



CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE NEW MILLENIUM: THE NEW GREAT GAME? US, RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INTERESTS AND ACTIVITIES IN CZECHIA, HUNGARY, POLAND AND SLOVAKIA

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Abstract:

After the fall of communism, Central Europe (CE) was a region with relatively high US interest and support. Washington supported the NATO membership of CE countries, provided financial as well as technical assistance to the region and several American high-positioned political representatives visited the region. However, during the last few years, it is evident that CE is a space where the Russian and Chinese presence and influence have been risen. The present article analyses several questions aiming to scrutinize the Russian and Chinese presence and activities in CE, particularly, when and how Russia and China penetrated into CE, what are the consequences of the rising Russian and Chinese influence and who are the supporters and opponents of Moscow and Beijing in CE. The article concludes that, the main competing actors in CE are Washington and Russia, while China profits from the US-Russia clash. While the US and Russian interests are dominant in security and political issues, China aims to penetrate CE economics.

Keywords: Central Europe, Russia, China, Influence, United States

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Resumen:

Tras la caída del comunismo, Europa Central (EC) era una región con un interés y un apoyo relativamente alto por parte de los Estados Unidos. Washington apoyó el ingreso en la OTAN de los países de EC, proporcionó asistencia financiera y técnica a la región y varios representantes políticos estadounidenses de alto rango visitaron la región. Sin embargo, durante los últimos años, es evidente que EC es un espacio en el que la presencia y la influencia rusa y china se han incrementado. En el presente artículo se analizan varias cuestiones sobre la presencia y las actividades rusas y chinas en EC, en particular, cuándo y cómo penetraron Rusia y China en EC, cuáles son las consecuencias de la creciente influencia rusa y china y quiénes son los partidarios y los opositores de Moscú y Beijing en EC. El artículo concluye que los principales actores que compiten en EC son Washington y Rusia, mientras que China se beneficia del choque entre estos dos países. Si bien los intereses de EE.UU. y Rusia predominan en asuntos políticos y de seguridad, China pretende penetrar en la economía de EC.

Palabras Clave: Europa Central, Rusia, China, influencia, Estados Unidos.

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1. Introduction²

After the Second World War, Central Europe (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) became part of the Soviet led communist bloc. Until the end of the 1980s the role of the United States and China in Central Europe (CE) was marginal. The United States were an ideological and powerful foe, China did not have the capacity to significantly enter into the global international politics and distant territories. The situation dramatically changed after the end of the Cold War. In only one decade the Soviet (Russian) influence in CE declined and the United States became the strategic partner of Poland and the Czech Republic, the main driving force for NATO-enlargement and donor of technical and financial assistance to all CE countries. In the second half of the 1990s China started to prosper and demonstrated its first ambitions to enter the world politics. In only one decade the situation in CE has become dramatically different: at the beginning of the new Millennium the activities and influence of the United States in CE declined, societies of CE countries turned rather anti-American with a rising sentimentality for the communist period, several CE politicians expressed sympathy for Russia, particularly the strong leadership of V. Putin, and China became an economic and business magnet, assertively creating its first businesses in CE. In CE countries, especially after the 2008 world economic crisis, concerns grew that China will be the only economic giant of the new century and wasting the chance to win Chinese investments and tourists meant the loss of competitiveness in the world market. The Chinese and Russian influence in CE grew while the US presence declined and the EU countries were not able to effectively fill the vacuum. The US approach changed after the arrival of the Trump administration, which actively sought to challenge the impudent Russians and assertive Chinese. Furthermore, increasing Chinese and Russian involvement in CE has resulted in China and Russia's activities dividing Europe and fostering their Trojan horses which can act as vehicles for Chinese/Russia influence in the EU. In May 2019, the Head of the US State Department Michel Pompeo stated that, "too often in the recent past, the United States was absent from Central Europe...That's unacceptable. Our rivals filled those vacuums"³. Consequently, the United States started actively engaging in new activities in the CE to counter Russia and China. During less than two decades, CE became "a new grand chessboard" for the 'Big three'.

The goal of the present article is to analyze "the new great game" between United States, Russia and China in CE, particularly in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. I will firstly give evidence of the rise and fall of the US presence and influence in CE and consequently collect evidence about the rising Russian and Chinese interests and activities in Central European countries. This article tries to clarify the following questions:

- 1) When the United States left the CE and when rising Russian and Chinese engagement may be observed?
- 2) What are the forms of Russian and Chinese penetration into CE?
- 3) What are the effects of Russian and Chinese engagement in CE?
- 4) How CE societies and politics understand and respond to the rising Russian and Chinese presence?
- 5) Who are the supporters and opponents of Russian and Chinese engagement in the CE countries?

² This research was supported by Czech Science Foundation, Grant No. 19-09443S "Expert Knowledge Diffusion in International Politics".

³ Foreign Policy (2019): "To counter China and Russia, US mulls inviting Hungary's Orbán to D.C.", *Foreign Policy*, 1 May 2019, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/01/to-counter-russia-and-china-u-s-trump-white-house-mulls-invite-to-hungary-viktor-orban-europe-diplomacy/>



The present analysis is divided into four parts. The first part documents and analyzes the arrival of the United States into Central Europe and its leaving during the two decades after the fall of communism. The second part traces the period of transformation when Russia and China penetrated CE countries and documents and analyzes the context of the rise of Russian and Chinese engagement. To gain a deeper insight into the situation and to get more of a complex picture and answers to the five research questions, the Czech Republic is used as a case study. The goal of the case study is to show that countries are not unitary actors and “black boxes”, and only insight into the country’s domestic environment may bring information who the actors are, what are their motivations and interests vis-à-vis Russia and China and what are the effects of rising Chinese and Russian engagement. The last one compares and concludes the findings and discusses the answers to the research questions.

For the collecting of evidence, evaluation of data and analysis a combination of methods is used, mainly a qualitative historiographic study and analysis of documents and media. In the second part of the article the case study is used to go deeper into the problem.

2. The rise and fall of US engagement in Central Europe after the end of the Cold War

Since the end of WWII, CE had been the zone of Soviet influence. The importance of the region in the Soviet Cold War strategy documents several Soviet political and military interventions in CE countries, particularly in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. After the fall of the communist regimes, all CE countries embark on a journey towards democracy and a free liberal economy. Despite individual journeys differing and some CE countries (especially Slovakia and Hungary) experiencing periods of political turbulence, they all successfully joined the West which was institutionally confirmed by EU and NATO enlargement. One of the driving forces of political and economic changes in Central Europe was the United States. The following subchapters trace the rise and decline of the US presence and engagement in individual CE countries.

