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Intersections.EEJSP  
3(5): 49-67.  
DOI: 10.17356/ieejsp.v5i3.564  
<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

## Followers, Challengers, or By-Standers? Central European Media Responses to Intensification of Relations with China

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### Abstract<sup>2</sup>

The article answers how growing intensity of China-V4 relations in the period of 2010–2017 impacted the media discourse of China in Central Europe. While diplomatically speaking China and the Visegrad countries reached perhaps the most positive and intensive relations ever, the top-down impact on people’s perceptions is less clear. Media play an important role as an intermediary between the politics and public opinion and their role in EU-China and China-Central Europe relations has been previously discussed. The paper summarizes empirical findings of large-scale research of media reporting related to China in Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic from 2010 till mid-2017 in which more than seven thousand media outputs were consulted. It is found that the political relations led to quantitative increase of media coverage of China, yet the qualitative impact is ambivalent, thus questioning the success of Chinese soft power attempts. The discourse on China in the Czech Republic and Hungary is in no small extent politicized, polarized, and media often inform about China based on domestic political considerations, while in Slovakia there is little interest in China overall and media largely follows official narratives and international discourse.

*Keywords:* China, China-Central Europe, China-V4, Chinese soft power, image of China.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this of this text were published in the form of the ChinfluenCE project’s policy paper, see (Karásková et al., 2018). Project ChinfluenCE is run by the Association for International Affairs (AMO) and supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED Grant No. 2017-841).

<sup>2</sup> The work on this article was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project ‘Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges’ (CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_019/0000791).

## *1. Introduction*

Since 2011, China and Central Europe started to write a new chapter of their relations under the labels of 16+1 platform and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although sometimes referred to as ‘traditional friends’ (Turcsányi and Qiaoan, 2019), the two sides have spent most of their history neglecting each other. Given the political realities, Central European countries started meeting China in their capacity as independent countries only after the First World War. Yet, this era did offer only few chances to interact, given the geographical distance, and more immediate security, political, and economic challenges both sides faced. Although both China and Central Europe ended up in the communist camp after the Second World War, the contacts were frozen soon after as the result of Sino-Soviet split. When the ice started to melt during the 1980s, it met an abrupt end with the events of 1989 again. For about two decades since the fall of Communist regimes in Central Europe, the attention of both China and Central Europe was directed towards the West. It was only after the 2008 economic crisis that the Central European countries started to see China as a potential partner and soon after the two sides started to develop contacts under the banners of the 16+1 platform and the Belt and Road Initiative, reaching the most active levels ever in their history (Fürst and Tesař, 2014; Turcsanyi, forthcoming).

There has been a scholarly and pundit discussion about what goals China has pursued in the region. Some have claimed that increasing the economic interaction has been the prime Chinese intention, while others have raised a possibility of political goals being the most important ones (Turcsányi et al., 2014), including the option that China has attempted to ‘divide and rule’ Europe (Gaspers, 2018; Turcsányi, 2014). Although there is no definite answer yet on China’s motivations in CEE, most observers would agree that China tries to improve its image internationally, both in general and also in particular with its recent initiatives (Balding, 2018; Boboc, 2017). It is therefore meaningful to study how the increase of diplomatic exchanges between China and Central Europe have impacted the image of China in these countries. Media play an important role here as an intermediary between the politics and public opinion.

The aim of this article is to answer a research question of how growing intensity of China-Central Europe relations in the period of 2010-2017 impacted the media discourse of China in Central Europe. More specifically, the focus will be on whether the improving political relations with China led to similar improving of China’s image in the Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak media, and hence whether the Central European media have been susceptible to Chinese narratives. This research can be seen as complementary to the one by Turcsanyi and Kachlikova which focused on how selected media in Spain, Poland, and the UK reported on the BRI in the first four years of the BRI (2013-2017) (Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, unpublished). It was found that European media largely followed Chinese narrative frames of economic opportunity, which helped to improve the general image of China in the media. This paper adopts a significantly more comprehensive method to study more media outlets and their overall reporting on the political and economic issues related to China, not just limited to the one on the BRI.

