of the EU as a whole⁴. Current research on the state-level is scarce. It mainly focuses on the projects that might be developed in each country⁵ without attempting to analyse the factors influencing EU member states' attitude on the BRI.

Therefore, this paper approaches the BRI from the viewpoint of the heterogeneous stance that EU member states have shown. After a brief explanation of the opportunities and challenges posed to the EU by the BRI, useful to understand the enthusiasm or reluctance of member states towards the initiative, this paper will analyse the driving force behind the attitude of the most significant EU member states, explaining both their economic and political motivations. The joint analysis of these two variables and their interaction will provide a better explanation of EU member states' stance towards the BRI than those based merely on the explanation of economic factors. In fact, the hypothesis of the paper consists of the idea that political factors and internal tensions with the EU have a deep impact on the country's attitude towards the initiative, shaping it even in a greater way than economic factors, understood as the range of opportunities posed by the BRI.

² See HOLSLAG, J., "How China's New Silk Road Threatens European Trade", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2017, pp. 190-206; WANG, X., RUET, J. and RICHET, X., "One Belt One Road and the reconfiguration of China-EU relations.", *Document de travail du CEPN*, No. 4, 2017, pp. 1-17; WANG, W., and PICCIAU, S., "How to Strengthen EU-China Cooperation Based on 'the Belt and Road'?", *Revista Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2017, pp. 21-33.; BOND, I., "The EU, the Eurasian Economic Union and One Belt, One Road. Can they work together?", 2017. Available at <https://cer.eu/sites/default/files/pb_eurasian_IB_16.3.17_0.pdf>; VERLARE, J. and VAN DER PUTTEN, F., "One Belt, One Road: An Opportunity for the EU's Security Strategy.", 2015. Available at <<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/one-belt-one-road-opportunity-eus-security-strategy>>.

³ See CAMERON, F., "Can OBOR Bring the EU and China Closer Together?", 2017. Available at <http://eu-asiacentre.eu/pub_details.php?pub_id=209>; WANG, Y., "China's 'New Silk Road': A Case Study in EU-China Relations.", in Amighini, A. and Berkofsky, A. (eds) *Xi's Policy Gambles: The Bumpy Road Ahead*, Milano, ISPI, 2015, pp. 93-110.; ZHAO, M., "The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Implications for China-Europe Relations.", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 51. No.4, 2016, pp. 109-118.; PICCIAU, S., "The 'One Belt One Road' strategy between opportunities & fears: a new stage in EU-China relations?." *IndraStra Global*, 2016, pp. 1-14.

⁴ See MOHAN, G., "Europe's Response to the Belt and Road Initiative.", 2018. Available at <<http://www.gmfus.org/publications/europes-response-belt-and-road-initiative>>; MISIĄGIEWICZ, J. and MISIĄGIEWICZ, M., "China's «One Belt, One Road» Initiative - the Perspective of the European Union", *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, Vol. 23, No.1, 2016, pp. 33-42.

⁵ See VAN DER PUTTEN, F., and SEAMAN, J., "Europe and China's New Silk Roads.", 2016. Available at <<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/europe-and-chinas-new-silk-roads>>.

The case this paper is dealing with reflects the intersection between the structural implications of the BRI in terms of the global distribution of power and influence on one side, and the implementation of a policy-making that takes into account regional and domestic considerations on the other side. Neoclassical realism is well suited to explain this intersection, compared to neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Neorealism, an overly structuralist paradigm of International Relations, with its focus on anarchy and the balance of power, understates the role of domestic politics and policy-makers' ability to affect international events⁶. Therefore, it is not suitable for explaining an issue in which domestic preferences are precisely the key variable for a given state's participation in an initiative that has an impact at the international level. Meanwhile, neoliberal institutionalism's emphasis on cooperation and interdependence assumes that international institutions are capable of regulating state behaviour through the reduction of transaction costs, the promotion of information-sharing and the establishment of new ways for the peaceful resolution of conflicts⁷. But still, in spite of these benefits, the European Commission has been unable to forge a common response to the BRI and improve the strained relationship with some EU member states. In addition, EU-China relations (and above all, US-China relations) prove that economic cooperation and interdependence do not always lead automatically to positive political relations at the bilateral level. Neoclassical realism stays away from neoliberal institutionalism's optimism in the field of international cooperation, and in contrast to neorealism, combines realist assumptions about the structure of the international system with the analysis of domestic preferences and beliefs, not perceiving systemic pressures through deterministic lenses⁸. In fact, neoclassical realism's emphasis on domestic preferences and beliefs brings it closer in this case to a constructivist understanding of international relations, in which socially constructed ideas, perceptions and state interests have a large impact on state behaviour. And as this paper shows, preferences and beliefs at the domestic level have a remarkable influence on EU member states' decision to join the BRI.

The methodology of the paper consists of the analysis of two independent variables, being the attitude of the country towards the BRI taken as the dependent variable. The first independent variable consists of the level of opportunities, measured as low, medium and high-level opportunities depending on the size of the projects and their impact on the economy. The second independent variable, focused on the relationship of the country with the European Commission, analyses the existence or absence of tensions. The interrelation of these two independent variables will shed light on the willingness or the unwillingness of a given country to endorse the initiative. Regarding case selection, this paper analyses the trends of each region of the EU, being the member states classified around their geographical location: Southern and Mediterranean countries, Eastern European countries, and Western and Northern European countries.

