

PETER GRIES

University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

RICHARD TURCSÁNYI

Palacký University Olomouc, Olomouc, Czech Republic

The East Is Red . . . Again! How the Specters of Communism and Russia Shape Central and Eastern European Views of China

ABSTRACT During the past decade, China has rapidly emerged as a major player in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Will it divide Europe? Might these formerly communist countries align themselves again with a communist superpower to their east? Or does their past experience of Russia and communism generate suspicions of China? This article explores what public opinion 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 toward China. It suggests that China has become a “second Eastern power” beyond Russia against which many people in the CEE have come to define themselves. Although there are large differences between CEE publics in their views of China, individual-level self-identifications with the East or West, and attitudes toward the communist past and communism today consistently shape views of both Russia and China. Russia looms large for all in the CEE, but especially for Latvia and Poland, whose views of China appear to be almost completely mediated through attitudes toward their giant Russian neighbor. We conclude with thoughts on the implications of these findings about the structure of CEE public opinion toward China for the future of the “16+1” mechanism and CEE-China relations more broadly.

KEYWORDS post-communism, China-CEE relations, Russia-CEE relations, public opinion, foreign policy

WILL CHINA DIVIDE EUROPE?

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 and the end of the Cold War their political trajectories continued to diverge.

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 appeared 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).

Western analysts weren’t so sure. Would 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?

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Much research has focused on China's economic role in regional development (e.g., Wade, 2014; Garlick, 2015; Szunomar, 2014). Some analysts, including former US Assistant Secretary of State 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 et al., 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; Turcsányi, 2020; Jakubowski et al., 2020).

The political and security implications of growing China-CEE ties are also debated. Many have depicted the 16+1 platform 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) claims that "China has already become a full-fledged European power" (p. 16).

Others are more skeptical 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 Pavličević (2018, 2019) 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 China-CEE relations today. Chinese leaders and media frequently invoke the "traditional friendship" between China and CEE countries: a "shared past" can act as a stepping-stone toward a bright future. Turcsányi 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 CEE national policies. 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 toward 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 pre-communist, 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 self-identifications with the East or West, and attitudes toward 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 toward Russia and China, and the extent to which they are internally divided in the structure of their public opinion toward China. For instance, Russia looms large for all in the CEE, but much larger for the Latvian and Polish publics, whose views of China appear to be almost completely mediated by views of their giant neighbor.

These findings contribute to a better understanding of China-CEE relations. Extant scholarship suggests both that competing economic and political agendas make it hard for CEE countries to coordinate their policies toward 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 toward China buttress this view at the individual level: its complexity likely makes coordinating China policies both between and within CEE countries difficult—and the specters of communism and Russia darken overall prospects for China-CEE cooperation.

To situate this study of the structure of CEE public opinion toward China, we begin with a brief review of extant scholarship on the potential causes and consequences of public opinion about foreign policy. We then turn to the history of the CEE, briefly reviewing 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, and propose four hypotheses based on our review of the literature. 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 their east and west, and then exploring their country-level views of communism. We then turn to the individual level, exploring bivariate relationships between East/West identities and attitudes toward 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 toward 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 toward China for the future of CEE-China relations.

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 dismissed as an ignorant American public. This “Almond-Lippmann consensus” on the public’s “non-attitudes” was empirically challenged in the 1970s and ’80s (Pierce & Rose, 1974; Holsti, 1992). Today, political scientists largely agree that the American public does

maintain stable and structured foreign policy attitudes (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Wittkopf, 1990).

Where do these attitudes come from? The scholarly focus has largely been top-down, exploring how political elites (Berinsky, 2009) and the media (Baum & Potter, 2008) shape the public's international attitudes. Bottom-up and individual-level approaches now explore how peer socialization (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017) and preexisting identities (e.g., gender, Reiter, 2015) and ideologies (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 US foreign policy (Page & Shapiro, 1983). Given that a cause must precede an effect, this correlation was suggestive of a causal relationship. Mechanisms of causation 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. Does public opinion shape foreign policy decision-making in non-democracies? A reductionist (classical) liberal view of authoritarian politics as brute force—an “iron fist”—has long disparaged the existence of independent public opinion in non-democracies, like the CEE countries under communist rule during the Cold War. And while Freedom House scored (on a 100 point scale) 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.

Free of the constraint of public opinion, non-democracies have long been viewed as possessing an “authoritarian advantage” over democracies in foreign policy making (de Tocqueville, 2000 [1835], p. 228). Because persuasion is cheaper than coercion, however, 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 out on foreign policy. This may create a “non-electoral connection” (Gries & Wang, 2022) between public opinion and foreign policy even in hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010) like Hungary and Serbia, and other authoritarian systems where elections are not always free and fair.

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

1. *Freedom in the World*, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

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) toward CEE countries has inadvertently contributed to the institutionalization of CEE as a region (Karásková et al., 2020). CEE publics appear to have found a new Eastern Other against which to define themselves: China. Three historical eras systematically shape CEE views of China today: their pre-communist, communist, and post-communist pasts. Geographic proximity to Russia also structures how CEE publics view China.

