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Perception of China among V4 Political Elites

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Summary

- For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, China has not been in the focus of the V4 countries. This began to change in light of the 2009 financial crisis. Further impetus for the V4 countries to engage with China came with the establishment of the China-CEEC Cooperation platform (i.e. 17+1) and Belt and Road Initiative.
- In Slovakia, China is only rarely a topic of domestic political discourse. Despite the overall Slovak policy towards China, as well as the general perception of China among most parties being pragmatist in nature, every time China became a major political issue was related to human rights problems in China, and what Slovakia's response to them should.
- There is a strong divide between the government and opposition parties in Slovakia. The government parties tend to see China in purely economic terms. On the opposition's side, most politicians also view China pragmatically and recognize the need to cooperate in many areas, they are also wary of security implications as well as China's human rights abuses. On the extreme parts of the political spectrum (both left and right), there is a sense of ideological support for China and its current political regime.
- The Czech parliamentary parties have displayed internally varying views on China till Beijing's engagement with the CEE region started in 2013. It was not until then, that the parties formed their more clear-cut positions alongside the pro- or anti-China divide. They did so not due to their ideology leaning, but based on their position as government or opposition parties; the government pursued the promised benefits of political and economic cooperation with China, while the opposition sought to criticize this endeavor as a mean of discrediting its political opponents.
- Due to the Czech Republic's tradition of value-oriented foreign policy and negative Czech experience with China's engagement so far, the overall Czech approach towards China is likely to remain critical, especially in comparison to other Central European states.



- The main division line in Hungary is not along leftism and rightism or other political values, but it runs between the governing and opposition parties.
- When it comes to economic considerations the division line between Fidesz and opposition parties is less well articulated, as all parties regard China as an important business partner. Opposition parties, however, call for more caution and transparency in bilateral economic relations and are concerned about the domestic and international political costs of the cooperation
- Polish government is balancing between eagerness to attract Chinese investment on the one hand, and the strategic friendship with the US on the other.
- Significant parts of Polish elites on both left and right have wanted Poland to become a leader of Chinese-born initiatives.



1 Introduction

Establishment of the China-CEEC Cooperation (also known as 17+1)¹ platform in 2012 and Belt and Road Initiative a year later in 2013 has resulted in a renewed interest in China within the political circles in the Visegrad region and elsewhere. This has sparked a continent-wide debate about China's inroads in the EU and the rest of Europe. Increasing Chinese involvement in Central and Eastern Europe has resulted in China's deploring for dividing Europe and fostering its trojan horses which can act as vehicles of Chinese influence in the EU.

Indeed, there were many cases when individual Visegrad countries acted in a manner that is consistent with Chinese interests, be it deliberately or due to a lack of understating of current China and its foreign policy. Notable cases included Slovak Prime Minister Pellegrini echoing Chinese narratives on the China-CEEC Cooperation or spreading of pro-Chinese messages on the 2019 Hong Kong protests by some parliamentarians. In the Czech Republic, President Zeman has been a steadfast proponent of the country's shift towards cooperation with China and labeling the relations as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier of Chinese investment expansion." Hungary has on occasion acted as a Chinese proxy in protecting Chinese interests in the South China Sea.

Such actions on part of V4 countries are certainly troubling. However, basing analyses of the region's involvement with China mostly on these cases, while treating the countries as unitary actors may lead to missing crucial points regarding the main actor's motivations and interests vis-à-vis China, as well as possibilities of political change.

This publication attempts to look within the "black box" of the V4 states and provide an overview of how different politicians and political parties perceive China. This will help to shed more light on what factors influence China-related policymaking in the V4 regions, and to help predict future policy change (or stagnation) based on shifts in popular support to individual parties.

¹ The two names are used interchangeably in this publication; an older designation "16+1" may be used on occasion when referring to the period prior to the inclusion of Greece in 2019.



To understand how political elites in the V4 perceive China as such as well as its different activities, the four think-tanks participating on this paper – Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), Association for International Affairs (AMO), Central and Eastern European Center of Asian Studies (CEECAS) and Center for International Relations (OSM) – conducted an in-depth qualitative study of what views politicians belonging to the main parties in each country hold about China as such, its position in the world, the state of human rights in the country as well as about the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-CEEC Cooperation platform (known as 17+1).

To get the richest data possible, we relied on several sources of data. The data collection strategies were adjusted to suit the situation in the individual target countries as the accessibility of the political representation varies across the countries and political parties significantly. Interestingly, in all the countries the representatives of the government parties tended to be less accessible and responsive compared to the members of opposition parties.

As for the particular data sources, we conducted interviews with political parties representatives and other stakeholders that can offer insight into the subject matter (e.g. journalists and diplomats), analyzed their media statements and parliamentary discourse, sent out questionnaires (in case of Czech Republic).

This broad scale of data sources allowed us to collect a wide range of information about how political parties in V4 perceive China. Based on this data we performed a qualitative content analysis with the aim to uncover if politicians tend to see China as a threat or opportunity and whether these views are of pragmatic or ideological origin.

The chapter on Slovakia maps the views of a wide range of parties including long-established and new parties, as well as mainstream and extremist. We analyzed the views of politicians from SMER-SD, Slovak National Party (SNS), Most-Híd, Za ľudí, Progressive Slovakia, SPOLU-Civic Democracy, Christian Democrats (KDH), and People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS).

As for the Czech Republic, the chapter focuses on the Civic Democrats (ODS), ANO 2011, Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), Communist Party



of Czechia and Moravia (KSČM), Pirate Party, TOP09, Christian Democratic Union – the Czechoslovak Popular Party and Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD).

In Hungary, we analyzed the perception of China of the politicians from Fidesz, Jobbik, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), the Democratic Coalition (DK) and Momentum.

Last but not least, the Poland chapter looks into the views of the Civic Platform, Law and Justice party (PiS), Polish People's Party (PSL), Democratic Left Alliance, Razem, and Confederation.

Of course, all four countries have more political parties and movements. The parties listed above were selected based on their presence in national or European institutions.



2 Slovakia: Adoration and ambivalence

China does not feature highly on the agenda of Slovak political representation. A past research of project ChinfluenCE has shown that among the 76 stakeholders who voiced their opinion on China at least three times in the January 2010 to June 2017 period, only 3 politicians appeared: former Prime Minister Robert Fico, Former President Andrej Kiska, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák.²

Nevertheless, throughout modern Slovak history, several occasions when China became a top issue for the local politicians emerged:

- Visit of Hu Jintao in 2009 which resulted in a violent clash between Chinese natives supportive of President Hu and Slovak human rights activists, after which several prominent opposition politicians were arrested;³
- Private meeting between Dalai Lama and President Andrej Kiska in 2016;⁴
- Official meeting between Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi and President Čaputová, during which she criticized the human rights abuses in China.⁵

As China is becoming an ever more active and powerful actor in global politics, Slovak stakeholders, including politicians, have started to pay more attention to it in the recent period. This can be evidenced by the fact that one of the newly established political parties SPOLU – Občianska demokracia has paid attention to China and its global position in its foreign

² Richard Q. Turcsányi and Matej Šimalčík, „Čína na Slovensku: Sme pripravení na budúcnosť?“ (Policy Paper 07, AMO, 2018). http://www.asian.sk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/AMO_cina-na-slovensku-sme-pripraveni-na-buducnost.pdf.

³ “Chinese President Hu Jintao visits Slovakia; his supporters clash with Slovak human right activists,” The Slovak Spectator, 2009-06-19. <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20033103/chinese-president-hu-jintao-visits-slovakia-his-supporters-clash-with-slovak-human-right-activists.html>

⁴ “Dalai Lama visits Slovakia, meets president, university students,” The Slovak Spectator, 2016-10-17. <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20358241/dalai-lama-visits-slovakia-meets-president-university-student.html>

⁵ “Caputova Conveys Concerns about Human Rights to China’s Wang Yi,” News Now, 2019-07-10. <https://newsnow.tasr.sk/foreign/caputova-conveys-concerns-about-human-rights-to-chinas-wang-yi/>



policy program and dedicated a specific chapter of the program to China.⁶ However, besides the SPOLU party, no other party makes specific comments about China in its policy documents. It has been also reflected in the election program of the party coalition of SPOLU with Progressive Slovakia, which proposes to audit the results of Slovakia's engagement with China in BRI and 17+1 and whether it is prudent to continue participating in the two initiatives.

Nevertheless, in terms of economic and political engagement, China remains a marginal partner of Slovakia. In export, despite being the largest market for Slovak products in East Asia, China ranks only at 14th place representing only 1.6% of Slovak exports.⁷ At the same time, Slovakia maintains a long term trade deficit with China which, as of 2017, was at 40% of the total trade between China and Slovakia.⁸

When it comes to investments, China is not a highly important partner for Slovakia. According to the data of the Slovak National Bank, a total stock of Chinese FDI has been continuously lower than the FDI stocks of Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan.⁹ Furthermore, Chinese investments in Slovakia only rarely were in the form of greenfield investments, with the majority of investments being acquisitions of existing companies.

In discussing the importance of China for Slovakia, this economic reality has been recognized especially by the opposition parties, which, overall, tend to have a more skeptical outlook of China.

On the other part of the spectrum, government parties Smer-SD and SNS tend to focus on the possibilities of future development of economic relations with China rather than the actual facts on the ground. It must be

⁶ Miroslav Beblavý, Vladimír Bilčík and Dalibor Roháč, "Úspešné Slovensko v neistom svete," (SPOLU – občianska demokracia). <https://stranaspolu.sk/admin/public/docs/uspesne.pdf>.

⁷ "COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE APPROACH TOWARDS CHINA: V4+ AND ONE BELT ONE ROAD," Prague Security Studies Institute. https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/COMPARATIVE_ANALYSIS_full_05.pdf

⁸ Klára Dubravčíková, Filip Šebok, Martin Šebeňa, Matej Šimalčík and Richard Q. Turcsányi, „Prospects for Developing the V4+China Cooperation Platform” (Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2019). https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/V4-China-cooperation_FINAL.pdf

⁹ However, it must be noted that valuation of FDI stock is notoriously imprecise and the numbers vary between different sources. This is true not only for the stock of Chinese FDI, but also the FDI of other countries.



noted that these parties' focus on future possibilities tends to lack critical evaluation of past developments.

2.1 No clear benefits in sight

Generally, China is not viewed as a threat. Such views are very rare. However, that does not mean that a significant portion of the political spectrum does not consider China to be a political and security risk, which should be managed within the bilateral relations.

Generally, we can identify two approaches among the mainstream political parties in Slovakia:

- a view which presents China as a unique economic opportunity from which Slovakia can benefit;
- a view which recognizes the position of China in the international political order, which warrants engaging China politically, while recognizing the accompanying risks to the domestic democratic governance that can arise out of deepening economic and political cooperation with China.

