

# To BRI or Not to BRI?

*A framing analysis on the European Union's member states' views on China's  
Belt and Road Initiative*

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## **Abstract**

The European Union's foreign and security policy has become an important asset for the union and its members to act upon the security challenges within and outside Europe. Even though the union's foreign and security policy is well established, research shows that it still has difficulties uniting all its member states to its foreign and security policy on different security challenges. An example of this is China's Belt and Road Initiative. By comparative framing analysis on five selected member states' governments, Estonia, Italy, Germany, France and Hungary, the thesis map and compare the different views the member states have on the BRI and identify in what ways the member states differ. The analysis concludes that there are differences and similarities in the five member states framing BRI. The thesis' findings contribute to the broader academic research that tries to understand why the member states has difficulties uniting behind a common foreign and security policy, especially where security challenges are involved.

**Keywords:** European Union's foreign and security policy, EU, MS, BRI, framing

# Table of Content

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. <i>Research Problem</i>	1
1.1.1. The European Union's Foreign and Security Policy	1
1.1.2. Belt and Road Initiative	2
1.1.3. The Initiative in Europe	2
1.2. <i>Aim and Research Questions</i>	3
<b>2. Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1. <i>Previous Research</i>	5
2.1.1. Difficulty to Have a United Union in Foreign and Security Policy	5
2.1.2. The European Union and Its Strategic Partnership with China	6
2.1.3. Studies of the Belt and Road Initiative	7
2.2. <i>Framing Theory</i>	12
<b>3. Method</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1. <i>Research Design</i>	15
3.2. <i>Choice of Member States</i>	16
3.3. <i>Analytical Framework</i>	17
3.4. <i>Empirical Material</i>	19
<b>4. Analysis</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1. <i>Estonia</i>	21
4.1.1. Economic Frame	21
4.1.2. Geopolitical Frame	23
4.1.3. National Frame	23
4.1.4. EU Frame	24
4.1.5. The Estonian Government's Framing of BRI	24
4.2. <i>Italy</i>	25
4.2.1. Economic Frame	25
4.2.2. Geopolitical Frame	26
4.2.3. National Frame	27
4.2.4. EU Frame	28
4.2.5. The Italian Government's Framing of BRI	29
4.3. <i>Germany</i>	29
4.3.1. Economic Frame	29
4.3.2. Geopolitical Frame	30
4.3.3. National Frame	31
4.3.4. EU Frame	31
4.3.5. The German Government's Framing of BRI	33
4.4. <i>France</i>	33
4.4.1. Economic Frame	33
4.4.2. Geopolitical Frame	33
4.4.3. National Frame	34
4.4.4. EU Frame	35
4.4.5. The French Government's Framing of BRI	35
4.5. <i>Hungary</i>	36
4.5.1. Economic Frame	36
4.5.2. Geopolitical Frame	37
4.5.3. National Frame	38
4.5.4. EU Frame	39

4.5.5.	The Hungarian Government's Framing of BRI	39
4.6.	<i>Comparison Between the Analysed Member States</i>	40
<b>5.</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>42</b>
5.1.	<i>Critical Discussion</i>	42
5.2.	<i>Conclusions</i>	44
5.3.	<i>Limitations</i>	44
<b>6.</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>46</b>
6.1.	<i>Literature</i>	46
6.1.1.	Academic Sources	46
6.1.2.	Internet Sources	50
6.1.3.	EU Sources	51
6.2.	<i>Empirical Material</i>	51
6.2.1.	Estonia	51
6.2.2.	Italy	54
6.2.3.	Germany	54
6.2.4.	France	56
6.2.5.	Hungary	57
<b>7.</b>	<b>Appendix</b>	<b>61</b>
7.1.	<i>Sources for the Empirical Material</i>	61
7.1.1.	Estonia	61
7.1.2.	Italy	63
7.1.3.	Germany	64
7.1.4.	France	66
7.1.5.	Hungary	67

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research Problem

### 1.1.1. The European Union's Foreign and Security Policy

The European Union's (EU) foreign and security policy has become an important asset for the union and its members to act upon the security challenges within and outside Europe. Even though the union's foreign and security policy was established several years ago, the union still has difficulties uniting all its member states (MS) to its foreign and security policy on specific issues (Chappell, Mawdsley and Petrov, 2016, pp. 1–2). The EU's foreign and security policy is shaped by an interaction between the national policies of the MS and EU policies. The interaction between the national and the EU level is due to the structure of the EU, an international organisation containing several states of Europe. Therefore, the foreign and security policy is a multilevel policy where the influence of the MS vis-à-vis the union varies depending on the specific policy issue addressed, and where the EU policy does not always mimic the national foreign policy of its MS (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, pp. 17-19).

The EU's foreign and security policy has made the MS more capable of handling different security challenges (Chappell, Mawdsley and Petrov, 2016, pp. 1–2). Also, a united Europe strengthens the EU's position in bilateral and multilateral relations with other states, particularly emerging powers (Whitman, 2010; Thomas, 2013, p. 311), such as China. However, research has shown several aspects, such as conflict of sovereignty (Brack, Coman and Crespy, 2019) and Atlantic solidarity vs European solidarity (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, pp. 20-21), cause difficulties for the MS to reach a common foreign and security policy. Despite the challenges of having a common foreign and security policy within the union, such policy is of interest to the MS.

One example where the MS' different views on security challenges are prominent and no common approach has been reached within the union is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese project is significant to the EU because the initiative reflects the general changes the union has done due to China's increasing dominance in the world. It affects the union and the MS differently, which, in return, amplify the union's internal challenges to unite its MS concerning China (Smith, 2016). Therefore, BRI could be regarded as a case of the EU striving to unite behind a common foreign and security policy but facing challenges regarding differences between the MS. By studying BRI in Europe, we might thus better understand what

difficulties the MS face to reach a common foreign and security policy. Given this situation, the research problem of this study is what obstacles there are for a united EU policy on China and, in particular, BRI. By exploring this question, we might better understand the EU's difficulties to reach a common foreign and security policy.

### **1.1.2. Belt and Road Initiative**

In 2013 China's President Xi Jinping launched BRI. It rests on the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, connecting South-East Asia to Europe through the Middle East and Central Asia. The Silk Road Economic Belt refers to land corridors, a network of infrastructure. The Maritime Silk Road are sea corridors, which aims to develop maritime trade traffic. These sea and land corridors are developed through Chinese investments and loans from Chinese banks and funds, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). They boost different states to start infrastructure projects. Over the years, BRI has become an umbrella for several types of Chinese projects across all continents. Instead of solely building railways and ports (Chatzky and McBride, 2020), China is expanding in other sectors, such as technology through its Digital Silk Road and health (Kurlantzick and West, n.d.) through the Health Silk Road (Lancaster, Rubin and Rapp-Hooper, 2020). BRI can be seen as China's strategy to achieve its foreign policy goals by increasing its global dominance and reshaping global governance, challenging the soft power and the world's dependence on the United States (Zhou and Esteban, 2018).

### **1.1.3. The Initiative in Europe**

BRI has become increasingly prominent in the EU. However, instead of approaching the EU as one possible partner, China has had simultaneous bilateral talks with some MS (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2020, pp. 53–55). As of today, two-third of the MS have become formal partners in the project. In some MS, essential infrastructure projects for the initiative in the region already exist (Hillman and Tippet, 2021). However, some states have remained sceptical to the initiative (Brattberg and Soula, 2018; Oertel, 2020).

China's bilateral agreements with single MS create an imbalance within the union, making some MS more dependent on China than others. These bilateral agreements have also damaged and divided the EU, threatening the unity of the union (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2020, pp. 53–55). It has been shown that the MS that have bilateral relations with China are less prone to accept the EU's will to strive towards a more critical approach to China since Chinese activities

in Europe harm the union and its security (Hillman and Tippet, 2021). Therefore, the EU cannot be critical of China and yet stay true to its values and interests to the same extent as before. Within the EU, has the project been problematised. For example, in Committee on Foreign Affairs' Report on a new EU-China strategy (2021/2037(INI)) (European Parliament, 2021). Furthermore, the Delegation of the EU to China has stated that the EU supports China's initiative if it follows international rules and regulations, such as maintaining an open and fair market and sustainability (Press and information team of the Delegation to CHINA, 2017). The delegation also emphasised the importance that the project benefits all concerned parties, that is, "(w)e want to bring down barriers, not create new ones" (Press and information team of the Delegation to CHINA, 2017, p. 1). The EU's message on BRI does not force the union's MS to obey this approach towards China's initiative, even though it would benefit the union to be united on the matter. However, the EU's stance towards BRI might have influenced its members. The EU policy will be dealt with further at the end of the thesis.

It could be argued that the EU needs to unite in addressing the risks with BRI (Hillman and Tippet, 2021). Some MS have requested a united position regarding China's further activities in the region, especially BRI (Brattberg and Soula, 2018; Oertel, 2020). However, other MS have emphasised the importance of the MS to decide what approach to BRI they should take (Li, Hofman and Geraci, 2020, p. 240). Consequently, there are differences among the MS' views on how the union should approach the BRI and what measures are necessary to manage the Chinese activities of the BRI in Europe. There are differences between the MS on responding and interacting with BRI and the EU position – if indeed there should be one. The different views the MS have on BRI and the EU's position in the matter affect the unity of the union and its strength to tackle future BRI activities in Europe, which poses security threats to the EU as a normative power and organisation in the international arena.

BRI can be seen as an example of difficulties that the MS face in reaching a common approach to an issue that would pose a security threat for the union.

## 1.2. Aim and Research Questions

The research aims to map and compare the different views the MS have on the BRI and identify in what ways the MS differ. By doing so, the findings of this thesis could contribute to our understanding of why the MS have difficulties uniting behind a common foreign and security

policy, especially where there are security challenges involved – as is the case with China and its BRI. Therefore, could the research contribute to the field of Political Science with a specialisation in crisis management and security.

Five of the 27 MS' views of BRI will be analysed in this study. They represent the MS' different stances on the project among the EU's members. (See the method section for an in-depth discussion about the choice of cases).

Following this, the research questions to be empirically explored are:

- What are the views on BRI in Hungary, Estonia, Italy, France, and Germany as documented in their respective government policies?
- What differences and similarities are there in the five governments' views on BRI?