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” (p. 37). 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) 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” (p. 151). 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” (p. 34). 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 identity 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. As the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, anti-communists took power in Central Europe with overwhelming popular support, and democratization

began (Ash, Mertes & Moi'si, 1991). Afterward, however, political and economic trajectories across the region diverged significantly (Vlachová, 2019). Visegrad and Baltic countries have been more successful overall, while the Balkan countries have experienced more political troubles and economic stagnation. Over the past decade, first Hungary and then Poland have taken authoritarian turns, whereas Slovakia and the Czech Republic have largely maintained their liberal democracies. Hungary's Viktor Orbán (2021) has recently claimed leadership of the four Visegrad countries (V4) based on an "uncompromising anti-communism" and traditional values: "Christian social teachings." Slovakian minister for foreign and European affairs Ivan Korčok (2021), by contrast, has rejected Orbán's vision for the V4, aligning Slovakia with more progressive EU values.

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 anti-immigrant 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 COVID-19 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 a process that 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, appeared to provide a much-needed 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. The Polish anthem, however, starts with the verse: 'Poland has not yet perished'" (pp. 35–36). With a population of nearly 40 million, Poland is by far the largest CEE country. If Poles feel weak, other CEE publics are likely to as well.

For the three Baltic states and Poland, sharing land borders with Russia has further accentuated their feelings of vulnerability. "Thirty years of independence from communism and the Soviet Union have also meant 30 years of fear of a Russian invasion," Romanian security analyst Andrea Brînză (2020) writes. "All share a fear of Russia and are strongly committed to the United States." These concerns were heightened after the

Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ongoing Russian interference in Ukraine. As a result, Poland and the Baltics have clearly stood with the US against Russia—and China. They have all, for instance, taken firm stands against Chinese cyber espionage and Huawei. And Lithuania is the first of the original 16+1 CEE countries to leave the grouping.

Historically and geographically, then, CEE publics have a long history of understanding themselves between Western and Eastern Others. With the end of World War II and the Nazi peril to the west, their anxieties have primarily come from the east in the form of first the Soviet Union during the Cold War and now the Russian Federation. With China's emergence as a regional player over the past decade, China has come to be seen as a "second Eastern power" beyond Russia against which CEE publics define themselves.

Based on this brief literature review, we hypothesize that among CEE publics:

- H1. Greater self-identification with the West will be associated with greater dislike of China.
- H2. This direct effect will be mediated by attitudes toward the communist past and communism as a political system, with greater negativity contributing to greater dislike of China.
- H3. Attitudes toward Russia will also mediate the impact of East/West identities, and attitudes toward the communist past and communism, on China attitudes.
- H4. Russia should loom larger as a mediator of China attitudes for the Latvian and Polish publics, due to their shared border with Russia.

HOW CEE PUBLICS VIEW THE GREAT POWERS

Can public opinion data help us better understand the role that East/West identities, views of each nation's communist past, and attitudes toward communism and Russia today play in structuring CEE views of China? We designed a series of questions for the Sinophone Borderlands 2020 survey to find out. Funded by the European Regional Development Fund, the Sinophone Borderlands project at Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic hired NMS Market Research to conduct a survey of China attitudes in Europe. In September and October 2020, adults aged 18–70 in the Czech Republic ($n = 1,506$), Hungary ($n = 1,504$), Latvia ($n = 1,552$), Poland ($n = 1,503$), Serbia ($n = 1,500$), and Slovakia ($n = 1,502$) completed the survey online. The samples were nationally representative with respect to age, gender, education level, region, and population density (and in Latvia, language use).

We start by situating country-level views of China within a broader great power context. Participants were asked, on a 101-point scale ($0^\circ =$ "negative" to $100^\circ =$ "positive"), to assess their feelings toward 13 countries, four of which were great powers: the US, Germany, Russia, and China. Figure 1 presents mean country-level feelings toward each in West-to-East, left-to-right sequence for each of our six CEE countries.

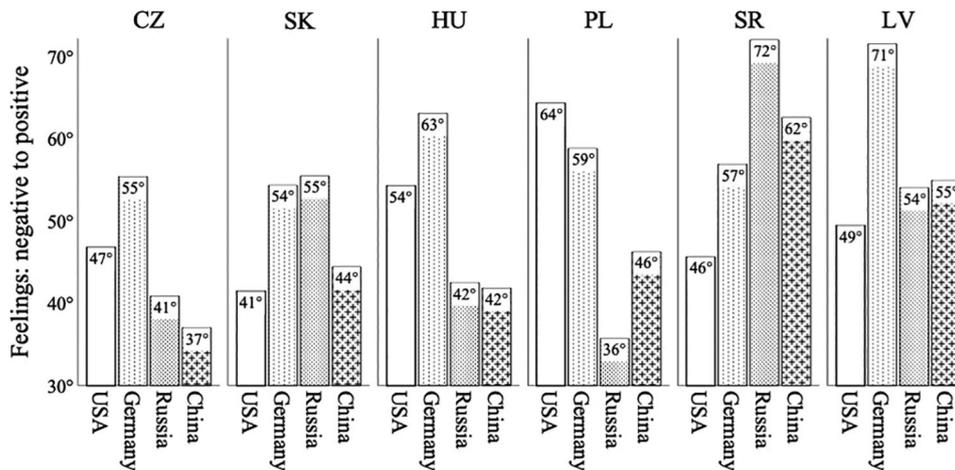


FIGURE 1. How six CEE publics felt about the great powers in fall 2020.