Based on several sources that were consulted in preparation of this paper, it is apparent that the first group is represented especially by the SMER-SD and SNS parties. Two aspects of their views clearly stand out. Firstly, these actors tend to downplay or even ignore security risks connected with Chinese activities and mutual relations. This can be illustrated by the statements of Deputy Prime Minister Richard Raši (SMER-SD) who in the interview with CCTV, a Chinese state television broadcaster, reduced the security risk of involving Chinese suppliers in the development of Slovak 5G networks to protection of privacy and personal data.¹⁰ It must be noted that such a reduction goes against the common EU risk evaluation that was made public only a mere 1 month prior to Raši's CCTV interview.¹¹

¹⁰ "Raši v Číne: Slovensko bude otvorené spolupráci na 5G," CyberSec, 2019-11-08.
<https://cybersec.sk/spravy/z-domova/rasi-v-cine-slovensko-bude-otvorene-spolupraci-na-5g/>

¹¹ "Member States publish a report on EU coordinated risk assessment of 5G networks security," European Commission, 2019-10-09.
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_6049



Moreover, the current government coalition (Smer-SD, SNS, and Most-Híd from 2016 to 2020) has passed a China-specific strategic document.¹² Its economic focus (while neglecting to mention political and security consideration) suggests a high level of pragmatism of these parties vis-à-vis China. According to the official document, Slovakia should focus on:

- attracting investments with high added value
- supporting Slovak business in accessing the Chinese market
- promoting tourism in Slovakia
- developing so-far neglected political relations¹³

However, the planning document is not being implemented due to the fact that an accompanying action plan to the strategy was not passed by the government on grounds of objections of the Foreign Affairs Ministry.¹⁴

On the other hand, in the current opposition, a more nuanced view of China tends to be present. This may be caused to a large extent that in several cases their foreign policy views are shaped by former think-tankers and diplomats. They tend to recognize the importance of China in global affairs and need to cooperate with it on issues like climate change. At the same time, most of those party members who are active in the foreign affairs discourse recognize that China also poses a challenge to the EU and the global West, while Chinese investments can bring about numerous security risks like intellectual property transfers, influence on politicians or even genuine threats to our democracy.

¹² Lucia Husenicová, Kristína Kironská, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík and Richard Q. Turcsányi, "Potenciál Novej hodvábnej cesty pre Slovensko" (Institute of Asian Studies, 2019). https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/20190102_BRI_PP_FINAL.pdf

¹³ "Comparative analysis of the approach towards China: V4+ and One Belt One Road," Prague Security Studies Institute. https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/COMPARATIVE_ANALYSIS_full_05.pdf

¹⁴ Lucia Husenicová, Kristína Kironská, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík and Richard Q. Turcsányi, "Potenciál Novej hodvábnej cesty pre Slovensko" (Institute of Asian Studies, 2019). https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/20190102_BRI_PP_FINAL.pdf



2.2 Human rights take precedence over economic issues?

Opposition politicians are quite vocal with their criticism of human rights abuses in China. As was already mentioned, when in 2009 Chinese President Hu Jintao met with Slovak President Ivan Gašparovič, a violent clash between human rights activists and Hu supporters occurred. Following the clash, 5 Slovaks and 4 Chinese were detained. The Slovak human rights activists included several future MPs like Ondrej Dostál (OKS/SaS) or Peter Osuský (SaS, formerly OKS).¹⁵

Moreover, Ondrej Dostál on several occasions campaigned against holding an exhibition of dead bodies in Slovakia. The reason for this was the uncertain origin of the exhibited corpses, which probably originated in China and could have belonged to political prisoners.¹⁶

Negative views of China were also articulated by Martin Poliačik, a liberal opposition politician (formerly SaS party, now Progressive Slovakia party). His negative views of China were pronounced in his comments on the state of human rights in Tibet. Similar views were expressed also by his former fellow party member Štefan Osuský.¹⁷

Overall, Slovak political discourse about human rights in China is largely focused on Tibet. In 2010, several lawmakers founded a Parliamentary Friend of Tibet Club. At the time of its founding, the club included mostly members of central-right parties (SDKU-DS, SMK, KDH) but one member was from the SNS party, which is nowadays known for its transactional China policy.¹⁸ The Club survived several election terms and its members are known for hanging the Tibetan flag in the Slovak parliament and calling on the Chinese government to enter into dialogue with the Tibetan

¹⁵ "Conflict over Hu's visit," The Slovak Spectator, 2009-06-29.
<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20033183/conflict-over-hus-visit.html>

¹⁶ "Aktivisti sa obávajú, že v Bratislave vystavujú telá čínskych disidentov," SME Domov, 2012-10-09. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/6561921/aktivisti-sa-obavaju-ze-v-bratislave-vystavuju-tela-cinskych-disidentov.html>; "Aktivisti vyzývajú štátne orgány, aby zasiahli proti výstave mŕtvych tiel", SME Domov, 2017-08-10. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20623527/aktivisti-vyzyvaju-statne-organy-aby-zasiahli-proti-vystave-mrtvych-tiel.html#ixzz5RIPJ8yFi>

¹⁷ "Slovenské médiá o Tibete šíria iba americkú propagandu, spustil Blaha. A takto to schytil od Chmelára a Poliačika," Parlamentné listy, 2017-05-19.
<https://www.parlamentnelisty.sk/arena/monitor/Slovenske-media-o-Tibete-siria-iba-americku-propagandu-spustil-Blaha-A-takto-to-schytil-od-Chmelara-a-Poliacika-288245>.

¹⁸ "Poslanci založili Skupinu priateľov Tibetu," SME Domov, 2010-03-09.
<https://domov.sme.sk/c/5277700/poslanci-zalozili-skupinu-priatelov-tibetu.html>



government in exile.¹⁹ In its later years, the club was composed of members from SaS, OKS, Most-Híd, and Progressive Slovakia parties.

Even those opposition MPs that are domestically less vocal on human rights issues in China recognize the need to constantly voice our concerns about them when engaging China. According to Martin Klus (SaS), we should raise these concerns especially through the EU as it has more leverage when it comes to dealing with China.²⁰

From the government, similar views can be found in the views of foreign-policy focused MPs of the Most-Híd party. To illustrate, Katarína Csefalvayová²¹ at one point said, in reaction to a China-paid trip of some MPs to Beijing and Tibet, that she sees no reason for MPs to travel to Tibet at China's invitation as there is a risk that they may be victims, or even tools, of Chinese propaganda.²²

The government parties SMER-SD and SNS hold different views of human rights in China compared to their coalition partner Most-Híd and the majority of opposition parties. The approach of SNS and SMER-SD is very pragmatist. In their views, human rights are not an issue that needs to be raised in relation to China. Their views are actually quite transactional in their nature, as they see human rights diplomacy as a factor that has a negative impact on the Slovak economic diplomacy in China.

Two notable cases show this predisposition: conflict of then PM Fico with then-President Kiska over Kiska's meeting with Dalai Lama and SNS's criticism of current President Čaputová over her criticism of human rights abuses in her meeting with Wang Yi, Foreign Minister of China.

As was already mentioned, the 2016 meeting between Andrej Kiska and Dalai Lama resulted in one of the few cases when China featured more

¹⁹ TASR, "Rozvinuli vlajku Tibetu" (SME Domov, 2014-03-11) p. 6.

²⁰ Matúš Dávid, "Martin Klus: Nebuďme pre Čínu pudlíkom, ktorý opakuje to, čo tvrdí propaganda" (týždeň, 2019-10-25). <https://www.tyzden.sk/rozhovory/59580/podpredseda-nr-sr-martin-klus-na-turkov-nemame-ziadne-paky-preto-nas-vydiraju-migrantmi/>

²¹ Katarína Csefalvayová was elected as MP for the Most-Híd party. Following the resignation of her party colleague František Sebej she was elected to become the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. In September 2019 she left the Most-Híd party and joined the nascent party Dobra volba. She remains the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

²² Matúš Dávid, "Šéfka Zahraničného výboru NR SR: Putinovo Rusko má na Slovensku spojencov aj vo vysokej politike" (týždeň, 2019-10-24). <https://www.tyzden.sk/rozhovory/59548/sefka-zahranicneho-vyboru-nr-sr-putinovo-rusko-ma-na-slovensku-spojencov-aj-vo-vysokej-politike/>



prominently on the domestic political agenda. According to Kiska, the meeting did not happen in his official capacity as President but as a private person. Due to this, the meeting did not occur in the Presidential Palace but in a restaurant selected specifically for this purpose. Nevertheless, the Chinese government issues a hard criticism of Kiska. The criticism did not end with the Chinese government though. One of the fiercest critics of Kiska was the PM Robert Fico, who saw this as an opportunity to attack Kiska. According to Fico, the meeting harmed Sino-Slovak relations and led to a loss of interest on part of a Chinese investor who contemplated investing in Slovakia. However, to this day no information on this supposed investment was given by Fico or his fellow party members.²³

In 2019, President Čaputová met with Wang Yi. During the meeting, she raised the issue of violations of human rights. “In this regard, she expressed, in line with the EU Common Position, concerns and fears regarding the deteriorating human rights situation in China and the detention of lawyers and human rights activists, as well as the status of ethnic and religious minorities,”²⁴ read the official statement of the Presidential Palace. “Human rights are absolute rights and cannot be relativized, so my attitude was the way I communicated it,” she added.²⁵ Čaputová’s views were echoed by the ombudswoman Maria Patakyova, a nominee of Most-Hid: “Not only as a public defender of rights but also as a person, I believe that human rights and freedoms take precedence over economic issues.”²⁶ Interestingly, no public retort on this came from the Chinese side,²⁷ which is in stark contrast with the previous activities of Andrej Kiska.

²³ “Už pociťujeme dôsledky stretnutia Kisku s dalajlamom,” tvrdí Fico. Veľký investor sa odmlčal,” Slovensko, 2016-10-23. <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/847702-uz-pocitujeme-dosledky-stretnutia-kisku-s-dalajlamom-tvrdi-fico-velky-investor-sa-odmlcal>

²⁴ “President Zuzana Čaputová received Mr Wang Yia, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China,” Zuzana Čaputová President of the Slovak Republic, 2019-07-10. <https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/cina/>

²⁵ “President: My Stance to China Unchangeable, but I Respect Danko’s Invitation,” News Now, 2019-08-13. <https://newsnow.tasr.sk/policy/president-my-stance-to-china-unchangeable-but-i-respect-dankos-invitation/>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “President Zuzana Caputova of Slovakia Meets with Wang Yi,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2019-07-10. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1680589.shtml



Čaputová's raising of human rights violations drew much domestic criticism from SNS and SMER-SD. According to Andrej Danko, raising human rights issues could endanger economic cooperation with China, especially pork exports, which were in the process of hygienic and veterinary certification at the time.²⁸ Čaputova was also harshly criticized by a SMER-SD parliamentarian Lubos Blaha. According to him, Čaputová's criticism damages Sino-Slovak relations and is an even bigger infraction than her predecessor's meeting with Dalai Lama, and that by raising the human rights issues she interfered in Chinese internal affairs. Moreover, according to Blaha, most EU countries try to foster good relations with China and avoid criticizing its human rights track record in order to improve trade relations.²⁹

Luboš Blaha is a specific case within the SMER-SD party, and his perception of China and human rights issues deserves further examination. Blaha is known for denying any reports of human rights abuses in China, labeling any kind of criticism as Western (especially U.S.) propaganda, and accusing those criticizing China for human rights breaches of harming Slovak national interests. With regard to Tibet, Blaha reproduces Chinese propaganda almost verbatim. According to him, Tibet used to be a feudal medieval tyranny of theocratic nationalist. It was China that brought Tibet development and modernization. He denies any accounts of the cultural genocide of the Tibetan peoples. On one occasion Blaha said: "Without China, [Tibetans] would return back to medieval times within 2 days. Chinese socialism has been a blessing for Tibet."³⁰ Blaha also expressed his views on Hong Kong protests against the extradition bill. He called the protests a color revolution sponsored by the USA.³¹

Views of China promoted engagement platforms – Belt and Road Initiative and 17+1 Platform – are similarly divided between the SMER-SD and SNS

²⁸ Martin Šebeňa, "Danko chce z našich daní dotovať bravčové mäso pre Číňanov" (týždeň, 2019-07-30). <https://www.tyzden.sk/svet/57356/danko-chce-z-nasich-dani-dotovat-bravcove-maso-pre-cinanova/>

²⁹ Matej Šimalčík, "Čínske omyly súdruha Blahu" (týždeň, 2019-07-18). <https://www.tyzden.sk/svet/57078/cinske-omyly-sudruha-blahu/>

³⁰ Luboš Blaha, 2019-08-22. <https://www.facebook.com/LBlaha/posts/2381077342130831>

³¹ Filip Šebok, "The curious case of the China-loving Slovak parliamentarian Luboš Blaha" (China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 2019-08-26). <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-curious-case-of-the-china-loving-slovak-parliamentarian-lubos-blaha/>



parties on the positive side and the Most-Híd and current opposition on the more critical side.