⁶ VIOTTI, P., and KAUPPI, M., *International Relations Theory*, Glenview, Pearson, 2012, p. 61.

⁷ ACHARYA, A., and BUZAN, B., *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at its Centenary*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 158.

⁸ STUART, D., "Foreign-Policy Decision-Making" en Reus-Smith, C. and Snidal, D. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 583.

II. BRI: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

The analysis of opportunities and challenges posed by the initiative is necessary, since the critical stance of the EU on the BRI, as well as the enthusiastic attitude of some member states, are influenced by them.

The BRI is expected to have a deep economic impact on the EU, which is regarded by the Chinese government as one of its final destinations. Infrastructure investment and economic cooperation, placed at the core of the initiative, highlight the economic aspects of a relationship that is already characterized by a considerable interdependence. The EU and China are two of the biggest traders in the world, and commerce has been during the last decades one key element of their relationship: China is the EU's second largest trading partner, while the EU is China's largest trading partner⁹. In fact, their combined economic output accounts for one third of the global total, and they are the world's two largest markets¹⁰. This will pose trade and industrial development opportunities, as well as some challenges to European interests.

According to recent research, the BRI might foster European economic growth through the reduction of transportation costs, which would increase its trade volume with China. Alicia García Herrero and Jianwei Xu state that 'a 10 per cent reduction in railway, air and maritime costs increases trade by 2 per cent, 5.5 per cent and 1.1 per cent respectively'¹¹. In the same line, the European think tank Bruegel estimates that the initiative might increase EU's foreign trade by 6 per cent¹², while another study increases the figure up to 8 per cent¹³. The expected creation of \$2.5 trillion in trade among participant countries during the next decade and the foreseeable increase of their middle-class consumers to 3 billion by 2050¹⁴ also reinforce the future economic opportunities posed by the initiative. Those opportunities might even go beyond the increase of the exports of European products and services to Asia, and include other aspects such as the

⁹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "China", 2019. Available at <<http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/china/>>.

¹⁰ ZHAO, M., "The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Implications for China-Europe Relations.", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 51. No.4, 2016, p. 3.

¹¹ PRODI, G., and FARDELLA, E., "The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact on Europe.", 2018. Available at <<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/valday/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-and-Its-Impact-on-Europe-19500>>.

¹² MING, H., "China and Europe Can Work Together on the Belt and Road Initiative.", 2018. Available at <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/opinion/china-and-europe-can-work-together-on-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>>.

¹³ EUROPE NOW, "Belt and Road Initiative in Europe: Reaching Beyond Asia", 2018. Available at <<https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/06/04/belt-and-road-initiative-in-europe/>>.

¹⁴ WANG, Y., "One Belt One Road: Opportunities for Europe-China Cooperation.", 2015. Available at <<https://www.friendsofeurope.org/global-europe/one-belt-one-road-opportunities-europe-china-cooperation>>.

collaboration with China in transport infrastructure projects in third countries along the BRI, mainly in Central Asia¹⁵.

Likewise, the EU-China Connectivity Platform, aimed at the promotion of cooperation “in areas such as the infrastructure, equipment, technologies and governance standards” could enhance synergies between the BRI and EU’s own connectivity initiatives and identify new investment opportunities¹⁶. In addition, channelling trade through new railway lines might have a beneficial effect from an environmental perspective. A study by the Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the European Parliament estimates that every TEU (Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit) transferred from air to rail would reduce CO₂ emissions by 25 tonnes, and that the increase in emissions due to the transfer of the shipment of commodities from ship to railway could be eliminated if part of the railway journey were powered by renewable energy sources¹⁷.

Nonetheless, regardless of the opportunities posed by the BRI, the European Commission and most EU member states are not fully convinced about Chinese narrative emphasis on shared prosperity, having some reservations about the initiative and being reluctant to join it. On the first place, the European Commission regards the initiative as a threat to the internal cohesion of the EU through its large investments in Eastern Europe, alleging that China is pursuing a strategy of ‘divide and conquer’ that would make European countries competing with each other for Beijing attention, aligning with its initiatives and therefore making impossible for the EU the adoption of a common stance on China. In August 2017, former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel stated that if the EU ‘don’t succeed in developing a single strategy towards China, then China will succeed in dividing Europe’¹⁸. Indeed, economic statecraft, defined by William J. Norris as ‘state manipulation of international economic activities for strategic purposes’¹⁹ could be favoured by the Chinese government’s ability to control many of its commercial and economic actors.

Discrepancies over the economic, social and environmental standards between the EU and China might also hinder China-EU cooperation under the BRI framework. While the Brussels model is based on a regulation aimed to ensure fair competition and economic sustainability, China prefers ad hoc negotiation, mainly at the bilateral political level²⁰. For example, Article 8 (4) of *Directive 2012/34/EU of the European Parliament and of*

¹⁵ DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES, “Research for TRAN Committee: The new Silk Route - opportunities and challenges for EU transport.”, 2018, p. 17. Available at <[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/585907/IPOL_STU\(2018\)585907_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/585907/IPOL_STU(2018)585907_EN.pdf)>

¹⁶ WANG, X., RUET, J. and RICHET, X., “One Belt One Road and the reconfiguration of China-EU relations.”, *Document de travail du CEPN*, No. 4, 2017, p. 5

¹⁷ DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES, “Research for TRAN Committee: The new Silk Route - opportunities and challenges for EU transport.”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁸ GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY, “Berlin Calls for a ‘One-Europe Policy’”, 2017. Available at <<https://www.german-foreign-policy.com/en/news/detail/7382/>>.

