

POLICY PAPER

# China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe: The Logic and Power of Chinese Influence

IVANA KARÁSKOVÁ, ALICJA BACHULSKA,  
BARBARA KELEMEN, TAMÁS MATURA,  
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**MAP!INFLUENCE**  
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## **CHINA'S STICKS AND CARROTS IN CENTRAL EUROPE: THE LOGIC AND POWER OF CHINESE INFLUENCE**

### **Policy paper**

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# Summary

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- In Central Europe (CE), China is a newcomer and thus without an infrastructure which would allow it to pull the levers of direct power. CE provides an interesting case study of how China goes about establishing influence from scratch and enables mapping the strategies and tactics employed in this effort through analysis of inducement ('carrots') and coercion ('sticks').
- China does not use a 'one size fits all' approach in Visegrád countries (V4, i. e. Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). While its goal of establishing a friendly environment and the strategy to achieve it are similar in all V4 countries, its tactics differ in reaction to the local political climate, geopolitical standing and level of interactions.
- In Hungary, China uses exclusively 'carrots' without the need to apply 'sticks'. In Poland it employs mainly 'carrots', while in Czechia, which represents a state with a tradition of opposing China, it uses a mixture of 'carrots' and recently also more 'sticks'. In Slovakia, China's influence is muted to a level where the notion of 'carrots' and 'sticks' only applies in a limited way as Beijing continues to remain on the sidelines of the country's foreign interests.
- In addition to China's intentions, Central European states and their political and economic elites' interest in attracting China's attention creates openings for Chinese influence to enter and thrive in the region.
- China has been increasingly active on the government-to-government level since 2000s. This level of CEE-China interaction (including party-to-party diplomacy) was also the first one to emerge. China's tactics tend towards employing 'carrots' as its first option in establishing itself in the region.
- The use of 'sticks' has predominantly been linked to the question of China's sovereignty, especially the issues of Taiwan and Tibet. On the other hand, sticks have not been used in connection to the human rights record critique or the Huawei case.
- China's tactics include signaling the use of 'sticks' and their scope before it implements them in order to prompt the opponent to budge. The effectiveness of 'sticks' depends on China's credibility to wield them and the potential damage they can cause to the other country. In the case of Central Europe, the damage would be limited.

- The means of coercion have not been limited to retaliation in the same domain where the 'offense' came from, i.e. the level of government-to-government relations. China tends to retaliate in a number of other domains. This finding supports the claim that the government influences all aspects of China's foreign relations (including those at the people-to-people or company-to-people level).
- The evaluation of 'sticks' used by China is complicated by the existence and activities of local political proxies. Domestic figures are one of the driving forces through which China's influence is exercised in the country and who also effectively shape China's image. It is thus not exclusively China's actions which lead to China's public diplomacy 'achievements' or 'failures'. The activities of domestic players deserve equal scrutiny in the effort to describe and critically assess the impacts of China's 'sticks' and 'carrots'.
- In Czechia, China has used local proxies to communicate some threats as well as inducements. Still other forms of 'carrots' were clearly offered and promoted by China, sometimes through the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party, that has been active in party-to-party and people-to-people relations, cultivating senior as well as upcoming politicians of not only the governing, but also opposition parties.
- China has become active at a sub-governmental level, establishing and increasing the number of partnerships with regions and municipalities. In this domain its activities have gone largely unnoticed by the local China watching communities and journalists.
- People-to-people interactions have been the most dynamically evolving – but not necessarily widely enough publicized and researched – component of China's activity in the Visegrád countries. Academic exchange has developed bilaterally as well as multilaterally and local non-profit and non-governmental organizations have maintained communication with different Chinese organizations. Confucius Institutes have also grown in number despite international criticism related to their possible impact on enabling and shaping uncritical China-related academic debates.
- Especially with the COVID-19 epidemic, China's activities which attempt to influence local media and target the Chinese diaspora increased.
- With the exception of Hungary, the Chinese embassies in the other Central European countries have combined fringe media outlets with attempts to increase their presence in mainstream ones. Media cooperation in the form of supplements, shared content agreements and the increased presence of China Radio International broadcasting in local languages contributed to shape China's image. However, despite numerous attempts by the Chinese



entities, their media reach is still limited and receives a significant pushback from journalists.

- EU-China and US-China relations influence ties between Central Europe and China, especially in security domain. V4 countries have been wary of endangering their alliance with the US through developing closer relations with China.

## Recommendations

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- At the EU level, particularly in the aftermath of the coronavirus epidemic, EU should initiate information and PR campaigns to make its citizens aware of the benefits of the EU, its values and its economic might as a component of fighting China's appeal and influence stemming from China's perceived economic superiority and promises of economic benefits.
- Higher levels of transparency should be employed at all levels of relations with China. Special emphasis should be placed on transparency in investment, loans and public procurement.
- Visegrád countries need to recalibrate their approach to China to make their objectives more realistic, yet not opportunistic, while also taking into account the structural and political barriers evident in bilateral as well as multilateral relations. Countries should be more active in (co)creating China policy in the EU as well as within the 17+1 platform, adhering to common EU policy wherever possible.
- Due to low economic dependence on China, Visegrád countries should not be afraid to engage in critical discussions, including those on human rights issues, without the fear of experiencing high economic costs.
- V4 countries should conduct an audit of their relations with China to evaluate the role of individual government agencies and the effectiveness of their policies towards China. After the audit, the countries should come up with their own coherent China strategies which will contain clear and measurable objectives and specify the means to achieve these objectives. The countries' China strategies should be aware of both the economic and political realities of China, including its human rights track record.

- Guidelines for paradiplomacy would provide an overview of (un)suitable approaches towards China for local and regional governments and can complement the V4 countries' overall China strategies.
- V4 countries should avoid assisting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in creating alternative platforms for conducting party diplomacy, thus avoiding regular government-level channels. Such efforts assist in bolstering CCP legitimacy and undermine the integrity and coherence of the respective governments' foreign policies.
- The trend of former politicians finding employment as pro-China lobbyists, salient especially in Czechia, is worrisome. The revolving-doors rules should be reviewed to limit the potential for misuse of former politicians' political access and networks for the gain of foreign powers.
- A support for independent journalism is crucial in raising public awareness of the potential benefits, risks and side effects of cooperation with China. The experience of Czech investigative journalists can serve as an inspiration.
- Despite China's current media strategy having been, so far, unsuccessful, it could grow more aggressive in the future in the case of Chinese investment in the media sector. It is thus crucial to keep considering media as a strategic asset and to monitor investment into the media sector through national investment screening mechanisms.
- The academic cooperation between Visegrád countries and China goes largely unnoticed. Central European governments should support the education of their home-grown China experts, otherwise universities will be tempted to rely on Chinese financing of China-focused subjects, thus opening future generations of governmental China experts to undue Chinese influence.
- Universities need to undertake increased due diligence when dealing with Chinese entities while also taking into account possible linkage of Chinese companies to the military and CCP.

# Introduction: Research design and its scope

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**Ivana Karásková**

Association for International Affairs (AMO)

As China rises, it has increasingly come to be perceived through the prism of power politics, including attempts to carve out spheres of influence. Such concerns have primarily focused on East Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region, but through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced in 2013 also cover farther-flung territories like Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America or Europe.

In some of the regions, such as in Central Europe (CE), China is a newcomer and thus without an infrastructure which would allow it to pull the levers of direct power. CE may thus provide an interesting case study of the strategies and tactics China employs to establish its influence from scratch.

While China can certainly apply its power directly against Central Europe, the extent of its impact is limited due to the geographic distance of the countries and their geostrategic location (thus practically nullifying the possible use of China's military hard power), the relatively low level of mutual economic exchange (which limits the effects of possible economic sanctions) and, until recently, the narrow scope of political relations (which puts in doubt the impact of diplomatic sanctions). This study maps the tools China employed in order to gain influence. A special focus is given to 'soft' components of China's power, such as public diplomacy and propaganda, as these can become effective in contexts where the 'harder' aspects of power, such as military might or economic power, are weak or not present at all, as in the case of Central Europe.

This publication represents a first-ever attempt to systematically map China's influence in the region, focusing on a broad range of tools of China's traditional and public diplomacy and assessing their effectiveness. The main value of the publication rests in careful, rigorous research focused on the manifestation of China's diplomacy efforts over the period of the past fifteen years in four different countries in Central Europe. It builds on the knowledge and the network established through the Map-InfluENCe project,<sup>1</sup> designed and led by the Association for International Affairs (AMO) in Prague.

The study draws inspiration from Jarol B. Manheim's useful typology of relations.<sup>2</sup> Manheim distinguishes traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy by looking at the actors who engage in it.<sup>3</sup> This study, however, modifies Manheim's approach and diverts from him as it focuses on paradiplomacy (diplomacy conducted at the sub-state level, such as by regions or municipalities) rather than on diplomat-to-diplomat relations as it sees them as belonging to the broader government-to-government type of relation. It enlarges the scope of the original framework by adding two types

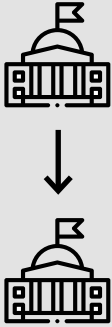

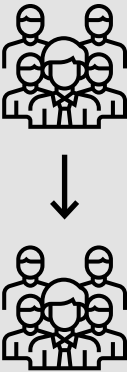
of relations (company-to-people and company-to-government) in a need to react to the diplomacy China has conducted via its state companies (e.g. CITIC, HSBC) or nominally private companies with strong relations to the Chinese government (e.g. Huawei). It also looks at the manifestations of the recent 'mask diplomacy' conducted by Beijing during the COVID-19 pandemics in Central Europe.

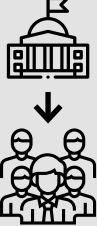
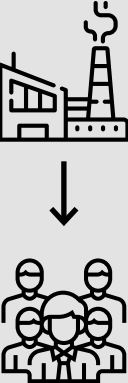
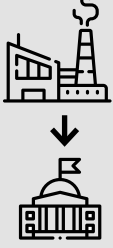
Of course, all countries engage in diplomacy and use similar means to promote their goals abroad. China, however, represents a rather special case where – unlike in democratic countries – all types of relations, including people-to-people relations, involve in one form or another the government, which allows the activity in the first place and may provide resources for it to be carried out. The Chinese government penetrates all relations, be it relations conducted on the sub-state level, the people-to-people level or Chinese companies' relations in foreign countries. Nevertheless, this study distinguishes among various types of relations based on the actors which engage in them. The distinction of various types of relations (below) reflects Chinese rhetoric, which differentiates (at least verbally and when in China's interests) between these relations. It also serves the analytical purpose of structuring the publication, allowing for comparison among four countries and enabling reaching more general conclusions. In several cases, such as the establishment of direct transport links between China and CE countries, the classification of the type of the relation in a particular country (e.g. belonging to government-to-government, paradiplomacy or company-to-people type of relations) is rather difficult to make. Similarly problematic were the negotiations over the lease of panda to CE countries. In order to adhere to the structure of the publication, the specific tool is included into the category which fits most of the described cases. Similarly the existence and activities of local interlocutors who (in reality or only allegedly) communicate on behalf of Chinese entities further complicates the attribution of a particular tool. The study discusses this issue and clearly marks where the tool was announced by a local interlocutor instead of the Chinese entity.

This study focuses on tools of China's traditional and public diplomacy which can be documented and evaluated using open source material and deliberately ignores similar or reciprocal actions taken by Central European countries in regard to China. The relations between China and Central European states are complex and reactive, e.g. China's decision to cancel the Czech musical ensembles' concerts in Beijing was closely linked to the Prague Mayor's statements and actions preceding the cancellation, however, the study focuses only on China's activities, providing thorough but not full account of the bilateral exchange. Moreover, some of the relations are closely tied to the 17+1 platform, thus making it hard to dissect bilateral and platform-based interactions.

The following table attempts to summarize different types of relations and examples of the tools which China uses to achieve its goals in Central Europe. 'Carrots' represent an inducement (the positive, appealing nature of diplomacy instruments which are yielded by China), while 'sticks' refer to coercion (the negative, punishing nature of the tools used against the local government/public).

**TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF TOOLS OF CHINA'S TRADITIONAL AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AS DOCUMENTED IN CENTRAL EUROPE<sup>4</sup>**

type of relation	inducement ('carrots')	coercion ('sticks')
<b>GOVERNMENT-TO-GOVERNMENT</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ increased diplomatic exchange, high-level visits (President, Prime Minister, ministerial level)</li> <li>→ (co)sponsored trips of politicians (invitations through e.g. parliamentary friendship groups)</li> <li>→ signing of high-level documents (e.g. strategic partnerships)</li> <li>→ increased party-to-party relations</li> <li>→ support in international forums (e.g. during the UN Secretary-General selection)</li> <li>→ opening of direct transport links (for political reasons)</li> <li>→ promises of China's investment</li> <li>→ "mask diplomacy" during coronavirus epidemic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ shunning/ignorance of state representatives</li> <li>→ cancellation of visits</li> <li>→ limitation/freezing of diplomatic relations</li> <li>→ halting of negotiations on economic cooperation</li> <li>→ postponement of opening new/cancellation of already established direct transport links/ threat of rerouting direct transport links*</li> <li>→ threat of economic retaliation against companies operating in China</li> </ul>
<b>PARADIPLOMACY</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ cultivation of regional ties</li> <li>→ promises of investment projects</li> <li>→ (co)sponsored trips of regional/ municipal representatives to China</li> <li>→ sister city agreements</li> <li>→ panda diplomacy**</li> <li>→ opening of transport links (based on provincial governments' agreements)</li> <li>→ "mask diplomacy" during coronavirus epidemic (sub-national level)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ renunciation of sub-government documents (e.g. sister city agreements)</li> <li>→ pressure applied on communal politicians (e.g. on disinviting Taiwan's representatives or renaming public spaces to honor Tibetans)</li> <li>→ denial of panda **</li> </ul>
<b>PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms</li> <li>→ spread of China-positive narrative (e.g. media cooperation in supplements, sharing content between Xinhua and local news agencies and NGOs, local language broadcasting by China Radio International)</li> <li>→ (co)sponsored trips of non-governmental actors (e.g. journalists, NGOs, academics)</li> <li>→ establishment of NGOs in the region</li> <li>→ increased academic cooperation</li> <li>→ sponsorship of cultural events</li> <li>→ youth cooperation projects (e.g. Bridge for the Future, Chinese diaspora camps)</li> <li>→ establishment and cooperation with friendship associations</li> <li>→ use of Chinese diaspora</li> <li>→ lower level "mask diplomacy" (e.g. between Chinese and CE universities)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ cancellation of invitations to China</li> <li>→ demonstrations orchestrated by Chinese Embassy/abuse of Chinese diaspora</li> </ul>

<p><b>GOVERNMENT-TO-PEOPLE</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ China's government scholarships</li> <li>→ content co-created by Chinese state representatives in local media (e.g. ambassador's op-eds, increased presence of Chinese state entities on social media, cooperation with local social media influencers, etc.)</li> <li>→ "mask diplomacy" (e.g. conducted by Chinese Embassy involving Chinese diaspora)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ critical ambassador's op-eds</li> </ul>
<p><b>COMPANY-TO-PEOPLE</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ sponsorship of events (cultural, sport, academic, etc.)</li> <li>→ advertorials (paid op-eds promoting the company or its views)</li> <li>→ sponsorship of think tank analyses promoting company's interests (e.g. on costs of excluding Huawei from 5G)</li> <li>→ company's sponsorship of establishment and operation of Confucius Institutes (e.g. Wanhua-Borsodchem)</li> <li>→ rewards connected to winning students' competition (Huawei's Seeds for the Future program)</li> <li>→ company-to-academia cooperation (e.g. Huawei Authorized Information and Network Academy in Poland, Huawei-Slovak Academy of Science joint research)</li> <li>→ media acquisition to control local media's China coverage</li> <li>→ acquisition of local sports teams</li> <li>→ "mask diplomacy"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ threat of divestment (e.g. from a local sport team)*</li> </ul>
<p><b>COMPANY-TO-GOVERNMENT/ COMPANY-TO-SUB-STATE LEVEL ENTITIES</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ "mask diplomacy" (company donations of protective equipment to municipalities, regions or national healthcare centers)</li> <li>→ establishment of company regional center (provider of employment and taxpayer)</li> <li>→ strategic partnership between Chinese companies and CE governments (e.g. Huawei, BorsodChem, Yanfeng, Bank of China or Wescast-Bohong in Hungary)</li> </ul>	

Source: authors' own compilation

\*Threats conveyed by Central European interlocutors, not Chinese state entities.

\*\* Panda diplomacy may belong to paradiplomacy, government-to-people relations or government-to-government type of relations (based on the actors involved). The authors decided to place panda diplomacy to the paradiplomacy section based on the experience of Poland, despite the fact that in the Czech case, the Chinese side insisted on the initial round of negotiations of the lease of panda being conducted at the highest possible level (e.g. heads of the state or heads of the government).

The following country-based chapters build on the aforementioned typology of relations and answer the questions of what kind of tools China uses in Central European states to promote its goals, how the ‘sticks’ are applied in the case that ‘carrots’ do not bring the desired outcomes and what similarities and dissimilarities in China’s tactics can be observed across the region. Conclusions and specific recommendations for the countries stem from the situation described in the country-based analyses.

# Hard sell: The travail of establishing China's influence in Czechia

**Filip Šebok and Ivana Karásková**

Association for International Affairs (AMO)

Czechia is a prime and interesting laboratory in which to test China's employment of rewards ('carrots') and punishments ('sticks'). Unlike in Hungary, Czech politicians of every stripe tend to have agency in dealing with China, though some of their actions aim at a local audience and are a function of domestic political struggle. China tends to react – either positively or antagonistically – to all such developments. However, as the Czech case demonstrates, China also acts via a number of domestic actors (e.g. current as well as ex-politicians and lobbyists) hiding effectively behind them. This leads to a principal-agent situation, where pro-China figures are the main force through which China's influence is exercised in the country and who also effectively shape China's image, rather than China's direct actions alone doing so.

China-Czech relations at the level of governments in the past 15 years have been characterized by a sinusoid, with outbursts of mutual affection alternating with a cooling of high-level contact. China's approach has been largely reactive, responding to the changing environment on the Czech political scene, where the struggle of human rights versus economic pragmatism as a basis for China policy has been unfolding since Czechia's independence. Beijing has proved to be willing to punish Czech politicians for touching upon 'sensitive issues', but also moved to reward leaders in Prague with increased political attention and economic incentives when they showed interest in strengthening relations with China. Since 2012, ties with Czechia have been subsumed under the 17+1 cooperation format,<sup>5</sup> which has to some extent anchored the relationship as it has provided for regularized bilateral contacts and enmeshed it into a wider regional context.

Chinese PM Wen Jiabao visited Czechia in 2005 in a first visit of a top-level Chinese official to the country since 1993. The visit manifested the improvement of bilateral relations after a tumultuous period when conflict over the issues of Taiwan, Tibet and human rights resulted in a de-facto freeze of high-level political contacts. The new government led by the leftist Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) with PM Jiří Paroubek at the helm professed to be open to improved cooperation with China, expecting economic gains. In later comments, Paroubek alleged that his government was preparing to sign a strategic partnership agreement with China at the time, ten years before it was actually signed.<sup>6</sup>

However, the sensitive issues in bilateral relations soon returned to the spotlight with the change of the government in 2006. The Greens (Zelení), a minor coalition par-



ty, took up the Tibet issue, leading to the establishment of a parliamentary friendship group for Tibet.<sup>7</sup> Karel Schwarzenberg, the then Foreign Minister, openly called for the boycott of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, comparing them to Hitler's Olympics.<sup>8</sup> PM Mirek Topolánek only visited the games in a personal capacity, based on a common policy agreed by the Czech cabinet.<sup>9</sup> In 2009, Jan Fischer, Topolánek's successor in the post of Prime Minister, met with the Dalai Lama which resulted in fierce Chinese criticism and the freezing of high-level contacts. As a result, Fischer had to cancel his planned visit to the Shanghai EXPO in 2010, since no Chinese high-level official was reportedly willing to meet him.<sup>10</sup> Contacts were frozen on other levels as well – the intergovernmental committee on economic cooperation ceased functioning between 2009 and 2014.<sup>11</sup>

High-level contacts did not resume until 2012, when Beijing included Czechia in its 16+1 initiative at the summit in Warsaw. China's new-found interest towards the region came, largely coincidentally, at a time when the Czech government was reconsidering its approach towards Beijing.<sup>12</sup> Just two months before the Warsaw Summit, the Czech PM Petr Nečas came up with a new term pejoratively describing the Czech foreign policy to China as “Dalai-Lamaism”, seeing the human rights-based policy followed by Czechia for the previous 20 years as performative and detrimental to promoting relations with China.<sup>13</sup> Soon after, the election of Miloš Zeman, the new Czech President, and his appointment of the care-taker government led by Jiří Rusnok in 2013 resulted in a fundamental change of course in policy towards China. The ‘restart of relations’ was finalized by the new government formed in January 2014 and led by ČSSD's Bohuslav Sobotka.

