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East Central Europe's exposure to China: ephemeral sources of susceptibility

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Abstract

China's presence in ECE is characterized by its fragmented structure and continued divergences between societal perceptions and political stances toward Beijing, thereby rendering the exposure to its influence ephemeral. The ECE-China engagements transcend the conventional framework of material-economic considerations, veering into the domain of ideational influences, wherein it predominantly manifests through elite-level identity dynamics and the intricacies of rhetorical politics. Within this premise, the paper employs analytical eclecticism to operationalize theories on normative power and symbolic domination in synthesis with the concepts of liminality and elite capture to explain ECE's exposure to China. With an emphasis on the historical ideational paradigms and institutional-political dynamics, the paper delineates two pivotal factors that were instrumental in elucidating the contours of regional vulnerability. First, it foregrounds the historical geopolitical liminality of ECE, dissecting its contemporary expression in the strategic rivalry between the development models propagated by the EU and China. This juxtaposition is starkly characterized by a cleavage between Beijing's pragmatic-driven framework embodied in the 16/14 + 1 platform and ECE's existence within a values-based paradigm upheld by Brussels. Within this dichotomy of fundamentally divergent development paradigms, ECE nations undergoing an illiberal turn or lacking in resilient state capacity yet striving to assert their geopolitical subjectivity have increasingly displayed an eastward pivot in their foreign relations. Secondly, the paper addresses the interplay between post-communist institutional development and elite formation and their correlation with susceptibility to China's influence, emphasizing the elite capture phenomenon, predominantly evident among the more authoritarian-leaning countries of the region.

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ECE-China relations: an overview

The interactions between East Central Europe (ECE)[1] and China have been free of historical animosity. In China's collective and discursive memory, entrenched as a "century of humiliation," modern countries in ECE are not associated with the colonial attacks of European powers between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, making them a "different Europe" in China's eyes. Constituting the western flank of the Soviet-led Socialist Bloc during the Cold War era, these countries had limited ties with China, which were heavily influenced by the changing dynamics of Sino-Soviet relations (Turcsanyi and Qiaoan 2019). After the fall of the communist regimes in 1989, the countries in ECE embraced the idea of "returning to Europe," signifying their commitment to economic and political Europeanization and institutional transition from communism to liberal capitalism (Tulmets 2014: 25). While severing ideological ties with Beijing during the early stages of their transitionary period, ECE countries maintained cautious engagement with China, prioritizing economic interactions (Tubilewicz 1999: 4–5). Although China also endeavored to align itself with Western paradigms following the culmination of the Cold War, its ideational identity has consistently been perceived as that of an illiberal counterpart within a fundamentally liberal order, particularly from the perspective of post-communist European nations. This perception stems from the inherent paradox in which China actively engages with and presents itself as a proponent of the institutions that underpin the liberal order, from which it derives benefits, while simultaneously displaying actions that contravene the foundational principles of liberalism (Odgaard 2018: 150–153).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a cornerstone of China's global economic development model (Macaes 2018; Zhao 2020; Yu 2024), has emerged as a pivotal element in reshaping the ECE-China engagements, accentuating the region's strategic role as a vital gateway for China's access to larger European markets (Garlick 2019a:1391). By promoting infrastructure development through investments in critical components via the BRI, China aimed to facilitate smoother trade routes

[1] There is considerable scholarly discussion delineating European regions across various paradigms, such as the distinctions between Western and Eastern Europe and Western and Orthodox civilizations. This discourse has produced different designations for the countries comprising the area between the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas—"a region historically divided and never forming any unit geographically" (see Halecki 2000: 125–141). The terms include "Eastern Europe," "Central Europe," "Central and Eastern Europe," "East Central Europe," and "Eastern Countries of the EU." This study employs the term "East Central Europe" (ECE) to provide an inclusive framework for the nations located within the expansive territory stretching from Finland to Greece. This terminology is utilized to thoroughly articulate China's perspective in its cooperation platform, which regards this region as a cohesive entity that is fundamental to its regional diplomacy initiatives (see Vangeli 2020). For more insights on contested and repeatedly deconstructed geographic identities in Eastern Europe (see Nyyssonen 2018: 258–269; Todorova 2009: 140; Cabada 2021; Bartoszewicz 2023: 795–819).

and pave the way for deeper economic, political, and diplomatic relationships as a bridgehead for a greater European influence. Hence, the collaboration between China and ECE countries was central to the BRI, as participants from the region had already been assembled under the 16/14 + 1 platform[2] before the project's announcement, creating an institutional means for China to strengthen its ties with the region.[3]

Formally referred to as the Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, the platform was launched in 2012 by China and 16 ECE countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia) and was expanded in 2019 to include Greece. The establishment of the platform positioned the ECE region within the broader geoeconomic framework of the BRI and is designed to serve as a conduit for the diffusion of innovative regional development concepts and practices aimed at region-building. China's efforts at region-building in ECE through the BRI encompass various networking strategies, including the creation of "quasi-institutional" mechanisms for dialogue, promoting interactions among experts and policymakers, and facilitating development projects (Vangeli 2020: 15). In this regard, China's diplomatic activities aimed at generating political influence in ECE included cooperation among political parties and communication between parliaments, civil society groups, and think tanks, which occurred despite ideological differences (Liu 2018: 95). Therefore, the seemingly economic focus of China's engagement strategy also involved political mechanisms for generating influence. As a result, China's cooperation platform envisioned an agenda that extends beyond mere connectivity and trade, placing equal importance on political and diplomatic relations to foster dialogue with senior government officials and establish connections with business communities.

