THE END OF A PARTNERSHIP AND COOOPERATION. HOW SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP RUINED PERCEPTION OF CHINA IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract:

Since the first decade of the 21st century, pro-China attitudes have gradually become the political mainstream in Central Europe. Today, however, the relationship between Central European countries and Beijing is different. While Beijing remains an important partner for Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland have turned away from cooperation with China, and Slovakia's enthusiasm for China has cooled somewhat. This article examines why the Czech Republic and Poland, but not Slovakia and Hungary, have stopped building and maintaining their relations with China. It uses contrafactual analysis to find an answer. The article concludes that what caused the change and ruined the relations between Czechia and Poland on the one hand and China on the other hand was China's building of relations with Russia. In contrast, Hungary and Fico's Slovakia, which have repeatedly refused to recognise the Russian invasion of Ukraine and have maintained relations with Moscow, continue to have good relations with China.

Keywords: Central Europe, China, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Russia.

TiItle in English: *The end of a Partnership and Cooperation. How the Sino-Russian partnership ruined the perception of China in Central Europe.*

Resumen:

A partir de la primera década del siglo XXI, las actitudes pro-China se han ido convirtiendo gradualmente en la corriente política dominante en Europa Central. Hoy, sin embargo, la relación entre los países centroeuropeos y Pekín es diferente. Mientras que Pekín sigue siendo un socio importante para Hungría, la República Checa y Polonia se han apartado de la cooperación con China, y el entusiasmo de Eslovaquia por China se ha enfriado un poco. Este artículo examina por qué la República Checa y Polonia, pero no Eslovaquia y Hungría, han dejado de construir y mantener sus relaciones con China. Utiliza el análisis contrafactual para encontrar una respuesta. El artículo concluye que lo que provocó el cambio y arruinó las relaciones entre Chequia y Polonia, por un lado, y China, por otro, fue el establecimiento de relaciones de China con Rusia. En cambio, Hungría y la Eslovaquia de Fico, que se han negado reiteradamente a reconocer la invasión rusa de Ucrania y han mantenido relaciones con Moscú, siguen manteniendo buenas relaciones con China.

Palabras Clave: *Europa Central, China, República Checa, Polonia, Eslovaquia, Hungría, Rusia.*

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1. Introduction

In 2024, the Central European countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) will celebrate 25 years of NATO membership and 20 years of EU membership. However, membership of these organisations was not a foregone conclusion. Since the Second World War, Central European countries had been part of the Soviet-led Communist bloc, and the role of the United States, Western Europe and China in Central Europe was marginal. The West was an ideological enemy and China was so far away as to be politically irrelevant. The situation has changed since the 1990s. In just one-decade, Soviet (Russian) influence in Central Europe declined and the United States and EU countries became its allies. During this period, China became an economic magnet, confidently setting up its first businesses in Central Europe.[2]

In Central European countries, especially after the 2008 global economic crisis, there was a growing concern that China would be the only economic giant of the new century, and that losing the chance to attract Chinese investment would mean losing competitiveness on the global market. Since 2012, Central European countries have participated in the 16+1 framework and signed memoranda of understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative. Bilateral economic and investment forums have been established, and the Chinese president visited several Central European countries for the first time in history. Since the first decade of the 21st century, pro-China attitudes have gradually become the political mainstream in the region.[3]

Today, however, Central Europe is divided; while the Czech Republic and Poland have cold relations with Beijing, Slovakia and Hungary describe China as a friendly country.[4] The differences in Central European countries' relations with China are well illustrated by the difference between Czech and Hungarian attitudes towards Beijing. While in September 2021 the Czech Republic passed a law excluding Chinese companies from tenders for the construction of a new nuclear power plant in Dukovany (Lex Dukovany)[5] and at the end of February 2023, the Czech MFA, announced that "it is not beneficial for the Czechia to participate in the 16+1 platform, …, (and) the Ministry … will change the official foreign policy towards China",[6] Hungary blocked EU statements criticising Beijing's security law in Hong Kong in 2019, and Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán was the only EU leader to attend a Belt and Road Initiative forum in Beijing in 2023.[7] The evidence here suggests that in less than a decade, Central European countries' relations with China have changed and that Central European countries no longer share the same perception of the PRC as they did in the previous decade.

The aim of this article is to explore why the Czech Republic, Poland and pre-Fico Slovakia have recently stopped building and maintaining their relations with China, despite almost three decades of positive developments, and why Hungary has not.