A way of looking at these differences is through framing. Comparative framing analysis will be applied on official documentation depicting the five selected MS' governments views on BRI. Through previous research, four frames have been identified and coded in the analysed material, thus, to see the differences and similarities between the five cases. The frames will contribute to a comparison of the cases, which can answer the research question and the aim of the research. The five governments' views on BRI could be a way to look at the EU-China relation. In many regards, the EU-China relation reflects the difficulties for the EU to unite in common security and foreign policy, highlighted by academic research.



## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Previous Research

To compare the MS views on BRI in Europe and identify in what ways the MS differs, it is necessary to understand the research that has been made regarding general difficulties for the MS to reach a shared foreign and security policy. Furthermore, it is beneficial to understand the difficulties between the EU and China's strategic partnership since the BRI is a project initiated by China but with consequences for Europe. Additionally, it is also vital to understand the research about the BRI in Europe.

#### **2.1.1. Difficulty to Have a United Union in Foreign and Security Policy**

Several researchers have tried to explain the reasons for the EU's challenge to reach a foreign and security policy. Among these reasons are differing interests, values, and effects of specific policies on the national level, differing relations to the superpowers, and an inability to take the EU's identity into proper consideration. The lack of coordination among the states (Thomas, 2013, p. 311) and MS' strong will of maintaining independence on foreign and security issues create inconsistency in the EU's foreign and security policy (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, pp. 174–175).

Different foreign policy priorities have led to the MS' wish to separate themselves from the union's foreign and security policy and instead manage these matters nationally. The different foreign policy priorities are due to domestic conditions, such as pre-existing bilateral relations (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, p. 162). Atlantic solidarity challenges the idea of European solidarity, especially for MS that are members of The Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, p. 174; Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, pp. 20–21).

Another tension that exists and affects the strength of the EU's foreign and security policy is the MS' views of the union as an organisation and what decision the EU should have in matters of foreign and security policy (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, pp. 22–23). This tension could be regarded as a conflict of sovereignty, where the national sovereignty is contested when the EU has the right to decide on matters traditionally regarded as owned by the national state (Brack, Coman and Crespy, 2019, pp. 820–827). The conflict of sovereignty becomes apparent when national self-interests and geostrategic interests are at stake (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, pp. 326–327).

Even though tensions exist in the EU's foreign and security policy, there is often a balance between MS responsibilities to the union and its national interests (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, pp. 322–327; Bretherton and Vogler 2006, pp. 186–188). Therefore, there is a possibility to reach a common foreign and security policy within the union.

An essential aspect of the EU's foreign and security policy is the union's position towards third states, such as China. Because China created BRI, it is vital to understand the relations between China and the EU.

### **2.1.2. The European Union and Its Strategic Partnership with China**

The bilateral relations between the EU and China can be seen through research regarding China's and the EU's strategic partnership.

In many respects, China and the EU have mutual interests that could pave the way for a successful strategic partnership (Smith, 2016; Musiałkowska and Dąbrowski, 2018). By analysing the strategic partnership that has existed for years, Michael Smith explains the difficulties with the partnership due to both external and internal factors (2016). The EU has tried to frame this strategic partnership with China through discourses and rhetoric. However, the discourses for the partnership have not been unified, for example, if China should be regarded as an economic opportunity or a challenge. Another tension in framing the strategy is the EU's will to make the strategic partnership a comprehensive partnership – to 'Europeanise' the union's policies on China by reducing the MS' bilateral relations with China. A comprehensive partnership in several areas makes the EU balance its different roles, both as a normative power, advocating for values such as human rights internationally and as a trading union, having material economic interests. Furthermore, the MS have different views on the extent of the bilateral and EU relations with China (Smith, 2016, pp. 80–84, 92–94). Tensions in the framing of the strategic partnership are seen in both negotiations and managing the partnership. Again, there are tensions between the EU and China due to different interests and views on the strategic partnership (Smith, 2016, pp. 84–94).

How the external and internal factors shape the strategic partnership between the EU and China is also seen in Anna Michalski and Zhongqi Pan's research (2017). By analysing the strategic partnership throughout the years, they found that the roles between China and the EU have

shifted. From the beginning, the partnership was an opportunity for the EU to bring China into the multilateral order while acting as a normative power and imposing EU norms and principles on China. When the eurozone crisis occurred, the EU became weaker in its international status and more dependent on China. The power shifted, leading to the union no longer imposing its norms and principles on China to the same extent. Consequently, the union has had to accept China's interests, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity. Internal affairs, such as Tibet, are not discussed internationally (Michalski and Pan, 2017, pp. 617–625).

Political values, the view of the world order and geopolitical interests in the EU and China also affect the strategic partnership. The EU's political values, such as human rights, democracy, and liberalism, stands against China's core issues, such as sovereignty and the so-called One-China policy. Other differences exist, such as different views on trade, economic relationships, and geopolitics interests. The EU is concerned about the migration crisis and Russia. At the same time, China is concerned about the development in the Asian-Pacific region, where China wants to challenge the US dominant role in the region (Maer, 2016, pp. 962–975). These differences make it more difficult for China and the EU to have solid bilateral relations (Maer, 2016). Additionally, as Michalski and Pan highlight, the internal crises in the EU have weakened the union (2017, pp. 624–625; Maer, 2016) and has made China deprioritise the bilateral relations with the union. An example is that China regards the EU as 'weak' (Maer, 2016, pp. 975–976).

In sum, the strategic partnership between China and the EU faces many challenges due to the international milieu the two actors are surrounded by, internal tensions, their own identities, and their role as global actors in the international order.

### **2.1.3. Studies of the Belt and Road Initiative**

Briefly reviewing many MS' documents and literature on the BRI, four key aspects regarding the MS' views on the BRI: economy, geopolitics, national and EU conditions have been identified. These four aspects can also be seen in previous research on the EU's difficulty to have a united foreign and security policy and its strategic partnership with China. Therefore, the next section will describe the research that highlights these aspects of BRI. These aspects will correspond to the analytic framework used in the empirical part of the thesis (see section three).

### *2.1.3.1. The Significance of Economy*

BRI contains Chinese investments, infrastructure projects and so forth (Chatzky and McBride, 2020), making the economic aspect of the project essential. The project could strengthen the economies of the EU and China (Li, Hofman and Geraci, 2020, pp. 241–246). The economic prospects of engaging in BRI have attracted several MS involved in the project for domestic growth (Matura, 2018, pp. 178–179) and an improved financial position (Pacheco Pardo, 2018; Li, Hofman and Geraci, 2020). Italy is an example where the project's economic prospects have served as one of the main reasons the Italian state reached an agreement with China on the initiative. This pragmatic approach taken by Italy has increased the trade and investments volume with China and, therefore, Italy can compete with other large EU economies (Li, Hofman and Geraci, 2020, pp. 242–243).

On the other hand, China's increased involvement in Europe through BRI has also led to disadvantages for the economies of the EU. Domestic companies and workforces have been found not to benefit from the increased Chinese presence in their domestic markets (Matura, 2018; Scott, 2018, pp. 26–29).

China's increased economic dominance in Europe has made the MS less keen to criticise China in other political issues (Pacheco Pardo, 2018; Scott, 2018, pp. 29–34). For example, China's increasing economic power in the Baltic region has made the Baltic states more passive in specific questions related to Chinese interests. The Baltic states' official meetings with Dalai Lama received very adverse reactions from the Chinese state, stopping further discussions about trade and investments with the Baltic region (Scott, 2018, pp. 29–31). China's reaction led to a more cautious approach to raising issues such as Tibet and human rights in China by the Baltic States (Scott, 2018, pp. 33–34).

Therefore, BRI can both be an opportunity and a threat to the economies of the EU. Furthermore, partially through its BRI project, China's increased economic dominance contributes to the MS being less keen to criticise China on some political issues.

### *2.1.3.2. Geopolitics*

The economic dimension of BRI is often seen with the geopolitical dimension. In geopolitical research of the initiative, the geo-economical and the geopolitical aspects are often intertwined, illustrating the difficulty to regard the project in economic terms only (Blackwill and Harris,

2016; Richardson, 2021). In many ways, BRI is an excellent example of geoeconomics, that is, “(t)he use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nations' economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals” (Blackwill and Harris, 2016, p. 20). Therefore, the initiative could be seen as a combination of an economic and a geopolitical project, where China spreads its geographical sphere through trade flows, infrastructure projects and so forth (Richardson, 2021, pp. 5–6).

Even though the economic and geopolitical aspects are often intertwined, some researchers claim that BRI could be only a geopolitical issue, changing the geopolitical landscape and helping China achieve its geopolitical goals in Europe and Asia (Richardson, 2021, pp. 6-7).

Within geopolitical studies, a third view of BRI has developed: the geo-development aspect of the initiative. The initiative has a discursive element, where the initiative tries to redefine the view of China and the world and where the initiative becomes a part of Xi Jinping's China dream, symbolising the restoration of the ancient Silk Road that connects China to Europe (Richardson, 2021, pp. 7-8). Therefore, BRI's economic incentives have influenced the diplomacy between China and those European states involved in the project, especially if looking at China's relationship with Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE), often referred to as the 16+1 or 17+1 format (Vangeli, 2017).

For China establishing the BRI project in eastern Europe is a strategic choice since China sees the region as a test for its bigger geopolitical and geoeconomics goals. China not only aims to benefit from the initiative but also wants “to steer global economic development and contribute to the principles of economic governance, thus impacting the process of globalization by introducing concepts that diverge from hegemonic market neoliberalism” (Vangeli, 2017, p. 103). It means that China wants the global market to be more open and inclusive, where states' sovereignty and own path of governance and development and cooperation is based on mutual benefits (Maer, 2016; Vangeli, 2017). These ideas of changing the international values have, to some extent, been successful in the 16+1 format, where the Eastern European states have adapted to the ideas that China values and where the general view of China has become more positive than previously (Vangeli, 2017).

It is not only for China that the project could help achieve geopolitical goals but also for the MS. For example, Matura has highlighted that for many Eastern European states, participation in BRI is an economic opportunity and an opportunity to increase its bargain position within the EU (Matura, 2018, pp. 178–179). Therefore, has BRI a geopolitical dimension, benefiting China and making it possible for other actors to achieve and defend its national geopolitical interests.