Described as "old comrades rejoined" (Song 2018: 17), ECE nations' tilt towards partnering with Beijing through the 16/14 + 1 platform was unexpected and salient because the two sides historically have had limited relations and different historical paths (Auer and Stiegler 2018: 111). Some critics have characterized the platform as an "empty shell" lacking tangible economic substance (Karaskova 2020), while others have detected significant cognitive-level implications for Europe in terms of Beijing's potential for "symbolic domination" (Vangeli 2018) and public diplomacy aimed at showcasing its soft power (Kavalski 2013, 2019a, b; Jakimow 2019), including diminishing negative perceptions of China and enhancing understanding of Chinese values among ECE nations (Liu 2018). Such assessment variations are closely associated with the heterogeneous nature of ECE. It comprises several

[2] Debates emerged regarding appropriate terminology for the 16 + 1 platform after Greece joined the platform. While specific references employ the term "17 + 1," the exit of the Baltic states has precipitated further ambiguity, leading to discussions on whether the appellation "14 + 1" would be more fitting. In this study, we will adopt the designation "16/14 + 1," as it more precisely delineates the original and current number of participants.

[3] One of the most significant indicators of the connection between the 16/14 + 1 and BRI is the China–Europe Land-Sea Express Route project, also known as the Express Route. This project offers a new, critical trade corridor connecting China and Europe, with Budapest and Piraeus Port in Greece serving as two vital infrastructural centers (see Li 2022: 496).

subregions with diverse political, economic, and social characteristics, leading to a fragmented structure of China's regional influence.

Notwithstanding shared past experiences and current geopolitical affiliations,[4] historically, the region lacked a cohesive geographic identity. ECE countries concerted participation in the China-led 16/14 + 1 platform revealed nascent signs of regionalization by adopting China's approach of symbolic reorganization of geographic spaces (Vangeli 2018: 680–685) and treating ECE as a homogeneous entity (Kavalski 2019a, b). However, Beijing failed to project its multilayered influence across the region evenly as a lack of shared perspectives among the participating countries has led to significant divergences in their attitudes toward partnering with China within the 16/14 + 1 platform, resulting in the emergence of four distinct groups: "China-friendly," "China-neutral," "China-polarized," and "China-skeptical" (Suetyi and Yidong 2022). Being a loosely structured group of states regarding the dwindling number of participants and fluctuating stances, the 16/14 + 1 platform thus has engendered a fragmented impact on the region. Significantly, China's inability to fulfill its investment commitments, its pro-Russian stance in terms of the ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as changing dynamics in China's broader relations with the West resulted in a marked shift from initial optimism to disillusionment among ECE countries, leading to the characterization of the cooperative platform as a dormant "zombie mechanism" (Brinza 2021). Against this backdrop, China used the multilateral platform to engage in bilateral dialogue with individual ECE countries, leading to a new type of relationship described as multilateral bilateralism (Szczudlik 2019; 2020). China's approach to this multilateral framework differs from traditional international institutions led by Western powers in that China's practice of multilateralism is rooted in bilateral relationships that prioritize inclusivity and connectivity (Huang 2025). Such an approach to regional engagement facilitates China's ability to navigate regional complexities (Song and Pavlicevic 2019), with the overarching objective of strengthening its economic and political foothold in Europe (Pepermans 2018: 181).

However, China's economic impact on the 16/14 + 1 platform participants, particularly on the EU member countries apart from Hungary, is marginal and patchy. Cooperation under the platform has not caused substantial investments or infrastructure enhancements. The EU continues to be the primary trade and investment partner for all the countries in the region (Muzikarova 2023). In 2022, Chinese investment in Europe was concentrated in four countries, with 88% going to Germany, France, the UK (the Big Three), and Hungary. Hungary's position in this percentage was driven by Chinese battery manufacturer and technology company CATL's gigafactory. Additionally, Chinese battery producer EVE plans to build a battery plant in Hungary, and SEMCORP has already initiated local production (Kratz et al. 2023). In 2023, Hungary also led in Chinese FDI with 44% from electric vehicle investments, promising to become a hub for battery manufacturing in Europe, with the

[4] The ECE region primarily consists of post-socialist countries, apart from Greece, and currently includes countries both affiliated with and remaining outside of the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

most substantial ties to China (Kratz et al. 2024). However, there have been no new Chinese investments in other ECE countries over the last few years.

The disillusionment and fragmentation within the 16/14 + 1 platform illustrate the divided stances toward China. Some participants have dissociated from the platform, aligning with the EU's strategy for reducing dependency on China, while others maintain minimal connections. The withdrawal of countries like Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia highlighted this divide, leading to decreased participation levels within the initiative. Notable repercussions include abandoning Chinese projects due to local and governmental opposition, such as Romania and the Czech Republic's discontinuation of a Chinese nuclear reactor project and Romania's exclusion of Chinese companies from public infrastructure projects (Necsutu 2020; Neagu 2022). Additionally, critical agreements with the US to prevent firms like Huawei from developing 5G infrastructure in the region signify a strategic pivot away from Chinese technologies among these countries.

However, the estrangement from China varies across the region, with Hungary, Slovakia, and the Balkans, especially Serbia, continuing to have ties with China. This is highlighted by the Sino-Serbian free trade agreement signed in October 2023 (Jevtic 2023) and strategic partnerships between Hungary and China across infrastructure, industry, R&D, and finance (Gutierrez 2023). Furthermore, the impending completion of a China-funded high-speed rail linking Belgrade and Budapest signifies China's lasting economic presence and influence in the region.[5] Slovakia, eager to strengthen relations with non-EU countries through its "all-azimuth diplomacy," views China as its largest trading partner outside the EU (Simalcik and Sebok 2024). During Prime Minister Robert Fico's visit to Beijing in November 2024, which featured the largest Slovak delegation to any other country, both sides committed to strengthening trade and investment ties, broadening collaboration in new energy, transportation, and green technology, and elevating their overall relations to a strategic partnership (Reuters 2024). Slovakia is seeking Chinese investment to support an electric vehicle battery plant, a crucial development amid the EU's imposition of tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles. China pledged to increase collaboration and introduce visa-free entry for Slovak citizens for 15 days (Global Times 2024). Moreover, revitalized meetings between China and ECE countries have emerged across multiple platforms. In November 2024, the Communist Party of China (CPC) organized an event in Beijing themed "China's Modernization and New Opportunities for China-ECE Relations: Contribution of Political Parties," attracting nearly 50 delegates from 19 ECE political parties (China Daily 2024b). The 6th Local Leaders' Meeting in Shandong in October 2024 emphasized the China-ECE cooperation platform's role in strengthening people-to-people ties, with over 300 attendees from the region discussing the alignment of development strategies alignment and improvements in local cooperation (China Daily 2024a).