According to Dana Meager, an SNS-nominated Government Plenipotentiary for BRI negotiations and State Secretary of the Finance Ministry, the BRI offers Slovakia and Europe access to new markets via land, sea, and air transportation corridors.³² Moreover, in her view, Slovakia could become a gateway for China to Europe.³³

The “gateway to Europe” narrative is quite prevalent in the discussion of China, BRI and 17+1 cooperation by the SNS and SMER-SD politicians.

Moreover, during the annual 17+1 summits, Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini repeatedly noted the positive role of China in upholding open international trade regime, which he even juxtaposed with the current position of USA under Donald Trump. Furthermore, he remarked that Chinese activities in non-EU Balkan countries helps them in the integration process.³⁴

The previous Prime Minister Robert Fico also presented the BRI and 17+1 as important tools for Slovakia to develop economic relations with China.³⁵ However, a more thorough examination of his actions shows that he did not do much to promote mutual relations besides the rhetorical support of the relationship.³⁶

However, not all members of the government coalition view 17+1 and BRI in such positive light. To illustrate, Katarína Csefalvayova, who until recently was a member of Most-Híd and remains chairman of the Parliamentary

³² “Meager: Čína aj Európa si od Hodvábnej cesty sľubujú vstup na nové trhy,” Teraz.sk, 2018-11-22. <https://www.teraz.sk/ekonomika/meagercina-aj-europa-si-od-hodvabne/362814-clanok.html>

³³ “MF SR : Vyjadrenie Dany Meager – One Belt – One Road,” PRservis.sk, 2017-11-13. <https://www.prservis.sk/mf-sr-vyjadrenie-dany-meager-one-belt-one-road/>

³⁴ Klára Dubravčíková, Runya T. Qiaoan, Filip Šebok and Matej Šimalčík, “Chinese Media Watch: 16+1 & China-EU Summit” (Institute of Asian Studies, 2018-08-20). <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Media-Watch-16plus1.pdf>

³⁵ “Robert Fico: Čína je pre Slovensko strategickým partnerom,” Úrad vlády Slovenskej republik, 2017-11-27. <https://www.vlada.gov.sk//robert-fico-cina-je-pre-slovensko-strategickym-partnerom/>.

³⁶ Richard Q. Turscányi, “Fico pre rozvoj vzťahov s Čínou neurobil prakticky nič” (Denník, 2016-11-07). <https://dennikn.sk/602336/fico-pre-rozvoj-vztahov-s-cinou-neurobil-prakticky-nic/>



Foreign Affairs Committee, publicly decried the 17+1 platform as an attempt to divide the EU.³⁷

When it comes to the opposition parties, there is a general consensus about skepticism towards BRI and 17+1. The skepticism is usually pragmatical and focused on the general lack of any positive outcomes for Slovakia from the participation in the project. In few cases, the opposition to participation on the two projects is motivated ideologically and based solely on the fact that they are initiated by China, a country that in view of these lawmakers repeatedly violates the human rights of its citizens.

From among the opposition, the most attention to the two formats is paid by the coalition of Progressive Slovakia and SPOLU parties. As was already mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the two parties propose to audit Slovak engagement within BRI and 17+1. They want to consider both the economic prudence of the participation, as well as the geopolitical and security implications of the participation on the two platforms.³⁸

2.3 Pragmatism takes center stage

Looking at the statements by two consecutive prime ministers from the Smer – SD party, Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini, it is evident that they view China mostly in economic terms as an opportunity for attracting new investments. This pragmatism can at time conflict with the views of the more idealist politicians, as is evident from the previous section discussing human rights. A notable example is the conflict between Fico and Kiska over Dalai Lama's visit in 2016.

Interestingly, in pursuing a pragmatist economic policy towards China, a narrative convergence between Chinese and Slovak representatives has been occurring. After the 2018 Sofia Summit of the 16 + 1 platform, Prime

³⁷ Matúš Dávid, "Šéfka Zahraničného výboru NR SR: Putinovo Rusko má na Slovensku spojencov aj vo vysokej politike" (týždeň, 2019-10-24). <https://www.tyzden.sk/rozhovory/59548/sefka-zahranicneho-vyboru-nr-sr-putinovo-rusko-ma-na-slovensku-spojencov-aj-vo-vysokej-politike/>

³⁸ "Zahraničné veci," Progresívne Slovensko. <https://progresivnespolu.sk/bod-zlomu/zahranicne-veci>



Minster Pellegrini has been basically echoing Chinese position in the benefits of the platform and its relations to the broader EU-China relation.³⁹

Yet, not all members of the above-mentioned parties subscribe to such a pragmatist view. A notable example is the Member of Parliament for the Smer-SD party, Ľuboš Blaha. A self-described Marxist, Blaha often promotes views that are opposing the USA, globalization, liberalism, and defending Marxism, and communist rule in Czechoslovakia before 1989. Only recently, Blaha went to China to present his book 'An Antiglobalist' - the irony being that today's China is a staunch supporter of globalization, hence, Blaha was going against the Chinese official line.

A similar case can be made also about Milan Uhrík, a member of parliament for the neo-Nazi party Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia. In 2016, Uhrík visited China at the invitation of Henan provincial government. In his Facebook posts from the visit, Uhrík praised Chinese state-owned enterprises and their efficiency, which in Uhrík's words protects China from foreign colonizing and Chinese people from capitalistic pillage, despite the fact that the inefficiency of these enterprises has been repeatedly mentioned by the official state-owned media in China. Moreover, Uhrík praised the communist government of China, while at the same time denouncing the EU. Similarly to Blaha, Uhrík also made paradoxical statements in his praise of China. According to him, there is virtually no corruption in the country, which runs contrary to the notoriously known anti-corruption campaign of Xi Jinping that calls for a stricter investigation of corruption within the Communist Party of China and state administration.⁴⁰

However, views of adoration akin to those of Blaha and Uhrík are not at all common among Slovak politicians. This is evident from the fact that there are many (especially opposition) politicians with quite anti-Chinese views determined by their support for human rights and democracy, which in turn shapes their support of Taiwan.

³⁹ Klára Dubravčíková, Runya T. Qiaoan, Filip Šebok and Matej Šimalčík, "Chinese Media Watch: 16+1 & EU-China Summit" (Institute of Asian Studies, 2018-08-20). <http://www.asian.sk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Media-Watch-16plus1.pdf>

⁴⁰ Milan Uhrík's, 2016-07-13. https://www.facebook.com/pg/ing.milan.uhrik/photos/?tab=album&album_id=292385864447866.



An allegoric, albeit telling example of the ideologically determined negative views of China occurred when interviewing one of the SaS lawmakers. When asked about the benefits (if any) of Slovakia's participation in the 17+1 Cooperation Mechanism, this lawmaker did not know what is the nature of the mechanism or even who are the members of the platform. After explaining the nature of the platform, the interviewed legislator outright rejected that it could (even potentially) bring any benefits to the country solely on the account that the platform was initiated by China.

Nevertheless, even in the democratic opposition pragmatism prevails. While it is not a cause for such outright Sino-optimism as in the case of the government parties, many opposition MPs, even the staunchest of critics, recognize the need to cooperate with China on global issues like climate change and see an economic potential in developing relations with China, which failed to materialize so far due to flawed policies on both Slovak and Chinese side.



3 Czechia: Between Economic Opportunity and Identity Threat

The Czech perception of China among political parties has been overly negative since 1989.⁴¹ Czech foreign policy, influenced by Václav Havel's ideals and his friendship with Dalai Lama⁴², embraced the legacy of struggles against communism and created a sense of moral obligation to support the fight for freedom of those still living under communist rule. China fitted the narrative perfectly as a distant antagonist.

During the 1990s, almost all mentions of China on the parliamentary floor were brief and linked to negative references of communism, authoritarianism and human rights abuse.⁴³ It wasn't until 1998, when the image of China in the Czech politics began to change, as parliamentarians noticed China's fast-paced economic development. The narrative of China as a potential economic partner could be seen across the political spectrum and strengthened even more after the 2008 global financial crisis.

First herald of an upcoming political change emerged in September 2012, when a then-Prime Minister Petr Nečas from the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (Občanská Demokratická Strana, ODS) delivered a speech, where he pejoratively labeled the Czech value-oriented foreign policy as "*dalailamism*".⁴⁴ Nečas claimed that Czech export suffered losses in China due to unnecessarily negative, human rights-oriented policy. Nečas's speech came seemingly out of the blue. Only later it turned out that it was delivered right after Nečas's meeting with Wen Jiabao in Warsaw, which marked the inception of the 17+1 initiative.⁴⁵ The Czech political scene was

⁴¹ Ivana Karásková, Alžběta Bajerová and Tamás Matura, "Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments" (Policy Paper 02/2019, AMO, 2019)

⁴² Ondřej Ditrych, Vladimír Handl, Nik Hynek and Vít Střítecký, "Understanding Havel?," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, No. 3 (2013): 407-417

⁴³ In fact, China itself was nearly never a full-fledged topic of informed discussion in the Czech Parliament until 2014.

⁴⁴ "Nečas: podpora dalailamismu škodí českému exportu," ČT24, 2012-09-09. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/1147149-necas-podpora-dalajlamismu-skodi-ceskemu-exportu>.

⁴⁵ "Čína stojí o česká auta nebo motory," Website of the Government of the Czech Republic, 2012-04-26. <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/cina-stoji-o-ceska-auta-nebo-motory-95087/>.



divided by Nečas' remarks⁴⁶, but the division did not fall across the party lines. Both critical and supportive voices emerged within the same political parties, showing that no clear or refined party policies on China were in place.

The nature of changes in Czech foreign policy was further shaped by a vocal position of the newly elected President Miloš Zeman, who announced a “restart” of Czech-China relations and often praised a “traditional partnership” of the two countries.⁴⁷ A temporary non-partisan government of Jiří Rusnok in 2013 endorsed the “restart”⁴⁸ and a year later the newly elected government of Bohuslav Sobotka of the Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD) supported the foreign policy shift, too. The highpoint of the new relations was the Xi Jinping's visit to the Czech Republic in 2016, considered a major diplomatic success by the Social democrats.⁴⁹ Consequently, China became a topic of its own right in the Czech parliament – for the first time since 1993.⁵⁰ Strangely, however, the China-led initiatives, such as 17+1 or the Belt and Road, were not part of the discussion. Instead, the debate revolved around Czech domestic issues, such as economy and recent changes in Czech foreign policy.⁵¹

The parliamentary debate was positive at first, reflecting the government's expectations of opportunities coming out of the restart. However, the newfound proximity to Beijing increasingly attracted criticism from opposition and media, which accused the government of being too servile.

⁴⁶ Josef Kopecký and Jan Wirnitzer, “Schwarzenberg vyčítá Nečasovi úlet. Politici se přou o „dalajlamismus“ (iDNES.cz, 2013-09-11). https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/top-09-stoji-za-schwarzenbergovou-kritikou-necase.A120911_120033_domaci_kop.