#### *2.1.3.3. The National Dimension of BRI in Europe*

The research conducted on the economic and geopolitical aspects of BRI in Europe shows how they affect MS in different ways. However, research shows that domestic mechanisms also affect MS' actions concerning BRI. Here, the media has a vital role to play. The national media's perception of BRI influences the state's overall view of the project (Langendonk, 2020).

Tamas Matura has analysed how the initiative has been depicted in Hungarian and Slovakian media (2018). Among the Eastern European states, Hungary is the state most politically influenced by China and Chinese investments through BRI, while Slovakia has the lowest activities related to Chinese projects in Eastern Europe (Matura, 2018, pp. 174–175). However, the media's discourses of BRI in Slovakia and Hungary are pretty similar, according to Matura. Most of the media coverage tended to have a neutral perception of BRI. The more positive articles to the project tended to have a favourable view of the Hungarian and Slovak governments. Therefore, Matura concluded that even though the initiative does not perceive a lot of media's attention, the view on BRI is politicised (2018, pp. 185–187).

Similarly, Li Zhang (2021) has studied the elite media's perception of China and BRI in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. Even though the prominent focus in the newspapers was portraying the initiative through an economic lens, some articles emphasised the geopolitical dimension of the project, mainly German media. There were also different attitudes to the project, both positive and negative, where French media was mainly negative to the project while at the same time the British media was portraying it most positive of the three national media (Zhang, 2021, pp. 122–127).

How the national media views BRI could affect the overall domestic position in the MS. However, the national approach to BRI is formed not only by the media but also by other

domestic actors that portray certain narratives of the project (Langendonk, 2020). The narratives the MS have on the BRI are formed by the narratives on China in general, such as China's identity, its role in the international order, and what the EU's cooperation with China is like (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2020; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Zeng, 2020a). Consequently, the national perception of the BRI is formed through several intersubjective processes by different domestic actors, all of which affect the MS' views of the project in Europe and, in the end, the EU's position towards BRI. The key insights from this discussion will be included in the national frame (see method below).

#### *2.1.3.4. EU's Views on BRI*

According to previous research, the presence of BRI in Europe has an impact not only on MS but on the union in general. The national narratives of BRI affect the EU's overall position in this matter (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Zeng, 2020a). Furthermore, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng highlight how the EU's overall perception of China and its role in and impact on the world, together with its view of BRI, affects the EU-China relations (2020b). The BRI project is seen as China's grand strategy and as a positive initiative bringing benefits globally. However, it does not matter what BRI is if the narratives of BRI is different, claims Miskimmon et al. The narratives of BRI in the EU will shape the future policy for the project (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Zeng, 2020b, p. 232). Currently, the narratives within the EU are different (Zhang, 2021), which will also affect the EU's overall position to BRI and its future relationship with China (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Zeng, 2020b).

There are differences in the views of BRI not only between MS but also within the EU itself. Emil Kirchner (2021) describes the concerns and opportunities that the EU sees with BRI. On the one hand, the EU sees the economic opportunities with BRI, contributing to projects and policies within the EU for better connectivity and infrastructure between Europe and Asia. On the other hand, the EU has security concerns regarding BRI's impact on Central Asia's democratic development and stability. Furthermore, the EU fears that the project could make China a hegemony in the region, which will benefit Russia. In addition, infrastructure projects funded by China, such as the Budapest-Belgrade rail link, have been criticised by the EU for not following international standards and practice of market economy. Furthermore, the EU regards Chinese funding in some critical infrastructure in Europe as a security concern. The EU also sees how Central Asia's dependence on China applies to some MS, which has made it more difficult for the EU to have a united approach to China. Some projects, such as the 17+1 format,

could divide the EU. Another concern for the EU is that the BRI could create an imbalance between the EU and China rather than improve the relationship. Furthermore, BRI could affect the EU's other relations to Asian states and the US (Kirchner, 2021, pp. 149–151).

## 2.2. Framing Theory

When studying the previous research, different aspects explain why it is difficult for the EU to have a common foreign and security policy regarding security challenges, such as BRI. The analysis aims to map and compare the different views the MS' have on BRI and in what ways the MS differ. In the case of BRI, the four aspects presented above have significance for the views of the MS on BRI. Therefore, the empirical analysis of this thesis aims to explore if these four aspects are presented in the five cases intended to be analysed, and most importantly, how these four aspects are depicted and assessed in the five cases – not at least to one another. A way to analyse the five cases according to these four aspects is through framing.

Framing can be a theory and a method, referred to as framing analysis. For Erving Goffman, frames are the “definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1974, p. 10 cited in van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, p. 94). It is a way for the situated participants to make sense of their social realities and relation to themselves and others in these representations of social realities (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, p. 94). Frames are contextual, formed in communication. Most importantly, for these purposes, frames are formed in the policy processes. Therefore, a policy frame is situational, in Goffman's basic sense (Goffman 1974, p. 10 cited in van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 94), and ever-changing. As Donald Schön highlights: “The nature of the public problem appears to different actors in different and often incompatible ways” (Schön, 1971, pp. 210-211 cited in van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 95).

Consequently, frames in policies depend on the actors involved, the actors' perspectives, interests, roles, and access to information (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016 p. 95). Actors' circumstances, such as interests and roles in the world, affect policy frames, argue for analysing and comparing five different MS of the EU, which differ among themselves in specific ways (see section three). Understanding the framing process is about understanding the formation of policy processes, and this, in turn, could contribute to the understanding of how, for example, divisions can be created among policy-relevant actors (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, p. 96), such as the five selected cases for the analysis.



The intersubjective process that framing could be regarded as (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, p. 95) can be a conscious and an unconscious process produced by a communicator with consequences for the audience's view of the framed issue or event (Entman, 2004, pp. 26–28; Entman, 1993, pp. 52–53). Therefore, one might argue that framing is an exercise of power through communication. Depending on the audience's reception of framing, frames can be said to take on meaning that influences political decision-making and steer political action in certain directions (Entman, 2004, s. 4–6; Haste, Jones and Monroe, 2016, pp. 313–314). Framing can be regarded as a mean for the communicator to achieve political ends (Entman, 1993). How the five cases depict BRI in the four different aspects could show the five governments framing of BRI to convince its audience of how BRI should be regarded to achieve political goals.

Merlijn van Hulst and Dvora Yanow (2016) show the formation of frames and how frames can influence and exercise power. For them, framing is formed through three distinctive acts: sense-making, naming and storytelling (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, p. 96). Sense-making is the process in the framing where an understanding of the situation is created. By understanding the situation in a particular manner, the actors can imagine further actions that need to be taken (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016). Naming includes selecting and categorising. By selecting relevant features of the issue and discarding others, then naming these features and categorising them, they argue that framing creates a possibility for political leaders to form a policy discourse to ensure specific actions (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, pp. 99-100). Storytelling binds together all components and use narrative frames to explain to the “audience what *has been* going on, what *is* going on, and, often, what needs to be done” (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, p. 100). Storytelling tries to make the frame persuasive to its audience. These three acts contribute to understanding the framing of policy issues and policy-relevant actors' identities and relationships (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, pp. 100-101).

According to Robert M. Entman, the formation of frames is driven by selection and assessment of salience, which can be equated to van Hulst's and Yanow's naming (2016). Selection is when certain aspects of an issue to be communicated are chosen and defined. These aspects of the issue are highlighted and emphasised by the communicator to the audience, salience. Salience takes different forms and makes the selected aspects of the issue assigned more weight than other aspects for the audience (Entman, 1993, p. 52; Entman, 2004, p. 26).

Frames give directions towards specific options and paths for a political issue through different political and social processes, but different frames may also be seen as competing with one another – frame games (Morth, 2000; Aalberg, Strömbäck and De Vreese, 2011). Therefore, if there are discrepancies in further actions for a political issue, competing frames often exist for a particular issue. Competing frames illustrate the different interests and ideas among the actors involved over the same issue (Morth, 2000, p. 176). Therefore, an issue might be framed in different ways simultaneously and within the same organisation, such as within the EU (Morth, 2000). Competing frames among the five analysed cases could exist in their depiction of BRI and how the four aspects of BRI are assessed. Furthermore, framing BRI in the five cases could show if the MS manifest against the EU and its perception of BRI or aligned with the EU perception. Thus, aligning and competing frames could exist between the MS and the EU.

Analysing frames on BRI in the five chosen cases according to the four aspects described in the previous research is a way to map and compare the MS's different views on the BRI and identify how the MS differ. Suppose that the frames among the five cases differ in how the four aspects are depicted and assessed in the chosen empirical material. These competing frames could then explain the EU's difficulty uniting behind a common foreign and security policy, particularly where security challenges are involved. Framing is thus a suitable theory and method to use to achieve the aim of this thesis.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research Design

The research will have an interpretive approach. By using framing analysis as theory, the researcher agrees with the theory's ontological assumption, which is interpretive (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, pp. 40–43). Framing and framing analysis emphasises the intersubjective process of social realities, where people create meaning about objects and actions through language and where these meanings are taken to influence policy and decision making (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016). Also, the interpretive approach is suitable because it gains contextual knowledge (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, pp. 46–49), which qualitative framing analysis also does. Qualitative framing analysis contributes to understanding the complexity of the frames' characteristics and gives contextual knowledge (Linström and Marais 2012, pp. 26–27). Contextual knowledge is desirable because the project aims to understand the EU's difficulty to unite in a foreign and security policy, particularly its relation to China and its BRI. Thus, qualitative framing analysis is a suitable method to map the five selected cases' different views on BRI in Europe.

The five cases are analysed to identify the depictions and assessments within the four aspects identified. The research aims not only to see how these four aspects are depicted in these five cases but also to investigate if these depictions differ in any way. The comparative analysis highlights the relational aspects of the studied cases, primarily if any similarities or differences exist between the selected cases (Denk, 2012, p. 11). Consequently, the thesis will be a comparative framing analysis.

The research will analyse the five cases based on the four aspects that have been presented in the previous research. Therefore, pre-existing conditions exist where the analysis is not about identifying what frames exist in the chosen material but rather analysing how these frames, predefined by the four aspects highlighted in the previous research, are described in each case. The thesis thus has a deductive approach (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, pp. 26–27).

The following section will further describe the five MS chosen to be analysed.

### 3.2. Choice of Member States

BRI is an example of the EU-China relation, showing the difficulties with this relationship and the EU's overall difficulty to unite behind a common foreign and security policy. As shown in the previous research, some aspects, economic, geopolitical, national and EU, could explain the differences and similarities of the MS' views of BRI. Therefore, studying the MS' views of BRI could contribute to understanding the EU's difficulty to unite in a common foreign and security policy.