It will be concluded that overall there was a growth in terms of the quantity of articles dealing with China. Although the BRI was indeed framed positively (in

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Hungary and Slovakia), no considerable qualitatively positive impact can be observed when it comes to the overall image of China, meaning that media discourses in Central Europe did not imitate the improving political relations between China and Central Europe by improving the overall sentiment of China in reporting. In the Czech Republic, the intensification of contacts with China took place in the background of a continuously highly polarized discourse on China, and it might have only strengthened the perception of China as ‘the Other’ (Karásková et al., 2018). In Hungary, the assessment of Hungarian-Chinese relations is influenced by the political attitude of the given media outlet towards the government, yet in the conditions of overall political dynamics in the country, the voices critical of the government were being, to no small extent, overwhelmed and side-lined. Slovakia finds itself in between the two, with relatively little impact of the intensification of the diplomatic relations on the quality and the quantity of the media discourse.

The article will proceed as follows. First, the theoretical section will present the context in which China-Central Europe relations started to develop actively in the aftermath of 2011. We will present a framework in which Chinese foreign policy conducts public diplomacy in order to improve its soft power and legitimize itself domestically. The image of China conveyed by media in Central Europe can be seen as an intermediary indicator of the extent of success or failure of China’s soft power activities. Second, the methodological section will explain concrete steps taken as part of this study, such as the selection of the case studies, period of study, and most importantly the media analysis and coding process. Third, the empirical part will present outcomes of the research related to the three case studies. Finally, the concluding section will sum up the findings and offer answers using the concepts presented in the theoretical section.

## *2. China’s soft power and relations with Central (and Eastern) Europe*

Former Chinese State Councillor Dai Bingguo (2010) suggested that China has three core interests: regime security, national sovereignty, and economic development. It can be argued that the first – regime security – is superior, and it depends on the other two – the government being able to provide economic development while satisfying increasingly nationalist feelings on the part of the Chinese population.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that these interests often require contradictory foreign policy behaviour – China needs a stable international environment for economic development, yet a nationalistic public wants an uncompromising foreign policy – something which can easily undermine the international stability and the image of China (Turcsanyi, 2016). Following this logic, the pro-active and ambitious international initiatives of China such as the BRI or the 16+1 platform can be seen as an attempt to break out of the contradictory pattern between domestic and international public opinions (Sørensen, 2017). Initiatives which put China in the driving seat and see leaders of various countries competing in wooing China would appeal to the nationalistic Chinese population which wants to see China regaining its traditional international ‘status’ (Deng, 2008; Edney, 2015; Poh and Li, 2017). At the same time, other countries are

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<sup>3</sup> Previous version of parts of this section appear in another publication of one of the authors (Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, unpublished).

excited about the economic promises and in the process, allegedly, tune down criticism of matters such as the human rights record or perceived threatening foreign policy moves (Jakimów, 2019).

Promoting China's soft power abroad is in line with these considerations about the Chinese 'core' interests and it has been an official policy goal at least since the time when Hu Jintao (2007) stated that China must 'enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country' and that 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture'. Subsequently, President Xi Jinping announced that 'we should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world' (Kissinger Institute, 2014). Interestingly, Chinese leadership has often treated culture as the main feature of the concept, even to the extent that we can talk of 'cultural soft power' (Aukia, 2014). This understanding has its roots in the very first academic article in China published on the topic by the then Fudan professor Wang Huming (1993) titled 'The Culture as a National Power: Soft Power'. Yet, at the same time, it is the economy which remains the main attraction of China internationally (Chen and Song, 2012), and China has utilized active summitry and promises of 'mutual' economic benefits to drive the expectations (Shambaugh, 2015).

Peter Gries argues that public opinion plays an important role (not only) in democratic countries when it comes to foreign policy (Gries, 2014). In democracies, an elected government may fall out of favour and be defeated at the next election, while in authoritarian political systems, the government wants to avoid angering the public and putting itself under pressure. Both in democratic and authoritarian systems, media play an important role as an intermediary between the politics and public opinion. The role of European media when it comes to informing and driving the image of China was discussed by William Fingleton, who shows that many in China have long complained about what they see as bias and overly negative reporting on China (Fingleton, 2016). It is therefore reasonable to study European media images of China, both as a way of understanding European public opinion drivers and a way of assessing the success or failure of Chinese public diplomacy efforts towards improving its soft power.

