



Doors Wide Shut

Russian, Chinese and Turkish authoritarian influence in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia

Authors: Patrik Szicherle, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Jonáš Syrovátka, Jakub Merc, Péter Krekó

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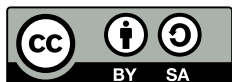
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The Central and Eastern European region is particularly vulnerable to the political influence of authoritarian regimes** because their democracies are less established, institutions are weaker and local governments themselves employ populist narratives to maintain their popularity. Influencing local states can be important for Russia, China and Turkey for two reasons: (1) **they can use friendly political actors to disrupt the unity of the Western community** and influence certain policies; and (2) they **happily acknowledge the coming to power of illiberal regimes, helping them relativize their own political systems**.
- The strength and extent of authoritarian influence in the V3 (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic) depends on various factors, including their respective governments' openness to it.
 - Russia is the one out of the three authoritarian states analysed in this study that has a vested interest in weakening European integration. **Russian influence often employs sharp power tools**, such as active measures implemented by Russian intelligence agencies, in the region **to support its anti-NATO and anti-EU foreign policy agenda through local pro-Russian actors**.
 - China's relationship is often conflictual with the EU, but it views Europe as one of the pillars in a multipolar world order and its main interest is having a flourishing EU as its economic partner. **China thus focuses on soft power**, namely cultural-educational activities, **but it sometimes turns to other influencing tools to prevent any local political actors from stepping over certain red lines for Beijing**. One such tool is the "carrot and stick" approach, meaning that China prefers or sells the perception that it prefers to invest in countries that do not follow policies against Beijing's interests.
 - Turkey is the closest to the West institutionally. Consequently, Ankara's activities in the region are generally restricted to the cultural level, but **Turkey can improve its political and economic clout as well if it is invited by local governments to do so**, which is clearly visible in the case of Hungary.
- The ways authoritarian influence materialises in the V3 can differ from country to country.
 - Authoritarian regimes have the easiest task in Hungary. **The Hungarian government's openly pro-Eastern foreign policy, seeking to become a "bridgehead" between the East and West, leaves the door wide open to authoritarian influence over the country**. Budapest often hinders EU-level decisions voluntarily in the hope of improving economic relations with third countries and encouraging Russian, Chinese and Turkish investments into the economy to finance pro-government oligarchs. The concrete threats to Hungary and its allies include the establishment of the HQ of the Kremlin-backed International Investment Bank (IIB) in Budapest, which could serve as a Russian intelligence hub working in the Western Balkans to hinder EU and NATO efforts in the region, or the opening of the first Turkic Council Office in Hungary, which could intensify lobbying efforts by Turkic states to influence Budapest's decisions in the Western institutional system.
 - **In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, authoritarian regimes also have their supporters in political and economic life**, including Czech President Milos Zeman and Slovak Parliament Speaker Andrej Danko, but **their effect on their respective countries' foreign policy agenda is restricted**. Thus, in these countries, authoritarian regimes – mainly Russia and China – are active in the party political (e.g., courting anti-West political forces), economic (e.g., perceived "carrot and stick" approach in investment projects), intelligence (e.g., activities of their embassies) and cultural domains (e.g., educational cooperation) to achieve their goals.

- As far as V3 vulnerabilities to authoritarian influence are concerned, there are common and divergent traits in the three countries.
 - **In the case of Russia, energy dependence, inefficiency to solve societal problems that can be exploited by external actors, information sharing between local officials and the Kremlin, and the pro-Russian views of some layers of the local populations can be considered common vulnerabilities.** Budapest's decision to open the door to Russian influence to help bilateral relations could constitute a risk to Western institutions as a whole, while the Russian Embassy in Prague can continue functioning as a hub for Russian intelligence operations. Slovak paramilitary movements are a backdoor for Russia to infiltrate a NATO country.
 - **Regarding China, the main threats are the lack of information on China in the region and local government's too high expectations on what economic benefits cooperation with Beijing might bring.** The Budapest-Belgrade railway investment is a good example in Hungary, as it will not be profitable to the Hungarian economy, but it will be a valuable source of income for pro-government oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros. The promised Chinese investment projects barely materialised in Slovakia, while in 2018 the flagship of Chinese investments in the Czech Republic, CEFC, was affected by financial troubles and declared bankruptcy. Cordial relations between Czech businessman Petr Kellner and the Chinese government might constitute a risk as well.
 - **Turkey is less of a threat due to its limited financial capabilities and the fact that it is a NATO member and an EU candidate country. Only Hungary is showing systemic vulnerabilities to Turkey,** mainly the close personal and nepotistic ties of the Hungarian PM and Turkish governmental and pro-government actors. This relationship allowed Ankara to influence EU policies, for instance in the case of its offensive in Northern Syria.
- **Local pro-Kremlin portals are all highly active in spreading pro-Russian narratives to the local populations, and most of them support pro-China positions as well,** although there are exceptions in the latter case, such as the Czech Aeronet. **Hungary is also a special case in disinformation: the majority of pro-Russian disinformation and narratives predominantly assessing the role of China on the international level positively are spread by government-controlled portals,** which makes Russian and China-backed manipulative campaigns unnecessary in the country. Independent media make important contributions to the public discourse and local resilience by providing a balance to arguments in favour of authoritarian regimes.
- **Our research shows that once a pro-Eastern government is in power in a Western country, Eastern authoritarian regimes have a relatively clear path to influence the decisions of Western institutions.** This indicated by the Hungarian government's activities offering political advantages to Russia (e.g., rhetorically hindering potential efforts to implement additional sanctions against Moscow), China (e.g., vetoing initiatives condemning Beijing) and Turkey (e.g., delaying the approval of a statement condemning Turkey for its offensive in Northern Syria) on the international and domestic scene. Pro-Eastern cabinets in the West have proven to be willing to sacrifice their Western ties to gain perceived benefits from authoritarian partners. **This realisation might encourage Russia, and possibly other authoritarian regimes, to maintain or even increase their support for pro-East actors throughout Europe and North America.**

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **EU institutions and pro-Western actors must continue pushing for introducing qualified majority voting (QMV) in EU foreign policy matters, as it would considerably weaken the lobbying power of authoritarian third countries in EU level decision-making through their connections with individual member states.** The arguments for introducing QMV should be founded on the need for a stronger role for Europe in world affairs, as too often Europe is left as a spectator to international events due to the necessity of unanimity in decision making. For instance, it could not effectively step up against the Turkish offensive in Northern Syria, where Turkey-backed forces reportedly committed war crimes.
- In lieu of QMV in foreign policy decisions, EU member states that are willing to coordinate their responses to international events should issue joint statements and take joint action as fast as possible in case the Council cannot reach a unanimous decision. Moreover, the European Parliament should continue issuing resolutions on world affairs as swiftly as possible and be the voice of the EU on the international scene until (and after) the introduction of reforms to EU foreign policy decision-making.
- Disinformation and biased reporting remain considerable issues in EU member states in general and in the three states under review in particular. The European Union must significantly intensify its efforts in countering disinformation, improving the quality of journalism, and upholding the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press in Europe (including not only EU member states but candidate countries as well). **Funding for the East Stratcom Task Force should be increased and its mandate broadened considerably. Improving media literacy could be a long-term solution to disinformation.**
- **EU communication should be vocal about the successes of EU cohesion policy and emphasise the advantages of EU subsidies** (e.g., non-refundable support, EU oversight on spending) **compared to investment projects financed by authoritarian states** (e.g., loans, no EU oversight). This could help discredit pro-Eastern forces' arguments concerning the perceived advantages of investments of authoritarian states into the local economy instead over EU membership.
- Western allies must clearly condemn the measures of EU/NATO member states who turn towards authoritarian regimes, and cooperation with them should be kept to a minimal level with strong pressure placed on them to reverse course. **Raising the cost states cooperating widely with authoritarian states incur within their alliance system could serve as a factor discouraging potentially the rouge states themselves but at least others from taking such a path.** Regimes that claim to be trying to balance between the East and West should be put in situation where they have to clearly chose what side they are on as often as possible.
- Pro-Western political forces in the European Union should stick to value-based communications on geopolitical affairs, but also realise that wide layers of the local populations are not necessary interested in foreign policy. However, effective communication on these issues is possible if **pro-Western forces can show the effects of authoritarian influence and that of relations with such countries on the daily lives of ordinary citizens**; e.g., the financial repercussions of deals with authoritarian leaders, low quality of services (e.g. the quality of trains running on Subway Line 3 in Hungary), and dangers of investments financed/led by authoritarian states (e.g. the expansion of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant by Rosatom).

INTRODUCTION

The European Union and the values it represents have been under attack by authoritarian regimes from within and outside of the bloc. The main external challengers are Russia, China and Turkey, which are regularly depicted by anti-EU disinformation narratives as suitable alternatives to the liberal democracy of the EU, and as examples that nation states can be strong on their own merit outside of the bloc. This logic was used by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in his infamous Baile Tusnad speech in 2014 as well, when he named these three authoritarian powers (among others such as India and Singapore) as successful role models for his illiberal regime.

Naturally, the three sources of influence are completely different. **While the economic influence of these countries, especially that of Russia and China, is strong in Europe, Central and Eastern European states are particularly exposed to political influence.** In this region, liberal democracy is less established, institutions are weaker and governments themselves increasingly choose to employ populist narratives and policies to maintain their popularity. Such countries can be ideal targets for authoritarian influence.

Turkey's actions are usually perceived differently, as it is a NATO-member state and technically an EU candidate country. Still, in some respect, their influencing tactics in EU member states on certain occasions also share the features of "sharp power";¹ e.g., aiming to penetrate to the information environment of the target to have an impact on political processes and institutions.

While Russia, China and Turkey have more differences than similarities, they share a kind of authoritarian DNA. *"All of them happily acknowledge if the number of not perfectly democratic states grows, as it helps them relativize their own non-democratic courses."*, as Pál Dunay, a professor of NATO and European Security Issues at the George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies, one of our interview subjects, perfectly summarized. With illiberal democracy spreading, the situation of these three regimes in the international arena changes. They can no longer be contrasted solely with the liberal democracies of, for instance, Sweden or the Netherlands, there are multiple other countries living in the space between liberal democracy and totalitarian dictatorships – points out Pál Dunay.

To investigate how authoritarian regimes are trying to achieve their goals vis-à-vis Europe in general and the countries under examination in particular, Political Capital and its partners set out to examine authoritarian influences on Hungarian, Slovak and Czech policies in the political, economic, intelligence, cultural and media spheres, and detail the cooperation between Russia, Turkey and China, and the V3. We asked two main questions: How do Chinese/Russian/Turkish relations affect the decisions of national governments? How do pro-Chinese/Russian/Turkish relations feed Eurosceptic narratives?

The influence of foreign authoritarian powers on internal development and the public discourse in targeted states is analysed in the context of the following factors:

1. The overall nature and dynamism of bilateral relations of the countries concerned;
2. the types of tools used by authoritarian states to enforce their influence in target countries;
3. and the political, economic, socio-cultural, and ideological environment in the countries influenced by activities of foreign states.

1 Christopher Walker, „What is »Sharp Power«?”, *Journal of Democracy*, sz. 3 (2018): 9–23.

When analysing the bilateral relations of the V3 with the three authoritarian countries included in the study, the fact that the V3 are all members of the European Union and NATO must be taken into account. **The basic frameworks of their bilateral relations are largely determined by common EU policies and NATO commitments. At the same time, it is also important that membership in these Western institutions can be an additional value to authoritarian regimes outside of these blocs.** While the relationship of the EU and NATO are largely conflictual with Moscow and often tense with Beijing, Turkey is a NATO member and an EU candidate country. Turkey's accession process to the EU, however, stalled and given the local political developments of past years, Ankara's future relationship with the EU is uncertain. This will certainly be the case until President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is the leader of the country, as he is more interested in realising Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East and extending its influence in the Western World, mainly through personal connections rather than international investments.

Successive Orbán governments in Hungary have seriously undermined the rule of law and democratic values in the country. It not only diminished the quality of Hungarian democracy, but also undermined its resilience against authoritarian influences. **Budapest's changing foreign policy reorientation to the East voluntarily opened the gates to such influences from third countries that PM Orbán wants to cultivate cordial ties with.** The official government policy seeks to make Budapest a bridge between the East and West, but in practice this often leads to Hungary undermining the unity of the West on key issues. Hungary is the EU member where the dominant ruling party most openly, and most ideologically flirts with authoritarian regimes, making the country a special case to analyse. Looking for economic benefits in doing business with such countries, of course, is not Hungary-specific.

RUSSIA IS ACTIVE ON ALL FRONTS



Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia became a consolidated autocracy with kleptocratic-oligarchic elements based on a “power vertical”, the strong influence of the people previously connected to secret services (“siloviki”). Elections in Russia are non-competitive and politically manipulated already during the preparatory phase – when excluding rivals for example. This political system is paired with an increasingly expansionist foreign policy aimed at challenging the unilateral structure of contemporary international relations, which – according to Czech expert Jan Paďourek from the CEVRO Institute – involves restoring the Soviet Union’s former political, economic and intelligence clout over Eastern Europe and dividing the Eastern and Western constituents of rival alliances.

According to Alexander Duleba, the former executive director of the Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Russia defined its European policy goals as challenging the bloc and creating doubts about the institutions and structures keeping Europe together. Russia has since been confronting the West wherever the latter is unwilling to accept the Kremlin’s ideas about arrangements in Europe – said the expert. The Russian Foreign Policy Concept approved in 2016 claims that the “geopolitical expansion pursued” by NATO and the EU “run counter to the long-term interests of all sides” and accuses the West of exerting “political, economic, information and other pressures” on the country.² This seems to substantiate that Moscow sees the West as a systemic rival.

² „Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)” (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2016), https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

SWINGS IN BILATERAL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Russian-Hungarian diplomatic relations turned conflictual under the first Orbán government (1998-2002), especially after it decided to disbar a Russian convoy heading to Serbia from entering the country because it carried products falling under a UN embargo.³ Successive socialist governments built strong relations with the Kremlin, supported Russia-backed gas pipeline projects over EU-supported ones and reacted slowly to Georgian conflict of 2008. More importantly, it was allegedly responsible for allowing FSB officials to perform polygraph tests on staff members of the Hungarian National Security Office.⁴ Viktor Orbán maintained his anti-Russian stance in opposition as well until 2009, when he met Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg, after which he declared that bilateral relations should be placed on “21st century foundations”. Since Orbán came back to power, he gradually committed himself more and more to Putin and his regime. Since the annexation of Crimea, there have been seven high-level meetings between Orbán and Putin, which is one of the most in the EU- and way more than what Hungary’s diplomatic and political weight would justify.

Slovak-Russian relations have largely been defined by the individual attitudes of local parties and governments to Moscow. Parties with a clear pro-West foreign policy orientation have avoided building relations with Moscow as long as it negatively affects the implementation of the country’s pro-Western course. Thus, they separate economic ties with Russia from Slovakia’s main foreign policy agenda. Other political forces rather treated Slovak-Russian relations as a supplement to the country’s pro-Western course and promoted a sort of symbiosis between Euro-Atlantic integration and partnership with Russia. This approach, represented primarily by the HZDS, SNS and partially Smer-SD, has been inconsistent and unrealistic, as it underestimated or neglected the fact that Russia has acted consistently to prevent the deeper integration of Slovakia into Western structures after the collapse of the communist regime. Openly pro-Russian forces such as Kotleba’s People’s Party – Our Slovakia would uncritically choose Russia over NATO as a strategic ally.

In the Czech Republic, finding the right balance in the country’s relationship with Russia has historically been important. Distant events, such as Pan-Slavism in the 19th century, the Second World War and the 1968 invasion of the Czech Republic by the Warsaw Pact are shaping discussions even today.⁵ For two decades after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Czech-Russian relations remained relatively stable, except for debates surrounding the construction of a US radar base in the Czech Republic⁶ or the gas crisis negotiations.⁷ There are some openly pro-Russian forces though as well, such as President Milos Zeman, the Czech Communists, and the party of Tomio Okamura, working hard on opening the doors wide for authoritarian (especially Chinese and Russian) influence.

The Ukrainian crisis erupting in 2013 changed the approach of the V3 towards Moscow. The Russian annexation of Crimea, the War in Eastern Ukraine, and the Skripal case have all been important developments shaping and affecting V3 policy towards Russia. All three states have implemented sanctions against Russia for its role in Eastern Ukraine, but all three have actors advocating for lifting these sanctions.

3 Ackermann Sándor, „Váltakozó sikerű orosz-magyar kapcsolatok”, *Kitekintő.hu* (blog), elérés 2019. július 15., https://kitekinto.hu/europa/2011/11/30/valtakozo_siker_orosz-magyar_kapcsolatok.

4 Bódis András, „Megvan a bizonyíték: nem Őszöd volt a Gyurcsány-korszak legnagyobb botránya”, *Válasz Online* (blog), elérés 2019. július 15., <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2019/04/17/gyurcsany-szilvasy-oroszok-titkosszolgalat/>.

5 See, for example: Jan Holzer és Miroslav Mares, szerk., *Czech Security Dilemma: Russia as a Friend or Enemy?*, First Ed. (Palgrave, é. n.).

6 Česká televize, „Rusko radar dál nechce”, ČT24, 2008, <https://ct24.ceskatelivize.cz/svet/1451459-rusko-radar-dal-nechce>.

7 Lukás Tichy, „Dvě kola rusko-ukrajinské plynové krize 2009”, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.euroskop.cz/46/11211/clanek/dve-kola-rusko-ukrajinske-plynove-krize-2009/>.

SECURITY POLICY ISSUES IN FOCUS

On the political level, Hungary is currently one of the main voices and facilitators of Russian interests on the EU level. PM Orbán himself claimed multiple times that the EU's sanctions policy against Russia is a mistake,⁸ even citing highly inflated numbers regarding the damage done to the Hungarian economy to back it up.⁹ The most important foreign policy concession to Russia by the Hungarian government, Pál Dunay says, could be the fact that Hungarian declarations concerning the ineffectiveness of the EU's anti-Russia sanctions regime alone are adequate to ensure that the sanctions, while remaining in place, are not aggravated. The Orbán government's loud opposition to the sanctions are likely suitable to discourage EU institutions or other member states from contemplating implementing new sanction measures.