Looking farthest east first, Serbs ($M = 62^\circ$) on average felt 25° more positively toward China than did Czechs ($M = 37^\circ$), a very large difference statistically.² This finding is consistent with previous research on elite Serbian (Conley et al., 2020) and Czech (Bajerová & Turcsányi, 2020) views of China. Between these extremes, on average Latvians ($M = 55^\circ$) felt slightly positive toward China, just above the scale midpoint of 50° , whereas Poles ($M = 46^\circ$), Slovaks ($M = 44^\circ$), and Hungarians ($M = 42^\circ$) felt progressively more negatively toward China. That the Hungarian public was the second most negative toward China is perhaps surprising, given that Prime Minister Orbán has actively courted China, and Hungarian media have increasingly been under the firm control of the Orbán administration.

Country-level feelings toward Russia were even more polarized, with Serbs ($M = 72^\circ$) on average feeling 36° more positively toward Russia than did Poles ($M = 36^\circ$), an extremely large difference.³ Latvians ($M = 54^\circ$) and Slovaks ($M = 55^\circ$) followed the Serbs as the second warmest toward Russia, with Czechs ($M = 41^\circ$) and Hungarians ($M = 42^\circ$) the second coolest.

Only in Poland were views of China ($M = 46^\circ$) more positive than views of Russia ($M = 36^\circ$). In Latvia ($M = 54^\circ/55^\circ$) and Hungary ($M = 42^\circ$) average views of the two countries were equally positive and negative respectively. In the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Serbia, views of China were cooler than views of Russia.

Turning our gaze West, the average Pole ($M = 64^\circ$) felt 23° more positively toward the US than did the average Slovak ($M = 41^\circ$), a large difference statistically.⁴ Views of the Cold War superpowers US and Russia were the most polarized in Poland, where the

2. $t_{3004} = 28.16, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.03$. Cohen (1988) considered $d = 0.2$ to be "small," 0.5 "medium," and 0.8 "large" effect sizes.

3. $t_{3001} = 40.84, p < .001, d = 1.49$.

4. $t_{3003} = 24.84, p < .001, d = 0.91$. Views of the US in fall 2020, of course, were likely depressed after four years of Trump's "America first" foreign policies.

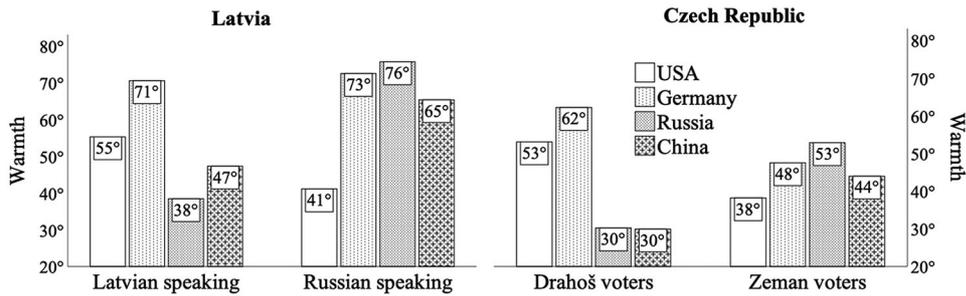


FIGURE 2. In 2020, the Latvian and Czech publics were divided in their views of China—and the other great powers.

US was seen 28° more positively than Russia, and in Serbia, where Russia was seen 26° more positively than the US. They were the least polarized in Latvia, with Russia (and China) on average seen just 5° more positively than the US was.

In sum, in 2020 there were substantial differences *between* the publics of our six CEE countries in their views of China and Russia to the east, and Germany and the US to the west.

SUBNATIONAL CLEAVAGES OVER CHINA AND THE GREAT POWERS

This last finding about Latvian public opinion begs explanation. Given Latvian political elites and security policies that lean heavily toward the US and away from Russia, can the Latvian public really feel similarly about these two great powers?

National averages from surveys can be deceiving, hiding important subnational cleavages. In the case of Latvia, there is a substantial minority population of ethnic Russians. Might their views of the great powers differ systematically from those of the majority? Latvian respondents to the 2020 survey had the choice to take the survey in either the Latvian or Russian language. The left side of Figure 2 reveals striking similarities and differences in how these two subpopulations viewed the great powers. Latvian speakers ($N = 904$, $M = 47^\circ$) felt 18° cooler toward China than did Russian speakers ($N = 646$, $M = 65^\circ$), a large difference statistically.⁵ They disagreed even more over Russia, with Russian speakers ($M = 76^\circ$) 38° warmer toward Russia than were Latvian speakers ($M = 38^\circ$), a massive difference.⁶ They also differed substantially in their views of the US, with Latvian speakers ($M = 55^\circ$) 14° warmer toward the US than were Russian speakers ($M = 41^\circ$), a medium-sized difference.⁷ In short, ethnic/linguistic divisions within Latvia systematically divide views of the great powers, especially of Russia and China.⁸

5. $F_{1, 1546} = 275.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. All ANCOVA control for age and gender. Following statistical convention (Cohen, 1988), a “partial eta squared” (η_p^2) of .01 is considered small, .06 medium, and .14 large. Despite the unequal sizes of the two groups, a non-significant Levine’s test, $F_{1, 1548} = .20$, $p = .66$, revealed that the equality of variances assumption for ANCOVA was not violated.

6. $F_{1, 1546} = 805.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$.

7. $F_{1, 1546} = 108.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$.

8. The two groups did share an equally positive ($M = 71^\circ/73^\circ$) view of Germany; however, $F_{1, 1546} = 2.89$, $p = .09$.

