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Geostrategy

*Study*

Geopolitics Programme

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# The People's Republic of China: Political perceptions in Central Europe

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*Edited by Patrick Triglavcanin*

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*New geostrategic thinking for a more competitive age*

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## Table of acronyms

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AIIB     | Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank               |
| BRI      | Belt and Road Initiative                           |
| CCP      | Chinese Communist Party                            |
| CCTV     | China Central Television                           |
| CFSP     | Common Foreign and Security Policy                 |
| EP       | European Parliament                                |
| EPP      | European's People's Party                          |
| EU       | European Union                                     |
| FCDO     | Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (UK) |
| FDI      | Foreign Direct Investment                          |
| G7       | Group of Seven Industrialised Countries            |
| HM       | His Majesty  |
| INTERPOL | International Criminal Police Organisation         |
| IPAC     | Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China              |
| MP       | Member of Parliament                               |
| MEP      | Member of European Parliament                      |
| NATO     | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation                 |
| PRC      | People's Republic of China                         |
| UN       | United Nations                                     |
| US       | United States                                      |
| UK       | United Kingdom                                     |
| WHO      | World Health Organisation                          |

### *Political parties*

#### **Austria**

|        |                                   |
|--------|-----------------------------------|
| AUTNES | Austrian National Election Survey |
| FPÖ    | Freedom Party of Austria          |
| ÖVP    | Austrian People's Party           |
| NEOS   | New Austria and Liberal Forum     |
| SPÖ    | Social Democratic Party           |

#### **Bulgaria**

|     |                           |
|-----|---------------------------|
| BSP | Bulgarian Socialist Party |
|-----|---------------------------|



|      |   |
|------|---|
| BNT  | Bulgarian National Television                 |
| BR   | Bulgarian Rise Party                          |
| DB   | Democratic Bulgaria Party                     |
| GERB | Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria |
| MRF  | Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party        |
| WCC  | We Continue the Change Party                  |

## **Croatia**

|      |   |
|------|---|
| DP   | Homeland Movement Party                         |
| HDZ  | Croatian Democratic Union Party                 |
| HNS  | Croatian People's Party-Liberal Democrats (HNS) |
| HSLs | Croatian Social Liberal Party                   |
| IDS  | Istrian Democratic Assembly                     |
| GLAS | Civic Liberal Alliance                          |
| SDP  | Social Democratic Party                         |

## **Czech Republic**

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| ANO     | Action of Dissatisfied Citizens Party                    |
| BIS     | Security Information Services                            |
| ČSSD    | Czech Social Democratic Party                            |
| KDU-ČSL | The Christian Democratic Party                           |
| KSČM    | Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia                   |
| ODS     | Civic Democratic Party                                   |
| STAN    | Mayors and Independents Party                            |
| SPD     | Freedom and Direct Democracy Party                       |
| SPOLU   | Together Coalition Parliamentary Alliance                |
| TOP 09  | Tradition Responsibility Prosperity Party (Founded 2009) |

## **Hungary**

|        |                                     |
|--------|-------------------------------------|
| DK     | Democratic Coalition Party          |
| FIDESZ | Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union        |
| KDNP   | Christian Democratic People's Party |
| LMP    | Politics Can Be Different Party     |
| MSZP   | The Hungarian Socialist Party       |
| PM     | Dialogue for Hungary Party          |
| SAO    | State Audit Office                  |



## Poland

|     |                         |
|-----|-------------------------|
| iPL | Polish Initiative Party |
| PiS | Law and Justice Party   |
| PO  | Civic Platform          |
| PPS | Polish Socialist Party  |
| PSL | Polish People's Party   |
| RN  | National Movement Party |
| SP  | United Poland Party     |

## Romania

|      |  |
|------|--|
| AUR  | Alliance for the Union of Romanians          |
| PDL  | Democratic Liberal Party                     |
| PNL  | National Liberal Party                       |
| PSD  | Social Democratic Party                      |
| UDMR | Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania |
| USR  | Save Romania Union                           |

## Slovakia

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| HLAS-SD | Voice-Social Democracy Party                            |
| OLANO   | Ordinary People and Independent Personalities Party     |
| SaS     | Freedom and Solidarity Party                            |
| SMER-SD | Slovak Social Democracy Party                           |
| SPOLU   | Progressive Slovakia and Together-Civic Democracy Party |

## Slovenia

|      |  |
|------|--|
| IMNS | Italian and Hungarian National Community Parliamentary Group |
| LMŠ  | List of Marjan Šarec Party                                   |
| NSi  | New Slovenia-Christian Democrats                             |
| SAB  | Party of Alenka Bratušek                                     |
| SD   | Social Democrats   |
| SDS  | Slovenian Democratic Party                                   |

## Foreword

In keeping with our mission, the Council on Geostrategy is interested in the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Chinese engagement with the wider world. The PRC's expansionist foreign policy knows few bounds; the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to shape the world and key regions in accordance with its interests. As the gateway to Western and Northern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe is one such region.

Just as we have focused on the PRC's rise, we have also taken a fundamental interest in Central and Eastern Europe, a region critical to British interests given the United Kingdom's (UK) ongoing commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the defence of Europe.

Given the change in attitude in recent years towards the PRC in Britain and many key allies and partners – including the United States (US), Australia and Japan – we thought it worthwhile to determine how perceptions of the PRC might be changing in Central and Eastern European countries.

Thus, during late 2022 and early 2023, we engaged with nine Central and Eastern European partners from Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia to help us undertake this inquiry. We are grateful for their assistance and support.

The resulting Study, the most extensive survey of its kind to date, draws on regional expertise to explain how Central and Eastern European political parties perceive the PRC, particularly since Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the CCP in 2012.

**James Rogers**

*Director of Research, Council on Geostrategy*





## Executive summary

- Many no longer view the People's Republic of China (PRC) predominantly as a partner. Under Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it is viewed, increasingly, as a 'systemic competitor' or a 'systemic rival', as the CCP has become more assertive at home and abroad. Consequently, many nations, previously open to investment, trade and political engagement with the PRC, have already started to re-evaluate their economic and political relations with the country. But this is not an easy task; the PRC's newfound economic power means it can no longer simply be ignored or excluded from global decision making.
- As the CCP views Western Europe as a strategic target for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with Central Europe acting as the gateway, Chinese engagement with the region has grown substantially over the past ten years. Individual governments in Central Europe have often embraced Chinese engagement, frequently perceiving it as a commercial opportunity.
- Austria's stance on the PRC is currently set in the tacit cross-party consensus on the necessity to preserve stable and amicable relations with Beijing. This is reinforced by the limited scope of political debate and parliamentary scrutiny regarding the PRC and related issues. However, greater debate in the future is to be expected; at the end of 2020 the Federal Government initiated the process of developing a national 'China Strategy'.
- Some Bulgarian politicians have displayed an affinity for the PRC, particularly when it comes to Bulgaria's economic development. However, the country has failed to engage in any long-term business deals or political initiatives of significance with the PRC. And this looks unlikely to occur in the future, as the hardening of the EU's stance towards the PRC constrains Sofia's decision making; it is unlikely that Bulgaria will pursue an independent course when it comes to making policy in relation to the PRC.



- Politicians in the Croatian Parliament are silent when it comes to the PRC. Croatia has a tendency to keep its political relations closely aligned with that of its major partners (the EU, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US)), and is therefore hesitant to dramatically shift its own position. But it is clear that several parliamentarians are aware of the geopolitical risks associated with the PRC.
- In the Czech Republic, political perceptions of the PRC over the last ten years have evolved from being more embracing to more critical. Nevertheless, scrutiny of the PRC is primarily levied by select individuals or organisations. Petr Pavel, the incoming president, looks set to change the Czech Republic's stance on Taiwan, which will affect its relationship with the PRC.
- In Hungary, matters relating to the PRC do not dominate either public or parliamentary discourse. When they are placed on the agenda, political perceptions are mainly determined by domestic political considerations and interests, rather than the implications of the PRC's activity.
- Poland has responded firmly to the PRC's failure to condemn Russia's war against Ukraine has led to a sharp deterioration in how the CCP is perceived. Criticism of the CCP's humanitarian abuses and the involvement of Huawei in the construction of Poland's 5G network has received particular attention in the Polish Parliament, and led to the development of legislation.
- The PRC rarely animates Romanian parliamentarians; instead, they tend to stay close to the EU line. However, they are aware of and actively debate CCP activity within Romania, such as the role of Confucius Institutes linked to universities.
- The PRC is rarely a topic of Slovakian political discourse. Earlier attempts to establish connections with the PRC were not a result of a broad inter-parliamentary consensus, but were instead driven by a specific segment of Slovakia's political spectrum. Slovakia's position on the PRC is prone to dramatic shifts resulting from domestic political change.



- The PRC's presence in Slovenia and the bilateral relationship between the two countries has gone largely unnoticed over the past decade in Slovenian politics. Nevertheless, a shift towards recognising the PRC as a global power by parliamentarians is noticeable.
- There are differing levels of parliamentary scrutiny regarding the PRC in Central Europe. There are also differences in how each nation perceives the PRC, its role in global affairs, and its activity within the selected nation. There are also, of course, similarities.
- In all Central European countries public perceptions of the PRC have changed for the worse over the past three years. This is mainly to do with the failure of the CCP to rebuke Russia's renewed aggression towards Ukraine, as well as the CCP's response to Covid-19. The former has also compounded existing doubts instilled in politicians regarding the CEE-China initiative.
- The amount of attention Central European parliamentarians pay to the PRC, including the impact of its outreach, has visibly increased. However, they should further invest in their capability to understand the CCP and its geopolitical objectives. This will enable them better to deflect attempts by the CCP to interfere in the political and economic systems of their countries; they will also be more ready to minimise risks where engagement might be desired. Indeed, how to deter, protect against, and engage and compete with the PRC – all at the same time – is a strategic challenge facing all.

## 1.0 Introduction

Since Xi Jinping came to power as General Secretary in 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has followed an increasingly nationalistic and assertive approach to both domestic and foreign policy. The CCP's repression of its own citizens and economic and geopolitical pushes overseas – including in the South China Sea, the Himalayas and beyond through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – have alarmed the governments of many surrounding nations, as well as those further afield.<sup>1</sup> Gone are the days when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was seen predominantly as a partner; under Xi, it is viewed, increasingly, as a 'systemic competitor' or a 'systemic rival'.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, many nations, open to investment and trade with the PRC after liberalisation began in 1978, which continued well into the 2010s, have already started to re-evaluate their economic and political relations with the country. Legislation, designed to provide protection from CCP interference, is already being implemented.

This is all not an easy task. The PRC's economic power means it can no longer simply be ignored or excluded from global decision making. Not only does the PRC dominate the supply of many key commodities, including numerous critical minerals,<sup>3</sup> but many foreign governments, especially in the developing world, are still drawn to the perceived success of the Chinese economic model. In terms of crude growth, the PRC has outperformed every Group of Seven (G7) member since 1990, just as some 800 million Chinese citizens have been lifted

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<sup>1</sup> For a solid overview of the PRC's trajectory, see: Charles Parton, 'The 20th Party Congress: What it means for the CCP and the world', Council on Geostrategy, 22/11/2022, <http://bit.ly/3E4NoTx> (checked: 16/02/2023); Kevin Rowlands and Edward Hampshire, 'The Chinese navy: From minnow to shark', Council on Geostrategy, 07/12/2022, <https://bit.ly/3XuRfjJ> (checked: 16/02/2023); and Gray Sergeant, 'Geopolitics in the Himalayas: Towards a British strategy', Council on Geostrategy, 09/11/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xiofwr> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>2</sup> In His Majesty's (HM) Government's Integrated Review, the PRC was designated a 'systemic competitor', while in the European Commission's Joint Communication, it was defined as an 'economic challenge' and 'systemic rival'. See: 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', Cabinet Office, 07/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3vX8RGY> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: EU-China – A strategic outlook', European Commission, 12/03/2019, <http://bit.ly/3YqkljX> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>3</sup> 'Resilience for the Future: The UK's critical minerals strategy', Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 22/07/2023, <http://bit.ly/3XwvE9o> (checked: 16/02/2023).

out of extreme poverty.<sup>4</sup> It has, however, continued to perpetuate humanitarian abuses and develop a revanchist foreign policy with increased vigour.<sup>5</sup> As the CCP views Western Europe as a strategic target for the BRI, with Central Europe acting as the gateway, Chinese engagement with the region has grown substantially over the past ten years. Individual governments in Central Europe have often embraced Chinese engagement, frequently perceiving it as a commercial opportunity. Indeed, over the past ten years Beijing has signed BRI memorandums of understanding with all Central and Eastern European countries – except Kosovo, which the PRC does not recognise.<sup>6</sup>

The extent of Chinese objectives in Central Europe have been well documented.<sup>7</sup> These interests range from expanding the BRI and capitalising on other economic opportunities to fostering closer political relations. For the CCP, it is less relevant which political forces or parties it engages with, although those least supportive of Euro-Atlantic integration have the potential to undermine European unity, something which chimes with the CCP's interests. Besides Austria, all countries in Central Europe are allies within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and all are members of the EU. The launching of the 'Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries' (CEE-China) initiative in 2012 reflects the extent of the CCP's interest in the region and the energy it is prepared to inject into its diplomatic and economic agenda.<sup>8</sup>

During the early 2010s, countries in Central Europe tended to mirror that energy when engaging their Chinese counterparts.

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<sup>4</sup> 'GDP growth (annual %) – China, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, United States', World Bank Group, 2021, <http://bit.ly/3RXn5CV> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'Lifting 800 Million People Out of Poverty – New Report Looks at Lessons from China's Experience', World Bank Group, 01/04/22, <http://bit.ly/3KdafyS> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Parton, 'Taiwan: Invasion is not likely, but deterrence remains vital', Council on Geostrategy, 06/09/2022, <https://bit.ly/3KcAR2N> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>6</sup> David Sacks, 'Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's In And Who's Out', Council on Foreign Relations, 21/03/2021, <http://bit.ly/3EcobSC> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>7</sup> Edward Lucas, 'Chinese Influence in Central and Eastern Europe', Centre for European Policy Analysis, 02/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3XwVnhD> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>8</sup> The CEE-China initiative was established by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012 and was principally designed to boost Chinese investments, trade cooperation and infrastructure within Central Europe. Due to the initial number of participants it was first dubbed the '16+1' (16 Central and Eastern European countries and the PRC), and became the '17+1' in April 2019 following the incorporation of Greece. It was subsequently re-dubbed as the '16+1' following the withdrawal of Lithuania in March 2021, and then as the '14+1' following the withdrawal of Latvia and Estonia in August 2022. To avoid confusion in this report, it will be referred to as the 'CEE-China initiative' throughout.

Underpinned by strong economic growth, the CCP had deep pockets and a willingness to reduce barriers to accessing them. For countries eager to move speedily away from the communist era, the PRC's track record on poverty alleviation and domestic development was attractive. This latter point led to an increasing desire for access to the Chinese market amongst Central European countries; during this time, they had few qualms, either. After all, their allies and partners in Western Europe and North America were doing the same thing – witness the so-called 'golden decade' George Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, heralded in 2015.<sup>9</sup> The downsides of the PRC's economic system – including geoeconomic statecraft and gross environmental degradation – as well as the CCP's authoritarian political nature, were overlooked. Free and open countries incorrectly thought engagement would transform the PRC into a 'responsible stakeholder'.<sup>10</sup>

As Xi has implemented a more repressive and nationalistic agenda, the initial enthusiasm for deeper relations with the PRC has come into question, not least in Central Europe. The CEE-China initiative, despite some initial success, has lost momentum and three members – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – have already left. The CCP's continued abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong are becoming starker under Xi and harder to ignore for many Central European politicians, particularly those familiar with totalitarian excess. The CCP's 'mask diplomacy' efforts during the initial outbreak of Covid-19 were initially viewed favourably in various nations in Central Europe, though attitudes soured when some of the medical supplies offered were faulty or poorly made.<sup>11</sup> The CCP's failure to rebuke Russia for its war against Ukraine – something most countries in Central Europe are particularly aware of given their history of dealing with Russian aggression – has only served to compound Central European concerns, which the PRC's rhetoric towards Taiwan have only amplified.

As with many other free and open countries, attitudes towards the PRC in Central Europe have started to change. But it is unclear whether politicians in the region are aware of the multifaceted character or extent of the challenge they face. This is not a problem

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<sup>9</sup> George Osborne, Speech: 'Let's create a golden decade for the UK-China relationship', HM Treasury, 22/09/2015, <http://bit.ly/3Ysa3zX> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>10</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, Speech: 'Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?', Department of State (US), 21/09/2005, <http://bit.ly/3XvAzHf> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>11</sup> Bartosz Kowalski, 'China's Mask Diplomacy in Europe: Seeking Foreign Gratitude and Domestic Stability', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 50:2 (2021).

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unique to Central Europe; it is a problem facing nations throughout the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, to say nothing of those in Africa and South America.

## *1.1 Research goals*

This report sets out to probe the extent to which politicians in Central European countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – are aware of the multifaceted (or ‘systemic’) nature of the challenge posed by the CCP and its activities. Consequently, the following research questions have been identified:

1. How much does the average citizen or politician in the countries of Central Europe know about the PRC and the activities of its ruling party? How is the PRC viewed in the region?
2. How much do Members of Parliament (MPs) in Central European nations know and care about CCP activities?
3. And, if they are aware of them, how often are they investigated, scrutinised or even mentioned in the respective parliaments or other official government channels?

By assessing how politicians in Central Europe have viewed the PRC, particularly since Xi took power in 2012, this report aims to close a key knowledge gap in the field of Central European-PRC relations. It also shines light on the need to foster enhanced political debate on the PRC so that social, economic and political spaces in nations the world over are better protected from potential penetration and exploitation by the CCP.

## *1.2 Research design*

Constructed around nine country-specific sections, this study explains how parliamentarians and political parties in Central Europe view and scrutinise the PRC and PRC-related activities. It also touches on the public’s perception of the PRC, insofar as this may animate the political decisions taken in democracies. Further, it provides a snapshot of how attitudes towards the CCP may be changing over time in the nine Central European countries.

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## 1.2.1 Partners

The research underpinning this study is completely independent. To produce the sections, the Council on Geostrategy sought out the assistance of institutions in each country with a strong track record of providing high-end research on topics pertaining to European and international affairs. For these reasons the Council on Geostrategy partnered with the following organisations:

- Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (Austria);
- Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria);
- Centre for Public Policy and Economic Analysis (Croatia);
- Institute of International Relations Prague (Czech Republic);
- Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Hungary);
- Institute of New Europe (Poland);
- New Strategy Centre (Romania);
- Central European Institute for Asian Studies (Slovakia); and
- The chapter on Slovenia was produced by an independent researcher.

These institutions were also chosen due to their country-specific experts whose focus also included the PRC.

## 1.2.2 Methodology

This study is based primarily on open source data, such as opinion polls and information contained within online parliamentary portals. Where such data could not be found, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to generate the relevant information. Researchers were asked to use 2012 as a baseline for identifying changes in public opinion, as this was the year Xi became General Secretary of the CCP and the PRC's engagement with the wider world started to grow sharper.

In assessing how Central European parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC, researchers analysed official statements and the activities of official parliamentary committees, as well as the output of any unofficial groupings and caucuses whose focus includes the PRC. This provides for the broadest possible analysis of possible changes in





political perceptions of the Chinese state and policy. In assessing formal parliamentary scrutiny of CCP activity, researchers were asked to examine whether there were any differences between the way that parliamentarians scrutinise PRC activity domestically (i.e., within the home country) or overseas.

To help guide the partners and ensure consistency throughout each section, the Council on Geostrategy developed a set of research guidelines. These guidelines outlined the research questions and provided a uniform structure for each researcher to follow, to both simplify the research process and prevent the submission of nine radically different drafts (see Annex 1).

The guidelines were set after the Council on Geostrategy hosted an online workshop to establish the research parameters with the nine partners and their selected researchers. A draft of the guidelines was distributed before the first meeting was held, giving each participant the opportunity to ensure they were sensible, comprehensive, and rigorous. A second research workshop was held to ensure each researcher was happy with the development of the project, whilst also providing opportunity for each expert to ask any questions regarding their section. The Council on Geostrategy remained open for queries throughout the research process and communicated directly with researchers when any questions arose.

Once each section had been submitted, they were further edited to fit the following structure:

- Part 1 of each national section provides an introduction to the country's political system, as well as the main (currently active) political parties;
- Part 2 provides an overview of how the general public of each country views the PRC, as well as how much the national media covers topics related to the PRC, including the tone of any coverage;
- Part 3 explores how parliamentarians and political parties in the country view the PRC, with particular emphasis on the stance of that nation's political parties towards CCP policies. This part also identifies which parliamentarians are the most outspoken on the PRC, and whether official parliamentary committees or groups exist which focus or touch upon the PRC; and,



- Part 4 assesses how much scrutiny the PRC receives in each national parliament, with both international Chinese activity assessed, as well as that in the specific country.

### 1.2.3 Quality assurance

After each section was submitted, a review and verification procedure took place to ensure that it met the research requirements. Each section was also edited to ensure a uniform consistency, before being integrated into this report. Towards the final phase of the process, the report was assessed by a leading external expert using the Council on Geostrategy's peer review guidesheet; final alterations were then made in response to the external reviewer's comments before the Director of Research signed the report off as suitable for release.

### 1.3 Structure

In addition to this introductory section, this report contains two additional sections. The next section, Section 2.0, provides the nine country-specific sections. The following section, Section 3.0, assesses the similarities and differences between them, as well as the areas which might require further attention.

## 2.0 Political perceptions of the PRC: National cases

### 2.1 Austria

By Lucas Erlbacher

#### 2.1.1 Austria's political system and the main political parties

The Republic of Austria (hereinafter Austria) is a federal parliamentary republic constituted of nine federal provinces (*Bundesländer*). The Federal President (*Bundespräsident*), who is elected through direct majoritarian election, is the country's head of state. The National Council (*Nationalrat*) and the Federal Council (*Bundesrat*), the lower and upper houses respectively, constitute Austria's two legislative bodies. The Federal Chancellor (*Bundeskanzler*), who is appointed by the Federal President based on the composition of the National Council, represents the head of the Federal Government.

The Federal Government is usually formed by a coalition of two parties. While from 2007 to 2017 a coalition led by the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) was in power, between 2017 and 2019 the ÖVP formed a coalition government with the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Since then, the Austrian People's Party has governed in a coalition together with the Austrian Greens as their junior partner. The current National Council hosts five different parties: ÖVP with 71 seats, SPÖ with 40, FPÖ with 30, Austrian Greens with 26 and the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS) with 15.

At the federal level, foreign policy is primarily driven by the Federal Government. Although, constitutionally, the two parliamentary chambers – the National and Federal Council – hold substantial co-determination rights over foreign policy issues, these are only partially used.<sup>12</sup> In the context of foreign policy, the National Council is

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<sup>12</sup> Reinhard Heinisch and Christoph Konrath, 'Bundespräsident, Bundesregierung und Parlament' ['Federal President, Federal Government and Parliament'], Martin Senn et al. (ed.), *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs [Austrian Foreign Policy Handbook]* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022), pp. 51-75.



tasked with shaping the government's actions. This includes submitting both inquiries to the government and motions for resolution, as well as the fostering debate in parliament. Importantly, the National Council is not entitled to an independent foreign policy role. Motions are not binding for the government and merely reflect the parliament's inclination toward a particular issue.

In addition to the Federal Government, the Federal President has significant influence over Austria's foreign policy. Heinz Fischer, Federal President from 2004 to 2016, for example, had a significant impact on the strengthening of diplomatic and economic ties between Austria and the PRC; he led state visits to the PRC in 2010 and 2015, which saw the signing of several bilateral agreements. On the sub-national level, provincial governments have in the last decade been increasingly active in deepening the Austria-PRC relationship. This has manifested itself in recurrent visits of high-profile Austrian provincial delegations to the PRC, hosting Chinese provincial delegations, as well as the conclusion of provincial economic cooperation agreements. Similar to the federal level, there has been a lack of significant endeavours about Chinese activity in provincial assemblies (*Landtag*).<sup>13</sup>

## 2.1.2 How the Austrian public views the PRC: General indifference despite growing concern

As for other European countries since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Austrian public perception of the PRC has '[been] falling on hard times'.<sup>14</sup> This is reflected in the Eurobarometer survey's question on national perceptions towards the PRC. Whereas in 2017 and 2018 57% and 58% of Austrian respondents respectively had a negative image of the PRC, this proportion climbed to 74% in 2022.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> To deduce this, the parliamentary proceedings of all nine provincial assemblies were examined. Specifically, mentions of 'China' in debates and inquiries to provincial governments were searched.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: Ties Dams, Xiaoxue Martin and Vera Kranenburg (eds.), 'China's Soft Power in Europe - Falling on Hard Times', Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 20/04/2021, <http://bit.ly/3lIqYj6> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>15</sup> 'Special Eurobarometer 467 - Future of Europe 2017', European Commission, 11/2017, <http://bit.ly/3ZcVn7Z> (checked: 16/02/2023); 'Special Eurobarometer 479 - Future of Europe 2018', European Commission, 11/2018, <http://bit.ly/3YBA3cg> (checked: 16/02/2023); and 'EP Eurobarometer Spring 2022 Survey: Rallying around the European flag - Democracy as anchor point in times of crisis', European Commission, 06/2022, <http://bit.ly/3S570Qz> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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Crucially, this deterioration in opinion is similar in scope to the European average, which saw an increase from 53% in 2018 to 70% in 2022 of respondents saying they held a negative view of the PRC.<sup>16</sup>

The changing attitude has been mirrored in the Austrian media coverage of the PRC and related issues. The first quarter of 2020 – coinciding with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic – witnessed a significant expansion of news articles about the PRC published in major Austrian media. In 2022, this expansion continued with Austria’s leading news website, News.ORF, covering aspects of the PRC’s domestic affairs, as well as its international activity.<sup>17</sup> The four main topics were: growing tensions in cross-Strait relations (especially following the visit of Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the United States (US) House of Representatives, to Taiwan and the PRC’s ensuing military exercises); the PRC’s relation with Russia as well as its positioning regarding Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine; the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang; and the CCP’s 20th Party Congress.

Importantly, Austrian media rarely cover the PRC’s activities in Austria, or more broadly, the bilateral relationship between the two countries. For example, in the last seven years, only three news articles on the PRC’s potential influence over the country’s two Confucius Institutes, in Vienna and Graz, can be identified.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, only one third of Austrian media articles relating to economic dependencies on the PRC refer to Austria’s domestic context.<sup>19</sup> In addition, especially compared to Germany, the Austrian debate on the PRC, both in the media and public, is not very prominent or impactful. Indeed, public scrutiny over the government’s policy toward the PRC has, until now, been virtually non-existent. This demonstrates how Austria has been lacking a significant public debate on the PRC.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> In total, 137 articles published on News.ORF in 2022 containing the keyword ‘China’ in their title were included in this sample. Initial data analysis was conducted using the open-source tool ‘NoCodeFunctions’. Key topics have been identified through a topic modelling analysis.

<sup>18</sup> Here, the following Austrian media organisations were searched: ORF, Kronen Zeitung, Der Standard, Wiener Zeitung, Die Presse, Kurier, Kleine Zeitung, Heute, Oe24, Salzburger Nachrichten and Tiroler Tageszeitung. The search timeframe was from 01/01/2015 to 05/12/2022.

<sup>19</sup> Lucas Erlbacher, ‘Austria: From the Chinese Hoffungsmarkt to European strategic dependence’, John Seaman, Francesca Ghiretti, Lucas Erlbacher, Xiaoxue Martin and Miguel Otero-Iglesias (eds.), *Dependence in Europe’s Relations with China – Weighing Perceptions and Reality*, European Think-tank Network on China, 25/04/2022, <https://bit.ly/3xwBqgc> (checked: 16/02/2023).



More generally, the Austrian debate on foreign policy is shaped by its constitutionally enshrined ‘everlasting neutrality’, which arguably constitutes a central tenet of the country’s national identity.<sup>20</sup> Although Austria’s membership to the EU, particularly the participation in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), ushered in a de facto change to the country’s neutrality policy, especially the understanding of neutrality prevalent during the Cold War, the relevance and specific implications of Austria’s neutrality are rarely the object of intense public debate.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, Austria’s public stance towards the PRC can be described as being rather indifferent; although perceptions have worsened in the last three to four years, there seems to be no great public interest in debating or altering Austria’s approach to the PRC.

### **2.1.3 How Austrian parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: A consensus for maintaining amicable relations**

The PRC constitutes a peripheral issue in Austria’s political process. Political parties with representation in the National Council have, as of yet, not formulated positions on Austria’s bilateral relationship with the PRC. In the election programmes for the last national election in 2019, as well as the European Parliament election the same year, ‘China’ was either not mentioned at all or only anecdotally. Overall, the PRC did not constitute a major topic during the last years’ political debate.<sup>22</sup> This is indicative of both the topic’s low salience in the country’s political debate, as well as a tacit consensus on how Austria’s bilateral relationship with the PRC should be pursued. In fact, across party lines, members of the National Council tend to underline the

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Senn, ‘Österreichs Neutralität’ [‘Austrian Neutrality’], Martin Senn et al. (ed.), *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* [Austrian Foreign Policy Handbook] (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022), pp. 23–50.

<sup>21</sup> In May 2022 a group of Austrian academics, politicians and other important social actors signed an open letter urging for ‘a serious, nationwide discussion’ on Austria’s security doctrine, including its neutrality. See, for example: ‘Prominente fordern ernsthafte Diskussion über Verteidigungspolitik’ [‘Celebrities call for serious debate on defence policy’], *DerStandard* 09/05/2022, <http://bit.ly/3YZfAoV> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>22</sup> Media coverage during Austria’s last two national elections (2017 and 2019) was studied using the 2017 and 2019 datasets of the ‘Austrian National Election Survey (AUTNES) Automatic Content Analysis of the Media Coverage’. Second, using the dataset ‘AUTNES Content Analysis of Party Press Releases 2002 to 2017’, the press releases of Austria’s political parties were analysed.

necessity of maintaining amicable relations with Beijing, all the while, addressing – with moderation – sensitive issues.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, Austria’s political parties differ in how much they engage with PRC-related issues, particularly regarding humanitarian issues and Chinese coercion against other EU members. Figures 1 and 2 show the proportion per party of PRC-related parliamentary activity for the last two legislatures (2017 to 2019, 2019 to current), including motions for resolution, inquiries to the Federal Government, citizen initiatives, and committee reports. During the current legislative period, the liberal NEOS has accounted for nearly half of legislative activities related to the PRC, even though it holds less than 10% of the National Council’s seats (see Figure 2).<sup>24</sup> This underlines NEOS’ position as Austria’s most outspoken political party in relation to the PRC. In comparison, the social-democratic SPÖ, as well as the two parties currently in government, the Christian-democratic conservative ÖVP, and Austrian Greens, tend to follow a less vocal approach. Lastly, the far-right FPÖ is perceived as largely absent from discussions on Austria’s foreign policy regarding the PRC. However, MPs from FPÖ have increasingly used the PRC as an image of ‘otherness’ in the context of their critique of the government’s domestic policy, notably on Covid-19 control measures.<sup>25</sup> In that sense, rather than ‘anti-China’ populism, FPÖ’s discourse on the PRC appears to be part of its populist rhetoric on domestic policy issues.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, the proportion of activities by political parties forming the ruling government has, over the last two legislatures, remained relatively small (see the ÖVP and Austrian Greens segments in Figures 1 and 2). This is in line with the phenomenon that, in the context of foreign policy, parliamentary control rights tend to be primarily employed by opposition parties.

