POLICY PAPER

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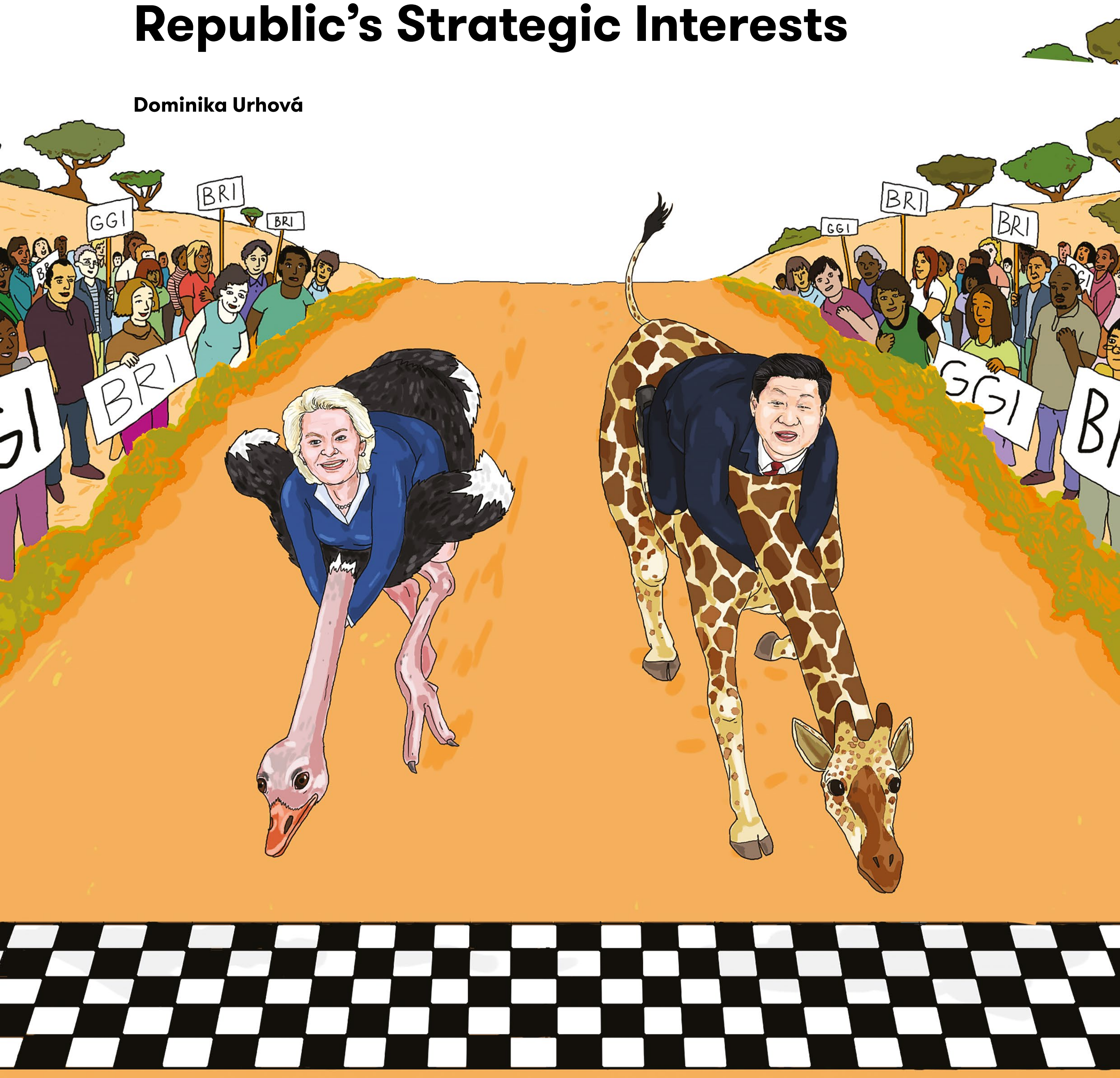
Dominika Urhová



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LEVERAGING THE GLOBAL GATEWAY INITIATIVE TO ADVANCE THE CZECH REPUBLIC'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS

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Executive summary

- Over the last several years, global geopolitical shifts – including China's rise and escalating US-China competition – have prompted the EU to reassess its strategic stance. This has led to a greater focus on strategic autonomy through a de-risking agenda, including diversifying partnerships away from China and toward emerging and developing nations.

- This study examines the European Union's Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) from the perspective of the Czech Republic. The research intends to outline the role that the Czech Republic can play in facilitating the implementation of the Global Gateway strategy, as well as the opportunities that the Czech Republic and Czech companies may gain from participating in Global Gateway projects.

- The paper focuses specifically on the Europe-Africa package of the Global Gateway, which has received half of the total Global Gateway budget. The investment package, while of particular importance, also carries specific and unique implementation challenges related to the colonial and post-colonial history of Europe-Africa relationships.

- The paper argues that the appointment of Jozef Síkela as the new EU Commissioner for International Partnerships presents the Czech Republic with an opportunity to elevate its image within the EU and strengthen its influence at the EU level. The new Commissioner can leverage the Czech Republic's experience in engaging with the African region to rebuild the African nations' trust with the EU and create strong partnerships based on mutual developmental needs and agendas.

- Global Gateway presents an opportunity for the Czech Republic to build on its past successes in bilateral economic and development cooperation. Czech NGOs have a strong track record in securing development funding and fostering developmental cooperation. Their expertise could be leveraged to help Czech businesses navigate new markets and access new sources of funding. Nonetheless, a productive dialogue between the non-governmental and the private sector has yet to take shape, as lingering mutual distrust remains a challenge.

- For the private sector, the added value of Global Gateway lies in its ability to serve as one of the tools – particularly through its loan guarantees – to increase Czech companies' engagement in previously neglected regions. These encompass regions such as Africa, Asia, or Latin America, where companies have previously struggled to operate due to difficult business environments. While the Czech Export Bank has already made some progress in this area, the GGI's financial instruments can enhance these efforts and offer additional support for Czech companies aiming to succeed in African and other markets.

→ Global Gateway offers the Czech Republic an opportunity to diversify its exports. Currently, the majority of the Czech Republic's exports target other EU markets, with about 40 percent of its exports taking the form of subcontracts. Some members of the Czech Confederation of Industry have advocated for greater export diversification, emphasizing the need for the Czech Republic to start exporting to countries beyond the traditional markets. However, this has not yet been accomplished, and Global Gateway could be one of the tools to achieve this goal.

→ Despite these opportunities, Global Gateway faces several challenges that prevent it from meeting its potential. These include limited transparency, visibility, and clarity; deficiencies in its communication strategy towards the private sector and partner countries; lack of prioritization, assessment and monitoring strategies; and framing of the strategy as being a geopolitical instrument, which can be counterproductive when communicating with partner countries.

→ The Czech Republic itself must also confront various structural hurdles to foster a business climate that encourages more private sector involvement. Additionally, there is minimal awareness and tradition of actively engaging the private sector in development assistance, both locally and beyond Czech borders. As such, the Czech government should outline a clear concept of commercial development assistance to help companies understand their role. Secondly, a clear communications strategy is needed to increase the visibility of the role of the private sector in engaging in development assistance in general and the Global Gateway in particular.

→ On a strategic level, given its relatively small size, the Czech Republic needs to set for itself clear priorities in development areas, regions of cooperation, and sectors of cooperation where the country holds the most pronounced comparative advantage.

Recommendations

- To offset the mentioned challenges, the paper offers several recommendations for the EU, Commissioner Síkela, and the Czech government. To gain the trust of partner countries and improve the visibility of Global Gateway, the European Commission (EC) should improve the attractiveness of the strategy and understand who they are (or are not) competing with. The narrative around Global Gateway should reflect the EU's understanding of local contexts in partner countries. Likewise, the narrative should refrain from framing Global Gateway as exclusively a geopolitical and geoeconomic tool in the EU's competition with China. It should instead put greater emphasis on the developmental aspects while also refraining from adopting paternalistic rhetoric.