Might political cleavages within the other CEE countries also divide views of the great powers? For instance, are the stark divisions over China among the Czech political elite discussed above reflected in the Czech public? In the 2018 presidential elections, opposition candidate Jiří Drahoš won nearly 49% of the vote, but Zeman retained his presidency with just over 51%, attesting to how evenly divided the Czech public is—and making it a good case study to address this question. In our 2020 survey, participants reporting voting for Zeman ($N = 589$) and Drahoš ($N = 618$) differed systematically in their West-to-East self-identifications, measured with the question “Do you consider yourself more part of the West or the East?”⁹ Zeman voters ($M = 52$ out of 100) were on average ambivalent about their East/West identities. Drahoš voters ($M = 35$), by contrast, identified overwhelmingly with the West, a large difference statistically.¹⁰

These Czech voters also differed systematically in their views of China and the other great powers. As can be seen on the right side of Figure 2, more West-identifying Drahoš voters ($M = 30^\circ$) felt 14° cooler toward China than did Zeman voters ($M = 44^\circ$), a medium-sized difference.¹¹ They were even more divided (23°) over Russia, with Drahoš voters ($M = 30^\circ$) again feeling more negatively than Zeman voters ($M = 53^\circ$), a large difference statistically.¹² Turning to the great powers to the west flips their relative positions, however, with Zeman voters more negative toward Germany and the US than Drahoš voters.

In Slovakia, our 2020 survey asked, “In the March 2019 second round of the presidential election, who did you vote for?” Our Slovakia sample included 609 Zuzana Čaputová and 245 Maroš Šefčovič voters. Čaputová was originally an environmental activist, and attracted progressive voters, whereas Šefčovič—a candidate of the governing party—championed himself as a defender of “traditional Christian values” against Čaputová’s alleged “ultraliberal agenda” (Mortkowitz, 2019). Šefčovič voters ($M = 60$) identified 19 points more with the East than did Čaputová’s voters ($M = 41$), who identified more with the West, a large difference statistically.¹³

These Slovak voters also differed systematically in their views of the great powers. More West-identifying Čaputová voters ($M = 43^\circ$) felt 8° cooler toward China than did Šefčovič voters ($M = 51^\circ$), a small but significant difference statistically.¹⁴ They differed much more over Russia, however, with progressive voters ($M = 48^\circ$) feeling 23° cooler than did more traditional voters ($M = 71^\circ$), a large difference.¹⁵ The two groups of voters flipped positions regarding the US, with Čaputová voters ($M = 48^\circ$) feeling 16° warmer than did Šefčovič voters ($M = 32^\circ$), a medium-sized difference.¹⁶ These results are largely

9. Participants choose a point along a scale anchored by “West” (0) to the left and “East” (100) to the right.

10. $F_{1, 1183} = 130.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$.

11. $F_{1, 1183} = 83.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$.

12. $F_{1, 1183} = 195.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$.

13. $F_{1, 850} = 78.55, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$.

14. $F_{1, 850} = 16.21, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$.

15. $F_{1, 850} = 145.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$.

16. $F_{1, 850} = 62.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$.

consistent with our Czech findings in Figure 2, although the uneven sample sizes should make us more cautious about the results.¹⁷

Hungarian participants in our 2020 survey were asked, “To what extent are you satisfied or unsatisfied with the current prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán?” Hungarians ($n = 859$, 39°) unsatisfied (1–3 on the seven-point scale) with (authoritarian) Orbán were 11° more negative toward China than those respondents ($n = 412$, $M = 50^\circ$) satisfied (5–7 on the scale) with Orbán, a small-to-medium-sized difference.¹⁸ Hungarians satisfied with Orbán ($M = 51^\circ$) also felt 13° warmer toward Russia than did those dissatisfied with him ($M = 38^\circ$), a medium-sized difference.¹⁹ Both groups were ambivalent about the US, just 3° apart. These findings are largely consistent with the Czech data above, but again suffer from unequal sample sizes. There were no comparable measures for the Polish or Serbian samples.

In short, ethnic/linguistic and political cleavages *within* CEE countries divided sub-populations in their attitudes toward China and the great powers in systematic and substantial ways.

THE EAST IS RED!

In addition to the West-to-East self-identification item, our 2020 survey included a measure of attitudes toward each nation’s communist past, “Do you perceive the communist period of your country to have been more positive or negative?” Participants chose a point between the two anchors of “negative” (0) to the left and “positive” (10) to the right. As the horizontal dashed line at each scale’s midpoints at the top of Figure 3 reveals, none of our six CEE publics on average viewed their communist pasts positively (Figure 3, *right*), nor did they identify themselves primarily with the East (Figure 3, *left*). In 2020, CEE publics overall self-identified more with the West and felt negatively about their communist pasts.

But there was substantial variation. On average, Poles and Latvians ($M = 31$) self-identified as 18 points more Western than did the Slovak and Serbian publics ($M = 49/48$), who on average were ambivalent (indistinguishable from the scale midpoint of 50) about whether they belonged more to the East or West. This is a medium-large difference statistically.²⁰ Perhaps to distinguish themselves from their Russian neighbors, Poles and Latvians appear to self-identify as very much belonging to the West.

On average, Poles also viewed their communist past the most negatively ($M = 3.3$), while Slovaks were the most ambivalent ($M = 5.0$) about their communist past, a medium-large difference statistically.²¹ On average, Latvians ($M = 4.4$) were in the

17. Levine’s tests for the three variables were $F_{1, 1548} = .20$, $p = .04$, $.06$, and $.003$, suggesting that the equality of variances assumption for ANCOVA was partially compromised.