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews were conducted with members of the Austrian National Council. These included Dr. Reinhold Lopatka (ÖVP), Nico Marchetti (ÖVP), Michel Reimon (Austrian Greens), Dr Ewa Ernst-Dziedzic (Austrian Greens), Dr Christoph Matznetter (SPÖ), Dr Harald Troch (SPÖ), and Dr Helmut Brandstätter (NEOS).

<sup>24</sup> That being said, NEOS’ parliamentary activity on the PRC is driven primarily by Dr Helmut Brandstätter.

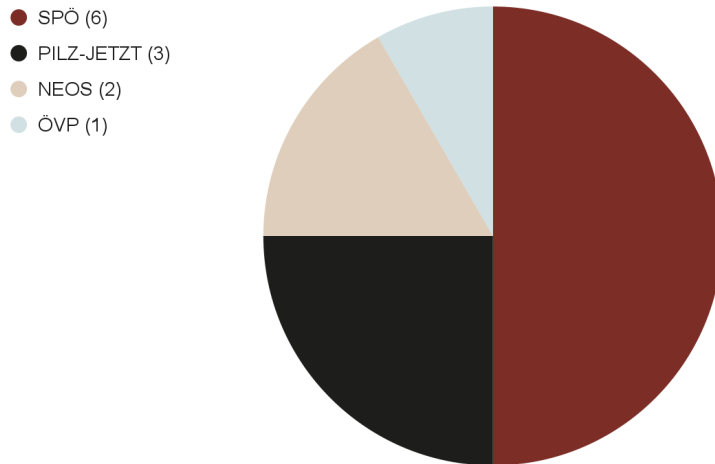
<sup>25</sup> This emerges from an analysis of the National Council plenary session’s stenographic protocols during the current legislative period.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi and David Hutt, ‘Europe’s Rising Anti-China Populism’, Chinese Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 07/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/3YCuwCj> (checked: 16/02/2023).

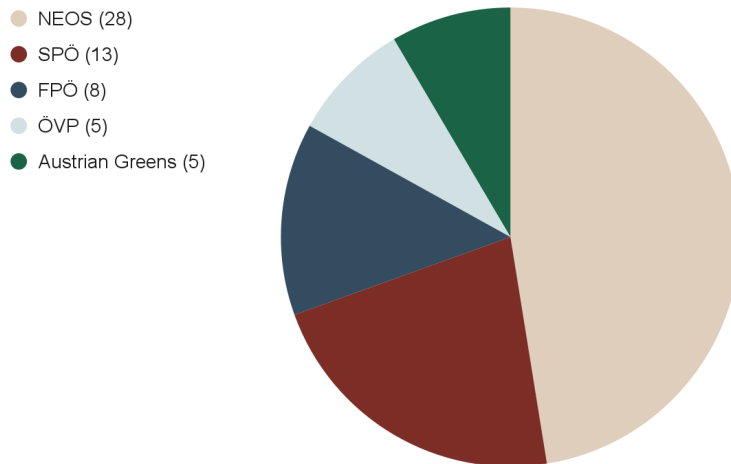
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**Figure 1: Austrian parliamentary activity on the PRC: Proportion by political party for the previous legislature (November 2017 to October 2019)<sup>27</sup>**



**Figure 2: Austrian parliamentary activity on the PRC: Proportion by political party for the current legislature (October 2019 to current)**



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<sup>27</sup> The data for Figures 1 and 2 was gathered through manual research on the Austrian Parliament's website. The mentions of 'China' within the parliament's plenary debates have been excluded from this dataset due to their low relevance. In total, the dataset includes 22 motions for resolution, 31 inquiries to the federal government, two citizen initiatives, as well as one committee report.

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In addition, the main political parties' approach towards the PRC seems to be shaped by their different views on the role of the EU. On the one hand, NEOS advocates for a greater foreign policy and security role of the EU, notably through the establishment of an EU army. This would entail a political re-orientation of Austria's neutrality. Similarly, Austrian Greens support an expansive EU common foreign policy, as well as incremental changes to Austria's neutrality policy. The SPÖ and ÖVP's position appears rather ambiguous, as both are committed to the process of EU integration, in particular strengthening the EU's foreign policy, yet it staunchly adheres to Austria's current foreign policy status-quo – a pro forma neutrality. By contrast, the FPÖ pursues an EU-sceptic line and maximalist approach to Austria's neutrality. The EU's CFSP has shaped Austria's foreign policy towards Asia, particularly the PRC.<sup>28</sup> The multifaceted approach regarding the country as 'as a partner, a competitor and a systemic rival', which was laid out in the EU's strategic outlook in March 2019, structures Austria's bilateral relations to the PRC.<sup>29</sup> Although the PRC-EU relationship has significantly deteriorated in the last two years, Vienna has refrained from any direct opposition to Beijing. Specifically, it has sought to strike a balance between, on the one hand, maintaining amicable bilateral relations with the PRC, while not appearing too close to Beijing, and, on the other hand, supporting and relying on a European approach towards it. Going forward, this balance is likely to be influenced by the political parties' attitude towards the EU, more specifically their support for a common European approach towards the PRC.

#### **2.1.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Austria: An emerging debate amongst parliamentarians**

The Austrian public's indifference regarding the PRC is mirrored by the absence of a significant domestic political debate. Most strikingly, within the National Council there has thus far been no significant discussion on the PRC or PRC-related issues. In fact, when looking at

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Reiterer, 'Die Außenpolitik gegenüber den Staaten Asiens' ['Foreign policy towards the states of Asia'], Martin Senn et al. (ed.), *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs [Austrian Foreign Policy Handbook]* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022), pp. 663-667.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see: Janka Oertel, 'The new China consensus: How Europe is growing wary of Beijing', European Council on Foreign Relations, 07/09/2020, <http://bit.ly/3xsfNoE> (checked: 16/02/2023).



the stenographic protocols of the National Council's plenary sessions since 2018 which contain the keyword 'China', it is evident that it is only referred to anecdotally and often in conjunction with other countries. Similarly, there seems to be no substantial debate within the council's parliamentary committees. Indeed, within the agendas of the National Council's principal parliamentary committees – that of foreign policy, humanitarian issues, the economy, national defence, and the environment – only six items have been specifically related to the PRC for the last three legislature periods (2013 to 2017, 2017 to 2019, 2019 to current).<sup>30</sup> The PRC's anecdotal role within Austria's parliamentary debate can partially be explained by the lack of public debate on the PRC and the subsequent low level of domestic political capital afforded to it. Indeed, in general, only foreign policy issues which receive extensive public and media attention find an echo within Austria's parliamentarian process.

Yet, whereas the Austrian Parliament has had limited political debate on the PRC comparable to other European legislatures, there has recently been a slight increase in interest. In fact, five of the committees' six agenda items on PRC-related issues have occurred in the last two years and are associated with either humanitarian issues or instances of political coercion against other EU members. Similarly, other parliamentary activities, such as inquiries to the government, motions for resolution, committee reports or citizen initiatives, also saw an increase. Whereas for the previous legislature only thirteen separate activities could be identified as being associated with the PRC, during the current legislative period this number has risen to forty-four (see Figures 3 and 4).<sup>31</sup>

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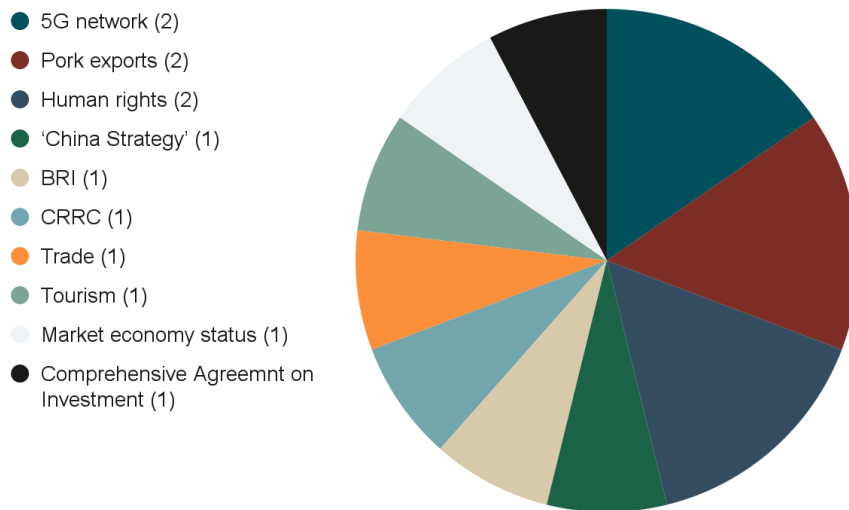
<sup>30</sup> The agendas (*Tagesordnung*) of the above-mentioned committees were investigated for the last three legislative periods.

<sup>31</sup> This data was gathered from the National Council. Nearly all activities were either parliamentary inquiries to the government or motions for resolution.

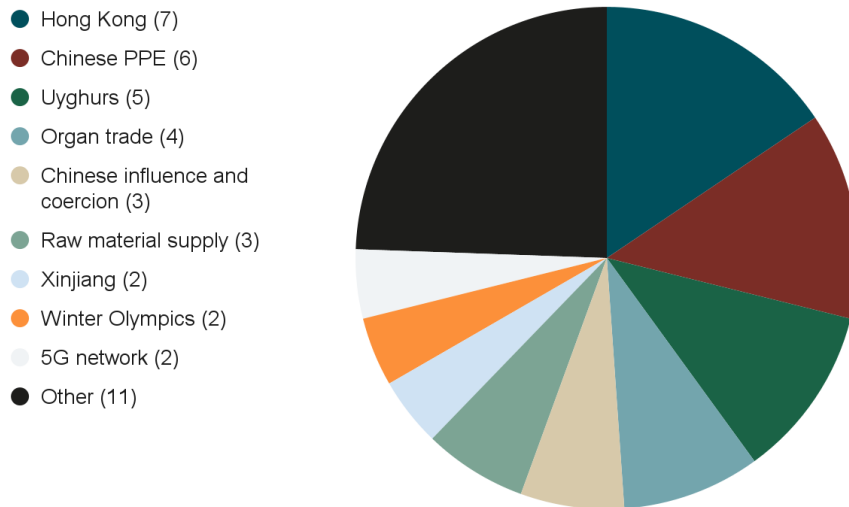
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**Figure 3: Austrian parliamentary activity on the PRC: Proportion by topic for the previous legislature (November 2017 to October 2019)<sup>32</sup>**



**Figure 4: Austrian parliamentary activity on the PRC: Proportion by topic for the previous legislature (October 2019 to present)**



<sup>32</sup> Excludes plenary debates. The topics have been assigned manually based on publicly available documents.

In addition, the thematic focus of parliamentary activity on the PRC or related issues during the last five years has seen a considerable shift. In the previous legislative period (2017–2019) topics related to trade, most prominently the export of pork to the PRC and Austria’s participation within BRI, occupied around one third of the Austrian National Council’s activity on the PRC (see Figure 3). In addition, the involvement of Chinese companies in the construction of Austria’s 5G network gained attention. The 5G issue was not politically contentious. In fact, the announcement by the Federal Government that the decision whether or not to use Chinese technology would be delegated to the network operator did not trigger any further debate or action within Austria’s parliament.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, the current parliamentary term has witnessed an amplification of humanitarian issues (see Figure 4). This development is also mirrored in the discussions within the National Council’s committees: half of the six agenda items previously mentioned relate to the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Most prominently, the first two years of the current legislature saw the adoption by majority vote of three parliamentary motions for resolution, on Hong Kong and organ trade in June 2020, as well as on the situation of Uyghurs in April 2021. Through these the Austrian Parliament called on the Federal Government to increase its diplomatic engagement regarding these issues, particularly on the European level as well as within international institutions. Having been supported by all five parliamentary parties, these motions reflect the parliament’s ambition to address sensitive issues related to the PRC.<sup>34</sup>

Besides that, the dependence on the PRC, notably on personal protective equipment or raw materials, has become a prominent issue. Indeed, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, Austria’s debate on the PRC shifted away from being driven by a perception of it as ‘a “market of hope” or Hoffnungsmarkt’ towards centring on ‘a

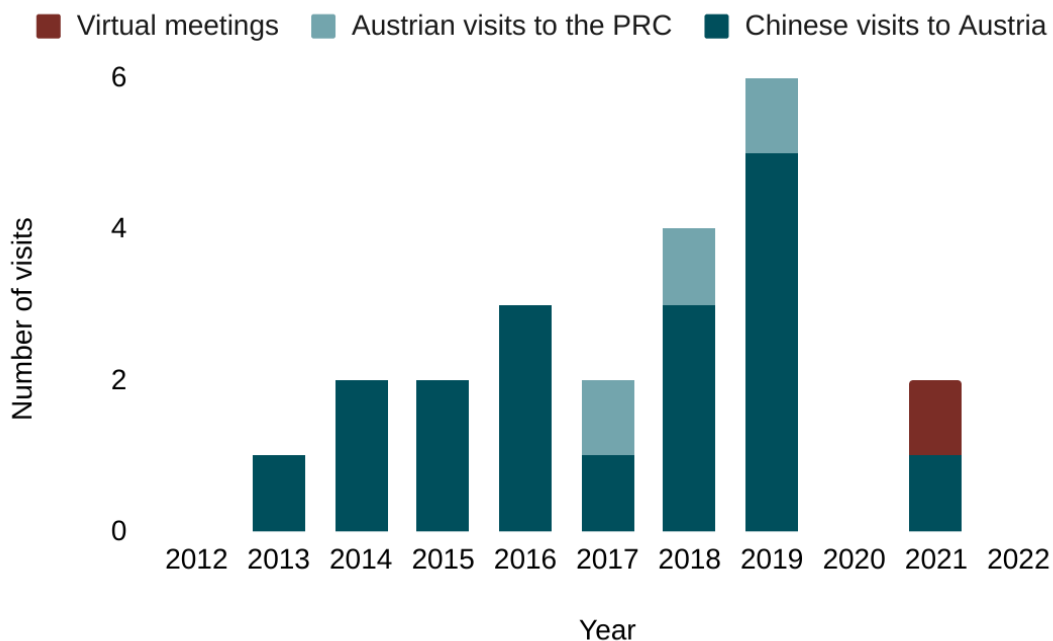
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<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth Köstinger, ‘Anfragebeantwortung – Sicherheitsbedenken beim 5G-Ausbau’ [Query response – Security concerns about 5G rollout], *Bundesministerium für Landwirtschaft, Regionen und Tourismus* [Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism], 20/03/2020, <http://bit.ly/3I8OddK> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>34</sup> While the above mentioned motions gained, in the context of the plenary discussion, the support of all five parties in the National Council – ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, Austrian Greens and NEOS – the initial proposal was not co-signed by all parties. For example, the motion for resolution on the situation in Hong Kong was proposed by parliamentarians from Austrian Greens, ÖVP, NEOS and FPÖ, but not SPÖ.

discussion on strategic dependence'.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, instances of coercion and Chinese attempts to generate influence within EU countries have recently found traction in Austria's Parliament.

**Figure 5: Bilateral parliamentary delegations<sup>36</sup>**



In parallel to the Austrian Parliament's emerging debate on the PRC, the current legislative term has also witnessed a shift in its diplomatic engagement with the CCP. Throughout the 2010s, the National Council, and to a lesser degree the Federal Council, played an important role in the strengthening of diplomatic ties between Austria and the PRC. As Figure 5 illustrates, Chinese official delegations have regularly visited Austria's legislative chambers. Beginning in 2017, these trips were also reciprocated by Austrian parliamentary delegations. In this context, the National Council's Austria-China

<sup>35</sup> Lucas Erlbacher, 'Austria: From the Chinese Hoffungsmarkt to European strategic dependence', in John Seaman, Francesca Ghiretti, Lucas Erlbacher, Xiaoxue Martin and Miguel Otero-Iglesias (eds.), *Dependence in Europe's Relations with China - Weighing Perceptions and Reality*, European Think-tank Network on China, 25/04/2022, <https://bit.ly/3xwBqgc> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>36</sup> These statistics have been compiled using the Austrian National Council's yearly work reports, as well as through manual searches of the weekly activities of MPs. It includes both the National Council and Federal Council.



parliamentarian group (*Parlamentarische Gruppe Österreich–China*) acted as an important vehicle for bilateral contacts by hosting Chinese delegations in Vienna, as well as participating in visits to Beijing. 2019, the year prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, saw the largest culmination of bilateral parliamentary visits. This also coincides with major government visits to the PRC, notably in April 2019 by Sebastian Kurz, then Federal Chancellor, and one year prior by both the Federal President and Chancellor with the biggest Austrian diplomatic delegation in history.

Understandably, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, these bilateral meetings have largely been frozen. The last three years saw only one Chinese official delegation led by Wan Gang, the Vice-Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, visiting Vienna’s parliament, as well as one virtual meeting between Wolfgang Sobotka, the National Council’s President, and the Chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee. With pandemic control measures lifted in the PRC, there is a chance that bilateral parliamentary visits may resume. But it is unlikely they will regain the same intensity; Vienna’s legislators do not appear eager to significantly deepen bilateral relations.

Ultimately, the last three-to-four years appear to have brought about an increased focus on politically fraught topics sensitive to Beijing – in particular humanitarian issues. This marks a shift away from the Austrian parliament’s focus on deepening relations with the PRC. Crucially, parliamentary debate and scrutiny has centred on the PRC’s international activities, rather than on its bilateral relationship with Austria.

### **Conclusion**

The Austrian Parliament’s stance on the PRC can be expected to remain within the confines of the tacit cross-party consensus on the necessity to preserve stable and amicable relations with Beijing. This is reinforced by the limited scope of political debate and parliamentary scrutiny regarding the PRC and PRC-related issues. As long as the PRC remains a peripheral issue in Austria’s domestic debate, this status-quo is likely to be maintained.

In that regard, the release by the Federal Government of a national ‘China Strategy’ or a position paper on the PRC by a

parliamentary party might well prove to be a significant trigger for a greater political and public debate on the PRC. Indeed, at the end of 2020 the Federal Government initiated the process of developing a national ‘China Strategy’ by establishing an inter-ministerial coordination group on the PRC, as well as commissioning an input paper on the bilateral relationship.<sup>37</sup> In addition, given the Austrian Green’s ongoing reflection on its foreign policy principles, particularly the relevance of its pacifist roots in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine,<sup>38</sup> an internal deliberation on Austria’s relationship with the PRC appears likely.

## 2.2 Bulgaria

*By Svetoslav Malinov, Kristina Tsabala and Ruslan Stefanov*

### 2.2.1 Bulgaria’s political system and the main political parties

Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic with a democratic constitution based on the principle of the separation of powers. Governmental power is divided into legislative, executive and judicial, which are independent bodies that complement one another.

The National Assembly is the legislative authority. It is a unicameral parliament with 240 members who are directly elected by the Bulgarian people for a four-year term. The National Assembly exercises parliamentary control over the Council of Ministers, which governs the executive branch of the government.

The President of Bulgaria is directly elected by the people for a maximum of two terms of five years, and represents the country in international affairs. The president is obliged to promulgate laws adopted by the National Assembly and has an amendatory veto. If a parliamentary-backed government cannot be formed, the president dissolves the National Assembly, calls parliamentary elections, and appoints a caretaker government.

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<sup>37</sup> ‘China-Strategie Papier (8866/AB): Anfragebeantwortung durch den Bundeskanzler Karl Nehammer, MSc zu der schriftlichen Anfrage (8993/J) der Abgeordneten Dr Helmut Brandstätter’ [‘China Strategy Paper (8866/AB): Query response by Federal Chancellor Karl Nehammer, MSc to the written question (8993/J) by Dr Helmut Brandstätter’], Parlament Österreich [Parliament of Austria], 16/02/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xvd1YF> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>38</sup> Michael Völker, ‘Österreichs Grüne rücken vom Pazifismus ab’ [‘Austria’s Greens move away from pacifism’], *DerStandard*, 05/05/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xpOPHd> (checked: 16/02/2023).

The Council of Ministers governs the executive branch. It is a collective body consisting of the prime minister, deputy prime ministers, and other ministers, who all collectively define, develop and implement the policy of the state, including foreign policy. The Council of Ministers manages the implementation of the national budget and also has the right to a legislative initiative. It is proposed and voted by the National Assembly by a simple majority.

From March 2021 to January 2023, four parliamentary elections took place in Bulgaria. In this period, the country has had one regular government elected by the National Assembly and four caretaker ones appointed by the president. As of January 2023, a caretaker government is still in power and the National Assembly consists of seven parties. Table 1 shows the respective number of MPs for each party.

**Table 1: Elected MPs as of October 2022**

| Party  | Number of MPs |
|--|---------------|
| Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) | 67            |
| We Continue the Change (WCC)                         | 53            |
| Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)               | 36            |
| Revival  | 27            |
| Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)                      | 25            |
| Democratic Bulgaria (DB)                             | 20            |
| Bulgarian Rise (BR)                                  | 12            |

Between 2009 and 2021, GERB held a majority in the National Assembly and appointed the prime minister, with its last full parliamentary term running between 2017 and 2021. GERB has firmly supported Bulgaria's pro-Euro-Atlantic orientation, particularly in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine. Despite this, its leadership has supported Kremlin business interests in Bulgaria, such as the TurkStream gas pipeline. Outlets associated with the party have also at

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times spread pro-Kremlin disinformation.<sup>39</sup>

BSP is the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party. In the past two years the party has suffered continuous electoral decline, which has perpetuated internal conflicts. BSP can be considered the most consistently pro-PRC and pro-Russian mainstream party in the Bulgarian National Assembly, as well as in the European Parliament.

WCC was established in 2021 on a strong anti-corruption, anti-GERB foundation. It has had a very pro-Euro-Atlantic orientation and supports Ukraine. Before the party was established, part of the political leadership had business joint-ventures with Chinese companies.<sup>40</sup>

DB is a centre-right alliance founded in 2018, formed by three political parties. DB can be seen as the most staunchly pro-democracy, pro-Euro-Atlantic and anti-authoritarian party in Bulgaria.

MRF represents the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. MRF has consistently supported the integration of Bulgaria into the Euro-Atlantic structures, both in the Bulgarian and European Parliament. Yet, its leadership has been associated with questionable business deals; Mr Delyan Peevski, an influential member, was sanctioned in 2021 under the Global Magnitsky Act.<sup>41</sup>

Revival is a far-right, nationalistic and pro-authoritarian (Russia and PRC) populist party which entered parliament for the first time in the October 2021 elections and has gained popularity on the back of strong campaigns using social media in a confrontational style.

Bulgarian Rise is an emerging national conservative political party founded in May 2022. Stefan Yanev, the Leader of the party, has demonstrated an affinity for authoritarian leaders and was sacked as the Minister of Defense for insisting on calling Russia's war against Ukraine a 'special military operation'.<sup>42</sup>

Political parties in Bulgaria are subject to basic checks and balances when it comes to their transparency. Parties are obliged to

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<sup>39</sup> Ruslan Stefanov et al., 'The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe', Centre for the Study of Democracy, 10/01/2022, <http://bit.ly/3YEnPjc> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>40</sup> 'Китайците от Хайнан инвестират в Летище Пловдив 79 млн. Лв.' ['The Chinese from Hainan are investing in Plovdiv Airport 79 million BGN'], *Maritsa*, 15/03/2018, <http://bit.ly/3xuLO8r> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>41</sup> Countering Systemic Corruption in Defence of Bulgarian Democratic Institutions, Department of State (US), 10/02/23, <https://bit.ly/3Itxq5B> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>42</sup> 'Стефан Янев: Да не използваме фриволно думата "война", Путин я избягва' ['Stefan Yanev: Let's not use the word "war" carelessly, Putin is avoiding it'], *Dnevnik*, 24/02/2022, <http://bit.ly/3YUX8Gp> (checked: 16/02/2023).

declare their finances annually according to the Political Parties Act, and this information is publicly available on the National Audit Office's website.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, MPs are obliged to declare their assets annually according to the Anti-Corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture Act.<sup>44</sup> However, Bulgaria lacks a law that regulates lobbying, hindering the prevention of external influence over MPs. In comparison to other EU members, Bulgarians are the least likely to agree that there is sufficient transparency and supervision in the financing of their political parties (16% compared to EU average of 31%).<sup>45</sup>

### 2.2.2 How the Bulgarian public views the PRC: A regional outlier

According to a special Eurobarometer survey conducted by the European Commission in spring 2022, 50% of Bulgarians had a 'total positive' attitude towards the PRC.<sup>46</sup> This was the highest approval rating among all participating EU members, with the average percentage of people in this category for the EU being 28%. Despite this, it is evident that there is rising rejection of Chinese activities within Bulgarian society; the PRC's approval rate in Bulgaria dropped by 9% compared to 2018 levels, and 37% of Bulgarians had a 'total negative' attitude towards the PRC.<sup>47</sup> This can partially be attributed to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. It could also be linked to negative media coverage regarding the PRC and the CCP's humanitarian abuse and imposition of drastic restrictions on its own citizens to curb the spread of Covid-19. It is important to note that this does not point to the growing Euro-Atlantic orientation of the Bulgarian public; Bulgarians remain among the most sceptical to these institutions in the EU.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'Control of Political Parties', Bulgarian National Audit Office, No date, <https://bit.ly/3xqiUpN> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>44</sup> 'Закон за противодействие на корупцията и за отнемане на незаконно придобитото имущество' ['Anti-Corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture Act'], Министерство на финансите на Република България [Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Finance], 12/04/2018, <https://bit.ly/3YSNCns> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>45</sup> 'Special Eurobarometer 523 March-April 2022: Corruption', European Commission, 07/2022, <http://bit.ly/3IGqoCE> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>46</sup> 'EP Eurobarometer Spring 2022 Survey: Rallying around the European flag - Democracy as anchor point in times of crisis', European Commission, 06/2022, <http://bit.ly/3S57OQz> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> 68% of Bulgarians think that the US is destabilising the world. See: 'War in Ukraine: The View of Europeans', Gallup International, 03/24/2022, <https://bit.ly/3xuAs4q> (checked: 16/02/2023).

Overall, the PRC and related issues do not have a strong presence in Bulgarian public discourse. The country is perceived as a foreign actor of economic significance due to its manufacturing capacity and rapid technological advancement across multiple sectors.<sup>49</sup> However, the PRC's presence in Bulgarian media remains marginal, leaving it with little effect on public opinion as the country's actions remain largely unknown to Bulgarians.

The most notable presence of official Chinese content in the Bulgarian media is the online and print edition – both freely available – of *China Today*, which is translated into Bulgarian. The publisher of *China Today* is Svetlana Sharenkova, a former member of BSP and someone involved with several pro-Russian newspapers in Bulgaria.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the Chairman of the Editorial Board of *China Today* is the last director of the Bulgarian Communist Party security services' political police (which was disbanded in 1989).<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, *24 Chasa*, one of the most popular print and online Bulgarian newspapers, has signed an agreement with *Radio China International* (CRI) to provide a column dedicated to the PRC.<sup>52</sup> The column reposts news from CRI in Bulgarian without any editorial changes on a daily basis, leaving it as a direct channel for official Chinese narratives in Bulgaria. In addition, Bulgarian National Television (BNT) has an agreement with China Central Television (CCTV) to air Chinese content on BNT 2 and its other channels several times a week.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> 'GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021: Bulgaria', Centre for the Study of Democracy, 18/11/2021, <http://bit.ly/3XzRCYS> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>50</sup> For Sharenkova's position as Publisher, see the bottom of: 'Китай днес' ['China Today'], No date, <http://bit.ly/3IvkJrQ> (checked: 16/02/2023); For Sharenkova's dismissal from BSP in February 2023, please see: 'Проф. Светлана Шаренкова: Конгресът на БСП беше полицейски, ще заведем колективно дело' [Prof. Svetlana Sharenkova: The Congress of BSP was policed, we will file a joint lawsuit], BNR, 13/02/2023, <http://bit.ly/3KewIvt> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>51</sup> Ognian Shentov, Ruslan Stefanov and Todor Galev, 'Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe: Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation', Centre for the Study of Democracy, 25/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3KdthFa> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'Нов седмичник ще популяризира Китай' ['A new daily will popularise China'], SEGA, 07/01/2019, <http://bit.ly/3S52exA> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>52</sup> 'GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021: Bulgaria', Centre for the Study of Democracy, 18/11/2021, <http://bit.ly/3XzRCYS> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>53</sup> Ruslan Stefanov, 'Chinese Influence in Bulgaria', Centre for European Policy Analysis, 31/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3S69eud> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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### 2.2.3 How Bulgarian parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: Support for engagement despite some misgivings

Bulgaria-PRC relations were at their strongest in 2018, when Boyko Borissov, then the Prime Minister, hosted the CEE-China initiative Summit in Sofia during Bulgaria's EU Council presidency.

A year later, in 2019, Rumen Radev, the President of Bulgaria, and Xi met and agreed on their desire to deepen ties between Bulgaria and the PRC via a 'strategic partnership'. However, despite this promise, no significant deepening of ties has occurred between the two countries, highlighted by the fact that no representative of the government attended the commemorative event for the 100th anniversary of the CCP in Sofia, with only the justice minister of the then caretaker government sending a congratulatory statement to the event.

Between August 2021 and October 2022, there was no active Ambassador for the Republic of Bulgaria to the PRC. In 2022, the interim government, led by Galab Donev, appointed Andrey Tehov as Ambassador without waiting for a new regular government to take office, noting that the diplomatic mission in the PRC was considered of vital importance for attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the country and increasing the volume and scope of Bulgarian exports.<sup>54</sup>

A notable initiative undertaken by the Bulgarian Government, yet never ultimately realised, was the CEE-China Global Partnership Centre in Sofia. It was announced in 2019 under the administration of Boyko Borissov, then Prime Minister, and member of GERB, and was to be situated at the Bulgarian Council of Ministers. It intended to offer consultation and advice to government agencies and businesses involved in the CEE-China initiative.<sup>55</sup> However, there is no evidence that the centre ever functioned, or does so today. During her meeting with the Chinese Ambassador to Bulgaria on 25th May 2021, Iliana Yotova, the Vice-President of Bulgaria, noted that the initiative is not widely known due to the PRC's lack of sufficient support for it.<sup>56</sup> A similar centre, the Association for the Promotion of Agricultural

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<sup>54</sup> 'Радев не чака редовно правителство за смяна на посланици' ['Radev does not wait for regular government to change ambassadors'], *Euractiv*, 24/10/2022, <http://bit.ly/3I6wvYp> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>55</sup> 'China-CEEC global partnership centre officially launched', *Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries*, 16/04/2019, <http://bit.ly/3xqdqLI> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>56</sup> 'Китай днес' ['China Today'], 4-10/6/2021, <http://bit.ly/3xsV3FZ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

Cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries, dedicated to cooperation in the agricultural sector, has operated within the Bulgarian Ministry of Agriculture since 2018.<sup>57</sup>

In the 47th Bulgarian National Assembly the Friendship Group with the PRC consisted of 64 MPs, the sixth largest such group in the Bulgarian NA, out of a total of 92. In the 44th National Assembly (2017 to 2021) the Friendship Group for the PRC was the second largest only behind the one with Russia, and consisted of 81 MPs. The US-focused group came third with 69 MPs. Korneliya Ninova, the BSP leader, and Mustafa Karadayi, the MRF leader, were both members of the PRC friendship group. There are currently no official friendship groups in the 48th National Assembly in Bulgaria as a caretaker government is in power.