To find an answer, I use a case study of the Czech Republic and contrafactual analysis. The results of the case study are then discussed for three other Central European countries. In other words, I will discuss whether the reason for the deterioration of relations between Prague

[2] For details about Chinese investments in Central Europe and beyond see American Eterprise Institute project China Global Investments Tracker (www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/).
[3] Karásková, Ivana; Matura, Tamáš; Turcsányi, Richard Q. and Šimalčík, Matej (2018): *Central Europe for sale: The politics of China's influence,* Praha, AMO and National Endowment for Democracy.
[4] Reuters: "China´s Xi says he considers Hungary´s Orban a "friend"", *Reuters*, 17 October 2023, at www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-says-he-considers-hungarys-orban-friend-2023-10-17/.
[5] Amendment to the Law on energetics, number 367/2021
[6] Koutník, Ondřej: "Česko přepisuje vztahy s Čínou. Pekingu se to líbit nebude", Seznamzpravy.cz, 25 March 2023, at www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-duraz-na-lidska-prava-a-tchaj-wan-cesko-prepisuje-vztahy-s-cinou-228290.
[7] China´s Xi, Reuters 2023 *op.cit*

and Beijing found in the case study also explains the relations of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia with China.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I identify possible causes (explanations) for why Czech relations with China may have deteriorated. In the second part, I examine each explanation in detail and test the explanatory power of each of the possible options through a contrafactual debate with the aim of finding a real cause. The third part discusses the findings in the case of the Czech Republic and examines their explanatory power for the relations of Poland, Hungary and Slovakia with China.

2. How to explain the deterioration of relations between the Czechia and China? The Set of Possible Options

A plausible contrafactual analysis requires more than one possible explanation. To obtain the set of possible explanations, I use content analysis of news from the Czech national media. In line with the literature on state motivations in foreign policy,[8] I sort the identified possible explanations into two groups - systemic/international causes and state-level/domestic causes (Table 1). News was accessed through ANOPRESS (www.anopress.cz), the full-text dataset of Czech media. The media analysis covered all nationwide daily newspapers in the period from 1 January 2015 to 28 February 2023.

The logic behind this decision is the fact that between 2015 and 2017, bilateral relations between Prague and Beijing were assessed as rather good and open hostility towards China was rare, while between 2019 and 2023, Sino-Czech relations deteriorated, several conflicts escalated and the first draft of the Czech security strategy was published, which referred to China as a security risk.[9]

As a first step, I sorted the national news by keywords. To identify causes, I assumed that "something negative happened" between the Czech Republic and China. Therefore, the group of news for content analysis includes the news coded "China AND Czech Republic/Czechia AND foreign policy AND conflict OR problem" (Čína AND Česká republika/Česko AND zahraniční politika AND konflikt OR problém) and "China AND Czech Republic/Czechia AND foreign policy AND threat OR security" (Čína AND Česká republika/Česko AND zahraniční politika AND hrozba OR bezpečnost). The filtering of the news resulted in a group of 94 stories. In the second step, these 94 stories were subjected to content analysis. The themes identified as possible explanations for why the Czech Republic became cautious in its relations with Beijing are summarised in Table 1.

[8] Haney, Jeanne; Hey, Patric and Neack, Laura (1995): *Foreign policy analysis: Continuity and change in its second generation*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Neack, Laura (2019): *Studying foreign policy comparatively: Cases and analysis (*New millennium books in International Studies*),* Miami, FL, Miami University. Posen, B.R. (1984): *The sources of military doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the world wars,* Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.

[9] Karásková, Matura, Turcsányi and Šimalčík, *op. cit.*

Table 1. What drove the decline of Czech interest in building relations with China?

Structural explanations		Domestic explanations
- Growing political and economic rivalry between China and Czech allies, especially the United States, but also Lithuania. - China's global ambitions combined with differences in values and world views between the West and China. - Chinese actions that violate Czech national security, such as increasing intensity of intelligence and espionage operations, increasing number of cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, misuse of investments and technological knowledge for political or security purposes, state-led interventions in the supply chain for products such as EV batteries, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals. - China's rapprochement with Russia (partnerships with North Korea and Iran were also mentioned), in particular China's political and economic support for Russia following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.	State preference formation	- Differences in political system and political culture, in particular the abandonment of communist methods of governance and disagreement with restrictions on political rights and the rights of minorities (the cases of the Uighurs, Tibetans and Falun Gong members were mentioned). - Unacceptability of China's reaction to Czech efforts to develop relations with Taiwan - Disappointment with the low level of Chinese investment; China has not fulfilled its investment promises.

In the following two sections, I will use counterfactual analysis to examine the ability of the possible options listed to explain the Czech Republic's departure from developing and maintaining bilateral relations with China. The counterfactual debate is divided into two parts. First, I will test the explanatory power of state-level explanations; second, I will analyse and test the explanatory power of systemic explanations.

3. Testing Domestic Factors: Do They Explain the Change in the Czech Attitude to China?

The content analysis identified three domestic factors that could explain why the Czech Republic changed its attitude towards China (Table 1). I begin with the debate about the political system, political culture and aversion to communist methods of governance. I offer three arguments as to why these factors do not have explanatory power and are not the cause of the change. First, these problems are not new. They have been present in Sino-Czech relations since the 1990s, and since then Prague and Beijing have always offered the same arguments and counterarguments, both sides know what arguments to expect from the other side, and both sides already have "rules" for how to conduct the debate. When a Czech political actor starts talking about human rights violations or the suppression of democracy and political freedom in China, as long as these issues are the subject of Czech domestic debate, Beijing ignores them. When these issues are raised directly against China's political representatives or appear to represent the official Czech position, Beijing usually protests and declares that human rights

are an internal matter in which no one has the right to interfere. [10] In response, the Czech Foreign Ministry usually declares that "the aim of the Czech Republic is not to interfere in China's internal affairs".[11]

