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CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL EUROPE: WORDS SPEAK LAUDER THAN ACTIONS¹

Šárka Waisová – Ladislav Cabada*

ABSTRACT

Until the end of the 1980s the role of the United States (US), European Communities (EC) and China in Central Europe (CE) was marginal. However, with the end of the Cold War the situation dramatically changed. The present article collects and analyses the evidence about the rising Chinese engagement in CE, particularly in the Visegrád Group (V4) countries Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia and about its political, societal and economic effects in the region. The research is designed as a three-level analysis of Chinese activities and interests in CE: firstly, attention will be paid to individual CE countries, secondly, to V4 which is historically the longest joint political project of CE countries, and thirdly, to the impact of the situation in CE on the EU level. We found out that pro-Chinese forces recruit from the populist and anti-liberal groups, Chinese activities and influence in individual CE countries differ, even though Chinese strategies to penetrate politics and business are similar, and that China's "words speak louder than actions". We conclude that even when V4 countries alone are sobering up from the 'Chinese dream', they use the 'China card' within the EU and towards EU authorities to get what they want.

Key words: Central Europe, China, engagement, V4, China's interests

Introduction

The initial idea of this article is that Central Europe (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) has been historically, geographically, culturally and politically

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located between East and West. With the victory of communist parties after WWII in Central Europe (CE), Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland became part of the East. Until the end of the 1980s the role of the United States (US), European Communities (EC) and China in CE was marginal. However, with the end of the Cold War the situation dramatically changed. In only one decade the Russian influence in CE declined and the EC, US and NATO became the strategic partners of CE countries. Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia clearly declared the effort to return 'back in the West' and their western orientation was backed up by NATO- and EU-enlargement. At the beginning of the new millennium, it seemed that the 'geo-political cards are clearly dealt out' and few people would think about a new geopolitical game in CE. However, new domestic developments in CE countries connected with rising nationalism, nostalgia for the communist period and populism combined with Chinese economic prosperity and the rising geo-political ambitions of Beijing changed the situation in only one decade: China became an economic and business magnet, assertively penetrating CE. During the covid pandemic China was one of the very few countries which economically rose. The pandemic also provided evidence of the dependence of world production and international trade on Chinese manufactures and shipping companies. In CE countries the pandemic became an accelerator of pro-Chinese forces which believed that cooperation with Beijing will help to recover from the covid-caused economic slump.

The goal of the present text is to collect evidence of the rising Chinese engagement in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia and to analyse its political, societal and economic effects in the particular country, in the region and within EU. Specifically, we will analyse:

- *Level I, individual countries*
 - When may rising Chinese engagement be observed (time and context)?
 - What are the forms of Chinese penetration in economics and politics (projects, instruments, strategies)?
 - Who are the political supporters and opponents of Chinese engagement?
 - How do societies understand and respond to the rising Chinese presence (feelings about China, difference in attitude to society in comparison to political elites)?
 - What are the effects of Chinese engagement (in politics and in economics)?

- *Level II, V4*
 - Is there any V4 attitude towards China and its economic and political engagement in CE? If yes, what is that attitude (positive, negative, neutral, joint projects and their goals)?
- *Level III, V4, EU and China*
 - Do V4 countries share the EU position on China (what is the EU position on China, does it differ from the V4 position and what are the issues of discord if any/Taiwan, human rights, vaccination etc./)?
 - What are the effects of different stands on China for the V4 and the EU?

This article is an empirical-analytical study aiming to collect and evaluate evidence, it does not test any model or theory. The aim is to present a three-level analysis of the rising Chinese presence in CE from the beginning of the 1990s. For the collection of evidence and evaluation of data and analysis a combination of methods has been used: case study, a qualitative historiographic study, textual analysis, and public opinion polls (Eurobarometer as well as national).

1. Level I: Chinese penetration into particular Central European countries

In the 1990s there was no Chinese trail in Central Europe. However, in the last two decades, China has penetrated many countries including Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, mainly through its ambitious business projects. Despite the similar historical and political developments, territorial proximity and aforementioned similarities, Beijing has made use of different measures respecting individual attributes of CE countries. These countries are perceived differently by China, particularly in political and economic situations and power constellation. The case studies will be structured the research questions accordingly.

1.1 Czechia

Even though the diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and China can be dated back to 1949, the history of Chinese engagement in the Czech territory is short. Political relations between Prague and Beijing developed step by step while in the 1990s it was slowed down by the dissident tradition in Czech foreign policy (Waisová and Piknerová 2012). During the 1990s political relations were

disrupted mainly by activities such as hanging Tibetan flags on public buildings or by then-President V. Havel's invitation to the Dalai-lama. Today, Czechia officially respects the 'one-China-policy', there are several bilateral agreements between both countries (Table 2) and Czechia also became a member of the 16+1 (since 2019, 17+1) Framework, a key platform for promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) driven by China.