China reacted to the change of policy by resuming bilateral contacts, in significant part related to 17+1 activities. During a visit of Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek to Beijing in April 2014, a common press communique was issued, calling for a “fresh impetus” in relations. In the communique, the Czech side explicitly affirmed support for the One-China policy in relation to Tibet.<sup>14</sup> In November 2015, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative, a move with allegedly economic, but in reality mostly political rationale.

The warming of relations finally culminated in the March 2016 visit to Czechia by President Xi Jinping. The first-ever visit of the Chinese President was apparently a reward for Zeman's trip to Beijing to commemorate the end of the Second World War in Asia (as the only EU head of state and despite significant domestic and international criticism) and a more pro-China policy by the Czech leadership. It was stressed that Czechia was the first country in the region that Xi Jinping had visited as president and the bilateral ties were described as the best in history. The two leaders signed a strategic partnership agreement during the visit<sup>15</sup> and, according to the tally issued by the Office of the Czech President, presided over the signing of 23 investment and export deals, worth 12 billion EUR in total.<sup>16</sup> One of the deals was on cooperation on an analytical study on building the Danube-Oder-Elbe river canal, an extremely expensive project of the Czech President. Thus, it appeared that China was poised to reward Czechia for its shelving of political issues and its cessation of ‘sensitive moves’ on issues of China's sovereignty and human rights record.

Much ado was made about the economic deliverables – Zeman touted more than 200 billion CZK of Chinese investment coming to Czechia by 2020. Most attention

was given to acquisitions by a nominally private Shanghai-based company CEFC which made its headquarters in Prague, employing former Czech politicians and lobbyists.<sup>17</sup> CEFC acquired a wide portfolio of assets in real estate, beer brewing, engineering, sports and media over 2015–2017. The activities of CEFC were interpreted in Czechia as directed by the Chinese state and as a part of the economic charm offensive. The chairman of CEFC, Ye Jianming, even (unprecedentedly) became an honorary advisor to the Czech President Zeman.

At the first glance, the Czech government's new policy towards China brought benefits for (at least some) Czech companies on the Chinese market. At a time coinciding with the Czech foreign policy 'restart', Home Credit (a daughter company of PPF, owned by the richest Czech businessman, Petr Kellner) was granted a national license to offer retail loans in China.<sup>18</sup> PPF has been linked closely to President Zeman and pro-China lobbyists in Czechia and has been speculated to be an important force pushing for the 'restart'.<sup>19</sup> However, as PPF is registered in the Netherlands and does not pay taxes in Czechia, the actual benefits of its business success in China for the Czech economy are questionable.

Beijing's favoring Czechia seemingly translated into support of Czechia's priorities within the 17+1 platform, where it has been designated as a center for financial cooperation, civil aviation and health cooperation. The China Investment Forum (supported by CEFC) was subsumed under the framework of the 17+1 in 2013 (it was first held in 2010) and became a flagship event for Czech participation in the format. Encouraged by the Beijing government, the Bank of China, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the Bank of Communications opened branches in Prague in 2015, 2017 and 2019 respectively. Czechia hosted the 1st China-CEEC Civil Aviation Forum in 2018, with its role as an aviation hub being manifested by the three direct Czech-China flights to Chengdu, Beijing and Shanghai (with a stopover in Xi'an) which have opened since 2015.<sup>20</sup> Rather than buttressed by a clear economic rationale, the opening of direct connections seems to have been made directly on the request of the Czech side and despite some opposition from Chinese airline companies.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, the period of warm bilateral ties that reached its apex at the time of Xi Jinping's 2016 visit has faded very quickly. Relying on the establishment of political partnerships (see below) has not proved sufficient in the face of a lack of promised economic results. China's economic outreach, undertaken mostly through CEFC investments, ran down after the company encountered financial problems and its chairman Ye Jianming disappeared in a corruption probe in China.<sup>22</sup> CEFC turned out to be the wrong choice for Beijing to carry out its objectives towards Czechia, ultimately bringing embarrassment for the Chinese government.<sup>23</sup> Its operations were revealed to be a Ponzi scheme fueled by local financing, and CEFC was bailed out by the Chinese state-owned CITIC company which came to the rescue and acquired its assets in 2018 in a final bid to save face.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, it is notable that most of the public expectations surrounding Chinese investment (including specific numbers) have been created by Czech actors following their own domestic interests, rather than by Beijing. Paradoxically, Chinese interlocutors thus contributed to the ultimate backlash against China by creating a vision of an unrealistic upgrade of economic ties that Beijing could not (or did not want to) deliver upon. As an investment target, Czechia – and all others CEE coun-

tries – simply seems not to be that attractive, in comparison to Western European countries.<sup>25</sup> Chinese investments have continued flowing mostly to Western Europe and even here FDI faced a downturn due to stricter capital controls in recent years.<sup>26</sup>

In the government formed in 2017 and led by the ANO party, China has missed its previous political support, as the Social Democrats were relegated into a junior coalition partner and even its representatives became significantly less enthusiastic due to unfulfilled economic expectations.<sup>27</sup> Issues of human rights, Taiwan and Tibet gained in strength as a counterweight to the China policy promoted by the previous government since 2013. This was already manifested by the late 2016 visit of the Dalai Lama to Prague, during which he was received by a group of politicians including ministers of the government from the junior coalition member, the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL). The Chinese side threatened to retaliate and it was calmed down at the time by the so called 'declaration of four', where the four constitutionally highest representatives of the Czech state reiterated Czech support for China's territorial integrity.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, China still cancelled the visit of the Czech Minister of Agriculture to China.<sup>29</sup> Finally, security issues related mainly to Huawei have become a new topic in Czech-China relations after the late 2018 public warning on ZTE and Huawei by the National Authority on Cyber and Information Security (NUKIB) which made Czechia an early skeptical voice in the European debate over 5G security.<sup>30</sup>

China has reacted harshly to the changing environment on the Czech side, with a demonstration of 'sticks'. The Chinese Embassy under the new Ambassador Zhang Jianmin, who assumed the post in 2018, became unprecedentedly assertive in criticizing Czech politicians and media for statements on Taiwan, Hong Kong, Chinese telecommunication companies and other issues. The brash style of the ambassador led to public conflicts with PM Andrej Babiš and Minister of Culture Lubomír Zaorálek (Minister of Foreign Affairs in the previous Social Democrats-led government).<sup>31</sup> Zhang took steps which appeared to have steered away from established practice when he pressured the Czech Minister of Industry and Trade as well as the Prague Mayor to expel the director of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office from meetings where the representative of the People's Republic of China was present as well.<sup>32</sup> These moves have, however, only served to further antagonize both Czech politicians and the media.

China did not hesitate to take concrete actions to punish the 'misbehaving' Czech politicians. On top of cutting cultural cooperation (see below), when after several months of discussions, Prague finally revoked its sister-city agreement with Beijing in October 2019 due to the inclusion of a One-China policy article, China decided to shelve the planned fifth direct flight between Czechia and China (Prague-Shenzhen) and was reportedly considering divestment from the Slavia soccer club.<sup>33</sup> The worsening relations have manifested in the diplomatic sphere as well. According to leaked diplomatic cables published in Czech media in September 2019, Chinese counterparts treated the Czech Ambassador in Beijing Vladimír Tomšík unceremoniously. Tomšík's requests for meetings were met with protracted responses and he was finally received only by a low-level ministry official.<sup>34</sup> Czech diplomats have also reported Chinese stalling on commercial contracts such as the sale of Czech light aircraft and the opening of a trade office in Guangzhou, referring to "bullying,

threats and punishments” from the Chinese side.<sup>35</sup> Starting from March 2020, the direct flight connection between Prague and Beijing was scrapped.<sup>36</sup> This move most likely resulted from the financially troubled Hainan Airlines getting approval to cancel the unprofitable connection as the number of passengers had been decreasing since 2017.<sup>37</sup> The introduction of the flight connection, despite initial doubts over its profitability, serves as one of the prime examples of carrots offered by China. Moreover, the possibility that China would limit tourism to Czechia was also discussed by Czech commentators,<sup>38</sup> based on similar precedents from South Korea and Taiwan. However, Beijing has not (yet) moved in this direction.

Despite facing a significant backlash from Czech society and politicians against its harsh approach, Beijing only chose to increase its use of threats. In late 2019, Jaroslav Kubera, the late President of the Czech Senate, was planning a visit to Taiwan as the head of a delegation scheduled for February 2020. The delegation would have represented the highest-profile visit of a Czech politician to the self-ruling island in decades. Once again, the pressure against the visit was not communicated publicly by China's representatives in Czechia or directly by Beijing, but by the President Miloš Zeman, who warned that the visit would damage Czech economic interests.<sup>39</sup> As Kubera suddenly passed away in January 2020, the plans for the visit were halted. The Czech media revealed that shortly before his death Kubera received a threatening letter from the Chinese Embassy.<sup>40</sup> The letter was written in a form and language that was not in line with the standard diplomatic practice. Most importantly, it threatened repercussions for Czech companies if Kubera proceeded with his plans to visit Taiwan, explicitly listing carmaker Škoda Auto, retail-banking provider Home Credit Group and piano manufacturer Klavíry Petrof. Curiously, the letter seems to have been handed to Kubera by the Office of the Czech President together with its own evaluation of the situation including the warning that the visit may bring another freeze in high-level contacts as had been the case after 2009. It was later found out that the letter was requested from the Chinese Embassy by the Office of the Czech President in order to stall the visit.<sup>41</sup> The revelations are in line with the assertions of the Czech Security Information Service (BIS), which noted China's “efforts to disrupt Czech-Taiwanese political and economic relations”, apparently with strong assistance from domestic actors.<sup>42</sup>

The use of sticks by China eventually backfired. The new Senate President Miloš Vystrčil expressed his intention to proceed with the visit to Taiwan anyway. On March 11, 2020, a meeting of the four constitutionally highest representatives – President Zeman, PM Babiš, Senate President Vystrčil, Chamber of Deputies Speaker Vondráček – was held. At the meeting, Vystrčil was outvoted on his proposal that the Chinese Ambassador Zhang be replaced and that the Embassy apologize for its threats.<sup>43</sup> However, the statement issued after the meeting signified so far the strongest reaction to China's use of threats and at least a verbal repositioning of the former actively pro-China policy.<sup>44</sup> It thus stood in direct contrast to the previous ‘declaration of four’ signed in 2016. The statement voiced that the ties between the two countries should be “mutually beneficial” and stressed discontent with the results of bilateral economic relations. Moreover, it said that the representatives “refuse any form of pressure and condemn threats of reprisals”. The determination to “develop economic and cultural cooperation with Taiwan” was also mentioned.

The apparent freefall of Czech-China relations was halted out of necessity due to the sudden outbreak of coronavirus. Initially, PM Babiš refused to provide help to China, despite official requests made by the Chinese ambassador, saying that medical supplies will be needed at home.<sup>45</sup> After the negative reaction by a portion of the Czech public Babiš changed his mind, promising 10 million CZK of aid. About 6 million CZK was donated to the World Health Organization (WHO) and 3 million CZK used to buy medical supplies for China.<sup>46</sup> The first batch of aid was dispatched through Austria on February 13, 2020. Another batch, this time loaded on a Czech Army plane and carrying 5 tons of supplies was only sent to China on March 1, when the epidemic situation in China had already passed its apex.<sup>47</sup> The supplies in the second batch were donated by Czech companies including PFF and Škoda, Czech regions and cities as well as universities. Due to the lack of supplies at the time, they were not bought in Czechia but in other EU countries.<sup>48</sup> Some 4 tons of cargo that did not fit on the plane was eventually donated by China back to Czechia after the spillover of the epidemic to Europe.

Just a few days before the second donation was delivered, the Chancellor of the Czech President Vratislav Mynář, together with Zeman's advisor Martin Nejedlý and political entrepreneur, lobbyist and member of the Board of CITIC Europe Holdings Jaroslav Tvrdík visited China, where Mynář met with the Chinese vice-PM Hu Chunhua.<sup>49</sup> According to the Office of the President, the reason for the visit was to personally present the donation letter and communicate the intention of President Zeman to attend the 17+1 summit in Beijing that was to be held in April. While Zeman initially claimed that he would not attend because of the lack of Chinese investments, he later changed his mind and was set on going even when it was clear the summit would not take place.<sup>50</sup>

On March 1, the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Czechia, with numbers rising to more than 2,000 by the end of the month. The country found itself in a situation of lack of medical supplies such as masks, respirators, protective garments, etc. As China was the biggest supplier and already past the worst of the outbreak, the Czech government rushed to purchase the supplies from China.

The Czech government seems to have reached suppliers mainly through Chinese interlocutors of the Czech China Chamber of Collaboration led by Tvrdík.<sup>51</sup> The task to manage the purchases was given to the Minister of Interior and the Chairman of Social Democrats, Jan Hamáček, who even sent a personal letter to the Party Secretary of Shanghai to assist in the matter. Initially, hiccups were encountered because the Ministry of Health did not finalize the payment for the supplies and PM Babiš went on television to claim that the "Chinese scammed us".<sup>52</sup> Eventually, the payment was made with the assistance of the Czech National Bank and the office of Bank of China in Prague. To clear up the apparent misunderstanding, Babiš met with Ambassador Zhang and thanked him for the Embassy's involvement. President Zeman is also said to have intervened in the matter.<sup>53</sup> The first plane from China with rapid testing kits arrived in Czechia on February 18, 2020. An "air bridge" was created afterwards, with several planes with medical supplies arriving every few days. The first airplane with respirators on March 20, 2020, was welcomed at the airport by PM Babiš, Minister of Interior Hamáček and Chinese Ambassador Zhang. The ambassador stressed that

Czechia had earlier supported China in the fight against the epidemic and that China would “help to the best of its capabilities”.<sup>54</sup>

Pro-China politicians presented successful purchases from China as vindication for the friendly policy towards Beijing that they had been advocating for years. The President's advisor Mynář claimed that China has ordered one production facility to produce supplies specifically for Czechia.<sup>55</sup> He attributed China's willingness to assist in the matter also to his February visit to Beijing. In a televised address, President Zeman – similarly to Serbian president Vučić – said that China was the only country that had helped Czechia to fight the epidemic.<sup>56</sup> PM Babiš, who only a few weeks before had said he would not miss Chinese Ambassador Zhang if he was replaced, lauded the assistance of the Chinese Embassy and stressed that the contacts that President Zeman had established in China would prove useful in the ongoing crisis.<sup>57</sup>

However, representatives of the Czech government were criticized for gratitude towards China, as the supplies from China were not donated (as opposed to Czech aid provided to China during the outbreak of coronavirus) but regularly purchased. To the contrary, the role of other actors such as NATO, which provided an airplane for the airlift of supplies, or the EU, which announced large-scale budgetary measures to assist the member states in fighting the epidemic, was ignored or downplayed by the government.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, suspicion has arisen as to whether the government has not unduly preferred Chinese suppliers over local companies able to provide the necessary material, sometimes even at better prices.<sup>59</sup> Whether Beijing really gave Czechia preferential treatment in terms of supplying medical material is not yet clear and, at the time of writing, is only corroborated by the statements of Czech politicians.

Czechia was also included in China's propaganda blitz on COVID-19. The medical authorities of both countries were in contact during the 17+1 videoconference call organized by China on March 13, 2020, to share its experience of fighting the epidemic. The call was used by Chinese propaganda as evidence of China helping the CEE countries and the Chinese government's competence in managing the outbreak.<sup>60</sup> However, Czechia decided to cooperate also with Taiwan on anti-epidemic efforts, which garnered a predictable rebuke from the Chinese ambassador.<sup>61</sup>

## **LET'S PARTY: INTER-PARTY RELATIONS AS A MAINSTAY OF CHINESE INFLUENCE**

One of the anchors of China's presence in Czechia has been its contacts with political elites, facilitated by invitations for visits to China and high-profile treatment as inducements. Not surprisingly, the traditional partner of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and China in Czechia has been the Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia (KSČM), where inter-party ties go as far back as to the 1990s. KSČM has been the most steadfast supporter of relations with China in the country despite the changes of political environment. Members of the Czech Communist Party visit China regularly on propaganda tours, including the (so far underreported) example of the participation of KSČM Deputy Chairman Václav Ort at the Conference on Chinese ethnic policy organized in February 2019 in Xinjiang. At the conference, 50 participants from 20 countries learned how to “manage” ethnic minorities in multiethnic

states from the Chinese Communist Party's organizers.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, apart from aiding in spreading Chinese propaganda, Czech Communists' ability to proactively shape the policy of Czech governments has been limited.

Therefore, the more consequential proponent of pro-China policies has been the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) whose ties with CCP have deep roots as well.<sup>63</sup> When ČSSD found itself in opposition in 2006, CCP made sure to continue its relations with the party and invited ČSSD leader Paroubek for a visit to the International Liaison Department (ILD) of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in Beijing.<sup>64</sup> In 2012, the two parties "institutionalized" their ties by signing a memorandum of cooperation, which was only reported in Chinese media and the content of which is not known.<sup>65</sup>

The role of ČSSD in reorienting the country's foreign policy towards China after 2013 was commended by the vice-minister of the ILD Zhou Li, who referred to the Czech Social Democratic Party as a focus of CCP outreach towards Czech society, conducted "through close contacts and focused exchanges and communication".<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Social Democrats led the government that finalized the 'restart' of Czech-China relations together with President Zeman, himself a former Social Democratic politician. Worthy of particular attention is the fact that former Social Democratic politicians-turned lobbyists have played an outsized role in the promotion of ties with China in the country – most visible among them Jaroslav Tvrdík (ex-Minister of Defense), Jan Kohout (ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Štefan Füle (ex-EU Commissioner for Enlargement).<sup>67</sup> Former Social Democratic PM Paroubek still gets regular invitations for high-profile events in China, despite his lack of influence over the current politics.<sup>68</sup> Paroubek also regularly communicates China-positive messages in the Czech discourse. Former PM Sobotka was also invited to ILD in Beijing after finishing his tenure, demonstrating the concerted efforts to maintain contacts with former politicians.<sup>69</sup>

However, links to China have not been limited to the Czech Communists and Social Democrats. Petr Nečas, the PM of the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) government in 2010–2013, has been involved in China-related lobbying activities and emerged to defend China in the public debate during the downfall of relations in 2019.<sup>70</sup> Jan Zahradil, another representative of ODS, is a chair of the EU-China Friendship Group at the European Parliament, often quoted in Chinese media as a representative of the EU stance.<sup>71</sup> Recently, the CCP has also sought to build relations with ANO,<sup>72</sup> although ANO has denied developing contacts.<sup>73</sup> Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), a right extremist party, was apparently contacted with an offer of cooperation by CCP as well.<sup>74</sup>

Another impetus for inter-party contacts came with the 17+1 cooperation as inter-party summits have been held under the platform and organized by the ILD in 2016 and 2017. Czech Communists (KSČM) attended both the meetings and Social Democrats (ČSSD) and Civic Democrats (ODS) at least one of them. ČSSD and KSČM parties were also present at the High-Level World Political Parties Dialogue in Beijing in 2017, designed to boost CCP's legitimacy as well as Chinese designs for international relations, specifically the "community of shared destiny" which was the main theme of the meeting.<sup>75</sup>

Interestingly, several high-profile visits of Chinese representatives to the country after the 'restart' were of Communist Party apparatchiks as opposed to representatives of the government. This was, for example, the case of the attendance of Liu Yunshan, nicknamed the Chinese "Propaganda tsar",<sup>76</sup> who lacked any formal government role, at the 2017 China Investment Forum held in Prague. The forum itself was co-organized by the China Economic Contact Center, an ILD organization.<sup>77</sup> It thus appears that Beijing has given an outsized role to party diplomacy in its dealings with Czechia, seeking to build ties that would outlast respective governments. China has targeted current and also former leaders, providing them an opportunity to stay relevant, thus establishing wide networks of influence. This has echoed a similar strategy employed by China in other European countries.<sup>78</sup>

## UNDER THE RADAR: THE DISCREET CHARM OF CHINESE PARADIPLOMACY

Paradiplomacy, relations on the sub-national level, has become one of the chief avenues of China's ties with Czechia after the warming of bilateral relations and also an important part of cooperation within the 17+1 format. Out of the 18 existing partnerships among Czech regions and their largest cities (regional seats) with their Chinese counterparts, 12 have been concluded since the inception of the 17+1 format in 2012.<sup>79</sup> However, the Czech regions gained interest in exploring cooperation with China even sooner, and visits of Czech regional leaders were one of the few contacts between the countries that were still ongoing during the 2009–2012 freeze. Moreover, local cooperation became one of the focus areas of Czechia under the 17+1 format.<sup>80</sup>

In August 2014, the 2nd China-CEEC Local Leaders' Meeting was held in Prague, resulting in the establishment of the China-CEEC Association of Provincial Governors. Miroslav Novák, the head of Moravia-Silesia region, became one of the co-presidents of the Association,<sup>81</sup> the functioning of which remains largely unknown. The 3rd China-CEEC Local Leaders' Meeting in Tangshan, China, held in 2016 was also attended by PM Sobotka, stressing the importance given to this agenda by the Czech government.

