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The Belt And Road Initiative depicted in Hungary and Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

Central and Eastern European countries, like Hungary and Slovakia, are located along the Western section of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and serve as a gateway to the European Union. Thus, the participation of the CEE region is inevitable in the BRI, and the attitude of national governments and the public opinion may have an impact on the future of EU-China relations in the framework of the new “Silk Road” connecting the East to the West. The following paper offers an introduction to the so-called 16 + 1 cooperation of China and its 16 partners in the CEE region, and analyzes the political environment, public support, and media discourse of the BRI in two selected countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

KEYWORDS

China; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

1 Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is indeed the most important initiative of the last decades proposed by China. This historical project may have a significant impact on the whole world, with a special effect on the connections between the European Union and China. As Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are geographically located between Western Europe and the Asian continent, it is obvious that their role will be significant in building this section of the BRI. Furthermore, the regional cooperation of CEE countries with China, the so-called 16 + 1 initiative may become more significant, as it overlaps with the BRI.

The core regions of CEE – that is, the Visegrad Four countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – have been playing a pivotal role in the 16 + 1. Hungary was the first European country to sign a MoU on the BRI with China, and recently elevated its political relations with Beijing to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership.¹ Meanwhile Poland is already a de facto BRI country, as an important railway connection runs between the cities of Chengdu and Lodz in Poland.² As Europe gets more skeptical of the BRI initiative, and formulates some serious critical remarks on the matter as noted in a Handelsblatt article on April 17, 2018, it is necessary to raise the question: how certain CEE countries see the BRI?

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¹Chung, *Hungary is first in Europe to sign up for China's New Silk Road plan.*

²Czerep, “Influence of the Lodz-Chengdu railway.”

Table 1. Media sentiments about the BRI in Hungary.

	Media sources	Average sentiment of their coverage on the BRI
Antigovernment media	HVG/hvg.hu	-0.3
	index.hu	-0.1
	Magyar Nemzet/mno.hu post-2015	0
	RTL Klub	0
Pro-government media	TV2	0
	MTVA	0.2
	origo.hu	0.3
	Magyar Nemzet/mno.hu pre-2015	1

Source: Author's own calculations.

Table 2. Media sentiments about the BRI in Slovakia.

	Media sources	Average sentiment of their coverage on the BRI
Anti-government media	Denník N/dennikn.sk	-1
	Týždeň	-1
	Slovenský rozhlas	0
	SME/sme.sk	0
	Trend	0
Pro-government media	hlavnespravy.sk	0.11
	aktuality.sk	0.33
	Život	0.5
	Pravda	0.57
	HN	0.71

Source: Author's own calculations.

The following paper offers a brief introduction into the political and economic presence and influence of China in CEE, presents the context of China-CEE relations, the 16 + 1 cooperation, and analyzes the perceptions of the BRI initiative in two selected countries, Hungary, and Slovakia.

2 Methodology and structure

It has to be emphasized that research on the impact of the BRI in the CEE region is still in its infancy. BRI has not created any tangible results in the CEE region so far, and public awareness is very limited, that is, it is the idea of the BRI and perception of the BRI what is to be studied. Since BRI is a relatively new topic in Europe and in the CEE countries, public opinion surveys are not available yet, what makes it impossible to analyze factors like history, domestic culture, trade relations or other variables what may have an impact on the image of the BRI. Thus, at this very early stage of research, it is utmost important to analyze how public opinion is formed. To find an answer to the question I run an empirical analysis of the media discourse on the BRI in Hungary and Slovakia. These two countries represent two extremities in the region, as Chinese investment and political influence is the highest in the region in Hungary, while it is one of the lowest in Slovakia.³ The analysis may reveal potential patterns and attitudes of different media sources and individual agenda setters toward the BRI.

As the following section on the theoretical background presents sentiment of news has a major impact on the public image of the countries in concern. Furthermore, the general media image of China in Hungary and Slovakia was rather negative in the

³Karášková et al., "Central Europe for Sale."

analyzed period. Consequently, it is a plausible hypothesis that sources close to the government broadcast a generally positive image of the BRI, while opposition media depicts BRI in a negative tone.

