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The East is Red… again! How Central and Eastern European Perceptions of China are influenced by the Specters of Communism and Russia

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Abstract

China has rapidly risen to prominence in Central and Eastern Europe over the past ten years (CEE). Will it split Europe apart? Could these formerly communist nations re-align with the East's communist superpower? Or does their prior exposure to communism and Russia make them suspicious of China? This article investigates what the results of a fall 2020 poll conducted in six CEE nations—the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Serbia, and Slovakia—can reveal about the factors influencing CEE attitudes toward China. It implies that China has emerged as a "second Eastern power" after Russia, which many CEE nations have come to identify with. Although there are significant differences between CEE publics' perceptions of China, perceptions of both Russia and China are consistently influenced by people's East or West self-identifications and attitudes toward both the past and present of communism. For all of the CEE, but especially for Latvia and Poland, where opinions toward their enormous Russian neighbour appear to almost entirely filter perceptions of China, Russia looms huge. We end by considering the effects of these conclusions regarding the composition of CEE public opinion toward China on the future of the "17+1" mechanism and CEE-China relations in general.

KEYWORDS- Post-communism, China-CEE relations and Russia relationships

Introduction

The Soviet satellites of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were among the first countries to diplomatically recognize the new People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and enjoyed a "Golden Era" with China during the 1950s. The Sino-Soviet split of 1960 quickly froze budding China-CEE relations, however, and after 1989 their political directions took even more different trajectories. Following the establishment of a "16+1" platform in 2012, and the announcement of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) in 2013, China-CEE relations seem to flower again. Beijing pledged to invest $12 billion in the CEE, and presented the goal of the relationship to be benign and "pragmatic" cooperation (Deng & Liu 2018; Liu 2018). Will China divide Europe? Might these formerly communist countries again align themselves with a communist superpower to their East? Or do their past experiences of communism and Russia generate suspicions of China? Western analysts are divided. Much research has focused on China's economic role in regional development (e.g. Wade 2014; Garlick 2015; Szunomar 2014). Some, including former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell (2020), have warned that China is "buying up" the region. In a recent report, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) similarly warns that Serbia is becoming a Chinese "client state" (Conley, Hillman, McCalpin, & Ruy 2020). Others counter, however, that China's economic role in the region is actually quite limited, with promised investments failing to materialize (e.g. Garlick 2019; Turcsanyi 2020; Jakubowski et al. 2020). The political and security implications of growing China-CEE ties are also debated. Many have depicted the now 17+1 platform (with the late addition of Greece) as a Chinese attempt to divide Europe (e.g. Benner & Weidenfeld 2018; Gaspers 2018). Anastas Vangeli (2018) argues that China has established its "symbolic power," shaping how CEE elites think about regional and international affairs. Emilian Kavalski (2020, p. 16) claims that "China has already become a full-fledged European power." Others are more sceptical of Chinese political or security gains. Some