On the Chinese side, provinces have been incentivized by the central government to establish partnerships with CEE countries to give substance to 17+1 cooperation. Local cooperation has brought about some of the largest projects in Czech-China cooperation, such as the planned thermal resort in Pasohlávky in the South Moravia Region.<sup>82</sup> The company involved in the project was approached by the Hebei province, a partner of South Moravia region since 2016, with a recommendation to choose the project for its planned overseas expansion.<sup>83</sup> However, as shown by previous research, in most cases the cooperation seems to have been at the initiative of the Czech regions, where local politicians have been enthusiastic about exploring economic cooperation with China.<sup>84</sup> It should also be noted that most of the regional leaders advocating for opening relations with Chinese regions, including Michal Hašek, the head of Association of Czech regions at the time, were (again) from the Social Democratic Party, the party that was at the time leading the change of policy towards China.

An interesting case of local cooperation is that of Olomouc Region and Fujian Province. The cooperation started in 2014, on the initiative of the Secretariat for



Cooperation between CEE countries. The same year, a representative office of the Olomouc Region was opened in Fuzhou. The running of the office was taken up by a well-connected Chinese businessman James Wu, who, since 2019, has also been the head of the Czech Fujian Association. However, it turned out that the representative office did not bring any concrete results to the Olomouc Region, instead being used for personal business interests of the Chinese businessman, with the local government considering withdrawing its official support.<sup>85</sup> This thus seems to be a case of local cooperation and political cover being hijacked for personal business interests.

Despite the seemingly unpolitical nature of local cooperation, it has proved to be controversial in connection with the Prague-Beijing sister city agreement, signed during the visit of Xi Jinping to Prague in March 2016. The agreement included an article in which Prague acknowledged support for the Chinese government's One-China policy. The Chinese side even allegedly tried to "smuggle" into the sister city agreement a clause in which Prague recognizes the Market Economy Status (MES) of China.<sup>86</sup> The MES was left out of the agreement, while reference to Taiwan as a part of China remained, based on the acknowledgement of One-China policy by Czechia. Some authors, however, claim that the One-China clause was included proactively by the Czech side alone.<sup>87</sup>

Nevertheless, after the 2018 elections to the Prague city government, the new ruling coalition led by Mayor Zdeněk Hřib set out to alter the sister city agreement, deeming it inappropriate and a symbol of subservience to China.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Hřib also made a series of moves on issues seen as sensitive by China, such as meeting with the Taiwanese President and the head of the Tibetan Parliament in exile.<sup>89</sup>

After Beijing did not react to Prague's demands to renegotiate the partnership agreement, the Prague city council voted to revoke the agreement in early October 2019.<sup>90</sup> Before it could formally do so, Beijing city government announced the termination of the agreement itself. China's 'sticks' were applied in various domains even before the break-up was finalized. Some directly targeted Prague, such as cancellations of tours in China of musical ensembles affiliated with the city,<sup>91</sup> but most were not discriminatory and affected the bilateral relations overall.

After Prague finalized its new partnership agreement with Taipei in January 2020, the Shanghai government announced it would sever ties with Prague over its interference in China's "domestic affairs".<sup>92</sup> The episode demonstrated that even in the case of sub-national relations, ties with China always carry political undertones that need to be accounted for.

Linked to the sister city agreement was another 'carrot' which turned up sour. In response to the criticism of the Prague-Beijing sister city agreement directed to the then ruling coalition in Prague, the municipal government argued that the agreement was a precondition for economic cooperation with Beijing, and that it would, among other benefits, help Prague secure a highly coveted panda for the Prague zoo.<sup>93</sup> The arrival of a panda was presented as a done deal and the Prague zoo ran a tender for building a pavilion worth 200 million CZK. However, the panda was not in the end leased to Czechia. The Prague Mayor and the director of Prague zoo blamed the Czech President Zeman for not officially asking for the animal, while Zeman accused both the municipality and the director of the Prague zoo of not being active enough in securing the animal.<sup>94</sup> One of the representatives of the municipality government

tweeted that he did not see “why [Czechia should] pay China 20 million a year for the lease of a panda” and that “China will most likely use this money for industrial espionage against us”.<sup>95</sup> Given the fact that during the hyped debate over the panda the new Prague government coalition had already signaled its uneasiness with the sister city agreement, the discontinuation of the sensitive talks on panda seems to have been a rather preemptive move from the Chinese side in anticipation of the problems.

The COVID-19 crisis presented another case of activation of sub-national relations. At least five Czech regions (Pardubice, Olomouc, South Moravia, Karlovy Vary and Vysočina) and one city (Třebíč) donated medical supplies to their partners in China as part of the second batch of aid dispatched from Czechia to China at the beginning of March 2020. The aid was coordinated by the Association of Czech Regions. The supplies that did not fit on the plane were eventually re-donated back by China as the local situation in Hebei had gone better.<sup>96</sup> In mid-April 2020, aid was reciprocated by Chinese regions. The city of Kaifeng donated 20,000 masks to the city of Náchod.<sup>97</sup>

## **WE THE PEOPLE? CHALLENGES OF PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE DIPLOMACY WITH PRC**

One of the examples of Chinese ‘carrots’ to Czechia is the presence of Confucius Institutes (CIs). In Czechia, attempts to establish institutions under direct Chinese tutelage have been met with open skepticism and opposition. When China attempted to establish a CI at Charles University, the offer was refused. Other Prague-based public universities followed. A CI was eventually established at Palacký University in Olomouc, a city in the region of Moravia in 2007.<sup>98</sup> Repeated attempts to establish a CI in Prague resulted in one opening at the private University of Finance and Administration in 2018.<sup>99</sup> In the end, China succeeded in laying down a possible foundation for its further academic influence, but was denied the higher level of academic prestige it had apparently originally sought.

The situation is less clear when it comes to Confucius Classrooms. The first one opened at VSB – Technical University of Ostrava in 2018.<sup>100</sup> The classrooms have not yet raised much attention among the China watching community.

Academic cooperation with Czech universities has evolved significantly in recent years and takes place at both university as well as faculty, institute and center levels. The opportunities for studying in China have also grown significantly. Apart from scholarships on a bilateral level, Czech students can also apply for EU Window scholarships or 17+1 scholarships. Moreover, there are also special scholarships offered by Confucius Institutes, universities, provinces, etc. According to information from the Chinese Embassy in Prague from 2018, there were around 400 Czech students in China studying in various programs, 90 of which were there on a scholarship administered by the Embassy.<sup>101</sup> Interestingly, despite the many opportunities and the spur from a political level, the interest of Czech students towards studying Chinese has actually decreased.<sup>102</sup> This can be attributed to the increase in other study opportunities elsewhere and/or the negative perception of China in the country.

Perhaps even more intriguing is China's promotion of Czech language study in China. Apart from the long-established study program at the Beijing Foreign Affairs

University, many other study programs and courses on the Czech language have sprung up around China in recent years. Hence, the Czech language can now be studied at more than ten universities.<sup>103</sup> This growth is connected to the wider efforts within the Belt and Road Initiative and China-CEE cooperation to train students with regional skills and language expertise. It can be safely assumed that Chinese universities have been opening the courses to take advantage of the economic incentives offered by the central government. However, whether this is actually commensurate with the real requirements of the job market is questionable.

Until recently Czech universities seemed rather oblivious to any risks associated with cooperation with the Chinese side. However, the example of the Czech-China research center established at Charles University, the oldest and still the most prestigious Czech university, changed the situation.<sup>104</sup> The center's activities included annual conferences enabling Chinese participants to uncritically (and largely unopposed) present Chinese government's standpoints on security, the Chinese model of development and other issues. The researchers associated with the university secretly billed the Chinese Embassy for co-organizing the conferences and teaching a course on the Belt and Road Initiative at the public university, and selected prospective students who were later invited to China under the Bridge for the Future program.<sup>105</sup>

While the number of Chinese students in Czechia is still relatively modest,<sup>106</sup> the increase over the last five years has been astonishing – reaching 267%, by far the highest increase in comparison to other countries. China also has the second (after Russia) highest number of institutional agreements with Czech public universities.<sup>107</sup> Despite the growing numbers, Chinese students are largely seen by Czech universities as an unproblematic component of the internationalization of higher education and as an additional source of income. Until recently, the universities were not aware of the fact that the Chinese Embassy in Prague monitors Chinese students' activities (and opinions they express while pursuing their studies) in Czechia.<sup>108</sup> The embassy holds regular debriefs with both Chinese students and incoming visiting researchers. Closed WeChat groups bringing together students and including representatives of the embassy allegedly exist in Czechia too.<sup>109</sup>

The activities of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) have flown mostly under the radar of both the China watching community and Czech journalists. CSSA has a branch in Czechia, but very little is available about its activities. One example is a screening of the patriotic propaganda movie “Me and My Country” (我和我的祖国).<sup>110</sup>

The COVID-19 epidemic, however, shed more light also on the functioning of the local CSSA and its relations to the Chinese Embassy in Prague. The embassy allegedly offered the Chinese diaspora in Czechia access to masks, hand sanitizers and gloves, showing its support and care in a time of crisis (and indirectly implying that the Czech state is not able or willing to provide these to the Chinese diaspora). In relation to the Chinese students, the embassy outsourced these activities to the local branch of CSSA, which allegedly required students to submit personal information (including on their families in China) in order to access the medical equipment supplies provided by the embassy.<sup>111</sup>

In the domain of people-to-people relations, Chinese attempts to influence media narratives in Czechia deserve special attention. In an attempt to change the discourse

on the Hong Kong protests, Zhang Jianmin, the Chinese Ambassador to Czechia, wrote an op-ed critical of the Hong Kong protests and mentioning foreign influence behind the scenes; the piece was published in *Parlamentní listy*, an 'alternative', yet widely read news server.<sup>112</sup> Discourse analysis on a large-scale sample of media outputs published from 2010 to mid-2017 in Czechia, done by the MapInfluenCE project, uncovered that in 2015, when the allegedly private Chinese company CEFC invested in the Czech company Empresa Media, the tone of the reporting by its two media outlets (TV Barrandov and the magazine *Týden*) changed significantly. Before the acquisition the media produced a mixture of positive, negative, and neutral reports on China; however, from the day of the acquisition, they started reporting on China only in a positive manner (both negative as well as neutral reports on China disappeared completely from the media discourse of these two outlets).<sup>113</sup> Not only has the tone changed, but also its China-related focus shifted – especially in the case of TV Barrandov. The network, already famous for weekly interviews with the Czech President Zeman, who backed China's narratives, now started to cover China's Belt and Road initiative with a frequency unparalleled in comparison to 40 other Czech media outlets, both publicly as well as privately owned, which were included in the analysis.

If a direct acquisition is not possible, China in Czechia has employed content-sharing tactics. In Czechia, in connection with the 70th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations, the Chinese embassy produced an eight-page supplement to the local nationwide daily *Právo*. The section was obscurely labeled as a "theme and commercial supplement". The articles were exclusively positive towards China and were signed by the daily's reporters, easily misleading readers into believing that the supplement was the usual reporting by the media.<sup>114</sup> *Právo* also hosted signed articles by Wen Jiabao and Xi Jinping on the occasion of their visits in 2005 and 2016 respectively.

An even more salient case is that of *Literární noviny*, which concluded a content-sharing agreement with *Guangming Daily* in 2017, one of the chief communist party-run newspapers.<sup>115</sup> The content is titled *Reading China+* and is reminiscent of the similar "China Watch" content present in Western media such as in the *Washington Post*. The articles published here mostly focus on spreading "positive energy" about China, but also defend official foreign policy stances of China.

Another traditional avenue is to publish ambassador's op-eds in *Parlamentní listy*, a media outlet accused in the past of spreading disinformation.<sup>116</sup> The op-eds, published regularly, focus on for example Czech-Chinese economic cooperation, China's management of the COVID-19 epidemic, China's view on the Hong Kong protests, etc.

China has also slowly built up a presence on social media platforms in Czechia, a trend that has accelerated in 2019–2020. The Chinese Embassy established its Facebook page in 2015 and since then have placed advertisements to its posts in order to reach a wider audience. In February 2020, the Embassy also opened a Twitter account, following the trend of other Chinese embassies all around the world. Both channels have been especially active throughout the COVID-19 epidemic in presenting the "Chinese story" of the government's handling of the epidemic and later on China's "mask diplomacy" in Czechia and elsewhere in Europe. The prime Chinese media with a presence on social media in Czechia is the China Radio International (CRI) that has

had a Facebook page since 2013. The page has more than 850,000 followers, with most of them apparently fake accounts. In comparison, China Radio International which operates in four times bigger Poland (Chińskie Radio Międzynarodowe), had less than 90,000 followers in March 2020. The Czech version of the CRI page also widely uses paid promotion for its posts. During the COVID-19 epidemic, CRI was offering 500 CZK (20 EUR) to Czech students for shooting supportive messages for China. CRI also shot “personalized” videos with a Czech-speaking Chinese commentator discussing the epidemic situation in China.<sup>117</sup> However, most of the content of social media accounts consists of state media stories translated into Czech with (so far) little customization to the audience. Unlike in Poland (see the chapter on people-to-people diplomacy in the country), a cooperation with social media influencers has not been observed in Czechia so far.

Local Chinese media are present in Czechia as well. A number of Chinese diaspora associations in Czechia issue a newspaper the Prague Chinese Times (布拉格时报), established in 2010.<sup>118</sup> A powerful local figure Zhou Lingjian, mentioned below, heads the diaspora newspaper. Apart from coverage that broadly touches upon issues related to the local community, the newspaper also seems to serve as a semi-official outlet of the Chinese Embassy, although there is no direct affiliation mentioned in the newspaper. The local branch of European Times (欧洲时报), a Europe-wide network of Chinese language media, was established in 2019.<sup>119</sup>

Overall, the direct impact of Chinese efforts to spread its messages in the media and to the public has been rather limited. Messages backing China's narrative have been effectively communicated indirectly through proxies, chief among them, President Zeman himself. A peculiar case is that of the hiring of a PR agency with the goal of ‘rationalizing the debate about China’ in the country. In December 2019, it was revealed that the Home Credit company financed this move. The PR agency further assisted in the setting-up and functioning of a think-tank Sinoskop, led by Vít Vojta, a long-time Chinese interpreter for the Czech presidents, including for President Zeman. Sinoskop has presented itself as a “moderate” voice on China in the country. Through the PR agency, Home Credit also supported a conference on China in the Chamber of Deputies and briefed the opposition representatives in Prague on their response to Mayor Hřib's decision to revoke the sister city agreement with Beijing. In this case, the defense of China's image in the country was effectively outsourced to a local company, driven most likely by its own business interests rather than Beijing's directives.

The Czech Security Information Service (BIS) has warned that China has been increasingly selecting persons of interest from academia, security bodies and the state administration and inviting them for various all-expenses-paid trips to China. According to BIS, China “thus establishes a contact network of individuals, who will regard it with favor, or more specifically feel that they ‘owe China something’ and will be willing to be forthcoming towards China”.<sup>120</sup> One example among many is the case of the visit of the head of ANO 2011-affiliated think-tank, Šárka Prát, to China with an unspecified group of young people in 2019 that caused controversy in Czech politics.<sup>121</sup>

China and Czechia have also cooperated in sports, with the cooperation gaining traction especially in winter sports in the run-up to the Beijing Winter Olympics in

2022. China managed to enlist some of the most famous Czech athletes in its efforts. In 2019, Chinese hockey team China Golden Dragon entered the 2nd National Czech Hockey League as a competing team. The project has been led by the famous Czech hockey player Jaromír Jágr who was named an ambassador of China's ice hockey in 2019 during a visit to China as a member of President Zeman's entourage.<sup>122</sup> In soccer, the cooperation has been spearheaded by former soccer star Pavel Nedvěd, who became an ambassador of the Chinese Super League in 2016.<sup>123</sup> Nedvěd was paid to promote Chinese soccer by CEFC, the original investor in the Slavia soccer club.<sup>124</sup> Coupled with Jágr's promotion deal with Huawei,<sup>125</sup> which ensured sponsorship for the Jágr-owned Kladno ice hockey team, the interlocking engagement of Chinese companies and the government's efforts is worthy of attention.

Although there is only a relatively small Chinese diaspora in Czechia numbering around 7,000<sup>126</sup>, it has also figured more prominently in recent years in China's approach towards Czechia. This has been connected to the increased prominence of United Front work abroad globally.<sup>127</sup> There is a patchwork of Chinese organizations in the country, with several of them mirroring CCP-affiliated organizations present in the Chinese diaspora globally. The Czech branch of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, directly subordinated to the CCP United Front Work Department, was founded in 2004. It has regularly published statements supporting the Chinese government's stances, such as the condemnation of the Hong Kong protests in 2019.<sup>128</sup>

In several cases, the use of the Chinese diaspora to achieve political goals has stirred controversy. In 2016, the Chinese Embassy organized a welcoming for Xi Jinping during his visit to Prague, an established practice during visits of high officials. At the welcoming, a small number of Chinese supporters got into conflict with Czech demonstrators who were waving flags of Tibet and East Turkestan.<sup>129</sup> The Chinese Embassy has also reportedly mobilized the local Chinese community to harass a group of Chinese Christians, who applied for asylum in the country in 2016.<sup>130</sup> For example, some of the asylum seekers lost their jobs in Chinese restaurants on the impetus of the Chinese Embassy after their identity was revealed.<sup>131</sup> The embassy's representatives also allegedly demanded passport numbers of the asylum seekers from officers of the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic.<sup>132</sup>

The local Chinese diaspora became a focal point of attention during the COVID-19 epidemic. On March 17, 2020, the Czech government confiscated some 680,000 face masks in the town of Lovosice. The reason given was that the masks belonged to a local company that was trying to sell them to the Ministry of Health for an inflated price. However, it was soon revealed that some of the packages confiscated were a part of aid from the Qingtian Red Cross Society, destined for Italian Chinese compatriots. A report in the Czech media<sup>133</sup> pointed out that all the masks had been initially imported by Zhou Lingjian, the head of the Qingtian Association in Czechia, and a powerful figure in the Chinese community.<sup>134</sup> According to Zhou's account, he sold a bigger part of the masks to the local company for a regular price and wanted to send the rest to Italy. However, suspicions remained as it was Zhou who also organized a large-scale purchase of medical materials to be sent the other way, from Czechia to China, just a month before. The efforts were supported by the Chinese Embassy and the Czech government was even warned about it by

the Czech intelligence service at the time.<sup>135</sup> Some in the Chinese community have doubted Zhou Lingjian's story, suspecting not all of the donated supplies were delivered and speculating that the supplies were resold in Czechia.<sup>136</sup> Zhou was also reportedly offering 50 masks for each local Chinese family, provided that they pay the fees to join the Qingtian Association.<sup>137</sup>

## DEATH OF A SALESMAN: THE EMPTY PROMISE OF CHINESE INVESTMENT

Documented cases of Chinese 'carrots' and 'sticks' in the business domain are rather scarce. The prime example in this respect is Huawei which is interested in building 5G networks in Czechia. Huawei donated one hundred cell phones worth a million Czech crowns to the Office of the President in 2014.<sup>138</sup> Despite warnings from the security services, President Zeman has kept defending Huawei, expressing his "solidarity" and claiming the allegations "lack evidence".<sup>139</sup>

It is noteworthy, that during the COVID-19 epidemic, Czech server Info.cz carried an article citing an analysis according to which Czechia would pay additional 38 billion CZK<sup>140</sup> if Huawei was excluded from building 5G network in the country.<sup>141</sup> The article was shared by the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic. What the article, however, failed to mention and what was later reported by investigative journalists was that the cited analysis was produced in cooperation with Huawei itself. The case represents an interesting example of Huawei's attempts to influence public discourse.

