



Friends or foes? How diverging views of communist past undermine the China-CEE '16+1 platform'

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Abstract

China and the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have been engaged recently in dynamic diplomatic exchanges under the umbrella of 16+1 platform and the Belt and Road Initiative. The article offers an explanation of why the massive Chinese diplomatic effort did not lead to an improved image of China in the CEE region. We adopt the approach of cultural sociology and focus on how the two sides' 'meaning structures' relate to each other. It is argued that main China's discourse frame of 'traditional friendship' based on the shared socialist past is not well received in most of the CEE region which has quite problematic view of Communism due to own historic experience. The dissonance between the Chinese friendly rhetoric and the CEE lukewarm reception imply some deep-cutting differences when it comes to views of history which have significant political implications for current and future relations between the two sides.

Introduction

In April 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao met in Warsaw the prime ministers of 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, all formerly ruled by the Communist parties.¹ What followed has been an exciting and dynamic diplomatic process (Chang and Pieke 2018; Kamiński 2019). China and the CEE countries now meet the most often, at the highest level, and in the densest network of relations, they have ever had (Huang and Liu 2018). For the CEE countries, their relations with China currently are perhaps the most intensive they have outside the Euroatlantic frameworks. Even from China's perspective, the initiative is more active than similar regional projects in Latin America or Africa (Jakóbowski 2018).

¹These 16 countries can be roughly divided into three sub-regions: Visegrad countries, sometimes referred to as 'Central Europe' (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia), Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Balkan countries (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania). At some places, we will refer to 'Western Balkans' which covers the non-EU members (Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro).

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This paper is going to look at the socio-cultural aspects of China-CEE relations, highlighting the impact of present discourse and historical memories on the current China-CEE relations. Collective memories and cultural trauma play important roles in national identity building, they influence social actors' interpretation of current international order and their position in such an order. This focus should not be interpreted as a claim that these aspects are the deciding factors of the 16+1 platform. We do not dispute that both China and the CEE countries approach each other with a mixture of economic and political goals (Turcsányi et al. 2014a). It is a conscious decision of the authors therefore to offer an insight into an alternative area of this dynamic and broad relationship with an aim to draw implications for political and economic relations.

Culture has an autonomous explanatory power, which accounts for the outcome of social actions (Alexander and Smith 2001). In other words, the economic and political relations are related to the socio-cultural context and can be explained, to some extent, through the socio-cultural factors. Interestingly, it has been mentioned by voices on both sides that socio-cultural interaction is where the 16+1 initiative has allegedly made a significant impact as it has provided numerous opportunities for the two sides to interact and get to know each other better (Song 2018). Yet the surveys of the international public opinion of China by Pew Research Centre (2018) show that available data for the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland do not experience any growths in favourable rates. The Eurobarometer (European Commission 2017) has more extensive data involving all the EU countries, and here the message is even stronger - from among the eleven EU members of the 16+1 platform, in majority the image of China got worse during 2016–2017 (the three exceptions were Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia, yet still with no significant improvements).

The article sets to explain why the massive diplomatic effort of China under the 16+1 platform and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) did not lead to an improved image of China in the CEE region and why many CEE countries respond with reservations towards the Chinese initiatives. The research is based on an innovative approach to assessing the China-initiated 16+1 platform by bringing culture onto the centre stage of analysis. In the 'strong program of cultural sociology' of Jeffrey Alexander, culture is understood in a general term referring to the meaning system of a given society (Alexander and Smith 2001). We introduce the cultural sociological approach to examine the interactions between China and the CEE countries because besides material factors, the 'meaning structure' also plays a role in social actions, including actions between countries and regions. We hermeneutically reconstruct social texts through 'thick description' (Geertz 2000) of the discourses and narratives that weave webs of social meaning. These socio-cultural texts can be found in both contemporary media and historical memory, so this meaning-centred cultural analysis involves media content analysis and collective memory recounts (Halbwachs 1992). The cultural context cannot and should not be reduced to abstract descriptions of values, norms or ideology of a society (Alexander and Smith 2001). Instead, the structural analysis of media content and hermeneutic studies of collective memory give a more comprehensive picture of the cultural meaning system of a society. Through such analysis, we intend to reconstruct social actors' interpretation of their identities, which shape their external actions and influence the outcome of social interactions. In this study, we contextualize the initial empirical findings within the cultural sociology approach of structural hermeneutics (Alexander and Smith 2001) to show that the frames utilized by

China in the diplomatic discourse meant to communicate warm feelings lead to dissonance in most of the CEE countries due to their different collective memory.