Chinese scholars and officials have painted China-CEE cooperation as strengthening European unity (e.g. Song 2018). Dragan Pavlicevic (2019; 2018) cautions against exaggerating a China threat to Europe. Tamas Matura (2019) argues that there is little to no evidence of CEE countries changing their foreign policy positions as a result of their relations with China. Yet other scholars have explored the role of the communist past in shaping ChinaCEE relations today. Chinese leaders and media frequently invoke the "traditional friendship" between China and CEE countries: a "shared past" can act a stepping stone towards a bright The East is red… again! 3 future. Turcsanyi and Qiaoan (2020), however, have argued that CEE publics are at the very least ambivalent—and frequently highly negative—about their Communist pasts. Indeed, many post-communist governments in the CEE construct their legitimacy in part on their rejection of both communism and "the East." Most of this scholarship on China-CEE relations focuses on the views of CEE political elites and national policies of the CEE governments. Less is known about what and how CEE publics think about China today. This article explores what data from a fall 2020 survey of six CEE countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Serbia, and Slovakia) can teach us about the drivers of CEE attitudes towards China—and their implications for the future of China-CEE relations. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia are Visegrad countries at the heart of Central Europe. We further add Latvia from the Baltics and Serbia from the Western Balkans. While certainly not representative of the entire CEE region, these six countries are diverse in terms of their population sizes, geographic locations, and their precommunist, communist, and post-communist pasts, allowing us to explore the drivers of similarities and differences both between and within each country in their views of China. To briefly preview, we find that, with the exception of Serbia, on average these CEE publics all identify more with the West, and maintain negative views of their communist pasts, communism as a political system, Russia, and China. Individual-level selfidentifications with the East or West, and attitudes towards the communist past and communism as a system consistently structure views of Russia and China. But there are substantial differences between CEE countries in how negative they are towards Russia and China, and the extent to which they are internally divided in the structure of their public opinion towards China. For instance, Russia looms large for all in the CEE, but much larger for more Eastern countries like Latvia and Poland, whose views of China appear to be almost completed mediated by their views of their giant neighbour. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the China-CEE relations. Extant scholarship suggests both that competing economic and political agendas make it hard for CEE countries to coordinate their policies towards China—and that broken promises about economic benefits and worsening security relations between China and the West cast doubt on the future of China-CEE cooperation. Our findings on the structure of CEE public opinion towards China buttress this view at the individual level: its complexity likely makes coordinating China policies both between and within CEE countries difficult—and the spectres of communism and Russia darken overall prospects for China-CEE cooperation. The East is red… again! 4 To situate this study of the structure of CEE attitudes towards China, we begin with a brief review of scholarship on the potential causes and consequences of public opinion about foreign policy. We then turn to the history of the CEE, briefly reviewing extant scholarship on evolving CEE identities between East and West. We suggest that China is widely viewed in the region as a "second Eastern power" beyond Russia against which CEE publics now identify themselves. We then turn to the survey data, first presenting descriptive statistics about differences both between and within our six CEE countries in their views of China and the other great powers to the East and West. We then explore bivariate relationships between East/West identities, attitudes towards each nation's communist pasts, communism, Russia, and China. To better understand just how these variables shape China attitudes, we then introduce a pair of serial mediation models on the Czech and Polish data, two polar cases of the role of Russia in mediating the effects of East/West identities and attitudes towards the communist past and communism on China attitudes. We conclude with thoughts on the implications of these findings about the structure of CEE public opinion towards China for the future of CEE-China relations. 2. The causes and consequences of public opinion about foreign policy Does public opinion about foreign policy even exist? In the interwar and early postwar periods, Walter Lippmann (1922), Gabriel Almond (1950), and Phillip Converse (1964) disparaged the lack of stable foreign policy attitudes among what they disparaged as an ignorant American public. This "Almond-Lippmann consensus" on the public's "nonattitudes" was empirically challenged in the 1970s and '80s (e.g. Pierce & Rose 1974; Holsti 1992). Today, political scientists largely agree that the American public does maintain stable and structured foreign policy attitudes (e.g., Hurwitz & Peffley 1987; Wittkopf 1990). Where do these attitudes come from? The scholarly focus has largely been top-down, exploring how political elites (e.g. Berinsky 2009) and the media (e.g. Baum & Potter 2008) shape the public's international attitudes. More bottom-up and individual-level approaches now explore how peer socialization (Kertzer & Zeitzoff 2017) and preexisting identities (e.g. gender, Reiter 2015) and ideologies (e.g. Gries 2014) divide democratic publics in their foreign policy attitudes. Does public opinion matter for foreign policy? An early longitudinal analysis of survey data revealed that changes in American public opinion on foreign affairs regularly preceded changes in U.S. foreign policy (Page & Shapiro 1983). Given that a cause must precede an effect, this correlation was suggestive of a caUSl relationship. Mechanisms of The East is red… again! 5 caUStion were soon found in political responsiveness: self-interested politicians, attuned to the "electoral connection," respond to the views of those who elect them (Aldrich et al. 2006; Tomz, Weeks, & Yarhi-Milo 2020). Extant research on public opinion and foreign policy thus focuses on democracies like the United States. It is debatable whether public opinion shapes foreign policy decision making in non-democracies. A reductionist Liberal view of authoritarian politics as brute force—an “iron fist”—has disparaged the existence of independent public opinion in nondemocracies – like CEE countries under communist rule during the Cold War. Free of the constraint of public opinion, non-democracies have long been viewed as possessing an “authoritarian advantage” over democracies in foreign policy making (e.g. de Tocqueville 2000 [1835], p. 228). While Freedom House rated the Czech Republic (91), Slovakia (90), Latvia (89), and Poland (82) as “free” in 2020, Hungary (69) and Serbia (64) were only “partly free,” suffering from serious restrictions in their political rights and civil liberties.1 So the “electoral connection” could be weaker there. However, because persuasion is cheaper than coercion, even authoritarian elites seek the consent of the governed, so work hard to legitimate their rule. One way they do so is by making nationalist claims to rightful rule, thus empowering nationalist publics to speak back on foreign policy. This creates a “non-electoral connection” between public opinion and foreign policy even in hybrid regimes like Hungary and Serbia where elections are not always free and fair (Levitsky & Way 2010). 3. Between East and West External differentiation between Self and Other has long been central to the construction and reconstruction of national and regional identities in Central and Eastern Europe (Neumann 1998, Ch. 5; Johnson 1996; Kazharski 2018). In the 19th and 20th centuries, two primary Others for CEE countries were first Imperial then Nazi Germany and then Western Europe to the West, and first the Russian Empire then the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation to the East. In the 21st century, we suggest that China has become a “second Eastern power” beyond Russia against which CEE publics have begun to define themselves. Over the past decade in particular, China’s active "multilateral bilateralism" (Jakóbowski 2018) towards CEE countries has inadvertently contributed to the institutionalization of CEE as a region (Karásková, Bachulska, Szunomár, & Vladisavljev 2020). CEE publics appear to have found a new Eastern Other against which to define themselves.

