

Partnership Without Substance: Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe

Edward Lucas and Bobo Lo

1 Introduction¹

In recent years, the Sino-Russian partnership has emerged in Western eyes as the principal threat to the post-Cold War, rules-based international order (The White House, 2017). According to this narrative, the challenge is no longer simply one of China's rise or Russia's resurgence, but a growing strategic convergence: a mutually reinforcing "axis of authoritarians" (Ellings & Sutter, 2018). Talk of an alliance has become commonplace (President of Russia, 2019). In leading Western capitals, the Sino-Russian "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" ("Joint Statement", 2019) has become the existential menace of our time. This sense of alarm has been heightened by a feverish international context, dominated by great-power rivalry and the devastating consequences of the covid-19 pandemic.

¹An earlier version of this report was published in April 2021. It is part of a broader CEPA effort aimed at tracking and evaluating the evolving Sino-Russian partnership and expanding Chinese influence across the transatlantic space. This work benefitted from feedback from a workshop with experts and practitioners convened by CEPA including Mathieu Boulègue, Mathieu Duchâtel, Alexander Gabuev, Martin Hála, Jakub Janda, Marcin Kaczmarek, Leigh Sarty, and Elizabeth Wishnick. The authors are also grateful for research and project management support from Ladislav Charouz, Mallie Kermiet, Jake Morris, and Iryna Solomko; Charles Mann provided further statistical research for this chapter. That publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command, Stuttgart, Germany. Opinions, arguments, viewpoints, and conclusions expressed in this work do not represent those of RSI, U.S. EUCOM, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This publication is cleared for public release.

E. Lucas (✉)

Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), Washington, DC, USA

e-mail: el@edwardlucas.com

B. Lo

Independent Analyst, Brighton, UK

One region, however, has been largely exempt from such speculation. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) remains a backwater of Sino-Russian engagement and Western reactions have been correspondingly muted. Nevertheless, the region provides a useful window through which to assess the dynamics of the relationship.

1. It highlights the extent to which Beijing and Moscow pursue their own foreign policy agendas. The usual self-serving rhetoric about partnership is absent. Here, more than anywhere else, it is all about *individual* national interests.
2. In the longer term, greater Chinese activity in Central and Eastern Europe could expose latent tensions in the partnership, given Russia's perception of the region as a sphere of special interests.

So far, though, there is little sign of trouble between them. Russia and China have achieved an implicit *modus vivendi*. Their relationship is defined neither by cooperation nor competition, but by compartmentalization and distancing. It helps that the region is of peripheral importance to Beijing, while Moscow feels unthreatened by the level of Chinese activity. For both sides, success is judged principally by the avoidance of negative outcomes.

2 The Strategic Context

The Sino-Russian partnership is one of the most remarkable stories of the post-Cold War era. Beijing and Moscow have transcended centuries of mistrust, imperial hangovers, national humiliations, major cultural differences, and achieved an unprecedented level and breadth of cooperation.² Their multidimensional partnership encompasses close political and institutional ties,³ expanding defense and security cooperation, like-mindedness on many international issues, and economic complementarity.

Yet the partnership is also a classic relationship between autonomous great powers, with their own perspectives, priorities, and interests. It is not based on affection, values, or even trust, but on results. The two sides identify significant political, security, strategic, economic, and technological dividends from

²The so-called “unbreakable friendship” established by Stalin and Mao in 1950 lasted only a decade, before dissolving in mutual recriminations. In 1960, Khrushchev withdrew all Soviet advisors from China. The next 30 years saw a protracted cold, and occasionally hot, war. Although there were some tentative moves toward a rapprochement in the 1980s, it was not until Boris Yeltsin became Russian president in 1991 that the relationship started to improve noticeably. Since then, it has been on a consistently upward trajectory, boosted at key moments by catalytic events, such as the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea.

³The public love-in between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin is a feature of the contemporary Sino-Russian partnership. In remarks to the 2020 Valdai Club annual conference, Putin claimed that the two presidents “continuously consult each other on what and how things need to be done ...” (President of Russia, 2020b).

cooperation. This realism enables them to maximize the gains, moderate expectations, and glide over differences.

Russia and China converge on core principles: the unacceptability of U.-S. “unilateralism,” the privileged role of great powers, the United Nations (Security Council) as the primary decision-making body in world affairs, and the abiding importance of state sovereignty. They agree on a “sovereign internet,” reject Western “interference” in their domestic affairs, and oppose sanctions. They have neutralized potential disagreements between them, notably over the expansion of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into Central Asia, and growing Chinese interest in the Arctic. There is also a new convergence in their public messaging.

Many Western policymakers assume, therefore, that Russia and China have a common—and malign—purpose, compounding the threats they pose individually to Western interests and values (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021). But the reality is more complicated. We underestimate what divides them, and how jealously they guard their strategic independence and freedom of maneuver. We also overestimate the extent to which their relationship revolves around the West.

China is a *system-player*. It is a revisionist power, but its revisionism is incremental rather than revolutionary, with an approach that is often less strategic than opportunistic. Far from seeking to establish a new authoritarian world, it games the advantages and weaknesses of the existing order, profiting from global and regional trade, investment, norms, and institutions. Beijing recognizes that a stable external environment is critical to China’s prosperity and the regime’s security.⁴

Russia is a *system-disruptor*. Viewed from the Kremlin, the U.S.-led post-Cold War order wrecked Russia’s economy in the 1990s while riding roughshod over its geopolitical interests. Today, President Vladimir Putin not only believes that liberalism is obsolete (Barker et al., 2019) but also that the demise of the liberal international order should be expedited in favor of a twenty-first-century Concert of Great Powers (President of Russia, 2020a). In the meantime, he has shown a readiness to use force in support of Russian interests. For Moscow, international instability is helpful. The messier the environment, the more possibilities for Russia to influence events.

These differences in worldview between Beijing and Moscow are manageable. But they limit their capacity for strategic coordination (Lo, 2020a; Kaczmarek, 2020). Tellingly, every major Chinese or Russian foreign policy venture of recent times has been unilateral. Putin did not inform, much less consult, the Chinese before launching military interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), or Syria (2015). Equally, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy’s activities in the South China Sea, Beijing’s increasingly aggressive stance toward Taiwan, and “foreign influence” operations are deemed the sole business of China. Xi launched the BRI in 2013 in Astana, Kazakhstan, without so much as a by-your-leave from Moscow. It was only later that Beijing saw fit to massage Russian sensitivities—with the 2015

⁴For a fuller discussion of Chinese and Russian attitudes toward global order, see Lo (2020b).

agreement between the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Gabuev, 2015). Even today, Russia's practical involvement in the BRI remains modest (Luzyanin & Zhao, 2020, p. 86).⁵ Beijing promotes Chinese interests, not those of some mythical conjoined entity.

2.1 *The CEE Region in Russian and Chinese Foreign Policy*

Central and Eastern Europe is not a unitary geographical or political space. It encompasses diverse subregions: Central Europe, the Baltic states, the Eastern Partnership countries, and the Balkans. Neither Russia nor China has an overarching approach toward the region. The importance of the countries varies, as does the policy attention they receive.