18. $F_{1, 1267} = 38.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Although there were over twice as many Hungarians in the sample who were unsatisfied ($n = 859$) as satisfied ($n = 412$) with Orbán, a non-significant Levine’s test, $F_{1, 1269} = 1.08$, $p = .30$, revealed that the equality of variances assumption for ANCOVA was not violated.

19. $F_{1, 1267} = 83.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.

20. $t_{3003} = 18.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.68$.

21. $t_{3003} = 16.01$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$.

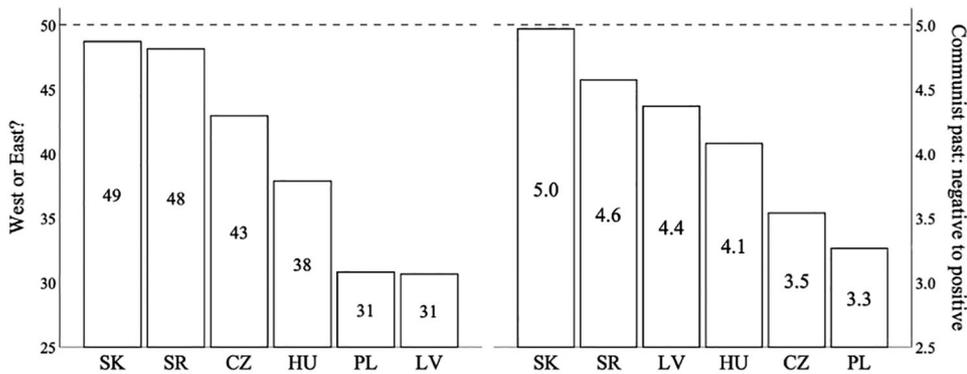


FIGURE 3. The East is red! Self-identification as more of the East or West largely lines up with attitudes toward the communist past.

middle of the six CEE countries in how they felt about their communist past. This masked, however, a truly massive difference between the Russian-speaking minority, who were extremely positive about the communist past ($M = 6.32$), and the Latvian speaking majority ($M = 2.98$), who were extremely negative about it.²² By contrast, there was only a small difference between the two groups of Latvians in their self-identification more with the West.²³

If one excludes the positive-about-the-communist-past Russian minority in Latvia, and compares the left and right bar charts in Figure 3, there is remarkable consistency in the country-level mean sequences. Poles and Latvian-speaking Latvians consistently identified the most with the West and felt the most negatively about their communist pasts. Three decades of post-Cold War anxiety about a reemerging Russian threat to their hard-won national independence may help explain this.

On average, Slovaks and Serbians, by contrast, were the most ambivalent in 2020 about their East/West identities and their communist pasts. In both countries, substantial subpopulations perceive a “decadent” West as a threat to traditional values, and view Russia as a Slavic “brother” defending these values (see, for example, Golianová & Kazharski, 2020). Slovakia’s rapid industrialization during the Cold War may also contribute to their public’s less negative view of their communist past. Serbians may feel nationalist pride about their communist past under Tito, while the memory of 1999 NATO bombings during the Kosovo War further tarnishes their image of the West. Czechs and Hungarians lie between these two extremes. On average they self-identify more with the West, and feel negatively about their communist pasts, but not as much as Poles and Latvians.

Our 2020 survey also included a measure of feelings toward communism as a political system. On average, the six CEE publics collectively felt very negatively ($M = 30$ out of 100) about communism, well below the scale midpoint of 50, a large difference

22. $F_{1, 1546} = 729.69, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .32$.

23. $F_{1, 1546} = 28.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .018$.

TABLE 1. Bivariate Correlations by CEE Country

	CZ	SK	HU	PL	SR	LV	M
1. West/East identification & China	.30	.15	.09	.02 ^{ns}	.17	.12	.13
2. West/East identification & Russia	.41	.36	.20	.18	.29	.25	.31
3. West/East identification & communism	.42	.32	.12	.22	.07	.31	.29
4. West/East identification & communist past	.46	.37	.17	.22	.04 ^{ns}	.30	.28
5. Communist past & communism	.69	.65	.56	.52	.60	.62	.63
6. Communist past & Russia	.40	.43	.03 ^{ns}	.27	.01 ^{ns}	.65	.36
7. Communist past & China	.28	.14	.00 ^{ns}	.05 [†]	.11	.35	.18
8. Communism & Russia	.40	.36	.10	.21	.06	.50	.33
9. Communism & China	.33	.19	.08	.04 [†]	.12	.28	.19
10. Russia & China	.63	.46	.42	.42	.51	.52	.54

Note: M = mean correlation; ^{ns} = non-significant; [†] $p < .10$, marginally significant; all other $ps < .001$.

statistically.²⁴ Poles ($M = 19^\circ$) were on average the most negative about communism, while Slovaks ($M = 38^\circ$) were the warmest, although they were still quite negative about it.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DRIVERS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD CHINA

Can we dig deeper still to explore how individual-level West-to-East self-identifications, attitudes about the communist past, and attitudes toward communism as a political system, relate to attitudes toward Russia and China? Table 1 lists the correlations between each of these five variables for each of our six CEE countries, and the mean correlation across all six countries in the last column.

The first row reveals that in five of our six CEE countries, greater identification with the East was associated with more positive views of China, mostly supporting HU. The strongest association ($r = .30$) was in the Czech Republic, where China has been central to partisan politics, with progressive voters who identify more with the West substantially more suspicious of China. The only exception was Poland, perhaps because, as we have seen, Poles across the political spectrum identify with the West to distinguish themselves from Russia.

