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Between Normative Influence and Securitization Dynamic

China's Engagement in the Visegrád Group

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Introduction

China's engagement in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the last decade, both economic and political, has been unprecedented. This engagement was perhaps most boldly signified by the formation of the 16+1 (later relabelled as 17+1 and 14+1) platform in 2012 to facilitate the implementation of China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's entry was welcomed for its promise of economic investments, especially for those economies in the region which looked for extra-EU sources of investments due to the 2008 global financial crisis. However, despite the proclaimed 'no political strings attached' rhetoric, the BRI investments came with less or more direct political, and, in consequence, normative influences: from the rise of Chinese advisers' influence in local politics, to adoption of China-promoted language and behaviours within the diplomatic conduct, to the rise of pro-China narratives among the prominent politicians in the region. The normative convergence between the nationalistic, populist, and illiberal trends and the values represented by the so-called China model can also be noted. However, this tide started to shift visibly in 2018, when some CEE countries started to approach China's presence in the CEE region with growing scepticism and suspicion. From failed Chinese infrastructure projects to the controversy over the influence of Huawei 5G technology on national security, to mixed responses to China's COVID-19 'mask diplomacy', China's European 'enter the dragon' moment has been stalled by a growing resistance at both the EU and CEE regional level.

Focusing on the Visegrád Four (V4) group of states (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), this chapter seeks to capture these changing trends

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and unpack the nexus between normative and securitization dynamic in the region. To what extent are we facing normative convergence between China and the regional illiberal trends? Do Chinese investments result in China's normative influence in the region? What is the impact of the changing approach to China as a 'security threat' in the region on China's ability to wield normative power? This chapter will analyse the impact of the changing securitization dynamic around Chinese investments in the region on China's ability to exert normative influence in the V4 states. To this end, the chapter is not concerned with the soft power influence which is often measured by the spread of Confucius Institutes, China-friendly think tanks or the promotion of Chinese culture via the media, but rather with the ways in which political elites bend accepted norms, or, indeed, adopt new ones, as a result of China's political influence exerted through its economic prowess.

Although China-V4 states relations and the attending possibility of normative influence remain deeply embedded in the 'state-society complexes' (see the introduction to this volume), this paper focuses specifically on political elites as the target actors of such influence for two interlinked reasons. First, there has been a long-standing disconnect between the political elites and popular approaches to China in the V4 countries. According to the recent survey conducted by the Sinophone project, the voters of the ruling parties in V4 countries all hold negative views of China (Turcsányi et al., 2020: 11), and this trend has been largely unchanged throughout the 2010s, despite heavy Chinese investments into improving its image in the region (Song, 2013: 12). However, the negative image of China among the voters has not impacted the ruling elites' preferences towards ever-closer engagement with China over most of the last decade. This disconnect indicates that while the assessment of China's ability to influence the wider public opinion as opposed to the political elites in these countries is important, it merits a separate study. Second, there is a clear preference towards high-level political (or other elite) channels in the conduct of China-V4 countries international relations, with limited role given to the grassroots social exchanges. While the role of non-state actors, particularly the media, in spreading Chinese influence in the region is important,[1] political elites are the primary actors who shape normative outlooks and the resultant policy preferences of the country, deserving a focused study of how normative influence might be exerted upon them specifically.

The first section of this chapter highlights the current discussions on the relationship between China's normative power and securitization and

[1] See, for instance, many publications of the Mapinfluence project. Available at: https://mapinfluence.eu/en/our-projects/.

formulates the study's theoretical framework. The second section highlights the tendency towards China-friendly and even China-admiring narrative among the V4 states in the initial 'honeymoon' phase of China's engagement in the region (in years 2012–2017), spurred by the enthusiastic perception of China's potential investments, and accompanied by the desecuritization of China's image in the region. The third section presents how, with the growing disappointment over the BRI's unfulfilled promises, and the accompanying international securitization of China since 2018, some countries within the region have adopted a more China-sceptic, if not outright securitized view, with the pro-Chinese voices becoming less dominant. However, this section shows that this shift, particularly visible in Poland and Czechia, has not been universal across the region, with Hungary remaining on a strong pro-China course and Slovakia maintaining careful diversification politics. The fourth section highlights how the contrasting trends between China's securitization and desecuritization within the V4 countries came into stark conflict under the COVID-19 emergency. In the early stages of the emergency, China succeeded in projecting a positive image of its governance model and engagement in the region. Those states which embarked on securitization pathways have faced a conflict of interest in the face of shortages of medical equipment and the need to rely on China for the supplies, with normative consequences. However, with the fading of COVID-19 reliance on China, it becomes more apparent that the underlying security concerns in the region largely limit the ability of China to exert long-term political and normative influence.