How exactly the mechanism works can be seen in the case of the Dalai Lama's visits to the Czech Republic. Since 1990, the Dalai Lama has visited the Czech Republic 11 times, and each visit has provoked protests from China. In 2009, the Dalai Lama spoke at a Prague conference for human rights defenders and met with former President Havel and some members of the Czech parliament. Beijing protested and issued a note saying that the event would have a direct impact on the deterioration of Sino-Czech relations. [12] The Czech government confirmed that human rights are always on the Czech political agenda, but that in this particular case all meetings with the Dalai Lama were organised as private events and did not represent the official government position. [13] During his last visit in 2016, the Dalai Lama met with several political representatives, including the minister of culture. After China protested, the President's Office issued a statement, co-signed by the Prime Minister, which said: "We would like to jointly emphasise that our long-term policy towards the People's Republic of China is based on the principles of strategic partnership and mutual respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China, of which Tibet is a part."[14]As these two cases confirm, the Czech Republic and China are accustomed to disputes over political and human rights issues, and we can hardly expect that after more than three decades of "mutual teasing" these issues have the potential to cause a deterioration in Sino-Czech relations.

The second reason why I argue that the difference in political culture between China and the Czech Republic, the aversion to Chinese communist methods of governance, and the disagreement between them on human rights issues have not had a significant impact on their relations since 2019 is the fact that these issues are usually discussed only in Czech domestic debates, which do not affect foreign policy. As observers have noted,[15] Czech political culture in the post-Communist period works with an apparent dichotomy: "Communism is bad, and fighting Communism serve to the good". For most of the Czechs, to be associated with Communism or to be labelled as like any representative of Communist regimes means defamation. Conversely, to be associated with dissidents – "courageous freedom fighters" – brings moral credit.[16] In Czech politics, the courage to meet the Dalai Lama or to raise the flag

[10] "Čínské MZV: Otázky související s Tibetem jsou vnitřní záležitosti Číny a žádná cizí země nemá právo do nich zasahovat", CRI, 12 December 2022, at https://czech.cri.cn/2022/12/12/ARTISOKWq8mnaF4J3DrdtjCO221212.shtml.

[11] The former Minister of Foreign Affairs Petříček according to iRozhlas: "S Čínou je třeba vest pragmatický dialog", iRozhlas, 24 February 2018, at www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/tomas-petricek-cina-milos-zeman-lidska-prava-ekonomicka-diplomacie_1811041247_och.

[12] China's Embassy to Prague: "Velvyslanec Čang Ťien-min představil oficiální postoj ohledně cesty předsedy Senátu Parlamentu ČR na Tchaj-wan", (2009), at http://cz.china-embassy.gov.cn/cze/xwdt/202009/t20200901_2621006.htm.

[13] "Dalajlama vyzval v Praze Západ k podpoře rozvoje demokracie v Číně", ČT24, 11 September 2009, at www.ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/svet/1385839-dalajlama-vyzval-v-praze-zapad-k-podpore-rozvoje-demokracie-v-cine.

[14] Společné prohlášení nejvyšších ústavních činitelů, President of the CR, 2016, at www.hrad.cz/cs/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/aktualni-tiskove-zpravy/spolecne-prohlaseni-nejvyssich-ustavnich-cinitelu-ceske-republiky-12953.

[15] Fürst, Rudolf: "České trápení v bilaterálních vztazích s Čínou", *Mezinárodní politika,* nº 6 (2005), pp.18-20. Fürst, Rudolf (2011): "Dálný východ v české zahraniční politice", in Kořan, Michal, ed., *Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2010: Analýza ÚMV*, Praha, Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, pp. 260-271. Hříbek, Martin (2015): "Dalai-Lamaism: An orientalist construction of postsocialist consciousness", in Cervinkova, Hanna; Buchowski, Michal and Uherek, Zdeněk(eds) (2015): *Rethinking ethnography in Central Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

[16] Waisová, Šárka (2012): *The burden of choice. Czech foreign policy between principles and interests*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang.

of Tibet clearly shows "who is who".[17] When Czech political actors discuss political oppressions in China, it is mainly used to differentiate themselves from political opponents or even to discredit them not to change the foreign policy.[18] Over the past decade, China has become a symbol of a long-term split in Czech politics, simply called "Havel versus Zeman", which in reality had little to do with foreign policy preferences. When Petr Pavel was elected president in January 2023 and announced plans to call Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, the media wrote about "Havel retro" and the return of the Czechs to an ethics-driven foreign policy. For Pavel, this was not about helping Taiwan or protesting against China, but about showing that he is politically different from his predecessor, M. Zeman, who was a strong supporter of both Moscow and Beijing.