2.1. The Czech Republic

US-Czech relations have a long tradition, dating back to the time of an independent Czechoslovakia. The foundation of US-Czech relations was established against the backdrop of the outcome of WWI. However, the arrival of communism in 1948 broke off their development. The US-Czech relations were reestablished after the Velvet revolution. The political elites of post-communist Czechoslovakia were clearly and unequivocally Western oriented, preferring either the US or EU. In the 1990s the unification of Germany, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia strengthened the Atlantic and pro-American orientation of Czech politics. The pro-US spirit in the Czech Republic was strengthened by rapport and friendly personal relations between V. Havel, B. Clinton and M. Albright. In 1997 the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs even labelled the Czech Republic as “the American camp”.⁴

The change came in the new Millennium; following the air-attacks on Serbia in the spring of 1999 and post-9/11 changes in US foreign policy, the US-Czech relations have been eroded, accompanied by a rising critical opinion about the US in Czech society and politics.⁵ The circumspect Czech approach to the US was strengthened after the country joined the EU in 2004. The pro-US politicians (e.g. A. Vondra, J. Schneider) had been step-by-step losing political positions and influence, and the incoming generation of new Czech politicians has been rather either pro-EU or EU-sceptical which was often connected with pro-Russian or pro-

⁴Waisová, Šárka (2007): “Between Atlanticism, Anti-Americanism and Europeanisation: Dilemmas in Czech Foreign Policy and the War on Terrorism”, in Miller, M., Stefanova B: *The War on Terror in Comparative Perspective. US Security and Foreign Policy after 9/11*, Palgrave: Mcmillan, pp. 191-204.

⁵Waisová, Šárka; Píknerová, Linda (2012). “Twenty years after: Dissident tradition in Czech foreign policy matters”, *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp 162-188



Chinese positions.⁶ Today, the Czech-US relations are standard –not good but not bad. However, the Czech society as well as dominant part of politics is wary of the Trump administration.⁷

2.2. Hungary

Hungary established diplomatic relations with the United States in 1921 following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Hungary severed relations with Washington in 1941 when they became allies of Nazi Germany. Both countries reestablished relations following the end of WWII. At the end of the War, Soviet forces entered Hungarian territory and over the course of several years installed a communist regime that remained in place for over four decades. After the collapse of communism, the United States offered – like it did to other post-communist CE countries – assistance to help Budapest to establish a democratic political system and a free-market economy. The assistance included language courses, support for developing the private sector, official development and technical assistance, and training, to name a few. With a strong US support, Hungary, like the Czech Republic, joined NATO in 1999. At the end of the 1990s the US-Hungarian relations were good and strong and the political and social attitude towards the USA was rather positive.⁸

However, like in other CE countries the anti-American sentiment, which has been always present in some circles in Hungary including in parts of academia, started to rise after the changes of US foreign policy in the post-9/11 period. The milestone in Hungarian-US relations arrived after 2010 when Fidesz won the elections and Victor Orbán became the Prime Minister. Since taking office, Orbán has been flirting with Moscow and Beijing; his goal was not only to weaken the US positions in Hungary, but to strengthen the blackmailing potential of Budapest vis-à-vis US, EU and NATO and, at the same time, to win Russian and Chinese political and economic support. It was during this time that the US heavily criticized Hungary for the erosion of the rule of law, harassment of non-governmental organizations, violation of human rights and freedoms and rising anti-Semitism.⁹ The number of conflict issues between US and Hungary rose, dominated by the concern of the deliberalisation of Hungarian public life (hot issues were Central European University and George Soros' activities in Hungarian territory) and the freedom of media and civic society. At the same time, Russia seized a big part of the Hungarian market including the transport and manufacturing of oil and gas and won the contract for the new nuclear power plant in Paks. Consequently, the Hungarian envoy to NATO tried to sabotage the improvement of relations between the Alliance and Ukraine.¹⁰ The Chinese arrival was even stronger: Hungary and China signed a strategic partnership and Hungary became the first European country to support the Chinese-proposed Belt and Road Initiative.¹¹

⁶ The exception is ODS which is EU-skeptical, however not generally pro-Russia or pro-Chinese.

⁷ *Hospodářské noviny*: “Češi ze světových lídrů nejvíc důvěřují Putinovi”, *Hospodářské noviny*, 8 January 2020, at <https://zahranicni.ihned.cz/c1-66703260-cesi-ze-svetovych-lidru-nejvic-duveruji-putinovi-trumpovi-veri-pouze-29-procent-lidi-zijicich-mimo-usa>; Týden (2019): “Ze zahraničních osobností Češi nejlépe hodnotí Čaputovou”, *Týden.cz*, 7 August 2019, at https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/ze-zahranicnich-osobnosti-cesi-nejlepe-hodnoti-caputovou_529171.html

⁸ *National referendum initiatives*, National Election Office, Hungary, 12 December 2017, at <https://www.valasztas.hu/web/national-election-office/national-referendums>

⁹ *Euroasia and emerging threats of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, Hearing before the subcommittee on Europe, House of Representatives. 2015, First Session, Serial No. 114-45. 5

¹⁰ Kirchick, James (2019): *Is Hungary becoming a rogue state in the center of Europe?*, Brookings Institution.

¹¹ “China and Hungary aiming to push ties to new high”, *China Daily*, 30 September 2019, at <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/30/WS5d915ef8a310cf3e3556e489.html>



The Trump administration brought a modest turnabout.¹² Firstly, ideologically and influenced by personal attributes, Trump and Orbán understand each other (they for example share the same view on immigration), secondly the US feel challenged by the rise of Russia and China, and Hungary – as a flagship for Russian and Chinese – has logically attracted Washington's attention.¹³ Critics say that the Trump administration when trying to counter Russian and Chinese influence in Hungary, is setting aside concerns over human rights and rule of law in Hungary to get Budapest back into the Western fold.¹⁴

2.3. Poland

The United States became the first country to recognize an independent Poland in 1919. The US-Polish relations were disrupted during the Cold War, however, after the demise of communism in 1989, US-Polish relations prospered and Poland became a strategic and loyal US partner, a key ally and one of the most pro-US countries in Europe.¹⁵ Poland joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004.

A particular pillar of the special relations between Washington and Warsaw has been the security sector: they partner closely on NATO capabilities, counterterrorism, nonproliferation, missile defence, human rights, economic growth and innovation, energy security, and regional cooperation in Central Europe. Poland hosted the 2016 NATO Summit, and today the country hosts the NATO Multinational Corps and Division Northeast Headquarters, a NATO Force Integration Unit, a US aviation detachment and units from a rotational US Armoured Combat Brigade Team, a NATO enhanced Forward Presence battalion (with the United States as a framework partner), and will host a ballistic missile defence site under the European Phased Adaptive Approach. Poland will also be a framework nation under the very high readiness joint task force in 2020. The country has contributed to operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, as well as to operations against ISIS. In 2004 Warsaw confirmed having secret CIA prisons established during the anti-terrorist campaign after 9/11 on its territory.¹⁶ Poland is the only CE country to have US troops permanently on its territory. Despite some ups and downs in US-Polish relations, no Polish government ever ignored Washington and the United States has always been a loyal strategic security and political partner to Warsaw.¹⁷ Among CE countries, Poland is definitely the only country which has a tradition of special relations with the US.