- The communication of the Global Gateway should be simplified. It is currently difficult to distinguish which projects belong specifically to Global Gateway and which are part of the Team Europe Initiative but not Global Gateway. For the private sector, establishing a dedicated service could enhance the initiative's visibility, assist companies in navigating proposal submissions, and streamline funding requests and project implementation.

- To develop a national strategy and framework for the Czech Republic's effective involvement in Global Gateway, it is crucial to enhance the participation of Czech government institutions. Currently, only the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a dedicated department focused on the strategic significance of Global Gateway. This effort must be accompanied by much more active involvement from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Transportation, and other relevant bodies.

- The Czech government also has a significant role to play in facilitating private sector engagement. More funding should be allocated to increasing the visibility of Global Gateway and the potential benefits that firms can derive from active engagement. This will require a clear communication strategy alongside a concept to showcase the synergies between commercial and development activities.

- The Czech government should also work on establishing key priority areas based on where economic and development priorities overlap with Czech companies' skills and expertise. Doing so would enable the Czech Republic to map out regions, countries, and sectors in which Czech engagement could have added value. The Czech Republic's past collaborations with African nations highlight its strong reputation and expertise in sectors like healthcare, agriculture, food production, water management, and transport and infrastructure. As such, narrowing the cooperation (for instance, to the above-mentioned areas) could ensure better allocation of resources and help the Czech Republic build a competitive edge as well as a reputation and brand.

→ Mobilization of private capital should be done through a dialogue between the Czech government and Czech companies. While there currently exists an interest in creating such a dialogue, the practical implementation has so far failed to generate the needed results.

→ The Czech government should adopt strategies to reconcile Czech non-governmental and private sectors and create platforms for dialogue and cooperation, which could facilitate knowledge-sharing and allow Czech companies to increase their participation in development assistance and in Global Gateway.

Introduction

In recent years, global geopolitical shifts – including China's rise and escalating US-China competition – have prompted the EU to reassess its strategic stance. This has led to a greater focus on strategic autonomy through a de-risking agenda, including diversifying partnerships away from China and toward emerging and developing nations. However, while establishing strong partnerships with countries in the Global South is essential for the EU to strengthen its global positioning, China's substantial presence may challenge – and even undermine – its efforts.

As part of the EU's ambition to extend its global influence, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy unveiled the Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) in December 2021. This extensive infrastructure development and connectivity initiative is designed to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and act as a more transparent and sustainability-oriented alternative to Chinese infrastructure investments.

However, for the GGI to enhance the EU's geopolitical significance, the European Commission will likely need to develop strategies to overcome the skepticism of Global South countries toward the EU's capability and commitment to timely project execution while also improving its transparency, clarity, and visibility. Beyond the general challenges that the GGI may encounter, the unique historical ties between the African continent – which takes centre stage in Global Gateway – and several EU Member States present additional issues and questions that must be addressed to enable the strategy's successful implementation. As the EU seeks to leverage the GGI to establish itself as a trusted and reliable partner capable of competing with the BRI while enhancing its global reputation, it must also engage with African countries in order to achieve these ambitions. Rebuilding trust, which was eroded during the colonial and post-colonial periods, remains a significant challenge for the EU in demonstrating its commitment to the continent.

While the EU has set ambitious goals for itself, the initiative's success will largely depend on effective implementation and leadership. The recent appointment of Jozef Síkela as EU Commissioner for International Partnerships positions the Czech Republic to play a pivotal role in bringing the GGI to fruition.

The initiative is a channel through which the Czech Republic can elevate its image, increase its engagement in development assistance and infrastructure investment, leverage its non-colonial history, secure stronger influence on the EU level, and become one of the steering voices in decisions that are strategically important to the EU.

For the Czech Republic's private sectors, the GGI also has the potential to open up new avenues for businesses to operate in international markets, become one of the tools to help the Czech Republic diversify its exports, and – through financial guarantees – support larger investments by Czech companies into previously unexplored countries or regions with perceived higher risks.

This paper analyzes the GGI from the Czech Republic's perspective, highlighting aspects of Global Gateway from which the Czech Republic can derive significant opportunities while also identifying areas where Commissioner Síkela could facilitate progress. Given the limited scope of the paper and the diverse set of countries and projects encompassed within the GGI, this paper mainly examines the GGI's Europe-Africa Investment Package. Not only is half of the GGI budget allocated to this specific deal, but its successful implementation could also improve the EU's security, especially in the context of reducing migration, and enhance the EU's geopolitical standing in a region where China has gained significant influence.

Last but not least, as mentioned above, the African continent bears unique challenges for the EU, and the Czech Republic could be well positioned to build on its past experiences and strengthen its own and the EU's cooperation with Africa through the framework of Global Gateway.

How many is too many?

In response to China's expanding influence abroad, particularly through its BRI, several new global infrastructure initiatives, spearheaded by the US, the EU, and the G7, were launched in 2021. The surge began with the US-led G7 Build Back Better World (B3W) Initiative being launched in June. This was soon followed by the EU unveiling its Global Gateway Initiative in September and the UK introducing its Clean, Green Initiative (CGI) at COP26 in November.[1] Collectively, these initiatives showcase the renewed commitment of the US, EU, and allied nations to collaboratively address global issues, reduce the widening global infrastructure investment gap – projected to reach €14.33 trillion by 2040[2] – and establish themselves as preferred partners for Global South nations. The investment gap is a key focus of these renewed efforts, as it hinders development, particularly in vulnerable regions such as Africa, and poses substantial challenges to global connectivity in an era characterized by hyper-globalization.

The initiatives also have the potential to serve as a precursor to a new framework for developmental cooperation driven by strategic interests and aimed at catalyzing commercial investment while offering a competitive alternative to China's BRI. However, the question still lingers over whether countering China's expanding influence with various initiatives that sound alike and share similar goals is an effective strategy. What is more, if Global Gateway is poised to be the ultimate infrastructure investment strategy, what, then, differentiates it from the other initiatives?[3]

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF GLOBAL INFRASTRUCTURE INITIATIVES

Initiative	Year established	Package size	Nature of the package	Financial instrument
Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	2013	Over $1 trillion	State-led with private sector as an instrument	China State Bank and China Exim Bank; subsidies to private sector companies by the state
Clean, Green Initiative (CGI)	2021	Over $3 billion (2022-2026)	State-led with private sector as a partner	British International Investment
Global Gateway Initiative (GGI)	2021	Over $300 billion (2021-2027)	Commission-led with private sector as a partner	European Investment Bank and European Development Finance Institutions; Creation of an EU Export Credit Agency (TBD)
Build Back Better World (B3W)	2021	No set amount	State-led with private sector as a partner	US International Development Finance Corporation

Source: Author's compilation

The obvious first answer to this question is the size of its budget, the scale of expected EU and private sector involvement, and the scale of the financial instruments designed for and dedicated to meeting the initiatives' ambitions. Numerous funding opportunities and mechanisms are available for implementing GGI projects. Global Gateway aims to mobilize up to €300 billion by 2027 using a diverse financial toolkit that includes soft loans, guarantees, and grants. While some funding is expected from the private sector, the majority will come from the EU's existing funds.[4]

It is projected that €135 billion in investment will come through the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+). Of this, €40 billion will be allocated as loan guarantees, with €26.7 billion managed by the European Investment Bank and the remaining €13 billion distributed through an EFSD+ "window" specifically designated for Global Gateway, providing loans from the national development finance institutions of EU Member States. An additional €18 billion in grants is set to be allocated via EU external assistance programs. The leftover €145 billion is expected to be sourced from the financial and development finance institutions of EU Member States through the Team Europe approach explained below.[5] Furthermore, to enhance existing credit arrangements, the EU is considering the creation of a European Export Credit Facility, which could strengthen the competitiveness of the EU's private sector in developing nations.[6]

The initiatives launched in 2021, particularly the B3W and GGI, are designed to be mutually reinforcing and build upon earlier strategies of the US, the EU, and their partner countries. However, while extensive funding strategies have been developed as part of the initiatives (see Table 1), the planned funding still falls significantly short of what China has already allocated for the BRI.[7] As such, though ambitious in scope, they can be considered not only latecomers but also second-tier players to the global connectivity competition when compared to China's BRI.