We argue that the dissonance of China-CEE communication is produced in a different context as in the Western Europe where the public anxiety over China is formed around diverging political ideas while happening on the background of ever closer economic relations (Reilly 2017). For the CEE countries, the problem is actually perceived lack of economic interaction with China, meaning their exports to China and Chinese investments in the CEE region. This is ironic for the staple of the recent era of the China-CEE relations has become the announcements about ambitious economic projects and exchange of warm diplomatic statements. In reality, the platform has not changed the economic dynamics much in terms of trade (especially the CEE exports to China) and Chinese investments in the CEE region (Garlick 2020; Szczudlik 2018; Wade 2014). As the economic hopes of the CEE countries are frustrated, the cultural and social factors are becoming even more critical in driving their policy responses.

The paper problematizes the notion of 'traditional friendship' between the two sides, and it demonstrates that overlooking the historical complexities and diverging present views of the Communist past undermine the potential success of the China-CEE interactions. Anastas Vangeli (2018) described before the rise of Chinese 'symbolic power' in the CEE region under the umbrella of the 16+1 platform. We propose to specify his assertion to read that there is a significant divergence within the CEE region in terms of its 'resonance' towards China, with the main difference cutting between the five Western Balkan countries which are not currently the EU members, and the remaining eleven countries of the 16+1 platform, especially those in the Visegrad and Baltic regions. The 'symbolic power of Global China' seems to be much more present in the former rather than the latter. In the process, we not only recognize, but even emphasize the internal heterogeneity of the 16 CEE countries involved in the 16+1 platform. For that reason, the paper will discuss developments in various CEE countries and compare them with each other.

The case study of China-CEE relations is relevant from the perspective of studying Chinese foreign policy towards various world regions. It was previously suggested that China has been rather successful in 'winning friends' in the 'Global South', such as in Latin America or Africa, due to the features of its approach mixing political and economic factors which have been found attractive by the receiving countries (Strüver 2014). At the same time, China does consider the 16+1 platform as part of its relations with the Global South (Kowalski 2017). This paper, however, demonstrates the importance of fine-tuning of foreign strategies as presently China has not won much friendship in the CEE region. Following the approach of this paper, it is revealed that much of the region actually does not identify itself with the 'Global South' and China's attempts to build a common ground under the 'anti-hegemonic' flag do not resonate with the most people in the region. Much of what our accounts discover seem to be in line with the thesis of the existing (and growing) complexity of relations between the EU and China, which create tensions between increasing economic interdependency and diverging political ideas (Freeman 2017). In this regard, the paper points out that the experience and memory of the Communist past in the CEE may actually create significant historical baggage which in the context of perceived shortcomings in the economic and political spheres further problematizes the relations with China.

Traditional friendship facing bright future?

For most of history, the communication between China and the CEE region remained barren. The Western European countries interacted with China for centuries, with increasing dynamic since the nineteenth century thanks to their global maritime power and presence in East Asia. Similarly, Russia remained a constant presence in China for centuries due to both its power and geographic location reaching all over the Eurasian continent. The CEE countries did not emerge as independent fully-fledged international actors until after World War I and even then barely exchanged the diplomatic recognition with the ruling regime of the Republic of China (Bakešová 2013). The lack of CEE historical role in China has some pros and cons. On the one hand, this vacancy freed CEE countries from being denounced as the ‘Western colonizers’ and ‘imperialists’ who are generally held accountable in China for the traumatic history of the nineteenth and early twentieth century China. On the other hand, this also contributes to a general perception in China that CEE is not part of the West or developed world.

