

Economic Cooperation and Development Strategies in New Energy Technology Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries in the 21st Century

Mingchen He^{1,a,*}

¹Shanghai Minhang Crosspoint Academy, Shanghai, China

a. huangmirun@ldy.edu.rs

*corresponding author

Abstract: In the 21st century, the economic cooperation in new energy technologies between China and Central Eastern European countries is becoming more and more important. China, being the world's largest energy consumer and a significant investor in sustainable energy, plays a pivotal role in this global transformation. This paper will study about the current state of this cooperation, existing challenges and opportunities. It will also talk about the development strategies for strengthening collaboration. The case study will be focused a successful program between China and Poland, highlighting the factors that contributed to its achievements. On the contrary, the failed project between China and Romania is also examined to understand the experiences and lessons. The paper aims to offer ideas and advices on improving economic and technological cooperation in the new energy sector. By highlighting the key experiences, fully showing the potential of the partnership between China and Central Eastern European countries in developing sustainable energy in the future.

Keywords: Economic cooperation, renewable energy, sustainable development, investment.

1. Introduction

In the present era, the global energy landscape is undergoing a transformative shift towards sustainable energy sources and the adoption of innovative energy technologies. This transition is fueled by the pressing need to combat climate change, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and ensure energy security [1]. Concurrently, the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries possess the potential to become crucial partners in the development of new energy technologies, owing to their strategic location and burgeoning economies [2]. In recent years, the collaboration between China and CEE nations in the realm of new energy technology has been steadily growing. The “16+1” initiative, launched in 2012, provided a platform for economic cooperation between China and CEE countries, including in the energy sector [3]. This “16+1” initiative serves as a cooperative framework between China and CEE countries, facilitating communication and mutual assistance across various fields. Chinese companies have also invested in energy programs within these countries, such as solar power plants in Hungary. Joint research and development projects between China and CEE countries have been undertaken, focusing on areas like energy storage and electric vehicles. However, the current level of cooperation and development strategies between them in new energy technology remains insufficient and faces challenges, such as differences in technological capabilities, market

dynamics, and regulatory frameworks [4]. To enhance cooperation and address these challenges, it is imperative to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current situation and explore further opportunities in this domain.

For the reason of choosing this topic, I think that the studying of the economic cooperation and development strategies in new energy technology between China and CEE countries cannot be ignored. It can contribute to the global sustainable development and provide valuable view and suggestions to this field. Since the 21st century, China is always seeking cooperation with the countries in the world especially about economy and technology. The project of the new energy is a part of the collaboration between China and these relatively young countries in the Central and Eastern Europe. The advantages of China and CEE countries are complementary, China has better technology and finance, those countries have better market potential. So, the topic is study-worthy.

About the structure of the paper's central part, I will first discuss the Current situation of Economic Cooperation and advantages, then the challenges. Finally, I will write about the development strategies, the chances of cooperation will be dispersed.

2. Background

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 led to many Central and Eastern European (CEE) nations, which were part of the Soviet Bloc, recognizing the new government and forging diplomatic ties with China. During this period, China and CEE countries maintained a relatively close relationship based on shared socialist ideologies and political systems. However, the relationship between China and the CEE countries underwent transformations with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communist regimes in those nations. Many CEE countries initiated the process of political and economic transition, seeking closer integration with Western Europe and the United States. During this phase, Chinese contact with CEE countries was relatively limited. In 2012, China and 16 CEE nations—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia—launched the “16+1” initiative. The objective of this initiative was to strengthen economic, cultural, and political relations between China and the Central and Eastern European region, focusing on areas such as trade, investment, infrastructure, and cultural exchange. These countries also hold annual summits to promote cooperation and identify new opportunities for collaboration. In the 21st century, China also initiated the Belt and Road initiative, which is closely related to the “16+1” format. The Belt and Road is an extensive infrastructure and investment project connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Notable examples of this program include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), including the development of the Gwadar Port, and the China-Europe train. The initiative attracted the interest of many CEE countries. Although some European Union member states expressed concerns about Chinese increasing influence in the region, many CEE countries expressed their solidarity with the EU and aimed to maintain a balanced relationship.