⁴⁷ “Dohody s čínskými firmami podepsaly PPF i Kiwi. Český vývoz do Číny vzrostl za poslední rok o 20 procent, připomněl na zahájení podnikatelského fóra Zeman,” iHNed.cz, 2018-11-06. <https://zahranicni.ihned.cz/c1-66328380-zeman-v-sanghaji-zahajil-cesko-cinske-podnikatelske-forum-dohody-podepsaly-ppf-i-kiwi-podle-ministryne-prumyslu-novakove-mohou-cesi-vyvazet-do-ciny-i>.

⁴⁸ “Premiér: Věřím v dlouhodobé strategické partnerství mezi Čínou a Evropou,” Website of the Government of the Czech Republic, 2013-11-13. <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/projevy/premier-osobne-verim-v-dlouhodobem-strategicke-partnerstvi-mezi-cinou-a-evropou-113340/>.

⁴⁹ “Hrad sčítá čínské stamiliardy, mnohé obchody jsou ale jen v počáteční fázi,” iHNed.cz, 2016-03-30. <https://byznys.ihned.cz/c1-65226560-ceska-a-cinska-strana-podepisi-na-30-obchodnich-dohod-zeman-zminil-kanal-dunaj-odra-labe>.

⁵⁰ Ivana Karásková, Alžběta Bajarová and Tamás Matura, “Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments” (AMO Policy Paper 02/2019, AMO, 2019)

⁵¹ Ibid.



In 2017, Chinese company CEFC, the main Chinese investor in the Czech Republic, turned out to be based on a Ponzi scheme⁵² and had to be bailed out by the state-owned CITIC⁵³. Moreover, the Czech security agencies became increasingly more vocal on the issue of Chinese intelligence operations in the Czech Republic⁵⁴ and media pointed out the failed promises of green-field investments from China.⁵⁵ By the end of 2018, the criticism of the ČSSD's restart of the Czech-China relations completely overshadowed any positive pro-China notions and the Czech Republic figuratively returned to the post-1989 position on China, perceiving it as a Communist state with a potentially dangerous motivations.

3.1 Czech Parliament's China approach from 2018 onwards

The current government, formed by ANO and Social Democrats (with a silent support of Czech Communists), formulated its approach to China in reaction to the unfulfilled economic promises and growing security concerns surrounding new technologies from China. These factors are complemented by the historically negative view of China in Czechia. Czech political parties are therefore more critical to China, especially in comparison to their counterparts in the Hungarian parliament.⁵⁶ But yet again, China is not a priority of the current government or any particular political party. China is simply no longer perceived as an immediate economic partner, while it is also not viewed (perhaps yet) as an imminent threat.

⁵² Andrew Chubb, "Caixin's investigation of CEFC and Chairman Ye Jianming," 2018-03-29. <https://southseaconversations.wordpress.com/2018/03/29/caixins-investigation-of-cefc-and-chairman-ye-jianming/>.

⁵³ Ivana Karásková, "Vytváření pročínské agendy v Česku: Aktéři, jejich role a vazby" (AMO Policy Paper 09/2018, AMO, 2018). https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/AMO_Vytvářen%C3%AD-proč%C3%ADnské-agendy-v-Česku-aktéři-jejich-role-a-vazby-.pdf.

⁵⁴ "Zpráva BIS přehledně: ruská a čínská špionáž skrytá za diplomatickými pasy, kyberútoky i syrští bojovníci," iRozhlas.cz, 2018-12-03. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/zprava-bis-kontrarozvedka-ruska-spionaz-cinska-spionaz-kyberutoky-dezinformacni_1812031437_dbr.

⁵⁵ "Skvrna na spolupráci.' Zeman zkritizoval nízké čínské investice v Česku," iRozhlas.cz, 2019-04-23. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/milos-zeman-cinske-investice-cina-cctv_1904231416_haf.

⁵⁶ Ivana Karásková, Alžběta Bajerová and Tamás Matura, "Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments" (AMO Policy Paper 02/2019, AMO, 2019)



To illustrate the views and positions of members of the Czech parliament, the authors distributed anonymous online questionnaires to both members of the Chamber of Deputies (CoD) and the Senate. The return rate was low (about 10%),⁵⁷ so the results of the survey cannot be treated as representing the majority of views.⁵⁸ However, they interestingly corroborate authors' observation that the issue of China, though hyped in media, academic circles and among security and China practitioners, is not still considered crucial by the Czech politicians. Only a minority of those who responded to the questionnaire claimed that they have taken interest in the issue or plan to focus on China in a foreseeable future. Also, the questionnaire was mostly answered by the members of the opposition parties which underlies the authors' previous findings that the issue of China has entered and started being (ab)used in domestic politics.⁵⁹

While the questionnaire cannot be treated as disclosing a statistically representative data, some findings seem worth mentioning. Despite the political party membership, China seems to be perceived among important actors in the international arena. At the same time, however, China and the Czech Republic are perceived as not having joint interests to promote. It could be deduced that consideration of China being an important partner thus largely stems from China's economic power, rather than a convergence of interests. It also seems that China (at least by the respondents of the survey) is perceived as a threat, mostly in security realms. Research and development, innovation, tourism, and industry were listed among the most promising areas for potential cooperation. It could be concluded, that the

⁵⁷ From among 30 returned questionnaires, 17 were filled by Members of the Parliament, the remaining 13 by Senators.

⁵⁸ In fact the uneven distribution of members from the political parties in the Chamber of Deputies who decided to enter into the survey deserves a separate note. Majority of those who decided to respond belongs to the opposition parties: only 3 members of government parties responded to the survey (3 MPs from ANO 2011, 0 MPs from Czech Social Democratic Party). Thus the MPs from the opposition parties formed a majority of respondents (in detail: 1 MP from Christian Democratic Union - Czechoslovak Popular Party, KDU-ČSL; 6 MPs from the Pirate Party; 2 MPs from the Freedom and Direct Democracy, SPD; 2 MPs from Civic Democratic Party, ODS; and 3 independent MPs).

⁵⁹ Ivana Karásková, Alžběta Bajerová and Tamás Matura, "Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments" (AMO Policy Paper 02/2019, AMO, 2019); Ivana Karásková, Tamás Matura, Richard Q. Turscányi and Matej Šimalčík, "Central Europe for Sale: The Politics of China's Influence" (AMO Policy Paper 03/2018, AMO, 2018)



Czech Republic should be more active in searching for business opportunities in and with China.

3.2 China fatigue among Czech politicians

Two parties stand out in their critical position on China - TOP 09 and the Pirate party (both parties are currently in opposition). While none of the parties take primary interest in China, both consider China as a security as well as ideological or identity threat to the Czech Republic. *"China is foremost a security threat,"* claims Helena Langšádlová (TOP 09), who was interviewed for the chapter, and continues: *"It represents a hybrid threat, a country with rising economic influence, especially in strategic sectors."* Every year, members of TOP 09 hang Tibetan flag out of the parliament's windows to express their solidarity with Tibetans. They also often bring up the topic of human rights abuses in China on the parliamentary floor. But the former third strongest party lost its significance in the past years and currently holds only seven seats out of 200 in the Chamber of Deputies, facing a tough fight in the upcoming 2021 elections to get over the threshold of 5%.⁶⁰

The Pirate Party, the third strongest player in the Czech political arena, does not view China as a major issue. However, some of its members have recently taken a hardline value-oriented position towards China. The Mayor of Prague Zdeněk Hřib is currently the most visible face of the party on China issues. In 2019 Hřib became the center of controversy when he suggested excluding an article acknowledging the One China Policy from the twinning agreement between Beijing and Prague⁶¹, prompting Beijing to retaliate by calling off numerous Czech cultural activities in China. Besides the article, Hřib hosted the head of Tibet's government-in-exile Lobsang

⁶⁰ "Volební model potvrzuje úpadek levice, na historickém minimu je i TOP 09," aktualne.cz, 2018-10-26. <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/hnuti-ano-by-nyni-ziskalo-ve-snemovne-83-kresel-top-09-by-se/r~8d501790d8f811e890ecac1f6b220ee8/>.

⁶¹ Alžběta Bajerová, "Inside of China's Current Hassle with the 'Rogue' Mayor of Prague" (China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 2019-08-01. <https://chinaobservers.eu/inside-of-chinas-current-hassle-with-the-rogue-mayor-of-prague/>).



Sangay,⁶² hung a Tibetan flag over Prague's City Hall,⁶³ and made an official visit to Taipei, where he criticized China for harvesting organs from political prisoners and Falun Gong practitioners.⁶⁴ All of this led to China openly asking Hřib to "stop damaging Czech-Chinese relations."⁶⁵ Hřib, however, enjoyed the support of his party, which suggests that Pirates might be bringing back the value-based critical approach towards China, although they have not (yet) expressed coordinated policy in this regard.

The already-mentioned Civic Democrats (ODS) appear incoherent in their stance on China. Some ODS members criticize the last government's friendly approach and recognize China as a security threat – even to the Czech economy. "*China has a giant economy that threatens the European economy. All countries are competing to correct their trade balance with China and strengthen their export to the country, but they are not succeeding,*" deems Miroslava Němcová (ODS). The party profiles itself as conservative and pragmatic, which apparently leads to two opposite approaches. While Němcová expressed security-based concerns, other party members recognize the possible benefits of economic relations with China. After all, it was former Prime Minister Miroslav Nečas (ODS), who first promoted closer ties with China in 2012.

As mentioned above, Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) used to be the most enthusiastic supporters of the Czech-China restart involved in the foreign policy shift in 2013. Interestingly, the Social Democrats did not express any particularly pro-Chinese views before the announcement of the restart. It was only after China started engaging with the CEE region in 2013 when the party's discourse stressed the importance of the Czech-China "traditional

⁶² "Vedení města přijme předsedu tibetské exilové vlády," Website of the Prague City Hall, 2019-03-01.

http://www.praha.eu/jnp/cz/o_meste/magistrat/tiskovy_servis/tiskove_zpravy/vedeni_mesta_prijme_predsedu_tibetske.html.

⁶³ "Praha po letech vyvěsí tibetskou vlajku. Primátor Hřib se sejde s předsedou exilové vlády," iRozhlas.cz, 2019-02-28. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/tibetska-vlajka-tibet-cina-praha-primator-zdenek-hrib-lozang-sanggja_1902281520_ako.

⁶⁴ "Očima Jakuba Michálka: Na Tchaj-wanu jsme řešili lidská práva, turismus i leteckou linku," Pirátské listy, 2019-04-30. <https://www.piratskelisty.cz/clanek-2353-ocima-jakuba-michalka-na-tchaj-wanu-jsme-resili-lidska-prava-turismus-i-leteckou-linku>.

⁶⁵ "Poškozujete vztahy mezi Českem a Čínou, vzkázal Peking primátorovi Prahy," iDnes.cz, 2019-07-18. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/cesko-cina-poskozovani-vztahu-pekings-primator-praha-zdenek-hrib.A190718_083654_zahranicni_baje.



partnership.” When ČSSD’s efforts to attract Chinese investment failed and grave security concerns emerged, pro-Chinese comments disappeared from the party discourse. After the grim 2018 parliamentary election, when ČSSD became a minority partner in the government, ČSSD got the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which prevented China from falling off the party agenda completely. Interestingly, Tomáš Petříček, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, approaches China rather differently than his predecessors. When Petříček was faced with the conflict surrounding Prague’s Mayor Zdeněk Hřib, he approached Beijing with assertiveness and realism in his expectations. Petříček also brought back the tradition of human rights agenda to Czech foreign policy and he publicly stated his willingness to discuss this topic with his Chinese counterparts. Lubomír Zaorálek (ČSSD), a newly appointed Minister of Culture, follows a similar approach. Zaorálek held the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Sobotka’s government and was one of the main propellers of the pro-China U-turn. Back then, Zaorálek signed “the Declaration of Four” - a letter of four constitutionally highest policymakers in the Czech Republic - reassuring Beijing of their respect of the One China Policy, after another member of the government met with the Dalai Lama.⁶⁶ Three years later, Zaorálek reportedly left a meeting with the Chinese ambassador due to the ambassador’s “incompetence and lack of constructive approach”.⁶⁷ The change in ČSSD’s China approach signals that the pro-China stance in 2014-2018 was not an ideological, but pragmatic decision. It also showcases that following pro-China stance is not considered pragmatic in the Czech Republic anymore.