Scanning down, rows 5 and 10 stand out for their very high average correlations. Attitudes toward the communist past and toward communism as a political system on average shared 40% of their variation ($r = .63^2$). Given the measurement error generally associated with single item measures, this is extremely large, but makes intuitive sense: how one thinks about communism is closely related to how its experience is remembered—even for youth who may have no direct memories of the Cold War.

24. $t_{9066} = -73.08$, $p < .001$, $d = -.77$.

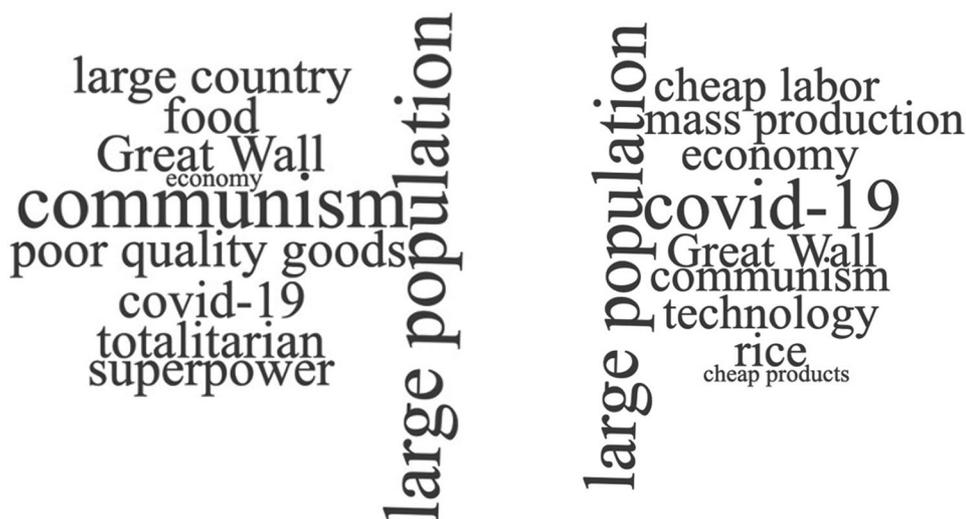


FIGURE 4. Czech and Polish word associations with China.

Attitudes toward Russia and China (row 10) also covary substantially, at 29% ($r = .54^2$) across the six countries. This supports our suggestion that China may act as a second “East” after Russia against which CEE publics define who they are. And it supports H₃ that any effort to understand the drivers of CEE attitudes toward China must consider the mediating role of views of Russia.

Scanning horizontally across columns reveals low and inconsistent correlations between our variables for the Polish sample, but high correlations in the Czech sample. For instance, Poles only associate China with Russia ($r = .42$). China is not directly associated with Polish West-to-East self-identifications ($r = .02^{ns}$), and only marginally with views of its communist past ($r = .05^\dagger$) and communism as a system ($r = .04^\dagger$). Instead, these variables are substantially associated with Russia. In the Czech sample, by contrast, China attitudes are positively and substantially associated with all these variables: West-to-East self-identification ($r = .30$), attitudes toward one’s own communist past ($r = .28$), and communism as a system ($r = .33$).

These divergent Czech and Polish associations with China are also reflected in answers to an open-ended question, “What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned?” also in the 2020 survey. Figure 4 displays word clouds of the top ten words for the Czech and Polish samples. Font size roughly corresponds with each word’s frequency. For Czech respondents on the left, “communism” was the most frequently mentioned word, and “totalitarian” was frequently mentioned as well. By contrast, “communism” was low on the list of words that Poles associated with China. This replicates the quantitative finding above that while China is strongly associated with communism in the Czech Republic ($r = .33$), it is not in Poland ($r = .04^\dagger$), where communism is instead associated with Russia ($r = .21$), although still not as strongly as it is in the Czech Republic ($r = .40$).

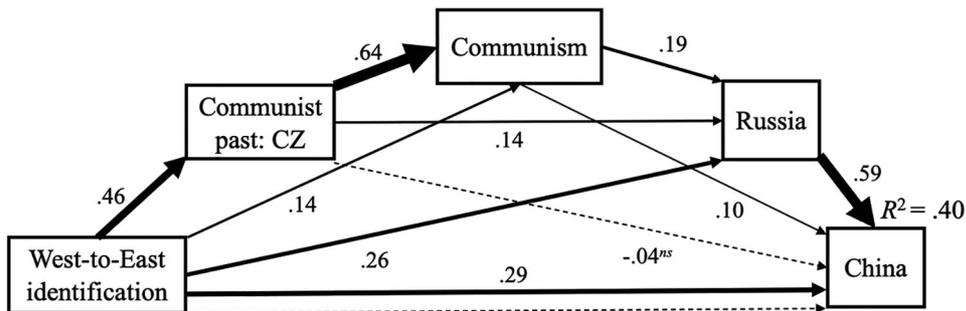


FIGURE 5. Czechs who see themselves as belonging more to the East (vs. West) view China much more positively, in part because they view their communist past, communism, and Russia more positively.

Note: A serial mediation model, run with SPSS v25 PROCESS v3.0 plugin Model 6, with 95% confidence intervals bias corrected with 5,000 bootstrapped samples, and controlling for age and gender, not shown to reduce clutter. Indirect effect statistics are in the appendix. The solid horizontal arrow is before mediators are added; the dashed arrow beneath it is after mediators are added.