In the aftermath of the Second World War and after the Communist takeovers in China and the CEE countries, the intensity of the two sides’ interactions proliferated. The European Communist governments were among the first to recognize the newly established People’s Republic of China, and the two sides enjoyed the ‘Golden Era’ of their relations in the 1950s (Liu 2005; Fürst and Tesař 2014). This included not only rich diplomatic and political relations but also important economic cooperation. The era also created opportunities for some of the first historical opportunities for people on both sides to get to know each other, including as part of the rich academic or cultural cooperation. The two sides, for instance, started to study each other’s languages which paved the way for further development of links (Roubal 2014). However, this ‘honeymoon’ period was soon over due to worsening Sino-Soviet relations at the end of the 1950s. Since most of the European Communist regimes were in a subordinate position to Moscow, they were forced to limit relations with Beijing. The exception were those countries who enjoyed certain leeway when it came to Soviet influence, such as Yugoslavia, Albania or Romania, who preserved their links to China throughout the entire Cold War era.

The frozen relations between most of the CEE countries and China started to melt during the 1980s with the improving relations between the Soviet Union and China, thanks to the reform processes initiated on both sides by Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev (Fürst 2010). However, the process brought flashbacks of the 1950s not only because of the re-starting of exchanges but also because it again ended abruptly. Facing turbulences in 1989, the two sides chose different solutions, with the CEE countries embarking on the path of democratic transformation and China doubling down on the Communist regime. The 1989 experience of former Eastern European Communist regimes have been deeply studied in China and events such as the execution of China’s ally Ceausescu of Romania, and televised view of his dead body, had a significant impact on Chinese leaders (Garver 2016).

During the 1990s and most of the 2000s, neither China nor CEE had much interest in the other side. For many of the newly democratic CEE countries, China became the quintessential example of the oppressive regime, a general symbol of ‘other’, and opposing it was regarded as a signal of supporting the post-1989 changes happening in own country. Similarly, the Chinese leadership dealt with the potential challenge and

model of the CEE democratization by presenting their transformation as a betrayal of socialism resulting in a full range of social and economic problems (Tubilewicz 1997). Most of the post-Communist countries, especially those that are today involved in the 16+1 platform with China, saw the collapse of Communist regimes and the Soviet Union as offering them a strategic opportunity to escape the Russian sphere of influence and 'return to Europe', meaning the integration with the Western European and North Atlantic institutions. The EU and NATO were seen as virtually the only credible guarantors of the security, political, and economic progress of the region (Smith 2000; Henderson 2005).

The interactions between China and the CEE only started to warm up at the beginning of the twenty-first century. First, trade began to grow, mainly Chinese exports to the CEE countries, which came as the result of China's domestic transformation and the WTO accession and the CEE countries' opening up to the international trade. The CEE exports to China followed slower and later after the CEE economies bounced back revitalized thanks to the inflow of the FDI. The EU accession of most of CEE throughout the 2000s increased its relevance for China both economically and politically. It was the 2008 global crisis, however, which finally changed the dynamics of the previous two decades in China-CEE relations. The CEE countries started to perceive it as a potential vulnerability that their economies were too much oriented on Western Europe when it came to investments and export markets. China seemed like presenting an option of how to get away from this one-sided dependence to diversify options (Golonka 2012).

Chinese warming up towards CEE

In 2011, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao met for the first time representatives of the 16 CEE countries at the First China-CEE Business Forum in Budapest, followed the year later in Warsaw by the first summit of the prime ministers of the same set of countries. Since then, the premiers have met annually, and the China-CEE cooperation has experienced an upward trend in many aspects, from trade and politics to social and cultural communications (Turcsányi et al. 2014b). The Chinese official discourse underscored the change in its foreign policy approach. First, there has been an increase in the People's Daily articles containing 'Central and Eastern Europe' in the title (in Chinese 'zhongdong'ou'), from an average of about two per year before 2012 to about six since then. Second, more interestingly, there has been a decisive shift in the sentiment of these articles. Before 2012, the majority of reporting on CEE was neutral with a significant portion of negative-sounding articles coming second. Only five People's Daily articles with the CEE in title from before 2012 had a positive sentiment. Starting in 2012, the negative reporting on CEE have almost entirely disappeared from the People's Daily with the positive sentiment decisively taking over (see Chart 1).