Beyond the challenge of meeting budget goals – or even matching China's spending – other concerns and criticisms, particularly regarding the GGI, highlight that much of the dedicated financing consists of 'repackaged' funds rather than new sources of investment. This raises questions about the EU's ability to secure the necessary funds to achieve its ambitious goals.[8] And although Global Gateway claims to offer a diverse funding structure to ensure reliable financing and minimize debt risks, a stark contrast remains: China has allocated over $1 trillion to infrastructure, while these newer initiatives remain largely aspirational and lack a clear strategy for mobilizing private-sector funding.

Additionally, with various overlaps among G7, EU, and US initiatives, a critical question is how to effectively coordinate these efforts. This includes identifying synergies, fostering areas of collaboration, aligning funding opportunities and responsibilities, and exploring how these initiatives can interact in a complementary manner. Such coordination is essential; without a clear strategy, efforts may become fragmented, leading to duplicated initiatives and inefficient resource allocation. This stands in contrast to China's BRI, which requires far less coordination.[9]

GGI and BRI: same act, different impact

The official framing portrays the GGI as transparent, sustainable, and aligned with EU values and principles. The key emphasis is on creating a framework for resilient global connectivity, with the defining feature being "smart, clean, and secure investments in quality infrastructure." Partnerships formed under the Global Gateway umbrella are based on six key principles: democratic values and high standards, good governance and transparency, equal partnerships, green and clean, security focus, and catalyzing private sector investment.[10] Each year, new flagship projects are proposed and added to Global Gateway. In 2023 and 2024, 218 key initiatives were endorsed. For 2025, an additional 46 flagship projects received endorsement.[11]

The Team Europe approach serves as the main method for implementing Global Gateway. This term signifies the collaboration between the EU, EU Member States, the European Investment Bank (EIB), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to promote international cooperation.[12] Notably, it is crucial to recognize that the Team Europe approach extends beyond Global Gateway, as it is part of a larger Team Europe Initiative (TEI), which currently includes a total of 169 TEIs. Among these, 132 are country TEIs, 33 are regional TEIs, and 4 are global TEIs.[13]

The European Commission has also initiated a Business Advisory Group[14] and a Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform[15] to promote inclusiveness. These informal platforms connect the private sector, civil society, EU bodies, and financial institutions. For the private sector, the European Commission also established the EU Business Fora, which facilitate active dialogue between private and public sectors, offering opportunities for business-to-business meetings, business-to-government interactions, panel discussions, in-person field visits, and similar activities.[16] The Global Gateway Forum also convenes to promote international dialogue and collaboration among various stakeholders, including government representatives and the private sector.[17]

In contrast, China's BRI was launched in 2013 under the leadership of Xi Jinping. In 2017, this infrastructure initiative was incorporated into China's constitution, solidifying it as a significant legacy of the Xi Jinping era. It has also become a crucial aspect of China's ambition to be viewed as a global leader and to expand its influence. The initiative is rooted in China's policy of non-interference and win-win cooperation, with projects perceived as allegedly lacking the conditionalities traditionally associated with Western-style development aid and cooperation. While it primarily focuses on creating and connecting trade routes, the key motivation behind the initiative's launch was to stimulate China's economic growth, particularly in its poorer provinces, and to find alternative markets for both Chinese products and companies operating in an increasingly saturated environment. By engaging with China's BRI, recipient countries can access large-scale investments, particularly in infrastructure, which is often seen as a developmental priority.

Relatively recently, there has been a shift in China's approach to the BRI as it entered a new phase, sometimes labelled BRI 2.0.[18] Some researchers attribute this change to the slow economic recovery post the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to prioritize domestic economic issues.[19] This next stage moves away from large-scale projects toward smaller, more sustainable projects and strategic investments in green and digital technology. It has also been characterized by the downscaling of Beijing's BRI investments and a recalibration of China's strategic focus. For instance, China's overseas development funding was reduced dramatically, decreasing from approximately $80 billion of new funding in 2016 to $5 billion in 2021. This down-scaling has been particularly pronounced in Africa, where the funding decreased from $30 billion in 2016 to $1billion in 2023. Furthermore, instead of the traditional large-scala 'gala' infrastructure, Beijing has also started to invest in "small but beautiful" BRI projects with greater focus on open, green, and clean infrastructure.[20] For instance, China channeled $6 billion of its financing into renewable energy in the past couple of years and commenced low-carbon electricity generation projects in more than 100 countries.[21] Moreover, Beijing invested $19.4 billion in 2023 in the mining and metal industries necessary for the green transition.[22]

For context, Global Gateway employs various financial instruments to fund its projects, whereas the BRI primarily relies on loan-based infrastructure initiatives, often secured by collateral. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) oversees implementation, with direct investments supported by the China Investment Corporation. By 2023, total investments reached $643 billion in construction contracts and $419 billion in other non-financial investments. Notably, the BRI spans multiple regions and is not limited to developing nations. For the most part, China's BRI has focused on funding large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly in sectors such as transportation, energy, telecommunications, and industrial development.[23]

While the BRI appears to provide partner countries with valuable resources for their economic development, the initiative has also faced significant criticism and concerns. These include a perceived lack of transparency, negative impacts on local communities and the environment, growing debt burdens for recipient countries, limited market access for non-Chinese companies, and human and labor rights violations.[24] Considering these concerns, a narrative has emerged suggesting that the BRI primarily benefits China rather than the recipient countries. For the EU, these concerns can serve as lessons for its own efforts in implementing the GGI.

It is about China, stupid

European Union officials have yet to explicitly frame Global Gateway as a competitor or response to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Nonetheless, several parallels between the two initiatives and comments from EU officials like Ursula von der Leyen[25] have led to the GGI being increasingly seen as a response to China's expanding global influence.[26]

While not directly stated, the wording in the GGI description reflects the EU's ambition to be recognized as the leading partner for nations most affected by inadequate infrastructure and the widening global investment gap. Additionally, the Joint Communication from December 2021 begins by emphasizing democracies, their values, and their responsibility to address global challenges, positioning Global Gateway at the center of today's geopolitical landscape.[27] This framing subtly suggests that the GGI is designed to serve as a credible alternative to address shortcomings and avoid the mistakes commonly associated with China's BRI. The narrative surrounding Global Gateway also highlights the EU's need to strengthen its global presence and competitiveness, particularly in infrastructure development – a sector heavily influenced by China since 2013. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to analyze the Global Gateway strategy without referencing the BRI or drawing comparisons between the two initiatives.

TABLE 1: OFFICIAL FRAMING OF THE GLOBAL GATEWAY INITIATIVE

"Democracies – and the values that underpin them – must demonstrate their ability to deliver on today's global challenges."
"They must have the capacity and the ambition needed to help improve people's lives around the world."
"[...]countries need a positive offer when deciding how best to develop[...]"
"This is why they need a trusted partner to design projects that are sustainable and of high quality and implemented with high levels of transparency and standards in order to deliver lasting social and economic benefits for local communities."
"The EU will offer its financing under fair and favorable terms in order to limit the risk of debt distress."
"Without proper transparency, good governance and high standards projects can be badly chosen or designed, left incomplete or be used to fuel corruption."
"Given the global nature of this challenge, the EU needs to provide a positive offer for its partners."
"To deliver on this, Global Gateway will work around the world, adapting to the needs and strategic interests of different regions, while remaining values-driven."
"It [Global Gateway] aims to forge links and not create dependencies."

