
Polish Perceptions of the Belt Road Initiative Research among Managers in Opole Voivodeship

Submitted 20/08/20, 1st revision 13/09/20, 2nd revision 22/10/20, accepted 12/11/20

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Abstract:

Purpose: The article discusses the expectations and plans of Polish managers from small, medium, and large sector enterprises in Opole Voivodeship related to the possibility of more effective cooperation with the Chinese side.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A survey was carried out among Polish managers who represent small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large businesses in Opole Voivodeship to learn their perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the plans and expectations that entrepreneurs have of the initiative.

Findings: The main conclusions drawn involve, among others, the observation that entrepreneurs have very similar views on BRI. Insufficient information provided to the local business community on the Initiative was noted, which results in them not fully realizing what the Initiative actually is. Consequently, they do not know how they can participate in it or where they can obtain answers to questions about potential cooperation with the Chinese side. Moreover, most of the information about the Initiative that they have received so far does not come from the business or scientific community but the media.

Practical Implications: The presented results are important for the European and Chinese sides. Among others, for institutions piloting individual projects operating under the auspices of OBOR, organizations operating in Opole Voivodeship, and for universities teaching in the area of economic and legal science.

Originality/value: Research results can contribute to how the BRI is currently perceived by the Polish, who represent the SME and large enterprise sectors, how it impacts the practical effects of economic cooperation, and what steps should be taken make these effects acceptable.

Keywords: One Belt One Road Initiative, People's Republic of China, Poland, Opole Voivodeship, international economic integration, managers' perception.

JEL classification: F15, F53, F63, O24.

Paper Type: Research study.

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1. Introduction

OBOR arouses a lot of interest and emotions among both people who look at it in terms of theory and practice, including researchers of the phenomenon from numerous disciplines, the business community, and politicians. At seven years old, OBOR, on the one hand, seems to be its phenomenon that is well-known in society, as evidenced by prevalence in media and the correlation with the flourishing People's Republic of China (PRC), but not necessarily associated with a specific definition, framework or completed actions. The Initiative is undoubtedly an action in terms of international economic integration; nevertheless, it seems to be unavailable in terms of a micro perspective, i.e., for entrepreneurs looking at it from a local perspective.

2. Literature Review related to an Overview of the BRI, as well as Poland's and Opole Voivodeship's Participation

Since 2013, when information about BRI starting spread around the world, the media, analysts, and the scientific community have observed it from a few perspectives, mainly from the local coverage side, funding sources, foreign direct investment (FDI), intercontinental transport, the geopolitical situation, motives for starting it, opportunities and challenges (Belt and Road Initiative a Strategic Pathway) facing the countries that join the initiative, benefits, and related costs. For example, on the website Web of Science, the term Belt and Road Initiative appear in the titles of 1,305 articles; BRI 1,095; One Belt and Road Initiative 468; and OBOR 201. Opinions about BRI differ, the initiative is praised by some, criticized by others, and BRI itself is described, among others, as:

- Changyi [倡议] an initiative/ something that has only been proposed (Shihort, 2018) but, despite everything, it is connected with certain terms: strategy, concept, plan, and project;
- A relatively new concept that surpasses the ancient Silk Road in both its range and importance (Wang, 2016), referred to as the “project of the century” (China's Xi hails Belt and Road as ‘project of the century’);
- An initiative created by the land “silk economic belt” and ocean “sea silk route,” comprising six corridors: Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, China-Mongolia-Russian Federation Economic Corridor, Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor, and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor;
- Mission statement without a precise definition (Gut and Wilczewski, 2015), with a very general framework, without any specific proposals from China. An insufficiently characterized initiative that lacks available information as to whom to contact with bothersome questions (China's Belt & Road and the World: Competing Forms of Globalization);