Along with producing a fragmented impact across ECE, the 16/14 + 1 platform has evolved in a specific socio-political environment. The seeming initial

[5] The project has been delayed on the Hungarian side because of an EU investigation into the project's non-transparent contract awarding process.

convergence between China and select ECE countries primarily resulted from top-down political initiatives and elite-driven interest rather than societal convergence. Scholarly discourse dissecting the public opinion surveys supports this polarization (Turcsanyi et al. 2020; Suetyi and Yidong 2022; Silver et al. 2023), illustrating that Beijing's intense diplomatic efforts and propaganda have failed to convince the local population in ECE to perceive China as a benign player in the region, even in the most China-friendly societies (Song and Li 2024: 4–5). Consequently, interactions with China were undertaken amidst an enduring incongruity at the societal level concerning cultural and ideational perspectives,[6] in contrast to the rhetorical proclivity amongst individual political leaders and elite groups towards fostering a partnership with China.

Thus, the fragmented exposure to China in ECE is not primarily material-economic but ideational, manifesting in elite-level identity dynamics and rhetorical politics. The patchy structure of China's presence in the region and persistent divergence between societal and political attitudes toward China within ECE countries render exposure to China ephemeral. In light of this premise, the paper identified two interconnected factors contributing to understanding the specific circumstances of the exposure to China's penetration. First, the paper focuses on the ECE regions' historical-geopolitical liminality by dissecting its current manifestation in a strategic competition of development models between the EU and China, characterized by a divergence between China's pragmatism-driven approach and the EU's value-driven model. Being caught between quintessentially divergent development models, countries in ECE experiencing an illiberal turn or lacking resilient state capacity have developed a political-economic approach of pivoting to the East premised on the belief that the global economic power is gradually shifting eastward and, thus, securing a prosperous future is contingent upon independently aligning with China as a new power center. Second, the paper proceeds by analyzing the connection between post-communist institution-budling and elite-formation processes in ECE and the exposure to China's influence with a specific focus on the phenomenon of elite capture, primarily observed within illiberal ECE governments. Before disentangling these two points, the paper briefly outlines the existing literature on ECE-China relations and articulates the analytical and methodological aspects of the inquiry. The remainder of the paper examines the factors leading to the region's susceptibility towards China, providing empirical substantiation.

[6] A significant ideational point of concurrence between elites and the population in their perception of China is that both reject China's Global South discourse as a foundational paradigm for legitimizing its growing global presence. None of the ECE countries identify with the Global South and share the ideas China promotes through the rhetoric of anti-imperialism (see Kowalski 2017).

Literature review

An institutionalization of formerly low-profile ECE-China relations within the 16/14 + 1 platform sparked scholarly interest in deciphering the rapidly evolving dynamics between the parties. The rational and ideational underpinnings of developing relations and ensuing implications for regional and European politics have been the subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny. A pivotal theme emerging in the initial scholarly debates was the structure and magnitude of China's ECE activism from the perspective of two opposing paradigms, concentrated on perceiving China either as a threat or an opportunity (Pavlicevic 2018; Song 2018; Grzywacz 2020). In critical assessments of the region's receptivity towards China's diplomatic overtures, characterized as a strategic move to achieve political ambitions by leveraging economic enticements, particular attention has been devoted to China's economic diplomacy and investment trajectories, bolstering Beijing's political sway in the region and select countries (Jacoby 2014; Matura 2019; Garlick 2019a).

Of particular importance for our study are scholarly outputs that have dissected China's ascendancy in the ECE region by scrutinizing the modalities of its soft power influence and juxtaposing ideational leverage exerted by China against the EU's rule-diffusing normative and structural actorness in the region. Garlick and Qin (2023a) identify a fundamental feature of China's normative approach manifesting itself in Beijing's focus on introducing practices rather than rules through regional platforms such as the 16/14 + 1 seen as a "co-constituted community of practices," which markedly diverges from the EU's model of adhering to a set of pre-established norms and rules. Kavalski (2013) describes Beijing's normative power as a "relationship-based model," highlighting China's emphasis on learning and dialogue in its normative power projection. China's soft power narrative incorporated into the 16/14 + 1 platform prioritizes mutually beneficial economic interactions and national sovereignty over norms and commitments to supranational institutions. This peculiarity has been conceptualized by Jakimow (2019) through the notion of "desecuritization," which is a co-produced phenomenon in the sense that, on the one hand, it advances China's presence in the region and, on the other hand, serves as political leverage for ECE governments in their relations with core European countries and EU institutions. Indeed, ECE governments have strategically utilized their relations with China to serve domestic agendas and navigate the complexities of intra-European political dynamics.

Similarly, Vangeli's (2018) concept of symbolic domination represents a distinct lens for understanding ideational factors of China's multifaceted engagement in ECE. He argues that China's impact has been materialized not through a direct effect on existing economic and security frameworks within ECE but through a nuanced cultivation of a new normality. The key tactic of this process is the strategic use of language that emphasizes respect for sovereignty and promotes the idea of the ECE nations' entitlement to define their developmental path and seek economic partnerships. This entails shaping vulnerable ECE nations' preferences and behaviors, a task accomplished by challenging or redefining their deep-seated

perceptions of regional boundaries, historical narratives, and the principles underlying their post-communist evolution (Vangeli 2018: 674). In another seminal work, Vangeli (2019) posits that the diffusion of ideas in China's engagement strategy entails a "co-production of meanings," which implies merging different perspectives to foster a beneficial collaboration environment and aligning geoeconomic visions.