2.4. Slovakia

Even when Slovakia shared its history with the Czech Republic for more than several decades and received US financial and technical assistance for democratization and economic liberalization from the US like the Czech Republic, the way the US-Slovak bilateral relations developed has been different and more complicated. V. Mečiar and his political party (HZDS) which governed Slovakia in the 1990s did not share the pro-European and pro-Atlantic enthusiasm of the Czech post-velvet revolution political elite. Mečiar's government was sceptical of the EU and NATO, rather authoritarian and illiberal. Based on this and also based on the strategic marginality of the country, the reactions of the West to post-communist

¹² Kingsley, Patrick (2018): "Hungary's leader was shunned by Obama, but has a friend in Trump", *New York Times*, 15 August 2018

¹³ *Foreign Policy*, op.cit.

¹⁴ See US State Department, 2015; Frynia, Lukasz (2019): *Hungary's response to the offer to improve US-Hungarian relations*, at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2019-02-13/hungarys-response-to-offer-to-improve-us-hungarian-relations>, 2019; Kirchick, op.cit.

¹⁵ US Department of State (2019): *US relations with Poland*, at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-poland/>

¹⁶ "V Polsku byly tajné věznice CIA", *iRozhlas*, 10 December 2014, at https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/v-polsku-byly-tajne-veznice-cia-pripustil-byvaly-prezident-kwasniewski_201412102114_mskalicky.

¹⁷ *Poland: Background and US Relations*, Congressional Research Service, 25 June 2019.



Slovakian politics were rather cold. Observers¹⁸ noticed that in the 1990s the only pro-Western government was that of J. Moravčík, however, this government existed only for a few months in 1994. Slovakia felt in political isolation giving an impulse to Russian economic and political activities. However, the Slovakian market and politics is – within Europe – rather insignificant and Russian interest was thus limited. When Slovakia was not invited to join NATO in the first wave, Moscow celebrated.

The situation changed at the end of the 1990s when the HZDS was repeatedly not able to establish the government and the liberal oriented pro-Western political parties broke through. The Slovak political course changed and later the country joined the EU and NATO. It normalized its international position, particularly relations to the old EU countries and to the US. Nevertheless, even after it, the Slovak position has not been easy. As a small land-locked country neighbouring with illiberal Hungary and one of the biggest Russian rivals – Ukraine, fully dependent on Russian oil and gas, Slovakian political and economic manoeuvring was significantly limited. The US-Slovak relations have been always and even today rather standard without special relations and personal connections such as Havel had or the historical, strategic and social connections that Poland had. However, the country stays loyal to NATO and appropriate to the USA.

3. Russian and Chinese penetration into Central Europe

In this section, the penetration of Beijing and Moscow into CE will be traced and the forms of Russian and Chinese engagement will be analyzed. Attention will be paid to Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The Czech Republic will be analyzed as a separate case study in depth in the third part. Before analysing the different countries, it is important to mention that there are several attributes shared by all four CE countries:

- all had experience with the Soviet power and communism,
- all went through the process of democratization and economic liberalization including industrial restructuring with financial and technical support from the West,
- all have been experiencing some form of post-communist sentiment and anti-Americanism,
- all are NATO and EU members,
- all did not have any direct experience with China before 2000,
- all experienced some domestic political crisis concerning the vision of their own position in European and world politics,
- all have been experiencing a rise in Russian and Chinese engagement, and
- all are members of the 16+1 Framework (a key platform for promoting the Belt and Road Initiative) driven by China.

Despite the similar historical and political development in CE countries, territorial proximity and aforementioned similarities, Moscow as well as Beijing made use of different measures respecting individual attributes of CE countries. These countries are perceived differently by Russia and China, particular in political and economic situation and power constellation. They also differ in their position to Chinese and Russian human rights abuses and communist ideology. That is why, in the following sections, individual countries will be analyzed – firstly

¹⁸ Procházka, David; Cabada, Ladislav (2020): “Exploring the “grey zone”: The Theory and Reality of “Hybrid Regimes” in Post-Communist Countries”, *Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 13, n° 1 (2020), pp. 4-22.



the empirical evidence of Russian presence and influence, secondly of Chinese penetration will be collected and consequently scrutinized.

3.1. Poland

The relations between Poland and Russia have been historically difficult and the reason was not only the dictate of communism (e.g. the Katyn Massacre of 1940, Poland has a direct border with the Russian Kaliningrad Oblast, which is the most militarized region in Europe). Among CE countries, Poland is the only country which systematically and strongly opposes Russia and Polish political representatives share the conviction that the country's dependence on Russia must be eliminated.¹⁹ Poland for years has protested the construction of the Nord Stream 2, arguing that the project will strengthen the Russian position in the EU energy market²⁰ and has been supporting EU sanctions against Russia after its occupation of Crimea. Poland has the largest demographic, military, and economic potential of the countries on NATO's eastern flank and is thus perceived as Russia's main rival in the region.

No mainstream political party and no mainstream media are openly pro-Russian, the pro-Russian activities, news (Sputnik or the television channel RT), arguments and information are usually connected with marginal, extremely conservative forces and have a minor audience.²¹ The general public views sources of opinion and information backed by the Russian state with deep suspicion, even when trolls are very active and disinformation is widely present. The pro-Kremlin forces inside Poland rather than openly forcing pro-Russian propaganda support the rise of tensions between Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine.²² The only Russian position which seems strong in Poland, is the economic engagement – Warsaw is dependent on the Russian energy supply, the Russian market is a popular place for Polish export and Russian companies like the Polish market. However, the economic crisis in Russia, EU sanctions and the declining prices of oil harmed the economic relations between both countries as well²³ and Warsaw systematically aims to reduce its dependence on Russia.

Relations between Warsaw and Beijing are relatively new and dominantly include business and economic, even though they have a strong political background. Poland sees itself as a central hub for China's expanding trade ties in Europe. With EU funding set to decrease after 2020, the Polish government is looking for new sources of investment. Today, China is the biggest trade partner of Poland in Asia and Poland is one of the largest trade partners of China in Europe. However, Poland is experiencing a trade deficit. While China increases its exports to Poland (or uses Poland to re-export), Poland struggles to increase its export to China and changes have been slow.²⁴ In 2011 Poland established a strategic partnership with China, in 2012 Warsaw became part of the 16+1 Framework, in 2015 Poland-China Intergovernmental Committee was established and one year later the comprehensive strategic partnership agreement was signed. However, the Polish political representatives are divided on economic and business ties to China. Some are opposed to Chinese investments in strategic infrastructure,

¹⁹ See Kremlin Watch, 2019.