In 2022, the PRC was mentioned in only two programmes of political parties with elected representation at the national level: WCC and DB. WCC mentioned the PRC in the section entitled ‘Development of mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation with China in alignment with the EU strategy, including the increase of Bulgarian export.’<sup>58</sup> Similarly, DB appealed for mutual cooperation between Bulgaria and the PRC based on the EU’s CFSP.<sup>59</sup>

GERB’s position has fluctuated to reflect the evolving relations between the EU and other major powers such as the PRC and US. GERB hosted the 2018 high-level multilateral meeting with Chinese representatives for the CEE-China initiative. Yet, just before the meeting in Sofia, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, Vice President of GERB, described the PRC as a threat to national security. This statement provoked a very rare vigorous debate in the Bulgarian National Assembly regarding the nation’s stance towards the PRC, and BSP members criticised the lack of consistency between representatives of the government. It can nonetheless be said that GERB is supportive of Bulgaria’s traditionally good relations with the PRC, and does not seek to either disturb or deepen them. There was only one notable deal concluded with the PRC in GERB’s last term in government, which was the construction of ships

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Association for the Promotion of Agricultural Cooperation Between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries’, Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Agriculture, No date, <https://bit.ly/3xthZVD> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>58</sup> ‘Програма’ [‘Programme’], Продължаваме промяната [‘We Continue the Change’], 15/09/2022, <https://bit.ly/3I4YKXw> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>59</sup> външна политика [‘Foreign Policy’], Демократична България [Democratic Bulgaria], 2022, <http://bit.ly/40U4Cvn> (checked: 16/02/2023).

for the Bulgarian Sea Shipping Company, a private business.<sup>60</sup>

Despite not mentioning the PRC in its manifesto, BSP shows strong support for expanding cooperation with the PRC and has maintained a good relationship with the CCP throughout the years. In 2014, BSP officially offered Bulgaria as host for the CEE-China initiative's multilateral meetings, and BSP MPs often highlight the advantages of strong economic cooperation with the PRC.<sup>61</sup>

The position of the MRF on the PRC is unclear. At the European level, MRF has strongly supported the EU's declarations condemning the CCP's humanitarian abuse. However, in May 2022, Mustafa Karadayi, the Chairperson of MRF, met with Dong Xiaojun, the Chinese Ambassador to Bulgaria, where both highlighted the deeply-rooted healthy relationship between the two countries and the need to develop it further.

In August 2022, Kostadin Kostadinov, the Chairperson of Revival, stated publicly in a meeting with representatives of the Chinese Embassy that Taiwan is part of the PRC and that he supported the PRC's 'One China' principle.<sup>62</sup> Kostadinov also condemned the supposed meddling of American authorities in Chinese foreign policy. In an interview with *Radio China*, he explained that the official statement of his party is that Taiwan and Hainan are parts of the PRC and that any external provocation of the issue may put international peace in jeopardy.<sup>63</sup>

There are no official statements by BR regarding the PRC. However, during the period when Stefan Yanev, the founder of the party

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<sup>60</sup> 'Вдигна флаг вторият 45,500-тонен кораб на, Параходство БМФ' ['The second 45,500-ton ship of "Shipping Company БМФ" is operational'], *Dariknews*, 25/09/2019, <http://bit.ly/3IpSoVr> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>61</sup> Kristiyan Vigenin, 'Декларация № 87 в Народното събрание' ['Statement No. 87 at the Bulgarian National Assembly'], *Strazha* [Guard], 06/07/2018, <https://bit.ly/3YC7UBF> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'Корнелия Нинова се среща с посланика на Китай' ['Kornelia Ninova met with the Ambassador of China'], *Българска социалистическа партия* [Bulgaria Socialist Party], 18/09/2019, <http://bit.ly/3IHCCeH> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>62</sup> The 'One China' principle has three core parts: That there is only one China; that the PRC is the legitimate representative of China; and that Taiwan is part of China. Most countries recognise the PRC as opposed to Taiwan, but recognising the PRC is not the same as adopting the 'One China' principle. 'Костадин Костадинов се среща с китайския посланик' ['Kostadin Kostadinov met with the Chinese Ambassador'], *Trud Media*, 10/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/4OU5kZz> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>63</sup> 'Костадин Костадинов пред Радио Китай: Добре известен факт е, че САЩ представляват най-голямата заплаха за световния мир' ['Kostadin Kostadinov to Radio China: It is a well-known fact that the USA is the biggest threat for International Peace'], *24 Chasa*, 16/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3IqwEY7> (checked: 16/02/2023).

and current member of the National Assembly, was acting caretaker prime minister, he met with Dong. During their conversation, they both put emphasis on expanding access to the Chinese market for high quality Bulgarian products and services and on obtaining the necessary permits from the Chinese side to import more Bulgarian agricultural products into the PRC. The CEE-China initiative was also a key topic of discussion.

Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are more vocal regarding Chinese activity than those in the Bulgarian Parliament. Eva Maydell, a GERB MEP, has the most recorded statements related to the PRC, where she mainly addresses the importance of economic and technological cooperation. However, Maydell has also called for deepening cooperation with Taiwan in importing semiconductors so as to lessen Bulgaria's dependence on the PRC.<sup>64</sup>

#### **2.2.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Bulgaria: A lacking debate**

Since October 2014, the PRC has only been mentioned on a few occasions by the most actively participating MPs in parliamentary debates; only eight MPs have mentioned the PRC in parliament, in a total of 25 statements.<sup>65</sup> These statements mostly highlight the technological advancements of the PRC and the advantages of strengthened economic relations. The most important discussion since 2014 was related to the meeting of the CEE-China initiative in Sofia. Chinese activity within Bulgaria is limited. For example, only around 1% of FDI in Bulgaria comes from the PRC.<sup>66</sup> Thus, there has not been any strong political scrutiny of Chinese activity within Bulgaria. Likewise, when it comes to dealing with the PRC on the EU level, it is notable that leaders of parties represented in the Bulgarian Parliament

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<sup>64</sup> 'Евродепутатът от ГЕРБ/ЕПП Ева Майдел: Министерство на иновациите, вземете пример от Литва!' ['MEP from GERB/EPP Eva Meidel: Ministry of Innovation, take an example from Lithuania!'], GERB-EPP, 08/02/2022, <http://bit.ly/3luq9dF> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>65</sup> The political statements in the sessions of the NA of 26 MPs were researched. These 26 MPs were the most outspoken and influential in all six editions of the Bulgarian National Assembly since 2014. These included eight MPs from GERB, six from BSP, four from WCC, three from MRF, three from DB, one from Revival and one from BR. See: Strazha [Guard], No date, <http://bit.ly/3S8xhIR> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>66</sup> Джо Харгер, 'България, Унгария, Полша: опасни ли са китайските инвестиции в Източна Европа?' [Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland: are Chinese investments in Eastern Europe dangerous?], *Deutsche Welle*, 19/08/2021, <http://bit.ly/3jZGuXq> (checked: 16/02/2023).

mentioned 'China' only five times from 2015 to 2021.<sup>67</sup>

During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, 'China' was mentioned multiple times in Bulgarian political discourse. Nonetheless, the debate largely revolved around crisis responses, shortages of medical supplies and the restrictions imposed by the CCP on Chinese borders and citizens in order to curtail the virus' spread.<sup>68</sup>

Bulgarian politicians have largely refrained from discussing the PRC's governmental system or CCP's humanitarian abuses. On the one hand this might owe to the fact that top-tier politicians from MRF and WCC (such as Delyan Peevski and Assen Vassilev) had professional links to the PRC and that Radev supports intensified engagement with Beijing.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, Bulgarian politicians rarely discuss issues related to international affairs outside of Europe in parliament.

Representatives from the MRF in the European Parliament have taken a more active position concerning humanitarian abuses perpetrated by the CCP. In 2019, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, an MRF MEP, nominated Prof. Ilham Tohti, an imprisoned critic of Beijing's policies against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, which he eventually won. The CCP banned Kyuchyuk from entering the PRC in response. This story, however, was covered in only five media articles in Bulgaria and did not provoke any reaction from other Bulgarian politicians. Kyuckyuk has repeatedly urged Josep Borell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to raise the issue of the CCP's humanitarian abuse in all his meetings with Chinese officials.<sup>70</sup>

However, in comparison to others from Central and Eastern EU Countries, those in Bulgaria are much less critical of authoritarian regimes, including the PRC. Upon the investigation of votes on

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<sup>67</sup> 'GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021: Bulgaria', Centre for the Study of Democracy, 18/11/2021, <https://bit.ly/3xpcxTM> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>68</sup> The political statements in the sessions of the NA of 26 MPs were researched. These 26 MPs were the most outspoken and influential in all six editions of the Bulgarian National Assembly since 2014. These included eight MPs from GERB, six from BSP, four from WCC, three from MRF, three from DB, one from Revival and one from BR. See: Strazha [Guard], No date, <http://bit.ly/3S8xhIR> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>69</sup> 'Борисов дава рамо на фирма за кисело мляко на Пеевски в Китай' ['Borisov helps out a yogurt company of Peevski in China'], *Frognews*, 23/11/2015, <http://bit.ly/3XFgwq7> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'Китайците от Хайнан инвестират в Летище Пловдив 79 млн. Лв.' ['The Chinese from Hainan are investing in Plovdiv Airport 79 million BGN'], *Maritsa*, 15/03/2018, <http://bit.ly/3xuLO8r> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>70</sup> 'Bulgarian MEP Says China Imposed Sanctions On Him Over Uyghur's Sakharov Prize', *Radio Free Europe*, 23/03/2021, <http://bit.ly/3Kd7xJv> (checked: 16/02/2023).



resolutions critical of the CCP's humanitarian track record, it is evident that MEPs from the BSP are some of the most PRC-friendly.<sup>71</sup> BSP members were among the only Bulgarian MEPs to not vote on resolutions concerning the CCP's humanitarian abuses in Xinjiang and continued erosion of freedoms and the rule of law in Hong Kong.<sup>72</sup>

In addition the PRC's implicit support for Russia's war against Ukraine has dampened the enthusiasm of the Bulgarian political mainstream to voice support for engaging or expanding relations with the PRC.

## Conclusion

Sofia remains an interesting outlier in Central and Eastern Europe with regards to its policy on the PRC. Bulgaria has enjoyed traditionally good relations with the PRC, yet it has failed to engage in any long-term business deals or political initiatives of a significant nature. And this looks unlikely to occur in the future, as the hardening of the EU's stance towards the PRC in response to revelations of humanitarian abuse by the CCP and the Covid-19 pandemic constrains Sofia's decision making. It is unlikely that Bulgaria will start charting an independent course, different from that of the EU, when it comes to its policy regarding the PRC. However, it still may try to engage in more active diplomacy to better ensure the access of Bulgarian businesses in the Chinese market.

## 2.3 Croatia

By Daniel Hinšt, Igor Šlosar and Mario Guvo

### 2.3.1 Croatia's political system and the main political parties

Croatia is a unitary republic and parliamentary democracy. The main political institution is the parliament, which has one legislative chamber of representatives, while the government and president represent the executive power of the state. The Croatian Parliament (*Hrvatski Sabor*) proclaimed independence from socialist Yugoslavia in

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<sup>71</sup> 'Votes: China-critical index', *Political Capital*, 04/02/2020, <http://bit.ly/412CZA2> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*



the second half of 1991, which gained international recognition in January 1992. There are 151 seats in the Croatian Parliament.

The main political parties represented in the parliament are the centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP), followed by the green-left We Can and right-wing Bridge and DP. Furthermore, there are also several centrist liberal parties – Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS), Centre, Civic Liberal Alliance (GLAS), Focus, People’s Party-Reformists, Croatian People’s Party-Liberal Democrats (HNS) and Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLs). In 2021 the Social Democrats split from SDP and formed a separate parliamentary group. Finally, representatives of national minorities have eight fixed seats, while the ethnic Croat diaspora has three fixed seats. Both groups support the centre-right governing majority, which has been led by HDZ since 2016 together with the two oldest liberal parties (HSLs and HNS).

The Law on Financing Political Activities, Election Campaigns and Referendums regulates issues associated with transparency. The Law creates conditions for efficient supervision and transparency through an information system. Financial reports of political parties need to be published on the website of the State Election Commission. The most important source of financing the parliamentary parties is through public money, while there are several other sources. There are no restrictions on spending in election campaigns and parties in Croatia can receive donations from legal entities.

### **2.3.2 How the Croatian public views the PRC: Growing concerns despite a lack of knowledge**

Croatians perceive the PRC as a modern and growing economy with political influence in the current geopolitical system. 86% of respondents in a survey conducted by the Chinese Embassy in Zagreb supported Chinese investment in Croatia, particularly in building infrastructure. Despite this, however, Croatians were scarcely aware of the CEE-China initiative and BRI, with only 19% saying they had heard of the former, and 15% the latter.<sup>73</sup> This is surprising given the

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<sup>73</sup> Snježana Pavić, ‘Kinu Više Ne Doživljavamo Kao Veliku Komunističku Zemlju, Neo Kao Modernu Silu Čak 86 posto Hrvata podržava kineske investicije u Hrvatsku’ [‘We no longer perceive China as a great communist country, but as a modern power: As many as 86 percent of Croats support Chinese investments in Croatia’], *Jutarnji list* [Morning paper], 06/03/2018, <http://bit.ly/4oZqKnU> (checked: 16/02/2023).



high-profile nature of the now completed Pelješac Bridge (a BRI project), and highlights the average Croatian's lack of knowledge about the PRC and its political initiatives. However, in a survey conducted by Eurobarometer in 2022, 56% of Croatians had a 'total negative' view of the PRC (EU average of 70%) with 37% having a 'total positive' view (EU average of 22%).<sup>74</sup> This shows that views of the PRC are predominantly negative amongst the Croatian public, yet that there is also a degree of polarisation.<sup>75</sup>

As the PRC has become more authoritarian at home and abroad, according to interviews with relevant actors, Croatians have begun to focus more attention on the negative effects of unfair commercial practices such as Chinese price dumping, low standards of production and intellectual property theft.<sup>76</sup> It is a central theme of prominent and outspoken PRC experts in Croatia.<sup>77</sup>

The rise of more state involvement in the PRC's economy since 2012 was one problem for some interviewed. It has led to, it is said, a lack of respect for data protection, and the CCP's influence on the direction of investments can be seen as unfair. The CEE-China initiative is also at times seen by Croatian experts and critics of the PRC as an attempt to build a diplomatic capital to crumple European unity.<sup>78</sup> Other experts have cited the initiative when referencing expanding cooperation with Taiwan; if Taiwan is further engaged, membership to the CEE-China initiative may become politically unsustainable.<sup>79</sup> Lithuania's recent experience is a case in point.

Croatia has a strong Catholic tradition, and Rev Vatroslav Župančić, Chair of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, has pointed out that violations of religious freedoms are frequently reported in the PRC, something that if widely known would likely unnerve the Croatian public.<sup>80</sup> However, the media's interest in economic issues drowns out

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<sup>74</sup> 'EP Spring 2022 Survey: Rallying around the European flag - Democracy as anchor point in times of crisis', European Commission, June 2022, <http://bit.ly/3S57OQz> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Kristijan Kotarski, Professor at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science, conducted by the authors on 14th November 2022.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Interview with David Lekaj, CEO of Eurasia Business Platform, conducted by the authors on 24th November 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Vatroslav Župančić, Chair of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, conducted by the authors on 5th December 2022.

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almost all coverage of religious persecution in the PRC, so information such as this is rarely known.

There is nothing to indicate that the CCP or any Chinese businesses own Croatian media outlets. The Croatian mainstream media is predominately pro-Euro-Atlantic, and is generally immune towards PRC (and Russian) disinformation; the same can not be said for some of Croatia's close neighbours.<sup>81</sup> Formal institutional cooperation between Croatian media and the PRC is thin, with the main platform being annual study visits to the PRC for Croatian journalists.<sup>82</sup>

The Croatian media discusses the PRC and PRC-related issues relatively often. The 20th Party Congress received coverage, where the further concentration of power by Xi over the CCP and the CCP itself over the Chinese state was explained in the context of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union's demise.<sup>83</sup> Media articles also state how Croatia plays an important role in the new BRI as a coastal country, with the ports of Ploče and Zadar as ideal destinations for containers full of Chinese goods.<sup>84</sup> The PRC invested heavily into the port of Zadar, something which fits the broader Chinese strategy of acquiring important infrastructure points throughout Europe to ensure the continued free flow of Chinese goods. The PRC invested approximately €30 million (£26.5 million) into the port and joined its board, also stating its further interest in similar investments in Croatia.<sup>85</sup> Regarding the Zadar port investment, coverage in Croatian media is usually neutral. There was also wide coverage of the protests in the PRC against the CCP's strict Covid-19 control measures, which, although largely neutral, drew

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<sup>81</sup> Xhorxhina Bami, 'China Increasing its Footprint in Balkan Media, Study Concludes', *Balkan Insight*, 09/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3Yz6kAx> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>82</sup> Vladimir Shopov, 'Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence', European Council on Foreign Relations, 08/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3jVJRPn> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>83</sup> 'Kineska Komunistička partija ustavom osnažila moć Xi Jinpinga' ['The Chinese Communist Party strengthened Xi Jinping's power with the constitution'], *HRT*, 22/10/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xsMsmj> (checked: 16/02/2023) and Mladen Pleše, 'Na čelu Kine ostaje autokrat koji se zakleo da će njegova zemlja do 2035. postati najveća velesila. Svijet čeka kaos' ['At the head of China remains an autocrat who has sworn that his country will become the biggest superpower by 2035. The world awaits chaos'], *Telegram*, 14/10/2022, <http://bit.ly/3lIVERi> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>84</sup> Filip Raunić, 'Zašto su Kinezi probali stopirati izgradnju pruge Leskovac-Karlovac i što zapravo žele u Hrvatskoj?' ['Why did the Chinese try to stop the construction of the Leskovac-Karlovac railway and what do they really want in Croatia?'], *Net.hr*, 13/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3lEaokw> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>85</sup> 'Kinezi ulažu 215 milijuna kuna u zadarsku luku, zainteresirani su i za Rijeku' ['The Chinese are investing HRK 215 million in the port of Zadar, and are also interested in Rijeka'], *Jutarnji list [Morning paper]*, 08/06/2018, <http://bit.ly/3xpTk4o> (checked: 16/02/2023).



attention to a development in the PRC that Chinese authorities would almost certainly consider negative.<sup>86</sup>

### 2.3.3 How Croatian parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: A polarised debate

The Croatian Government sees the Pelješki Bridge as the most visible symbol of cooperation with the PRC, and something that may foreshadow further collaboration regarding the ports in Rijeka and Zadar, as well as on the Rijeka-Zagreb-Hungarian border. However, a strong and unwavering Euro-Atlantic direction is the priority of its centre-right foreign and European policy.<sup>87</sup>

Zoran Milanović (ex-SDP), the President of Croatia, said in July 2022 that it is smart to be friendly with the Chinese and cooperate with them,<sup>88</sup> and also reaffirmed Croatia's adherence to the 'One China' principle in 2021.<sup>89</sup> In the 2022 interview, he also stated that the PRC is a country that 'supports Russia in its aggression against Ukraine'.<sup>90</sup> Ivo Josipović (ex-SDP), former President of Croatia, sees the economic progress of the PRC and its largely successful fight against poverty in a positive light, and believes that all issues related to Taiwan should be handled through the 'One China' principle.<sup>91</sup>

In the Croatian Parliament, the Croatian-Chinese Interparliamentary Friendship Group is the only body dealing with the PRC directly. It aims at 'developing friendly relations' between the two countries and meeting with PRC officials when they visit Croatia. The general perception of its members regarding the PRC is positive. Members of all interparliamentary friendship groups are appointed by

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<sup>86</sup> 'Prosvjedi u Kini zbog mjera protiv COVID-a' ['Protests in China due to measures against COVID'], HRT, 28/11/2022, <http://bit.ly/3lEx3gK> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>87</sup> Daniel Hinšt, 'Neupitan je euroatlantski smjer naše zemlje i Vlade' ['The Euro-Atlantic direction of our country and the Government is unquestionable'], *Glas Slavonije [Voice of Slavonia]*, 03/12/2022, <http://bit.ly/3l7WUVS> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>88</sup> 'Milanović kritizirao Kineze i komentirao odnos s Plenkovićem' ['Milanović criticised the Chinese and commented on the relationship with Plenković'], HRT, 27/07/2022, <http://bit.ly/3K9xYQf> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>89</sup> 'Croatia reaffirms adherence to one-China principle', *China Daily*, 17/12/2021, <http://bit.ly/3S6fWk7> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>90</sup> 'Milanović kritizirao Kineze i komentirao odnos s Plenkovićem' ['Milanović criticised the Chinese and commented on the relationship with Plenković'], HRT, 27/07/2022, <http://bit.ly/3K9xYQf> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>91</sup> 'Josipović: Kina daje važan doprinos u borbi za svjetski mir' ['Josipović: China makes an important contribution to the fight for world peace'], *China Radio International*, 03/10/2022, <https://bit.ly/3K8r8KZ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

the Committee for Interparliamentary Cooperation based on a previously conducted survey among deputies. Parliamentarians opt for a particular group given their specific knowledge of a country, region, or language. The composition of Interparliamentary Friendship Groups reflects the multi-party structure of the Croatian Parliament.

There is a Foreign Affairs Committee in the Croatian Parliament, and it is currently Chaired by Gari Cappelli (HDZ).<sup>92</sup> The committee has a strong influence in parliament on matters related to Croatia's foreign policy, EU policy and national security policy, which it regularly discusses and produces draft legislation on. It is also influential in deciding who heads diplomatic missions for Croatia, and whether current appointments are satisfactory. The Committee regularly organises meetings with parliamentarians from other countries, and Cappelli expressed his support for the CEE-China initiative when the delegation of the PRC's Foreign Policy Committee of the All-China People's Congress came to the Croatian Parliament on a working visit in 2014.<sup>93</sup> A separate European Affairs Committee exists that does not deal with the PRC or PRC-related issues.

Gordan Jandroković (HDZ), the President of the Croatian Parliament, has emphasised the need to strengthen cooperation between the PRC and Croatia through the CEE-China initiative and BRI.<sup>94</sup> In addition, Jandroković has asserted that Croatia respects the influence the PRC is having on the international order.<sup>95</sup>

From the opposition, Domagoj Hajduković (Social Democrats), who is the President of the European Affairs Committee and member of the Committee for Interparliamentary Cooperation, emphasised how the Pelješki Bridge represents successful cooperation between Croatia and the PRC.<sup>96</sup> Hajduković also thinks that Croatia's EU membership does not have to be a limiting factor in deepening relations with the

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<sup>92</sup> 'Foreign Affairs Committee: 10th term of the Croatian Parliament (22 July 2020)', Croatian Parliament, No date, <https://bit.ly/3S2XSHg> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>93</sup> 'Izaslanstvo Odbora za vanjsku politiku Svekineskoga narodnog kongresa NR Kine boravi u radnom posjetu Hrvatskome saboru' ['The delegation of the Foreign Policy Committee of the All-China People's Congress is on a working visit to the Croatian Parliament'], Hrvatski Sabor [Croatian Parliament], 10/07/2014, <https://bit.ly/3jWxHpn> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>94</sup> 'Gari Cappelli primio veleposlanika Kine Qi Qianjina' ['Gari Cappelli received Chinese Ambassador Qi Qianjin'], Hrvatski Sabor [Croatian Parliament], 03/03/2022, <https://bit.ly/3YAhkxJ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> 'Domagoj Hajduković primio kineskog veleposlanika Qi Quianjina' ['Domagoj Hajduković received the Chinese ambassador Qi Qianjin'], Hrvatski Sabor [Croatian Parliament], 08/06/2022, <https://bit.ly/40ZxGBD> (checked: 16/02/2023).

PRC.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, Gordan Maras (ex-SDP), the former Chair of the Croatia–Chinese Interparliamentary Friendship Group, called for a stronger connection with the PRC through the group itself and for the further improvement of relations within the CEE–China initiative and BRI.<sup>98</sup>

While representatives from large parties from both sides of the political spectrum have had positive views of the PRC (as well as toward the EU and NATO), several (right-wing) liberal and conservative parliamentarians, regardless of their political inclination, are outspokenly critical of the PRC and PRC-related issues. For example, Darko Klasić, a representative of the governing conservative liberal party HSLs, sees problems with the PRC's theft of intellectual property and unfair economic practices.<sup>99</sup> Klasić believes that the PRC uses the BRI to deepen its relations with the EU, and that benefits from the CEE–China initiative are low. He thinks Croatia should remain closer to free and open nations, particularly Croatia's NATO allies, and that the CCP's humanitarian abuses in the PRC and particularly the rule of law in Hong Kong is something which could be replicated in Taiwan should the CCP launch a successful incursion.<sup>100</sup>

Davor Nađi, the President of Fokus, is concerned by the tightening grip of the CCP over the PRC. He sees this as a particularly geopolitical issue as the CCP is trying to undermine the open international order, meaning its staying power within the PRC will give it more time to do so. Nađi thinks that there is no economic benefit within the CEE–China initiative, and that Croatia should continue developing a strong partnership with the US, United Kingdom (UK) and the EU. Nađi sees respect for human rights and economic freedom as connected, and believes that economic relations with the PRC should not be expanded if in doing so they contribute to the infringement of

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<sup>97</sup> 'Domagoj Hajduković: Suvremena Kina je zemlja znanja, inovacija i tehnologije' ['Domagoj Hajduković: Contemporary China is a country of knowledge, innovation and technology'], *Osijek Danas [Osijek Today]*, 14/04/2021, <http://bit.ly/3YQXQ8l> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>98</sup> 'Članovi Hrvatsko–kineske skupine prijateljstva održali sastanak s kineskim veleposlanikom Zhaomingom Huom' ['Members of the Croatian–Chinese Friendship Group held a meeting with Chinese Ambassador Zhaoming Hu'], Hrvatski Sabor [Croatian Parliament], 13/07/2017, <https://bit.ly/3Ivdgt9> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'Gordan Maras primio kineskoga veleposlanika Zhaominga Hua' ['Gordan Maras received the Chinese ambassador Zhaoming Hua'], Hrvatski Sabor [Croatian Parliament], 25/05/2017, <http://bit.ly/3Ir2yUm> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Darko Klasić, a Croatian MP (HSLs), conducted by the authors on the 13th November 2022.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*



civil liberties, and that ultimately Europe and Croatia should work with the US to contain aggressive Chinese behaviour.<sup>101</sup>

Stephen Nikola Bartulica, conservative representative of the DP, sees the PRC's one-child policy as a failure of the CCP due to the mass amounts of sex-selective abortions and subsequent shortage of around fifty million women.<sup>102</sup> Although the PRC has witnessed significant economic development, Bartulica believes that it is better to opt for slower economic development whilst maintaining respect for human rights and dignity, as is seen in some Central and Eastern European countries, than pursuing rapid growth whilst containing and monitoring individual choices of citizens; for him, economic success cannot be praised without considering human rights and dignity.<sup>103</sup>

As these examples show, it is evident that liberal parliamentarians – especially from Fokus and HSLS – are most often critical and outspoken regarding the PRC.

It can be argued that the degree of hesitation present in Croatia about engaging the PRC is connected with its EU membership. If the relationship between the EU and PRC continues to worsen, relations between Croatia and the PRC will likely follow.

#### **2.3.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Croatia: A lack of voice**

According to the parliamentarians interviewed, there is extremely limited scrutiny of PRC activity internationally, and in Croatia, in the Croatian Parliament. This is mainly because Croatia has a tendency to keep its political relations closely aligned with that of its major partners (the EU, UK and US), and is therefore hesitant to dramatically shift its own position. Therefore, there are no voices, at least among the mainstream parliamentarians and especially within the relevant committees, which would initiate a repositioning of Croatia's foreign policy towards the PRC.

Several parliamentarians are aware of the geopolitical risks associated with the PRC. However, there has never been any 'on the record' discussion scrutinising the PRC or PRC-related issues, even from parliamentarians that hold negative views towards the PRC. One

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with Davor Nadi (Fokus) conducted by the authors on 9th November 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Stephen Bartulica, a Croatian MP (DP), conducted by the authors on 29th November 2022.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*





of the reasons behind this absence is a lack of interest amongst parliamentarians regarding foreign policy issues. On top of this, the Croatian Parliament has a tendency to over-politicise domestic issues and focus on discussing laws, preventing broader perspectives related to geopolitical issues from arising.

## Conclusion

It is clear that Croatia's political parties and active parliamentarians have different views on the PRC; according to the interviewees, several parliamentarians and experts are critical toward the CCP's authoritarian policies at home and increasingly assertive behaviour abroad. It will be important, in the future, to monitor any potential parliamentary scrutiny in Croatia of PRC activity in Croatia, the EU, and indeed the world. Rising geopolitical competition between free and more authoritarian countries will represent a key consideration which will shape Croatia's future and government policy. For now, however, it can be expected that Croatia will follow the EU's policy toward the PRC whilst continuing to share its geostrategic concerns with like-minded partners – primarily the UK and US.

## 2.4 The Czech Republic

*By Alica Kizeková*

### 2.4.1 The Czech Republic's political system and the main political parties

The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy. The president is the formal head of state and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and is directly elected for a five-year-term via a national popular vote. Miloš Zeman, the outgoing President, has been in power since 2013, and his second term ends in March 2023. Petr Pavel, a retired army general who served as the Chairman of the NATO military committee from 2015 to 2018, is going to succeed him. Although his decision-making is restricted and the majority of power lies in the hands of the prime minister and government, the president will intervene in times of tension and crisis, and is the primary constitutional figure in terms of protocol.

As has been pointed out, the supreme executive body is the Czech Government, which is led by the prime minister. All government members are appointed by the president upon the prime minister's recommendations. The president, however, has the final say. The formed government must then win the vote of confidence in the lower house of parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, to officially govern. There are 200 deputies elected on party tickets via a secret ballot, which is based on proportional representation, and their term is for four years. The Senate is the upper house and is composed of 81 senators who are elected in individual electoral districts via a majority win system for six-year terms.

The current government, sworn in on 17th December 2021, is a coalition comprising two electoral alliances – the centre-right Together coalition (Together (SPOLU): Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (TOP 09) and The Christian Democratic Party (KDU-ČSL)) and the Pirates-Mayors coalition.<sup>104</sup> It is headed by Petr Fiala, the SPOLU leader, who is the prime minister. The traditional left-wing parties ČSSD and KSČM did not reach the 5% vote threshold necessary to get any seats in the Chamber of Deputies, happening for the first time since 1993.