The third possible domestic explanation for the Czech retreat from developing relations with China is that it is a reaction to Beijing's pressure on the Czech Republic to intensify relations with Taiwan. The issue of Taiwan has only recently emerged in Czech politics. Taiwan first became a topic of Sino-Czech relations in the summer of 2019, when the then speaker of the Czech Senate, Kubera, announced plans to visit the island. It was the first time that a high-ranking Czech political representative planned to visit Taiwan. In January 2020, J. Kubera passed away. However, his successor, M. Vystrčil, continued Kubera's efforts and, accompanied by Prague Mayor Hřib and a business delegation, visited Taiwan in September 2020. Beijing protested the visit, declaring that "the visit is a serious encroachment on China's sovereignty and a serious interference in China's internal affairs.... China strongly disagrees".[19] The Czech Republic was said to be paying a high price for such visits. Czech Foreign Minister Petříček replied that "the government's position has not changed ... (and) the government has a one-China policy. Therefore, I could not recommend a trip to Taiwan to M. Vystrčil".[20]

Looking at Czech domestic politics, the intensification of relations with Taiwan is not the cause of changing foreign policy preferences. On the contrary, increased contact with Taiwan is a consequence of the changing external/international context. It was not until 2023 that a Czech government supported a trip by a political representative to Taiwan, even though Taiwan is one of the largest foreign direct investors in the Czech Republic. When representatives of the parliament or Czech cities visited Taiwan in recent years and Beijing protested, Czech governments said they were private visits and not official delegations. The first time the government said that developing and maintaining relations with Taipei was in line with Czech foreign policy was in January 2023 - that is, after relations with Beijing had already deteriorated. This means that the changing attitude of Czech foreign policy towards Taiwan developed only after the deterioration of relations between Prague and Beijing, and thus the development of relations between Prague and Taipei and China's counter-reactions to this development do not explain the change in the Czech attitude towards China.

The last factor that appears in the Czech media as an explanation for the deterioration in Sino-Czech relations is Czech disappointment with the low volume of Chinese investment. Some Czech politicians (e.g. former President Zeman, former Prime Minister Rusnok and

[17] Honzejk, Petr: "Vystresovaný Sobotka, vykutálený Babiš", *Hospodářské noviny*, 19 September 2016, pp.2–3.
[18] Fürst, *op. cit.* Kopecký, Josef and Wirnitzer, Jan: "Schwarzenberg vyčítá Nečasovi úlet. Politici se přou o "dalajlamismus"", iDNES, 11 September 2012, at http://zpravy.idnes.cz/top–09-stoji-za-schwarzenbergovou-kritikou-necase-f7w-/domaci.aspx?c=A120911_120033_domaci_kop. Musil, Michal: "Kritikou Tibetu Nečas překročil meze. Udobřuje si Klause?", iDNES.cz, 11 September 2012, at http://zpravy.idnes.cz/komentar-o-necasovi-pussy-riot-a-dalajlamovi-f3y-/domaci.aspx?c=A120911_1827294_domaci_jw.
[19] "Otázka Tchaj-wanu nedovoluje žádné vnější vměšování", China's Embassy to Prague, 2023, at http://cz.china-embassy.gov.cn/cze/xwdt/202303/t20230307_11036661.htm.
[20] "Čínské výhrůžky. Přimějeme Vystrčila zaplatit vysokou cenu, prohlásil ministr", iDNES cz, 31 August 2020, www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/milos-vystrcil-cesko-cr-cina-cesta-tchaj-wan-vyhrozovani-cinske-ministerstvo-zahranici.A200831_031612_zahranicni_hm1.

former Foreign Minister Kohout) believed that China was the most promising economic and trade partner, which was confirmed by Beijing's statements that it planned to invest generously in Czechia.

Although Chinese investment in the Czech Republic increased, statistics from 2019 to 2020 showed that it fell far short of initial promises and its impact on the growing number of jobs was negligible. In 2019 and 2020, only 5.7% of foreign capital came from non-European countries, and the main non-European investors in the Czech Republic were South Korea, Japan and the United States.[21] At the same time, CEFC China Energy failed, and its director – who was also an advisor of then-President Zeman, disappeared. The CEFC contracts were taken over by the state-owned CITIC, but behind closed doors. Czech media wrote about "the end of the fairy tale about Chinese investments".[22]

I have three arguments why unfulfilled expectations of Chinese investment are not a reason for the disruption of Czech-Chinese relations. First, pro-Chinese politicians did not change the course of foreign policy, but appealed to Beijing to increase investment. Second, anti-Chinese politicians welcomed the situation, arguing that it would be better for the Czech economy to cultivate trade relations with EU markets rather than with Chinese state-owned enterprises.[23] Thirdly, Czech companies have traditionally had negligible business contacts in China, and thus, for most of them, low Chinese investments did not bring any difference. Furthermore, when the evidence for unfulfilled investment promises went public, the effort to review and revise relations with China had already been articulated.[24]and the first steps to limit Chinese economic involvement in the Czech Republic had already been taken. Today, Chinese investment and the dependence of Czech industry on Asian - mainly Chinese - suppliers are interpreted as a security threat,[25] and various politicians have begun to talk about the need to diversify Czech trade relations in order to make the country more resilient. At a time when the prevailing opinion in the Czech Republic on Chinese investment could be summed up as "the smaller the better", it is hard to believe that disappointment over low levels of Chinese investment could be a cause of deterioration in Czech relations with Beijing.