The members of the Communist party of Czechia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM) remain the most reliable supporters of China within the Czech parliament. While China is sporadically criticized by the Czech Communists, the critique is never linked to ideology or human rights, but to ‘softer’ issues such as listing the country among the world’s biggest polluters.

⁶⁶ “Prohlášení o Číně, které nadzvedlo půl republiky, připravil Zaorálek,” novinky.cz, 2016-10-19. <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/prohlaseni-o-cine-ktere-nadzvedlo-pul-republiky-pripravil-zaoralek-40012082>.

⁶⁷ “To se nedalo poslouchat. Zaorálek odešel ze schůzky s čínským velvyslancem,” novinky.cz, 2019-09-12. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/zaoralek-cinsky-velvyslanec-schuzka-kritika.A190912_133156_domaci_zaz.



The ANO 2011 movement, currently the leading Czech political party, is relatively new to the Czech political scene, thus it does not allow for assessment of its long term position on China. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš - whose foreign policy posture greatly influences the party's position - appears to be skeptical in his expectations from Beijing. He rarely criticizes China, despite his blunt remarks regarding the persona and attitude of the Chinese ambassador in Prague.⁶⁸ On the other hand, Babiš frequently complains about the trade imbalance between the Czech Republic and China and low levels of Chinese investments. He has never publicly labeled China as a threat, but neither as an opportunity, and he reportedly draws his skepticism from his own personal negative business experience in China. Overall, Babiš does not focus on foreign policy in general, especially on China, and leaves the issue to ČSSD, the minority partner in his government.

Though the chapter deals with political parties' stances on China, the overview would not be complete without mentioning the Czech President Miloš Zeman. Since ascending to the office in 2013, Zeman has visited China five times. Each time he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and during his penultimate visit he even gushed over "feeling like a friend" when in China.⁶⁹ Even Zeman, however, appears to be more critical lately. After the CEFC fiasco, the Czech Republic has witnessed no investments or other forms of engagement from the Chinese counterparts. Beijing also did not include the Czech Republic into the Belt and Road Initiative, despite Zeman's numerous attempts⁷⁰ and did not lease panda to Prague. Zeman acknowledged the absence of any big Chinese investors in the Czech Republic during his last visit to China in April 2019, dubbing it a "stain on the Czech-China relationship".⁷¹

⁶⁸ "Čínské investice v Česku zatím nejsou zcela uspokojivé, míní Babiš," ČT24, 2019-04-11. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/ekonomika/2785415-cinske-investice-v-cesku-zatim-nejsou-zcela-uspokojive-mini-babis>.

⁶⁹ "Dvaasedmdesát hodin prezidentovi v patách. V Číně je Zeman mezi svými," iDnes.cz, 2018-11-08. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/zeman-navsteva-cina-veletrh-sanghaj-prezident-si-tin-pching.A181107_201940_zahranicni_pmk.

⁷⁰ "Zeman přiletěl do Číny kvůli Hedvábné stezce. Sám překonal obtíže na schodech," Blesk, 2017-05-12. <https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-politika/468635/zeman-priletel-do-ciny-kvuli-hedvabne-stezce-sam-prekonal-obtize-na-schodech.html>.

⁷¹ "Skvrna na spolupráci.' Zeman zkritizoval nízké čínské investice v Česku," iRozhlas.cz, 2019-04-23. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/milos-zeman-cinske-investice-cina-cctv_1904231416_haf.



3.3 Pragmatism towards China prevails

On the first sight, the Czech China-related discourse among politicians might seem ideologically underpinned: the left-wing ČSSD was responsible for the pro-Chinese foreign policy shift to China, while the right-wing TOP 09 and ODS stood opposite to the initiative. When judging the parliamentary discussions over a longer period of time, however, it becomes clear that all Czech parliamentary parties have displayed internally varying views on China till Beijing's engagement with the CEE region started in 2013. It was not until then, that the parties formed their clear-cut positions alongside the pro- or anti-China divide. Hence, this paper argues that they did so not due to their ideology leaning but based on their position as government or opposition parties; the government pursued the promised benefits of political and economic cooperation with China, while the opposition sought to criticize this endeavor as a mean of discrediting its political opponents.

Indeed, in 2014-2018 Beijing provided the ruling parties with the promise of market access. The government presented these opportunities as its own achievements and bashed the opposition for not restarting relations with China earlier. At the same time, the opposition used the government's newfound pro-China discourse as ammunition for criticism. At first, the criticism was based primarily on China's human rights record and narrative of an alleged 'betrayal of values for Chinese money'. Over time, the lack of China's investment, CEFC fiasco, and the worsening security concerns over China's influence propped the opposition's argument with tangible facts. The sum of unfulfilled expectations, Chinese mismanagement, and historical mistrust towards China all discredited the pro-China narratives. China's main proponents on the parliamentary floor – ČSSD – therefore ceased the support. In sum, China was instrumentalized by the Czech political parties to serve their domestic political interests. When the tool stopped being effective, the former pro-China politicians abandoned the stance.

Czech political parties' approach towards China has come through turmoil in the past years. The process led to a realization that the China issue is a complex, long-term problem. It also initiated a conversation about the price of state sovereignty face-to-face global superpower. China is no longer a mere epitome of a distant human rights violator, neither an abstract golden



mine that could single-handedly jumpstart the Czech economy. “*We are open towards China, but also realistic,*” reads the MFA statement from August, summing up the post-2018 Czech attitude towards China. At the same time, the topic is not too widely discussed, as China is not of utmost importance to the government or any of the political parties, which so far have not developed a united China-approach in response to the past experience. The Czech political attitude towards China therefore still remains a set of individual politician’s preferences and perceptions. Due to the Czech Republic’s tradition of value-oriented foreign policy and negative Czech experience with China’s engagement so far, the overall Czech approach towards China is likely to remain more critical, especially in comparison to other Central European states.



4 Hungary: Sharing common values?

The Hungarian government has been enthusiastically developing Sino-Hungarian relations since 2010, not only following the footsteps of the previous socialist government but elevating political relations to a higher level. The Eastern Opening Policy of the Hungarian government aims at finding new export opportunities in non-EU countries in general and in China in particular.

Budapest has been eager to invite Chinese investors to the country and to forge as good political relations with Beijing as possible. Hungary has achieved some positive results in this regard, as trade with China has been growing rapidly, the stock of Chinese FDI is the highest in the region, more and more Chinese tourists arrive in the country and direct flights have been established between Budapest and various Chinese cities, etc.

Still, it is hard to decide whether the cup is half full or half empty. Critics point at the fact that bilateral trade is mostly conducted by multi-national companies, and the rise of Hungarian exports is mostly due to foreign companies, while the share of indigenous Hungarian products is minimal. The stock of Chinese capital is high compared to other CEE nations, but still insignificant compared to German, French or US investment, and its inflow has been minimal in the last 7-8 years. As a matter of fact, China ranks only 14th (with a share of 1.91%) on the list of most important export partners of Hungary, and it is the fourth most important source of imports (5.43%).

When it comes to investment data, the picture is ambiguous, as official data and governmental communications about the actual stock of Chinese capital in Hungary are in sharp contrast. According to the Hungarian Central Bank, China has invested EUR 1.6 billion so far, which represents a mere 2.13% of the total stock of FDI in Hungary, whereas Germany alone is responsible for 25.36% and the US for 14.52%. Meanwhile, according to the public statements of the Hungarian and the Chinese government, China has invested EUR 4.3 billion (5.51%) so far. The difference may come from different definitions of what FDI is. The Central Bank nevertheless follows international statistical standards (BPM6) in its data releases.

To sum it up, according to the relevant data China is a moderately important trade partner of Hungary, while it plays a minor role as an investor. Still,



political relations have never been stronger between Budapest and Beijing, which poses the question of how political parties perceive the actual importance of bilateral relations.

The main dividing line is between the governing party and the opposition, rather than between right-wing and left-wing or liberal/progressive parties. The ruling party, Fidesz, sees China as an important power of the World and highly regards bilateral relations between Hungary and China. Meanwhile, opposition parties are less optimistic about the global role of Beijing and see China as a less important partner.

Of course, there are slight differences between the approaches of opposition parties as well. The Socialist Party is mostly positive about the rising global role of China, right-wing conservative (formerly extremist) Jobbik is neutral, while the left-liberal Democratic Coalition is slightly negative about the issue. The progressive-liberal Momentum seems to be the most suspicious one about the international role of Beijing.

Likewise, all opposition parties see Beijing as a partner of secondary importance, though each party has mentioned the potential of economic cooperation with China. None of the opposition parties see any political values shared by Hungary and China at the same time, while Fidesz emphasized that the principle of sovereignty is important both to Budapest and Beijing.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán pointed it in his speech at the China-CEE Political Parties Dialogue in late 2016: *“We hold that each house has its own customs. We believe that each nation has its own character and that this is embodied in specific and unique political systems. And this is something which should be respected. Therefore we, for our part, also look upon the Chinese political system in this spirit. The Chinese political system is a matter for the Chinese people, just as the Hungarian political system is a matter for the Hungarian people. No one has the right to interfere with this by adopting the role of a kind of self-appointed judge.”*⁷²

⁷² “Viktor Orbán’s speech at the conference ‘China-CEE Political Parties Dialogue,’” The Prime Minister’s Office, 2016-10-08. <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-conference-china-cee-political-parties-dialogue>



Nowadays Fidesz describes itself as a conservative right-wing party and emphasizes the importance of Christian values. The world-view of the party, however, has gone through tremendous changes in the past three decades, as it was founded by liberal, strictly secular party in the late 1980's, later it turned toward the centrum of the political spectrum and proclaimed itself as the party of the middle-class in the late 1990s, and moved to the right in the late 2000s, and it eventually turned itself into populist right-wing party with mixed economic policies and strong connections to the Church. The tone of speeches by MPs of Fidesz has followed the same course of change, as the party was a vocal supporter of human rights and a critic of China for decades only to make a major turn following its election victory in 2010. Fidesz has stopped criticizing China, moreover, it established party-to-party relations to the Communist Party of China⁷³ and pursues strong political and economic ties with Beijing, often against the will and goals of the European Union or its major member states.⁷⁴

Jobbik was born as a radical right-wing party, its initial political agenda presented Roma minority groups and to a lesser extent Jews as the source of the problems in the country. The party swiftly become the most important opposition party in the country, but it had reached the limits of domestic support for extremism, thus it has started to move toward the center of the political spectrum. The reshuffling of the party's agenda caused serious internal struggles among members, and Fidesz took over some elements of Jobbik's radical political messages, which has eventually led to a major setback in Jobbik's popularity. The party's approach toward China has been mixed and somewhat ambiguous, as the speeches of its MP's presented both serious criticism of Beijing and positive remarks as well, what was probably a sign of division within the party itself. Jobbik supports NATO and EU membership, but it also thinks that European integration needs serious reforms. At the same time, it believes that Hungary has to pay attention to

⁷³ "Kommunista pártkapcsolatokat épít Orbán Kínában (Orbán building communist party relations)," Népszabadság Online, 2009-12-02.
http://nol.hu/kulfold/kommunista_partkapcsolatokat_epit_orban_kinaban-453181

⁷⁴ e.g. in 2016 Hungary fought hard to avoid a direct reference to Beijing in an EU statement about a PCA ruling on the South China Sea; in 2017, Hungary refused to sign a joint letter denouncing the reported torture of detained lawyers in China; in 2018 the Hungarian was the only EU ambassador in Beijing to refuse to sign a joint letter criticising the BRI.



the interests of Russia, Germany, and Turkey, which is similar to the foreign policy strategy of Fidesz.