Regarding global sustainable energy cooperation, as the world grapples with the pressing need to address climate change and transition to a low-carbon economy, which have already become hot topics, international collaboration in the field of new energy technologies is becoming increasingly crucial. Governments, corporations, and research institutions are investing in the development and deployment of renewable energy sources, such as solar power, wind power, and hydropower. This global trend has led to the emergence of new partnerships and initiatives aimed at promoting cooperation and resource sharing in the new energy sector. For instance, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) is an international organization established in 2009^{1.26} to actively promote the rapid transition of renewable energy to widespread and sustainable use. Additionally, the Clean Energy Ministerial brings together energy ministers from major economies worldwide to boost clean energy policies and practices [5]. In this context, the cooperation between China and Central and

Eastern European (CEE) countries in the area of new energy technology represents a significant contribution to global trends. Since 1991, the market economy in some CEE countries has remained relatively unstable, and these initiatives can aid in their market development. Furthermore, new energy technology can be a relatively new field in economic development, similar to Chinese electric vehicle companies [6].

Recent studies examined growing collaboration between China and Central Eastern Europe and analyzed the motivation of China such as expanding economic influence and gain political supports, advantages of attracting Chinese investment and motivating economic growth in Central Eastern Europe. More details and data about the cooperation will be shown in later paragraphs.

3. Current Situation

These years, the economic collaboration between China and CEE countries in the field of new technology is growing stably. The collaboration model is basically based on the “17+1” platform, promoting cooperation in various sectors including energy. The main fields of collaboration of new energy are mainly about renewable energy like solar power, wind power and hydropower, energy efficiency problems and smart grid technology [6]. This is a technology that achieve the goal of a safe, economical, efficient and environmentally friendly power grid by building integrated, high-speed network and using more advanced technique, also called “Power grid 2.0” [7]. China and CEEC are working together on research and development of the electric vehicles, but the relationship is mainly related to production and investment yet [8]. For example, famous battery supplier of electric cars-Contemporary Amperex Technology (CATL) built a battery factory in Hungary. BYD and Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation (SAIC) also want to build their factories. Great Wall Motor acquired an automobile factory in Bulgaria to produce and export new energy vehicles [9].

There are two instances of Chinese renewable energy ventures in Central and Eastern European nations. Firstly, the Mozura Wind Farm in Montenegro, constructed by Shanghai Electric Power Company and Malta’s state energy provider Enemalta in 2019. This 46 MW wind farm, comprising 23 turbines, stands as one of Montenegro’s largest renewable energy undertakings. “Establishing cooperation between one of the EU’s smallest members and one of the world’s largest economies was no easy feat,” stated Malta’s Minister for Energy and Water Management, “but ultimately, the project presented a unique opportunity to partake in the development of Eastern Europe’s energy sector.” [10]. According to Montenegro’s Minister of Economy, the alliance between China and Malta also exemplifies a new level of collaboration between China and the EU [11]. The second example is the Photovoltaic Power Plant in Hungary. In 2020, China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation (CMC) erected a 100 MW photovoltaic power plant in Kaposvar, Hungary, an area conducive to solar power generation. This project stands as one of Central European largest solar power plants, financed by the China Development Bank, with a total investment of around 100 million Euros [12]. The power plant is anticipated to supply sufficient electricity for approximately 50,000 households [9].

The swift advancement of innovative energy technologies, such as highly efficient solar panels and wind turbines, has opened up more avenues for collaboration between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. China’s extensive expertise and professionalism in producing and utilizing these technologies on a large scale are particularly valuable for CEE nations seeking to expand their renewable energy capacity [13]. The rising demand for clean energy solutions, fueled by heightened awareness of environmental protection’s importance, coupled with the declining costs of new energy technologies due to increasingly mature techniques, has made investments in the renewable energy sector more appealing [14]. The Belt and Road Initiative has provided a framework for financing and developing new energy projects in Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). However, the cooperation between China and these nations in the new energy sector has been

influenced by other geopolitical dynamics, such as the European Union's efforts to strike a balance in its relations with China and the United States. While some CEE countries aim to leverage their cooperation with China to gain more influence within the EU, others remain more cautious about engaging with China due to concerns over potential political influence [15].