4. Testing Structural Processes: Do They Explain the Change in the Czech Attitude to China?

At the systemic level, four factors were identified as possible causes that have the potential to explain the rupture between the Czech Republic and China (Table 1): growing rivalry and disputes between China and Czech allies, especially the United States and the EU; China's global ambitions combined with a different vision of world order; an increasing number of non-military attacks from China on Czech goals and economic dependence on China; and China's rapprochement with Russia. A closer look at these four factors reveals that they have something in common: "China is not a friendly country at the moment".[26] The question is why the Czechs believe this.

[21] "Přímé zahraniční investice 2021", Praha, Czech Cetral Bank. ČNB.
[22] Klička, Jan: "Vyšetřování šéfa CEFC. Konec pohádky o čínských miliardách?" *Denik.cz*, 3 March 2018, at www.denik.cz/ekonomika/profil-konec-pohadky-o-cinskych-miliardach-20180303.html.
[23] Trousilová, Alžběta: "Nová hedvábná stezka v Česku končí. Nebyl zájem, přiznává exministr", *Seznam Zprávy*, 10 September 2019, at www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/cinsky-projekt-byvaleho-ministra-konci-exministr-priznava-nezajem-78639.
[24] Gosling, Tim: "Czech Republic eyes exit from China's 16+1 investment club", *AlJazeera*, 8 June 2022, at www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/6/8/czech-republic-eyes-exit-from-chinas-161-investment-club.
[25] Czech Security Strategy *op.cit*
[26] Petr Pavel for Financial Times: "Czech president-elect says West must accept China is 'not friendly", *Financial Times,* 31 March 2023, at www.ft.com/content/df41b4a8-97f0-4e20-9ef4-4a53c0ab8f30.

The first possible explanation is based on the idea that Czech foreign policy preferences and attitudes towards China changed because of rising tensions between Beijing and Czech allies, especially the United States. In this explanation, the driving force behind why Prague stopped developing relations with China is either loyalty or a vassal relationship with Washington.[27] However, I do not think that the relationship with the United States, be it loyalty or vassalage, is the cause of the change, even if later, from around 2021, Prague shared the US attitude towards China.

US-Czech relations have a long tradition, interrupted by four decades of communism. US-Czech relations were re-established after the Velvet Revolution, strengthened by the unique relationship between then President Václav Havel and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was of Czech origin.[28] In 1997, the French Foreign Ministry even referred to the Czech Republic as "the American camp" when discussing Czech foreign policy.[29] However, following the NATO air strikes on Serbia in the spring of 1999 and the changes in US foreign policy after 9/11, US-Czech relations eroded, accompanied by a growing critical view of the United States in Czech society and politics. Pro-US politicians gradually lost political positions and influence, and the new generation of Czech politicians was strongly pro-EU.[30] The United States were gradually losing ground in Czech foreign policy. The change was symbolically confirmed in autumn 2009 when Washington stopped negotiations about stationing ground-based missile defence in Czechia.[31]

My strongest argument for why loyalty or vassalage to Washington has not been the cause of the change in Czech foreign policy preferences is the fact that the growing disputes between Prague and Beijing have coincided with a deterioration in US-Czech relations. While relations between Prague and Washington were rather cooperative during the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations, the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House became a turning point. During the Trump presidency (2017-2021), Czech political representatives became sceptical about any cooperation with Washington. The shift in attitudes towards the United States can also be seen in public opinion. While between 2008 and 2017 more than 86% of Czechs believed that US-Czech relations were good, during the Trump presidency the number dropped to 78%. The situation is even clearer when Czechs are asked about their trust in the US president. While in 2012 66% of Czechs believed in US President Obama, in 2018, when Donald Trump was president, the figure was 20%.[32] To sum up, it is hard to believe that Czech foreign policy would follow American anti-China policy at a time when cooperation between

[27] Drulák, Petr: "O co se dnes hraje", Parlamentní listy, 26 January 2023, at www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/O-co-se-dnes-hraje-Cina-USA-a-evropsky-vazal-Profesor-Drulak-a-kontext-o-kterem-se-nemluvi-727335.

[28] Waisová, Šárka (2007): "Between Atlanticism, Anti-Americanism and Europeanization. Dilemmas in Czech foreign policy and the war on terrorism", in Miller, Mark. J. and Stefanova, Boyka (eds): *The war on terrorism in comparative perspective*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.191-204.

[29] Blocker, Joel: "Chirac fails to improve Franco-Czech relations", *RFE/RL Newsline*, 4 April 1997, at https://www.rferl.org/a/1084262.html.

[30] Pick, Otto and Handl, Vladimír (2004): *Zahraniční politika České republiky 1993–2004,* Praha, Ústav mezinárodních vztahů.

[31] "Nová etapa česko-amerických vztahů. Čeští politici komentují Trumpovo vítězství", E15*,* 9 November 2016, at www.e15.cz/zahranicni/nova-etapa-cesko-americkych-vztahu-cesti-politici-komentuji-trumpovo-vitezstvi-1325137.