Theorizing Normative Influence of Chinese Investments

The potential for China to exert normative influence globally through its economic and other soft power tools has attracted much scholarly attention in the past years, and various concepts have been coined to describe it. The concepts of soft power (Callahan, 2015; Nye, 1990), normative power (Kavalski, 2013; Kerr, 2015), sharp power (NED, 2017), and symbolic power (Vangeli, 2018) are but a few which have been used so far to describe the various elements of this impact. In this chapter I mainly rely on two interlinked concepts from this toolkit: normative power and normative influence.

'Normative power' was first defined by Ian Manner with reference to the Normative Power Europe (NPE) model, and it depicts the ability of an actor to determine what passes as '"normal" in international relations' through 'power of ideas and norms' (Manners, 2002: 239, 253). Against clearly defined European values spread by NPE, which are democracy, liberty, human rights,

rule of law, anti-discrimination, social solidarity, sustainable development, and good governance (Manners, 2002: 243), the exact norms which are supposed to be diffused by China have been more elusive. Officially, China rejects the idea of norm-spreading, insisting on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence[2] as the foundation of its international conduct. These five principles are: 'mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity', 'mutual non-aggression', 'non-interference in each other's internal affairs', 'equality and mutual benefit', and 'peaceful coexistence' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2014). However, these principles are certainly normative and tend to overlap with those professed by the EU (it can hardly be imagined that the EU would not share the norms of 'peaceful coexistence' or 'mutual non-aggression', since its very creation was built on the idea of future war-prevention and peace). Therefore, despite its official declarations of norm-neutrality, China diffuses the norms embedded in the Five Principles, and, arguably, others, which are less explicitly verbalized. Indeed, most scholars see China's normative impact not as exerted through the official rhetoric, which claims that China has no interest in spreading its norms, but rather in the kind of 'new normal' that China builds in international relations (Bryant and Chou, 2016; Kavalski, 2013; Nathan, 2015; Vangeli, 2018). Some scholars point to the 'incidental' spread of Chinese norms and values, as the result of the unintended consequences of its investments (Jones, 2020), diffused by 'the power of example' rather than by direct promotion of its governance model (Bryant and Chou 2016; Nathan, 2015). Others point to the production of new modes of interactions, behaviour, thinking, and language in international relations: China sets new language which establishes what is permissible (Goh, 2014; Vangeli, 2018), and it creates new institutional tools that define power asymmetries between itself and other countries (Goh, 2016; Jakóbowski, 2018). Finally, China's attractiveness relies on its unique approach to IR as 'relational', rather than 'rules-based', which reshapes the rules of international diplomatic conduct (Kavalski 2013: 254; Kavalski and Cho, 2018; Qin, 2016).

An important set of norms, spread by both sides, which do not figure in the official definition of NPE proposed by Manners or in the Chinese legal documents, relate to how both actors approach the established Liberal International Order (LIO). This non-verbalization of the respective approaches to political economy as norms is somehow puzzling, as the disputes over the rules governing the international economic order between the two powers

[2] Herewith referred to as 'Five Principles'.

are long-standing and contentious, and fundamental to the idea of normative power shift, as the articles in this volume attest. Some of these norms relate to global competition over the governance of finance (Peng and Tok, 2016), while others boil down to the contention over what constitutes the permissible extent of a state's intervention in the economy, and which, in the case of EU and China, has long been known as a dispute over China's market economy status (MES). In this respect, China seeks to exert normative pressure on countries it interacts with, seeking for them to align with its interests: Hungary is an example of an EU country which has long lobbied for granting China an MES status as a consequence of Chinese engagement in the country (see Wu, 2016).

Other norms, which spin out of the 'non-interference in domestic affairs' principle, include the 'regime-type-neutral' definition of human rights, which while being heavily emphasized in diplomatic relations and supported by China's propaganda machine (Nathan, 2015) is not portrayed as norm-diffusion at all, but rather as norms-neutrality. The proponents of the 'sharp power' concept argue that these are examples of how China has been diffusing norms internationally in recent years. They argue that China's strategy centres on 'manipulation and distraction' and involves 'suppression of political pluralism and free expression' abroad (Walker and Ludwig, 2017: 10), making China's norms-diffusion obscured, if not insidious.

