

Cumpănașu, Bogdan Lucian

**Article**

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## China's linkages and leverages in Central and Eastern Europe – a new challenge for EU

Bogdan Lucian CUMPĂNAȘU\*

### Abstract

*Relying on the linkage and leverage theory, the paper aims at reviewing critical issues related to China's economic, cultural and political expansion in EU's Central and Eastern member states. Through the "17+1" format and "One Belt, One Road" initiative, China became an assertive competitor in Europe, acting on a "divide et impera" strategy through bilateral or multilateral negotiations, undermining the EU's cohesion. Also, the European Union is facing a movement of illiberal, nationalist or populist policies that occurred in the former Warsaw Pact countries which are trying to avoid Brussels' norms and therefore they are opened to other alternatives. In order to find out a pattern or relevant arguments for advancing a set of competing hypotheses or scenarios, a structured analytical technique will be applied, respectively "indicators or signposts of change", for the following countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. In this regard, the key indicators will refer to: economic factors, the strength of the civil society, the force of the opposition or of pro-European parties and the degree of Europeanization in the analysed states. Thereby, the article will advance three important questions: 1) Is EU in competition with China and how the confrontation takes place? 2) Which are the EU's countries more likely to strengthen the partnership with China? 3) Which are the EU's own linkages and leverages in its Eastern part and how they can be used for stopping China's advancement? The results will strengthen the idea that China became a real competitive actor, trying to expand in Europe, where the peripheral ex-communist states have been placed in the core of the confrontation. Also, the article will demonstrate that EU facing a real economic rival has the capabilities to stand up and therefore act as an international power.*

**Keywords:** European Union, Central and Eastern Europe, China, leverage, linkage, competition

### Introduction

In recent years, European Union (EU) is facing a growing number of multilateral initiatives or bilateral negotiations promoted by important actors of the international system, such as United States of America (USA), Russian Federation or China, pointing out a major swift in the geopolitical architecture, EU's former partners becoming possible competitors.

EU proved that the Union can have divergent interests in relation with:

a) USA:

– JCPOA issue on Iran, Paris Agreement on climate change or North Stream II;

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\*Bogdan Lucian CUMPĂNAȘU is PhD Student at National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania, e-mail: cumpanasu\_bogdan@yahoo.com.

– Trump’s Doctrine of selective isolationism (You, 2019) and the strategic American policy of providing LNG in Europe.

These misunderstandings determined USA to search for new partners within EU by developing a multilateral format of cooperation, respectively Three Seas Initiative.

b) Russian Federation. After Moscow annexed the Crimean Peninsula, it became obvious that the EU-Russia relations have deteriorated and moved from partnership to competition and could evolve into confrontation (Pop, 2016, p.61). Russia’s interference in influencing the parliamentary or presidential elections deployed in EU’s member states, by financing Eurosceptic parties or spreading fake news, demonstrated Moscow’s objective of dividing the Union. Also, energetic blackmail and maintaining EU’s dependence of Russian gas continue to keep Brussels vulnerable.

c) China. China’s increased economic and political footprint in Europe transformed the Asian state into a systemic rival or economic competitor for Europe, EU being forced to find a new approach in its relations with Beijing (Zeneli, 2019).

It is remarkable that the battle-competition is held in EU’s periphery, the Eastern and Central members being a target for Brussels’ rivals. In fact, these countries have a common communist past and part of them (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania) are slipping in illiberal and nationalist republics, criticizing EU and European norms, looking for easy or immediately alternatives, without measuring the long-way risk. It turns that the post-communist countries are transforming into an EU’s Achille’s tendon and as a gate for China’s expansionist interests. Along with economic investments, Beijing is promoting an alternative model of governance and a less transparent use of finance, more attractive for some EU’s leaders that are currently attacking Brussels’ bureaucracy.

Therefore, the article aims at reviewing critical issues related to China’s economic, cultural and political expansion in EU’s Central and Eastern member states and their vulnerabilities to Beijing’s initiatives. In order to combat China’s assertive policies, one of the focuses will be on EU’s own linkages and leverages that can be used for protecting and strengthening Brussels’ cohesion and international power.