[32] Červenka, Jan: "Důvěra vybraným politikům v mezinárodním kontextu", CVVM November 2012, at cvvm.soc.cas.cz/cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/mezinarodni-vztahy/1464-duvera-vybranym-politikum-v-mezinarodnim-kontextu-listopad-2012. Červenka, Jan: "Důvěra vybraným politikům v mezinárodním kontextu", CVVM, 19 December 2019, at https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/mezinarodni-vztahy/5075-duvera-vybranym-politikum-v-mezinarodnim-kontextu-listopad-2019

Prague and Washington has almost ceased and when Czech political representatives openly express their disagreement with US policy.

The second possible explanation is that the cause of the deterioration in Sino-Czech relations is Beijing's global ambitions and its vision of world order, which is incompatible with the Western community's vision of the world. I believe that this argument does not explain the deterioration of Czech-Chinese relations either. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the Czechs - even when they joined Western institutions - did not identify politically or ideologically with the West for a long time; secondly, Prague has long welcomed several Chinese global projects. Surveys of Czech domestic and foreign policy,[33] surveys of value orientation of Czech society,[34] and opinion polls[35] provide strong evidence that membership in Western-backed institutions has not been accompanied by immediate ideational and political Westernisation in the Czech Republic. Even in the 1990s, when Czech politics emphasised the "way back to Europe" (in Czech: "zpět do Evropy"), a dominant part of the political representatives (e.g. then President Václav Havel, then Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier) believed in a unique Czech Central European (rather than Western European) destiny.

Not only did the Czechs believe that they were not part of the real West, they did not share Western (mainly US) concerns about a rising China. When the Czechs began to participate in China-backed projects such as the 16+1 framework and the BRI, Czech politicians and economists argued that the Czechs had their own interests and didn't need to be a victim of the Sino-American trade war.[36] In sum, the argument that the deterioration of Czech relations with China is the cause of Beijing's global ambitions and worldview is weak because the Czechs have long not shared the Western worldview. For almost its entire post-Cold War history, Prague, which views the world from a Central European perspective, has sought political, security and economic strategies different from those of the "old West", "old Europe" and the United States.

The third possible explanation is based on the argument that China threatens the Czech Republic's critical infrastructure and prosperity. This is a serious argument, however, as closer examination reveals that there is no known case of Chinese intelligence services being directly active on Czech territory until 2022, and the first cyber-attacks on Czech targets and influence operations conducted from Chinese territory appeared only in 2019.[37] The warning that China could seriously threaten the development of the Czech economy came even later. It was the COVID-19 pandemic and China's zero COVID policy that disrupted global supply chains. It turned out that without supplies from China, several sectors of Czech industry had serious problems, and some companies had to temporarily stop production. There were calls to reduce dependence on the Chinese manufacturing sector and to bring production back to Europe.[38] The aim of reducing economic dependence on China and countering Chinese influence operations

[33] *Ibid.*
[34] Rabušic, Ladislav (2001): *České hodnoty 1991–1999,* Brno, Masarykova univerzita.
[35] Spurný, Martin: "Security threats for the Czech Republic in view of public - November and December 2022", CVVM, 2 February 2023, at cvvm.soc.cas.cz/en/press-releases/other/security-negative-phenomena/5638-security-threats-for-the-czech-republic-in-view-of-public-november-and-december-2022.
[36] "Neničte obchodní válkou světový řád, obrátil se Tusk na USA, Rusko a Čínu", iDNES, 16 July 2018, at www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/donald-tusk-summit-eu-cina-svetovy-rad-obchodni-valka-usa-rusko.A180716_062513_zahranicni_hm1.
[37] Fišer, Miloslav and Zoulová, Lenka: "Do kyberválky se zapojila i Čína", Novinky.cz, 16 March 2022, at https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/internet-a-pc-bezpecnost-do-kybervalky-se-zapojila-uz-i-cina-ohrozene-jsou-i-cile-v-cesku-40390616.
[38] Kajínek, Milan: "Šéf české tajné služby hodnotí závislost ČR na Číně jako bezpečnostní Hrozbu", *EpochTimes*, 20 February 2023, at www.epochtimes.cz/2023/02/20/zavislost-cr-na-cine-je-bezpecnostni-hrozba-rika-sef-ceske-tajne-sluzby/.

could be a reason for the change in bilateral relations, but what makes this argument weak is the factor of time. The dependence of Czech industry on Chinese production and supply chains is not new; what is new is the interpretation of the situation. It was not until COVID-19 that the relocation of industry to Asia was systematically understood as a problem in the Czech Republic. At a time when there was a shortage of labour in the Czech Republic, when the cost of European labour was rising, and when climate change commitments were a burden on both companies and the state, relocation to Asia was presented as an advantage.[39] The interpretation of economic dependence on China as a threat followed the political divorce of both countries.

