

# Recent Developments in Relations Between Visegrád Group Countries and Taiwan Explained (2018-2022)

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## Abstract

The Taiwanese media and public have recently paid growing attention to the countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Taipei's efforts to develop ties with Lithuania and the Czech Republic, as well as Poland and Slovakia, have become a hot topic. Headlines in the press lauded each related event: "Lithuania Shows Blueprint to Oppose China," "Taiwan and Poland Tied by Love of Democracy," "The New Czech Foreign Minister Calls Taiwan Important Economic Partner 'Taiwan is Several Times More Important than China.'"<sup>1</sup> Despite some titles showing more restraint, in general, expectations regarding Taiwan – CEE cooperation seem to be high.

This article attempts to explain the most recent developments in relations between selected Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) towards Taiwan. It looks at the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia — the four members of the Visegrád Group (Visegrád Four, later V4) — an alliance formed in 1991 by the countries of the Central Europe to advance cooperation on issues of common interest. It traces their foreign policy choices concerning relations with China and Taiwan since the end of Cold War, inquiries into the decisive factors behind them, and examines the static and changing elements in their relations with both Asian partners. Finally, it provides policy recommendations.

**Keywords:** Visegrád Group, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Taiwan

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1. Thomas Shattuck, "Lithuania Shows Blueprint to Oppose China," *Taipei Times*, September 1, 2021, <<https://taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2021/09/01/2003763571>>; Emilia Chen,

## I. Taiwan's Challenge to China within the CEE

After the end of the Cold War, CEE countries with respect to security and political relations prioritized integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures and later on focused on developing closer ties with their members. Still, two factors, to different extents within each country, played to the advantage of Taiwan. First, CEECs' foreign policies during this period were informed by their newly acquired anti-communist identity. In this respect, Czech President Václav Havel in 1990 initiated "first ladies' diplomacy" and in 1994 Prague for the first time expressed support for Taiwan's membership in the UN.<sup>2</sup> Second, as CEE were restructuring their economies, they began searching for investment, new export markets, and financial assistance. Taiwan responded positively. Although it did not follow up its economic commitments and many of its investment and trade promises never materialized, it scored a number of successes in relations with this region.

Then Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary had already established contacts with Taiwan during the first years of their democratic transformation (See Table 1). Even though Taipei did not create formal ties with the region, it set up the basic infrastructure and channels for cooperation. It also figured out the strategies to conduct those relations in the shade of "China's retributions" and tested Beijing's limits to realize that China would tolerate economic and cultural encounters as well as unofficial political contacts. Moreover, the CEE states signed cultural and economic agreements with Taipei and supported Taiwan's membership in the WTO. Czeslaw Tubilewicz rightly stated that in post-communist Europe "Taipei successfully staged a short-term challenge to China in a region long considered the zone of Beijing's exclusive influence."<sup>3</sup>

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"Taiwan and Poland Tied by Love of Democracy," *Taipei Times*, September 15, 2021, <<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2021/09/15/2003764383>>; 〈捷克新外長稱我重要經濟夥伴「台灣比中國重要好幾倍」〉, *The Liberty Times*, December 21, 2021, <<https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/paper/1491273?fbclid=IwAR3aQ1hZJ6D6NZ9WqCoqpCotVUgNYtu6PIuTtxzVMbygi9zX7tPSj8Qn3xo>>.

2. Czeslaw Tubilewicz, *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 51-55.

3. Czeslaw Tubilewicz, *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies*, p. 189.

**Table 1. Dates of the Establishment of V4 Countries' Trade and Representative Offices in Taiwan and Taiwanese Offices in the Region**

	V4 Countries' Trade and Representative Offices in Taiwan	Taiwanese offices in V4 Countries
Czech Republic	Czech Economic and Cultural Office (1993)	Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, Prague (in Czechoslovakia, 1991, later the Czech Republic)
Hungary	Hungarian Trade Office (1998)	Taipei Trade Office (1990) renamed to Taipei Representative Office, Budapest, Hungary (1995)
Poland	Warsaw Trade Office (1995) renamed to Polish Office in Taipei (2018)	Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (1992) renamed to Taipei Representative Office in Poland (2018).
Slovak Republic	Slovak Economic and Cultural Office (2003)	Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (in Czechoslovakia (1991), Taipei Representative Office, Bratislava (2003)

Source: Author's own compilation.

## II. V4's China Turn

The 2008 global financial crisis revealed the CEECs' economic over-dependence on the European Union (EU) in terms of trade, investment, and EU funding. The countries in the region started to seek diversification away from the EU. Similarly to the 1990s, their interest in building closer ties with Asian partners was mainly driven by an economic rationale. However, this time, the countries in the region looked up to China as a source of trade and investment rather than to Taiwan as in the past. The CEE contacts with China gained momentum with the establishment of the 16+1 forum in 2012 (after Greece joined in 2019, the group was renamed 17+1), which brought together 16 CEE states and China. It provided the framework for accelerated governmental contacts and the establishment of various platforms of cooperation. The CEECs were also enthusiastic about participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Moreover, some of the governments in the V4 recognized the political potential of cooperation with the Asian partner. The 2008 crisis not only had economic repercussions but also undermined the legitimacy of the EU and the whole Western model of economic and political governance. At the same time, the nationalist and populist governments of PM Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Poland's Law and Justice party entered into conflict with the EU, challenging its legal norms as well as the

organization's rule-of-law enforcement mechanism. Therefore, besides the shared desire to attract Chinese investment and increase exports, Budapest and Warsaw turned to Beijing to demonstrate that they had political and economic alternatives to Brussels. The growing international isolation of both countries provided another rationale to embrace cooperation with Beijing.