The shift of discussed topics accompanies the change of the sentiment. The underlying theme in Chinese media related to the CEE region from before 2012 is 'economic crisis'. Following the year 2012 and the initiation of the 16+1 platform, no crisis is mentioned related to CEE anymore. More than half of the coverage is about the cooperation between China and CEE in a number of issue areas with a considerable part of these articles discussing explicitly mutual visits of many kinds. There are also articles on economic issues, but this time, they talk about trade and investments between China and CEE countries. The region is now presented as offering

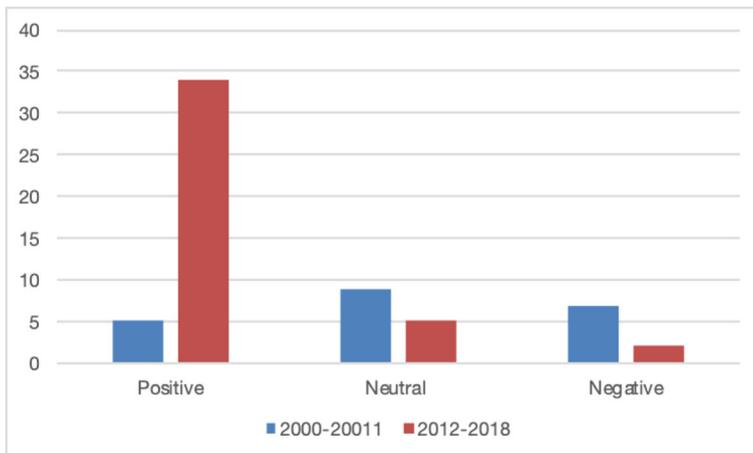


Chart 1 The sentiment of the People's Daily articles with the 'CEE' label in the title. Source: Own research

opportunities for China, and its 'traditional friendship' and 'shared historical experience' with China are highlighted, meaning that the 16 countries involved in the 16+1 platform were all part of the socialist bloc of countries.

The frames that Chinese leaders use at the official diplomatic meetings with the CEE leaders do not differ from this media discourse. Already at the first China-CEE Business Forum in 2011 in Budapest, then Premier Wen Jiabao in his speech titled 'Strengthen Traditional Friendship and Promote Common Development' referred repeatedly (altogether eleven times) to the 'long-standing friendship' of the CEE countries and peoples going back to the time when the People's Republic of China was established. Wen specifically appreciated that the CEE countries were among the first to recognize China diplomatically at the time and that the first joint venture of 'New China' with a foreign country was with a CEE country—Poland (Wen 2011).

The speeches of Chinese leaders at following annual prime minister summits worked with similar themes. Premier Li Keqiang, who represented China at the 16+1 summits starting from 2013 onwards, never omitted to either recall the 'traditional friendship' between China and the CEE countries, or at least to call his CEE counterparts 'friends', including in Sofia in 2018 and in Dubrovnik in 2019.² In 2015 at the Suzhou summit, Li announced explicitly that 'China and CEE countries enjoy close historical bonds and deep traditional friendship' (Xinhua 2015). Chinese President Xi Jinping for his part reiterated that China and CEE are traditional friends, and his visit to the region in 2016 was presented under the similar frames in Chinese media (Kowalski 2017).

The CEE countries' policy approaches to China

Judging from the rhetoric at the summits, it may seem that the platform has been nothing but a success. However, scratching the surface, one would see a more complex picture. Reuters cited senior diplomats saying that China itself decided to lower the

² See the official Youtube Channel of the Bulgarian Presidency of the 16+1 platform, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr3bc-Q49VFgtOusSarm4bA>

profile of the summit gatherings, possibly due to the EU criticism. It also quoted frustration, such as in the Baltics, that the CEE countries are expected to sign up for the declarations (as part of the guideline documents issued at every summit) without sufficient pre-negotiation and reached consensus. Others, such as Poland, were quoted as being against China's insistence on control over the projects it funds and this worry might also be one reason why the Budapest-Belgrade railway project has not been progressing much (Tsolova et al. 2018).³

Most telling is the direction Poland took. It was in Warsaw in 2012 when the initiative started with the announcement of the '12 points' and Poland, as the largest CEE country, has been considered an informal leader or at least the most important country in the region. Poland was also counted as one of the most enthusiastic countries within the initiative, putting high hopes on China when it came to investments, exports and even political issues (such as putting pressure on Russia) (Waszczykowski 2016). However, in 2018 summit in Sofia, Polish PM was notably missing. In the meantime, some Chinese companies were disqualified after winning public tenders in Poland throughout 2018, officially due to formal issues, but one might consider a political imprint in the decisions as well (Kowalski 2018). The Polish Prime Minister in November 2018 even mentioned China along with Russia as the 'security problems', resembling recent comments on China coming from the USA. These steps well compliment recent moves in Poland which included arresting of two Huawei employees (one of them Chinese national) for spying and recent arbitrary cancellations of Chinese companies' participation in public tenders in Poland (Bachulska and Turcsányi 2019).