The final possible explanation for the deterioration in Prague's relations with Beijing is the rapprochement between China and Russia. To understand why Czechs are wary of China's partnership with Russia, it is necessary to understand Czech-Russian relations. Contemporary Czech-Russian relations have been negatively affected by the experience of Soviet-led Communist rule during the Cold War, particularly the Soviet-led military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Since then, Czech confidence in Russia has been minimal. Most political representatives and most of society have had problems with some of Moscow's activities, such as Russian involvement in Chechnya or Georgia, and with political processes, such as those involving Pussy Riot or A. Navalny. When Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in February 2009 that the Czech Republic was part of Eastern Europe, Czech Foreign Minister Vladimír Schwarzenberg protested: "We are in Central Europe, of course".[40] As a result, several political representatives of Central European countries, including former presidents and prime ministers (a total of 22 leaders), sent an open letter to US President Obama warning the United States about Russia.[41] Since the 2000s, the Czech Security Information Service [42] has reported evidence that Russia is conducting influence operations, disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks with the aim of destabilising Czech politics, and that the Czech Republic is a hotspot for Russian intelligence activities. The final point of no return in Czech-Russian relations came between April 2021 and February 2022. In April 2021, Czech intelligence and security services confirmed that a massive explosion of an ammunition depot in Vrbětice in 2014, which destroyed tonnes of ammunition and killed two people, was carried out by the GRU, the Russian intelligence service. At the end of February 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, which the Czech Republic saw as a completely unacceptable act that violated both the sovereignty of another state and existing international norms. Given the geographical proximity and the experience of the Soviet army's occupation of Czechoslovak territory after 1968, national security concerns soared. Prague made clear its allegiance to the EU and NATO. Since April 2021 and February 2022, Czech relations with Moscow have been permanently damaged, and even the biggest supporters of Russia (e.g. former President Zeman) were sceptical about the future of relations between the countries, commenting that "madmen must be isolated". [43] The transformation in Czech attitudes towards Moscow is documented by public opinion polls: while in 2014 28% of Czechs considered Russia a threat to the Czech Republic, by the end of 2022 51% of Czechs did.[44]

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[39] "Nejatraktivnější `off-shore´ lokality jsou stále Indie a Čína", ČTK, 26 October 2009, at www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/404544. Vališ, Zdeněk: "České firmy hledají spásu v Asii", *Radio Prague International,* 6 March 2009, at www.cesky.radio.cz/ceske-firmy-hledaji-spasu-v-asii-8586832.

[40] Černý, Pavel: "Podle Lavrova je ČR východní Evropa", Lidovky.cz, 11 February 2009, at https://www.lidovky.cz/svet/podle-lavrova-je-cr-vychodni-evropa.A090211_190306_ln_zahranici_mel.

[41] Vinocur, John: "Central and Eastern European Countries", *New York Times*, 31 March 2009, at www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/world/europe/21iht-politicus.html.

[42] Annual Report for 2019, Security Information Service, at www.bis.cz/annual-reports/.

[43] M. Zeman according to iRozhlas: "Prezident Zeman k útoku na Ukrajinu: Rusko se dopouští zločinu proti míru. Šílence je nutné izolovat", iRozhlas, 24 February 2022, at www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/milos-zeman-prezident-rusko-ukrajina-valka-invaze-projev_2202241107_ako.

[44] Spurný, *op. cit.*

The Czech Security Strategy of 2023 (Figure 1) shows how seriously the Czech Republic takes Russian-Chinese relations and Russia and China as threats. It identifies Russia as a threat and China as a security challenge for the Czech Republic.

At this point I would like to return to relations between Prague and Beijing. As mentioned above, since the 1990s there has been a negative (and not always rational) perception of China in Czech politics and society.[45] But what has really ruined Czech relations with China is China's support and partnership with Russia. What the Czechs feared was not China itself, but its association with Russia. The Czech foreign ministry added: "We are closely watching China's behaviour towards Russian aggression in Ukraine. China is adopting and passing on the image of the war as painted by Russia, and this is wrong".[46]

Picture 1. Threats to Czech national security

Source: Czech Security Strategy 2023, chapter "Security threats and sources of instability" (keyword occurrence analysis using cloud algorithm)

When Moscow and Beijing declared a "no limits" partnership in February 2022[47], it led to a clear conclusion in Czech politics - it is impossible to find common ground and interests with China if it maintains a partnership with Russia. In summary, for the Czech Republic, China's attitude towards Russia, which is now clearly understood as a threat to Czech national security

[45] Fürst, *op. cit.*

[46] "Dezinformace o Ukrajině šířené Čínou v podání Čínského rozhlasu pro zahraničí", Ministerstvo vnitra, 31 March 2023, at www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/dezinformace-o-ukrajine-sirene-cinou-v-podani-cinskeho-rozhlasu-pro-zahranici.aspx. Trousilová, Alžběta: "Česko přepisuje vztahy s Čínou. Pekingu se to líbit nebude", Seznam Zprávy, 25 March 2023b, at www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-duraz-na-lidska-prava-a-tchaj-wan-cesko-prepisuje-vztahy-s-cinou-228290.

[47] It should be noted that this was not the first act of cooperation between the two countries. Beijing and Moscow signed the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001, which was reaffirmed by both parties in 2021. In 2019, China and Russia announced their intention to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era. In 2021, the two countries signed a military cooperation roadmap for 2021-2025. In 2022, the PRC joined Russia in vetoing a US-led draft UN resolution that would have tightened sanctions on North Korea over its missile launches. In 2023, a joint PRC-Russian flotilla conducted a maritime patrol of areas including near Alaska.

(Czech Security Strategy 2023, Figure 1), is the determining factor for any possible future relations.