These valuable contributions notwithstanding, there exists a considerable opportunity for more in-depth exploration of the subject matter. This includes the necessity for systematically conceptualizing the elite-level determinants that influence governmental orientations toward China in ECE. This emphasis on elite-level scrutiny underscores the crucial function of elite networks, bureaucratic actors, and corporate entities, particularly viewed through the lens of their post-communist evolution, culminating in the emergence of illiberally inclined governments in ECE. These governments' official China policies expose China's influence in that they tend to accept a China-led co-creation of meanings by supporting synchronized geoeconomic stances to foster a beneficial cooperation milieu. Furthermore, there appears to be a gap in systematic scholarly inquiry regarding the complex triangular relationship involving the EU, China, and the ECE countries in the circumstances when the latter's historical geopolitical liminality, characterized by intermediary emplacement between great powers, demonstrates a novel manifestation with China's emergent regional activism as a pivotal new dimension. Through partnering with China via the 16/14 + 1 platform, countries in ECE, as integral parts of the EU or aspiring to become such, found themselves in a strategic competition of development models. In this sense, the study of Pavlicevic (2019b), which concentrates on a singular sub-region of the Western Balkans within the EU-China competitive interplay, represents a salient exception to this omission. Vangeli's (2020: 25) emphasis on various regional imaginaries advanced by different actors, particularly the USA and the EU, constituting a significant challenge to China's region-building efforts, represents another important exception. Accordingly, this paper endeavors to augment the extant literature concerning ECE-China engagements premised on the notion that the frameworks of elite capture and the historical geopolitical liminality of the region offer novel avenues for studying the ECE-China nexus and fragmentary structure of the region's exposure to China.

Analytical framework and methodology

The paper's investigative framework is predicated upon an analytical eclecticism, drawing upon "selectively integrating analytic elements—concepts, logics, mechanisms, and interpretations—of theories or narratives developed within separate paradigmatic constructs" (Sil and Katzenstein 2010: 9–10). The complex dynamics of rational and ideational aspects characterizing ECE-China relations necessitate such a methodological preference. These dynamics encompass a multifaceted interplay among political and economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and evolving domestic political landscapes. Furthermore, this approach is distinguished by its analytical prowess in addressing ideological and rational determinants simultaneously.

Within this scope, the core concepts operationalized through analytical eclecticism include the previously mentioned constructs of normative power and symbolic domination due to their strong analytical capacity to account for the intricate relational dynamics under scrutiny. These theoretical approaches shape the foundation of our analysis, further enhanced by incorporating two theoretical lenses—the liminality approach and the concepts of elite capture, which provide a bifocal perspective for analyzing historical-ideational paradigms and institutional-ideational dynamics that determine the ECE countries' exposure to external influences.

The concept of liminality

The concept of liminality, first developed by anthropologist Victor Turner in the late 1960s to critique the structuralist approach in sociology, focuses on the ambiguity of cultural, political, and geographical spaces and actors (Turner 1995). The liminal position causes oscillation between different classifications and characterizations, rendering prevailing identities and self-perceptions elusive. The conceptual lens of liminality has been studied from different angles and applied to several topics ranging from the social and normative structure of international politics to the self-versus-other divisions in constructivist accounts. Particular attention has been devoted to utilizing Turner's liminality approach in studying the intermediary existence of peripheral nations and geographical areas, situating them into paradigmatic East–West divide, liberal-illiberal identity politics, and Europeanness versus non-Europeanness contestations (Rumelili 2003; Malksoo 2009; Stoicescu 2009).

From the perspective of ECE's perennial position at the intersection of two colossal civilizational and political entities—the Euro-Atlantic West and the Eastern expanse, marked by periods of Mongol invasions, Ottoman expansionism, and Russian dominion attempts (Bartoszewicz 2023: 803–807)—the liminality approach provides a valuable framework for conceptualization. ECE is a geographical and cultural domain in which historical narratives are perpetually subject to reinterpretation and re-evaluation, resulting from a liminal position. As a result of these profound shifts and alignments, policies and identities in ECE have been shaped by specific contextual considerations and the "geopolitics of naming" (Hagen 2003: 489). The efforts to balance between these influences or extricate the region from this geopolitical and geo-cultural dichotomy have predominantly manifested through various interpretations of the region's place and role in the international system, aiming to elevate it to parity within the broader constellation of European and global power dynamics. The balancing attempt has always entailed activating the region's potential to function as a strategic realm, allowing in-between nations to harmonize differing visions, thereby safeguarding their respective national interests and subjectivity.

Narrative and efforts to rejoin Europe, prevalent in ECE after the communist era, dismissed any prospects of creating distinct or substitutive regional counter-models to the EU (Western Europe). This quickly exposed underlying disparities and tensions between Europe's eastern and western parts and gradually overshadowed the East's independent subjectivity (Bartoszewicz 2023: 804; Grgic 2023). Amidst these tensions, China's 16/14 + 1 cooperation framework—an institutional embodiment

of a competitive cooperation model, geographically encompassing this liminal and valuable for Beijing as a crucial commercial passageway region, appeared to offer ECE countries an opportunity to rearticulate their identity. Thus, Beijing's emergent role introduced a new dimension to the ECE countries' liminal position, contributing to their identity politics and international positioning, though not necessarily implying a wholesale reorientation. In other words, though anchored in strategic economic considerations, ECE leaders' decision to partner with China within the 16/14 + 1 platform was also underpinned by distinct identity narratives, underscoring this region's multifaceted nature, wherein "actors may simultaneously assume diverse and sometimes conflicting roles and affiliations" (Kavalski 2019a, b), exemplifying a state of their liminality.