¹⁹ NORRIS, W., *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2018, p. 16.

²⁰ HALA, M., “Europe's New 'Eastern Bloc'.”, 2018. Available at <<https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-new-eastern-bloc-china-economy-model-belt-road-initiative/>>.

the Council establishing a single European railway area declares that member states must ensure that ‘the profit and loss account of an infrastructure manager shall at least balance income from infrastructure charges, surpluses from other commercial activities, non-refundable incomes from private sources and State funding [...] and infrastructure expenditure’, in order to guarantee the economic sustainability of future infrastructure projects²¹. European representatives often state that China’s initiative should adhere to market rules and international standards, avoid debt-fuelled investments and focus on sustainable projects if it wants European partners to welcome the initiative.

In addition, some BRI projects are regarded by the EU as discriminatory and mostly beneficial for Chinese companies, and thus demanding equal opportunities for all investors: around 89 per cent of BRI-related contracts are reportedly granted to Chinese firms²², and when large European firms are involved in BRI projects, quite often are just at a subcontractor level²³. These concerns were echoed during French President Emmanuel Macron’s visit to China in February, stating that the initiative could not be ‘one-way’²⁴.

Behind the EU statements on the BRI there is also a latent fear about the exacerbated competition that the initiative could pose in some areas, becoming one of the biggest challenges for Europe. Important sectors of EU member states might fall into the hands of Chinese buyers, which have already become a real alternative to European investment. The case of the Piraeus Port in Greece, purchased by the Chinese state-owned enterprise COSCO in 2009, contrasts with the privatization of the port of Thessaloniki, sold to a consortium of French, German, Russo-Greek companies²⁵. China’s increasing control of European port capacity is also favoured by other recent acquisitions in Spain, Italy and Belgium²⁶. This stiff competition is not confined to the European area, being actually extended to the East in the realms of trade, market access and investments. A Chinese gaining of market shares along the BRI participant countries would pose a challenge to the European economy, given that the imports of countries along the route barely grew between 2008 and 2014, and thus economic competition in a market with sluggish growth

²¹ EUR-LEX, “Directive 2012/34/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 November 2012 establishing a single European railway area Text with EEA relevance.”, 2012. Available at <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32012L0034>>.

²² VAN LEIJEN, M., “EU Commission: The Belt and Road Initiative Is a Chinese Project.”, 2018. Available at <<https://www.railfreight.com/specials/2018/09/18/eu-commission-the-belt-and-road-initiative-is-a-chinese-project/>>.

²³ MOHAN, G., “Europe’s Response to the Belt and Road Initiative.”, 2018, p.3. Available at <<http://www.gmfus.org/publications/europes-response-belt-and-road-initiative>>.

²⁴ BRATTBERG, E., and SOULA, E., “Europe’s Emerging Approach to China’s Belt and Road Initiative”, 2018. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/19/europe-s-emerging-approach-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-77536>>.

²⁵ DUCHÂTEL, M., and DUPLAIX, A., “Blue China: Navigating the Maritime Silk Road to Europe.”, 2018, p. 7. Available at <https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/blue_china_navigating_the_maritime_silk_road_to_europe>.

²⁶ WE BUILD VALUE, “Europe Wants Its ‘Own’ New Silk Road”, 2017. Available at <<https://www.webuildvalue.com/en/global-economy-sustainability/europe-wants-its-own-new-silk-road.html>>.

might turn into a zero-sum game²⁷. This situation can hardly be accepted by EU leaders, focused -in the same way as the Chinese leadership- on the goals of promoting economic growth and fighting unemployment at home.

From the EU side, a common response towards the BRI is hindered by the attitude of its member states: whereas some -mostly Western European- countries regard it as a threat, other -mostly Eastern European- countries regard it as an opportunity. Strikingly, contrary to prior expectations and assumptions of most publications on the issue, diverging economic interests and the different scope of opportunities that the initiative poses to the EU member states is by no mean the most influencing variable: the relation of the member states with the European Commission has a deeper impact on their attitude towards the BRI, as the paper will show below.

III. COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES, EU INTERNAL TENSIONS AND STATE MEMBERS' BEHAVIOUR

This section will analyse each region of the EU, whose member states are classified according to their geographical location: Southern and Mediterranean countries, Eastern European countries, and Western and Northern European countries. While Eastern member states have enthusiastically welcomed the initiative, due to a favourable correlation of economic and political factors in the countries with higher political weight in the region, no member state in Western or Northern Europe has officially endorsed the initiative. The lack of tensions with the EU provides no incentive that could compensate for the presence of only low-medium level economic opportunities offered by the BRI to most of the countries located in the area. In contrast, Southern and Mediterranean Europe is a much more heterogeneous region, involving countries that have endorsed and refused to join the initiative.

1. Southern and Mediterranean member states of the EU

The BRI might stimulate the economic expansion of Southern and Mediterranean states of the EU through the deepening of its economic relations with Beijing and facilitating its exports to China and other participant countries²⁸. In addition, Chinese investment is favoured by the privatization of large parts of their economies due to the public debt crisis and the lack of financial resources²⁹.

Among Southern and Mediterranean countries, Greece, severely affected by debt, stagnation and recurrent conflictual relations with the EU, is the one with the most proactive stance towards the BRI. It is one of the EU countries that has signed a

²⁷ HOLSLAG, J., "How China's New Silk Road Threatens European Trade", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2017, pp. 46-47.