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- An initiative where Chinese investors described their actions as those carried out under their auspices;
 - A concept based on signing documents about cooperation (China has signed 171 B&R cooperation documents), a communication platform that is an institutional agreement (Amighini, 2017), and an economic diplomacy program;
 - A geostrategic project that reflects the construction of an interesting community, a community of goals, and a community of responsibility (Wang, 2016), which is a long-term obligation (Khan *et al.*, 2018), leading through cooperation to mutual benefits (including achieving sustainable development). On the other hand, there are descriptions that it is a Chinese project executed by and for Chinese companies (China's Belt & Road and the World: Competing Forms of Globalization), based mainly on cooperation with China as the dominant partner (Belt and Road Initiative a Strategic Pathway), which has its own purposes related to achieving even greater dominance in the East Asia region and strengthening its own position as a competitor to the USA (Grzywacz, 2019). Also, planning to reduce its own dependence on investments in infrastructure, finding a market for Chinese companies (especially in sectors of transport, energy, hydro, telecommunication, and production (He, 2019), securing energy supplies for China and generating increased demand for Chinese products and services in countries developing their infrastructure within BRI (Pendrakowska, 2019). Thus, a picture of a project that brings together the economic, energy, and geostrategic priorities of the PRC emerges (China's Belt & Road and the World: Competing Forms of Globalization);
 - Changyi highlights open and wide consultations (Wang, 2016), thus constantly expanding its reach. In 2019 the initiative covered 70% of the global population, almost 55% of global GDP, and 75% of global resources (Choroś-Mrozowska, 2019). In May 2020, BRI already had 143 countries (Belt and Road Portal). BRI, at the same time, is described as a bumpy trail, implemented too hastily, with a too broad range and not well planned (Johnson, 2016);
 - An element of a strategy transforming China's economic development model (Johnson, 2016), or an alternative economic development model (China's Belt & Road and the World: Competing Forms of Globalization);
 - An initiative focusing on reducing transport costs through infrastructure modernization (Belt and Road Economics. Opportunities and Risks of Transport Corridors; Trade impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative), and creating a network for free trade flow and physical and digital market integration (The Belt and Road Initiative), affecting virtually all the sectors of the economies of the countries involved.

Descriptions of the Republic of Poland's (RP) involvement in the initiative are much rarer in the literature. Texts on it are developed, among others by Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Czerwicz-Filipowicz (2019), Krukowska (2016), Choroś-

Mrozowska (2019), Szczudlik (2016), Pieriegud (2019), Pendrakowska (2019), Bachurska (2017), Kaczmarek (2015) and Góralczyk (2017). The topic of OBOR, however, regularly appears in the Polish press. The country is described by the scientific community, analysts, and journalists, among others, as a country located on the Eurasian corridor route, at the geographical center of Europe, due to its location which is the most important logistical center for the China-Europe Railway Express in Central Europe (Xie, 2019). Apart from its location (geographical and logistic approach), Poland has structural, economic, and population potential. The RP has had diplomatic relations with the PRC practically since its proclamation.

These relations within BRI have involved: a dialogue between the EU and the PRC, relations between 17+1 (cooperation of Central and Eastern Europe, Greece and the Balkans with China) and bilateral relations between the RP and the PRC (Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Czerewacz-Filipowicz, 2019). Poland is described as China's most important partner in the region (Góralczyk, 2017). Even though China is Poland's biggest Asian trading partner and Poland is China's largest trading partner in Central and Eastern Europe, a disproportionate anomaly in favor of the PRC has been noted in terms of trade. This is also visible in the loading level of trains running on the Łódź-Xiamen route, arriving fully in Poland and leaving empty or half-loaded. Despite the above, Poland, together with Serbia and Greece, is mentioned as countries interested in Chinese investment (Brown, 2018).

The Republic of Poland, in the Central-Eastern Europe region, has received some of the largest Chinese FDI (Choroś-Mrozowska 2019; Kostecka-Tomaszewska and Czerewacz-Filipowicz, 2019). The country lies on the northern corridor route, which is treated as the fastest and most reliable route for container rail transport (Pieriegud, 2019). Poland has a positive attitude towards BRI, among others, regarding expanding Polish exports, accelerating reindustrialization, and plans to grow up as a transshipment point/ OBOR central communication port (Szczudlik, 2016). However, in both society and the Polish government, there is no common perspective regarding BRI. Because most Polish companies are SMEs, they experience difficulties in competing in the Chinese market (Pendrakowska, 2019). The Polish public tenders' procedure for infrastructure projects causes frustration among some Chinese investors (Poland embraces strategic development role). In contrast, Polish producers have some difficulties with access to the Chinese market due to strict regulations and bureaucracy. Trade between the two countries prevails via sea routes. The Polish side prefers greenfield investment; the Chinese side, however, is interested in acquisitions and expanding procurement markets (Choroś-Mrozowska, 2019). It is important to highlight that this initiative is crucial to Poland because, after 2020, financing of structural projects from the EU budget will have finished.