## 1. Theoretical framework

China’s increasing influence in world is related to its pragmatic approach, which “*has elicited strong animosity from western countries*” (Maru, 2013) due to the fact that Beijing’s attractiveness resorts in disrespecting international norms and standards of transparency (Maru, 2013). Therefore, China capitalizes on the corruption existing in states which seek for easy and nontransparent solutions to their own economic and infrastructural deficiencies.

In this regard, a hypothesis is launched: more democratization and Europeanization entails a less influent Beijing. Simultaneously, if the EU's linkages and leverages become stronger, then China's power decreases.

Levitsky and Way's linkage and leverage theory (LLT) is an useful theoretical tool for analyzing the dynamics of China's relations with the post-communist EU countries and separately, Beijing – Brussels statute.

LLT emphasizes the degree of democratization in the analyzed countries through the international influence, pointing out that “*governments in weak states with small, aid-dependent economies are more vulnerable to external pressure than those of larger countries with substantial military and/or economic power*” (Levitsky and Way, 2010, pp. 39-41). “*Leverage thus refers not to the exercise of external pressure, per se, but rather to a country's vulnerability to such pressure*” (Levitsky and Way, 2010, p.40).

According to the LLT, linkages represent a multitude of ties in different sectors (political, economic, social, diplomatic and organizational) and trans-boundary flows of capital goods, services, people and information.

Levitsky and Way refer to the geographic proximity as an important linkage, by favouring interdependence among countries, but also identify 6 dimensions of linkages:

- *economic linkage (flows of trade, investment and credit);*
- *intergovernmental linkage (bilateral diplomatic and military ties as well as participation in alliances and treaties);*
- *technocratic linkage (a country's elite that is educated abroad or has professional ties with universities or institutions from other state);*
- *social linkage (tourism, immigration, refugee flows);*
- *information linkage;*
- *civil society linkage” (Levitsky and Way, 2010, p.44).*

However, LLT has its own limits, confining to a set of quantifiable factors that underline if political regimes democratise or not (Hughes and Sasse, 2016, p. 314), without taking in account other relevant international actors, besides the West. In this article, linkages and leverages will be extended referring to EU-China relations from the perspective of their influence in CEE and determining which LL are stronger: promotion of democratic norms and values or pragmatic economic ties.

At the same time, China's expansion in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) behaves as a snowballing effect. Beijing's expectations are relying on their successful initiatives in one or more

post-communist European states that will be capable of triggering a comparable favourable situation almost simultaneously in a different country (Huntigton, 1991, p. 33).

## **2. EU's linkages and leverages in Central Eastern Europe (CEE)**

### *2.1. CEE states in transition – EU as a model of governance*

After the fall of Iron Curtain and the removal of the oppressive communist regimes, the former Warsaw Pact members have voluntarily embraced the democratic values, EU being perceived as a model of governance. Hence, the new strategic goal for the post-communist countries had become EU's adherence, for which CEE states were willing to reform and democratize. Therewith, EU political model is represented by democratization and the effects of Europeanization can be applied successfully only on a democratized society (Cumpanasu, 2018, p.188).

Immediately after the collapse of communism, Western linkages rapidly developed in CEE countries by opening trade. Also, the former communist countries experienced a major flow of Occidental investors, media, NGOs, subsidiaries of multinational companies or universities (*Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 87*). *“Moreover, linkage, geographic proximity, and security concerns motivated an unprecedented degree of Western intervention in the domestic politics and policies of Eastern European states” (Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 88).*

In this regard, EU represented a fusion of linkages and leverages which permitted democratic conditionality in CEE states consistently and thoroughly, within this context the integration process meant that the reform in post-communist countries would engage in all sectors of public activity and interest (*Levitsky and Way, 2010, p. 88*).

EU promotion of democracy in CEE countries relied on two factors: convergence and conditionality. Before EU accession, convergence, defined as *“a system conformity produced by the spread and acceptance of democratic norms” (Kubicek, 2003, p.12)*, was a powerful tool in the post-communist countries. CEE states were discovering once again the common cultural legacy with Western Europe, part of the new elites were educated beyond the Iron Curtain or were Europhiles, the euro-vibrant civil society became to gain a more important role in the state's foreign and internal policies, while a successful economy meant open trade with EU.