²⁸ BARISITZ, S. and RADZYNER, A., "The New Silk Road, part II : implications for Europe", *Focus on European Economic Integration Q4/17*, Oesterreichische Nationalbank (Austrian Central Bank), 2017, p. 1.

²⁹ WANG, X., RUET, J. and RICHET, X., "One Belt One Road and the reconfiguration of China-EU relations.", *Op. Cit.*, pp. 12.

Memorandum of Understanding on BRI with China, and in 2017 Stergios Pitsiarlos, Greek deputy economics minister, stated that ‘Greece should take advantage of these new opportunities that the Chinese strategy opens up. Our strategy is to take advantage of our geographical position and to attract foreign investment’³⁰. Indeed, the initiative offers many opportunities for the country.

The most important project of the initiative in Greece is related to the Piraeus Port, privatized by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in 2016. China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) purchased 67 per cent of Piraeus for a sum of €368.5 million over a 35-year concession, facilitating the arrival of Chinese products to the rest of Europe. Over the next ten years, China has committed to invest at least an additional sum of €350 million and has planned the construction of a high speed train from Athens to Budapest, with the aim of creating a new trade link between Central Europe and Asia³¹. A study by the Foundation for Economic and Industrial Research of Greece estimates that COSCO’s investments in the Piraeus Port might increase Greece’s GDP by 0.8 per cent by 2025³², being favoured by the construction of the Piraeus-Budapest railway, which would transform the Piraeus into China’s main gateway for Central and Eastern Europe and could shorten transportation between China and Europe by 7 to 11 days³³. In view of the opportunities of Greek infrastructure for Chinese commerce, China has already plans to buy the port of Thessaloniki and to acquire and expand Athens airport.

From the point of view of Greek domestic politics, Alexis Tsipras and its political party Syriza came to power through a Eurosceptic and anti-globalization discourse³⁴, blaming the EU for imposing austerity measures and for violating Greece’s national sovereignty. Tensions with the European Commission, although recurrent, reached a peak in 2015, when the Greek government convened a referendum to decide about the acceptance of bailout conditions proposed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. Recently, the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker lamented the lack of solidarity with Greece during the financial crisis³⁵.

In the cases of Italy, Spain and Portugal, even though they all just present limited synergies with the BRI framework, their relationship with the EU varies. Therefore, they

³⁰ HOSKEN, A., and KASAPI, A. “Why Is China Investing Heavily in South-East Europe?”, 2017. Available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41654346>>.

³¹ MÜLLER-MARKUS, C., “One Belt, One Road: the Chinese Dream and its impact on Europe.”, 2016, p. 4. Available at <https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_148_one_belt_one_road_el_sueno_chino_y_su_impacto_sobre_europa/one_belt_one_road_the_chinese_dream_and_its_impact_on_europe>.

³² PRODI, G., and FARDELLA, E., “The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact on Europe.”, *Op. Cit.*

³³ WANG, W., and PICCIAU, S., “How to Strengthen EU-China Cooperation Based on ‘the Belt and Road’?”, *Revista Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2017, p. 25.

³⁴ VASILOPOULOU, S., “The Party Politics of Euroscepticism in Times of Crisis: The Case of Greece”, *Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2018, p. 318.

³⁵ MAMOZELOS, G., “Commission President Says EU Failed Greece.”, 2019. Available at <<https://greekcitytimes.com/2019/01/16/commission-president-says-eu-failed-greece/>>.

have different attitudes towards the initiative, even though the case of Portugal is striking and is the only one that does not suit the correlation between political tensions with the European Commission and participation in the initiative proposed in this paper³⁶.

Remarkable tensions between Italy and the EU over budget rules and migration were defining to a large degree Italian politics during the second half of 2018³⁷. The Italian government formed in 2018 by a coalition between the Five Stars Movement and the Northern League followed a populist approach of politics that was at odds with the EU. Therefore, according to the hypothesis of this paper, it might present a more positive stance towards the BRI. In fact it does, even though the BRI is only offering limited opportunities and even some challenges to the country, given that its promotion of Piraeus Port is increasing its competitiveness, to the detriment of Italy's strategic position.

The only BRI important project in Italy so far is the one to create a giant offshore platform at the city of Malamocco in order to allow Chinese cargo ships to come via the Suez Canal to unload goods and send them by railway to other European countries³⁸. However, even though the initiative is not posing for the time being many opportunities for Italy, this country -the same way as Portugal- broke the common stance of Western European member states towards the initiative and pledged to sign a cooperation deal including sectors such as railways, airlines, space and culture, stating its intention to be 'China's first G7 partner on belt and road'³⁹. Noteworthy, Italy did not make the decision to join the BRI until it was ruled by a new government that was having constant frictions with the EU.

Regarding Spain, it is the only Mediterranean European country reluctant to join the BRI, even though the initiative can pose some opportunities and competitive advantages. The railway connection Madrid-Yiwu, the longest in the world, goes through France, Germany, Poland, Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan, and it has promoted bilateral trade and the creation of a foundation for Spain-Yiwu exchanges⁴⁰. In addition, Spain possesses some of the most important ports in the Mediterranean, which could attract Chinese investments from companies interested in gaining presence in a strategic position, considered a platform towards Europe and northern Africa⁴¹. The investment of €450

³⁶ As the paper will show below, political factors in Romania also seem not to have a decisive role in the country's participation in the initiative. However, in Rumania this can be explained due to the push exerted by the decision taken by the big economies in Eastern Europe in favour of joining the BRI, whereas this does not happen in the case of Portugal, given the general reluctance of the largest economies in Western Europe towards the initiative.