The beginnings of cooperation within OBOR are mainly associated in Poland with the conflict that took place in 2011, which is related to starting construction of the A2 highway fragment between Warsaw and Łódź, showing problems in cooperating

with Chinese enterprises, e.g., the cooperation with COVEC company (Gleave *et al.*, 2018), and, finally, signing a strategic partnership in 2016. Creating a rail-freight connection on the Łódź (Łódź Voivodeship) - Chengdu (Sichuan Province) route in 2013 and its extension in 2015 to the city of Xiamen (in Fujian province) is considered a significant project within BRI (Czerpak, 2018). Nevertheless, it is still difficult to clearly determine which of the projects are directly related to OBOR (Choroś-Mrozowska, 2019) also, despite the scenarios indicating that joining BRI will have a positive effect on EU member states (among others, reductions in trade costs of 12-23% (Trade impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative), with- benefits resulting mainly from decrease transport costs, although not necessarily from concluding free trade agreements (Herrero and Xu, 2016), it is difficult to determine what the real influence of involvement in OBOR on the Polish economy is, despite signing numerous contracts and agreements (Pendrakowska, 2019; Bachulka, 2017).

Opole Voivodeship is the smallest voivodeship in Poland; nevertheless, the touted cooperation with the Chinese side has been ongoing since 2008, when the Confucius Institute was founded at the Opole University of Technology. Apart from promoting the Chinese language and culture, business (business consulting) has become a strong part of its activity, visible in the name: Confucius Institute Poland-China Cooperation Center (Centrum Współpracy Polska-Chiny Instytut Konfucjusza). In the context of Opole Voivodeship, the cooperation with the Chinese side within BRI has taken the following shape:

- In 2012, signing a partnership between Fujian Province and Opole Voivodeship, whose cooperation "goes in a good, economic direction" (Chcą pogłębiać gospodarcze relacje Fujian i Województwa Opolskiego) and results in, among others, meetings of Polish and Chinese representatives;
- A visit by the deputy governor of the partner province (Fujian) Zhou Lianqing to Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Opolskiego (Opole Voivodeship Marshal's Office), resulting in a declaration to create a team supporting the establishment of relations between Polish and Chinese companies, strengthening bilateral trade relations;
- Start of investment by the Chinese company HONGBO in Opole, specializing in LED lamp production. During the New Silk Road Forum in Warsaw, a declaration on cooperation between the company's representatives and the voivodeship authorities was signed;
- Lively Chinese investors' questions on 1/10 of investment projects carried out in Opole Voivodeship in 2018-2019.

3. Materials and Methods

To realize the expectations and plans of Opole Voivodeship entrepreneurs in terms of establishing cooperation and goods exchange with the People's Republic of China within OBOR and their knowledge of BRI, a survey among managers of SMEs and

large enterprises in the region was carried out without considering their legal form, but taking into account the number of employees¹. It was accepted that small and medium-sized companies employ fewer than 250 employees, whereas large ones employ over 250. From data from the economic self-government organization, Opole Economic Chamber (OIG) (Opolska Izba Gospodarcza), in December 2015, there were 142 large entities registered in Opole Voivodeship.

However, by the REGON Number (National Official Register of National Economy Entities), a register of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, in the voivodeship, 753 large entities of the national economy² were registered. These were defined as those employing over 50 people, 668 entities employing from 50 to 249 people, and 85 entities employing over 250 people, respectively. Therefore, both medium-sized enterprises and large companies matched this category. When planning the study, it was assumed to recruit as many entrepreneurs as possible and compare the answers broken down by enterprises' sizes (SMEs/large companies). The survey of SME companies was carried out between December 2015 and February 2016. Large companies were contacted in the period February of October 2017. Initially, cooperation with OIG was established. The survey form was disseminated among managers in the region by email, using a website that allows preparing and conducting an online survey, designed by Magdalena and Tomsaz Szpunar. Due to the low number of responses, it was also decided to use other channels to distribute survey forms.