The milestone for the development of Sino-Czech political relations was in 2013 when **M. Zeman**, a big supporter of China, began his first term in the Office of the President. In 2014 **Zeman** announced a 'reset' of Czech-China relations and a special advisor on relations to China was appointed within his office. When interviewed by CCTV in 2014, Zeman said that 'Czechs shall stop commenting on human rights and business in China and rather start to learn from it' (interview with M. Zeman in ČT24, 2014). This position was also shared by then Minister of Foreign Affairs, **L. Zaorálek**. **Zeman** and his fellow workers and advisors (**M. Nejedlý**, **V. Mynář**) declared that they have special relations with Chinese political circles (iRozhlas, 2019b; iDnes, 2020). It was demonstrated for example in 2017 when **Zeman** appointed **Ye Jianming**, CEFC China Energy founder, his personal advisor, and in March 2020 during the peak of the Covid pandemic when **Zeman's** collaborators including **Nejedlý** and **Mynář** went to Beijing for negotiations (the content of these negotiations was not published). The uncritical pro-Chinese position of the Czech President was confirmed when Zeman sought to cut the Czech Senate President **M. Vystrčil** out of foreign policy meetings as a consequence of his Taiwan visit (see below), and in spring 2021 **M. Petříček**, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, was removed from the post and appointed as new Minister was **J. Kulhánek**, who had previously worked as a consultant for CEFC Europe/CEFC China Energy.

Czech companies have traditionally had negligible business contacts in China and *vice versa*. However, since Czechia became the EU member Chinese investment has been flowing into the Czech Republic and Czech-Chinese contracts have risen. Business contracts and economic relations include investments, special contracts such as the purchase of several media outlets (e.g., TV Barrandov) and the confirmation of approved destination status, the official Chinese stamp confirming that the country can host organised tourist groups from China. Leading Chinese companies present in Czechia are electronic manufacturers, IT companies, makers of transport equipment and food producers. Two state-owned banks – the Bank of China and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China – are also present. Traditionally, the biggest Chinese

investment belonged to China Energy Company Ltd (CEFC). The company has purchased shares in Czech Airlines and bought a majority stake in the SK Slavia Prague soccer team. Statistics, however, provide evidence that Chinese greenfield investments are rather low (Fürst, 2018) and significant Chinese investments in the energy sector, transportation and logistics infrastructure came at the earliest after spring of 2020.

A new issue in Czech-Chinese relations is cultural and academic cooperation. Two Confucius Institutes were established at different universities, as well as several centres of traditional Chinese medicine and Beijing has given financial support for scholars writing and speaking positively about China (Forum 24, 2019).

Despite developing political and trade relations there are several heavy disputes in Czech-Chinese relations: cyberattacks on Czech institutions led from the Chinese territory, the human rights of Uyghurs in Xinjiang (iRozhlas, 2019a) and the influencing of Czech opinion makers, particularly in academia. In the autumn of 2019 came out that some scholars at the Charles University were financed by China or by China-related companies to improve the Beijing's image through lectures and conferences. The university later confirmed the accusation and those scholars had to resign from the university. The media also published evidence of the existence of several quasi-NGOs (e.g., New Silk Road Institute in Prague²) whose goals were not only to improve the image of China, but to build links to policy and opinion makers and to influence political representatives in favour of China (Forum24, 2019; Respekt, 2019). The last dispute in Sino-Czech relations caused the formal visit of the Czech Senate President **M. Vystrčil** and the Mayor of Prague **Z. Hřib** accompanied by a business delegation to Taiwan (September 2020). When information about the plan of the visit were published, Beijing threatened delegation's participants with extensive penalisation of different origins³. All the development has been reflected by public opinion (Table 1): the data from 2020 (Turcsányi et al, 2020) indicate that 56% of Czechs had a predominantly negative view of China and 41% also said that their views of China had worsened in the last year. Projects such as the BRI or 5G network development are seen as slightly negative.

² The institute existed between 2015 and 2019 and was presented as an NGO, but the composition of leadership shows a clear connection to President Zeman, as well as some political parties, primarily Social Democrats (Seznam Zprávy, 2019).

³ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who was in Germany at the time, threatened that the Czech Republic would 'pay a heavy price' for the visit.

As evidence mentioned above indicates, there exist pro- and anti-China divides in the Czech Republic. Based on their attitude to China, Czechs may be categorised as 'hawks', 'multilateralists', 'pragmatists' and 'friends of China'. Hawks, many of them with a dissident tradition (Waisová and Piknerová, 2012), see China as a subversive non-democratic force which may destabilise Czech politics and economics and good relations with EU countries, tunnel Czech companies and use the Czech territory to launder money. Hawks are represented by several people from liberal-conservative parties TOP09 and ODS, and Social Democrats (ČSSD) (Deník.cz, 2020). Multilateralists see China as any other country; however, they do not close their eyes to human rights abuses in the country. This group includes several people from ODS and some ČSSD members. Pragmatists merge with friends of China. Both see the Chinese market and investments as an opportunity without evaluating Chinese politics. Friends of China directly support Chinese engagement in Czechia and favour a Sino-Czech link before EU membership. An example of a pragmatist is former Prime Minister **P. Nečas**. In 2012 he delivered a speech where he pejoratively labelled the Czech value-orientated foreign policy as 'dalailamism' and 'pussy-riotism' (iHned, 2012). Today, the most visible friends of China in Czech politics are representatives of the Communist Party and President **M. Zeman** and his advisors. Zeman's motivations are not publicly known, speculations indicate that Beijing financed his presidential campaign (Forum24, 2018; iRozhlas, 2018). The tensions concerning China in Czech politics were clearly visible in reactions to Chinese mask diplomacy. While President **Zeman**, Prime Minister **Babiš** and Minister of Interior **Hamáček** obsequiously waited at the Prague airport and theatrically welcomed the airplane from China bringing health equipment (for which Czechia properly paid), Pirate Party, ODS and TOP09 welcomed the effort of Czech companies to increase the volume of production at home as well as a quick development of new and better masks and oxygenators (Vláda, 2020; Hospodářské noviny, 2020).