Source: Joint Communication to the European Parliament[28]

A leaked briefing intended for the new EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela, has further underscored the GGI's geopolitical relevance. The document highlighted the EU's need to strengthen ties with emerging and developing economies, referencing a "battle of offers" and portraying the GGI as a tool for both defensive and offensive geopolitical objectives.[29] The competitive undertones of the GGI were also evident in Ursula von der Leyen's 2023 speech at the inaugural Global Gateway Forum. Without naming China explicitly, she criticized the exploitative practices of other global actors and emphasized the EU's goal of offering sustainable and transparent investment choices.[30] Former Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen also emphasized the "battle of narratives" surrounding global infrastructure investment initiatives and China's ability to deliver tangible outcomes.[31] These statements position the GGI at the center of the shifting geopolitical dynamics, highlighting the initiative's importance for the EU's efforts to improve its global stature and competitiveness.

However, in order to achieve these geopolitical ambitions and be considered a substitute or a competitor to the BRI, the new Commissioner will need to establish strategies to effectively communicate the successes and scale of the EU's global involvement. Although the EU and its Member States are the foremost providers of official development assistance (ODA), the magnitude and effectiveness of their contributions have not received much warranted recognition.[32] This oversight stems from the EU's inadequate communication about its global development assistance initiatives, which has hindered the establishment of a unified EU brand capable of garnering interest and backing from recipient nations.

In contrast, China has been notably outspoken about the BRI and embarked on a branding exercise that framed the initiative in the context of national pride and material well-being and helped Beijing establish a reputation as an effective development partner.[33] Notably, Beijing's reputation remains relatively intact despite growing criticism regarding the quality of its infrastructure projects, labor rights violations, and the increased indebtedness of recipient countries resulting from the BRI. With the BRI continuing to be at the forefront of developing countries' infrastructure development, the Global Gateway offers the EU and its Member States an opportunity to build a unified and impactful brand that demonstrates the EU's capacity to play a significant role in an uncertain geopolitical landscape and become a more sustainable alternative to China's infrastructure investments.

Africa-Europe investment package takes centre stage

In recent years, the African continent has grown significantly in geopolitical, economic, and strategic relevance. This change has empowered African nations, giving them a more pronounced voice on the global stage. It has also prompted countries such as China, Russia, and the Gulf states to increase their involvement in the region.

The continent has also gained significant importance in the EU's strategic agenda. Due to Africa's proximity as a neighbor to the EU, developments within the continent – both economic and security-related – directly affect the EU. The importance of cooperating with the African continent was highlighted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which made the EU recognize the necessity of African nations' support, particularly in multilateral settings, to uphold and enforce a rules-based order.[34] Furthermore, migration has emerged as a pivotal issue in EU-Africa relations. The Russian invasion has exacerbated a food crisis in African nations, driven by soaring grain prices and reduced exports. This escalating food insecurity is poised to trigger new waves of migration throughout Africa and into neighboring regions, including the EU. Adding to this is the fact that Africa is the region most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and at the highest risk for forced environmental migration.[35]

Given the region's significance and the persistent issues it faces, which directly affect the EU, it is not surprising that around half of the GGI's total budget of €300 billion has been dedicated to the Global Gateway Africa-Europe Investment Package.[36] The continent's vast resource base, rapidly growing population, and developmental needs offer significant opportunities for the GGI to contribute to transformative change while securing access to critical raw materials (CRMs) and enhancing the EU's geopolitical footprint. However, the initiative faces substantial competition from China's BRI, which has established a strong presence across Africa since 2013.

Based on the European Commission's website, the main goal of this investment package is to "support Africa for a strong, inclusive, green, and digital recovery and transformation." To do so, the investment package includes five key topics (plus one on sustainable financing growth), each with its priority areas, as shown in Table 2. If communicated and executed effectively, the GGI could be at least part of the solution to Africa's growing need for infrastructure investment, estimated at $130-170 billion annually. [37,38]

The GGI's blended finance model, combining grants with private-sector investments, offers a more cautious and collaborative alternative to the BRI's often debt-heavy approach. Moreover, the GGI's focus on fostering partnerships with local stakeholders could help engage African countries as active participants in the development process and demonstrate the EU's understanding of and respect for African countries' agency and ownership of their development.

TABLE 2: GLOBAL GATEWAY EUROPE-AFRICA INVESTMENT PACKAGE OVERVIEW

Key areas	Key topics
Green transition	Sustainable energy Biodiversity Agri-food systems Climate resilience and disaster risk reduction
Digital transition	Universal access to reliable internet networks
Sustainable growth and decent job creation	Transport Support to businesses Economic integration Inclusive economies – North African region Sustainable mineral raw materials value chains Africa-EU Science, Technology, and Innovation Initiative
Strengthening health and pharmaceutical systems	Vaccination coverage African pharmaceutical system and regional manufacturing capacities
Investing in education and training	Skills and opportunities development
Supporting sustainable financing for growth	Grants and loans Global Green Bond Initiative Special drawing rights

Source: European Commission, EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package[39]

This starkly contrasts with China's strategies within the framework of the BRI, where projects are often allocated to Chinese companies that import workforce from China rather than increasing local hires. This approach prevents BRI projects from generating increased local income and fueling local job creation.[40] Nevertheless, despite this, China's pragmatic and politically neutral stance continues to resonate with African governments that are wary of external interference and question the EU's intentions.

The GGI has the potential to create a significant impact on African economies and societies, especially since its priority areas align well with the continent's broader needs. Its success could particularly improve the region's energy systems, expand labor market access for women and youth, mitigate the effects of climate change, enhance connectivity and digitalization, and improve transportation networks.

The GGI could address Africa's urgent energy deficit through Just Energy Transition Partnerships and various flagship projects, like rural electrification projects in Angola. These projects provide decentralized solutions and support access to electricity in remote areas where centralized grids are impractical, and create sustainable energy systems.[41] In contrast, China's BRI investment often targets large-scale fossil fuel projects and traditional grid infrastructure. While this can be effective in bolstering power supply, it also generates negative environmental impacts. Thus, the GGI's focus on climate-resilient energy solutions positions it as a more suitable and sustainable partner for African countries as it provides alternative investments capable of balancing growth with environmental protection.

Moreover, regarding improving access to the labor market, the GGI can help African countries achieve significant progress in labor market inclusivity. The EU has launched a Gender Action Plan and integrated it into the GGI.[42] Global Gateway's projects, such as the Gender Transformative Action Program and vocational and technical training, are well-positioned to empower women, facilitate their participation in the labor market, improve young people's technical skills, increase youth mobility, and prepare graduates for employment across various sectors.[43] The GGI's strong emphasis on youth education and mobility is evident in the Youth Mobility for Africa flagship project, the launch of the Youth Action Plan, and the establishment of the Africa-Europe Youth Academy.[44,45] While China's BRI is said to have created numerous jobs, it has also faced criticism for relying on Chinese labor, thereby limiting skill transfer and local job creation. In comparison, the GGI prioritizes local workforce participation and capacity building. This approach ensures long-term skill development while also providing immediate employment opportunities, ultimately benefiting recipient countries' economies.

Significant progress can also be achieved in Africa's digital connectivity. The GGI recognizes Africa's growing digital divide and views improving connectivity as a catalyst for development. As such, the GGI emphasizes projects capable of unlocking innovation and economic opportunities across the continent.[46] However, it is important to note that digital device usage rates differ significantly across the region, ranging from six to 53 percent.[47] As such, current or future projects must be carefully crafted and tailored to recipient countries' contexts. While more developed countries need the modernization of existing digital infrastructure, other countries require the expansion of access to the electrical grid and new infrastructure construction.