Within the SME sector, managers were contacted individually using a snowball method. As for large enterprises, cooperation with a business club for entrepreneurs and the country's largest statutory organization for individual employers Business Centre Club *Loża Opolska* and *Klub 150* (Club 150) in Opole Voivodeship, which brings together the largest, the most dynamic and innovative companies of the region - was established. The link to the survey was sent by email through these channels. Lack of official data on established and implemented trade initiatives between entrepreneurs from the Opole region and Chinese ones enabled additional, narrowing selection criteria⁴. After six months of research, 60 questionnaires were received, 30 each from SMEs and large companies. The study conducted was one-off and non-interfering. The survey consisted of 16 research questions and six questions related to the respondents' demographic and social affiliations. The research conducted was qualitative and, therefore, it does not apply to every entity located in the Opole Silesia region. Conducting the above survey allowed formulating certain regularities, and in a broader perspective, it requires further and deeper recognition as OBOR develops, and the participation of Polish (Opolian) entrepreneurs increases.

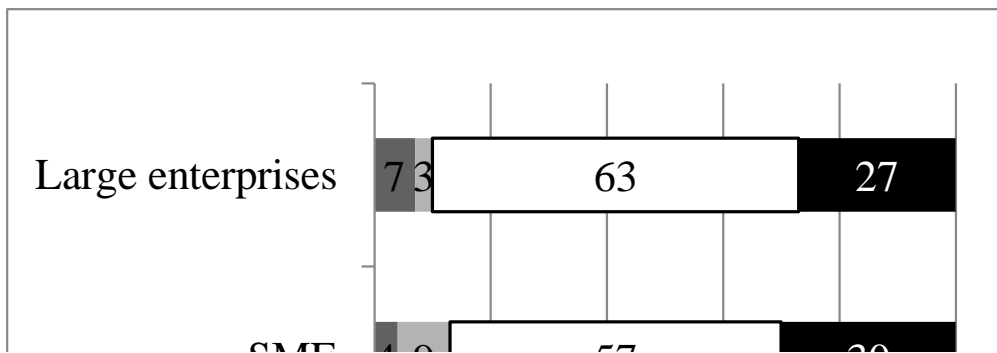
In the gender structure of the surveyed managers, men predominated (SMEs 60%, large companies, 74%). All people were between 35 and 60 years old, and everybody had higher education. SMEs mainly dealt with production (production 50%, sales 7%, communication, banking, and technology services 3% each, no data 34%). Large enterprises represented production (electronics 52%, construction

services 30%) and import/export of goods (18%).

4. Results

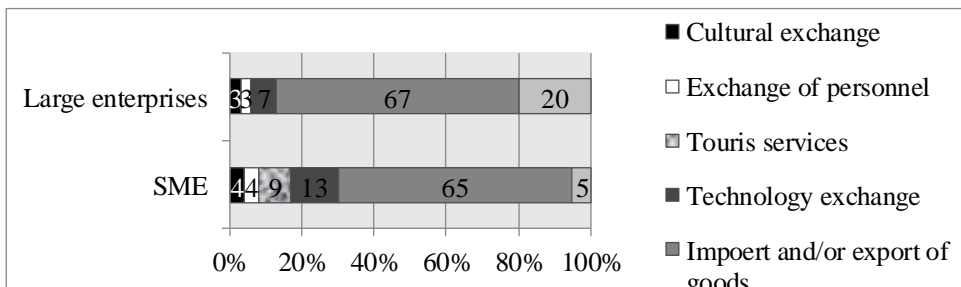
The majority of recruited businesses (SMEs 87%, large enterprises 90%) did not cooperate with Chinese enterprises. However, over half of them (SMEs 57%, large companies, 63%) planned to start such cooperation in the future (Figure 1). Past cooperation with the Chinese side was based mainly on importing or exporting goods (SMEs 65%, large enterprises 65%), and technological exchange (SMEs 13%, large enterprises 7%); see Figure 2. In SMEs, trade exchange most often concerned the import of finished products (52%); however, in large companies, it was the export of finished products (53%), and raw materials (50%) details are presented in Figure 3. Among enterprises that had the experience of working with the Chinese side and which took advice from external companies, consulting most often concerned running a business in China (large companies 57%), mediation in establishing business contacts (large enterprises 33%, SMEs 26%) and due to the character of the Chinese language: language support (large companies 17%, SMEs 10%). Details are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 1. Experience of cooperation with the Chinese side