HOW THE SPECTERS OF COMMUNISM AND RUSSIA DARKEN CEE VIEWS OF CHINA

So, just how does West-to-East self-identification shape attitudes toward China? Mediation analyses allow us to explore possible mechanisms linking the two. Given the substantial bivariate correlations between our three mediators (the communist past, communism, and Russia) displayed in Table 1, we ran serial rather than simultaneous mediation models. For instance, it is clear from Table 1 (row 5), that the communist past and communism are strongly associated with each other across all six of our countries, so it would violate the assumption that they play independent mediating roles if we ran them as simultaneous mediators. We also believe that serial mediation makes more sense theoretically, as Russia is more conceptually proximate to China, and West-to-East self-identification is more proximate to memories of the communist past.

To better understand the diversity of mechanisms driving views of China across our six CEE countries, we explore the Czech and Polish survey data as polar cases. Figure 5 visually displays the results of a serial mediation model run on the Czech data. Solid lines are statistically significant; dashed lines are not. Line thickness reflects the absolute size of the standardized coefficient (β).

The solid horizontal line from West-to-East identification to China ($\beta = .29$, center bottom) reveals that even after controlling for age and gender, the more Eastern a typical Czech saw herself, the more she liked China (or, the more Western she saw herself, the more she disliked China), accounting for a substantial 9% of variation in attitudes toward China, HI strongly confirmed. The dashed horizontal line ($\beta = .03^{ns}$) beneath it further reveals that this variance is well accounted for when the three mediators are entered into the model.

Six of the seven indirect paths in the Czech model were statistically significant, together accounting for a remarkable 40% of the variance in China attitudes (see the

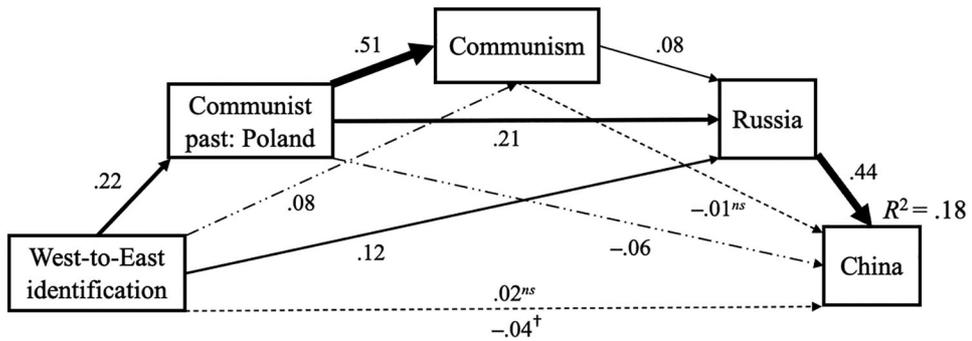


FIGURE 6. Identification with the East (vs. West), evaluations of Poland’s communist past, and of communism only shaped Polish attitudes toward China indirectly via attitudes toward Russia. Note: [†] $p < .10$, only marginally significant. Short-dashed lines are not significant; long-dashed lines are significant, but their associated indirect effects were not. Only the four indirect paths running through Russia were statistically significant; the other three indirect paths running directly to China from Poland’s communist past and/or communism were not. See the appendix for indirect effect statistics.

appendix for a table of indirect effect statistics). Only the path running solely through the communist past was not significant, as there was no direct impact of the communist past on attitudes toward China ($\beta = -.04^{ns}$). Attitudes toward the communist past had their effect on China attitudes indirectly, however, through attitudes toward communism, through attitudes toward Russia, and through attitudes toward communism and Russia sequentially. These findings confirm H2 and H3.

These results strongly support studies of elite Czech politics arguing that China has become symbolic of domestic political divisions (Šebeňa & Turcsányi, 2021; Karásková et al., 2018). Perhaps because of the legacy of the late Václav Havel, famous for defending democracy and opposing communism, China has become a salient Other against which pro-Western Czech publics (not just political elites) express their opposition to the communist past, communism, and Russia—and the Zeman presidency.

The Polish case (Figure 6) is very different. West-to-East self-identification as a Pole had no direct effect on attitudes toward China ($\beta = .02^{ns}$), as the dashed horizontal line at the bottom reveals. Attitudes toward Poland’s communist past and communism as a political system had no direct effect on attitudes toward China either. Instead, each had its impact on views of China only indirectly, via attitudes toward Russia (H3 supported). Together these four indirect paths accounted for 18% of variance in attitudes toward China, much less than in the Czech Republic, but still substantial. The Polish view of China, it seems, is filtered through Russia. Looking East, Poles see China through the prism of Russia, views of which are substantially shaped by their West-to-East self-identifications, and their views of the Polish communist past and of communism as a political system.

In sum, East/West identifications, attitudes toward the communist past, communism, and Russia all shape CEE views of China. But the mediating role of Russia looms much larger in countries like Poland and Latvia confronting a potential Russian threat right on

their Eastern borders (H4 supported). For countries farther from Russia like the Czech Republic, by contrast, attitudes toward China are driven more directly by preexisting identities and attitudes.

CONCLUSION: 17 + 1 ≠ 18

On February 9, 2021, Beijing virtually hosted the 9th summit of the “17+1” group of CEE countries and China. It was temporarily 17 because Greece had joined in 2019, and Lithuania left the group the next month, in March 2021. 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* (Englsm.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. Indeed, just a few months later, in May 2021, Lithuania publicly announced that it was leaving the group (Lau, 2021a).