²⁰ "Poland's anti-monopoly body fines France's Engie over Nord Stream 2", *Reuters*, 8 November 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-nordstream/polands-anti-monopoly-body-fines-frances-engie-over-nord-stream-2-idUSKBN1X1166>

²¹ Kucharczyk, Jacek (2019): *Instrument of Russian influence in Poland*, at <http://www.aalep.eu/instruments-russian-influence-poland>

²² See Kremlin Watch, 2019.

²³ *United we stand, divided we fall: the Kremlin's leverage in the Visegrad countries*, Prague Security Studies Institute, 2017, at http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/486_executive-summary-cz.pdf.

²⁴ Majman, Slawomir (2019): "Poland, China should realize dreams together", *China Daily*, 4 September 2019, at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/04/WS5d6f0d0da310cf3e3556990f.html>



some welcomed them.²⁵ The contemporary mood among Polish society and politics indicates the optimistic and forward-looking position on cooperation with China seems to have weakened. Some high-ranking officials, as the Minister of Defense M. Blaszczak, even warned that “China and Russia are forming a coalition against the free world”.²⁶

To sum up, Poland is historically detached from Russia and despite economic and energy dependencies and ties, Russia is widely distrusted and is considered as a foe by many. On the other hand, China was optimistically welcomed as somebody who may help Warsaw to solve economic and infrastructure problems strengthened by the 2008 economic crisis. With rising Chinese assertiveness and based on existing data indicating low investments and poor experience with Chinese companies, Poland has been changing its attitude to Beijing and intensified its wariness. In the case of Poland, in the mid-term perspective, the US will definitely remain the country’s key ally, Russia tolerated but an unpopular partner, and China an economic collaborator but accepted with suspicion.

3.2. Hungary

At the beginning of the 1990s Hungarian-Russian relations were minor and the only political force having active relations with Moscow was the right-wing party Jobbik.²⁷ However, the arrival of Fidesz and the political transformations in Hungary under the Victor Orbán government brought change. Orbán and his governments have been systematically building relations with Moscow as well as Beijing. Russian engagement in Hungary is diversified and includes political, economic and information ties. Since 2010 Hungarian governments have been supporting the pro-Russian organizations, some of them directly financed by the government in Budapest.²⁸ In other words, the pro-Russian narrative is promoted directly by the government, not – like in the Polish case – by minor political forces. Furthermore, Orbán and Putin share several ideas and values, e.g. the view of civil society, George Soros, and academic freedoms to name a few. The Fidesz governments were effectively able to limit the freedom of press, civil society and academia and have relatively easy access to the media space. Several media outlets are using Russian quasi-media like Sputnik or RT as their sources. Orbán and his fellow-politicians use relations with Moscow for domestic political and economic reasons or as a pragmatic tool against the EU. All this takes place even though the attitude of the Hungarian public to Russia is rather circumspect and the country remains dedicated to NATO.²⁹ The economic engagement with Russia is rather low, however it will immensely rise because Russia won the contract to build the nuclear power plant Paks 2 and Hungary agreed with Moscow to buy more Russian gas in the near future.³⁰

Chinese penetration into Hungary can be dated back to the early 2000s. Similarly to Poland, Hungary tried to win Chinese investment to bridge problems resulting from the 2008 economic crisis, energy dependence on Russia and its land-locked position.³¹ Hungary

²⁵ “Poland open to investment from China: foreign ministers”, *Reuters*, 8 July 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-china/poland-open-to-investment-from-china-foreign-minister-idUSKCN1U31LR>.

²⁶ Turcsányi, Richard Q. and Bachulska, Alicja (2019): “Behind the Huawei Backlash in Poland”, *The Diplomat*, February, at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/behind-the-huawei-backlash-in-poland-and-the-czech-republic/>

²⁷ Hungarian MEP charged with spying on EU for Russia”, *BBC*, 6 December 2017, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42257996>

²⁸ PSSI, *op.cit.*

²⁹ Fagan, Moira; Poushter, Jacom (2020): “NATO seen favorable across member states”, Pew Research Center, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-ember-states/>

³⁰ RFE/RL (2019): “Orbán defends Hungary’s good relations with Russia”, *RFE/RL*, 30 October 2019, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-to-visit-eu-nation-hungary-as-russian-presence-grows/30243531.html>

³¹ Matura, Tamás (2018): “Chinese investment in Hungary: few results, great expectations”, *Chinafluency*, at <https://www.chinfluence.eu/chinese-investment-hungary-results-great-expectations/>



enthusiastically joined the 16+1 Framework, closed a strategic partnership agreement and several other agreements and contracts with Beijing and refused to share the critical EU attitude to the Belt and Road Initiative.³² Even when Fidesz obviously did not share any values or ideas with China, Budapest tried to strengthen political relations to Beijing. Today, Budapest has been using the improvement of its relations with China (and Russia) as a blackmailing strategy towards EU. Since 2018, Budapest has been experiencing some sobering up: despite the promises, the flow of Chinese investment is still low and more than a dozen joint projects failed.³³ An interesting moment in Hungary is that unlike in some EU countries, including Czechia and Poland, increased Chinese activity has not triggered any alarm in the Hungarian political opposition or among the wider public. Nobody from the major political players opposes the opening towards Beijing and obviously public attention on the matter decreased as well.³⁴

To sum up, contemporary Hungary has two partners – Russia and China. While Russia is rather the political partner supporting Orbán's government against the EU, NATO and US and assisting to oppose EU and US criticism of human rights violations, China is optimistically welcomed as somebody who may help Budapest solve economic and infrastructure problems. Despite existing data indicating poor previous Chinese investment and several failed projects, Hungary has not been changing its optimistic and friendly attitude to Beijing. Also, in the Russian case, despite the rise of Russian espionage activities in Hungary and the EU territory, Budapest maintains its East-bound policy. In the Hungarian case, in the mid-term perspective no profound change is expected in its relations to Moscow and Beijing. Despite temporary improvement of relations between Trump and Orbán, the US will remain low on the country's list of allies, and Russia and China will remain Hungarian strategic partners, both in business and in the pragmatic defense of Hungarian positions and politics against Western criticism.