Whereas the above studies discuss how China projects its normative power, it is equally important to assert the extent to which such projections actually translate into tangible normative influence, that is, the extent to which the target recipient of norms-transfer actually adopts the norms. In this article, I follow the multidimensional understanding of normative influence (or impact) presented by Dandashly and Noutcheva (2022: 422), where normative influence is not simply understood as norm acceptance or rejection, but also as modification, which is particularly common among the cases presented in the article. Modification means that in between accepting or refusing Chinese norms in the V4 region, there is a large variation of how these norms are modified and moulded to suit domestic interests of governments and other actors within the state. Also, as the above discussions on soft, normative, sharp, and symbolic power reveal, China's normative influence can be seen as either intentional (for example, sharp power) or unintentional (for example, symbolic power). This chapter adopts the 'agnostic' approach to the intentionality of China's normative influence (see Roy and Hu's introduction to this volume), by revealing the extent to which normative influence can be unintended or even misrepresented by the recipient political elites.

In order to shed some further light on China's ability to exert normative influence, this chapter pays particular attention to instances of securitization and desecuritization of China as important variables in such a process. Following the seminal study of the Copenhagen School of critical security studies (CSS) (Buzan et al., 1998), 'securitization' is understood as instances of framing an issue as an 'existential threat, requiring emergency measures', and therefore 'as special kind of politics or as above politics' (Buzan et al., 1998: 23, 24), while 'desecuritization' is seen as returning the objects to 'the ordinary public sphere', and has been predominantly viewed in a positive light (Buzan et al., 1998: 4, 29). However, 'resecuritization' of a previously desecuritized actor is seen by some as always inevitable (Floyd, 2015: 137), making desecuritization itself impossible in a long term (Behnke, 2006: 65). However, what has been largely missing from the literature, and is relevant for the cases discussed in this chapter, is the lack of adequate attention to the political and normative implications of securitization and desecuritization (Aradau, 2004; Floyd, 2015; Hansen, 2012: 527–528), including how they might facilitate normative influence. The CSS literature on China, similarly, focuses on investigating the ways in which China engages in 'desecuritization', that is, how it presents itself as non-threatening (Biba, 2014; Danner, 2014; Vuori, 2018: 127), rather than on the impact of securitization or desecuritization on norms-diffusion.

However, it is important to more closely assess the relationship between the two processes. Desecuritization can exert normative impact because it changes the target audience's perception of an actor in line with this actor's soft power projections, and therefore should not be seen as a 'neutral' or apolitical process (Jakimów, 2019). For instance, China presents its economic investments in V4 in desecuritized language such as 'win-win' and 'politically neutral', denying any normative influence of such engagement. However, the very act of presenting the investments in an apolitical and norm-neutral manner (desecuritization) is meant to soften China's image, presenting it as an unthreatening state—therefore it is a tool of its soft power strategy. The new non-threatening image opens the space to accept the norms China promotes, such as 'regime-neutral definition of human rights', or the recognition of China's MES. In this article, I delve into the process of both the desecuritization and resecuritization of China and how these processes influence its investments in the region and the ability to exert normative influence. As the region which relatively recently engaged with China, and which in the span of the last decade has gone through phases of de-/resecuritization of China, the V4 group provides relevant context for the discussion of the relationship between such trends and the possibility of China's normative influence. In

the light of the growing discussion of democratic backsliding and the growth of authoritarian regimes, for which V4 appears to be a particularly relevant battleground, the study of China's engagement in this region can shed light on the extent to which China's normative influence can withstand cycles of resecuritization.

The Extent of China's Normative Influence in the 'Honeymoon' Phase (2012–2017)

China's engagement with the V4 region entered a new phase in 2012 with the formation of the 16(17)+1 platform, which led to intensification of both region-wide and bilateral relations with China. At the time, spurred by the promise of economic investments via the BRI, the political elites in the region engaged in intensive political relations with Chinese officials and, as a result, opened doors to Chinese companies. However, to what extent did this economically motivated political opening result in China's normative influence? And how does China's possible normative influence relate to the already present 'illiberal' transformation in the region? Is the 'normative convergence' between China's and some V4 countries' models of governance merely accidental? In order to establish the relationship between these overlapping processes, it is necessary to first analyse the extent and nature of China's normative influence in the region.