The cooperation between China and CEE countries in the new energy sector is driven by both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Bilateral cooperation was promoted through various agreements, such as joint declarations, outlining specific areas of collaboration and investment [6]. Multilateral cooperation is mainly proceeded through the "17+1" platform, which includes regular summits, ministerial meetings, and working groups focused on energy and other sectors [16]. Other multilateral mechanisms, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the EU-China Connection Platform also played a role in supporting new energy projects and relationships between China and CEEC [10,17].

4. Challenges and Chances

Though the cooperation between China and Central Eastern Europe countries about new energy technology is keep growing, there are some new challenges appeared, possibly be obstructive to the further development of the relationship. The first main challenge is the lack of clear and more consistent framework for cooperation, it may bring more uncertainty to the cooperative projects [6]. Some people are also questionable to the projects funded by China about their stability and sustainability, especially in the field of debt management and impacts to the environment [14].

Another main challenge is asymmetry in economy and politic between China and CEE countries, this situation may create imbalances in the negotiation and implementation of agreements [16]. Some CEE countries also expressed worry about being too dependent to Chinese investments and techniques, probably limiting their own ability of independent diplomacy and economy. The differences between CEEC are also not small, providing obstruction to the cooperation. Some countries these years have closer connection with USA like three Baltic states and Poland. Countries like Serbia are closer to China, some of them are more interested in the topics of human rights like Czech [17]. There are also some countries feel unfair about the investment. The differences of nations, culture, politic due to the complexity of that region make this cooperation limited.

Boarder geopolitical tensions are also key challenges, such as the China and USA's competition and EU's efforts to unity [13]. These tense situations potentially restrict the range and the depth of new energy field's development [18].

We talked about many challenges, on the contrary, there are still new opportunities for collaboration and further development in the field of the new energy. The first one is very clear, global demand for clean energy is continuously growing, driving by the need of transition to the low-carbon environment and facing climate change [7]. More and more countries set up ambitious goals for sustainable energy, so China and CEE countries still have much potential to develop and innovate in these areas [12]. As the electric vehicle industry is in a period of vigorous development in China, like I mentioned in the first paragraph of the section 3, Chinese new energy vehicle companies can go to Central Eastern Europe for a bigger market opportunity.

Another appropriate chance is after the period of COVID-19, in these years, governments and organizations are more and more focused on the sustainable development and emphasize the importance of the efforts of both the economic recovery and clean energy. Investing the companies and infrastructure of clean energy can create new job opportunities and motivating economic growth [19]. So China and CEEC can use this unique chance to make more contribution to the local sustainable development by using their cooperation in this field to support green energy efforts [6]. Furthermore, a much newer chance is that digital technology such as artificial intelligence, big data and the Web of Things [13]. China and CEE countries can develop and deploy smart energy system

together like intelligent power grids and energy management systems, helping optimize production, allocation and consumption [12].

Finally, multilateral cooperation frameworks- “17+1” platform and the Belt and Road initiative which have already become the signal of the two regions’ cooperation. The beneficial environment provides the condition to deepen their cooperation and stimulates knowledge sharing and joint research, helping overcome some difficulties. The collaboration actually still has much potential to be deepened but the challenges should be solved at first as there are many different countries in the region of central eastern Europe [17].