The empirical part of the paper is preceded by the description of the 16 + 1 initiative, and by an introduction of investment and trade relations between China and the Visegrad Four countries. The following chapter offers an overview of regional literature on the BRI in a country-level approach. Finally, the empirical research of the media discourse analysis processes all BRI and China related news broadcasted in Hungary and Slovakia in both a quantitative and qualitative way between 2013 and Q2 2017. The research is based on an extensive database built by project ChinfluenCE. Through this project we collected almost 4000 articles in Hungary and 2600 in Slovakia from the most popular newspapers, weekly magazines, radio and television channels and online news sites in nation-wide circulation. Repeated discourses, when a certain media source published the same report both online and in its printed version were counted twice, as those who read the online version are unlikely to buy the printed newspaper at the same time. Therefore, the two versions predominantly influence different individuals. Through the coding process we created a database of all relevant articles (those which are about Chinese politics and economics) with the sentiments of each article, most frequently mentioned topics, keywords, and agenda setters (Hungarian or Slovak nationals – politicians, experts, journalists, business people – cited or interviewed at least three times in the analyzed period). Of course, it is always a bit shaky to evaluate the sentiment of an article, as it is inherently a subjective intellectual task. To minimize the potential impact of personal bias or misinterpretation, we employed 22 volunteers to read and code the articles, which were randomly distributed among them. If the coder had the impression that the wording of an article was phrased in a way to actively influence the reader in a negative or positive way, it was coded like that. Meanwhile articles with a balanced view were coded as neutral. The differentiation between pro-government and antigovernment media is a common sense in the CEE region. The empirical part of the present paper focuses on the news that depict the BRI, filtered out of the total of 6600 articles.

3 Theoretical background

President Xi Jinping delivered a remarkable speech at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 18 October 2017. I believe his words represent the dawn of a new era, where the competition between the US and China gets to a new level and goes beyond economic or strategic competition. As Mr. Xi said:

“It means that the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernisation. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.”⁴

⁴Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous,” 9.

In the same speech the President also said that in the “new era” China will move closer to center stage and make greater contributions to mankind,⁵ and that the dream of the Chinese people is connected with the dreams of the peoples of other countries,⁶ and that China’s international influence, ability to inspire and power to shape has risen further.⁷ Based on such statements it seems clear that China not only wants to play a major power’s role in World affairs, but also perfectly understands the importance of influence, that is soft power in the twenty-first century. As Wang Jianwei argues, the foreign policy of China under Xi has embraced a moralistic dimension, and this new approach is to become a banner to highlight China’s soft power.⁸

As Joseph Nye famously put it the proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states, and the soft or co-optive power means that a country, based on its cultural, ideological and institutional resources is able to get others to want what it wants.⁹

In the modern era mass communication and the media represent an important space where the soft power of a nation or its ideas may be boosted or on the contrary, degraded. The results of Wanta et al. showed a clear relationship between media coverage of nations and how individuals viewed those nations, and the sentiment of news (positive, negative or neutral) had a major impact on the public image of the countries in concern. Negative coverage showed a clear agenda-setting trend between media and the public opinion.¹⁰ The paper of Kioussis and Wu also found that increased media salience of negative news portrayals correlated with greater public awareness and negative attitudes toward foreign nations.¹¹

Based on the above-mentioned sentences of President Xi, one may easily argue that public opinion on the growth and development of China is an important source or even fundamental element of the soft power of Beijing. Chinese analysts are aware of the global dominance of Western media, what some of them call “cultural hegemony,” and that Western media focuses mostly on negative reporting of China.¹² Consequently, it is important to understand how the media in countries, like Hungary, depict China and the BRI, as it has a major impact on the general public opinion on the BRI.

4 The context of China-CEE relations: the 16 + 1 initiative

Seven years ago Budapest hosted the first China-CEE Countries Economic and Trade Forum in 2011, the first meeting between Beijing and its partners in the region, or the 16 + 1 initiative as we know it today. The forum was so successful that the parties agreed to organize a prime minister level summit every year ever since, where the heads of government of China and Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland,

⁵Ibid., 9.

⁶Ibid., 22.

⁷Ibid., 6.

⁸Wang, *Xi Jinping’s “Major Country Diplomacy”: A Paradigm Shift?*, 9.

⁹Nye, *Soft Power*, 153–171.

¹⁰Wanta, “Agenda Setting and International News.”

¹¹Kioussis and Xu, “International Agenda-Building and Agenda-Setting.”

¹²Li, *Soft power in Chinese discourse: popularity and prospect*.

Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Serbia convene to address strategic level issues of the cooperation.¹³ Eleven of the 16 countries are members of the European Union, while five countries of the Western Balkan (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) may join the integration in the upcoming decades. In the following years, Poland and the Czech Republic became strategic partners of China, while Hungary signed such an agreement with Beijing in 2017. Hungary is one of the most stable political partners of China in the region. It hosts the majority of Chinese investments, the largest Chinese community, four Confucius Institutes, the regional headquarters of Bank of China, and a Chinese-Hungarian bilingual elementary school.¹⁴ China have been high on the political agenda of all CEE countries, since many believed that the initiative may lead to increased inflow of Chinese investment and new export opportunities to the second biggest economy of the world. The global financial crisis and the struggles of the EU's economy had a serious impact on most CEE countries, thus cooperation with China became a priority to many governments around the region. Despite expectations, however, the level of Chinese investment is still relatively low in the region.¹⁵

Individual CEE countries have different incentives to participate in the 16 + 1. Non-EU member countries of the Western Balkan are particularly interested in the inflow of Chinese capital and in infrastructure projects, as EU funds are not available for them. Meanwhile political factors may also play their role as strong relations to Beijing could serve as a bargaining chip in their negotiations with the Brussels. The 11 EU member states have been less successful in attracting Chinese investment in the past 7 years, but some national leaders like Viktor Orban of Hungary or Milos Zeman of the Czech Republic seem to nurture good political relations with China to gain better bargaining positions in the EU.

Visegrad Four countries represent the core of the CEE region when it comes to economic relations to China. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia accounted for 75% of regional exports to China in 2016 (19.6%, 22.9%, 19.5%, and 12.9%, respectively), while the remaining 12 countries played only a minor or even insignificant role in this regard.¹⁶ FDI relations show a similar pattern, V4 countries host a major part of Chinese investment in Central Europe.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Chinese enterprises have not found many opportunities in EU members of the CEE region, as the rules and regulations of the integration seem to be too strict and complicated compared to the business environment in the Balkan.¹⁸ The BRI however, may reinvigorate Chinese investment and business activities in V4 countries as well, as these countries have a crucial geographical location and their will to attract Chinese infrastructure construction companies may increase in the upcoming years.

The cooperation project of China and its 16 CEE partner countries has been attracting a lot of attention since its birth in 2011, and it has created suspicions in

¹³Matura, "Hungary and China Relations," 137–153.

¹⁴Matura, "Hungary and China: Hopes and reality."

¹⁵Seaman et al., *Chinese Investment in Europe*.

¹⁶UNCTAD STAT .

¹⁷Hanemann and Huotari, "Record flows and growing imbalances."

¹⁸Please, note that available FDI data are unreliable, and tend to vary widely in different sources. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, the CEE16 countries host USD 18bn, out of which 8 billion is located in V4 countries. However, other sources mention significantly lower levels of Chinese investment into the CEE region.

EU institutions regarding the true nature of the project, the intentions of the Chinese side and its potential impact on the integrity of the Union. CEE countries had to learn how important communication was, in order to convince European authorities that 16 + 1 was not a real threat to the common China policy of the EU.¹⁹

When Beijing introduced the outlines of the cooperation between the PRC and its 16 CEE partners in 2011–2012, most observers believed that China had a well prepared and detailed plan in the background. Since this supposed plan has never been published or even talked about, some people developed concerns regarding the true intentions of China.

When it comes to the results of the 16 + 1 time and patience plays a significant role, since the cooperation started only seven years ago. Governments have done a lot to make business circles aware of mutual opportunities and the legal and political framework has been established. Still, the 16 + 1 cooperation has not produced much tangible results. When it comes to investment issues, China and the CEE countries have diverging interests in many cases. While the region desperately needs green field investments, technology, and new jobs, it seems that China is more interested in infrastructure construction and financial cooperation.²⁰ The looming project of connecting the port of Piraeus in Greece with Budapest through Macedonia and Serbia is one of the first examples of how the BRI and 16 + 1 may eventually merge together. Furthermore, CEE is a region which might be able to attract more Chinese investment in the future if Beijing starts to relocate some of its industrial or manufacturing capacities into foreign countries to rebalance its domestic economic structure and its foreign trade. Transportation corridors of the BRI may offer a particularly good chance. Countries like Poland or Hungary are to develop proactive strategies to draw Chinese investors' attention to the potential business opportunities provided by their EU and Schengen Area membership.²¹

However, besides the promising opportunities to individual countries, the Chinese activity has some concerning aspects when the pan-European perspective is considered. Beijing has been working on the establishment of a Nordic-Chinese (5 + 1) and a Mediterranean-Chinese (7 + 1) regional cooperation.²² That is, EU-China relations would be turned into a set of regional talks, while only major member states could keep their contacts with Beijing on a bilateral level. The 16 + 1 cooperation is not a threat to the EU on its own, but if China succeeds to create a puzzle of regional forums across Europe, it is hard to see what role Brussels and the common China policy could play in the future. The potential proliferation of project like 16 + 1 across the EU is a concerning option, thus all member states and EU institutions should scrutinize the issue to articulate the proper strategy to the challenge imposed by the increased Chinese presence in Europe. Recent developments of the EU's China policy suggest that European powers have realized these challenges and are willing to respond accordingly.