In the beginning, all the MS were studied. Regarding some MS, there was limited access to material or barely any material. Among those states where considerable material existed, five MS were selected based on what previous research had shown: Estonia, Italy, Germany, France, and Hungary. Together, these five cases constitute a miniature EU according to several parameters, such as smaller and bigger states, smaller and bigger economies, different geographical regions, older and newer EU members. All this makes them a representative sample of the states of the EU.

Hungary and Estonia are parties of the 16+1 format, an integrated part of BRI (Vangeli, 2017, p. 103). Hungary was the first European state to become a BRI member and set up a Memorandum of Understanding (MuO) for BRI. The state has the most involvement with China and Chinese investments within the 16+1 format. Furthermore, Hungary is a BRI member and recently collaborated with China to construct a railway link between Budapest and Belgrade. This project is considered a part of BRI (Matura, 2018; Sielker and Kaufmann, 2020; Hillman and Tippet, 2021). Estonia is not a BRI member but has MuO for BRI and is also a part of the 16+1 format (Sielker and Kaufmann, 2020; Hillman and Tippet, 2021).

Like many BRI members, Italy is not part of the 16+1 format (Vangeli, 2017; Matura, 2018). However, what stands out about Italy is that it was the first of the major economies in Europe to join the project (Ellyat, 2019). Furthermore, it is interesting to analyse France and Germany, two major economies in Europe, neither of which are BRI members. Both France and Germany have MuO for BRI. France has specific financial deals, while Germany has specific infrastructural deals with China within BRI (Sielker and Kaufmann, 2020). Both Germany and France have been interested in developing a close relationship with China and are driving these ambitions within the EU. For example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel pushed for the EU-

China Comprehensive Investment Agreement, even though different views on closer cooperation with China within the EU exist. Merkel's actions were supported by France (von der Burchard, 2020). However, France has lately become more sceptical towards China due to China's increased power globally (Pamuk and Brunnstrom, 2021). These three states, France, Italy, and Germany, are major economies in Europe with different and complex approaches towards China and its BRI.

In summary, are the five selected states are a representative sample of different types of MS.

### 3.3. Analytical Framework

By analysing the five selected cases through comparative framing analysis, the frames need to be analysed. Linström and Marais' method for qualitative framing analysis highlights the selection of a frame typology: what types of frames will be analysed in the selected material (2012, pp. 29–30). Standard, generic frames could be used by the researcher (Linström and Marais, 2012, pp. 29-30). However, these standard frames do not always have to be applied to all kinds of research projects. Frame typology can emerge during the research process (Linström and Marais, 2012, pp. 29–30). Therefore, this thesis' frame typology will be based on the four aspects highlighted in the previous research.

The frames analysed in the empirical material are:

- Economic frame
- Geopolitical frame
- National frame
- EU frame

The economic frame is based on the previous research that highlights the importance of the economic perspective of BRI in Europe (Matura 2018; Scott 2018; Li, Hofman & Geraci 2020). The economic frame can contain statements that frame the initiative as an opportunity or problematic and threatening. Statements where BRI is spoken of as an economic issue, which could be related to trade, finance, national economy, and so forth, will be investigated.

The BRI might also be seen as geopolitical, where China is achieving its geopolitical ambitions in Europe (Richardson, 2021). It may be that the MS have geopolitical ambitions with their

involvement in the project (Matura, 2018, pp. 178–179). Therefore, the geopolitical frame will focus on China and the MS' geopolitical achievements and ambitions for the BRI. The frames may overlap or be combined. For instance, the geopolitical frame might be combined with the economic frame. For the sake of clarity, the first part of the analysis will deal with one frame at a time, in this case, the geopolitical frame. The combination of frames will be brought in later. Additionally, the geopolitical frame will include statements discussing BRI as a security concern to the five selected cases and the EU.

The national frame and the EU frame are connected. They both tie in with the previous research that shows the dilemma between national interests and European interests and how it might be seen (Thomas, 2013; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014; Brack, Coman and Crespy, 2019; Maer, 2016; Musiałkowska and Dąbrowski, 2018; Smith, 2016; Matura, 2018; Langendonk, 2020, Li, Hofman and Geraci, 2020). It is possible that the MS' views the initiative as a national question and, therefore, will act upon the issue based on national interests. It may also be the case that the MS believe that the issue should be handled at the EU level. Therefore, the analysis will seek to identify national and unionistic aspects in the MS' framing of BRI. When the national aspect and the EU aspect of BRI are spoken of simultaneously, it will be determined whether the emphasis is on the national aspect or on the EU aspect.

Operational questions are used to extract how these four frames are depicted and assessed in the five cases. The questions are:

- How are the four frames depicting BRI in the five analysed cases?
- Are the depictions of the frames given equal importance, or are some frames given more emphasis than others in each analysed case?
- Do the depictions of the frames overlap in any way in each analysed case?

However, to identify how the five selected cases' depictions and assessments of the four frames differ, the conclusions of each analysed case are compared. The comparison can be made by answering this question:

- Are there similarities and differences in the five MS depictions of the four frames of the BRI in the analysed empirical material?

### 3.4. Empirical Material

The empirical material used will consist of official documents representing each selected case (see the appendix for a complete listing of all the documents used). The empirical material illustrates each governments' view of the BRI in the five cases. It could be argued that the government is an essential part of the state and determines much of the state's political actions and affects the political milieu the states are surrounded by. Especially in framing different political matters (van Hulst and Yanow, 2016, p. 104). Therefore, it is relevant to analyse the views of the governments of these five MS. Government statements are suitable empirical material for this analysis.

Several different authorities representing the MS' governments, such as the MS' embassies in Sweden, representation in the EU, and officials from different ministries, have been contacted to collect the empirical material. Furthermore, data has been collected from official websites created by the government and its different authorities. The data that has been collected from BRI was launched in 2013 and onwards (Chatzky and McBride, 2020). To not exclude empirical material concerning BRI, empirical material discussing BRI without using the name BRI has been included. Hence, the empirical material has been collected using the following search terms: 'Belt and Road Initiative', 'BRI', 'Silk Road', 'New Silk Road', and 'China'. The selected documents and texts were read and evaluated to determine if the material that contained these search terms was relevant to the research's aim and if it discussed BRI in relation to the MS.

The official documents have been complemented by news articles about the MS and BRI. The media archive Retriever were examined for news articles with the search words: 'X member state' and 'Belt and Road Initiative'. Then, news articles where representatives of the MS' governments have spoken about BRI concerning their state were collected to complement the governments' material.

It could be considered problematic to use two different sources of empirical material in the thesis, which is produced by two different actors, the government, and the media. However, the material collected represents the MS' governments' views of the BRI. The material collected from the news articles only contains statements from the governments on BRI and not the media's interpretation of BRI and these statements. The material could differ from one analysed

MS to another. However, using different kinds of material is not problematic but adds substance to the analysis.

Another limitation of the material is due to the language barrier. There could be material in the national languages of the MS. However, due to the lack of language skills, only material in English has been used. Consequently, the material collected is based on the premises that it is written in English and produced by the MS' governments or are news articles where statements by the selected cases governments have been made.

After collecting material, it can be stated that the study has a mixture of sources and, to some extent, an unevenness in the amount of material between the five cases analysed. However, the differences in the material between the five cases will not hinder comparing the cases with each other.



## 4. Analysis

The analysis will first describe how the four defined frames, economic, geopolitical, national and EU, were discussed in each of the analysed MS. Then, a conclusion of how the frames were discussed and which frame(s) was dominant among the four frames for each analysed member state. After this, a comparison of the five analysed MS' frames will be made to see differences and similarities in discussing and defining the four types of frames.

### 4.1. Estonia

#### 4.1.1. Economic Frame

The Estonian government frames BRI as an economic issue, particularly regarding the economic opportunity BRI could give Estonia. An example of this is when Estonia signed three agreements with China related to BRI. One of the agreements, the Silk Road Memorandum, means “prospects for foreign investments” for Estonia and “provides additional opportunities for connecting the Rail Baltic rail link with the East-West transport corridor”, according to former minister Urve Palo (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, 2017). Together with the other two agreements, the E-Commerce Agreement, and the Digital Silk Road Agreement, it strengthens cooperation and trade relations between China and Estonia (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communication, 2017). Furthermore, other ministers within the Estonian government have highlighted these three agreements saying that they will bring opportunities for Estonian logistics and transportation companies (Government Communication Unit, 2018a; Government Communication Unit, 2018b; Government Communication Unit, 2019).

Opportunities for the Estonian companies relate to the Estonian government wanting to support Estonian companies to enter the Chinese market. Former prime minister Jüri Ratas says the 16+1 format is a good way to promote Estonia, gain trust, and open doors to China (Government Communication Unit, 2018b). The Estonian government argues that increased cooperation with China in trade, transport, and infrastructure benefits Estonia and its economy (Töhk, 2015) but also China. As Ratas stated, it is a win-win situation, leading to discussions between Estonia and China on different BRI projects (Government Communication Unit, 2017a). Furthermore, the Estonian government has argued for the possibility for Estonia to be a regional hub for

transport and logistics (Tõhk, 2015; Government Communication Unit, 2017a; Government Communication Unit, 2018c).

Even though the economic opportunities with BRI are focused on Estonia and its economy, former prime minister Taavi Rõivas argued for the prospects for Europe: “I believe that this project has the potential to bring China and Europe closer together and boost the economy of both parties” (Känd, 2014).

However, the Estonian government does not claim that everything within the BRI framework is economically beneficial. Current prime minister Kaja Kallas sees how the West’s control is at risk and that the same goes for western investments in different countries within the BRI framework. Kallas believes the West must beef up its economic diplomacy and connect its different initiatives to stop the “control slipping away from Europe” (Cerulus, 2021).