The coalition government established by ODS, TOP09, Pirate Party and Starostové went even further: in May 2022 Czech ambassador to World Health Organization directly supported Taiwan's membership in the organization in his speech during an opening ceremony in Geneva and in May 9, 2022 Foreign Policy Committee of the Lower Chamber of the Parliament recommended to the government, particularly to the MFA, to terminate the Czech participation in 16+1 Platform (An Interview with Deputy Minister J. Kozák, May 26, 2022).

There are three milestones for the rising negative perception of China in

Czech society: 1) the disappointment based on the first statistics of Chinese investments from autumn 2019 showing that they are lower than promised, 2) the failed case of the Chinese company CEFC, the main Chinese investor in Czechia and 3) the Chinese reactions to the Senate President **M. Vystrčil**'s trip to Taiwan. For a long time, Czech society has discussed who the Chinese investors are; the great suspicion was with the state-owned and the companies managed by the Communist Party. Czech pro-Chinese forces argued that there is diversity among investors and the biggest investor, CEFC, is a private company. However, after CEFC had problems and some of its high-position representatives were jailed in China, its contracts in the Czech Republic were taken over by the state-owned CITIC. This confirmed the arguments of critics. Deep disappointment was caused by Chinese reactions to the trip of several Czech political figures with a business delegation to Taiwan in August 2021. For many politicians and most of society Beijing's intimidation was totally unacceptable. When in reaction China announced the cancellation of a 200,000 Euro contract for 11 pianos with the Czech piano maker Petrof, a big wave of solidarity rose and support on social networks was expressed by thousands of people. Consequently, to help Petrof and to demonstrate the independence of Czechia, the Komárek Family Foundation bought all the pianos and donated them to Czech musical schools (Forbes, 2020).

Czech academia is similarly divided. Especially after the scandal with the pro-Chinese research centre at Charles University paid-for by the Beijing, awareness of China in academic circles has risen. Today, there is a rather small and constant number of pro-Chinese academics, while the number and activities of those who warned about the non-transparent Chinese activities is rising. The well-known organisations are ChinafluenCE⁴ and Sinopsis⁵. These organisations are not anti-Chinese in nature, their founders believe that Beijing does not share enough information. Their goal is to trace the activities, contacts, contracts, relations and links between Czech and Chinese actors and to deliver more information to the media, society and politics.

The evaluation of Chinese engagement in Czech Republic

Here we try to sum up and assess the impact of China in Czechia. It was not until 2004 when Chinese interest and presence in Czech territory was evident.

⁴ ChinafluenCE, at <https://www.chinfluence.eu/cs/>.

⁵ Sinopsis, at <https://sinopsis.cz/>.

The Chinese engagement is political as well as economic, political contacts are mainly aimed to arrange economic opportunities and geostrategic positions. Beijing meticulously monitors Czech media, criticises any statements not responding to official Chinese discourse, develops personal relations of dependence to influential actors in politics and economics, apparently blackmails those having a different world view from China, aims to improve the image of Chinese projects including the BRI and develops the image of its own indispensability. Czech society as well as politics is deeply and irreconcilably divided in their view of China and its contribution to the development of the Czech Republic. Today, for Czech society China is no longer the mere epitome of a distant human rights violator, nor is it an abstract gold mine that could single-handedly jumpstart the Czech economy. Besides assistance in the supply of health equipment during the pandemic, there are no Chinese projects or activity which is perceived positively. China rather has an image of a dubious and unscrupulous villain and many of those linked with Chinese business and politics are seen as incredible suspects.

1.2 Hungary

Hungary has been for years a country with many domestic political and economic problems and with an unclear foreign policy orientation. Despite Hungary having had a similar Cold War experience to the other CE countries and becoming a NATO and EU member together with Czechia, Slovakia and Poland, in the late 1990s it became the country with the biggest effort to build special relations with Russia and China. Hungarian political representatives planned to use business relations with Russia and China as an instrument of economic development, political cooperation with Moscow and Beijing was used – particularly by **Orbán** governments – as a blackmailing strategy towards the EU or NATO. Budapest for example refused to share the critical EU attitude to the BRI (European Parliament, 2018)

Hungary has had diplomatic relations with China since 1949. Hungarian-Chinese relations have developed more intensively since 1989. In 2004 both countries signed a joint statement on friendly partnership and cooperation. After 2008 Hungary tried to win Chinese investments to bridge problems resulting from the economic crisis, energy dependence on Russia and its land-locked position (Matura, 2018). Consequently, in 2010 the Hungarian government introduced the 'Opening to the East' policy (*Keleti Nyitás*), which was supposed to attract capital from China and Central Asia to counterbalance that from the EU. In 2011

