



DISSERTATION | DOCTORAL THESIS

Titel | Title

De-Europeanisation of National Foreign Policy of EU Member States: Is China A Driver? The cases of Hungary and Czechia.

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doktor der Philosophie (Dr.phil.)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 796 310 300

Dissertationsgebiet lt. Studienblatt | Field of
study as it appears on the student record
sheet:

Politikwissenschaft

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Patrick Müller Privatdoz. M.A.

Acknowledgement

They call it “the PhD Process”, and yes, it sure was a process. But what in life isn’t a process? For me, this process took six years, with all its ups and downs, twists and turns. I wouldn’t have completed this process without the unwavering support and the patient guidance from my supervisor, friends, colleagues, and most importantly, my family.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Patrick Müller. Thank you for imparting a great deal of knowledge to me, and for constantly sharing your perspectives, ideas, and insights. Without you, this process would not have been possible. More importantly, throughout this process, you have shown great understanding and support for my familial responsibilities and my professional commitments. For this, I am very grateful.

Secondly, I would like to thank the people whom I interviewed over the process. Without their interest, readiness, and support, this thesis would have looked quite differently.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank the friends and colleagues who made this process and my sojourn in Vienna enjoyable. A big thank you to Malcolm Crick and Tiffany Williams for all the late-night laughs and drinks. I would also like to thank Anna, my Paris Family, my Russians, and the Fantastic Wieners for all the heart-to-heart conversations, and for all the fun.

I would like to express my utmost gratitude to my family, without which none of this would be possible. I thank my grandma and my late grandpa for their early upbringing and for their constant guidance. In fact, it was my late grandpa who taught me the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, bought me my first world atlas, and introduced me to the literature related to history and political science. All of this planted a seed in me in my formative years, which ultimately led me to this PhD. I thank my mum and dad for giving up their rising careers and their comfortable lives to immigrate to Canada. Your decision has changed my life forever and words cannot describe how grateful I am. I thank my aunties and uncles for giving me their unconditional love and support. I thank my sister Lindsay for being the constant drive that pushes me forward.

Last but not least, I want to thank myself. It has not been easy to pull this off with everything that is going in my life, but I did it. Now, I am ready for the next chapter of my life.

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List of Abbreviations

AEI	American Enterprise Institute
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BIS	Security Information Service
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAP	common agricultural policy
CCTV	China Central Television
CEE	Central and Eastern European
CEECs	Central and Eastern European countries
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CI	Confucius Institute
CMC	China National Machinery Import & Export Corporation
COREPER	Committee of Permanent Representatives
COREU	Correspondance Européenne
COVEC	China Overseas Engineering Group
CPC	Communist Party of China
CRCC	China Railway Construction Corporation
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSO	civil society organisation
ČSSD	Czech Social Democratic Party
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EC	European Community
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EP	European Parliament
EPC	European Political Community
EPP	European People's Party
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
EUNIC	European Union National Institutes of Culture
FDI	foreign direct investment
FN	Front National
FPÖ	Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs)
GDP	Gross domestic product
GDP (PPP)	Gross domestic product by purchasing power parity
HPPD	High-Level People-to-People Dialogue
HR/VP	High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the European Commission
ICT	information and communications technology
IFDI	inward foreign direct investment
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	international relations
KDNP	Christian Democratic People's Party
KDU-ČSL	Christian Democrats
KSČM	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia
LIDEM	Liberal Democrats
MÁÉRT	Hungarian Permanent Conference (Magyar Állandó Értekezlet)

MÁV	Hungarian State Railways
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament
MES	market economy status
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (generally)
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
MNB	Hungarian National Bank (Magyar Nemzeti Bank)
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
MOFCOM	Ministry of Commerce
MSZP	Hungarian Socialist Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisations
NSS	national security strategy
NUKIB	National Cyber and Information Security Agency
OFDI	outward foreign direct investment
OMC	Open Method of Coordination
OO	outside option
OSD	Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana)
ÖVP	Austrian People's Party
PiS	Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)
PKF	Prague Philharmonic Orchestra
PM	Prime Minister
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRR	populist radical right
ŘN-VU	Order of the Nation – Patriotic Union
ROO	rules of organisation and operation
SiLKS	Silk Road Think Tank Network
SPO	Party of Civic Rights (Strana Práv Občanů)
SZ	Green Party
SZDSZ	Alliance of Free Democrats
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TPP/TTIP	Trans-Pacific Partnership/Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
US–DEU	Freedom Union–Democratic Union (Unie Svobody–Demokratická unie)
V4	Visegrád Group
VV	Public Affairs
WTO	World Trade Organization

List of Interviews

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1. INTRODUCTION

International relations are changing fast, and new balances of power are emerging in the global arena, as acknowledged by the EU itself (European Council 2003; European Union 2016). This past decade was marked by growing uncertainty amongst Western allies and the erosion of their long-established dominant position on the international scene (Cox 2012). This seismic transformation, variably referred to as ‘the Age of Asia’ (Bartsch and Laudien 2019), the ‘Rise of the Rest’ (Zakaria 2011) or ‘Easternization’ (Rachman 2016), will undoubtedly reshape the international order in the years to come. As the EU navigates this sea of changes, the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States and his promise to ‘Make America Great Again’ have cast its long-standing transatlantic relationship into doubt. Whereas in 2003 it was the US’s assertive unilateralism in the Iraq War under President George W. Bush that irritated many European political elites (European Council 2003), today, ironically, it has been the US’s disengagement and decline that have exacerbated the anxieties of these elites. This has prompted Brussels and many European capitals to rethink their international position, allies, foreign policy, and security issues. In the economic sphere, Western liberal capitalism has been challenged by rising economies, such as China, India and Brazil, who seek to capitalise on the opportunities that the open global economy has to offer, all whilst maintaining their practice of heterodox economic policies (Ban and Blyth 2013). Since the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and notably since the global financial crisis in 2008, their economic clout has been translated into political influence, and countries such as China have been able to offer an alternative model of governance for many countries, including EU Member States (Fox and Godement 2009; Godement et al. 2011; Godement and Vasselier 2017).

The European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) faces major challenges, both abroad and at home, to the extent that its purpose and even its very existence are being questioned (European Union 2016, 3). In the past, the debate surrounding the Union’s actions, or the lack thereof, in international affairs primarily focused on Member States’ unwillingness to cede more power to Brussels, thus weakening European institutions and crippling their capability to act. More recently, however, the focus has shifted towards the question of domestic support for the EU and EU foreign policymaking, originating from both domestic political actors and the wider European public. The origin of these issues can arguably be traced back to the global financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent European sovereign debt crisis, which led to severe economic dislocation in many Member States. The single European currency—the euro—once praised as one of the greatest achievements of the European integration project was (and perhaps still is) seen as an economic liability. During the height of the crisis, there were talks of leaving the eurozone, and studies were carried out to study the legality thereof (see e.g., Estella 2015; Dammann 2012). The EU’s handling of this crisis has had two major implications: First, the prolonged economic malaise across the Union and the lack of capital in many Member States (mostly southern and eastern ones) have opened the door to foreign investors, such as China, who were willing to help these cash-strapped Member States with shoring up their ailing economies, but often with strings attached (see e.g., Godement et al. 2011). Second, this economic situation, coupled with other sources of popular discontent, has fuelled Euroscepticism (Kaeding et al. 2021). These Eurosceptic sentiments are present across the Union, affecting many if not all Member States, regardless of their size, economy and geography. From France’s Front National (FN) and Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to Austria’s Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party, or FPÖ) and Hungary’s Jobbik, these right-wing, populist, Eurosceptic parties are fierce defenders of national sovereignty and see the EU as a threat thereto. The UK’s Brexit referendum in 2016

and the country's formal withdrawal from the EU in 2020 reveal just how destructive these parties can be to European integration.

Furthermore, some of these aforementioned parties have gained a foothold in national legislatures and now wield (significant) political influence in their respective Member States, which further poses challenges to the EU and its foreign policymaking. This is especially the case for Central and Eastern European (CEE) Member States. The increase in illiberal practices in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Romania has significantly changed their foreign policies (see e.g., Varga and Buzogány 2020; Sedelmeier 2014). Almost immediately after their accession in 2004/2007, there were discussions on the effectiveness of conditionality in safeguarding Europeanised gains (see e.g., Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Sedelmeier 2008). However, as scholars have noted, the incentive structure and the sanctions available against breaches after accession are significantly weaker than the threat of withholding EU membership before accession (Sedelmeier 2017; Blauburger and Sedelmeier 2025). To many, these assaults against the core values of liberal democracy are seen as a signal that the European integration project is in eminent danger (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Varga and Buzogány 2020), and these developments are further aggravated by assertive autocracies such as Russia and China increasing their economic and political influence in the region (Jacoby and Korkut 2015; Orenstein and Kelemen 2017).

It is important to treat the aforementioned external and internal challenges to the EU and its CFSP not as stand-alone but as interconnected phenomena that organically interact with one another. The discussion above has already highlighted some of their links and connectedness. This holds theoretically, because, although foreign policy is a policy field directed towards the external environment, it is a product of domestic policymaking and thus 'can never be abstracted from the domestic context out of which it springs' (Hill 2003, 37–39). In other words, foreign policy is influenced by both the 'international sources of domestic politics' (Gourevitch 1978) and the 'domestic sources of foreign policy' (Rosenau et al. 1967). Accordingly, the analysis of any foreign policy, national or European, needs to take both internal and external factors into account.

All in all, these challenges present an interesting puzzle for researchers, prompting them to review how EU foreign policymaking should be studied. Until now, the literature has examined EU foreign policymaking from within and focused on institutionalisation, policy adaptation and cooperation within the CFSP framework (see e.g., M. E. Smith 2004; Tonra 2003) as well as the Europeanisation of Member States' national foreign policies (see e.g., P. Graziano and Vink 2008; Gross 2011; Wong and Hill 2011; de Flers and Müller 2012). In these studies, Europeanisation is largely understood as a positive and unidirectional process; that is, as time goes on, national foreign policies will become more aligned to EU common positions, and more cooperation on CFSP matters will take place in Brussels. That said, times are different now. The aforementioned challenges have the potential to undermine the cohesion of the CFSP and hamper its institutional capability to address external development, and despite their corrosive nature, researchers know relatively little about them to date.

Building upon the novel theoretical conceptualisation of 'de-Europeanisation', this PhD thesis takes stock of these challenges and provides a tentative explanation of the current state of being of EU foreign policymaking. In doing so, this PhD thesis contributes to the field of (de-)Europeanisation in the following ways: First, it challenges the axiomatic assumptions about Europeanisation, not least the assumption of its positive unidirectionality. Second, it develops the novel concept of 'de-Europeanisation' and theorises about its various drivers,

elements and dynamics. Third, it introduces China as an external actor into the equation and explains how powerful external actors may engage with and possibly contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Member States' national foreign policies. To this end, the empirical research of this thesis follows a two-step process. To begin with, it embarks on a descriptive analysis that fleshes out the phenomena that can be understood as signs of de-Europeanisation. The simple question here is: what has been de-Europeanised in Member States' national foreign policies? Second, it provides an argumentative analysis that explains the aetiological forces that underpin these phenomena. The question here is: what are the mechanisms through which China engages with and possibly contributes to the de-Europeanisation of national foreign policies delineated in the descriptive analysis?

This PhD thesis is constructed as a comparative small-*n* case study of the Czech Republic and Hungary. For many, these two countries have long been seen as 'poster children' of Europeanisation, and their accession in 2004 was a great testament to their realignment with the West. Yet, for rather small countries, the Czech Republic and notably Hungary have garnered significant media and academic attention since 2010 because of their political developments after Petr Nečas and Viktor Orbán arrived in power. Since then, both Hungary and Czechia have adopted increasingly Eurosceptic rhetoric and have, in various ways, challenged the coherence of EU foreign policy: In Hungary, Orbán's government has frequently obstructed decisions from Brussels, most notably by threatening vetoes on sanctions against Russia, financial aid to Ukraine, and even the opening of Ukraine's EU accession talks. These actions, especially undertaken during Hungary's conflict with the EU over the rule of law, have been interpreted as a form of 'soft hostage-taking' of EU foreign policy (P. Müller and Slominski 2025). In Czechia, while the country's foreign policy remains largely anchored in the EU framework, senior political figures, in particular President Miloš Zeman and PM Andrej Babiš, have publicly questioned the EU's stance on the annexation of Crimea and the effectiveness of sanctions on Russia. These rhetorical divergences have contributed to increasingly ambiguous foreign policy actions that, whilst not fully de-Europeanised in practice, send mixed signals to domestic and European actors (T. Weiss 2021)

A sizeable literature has been dedicated to these two countries, and whilst some scholars explicitly claim that both countries are showing signs of de-Europeanisation, others implicitly support this view without using the exact term (see e.g., Ágh 2019; Kelemen 2020; Simon 2019; Pállinger 2019; Bogaards 2018; Szymański 2017; Kizeková 2018; Korkut and Gyollai 2020). Furthermore, both countries and the wider CEE region were hit hard by the global financial crisis and the subsequent European sovereign debt crisis. As a consequence, China has become a (major) source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in these two countries. In order to secure more Chinese money, both countries have spoken against their previous governments and broken away from EU common consensus on CFSP matters, with Hungary even flirting with a Chinese mode of governance. In short, these two countries provide a sound and apt testing ground to see what de-Europeanisation is (and is not) as well as how China engages with and possibly contributes to the de-Europeanisation of Member States' national foreign policies.

This PhD thesis is organised as follows: This first chapter provides some introductory remarks and sets the stage for the rest of the thesis. The second chapter is a review of relevant literature in the scope of this thesis. It comprises two parts. In the first part, the literature on (de-)Europeanisation is reviewed. This exercise is important, because the more recent theoretical conceptualisation of de-Europeanisation was developed based upon this established literature of Europeanisation. It starts off with reviewing the vertical and horizontal conceptualisations of Europeanisation. It then compares and contrasts 'Europeanisation West'

with ‘Europeanisation East’ in order to flesh out the particularities related to the Czech Republic and Hungary’s process of Europeanisation. In the second part, it reviews the literature on China–EU relations. To this end, it traces the history and evolution of Chinese foreign policy to provide a better and nuanced understanding of modern-day Chinese foreign policy. It also explains the actors involved in Chinese foreign policymaking and its implementation abroad. This is necessary because the Chinese foreign policy apparatus is far more complex and opaquer than its Western counterparts. Last, the chapter examines key issues in the political, economic and societal dimensions of China–EU relations that are pertinent to this thesis.

The third chapter is the research design. Building upon the literature review in the second chapter, this chapter first constructs a conceptual framework for de-Europeanisation, by defining (‘what is de-Europeanisation?’) and delimiting (‘what is not de-Europeanisation?’) the concept. It then constructs a theoretical embedding for external actors’ influence on de-Europeanisation upon which the rest of the thesis is anchored. After having defined the conceptual domain and laid down the theoretical foundation, the chapter then poses the research and sub-research questions. Finally, it concludes with the analytical and methodological design that will be adopted in order to answer these aforementioned questions.

The fourth chapter provides a contextual background for positioning the subsequent empirical analyses and findings. This is a necessary exercise, given China’s rather unique modern history. It traces the history and evolution of China–EU relations, examines the structures and processes of Chinese foreign policymaking and situates Hungary and Czechia within in this setting and the broader geopolitical landscape of Central and Eastern Europe. This chapter also explains China’s unique foreign policy apparatus and explains the various facets that affect its making.

The fifth chapter has two aims: First, it examines the bilateral relations between China and the two case study countries between 2010 and 2020 and paints an important backdrop against which China’s engagement with and contributions to the de-Europeanisation of their national foreign policies can be identified and analysed. Second, it sheds light on the various mechanisms (be they organisational, political or economic) through which China exerts influence to shape foreign policy preferences and actions that diverge from EU norms. Special attention is given to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the ‘17+1’ regional cooperation format.

Moving on to the empirical findings of this research, the sixth chapter, using Hungary as a case study, provides a longitudinal analysis of the country’s foreign policy trajectory before and after EU accession. The chapter traces the Europeanisation of Hungary’s foreign policy institutions and practices before 2010 and analyses the shift towards de-Europeanisation in the following decade. It explores the rhetorical, substantive and institutional changes that have led to an increasing misalignment with EU foreign policy, contextualised by China’s growing presence and domestic political transformations. Similarly, the seventh chapter then examines Czechia, charting the country’s process of Europeanisation prior to 2010 and explaining how de-Europeanisation has since unfolded. Whilst the Czech experience differs substantially from the Hungarian experience, the chapter identifies moments of rhetorical divergence and political ambiguity that suggest a subtle and nuanced form of de-Europeanisation.

The final chapter synthesises the key empirical and theoretical findings of this thesis. It begins with a restatement of the research problem and posits it in the overall context of China’s role in the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian and Czech foreign policies. It summarises the main

insights from both case studies, reflecting on how different forms of Chinese influence have manifested and interacted with different domestic political contexts. The chapter then highlights the theoretical contribution of the research by expanding the concept of de-Europeanisation to include external actors and their ways of exerting influence. Finally, the chapter acknowledges the research's limitations and propose avenues for future research, including the exploration of other external actors and Member States within and beyond the CEE region.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Literature Review on Europeanisation

This research treats ‘Europeanisation’ as the parent concept, from which stems the more recent concept of ‘de-Europeanisation’. To better shape the conceptualisation of ‘de-Europeanisation’ in later sections and to put flesh on the bones, so to speak, a literature review on Europeanisation is prudent here. Compared to other fields of study in political science and international relations (IR), Europeanisation studies, especially Europeanisation as applied to foreign policy, have experienced a remarkable growth over the past two decades. This growth has been driven more by the geographical¹ and sectoral² expansion of Europeanisation studies than by their conceptual and theoretical consolidation, despite the significant progress achieved by the latter. This inflationary growth from an ‘emergent field of inquiry’ (Goetz and Hix 2001, 15) to a catch-all, omnipotent concept has attracted a fair share of concerns and criticisms: Europeanisation has been criticised for suffering from conceptual overstretching (Radaelli 2002), for being confusingly or poorly defined (Mair 2004) and for having limited explanatory capacity, due to either the confusion over its direction of causality (Wong and Hill 2011) or the lack of parsimony in its measurement (Lodge 2006).

The question then arises: what went wrong? To answer this question, it is important to first trace the genealogy of this concept. Adopted from the broader literature of European studies,³ the term ‘Europeanisation’ was originally employed as an ‘attention-directing device’, in the words of Olsen (2002, 921), to (better) understand how European integration ‘hits home’. Yet, ‘scholars coming from different theoretical traditions touch upon different parts of the elephant and thus portray a different beast’ (Jensen and Kristensen 2013, 1) and as such, they generated a ‘bewilderingly large of array of definitions’ (Jordan and Liefferink 2004, 4). Some researchers conceptualised Europeanisation in great depth, at the expense of the concept’s field and theoretical utility; others expanded the concept’s utility by broadening the *definiendum*,

¹ For example, Europeanisation studies, especially Europeanisation as applied to foreign policy, have been extended to the following countries: Czechia (Waisová 2006), Denmark (Larsen 2012), Estonia (Kuus 2002), Finland (Palosaari 2011; Haukkala and Ojanen 2012; Jokela 2013), France (Wong 2005; Rieker 2006; Gross 2009b; Charillon and Wong 2012; Drake 2013), Germany (Miskimmon 2007; Gross 2009c; Daehnhardt 2012; 2011), Greece (Agnantopoulos 2010; Gemenis and Lefkofridi 2013; Tsardanidis and Stavridis 2012), Ireland (Tonra 1999), Italy (Brighi 2012), Malta (Fiott 2010), Poland (Pomorska 2007; 2012; Kasproicz and Styczyńska 2013), Portugal (Raimundo 2013), Romania (Micu 2011), Slovenia (Kajnc 2012; Fenko and Lovec 2015), Spain (Torreblanca 2001; Barbé 2012) and (formerly) the UK (Dover 2007; Gross 2009a; Aktipis and Oliver 2012; Mannin 2013). There are also Europeanisation studies based on small-*n* case selection: the neutral Member States of Austria and Ireland (Alecú de Flers 2012), the Central and Eastern Member States of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia (Denca 2009) or Romania and Bulgaria (Dimitrova 2020; Surubaru 2020), and Nordic Member States (Laatikainen 2003). There are, for example, some studies that compare current Member States and prospective members—Romania and North Macedonia (Demetropoulou 2002), Greece and Turkey (Terzi 2005), Romania, Moldova and Ukraine (Vahl 2015)—as well as studies that examine non-Member States, such as EEA states (Magnússon 2014) and the Eastern Neighbourhood (Flenley 2013).

² For example, Europeanisation studies have been extended to the following sectors and policy areas: foreign policy *stricto sensu* (Blair 2004; Wong 2005; Gross 2009d; Pomorska and Wright 2013), cohesion policy (Bache 2008), environmental policy (Börzel 2008), economic policy (Dyson 2008), social policy (Falkner 2008), anti-discrimination policy (Guiraudon 2008), asylum policy (Lavenex 2008), agricultural policy (Roederer-Rynning 2008), telecommunication policy (Schneider and Werle 2008), immigration policy (Lahav and Luedtke 2013), energy and climate policy (Vogler 2013), development policy (Bretherton 2013), health care policy (Kostera 2014; Heard-Lauréote 2013), welfare policy (Ladi and Graziano 2014) and food safety policy (Alam 2014).

³ For an overview of the genesis and early development of this concept, see Olsen (2002) and Graziano and Vink (2008).

but in doing so undermined its boundedness.⁴ Furthermore, the concept has even been employed in contradictory contexts, and ‘the majority of its work has not been reflexive about the concept it is employing’ (Buller and Gamble 2002, 5).

Today, however, the concept of Europeanisation has arguably come of age and has established itself as a relatively stable middle-range theory, ‘with generally acknowledged core definition(s), wide agreement on method and approach and a broadened empirical application deployed to test its added value’ (Tonra 2015, 182). Moving forward, the rest of this section will examine the various conceptualisations and dynamics of Europeanisation, especially Europeanisation as applied to foreign policy, and differentiate between the Europeanisation phenomena of western and eastern Member States.

2.1.1. A Vertical Conceptualisation of Europeanisation

The vertical conceptualisation of Europeanisation understands the concept as a bidirectional, linear process of change operating between an (emerging) European institutional centre and domestic structures of governance.⁵ This linear process offers identifiable causes and consequences. As such, in the language of methodologists, there are clear(er) dependent and independent variables. This linear process engenders two conceptions: in the bottom-up conception, Europeanisation is the independent variable, with the *explanandum* posited at the European level; in the top-down conception, it is the dependent variable, with the *explanandum* posited at the domestic level.

2.1.1.1. Bottom-Up Conception and Dynamic: ‘Uploading’

The bottom-up conception sees Europeanisation as an *explanans* that produces institutional changes at the European level. Accordingly, Europeanisation can be defined as the ‘emergence and development at the European level of distinct structures of governance, that is, of political, legal and social institutions associated with political problem-solving that formalise interactions among the actors, and of policy networks specializing in the creation of authoritative rules’ (Risse et al. 2001, 3). As such, the bottom-up conception focuses on the mechanisms through which various domestic actors project their policy preferences, ideas and interests onto the European level (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, 140–45), thus engendering a process that scholars refer to as ‘uploading’.

The bottom-up conception of Europeanisation, as applied to foreign policy, refers to the growing salience of the European Political Committee (EPC) (until the Maastricht Treaty) and the CFSP (after the Maastricht Treaty). In this context, Europeanisation entails the ‘aspects of foreign policy being “taken out” of the exclusively national conduct of foreign policy and elevated to EU policymaking’ (Jørgensen 2004, 49). This process mainly operates from the Member State level to the European level and can thus be seen as one ‘of integrating policies and actions of the Member States’ (White 1999, 43). However, it can also germinate at the EU level and ensue through ‘communitarisation’ of foreign policy. In this perspective, Europeanisation marks a departure from intergovernmentalism and a shift towards ‘the process

⁴ For various terminologies in concept formation, see Gerring (1999).

⁵ The terms employed here are intentionally generic: ‘An (emerging) European centre’ can entail European institutions (e.g., the European Commission), agencies (e.g., the European External Action Service, EEAS) and policies (e.g., common agricultural policy, CAP). Similarly, ‘domestic structures of governance’ can entail Member States’ ministries, agencies and actors. They are not narrowly confined to the EU and the Member State government, respectively.

by which EPC (and later the CFSP) moved closed to EC/[EU] norms, policies and habits, without itself becoming supranationalised' (Ginsberg 1999; see also, L. G. Miller 2019).