3.3. Slovakia

Slovakia has had a very ambiguous approach to Russia since the 1990s. On the one side, Russia was seen as directly connected with the gloomy communist history of Slovakia, on the other side, Moscow was seen as the alternative to the EU and NATO and was (still is) the only Slovakian supplier of oil and gas. In the last three decades, the most pro-Russian period of Slovakian politics were the years of HZDS' governments in the 1990s. Since the new Millennium the Slovakian politics were transformed. Even when Bratislava from time to time flirts with Moscow, the country is loyal to the EU as well as NATO, alliance that Bratislava joined in 2004. In the last years, many Slovakian political representatives as well as media and civil society have been active in trying to raise public awareness on Russian disinformation and influence operations and the country is a firm supporter of the counter measures against Russia taken by EU and NATO following the annexation of Crimea. In June 2016, the Slovakian government admitted for the first time that Slovakia had become the target of Russian propaganda.³⁵ However, energy dependence and economic links to Russia lead to the occasional capitulation in Slovakian politics, for example in the case of the deployment of the US missile shield.³⁶

³² Research for TRAN Committee: Route-opportunities and Challenges for EU Transport, European Parliament (2018) at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/585907/IPOL_STU\(2018\)585907_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/585907/IPOL_STU(2018)585907_EN.pdf).

³³ Matura, *op.cit.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Kremlin Watch, *op.cit.*

³⁶ Kremlin Watch, *op.cit.*; Kalan, Dariusz; Vass, Ágnes (2015): "Big Gestures, Small Actions: Paradoxes of Slovakia's Policy towards Russia", *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, vol. 43, n°. 775, non-paginated.



Slovakia as a small country with rather small capacities has been circumspect to Chinese expansion into CE. Even when Prime Minister R. Fico declared in 2006 to improve the country's economic relations with China to solve Slovakia's rising economic problems, it did not happen until 2015 when Beijing noticed that the small country existed. Slovakia became part of the 16+1 Framework, in 2016 it installed for the first time an ambassador in Beijing and several "Slovak houses" in various parts of China were opened and signed the General framework of cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, as the only CE country that did not sign a MoU with China as well as the agreement on strategic partnership, the available data points to very low levels of Chinese investment in Slovakia. The observers³⁷ suggest that the main motivation for Chinese economic engagement in Slovakia is gaining access to EU markets and accessing knowhow and technology. In 2017 Bratislava even accepted a special document to prepare the space for rising economic relations between China and Slovakia³⁸. Today, as with many other CE countries, Bratislava is sobering up and finding out that the real Chinese investments are low (lower than Japanese or Taiwanese investments in the country) and several projects failed. Moreover, Slovak intelligence services (like the Czech ones) warned about the rising Chinese and Russian secret operations in the Slovakian territory and several observers³⁹ about the risks of making Slovakia dependent on Chinese money.

To sum up, Slovakia – based on its complicated domestic political situation, geographic location and trapped in its energy dependency to Russia – pendulated between Western orientation and Russia. Today, even when Russia is widely distrusted, the partnership is maintained because Moscow is the main supplier of oil and gas to Slovakia. China was optimistically welcomed as somebody who may help Bratislava to solve economic and infrastructure problems of the small land-locked country but with the rising poor experience of Chinese investments, political representatives in Bratislava have been sobering up and are becoming more and more sceptical of the value of Slovak-Chinese relations in the future. Nevertheless, Bratislava is in a complicated situation because unlike Poland or Hungary, the country is very low on the list of US or EU priorities in CE.

4. Russian and Chinese penetration into Czechia

In the following section the Russian and Chinese penetration into Czechia will be traced and analyzed. The empirical material will be collected and scrutinized with the goal of introducing the history of bilateral relations and to explore the forms and effects of Russian and Chinese engagement in the Czech environment and the reactions of Czech policy-makers and society on the rising presence of Moscow and Beijing.

4.1. The history of bilateral relations and changing forms of Russian and Chinese engagement in the Czech Republic

The Czech relations to modern Russia have had a long history dating back to the period shortly after WWI. Since the 1990s the bilateral relations are complex but highly complicated due to a strong anti-Soviet (anti-Russian) sentiment from the Czech side. In the 1990s the democratic liberal Czech political representation was strongly pro-Western and no cooperation with Russia was thinkable. The situation started to change after Havel and when the dissident generation

³⁷ Pleschová, Gabriela (2017): "Chinese investment in Slovakia: The tide may come in", in Seaman, John, Huotari, Mikko and Otero-Iglesias, Miguel (eds.): *Chinese investment in Europe*, ETNC Report, at https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_reports_2017_final_20dec2017.pdf.

³⁸ Návrh 'Konceptia rozvoja hospodárskych vzťahov medzi Slovenskou republikou a Čínskou ľudovou republikou na roky 2017 - 2020', Slov-Lex, LP/2017/203, at <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/-/SK/LP/2017/203>

³⁹ Turcsányi, Richard Q. and Šimalčík, Matěj (2018): *Čína na Slovensku: Sme pripravení na budúcnosť?*, AMO Policy paper 07, at https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/AMO_cina-na-slovensku-sme-pripraveni-na-buducnost.pdf



left Czech politics. New political figures such as V. Klaus (former Prime Minister as well as President) and M. Zeman (former Prime Minister and the contemporary President) have had official and even semi-hidden contacts with Moscow and cooperation with Russia started to appear in Czech foreign policy. However, historically, Czech politics as well as the society are divided in their view of Russia. Part of the society disapproved with the Russian engagement in Chechnya, Georgia and later Crimea and protested against human rights abuses and the political processes such as the one with Pussy Riot, another part of the society saw Russia as Slavic brothers and sisters and the only way to keep the sovereignty of the country and face Westernisation.

The Russian presence in the Czech Republic has several faces: a public, semi-public, semi-hidden and hidden one. The publicly known presence includes Russian energy supply, Russian tourists (particularly in Prague and Karlovy Vary) and rising Russian ownership of property, particularly flats in Prague. The semi-public presence is obvious when Russian or Czech companies announce their contracts and when political parties, political representatives and some organizations publish information on their donors. Václav Klaus is a well-known case of someone who got support from Lukoil to publish his books⁴⁰ and Miloš Zeman who got financial support from Russian companies to be able to enter the presidential elections. The semi-hidden presence includes the Russian support of platforms spreading pro-Russian disinformation. The Kremlin for example finances the Czech version of the news server Sputnik. Another example of the semi-hidden presence is the relations of Russian business to specific political figures with a high potential to spread political influence, e.g. Martin Nejedlý, a friend of Miloš Zeman. Information on the Russian hidden presence rarely rises to the surface; however, it does indicate that the Czech territory is important for Russian operations. In 2019 the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) announced that Russia aims to manipulate the decision-making processes at all levels of Czech politics and all Russian intelligence services are active in the Czech territory.⁴¹ The report also described several strategies used by the Kremlin, particularly the strategy when Russia raises and supports the social and political controversies to destabilize the political and social consensus. The Czech security services also confirmed that cyberattacks carried out on several Czech institutions (including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and some hospitals) in the last few years had their origin in Russia. In an interview in March 2020, the Head of the Security Information Service Koudelka warned that the Russian presence and engagement in Czechia is more dangerous than the Chinese one. He argued that the difference between Moscow and Beijing's goals is that while Beijing has mainly economic and business interests, Moscow carries out security-related operations with the aim to influence politics and destabilize societal consensus.⁴²