Another example where the Estonian government has been hesitant to the BRI concerning its economic interests is the Tallin-Helsinki tunnel. The tunnel will be a part of Rail Baltic, connecting the Baltic States with Western Europe. The Rail Baltic and the Tallin-Helsinki Tunnel will be China-funded (Roonemaa, Eesmaa and Liepina, 2019). It is in the interest of China and Chinese companies to strengthen the transport corridor to the Arctic (Posaner, 2020). Furthermore, former prime minister Andrus Ansip has said that “Chinese companies are welcome to participate in the procurements related to Rail Baltic” (Valitsuse kommunikatsioonibüroo, 2013). However, according to the Estonian government, the current plan for the project has economic difficulties. The unrealistic time frame for the plan and unclear economic means to realise the tunnel make the developer’s plan not feasible and create further costs for the project (Roonemaa, Eesmaa and Liepina, 2019; Sutt, 2019; Haavala, 2020). Furthermore, the Estonian government argues that the project will likely generate unforeseen public costs (Haavala, 2020). Despite this, the Estonian Minister of Public Administration, Jaak Aab states that “Estonia supports the idea of a Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel that would be connected to the future Rail Baltic railway both for passenger and freight transport” (Sutt, 2019). Contributing to “further the development of the region and promote good transport connections” would benefit Estonia (Haavala, 2020). Therefore, according to the Estonian government, a railway tunnel project is something to consider in the future (Haavala, 2020).

The Estonian government sees BRI as an economic issue, giving both Estonia and Europe opportunities. However, it also states that BRI could bring economic risks and effects and harm the West's economic dominance.

#### **4.1.2. Geopolitical Frame**

When Kallas talks about beefing-up economic diplomacy as a response to BRI, she points to how China uses infrastructure investments in other countries to gain more control over the infrastructure in these countries. Kallas adds that Europe and like-minded states should look at the possibility to offer similar funding so “the control doesn't slip away” (Cerulus, 2021). Furthermore, Kallas highlights telecommunication security issues that affect other sectors, such as infrastructure and transport. One such security issue is China's involvement in launching the 5G network. According to Kallas, the West should support different programs that assess the security of infrastructure investments and technology to value how much states can trust different technologies and protect themselves (Cerulus, 2021).

The Estonian government also sees risks for the national security in a particular BRI project, the Tallin-Helsinki tunnel. The Estonian government sees that the project could “incur costs for developing and maintaining national defence capabilities” with the current plan (Haavala, 2020). Furthermore, with the information available today, Aab doubts that the project can be realised due to security reasons (Haavala, 2020). Therefore, the Estonian government should not pursue the tunnel project because of the costs for the national defence capabilities and other national security issues.

Investments within infrastructure, which China is doing within the BRI framework, are viewed as having a security element. Therefore, the Estonian government frame BRI as a geopolitical issue that could pose security risks to Estonia and the West and challenge the Western dominance in the world economy.

#### **4.1.3. National Frame**

The Estonian government sees BRI as a national issue because it could bring economic opportunities and benefits to the Estonian economy. For example, when Estonia signed the three MuOs within the BRI framework, it was stated that it would give opportunities to Estonian transport and logistics businesses and strengthen the bilateral cooperation between Estonia and China in different areas, such as technology and tourism (Ministry of Economic Affairs and

Communications, 2017; Government Communications Unit, 2018b). Furthermore, the Estonian government has discussed with China different initiatives between Estonia and China that could be created within the BRI framework (Government Communication Unit, 2018c). The Estonian government argues for the benefits for China of cooperating with Estonia, such as its geographical advantage, Nordic work ethics and good business environment (Tõhk, 2015; Government Communication Unit, 2017b; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, 2017).

However, Aab proposed to the cabinet not to initiate the national plan for the tunnel due to the developer's current plan for the project (Haavala, 2020). Aab states that the plan is ambitious and innovative to create an important link between Estonia and Finland. However, "in the light of the information known to the state authorities today, we have reason to doubt that the given project can put into practice for environmental, economic and security reasons", Aab believes (Haavala, 2020). Furthermore, for many reasons, the developers' current plan is not in the public interests of Estonia, Aab states (Haavala, 2020; Posaner, 2020). According to Aab, there are still questions and doubts about the project, and it does not "concord with the interests of the Estonian government in all of its points" (Haavala, 2020). Aab's statement towards the developer's project can be interpreted as a national framing of the project, where the developer's plan for the Tallin-Helsinki tunnel does not benefit the national interests of Estonia.

The Estonian government sees BRI as a national issue and has focused primarily on economic aspects for Estonia with BRI.

#### **4.1.4. EU Frame**

The Estonian government sees BRI as a project that can boost Chinese and European economies and bring the parties closer. Furthermore, Rõivas sees the 16+1 forum within the BRI framework as a supplement to the bilateral relations between the EU and China (Känd, 2014). Ratas has also stated a similar view of the 16+1 format (Government Communication Unit, 2019).

#### **4.1.5. The Estonian Government's Framing of BRI**

In the Estonian case, economy is the dominating frame of BRI. The economic benefits and opportunities with BRI are depicted strongly, where a motivation by the Estonian government has been to point to advantages for China to invest in Estonia within the BRI framework.

However, the Estonian government sees BRI not only as an economic opportunity but as a cost for Estonia and its economy. The national frame of BRI is also a dominating frame in the material, often overlapping with the other frames, such as economy and geopolitics. The Estonian government mentions the risks and costs for national security with different BRI projects, for example, the Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel. Compared to the other frames, the EU frame is less strong. Therefore, for the Estonian government, BRI is mainly an economic and national issue and not so much a question of geopolitics or an issue primarily handled at the EU level.

## 4.2. Italy

### 4.2.1. Economic Frame

Italy has signed a MuO with China for BRI. In the agreement, there are many economic aspects highlighted. The agreement states that the parties, Italy, and China, will cooperate in developing infrastructure in areas of mutual interest, such as railways, energy, and telecommunication (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 3). In the agreement, the historical land and sea routes between China and Italy are referred to, where Italy takes its "traditional role as terminal of the maritime Silk Road" (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, to some extent, the agreement can be interpreted as a re-establishment of trade routes that previously existed between Asia and Europe.

The parties emphasise their will to cooperate in infrastructure, transport, and logistics and expand investments and trade flows between the two states. However, they want within the BRI framework to "promote transparent, non-discriminatory, free and open trade and industrial cooperation, an open procurement, level playing field and respect for intellectual property rights" (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 4). Values, such as sustainability, are mentioned several times in the MuO between China and Italy, especially concerning economic cooperation, such as trade and transport (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The MuO between Italy and China for the BRI shows that Italy frames BRI as a possibility for economic cooperation with China in areas of mutual interests, such as transport, logistics and trade if the economic cooperation is in line with specific values.

When Italy signed the MuO with China concerning China's initiative, Italy received criticism from its Western allies, such as the US (Fonte, 2019; Reuters Staff, 2019). The criticism was responded to by former deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio in the following way:

I have heard the alarm being raised from the United States yesterday about this deal on the Silk Road that Italy wants to sign with China (...). Let it be clear that, if we are looking at the Silk Road towards China for our exports, it is not to strike a political deal with China but only to help our companies (Reuters Staff, 2019).

Helping the Italian companies is one of the arguments for Italy to sign an agreement for BRI. Furthermore, Di Maio wants to reverse the dominant trend of strong Chinese trade flows of goods by increasing the exports of Italian goods to China by being part of BRI. Italy clearly emphasises that the agreement does not aim to strengthen the political bonds between the two states or that China should help Italy, but to create more jobs for Italians through increased export to China, that is, 'Made in Italy' go to China (Reuters Staff, 2019; Turak, 2019).

The Italian government frames the cooperation with China through the BRI framework as a possibility for economic cooperation with China, helping Italy's economy and assuring its allies that it is an economic agreement and not a step closer to China politically.

#### **4.2.2. Geopolitical Frame**

While Italy wants to reassure its Western allies that the MuO with China is aimed for economic cooperation in transport and infrastructure, Di Maio responded to criticism from Italy's Western allies, such as the US:

We are maximizing all precautionary measures, and I want to tell the U.S., and I will tell them as well in next week's visit, that they are our allies, and that we understand their concerns. But the contents of the MOU (memorandum of understanding) that we are signing tomorrow contains nothing for them to worry about, nothing relating to 5G or any agreement on strategic telecommunications (Turak, 2019).

Di Maio argued that the 5G network is a part of the strategic infrastructure and that Italy agrees with the US that there are security concerns involved in these types of telecommunications. Italy's government responded to these security concerns by having new regulations regarding China, referred to as the 'golden power' (Turak, 2019). In his statement, Di Maio also stressed that Italy remains with its allies in the West, that is, the US, NATO, and EU and that the agreement with China is not to “ask China for help with our government bonds” (Turak, 2019).

Di Maio's response to Western allies' scepticism, mainly the US, shows how the Italian government tries to frame the MuO between Italy and China for BRI not as a geopolitical issue but as an economic issue. However, the Italian government sees some security concerns with the cooperation with China concerning telecommunications (Turak, 2019), even though Italy and China have agreed in the MuO to cooperate in areas of mutual interests such as telecommunication (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 3).

There seems to exist different elements in the geopolitical frame. The Italian government has agreed with China to cooperate in telecommunication if it is of mutual interest. However, the MuO does not include strategic telecommunications. Italy agrees with its Western allies on the security concerns with Chinese involvement in the 5G network, which has led the Italian government to adopt regulations regarding this critical infrastructure.

#### **4.2.3. National Frame**

The Italian government regards the BRI as a national issue to some extent. First and foremost, Di Maio says that the benefits of the agreement with China and its BRI can give Italian companies increased revenues, Italian jobs, and Italian export (Reuters Staff, 2019; Turak, 2019). Di Maio states that the aim of signing this agreement is the “possibility of ‘Made of Italy’ to go China” and advance Italy's agenda (Turak, 2019). Di Maio's statements show a national element in Italy's relation to BRI.

The MuO between Italy and China promotes bilateral relations and strengthens bilateral communication within the BRI framework. An example is that the parties try to synergise the transport and infrastructure systems in Italy and within BRI (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019, pp. 3-4). It is also stated in the MuO that this bilateral partnership should be based on “mutual respect, equity and justice

and in a mutually beneficial manner, in the perspective of a strengthened global solidarity” (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, the bilateral relationship is viewed as part of the international context.

The Italian government’s national framing emphasises Italy’s bilateral relation with China and how it benefits Italy and its economy.