The logic underpinning this integrative dynamic of uploading in foreign policy is twofold. As Wong and Hill (2011) argue, Member States upload their policy preferences, ideas and interests onto the EU in order to increase their global profile, to influence the EU and fellow Member States' foreign policies and to use the EU as a shield/umbrella for national foreign policy or as an influence multiplier. To complement these aims, Member States may also choose to upload their policy preferences, ideas and interests because they perceive themselves as having the foreign policy 'know-how' in a particular third country or region. Such is the case for Portugal in its uploading efforts vis-à-vis Angola and Mozambique (Raimundo 2013), for France vis-à-vis Lebanon and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Gross 2009b) and for Poland vis-à-vis the Eastern Neighbourhood (Pomorska 2007). As Tonra (2015) contends, there are two quite different logics at play here—strategic and ideational—which stem from the rationalist and sociological logics leading to domestic adaptation (Bulmer 2008). From a strategic point of view, uploading allows Member States to pursue their interests with greatest effect. Member States perform rationalistic calculations between the pursuit of foreign policy objectives collectively within the European framework and unilaterally without the European framework, thus within their domestic frameworks. They often reach the conclusion that collective European efforts would carry greater salience and generate greater impact (Pomorska 2007). From an ideational perspective, uploading is a result partly of the shifting role perception and/or evolving political identities of Member States (Aggestam 2018). Here, it is argued that, through socialisation and learning at the European level, Member States' national interests evolve and a collective agreement on key foreign policy issues becomes a policy priority in its own right (Tonra 2015, 185).

The main criticism of the bottom-up conception of Europeanisation is that researchers run the risk of concept-stretching by expanding the concept's *definiendum* (see e.g., Radaelli 2002). More concretely, if Europeanisation entails changes at the European level, why do researchers use this conception to look for explanations at the domestic level? Furthermore, the bottom-up conception often fails to 'demarcate the specific territory of Europeanisation' in relation to other neighbouring concepts, such as European integration (Radaelli 2004). It seems that the definition of Europeanisation generated through this conception can easily be substituted by the early Haasian definition of European integration; that is, a 'process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalty, expectations and political activities towards a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states' (E. B. Haas 1958, 14; contra, Risse et al. 2001). This renders Europeanisation vague and poorly bounded, with 'definitional borders which overlap neighbouring concepts' (Gerring 1999).

2.1.1.2. *Top-Down Conception and Dynamic: 'Downloading'*

Conversely, researchers who employ the top-down conception see Europeanisation as the dependent variable and search for an *explanans* at the European level. Accordingly, the *explanandum* is posited at the domestic level, where 'changes in national political systems [occur], that can be attributed to the development of European regional integration' (Vink and Graziano 2008, 3). This conception sees the EU as a *réfèrentiel*, i.e., a template or benchmark, for Member States. As a result, domestic actors 'download' European ideas, norms, preferences, *acquis communautaire* and *acquis politique*, and in doing so, they usher in 'change in the core domestic institutions of governance as a consequence of the development of European-level

institutions, identities and policies’ (Olsen 2007, 79). This dynamic of downloading is necessitated by legal requirements (e.g., in the form of an EU directive) and/or facilitated by domestic structures that ‘fit’ well with EU demands.⁶

The top-down conception of Europeanisation, as applied to foreign policy, appreciates the EU as a *référéntiel* and assumes ‘a distinctive European position in international affairs’ (Hill 1983, 200). More specifically, this conception refers to the greater salience of European foreign policy priorities, preferences and rhetoric on national foreign policy agendas, the desire of domestic actors to arrive at a collective European position, and the changes necessitated by European foreign policy agreements and/or institutional structures (Wong and Hill 2011). Put differently, the downloading dynamic of Europeanisation leads to domestic adaptation of EU foreign policy, which then creates changes in national foreign policy and its mechanisms, values and identity (Jørgensen 2004, 48). Here, domestic adaptation is perceived as ‘a move by national actors towards a greater consistency with the EU foreign and security policy’ (Miskimmon 2007, 5).

Again, two distinct logics motivate domestic actors to download from the EU *référéntiel*. For one, domestic actors perform a cost–benefit analysis and adapt to the *référéntiel* in aspects they perceive to be in their strategic interest. Alternatively, European agreements and/or institutional structures oftentimes require the downloading dynamic to take place and thus create adaptational pressure. Costs, in the form of penalisation, for example, could be incurred should domestic actors fail to download EU demands. From an ideational logic, the downloading can create a snowball effect whereby European foreign policy preferences, norms and identities are internalised by domestic actors, thus building a basis for further deepened policy cooperation and agreement.

It is important to highlight that top-down Europeanisation ‘intervenes not only after the process of integration, when common institutions and policies exist, but also during and even before the process’ (Irondele 2003, 243). In other words, top-down Europeanisation can be conceived as an outward process, whereby the EU exports ‘its structures and values beyond its territory and embed[s] third countries within these’ (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, 209), and as such it can be extended to the studies of EU candidate countries. In this case, the EU ‘wholesales’ its *acquis* to candidate countries, and these countries, having performed their cost–benefit analysis, download the European ‘ways of doing things’ in bulk as a ‘means of attaining economic and institutional modernisation’ through EU membership (Escribano 2005). The impact of top-down Europeanisation in candidate countries will be further elaborated in section 2.1.3, which aims at differentiating between Europeanisation West and Europeanisation East.

In a similar vein to its bottom-up counterpart, the top-down conception of Europeanisation has received its share of criticisms. For a start, this conception is built on the post-ontological existence of an EU *référéntiel*; that is, it assumes that an EU *référéntiel* must exist for any downloading to take place. This is problematic in the following ways: First, it assumes that the EU *référéntiel* has clearly demarcated boundaries and that there is a ‘list’ of EU norms and values to be downloaded, when in reality boundaries are not clear-cut and such a list is often non-existent. Second, it can potentially prejudge the role of the EU *référéntiel* in ushering in changes in Member States, when domestic actors could very well download norms from other entities (e.g., the UN, Council of Europe) and/or change simply due to wider

⁶ For a discussion on the ‘goodness of fit’, see, for example (Risse et al. 2001).

phenomena or processes (e.g., globalisation, democratisation). Third, it rules out that Europeanisation could emerge without the presence of an EU *référentiel*. For example, in their studies on the French case of railway privatisation and road haulage, Héritier and Knill argue that Europeanisation can occur ‘in the absence of European adaptation pressure’ and that the adaptation pressure ‘does not necessarily constitute a condition for domestic change’ (2001, 288). Last, if it is assumed that the end goal of Europeanisation is further European integration and institutionalisation, then top-down Europeanisation does not automatically lead to this result, contrary to the bottom-up conception (Peters and Pierre 2009). Put differently, Member States can download EU ‘ways of doing things’ without promoting further consolidation at the European level, or candidate countries can download EU ‘ways of doing things’ without actually acceding to the EU.

2.1.1.3. *When ‘Uploading’ Meets ‘Downloading’*

Whilst the ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’ conceptualisations of Europeanisation have provided valuable insights into the mechanisms of influence and agency between the EU and Member States, they have also been criticised for their binary framing, as explained in previous subsections. More recent scholarship suggests that these dynamics are not mutually exclusive and can, in fact, operate concurrently and in tandem. In this vein, Börzel (2002) argues that Member States do not merely passively absorb European norms and policies (‘downloading’), nor do they solely project their preferences onto the EU level (‘uploading’). Instead, Member States may shape EU policies through uploading whilst simultaneously downloading and then adapting their domestic structures to European demands, leading to a more strategic and adaptive interplay between the two processes. This co-constitutive relationship strengthens the analytical utility of Europeanisation by acknowledging the agency of domestic actors without overlooking the structural constraints imposed by the EU framework.

This recognition of the interplay between uploading and downloading not only helps mitigate the conceptual shortcomings discussed previously but also reinforces the value of including both perspectives in empirical research. This is especially true in the realm of foreign policy, where national preferences often compete with collective EU positions. It highlights how Member States may use EU mechanisms to advance national foreign policy interests and goals, all whilst also being shaped by broader EU norms, values and strategic priorities. To end on a more constructive note, this interplay of downloading and uploading underscores the flexibility and relevance of the Europeanisation framework when applied carefully and reflexively. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, this strategic and adaptive interplay between the two processes, complemented by the horizontal conceptualisation of Europeanisation, forms the key to the empirical research of this thesis.

2.1.2. **Horizontal Conceptualisation of Europeanisation**

To sum up the discussion in the previous subsection, the vertical conceptualisation of Europeanisation treats the concept as a bidirectional process—uploading and downloading—with identifiable dependent and independent variables, and thus clear(er) causal linkage. This is complemented by the horizontal conceptualisation, which, in contrast, sees Europeanisation as a reflexive process. It does not see the EU as a causative point of reference but rather as a platform that has a co-constitutive impact on EU policymaking. Understandably, this has troubled methodologists, since different variables cannot be easily identified and causality established.

2.1.2.1. *Horizontal Conception and Dynamic: ‘Cross-Loading’*

The horizontal conceptualisation of Europeanisation conceives of the concept as a ‘matter of reciprocity between moving features’ (Bulmer and Radaelli 2004). As such, Europeanisation is understood as a reflexive process, whereby various actors interact across multiple levels of governance and their interactions have a constitutive impact on domestic and European structures and policies. Through a broader epistemology, this conceptualisation appreciates the organic, non-linear and multi-directional interplay between different actors and between different structures, but also between actors and structures. This epistemological position on Europeanisation has implications for the concept’s ontology. By prioritising the reflexive qualities of Europeanisation, the horizontal conceptualisation shifts from the rationalist, ‘thin’ ontology of the concept to a social-constructivist, ‘thick’ ontology (Checkel 1999; Schmidt 2008; Bulmer 2008; Tonra 2015).

Europeanisation, in its horizontal conceptualisation, does not assume the pre-existence of a *référentiel* reified by the EU and hierarchically posited above the Member States. Though the EU is indeed an important aspect in Europeanisation studies, it is by no means the only one. In fact, the EU is one of the many ‘transfer platforms’ (Bulmer and Radaelli 2004) in the international community that foster hierarchical and heterarchical interactions amongst subnational, national, international and transnational actors. That said, from a transactionalist point of view, the EU is important, as it is an ‘institutional arena [that] steadily became the prime arena for [...] political transactions’ amongst the Member States (Puchala 1970, 761). Furthermore, the EU is not a fixed institutional arena, as it is constituted through interactions on its multileveled structure. Actors interact with one another to form or transform their individual and collective identity (Wong 2005).

In her seminal work, Major (2005) first applied this horizontal conceptualisation in studying the Europeanisation of foreign policy, and she coined the term ‘cross-loading’ to describe this reflexive process. She argues that national foreign policy change, or Europeanisation, might well be due to ‘the transfer of ideas, norms and ways of doing things that are exchanged from and with European neighbours. Put simply: it is not only change *due* to Europe but also *within* Europe’ (Major 2005, 185). The dynamic of cross-loading was further developed by Aggestam and Bicchi,⁷ who argue that the ‘the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in the context of a fragmenting consensus has led to an increase in Member States’ reliance on informal practices, namely cross-loading’ (2019, 1). Here, cross-loading is defined as the mutual influence amongst Member States independent of the EU (Aggestam and Bicchi 2019; see also, Major 2005; Wong and Hill 2011). Drawing upon literature on informal groupings and informal governance, Aggestam and Bicchi contextualise cross-loading and propose that in ‘an informal way, a self-selected group of actors (Member States, EU institutional actors, or others) can take the lead in EU policymaking towards specific issues based on particular interests’ (Justaert and Keukeleire 2013, 445), and in doing so, these actors create a coalition of the willing within the EU (Elgström 2017).

Some scholars view this horizontal conceptualisation of Europeanisation with concern, not least due to the concept’s lack of separateness between its independent and dependent variables. Europeanisation understood through this conceptualisation has been criticised for

⁷ Aggestam and Bicchi illustrate cross-loading and other informal practices by using the case of Sweden’s recognition of Palestine in October 2014. They argue that whilst ‘this seemed to break away from the established EU consensus, Sweden’s decision aimed at leading the way and imparting momentum, especially within the like-minded group of EU countries’ (2019, 1).

being too general and poorly bounded, because according to this understanding, any interaction within the European structure would constitute Europeanisation (Radaelli 2002). Not to mention, the boundary of this ‘European structure’ or ‘European arena’ is not clearly demarcated due to various institutional set-ups and overlaps. Accordingly, any researchers who wish to employ this conceptualisation need to specify and delineate these boundaries in their studies. This task is rendered more important because this conceptualisation may easily overlap with neighbouring concepts, such as convergence, harmonisation and political integration (Grabbe 2001). In sum, much needs to be done before this conceptualisation can add empirical, analytical and theoretical value to the existing literature on Europeanisation.

2.1.3. Europeanisation West vs. Europeanisation East

Given this research’s focus on Czechia and Hungary,⁸ it is imperative to differentiate between ‘Europeanisation West’ and ‘Europeanisation East’. This exercise will shed light on the particularities associated with Europeanisation East and give a nuanced understanding of the inner workings of Europeanisation in different parts of Europe. Before proceeding further, definitions are necessary. The term ‘Europeanisation East’ was first coined by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) and by Héri-tier (2005) when studying the far-reaching impact of the Europeanisation process in Central and Eastern Europe, which roughly corresponds to the current Member States during the 2004 and 2007 enlargements.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain, many international organisations played an important role in the democratic transition and socio-economic transformation of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). Amongst them, the EU stood out for having, arguably, the greatest impact. The aspiration of most CEECs in joining the EU had allowed the EU to have an unprecedented, or even pervasive, influence in the restructuring of the domestic institutions and public policies of these countries. However, until the publication of the seminal work of Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) and Héri-tier (2005), the extent to which and the ways in which the EU exerted such influence in the CEECs were unclear, and the Europeanisation outcomes in the region had not been subjected to systematic, theory-oriented and comparative analysis.

Of course, 10 of those CEECs have acceded to the EU during the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. The unique process of the Europeanisation East has left a permanent mark on their domestic structures, institutions and actors. Furthermore, the conceptualisation and theoretical framework of Europeanisation East provided by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) as well as Héri-tier (2005) can be arguably used for other candidate countries, such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (see e.g., Economides and Ker-Lindsay 2015; Džankić et al. 2019).

In order to better understand Europeanisation East, the rest of this subsection will be organised as follows: First, a literature review of Europeanisation East will be provided. Specifically, this review aims to posit Europeanisation East amongst several bodies of well-established literature. Then, the differences between Europeanisation East and Europeanisation West will be fleshed out. It is imperative to take these differences into account, because they set the contextual background against which the rest of this research will be pursued.

⁸ For case study selection, see section 3.8.1.

2.1.3.1. *Literature Review of Europeanisation East: Lacunae and Synergies*

Before examining Europeanisation East in detail and shedding light on its differences from Europeanisation West, it is first important to understand the literature upon which Europeanisation East was originally built. At the time of its inception, around the mid-2000s, the research on Europeanisation East contributed to and bridged several bodies of well-established literature: enlargement, transition, EU international governance institutions and Europeanisation (West) (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002). Europeanisation East aimed to address the systematic lacunae of and produce synergies amongst these bodies of literature.

To begin with, Europeanisation East has been closely linked to the theoretically informed literature on the EU's eastern enlargement, which focuses on EU enlargement policies and decisions as well as on existing Member States' enlargement preferences (e.g., Scandinavian Member States in support of the accession of the Baltic states⁹). However, this body of literature is mainly concerned with the 'provider' side (i.e., the EU and its institutions and Member States), and not the 'recipient' side (i.e., candidate countries). More specifically, it does not examine the accession negotiations, the process of *acquis* adoption and the domestic circumstances that support and/or constrain the potential membership. By contrast, Europeanisation East takes these factors into account.

Second, as will be further explained below, the process of Europeanisation East has been concomitant with the political transition of the CEECs. The literature on this transition primarily takes the angle of the domestic political landscape to understand and explain the institutionalisation of liberal norms and the consolidation of democracy. Despite the acknowledgement of the 'international dimensions of democratisation' (Whitehead 2002), the international environment and the influence of international actors (e.g., regional institutions) often come second in this body of literature. Conversely, Europeanisation East centres around the EU as an international organisation that affects the domestic transition of the CEECs and thus integrates the EU's role into the research design and explanations.

Around the mid-2000s, the literature on EU governance was burgeoning, and its focus was shifting from the explanation of general integration dynamics and 'grand bargains' to the study of the EU as a multileveled regional entity with specific powers of policymaking (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006; Schmidt 2018). Since candidate CEECs have become a part of the EU governance system through accession negotiations and *acquis* adoption, this body of literature should be prepared or equipped to study the 'consequences of enlargement for EU governance, EU institutional development and governance in applicant countries' (Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch 2004, 112 cited in Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005, 5). Yet, as Friis and Murphy note, while the governance literature does provide 'the analytical tools necessary to understand the interplay between EU policies towards the CEEC and its international development as a system of governance', it 'has not been directly applied to studies of the external role of the Union' (1999, 212). In response, Europeanisation East takes traditional governance studies to the CEECs, and in doing so, it adds more nuances and variations, such as 'governance by enlargement' (Dimitrova 2002, 176), to the concept.

On a grander scheme, Europeanisation East is anchored to the research on international institutions. In the 1990s, this body of literature shifted its interest and focus to regime effectiveness and rule compliance (see e.g., Chayes and Chayes 1998). Furthermore, this body

⁹ See, for example, Archer (1999).

of literature is firmly embedded in the ‘great debate’ between constructivist and rationalist institutionalisms. Whilst the constructivists explain compliance through processes of international socialisation, in which countries change their preferences, adapt their behaviours and transform their identities, the rationalists emphasise the importance of positive and negative incentives, whereby countries do so, if necessary, after having performed a cost–benefit analysis. Yet, this body of literature does not focus, as much as it should, on the study of the CEECs, despite the post-Cold War CEECs offering a rich empirical testing ground. Accordingly, Europeanisation East contributes to this strand of research by extending it to the CEE context.

Last, Europeanisation East is unsurprisingly embedded in the traditional Europeanisation (West) research. Put simply, Europeanisation is concerned with the impact of the EU on domestic politics, politics and policies. As previously described in sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2, several conceptualisations and mechanisms have been devised by Europeanisation scholars to understand said impact. However, until the late 1990s and early 2000s, Europeanisation (West) primarily focused on existing Member States, though some exceptions exist, and studies on the EU’s impact on candidate countries in Central and Eastern Europe were scant. The extension of Europeanisation (West) to the CEECs enables the use of existing conceptualisations, dynamics and findings in a new context. The differences between Europeanisation West and Europeanisation East will be the focus of the next subsection.

2.1.3.2. Differences Between Europeanisation West and Europeanisation East

Building upon previous discussions, Europeanisation East and Europeanisation West differ significantly in several respects. First and foremost, Europeanisation East has a different starting point than Europeanisation West, a fundamental facet that engenders other differences between the two strands of research. When Europeanisation East first emerged, arguably in the mid-1990s, a *référéntiel* had already been reified by the EU and posited above these CEECs who aspired to accede to the Union. Furthermore, the process of Europeanisation East coincided with the democratic and socio-economic transitions of these countries. Theoretically speaking, studies on the said transitions (see e.g., Elster et al. 1998) constitute a critical strand of research but should be analytically separated from Europeanisation (East) research. However, researchers should not overlook the interdependence and correlation of these two strands of research. In fact, the key political Copenhagen criteria are democracy, rule of law and human rights. As such, given its self-perceived ‘normative power’ (Manners 2002), the EU has played a crucial role in these countries’ transition from authoritarianism to democracy, from communist state-led economies to capitalist market economies (Schmidt 2002).

In contrast, Europeanisation West started with the genesis of the EU itself, and its developments have hence been concurrent with one another. For the most part, the EU did not play any role in introducing or consolidating democratic structures and institutions in western Member States, because such structures and institutions were already in place when the EU first came into being.¹⁰ If anything, scholars have argued that the accession of Denmark in 1973, as well as Finland and Sweden in 1995 to the EU had generated the debates regarding democratic transparency and access to information within EU institutions and their policy processes (Grønbech-Jensen 1998; Attard et al. 2015; Kassen 2017; Safarov 2019). These debates led to the introduction of such procedures in the EU. This is a successful case illustrating the bottom-up conception of Europeanisation (West), whereby domestic actors

¹⁰ However, the EU did exceptionally play a positive role in cementing democracy in Greece, Portugal and Spain.

upload their preferences, ideas, norms and values to the European level. In addition, some (old) Member States have become increasingly concerned with the lack of democratic legitimacy within EU institutions and their comitology procedures, which have sparked criticisms in national parliaments (see e.g., Crombez 2003; Brandsma et al. 2008; Kaeding and Hardacre 2013; Voermans et al. 2014).

This unique point of departure for Europeanisation East leads to the second difference between the two strands of Europeanisation research, namely that Europeanisation East has been intimately linked to the accession negotiations of these aspiring CEECs. These negotiations are predominately associated with the pervasive policy of conditionality. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004; 2019) designed the External Incentives Model to understand Europeanisation East and particularly the enormous pressure exerted by EU conditionality on the candidate countries. The model specifies several conditions that influence candidate countries' cost-benefit analyses, amongst which 'reward' is arguably the most decisive condition. Candidate countries had to accept EU democratic conditionality and *acquis* conditionality with no 'ifs and buts'. For example, in preparation for the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, CEECs had to adopt more than 250 environmental policies, which was 'a bitter pill that candidates have to swallow' (Dimitrova 2005, 135). In June 1999, 152 of the 180 laws passed by the Hungarian parliament were not subject to debate, simply because these laws were part of the *acquis* (*Magyar Nemzet* 19 June 2009 cited in Kopstein and Reilly 2000, 27). In the words of a Hungarian official, 'accession on any terms is better than no accession' (Grabbe 2005, 135). This point is concurred by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, who argue that 'membership in the EU, which entails larger financial assistance, unconditional market access, and voting power in the EU, is a bigger "carrot" than association' (2019, 4).

Here, there are some important points that need to be fleshed out regarding the linkage between Europeanisation East and accession negotiations. For one, there is an inherent paradox in this process, in that the accession negotiations have always been dominated by executive politics. Although a candidate country's ultimate membership of the EU is subjected to a referendum at home, the extent to which EU conditionality enjoys democratic and popular support is questionable. Building upon this point, the normative aspects associated with EU conditionality remain arguably at the level of mere transposition and are thus unable to produce behavioural adjustment and policy outcomes, not to mention policy impact. This creates a phenomenon that some scholars call 'shallow Europeanisation' (Dąbrowski 2012; Horký 2012; Orbie and Carbone 2016). It can then be argued that Member States are likely to revert to their old 'ways of doing things' because EU norms and values are not ingrained in their psyche. This is a key argument which this research explores.

On the contrary, non-compliance in Europeanisation West triggers only mild sanctions, if any, and the EU can no longer threaten existing Member States with losing their membership, as it could with CEECs. In case of non-compliance, the EU can limit the monetary and non-monetary benefits meant to be given to the Member States. Sometimes, the Commission and the European Court of Justice can take legal actions against non-compliance or malpractice, such as the illegal spending of EU funds. The Treaty on European Union (TEU) has empowered the EU with Article 7, whereby the latter can suspend certain rights, such as voting rights, of a Member State who persistently breaches EU foundational norms and values. However, Article 7 does not give the EU the right to expel a Member State. Since its introduction, the use of Article 7 has been debated vis-à-vis Austria, Romania, Hungary and Poland (Sedelmeier 2014; 2017; Surubaru 2020; Varga and Buzogány 2020). Yet, many have argued that Article 7 is

paralysed by the EU's own procedures and mechanisms and thus cannot yield effective results (Sedelmeier 2014; 2017; Surubaru 2020; Varga and Buzogány 2020).

Stemming from accession negotiations, the third difference is that Europeanisation East has a much larger footprint than Europeanisation West, covering an entire sector, if not the entire *acquis*. However, even when Europeanisation East entails only one sector, such as agricultural policy, environmental policy or social policy (see, respectively, Andonova 2005; Jacoby 2005; Sissenich 2005), the compliance effort of the candidate countries would always be assessed in the context of the overall *acquis*, because the Commission would offer membership based on the overall compliance of the *acquis*. Conversely, Europeanisation West research initially focused on a particular policy area or sector and studied a small number of Member States' uploading and/or downloading efforts therein (see e.g., Börzel 1999; Knill 2001; Héritier and Kerwer 2001). Later, this research approach was supplemented by large-n studies on Member States' compliance with multiple measures, conducted through regression analysis (see e.g., Falkner et al. 2002).

The extensive reach of Europeanisation East has an important implication: Europeanisation East entails more institutional requirements than Europeanisation West. During accession negotiations, EU policy demands often require candidate countries to transform their national political, administrative, judicial and economic structure in its entirety, which are collectively called institutional *acquis* (see e.g., Dimitrova 2005). In Europeanisation West, however, such explicit, complete and pervasive institutional demands are a rare occurrence. In the past, these rare exceptions included the implementation of accession to information procedures (Grønbech-Jensen 1998; Attard et al. 2015; Kassen 2017; Safarov 2019) or the establishment of independent regulatory agencies after the liberalisation of network industries (Coen and Thatcher 2008; Thatcher and Coen 2008; Gilardi 2008; Maggetti and Gilardi 2011).