Why are CEE-China relations deteriorating? 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 agri-food goods from Poland” (Lau, 2021b). Despite the CCP’s “win-win” rhetoric, Jeremy Garlick (2019) has argued that China’s BRI in CEE is actually motivated by an “offensive mercantilism” 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

Bērziņa-Čerenkova 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 article 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 toward China, the Serbian public on average held positive views (Figure 1). Country-level views of China tended to mirror views of Russia and to contrast with views of the US.

These country-level differences in public attitudes toward 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 et al., 2020). Given positive Serbian public opinion toward China, this trend is likely to continue.

National averages can hide subnational cleavages. For instance, we found that Russian speakers in Latvia on average felt massively more positively toward both Russia and China and negatively toward the US than did Latvian speakers (Figure 2, *left*). We also found substantial political divisions over China within the Czech Republic (Figure 2, *right*), with progressive (vs. conservative) voters more negative about China and Russia, and more positive about the US and Germany. Smaller but similar subnational political cleavages were also found in Slovakia and Hungary.

These subnational divisions in public opinion toward China allow politicians to take different approaches toward China, catering to the different views of their constituents. In Slovakia, for instance, former President Andrej Kiska met with the Dalai Lama, appealing to his progressive constituents, whereas the conservative government attempted to take a more pragmatic approach to China (Šimalčík, 2021). In the Czech Republic, divisions within public opinion are perhaps most visible in elite politics, with President Zeman positioning himself as China’s trusted ally, and opposition politicians publicly supporting Taiwan, confident their progressive and more anti-communist constituents will support them (Bajerová & Turcsányi, 2019).

Across the CEE, at the individual level, East/West self-identifications, attitudes toward the communist past, and evaluations of communism as a system consistently shaped views of Russia and China. But there were substantial differences between CEE countries in the extent to which individual-level attitudes toward Russia mediated the impact of these identities and attitudes on views of China. The Czech Republic lay at one extreme, with all of these variables playing a major role in shaping China attitudes (Figure 5). Czechs self-identifying as more Eastern (vs. Western) tended to hold more positive views of their own communist past, communism as a system, and of both Russia and China. Their post-communist experience likely contributed to this complex structure of Czech public opinion

on China. Former President Havel made support for democracy and human rights a centerpiece of his presidency, a legacy that the progressive Czech opposition carries forward to this day. Meanwhile, current President Zeman looks East toward Russia and China, appealing to his more conservative constituents (Šebeňa, 2020).

At the other extreme lies Poland, where views of China are almost completely mediated through views of Russia (Figure 6). Like Latvia, Poland lives with a giant Russian bear just to its east, generating an overwhelming security issue that overrides all else. Recall that of our six CEE countries, it was Poles and Latvians who by far on average self-identified the most as “Western” (Figure 3). It may be that whereas feelings of belonging to the “East” vs. “West” in the Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian contexts capture an ideological divide between more conservative and more progressive voters, identifying with the “West” in Poland and Latvia may be much more about distinguishing the national self from the Russian Other.

The structure of public opinion in the remaining CEE countries lies between the poles of the Czech Republic and Poland. Slovakia and Hungary are more similar to the Czech Republic, while Latvia and Serbia are more similar to Poland. In the former countries, East-West identities and attitudes toward communism have a more direct impact on China attitudes, while in the latter countries their impact is mediated more through attitudes toward Russia.

These individual-level findings do not bode well for the future of CEE-China relations. As China becomes more authoritarian under Xi Jinping, progressive CEE publics will increasingly sour on China. And as China tightens its security relations with Putin’s Russia, nationalist publics wary of Russia throughout the region are likely to prioritize relations with the EU, US, and NATO over relations with China. The specters of communism and Russia, in short, will likely further cloud CEE views of China. ■

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Corresponding author email: peter.gries@manchester.ac.uk

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APPENDIX.

Indirect Effect Statistics

	Point estimate	95% Confidence intervals (CI)*	
		lower	upper
Figure 5: From East-to-West identification to China attitudes in the Czech Republic			
Total indirect effects	.2507	.2070	.2929
<i>via the Czechoslovakian communist past only</i>	−.0185	−.0463	.0096
<i>via communism only</i>	.0139	.0041	.0256
<i>via Russia only</i>	.1490	.1136	.1846
<i>via the CZ communist past and communism</i>	.0270	.0086	.0458
<i>via the CZ communist past and Russia</i>	.0337	.0151	.0533
<i>via communism and Russia</i>	.0155	.0085	.0237
<i>via the CZ communist past, communism, and Russia</i>	.0301	.0175	.0440

Figure 6: From East-to-West identification to China attitudes in Poland

Total indirect effects	.0667	.0390	.0963
<i>via the Polish communist past only</i>	−.0141	−.0298	.0005
<i>via communism only</i>	−.0005	−.0055	.0040
<i>via Russia only</i>	.0533	.0274	.0808
<i>via the Polish communist past and communism</i>	−.0007	−.0073	.0062
<i>via the Polish communist past and Russia</i>	.0213	.0129	.0312
<i>via communism and Russia</i>	.0029	.0005	.0063
<i>via the Polish communist past, communism, and Russia</i>	.0044	.0011	.0084

* Bias corrected with 5,000 bootstrapped samples using SPSS v25 PROCESS v3 model 6. The confidence intervals for the *italicized paths* pass through zero so are not statistically significant.