#### **4.2.4. EU Frame**

In the MuO, the bilateral relationship between China and Italy and the agreements relation to the EU is highlighted. For example, the parties express synergies between, on the one hand, BRI, and the other hand, Italy’s transport and infrastructure system and EU’s Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2019, p. 3). Additionally, there should be a synergy between the BRI framework and the EU’s different policies and platforms, such as EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, EU Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia and EU China Connectivity Platform (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). For Italy, in particular, the MuO should comply with its obligations as an MS (Government of the Italian Republic and Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2019, p. 7). The EU frame for the MuO between China and Italy was also seen when Di Maio assured Italy’s alliance with its Western allies, such as the EU, when responding to its allies’ critique for signing the agreement with China (Turak, 2019).

A year after the MuO was signed between China and Italy for the BRI framework, Italy’s Minister of European affairs, Vincenzo Amendola, said that they had made a mistake and that Xi Jinping’s China was not what it used to be (Roy Chaudhury, 2020). Italy has since then chosen to support the EU’s firmer stance towards China. Amendola motivates this shift by stating that:

Italy is geared toward trade with everyone, but accords with China must today pass through a commitment of the 27, because foreign trade has to do with European sovereignty (...) The European Commission manages trade for everyone, so we think it’s fundamental that we work within the European framework (Roy Chaudhury 2020).



It shows how Italy views its foreign trade to its membership in the EU. It could be interpreted as Italy's change in framing its relation to BRI from being a national matter, national framing, between two bilateral state actors to being an issue that should be handled within the EU framework, an EU framing.

#### **4.2.5. The Italian Government's Framing of BRI**

The Italian government sees BRI mainly as an economic issue, as an economic opportunity for Italy and its economy. The economic framing sometimes overlaps the national framing of BRI since the government highlights the economic prospects for the Italian economy. Furthermore, the economic framing is used to assure other Western actors, such as the EU, that Italy's commitment to BRI does not aim to strengthen Italy's political bonds with China or downplay the security risk but only to benefit Italy economically. However, the Italian government has shifted its economic framing of BRI in the sense that Italy currently believes that foreign trade should not be bilateral, as Italy once did with China when signing a MuO for BRI, but involve the EU. Therefore, there is a shift where the view of BRI has gone from a national economic context to a more EU economic context.

In summary, in the Italian case, the economic frame is the most dominating frame. However, economic aspects can be seen in the other frames. Hence, the economic frame overlaps the other frames in different ways.

### **4.3. Germany**

#### **4.3.1. Economic Frame**

For the German government, BRI can enhance the connectivity between Asia and Europe. Furthermore, BRI could complement strategies within the EU and create a synergy between BRI and European infrastructure planning (Federal Foreign Office, 2016a; Federal Republic of Germany and People's Republic of China, 2018). By developing the Eurasian transport corridor, the German government has ambitions to explore the possibility for German businesses to be involved in the process to form the corridor (Federal Republic of Germany and People's Republic of China, 2018, p. 7). The German government believes that BRI could bring great opportunities, not just for German businesses, but for Germany's economy in general (Maas 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, it gives great potential for economic cooperation between the

EU and China, giving prospects for trade and growth (Federal Foreign Office, 2016a). However, such economic cooperation must be founded on mutual gains and benefits such as “transparency, common standards and rules that guarantee equal access to opportunities for all participants” (Federal Foreign Office, 2016a). The importance of these norms in the economic cooperation within the BRI framework is mentioned in several different statements by the German government (Federal Foreign Office, 2016a; Federal Foreign Office, 2017; Federal Foreign Office, 2018).

The German government frame BRI as an economic issue, giving Germany and the EU economic opportunities. However, this economic cooperation must be based on specific values to benefit all parties involved.

#### **4.3.2. Geopolitical Frame**

Germany frames BRI as a geostrategic initiative. Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe, states that BRI is a “huge geostrategic project” playing “an important role in underpinning China’s leadership aspirations” (2018). Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas mentioned BRI during a speech. According to Maas, the initiative involves the whole world and could create opportunities for the German economy. At the same time, Maas states the risks with the initiative if China forms the project only according to itself and creates poles between countries, such as dividing the EU through the 16+1 format (Maas, 2018, p. 4). Minister of State Niels Annen also highlights the problems with BRI and 16+1 format: “We also cast a skeptical eye on the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and its 16+1 meetings” (2019). The German government emphasises the risks with China using BRI as a geostrategic tool to force its ideas of order in different areas, such as the geopolitical, the geographical, trade, and the militarily (Gabriel, 2017).

Peter Bayer, Coordinator of Transatlantic Cooperation at the Federal Foreign Office, also emphasises the geopolitical aspect of BRI. BRI is an example of China’s attempt to influence the EU and its MS, forcing “them into dependence and neutralize them” (Beyer, 2018, p. 27). According to Bayer, China’s investments in Europe, such as in the Western Balkan, aim to gain influence, which means that Europe and the US must have a transatlantic strategy for China and cooperate closely. However, the West and China are economically interdependent, and in a globalised world with issues such as climate change must the West deal with China (Beyer, 2018, pp. 27–28). Therefore, the strategy should be based on the idea that the West should “be

competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be” (Beyer, 2018, p. 28).

As seen in these statements of different ministers within the German government, BRI is framed as a geopolitical issue. China’s geostrategic project to achieve its goals and form the European states according to China’s interests calls for action by the West. However, the German government highlights the issue’s complexity, where BRI poses geopolitical risks and creates economic opportunities for the German economy at the same time.

#### **4.3.3. National Frame**

The German government portrays BRI as a national issue to some extent. The government sees the opportunities with BRI for the German economy (Maas, 2018). However, the view of BRI as an EU issue dominates.

#### **4.3.4. EU Frame**

The German government sees the importance of BRI for Europe, as former State Secretary Markus Ederer states: “The area covered by China’s Silk Road is just as momentously important to us Europeans as it is to China” (Federal Foreign Office, 2017). The German government sees BRI as a complement to the EU policies and projects to improve the connectivity between Europe and Asia, where Germany can contribute in different ways (Federal Foreign Office, 2016a; Federal Foreign Office, 2016b; Federal Republic of Germany and People’s Republic of China, 2018). Furthermore, BRI benefits the European business sector with increased investments, such as infrastructure projects. However, according to Roth, BRI should not be regarded as a replacement for the EU’s funding and investments in Europe. It is a false accusation, particularly regarding Central and Eastern Europe. Minister Roth also believes that the perception that China’s increased presence in Europe aims to influence, destabilise, and even destroy the EU is exaggerated. Instead, China wants to have further political and economic cooperation to stabilise Europe (Roth, 2018).

Nevertheless, with this said, Roth (2018) and other parts of the German government see the risks with the initiative. One risk with having business with China is that it can pose challenges on EU values, “(s)ome EU partners are even willing to undermine European human rights policy for a lucrative bilateral deal with China” (Roth, 2018). Not only can BRI damage the values of the union (Maas, 2018; Roth, 2018), but it can contribute to a division within the EU

due to different concepts within the BRI framework, such as the 16+1 format (Maas, 2018). The view that there are risks with BRI for EU becomes evident in Bayer's statement on BRI:

The European Union has rightly defined China as a systemic rival. Beijing has launched a number of attempts to influence the EU and individual member states, to force them into dependence and neutralize them, for example through its Belt and Road Initiative (Beyer, 2018, p. 27).

Furthermore, BRI does not guarantee to connect with European infrastructure plans and follow common cooperation and investing standards (Federal Foreign Office, 2016a). Therefore, the German government sees a risk that BRI would damage European values and the European model, and minister Roth believes that the EU needs to defend and preserve the European DNA (2018).

With the risks with BRI for the EU, the German government argues that the EU needs to improve its connectivity strategy to respond to BRI (Maas, 2018; Roth, 2018). Germany's envoy to Brussels, Michael Clauß, can exemplify this message by the German government:

Europe's EU-Asia Connectivity strategy isn't holding a candle to China's big guns in the Belt and Road, and Europe needs to address that failure. "The EU connectivity strategy is a bit like a Sleeping Beauty which needs an urgent wake-up call. The original idea was to have an initiative at the same level of ambition as Belt and Road. But so far, it has not met expectations and it doesn't have any real visibility yet (...) The connectivity strategy enables us to tackle the reality of a long-term geopolitical rivalry with China" (Lau, 2021).

What can be seen is that the German government frames BRI as an EU issue, where it can contribute to the EU's work with connecting Europe and Asia and at the same time risk the union's values and model.

#### **4.3.5. The German Government's Framing of BRI**

It could be argued that the German government frames BRI mainly as an EU issue and an economic issue. BRI can contribute to more connectivity between Eurasia, benefiting European companies and complementing existing EU policies for connectivity between the two continents. However, BRI can also threaten the EU model and its values. The German government believes that the EU must improve its connectivity strategy to respond to BRI. The EU framing of BRI often overlaps other frames, such as the economic and geopolitical frame, where China's geopolitical project can contribute to division within the EU but also to economic possibility for Europe. The economic framing highlights the prospect for Europe and Germany's economy, while at the same time the importance of preserving certain values that the German government cherishes when cooperating with China and its BRI. Therefore, the economic framing of BRI has national and European elements to it and the German government's national and EU frame of BRI overlap to some extent. In the geopolitical frame, economic aspects are also highlighted. Therefore, it is concluded that the German government first and foremost frames BRI as an EU and an economic issue. However, statements illustrate that the government also sees BRI as a geopolitical and national issue, but not to the same extent as an EU and an economic issue.

### **4.4. France**

#### **4.4.1. Economic Frame**

For France, BRI is an economic issue. President Emmanuel Macron has applauded China's Belt and Road Initiative concerning trade. However, Macron also emphasises that there must be a balanced partnership based on reciprocity: "These roads are for sharing and cannot be one-way" (Gouvernement, 2018). Furthermore, Macron states that "European firms needed better access to China, more trust in their exchanges and a tangible improvement in the business environment and fair competition (...) BRI had to meet international norms" (Pennetier and Irish, 2019).

What can be understood is that France sees BRI as an economic issue, where China must create economic opportunities that benefit France and Europe within the BRI framework.

#### **4.4.2. Geopolitical Frame**

The French government regards BRI as an economic issue and a geopolitical matter. Macron has stated in a speech in 2017 that BRI can be regarded as a geopolitical project: "China, as I

was saying, has taken important initiatives in recent years – the New Silk Road is a perfect example of a major Chinese geopolitical project” (Macron, 2017). A year later, Macron again highlighted BRI as an essential geopolitical concept with a particular vision of globalisation. This type of globalisation means stabilising certain regions but simultaneously providing a hegemonic system. Therefore, Macron believes that France can offer a balanced approach towards China and its BRI in a confident, demanding, and constructive manner while protecting France’s interests and its vision of its place in the world (Macron, 2018).