Last, the two strands of Europeanisation research differ in their process. In Europeanisation West, all mechanisms—uploading, downloading and cross-loading, are at the disposal of existing Member States. Researchers are interested not only in how EU policies impact Member States but also in how Member States shape the very EU policies with which they are subsequently required to comply. As explained previously, the EU is by no means the sole 'initiator' of policies, demands and reforms. Many Member State governments initiate these as well in order to, for example, avoid higher domestic adjustment costs, project their interests and preferences and amplify their expertise in a certain policy or issue. Because Member States do so with different intentions, they take turns playing the role of 'initiator'. Therefore, Europeanisation West is a far more interactive and dynamic process. On the contrary, Europeanisation East is a one-way street of downloading, whereby the EU dictates the reforms needed in candidate countries. Prior to accession, these countries have little to no say in shaping EU policies and they must accept EU demands without 'ifs and buts'.

Since Europeanisation East takes place amidst accession negotiations, this process is subjected to much more routine and robust scrutiny from the EU. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that the EU assesses candidate countries' membership eligibility based on the latter's compliance with specific demands. Even if formal policies are vague and abstract, 'a continuous stream of Commission communications' still serves to specify the adjustment requirements and assess the current state thereof (Schimmelfennig et al. 2005, 32). However, in Europeanisation West, adjustment and compliance mainly rely upon Member States, and

only in exceptional circumstances have they been subjected to the EU's direct monitoring, such as in the case of the competition policy (Cengiz 2010; Warloutzet 2015).

In short, the differences between Europeanisation West and Europeanisation East stem mainly from the different starting point of CEECs. In the aftermath of the fall of communism, research on Europeanisation East has inevitably and appropriately been linked to transition research from a broader perspective and to accession negotiations from a narrower perspective. As such, Europeanisation East covers a wider range of policies, which are primarily downloaded by the candidate countries, who are then subjected to greater institutional expectations and more routine and robust assessments by the EU. These differences must be taken into account for the rest of this research.

2.2. Literature Review of China–EU Relations

After reviewing the literature on Europeanisation, this thesis now turns to the literature on China–EU relations. This research aims to understand the de-Europeanisation of Member States' national foreign policies and shed light on China's engagement with or possible contribution to this phenomenon. Accordingly, a detailed review of China–EU relations is needed. Although diplomatic relations between the EU¹¹ and China were established in 1975, these relations gained momentum only in the early 1990s. Since the first China–EU summit, held in 1998, bilateral relations have experienced a substantive degree of institutionalisation, with frequent and dense interactions across all levels, from high-level summits to ministerial meetings and people-to-people dialogues. In 2003, both sides elevated their relations to a strategic partnership. Through statements and declarations, both sides have identified areas of shared interest and, especially in view of a more volatile American foreign policy under Donald Trump, there has been a growing consensus in both Beijing and Brussels that bilateral relations should place a greater emphasis on cooperation rather than confrontation. Today, China–EU relations are without a doubt one of the most important relations in the world.

This is, however, not to say that China–EU relations are all sweetness and light. Deep-seated differences and their resulting conflicts often crop up in bilateral relations. China and the EU each started from a unique historical experience, which in turn produced a different process of politico-economic development and thus engendered distinct priorities, interests and positions (see e.g., Morris 2011). Yet, in this day and age, both are bound by an increasing economic interdependence and a sense of shared, albeit differentiated, responsibilities in international affairs (Christiansen et al. 2015).

What follows is a detailed literature review of China–EU relations. It starts by taking stock of the current state of China–EU research, highlighting key trends and characteristics of this burgeoning field. It will then examine the political, economic and societal dimensions of China–EU relations, with particular attention paid to the issues that often crop up in this unique relationship and that are pertinent to this research. In doing so, this entire section will provide a much-needed backdrop against which the issues of interest are posited and the rest of this research is pursued.

2.2.1. Current State of China–EU Research

¹¹ For the sake of ease and consistency, the term 'EU' will be used throughout this thesis, unless specific contexts require otherwise. However, readers must be aware of the legal and institutional evolution of the polity, from the European Economic Community (EEC), to the European Community (EC), and finally the European Union (EU).

Despite the establishment of diplomatic relations between the EU and China in 1975 and the subsequent drafting of a Cooperation Agreement in 1985, both sides, for a variety of reasons, devoted meagre attention to each other's foreign policy and bilateral relations. China–EU relations only started to receive increasing scholarly attention since the 2000s due to three main factors: first, China's continuous rise on the international scene, characterised by its new foreign policy doctrine called 'China's peaceful rise'¹² (中国和平崛起; *zhongguo heping jueqi*); second, the EU's revitalisation and reorientation of bilateral relations in the form of a 'pivot to Asia' (Parello-Plesner 2012; Casarini 2013); and hence third, the elevation of relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2003. As this new strand of literature emerged, different approaches to conceptualising and understanding China–EU relations have also emerged. These partners' relationship is unique in that it is neither *stricto sensu* a bilateral state-to-state relationship nor an interregional one. Instead, it is more of a region-to-state relationship¹³ (Rüland 2006; Hänggi 2006).

Furthermore, Chinese researchers (see e.g., L. Zhu 2008; Z. Pan 2012) echo the debate amongst European researchers (see e.g., Groenleer and Van Schaik 2007; Thomas 2012; Gehring et al. 2013; Niemann and Bretherton 2013) regarding the EU's actorness in the international arena. As such, most researchers have focused on 'Sino-European' relations, which are understood as the bilateral relations between China and individual EU Member States. This focus is sensible and justified, given that the CFSP is not fully supranationalised to Brussels and that foreign policy and security matters remain mainly the prerogative of individual Member States, thus leaving numerous access points for external actors, such as China (M. Smith and Xie 2010; Maher 2016; Orenstein and Kelemen 2017). Researchers who opine as such outline the futility of treating the EU and China as equal-weighted counterparts (see e.g., Algieri 2008), and they advocate for more analyses of the bilateral state-to-state relationships between China and individual Member States, such as France, where more geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations are at stake (see e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2019a).

On a grander scheme, there are three imbalances in current China–EU research that require particular attention here. The first imbalance is the Eurocentrism in current China–EU research, especially in non-Chinese academic literature. This means that the research has primarily been conducted by European researchers, who may not have enough understanding of Chinese foreign policy and who are more likely to employ the European perspective vis-à-vis 'China's peaceful rise' (Griese 2006; Huotari et al. 2017; Godement and Vasselier 2017). They often take little account of the Chinese perspective due to reasons such as inaccessibility of data, linguistic barriers or simple empirical oversight (Gerring 2007). The second imbalance lies in the Chinese research on the EU and its policies. Though EU/European studies have recently gained traction in Chinese academia and the group of so-called 'Europe Watchers' has become more well known outside China (D. L. Shambaugh et al. 2008; B. Dai 2008),

¹² Under the doctrine of 'China's peaceful rise', the Chinese leadership under Hu Jintao admitted the overriding importance of economic development, all whilst accentuating China's role as a rising power. However, the leadership reassured the world that China's rise would not pose a threat to international peace and security. See, for example, Yi (2005) and Zhu (2007). Given the possible negative connotation associated with the English word 'rise', Chinese academics and authorities innocuously rechristened the doctrine as 'China's peaceful development' (中国和平发展; *zhongguo heping fazhan*) or 'China's path of peaceful development' (中国和平发展道路; '*zhongguo heping fazhan daolu*') (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2006).

¹³ However, some researchers would argue that a region-to-state relationship could be conceptualised as a quasi-interregional relationship (see e.g., Gilson 2005; Hänggi 2006; Baert et al. 2016).

systematic studies on China–EU relations beyond the economic dimension remain scant.¹⁴ This should come as no surprise, as the Chinese government sees the great potential of the European Single Market, as repeatedly stated in its policy papers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2003; 2014a; 2018b). The third imbalance is the overall dominance of the economic dimension in the current state of research. Admittedly, this reflects the fact that this dimension has long been the heart of bilateral relations, and today, with a daily trade volume of €1 billion, the EU is China’s largest trading partner and China is the EU’s second-largest trading partner. The political dimension, and especially the security and societal dimensions, is relatively under-researched. The recent book on China–EU relations by Christiansen, Kirchner and Wissenbach (2019) addresses these empirical shortcomings, but more research on other dimensions and aspects is still needed.

Apart from the conceptual differences and empirical shortcomings described above, the mutual perceptions of China–EU relations have changed over time, and more drastically so over the past decade or two. The literature has duly accounted for and reflected upon these changes. Today, the scholarly discussion primarily revolves around the so-called ‘China’s peaceful rise’ policy, in the hope of determining how ‘peaceful’ it actually is and how it impacts the Western-led liberal international order economically, politically and security-wise. As of now, a dichotomy splits this discussion within academia, especially Western academia: Some policymakers, researchers and informed observers view China’s rise with great scepticism, arguing that it will lead to revisionism and China will become a major competitor with the West on the global scene (see e.g., Johnston 2003; 2013; H. Feng 2009; Legro 2007). Others view China’s rise with moderate optimism, arguing that it will lead to responsibility and that China will become a (major) cooperation partner for the West in international affairs (see e.g., Putten and Chu 2012; Z. Chen 2016; Christiansen et al. 2019).

On the one hand, China’s rise can be seen as a threat to the liberal international order, and China’s engagement within the EU and its neighbourhood poses ideological, strategic, geoeconomic and geopolitical challenges (Broomfield 2003; Johnston 2003; Christiansen et al. 2015). In this understanding, China is seeking global hegemony due to its great aspirations for power and economic wealth and is thus willing to challenge any actors that stand in its way (Roy 1994; Griesse 2006; Sørensen 2013; Huotari et al. 2017). Many of the researchers that situate themselves in this understanding come from the realist perspective, and their studies have mainly focused on power politics (Zweig and Bi 2005; Dannreuther 2013; Broomfield 2003). For example, both Western and Chinese scholars have argued that the BRI creates more competition than cooperation and is characterised by geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018; M. Li 2020; Flint and Zhu 2019). Therefore, as they argue, the West must find new, innovative and enticing strategies to offset China’s growing influence. More specifically in the European context, many have called China’s presence in Europe ‘the scramble for Europe’ (Godement et al. 2011), with a negative and (neo)colonial undertone, and China’s tactics vis-à-vis Europe ‘divide and conquer’ (Meunier 2014b). Many blame the EU’s lack of internal cohesiveness for China’s ‘new assertiveness’ (Liao 2016) and its ability to play off Member States against one another in order to strike bargain deals (Fox and Godement 2009; Holslag 2011; Meunier 2014b; Maher 2016; Godement and Vasselier 2017). In fact, Benner et al. (2018) argue that China has devised various mechanisms in order to further its authoritarian advances in Europe, and they see the country as ‘a challenge to liberal democracy as well as Europe’s values and interests’ (Benner et al. 2018, 2).

¹⁴ Notable exceptions include Fang (2000) and Yan (2000).

On the other hand, although China's rise admittedly ruffles feathers, no (major) military conflicts have arisen between emerging powers and established hegemons, as evidenced by history (Buzan and Cox 2013). As such, Chinese researchers argue that China's rise has indeed been 'peaceful' and will continue to be so (Yi 2005; Z. Zhu 2007; He and Walker 2015; Han 2017; Zeng 2017). Some Western researchers mirror this view by arguing that, despite the constraints, there are plenty of opportunities for cooperation (Möller 2002; Kirchner 2015; Maher 2016; Pradt 2016; Dorussen et al. 2017; Christiansen et al. 2019). In spite of the systemic differences and conceptual gaps (Z. Pan 2012), China can contribute to the stability of the international system (D. Shambaugh 2005; Stanzel 2007; Zhao 2011). Examples of such contributions include China's organisation of the Six Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear issues as well as its increasing involvement in UN peacekeeping efforts (Pang 2005; Oertel 2011; Richardson 2011; Lanteigne 2018). Furthermore, China–EU bilateral cooperation has already extended to non-traditional issues, such as technology, culture and climate change (Y. Dai and Wang 2018; Noesselt 2019). Yet, deeper cooperation and alignment can be difficult due to the contradicting foreign policy principles, geoeconomic and geopolitical competition and China's preferences, behaviours and discourse on certain issues (e.g., human rights) that are dear to the EU's heart (Stanzel 2007; Kirchner 2015; Dorussen et al. 2017). Some researchers even argue that China–EU cooperation has hit a 'stalemate' (Godement and Vasselier 2017, 16).

Turning to the Chinese perception of the EU, despite the dominance of Western/European researchers in the field of China–EU research, the number of Chinese and English scholarly writing produced by Chinese researchers has increased significantly in recent years. According to researchers such as Song (2010, 774) and Wiessala (2013, 218), this is largely thanks to the rapid development of European studies programmes in China, which itself is due not only to the funding and support of the EU and Chinese governments but also to China's genuine interest in learning about Europe and about the European experience. The emergence of European studies as a discipline has been further aided by the increasing number of leading academics in China from countries like France, Germany and the UK (Meissner 2002). This growing scholarship includes three main subject matters: taking stock of the general development of China–EU bilateral relations, assessing China–EU relations in a particular issue or policy field and focusing on China's bilateral relations with individual Member States. With the changing role of the US in international affairs and the emergence of new balances of power, some researchers argue that Chinese scholarship will increasingly shift its attention away from Sino-American relations and focus more on China–EU relations, especially with regard to the possibilities of and constraints on further cooperation (Ross et al. 2010; Gabriel and Schmelcher 2017; Meijer and Jensen 2018; Christiansen et al. 2019).

As reflected in Chinese political and academic discourse, the Chinese perception of the EU is generally affected by two interrelated factors: China's new role in the changing international order and the EU's institutional structure and internal cohesiveness (J. Zhang 2008; Ye 2011). Despite the occasional stumbling blocks, such as the Iraq War¹⁵ (Young and

¹⁵ In light of the Iraq War, whilst British Prime Minister Tony Blair reiterated the need to maintain transatlantic unity, French President Jacques Chirac, driven by Gaullist ideology, insisted on a multipolar world (Young and Crawford 2011). Both proponents had their respective supporters, with Italy, Spain and Portugal supporting the UK, and Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands supporting France. In response to these developments, the EU issued a policy paper in 2003. Like in 2001, it focused less on new policies and more on the mechanics and outputs of the bilateral relations. For its part, China issued its first policy paper on the EU in

Crawford 2011), European sovereign debt crisis (Z. Zhang 2016; Ville and Vermeiren 2016), so-called migrant/refugee crisis (Gabriel and Schmelcher 2017) and Brexit (J. Yu 2017), Chinese literature views the EU with favour and optimism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2003; 2014a; 2018b; Lan 2005; Dong 2014; J. Long and Dai 2018). As Chen has noted, ‘Europe has been [former] Chinese premier Wen Jiabao’s key foreign policy priority during his two terms [...] in office’ (Z. Chen 2012, 2). And today, the EU remains ‘one of the key directions of Chinese diplomacy’ (Cui 2018). These researchers do not deny or overlook the systemic differences and conceptual gaps between China and the EU that have led to a number of disputes on human rights and the protection of minorities and the imposition of an arms embargo by the EU. Instead, they argue that the EU remains China’s important partner on the global stage with regard to a plethora of political, economic and security issues (Z. Chen 2012; 2016; L. Song 2011).

Another group of Chinese researchers views the EU with concern, as they question its actorness in international affairs and by extension its worthiness as a viable partner in its cooperation with China. Much in line with the discussion in Western academia (see e.g., Orenstein and Kelemen 2017; Groenleer and Van Schaik 2007; Gehring et al. 2013; da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier 2014), this strand of Chinese literature criticises the EU’s lack of internal cohesion, or a single voice so to speak, and notes the growing dissent amongst various Member States on certain policies and issues (see e.g., Chang and Pieke 2018; C. Feng 2018). For example, Zeng (2017) argues that, although the EU was once deemed an important ‘pole’ in China’s vision of a new multipolar world, now the Union plays only a marginalised role in China’s ‘new type of great power relations’, implying that the EU is no longer (or never was) a great power. Some Chinese researchers have gone as far as arguing that the EU’s decline is inevitable due to its internal division and that it will resort to protectionist and seclusive policies (Liu 2017). Through an examination of Chinese media discourse, L. Zhang (2016) argues that there is neither a ‘capability-expectations gap’ (Hill 1993) nor an ‘expectation deficit’ (Tsuruoka 2008); instead, she finds that the Chinese public only expects a ‘united Europe to be a major force in the multi-polar system’ (L. Zhang 2016, 476).

In short, the current state of China–EU research is a burgeoning field. Yet, it suffers from conceptual differences, or imbalances, primarily marked by the debate over the very nature of China–EU relations as well as the Eurocentrism that dominates the field. Furthermore, it lacks empirical findings in other areas and issues, as the economic dimension of the bilateral relations is thus far prioritised above all others. As the field stands now, the mutual perception is highly dichotomous on both sides. From the European point of view, China is seen either as a threat or as a benign partner of cooperation. For their part, Chinese researchers view the bilateral relations with great optimism, but some are concerned about the internal division within the Union and thus question the actorness of the EU in international affairs.

2.2.2. Political Dimension of China–EU Relations

The political dimension of the bilateral relations only started to take shape in the mid- or late 1990s after the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 legally enabled the EU to engage with third countries in matters related to foreign and security policies. Since then, the political part of China–EU relations has progressed rapidly, especially after the establishment of the strategic partnership in 2003. This thesis prioritises the political dimension, because this is an area where many ‘hot

the same year. In this paper, China iterated its independent foreign policy and its growing role in international affairs on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence.

topics' and disagreements are often generated. Mismanagement and/or misunderstanding of the political dimension of China–EU relations would very likely have an adverse impact on the economic and societal dimensions of bilateral relations.

The literature has noted three stand-alone, yet interrelated drivers of China–EU political relations, which reflect the multifaceted nature of bilateral relations. First, the end of the Cold War ushered in a new world order marked by the rise of (Western-led) globalisation. Yet, new political and security challenges, such as terrorism, organised crime and climate change, have concomitantly arrived. Therefore, China is an indispensable partner for the EU to engage to tackle these issues, not only for the sake of global security *stricto sensu* but more importantly for the immense benefits of China–EU bilateral trade. Second, as China copes with its domestic developments and its One Country, Two Systems policy (vis-à-vis Hong Kong, Macau and indirectly Taiwan) at home, and as it seeks a greater role in international affairs in light of its 'peaceful rise' abroad, it sees the EU as a strategic partner. As noted in China's policy papers, the strategic value of the EU stems partly from its success in overcoming war and poverty and integrating a diverse group of countries, and partly from the EU's advocacy for peace, stability and a multilateral world order, a position shared by China. Furthermore, China supports European integration and sees the EU not as a military threat but as a respected and valuable partner. Third, the EU has had a long-standing hope, dating back to its initial engagement with China in 1975, that it would be able to export its liberal values, norms and system to China. As Barysch et al. explain, 'Europeans hope that a China with open markets and a firm rule of law will be more likely to respect human rights and allow democratic freedoms. They also believe that a more open, democratic and law-abiding China will be a better partner in building the kind of multilateral global order that most Europeans want' (2004, 1)

Moving forward, three issues in the political dimension of China–EU relations are pertinent to this research: the nature of the China–EU strategic partnership, the lack of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and the arms embargo. To begin with, a 'strategic partnership' is anything but unique in IR: In fact, the EU has strategic partnerships with nine other countries apart from China,¹⁶ and for its part, China has partnerships or strategic partnerships with five regional organisations and 78 countries,¹⁷ roughly amounting to half the countries with whom China maintains formal diplomatic relations (Q. Li and Ye 2019). Apart from relations with the four 'established partners', the establishment of the strategic partnership with China was 'the first time that the EU had attempted to act strategically with regard to China and tried to go beyond its traditional role as a junior partner of the US' (Casarini 2012, 24), a move that caught Washington by surprise. At the time of the partnership's establishment in 2003, a common objective declared by both sides was to conduct their partnership 'in a spirit of equality, reciprocity, and mutual benefit' (Council of the European Union 2010).

This common objective should not be taken lightly. Both partners come from different historical backgrounds, which thus led to different socio-economic developments, normative orientations, (geo)political positions and national interests (Morris 2011). It then follows that

¹⁶ The EU has strategic partnerships with the USA, Canada, Russia, Japan, China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico and South Korea. The US, Canada, Japan and Russia are considered 'established partners', and strategic bilateral relations were not established by official agreements. The strategic partnerships with China (2003), India (2004), Brazil (2007), South Africa (2007) and Mexico (2008) were formally proposed by the Commission and subsequently approved by Member States. The strategic partnership with South Korea was established in 2010, without having gone through formal processing.

¹⁷ China's network of partners consists of 24 different classifications, amongst which 12 contain the term 'strategic'. This sheer number of partnership types should intrigue researchers, as they reveal certain subtleties (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

these contextual differences have an impact on each side's commitment to its partnership (Z. Pan 2012; Weil and Jing 2012; Stumbaum and Xiong 2012). For example, when the EU talks about 'democratisation', it speaks about respecting human rights, strengthening the rule of law and empowering civil society; yet, China speaks about government responsibility, responsiveness and accountability (Geeraerts 2013, 498). Furthermore, though not a focus of this research, an external factor that affects both sides' commitment to their partnership is 'the elephant in the room'—the US (see e.g., Farnell and Crookes 2016). Last, this partnership's content is also an important component of it and is unique in the following ways: First, for both sides, this is the most mature 'new-generation' strategic partnership (M. Smith and Xie 2010, 4). Second, this partnership provides one of the biggest institutional platforms, including summits, meetings and dialogues at multiple levels. Third, this partnership has expanded its content, at least for the EU, to include 'third-party issues', such as China's and the EU's engagement with Africa. Fourth, for China, apart from the collaboration with the US, this partnership has the longest history and the most extensive institutionalisation.

Table 1. China's partnership network within the EU (ranked by level of intensity in descending order).

Types of Partnership	Partners
All-Round Strategic Partnership 全方位战略伙伴关系	Germany
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 全面战略伙伴关系	EU, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain
Mutually Beneficial Strategic Partnership 互惠战略伙伴关系	Denmark, Ireland
Strategic Partnership 战略伙伴关系	Czechia
All-Round Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation 全方位友好合作伙伴关系	Belgium
Comprehensive Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation 全面友好合作伙伴关系	Bulgaria, Romania
Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership 全面合作伙关系	Croatia, the Netherlands
Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation 友好合作伙关系	Hungary

Second, despite the positive developments and further enhancement of the political dimension of China–EU relations, the long-running negotiations between Brussels and Beijing over a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement have stalled. As presented in the literature, this is mainly due to the following reasons: China's reluctance to fully open up its market (Grant 2013; R. E. Scott and Jiang 2015), China's reluctance to comply with EU stipulations on norms and values and the EU's reluctance to lift its arms embargo on China (Weske 2007). In short, as noted by several authors (see e.g., Barysch et al. 2004; Zaborowski and Andrews-Speed 2006; Crossick and Reuter 2007; Kerr and Fei 2007; Balme 2008; Grant and Barysch 2008; Fox and Godement 2009), China–EU relations have experienced fluctuations over the past four decades, largely due to increasing misunderstandings, misconceptions and misalignments of interests over issues such as trade, technology and, more importantly, political values. With all that being said, there are important driving forces that cultivate this partnership, and they will continue to do so.

Last and certainly not least, perhaps the arms embargo is the single greatest obstacle in China–EU relations; accordingly, it has received great scholarly attention. Though an embargo seems to be an economic issue at first sight, the EU arms embargo was imposed in response to the Chinese government’s reaction to a series of political protests in 1989 and thus has a political and security dimension to it. The literature focuses on two facets of this issue: First, the EU’s refusal to lift the arms embargo is deemed political discrimination of China and a rejection of ‘China’s peaceful rise’ or its great power status. This goes directly to the concept of ‘the century of humiliation’ and its lingering victimisation sentiment, widely acknowledged and discussed in Chinese academic and political discourse (Berkofsky 2014; Casarini 2009; Z. Chen and Armstrong 2010; Narramore 2008). Second, despite there having been waves of discussions regarding the lifting of the arms embargo, the EU’s failure to do so ‘reveals a complex, multi-level bargain over interests at domestic, regional and international levels’ (Narramore 2008, 98). The EU has repeatedly had to deal with disagreement and reconcile the differences amongst 27 (or formerly 28) Member States. This reveals the EU’s inability to speak with one voice, widely acknowledged by both Western and Chinese academia (da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier 2014; da Conceição-Heldt 2014; Z. Chen 2016).