There are similar voices, although muted, coming from other countries around the region. In the Czech Republic, although being represented since 2012 by China-friendly president Zeman, the diplomats are voicing dissatisfaction that the country is not benefitting by being associated with the 'East', instead of the 'West'.⁴ Other EU members among the CEE countries, particularly Slovakia or Slovenia, would see things similarly. In the same vein, Baltic countries feel they are 'Northern' rather than Eastern' (Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). All in all, Hungary and Serbia are becoming lonely enthusiasts among the CEE countries when it comes to China and the 16+1 platform (Tsolova et al. 2018).

CEE historical memory and approaches towards communism

European Communist regimes collapsed in 1989 after public protests toppled the 40 years of one-party rule. The conditions differed from country to country (perhaps most in former Yugoslavia), with the reformist Communist fractions playing more substantial roles in some while not in others, but overall the year 1989 can be regarded as the moment when the CEE region massively and decisively rejected Communism. Although the subsequent development was far from smooth and the Communist nostalgia existed in some sections of society, the political legitimacy of the post-1989 regimes has been embedded in opposition to Communism.

³ These views were also communicated to the author by various Polish and Hungarian diplomats.

⁴ Based on the personal interviews with the Czech diplomats.

The Czech Republic is a good starting place to demonstrate the point. At the 100 years independence anniversary, the massive laser video screening over the National Museum building showed the Communist era marked by images of show trials, Soviet tanks destroying the Prague Spring reform process, extremely standard, massive, and not very comfortable housing, only to culminate with the happy ending of the Velvet Revolution and the ‘return to Europe’, meaning the European Union.⁵ Runya Qiaoan (2014) studied how the popular Czech cultural products present the history and using post-1989 movies she shows that the memories of the Communism—directly linked to the view of Soviet Union—are presented in today’s Czech Republic in a more straightforwardly negative way than the suffering under Nazi occupation during the Second World War.

Communism is not seen in CEE as just an abstract ideology—it has a straightforward link to Russia and the twentieth-century violent history, as the Polish experience well underscores. Already in 1919, freshly re-established independent Poland was fighting a war with newly created Bolshevik Soviet Union. At the beginning of the Second World War, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Hitler and Stalin divided Poland between the two, and it led Stalin to invade Eastern Poland shortly after Hitler attacked from the West. Soviet policies on its occupied Polish territories included the Katyn massacre, in which tens of thousands of Polish elites were murdered. For the entire following period of the Communist regime in Poland, however, the official propaganda promoted the Soviets as liberators from Nazism. It is not surprising that many in Poland (and elsewhere in the region) put Communism into the same category as Nazism and Fascism (Johnson 1996; Longworth 1997; Janos 2002).

The tragic Polish experience with Communism had a substantial impact on post-1989 political development in the country. Although some form of ‘decommunization’ was undergone during the 1990s, the Law and Justice government after its electoral victory in 2015 initiated a new campaign to rid the country of the remaining Communist era legacies. It is now clearing the country of the Communist monuments and allegedly Communist-era judges and their family members, stripping Communist-era generals of their rank (even posthumously), and renaming streets and institutions seen as recalling the Communist era (AFP 2018; Wójcik 2017). Without delving into the discussion into the nature of these steps—which has attracted many controversies—they show how vivid the anti-Communism still is in Poland, if ‘only’ as the means of mobilizing the public.

The situation in Hungary is somewhat more complicated, but the public display of anti-Communism is present there as well. Prime Minister Orbán and his Fidesz party started as young anti-Communist liberal democratic force during the 1989 revolution, though he developed quite significantly throughout the decades all the way to an authoritarian leader openly flirting with Russia and China, even to the level as naming them consistently as possible role models in constructing what he calls ‘illiberal democracy’ (Orbán 2014). At the same time, perhaps ironically, the Hungarian government was only recently outspoken in the implementation of a law which prohibits Communist symbols in the country to the extent that it was considering making the Heineken red star mark as illegal (although this was for other than ideological reasons)