Relations between the CEE and China seemingly became so close that they were even perceived as a Trojan horse for the EU's unity and interests. At the same time, efforts to develop closer relations with China led to more cool attitudes towards Taiwan and prevented V4 countries from significant engagement with Taipei. However, in the recent years, China's standing in the region has been waning. Although all of the EU countries remain committed to a "one China" policy, some of its members in the CEE region have increasingly demonstrated their support for Taiwan.

Is V4 members' engagement with Taiwan growing in the same manner, as some editorials suggest, or do the four countries differ when it comes to their willingness to build ties with Taiwan?



**Figure 1. China-CEEC Summit 2021**

Source: Cooperation between China and CEEC, "China-CEEC Summit 2021," February 9, 2021, *Cooperation between China and CEEC*, <[http://www.china-ceec.org/oldsite/zdogjhz/202102/t20210209\\_10015944.html](http://www.china-ceec.org/oldsite/zdogjhz/202102/t20210209_10015944.html)>.

### III. Recent Developments in Relations Between Taiwan and V4 Member States

Among the V4 countries, the Czech Republic became the most active in fostering ties with Taiwan. The first in a series of CEECs' friendly gestures towards the island-nation was made at the subnational level. In January 2019, Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib suggested excluding a fragment acknowledging the "one China" policy from the city agreement between the Czech capital and Beijing.<sup>4</sup> China severely criticized and dismissed the mayor's request. After the Prague-Beijing standoff and termination of sister-city relations, Hřib turned to Taipei to establish sister-city ties instead.

The next hot topic in Czech-Taiwan relations was the announcement by Senate Speaker Jaroslav Kubera — the country's second most senior government official — of his plans to visit Taiwan. Although the visit never materialized, as Kubera passed away on January 20, 2020, on May 20 the same year the Czech Senate, in a 50-1 vote, passed a resolution supporting the visit of a delegation to Taiwan led by his successor.<sup>5</sup> The Czech delegation consisted of 89 members, including the new Senate President, Miloš Vystrčil, the Mayor of Prague, as well as entrepreneurs, parliamentarians and educators, who arrived in Taiwan on August 30 for a six-day visit. The delegation signed memoranda of understanding (MOU) on AIoT, smart cities, smart machinery, and startup communities.<sup>6</sup> In October 2021, Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu visited to Prague to meet Senate President Vystrčil, Prague Mayor Hřib and attend a seminar hosted by the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Czech think tank Sinopsis.<sup>7</sup>

4. Manuel Eckert & Richard Q. Turcsányi, "Prague vs. Beijing: Estranged Sister Cities," *The Diplomat*, October 8, 2019, <<https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/prague-vs-beijing-estranged-sister-cities/>>.

5. Joyce Huang, "China's 'Coercive Diplomacy' Backfires as Czech Senate Delegation Visits Taiwan," *VOA News*, August 30, 2020, <[https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_chinas-coercive-diplomacy-backfires-czech-senate-delegation-visits-taiwan/6195197.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_chinas-coercive-diplomacy-backfires-czech-senate-delegation-visits-taiwan/6195197.html)>.

6. National Development Council, "Joint Press Release by National Development Council (NDC) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOEA). A high-profile delegation led by Czech Senate President to Taiwan, marking a new milestone in bilateral cooperation," August 31, 2020, *National Development Council*, <[https://www.ndc.gov.tw/en/nc\\_8455\\_34363](https://www.ndc.gov.tw/en/nc_8455_34363)>.

7. Lin Yu-li & Kay Liu, "Foreign Minister Wu speaks out against Authoritarianism in Prague," *Focus Taiwan*, October 27, 2021, <<https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202110270023>>.

During the same trip to Europe, on October 21, Wu also went to Slovakia. He attended a forum organized by the local think tank GLOBSEC where he gave a speech on post-pandemic cooperation. Also in October, the Trade and Investment Delegation to Slovakia led by Taiwan National Development Council (NDC) Minister Kung Ming-hsin signed seven MOUs covering issues such as supply chains, investment, tourism, and smart cities.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2. Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil Visits Taiwan**

Source: Office of the President, R.O.C.(Taiwan), “President You presented a Medal of Honor to the Senate President Vystrčil in recognition of his contribution to the parliamentary diplomacy of Taiwan and Czech Republic,” September 1, 2020, *Wikipedia*, <[https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020%E5%B9%B4%E9%9F%8B%E5%BE%B7%E9%BD%8A%E8%A8%AA%E8%87%BA#/media/File:2020-09-01\\_Milo%C5%A1\\_Vystr%C4%8Dil\\_in\\_Taiwan\\_04.jpg](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020%E5%B9%B4%E9%9F%8B%E5%BE%B7%E9%BD%8A%E8%A8%AA%E8%87%BA#/media/File:2020-09-01_Milo%C5%A1_Vystr%C4%8Dil_in_Taiwan_04.jpg)>.

In December 2021, a Slovakian delegation, consisting of the highest ranking officials since the establishment of representative offices in 2003, visited Taiwan. The group,

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8. Pan Tzu-yu & Teng Pei-ju, “Taiwan and Slovakia in 7 MOUs, pave way for closer ties,” *Focus Taiwan*, October 23, 2021, <<https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202110230004>>.

led by Slovak Deputy Economic Minister Karol Galek, attended the first session of the Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation and signed seven MOUs.<sup>9</sup> Even before that, Bratislava and Taipei had already signed several important agreements, including the agreement on avoidance of double taxation (2011), mutual recognition of driving licenses (2012) and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (2021).<sup>10</sup>

A positive dynamic in Czech and Slovak relations with Taiwan was highlighted with masks donations by Taiwan and the provision of COVID-19 vaccines by Czechia and Slovakia to Taiwan as well as with cooperation on anti-epidemic efforts.<sup>11</sup> For example, Taiwan donated 700,000 medical masks to Slovakia. Slovakia returned the favor in 2021 by donating 10,000, and later another 160,000, COVID vaccines.