Similarly, China has invested heavily in digital infrastructure as part of its Digital Silk Road. Chinese companies like Huawei, ZTE, and China Telecom have played key roles in building and modernizing Africa's telecommunications infrastructure, becoming the driving forces behind Africa's telecommunications revolution.[48] At present, Chinese telecom companies form an integral part of almost every layer of Africa's telecom infrastructure, including undersea cables, satellites, applications, and similar components. Notably, despite the growing criticism concerning cybersecurity risks and the lack of data protection standards in Chinese-led projects, Chinese companies continue to enjoy expanding opportunities on the continent.[49]

In response to this, the new EU Commissioner will need to enhance the EU's communication strategy to make the GGI's digital connectivity projects attractive and able to compete with China's BRI. Furthermore, the EU needs to recognize that access to infrastructure outweighs security concerns for many African countries. Chinese companies offer faster, easier, and more affordable ways to enhance Africa's digital connectivity and achieve universal access to digital infrastructure technology. This improvement can, in turn, facilitate the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, boost the productivity of services, and contribute to more effective healthcare provision and disaster management. Therefore, overcoming China's dominance will not be an easy task, especially considering its decades-long involvement in Africa's telecommunications sector and the opportunities that many African nations see in continued cooperation with China.

Moreover, Africa is disproportionately affected by climate change despite contributing minimally to global emissions.[50] Some key flagship projects on the regional scale include climate adaptation and resilience in Africa, partnerships with private institutional investors on climate-smart solutions, and energy efficiency in buildings; the latter aiming to support the transition to low-carbon, energy-efficient, and climate-resilient buildings. Particularly now, one of the newest partnership programs under Síkela's leadership is the Africa-EU Space Partnership Program, launched in January 2025 and backed by €100 million in investment. Fostering climate resilience is one of the key priorities, as it aims to use space technologies to improve early warning systems for monitoring and forecasting weather-related events.[51]

However, it is important to recognize that the dual objectives of industrialization and green energy transition do not fully align.[52] Therefore, the GGI should adjust its expectations regarding African nations' abandonment of fossil fuels. Instead, the focus should be on finding a practical balance between fossil fuel use and renewable energy, tailored to the specific needs and capabilities of recipient countries.

Last but not least, looking at it through the lens of geopolitical competition, the investment package could bolster the EU's presence in Africa, expand its sphere of influence, and provide means to access the region's critical raw materials (CRMs). This is reflected in one of the package's key components – the construction of transportation corridors across Africa. These corridors would involve the development of airports, roads, railroads, and ports, significantly improving regional connectivity, economic integration, and trade route efficiency. If implemented successfully, the transportation corridors could create a widespread positive impact at the grassroots level and significantly advance EU-Africa cooperation.[53]

The corridors pass through several countries with large deposits of critical raw materials.[54] With China's growing dominance in CRMs and the impacts of Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU now considers securing access to CRMs one of its top priorities. Therefore, gaining access to these materials through cooperation with resource-rich countries via the transportation corridors could strengthen the EU's geoeconomic positioning.[55] In a time of intensifying global competition, ensuring access to CRMs will likely remain a key strategic goal for the EU. This in turn places the GGI as central to the EU's pursuit of greater geopolitical relevance and can position Commissioner Síkela's portfolio at the heart of the EU's strategic calculations.

At present, the key question is whether, considering the geopolitical aspects of the initiative, the GGI will become a self-serving endeavor for the EU or whether it will genuinely assist Africa with sustainable growth and economic resilience. The opportunities are manifold, and success will depend on Síkela's ability to operationalize the GGI in a way that delivers tangible results.

The EU's uphill battle in Africa

Despite the GGI's optimistic portrayal as a facilitator of inclusive development and social justice, concerns persist that it continues to rely on outdated development policies and principles. This antiquated approach has frequently been viewed as neo-colonialist, imposing EU and Western ideologies on Global South nations without considering their unique contexts, and primarily serving European strategic interests.[56] For the GGI to succeed, the EU must first restore the trust it lost with African nations due to a historical legacy of exploitative and one-sided relations established during the colonial and post-colonial periods.[57] This trust is crucial in order for the GGI to effectively promote shared prosperity and cooperation mutually beneficial to the EU and Africa. To achieve this, the EU and its Member States must avoid reigniting a new scramble for Africa and ensure that the benefits of this new development cooperation framework reach local communities in the recipient countries.[58]

A significant challenge to Global Gateway's success in Africa arises from public discussion about the initiative and how it is perceived in recipient countries. The EU's portrayal of the GGI suggests competition and power struggles. However, African nations prefer not to entangle themselves in regional power conflicts and instead prioritize diversifying their partnerships. Unsurprisingly, given their existing investment deficits, they are also reluctant to pick sides as that could alienate other partners. For them, geopolitical games between the US and China extend beyond their immediate interests.[59] For the EU to succeed in this initiative, it should prioritize cooperation over competition as the fundamental principle of the GGI. The EU should capitalize on its strengths, consider recipient countries' development and green agendas, and focus on complementing China's presence in the region. Ultimately, the EU should re-evaluate its outlook on China's role and adopt a more pragmatic and constructive strategy that takes into account China's role in Africa's green transition. In other words, do the GGI and BRI really need to be framed in the context of a zero-sum game, or do synergies exist between the two initiatives?

Moreover, since the introduction of the GGI in 2021, African experts have remained doubtful about the EU's capability to fulfill its commitments. In contrast to the EU, China has successfully facilitated infrastructure development across the continent, leading some to interpret Global Gateway as a reaction by the EU – recognizing China's more effective strategy – rather than a sincere effort to enhance livelihoods in Africa. Furthermore, African counterparts continue to express frustration with the EU's failure to respect African autonomy and engage meaningfully with local governments and communities to determine what is truly needed for their nations to thrive. A significant concern raised after the GGI's launch was that, despite allocating half of the budget to Africa, the EU did not consult African stakeholders beforehand.[60]

To genuinely present the GGI as an inclusive initiative that provides "benefits and protections"[61] to its partners, the EU should also avoid a condescending approach and actively listen to its African partners. The EU's patronizing tendencies present a critical hurdle that must be addressed if the GGI is to help the EU establish itself as a credible and trusted partner in the region. While the EU tends to frame these partnerships as equal and responsive to the recipient countries' needs, this narrative often comes across as paternalistic and prescriptive rather than genuinely attuned to what these countries require.[62] Ultimately, most countries seek to engage with a diverse set of partners – but on their own terms.

Another challenge stems from how African countries perceive the EU's development aid structure. Many view cooperation with the EU as burdened by excessive bureaucracy and stringent conditions related to human rights, labor standards, environmental regulations, and democratic values. This also applies to the Global Gateway, which, being rooted in EU values, follows a highly technocratic approach. In contexts where urgent infrastructure investment is critical, conditions like these can obstruct funding for recipient countries. As a result, many nations turn to simpler alternatives, such as Chinese loans, which involve minimal bureaucracy and do not require extensive institutional capacity.

Last but not least, the EU must recognize that broader geopolitical developments and its reactions to them can influence how recipient countries view the bloc. A case in point is the most recent conflict between Hamas and Israel. The EU's unwillingness to condemn Israel's military operations in Gaza has undermined its credibility and further strained an already fragile relationship with the African continent. Consequently, the EU must carefully navigate global developments to avoid reinforcing perceptions of itself as applying double standards.[63]

GGI as an opportunity for the Czech Republic

The International Partnerships portfolio offers the Czech Republic a significant opportunity to assert a central role in shaping the EU's strategic agenda. This portfolio is increasingly recognized as an important aspect of the EU's evolving foreign policy, which seeks to integrate economic priorities with geopolitical ambitions.

Overall, the appointment of Síkela as the new EU Commissioner for International Partnerships also has the potential to enhance the Czech Republic's image and influence on the EU level. Due to the scope of the portfolio and the GGI, the Commissioner is likely to be involved in a wide range of strategies related to artificial intelligence, healthcare, energy security, climate, and transportation.[64] Tangible progress in GGI projects under the auspices of Commissioner Síkela can thus lead to increased visibility for the Czech Republic on the EU and international stages.