The concept of elite capture

On the other side of this analytical equation, the concept of elite capture helps account for the region's exposure to China's influence by scrutinizing the changing dynamics of post-communist institution-building, including the elite formation process, which engendered the subsequent "illiberal turn" in certain ECE countries undergoing democratic regression. Thus, it is important to conceptualize the institutional-ideational and political circumstances of the region's engagement with and vulnerability to China.

The scholarly discourse on elite capture, unique to third-world elites' illicit appropriation of public resources for personal enrichment (Shapland et al. 2021), has been further extended to the context of post-communist ECE. In this sense, it is argued that the combination of "partial" economic reforms and centralizing political power within select elite factions fostered an environment conducive to state capture. This resulted in the "early winners" of reforms reaping the most significant rewards and maintaining influence over the public institutions and the media to their advantage (Hellman 1998). There are also instances where corporate actors in transition economies have determined the direction of economic institution-building and shaped the rules along their narrow interests. The increasing role of influential oligarchs colluding with politicians and government officials is characterized in the literature as a "capture economy" (Hellman et al. 2000: 4). The principal attribute of post-communist societies' transition to a market economy was the rapid "original accumulation of capital," which incorporated elements of neo-patrimonialism and neo-prebendalism due to the ambiguous legal regulations around initial privatization. Such regulatory ambiguities have afforded political and personal networks considerable latitude in orchestrating the transition to private ownership, thereby embedding neo-patrimonial elements within the fabric of post-communist capitalist systems and creating circumstances for the subsequent transition in select ECE countries from liberal principles towards such models as political capitalism, crony capitalism, or neo-patrimonialism (Csillag and Szelenyi 2015: 10–11; Fukuyama 2014: 21; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Karolewski 2021: 310).

In another essential endeavor to determine how changes in political institutions affect economic institutions, with a focus on the persistence of power, elites, and

institutions, Acemoglu and Robinson argue that "changes in de jure power driven by reforms and political institutions can be partially or entirely offset by changes in de facto political power" (2008: 287). They describe this model as a "pattern of captured democracy," where a democratic regime de jure persists but adopts economic institutions that benefit the elite. Thus, despite formal changes in political institutions, the subsequent policy outcomes remain unchanged, ensuring a continued persistence of elite networks-controlled economic institutions. From this perspective, though the post-communist transition in the ECE countries, particularly experiencing the EU accession, allowed the proliferation of official democratic institutions, local political leaders operating within this democratic framework retained their patterns of behavior and attitudes, ensuring the "elite continuity" (Luca 2012:118–121). Nicole (2008: 34–63) articulates the disjunction between the illiberal practices of post-communist elites and the ostensibly democratic framework of the institutions by conceptualizing this phenomenon as "elite fragmentation," characterized by the strategic appropriation of democratic political institutions for the advantage of select factions within the broader spectrum of national elites.

Considering these analytical dimensions, the paper's methodological construct is anchored in a case study approach, retrospectively examining the Czech Republic's diplomatic and economic interactions with China within the framework of the 16/14 + 1 platform during former President Milos Zeman's tenure alongside Hungary's continued cordial stance towards China. However, it is important to recognize that the specific results of this study, particularly those related to the thorough assessment of China's multifaceted engagement in Europe, possess applicability beyond these particular cases, extending to the wider context of the 16/14 + 1 framework.

ECE's in-betweenness in a strategic competition of development models

Historically constituting the frontier of Western civilization (Halecki 2000), nations in ECE have encountered a distinct historical reality characterized by their geographic proximity to formidable neighboring states. This has significantly influenced their conduct, aligning it with the strategic interests and visions promulgated by these great powers. Such geographic proximity has produced a deep-seated sense of insecurity and a "victim syndrome"—a natural consequence of being constantly betrayed, occupied, and subjugated by powerful neighbors (Cabada 2021: 9).[7] In their quest for supremacy, great powers viewed the in-between region of ECE as an essential bulwark against each other and strived to incorporate them into mutually incompatible development models (Chodakiewicz 2012). At the same time, there

[7] The shared memories of the nations in the ECE region indicate that their past subjugation to external powers is the primary reason for their skepticism towards the West, particularly Germany, and their hostility towards the East, especially Russia. This also explains the growing trend of traditionalism in ECE countries and their strong inclination to preserve their unique national cultures.

have historically been tentative efforts to create an intra-regional alliance to endure and counter the external pressures emanating from both Eastern and Western power centers.[8]

Following the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, these nations sought to overcome their sense of insecurity both by joining overarching integrative structures such as the EU and NATO and forming "complementary" sub-regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the Visegrad Four (V4) to support the broader European integration (Grgic 2023). However, institutional integration has produced uneven ideational convergence with the EU as indications appeared that countries in ECE, notably V4 participants, emerged hesitant to accommodate the liberal democratic values of the EU genuinely. The resurgence of nationalist forces over the supra-national integrationist proponents and the proliferation of illiberal practices has hindered intra-regional resilience against external pressure. Amidst such normative contestations and declining Western competitiveness (Zielonka 2018), China's global ascent represented an alternative power center, offering lucrative developmental opportunities for the region (Missen 2021). Countries in ECE, dissatisfied with the "Brussels consensus" and experiencing the rise of populist politicians, turned to China as a potential alternative to overcoming a historical sense of insecurity. Under these circumstances, ECE's liminality acquired a new dimension. In other words, these external circumstances once again put the ECE in a challenging position, requiring them to consider multiple dyadic power relations. Hence, the desire to forge ties with China through the 16/14 + 1 platform, thus, separately from the existing EU-China partnership, placed the region into the EU-China geo-economic rivalry,[9] creating a Sino-ECE-EU triangle.