The government in the Czech Republic is relatively transparent and respectful of political rights and civil liberties; however, improvements in strengthening safeguards against official corruption and the disclosure of the procurement process and public spending could be made.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> The key political parties in the Czech Republic are as follows: Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (*Akce nespokojených občanů*, ANO), Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS), Czech Pirate Party (*Česká pirátská strana*, Piráti, Pirates), Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie Tomio Okamura*, SPD), Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, KSČM), Czech Social Democratic Party (*Česká strana sociálně demokratická*, ČSSD), The Christian Democratic Party (*Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová*, KDU-ČSL), Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (*Tradice-Odpovědnost-Prosperita*, TOP 09), and Mayors and Independents (*Starostové a nezávislí*, STAN).

<sup>105</sup> 'Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report: Czech Republic', *Freedom House*, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3K9EO8z> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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### 2.4.2 How the Czech public views the PRC: Increasingly negative but lacking wider debate

It should be noted that, overall, the Czech public is largely disinterested in the politics of the PRC – and the Indo-Pacific more broadly – due to geographical distance and cultural differences. There is increasing polarisation regarding the PRC and PRC-related issues among decision-makers and experts that impacts public opinion, but a wider discussion on specific aspects of the PRC and its activity is still missing in the Czech Republic, save a few short articles that relate to tensions in the Taiwan Strait or the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>106</sup>

There have not been many surveys of public opinion on the PRC conducted in the Czech Republic. The most quoted findings come from a worldwide survey by the Washington based Pew Research Centre.<sup>107</sup> In 2019, on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, 57% of surveyed Czechs had an unfavourable opinion of the PRC. 53% lacked confidence in Xi to ‘do the right thing in world affairs’, but it should be noted that he is fairly unknown in the Czech Republic, despite visiting the country and setting up a strategic partnership in 2016.<sup>108</sup>

A more recent report examining Czech public opinion on the PRC in the era of Covid-19 concluded that there was a predominantly negative view (56%), with 30% having a positive one and the remaining respondents neutral.<sup>109</sup> In terms of changes in their perception when comparing the last three years (2018–2020), the authors of the study concluded that a large proportion of surveyed respondents had changed their views, with 41% seeing the PRC more negatively and 11% more positively. It can be argued that Covid-19 played a large part in this change, with the provision of medical equipment from the PRC

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<sup>106</sup> Alex Švanberg, ‘Čína nacvičuje obklíčení Tchaj-wanu’ [‘China is practising the encirclement of Taiwan’], *novinky.cz*, 07/04/2021, <http://bit.ly/3ItiXHX> (checked: 16/02/2023) and ‘Ujgurové? Nucené sterilizace, ponižování a nedobrovolná výuka čínštiny’ [‘Uighurs? Forced sterilisation, humiliation and involuntary Chinese language lessons’], *iROZHLAS*, 15/01/2023, <http://bit.ly/3Kh3dZM> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>107</sup> Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, ‘China’s Economic Growth Mostly Welcomed in Emerging Markets, but Neighbours Wary of its Influence’, Pew Research Centre, 05/12/2019, <http://bit.ly/3IrrqKpG> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>108</sup> ‘China, Czech Republic Set up Strategic Partnership’, *China Daily*, 30/03/2016, <http://bit.ly/3S2ovt9> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>109</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi, Renáta Sedláková, Matej Šimalčík and Kristína Kironská, ‘Czech public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: A divided nation’, Palacký University Olomouc and Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 06/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/411wbTr> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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fostering positive views in the early stages of the pandemic,<sup>110</sup> and the origins of the virus and the CCP's attempt to 'cover it up' fostering negative views in others.

It also appears that the public is divided across the political spectrum when it comes to the PRC, with supporters of Zeman having a tendency to hold more positive views, while those embracing the legacy of Václav Havel, the last President of Czechoslovakia, share more negative ones.<sup>111</sup> In relation to specific political parties, the voters of TOP09, ODS, STAN and the Pirate Party, followed by the Social Democrats, share more negative views, while voters of the SPD and Communist Party tend to view the PRC more positively. However, even among supporters of the Communist Party, negative views (39%) prevailed over positive views (30%). When assessing the PRC's political system, the same trends are apparent.

When discussing specific areas of cooperation with various expert groups, business entities, and the public to specific cases related to the PRC, there was some support for continued trade with the country because it is viewed as an important global economic actor. But, when comparing different Asian countries, there is not much trust towards the PRC and the quality of its products, and the same goes for trust in Chinese firms, particularly in comparison to those of South Korea and Japan. Very few Czechs support cooperation with Chinese companies in the construction of their new 5G network. The Czechs are also very concerned with the environment and its protection, resulting in some of the most negative sentiments toward the PRC coming from their criticism of the country's impact on the global environment. There are also strong negative views toward the CCP's humanitarian abuses and threats towards Taiwan.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> The 'positive' sentiment related to medical equipment was felt in the earlier stages of the pandemic (when the survey was conducted), but later the Czech minister of health tested each delivery and a third was of low quality. Legal analysis was even done to see whether the PRC could be taken to court over faulty facemasks. See, Staňa Sedřová, 'Česko se chystá na soud kvůli nekvalitním rouškám z Číny' ['The Czech Republic is preparing for court over low-quality face masks from China'], *novinky.cz*, 26/08/2020, <http://bit.ly/3YNGrwU> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>111</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi, Renáta Sedřáková, Matej Šimalčík and Kristína Kironská, 'Czech public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: A divided nation', Palacký University Olomouc and Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 06/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/411wbTr> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* and author's findings from attending closed door expert discussions, as well as interviews conducted with business owners trading with the PRC and public servants working at the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence and Ministry of

### 2.4.3 How Czech parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: Auditing relations with the PRC, while openly supporting Taiwan

Since 1993, Czech political (and parliamentary) debate has evolved from mentioning the PRC and PRC-related issues only briefly to having more specific debates regarding it, so much so that it is now rather diverse.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, the topic of the PRC is still marginal among Czech deputies in the Chamber and senators, with Russia or the EU being more prominent. Since the PRC has engaged in more proactive diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe, notably through the launch of the CEE-China initiative in 2012, views have fluctuated from viewing the PRC as an authoritarian state that inhumanely infringes upon the rights of its citizens and poses a major security threat, to seeing the PRC as primarily an investment and economic opportunity. The lack of tangible results under the CEE-China initiative and BRI has left even the proponents of closer engagement to become more critical of the Czech-PRC relationship in recent years.<sup>114</sup>

Prior to 2012, the Mirek Topolánek (ODS) administration (2006 to 2009) boycotted the Beijing Olympic Games, and there was strong support for Tibetan rights and environmental concerns, mainly supported by the Green Party.<sup>115</sup> At the same time, however, there were also calls to engage with the PRC more economically by Jiří Paroubek (ČSSD), who compared the Czechs to Sweden; both governed by a

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Industry and Trade. These individuals are members of political parties across the whole Czech political spectrum.

<sup>113</sup> Since the establishment of the independent Czech Republic (1993), there have been three presidents each with a unique approach to relations with the PRC. Václav Havel (1993-2003) dedicated his work to democracy and human rights. He was in strong opposition to Communist ideology, and a supporter of Tibet. Havel met the Dalai Lama regularly. His successor, President Václav Klaus (2003-2013), believed that while the PRC had a problematic human-rights record, the Czech Republic should attempt to forge a strong relationship with it, just like other European countries such as Germany and France. Klaus undertook a historic 11-day trip to the PRC in 2004. The outgoing Milos Zeman (2013-2023) endorsed a major strengthening of political and economic ties with Beijing and signed a strategic partnership in 2016.

<sup>114</sup> One example of such criticism came from Zeman directly when he spoke negatively about the level of Chinese investments in the Czech Republic on CCTV and described them as 'very low'. See: 'Miloš Zeman v čínské televizi: Nejsem spokojen, investujte v Česku víc' ['Milos Zeman in the Chinese television: I am not satisfied, invest in the Czech Republic more'], *iDNES.cz*, 23/04/2019, <http://bit.ly/3YH088a> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>115</sup> 'Zelení přivítali Číňany ve sněmovně tibetskou vlajkou' ['Greens Welcome Chinese to the Chamber of Deputies with Tibet Flag'], *Hospodářské noviny* [Economic newspaper], 25/09/2008, <http://bit.ly/3XGkwXg> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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right-wing party but having a positive trade balance with the PRC.<sup>116</sup>

From 2013, there have been three electoral cycles which have brought a distinct approach to the PRC and the debates surrounding the Czech Republic's relations with it. The most prominent shift in parliamentary perceptions of the PRC took place from 2014 to 2017, when leadership of the government, Chamber of Deputies, Senate and Ministry of Foreign Affairs was in the hands of Social Democrats. Bohuslav Sobotka, then Prime Minister, opted for a more pragmatic approach toward the PRC based on economic diplomacy. He argued during this time that Czech companies should expand towards the markets of growing economies and stressed improving political relations with the PRC.<sup>117</sup>

Opposition parties were critical of this approach, especially because all agreements with Beijing included the mention of Taiwan as part of the PRC's territory. This stance was supported by Zeman, who made several trips to the PRC during this time and even proclaimed on Chinese television that he came to learn 'how to stabilise [Czech] society'.<sup>118</sup> The friendliness of the Sobotka administration peaked during the presidential visit of Xi to Prague in 2016. While the Czech Senate has a tendency to discuss the environment and economy, during this time, the senators focused discussions around humanitarian issues in the PRC and also issued an appeal to the Chamber of Deputies and the Government to adhere to the Concept of Czech Republic's Foreign Policy (2015),<sup>119</sup> which included a global goal to protect human rights and dignity.<sup>120</sup> Increasingly, opposition politicians became more critical of Sobotka and Zeman's statements, particularly the activities surrounding the controversial company CEFC China Energy and their

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<sup>116</sup> 'Parlament České republiky, Poslanecká sněmovna 2010 – 2013' ['Parliament of the Czech Republic, Chamber of Deputies 2010-2013'], Parlament České republiky [Parliament of the Czech Republic], 27/04/2012, <https://bit.ly/3ka728m> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>117</sup> 'Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka of the Czech Republic Meets with Wang Yi', Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, 16/10/2015, <http://bit.ly/3KoZo4G> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>118</sup> 'Zeman: Do Číny jsem se jel poučit, jak stabilizovat společnost' ['Zeman: I came to China to learn how to stabilise society'], *E15.cz*, 30/10/2014, <http://bit.ly/3IsVmXH> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>119</sup> 'Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 03/08/2015, <http://bit.ly/3kootbD> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>120</sup> 'Usnesení Senátu k zahraniční politice ČR ve vztahu k Čínské lidové republice' ['Senate resolution on the foreign policy of the Czech Republic in relation to the People's Republic of China'], Milos Vystrčil personal website, 30/11/2016, <https://bit.ly/3NOJrSe> (checked: 16/02/2023).



acquisitions in the Czech Republic, a concern which was backed by annual reports issued by the Security Information Services (BIS) which warned against Chinese infiltration and spying.<sup>121</sup>

The period from 2017 to 2021 saw discussions about the PRC as a security threat increase, especially in regards to Huawei and its participation in the construction of the Czech Republic's 5G network, or breaches of environmental protection in reference to the Paris Climate agreement. Additionally, Zeman even seemed to take a more critical stance on the PRC, criticising investments that lacked results and threatening to boycott the CEE-China 2020 summit.<sup>122</sup> The Czech-PRC relationship became rather tense after Milos Vystrčil, President of the Senate, made a formal visit to Taiwan in late August and early September 2020. Wang Yi, then the Chinese Foreign Minister, warned the Czechs that they would pay a heavy price for such a visit.<sup>123</sup>

In the current electoral cycle, the leadership of the Senate (Vystrčil), Chamber of Deputies (Marketa Pekarová-Adamová, TOP09) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Jan Lipavský, Pirate Party) have all spoken very openly about their support for Taiwan. They all support a major revision of the Czech Republic's ties with Beijing.<sup>124</sup>

The Czech Republic-China Interparliamentary Friendship Group facilitates informal engagements between the Czech Chamber of Deputies and Chinese parliamentarians. Vojtech Filip (KSČM), the former Chairperson, used the group to strengthen interactions with Chinese parliamentarians during a meeting in April 2015 where he

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<sup>121</sup> Annual BIS Reports usually touch on intelligence findings and any subversive activity targeting the Czech Republic from mainly Russia, the PRC and Iran. For the latest report, see: 'Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2021', Security Information Service of the Czech Republic, 17/10/2022, <https://bit.ly/3S3Uax7> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>122</sup> 'Zeman chce místo sebe poslat do Číny Hamáček. V Rusku si bude stěžovat kvůli zpochybňování srpna 68' ['Zeman wants to send Hamáček to China instead of himself. In Russia, he will complain about questioning August 68'], Česká televize [Czech Television], 12/01/2020, <http://bit.ly/40YGmrZ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>123</sup> On the municipal level, Zdenek Hrib (Pirate Party), the Mayor of Prague, ended Prague's sister agreement with Beijing and concluded one with Taipei in 2019.

<sup>124</sup> 'Autokratům nelze ustupovat. Stali bychom se vazaly, hodnotí návštěvu Pelosiové na Tchaj-wanu Vystrčil' ['Autocrats cannot be appeased. We would become vassals, says Vystrčil of Pelosi's visit to Taiwan'], iRozhlas [iRadio], 08/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3YWFYNv> (checked: 16/02/2023); 'Předsedkyně Sněmovny: Tchaj-wan musí zůstat ostrovem svobody' ['The Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies: Taiwan must remain an island of freedom'], Parlament České republiky [Parliament of the Czech Republic], 20/07/2022, <http://bit.ly/3S6j3YZ> (checked: 16/02/2023); and Lu Yi-hsuan and Liu Tzu-hsuan, 'Time EU helped "bullied" democracies: Czech official', *Taipei Times*, 15/04/2022, <http://bit.ly/3k04N7C> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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argued the importance of discussing investments, avenues of cultural exchange and educational cooperation.<sup>125</sup> There has never been any regular contact between the Czech and Chinese groups, rather more ad hoc meetings attended by the Chinese Ambassador in Prague. The current members are predominantly from ANO (12), SPD (4) and ODS (2).<sup>126</sup> The number of members has decreased from 55 between 2013 to 2017, to 41 between 2017 to 2021, to now 18, highlighting a decreased lack of interest among parliamentarians in fostering closer relations with the PRC. The activities of this group are not publically well-known, and membership is voluntary.

Pavel Fischer (Independent), a Senator and Chairperson of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security, is a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC).<sup>127</sup> From 2019, under his chairmanship, the Senate Committee has held a series of public hearings to discuss the Czech Republic's relations with the PRC, in the realms of security, business and politics. The first meeting involved companies and other economic actors that collaborate with the PRC. He previously stated that the PRC was equally a huge opportunity and threat, due to its challenging of the United Nations's (UN) core value system.

To summarise how political parties perceive the PRC in the Czech Republic, the members of TOP 09 have been the most consistent critics of the state, particularly politicians such as Miroslav Kalousek, Helena Langšádlová and Markéta Pekarová-Adamová. They are equally supported by Jan Lipavský (Pirate). Somewhat critical are the members of ODS. Members of ČSSD and ANO displayed more positive views regarding the PRC and embraced it pragmatically, while KSČM consistently projected a pro-Chinese position throughout the electoral cycles mentioned. The more recent right-wing SPD party, led by Tomio Okamura, has also shared a more positive outlook on the PRC and the Czech Republic's relationship with it. It would be misleading to argue that all members of these right-wing or left-wing parties take either a more critical (ODS) or positive (ČSSD) approach to the PRC; there is a

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<sup>125</sup> The author worked as an expert adviser to the office of the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies at this time and was present at some of the negotiations with the Chinese delegations.

<sup>126</sup> 'Členové-Skupina ČR-Čína' ['Members of the Group the Czech Republic-China'], Parlament České republiky [Parliament of the Czech Republic], No date, <http://bit.ly/3KdCU6U> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>127</sup> For more, see: Interparliamentary Alliance on China, No date, <http://bit.ly/3S3Jajm> (checked: 16/02/2023).





diversity of views in these parties. However, an increasingly value-based foreign policy is beginning to gain traction in the Czech Republic, and therefore so is a more critical assessment of the PRC and PRC-related issues. Academics, sinologists and China experts have driven this strategy by uncovering cases of the PRC's misconduct and presenting it to the Czech public, as well as through assessing what Czechs think about the PRC. It is not clear to what extent individual politicians are involved with these groups, or how frequently they seek their advice and insight.

#### **2.4.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in the Czech Republic: Growing scrutiny but insufficient discussion**

It is not possible to get a full picture of parliamentary scrutiny regarding the PRC or PRC-related issues since some discussions take place during closed sessions of parliamentary committees, which focus on a range of issues from security risks, to the environment and the economy. What is possible is to access the Parliamentary Library database of digital transcripts of parliamentary sessions and to identify keywords. Records that mention the PRC only in passing in the context of signatories of international agreements or as a member of organisations must be omitted.<sup>128</sup> There are not many records that would point to an extensive, serious discussion, rather statements that suggest an attitude toward the PRC or PRC-related issues – whether negative, positive or neutral.

The period from 2012 to 2017 was known for more positive political discussion surrounding regional cooperation through the CEE-China initiative and the importance of the PRC in world affairs, or in relation to its relationship with the US, Russia or India. All relevant topics would be voiced, ranging from human rights and the position of minorities in the PRC, the trade imbalance between the Czech Republic and the PRC and the need to increase Czech presence in the Chinese market, to warnings from BIS to pay attention to the threat of Chinese infiltration and the participation of Huawei in the construction of the Czech Republic's 5G network and other public infrastructure. However, a commonly held belief amongst the Czechs is that these debates were

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<sup>128</sup> Alžběta Bajerová and Ivana Karásková, 'Čína v Parlamentu České republiky v letech 1993-2018' ['China in the Parliament of the Czech Republic in 1993-2018'], Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky [Association for International Affairs], 28/07/2019, <https://bit.ly/3XDTa45> (checked: 16/02/2023).

too superficial and not deep enough.

Some more prominent moments were the visit of the Dalai Lama and his meetings with Daniel Herman (KDU-CSL), the Minister of Culture, in 2016 which was followed by a statement by the four highest constitutional officials in the Czech Republic, reassuring Beijing of the countries support for the 'One China' principle.<sup>129</sup> This statement was not received well, and was criticised for its subservient nature.<sup>130</sup>

As was already pointed out, the change came with the new concept of Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic, which elevated the use of economic diplomacy and, thus, increased high profile ministerial exchanges between the Czech Republic and the PRC, which included groups of entrepreneurs, in pursuit of new investments. At present, there is more of a focus on organising such visits to Taiwan. Additionally, from 2014, there has been a discussion platform – the National Convention on the EU – among government representatives, politicians, businesses and non-governmental entities, where big topics, including the relationship with the PRC, are debated. The sessions are closed, but generate public recommendations. The latest discussions focused more on the new Czech Indo-Pacific Strategy and debating Czech ties with like-minded Asian countries.<sup>131</sup> Scrutiny of relations with the PRC has mainly taken place in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which tends to keep details confidential for fear of them being leaked to the media. Even parliamentarians have not had a chance to fully discuss the revised position regarding the Czech Republic's relationship with the PRC.

Recent topics brought up during a parliamentary session in February 2022 related to the PRC's social credit system, with Vladimír Zlínský (SPD) comparing it with measures taken earlier during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic. He detailed the restrictions

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<sup>129</sup> 'Společné prohlášení nejvyšších ústavních činitelů České republiky' ['Joint Statement of the Supreme Constitutional Leaders of the Czech Republic'], Pražský hrad [Prague Castle], 18/10/2016, <https://bit.ly/3NqbM5T> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>130</sup> The Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic issued a statement condemning the statement. Only around 40% of the Czech public considered the statement to be exaggerated, according to a survey conducted by the Nielsen Admosphere agency for Czech Television. A fifth of respondents said the statement was normal, while 11% said it was exceptional but necessary. See: 'Přes 40 procent lidí považuje pročínské prohlášení za přehnané' ['Over 40 percent of people consider the pro-China statement to be exaggerated'], *novinky.cz*, 29/10/2016, <http://bit.ly/3LHQ2Hf> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>131</sup> 'Kulatý stůl: Vztahy EU s indopacifickou oblastí z pohledu ČR' ['Roundtable: Relations of the EU with Indo-Pacific region from the Czech Republic's perspective'], Národní Konvent [National Convention], 25/04/2022, <http://bit.ly/3XC1h17> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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that the PRC imposes on its citizens and pointed out that the Czech government, through the Ministry of Health, was also restricting individual freedoms and increasing its control over citizens. Another big topic was related to the PRC's participation in tenders to build a new nuclear power plant at the Dukovany Nuclear Power Station, where the PRC was excluded on national security grounds.

Other recent notable scrutiny of the PRC or PRC-related activity took place during a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee in relation to the PRC's position towards Russia's war against Ukraine. It was presented by Jiří Kozák, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, during a session of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies on 31st March 2022.<sup>132</sup> More elaborate was the Resolution 38 of the Committee from 19th May 2022 which stated that the CEE-China initiative has not delivered any substantial benefit to the region, and rather served the one-sided interests of the PRC.<sup>133</sup> It also said that the behaviour of the PRC has remarkably changed since the leadership of Xi, positioning the PRC as a rival to the US and EU, and as a state which is aspiring to acquire the position of world leader. They also acknowledged the exit of Lithuania from the platform and encouraged the Czech Government to revise relations with the PRC and to consider distancing itself from the activities within the CEE-China initiative and, ultimately, to withdraw from the platform.

Assessing this specific period reveals that the number of instances when 'China' is debated in the Chamber or Senate has not increased too much, yet the quality of the discussion has improved. There is a genuine effort to try and better understand various aspects of engagement. There is also a more pragmatic outlook on the country, in line with discussions taking place in other allied countries that are publishing Indo-Pacific strategies and promoting cooperation in the region. However, Czech parliamentarians and decision-makers across

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<sup>132</sup> A summary of this report in Czech is available. See: 'Parlament České republiky Poslanecká sněmovna 2022 9. volební období zápis ze 7. schůze zahraničního výboru konané dne 31. března 2022' ['Parliament of the Czech Republic House of Commons 2022 9th election period minutes from the 7th meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee held on March 31, 2022'], Parlament České Republiky [Parliament of the Czech Republic], 08/11/2022, <https://bit.ly/3IrfWrs> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>133</sup> 'USNESENÍ 38 zahraničního výboru z 9. schůze ze dne 19. května 2022 k informaci o aktuálním stavu platformy 16+1 (spolupráce Číny a zemí střední a východní Evropy)' ['Resolution 38 of Foreign Affairs Committee from 9th Meeting on 19 May 2022, to inform about the current status of the 16+1 (platform, cooperation of China with the countries in the Central and Eastern Europe)'], Parlament České Republiky [Parliament of the Czech Republic], 08/11/2022, <https://bit.ly/3k3eT7U> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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the public sector do not always tap into the full potential of expertise and only focus on selected individuals, groups or institutions to provide briefings regarding the PRC.

## Conclusion

Political perceptions of the PRC over the last ten years have evolved from being more embracing to more critical, which is important for the Czech Republic in relation to its foreign policy priorities but also in its engagements with more compatible partners. Nevertheless, scrutiny of the PRC is primarily done by select individuals or organisations, and is often funded by foreign grants. There is not adequate support for the existing, and next, generation of Czech China experts which would encourage the better sharing of findings and more elaborate domestic discussion about issues relevant to the Czech Republic.

In January 2023, Czech voters elected Petr Pavel as their new president, and he has already held a phone call with his counterpart in Taiwan. He publicly acknowledged the fact that the Czech Republic's foreign policy would be more pro-Taiwan.<sup>134</sup> The most important upcoming event to observe is the parliamentary visit of Markéta Pekarová Adamová, the Czech Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, to Taiwan in March 2023. This will be followed by the outcome of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' position statement or strategy toward the PRC, which will no doubt include a position on the Czech Republic's membership to the CEE-China initiative.

## 2.5 Hungary

By Péter Goreczky

### 2.5.1 Hungary's political system and the main political parties

Hungary is a parliamentary republic and legislative power rests with the parliament, which consists of 199 Members in a single chamber, being the National Assembly. Parties need a minimum of five seats for

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<sup>134</sup> 'Pavel: Situace na Hradě je horší, než jsem čekal, možná padne trestní oznámení. Babiš mi napsal SMS' ['Pavel: The situation at the Castle is worse than I expected, there may be a criminal complaint. Babiš texted me'], *Reflex* via Youtube, 31/01/2023, <https://bit.ly/3S6usrK> (checked: 16/02/2023).

official representation in the National Assembly. Executive power in Hungary rests with the government, and judicial power rests with the courts.

MPs are elected on a four-year term, being voted in via secret ballot, with all adults ages over 18 years being granted universal suffrage. The parliament has the right to monitor the work of the government, and if it concludes that the government is not pursuing its responsibilities satisfactorily, it may withdraw its support and appoint a new prime minister by a majority vote.

The government is the main body of executive power and the primary director of public administration, meaning it implements decisions made by parliament, as the legislative organ, and pursues the goals laid out in the government's programme. The prime minister is the head of the government whose appointment is subject to a majority vote by MPs. The task of the prime minister is to determine the general direction of government policy within the context of its programme.

The President of the Republic represents the Hungarian state, may participate and speak in parliament, and may initiate laws and national referendums. This individual also determines the dates for general parliamentary, local council and mayoral elections, elections to the European Parliament, and national referendums. The president may also dissolve the parliament.

There are currently nine political parties with representation in the Hungarian Parliament. The governing central right coalition, consisting of the Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union (FIDESZ) and Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), currently holds 135 seats in parliament. Opposition parties, the left-liberal Democratic Coalition (DK), the right-conservative Movement for a Better Hungary (commonly known as Jobbik), the centrist-liberal Momentum, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), the green Politics Can Be Different (LMP), the left-green Dialogue for Hungary (PM) and far-right Our Homeland share 63 seats altogether (these parties, except for Our Homeland which has six parliamentary seats, formed a unified opposition at the last elections). Ethnic Germans hold one representative seat. There are no major political parties outside the National Assembly.

The State Audit Office (SAO) of Hungary is the only designated

entity that controls the finances of political parties.<sup>135</sup> The organisation is independent from the government and is subordinate to the National Assembly. The head of the SAO can not be a person who was a member of the preceding government, or who was a leader of any of the parties.

### 2.5.2 How the Hungarian public views the PRC: Economic issues in focus

A wide-scale survey of public opinion on the PRC was conducted between September and October 2020 in 13 European countries, including Hungary.<sup>136</sup> The study revealed that 49% of Hungarian respondents viewed the PRC negatively, with only 25% holding a positive view. 31% of respondents declared a worsening perception of the PRC since 2017. Party preference had little bearing on how Hungarians viewed the PRC; however, less than 40% of FIDESZ-KDNP voters held negative views, below the average. The Momentum Movement had the voter base with the most negative perception of the PRC, with 62% holding negative views.

However, according to a survey made by the Corvinus University of Budapest and the Hungary based Medián Institute in 2022, there has been a turn in public opinion regarding the PRC since 2020, with around 50% of respondents stating that they see the PRC positively and only a quarter holding negative sentiments.<sup>137</sup> This change is mainly attributed to the PRC's provision of medical equipment and vaccines to Hungary during the Covid-19 pandemic, something which the pro-government media covered positively.<sup>138</sup> In the survey, it was speculated that around 60-70% of FIDESZ-KDNP voters had a positive perception of the PRC.

The survey conducted in 2022 measured a relatively positive perception amongst Hungarians regarding the expansion of economic

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<sup>135</sup> 'Act LXVI of 2011 on the State Audit Office of Hungary', State Audit Office of Hungary, 01/07/2013, <https://bit.ly/3NoF6tu> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>136</sup> Klára Dubravčíková, Richard Q. Turcsányi, Renáta Sedláková, Matej Šimalčík and Kristína Kironská, 'Hungarian public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19. Enthusiasm overshadowed by skepticism?', Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 27/08/2020, <https://bit.ly/3K9AJ49> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>137</sup> Anna Szabó, 'Nagyot változott a kínaiak megítélése Magyarországon' ['The perception of the Chinese in Hungary has changed a lot'], *Novekedes.hu*, 06/10/2022, <http://bit.ly/3K8Yqtx> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>138</sup> 'Hétfőn újabb 10 ezer maszkot tartalmazó adomány érkezik Zalaegerszegre' ['On Monday, another donation of 10,000 masks will arrive in Zalaegerszeg'], *Zala vármegyei hírportál [Zala county news portal]*, 08/05/2020, <http://bit.ly/3Isu6sB> (checked: 16/02/2023).

ties with the PRC, something also seen in the 2020 survey. Deepening cooperation in science and higher education is also seen positively, however, the planned satellite campus of Fudan University in Budapest is a highly debated issue. The PRC's relationship with Russia also received strong criticism among respondents, especially due to Beijing's tacit support for Russia's renewed aggression towards Ukraine.

Research made by MapInfluencE<sup>139</sup> revealed that between 2010 and 2017, the Hungarian media mainly focused on the economic dimension of Hungary's relationship with the PRC, regularly covering trade statistics. Therefore, the media's tone was largely neutral. Nevertheless, when reports on political issues did appear, they were negative, and the rate of such coverage steadily increased between 2010 and 2017.

Not a lot has changed since 2017 in how the Hungarian media presents the PRC. Pro-government media presents a more positive view but it seldom praises the PRC and CCP directly. Instead, the media emphasises the positive consequences of closer ties, particularly in the economic realm.<sup>140</sup> That said, anti-government Hungarian media has continued to report on the PRC in a more negative tone.<sup>141</sup> In sum, the Hungarian media focuses primarily on the financial and economic aspects of Hungary's relationship with the PRC, with political issues less represented. Considering the public is generally less informed about potentially sensitive political issues, Hungary's media discourse around the PRC is not expected to change in the near future.

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<sup>139</sup> Tamás Matura and Ivana Karasková, 'A kínai beruházásokról és 5G technológiáról szóló vita Közép-Európában – A magyarországi helyzet' ['About Chinese investments and 5G technology debate in Central Europe – The situation in Hungary'], *Asociace pro Mezinárodní Otázky* [Association for International Affairs], 14/06/2021, <https://bit.ly/4oUUJol> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>140</sup> 'Szijjártó Péter: A kínai beruházások biztosíthatják a gazdasági növekedést' ['Péter Szijjártó: Chinese investments can ensure economic growth'], *Magyar Nemzet* [Hungarian Nation], 22/09/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xncurt> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>141</sup> 'Kína megint fenyegetőzik, nem lesz tétlen a hadsereg, ha az amerikai házelnök Tajvanra merészkedik' ['China is threatening again, the army will not be idle if the American speaker ventures to Taiwan'], *Népszava* [People's World], 01/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3Ed4SvB> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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### 2.5.3 How Hungarian parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: Domestic political considerations and interests come first<sup>142</sup>

The governing FIDESZ-KDNP alliance perceives the PRC as a rising global power that is a challenge, competitor and partner all at the same time.<sup>143</sup> When shaping relations with the PRC, the coalition believes Hungary's national interest should always come first, yet understands the importance of Hungary's relationship with its Euro-Atlantic allies and partners, particularly in regarding security. FIDESZ-KDNP encourages free and open nations and the PRC to seek win-win dialogue and avoid interfering in each other's internal affairs. The party alliance also considers regional (Central Eastern Europe) cooperation with the PRC to be important, and believes that debates around PRC-related issues are a reflection of domestic politics in Hungary.