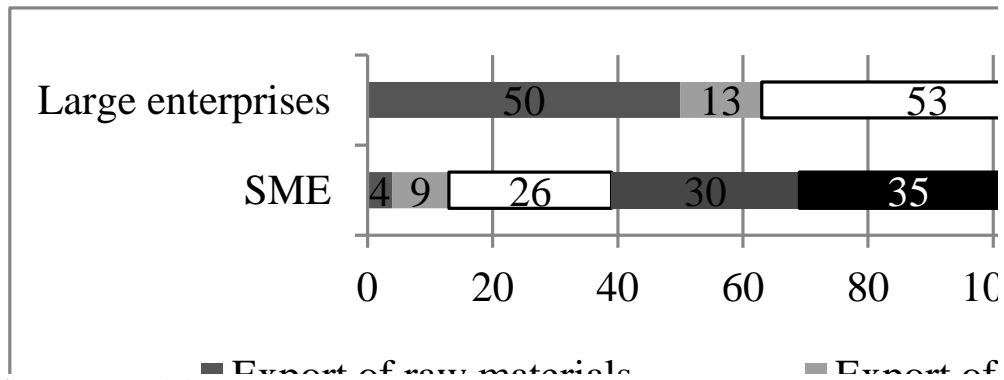
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Range of cooperation with the Chinese side



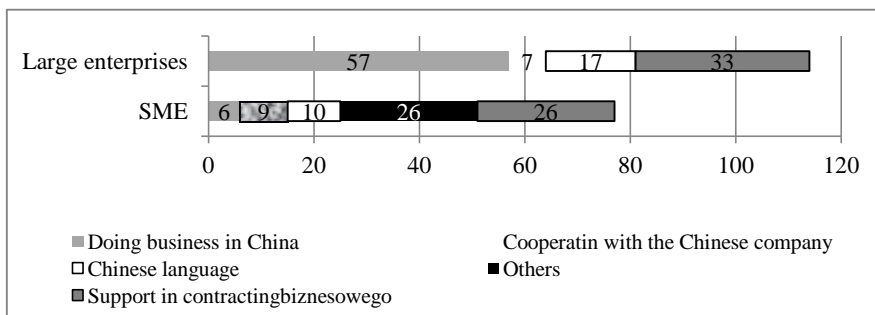
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3. Trade with China (multiple answers)



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4. Consulting external companies (multiple answers)

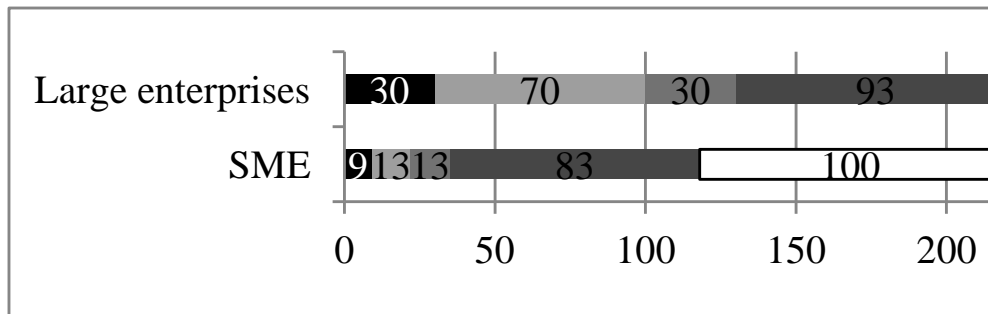


Source: Own elaboration.

In the opinion of managers, support from contacts on the Chinese side is necessary, mainly for procurement (SMEs 100%, large companies 80%), customs clearance (SMEs 83%, large enterprises 93%), and despatch (SMEs 13%, large companies 70%), see Figure 5. The preferred means of transporting goods to and from China turned out to be sea routes (SMEs 57% of indications, large companies 53%). The choice of this means of transport is mainly dictated by the relatively lower costs of sea transport, despite the relatively long time of transport, see Figure 6.

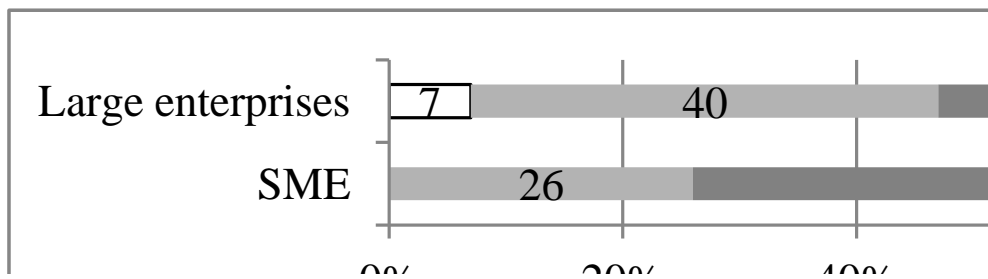
The majority of respondents did not know which institutions in the Opole region offer support with business contacts on the Chinese side (SMEs 87%, large enterprises 75%); see Figure 7. More aware people mentioned the Poland-China Cooperation Centre Confucius Institute at Opole University of Technology (Centrum Współpracy Polska-Chiny Instytut Konfucjusza Politechniki Opolskiej) and the previously mentioned budget unit of OCRG - Local Government of Opole Voivodeship Opolian Center for Economic Development (Samorząd Województwa Opolskiego Opolskie Centrum Rozwoju Gospodarki).