Central and Eastern Europe has a specific position within Europe when it comes to relations with China. As formerly part of the Communist bloc of countries, the events of 1989 set China and the CEE countries towards opposing trajectories. After China violently suppressed the Tiananmen square protests, the CEE countries were treated as 'traitors' of Communism and Chinese media reported in a negative way about their transformation experiences (Tubilewicz, 1997). In a similar way, the legitimacy of the post-1989 political regimes in CEE has been based around the rejection of Communism, putting China in a sensitive spot (Turcsanyi and Qiaoan, 2019; Karásková and Bajerová, 2019). The relations between the two sides remained cold for most of the 1990s and the 2000s. However, the 2008 global financial crisis created an environment in which both sides again started to look at each other. At the time, the CEE countries were in search of new export markets and investment sources, after their 'traditional' Western European sources struggled with the recession (Szent-Iványi, 2017). China, on the other hand, was elevated to the engine of global economic growth as the only major economy that continued its development with only a minor slowdown (Turcsanyi, forthcoming).

In 2011, China-CEE relations started writing a new chapter when Premier Wen Jiabao visited Budapest and met representatives of (mainly economic ministries) of the 16 countries of the CEE region. The same setting of the countries met the year later in Warsaw at the first summit at the Prime Minister level, which has since then met annually. The main aspect of the relation was since the beginning directed at the 'pragmatic' cooperation with the aim of increasing economic interaction. The targets were set already by Premier Wen who announced a 10 billion USD credit line for the infrastructure constructions in the CEE region and promised that the China-CEE trade would double (from 50 billion to 100 billion USD) by 2015. The necessity of producing material outcomes was recognised by a number of Chinese authors who were cautioning that the CEE countries approached China with the excitement due to temporary economic needs after the 2008 global financial crisis and following the European debt-crisis (Long, 2014; Zhu, 2016; Xu, 2015). Liu Zuokui (2013) put it even more straightforwardly when he called the situation after 2012 in CEE from China's perspective as a 'window of opportunity period'.

### *3. Methodology considerations*

Visegrad countries offer a good opportunity to study whether China has managed to turn this 'window of opportunity' into an improved image in the CEE region. The study of ECFR (Godemont et al., 2012) put them at roughly same level when it comes to the economic approach towards China, yet very differently when it comes to the political attitude. The Czech Republic was found to be the most critical country of the European countries involved in the study. Since the independence the country followed the ideal of the normative underpinning of foreign policy based on a critical reflection of own Communist experience, under a strong influence of anti-Communist revolutionary-turned President Václav Havel (Karásková et al., 2018). China was regarded from this perspective as a symbol of non-democratic 'Other' (Karásková and Bajeroová, 2019) and the political relations remained cold for a long time. Coincidentally, this was reversed after 2013 when the newly elected President Miloš Zeman became more vocal on the issue (Karásková, 2016) and the government of Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka led to an active pro-China U-turn in Czech foreign policy with the aim of attracting economic benefits (Karásková et al., 2019).

Hungary, on the other hand, was among the most supportive of China in 2012 together with other, mainly South European, countries struggling with the consequences of the economic crisis. Moreover, Hungary has had the most experience with China among the Visegrad countries as thanks to the visa policy at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s it has received a large number of Chinese immigrants who have established a growing community in the country (Nyiri, 2007). Increasing Chinese presence has not triggered any alarm in Hungarian political circles or among the wider public. In fact, throughout the 2000s, Hungary started to look towards China as probably the first country in the region. Finally, Slovakia was located by the authors of the ECFR study more or less in the middle of the spectrum. When it comes to relations with China, Slovakia is a unique and paradoxical case in the region. On the one hand, as the smallest of the V4 group, the country has been mostly 'cautious' in its approach towards China, trying to avoid taking too critical stances (Gregušová, 2003; Fürst and Pleschová, 2010). Slovakia has tacitly supported the BRI

and the 16+1 platform but has done little overwork to push it through (Husenícova et al., 2019).

The paper looks at how the media in three Central European countries – Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia – have responded to the intensive and unprecedented development of relations with China. The article will draw on the extensive research conducted by the ChinfluenCE project<sup>4</sup> which focused on the media discourses of China in the three countries since the year 2010 until mid-2017. This selected period allows us to compare the images during the dynamic increases of the China-CEE interactions after the beginning of the 16+1 platform (2012) and the Belt and Road Forum (2013), with the one immediately preceding (2010-2012). Moreover, there are indications that the European discourse on China took a downturn after the first Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, after which various European politicians started taking more critical positions on China. Hence, focusing on the situation prior to that allows us to understand the dynamics in the first ‘honeymoon’ period of the BRI and the 16+1 platform.