5. Development Strategies

The paragraph discusses the strategies and policies implemented by China and Central Eastern European (CEE) countries to promote cooperation in the new energy technology sector. China has been actively pursuing its “Going Global” strategy, encouraging Chinese companies to invest and develop in overseas markets, particularly in regions like Africa, which have been overlooked by developed Western countries. This strategy encompasses the new energy sector as well. Concurrently, the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies, such as the Renewable Energy Law and the Energy Development Strategy Action Plan from the 14th Five-Year Plan (2014-2020), aimed at environmental protection, fostering the growth of renewable energy, and facilitating international collaboration [20]. This action plan outlines goals for a low-carbon transition, including increasing the share of non-fossil energy generation to approximately 39% by 2025, raising the share of electric energy in terminal energy usage to around 30%, and increasing the share of non-fossil energy consumption to roughly 20%. Furthermore, the plan targets a 25% share of non-fossil energy consumption by 2030 [21]. On the other hand, CEE countries have also implemented relevant policies to attract foreign investment and stimulate the development of the sustainable energy sector. For instance, Poland has set a target of 21%-23% renewable energy in final energy consumption by 2040, as outlined in its Energy Policy 2040 [22]. Similarly, the Hungarian National Energy Strategy 2030 highlights the potential for collaboration with China in the new energy technology domain and aims to increase the share of renewable energy in final energy consumption to 20% by 2030.

Platform is always a key part in the cooperation. As I mentioned before, there have already been cooperation platforms between China and CEEC. The most prominent platform is also the “17+1” mechanism, including a special working group of energy collaboration [16]. This group is focused on promote energy policies, joint research and business partnerships about the renewable energy and technology efficiency [23]. There are also other important platforms like the Investment Cooperation Fund for China-CEEC, providing financial support for joint programs of the new energy [17]. The China-CEEC Technology Transfer Center, it promotes the exchange of knowledge and technique between China and Central Eastern European companies and research institutions [6].

Market strategies are an important of the economic cooperation and development strategies. China and CEEC are continuously adopting different market strategies to facilitate the collaboration and development of clean energy techniques. At the same time, Chinese companies are also actively attend in new energy projects in CEEC, generally through joint companies or suppliers of technology and equipment [13]. For example, China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) participated in the construction of nuclear power stations in Bulgaria and Romania, Risen Energy provided solar panels to Poland and Hungary [6]. CEE countries are trying to create attractive and beneficial market environments to attract Chinese investment. Many of them have already introduced supportive plans like tax breaks to encourage the deployment of renewable energy. Additionally, some countries established special economic zones and dedicated industrial park such as the Renewable Energy Industrial Park in Poland, which also aiming to attract Chinese the foreign investments [24].

Furthermore, China and CEE countries are actually working together to develop marketing and branding strategies to complete their cooperation in the new energy sector. For instance, China-CEEC Expo every year in China has a special section for renewable energy, providing a platform for the companies in two places to show their products and services, look for business opportunities [19].

6. Case Study

In this part, I want to discuss about two classical examples in the economic cooperation including one successful example and an unsuccessful one, in order to learn from the experiences and avoid mistakes in the past. A successful example of the economic cooperation between China and the Central Eastern European countries in new energy technology is the wind power program between China and Poland. In 2009, Chinese Xinjiang Goldwind Science & Technology Co., which is among the biggest producers of wind turbines worldwide, established a joint venture named Goldwind Polska with a Polish sustainable energy company – Energoaparatura S.A.(Polish) to produce wind turbines in Poland. Goldwind Polska is actually a subsidiary corporation of Xinjiang Goldwind Science & Technology Co. in Poland. This joint venture allowed Goldwind company to establish a manufacture base in Europe and provide Energoaparatura the Goldwind's more advanced technology of the wind turbine at the same time. This partnership has been proved mutually beneficial. To Goldwind company, it can enter the huge European wind energy market. To Polish Energoaparatura, the cooperation enabled the company to shift from traditional power generation to producing modern wind turbines [25]. Until 2014, Goldwind Polska has invested over 100 million of Euro in Poland and created over 500 job opportunities [26]. In the first 9 months in 2023, its parent company-Golwind's total sales increased over 10% to CNY 29.3 billion compared to the last year-first nine months in 2022 [27]. This success of this Sino-Polish joint venture shows the strong potential of the successful collaboration between China and CEE countries in new energy technology.