In addition, conditionality expresses literary persuasion in adopting a given policy, by offering *carrots and sticks*. EU is not the only actor which uses these tool, other actors are doing as well, but is important to determine *“whether and under what conditions can conditionality actually work?” (Kubicek, 2003, p.17).*

## 2.2. CEE in EU – From Europeanization to illiberalism

Kubicek points out 4 important factors of conditionality: “*sizable carrots*” (powerful incentives offered by external actors), “*real sticks*” (the external actor is able to offer strong incentives), “*lack of alternatives*” (states are dependent by one or a limited amount of international actors) and “*transnational networks*” (Kubicek, 2003, p. 20).

After the former communist countries managed to obtain EU's membership, the most important carrot was consumed. Furthermore, EU's real stick, the trigger of Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty, a mechanism intended for deterring member states from shifting off democratic path and European norms and values (Martin, 2018) and considered as a nuclear solution, has proved inefficient.

Poland, Hungary and recently Romania demonstrated that were capable of reversing almost two decades of constant Europeanization, towards a less democratic political turn. Characterized by an oligarchic leading class, with access both to national resources and European funds as well, the illiberal political movements that occurred in the Eastern members of EU challenge the rule of law by: interfering in judicial system, limiting or harming civil society and freedoms, controlling media and even crushing protest movements (Romania-Insider, 2018).

EU's major security threats, such as illegal immigration from MENA, economic crisis, major terrorist attacks in Western Europe and an aggressive Russia in East weakened the Union and favored populist and anti-European political movements to gain power.

Also, a dynamic multilateral world brought new powerful actors in Europe, and therefore the post-communist states faced new alternatives. The model of authoritarian governance, implemented with success in East (Russian Federation, China and Turkey) is tenting for the countries where EU's linkages and leverages become weaker.

Therefore, EU realized the importance of its own cohesion, and in the context of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Sibiu Declaration, released after the Informal Summit of Heads of State or Government of the EU, pointed out a major swift in Europe's strategic goals, respectively strengthening EU's unity. Hence, the message urge for: “*defending one Europe – from East to West, from North to South because in the past millions of people fought for their freedom and for unity and brought down the Iron Curtain, which had divided Europe for decades; looking for join solutions; staying united, through thick and thin*” (Council of the European Union, 2019).

### 3. China's interests in CEE – a new competitor for EU

China's involvement in CEE has raised concerns in Brussels, Beijing's divisive strategy revealed its preference for a fragmented Europe (Pepe, 2017, p. 1). This behavior, completed by an increased political and economic mark in Europe changed EU's approach, China being considered, simultaneously:

- *“a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives”* (European Commission, 2019, p. 1);
- *“a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests”* (European Commission, 2019, p. 1);
- *“an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership”* (European Commission, 2019, p.1);
- *“a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance”* (European Commission, 2019, p.1).

Therefore, Brussels describes Beijing for the first time as a systematic rival and the trend is to transform China from a strategic partner to a negotiating one. The relations between the two actors are sensible, due to the fact that *“China is the second largest trade partner for the EU, constituting 20 percent of European imports and almost 10 percent of its exports”* (Zeneli, 2017).

China's advance in CEE is characterized by Beijing's different strategic view on Europe, by splitting into *“two distinct zones consisting of the West and the East, based on variances in economic wealth and technological advancement”* (Zeneli, 2016). In this regard, CEE countries are perceived as an opportunity for China to *“leverage its growing economic and political influence with the EU as a whole”* (Zeneli, 2016).

China – CEE cooperation underlines a Beijing's *divide et impera* strategy, by negotiating bilaterally or multilaterally with the post-communist countries, in order to *“acquire national technological and industrial assets while bypassing EU regulations”* (Pepe, 2017, p. 3).

In the same time, together with economic and financial benefits, CEE states are interested to engage a strong relation with China from a strategic point of view, by transforming Beijing as a counterbalance to EU and Russia influence in the zone. Practically, CEE countries that usually promote their individual interest, have now an alternative that strengthens negotiation power in relations with EU and get a solution to Russia's blackmail in energy sector. Moreover, intensifying ties and linkages with China, EU leverages are weakened and EU common objectives are affected.