BRI is regarded by the French government as a geopolitical issue, especially by President Macron, where France can play an essential role in relation to China, to preserve French interests.

#### **4.4.3. National Frame**

The French government believes that France can play a vital role concerning China and BRI (Gao, 2018). When the French government discusses BRI, it discusses France’s role in BRI. During a visit to China, President Macron stated that France should engage in BRI (Goulard, 2018). Macron believes that Europe and China should strengthen their collaboration within the BRI framework, and that France can play a vital role in this collaboration (Gao, 2018). According to Macron, participation in China’s different infrastructure projects could benefit France if conducted in the spirit of cooperation (Rose, 2018). Macron also believes that France and China should co-lead an initiative on the environment called the Green Silk Roads Initiative (Goulard, 2018).

France highlights BRI’s role to connect Asia and Europe. Macron believes that BRI has “a major role in structuring the Eurasian region and that it represents a real opportunity to create bridges, through exchange, between countries and civilizations, just as the ancient silk routes once did” (Gao, 2018).

The French government sees BRI as a national issue, with benefits for France and where France can play an important role in the cooperation between Europe and China within the BRI framework.

#### **4.4.4. EU Frame**

The French government sees BRI in relation to its European interests (Macron, 2017). It also highlights the importance of European businesses having access to the Chinese market and fair competition between Chinese and European companies within the BRI context (Pennetier and Irish, 2019). As Macron clearly says, “the ancient Silk Roads were never only Chinese” and that “(b)y definition, these roads can only be shared. If they are roads, they cannot be one-way” (Rose 2018). Therefore, the relationship between China and the EU within BRI must be based on cooperation (Rose, 2018). Furthermore, the French government sees the importance of the EU being united and having a coherent message towards China’s continued initiatives within trade and technology, such as initiatives within the BRI framework (Pennetier and Irish, 2019).

The French government sees BRI as an EU issue, exceptionally in the sense that BRI should be in the interests of EU and European companies and in line with the union’s values. Furthermore, the government stresses the importance of a united approach within the union towards China and its BRI.

#### **4.4.5. The French Government’s Framing of BRI**

The French government considers BRI mainly as an economic issue. When framing BRI as an economic issue, the government highlights the economic possibilities for Europe and the importance of the project being a two-way solution, benefitting the EU and China at the same time. Furthermore, the French government sees economic opportunities for France with BRI. When the government states that BRI is an economic issue, it overlaps other frames like the national and the EU frame. The national frame highlights the economic benefit for France and suggests how China and France could cooperate in the spirit of BRI with the Green Silk Road Initiatives. The national frame overlaps the geopolitical frame when Macron mentions how French interests need to be protected regarding BRI, China’s geopolitical project. It could be argued that the economic frame is the most dominating, in that sense that the economic aspects often are highlighted in the other frames. At the same time, the French government has a relatively even emphasis on BRI as a geopolitical, national and EU issue compared to the economic issue.

## 4.5. Hungary

### 4.5.1. Economic Frame

The Hungarian government sees China and BRI's role for Hungary and Europe, especially regarding economic growth. For example, BRI contributes to developing infrastructure between Asia and China, which is of interest to Hungary since Hungary views transport links as needed in "free and unhindered global trade" (Szijjártó, 2019a). Transport links are one reason for constructing the Budapest-Belgrade rail link, linking Western Europe to China, and making Eastern and Central Europe a significant route for world trade. This route is a part of BRI (Varga, 2019). The emphasis on BRI's importance can be seen when Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, states that BRI is an important programme, guaranteeing free trade: "Because it is pointless to talk about global free trade without infrastructure, and the Chinese imitative [sic] strives to create precisely this condition" (2019b). The Hungarian government's interests in free trade and tighter economic cooperation in Eurasia become essential reasons for the government's support of BRI (Orbán, 2019a; Orbán, 2019b; Szijjártó, 2019a; Szijjártó, 2019b; Szijjártó, 2019c; Varga, 2020).

Another argument for the Hungarian government for its participation in BRI is the economic benefits China's presence in Hungary has meant. Prime minister Orbán has said that he "highly values the presence of Chinese companies in Hungary", such as Huawei and Bank of China, which has contributed to Hungary's economy's increased employment and growth (Orbán, 2018). Therefore, the Hungarian government is taking every action to attract Chinese investments in logistics, technology, and finance (Palkovics, 2019; Szijjártó, 2019c). An example is how the Hungarian government sees the need for digital technology for success in business and economy, such as the 5G telecommunication network, where the government has strategic cooperation with, for example, the Chinese company Huawei (Szijjártó, 2019d). Further, Szijjártó has said that the agreement between China and Hungary in implementing BRI "fully serves Hungarian economic interests" (2019e).

There are economic benefits not only for the Hungarian economy but also for the European market. China has a significant role in the world economy and the future of Europe. Europe today does not have the infrastructure to meet the competition in the global market. BRI could provide the infrastructure needed in the region. Therefore, BRI creates opportunities for Europe and its competitiveness in the global market (Szijjártó, 2017a; Szijjártó, 2017b).



The Hungarian government sees the role that Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Hungary, can have for economic cooperation between Europe and BRI. Central Europe is described as the source of European growth (Orbán, 2018), where there are no political and financial difficulties for economic cooperation between China and Europe (Orbán, 2017a). The financial and technological involvement by China in Europe is necessary for Europe's continued development. The 16+1 format benefits Central and Eastern Europe and the whole EU (Orbán, 2017a; Orbán, 2017b). Furthermore, the Hungarian government points out certain circumstances that make Hungary an attractive partner for China within the 16+1 format, such as Hungary's labour force, geographical location, and low taxes (Orbán, 2017c; Varga, 2017; Szijjártó, 2019c).

Western Europe has criticised Hungary's economic involvement with China within the BRI framework. Orbán responded by saying that "so far 'the real big bucks' have been claimed by the Germans and the French" (2019c). Furthermore, Orbán says that it is hypocritical of Western Europe to say that it is wrong for Hungary to trade with China (2019c). Additionally, Szijjártó has said that no enterprise should be discriminated against in Hungary due to its origin, as long as it follows the regulation of Hungary (2019d).

There are several elements in the Hungarian government's framing of BRI as an economic issue. The economic aspect of BRI is in the interests of Hungary and the EU, where Hungary and the 16+1 format can have a significant role in the economic relation between China and Europe. Furthermore, the Hungarian government does not see any problems participating in BRI.

#### **4.5.2. Geopolitical Frame**

The Hungarian government sees BRI as a geopolitical project. The government has mentioned that the 16+1 format is closely linked to BRI, China's geo-strategical and geopolitical initiative (Szijjártó, 2018). The geopolitical aspect of BRI is shown in how the Hungarian government views that China has a key role in the future for the global economy and politics (Szijjártó, 2017a). BRI is presented as a 'new globalisation model', which Hungary welcomes (Orbán, 2017d). BRI is regarded as an opportunity, not a threat (Orbán 2019b). Furthermore, Orbán says that Hungary is "proud of being part of the renewal of international relations that is embodied in the One Belt, One Road initiative" (2017d).

The Hungarian government claims that a new geopolitical context has been adopted in Hungary and Eastern and Central Europe, where the geographical position of Hungary could benefit Hungary and its interests by participating in BRI (Orbán, 2017d). Furthermore, Szijjártó has said that the “initiative is in harmony with Hungary’s national interests and national strategy” (2019c).

The Hungarian government sees BRI as a geopolitical issue since it is part of a more significant geopolitical change currently underway and as an initiative that benefits Hungary geopolitically.

#### **4.5.3. National Frame**

The Hungarian government also sees BRI as a national issue. One clear example of this is how the government sees BRI’s benefits to Hungary. The initiative aligns with Hungary’s national interests and national strategy (Szijjártó, 2019c; Orbán, 2019b). These national interests within the BRI framework will always be safeguarded, and as Orbán emphasises, Hungary “shall not accept any kind of external ideological pressure” (2019b). Furthermore, transport links that BRI contributes to, necessary for free trade (Szijjártó 2019a), are of Hungary’s national interests. It is not only free trade that is a national interest of Hungary but further Eurasian economic cooperation, which BRI is an excellent contribution to (Szijjártó, 2017b; Szijjártó, 2019f).

The initiatives within the framework have made it possible to improve Hungary’s and the EU’s future economic strength (Szijjártó, 2017b). Hence, from a national perspective, the Hungarian government highlights the importance of Hungary to participate in different BRI projects, such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway (Szijjártó, 2019g; Varga, 2019). Without the project, “Hungary would fall behind in the competition for transport routes” (Varga, 2019). The Hungarian government also believes that the BRI “serves the interests of the Hungarian economy” and is a vast opportunity for Hungary “to achieve further foreign trade success” (Szijjártó, 2019f). Therefore, the Hungarian government sees BRI as a possibility to achieve national interests.

The intense depiction by the Hungarian government of BRI achievement of national interests is illustrated by the government’s wish to participate in BRI actively. As Orbán stated:

And, ever since, on every issue Hungary has been among the first to make a move: we were the first to welcome the President's One Belt One Road Initiative; we were the first to attend the conference on this initiative; and we were the first to sign the relevant agreements. And I could go on (2017c).

The Hungarian government frames BRI as a national issue, in line with Hungary's national interests. It is in the government's intention to maintain Hungary's participation within BRI.

#### **4.5.4. EU Frame**

The Hungarian government sees BRI as an opportunity for the EU. Here, the 16+1 format plays a key role and is in the best interest of the EU (Orbán, 2017a; Orbán, 2017b), since Central Europe is the economic engine of growth in the union (Orbán, 2017d; Orbán, 2018) The BRI is an opportunity for the EU for several reasons. The global economy has shifted and is determined by China and its BRI, according to Szijjártó. Therefore, the EU needs to adapt to the current economic changes and compete in the global market. EU must cooperate with a significant actor in the global economy by, for example, participating in BRI (Szijjártó, 2017a; Szijjártó, 2017b; Szijjártó, 2019h).

However, Hungary has been criticised for its involvement in BRI initiatives (Orbán, 2019c). The Hungarian government has assured that the government follows European values in these different initiatives in the BRI's cooperation framework (Szijjártó, 2018).