⁵ See the Youtube video of the projection on the official channel of the Czech Gallery, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLY8fBF-C8>

(The Guardian 2017). At night on 27–28 December 2018, the statue of Hungarian hero and leader of 1956 revolution Imre Nagy was taken away from its prominent place near Hungarian parliament, allegedly due to government plans to return the image of the area to its pre-Communist appearance (Lázár 2018). Others claim that even the reform-Communist Nagy is not welcome in Orbán's increasingly right-leaning Hungary. Notably, both explanations assume that negative approach towards Communism was the motivation behind the move. Orbán's another legacy is even more telling—during his first term in office, he initiated, with big fanfare, the 'House of Terror' museum devoted to showcasing the sufferings (largely) under the Communist regime in Hungary. In one exposition, the museum looks at other Communist regimes in the world, including China. Elsewhere, the museum compares the Communist regime to the domestic Nazi one from the Second World War era, apparently making the point that the two totalitarian regimes had much in common (House of Terror Museum 2019).

Similar museums exist in other countries of the region, with perhaps the most high-profile ones being in the three Baltic countries who call their forty-something years within the Soviet Union unequivocally as 'occupations' and each of them hosts a related museum in the capital. Besides, Tallinn also hosts 'The International Museum for The Victims of Communism' with an affiliated research centre. The three Baltic countries have also made Communist parties illegal and have attempted (successfully or not) to outlaw the public display of Communist symbols. Similar policies are present also elsewhere. Bulgaria has currently in place a law which prohibits public glorification of Communist symbols (Sofia Globe 2016). Other countries have attempted to introduce similar laws including Albania, Croatia, Slovenia or the Visegrad countries, though the relevant laws were either not approved by the parliaments or were found unconstitutional (for limiting the freedom of expression).

The Western Balkan countries within the 16 + 1 platform, however, differ to some extent when it comes to the perception of the Communist past, which they see more favourably than countries in the Visegrad and Baltic regions, due to both historical and present reasons. Firstly, unlike the rest of the CEE region, the Yugoslavia and Albania established the Communist-led governments essentially as the home-grown regimes with only a limited role of the Soviet Red Army. As a result, both Yugoslavia and Albania split with the leading Communist power and gained much more independence than other regimes in Eastern Europe (Applebaum 2013). Secondly, the fall of Communist regimes in Yugoslavia led to interethnic tensions resulting in wars and atrocities unprecedented in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Related socio-economic and political troubles in the Western Balkans, especially in the five non-EU members, have made the distinction between pre and post-1989 regimes much more questionable than elsewhere. In turn, the Communist past is seen more positively, successfully, and legitimately than elsewhere in the CEE region.

Pew Research Center (2010) has some relevant data regarding the public sentiment in CEE countries when it comes to Communism. According to 2009 survey, neither of the surveyed countries from among those involved in 16+1 platform (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Lithuania) showed less than 50% approval rates of the post-1989 democratic changes (as a replacement of Communist regimes), with 80% Czechs approving and 70% or more Poles and Slovaks. These are impressive numbers considering that the survey was published during the global crisis and as other questions of the same survey showed, the majority of the people actually

did not see their well-being improved after 1989. Still, pro-democratic preferences were prevailing in most of the region. Therefore, the results could be interpreted as people's ideological preference of the democratic values even against what was perceived as doubtful material development.

Opinion polls on views of the Communist past and related issues in the Western Balkans emphasize the difference with the rest of the CEE region, while at the same time reveal internal variances between the countries. According to Gallup poll, four former Yugoslav countries look back at the Yugoslav times positively—only 4% Serbians, 6% of Bosnians, 12% of North Macedonians and 15% of Montenegrins see the break-up of Yugoslavia as benefitting them. Compared to them, 41% of Slovenians and 55% of Croatians see the break-up in their benefits (Keating and Ritter 2017). According to another poll realized in Serbia, Tito—the half-Croat half-Slovenian leader of Yugoslavia, was voted decisively as a person contributing the most to Serbia's prestige in the last 200 years. In another poll in Croatia, Tito was voted as 'the greatest Croat' (Ramet 2007). More broadly, the IRI (2019) survey shows that majorities of public in Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina do not regard themselves as being part of the West.