³⁷ THE ECONOMIST, "Tensions Rise between Italy and the EU.", 2018. Available at <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/08/30/tensions-rise-between-italy-and-the-eu>>.

³⁸ WANG, X., RUET, J. and RICHET, X., "One Belt One Road and the reconfiguration of China-EU relations.", *Op. Cit.*, p. 13

³⁹ BRATTBERG, E., and SOULA, E., "Europe's Emerging Approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative", *Op Cit.*

⁴⁰ XINHUA, "Belt and Road Initiative Enriches Spain-China Cooperation.", 2018. Available at <<http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201805/19/WS5affb5e7a3103f6866ee966e.html>>.

⁴¹ FANJUL, E., "Capítulo II: Las relaciones económicas y comerciales entre China y España ante la Nueva Ruta de la Seda" en Beneyto, J.M. and Fanjul, E. (eds) *La Nueva Ruta de la Seda: Oportunidades, Retos, Recomendaciones*, Thomson Reuters Aranzadi, 2018, p. 83.

million of the Chinese company Hutchinson Port Holdings in the Port of Barcelona and the investment of €500 million from COSCO and China Merchants in the Port of Valencia⁴² reflect the opportunities that the BRI poses to Spain in the maritime area. Nevertheless, the Spanish government, who enjoys fluent and positive relations with the European Commission, refused to sign on the BRI initiative during the state visit of Xi Jinping to Spain at the end of 2018⁴³. The Spanish case contrasts sharply with the Polish one: both held in the past official Silk Road forums (in 2015 and 2016 respectively), but only the latter, with strained relations with the EU, decided to join the initiative.

Finally, the case of Portugal is striking: even though the BRI is expected to have a limited impact on the country, offering just one important project so far, and Lisbon enjoys good relations with Brussels, Prime Minister Antonio Costa unexpectedly decided to join the BRI during the official visit of Xi Jinping to Portugal at the end of 2018, almost at the same time that Spanish Prime Minister refused to take part on the initiative. From the point of view of the hypothesis of the paper, even though China is interested in developing the Port of Sines in order to enhance connections between China, Western Europe and Africa⁴⁴, the benefits posed by the initiative are not as big as to explain Portuguese participation in the BRI and its rupture of a common Western European stance towards the initiative, given that the country has quite good relations with the European Commission.

2. Eastern European member states of the EU

Eastern European countries mainly channel their relations with China through the 16+1 cooperation framework, which includes 11 EU member states. This framework, intended to strengthen trade and transportation ties between China and participant countries, has aroused some fears in Brussels, which regards it as a Chinese tool to gain leverage within the EU⁴⁵. At the same time, the region is seen by China as the gateway to its economic expansion in Europe, expecting an expansion of trade from \$52 billion in 2013 to \$120 billion in 2020⁴⁶. Among Eastern European countries, which in general have welcomed the initiative, given that according to Angela Stanzel ‘the infrastructure gap with the European Union’s Western members is expansive and the EU hasn’t acted fast enough to bridge the divide’⁴⁷, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic -the most influential

⁴² WANG, X., RUET, J. and RICHEL, X., “One Belt One Road and the reconfiguration of China-EU relations.”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 13.

⁴³ OBOREUROPE, “Spain, Europe and the BRI.”, 2018. Available at <<https://www.oboreurope.com/en/spain-europe-bri/>>.

⁴⁴ VAN DER PUTTEN, F., and SEAMAN, J., “Europe and China’s New Silk Roads.”, 2016, p. 51. Available at <<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/europe-and-chinas-new-silk-roads>>.

⁴⁵ VERLARE, J. and VAN DER PUTTEN, F., “One Belt, One Road: An Opportunity for the EU’s Security Strategy.”, 2015, p. 2. Available at <<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/one-belt-one-road-opportunity-eus-security-strategy>>.

⁴⁶ PEPE, J., “Eurasia’s Reconnection: Implications for Europe and Germany.”, 2017. Available at <<https://doc-research.org/2017/12/eurasias-reconnection-implications-europe-germany/>>.

⁴⁷ DAVIS, A., and KAROL B., “China Opens Door to EU Influence through Belt and Road’s Divisive Investments.”, 2018. Available at <<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/mar/4/chinas-belt-and-road-investments-divide-eu/>>.

members- have been especially receptive, even though the specific opportunities posed by the initiative are still limited. Indeed, together with Romania, these countries receive more than three quarters of Chinese FDI in Eastern Europe⁴⁸, and thus they will be the main object of analysis in this section.

Despite the reluctant attitude of the EU towards the BRI, Hungary has firmly endorsed the initiative, being regarded as the country that most enthusiastically has welcomed it. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, which maintains tense relations with the EU - the European Parliament even voted in September 2018 to punish Hungary for 'cracking down on democratic institutions'-, stated during the 6th 16+1 summit in Budapest that 'some consider the awakening of China and Asia as a threat, for us, it's a huge opportunity'⁴⁹. However, despite his words, the BRI only hosts one important project in Hungary, the Budapest-Belgrade railway, aimed at the modernization and extension of railroads as a part of the first segment of the Piraeus-Budapest railway.