5. Concluding debate: What can the findings on Czech-Chinese relations indicate about Poland, Hungary and Slovakia's relations with Beijing?

Given the evidence gathered and the results of the counterfactual debate, if the Czech Republic finds Russia's role in the Vrbětice explosion as well as the military invasion of Ukraine and any support for Moscow in this matter unacceptable, it must also find China's (and any other state's) pro-Russian rhetoric and support in this case unacceptable. When thinking about Hungary, Poland and Slovakia and their relations with China, Aristotelian logic or Aristotle's syllogism can be used. Syllogisms are used to establish causes, essential properties and relationships between concepts. A syllogism is a judgement formed by combining three judgements according to well-defined rules. Applying the syllogism to the political problem discussed above, we can formulate the three-step statement:

1) By invading Ukraine, Russia has committed an unacceptable violation of the principle of sovereignty and international peace.

2) Countries supporting Russia or expressing sympathy for Russia's attack on Ukraine also violate the principle of sovereignty and international peace.

3) China's support and sympathy for Russia's attack on Ukraine violates the principle of sovereignty and international peace.

Applying Aristotle's logic to the attitudes of Central European states towards China may explain their position. Poland, the Czech Republic and pre-Fico Slovakia have clearly rejected Russia's attack on Ukraine as well as Moscow's arguments to justify Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, so countries that support Russia and abstain from condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine cannot be partners for them. China has systematically avoided any criticism of Russia's actions in Ukraine. In 2014, China abstained from the UN Security Council vote following Russia's annexation of Crimea. In February 2023, Beijing abstained in the UN General Assembly when a resolution calling for Russia's immediate withdrawal from Ukraine was discussed. In February 2024, Chinese and Russian officials declared that "relations between the two countries are at their best in history" and that Moscow and Beijing should "play a better role as an anchor of stability in the changing circumstances of the century"[48] The Chinese position was (and still is) perceived as support for Moscow in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia before R. Fico became prime minister. Given the above syllogism, it is clear that Beijing cannot be a good partner for Warsaw, Prague or Bratislava.

That this syllogism works can be seen in the example of Poland and Slovakia. With the outbreak of COVID 19 in early 2020 and the subsequent disruption of connectivity networks and trade relations, Sino-Polish trade relations took a hit. Before they had resumed, Russia's war against Ukraine began, followed by Poland's unequivocal support for NATO and Western military assistance to Ukraine. The Russian attack led to a significant increase in Poland's tilt towards the EU and NATO. As stated in the Polish Foreign Policy Strategy 2023, the EU and NATO are the two most important international institutions of which Poland is a member. All this eventually became the source of incompatibility in Polish cooperation with Beijing. The war significantly changed Poland's overall foreign policy orientation towards NATO and the

[48] "China lauds Russia relations", *AlJazeera*, 28 February 2024, at www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/28/china-lauds-russia-relations-and-calls-for-strengthened-asia-pacific-role.

West and reinforced the growing disinterest in developing closer political relations with China, which expressed its support for Russia.[49]

The second example, which confirms that the Russian-Chinese rapprochement discourages Central European countries from contacts with Beijing, is Slovakia before the accession of R. Fico. In February 2024, after R. Fico became prime minister of Slovakia, the Czech-Slovak break-up took place. A different view of Russia's involvement in Ukraine is the main reason for the deterioration in relations. For decades, Prague and Bratislava enjoyed very special relations, but after R. Fico declared that "Putin is being falsely demonised", "the conflict in eastern Ukraine was actually provoked by pro-Russian separatists" and "the EU's only plan is to encourage the mutual killing of Slavs", Prague refused to continue any special relations with Slovakia and bilateral talks were suspended. Commenting on the situation, a Czech newspaper wrote that "Visegrad is in two halves".[50] The "other half" of Visegrad, however, is not only today's Slovakia. It also includes Hungary, represented by V. Orbán, who - as we have shown above - avoids criticism of Moscow and continues to cooperate with both Russia and China. Returning to the central question of this article, the contrafactual debate confirmed that it was Chinese support and partnership for Moscow after Russia's invasion of Ukraine that ruined Czech-Chinese relations. The evidence-based and contrafactual debate and the application of the syllogism made it clear that the equation "as long as China supports Russia, it is not possible to cooperate with China" is true not only for the Czech Republic, but also for Poland and, for a long time, for Slovakia. The strength of this assertion can be supported by the case of the deterioration of relations between the Czech Republic and Slovakia after the new Slovak Prime Minister Fico began to soften Slovak attitudes towards Russia and China. We can therefore conclude that China and Russia are connected ships in Central Europe.

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[49] Proń, Elzbieta: "Poland-China relations: Policy shift, economic, educational, and cultural ties in Multipolar World Order 2.0", in Sahakyan, Mher (ed.) (2025): *Routledge Handbook of Chinese and Eurasian International Relations*, Routledge, pp. 228-242.

[50] iDnes, "V4 je vejpůl, potvrdila schůzka", *iDnes*, 21 March 2024, at idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/lipavsky-ministri-zahranici-v4-slovensko-blanar-szijjarto-lavrov-sikorski.A240321_053030_domaci_kop.

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