The history of Chinese engagement in the Czech territory is short and can be dated back to the 2000s. Since then, the Czech Republic and China closed several agreements including the General framework of cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (2015) and two Memorandums of Understanding (2016, 2017), and Czechia became a member of the 16+1 Framework. A particular segment in Czech-Chinese relations is the link between president Zeman and several people around him (Martin Nejedlý, Vratislav Mynář, Jaroslav Tvrdík) to Chinese political representatives.⁴³ The Chinese presence in the Czech territory has at least two

⁴⁰ Václav Klaus at <https://www.klaus.cz/clanky/230>.

⁴¹ BIS (Bezpečnostní informační služba) (2019): *Výroční zpráva 2018*, at <https://www.bis.cz/vyrocnizpravy/vyrocnizprava-bezpecnostni-informacni-sluzby-za-rok-2018-ddd066bb.html>

⁴² "Šéf BIS Koudelka: V akci zemřelo několik našich důstojníků", *Lidové noviny*, 9 March 2020, at https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/sef-bis-koudelka-v-akci-zemrelo-nekolik-nasich-dustojniku-vsechny-jsem-je-znal-osobne.A200308_195003_In_domov_ele.

⁴³ "Zemanův poradce ignoruje karantému", *iDnes*, 2 March 2020, at https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/nejedly-koronavirus-sel-do-restaurace-cina.A200302_144608_domaci_zaz.



forms: firstly, business contracts and investments; secondly, special relations between particular people in business as well as politics.⁴⁴ Business contracts and economic relations include Chinese investments (however, greenfield investments are rather low⁴⁵), special contracts such as the purchase of the football club Slavia Prague and Chinese tourists under the Approved Destination Status. However, there were no significant Chinese investments in the energy sector, transportation and logistics infrastructure before the spring of 2020. Special relations are less visible, but from time to time they rise to the surface. An example of this may be the visit of people close to president Zeman to China in March 2020 who despite the cancellation of a direct flight to China because of the coronavirus epidemic, went to Beijing for negotiations (the content of these negotiations was not published).

Quite a new issue is the Chinese strategy aimed at influencing the public attitude to the country. In the autumn of 2019, the media warned that some scholars and research bodies at the Charles University are financed by China or China-related companies to improve the Chinese image in Czechia through lectures and conferences introducing China positively. Consequently, several pieces of information – not only in relation to the Charles University – were made public; investigative journalists published the evidence about the existence of several quasi-NGOs and research bodies whose goals were not only to improve the image of China, but to build links to policy and opinion makers and to influence political representatives.⁴⁶ Until now, no case where Chinese intelligence service would be directly active in the Czech territory is known, however information on cyberattacks led from the Chinese territory were published by the Czech Office for Cyber- and IT Security.⁴⁷

4.2. Who likes Russia and China and who does not?

Pro- and anti-China and pro- and anti-Russia divides exist in the Czech Republic. This division did not fall across party lines, both critical and supportive voices of Beijing and Moscow emerged within the same political parties. The divide also exists within the public, academia, media and civil society. The cause of the divide is mainly the different value scale. Those supporting the dissident tradition and value-oriented policy of the Czech Republic oppose Russia and China, pragmatists do not accept the dilemma between trade and human rights and see Russia and China primarily as markets and a possible way to increase the Czech economic prosperity.⁴⁸ Despite this statement, there are some groups, organizations and circles with a constant pro-Russian/Chinese or anti-Russian/Chinese attitude. Here, the main figures and organizations of each side will be introduced.

Kratochvíl and Řeháčková offer a useful typology of the attitude of Czech actors to Russia; they speak of “hawks”, “multilateralists”, “pragmatists” and “friends of Russia”. Hawks see Russia as an enemy and in the Czech political and public discourse they are represented by several people from TOP09 and ODS, by right-wing media such as Lidové noviny and Respekt

⁴⁴ China also started to spread its influence through the cultural and academic institutions (Confucius Institutes and several think tanks), however after scandal of China paying academics with pro-Chinese lectures at Charles University, universities generally started to be vigilant, particularly to the concept of the Confucius Institute.

⁴⁵ Fürst, Rudolf : “Czechia’s Relations with China: on a Long Road toward a Real Strategic Partnership?”, in Weiqing Song (ed.) (2018): *China’s Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From “Old Comrades” to New Partners*. Routledge Contemporary China Series, pp. 117-136

⁴⁶ “Čínská aféra na Karlově univerzitě je jen špička ledovce”, *Forum24*, 15 November 2019, at <https://www.forum24.cz/cinska-afera-na-karlove-univerzite-je-jen-spicka-ledovce/>; “Za odměnu s Univerzitou Karlovou do Číny”, *Respekt*, 29 October 2019, at <https://www.respekt.cz/politika/za-odmenu-s-karlovou-univerzitou-zdarma-do-ciny>.

⁴⁷ “Za více než 90 % kyberútoků na Česko je cizí stat, nejčastěji Rusko a Čína, uvedl bezpečnostní úřad”, *iRozhlas*, 25 September 2019, at https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/nukib-narodni-urad-pro-kybernetickou-a-informacni-bezpecnost-rusko-cina_1909251420_dok.

⁴⁸ Waisová and Piknerová, *op.cit.*



and by particular individuals such as former Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg. Multilateralists see Russia as a rival and are represented by part of the Social Democrats, e.g. former Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek. Pragmatists, who see Russia as a market and useful political partner, are represented by Social democrats and members of the ANO party, including former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and contemporary Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. Friends of Russia see Moscow as a potential politically key ally and the only promising market. This group includes president Miloš Zeman, former president Václav Klaus and the representatives of the Communist Party. Friends of Russia regularly meet Russian political representatives and defend and support Russian politics (including Russian activities in Crimea) in Czech media as well as in parliamentary debates.