LMP considers the PRC as a main actor in global politics; a leading economic and political power.<sup>144</sup> However, it considers the politics of the CCP as dictatorial, and opposes its revanchist aspirations. LMP emphasised the need for the PRC to respect human rights, the freedom of religion, and the autonomy of Tibet. On Taiwan, LMP respects the 'territorial integrity of the PRC' but supports the participation of Taiwan in international organisations. LMP considers itself as the most active party in Hungary in opposing the CCP's revanchist aspirations, what it calls the PRC's 'recolonising' efforts.<sup>145</sup>

LMP also previously launched a proposal in parliament to terminate the Budapest-Belgrade railway project, and participated in preparing the referendum on the establishment of the Fudan University campus in Budapest. LMP also protests against the battery manufacturing investment project of the Chinese company Contemporary Ampere Technology, or CATL, in the city of Debrecen

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<sup>142</sup> In order to collect the relevant information for this section, the author approached all political parties with parliamentary representation with a request for an interview. FIDESZ-KDNP, LMP and MSZP responded to the inquiry, while Democratic Coalition refused to take part. Therefore, information on the perspective of Momentum, Jobbik and the Democratic Coalition was collected from the findings of a research project by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, see: Matej Simalcik, Alzbeta Bajerova, Ivana Karaskova, Tamas Matura, Agnieszka Ostrowska and Bruno Surdel, 'Perception of China among V4 Political Elites', Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 31/12/2019, <https://bit.ly/3I1MMxQ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Mr Lőrinc Nacsa, a Hungarian MP (FIDESZ-KDNP) and member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, conducted by the author on 15th December 2022.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Mr Örs Tetlák, a board member of LMP, conducted by the author on 22nd November 2022.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*



because of environmental concerns. MPs of the party regularly touch upon the PRC and PRC-related issues in parliamentary sessions, with the most frequent speakers being Péter Ungár, co-chairperson, and Örs Tetslák, a party board member.

The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) also considers the PRC as a global power, politically and economically.<sup>146</sup> However, it sees the PRC as a systemic rival and opponent of NATO, and one which is actively working on creating a global order that is more receptive to its interests. Despite this, given the growing weight of the PRC in international affairs, MSZP regards the development of bilateral relations with the state as necessary and important. The basis of cooperation, it is said, should be transparent dialogue that aims to solve regional and global issues. MSZP defines Hungary's place in the changing world as embedded in the security architecture of the Euro-Atlantic, and believes that Hungary's bilateral relations with other players (including the PRC) should be in coordination with Hungary's main allies and partners.

Opposition party Momentum considers Chinese investments to be risky as political concessions are at times attached to them and they sometimes raise national security issues.<sup>147</sup> For instance, the party opposed the participation of Huawei in the construction of Hungary's 5G infrastructure. However, the PRC is seen as an important partner that should not be alienated. Momentum believes that there is benefit to be had from deepened economic cooperation with the PRC, however, that this relationship should be developed in line with the country's commitment to its Euro-Atlantic partners. Momentum considers human rights in the PRC as under infringement and supports standing up for Chinese citizens in this regard, but primarily via the EU.

Right-wing opposition party Jobbik considers the PRC as a far less important partner than the governing FIDESZ-KDNP alliance.<sup>148</sup> Chinese investments are mainly seen as a potential source of danger, as they are seen as having the potential to increase the influence of the CCP within Hungary. Jobbik has been one of the most critical parliamentary parties towards the PRC, basing their criticism around

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with Ms. Zita Gurmai, a Hungarian MP (MSZP), conducted by the author on 2nd December 2022.

<sup>147</sup> Matej Simalcik, Alzbeta Bajerova, Ivana Karaskova, Tamas Matura, Agnieszka Ostrowska and Bruno Surdel, 'Perception of China among V4 Political Elites', Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 31/12/2019, <https://bit.ly/311MMxQ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*



the interests of the Hungarian people. This is a major difference compared to the perspective of liberal opposition parties, like LMP or Momentum. For instance, Jobbik has been particularly worried about the business practices of the Chinese diaspora that infringe upon the interests of small and medium sized Hungarian enterprises. Nevertheless, they see potential in developing relations with Beijing, but they are cautious regarding the BRI and cooperation through the CEE-China initiative. Jobbik promotes human rights and the party is critical regarding the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang. However, they do not consider attempting to solve these issues as a primary task of Hungarian diplomacy. The party is ultimately anxious about the possibility of the PRC using Hungary to pursue its own interests in the EU and NATO, something that could damage Hungary's relationship with the US.

As they refused to take part in this project, the general perspective of the Democratic Coalition on the PRC cannot be detailed in depth. However, the party has been consistent in criticising every recent government decision regarding the PRC. The Democratic Coalition launched an especially harsh campaign against the government for its decision to purchase and distribute Covid-19 vaccines from the PRC amongst Hungarians, and were also active in opposing the Fudan University campus in Hungary and the Budapest-Belgrade railway project. Mr Lajos Oláh, Vice President of the National Assembly, is the most knowledgeable MP in the Democratic Coalition regarding the PRC and PRC-related issues. Our Homeland and PM hold similar views to the Democratic Coalition. The main difference is that being a patriot right-wing party, Our Homeland usually links the criticism of PRC behaviour with Hungary's national interests.

Although Hungary is committed to the 'One China' principle, Hungarian parliamentary delegations visited Taiwan in 2013 and 2016. Both delegations included members of the Hungary-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Association. In 2013, MPs from both the governing alliance FIDESZ-KDNP and from the opposition travelled to the island, while in 2016 only three MPs from the ruling coalition made up the delegation.

In the Hungarian National Assembly there are 16 standing committees which assist the parliament's legislative and monitoring activities. They have a pronounced role in the legislative process, as detailed debates are conducted in committee meetings and not in



plenary sessions. Most committees are chaired by a member from the governing party, and party representation mirrors that of the parliament. However, as a sign of control over the government, some of them, such as the Committee on National Security, are headed by an opposition party member. None of the 16 standing committees discuss Chinese activity on a regular basis but some of them, such as the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Economics, do occasionally. Such discussions usually reflect domestic political inclinations, with government politicians defending the government's policy regarding the PRC and opposition MPs criticising it. The frequency of how often the PRC is mentioned is therefore subject to the domestic political agenda, and none of the standing committees produce concrete research on the PRC or PRC-related issues. Within the governing party alliance, the members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs are the MPs who are particularly outspoken on PRC-related issues.

There are also 'friendship groups' of the Hungarian National Assembly that aim to strengthen ties with particular countries or regions and play a role in parliamentary diplomacy. The Hungary-China Friendship Group was established in 1990, and there is also a Hungary-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Association. Currently, there are 15 MPs in the Hungary-China Friendship Group, with the governing party alliance being largely overrepresented with 11 members. During the previous parliamentary cycle, there were 27 MPs in the Hungary-China Friendship Group, of which 13 were from opposition parties. This drastic drop in enthusiasm reflects the extent to which opposition parties' view of the PRC has deteriorated.

#### **2.5.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Hungary: Surfacing occasionally**

Parliament has the right to monitor the work of government, including its stance on the PRC's political and economic activity. Occasionally, there are issues and projects related to the PRC that are placed on the agenda of plenary sessions and committee meetings, or come under the parliament's legislative power. Interpellations by MPs are the most common way Chinese activity gets scrutinised in the Hungarian parliament.

Since 2002, the number of PRC-related speeches in the National



Assembly has grown continuously, showing a threefold increase from the parliamentary cycle of 2002 to 2006 with 2014 to 2018.<sup>149</sup> As engagement with the PRC continues to be high on the government agenda, and opposition parties remain keen on politicising PRC-related issues, this trend is likely to continue. Some recent topics related to the PRC discussed in parliament were the involvement of Huawei in the construction of Hungary's 5G network, the establishment of a Fudan University campus in Budapest, and the Budapest–Belgrade railway project.

To date, the latter is the largest infrastructure project with Chinese involvement in Hungary. Since it is the role of the National Assembly to transplant international contracts into the Hungarian legal system, the inter-state agreement signed between Hungary and the PRC for the Budapest–Belgrade railway came under the parliament's legislative power. The National Assembly also made new legislation to simplify the official permitting procedures to reduce the timeframe of the project.<sup>150</sup> The parliament also voted when choosing whether to declare the details of the project, which were made confidential for ten years. The Fudan University project came under the parliament's jurisdiction as well, with the National Assembly establishing the Foundation for Fudan University in Hungary and granting four state-owned real estate companies contracts to the project.<sup>151</sup>

As for providing incentives for Chinese FDI in Hungary, such as manufacturing projects, the government bases its decision around EU regulation. Nevertheless, MPs may also debate this in parliament through interpellations, but are yet to do so.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, standing committees also play a role in the monitoring activity of parliament and some of them occasionally scrutinise the PRC and PRC-related issues. A prominent example is when the Military National Security Service had to present

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<sup>149</sup> Tamás Matura, 'Kína megítélése a magyar pártpolitikában (1. rész)' ['Assessment of China in Hungarian party politics (part 1)'], *Külpraktika* [External practice], 14/10/2012, <http://bit.ly/3jV4E5A> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>150</sup> '2020. évi XXIX. törvény a Budapest–Belgrád vasútvonal újjáépítési beruházás magyarországi szakaszának fejlesztéséről, kivitelezéséről és finanszírozásáról' ['XXIX of 2020 law on the development, construction and financing of the Hungarian section of the reconstruction investment of the Budapest–Belgrade railway line'], *Wolters Kluwer*, 19/05/2020, <http://bit.ly/3xs9SZv> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>151</sup> 'Szavazott az Országgyűlés a Fudan Egyetemről és a Diákvárosról' ['The National Assembly voted on Fudan University and Student City'], *Portfolio*, 15/07/2021, <http://bit.ly/3EbjICR> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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the findings of an investigation into a Chinese company – which was suspected of collecting the data of Hungarian citizens – to the Committee on National Security.<sup>152</sup> The issue was not raised further in Parliament and the public was not informed of the outcome due to its sensitive nature. The Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Economics has also discussed the Budapest-Belgrade project and Chinese investments in Hungary.

The opposition parties are mostly motivated by domestic political considerations when raising PRC-related issues in parliament. An important element of the opposition's campaign prior to the last parliamentary elections in April 2022 was to position themselves as pro-Euro-Atlantic parties against a government that was seeking closer ties with an authoritarian PRC. Accordingly, the opposition amplified messaging around the PRC and PRC-related issues in its communication.<sup>153</sup>

Human and minority rights in the PRC have been the subject of proposals for parliamentary resolutions in the past. In 2008, a proposal was submitted to urge the PRC to respect human rights in Tibet and to stop violence against Tibetans. The proposal would have called the government to support the start of peace negotiations between Beijing and the Dalai Lama on the autonomy of Tibet. The proposal was voted down by the then governing party MSZP. In 2011, LMP submitted a proposal with practically the same text. Péter Ungár, a LMP politician, also submitted a proposal for parliamentary resolution to condemn the repression of Uyghurs and other minorities in the PRC.

LMP criticised the Budapest-Belgrade railway project due to concerns regarding the return of the investment. They particularly disputed the foreseeable utilisation rate of the railway line. As for the proposed Fudan University campus, the opposition party heavily criticised the project as they considered it to be a national security threat to Hungary. They claimed that the project's implementation required Chinese loans, and that the construction of it would have

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<sup>152</sup> 'A Nemzetbiztonsági Bizottság előtt a kínai adatgyűjtés ügye' ['The Committee on National Security discusses the case of Chinese data collection'], *Szabad Európa* [Free Europe], 16/10/2020, <http://bit.ly/3lK2lT9> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>153</sup> 'Szél Bernadett: a nemzeti szuverenitás a Fidesznek már csak egy "politikai termék"' ['Bernadett Szél: national sovereignty is only a "political product" for Fidesz'], *Ezalenyeg* [That's the point], 16/11/2021, <http://bit.ly/3jRPePy> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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hindered the project of creating a student city in the neighbourhood.<sup>154</sup>

It is important to note that the governing parties are able to easily secure a voting majority; the parliament therefore currently has little control over PRC-related government decisions, no matter the level of scrutiny.

## Conclusion

In Hungary, matters relating to the PRC do not dominate either public or parliamentary discourse. When they are placed on the agenda, public and political perceptions are mainly determined by domestic political considerations and interests. These trends are well reflected in those instances of the Hungarian Parliament that occasionally scrutinise the PRC's international activity.

## 2.6 Poland

By *Lukasz Kobierski*

### 2.6.1 Poland's political system and the main political parties

According to Poland's Constitution, its political system is a parliamentary republic. Executive power is exercised by the Council of Ministers and the president, judicial power by judges and tribunals, and legislative power by the parliament, which is divided into the Sejm and the Senate, and whose members are elected in general elections every four years. The electoral threshold for parties to join the Sejm is 5%, and 8% for party coalitions. The allocation of seats is calculated by using the D'Hondt method that selects 460 deputies. In turn, representatives of the Polish Senate are elected from 100 single-member constituencies.

The main political parties in Poland are those that have representatives in the Polish Parliament. The ruling party, which formed a coalition government in the Sejm, is Law and Justice (PiS), which represents national and social conservatism, and has 228 deputies and 46 senators.

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<sup>154</sup> Tamás Vaski, 'Budapest Leadership Clashes with Gov't Over Fudan University', *Hungary Today*, 19/04/2021, <http://bit.ly/3RZdUSw> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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On the other hand, the opposition groups and caucuses in the Sejm – which have more than four representatives in the Polish Parliament – are as follows:

- Koalicja Obywatelska (Civic Coalition), which represents liberal conservatism and has 126 deputies and 42 senators;
- Lewica (The Left), which represents social democracy and pro-Europeanism and has 44 deputies;
- Koalicja Polska (Polish Coalition), which represents Christian democracy and has 24 deputies and three senators;
- Konfederacja (Confederation), which represents economic liberalism and right-wing populism and has 12 deputies;
- Polska 2050 (Poland 2050), which represents Christian democracy and green politics and has eight deputies and one senator;
- Porozumienie (Agreement), which represents liberal conservatism and has five deputies and one senator; and,
- The Polish Socialist Party (PPSS), which represents democratic socialism and has three deputies and two senators.

As can be seen, the Polish opposition is characterised by a higher degree of fragmentation.

The transparency of Poland's political parties is largely regulated by the Anti Corruption Law, which was adopted in 2021.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, since July 2022, political parties in Poland are required to publish information on the internet about donations and concluded contracts.<sup>156</sup> According to the Corruption Perception Index created by Transparency International, in 2021 Poland ranked 42nd out of 180 (highest rank being 1) countries in terms of corruption, comparable to Italy.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> 'Poland. Rule of law report for 2021. Submitted in public consultations on January 24th, 2022 by civil society organisations', Batory Foundation, 30/01/2022, <https://bit.ly/3XrNkTi> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>156</sup> Malwina Gadawa, 'Kto wpłaca na partie w Polsce i ile? Każdy z nas będzie mógł to sprawdzić. Idą ważne zmiany' ['Who pays for parties in Poland and how much? Each of us will be able to check it. Important changes are coming'], *Money.pl*, 01/07/2022, <http://bit.ly/3Kbo7JQ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>157</sup> 'Corruption Perception Index', Transparency International, 2021, <http://bit.ly/3Eboopr> (checked: 16/02/2023).

### 2.6.2 How the Polish public views the PRC: Increasingly negative but economic engagement desired

Apart from specialist magazines that mainly focus on foreign policy issues and economics, the subject of the PRC occupies little space in Polish media. This could be said to be partly the result of a strong orientation among Poles to the politics of free and open countries. However, in 2022, the investment climate in Poland (as represented in the Polish media) has become extremely unfriendly to the Chinese. The reason is both the war against Ukraine and the PRC's tacit support for Russia, and Polish media publications warning against the PRC gaining more influence over critical port infrastructure in Poland.<sup>158</sup>

Between 2010 and the outbreak of Covid-19, relations between Poland and the PRC were relatively stable and friendly. Warsaw joined China-led programmes such as the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and proposed establishing special economic zones for Chinese capital in Poland.<sup>159</sup> Despite growing tensions between the US and the PRC, the prevailing belief in Poland was that good relations with Beijing were important and desired.

Bilateral relations, however, deteriorated as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19. In May 2020, Poland, together with a group of 121 countries, including all EU countries, the UK, Australia, Canada, the US and New Zealand, submitted a request to the World Health Assembly operating within the World Health Organisation to investigate the place of origin of the Covid-19 virus, something which was perceived as hostile by the CCP.

The deterioration of the political relationship, in turn, has had an impact on the Polish general public's perception of the PRC. While in 2019 about 47% of Poles held a positive opinion about the PRC, and 34% held a negative opinion, in 2020 these values were 30% and 40% respectively.<sup>160</sup> In addition, in a survey from 2021, as many as 34% of

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<sup>158</sup> Laurens Groeneveld and Maria Pankowska, 'Chiny inwestują w europejskich portach i podtapiają obronę NATO' ['China is investing in European ports and waterlogging NATO defenses'], *frontstory.pl*, 18/10/2022, <https://bit.ly/3XyEcMw> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>159</sup> 'Wizyta prezydenta Chin w Polsce' ['Visit of the President of China to Poland'], *Bankier* [Banker], 20/06/2016, <http://bit.ly/3Ebv6P3> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>160</sup> Marcin Przychodniak, 'Strategiczny partner Chin czy wspólnik USA? Polska w retoryce władz i środowisk eksperckich ChrL' ['China's strategic partner or USA partner? Poland in the rhetoric of the Chinese authorities and expert circles'], *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych* [The Polish Institute of International Affairs], 18/01/2018, <http://bit.ly/3lBiYRc> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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respondents said that their opinion of the PRC had declined since 2019.<sup>161</sup> Also in 2021, according to a survey for the Polish tabloid Super Express, only 26% of Poles were in favour of buying Chinese vaccines, with 74% against it.<sup>162</sup>

Thus, over the last decade, Poland has seen a change in opinion about the PRC for the worse, mainly due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this does not mean that Poles are in favour of reducing mutual economic ties – in a 2020 poll for the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), about 60% of Polish respondents stated that they consider economic cooperation with the PRC positively, the highest score in Visegrad Group countries.<sup>163</sup> This reflects the fact that, even despite the negative political perception of the PRC by Poles, the Poland-PRC economic relationship could yet deepen.

Significantly, according to the same poll for the CEIAS, sympathies for the PRC broken down by party preference in Poland were as follows:

- Koalicja Obywatelska (Civic Coalition), including Civic Platform (PO), Modern and Polish Initiative (iPL) – almost 40% of respondents indicated a negative or very negative opinion about PRC, and 35% a positive or very positive one;
- Zjednoczona Prawica (United Right) Law and Justice (PiS), United Poland (SP) and The Republicans – 50% of respondents indicated a negative or very negative opinion about the PRC, and 35% a positive or very positive one;
- Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (Confederation Liberty and Independence) including National Movement (RN) – about 40% of respondents indicated a negative or very negative opinion about the PRC, and 35% a positive or very positive one;
- Lewica (Left) including New Left, Left Together and Polish Socialist Party (PPS) – 30% of respondents indicated a negative or very negative opinion about the PRC, and 35% a positive or very positive one; and,

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<sup>161</sup> Ellie Young and Alicja Bachulska, 'Beijing's global media influence 2022 - Poland', Freedom House, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3K9aomE> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>162</sup> 'Sondaż: Polacy nie chcą szczepionek z Chin i Rosji' ['Poll: Poles do not want vaccines from China and Russia'], *Gospodarce [Economy]*, 06/03/2021, <http://bit.ly/3xr1evU> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>163</sup> Adrian Brona, Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská and Renáta Sedláková, 'Polish public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19', Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 28/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3xoJa3X> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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- Koalicja Polska (Polish Coalition) including Polish People's Party (PSL) and Centre for Poland – 50% of respondents indicated a negative or very negative opinion about the PRC, and 25% a positive or very positive one.<sup>164</sup>

### 2.6.3 How Polish parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: A fringe issue

The subject of the PRC is not very prominent in Poland, whether that is in public or parliamentary debate. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that 'bilateral relations, which are a priority for Poland, complement the multilateral cooperation formats proposed by China'.<sup>165</sup> However, it can be argued that, for Poland, importance should be placed on bilateral cooperation with the PRC, with multilateral initiatives like CEE-China potentially having a hindering effect on the relationship; Chinese leaders may feel engagement with Poland through this format as sufficient.<sup>166</sup> Thus, a certain inconsistency is evident between how the government and specialists and experts believe Poland should be best engaging the PRC.

For Poland, the bilateral relationship is not a priority, and is indeed far from being so. Nevertheless, issues pertaining to the PRC are still debated in the Polish Parliament, with different MPs and political groups holding different opinions. Within the parliament, there is a special group called the 'Polish-Chinese Parliamentary Group', which is chaired by Marek Suski, an MP affiliated with Law and Justice. This group consists of 61 members who are a mix of deputies and senators and its current membership was formed in 2020 (with the previous being from 2016). The activities of the group are not described on the Sejm's website; however, signs of this group's functioning can be found, for example, in the speech Suski gave at a diplomatic reception organised at the Chinese Embassy in Warsaw on the occasion of the

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<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> 'Polska w ChRL: Współpraca polityczna' ['Poland in the PRC: Political cooperation'], Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Service of the Republic of Poland], <http://bit.ly/3k4A2hN> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>166</sup> Damian Mierzejewski and Bartosz Kowalski, 'Wielowymiarowość polityki Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej w regionie Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej' ['Multidimensionality of the policy of the People's Republic of China in the region of Central and Eastern Europe'], *Prace IES [IES Working Papers]*, 07/2019, <https://bit.ly/3YTQqR2> (checked: 16/02/2023).

72nd anniversary of the proclamation of the PRC.<sup>167</sup> Suski said that Polish people have great respect for Chinese culture, and emphasised the long tradition of friendship between Poland and the PRC. In addition, in 2018, with the help of the Polish–Chinese Parliamentary Group, two pianos were donated to the Music School Complex in Radom by a private Chinese company.<sup>168</sup>

Moreover, the activities of the aforementioned parliamentary group, there are also the Sejm Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, which discuss matters relating to Polish foreign policy, review draft legislation, and question the government. Discussion about the PRC in these committees is not common, although it does occur.<sup>169</sup> One example is the session of the Senate Foreign and EU Affairs Committee that happened on 21st July 2021, during which the invited expert asked about ‘the priorities of Polish foreign and security policy in the context of Minister Zbigniew Rau’s visit to the PRC and the signing of a declaration in which Poland recognises the PRC’s legitimate interests’.<sup>170</sup> When it comes to the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Sejm, the most visible instance of discussion regarding the PRC was when a meeting was held on 13th October 2020 with parliamentarians and foreign affairs experts to discuss the spying scandal in which the sales director of Huawei Poland was charged with espionage.<sup>171</sup>

Meanwhile, there is also a Polish–Taiwanese Parliamentary Team in the Polish Parliament, with the current composition of the committee decided on 13th February 2020. The chairman of the team is Waldemar Andzel (PiS). The group aims to promote the deepening of

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<sup>167</sup> ‘Ambasada RP wydała przyjęcie z okazji 72. rocznicy proklamowania Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej’ [‘The Embassy of the Republic of Poland hosted a party on the occasion of the 72nd anniversary of the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China’], Ambasada Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej w RP [Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Poland], 07/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3jSATCt> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>168</sup> ‘Dwa fortepiany dla szkoły muzycznej. To efekt współpracy polsko – chińskiej’ [‘Two pianos for a music school. This is the result of Polish–Chinese cooperation’], *Zebrra.tv*, 12/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/3S34zcck> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>169</sup> There are no statistics related to the frequency of topics raised during meetings of committees, so this amount is only estimated by searching the websites of the above-mentioned committees.

<sup>170</sup> ‘Prace w komisjach senackich – 21 lipca 2021 r’ [‘Works in Senate committees – 21st July 2021’], Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Senate of Republic of Poland], 21/07/2021, <http://bit.ly/3Xwc2BZ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>171</sup> Przemysław Cizak, ‘Afera szpiegowska w Polsce. Były dyrektor Huawei na Polskę wydał oświadczenie’ [‘Spy scandal in Poland. The former director of Huawei for Poland made a statement’], *Money.pl*, 22/01/2019, <http://bit.ly/411mww3> (checked: 16/02/2023).



bilateral relations between Poland and Taiwan and advocates for Taiwan's international representation.

In the previous parliamentary elections, only Law and Justice included points relating to the PRC in its election programme. The other parties did not raise this issue at all, or did so tangentially. When it comes to statements made by individual politicians and political parties, they are not numerous but nevertheless occur.

Despite the deteriorating opinion of Poles about the PRC, some political parties still push for closer political and economic ties. For example, some members of the New Left are in favour of cooperation with Beijing in carrying out energy, technological and scientific advancements in Poland. Interestingly, similar opinions can be found in representatives of far-right parties, such as National Movement, which usually combines positive statements about the PRC with criticism of the US.

Andrzej Sejna (New Left),<sup>172</sup> Janusz Korwin-Mikke (New Hope),<sup>173</sup> Robert Winnicki (Confederation Liberty and Independence)<sup>174</sup> and Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS)<sup>175</sup> recently made statements that received attention. However, the messaging, and reason for referring to the PRC, in these statements differ widely. Sejna, as a representative of the left, stated that one can learn from the CCP's governance model, while Kaczyński put forward the thesis that Poland is second, right after the PRC, in terms of the speed of economic development after 1989. Both of these paint the PRC in a positive light. Korwin-Mikke, coming from a right-wing base, openly criticised the actions of the PRC and its governance model, which, in his opinion, went 'in the wrong direction'. However, he acknowledged that one cannot depart from the PRC, because it is the only salvation against 'leftism'. Winnicki cited the December 2022 protests in the PRC to buttress his stance against restrictive measures to curb the spread of Covid-19.

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<sup>172</sup> 'Poseł Nowej Lewicy o chińskich komunistach: Można się od nich uczyć' ['New Left MP on Chinese communists: You can learn from them'], *Rzeczpospolita* [Republic], 28/06/2021, <http://bit.ly/3lBgZMz> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>173</sup> 'Korwin-Mikke krytykuje Chiny, ale twierdzi, że tylko ten kraj uratuje nas przed TYM' ['Korwin-Mikke criticizes China but claims that only this country will save us from THIS'], *Najwyższy Czas* [High Time], 18/10/2022, <http://bit.ly/40Pryf4> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>174</sup> 'Lockdowny, segregacja i Chiny. Winnicki: Zanotowaliście ciekawą rzecz?' ['Lockdowns, segregation and China. Winnicki: Have you noticed an interesting thing?'], *Dorzeczy* [ToThePoint], 02/12/2022, <http://bit.ly/3lBRoor> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>175</sup> 'Polska jest druga po Chinach mimo złych rządów. Rozwój gospodarczy według prezesa PiS' ['Poland is second to China despite bad governance. Economic development according to the leader of PiS'], *Money.pl*, 23/10/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xpPybi> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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Zbigniew Rau, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Andrzej Duda, President of Poland, have also had recent contacts with Chinese representatives. There have been several meetings and talks between the foreign ministers of Poland and the PRC, such as the meeting of Rau and Wang Yi, then Chinese Foreign Minister, in the PRC in 2021, during which they talked about the CEE-China initiative. In February 2022, Duda and Xi met on the sidelines of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, where they discussed security issues in Eastern Europe and Russia's war against Ukraine, which was followed up by a phone call in July. Both Duda and Rau have not officially stated their private opinions on the PRC. But, in general, there is a lack of any negative dispositions.

Mateusz Morawiecki, Prime Minister of Poland, expressed some of his opinions regarding the PRC in an article for *Politico*.<sup>176</sup> He claimed that as a result of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, the PRC has more 'incentive to become more active in taking over global assets.' Furthermore, according to Morawiecki, the lack of serious actions by free and open nations towards Russia may bring disastrous consequences for Taiwan.

In sum, the PRC and issues related to it does not play a notable role in Polish politics. The PRC is a distant country for Poland, and the general public's interests, and that of politicians, is not great. The PRC is known to everyone in a general form which is substantiated by surface level information regarding the nation. It is nowhere near as high up the agenda for politicians as, for example, Russia or Poland's relations with the EU. In Autumn 2023, new parliamentary elections will be held in Poland. It remains to be seen whether the question of the PRC will be brought up to a greater extent.

#### **2.6.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Poland: Growing concerns**

Despite not occupying a large place in Polish politics, certain elements of Chinese activity are afforded parliamentary scrutiny. One prominent issue is the participation of Huawei in the construction of Poland's 5G network. The Foreign Affairs Committee in the Sejm, as previously mentioned, held a meeting to discuss the spying scandal related to Huawei in Poland in 2020. Issues around Huawei more broadly have

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<sup>176</sup> Mateusz Morawiecki, 'The Future of the West Is in Question', *Politico*, 27/06/2022, <http://bit.ly/3lBRhYv> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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also been raised numerous times by MPs via parliamentary questions. On 31st March 2021, Jarosław Sachajko (Kukiz'15) and Dobromir Sośnierz (Confederation Liberty and Independence) sent five questions to the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers – who is also the chairman of the Committee of the Council of Ministers for National Security and Defence Affairs – on this matter.<sup>177</sup> They asked about the policy of the Polish Government regarding Huawei espionage and the amount of Huawei equipment being used in government, local government, and public infrastructure. In response, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister stated that, in the case of espionage by Huawei, the Polish Government had the appropriate tools at its disposal to effectively eliminate any potential threats to the security of the Polish state. Further, in response, it was stated that Polish law does not exclude any supplier of telecommunications equipment or software, so Huawei equipment may or may not be used in national and local infrastructure.<sup>178</sup>

On 8th September 2020, the Polish Ministry of Digitisation published a draft act that opens the way for the legal exclusion of suppliers of telecommunications equipment that may pose a threat to the security of Poland's national cyber system. This change should be seen in the context of an attempt to eliminate or significantly limit Huawei's participation in the construction of Poland's 5G network. It is evident that Poland has a rather negative stance towards the participation of Huawei in its 5G infrastructure.

Another issue relating to the PRC which has been questioned in the Polish Parliament is the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, raised by Monika Rosa (Modern) in August 2020.<sup>179</sup> Rosa was highly critical of the treatment of the Uyghurs by the CCP, labelling it an 'affront to human dignity', and asked the prime minister and minister of foreign affairs whether they were monitoring the situation and or taking action.

The market authorisation process (in Poland and the EU) for Covid-19 vaccines produced in the PRC was also raised in the Polish

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<sup>177</sup> 'Interpelacja nr 22132' ['Interpellation No. 22132'], Sejm Rzeczpospolita Polska [Sejm of the Republic of Poland], 31/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3YEB5Ew> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>178</sup> 'Odpowiedź na interpelację nr 22132' ['Answer to the interpellation No. 22132'], Sejm Rzeczpospolita Polska [Sejm of the Republic of Poland], 27/04/2021, <https://bit.ly/3Ka2kCd> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>179</sup> 'Interpelacja nr 9489' ['Interpellation No. 9489'], Sejm Rzeczpospolita Polska [Sejm of the Republic of Poland], 7/08/2020, <https://bit.ly/3lB1KmQ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

Parliament by Magdalena Łośko (Civic Platform) in March 2021.<sup>180</sup> Łośko did not condemn the vaccines in any way, though, he did question their procurement given Poland pulled out of purchasing Pfizer and Moderna vaccines due to a ‘too late delivery date’.