Regardless, the Hungarian government does not step over certain red lines: it has approved prolonging the sanctions in the council and remains active in NATO. At the same time, it takes every possible measure to avoid negatively influencing its relations with the Kremlin. For instance, according to the Hungarian press, the government forced the Constitutional Protection Office (AH) to indict MEP Béla Kovács, who they investigated for spying on the EU for Russia, before they could map Kovács's entire network. It might have helped Russian secret services to clean their traces.¹⁰

Moreover, Russia is also an important political partner to Hungary on the ideological level. Russia serves as a rhetorical counterpart to the "decadent West" in the PM's worldview, which has become increasingly pronounced parallelly to Hungary's relationship with its allies turning more and more conflictual. Pál Dunay also highlighted the fact that there is a sort of know-how transfer between Russia and Hungary concerning legislative issues, the prime example being their anti-NGO efforts.¹¹

Slovakia joined and abided by the EU's sanctions policy against Russia in the wake of the Crimean conflict and the downing of MH-17. However, former PM Robert Fico, who served as prime minister between 2012 and 2018, frequently expressed his objections against the sanctions and spoke about the necessity to lift them. Incumbent Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini (2018–) has continued representing this stance, he characterizes sanctions as ineffective, useless and even harmful for Slovakia's economy. Parliament Speaker Andrej Danko from the SNS (he has filled this position since 2016) is known for his close personal relationship with Russian State Duma Speaker Viacheslav Volodin. Danko frequently visits Moscow to present stances contradicting common EU policies towards Russia. The House speaker and the two prime ministers publicly expressed views dissenting from joint EU positions, aiding the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives in Slovak society. These can create an inadequate, misleading image of Russia and its policies towards Slovakia and the country's allies. Alexander Duleba mentioned that after Slovakia decided to partake in providing reverse gas flow to Ukraine, **Andrej Danko and his SNS became the "Russian Trojan horses" in the country, who managed to block the approval of pro-Western foreign and security policy documents.** The country also failed to expel any Russian diplomat after the Salisbury attack. The extremist Marian Kotleba can also be a potential target of Russian influencing activities.

8 Péter Urfi, „Meghosszabította az Oroszország elleni szankciókat az EU, még Orbán is megszavazta”, 444, 2019. június 27., <https://444.hu/2019/06/27/meghosszabította-az-oroszország-elleni-szankciókat-az-eu-meg-orban-is-megszavazta>.

9 „Egyre ferdebbeket ferdit a kormány az Oroszország elleni szankciókról”, Eurologus, 2017. február 6., http://index.hu/kulfold/eurologus/2017/02/06/orban_putyin_szankciok_gaz_kamu/.

10 Panyi Szabolcs, „KGBéla megüssza a kémügyet, pedig gyanúsabb, mint valaha”, 2017. október 5., http://index.hu/belfold/2017/10/05/kgbela_megussza_a_kemugyet_pedig_gyanusabb_mint_valaha/.

11 „Felfedezhető az orosz minta a külföldről támogatott civil szervezetek regisztrációját előíró törvényjavaslatban”, 444, 2017. április 20., <https://444.hu/2017/04/20/felfedezhető-az-orosz-minta-a-kulfoldrol-tamogatott-civil-szervezetek-regisztrációját-előíró-törvényjavaslatban>.

Pro-sanctions views were expressed by former President Andrej Kiska and his successor Zuzana Čaputová. They and the Slovak Foreign Ministry not only support the sanctions but regularly emphasize the necessity of strengthening Slovakia's cooperation with the EU and NATO.

Local pro-Russian groups and personalities in Slovak intellectual and media circles promote and justify Russian policies and narratives. This group includes select politicians (members of different parties), experts, journalists, public intellectuals, bloggers, activists, etc. Since 2014, the members of this ideologically diverse community have promoted narratives consistent with the main lines of arguments employed by Russian propaganda, for instance on Ukraine and Western aggression against Moscow.

According to Jan Paďourek, Russian influence in the Czech Republic is mainly political. Some members of the current Czech government occasionally mention there is a need for a more pragmatic approach towards Russia (for example by lifting sanctions, as suggested by the minister for trade and industry),¹² but it is unlikely that the government will advocate for changes to the status quo on the EU level.¹³ **Like elsewhere, there are Czech politicians who openly spread the Russian interpretation of events. Currently, the extreme left-wing KSČM and extreme right-wing SPD are the most prominent political forces in this respect.** Their members have received support from Russia on multiple occasions, and they have travelled to the occupied territories of Ukraine.¹⁴ Another important proponent of pro-Russian views is the Czech President Miloš Zeman, whose advisers are widely suspected of having close links to Russia.¹⁵ Zeman is known for his pro-Russian stances such as claims that the annexation of Crimea is a fait accompli or his advocacy for launching an investigation into the possibility of the nerve agent used for poisoning Sergei Skripal originating from the Czech Republic.¹⁶ He also severely criticized Czech counter-intelligence services for their reports identifying threats related to Russian influence.¹⁷ However, Jan Paďourek emphasised that these actors are “not responsible for developing Czech foreign policy”.

12 „Čím dříve nebudou, tím lépe.“ Ministr Havlíček by rád zrušil unijní sankce proti Rusku”, iROZHLAS, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ministr-prumyslu-karel-havlicek-sankce-rusko-evropska-unie_1906240805_ako.

13 For a more detailed assessment, see: „Agenda pro českou zahraniční politiku”, *Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky* (blog), elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.amo.cz/agenda-pro-ceskou-zahranicni-politiku/>.

14 Krejčí Markéta, „Legitimization of the Russian Federation regime by the Members of Parliament of the Czech Republic” (European Values, 2018), <https://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/legitimization-russian-federation-regime-members-parliament-czech-republic/>.

15 Vladimír Soldatkin és Jan Lopatka, „On Kremlin Visit, Czech President Is among Friends”, *Reuters*, 2015. május 9., <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-russia-czech-idUKKBN0NUONM20150509>.

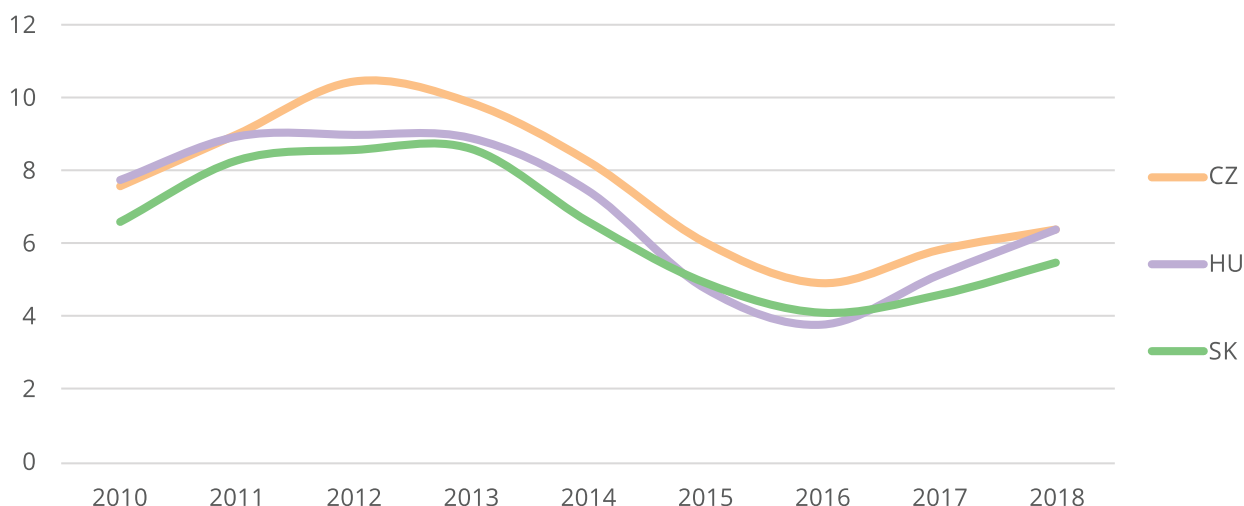
16 „Prezident Zeman výroky k ruské anexi Krymu legitimizoval agresí, shodli se senátoři”, iROZHLAS, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/prezident-zeman-vyroky-k-ruske-anexi-krymu-legitimizoval-agresi-shodli-se_1710121219_jra.

17 Echo24, „Jsou to čučkaři a plácáci. Zeman se tvrdě pustil do BIS. Ta jeho kritiku odmítla”, 2018. december 7., <https://echo24.cz/a/SaMby/jsou-to-cuckari-a-placaji-zeman-se-tvrde-pustil-do-bis-ta-jeho-kritiku-odmitla>.

OVEREMPHASISED ECONOMIC TIES

According to official statistics, the V3's trade ties with Russia have become less significant since the implementation of sanctions in 2014 due to Moscow's "counter-sanctions" (see Figure 1 below for data). But sanctions are not solely to blame: lower oil and gas prices, a weaker Rubel and the deteriorating consuming power of Russians all contributed to it.¹⁸

Figure 1: Total trade value of the V3 with Russia 2010-2018 (in EUR billions). Source: Eurostat



Russia has long been one of the primary targets of the Orbán government's Eastern Opening Policy (EOP), especially when Budapest started looking for international partners to balance its weakening position in the West. However, there are also economic reasons for the cordial Hungarian-Russian ties. According to Eurostat, Hungary is covering the majority of its energy needs from Russian sources.¹⁹ Thus, the Kremlin became uniquely important for Budapest once the Orbán government made utility cost cuts its signature policy and parallelly started to nationalise gas infrastructure and service provision. By having almost complete control over household utility prices, the cabinet must push down the price of Russian gas imports to be able to maintain low utility prices, which – says the chief economist of the International Energy Agency, László Varró – is only possible to achieve in two ways: by forcing Gazprom to compete in the free market or by aligning with the Kremlin's foreign policy.²⁰ Since successive Hungarian governments have failed to achieve the former,²¹ the Orbán government has had to make numerous political concessions to Russia to achieve this goal.²² The concessions and, partly, Hungary's efforts to diversify the country's energy sources have achieved results: Hungary's long-term gas deal with Russia, which expired in 2015, was extended on multiple occasions, allowing Budapest to use the gas quantity it had not purchased in previous years.²³

18 „Nagyot ferdít az orosz szankciókról a külügy”, 2017. január 30., http://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/01/30/felrebeszel_az_orosz_szankciokról_a_kulügy/.

19 „EU imports of energy products - recent developments”, Statistics Explained (Brussels: Eurostat, 2019), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/46126.pdf>.

20 Károly Csabai, „Gázfüggőség vagy gázkereskedelem?”, hvg.hu, 2015. február 14., http://hvg.hu/gazdasag/201507_gazfuggoseg_vagy_gazkereskedelem.

21 Patrik Szicherle, „Orosz befolyás Magyarországon (1. rész): a rezsisökkentés fogságában”, PC (blog), elérés 2019. július 15., <https://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2018/02/23/orosz-befolyas-magyarorszag-1-resz-a-rezsicsokkent-es-fogsagaban/>.

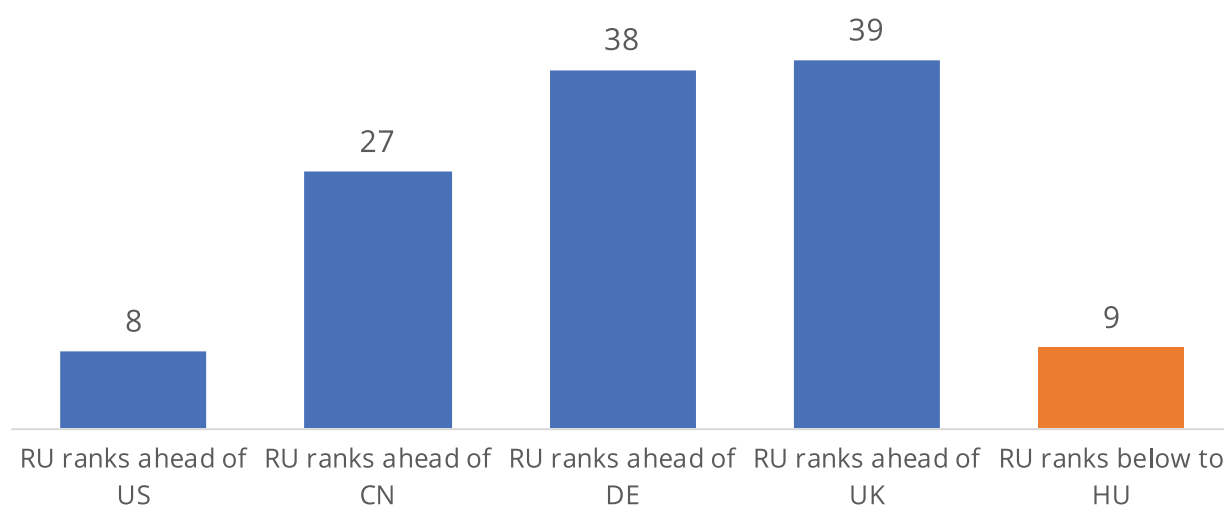
22 „Atom gáz – A magyar–orosz gazdasági kapcsolatok háttere”, 2014. február 6., <http://magyarnarancs.hu/gazdasag/atom-gaz-a-magyar-orosz-gazdasagi-kapcsolatok-hattere-88507>.

23 Hecker Flórián, „Orbán fogadta Putyint a Sportarénában”, <https://www.origo.hu/>, elérés 2019. július 15., <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20170828-iden-masodjara-is-leszallt-ferihegyen-vlagyimir-putyin.html>.

The Hungarian government has had to make several concessions to advance bilateral relations. First, the Paks nuclear power plant expansion project will be realised with heavy Russian involvement. Rosatom campaigned for dropping the idea of launching a public procurement tender for the project,²⁴ and after spending EUR 9.2 million on preparing the tender, the Hungarian government decided to award the contract to Russia without competition. Moscow is also providing an EUR 10 billion credit line to realise the project.²⁵ In another instance, the Hungarian government pulled the credit guarantee for a project from the Hungarian company Ganz, which had won an Egyptian railway carriage tender. Instead, Budapest started backing a group headed by the Russian Transmashholding, which helped it win the tender in place of Ganz.²⁶ Both contracts are beneficial to the Kremlin, but they also involve Hungarian businessmen close to the ruling party.²⁷

The Orbán government's rhetoric on the need for economic cooperations and the huge exaggerations about the role of Russia in Hungarian trade have an impact on public opinion as well. According to a Political Capital Institute research, Russia is seen by Hungarians as a much more important trade partner for the country than it really is, and the size of its economy is perceived to be much bigger than in reality. For example, almost 40% of Hungarians think that Russia's economy is bigger than that of Germany, and we can see the same in the case of the UK.²⁸

Figure 2: Over- and underestimation of Russia's GDP in country comparisons (Proportion of incorrect answers in the total sample, in %. Underestimation in yellow.)



Similarly, in Slovakia, pro-Russian narratives by high-ranking politicians often discuss the irreplaceability of Slovak-Russian economic ties, which is part of painting an overly favourable picture of the country. However, in 2018, Slovak exports to Russia were responsible for 5.3% of Slovakia's total. In contrast, Slovakian

24 „Az oroszok építik Paks két új blokkját”, 2014. január 14., http://index.hu/gazdasag/ado_es_koltsegvetes/2014/01/14/nem_veletlenül_ment_orban_moszkvaba/.

25 „Atom gáz – A magyar–orosz gazdasági kapcsolatok háttere”.

26 Szabó András, „Egyre kedvezőbb az oroszoknak a kormány által támogatott egyiptomi gigauzlet, amiből egy magyar céget fúrtak ki - 444”, elérés 2019. október 29., <https://444.hu/2019/10/29/egyre-kedvezobb-az-oroszoknak-a-kormany-altal-tamogatott-egyiptomi-gigauzlet-amibol-egy-magyar-ceget-furtak-ki>.

27 „A Közérdekvédelmi Központ közzétette a paksi bővítés előkészítése során kötött szerződéseket”, *atlatszo.hu* (blog), elérés 2018. szeptember 28., <https://atlatszo.hu/2017/09/13/a-kozerdekvedelmi-kozpont-kozzetette-a-paksi-bovites-elokeszitese-soran-kotott-szerzodeseket/>.

28 Péter Krekó, Csaba Molnár, és András Rácz, „Mystification and Demystification of Putin's Russia” (Political Capital, 2019. március), https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_mystification_and_demystification_of_russia_eng_web_20190312.pdf.

exports to EU members accounted for 85.2% of the country's total exports.²⁹ Alexander Duleba mentioned that Slovak-Russian business ties are centred around arms trade, while Russian investments in the country are marginal, and bilateral trade remains small, especially Slovak exports to Russia.

Russia also has an economic clout in the Czech Republic. Jan Paďourek highlighted that there are numerous *“businessmen lobbyists [in the Czech Republic], who are interested in weakening of European sanctions against Russia, because Russia is huge potential market for Czech industry”*. The country is still very much dependent on Russian oil and gas. Another important area of mutual economic relations is nuclear energy, particularly due to the possible construction of new nuclear blocs in the Dukovany power plant. The Russian company Rosatom is expected to be one of the serious bidders for the tender, which will likely lead to the mobilization of the Russian influence toolkit, but the Chinese might show interest as well.³⁰

RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE IN THE V3: DISINFORMATION AND INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES

The Hungarian government authorized the Russia-controlled International Investment Bank to move to the Hungarian capital,³¹ which has the potential to turn the country into an intelligence hub for Russian operations in the Western Balkans.³² The Béla Kovács case mentioned above shows that Budapest's strategy in countering Russian influence is often dictated by political considerations.³³ Local authorities are active in countering Russian influence nevertheless, but these efforts are hidden from the public eye.³⁴ Pál Dunay added that there is one considerable issue in this domain: information frequently finds its way from some Hungarian public administration officials to Russian actors, which *“could help them [Russians] enormously in terms of transparency”*.