CEFC Group (Europe) Company provides another example. In the time of its operation in Czechia, the company was considered one of the most important vehicles of Chinese investment abroad. Its chairman Ye Jianming was named an honorary advisor to President Zeman at the height of the surge of Czech-Chinese political and economic courtship in 2015. Besides other companies, CEFC invested in Empresa Media, a company which co-owned TV Barrandov,<sup>142</sup> one of the alternative media outlets whose bias for President Zeman was notorious. As the previous media discourse analysis of MapInfluCE revealed, after CEFC's acquisition of its stake in Empresa Media, its media outlets started referring to China only in a positive manner. All neutral or negative coverage of China effectively disappeared from the discourse of the given media. The case illustrates how effectively Chinese investment eliminates any critique of the country.

CEFC also invested in Travel Service<sup>143</sup>, a company which owns Czech Airlines, Lobkowicz Group (brewery), Žďas (metallurgy), Slavia soccer club, hotels and buildings in Prague city center, etc. CEFC was said to have invested 38 billion CZK in Czechia,<sup>144</sup> yet in 2018, its chairman Ye disappeared in China in a corruption probe and soon after his company turned out to be a Ponzi scheme. Chinese state-owned CITIC came to the rescue, taking over CEFC's debts and assets and running an audit, revealing to the auditors the real state of CEFC's *modus operandi* in Czechia. The affair had a profound impact on Czech public perception of Chinese investments and business models and brought ridicule upon political elites, including President Zeman, who praised China as an economic alternative to Western investors. It is, however, worth noting that out of the four Visegrád countries, Czechia has consistently exhibited the most negative perception of China in public<sup>145</sup> as well as in media discourse<sup>146</sup>.

One of the few exceptions where Chinese investment has been reluctantly acknowledged by the public, is the case of Slavia club. Slavia, one of the most popular and oldest soccer clubs in the country, went into financial troubles and was bought by CEFC in 2015. The CEFC stake was taken over by CITIC in 2018 and sold to the current Chinese majority owner, Sinobo, in November 2018. The financial help which prevented the club from going bankrupt was turned by CEFC/CITIC/Sinobo into a PR victory itself. Yet public activities conducted by the owners of the club and leading to an improvement of China's image have been negligible.

The coronavirus epidemic opened a new window of opportunity for Chinese companies present on the Czech market. An interesting case is that of the Changhong company. Changhong donated some 20,000 respirators, 200,000 masks and protective garments to the city of Nymburk and the Central Bohemia region in two donations.<sup>147</sup> The news of the donation caused a stir on the Chinese internet, with people criticizing the company for helping such an “unfriendly” country to China as Czechia. The company even issued a public statement, stressing how it had donated medical supplies in China before and assuring that it “resolutely opposes any place or person hurting Chinese people’s feelings”.<sup>148</sup> Also Dahua company, one of the companies on the US blacklist due to human rights abuses in Xinjiang, donated 3,000 masks to the city of Ústí nad Labem and 500 masks to the Plzeň region.<sup>149</sup> Curiously, it also donated 1,000 masks to the Senator Ivo Valenta,<sup>150</sup> who has not been known for supporting China in the Upper House of the Czech Parliament. Valenta, however, owns *Parlamentní listy*, an outlet frequently publishing op-eds of the Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic Zhang Jianmin.



# When Beijing met Warsaw: A story of continuing courtship

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Prior to 2008, China remained at the periphery of Poland's international agenda. From the end of the communist regime in 1989, consecutive governments in Warsaw were mainly preoccupied with developing their ties with the EU and the US. At the same time, China was either ignored or perceived through a normative lens as an authoritarian regime that had failed to democratize, while Poland perceived itself as a pioneer of democratization and its contribution to ending the Cold War was treasured as an international tool for boosting the country's soft power.

Throughout the first two decades following the end of the communist regime in Poland, government representatives met many times with the Dalai Lama on Polish territory, while support for the Tibetan cause among the general public was high, with organizations like the Polish-Tibetan Friendship Association active both politically and culturally.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, institutions like the Parliamentary Group for Tibet or the Polish-Taiwanese Parliamentary Team were established and attracted the negative attention of the Chinese Embassy. This kind of support for both Tibet and Taiwan, considered by Beijing as illegitimate, of course met with Chinese criticism.

The global financial crisis was a turning point in terms of changing Warsaw's attitude towards Beijing. Although Poland went through the crisis relatively untouched, the event led to the realization that diversification of economic partners was needed and that the so-called emerging markets were a viable option. At that time China had already been undergoing rapid economic development for a number of decades, but for Polish decision-makers the notion of the "China miracle" seemed to be an attractive novelty and a premise for boosting its own economy. The year 2008 was also the last to be marked by straightforward criticism of China's domestic behavior by Polish representatives. Poland's then President Lech Kaczyński as well as the country's then Prime Minister Donald Tusk joined the international boycott of the Beijing Olympics' opening ceremony, pointing towards China's human rights abuses, especially in Tibet.<sup>152</sup> At the time, Poland was among the most vocal advocates of the EU taking a firmer stance towards the issue, with Donald Tusk being the first EU head of government to announce the planned boycott.<sup>153</sup> In the same year, both Lech Kaczyński and Donald Tusk met unofficially with the Dalai Lama, which resulted in a harsh response from the Chinese side and fears of economic sanctions.<sup>154</sup> Sino-Polish diplomatic relations were consequently frozen for a period.

What followed was a radical policy turn, embedded in a wider shift towards the search for new international partners outside of the EU – Warsaw started to advocate

an agenda aimed at attracting Chinese investment. The ultimate aim of boosting economic cooperation was underpinned by diplomatic efforts and political gestures that met with Beijing's response. At the political level, 'carrots' materialized in the form of a strategic partnership agreement (2011) and Wen Jiabao's visit to Warsaw (2012), which, from the Polish perspective, became the inauguration of the 16/17+1 framework for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). Both events took place under the liberal Civic Platform's (Platforma Obywatelska) rule. Government-to-government cooperation intensified even further after the conservative Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) came to power in 2015. A year later, Chinese president Xi Jinping visited Poland and elevated bilateral ties between the two countries to a strategic comprehensive partnership. The extensive list of cooperation agreements signed during Xi's visit (13 in total) was a symbolic gain, which helped to boost an inflated image of win-win cooperation promoted by Beijing.<sup>155</sup> The announcement of the BRI and the hype surrounding it were quickly picked up by Polish media and some officials, who started to promote the notion of Poland as China's "gateway to Europe".<sup>156</sup> Warsaw endorsed the project by signing an MoU on the BRI during the Suzhou 16+1 summit in 2015. In 2017, then Prime Minister Beata Szydło attended the first BRI Forum for International Cooperation. The same year Warsaw also witnessed the high-level visit of Zhang Dejiang, the Chair of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), during which the two countries signed an MoU on cooperation between the NPC and the lower house of the Polish parliament (Sejm).<sup>157</sup>

For a long time, no 'sticks' were used by China as Poland refrained from criticizing China's poor human rights record or from advocating any kind of agenda that Beijing could perceive as threatening. As engagement grew, so did occasions for Beijing to criticize Warsaw's foreign policy. Poland, which enjoyed close relations with the US after 1989, has found itself torn apart in terms of some China-related decisions that started to be perceived as potentially deteriorative for its ties with Washington. Through cultivating new ties with Beijing, Warsaw has enabled a growing (albeit still limited) Chinese presence in the Polish market. The starkest example of how Poland has been trying to balance its interests with the interests of its international partners could be the case of Huawei's engagement in the Polish telecommunications sector. As Chinese tech giant Huawei has gained a strong foothold in the Polish market in recent years, it has also become the target of fierce international criticism related to its alleged links to the Chinese party-state apparatus and military. Simultaneously, the US administration under Donald Trump has focused on limiting China's expansion in (not only) the realm of technology. Huawei has become the focal point of the debate on the Sino-American strategic rivalry and its implications for third countries, including Poland. The arrest of an alleged Chinese spy, who worked for Huawei's Warsaw office as one of its regional directors, was widely read as a sign of Poland siding with the US in terms of its approach towards growing international Chinese presence in crucial sectors. This perception was fueled by official American praise of Poland, such as that displayed in the speech of the US vice-president Mike Pence, in which he thanked Poland for "protecting the telecoms sector from China".<sup>158</sup> When Warsaw and Washington signed the Polish-US Joint Declaration on 5G in September 2019, the Chinese Embassy immediately reacted.<sup>159</sup> Although the Chinese side acknowledged

that the document was not targeting any specific entity, it interpreted it as part of the bigger US offensive aimed at “instigating the media to slander, (...) undermining and manipulating cyber-security, (...) infringing citizens’ privacy and personal freedom”.<sup>160</sup>

Visits by former high-level politicians or members of the political elite have taken place. Among others, politicians such as Marek Suski (a high-ranked member of the conservative Law and Justice party) attended the Dialogue of the CCP with the World Conference in 2018 or Bronisław Komorowski (a member of the liberal Civic Platform party and Poland’s former president) attended the Taihu World Cultural Forum in 2018. It clearly seems that individual involvement in cooperation between Poland and China goes beyond conventional ideological divides associated with the Polish political spectrum and its internal divisions.

In terms of symbolic agreements, the establishment of direct flights between Warsaw and Beijing operated jointly by Polish Airlines LOT and Air China have facilitated connectivity and have been recently extended with a connection between Warsaw and the new airport Beijing Daxing. Unlike what happened in Czechia, China never threatened to scrap the connections as punishment for the perceived anti-Chinese actions of Polish politicians. The general mobility of Poles traveling to China has also increased, as China introduced visa-free transfers (for all EU citizens) to certain regions in China, lasting up to 144 hours.

The Chinese government’s ‘carrots’ have become especially evident during the COVID-19 epidemic that started to unfold internationally at the beginning of 2020. After having contained the first phase of the epidemic in mid-March, Beijing embarked on a diplomatic mission to strengthen China’s soft power globally by promoting its assistance to countries still struggling with the crisis. These efforts have started being referred to as Beijing’s “mask diplomacy”, since they have relied mostly on Chinese deliveries of sanitary equipment, such as masks, testing kits and thermometers. China has presented these deliveries as aid, although most of the equipment was actually bought by respective states. When it comes to Poland, in mid-March 2020 China pledged to provide free of charge 10,000 test kits, 20,000 N-95 masks, 5,000 protective suits, 5,000 medical goggles, 10,000 disposable medical gloves as well as 10,000 shoe covers.<sup>161</sup> The first three planes carrying some of the goods from China arrived in Poland on March 26, 2020, but apart from 9,000 masks donated by some Chinese enterprises, they carried commercial purchases procured by Polish state-owned enterprises (among them KGHM, the major national copper and silver producer) and two governmental bodies (the Industrial Development Agency and the Material Reserves Agency).<sup>162</sup> KGHM has claimed that it has bought from China equipment worth 15 million USD, including 600,000 masks, over 250,000 protective suits, tens of thousands of medical goggles as well as around 150 respirators.<sup>163</sup> At the time of writing, it was still unclear whether new deliveries would follow. However, China’s diplomatic efforts in the time of the coronavirus pandemic cannot be denied: Beijing has tried to reinvigorate some communication channels (e.g. through a 17+1 videoconference with health professionals from the region and from China)<sup>164</sup> to push forward its own image as a responsible partner while ignoring criticism related to its initial inefficient responses that enabled the virus to spread in the first place.

## MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: CHINA'S PARADIPLOMACY IN POLAND

Local-level cooperation between Polish regions and cities and their Chinese counterparts has played an increasingly important role in developing Sino-Polish ties throughout the last decade. Paradiplomatic dynamics have to a large degree mirrored political trends at the central level, i.e. the turn from skepticism to high-level engagement. The last case of Polish local governments' efforts to support normative issues related to the situation in China was the public debate on naming a roundabout in Warsaw to honor the people of Tibet and their struggle to maintain their cultural and political distinctiveness. The initial idea came in 2008 from a local Civic Platform politician, Michał Kubiak from Wola district, who wanted to name one of Warsaw's roundabouts the Free Tibet Roundabout. Members of the local district council supported the idea. The project received strong pushback from both the Chinese Embassy and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing. Finally, the word "free" was removed from the name, with the media suggesting that it had been a direct result of Beijing's pressure on Warsaw.<sup>165</sup>

Since the diplomatic turn towards cooperation with China took place at the central level, local level governments have also started to develop ties with their Chinese counterparts at different levels, both provincial (13 Polish regions) and municipal (23 Polish cities).<sup>166</sup> The most notable example is the cooperation between the cities of Łódź and Chengdu, the main nodes of the Chengdu-Łódź railway connection, often advertised as the "model connection" under the BRI. Cooperation at lower levels of government has taken place primarily within the 17+1 format (e.g. China-CEEC Local Leaders' Meeting or China-CEEC Forum of Capital City Mayors) as well as bilaterally. As a result of the strategic partnership from 2011, the Regional Forum Poland-China was established and held annually in the years 2013–2016. As of early 2020, only three out of 16 administrative regions (known in Poland as voivodeships) do not cooperate with Chinese counterparts.<sup>167</sup>

Moreover, it seems that during the period of increased political cooperation between Poland and China in the years 2011–2017, paradiplomatic efforts also accelerated, while after 2017, together with a gradual revision of Polish foreign policy towards China, regional cooperation also started to slow down.<sup>168</sup> Apart from the city of Łódź, the most active places involved in paradiplomatic relations with China include Kutno (its intermodal terminal promoted as a crucial node of the BRI), Małaszewicze (four train container terminals on the route from Central Asia to Europe) and Gdańsk (maritime port).

The first case of so-called "panda diplomacy" has also been noted, when the cities of Zamość and Ya'an signed a bilateral cooperation agreement in August 2019 and the Chinese side promised to send a panda to the Zamość zoo.<sup>169</sup>

Sino-Polish paradiplomatic efforts have also played a role during the COVID-19 epidemic in Poland. In mid-March 2020 the city of Łódź officially requested help from its Chinese partners, the cities of Chengdu, Guangzhou and Tianjin. In a letter to the Chinese mayors, the mayor of Łódź Hanna Zdanowska asked the Chinese side to facilitate deliveries of sanitary and medical equipment to Poland.<sup>170</sup> Interestingly, two months earlier it was the Chinese side that had asked for similar assistance: cities such as Nanjing, Yuyao or Taizhou reportedly requested help from their Polish

partners, yet in most cases actual support remained limited due to administrative and legal constraints.<sup>171</sup>

## UNNOTICED, DEVELOPING FAST: PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE RELATIONS

As far as cooperation between societal actors is concerned, various types of organizations from the non-governmental sector have been developing ties with their Chinese counterparts. However, it is important to bear in mind that in the Chinese environment, most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are actually government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), reflecting the nature of the political system they operate in. Thus, the level of their contacts and communication with official representatives is much higher when compared to their European counterparts. Because of this, people-to-people cooperation between China and other countries has to always assume a certain level of government intervention or supervision on the Chinese side as societal cooperation is seen by Beijing as an attempt to extend the CCP's influence and achieve its international goals.

In Poland, there is a number of organizations that foster ties with China, such as the Sino-Polish Friendship Organization (Towarzystwo Przyjaźni Polsko-Chińskiej), Poland-Asia Studies Centre (Centrum Studiów Polska-Azja), Polish-Chinese Economic and Cultural Association (Polsko-Chińskie Towarzystwo Gospodarczo-Kulturalne), Sinopol Foundation (Fundacja Sinopol), Civil Association Polish House (Stowarzyszenie Obywatelskie Dom Polski) and Lower Silesia Club of Harbin Inhabitants (Dolnośląski Dom Harbińczyka). Some of these institutions have been involved in organizing public events (e.g. conferences, concerts) and promoting Sino-Polish ties, for example on the occasion of anniversaries of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Poland and China. Their actual impact on shaping public perceptions of Sino-Polish relations seems to be limited, as they are close to invisible in the mainstream media. However, when it comes to controversial issues, Chinese media noted that a member of the Civil Association Polish House visited Xinjiang together with a group of “foreign scholars”, who all expressed their support for the way in which the government in Beijing is handling the situation in the region.<sup>172</sup> Given the increasing amount of evidence showing the extent of coordinated efforts aimed at the oppression and control of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, it seems that these “foreign scholars” were either framed or consciously participated in a propaganda effort aiming to improve the tarnished image of the CCP rule over the region.

Academic cooperation takes place between universities, both bilaterally and multilaterally, e.g. through the Sino-Polish University Consortium under the BRI, which brings together 14 Chinese and 9 Polish universities of technology. Government-sponsored cooperation in the realm of education has also been developed through grant-schemes established directly by Polish and Chinese public institutions, such as the SHENG scheme by the Polish National Science Centre and the National Natural Science Foundation of China, which supports joint Sino-Polish research teams in all fields of the natural, engineering, life and management sciences.<sup>173</sup> Collaborative research institutions have also been established at different universities, like the Shanghai-Warsaw AI Scientific Joint Lab at Warsaw University of Technology.

Confucius Institutes (CIs)<sup>174</sup> have attracted growing criticism in recent years throughout the Western world as they have been accused of interfering in the internal affairs of universities<sup>175</sup> where they are established, e.g. through altering schooling curricula in favor of the Chinese perspective, or avoiding topics deemed controversial by the government in Beijing.<sup>176</sup> However, Confucius Institutes' activities in Poland have remained rather uncontroversial and focused on language training and traditional culture workshops. No cases of outsourcing of academic courses on potentially sensitive topics from university departments to CIs have been reported, most probably due to structural constraints at Polish universities and their different institutional setup, as compared to American ones. Currently, there are six CIs in Poland, the oldest established at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in 2006 and the newest at the Warsaw University of Technology in 2019. Despite their relative neutrality, their potential to stir controversies still exists: as China studies and sinology have been chronically underfunded in Poland, CIs do represent one of the most dominant institutions when it comes to shaping China-related narratives, even in areas considered relatively unproblematic, like language and culture.

Polish and Chinese media cooperation has also been growing, especially in the context of 2017 being the official year of media collaboration within the 17+1 framework. Polish public Television TVP recently signed an agreement with Chengdu Radio and Television.<sup>177</sup> The outlet is from the Sichuan province, with which some Polish local governments (e.g. the city of Łódź) have especially close contacts. According to the agreement, the two parties are supposed to produce a documentary on the Belt and Road Initiative and its meaning for Sino-Polish cooperation and the cities of Chengdu and Łódź. Moreover, also in 2017, the Polish Press Agency (PAP) and the Poland-Asia Studies Centre signed an agreement with the China Economic Information Centre, an institution affiliated with the Xinhua press agency, thus extending the scope of cooperation between Chinese state-owned media and the Polish side.<sup>178</sup> China Radio International (CRI) has its own Polish channel, however, it does not air extensively. The CRI Polish website enables listeners to access a database of archival radio programs on a number of topics, such as economy, sport, film, Chinese language learning, traveling, society and "China in the eyes of foreigners".<sup>179</sup> CRI and its website's content seemed rather outdated, but once the coronavirus epidemic started to spread around the world, it suddenly became very vocal and active in pushing the official Beijing narrative through its social media channels, most notably Facebook.<sup>180</sup> Its posts have aimed at praising China's efforts in containing the virus, while at the same time overlooking that the PRC was where the epidemic initially developed.