4.1 Chinese investment in the CEE region

The dissemination of Chinese investment in V4 countries is uneven both in terms of amount and timing. Hungary has received by far the highest amount of Chinese

¹⁹Pavličević, "China in Central and Eastern Europe."

²⁰Jakóbowski and Kaczmarek, "Beijing's mistaken offer."

²¹Jakóbowski et al., *The Silk Rail Road The EU-China Rail Connections*.

²²Sverdrup and Lanteigne, "Looking for the North Star: Sino-Nordic Sub-Regional Diplomacy and the '5 + 1'."

capital, as more than EUR 2 billion has flown into the country, while Poland has attracted EUR 1 billion and the Czech Republic stands at EUR 560 million. Meanwhile, Slovakia is lagging far behind on the list, where Chinese investment is almost nonexistent: according to the most reliable data source Bratislava has attracted EUR 50 million so far.²³ The V4 countries performance is very different when it comes to the peak time of the inflow of Chinese capital. While Hungary was indeed the first to attract high amounts of capital from the PRC, the inflow has significantly slowed down or even stopped in the last few years. Meanwhile Poland has slowly but steadily increased its stock of Chinese FDI. However, it was the Czech Republic which has managed to boost its investment relations to China at a rocketing pace, mostly due to its sudden change of attitude toward China.²⁴

Another problem from the CEE countries' point of view has been the preference of Chinese companies toward acquisitions and infrastructure construction, instead of investing into green field projects. Although most countries of the region initially expected China to create new jobs and production facilities, Chinese greenfield projects are still almost nonexistent, as Chinese companies are eager to build infrastructure in the region, in order to ease their domestic overcapacity and to get rid of their excess financial capital and to access new markets through M&As. Chinese investment targeted mostly the energy sector in Poland, technology and chemical industry in Hungary, and the financial sector in the Czech Republic. In the fields of infrastructure investment, Chinese companies have been successful mostly in the Balkans so far, particularly in Serbia, Montenegro, and Moldova, probably due to the less sophisticated public procurement standards in these non-EU member states.²⁵

Despite the developments of the last decade, the stock of Chinese investment is still very modest in the CEE region, as it equals to approximately EUR 4.7 billion, that represented 1.17% of the total stock of FDI in the five major economies (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) of the region in 2016. Meanwhile the share of Chinese capital in the five biggest European economies (Germany, the UK, France, Italy, and Spain) of the EU was 2.51%.²⁶

4.2 China – CEE trade

Even though most CEE countries aim at increased trade with, and first of all export opportunities to China, and governments on both sides have been praising the importance of trade relations in recent years, the actual achievements are modest. The growth of China-CEE trade has been outpacing the EU average, the overall importance of China, however, is still very limited. Indeed, regional exports to China have been growing significantly since the implementation of the 16 + 1 cooperation (9% annually on average) but the share of exports to China was as low as 1.2% of the total exports of CEE countries on average in 2016. In fact, the export dependence on China of

²³See note 17 above.

²⁴Fürst, "The Czech Republic," 41–47.

²⁵Seaman et al., *Chinese Investment in Europe*.

²⁶See note 17 above.

Germany, the UK and of France is considerably higher (6.4, 4.4, and 3.6%, respectively) than any of the CEE countries.²⁷

The total bilateral trade volume between China and the 16 CEE countries amounted to \$74.4 billion in 2016, which was 11.8% of total EU-China trade. Since the trade dependence on EU markets of the CEE countries is between 60 and 90%, it was logical to seek alternative trade opportunities amidst the raging European financial and economic crisis. Another important fact is that the overwhelming majority of CEE exports to China are produced by multinational companies and not by local enterprises.²⁸

The structure of trade relations with China is concerning in the region. First, all countries have to face a substantial amount of trade deficit to China, even up to such extreme cases like Serbia where the value of imports is 63 times higher than the value of exports to China. Regarding the bigger economies of the region, the trade balance is a reason for headache in Poland, as the country imports 12 times more from China than it exports, resulting in an EUR 21 billion deficit. Hungary imports twice as much as it exports to the PRC.²⁹ The main reason for the significant level of trade imbalance is that major CEE economies are integral part of global value chains, connected mostly to Germany, thus a significant (though statistically unknown) amount of their imports from China represent inputs (parts and accessories) to their industry. Therefore, the majority of imported Chinese goods are reexported to other, mostly Western EU countries, as parts of high-tech products manufactured or assembled in CEE countries. Small and medium sized enterprises in CEE are usually too weak to facilitate their own business relations with their Chinese counterparts due to the lack of quantity or proper financial background.