Premised on its pragmatism-driven development model,[10] China has created a network of regional cooperation platforms under its leadership in the developing world and the Global South (Jakobowski 2018). However, as illustrated by the 16/14 + 1 platform in ECE, which has never been a part of the Global South, the

[8] In this sense, in the early twentieth century, the Polish idea of Intermarium—a historical terrain bounded by the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black seas, currently resurrected within a regional cooperation platform of the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), proposed regional integration as a remedy for liminal nations of ECE in their struggle for survival. However, such an idea resulted from the elite-driven top-down cultivation of a maritime identity (notably by the Polish elites), which starkly contrasted with the predominantly landlocked rather than maritime and national rather than regional self-perception of ECE's inhabitants (see Troebst 2003).

[9] For an important extension of such reasoning, describing the ECE region as an area of geo-economic contention between exclusively German and Chinese companies (see Pavlicevic 2019a).

[10] However, it is essential not to view pragmatism as an absolute principle in China's development model. While it remains committed to experimentation and innovation grounded in prevailing conditions, it emphasizes "sustainability and equality, along with self-determination in the design and implementation of socio-economic policies" (Liu 2019: 375). The term delineates the development strategies adopted by China, which are categorized into various domains and principles. In addition to the principles of innovation and experimentation, these strategies include incremental reform, export-led growth, state capitalism, and authoritarian governance (Williamson 2012: 6). In contrast to the conceptual rigidity associated with the Washington Consensus, this model exhibits ideological flexibility and eclecticism (Huang 2010: 31). As the creator of the term "Beijing Consensus" observes, this model is "as much about social change as economic change" (Ramo 2004: 4–5).

spillover effect of China's alternative model is more expansive. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the proclivity of exhibiting affinity towards the governance model exemplified by China is not emblematic of all countries within ECE, with a minority of political actors and entities conveying such a tendency.

Its core principle—pragmatism—distinguishes and makes China's development paradigm attractive to such political forces. Within the 16/14 + 1 platform, this implied that "both sides agree to regard as insignificant the distinct normative trajectories each have embarked on since 1989" (Auer and Stiegler 2018: 114). China's non-conditionality-based pragmatic development model, also known as the "Beijing Consensus," envisions an Asian type of capitalism that does not require compliance with Western-style liberal democracy and values of economic and political freedom. It promotes a strong link between a centralized state, economic growth, and social stability (Ham 2011:108; Mayer and Kavalski 2019).

However, this seeming "non-normativity" does not imply that the platform has exclusively pursued pragmatic economic objectives for both sides. While deemphasizing norms in mutual engagement helped to overcome historical differences between the parties, the platform also had a significant ideational component (Auer and Stiegler 2018: 115). Hence, China's influence in ECE is more apparent in the active though fragmentary normative realm, which has consequences for domestic political and geopolitical identity dynamics. First, China's discourses foregrounding partnership based on such principles as "win–win cooperation," "joint discussion," "co-construction," and "benefits-sharing" (Liu 2018: 50–51; Garlick 2019b; Garlick and Qin 2023b) have been internalized by certain fractions within political elites, thereby indicating a complex cognitive receptivity that facilitated China's symbolic domination (Vangeli 2019). Secondly, cultivating diplomatic and economic ties with China has become an arena for government officials and politicians to redefine their identities and re-articulate their subjectivity within European politics.

Considering the ECE nations' conventional oscillation between bridging and bandwagoning as a critical foreign policy-making strategy and a model for relations with great powers (Spero 2004: 23–24), the mere participation in the 16/14 + 1 platform, separate from the EU-China relational framework, has been strategically employed by certain governments in the region as an opportunity to elevate their stature and subjectivity within European and global political arena (Mayer and Kavalski 2019; Kavalski 2019a). This approach is indicative of their aspiration to be recognized as "middle powers," entitled to pursue an independent foreign policy while simultaneously endeavoring to carve out an identity that extricates them from the overshadowing influence of the EU (Nyyssonen 2018: 258) and its post-modern liberal values (Csillag and Szelenyi 2015: 4; Cabada 2021: 7–8). This shift towards self-identification as "traditionalist" and "independent Europeans" seeks estrangement from being perceived as the EU's periphery (Kavalski 2020), challenging the EU-centric identity formation process and contributing to a divide between New and Old Europe.

Hungary exemplifies a critical case among ECE countries where the nuances of liminality have augmented the symbolic influence of China on national policy orientations. In response to the European sovereign debt crisis of the late 2000s,

the Hungarian administration endeavored to diminish its dependency on the EU by embarking on the Eastern Opening Policy.[11] This initiative represented a conservative nationalist countermeasure to the crisis, catalyzing a pivot in foreign policy aimed at reclaiming national sovereignty and revitalizing Hungary's historical and cultural affiliations with the East,[12] while preserving its foundational connections to the West (Matura 2018: 175). Premier Victor Orban, in numerous official pronouncements, has consistently underlined that Hungary, amidst evolving global economic paradigms symbolized by the "eastern wind," must recalibrate its strategic approaches to safeguard national prosperity, indicating a requisite equilibrium in its geopolitical orientation between the East and West (Jacoby and Korkut 2015: 2). This recalibration of foreign policy is predicated on the premise that the global economic epicenter is incrementally shifting towards the East, with China emerging as a predominant force. It posits that Hungary should position itself as an instrumental entity capable of harnessing Asia's economic ascent and serving as a conduit linking Western and Eastern market economies (Song and Li 2024: 8). Consequently, Hungary's strategic realignment towards the East, especially China, is deemed indispensable for securing a prosperous future. This strategic move aimed at leveraging Hungary's geopolitical position manifested itself in fostering economic ties with rapidly developing economies in Asia, post-Soviet Eurasia, and the Arab world, potentially transforming Hungary into a logistical hub between Europe and Asia (Greilinger 2023).

Hungary's fear of being diluted within the dominant Euro-Atlantic system of liberal values and institutions reflects the prevailing belief that contrary to the imitative post-1989 modernization/Europeanization, genuine modernization of the EU's eastern nations should serve as an avenue for attaining subjectivity (Nyyssonen 2018: 258–259). From this perspective, Hungary's illiberal turn, too, can be viewed as a strategic maneuver to articulate national subjectivity and distinctive non-EU European identity.