Regarding the Africa-EU investment package, the Czech Republic's past collaborations with African nations create a solid base for future engagement with the region. During the Cold War, Czechoslovakia ranked among the most engaged socialist countries on the continent, and, what is more, unlike many other EU nations, the Czech Republic does not carry the weight of colonial history. The Czech Republic is also increasingly seen as a reliable development partner that understands the specific needs of different African countries and knows how to provide practical, affordable, and high-quality solutions. Moreover, the Czech Republic has built for itself a reputation for being a partner that is dedicated to fostering mutual relations based on equal partnerships, free from neo-colonial ambitions.[65] Thus, the Czech Republic likely holds a stronger position than many other EU Member States to build on its previous experience, rebuild trust with African countries, and elevate mutual cooperation to a new level.

Concerning the private sector and the experiences of Czech stakeholders, the Czech Republic already possesses some level of knowledge and expertise, with numerous non-governmental organizations and universities working locally in Africa and acquiring relevant insights. The participation of the Czech private sector is particularly evident in healthcare, agriculture, the food industry, water management, transport and infrastructure, geological surveys, and mineral extraction and processing. Furthermore, the private sector's activities are seen as fostering local capacities and employing environmentally sustainable technologies.[66] As such, through its prior efforts, the Czech Republic has built a strong reputation and expertise in these areas, unique to the country, which can serve as a foundation for future cooperation with the African region under the Global Gateway initiative.

Additionally, the portfolio itself requires strong engagement with recipient countries. As such, Commissioner Síkela will have the opportunity to improve visibility not only of European firms but also of Czech companies.[67] Thus, his mandate has the potential to enhance companies' access to foreign markets, further strengthen their integration in global supply chains, expand their operations, and establish new collaborations.[68] Though the Czech private sector does not have the tradition of participating in development assistance – since on the national level, there is no clear concept or definition of how the private sector can be engaged in development assistance – the Czech Republic's non-governmental sector is well-regarded for its success in obtaining development funding and executing development assistance projects.[69] Therefore, with the government acting as a facilitator of dialogue and knowledge sharing, the private sector could gain insights from non-governmental organizations. This collaboration could enhance private sector involvement and create opportunities for it to explore new markets, leverage available GGI financing, diversify national exports and trade routes, and establish or strengthen its competitive advantage.

Despite these opportunities, however, the Czech Republic and Commissioner Síkela will face several challenges before Global Gateway can be fully leveraged. On the Czech side, there is a general lack of interest and understanding regarding development assistance and its importance as part of a country's foreign policy. This holds true for the Czech public, which tends to prioritize domestic policies over foreign policy. Regarding the private sector, there is no clear concept or definition of 'commercial development assistance,' and firms lack guidelines on how to become key players or implementers of development assistance projects. At the national level, the Czech government has yet to devise a comprehensive communications strategy that would emphasize the role of Global Gateway in Europe's geopolitical positioning in general and the Czech Republic's geopolitical standing in particular. Similarly, the private sector lacks essential information on effectively engaging with Global Gateway and often encounters issues concerning the strategy's transparency, clarity, and readability.

Moreover, the Czech Republic faces a structural issue where its economy depends on foreign investments and its private sector is export-oriented, with approximately 40 percent of Czech exports being subcontracts. Though this situation is slowly changing and Czech companies are becoming more investment-oriented, there needs to be greater emphasis on export diversification as well as greater government support for companies. This is important, especially in environments that are perceived as higher risk or as having difficult business conditions, such as Africa and Latin America.[70]

Síkela's (Gate)way forward

Following his hearing at the European Commission, Síkela outlined six key steps toward the successful operationalization of the GGI. The question is whether he will be able to create strategies that give the GGI the visibility, credibility, and brand it needs:

TABLE 3: JOZEF SÍKELA'S SIX POINTS TO EXECUTE GLOBAL GATEWAY

- **Realize the full €300 billion potential of the GGI via public-private partnerships. The key areas of focus should include the Lobito Corridor.**
- **Simplify private investment participation and make the GGI more flexible to unlock the necessary funding to finance the initiative.**
- **Address the issue of migration through poverty reduction, climate resilience, and sustainable business practices.**
- **Prioritize the least developed nations, particularly as conflict prevention and good governance are essential for success.**
- **Use the EU-Africa summit as an important platform for international dialogue.**
- **Ensure that projects under the Global Gateway comply with the EU's Green Deal.**

Source: Czechia's commissioner hearing, Politico[71]

In recent developments, the new Commissioner attended the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos in January 2025. This marked the first time the Commissioner for International Partnerships participated in this event, which brings together politicians, private sector representatives, financial institutions, and other stakeholders. Commissioner Síkela took part in several high-profile meetings and panels. This is significant, as the WEF provides an excellent platform to tackle common challenges, engage with both the public and private sectors, and enhance the visibility of the GGI.[72] He also took the opportunity to announce the EU's support for a new initiative launched by the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo – the Green Corridor.[73] If this approach continues and Síkela manages to deliver tangible and measurable results, it could be a positive step forward in advancing the visibility and credibility of the GGI.

For Síkela, the appointment presents another opportunity to leverage his extensive experience as a businessman and dealmaker. Although global infrastructure development competition is often daunting, this is not Síkela's first experience in the field. His track record in high-stakes negotiations includes steering the EU through a severe energy crisis during the Czech Republic's rotating EU presidency in 2022. At that time, Síkela successfully brokered a deal to help the EU from the crisis.[74] Now, he must use those same skills to elevate Global Gateway to the level of China's BRI and establish the EU as a reliable infrastructure partner for the Global South. In his own words, he was appointed to his current position to “turn the Global Gateway from a start-up into a scale-up.”[75] However, the question remains: Can his negotiation abilities translate well with nations that prioritize potential gains from China while expressing skepticism toward the EU?

Conclusion and recommendations

The European Union's difficulties in establishing meaningful and sustainable partnerships in Africa cannot be attributed solely to China's increasing presence in the region. A closer examination reveals that the EU's persistent internal challenges may pose an even greater obstacle. The often rigid and generic nature of its development policies has at times failed to address the diverse and evolving needs of African nations. Additionally, the erosion of trust – stemming from historical inequalities, perceived paternalism, and unmet commitments – has left lasting scars on EU-Africa relations. Failing to tackle these foundational structural and relational problems may hinder Global Gateway from being viewed as a genuine partner in Africa's development, regardless of competition from China or other players. For real success, the EU must shift its focus from competing narratives to rebuilding trust, fostering mutual respect, and adopting a more flexible approach to development and cooperation.

Furthermore, the Global Gateway is still in its early stages. Although several key projects are underway, the initiative's overall reach and effectiveness remain unclear. At present, evaluating Global Gateway's overall performance is also challenging due to insufficient information and the lack of a comprehensive assessment of its flagship projects' impacts.[76] The new EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela, should formulate strategies to move the initiative from rhetoric to tangible results. His main priorities should include securing the necessary financing, building a credible and trustworthy brand, enhancing GGI transparency, streamlining private sector engagement, and convincing partner nations that the EU can deliver on its commitments. Importantly, Síkela's ability to redefine the GGI as a distinct and valuable initiative and move beyond the zero-sum game perspective will play a key role in determining recipient countries' willingness to engage with the EU.

TABLE 4: KEY STEPS NEEDED FOR SECURING GLOBAL GATEWAY'S SUCCESS

- → **Securing sufficient financing to achieve its ambitious goals**
- → **Generating strong interest from the private sector**
- → **Establishing clear priorities, enhancing transparency, and promoting inclusiveness**
- → **Accelerating the implementation of its projects**
- → **Rebuilding trust and restoring relationships, especially with African countries**

TABLE 5: THE CZECH REPUBLIC'S KEY CHALLENGES

- → **A business environment not conducive to greater private sector participation due to the lack of a clear communication strategy**
- → **The absence of the customary role of the private sector**
- → **Lack of clear national development and economic priorities identifying Czech private sector's comparative advantages and added value**
- → **Distrust between Czech non-governmental organizations and the private sector, which prevents knowledge sharing and cooperation**
- → **Lack of support or incentives for the private sector to engage in high (or higher) risk environments due to the lack of government guarantee**

As such, this paper provides the following recommendations to the EU, Commissioner Síkela, and the Czech government:

Strengthen the EU's offer and reframe Global Gateway

With global geopolitical shifts and the EU's ongoing tougher stance on China, the GGI has become a symbol of EU-China rivalry. However, framing the initiative within the context of the EU's geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis China is counterproductive and likely to undermine the EU's efforts.