We may use the aforementioned typology also for the qualification of Czech-Chinese relations. Hawks see China as a subversive non-democratic force which may destabilize Czech economics and good trade relations with EU countries, tunnel Czech companies and use the Czech territory (including sport clubs) to launder money. Hawks also protest against Beijing's attempts to blackmail Czech companies and politics because of relations to Taiwan. This group is represented by several people from TOP09, ODS and even includes some Social democrats.⁴⁹ Multilateralists see China as country like any other, however, they do not usually close their eyes to human rights abuses in this country. This group includes several people from ODS and some Social democrats. Pragmatists merge with friends of China. Both see the Chinese market as an opportunity and Chinese investments as an advantage without evaluating the Chinese political system and politics respectively. Friends of China directly support Chinese engagement in the Czech Republic and lobby politicians as well as decision-makers. As an example of a pragmatist, former Prime Minister Petr Nečas (OSD) could be mentioned. In 2012 he delivered a speech where he pejoratively labelled the Czech value-oriented foreign policy as "dalailamism"⁵⁰ and "pussy-riotism".⁵¹ The most visible friends of China in the Czech political space are the representatives of the Communist Party and president Miloš Zeman. He announced a "restart" of Czech-China relations, had a special advisor on relations to China and has special relations to Chinese political circles.⁵²

To sum up, Czech politics is divided concerning the attitude to be held on Russia and China and even pro- and anti-Russian/Chinese attitudes differ. The biggest friends of Russia and China among relevant political figures in Czech Republic are president Miloš Zeman and his advisors (Martin Nejedlý). Zeman's motivations are not publically known, speculations indicate that Beijing and Moscow financed his presidential campaign and that Moscow has some discrediting materials of the former communist Secret State Services (STB)⁵³.⁵⁴ The biggest opposition to the rise of Chinese and Russian engagement in Czech Republic is to be

⁴⁹ "Čína chtěla trestat Kuberu kvůli Tchaj-wanu", *Deník.cz*, 19 February 2020, at https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/cina-tchajwan-zeman-kubera2020.html.

⁵⁰ "Českému exportu podle Nečase škodí falešné adorování Pussy Riot i módní dalajlamismus", *iHned*, 10 September 2012, at <https://byznys.ihned.cz/c1-57422060-ceskemu-exportu-podle-necase-skodi-falesne-adorovani-pussy-riot-i-modni-dalajlamismus>

⁵¹ See Šimalčík, Matej et al. (2019): *Perception of China among V4 Political Elites*. Bratislava, CEIAS.

⁵² "Můj čínský poradce Jie Tien-ming není ve vězení, řekl Zeman", *iRozhlas*, 28 April 2019, at https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/milos-zeman-navsteva-ciny-si-tin-pching-delegace-jagr-citic_1904280636_dbr.

⁵³ Similar speculations concerns former Prime Minister and President Václav Klaus. Both men, Zeman and Klaus, worked in Prognostic Institute before 1989. The institute was managed by the Communist Central Committee and served as the main advisory body of the Communist Party.

⁵⁴ "Ruské vlivy. Zemanovu kampaň sponzorovaly firmy z Putinova okruhu", *Forum24*, 10 December 2018, at <https://www.forum24.cz/ruske-vlivy-zemanovu-kampan-sponzorovaly-firmy-z-putinova-okruhu/>; "Kdo financuje kampaň Miloše Zemana?", *iRozhlas*, 26 January 2018, at https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/spo-milos-zeman-prezidenstke-volby-spozor-financovani-kampan_1801261355_kno.



heard from right-wing democratic parties TOP09 and ODS, however several Social democrats (e.g. Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček) also caution against Chinese and Russian interference. Those people mainly emphasize the lack of transparency in Russian and Chinese engagement, blackmailing attempts of Moscow and Beijing as well as having reservations about the human rights abuses in both countries.

4.3. Czech reactions to the rising engagement of Russia and China

In this section I will trace and analyze how the Czech security and intelligence services and public responded to firstly, rising Russian and Chinese presence, and secondly, the rising divide in Czech society and politics on the issues concerning Moscow and Beijing.

Due to the Czech tradition of value-oriented foreign policy and negative Czech experience with Russian and Chinese engagement so far, the overall Czech approach towards China and Russia is likely to remain critical. Even when the inclination to Russia and partly to China had been increasing in the last years, it is significantly lower than the trust and preferences in other countries including USA.⁵⁵ For example in 2011 52 percent of Czechs declared having excellent relations with the US, while only 23 percent had a relation of the same quality to Russia and 18 percent to China. In 2019 41 percent declared having an excellent relation to US, 34 percent to Russia and 22 percent to China.⁵⁶

Czech society, similarly to Czech politics, is divided in its opinion of Russia and China. The divide goes across the society, even when we may observe differences based on education and age. The elderly people, among whom we can find many voters for the Communist Party, tend to prefer Russia over the EU and US, preferences for China are lower in the same sample but higher than in the rest of society. People with university education, particularly with social science degrees, prefer the relationship to the EU and US (even when Czechs do not like the US president D. Trump). The representatives of companies and business sector are rather pragmatic, however taking the security risks into consideration.

The milestone for rising negative perception of Russia was the Russian engagement in Crimea. While in 2013 only 36 percent of Czechs believed that Russia is a security threat to the Czech Republic, in 2014 it was already 65 percent.⁵⁷ The milestone for rising negative perception of China is connected with the first statistics of Chinese investments from 2019 showing that they are lower than promised with almost no greenfield investments, and the failed case of Chinese company CEFC, the main Chinese investor in the Czech Republic. Politicians, media as well as societal actors discussed who the Chinese investors are; the great suspicion was with the state-owned and the companies managed by the communist party. China as well as several Czech pro-Chinese agents argued that there is diversity among investors and the biggest investor is a private company. However, after the CEFC had problems (some of its high-position representatives were jailed in China), the contracts were taken over by the state-owned CITIC. Today, China is no longer a mere epitome of a distant human rights violator, neither an abstract gold mine that could single-handedly jumpstart the Czech economy. Nevertheless, when a Eurobarometer poll in 2017 asked in EU countries regarding China and positive/negative view towards the country, 69 percent of Czechs declared they have a totally negative relation to Beijing. For comparison, 50 percent of Hungarians, 45 percent of Poles and 44 percent of Slovaks declared a total negative relation to China.

⁵⁵ *Vztahy občanů ČR k vybraným zemím*, STEM (2012) at <https://www.stem.cz/vztahy-obcanu-cr-k-vybranim-zemim/>. STEM (2019): *Hodnocení vztahu českých občanů k vybraným zemím Evropy a světa*, STEM (2019), at <https://www.stem.cz/hodnoceni-vztahu-ceskych-obcanu-k-vybranim-zemim-evropy-a-sveta-2/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*



Czech security and intelligence services constantly monitor the Russian and Chinese activities in Czech territory and repeatedly warned about the security effects of Russian and Chinese engagement. The political reactions on these reports copied the divide mentioned above: some politicians and parliamentarians downplayed the findings; others used them to point out their long-term vigilant approach and warnings.