4.3 Chinese influence in the CEE region

It is also noteworthy that public support among the population of CEE member states does not back the enthusiastic pro-China policies of some of their governments. According to a recent survey by Eurobarometer only 40% of Hungarian and 25% of Czech respondents have a positive perception of China, while the EU average is 32%.³⁰ The same applies to public discourse. In the framework of project *ChinfluenCE*, we analyzed almost 10,000 articles published on China in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia in the period 2010–2017. According to our results negative opinions outweighed positive ones by a wide margin, while the clear majority of articles were pretty neutral toward China. Though the Czech Republic has made a political turnaround and became a supporter of Beijing in recent years, the public discourse is still highly critical of China, and topics like human rights and other values are high on the agenda.³¹

²⁷UNCTAD STAT database.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰European Commission, "Special Eurobarometer 467," 81.

³¹Karášková et al., "Central Europe for Sale."

5 The BRI and CEE

5.1 Country-level approaches

5.1.1 The Czech Republic

The relationship between the Czech Republic and China has reached a new peak in recent years. President Xi visited Prague in 2016 and the two governments signed a strategic partnership. Compared to its previous China policy, now Prague follows a new pragmatic policy toward Beijing and takes advantage of the 16 + 1 cooperation. However, the BRI has only a minor impact on bilateral ties, though the Czech government has expressed its support to the project. The main reason is that China's BRI diplomacy is only partially synchronized with Czech development priorities.³²

Czech-Chinese relations have experienced a major improvement since 2013, thanks to the pro-China policies of President Miloš Zeman. However, from the Czech perspective, the improvement is not connected to the Chinese BRI strategy. Meanwhile, from the Chinese point of view, Czech political support to the BRI is an important element of bilateral diplomatic relations.³³

The Czech government supports the BRI and Czech-Chinese relations in general, thus it signed a Joint Memorandum of Understanding in 2015. Both the President and the governing parties push for stronger Czech-Chinese relations to boost economic and business opportunities. The Prime Minister visited Beijing in 2015, and a New Silk Road Institute was opened as well in Prague. The Institute is a nongovernmental organization that promotes Euro-Asian cooperation and raises awareness of the BRI project. China plays a proactive role in the promotion of the BRI in the Czech Republic, through the invitation of Czech political, business and scientific delegations to conferences and investment forums in China. However, Czech politicians, business people or experts regard the BRI as something rather rhetoric, a distant or theoretical issue.³⁴

The main problem is, that though Chinese BRI diplomacy is very active, it is detached from Czech economic realities and domestic political priorities. Therefore, the BRI is still a minor and unclear topic in political and media debates, compared to the attention what economic and political bilateral relations in general receive.

Though the Czech Republic is not concerned about the geopolitical or security related questions of Chinese investment into the country, a recent interview with the biggest Chinese investor raised some eyebrows. The company of Ye Jianming, CEFC has already invested hundreds of millions of Euros in the Czech Republic, and Mr. Ye served as an advisor to the Czech President. In an interview he said:

*"We have to look at geopolitics, (...) If one day the Czech Republic goes against China, we need to pull back our investments to rethink our strategies there."*³⁵

Such statements obviously have a negative impact on Czech perceptions about Chinese activity in the country, especially that Ye Jianming was allegedly detained by the Chinese authorities in early 2018.

³²Fürst, "The Czech Republic: New Strategic Partnership with China, yet Little Real OBOR Touch," 12–16.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Cendrowski, *The Unusual Journey of China's Newest Oil Baron*.