Despite the close ties between the two sides and the fact that the Orbán cabinet achieved some results in its relationship with Russia, the Kremlin often reminded Hungary that bilateral ties are highly asymmetric. Russia accused Hungary of delivering tanks to Ukraine in 2014 based on the claims of a then unknown far-right portal and unilaterally published the Paks II contract.³⁵ Russian diplomatic efforts also succeeded in removing the head of the Hungarian Public Transport Centre (BKK) after a Russian disinformation campaign concerning his behaviour towards the representatives of the Russian Federation. Consequently, the Russian Metrowagonmash won Budapest's subway train renovation tender.³⁶

29 „Celkový dovoz a celkový vývoz podľa kontinentov a ekonomických zoskupení krajín v roku 2014 [zo0002ms] - IBM Cognos Viewer”, elérés 2019. november 14., [http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosext/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeID\(%22i10B2CB52FFF44B319DA31F65A3FFE155%22\)&ui.name=Celkov%c3%bd%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%c3%bd%20v%c3%bdvov%20pod%c4%bea%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%c3%bdch%20zskupen%c3%ad%20kraj%c3%adn%20v%20roku%202014%20%5bzo0002ms%5d&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosext%2fcps4%2fportlets%2fcommon%2fclose.html&run.outputLocale=sk](http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosext/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeID(%22i10B2CB52FFF44B319DA31F65A3FFE155%22)&ui.name=Celkov%c3%bd%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%c3%bd%20v%c3%bdvov%20pod%c4%bea%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%c3%bdch%20zskupen%c3%ad%20kraj%c3%adn%20v%20roku%202014%20%5bzo0002ms%5d&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosext%2fcps4%2fportlets%2fcommon%2fclose.html&run.outputLocale=sk).

30 For more detailed overview of economic relations see out-puts of project „Mapping Mechanisms for Protecting the Czech Republic from Non-Standard Economic Behavior of the Russian Federation”: „PSSI | Economic and Financial Threat Program”, PSSI, elérés 2019. november 14., <http://www.pssi.cz/economic-and-financial-statecraft-program/zmapovani-nastroju-na-ochranu-cr-pred-nestandardnim-ekonomickym-chovan>.

31 Rácz András, „Miért nem igaz, amit a kormány állít az orosz érdekeltségű bankról?”, 2019. június 17., https://index.hu/velemeney/2019/06/17/nemzetkozi_beruhazasi_bank_orosz_befolyas_racz_andras_velemeney/.

32 Panyi Szabolcs, ‘Orosz Diplomátákat Érték Kémkedésen Magyarországon, És Szép Csendben Ki Is Szorították Őket’, 444, 20 December 2018, <https://444.hu/2018/12/20/orosz-diplomatakat-ertek-kemkedesen-magyarorszagon-es-szep-csendben-ki-is-szorítottak-oket>.

33 Panyi, „KGBéla megússza a kémügyet, pedig gyanúsabb, mint valaha”.

34 Panyi, „Orosz diplomatákat érték kémkedésen Magyarországon, és szép csendben ki is szorították őket”.

35 Panyi Szabolcs, „Magyarország egy dzsúdóaréna, ahol Putyin és lobbistái kedvükre játszadoznak”, 2018. február 15., https://index.hu/belfold/2018/02/15/igy_lettunk_az_orosz_atomlobbi_es_putyin_pizskos_trukkeinek_jatszotere/.

36 Panyi Szabolcs, „Moszkva kavarása áll a budapesti metrókáosz mögött”, 2017. október 28., http://index.hu/belfold/2017/10/28/vitezy_david_oroszorszag_metrofelujitas/.

As far as Russian disinformation activities in Hungary are concerned, it must be noted that Hungarian pro-government media have largely taken over the role of Kremlin-backed portals. That said, some fringe pro-Kremlin portals are active in Hungary, and they – contrary to pro-government sites – are very active in spreading anti-NATO and anti-US propaganda besides disseminating regular anti-EU content.

In 2018, the Slovak government, in contrast to the majority of EU and NATO members, including Hungary, did not expel a single Russian diplomat, possibly Russian intelligence officers, in the wake of the Skripal case. Some Slovak politicians argued that there is no clear evidence for Russia's involvement in the murder attempt.

According to Slovak intelligence, Russian secret services are in fact active in Slovakia. The annual report (2018) of the Slovak Intelligence Service (SIS) states that *“The activities of Russian intelligence services were directed against the protected interests of the Slovak Republic as a member of the EU and NATO. Members of the Russian intelligence services operating in the Slovak Republic, mostly under diplomatic cover, sought to recruit employees in the central bodies of state administration, security forces and in the field of energy and defence.”* The SIS noted that Russian activity primarily aimed at *“keeping the Slovak public sympathetic to Russia, its culture and politics, and at weakening forces openly sceptical or critical of Russia. The Russian side also sought to create an impression among its own domestic as well as foreign audiences that the Slovak Republic is a close ally of Russia, which, as a member of NATO and the EU, respects and understands Russian interests”*.³⁷

The narratives employed by actors of Russian influence in Slovakia are adjusted to the peculiarities of the political landscape of Slovakia, a country in transition with a dominantly Slavic population. These include “theories” on the inappropriateness of liberal democracy, the prevalence of Slavic solidarity and brotherhood over a political alliance with the West, the selfish West, Russia as a natural defender of small Slavic nations, among others. Slovak public media do not spread openly pro-Russian narratives; however, sometimes in an attempt to demonstrate an “objective” and “balanced” approach they give opportunities to pro-Russian individuals to present their stances.

Russian influence in Slovakia was especially visible in the country when Slovak and Russian para-military groups started cooperating openly in 2018, when there was an (eventually unsuccessful) attempt in Slovakia to interlink Russian propaganda (cult of raw physical force, militarism, historical revisionism, hatred of the West, rejection of the EU and the NATO, resistance to liberal democracy, emphasis on “traditional values” and ideas of a “Slavic brotherhood”) **with the training of local pro-Russian para-military groups.**

The main Russian actor involved was the “patriotic” motorcyclist gang Night Wolves. Since 2015 this gang has organized spectacular rides around Slovakia dedicated to the USSR's victory in the “Great Patriotic War.” In June 2018 Night Wolves announced the opening of their branch in Slovakia that would serve as their “European Headquarters.” In the small village of Dolná Krupa, near the regional city Trnava, local businessman, fireman and biker Jozef Hambálek opened an estate that was supposed to be a museum of historical military equipment. Hambálek said the estate will be a seat of the Night Wolves’ “European Headquarters.”

Hambálek helped the Night Wolves in their previous attempts to enter Slovakia and even participated in their activities in Russia. In 2017, together with Night Wolves head Aleksandr Zaldostanov, he met with Vladimir Putin in Crimea. He also had contacts with high-ranking Slovak politicians, including former Minister of Interior Robert Kaliňák, with whom he shared his main hobby – riding motorcycles. Hambálek managed to borrow several pieces of old military equipment from the State Historical Museum. After this he successfully disseminated a false narrative about the construction of a military museum in Dolná Krupa.

37 „Slovenská informačná služba | Pre Vás | Správa o činnosti SIS v roku 2017”, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.sis.gov.sk/pre-vas/sprava-o-cinnosti.html#uvod>.

Local Slovak journalists managed to shoot a video using a drone to show that it was in fact a facility designed to train paramilitaries (there is a shooting range, track for armoured vehicles). It turned out that members of the unregistered paramilitary group Slovak Conscripts, which the Ministry of Interior considers to be an extremist organization, already conducted their exercises in that estate. The Slovak Conscripts is a pro-Russian anti-Western paramilitary unit, tending to radical nationalism in the spirit of "Slavic brotherhood."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense reacted quickly. The MFA expressed concerns and stated that members of this gang are spreading a harmful narrative aimed at rewriting history. The MoD punished the management of the military museum for lending Hambálek old military technology. The MoI reiterated that it had been closely monitoring the situation and would have intervened if illegal activities were conducted. The most striking reaction came from President Andrej Kiska who called on the government to create the conditions for effective intervention against "dubious associations that are spreading their wings in our country." Slovak civil society also manifested its strict opposition to the Night Wolves. Well-known NGO representatives have signed a petition against their presence in the country. After such strong public pressure and administrative measures conducted by the authorities, Hambálek had to close the facility.

In the Czech Republic, diplomacy is one of the main tools of Russian influence. The Russian Embassy in Prague is disproportionately larger than any other diplomatic mission with forty-six accredited diplomats.³⁸ **Czech intelligence services have warned that Prague is serving as a regional hub of Russian intelligence.**

Media outlets spreading pro-Russian narratives, including the Kremlin-backed Sputnik CZ, are very active in the Czech Republic. While the only Czech news portal directly connected to Russia is Sputnik CZ (part of the state news agency Rossia Segodnia), there are several dozen anti-establishment platforms in the country amplifying pro-Russian narratives. One of the most telling examples in this regard is the one-sided reporting on the Skripal case.³⁹ According to Jan Paďourek, who believes there is a considerable layer of Czech society that views Russia positively, disinformation campaigns have had an effect on Czech elections as well; for instance when pro-Russian disinformation sites helped Miloš Zeman win the presidency.

RUSSIAN GONGOS TIE ALL OF US TOGETHER?

The "Christian connection" between Hungary and Russia is emphasised regularly, PM Orbán once noted for example the culture is the foundation of good bilateral relations.⁴⁰ The Hungarian government is actively supporting the renovation of Russian Orthodox churches in Hungary despite the fact that few Orthodox Christians live in Hungary. Budapest is also in the process of improving bilateral cultural ties through policy cooperation with the Kremlin.⁴¹ Moreover, Russia is advancing cultural ties through Russkiy Mir institutions. In certain layers of society, Russian soft power holds sway. The University of Debrecen can be counted as one institution with some individuals displaying Russian sympathies: the university's senate awarded an honorary doctorate to Vladimir Putin, while the chairman of the DE Student and Doctorate Representation (DEHDK) said in 2017 that Crimea had always belonged to Russia.⁴² In 2018, a private person started gathering signatures to declare Russians living in Hungary an official minority. The National Election Committee

38 Robert Brestan, „Ruských diplomatických aut je v Česku víc než diplomatů. Škrtat se je nedaří”, HlidacíPes.org, 2019. február 12., <https://hlidacipes.org/ruskych-diplomatickych-aut-je-v-cesku-vic-nez-diplomatu-skrtat-se-je-nedari/>.

39 Jonas Syrovatka, „Skripal: The Two Faces of the Czech Media Space”, Visegrad Insight, 2018. május 10., <https://visegradinsight.eu/skripal-the-two-faces-of-the-czech-media-space/>.

40 Gábor Medvegy, „Orbán: Magyarország és Oroszország együttműködésének a keresztény kultúra ad alapot”, 24.hu (blog), 2018. szeptember 18., <https://24.hu/belfold/2018/09/18/orban-magyarorszag-es-oroszorszag-egyuttmukodesenek-a-kereszteny-kultura-ad-alapot/>.

41 Herczeg Márk, 'Kásler Miklós Magyar-Orosz Kulturális Együttműködési Egyezményt Írt Alá Moszkvában', 444, 9 September 2018, <https://444.hu/2018/09/09/kasler-miklos-magyar-orosz-kulturalis-egyuttmukodesi-egyezményt-írt-ala-moszkvában>.

42 „A Debreceni Egyetem hozta, amit Putyin elvár otthon is: 90 százalék feletti igent”, hvg.hu, 2017. augusztus 28., https://hvg.hu/itthon/20170828_Haboruval_is_le_lehet_venni_egy_teruletet_Putyin_egyetemi_diszpolgarsagarol_beszelt_egy_szenatusi_tag.

has accepted more than a thousand signatures requesting it. However, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) found that there is no proof the minority has been continuously present in the country for 100 years,⁴³ and the National Assembly rejected the initiative in a resolution.⁴⁴ There would be tangible benefits to the Russian community of gaining nationality status, as it comes with state subsidies and additional rights. Official nationalities may establish their own self-governments, or operate cultural, educational or scientific institutions.

Russian specialised state and pro-government institutions are very active in Slovakia. Rossotrudnichestvo is responsible for drafting the programs for the Russian Centre of Science and Culture (a part of Russian diplomatic mission in Slovakia) and the supervision of cooperation between Slovak and Russian institutions; the Moscow State Institute of International relations (MGIMO) organizes lecture trips for Russian experts cooperation with some Slovak universities; the Gorchakov Fund and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI) send Russian experts to participate in conferences in Slovakia; the International Union of Russian Compatriots serves to help maintain ties with the Union of Russians in Slovakia; the Valdai Club invites participants from Slovakia to events in Russia; the “Russkiy mir” Foundation co-sponsors public cultural and social events; and the Association of University Teachers of Russian Language and Alexander Pushkin State Institute of Russian Language organize seminars for Russian-language teachers.

The Russian Centre for Science and Culture representing the state agency Rossotrudnichestvo is part of the Kremlin’s influencing toolkit in the Czech Republic as well. The centre aims to promote “an objective image of contemporary Russia”⁴⁵ abroad, for instance by organizing a discussion with the editor-in-chief of the Russian state news agency Sputnik CZ. NGOs promoting pro-Russian views are also present. The most significant organizations of this kind are those promoting the idea of Pan-Slavism. Among these, the most prominent is the Bohemian-Moravian Pan-Slavic Congress, whose members have travelled to events held in Moscow.⁴⁶

VULNERABILITIES TO RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE V3

In the case of all three authoritarian states, there are common and individual vulnerabilities to authoritarian influence in V3 states. **The very basis of the V3’s vulnerability to Russia is their longstanding energy dependence on Moscow.** This is the most pronounced in Hungary, but it is a highly prevalent issue in Slovakia and the Czech Republic as well. Local populations’ high sensitivity to energy prices and inflation can aggravate this issue. The lack of viable alternatives to Russian gas in the region means that this vulnerability will remain present in the future. Alternative routes from Poland, Romania, Croatia and Slovakia could help countering this issue.



Inefficiency in terms of finding solutions to real social problems, corruption, loopholes in the education system, insufficient state countermeasures, and the low prioritization of the foreign influence agenda can constitute vulnerabilities in all V3 states, although to different extents, as the Czech Republic, for example,

43 „Állam által elismert kisebbség lehet az orosz Magyarországon”, HVG, elérés 2019. november 29., https://hvg.hu/itthon/20180911_Allam_altal_elismert_kisebbsseg_lehet_az_orosz_Magyarorszagon.

44 „Országgyűlési Napló” (Országgyűlés, 2018), <https://www.parlament.hu/documents/10181/1569934/ny181029.pdf/aed25168-8e42-63d8-960d-5d9afeb06fd9>.

45 „About Rossotrudnichestvo”, elérés 2019. november 14., <http://rs.gov.ru/en/about>.

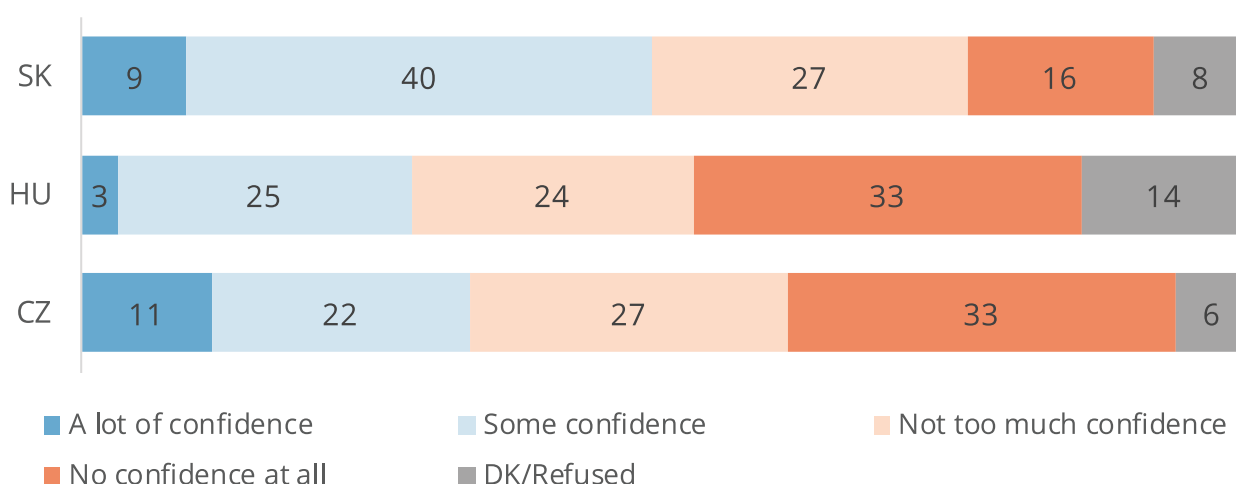
46 Jakub Zelenka és Ondrej Soukup, „Rusové platili sjezd Slovanů, přijeli i dezinformátoři. Šéfa české delegace přijal velvyslanec Remek | Aktuálně.cz”, Aktuálně.cz - Víte, co se právě děje, 2017. júnus 13., <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/rusove-platili-sjezd-slovanu-prijeli-i-dezinformatori-sefa-c/r~5f186c7a4f7311e7886d002590604f2e/>.

leads the pack in terms of stepping up against Russian interference. Moreover, Russia has been able to rely on old networks from the communist era that are still present in the region, albeit the importance of these links is fading. Nevertheless, pro-Russian actors – such as President Zeman, Andrej Danko or Viktor Orbán – will continue advocating for pro-Russian stances in the future. The fact that the Czech Communist Party is supporting the government externally might help them increase their influence. However, it must be noted that such forces have achieved few results so far, although they might have been key to stop the extension of the scope of sanctions against Russia.

Information-sharing between local and Russian officials is a very significant vulnerability to the entire region and NATO as well, which could in the long-term harm the credibility of the V3 nations as trustworthy allies to other members of these alliances.

The pro-Russian views of certain, relatively wide layers of the local populations constitute a threat, as it can encourage further pro-Russian views by the administrations (see Figure 3 below for data). Consistent pro-Russian policies by local governments can form public opinion. In Hungary, the ruling party's consistent pro-Russian rhetoric has turned its own electorate into the party preference group most supportive of Russia.⁴⁷ In Slovakia, the persistence of the population's socio-cultural attitudes receptive to Russian propaganda, the activities of local pro-Russian groups with a political background assisting Russia in its efforts to disconnect Slovakia from the EU and NATO can also be considered threats.

