WORKING PAPER

The Power of Perceptions in International Relations: CEE and China in a New Era

Martina Vetrovcova

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Abstract

Historically, contacts between China and post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were rather scarce. It was not until the global economic and financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone's debt crisis that China emerged as a "significant other" for the countries in the region. Since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and especially the 16+1 Cooperation, China has been perceived as a country that could bring economic benefits to the CEE region through higher inflow of investments and strengthened trade relations. However, according to most observers, China has not (yet) met those economic expectations, which has contributed to growing disappointment on the part of the CEE states and raised questions about the "win-win" nature of the BRI and 16+1 initiatives. While several empirical studies exist on varying degrees of enthusiasm for the CEE engagement with China, a theoretical explanation of these observations is largely missing. Consequently, the present paper will provide an analytical framework to assess how the CEE countries' perceptions of China have changed over the course of the last six years.

The paper will argue that out of the International Relations theories, Social Constructivism is best suited to comprehend perceptions in international relations. Unlike positivist approaches focusing on objective facts, such as military power or economic interdependence, it contends that, due to contextual differences, the same situation can be perceived differently by different actors and perceptions of outside world are key determinants of states' behavior. Following the premises of Social Constructivism, perceptions of the other are closely related to the identity of the self, or, in other words, one's own identity serves as a basis for perception. Therefore, before analyzing the CEE countries' perceptions of China's development, the first part of the paper will explore their distinct national identities. For the purpose of analytical coherence, the study revolves around the most clearly profiled regional initiative in CEE, the Visegrad Group, which also plays a prominent role within the 16+1 Cooperation.

The second part of the paper discusses how states' identity shapes their views of other actors they interact with. In order to capture the Visegrad states' perceptions of China, the present paper will apply the Theory of International Images. As a relational theoretical approach, the Image Theory allows for the studying of relationships and interactions in international relations. Although "perception" is a broader term than "image", which is focused solely on the final outcome of the perceiving process, the two concepts will be used interchangeably. The main proposition of the Image Theory is that mutual images held by actors affect their behavior and policy choices. Simultaneously, perceptions and images have their roots in identity. To close the circle, the paper will also elaborate on how images that states hold of each other and the resulting behaviors influence identity formation. The purpose of this "analytical triangle" is to highlight the role of identities and the power of perceptions for the management of expectations in mutual relations between China and CEE.

1 Introduction

Historically, contacts between China and post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were rather scarce. It was not until the global economic and financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone's debt crisis that China emerged as a "significant other" for the countries in the region. Since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and especially the 16+1 Cooperation, China has been perceived as a country that could bring economic benefits to the CEE region through higher inflow of investments and strengthened trade relations. However, according to most observers, China has not (yet) met those economic expectations, which has contributed to growing disappointment on the part of the CEE states and raised questions about the "win-win" nature of the BRI and 16+1 initiatives. While several empirical studies exist on varying degrees of enthusiasm for the CEE engagement with China, a theoretical explanation of these observations is largely missing. Consequently, the present paper will provide an analytical framework to assess the CEE countries' perceptions of China and explore how these have changed over the course of the last six years, since the 16+1 Cooperation was established.

Following the premises of Social Constructivism, the paper contends that perceptions of the *other* are closely related to the identity of the *self*, or, in other words, one's own identity serves as a basis for perception. Therefore, before analyzing the CEE countries' perceptions of China's development, the first part of the paper will explore their distinct national identities. For the purpose of analytical coherence, the study revolves around the most clearly profiled regional initiative in CEE, the Visegrad Group, which also plays a prominent role within the 16+1 Cooperation.

The second part of the paper discusses how states' identity shapes their views of other actors they interact with. In order to capture the Visegrad states' perceptions of China, the present paper applies the Theory of International Images. As a relational theoretical approach, the Image Theory allows for the studying of relationships and interactions in international relations. Although "perception" is a broader term than "image", which is focused solely on the final outcome of the perceiving process, the two concepts will be used interchangeably. The main proposition of the Image Theory is that mutual images held by actors affect their behavior and policy choices. Simultaneously, perceptions and images have their roots in identity. To close the circle, the paper will also elaborate on how images that states hold of each other and the resulting behaviors influence identity formation and transformation. The purpose of this "analytical triangle" is to highlight the role of identities and the power of perceptions for the management of expectations in mutual relations between China and CEE.