In 2020, the PRC invested roughly US\$1 billion (£810 million) in Poland, the highest amount for any EU country behind Germany and France. Considering that in 2021 the PRC invested less than US\$50 million (£40.6 million) in Poland, this investment was notable.<sup>181</sup> No mention was made of this investment in the Polish Parliament despite its significant nature, perhaps as a result of the on-going cooperation at the time between Poland and the PRC regarding the provision of medical equipment to cope with and curb the Covid-19 pandemic.

No mention has also been made of the recent increase in activity of Chinese companies applying for (and winning) road and rail project contracts in Poland, despite the acknowledgment that the Chinese project financing model did not match EU standards. This is largely due to their small-scale nature. Nonetheless, Poland plays an instrumental part in the PRC-Europe rail route, with 75% of goods transported on it currently passing through the Polish-Belarusian border.<sup>182</sup>

## Conclusion

Poland has felt the effects of Russia’s war against Ukraine heavily, and the PRC’s tacit support for Russia has led to a sharp deterioration in how it is perceived. The Covid-19 pandemic has also had a negative impact upon the PRC’s image in Poland. Despite this, however, the Polish Government still wants to increase exports to the PRC and receive more FDI, putting the government in a tricky position politically when it comes to scrutiny of Chinese activity inside and outside Poland. Nonetheless, criticism regarding the PRC’s humanitarian abuses and involvement in the construction of Poland’s 5G network inside the

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<sup>180</sup> ‘Interpelacja nr 20647’ [‘Interpellation No. 20647’], Sejm Rzeczpospolita Polska [Sejm of the Republic of Poland], 03/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3kog8ok> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>181</sup> Maciej Kalwasiński, ‘Padł rekord chińskich inwestycji w Polsce. Nasz kraj odbiorcą największej chińskiej inwestycji w Europie w 2020 r.’ [‘The record of Chinese investments in Poland has been broken. Our country is the recipient of the largest Chinese investment in Europe in 2020’], *Bankier* [Banker], 02/02/2021, <http://bit.ly/3K9fHCA> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>182</sup> Łukasz Wilkowiec, ‘Chiny pożyczają, budują i hodują. Polska staje się częścią Nowego Jedwabnego Szlaku’ [‘China borrows, builds and breeds. Poland becomes part of the New Silk Road’], *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* [Daily Legal Newspaper], 05/11/2021, <https://bit.ly/3S33ql3> (checked: 16/02/2023).

Polish Parliament is evident, underlining Poland's orientation towards free and open nations, as well as NATO and the EU.

## 2.7 Romania

By Horia Ciurtin

### 2.7.1 Romania's political system and the main political parties

Romania's political system has constantly been described as semi-presidential (of a 'weak' or 'attenuated' form). The president is elected directly by the people (there is universal suffrage in Romania for all over 18 years of age) for a term of five years, having limited – but significant – prerogatives within the asymmetric layout of the executive.

Together with the government (headed by the prime minister), the presidential office resides at the helm of what some deem a 'bicephalous' executive.<sup>183</sup> Mostly running in tandem, often merely cohabitating, but sometimes on the brink of institutional clash, the president and the government share the main responsibilities in devising and implementing Romania's foreign policy objectives, as well as in matters pertaining to national security and defence.

The dual-chamber parliament also possesses – by constitutional design – relevant powers that allow it to step up at key moments in developing Romania's foreign policy and attempting to bring it to (political) fruition. Nonetheless, the executive maintains the lion's share of power in this realm, leaving a diminished space of manoeuvre for parliament to intervene.

The president and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs exercise the greatest power in dealing with external actors, often confining the legislative forum to a marginal position of ratifying and acquiescing to the pre-established lines of conduct. On the other hand, when dealing with matters pertaining to domestic economic policy, trade, inbound FDI, and infrastructural and technological development, the parliament has a stronger voice, even when foreign entities are involved.

Political forces in Romania have generally coalesced around two mainstream poles: a centre-right party (or grouping) and a centre-left

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<sup>183</sup> See: Ion Deleanu, *Instituții și proceduri constituționale* [Constitutional Institutions and Procedures] (Bucharest: C.H. Beck, 2006), pp. 716–718.



party. These two parties can be seen as figures of stability, although their continued relevance is arguably a product of inertia. Nonetheless, they have been accompanied by various lesser actors, some long-lasting (such as ethnic minority parties), and some driven by a specific issue, both of which are highly useful in forging coalitions.

Among the two mainstream poles, the centre-right position has varied in form and size over time, but has usually revolved around the National Liberal Party (PNL). In the last eight years, after the merger with the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), PNL remained the country's most prominent right-wing force. At the other side of the political spectrum, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) is the most prominent centre-left party, obtaining high parliamentary scores in the last decade and holding four prime minister positions. Presently, PNL and PSD are part of a grand coalition along with a junior partner, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR).

UDMR professes a centre-right ideological stance, but remains committed to an ethnic-oriented policy line and voter base, appealing to the significant Hungarian minority in Romania. Although it maintains close ties with Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ), the party of Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, UDMR refrains from antagonising EU institutions and principles and reflects Romania's generally pro-EU stance.

Two newcomers to Romanian parliamentary politics, Save Romania Union (USR) and the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), have a less numerous but increasingly visible voter base. Although highly different ideologically – with USR playing the centrist-progressive card and AUR appealing to the nationalist and populist variety – they both share an issue-based and anti-establishment stance.

### **2.7.2 How the Romanian public views the PRC: (Once) flying under the radar**

For the general public, the image of a stable and consistent Romania-PRC relationship lies largely in the past. It is a tale going back to a 'golden age' of intra-communist dissent towards Moscow, where Bucharest and Beijing formed a peculiar type of partnership in order to maintain their strategic and ideological autonomy alongside (or against) the Soviet Union. The political dialogue between the two was

rather intense, with seven top-level state and party official visits during the 1980s, and 11 more between 1989 and 2011. The economic links between the two continued to underpin the relationship in this period.<sup>184</sup> Despite this close political relationship the PRC has historically lingered symbolically as a benign actor on the other side of the world for Romanians; too far away to matter in any equation that may affect Bucharest's international standing.

Even after 2012, Romanians remained rather indifferent in their perception of the PRC. While the government of Victor Ponta (2012–2015) pushed for an upgraded relationship with Beijing, the approach never gained traction with the general public and produced no tangible results in placing the PRC higher in the population's preference for geopolitical and economic partners. After the Ponta administration, Romania kept the PRC at arms length. The PRC did not represent an immediate preoccupation, but nor did Romania completely ignore the PRC's position as an increasingly important power. And so did the political elite which soon forgot the brief honeymoon period regarding Chinese investment in Romania, as they gradually shut down all proposed deals with the PRC, from transport infrastructure to power plants and telecommunication technology, unequivocally excluding Beijing from such projects.<sup>185</sup>

Before Russia intensified its offensive against Ukraine in February 2022, most polls conducted in Romania showed an ambivalent attitude towards the PRC, with respondents almost equally split between those holding a favourable or unfavourable view towards its political system and values or between those mentioning it on the list of trustworthy or untrustworthy states.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> For more details about this period, see: Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai and Liu Minru, 'Sino-Romanian Relations under the New World Order', Weiqing Song (ed.), *China's Relations with CEE, From Old Comrades to New Partners* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>185</sup> Horia Ciurtin, 'Not Really Probing the East: Romania's Position on Chinese Investments', The Jamestown Foundation, 30/11/2019, <https://bit.ly/3XNkywN> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>186</sup> See the 2020 survey: 'Lumea și valorile ei politice, 1-7 Mai 2020' ['The World and Its Political Values, May 1-7, 2020'], *Biroul de Cercetări Sociale [Bureau of Social Research]*, 05/2020, <http://bit.ly/3XD6cyK> (checked: 16/02/2023). The poll shows 43% of respondents having a favourable perspective of Chinese politics, as opposed to 39% viewing it unfavourably, and 18% who are indifferent. See the 2021 survey: 'Barometrul de Securitate al României, Octombrie 2021' ['The Security Barometre of Romania, October 2021'], *LARICS – ISPRI*, 18/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3Kdwkgz> (checked: 16/02/2023), where the figures rise up to 45% of respondents having a high or very high confidence in the PRC, and 53% respondents having low or very low confidence.

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Results from a survey on public perceptions of the PRC and specifically the image it conveys showed that a relatively high proportion of respondents (49.1%) considered it ‘an important country with which we always maintained good relations and we should not enter into a conflict with’, while 28.2% believed that it was an ‘undemocratic and unfriendly country’, and 21.5% that it was ‘too far away to be of interest’.<sup>187</sup>

Nonetheless, against the background of Russia’s renewed aggression towards Ukraine and the PRC’s reluctance to formally pick sides (generally viewed as a tacit endorsement of Moscow’s position), public perceptions in Romania have shifted significantly. The PRC is no longer viewed as a ‘benign’ power and its reputation has suffered a visible degradation. In comparison with the previous year, merely 17% of respondents still considered the PRC trustworthy (down from 45%), while 82% had a low or very low degree of confidence that it would do the right thing on the international stage (up from 53%).<sup>188</sup>

The domestic media narrative around the PRC has displayed a rather long-lasting reluctance towards Beijing’s policies and flagship global projects, Romania being one of the few countries with a prevailing negative press reflection of the BRI.<sup>189</sup> With no relevant foothold in the mainstream media, Beijing’s own voice appears ineffective, as official CCP propaganda rarely makes it to the front pages and almost no landmark publications engage in spreading its narrative of current events. Mainly using the Facebook page of the Chinese Embassy in Bucharest, episodic *Xinhua* reporting and a Romanian-version of *China Radio International*, Chinese discourse seldom reaches the general public and has little impact in shaping Romanian perceptions of the PRC.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> See the 2022 survey: ‘Barometrul de Securitate al României, Octombrie 2022’ [‘The Security Barometre of Romania, October 2022’], *LARICS – ISPRI*, 10/2022, <https://bit.ly/3lHOX1O> (checked: 16/02/2023). At the same time, when interviewed about the actual behaviour of specific states vis-à-vis Romania, a survey recorded that 40% of respondents have a negative perception of the PRC’s conduct versus 24% harbouring a positive view – see ‘Barometrul opiniei publice, Septembrie 2022’ [‘Public Opinion Barometre, September 2022’], *Avangarde [Vanguards]*, 09/2022, <https://bit.ly/3YzLz83> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>189</sup> See: Annex 3 of the study prepared by Alicia García-Herrero and Jianwei Xu, ‘Countries’ perceptions of China’s Belt and Road Initiative: A big data analysis’, *Bruegel*, 06/02/2019, <https://bit.ly/3xpuDFa> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>190</sup> Rufin Zamfir and Andrei Tiut, ‘Chinese Influence in Romania’, Centre for European Policy Analysis, 17/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3Xxoxxd> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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Therefore, the PRC's image in Romania has devolved from indifference to an increasingly negative perception, irrespective of CCP's desire to interfere and shape it to suit its goals. If the PRC managed to fly under the public's radar for most of the last decade and initially maintained a 'neutral' role in the public's collective imagination, a new dynamic appears to have emerged in the aftermath of Russia's renewed act of aggression, with the PRC now seen as a covert endorser. In this sense, how Romania views the PRC is clearly affected by Beijing's association with Moscow.

### **2.7.3 How Romanian parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: Accounting for every idle silence**

It can be argued that the PRC has invested more effort in cultivating relationships with specific groups of the Romanian political elite than influencing the general public's perception of Chinese politics, but has had no success beyond circumstantial outbursts of declared friendships that have failed to materialise into anything substantial. The Ponta government (2012–2015) represents an administration that urged for closer ties with the PRC, as the prime minister attempted to push his own reluctant party (PSD) and disinterested coalition partners (PNL or PNL splinter groups, as well as UDMR or other minor parties) in that direction.<sup>191</sup>

After the Ponta government's tenure, Chinese activity in the Balkans and Central Europe fell on deaf ears in Romania, with no prominent politician – in office – assuming an overtly sympathetic position towards Beijing.<sup>192</sup> At the present moment, none of the parliamentary parties mention the PRC in any form in their respective political platforms, manifestos or strategies, either as a potential partner or as a challenge.<sup>193</sup> The PRC is, thus, surrounded by an awkward silence, as the multi-partisan foreign policy consensus in Bucharest appears to find no place for elaborate discussions on Chinese influence.

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<sup>191</sup> Liliana Popescu and Andreea Brînză, 'Romania-China Relations. Political and Economic Challenges in the BRI Era', *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 18:2 (2018), pp. 29–34.

<sup>192</sup> Although the PRC has constantly attempted a 'top-down', elite-driven approach in deepening its relationship with Romania, the only real success it had was having some former politicians keep the subject of the PRC on the table in neutral or positive terms.

<sup>193</sup> This is the case of both mainstream parties (PNL and PSD), of the ethnic Hungarian party (UDMR) and in the case of the newcomers to Romanian parliamentary politics (USR and AUR).

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Even at governmental level – where a precise direction is expected – there seems to be no consistent trajectory in the ruling coalition’s programme on Romania’s relationship with the PRC. The three parties involved (PNL, PSD and UDMR) merely offer an anodyne paragraph relating to the PRC (in more than 15 pages dedicated to foreign policy) which states that Romania’s approach towards Beijing shall continue along the established lines of conduct within EU-wide parameters.<sup>194</sup> Moreover, there also seems to be little attention granted to the PRC in Romania’s 2020–2024 National Defence Strategy, issued by the presidential administration, merely mentioning it in passing in connection to US–PRC competition at a global level.<sup>195</sup> This is noteworthy given the significant prerogatives of the president in defining the international stance of Romania. It ultimately appears as if there is a consensus among the three parties in displaying strong support for Romania’s EU and NATO membership. Regarding the opposition, USR shares this approach, and even goes further with an emphasis on ‘more Europe’, while AUR perpetuates the opposing ‘sovereignist’, Eurosceptic and anti-federalist narrative.

As for parliamentary activity, it must be stated from the outset that the legislative forum rarely acts as a platform for initiating international positions or reviewing the fulfilment of governmental objectives. Nonetheless, both chambers of parliament – the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies – contain an autonomous Committee on Foreign Policy and a level of authority on the matter, although this is seldom exercised in parallel with, or in contradiction of, the executive. The activity of the committees, rather, focuses on following the lines of action devised by the government and the president, ratifying documents brought forth to attention before a plenary session.<sup>196</sup> The situation is similar for the Standing Committees on Defence and National Security.

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<sup>194</sup> ‘Program de Guvernare 2021–2024’ [‘Programme for Government 2021–2024’], Coaliția pentru reziliență, dezvoltare și prosperitate [Coalition for resilience, development and prosperity], 06/12/2021, <https://bit.ly/4oYpGRh> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>195</sup> ‘Strategia Națională De Apărare a Țării Pentru Perioada 2020–2024’ [‘The National Defence Strategy of the Country for the Period 2020–2024’], Administrația Prezidențială a României [Romanian Presidential Administration], 01/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/3lB6wkg> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>196</sup> The Foreign Affairs Committees of both chambers convene joint hearings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding candidates for ambassadorial postings abroad, but their vote is consultative. There have been no cases where a candidate has been outright rejected, although negative votes are common.

In this context, the PRC rarely makes the singular object of committee (or plenary) discussions and when it does feature, it is usually mentioned in relation with the US, the EU or merely as a rhetorical point with no significant connection to any specific action of the PRC. So far, no formal or informal groups dedicated to analysing Beijing's international, regional or bilateral conduct have been established on the side-lines of the parliament, although some parliamentarians consider such an approach necessary.<sup>197</sup>

The only groupings that do exist are the so-called Romania-China parliamentary 'friendship groups', which conduct no substantial activity beyond episodic bilateral visits and ceremonial meetings, although some discussion regarding the importance of the UN Charter, with 'territorial integrity' and 'state sovereignty' mentioned, sometimes occurs.<sup>198</sup>

Moreover, the sporadic references of the PRC in the Romanian Parliament cannot be circumscribed to a singular tone or mood. There is no dominant narrative, on (or off) the record. While some periodic (positive) mentions of closer economic ties were warily made on the record between 2013-2015 (when the Ponta government was in power), there was also, simultaneously, notable questioning – and outright opposition – to this vision.

After Ponta's vision was quashed, and his time in power over, the PRC received little to no mention by the Romanian Parliament. The PRC was only referenced in passing, in connection with other topics or merely as a reference point, sometimes in neutral terms, sometimes as a reminder, but it did not feature as a stand-alone matter of discussion.<sup>199</sup> There was, however, a relative increase in the number of

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<sup>197</sup> Interview with Claudiu Târziu, member of the Senate and co-President of AUR, conducted by the author on 20/12/2022. In the interview, he stated that 'I consider necessary a certain form of preoccupation in the sense of, for instance, establishing an ad-hoc group at the level of both Chambers of Parliament which would monitor the policies and activities of the PRC'.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with Ben-Oni Ardelean (PNL), member of the Chamber of Deputies and Vice President of the Committee on Foreign Policy, conducted by the author on 27th December 2022. In the interview, he stated that 'at the level of this group (the Romania-China friendship group) the role of parliamentary diplomacy is a special one, as themes that pertain on the international agenda are constantly approached, with a specific attention granted to the respect of the UN Charter, of territorial integrity and state sovereignty'.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.* He stated that 'on the agenda of the Committee, in the last year, there were no relevant activities related to China, but rather formal subjects pertaining to parliamentary democracy [...] The reason for which China does not constantly feature on the daily agenda of the Chamber of Deputies is that the previously-concluded agreements for investment projects were suspended and, thus, diplomatic and economic relations were significantly reduced'.

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mentions of the PRC during the Covid-19 pandemic, as reflected in parliamentary debate records, either in connection with measures for containing the virus or about the importation of medical supplies from the PRC.

Even themes that should have generated some sort of debate – such as the joining of the AIIB<sup>200</sup> or the participation of Huawei in the construction of Romania's 5G network – did not stir up any intense feelings or debate in the chambers. Throughout the last decade, the debate on the PRC has remained bland, with episodic discussions generated by internal disputes. In this sense, the reports of parliamentary sessions show no evidence of deputies or senators taking – on the record – any position whatsoever on the PRC in the rare instances when it is mentioned.

#### **2.7.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Romania: Marginal curiosity**

Overall, the Romanian political scene appears rather indifferent to the PRC. Scrutiny of Beijing's activities does not represent a consistent preoccupation of the legislative forum,<sup>201</sup> although, circumstantially, it does occur when a PRC-related issue becomes an internal tug-of-war between the government and the opposition. However, most of the time, the tone is neutral towards Beijing and the discussion does not follow a detailed analytical framework, as it merely mentions the matter – in a declaratory fashion – with little or no opinions at all. For instance, between December 2020–December 2022, 'China' was mentioned 47 times during 37 sessions. However, an overwhelming number of such references, which included topics focused on other issues (spanning from traditional handcrafts, artisanship, land exploitation and the export of honey to NATO priorities and Romania's partnership with the US), saw the PRC referenced as a figure-of-speech or merely as an element within a larger context, rather than a stand-alone topic. In those rare moments when the PRC featured as the high-point of a given intervention, no objections were voiced from

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<sup>200</sup> See: 'Sedinta Camerei Deputatilor din 29 octombrie 2018' ['The meeting of the Chamber of Deputies from October 29, 2018'], Camera Deputatilor din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 29/11/2018, <http://bit.ly/3k1qFQ6> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>201</sup> As one opposition leader pictured the situation: 'there is no manifest preoccupation toward the PRC, neither politically, nor diplomatically'. From an interview with Claudiu Târziu, co-President of AUR, conducted by the author on 20th December 2022.



other parliamentarians, no debate arose and no request for further details or inquiries was made.

Although quantitatively negligible in the overall workload of the parliament, a larger share of attention has been paid to the PRC's actions within Romania. Thus, matters concerning the PRC that could potentially reverberate across the national economy and social fabric of Romania were prone to be – at least – mentioned in parliamentary sessions. To quote a telling example, in regard to large infrastructure projects, Florin Cîțu, a PNL Senator and former prime-minister, speaking on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Romania's strategic partnership with the US, referred to the PRC's exclusion from nuclear energy contracts as proof of Romania's Atlanticist commitment.<sup>202</sup> As for debates surrounding the facilitation of Romania's 5G network, mentions of the PRC have been extremely scarce in parliamentary sessions dedicated to a new law on this topic, with Pavel Popescu (PNL) – a key figure in the law's normative proposal and in raising awareness about Beijing's increasingly challenging activities – stating that certain 'pressures' had been exerted in relation to it in the previous two years, and with George Simion (AUR) arguing that there had been alleged 'pressures from companies, including from China' for a delay in the law's discussion and adoption.<sup>203</sup>

Another PRC-centric topic scrutinised in the Romanian Parliament has been that of Confucius Institutes – of which there are four in Romania – where there was a proposal to effectively curtail the possibility of them functioning within state-funded universities, something which was introduced by Pavel Popescu (PNL) and supported by a group of parliamentarians from both governing parties (PNL and PSD). Among the arguments for the new law, there were

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<sup>202</sup> 'Dezbaterea și adoptarea Proiectului Declarației Parlamentului României cu ocazia aniversării a 25 de ani de la lansarea Parteneriatului strategic dintre România și Statele Unite ale Americii' ['The debate and adoption of the project for the Declaration Declaration of the Romanian Parliament on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the launch of the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the United States of America'], Camera Deputaților din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 28/06/2022, <http://bit.ly/3YxPmmh> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>203</sup> 'Dezbaterea Proiectului de Lege privind adoptarea unor măsuri referitoare la infrastructuri informatice și de comunicații de interes național și condițiile implementării rețelelor 5G (PL-x 161/2021) (rămas pentru votul final)' ['The debate of the law proposal regarding the adoption of certain measures pertaining to national interest information and communication infrastructures and the conditions for implementing the 5G networks (PL-x 161/2021) (left for final vote)'], Camera Deputaților din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 19/03/2021, <http://bit.ly/3xpIuv7> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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references to such entities being vehicles for CCP propaganda or ‘epicentres of espionage’ on behalf of Beijing’s intelligence services.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, in the corresponding press communiqué posted on the webpage of the Chamber of Deputies, Popescu, the initiator of the law, announced that he would begin to focus ‘on diminishing the influence of the CCP in Romania’s education sector.’<sup>205</sup>

At the same time, Dragoș Teniță (REPER, formerly USR), a member of IPAC, made a formal political declaration in the Chamber of Deputies addressing the matter of clandestine Chinese police stations on the territory of Romania, stating that such conduct represents ‘a major affront to human rights and national sovereignty’. In this context, he raised the matter of Beijing’s policy of intimidating and silencing dissenters abroad and asked for a governmental inquiry and measures to be implemented, in coordination with other democratic states, to curtail this development.<sup>206</sup>

Parliamentary scrutiny of the PRC’s international activity receives less attention. In matters relating to humanitarian abuse by Beijing, the debate is almost entirely absent, with Xinjiang and Tibet almost never mentioned in key discussions.<sup>207</sup> Similarly, topics pertaining to the violation of international law or the redrawing of the global order appear rather scarce, with occasional mentions. Dan Barna of the USR, stated in June 2020:

We already have several aggressive positions, on the global stage, with states that act at the limit or beyond existing treaties or international law. What China is doing today in Hong Kong is also a continuation of what China has done in the South China Sea and

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<sup>204</sup> ‘Propunere legislativă pentru aprobarea unor măsuri privind finanțarea cercetării științifice universitare’ [‘Legislative proposal for the adoption of certain measures regarding the funding of university scientific research’], Camera Deputaților din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 16/11/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xllHLv> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>205</sup> Pavel Popescu, ‘Press Communiqué’ [‘Press Release’], Camera Deputaților din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 24/11/2022, <http://bit.ly/3K9FV7Z> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>206</sup> Dragoș-Cătălin Teniță, ‘Sectiile clandestine de poliție ale Republicii Populare Chineze, pe teritoriul României, sunt un afront major la adresa drepturilor omului și a suveranității naționale’ [‘Political Declaration – PRC Clandestine Police Stations on the territory of Romania are a major affront to human rights and national sovereignty’], Camera Deputaților din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 07/12/2022, <http://bit.ly/3In21CN> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Oana Murariu (USR), member of the Committee for Human Rights, Religion and Problems of National Minorities in the Chamber of Deputies, conducted by the author on 10th December 2022.

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joins, in a way, Russia's actions in Crimea or in the frozen conflicts in the Black Sea region, among which Transnistria it hurts us in a special way.<sup>208</sup>

In essence, despite concerns, none of the positions expressed advance the need or possibility for Romania to reconsider its geopolitical priorities. And neither are any parliamentarians asking for a new chapter in relations with the PRC. On the contrary, most parliamentarians champion the consolidation of closer unity and solidarity with Romania's Euro-Atlantic allies and partners, particularly in the context of a resurgent Russia, sometimes placing Beijing in the same category of strategic challenge as Moscow.<sup>209</sup>

## Conclusion

In the last few years, neither the CEE-China initiative, nor the BRI – or advertised opportunities through the AIIB – have generated PRC-focused discourse in the Romanian Parliament. Following the establishment of a closer strategic partnership with the US, and its careful alignment with the EU's foreign policy, Romania did not modify its discourse to accommodate potential Chinese interests (or sensibilities), often playing the 'silent card' when the global situation started to deteriorate and become more competitive.

## 2.8 Slovakia

By Matej Šimalčík

### 2.8.1 Slovakia's political system and the main political parties

The Slovak Republic, established in 1993 following its peaceful split from the former Czechoslovakia, is a parliamentary democracy, with

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<sup>208</sup> See the political declaration of Dan Barna (USR): 'Este momentul ca România să arate stabilitate și solidaritate cu aliații americani' ['It's time for Romania to show stability and solidarity with the American allies'], Camera Deputaților din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 03/06/2020, <http://bit.ly/3XyUBAH> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>209</sup> See the declaration of Robert Sighiartău (PNL): 'Lumea Liberă trebuie să aibă politici energetice și de mediu realiste, raționale, bazate pe o puternică strategie comună SUA-UE' ['The Free World must have energy and environmental policies which are realistic, rational and based upon a strong common US-EU strategy'], Camera Deputaților din România [Chamber of Deputies of Romania], 08/02/2022, <http://bit.ly/3K65Uxn> (checked: 16/02/2023).



the president having a largely ceremonial and symbolic role.

The National Council of Slovakia, the country's parliament, is a unicameral body composed of 150 members elected every four years. Elections are based on proportional representation in a single, country-wide constituency. The government cabinet is subsequently formed based on the ability to create a majority coalition.

The last general election, which took place in February 2020, ushered in political change. After eight years in power, the leftist populist Direction-Slovak Social Democracy Party (SMER-SD) did not win the election and were therefore unable to form a majority. The unexpected winner of the election was the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities Party (OLANO), which ran on an anti-corruption platform. OLANO led a new government headed by Igor Matovič, then Prime Minister, alongside the centre-right Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), For the People, and right-wing populist We Are Family political parties.

Due to mismanagement of the country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as internal conflict, Matovič's government reorganised in 2021, out of which the new cabinet led by Eduard Heger, the current Prime Minister, was born, with Matovič taking over the role of finance minister (previously occupied by Heger). As of January 2023, Slovakia is facing the prospect of an early election; following the departure of SaS from the cabinet in summer 2022, Heger's government did not survive a no-confidence vote introduced by its former coalition partner. The early election is expected to be held in September 2023.<sup>210</sup>

Slovakia is thus currently entering the pre-election campaigning phase. As per polls conducted in January 2023,<sup>211</sup> the following political parties are relevant: Voice - Social Democracy (HLAS-SD)<sup>212</sup> and SMER-SD (both left-wing populist), Progressive Slovakia (liberal left), SaS (liberal right), OLANO (populist conservative), Republika (far-right neo-Nazi), We Are Family (populist conservative), and Christian Democrats (conservative).

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<sup>210</sup> Lucia Osvaldova, 'Sme rodina zahlasuje aj za májový a júnový termín volieb, šancu má len september' [We are a family also voting for the May and June elections, only September has a chance'], *Dennik N*, 26/01/2023, <http://bit.ly/3I5KuxJ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>211</sup> Andrej Kuzmany, 'Prieskum: Preferencie Hlasu klesli pod 18 percent, Progresívne Slovensko ďalej rastie' [Survey: Voice preferences fell below 18 percent, Progressive Slovakia continues to grow'], *SME*, 19/01/2023, <http://bit.ly/3lB9Ego> (checked: 16/02/2023).

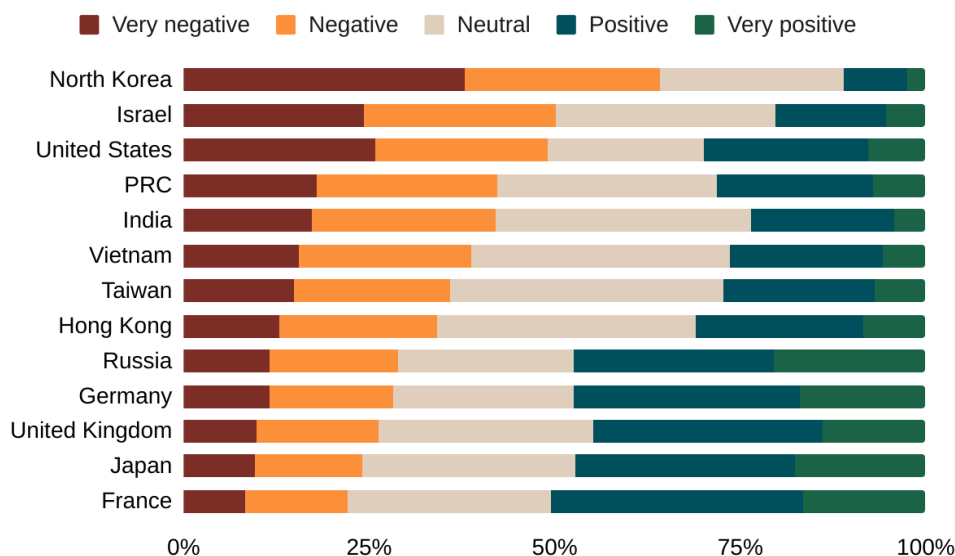
<sup>212</sup> The party was formed by Peter Pellegrini, former Prime Minister, after splitting from the Direction-Social Democracy Party.

Furthermore, a return to active politics by Mikuláš Dzurinda, former Prime Minister, who achieved Slovakia’s accession to both the EU and NATO in 2004, is expected, which could affect the distribution of political power in the country, especially amongst the centre-right of the political spectrum.