Regardless of the limited opportunities that Chinese investment can pose to Hungary, the country has become the strongest supporter of China's positions not only within Central and Eastern European countries, but also within the EU. It supported in 2016 China's pursuit of market economy status and, together with Greece, refused to be part of an EU critical statement on China's role in the territorial disputes over the South China Sea⁵⁰, and in 2017 it vetoed an EU statement on human rights in China. New financing opportunities might certainly be appealing for a country aimed at achieving economic growth, but the -limited- opportunities that the BRI is offering to Hungary do not explain themselves such an enthusiastic attitude towards the initiative. In the words of Stefan Meister, from the German Council on Foreign Relations, referring to Hungary and Greece, those countries are trying to use Chinese investment in order to say that 'they are sovereign states, that they have alternatives [to the EU] [...], and now they are even doing deals with China and even voting for China inside of the EU'⁵¹.

It is noteworthy that sovereignty issues are at the core of the tensions between some member states and the European Commission. While in the case of Greece the alleged lack of sovereignty was rooted in budgetary problems and the inability of the country to design its own financial policy, in the case of Eastern European countries it was focused on the supposed incompatibility of the political programs of their conservative leaders with the EU values, as well as their reaction during the refugee crisis. Viktor Orbán has repeatedly stated that the EU is unable to protect the bloc from Muslim immigration,

⁴⁸ MCCALED, A. and SZUNOMÁR, A., "Chapter 6: Chinese foreign direct investment in Central and Eastern Europe: an institutional perspective" en Drahekoupil, J. (ed) *Chinese Investment in Europe: Corporate Strategies and Labour Relations*, ETUI, 2017, p. 124.

⁴⁹ AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, "Europe Casts a Wary Eye on China's Silk Road Plans", 2018. Available at <<http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/europe-casts-a-wary-eye-on-chinas-silk-road-plans-125338>>.

⁵⁰ JÓZWIAK, V., "China's Role in Hungarian Foreign Policy", *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, Vol. 71, 2017, p. 2.

⁵¹ DAVIS, A., and KAROL B., "China Opens Door to EU Influence through Belt and Road's Divisive Investments.", *Op. Cit.*

going so far as to say that the European Commission is not a ‘friend of freedom’ and that its days ‘are numbered’⁵².

Meanwhile, in September 2018 the European Parliament voted to trigger the Article 7 of the EU Treaty in order to sanction the Hungarian government, accused of removing independent judges, silencing media and targeting NGOs⁵³. The Article 7 of the EU Treaty, designed to prevent member states from going against EU values, was also launched in 2017 against Poland because of its judicial reforms. Indeed, the situation of this country is rather similar to that of Poland: medium level opportunities offered by the BRI and remarkable tensions with the European Commission. Therefore, Poland also has a proactive attitude towards the initiative.

Between 2000 and 2016, Poland was the second largest recipient of Chinese FDI in the region (€936 million), being Hungary the first one during the same period (around €2 billion). However, the figure remains minimal compared with, for example, Germany’s FDI in the country: only in 2015, it invested in Poland over €27 billion⁵⁴. Specifically, the BRI presence in Poland is limited to the Lodz-Chengdu railway line, launched in 2013, increasing the capacity of the cargo terminal of the city⁵⁵. As it happens in Hungary, the prospects of becoming a transportation hub and Chinese gateway to Europe through the new routes partly offset the lack of a large number of specific projects. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated during the 6th 16+1 summit in Budapest that Poland is ‘ready to be the gate to the West, first of all, from the economic viewpoint. This also includes China’s One Belt, One Road initiative’⁵⁶. In addition, as in the Hungarian case, Warsaw’s relationship with the EU during the last years has been strained, being the Polish ruling party Law and Justice accused of trying to control the judiciary power and subvert democratic standards⁵⁷.

Hungary and Poland have not been the only countries facing tensions with the European Commission. In 2017 the Czech Republic was the third member state, along with the aforementioned countries, to be subjected to infringement procedures by the EU due to their refusal to host asylum seekers, being referred to the Court of Justice of the European

⁵² EURONEWS, “Hungary's PM Viktor Orban Attacks the EU”, 2018. Available at <https://www.euronews.com/2018/07/28/hungary-s-pm-viktor-orban-attacks-the-eu>.

⁵³ STAUDENMAIER, R., “EU Parliament Votes to Trigger Article 7 Sanctions Procedure against Hungary.”, 2018. Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-parliament-votes-to-trigger-article-7-sanctions-procedure-against-hungary/a-45459720>.

⁵⁴ BACHULSKA, A., “China, Poland, and the Belt and Road Initiative - the Future of Chinese Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe”, 2017. Available at <https://geopolitica.eu/more/in-english/2724-china-poland-and-the-belt-and-road-initiative-the-future-of-chinese-engagement-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.

⁵⁵ XINHUA, “Polish Logistics Firms Ride BRI to Big Gains.”, 2018. Available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/10/WS5b95fe05a31033b4f46552b6.html>.

⁵⁶ DAVIS, A., and BULSKI, K., “China Targets EU Economy with Belt and Road Investments.”, 2018. Available at <http://www.ara-network.com/newsroom/asia/3448-china-targets-eu-economy-belt-and-road.html>.

⁵⁷ GOCLOWSKI, M., and SOBCZAK, P., “Polish-EU Tensions Flare Again as New Law Requires Judges to Quit.”, 2018. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-poland-gersdorf/polish-eu-tensions-flare-again-as-new-law-requires-judges-to-quit-idUSKBN1JU0M1>.