5.1.2 Hungary

Hungary plays an important regional role in the building of the BRI project, although references to it (or the New Silk Road as it is more widely known in Hungary) are rarely evoked in China's relationship with the country. The underlying reason is that Budapest and Beijing cooperate mostly bilaterally or under the framework of the 16 + 1 network of the CEE countries and China. BRI would mean a third layer or label, therefore political actors rarely mention it, while media sources tend to totally forget about it. Still, there are at least two major projects in the country which qualify as BRI programs.³⁶

Hungarian politicians working in Brussels have taken steps to strengthen the country's position in this regard. The Europe China BRI Culture & Tourism Development Committee was launched at the China Cultural Center in Brussels in April 2016. Besides efforts to build the Budapest-Belgrade rail line, Hungary became the first European country to sign a MoU on BRI with China in June 2015. At the same time the country missed the opportunity to join the AIIB, it does not have an official China Strategy, a BRI Strategy or even coordination on BRI between different governmental actors. Local companies are too small to potentially join construction projects in third countries, and their knowledge on BRI is very limited or nonexistent.³⁷

In sum, Hungary has the chance to be one of the first European beneficiaries of a major BRI-labeled project, but the government could do more to utilize all potential aspects. Of course, the size of the country and its companies limits capacities to cooperate with Chinese partners on a much bigger scale, but the formulation of a national China Strategy may support efforts to articulate Hungarian interest vis-à-vis China and the BRI project itself.³⁸

5.1.3 Poland

According to Polish analyst Justyna Szczudlik Warsaw nurtures positive attitudes toward the BRI. The initiative is seen as a new opportunity to increase exports to China, to attract more Chinese investments, and to speed up Poland's reindustrialization through synergies between the BRI and Poland's own development strategy. Another major goal of Warsaw is to turn the country into a Central European hub along the BRI, thus the Polish government has been eager to sign agreements and memorandums and to attend multiple events or conferences on the BRI, and the initiative was included in the declaration of upgrading Chinese-Polish bilateral ties to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.³⁹

China puts the BRI high on the agenda of all bilateral meetings with Poland, as well as during political and economic, tourist and cultural dialogs, organizes seminars on the initiative, and sends Chinese governmental and business delegates to Poland to inspect the investment environment. Like some other countries in the CEE region Poland and the PRC signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative" at the 4th 16 + 1 summit held in Suzhou in November 2015. Policy-makers in Poland see

³⁶Matura, "Hungary," 35–38.

³⁷Ibid., 38.

³⁸Ibid., 38.

³⁹Szczudlik, "Poland on the Silk Road in Central Europe." 45–48.

more potential benefits than threats coming from the BRI, although this positive perception might have changed under Poland's new leadership since 2017.

Generally speaking, Polish political leaders perceive the BRI as a potential chance to expand Polish exports to China using both land based and maritime transport corridors. Apart from trade, the BRI is also perceived as a new opportunity to attract further Chinese investment to the country, in accordance with the reindustrialization and infrastructure development plans of the Polish government. Businesses' attitude is rather positive as well, but Polish companies are not very active in the BRI, as they do not have enough knowledge about the project or about the Chinese business environment as such. The Polish government has been very active to respond on the opportunities offered by the BRI, which is considered as a good means to fill the rather vague "strategic partnership" with real substance. The Polish government decided to apply for a founding membership in the AIIB, and actively pursues contacts with the Silk Road Fund.⁴⁰

Though the Polish governments has not established a specific institution or office devoted to the activities regarding the BRI, several important governmental agencies are actively engaged with the issue, like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of, the Ministry of Economic Development, and the state agency responsible for promoting trade and attracting investments.⁴¹

5.1.4 Slovakia

Slovakian involvement in the BRI has been minimal so far, though both the Slovak and Chinese side has expressed their interest in bilateral cooperation in the framework of the BRI's agenda. However, as Slovakia is not located along the existing main transport corridors, it seems that the country has no major projects to contribute to. Unfortunately, both the Northern way through Poland, and the Southern route through the Balkan and Hungary shuns Slovakia, while the railway running through Russia and Ukraine is more or less blocked by the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Slovakia like other countries in the region, signed an MoU with the Chinese side during the 16 + 1 summit in Suzhou in 2015. Former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico used to be an enthusiastic supporter of business cooperation with China and pursued good political relations with Beijing in order to achieve economic benefits. Fico actively lobbied in Beijing to incorporate the Chinese side into multiple projects in Slovakia, the construction of a hydro power plant or the establishment of a branch of a Chinese bank in Slovakia, and a direct flight connection between Bratislava and Beijing. None of these suggested projects, however, have materialized so far, thus the government is less enthusiastic nowadays about the cooperation with China.⁴²

5.2 Empirical analysis

Based on the database created in the framework of the international ChinfluencE project, in the following I analyze all the articles which touch upon the BRI to find answers to the questions and assumptions put forward at the beginning of the paper.

⁴⁰Ibid.,48.

⁴¹Ibid.,48.

⁴²Pleschová, "Slovakia." 53–55.