### 2.8.2 How the Slovakian public views the PRC: Negative opinion prevails

The Slovak public’s view of the PRC tends to be negative. A 2020 public opinion survey conducted by Sinophone Borderlands and CEIAS found that negative views of the PRC were held by 42% of respondents, while 28% saw the PRC positively, with the remainder holding neutral views.<sup>213</sup> At the same time, over 25% of respondents said that their opinions of the PRC worsened over the previous three years.<sup>214</sup>

**Figure 6: Perceptions of select countries in Slovakia<sup>215</sup>**

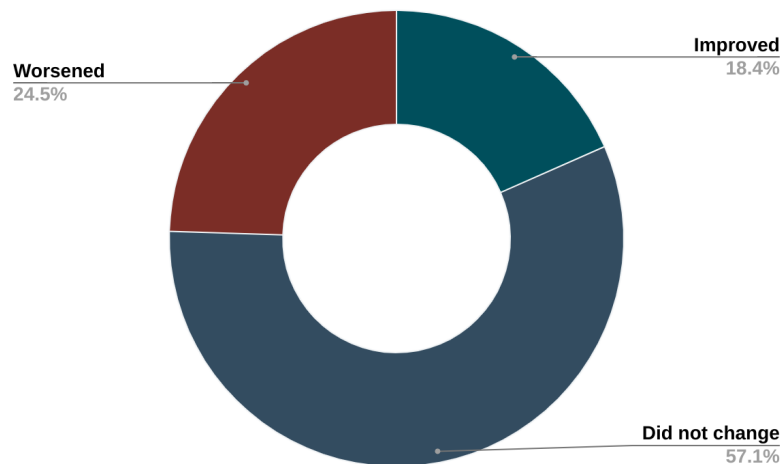


<sup>213</sup> Matej Simalcik, Richard Q. Turcsanyi, Kristina Kironska and Renata Sedlakova, ‘Slovak public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Caught between values and conspiracies’, Palacký University Olomouc and Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 22/11/2020, <https://bit.ly/3YvE81u> (checked: 16/02/2023). The survey was conducted in September 2020, and contains a sample of 1502 respondents representative of Slovak society.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

Figure 7: Changing perceptions of the PRC between 2017 and 2020<sup>216</sup>



Not only does the Slovak public lean towards negative views of the PRC, but the PRC is one of the most negatively perceived countries in general (see Figures 6 and 7). In a list of 13 countries, the PRC ranked as the 4th least favourable – following North Korea, Israel, and the US (the US also received a larger share of positive views compared to the PRC). That said, the views held by the Slovakian public on the PRC are rather shallow. When asked about their spontaneous first reactions to the PRC, Slovakian respondents tended to describe the PRC with terms like ‘a lot of people’, ‘big country’, ‘Great Wall’, ‘cheap products’, or ‘Communism’.

The PRC was also strongly associated with the Covid-19 pandemic in a negative light, showing that CCP campaigns to disassociate itself from the disease, and improve perception of itself through ‘mask diplomacy’, were largely unsuccessful in Slovakia. Despite this, almost half the population saw the PRC as helpful in dealing with the pandemic (49%), a share similar to that received by the EU (51%).<sup>217</sup>

Disaggregating the data based on political preferences shows that those that identify with centre-right parties tend to have a more critical view of the PRC, while the electorate of leftist-populist parties tend to see the PRC more positively. This division largely corresponds with the

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<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

positions that individual political parties and their representatives tend to take in discussing the PRC and Slovakia's policy towards it. As an extension of this, those that voted for Zuzana Čaputová (backed by Progressive Slovakia and Together-Civic Democracy (SPOLU)), the current president, in the 2019 presidential election have much more negative views of the PRC than those who voted for her rival Maroš Šefčovič, current Vice President of the European Commission, who ran in the election with the support of SMER-SD.<sup>218</sup>

When it comes to specific issues related to the PRC, the Slovakian public tends to have a relatively neutral stance on trading with the PRC and receiving investment from it. The PRC's military power, impact on the environment, and influence on democratic institutions in other countries, attracted predominantly negative views.

On Slovakia's foreign policy regarding the PRC, a majority of respondents marked cooperation on global issues (66%), promotion of trade and investment (58%), and addressing cyber security (57%) as top policy preferences. Slightly less than half of respondents (48%) identified addressing human rights as a policy priority. Preventing the PRC's geopolitical expansion was seen as a priority by only 36% of respondents.<sup>219</sup>

Previous research into how the Slovakian media portrays the PRC has revealed that even though the coverage of PRC-related topics has been increasing, the tone of the coverage has remained relatively neutral. In the small number of articles that took a non-neutral stance, the majority presented a negative view towards the PRC.<sup>220</sup>

No Slovakian media outlets are owned by Chinese companies or individuals. In the past, there were attempts to acquire Markíza, one of the largest television stations in Slovakia, by the CEFC China Energy Group. The transaction did not go through due to CEFC going bankrupt. Nevertheless, the potential sale garnered minimal public and political

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<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> Richard Turcsanyi, Ivana Karaskova, Tamas Matura and Matej Simalcik, 'Followers, Challengers, or By-Standers? Central European Media Responses to Intensification of Relations with China', *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 5:3 (2019); Ivana Karaskova, Alicja Bachulska, Tamas Matura and Matej Simalcik, 'Careful or careless? Debating Chinese investment and 5G technology in Central Europe', *Association for International Affairs and MapInfluencE*, 14/06/2021, <https://bit.ly/3KaxhGv> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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scrutiny.<sup>221</sup> Despite not owning any media outlets, Chinese actors have managed to inject ‘corrosive capital’ into the media via advertisement payments. This has resulted in, for example, Trend magazine publishing an advertisement that labelled protesters in Hong Kong as foreign-funded domestic terrorists.<sup>222</sup>

The Slovakian population is among the most susceptible to the spread of disinformation within Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>223</sup> Narratives on the PRC spread by various ‘alternative’ disinformation websites can thus have a profound effect on how certain segments of the public view specific issues. In Slovakia, however, most popular ‘media’ outlets spreading disinformation are not prone to push specifically pro-PRC narratives or CCP talking points, but rather instrumentalise the PRC and PRC-related issues as a tool in their quest to delegitimise the US and the West more broadly.<sup>224</sup>

### **2.8.3 How Slovakian parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: Lacking a consensus**

Despite the growing prominence of the PRC and its impacts on global affairs, political parties in Slovakia are not very active in communicating their positions on the country publicly. Prior to the 2020 general election none of the major political parties (except for one) took note of the PRC in their pre-election manifesto. The only exception was SPOLU which dedicated an entire chapter to the PRC in their foreign policy position document. Positions articulated in this document were also reflected in the election programme of the coalition between SPOLU and Progressive Slovakia, which proposed to audit the results of Slovakia’s engagement with the PRC through its BRI and CEE-China initiative, and whether it was prudent to continue

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<sup>221</sup> Matej Simalcik, ‘Čínska hrozba pre Markízu?’ [‘A Chinese threat to the Marquesas?’], *Denník N*, 27/11/2017, <http://bit.ly/4oWJJzy> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>222</sup> Matej Simalcik, ‘Ako slovenské médiá uverejnili čínsku propagandu’ [‘How Slovak media published Chinese propaganda’], *SME*, 27/08/2019, <https://bit.ly/3k1ud4S> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>223</sup> Dominika Hajdu and Katarina Klingova, ‘Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of democracy and governance in 10 EU countries’, *Globsec*, 23/06/2020, <http://bit.ly/3SOAj1S> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>224</sup> Veronika Blablova, Peter Duboczi, Pavel Havlicek, Matej Simalcik, Ivana Karaskova, Barbara Kelemen and Michaela Ruzickova, ‘From East with Love: Dissecting Pro-China Bias in Czech and Slovak Alternative Media’, Association for International Affairs and MapInfluencE, 29/04/2022, <https://bit.ly/3jXl8dn> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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participating in them.<sup>225</sup>

Politicians are also not very active in discussing the PRC publicly in the media. Among 76 stakeholders who voiced their opinion on the PRC at least three times between 2010 and 2017, only three politicians appeared.<sup>226</sup> Despite a lack of public communication on their positions on the PRC in official policy documents and the media, Slovakian parties can be grouped into three distinct camps:

- Pragmatic engagers tend to view the PRC predominantly in economic terms. They are willing to promote positive views of the PRC as long as they think this will benefit Slovakia's trade and economic relations with the country. SMER-SD and HLAS-SD fall into this category.
- Ideological supporters, found chiefly among the extreme-right and extreme-left politicians, promote positive views of the PRC out of their sincere belief that the Chinese economic and political system is superior to that of free and open nations.
- Ideological opponents tend to be found in the centre-right and liberal political parties. Their views are determined mainly by their support for democracy and human rights. As the PRC is a one-party totalitarian state, they tend to view the PRC in a negative light.<sup>227</sup>

There is, evidently, minimal consensus on Slovakia's approach to the PRC across the political spectrum. Thus, the approach to the PRC is prone to alteration whenever political change occurs, as was the case in the 2020 general election.

On an institutional level, several official and unofficial groups exist within the National Council of Slovakia, within which MPs with a common stance on various PRC-related issues group together. One example is an official Parliamentary Friendship Group with the PRC exists within the National Council, counting 20 MPs among its members. The group, with its membership concentrated chiefly within

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<sup>225</sup> Matej Šimalčík, Alzbeta Bajerová, Ivana Karásková, Tamas Matura, Agnieszka Ostrowska and Bruno Surdel, 'Perception of China among V4 Political Elites', Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 31/12/2019, <https://bit.ly/3I1MMxQ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>226</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi and Matej Šimalčík, 'Čína na Slovensku: Sme pripravení na budúcnosť?' ['China in Slovakia: Are we ready for the future?'], Association for International Affairs, 29/05/2018, <https://bit.ly/3I5NtWX> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>227</sup> Matej Šimalčík, 'Image of China in Slovakia: ambivalence, adoration, and fake news', *Asia Europe Journal*, 19:2 (2021).



the pragmatist and ideologically supportive categories laid out above, has been known to engage in spreading CCP inspired propaganda in Slovakia. In the previous election cycle, the group, led by Ľuboš Blaha (SMER-SD), went on a visit to Beijing and Tibet. The trip was paid for entirely by the CCP and was labelled as a ‘study visit’.<sup>228</sup> Together with Blaha’s outspoken posts on Facebook which echoed CCP talking points, the trip became quite controversial and managed to cause a public stir in Slovakia.<sup>229</sup>

Blaha is currently one of the most vocal ideological supporters of deepened cooperation between the PRC and Slovakia. He repeatedly echoes CCP propaganda, and feeds it to his electorate in a vitriolic manner. In the past, for example, he stated that Chinese socialism is a blessing for the people of Tibet, and labelled the 2019 Hong Kong protests as a colour revolution sponsored by the US.<sup>230</sup> Thanks to Blaha acting as a pro-PRC proxy in Slovakia, Chinese disinformation and propaganda has been able to affect much bigger and broader audiences compared to its reach via official CCP channels, such as through the Chinese Embassy. To illustrate, Blaha’s post on Facebook about Covid-19 being an American bioweapon deployed against the PRC spread via a network of typically anti-Euro-Atlantic social media groups.<sup>231</sup>

Not all MPs have been eager to echo CCP talking points on Tibet, though. An unofficial Friends of Tibet Group has been active in the parliament since 2010. The club survived several election terms and its members are known for hanging the Tibetan flag in the Slovakian Parliament and calling on the CCP to enter into dialogue with the Tibetan government in exile.<sup>232</sup> Similarly, an unofficial Friends of Taiwan Group exists. Despite the PRC’s criticism, members of the group have taken repeated trips to Taiwan, and maintain close relations with Taiwanese leadership. Peter Osuský, the group’s leader, received a

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<sup>228</sup> Filip Šebok, ‘The curious case of the China-loving Slovak parliamentarian Ľuboš Blaha’, China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 26/08/2019, <https://bit.ly/3YBLpNw> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* Blaha’s Facebook account has since been deactivated.

<sup>230</sup> Matej Simalcik, Alzbeta Bajerova, Ivana Karaskova, Tamas Matura, Agnieszka Ostrowska and Bruno Surdel, ‘Perception of China among V4 Political Elites’, CEIAS, 31/12/2019, <https://bit.ly/3I1MMxQ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>231</sup> Filip Šebok, ‘The curious case of the China-loving Slovak parliamentarian Ľuboš Blaha’, China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 26/08/2019, <https://bit.ly/3YBLpNw> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

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Friendship Medal from the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in recognition of his contributions to enhancing bilateral relations and his support of Taiwan on the international stage. The medal was awarded in June 2020 during a parliamentary delegation to Taiwan led by Milan Laurenčík of SaS. Members of the group have also been instrumental in adopting resolutions supportive of Taiwan in parliament.

On an international level, Slovakian MPs from both the National Council as well as members of the MEPs are active in IPAC, as well as the Formosa Club. Miriam Lexmann, an IPAC Co-Chair and MEP, Christian Democrats and European People's Party (EPP) was one of the MEPs specifically targeted by the PRC's sanctions adopted in retaliation against the EU's limited sanctioning of CCP officials responsible for abuses of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang.

#### **2.8.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Slovakia: Humanitarian issues take precedence**

The Slovakian Parliament has traditionally played a marginal role in forming Slovakia's foreign policy. The same holds true for the more specific issue of Slovakia's policy towards the PRC. The lack of scrutiny regarding relations with the PRC in the Slovakian Parliament can be best explained by the fact that since 2012 (coincidentally also the year when the CEE-China initiative was established) a parliamentary majority was held for two consecutive terms by political parties that charted a more pragmatic approach to the PRC, focusing on economic opportunities while considering humanitarian issues and security considerations as useless distractions.

The PRC is typically discussed in parliament during hearings of the Foreign Affairs Committee prior to the appointment of a new ambassador, who customarily presents the priorities of their upcoming tenure. The hearings are largely a formality and are not typically accompanied by a substantial debate on basic premises, nor particularities of Slovakia's approach to the PRC (or any other country for that matter).

Despite all of this, the lack of parliamentary activity regarding the PRC and PRC-related issues began to change in 2020. That year, the National Council, and its various committees, adopted a flurry of resolutions touching upon various PRC-related issues, especially related to Hong Kong, Tibet, Taiwan and Covid-19. This dramatic

change came about after the centre-right political parties – which were always critical of the PRC – gained a majority in the parliament and its crucial committees, allowing them to better express and pursue their political inclinations toward the PRC.

Slovakian MPs were among the most active in the EU in voicing their concerns over the adoption of new security laws in Hong Kong. In May 2020, as many as 19 MPs, including two deputy speakers and six MEPs, signed the joint statement decrying the CCP's breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in response to Hong Kong's adoption of various security laws. The volume of MPs was all the more significant as, at the time, Slovakia did not have any political conflict with the PRC. However, the group of MPs that signed the statement was almost exclusively composed of politicians identifying with the centre-right.

Nevertheless, this move influenced the executive branch. Slovakia was one of the 27 countries to sign a joint statement to the UN Human Rights Council demanding the PRC reconsider the law's adoption. Slovakia was the only country from the Central European region to co-sign the statement.<sup>233</sup>

A largely overlapping group of MPs (which also included Deputy Speakers Gábor Grendel and Juraj Šeliga) also initiated and signed a statement supporting Tibet on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Panchen Lama's abduction by the CCP. The MPs condemned the forced disappearance as a 'tragic milestone evidencing the continuous crime being perpetrated by China not only against [Panchen Lama] Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his family but also against all the Tibetans.'<sup>234</sup> The statement simultaneously noted abuses of Uyghurs and Chinese Christians.

Since 2020, the Slovakian Parliament has also become a rather active voice in calling for deeper engagement between Slovakia and Taiwan and in supporting Taiwan's greater international participation. MPs in various fora repeatedly voice their support for Taiwan's bid to participate in international organisations, especially UN specialised agencies. Several Slovak MPs (e.g. Peter Osuský and Miroslav Žiak) signed a letter to the World Health Organisation (WHO) President expressing their support for restoring Taiwan's observer status within

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<sup>233</sup> Matej Simalcik, 'Slovakia: A New Challenger of China's Human Rights Record?', *The Diplomat*, 17/08/2020, <http://bit.ly/3KaD7b4> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>234</sup> '22 Slovak Parliamentarians Issue Joint Statement Calling for the Release of Tibet's Panchen Lama', *The Tibet Bureau - Geneva*, 17/05/2020, <https://bit.ly/3Xuwsv7> (checked: 16/02/2023).

the organisation.<sup>235</sup> The same kind of activity was later repeated in coordination with parliamentarians from other Central European countries, calling for Taiwan's participation at the World Health Assembly.<sup>236</sup>

Supportive resolutions were also adopted in several parliamentary committees, especially the Foreign Affairs Committee, but also the Health Care Committee and European Affairs Committee. Since the start of the 2020 to 2024 term, these committees have adopted resolutions supportive of Taiwan on at least five different occasions. The adoption of these resolutions was naturally opposed by some of the MPs affiliated with the opposition political parties favouring a more pragmatic approach to the PRC on the grounds that such moves are in breach of Slovakia's official position and the 'One China' principle.<sup>237</sup>

Most committee activity concerned support for Taiwan's observer status in the WHO. The adoption of the resolutions was justified by citing Taiwan's record in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, or provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine.<sup>238</sup> Support was also expressed for Taiwan's participation in the International Civil Aviation Organisation and the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) (although the resolution on INTERPOL failed to receive necessary majority support, several vocal MPs were calling for its adoption).<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Miroslav Ziak, Facebook, 25/04/2020, <https://bit.ly/3SoOa8m> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>236</sup> Rhoda Kwan, '106 European lawmakers petition for Taiwan participation at World Health Org', *Hong Kong Free Press*, 03/11/2020, <https://bit.ly/3S5cXIr> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>237</sup> 'z 24. schôdze Zahraničného výboru Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky, ktorá sa uskutočnila 11.mája 2021 o 12:00 hod. v budove Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky, Nám. A. Dubčeka 1, miestnosť č. 149' ['Minutes from the 24th meeting of the Foreign Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, which took place on May 11, 2021 at 12:00 p.m. in the building of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, Nám. A. Dubčeka 1, room no. 149'], Zahraničný výbor Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky [Foreign Committee National Council of the Slovak Republic], 11/05/2021, <http://bit.ly/3I0eA5z> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>238</sup> '84.Uznesenie Zahraničného výboru Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky z 26. apríla 2022' ['84. Resolution of the Foreign Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic dated April 26, 2022'], Zahraničný výbor Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky [Foreign Committee National Council of the Slovak Republic], 26/05/2022, <https://bit.ly/3YPk2z2> (checked: 16/02/2023) and '52.Uznesenie Zahraničného výboru Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky z 11. mája 2021' ['52. Resolution of the Foreign Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic dated May 11, 2021'], Zahraničný výbor Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky [Foreign Committee National Council of the Slovak Republic], 11/05/2021, <https://bit.ly/3Iqeg1z> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>239</sup> Kelvin Chen, 'Slovakia Parliament committee backs Taiwan in International Civil Aviation Organization', *Taiwan News*, 09/09/2022, <http://bit.ly/3K8w8z4> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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Unlike values-related issues, Chinese economic activity receives next to no scrutiny in the Slovak parliament, despite the fact that Slovakia has been part of the CEE-China initiative since 2012 and signed a BRI Memorandum in 2015. It can be assumed that this is due to the fact that these projects have not met expectations. The lack of tangible results can be seen as justification for why Slovakia can afford to take a stronger stance on humanitarian issues in the PRC. It should be noted though that a major Chinese green-field investment (by Volvo, a subsidiary of Geely) is under preparation. This could potentially lead to a renewal of interest in discussing economic relations with the PRC among Slovak politicians.

## Conclusion

Slovakia's relative focus on the PRC and PRC-related issues are a recent phenomenon. Although attempts to establish cooperation have emerged since 2012, after Slovakia became part of the CEE-China initiative and signed the BRI Memorandum in 2015, they were chiefly about alleviating some of the economic stress Slovakia was under after the 2008 global financial crisis. Attempts to establish connections with the PRC were not a result of a broad inter-parliamentary consensus, but were instead driven by a specific segment of Slovakia's political spectrum; the views of the PRC and PRC-related issues among Slovakian MPs are, ultimately, quite different, making policy on the PRC prone to dramatic shifts resulting from domestic political change. Nevertheless, the PRC is still rarely a topic in domestic political discourse. Even though the National Council has been recently active in bringing attention to humanitarian abuses in the PRC and Taiwan-related issues, it has not become a venue for a nuanced scrutiny of Slovakia-PRC relations.

## 2.9 Slovenia

*By Nina Pejič*

### 2.9.1 Slovenia's political system and the main political parties

Slovenia is a unitary democratic republic and its parliament is composed of two houses: the National Assembly and the National

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Council. The government is elected from the 90 representatives of the National Assembly. 88 out of these members are elected using the party-list proportional representation system, with the remaining two being representatives of the Hungarian and Italian-speaking ethnic minorities in Slovenia.<sup>240</sup> These two seats have absolute veto power in matters concerning their ethnic groups.

The National Council has a so-called 'Upper Chamber' which consists of representatives from social, economic, professional and local interest groups in Slovenia. The National Council works as a correcting mechanism of the National Assembly and has no legislative power.<sup>241</sup> All the members of the National Council are employed and do not hold office professionally, lowering the chances of political interests corrupting their decision making and enabling them to maintain regular contact with their professional field.

The political parties currently with representation in the National Assembly are:

- Freedom Movement;
- the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS);
- New Slovenia-Christian Democrats (NSi);
- the Social Democrats (SD);
- Left; and
- the Italian and Hungarian National Community (IMNS).

The 10th parliamentary elections took place on 24th April 2022 and achieved 70.97% electoral participation, which was the highest voter turnout since 2000 and a large improvement on the 2018 election, which saw a voter turnout of just 52.64%.<sup>242</sup> This can be attributed to an increase in civil society movements encouraging voting.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> They are elected through the Borda count method, which intends to elect candidates based on consensus rather than majority. Currently it is in use only in Slovenia, Iceland, and the Republic of Kiribati.

<sup>241</sup> It is not elected by the general population, but rather from bodies of different interest groups: 22 representatives of local interests, six representatives of non-commercial activities, four representatives of employers, four of employees, and four representatives of farmers, crafts, trades and independent professionals.

<sup>242</sup> 'Volilna udeležba za celotno Slovenijo' ['Electoral participation for the whole of Slovenia'], Državna volilna komisija [National Election Commission], 2018, <https://bit.ly/3E65Hq0> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'Izidi glasovanja' ['Voting results'], Državna volilna komisija [National Election Commission], 2022, <https://bit.ly/3YN4Sdu> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>243</sup> This was a significant improvement from past elections, where turnout was just 52.63% in 2018 and 51.71% in 2014.

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The leading political party in Slovenia right now is Freedom Movement headed by Dr Robert Golob, the current Prime Minister of Slovenia, which received 34.45% of all votes. This is followed by the SDS, headed by Janez Janša, which received 23.48% of the votes. Following the elections, Freedom Movement formed a three party coalition with the Social Democrats and the Left party. SD have existed since 1993 and are a splinter group of the disbanded League of Communists of Slovenia. The Left is a democratic socialist, but also an anti-capitalist and Eurosceptic party.

The previous government headed by Janša from 2020–2022 spearheaded continued attempts to subvert Slovenia’s democratic institutions and judicial process, introducing several laws which were restrictive of individual rights and freedoms.<sup>244</sup> These measures were also poorly communicated to the public. Despite this, the Slovenian Democratic Party still currently has the second largest representation in the Slovenian parliament and is heading the opposition.

The transparency levels of the three political parties currently in power vary. Freedom Movement was established only a few months before the 2022 parliamentary elections (absorbing large parts of older parties such as the List of Marjan Šarec (LMŠ) and the Party of Alenka Bratušek (SAB)), and therefore has a relatively clean slate.

The Social Democrats have been connected to several transparency scandals in recent decades, with the most high-profile one being opaque investments into the Šoštanj lignite thermal power plant Unit 6 between 2004 and 2012, a matter that is currently under investigation by the anti-corruption commission.<sup>245</sup> Left has not been embroiled in any corruption scandals and is open about their standings, policy proposals and general worldview, however, this is their first full coalition participation.

### **3.9.2 How the Slovenian public views the PRC: An increasingly stronger power**

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, assessments in Slovenia – via academics, the media and politicians – of the PRC’s economic growth largely underestimated it, and dismissed it as the product of copying

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<sup>244</sup> ‘Freedom in the World Report: Slovenia 2022’, Freedom House, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3xp2ONf> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>245</sup> ‘Parliament to Investigate “Monument to Slovenian Corruption”’, Thermo Plant TEŠ 6’, *Slovenia Times*, 09/12/2014, <https://bit.ly/3KaiFa1> (checked: 16/02/2023).



foreign models.<sup>246</sup> Furthermore, there was generally little discussion on the PRC or PRC-related issues more broadly. The lack of knowledge and attention historically paid to the PRC is best reflected by the fact that, in 2014 during an address to the diplomatic corps, Borut Pahor, then President of Slovenia, referred to India and Japan as Slovenia's most important non-EU and non-NATO partners in Asia. The Chinese ambassador left the event.<sup>247</sup>

Slovenia accounts for a small fraction of Chinese investment and activities within the CEE-China initiative. Except for a few Chinese acquisitions in Slovenia which were negatively portrayed by the media, such as the acquisition of Gorenje, an appliance company, by Hisense,<sup>248</sup> the PRC does not receive a lot of media or public attention in Slovenia.

Nonetheless, the PRC's image in Slovenia has changed since 2012. While the general view of the PRC has largely stayed the same in recent years, with 39% of Slovenians having a positive view of the PRC remaining consistent in 2012, 2016 and 2018 respectively, the perception of the PRC's power has changed. Since 2012, the perception of Slovenians regarding the PRC as a powerful country relative to the EU has been increasing. In 2018, 61% of Slovenians thought the political influence of the EU was weaker than that of the PRC, compared to 48% in 2012.<sup>249</sup> While this cannot be characterised as either an improvement or deterioration of the PRC's image in Slovenia, it shows that Slovenians are starting to perceive the PRC as an important power in international politics.

This is reflected in the media, where (rare) articles on the PRC consist mostly of following US-PRC relations or other activity of the PRC with potential global influence, such as its management of the

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<sup>246</sup> Nina Pejič, 'Twists and Turns; Chinese-Slovene Relations in the Pandemic Era', Matthew Henderson (ed.), *China's Engagement in Central and Eastern European Countries*, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, 14/06/2021, <https://bit.ly/3S3dzyn> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>247</sup> Marjan Svetličič, *China in the World Economy and its Economic Relations with Slovenia: Past, Present and the Future* (University of Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences, 2021).

<sup>248</sup> Borut Mekina, 'Prodaja Gorenja na Kitajsko ni nekaj, na kar bi bila država lahko ponosna' ['The goal of Hisens, which bought Gorenje, is to penetrate the German market, but not social responsibility towards Velenje'], *Mladina*, 20/12/2019, <http://bit.ly/3YDKopx> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>249</sup> Nina Pejič and Tinkara Godec, 'Back to consistency: Slovenia and China in calm waters of bilateral economic relations.', Plamen Tonchev and Mirela Petkova (eds.), 'Secret Charm: China's hidden influence in Southeast Europe', Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Sofia Security Forum, 11/01/2023, <https://bit.ly/3lBzHnh> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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Covid-19 pandemic. However, public debate remains at the superficial level.<sup>250</sup>

CCP messaging rarely penetrates the Slovenian media. There are no Chinese-owned media outlets in Slovenia. When Nancy Pelosi, former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Taiwan in August 2022, media reporting in Slovenia was limited, apart from an op-ed by Wang Shunqing, the Chinese Ambassador to Slovenia.<sup>251</sup> On topics where the PRC is directly challenged, the Chinese Embassy's public response is timid. When the President of the Slovenian-Chinese Business Council called on Ambassador Wang and the PRC to stay neutral regarding Russia's war against Ukraine,<sup>252</sup> the response in Slovenian media was an agreeable reply by Ambassador Wang.<sup>253</sup> This dialogue was not followed by any wider discussion in the media.

### 3.9.3 How Slovenian parliamentarians and political parties view the PRC: Increasingly critical voices from the right

In Slovenian politics, the PRC is primarily perceived as a major economic force.<sup>254</sup> The PRC has become an important trading partner for Slovenia, with total trade doubling since 2012.<sup>255</sup> Slovenia also participates in the PRC's BRI, signing agreements on transportation and logistics, and has expressed interest in further cooperation in areas

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<sup>250</sup> "Trump obtožil WHO, da je "kitajska lutka"', ["Trump accused the WHO of being a "Chinese puppet"'], *24ur*, 19/05/2020, <http://bit.ly/3YVgKuj> (checked: 16/02/2023) and "Trump: "Kitajska bo naredila vse, da bi izgubil te volitve"' ["Trump: "China will do anything to lose this election"'], *RTV Slovenija*, 30/04/2020, <http://bit.ly/3Xtfu05> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>251</sup> Shunqing Wang, 'Načelo ene Kitajske je predpogoj in temelj zunanjih odnosov' ['The One China principle is the prerequisite and foundation of foreign relations'], *Dnevnik*, 06/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3KinH4e> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>252</sup> Tekst Žiga Vavpotič, 'Prošnja Kitajski, naj ostane nevtralna' ['A plea to China to remain neutral'], *Delo*, 20/03/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xuefDe> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>253</sup> Wang Shunqing, 'Prošnja Kitajski, naj ostane nevtralna (2)' ['A plea to China to remain neutral (2)'], *Delo*, 26/03/2022, <http://bit.ly/3k1Dwlk> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>254</sup> According to the Economic Complexity Index, which ranks countries based on how diversified and complex their exports are, Slovenia is the 9th most economically complex country in the world, making it less dependent on a single large trading partner or export product.

<sup>255</sup> In 2012, Slovenia's imports from the PRC amounted to €618 million (£550 million), while Slovenian exports to it amounted to €136 million (£121 million). From 2012 onwards, these numbers have grown to €4 billion (£3.6 billion) worth of imports from the PRC in 2021, and €337 million (£300 million) in exports to it for the same year. 'Exports and imports by countries, Slovenia, annually', Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3S0VxN4> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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such as tourism, environmental protection, and cultural exchange.<sup>256</sup> However, Slovenia has yet to attract any significantly large Chinese loans or investment.

This is mainly because Slovenia is a much smaller market when compared to other European countries who are members of the CEE-China initiative or the EU. In particular, Slovenia has very few large companies that compete with larger multinationals on the EU level, leaving many other targets for the PRC in Europe with a more diverse entrepreneurial landscape and bigger markets. Slovenia, however, is still a very strategic entry point to the EU market. Slovenia's policy towards the PRC has therefore largely focused on fostering and expanding economic cooperation and trade.

The Committee for Foreign Policy is in charge of scrutinising the work of the Slovenian Parliament on foreign affairs, touching mainly upon legislation.<sup>257</sup> Its members are MPs from all parties, but MEPs from Slovenia can attend and participate in debates without voting rights. Several other participants can be invited to the Committee for Foreign Policy session, such as representatives of ministerial or interministerial working bodies, representatives of the European Commission to Slovenia, representatives of supporting services, such as legislative or legal service, as well as representatives of expert public, civil and business society. The Committee for Foreign Policy meets approximately once a month in a regular session, but also conducts several (10 to 20) urgent sessions every year.<sup>258</sup>

The parliament also holds several 'friendship groups' that join parliamentarians from different parties, where they exchange opinions and experiences regarding the selected country, and cooperate with diplomatic and consular missions when they come to Slovenia. The members of the friendship group come from at least half of the parliamentary groups, both coalition and opposition, and elect a

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<sup>256</sup> Slovenia has signed 13 Memorandums of Understanding since the launch of the BRI in 2012. See: 'Pogodbeno stanje med Slovenijo in Kitajsko' ['The contractual situation between Slovenia and China'], Republika Slovenija [Republic of Slovenia], 2022, <http://bit.ly/3XwR9Ho> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>257</sup> Not all sessions of the Committee for Foreign Policy in Janša's mandate have a public record. Rarely, some sessions will have a transcript. Sessions also include confidential documents, the titles of which are not included into the agenda, so on occasion even the agenda of Committee for Foreign Policy sessions is unclear.