2 Theoretical argument and methodology

2.1 International Relations, Social Constructivism, identities, and perceptions

Different schools of International Relations theories conceptualize perceptions differently. When looking into how perceptions are conceived by the three major theoretical approaches to the study of international politics – Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism – it becomes clear that the overlap is greatest with the constructivist tradition, but perceptions are not absent from the other two either (Jervis 2017: xxvi). While the Realist school as the main representative of positivist thinking was initially not concerned with studying perceptions at all, they later realized a difference between real power and perceived power (Ametbek 2017). Realists further came to the conclusion that, in an anarchic system, perceived asymmetries in power would automatically activate a perception of threat and provoke intergroup conflict (Jervis 2017; Rousseau/Rocio 2007). Perceptions have not been at the center of Liberalism either. Nevertheless, according to the liberal theory of international relations as presented by Andrew Moravcsik (1997), domestic institutions and powerful groups are crucial to the policy process and can alter it by their own interests and perceptions of the world. In addition, according to the premises of the democratic peace theory, democratic leaders tend to perceive other democracies as having the same set of norms and values, which explains why democratic states usually do not engage in an armed conflict with each other (Jervis 2017: xxvii).

Of the International Relations schools of thought, Constructivism, which is in fact an ontology rather than a theory, is best suited to comprehend perceptions in international relations. Unlike positivist approaches focusing on objective facts, such as military power (Realism) or economic interdependence (commercial liberal theories), Social Constructivism contends that, due to contextual differences, the same situation can be perceived differently by different actors (Castano et al. 2003). Perceptions of the outside world and the *other* are not only key determinants of states' behavior but they are also closely related to the identity of the *self*, or, in other words, one's own identity serves as the basis of perception and related interests and actions (Wendt 1992).

In a constructivist understanding, identities are not fixed but relative and relational, i.e. they are shaped by history, ideas, norms, beliefs, and values, and constructed through interactions with other actors (Wendt 1999). An identity of a state or a nation reflects the legacies of the past that in turn lead to the adoption of specific beliefs and values (Tulmets 2011). In addition, most authors agree that an identity is not entirely domestically driven but the *self* is further defined in relation to *significant others* (Harnisch 2011). This can take the form of identification with or delimitation from one or several "out-groups" (Marcussen et al. 1999). The subsequent empirical chapter will accordingly present historical developments and milestones that have been particularly important for shaping the national identity of the Visegrad states as well as explore their relations to the past and present *significant others*. Based on the identified formative events and main *significant others*, the paper will draw up the main identity elements that continue to underpin the (foreign) policy actions of the Visegrad states.

2.2 The logic of images in International Relations

Similar to other social constructivist concepts, perceptions are not easy to measure. Consequently, the present study suggests that the Theory of International Images, shortly the "Image Theory", can serve as a promising means by which perceptions may be fruitfully studied. Image theorists postulate that impressions held of other actors are organized into group schemas, or ideal typical images, such as enemy versus ally, colonial power versus dependent, etc., which provide a certain degree of simplification of the objective reality and make the world more intelligible (Boulding 1959). Herrmann et al. (1997) further suggest that images of the *other* are constituted by the interaction of three main factors: "the perceived relative capability of the other actor, the perceived threat and/or opportunity another actor represents, and the perceived culture of the other actor" (Herrmann et al. 1997: 407-408).

This paper builds upon those theoretical insights and applies them to develop a robust analytical framework for operationalizing and measuring the perceptions and images the Visegrad states hold vis-à-vis China. Following Boulding's (1959) and Herrmann et al.'s (1997) notions of different types of images and drawing upon a systematic review of the existing secondary literature on the relations between China and the CEE countries, this paper contends that images are organized along two axes: (1) perceived positive or negative attributes and characteristics of the actor and (2) perceived relative significance of the actor. Combining the two axes provides a matrix of four ideal-typical images, which is depicted in **Figure 1**: a) enemy/threat; b) ally/friend; c) antagonist; and d) adherent.[1] This four-fold matrix will serve as a raster for the empirical analysis of Visegrad states' perceptions of China.