The first important finding is that the BRI has not been high on the agenda neither in Hungary nor in Slovakia in the analyzed time frame. There have been altogether 126 articles, that is 3.1% of the 4000 articles in Hungary and 56 articles (2.1% of the 2600 articles) in Slovakia with a focus on the BRI in the period between 2013 and the first half of 2017. Though there was no chance to dig into the details of the Czech case, it is known that numbers were similar there too, as there were only 24 articles (1.9%) on the BRI out of 1257 pieces between 2013 and Q2 2017.⁴³ This is quite surprising, given the fact that the topic of bilateral economic relations to China, growth of and markets in China have been on the top of the political agenda and most of the media coverage focused on these particular issues.⁴⁴

As to the sentiment of the articles, the coverage on the BRI is significantly more positive than on China itself in general. While the image of China was 9.4% negative, 4.8% positive, and 85.8% neutral in all relevant articles processed in Hungary in the analyzed period, articles focusing on the BRI itself were 25% positive, only 8% negative, and 67% neutral. Likewise, in Slovakia, the general media discourse on China was 26% negative, 6% positive, and 68% neutral, while the coverage on the BRI was 25% positive, 16% negative, and 59% neutral.

When one takes a closer look, however, at the details of the limited but rather positive perceptions of the BRI in the two respective countries, the reality is more nuanced. Like the general discourse on China, the discourse on the BRI is highly politicized as well, that is, the sentiment of articles strongly depends on the general attitude of the given medium toward the government. To put it simple, news sources friendly to the government tend to share a positive view on China and the BRI, while articles written by antigovernment media sources are a way more negative about China and the BRI.

In the case of Hungary, the economic weekly HVG (and its online edition hvg.hu), the online news portal index.hu, commercial television channel RTL Klub, and the post-2015 version of the daily Magyar Nemzet (and its online edition mno.hu) are considered to be antigovernment media sources. Meanwhile, the entire national broadcasting company, MTVA (with numerous television and radio channels), the online news portal origo.hu, the pre-2015 version (see below) of daily Magyar Nemzet, and the commercial television channel TV2 are considered as government friendly sources.⁴⁵ The average sentiment of their coverage is presented in the following table, where positive news were coded as “1”, neutrals as “0” and negative ones as “-1”, and average was calculated as the sum of these values divided by the total number of news and articles published by the given source in the analyzed time frame (Table 1).

The finding is in line with the general discourse on China, where pro-government media sources have a strong inclination to depict the PRC in a positive way, while more media on the opposition side tend to spread negative views. Though the deviation from perfect neutrality does not seem serious in most cases, it is more telling that 100% of negative news were broadcasted by anti-government sources (index.hu, HVG/hvg.hu), while 100% of positive news were shared by pro-government media (pre-2015 Magyar

⁴³Based on the report of project leader Ivana Karásková presented at the closing conference of project *Chinfluence* in Prague on June 7, 2018.

⁴⁴Karásková et al., “Central Europe for Sale.”

⁴⁵Bajomi-Lazar, *Hungary – Media Landscape*.

Nemzet/mno.hu; origo.hu; MTVA). The special case of Magyar Nemzet/mno.hu offers a glimpse into the development of the media in Hungary. The owner of Magyar Nemzet used to be a financial mastermind behind the governing party and a close ally of the current Hungarian prime minister until February 2015, when he publicly broke ties with the PM and used extremely rude words to describe him. Consequently, media sources in the hands of the businessman, previously friendly to the government, turned against FIDESZ. Thus, the pre-2015 version of the daily Magyar Nemzet (and its online edition, mno.hu) was extremely pro-BRI, literally every article they published was positive (with a value “1”), while following the break-up between the two allies the daily became totally neutral about the BRI (with a value of “0”).

It has also to be mentioned that the media discourse on China and therefore on the BRI was mostly neutral in both Hungary and Slovakia in the analyzed period. Besides the desired neutrality of media, the other main explanation is that the predominance of economic news had a major impact on the average sentiment of the discourse, as the high number of short news on simple facts and figures like the Chinese GDP growth, consumer price index, etc. tilted the whole picture toward neutrality. This effect was further increased by the fact that 51% of all news on China in Hungary were released by the national news agency (MTI) which is supposed to be neutral by nature. When simple economic news is excluded, however, the picture gets a way more polarized, as op-eds and longer articles on the matter tend to be less neutral, mostly more negative.⁴⁶