Poland's contacts with Taiwan seemed to pick up with the name change of its Warsaw Trade Office to Polish Office in Taipei in 2018. This was lauded as a “breakthrough” in diplomatic relations between Warsaw and Taipei. In June 2019, Taiwan and Poland signed the *Criminal Justice Cooperation Agreement*—as the first of its kind between Taiwan and the EU country. In 2020, Taipei and Warsaw held economic consultations on trade and investment, smart cities, electromobility and cybersecurity, and established direct cargo and passenger charter flights between both capitals.<sup>12</sup> Poland engages with Taiwan on a broad range of practical issues; however, its behavior towards the island-nation remains ambivalent. While the Czech Republic and Slovakia have cultivated relations with Taiwan and simultaneously distanced

9. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), Department of European Affairs, “Foreign Minister Jaushieh Joseph Wu Hosts Welcome Banquet for Slovak Delegation Led by State Secretary of the Ministry of Economy Karol Galek; Visit to deepen Taiwan-Slovakia Friendship,” December 6, 2021, *MOFA*, <[https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News\\_Content.aspx?n=1329&s=96920&fbclid=IwAR0vdf\\_wxAIk-oM1tI8OffGU7ruzqA5ufxhg8F0L-fhjTDzVp\\_f0qD3Lc](https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1329&s=96920&fbclid=IwAR0vdf_wxAIk-oM1tI8OffGU7ruzqA5ufxhg8F0L-fhjTDzVp_f0qD3Lc)>.

10. David Hutt, “CEIAS CONSIDERS: Taiwan’s Future in Central Europe,” October 21, 2021, *Central European Institute of Asian Studies*, <<https://ceias.eu/ceias-considers-taiwans-central-europe/>>.

11. Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, Prague, Czech Republic, “Taiwan and the Czech Republic Announced Joint Statement on Epidemic Prevention Cooperation,” April 1, 2020, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan)*, <[https://www.roc-taiwan.org/cz\\_cs/post/4117.html](https://www.roc-taiwan.org/cz_cs/post/4117.html)>.

12. Kelvin Chen, “Polish Envoy to Taiwan Lauds Strong Bilateral Ties,” *Taiwan News*, May 3, 2021, <<https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4193462>>.

themselves from China, Warsaw, despite friendly relations with Taipei and the signing of several agreements on practical matters, has recently pivoted towards Beijing.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, unlike the Czech Republic and Slovakia, senior Polish and Taiwanese politicians have not exchanged visits.

Hungary also cooperates with Taiwan on practical issues. Budapest and Taipei have signed an agreement on avoidance of double taxation and a cooperation agreement on the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program. Moreover, 30 Hungarian students have had a chance to participate in the Taiwan-Europe Connectivity Scholarship Program (TECS) provided by the Taiwanese side to attract more European students to study Chinese.<sup>14</sup> However, as the staunchest supporter of China in the region, Budapest does not engage with Taipei in a manner similar to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or even Poland. Even though Taiwan sent medical masks to Hungary during the pandemic, it was the only V4 nation that did not donate vaccines to Taiwan.

While Hungary's central government has not demonstrated any gestures of friendship with Taiwan, Budapest's mayor has expressed support for Taipei on various occasions. His efforts are very much welcomed in Taiwan. The visualization of the frequency of the words in articles in Chinese on Taiwan-Hungary relations shows how popular the initiatives taken by the mayor of Budapest are in Taiwanese media (See Figure 3).

This brings us to another topic of the relations between V4 member states and Taiwan at the subnational level. Besides the above-mentioned and the most famous case of Prague-Taipei city ties, it is worth recalling the participation of two Taiwanese cities — Taipei and Taoyuan since September 2021 — in the so-called Package of Free Cities. This initiative by the mayors of the V4 countries' capitals — Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw — was signed in 2019 to advance liberal democratic values, pluralism, and cultural diversity.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Natalie Tso, "Foreign Ministry: Poland is a Strong Partner," *Radio Taiwan International*, September 7, 2021, <<https://en.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2006064?fbclid=IwAR1no-Kf-rYIDDoeQwXvNk1eekupeJQ2YH9nLthiXY8WOhnFFR2fLJzvHbI>>.

14. Information required from the response to the inquiry on Taiwan-Hungary relations made by the author to the Hungarian Trade Office in Taipei on February 23, 2022.





Warsaw (Poland), Taoyuan-Radom (Poland), Tainan-Elbląg (Poland), Taitung-Debrecen (Hungary). However, their potential for expanding Taiwan's international space remains to be seen. The subnational relations should receive more attention as possible channels for Taiwan's conduct of external relations, not only because of the possible benefits such cooperation may bring for both communities, but also due to their perceived "sovereignty-free" character. With the exception of Prague's relations with Beijing and Shanghai, which became politicized in specific circumstances, many Taiwanese cities are officially linked with localities abroad, despite the latter having already established relations with Chinese municipalities. Tainan-Elbląg (Poland)-Baoji (China) or Taoyuan-Radom (Poland)-Huzhou (China) may serve as examples of such triangles in V4 states.

#### **IV. Factors Behind the 'Taiwan Turn' (or Lack Thereof) Among V4 Countries**

How can we explain the most recent events? The factors behind the attitudes of the V4 countries towards China, although in practice closely interconnected, in this study, for the purpose of clarity, are divided into four categories.