The CEE views of China on the background of its historical memory

The anti-Communist pathos shared around most of the CEE region have understandably made some important imprints on China policies of given countries. The Dalai Lama visits and meetings with officials serve as a good indicator since the formal meeting is a gesture about the political preferences without an economic payback in-fact, with a possible economic punishment (Fuchs and Klanna 2013). Based on the records of the Dalai Lama visits on his official webpage,⁶ most of the leaders of the CEE countries (such as presidents or prime ministers) have met the Dalai Lama. The exceptions are Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Romania, with the latter being the only EU member among the 16 CEE countries not meeting the Dalai Lama at the high political level. One may discover that more recently fewer leaders meet the Dalai Lama, though there were still the meeting in 2016 with the Slovak president or various meetings in 2011–2013 (with the leaders of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland). An interesting example is again Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán who saw the Tibetan spiritual leader in his first tenure in office in 2000 but ignored him later on. Not only that, during the Chinese Premier visit in 2011 and 2017, the Hungarian authorities made sure that anti-Chinese protestors would not be able to show up during the public appearances of the Chinese Premier (Spike 2017).

The Czech Republic can be seen as holding more negative and ideological views of China than the rest of the Visegrad dominated by the themes such as Communism, human rights and Tibet (Karaskova et al. 2018; Turcsányi 2017). It was also the only Visegrad country to sign the letter criticizing the treatment of human rights lawyers in China in 2017, with only one other CEE country, Estonia, being on the list (Denyer and Rauhala 2017). Comparatively, Polish, Hungarian and Slovak media are focusing more on economic issues, although also the topics related to Communism and human rights

⁶ See <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/events-and-awards/travels>

appear (Pleschová and Fürst 2015). If anything, the underlying anti-Communist feelings keep it a possibility that certain events may awaken anti-Chinese sentiments.

From the few speeches by the CEE leaders at the 16+1 summits, it seems that indeed the CEE countries are much less fond of the ‘traditional friendship’ with China going back to ‘shared history’. During the opening speech of Riga 2016 Prime Ministers’ summit and also at the China-CEE Business Forum, for instance, Latvian Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis (2016) did not recall any historical ‘shared past’ or ‘friendship’ between China and the CEE. Even Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (2017), who is perhaps the strongest proponent of the cooperation with China in the CEE region, have not looked to the shared past and did not call China a ‘friend’ neither during his introductory speech at the Budapest China-CEE summit in 2017 nor in his short speech at Riga summit in 2016. Another strong proponent of cooperation with China is the Czech President Miloš Zeman who casually calls Chinese President Xi Jinping ‘a young friend’. At the same time, although Zeman uses highly China-friendly rhetoric (including the ‘friend’ label), we have not been able to find any reference to the ‘*traditional* friendship’, ‘shared past’, or anything along the lines. It should be noted that Zeman has been critical of the pre-1989 regime in Czechoslovakia and he bases his current positive sentiment towards China on issues such as effective state performance (of China) or the foreign policy diversification and economic opportunities (for the Czech Republic).

The situation is again different to some extent when looking at the Western Balkans. When Aleksander Vučić won the Serbian presidential elections in 2017, he announced that his program was ‘European path while preserving the traditional friendship with Russia and China’.⁷ At a different occasion, Vučić told Chinese Ambassador that Serbia-China friendship [is] made out of steel, has been tested during the most difficult times and that this friendship means a lot to Serbia and Serbian people (Tanjug 2018). Other Western Balkan countries are however much less vocal about the ‘traditional friendship’ with China. Although we were able to find rhetoric mentioning friendly relations with China at some occasions, it seems that North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Albania are not as enthusiastic about recalling the ‘shared past’ with China as Serbia. Instead, they regularly mention practical issues of cooperation, especially the infrastructural projects which are now the staple of China-Western Balkan cooperation.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov who hosted the recent 2018 summit of the 16+1 platform did not evoke the ‘traditional friendship’ in his summit opening speech, though he did mention it in another of his speeches at a related side event. At the same time, he also reiterated that the contacts with China are not political and the purpose is to increase the gross domestic product and the incomes of citizens (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2018). In Romania, former Prime Minister Victor Ponta who hosted the China-CEE summit in 2013 used to call the relation with China ‘special’ and also ‘friendly’, such as when he said that he wants Romania to be the best friend of China in the EU (Romanian Government undated), or when he told Premier Li Keqiang during his visit that he regards China to be the ‘special partner and friend’ (Embassy of the PRC 2013).