One way in which such political opening to China can translate into normative influence can be observed in the phenomenon of personal relationship-building between V4 main political figures and Chinese high officials. Polish president Andrzej Duda, Czech president Miloš Zeman, and Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Órban are but a few such highest-ranking politicians who have been key figures in securing China's investment projects in the region, promoting closer ties with China and participating actively in desecuritizing China (Jakimów, 2019). Their personal engagement with Chinese elite politicians, particularly Xi Jinping, has been noted to abide by the Chinese logic of 'relationships before rules' in international relations (Kavalski and Cho, 2018; Kowalski, 2020), creating an important normative divergence from the way international relations had been handled by the V4 states in the past.

The Chinese investments, which were enabled by such 'relational' engagement, have resulted in various further forms of Chinese political influence in the region, in particular the rise of Chinese advisors to local politicians, as well as the intermingling of V4 countries' political circles with Chinese

business circles. This phenomenon is signified perhaps most prominently by the case of Ye Jianming, the CCP member and the now defamed former CEO of CEFC China Energy, a Chinese private energy company now overtaken by a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE), CITIC. Before his detention in China on bribery charges in 2018, Ye had been hovering in high circles of the Chinese political elite, and became an economic advisor of President Zeman in 2015 (Dębiec and Jakóbowski, 2018). Their relationship was largely seen as opaque and beyond the scrutiny of taxpayers, once again highlighting the growing normative impact of Chinese-style networking. CEFC's practices of grooming the China-friendly political elite in Czechia illustrate how Chinese political/business elites exert political influence in the region. For instance, Jaroslav Tvrdík, a former defence minister, an advisor to former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, and a long-term China lobbyist, became the head of the CEFC European division, a favour which further allowed for Chinese interests to be represented among the Czech political elite. Such opaque intermingling between the Czech-Chinese political and business circles, as seen in the examples of Tvrdík and Ye, has resulted in 'repurposing of [democratic] state institutions' to serve the interest of personal relationships between political and business elites so that 'they no longer can fully perform their intended functions' (Hála, 2020: 8). These relationships are, therefore, yet another example of how political-economic engagement can translate into normative influence on the transparency and democratic accountability of politicians in the region.

Another set of examples of how the political opening to China in the 'honeymoon' phase resulted in normative impact can be observed in China's influence on the shaping of foreign policy choices of the V4 states. This pertains in particular to the issue of so-called Chinese core interest (*hexin liyi*), encapsulated in the principle of 'non-interference in countries' domestic affairs'. In practice, China acts on this principle by exerting diplomatic and economic pressure on other states to retreat from any political relations with Taiwan, and to refrain from criticizing China's domestic policies towards Tibet and Xinjiang. Since 2012, a trend of adopting China-promoted language and conduct in this respect has become prominent among the V4 political elites, as discussed below. This, in turn, has resulted in subverting the established EU norms on human rights and multilateral commitments.

For instance, the reversal of the long-standing criticism of the human rights record in China, paired with the retreat from the EU-wide approach in this regard, is visible in Poland, Czechia, and Hungary. In Poland, an example of this drift can be found in the case of the 2016 Polish former Foreign Affairs vice-minister Jan Parys's speech given during the Asia-Pacific Day in front

of some Chinese delegates, criticizing 'Western' states' insistence on bringing up China's human rights record (Trybuna, 2016). Similarly, President Zeman, in an interview for Chinese television (CCTV) given in the same year, labelled his country's former critical policy on human rights in China as submissive 'to the pressure from the US and EU'. He posited it against his new policy, which he saw as enabling Czechia to be 'independent again', and 'not intefer[ing] with the internal affairs of any other country' (Zeman quoted in CCTV, 2016). Finally, in the speech given at the 2016 'China-CEE Political Parties Dialogue' event, Hungarian Prime Minister Órban subsumed criticism of the human rights record in China under a 'Western way of thinking', which 'expects other regions of the world to embrace its international doctrines', while Hungary prefers to take a road of 'mutual respect' (Órban, 2016). Clearly, the major political figures in each of these instances parroted Chinese exact wording of the norms embedded in the 'Five Principles', which demonstrates the uptake of Chinese norms by political elites in the region.