Budapest enthusiastically joined the 16+1 Framework. Hungary and China also closed the strategic partnership and Hungary became the first European country to support the Chinese-proposed BRI (China Daily, 2019). In 2016 the Chinese-Hungarian One Belt One Road (OBOR) Working Group Meeting was organised. Since 2000, Hungary and China have exchanged dozens of diplomatic visits, several bilateral agreements and contracts with Beijing were signed (Table 2), direct flights between Budapest and Beijing were opened and several infrastructure projects were developed (e.g., the modernisation of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line). In spring of 2013 the **Orbán** government established the office of the Government Commissioner for Hungarian-Chinese Bilateral Relations (Embassy of Hungary, Beijing, n.d.). Consequently, the China-CEE countries' Tourism Coordination Centre started to operate in Budapest. Several Chinese banks opened their regional centre in Budapest and one of the most controversial Chinese companies – Huawei – located its European supply and logistics centre in Hungary. In 2019 the opening of the campus of Chinese Fudan University in Budapest was announced which is expected to be finished in 2024 and to educate about six thousand students. During the pandemic Hungary confirmed its long-term positive viewpoint of Eastern authoritarian powers, Russia and China. The mask diplomacy was extended soon into the vaccine diplomacy; despite the lack of approval from the European Medicines Agency the Sputnik V and Sinopharm vaccines were included into the Hungarian national vaccination strategy.

A modest turnabout was brought by the **Trump** administration (US State Department, 2015; Frynia, 2019; Kingsley, 2018). Firstly, ideologically and influenced by personal attributes, **Trump** and **Orbán** understood each other (they e.g., shared the same view on immigration). Secondly, the US feel challenged by the rise of Russia and China, and Hungary – as a flagship for the Russian and Chinese – has logically attracted Washington's attention (Foreign Policy, 2019). Furthermore, since 2018 Budapest has been experiencing some economic sobering up: the flow of Chinese investment is still low and more than a dozen joint projects have failed (Matura, 2018), with many others delayed. In 2020, the Chinese economy absorbed only 1.7% of Hungarian exports (in 2010 it was 1.6) (Telex, 2021). The Budapest-Belgrade railway became the most visible problem. The loan agreement between Hungary and China was signed in April 2020, but in a short time the project was challenged by EU-investigation for violation of EU law on free economic competition.

An interesting moment is that unlike in some EU countries, increased

Chinese activity has not triggered any alarm in the Hungarian political opposition or among the wider public (RFE/RL 2021). Most Hungarians have never had problems with China and China was only a distant, unknown country. Until the end of 2010s, nobody from the major political players opposed the opening towards Beijing and obviously public attention on the matter was meagre as well (Matura, 2018). Since 2018, with rising opposition to **Orbán's** illiberal government, the aversion to China has grown. For the political opposition in Hungary, China became the symbol of authoritarianism and violation of human rights, both typical for Fidesz and **Orbán**. Today, protests against China are in fact protests against **Orbán** (BBC, 2021). Until now, the biggest anti-Chinese wave appeared when the construction of the Fudan University Campus in Budapest was announced. Thousands of people protested on the streets and **Gergely Karácsony**, liberal opposition mayor of Budapest, initiated the change in names of several streets in the neighbourhood of the campus to commemorate the victims of Chinese human rights abuses (e.g., Dalai Lama út. /street/, Free Hong Kong Road or Uyghur Martyr's Road). The observers say that the protests against the Fudan campus may help unify the opposition and mobilise their supporters. Today, China appears to be one of the most negatively perceived countries in Hungary. Half of Hungarians do not trust China and more than half prefer to cooperate with the EU in business as well as in development of 5G networks (Table 1). Even part of the Fidesz voters does not agree with the pro-Chinese politics of **Orbán's** government (Dubravčíková et al, 2020). The Sino-Hungarian relationship is thus more than complicated.

The evaluation of Chinese engagement in Hungary

There exists a deep gap between the government's rhetoric and data about real engagement of China in Hungary. China has been for a long time optimistically welcomed as actor who may help Budapest solve economic and infrastructure problems but even the Opening to the East policy did not increase either the Hungarian export to Asia or the flow of FDIs from China, and didn't decrease Hungary's reliance on Western markets. Despite existing data indicating poor previous Chinese investment and several failed projects, **Orbán's** government has not been changing its optimistic rhetoric and friendly attitude to Beijing. **Orbán** started to use the cooperation with Beijing as a stick to the EU, when the EU is more than vigilant to China. The change of the relationship to China and its economic engagement in Hungary could only come after the elections (planned for 2022) if Fidesz wasn't a government party.