Union⁵⁸. A year before tensions with Brussels reached its peak, Czech President Miloš Zeman stated that Prague had previously been ‘too submissive’ to the EU and USA, describing the new partnership with China as an opportunity for his country to be independent again. In addition, he presented the Czech Republic as an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier for China in Europe’⁵⁹. What is more, this statement of Miloš Zeman sheds light on the *mechanism* that is assumed for the causal explanation in this issue: political leaders leading countries that are facing tensions with the European Commission are willing to show that they are ruling sovereign countries, ignoring the European Commission’s concerns on the BRI and openly supporting the initiative.

An analysis of Prague’s attitude based exclusively on economic reasons is unable to explain this pro-engaging approach itself in light of the -small- number of Chinese projects being developed in the country, evidencing their confluence with political factors, in the same way that also happens in the previously analysed Eastern countries. Indeed, the share of Chinese FDI represented only 0.35 per cent of the total FDI in the Czech Republic in 2015, and the only BRI project in the territory is a plan to connect the Danube, the Oder and the Elbe through a canal that crosses the country⁶⁰. Nevertheless, in the case of Romania, economic reasons stand out above political reasons, given that the relevance of Chinese FDI is more crucial for its economy, accounting for 26 per cent of its total FDI inflows⁶¹. Regarding the BRI specific projects in the country, the investments in the Rovinari power plant, the construction of the Craiova-Pitești highway and the interest in expanding the nuclear power plant of Cernavodă are noteworthy⁶². Although Rumania is a participant country in the initiative, the lack of tensions with the European Commission is what precisely explains the absence of high-sounding statements regarding Bucharest participation in the BRI and its relationship with China, in stark contrast with Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

3. Western and northern member states of the EU

Germany and France represent the two main voices within the EU, a situation reinforced after Brexit. Both countries, as shown in the first section, represent the most critical voices towards the BRI within the EU, and even though they are the two countries in the area which can benefit the most from BRI projects, they have in common with all the countries of the region their lack of tensions with the European Commission, having opted for an official refusal to be part of the initiative. In fact, no Western and northern member state of the EU has signed a Memorandum of Understanding on BRI with China.

⁵⁸ BBC, “EU to Sue Poland, Hungary and Czechs for Refusing Refugee Quotas”, 2017. Available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42270239>>.

⁵⁹ HALA, M., “Europe’s New ‘Eastern Bloc’”, *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁰ WANG, X., RUET, J. and RICHET, X., “One Belt One Road and the reconfiguration of China-EU relations.”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

⁶¹ BARISITZ, S. and RADZYNER, A., “The New Silk Road, part II : implications for Europe”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

⁶² VOICU, C., “Romania and the Belt and Road Initiative by Claudia-Iohana Voicu.”, 2017. Available at <<http://www.themarketforideas.com/romania-and-the-belt-and-road-initiative-a188/>>.

Among them, Germany is clearly the member state to which the initiative poses the highest level of opportunities, even though they consist almost exclusively of railway project investments. The German-Chinese railway projects Leipzig-Shenyang, Duisburg-Chongqing, Hamburg-Zhengzhou, Hamburg-Harbin and Nurnberg-Chengdu have received a strong promotion from both sides, making Germany one of the most important railway hubs for the BRI through the increase of commerce and the reduction of transportation time. For example, the Chongqing-Duisburg railway line, built in 2016, has reduced transportation time between the two cities by 12-13 days⁶³.

Compared to Germany, France has received much less attention. The \$1 billion credit line from the Export-Import Bank of China to the French shipping company CMA CGM to purchase Chinese container ships, and the Chinese-led Symbiose Consortium's acquisition of a 49,99 per cent stake in the Toulouse Blagnac Airport in 2015, which might help to face the problem of reducing public resources, are among the few BRI-labelled projects located in France⁶⁴. In addition, the Lyon-Wuhan freight train has increased French trade with China, especially the exportation of wine and car parts⁶⁵.

Nevertheless, regardless of the opportunities offered by the initiative, both countries have refused to join it, and their political leaders have expressed concerns about the potential political impact of the BRI on the EU, which might increase Chinese influence on Central and Eastern European countries and thus jeopardize the European unity of action. Not surprisingly, the two most influential countries within the EU are also the most vigilant over a possible increase of Chinese influence in the region. Furthermore, in the same way as Germany and France, no other Western and Northern member state of the EU has shown willingness to officially endorse the initiative: the absence of political incentives does not counteract the lack of relevant BRI-labelled projects (low level of opportunities), a different situation to that of the Eastern countries previously analysed.

IV. THE BIG CONSEQUENCE OF DIVERGING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS: LACK OF COHESIVENESS

The stance of EU member states on the BRI is far from being homogeneous. While some EU member states have pledged support for the initiative, others have enthusiastically joined it. As shown in the previous section, the interrelation of political and economic factors has a deep influence on the nature of the response of the vast majority of the countries analysed. Regardless of the level of opportunities, all member states facing tensions in their relationship with the EU have decided to join the BRI, whereas most states enjoying fluent relations with the EU decided to reject an official participation in the initiative. Of those countries analysed which have good relations with the EU, only

⁶³ CHEN, B., "The Belt and Road Initiative: How European Businesses Can Benefit.", 2018. Available at <<http://www.china-briefing.com/news/belt-road-initiative-how-european-businesses-can-benefit/>>.

⁶⁴ RICHET, X., RUET, J. and WANG, X., "New Belts and Roads: Redrawing EU-China Relations", en Alessia Amighini (ed) *China's Belt and Road: A Game Changer?*, Milano, ISPI, 2017, p. 105.