Firstly, portraying the GGI as an alternative to China's BRI could undermine the EU's credibility simply due to the sheer size and scale of the BRI. The GGI is a relative newcomer to infrastructure development, whereas China has spent years building infrastructure in recipient countries. The BRI has also become emblematic of China's ability to provide fast and flexible financing that is not tied to any value- or ideology-based conditions – except adherence to the One-China policy. In contrast, the GGI is deeply rooted in EU values and principles, with many countries seeing China's model of cooperation as more beneficial. Moreover, China's ability to mobilize both private and public funds on a large scale, coupled with its flexible governance model, gives it a significant advantage over the EU.

Additionally, recipient countries do not want to be drawn into geopolitical competition. As such, the EU should place greater emphasis on the developmental aspects of the GGI, rather than focusing solely on its geopolitical and strategic aspects. Consequently, instead of framing the GGI in terms of competition with China, the EU's narrative should be based around recipient countries' needs and wants, placing them at the heart of the initiative. Many developing countries prioritize cooperation over competition and seek synergies and complementarities between different initiatives. These countries are unlikely to allow either the EU or China to push them into choosing sides. The GGI presents the EU and the Czech Republic with an opportunity to build on their experiences, successes, and strengths, rather than positioning the GGI as a direct alternative to the BRI.

Ultimately, the future of the EU's global positioning will depend on the partnerships that it is able to build, nourish, and maintain. Consequently, if it wants to establish a trusted brand and foster long-lasting partnerships, the EU must ensure that it respects and aligns with recipient countries' local agendas. This should include discussions with local leaders alongside other stakeholders, including the private sector and civil society. The GGI, as a whole, needs to be framed within the context of country-specific concerns and priorities.

As part of efforts to align the GGI with country-specific needs, Commissioner Síkela might want to consider identifying potential areas of cooperation with China. Research conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Morocco, and South Africa suggests that recipient countries may be open to collaboration between China and the EU in specific areas. This could range from leveraging the complementarities and synergies of both initiatives to developing concrete trilateral partnerships. Though many areas would be considered too sensitive for cooperation, environmental, social, and corporate governance could present viable opportunities for joint efforts. Given the nature of the bilateral relationship, cooperation could follow a step-by-step approach, starting with small-scale projects where both sides can test their synergies and compatibilities while building trust. As a start, the EU could fund research on China's presence in the region to better understand its strategies, ambitions, comparative advantages, and challenges.[77] This approach would not only help to identify mutual complementarities and synergies, but also enable the EU to learn from China's mistakes and refine its own strategies accordingly.

Successfully operationalizing the GGI will require the EU to communicate with partner countries that do not necessarily share its values and principles. To achieve this, the EU should focus its efforts on either establishing a new framework for communicating with developing nations that hold different values or leveraging existing platforms, such as the Transform Africa Summit [78] or the EU-AU summit.[79] It is imperative that the EU views Africa for what it truly is – a heterogeneous region with diverse value systems. While for China, this heterogeneity may not present many obstacles for the successful implementation of its projects – since it does not concern itself with domestic politics and values – the GGI is anchored in EU values and principles. As such, rather than directing its funding only to countries where EU and Western values are more widely accepted, the EU should strike a balance between promoting its values and addressing development needs. GGI projects can still be implemented in countries with contrasting governance systems, particularly in sectors such as education, environmental sustainability, and the expansion of economic and political freedoms. As a result, the EU should allocate some of its resources to mapping out potential areas of cooperation across various contexts and governance settings.

Improve private sector engagement

While Global Gateway sees private sector involvement as crucial for effective implementation, several issues remain unresolved. For companies to take full advantage of this infrastructure initiative, they must adhere to EU standards, navigate the complex landscape of financial tools, and understand the complexities of international collaboration across diverse contexts. Although the Business Advisory Group was established to promote private sector engagement, European companies continue to face difficulties navigating the EU tenders portal, procurement notices, and funding requests.

Currently, if a company seeks to participate in the GGI, the European Commission provides it with a set of links to various web pages along with contact information for the 144 EU delegations worldwide. Consequently, instead of offering a centralized system, the current approach creates a fragmented and complicated web of contacts, information, and guidelines. The Business Advisory Group also operates alongside other consultation platforms, such as the European Chamber of Commerce and other joint business fora. While these platforms enable private sector participation, they also contribute to the system's overall fragmentation.

The need to address these challenges was recently highlighted also by the Confederation of Industries of the Czech Republic, which reported that many Czech firms, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, are uncertain about how to engage effectively with Global Gateway projects. According to their statement, the primary issues stem from the decentralized access to information regarding present and future projects, funding sources, and tender opportunities. Additionally, the lack of transparency and readability of individual Global Gateway tools have been identified as a major barrier to private sector participation. Therefore, a stronger focus should be placed on business interests.

If this is not improved on the GGI level, the Czech government can actively facilitate private sector engagement itself. To achieve this, the Czech government should first map out priority areas based on economic and development priorities as well as on areas where Czech companies have added value. Though, as of now, no such cohesive overview exists, farming and agriculture[80] could be one of the viable options. Secondly, the government should devise an effective and cohesive communications strategy that would increase the visibility of Global Gateway alongside the synergies and complementarities between Global Gateway projects and the areas in which Czech companies have a comparative advantage.[81]

Improving the coordination between export credits and development funding could help mitigate investment risks, particularly in the early stages of projects. This involves establishing guarantees to address country-specific risks, which could boost commercial banks' confidence in the project financing. Moreover, considering the diverse range of participating countries, it is also crucial to address legal uncertainties and institutional challenges in partner nations by aligning project support with internationally recognized regulatory standards. Investment efforts should focus on enhancing local infrastructure and building institutional capacity to create a more conducive business environment.[82]

In the case of the Czech Republic, numerous companies have either hesitated or avoided tackling projects in regions like Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which are viewed as higher risk or present challenging business conditions. A representative from the Czech Confederation of Industries indicated that the Global Gateway is unlikely to motivate Czech firms to invest in previously overlooked regions. Rather, firms need to be committed to a project first, then leverage Global Gateway and its resources as a support framework for project implementation. Successful execution of GGI projects in these high-risk areas could act as examples and incentivize Czech companies to engage in similar risks. Additionally, to facilitate this, offering guarantees to the private sector, such as the EFSD+, and akin to the government guarantees given in the context of Ukraine following Russia's invasion, may enhance private sector participation.[83]

To promote collaboration between Team Europe and the private sector, it is essential to establish effective consultation mechanisms that include regular interactions aimed at identifying promising projects. National governments should work closely with local networks to support these initiatives and encourage participation from local businesses. Considering the large scale of this initiative and the extensive network of international, regional, national, and local partners, active communication and consultation are essential. This ensures efficient resource allocation and helps the private sector better understand the operational context. Regarding the Czech Republic specifically, the Czech government could draw on the experiences and successes of the country's non-governmental sector in securing development funding and implementing assistance programs. As such, the government should create a platform for dialogue between the non-governmental and private sectors to encourage knowledge sharing. It will also be essential for a greater number of government bodies to look at Global Gateway from a strategic point of view. While the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs already has a dedicated department that focuses on Global Gateway, other bodies, such as the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Transportation, should also be involved in the strategic assessment of the initiative and the potential opportunities it has for the Czech Republic and its private sector.[84]

Finally, ensuring that partner countries are treated as equal participants and are closely involved in defining project criteria is critical to aligning investments with their unique development needs. The EU can guarantee that project benefits trickle down and provide tangible benefits for local populations and stakeholders only by aligning investments with real development needs on the ground.