On the contrary, there is an unsuccessful example which is the failure of the agreement between China and Romania to build new nuclear reactors at Romanian Cernavoda power plant. It shows the possible challenges in economic cooperation programs in China-CEEC cooperation. In 2015, Chinese state-owned nuclear company CGN signed an agreement with Romanian nuclear power corporation to build two new and additional reactors at the Cernavoda plant with the design of Chinese Hualong One reactor [28]. However, the project faced repeated delays due to the political and regulatory problems. Finally in 2020, Romania cancelled the agreement with CGN with the reasons of "significant delays" and the failure to meet the EU's criteria of the participation of the third countries in nuclear projects [29].

On a subsequent date, specifically October 9th, Virgil Popescu, the Romanian Minister of Economy, Energy, and Business Development, along with Dan Brouillette, the U.S. Energy Secretary, initialed a draft intergovernmental agreement to collaborate on the construction of two additional reactors and the renovation of Unit 1 at the Cernavoda nuclear power plant. This agreement signifies a substantial shift in Romania's plans for its sole nuclear reactor, as earlier in the year, China was slated to be the provider of the requisite knowledge and technology [30]. This result is not so strange as Romania is much closer with USA than with China in these years. The failed nuclear power plant agreement represented the difficulties that can appear when navigating different regulatory environments and political interests between China and CEE countries. It also highlighted the importance of careful planning and stakeholder coordination in the large-scale industrial projects.

In conclusion, there are some key experiences from the new energy technology economic cooperation between China and CEEC: Mutual benefit and localization which are from the Sino-Polish wind power partnership show that providing necessary benefits for two sides and benefits for local areas such as more jobs can increase the projects' acceptance. Hidden political risks and

regulatory problems are challenges which can destroy the cooperation programs, especially large industrial projects. So regulation and political wind should be given due consideration.

7. Analysis

This study has lucubrated the current situation, challenges, opportunities, and development strategies for economic cooperation between China and Central Eastern European countries in new energy technologies. The analysis highlighted that though bilateral trade and investment are growing rapidly, there are remaining major obstacles like regulation, political risks, and technology gaps to overcome. Case studies of the successful Sino-Polish wind power joint venture and the failed China-Romania nuclear agreement illustrated the key factors that can make or break such cooperation projects. The wind power example showed the importance of mutual benefits, local economic chances creation, and making up technology differences. In contrast, the nuclear agreement's failure highlighted the risks of regulatory mistakes and the lack of consideration of the political winds.

The collaboration and growth plans in novel energy technologies between China and Central Eastern European nations offer invaluable insights for both parties and the global community. Firstly, the significance of trust and comprehension fostered through open dialogue and cultural exchange cannot be underestimated. Secondly, harmonizing national policies and regulatory frameworks is pivotal for cultivating a conducive environment for cooperation. Thirdly, leveraging complementary strengths and knowledge-sharing can expedite the adoption of new energy technologies and promote sustainable progress. Moreover, the research underscores the necessity for robust governance mechanisms and efficient risk mitigation strategies to address the intricacies of transnational endeavors. Stakeholder engagement and public acceptance are also critical determinants for the successful execution of new energy initiatives.

While this study provides valuable views, it is important to point out its limitations. The range of study was limited to China and Central Eastern European countries, so the findings may not be directly applied to other regions or situations. Additionally, the analysis focused on a wide range of new energy technologies, and the deeper investigations into specific technologies or sectors could lead to additional views.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the economic cooperation and development strategies in new energy technology between China and Central Eastern European countries provide both opportunities and challenges. By using the lessons and experiences, solving disadvantages and further research, paving the way for more effective and sustainable collaboration partnerships to promote the transition towards a greener and more developed future world. Future studies could focus on specific technologies, such as solar power, hydrogen fuel, or electric vehicles to provide more targeted recommendations for policymakers and industry stakeholders because the new energy technologies are very attractive nowadays especially the research and development of clean energy vehicles of many large automobile enterprises. Expanding to other non-mainstream regions such as Latin America and Southeast Asia is also a nice research direction to explore more about specific situation of the cooperation and development strategies under different backgrounds.

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