Yet abiding realities shape Russian and Chinese policy. Chiefly, the CEE region matters more to Moscow. Some countries, such as Ukraine and Belarus, are of first-order geopolitical, security, and cultural-emotional significance. Others, such as the Baltic states and Poland, are direct neighbors. Russia also has longstanding historical, linguistic, and religious ties with the Balkans. More broadly, the Kremlin views much of the region as the front line in its ongoing confrontation with the West.

None of this applies to China. Beijing has no compelling reason to invest heavily in economic, political, or security cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. The countries of the region matter mainly as a (secondary) conduit for goods and services to China's primary export markets in *Western* Europe (Umarov & Samorukov, 2021).⁶ They possess few significant natural resources—unlike Central Asia, Indochina, Africa, and Latin America. Even if the BRI (overcoming manifold disappointments so far) spread across the region, China would still be an outsider in all but the economic dimension. For all the furor it has caused, Beijing's 17+1 framework (see below) has had negligible practical impact. Indeed, by inflating expectations and delivering disappointment it has proved counterproductive for Chinese interests (Brînză, 2021; Stec, 2020).

The marginal relevance of the region for China means that Beijing is disinclined to risk damage to the Sino-Russian partnership, especially at a time when it faces mounting pressure on multiple fronts. Moreover, Russia's sensitivities are more acute here than in Central Asia, which at least lies in their common neighborhood. Such considerations dictate a cautious approach. For the Chinese leadership, not offending the Kremlin far outweighs tapping into minor commercial opportunities (Nizhnikau & Kaczmarek, 2020, pp. 7–8).

⁵The latest casualty of Sino-Russian cooperation within the joint BRI/EAEU framework is the Moscow-Kazan railway, which was finally cancelled in March 2020 after years of delay.

⁶For example, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova rank near the bottom of the top 100 countries in direct investment from China (Umarov & Samorukov, 2021). Although the volume of goods carried by rail has increased substantially in recent years, it is still a fraction of the volume of sea freight from China to Europe.

Sino-Russian interaction in the region is, therefore, minimal. Nowhere else is their strategic partnership more formalistic. Each side does their own (unimpressive) thing, with virtually no reference to the other. Chinese ships participated in military exercises with the Russian navy in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 and the Baltic Sea in 2017. But otherwise defense cooperation has centered overwhelmingly on Asia.⁷ It is telling that Beijing did not support Moscow's annexation of Crimea and de facto occupation of the Donbass, and has generally refrained from attacking the EU and NATO. Maintaining a discreet neutrality preserves China's options with the West, while keeping Russia onside (Trenin, 2020).

3 The Awkward Squad: Serbia, Hungary, Belarus, and Ukraine

For Serbia, Hungary, Belarus, and Ukraine, two points stand out. First is asymmetry. Their relationship with China is far more important for them than it is for Beijing. Second, events, and Russian and Chinese media coverage, show little or no sign of friction between the two outside powers.

The most striking example of Chinese influence in the CEE region is in **Serbia** (Velebit, 2020; Vuksanovic, 2020a, July 10). The global financial crisis in 2008 increased the country's need for external support while denting the credibility of the European economic model. It also prompted "enlargement fatigue" in which possible future membership of the EU receded into the distance. Whereas Western countries tend to treat the Western Balkans as a backwater, China sees possibilities for logistics development in this neglected and vulnerable region.

Diplomatic ties are strong, Xi visited in 2016; China backs Serbia over nonrecognition of Kosovo, its most important priority in international relations. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić describes ties with Beijing as "iron" and Xi as his "brother." Billboards in Belgrade marking the arrival of Chinese aid at the start of the pandemic in 2020 stated: "Thank you, brother Xi" (Gotev, 2020a, April 2). The close relationship is manifest in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement⁸ (though this should not be overstated: Italy, for example, has one with China as well) (Dimitrijević, 2019). Outward signs of close cooperation abound: Confucius Institutes in Belgrade and Novi Sad, and a media collaboration agreement which enables numerous exchanges and content sharing. This leads to a highly positive picture of China in state-approved media (Shopov, 2020).

⁷For example, the massive Vostok-2018 exercise took place across Siberia and the Russian Far East. Most Sino-Russian naval exercises ("Joint Sea") have been in the Western Pacific. And two controversial joint bomber patrols in July 2019 and December 2020 flew in the vicinity of the Dokdo/Takeshima islands in the Sea of Japan.

⁸For an explanation of the significance of the terminology, see David Cowhig (2021).

The most conspicuous recent signs of cooperation are in vaccine diplomacy. Hard-hit by the pandemic, Serbia was the first European country to approve Beijing-based biopharmaceutical company Sinovac's coronavirus vaccine; it has obtained one million doses and has the second-fastest vaccine rollout in Europe (Vuksanovic, 2021b; Pantovic, 2020). But technology and industry have been success stories too. Serbia has signed up for the "Digital Silk Road." There are two deals with Chinese telecommunications company Huawei—one on "smart cities" in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, the other on high-speed broadband and a regional data center (the third in Europe after the Netherlands and Germany) (Vasovic, 2020; "Police Director", 2019). Serbia is a European bridgehead for Chinese surveillance technology.

Other notable projects in Serbia that involve Chinese investments include:

- The Smederevo steelworks (sold back to the Serbian government for a symbolic \$1 by its previous owner, US Steel, in 2012), was purchased by China's state-run HBIS Group, or Hesteel Group, in 2016 for €46 million. It is now Serbia's largest exporter (Liebermann, 2019; "Serbian Govt", 2016);
- At least €800 million of planned investment in the Zrenjanin tire factory, €486 million in the Kostolac coal-fired power plant, and a €730 million investment in the Zijin Bor copper mine (Ralev, 2020a; "Chinese Company Starts", 2017; Anthony, 2020); and
- The Pupin Bridge over the Danube River in Belgrade, which was constructed by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) with a €145 million loan and completed in 2014 (Hartwell & Sidlo, 2017, p. 23).

China's arms sales to Serbia are significant as well. China's first European export of military aviation equipment (CH-92A combat drones) transferred not only new weaponry but also more fundamental knowledge and technology, testing the waters for future attempts to enter the European defense market. For its part, Serbia has become the largest drone operator in the Balkans (Vuksanovic, 2021a, January 5). In August 2020, Serbia also agreed to purchase the Chinese anti-aircraft FK-3 missile system instead of the Russian S-300 system ("Russian Media Suggest", 2020).

Yet China's \$4 billion in investments plus \$5 billion in loans and infrastructural projects puts it at only 6.6% of total foreign direct investment (FDI), behind the EU (72.3%) and Russia (11.2%) (Vasovic, 2019). Under the surface, developments are less promising.

- The Budapest-to-Belgrade high-speed rail line, announced in November 2013, is the flagship of the 17+1 and the BRI in Europe. But the €2.89 billion (original budget, now €4 billion), 350 km (220 mi) project is behind schedule and over budget (Brînză, 2020).
- Under US pressure, Serbia apparently excluded Huawei from its 5G rollout (Ruge & Vladisavljev, 2020).
- Chinese workers at the copper mine in Bor complain of slavery-like conditions (Dragojlo, 2021); locals there, in Smederevo, and elsewhere complain about environmental damage (Prelec & Chrzova, 2021; Prelec, 2021).