The Socialist Party (MSZP) used to be one of the strongest parties of the country between 1994 and 2010, governed Hungary for three terms, but lost its significance following its major defeat in 2010. MSZP has always been the most neutral in China since 1990.⁷⁵ As a leftist party, it cannot allow itself either to criticize China or to admire it too much being a formerly communist party itself. It was the socialist government led by PM Péter Medgyessy (2002-2004) and successive socialist cabinets (2004-2010), that started a rapprochement with Beijing after 2003, as the leadership of the party realized the economic importance of China following Hungary's EU accession. Today the party tries to get rid of its left-liberal past to re-establish itself as a purely left-wing socialist and patriotic movement. They believe that the Euro-Atlantic alliance must be saved, and further deepening integration of the EU is a priority to Hungary.

The Democratic Coalition (DK) was founded by former socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány, who broke ties with the Socialist Party in 2011. The party identifies itself as a left-liberal political movement, supports the deepening of EU integration and NATO membership. DK believes that Russia and the deterioration of Western-style political values in Hungary pose a major threat to the country.

Momentum was established in 2017 after its successful petition against Budapest's bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics. The party identifies itself as a progressive liberal party in the center of the political spectrum, supports the free market and the European Union, socially sensitive and tries to overcome left-right divisions. Momentum believes that Hungary must be part of the core of the EU, the Euro should be adopted, the Balkan should be stabilized, they are suspicious about Russia and consider hybrid warfare as a threat.

⁷⁵ Ivana Karásková, Alžběta Bajerová and Tamás Matura, "Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments" (AMO Policy Paper 02/2019, AMO, 2019);



4.1 Economic benefits trump security considerations

All mainstream Hungarian parties agree that cooperation with China offers ample economic opportunities, and it is in the interest of Hungary to develop business ties with Beijing.

Fidesz is the only party, however, to regard political cooperation as an important factor, while other parties rather see the political dimension as a source of risks. Jobbik believes that economic cooperation with Beijing always comes with a price, therefore Hungary should develop its relations with China with wariness.

Furthermore, Jobbik is aware of the security implications of the rise of China. As one of their MPs stated in the Hungarian Parliament back 2011: *“The first aircraft carrier of China will be deployed soon, and it will be followed by many more carriers. Meanwhile, Chinese generals have made comments about how they would protect Chinese citizens all around the world with the help of their aircraft carriers. The Chinese action radius is growing, and it has an impact on NATO.”*⁷⁶

The Socialist Party thinks that China and Hungary share some common interests in fighting climate change, and together with the Democratic Coalition, it sees opportunities in cultural cooperation as well. As one of the MPs of the Socialist Party said on the occasion of the opening of the Hungarian Cultural Center in Beijing: *“...the exchange of students is desirable since cultural exchanges support the bilateral relationship, and those who learn in Hungary will certainly support the Hungarian culture back home in China as well”*.⁷⁷

All opposition parties agree, however, that differences of the political systems of the two countries may pose some risks to Hungary. Jobbik sees China as an autocratic one-party system and its potential economic influence in Hungary as undesirable. The Socialist Party is not against Chinese investment per se, but it also emphasizes the need for transparency. Both the Democratic Coalition and Momentum thinks that the

⁷⁶ “Speech of MP Zsolt Németh (Jobbik) in the Parliament on 22 June 2011,” Országgyűlés, 2011-06-22. <https://www.parlament.hu/web/guest/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai>

⁷⁷ “Speech of MP István Józsa (MSZP) in the Parliament on 4 July 2013,” Országgyűlés, 2013-07-04. <https://www.parlament.hu/web/guest/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai>



major risk associated with China is that Beijing may help to finance and thus to maintain the rule of Fidesz in Hungary.

Furthermore, according to the Democratic Coalition, the business cooperation between the Hungarian ruling party and China may distort the domestic economy, while Momentum believes that Hungary has marginalized itself in the Western alliance system partially due to its close political cooperation with Beijing. Meanwhile, none of the parties perceive China as a direct threat to Hungary, their concerns are limited to the issues of political and economic risks.

The governing party and the opposition interpret the results of bilateral relations in a very different way. Obviously, the ruling party emphasizes the list of achievements: increase of exports, the coming reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line, direct flights between Hungary and China, Chinese investment in the country, educational and scientific cooperation, SME cooperation, etc. As one of the MPs of Fidesz elaborated on this issue: *“The Hungarian people managed to attract most of the Chinese investment in the (CEE) region, and Hungary exported the most to China from the region. We also see that Hungarian exports to China have doubled since 2010 and 50% more Hungarian companies export their products to China than in 2010, while the stock of Chinese investment reached 4 billion USD by 2016.”*⁷⁸ Meanwhile, opposition parties seem to agree that actual and tangible results are minimal. Jobbik does not see any real achievements, while the Socialist Party, the Democratic Coalition and the Momentum sees only minor results. Momentum also emphasizes that the price of these results outweighs their benefits and the international political status of Hungary has deteriorated due to its cooperation with China.

4.2 Human rights on the back burner

The issue of human rights used to be a major political topic across the Hungarian political spectrum in the 1990's, but its significance has been decreasing in the past twenty years, and almost entirely disappeared from the parliamentary discourse since 2010.⁷⁹ This is not a surprise, given the

⁷⁸ “Speech of MP Richárd Hörcsik (Fidesz) in the Parliament on 12 June 2018,” Országgyűlés, 2018-06-12. <https://www.parlament.hu/web/guest/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai>

⁷⁹ Ivana Karásková, Alžběta Bajerová and Tamás Matura, “Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments” (AMO Policy Paper 02/2019, AMO, 2019);



fact the Fidesz believes that Hungary has nothing to do with the situation in China, moreover Budapest has blocked EU statements criticizing Beijing's human rights records.⁸⁰ Most of the opposition parties agree that Hungary is not in a position to openly and effectively stand against China's policies in the field of human rights, but Jobbik, the Socialist Party, and the Democratic Coalitions would use backchannels and track II diplomacy to influence Beijing. Jobbik has a negative impression about the status of human rights in China, while the Socialists and DK put an emphasis on the slow development in the right direction and that China still has a long way to go. Meanwhile, Momentum embraces a remarkably different position, as the young, liberal-progressive party believes that human rights are universal values and Hungarian diplomacy should fight for their recognition in China as well.

When it comes to the Belt and Road Initiative Hungarian parties tend to have a generally positive attitude, though with differences between the ruling party and the opposition. Fidesz sees the BRI as a positive contribution of China to World affairs, while opposition parties are more cautious about embracing the BRI to its full extent. The Socialist Party is generally positive about the BRI, but it emphasizes the importance of transparency. The Democratic Coalition believes that the BRI may be beneficial to the further development of globalization, but also thinks that the initiative is too complicated and too expensive. Jobbik and Momentum call for caution, as they see the BRI as a Chinese tool of influence building, though they see its potential as well. Parties perceive China-CEE cooperation, which is the 17+1 in a similar way. Fidesz supports cooperation without any concerns. As the MP of Fidesz phrased it: *"Hungary is the bridgehead of the economic expansion of China into Europe, and the cooperation between the two countries is its best (...) I believe it is of utmost importance to have as fruitful as possible economic relations with such a rising country like China. The Budapest-Belgrade railway line is a promising development."*⁸¹ The Socialist Party is also optimistic about its development. Jobbik argues that being part of 17+1 is important, but Hungary should be more cautious. The

⁸⁰ Thorsten Benner and Jan Weidenfeld, "Europe, don't let China divide and conquer" (Politico, 2018-03-19). <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-china-divide-and-conquer/>

⁸¹ "Speech of MP Zoltán Bóna (Fidesz) in the Parliament on 30 November 2015," Országgyűlés, 2015-11-30. <https://www.parlament.hu/web/guest/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai>



Democratic Coalition and Momentum also supports Hungary's membership, but they are skeptical about the potential outcomes of the cooperation, as both parties argue that CEE countries compete, rather than cooperate.

4.3 Ideologic divide

Based on our current research and previous projects it can be concluded that the main division line in Hungary is not along leftism and rightism or other political values, but it runs between the governing and opposition parties.⁸²

Fidesz nurtures predominantly positive attitudes toward China and it does not associate any threats or risks to the cooperation with Beijing. The governing party is the only political movement among the analyzed parties that believes that Hungary and China do share some common values, like sovereignty.

All other parties deny the presence of shared values, and rather see China as a potential source of political risks and call for a cautious China policy. Pragmatic and ideological considerations both play an important role in how Hungarian parties relate to China.

From an ideological point of view Fidesz, an officially conservative Christian-democratic party obviously does not share any common values or ideas with China and the CPC (except sovereignty), thus the China policy of the governing party is pragmatic.

Ideology seems to have a bigger impact on the perceptions of opposition parties, as right-wing Jobbik and liberal-progressive Momentum are less friendly towards China than the left-wing Socialist Party and the Democratic Coalition. It has to be mentioned, however, that parties in opposition always have the luxury to focus on ideology, while parties in government must employ a more pragmatic approach for successful cooperation.

When it comes to economic considerations the division line between Fidesz and opposition parties is less well articulated, as all parties regard China as an important business partner. Opposition parties, however, call for more caution and transparency in bilateral economic relations and are concerned about the domestic and international political costs of the cooperation. The

⁸² See: Project Chinfluence by AMO (www.chinfluence.eu)



difference between Fidesz and the opposition's perception of the BRI and the 17+1 is even less obvious, as all parties support the BRI and Hungary's participation in the China-CEE cooperation to a certain extent, though the opposition is not certain about the real benefits of the two initiatives.

Another important conclusion is that most of the opposition parties are mostly critical of the foreign policy of the government in general, and its China policy in particular, but not deeply critical of China itself. One exception is Momentum, as it seems to genuinely condemn some of Beijing's policies. Jobbik, the Socialists, and DK have a more pragmatic approach.



5 Poland: China outweighed by relations with the USA

Over the last decade, Polish political elites from left to right have been interested in strengthening Sino-Polish relations, attracting Chinese investments, as well as increasing Polish exports to China so as to offset the trade exchange, characterized by a significant imbalance (last year, out of over 33 billion USD worth of Poland-China trade, Poland's exports amounted to only 2.5 billion).⁸³

In 2011, Poland and China signed a Strategic Partnership agreement, which five years later was upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In 2012, the Polish Ministry of Economy launched a "Go China" initiative, with the imperative to encourage Polish entrepreneurs to develop business relations with Chinese partners. Three years later, a new Consulate General was founded in Chengdu – the third consulate of Poland established in mainland China – following a launch (in 2013) of the direct rail cargo service between this Chinese city and the Polish city of Łódź.