Figure 3: The confidence of V3 populations in Vladimir Putin to do the right thing in world affairs. Pew Research Center, Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey



The Hungarian government's increasing ideological and political proximity to the Kremlin hinders the country's resilience to Russian influence. The Kremlin has become the primary counter-pole to Budapest's Western allies, where Budapest's positions are getting weaker and weaker, and it will only deteriorate as the Orbán government slides increasingly towards authoritarianism. **Illiberal tendencies in the region serve the Kremlin's interests, as they can ensure that Russia does not stand alone as a country weakening its own democracy, so the Kremlin can relativize its own political system.** Related to the previous points, the Hungarian government's decision to open the door to Russian influence in the hopes of gaining economic benefits also constitutes a threat to Hungary.

The Russian Embassy in Prague will likely continue to play an important role for Russian intelligence operations, as the Czech Republic is unable to reduce its size (mainly due to the disproportionately small number of Czech diplomats in Moscow).

47 Magyar Péter, „A fideszesek nagyon megszerették Putyint és Oroszországot”, 444, 2018. március 14., <https://444.hu/2018/03/14/a-fideszesek-nagyon-megszerettek-putyint-es-oroszorszagot>.

CHINA: THE PROMISED LAND FOR THE V3

China is a relatively new issue in the public discourse in V3 states. The discourse used to focus almost solely on human rights issues, but since then China has become very active in expanding its economic clout. Nowadays, the discussions often focus on the economic benefits China might bring. Mainland China is a one-party dictatorship with a constitutionally confirmed monopoly of power, official state ideology, strong powers concentrated in the hands of the supreme party leader, suppression of any opposing views with a political character, persecution of dissidents and civic activists, and systematic human rights violations.

The main strategic goal of Chinese influence in Central and Eastern Europe is creating favourable political conditions for China's economic expansion in the region. This objective is tailored to the specific format of China's cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries, the "16+1" (now 17+1), intended as a supplemental regional policy for the global "One Belt One Road" initiative. The promotion of the current Chinese economic model is a constituent part of China's expansive efforts, and in this context the popularization of Chinese culture, art and way of life is important as well. According to Czech expert Filip Jirouš, China has built a network of influential lobbyists in Europe to push for its long-term political interests.

Moreover, Chinese influence seeks to neutralize local actors' (statesmen, politicians, NGOs, media) in presenting alternative ("anti-Chinese") interpretations of sensitive issues, such as the One China Policy, Taiwan, the situation in Tibet, Dalai Lama, the general human rights situation, the events on Tiananmen Square in 1989, repressions against dissidents, the Uyghur minority and members of Falung Gong movement – said Matej Šimalčík, the executive director of the Central European Institute for Asian Studies (Bratislava). A Hungarian expert, who worked as an investment lawyer in China, emphasised that the Chinese are very clear in terms of their influencing strategies: *"the Chinese say that you should not interfere with our internal affairs, and in exchange, I will not interfere with your domestic affairs either."*

The former lawyer and researcher Ágnes Szunomár, both of whom we interviewed on China, said that it is interested in a strong, stable and united European Union that prospers economically, it is not the EU's rival. Matej Šimalčík added that China's vision involves replacing the unipolar world order with US hegemony, and Beijing sees the EU as one of the poles in this new world order.

THE CHINESE VALUE CONSISTENCY IN PARTNERS' POLICIES

Hungary has been very consistent in its China policy, and there are basically no significant political actors that seek to change Budapest's approach to Beijing fundamentally. The China experts we interviewed highlighted that Beijing values Hungary's consistency and remembers that the country was among the first to recognise the People's Republic of China and Medgyessy's visit in 2003, which marks the first step in the continuous improvement of Hungarian-Chinese bilateral relations.

Bilateral relations between Slovakia and China began to intensify gradually after the former's accession to the EU in 2004: membership in the EU increased the country's status as a potential cooperation partner due to the country's successful economic and social reforms. Slovakia also became a member of the 17+1 format in anticipation of its future economic advantages.

Czech-Chinese relations were – in the eyes of the public – limited to the issue of human rights, with particular emphasis on Tibet. This was due mainly to the stance of the first Czech President Václav Havel for whom these topics had particular importance. It changed in the wake of the financial crisis, when China was seen by some as a possibility for overcoming the domestic economic slowdown. Since then, China has increasingly become a part of the Czech diplomatic agenda.

CHINESE POLITICAL INFLUENCE IS LESS OF AN ISSUE

The Hungarian government has been visibly trying to court the Chinese central government by advancing Beijing's interests at the European level. Hungary has vetoed European and regional initiatives that would have criticised China or its One Belt One Road initiative. Hungary has become one of the most ardent supporters of Beijing's 17+1 and One Belt One Road initiatives, often deviating from mainstream European views on relations with China. Domestically, Hungarian authorities have stepped up against anti-Tibet protesters on some occasions, which Fidesz's director of communications explained in 2017 by "heightened security," although Fidesz-affiliated politicians regularly demonstrated in support of Tibet when they were in opposition. The practice of suppressing such protests – as the China experts told us – had also been the case under previous, socialist administrations. The Hungarian government has been raising its voice against "scolding" China on human rights issues. Ágnes Szunomár, a researcher focusing on China told us that *"the Hungarian government believes these trust-building steps help, which is true up to a certain point [...] but there is no guarantee that they will have tangible results. However, the Chinese would not hate us even if we did not do these."* However, she highlighted that Beijing does have red lines, such as taking the US administration's line on Huawei or supporting Taiwan. Budapest is a firm supporter of Huawei's involvement in Hungary despite US security concerns about the company.⁴⁸

Although Ágnes Szunomár said that while Chinese influence is primarily economic in nature both in Hungary and Europe, she also highlighted that some level of political influence is needed as well. There is currently no clear evidence that Beijing wanted to influence Hungarian political processes. Independent media suggested that it was China who requested Hungarian lawmakers to implement the controversial Hungarian Residency Bond Programme (RBP) allowing non-EU nationals to buy a residency permit in Hungary for EUR 250 000-300 000.⁴⁹ Our interviewees diverged on their opinion regarding this rumour. Ágnes Szunomár noted that *"it is imaginable that Beijing brought up the idea of a Golden Visa Programme to Budapest, and the latter was receptive to it,"* but emphasised that she does not know if that was the case. The former lawyer said it was unimaginable that China pressured Hungarian decision-makers about the programme, as China is rather restrictive when it comes to allowing its citizens acquire foreign passports, so it would not make sense for Beijing to sponsor it. Both agreed that albeit Chinese citizens were the main market for the bonds and background checks in the RBP were insufficient,⁵⁰ the arrivals do not constitute a security threat.

The Slovak government's typically significant and rather unrealistic economic expectations in its relationship with China prompts it to be extremely cautious in issues that China considers key.

Slovak government representatives avoid taking any stances that Beijing might consider unacceptable. When other Slovak politicians took a different stance on these issues (for example, President Andrej Kiska meeting privately with the Dalai Lama in 2016 or President Zuzana Čaputová, who in July 2019 at a meeting with Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi openly raised the issue of human rights in China), government officials openly criticized them and argued that such actions undermined the prospects for the development of Slovak-Chinese cooperation. Such events provoked disagreement and a critical reaction from the Chinese government. While the critical attitude of some Slovak actors to sensitive issues did provoke a reaction from Beijing, China's policies in other regions of the world did not affect relations.

In July 2019, Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák described Slovakia's approach to relations with China as follows: *"China is one of the key players in international politics. We are keen to maintain a dialogue with China in line with EU policy based on the principle of one China. We wish friendly relations and dialogue at the*

48 Szurovecz Illés, „Szijjártó: A Huawei közreműködésével épül ki a magyar 5G hálózat - 444”, elérés 2019. november 27., <https://444.hu/2019/11/05/szijjarto-a-huawei-kozremukodesevel-epul-ki-a-magyar-5g-halozat>.

49 R. Tamás Mészáros, „Magyarország lett Kína kapuja, csak Kína nem tud róla”, elérés 2019. július 12., https://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/02/08/kina_magyar_kapcsolat_orban_longform/.

50 Erdélyi Péter, Zöldi Blanka, and Sálling Gergő, 'Súlyos Nemzetközi Bűnügy Gyanúsítottja És a Szíriai Diktátor Pénzembere Is Magyar Papírokat Kapott a Kötvényprogramban', tldr, 28 March 2018, <https://tldr.444.hu/2018/03/28/letelepedes>.

highest level based on mutual respect."⁵¹ Nevertheless, Matej Šimalčík mentioned that the Slovak government is not working on improving ties with China actively, and it has even taken contradictory steps in the past, for instance when PM Fico refused to attend some "16+1" (now 17+1) summits because of the lack of progress in trade cooperation with China.

In the Czech Republic, a major shift in the perception of China came about in 2013, which was prompted by several reasons. First, one of the most vocal advocates of improving mutual relations – Miloš Zeman – became president. Filip Jirouš, an analyst at Sinopsis, said that the Czech Communist Party is also an important lobbyist for China, but also underlined that the Social Democratic Party, formerly sympathetic to Beijing, has recently started changing its stance to some degree. Second, the new government declared the enhancement of mutual economic ties as a key political objective. The strategy was supplemented by a reduced emphasis on the human rights agenda (as seen in the Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy from 2015).⁵² Third, China itself has become more interested in the region as a part of its Belt and Road initiative. This shift seems to have brought almost immediate results, as Chinese premier Xi Jinping visited Prague that year and signed up to a memorandum on Strategic Partnership, promising significant investment.

However, after realising that hopes concerning the benefits of mutual cooperation proved to be exaggerated, relations with China, mainly when it was perceived that Czech politicians had become too subordinate to Chinese positions, became the subject of significant criticism and a part of the domestic political debate.⁵³ After these problems became apparent, even the main proponents of Chinese investments, including President Zeman, expressed disappointment with the situation. Hence, it is unsurprising that the new government (appointed in 2018) remains rather sceptical about the possibilities of cooperation with China.⁵⁴

Different attitudes concerning a more sympathetic approach towards China have led to several domestic political conflicts in the Czech Republic. Those who continued to pursue "traditional" approaches have raised more problematic topics (such as human rights), which irritated the Chinese side and led to various repercussions in some cases. Most recently, for example, Chinese authorities have stopped several cultural projects with Prague due to Mayor Zdeněk Hřib (Pirates Party) wanting to amend the partnership agreement between the Czech capital and Beijing to omit the section acknowledging the One China Policy. In similar conflicts, those who are in favour of improving relations, such as President Zeman or the Social Democrats, support the Chinese position. A key Chinese political influencing tool has been the employment of formerly influential politicians, such as Jaroslav Tvrdík or Petr Nečas, or state servants, such as Štefan Fule, in Chinese companies.

51 Robert Barca, „Čaputová ostro kritizovala Čínu za porušovanie ľudských práv a zadržiavanie aktivistov“, Denník N, 2019. július 10., <https://dennikn.sk/1523239/caputova-ostro-kritizovala-cinu-za-porusovanie-ludskych-prav-a-zadrziavanie-aktivistov/>.

52 „Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy“, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/policy_planning/concept_of_the_czech_republic_s_foreign.html.

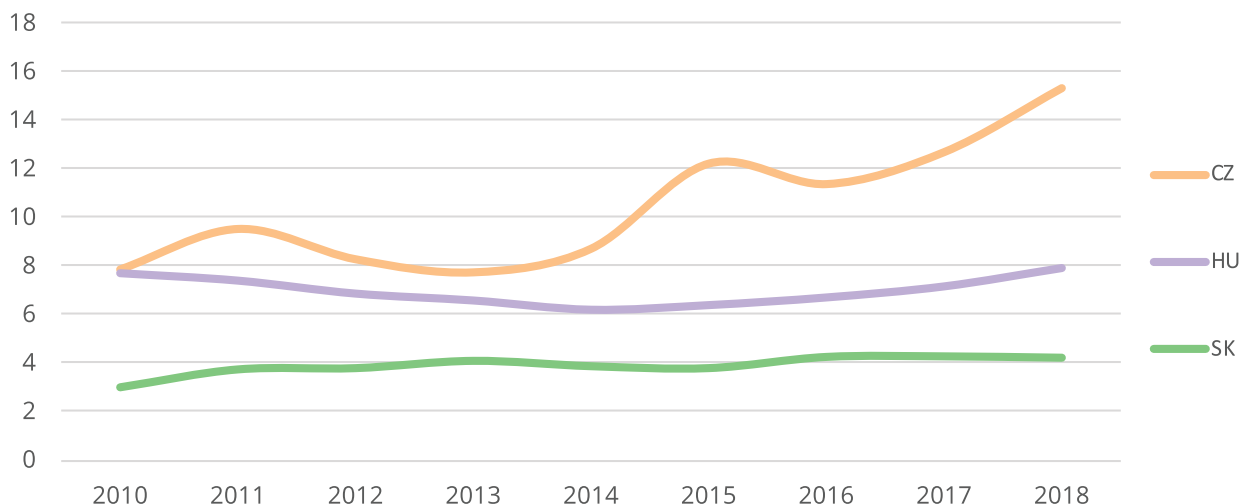
53 Alzbeta Bajerová és Ivana Karásková, „Čína v Parlamentu České republiky v letech 1993-2018“, *ChinfluenCE* (blog), 2019. június 25., <https://www.chinfluence.eu/cs/5506-2/>.

54 „Babiš: Čínské investice v ČR zatím nejsou zcela uspokojivé“, České Noviny, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/babis-cinske-investice-v-cr-zatim-nejsou-zcela-uspokojive/1743736>.

CENTRAL EUROPE'S SOURCE OF UNLIMITED RICHES?

Figure 4 indicates that only the Czech Republic has managed to meaningfully improve its trade relationship with China in the past decade, which is important in light of the fact that Hungary has clearly put the most political efforts into achieving such a result.

Figure 4: Total trade value of the V3 with China 2010-2018 (in EUR billions). Source: Eurostat



The Hungarian government's current openly declared goals in its relations with China are mainly economic in nature; Budapest wants closer ties with Beijing in the field of education, culture, transport, finance and digitalisation.⁵⁵ The former investment lawyer said that this is essentially the result of the fact *"there will be less money coming from the European Union and in a different construction, so we need to be looking for opportunities to maintain economic growth."* However, according to Tamás Matura, an assistant professor at Corvinus University Budapest, the main engine behind the Orbán government's China policy is that they might *"believe that close relations to China may serve as a bargaining chip in his struggle with Brussels."*⁵⁶

The incumbent Hungarian government's EOP is centred around improving Hungarian trade ties with non-EU partners, but the results are mixed. While exports to China increased somewhat, this increase has mostly been driven by multinational companies and not Hungarian SMEs.⁵⁷ Hungary has lost its leading position in the region as a target of new Chinese working capital investments to the Czech Republic and Poland. However, researcher Ágnes Szunomár highlighted the fact that Hungary still holds the highest level of Chinese capital in the region even though it is not growing as swiftly as it does elsewhere in the V4, but she added that those projects cannot be considered large investments either. The former investment lawyer highlighted the role of tourism as an important driver of bilateral economic relations.

Numerous Chinese investments promised over the years – including ones already discussed under earlier, socialist Hungarian administrations, as one of our experts noted – failed to materialise, such as the purchase of Malév by Hainan Airlines. One project that might materialise is the Belgrade-Budapest railway,⁵⁸ which the former lawyer said was a "pilot project" for the Chinese to learn about working in a continental and EU legal environment. A company linked to pro-government oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros will take part in the Chi-

55 www.napi.hu, „Ötpontos fejlesztési tervben állapotott meg Szijjártó a kínai külügyminiszterrel”, Napi.hu, elérés 2019. július 12., https://www.napi.hu/nemzetkozi_gazdasag/magyar-kina-szijjarto-vang-ji-kulugyminiszter-megallapodas-ot-pont.683149.html.

56 Tamás Matura, “The Misguided Discourse on Chinese Influence in Central Europe”, text, The New Federalist, 2018. október 4., <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/the-misguided-discourse-on-chinese-influence-in-central-europe>.

57 Mészáros Tamás, „Kínai sikerekkel van kikövezve a magyar külpolitika zsákutcája”, 2019. április 29., https://index.hu/gazdasag/2019/04/29/orban_viktor_egy_ovezet_egy_ut_kina_budapest-belgrad_meszaros_lorinc_selyemut_macron_zsakutca/.

58 „A critical look at China's One Belt, One Road initiative”, elérés 2019. július 12., <http://www.cadtm.org/A-critical-look-at-China-s-One-Belt-One-Road-initiative>.

nese-led consortium that will build the railway line.⁵⁹ This development once again shows that that joint projects with authoritarian regimes can be used as a source of financing for PM Orbán's political system.



According to Hungarian media, Hungarian-Chinese economic relations are hindered by multiple factors: bureaucracy, corruption, the lack of profitable project ideas and the fact that Hungary's industry is not developed enough for the Chinese to invest in it.⁶⁰ The China experts we interviewed both highlighted Chinese negotiation culture and strategies as important factors in it as well. Ágnes Szunomár stated that *"The Chinese need a very long procedure to build trust, and the Hungarians often cannot adjust to this."* Another issue that was mentioned is administrative in nature, namely that the Chinese cannot always realise their projects the way they want to due to the EU acquis. Third, both mentioned a perceived lack of competence in China affairs in the Hungarian diplomatic leadership, evidenced by the fact that a relatively young ambassador was appointed to China, where both age and experience are highly valued traits. The former lawyer added that important bilateral projects such as the Belgrade-Budapest railway are managed by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology.

Despite high Slovak expectations in terms of economic benefits coming from China and the "incidents" when some local politicians provoked Chinese reactions, economic impact remain limited.

Slovakia's stance on sensitive issues and its representation at 17+1 meetings at the prime ministerial level have not yet contributed to a significant increase in Chinese FDI in the country, the implementation of major projects, or a significant increase in bilateral trade. In 2018, Slovakia's export to China represented 1.7 % of the country's total exports; import from China represented 5.8 % of the total of Slovakia's imports.⁶¹

Matej Šimalčík mentioned that two financial groups, J&T and Penta, had vested interests in developing economic relations with China, but their efforts were not as intensive as those of Petr Kellner in the Czech Republic, and the negative experiences with the activities of the Chinese CEFC corporation in the Czech Republic could have discouraged the two financial groups from pursuing such plans.