First, the pre-communist past. The Central European Visegrad countries (V4) of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic were long at the heart of Roman Christianity and European civilization, only to be "kidnapped" (Kundera 1984) into the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. "By virtue of its political system," Milan Kundera (1984) famously argued during the Cold War, "Central Europe is the East; by virtue of its cultural history, it is the West." Because of their deep European roots, for most Central Europeans today, the balance between East and West tilts West. They debate more about "whether ['eternal'] Russia is wholly other," Iver Neumann (1998, p. 151) writes, "or whether there is the same kind of ambiguity between self and other in the case of Central Europe and Russia as there is between Central Europe and the West." Most Eastern European countries, by contrast, have stronger roots in the Orthodox church and the Byzantine Empire. Eastern Europeans today, therefore, may be less likely to culturally distance themselves from their Eastern and Orthodox roots. Second, the communist past. The Soviet Union looms large in the collective memory of the former communist states of the CEE region. "Russian communism vigorously reawakened Russia's old anti-Western obsessions," Kundera (1984) wrote, "and turned it brutally against Europe." Western Europeans during the Cold War, meanwhile, defined themselves against a Russian/ Soviet menace to the East (Neumann, 1998, Ch. 4). CEE countries thus found themselves caught in the cross-fire of an East vs. West conflict. CEE countries do differ in the extent of Soviet influence during the Cold War, however. While most were Soviet satellites with limited sovereignty, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Albania retained more independence. China played a secondary role in the communist pasts of CEE countries as well. As noted above, most enjoyed a “Golden Era” in their bilateral relations with China in the 1950s. During the Sino-Soviet split, although the more independent nations of Albania, Romania, and Yugoslavia maintained relations with the PRC (Garver 2016), the other CEE countries did not. As a result, Chinese viewed CEE countries with ambivalence: were they “Second World” (thus recognizing Soviet dominance), or “Third World” (thus overlooking their “shared” Communism)? (Yee 1983) Third, CEE countries also differ systematically in their post-communist political and economic experiences.

Divisions between authoritarian and progressive elites can be found not only between but also within CEE countries—and can have implications for their views of China. For instance, Miloš Zeman has been Czech President since 2013, and frequently deploys the antiimmigrant rhetoric of the authoritarian right. Carrying forward the legacy of the late Václav Havel, famous for defending democracy, human rights, and the freedom of oppressed peoples around the world, the Czech opposition has been more progressive. China has become symbolic of this domestic political divide (Karásková et al 2018). In 2020, during the Covid19 pandemic, two opposition politicians made their displeasure with China very clear. Czech Senate Speaker Miloš Vystrčil paid an unprecedented visit to Taiwan, while Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib initiated process which led to the cancellation of the sister city links with both Beijing and Shanghai (Remžová 2020). President Zeman, meanwhile, has continued to sing China’s praises. Economically, most CEE countries first looked to Germany and Western Europe for capitalist development models and investment in the first decades after the Cold War. With the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), however, that model faltered. China had already become a truly global power, and the GFC accelerated its economic development relative to the West. For many CEE countries, China seemed to offer a solution to regional overreliance on Germany and Western Europe. China, as an “Eastern” newcomer, seemed to offer a muchneeded option to diversify both FDI sources and export markets (Golonka 2012). Fourth and finally, geography matters. Compared to the great powers of Germany and Russia just to their West and East, all CEE countries are small and vulnerable. “A small nation can disappear and it knows it,” Kundera (1984) wrote, “A French, a Russian, or an English man is not used to asking questions about the very survival of his nation. His anthems speak only of grandeur and eternity.