Figure 1: Four ideal-typical images
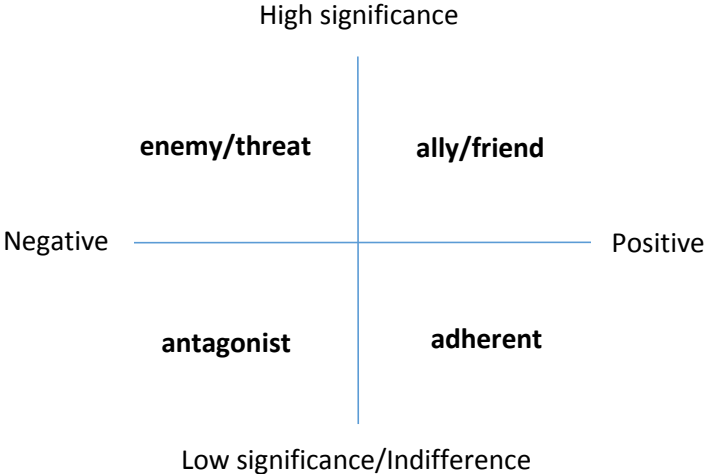
Source: author's own elaboration

The national identities of the Visegrad states and their perceptions of China are explored using the method of qualitative content analysis, which works with theoretically derived

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[1] Herrmann et al. (1997), who purport that relative power, culture, and threat/opportunity are at the core of strategic choices, formulated four different ideal typical images: (1) enemy, (2) ally, (3) colony, and (4) degenerate.

category schemas to systematically structure and interpret the text material and is therefore perfectly suited for studying different ideal-typical images.

2.3 Analytical triangle of identity, perceptions, and behavior

In addition to simplifying a complex international environment, another major purpose of images is to guide foreign policy decisions (Castano et al. 2003; Hurwitz/Peffley 1990). By exploring the image state A holds of state B, it is possible to predict how state A would react to an action carried out by state B. Foreign policy behavior stems not only from the images a state holds of other actors in the international arena, but also from the state's own identity (Jepperson et al. 1996). This is why an identity of a small state results in different interests and policy choices than that of a large state. Instead of being a direct source of (foreign policy) behavior, however, national identity provides a framework within which states can take action that is regarded as appropriate by all members of the society. Moreover, national identity has a multifaceted nature and is composed of a number of identity elements. Depending on the specific situation, different elements of identity are invoked, which in turn navigate the respective behavior (Marcussen et al. 1999).

Identity is treated by political psychology under the concept of "self-image" (Tajfel/Turner 1986). In the same sense, identity in international relations acts as a prism through which states see themselves and the world around them. In other words, the identity of the *self* affects the perceptions and images of *others* and, more importantly, the change in the identity of the *self* can lead to the adoption of new images of *others*. While national identity is understood as a relatively stable social construction, it is also prone to possible modification in the long term by reflecting not only upon one's own behavior but also upon the behavior of *(significant) others*. Last but not least, pondering upon one's own behavior and past decisions can alter the image of external actors. For example a positive experience with a particular state can lead to the adoption of a more positive image of that state and the other way round. The "analytical triangle", as depicted in **Figure 2**, graphically displays the described interdependencies between identity, perceptions/images, and behavior.

Figure 2: Analytical triangle of identity, perceptions, and behavior
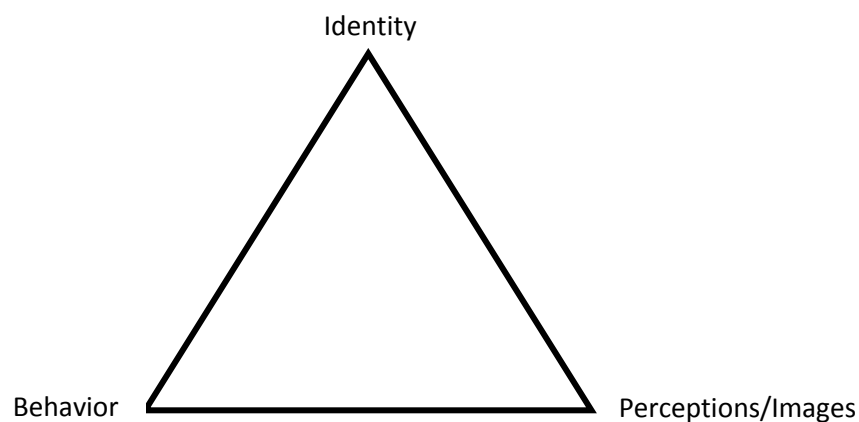
Source: author's own elaboration

3 National identity of the Visegrad states

The foundations for a special relationship between Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland were laid down in 1335 when the Czech, Hungarian, and Polish kings met in the Hungarian city Visegrad to negotiate better trade relationships and a closer cooperation among their countries (Krno 2013). The cooperation was reinvigorated in 1991 when the then three countries – Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary – agreed to jointly pursue their integration into Euro-Atlantic and Western European structures and established the Visegrad Group as we know it today. The following section will explore formative past events and actors that have been significant for the formation of the national identities of the Visegrad states. The resulting specific mix of main identity elements serves as a tool to better understand the Visegrad states' past and present perceptions and related images of China.