The nexus between post-communist elite formation and exposure to China: the phenomenon of elite capture

Narratives of downgrading the importance of liberal-democratic values and the legacy of the post-communist transition path directly result from the partial reform of state institutions and peculiarities of the transitional elite-formation process characterized by the strategic appropriation of democratic political institutions for the advantage of specific factions within the broader spectrum of national elites. Thus,

[11] Rather than constituting an officially announced policy, the designation "Opening to the East" has been used in the Hungarian official narrative since the early 2010s to describe the government's trade policy. Subsequently, it embodied the overall Eastward swing in Hungary's geo-economic approach.

[12] In this sense, the ideas of Eurasianism and neo-Turanist thinking from the interwar period find modern iteration in Hungarian right-wing political discourse, which advocates for severing Hungary's ties with the Euro-Atlantic bloc to form alliances with Turkic peoples and East Asian nations revoking the myths of ancient Sino-Hungarian brotherhood.

unique experiences of elite formation, embedded in post-communism as a "historically specific period of state building" in ECE (Ganev 2005: 425), represent an essential framework for understanding the region's tentative tilt toward partnering with China.

Despite consolidated democratic transition efforts, unlike established core EU democracies, ECE countries lack the same understanding of the state as an impersonal institution guided by the rule of law and stable inter-party competition, rendering their state institutions weak and incompatible with the Weberian principle of impersonality (Innes 2014). While not representative of the entire region, this intrinsic characteristic created favorable conditions for subsequent illiberal turn and the proliferation of "executive aggrandizement" practices,[13] involving local political leaders maintaining their conventional behavior patterns despite operating within a democratic system. These behavior patterns have also determined the nature of interactions between state institutions, elites, and citizens during the formative years of transition. As a top-down process facilitated by the "overlap between democratization and Europeanization," the transition to democracy was an elite-driven process, notwithstanding the democratically inclined masses' crucial role at the initial stages (Dimitrova 2018: 258–262).

Though not in a uniform fashion across ECE, persistent elite networks took advantage of the transition and Europeanization, capturing state institutions and resources and shaping them to facilitate rent-seeking for narrow elite groups. This created different patterns of elite capture, categorized as a state capture driven by the powerful populist party ("party state capture" such as in Hungary and Poland during the PiS government) and state capture driven by fraudulent elite networks ("corporate state capture" as in the Czech case) (Innes 2014). These types of state-elite interaction in several ECE countries resulted in systemic corruption, allowing private businesses to exert undue influence over the government's decisions and the ruling parties to monopolize state control through nepotism and loyalty-based appointments, forming political and financial monopolies in various sectors of economies.

Existing patterns of elite capture in local power structures in ECE reinforced China's ability to build an economic presence through profitable trade and investment deals and shape the preferences of local economic and political elites with cases of individual political leaders within the 16/14 + 1 platform promoting Chinese activism due to their inherent personal interest. As a result, Chinese companies have expanded their business operations in those parts of ECE where local institutions and regulatory frameworks remain fragile, and the principles of public scrutiny and transparency have become dysfunctional under the conducive circumstances of democratic backsliding (Brattberg et al. 2021: 13–14). Indeed, prominent politicians and corporate elite representatives, particularly from the Czech Republic during Milos Zeman's Presidency and Hungary, have displayed a significant favorable bias

[13] "Executive aggrandizement" implies formal legislative and institutional measures that allow elected leaders to systematically modify state institutions, eroding the balance of power and increasing government control over the judiciary. See: Pech and Scheppele 2017.

toward partnering with China since the launch of the cooperation platform. These countries' agency in and embracement of the co-production of de-securitized narratives concerning Beijing's quintessentially different development model, thus facilitating the spread of China's ideational influences, has been premised not only on the investment expectations and gaining economic benefits from cooperation but also further their political aim to boost domestic popularity through national subjectivity and normative estrangement from Brussels (Jakimow 2019: 379). This trend is especially evident in the shift from the EU's collective stance on China's human rights issues.[14] Thus, China has taken advantage of the institutional and regulatory vulnerabilities specific to the political systems of the ECE countries, making it easier for Beijing to propagate its political influence through this critical part of Europe, causing significant consequences for the EU's cohesive decision- and policymaking.

The cases of government-level policies and appointee-level pursuit of stronger ties with China have been profoundly illustrated by the case of the Czech Republic. The extent of Beijing's impact on the leadership within selected ECE countries was vividly manifest throughout Milos Zeman's tenure as President of the Czech Republic from 2013 to 2023. Since the fall of the communist regime, the Czech Republic has been one of the most active supporters of human rights in Europe and internationally. The concept of non-violent resistance to communist state power, inspired by dissident circles, has strongly influenced Prague's human rights activism towards Beijing. However, after joining the 16/14 + 1 platform, Prague has significantly shifted its approach to China, from criticizing it on ideological grounds to becoming a strategic partner, aligning with the growing pro-Chinese consensus among Czech business and political elites, perceiving cultivating ties with China as a significant economic opportunity (Fürst 2018: 150–156). In this sense, the complex case of CEFC China Energy, a once-prominent Chinese private conglomerate led by Ye Jianming,[15] with investments in Czechia (Hala 2018; Gardaz 2021), exemplifies the fusion of corporate goals with political ties at the highest levels, through which Beijing sought to further its economic and political agendas. Zeman's personal activeness and enthusiasm in fostering Czech-China relations, mutual state visits of Czech and Chinese presidents, and the subsequent signing of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership in 2016 raised Czechia's importance in China's approach to Europe. President Xi Jinping's 2016 visit to the Czech Republic marked a tentative upsurge in China-Czech economic ties, sparking significant partnerships, including Ye's role as an economic advisor to former president Milos Zeman (Garlick 2019a). However, promoting pro-China policy by select political and corporate actors and narrow groups within Czech government institutions, thus illustrating agency in the

[14] Brussels's critical stance has encountered opposition from several ECE countries, most notably Hungary and Greece, which have blocked EU resolutions on human rights and opposed the EU's stance on the Uygur situation at the UN Human Rights Commission.