Some researchers have analysed the role that the US plays in the discussion surrounding the arms embargo and in the wider debate regarding the China–EU strategic partnership. Indeed, the EU has also come under pressure from Washington, which has sought to maintain its own strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region (D. Scott 2007a; 2007b; Farnell and Crookes 2016). Shambaugh argues that the China–EU strategic partnership is a joint effort to ‘constrain American power and hegemony’ (D. Shambaugh 2005, 246). This argument can be problematic, as the EU does not play an important role in the Asia-Pacific region, despite claims of its pivot toward Asia (Casarini 2013; Parelló-Plesner 2012). For instance, the EU is not a part of the Six Party Talks on North Korea’s nuclear issues. Some researchers even argue that the EU tends to free-ride on the US security coattails in the Asia-Pacific region (Grimmett and Papademetriou 2005, 9–10; Casarini 2009, 131–35; Narramore 2008, 100).

In 2003, the European Council reached a unanimous decision to open up the discussion on lifting the arms embargo. Originally, Member States that tend to more strongly emphasise normative values, such as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, were hesitant and cautious about the potential repercussions, but they ultimately decided not to break consensus amongst Member States and to avoid market entry refusal or commercial retaliation from China. Casarini argues that the lifting of the arms embargo is ‘a political act necessary for moving beyond Cold War thinking’ (Casarini 2009, 123), and the EU also agrees that the lifting would be a ‘symbolic gesture’ (2009, 127) to show that the Union is willing to engage with China on friendly terms and on equal footing. In the end, the Council rejected the proposal in 2005. The main reasons for this two-year discussion and the ultimate refusal were the strong pressure emanating from the US and even stronger opposition from some newly admitted Central and Eastern Member States (Farnell and Crookes 2016; Christiansen et al. 2019; Christiansen 2020).

To conclude, China–EU bilateral relations have experienced fluctuations marked by low and high points. The recent consolidation of bilateral relations is particularly evident in the establishment of the strategic partnership in 2003, which demonstrates that both partners were (or still are) willing to engage with one another in various areas and across multiple levels. That said, the deep-seated contextual differences and conceptual gaps between China and the EU must not be overlooked when examining their bilateral relations. In its current state, the literature has primarily focused on three issues, namely the nature of the China–EU strategic

partnership, the lack of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and the arms embargo. A solid understanding of ‘where China is coming from’ especially enables the assessment of the successes and failures of this partnership. The recent intensification of the economic dimension (the focus of the next section, 2.2.3) of bilateral relations might on the one hand dilute the EU’s normative approach vis-à-vis China and on the other motivate China to become more compliant with European normative demands.

2.2.3. Economic Dimension of China–EU Relations

The economic dimension has dominated China–EU relations since 1975, and this, in all likelihood, shall continue to be so in the (near) future. Bilateral trade, above all, has long been at the heart of the economic dimension of China–EU relations. This should come as no surprise: Trade promotion and liberalisation have been the central pillar of the EU’s own integration project. Trade, including trade relations with third countries, is an area where the EU enjoys exclusive competence. For its part, China’s hallmark policy of Reform and Opening-Up has allowed the country to enjoy rapid economic growth since the 1980s. This growth has further been accelerated by the country’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, a move strongly supported by the EU (Liao 2016; Meunier 2014a; Reilly 2017). Today, with a daily trade volume of €1 billion, the EU is China’s largest trading partner and China is the EU’s second-largest trading partner, with the US being the first. This sheer volume not only underpins the bilateral strategic partnership but also has a critical impact on the global economy.

Despite the positive growth of and mutual dependence on this strategic trade relationship, it has not always been smooth sailing. For one, the EU has consistently suffered a trade deficit with China.¹⁸ What is more, the traditional patterns of the EU importing low-value added goods from China and exporting high-value added goods in return have become far more complex due to the recent economic boom in China. More recently, China and the EU have begun to produce similar goods, in terms of price and quality, thus creating competition not only in their own respective market but also in third-party markets, such as Africa. As such, trade disputes have often cropped up in bilateral relations. Furthermore, especially since the financial crises of 2008, the volume of Chinese investment has increased significantly, and its nature has become more and more complex. Whilst some welcome Chinese capital, others view this with increasing concern, especially with regards to China’s acquisition of technical know-how and control over key infrastructure and resources. Today, the economic dimension of China–EU relations has increasingly taken on a strategic and security importance. This subsection, therefore, provides a literature review on the economic dimension of China–EU relations and examines some key issues of this dimension, namely market economy status (MES), FDI and eurozone crisis.

One long-standing issue in the economic dimension of bilateral relations, as the literature has noted, is the EU’s refusal to grant China market economy status (MES). Many researchers have devoted their attention to this issue, and they argue that the EU’s refusal is mainly due to the large trade deficit between China and the EU, and that the EU has used the MES as a bargaining leverage (see e.g., Rémond 2007; Z. Chen and Armstrong 2010; R. E. Scott and Jiang 2015). Trade relations between the two began to merge only in the late 1970s, when Deng’s Reform and Opening-Up policy allowed for private ownership and foreign investment. Compiled from WTO data, Table 2 and Table 3 show the total value of global trade

¹⁸ According to the Directorate General for Trade (2020), in 2019, for example, the EU imported €362.0 billion from China, but exported €198.3 billion to China, thus creating a trade deficit of –€163.7 billion.

and the share of selected economies in 10-year intervals, starting from the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Since 2013, China has been the world's leading trade nation, and today, China is the world's largest economy based on GDP (PPP).¹⁹ There is a strong correlation between China's trade and its economic growth, because since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy, China has adopted a model of a strongly export-led economy, and the income generated through exports sustains domestic growth (Freeman 2017).

Table 2. World merchandise export by region and selected economies in \$ billions and percentage.

	1949	1959	1969	1979	1989	1999	2009	2019
	Value							
World	59.6	118.4	276.6	1659.3	3098.9	5719.4	12563.0	18933.0
	Share							
World	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Africa	7.2%	5.7%	5.4%	5.2%	3.0%	2.0%	3.1%	2.5%
South Africa	1.9%	1.6%	1.2%	1.1%	0.7%	0.5%	0.5%	0.5%
Asia	13.9%	14.3%	13.2%	15.4%	23.5%	27.1%	31.0%	35.8%
China	-	2.7%	0.9%	0.8%	1.7%	3.4%	9.6%	13.2%
Japan	0.9%	2.9%	5.8%	6.2%	8.8%	7.3%	4.6%	3.7%
India	2.0%	1.1%	0.7%	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%	1.3%	1.7%
Australia and New Zealand	-	-	-	-	1.5%	1.2%	1.4%	1.6%
Middle East	2.5%	3.2%	3.0%	8.5%	3.5%	3.3%	5.7%	5.3%
Commonwealth of Independent States	-	-	-	-	-	1.9%	3.6%	3.3%
Europe	38.2%	44.5%	49.6%	47.1%	46.4%	44.1%	40.0%	36.6%
United Kingdom	11.5%	8.4%	6.4%	5.2%	4.9%	4.8%	2.9%	2.5%
European Union	-	-	-	-	-	-	33.9%	30.7%
Germany	1.7%	8.3%	10.4%	10.4%	11.0%	9.5%	8.9%	7.9%
France	4.7%	4.7%	5.5%	6.1%	5.8%	5.7%	3.9%	3.0%
Italy	1.9%	2.5%	4.2%	4.4%	4.5%	4.1%	3.2%	2.8%
North America	26.1%	20.3%	19.5%	15.3%	16.8%	18.7%	12.8%	13.5%
United States	20.2%	13.9%	13.5%	11.2%	11.7%	12.2%	8.4%	8.7%
Canada	5.1%	4.7%	5.2%	3.5%	3.9%	4.2%	2.5%	2.4%
Mexico	0.7%	0.6%	0.5%	0.5%	1.1%	2.4%	1.8%	2.4%
South and Central America, the Caribbean	9.7%	7.4%	5.1%	4.6%	3.3%	2.9%	3.8%	3.1%
Brazil	1.8%	1.1%	0.8%	0.9%	1.1%	0.8%	1.2%	1.2%
Argentina	1.8%	0.9%	0.6%	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%
WTO Members	-	-	-	-	92.1%	95.9%	97.5%	98.2%

Source: WTO

¹⁹ According to the IMF's World Economic Outlook (2020), the world has a GDP (PPP) of Int\$130,186,703 million, China of Int\$24,162,435 million (18.56% of the world share) and the US of Int\$20,807,269 million (15.98% of the world share).

Table 3. World merchandise import by region and selected economies in \$ billions and percentage.

	1949	1959	1969	1979	1989	1999	2009	2019
	Value							
World	62.8	123.1	286.8	1693.7	3205.5	5926.3	12710.4	19263.2
	Share							
World	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Africa	8.1%	6.0%	4.3%	3.9%	3.1%	2.2%	3.2%	3.0%
South Africa	2.0%	1.2%	1.1%	0.5%	0.6%	0.5%	0.6%	0.6%
Asia	15.7%	14.5%	13.8%	16.0%	21.5%	23.0%	28.9%	33.7%
China	-	2.3%	0.7%	0.9%	1.8%	2.8%	7.9%	10.8%
Japan	1.4%	2.9%	5.2%	6.5%	6.5%	5.2%	4.3%	3.7%
India	2.9%	1.6%	0.8%	0.6%	0.6%	0.8%	2.0%	2.5%
Australia and New Zealand	-	-	-	-	1.7%	1.4%	1.5%	1.4%
Middle East	2.3%	2.3%	2.5%	4.6%	2.9%	2.6%	4.2%	3.9%
Commonwealth of Independent States	-	-	-	-	-	1.2%	2.6%	2.4%
Europe	44.7%	46.0%	51.7%	50.2%	46.1%	43.8%	40.3%	35.7%
United Kingdom	13.5%	9.3%	7.0%	5.9%	6.2%	5.5%	4.1%	3.6%
European Union	-	-	-	-	-	-	33.1%	28.7%
Germany	3.3%	6.9%	8.7%	9.4%	8.4%	8.0%	7.3%	6.4%
France	4.4%	4.1%	6.1%	6.3%	6.0%	5.3%	4.4%	3.4%
Italy	2.5%	2.8%	4.3%	4.6%	4.8%	3.7%	3.3%	2.5%
North America	17.4%	19.7%	19.1%	17.2%	20.3%	24.1%	17.1%	18.2%
United States	12.0%	13.8%	13.4%	13.1%	15.4%	17.9%	12.6%	13.3%
Canada	4.6%	5.0%	4.9%	3.3%	3.7%	3.7%	2.6%	2.4%
Mexico	0.7%	0.8%	0.7%	0.7%	1.1%	2.5%	1.9%	2.4%
South and Central America, the Caribbean	9.6%	7.1%	5.0%	4.6%	2.6%	3.2%	3.6%	3.2%
Brazil	1.8%	1.1%	0.8%	1.2%	0.6%	0.9%	1.1%	1.0%
Argentina	1.9%	0.8%	0.5%	0.4%	0.1%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%
WTO Members	-	-	-	-	91.9%	96.5%	97.7%	98.2%

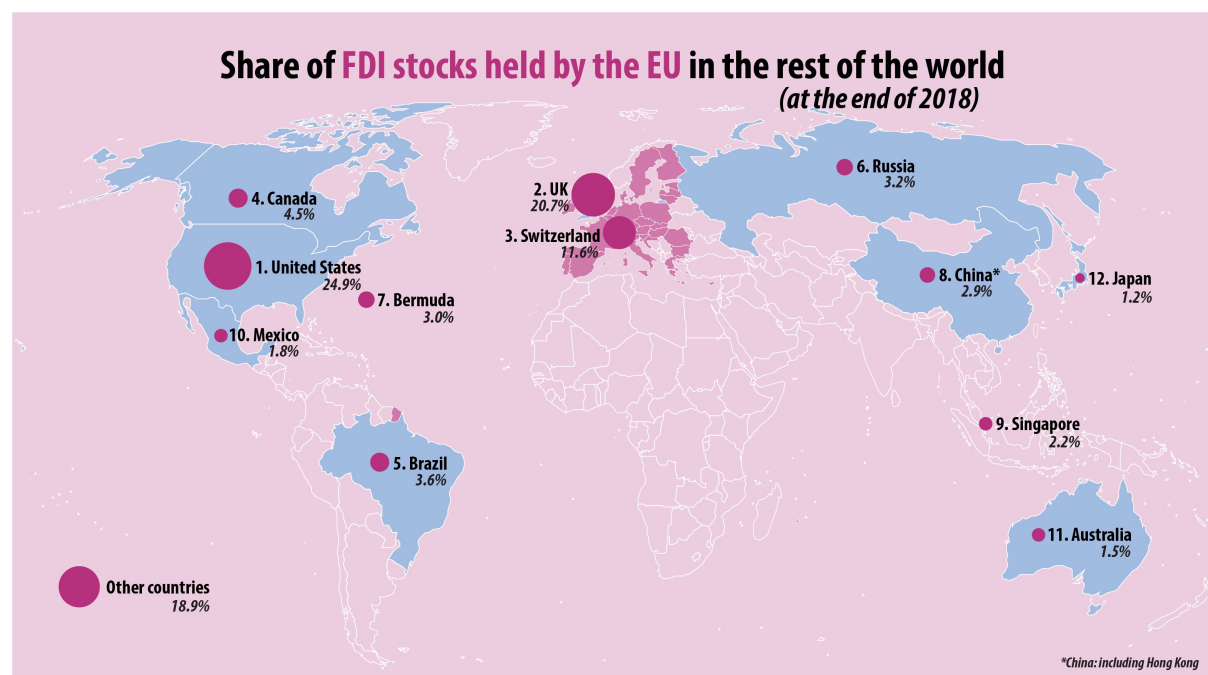
Source: WTO

Although the EU continues to emphasise that it has “committed itself to deal with the MES issue in a purely technical manner, that is in the framework of its anti-dumping policy, China does not yet fulfil the necessary requirements to be granted the status’ (Rémond 2007, 346), researchers in this strand of literature argue otherwise. For instance, Green claims that ‘China’s exports are much more diverse and concentrated in manufactured goods, which is a profile that threatens European firms much more’ (S. Green 2004). Brussels furthermore notes four problems that remain and that prevent it from granting China the MES: ‘a lack of transparency; industrial policies and non-tariff measures that discriminate against foreign companies; strong government intervention in the economy, resulting in a dominant position for state-owned firms, unequal access to subsidies and cheap financing, and, poor protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights’ (European Commission 2021).

Apart from the issue surrounding the MES, FDI has gained more salience in the economic dimension of China–EU relations since the 2010s, and the literature has reflected this. Today, it has become a topical or even political issue in bilateral relations, as a number of Chinese investments in Europe has raised controversies. To begin with, a point that is often overlooked or misunderstood is that cross-border FDI flows between China and the EU have historically (and presently) been meagre compared to the enormous volume of bilateral trade and to the FDI flows between the EU and other third countries. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the

share of FDI stocks held by the EU in the rest of the world and the share of FDI stocks held by the rest of the world in the EU, respectively. European investment in China, albeit small compared to other third countries, is something of a tradition. Foreign investment was a key part of China's Reform and Opening-Up policy, and European investors were attracted to China's market potential, low-cost production base and lenient environmental regulations (Dees 1998; F. Li and Li 1999; Fetscherin et al. 2010; C. Long et al. 2015). Despite the rapid growth of EU FDI in China, from €20 billion in 2004 to €252 billion in 2018 (Eurostat 2020), European investors have encountered difficulties when investing in the Chinese market. Two issues in particular have troubled European investors: the legal requirements and the regulatory conditions under which EU firms can conduct business in China²⁰ and the protection of intellectual property rights (or the lack thereof) that EU firms face in China.

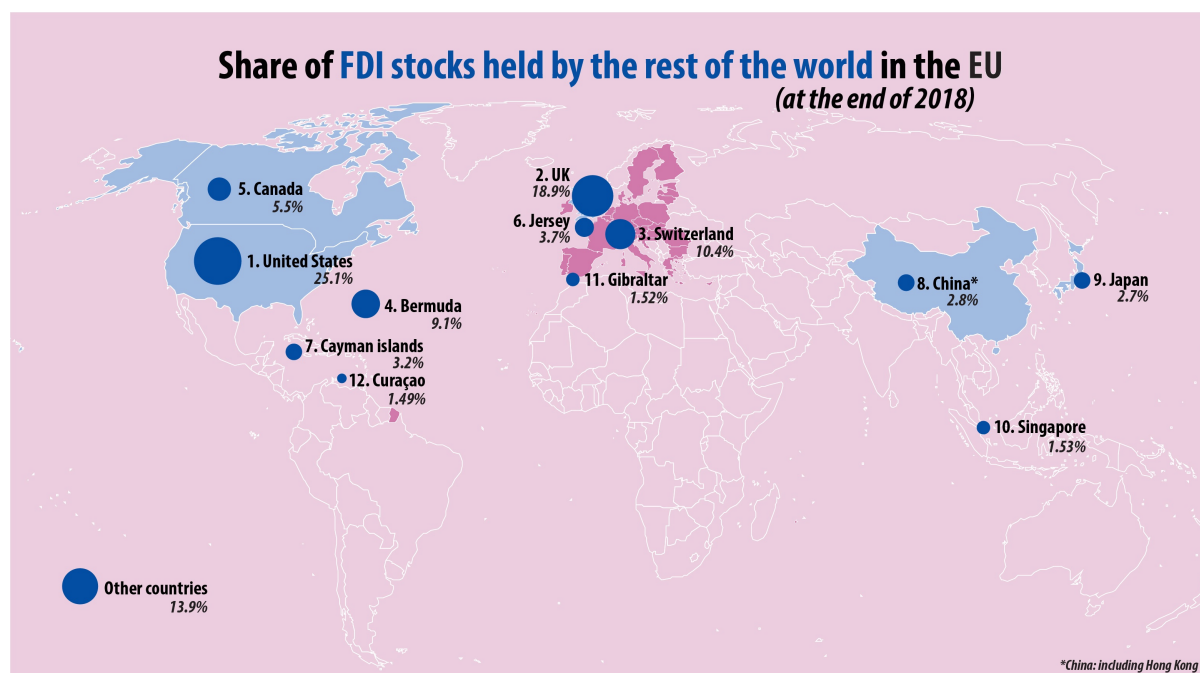
Figure 1. Share of FDI stocks held by the EU in the rest of the world.



Source: (European Commission 2018)

²⁰ The annual position papers published by the European Chamber of Commerce in China often cite three main legal and regulatory concerns: First, there are severe restrictions on the number of sectors that European investments can target, with foreign investors being outrightly excluded in several sectors. Second, foreign investment is often required to be in the form of a joint venture with Chinese firms, and as such, relevant technical know-how, source codes and data must be stored on Chinese servers. Third, it is difficult for foreign investors to repatriate their profits back to their country of origin. The view of the European Chamber of Commerce in China (2020) is shared by European and Chinese researchers alike (see e.g., Dees 1998; F. Li and Li 1999; S. Li 2007; Fetscherin et al. 2010; C. Long et al. 2015).

Figure 2. Share of FDI stocks held by the rest of the world in the EU.



Source: (European Commission 2018)

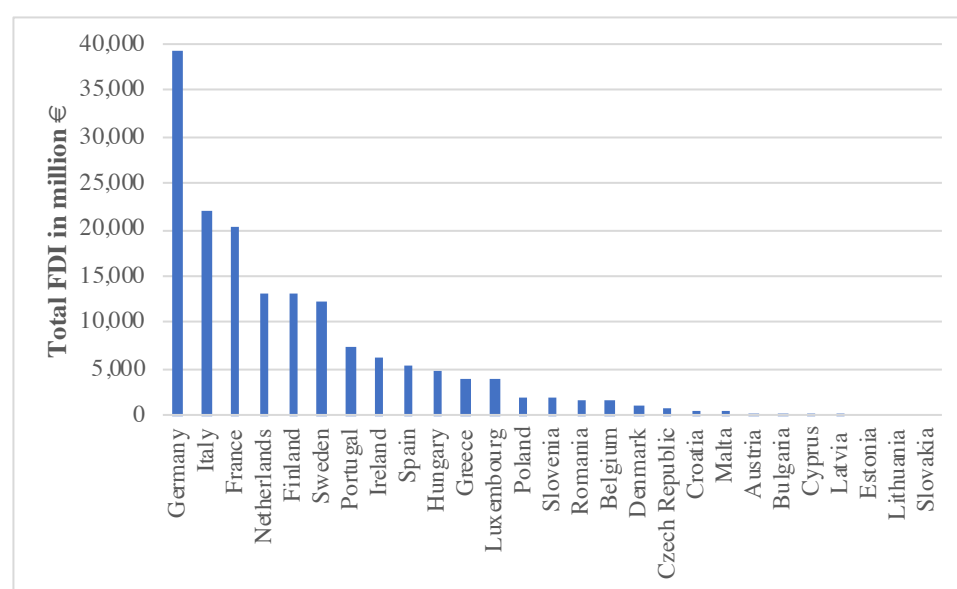
For its part, China's outbound FDI to the EU traditionally lagged behind the country's inbound FDI from the EU, with main targets being the distribution, assembly and sale of Chinese goods in Europe. However, the volume and nature of Chinese investments experienced a shift in the late 2000s, largely due to the global and European financial crises of 2008. Rather than merely facilitating its exports to the EU like before, China has since shifted its focus on the acquisition of technological know-how and strategic assets. This type of investments also forms a part of China's domestic industrial policy, which seeks to enhance technological expertise, streamline management, accelerate innovation and upgrade production processes. For example, Chinese FDI in the ports of Piraeus and Trieste and the airports of Toulouse, Ljubljana and Schwerin has received varying levels of media, political and academic attention. The EU has generally been a preferred target of Chinese investments, because, unlike the US,²¹ the EU has traditionally been less apprehensive about industrial policy and the political or security implications associated with it. China's shift was further aided by the depreciation of the euro, which made European assets cheaper, and the need for weaker, ailing economies to quickly shore themselves up amidst the crises.

Scholars like Defraigne (2017) note that China's increasing economic footprint in the EU is driven by targeted and systematic strategies devised by the Chinese government, though some businesses invest based on their free will according to their business needs. One such targeted and systematic strategy is the 17+1 framework, which has been viewed with some scepticism in Brussels. 17+1 is a great demonstration, as some argue, of China understanding how to exploit the multileveled nature of EU policymaking and of how the EU is unable to speak with one voice (see e.g., da Conceição-Heldt 2014; Meunier 2014b; da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier 2014; Godement and Vasselier 2017; Godement et al. 2011). China's economic

²¹ The US routinely blocks Chinese attempts to acquire key assets, such as infrastructure and transportation hubs. For example, the US blocked Chinese shipping company COSCO's attempt to acquire control over the Port of Long Beach. See <https://www.universalcargo.com/u-s-forces-china-out-of-port-of-long-beach-terminal-ownership/>.

‘offensive’ in the EU, as it has been called by Le Corre and Sepulchre (2016), has prompted the EU to implement a concerted policy vis-à-vis China. Since 2014, China and the EU have entered talks on the establishment of a bilateral investment agreement, and on 30 December 2020, both sides agreed ‘in principle’ to a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (European Commission 2020). Although some observers immediately qualified this as a strategic and diplomatic victory for China (see e.g., Fallon 2021; Rachman 2021), the content of this agreement and its impact on bilateral relations remain unclear.

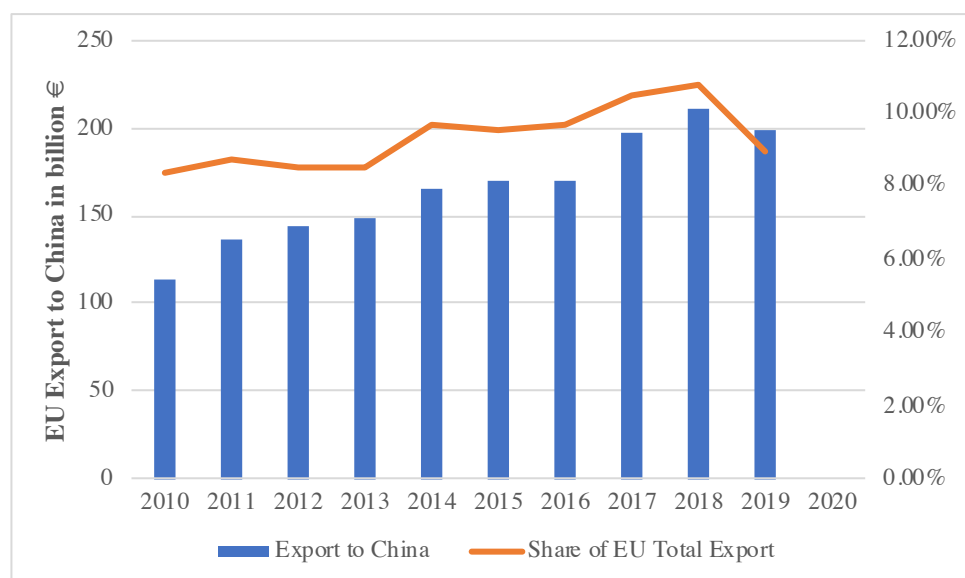
Figure 3. Total Chinese FDI in EU Member States, 2010–2020.