China has also exerted direct pressure on the conduct of foreign policy with regard to what it perceives as its 'renegade provinces'. When in 2016 Slovak President Andrei Kiska met with the Dalai Lama, he was criticized by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, as well as by many non-Slovak politicians, including Czech president Zeman (Šebok, 2016). This incident demonstrated the effectiveness of the China-promoted approach to human rights issues, which relies on the deflection of the potential criticism of China's human rights abuses by other states, by expressing official outrage at the meeting of Tibetan government-in-exile representatives, and therefore labelling these issues exclusively as 'internal Chinese affairs', outside of the legitimate purview of international criticism. Another prominent example of an attempt to exert this kind of political influence was the 2016 signing of the Prague-Beijing twin city agreement. Prague was lured by the promise of Chinese investments and agreed to sign the agreement, which, quite unusually, contained a phrase of 'Taiwan being an inalienable part of Chinese territory', going even further than the usual 'One China' remarks that the Chinese governments includes in strategic partnership documents at national level (Kowalski 2020: 15). This unusual politicization of a regular sub-national agreement illustrates how V4 states became the primary battleground in China's struggle to change the European approach to China's human rights record and the conduct of cross-strait relations.

As the examples above indicate, China's political engagement, which follows in the footsteps of its economic engagement, has pushed for recalibration of V4 states' normative outlook. The normative impact of such engagement is particularly visible in the ability of China to influence the

change in interstate diplomatic conduct from rule-based to relational interactions. This new relationship-based conduct can lead to the instances of 'repurposing of democracy' (Hála, 2020). Paired with the adoption of China-promoted language, it can also reshape norms around human rights and multilateralism. As I argued elsewhere (Jakimów, 2019), while these countries' political and normative engagement with China is ultimately pragmatic, it nevertheless promotes the process of China's desecuritization in the region, which aids the adoption of China-promoted language and norms. However, these trends started to substantially shift in 2018, when the US-China trade war resulted in the growing securitization of China in the US, which spilled over into the V4 region. This was accompanied by the growing disappointment over the unfulfilled investment expectation. The following years revealed with greater clarity the domestic struggles over the role of China and the political approach to China in some countries of the region.

Resecuritizing China and the Loss of Normative Influence (2018–2020)

While the pompous overtures between the CEE countries and China might have dominated the initial relation-building period after the formation of the 16(17)+1 platform, since 2018 the deeply rooted idea of a 'China threat' in the region (see, for instance, Godement et al., 2011) has resurfaced. This resecuritization shift, just like the earlier desecuritization of China, has been the V4 political elites' response to the domestic and close neighbourhood challenges, and their own domestic position. Among these, the earlier securitization of China at the EU level (see Jakimów, 2019 for more detail), and particularly the sharp turn to curb Chinese telecommunication companies' market presence due to the alleged cyber-security threat they pose, on both European and US levels, have played an important role. This resecuritization trend is most visible in the case of the recent Czech and Polish securitization moves against the Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei, but also in the growing Czech and Slovak resistance to China's attempts at political influence, particularly the attempts to exert leverage over normative choices in foreign policy. So far, only Hungary has remained on its previous course of complete acceptance and appraisal of China's engagement in the CEE.

The purported cyber-espionage, and particularly the Huawei case, deserves deeper analysis, as it is linked to the politics of the V4 countries towards their closest neighbourhood and the transatlantic alliance. In the case of Poland, the salience of the transatlantic alliance has been driven by the

long-standing security concerns over Russia's behaviour in the region. China-perceived threats, such as this of cyber-espionage, have also been growing in recent years, but Poland has subsumed these under wider strategic interests vis-à-vis Russia, as the main international threat, and the US, as the main security guarantor. When a Chinese Huawei executive, Wang Weijing, was arrested in Warsaw in January 2019 on spying charges, this was quickly interpreted as part of the US-led anti-Huawei offensive (Šimalčík et al., 2019: 40). Indeed, soon after the 2018 arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wangzhou in Canada, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its concerns over the alleged Chinese cyber-espionage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, 2018). This convergence of interests was later confirmed in the September 2019 signing of the US-Poland Joint Declaration on 5G, the move which has been further institutionalized by the proposed legislative changes, which make Polish cyber-security law compliant with US's anti-Huawei strategy (Kasonta, 2020). All these closely timed events clearly show a strategic aligning of Poland's response to the US's anti-Huawei offensive. However, while pragmatically aimed, this revaluation of the Polish approach to China clearly contains genuine security concerns regarding China itself, which the Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Kamiński expressed in his December 2019 US Wilson Centre address: 'Poland, like the United States, speaks clearly about the China threat' (Kamiński, quoted in Kasonta, 2020).