Chinese media outlets published extensively on topics such as the arrest of an alleged Chinese spy in Warsaw in early 2019, presenting the event as a direct result of US pressure on Poland (e.g. calling Poland "a US accomplice"<sup>181</sup>). The tone of some of the coverage was close to offensive.<sup>182</sup> However, this type of coverage was event-specific and seems to have been motivated by both Beijing's domestic and international needs when it comes to sending a more aggressive signal to the Polish side, given the relative restraint shown by Beijing at the time of the arrest. On the Polish side, in the months following the alleged spying incident, anonymous articles defending Huawei's involvement in 5G construction and criticizing Donald Trump's anti-China policies appeared in several media outlets, raising suspicions about their authorship and intentions.<sup>183</sup>

## LOOK WHO'S TALKING: CHINA STORY, MADE IN POLAND

As far as Chinese soft power tools in terms of influencing public opinion are concerned, their scope has extended, yet without a large-scale quantitative analysis their actual impact remains unknown. One of the first and so far, rare elements of China's PR outreach was a televised speech by Wen Jiabao during his visit to Poland in April 2012, in which he addressed the Polish people on the occasion of the first visit by a Chinese Prime Minister to Poland in 25 years.<sup>184</sup> In his speech, Wen Jiabao made numerous references to the "traditional friendship" between Poland and China and stated that strengthening cooperation and increasing trust were among the main goals of Sino-Polish cooperation. The fact that the speech was fully televised (lasting almost five minutes) and then uploaded to the official website and YouTube channel of the Polish Prime Minister's Office<sup>185</sup> suggests that at that time it was considered symbolically important for both sides. One of the promises made during the visit was to increase the number of Chinese government scholarships issued to Polish students.

A growing number of students from Poland have traveled to China for both short-term and long-term study programs. According to Xinhua, in 2017, there were 2,115 Polish students studying in China.<sup>186</sup> Until last year, the application process for the scholarships was fully remote, with applicants submitting all necessary documents online or by post. However, in 2019, the procedure changed and now, a second stage involves an interview at the Chinese Embassy.<sup>187</sup> According to posts on Facebook groups for Polish students interested in China, some of the interviews were allegedly held by the ambassador himself and his questions covered topics such as the applicant's view of the security situation in China or why the candidate had chosen China instead of the US as a place to study abroad. While this kind of anecdotal evidence does not mean that all candidates are somehow pre-screened in terms of their personal views prior to being granted a scholarship, it nevertheless suggests a growing need on the side of Beijing to control the inflow of foreign students and to know their attitudes towards China, especially on controversial issues. Other education-related events hosted in cooperation with the Chinese Embassy and the China Scholarship Council include education fairs, like the one hosted in 2018 by Warsaw University of Technology, where Polish students were introduced to 25 Chinese universities, including the prestigious Peking, Tsinghua or Fudan Universities.

Other activities co-organized or co-sponsored by China include closed meetings with journalists, such as the "journalist matinees" organized by the Chinese Embassy before Wang Yi's visit to Warsaw in July 2019 in order to "share the Chinese perspective" with the Polish media.<sup>188</sup> According to media reports, during the meeting a suggestion was put forward by the organizers that the journalists should not cover the event, which seems to defeat the purpose of the meeting itself.<sup>189</sup> The same media account noted, however, that the content of the meeting was filled with standard claims disseminated by Chinese officials in recent months, e.g. related to the allegedly unfair nature of the Sino-American trade conflict, the need for "win-win cooperation" as well as the lack of evidence supporting international accusations against Huawei. Chinese representatives (including Zha Peixin, the former Chinese Ambassador to the UK and Canada; Shi Mingde, the former Chinese Ambassador to Austria and Germany, and Cui Hongjian, the Director of the Department of European

Studies at the China Institute of International Affairs) also stated that in the context of growing tensions related to Huawei in the international arena, “each country has to make a choice and nobody can stay aside, as this is an important moment for whole global economy”.<sup>190</sup> These efforts represent Beijing’s global political campaign of “telling China stories well” (讲好中国故事, *jianghao zhongguo gushi*), which has been promoted under Xi Jinping as a strategy to develop and support CCP-friendly narratives all around the world through different means – media being among the most prominent ones.<sup>191</sup>

Another sign of China’s efforts to increase the country’s visibility and recognition in Poland has been China-related merchandise, such as Xi Jinping’s book “The Governance of China”. The publication has been widely displayed for purchase at various locations, such as newsstands at airports and train stations. They are usually very visible and displayed in the same spot for prolonged periods of time, suggesting that their location is the result of long-term cooperation with the sellers. The book was also promoted at high-level events attended by both Polish and Chinese diplomats as well as politicians, like the one hosted at Warsaw’s Royal Castle in late 2019.<sup>192</sup>

The Chinese perspective has also been promoted with the help of influencers, such as the author of the “Chiny to Lubie!” blog (China I like it!), who was invited to interview the Chinese Ambassador to Poland and has produced video reports from events hosted by the Chinese Embassy in Warsaw.<sup>193</sup> Although the author of the blog considers his cooperation with the embassy neutral and sporadic, there was a time when his official social media accounts stated that the “China I like it!” blog focused on spreading information related to China and the Embassy of the PRC in Poland.

When it comes to social media presence, the Chinese Embassy in Warsaw has also been active on both Facebook and Twitter and was among the first institutions of its kind to start to enlarge its presence in social media, which has now become a major new trend throughout the world. The engagement of Chinese diplomats in social media became especially visible during the coronavirus pandemic. In Poland, it took the form of various posts by the Embassy of the PRC and its Ambassador Liu Guangyuan, who set up his Twitter and Facebook accounts at the same time as the COVID-19 epidemic was reaching Europe. His Twitter activities centered around promoting China’s efforts to support Poland and the EU during the crisis.<sup>194</sup>

Traditional media has also been used not only to create positive narratives related to China, but also as means to disseminate more radical voices when needed. For instance, critical op-eds and interviews with officials from the Chinese Embassy have appeared in Polish media, most notably “Rzeczpospolita”, a popular nationwide daily that does not openly side with any of the Polish political parties. It is important to note that the same newspaper has also published pieces highly critical of China, such as interviews with gen. Robert Spalding, Donald Trump’s advisor on China.<sup>195</sup> The range of topics touched upon in these kind of publications has varied, as has its style. Together with Warsaw’s growing concerns related to the effects of the Sino-American rivalry on Poland, headlines included statements such as “US is the world king of lies” – the title of an interview with the Chinese Ambassador to Poland, in which he also expressed his concern that Poland might be “tempted by the US offers and then taken advantage of”.<sup>196</sup> The same newspaper also published paid inserts (labelled as “advertisement”) praising the governance of China under Xi Jinping, which attracted



some criticism, but did not change the media outlet's position on publishing texts in cooperation with Chinese officials.<sup>197</sup> Although this type of coverage has not been widespread, its message has been consistent. As indicated by previous MapInfluCE research, between January 2010 and June 2018 the number of articles covering China in the Polish mainstream media amounted to over 2,000 pieces, with the majority of them portraying the country in an allegedly neutral fashion.<sup>198</sup> We do not know, however, what percentage of them included op-eds and interviews by representatives of the Chinese Embassy, for example.

Last but not least, the Chinese Ambassador to Poland has displayed an unusual engagement in the Polish media in the time of coronavirus. Apart from his usual appearances in the daily *Rzeczpospolita*, he published an open letter in response to an opinion piece by the US Ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher, in which she claimed that “by covering up the truth, China had enabled the spread of the coronavirus throughout the world”.<sup>199</sup> In his response, Ambassador Liu accused Washington of spreading “a political virus” and claimed that China bought the US time to prepare for the outbreak.<sup>200</sup> Both pieces were published on the *Onet.pl* website, one of the most popular Polish web portals. They constitute an unprecedented case of a high-level PR offensive by Washington and Beijing aimed at the Polish general public, which also illustrates Sino-American strategic rivalry and its possible impact on societies in third countries.

The Chinese side has also invited Polish participants from the civil and NGO sector to take part in cooperation programs developed under the 17+1 framework. These programs include Bridge for the Future – a scheme that aims to bring together youth from CEE and China. Despite its benign appearances, the program raises suspicions over its aims and the lack of transparency of its recruitment processes. According to media reports, it is being coordinated by the All-China Youth Federation (ACYF), an organization working under the Central Committee of the Communist Party and following the goals of the United Front Work Department, a body responsible for co-opting and neutralizing sources of potential opposition to authority of the CCP both domestically and internationally.<sup>201</sup>

## **AND THE WINNER IS... : CHINA'S NATIONAL CHAMPION IN COMPANY-TO-PEOPLE AND COMPANY-TO-GOVERNMENT RELATIONS**

As China's economy has developed over the last decades, its economic influence and business footprint have also expanded. Many Chinese companies, both private and state-owned, have become global players in important sectors such as advanced technologies and innovations. Huawei has been among them and as such it has attracted a lot of attention due to its rapid international expansion and alleged links to the Chinese party-state apparatus and military. Over the last few years, the company has also become one of the key players in the telecommunications sector in Poland, both in terms of its penetration of the consumer market as well as its involvement in the creation of telecommunications infrastructure.

When it comes to company-to-people cooperation (also understood as company-to-company), partnership with Huawei dates back to 2006, when the state-owned

Chinese Development Bank (CDB) signed a loan agreement worth 150 million EUR to co-finance the construction of 2G and 3G networks with a newly-established Polish mobile operator P4.<sup>202</sup> Chen Zhiming (director of CDB Shenzhen branch) lauded the deal as “Huawei’s first key project in Europe, which is financed by CDB as part of its efforts to support the company’s long-term development”.<sup>203</sup> Two years later, Play mobile network (operated by 4G, currently the biggest mobile telecommunications provider in Poland) was granted another loan by CDB, this time amounting to 490 million EUR and aimed at constructing Poland’s first mobile 3.5G network.<sup>204</sup> In both cases, Huawei was the main provider of both equipment and solutions.<sup>205</sup> Other companies have also extensively cooperated with Huawei in the field of infrastructure and innovations, with players such as Orange partnering with the Chinese giant not only in construction of networks themselves, but also in developing innovations. For example, Orange Labs partnered with Huawei and the Warsaw Institute of Technology to establish a Long Term Evolution (LTE) network for students to experiment on and provide solutions for private businesses – a project praised by its authors as one among few of its kind in Poland.<sup>206</sup> In mid-2018, Huawei was already working with Orange on implementing non-standalone 5G solutions in urban environments in cities like Gliwice. In 2019, cooperation continued, but with Ericsson and in other cities, Zakopane and Warsaw.<sup>207</sup>

Another example of a Huawei-sponsored innovation-related cooperation project in Poland is the establishment of Huawei Authorized Information and Network Academy (HAINA) at Poznań University of Technology.<sup>208</sup> HAINA is a non-profit partnership scheme founded by Huawei that authorizes academic institutions to deliver Huawei certification courses to their students.<sup>209</sup> Huawei Poland also cooperates with local universities in implementing its global scholarship project known as Seeds for the Future. The scheme aims at selecting a group of information and communication technology students, who participate in an essay competition on a given topic related to high-tech and innovations. The winners travel to China on a fully paid two-week study trip, where they visit Huawei headquarters in Shenzhen as well as research facilities in Beijing.<sup>210</sup> The implementation of the program in Poland started in 2014, when five (currently 12) universities supported by the Polish Ministry of Digitalization as well as the Ministry of Science and Higher Education began to select students in internal competitions.<sup>211</sup> The admission process of the program seems transparent, since its rules are publicly available and participating universities seem to have a lot of autonomy in terms of choosing the best candidates internally (at least in the first stage of the competition).<sup>212</sup>

Moreover, Huawei established its Customer Solution Innovation and Integration Experience Centre in Warsaw in 2015 (the third in the world), where its business partners, telecommunications operators and representatives of public administration and educational institutions can test Huawei’s latest technologies and equipment.<sup>213</sup> Last but not least, Huawei has its regional headquarters covering Central and Eastern Europe and Nordic countries located in Warsaw, where the company employs around 1,000 people. In August 2019, Radosław Kędzia became Huawei’s vice-president for the region, the first time a non-Chinese national assumed the position of director general in the company.<sup>214</sup> The move was probably motivated by a growing need to

internationalize the image of Huawei for PR reasons, as the debate on the company and its allegedly close relations to the Chinese state kept growing globally.

With regard to this in Poland, Huawei came under the spotlight in January 2019, when one of the company's high-level Chinese employees was arrested in Warsaw on spying allegations.<sup>215</sup> Together with him, a Polish ex-security officer who also worked for Orange Poland was detained on the same charges. As the event happened one month after the arrest of Huawei CEO Meng Wanzhou in Canada and given Warsaw's closeness with Washington, it was widely interpreted as an expression of Poland's support for the US' approach towards China. Since the events were unfolding against the broader background of repeated US efforts under Donald Trump to curtail Chinese influence abroad, their dynamics began to be analyzed through the lens of Sino-American strategic rivalry. Consequently, Huawei's presence on the Polish market started to be increasingly seen as a potential security threat. It seems that the controversies have already impacted the consumer market too, with Huawei's sales dropping by around 11% in the second quarter of 2019 (holding 24,5% market share<sup>216</sup>), as compared to the first quarter, when Huawei held 35,4% market share.<sup>217</sup> As a result, the company has lost its leading position as the most popular seller of handsets in Poland, which it had gained only in early 2018.

When it comes to possible 'sticks' that could be used by the Chinese side to showcase its discontent with the current turn of events, a possible threat includes the relocation of the regional Huawei headquarters from Warsaw to some other regional capital, possibly Budapest. Hungary continuously maintains very good relations with Beijing and from a political perspective offers a more reliable business environment for Chinese companies. Huawei is both a comparatively big employer as well as a substantial taxpayer. In 2018, Huawei Poland paid nearly 100 million PLN (over 23 million EUR) in taxes (over three times more than in 2017), which made the company the biggest corporate taxpayer in the technology sector in the country.<sup>218</sup> Nevertheless, the relocation scenario currently remains solely hypothetical and understanding Huawei's behavior as both a nominally private entity as well as an entity that has legal obligations towards the Chinese state remains conceptually difficult for Polish politicians.

When it comes to company-to-government relations, Huawei has cooperated with a number of government institutions and ministries in Poland. For example, in 2011, the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration received free video conferencing equipment from the Chinese firm. The donation was soon discovered by the press who gave as their source an anonymous employee of the ministry who had witnessed the transfer.<sup>219</sup> The equipment was allegedly handed over for technical trials to the IT Project Centre, a unit responsible for organizing public tenders related to telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>220</sup> Its work also allegedly covers more sensitive areas, such as the process of legalization of secret service officers, in which they are assigned new identities that are particularly important for the officers of the Foreign Intelligence Agency who do not enjoy diplomatic immunity while working abroad.<sup>221</sup> As a result of the media coverage, the equipment donation was investigated by the Internal Security Agency. According to unofficial information, similar offers were made to other ministries. Also, some politicians have been given free Huawei

handsets while attending events co-organized by the Chinese side, resulting in critical comments from the public.<sup>222</sup>

As far as other big Chinese market players on Polish soil are concerned, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), Bank of China and China Construction Bank have their offices in Warsaw. ICBC was the first Chinese bank to open an office in Poland in 2012 offering corporate banking services, such as cross-border remittance, letters of credit and guarantee as well as import and export collection.<sup>223</sup> Bank of China opened its office in the same year and also caters to business clientele. The China Construction Bank's Warsaw branch was established in 2017 and focuses on RMB clearing and cross-border exchange, corporate lending and trade finance.<sup>224</sup>

Chinese companies in Poland have also joined Beijing's diplomatic efforts to promote the country's soft power during the coronavirus crisis. For example, Huawei has donated sanitary equipment to Polish companies (e.g. Exatel)<sup>225</sup> and institutions, most notably to the Central Clinical Hospital in Warsaw (MSWiA), which received 20,000 protective masks from the Chinese enterprise.<sup>226</sup> According to the Chinese Ambassador to Poland's Twitter account, another Chinese tech company, Xiaomi, has donated 50,000 masks and 300 thermometers, while Sino-Polish joint venture Chipolbrok sent from China equipment worth 250,000 USD.<sup>227</sup> The biggest Chinese players on the Polish market clearly want to improve their tarnished image, while their efforts simultaneously play into Beijing's soft power offensive in the time of the coronavirus pandemic. Although the actual impact of this kind of help remains very limited, its image-building properties seem to be crucial for the PRC in its efforts to shift Beijing's responsibility for the initial spread of the epidemic to the outside world. In this context, the ultimate goals of Chinese enterprises and the government in Beijing are convergent – building China's positive image abroad and maintenance of a functioning international trade system serve the long-term goal of keeping the country stable under CCP rule. Yet, given the still unknown effects of the coronavirus crisis on the global economy, these goals might evolve in the future, especially if it results in some forms of deglobalization (e.g. radical changes in global supply chains).

# One autocrat's taste for carrots: The curious case of China's influence in Hungary

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It is intergovernmental exchanges which make up the busiest venue of relationship between China and Hungary. Two main forms of official interaction – and the ostensible Hungarian government reaction to them – can be identified: high-level meetings and visits by Chinese state officials, and international agreements and joint projects between the two states.

There was an abundance of meetings between Chinese and Hungarian political leaders in the 2010s: in fact, Budapest hosted the first China-Central Eastern Europe meeting in 2011. Ever since, both Chinese delegations have visited Hungary, and Hungarian state leaders have travelled to China to meet their counterparts. Especially Chinese Prime Ministers met PM Viktor Orbán in his home country rather often – then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in Budapest in 2011, later his successor Li Keqiang in 2012 as Vice PM and in 2017 at the Budapest Summit of the 17+1 group. In addition, the two heads of government met during the 17+1 summits. Orbán himself has travelled to China several times, including to both Belt and Road Forums. Yet, while President Xi and PM Orbán met a few times in recent years, and Xi visited Hungary as Vice President in 2009, an official state visit from Xi Jinping to Hungary still has not happened.

However, another member of the Politburo Standing Committee, Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress did visit Budapest in 2019, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and State Councillor Wang Yi, who met PM Orbán in the same year. Orbán's relationship to China goes beyond pragmatic, as he has mentioned China several times as a good example of a successful 'labor-based society', and as an alternative to Western economies "based on speculation".<sup>228</sup> The two sides signed an agreement on comprehensive strategic partnership in 2017, though Hungary was one of the last major countries in the CEE region to rise to that level.<sup>229</sup>

Both governments like to refer to the high level of Chinese investment in Hungary as a clear sign of excellent relations between the two countries. It is indeed true, that Hungary hosts the largest sum of FDI from China in the CEE region, though the specific numbers are uncertain. According to the Hungarian government, the stock of Chinese investment has reached 4.5 billion USD in the country,<sup>230</sup> but the real number is probably closer to 2.5 billion USD. The source of the discrepancy might be that the

government includes companies now in Chinese hands as their parent companies were bought by the Chinese, but which did not involve a proactive investment into Hungary. The biggest investors are Wanhua Yantai, Huawei and ZTE, while having the CEE headquarters of Bank of China in the country plays an important regional role. Meanwhile, plenty of Chinese plans and promises have failed to materialize in the past decade, despite high levels of expectations. Hainan Group failed to buy MALÉV Hungarian Airlines, neither of the two proposed citric-acid factories have so far been built, Shanghai Construction Group has failed to build the cargo airport in the Southwest of Hungary, and the list of failed proposals features several more items.<sup>231</sup>

In the rhetoric of Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó a common theme starts to emerge regarding foreign policy towards the PRC. Beyond asserting that maintaining good relations with the country is in Hungary's interests, he more frequently talks about the "double standards" of the western democratic countries.<sup>232</sup> He claims that while American and European powers condemn the PRC politically, they trade with and make lucrative investments in the country, and yet call out smaller European states for co-operating with China. Speaking at the second annual China International Import Expo Szijjártó stated that the Government of Hungary does not discriminate between business actors based on their nationality.<sup>233</sup>

Indeed, business cooperation with Chinese companies is common, as detailed later. Multilateral meetings and cooperation are not rare, either, with the China-CEEC Tourism Promotion Agency headquartered in Budapest and the establishment of other agencies having been contemplated. Intergovernmental cooperation manifests in regulatory agreements in several fields. They include finance – indeed, the Governor of the Hungarian National Bank, György Matolcsy, is a known admirer of Chinese economic management and the first China-CEEC Central Bank Governors' Meeting took place in Budapest in 2018 – agriculture, and other minor areas. A particular joint infrastructure project, however, received a lot of attention: on the expert level, the massive Budapest-Belgrade railway project has become a contested issue, but it is virtually absent in the national political discourse. Most of the exact details of the deal are undisclosed, but according to media coverage, the upgrading of the existing connection between Budapest and Belgrade will be the most expensive railway infrastructure project in Hungary. The 160 km long Hungarian section of the line will cost at least 2.1-2.5 billion USD, and 85% of the cost is to be financed by a loan from the EXIM Bank of China. The EU initiated an infringement procedure against the deal in 2016, but the Hungarian government has finally found a way to settle the legal dispute. The public tender was awarded to the consortium of RM International Zrt. – a company controlled by a state supported billionaire and childhood friend of Prime Minister Orbán – together with China Tiejiuju Engineering & Construction and China Railway Electrification Engineering Group.<sup>234</sup> What makes Hungary interested in the project is highly debated among experts, as the Hungarian government has failed to point out the benefits of the project. Governmental officials argue that the North-South transportation corridor of the region has to be upgraded, but it is also true that the development of the connection between Belgrade and the Chinese controlled port of Piraeus in Greece is not even negotiated yet.<sup>235</sup> It is beyond question that the governments of Hungary and the PRC are undergoing

a honeymoon in their relations. This may be surprising, as the two sides could be considered as unlikely bedfellows: a formerly moderate national liberal anti-communist crusader, now right-wing Christian-democratic Prime Minister of a small Central European country and the President of the largest, communist-ruled state.