In Slovakia the findings were similar. Media sources like the dailies Denník N (and its online edition dennikn.sk) and SME (and its online edition sme.sk), weekly Týždeň⁴⁷ and the Slovak national radio (Slovenský rozhlas) are considered critical toward the Slovak government, even according to the prime minister who labeled journalists from newspapers Sme, Denník N, from public Slovak Television, and public Slovak Radio as “dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes.”⁴⁸ Meanwhile news outlets like Pravda (the former communist mouthpiece), HN, Život, hlavnespravvy.sk (pro-Russian web portal) and aktuality.sk are considered as pro-government or at least as non-anti-government.⁴⁹ Just like in Hungary, 100% of negative news on the BRI were published by media outlets with anti-government sentiments, while 85–92% of articles with a positive sentiment were written by pro-government media. The slight uncertainty of the above number stems in the fact that SME used to be more anti-government till a new owner took control of the daily in 2014, and thus numerous members of the staff left the company to establish a new paper, the anti-government Denník N (Table 2).

Daily Denník N (and its online edition) and weekly Týždeň published only a limited number of articles on the BRI, but all of these conveyed negative sentiments. The national radio, Slovenský rozhlas, broadcasted both negative and positive news and neutral ones as well, like SME (and its online version). Every single piece by Trend was neutral. At the same time sources as hlavnespravvy.sk, aktuality.sk, Život, Pravda and HN published nothing but positive or neutral coverage on the BRI.

⁴⁶See above 44, 26.

⁴⁷Nicholson, “Ladislav Reháč.”

⁴⁸Spectator Staff., “Fico to journalist: We are not on the same level.”

⁴⁹Školkay, *Slovakia – Media Landscape*.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of the research presented above support the assumptions of the hypothesis. First, despite the high number of articles on the Chinese economy and politics in general, the coverage on the BRI was low between 2010 and 2017, only 3.1% and 2.1% of publications focused on the matter in Hungary and Slovakia, respectively. As it has been mentioned above, Slovak-China relations are among the least dynamic ones in the region, thus the low prevalence of BRI related news in the country is understandable. The Hungarian case, however, is quite different, as the country focuses on economic cooperation with China, therefore the BRI should be in the forefront of media attention. A possible explanation is the general lack of understanding of the BRI in the West since the project is considered vague by many. Furthermore the lack of tangible BRI related projects in the two countries may also explain the low numbers. Finally, the media sometimes does not mention the BRI even in cases actually related to the Initiative. For instance the proposed reconstruction of the railway between Budapest and Belgrade is simply labeled as a “Chinese project” by the Hungarian media, without reference to the BRI.

Second, many of the most popular media sources in Hungary and Slovakia see the BRI (and China) through the lenses of their own political inclinations, and thus news broadcasted by outlets on the opposition side tend to depict the BRI in a significantly more negative way than sources supportive toward their respective governments. Though the general discourse on the BRI (and on China in general) is mostly neutral, it might be partially explained by the high share of news on its economic data and performance, where sentiments barely play any role. In comparison, the coverage is significantly less neutral on China in the Czech Republic (41% negative, 14% positive, and only 45% neutral), where moral issues and values constitute a major part of the discourse on China.⁵⁰

6.1 How to influence perceptions of the BRI?

A leading official of the European External Action Service once called the BRI the most expensive PR exercise in modern history.⁵¹ Though such statements are to be considered as witty exaggerations, still it is clear that perceptions of the BRI may have a significant impact on the success or failure of the project. One of the aims of China is to increase its soft power capabilities through the BRI, and local media coverage on the topic offers an insight into the current perceptions of the BRI in the countries concerned.⁵²

One important take away is that local media coverage on the BRI should be increased both in terms of quantity and quality. Stakeholders should do more on both sides to spread more information on the initiative, since no matter someone likes it or not, the BRI might have a serious impact on current world affairs, and the people of Hungary and Slovakia (and Central Europe in general) must be aware of these developments. As to the latter one, it would be desirable to share more balanced views

⁵⁰Karásková et al., “Central Europe for Sale.”

⁵¹Private consultation under Chatham House rules, conference in Warsaw, January 30, 2017.

⁵²Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power.”

of the initiative and on China itself, and to detach government bashing from BRI and China bashing in local media.

The second take away is that political bias shapes perceptions of the BRI to a significant extent. This bias, however is not based on political ideologies. In Hungary, it is the media of the left and the liberal side what is more critical about the right-wing government and therefore about the BRI and China, while in Slovakia the conservative and liberal media plays a similar role to bash the social-democratic government. That is, rightist-conservative media sources support closer relations to China and the BRI in Hungary, and leftist media outlets do the same in Slovakia.

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