##### **1. U.S.-China Rivalry**

The crucial factor in decisions taken by the V4 countries with respect to their Taiwan policies are security considerations. Although in previous years the debate about the security implications of building closer relations with China was not in the mainstream, to a large degree, due to the Chinese "soft power" de-securitization strategy, observers have noted that the situation has changed in the recent years.<sup>17</sup> The "re-securitization" of economic relations was in large part provoked by United States efforts. Huawei, China's telecommunication giant, has become an important

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17. Jacek Kucharczyk, "Exploiting Political Polarization in Poland," December 5, 2017, *National Endowment for Democracy*, <<https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>>; Richard Turcsányi, "Central European Attitudes towards Chinese Energy Investments: The Case of Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic," *Energy Policy*, Vol. 101, February 2017, pp. 711-722; Matej Šimalčík, "Stories about Middle Kingdom: Case Study of the Slovak Perception of China and its Implications for the Security Policy," *Panorama of Global Security Environment 2017-2018: The Central European Perspective* (Bratislava: STRATPOL, 2018), pp. 343-360.

issue in the Sino-American strategic rivalry. Washington's political and public campaign against it forced the region to make important decisions. In Poland, for example, the arrest of two Huawei employees in January 2019 over spying allegations was fueled by growing Sino-American tensions and signaled Warsaw's support for the U.S. in general and the U.S.' policies towards China in particular. This reminds us that the V4 countries are not spared from the U.S.-China rivalry as the United States is the ultimate guarantor of security for the region. This is another element, which brings Taiwan closer to V4 countries.

In this context, recent acts of friendship by the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland towards Taiwan should be seen as a way to demonstrate loyalty to the U.S. The countries sent signal to the U.S. that they are standing on the forefront of the community of values with Washington. They were particularly eager to clearly define their stance in the face of the intensifying Russian threat towards Ukraine, where U.S. elites were looking for a united front among Western states.<sup>18</sup>

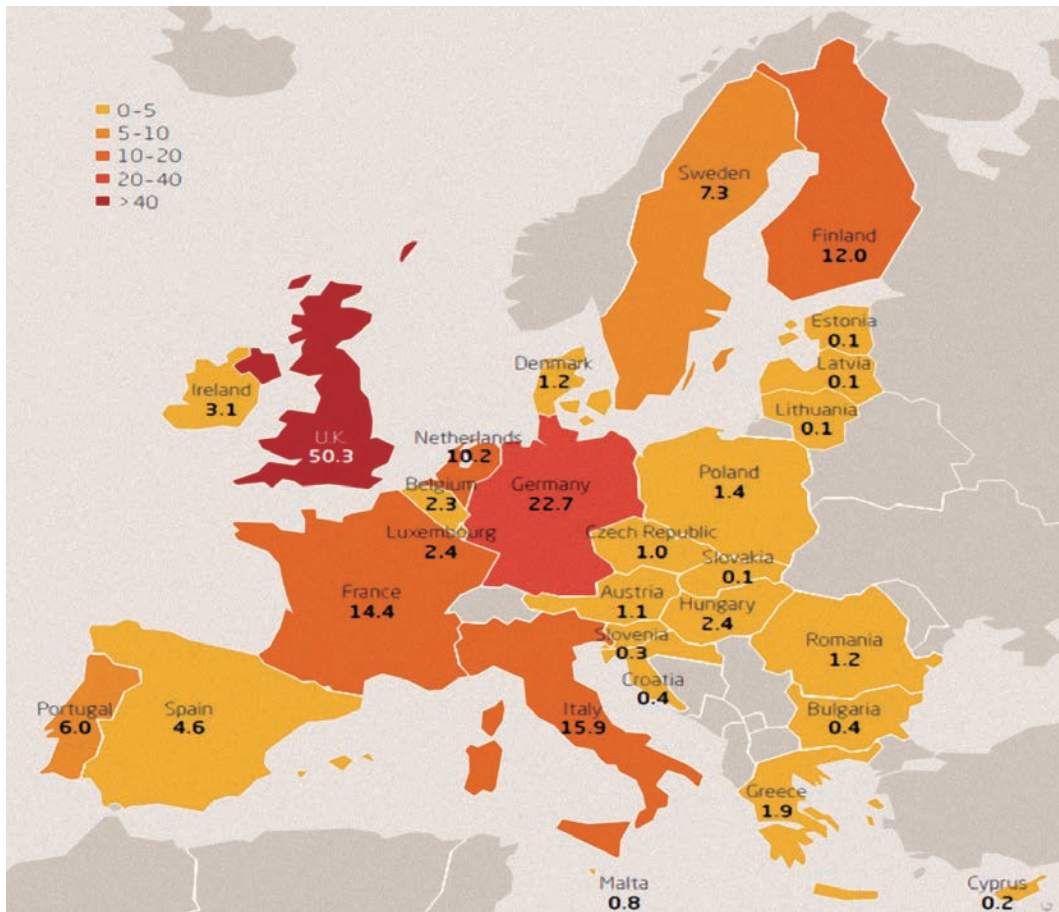
## **2. Growing Disillusionment with China in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland**

One of the crucial factors behind developments in the triangular V4-Taiwan-China relationship were China's unfulfilled economic promises. The countries in the region had mostly regarded Beijing as an economic partner. However, since around 2017 or 2018, the voices of disappointment with the results of economic exchanges, which did not bring about the expected increase in exports nor large-scale inward investment, have been heard in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland. Only Hungary's government still praises its achievements in cooperation with China. Even though the Chinese economic presence in the region has grown, the rise in trade was still mostly in terms of Chinese exports. Chinese direct investment (FDI) in all the 16 CEE states combined reached only US\$1.4 billion in 2018, compared with investment of more than US\$14 billion at the end of 2019 in Germany alone. Chinese FDI in the years 2000-2019 concentrated in Europe's largest economies, with 51% in the UK, 24.8% in Germany, 16% in Italy, 15% in France and 6.3% for all V4 countries (See Figure 4 and 5). The fact that Chinese investments in this group of CEE countries as well

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18. David Hutt, "Taiwan is Making New Friends in Europe. China isn't Happy About It," *Euronews*, February 2, 2022, <<https://www.euronews.com/2022/02/01/taiwan-is-making-new-friends-in-europe-china-isn-t-happy-about-it>>.