A similar resecuritization move towards China has been taking place in Czechia. Here, the US is also regarded as a security guarantor, and therefore an important power to look up to for support (Fürst, 2020a: 43). In late 2018, the Czech National Cyber Security Agency warned against the security threat of Chinese telecommunication companies Huawei and ZTE, over their legal obligation to cooperate with Chinese intelligence agencies (Bachulska and Turcsányi, 2019). This was followed by the immediate decision of the Czech government under Prime Minister Andrej Babiš to ban Huawei technologies and develop screening procedures alongside new public information networks guidelines. The high-level visits between US and Czechia followed in early 2019, allegedly propelled by Czechia's anti-Huawei turn (Fürst, 2020a). Under the Babiš's more China-sceptic government and highly China-critical media, Czechia was clearly steering away from the wholesale partnership with China, as had been the case under the Zeman-Sobotka leadership.

However, to what degree has this resecuritization played a role in the weakening of China's normative influence? This is perhaps more visible in the case of the Czechia-China spat over the issue of Taiwan, which epitomizes a growing pushback against what is perceived as a threat of China's normative influence. In Czechia this change started with the reversal of the

Prague-Beijing partnership agreement, when the new Prague mayor, Zdeněk Hřib, insisted on removal of the controversial quote on 'Taiwan being an inalienable part of Chinese territory' from the city partnership document (Kowalski, 2020: 15). This resulted in Beijing abandoning the partner city agreement, followed by Prague signing a new one with Taipei. Hřib has also been pushing a pro-human rights agenda in relation to China, by hosting Tibetan government-in-exile head Lobsang Sangay, hanging the Tibetan flag over the City Hall, and officially visiting Taipei (Šimalčík et al., 2019: 23–24). This change was soon followed on the national level by the Czech Senate Speaker Jaroslav Kubera, who in early 2020 announced a trip to Taiwan. In response, the Chinese embassy in Czechia immediately threatened to take retaliation measures, which, in turn, resulted in the opposition parties' sharp response against China's interference and Prime Minister Babiš's call for the replacement of China's ambassador Zhang Jianmin. While Kubera's sudden death interrupted these plans, his replacement, Miloš Vystrčil, did travel to Taiwan in August 2020, where he delivered the speech on a common experience of democratization in both countries and called himself 'a Taiwanese', paraphrasing John Kennedy's words pronounced in West Berlin. This, again, was met with a harsh response from Chinese Foreign Secretary Wang Yi, who threatened that Vystrčil 'will pay a high price for his short-sighted behaviour and political opportunism' (Johnson, 2020). The critical response towards the Chinese ministry's words, perceived as 'a threat', was overwhelming in Czechia and soon supported by Germany, France, and Slovakia (Zachová, 2020). Such reversal back to the traditional pro-democratic and pro-human rights normative stance in the region is also visible, perhaps on a less vocal level, in Slovakia, where new president, Zuzanna Caputova, famous for a liberal and pro-human rights agenda, confronted PRC Foreign Secretary Wang Yi on the issue of human rights in July 2019. These cases illustrate how the resecuritization trend among both local- and national-level politicians in Czechia and Slovakia has resulted in the pushback against what is being perceived to be Chinese attempts at exerting normative influence, the attempts which are themselves framed as a security threat.

A New Turn in the Tale? COVID-19 and the Future of China's Normative Influence

The period since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the contradictions between the desecuritization and resecuritization of China to the fore. At the beginning of the pandemic, in late 2019 and early 2020, China's

governance model came under attack in some of the V4 regional media, with the media pointing towards the complicity of the authoritarian system in the mishandling of the initial stages of the pandemic and the spread of the virus outside of China (Fürst, 2020b: 17; Matura, 2020b: 34). However, these voices were quickly subdued in the face of international competition for the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies, which compelled the governments to continue their overtures towards China. These can be observed in particular in the period from February 2020 onwards, countering the earlier resecuritization moves.