- For all the fanfare over Chinese weapons sales, between 2008 and 2018 the United States was the largest provider of military hardware to Serbia (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, 2021).

Serbian ties with Russia strengthened after Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. The Kremlin blocks international recognition of Kosovo and also backs the Republika Srpska, the ethnic-Serbian entity in Bosnia (Samsó, 2020; Đorđević, 2021). The humanitarian emergencies facility in Niš, believed by Western intelligence to be a base for espionage and special operations, exemplifies the relationship. It is Russia's only quasi-military facility in Europe (outside the former Soviet Union) (Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center, 2019; Phillips, 2021). Russia has supplied MiG-29 fighter jets, T-72 tanks, Mi-35 helicopter gunships, combat patrol vehicles, and the Pantsir air defense system to Serbia ("More Russian Weapons", 2020). Delivering these shipments across the territory of NATO members causes diplomatic tension ("Romania Says It Blocked", 2019; "Russia 'Used Bulgarian Airspace'", 2020).

The most substantial Russian engagement with Serbia is in energy. In 2008, Gazprom Neft, a subsidiary of the Russian energy major Gazprom, took a controlling stake in Serbia's Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) oil and gas company, a deal worth more than \$450 million, and committed to invest at least \$600 million more in the company. The Turkstream gas pipeline, inaugurated in January 2020, entrenches Serbia's energy dependence on Russia, which supplies two-thirds of the country's gas and oil (Gotev, 2021).

In terms of infrastructure, Russian Railways (RZD International) is part-constructing the Stara Pazova-Novi Sad section of the Budapest-Belgrade line (Ralev, 2020b, December 28).

As in other countries of the Western Balkans, however, Serbia's ties to Russia are more performative and pragmatic than reflecting deep loyalties or ideological sympathy. Irritants and hiccups in the relationship abound; the Serbian leadership does not want to burn its bridges with Brussels or Washington. Relations with the Kremlin cooled notably after Vučić visited the White House in September 2020, during the Trump administration's unsuccessful attempt to broker a deal between Serbia and Kosovo. A crude personal jibe by the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova caught the headlines, but was just the latest twist in a decline that began 3 years before (Vuksanovic, 2020c). Earlier in 2020, Serbian authorities used the state propaganda apparatus to blame Russian provocateurs for political unrest (the nationalist opposition is ardently pro-Kremlin) (Vuksanovic, 2020b; Hopkins, 2018). They also cancelled participation in the annual Russo-Belarus-Serbian "Slavic Brotherhood" military exercises ("Serbia Withdraws from Belarus", 2020).

For its part, Serbia does not have to choose between Moscow and Beijing, but uses both to balance pressure from Brussels and Washington. Of the two, China is more useful to Belgrade.

The second main example of Chinese influence in the CEE region is **Hungary**.

Since Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán returned to power in the 2010 parliamentary election, Hungary's ties with the West have deteriorated. The government is under pressure from the European Commission for curbs on media freedom, civil society, political competition, and the rule of law. In response, Hungary has boosted its economic and political ties with Russia and China, to the point that it is seen as China's main supporter within the EU. Hungary's "Opening to the East" policy was launched in 2011 and a comprehensive strategic partnership signed with China in May 2017. In 2015, Hungary was the first European country to sign up to what was then called the "One Belt, One Road" (now the BRI).

This has brought some results, especially in vaccine diplomacy: supplies of Chinese state-owned pharmaceutical firm Sinopharm's jab may boost Orbán's chances in elections next year (Shimov, 2020). In 2017, Hungary vetoed an EU statement criticizing Chinese human rights abuses (Denyer & Rauhala, 2017). In February 2021, it was the only EU country not to sign a Canadian declaration denouncing the incarceration of foreign nationals as a bargaining tactic in international disputes (which was implicitly aimed at China). It did not, however, seek to block the EU from signing the declaration (Government of Canada, 2021).

Symbolic ties include China's Fudan University opening a controversial campus in Budapest (Hopkins, 2021). The Hungarian capital is home to China's first think tank in Europe, the China-CEE Institute ("China Launches 'China-CEE Institute'", 2017). And Budapest has a large Chinese community, with the region's only Chinese-Hungarian bilingual elementary school.

Business ties are beneficial, particularly for Hungary, which hosts by far the largest amount of Chinese direct investments among the EU member states in the CEE region—\$5 billion (2020) (Duan, 2020; Bu, 2016; Gotev, 2020b). Orbán's close friend Lőrinc Mészáros is constructing the 150 km (93 mi) Hungarian section of the Budapest-Belgrade railway, which is expected to be completed by 2025. Terms of the \$2.1 billion project are classified for the next 10 years ("Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Proxy", 2021). China is Hungary's biggest non-EU trading partner. Rail freight is booming, up tenfold year-on-year in 2020 ("Rail Cargo Hungary", 2021). A Chinese-built 100 MW solar power plant is coming on stream in 2021 ("Hungary's Kaposvar Photovoltaic", 2020). Chinese and Hungarian central banks signed a currency swap deal in 2013, renewed in 2016 and 2020: this is part of China's attempt to internationalize the renminbi and dent dollar hegemony ("The Currency Swap", 2020). Budapest is the CEE headquarters of the Bank of China (Matura, 2018). Huawei's biggest supply center outside China is in Hungary and it also has an R&D facility in Budapest ("Huawei's Economic Influence", 2020).

However, the relationship with China is stronger on show than substance. No major investments have been made since 2010, with the exception of the financing deal for the railway (Than & Komuves, 2020). It is unclear if Hungary will allow Huawei to play a role in its 5G network when other EU countries ban it.

Despite the fervent anti-communism of his youth, Orbán has shunned Western criticism of the Putin regime. He invited Putin to Budapest in 2015, at a time when the Russian leader was treated as a pariah in other Western capitals following the

attack on Ukraine (“Hungarians Protest”, 2015). Hungary was the first EU state to trial the Russian Sputnik V covid-19 vaccine (Foy, 2020).

Notable controversies include:

- **Energy:** In 2014, Hungary picked the Russian atomic energy corporation Rosatom (without a tender) in a €12.5 billion deal to build two 1200 MW reactors at the Paks nuclear power plant. Russia is financing 80% of the cost. Hungary has signed up to the Turkstream natural gas pipeline and will begin receiving supplies in late 2021 (“Hungary to Join”, 2020; Szilagyi, 2020). Cheap gas underpins Orbán’s popularity.
- **Espionage:** Hungary controversially agreed that a Soviet-era financial relic, the International Investment Bank, should open its headquarters in Budapest, and granted the staff of the institution wide-ranging diplomatic privileges. Western intelligence agencies believe the bank is a cover for clandestine operations (Hopkins, 2019).

Nevertheless, Hungary remains a member of the EU and NATO. It has not blocked either institution’s decision-making on issues such as sanctions against Russia or military planning to protect frontline states.