Other new institutions and mechanisms focusing on the expansion of bilateral relations with China included a new post of the Representative of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Polish Embassy in Beijing, the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Coordination of the Polish-Chinese Strategic Partnership Development, or the Working Group on Poland-China Local Cooperation within the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development.⁸⁴

On top of that, at the end of 2018, the largest Polish seaport "Port Gdańsk" opened its business office in Shanghai.⁸⁵ Besides developing bilateral cooperation, Poland was eager to join new Chinese-born regional formats of co-operation – "16+1" formula, announced by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao during his visit to Warsaw in 2012, and the Belt and Road

⁸³ Hubert Koziel, "Wymiana handlowa z Chinami jest pełna dysproporcji," (Parkiet, 2019-05-30). <https://www.parkiet.com/Analizy/305309902-Wymiana-handlowa-z-Chinami-jest-pelna-dysproporcji.html>

⁸⁴ Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar, "Poland-China Relations: Forging a Strategic Partnership," in "Mapping Europe-China Relations: A Bottom-Up Approach" (ETNC Report, European Think-Tank Network on China, 2015)

⁸⁵ "The Port of Gdansk opens a new business office in China," Port Gdańsk, 2018-11-03. <http://www.portgdansk.pl/events/the-port-of-gdansk-opens-a-new-business-office-in-china>



Initiative (BRI) in 2013 – aspiring to become Beijing’s strategic European partner, conveniently located in the transportation corridors between China and Europe.

Poland also became (in 2016) a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), being the only country from Central and Eastern Europe to take part. The Sejm voted unanimously in support of Poland’s accession to AIIB, which was a rare occurrence those days.

However, despite political declarations, high-level meetings and visits, agreements signed, as well as participation in the new formats, quite disappointingly, cooperation between Warsaw and Beijing has had little effect upon the Polish economy.

Moreover, no uniform vision has been developed over the last decade of how to design Polish relations with this newly emerging power, a number-two world economy, actively present in our region.

5.1 Swinging perception of China

It is difficult to state unambiguously whether Polish political elites perceive cooperation with China as an opportunity, or a threat, as contradictory signals have been sent to Beijing from Warsaw.

2015-2017 was a period of high-level political exchanges, with optimism reaching its peak in June 2016 during Xi Jinping’s visit to Poland, when Polish and Chinese presidents jointly greeted the arrival of the first China Railway Express train at the Warsaw PKP CARGO Terminal, symbolically inaugurating the opening of the New Silk Road.⁸⁶

However, Sino-Polish economic ties declined in January 2017, when then Polish Minister of National Defense, Antoni Macierewicz, blocked the sale of a parcel for a logistic hub that meant to be part of BRI. 2018 saw a significant decrease in the delegation rank at the “16+1” summit in Sofia.

Another problematic case happened in early 2019, when a Chinese Huawei executive, together with a former Polish counterintelligence officer, was arrested in Poland on spying charges. In effect, Poland started to consider

⁸⁶ Federica Antonutti, “The first Chinese container train at the Warsaw PKP CARGO Terminal” (pol-rail.net, 2016-02-14). <http://www.pol-rail.net/en/il-primo-treno-container-cinese-al-terminal-ppk-cargo-di-varsavia/>



a ban on the use of Huawei technology at public institutions, amid media speculations about an alleged advise from Washington to disengage from the cooperation with Huawei Technologies due to security concerns. In September 2019, US Vice-President Mike Pence and Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki signed a 5G security agreement, which has been seen as part of effort to block the Chinese telecom from European networks, as well as a signal that Warsaw intends to put its essential strategic alliance with Washington above good relations and benefits from cooperation with China.

5.2 Opportunism rampant across the political mainstream

Since late 2015 – with a new electoral victory on 13. October 2019 – Poland has had a conservative Law and Justice (PiS) government (and a new President from that same political camp) whose domestic and foreign policy differ from what was pursued by the rather opportunistic, programmatically amorphous Civic Platform. The PiS's comprehension of the value of Sino-Polish relations generally, and of the New Silk Road initiative, specifically, seemed in the very beginning deeper and the commitment – stronger than was the case in the past. There was even noticed a convergence between issues prioritized by the new Polish government that is stable economic development, and the construction of the Belt and Road.

The incumbent Polish presidency and the PiS government are more assertive and self-confident but without any U-turns. As they claim, they are more Euro-realist, but also more autonomous in their choices compared to the eight-year rules of the Civic Platform. In 2015, there was a strong voice for “re-nationalization” of Poland's economic ties with China – a more sovereign Polish decision-making, especially with building evidence that any single State within the EU rather pursues the interests of its own companies when it comes to China-Europe relations. PiS politicians have been arguing that what we are witnessing are just bilateral relations. For a presumed “European Unity” – unity within the European Union – it is absent when it comes to very many core issues, including China. The re-evaluation of Sino-Polish ties resulted in opening a new chapter in the mutual relations of both countries.



In November 2015, Polish President Andrzej Duda presided over an official Polish delegation to China for CEE-China (16+1) summit, which was highly significant, as routinely prime ministers attend these meetings. He also opened the Polish-Chinese Economic Forum. In this way, Polish authorities tried to highlight the importance they attributed to bilateral relations with Beijing. President Duda was sworn into office in August 2015, and one of his first decisions was paying a visit to China. During that visit, he expressed a strong hope that five years of his presidency would be a period of great intensification of cooperation between the two countries. Polish authorities and business community wished Poland to become one of the main Chinese partners in Europe within the framework of One Belt, One Road initiative, and to better use our geographical location as the country that can connect China with Western Europe, and precisely – with Germany. That was the prevailing public narrative of the ruling Law and Justice party.

The declared and real efforts paid off as Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Warsaw in June 2016 and cooperation with Poland was raised into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Investments followed. But within the PiS there have always been various factions when it comes to Poland-China ties. Former Minister of Defense, Antoni Macierewicz in his speeches home and abroad represented a view that Belt and Road Initiative is a “Sino-Russian conspiracy to weaken USA and the Transatlantic alliance”. On the other hand, such influential MEPs as Ryszard Czarnecki have been somewhat enthusiastic or at least affirmative in respect of Chinese economic achievements and the potential of Sino-Polish economic partnership. The lack of a clear-cut policy towards Beijing has been, however, the very feature of all Polish governments in the past.

With the new American administration of President Donald Trump and trade war with China, the narrative of Polish ruling elites has changed remarkably. Polish partnership with the United States has been the very foundation of the country’s security policy since Poland regained independence after the 1989 peaceful transformation. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine have only strengthened the strategic alliance with Washington. At least in the eyes of the PiS politicians. The interviewed Foreign Ministry officials view that alliance as a ‘non-alternative’ option for Poland. Therefore, as they say, if closer economic ties with China would be



an obstacle for a larger and permanent presence of American military units in Poland, Warsaw obviously stands by its US partner. This has been also reflected in declarations made by the current Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz on various more or less official occasions. The pressure exerted by the Trump administration on Visegrad countries brought – to some extent – alignment on the part of the Polish ruling party. The Huawei scandal in Canada had its local version with the arrest of the company’s executive in Poland. Polish Foreign Ministry followed also American narrative on the “spying activities” of some Chinese companies controlled by the Communist Party.

On the other hand, Polish officials from the PiS party have been quite confident that despite the American official rhetoric about the Huawei involvement in illegal actions there is a large margin of flexibility left to Poland by Washington. Poland – while taking precautions in respect of the Chinese involvement in the 5G network – has not excluded the Chinese telecom giant from the Polish market. As officials say: Poland cannot afford that. Hence the presence of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki at the 16+1 (17+1) summit in Dubrovnik in April 2019. Poland has also recently opened several new trade offices in China. The returning mantra coming from Warsaw is the large trade deficit with Beijing, and opening of the Chinese market for Polish products, including the “proscribed” pork, and the level playing field for Polish business in China. However, Prime Minister Morawiecki took also a strategic “anti-China” stance in August 2019 when in interviews with the foreign media he said that “the threat to the free world comes not only from Moscow but also from Beijing”. The ambiguity of the ruling party results from its “balancing act” between economic interests and appetite for “quality” Chinese investments, and – on the other hand – strategic considerations – including the “iron friendship” with the only superpower and its mercurial leader.

In 2019, Poland and China celebrate the 70th anniversary diplomatic relations. In Poland’s political elites narrative, China has been the country’s significant and prospective economic partner at least since the famous visit of former President Bronisław Komorowski in Beijing in 2011. Mr. Komorowski is linked to the liberal-left wing Civic Platform (PO) party. Back then, Poland-China Strategic Partnership agreement was signed by Polish



and Chinese Presidents. In Central-Eastern Europe (CEE), Poland was one of the first nations to upgrade its relationship with China to the level of a strategic partnership.

After years of relative stagnation, this was hailed as a new beginning for our bilateral contacts, which was confirmed in April of 2012 with a historic visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Warsaw who was welcomed by another PO politician – Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Precisely this was that visit that brought new prospects and also raised high expectations both in Poland and in other Central and Eastern European countries. Polish capital city Warsaw was chosen by the Chinese guest to announce a new initiative, known as the “16+1” format, officially called “Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”.

Poland has longed for a kind of “leader” status in that grouping due to its strategic geographical location in the center of Europe, ensuring Chinese investors and exporters access to the entire EU market. A big advantage is also the size of Poland’s market and its population as well as economic and political stability. That expectations, however, have not materialized but the “16 + 1” as a format of dialogue and cooperation gained a new momentum with the advent of the New Silk Road. So again, Poland envisioned itself at the heart of its Central-Eastern European part. Actually, some segments of Polish elites on both left and right wished to see their country as a prospective logistics-transportation hub for Sino-European trade. The momentum waned with the stagnation of the Civic Platform government and appointment of Prime Minister Donald Tusk to the post of the President of the European Council in September 2014. The new Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz skipped the “16+1” summit in December of the very same year. It was a stunning development as she did not hesitate to visit Beijing a year earlier in her capacity as the Speaker of Polish Sejm (lower chamber of Parliament) on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Her views on China and Warsaw’s relations with Beijing have always been somewhat enigmatic and seem based exclusively on advice given by more or less informed officials in the Cabinet.

The Civic Platform politicians do not differ much from some other opposition parties (e.g. Democratic Left Alliance) with their opportunism and ambivalence when it comes to Sino-Polish ties. There is a sense of a



prevalent pragmatism blended with aversion to expressing any clear-cut opinions.

The Polish People's Party (PSL) has always been the virtually most pragmatic party on the Polish political scene. Participating in many governments since 1989, it has been struggling for survival in recent years.

Two former leaders of the PSL stand out when it comes to cooperation with China: Waldemar Pawlak (former Prime Minister) and Janusz Piechociński (former Deputy Prime Minister and current President of Poland-Asia Chamber).

Both of them are known for their long and comprehensive interest and commitment to developing economic ties with Beijing. Mr. Piechociński since the early 1990s was impressed with China's economic rise and saw an opportunity for Polish farmers and other industries in closer economic cooperation with the Middle Kingdom.

Contrary to most other politicians from the whole political scene in Poland, he gained considerable expertise concerning the Chinese economy, development, and the real prospects of Sino-Polish economic partnership. In his view, Polish firms are unprepared for business with China and do not exhibit sufficient knowledge nor possess needed resources. 97% of Polish firms are SMEs. Therefore, they cannot compete with Western companies in the Chinese market.

Meanwhile, the Polish government lacks any real strategy to assist Polish companies in China nor how to promote or create Polish brands there. Poland is losing even in Central and Eastern Europe to its neighbors when it comes to making business with Beijing and attracting FDI. Belt and Road means opportunity but Poland has not worked out tools to efficiently use it.