3.1 Formative events and significant others

While the origins of statehood and the historical developments of the Visegrad states differ to a certain degree, what all four states have in common is that their history can be divided into periods of "golden" and "dark" ages, while the darker legacies mostly refer to experiences of foreign domination. Slovakia was first incorporated into the Hungarian kingdom, which was annexed by the Ottoman Empire in 1526 and later fell under complete domination of the Habsburg Empire (Macartney 2008). The Czech Lands also developed as part of the Habsburg Monarchy and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Holý 1996). The Polish lands experienced several territorial divisions, which eventually resulted in the loss of Polish independence. Poland was first annexed and divided by the Kingdom of Prussia, Habsburg Austria, and the Russian Empire in 1772, which became known as the first partition of Poland (Millard 1995). The second partition followed in 1793, and after the third partition of 1795, the Polish state disappeared from the map of Europe for more than 100 years (Cichocki/Czerwińska 2011)

The 19th century was characterized by growing nationalism sparked by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which also spread across the CEE region. The desire for cultural, political, and economic emancipation resulted in the armed uprisings against the Habsburg rulers and the 1848-1849 revolutions. Although the revolutions failed to achieve the countries' political goal of asserting themselves within the Habsburg Monarchy and/or restoring national independence, this period of the so-called "national awakening" was crucial for the formation and strengthening of national consciousness (Argentieri 2015; Kubiš et al. 2005).[2]

The experience of the two World Wars left a significant imprint on the four nations and their identities. In 1918, after 123 years of partition, Poland finally regained its independence. Au contraire, Hungary, which remained in the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy until the outbreak of World War I, appeared on the losing side of the war and had to suffer the most drastic reduction of territory in its history. Under the terms of the Peace Treaty of Trianon signed in 1920, Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and one third of its population

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[2] The 19th century was a century in which the Polish state did not exist and the Poles were therefore presented with an even bigger challenge to develop a tangible national identity (Galbraith 2004).

(Shevchenko 2018: 65). The Trianon Treaty is conceived as the most traumatic event of the Hungarian collective memory, having an important impact on the present Hungarian national identity (Csepeli 1997; Kovács 2016). The strong feeling of injustice and the determination to regain its "historical lands" prompted Hungary to join the Axis powers at the outbreak of the Second World War (Traub 2015). While Czechoslovakia had to cede large parts of its territory to Germany, Hungary, and Poland under the terms of the Munich Agreement (1938) and also the rest of the Czech territory was subsequently occupied by Nazi Germany and turned into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the Slovaks declared an independent Slovak state under the official "protection" of the Third Reich (Holý 1996).[3] Although both Slovakia and Hungary attempted to switch sides and align with the Allies later during the war, the Second World War is regarded as one of the most controversial periods of their history, not least because both states followed a systematic anti-Semitic policy (Csepeli 1991; Findor 2002). The fourth partitioning of Poland, which refers to the Nazi German aggression on 1 September 1939 and the Soviet invasion a few weeks later, followed by lasting occupations by the two totalitarian systems until the end of the war, left a traumatic mark on the Polish nation (Curry 2015).

From 1948 to 1991, the national identities of the Visegrad states were being construed in contrast to the Soviet Union and the Russians. The 1948 communist overthrow in all four countries and the subsequent installation of the communist regimes had three major consequences: First, it led to mass emigration from the Central European region. Second, the growing tensions between East and West resulted in the introduction of strict border controls and prevented the Visegrad states' societies from interacting with most other nations (Nedomová/Koštelecký 1997). And third, the communist parties aimed to apply total state control of all aspects of society and national identities were therefore largely suppressed between 1948 and 1989 (Vlachová 2016; Wolchik 2015). Growing frustration with the communist regimes culminated in the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the "Polish October" of 1956, and the Czechoslovak "Prague Spring" of 1968 (Macartney 2008). Although those attempts were suppressed by the Red Army (in the Hungarian case) and the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armed forces (in Czechoslovakia), they contributed to strengthened national consciousness of the societies. While the Soviet Union disappeared as a *significant other* in 1991, the communist era left a considerable imprint on the Czech (and Slovak), Polish, and Hungarian identities.