As in the case of Serbia, Hungary’s relationships with Russia and China are pragmatic. They bring political and economic dividends, which help entrench the authorities’ grip on power. Diplomatic flirtation and spoiler tactics help underline the importance of Hungary to decision-makers in Berlin, Brussels, and Washington. Hungary may sometimes relay Russian and Chinese talking points (mostly with counterproductive results). But neither outsider (nor indeed any foreign power) exerts serious influence in the country. That is Orbán’s prerogative.

In **Belarus**, Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime has enthusiastically cultivated ties with China, partly to bolster the economy (which is heavily dependent on subsidized Russian energy), and partly to balance the Kremlin’s overbearing political and diplomatic influence. For China, Belarus was, after 2014, an attractive alternative to crisis-stricken Ukraine (“Sivitskiy: Kitay ukhodit ot Belarussi”, 2020).

Outward signs of friendship in previous years have been conspicuous. Xi visited Belarus in 2010 to open the Great Stone industrial park, which he has since called the “pearl” of the BRI, and again in 2015. China is building a new embassy in Minsk (Republic of Belarus, 2018). Belarus has five Confucius Institutes (Belarusian National Technical University, 2021; “Confucius Institute Opens” 2020). China finances aid projects such as a new soccer stadium, international-standard swimming pool, and social housing (Sharshukov, 2021; “Belarus’ i Kitay obsudili”, 2020). Minsk international airport has Chinese-language signage. But the results of the relationship are mainly disappointing (Yeliseyeu, 2020). The trade imbalance is striking: \$675.5 million in exports (mainly fertilizer) from Belarus to China and \$3.8 billion in imports to Belarus from China (Artemenko, 2020). Chinese investments and technology transfers have been insignificant. Belarus is not interested in selling its industrial “crown jewels,” such as its potash (Belaruskali) and nitrogen fertilizer (Grodno Azot) companies. Several investment projects have flopped. For example, production of Geely cars (assembled for the Russian market) halted in

2020. Lukashenka blamed “sloppy” work by Chinese investors and said he would raise the issue with Xi (Boguslavskaya, 2019). Construction of a battery plant in Brest was suspended following environmental protests (Istrate, 2019).

Belarus’s international isolation, the regime’s threats to block transit of German exports, and the possible suspension of Polish-Belarusian rail traffic, have dented its appeal (Zhang & Yin, 2021). Talk of an “iron brotherhood” and an “all-weather partnership” are not matched by deeds (Niva, 2021).

Perhaps most gallingly for Lukashenka, though Xi congratulated him after his rigged election victory, China has not given the regime in Minsk diplomatic or other support against the pro-democracy protesters (Umarov, 2020).

China has made it clear that it has no interest in being a geopolitical counterweight to Russia in Belarus. Its interests are logistical—chiefly to develop overland freight to Europe. In future, Ukraine may be a more interesting prospect for China because its relations with the West are better (“Sivitskiy: Kitay ukhodit ot Belarussi”, 2020). Russia does not object to China’s role in Belarus. In fact, Russia favors it because it would prefer east-west freight routes to take a northern route (through Russia and Belarus). Lukashenka’s dreams of geopolitical balancing are just that: dreams, indulged by China and ignored by the Kremlin. Russia decides what happens in Belarus.

China’s relationship with **Ukraine** is superficially more promising. The authorities in Kyiv seek all kinds of counterweights to Russia, their sole adversary (Bugriy, 2021). The authorities in Beijing are allergic to border changes and separatism. They did not like Russia’s annexation of Crimea or its backing for separatist forces in the Donbass. Ukraine is the largest country in the CEE region and an important link in east-west transit. Notable features of the relationship include:

- **Trade.** China was, by the end of 2020, Ukraine’s largest trading partner, accounting for 15% of foreign trade (Kalashnik, 2021; Kornilov, 2021). Key Ukrainian exports are iron ore, grain, sunflower oil, arms (air-to-air missiles, aircraft, and tank engines).
- **Technology.** Huawei has had a presence in Ukraine since 2000. In 2017, it set up an R&D center in Kyiv. The company provides scholarships and supports Ukraine’s flagship e-government program (“20 Years of Huawei”, 2020).
- **Vaccines.** Ukraine signed up for Sinopharm’s Covid-19 vaccine after expressing disappointment with its Western partners, the EU and the United States, for failing to provide help during the pandemic (“Ukraine Signs up”, 2020).

Nevertheless, Ukraine’s political orientation remains pro-Western. Under US pressure, the government in Kyiv imposed sanctions on three Chinese individuals and four legal entities involved in the (80% Chinese-owned) Motor Sich company (Teise, 2021). As the pro-Kremlin Regnum news agency noted gleefully, “thunder” from China resulted, with a halt to purchases of agricultural goods and metal products (Ganzha, 2021). Motor Sich is also an irritant between Moscow and Beijing, as the Chinese acquisition cut out Russia’s lucrative intermediary role in sales to China. In 2021 the Ukrainian government sanctioned four Chinese enterprises and three Chinese citizens who participated in a deal involving Ukrainian

aerospace company Motor Sich, which is one of the largest producers of engines for helicopters, jets and missiles (Security Service of Ukraine, 2021). Under US pressure Ukraine is also moving away from Huawei, replacing it with Cisco in the “smart city” digitalization program for Kyiv (Antoniuk, 2020). China recently became Ukraine’s leading trade partner, with exports reaching a record \$7.1 billion; Chinese imports reached \$8.3 billion (Musafirova, 2021). Ukraine’s previously unquestioned pro-Western stance has come under strain. Ukraine abandoned a coalition of countries backing a US-led motion criticizing China at the June 2021 UN Human Rights meeting in Geneva. Since then it has signed a trade and investment deal with China, while President Volodymyr Zelensky had a notably friendly phone call with Xi Jinping (De Luce & Melkozerova, 2021).

4 17+1 = Trouble. The Rise and Fall of China-Led Multilateralism

Launched in 2012, the 17+1 framework is the flagship venture for Chinese cooperation with the countries of the CEE region. Its members are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece (since 2019), Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania (until 2021), Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia (“Cooperation Between China”, 2021).

From the start, the project has attracted controversy. As well as the seemingly uncontroversial mission of boosting trade and cultural ties, it was seen in Brussels and Washington as an attempt to divide the EU between East and West, and also to divide the CEE countries by offering preferential terms for those prepared to adopt Chinese positions on other issues (Brînză, 2021). Some commentators rebut this view, saying that the aim from the outset has been economic and that Chinese investment in the region has been minimal and plagued by setbacks (Matura, 2019; Allen-Ebrahimian & Tamkin, 2018). In 2019, the combined stock of Chinese investment in the 11 EU countries of the 17+1 was a mere €7.1 billion, one-third of the amount invested in Germany (Kratz et al., 2020). Chinese projects have been plagued by delays, rows over funding, and other obstacles.