In many cases Hungarian public administration agencies follow policies that are favorable to Chinese nationals, companies, and investors, even if their activities may affect some Hungarian stakeholders adversely, for example those worried about legal immigration due to the effects of the Hungarian government's "golden visa" program which has led to some adverse effects,<sup>236</sup> or those who find the protection of basic human rights important, when Hungary banishes prominent Uyghur activists or makes sure Chinese delegations do not face protests during their visits to the country.<sup>237</sup> Publicly and openly, Orbán's Fidesz party welcomes Chinese investments in Hungary.

Internationally, however, PRC-friendly political decisions are even more significant. Not only does Orbán's government not stand up to Beijing's human rights violations and persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in China, it also actively blocks multilateral mechanisms that would do so.<sup>238</sup> Hungary also defends other questionable international PRC policies. At least four times, PM Orbán's government vetoed or threaten to veto EU decisions aimed against controversial PRC measures between 2016 and 2018 (either alone or jointly, in the cases of the South China Sea conflict, detainee torture, supporting Japan in maritime security, and human rights).<sup>239</sup> As mentioned, a NATO-ally, and an EU member state's minister of foreign affairs regularly calls out partner governments over real as well as assumed hypocrisy over their policy stances towards PRC; and he carefully yet enthusiastically conforms to Beijing policies.<sup>240</sup> In return, the 'long stick' of the PRC is absolutely absent in Hungary.

Such an almost monopolistic political environment does not exist anywhere else in the EU. Even if national governments have been strongly dominated by certain political parties or organizations, they always face credible opposition from local politicians, the judiciary or government agencies who can represent a critical approach towards China. The question arises: will Hungary shift its PRC-related policies anytime soon? Most likely not.

Firstly, PM Orbán's hold on power has been remarkably stable. Having captured every facet of politico-economic power in the country, he can comfortably continue his PRC-friendly policies. However, with recent changes in local politics – opposition parties winning mayoral and council majorities in key municipalities, first and foremost in Budapest —, this could see some revisions. But secondly, it is worth noting that the national cooperation of the rainbow coalition of opposition is highly questionable itself. Thirdly, the predecessors of the Orbán governments, former PMs Gyurcsány and Medgyessy of the Hungarian Socialist Party (the former, now chairman of the up-and-coming social-liberal party Democratic Coalition, the latter has retired) have been highly supportive of an opening towards China – in fact, initiated fundamental policies themselves. Furthermore, none of the opposition parties seem to be a harsh critic of China and would probably follow a somewhat more careful but still open-minded policy toward Beijing in government too.<sup>241</sup> Therefore, it can be comfortably stated that even a significant portion of today's opposition has got a pro-PRC policy record. For all these reasons, it is highly unlikely that Hungary's foreign policies towards Beijing will change in the foreseeable future. Consequently, there is

simply no need for China to employ any 'sticks' in its relations with Hungary, as the current political environment eagerly and proactively supports Beijing in many cases.

Connections between the two countries have become tighter thanks to Shanghai Airlines (a subsidiary of China Eastern airlines) launching its regular, direct flights between Shanghai and Budapest, operated three times a week.<sup>242</sup> There are also direct flights between Beijing and Budapest three times a week operated by Air China. Plans exist to expand connections between Budapest and other Chinese destinations: the civil aviation authorities of the PRC have granted rights for China Eastern airlines flights between Xi'an and Budapest (three times a week); and for Hainan Airlines to fly between Chongqing and Budapest (twice a week) as well as on the route Shenzhen-Xi'an-Budapest (twice a week).<sup>243</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic has introduced a new dimension to government-to-government relations between Hungary and China, as the Hungarian government turned to Beijing for medical equipment. Unlike in other European countries, the Chinese side did not launch a major PR campaign in Hungary to spread news about its medical support. Meanwhile, the narrative of the Hungarian government emphasizes the success of the Eastern Opening policy and the deep friendship between the two nations, as if China was supplying masks and ventilators due to the close political relations.<sup>244</sup> The language of governmental communiques and pro-government media coverage avoids any reference to the price of the medical supply, and never uses verbs like "bought", "purchased", but rather gives the impression that all the supplies are generous assistance coming from China.

In sum, government-to-government relations are driven by two main forces: the promise of economic and business cooperation with China and Viktor Orbán's and other leaders' seemingly genuine admiration of the Chinese model.

## **NOT VERY NUTRITIOUS: PARADIPLOMACY À LA HUNGARY**

Despite high level government-to-government relations, lower-tier relations do not really flourish. This may seem like an oddity, nevertheless, there are a few compelling explanations for it. One is the special political system of Hungary. The ruling Fidesz party of PM Orbán has been the most successful (at staying in power) political party in the EU winning three national legislative elections resulting in constitutional supermajorities each time.<sup>245</sup> This has allowed the PM to re-shape Hungary's political and economic order to his advantage, cementing Fidesz rule for a long time to come, with basically still no credible opposition challenger in sight. Other successful (at staying in power) populist governments in the Visegrád region such as in Poland do not enjoy such long-term virtually unchecked power – legislative supermajorities at almost all levels and branches of government. Fidesz leadership is very committed to the idea of profiting from the re-emergence of the PRC – and has probably built fruitful, lucrative personal and business relationships out of it.<sup>246</sup>

Sub-national governmental units of the PRC have been trying to seek good relations with their Hungarian colleagues in the form of sister city or sister county agreements. Hungary, however, is a rather centralized country – and has not become less so under the successive governments led by Orbán. Therefore, local governments



have rather limited powers, competencies, and resources to conduct foreign relations or even influence socio-political and economic decision-making. A plethora of twin city relations have been established in the 2010s between Chinese and Hungarian localities, e.g. the smaller-sized county seat Szolnok, and mid-sized rural towns such as Ajka and Gyöngyös. It is hard, however, to assess the actual significance of such relations. Budapest – becoming an ever more significant European tourism destination also popular with Chinese tourists—has also been working on improving its relations: for example, Mayor István Tarlós (supported by the ruling Fidesz party) visited Beijing where he found the disciplined Chinese way of city governance exemplary. As he said: "We would like to add more discipline into the life of Budapest, we follow the Chinese example".<sup>247</sup>

The outcomes of such activities rarely materialize significantly and are difficult to assess, as an official list of sister city agreements is not available, and generally speaking interactions between local authorities and their Chinese counterparts are hard if not impossible to track. Still one may have the impression that such activities rarely go beyond some mutual visits and the signing ceremonies of MoUs.

## **GROWING APPETITE: PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE RELATIONS**

The tendency towards more measures addressing civil society and the general public is observable. An impressive number of cultural and educational institutions have been established in the past decade in Hungary, such as the relatively large number of five Confucius Institutes (CIs) – one in Budapest in 2006 at ELTE University and in the larger rural county seats of Szeged (2012 at University of Szeged), Miskolc (2013 at University of Miskolc), Pécs (2015 at University of Pécs) and Debrecen (2019 at University of Debrecen). Most of these institutes offer scholarships, public lectures and performances to their audiences. Their actual impact on the society, however, is limited, as one of the institutes in a city in the countryside privately confessed that the same approx. 500 people show up at their events on a regular basis. The China-CEE Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Sino-European Foundation of Chinese Culture and Education (SEFCCE) were both established in Budapest in 2017. The China-CEE Institute publishes briefings on bilateral relations between China and its CEE partners written by local experts paid by the Chinese side. SEFCCE is mostly involved in cultural and education exchanges between the region and China. Furthermore, Corvinus University of Budapest, the country's most prominent economics and business university, and Fudan University launched a joint MBA program in 2018, and following a meeting with PM Orbán, Fudan announced the establishment of its own independent campus in a building connected to the Hungarian National Bank in Budapest in 2019.<sup>248</sup> Prior to this, the Metropolitan University of Budapest was acquired by the private China-CEE Fund (worth 430 million USD in 2017 and advised by CEE Equity Partners) which has several large investments across the Central and Eastern European region, including Invitel Group, one of the leading companies on the Hungarian telecommunications market, with a portfolio including fixed voice, broadband internet, cable TV and IT services.<sup>249</sup>

Moreover, public events and exhibitions also took place – featuring a large swath of topics from ancient coins (at least partially financed by the Hungarian Central Bank) to the recent history of Chinese filmmaking. The 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Hungary and the PRC offered a good opportunity to organize these programs in 2019. These have also included cultural events such as a youth camp for Chinese diaspora children which was hosted in cooperation with the Ministry of Defense and the Catholic Church and resulted in a patriotic military training camp. According to media reports such camps have been organized for Hungarian children for many years, but representatives of Chinese minority groups in Hungary came up with the idea to dedicate a whole week's camp for Chinese kids only in August 2018.<sup>250</sup>

When it comes to the image of the Hungarian policy towards China, there is a certain ethos of cunning realpolitik in Hungarian society, as public and media discourse tend to focus on the potential (or imaginary) economic benefits of cooperation with China, instead of on political or value-based issues like in Czechia.<sup>251</sup> This, combined with the proven Asian origin of the Hungarian nation – sometimes falsely stretched as far as Japan, but still finding resonance with certain groups within Hungarian society and used for political purposes at home and abroad as well – creates a perfect environment for Beijing's European influence efforts. It is important to emphasize, however, that there is no need for proactive Chinese measures to influence the China policy of Budapest, as the government of Viktor Orbán has been very supportive of Beijing. According to some unofficial diplomatic sources the eagerness of Hungary has made China feel uncomfortable in certain cases, as the low reputation of Hungary in the EU may harm China-EU relations as well.

## **LEAVE IT TO THE BOSS: THE CONSPICUOUS LACK OF GOVERNMENT-TO-PEOPLE RELATIONS**

Since government-to-government relations seem to be rather intensive and positive, Beijing does not go to great lengths to directly appeal to Hungarian society beyond the usual channels. Unlike in other countries of the CEE region,<sup>252</sup> Beijing does not seem to be interested in influencing the Hungarian domestic discourse, as it sees the Hungarian government as a supportive partner.

However, it is worth mentioning that a few feeble attempts at acquiring positions in the media have been made: like in all other V4 countries, China Radio International (CRI) broadcasts in the local language (it was launched in the Hungarian language as early as 1976, but now it is only available online). Klasszik Rádió, a classical music radio station used to feature regular programs about China related issues and was originally sponsored by GBTimes through PRC government funding, however, the China-related shows were discontinued in 2019 as the Chinese state stopped financing these activities of GBTimes. None of these radio stations make the number of their listenership publicly available.

Somewhat unusually, the PRC's Ambassador to Hungary rather frequently gives exclusive interviews to Hungarian media outlets. Most of these media outlets are close to the government, and offer a safe space to the Ambassador, like the Hungarian national television, or the pro-government daily Magyar Idők (now Magyar Nemzet).

The latter one has even published the Hungarian transcript of an interview with the Ambassador conducted by the Hungarian correspondent of Xinhua News Agency.<sup>253</sup> The Ambassador also appeared on the state-owned national news channel M1 in a brief interview on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations where he received a few, friendly questions and answered them through simultaneous Mandarin-Hungarian translation.

Additionally, the PRC offers scholarships and educational programs to Hungarians to study in China. These are administered in both bilateral and multilateral (e.g. 17+1 cooperation) frameworks like the Chinese Bridge program.<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, there have been instances of Chinese state leaders participating in public events in Hungary during their official visits, for example PM Li Keqiang attended the unveiling of a statue of Confucius at a Chinese-Hungarian bilingual primary school in Budapest which plays a rather important and visible role in organizing Chinese diaspora life.

## **DRAWING CLOSER: COMPANY-TO-PEOPLE RELATIONS**

Scholarships are also a way for Chinese enterprises in Hungary to reach out and attract people – primarily as potential workforce to be employed. Huawei provides its Seeds for the Future scholarship to ten students in the technology field each year.<sup>255</sup> Wanhua-Borsodchem (a significant Chinese-owned chemical industry corporation operating in the north-eastern county seat of Miskolc) was involved in the establishment and has been contributing to the operation of the local university's Confucius Institute. The Confucius Institute of the University of Miskolc is unique as its Chinese partner institute is the Beijing University of Chemical Technology. According to their website, the idea came from Jason Ding, the Chairman of Wanhua-Borsodchem.<sup>256</sup> The company also offers five scholarships for university students<sup>257</sup> and supports a local badminton championship, called the Confucius Cup.<sup>258</sup> Overall, it is the promise of Chinese investments and outreach through job creation, community building and participation, and corporate social responsibility projects that could play a role in the company-to-people relations brought about by the government's public policy. So far not a lot of that seems to have been realized, as the level of Chinese FDI is still below expectations in Hungary.<sup>259</sup>

## **MORE THAN WELCOME: CHINESE COMPANIES IN HUNGARY**

The ties between Chinese companies and the Government of Hungary are close. Already in 2013, well before 5G had made it to the policy debate, Viktor Orbán's government signed a strategic partnership agreement with Chinese global telecommunications company Huawei. Such an agreement grants special status and rights to companies investing in Hungary. There are more than 80 corporations that have attained this standing with the government of the country – some of them prestigious household names all around the world such as Microsoft, Daimler AG, Nokia, Coca Cola, etc. Out of these, seven are Chinese according to the Minister of Foreign Affairs,<sup>260</sup> – Huawei, BorsodChem, Yanfeng, Bank of China, Westcast-Bohong (though

only five can be found on the list of the ministry)<sup>261</sup> – which might be part of the government's charm offensive to strengthen relations to Beijing.

It is not just the status: Prime Minister Orbán has personally met Huawei executives in Hungary, China and at international events; and Huawei has been receiving major state contracts: the emergency services call operation system,<sup>262</sup> a limited mobile network LTE-450 primarily used by state officials and also national security services.<sup>263</sup> The company has also participated in internet network development by laying 1,000 km of optical cables to provide broadband internet to 140,000 households.<sup>264</sup> Moreover, Huawei possesses permits that make it possible for the company to import dual-use devices to Hungary, although according to the company, it is natural for a company producing telecommunications equipment to have such permissions, as most of these products can be used both for civil and military purposes.<sup>265</sup>

Additionally, a revolving door seems to exist between the company and government employees. According to media reports one of the regional trade managers of Huawei used to work for the Ministry of Interior for seven years as a legal advisor. A former official of the National Tax and Customs Administration works as a leading customs specialist at Huawei, while a former deputy head of department of the immigration authority is employed as a visa specialist by the company.<sup>266</sup> Furthermore, Minister of Foreign Affairs Szijjártó announced in November 2019 that Huawei will develop the 5G system in Hungary, despite previous warnings by the US. As the number of strategic partnership agreements with Chinese corporations suggests Huawei is not alone even if it is obviously exceptional: the number of companies dealing with the Government of Hungary have seen an impressive increase.

The coronavirus pandemic has offered some new opportunities to Chinese companies to donate medical equipment all around the world. In Hungary the China Construction Bank (it plans to open its first branch in Hungary in 2020) has donated 20,000 masks to the Hungarian National Healthcare Service Center,<sup>267</sup> and some small Chinese companies (and individual members of the diaspora) also initiated a crowdfunding campaign to collect money for healthcare institutions.

# Missing in action? China in Slovakia

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Given the geographical distance as well as a different political history, Slovakia, for a long time, did not pay any particular attention to China, except for rather frequent (compared to relations with other Asian countries) meetings with Chinese officials. During the period 1993–2008, there were eight official visits to China from Slovakia, with the former Prime Minister Robert Fico visiting three times.<sup>268</sup> During this period, Slovak officials usually avoided stirring up any controversy regarding China's treatment of human rights issues. Generally, this approach has been interpreted as the outcome of the lack of historical support for human rights issues comparable to the strong imprint of Václav Havel on the foreign policy of Czechia. In addition, some argue that the cautious approach towards issues sensitive for China was one of the features of Slovak initiatives aimed at improving economic relations with China.<sup>269</sup>

After 2009, two important changes altered the countries' perceptions of one another and the subsequent tone of their relationship. First, Slovakia became a member of the European Union which increased its attractiveness as a potential destination for Chinese investment given Slovak economic liberalization and the subsequent economic boom after EU accession.<sup>270</sup> Second, the global financial crisis and the emergence of alternative markets made China much more important in the eyes of Slovak politicians, especially considering China's contribution to that year's global GDP.<sup>271</sup> In fact, after the global financial crisis, Slovak exports to China experienced continued growth driven by the Slovak car industry.<sup>272</sup> This hinted that China could become a more prominent partner. Nonetheless, the Slovak foreign policy towards China has not changed that much in practice. Although there were small differences in how various Slovak governments approached China on its human rights record, Slovak governments have all shared rather the same, cautious approach with a focus on economic relations.<sup>273</sup>

The 2009 landmark visit to Slovakia by Hu Jintao was an important breakthrough accompanied by various meetings between Hu and high representatives of the Slovak state. The visit was the first one by a Chinese president since Slovakia's independence in 1993 and marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. However, in 2009 society in Slovakia went against the government's traditionally cautious approach towards China's record on human rights. Despite the reluctance of Slovak officials to discuss any of the sensitive issues publicly, local human rights activists organized a protest in front of the Presidential palace and ended up clashing with supporters of the Chinese president.<sup>274</sup> A number of activists were arrested and the clash was widely commented on by the Slovak media with the majority of the Slovak public siding with the anti-Beijing protestors.<sup>275</sup>

Establishment of the 17+1 platform and Slovakia's inclusion into it reinvigorated Sino-Slovak contacts.<sup>276</sup> Apart from the 17+1 platform, the V4+China mechanism and most importantly the EU-China cooperation platform<sup>277</sup> were used as channels of communication by Slovak diplomats. The cooperation on a bilateral level also accelerated after 2012. The 10th and 11th meetings of the Slovak-Chinese commission for economic cooperation were accompanied by visits of then Chinese Vice Premier Hui Liangyu to Bratislava in 2013 and 2015.<sup>278</sup>

One of the recent drivers of cooperation has been the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ministry of Transport which have focused on deepening intergovernmental cooperation on the topic of connectivity, agriculture and forestry.<sup>279</sup> Since 2012, the Ministry of Economy has hosted a number of delegations of the Chinese agricultural business. The former Chinese Ambassador to Slovakia Pan Weifang met with the State Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Magdaléna Lacko-Bartošová, to discuss Slovak exports to China in 2013 and 2015.<sup>280</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture spearheaded the initiative to certify exports of Slovak dairy products and pork meat to China. Minister Gabriela Matečná, together with her Slovak National Party boss and Speaker of the Parliament Andrej Danko, even criticized new Slovak President Čaputová over her raising of human rights issues during a meeting with Wang Yi in 2019.<sup>281</sup>

In 2017, the China-CEEC Virtual Technology Transfer Center was established in Bratislava. The platform is set to coordinate and facilitate cooperation between China and the CEE states in innovation and technology transfer. The center also cooperated on the organization of the China-CEEC Conference on Innovation Cooperation that was held in Bratislava in 2017.<sup>282</sup> Besides, the center has organized a number of seminars and workshops on technology transfer and related topics across the CEE region. The overall relations between China and Slovakia can be characterized as a lukewarm pragmatic cooperation in a rather limited number of sectors mostly driven by the Slovak interest in China's market. 'Carrots', rather than 'sticks', prevail and even the 'carrots' have been scarce.