“17+1” format, part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promotes cooperation in trade, investment and transportation. BRI has also a geopolitical goal, China intends to become the world economic leader through an integrated transcontinental economic and commercial structure, under Chinese control.



Even though on the short period Chinese investments are attractive, examples of heavily indebted BRI countries to Beijing should concern CEE states. Practically, China is accused of “*leveraging its economic capacity to take control of strategically important infrastructure assets*” (Chan, 2019) and Beijing influence in CEE could use trade, infrastructure and investments to extend its influence on security and politics aspects.

#### *EU measures for combating Chinese expansion in CEE*

In the same time, EU perceived China as a competitor and Brussels is acting both internally and externally to limit Chinese influence, by:

- Challenging Beijing in Asia. In September 2018, Brussels launched EU strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia, “*with concrete policy proposals and initiatives, including interoperable transport, energy and digital networks*” (European Commission, 2018, p.1). The EU initiative can be perceived as balancing Chinese BRI, but based on European norms and principles.

- Forcing China to respect international rules. In order to protect its internal competitive market, EU is taking anti-dumping measures, the last European Commission investigations (2017) concluded that the Chinese government interferes with the industry sector, by offering significant state support to the producers (European Commission, 2017).

Therefore, in the EU-China: A Strategic Outlook document, Brussels expresses its will for a balanced relationship with Beijing, based on fair competition and market access by convincing China to make reforms in industrial sector (European Commission, 2019).

- Signing Economic Partnership Agreements with China's rivals. The EU – Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, signed in February 2019, created the largest open trade zone in the world which follows “*to increase the economic growth between the EU and Japan and removes the trade barriers*” (Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania, 2019, p. 2). Japan became a partner for EU due to a common support for democratic values and a global trade that respects international norms (Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania, 2019).

In conclusion, EU has the instruments to compete with China as a result of being a world commercial power, with a smart trade strategy. Despite numerous challenges, EU search for cohesion and unity and is important to determine the factors that could affect the Union, internally. EU remains committed to democratic norms and values, which continues to represent a powerful linkage within member states. Nonetheless, the selfish and irresponsible attitude of CEE countries could represent an Achile's tendon.



### 3. EU's countries more likely to strengthen the partnership with China

In this chapter, the statistical data analysis will demonstrate the hypothesis mentioned before: more democratization and Europeanization entails a less influent Beijing.

The indicators that were taken in consideration are related to:

a) linkages and leverages theory, such as economic linkages (Chinese direct investments in EU) and technocratic (the number of Confucius cultural institutes in the analyzed countries);

Data referring to intergovernmental linkage are difficult to explain, due to NATO's membership of CEE states and the inexistence of major shifts in this regard (as happened with the military relations between Russian Federation and Turkey, which represent a real risk to NATO).

Because China's soft power in Europe is projected especially through the cultural linkage, the Confucius institutes representing an important indicator, a real channel for Beijing to export its messages and an efficient tool to cultivate sinophiles.

b) values that define a country as a real democracy or an autocratic one (such as governance accountability, quality of democracy and freedom status), with a liberal or illiberal economy.

The applicability is detailed below (Table 1).

c) internal vulnerability of a country revealed through governance executive capacity. An inefficient or vulnerable state is more likely to make concessions in comparison with a strong actor, in order to gain easy and nontransparent financial support, which eventually could lead the country to a dangerous and instable path.

In this regard, Table 1 contains data related to the following indicators:

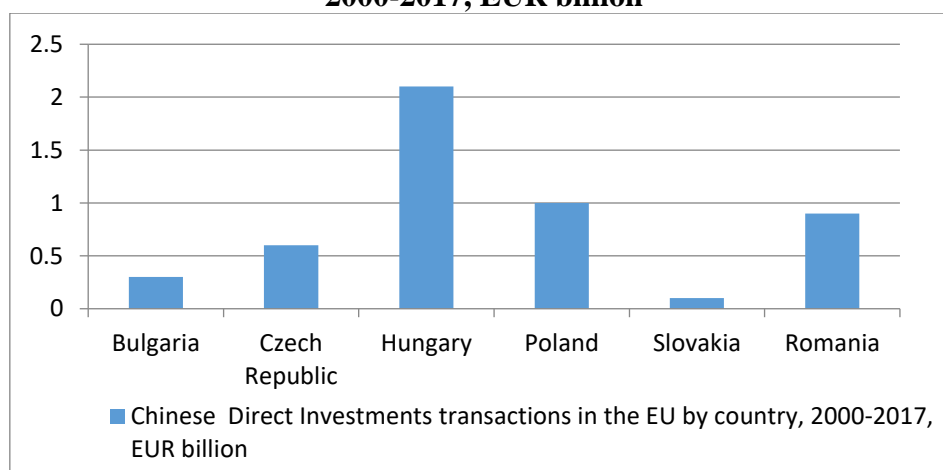
- Economic policies performance (values regarding labor markets, taxes, budgets, research and innovation or global financial system);
- Quality of democracy (electoral process, access to information, civil rights and political liberties, rule of law);
- Governance executive capacity (strategic capacity, inter-ministerial coordination, evidence-based instruments, societal consultation, policy communication, implementation, adaptability);
- Governance executive accountability (citizens' participatory competence, legislative actors' resources, media, parties and interest association);
- Freedom status (freedom rating, political rights, civil liberties).

**Table 1. Quality of governance in Central and Eastern European countries**

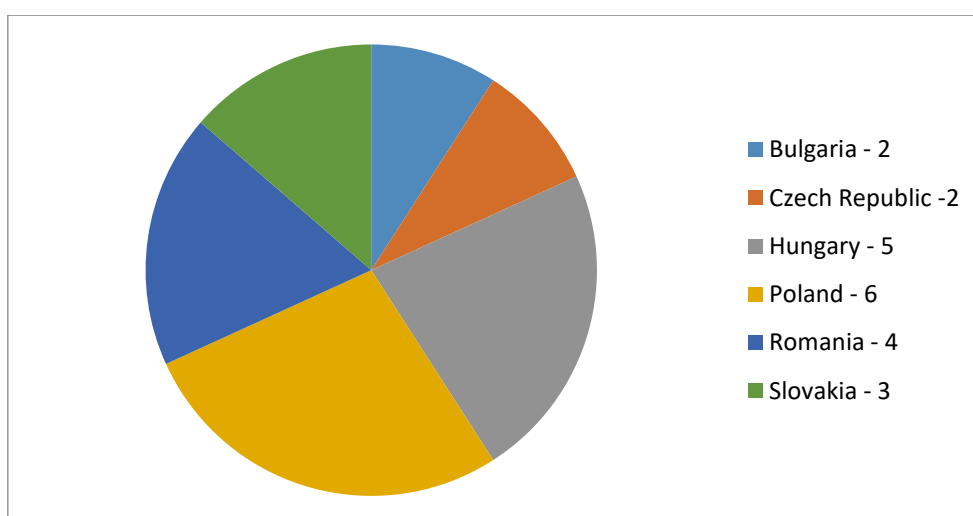
Indicators	Bulgaria	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia	Romania
Economic policies performance	5,6	6,6	5,1	5,9	5,5	4,9
Quality of democracy	5,7	7,3	3,5	5,3	6,8	5,1
Governance – executive capacity	4,8	5,4	5,0	5,2	5,0	4,3
Governance – executive accountability	5,6	6,6	4,8	5,4	5,4	5,0
Freedom status	80/100	91/100	70/100	84/100	81/100	88/100

Source: Sustainable Governance Indicators Survey (2018) and United Nations Development Programme (2019)

In Figures 1 and 2 data about the Chinese Direct Investments transactions in CEE countries are included, between 2000 and 2017 and the number of Confucius Institutes.