A new impetus for the redefinition of the Visegrad states' national identities came with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the political regime change between 1989 and 1991. After more than 40 years, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland were able to restore their national sovereignty and emerged as independent states. The process of finding a new state identity proved extremely challenging, especially in the Czechoslovak case. The inability of then policy makers to accommodate the preferences of both Czechs and Slovaks in a newly established state resulted in a profound identity crisis and the division of Czechoslovakia

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[3] This became to be known as the "Munich betrayal" because the Czechoslovaks felt abandoned by their closest allies, especially Great Britain and France (Kubiš et al. 2005).

(Brodský 2001). The 1990s were in the spirit of fundamental political and economic transformation as well as foreign policy re-orientation of the V4. Driven by the desire to make a sharp break with the past, the four countries aimed to strengthen their political, economic, and cultural ties to the West, which was reflected in the use of slogans "Back to Europe" or "Return to Europe" (Jeszenszky 2007).

The accession to the EU in 2004 fundamentally influenced the process of re-defining the national identity of the four countries. In their efforts to re-establish themselves in Europe and become active contributors to EU policies, the V4 became strong advocates for the countries of Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans region, supporting them in their Euro-Atlantic integration and their EU accession efforts (Ágh 2011; Klatt 2011). While the enthusiasm towards the West was very strong in the years before and immediately after the EU accession and the populations supported the Europeanization efforts of their governments, the popular support for EU membership has decreased somewhat in the past few years (Vetrovcova/Harnisch 2018). The EU undoubtedly serves as one of the Visegrad states' most important *significant others*, however, the relationship is highly ambiguous, fluctuating between close attachment and occasional disillusionment. While some decision makers portray the EU as a *positive other* epitomizing freedom and democratic values, others present it as an entity that threatens the sovereignty of its Member States and leads to the erosion of their distinct national identities (Ágh 2011; Esparza 2010; Millard 1995).

3.2 Main identity elements

All four Visegrad states have evolved over centuries under the constant presence and influence of great powers, which has had a significant influence on the collective memory of the respective nations and, accordingly, the formation of their national identities (Kubiš et al. 2005). On the one hand, they always emphasized their political, cultural, and religious links to Western Europe or the West in general (Galbraith 2004; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Nevertheless, there were also instances when the countries felt abandoned, mishandled, or unfairly punished by the Western powers. The Trianon Treaty punishing Hungary for their involvement in World War I, the Munich pact ("betrayal of Munich") of 1938 leading to Germany's annexation of parts of Czechoslovakia, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 with its secret protocol that divided Poland into German and Soviet "spheres of influence", or the invasion of Czechoslovakia ("betrayal of Moscow") in 1968 have all been conceived as deep historical traumas. Such events created mistrust and led to negative othering vis-à-vis great powers (Beneš/Harnisch 2015). The anti-great power sentiments remain present in official discourses until these days, and they only differ with regard to which great power presents a bigger threat. Foreign policy preferences of the Visegrad states oscillate accordingly between the EU, sometimes portrayed as an "emerging great power", and Russia. This ambivalence toward both East and West is in some countries stronger than in others (Jeszenszky 2007; West 2000).

Numerous studies have provided evidence that, because of their bitter experiences of years of lost sovereignty and their long struggle for freedom and independence, the Visegrad states have problems with transferring their national sovereignty to the EU level (Vlachová/Řeháková 2009). Consequently, these four post-communist states also share the

hierarchical understanding of identities, where the national identity always takes precedence over a European identity. Some authors attribute the existence of Euroscepticism in the Visegrad states and their opposition to deeper integration efforts precisely to this primacy of national sovereignty and identity (Riishøj 2007; Shevchenko 2018).

In addition to unresolved relationships with great powers and the related great emphasis on sovereignty, the notion of victimhood is very strong in all four Visegrad states. They often portray themselves as innocent victims suffering from oppression, subjugation, and domination by others, be it the Habsburg Monarchy, (communist) Russia, or (Nazi) Germany (Haynes 1995; Stańczyk 2013). Apart from the collective victim role, policy makers from the Visegrad States sometimes invoke positive historical periods of national gloriousness, such as the Kingdom of Bohemia in the Middle Ages, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the First Czechoslovak Republic. In addition, the Visegrad states perceive themselves as gatekeepers of Western values and Christendom, who for centuries defended Europe against enemies coming from the East (Deme 1998; Holý 1996; Wilkiewicz 2003). The exceptionally smooth and peaceful transformation period in the 1990s further strengthened the countries' feeling of belonging to the West and their deliberate demarcation from Eastern Europe. In other words, due to the specific geopolitical location and the historical legacies described above, the Visegrad region sees itself as a bridge between East and West (Brodský 2001; Holý 1996; Örkény 2006). The national pride and positive self-identification fuels the Visegrad countries' need to be respected and recognized as relevant international players.