⁶⁵ EUROPENOW, "Belt and Road Initiative in Europe: Reaching Beyond Asia", *Op. Cit.*

Rumania and Portugal have decided to take part in the initiative officially. In other words, the existence of tensions with the European Commission is a *sufficient* condition for the occurrence of a specific outcome (i.e., the member state's official participation in the BRI), whereas the presence of medium or even high-level economic opportunities does not raise the probability of pledging official support to the initiative.

The case of Rumania, which is not facing tensions with the European Commission, can be explained for the medium-level opportunities offered by the initiative and by the push exerted by the decision taken by the big economies in Eastern Europe in favour of the BRI. In fact, following the decision made by the biggest economies in the region, other neighbouring member states with smaller economies (Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia and Slovakia) also decided to join the initiative, regardless of their lack of tensions with the EU. On the contrary, the case of Portugal cannot be explained either by economic or political reasons: the initiative is offering low-level opportunities to the country (just one relevant project), and Lisbon's relationship with Brussels is far from being turbulent. The decision of Portugal certainly broke the unity of response in the Western part of the EU, characterised by a critical stance on the initiative, and therefore it deserves future monitoring in order to shed light on its details.

Excluding the few countries mentioned in the previous paragraph, the rest of the EU member states can be classified in the following chart:

Table 1: Influence of political and economic factors in state attitude on the BRI

	Absence of tensions with the EU	Existence of tensions with the EU
Low-level opportunities	No official participation ⁶⁶	Official participation ⁶⁷
Medium-level opportunities	No official participation ⁶⁸	Official participation ⁶⁹
High-level opportunities	No official participation ⁷⁰	Official participation ⁷¹

⁶⁶ Western and Northern member states, excluding Germany and France: minor projects - no tensions with the EU.

⁶⁷ Czech: one minor project - tensions with the EU; Italy: one big project, although increased competition with Greece - tensions with the EU.

⁶⁸ France: one big project and considerable investment opportunities - no tensions with the EU; Spain: three big projects - no tensions with the EU.

⁶⁹ Hungary and Poland: one big project in each country, additional qualitative effects on the economy if they become an important Chinese trade hub in Europe - tensions with the EU.

⁷⁰ Germany: investment in five railway projects - no tensions with the EU.

⁷¹ Greece: three big projects, increased opportunities as it becomes a Chinese maritime gateway to Europe - tensions with the EU.

As can be seen in the chart, there is a clear preponderance of the role of political factors and the nature of the relationship of each member state with the European Commission above economic considerations. Indeed, the level of opportunities posed by the initiative has no noticeable effect on determining the states' response. The most extreme comparison can be obtained from the cases of Czech and Italy on the one side, countries with strained relations with the European Commission that even though they can only benefit from low-level opportunities have decided to join the initiative, and Germany on the other side, a country with fluent relations with the European Commission that has decided not to officially support the BRI in spite of the high-level opportunities posed to it by the initiative.

V. CONCLUSION

The EU has clearly failed to deliver a common response on the BRI, developing each member state its own strategy depending on its own internal and external circumstances. Among those circumstances, political factors, understood as the absence or existence of tensions with the EU, have been proven to significantly influence the final outcome.

The region that has supported the BRI in the most proactive way has been Eastern Europe, in which the most favourable confluence of economic and political factors is found: three of the four largest economies in the area (Czech, Hungary and Poland) are facing tensions with the European Commission, with the two latter enjoying middle-level opportunities from the initiative. On the contrary, no member state in Western or northern Europe has officially endorsed the initiative, given that the lack of tensions with the EU provides no incentive that could compensate for the presence of only low-medium level economic opportunities offered by the BRI to most of the countries in the region. For its part, Southern and Mediterranean Europe is a much more heterogeneous region, involving countries with diverse circumstances and, therefore, heterogeneous responses.

The diverging circumstances of EU member states make the adoption of a common EU approach on the BRI difficult. The cases of Greece, Hungary and Poland, strong supporters of the initiative, are especially noteworthy, with the latter even refusing to sign a report compiled by EU ambassadors to Beijing with a critical stance on the BRI⁷². Depending on their situation, some member states regard the initiative as a threat, while others regard it as an opportunity, not only to foster economic growth, but also to send a powerful message to the EU which stresses that they are sovereign states capable of developing not only their own foreign policy, but also a foreign policy that is at odds with the stance of the European Commission.

There is a possibility that the success of China in the control of Covid-19 and the severe damage suffered by European economies after the outbreak of the pandemic might invite

⁷² HEIDE, D., HOPPE, T., SCHEUER, S. and STRATMANN, K., "EU ambassadors band together against Silk Road.", 2018. Available at <<https://www.handelsblatt.com/today/politics/china-first-eu-ambassadors-band-together-against-silk-road/23581860.html>>.

some EU member states to officially join the BRI in the seek for funding and new growth opportunities in spite of the absence of political tensions with the European Commission. However, as this paper has shown, political factors have outweighed the economic ones when it comes to the official participation of member states in the BRI so far. Therefore, a successful policy of economic reconstruction at the EU level might keep them away from the initiative even under a situation of economic crisis, as long as they maintain a fluent relationship with the European Commission. As seen with the preponderance of political factors in the behaviour of member states in the case this paper is dealing with, solving its internal problems is for the EU the essential prerequisite for the implementation of a strong and effective foreign policy not only on the BRI, but also on the growing challenges of the new century.