Figure 5. Stage of support needed (multiple answers)



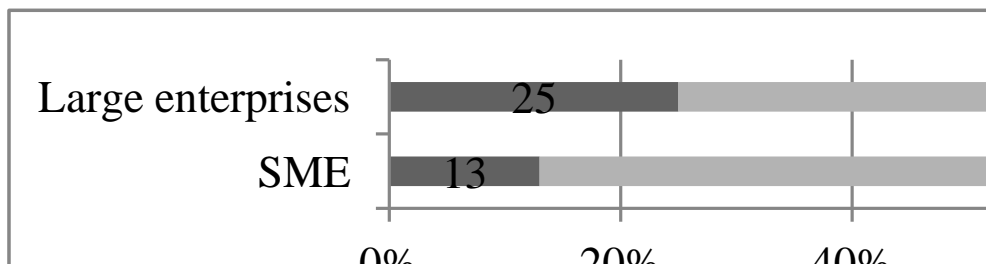
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 6. Means of transport



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 7. Knowledge about institutions in the region offering support / consultancy



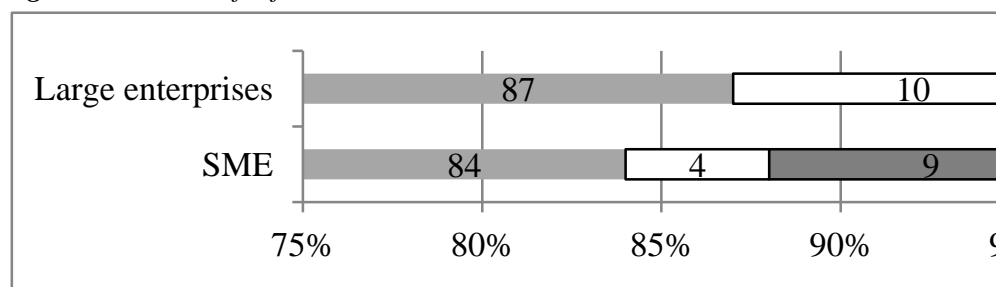
Source: Own elaboration.

The OBOR Initiative, also called in Poland, colloquially the new Silk Road, was first connected by respondents to its ancient counterpart. Associations mainly concerned the following categories: trade route (communication/transport route, communication trail), a route connecting the East and the West (route from the Far East to West/ from the Middle East to the West, from China to Europe, from Asia to Europe and even from eastern China to the western part of China), the ancient former route (ancient silk road, Middle Ages/ ancient times), international trade exchange, China (chairperson Xi Jinping, benefits mainly for the Chinese side as well as the fact that the actual trade route begins and ends in the PRC), silk and other goods that were transported along the ancient route (silk trade), caravans and Marco Polo. BRI appeared in the minds of managers mainly through information shared by