Last but not least, historical experience has essentially shaped current worldviews of the V4, which in turn guide their policies. While the Visegrad region was largely multiethnic throughout most of the centuries, the historical events of the 20th century, especially the two World Wars and the 40 years of communist rule when the countries lived closed off from the rest of the world, substantially altered the composition of the societies, making them largely homogenous in their ethnic compositions (Millard 1995; Vlachová 2016). This particular identity trait can explain the Visegrad societies' cautious, mistrustful, and sometimes overly negative attitude towards foreigners (Nedomová/Koštelecký 1997).

4 Perceptions of China in the Visegrad states

The elaboration of the formative events shaping the national identities of the Visegrad states revealed that China did not play a decisive role in their historical development and did not function as their *significant other*. However, this has changed in the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis in 2008 and especially after the launch of the 16+1 Cooperation in 2012. The following paragraphs discuss how Visegrad states' perceptions and images of China have shifted over the past almost 70 years since the People's Republic of China (PRC) was created and what the role of V4 identities has been in this regard. This paper identifies four main phases narrating the evolving relationship between China and the Visegrad states: (1) during the Cold War era (1949-1989); (2) after the collapse of the Soviet Communist bloc and before the countries' accession to the EU (1989-2004 and a few years after the big Eastern enlargement); (3) after the global financial crisis and especially the

Eurozone debt crisis (2008-2011); and (4) after the launch of the 16+1 Cooperation framework (since 2012).

All Visegrad countries formally recognized the People's Republic of China as early as 1949 and their Communist parties established diplomatic relations and maintained close contacts with the Chinese Communist Party in the beginning years of the Cold War period (Song 2013). However, the China-CEE relationship was strongly affected by the deterioration of China-Soviet relations and the doctrinal divergence between the two powers (Long 2014). The Chinese economic reforms and "opening-up" policy brought the countries once again closer together, but only for a brief period. For the remainder of the Cold War era, the relations between Central Europe and China remained only scarce.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the Visegrad countries underwent democratic transitions in the 1990s and reoriented their foreign policies towards the West. Against this background, they deliberately sought to distance themselves from China, casting it into a *"negative other"* (Long 2014; Szunomár et al. 2017). The China-CEE political and diplomatic relations were impaired by several controversial issues related to China's human rights policy and the state of democracy and freedom (Song 2013). Although the Visegrad states cultivated some economic relations with China, the Chinese economy was mainly associated with cheap, low quality exports and therefore perceived neither as a threat nor an opportunity in CEE (Gjorgjioska/Vangeli 2017).