1.3 Poland

Diplomatic relations between Warsaw and Beijing may be dated back to 1949. However, lively business and political relations between Warsaw and Beijing are relatively new. For decades, Chinese foreign policy saw Poland as a peripheral country of the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical area, so the relations with Warsaw became the far margin of Chinese policy. The Chinese perception of Poland changed in 2004 when the country joined the EU. Proof of this change was the visit of the Chinese president to Poland in 2004. Since then both countries have signed several bilateral agreements (Table 2). In 2015 the Poland-China intergovernmental committee was established and one year later the comprehensive Strategic partnership agreement was signed. Approximately till 2016, Poland was seen by the Chinese authorities as a key actor in Central East Europe along with Belarus, Czechia and Serbia. This was confirmed by the visits of **Xi Jinping** himself in Minsk in April 2015, Prague in March 2016 and Belgrade and Warsaw in June 2016 (Góralczyk, 2017, p. 156). During the Warsaw visit, the international Silk Road Forum was organised that was attended by China and Poland's presidents. The most visible supporters of a Sino-Polish partnership in recent years were Foreign Minister **Z. Rau** and President **A. Duda**, both representing the Law and Justice Party (PiS).

Poland's clear preference is to develop business and trade relations with China, politically and ideologically Warsaw is rather reserved. The main reason is the fact that the Chinese officials present Russia as an important partner, which is in Warsaw seen as an obstacle for more active cooperation with China and the BRI. Economically, Poland sees itself as a central hub for China's expanding trade ties in Europe. On Poland's vision of the country's role in 2016, Polish President **A. Duda** commented '... that Poland will become a gateway to Europe for China, not only in symbolic terms, but primarily in actual economic terms' (Duda according to Prezydent.pl, 2016). Poland feels itself to be the most important country in the 16+1 Framework; the format itself was presented in 2012 in Poland's capital.

With EU funding set to decrease after 2020, the Polish government is looking for new sources of investment. In Poland, Chinese money was perceived as a potential alternative to the capital from the EU and as a way to implement a new economic plan of then Minister of Economic Development and Finance **Morawiecki** (i.e., a fiscal plan adopted in February 2017, called the *Polish Deal*) (van der Putten et al, 2016, p. 48). Today, China is the biggest trade partner of Poland in Asia and Poland is one of the largest trade partners of China in Europe.

Nearly 90% of the China-Europe freight trains pass through or arrive in Poland, the port of Gdansk, which is the largest container terminal on the Baltic Sea, and is COSCO's Baltic distribution centre (Majman, 2019; Statistics Poland, 2021). Relatively successful is the development of the cargo train connections between Chengdu and Lodz, and Suzhou and Warsaw, and Chinese companies are active in road and rail tenders and in other infrastructure projects.

However, the recent statistics on Poland's economic relations with China (Statistics Poland, 2021) indicate that while China increases its exports to Poland, Poland is experiencing a trade deficit. Earlier Beijing's announcements on investment were also not realised. As a result, there emerged first serious tensions between Warsaw and Beijing which deepened during the Trump administration which considered Poland the strategic channel to inflow of Chinese investments and influence into Europe. **Trump's** anti-Chinese stands and deeds resulted in more active politics to Warsaw. Furthermore, the US has traditionally been a partner of Poland in NATO and beyond and both countries have had friendly relations for decades. At the end of 2017 then-Prime Minister **M. Morawiecki** declared that economic relations with Beijing were difficult and the Chinese market closed to Polish companies. Consequently, at the 16+1 meeting in Sofia, Poland significantly lowered the rank of the delegation when the country was represented by the deputy prime minister instead of the prime minister (PAP, 2017). During the visit of US Vice President **M. Pence** on September 2019, both countries signed an agreement to cooperate on 5G technology. In 2020 Poland amended the National Cybersecurity Act which, even though it does not mention Chinese firms, effectively prevents the participation of Chinese companies in the development of the 5G network in Poland (Kobierski, 2021).

The changing Polish attitude to China confirms the opinion of Polish society. During the first decade of the new millennium, a relatively positive view of the Chinese project predominated in Polish society (Jakubowski et al, 2020, p. 368). With rising Chinese assertiveness and based on existing data indicating low investments and poor experience with Chinese companies, Polish society has been changing its attitude to Beijing and intensified its wariness. Today, almost 42% of the Polish public view China negatively, 32% view China positively (the rest have neutral views) (Table 1) (Brona et al, 2020). Based on the historical memory and Poland's Cold War experience, as long as Beijing will be partnering with Moscow and violate human rights, China will never be fully welcomed by a majority of the Polish public. Furthermore, like in other countries, there is a rising critical stand of the society to Chinese penetration of Poland's universities and

research bodies. There are six Confucius Institutes in Poland and several universities have developed a research partnership with China. When in June 2019 a former Chinese Huawei executive was arrested in Poland on allegations of spying for China, universities as well as decision-makers became alert (Reuters, 2021).

The redirection of Poland's strategy confirms the testing of development strategies without China; Warsaw is for example the leader of another economic and development activity in Central East Europe – the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). The initiative, launched in 2015 by the Croatian and Polish presidents, comprises 12 EU-member states, along with 11 new democracies, and also Austria. Its profile is predominantly economic, stressing the necessity for proper development strategies in the region to catch up with Western Europe. From the beginning, 3SI was considered an activity interconnected with US priorities⁶, above all during the Trump presidency⁷ (Cabada and Waisová, 2018).