As elsewhere, optimism related to mutual economic ties had been greatly inflated in the Czech Republic.

Chinese economic influence in the Czech Republic is negligible in real terms – said Filip Jirouš. He added that, in contrast, the People's Republic of China, *"managed to present itself as a promising investor and great business opportunity for exporters. At the same time, it managed to create an impression that improvement of political ties will automatically result in the improvement of business relations"*. The only real economic influence China has is tourism, which is important for all V3 states, and *"it has already been used for political blackmail in the Czech Republic and in other countries as well"* – says the Czech expert. In 2018, the flagship of Chinese investments in the Czech Republic, CEFC, was affected by financial troubles and declared bankruptcy. Promised investments failed to materialise and bilateral trade did not improve significantly.⁶² Filip Jirouš emphasised that it was in fact this lack of tangible results that contributed to the recent slowdown in Czech-Chinese relations.

59 Czinkóczi Sándor, 'A Kormány Lehívja a Kínai Hitelt, Hogy Mészáros Lőrinc Nekiláthasson a Budapest-Belgrád Vasútvonalnak', 444, 7 June 2019, <https://444.hu/2019/06/07/a-kormany-lehivja-a-kina-i-hitelt-hogy-meszaros-lorinc-nekilathasson-a-budapest-belgrad-vasutvonalnak>.

60 Mészáros, „Magyarország lett Kína kapuja, csak Kína nem tud róla”.

61 „Celkový dovoz a celkový vývoz podľa kontinentov a ekonomických zoskupení krajín v roku 2014 [zo0002ms] - IBM Cognos Viewer”.

62 Václav Kopecky, „Východní Asie”, *Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky* (blog), 2018. november 9., <http://www.amo.cz/cs/agenda-pro-ceskou-zahranicni-politiku/vychodni-asie/>.

Nevertheless, Chinese investments into the Czech economy constituted the main tool of influence for Beijing in the country. These served as important means of promoting China's good intentions and ambition to support the Czech economy. It could be argued that some of these investments (such as the acquisition of the Lobkowicz brewery or Slavia football club) were not based on economic considerations, but served primarily PR purposes. The investments raised concerns that China might enter areas that are considered to be part of the Czech critical infrastructure. This concern was additionally fuelled by speculations surrounding the potential sale of the popular Czech TV station NOVA to the Chinese CEFC company. It was argued that Chinese ownership of this media outlet might turn the TV channel into a tool promoting Beijing's interests, particularly as the company has very close ties to Chinese state officials. NOVA was later purchased by the Petr Kellner-owned PPF. Kellner, a Czech businessman, has business interests in China. Although the acquisition of NOVA fell through, similar concerns have arisen in connection to the current debate surrounding Huawei and 5G networks.

CHINESE INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES DIFFER FROM COUNTRY TO COUNTRY

In Hungary, Chinese intelligence activities are largely absent from the public discourse and our interviewees did not bring these up either. It must be noted that narratives depicting China in a predominantly positive light appear frequently in government-controlled media and the public broadcaster is running a daily Chinese-language news programme, so operations to influence public opinion on behalf of China are largely unnecessary. Experts working on the ChinfluenCE project found that in the Hungarian media space there is a noticeable contrast between the China-related reports of pro-government and independent/opposition media, with the former writing significantly more positively about the country.⁶³ The former lawyer mentioned that China *"wants to show external actors that everything is okay at home,"* but it is unlikely to pressure the Hungarian government to disseminate these narratives in the media, while our other interviewee said that – nevertheless – they monitor and value the favourable media environment.

In Slovakia, the SIS characterises China as an assertive foreign power looking for investment opportunities. Slovak intelligence mentions in its 2018 annual report the fact that several countries China gave loans to are worried that these investments could pose security risks in the long-term. The SIS highlighted that in the EU *"China has shown an interest in influencing public and professional opinion in its own favour."* The SIS also noted that China's intelligence services are particularly interested in obtaining information from the area of telecommunication and information technologies.⁶⁴

China is promoting local groups supportive of China's positions and interests in Slovakia. These are mostly local political and economic circles who can be instrumental in implementing China's economic projects. The list of goals of Chinese influence in Slovakia includes: helping the promotion of China's economic projects and ensuring full adherence to Chinese political lines on sensitive issues. Matej Šimalčík mentioned China's promises of heightened economic cooperation as a primary tool of Chinese influence in the country. As he said, *"Sometimes the promise of economic advantages alone is sufficient for Slovak politicians to become positive towards China."* The expert added that some politicians have received paid trips to China, who subsequently publish pro-Chinese opinions that contradict reality. Moreover, "useful idiots" in conspiratorial media can also play a part, but the Chinese state itself is active in the country as well: its ambassador published articles in the online disinformation daily Hlavné Správy and the embassy have bought paid advertisements in mainstream media outlets.

Filip Jirouš told us that the main threat of Chinese influence, not only in the Czech Republic but in the region as well, is that Beijing could disrupt the unity of the EU and NATO on issues where China has an interest.

63 Turcsányi Richard Q. és mtsai., „Followers, Challengers or By-Standers? Central European Media Responses to Intensification of Relations with China”, *East European Journal of Society and Politics* 5, sz. 3 (2019): 49–67.

64 „Slovenská informačná služba | Pre Vás | Správa o činnosti SIS v roku 2017”.

Currently, the focus of attention in terms of Chinese activities in the Czech Republic is on Huawei, whose products were identified as a national security threat by the Czech National Centre for Cyber Security,⁶⁵ which is particularly important in light of the upcoming discussions on 5G networks.⁶⁶ Czech intelligence services are concerned about Chinese technological espionage as well.⁶⁷

The experts we interviewed in the three countries all mentioned that there are no Chinese-backed disinformation campaigns in their respective countries.

CULTURAL TIES: EDUCATION IN THE FOCUS

The Hungarian former investment lawyer said that the first step when China launches bilateral relations with another state is the opening of a Confucius Institute, *“which is the basis of cultural cooperation and – with regards to this – China prioritises states among its partners that have the most of these institutes.”* Hungary has been active in aiding the opening of them and supported numerous initiatives concerning Chinese medicine.⁶⁸ Hungary also helps deepening educational ties between the two sides, as the Fudan University signed a cooperation agreement on a joint MBA degree with the Corvinus University of Budapest, and PM Orbán authorised his government to start preparations for supporting the Fudan University’s Hungarian higher education activities.⁶⁹

Cultural ties in Slovakia are also based on Confucius Institutes and educational ties. These institutes, while managed by the Chinese-funded state organisation Hanban, are formally incorporated into the Slovak educational system. The first of these cooperation projects were launched in Slovakia in 2007. Four Slovak universities are involved in the activities of the first institute. The second Confucius Institute was opened in 2015, involving the cooperation of the Comenius University of Bratislava and the Shanghai University of International Business and Economy.

The motivation of the local audience in Slovakia to be involved in Chinese “soft power” activities can be similar to those who are engaged in pro-Russian activities (political sympathies, ideological inclinations), however, the educational motives can prevail among some groups, such as the youth. China’s main aim is to create a positive image of itself in the country, and it mainly uses cultural events and educational programs to achieve this goal.

VULNERABILITIES TO CHINA: HOPES ARE TOO HIGH?

One important a rarely discussed vulnerability to Chinese influence is the lack of information on China in the societies of the V3. The low awareness and understanding of China’s real intents in its global and European policy, unrealistic expectations of benefits from economic cooperation with China and inability to identify political risks behind Chinese influence disguised as cultural and educational activities. For some V3 citizens, China’s successes in economic development and technology can potentially weaken support for the social model chosen by Central European countries after the collapse of communism. The spring 2019 Pew Research Center Global Attitudes survey showed that the relative majority of Czechs and Slovaks have a somewhat unfavourable opinion of China, while the relative majority of Hungarians have a somewhat favourable views, which might be the result of generally favourable China coverage in Hungarian government-controlled media outlets.

65 „Software i hardware společností Huawei a ZTE je bezpečnostní hrozbou”, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.govcert.cz/cs/informacni-servis/hrozby/2680-software-i-hardware-spolecnosti-huawei-a-zte-je-bezpecnostni-hrozbou/>.

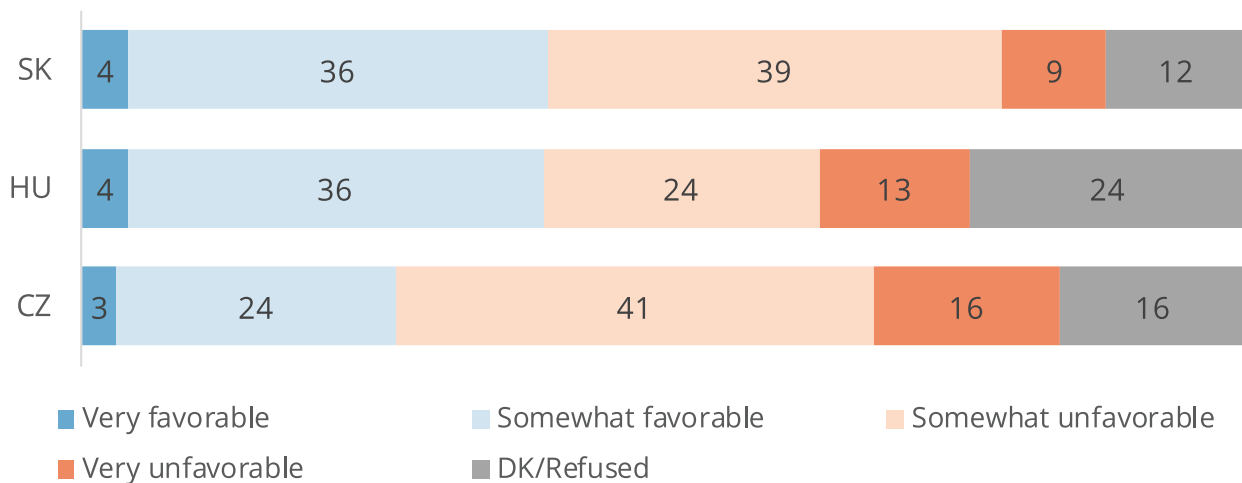
66 Michaela Marecková, „Predstavuje Huawei naozaj bezpečnostnú hrozbu?” (PSSI), elérés 2019. november 14., http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/653_blog-predstavuje-huawei-naozaj-bezpecnostnu-hrozbu.pdf.

67 „Výroční zpráva”, BIS, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.bis.cz/vyrocní-zpravy/>.

68 „Fideszesek legalizálnák a kínai csodadoktorokat”, hvg.hu, 2013. november 29., https://hvg.hu/itthon/20131129_kinai_orvoslas_Fidesz_modosito.

69 Czinkóczi Sándor, ‘Orbán Viktor Egy Kínai Egyetem Működésére Rábólintott, a CEU Még Mindig Vár’, 444, 30 October 2018, <https://444.hu/2018/10/30/orban-viktor-egy-kinai-egyetem-mukodesere-rabolintott-a-ceu-meg-mindig-var>.

Figure 5 Opinions of V3 populations on China. Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey.



China presents itself as a primarily economic actor, which might motivate some to see it only through this prism and in doing so, neglect security challenges that are related to the more significant Chinese presence in the region. All V3 states are hoping for tangible economic results through tight cooperation with China, while the lack of such results is visible in all three.

In Hungary, which has built the strongest cooperation with Beijing among the three, the desire to streamline foreign policy to Chinese needs is especially visible. Hopes of economic prosperity through China are likely dictating the Orbán cabinet to follow a very pro-China line in terms of foreign policy decisions, which makes Budapest's eagerness for Chinese money the country's main vulnerability to Beijing's influence – but this could be an important issue in the entire region.

In the Czech Republic, a specific issue is cordial relations between Czech businessmen and China. This is mainly the case of Petr Kellner, the richest Czech and owner of the PPF company, whose firm Home Credit benefits tremendously from providing loans on Chinese market, but at the same time is dependent on the license provided to him by the Chinese local government.⁷⁰ This should be taken into account in every analysis of Chinese activities in Czech Republic.

⁷⁰ Lenka Ponikelska és Krystof Chamonikolas, „Czech Billionaire Could Get Caught Up in Huawei Spying Scandal”, *Bloomberg.Com*, 2019. március 6., <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-06/biggest-fortune-in-eu-s-east-gets-caught-up-in-huawei-scandal>.

TURKEY REMAINS IN RELATIVE OBSCURITY

Turkey is an electoral democracy with an illiberal execution of power. The Turkish political system maintains competitive character; however, the central government seeks to maximize the concentration of power and to limit the space for free political competition. The coup d'état attempted under unclear circumstances in 2016 served for the central government as a pretext for strengthening its grasp on power and implement various punitive steps against persons suspected of participating in or supporting this attempt.

In recent years, Turkey has become an arena of controversial internal political developments (manifestations of illiberal power execution and authoritarian tendencies inside governmental circles, the above-mentioned attempted coup d'état with unclear background and sharp consequences. Tamás Szigetvári, a senior research fellow at the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies and the expert on Turkey we interviewed for this study said that on the economic level, Turkey is interested in having a strong European Union as its partner, while in other areas – such as Syria or the Kurdish question – it does not want the EU to interfere with its affairs. *“In Turkey, joining the EU has not been taken off the agenda, officially the political will for it is there, but it can be seen that they themselves realised this is a goal that will not necessarily be realised. Regardless, they still want the EU to accept them as an equal partner”* – he added. In NATO, Turkey is playing a disruptive role on some levels, especially since it started to cooperate with Russia very closely.

Karolína Lahučká, a Czech expert at the Association for International Affairs, highlighted that Turkey's political influence mainly targets the Middle East and the Balkans, not CEE states. Tamás Szigetvári mentioned that the Turkish state *“is currently focusing on hard power, even in foreign policy it is security interests that dominate, and not economic interests,”* adding that some voices even in Turkish governmental circles now say that the country should return to focusing in soft power.

TURKEY HAS ALWAYS BEEN SEEN AS A DIPLOMATIC PARTNER

After Hungary's democratic transition, Turkey first became an important diplomatic partner when Hungary successfully joined NATO. Then, Turkey gained prominence in Hungary's efforts to diversify its energy sources with the Nabucco gas pipeline, a now defunct project. After the change of government in 2010, Turkey became one of the key targets of the Hungarian Eastern Opening Policy.

Slovak-Turkish bilateral relations have been developing since 1993 as a partnership of allied countries, balanced and friendly. Before 2004, Turkey supported the efforts of Slovakia (and other Central European countries) to join NATO, and since 2004 Slovakia has supported Turkey's ambition to become a full-fledged member of the EU.

Czech-Turkish relations deteriorated after the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, but the real issue was the Czech acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide in 2017, according to Karolína Lahučká. **The diplomatic discord was even strengthened by the incident when a Czech court blocked the extradition of arrested Kurdish politician Salih Muslim to Turkey in 2018, which made Turkey uncooperative on other issues,** said the expert. Lahučká noted that political relations have been improving since 2018, when Czech PM Andrej Babiš met with Turkish vice president. Currently the Czech prime minister's official visit to Turkey is being planned.

ANKARA'S WEAK POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Tamás Szigetvári emphasised that *“there is a very good relationship between Viktor Orbán and Erdogan, not only football, but other things help them bind as well.”* Hungary supported President Erdogan after the attempted coup in 2016, Péter Szijjártó noted that a *“friend is a friend even when he is in trouble,”* and said that Ankara's answer to the coup has to be accepted.⁷¹ Szijjártó was the first high-ranking European official to visit Turkey after the coup. In the wake of the coup attempt, Ankara's ambassador to Hungary asked local authorities to “act” in the case of two schools in Budapest that are allegedly tied to Fethullah Gülen.⁷² Tamás Szigetvári noted that local authorities did investigate, but did not shut down any organisations, which shows that Turkish political influence in Hungary is limited.

Turkish-Hungarian relations have remained intensive since the coup attempt, and Hungary continues supporting Turkish membership in the European Union, which, according to Tamás Szigetvári, is why Turkey would view the Hungarian European commissioner receiving the enlargement portfolio positively. Hungary did not veto EU sanctions against Turkey in the wake of the latter's illegal oil drilling attempts near Cyprus,⁷³ showcasing that just like in the case of sanctions against Russia, Budapest remains reluctant to break EU unity on certain substantial issues. Tamás Szigetvári highlighted that this is unlikely to hinder Turkish-Hungarian relations, as Ankara understands the red lines Budapest has to adhere to and they know that *“maintaining good relations with Hungary is valuable [...] because it can be supportive on other issues.”* This was visible in the case of Turkey's offensive in Northern Syria. The Hungarian government was self-admittedly instrumental in delaying an EU joint statement condemning the offensive until after it was launched,⁷⁴ which Erdogan personally thanked Orbán for.⁷⁵ Moreover, Hungarian officials have been consistently spreading Ankara's views on the goals of the offensive in Hungarian domestic media, and labelling it as “a Hungarian national interest”.⁷⁶ The Hungarian PM was also very supportive of Turkish goals in Syria on the Orbán-Erdogan joint press conference after their meeting on 7 November.⁷⁷



Hungary has been rhetorically legitimising the Erdogan regime, especially in the post-coup era, and remains a supporter of Turkey's EU accession. In 2018, Viktor Orbán said that the EU needs Turkey if it wants to play a role in world politics, adding that Brussels has been treating Ankara unfairly.⁷⁸ This, as Tamás Szigetvári noted, is very useful to Erdogan, as *“he can say that ‘see, we are supported by EU members as well’, so it cannot be argued that the EU is united.”*

71 „Szijjártó Péter az első, aki a puccskísérlet óta Ankarába megy”, Origó, elérés 2019. július 29., <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20160819-ankara-torokorszag-szijjarto-peter-kulugyminiszter-puccskiserlet.html>.

72 „Magyarországot is elérte a török elnök bosszúhadjárata”, Népszabadság, 2016. augusztus 5., <http://nol.hu/kulfold/magyarorszagot-is-elerte-a-torok-elnok-bosszuahjarata-1626389>.

73 „Az Európai Unió szankciókat fogadott el Törökország ellen”, Origó, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190715-az-eu-szankciokat-fogadott-el-torokorszag-ellen-a-ciprusi-illegalis-probafurasok-miatt.html>.