**Figure 1. Economic linkages: Chinese Direct Investments transactions in the EU by country, 2000-2017, EUR billion**

Source: Hanemann and Huotari (2018)

**Figure 2. Cultural linkages: China's Confucius Institutes in CEE - 2018**

Source: Statista, 2019

The data from Table 1 is interlinked with the one in Figure 1 and Figure 2, and one conclusion is obvious: countries like Hungary and Poland, with the lowest indicators benefited of substantial Chinese investments. An explanation could be related to the fact that China's inexistent pressure against bribery or on the use of money makes it an attractive loaner for corrupt and illiberal countries. Also, Beijing could become an alternative for these countries if EU would impose conditionalities for accessing the communitarian funds by respecting the rule of law.

In case of Romania, the high Chinese investments could be the result of the generalized corruption and historical good ties with Beijing in the communist period, when Romanian experts in different fields were sent in China. Nowadays, some of them, educated as sinophiles in the communist period are occupying important governmental positions in Bucharest (G4media, 2019) and are trying to favor and promote Chinese interests in Romania.

The pragmatic economic approach of Czech Republic can explain the high Chinese investments. Also, misunderstanding with EU on the sanctions against Russian Federation intensified ties between Prague and other major actors, including China.

Being one of the most corrupt countries in EU, Bulgaria is vulnerable to Beijing's initiatives and as a forecast this state could become the new gate of China in Europe.

Slovakia, the country with the lowest funds from Beijing and consequently the best indicators is an example that China will not invest in strong and stable states where the rule of law is respected.

Related to the Confucius Institutes, the great values for Poland (6) and Romania (4) could be explained the geographical factors, the two countries being the biggest in the Central and Eastern Europe and also have a major strategic relevance for Beijing.

The anomaly is registered for Hungary (5), which demonstrates that Orban's regime is an important partner for Beijing. Therefore, data confirmed that the countries where China's indicators had the biggest rating (HU, PL, RO) are in fact the same states with the lowest values of economic policies performance (HU, RO), quality of democracy (HU, RO, PL), governance executive capacity (RO, HU), governance executive accountability (HU, RO, PL) and freedom status (HU).

In conclusion, the countries more likely to strengthen the partnership with China are influenced by the level of democratization and Europeanization; more critics are addressed to EU, more bridges are constructed with Beijing. Nonetheless, against two of these countries, Hungary and Poland, EU triggered Article 7. The case of Hungary is special due to the fact that this state represents the EU's weak link and is the most vulnerable to China's expansion in CEE. Also, Budapest has remarked by repeatedly contesting Brussels and governmentally promoting an illiberal movement.

## Conclusion

EU's commercial power offered Brussels a great opportunity to act as a competitive global actor, especially in the economic field. EU's approach as a promoter of fair, transparent and innovative business, with respect for democratic norms and values represented a real soft power instrument and attracted powerful like-minded actors, such as Japan, Canada and even Mercosur region. Therefore, EU successfully managed to capitalize on its assets by expanding its competitive market in the world.

Brussels' new paradigm was integrated in 2016, in the EU's Foreign and Security Policy Global Strategy, by envisaging that:

- “EU will promote a rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core” (European Union External Action, 2016, p. 8);
- “EU will engage with others” (European Union External Action, 2016, p. 8);
- “EU will be a responsible global stakeholder (...) we will work with core partners, like-minded countries and regional groupings. We will deepen our partnership with civil society and the private sector as key players in a networked world” (European Union External Action, 2016, p. 8).

This attitude also brought powerful competitors for Brussels which clearly demonstrated that they follow to limit EU's power and to access EU's know-how in different domains. The easiest way to stop EU's great economic power was to affect its own cohesion and unity and therefore, the CEE countries became a target. Characterised by a post-communist transition, corruption, populism and being more vulnerable to external factors than the Western states, but in the same time part of EU's market and administrative structures, CEE countries are attractive to Brussels' competitors.

Lately, EU demonstrated that the Union became mature and realised the threats which challenge Brussels' power in a more competitive and aggressive international stage. Therefore, the efforts for democratising the CEE countries need to continue and a more Europeanization, interdependent and interconnected Europe could defeat the populist movements and illiberal policies. EU still has sufficient *carrots* both for its members and also for the vicinity, but is important how to use and advertise them.

In conclusion, CEE countries cannot strive in a competitive world without EU, CEE countries still need reforms and also CEE countries should realise their great importance and potential by using them in favour of the Union, strengthening and not weakening Brussels'.

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