The evaluation of Chinese engagement in Poland

After a decade of partnering with Beijing, these days Poland's economic and political relations to China are rather circumspect. The Polish public as well as politics see the future of Poland as an EU and NATO member and the Beijing vision of international order with a weak American presence in Europe and partnership with Russia promoted by China goes against Polish strategic aims and vital foreign policy goals. The rise of China and China's partnering with Russia is more and more viewed as having a negative impact on Poland's security environment. While a decade ago China was portrayed as an opportunity, today it is rather perceived as a potential destabilising force of Poland's position in Europe and the world. Nevertheless, business-to-business relations are still welcomed, even though official authorities are more careful when the business concerns strategic issues such as the sale of land and estate in industrial zones or ports on the Baltic Sea. In recent years, several governmental representatives in Poland have declared that China and Russia forming a coalition is against the free world (Turcsányi and Bachulska, 2019) and the Russian invasion to Ukraine will probably make Sino-Polish relations even colder. Today, Warsaw is step by step awakening from its pro-Chinese dreaming.

⁶ Such as the transit and use of US LNG sources.

⁷ In February 2020, US State Secretary M. Pompeo promised 1 billion USD to reinforce energy security and economic growth of the group.

1.4 Slovakia

Slovak-Chinese relations have developed since 1949 within Czechoslovakia. Since its independent existence in 1993, Slovakia – based on its complicated domestic political situation, geographic location and its energy dependency to Russia – has pendulated between Western orientation and Russia. In the new millennium China was optimistically welcomed as somebody who may help Bratislava solve economic and infrastructure problems of the small land-locked country and decrease their dependency on Russia. All these are influenced by the fact that Bratislava is in a complicated situation; unlike Poland or Hungary, the country is very low on the list of US or EU priorities. Even though Prime Minister **Fico** declared in 2006 his intention to improve the country's economic relations with China to solve Slovakia's rising economic problems, it did not happen until 2009 when Beijing noticed that the small country existed. In 2009 the Chinese president was for the first time in independent Slovakia. Consequently, several bilateral agreements were signed (Table 2). In 2016 Bratislava installed for the first time an ambassador in Beijing and several 'Slovak houses' in various parts of China were opened.

The Chinese engagement in Slovak politics is rather low and the official bilateral relations are sporadic. Slovakia is the only CE country without a direct flight to China and both countries even did not sign a MoU or an agreement on strategic partnership.⁸ In building economic links Slovakia is better, even though the available data points to low levels of Chinese investment in the country. The observers (Pleschová, 2017) suggest that the main motivation for Chinese economic engagement in Slovakia is gaining access to EU markets and accessing know-how and technology. Despite the fact that in 2017 Bratislava accepted a special dispensation to prepare the space for rising economic relations between China and Slovakia⁹, there aren't many Chinese companies with manufactures in Slovakia and greenfield investments are rather low. The biggest contracts are in the automotive industry followed by IT companies. Research contacts and technological cooperation are rising (Huawei, ZTE and Dahua). Slovakia is also the object of Chinese cultural influence; there have been three Confucius Institutes established at universities and Chinese CEFC

⁸ However, it is quite understandable – Bratislava has a small airport and the car or train trip from Bratislava to Vienna airport takes less than an hour.

⁹ Návrh Koncepcia rozvoja hospodárskych vzťahov medzi Slovenskou republikou a Čínskou ľudovou republikou na roky 2017 – 2020 (Slov-Lex, LP/2017/203, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/LP/2017/203>).

expressed its interest in buying some Slovak media (TV Markíza).

Slovak politics is divided in its relationship to China, but not so deeply as politics in other countries. This is the matter of China being seen as rather distant for Bratislava. There is no political party with a clear Chinese position. The most pro-Chinese rhetoric was carried out by former Prime Minister **R. Fico** and then Minister of Foreign Affairs **M. Lajčák**. **Fico** personally lobbied to secure Chinese support for the construction of a hydropower plant on the Ipel' River, the establishment of a branch of Chinese banks in Slovakia and direct flights between Bratislava and Beijing (SME, 2015). **Lajčák** looked for the Chinese support when he applied to be candidate for UN Secretary General in 2016. The most critical figure of China is the contemporary President **Z. Čaputová** who criticises China's approach to Tibet, Taiwan, human rights violations in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong.

As China is not a priority issue in Slovak political and societal discourse, there are only a few metrics and power polls about the attitude of Slovaks to issues concerning China. They indicate that in Slovakia the perception of China is volatile (European Commission, 2021); it depends on the actual media image of China and scandals concerning Chinese investment in Slovakia or unclear and suspicious relations to prominent political and business figures. The covid pandemic had the potential to act as an important catalyst affecting a change in the public perception of China. Opinion polls conducted in spring 2020 (Turcsányi et al, 2020) has shown that over 67% of Slovaks thought that China was helping Slovakia to get the pandemic under control, while only 22% of Slovaks thought the same about the EU. However, the general view of China is negative; over 40% of the Slovaks see China negatively, while a quarter of the population indicated that their views have worsened in the past three years (Turcsányi et al, 2020). When it comes to political self-identification, there is a link between the people's perception of China and the positions of a political party with which they identify. The most negative perception of China can be found among the voters of Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and Progressive Slovakia parties which themselves are critical of China. The most positive view of China is held by voters of SMER-SD and HLAS-SD.