What people know about the world is largely determined by what the media report about it (Lippmann 1922). This assertion, ever more relevant today than a century ago when Lippmann formulated it, gives media the power over the public’s constructing images, especially on issues which the general population has little knowledge of or lack direct personal experience with, leading to a media-dependency on topics which are remote (Adoni and Mane, 1984). Image refers to ‘the total impression an entity makes on the minds of others’ (Dichter, 1985: 75). If the entity is a country, than national image is a sum of beliefs and assumptions one has about a nation or, in other words, ‘the cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country, what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people’ (Kunczik, 1997: 46).

Moreover, what media depicts as important tends to enter into the public discourse (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and vice versa (Cobb and Elder, 1971), creating an interplay between media and the public and setting an agenda for both. The world according to Lippmann is ‘out of reach, out of sight, out of mind’ and media do not reflect the reality but shape it (Lippmann, 1922). In doing so they construct a different social reality. How the shaping of the social reality through media takes place has been a long time focus of agenda setting theory which ‘has become in less than half a century one of the most refined media effects theory’ (Corbu and Hosu, 2017: 12). What used to be a rather homogenous theory has developed into various forms, such as the first level and second level agenda setting and framing and is distinguished from agenda building.

Based on the accessible numbers of the audience (readers, listeners, etc.), checked periodically for the whole analysed period of six and half years, we have selected altogether 86 media – dailies, weeklies with a political and/or economic focus, TV stations, radio stations and online news servers. The selected outlets represent the most read, listened to, and watched media in the three countries, encompassing mainstream as well as ‘alternative’ sources, public as well as privately-owned ones, including media with Chinese co-ownership (although still very few). The comprehensive automatic search was then performed to identify outputs dealing with

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<sup>4</sup> See ChinfluenCE (2019).

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China in connection with politics or economics, while those discussing other aspects in relation to China – such as sport or art – were not included in the dataset. The level of the analysis was thus a single output, regardless of its lengths or the outlet which published it (e.g. media articles were treated in a similar fashion as a lengthier transcripts of TV news or programmes on China). While Czech and Slovak researchers were able to access transcripts of TV and radio shows dealing with China, in the Hungarian case the analysis did not catch texts produced by TVs and radios in 2010 and 2011 due to limited access to transcripts. The search resulted in establishing the dataset of texts in three different languages. Altogether more than 7,000 pieces of media news discussing China's politics and economy have been selected for the analysis.

The set of media outputs was then subjected to a multi-stage analysis. The research focused on both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the discourse's transformation. Each text was coded for the issue, an affective attribute and for agenda setter(s). Every text was treated as a single unit carrying an aggregated sentiment value and was labelled as conveying either positive, neutral or negative sentiment regarding China, focusing on the overall context of the article and putting aside the question of the objectivity of articles or correctness of facts mentioned in them. If the text carried both positive and negative sentiment, it was coded as neutral, focusing on the overall impression of the text on a hypothetical audience. The authors relied on an overall context in which the words were used. The decision on coding the text as being either positive, neutral or negative to China thus derived from the overall context of the text, following the approach of 'speculation of a common-sense kind on the likely impression made on an average audience' (McQuail 1992: 227).

For the study of China's image abroad, and thus for the successful projection of China's influence outside its frontiers, we used the well-established and long-developed approaches of first and second-level agenda setting. The second-level agenda setting, which enables one to trace affective attributes (negative, positive or neutral tone of the reporting), seemed especially promising in this context. We have also recorded themes which were prevalent in the articles, such as world politics, bilateral economic relations, human rights or arms embargo, providing detailed knowledge of the discourse and enabling comparative analysis. Altogether, this approach allowed us to produce datasets of how the media talk about China, what topics they cover, what sentiment they spread, and whether there have been changes in the coverage and sentiment over time.

## *4. Case studies*

### *4.1 Hungary: Followers taking over*

We have analysed almost 4,000 Hungarian media outputs, published between 2010 and June 2017 of the selected 15 media sources that were most widely read, listened to, or followed and had nationwide coverage. One of the first findings is that the number of articles on China has been generally stable in the analysed period; however, two significant phases may be recognized based on the number of publications. The first phase lasted from 2010 with a constant increase of attention until it peaked in 2013 (the year of the China's 12th National People's Congress),

while during the following phase, there has been a gradual decline in the number of articles on China. The rise and fall of publication may be explained first by exaggerated hopes regarding the expected inflow of Chinese investment to Hungary, and later by the confrontation with reality, that few of the hopes had been realized.