74 Sándor Czinkóczi, „Szijjártó elismerte, hogy a magyar kormány miatt akadt el a törököket elítélő állásfoglalás - 444”, elérés 2019. október 29., <https://444.hu/2019/10/10/szijjarto-elismerte-a-magyar-vetot-amit-egy-nappal-korabban-a-kormany-biztosjeloltje-meg-kamunak-nevezett>.

75 Georgi Gotev, „Erdogan thanks Orban for ‘support at the international stage’ – EURACTIV.com”, elérés 2019. október 29., <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/erdogan-thanks-orban-for-support-at-the-international-stage/>.

76 Pál Dániel Rényi, „Szijjártó: A szíriai offenzíva magyar nemzeti érdek - 444”, elérés 2019. október 29., <https://444.hu/2019/10/15/szijjarto-a-sziriai-offenziva-magyar-nemzeti-erdek>.

77 „Erdogan's visit to Budapest: another symbolic meeting” (Political Capital, 2019), https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2469.

78 „Orbán katonai együttműködést akar Erdogannal”, hvg.hu, 2018. október 8., https://hvg.hu/itthon/20181008_Orban_Erdogannak_Egymas_szovetsegei_vagyunk.

Hungary has become highly involved in the work of the Turkic Council as well. In their October 2019 summit in Baku, PM Orbán offered Azerbaijan and Turkey Hungary's hand to help them with their "aspirations" if the country got the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolio in the new European Commission.⁷⁹ The first European representation of the Turkic Council was opened in Budapest, and Hungary is providing diplomatic immunity to its staff.⁸⁰

Contrary to the issue of bilateral relations between Slovakia and Russia, China, US, the EU and some of its member countries, the issue of bilateral relations with Turkey is weakly represented in the country's public discourse. When Erdogan visited Bratislava in 2015, Slovak President Andrej Kiska said that relations were at the "highest level" in history. Just a year earlier, Turkey had cancelled visa requirements for Slovak citizens.

Today, in official Slovak documents dealing with foreign policy, Turkey is characterized as a country with strong scientific and research potential with which Slovakia should have increased interest in cooperating. Slovakia implements projects with Turkey in the frames of the activities of the Centre for the Transfer of Experience from Integration and Reforms (CETIR) at the Slovak MFA. Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák spoke about "excellent relations" between Slovakia and Turkey during his visits to the latter in 2017–2018. According to an MFA report, in 2018, "*an open communication based on trust and need for political dialogue*" was maintained with Turkey. The report noted, however, that in 2018 "*Slovak-Turkish relations were stagnant*" and linked it with the absence of progress in Turkey's accession to the EU. In previous years, the MFA also highlighted the negative effects of the coup attempt in Turkey on Ankara's integration process. It stated that relations with Turkey should be returned to the original status and underlined that "*the Slovak Republic's interest is a functional EU-Turkey dialogue, based on European values and common interests.*" Slovakia, similarly to other V4 countries, does not include human rights concerns on the bilateral agenda, and leaves EU institutions to deal with these – said Lucia Yar, an analyst at Euractiv.sk.

No local Slovak lobby groups with possible political background have been identified that could publicly push for strengthening ties with Turkey or advocate for the Turkish government's policies in order to boost Turkey's influence in Slovakia. Lucia Yar emphasised that Turkish activities in Slovakia are "*aimed at explaining the context of domestic developments in the country.*" **From time to time, the Turkish Embassy in Bratislava sends press releases to various institutions (such as think-tanks and media) containing information on major domestic political events in Turkey or Turkey's steps in foreign policy. In 2016, the embassy's website launched a subsite dedicated to events related to the coup d'état attempt and its consequences with an official interpretation of the case.** Lucia Yar highlighted that the embassy was extraordinarily active during Operation Peace Spring in Syria in October 2019, explaining the Turkish position almost hourly on social media and organising a press conference, and the ambassador appeared in the media multiple times.

Czech-Turkish relations are backed by three elements. The first is increasing bilateral trade, the second is the Czech support for Turkish membership in the EU, and the third is Czech-Turkish cooperation in NATO.⁸¹ Nevertheless, three diplomatic incidents occurred in the past few years. The first was in 2017 when two Czech citizens were arrested in Turkey over their support for the Kurdish militia YPG, which is perceived as terrorist group by Turkish authorities. Czech diplomats attempted to negotiate their extradition to the Czech Republic, but without success.⁸² The second incident was in 2018, when Czech judges banned the ex-

79 „Hungary can offer Turkic Council connection to Europe”, Government, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/news/hungary-can-offer-turkic-council-connection-to-europe>.

80 Herczeg Márk, „A Türk Tanács budapesti európai képviselői diplomáciai mentességet kap”, 444, 2019. november 13., <https://444.hu/2019/11/13/a-turk-tanacs-budapesti-europai-kepviseloje-diplomaciai-mentesseget-kap>.

81 „Relace České republiky a Turecka”, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.mzv.cz/ankara/cz/vzajemne_vztahy/relace_ceske_republiky_a_turecka.html.

82 „Češi v Turecku dostali za spolupráci s kurdskou YPG šest a čtvrt roku”, iDNES.cz, 2017. augusztus 2., https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/cesi-zadrzeni-v-turecku-dostali-sest-let-vezeni.A170802_114720_zahranicni_kha.

tradition of arrested Kurdish politician Salih Muslim to Turkey. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had requested his extradition arguing that Muslim is the leader of a terrorist cell.⁸³ The last incident occurred in 2019, when Czech President Miloš Zeman claimed that Turkey supports the Islamic State, a well-known terrorist organization, which was protested by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸⁴

The Turkish offensive in Northern Syria created a rare instance of unity among Czech politicians and media, as all agreed that Ankara's invasion was a violation of international law and an act of aggression. This was likely prompted by the high level of acknowledgement of Kurdish fighters' accomplishments in the fight against ISIS in Czech discussions.

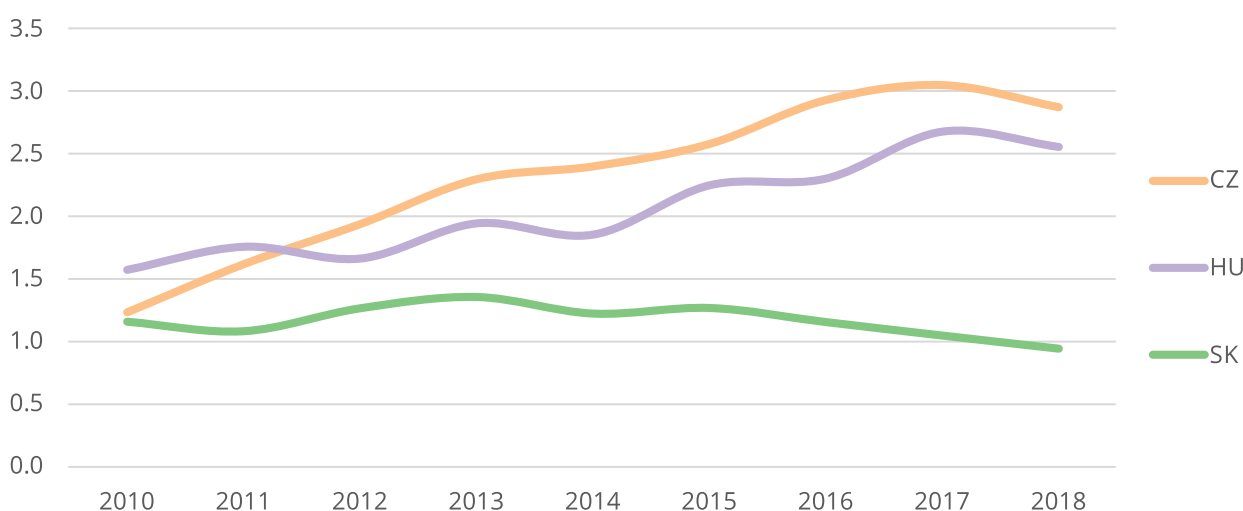
However, these individual incidents have not harmed bilateral relations significantly, which remain stable. In the future, external factors, such as disputes between Turkey and other NATO countries following the S-400 deal, might impact the Czech-Turkish relationship. As far as security services and experts are aware there are not significant Turkish influence activities in Czech Republic.

Karolína Lahučká identified two types of Turkish lobby in the Czech Republic. The first, official one is the Turkish Embassy in Prague that is spreading the official narratives of the Turkish government. The second is the Meridian International School in Prague, which is connected to the Turkish opposition and Fethullah Gülen. Neither has any significant influence in the Czech Republic.

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE IS KEY TO ANKARA

Data shows that bilateral trade with Turkey is the lowest among the three authoritarian states in all Central-Eastern European countries under examination (see Figure 6). Although the Czech Republic and Hungary have managed to increase their trade value with Turkey between 2010 and 2017, trade relations deteriorated in both cases in 2018.

Figure 6: Total trade value of the V3 with Turkey 2010-2018 (in EUR billions). Source: Eurostat



83 „Skandální pošlapání práva, zlobí se Turci po propuštění kurdského politika. Česko nařčení odmítlo”, iROZHLAS, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/salih-muslim-turecko-kurdove-diplomaticka-nota_1802271744_ako.

84 „Turecko se ohradilo proti Zemanovým výrokům o spojení s Islámským státem. Prezident na nich trvá”, iROZHLAS, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/turecko-milos-zeman-islamsky-stat-vyroky_1903211631_pj.

Tamás Szigetvári told us that Ankara's primary tool of influence is economic expansion in the EU, the most important economic partner of Turkey, which remains very important in Hungary's EOP. Already in spring 2013, then-Hungarian ambassador to Turkey János Hóvári wrote that *"Hungary today is one of the most important South-Eastern partners of Hungarian foreign policy, and its partner in the Eastern Opening Policy,"* adding that trade relations are strong but amount to considerably less than what the "capabilities and opportunities" of the two countries would allow for. In 2018, bilateral trade accounted for EUR 3.8 billion, which prompted President Erdogan and PM Orbán to raise the target from EUR 5 billion to 6 billion.⁸⁵ Tamás Szigetvári added that state measures to encourage companies' export activities are important to reach this target, but they are not entirely effective, as the majority of the countries' exports are influenced by multinational companies. However, he added that in certain sectors, such as military cooperation, cordial political relations can help, and it is partly why Budapest decided to purchase Turkish military hardware.⁸⁶

One important aspect of Turkish economic influence in Hungary is the friendship of Turkish businessman Adnan Polat, who is on good terms with President Erdogan and PM Orbán. **Tamás Szigetvári said that it is unknown whether Polat acts as a messenger between the two sides or simply follows his own interests in Hungary.** Polat, the head of the Turkish-Hungarian department of the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (DEIK), has a wide range of business interests in Hungary (property market,⁸⁷ solar panels⁸⁸), which are actively helped by the Hungarian state.⁸⁹ He has also had business dealings with the family of PM Orbán.⁹⁰ Tamás Szigetvári added that several Turkish families who cooperate with Polat in Turkey are working together with the Turkish businessman in Hungary as well. Hungarian media claims that the purchase would go through a middle company, HT Division, which is owned by Hungarian government-friendly oligarch László Szíjj and a business associate of Adnan Polat, Suat Gökhan.⁹¹ The Hungarian state is supporting Polat financially: his company is operating the Hungarian National Trading House in Turkey, tasked with increasing Hungarian exports to the country. All Trading Houses were closed in 2018, except for the one run by Polat.⁹² Moreover, the Hungarian consulate, the Hungarian Institute and Eximbank's local representation moved to the Polat Ofis building in Istanbul.⁹³

Turkey and Slovakia have 17 different bilateral governmental agreements and treaties in place in the areas of economic, cultural and even military cooperation. In 2018, bilateral trade was at EUR 1.2 billion between the two, with Turkish imports to Slovakia growing especially quickly. Lucia Yar said that trade and economic relations shape bilateral relations between Turkey and Slovakia, and highlighted tourism as a constantly growing factor in this equation. In 2018, over 100 000 Slovak tourists visited Turkey, and the number is expected to grow swiftly. Bilateral economic cooperation remains restricted in scope, but the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes that there are further opportunities to improve upon it in the field of energy.

85 Dezsé Balázs, „Magyar–török gazdasági fórum: Nem vagyunk versenytársak, szövetségesek vagyunk”, *PestiSrácok* (blog), elérés 2019. július 29., <https://pestisracok.hu/magyar-torok-gazdasagi-forum-nem-vagyunk-versenytarsak-szovetsegesek-vagyunk/>.

86 „Az uniós országok közül elsőként Magyarország vásárol török harci járműveket”, *Türkinfo* (blog), 2019. május 21., <https://turkinfo.hu/aktualis/hirek/az-unios-oroszok-kozul-elsokent-magyarorszag-vasarol-torok-harci-jarmuveket/>.

87 „Álomváros épülhet a Közvágóhid helyén (képek)”, *Portfolio.hu*, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.portfolio.hu/ingatlan/varos/alomvaros-epulhet-a-kozvagohid-helyen-kepek.296962.html>.

88 Bódis András, „Bizonyíték: Adnan Polat a magyar nemzeti burzsoázia új tagja”, *Válasz Online* (blog), elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2018/12/13/bizonyitek-adnan-polat-a-magyar-nemzeti-burzsoazia-uj-tagja/>.

89 „Nem nagyon van rá magyarázat, hogy Magyarországnak miért éri meg az Orbán-Erdogan barátság - 444”, elérés 2019. október 29., <https://444.hu/2019/10/22/nem-nagyon-van-ra-magyarazat-hogy-magyarorszag-nak-miert-eri-meg-az-orban-erdogan-baratsag>.

90 Urfi Péter, „A török meló - Adnan Polat és az Orbán család üzletei”, *Magyar Narancs*, 2016. július 8., <http://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/a-torok-melo-99539>.

91 Yvette Szabó, „Orbán-közi cégen keresztül veszünk harci járműveket a háborúzó Erdoganéktól”, elérés 2019. október 29., https://hvg.hu/360/20191022_Orbankozeli_cegen_keresztul_veszunk_harci_jarmuveket_a_haboruzo_torokoktol.

92 „Bezárnak a kereskedőházak, csak Orbán török barátja marad a bizniszben”, *Magyar Narancs*, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://magyarnarancs.hu/gazdasag/bezarnak-a-kereskedohazak-csak-orban-torok-baratja-marad-a-bizniszben-118205>.

93 „Orbánék haverja miatt költözött az isztambuli konzulátus?”, *HVG*, 2016. június 10., https://hvg.hu/itthon/20160610_Orban_haverja_miatt_koltozott_a_pusztasagba_az_isztambuli_magyar_konzulatus.

The two sides have established a joint bilateral economic commission as well, but its last meeting was held in 2012. The Slovak-Turkish Business Forum was established in 2015, its Slovak members can be considered the most interested in deepening of bilateral relations. As far as business relations are concerned, Lucia Yar says there are almost 40 companies with Slovak capital operating in Turkey, while the Slovak Republic recognises 36 Turkish companies with business interests in the country, active in the textile, automobile and processing industries. The owner of the Železiarne Podbrezová steel factory, Vladimír Soták is the honorary consul of Turkey in Slovakia.

Karolína Lahučká told us that bilateral Czech-Turkish economic relations are traditionally good, and Turkey is highly interested in highly reputable Czech technologies. As far as economic diplomacy is concerned, the Czech expert said that Prague mainly wants to solve the deadlock surrounding the Adularya power plant.

CULTURAL TIES ARE ALSO IMPORTANT TO TURKS

Turkish-Hungarian cultural ties have been flourishing. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) financed the construction of a “language laboratory” in the Óbuda High School,⁹⁴ co-financed the restoration of the Tomb of Gül Baba and the Tomb of Idris Baba,⁹⁵ among numerous other projects. The TIKA also financed the excavations around the Mosque of Suleiman,⁹⁶ a very negative figure in Hungarian history, which shows that Turkish cultural expansion does not take into account the sensitivities of host nations. Tamás Szigetvári highlighted that besides the above-mentioned school close to the Turkish opposition, the Marif Foundation will open a school in Hungary as well, which is associated with President Erdogan.

Since 1993, Slovakia and Turkey have signed 17 agreements on mutual cooperation in various areas. There is regular cooperation between Slovak and Turkish academic scientists in different disciplines. At the end of 2018, Turkey and Slovakia signed a memorandum on cultural cooperation, stating that it should involve exchanges between state-run cultural and art institutions.

Cultural ties are much less intensive in the Czech Republic and disinformation outlets do not always take the side of Turkey, which happened in the case of the Turkish offensive in Northern Syria. However, it must be noted that the narratives concerning this invasion were used to discredit the US and NATO, as they depicted the US as an unreliable partner who can betray its own allies, making NATO an obsolete organisation.

PERSONAL TIES CAN BE A VULNERABILITY

In the case of Hungary, the main vulnerability seems to be the personal and business ties of Viktor Orbán and his family with Adnan Polat. Polat has personal access to both the Hungarian prime minister and the Turkish president, so he can be used as a middleman between the two regimes, which is strengthened by the fact that Polat is the chairman of the Turkish-Hungarian department of the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (DEIK).

The ideological proximity between Orbán and Erdogan also play a role in Turkish authoritarian influence in Hungary, and the effects of this are visible on the cultural, economic and narrative levels. **One key element on the narrative level is the mutual legitimisation of each other's regimes.** In fact, the personal and ideological relationships mentioned above might explain why Turkish influence seems to be by far the strongest in the V3.

94 „Török támogatással új nyelvi labort adtak át az Óbudai Gimnáziumban”, elérés 2019. október 29., <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/nemzetgazdasagi-miniszterium/hirek/torok-tamogatassal-uj-nyelvi-labort-adtak-at-az-obudai-gimnaziumban>.

95 „Török támogatással új nyelvi labort adtak át az Óbudai Gimnáziumban”.

96 „Befejezéséhez közelít Szulejmán szultán szigetvári sírjának feltárása | BAON”, elérés 2019. október 29., <https://www.baon.hu/egyperces/befejezeséhez-kozelit-szulejman-szultan-szigetvari-sirjanak-feltarasa-1993613/>.