<sup>258</sup> 'Seje delovnih teles - Odbor za zunanjo politiko' ['Working body meetings - Foreign Policy Committee'], Državni zbor [National Assembly], No date, <http://bit.ly/3I3APrj> (checked: 16/02/2023).



president from among its members, who coordinates its work. There are currently 58 friendship groups in the Slovenian Parliament. One of such groups is dedicated to the PRC and currently consists of 13 representatives: 8 representatives of the Freedom Movement, 3 representatives of the Left, 1 representative of the SDs and 1 representative of New Slovenia-Christian Democrats (NSi) party, the latter currently being an opposition party, with the first three being members of the governing coalition.<sup>259</sup>

A major shift in political perceptions in Slovenia regarding the PRC occurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Slovenia began to better acknowledge the role of the PRC in international affairs and, consequently, made new policy decisions.

Janša of the right-wing SDS was in power during this time. When he took power, the PRC was pushed down the list of national, as well as EU, priorities; Slovenia presided over the Council of the EU in 2021, and no major decisions regarding the EU-PRC Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, or other PRC-related issues, were made.<sup>260</sup> Janša also opted out of participation in the CEE-China 2021 Summit and supported the declaration of the G7 and NATO identifying the PRC as a key 'strategic competitor'.<sup>261</sup> Janša was also harshly critical of the PRC when it came to humanitarian issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, as well as rising tensions across the Taiwan Strait. He criticised the PRC during an interview for 'Doordarshan', a government-owned television broadcaster in India on 17th January 2022, only (perhaps purposefully) a month after Slovenia's presidency of the Council of the EU ended and application to the UN Security Council was submitted.<sup>262</sup> The Slovenian prime Minister criticised the EU's ambiguity when it came to the PRC and evidenced a desire for deeper Slovenia-Taiwan ties. Janša said Slovenia would support any sovereign decision of the Taiwanese people, including independence, should that be their decision, also

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<sup>259</sup> 'Kitajska - Skupina prijateljstva z Ljudsko republiko Kitajsko' ['Group of Friendship with the People's Republic of China'], Državni zbor [National Assembly], No date, <http://bit.ly/3ItmXrJ> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>260</sup> Nina Pejič, 'Slovenian Presidency is Likely to Push China from Top EU Priorities', China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 30/08/2021, <https://bit.ly/3YSNaWb> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> Tinkara Godec, 'Sino-Slovenian Relations Off to a Rocky Start in 2022', China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 17/02/2022, <https://bit.ly/3KiiNod> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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referring to Taiwan as a ‘country’ at one point in the interview, a strong stance.<sup>263</sup>

Despite this, the Janša administration maintained a close and pragmatic economic relationship with the PRC. Zdravko Počivalšek, then Minister of Economic Development and Technology, responded to the prime minister’s comments by emphasising that the PRC is one of Slovenia’s largest economic partners outside the EU, and how foreign policy must have in mind Slovenia’s economic interests.<sup>264</sup>

The central and central-left opposition parties<sup>265</sup> also reaffirmed Slovenia’s adherence to the ‘One China’ principle, regardless of the prime ministers’ comments. Milan Brglez, a MP for the Social Democrats, tweeted: ‘Shameless and crazy privatisation of foreign policy. The Prime Minister does not care about the Foreign Affairs Act and the National Assembly, as he pits us against the two superpowers.’<sup>266</sup> Other members of the Social Democrats and the then opposition parties also opposed Janša’s views. Matjaž Nemeč (Social Democrats), who is also a member of the above committee, said that the Prime Minister’s statements were inconsistent with Slovenia’s foreign policy.<sup>267</sup>

There has also been evident backlash against other policies of the Janša administration that took a harder line against Beijing, such as on the participation of Huawei in the building of Slovenia’s 5G network. In August 2020, following a well-advertised visit to Europe by Mike Pompeo, then the US Secretary of State, Logar signed a Joint Statement on the Security of 5G Networks in Slovenia. In the agreement, ‘the United States and Slovenia declare[d] their desire to strengthen [their] cooperation on 5G’, a strong sentiment given the US was actively trying to convince allies and partners to exclude Huawei technology from their 5G network.<sup>268</sup> The government desire to categorise Huawei as a ‘high-risk supplier’ never materialised in Janša’s mandate between

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<sup>263</sup> ‘Interview of Prime Minister Janez Janša for the Indian national television Doordarshan’, Republic of Slovenia, 17/01/2020, <https://bit.ly/3xt2zAT> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>264</sup> ‘Posledice Janševih izjav: preklici pogodb in izstopi iz naložb’ [‘Consequences of Janš’s statements: cancellation of contracts and withdrawal from investments’], *24 ur*, 20/01/2022, <http://bit.ly/3EbcApW> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>265</sup> Social Democrats, LMS (now merged into the Freedom Movement) and SAB.

<sup>266</sup> Milan Brglez, Twitter, 18/01/2022, <https://bit.ly/3ItLr45> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>267</sup> Irma Musić, ‘Tajvan: opozicija zahteva izredno sejo OZP, Počivalšek pa pojasnila od Janše’ [‘Taiwan: the opposition demands an extraordinary session of the OZP, and Počivalšek gets explanations from Janša’], *N1*, 19/01/2022, <http://bit.ly/3I9Q8ie> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>268</sup> ‘Joint Statement on United States – Slovenia Joint Declaration on 5G Security’, Department of State (US), 08/13/2020, <http://bit.ly/3YY8KZc> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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2020 and 2022. The parliament overturned the so-called ‘anti-Huawei’ bill at the beginning of February 2022. The new draft law on electronic communication was accepted in September 2022 and still includes additional security requirements for operators that provide mobile networks to managers of critical infrastructure: the restrictions refer to the ‘ban on the use of equipment that could threaten national security’, as opposed to the previous wording about the participation of ‘high-risk suppliers’ in providing electronic communication networks.<sup>269</sup>

To summarise the outlooks of Slovenian parliamentary parties on the PRC: it is clear that the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party and its former coalition member New Slovenia-Christian Democrats employ rhetoric that is critical of the PRC, even after their mandate ended in 2022. While Janša might be the most visible representative of this party, there are other members that take a similar position, such as Milan Zver and Romana Tomc (two European MEPs), indicating that this will become – or it already is – an official party position even without it being made formal in their electoral programme; party members take stances connected to PRC-related issues on the party’s webpage.<sup>270</sup> On the other hand, the Social Democrats, the Left and Freedom Movement believe that fruitful economic cooperation with the PRC can be achieved without a significant deepening of relations on a political and cultural level through engaging with the PRC on the EU level.

Under the current three-party coalition, Slovenia’s policy toward the PRC has reverted back to one underpinned by economic cooperation and adherence to a common EU-stance regarding human rights and other both regional and global political issues. Similarly, the Slovenian ambassador in the PRC maintains a common European stance regarding sensitive issues such as the humanitarian situation in the PRC, the rule of law, and Russia’s war against Ukraine.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> ‘Zelena luč predlogu zakona o elektronskih komunikacijah’ [‘The green light to the bill on electronic communications’], *RTV Slovenija*, 14/09/2022, <http://bit.ly/3XxWT33> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>270</sup> Dr Milan Zver, ‘Kitajski virus’ [‘Chinese virus’], *SDS*, 16/04/2020, <https://bit.ly/3xtSoMw> (checked: 16/02/2023) and ‘Romana Tomc: Stop kitajski nakupovalni turneji po evropi’ [‘Romana Tomc: Stop the Chinese shopping tour in Europe’], *SDS*, 17/06/2020, <https://bit.ly/415gmLn> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>271</sup> Alenka Suhadolnik, ‘Slovenia and China: 30 years of diplomatic relations’, *China Global Television Network*, 12/05/2020, <http://bit.ly/3lIvdvi> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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### 2.9.4 Parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activities in Slovenia: Shallow engagement

When discussed in the Slovenian Parliament, the PRC or PRC-related issues are usually connected to trade and the economy. Chinese trade and investment activities in Slovenia are regarded as positive developments for Slovenia, evident in the Committee for Foreign Policy session where Matjaž Nemeč (Social Democrats) was critical of the possible negative affect Janša's comments regarding the PRC on Indian television may have on the PRC-Slovenia relationship and Slovenia's economy.<sup>272</sup> Significantly, this scrutiny was not levied against the PRC's international activity (of which Janša was criticising) but in fact the prime minister's condemnation of it. In this instance, the Slovenian Parliament was actually working to neutralise Janša's criticism of the PRC, rather than foster it.

Other matters related to the PRC have been on the agenda of the Committee for Foreign Policy on rare occasions. 'China' was mentioned in the session of the 101st regular Committee for Foreign Policy assembly on 26th January 2022, which was discussing the reformulation of the Slovenian Foreign Policy Strategy. On January 28th 2022, Logar informed the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Policy that Slovenia and Taiwan were planning to reciprocally open economic and cultural offices, with the offices in Slovenia carrying the name 'Taipei'. Parliamentary members discussed political and economic relations between Slovenia and the PRC, as well as Slovenia and Taiwan; the committee session resulted in reaffirming the country's adherence to the 'One China' principle and garnering a consensus on Slovenia's revised Foreign Policy Strategy. Since Golob's administration has been in power, the PRC has been mentioned in three sessions of the Committee for Foreign Policy since April; however, it has mostly been in passing and in relation to other events, such as COP27.

Regarding Chinese investments in Slovenia in general, they are subject to domestic and EU regulatory control headed by the European Commission, which has approved both acquisitions and mergers by Chinese companies in Slovenia: while parliamentary parties did discuss

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<sup>272</sup> 'Seje delovnih teles - Izbrani zapis seje 16 - Odbor za zunanjo politiko - 101. Redna' ['Meetings of working bodies - Selected record of meeting 16 - Committee on Foreign Policy - 101. Regular'], Državni zbor [National Assembly], 26/01/2022, <http://bit.ly/3HZjhg9> (checked: 16/02/2023).

the feasibility and social influence of these investments,<sup>273</sup> such investments are rare and the political attention attached to them is short-lived.

In the new parliamentary constellation, the PRC has been mentioned a few times in relation to Russia's war against Ukraine (three mentions), Slovenia's developmental aid in Africa (one mention) and the fight against climate change (one mention), where the PRC is seen as a relevant actor. There is thus overall a modest amount of discussion and scrutiny over Chinese activity within Slovenia, but also globally, in parliament. This could be a consequence of a limited amount of Chinese activities in Slovenia, or also Slovenia's lack of independent engagement with global issues; Slovenia's foreign policy is usually discussed within the framework of the EU CFSP. Furthermore, Slovenia, as a smaller economy, does not want to either take a strong anti- or pro-PRC stance. Slovenian Democrats headed by Janša remain the most active in scrutinising the PRC in the Slovenian Parliament.

An investigation of Slovenia's two most recent foreign policy strategies provides good insight into how political parties in the Slovenian Parliament think about the PRC. Importantly, while the foreign policy strategy comes under the mandate of Anže Logar, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his team, it still has to be discussed in the National Assembly and responsible committee. Insofar as the 2021 strategy did not face any disapproval, it may reflect the changing preferences of Slovenian politicians.<sup>274</sup> In the new document, the PRC was mentioned four times – in the old strategy confirmed in 2015, the PRC is also mentioned four times.<sup>275</sup> However, the contexts differ. This is because the 2015 strategy mentions the PRC in the context of a multipolar world, where it was said that 'the relations between the USA and China and between China and Russia will mark Eurasia, the Atlantic area and the world in the long term.'<sup>276</sup> The foreign policy strategy of 2015 mentions Asia as a separate category, where it states that 'the

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<sup>273</sup> The Left stood up to stop the possible takeover of Gorenje by Hisense. See: 'Levica za ustavitev kitajskega prevzema Gorenja' ['Left for stopping the Chinese takeover of Gorenje'], RTV Slovenija, 16/05/2018, <http://bit.ly/3K5sSoh> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>274</sup> 'Slovenija: varna, uspešna in v svetu spoštovana' ['Slovenia: safe, successful and respected in the world'], Republika Slovenija Ministrstvo za Zunanje Zadeve [Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 11/10/2022, <https://bit.ly/3XsOSwt> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>275</sup> 'Slovenija: varna, uspešna in v svetu spoštovana' ['Slovenia: safe, successful and respected in the world'], Republika Slovenija Ministrstvo za Zunanje Zadeve [Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 30/07/2015, <https://bit.ly/3K7T55E> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*



most important partners of the Republic of Slovenia are India, Japan and China, as the world's largest economy', where 'cooperation with Asia' was seen as 'extremely important in the field[s] of science, development and innovation.'<sup>277</sup>

In the new 2021 foreign policy strategy the 'extremely important' nature of cooperation with Asia in certain fields remains the same, yet the region is named as the 'Indo-Pacific' for the first time, where it is further stated that Slovenia will focus special attention on 'deepening cooperation with the democracies in this region'.<sup>278</sup> It states that the most important Slovenian partners in this part of the world are 'India, as the world's largest democracy, Japan, China, Korea and Australia'; special emphasis is placed here on the 'world's largest democracy' as opposed to its 'largest economy'.

Moreover, the strategy also redefines the context of global powers, stating that 'China is also increasingly present in Europe and represents an economic opportunity, but at the same time it is also a growing systemic and strategic competitor'. This reflects the EU's language regarding the forging of a 'multifaceted approach' to the PRC. It seems that Slovenia's foreign policy strategy will again be redefined by the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tanja Fajon (Social Democrats), who is taking the position in Golob's government, whose mandate lasts from 2022 to 2026. The new minister plans to put the EU's core values at the heart of a new foreign policy strategy, as well as take into account the changes in Euro-Atlantic security following Russia's war against Ukraine.

## Conclusion

The PRC's presence in Slovenia and the bilateral relationship between the two countries has gone largely unnoticed over the past decade in Slovenian politics. With the exception of a few extraordinary events, such as the Slovenia-US Joint Statement on the Security of 5G Networks in Slovenia, and Janša's interview, while prime minister, on Indian television, the PRC and PRC-related issues are rarely a topic of parliamentary debate. Nevertheless, the shift towards recognising the

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<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> Emphasis added. 'Slovenija: varna, uspešna in v svetu spoštovana' ['Slovenia: safe, successful and respected in the world'], Republika Slovenija Ministrstvo za Zunanje Zadeve [Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 11/10/2022, <https://bit.ly/3XsOSwt> (checked: 16/02/2023).





PRC as a global actor by parliamentarians is still noticeable as the PRC has featured in their discussions connected to the current geopolitical climate.

The PRC's 'charm' in Slovenia is mostly connected to its economic appeal: as two distinctively different markets in size and population, it is no wonder that the PRC represents an economic opportunity for Slovenian companies. The economic, political and cultural activities between the two are growing but remain modest in comparison to other countries in the CEE-China initiative. Slovenia also follows EU standards for procurement and lacks any big-scale infrastructure projects connected to the PRC, as opposed to its neighbours in countries such as Italy, Hungary and Croatia.

## 3.0 Conclusion

It is clear from the research that there are differing levels of parliamentary scrutiny regarding the PRC in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. There are also differences in how each nation perceives the PRC, its role in global affairs and its activity within the selected nation. There are also, of course, similarities. From both, conclusions can be drawn about the region's general sentiment towards the PRC and the CCP, as well as how it might develop in the future.

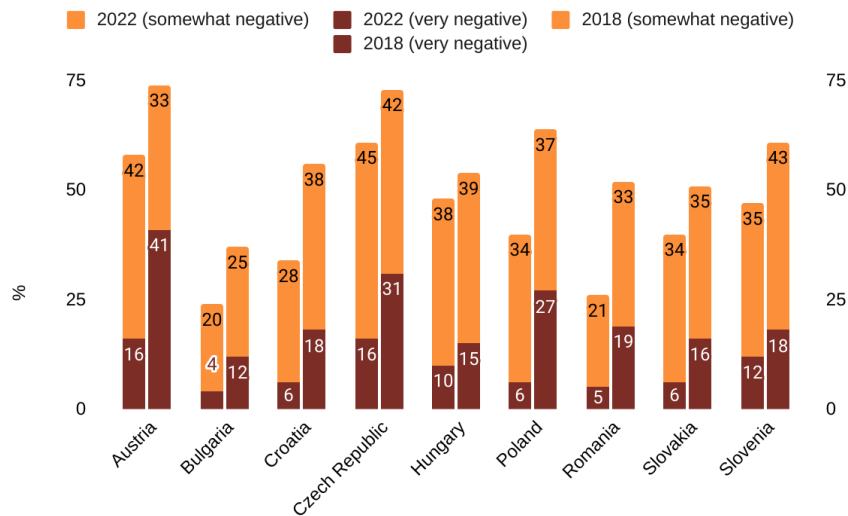
### *3.1 Changing perception, growing interest, increasing scrutiny?*

In all Central European countries public perceptions of the PRC have changed for the worse over the past three years (see Figures 8 and 9). Although attitudes became more positive during the PRC's efforts at 'mask diplomacy' in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, these were short-lived, particularly as the products supplied often were of low-quality, most evidently in the Czech Republic where legal action was considered against Chinese suppliers. Unfolding stories of the virus' origins and subsequent cover up by the CCP also affected opinion negatively.

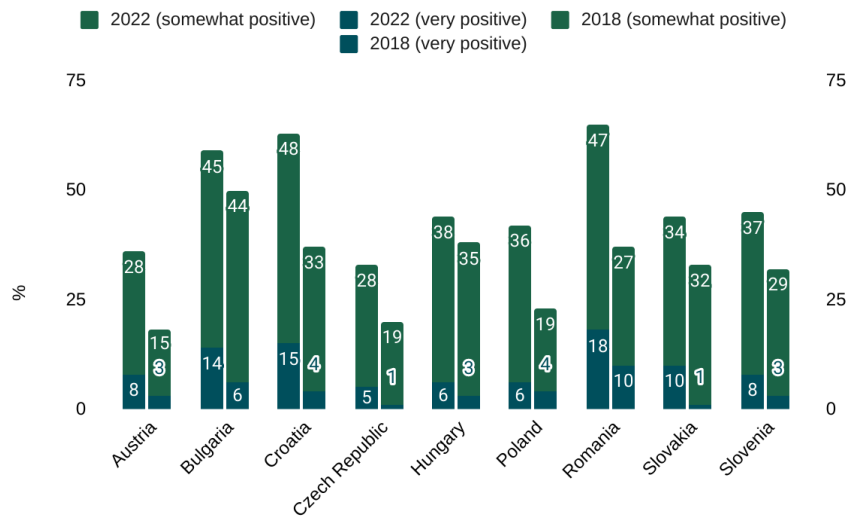
Beijing's response to Russia's renewed aggression towards Ukraine has not helped the PRC's image, either. This is due to the CCP's refusal to condemn the renewed offensive, which is seen as tacit support in Central Europe, or even approval. Likewise, CCP abuses – notably in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet – were also a problem for the Central European public. This was the issue most likely to encourage political parties to discuss the PRC and CCP openly. However, government discussion of this topic is quite rare; most nations' political parties also fail to reference the PRC at all in the party programmes produced during elections, although this did occur occasionally in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Some of these references, however, were merely in passing and did not articulate a national position.



### Figure 8: Change in negative perceptions of the PRC per country between 2018 and 2022<sup>279</sup>



### Figure 9: Change in positive perceptions of the PRC per country between 2018 and 2022<sup>280</sup>



<sup>279</sup> 'Special Eurobarometer 479 - Future of Europe 2018', European Commission, 11/2018, <http://bit.ly/3YBA3cg> (checked: 16/02/2023) and 'EP Eurobarometer Spring 2022 Survey: Rallying around the European flag - Democracy as anchor point in times of crisis', European Commission, 06/2022, <http://bit.ly/3S570Qz> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*



Where political parties in Central Europe have adopted positions on the PRC, these can sometimes be inconsistent and superficial. For example, political parties tend to seek ‘stable’ relations with the PRC to secure economic concessions and promote commerce; until recently, little thought was given to the potential geostrategic implications of such an approach. Nuances – such as concerns about civil rights, climate change and intellectual property theft which may arise from deepened economic engagement – often are absent from these positions. In some countries, such as Croatia and Poland, better economic engagement with the PRC is still seen as desirable by politicians and the public despite worsening perceptions of the PRC and its foreign policy. As well as highlighting the CCP’s excesses in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, political parties taking a firmer stance on the PRC are more likely to draw connections between Taiwan and Russia’s war in Ukraine.

The PRC’s refusal to condemn Russian aggression towards Ukraine has pushed existing questions higher up the agenda about its true motives for engaging in the CEE-China initiative. Some now see the platform merely as a plaything for Beijing to pretend that it cares about the region; others now see it as a tool for the CCP to prise apart European or Euro-Atlantic cohesion. At any rate, it is clear that Central European governments’ interest in the initiative is waning. This is a significant shift considering that the initiative’s launch in 2012 was received positively, and early success actually led to its expansion. As attitudes towards the PRC soured in the aftermath of Covid-19 (which also obliged the annual summits to be held online for an extended period of time), interest in the CEE-China initiative dwindled as well. Diminishing engagement with the CEE-China initiative reflects a general decline of willingness among Central European politicians to deepen relations with the PRC, including by joining Chinese parliamentary ‘friendship groups’.

Unlike the UK, most Central European nations have a wide spectrum of political parties from left to right, which often form governments based on expedient coalitions and associations. At times this can lead to a degree of political polarisation. Attitudes towards the PRC will not be exempt. This is important, given that in countries such as the UK, US and Australia, policy towards the PRC is now relatively bipartisan (and occasionally the only issue that is). As political coalitions wax and wane, sudden shifts in Central European countries’

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foreign policy towards the PRC can thus be expected, something the CCP may be able to exploit. Furthermore, as presidents are at times empowered to speak for the entire nation, they can attempt to shift the national position by speaking out on certain issues, in this case on issues which affect relations with the CCP. This phenomenon is currently unfolding in the Czech Republic, where Zeman, who dramatically expanded the country's engagement with the PRC, is being replaced by Pavel, who called his counterpart in Taiwan two days after winning the election and has already dubbed the PRC 'not friendly'.<sup>281</sup>

Despite declining perceptions of the PRC throughout Central Europe, scrutiny of the PRC and related matters – whether domestic or international – remains varied. The Polish Parliament is the most active in probing Chinese activity; questions have been raised in parliament regarding the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, while the potential role of Huawei in Poland's 5G infrastructure also has been heavily scrutinised. Austria and the Czech Republic follow: Austria currently is formulating a 'China strategy', while the Czech Republic, an entirely landlocked country, approved an 'Indo-Pacific strategy' in January 2023.<sup>282</sup> The want to formulate such strategies can be understood as a response to the changing perceptions of the PRC and CCP's geopolitical approach in the Indo-Pacific. As such strategies emerge, it can be no surprise that the PRC is scrutinised more vigorously given how its economic and military power may affect their countries' engagements. The PRC still nonetheless remains far from a salient issue in these parliaments.

The politicians of Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia scrutinise the PRC less than the leading Central European countries, though this does not mean it does not take place. A change in the ruling party since 2020 in Slovakia has seen greater probing of the PRC in the Slovakian Parliament (albeit from a very low baseline), though elections are expected this year which could see more PRC-friendly parties gain power. The new Slovenian Government elected last year has a different approach to the less PRC-friendly Janša, former Prime Minister of Slovenia, yet his influence is still strong. It is worth reiterating here that during his time in power, the Slovenian Parliament

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<sup>281</sup> Raphael Minder, 'Czech president-elect says west must accept China is "not friendly"', *Financial Times*, 01/02/2023, <http://bit.ly/3lHyfQr> (checked: 16/02/2023).

<sup>282</sup> 'The government has approved Czechia's strategies for engaging in Africa and for cooperation with the Indo-Pacific', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 05/01/2023, <https://bit.ly/3NldbdR> (checked: 16/02/2023).



worked to *neutralise* criticism of the PRC by Janša. The Romanian Parliament, although largely disinterested in the PRC's international activity, actually seems to monitor Chinese domestic activity the most out of all countries in Central Europe, with the role of Confucius Institutes in universities a topic of intense debate.

Of all parliamentarians in Central Europe, the Bulgarians and Croatians probe Chinese activity the least. That said, across the board, parliamentary scrutiny of Chinese activity is relatively low in all countries throughout the region, especially when compared to other European democracies such as the UK, or those in the Indo-Pacific such as Australia. At this point, it is worth pointing out that MEPs tend to be the most vocal in Central Europe in pointing to the risks of engaging with the PRC, though they merely raise awareness and have little formal domestic role in the countries they represent. MEPs from Bulgaria, however, have been known to promote a pro-PRC agenda in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Particularly since 2020, perceptions of the PRC have started to change. The amount of attention Central European politicians pay to the PRC, including the impact of its outreach, has visibly increased. But the region's politicians have some way to go until they reach the level of knowledge and interest some of their American, Australian, British and Japanese colleagues display. To no small extent this is understandable; domestic concerns (particularly in Croatia, where issues still prevalent from the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s remain unresolved) and growing concerns about Russia have dominated the regional agenda. Meanwhile, leading democracies, which hitherto regarded deepening relations with the PRC as a global economic opportunity, have to varying degrees begun to grasp the systemic challenge posed by the CCP under Xi's increasingly imperious form of leadership. When politicians in the US started to realise the extent of the problem, the charge was led by Donald Trump, whose unique style made these attitudes easy to dismiss, despite perceptions of the CCP hardening in the US for some years prior. Now, it is a bipartisan issue in Washington, and increasingly London, that competition with the PRC is a geostrategic reality. NATO and the EU are also increasingly more aware of the challenge posed by the CCP.

### *3.2 The way forward*

Given the transformation in the CCP's approach under Xi, Central European parliamentarians and political parties ought to enhance their knowledge of the Chinese state and agenda. Although awareness and scrutiny of the PRC has grown as regional perceptions of the CCP have tumbled, many gaps in knowledge remain. While some Central European nations have done more than others to overcome this problem, others still trail behind. This is not to say that politicians and political parties in Central Europe are uniquely unaware of the PRC and the extent of the CCP's ambitions; until very recently, there has been a systemic failure to identify and monitor the growth of Chinese power and interference throughout the democratic world. This is due to multiple factors, not least fantasies about enhanced trade's ability to affect political change, but also the speed at which the PRC has risen and begun to challenge the open international order.

Given Central Europe's geostrategic position as the PRC's gateway to Western Europe, politicians in the region ought to pay closer attention to the underlying aims and intentions of the CCP's engagement with their countries. At the very least, politicians from the region should continue to invest in their capability to better understand the CCP's geopolitical objectives and geoeconomic aims, as well as Chinese culture more broadly – particularly the history and language. Similarly to their British counterparts since 2020, they could mobilise through a caucus such as the 'China Research Group', which was established in the UK in early 2020 to 'promote debate and fresh thinking' about the PRC's rise and posture.<sup>283</sup> In addition, they could interact more with colleagues from other parliaments in Central Europe, and beyond, to share knowledge and best practice in monitoring the PRC, in particular identifying, investigating and constraining the risk from CCP influence operations.

Having increased their awareness and understanding of the CCP's geostrategic agenda, Central European politicians will be better able to serve their constituents and countries by remaining vigilant to any risks that come with engaging Beijing. This will enable them better to deflect attempts by the CCP to interfere in the political and economic systems of their countries; they will also be more ready to minimise risks where engagement might be desired. Indeed, how to deter, protect

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<sup>283</sup> 'Coronavirus: Tory MPs to examine "rise of China"', BBC News, 25/04/2020, <http://bit.ly/3I3H12x> (checked: 16/02/2023).

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against, and engage and compete with the PRC – all at the same time – is a strategic challenge facing all.





## Annex 1

### *Research guidelines for each partner*

Your section should be divided into the following four sections. Each section should focus on answering a specific research question:

#### **1.0 Introduction to the political system (300–500 words)**

- What form of political system exists in your country (parliamentary, presidential, and how the parliament is structured), what are the main political parties and how transparent are they?

#### **2.0 How the general public views the PRC (300–500 words)**

- How does the general public perceive the PRC, particularly its actions within your nation and on the international stage?

This will require:

- The use of publicly available opinion polls, where possible;
- An investigation of what the media and press says about the PRC, as well as if any of these outlets are owned by the PRC;
- An overview of how perceptions may (or may not) have changed since 2012 and how;
- Whether the public are broadly in agreement with their government's approach towards the PRC; and,
- Whether a specific political party best represents public opinion.

#### **3.0 How parliamentarians and political parties perceive the PRC (850–1,000 words)**

- How do parliamentarians and political parties in your country perceive the PRC?



This will require:

- An overview of the political parties' stances towards the PRC;
- An outline of any parliamentarians who are particularly outspoken on the PRC or specific Chinese policies;
- The overview of whether official parliamentary committees exist, and if so, if their work covers the PRC and its activities (example: the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and Defence Select Committee in the UK's House of Commons);
- An outline of whether official parliamentary groupings (called 'All Party Parliamentary Groups' in the UK) exist in your parliament and if so, if their operations focus on the PRC and its activities (example: the UK's All Party Parliamentary Group on China);
- An outline of any other groups which parliamentarians in your country may have formed to provide independent scrutiny of Chinese policies (such as the China Research Group in the UK or Interparliamentary Alliance on China), and,
- An analysis of how the PRC is discussed 'on the record' in your parliament (i.e., in what light is the PRC mentioned and how frequently?).

## **4.0 Chinese activities: Parliamentary scrutiny (850-1,000 words)**

### 4.1 Scrutiny of Chinese domestic activity (i.e., within your country)

#### 4.2 Scrutiny of Chinese international activity

- How much scrutiny does Chinese economic and political activity receive in the parliament of your country?

This will require:

- An investigation of how much scrutiny new Chinese activity in the selected country comes under in its parliament (examples of activity include: Particularly large



- infrastructure projects; financial assistance; technology contracts);
- An analysis of how much scrutiny Chinese international activity receives in your parliament, particularly the PRC's violations of human rights and international law; the 14+1 initiative; other Chinese geopolitical interests or objectives; and whether your country should reposition itself or reappraise its relations with the major powers – such as the UK, US and EU – to better accommodate Chinese interests.



## About the editor

**Patrick Triglavcanin** is Senior Research Assistant at the Council on Geostrategy. He holds a BA in Sociolegal Studies from the University of Western Australia and a Postgraduate Diploma in International Relations and National Security (1st Class Hons.) from Curtin University. Patrick focuses on the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, particularly Australia, the PRC and Britain's role in the region.

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Founded in 2021 as a Company Limited by Guarantee, we aim to shape British strategic ambition in a way that empowers the United Kingdom to succeed and prosper in the twenty-first century. We also look beyond Britain's national borders, with a broad focus on free and open nations in the Euro-Atlantic, the Indo-Pacific, and Polar regions.

Our vision is a united, strong and green Britain, which works with other free and open nations to compete geopolitically and lead the world in overcoming the environmental crisis – for a more secure and prosperous future.



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