Hungarian media coverage on China has been very pragmatic – or valueless – during the period under study. Most of the articles analysed focused on the general economic situation of China, its role in world politics and economics, and the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations. Topics like human rights, Tibet, the Dalai Lama or the protection of intellectual property rights have been barely mentioned. Instead, themes like the ‘Chinese economy’, ‘China and the World’ and ‘Hungarian economic relations with China’ were by far the most important ones (found in over 1500, 1100 and 700 articles respectively). Meanwhile issues like ‘censorship’, ‘Tibet’, or ‘Uighurs’ appear in fewer than 200, 100 and 50 articles respectively, underscoring the fact that Hungarian society does not see these issues as defining factors when it comes to its views of China.

It should be noted that more than half of all the articles were published by the small group of online news services, including *hvg.hu* which published almost one-third of all the articles alone, while *index.hu* and *origo.hu* released a further 14 and 11 per cent of the news respectively. Nevertheless, digging deeper, the picture gets a bit more complicated, as the original source of at least 52 per cent of all news was the official Hungarian news agency (MTI) and not individual media companies, thus the share of articles produced by other media outlets themselves was less than half of the total. It is not surprising that this fact has had an impact on the generally neutral image of China in the Hungarian media, as 87 per cent of the news based on the MTI as a source were neutral. Including all sources, 4.8 per cent of news was positive, 9.4 per cent negative and 85.8 per cent neutral between 2010 and 2017. When excluding all news based on the MTI, the picture gets slightly different: 3.7 per cent of the articles produced by media sources themselves were positive, while 12 per cent was negative.

When individual media sources are taken into account, domestic political division lines and their impact on the image of China itself becomes obvious. Media sources believed to be close to the government (Hungarian national television and radio channels, TV2, *origo.hu*) publish significantly more positively about China, while media sources on the opposition side (*Magyar Nemzet* daily, *index.hu*, *HVG*, *hvg.hu*, *RTL Klub*) published more negative than positive ones. Still, neutral news dominated their activities.

The share of negative news (thus the polarity of the discourse on China) had been constantly increasing between 2010 and 2017. Negative news made up 6 per cent and positive news 5 per cent of all articles in 2010, while the share of negative news rose to 15 per cent against 5 per cent of good news in 2017. The year of 2013 seems to be the turning point, not only in terms of absolute numbers of articles, but in terms of sentiment as well, since there were 4 per cent positive and 3 per cent negative news items in 2012, and as much as 12 per cent of all news on China was negative and 5 per cent positive in 2013. An interesting observation may be that the articles dealing with the BRI were more positive than the overall average of the articles on China – there were three-times more positive leaning BRI-related articles, compared to the average where there are twice as many negative as positive articles (Matura, 2018). This can be

interpreted as showing that during the period under study, the BRI had a positive impact on the overall media image of China in Hungary.

To sum up, the Hungarian media discourse on China is mostly one dimensional, focusing overwhelmingly on economic data and the development of bilateral relations. At the same time, it is strongly politicized, as the assessment of Hungarian-Chinese relations in the media is strongly influenced by the political attitude of the given media source towards the government. Although there is a consensus in Hungary that China is a prominent political partner, and although society does not seem to focus too much on sensitive issues such as human rights, the opposition-leaning media published articles with the negative sentiment in an increasing fashion throughout the study period as a way of criticizing the government. At the same time, given the political dynamics in Hungary, the pro-government voices in media following the official line have been becoming dominant and were marginalizing and overwhelming the opposition voices.

#### *4.2 Czech media: Challengers fighting back*

The quantitative analysis of Czech media revealed that the number of articles on China rose steadily with the intensification of Czech-Chinese bilateral relations, culminating in 2016 with the visit of both the PRC's president Xi Jinping and the Dalai Lama in Prague. Qualitatively, the image of China in the Czech media over the period in question was mostly negative or neutral: only 14 per cent of the analysed media outputs were inclined to view China positively, while 41 per cent viewed it negatively. The remaining 45 per cent were presenting China in a neutral light. The polarity of Czech articles is especially telling in comparison to the Slovak and Hungarian cases which showed the overwhelming majority of articles on China being coded as neutral.

The polarity of analysed outputs did not evolve significantly during the researched six and a half years. Despite public promises of future Chinese investment, the image of China in Czech media remained mostly negative. When analysing journalists themselves as agenda setters in matters of political and economic affairs concerning China, the picture is more apparent still: only 6 per cent of analysed occurrences were positive, 64 per cent were neutral and 30 per cent negative. In other words, open promotion of China by journalists was rare, and this finding holds throughout the period examined. However, in the leftist media (*Haló noviny*) or media with a Chinese (co)owner, the image of China was distinctly more positive. In the cases of the *Týden* weekly and TV Barrandov, it is evident that the takeover by the Chinese company CEFC led to exclusively positive coverage of China.