As can be seen by the Hungarian government's framing of BRI as an EU issue, it emphasises the solution and necessity participation BRI could give EU in a changing global market and how Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe could contribute to this change. Furthermore, the government ensures that the initiatives within BRI go in line with the values and interests of the EU.

#### **4.5.5. The Hungarian Government's Framing of BRI**

The Hungarian government illustrates BRI, first and foremost, as an economic issue, which gives opportunities both for Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe and for the EU in general. The economic aspect of BRI is also reflected in the other frames, the geopolitical, national and EU frames. The national framing of BRI is also vital since it is mentioned in all other frames.

Even though BRI is depicted as a geopolitical and EU issue, they often overlap the economic and national frame of BRI, with arguments about the economic and national interests from an EU and geopolitical perspective. Therefore, the Hungarian government mainly frames BRI as an economic and national issue.

#### 4.6. Comparison Between the Analysed Member States

All five MS see the economic opportunities and benefits with BRI. Furthermore, all five strongly emphasise the economic frame compared to the other three. However, there are also some distinctions between how the states speak of the economic aspects of BRI. For example, France and Germany see the economic benefit with BRI but stress that certain norms, values, and principles must be followed. Similarly, Italy highlights maintaining certain values when cooperating with BRI in the MuO between Italy and China. The need to ensure that the BRI project meets specific standards is not seen in the case of Estonia and Hungary. Another difference is that Italy has shifted its focus from seeing the economic benefits of BRI from a national perspective to a more EU perspective, where economic cooperation with China and its initiative should be within the EU framework. The other four MS also discuss economic benefits for their nations and Europe. In contrast to Italy, they have not shifted from national to EU focus on the economic aspects of BRI but instead highlighted both perspectives.

The geopolitical frame was not one of the dominant frames in any of the five cases. However, the geopolitical frame had different meanings for the five MS. All claimed that BRI is a geopolitical initiative. However, this meant different things and had different consequences for the various MS. For Germany, China's initiative was a geopolitical tool in several areas, such as geopolitical and military. Furthermore, the project could divide the EU and influence the MS in different ways, which means that the West needs to have a strategy towards this geopolitical project. Estonia sees the issues for the West with BRI in a similar way. However, Estonia also highlights the national security concerns for Estonia with BRI. Both Italy and Estonia see the security concerns with BRI regarding telecommunication, for example, the implementation of the 5G network, in which China and its BRI are involved. France underlines how it could contribute to the dialogues with China and its geopolitical project. Compared to the other four MS, Hungary does not see this as a threat but rather as an opportunity, in line with Hungary's national interests and strategy.

When it comes to the national frame, all MS see the benefits for their national economy. Germany depicts very little of its view of BRI as a national issue. In contrast, Hungary depicts the national perspectives of BRI very much, depicting the importance of both economically and other national interests for Hungary. Furthermore, Hungary has made explicit statements of the importance for Hungary to be a part of BRI. Italy and Estonia both see the benefits for the national economy and speak of their intention to deepen the bilateral relation with China within the BRI framework. France is also optimistic about bilateral agreements with China about BRI. However, France strongly emphasises the importance of the relationship to be in the spirit of cooperation. Furthermore, France stands out because the government wants to play a vital role in strengthening the cooperation between Europe and China within the BRI framework.

Regarding the last frame, the EU, there are also differences. All five MS see how the BRI framework contributes to the interests of the union. Both Estonia and Hungary see that the 16+1 format plays a crucial role in the cooperation between the EU and China within the BRI framework. In addition, they also see the economic benefits for the EU. Hungary focuses on the need for the EU to cooperate with BRI due to the economic and political changes in the world. On the other hand, Germany sees the risks for the EU with BRI because it could influence certain MS not to comply with EU values, such as human rights. Furthermore, Germany fears that the project could damage and divide the EU. Germany is not convinced that the BRI project could complement the EU's strategies to connect Eurasia. Therefore, according to the German government, the EU needs to strengthen its connectivity strategy. France also sees the need for the EU to have a united message towards BRI. On the other hand, Italy and Hungary do not see any risks that their involvement in BRI would affect their relationship with the EU. However, they have felt the need to assure other MS that their bilateral relations with China within BRI align with their EU membership.

In summary, when comparing the five analysed MS, there are similarities and differences regarding how they discuss the four frames.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Critical Discussion

What can be concluded by the analysis is that the economic frame is the most dominating frame for all five cases. As the comparison shows, the economic frame has different meanings in different cases. Many of the cases highlight the national perspective of the economic frame, how it would benefit each states' economy and economic interests. Similarly, it is the case with the national frame, where economic aspects are highlighted in most analysed cases. The overlapping of the economic and national frame, which the Italian case is an excellent example of, is supported in the previous research (Matura, 2018, pp. 178–179; Li, Hofman and Geraci, 2020; Pacheco Pardo, 2018).

All cases see BRI as a geopolitical project, but the geopolitical frame is not dominating regarding any of the five MS, as one might believe, based on the previous research (Richardson, 2021; Vangeli, 2017). In the geopolitical framing, Hungary stands out because it sees this geopolitical initiative as an opportunity and not as a threat. The other four cases see some security risks with BRI, either to the own nation or to the EU and the rest of the Western world.

The EU frame is only a dominant frame in the case of the German government. Despite the EU frame not being the dominant frame for the other cases and the national frame being a more dominating frame, the EU has a role in all five cases. The EU's role is depicted in the EU frame and the national frame, sometimes related to each other. For example, BRI is viewed as benefitting both national interests and EU interests, where BRI's different projects and concepts, such as the 16+1 format, benefit both the states involved and the EU and its ambitions in Eurasia. The mix of national and EU perspectives when discussing foreign and security issues is seen in the previous research, by mentioning the MS' balance between national interests in foreign and security issues and the MS' obligations to the union and its common foreign and security policy (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006).

A finding in the analysis is that not all cases mention the essential values for the EU when cooperating with China and its BRI (Press and information team of the Delegation to CHINA, 2017; Smith, 2016; Maer, 2016). The German and French governments demand that specific values, which is aspired by the EU too (Press and information team of the Delegation to CHINA, 2017), be met when cooperating with China and its BRI. The Italian government also

mentions in the MuO for BRI between Italy and China that international standards need to be met. Among these three cases, the German government stands out because it sees the risks with BRI in the sense that BRI can make MS less inclined to follow the values of the EU. The emphasis on maintaining specific values when cooperating with BRI is not seen in other cases. Instead, Hungary, for example, ensures that the state follows EU standards and norms when taking part in the BRI framework.

A possible explanation for why some states highlight the EU's values when discussing BRI could be seen in the previous research. Vangeli (2017) argues that those states that are involved in the 16+1 format are more open to China and its values (2017), which is different from the values of the EU (Maer, 2016). The cases that did not mention these values are Estonia and Hungary, part of the 16+1 format. Maybe their participation in the 16+1 format could answer why these differences exist between the five analysed cases. However, the thesis cannot conclude this since the research design does not provide an explanation for these differences. The research design only helps to map and compare the differences and similarities between the cases on how the four predefined frames are depicted and assessed in the case of BRI. Further research is needed to draw these types of conclusions.

The analysis finds the most considerable contrasts between the Hungarian and the German governments framing of BRI, especially when looking at the geopolitical frame. Of the five cases, the German government is the one that most highlights the risks with China's geopolitical initiative, especially for the EU. On the other hand, the Hungarian government does not have a risk mindset. Instead, the Hungarian government sees BRI as an opportunity and possibility to fulfil many of the national interests of Hungary. The government sees a need for Hungary and the rest of the EU to adapt to the changes in the international arena, with increased Chinese dominance. This research's analysis cannot explain why the most considerable contrasts between the two cases views of BRI exist. Further research is needed to analyse why the German and Hungarian governments have these different views.

These findings show differences and similarities between the five cases' depiction and assessment of the four predefined frames. It can be argued that all four frames are depicted and assessed in the five analysed cases, but in different ways and to different degrees of importance.

## 5.2. Conclusions

The thesis aimed to map and compare the different views the MS have on the BRI and identify in what ways the MS differs. To answer the research questions, a representative sample, five of 27 MS' governments, were selected to be analysed. These cases were: Estonia, Italy, Germany, France, and Hungary. A comparative framing analysis was applied on material depicting the five selected MS governments' views of BRI. Four frames were identified by previous research and analysed in the chosen empirical material. A comparison of the five selected cases depicting and assessing the four predefined frames on BRI was executed, showing the differences and similarities of the five governments' views of BRI.

The differences and similarities found in MS' views on BRI strengthen the previous research's explanation of the EU's difficulty to unite in a common foreign and security policy, such as the different views among the MS on EU's role in foreign and security issues and how much the EU should decide over the MS' own foreign and security interests and bilateral relations to other states, such as China (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Brack, Coman and Crespy, 2019; Smith, 2016). Additionally, it can be concluded that the use of predefined frames, based on previous research, made it possible to map and compare the MS' views of BRI and in what ways they differ, answering the research questions and fulfilling the aim of the research. Based on the research findings, this thesis contributes to our understanding of why the MS have difficulties uniting behind a common foreign and security policy, especially where there are security challenges involved – as is the case with China and its BRI. Therefore, the thesis contributes to the field of Political Science with a specialisation in crisis management and security.

## 5.3. Limitations

Based on the analysis, the research is limited to only mapping and comparing the five MS views of BRI and thus cannot explain why differences and similarities exist among the five cases. Therefore, further research is needed to explain why MS differ in their views of BRI.

A limitation with the thesis' research design is the selection of the five MS. The five cases were selected to give a representative sample of the MS since they differ in several ways, such as geographical position and new or old MS. These differences between the five MS could affect the different depictions and assessments of the four predefined frames on BRI. Furthermore,



domestic conditions could explain why there are differences and similarities in the views of BRI among the five MS (Langendonk, 2020; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Zeng, 2020a). Even though a larger sample or an analysis of all MS' views of BRI could eliminate these uncertainties, it would not have been feasible to provide an in-depth analysis of each case within the framework of this study. It would be interesting to compare this study with a future study that compares all MS' views of BRI.

Another limitation to the research is that the material collected stretches from 2013 onwards. The analysis does not study the changes of views among MS over time. Therefore, a potential shift has not been analysed in the study. Even though this does not contradict the research thesis' findings, it could have nuanced the findings further.

## 6. Bibliography

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