Enthusiasm for the 17+1 has diminished markedly as a result of disgust at human rights abuses in China, concerns about Beijing’s foreign policy, and a desire in some countries to follow the United States’ lead in global politics. The 2019 summit in Croatia was a flop (Brînză, 2019). In the summer of 2020, all members, apart from Hungary, Greece, and Serbia, stayed away from a BRI conference convened by China. A hurriedly convened virtual summit in February 2021 was a debacle, thanks to a rebellion led by Lithuania’s new Atlanticist government, with the support of Estonia and other countries (Lucas, 2021). Further:

- Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia rejected the summit invitation to send prime ministers or presidents;

- Attempts by China to insert political talking points into the communiqué prompted a boycott of the drafting process; and
- No announcement was made of the location or date of the next summit.
- Lithuania left the 17+1; Estonia has said it will reduce cooperation and has made no decision about future participation (“Liimets: no decision made”, 2021).

The episode highlighted some fundamental weaknesses in China’s approach, particularly in dealing with distant, small countries in a multilateral context. Treating them like European versions of Laos and Cambodia was a nonstarter. The idea that fervently Atlanticist countries with determined anti-communist views and deep sympathies for Tibet and other human rights causes would fit neatly into the same framework as those with anti-Western and mercantilist outlooks was flawed from the start. Bland talking points are no substitute for a strategy. For their part, Chinese commentators blame the stalled relationship with the CEE region on ideological differences, pushback from the EU and the United States (the latter resulting in “distrustful” thinking), tougher regulatory scrutiny, and the uncompetitiveness of the region’s agricultural products (Liu, 2020).

It is worth noting that China’s approach is long-term, and that much of the 17+1 activity happens outside the high-profile annual summits and through bilateral relationships. The annex to the communiqué issued after the Dubrovnik summit in 2019, for example, lists 71 subsidiary events and organizations, ranging from central bankers’ meetings to the “China-CEEC Veterinary Research Center” opened in Sarajevo in December 2018 (Li, 2019). China prizes the creation of bureaucratic and personal relationships that such initiatives enable, believing them to have long-term value (Matura, 2019).

For now, the real role of the 17+1 is that it allows Eurosceptic leaders such as Orbán and Czech President Miloš Zeman to demonstrate their diplomatic independence, shunning US and other pressure to boycott the forum or downgrade involvement (Rühlig et al., 2018). Photo-ops with Xi and other Chinese leaders are also political currency at home, countering perceptions of diplomatic isolation. But this does little to promote China’s interests in the region.

5 The Scorecard

Sino-Russian engagement in the CEE region is unimpressive. However, results should be measured against intentions and capabilities. What do Moscow and Beijing want from their relationship in Central and Eastern Europe? Is either side unhappy about the outcomes so far, or worried about the future of their interaction in the region?

In this case, less is more. Sino-Russian cooperation may be practically nonexistent, but more relevant is the lack of mutual tensions. What could have been a troublesome area for their relationship has turned out to be anything but. Both sides appear content with the state of play.

Unlike in Central Asia, where Beijing is pursuing an ambitious, multifaceted, and well-resourced agenda, the Kremlin can be confident that the Chinese have no intention, let alone capability, of displacing Russian influence in the CEE region anytime soon. Paradoxically, China's modest CEE profile gives it scope to pursue some BRI-related projects. Since these are not seen to threaten Russian interests, Moscow is not obstructive; strategic comfort breeds benignity.

5.1 *Looking Ahead . . .*

The widening asymmetry of the overall Sino-Russian partnership raises questions about its longevity. Will Russian decision-makers reconcile themselves to a lasting strategic inferiority or instead become increasingly allergic and resentful? Will the Chinese leadership overplay its hand, and stop giving Moscow the great-power respect it demands by right? The answers to these questions will remain unclear for some time. But it is already evident that Sino-Russian interaction in the CEE region will have little bearing on how the overall relationship evolves. The real tests lie elsewhere—Northeast Asia, Central Asia, the Arctic, Antarctica, and the future of global order. If there is a change in the nature of Sino-Russian interaction in Central and Eastern Europe, it will be a by-product of a larger structural shift.

It is far-fetched to imagine that Moscow would run interference on Beijing's behalf in the event of Sino-US confrontation in the Asia-Pacific—for example, through disruptive behavior in Ukraine, the Baltic states, and the Western Balkans (Gorenburg, 2020). For one thing, serving as Beijing's proxy in Central and Eastern Europe would jeopardize Russia's security and economic interests to no discernible advantage. It would also contradict the central goal of Putin's foreign policy over the past two decades: to position Russia as an *independent* center of regional and global power (Trenin, 2019a, July 18). Putin has no intention of seeing Russia become a "mere sidekick" (Trenin, 2019b) to China. In the last 2 years, he has diversified Russia's relations in the Asia-Pacific, reinforced political and security ties with the ex-Soviet republics, flirted with mainstream European leaders such as French President Emmanuel Macron (Stratievski, 2021), and stepped up efforts to promote Russia as a good international citizen (President of Russia, 2021). In a Sino-US confrontation, his first priority will be to avoid damage to Russian interests. Beyond that, he may be tempted to position Russia as the global "swing power"—gaining leverage with both China *and* the United States (Karaganov, 2020).

It is even more implausible that China would become involved in a conflict in Europe. Not only does it lack the means, but the Kremlin might also interpret any such move as an attempt to expand Chinese geopolitical influence at Russia's expense. Beijing would scarcely embark on an enterprise so far from home that could simultaneously alienate Moscow, Washington, and Brussels.

References

- 20 Years of Huawei in Ukraine. (2020, June 22). *Huawei*. <https://www.huawei.com/ua/corporate-information/local-states>
- Allen-Ebrahimian, B., & Tamkin, E. (2018, March 16). Prague opened the door to Chinese influence. Now it may need to change course. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/16/prague-to-czech-chinese-influence-cefc-energy-communist-party/>
- Anthony, C. (2020, November 20). Linglong injects 146 million Euros of capital into Serbian Factory Project. *Tyrepress*. <https://www.tyrepress.com/2020/11/linglong-injects-146-million-euros-of-capital-into-serbian-tyre-factory-project/>
- Antoniuk, D. (2020, December 29). US to give Ukraine money to ditch Huawei as 5G equipment supplier. *Kyiv Post*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.kyivpost.com/technology/us-to-give-ukraine-money-to-ditch-huawei-as-5g-equipment-supplier.html>
- Artemenko, S. (2020, April 10). Kak Lukashenko khotel pri pomoshchi Kitaya stat' liderom Vostochnoy Evropy [How, With Chinese Help, Lukashenko Wanted to Become the Leader of Eastern Europe]. *Regnum*. <https://regnum.ru/news/economy/2912766.html>
- Barker, A., Barber, L., & Foy, H. (2019, June 27). Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete'. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>
- Belarus' i Kitay obsudili ispol'zovaniye ostatkov kreditov Istochnik [Belarus and China Discussed the Use of Loan Balances]. (2020, December 16). *Reformation*. <https://reform.by/187888-belarus-i-kitaj-obsudili-ispolzovanie-ostatkov-kreditov>
- Belarusian National Technical University. (2021). Confucius Institute on Science and Technology. *About us*. Retrieved January 29, 2021, from <https://en.bntu.by/confucius-institute-science-and-technology>
- Boguslavskaya, A. (2019, April 26). Belarus' i Kitay: novyy drug luchshe bratskoy Rossii? [Belarus and China: a New Friend Better than Fraternal Russia?]. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/ru/беларусь-и-китай-новый-друг-лучше-братской-россии/a-48385248>
- Brînză, A. (2019, April 11). How China blew its chance in Eastern Europe. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/11/how-china-blew-its-chance-in-eastern-europe/>
- Brînză, A. (2020, October 30). China and the Budapest-Belgrade railway saga. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/china-and-the-budapest-belgrade-railway-saga/>
- Brînză, A. (2021, February 10). How China's 17+1 became a zombie mechanism. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/how-chinas-171-became-a-zombie-mechanism/>
- Bu, S. 步少华. (2016, March 15). *Zhong-Ou 'ci quyū hezuo': yunli yu weilai fangxiang* [China-EU "Sub-regional Cooperation": Motivation and future direction.] China Institute of International Studies. https://www.ciis.org.cn/gjwtyj/qkml/2016n/202007/t20200714_2055.html
- Bugriy, M. (2021, February 11). Ukraine's China policy: A (not so) delicate balance. *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-china-policy-a-not-so-delicate-balance/>
- China Launches 'China-CEE Institute' Think Tank in Hungary. (2017, April 25). *Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries*. http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjhz_1/t1456482.htm
- Chinese Company Starts Construction of Serbian Coal-Fired Power Plant. (2017, November 20). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/serbia-power-idUSL8N1N49F>
- Confucius Institute Opens in Brest. (2020, November 4). *Belarusian Telegraph Agency*. <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/confucius-institute-opens-in-brest-134748-2020/>
- Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries. (2021). *Secretariat for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries*. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>
- Cowhig, D. (2021, February 4). China's diplomacy: How Many kinds of major and minor partner relations' 夥伴關係 Does China Have? 高大伟 *David Cowhig's Translation Blog*. <https://gaodawei.wordpress.com/2021/02/04/chinas-diplomacy-how-many-kinds-of-major-and->