Source: <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2019-update>

Given the importance of the economic dimension in China–EU relations, it comes as no surprise that the European sovereign debt crisis in the 2010s had a great impact on bilateral relations. Although some points were fleshed out in the discussion above, this crisis warrants greater analysis, as the start of this crisis coincides with the timeframe of this research (see section 3.8.2). Broadly speaking, as explained by literature, the crisis impacted bilateral relations in four main ways: First, the crisis immediately decreased European consumption, as incomes decreased, unemployment increased and available finance dried up. This created a decrease in demand for Chinese goods, which inevitably affected China’s domestic growth. For many Chinese policymakers, the crisis reminded them of the intimate correlation between the EU’s economic well-being and its own. Many Europeans saw China as a way out of this crisis. As Figure 4 demonstrates, the total value and share of EU exports to China have enjoyed a healthy growth since 2010. Therefore, this crisis taught both sides the importance of bilateral trade relations and their mutual dependency on their respective economic well-being (Grevi and Renard 2012). Second, partly motivated by economic considerations and partly motivated by (geo)political considerations, China has supported the euro throughout the crisis. In its policy papers on the EU, China has consistently voiced its support for European integration and the single European currency. In honouring this, it is believed that China stepped in multiple times between 2011 and 2013 to prop up the euro in the global financial market by purchasing public debt from EU Member States, as later confirmed by Yi Gang, the then head of China’s State Administration for Foreign Exchange, in 2012. According to SAFE (2015), China held \$3.33 trillion in foreign reserves at the end of 2015, and, although precise public data are unavailable, it is estimated that roughly one-third of these reserves are held in euros.

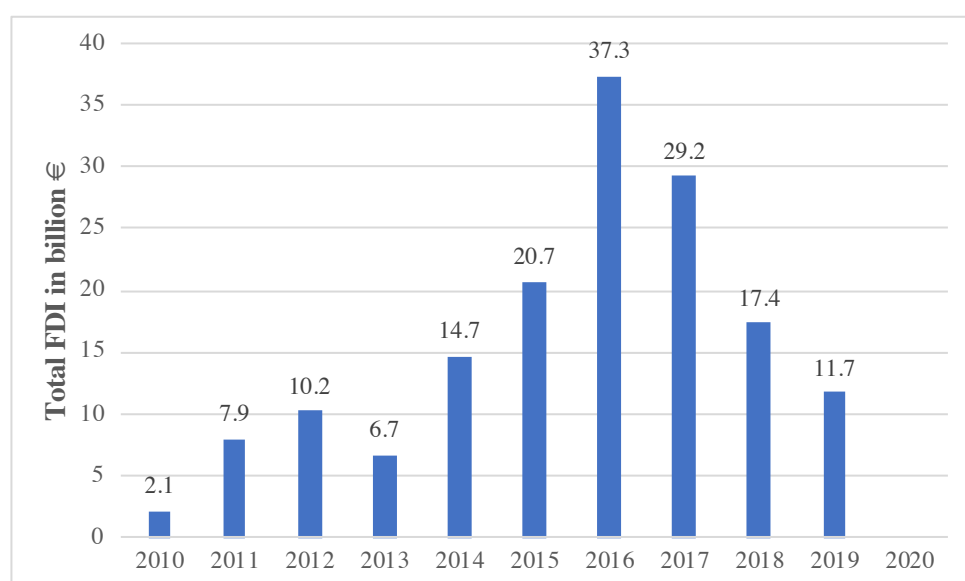
Figure 4. Total volume and share of EU exports to China, 2010–2020.



Source: <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2019-update>

The third impact of the crisis is that it provided China with great new opportunities for Chinese investment in Europe. The crisis created a dire need for capital inflow in many EU Member States, and with its large euro holdings, China provided some of this capital. As a result, there has been a consistent rise of Chinese FDI flowing into the EU, with the biggest increase in 2016 (see Figure 5). In fact, as Meunier notes (2014a), the crisis prompted Member States to lower their reluctance to accept Chinese investments and even created competition amongst Member States in some cases. Last, the crisis, along with its endless bailouts, blame-shifting and protests undoubtedly damaged the EU’s reputation abroad. Traditionally, China had viewed the EU in a relatively positive light (Chaban and Magdalena 2014), but this changed greatly during and after the crisis. China saw the flaws of the ‘European model’, and the EU’s dealings with its internal issues weakened its capacity to address external development, with Crimea being a case in point (Lai and Zhang 2013).

Figure 5. China’s FDI in the EU, 2010–2020.



Source: <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2019-update>

To conclude, the economic dimension, with bilateral trade at its core, plays an important and strategic role in China–EU relations. If anything, the eurozone crisis and China’s own declining economic growth actually strengthened bilateral relations by demonstrating the mutual benefit of, or even mutual dependence on, bilateral trade. This has provided opportunities for Chinese investments and created a more equal partnership, where the EU’s normative agenda is put on the backburner (Crookes 2013). That said, as the nature of the economic relations between China and the EU evolves and becomes increasingly complex, a number of trade issues and disputes have cropped up that caused tensions on both sides. Yet, the bilateral economic relations have shown resilience, adaptability and durability. As of January 2021, China and the EU have agreed ‘in principle’ on a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, which should offer greater certainty and enhanced cooperation in the economic dimension of China–EU relations.

2.2.4. Societal Dimension of China–EU Relations

For any political and/or economic relations between two countries to flourish, an understanding, if not an appreciation, of their respective society and culture is fundamental. China–EU relations are no exception to this rule. As the literature has noted, though both have few historical parallels in common (Morris 2011), their respective, unique history informs their foreign policies and, by extension, shapes their bilateral relations (Stumbaum and Xiong 2012; Z. Pan 2012; Christiansen et al. 2019): China takes pride in its five millennia of uninterrupted history, and the EU draws inspiration, as stated in the Preamble of the Lisbon Treaty, from its ‘cultural, religious and humanist inheritance’. Furthermore, as Fulda (2019, 2) argues, citizen diplomacy can be an alternative route to bridge the conceptual gaps and solve deep-rooted conflicts in China–EU relations. More formally speaking, the societal dimension is important in bilateral relations, as ‘people-to-people relations’ constitute the third pillar of the China–EU strategic partnership. This subsection presents a literature review of the societal dimension of China–EU relations, prioritises the societal issues that are pertinent to this research and examines, in turn, the following three distinct yet interrelated facets: education and research collaboration; think tanks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society; and culture and cultural relations.

To begin, both Western and Chinese literature have noted that education, especially higher-level education, is an important aspect of the societal dimension of bilateral relations (Z. Pan 2012; S. Pan 2013; Wiessala 2013). Whilst China has long maintained exchange ties with some Member States, EU-led educational activities only started to take place in the 1990s and since then have become an important element of the EU’s soft power (Yang 2015). The EU commenced its efforts in the early 1990s with the establishment of European Documentation Centres in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and six other universities. Soon after, the EU–China Higher Education Programme (1997–2001) and the EU–China European Studies Centre Programmes (2003–2008) complemented the EU’s earlier efforts and propagated European studies programmes to a wider group of Chinese universities.

In Europe, even before the 1990s, there had been a significant number of sinology institutes or departments across European universities. It is worth noting that many of them were home-grown programmes without the support and funding of the Chinese government. This changed in the 2000s when, for example, China and the Baillet Latour Fund supported the establishment of a Chair of EU–China Relations at the College of Europe from 2008 to 2020. During his visit to Europe in March 2014, President Xi personally delivered a speech at the College and opened an EU–China Research Centre and a China library. The first biannual EU–

China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD) held in April 2012 set out a series of action points: first, to establish the EU–China Higher Education Platform for Cooperation and Exchange, which, as its name suggests, aims at promoting education exchanges between both sides; second, to increase the number of students and visiting scholars by, for example, providing merit-based and need-based scholarships; third, to increase student mobility through Erasmus-type programmes between European and Chinese universities; fourth, to promote multilingualism through language teaching programmes and cultural exchanges; and fifth, to encourage China’s participation in the Marie Curie Actions and Horizon 2020 programme.

The second facet of China–EU societal relations is the role of think tanks, NGOs and civil society. The EU’s 2006 policy paper calls for stronger links amongst social organisations, stipulating that these organisations should provide direct support and impetus for greater bilateral relations and encouraging the participation of Chinese NGOs in international conferences. The first China–EU Civil Society Round Table held in July 2010 provided further momentum for mutual cooperation, and the role of societal organisations, especially youth organisations, was highlighted by the first HPPD in April 2012. However, the role that NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) play in strengthening bilateral relations is difficult to assess, and sometimes their efforts may well be counterproductive. It is difficult because, for one, NGOs and CSOs (on either side) are often issue-based and hence do not have the breadth and depth of knowledge to advance other issues that are salient in bilateral relations. Furthermore, Chinese NGOs and CSOs often see the EU as a donor rather than as a strong player (Sausmikat and Asienstiftung 2010). For their part, European NGOs and CSOs rarely see their Chinese counterparts as purely non-governmental. Therefore, exchanges and cooperation have been difficult at times.

There is in fact a wider debate in Western academia on the nature of Chinese organisations, especially their relationship with the Communist Party of China (CPC). This debate became more heated when President Xi launched a review and subsequently introduced a new policy governing NGOs and CSOs (Menegazzi 2016). In the Xi–Li administration, Chinese think tanks, NGOs, and civil society must have ‘Chinese characteristics’ and serve the country and the Party’s interests abroad (Godement 2016). This does not mean, however, that they are abrasive instruments used merely for carrying out the Party’s interests. On the contrary, as Menegazzi (2016; 2020) and Godement (2016) argue, they play a more nuanced and often complex role in subtly affecting public opinion, feeding new ideas to the policy process and creating new rhetoric in the public discourse.

Sausmikat (2010) has identified four main areas in which China and European civil societies cooperate: human rights, environment and climate change, labour and labour protection, and education. As Sausmikat (2010) has shown, CSOs may have a detrimental impact on bilateral relations because European partners need to first identify the nature of each Chinese CSO and then tread a fine balance between ones sanctioned by the state/Party and ones tacitly tolerated at the grassroots level. Conversely, for Chinese CSOs, their difficulty lies in the fact that they are constantly confronted by European partners who challenge their agendas and normative values and whom they believe lack a good understanding of the domestic situation in China. Furthermore, European CSOs are often uninterested in small pilot projects and more interested in big projects that yield fast results. This creates an immense amount of pressure on Chinese CSOs.

The third element of the societal dimension of China–EU relations, i.e., culture and cultural relations, has been long-standing. The promotion of European culture in China was

first championed by individual Member States and their respective cultural and language institutes, such as the Alliance française, Goethe-Institut, Società Dante Alighieri, Instituto Cervantes, Instituto Camões and previously the British Council. The EU's efforts in promoting European culture, as with other aspects, came later than those of individual Member States. Equally important to understand is that the 'European culture' that the EU promotes is more linked to democracy, human rights and development than to European cultures and languages *sensu stricto*. As a result, the EU's efforts have mainly been conducted under the auspices of German political foundations such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Hanns Seidel Foundation. In 2006, the EU created the European Union National Institutes of Culture (EUNIC) in an attempt to combine the efforts of cultural promotion of various Member State organisations and produce synergies vis-à-vis third countries, such as China.

On the Chinese side, as of January 2021,²² China has set up 110 Confucius Institutes (CIs) and 14 classrooms across the EU with the aim to teach the Mandarin language, provide information about China and showcase Chinese art, history and culture in general. Whilst most have done just that, some institutions have raised doubts and concerns and few were closed.²³ That said, research has shown that, despite the 'CI project' being a concerted governmental strategy, it has encountered great difficulties in its attempts to change 'hearts and minds' (S. Pan 2013; Lo and Pan 2016). In 2012, China and the EU adopted a Joint Declaration on EU–China Cultural Cooperation, which aims at deepening and strengthening cultural cooperation between both sides.

In conclusion, this subsection has examined three main facets of the societal dimension of China–EU relations that are pertinent to this research. Other facets, such as migration and diaspora as well as sports, were excluded. Similar to other dimensions and aspects, despite conflicts and misunderstandings, the literature has identified positive trends and argued that there are 'meeting places' for further cultural exchanges and cooperation in bilateral relations.

²² See Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), http://www.hanban.org/confuciusinstitutes/node_10961.htm.

²³ In May 2020, Sweden closed all its Confucius Institutes and classrooms. See <https://scandasia.com/sweden-has-closed-all-confucius-institutes-and-classrooms/>.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building upon the emerging literature on de-Europeanisation, this thesis theorises and empirically researches external actors' influence on this phenomenon, a rather nascent subject within the overall literature. To this end, this chapter lays down the theoretical and conceptual framework of this research design: The first section explains the importance and usefulness of conceptualising the effects of external influence on (de-)Europeanisation. In doing so, it paints the backdrop against which the rest of the research design is carried out. The second section reviews the parent concept (that is, Europeanisation), provides a definition of the concept of de-Europeanisation (drawing heavily upon the work of Müller et al. (2021)), and delimits this novel concept in order to avoid misunderstandings and clarify it in the context of this research design. The third section theorises, in broader terms, external actors' influence on de-Europeanisation by using Greif and Latin's (2004) theory of endogenous institutional change and Orenstein and Kelemen's (2017) theory of 'trojan horses' in EU foreign policy and foreign policymaking. The fourth section then zooms on the three key mechanisms that external actors may employ when engaging with and/or contributing towards the de-Europeanisation of EU Member States. The fifth section outlines the research questions and sub-research questions that this thesis aims to answer. The sixth section outlines the overarching research strategy adopted for this research, and explains the reason for adopting a cross-national, longitudinal, small-n case study. The seventh section elaborates the analytical framework that operationalises the theoretical propositions introduced earlier in the chapter by identifying and employing three main mechanisms of external influence. Finally, the eighteen section sets out the methodological design and its operationalisation.

3.1. Why Does External Influence on De-Europeanisation Matter?

To begin, it is necessary to understand the importance and usefulness of conceptualising the effects of external influence on (de-)Europeanisation to posit this research within contemporary global affairs and highlight its relevance and timeliness. Through decades of integration, socialisation, cooperation, and learning, the EU has developed a foreign policy identity that is unique in its own right (see for example, Manners 2002). This identity has engendered common foreign policy norms, routines, procedures, and 'ways of doing things' that are key to EU foreign policy's cohesion and the EU's institutional capacity to address global issues. Yet, this development has not taken place in isolation. Quite on the contrary, it has taken place in an environment where the EU is increasingly finding itself in systemic competition with other major powers, such as Russia and China, that are also trying to influence EU foreign policy from both within and without and to present themselves as alternative models to certain Member States and potential Member States. The presence and influence of these major powers can, and often do, have an impact on EU foreign policy and its cohesion. That said, as explained in Chapter 2, the research and literature have so far overlooked this vital aspect. To address this, the conceptualisation of external influence under the framework of de-Europeanisation, as will be explained later in this chapter, enables researchers to understand and measure how this growing competition and external influence impact core common features of the multilevel EU foreign policy system.

The second argument for conceptualising and better understanding the external influence on (de-)Europeanisation is that there is a bias in the theoretical literature on EU foreign policy, which focuses primarily on intra-EU policy processes, sources of power capabilities and institutional structures. In other words, researchers tend to look at EU foreign policy more from within and less from without. In fact, this bias can be generalised to IR

literature as a whole: Much of this literature does not allow for an explicit conceptual differentiation between both levels of analysis, namely the domestic and the international level. Furthermore, it does not account for the emergence of the interdependent environment as a whole (Pustovitovskij 2016). The conceptualisation of external influence on (de-)Europeanisation addresses these shortcomings in (de-)Europeanisation research. This is done by including the ‘outside option’ (OO) (Pustovitovskij 2016), that is, an external, third actor that strengthens actor A vis-à-vis actor B in a bargaining situation. In this model of structural power, structure is seen as a ‘fluid, emergent network of relations between the actors involved’ that comprises interdependent and indirect relations (Pustovitovskij 2016). The inclusion of the OO enables researchers to factor in external actors and an external environment that can impact EU foreign policy and its cohesion.

Another compelling reason to examine and conceptualise the effects of external influence on (de-)Europeanisation is that, to put it quite simply, foreign policy is a product of domestic policymaking, but it is also a policy field that is directed towards the external environment. Therefore, it is only sensible to consider this external environment and the actors that operate therein. In the case of the EU, actions and interventions of external actors (via Member States or otherwise) can have quite a significant impact on EU foreign policy and its cohesion, either in and of themselves or through their linkage to national political processes and policymaking. The incorporation of external influence into the examination of national foreign policymaking can then explain the internalisation of said influence by Member State governments and their national interests, and why these states fluctuate between Europeanisation and de-Europeanisation.

3.2. De-Europeanisation: A Conceptual Framework

3.2.1. Europeanisation: The Parent Concept

Given its conceptual novelty, the conceptualisation of de-Europeanisation in this research design starts from an established and accepted definition of Europeanisation and, for now, treats de-Europeanisation as a mirror image, or a potential antonym, of its parent concept. Accordingly, the definition of Europeanisation needs to be clarified before proceeding further. As examined in section 2.1, Europeanisation can be explained and understood by two conceptualisations—vertical and horizontal—that can be further subdivided into three dynamics.

The vertical conceptualisation traces its roots to a focus upon the reciprocal relationship that arguably exists between national- and European-level policymaking, and this focus was a critical feature that came to dominate early scholarship in the field (M. E. Smith 2004; de Flers and Müller 2010). Challenging the traditional realist and intergovernmental understanding, it was argued that the formulation and outputs of national foreign policies were transforming as a result of the deepening cooperation and socialisation within European foreign policymaking and that, simultaneously, European foreign policy itself was changing as a result of Member States’ active engagement with and contribution to the collective policy system (Tonra 2001; 2015). This vertical conceptualisation of Europeanisation consists of the interconnected and parallel dynamics of ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’²⁴ (Tonra 2001; 2015; Major 2005; Wong 2005). More concretely speaking, uploading considers how, when and to what extent individual

²⁴ The ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’ mechanisms of Europeanisation are also commonly referred to as ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ mechanisms, respectively (see for example, Tonra 2015; de Flers and Müller 2010).

Member States project their policy preferences, ideas and interests onto EU institutions and frameworks. They do so in hopes of using the EU as a protective shield and as an influence multiplier for national foreign policy (Wong and Hill 2011). Conversely, downloading considers the process of national adaptation to the aforementioned European foreign policy preferences and institutional frameworks and examines how national foreign policy evolves over time as a result (Wong and Hill 2011).

This bidirectional vertical conceptualisation of Europeanisation was later supplemented by the horizontal conceptualisation, first proposed by scholars such as Major (2005). This horizontal conceptualisation translates into the ‘cross-loading’ dynamic, whereby national foreign policy changes over time due to the ‘transfer of ideas, norms and ways of doing things that are exchanged from and with European neighbours, domestic entities or policy areas. Put simply: it is not only change *due* to Europe but also *within* Europe’ (Major 2005, 186). Such transfers can take place within or outside of EU formal institutions, including subregional networks and informal groupings (Aggestam and Johansson 2017; Aggestam and Bicchi 2019; Kazharski 2020).

Taking stock of these ideas, this research design defines Europeanisation as ‘a transformation in the way in which national foreign policies are constructed, in the ways in which professional roles are defined and pursued and in the consequent internalisation of norms and expectations arising from a complex system of collective European policy making’ (Tonra 2000, 229). Several points of this definition need to be further emphasised: First, this definition stresses the importance of change, or ‘transformation’, thus placing equal emphasis on the process and the outcomes. Second, this definition does not mention Member State governments and, in doing so, it accommodates both governmental institutions and individual actors. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this definition appreciates that Member States are not only the passive recipient of adaptational pressures emanating from the European level (‘Europeanised’) but are also the active projector of policy preferences onto the European level (‘Europeanising’). Therefore, Europeanisation is ‘an ongoing and mutually constitutive process of change composed of a defining property—domestic change caused by European integration—and an accompanying property—the emergence at the EU level of policies and institutional structures’ (Major 2005, 181).

3.2.2. The *definiens*: How Is De-Europeanisation Defined?

Apart from serving as the point of departure, or as the baseline of analysis, the definition of Europeanisation given in the above subsection is also important because it forms the main assumption of this research: In agreement with Copeland (2016), this research assumes that, for de-Europeanisation to occur, a certain level of Europeanisation must have previously been attained. Building on this assumption, this research design treats core past achievements of Europeanisation as a central benchmark and the EU as a *référentiel* against which de-Europeanisation is established and its extent is measured. As pointed out earlier, the literature on de-Europeanisation is an emerging field, and there remains disagreement about a precise definition. For the debate on de-Europeanisation, an argument similar to that for the earlier definitional debate on Europeanisation can be made, in that ‘scholars coming from different theoretical traditions touch upon different parts of the [de-Europeanisation] elephant and thus portray a different beast’ (Jensen and Kristensen 2013, 1). Before a definition is provided for this research, a brief review of the current state-of-the-art on de-Europeanisation is warranted.

From a structuralist point of view, Daehnhardt proposed arguably the first definition. To her, de-Europeanisation is ‘a practice through which a member state acts intentionally so as to prevent uploading or downloading effects from occurring in the national and Europeanisation dimensions’ (Daehnhardt 2011, 14). In other words, Member States who engage in de-Europeanisation deconstruct previous Europeanisation gains and prevent further gains from being made. By contrast, in the context of Estonia’s engagement with the European Structural Funds, Raagmaa et al. (2014, 782) argue that de-Europeanisation may emerge when ‘(1) the political establishment declares that coherence with the EU is not a priority, and that a different national interest exists. (2) Publicly they may even raise slogans that stress national interest and the threat of losing independence, thus explaining the rejection of reform initiatives and justifying these exceptional positions through the public voice. (3) However, they may create new institutions in order to get access to the EU funds but (4) relevant institutions and policy measures rather support already existing establishments instead of structural reforms.’ Later, in studying the UK’s employment policy and the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), Copeland reviews these two definitions and argues that, whilst these previous definitions are apt in explaining why de-Europeanisation occurs, they do not explain well how it occurs. He thus proposes the following definition: ‘overturning programmatic, agenda, procedural and/or cognitive shifts that have previously occurred when national (and/or subnational) actors have engaged with the OMC; with the specific aim to reserve the process of Europeanisation and to prevent future uploading and downloading in the governance process’ (Copeland 2016, 1126).

It is interesting that, although de-Europeanisation has not matured as an established field of inquiry within the geographical scope of the EU, it has already been exported to non-Member States, and it has generated a unique set of definitions in that specific environment. De-Europeanisation has most often been used in the context of Turkey and its long process of accession. In studying the transformation of Turkish foreign policy, Ovalı provided one of the first definitions by arguing that de-Europeanisation ‘refers to partial or complete renationalisation of domestic politics, policies and polity as the result of a member/candidate country’s reaction to adaptation pressures generated by the EU’ (Ovalı 2015, 144). This definition was further elaborated by Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber, who argue that de-Europeanisation can manifest itself in two ways: ‘firstly, as the weakening of the appeal and influential capacity of European institutions, policies, norms and values, leading to a retreat of EU-Europe as a normative/political context for Turkish society and politics; and, secondly, as the growing scepticism and indifference in Turkish society towards the EU/Europe, risking the legitimacy of the EU/Europe as a reference point in cases even where reform is incurred’ (Aydın-Düzgit 2016, 5–6). Although the case studies of this research—Czechia and Hungary—are Member States, the definition and conceptualisation of de-Europeanisation in the Turkish context does flesh out some important elements of the concept, that is, the turning away from EU structures and processes and the reconstruction of foreign policy predominantly or exclusively on national terms.

It was only recently that a more systematic approach to conceptualising de-Europeanisation for the foreign policy domain has been made (P. Müller et al. 2021). The authors understand

De-Europeanisation to relate to situations where EU foreign policy-making runs against the grain of certain Member States’ declared values and interests; where Member States are less willing to engage in collective foreign policy-making at the EU-level, prioritising other multilateral frameworks or (unilateral) national actions; and where the results of that policy-making are, on occasion, explicitly

undermined by Member State practice. Such behaviour may emerge from within the Union's foreign policy process and institutions, it may be conducted unilaterally by member states in other multilateral fora (such as the UN), or it may arise in bilateral or mini-lateral relations with third parties. (P. Müller et al. 2021, 520)

As synthesised by Michael Smith (2021, 637–38), there are several important assumptions at play here. First, the de-Europeanisation of Member States' foreign policy is visible and significant, meaning that it can be identified through empirical research and that its effects can challenge EU-level policymaking and hinder the Union's institutional capacity to address external developments. Second, de-Europeanisation can be seen as a collective action problem, whereby the Union's ability to act and react is constrained by individual Member States' vacillating levels of commitment to EU policymaking, as manifested through their free-riding or active defection. Third, actions at the EU level are preferable to, and should hence take precedence over, any other bilateral, multilateral and/or mini-lateral actions. Last, there is a (strong) linkage between the phenomenon of de-Europeanisation and changes in the domestic political arena of Member States (notably the rise of populist, nationalist and Eurosceptic parties and a renewed and rekindled relation with third parties).