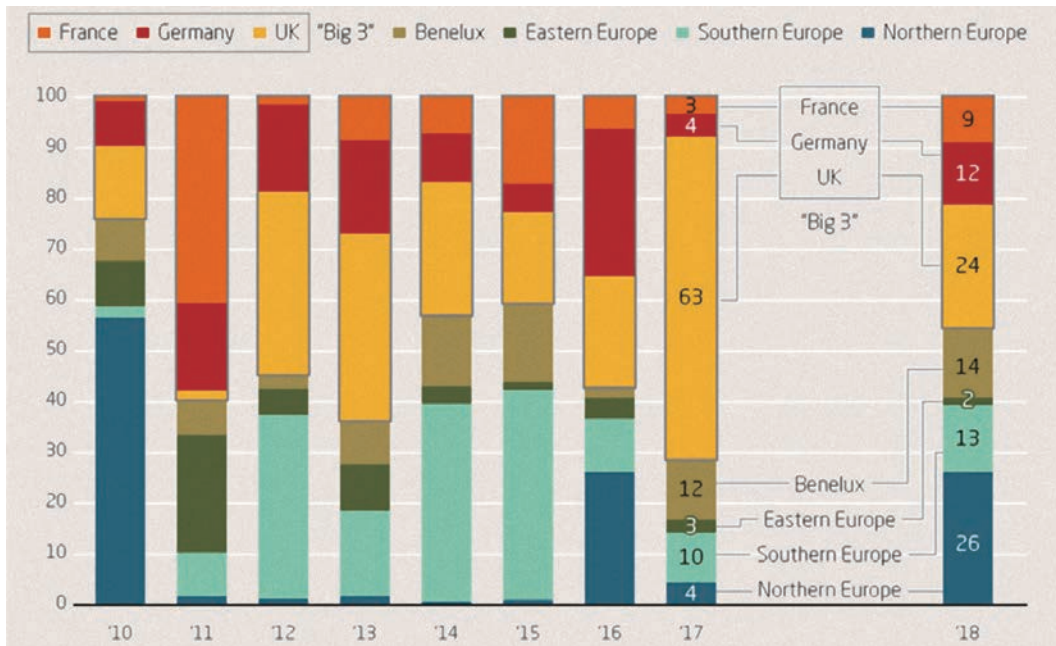
as trade remains low — accounting for less than 9% of the region’s total imports and less than 2% of its exports — has led commentators to argue that economy-wise, these states cannot be easily punished in a confrontation with China, as would be the case for China’s important economic partners, such as Germany or France.<sup>19</sup> The relatively weak economic ties between the CEE and China therefore provide an opportunity for Taiwan.



**Figure 4. Cumulative Value of Chinese FDI Transactions in the EU by Country, 2000-2019**

Source: Agatha Kratz, Mikko Huotari, Thilo Hanemann, & Rebecca Arcesati, “Chinese FDI in Europe: 2019 Update. Special Topic: Research collaborations,” April 2020, *MERICs*, <[https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/MERICs-Rhodium%20Group\\_COFDI-Update-2020%20%282%29.pdf?fbclid=IwAR018Hb-3V1M7RR1su3dUTh8fPYKUzAz5n5iGQPXXEWielZP9CD11Yov8lQ](https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/MERICs-Rhodium%20Group_COFDI-Update-2020%20%282%29.pdf?fbclid=IwAR018Hb-3V1M7RR1su3dUTh8fPYKUzAz5n5iGQPXXEWielZP9CD11Yov8lQ)>.

<sup>19</sup> Andrius Balčiūnas, “Despite China Threats, Lithuania Moves to Recognize Uighur Genocide,”



**Figure 5. Chinese FDI Remains Concentrated in Europe's Largest Economies, 2010-2018**

Source: Agatha Kratz, Mikko Huotari, Thilo Hanemann, & Rebecca Arcesati, "Chinese FDI in Europe: 2019 Update. Special Topic: Research collaborations."

Other important factors that led to a deterioration in perceptions of China in the region were disinformation propaganda and assertive diplomacy. The former employed coercion, incitement, rewards, bribes and purchases of advertising space in order to impose the PRC's official version of events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or protests in Hong Kong.<sup>20</sup> Although these efforts were aimed at improving China's image, in practice they backfired and actually damaged impressions and interests of China. The post-communist societies of Czechia and Slovakia saw the manipulation

*EURACTIV*, April 7, 2021, <[https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/news/despite-china-threats-lithuania-moves-to-recognise-ughur-genocide/?fbclid=IwAR1uRnq6\\_9txgITu9B9ZSDJyrE-WDXJWZL9D\\_ZrJOmQpJTVkPgVPn5Ti\\_Ay4](https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/news/despite-china-threats-lithuania-moves-to-recognise-ughur-genocide/?fbclid=IwAR1uRnq6_9txgITu9B9ZSDJyrE-WDXJWZL9D_ZrJOmQpJTVkPgVPn5Ti_Ay4)>.