- minor-partner-relations-%E5%A4%A5%E4%BC%B4%E9%97%9C%E4%BF%82-does-china-have/
- De Luce, D., & Melkozerova, V. (2021, July 29). Fed up with the U.S., Ukraine cuts deals with China and shuts up about the Uyghur. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/fed-u-s-ukraine-cuts-deals-china-shuts-about-uyghurs-n1275192>
- Denyer, S., & Rauhala, E. (2017, March 22). Eleven countries signed a letter slamming China for torturing lawyers. The U.S. did not. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/22/eleven-countries-signed-a-letter-slamming-china-for-torturing-lawyers-the-u-s-did-not/>
- Dimitrijević, D. (2019). Serbia-China comprehensive strategic partnership — The foreign policy paradigm of the ‘new silk road’. *Eurasian Integration: Economics, Law, Politics*, 4, 94–106.
- Dordević, N. (2021, January 26). Just how much influence does Russia have in Bosnia and Herzegovina? *Emerging Europe*. <https://emerging-europe.com/news/just-how-much-influence-does-russia-have-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>
- Dragojlo, S. (2021, January 26). ‘Like prisoners’: Chinese workers in Serbia complain of exploitation. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/26/like-prisoners-chinese-workers-in-serbia-complain-of-exploitation/>
- Duan, J. (2020, September 14). China, Hungary overcome difficulties to pursue common development under BRI. *Global Times*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200834.shtml>
- Ellings, R., & Sutter, R. (Eds.). (2018). *Axis of authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia cooperation*. The National Bureau of Asian Research.
- Foy, H. (2020, November 12). Hungary to become first EU state to trial Russian covid vaccine. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/efbada95-c877-4200-ada8-0610bc7dbfa5>
- Gabuev, A. (2015, June 5). Eurasian Silk Road Union: Towards a Russia-China consensus? *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/eurasian-silk-road-union-towards-a-russia-china-consensus/>
- Ganzha, A. (2021, February 8). Ukraine flies into the Chinese millstones. *Regnum*. <https://regnum.ru/news/3184816.html>
- Gorenburg, D. (2020). *An emerging strategic partnership: trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation*. George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/emerging-strategic-partnership-trends-russia-china-military-cooperation-0>
- Gotev, G. (2020a, April 2). Serbia sets the stage for Beijing’s mask diplomacy. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-sets-the-stage-for-beijings-mask-diplomacy/1450727/>
- Gotev, G. (2020b, April 24). Hungary, China sign classified loan deal for Budapest-Belgrade Chinese Rail Project. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/hungary-china-sign-classified-loan-deal-for-budapest-belgrade-chinese-rail-project/>
- Gotev, G. (2021, January 1). Serbia opens Russian-Turkish Gas Project Portion. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/serbia-opens-russian-turkish-gas-project-portion/>
- Government of Canada. (2021). *Arbitrary detention in state-to-state relations*. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/arbitrary_detention-detention_arbitraire.aspx?lang=eng
- Hartwell, C., & Sidlo, K. (2017). *Serbia’s cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America*. European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603854/EXPO_STU\(2017\)603854_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603854/EXPO_STU(2017)603854_EN.pdf)
- Hopkins, V. (2018, March 30). In Balkans, Britain rejoins battle for influence. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/balkans-bbc-britain-rejoins-battle-for-influence-russia-soft-power/>
- Hopkins, V. (2019, March 26). Russian development bank’s move to Hungary causes alarm. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/2d19f912-41a4-11e9-9bee-efab61506f44>