Conclusion

On February 9, 2021, Beijing virtually hosted the 9th summit of the “17+1” group of CEE countries and China. For the first time, Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted the meeting, an upgrade from China’s previous prime ministerial level representation. In his keynote address, Xi argued for positive-sum cooperation: “17 plus 1 could make more than 18” (Xi 2021). The online meeting resulted in a “Beijing Activity Plan” that promised more Chinese agricultural imports from CEE countries, more infrastructure investment in the region, and more vaccine cooperation to address the Covid-19 pandemic. “China-CEEC cooperation bears fruit,” the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) official China Daily declared triumphantly in a headline the next day (Mo & Zhou 2021). The CEE view differed. “Old wine in new bottles,” Polish analyst Jakub Jakóbowski lamented in a tweet. “Grandiose China summit passes almost unnoticed,” Latvian Public Broadcasting declared in its headline, dripping with schadenfreude (lsm.lv, 2021). “How China’s 17+1 Became a Zombie Mechanism,” was the title of Romanian Andreea Brînză’s analysis for The Diplomat. “Just as China has zombie companies, which are no longer profitable but are kept alive” for appearances, Brînză (2021) argued, “it now also has diplomatic zombie mechanisms.” Evidence for this argument was plentiful. Only five CEE countries reciprocated

China’s upgrade and were represented by a president (Poland, Czech Republic, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina). Six sent their prime ministers (Slovakia, Hungary, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, and Greece), and the remaining six EU countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria) downgraded their participation by sending ministers only. The vague “Beijing Activity Plan” was conspicuously silent about a next summit, suggesting that the fate of the “17+1” platform is uncertain. The East is red… again! 21 Indeed, a few months later, in May 2021, Lithuania publicly announced that is leaves the platform (Lau 2021a). Why are CEE-China relations unravelling? The core economic argument for the downward trajectory of CEE-China relations is that after nearly a decade, China’s promises of trade and investment have yet to be realized. Polish President Andrzej Duda attended the 2021 virtual summit, but said Poland was “dissatisfied” with “restrictions on imports of agrifood goods from Poland” (Lau 2021b). Scholars have noted that despite the CCP’s “win-win” rhetoric, China’s BRI in CEE may be more motivated by an “offensive mercantilism” (Garlick 2019) that puts China’s interests first. Other analysts focus more on security. Since its annexation of Crimea in 2014, CEE countries have become more anxious about the Russian threat to the East. “When it comes to the Baltic states it’s really simple—you have Russia,” Latvian China scholar Una BērziņaČerenkova told Politico. “China is already getting the idea that the Baltic states are backing out [of 17+1] slowly” (Lau 2021b). Most CEE countries have joined the US “Clean Network” initiative to protect digital infrastructure. “Instead of being a Chinese bridgehead in Europe,” Brînză (2021) writes, “Central and Eastern Europe ended up one of the most restrictive regions for Huawei.” Complementing the elite politics focus of these economic and security arguments, this paper has mined what a recent CEE public opinion survey can teach us about what and how CEE publics think about China today. At the country level, while publics in the four Visegrad countries held predominantly negative attitudes towards China, the Serbian public on average held positive views (figure 1). Country-level views of China tended to mirror views of Russia, and contrast with views of the US. These country level differences in public attitudes towards China may make it more difficult for CEE countries to construct a common China policy. The case of Serbia may prove particularly consequential. As a recent CSIS report warns, President Aleksandar Vučić is hedging against overreliance on Russia by welcoming Chinese digital infrastructure and other investments, risking turning Serbia into a Chinese “client state” (Conley, Hillman, McCalpin, & Ruy 2020). Given positive Serbian public opinion towards China, this trend is likely to continue.

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