At the beginning of the new millennium, differences between the individual Visegrad states came to the fore. While Slovakia and Hungary recognized China's growing role in the global economy and hoped for commercial benefits resulting from friendly relations with the emerging economy, Poland and the Czech Republic maintained limited political trust towards China. Issues of Tibet and Taiwan constituted fundamental obstacles to the development of bilateral relations. The main critic of China was then Czech President Vaclav Havel, who was a vocal advocate a "two China" principle and Taiwan's re-entry into the United Nations. Similarly, the visits of the Dalai Lama to Prague and Warsaw provoked outrage from the Chinese government (Simurina 2014). Accordingly, especially in the latter two states, China retained a negative image among the politicians, the media, and the society throughout the 2000s and early 2010s (Song 2013).
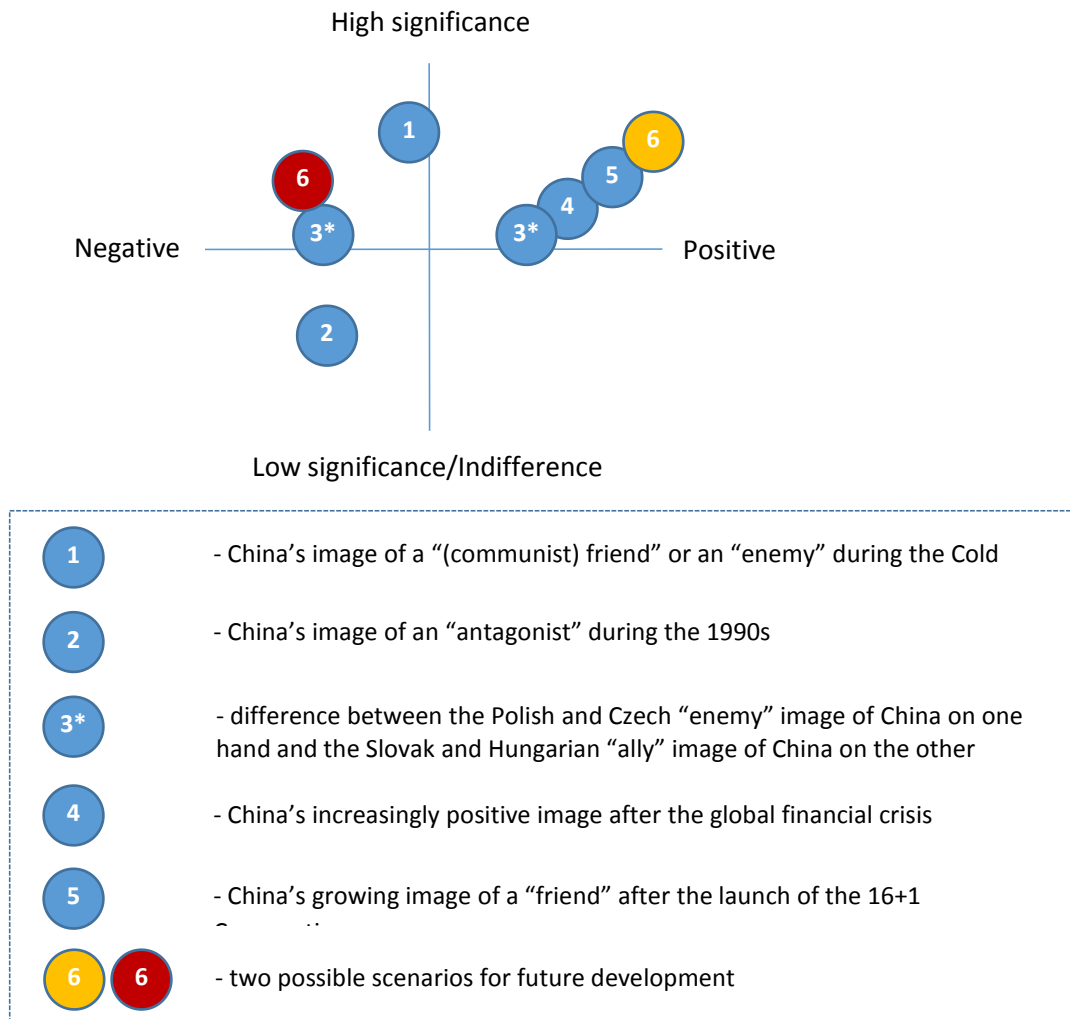
After the Visegrad countries joined the EU in 2004, their China policy fell under the EU-China Strategic Partnership but the "eastern awakening" on the part of the Visegrad states did not take place until the 2008 global and financial crisis. More importantly, the subsequent Eurozone crisis can be regarded as a critical juncture that opened the "window of opportunity" for China-Visegrad relations. The Visegrad countries, hoping to attract Chinese investment in order to accelerate their recovery from the recession, have since then taken on a more pragmatic approach towards China, avoiding to pursue talks on sensitive issues like human rights, Tibet, or Taiwan (Simurina 2014; Szunomár et al. 2017).

The so far most intensive period of mutual cooperation between China and the Visegrad states began in 2012, after Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao announced "China's 12 Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries", a comprehensive set of goals for deepening mutual relations and developing joint cooperation

projects. The launch of the 16+1 Cooperation raised considerable expectations in the Visegrad states. However, the economic outcomes of this initiative have fallen short of expectations so far. Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and to a lesser extent also Slovakia have received a considerable amount of Chinese investment under the 16+1 framework and benefitted from strengthened trade relations with China. However, the share of Chinese investment among the total foreign direct investment (FDI) stock remains generally very low and the V4 would prefer more greenfield investments and joint-ventures (Huotari et al. 2015; Stanzel et al. 2016). The discrepancy between promises and results might dampen Visegrad states' enthusiasm for the continuing cooperation with China, which would also have a negative impact on the increasing positive image of China (Turcsányi 2015).