<sup>20</sup> Matej Šimalčík, "China's Fight Against 'Erroneous Opinions'," *China Observers*, September 3, 2019, <<https://chinaobservers.eu/chinas-fight-against-erroneous-opinions/>>; Matej Šimalčík & Barbara Kelemen, "Missing in Action? China in Slovakia," in Ivana Karásková et al. eds. *China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe: The Logic and Power of Chinese Influence*, Association for International Affairs (AMO), Policy Paper, June 2020, pp. 53-63, AMO, <[https://mapinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Chinas-Sticks-and-Carrots-in-Central-Europe\\_policy-paper\\_A4\\_-interaktivni\\_03-1.pdf](https://mapinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Chinas-Sticks-and-Carrots-in-Central-Europe_policy-paper_A4_-interaktivni_03-1.pdf)>.

of media in a very negative light: as undermining freedom of expression. This, in turn, is seen as a foreign imposition of power, which in this region is negatively associated with communist-era Soviet dominance. However, in Poland and Hungary, two countries that have been experiencing a democratic backsliding, the Chinese discourse on the superiority of the undemocratic regime over democratic ones in providing economic prosperity has found its supporters among the elites of various political orientations.<sup>21</sup>

The assertive Chinese diplomacy, described in the literature as “sharp power” or “wolf warrior diplomacy,” further increased negative perceptions of China.<sup>22</sup> Chinese diplomats abroad exhibited an increasingly strident behavior and China did not hesitate to use sticks to crack down on governments that crossed its “red lines” by touching upon “sovereignty” related issues, such as Taiwan and Tibet.<sup>23</sup>

Also not without an impact on international perceptions of China and Taiwan has been Beijing’s punishing strategy towards Taiwan since 2016, which reinforced the Western discourse about “China’s rise,” which, from the Chinese perspective, is to be regarded as “peaceful.” In early 2021, *The Economist* labeled the Taiwan as “the most dangerous place on earth,” pointing to it as the potential “flashpoint” for war between the U.S. and China. Additionally, disinformation and a poor response in the initial stages of the pandemic in 2019 led to a significant drop in China’s popularity around the world.

### **3. Domestic Political Factors in V4 Countries’ Policies Towards China and Taiwan**

Following the launch of the 16+1 in 2012, V4 members rather avoided references to possible irritants for Beijing. Economic interests prevailed over the sensitive

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21. Jacek Kucharczyk, “Exploiting Political Polarization in Poland,” p. 113.

22. Peter Martin, *China’s Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 1-11.

23. “Fico: Sino-Slovak Relations Getting Back to Normal Following a Cool Off,” *Slovak Spectator*, November 27, 2017, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20705412/fico-sino-slovak-relations-getting-back-to-normal-following-a-cool-off.html>>; Ivana Karásková, “As Czechs Head to the Polls, China Remains on the Margins,” *China Observers*, October 8, 2021, <<https://chinaobservers.eu/as-czechs-head-to-the-polls-china-remains-on-the-margins/>>.

questions of human rights, democracy, Taiwan and Tibet. The countries seemed to abandon their democratic ideals, which constituted the main element of their post-communist identity and foreign policy. While around the time of 2008 Beijing Olympics Warsaw was highly critical of China, already between 2012-2016, Polish politicians took a pragmatic stance and became much more accommodating in relations with their Asian partner.<sup>24</sup> In Slovakia, Prime Minister Robert Fico strongly condemned a meeting between President Andrej Kiska with the Dalai Lama in 2016. Although the president met the Tibetan spiritual leader in his private capacity, the prime minister interpreted it as a threat to Slovak economic cooperation with China.<sup>25</sup>

Economic interests overrode ethical issues under the Social-Democratic coalition government in Czechia (2014-2017), and in Slovakia, under Robert Fico (2006-10, 2012-18) and Peter Pellegrini (2018-2020). However, in Czechia, already in 2017, China did not enjoy the same support in ruling circles led by the ANO party as among its predecessors. The Andrej Babiš' center-left government was more assertive in dealing with China. And finally, after the recent elections, the popular "economy first" approach on display between 2014-2017 lost its appeal and gave a way to more traditional topics in Czech diplomacy—human rights and democracy.<sup>26</sup> The new Czech center-right prime minister, Petr Fiala, appointed Jan Lipavský as foreign minister, who presents China as a threat to his country. Moreover, the new coalition government's agreement concerning foreign policy issues spells out the goal of deepening "cooperation with democratic partners in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Taiwan."<sup>27</sup> Various articles in Taiwanese media correctly highlighted the crucial role played by the new government in improving Taipei-Prague relations.

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24. Paulina Kanarek, "Sino-European Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from the Chinese Investment in Poland," *Mapping China Journal*, No. 1, 2017, pp. 106-115.

25. Matej Šimalčík & Barbara Kelemen, "Missing in Action? China in Slovakia," pp. 53-63.

26. Alžběta Bajerová, "Inside of China's Current Hassle with the 'Rogue' Mayor of Prague," *China Observers*, August 1, 2019, <<https://chinaobservers.eu/inside-of-chinas-current-hassle-with-the-rogue-mayor-of-prague/>>.

27. Siegfried Mortkowitz, "On Day 1, New Czech Prime Minister Turns West," *Politico*, December 17, 2021, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-prime-minister-petr-fiala-prague-jan-lipavsky/>>.





members of the opposition also support relations with Beijing. Among the very scarce signs of internal questioning of the government's pro-China policies were the events in June 2021, when people went to the streets of Budapest to protest against plans for the establishment of a local branch of Shanghai's Fudan University in June 2021.<sup>30</sup> Commentators agree that a shift in Hungary's policies towards China and Taiwan would be possible only with the ouster of Viktor Orbán in the 2022 elections. The opposition parties recently included the China issue in their political campaigns. Among other things, they target the Orbán government's controversial cooperation projects with China, such as the procurement of Chinese medical equipment during the pandemic or the Budapest-Belgrade railway, pointing out concerns over debt and corruption.