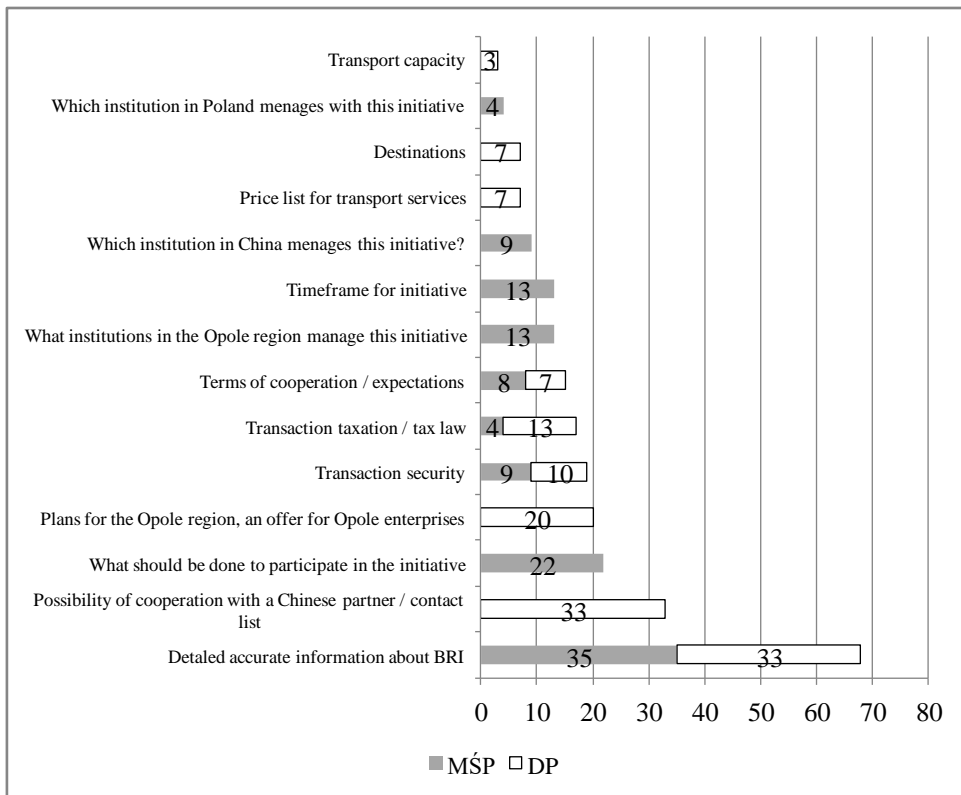
the media, primarily through articles posted on the Internet and in the press (SMEs 84% of responses, large enterprises 87%) and information obtained from the business environment, i.e., coworkers and business partners (SMEs 4%, large enterprises 10%), see Figure 8. The other information category sources were indications about a scientific environment offering courses, training, symposia, and postgraduate programs (Opole University of Technology) and family members. Managers reported a lack of detailed BRI (SMEs 35% of indications, large companies 33%). Some of the respondents' statements referred to the desire to learn literally "everything" about OBOR because, in Poland, the subject matter on it is presented very briefly.

Thus, due to a lack of information, it is not known what it is about. The respondents noticed that only very general and even "fragmentary" information illustrating the project/initiative commenced in 2013 by the Chinese side appears in the media, without any indication of who is responsible for what within BRI and who to address in case of any questions. This affects, among others, the fact that the initiative is sometimes seen as an equivalent of an EU program that you can apply for to receive a non-returnable grant. The respondents pointed out that the lack of information regarding possibilities of cooperation with a Chinese partner (large enterprises 33%), conditions to be met to join the project/ participate in the initiative (SMEs 22%), plans related to the initiative, and Opole Voivodeship (SME - 20%) and seeking answers to questions related to transaction security, taxation, time frame, price lists, institutions responsible for piloting the initiative in the international (represented by the Chinese side) national and regional senses, i.e., what units are responsible for transaction security, informing about project stages, etc. (Figure 9).

Figure 8. Sources of information about BRI



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 9. Missing BRI information (multiple answers possible)

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Conclusion

A comparison of the indications of managers representing small, medium-sized, and large enterprises located in Opole Voivodeship shows that their responses are, in fact, very similar. This applies to both the current lack of involvement in Polish-Chinese business relations and knowledge of BRI. Over half of the respondents were interested in both starting cooperation with the Chinese side (capital cooperation and trade exchange) and detailed exploration of the subject of OBOR. However, it is essential to provide more comprehensive information to the region's business community about the initiative. Businesspeople do not know which organizations they can turn to with questions concerning it. Both those representing the Chinese side and offices/ units on the Polish side, in their region of residence, offer support related to generally understanding cooperation with the Chinese side.

Due to the lack of access to the information sought, managers create their own perspectives on the initiative, similar to organizational structures known in Europe programs created for member states of the EU (cofinanced by European funds). The misconception is deepened because it is difficult to find an official and generally

accepted definition of the initiative. Its fairly adequate, overall defined framework is not a clearly defined program (Dunmore *et al.*, 2019; Gleave *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, primarily through bilateral discussions, China's cooperation is with individual countries, not with EU institutions, which might also cause problems with understanding its functions. Therefore, managers approach the initiative either in the category of potential application possibilities in the co-financing program (only without officially specified requirements, dates, and ways of application), or they compare to see the initiative as the counterpart of an economic union created on an intercontinental scale, so not necessarily addressed to Opolian companies shortly, and currently considered only in the area of diplomatic contacts. The third way of "understanding" the initiative is comparing it to the ancient silk road, related to categories such as silk, caravans, or Marco Polo, so perceiving it more in a historical rather than contemporary way.