In the initial phase of the COVID-19 emergency in Europe, the personal relationships that earlier played such a crucial role in the facilitation of China's BRI investments were once again invoked to secure mostly commercial deliveries of the PPE, labelled, nevertheless, as 'aid' (Seaman, 2020: 8). For instance, Czech President Zeman's pro-China lobby efforts allowed Czechia to presumably jump the queue, and, in effect, to secure shipment of the PPE in early March (iRozhlas, 2020). However, the press was quick to point out that the 'deal' was an opaque arrangement, accompanied by 'kowtowing' to the Chinese shipment of goods which were purchased, and not even donated (Fürst, 2020b: 18). In Poland, similarly, the initial response to the pandemic relied on securing the delivery of equipment from China via personal connections between presidents Duda and Xi, with simultaneous restraint in criticism over China's responsibility in the evolution of the pandemic (Szczudlik, 2020: 50–51). President Duda's sympathy letter to Xi Jinping, praising the Chinese response to the pandemic, was accompanied by aid deployments from Poland in February 2020, which resulted in the ability to secure some shipments back from China in March, via both private purchases and donations (Szczudlik, 2020: 50–51). In Slovakia, a similar dynamic to that observed in Czechia took place: commercial purchases overtook aid (Turcsányi and Šimalčík, 2020: 60), and a welcoming party headed by the outgoing Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini was organized to receive Chinese transport of the PPE in March 2020. Moreover, the former Prime Minister Robert Fico and Member of Parliament Ľuboš Blaha emphasized the importance of praising China for its 'aid' and refraining from criticism (Turcsányi and Šimalčík, 2020: 61). Hungary had been active in sending aid to China prior to March 2020. In exchange, it received mainly commercially purchased Chinese equipment. However, these shipments were not clearly labelled as 'purchases', and their price was not revealed (Matura, 2020a: 33). Moreover, the COVID-19 emergency allowed the government to classify the details of the EU-investigated Belgrade-Budapest railway tender (Matura, 2020a: 34), which deepened the lack of transparency over Hungary's deals

with China. Last but not least, as the teleconference regarding the equipment delivery to the 16(17)+1 region took place one week before the one with the rest of the EU (Seaman, 2020: 7), V4 and other 16(17)+1 countries were given priority in securing 'PPE purchase deals', reflecting the 'gift-bestowing' approach of Chinese authorities to those who proved loyal to China.

Akin to the cases of the pre-2019 coproduction of China's desecuritization narratives by the political elites in the region (Jakimów, 2019), the early months of the European phase of the pandemic saw similar instances of desecuritization. The kowtowing, the kissing of the Chinese flag (Niewenhuis, 2020), thanking China in national speeches (Fürst, 2020b: 19), and praising China's response to the pandemic among the V4 and other 16(17)+1 countries were quickly echoed in China's press and boosted its image-building in the region (see Šebok and Karásková, 2020: 10). The language adopted by the V4 political elites was not accidental either: by portraying China-purchased equipment as 'aid', the political elites in the region subscribed once again to the China-promoted narrative, this time on 'mask diplomacy', helping to boost its desecuritization efforts. The nearly uncritical embrace of China-promoted narratives and conduct, including 'kowtowing' and the adoption of Chinese propaganda around the COVID-19 pandemic and 'mask diplomacy', has translated into a strengthening of Chinese normative influence. This normative impact should be understood, again, not as the wholehearted adoption of authoritarianism or the 'China model', but rather as the subscription to China-promoted relational forms of international relations (in order to secure the PPE shipments), as well as the undermining of due democratic procedures and mechanisms (the lack of transparency around the PPE shipments, and the manipulation of the pandemic 'emergency' status to further obscure the details of Chinese investments in the region).

Additionally, certain normative convergences between China and the V4 countries can also be noted during the pandemic. In Poland and Hungary, in particular, the ruling parties have pushed for various legislative initiatives, which either undermined normal democratic procedures or introduced socially controversial reforms at the time when social protest was officially disallowed. In Hungary, rule-by-decree was introduced in March 2020, which extended Órban's executive power indefinitely. While these special powers were curtailed by the parliament later that year, this move created a dangerous precedence towards potential dictatorial power. As to Poland, the government sought to hold the national elections and to push through a highly controversial anti-abortion law in the midst of the pandemic (European Parliament, 2020). Additionally, regional governments boosted their

national images of 'saviours' amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (see Matura, 2020a), by arguing that they dealt more decisively and effectively with the pandemic than Western Europe, a move eerily mirroring that of the Chinese domestic propaganda.