A few exceptions to the rule, however, stand out. First, on the diplomatic front, according to (unconfirmed) reports by diplomatic sources, China supported the Slovak candidate Miroslav Lajčák during the 2016 United Nations Secretary-General selection.<sup>283</sup> Lajčák, who until March 2020 served as Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, met with various Chinese officials both in his capacity as a minister and as the UN General Assembly president.<sup>284</sup> This suggests the existence of cordial relations between Chinese officials and the Slovak minister who on numerous occasions argued for strengthened cooperation with China.<sup>285</sup>

A second case points to China's willingness to use 'sticks' in its relations with Slovakia if its core interests (Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, etc.) are concerned. The main exception to the Chinese benevolent approach towards Slovakia came after the then Slovak President Andrej Kiska met with the Dalai Lama in 2016.<sup>286</sup> In response, China's Foreign Ministry initially threatened retaliation against Slovakia based on an interpretation of the meeting breaking "the political basis of China-Slovak relations".<sup>287</sup> This statement was then followed by a year-long diplomatic stalemate in Slovak-Chinese relations. The relationship only began to return to normal at the end of 2017 following the 6th summit of the 17+1 marked by China's renewed interest

in Slovakia and cooperation in railway-cargo transport and customs.<sup>288</sup> However, it is important to point out that during this diplomatic freeze off, Slovakia did not experience any negative impact on its economy and if anything, the bilateral economic exchange grew slightly. According to World Bank data, Slovak exports to China grew from 1.13 billion USD in 2015 to 1.26 billion worth of exports in 2016.<sup>289</sup> This trend continued in 2017 and 2018, suggesting that political and economic relations work to a different rationale.

After the 2016 meeting with the Dalai Lama, Slovak governmental officials took (again) a rather cautious stand towards China, trying to re-open the channels for communication. Andrej Danko, the Speaker of the National Council, repeatedly invited his Chinese counterpart to Slovakia during the Eurasian summit in 2018 and while meeting with the Chinese Ambassador to Slovakia in 2019. The Chinese side, however, has so far chosen not to act upon the invitations.

Recently though, Slovakia has once again become more critical when it comes to China's human rights record. In July 2019, the Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová met with State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Bratislava. While the meeting went down without any tensions, some politicians such as Slovak MP Ľuboš Blaha were quick to point out Čaputová's remarks regarding her concerns over the human rights situation in China.<sup>290</sup> While this position is in accordance with the official stance of the European Union, Čaputová's position was portrayed as problematic by Gabriela Matečná, the Minister of Agriculture, who was worried about the potential effects of her remarks on Slovak dairy products exports.<sup>291</sup> Despite the concerns, China effectively played down any potential criticism and the remarks have so far proved to have had no effect on Slovak-China relations.<sup>292</sup> The non-response by the Chinese to Čaputová's criticism can be explained by the fact that Čaputová did not go beyond the official EU consensus and raised the criticism in a closed meeting with Wang Yi rather than engaging in a highly symbolic public statement or meeting with the Dalai Lama, as was the case of Kiska.

As part of 17+1 cooperation, China also fosters relations with political parties. From Slovakia, an active member in this cooperation is the SMER-SD party. In November 2019, China held a meeting of the governing parties from China and CEE in Beijing. From Slovakia, the meeting was attended by Juraj Blanár, Deputy Chairman of SMER-SD.<sup>293</sup>

Probably the biggest anomaly to Slovakia's pragmatic yet rather cautious approach towards Beijing is the parliamentary group for friendship with China. In August 2019 the group, led by MP Ľuboš Blaha, went on a visit to Beijing and Tibet. The trip was paid for entirely by China and labelled as a "study visit". Together with Blaha's outspoken posts on Facebook which echoed lines of Chinese propaganda, the trip has become quite controversial and managed to cause a public stir in Slovakia.<sup>294</sup> However, rather than assuming links between Blaha and the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia, his affinity towards China should be viewed through the prism of Slovak domestic politics where he uses this subject as a way to attack the 'liberal opposition'. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that MP Blaha has become one of the most vocal voices promoting China and its narratives in Slovakia.

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 epidemic has resulted in a large-scale China's public diplomacy campaign in Slovakia, with the aim of improving the image of

China and exculpating it from responsibility for the initial mishandling of the viral outbreak (more in the chapter on people-to-people relations).

Despite becoming more important in recent years, China is not among Slovak core interests when it comes to foreign policy, despite the existence of the Slovak government's strategy towards China for 2017-2020 and an accompanying action plan on the development of economic relations between China and Slovakia.<sup>295</sup> The plan itself shows that the Slovak strategy has so far been defined by economic considerations rather than by a wider political/public dialogue which would take into account political or security implications. It is symptomatic of this set up that while the government has endorsed the strategy, it has failed to pass the action plan due to major objections by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs.<sup>296</sup>

China has often used the establishment of direct flights with Chinese cities as a public diplomacy tool of some economic, but also symbolic significance. As other chapters of the paper show, this has been the case in Czechia, Hungary, and Poland. However, unlike its V4 partners, Slovakia does not have a direct line established with any Chinese airport from either Bratislava or Košice (the two main civilian airports located in the West and East of the country). The reason is partially a practical one as both airports are quite close to other larger international airports (Vienna airport is less than an hour's drive from Bratislava; Budapest airport is approximately 2.5 hours from Bratislava and a little under 3 hours from Košice). Nevertheless, the Slovak government (especially former Prime Minister Fico) has repeatedly mentioned engaging a Chinese investor in future development of the Bratislava airport. The idea that was floated by the government included developing the airport for both passenger and cargo transport.<sup>297</sup> However, these plans failed to materialize. Fico cited as a reason for the failure of the proposed project the meeting between President Kiska and the Dalai Lama. This argument was however used mainly as a tool in the domestic political fight between the two leaders which makes the argument less credible.

## THE WEAK CONCOCTION OF SINO-SLOVAK PARADIPLOMACY

Sub-national cooperation is an often overlooked aspect of Sino-Slovak relations. Based on the administrative division of the Slovak Republic, sub-national relations take place on a municipal and a regional level. Currently, three self-governing regions have concluded sister agreements with Chinese provinces.

Bratislava Region established ties with Shanghai already by 2003. In 2007, then-governor Vladimír Bajan (independent) met with a delegation of the Shanghai Oversight Committee. The purpose of the meeting was to exchange experience in oversight with the Bratislava Region's Controller Office. In 2015 then-governor Pavol Frešo (SDKÚ-DS) called for an intensification of the relationship during a meeting with the representatives of the Shanghai Municipal People's Congress.<sup>298</sup> Besides the two meetings in Bratislava, the cooperation has mostly focused on educational and cultural exchanges.

Žilina Region established a partnership with Zhejiang province in 2012. The agreement was concluded by the governor Juraj Blanár from the social democratic party (SMER-SD), who has been one of the drivers of Slovakia's engagement with China.<sup>299</sup>



The Prešov Region agreed to cooperate on a Memorandum of Understanding with Hebei province in 2016 under the framework of the 17+1 cooperation. The signing occurred during the 3rd Meeting of China-CEE Local Leaders. Besides concluding the bilateral Memorandum of Understanding, Prešov region along with other participants of the meeting adopted the so-called Tangshan Consensus,<sup>300</sup> a document aimed at promoting further cooperation between Chinese and CEE municipalities in areas like cultural exchange, technological and scientific innovation, energy conservation, or agriculture.<sup>301</sup>

Slovakia has eight regional-level cities, and the three which have established some form of cooperation with Chinese cities are Banská Bystrica, Košice, and Žilina. Banská Bystrica started its cooperation with Shenyang (Liaoning Province) in 2016. While the two towns did not sign any formal cooperation agreement, there is a declared mutual interest in developing cooperation further.<sup>302</sup> In 2012, Košice signed a Friendship and Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding with Wuhan (Hubei).<sup>303</sup> As for Žilina, its cooperation with Changchun (Jilin) was established in 1993,<sup>304</sup> but it is questionable whether the towns managed to reap any significant benefits from these partnerships. Since the Žilina-Changchun partnership is the longest running municipal level partnership between a Slovak and a Chinese city, it can serve as an example showcasing the merits of municipal-level cooperation. Based on a freedom of information request filed by the authors, the City Hall provided an overview of the main activities that were conducted within the partnership agreement framework. According to the City Hall, a Chinese delegation visits the city on an annual basis. A Slovak delegation has visited Changchun on several occasions as well. As for practicalities, cooperation occurred especially in the culture and sports fields. On the city's website, Changchun is presented as a city with important car making industry. As the local economy in Žilina is based around car manufacture as well (KIA factory was established on the outskirts of Žilina in 2004 with manufacture starting in 2006), this could be a potentially beneficial area of cooperation for the two cities. However, no interaction in this field was mentioned by the City Hall in the response to the freedom of information request.

During the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>305</sup> the sister-city relations remained dormant and were used neither by Slovakia to arrange purchases of medical materials, nor by China to engage in "mask diplomacy". Instead of any of the sister cities, a donation of masks was made by the city of Cangzhou in Hebei province together with the local Farm of Sino-Czechoslovak Friendship.<sup>306</sup> The donation was inherently tied to a Slovak entrepreneur, Eduard Šebo, who is active in China and whose business interests are tied to the Cangzhou city. Šebo, prior to the pandemic reaching Europe, engaged in the buying up of medical supplies across Europe and selling them to the Cangzhou municipal government.<sup>307</sup> Regarding provincial-level partnerships, Shanghai municipal government offered material aid to Bratislava Region, with which it has had a partnership since 2003. Shanghai supplied 2 pallets of medical equipment.<sup>308</sup>

## **EASTERN PROMISES: GROWING NETWORK OF CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES IN SLOVAKIA**

Confucius Institutes in Slovakia are rather active with two currently operating in Bratislava, and one in Banská Bystrica. The first of the institutes was established in 2007 as a partnership between the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava and Tianjin University.<sup>309</sup> In 2015, the second of Bratislava's Confucius Institutes started its operations at Comenius University, the oldest Slovak university, in partnership with the Shanghai University of International Business and Economics.<sup>310</sup> The latest of the three Confucius Institutes was established only in 2018 as a result of a partnership between Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica and Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, Dalian.<sup>311</sup>

Despite the international criticism and the trend of closing down CIs,<sup>312</sup> Slovak universities in general do not seem to consider CIs as a potential threat as was revealed by interviews with several university personnel familiar with the CIs' operations. On the contrary, Matej Bel University undertook the establishment of their Confucius Institute while the global debate on the institutes' negative interference was raging. Slovak CIs focus mostly on providing Mandarin language classes to university students and the broader public. At Comenius University, the Confucius Institute lecturers are an integral part of the language education of future sinologists. The same goes for the Confucius Institute at Matej Bel University, which is of interest as its Faculty of Political Science and International Relations is one of the largest academic organizations providing education in the fields of international relations and security and thus one of the main recruiting grounds of future Slovak diplomats and security experts. Given the accusations of the Confucius Institutes altering the school curricula to present contentious issues in line with Chinese propaganda, the Confucius Institutes' involvement at Slovak universities could be problematic as it could influence future generations of China watchers in the country. However, this problem has so far been overlooked in Slovakia as China tends to be neglected by the Slovak foreign and security policy community.

Besides the three institutes' activities at their host universities, a significant part of their activities is external – be it organizing exhibitions or providing language classes to other institutions. To illustrate, the Confucius Institute at Comenius University organized, in cooperation with the Chinese Embassy, a public exhibition “Chinese story – Chinese Tibet”. The exhibition was naturally thoroughly framed within the official Chinese narrative on Tibet. The exhibition was held at several locations throughout Slovakia, including at Comenius University, University of Agriculture in Nitra, as well as at several galleries. Apart from the above-mentioned exhibition, the Chinese Embassy has organized various exhibitions of its own accord. A notable case was the exhibition located in one of Bratislava's shopping malls which was supposed to highlight the successes of 17+1 cooperation. However, its persuasion potential was quite low both due to its location and the content, as it did not list a single case related to Slovakia (only to the other CEE countries).<sup>313</sup>

Moreover, the CI based at the Slovak Technological University opened a Confucius Classroom at University of Agriculture in Nitra. There is also ongoing cooperation

between the CI and Mikuláš Kováč Grammar School in Banská Bystrica, which offers bilingual high-school education in the Chinese language.<sup>314</sup>

Besides the Confucius Institutes, Slovak universities cooperate with Chinese entities on academic research as well. Notable cases include those with the involvement of Huawei, which has come under international crossfire due to its dubious links to the Chinese government and the potential to present a security risk over its engagement in 5G network architecture. Huawei has concluded an agreement with the Slovak Academy of Science, the Institute of Material Science and Žilina University on conducting joint research and development. Huawei's research cooperation with the Academy of Science, signed in October 2019, focuses on insulation coating for metal material development.<sup>315</sup>

Cooperation between Huawei and Žilina University was established in 2016 and the agreement was labeled by the university as an "extraordinary partnership of the future". Research conducted with Žilina University focuses on the internet of things, intelligent systems, ICT networks, or the Safe City concept. The university also received equipment to conduct applied research from Huawei as part of the partnership.<sup>316</sup>

Huawei also cooperates with several technology and applied science-focused universities (e. g. Žilina University, Technical University of Košice, or Technical University in Zvolen) by providing scholarships to students majoring in ICT related fields as part of its Seeds for the Future program. This program was even endorsed by the Ministry of Education, when the then Minister Peter Plavčan attended the award ceremony for the alumni of the program in 2016.<sup>317</sup>

Moreover, Huawei gave donations to the Ministry of Education in the total amount of 35,000 EUR in support of the Week of Science and Technology in 2016 and 2017.<sup>318</sup> The annual event aims at popularizing science among the Slovak public and promoting the interest of young people to study in scientific programs.<sup>319</sup>

## TELLING CHINA'S STORY IN SLOVAKIA

In the realm of government-to-people relations, the media activities of the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia warrant a deeper analysis. Over past years, the embassy has attempted to shape the Slovak public or media discourse on issues that China itself considers to be its core interests. The embassy's media strategy has been evolving – its media presence started in online outlets catering to extremist views and known for publishing hoaxes and disinformation, such as articles and ambassador's op-eds published in *Hlavné správy* or *Nové slovo*. When questioned about the reason why the ambassador chose these outlets for publishing, the embassy staff responded that they simply did not understand the nature of these media. However, such an explanation seems highly unlikely since the embassy published more articles there even after it was made aware of the problematic nature of the outlets. However, recently the embassy managed to gain a foothold in the mainstream media. In 2018 it sponsored a special issue of *Trend*, a major business-oriented magazine. While most of the issue presented a balanced and fairly critical view of China,<sup>320</sup> the publication with the support of the embassy clearly served to 'normalize' the embassy in the public eyes.

Two articles stand out in their positive stance on China. The Trend special issue included an op-ed by Lin Lin, Chinese Ambassador to Slovakia, and an interview with Lu Xinhua, Chairman of the Chinese Association of South-South Cooperation. The op-ed by Lin Lin focused on presenting 17+1 cooperation and the BRI as a win-win form of cooperation from which both China and the CEE countries benefit. It also pushed the idea of the “community of shared destiny” a common trope of Chinese external propaganda. Moreover, the article exhibited traits of the Xi Jinping personality cult.<sup>321</sup> This is best illustrated by the following quote from the article: “Chinese President Xi Jinping, standing directly in the evolution of human history, pondered deeply what world and in what way to build it, and he thought about other important questions which are connected to the future destiny of mankind, to which he gave a clear answer – to create a global community of shared destiny.”<sup>322</sup> The interview with Lu Xinhua also presented a rather rosy picture of Sino-Slovak relations and China-CEECs cooperation.<sup>323</sup>

A far more problematic activity occurred at the time of 2019 Hong Kong protests. Once again in Trend, the embassy published an advertorial, a piece of paid-for PR content in the form of an op-ed, titled “China upholds the one country, two systems principle, foreigners shouldn't intervene in its internal affairs”. The article was signed again by Lin Lin, Chinese Ambassador to Slovakia. In the piece, he accused the protesters of terrorism and implied that the protests were supported by foreign powers. The embassy reprinted the piece on its website claiming it was published in a mainstream Slovak magazine and forgot to mention that it was published as advertising content. Even the photograph which was attached to the article on the Chinese Embassy's website had the label indicating it was a PR article removed.<sup>324</sup> The article was later abused for Chinese domestic propaganda as it was republished by the news portal Sina,<sup>325</sup> a part of the popular social network Weibo which had 462 million active users as of December 2018.<sup>326</sup>

This embassy's activity on Hong Kong was preceded by an attempt to disseminate a similarly worded press release to mainstream Slovak media. As none of these published the press release, the embassy resorted to purchasing ad space in Trend to make its message public. The only medium that published the press release unprompted was the already mentioned *Nové slovo*.<sup>327</sup> The press release in question appears to be the result of a wider coordinated action on the part of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. The Slovak press release was a shortened version of a similar document produced by the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry on August 20, 2019.<sup>328</sup> The original 42-page document, which listed ‘facts’ about the situation in Hong Kong, was sent to more than 30 international media outlets (e.g. Reuters, Bloomberg, BBC, Wall Street Journal, Asahi Shimbun, etc.) to influence media discourse in favor of Beijing.

The ambassador was also interviewed by the Slovak edition of Euractiv, an online news portal dedicated to EU affairs. Unlike in the case of Trend or his previous appearances in obscure media, here the ambassador was actively questioned and pushed on contentious issues like Hong Kong or Huawei by the interviewing journalist. This serves to illustrate that the media reach of the Chinese Embassy is still very limited and receives pushback from journalists. It in turn means that the embassy's mission to spread its official narrative is largely unsuccessful.

However, its reach could be augmented in the future if Chinese investors manage to purchase Slovak media. The Chinese company CEFC already attempted to purchase the largest privately owned TV station in Slovakia (Markíza) together with Czechoslovak financial group Penta in 2017.<sup>329</sup> As previous research by the MapInfluenCE project uncovered, when CEFC purchased Czech media, their coverage of China shifted dramatically in both tone (to more positive) and topics. Recently, Markíza was purchased by PPF, an investment group of the Czech oligarch Petr Kellner, who has substantial business ties to China. As he has already been implicated in supporting a pro-China media campaign in Czechia, his access to a major TV station in Slovakia could prove problematic in the future.<sup>330</sup> PPF group also owns O2, one of the local mobile network providers.

The Chinese embassy has recently also become active on social media. The embassy's Twitter account was created in February 2020.<sup>331</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, the account was used to spread disinformation about the origin of the virus when it pushed a narrative about the purported origin of the virus being in the USA and its subsequent introduction to China by U.S. military.<sup>332</sup>

The embassy also attempted to decry Slovak media for their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, which in the embassy's view was anti-Chinese. The embassy published a letter in which it objected to an article by *Hospodárske Noviny*. Among other things, the letter decried the newspaper noting China's lack of transparency and the untrustworthy nature of the Chinese data on infection cases and mortality. It also objected to the newspaper using an image of the Chinese flag in connection with the report on COVID-19. The letter was published only in the Chinese language which suggests that its main purpose was to serve in China's domestic propaganda.<sup>333</sup>

This narrative was picked up by China's local proxies. A Marxist MP Ľuboš Blaha (SMER-SD), who is a regular supporter of China, has been applauding China on its supposed success in handling the COVID-19 crisis and juxtaposed it with the situation in New York.<sup>334</sup> He also used it to attack President Čaputová for being critical of China and called for expressions of gratitude towards China for sending aid to Slovakia to deal with the pandemic,<sup>335</sup> even though most of the medical material obtained from China were regular purchases and not aid. He also peddled the idea that there is a possibility that the virus originated in the USA and was deployed against China as a biological weapon.<sup>336</sup> Similar rhetoric was also spread by Robert Fico, chairman of SMER-SD party and Blaha's fellow party member. According to Fico, new Prime Minister Matovič (assumed office on March 21, 2020) should express gratitude towards China for its willingness to sell medical supplies to Slovakia. He also suggested that the spread of the virus could have been caused by business interests.<sup>337</sup>

Besides media, the Chinese government has also attempted to shape and control the scientific discourse about China in Slovakia. In 2015, the Chinese embassy in Bratislava provided funding for the publishing of a special China-dedicated issue of *International Issues and Slovak Foreign Policy*, a journal published by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA).<sup>338</sup> The issue included several balanced and even somewhat critical articles on China's involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. In an interview with one of the editors of the journal it was revealed that at the time the embassy did not have any involvement in the editorial process. The embassy offered to provide funding for another special issue in 2019, but this time requested editorial

control which would allow it to stop publication of any critical content. This change in the embassy's approach was most likely a direct consequence of SFPA publishing articles critical of China in the first special issue. After the embassy made the grant conditional on having editorial control, SFPA declined the funding in order to protect the journal's integrity.