- Hopkins, V. (2021, January 18). Chinese University to open Budapest Campus as Orban Tilts to Beijing. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/55565169-98f3-4391-8df8-5adf30d814f9>
- Huawei's Economic Influence in Hungary Is Growing. (2020, December 9). *bne IntelliNews*. <https://www.intellinews.com/huawei-s-economic-influence-in-hungary-is-growing-198504/>
- Hungarians Protest as Putin Meets Orban. (2015, February 17). *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31499654>
- Hungary to Join TurkStream Gas Pipeline. (2020, June 30). Warsaw Institute. *Russia Monitor*. <https://warsawinstitute.org/hungary-join-turkstream-gas-pipeline/>
- Hungary's Kaposvar Photovoltaic Plant Expected to Come on Line in February 2021. (2020, December 28). *EU Today*. <https://eutoday.net/news/energy/2020/hungarys-kaposvar-photovoltaic-plant-expected-to-come-on-line-in-february-2021>
- Istrate, D. (2019, June 17). Belarus suspends construction of controversial battery plant. *Emerging Europe*. <https://emerging-europe.com/news/belarus-suspends-construction-of-controversial-battery-plant/>
- Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Collaboration in the New Era (Full Text). (2019, June 6). *Bilaterals*. <https://www.bilaterals.org/?joint-statement-of-the-people-s>
- Kaczmarek, M. (2020). The Sino-Russian relationship and the west. *Survival*, 62(6), 199–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1851101>
- Kalashnik, P. (2021, January 12). Kitaj byl krupnejshim trgovym partnerom Ukrainy v 2020 godu, Rossiya — tret'ya [China Was Ukraine's Largest Trading Partner in 2020, Russia Third]. *Hromadske*. <https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/kitaj-byi-krupnejshim-torgovym-partnerom-ukrainy-v-2020-godu-rossiya-tretya>
- Karaganov, S. A. (2020, June 29). *The future of the big triangle. Russia in global affairs*. Foreign Policy Research Foundation. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/future-big-triangle/>
- Kendall-Taylor, A., & Shullman, D. (2021, January 14). *Navigating the deepening Russia-China partnership*. Center for a New American Security. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/navigating-the-deepening-russia-china-partnership>
- Kornilov, V. (2021, February 2). Ukraina zanyalas' 'varvarskim grabezhom' Kitaya [Ukraine Was Engaged in a 'Barbaric Plunder' of China]. *RIA*. <https://ria.ru/20210203/ukraina-1595681983.html>
- Kratz, A., Huotari, M., Hanemann, T., & Arcesati, R. (2020). *Chinese FDI in Europe: 2019 update special topic: Research collaborations*. Mercator Institute for China Studies and Rhodium Group. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from https://rhg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/MERICS-Rhodium-Group_COFDI-Update-2020-2.pdf
- Li, X. (Ed.). (2019, April 13). Full text of the dubrovnik guidelines for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries. *Xinhua*. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/13/c_137973910.htm
- Liebermann, O. (2019, September 14). China's clout is growing on the edge of the EU, and the US is worried. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/14/europe/serbia-china-investment-intl/index.html>
- Iiimets: No decision made on Estonia's future 17+1 participation. (2021, May 24). *ERR News*. <https://news.err.ee/1608222910/iimets-no-decision-made-on-estonia-s-future-17-1-participation>
- Liu, Z. 刘作奎. (2020, March 27). *Da bianju xia de 'Zhongguo-Zhong dong'ou guojia hezuo' ['China-CEEC Cooperation' is undergoing great changes]*. China Institute of International Studies. https://www.ciis.org.cn/gjwtyj/qkml/2020n/202007/t20200714_1767.html
- Lo, B. (2020a). The Sino-Russian partnership and global order. *China International Strategy Review*, 2(2020), 306–324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00063-7>
- Lo, B. (2020b, July 29). *Global order in the shadow of the coronavirus: China, Russia and the West*. Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/global-order-shadow-coronavirus-china-russia-and-west>

- Lucas, E. (2021, February 11). Beijing's 17+1 summit flop; Britain Fumes over Chinese Spies. *Coda Story*. <https://www.codastory.com/newsletters/china-influence-monitor-february-11/>
- Luzyanin, S., & Zhao, H. (2020, August 27). *Russia-China dialogue: The 2020 model*. Russian International Affairs Council. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-china-dialogue-the-2020-model/>.
- Matura, T. (2018, February 14). Chinese investment in Hungary: Few results but great expectations. *Chinfluence*. <https://www.chinfluence.eu/chinese-investment-hungary-results-great-expectations/>
- Matura, T. (2019, May 7). China and CEE: 16+1 is here to stay. *Emerging Europe*. <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/china-and-cee-161-is-here-to-stay/>
- Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia. (2021). Informator o radu Ministarstva Odbrane [Information on the Work of the Ministry of Defense]. Retrieved February 14, 2021, from <http://www.mod.gov.rs/cir/4347/informator-o-radu-ministarstva-odbrane-4347>
- More Russian weapons for Serbia despite US sanction threats. (2020, February 23). *Voice of America*. <https://www.voanews.com/europe/more-russian-weapons-serbia-despite-us-sanction-threats>
- Musafirova, O. (2021, June 28). Kitay upravlyayet Ukrainoy? [Does China rule Ukraine?]. *Novaya Gazeta*. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/06/28/kitai-upravliaet-ukrainoi>
- Niva, N. (2021, November 23). Will China come to Belarus' rescue? *Transitions*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://tol.org/client/article/will-china-come-to-belarus-rescue.html>
- Nizhnikau, R., & Kaczmarek, M. (2020). *China's policy towards Belarus and Ukraine*. FIIA. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/bp298_chinas-policy-towards-belarus-and-ukraine.pdf
- Pantovic, M. (2020, October 21). How Serbia's addiction to coal could cloud its future in Europe. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/21/how-serbia-s-addiction-to-coal-could-cloud-its-future-in-europe>
- Phillips, D. L. (2021, January 21). Under Biden, Balkans to remain flashpoint in US-Russia Relations. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/21/under-biden-balkans-to-remain-flashpoint-in-us-russia-relations/>
- Police director: Its impossible to tamper with security cameras. (2019, February 2). *NI Info*. <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a459043-1000-new-security-cameras-in-belgrade-by-2020/>
- Prelec, T. (2021, January 26). *Eco-monsters & eco-fighters: Chinese investment in Serbia*. Balkan Crossroads and Prague Security Studies Institute. <https://www.balkancrossroads.com/chinese-investments-in-serbia>
- Prelec, T., & Chrzova, B. (2021, January 28). It's time to act on air pollution in the Balkans. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/28/its-time-to-act-on-air-pollution-in-the-balkans/>
- President of Russia. (2019, October 3). *Valdai Club Conference*. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>
- President of Russia. (2020a, September 22). *75th session of the UN general assembly*. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64074>
- President of Russia. (2020b, October 22). *Meeting of the Valdai discussion club*. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>
- President of Russia. (2021, January 27). Session of Davos Agenda 2021 online forum. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64938>
- Prime Minister Viktor Orban's Proxy is richest Hungarian ever. (2021, February 4). *bne IntelliNews*. <https://www.intellinews.com/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-proxy-is-richest-hungarian-ever-202020/>
- Rail Cargo Hungary reports tenfold increase in Chinese rail freight traffic. (2021, January 26). *Xinhua*. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/26/c_139697103.htm
- Ralev, R. (2020a, October 26). Linglong to complete 1st phase of Serbian tyre factory construction by Nov 30. *SeeNews*. <https://seenews.com/news/linglong-to-complete-1st-phase-of-serbian-tyre-factory-construction-by-nov-30-718422>