In more concrete terms, the definition above provides the basis for the empirical inquiry by identifying three key elements of de-Europeanisation: the reconstruction of professional roles in exclusively or predominantly national terms, the implicit or explicit repudiation of well-defined and established foundational EU foreign policy norms and the consequential structural disintegration of collective policymaking institutions (P. Müller et al. 2021, 527–527). In what follows, these elements of de-Europeanisation will be developed further, and main dynamics that operate within each of them as well as indicators needed for empirical assessment will be established.

The first element, i.e., the reconstruction of professional roles in exclusively or predominantly national terms, relates to de-Europeanisation dynamics that involve both substantive and institutional and procedural aspects. Regarding the substance of foreign policy, Europeanisation, especially its downloading mechanism, is manifested through a greater salience of European preferences and priorities on the national agenda, the primacy accorded to the establishment of common European positions and institutional and policy changes made in line with European terms (Wong and Hill 2011; Tonra 2015). This mechanism has had especially far-reaching impact on smaller EU Member States, whose foreign policy outlook has traditionally been limited but who have participated in an increasingly wide spectrum of EU foreign policy issues since their accession to the EU²⁵ (Pomorska 2017; Fenko and Lovec 2015). Conversely, de-Europeanisation refers to instances in which Member States step back from common European understandings, preferences and roles that have emerged through Europeanisation. In terms of the substance of foreign policies, Member States may withdraw from previously Europeanised foreign policy objectives and priorities in favour of a renationalised foreign policy agenda. In terms of foreign policy discourse and official diplomatic rhetoric, national officials may represent themselves as champions of their respective national foreign policy interests whilst questioning or actively opposing a joint European foreign policy agenda.

²⁵ This point is particularly important to this research design and, by extension, this thesis, because the two countries that are selected as case studies are Czechia and Hungary. See Section 3.8.

The second element, i.e., the repudiation of foundational norms, relates to a regression from a commitment to well-defined procedural and substantive EU norms. After several decades of institution-building, EU-level cooperation and elite socialisation, the EU has taken on a distinctive foreign policy identity based on norms such as human rights, the rule of law and democracy (Manners 2002), as well as a common sense of purpose, ideational commitment and a ‘culture of cooperation’ (Nuttall 2000; Manners and Whitman 2000; Tonra 2003; Whitman 2011). Using this distinctive foreign policy identity as a point of departure, this research design’s conceptualisation of de-Europeanisation differs from works such as that of Rivera Escartin (2020),²⁶ which argue that *any* common policy produced through EU foreign policymaking constitutes Europeanisation, even if it amounts to a regression from foundational EU norms and values. The conceptualisation in this research design argues that a regression from these norms and values, as described in the EU’s founding treaties, is at odds with Europeanisation. As such, it speaks of de-Europeanisation when instances of such regression occur.

The third and final element, i.e., structural disintegration, relates to when Member States object to established EU structures and foreign policymaking processes in their foreign policy discourse and behaviours. Structural disintegration also results from a decreasing salience of EU structures and processes, as manifested by Member States’ ‘circumvention’ of the EU. More concretely speaking, circumvention involves situations in which Member States express increasing commitment to or reliance on alternative multilateral, mini-lateral or bilateral diplomatic frameworks rather than on the CFSP. For example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), whose geographic outreach, membership, mandate and resources overlap greatly with European frameworks, has significantly influenced the development of the CFSP and to a greater extent the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (Hoffmann 2000). The existence of NATO is especially important in understanding this conceptualisation, considering that it has been a more or less unwritten rule for prospective EU Member States to join NATO first and then the EU. Such was the scenario for the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements of the EU. Furthermore, both before and after their accession, many EU Member States have formed subregional groupings, such as the Visegrád Group, the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly. Last, given the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP, Member States can and very often do pursue their foreign policy objectives with important third countries, such as China, through bilateral networks, thus prioritising their national interests over EU-level cooperation. In sum, circumvention as de-Europeanisation occurs when Member States use alternative options over the CFSP framework, whilst Europeanisation has been traditionally understood as increasing reliance upon the CFSP framework (Gross 2011; P. Müller 2012).

The discussion of the three key elements of de-Europeanisation engenders two sets of implications. The first is that de-Europeanisation is in essence the Member States’ turning away from the EU and its roles, values and institutions and taking on a more inward-looking and nationalistic perspective. The second is an implied, and almost linear idea of causation: the reconstruction of professional roles in more national terms interacts with and is manifested in the repudiation of normative and/or foundational norms, which thus in turn leads to structural disintegration. As Thomas (2021) argues, this line of causation offers the advantage of rigour and clarity, but real-world policymaking is often more complex, dynamic and multilayered.

²⁶ In his article, Rivera Escartin (2020) offers a new conceptualisation of Europeanisation—informal and illiberal Europeanisation—and analyses how and to what extent the populist radical right parties of Hungary and Italy ‘uploaded’ their policy preferences in order to shape the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

3.2.3. Concept Delimitation: What Is Not De-Europeanisation?

Having spelt out the three main elements of de-Europeanisation, it is important to now proceed to delimiting the concept. First, for this research design, de-Europeanisation is not policy disagreement, reversals, weaknesses, failures or limitations. Policy disagreement is well within the realm of normal political contestation and is thus a fundamental pillar of Western democratic values. When policymakers design, debate and finally implement policies, despite their (often) best intentions, some policies do not stand the test of time and are revised or worse, withdrawn after the initial implementation. These are common across the board, regardless of the level of governance and the type of political system. Therefore, all these phenomena occur when ‘doing politics’, and accordingly they should not be perceived as signs of de-Europeanisation.

Second, disengagement is not necessarily de-Europeanisation. Whilst disengagement may result in de-Europeanisation, it does not automatically follow. The former involves a retreat from active Europeanisation, all whilst maintaining, more or less, the domestic policies, processes and structures that were previously Europeanised. Some may argue that disengagement is indeed de-Europeanisation, because ‘no answer is an answer’. However, given the scope of this research and the definition of de-Europeanisation set out earlier, to de-Europeanise, the national government must intentionally reverse the effects of previous Europeanisation.

Third, mindful that there are often unintended consequences in the realm of politics, this research is not concerned with momentary slips, or ‘oops moments’ of Europeanisation, but rather with Member States who continuously perform at the far end of or even fall from the EU ‘gold standard’, or *référentiel*. Momentary slips may happen in two instances: First, going back to ideas on policy limitation and failure, a policy or action may have unintended (negative) consequences. Second, the political establishment may take actions all whilst conscious of their negative consequences, but does so anyway in order to secure its own interests and make political gains. However, this is not common, because of the fear of punishment or repercussions. Therefore, for the sake of this research, intentionality and consistency are key in defining de-Europeanisation.

Fourth, this research design distinguishes between discursive de-Europeanisation and substantive de-Europeanisation. Whilst the former is about ‘lip service’ without necessarily taking action, the latter involves concrete actions, sometimes even in the absence of verbal statements. A good case in point of discursive de-Europeanisation was when, in 2016, both Czech President Zeman and PM Babiš argued that it was not possible to return Crimea to Ukraine and called for the recognition of this *fait accompli*, all whilst acknowledging the illegality of the Russian annexation of Crimea. This was a clear deviation from the common EU position, and in fact from the Czech government’s position (T. Weiss 2021). That said, Czechia, or particularly Zeman and Babiš, did not take further actions at either the national or the EU level to translate their discourse into concrete policies. Discursive de-Europeanisation offers less substantive content to analyse than actual de-Europeanisation, in which concrete policy actions are taken whose impact can be assessed and analysed.

Last, due to the intergovernmental nature of the EU’s CFSP, Member States may choose to pursue their foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis third countries via either Brussels or their own national capital. Given the fact that democratic values and norms are a sensitive issue to China, Member States often choose to outsource the responsibility of norm promotion to

Brussels (Rühlig et al. 2018). However, different Member States may have quite contrasting motives for doing so. Some may outsource norm promotion to Brussels because they understand that the EU has the potential to exercise more leverage than their individual efforts, whereas others simply wish to take these contentious issues off their bilateral agendas with China (Rühlig et al. 2018). Regardless of the rationale, when Member States outsource the responsibility for norm promotion to the EU and take a less confrontational or abrasive approach to China, this is not de-Europeanisation.

3.3. Theorising External Actors' Influence on De-Europeanisation

The 1980s onwards represents the second phase of European integration theory, a phase that broadened empirical research and theoretical reflection on European integration and introduced a greater degree of interdisciplinarity to the field (Diez and Wiener 2018, 11). Through the theoretical lens of neo-institutionalisms (Hall and Taylor 1996; Pollack 2018; Risse 2018), this phase analysed the key process of Europeanisation (Risse et al. 2001). However, if only neo-institutionalisms were adopted to understand de-Europeanisation, this would generate no more than a shallow understanding of the concept and would tell us little about its drivers. Furthermore, it would not provide any theoretical perspective on external actors' influence on de-Europeanisation. In theoretical terms, de-Europeanisation is essentially institutional change. In their seminal work, American institutionalist scholars Greif and Laitin (2004) provide a theory of endogenous institutional change that considers external influence. Accordingly, their work provides the theoretical foundation for this research.

In their work, Greif and Laitin ask 1) why and how institutions change, 2) how an institution persists in a changing environment and 3) how the processes it unleashes lead to its own demise (2004). These questions, as they argue, are difficult to answer based on the game-theoretic notion of self-enforcing equilibrium and the historical institutionalist focus on process (Greif and Laitin 2004). Studying institutions using game theory was first suggested by Ullmann-Margalit (1977) and Schotter (1981). Viewed from this perspective, institutions are considered self-enforcing and as generating all behaviours endogenously. Later, Hall and Taylor (1996) reaffirmed the advantage of this perspective, because it demands a 'precise conception of the relationship between institutions and behaviours' (950) and thereby explains 'why existing institutions continue to exist' (952).

However, this line of thought is inadequate for addressing how institutions change endogenously, because after all, a self-enforcing institution is one in which each player is on their best behaviour (Greif and Laitin 2004, 633). Therefore, the obvious conclusion is that endogenous institutional change must have an exogenous origin. Building on game-theoretic foundations but bearing in mind their shortcomings, Greif and Laitin (2004) introduce the concept of 'quasi-parameters' to account for the exogenous origins of endogenous institutional change.

Parameters are considered exogenous to the institution under consideration, whilst variables are seen as endogenous. However, some aspects should be viewed as parameters in studying self-enforceability and as variables in studying institutional dynamics. These aspects are defined as 'quasi-parameters'. If and when an institution is self-enforcing in a situation, individuals find it best to comply with the best behaviours associated in this situation, and exogenous change that would otherwise lead to institutional change would fail to usher in such change. That being said, this self-enforcing process can fail to occur in a situation if the institution is still 'in-the-making', whereby its incomplete processes encourage self-

undermining behaviours that ‘cultivate the seeds of [its] own demise’ (Greif and Laitin 2004, 634).

This theoretical perspective was later applied by Orenstein and Kelemen (2017) when theorising ‘Trojan horses’ in EU foreign policy. Orenstein and Kelemen begin with the disaggregated nature of the EU’s CFSP (Cross and Karolewski 2017) and argue that, ‘in order to develop a fully aggregated foreign policy, any federal or quasi-federal entity like the EU must simultaneously *establish* common policies and *prohibit* constituent states from engaging in independent policies’ (Orenstein and Kelemen 2017, 88). For example, the US Constitution not only establishes the federal government’s jurisdiction over foreign and defence policy (Article 1, Section 8 and Article 2, Section 2) but also explicitly prohibits subfederal governments from pursuing their own foreign policies (Article 1, Section 10). The disaggregated CFSP only completes half of this equation.

Although the EU’s CFSP has developed a substantial capacity to act collectively over the years (Bickerton 2011; Bickerton et al. 2011; Howorth 2012), it does not challenge or supplant any foreign policy that Member States may continue to favour (Howorth 2012, 535). As such, Member States can pursue foreign policies that are contradictory to the CFSP of the EU collective. Therefore, Orenstein and Kelemen argue, the EU’s ‘half built’ foreign policy is likely to be inherently unstable and unsustainable, qualifying as what Greif and Laitin (2004) call a ‘self-undermining institution’. A clear implication then follows: As the EU strengthens its capacity to act collectively, external actors become more incentivised to pursue a ‘Trojan horse’ policy by cultivating closer ties with certain Member States, and in doing so, they undermine EU foreign policy from within.

3.4. Theorising External Influence: A Driver for the De-Europeanisation of Foreign Policy?

Having used Greif and Latin’s (2004) theory to broadly explain external influence on de-Europeanisation, it is now vital to zoom in on the mechanisms through which external actors engage with and/or contribute to the de-Europeanisation of the foreign policy of Member States. Here, three general mechanisms are identified.

The first mechanism, and perhaps the most common mechanism in the realm of IR in general, is political and/or economic leverage. External actors can, and often do, provide political and/or economic benefits to individual Member States in order to sway the policy preferences, behaviours and/or rhetoric of local political elites. Such benefits include, but are not limited to, bilateral cooperation on issues that are dear to the hearts of these political elites, as well as foreign direct and/or indirect investments that are needed to strengthen national economies. Major global actors, such as Russia and China, can also use their political influence (such as their veto power at United Nations Security Council) to support specific interests of EU Member States in international organisations and in the global arena in general. The example of Russia’s and China’s veto power alone demonstrates the significant leverage that these major global actors may hold vis-à-vis individual Member States, because neither the EU itself nor any EU Member States except one (i.e., France) wield such power. Regarding economic leverage, these major global actors can withhold financial goods and resources (e.g., sanctions) or provide financial goods and resources (e.g., aid) to change the payoffs of targeted Member States. This is done by affecting the ability of the political elites of said Member States to navigate complex issues in the global arena and their ability to maintain domestic support so they can act as national leaders. Because political and/or economic leverage comprises

concrete and direct actions that yield, or at least are designed to yield, concrete and direct results, Rothman (2011) conceptualises this as the influence of harder powers.

The flipside of harder powers—that is, softer powers—constitutes the second mechanism through which external actors engage with and/or contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Member States' foreign policy. Normative influence is key in understanding external influence on de-Europeanisation, because norms are customs or behaviours based on an actor's unique identity in a given social environment, where said actor's actions follow the 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 2008). Therefore, instead of acting based on rational calculations, actors act in accordance with what they believe to be 'right' or 'normal'. As the EU finds itself in a growing, systemic competition with major global actors, and as frictions between Brussels and national capitals become more frequent and more evident, some Member States may become more vulnerable to normative influence by said external actors. Countries like Russia and China can be and often are seen as alternative modes of governance to the mode of governance championed by the EU. China's economic success, despite its illiberal politics, is a good case in point here, and the country is a good role model to emulate for European political elites with illiberal predilections and tendencies. In praxis, norms can be diffused through various channels, such as epistemic communities (e.g., universities and think tanks) (P. M. Haas 1992) and transnational advocacy networks (e.g., cultural diplomacy, dialogues and community groups) (Keck and Sikkink 1998). In other words, external actors seeking normative influence often have more access points into Member States than those seeking traditional, political and/or economic leverage, which primarily takes place on governmental levels. Furthermore, the soft powers of external actors such as China might be less promising when directed at liberal actors and Member States within the EU but might resonate more strongly with and appeal to illiberal actors and their tendencies.

External actors have a third mechanism at their disposal: organisational influence. This has a direct impact on the de-Europeanisation of Member States' foreign policy, especially in terms of structural disintegration, as elucidated previously. External actors can create international organisations that overlap with some or much of the EU's membership and its objectives/tasks, or they can institutionalise, often extensively and intensively, bilateral relations between themselves and targeted Member States. For their part, Member States may participate in these deliberately created institutional overlaps due to their dissatisfaction with the substantive norms and/or procedures of the existing institution (i.e., the EU), their dissatisfaction with the existing decision-making rules and procedures and/or their dissatisfaction with the existing governance arrangement (Faude and Fuss 2020). Should Member States partake in these newly created international organisations or institutional arrangements, it would entail a restructuring of their foreign policy apparatus and organisational structure as well as a reallocation of staff and diplomatic resources. The extent of these changes may well alter the balance between EU-led structures and third-countries-led structures, with Member States often shifting away from the former towards the latter. This shift can be conceptualised as de-Europeanisation.

3.5. Research Questions

Moving forward, the conceptual domain of this research has been defined in section 3.2, with some dimensions of the concept being prioritised. What was once a vague concept under the generic term 'de-Europeanisation' has now been delineated and narrowed down for the purpose of this research. Subsequently, the theoretical foundation of this thesis was elaborated in sections 3.3. and 3.4. This foundation provides the theoretical lens and tools needed to

understand the issues at play. It is within this conceptual framework and on this theoretical basis that the research will be conducted. In more concrete terms, this research seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: *What have been the key mechanisms of Chinese influence on EU foreign policy?*

The first research question (RQ1) of this thesis aims to shed light on the key mechanisms of Chinese influence on EU foreign policy, especially that of the Member States. Though more descriptive in nature, RQ1 is an important exercise to undertake before proceeding to the second research question (RQ2): It lays down the independent variable of this research ('Chinese influence') and launches a systematic exploration of Chinese influence before establishing the causal linkages between the independent variable and the dependent variable. The preliminary empirical evidence indicates that China utilises all three mechanisms briefly explained above. First of all, China frequently leverages political and economic 'carrots and sticks' to influence the political elites of Member States. Second, given China's success, its model is often seen as an alternative mode of governance, a rather successful one, to what the EU champions and embodies. Last, over the past decade, China has intentionally created institutional overlap and has greatly institutionalised its relations on these platforms as well as on a bilateral basis.

RQ2: *To what extent has Chinese influence engaged with and/or contributed to a de-Europeanisation of the foreign policies of Hungary and Czechia?*

Having explained the key mechanisms of Chinese influence, RQ2 aims to explain China's engagement with and/or contribution to the de-Europeanisation of the foreign policies of Hungary and Czechia. RQ2 sets out the dependent variable (i.e., the de-Europeanisation of foreign policies) and the locus of observation (at the Member State level, that is, Hungary and Czechia). This research question is not preoccupied with changes in foreign policy *stricto sensu* but is rather interested in changes in foreign policy preferences, behaviours and/or rhetoric in Hungary and Czechia vis-à-vis the wider EU CFSP. The broader focus on Member States' foreign policies indicates that this research is interested in all three elements of de-Europeanisation, as described in section 3.2.2. This broader and deeper interest implies that the research prioritises patterned changes in the Member States' foreign policies over time that could constitute signs of de-Europeanisation and cares less about momentary slips, or 'oops moments'. In short, RQ2 operationalises the concept of de-Europeanisation and paves the way for the empirical enquiry upon which this research builds.

To simplify the discussion in the above subsections and better operationalise the empirical research later on, the table below outlines the elements, dynamics and indicators of de-Europeanisation that are pertinent to this research. It also describes possible mechanisms and tools through which China engages with the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian and Czech national foreign policies.

Table 4. Elements, outcomes and indicators of de-Europeanisation.

Elements of De-Europeanisation	Outcomes and Indicators of De-Europeanisation
1. Discursive de-Europeanisation	- Effectiveness: Member States recognise China's economic and/or political model as successful or even superior - Legitimacy: Member States refer to China as a legitimate alternative model of governance - Member States increasingly provide declaratory support for Chinese positions on key issues
2. Substantive de-Europeanisation	- Member States provide support for Chinese interests/positions through substantive foreign policy actions, even at the expense of the cohesion and effectiveness of EU foreign policy - Member States' discursive rejection of EU common foreign policy norms, routines, procedures and 'ways of doing things' translates into resistance to 'procedural norms' and 'fundamental norms'
3. Organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation	- Member States redefine organisational priorities and structures for cooperation with China - Member States dedicate more foreign policy resources and personnel to the advancement of their relations with China - Member States engage in institutionalised dialogue with China (including with think tanks and academic institutions) which provides counter-socialisation and counter-Brusselisation

Source: Adapted from Müller et al. (2021, 527) with researcher's own configuration.

3.6. Research Strategy

This section outlines the research strategy and its operationalisation. In accordance with the conceptual framework of de-Europeanisation and in response to the research questions, this research adopts an actor-oriented research strategy, attaching importance to outcome-oriented empirical surveying and inductive research. In treating the EU (and other EU institutions) as exogenous variables (Radaelli and Pasquier 2008; Radaelli 2003), this research strategy tries, first, to empirically establish what has been de-Europeanised and then to inductively establish whether Chinese influence is salient enough to induce such de-Europeanisation outcomes. To this end, the research starts from 'the set of actors, ideas, problems, rules, styles and outcomes at the domestic level at time zero, [...] then process-traces the system over the years and identifies the critical junctures or turning points—for example, when major ideational change takes place, or the constellation of dominant actors is altered' (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2009, 510). And finally, the research examines whether Chinese influence has been the cause of these de-Europeanised outcomes. Therefore, this research strategy shares similarities with 'backward

mapping' in policy design and implementation, a research strategy that starts from the implementation outcomes and works backwards to establish causality (Elmore 1979; C. H. Weiss 1998).

In praxis, the operationalisation of this research strategy is as follows: To begin with, empirical observations and data are collected in order to constitute the dependent variable ('de-Europeanisation'). This part comprises the descriptive analysis of the empirical research. During this process, little to no attention is paid to explaining the aetiological drivers behind the observed phenomena. The method of data collection will be outlined in section 3.8.3. Once the dependent variable is constructed by collecting the empirical data, describing changes and thoroughly analysing them in a time-sensitive manner, the causal and constitutive relationships between the dependent and the independent variable ('Chinese influence') are explored. This part constitutes the argumentative analysis of the empirical research. It draws upon and adapts from the scholarship²⁷ that has relied on process-tracing and triangulation in exploring China–EU relations and China's relations with individual Member States. The goal here is to identify the teleological, normative and structural drivers behind China's influence on the de-Europeanisation of Hungary and Czechia as well as to determine whether the mechanisms employed by China, rather than other factors, brought about the de-Europeanising changes in Hungary and Czechia.

Throughout the entirety of the research process, cautions and checks will be in place to reduce 'the risk of committing the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent' (De Vaus 2001, 13). For example, when Member States give greater priority or commitment to other multi-, mini- or bilateral frameworks than the CFSP in their foreign policy discourses, this is by no means limited to their bilateral relations with China or their activities on China-backed multilateral forums. In fact, as will be described in section 3.8.1.2, the Czech Republic and Hungary are also Member States of the Visegrád Group, a regional mini-lateral platform that played an important role in these two countries' accession to the EU in 2004. Thus, a mini-lateral platform is readily available on which these two countries can pursue their foreign policy objectives, whilst many of their fellow Member States do not have access to such platforms. Similar to the high risk of prejudging the role of the EU in Europeanisation research (Haverland 2008; 2006; Radaelli and Pasquier 2006), the risk of prejudging the role of China in de-Europeanisation research in relation to other rival or plausible variables needs to be taken seriously and addressed adequately.

3.7. Analytical Design

To investigate how external actors—particularly China—engage with and contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Member States' national foreign policies, this research employs the following analytical framework: Whilst the concept of Europeanisation has traditionally been applied to describe the EU's internal norm diffusion and policy alignment processes, this thesis extends the framework to explore external drivers of policy reorientation. In doing so, the analysis draws on institutionalist theory to identify and distinguish between three main types of external influence: interest-based, norm-based and institutional mechanisms. This framework aims to maintain analytical clarity and empirical tractability, in line with the more recent de-Europeanisation literature.

²⁷ See, for example, Karáskova (2020) and Le Corre and Sepulchre (2016)

The analytical approach taken here is partly inspired by Carlsnaes's (2002) tripartite typology of foreign policy motivations—teleological, dispositional and structural. However, rather than fully adopting his terminology, the framework adapts these categories to more explicitly reflect dominant strands of institutionalist theory that underpin much of the Europeanisation and de-Europeanisation literature. As such, the analytical categories correspond more closely to rational choice institutionalism, social institutionalism and institutional embeddedness, respectively. This not only allows for a more straightforward and timely application to the cases of Hungary and Czechia but also aligns more naturally with the mechanisms typically discussed in more recent de-Europeanisation literature.