Regarding the topics, Czech media paid most attention to the Chinese economic and political relations with other countries and organizations (US, Russia, EU, India, Japan, etc.). Human rights, including general information on abuses and violation of rights of minorities, the death penalty, detention of dissent or organ harvesting, were the second most important category of the topics covered by the Czech media. The human rights reporting, however, did not go beyond stating the notoriously known and in various cases the issue was artificially attached to articles which dealt with seemingly unrelated topics. The themes of communism,

authoritarianism, and censorship followed in frequency, revealing the importance of the issue to Czech journalists and Czech society in general, perhaps symbolizing an ongoing internal struggle with its own Communist past.

While the prevalence of the above-mentioned categories remained constant in the studied period, notions of Tibet, though it scored in frequency, fluctuated in time, culminating in 2016 when the Chinese president Xi Jinping and the Dalai Lama both visited Prague. A counter-narrative to the human rights discourse spread in Czech media, arguing that Tibet was liberated by the People's Liberation Army in 1959 and saved from theocracy that supported slavery and feudalism and from the Dalai Lamas who punished disobedient subjects with 'cutting off hands and poking eyes out'. These lines were repeated by President Zeman, the Communist member of the European Parliament Miloslav Ransdorf, journalists in the Communist daily *Haló noviny*, alternative media, and the Chinese embassy.

Interestingly, the issue of relations with Taiwan was – in comparison to the Tibet issue – largely marginalized, although Taiwan and the Czech Republic share a similar history of transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy, an experience of living on the borders of a great power and, on top of that, Taiwan is one of the three most important Asian investors in the Czech Republic.

As far as the issue of the Belt and Road Initiative was concerned, a hypothesis that articles dealing with the issue would exhibit higher positive polarity had to be rejected. Out of 1,257 analysed Czech texts, only 23 mentioned the Belt and Road (or New Silk Road) initiative between 2010 and mid-2017. From these 23 items, 11 were coded as neutral, 6 as negative and 6 as positive. The media which carried texts with a positive sentiment and at the same time mentioned the BRI were either connected with the Czech Communist party or media with Chinese co-ownership. It can be argued that media did not pay much attention to the BRI and, in these limited occurrences, the issue was portrayed with an even polarity.

It is noticeable that the Czech media exhibit a tendency to portray China as a direct opposite to the values and preferences of the Czech Republic. This process of 'othering' China gradually shifts into outputs that, ostensibly, do not contain any link to the country (e.g. articles on alleged 'censorship' on the Czech internet). The analysis of the Czech media outputs demonstrated that the Czech debate on China is highly politicized and stereotyped. The hijacking of the 'China issue' by domestic political and economic interests masks several perils. Instead of a serious debate on China's growing international role and Czech foreign policy towards it, or a sober assessment of possible benefits and potential risks of Chinese investment for the Czech economy, a hollow debate is waged on whether to have any relations with China at all. The fragmented, non-transparent, and emotional public debate might draw attention away from the real content of agreements, from the motivations of political and economic elites and from the actual Chinese strategy in the region. As an example, at times of efforts at strengthening Czech-China political and economic relations, the media sharply increased information about somewhat unrelated issues such as Tibet.

Throughout the researched period, the Czech media served to some extent as a sceptical antidote and a challenge to the promotion of closer Czech-Chinese relations with by far the highest share of negative leaning articles on China among the three countries in question. This negativity mostly stemmed from the perceived necessity to

balance a domestic pro-China discourse pushed for by (part of) the Czech political and economic elites. This balancing worked both ways – the Czech media thus also contained the highest share of positive articles on China compared to Slovak and Hungarian research results.

#### *4.3 Slovakia: By-standers with little interest*

Slovak media paint at first sight a rather unengaged picture when China comes into question. The volume of media reporting on China has mainly been fluctuating throughout the examined period. Nevertheless, there is a clear increasing trend in the number of China-related articles. Interestingly, the increased output of Slovak media was not driven by topics related to Sino-Slovak relations, but rather by topics covering Chinese domestic politics and economic performance of the country.