Polish policies towards Taiwan are a consequence of Warsaw's strategy of maneuvering between the U.S. and China.<sup>31</sup> This balancing of interests has manifested itself on multiple occasions. On the one hand, Warsaw supports the U.S.' "Clean Network" campaign, which Poland joined in June 2020 and whose purpose is to build a 5G infrastructure free of Chinese influence, chief among those the Huawei telecommunications giant. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has called for "all of Europe to stand with America on 5G," and warned against "influence from authoritarian regimes."<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, despite the boycott of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics over human rights concerns by a number of Western countries including the United States, Australia, Canada, Belgium and Japan, Polish President Andrzej Duda attended the opening ceremony. He was one of only two presidents present from Europe (the other was Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić) and the highest ranking politicians from the EU.<sup>33</sup>

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30. "Budapest Protest Against China's Fudan University Campus," *BBC*, June 5, 2021, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57372653>>.

31. Justyna Szczudlik, "Poland: Maneuvering Between the US and EU While not Decoupling from China," in Mario Esteban et al. eds. *Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry* (ETNC, 2020), pp. 123-131.

32. Mateusz Morawiecki, "All of Europe Must Stand with America on 5G," *The Telegraph*, July 15, 2020, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/07/15/europe-must-stand-america-5g/>>; U.S. Department of State, The Clean Network, "Building a Clean Network: Key Milestones," March 8, 2022, accessed, *U.S. Department of State*, <<https://2017-2021.state.gov/building-a-clean-network-key-milestones/index.html>>.

Moreover, in Poland, opinions on whether China is an opportunity or a threat go beyond political divisions. Poland started to advocate boosting cooperation with China during the liberal Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) rule and the conservative Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) continued its predecessor's policies towards China after it came to power in 2015, only "with greater involvement and enthusiasm."<sup>34</sup> The supporters and opponents of stronger ties with China are within governmental circles as well as in the opposition. This partially explains Polish inertia in relations with China mixed with periods of rapprochement and ambivalent policies towards Taiwan.

#### 4. The Taiwan Factor

Taiwan has skillfully navigated the changing situation and taken advantage of the favorable circumstances by contributing to their creation or reinforcing them. The more China becomes the "Other" the more Taiwan is perceived as one of "Us" in the area of security and democratic values. Nowadays, the West and Taiwan have the same perceived enemy. Consequently, Western countries are able to understand the "China's threat" to Taiwan better than ever and they can learn from Taiwan's broad experience of dealing with its powerful neighbor.

As a result of the Chinese crackdown on Taiwan in paralleled with President Tsai's efforts to show the world that Taiwan is "a staunch guardian of peace,"<sup>35</sup> it is Beijing, not Taipei, that has come to be seen as irresponsible and threatening peace, not only in the Taiwan Strait, but world-wide, and particularly when the U.S.-China rivalry is concerned. The juxtaposition of Taiwan with China's efforts to rewrite the rules-based global order and its increasing assertiveness and violations of human rights, highlights Taiwan's appeal as a responsible and democratic partner. Western

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33. Shannon Tiezzi, "Who's Coming to the Beijing Olympics?" *The Diplomat*, January 29, 2022, <<https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/whos-coming-to-the-beijing-olympics/?fbclid=IwAR3NMr8BNGU1CKgcPM95iDWNkUQLuSHMB6dTR1ehDFtBmeXGXhYrrB1iNaI>>.

34. Łukasz Sarek, "Poland and the EU: Seeking a Two-way Street with China," March 30, 2018, *The Warsaw Institute Review*, <<https://warsawinstitute.org/poland-eu-seeking-two-way-street-china/>>.

35. Commonwealth Magazine, "Full Text of President Tsai's Inaugural Address," May 20, 2016, *Commonwealth Magazine*, <<https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=90>>.

countries fear the Chinese disinformation, “sharp power,” and “attempts of the PRC to influence the internal affairs of other countries in economic, political and societal domains”<sup>36</sup> — all of which Taiwan has claimed to experience since it became a democracy.

The most recent Chinese disinformation and poor response in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further undermined perceptions of the Asian power in Europe and beyond. In contrast, Taiwanese politicians, with the support of society, launched a successful campaign to show the world that they are not only able to deal with COVID-19 themselves but also “can help” others.

## V. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

After the 2008 financial crisis, the growing demand for Chinese investment drove CEE countries closer to China and away from Taiwan. However, in recent years, some of them started to promote more active policies towards Taipei. Still, countries in the region, even within the V4, are not a monolithic group, and consequently their support for Taiwan differs, and will continue to do so in future. They diverge when it comes to domestic policies, attitudes towards European integration, and the main focus of their external relations. The new governments in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are relatively EU-friendly and pay more attention to values-based foreign policy than the euro-sceptic governments of Poland and Hungary. Warsaw and Budapest, in order to diversify international partners away from the EU, have focused on economic goals, which may lead to the prevalence of a pragmatic foreign policy outlook over ethical concepts. As such, Slovakia and Czechia are among the leading voices for broadening engagement with Taipei. Poland, in turn, has responded positively to developing pragmatic economic and cultural contacts, but its recent rapprochement with China seems to prevent it from having a more proactive Taiwan strategy. Hungary, which attracted the highest amount of Chinese FDI among the V4 states, has been the staunchest ally of Beijing in this part of the world, and therefore has not participated in the recent CEE “turn to Taiwan,” although at the same time it has made progress in the area of economic, technological and academic cooperation with Taiwan.

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<sup>36</sup> Petra Vaculíková, “Chinese Influence in the World: Global Strategy, Local Impacts,” *Sinofon*, February 29, 2020, <<https://sinofon.cz/workshops-conferences/previous-events/chinese-influence-in-the-world-global-strategy-local-impacts/>>.