The three analytical approaches are outlined below, alongside the expectations they generate about the potential for external-actor-driven de-Europeanisation.

3.7.1. Interest-Based Drivers

The first analytical approach refers to rational, interest-based calculations on the part of the foreign policy actors at the Member State level. According to rational choice institutionalism, political agents respond to incentives and constraints in ways that maximise their perceived utility. When applied to foreign policy, this suggests that states or political elites may deviate from EU consensus if they believe that closer alignment with an external actor—such as China—offers (more) tangible material or strategic benefits (Pollack 2018; Stein 2016).

In this regard, it would be expected that Member States with significant economic ties to China, or those who are actively seeking Chinese investment and trade opportunities, may be more inclined to reorient their foreign policies in a pro-China direction. Concrete examples of such reorientation might take the form of blocking EU statements critical of China, softening language on China's human rights issues or avoiding alignment with EU positions on matters involving China's core interests, such as Taiwan or the South China Sea. In doing so, Member States render EU foreign policy less cohesive and effective.

3.7.2. Norm-Based Drivers

The second analytical approach concerns ideational and normative alignment. Drawing on sociological institutionalism, this approach emphasises the role of collective identities, belief systems and the logic of appropriateness in shaping political preferences and foreign policy orientations. In contrast to the interest-maximising logic of rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism posits that actors follow norms and rules that are socially constructed and embedded within broader cultural and social frameworks (S. Wang 2016; Schimmelfennig and Thomas 2009).

In this light, external actors like China may influence Member States' foreign policy preferences and actions not only through material incentives (such as investments and other economic opportunities) but also by echoing domestic political ideologies or normative positions. Member State governments that share scepticism towards liberal-democratic norms, such as populist or illiberal regimes, may find China's model of governance more ideologically appealing than that of the EU. This mechanism thereby contributes to the discursive and behavioural divergence of Member States from EU foreign policy norms. This is especially evident in the rhetoric of political leaders who frame the EU as an overly normative or paternalistic actor while portraying China as a pragmatic, non-interfering partner.

3.7.3. Institutional Drivers

The third analytical approach focuses on institutional relationships between individual Member States and external actors. These relationships include formal agreements, repeated diplomatic engagement and embedded cooperation through bilateral or multilateral forums that fall outside the EU framework or exclude the participation of the EU. The underlying logic here is that institutional proximity can normalise foreign policy actions and preferences that diverge from EU norms and expectations, which then gradually erode Member States' alignment with the EU consensus and render EU policy incohesive and ineffective.

China's implementation of alternative cooperation frameworks, most notably the '17+1' framework and the BRI, is a key mechanism for cultivating such institutional ties. Through regular bi- and multilateral summits, memoranda of understanding and sector-specific cooperation platforms, China has built channels of communication and engagement that bypass EU-level coordination. This essentially offers a parallel track for Member States to pursue foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis China, all whilst circumventing Brussels.

The hypothesis underpinning this approach is that the more routinised and intensive these institutional ties become, the more likely it is that they will foster foreign policy actions and preferences that are increasingly distinct from EU norms, even if not openly oppositional to them. Over time, institutional embeddedness may facilitate a process of gradual de-Europeanisation by creating alternative points of reference, coordination and loyalty.

3.8. Methodological Design

3.8.1. Case Study

This thesis adopts the methodological design of a cross-national, longitudinal, small-*n* case study. Broadly speaking, the tradition of case study research continues to wield influence in the realm of political science (Blatter and Haverland 2012; Rohlfing 2012; Gerring 2017). More specifically, this methodological design makes it possible to examine de-Europeanisation phenomena and China's possible engagement therewith in the two countries, 'with the express intention of comparing their manifestations in different socio-cultural settings (institutions, customs, traditions, value systems, life styles, language, thought patterns), using the same research instruments' (Bryman 2012, 72).

The two countries chosen for this research are part of Central Eastern Europe, geographically and geopolitically, and of 'Europeanisation East' theoretically and conceptually. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, both countries followed similar political and socio-economic trajectories. Both have conducted dynamic foreign policy on the international stage, and their foreign policy actors have interacted intensively with the EU both before and after their accession in 2004. Yet, the two countries' relationships with the EU exhibit specificities, and their relationships with China differ meaningfully from one another. Therefore, the choice of two countries instead of one can best capture these nuances. Technically, a third (or even a fourth) country could have been included in the study, but this addition would not have added much explanatory power and could have increased the difficulty of conducting this research.

Furthermore, referring to the analytical framework developed in the previous subsection, both countries exhibit varying degrees of alignment with two hypothesised conditions under which externally driven de-Europeanisation is likely to emerge. First, they are both targets of substantial Chinese diplomatic and economic engagement, suggesting the presence of an external actor capable of providing material incentives or strategic alternatives to EU consensus and alignment. Second, and more crucially, their domestic political environments have, at different moments, been marked by the presence of populist or ideologically China-friendly leaders, some of whom have openly challenged liberal-democratic EU values. These characteristics make them well-suited to explore the proposition that external actor-driven de-Europeanisation is most likely to occur where material leverage intersects with normative or ideological receptiveness.

3.8.1.1. *Hungary and Czechia: 'Return to the West'*

The two countries that have been chosen for this research are Hungary and Czechia. The choice of these two countries echoes the need to select 1) information-rich cases, 2) cases with meaningful similarities and 3) cases with meaningful differences. Before delving into the justification of this choice, it is first important to provide a brief overview of these countries' turbulent and traumatic experience from the end of the Second World War to the fall of communism in 1989. This survey provides a better understanding of their modern-day foreign policy preferences, behaviours and rhetoric.

The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 took place against the background of numerous forms of discontent. Unlike the Soviet Union (and later Russia), where Bolshevism was, to a large extent, a home-grown political ideology stemming from domestic political and socio-economic dynamics, Czechoslovakia and Hungary (and, by extension, most CEECs) were forced to accept communism after the Second World War, mainly driven by the global East–West geopolitical standoff amidst the Cold War.²⁸ Motivated by their perceived geographical adjacency, cultural proximity and historical connectedness to Western Europe, the societies and peoples of Central and Eastern Europe were naturally inclined to evaluate their situation in comparison to that of Western Europe, especially on important issues such as personal freedoms,²⁹ sovereignty and geopolitical identity,³⁰ and

²⁸ As historians point out, the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe actively built myths of origin, tried to legitimise their rule through narratives about an indigenous fight for communism prior to the Second World War and portrayed the creation of the Eastern Bloc 'as the consequence of the genuine political aspirations for the respective peoples and parties'. For more details on the actions of these communist regimes and the involvement of Moscow, see Gibanskii and Naimark's *The Soviet Union and the Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944–1954* (2019).

²⁹ Regarding personal freedoms, one of the most sensitive curtailments was the ban on travelling. Communist regimes tried to prevent people from fleeing abroad, even at the cost of killing their own citizens. They used border guards and specially trained dogs, erected walls and electric barricades and buried land mines. According to the Nation's Memory Institute (Ústav pamäti národa) of Slovakia, the Czechoslovak authorities killed up to 500 people who tried to cross the border to make it to the West. Therefore, for post-1989 political elites and the general populace, EU membership, which grants the freedom of movement, secured a freedom for which they fought long and hard. See Nation's Memory Institute, 'Fleeing Abroad', at <https://www.upn.gov.sk/en/fleeing-abroad/>.

³⁰ In his seminal essay 'Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale' (A kidnapped West or the tragedy of Central Europe), Milan Kundera (1983) writes,

In fact, what is Europe for a Hungarian, a Czech or a Pole? Since the beginning, these nations have belonged to the part of Europe rooted in Roman Christianity. They have participated in every phase of its history. For them, the word 'Europe' does not represent a geographical

economic welfare. This comparison further exacerbated their traumatic experience behind the Iron Curtain.

It is important to note, however, that Central and Eastern Europe had its fair share of home-grown authoritarianism before the end of the Second World War. In fact, by 1938, Czechoslovakia was the only democracy among all the newly established states in the region. That said, the region had historically been acclimatised to more rights and freedoms than the Soviet-backed communist regimes were willing to offer. Resentment, especially normative resentment, towards communism was further cemented by the brutal Soviet crackdowns on what Moscow viewed as revisionist reformism in Hungary (1956), Poland (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). Václav Havel's slogan 'living in truth'³¹ empowered the local populace and gave impetus to their dissident resistance against a highly repressive political system that had been forcibly imposed on the region by a foreign superpower. Furthermore, the Prague Spring in 1968 prompted Moscow to develop the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, whereby the Soviet Union could politically and/or militarily intervene in any state in Central and Eastern Europe that posed a threat to Soviet-backed communism. Here, the personal and the political formed a nexus, in that the general resentment towards communism was fuelled by the lack of personal rights and freedoms and the nationalistic fight against the traumatic predicament of belonging to the Soviet's 'informal empire' (Wendt and Friedheim 1995).

Milan Kundera's image of a Central and Eastern Europe that was historically Western but had politically been 'kidnapped' by the Soviet Union underpinned the goal of the region's post-1989 political elites to 'return to the West'. This rhetoric or myth of the 'return' fostered several important expectations within the region and across Europe. The 'return', intimately but paradoxically linked to the restoration of national sovereignty, was to be realised through membership of the EU and NATO (Moisio 2002; Pomorska 2017). To Western Europe, the admission of its Central European 'lost cousins' implied the restoration of Central Europe as normatively, (geo)politically and culturally Western; hence, since the 2000s, membership of NATO almost went hand-in-hand with that of the EU. On a more personal level, the expectation of convergence between the East and the West in terms of personal freedoms coincided with the general expectation of an increase in living standards in the region (Lane 2007). Last, the 'return' constituted a part of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992), an unipolar moment when liberal democracy, along with Western capitalism, seemed to have triumphed over all other alternatives.

phenomenon, but a spiritual notion that is synonymous with the word 'West'. The moment when Hungary is no longer European—that is, no longer Western—it is driven from its own destiny, beyond its own history: it loses the essence of its identity. (Researcher's own translation)

It was this very sense of being 'kidnapped' from the West that translated into the political rhetoric of a 'return to Europe' shared by many CEECs. The post-1989 political elites in this region used these ideas to legitimise their foreign policies, including EU membership. See Neumann's *Uses of the Other* (1999). For example, as Petr Drulák (2012, 78) points out, 'the interpretation of the Czech communist experience by the new elite was very much in tune with Milan Kundera's metaphor of "kidnapping"'.³¹

³¹ See Václav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless* (2018). The original essay was published in Czech as *samizdat* in 1979. *Samizdat* (Russian: самиздат, lit. trans. 'self-publishing') was a form of dissident activity across the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, whereby individuals reproduced and often translated state-censored publications for underground dissemination across the region. For more information on *samizdat*, see Peter Steiner (2008), 'Introduction: On Samizdat, Tamizdat, Magnitizdat, and Other Strange Words That Are Difficult to Pronounce'.

In short, for Hungary, Czechia and many other CEECs, the ‘return to the West’ was not only an identity-based (geo)political and cultural choice but also a panacea for the many ills brought about by the Soviet Union in the region during the second half of the twentieth century.

3.8.1.2. *Information-Rich Cases*

Conducted under the general auspice of de-Europeanisation research and contributing to the relevant literature, this thesis has two research *foci*: a politico-geographical one (Central and Eastern Europe) and a sectoral one (national foreign policy). Bearing in mind the time allotted to this thesis, it is methodologically unfeasible or even impossible to study, analyse and compare all possible de-Europeanisation phenomena in the region. As such, it is imperative to choose cases that can best contribute to the current debate on de-Europeanisation in academia. Cognisant of the (relative) heterogeneity in Central and Eastern Europe, this research design prioritises cases that exhibit information-richness.

The choice of Hungary and Czechia is anchored on the fact that both countries have been conducting a dynamic foreign policy for the past three decades. This dynamism is characterised by their rapidity and agility in developing their foreign policy apparatus, ‘downloading’ foreign policy preferences from the EU *référéntiel* during the accession process, ‘learning’ new foreign policy issues and championing ones that matter to them. Methodologically speaking, this dynamism provides these two countries with information-richness.

After decades under the Soviet sphere of influence, a commonality amongst most CEECs is (or *was*) their relative lack of experience in modern foreign policymaking and (multilateral) diplomacy (Pomorska 2017, 51). Countries like Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Baltic states needed to build up their foreign policy structure almost from scratch (Pomorska 2017; Fenko and Lovec 2015). After the wave of revolutions in 1989 that brought forth democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, both Hungary and Czechia (then Czechoslovakia) knew that a steep learning curve lay before them and that they needed to quickly engage with various countries bilaterally, regionally and internationally.

And this they did. After 1989, both countries aligned themselves to a clear policy trajectory and immediately embarked on their ‘return to the West’. Against this backdrop, the Visegrád Group (formerly V3; now V4)³² came into existence. The founding declaration of the group states that the signatory countries are committed in their transition from the Soviet political-economical system to European integration and that they seek cooperation in order to facilitate this transition (Visegrád Declaration – Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration 1991). After a brief ‘hibernation’ in the mid-1990s, the V4 was revigorated by the joint prime ministerial declaration ‘Contents of Visegrád Cooperation’, which was adopted in Bratislava in 1999. The declaration widened the areas of cooperation, including several intra-group policy domains such as education, science and culture, and interior affairs (Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 1999 1999). The declaration further strengthened the V4’s institutional capacity by creating mechanisms and increasing the frequency of meetings of experts and senior governmental officials (Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 1999 1999). More importantly for the scope of this research, the declaration listed

³² At the time of its establishment, the Visegrád Group (then V3) had only three members: Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, both Czechia and Slovakia became full-fledged independent members of the group, thus increasing its membership to four (V4).

‘EU accession talks’ and ‘strategic questions of Central Europe’ as the two ‘main topics’ for prime ministerial meetings—the highest form of intergovernmental cooperation within the V4 framework (Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 1999 1999).

The day 1 May 2004 was a testament to Hungary and Czechia’s ‘return to the West’, as both countries acceded to the EU. After their accession, the mandate and nature of V4 naturally changed and, as Dangerfield conceptualises, the post-2004 V4 should be seen as ‘a specific vehicle for cooperation and coordination around EU affairs with well-defined limitations and not as some kind of Central European lobby or regional bloc within the EU’ (2014, 71). This conceptualisation specifically refers to the 2004 prime ministerial declaration in Prague—the Kroměříž Declaration, which stated ‘with full satisfaction that the key objectives set in the 1991 Visegrád Declaration have been achieved and declare[d] their determination to continue developing the cooperation of the Visegrád Group countries as Member States of the European Union and NATO’ (Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on Cooperation of the Visegrad Group Countries after Their Accession to the European Union 2004)

Hungary and Czechia’s unique modern history produced several key foreign policy elements that speak very much to the context and interests of this research. In the case of Hungary, Hungarian nationalism and, more importantly, solidarity with ethnic Hungarians living in its near abroad have been the key cornerstones of its foreign policy since 1989.³³ In slightly more abstract terms, Hungarian foreign policy has always distinguished between *self* and *other* (Rácz 2011, 144). Solidarity, in terms of foreign policy, ‘expresses a belonging to various elements of the *self* that are abroad’ (Rácz 2011, 144). Even after Hungary’s accession to the EU in 2004, the focus on ethnic minorities abroad still prevailed as a key foreign policy element. In an interview given to the daily *Népszabadság*, the then Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ferenc Somogyi said, ‘the well-planned implementation of these three foreign policy tools³⁴ may provide good chances for pursuing our political interests and economic goals and also to realise our efforts aimed at improving the situation of the Hungarian minority communities’ (Rácz 2011, 151).

In the case of Czechia, dissident activity before 1989 left its imprint on Czech society and politics, and as such, a dissident tradition has dominated Czech foreign policy matters, both before and after its accession to the EU (Waisová and Piknerová 2012; Pomorska 2017). In fact, an explicit mechanism that has incorporated the dissident tradition exists in the Czech foreign policy process and has, in quite a few cases, affected policy outcomes (Waisová and Piknerová 2012). Furthermore, former dissidents have been the main shapers of Czech foreign policy until arguably recent years. The most influential dissident amongst them, Václav Havel, was the tenth president of Czechoslovakia (1989–1992) and the first president of the Czech Republic (1993–2003). Other former dissidents who held key posts include but are not limited to the first Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier (1989–1992), former Defence Minister under Nečas Alexandr Vondra (2010–2012) and former Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg (2007–2009 under Topolánek, 2010–2013 under Nečas).

³³ For the reasons behind the large number of ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary, see section 3.8.1.3.

³⁴ After 1989, the new Hungary defined its foreign policy along three main pillars/tools: 1) Euro-Atlantic integration, 2) good relations with neighbouring countries and 3) responsibility for Hungarian minorities living abroad. See ‘A nemzeti megújulás programja. A Köztársaság első három éve’ (Programme of the National Renewal: The first three years of the republic) (Government of Hungary 1990).

In short, as a result of their communist legacy, both Hungary and Czechia have been committed to democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law as well as the protection of minorities (Visegrád Declaration – Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration 1991). All of these political values, of course, fall within the scope of this research.

3.8.1.3. *Cases with Meaningful Similarities*

The most common criticism of the small-*n* comparative method is, in Lijphart's words, the 'too many variables, too few cases' problem (1971). In order to make a sound comparison, cases must be chosen in a manner that reduces the number or significance of variables. The exception here, of course, is the independent variable(s) used to explain the phenomenon of de-Europeanisation. This methodological issue is mitigated through the choice of cases that exhibit meaningful similarities. The choice of Hungary and Czechia attends to this need for meaningful similarities.

First, Hungary and Czechia share a common history. Modern-day Czech Republic traces its origins to the Duchy of Bohemia, which emerged in the late ninth century when it was unified by the Přemyslid dynasty. The Duchy was recognised as an Imperial State of the Holy Roman Empire in 1002 and later became a kingdom in 1198. Similarly, the foundation of modern-day Hungary was established in the ninth century when the Hungarian prince Árpád conquered the Carpathian Basin. His great-grandson Stephen I adopted Christianity and established the Kingdom of Hungary. The Kingdom reached its political and cultural height in the fifteenth century. Between 1490 and 1526, the Bohemian and Hungarian kingdoms were held in a personal union under Vladislav II and then his son Louis II. The Battle of Mohács in 1526 was a turning point in the countries' common history. Following the battle, the Hungarian lands became occupied by the Ottoman and Austrian Empires. Northward, the Habsburgs also began to integrate the Czech lands, which was met with fierce resistance from the local Protestant nobility, which ultimately culminated in the Defenestration of Prague in 1618 and the ensuing Thirty Years' War. With the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the Austrian Empire fully consolidated its control over the Czech lands. Around the same time, Hungary became fully integrated into the Austrian Empire, though its status was formally elevated with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. The Austro-Hungarian Empire met its demise after the end of the First World War in 1918, after which numerous ethnic nation-states were established during the interbellum era.

Second, Hungary and Czechia share important socio-cultural characteristics, largely due to their common history. Their experience under the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire greatly affected their modern-day demographical make-up (see Table 5). Today, both countries are multi-ethnic states with a significant ethnic majority and sizeable ethnic minorities. Domestically speaking, Hungary is more ethnically homogeneous than Czechia. The largest ethnic minority group in Hungary are the Romani people, whereas the largest ethnic minority group in Czechia are Slovaks and people of other Slavic origins. According to the 2011 census, the largest Asian minority groups in Hungary and Czechia are, respectively, Vietnamese (0.3%) and Chinese (0.2%). Outside their borders, both countries also have a sizeable diaspora, though the diaspora community of Hungary is significantly bigger than that of Czechia. For example, Romania alone has approximately 1.3 million Hungarians, with Slovakia having 0.5 million. This is partly due to Hungary's experience in the Austro-Hungarian Empire but more importantly because of Hungary's major loss of territory as a result

of the Treaty of Trianon after the end of the First World War. In terms of religious affiliations, the populations of both countries have predominantly not specified their religion or have identified as non-religious/atheist. That said, today roughly 40% of the Hungarian population identifies as Catholic, and the Czech Republic has historically been a Roman Catholic country.

Table 5. Country comparison: Demographics of the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Name	Czech Republic	Hungary
Area	78,966 km ²	93,028 km ²
Population	10,693,939	9,769,526
Ethnic groups (Top 5)	(according to 2011 census) 64.3% Czechs 25.3% Unspecified 5.0% Moravians 1.4% Slovaks 1.0% Ukrainians	(according to 2011 census) 85.6% Hungarians 14.1% Unspecified 3.2% Romani 1.9% Germans 0.4% Slovaks
Diaspora in Europe (Top 3)	Austria: 50,000 Slovakia: 36,153 France: 15,000	Romania: 1,227,623 Slovakia: 458,467 Serbia: 253,899
Religious affiliations	(according to 2011 census) 45.2% Unspecified 34.2% Non-religious 10.3% Catholics	(according to 2011 census) 38.9% Catholics 27.1 Unspecified 18.2 Non-religious
GDP (nominal)	\$245,226 billion (45th) \$23,113 per capita (36th)	\$161,182 billion (54th) \$16,484 per capita (47th)
GDP (PPP)	\$306,176 billion (45th) \$37,430 per capita (34th)	\$312,052 billion (53th) \$31,914 per capita (40th)
Human Development Index (HDI)	0.891 very high (26th)	0.845 very high (43rd)
Currency	Czech koruna (Kč) - CZK	Hungarian forint (Ft) - HUF

Table 6. Country comparison: Political systems of the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Name	Czech Republic	Hungary
Government	Unitary parliamentary constitutional republic	Unitary parliamentary constitutional republic
Executive branch	President <i>elected by direct vote, 5-year term, renewable once</i>	President <i>elected by National Assembly, 5-year term, renewable once</i>
Legislative branch	Bicameral Chamber of Deputies (<i>Poslanecká sněmovna</i>) 200 seats <i>elected for a 4-year term</i> Senate (<i>Senát</i>) 81 members <i>elected for a 6-year term</i>	Unicameral National Assembly (<i>Országgyűlés</i>) 199 seats (386 seats before 2014) <i>elected for a 4-year term</i>

Third, Hungary and Czechia share important socio-political characteristics (see Table 6). Both countries are unitary parliamentary constitutional republics, whereby the head of government (i.e., prime minister, or PM) wields considerable power compared to the head of state (i.e., president), whose power is rather limited and nominal. One notable difference between the two political systems is that the Hungarian legislature is unicameral and Czech legislature bicameral. That said, this difference does not significantly affect this research, in that the Czech Senate's delays or vetoes can be overridden, in most cases, by an absolute majority (i.e., at least 101 out of 200 members) of the Chamber of Deputies. In Czechia, the political landscape supports a wide range of political parties posited on different points on the political spectrum. Between 1993 and 2013, the two largest parties were the centre-left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS). This bipartite model changed in the 2013 legislative elections with the rise of the populist ANO 2011 party, founded by the second-richest person in the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš. The legislative election in 2017 witnessed the rise of another political party—the liberal Czech Pirate Party under the leadership of Ivan Bartoš. Last, it is important to note that the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) still holds salience in the Czech political scene, having won a considerable number of seats since 1989. In comparison, the political landscape in Hungary is less diverse and is generally positioned between centre-right and far-right on the political spectrum. The Hungarian political scene is dominated by three or four parties: the national-conservative, right-wing Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance, affiliated with the European People's Party (EPP) at the EU level;³⁵ the Christian, right-wing Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP); the far-right, nationalist, populist Movement for a Better Hungary (commonly known as Jobbik); and the social-democratic, centre-left Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), born as one of the legal successors to the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party during the communist era and currently affiliated with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats at the EU level. In recent elections, only Jobbik and the MSZP have really jockeyed for power with Fidesz–KDNP, but the latter have enjoyed great election results since 2010 and have thus formed governments under the premiership of Viktor Orbán.

3.8.1.4. *Cases with Meaningful Differences*

The third issue that needs to be addressed in the case selection is the necessity to select cases that exhibit meaningful differences. The choice for Hungary and Czechia in this research design reflects this need, as both countries exhibit meaningful differences in their relationships with the EU and with China.

After 2004, Hungary and Czechia's trajectories in their relations with the EU and their core values have diverged. Hungary, under the premiership of Orbán, has experienced what scholars have called 'democratic backsliding' (Sedelmeier 2008; 2012; 2014; Domaradzki 2018; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2019). Orbán's government, with the support of his party coalition's two-thirds supermajority in the national assembly, passed a new constitution—heavily criticised by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission in June 2011. Another legislative change that received heavy criticism from a number of Member States, European Parliament (EP) party groups and the European Commission was the Media Law, adopted in 2011. Amongst other controversial elements in this law, it established a Media

³⁵ Due to Hungary's poor record in the rule of law, the EPP suspended Fidesz's affiliation as of March 2019, but left the door open for Fidesz to regain full membership. See <https://www.politico.eu/article/orbans-party-suspended-from-european-peoples-party/>.