Another specific aspect of the government-to-people relationship relates to the Chinese diaspora. Overall, the Chinese diaspora in Slovakia is quite invisible and rarely participates in public matters. A notable exception were the events surrounding the 2009 visit of President Hu Jintao to Slovakia. Coming to the official meeting with President Ivan Gašparovič, President Hu was greeted by more than 100 overseas Chinese led by Xingmin Ji, the Vice-President of the Union of Chinese Entrepreneurs in Slovakia. The diaspora members greeted Hu with banners and by waving a Chinese flag. At the same time, a group of Slovak activists was protesting against human rights abuses in China with the aim of appealing to Gašparovič to raise the human rights issues in his talks with Hu. The close proximity of the two groups resulted in a violent clash during which the Chinese supporters of Hu assaulted the Slovak activists, tore down their banners and even attacked Štefan Osuský, then Vice-Rector of Comenius University and future member of the Slovak Parliament, with a flagpole. During the incident several people were hurt, including journalists who were covering it. Following the incident, 6 Slovaks (including Ondrej Dostál, a prominent human rights activist and then Member of Bratislava City Assembly, currently a Member of Parliament) and 3 Chinese nationals were taken into custody by the police.<sup>339</sup>

Diaspora activities came to light again in 2019 and 2020. After a devastating gas explosion in Prešov in early December, due to which a residential building collapsed leaving 8 people dead and 40 injured, the Chinese diaspora in Slovakia organized a collection to support the victims of the explosion. The call for donations was issued by the Slovak Chinese Youth Chamber of Commerce. The diaspora members collected 25,088 euros and presented it to the mayor on December 30, 2019.<sup>340</sup>

Similarly to Czechia, the Chinese diaspora was active in collecting face masks for their compatriots in China during the COVID-19 crisis. After the All-China Federation for Returned Overseas Chinese issued a call to overseas Chinese to organize donations to support the mainland, the Slovak diaspora started to collect masks and other protective materials in order to ship them to China. A call to action was also issued by the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia, which promoted donations to the Chinese Red Cross on the Chinese language version of the embassy's website.<sup>341</sup> Altogether, two shipments were made. The first shipment, worth 700,000 RMB, was organized by the local community of overseas Chinese from Qingtian in Zhejiang province.<sup>342</sup> The second shipment, which included 52,000 face masks was organized by the Slovak Chinese Youth Chamber of Commerce.<sup>343</sup>

## TOUCHY-FEELY BUSINESS INTERCONNECTIONS

Cooperation in the field of research and development has been taking place not only as part of academic cooperation, but also on the business-to-business level which intersects with the official governmental level. As was already mentioned, Slovakia

is hosting the 17+1 Virtual Technology Transfer Center. However, this is not the only avenue of technological cooperation between Chinese and Slovak enterprises with governmental support, as of 2019, a China-CEEC Blockchain Center of Excellence has been established. Its goal is to increase the number of private-public partnerships (PPP) aimed at developing blockchain technology. The establishment of the center was initiated by the Slovak private sector (blockchain technology start-up Decent) but received official support of the Prime Minister who saw it as a specific initiative of Slovakia to be developed under the 17+1 umbrella. Currently, the center is only in its initial development stage and it remains to be seen what its actual activities will be. Several Chinese universities are listed as the center's members, including the prestigious Tsinghua University and Peking University. From the Slovak side, the Technological University in Košice and Slovak Academy of Science are involved with the center.<sup>344</sup>

Also, cooperation with Chinese industries in the telecom sector has started to be of larger importance recently. Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE are important partners of some of the Slovak telecom providers. In light of the recent discussions about 5G development and the potential risks of involving Chinese companies, the cooperation deserves further scrutiny. The youngest of the four mobile providers in Slovakia, the Štvorka network operated by Swan Mobile, undertook a credit line of an unspecified amount from the Bank of China with the entire network as collateral in order to develop its 4G network (built with ZTE components).<sup>345</sup> Moreover, Swan Mobile, in cooperation with its sister company Swan Inc. and Chinese telecom giant ZTE, demonstrated a pilot 5G project in Banská Bystrica. Swan Inc. is partially owned by J&T Finance SE, in which Chinese state-owned enterprise CITIC holds a 9.9% share.<sup>346</sup>

By holding shares in J&T Finance SE, CITIC also has an indirect ownership of the Postal Bank and J&T Bank.<sup>347</sup> The legal predecessor of CITIC, CEFC Europe, attempted to purchase as much as a 50% stake in J&T Finance SE, however, the attempt was blocked by the Czech National Bank (both European Central Bank and Slovak National Bank had already given a green light to the purchase).<sup>348</sup> At the same time, Postal Bank, J&T Bank, and J&T Private Investments (a member of the private equity branch of the J&T group's portfolio) financed CEFC's acquisitions spree across Central Europe, especially in Czechia.<sup>349</sup>

# Conclusions

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China does not use a 'one size fits all' approach in Central Europe. Our research shows that while China's goal of establishing a friendly (or at least friendlier) environment and a strategy to achieve it are similar in all four countries, its tactics differ in reaction to the local political climate, geopolitical standing and level of interactions. From the open source materials it seems that in Hungary China uses exclusively 'carrots' without the need to apply 'sticks'. In Poland it employs mainly 'carrots', while in Czechia, which represents a state with a tradition of opposing China, it uses a mixture of 'carrots' with a recent increase in the use of 'sticks'. For specific reasons, in Slovakia, China's influence is muted to a level where the notion of 'carrots' and 'sticks' applies only in a limited way as Beijing continues to remain on the sidelines of the country's foreign interests. Thus, it could be argued that it is not only China's intentions, but also the Central European states' and their political and economic elites' interest in attracting China's attention which is helping to provide openings for Chinese influence to enter and thrive in the region.

China is active in all researched domains of relations, though the level of activity varies. In all four countries, China has been increasingly active on the government-to-government level since 2000s. This level of interaction (including party-to-party diplomacy) was also the first one to emerge. The research shows that China's tactics tend towards employing 'carrots' as the first option in establishing itself in the region. The use of 'sticks' is predominantly linked to the question of China's sovereignty. In all documented instances, China's harsh reactions came after official actions (at either governmental or sub-governmental levels or both) related to Tibet or Taiwan (e.g. meeting with the Dalai Lama, renunciation of an article in the Prague-Beijing sister city agreement acknowledging Taiwan being a part of China, etc.). At the time of the writing of this study, 'sticks' have not been documented in connection with the Huawei case.

The case of Prague-Beijing sister city agreement reveals this tactics in greater detail. In this specific case, China signaled its use of 'sticks' before it implemented them in order to influence its challenger to budge. The effectiveness of 'sticks' depends on China's credibility to wield them and the potential damage they can cause to the other country. In the case of Central Europe with its (still) limited bilateral trade exchange, dominant orientation to the European Union's internal market and – with the exception of Hungary – few political goals for which it would strive to obtain China's backing in the international arena, the damage would be rather small.

Curiously, while the use of 'sticks' has been already visible in a number of domains (e.g. government-to-government, people-to-people relations), they have, so far, not been applied in economic relations. This could be explained by a relatively modest economic exchange between China and Central European countries and a strong potential for the measure to backfire and negatively affect Chinese companies. Even in Hungary,



China's economic presence is still limited in comparison to the importance of the EU and the US. The EU member countries are also far more important investors.

Our research shows that, perhaps surprisingly, 'sticks' seem less likely to be used as a follow-up to a critique of the Chinese human rights record, especially if the words are not accompanied with deeds and if the critique is in line with the position of the European Union. While official reactions from Chinese embassies almost inevitably follow, the critique itself does not seem to affect economic relations. In this case, political and economic relations seem to follow a different rationale.

There may be, however, a few recorded exceptions, when it seems that China blocked or halted economic deals in connection to 'sensitive issues' such as Tibet or Taiwan (yet, the list does not include human rights issues). China is said to block impending economic deals when a Chinese investor allegedly lost interest in Slovakia after then President Kiska met with the Dalai Lama<sup>350</sup> or when a deal concerning Czech airplanes was allegedly halted due to a planned trip of the President of the Czech Senate to Taiwan<sup>351</sup>. Though both cases touch upon Tibet or Taiwan issues, the problematic nature of these kind of 'sticks' is the questionable probability of the deals having materialized in the first place, and also the fact that in both cases the 'sticks' were announced by local politicians rather than Chinese side.<sup>352</sup>

Also, the means of coercion have not been limited to retaliation in the same domain where the 'offense' came from, i.e. the level of government-to-government relations. China tends to retaliate in a number of other domains.<sup>353</sup> This finding supports the claim that the Chinese government influences all aspects of foreign relations (including e.g. those at the people-to-people or company-to-people level).

The evaluation of 'sticks' yielded by China is complicated by the existence and activities of local political proxies. It leads to a principal-agent problem, when domestic figures are one of the driving forces through which China's influence is exercised in the country and who also effectively shape China's image. It is thus not exclusively China's actions which lead to China's public diplomacy 'achievements' or 'failures'. The activities of domestic players deserve equal scrutiny in the effort to describe and critically assess the impacts of China's 'sticks' and 'carrots'.

Indeed, some threats were communicated by local actors, not China itself (e.g. when the Czech President Miloš Zeman announced China's probable retaliation against the main Czech airport and divestment from Slavia soccer club). So, at least hypothetically, we cannot rule out an option that some threats might have been the result of the positioning of domestic political actors rather than a true representation of China's intentions. Yet other threats were communicated by the same proxies on behalf of the Chinese Embassy, as shown in the case of a letter sent from the embassy to the late President of the Czech Senate to prevent him from visiting Taiwan. The letter was handed over by the Office of the Czech President. In this case, Beijing used a threat of potential detriment caused to local Czech companies operating in China if the visit was not canceled. The tactics was based on the assumption that the proxies themselves would make sure the Senate President would refrain from any action seen as provoking China.

It is also notable, in case of Czechia, that some 'carrots' in the form of public expectations surrounding Chinese investment (including specific numbers) were announced again by the Czech political interlocutors. Perhaps paradoxically, local interlocutors

largely contributed to the backlash against China by selling an unrealistic vision of a substantial upgrade of economic ties that Beijing could not (or did not want to) deliver upon. Still other forms of 'carrots' were clearly offered and promoted by China, sometimes through its International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party, that has been active in party-to-party and people-to-people relations, cultivating senior as well as upcoming politicians of both leading and opposition parties.

Similarly to the situation in Czechia, one of the sources of China's influence in Hungary is the proactive eagerness on the part of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Perhaps surprisingly, members of the ruling party Fidesz used to be fierce opponents of China for decades, while other mainstream parties in the parliament show a much more cautious or even hostile approach towards China.<sup>354</sup> Research interviews have bolstered these findings.<sup>355</sup> Three possible explanations emerge. First, despite all the disappointments over the past nine years, PM Orbán still believes in the potential of Chinese investment especially against the impending decrease of EU structural funds. Second, Orbán enjoys close relations to Beijing as it offers him leverage at the EU level and potential political support from another illiberal state. Third, cooperation with Chinese companies creates business opportunities for Hungarian interest groups close to the government, as the examples of the reconstruction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway and the golden visa program show. Either way, the political proximity of Orbán's government to Beijing will likely remain the reality for the years to come.

Our research also shows that China has become active at a sub-governmental level, establishing and increasing the number of partnerships with regions and municipalities. In this domain its activities have gone largely unnoticed by the local China watching communities and journalists.

In general, people-to-people interactions have been the most dynamically evolving – but not necessarily widely enough publicized and researched – component of China's activity in the Visegrád countries. Academic exchange has developed bilaterally as well as multilaterally in different formats and local non-profit and non-governmental organizations have maintained communication with different Chinese organizations (which should, however, not be called their "counterparts", given the discrepancies in terms of their workings and roles in PRC's political system). Confucius Institutes have also grown in number despite international criticism related to their possible impact on enabling and shaping uncritical China-related academic debates.

When it comes to government-to-people cooperation over the past fifteen years, Chinese presence in Central Europe has expanded through various means, such as promotion of government-sponsored scholarships, cooperation with local media and individual journalists or social media influencers as well as promotion of China-related official merchandise. Especially with the COVID-19 epidemic, the increase in China's activities which attempt to influence local media and also target the Chinese diaspora is worth noticing. Even before the coronavirus epidemic, Chinese embassies attempted to shape the public and media discourse on issues related to China and its declared core interests. With the exception of Hungary, where the Chinese Embassy does not feel an urge to deal with the local media and where the public discourse is seen as already positive on China, the Chinese embassies in the remaining Central European countries combined rather fringe media outlets with attempts to increase their presence in mainstream ones. This media cooperation in the form of supplements,

content sharing agreements and the increased presence of China Radio International broadcasting in local languages contributed to shape China's image. Nonetheless it is important to point out that despite numerous attempts by the Chinese entities, their media reach is still limited and receives a significant pushback from journalists, especially in Czechia and Slovakia.

In the case of Chinese companies' relations, Chinese firms seem mostly active in Poland and Hungary, while in Czechia, where the CEFC scandal negatively affected the perception of Chinese investments and the reputation of other Chinese firms, companies seem not to publicly invest in an attempt to improve China's image. However, the recent case of Huawei sponsoring an analysis on alleged costs Czechia would bear if excluding the company from 5G networks may represent a new turning point.

Finally, the relations between the Central Europe and China do not exist in a vacuum, as relations between China and the other powers, specifically the EU and the US, influence the overall context. The influence of the Sino-American rivalry is perhaps most visible in the case of Poland. Some elements of coercion became visible at the level of political declarations when Sino-Polish ties started to be influenced by the general deterioration of ties between Beijing and Washington. As Poland has enjoyed very close ties with the US, Sino-American strategic rivalry has impacted certain forms of cooperation between Warsaw and Beijing, most notably in terms of limiting Huawei's potential involvement in the creation of Polish 5G networks, which has met with criticism from the Chinese side.

However, unlike in the Czech case, China has mostly refrained from using sticks (or a threat thereof) in its relations with Poland when bilateral ties were strained. Perhaps, Warsaw's close ties with Washington serve as a factor deterring Beijing from using sticks against Poland. On the other hand, the actual scope of Sino-Polish cooperation remains so limited that even if Beijing wanted to use specific measures against Warsaw, they would hardly harm Poland in a significant way.

# Recommendations

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The set of recommendations for the Visegrád countries is rather straightforward:

First, after the coronavirus epidemic, the European Union should initiate information and PR campaigns across Europe to make its citizens aware of the benefits of the EU, its values and its economic might. As the major part of Chinese influence springs from its perceived economic superiority and promises of economic benefits, it is fundamentally important to increase the self-awareness and self-esteem of Europeans. More intensive and smart strategic communication should also target Hungary and remind it of economic reality.

Second, higher levels of transparency should be employed in all fields of relations with China. In the specific case of Sino-Hungarian relations a special emphasis should be placed on transparency in investment, loans and public procurement issues. The European Union should scrutinize business transactions between the Hungarian and Chinese state to eliminate even the slightest chances of misconduct.

Third, the four Central European countries need to recalibrate their approach to China to make their objectives more realistic, yet not opportunistic, while also taking into account the structural and political barriers that have become evident in bilateral as well as multilateral relations in recent years. This should also be achieved through joint EU-wide efforts to ensure a greater impact and increase in European bargaining power vis-à-vis China. Central European countries should also be more active within the 17+1 platform, and push for common EU interests thus mitigating the asymmetry advantage China has over 17+1 as well as smaller EU member states.

Fourth, due to a low economic dependence on China, Central European countries should not be afraid to engage in critical discussions, including those on human rights issues, without the fear of experiencing high economic costs. Moreover, by including human rights in the conversations with China, the countries can showcase their commitment to global norms and values.

Fifth, Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia should conduct an audit of their relations with China to evaluate the role of individual government agencies and the effectiveness of their policies towards China. After the audit, the countries should come up with their own coherent China strategies which will contain clear and measurable objectives and specify the means to achieve these objectives. Countries' China strategies should be aware of both the economic and political realities of China, including its human rights track record.

Sixth, the Visegrád countries should avoid assisting the CCP in creating alternative platforms for conducting party diplomacy, thus avoiding regular government-level channels. Such efforts assist in bolstering CCP legitimacy and undermine the integrity and coherence of the respective governments' foreign policies.

Seventh, the trend of former politicians finding employment as pro-China lobbyists, salient especially in Czechia, is worrisome. The revolving-doors rules should

be reviewed to limit the potential for misuse of former politicians' political access and networks for the gain of foreign powers.

Eighth, many of the activities at the sub-national level have gone unnoticed by the media and China watching local communities. With varying levels of success, municipalities and self-governing regions rely on activities which in turn serve to legitimize the CCP and its cadres domestically. The guidelines for paradiplomacy which would provide an overview of (un)suitable approaches towards China for local and regional governments would complement the countries' overall China strategies.

Ninth, support for independent journalism is crucial in raising public awareness of the potential benefits, risks and side effects of cooperation with China. The Czech case, with the highest number of documented cases enabling conclusions to be reached on the Chinese modus operandi in employing 'sticks' and 'carrots' and detailed coverage of proxies' involvement in spreading Chinese influence, can serve as an inspiration.

Tenth, despite China's current media strategy being unsuccessful, the four Visegrád countries should stay vigilant as this influence could augment in the future in the case of Chinese investment in the media sector. It is thus crucial (not only because of Chinese investment, but because of other malign actors as well) to keep considering media as a strategic asset and to subject it to national investment screening mechanisms.

Finally, with the exception of Czechia, the academic cooperation between Visegrád countries and China goes largely unnoticed. Central European governments should support the education of their home-grown China experts, otherwise universities will be pushed to rely on Chinese financing of China-focused subjects thus opening future generations of governmental China experts to undue Chinese influence. Universities need to undertake increased due diligence when dealing with Chinese entities while also taking into account possible linkage of Chinese companies to the military and CCP. Moreover, as the case of Slovakia shows, there has been cooperation in the field of research and development, occasionally intersecting with the official governmental level, going unnoticed. The 17+1 Virtual Technology Transfer Center or the China-CEEC Blockchain Center of Excellence, initiated by the Slovak private sector, serve as a useful example.



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# About MapInfluenCE

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

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

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

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

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

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# About AMO

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Association for International Affairs is a non-governmental non-profit organization founded in 1997. The mission of AMO has been to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs through a broad range of educational and research activities. Thanks to its activities in the Czech Republic and abroad and 20-year tradition, AMO has established itself as the Czech leading independent institution in the field of international relations and foreign policy.





## IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE ITS GOALS AMO STRIVES TO:

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- create vital conditions for growth of a new expert generation;
- support interest in international relations in the wider public domain;
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The Research Center of the Association for International Affairs is a leading Czech think-tank, which is not bound to any political party or ideology. With its activities, it supports an active approach to foreign policy, provides an independent analysis of current political issues and encourages expert and public debate on related topics. The main goal of the Research Center is systematic observation, analysis and commentary on international affairs with special focus on Czech foreign policy.

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# Footnotes

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- 1 The project has been known as ChinfluenCE in 2017-2020. For the project website visit [www.mapinfluence.eu](http://www.mapinfluence.eu)
- 2 Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- 3 Manheim outlines four types of relations: (1) government-to-government, (2) diplomat-to-diplomat, (3) people-to-people and (4) government-to-people, claiming that the former two forms represent traditional diplomacy while the remaining pair can be conceptualized as people (public) diplomacy (because they relate to the public). However, how the public is defined and involved is less clear.
- 4 The table documents known examples of 'sticks' and 'carrots' in the region. It is by no means an exhaustive list which would summarize all kinds of tools yielded by China. China has been known to use other means globally (such as foreign aid, harassment of scholars, using student organizations to influence academia, consumer boycotts etc.) which have not been (perhaps yet) documented in the region.
- 5 The format originally comprised 16 Central and Eastern European countries. Since the inclusion of Greece in 2019, the platform has been known as 17+1.
- 6 Jiří Paroubek, "Strategické partnerství s Čínou", *Parlamentní Listy*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/politici-volicum/Jiri-Paroubek-Strategicke-partnerstvi-s-Cinou-424118>.
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- 352 Slovak exports to China were not impacted by the meeting and Prime Minister Fico never specified which purported investment plans fell through, leading to a possible conclusion that publicizing the whole issue may have been the result of Fico's domestic positioning. Also Zeman's claims regarding the halting of the deal concerning Czech airplanes were met with skepticism.
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