When discussing China, the Slovak media put forth a neutral representation of China in as many as 68 per cent of all the articles. Only six per cent of articles spread positive views of China, while 26 per cent presented China in a negative light. This sentimental distribution of the articles remained quite immune to the time change and even despite rising engagement (and media coverage volume) remained virtually the same.

Most of the media discussed domestic issues of China or the issues of Chinese global economic influence. Of all the topics Slovak media covered, the majority received more negative than positive coverage overall. Only three topics stand out as being discussed favourably towards China – history and culture, the 16+1 platform, and the Belt and Road Initiative. However, these three topics account for only five per cent of the total media coverage of China in Slovakia. At the same, this also shows that the recent diplomatic efforts by China brought some results as they contributed positively to the overall image of China in Slovak media.

Interestingly, the ‘alternative media’ (which often spread news favourable of Russia and on numerous occasions outright proven to be fake) did not differ from this picture. The only portion of Slovak media which differed were tabloids which were the only group in which the share of negative articles was higher than the percentage of neutral pieces and that also had a much greater amount of positive news of China. Interestingly, Slovak tabloids show a more polarized image of China, not too different from the overall image of China in the Czech media.

On average, Slovak media outlets tend to have more negative than positive perceptions of China. Only one media outlet consistently reports positively on China, and this outlet is regarded to be of disinformation provenance (*Parlamentné listy*<sup>3</sup>). Despite this, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has all of a sudden begun to receive favourable coverage. While in general, the share of negative articles on China is almost 4.5 times higher than the share of positive articles, this is not true for the coverage of BRI. In this case, positive media mentions are 1.5 times more frequent than the negative ones.

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<sup>3</sup> *Parlamentné listy* was labelled a disinformation outlet by a Slovak watchdog *Konšpirátori.sk* at the time. However, in the second half of 2017, the site was re-evaluated and taken away from the list. See <https://medialne.etrend.sk/internet/parlamentne-listy-uz-nie-su-na-zozname-konspiracnych-webov-polepsili-sa.html>.

Overall, economic topics prevail over domestic and foreign policy related topics. The Chinese economy was discussed 1.7 times more often than Chinese foreign policy and 2.1 times more often than Chinese domestic politics and policies. Among the top five topics covered by the media, only a single topic is not related to the economy but rather to domestic policy. Security-related topics are seriously underrepresented in the media discourse. The reason for the thematic imbalance in the media coverage is connected with the composition of the actors involved in the media debate, where economists have a dominant position in the media discourse.

Most of the reporting on China is taken from the international agencies, with extremely little attention being paid to Sino-Slovak relations. Hence, there is basically no debate going on about how to approach China. This may cause the country political and security challenges when an important issue related to China emerges. This was most visible around the time when the potential acquisition of TV Markíza by CEFC, a Chinese company, was announced. The proposed deal received very little coverage compared to similar Russia-related incidents even though there was already evidence from the Czech Republic available that showed when the CEFC bought two Czech media outlets, they completely changed their discourse on China to a completely positive one (Karásková et al., 2018; Šimalčík, 2017).

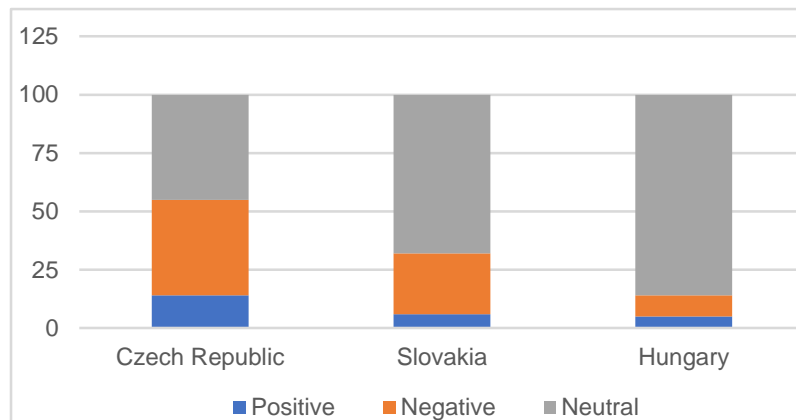
### *5. Comparisons and concluding remarks*

Summing up the findings, the research of Central European media in the three countries revealed that the impact of the intensifying of political relations between China and Central European countries on the media narratives is ambiguous. One observable – and quite natural – outcome has been the quantitative rise in the number of articles dealing with Chinese politics and economy. The impact on sentiment is less clear, however. There was a slight growth of negative-leaning articles in Hungary over time, perhaps related to the growth of criticism towards Orbán's policies by opposition figures and the somewhat prominent role of China in Hungarian politics. At the same time, the image of Belt and Road Initiative in Hungarian media is much more positive than the average image of China. In Slovakia, we have noted the similar impact of the BRI improving the sentiment of articles on China, but overall media discourse throughout the period under study did not change much. Finally, the Czech media image of China noticed no considerable changes during this time. The coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative fits into the overall picture of a polarized discussion.