However, like other countries, there also emerged some disputes about the effects of Chinese engagement at Slovak universities and in research, technological and economic cooperation (SME, 2021). There exist warnings about security risks from this cooperation, and there are rising concerns about Chinese participation in the 5G network development in the country. Recently, Slovak intelligence services have warned about the rising Chinese secret

operations in the Slovakian territory and several observers (Turcsányi and Šimalčík, 2018) stress the risks of making Slovakia dependent on Chinese money.

The evaluation of Chinese engagement in Slovakia

Slovakia is the smallest and least populated CE country with a strategically unimportant position and without any strategic resources. Slovakia itself has been interested in partnering with China; however, they have remained mainly overlooked by Beijing. Sino-Slovak relations are sparse and for Slovak political representatives as well as business circles disappointing. For Beijing, Slovakia offers almost no advantage; it has neither strategic location nor resources or political influence. It can be hardly expected that the situation will change in the future. With the rising poor experience of Chinese investments, political representatives in Bratislava have been sobering up and are becoming more and more sceptical of the value of Slovak-Chinese relations.

Table 1: Public opinion in CE countries on China, 2020

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Negative feeling towards China (% of respondents)	56	52	45	43
Worsening of feeling towards China in the past three years (% of respondents)	41	31	38	25
Perceptions of Chinese investments, negative view (% of respondents)	45	48	59	49
Perception of BRI, negative view (% of respondents)	45	49	54	48
Agreement on cooperation in building the 5G network, China/EU (% of respondents)	20/63	37/62	31/70	32/65
Trust in China (% of respondents)	10	10	8	18

Source: Authors, based on Turcsányi et al, 2020

Table 2: Summary of bilateral relations between CE countries and China

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Membership in 17+1 Framework	yes	yes	yes	yes
Approved Destination Status	yes	yes	yes	yes
Bilateral MoU on BRI	yes	yes	yes	no
Direct flights from China	yes	yes	yes	no
Confucius Institute	yes	yes	yes	yes
Authorization and use of Chinese covid vaccines	no	yes	no	no
Approaches to participation of	MoU with US on	No	MoU with US	MoU with US

Chinese companies in 5G networks	exclusion of Chinese companies, implied as a security problem	restrictions	to exclude, legal ban followed	on exclusion
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Source: Authors, based on articles and webpages used in this article

2. Level II: China and V4

For Beijing, the relations with the V4 are an important element in the development of the BRI. However, business and political cooperation with China is a novelty for Visegrad Group; the individual countries as well as the V4 do not have any long-term and consistent strategy for how to cope with China's rising assertiveness. Even though students of integration usually believe that uniting smaller parts into a bigger whole brings benefits for all participants, there exists neither a unified V4 view or statements to China, nor a Chinese initiative to handle the V4 as an association of countries representing one opinion. Beijing never strove for negotiations with the V4 as a group and preferred bilateral talks and special relations to particular individuals from CE. Not only there is no unified V4 agenda to China, CE countries never tried to speak with one voice to Beijing and never tried to negotiate with China collectively (as they do for example with Japan, Republic of Korea, or Israel). The framework of negotiations has always been set up by Beijing and directly managed from Beijing. Despite China speaks about the exceptional status of the V4 in its foreign policy, it has been until now essentially declarative, as it does not come with any unique, bespoke political or economic instruments that somehow distinguish the Chinese engagement in the V4 from Chinese projects in the Balkans or the Baltic States. Until now, there was only one V4-China meeting when in 2018 the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs met his colleagues from the V4 (MFA PRC, 2018) and there exist no multilateral projects in CE. In the eyes of China, dealing with the V4 serves first and foremost as an important additional channel of communication with the EU or as a force able to divide the EU (Reuters, 2018). Within the V4, partnering with China is used to confront Brussels in periods of disputes such as issues of immigration.

3. Level III: V4 and “the Chinese card” in the EU

Even though there is no unified position of the V4 to China and there does not exist joint V4 agenda or policy on China, economic and political relations to

China are causes of disputes between the EU and the V4. As China indicated, it “believes the Visegrad group in the European Union - Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland - is the bloc’s most dynamic force” (Reuters, 2018). It is more than clear that when it is useful, V4 countries use the ‘Chinese card’ (information about cooperation and trade with China) as a stick to EU authorities. When V4 countries are criticised by EU authorities for issues such as immigration quota or violation of political rights, their political representatives calculatedly answer by stressing the good relations to Beijing and China’s rising engagement in business. The most visible case is Hungary. When EU authorities warned Budapest about rising illiberal practices and restrictions of democratic life, as an answer Hungary repeatedly mentioned its great relations with Beijing, informed about Sino-Hungarian bilateral construction projects and opposed the EU’s critical position on China’s handling of the situations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Consequently, Budapest blocked an EU statement criticising China’s new security law in Hong Kong in April 2021.