- Ralev, R. (2020b, December 28). Russia's RZD signs 58 Mln Euro railway infrastructure deal in Serbia. *SeeNews*, <https://seenews.com/news/russias-rzd-signs-58-mln-euro-railway-infrastructure-deal-in-serbia-726100>
- Republic of Belarus. (2018). Construction of new building for Chinese Embassy in Minsk discussed. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/construction-of-new-building-for-chinese-embassy-in-minsk-discussed_i_82777.html
- Romania says it blocked a Russian arms shipment to Serbia. (2019, July 26). *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-says-blocks-russian-arms-shipment-to-serbia/30077540.html>
- Ruge, M., & Vladisavliev, S. (2020, September 22). *Serbia's 5G deal with Washington: The art of muddling through*. European Council on Foreign Relations. https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_serbias_5g_deal_with_washington_the_art_of_muddling_through/
- Rühlig, T.N., Jerdén, B., van der Putten, F., Seaman, J., Otero-Iglesias, M., & Ekman, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Political values in Europe-China relations*. European Think Tank Network on China. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/full-report-web-version_updated_2019.pdf
- Russia 'Used Bulgarian Airspace' to deliver military equipment to Serbia. (2020, December 17). *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-planes-bulgarian-airspace-military-equipment-serbia/31006388.html>
- Russian media suggest Serbia behaves as divided personality. (2020, August 10). *NI. Info, Balkan Security Network*. <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a628258-russian-media-suggest-serbia-behaves-as-divided-personality/>
- Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center. (2019). Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <http://ru.ihc.rs/en/home/>
- Samsou, J. (2020, June 18). Russia hits back as US takes lead in Kosovo-Serbia peace talk. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/18/russia-hits-back-as-us-takes-lead-in-kosovo-serbia-peace-talks>
- Security Service of Ukraine. (2021, March 20). *Court seizes property and 100% of shares of JSC Motor Sich*. Security Service of Ukraine. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <https://ssu.gov.ua/en/novyny/sud-naklav-aresht-na-maino-ta-100-aktsii-at-motor-sich>
- Serbia withdraws from Belarus military exercise, citing EU pressure. (2020, September 9). *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-withdraws-from-belarus-military-exercise-citing-eu-pressure/30829735.html>
- Serbian Govt, Chinese Company sign deal on sale of Smederevo Steel Mill. (2016, April 9). *China Daily*. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-04/19/content_24663026.htm
- Sharshukov, S. (2021, February 3). Kitay postroit v Belarusi 20 domov dlya nuzhdayuschikhsja. Na eto on potratit 34 milliona dollarov [China Builds 20 Houses for the Needy in Belarus. For that Purpose it Spends 34 Million Dollars]. *Realty.TUT.by*. <https://realty.tut.by/news/building/717450.html>
- Shimov, Y. (2020, November 24). Orban i ego 'Sputnik'. Zachem Vengrii vakzina iz Rossii [Orban and his "Sputnik". Why Vaccine from Russia for Hungary]. *Svoboda*. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30966403.html>
- Shopov, V. (2020). 'Getting on the Radar': China's Rising Media Presence in South East Europe. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <https://bird.tools/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s-Rising-Media-Presence-in-South-East-Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf>
- Sivitskiy: Kitay ukhodit ot Belarussi – Solidarnasts' [Sivitskiy: China Leaves Belarus – Solidarity]. (2020, October 28). *Gazetaby*. <https://gazetaby.com/post/siviczkiy-kitay-uxodit-ot-belarusi-k-ukraine/170272/>
- Stec, G. (2020, October 1). *Central and Eastern Europe and joint European China Policy: Threat or opportunity?* Mercator Institute for China Studies. <https://merics.org/en/analysis/central-and-eastern-europe-and-joint-european-china-policy-threat-or-opportunity>

- Stratievski, D. (2021, January 20). Armin Laschet: A Merkelian Putinversteh'er?. *Riddle*. <https://www.ridl.io/en/armin-laschet-a-merkelian-putinversteh'er/>
- Szilagyi, T. (2020, November 23). Rosatom's €12.5bn nuclear plant expansion in Hungary moves forward. *bne IntelliNews*. <https://www.intellinews.com/rosatom-s-12-5bn-nuclear-plant-expansion-in-hungary-moves-forward-197193/>
- Teise, E. (2021, February 8). Conflict around the Ukrainian Motor Sich Plant: What the US and China want. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/ru/konflikt-vokrug-ukrainskogo-aviazavoda-chego-hotjat-ssha-i-kitaj/a-56499961>
- Than, K., & Komuves, A. (2020, April 24). UPDATE 3-Hungary, China sign loan deal for Budapest-Belgrade Chinese Rail Project. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/hungary-china-railway-loan-idUSL5N2CC6A0>
- The Currency Swap Agreement between Hungary's and China's Central Banks Has Been Renewed and the Total Amount Has Been Doubled. (2020, January 10). *Magyar Nemzeti Bank*. <https://www.mnb.hu/en/pressroom/press-releases/press-releases-2020/the-currency-swap-agreement-between-hungary-s-and-china-s-central-banks-has-been-renewed-and-the-total-amount-has-been-doubled>
- The White House (2017). National security strategy of the United States of America. Retrieved August 23, 2021, from <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>
- Trenin, D. (2019a, July 18). *Russia's changing identity: In search of a role in the 21st century*. Carnegie Moscow Center. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79521>
- Trenin, D. (2019b, November 19). *How cozy is Russia and China's military relationship?* Carnegie Moscow Center. <https://carnegie.ru/2019/11/19/how-cozy-is-russia-and-china-s-military-relationship-pub-80363>
- Trenin, D. (2020, May 1). *How Russia can maintain equilibrium in the post-pandemic bipolar world*. Carnegie Moscow Center. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81702>
- Ukraine signs up for China's Sinovac vaccine, with doses expected soon. (2020, December 30). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-ukraine-vaccine/ukraine-signs-up-for-chinas-sinovac-vaccine-with-doses-expected-soon-idUSKBN294150>
- Umarov, T. (2020, September 7). *In Belarus, China is neither at odds with Russia nor wedded to Lukashenko*. Carnegie Moscow Center. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82662>
- Umarov, T., & Samorukov, M. (2021, March 19). *China's relations with Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova: Less than meets the eye*. Carnegie Moscow Center. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83538>
- Vasovic, A. (2019, July 12). Serbia wants billions in foreign loans to invest in infrastructure: Minister. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-investment-china/serbia-wants-billions-in-foreign-loans-to-invest-in-infrastructure-minister-idUKKCN1U71VG?edition-redirect=uk>
- Vasovic, A. (2020, August 13). Serbia chooses links with China to develop economy, telecoms despite U.S. warning campaign. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-china-huawei-idUSKCN2592AN>
- Velevit, V. (2020, July 8). China has overtaken Russia as Serbia's Great Ally. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/08/china-has-overtaken-russia-as-serbias-great-ally/>
- Vuksanovic, V. (2020a, July 10). Belgrade is embracing China as it ditches its Russian alliance. *Reaction*. <https://reaction.life/belgrade-is-embracing-china-as-it-ditches-its-russian-alliance/>
- Vuksanovic, V. (2020b, August 28). Belgrade's new game: Scapegoating Russia and Courting Europe. *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/belgrades-new-game-scapegoating-russia-and-courting-europe/>
- Vuksanovic, V. (2020c, September 23). Russia and Serbia: A partnership past its prime. *RUSI*. <https://rusi.org/commentary/russia-and-serbia-partnership-past-its-prime>

- Vuksanovic, V. (2021a, January 5). Chinese drones in Serbian Skies. *RUSI*. <https://rusi.org/commentary/chinese-drones-serbian-skies>
- Vuksanovic, V. (2021b, February 12). *Chinese vaccine diplomacy comes to Serbia*. Center for European Policy Analysis. <https://cepa.org/chinese-vaccine-diplomacy-comes-to-serbia/>
- Yeliseyeu, A. (2020, July 31). *China fails to deliver on its promises in Belarus*. *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe*. <https://chinaobservers.eu/china-fails-to-deliver-on-its-promises-in-belarus/>
- Zhang, D., & Yin, Y. (2021, November 16). Companies skittish about rail link between Poland, Belarus. *Global Times*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1239127.shtml>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