Besides the domestic factors, external influences play a huge role in shaping foreign policy decisions of the four countries. The key to understanding their choices on the international stage in general and with respect to Taiwan in particular is the region's traditional strategic dependence on the United States, its profound and complex interdependencies with the EU and recent developments in their relations with China. This complicated web of relations turned the countries of the region into a stage on which the three powers compete for influence. In this competition, the U.S. has recently scored more points due to the growing perception of China as a security threat and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. China's ratings in contrast have been falling due to its unfulfilled economic promises, disinformation, propaganda and assertive diplomacy in the region as well as in Asia, including the punishing strategy towards Taiwan since 2016. As these factors played out in different ways among the V4 countries, its members demonstrated various degrees of support for Taiwan.



**Figure 7. After Taipei and Prague Agree to Sign a Sister-City Agreement, Taipei Offers Two Pangolins to the Prague Zoo**

Source: Taipei Zoo, "Taipei Zoo ready to ship pangolins to Prague for loan," *Focus Taiwan*, October 31, 2021, <<https://focustaiwan.tw/society/202110310011>>.

The success of Taiwanese efforts to sustain the momentum in relations with Slovakia and Czechia and to attract other countries from the region will depend to a great degree on how well it can differentiate itself from China and avoid the mistakes Beijing made in the region.

1. While China was seen mainly as an economic opportunity, Taiwan needs to show that as a “smart” and democratic power, it has more to offer in areas such as technology, education and culture.

2. Still, from an economic perspective, there is lots of room for improvement in exchanges between Taiwan and V4. Taiwanese investments in the whole EU represent only around 2% of Taiwan’s global FDI.<sup>37</sup> The largest share of this investment in 2020 went to Hungary, with 89.8%,<sup>38</sup> followed by Slovakia and the Czech Republic — the largest recipient of Taiwanese investment in the EU.<sup>39</sup> Taiwan’s most important trade partners in the EU have been from in Western Europe — Germany, the Netherlands, UK, France, Italy, with V4 states getting a very small share (see Table 2).

**Table 2. 2021 Value of Exports & Imports with Taiwan by V4 Country in Million USD (January-December 2021)**

Country Name	Total trade			Export			Import		
	Ranking	Amount	Share	Ranking	Amount	Share	Ranking	Amount	Share
Poland	35	1,653.81	0.200	27	1,241.74	0.278	50	412.07	0.108
Hungary	44	1,124.80	0.136	35	727.75	0.163	52	397.05	0.104
Czech Republic	46	954.39	0.115	40	529.31	0.119	49	425.07	0.112
Slovakia	63	350.79	0.042	65	129.86	0.029	57	220.86	0.058

Source: The Bureau of Foreign Trade, MOEA, “Value of Exports & Imports By Country,” February 24, 2022, accessed, *The Bureau of Foreign Trade, MOEA*, <<https://cuswebo.trade.gov.tw/FSCE040F/FSCE040F>>.

<sup>37</sup> European Commission, “Trade, Policy, Countries and Regions: Taiwan,” March 5, 2022, accessed, *European Commission*, <<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/taiwan/>>.

<sup>38</sup> Jens Kastner, “Taiwan Eyes Growth Potential in Central and Eastern Europe,” *AmCham Taiwan*, December 27, 2021, <<https://topics.amcham.com.tw/2021/12/taiwan-growth-potential-central-eastern-europe/>>.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall Reid, “Slovakia’s Growing Ties with Taiwan Signal Discontent with China in Central

3. The recent disappointment in the region with China was to a large degree the result of the different expectations on both sides. China as well as the V4 states kept their own versions concerning the results of cooperation. China has never clearly defined the purpose of the 17+1 format or BRI, which opened the room for various interpretations. Taiwan has to avoid this mistake in its dealings with the region. It should only make promises on which it can deliver.

4. The positive momentum in Taiwan-CEE relations will last as long as China, not Taiwan, is perceived as the “irresponsible” and “threatening” actor in the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, a return to the Chen Shui-bian approach to foreign policy would work with respect to promoting Taiwan’s image of a democratic state, but not when it comes to undermining the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

5. Taiwan’s diplomacy cannot aim at the establishment of official relations but at the diversification of relations by gaining new friends in the region, increasing its visibility, people-to-people contacts, economic exchanges and cultivating subnational relations.

6. China in Hungary and the Czech Republic relied on certain political and business elites who often represented a single political orientation. This dependence on selected individuals provided a political tool in the hands of the opposition parties. Taiwan has to avoid this scenario, and instead it should look for various channels of communication, including the development of people-to-people and contacts at the subnational-level. This is the only way to avoid the potential consequences of electoral volatility.<sup>40</sup>

7. One of the obstacles which prevented Beijing’s from fostering substantial relations with the region was a lack of understanding, which among other things manifested itself in a lack of sensitivity among Chinese embassies to the local symbols

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and Eastern Europe,” *The Diplomat*, December 14, 2021, <<https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/slovakias-growing-ties-with-taiwan-signal-discontent-with-china-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>>.

40. Marcin Jerzewski, “Beyond COVID-19 Diplomacy: Sustaining Momentum in CEE-Taiwan Relations,” *China Observers*, August 20, 2021, <<https://chinaobservers.eu/beyond-covid-19-diplomacy-sustaining-the-momentum-in-cee-taiwan-relations/>>.

and elements of identity. Therefore, Taiwanese diplomats have to put into practice their great skills “to navigate the fears and desires of governments ....., to proactively seek partnerships but also to be patient when governments believe that the timing is not appropriate .....”<sup>41</sup> The Taiwanese government, in turn, should promote programs to increase deeper understanding of the region among the current and future leaders of cooperation.

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41. J. Michael Cole, *Cross-Strait Relations Since 2016. The End of the Illusion* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 140.