The difficulty might influence it in determining what projects actually are included in the initiative. There is no one single branch of the Chinese government responsible for the BRI; there are many different sources for project funding, projects which are treated as components of the BRI, and not all the projects that the PRC is involved in were started after 2013 (Gleave *et al.*, 2018) nevertheless, the initiative is still developing as countries that show involvement join it.

Because information about the initiative comes mainly from the media, it can be considered that this channel is exceptionally effective and can also be used in the distribution of information sought by the managers on, among other issues, plans related to the initiative within Opole Voivodeship, conditions of participation, transaction security, the necessity of covering compulsory cash benefits collected by the Chinese and Polish sides, institutions piloting specific projects operating within its auspices, etc. Managers representing large companies also expect support in obtaining practical information concerning running an economic operation in the PRC and establishing business contacts with Chinese enterprises. The respondents (SMEs and large companies) also need intermediary help in establishing business relations and information on plans for the Opole region, i.e., offers addressed to enterprises in the region.

According to the respondents, support with the Chinese party's contacts is essential at supply, customs clearance, and despatch. Despite the development of rail transport infrastructure (Chengdu-Łódź express train within China-Europe Railway Express), managers still prefer maritime transportation. The above may be treated as a guide for organizations operating in Opole Voivodeship, for example, local government units in the voivodeship OCRG. Due to gaps in managers' knowledge regarding the economic and legal character of commercial transactions between the Polish and Chinese sides, it might also be an opportunity for universities in the region that teach areas of economy and law⁵, and which can prepare training programs and courses in this field⁶. Above all, however, it is a valuable tip for the Chinese side, managing information directed at the Polish/ European market, including entrepreneurs of the

Middle Kingdom, who are interested in working with the Polish side, as well as for other Polish enterprises already involved in trade and freight business.

Cooperation with Fujian Province, where there is a Fujian Group Hongbo headquarters, is currently the only tangible effect qualifying as one implemented within the Opole Voivodeship initiative. Even though the voivodeship is only 1/16 of the RP (in terms of administrative division), the results of the survey might be an introduction to further research and an outline of the situation and how BRI is currently perceived by the Polish, who represent the sectors of SMEs and large enterprises, what influence it has on practical effects of economic cooperation and what steps to take to make these effects satisfactory.

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Notes:

1 Currently, the division of enterprises in Poland is based on three categories: the number of employees and the level of annual turnover and/or total annual balance sheet. Thus, the SME category includes enterprises which not only employ less than 250 employees but also achieve an annual turnover not exceeding €50m. and/or a total annual balance sheet not exceeding €43m.

2 Not counting individuals only running individual farms.

3 eBadania.pl - Online Surveys.

4 Information obtained by email from the Opolian Center for Economic Development.

5Ie. the following universities operating in the province: Opole University of Technology, Opole University, University of Management and Administration, State Higher Vocational School in Nysa, University of Humanities and Economics in Brzeg, University of Bogdan Janski's long-distance faculty in Opole, Upper Silesian School of Commerce Wojciech Korfanty, University of Economics in Wrocław, Off-campus didactic centre in Kędzierzyn-Koźle, University of Banking in Wrocław, Faculty of Economics in Opole.

6 During the study, a post-graduate programme dedicated to EU-PRC business cooperation took place at the Opole University of Technology (EU-China International Business). Currently, postgraduate studies in this subject are conducted only by the scientific communities of other regions, including: Warsaw (Kozminski University: postgraduate studies Chinese Business - how to operate effectively in the time of the Silk Road, University of Warsaw: postgraduate studies Business and Politics of China, Warsaw School of Economics: postgraduate studies Asian-European financial-economic-legal relations), Krakow (Jagiellonian University: postgraduate studies Contemporary China society, politics, economy), Katowice (University of Economics in Katowice: postgraduate studies China business and law), Rzeszów (University of Rzeszów: postgraduate studies in Chinese Culture) and Lublin (College of Entrepreneurship and Administration in Lublin: postgraduate studies Business in Asia).