MEDIA NARRATIVES ON RUSSIA, CHINA AND TURKEY IN V3 MEDIA

To assess how different groups of media outlets discuss events related to the three authoritarian regimes included in this study, Political Capital and its partners first selected three local pro-government, government-controlled⁹⁷ or pro-Kremlin,⁹⁸ and three independent⁹⁹ media outlets.



Subsequently, Political Capital and its partners decided on three events related to the three countries, respectively, to be monitored in the period between 1 January and 31 July. These three topics were: The Ukrainian presidential election, the One Belt One Road initiative of China, and the municipal elections in Istanbul. Our search parameters were the following (translated into local languages in all three cases):

- Russia: Russia AND Ukraine AND election
- China: China AND Belt AND Road
- Turkey: Turkey AND Istanbul AND election

Three cases were chosen for monitoring and evaluating V3 media's reflection on narratives related to Russia, China and Turkey: elections in Ukraine in the context of Russian-Ukrainian conflict, China's efforts to enforce the cooperation with Central European countries (One Belt One Road Initiative, "16+1" format) and local elections in Istanbul.

THE UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: PART OF THE "WEST'S WAR" ON RUSSIA?

Hungary: forgetting Russia's role in Ukraine?

Pro-government media generally discussed the Ukrainian elections in the context of Hungarian minority rights, solely disseminating the government's rhetoric on the issue. **They clearly took sides in the Ukrainian presidential election, favouring Jurij Bojko in the first round,¹⁰⁰ although it was presumably because they believed he would serve Hungarian minority interests the best, and not simply because of his pro-Russian stance.** These outlets generally "forgot" to include an important point in discussions about Ukraine: describing Russia's role. There were numerous articles that emphasised that Ukraine should "close the war"¹⁰¹ with Russia without mentioning that peace is impossible without Moscow's cooperation.¹⁰² Pro-government media largely avoided giving space for the Ukrainian version of the events, and it also avoided certain topics that could be uncomfortable for the Hungarian and Russian governments. For instance, they failed to mention Russia's efforts to fuel conflicts between Ukrainians and the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia.¹⁰³

97 Hungary: Origo, 888

98 Hungary: Világ Figyelő; Slovakia: Hlavné správy, Infovojna, Zem a Vek; Czech Republic: Sputnik CZ, Aeronet, AC24

99 Hungary: 444, Index, 24.hu; Slovakia: Sme, Denník N, Pravda; Czech Republic: Aktuálně, iDnes, Novinky

100 „Jobbat már senki nem remél, elég, ha nem lesz sokkal rosszabb”, Origó, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190328-ukrajna-valasztas-2019.html>.

101 „Jobbat már senki nem remél, elég, ha nem lesz sokkal rosszabb”.

102 „Ukrajnának változásra van szüksége a kárpátaljai magyar közösséget illetően”, Origó, 2019, <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190402-ukrajnának-valtozasra-van-szuksege-a-karpataljai-magyar-kozosseget-illetoen.html>.

103 Lóránt Győri, „How was the diplomatic feud between Ukraine and Hungary portrayed in and fuelled by the Russian disinformation networks?”, PC, elérés 2019. szeptember 9., https://politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/publications.php?article_id=2388.

Meanwhile, pro-Kremlin media was discussing other topics: they reported on the relationship between Russia and the Political Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), describing Russia's return as a "great step forward." Their articles suggested that the decision to suspend Russia for its actions against Ukraine were misguided.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, they were suggesting that various Western actors, for instance George Soros, want to start a war against Russia.¹⁰⁵

Independent media presented the narratives of the Hungarian, Russian and Ukrainian governments,¹⁰⁶ and assessed the minority conflicts in a more balance manner, admitting that some Ukrainian legislation has restricted Hungarian minority rights to some extent, but also providing the readers with Ukraine's view on the situation and the context in which these laws were introduced.

Therefore, in the case of Russia, the narratives of the three groups differ widely. Since pro-government media disseminates narratives in line with the perceived national interest, which fits in line with Russian narratives, pro-Kremlin media can focus on spreading wider conspiracy theories concerning the conflict between the East and the West. **Independent media proved crucial, as its articles add counter-narratives to the public discourse, which helps balance societal discussions on the topic and might contribute to building resilience against Russian influence in Hungary.**

East vs West in Slovak narratives on Ukraine

The disinformation portal Hlavné Správy reported on the presidential elections in Ukraine in line with the narratives that this periodical has consistently propagated in interpreting the overall developments in the country since 2014 and concerning the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. According to the daily, Ukraine became *"the poorest country in Europe after 2014, it encountered neither military nor political achievements by which the government would justify the population's deprivation"* (symptomatically, war with Russia was not even mentioned in the commentary). During the election campaign, the Infovojna portal claimed that Zelensky was the candidate the US "deep state" had chosen to lose the election to incumbent Petro Poroshenko. When the election result turned out differently, the portal claimed that the deep state did not comply with this "agreement" and that – regardless – Zelensky was not the choice of the people. Allegedly, Zelensky's victory over Poroshenko created better prospects for Russia to return Ukraine to the "Russian World" that has already started with the distribution of Russia's passports in Donbas.¹⁰⁷ The disinformation portal Zem a Vek was less enthusiastic about these prospects. They wrote that *"Washington has replaced former governor Poroshenko in Kiev and Zelensky will be willing to obey his greedy 'godfather' Kolomoisky only until he will be allowed to do it by his masters from behind the Atlantic."*¹⁰⁸ Hlavné Spravy said Zelensky's victory was good and bad news: Poroshenko was defeated, but it also "confirmed the oligarchic character of Ukraine".¹⁰⁹

104 Figyelő Világ, „Nagy lépés: Oroszország visszakapta a szavazati jogát az Európa Tanácsban”, *Világ Figyelő* (blog), elérés 2019. november 14., <https://vilagfigyelo.com/nagy-lepes-oroszország-visszakapta-a-szavazati-jogat-az-europa-tanacsban/>.

105 Figyelő Világ, „Soros háborút javasol Oroszország ellen”, *Világ Figyelő* (blog), elérés 2019. november 14., <https://vilagfigyelo.com/soros-haborut-javasol-oroszország-ellen/>.

106 Magyarai Péter, „Ukrajna nagy békülésre készül Magyarországgal”, 444, 2019. május 23., <https://444.hu/2019/05/23/ukrajna-nagy-bekulesre-keszul-magyarorszaggal>.

107 Praslav z Pereslavy, „KONCEPTUÁLNE OKIENKO V.V. Pjakin 20190429”, *Blog InfoVojna* (blog), 2019. május 2., <https://blog.infovojna.sk/konceptualne-okienko-v-v-pjakin-20190429/>.

108 Patrik Sloboda, „Ukrajina: Washington vymenil svojho miestodržiteľa v Kyjeve”, *Zem&Vek*, 2019. április 24., <https://zemavek.sk/ukrajina-washington-vymenil-svojho-miestodrziteľa-v-kyjeve/>.

109 Fábry Branislav, „Zelenský ako ukrajinská Čaputová? - Hlavné správy”, *Hlavné Správy*, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/branislav-fabry-zelensky-ukrajinska-caputova/1735566>.

The overall messages of articles on Ukraine in Denník N and Sme are clearly pro-democratic and lenient towards the pro-European and reformist orientation of the Ukrainian state,¹¹⁰ and critical to the current Russian regime and its policy towards Ukraine.¹¹¹ It can be stated that the contributions are aimed at neutralizing those Russian narratives that nourish an anti-Western and anti-European discourse in connection with developments in Ukraine, including the interpretation of Euro-Maidan as an American (Western) plot against Russia. They comply with the main line of pro-European narrative about the right of nations fighting for freedom and democracy to determine their own destinies and to integrate with the world's other democracies.

Sme put considerable attention to the presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine. It stressed the vagueness of Zelensky's programme and his ties to controversial businessman Igor Kolomoisky. The daily, at the same time, reported positively about the new president's pro-West orientation.¹¹²

The daily Pravda in its comments on the elections in Ukraine put less attention on the context of Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It mostly analysed the internal political circumstances surrounding the election results: the profile of the newly elected president, his approach to solving society's problems, his methods of reaching out the voters, and the overall balance of power between competing political forces.¹¹³ The newspaper notes Zelensky's unambiguous declarations on Ukraine's pro-EU and pro-NATO foreign policy line, while expressing doubts that, as it stands, Ukraine will be able to take fundamental steps in its political and economic development and to fulfil the conditions for membership in either grouping.¹¹⁴

Czech society faces a similar dualism in narratives about Russia

Czech alternative media focused on particular narratives regarding Ukraine. Sputnik CZ for example, questioned the legitimacy of the elections in a series of articles. These articles focused on the fact that Russian commissioners from OSCE were not allowed to monitor the election process. In addition, Sputnik CZ emphasized that Czech journalists and politicians who were connected to the Communist party or SPD (advocating pro-Russian positions) were not allowed to observe elections in Ukraine.¹¹⁵⁺¹¹⁶ Another narrative spread by Sputnik CZ claimed that the elections were influenced by the USA and Canada, which supported incumbent President Petro Poroshenko both financially and through media propaganda campaigns.¹¹⁷⁺¹¹⁸ Other alternative media did not consistently promote any strong narratives. Only AC24 claimed that President Poroshenko was preparing to falsify the results of the election in several articles.¹¹⁹⁺¹²⁰

110 Tomáš Vasilko, „Masaker starých elit. Komik Zelenskyj ovládl Ukrajinu ako nik, nebude potrebovať ani rockera“, Denník N, 2019. júlus 22., <https://dennikn.sk/1534302/masaker-starých-elit-komik-zelenskyj-ovladol-ukrajinu-ako-nik-nebude-potrebovat-ani-rockera/>.

111 Petra Procházková, „Ukrajinský analytik: Vojna s Ruskom sa skončí, až keď prezident Putin zomrie“, Denník N, 2019. júnus 26., <https://dennikn.sk/1488730/ukrajinsky-analytik-vojna-s-ruskom-sa-skonci-az-keď-prezident-putin-zomrie/>.

112 Peter Schutz, „Čo robí zo Zelenského úplnú zvláštnosť“, komentare.sme.sk, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/22104540/co-robi-zo-zelenskeho-uplnu-zvlastnost.html>.

113 Boris Latta, „Výdych a nádych Ukrajincov medzi voľbami“, Pravda.sk, 2019. május 13., <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/511928-vydych-a-nadych-ukrajincov-medzi-volbami/>.

114 „Kyjev do NATO. Vyzerá to jedine ako vzdialený sen?“, Pravda.sk, 2019. május 15., <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/512139-kyjev-do-nato-vyzerá-to-jedine-ako-vzdialeny-sen/>.

115 Jana Petrova, „Volby na Ukrajině nemohou sledovat Rusové, ani někteří Češi“, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://cz.sputniknews.com/politika/201903199469731-kohlicek-prezidentske-volby-ukrajina/>.

116 „Absence pozorovatelů RF vyvolává pochybnosti o průzračnosti voleb na Ukrajině – MZV RF“, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://cz.sputniknews.com/politika/201902089152311-rusko-ukrajina-diplomacie-obse-volby/>.

117 „USA vysvětlily Ukrajincům nutnost hlasování za Porošenka“, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201904059571627-usa-vysvetlily-ukrajincum-nutnost-hlasovani-za-porosenka/>.

118 „Peníze přes oceán. Proč Kanada poskytne Ukrajině pomoc ve výši až 24 milionů dolarů?“, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://cz.sputniknews.com/byznys/201903149434585-penize-pres-ocean-proc-kanada-poskytne-ukrajine-pomoc-ve-vysi-az-24-milionu-dolaru/>.

119 „Zběhlý agent SBU promluvil: Sestřelení Boeingu, tajné věznice v Donbasu, a falšování voleb!“, AC24, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://ac24.cz/-/zbehly-agent-sbu-promluvil-sestreleni-boeingu-tajne-veznice-v-donbasu-a-falsovani-voleb->.

120 „Ukrajínští novináři ukázali, jak se Porošenko chystá zfalšovat volby. 500 milionů dolarů je připraveno“, AC24, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://ac24.cz/-/ukrajinsti-novinari-ukazali-jak-se-porosenko-chysta-zfalsovat-volby-500-milionu-dolaru-je-pripraveno>.

Czech mainstream media focused primarily on the course and results of the elections, although several articles analysed also referred to Russian military exercises in Crimea¹²¹ and the Russian decision to provide citizenship for Donbass separatists.¹²² **Thus, in contrast to disinformation media, independent outlets prioritised no particular narrative.**

THE CHINESE QUESTION: IS THE BELT AND ROAD PROFITABLE?

Disinformation media generally forgets to talk about negative effects

In general, Hungarian-Chinese cooperation is pictured in government-controlled outlets as an initiative with unquestionable economic benefits,¹²³ which means that Hungary will refuse “any ideological external pressure” lobbying for downgrading bilateral relations.¹²⁴ These outlets put the initiative in the context of a “Eurasian Free Trade Zone” promoted by the government¹²⁵ and Vladimir Putin.¹²⁶ Some pro-government portals mentioned the financial issues surrounding Chinese-backed projects in other regions.¹²⁷ Human rights concerns in China and Western criticism of China are largely missing from the narratives on these sites, and even when these questions are mentioned, they are often framed in the context of democracy export, which sheds a negative light on Western concerns. **Framing the issue in the context of Eurasian and East-West cooperation serves the purpose of convincing Fidesz’s electorate that Hungary, which is frequently criticised by its allies for its pro-Eastern orientation, is in fact following the true interests of the West.**

Pro-Kremlin media generally emphasises that the Hungarian government is against democracy export, emphasises the benefits of Budapest’s drive to create physical connections between the two continents and its desire to restore cooperation between the West and the East.¹²⁸

Independent portals frequently raise concerns about the Chinese debt trap and the issues surrounding the Budapest-Belgrade railway project, question the Chinese human rights record and report the concerns raised by Beijing’s export of its monitoring technologies and Western partners’ worries about dependence on China.¹²⁹ Independent articles are regularly balancing the narratives of the Chinese and Hungarian government with experts’ opinions suggesting that the Belt and Road is used to expand Beijing’s influence in the world and to use Chinese production capacities that became redundant at home.¹³⁰ Independent media reveal statistical data suggesting that the Orbán cabinet’s success in improving Chinese-Hungarian economic ties is highly limited and uncover the reasons behind it, which is important because their work can

121 „Ruská armáda ukazovala svaly na Krymu, pár dní před volbami na Ukrajině - iDNES.cz”, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/rusko-ukrajina-armada-krym-cviceni.A190328_162631_zahranicni_luka.

122 „Putin hodil Zelenskému první klacek pod nohy, lidem z Donbasu usnadnil ruské občanství - Novinky.cz”, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.novinky.cz/zahranicni/evropa/clanek/putin-hodil-zelenskemu-prvni-klacek-pod-nohy-lidem-z-donbasu-usnadnil-ruske-obcanstvi-40280994>.

123 „Hszi Csin-ping: A kölcsönös nyereséget tartjuk szem előtt”, Origó, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190426-hszi-csinping-az-egy-ovezet-egy-ut-kezdemenyezes-a-kolcsonos-nyereseket-tartja-szem-elott.html>.

124 „Fontos gazdasági tanácskozás és sokmilliárdos bejelentések a héten”, Origó, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.origo.hu/gazdasag/20190426-globalis-jelenoseg-gazdasagi-tanacs kozas-ezer-milliard.html>.

125 „Az eurázsiai gazdasági együttműködés Magyarország és Európa érdeke is”, Origó, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20190506-az-eurazsiai-gazdasagi-egyuttmukodes-magyarorszag-es-europa-erdekes-is.html>.

126 „Putyin: Az egy övezet, egy út az eurázsiai együttműködést is elősegíti”, Origó, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190426-az-egy-ovezet-egy-ut-az-eurazsiai-egyuttmukedest-is-elosegitheti.html>.

127 „Pénzügyi gondok a világ tetejére tervezett vasútvonalnál”, Origó, elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://www.origo.hu/gazdasag/20190722-megsem-epul-vasutvonal-a-vilag-tetejen.html>.

128 „Orbán Viktor négy tanulságot fogalmazott meg az átalakuló világrend kihívásairól”, *Világ Figyelő* (blog), elérés 2019. augusztus 1., <https://vilagfigyelo.com/orban-viktor-negy-tanulasagot-fogalmazott-meg-az-atalakulo-vilagrend-kihivasairol/>.

129 Kovács-Angel Marianna, ‘Kína kíméletlenül hajszolja saját globális érdekeit – figyelmeztette Olaszországot Heiko Maas’, *24.hu* (blog), 24 March 2019, <https://24.hu/kulfold/2019/03/24/kina-olaszorszag-heiko-maas/>.

130 Mészáros Tamás, „Kínai sikerekkel van kikövezve a magyar külpolitika zsákutcája”, 2019. április 29., https://index.hu/gazdasag/2019/04/29/orban_viktor_egy_ovezet_egy_ut_kina_budapest-belgrad_meszaros_lorinc_selyemut_macron_zsakutca/.

start a discussion in Hungarian society on whether the Orbán government's political concessions to Beijing are worth the benefits gained in exchange. Moreover, connecting the Budapest-Belgrade railway with other financially unsuccessful Chinese projects is also a crucial contribution to the public debate on the utility of this joint Chinese-Hungarian project.