The Czech media image of China is the most polarized from the three countries under investigation – interestingly, there are the highest shares of both negative and positive articles on China in the Czech Republic. This reveals the country to be conforming to what Dragan Pavlicevic calls 'politics of dreams and fears' (Pavlicevic, 2018) in Central (and Eastern) Europe. On the one hand, China has become symbol of a dream of economic opportunity and material prosperity, bringing about solutions to the economic struggling. For some, on the other hand, China may even fit the patterns of the 'enemy image' (Gerő et al., 2017) as the surviving Communist authoritarian country standing for the values which were set aside by the revolutions in Central Europe in 1989. The share of the articles with negative sentiment in the Czech Republic is indeed almost at the level of those with a neutral

one, pointing towards very sceptical Czech media attitudes to China, which can be seen as *challenging* the government's (and the president's) attempts to warm up relations with China. Compared to that, Hungarian media inform about China overwhelmingly in a neutral way with most media following the government lines, although some critical media do bring about negative sentiment as well, mainly as a way of criticizing the government. Given the increasing dominance of the government in the Hungarian media spectrum, however, the Hungarian media reveals patterns of *following* the official positions. Slovakia stands somewhere in the middle – the human rights agenda, typical of the Czech discourse, is present in a limited way, and so is the focus of the Hungarian media on the bilateral aspects. In effect, the Slovak media recycle international news on China without adding as much own value and perspectives as the media in the other two countries do and largely conform to the role of a bystander when it comes to relations in China, to some extent similar to the whole Slovak position vis-à-vis China (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sentiment of the media discourse



Source: Own research as part of the ChinfluenCE project

To contextualize these findings within the theoretical knowledge, most importantly, the results show that we should not exaggerate the impact of Chinese public diplomacy on China's soft power. The Central European media might be generally less susceptible to Chinese narratives than expected, even though when reporting on concrete aspects of bilateral relations or issues directly touching them, such as the 16+1 platform or the BRI, they would adopt parts of Chinese frames in the process of covering them. All in all, however, the media image of China consists of much more than that and is shaped to a significant extent by the domestic issues in China (be it human rights, economy or others), as well as the general international news involving topics such as regional geopolitics or global governance. Chinese attempts to offer economic incentives to the Central European countries have little impact on changing the overall picture of China as this depends also on how China is portrayed by the international media. Moreover, an important variable influencing the media image in the three countries under study turns out to be the role of China in domestic politics. In the Czech Republic, China has become a highly sensitive and polarizing issue, and strengthening the China-friendly voices led to the similar strengthening of the critical

voices. After it started to become clear that the economic expectations were exaggerated, the critical voices became even more dominant. In Slovakia, there was little political and business interest in China and so the media reporting followed largely international news and brought a neutral picture of China. Hungarian media discourse of China includes some polarization as the opposition adopts any topics to criticize the government, yet China is far from being the sensitive issue in itself as it is in the Czech Republic.

To conclude, it has become common to talk about ‘Chinese influence’ and assume that various exchanges with Chinese entities automatically lead to transfer and acceptance of Chinese political positions (Benner et al., 2018; Diamond et al., 2018). Although there is some limited evidence that this has happened in the cases of Slovakia and Hungary when it comes to the specific issue of the BRI, these articles formed only a small portion of overall discourse on China. Overall, the image of China in Slovakia and the Czech Republic remained more or less the same – and far from overly positive – while the one in Hungary continued to be neutral, and actually becoming slightly more negative with the time. This means that if China attempted to improve its image in Central Europe and build soft power position there, it has not been very successful, unlike perhaps in the Western Balkans where China’s ‘symbolic power’ (Vangeli, 2018) might have been more entrenched due to different socio-economic, political, and historical contexts (Turcsanyi and Qiaoan, 2019). Overall, these results add further evidence to the growing body of academic literature suggesting that there is no conclusive evidence that the CEE countries would be getting closer to China as a direct result of Chinese initiatives (Matura, 2019; Liskutin, 2019).

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