The ‘China card’ used by V4 proceeds from the fact that China is by EU authorities seen as a ‘systemic rival’ (EU-China Strategic Outlook, 2019) and to face such a force, Brussels needs all member states speaking with one voice. Moreover, there is no unified position of EU countries to China as there is no unified position of V4 countries. The populist and anti-liberal CE leaders regard China as one of the key fighters against the international liberal order they are challenging, too (Cabada, 2021). What proponents of a positive image of China such as **Zeman**, **Orbán**, **Fico** and **Gašparovič** do is the prioritisation of economy, cultural specificity and national sovereignty over common EU norms and partnering with China seems to be a useful instrument (Jakimow, 2019, p. 378). China has thus a special value for their arguments and deeds. It is the new regional dynamics emerging in the EU, which is driven by the populist turn and a growing demand for Chinese investment in the European periphery, which China may skilfully utilise (Jakimow, 2019). The V4 countries do have only minimal joint program for inward cooperation, and they have no positive program for cooperation and partnering with third countries, however they have been effectively able to unite in blackmailing the EU authorities with China’s partnering.

Conclusion: China in Central Europe – Words speak louder than actions

When in 1997 **H. Kissinger**, describing the strategic competition between the US, EU, China and Russia in the post-Cold-War world called the post-communist Eastern Europe 'The Grand Chessboard', he had the eastern flank of Eastern Europe in mind. Today the great game has moved into CE. In the last decade, CE has become a space of multiple and multilevel games whose participants are local authorities, EU, China, Russia and the US. However, these games do not refer only to the inter-state level, but they deeply affect local business as well as societies. No other issue ever divided politics, business and societies in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia so deeply as the relationship to China. Based on the evidence collected above, we try to answer the questions from the introduction.

The first question asked 'when may rising Chinese engagement be observed', we were particularly interested in time and context. For decades V4 countries were on the margin of Chinese foreign policy and business interests. The milestone was 2004, when the CE countries joined the EU which significantly changed their geostrategic and economic position. The development of relations between China and CE countries was accelerated after the 2008 economic crisis when China was considered a perspective market with free and accessible money. For now, the last surge in Sino-Central European relations was within the Covid pandemic during which V4 economies were strongly affected while the Chinese economy was almost the only one rising. The rise in popularity and intensity in partnering with China has been going hand in hand with rising illiberal and populist political forces in CE countries and their anti-EU politics.

The second question was interested in forms of Chinese penetration in economics and politics in CE countries, particularly in character of projects, instruments and strategies. First of all, it is clear that Beijing prefers bilateral relations over any multilateral frameworks and even multilateral frameworks such as the 17+1 cooperation are managed directly from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and are based primarily on bilateral agreements. Such an approach will always bring advantages to China having exceptional political influence, economic strength and size of market. To negotiate with V4 countries, Beijing uses a 'carrot and stick' strategy when attraction and pressure are pragmatically combined. Beijing also closely watches social networks and media in CE countries to immediately stop any criticism of China. A recently used

strategy included the acquisition of local media which opened the door to control the content of information, not only about China.

The third question surveyed 'who are the political supporters and opponents of Chinese engagement' in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. In all V4 countries the political supporters of China recruit from the populist and anti-liberal political circles advocating the need for a new world order and disrespecting EU norms and values. Besides Poland, these illiberal populist forces also tend to acknowledge authoritarian rule in Russia. Opponents of intensification of contacts and partnering with China are usually liberal political forces. Those people do not close their eyes to human rights and freedom of speech violations in China and appreciate value based foreign policy. However, as is demonstrated in the case of Czechia, these people need not be necessarily enthusiastic about the EU.

Politics and decision makers alike are divided concerning China, the division exists within societies. Even though there are small differences in how many people have a negative feeling about China, in all V4 countries it is approximately half of the people who do not trust China and have a negative feeling about the country. China has effectively divided politics, business and the public and disrupted the socio-political consensus about the future development of the particular country. The main line of divide differs in particular countries; however, it has similar effects – destabilisation and an increase in domestic conflicts in politics and between politics and business. The cleavage in relations to China is then reflected in media as well as in research, advocacy and civil society campaigns. In all V4 countries there are research-advocacy groups on the rise which systematically trace the Chinese engagement in CE and inform public and policy makers. The number of those warning that Chinese activities are not transparent, not only in communication but in willingness to share information such as statistics on trade and investments or on owners of property has been growing.

After almost two decades of Chinese engagement in CE, it can be said that local political representation is not naïve to Chinese interests and goals any more. It is clear that Beijing promises more than it does and that from the promise it is a long way to the target. Furthermore, the way is not always lined with friendly words and deeds. Since approximately 2018 only Hungary has still maintained rhetoric about special relations between Hungary and China and about positives resulting from China's investments. Most political representatives of Czechia, Poland and Slovakia are rather vigilant and circumspect.

It is also clear that there is no joint V4 position on China in political as well as

in economic relations. There are several domestic as well as regional reasons for this situation. Because Chinese foreign policy prefers bilateral relations, this situation suits Beijing. It is also more than clear that China has effectively cut a wedge in EU unity. While Central European countries and some old EU members (Italy and Spain) have turned to China, other EU countries maintain a circumspect distance. Even though V4 countries do not have any joint China policy or agenda and they alone are sobering up from the 'Chinese dream', they use the 'China card' within the EU and towards EU authorities to get what they want. Brussels, between V4 demands and China's rising assertiveness, is then in a difficult position.

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