However, while the initial regional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and to China's role in it point to the continuation of the trend initiated in the 'desecuritization' phase of the relationship with China, after the initial period of competition for the PPE resources, the security concerns once again visibly came to the fore. In Czechia, critical oppositional voices pointed to the lack of transparency and the overt commercial character of China's overpriced 'mask diplomacy' (Valášek, 2020). The opposition also emphasized the institutional impact of Czech-Chinese state collusion brought about by the pandemic, Czech over-reliance on Chinese supplies, and the uncritical embrace of Chinese propaganda by the politicians (Fürst, 2020b: 18). Ultimately, the Czech Senate passed legislation to move away from reliance on China towards the EU-based and domestic suppliers for PPE in April 2020, with Pavel Fischer, the Senate's Foreign Affairs Commission chair, proclaiming that 'self-sufficiency in medical supplies is the first step towards country security' as the basis for the decision (Pavel Fischer, quoted in Kahn and Muller, 2020). This shift clearly continues the 2019 resecuritization trend, this time around health security concerns. Slovakia also followed in Czechia's footsteps, led by the new, more China-sceptic government, sworn in March 2020, with many pro-Western politicians emphasizing China's complicity in early mismanagement of the pandemic, including the Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs who decried the Chinese 'infodemic' around the COVID-19 pandemic (Turcsányi and Šimalčík, 2020: 62). Poland and Hungary have not witnessed a clear resecuritization of China during the COVID-19 pandemic so far, but Poland's siding with the US over anti-China legislature with regard to 5G and Huawei clearly stayed the course in this period, despite the government's overtures towards China over the PPE shipments.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the ambiguity and fluctuations in the securitization dynamic vis-à-vis China for three countries in the region: Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia. The normative impact that was facilitated via the desecuritization dynamic appears largely erratic. As the later resecuritization moves indicate, the pro-China stands are pragmatic and temporary, and the stretching of rules around democratic institutions paired with the adoption of 'relational' conduct in international relations, which can be associated with China's influence, might not have a lasting effect. Hungary might prove an exception here, as its response to China has been on a steady course of desecuritization and normative convergence and, so far, it has not

yet been unnerved by the resecuritization trend. China's normative impact is also not the same as normative convergence in terms of authoritarian tendencies, which increased during the pandemic in the cases of both Poland and Hungary, but which does not appear to be a direct result of relations with China.

Conclusion: Between Securitization Dynamic and China's Normative Influence

Exploring the relationship between the de/resecuritization of China and its normative influence among the V4 countries provides an important facet to understand China's ability to exert normative influence. The cases discussed in this article indicate that a unified, region-wide trend cannot be ascertained, as the study of each country reveals different national strategies vis-à-vis China's engagement. However, some general trends are still worth noting. Overall, the desecuritization of China's economic and political engagement in the region has led to the adoption of some China-promoted norms, such as 'relational' conduct in international relations, a change in the outlook on human rights issues, and the re-emphasis of the 'sovereignty over multilateralism' principle in foreign policy. The reverse also appears true: the normative influence of China seems to falter when V4 states are faced with security concerns over Chinese engagement in the region, and in the case of Czechia and Slovakia, the resecuritization of China has led to the reversal in such normative influence. In the case of Poland, concerns over cyber-security did take precedence over good relations with China, putting limitations on the adoption of China-promoted language, image, and, in effect, norms. In Hungary, which has continued on the desecuritization trajectory, normative influence has not faltered, with Órban's rhetoric remaining strongly supportive of China-desired narratives of itself and the normative consequences that it brings. These subtle yet clear trends point to the limits of China's normative impact, closely tied to its ability to shape desecuritization narratives of itself.

While the normative convergence between the illiberal trends in the region and the China model can also be noted, there is no sufficient evidence to ascertain that this trend is directly influenced by China's normative influence. Indeed, the resecuritization dynamic observed since 2018, though briefly interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis, points to a certain ambiguity in the relationship between China's ability to exert normative influence and the normative convergence between V4 countries and China. Not all the countries in the region follow the normative convergence trend. While Hungary

and Poland clearly deepened their illiberal turn during the COVID-19 pandemic, the same cannot be said about Czechia and Slovakia, which both saw a rise of more liberal-minded and Sino-sceptic politicians in this period. This divergence within the region perhaps points to the limited role that China plays in dictating or even shaping these trends. At the same time, the illiberal trends remained apparent in the cases of Poland and Hungary, with both countries simultaneously choosing a different approach towards China: one of securitization, the other of desecuritization. This shows that China-promoted norms are adopted selectively and modified if necessary to meet domestic interests. These findings also suggest that the normative convergence between illiberal regional trends and China-promoted norms is hardly a result of China's intentional norm-transfer, but rather part of a wider global shift, equally signified by Donald Trump's period in office and the rise of populism and right-wing politics in Europe.

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