Czech civil society and academia is similarly divided. However, in this specific case we do not have accurate statistical data. Based on estimations, it can be said that especially after the scandal with the pro-Chinese by Beijing paid research center at the Charles University, the awareness of China in academic circles has risen. Today, there is rather small and constant number of pro-Russian and pro-Chinese groups and organizations working in the Czech territory (some of them financed from Moscow or Beijing, most of them non-transparent, i.e. the sources of finances are not clear), but the number and activities of others who warned about the non-transparent Russian and Chinese activities is rising. The well-known organizations are for example Kremlin Watch⁵⁸, ChinafluenCE⁵⁹ and Sinopsis⁶⁰. These organizations are not openly anti-Chinese or anti-Russian; however, their founding mothers and fathers believe that Moscow and Beijing do not share enough information and their non-transparency is a strategy how to disorient the target society. Their goal is to trace the activities, contacts, contracts, relations and links between Czech and Russian/Chinese actors and to deliver more information to the media, society and politics.

5. Conclusion: Central Europe – a future grand chessboard?

When in 1997 H. Kissinger called post-communist Eastern Europe and South Caucasus “The Grand Chessboard” he tried to describe the inter-play and strategic competition between the US, EU, China and Russia in the post-communist world. While Kissinger had the eastern flank of Eastern Europe in mind, today, the great game moved into CE. Since Trump administration arrived, the USA returned again to the strategy of containment. The goal has been to contain the influence of Russia and China. Activities of the US representatives indicate that CE may become an area of future clashes and competition between the US, Russia and China. The EU will probably stand aside; Brexit, the pandemic of COVID-19 and the EU internal processes indicate that the EU does not have the capacity as well as the interest to engage in CE. In the introduction, I listed five questions with the aim to gain more information about the US, Russian and Chinese engagement in CE countries. Based on the data, information and analysis presented above I will respond to all these questions and try to formulate the answers.

The first question was: when the United States left the CE? The United States entered CE in the early post-communist period, however after less than a decade the US had been step-by-step leaving the region. Paradoxically, the milestone was the NATO enlargement in 1999 and later the change of US foreign policy after 9/11. The US administrations shared the belief that CE countries are pro-Western US-loyal assured territory and did not want to break up its capacity when concentrating its military and economic capacity in Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington understood the NATO membership of CE countries as a sufficient confirmation of where these countries stood.

The second question focused on the forms of Russian and Chinese penetration and engagement in CE and when the rising of Russian and Chinese engagement was observed? Moscow and Beijing’s engagement did not immediately follow the US retreat from the region. The main impulse in the return of Russia to CE was the domestic consolidation under Putin and his ambition to challenge the West, particularly the USA and EU. CE offered an intimately

⁵⁸ Kremlin Watch, at <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/#about-us>.

⁵⁹ ChinafluenCE, at <https://www.chinfluence.eu/cs/>.

⁶⁰ Sinopsis, at <https://sinopsis.cz/>.



known environment with good old contacts without any strategic competitor. The main impulse for Beijing was the economic success in Asia and Africa and the need for new but more developed markets with knowhow and technology. The observations from CE indicate that Beijing and Moscow do not compete with each other in the region. Their goals are different (Moscow aims to triumph over the US and EU political and security influence and shake US/EU confidence, Beijing needs access to new technologies and markets), even when it comes to assess the strategies they use, it can be said that they differ only partly. Russia uses legal instruments such as business contracts as well as peculiar instruments such as subversive operations of intelligence services, disinformation, destabilization at all level of the politics, pro-Russian public campaigns and propaganda, special relations with particular influential individuals in politics as well as businesses, blackmailing of individuals and corruption. China uses legal instruments such as official bilateral agreements and business contracts as well as peculiar instruments such as special personal relations to particular influential individuals in politics, business and even in academia, pro-Chinese public campaigns and propaganda, blackmailing of state bodies and companies and financial “encouragement” or corruption.

The third question asked about the effects of Russian and Chinese engagement in CE. The effects can be seen and evaluated on several levels. Russia and China effectively cut a wedge in the EU and NATO unity. CE countries and also some old EU members turned to China or Russia respectively (while Italy and Spain maintain contacts with China, Germany build contacts with Russia). The cleavages may be seen also across the CE countries. While Poland is pro-US, strongly anti-Russian and slightly pro-Chinese, Hungary is strongly anti-US and significantly pro-Russian and pro-Chinese. The effects may be also seen domestically. Russia and China effectively divided politics, business and public in several countries and disrupted the socio-political consensus about the future development of the country. The main line of the divide differs in particular countries; however, it has similar effects – destabilization and an increase in domestic conflicts in politics and between politics and business.

The fourth question aimed to find how CE societies and politics understand and respond to the rising Russian and Chinese presence. Politics as well as society in CE countries are divided into three groups: the first one ignores Russia, China and the US and is indifferent to political and security development when the economic situation is satisfactory; the second group is pro-Russian and pro-Chinese even when the motives in the group are different – some see Moscow and Beijing as economic partners, some as the anti-Western bastions; the third group warns against Russian and Chinese engagement. The reason of warning is usually the fact that the Russian and Chinese activities are not transparent, not only in communication but in willingness to share information such as statistics on trade and investments or on owners of property. All three groups are present in all CE countries, the countries differ in proportion of these groups in the society and politics. An interesting result of the situation is the emergence of CE cooperation within academia and civil society with the aim to exchange data on the presence of China and Russia in CE countries to fight against non-transparency.

The last question was interested in who are the supporters and opponents of Russian and Chinese engagement in CE countries? The evidence from particular CE countries shows that there is no uniting feature for those supporting and opposing China and Russia in CE countries respectively. In each country analyzed, the fact who supports or opposes Russia and China depends on the domestic situation, political context, distribution of power in the political system, political tradition and history of bilateral relations to Russia and China, geographic location as well as economic situation and relations between politics and business. As the Czech case shows, the pro- and anti-Russian (Chinese) positions are not reserved for specific political parties, as demonstrated in the Hungarian case, the pro- and anti-Russian (Chinese) positions



may have changed during the time, based on the domestic situation and pragmatism of political actors.

To sum up, Central Europe has become the space for a clash between three big players – the USA, Russia and China while the EU stood aside. The interests of all three are different: the United States were not interested for a long time in the territory, but, since the arrival of the Trump administration, the US started to engage in the region with the aim to contain Moscow and Beijing's spread of influence; Moscow is of course interested in having stable and solvent customers for its oil and gas, but it also aims to break the Western unity thus, strengthening the Russian world position; Beijing needs access to more developed markets with knowhow and technology and CE countries with their economic needs and stagnation after the 2008 economic crisis seems to be the perfect place to carry out the Chinese interests. Based on these findings, the main competing actors in CE may be Washington and Russia, while China may profit from the US-Russia clash. What effects it will have on CE countries is hard to say and how real and long-term the US interest in CE are, we will see in the near future.

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