⁷ See Vučić’s comment on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aa4ImkTsVoQ>

Conclusion: Resonance and dissonance of Chinese discourse in CEE

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the post-1989 identity—encompassing political, economic, security, social, cultural and other spectrums—of the CEE countries is centred around the rejection of Communism, although with some noteworthy specificities in the Western Balkans. This does not mean that there are no people who would want the old regime to come back or who would feel that they were better off under Communism. There is a cacophony of views regarding many issues related to the pre- and post-1989 history of the region. However, the *legitimacy* of all current CEE regimes is today constructed around the events of 1989 when Communist parties were forced to relinquish the monopoly of power all over the CEE region.

The distinct—and quite negative—view of Communism in CEE creates a significant gap between China and the CEE countries. China's utilization of the terms such as 'traditional friendship' and 'shared past' are framed within China's political context which sees them as the positive reinvigoration of the fact that at one-point China and the CEE countries were both ruled by the parties of the (nominally) same ideology. The markedly different post-1989 development, however, puts them on the opposite sides of the history (Fukuyama 1992; Huntington 1993). In China's post-1989 era, the party-state managed to re-establish itself as a legitimate political force which is broadly accepted by the public as capable of delivering its part of the 'social contract'—meaning primarily the improvement of economic well-being but also as being seen as the only sufficient defender of Chinese nationalism, which has been skilfully promoted and utilized by the leadership.

On the CEE side, the intended friendly messaging from China is meeting a very different context. As we have seen, we can distinguish two rather different audiences in what is a more diverse region than many recognize. First, eleven of the 16 CEE countries are the members of the EU, and they see their post-1989 development as relatively successful. At the same time, their view of their own Communist past is the one of suppression of their European identity, freedoms, and worse—the one of foreign occupation (Kundera 1984). Moreover, the Communist era was far from delivering positive economic development, especially for the Visegrad and Baltic countries. On the other hand, the five non-EU member countries in the Western Balkans have spent the previous three decades struggling with the political and economic turmoil, escalating in the hot wars and stagnating or worsening material well-being of their people. Their self-identification with the West is also much weaker. Besides, these countries had established Communist regimes as largely domestic-grown movements and thus see them as much more legitimate than the Visegrad and Baltic countries, where Communism is regarded as externally implemented. Somewhat contested is the position of Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria, who are all the EU members and their post-1989 experiences can be seen as positive (especially those of Slovenia and Croatia), while their Communist regimes are still considered as somewhat more legitimate than in the Visegrad and Baltic regions.

It is unavoidable to deal with the issue of the Communist past when China and the CEE countries interact. The two sides were overlooking each other for 20 years following the 1989 events which set them on the very different trajectories and created dissimilar contexts when it comes to the view of Communism. While many on both sides have probably hoped that this could be fixed and forgotten, the reality proves to

be more complex. It is suggested that in the context of the perceived economic underperformance of the 16+1 platform and growing political tensions with the EU, the socio-cultural factors further problematize the China-CEE relations. At the same time, this paper does not exhaust this kind of questioning, quite the contrary—it should inspire other empirical in-depth studies, both on the side of China and the CEE countries, to further test these conclusions.

As this research shows, China explicitly acknowledges the ‘shared experience’ between China and the CEE of being part of the Communist bloc before 1989, and it values the ‘traditional friendship’ of the CEE countries which belonged among the first countries internationally to recognize the People’s Republic of China in 1949. It may be unfair to judge this in other than positive lights as this may well truly be a warm gesture conveying sincere appreciation. However, most of the CEE countries today are apparently not grateful for being reminded of their Communist past. In a way, the old friendship which China recognizes is seen in much of the CEE region as deriving of their past Communist governments which are considered as illegitimate ones by today’s elite and much of the public. As a result of the diverging trajectories in the post-1989 era, China is already seen in much of the CEE region suspiciously as ‘the surviving Communist dictatorship’ and is casually put next to Russia as constituting two hostile authoritarian regimes posing a threat to the regional security and democracy. The more China emphasizes the ‘shared experience’ and the ‘traditional friendship’ implicitly recalling the Communist feature, the more likely the CEE countries—especially the Visegrad and Baltic countries—would perceive China as the ‘other’, who represents different values and political culture.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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