[15] Despite the CEFC's initial role in leading Chinese investments, in 2018, amidst Ye's detainment in China due to corruption allegations related to the company's activities in Africa, the state-owned enterprise CITIC subsumed its operations in the Czech Republic. The CEFC filed for bankruptcy in March 2020 after discovering that it had utilized affiliated companies to engage in fraudulent activities to bolster its expansion efforts.

co-production of susceptibility to China, has consistently stirred fierce objections from anti-China groups, meaning that China-related issues have always been polarized and politicized in the Czech Republic (Qin et al. 2023: 47–48). Furthermore, Zeman's efforts to forge relations lacked tangible public benefits, representing a significant illustration of elite capture phenomena since such a corporate-level economic convergence allowed certain Czech elite circles to strengthen their connections with China, with Ye seemingly functioning as a link between the Chinese and Czech administrations. Simultaneously, this allowed China to advance its political objectives via economic engagements—an approach designed to secure and maintain the allegiance of the incumbent elites.

Concluding remarks

This paper utilized the methodological approach of analytical eclecticism to operationalize the synthesis of ideational accounts of ECE-China engagements in conjunction with the concepts of liminality and elite capture. By examining the region's interactions with China through this analytical framework, the paper emphasized the historical ideational paradigms and political-institutional dynamics that have shaped the region's vulnerability to China. Methodologically grounded in a case study approach, the paper retrospectively examined the diplomatic and economic relationships between the Czech Republic and China, specifically during the administration of former President Milos Zeman, and addressed Hungary's continued friendly posture towards China.

The paper elucidated that the primary objective of Chinese activism within the ECE region over the preceding decade has been establishing a significant economic presence. Concurrently, China has adopted an opportunistic strategy to cultivate alliances among the region's structurally vulnerable states and sympathetic elite factions, thereby leveraging these relationships as a strategic fulcrum for disseminating political influence across Europe. The 16/14 + 1 cooperation platform with these countries, along with their involvement in China's BRI, epitomizes this strategic approach. However, the 16/14 + 1 platform, marked by its loosely structured coalition of states, dwindling participant base, and inconsistent positions, has precipitated a fragmented impact on the region. Notably, China's failure to fulfill its investment pledges has shifted the mood from initial optimism to disillusionment among ECE states, resulting in the dormancy of the cooperative framework. The analysis revealed that China's economic presence in ECE is insubstantial, with minimal societal support for relations with China. Instead, maintaining functional relations with Beijing is largely shaped by select political leaders and elite factions motivated by narrow corporate interests and geopolitical ambitions. This observation suggests that China's influence in the region is not stable but contingent upon the changing political dynamics within the ruling echelons of specific ECE countries.

This explains why interactions between China and ECE actors have manifested differently, with investments and ideas being localized distinctively across regional countries. Importantly, these diverse responses of ECE countries to China's activism and regional-building efforts align with the Global China

perspective, empirically supporting the notion that China does not impose its will on other nations and regions. Rather, it acknowledges local agencies and complex interactions, effectively co-producing new regional imaginaries (Mayer et al. 2025; Vangeli 2020:15). Consequently, the diverse responses from regional actors create varying outcomes, rendering the region's susceptibility to Chinese influence partial rather than comprehensive.

The fragmented structure of the region's susceptibility to China also serves as a stark indicator of the EU's internal disunity, highlighting the varying degrees of economic, political, and social integration within the EU. It underscores the challenges the Union faces in presenting a unified front on the global stage, particularly in its dealings with major powers like China. Consequently, it is imperative for the EU to prioritize formulating a unified policy stance towards China. This requires strengthening the resilience of the European project both internally and externally. In the context of complex power dynamics and strategic competition among development paradigms, concerted efforts should be dedicated to fostering resilience against the tactics of symbolic domination employed by China and mitigating the prevailing economic vulnerabilities characterizing EU-China relations.

In this vein, nascent but crucial steps have been taken by the EU to reconcile the dichotomy between economic interests and democratic values in its engagements with China and to adeptly harness its economic prowess in the pursuit of geopolitical objectives, signifying a paradigmatic departure from the traditional tenets of its current development model. This reorientation, precipitated by the evolving tactics of global powers, has compelled the EU to adopt a more assertive stance through the implementation of measures such as foreign investment screenings, anti-subsidy regulations, and anti-coercion legislation as part of its de-risking strategy toward China, unveiled in 2023. These developments, which denote the geo-politicization of trade and investment relations (Meunier and Nicolaidis 2019; Kuang et al. 2023), underscore the EU's shift towards deploying economic strategies as instruments to navigate and sculpt the global geopolitical landscape more efficaciously, a transformation that has been characterized as "Europe's geoeconomic revolution" (Kurilla 2023; Matthijs and Meunier 2023).

Yet, notwithstanding Brussels' recalibration of its strategic approach towards China to mitigate the risks inherent in its relations with Beijing, the actualization of any revised policy framework encounters substantial constraints due to the absence of cohesive unity among EU member states. The EU grapples with a fragmented approach to China, characterized by a perplexing amalgam of disparate national interests and supranational imperatives. This disunity results in a scenario where Beijing continues to exhibit a preference for engaging in bilateral agreements with individually susceptible states, exploiting the lack of a consolidated stance. In response to this quandary, the proposition of the 27 + 1 platform emerges as a potentially viable solution, advocating for the centralization of the EU's China policy development and implementation processes. Such a centralized approach is imperative for the EU to forge and maintain a coherent policy stance towards China, a critical factor for preserving its international role.

Abbreviations BRI: Belt and Road Initiative; ECE: East Central Europe; EU: European Union; FDI: Foreign Direct Investment; NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; UN: United Nations; TSI: Three Seas Initiative; V4: Visegrad Four

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