5.3 Differing views between the left and right-wing parties

The Left in Poland is still associated with the old, Communist past of the country. Its main face – the Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej) – is pretty much a refurbished leftover of the ancient regime's ruling totalitarian party. However, there are also new left-wing groups that do not have much in common with the former system and have been trying to build the Polish Left from scratch. One of them is the Razem



(„Together”), a party initiated by a new generation of social-liberals, and idealistic social-justice-seekers. In political, social and economic terms, they are – broadly speaking – followers of Yannis Varoufakis – a famous and influential Greek leftist visionary. One of their slogans sounds familiar to all left-leaning Europeans: „Higher wages, lower rents, free prescription drugs”. The issue, however, is that apart from their „socially progressive” program – which doesn’t seem to enjoy much support within the voters’ majority – the party does not have much on offer in an era of a massive redistribution extravaganza served to the voters by the Law and Justice government.

Foreign policy is an arena, where the Razem is against the alleged „excessive submission to the USA and [multinational] corporations”. As Razem’s leader, Adrian Zandberg, says, „This is a world in which the USA under Trump sees Europe no longer as an ally, but as an enemy.” On the other hand, „Europe is our home and we must take responsibility for it... Europe must become more democratic to move forward. The Left wants the European Parliament to have more power and to be able to control the functioning of the European Commission, not just on paper.”⁸⁷

Mr. Zandberg’s views of China’s rise, its political system and global economic expansion within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are neither enthusiastic nor even positive. The other way around, for him the Asian Communist giant is an epitome of a modern-day neo-colonialism: „It’s a world in which China is growing in strength and economically colonizing not only Africa but also the Balkans. These are real challenges...”⁸⁸

The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and its politicians, however, do not have such reservations towards Beijing. In summer 2012, their 14-member strong delegation was invited by the Chinese Communist Party for a China trip. The head of the visiting team was Professor Tadeusz Iwiński – a veteran ex-Communist politician and academician specializing in international affairs.

⁸⁷ Błażej Makarewicz, „Zandberg: Trump traktuje Polskę jak pionka. Sprzeda nas, jeżeli uzna, że to mu się opłaca [WYWIAD]” (Radio ZET, 2019-05-22). <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/Eurowybory-2019/Opinie/Zandberg-Trump-traktuje-Polske-jak-pionka.-Sprzeda-nas-jezeli-uzna-ze-to-mu-sie-oplaca-WYWIAD>

⁸⁸ Ibid.



*„It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white so long as it catches mice... The Chinese use this maxim very effectively...”*⁸⁹ professor Iwiński tried to explain his delegation's trip to China, which was sponsored by the Chinese Communists, quoting the famous saying of China's late paramount leader – Deng Xiaoping.

Other members of the SLD delegation were more frank in expressing their sentiments, including towards the Chinese political system: *„Beijing is almost like Manhattan, but cleaner... The Middle Kingdom's political system often raises controversies abroad, but in practice, it is quite effective. For example, in individual provinces, one of the deputy [Communist] party secretaries is also a governor.”*⁹⁰

Professor Iwiński also assessed the development of China rather approvingly: *„It seems that in the 21st century, China is an example of a positive convergence, because, on the one hand, China's 90 million-strong Communist Party has preserved its control over society, but at the same time deep economic reforms are being carried out in a very capitalist and free-market spirit.”*⁹¹

Professor Iwiński's comments on the prospects of China – Poland partnership are European Union-oriented which is no surprise as the whole SLD as a party had after the transition to democracy became overnight enthusiastically pro-European. In addition, however, Iwiński seems to be very pragmatic too, which actually is a very characteristic symptom of the Left's dislike for the right-wing Polish „exceptionalism” cherished by the ruling PiS Law and Justice party: *„Poland has a chance to become a real partner for China only as member of the EU. It is worth to take seriously the advice: less Poland-focused ideology and Messianism – more realpolitik is needed.”*⁹²

⁸⁹ Adrian Gąbka, „Chiński smok połyka polskich polityków. Przedstawiciele prawicy polecą do Pekinu?” (naTemat, 2012-07-10). <https://natemat.pl/blogi/adriangabka/22729,chinski-smok-polyka-polskich-politykow-przedstawiciele-prawicy-poleca-do-pekinu>

⁹⁰ „Delegacja SLD jara się Chinami,” dziki kraj, 2012-06-18. <http://dzikikraj.interia.pl/news-delegacja-sld-jara-sie-chinami,nId,613455>

⁹¹ Tadeusz Iwiński, „Jaka naprawdę była PRL” (Przegląd Dziennikarski, 2019-01-17). <https://przepladdziennikarski.pl/jaka-naprawde-byla-prl/>

⁹² „What does China think about Asia and Europe? Is the South China Sea a new field of power struggle?,” (Debate on China) CSM – CIR (Centre for International Relation's), 2018-06-12



Ironically enough, for the 2019 elections, both the Razem and SLD decided to join their forces and created an electoral bloc as the „Left” with another social-liberal new-comer „Wiosna” (Spring) party. Wiosna’s views about China seem to be ambiguous. Its leader, Robert Biedroń is a former member of the Polish Sejm (the lower House of the Parliament), and now a freshly elected member of the European Parliament. He is remembered for his comments about the ill-timed visit of a Polish parliamentary delegation (with a notable exception of the PiS and PSL Agrarian Party MPs) in Beijing in June 2013. It’s worth mentioning that Mr. Biedroń was a vice-head of the Polish Parliamentary Team for Tibet at that time.

For Poland, 4 June is a symbolic date of the peaceful end of Communism and the first partly-free parliamentary elections. For China, however, it is the Tiananmen Square massacre’s anniversary. Both events took place on the same day, the same month of 1989.

„I think that the timing of the visit – 4 June - and the meetings with representatives of the Chinese government do not make sense...” Mr. Biedroń argued. “But I also believe that the voice of the Polish Parliament is important. If this visit is already taking place, then members must be strongly armed with human rights arguments. I am glad that MP Kopyciński from the Palikot Movement [Mr. Biedroń’s former party] is there and will speak on that matter...”⁹³

„Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość” (Confederation Freedom and Independence) is a loose grouping of conservative, Nationalist and seasoned self-declared liberal politicians and their supporters. Their views on the social, economic and political order are far to the right compared with the ruling Law and Justice party which is socially conservative but favors some leftist ideals of redistribution of wealth. The more market-oriented, „American-styled” liberals in the Konfederacja cherish much more libertarian views on the economy. But by no means are they “pro-American” or “anti-Russian” – the sentiments that are usually associated with the PiS government. The opposite is the truth, as they hold more ‘pragmatic’ and ‘favorable’ views when it comes to Poland – Russia ties or a possible

⁹³ “Biedroń: wyjazd do Chin 4 czerwca nierozsądny, ale dobrze że nasz poseł tam jest,” wprost, 2013-06-03. <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/402243/Biedron-wyjazd-do-Chin-4-czerwca-nierozsadny-ale-dobrze-ze-nasz-posel-tam-jest.htm>



rapprochement with the Kremlin. On the other hand, Konfederacja's leaders and followers are staunch Eurosceptics and vocal critics of American foreign policy.

Leading politicians of the Konfederacja espouse even more radical views about China which they have expressed on many occasions. Earlier this year Poland was shocked by arrests of a Chinese Huawei executive and a former Polish ABW secret services officer on spying charges. During the most recent visit of the American vice-President, Mike Pence on 2. September, Polish President Andrzej Duda – who is supported by the PiS ruling party – was asked about the case. 'I want to say one thing – yes, indeed Polish counterintelligence services have detected some activities that could have a spy character, this case is currently being investigated.'⁹⁴

The case may be of critical importance for Chinese Huawei Technologies' participation in building a 5G network in Poland. And, interestingly, on U.S. Vice-President Pence's visit, both countries signed a joined declaration on 5G network security which reads: „All countries must ensure only trusted and reliable suppliers participate in networks”. It means a rigorous evaluation of foreign government control. Marc Short, Mike' Pence's Chief of staff said openly: “We must stand together to prevent the Chinese Communist Party from using subsidiaries like Huawei to gather intelligence while supporting China's military and state security services – with our technology,”⁹⁵

Grzegorz Braun – one of the Konfederacja leaders who is known for his often radical views on domestic and international affairs – commented on the issue: “As you can see, the policy of allegedly 'non-alternative strategic alliances' costs Poland not only the risk of war and the cost of permanently overpaid armament purchases, but also lost profits – lost opportunities of

⁹⁴ “Duda: polskie służby kontrwywiadowcze wykryły działania, które mogły mieć charakter szpiegowski,” Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2019-09-02. <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C505056%2Cduda-polskie-sluzby-kontrwywiadowcze-wykryly-dzialania-ktore-mogly-miec>

⁹⁵ Alan Charlish and Marcin Gocłowski, “U.S. and Poland urge tougher checks on foreign influence over 5G networks” (Reuters, 2019-09-02). <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-poland-usa-5g/u-s-and-poland-urge-tougher-checks-on-foreign-influence-over-5g-networks-idUKKCN1VN15E>



good deals that we will not reach because they could not be approved of by our imperial patrons.”⁹⁶

Moreover, Mr. Braun, who in the past was also a Presidential candidate, dreams of a permanent Chinese military base in Poland instead of a U.S. base (‘Fort Trump’) sought by the PiS government. He even claims that “China with its very existence saved us twice in the 20th century, probably saved the very existence of the Polish state... The New Silk Road could bring prosperity to the forgotten parts of South-Eastern Poland. The Polish Subcarpathia region should become a big logistics hub on the European scale... My answer for the Fort Trump is Fort Xi...”⁹⁷

The same fascination can be regularly found in opinions expressed by Janusz Korwin-Mikke – a well-known, controversial veteran politician of conservative-liberal views. He is another leader of the Konfederacja.

“I have been writing about China for over 30 years. Since the reforms of the late Deng Xiaoping - with growing admiration. After visiting China, I stated that even my last articles were about two years late. Today, China has definitely outrun Europe - and most likely outpaced the United States. And I can add one more thing: if we came to power today, in six years we chase away Germany, and in eight years America. But within these eight years, China will be far ahead of America - and most likely out of our reach.”⁹⁸

The recent Polish governments have not had a clear-cut policy towards Beijing, nor has there been a distinctive correlation between attitudes towards China and party lines, or else fundamental differences between the ruling party and mainstream opposition. Significant parts of Polish elites on both left and right have wanted Poland to become a leader of Chinese-born initiatives, a logistics-transportation hub for Sino-European trade, and a “gate to Europe” for China, trading off human rights issues for expected economic benefits. Similarly, the threats, such as a fear of Chinese “neo-colonialism” have been identified both by right, as well as the left side.

⁹⁶ “Trzeba się upomnieć o suwerenność – wywiad z Grzegorzem Braunem,” Bibula, 2019-02-07. <http://www.bibula.com/?p=106591>

⁹⁷ Grzegorz Braun, „Na Fort Trump odpowiedzią Fort Xi,” 2019-04-23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8E-X16Je9uk>

⁹⁸ Janusz Korwin-Mikke, 2016-06-20. <https://www.facebook.com/janusz.korwin.mikke/posts/10153658074757060/>



Politicians from all groupings have been expressing high expectations from cooperation between Warsaw and Beijing, despite its lack of actual impact on boosting Polish growth. None of the political camps has had a consistent strategy to systematize Sino-Polish relations, ideas how to even the trade deficit – a long-time characteristic of the trade exchange between Poland and China – nor how to effectively promote and assist Polish companies in China. Currently, the government is balancing between economic interests and eagerness to attract Chinese investment on the one hand, and the strategic friendship with the US on the other.



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