Integrate GGI projects with measures to enhance visibility, improve communication, and strengthen transparency

Ironically, while the official narrative behind the GGI emphasizes transparency as one of the initiative's main strengths, the reality is quite different. On the project side, the GGI encompasses a vast array of regional, national, and local projects spread across various areas. However, the size of the GGI, alongside other EU development programs and initiatives, makes it difficult to understand what is or is not part of Global Gateway. Furthermore, although the EU has mapped out the GGI's flagship projects, it has yet to provide a comprehensive assessment to evaluate the initiative's progress.

This lack of transparency makes it difficult to assess how projects align with development goals or to evaluate potential negative effects on recipient countries. Adhering to principles of good governance and transparency will be essential, as highlighted by the assertion that a "clear set of agreed deliverables" is necessary to ensure that GGI projects deliver on their promises.[85] The beneficiaries of these contracts include companies providing EU products such as data services, clean technology, digital solutions, and pharmaceuticals, effectively positioning countries in the Global South as consumers of EU technologies. Moreover, the initiative fails to outline specific strategies for addressing critical issues. Without well-defined and measurable targets, it remains unclear how these challenges will be effectively tackled.

Regarding visibility and credibility, the GGI must enhance its public communication efforts. More information should be provided about the scale of the projects, the implementation process, the level of financing, and the outcomes in recipient countries. A thorough assessment of existing projects is also necessary, as it could highlight areas in which the EU needs to improve or to which it needs to channel more resources. This assessment should also include feedback from stakeholders in recipient countries to ensure inclusivity and guarantee that projects align with recipients' needs and domestic agendas. Concerning the EU's communication efforts, these should also include country-specific narratives, allowing recipient countries to understand the strategies tailored to their contexts. Achieving this would require outreach to a variety of stakeholders who can help EU officials contextualize the GGI in their respective countries and highlight areas of success and improvement.

To realize its full potential and establish itself as a credible alternative to the BRI, the GGI must define clear priority areas to enhance the implementation process and direct funding toward sectors that can generate rapid success. This aspect is closely tied to transparency, as the GGI's broad focus makes it difficult to grasp what the initiative entails and which projects are included. When prioritizing among the flagship projects, the EU should adjust its decisions based on the evaluation of recipient countries' needs and preferences, targeting areas that require the most urgent attention. This could be achieved, for instance, by allowing recipient countries to participate in identifying flagship projects central to the GGI. [86]

In this way, the EU can establish a trusted brand recognized for having a positive and significant impact worldwide. It would not only improve the EU's transparency and visibility but also reinforce the GGI as an initiative founded on the principles of fair partnership and collaboration based on mutual understanding. This is especially important if the EU seeks to position itself as a credible alternative to China's BRI.

Take into account the broader geopolitical context

One critical issue that is often overlooked is the impact that the EU's response to the war in Ukraine and the most recent conflict between Israel and Hamas had on developing countries' perceptions of the bloc. The EU's strong condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, contrasted with its relatively muted response to developments in the Middle East – particularly Israel's military operations in Gaza – has fueled criticism across the African continent. The contrasting reactions have led some to perceive the EU's and the European Commission's approach to human rights as highly selective, undermining the bloc's credibility and reinforcing the view that its approach to foreign policy is Eurocentric and racialized.

Notably, the centrality of human rights in most of the EU's cooperation agreements with developing countries is viewed as hypocritical due to the bloc's initial support for Israel. This further erodes the EU's normative power on human rights while raising questions about its selective policies regarding which populations are deemed "worthy or unworthy of basic dignity and respect for life."[87] Given that the EU's ties with Africa are already burdened by their mutual history, the EU must recognize that geopolitical developments in other regions do not happen in a vacuum. Instead, the EU should carefully consider how its approach to global conflicts may be perceived in regions that it deems strategically important.

Make Global Gateway platforms more inclusive

This issue mainly concerns the Global Gateway Forum, the Business Advisory Group, and the Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform. The Business Advisory Group currently includes 59 members and 10 observers, while the dialogue platform consists of 57 members. The inaugural GGI Forum has been criticized for being a closed-door meeting with a very limited number of stakeholders and minimal input from civil society.[88,89]

Moreover, the Business Advisory Group comprises some of the largest companies in Europe, including those with histories of negative environmental impacts. Yet, it excludes any company from recipient countries. This creates space for private sector lobbying that may lead to a misallocation of resources, as funding may be directed toward private sector interests rather than the needs of the recipient countries. To address this, the governance structure should be adjusted to bring in and prioritize local companies to ensure democratic ownership and enhance the GGI's inclusiveness.[90]

Furthermore, when it comes to civic society, the dialogue platform currently performs only a symbolic role as it does not have any influence over the approach, selection, and design of GGI projects. A dedicated space should be established where civil society and other stakeholders can exchange views and ideas to facilitate a more constructive dialogue. While there are currently separate platforms for the private sector and civil society, creating a shared space could be beneficial and make the GGI more inclusive and transparent. This could be based on examples of existing initiatives such as the Fisheries Transparency Initiative or the Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative. It could also strengthen the GGI's monitoring and accountability mechanisms outside of transparency and inclusivity.[91]

Thus, while interactions between European and recipient countries' leaders are significant, they alone do not ensure the inclusivity of Global Gateway. For the initiative to truly reflect the needs and aspirations of the countries involved, it is imperative to include local companies and civil societies. Only through their participation can the initiatives address the diverse needs of the population and ensure that development efforts are inclusive and sustainable.

To conclude, Global Gateway embodies the EU's commitment to enhance its global influence by merging development aid with its geostrategic priorities. Compared to other infrastructure initiatives proposed by the US and G7, Global Gateway offers a sophisticated array of goals and financial mechanisms, establishing a framework for increased private sector investment. Nevertheless, despite these lofty ambitions and detailed plans for cultivating diverse partnerships, the strategy still has significant ground to cover to realize its full potential. With new Commissioner Jozef Síkela, the Czech Republic can play a pivotal role in operationalizing the initiative and addressing some existing challenges. While Síkela is first and foremost the representative of EU interests, he can also draw on his home country's expertise and experiences to guide Global Gateway towards a promising future. But crucial questions remain: Firstly, will the new Commissioner succeed in earning trust and fostering partnerships with nations that may favor collaboration with other partners, such as China, or are skeptical about the EU's capacity to fulfill its commitments? Secondly, will the Commissioner and the European Commission effectively juggle the EU's interests alongside the developmental needs and priorities of partner countries, or will Global Gateway turn into a self-serving mechanism?

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About MapInfluenCE

The publication was published within the MapInfluenCE (previously known as ChinfluenCE) project, which maps China and Russia's influence in Central Europe, specifically Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

The internationally acclaimed project has utilized various tools, such as media analysis to uncover who shapes China discourse in the Visegrád countries and why, the mapping of agenda-setters to reveal links between pro-China businessmen and local political elites, an analysis of changes in political parties' positions on China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments during the past 30 years, etc.

Through a variety of outputs (media articles, interviews, research reports, open as well as closed door events and briefings of stakeholders), MapInfluenCE broadens and shapes expert as well as public debates on China's influence and activities in the region of Central Europe. MapInfluenCE findings were widely quoted in European, US and Australian press, mentioned in e.g. the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2018 Annual Report or the Reporters without Borders' report on the vulnerability of media, and presented at the European Parliament or to a delegation of US Congressmen and Senators. The original approach of MapInfluenCE set the tone and inspired journalists, think tankers and NGOs both within and outside of the region, who later conducted similar analyses on the media image of China and agenda-setting, drawing on the project's methodology and techniques.

The international team has published more than 20 policy and briefing papers in five different languages (English, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovak), authored articles or was quoted in numerous local as well as international media including Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, China Digital Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Politico Brussels Influence, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Diplomat, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Le Temps, Radio Free Europe, etc.

MapInfluenCE has been designed and is run by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a Prague-based foreign policy think tank and NGO.

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