The examination of the development of China-CEE relations has shown that the Visegrad states' perceptions and images of China have shifted several times over the past 70 years (see **Figure 3**). During the Cold War era, the image of China was oscillating between a *"(communist) friend"* and an *"enemy"*, while the latter manifestation was prevalent in the V4. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and throughout the 1990s, China retained its negative image, but was not considered as a top priority or significant point for reference for the V4 both in the political and the economic realm. Its image at that time can therefore be best described as one of an *"antagonist"*. From the beginning of the new millennium, Slovakia and Hungary started to perceive China as an *"ally"*, primarily in the economic sphere, but in Poland and the Czech Republic, China's already negative image moved further to the *"enemy"* category as a result of the profound disagreement with regard to the Taiwan and Tibet questions. The global financial crisis, during which the V4 turned towards Beijing to compensate for unfulfilled expectations vis-à-vis the EU, provided an opportunity for strengthened economic cooperation between the Visegrad countries and China, leading to an increasingly positive image of China. The launch of the 16+1 Cooperation and the resulting strengthened cooperation between China and the Visegrad states also in non-economic areas, such as culture, education, and science, has led to a more positive perception of China. In addition, China has become a more significant partner for the V4 region, and its current image is one of a *"friend"*. Of course this perception is not shared by all segments of the society, and whether China will be perceived as a constructive and cooperative partner by all political, economic, as well as civil actors depends on China's future engagement in the CEE region.

Figure 3: Four ideal-typical images of China

High significance

Negative — Positive

Low significance/Indifference

1 - China's image of a "(communist) friend" or an "enemy" during the Cold

2 - China's image of an "antagonist" during the 1990s

3* - difference between the Polish and Czech "enemy" image of China on one hand and the Slovak and Hungarian "ally" image of China on the other

4 - China's increasingly positive image after the global financial crisis

5 - China's growing image of a "friend" after the launch of the 16+1

6 6 - two possible scenarios for future development

Source: author's own elaboration

5 Conclusion

While the image of China is generally improving in Central and Eastern Europe, there have been considerable differences between the Visegrad countries and their approach to China, which can be explained by looking at their distinct national identities. China's relations with Hungary were always stronger than with the other three countries. Hungary started to re-establish relations with China back in the early 2000s, when its Visegrad partners criticized China on human rights grounds, and all subsequent Hungarian governments, regardless of their political orientation, have committed themselves to maintaining rapprochement policies towards China. Under its "Eastern opening" strategy of 2010, a new foreign economic policy doctrine aimed at diversifying Hungary's foreign economic relations, Hungary presented itself as a China's gateway to Europe and the EU market (Szunomár et al. 2017). Similarly, Slovakia also refrained from openly criticizing China and strived to promote bilateral trade relations with China and attract Chinese investment (Song 2013). Poland and the Czech Republic have begun to pursue a more active policy towards China only in recent years and their relations were upgraded to the level of "comprehensive strategic partnership" (in 2011 and 2016 respectively) (Szczudlik 2016).

The motivations behind this earlier or later "eastward turn" of the Visegrad states are mainly pragmatic, while they are also attributable to the distinct identity of the V4. One of the pronounced identity traits of all Visegrad states, and especially Poland, is the desire to be seen as a relevant player and overcome marginalization in the world politics (Kořan 2017). The V4's rationale is that pursuing closer economic ties with China and playing a key role in connecting China to Europe would elevate their status within the EU as well as internationally (Szczudlik 2016). Apart from the potential economic and reputational benefits, the Visegrad states' continued tensions with the EU have made them search for alternative partners. Given their historical experience of subjugation to great powers and their long struggle for independence, the Visegrad governments and their societies are very sensitive to others telling them "what (not) to do". This historical trauma can be best expressed by using the words of Czech President Miloš Zeman commenting on the restart of Czech diplomatic relations with China: *Now we are again an independent country, and we formulate a foreign policy which is based on our own national interest. We do not interfere with the internal affairs of any other country, and this is my explanation of the restart"* (Zeman 2016).

The Visegrad states, susceptible to possible encroachment on their national sovereignty, have welcomed the "no-strings-attached" cooperation with China based on pragmatism and economic interests, where political aspirations are only secondary (Vetrovcova/Harnisch 2018). However, growing involvement in the region beyond economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges might trigger old memories and traumas in the Visegrad states and contribute to the creation of a negative image of China as a country aspiring for a superpower status. This might in turn result in diminished willingness on the part of the Visegrad states to pursue further cooperation with China. On the contrary, by deepening economic and cultural ties and building mutual trust, China can gradually eliminate the negative perceptions many still have of it and foster its image of a *"friend"*. This underlines the main argument of this paper that policy decisions, states' identities, and perceptions and images states hold of each other are closely interconnected, and states should at all times be aware of this interdependence.

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About the author:

Martina Vetrovcova, PhD Candidate, University of Heidelberg, Germany