Disinformation media is trying to stop Slovak politicians from criticising Beijing

The online daily Hlavné správy published articles informing about a presentation on the Chinese project One Belt One Road in Bratislava, organized by the Chinese Embassy in cooperation with the Institute of Economics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The daily provided extensive coverage of China's official arguments in favour of the implementation of the project and basically identified itself with it, not expressing any critical assessment.¹³¹ In other articles Hlavné správy reported that Russian President Putin praised the above-mentioned Chinese initiative during his visit to Beijing, and pointed out the confrontational policy of the US both towards China and Russia.¹³² The portal Infovojna sharply attacked Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, who in July 2019 at a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Bratislava, raised the issue of respecting human rights, which allegedly deteriorated Slovakia's prospects for participating in Chinese-led projects. According to Infovojna, *"while the neighbouring countries and the whole Europe are trying to get along with China because that is where most business is being done, Čaputová is doing the opposite and closing the doors to Chinese projects for us."* Zem a Vek positively highlights the "New Silk Road" project's economic benefits and "16+1" format, arguing that the EU is unable to be a real rival of China. The portal adds that *"It will be interesting to see how Russophobic and ultra-pro-American political elites in the three Baltic states and Poland will act when China showers them with lucrative trade offers. Will Washington give them the necessary freedom to trade and thus to converge on the China-Russia-Europe axis in times when it sharpens the Cold War with Moscow and Beijing?"*¹³³

Independent media, in contrast, was more balanced on the BRI, and mentioned numerous other aspects of relations with China. A Denník N commentator stated that the goal of the project is *"not mutually beneficial trade, but only better and safer access of Chinese goods to Europe."* The author pointed out that China is the world's largest and most dangerous dictatorship aiming to gain economic influence abroad, through which it wants to influence political affairs. **According to the author, China buys media in democratic countries to force them to inform the population in accordance with Beijing's instructions.** China tries to bribe, subsidize and extort the academic institutions of democratic countries to influence them on how to research China and what results they would prefer. Sme wrote about Beijing's attempts to strengthen its economic influence in Europe. Authors drew attention to Chinese activities in establishing special relations with Italy aimed at joining the One Belt, One Road initiative. Alongside the critical assessment of the EU's lack of ability to offer Southern Europe a sustainable solution to its economic problems and that China uses it in its offers, the article issues a warning that signing the Italian-Chinese memorandum of understanding is a *"symbolic gesture that helps legitimize the Chinese project,"* which may deepen the polarization between EU member states.¹³⁴ The "16+1" format is characterized by the author of one of the commentaries in Sme as *"nothing less than a wedge inserted into the Union's common Eastern policy."*¹³⁵ Pravda used a predominantly neutral, balanced tone when discussing the One Belt One Road project, without issuing any warnings about

131 Ivan Lehotsky, „Čo nám prinesie nová Hodvábna cesta? Aký skutočný odkaz pre Európanov sa skrýva za zdvorilými čínskymi úsmevmi?“, Hlavné správy, 2019. apríl 15., <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/co-nam-prinesie-nova-hodvabna-cesta-aky-skutocny-odkaz-pre-europanov-sa-skriva-za-zdvorilymi-cinskymi-usmevmi/1728312>.

132 „Hovorca Bieleho domu vyzýva Taliansko, aby nepodporovalo »márny« čínsky projekt »Jedno pásmo, jedna cesta«, Hlavné správy, 2019. március 10., <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/hovorca-bieleho-domu-vyzyva-taliansko-aby-nepodporovalo-cinsky-projekt-jedno-pasmo-jedna-cesta/1693095>.

133 Patrik Sloboda, „O stred a východ Európy prebieha tiché súperenie – 3. časť: Do hry vstupuje Čína“, Zem&Vek, 2018. október 1., <https://zemavek.sk/o-stred-a-vychod-europy-prebieha-tiche-superenie-3-cast-do-hry-vstupuje-cina/>.

134 Barbara Kelemen, „Podporia Taliani čínsku Hodvábnu cestu?“, komentare.sme.sk, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/22077430/podporia-taliani-cinsku-hodvabnu-cestu.html>.

135 Petra Schutza, „Čína úspešne rozdeľuje Európu“, komentare.sme.sk, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/22096367/cina-uspesne-rozdeluje-europu.html>.

the risky political implications emanated from China's economic infiltration into Europe. Articles on political development in China published in the daily, however, were marked by criticism of the Chinese regime due to its practice in the area of human rights. The daily supported Slovak politicians who raised the issue of human rights in negotiations with Chinese officials.¹³⁶

The Czech Republic: diversity of opinions in disinformation media

All media outlets writing about the BRI focused on similar topics. First, the possibilities that the BRI represents for Czech Republic were outlined. In these articles, President Miloš Zeman is generally described as a pro-Chinese politician and an important advocate further economic cooperation.¹³⁷⁺¹³⁸ While Sputnik CZ mentioned only the positive aspects of the BRI, mainstream media also identified the more controversial aspects of the project.¹³⁹ **Interestingly, the disinformation website Aeronet had a completely different position towards the BRI, claiming that Chinese investments in the Czech Republic are fake and can be connected to the mafia.**¹⁴⁰ This difference of opinion shows a divergence within the Czech alternative media scene.

The second popular topic was the accession of Italy to the BRI, and Sputnik CZ and mainstream media covered this topic with notable differences. According to Sputnik CZ, China and Italy have become significant partners in international trade and the USA is attempting to destroy this partnership.¹⁴¹ Mainstream media instead argues that the BRI is disproportionately more beneficial for China than Italy from an economic perspective¹⁴² and thus China might use the partnership for economic espionage.¹⁴³

TURKEY GENERATES LITTLE MEDIA INTEREST

Hungarian government-controlled media adopts a surprisingly neutral tone

Hungarian media generally shown little interest in Turkish affairs, although the Istanbul elections did somewhat raise the media's attention. The pro-Kremlin media included in this study did not publish a single article on Turkey. On its part, pro-government media reported on events in Turkey in a strictly neutral tone, without assessing the situation in any way, strictly relying on the reports published by the MTI. In the article on the second victory of Imamoglu, Origo highlighted AKP candidate Binali Yildirim's claims that the vote showed that "*democracy works flawlessly in Turkey.*"¹⁴⁴ Pro-government media seemingly tried to avoid the topic as much as possible, and especially assessing Erdogan's move to try repealing the results of the first vote as undemocratic. They did not raise any concerns regarding the authoritarian traits of the Erdogan regime.

136 Peter Javurek, „Nadpráca”, Pravda.sk, 2019. augusztus 12., <https://nazory.pravda.sk/komentare-a-glosy/clanok/522227-nadpraca/>.

137 „Zeman pro čínskou agenturu: Sním, aby nová Hedvábná stezka do Evropy vedla přes ČR”, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/201901269036812-Zeman-Cina-hedvabna-stezka-Evropa-Cesko/>.

138 „Zeman sní o tom, že nová Hedvábná stezka povede přes Česko”, iDNES.cz, 2019. január 25., https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/zeman-cina-hedvabna-stezka-rozvoj-prumysl-projekt-podporil.A190125_195334_zahranicni_pmk.

139 Jana Václavíková, „Hrozby Nové hedvábné stezky. Vyměření slonů, obchod s dluhy a rozvoj trhu s drogami | Aktuálně.cz”, Aktuálně.cz - Víte, co se právě děje, 2019. február 9., <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/nova-hedvabna-stezka-cina-obchod-sloni-obchod-s-lidmi/r~3f75b7c6294511e99182ac1f6b220ee8/>.

140 Vedoucí kolotoče, „Bomba: Údajné čínské investice CEFC v ČR jsou ve skutečnosti úvěrový tunel za půl miliardy EUR od slovenské J&T Bank a Poštové banky! Čínská Huaxin (CEFC) ve skutečnosti v ČR neinvestovala ani jedinou korunu, pohledávky po Tvrđíkově firmě CEFC Europe nyní bude hasit čínský gigant CITIC na přímý pokyn čínského prezidenta pro zakrytí stop po skandálu! Stopy vedou k čínské Futienké mafii a z celé konstrukce o čínských investicích v ČR nakonec může zůstat jen další tunel jako zůstal po Českých Aeroliniích! | AE News”, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://aeronet.cz/news/bomba-udajne-cinske-investice-cefc-v-cr-jsou-ve-skutecnosti-uverovy-tunel-za-pul-miliardy-eur-od-slovenske-jt-bank-a-postove-banky-cinska-huaxin-cefc-ve-skutecnosti-v-cr-neinvestovala-ani-korunu/>.

141 „Nová Hedvábná stezka pro Itálii. Proč jsou USA proti”, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://cz.sputniknews.com/byznys/201903139426129-nova-hedvabna-stezka-pro-italii-proc-jsou-usa-proti/>.

142 „Itálie má čínské Hedvábné stezce dodat lesk, ale přínosy zatím jistě nemá - iDNES.cz”, elérés 2019. november 14., https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/italie-se-zapoji-do-cinske-hedvabne-stezky-pas-a-stezka-cina.A190325_465825_zahranicni_kha.

143 „Itálie podepsala dohodu o nové Hedvábné stezce. Západ Řím před Čínou varuje | Aktuálně.cz”, Aktuálně.cz - Víte, co se právě děje, 2019. március 23., <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/italie-podepsala-dohodu-o-nove-hedvabne-stezce-zapad-rim-pre/r~585e50b24d9f11e9ab10ac1f6b220ee8/>.

144 Origo, „Megvan a megismételt isztambuli főpolgármester-választás eredménye”, <https://www.origo.hu/>, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://www.origo.hu/nagyvilag/20190623-a-kormanyparti-indulo-elismerte-vereseget-az-isztambuli-fopolgarmestervalasztason.html>.

In contrast, independent media – which proved to be more interested in the election – published detailed reports on the events in Turkey, presenting the views of the AKP and its opponents and well, and they highlighted that 25 of the 39 districts in Istanbul will be run by the ruling party's candidates.¹⁴⁵ Independent media outlets added their own assessments. They frequently emphasised that this was a blow to Erdogan's system, but also mentioned that it is not a conclusive blow, and it is not even sure that the secular-Islamist-nationalist-Kurdish opposition cooperation would last until the next general election.¹⁴⁶ These outlets also explain the authoritarian Erdogan regime's acts and characteristics in detail in the context of the municipal elections and Imamoglu's opportunities in the future.¹⁴⁷

Slovak disinfo media rather focused on Turkish-Russian ties

Slovak independent media generally wrote about the Istanbul local elections in the context of a struggle between liberal and illiberal democracy. Developments in Turkey in the editorial materials of Denník N were mostly mentioned in the context of a worldwide trend of authoritarian or illiberal populism, one of the embodiments of which is President Erdogan. The decision to repeat the local elections in Istanbul after the opposition candidate won in March 2019 was called by Sme an act "crossing the red line", the "manipulation of elections" and a "retreat from democracy."¹⁴⁸ A Denník N commentary posted after the second victory of Lord Mayor Imamoglu states that the autocratic Turkish president is nevertheless not invincible and that the victory of Ekrem Imamoglu, previously a less known politician, has become a hope for Turkish democracy.¹⁴⁹ The Pravda described the case of local elections in Istanbul as a struggle between authoritarian tendencies and democratic traditions. The victory of Ekrem Imamoglu in the repeated elections at the end of June 2019 was, according to Pravda, a severe blow to President Erdogan and it breathed new life into Turkish democracy.¹⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Slovak disinformation media rarely touched upon the elections and rather focused on geopolitics. Hlavné správy reported on the results of the repeated elections in Istanbul in a neutral tone, through republished news wire agency reports. In one article it quoted the Russian portal Gazeta which stated that *"the West is already pleased with the results [...] the Western mainstream reports about 'the success of democracy,' noting that 'Turkish democracy is still alive.'*" The portal reported positively about Russian-Turkish military cooperation, which is in line with the periodical's anti-US tone. Infovojna and Zem a Vek paid no attention to local elections, they focused strictly on the improving Russian-Turkish ties, which they say is connected to the decline of the US on the international scene.¹⁵¹

The Istanbul local elections generated the least attention in the Czech Republic. No differences were found between the narratives on Sputnik CZ and mainstream media, as all sources wrote about electoral processes and the results.

145 Horváth Bence, „A gyűlölet helyett az összefogás üzenete győzött Isztambulban”, 444, 2019. június 24., <https://444.hu/2019/06/24/gyulolet-helyett-az-osszefogas-uzenete-gyozott-isztambulban>.

146 Billay Gábor, „Megroppanthatja Erdogan rendszerét az ellenzék önkormányzati győzelme”, 24.hu (blog), 2019. július 2., <https://24.hu/kulfold/2019/07/02/erdogan-isztambul-valasztas-ellenzek/>.

147 Kerner Zsolt, „Súlyos következményei lehetnek Erdogan vereségének”, 24.hu (blog), 2019. június 24., <https://24.hu/kulfold/2019/06/24/isztambul-polgarmester-valasztas-ellenzek/>.

148 Lukás Ondercanin, „Zlý výsledek? Voľby zopakujme. Ako sa stráca turecká demokracia”, svet.sme.sk, elérés 2019. november 14., <https://svet.sme.sk/c/22115709/zly-vysledok-volby-zopakujme-ako-sa-straca-turecka-demokracia.html>.

149 Mirek Tóda, „Erdogan nie je nepremoziteľný. Kto ho po 25 rokoch porazil v Istanbule a prečo je to dôležité”, Denník N, 2019. június 25., <https://dennikn.sk/1509549/erdogan-nie-je-nepremozitelny-kto-ho-po-25-rokoch-porazil-v-istanbule-a-preco-je-to-dolezite/>.

150 Andrej Matisak, „Dostal Erdogan súpera? Turecká demokracia sa nadýchla”, Pravda.sk, 2019. június 25., <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/516912-dostal-erdogan-supera-turecka-demokracia-sa-nadychla/>.

151 „Američania zúria, Turci rozširujú spoluprácu s Ruskom”, Zem&Vek, 2019. május 31., <https://zemavek.sk/americania-zuria-turci-rozsiruju-spolupracu-s-ruskom/>.

CONCLUSIONS: DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO EXPLORE

Overall, Russian, Chinese and even Turkish influence is visible in the V3, albeit to different extents. **Russia's efforts to strengthen its influence in the V3 show that the strategic goal of the current regime in Moscow is to weaken liberal democratic foundations in Western countries, weaken the process of European integration, disrupt the EU, support the centrifugal tendencies within the individual member states and disconnect Central Europe from the EU and NATO.** The Kremlin seeks to relativize and if possible reverse the results of democratic transitions in the region by assisting the advance of illiberal and Eurosceptic political actors.

The Kremlin's sharp power activities generally do not promote Russia as a positive example, they rather seek to criticise liberal democracy as a system, provoke distrust in Western institutions, and boost opposition to the EU and NATO in general and their policies in particular (especially the sanctions policy against Moscow). Russian influence focuses on demonstrating the real or imaginable shortcomings of liberal democratic systems, thus relativizing the difference between liberal and "illiberal" means of democratic governance. **Moreover, the Kremlin's influencing activities aim to blur the line between reality and fiction, creating the feeling of an information overload for local citizens, which could stop them seeking fact-based answers to societal issues.** Russia is achieving these goals through various actors: politicians, media outlets, GONGOs supporting the Kremlin's agenda, and even Russian intelligence services in certain cases.

China's approach is more pragmatic and has a much more economic focus, and, thus, its interest is to have an economically prosperous EU as its partner. Chinese efforts seek to create favourable business cooperation with the region to support Beijing's economic expansion. China presents the 17+1 format as a purely economic matter that has no political background or consequences, but since it only involves Central, Eastern and Southern EU member states, concerns have arisen that Beijing wants to disrupt the unity of the European Union; although it must be noted that the country is very active economically in Western European member states as well. China does not necessarily get engaged in the internal political affairs of partner states as long as its red lines are adhered to. **Beijing mainly exercises soft power instead of sharp power, meaning that it rather wants to create a positive image of the country in the region through cultural, art, educational institutions.**

Generally, Turkey's influence is considerably smaller in the V3 than that of Russia and China, and it is hardly possible to talk about its massive or systematic activities with the aim of influencing the views of local population and political elite, either through its own state institutions or local pro-Turkish actors. Turkey is not interested in fundamentally weakening the European Union either, which is one of its main economic partners. **Turkish activities are mainly cultural and economic in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, but it seems to be using political influence as well in Hungary, where such activities are invited by the local government itself.**

Thus, considering that Russia is the authoritarian power that has a vested interest in weakening the EU, the Kremlin's efforts are the primary ones that contribute to Euroscepticism. Russian interests are often contradictory to those of the EU, even on the economic level, as Moscow would presumably prefer to negotiate economic agreements with individual member states, where it could often use its relative "power advantage" as leverage. The most anti-EU narratives are disseminated by pro-Kremlin fringe portals with the exception of Hungary, where government-controlled outlets are responsible for spreading the Eurosceptic Orbán government's messages. Pro-Russian articles often contrast Russia with the EU, depicting the former as the representative of tradition and the latter as a symbol of Western decadence. Narratives on China might feed into Euroscepticism when it is depicted as the international player member states should

cooperate with for economic prosperity (instead of “Brussels”), but such narratives are few and far between. Turkey is a less and less prevalent example as an illiberal success story in disinformation media, because – as a Turkey expert interviewed by us pointed out – its recent economic recession makes it hard to praise its achievements.

As far as the V3 states included in the study are concerned, it is notable that Russian, Chinese and Turkish influence is most prevalent in Hungary, as the Orbán government essentially opened the door to them voluntarily. Ágnes Szunomár highlighted that the Chinese have an easy task in Hungary because “*they get it [what they need] handed to them on a plate here.*” Based on our desktop research, this holds true for Russia and Turkey as well, although there are limits to what the length the Hungarian government is willing to go in its efforts to improve cooperation with them. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic actors who are willing to do that openly currently have considerably less influence on decision-making than Fidesz does in Hungary, but there is reason to believe that if their grasp on power strengthened, they would follow policies similar to the Hungarian ruling party. Pál Dunay explained to us what could motivate certain states to open towards authoritarian regimes and what could stop others from doing so: “*It seems there is a direct link between the perception of the international security situation in East-central Europe and the readiness of the states to “play with fire” and experiment with opening towards the three large autocracies analyzed in this study. The V3 belongs to this group, so do others. Those states that perceive a security deficit due to Russian assertiveness do not run such a risk as they may conclude that the price they may have to pay is far too high. They may be worried that such eastern opening may result in being deprived of US and NATO security guarantees or at least they would face their weakening. The Baltic states, Poland and Romania belong to this group. Their policy is more pro-Atlantic, and characterized by the reluctance to risk of opening towards those authoritarian regimes of which two are in “great power competition” with the U.S., according to the latter’s national security strategy.*” The statement of Pál Dunay seems to indicate that raising the cost states cooperating widely with authoritarian states incur within their alliance system could serve as a factor discouraging potentially the rouge states themselves but at least others from taking such a path.

This shows that once illiberal political forces come into power in EU/NATO member states, they might be willing to sacrifice their countries’ positions in Western alliances to forge deeper ties with illiberal regimes outside of these blocs. This realisation might encourage Russia, and possibly other authoritarian regimes, to increase its support for pro-East actors throughout Europe and North America.

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