Council composed of Fidesz supporters. The Council is responsible for licensing and tendering, the appointment of directors of public outlets and the imposition of high fines on media outlets whose contents are deemed ‘politically unbalanced’. In short, Orbán’s government centralised its power by, *inter alia*, weakening the Constitutional Court, seizing control of key public institutions and media outlets and changing the electoral law. Most importantly, this was done without formally violating the rule of law (for more examples, see Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012; Scheppele 2013).

In order to redress the democratic backsliding in Hungary, in June 2015, the EP debated the activation of Article 7 of the TEU, which provides the EU with a set of instruments against general breaches of democratic principles. If the EU finds that there is a ‘serious and persistent breach’ of core EU values, as outlined by Article 2 of the TEU, by a Member State, the Council can agree by a qualified majority to suspend certain treaty rights, including voting rights. That said, the determination of such a breach is quite demanding, as it requires a proposal by either the Commission or one-third of the Member States, approval by the EP with a two-thirds majority and unanimous agreement within the Council (not counting the accused and absent Member States). This is especially difficult to achieve when like-minded states such as Poland would always veto such a proposal. There are currently similar proceedings against Poland regarding the use of Article 7. In the period of composing this thesis, that is between 2019 and 2025, the EU has not managed to effectively use Article 7 against Hungary. However, it came quite close to sanctioning Austria in 2000, when the centre-right Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) formed a coalition with the populist far-right FPÖ, and Romania in 2012, when PM Victor Ponta—with the support of a newly aligned centre-left government coalition—suspended the centre-right President Traian Băsescu.

Unlike Hungary, Czechia has not experienced the same extent of democratic backsliding. Babiš, a billionaire businessman who campaigned on the accusation that the governmental establishment in Czechia was inept and corrupt, led his nascent ANO party to electoral victories and secured the premiership for himself from 2017 to 2021. Despite his penchant for populism and illiberalism, Babiš’s style of governance differed quite greatly from styles in other, backsliding CEECs. To begin with, there is not a dominant feeling of Czech nationalism for Babiš to exploit during and after elections, unlike Orbán with Fidesz in Hungary and Kaczyński with Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS) in Poland. Second, unlike Orbán, who vilifies political opposition and silences NGOs and independent media outlets, Babiš incorporated the views and voices of academia, think tanks, media and NGOs to reinforce and justify his democratic legitimacy. However, in the lead-up to the 2017 parliamentary elections, Babiš bought two of the biggest newspapers in Czechia, making him the most influential person in Czech media.

Czechia and Hungary finally differ in their respective relations with China. Largely due to the dissident tradition ingrained in Czech politics and foreign policy, past Czech leaders repeatedly voiced their concerns about China’s human rights records. President Havel maintained a close personal relationship with the Dalai Lama, much to the detriment of Sino-Czech bilateral relations. Their relations took another dive in 1995 when the Taiwanese Premier Lien Chan visited Czechia at the invitation of President Havel. Towards the end of Havel’s presidency, there were rumours about Czechia’s support for ‘Two Chinas’ and Taiwan’s re-entry to the UN as a full Member State. Bilateral relations only started to improve in the early 2000s, when President Václav Klaus reaffirmed the country’s commitment to the One China Principle. The ascent to power of President Miloš Zeman ushered in a new era of bilateral relations, conveniently coinciding with the timeframe of this thesis (i.e., 2010s). The

year 2009 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Since then, relations have improved due to the great number of high-level visits that, amongst others, focused on increasing bilateral trade, promoting tourism and people-to-people dialogue, cooperating in environmental protection and building mutual trust. That said, in August 2020, the president of the Czech Senate, Miloš Vystrčil, led a 90-member delegation to Taiwan and started a speech at the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan³⁶ by saying, in Mandarin, ‘I am Taiwanese’, alluding to famous ‘Ich bin ein Berliner’ speech by John F. Kennedy. China has threatened to take action in response to this development, and as of 2025, it is unclear how bilateral relations will proceed.

Unlike Czechia, Hungary has not experienced similar ‘roller-coaster-like’ relations with China. Much on the contrary, both countries have consistently maintained warm relations, possibly due the sizeable Chinese diaspora in Hungary and some early positive political gestures by the second Orbán government (2010–2014) (Matura 2018, 137). Hungary (then the People’s Republic of Hungary) officially recognised the PRC three days after the latter’s proclamation on 1 October 1949. Their relationship developed rapidly in the following decade, and a number of high-level visits improved various aspects of bilateral relations. Despite having suffered from serious deteriorations amidst the Sino-Soviet Split and China’s Cultural Revolution, their bilateral relations gained momentum after the reorientation of the CPC and the implementation of Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening-Up Policy in 1978. Once Hungary successfully acceded to the EU and NATO, it quickly realised the potential of China and, as a consequence, all four consecutive Hungarian PMs, starting with Péter Medgyessy, visited China (Matura 2018, 138). China is a key partner in Orbán’s policy of ‘Eastern Opening’ (*keleti nyitás*) and today, Hungary is the largest receiver of Chinese FDI in Central and Eastern Europe (American Enterprise Institute 2020).

³⁶ The Legislative Yuan is the unicameral legislature of Taiwan.

Table 7. Timeline of Chinese, EU, Hungarian and Czech political leadership, 2010–now.

Year	CN	EU	HU (PM)	HU (PRE)	CZ (PM)	CZ (PRE)					
2010	Hu-Wen	Barroso-Van Rompuy	Bajnai (MSZP)	Sólyom (Independent)	Fischer (Independent)	Klaus (ODS)					
2011				Schmitt* (Fidesz)	Nečas (ODS)						
2012											
2013	Xi-Li		Orbán (Fidesz)	Áder (Fidesz)	Rusnok (Independent)	Zeman (SPO)					
2014					Sobotka (ČSSD)						
2015		Juncker-Tusk									
2016		Babiš (ANO)									
2017		von der Leyen -Michel									
2018											
2019											
2020											

*Kövér was the Acting President of Hungary from April to May 2012

3.8.2. Timeframe: From 2010 to 2020

The empirical and analytical research of this thesis covers a timespan of roughly a decade, from 2010 until 2020. The year 2010 was a key moment in the Czech and Hungarian domestic political scene, as new governments emerged following parliamentary elections in the same year. Their emergence signalled a (major) shift in the direction of the countries' national foreign policies and, as such, possible signs of de-Europeanisation may be observed and analysed. During the sixth free elections held in post-communist Hungary, Orbán's Fidesz won an absolute majority in the country's legislature during the first round on 11 April 2010. His victory was further cemented during the second round on 25 April, where Fidesz-KDNP achieved the two-thirds majority needed to modify major laws and the country's constitution. On 29 May 2010, Orbán became the Prime Minister of Hungary, a position he has held until today, and shortly thereafter, he introduced the policy of 'Eastern Opening' in an attempt to reduce the Hungarian economy's dependency on the West through increased commerce with countries in the East, in particular with China.

Czechia held a legislative election on 28 and 29 May 2010, which saw the loss of support for ČSSD despite it having won the most seats. A month later, a government was formed with a coalition comprising ODS, TOP 09 and Public Affairs (VV)³⁷ under the premiership of Petr Nečas (ODS). The first herald of major change in Czech foreign policy vis-à-vis China was observed two years later, in September 2012, when Nečas pejoratively labelled the Czech value-oriented foreign policy as 'dalailama-ism' in a speech at the International Engineering Fair in Brno and claimed that Czech export suffered losses as a result.

Table 8. Country comparison: Chronology of EU–Czech and EU–Hungarian relations.

Events	Czech Republic	Hungary
Establishment of the modern state	1 January 1993 (the Czech Republic)	23 October 1989 (the Third Hungarian Republic)
Signature of Europe Agreement	4 October 1993	16 December 1991
Entry into force of Europe Agreement	1 February 1995	1 February 1994
Submission of membership application	23 January 1996	31 March 1994
Granting of candidate status by the European Council	12 December 1997	
Start of accession negotiation	31 March 1998	
End of accession negotiation	13 December 2002	
Signature of Accession Treaty	16 April 2003	
Accession to the EU	1 May 2004	
Presidency of the Council of the European Union	January-June 2009 July-December 2022	January-June 2011 July-December 2024

The timeframe between 2010 and 2020 also coincides with an increase in Chinese activities in Hungary, Czechia and wider Central and Eastern Europe. Examples of said activities include but are not limited to the establishment of the 17+1³⁸ framework on 25 April

³⁷ On 12 March 2012, VV was replaced by its breakaway party Liberal Democrats (LIDEM), which is now known as Order of the Nation – Patriotic Union (ŘN-VU).

³⁸ 17+1 (formerly known as 16+1) was established on 26 April 2012 at its first summit in Warsaw in order to promote trade and business activities between China and 16 CEECs. These countries include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. At its eighth summit, held in Dubrovnik on 12 April 2012, Greece joined the framework as a member (hence 17+1) and Austria, Belarus, the EU, Switzerland and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development attended as observers.

2012, the China–CEEC Think Tanks Network on 16 December 2014 and the China–CEE Institute on 24 April 2017. The timespan of the empirical and analytical research could arguably be extended further back. However, this will not be done for the following reasons: First, a longer timespan could be methodologically unfeasible and unsound, given the time allotted to the research. The chosen period of a decade is methodologically lean enough, yet still able to put flesh on the bones, so to speak. Second, as a supporter of European integration, China sees greater potential in CEECs once they have become Member States of the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2003; 2014a; 2018b), thus explaining China’s increased involvement in the region since the early 2010s. Any reference before 2010 is only to provide the historical context needed to better understand the period under examination (for a brief chronology of EU–Czech and EU–Hungarian relations, see Table 8).

3.8.3. Methods and Techniques

This section explains the methods and techniques that will be used in each stage of the research. The first stage of the research, i.e., the descriptive research, aims at identifying changes in Member States’ foreign policy. Although this stage is not preoccupied with establishing a causal relationship, it sets the tone and orientates the second stage of the research, i.e., the argumentative research, by providing ‘thick’ and descriptive observations. In short, the purpose of the descriptive research is to gather preliminary data in order to constitute the dependent variable. The second stage of the research is the analytical research, whose purpose is to examine the causal linkage between the observations made during the descriptive research and the independent variable. More specifically, it aims at establishing inference and examining the mechanisms deployed by China that underpin de-Europeanisation. Admittedly, it also considers the role of intervening variables in this process.

To this end, the research adopts a longitudinal design in collecting observations and in evidencing instances of de-Europeanisation (see Table 9).

Table 9. Longitudinal design.

	Year	2010	2011	...	2020
Observ.	1. Disbandment of EU structures/processes	Obs _{2010,1}	Obs _{2011,1}	...	Obs _{2020,1}
	2. Disengagement from EU structures/processes	Obs _{2010,2}	Obs _{2011,2}	...	Obs _{2020,2}
	3. Circumvention of EU structures/processes	Obs _{2010,3}	Obs _{2011,3}	...	Obs _{2020,3}

NB: Obs_{2010,1} stands for ‘observation of a de-Europeanisation phenomenon in 2010 related to the disbandment of EU foreign policy structures/processes’. Source: Adapted from (Bryman 2012, 65).

Observations are made and data collected using two guiding principles: parsimony and information-richness. To be parsimonious, the data collected are not meant to account for all changes in foreign policy in Hungary and Czechia during the 10-year timeframe, but instead to identify enough empirical observations to generate meaningful exploration in the argumentative research. Information-richness implies that the data collected has the capacity to lead to fruitful argumentation. Concretely speaking, this research design is not concerned with superficial changes but with substantial changes with concrete rhetorical and/or policy-backing.

Observations are made and data collected from the following secondary sources: official policy documents and policy papers of the EU and China; national policy documents and policy papers related to China; press releases from the EU (notably the EEFA/High Representative); press releases from national governments, national ministries and national

politicians; official meeting reports and minutes of meetings between key stakeholders and policymakers; audiovisual recordings of any of the meetings or press statements described above; policy reports from European, national and Chinese think tanks relevant to the research topic; news media publications, written press from national and international media agencies or news outlets relevant to the research topic; and published, peer-reviewed academic literature relevant to the research topic.

To complement the document-based analysis and provide theoretical and conceptual depth to this study, this thesis, moreover, incorporates a set of semi-structured elite interviews. The inclusion of these interviews responds not only to the logic of the aforementioned research design but also to the need for the triangulation of findings, a particularly necessary exercise when attribution and causal inference are difficult to determine through document-based analysis alone. Furthermore, given the complexity of identifying the specific mechanisms and pathways through which external actors, such as China, engage with or contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Member States' foreign policies, these interviews serve as a critical source of insight into the rationales, perceptions and contextual factors underpinning this process.

Interviewees were selected based on their expertise in foreign policy, Sino-Hungarian or Sino-Czech relations, with special attention to professional diversity (academia, diplomacy, policy advising) and the relevance of their positionality within the research timeframe (i.e., 2010–2020). The choice of this mix was intentional: academics provided theoretical and comparative insights into the de-Europeanisation dynamics, whilst practitioners offered on-the-ground perspectives on the domestic and external factors shaping Hungary's and Czechia's foreign policy. Furthermore, the aim of this selection was to ensure a contextually balanced and informed range of perspectives from those who have firsthand knowledge of foreign policy and its making in Hungary and Czechia. Whilst the selected sample of interviews skews slightly towards academic experts, this reflects their accessibility and their pivotal role in analysing external actors' influence and engagement.

Interviews were conducted in English via video-conferencing platforms and typically lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality in line with ethical guidelines, and all consented to the use of their responses for the purpose of this academic research. The structure of these interviews broadly reflected the key analytical concerns and parameters of this thesis. Questions were designed to first get a broad sense of the interviewees' perceptions of Sino-Hungarian/Czech relations and second understand their takes on China's influence across three broad mechanisms: interest-based, norm-based and institutional. Interviewees were asked to reflect upon the coherence, or the lack thereof, of Member States' policies vis-à-vis China, the extent of their de-Europeanisation and the domestic and international factors that have enabled these developments. Particular attention was paid to the compatibility between the (re)orientation of national foreign policy and China's policy aims in the region. Thematic coding and cross-case comparisons will allow for incorporation of the interviewees' insights into the Hungary and Czechia case study chapters, where relevant.

4. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Although diplomatic relations between the EU and China were established in 1975, these relations gained momentum only in the early 1990s. Since the first EU–China summit held in 1998, bilateral relations experienced a substantive degree of institutionalisation, with frequent and dense interactions across all levels, from official high-level summits to ministerial meetings and people-to-people dialogues. In 2003, both sides elevated their relations to a strategic partnership. Through statements and declarations, both sides have identified areas of shared interests and, especially with a view to an unstable US under Donald Trump, there has been a growing consensus in both Beijing and Brussels that bilateral relations should place a greater emphasis on cooperation rather than confrontation. Today, China–EU relations are without a doubt one of the most important relations in the world. Therefore, in order to better answer the research questions and better understand the forthcoming empirical findings, it is important to shed light on the unique history and evolution of China–EU relations, as well as on Chinese foreign policy and the various facets that affect its making.

4.1. History and Evolution of China–EU Relations

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping ushered in a period of *boluan fanzheng* (拨乱反正; lit. trans. ‘eliminating chaos and returning to normalcy’) in order to correct the political mistakes made since the founding of the PRC. This return to normalcy became the bedrock for the subsequent Reform and Opening-Up policy. These reformist policies were halted by the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, to which the EU reacted with the imposition of an arms embargo, but were later reinvigorated by Deng’s Southern Tour³⁹ in 1992 at home and the end of the Cold War abroad. These domestic and international developments provided momentum to China–EU relations and, since the 1990s, bilateral relations have gone through significant changes. This subsection traces and analyses said changes and examines different phases of China–EU relations through policy papers published by both sides. It is important to note that these phases are not delineated by whole decades but by specific events or developments that changed the course of bilateral relations.

Between the founding of the PRC in 1949 and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975, a period coinciding with the height of the Cold War, most Western European countries maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and some were even engaged in ‘hot wars’ with China on the Korean peninsula and in Vietnam. Only a handful of European countries had established diplomatic relations with the PRC before it replaced Taiwan at the UN in 1971 (see Table 10). Many of these belonged to the Soviet bloc, so it comes as no surprise that these countries immediately recognised China. The UK’s request to establish diplomatic relations with China was rejected by the latter, as the UK wanted such relations only at the *chargé d’affaires* level, while Sweden, Finland and Austria were (and still are) neutral countries. Only France and Italy were full EC members at the time. Here, Sino-French relations warrant greater analysis. China became a nuclear power in 1964 and, like France at the time, rejected the proposed limit, or outright ban, on nuclear testing. The then French President de Gaulle saw China as a counterweight to the US–Soviet bipolar world order, a role he also conceived for France. This perception imbued Sino-French relations with geopolitical considerations, and such considerations (namely, counterbalancing superpowers and building a multipolar world)

³⁹ Between 18 January and 21 February 1992, Deng Xiaoping (then retired) visited Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Guangzhou and Shanghai to reiterate the overriding importance of economic development and reinforce and assure the implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy.

still play an important role in Sino-French, and by extension China–EU, relations. During French PM Édouard Philippe’s visit to Beijing in 2018, China expressed its appreciation of France’s ‘independent policy in international affairs’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2018a) and reiterated this a year later on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-French diplomatic relations (2019a).

Table 10. Chronology of the establishment of diplomatic relations between current EU Member States (incl. UK) and China before UN General Assembly Resolution 2758.

Country	Date
People's Republic of Bulgaria	4 October 1949
Czechoslovak Republic	4 October 1949
Romanian People's Republic	5 October 1949
Hungarian People's Republic	6 October 1949
Republic of Poland	7 October 1949
German Democratic Republic	27 October 1949
United Kingdom	6 January 1950
Sweden	9 May 1950
Denmark	11 May 1950
Finland	28 October 1950
Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	2 January 1955
France	27 January 1964
Italy	6 November 1970
Austria	28 May 1971

The period from the EC’s official recognition of the PRC in 1975 to the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 represents the second phase of China–EU relations. Two international developments catalysed the EC’s recognition of China: First, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2758 on 25 October 1971, recognising the PRC as ‘the only legitimate representative of China to the UN’. This policy change prompted many countries, including Western European countries, to recognise the PRC. Second, US President Nixon visited China a year later, in 1972, marking a major shift in great power relations in the Cold War. The US’s engagement with the PRC in forging an alliance against the USSR, even to the detriment of Taiwan (M. J. Green 2017, 345–54), had led the EC to re-evaluate China’s strategic and (geo)political value. Given the EC’s lack of competence in foreign affairs at that time, the incipient stage of China–EU relations was primarily preoccupied with trade and development. Despite the low trade volume, the EC signed a trade agreement with China in 1978, its first with a socialist country. In 1985, an agreement on trade and cooperation was concluded and, in 1988, the EC established a Delegation in Beijing.

The initial fervour in bilateral relations hit a major roadblock after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, an event that dashed the EC’s strong optimism about political reforms in the country and that subsequently reoriented the EC’s stance vis-à-vis China. In response to these events, the EC imposed a series of sanctions, including an arms embargo, on China and placed bilateral relations into a broader political context. The Maastricht Treaty in 1992 gave the EC the legal and institutional wherewithal to do so by expanding its competence in political fields. In 1995, the EU published its first policy paper on China (‘A Long Term Policy for China–Europe Relations’), in which it acknowledges the rise of China, recognises China’s importance to Europe and highlights priorities in cooperation, but also reiterates the EU’s

commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms (European Commission 1995). This policy paper also introduced a main theme that recurs in future documents: Increasing bilateral trade and cooperation would lead to a more open and democratic China. Whether this is a pragmatic way of justifying the EU's intensifying economic engagement with China despite the widespread criticism of the latter's human rights record or a genuine (perhaps naïve) expectation of the EU, this theme has been a cornerstone of China–EU relations since then and has often led to disappointment on both sides. This period between 1989 and 1995 represents the third phase of China–EU relations.

The fourth phase of China–EU relations, from 1995 to 2003, was marked by important developments in China, which in turn had a lasting impact on bilateral relations: the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, which largely left mainland China unharmed; the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macau from the UK in 1997 and Portugal in 1999 respectively, which ended China's 'century of humiliation'; and China's accession to the WTO in 2001, which bolstered the country's role in the global market. Concomitant with these developments was China's rapid economic growth. In response, the EU published a new policy paper ('Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China') in 1998, merely three years after the previous one. In this paper, the EU acknowledges for the first time China's growing assertiveness⁴⁰ in international affairs, praises the improvement of human rights in China over the past two decades and proposes an annual China–EU summit (which has indeed been held annually since the inaugural summit in 1998) (European Commission 1998). For China's accession to the WTO, the EU published its third policy paper ('EU Strategy Towards China: Implementation of the 1998 Communication and Future Steps for a More Effective EU Policy'). As its title suggests, the paper validated previous papers and fine-tuned the mechanisms through which a partnership shall be pursued by providing a list of 'action points'. Although the EU admitted that China was 'not always an easy partner', it saw China as part of the solution for regional and global issues (European Commission 2001).

The fifth phase of China–EU relations, from 2003 to 2008, was characterised by China's continuous rise on the international scene and the internal rifts in both sides produced by domestic and international challenges, all of which were reflected in the tumultuous bilateral relations during this phase. The ascent to power of President Hu Jintao (see Table 7) in 2003 ushered in the new foreign policy doctrine of 'China's peaceful rise' (中国和平崛起; *zhongguo heping jueqi*). As a result, China voiced its support for multilateralism, hosted Six Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear issues and maintained good neighbourhood policies with Asian-Pacific countries. However, the SARS outbreak in 2003 caused a temporary economic slowdown and more importantly revealed the vulnerability of the public health-care system of China. Similarly, the EU's fragmented foreign policy and internal rifts were exposed by the Iraq War of 2003. Whilst British PM Tony Blair reiterated the need to maintain transatlantic unity, French President Jacques Chirac, driven by the Gaullist ideology, insisted on a multipolar world (Young and Crawford 2011). In response to these aforementioned developments, the EU issued a policy paper in 2003 and, like in 2001, it focused less on new policies and more on the mechanics and outputs of the bilateral relations. For its part, China issued its first policy paper on the EU in the same year. In it, China iterated its independence foreign policy and its growing role in international affairs on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence.⁴¹ Furthermore, China praised the EU's past and recent advances in its

⁴⁰ The term 'assertiveness' arguably had a much more positive connotation than it does today.

⁴¹ The five principles of peaceful coexistence are 1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; 2) mutual non-aggression; 3) non-interference in each other's internal affairs; 4) equality and mutual benefit; and 5) peaceful coexistence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2014b).

integration project, namely the scheduled enlargement in 2004. Most importantly, China drew the ‘red lines’ in bilateral relations, specifically the One China Principle. In 2006, the EU published yet another policy paper (‘EU China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities’), without prior notification to China and thus much to China’s discontent, given the paper’s critical stance. In January 2007, both sides started negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, meant to replace the 1985 agreement of trade and cooperation. In the following year, a High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue was held on the occasion of the 10th EU–China Summit, where contentious trade and market access issues were the main topics of discussion.

The sixth and arguably current phase of China–EU relations commenced in 2008 after the global financial crisis and the subsequent European sovereign debt crisis. Many crisis-ridden, cash-strapped Member States, dissatisfied with the conditions attached to EU- and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-led rescue programmes, sought alternatives to boost market confidence and shore up their ailing economies. China was glad to come to their rescue to combat its own economic slowdown, reduce trading costs and increase the international stature of the Chinese yuan (Renminbi), amongst other reasons. Under the frameworks of ‘17+1’ and later the BRI, China has been purchasing European sovereign debt, leasing transportation hubs and investing in and merging with European companies. Once an important but distant trading partner, China is now well represented within the EU. With a negative and (neo)colonial undertone, many scholars and analysts have called China’s presence in Europe ‘the scramble for Europe’ (Godement et al. 2011) and China’s tactics vis-à-vis Europe ‘divide and conquer’ (Meunier 2014b). Many blame the EU’s lack of internal cohesiveness for China’s ‘new assertiveness’ (Liao 2016) and its ability to play off Member States against one another to strike bargain deals (Fox and Godement 2009; Holslag 2011; Meunier 2014b; Maher 2016; Godement and Vasselier 2017). The European Commission’s June 2016 joint communication on China urges that ‘the EU must project a strong, clear and unified voice in its approach to China’ (European Commission 2016). Three years later, the Commission escalated its concerns by calling China ‘a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance’ (European Commission 2019, 1). This period serves as the backdrop against which this research will be conducted. For the research timeframe, see section 3.8.2.

4.2. Chinese Foreign Policy and Its Making

This subsection is dedicated to explaining Chinese foreign policy and the various actors and facets that affect Chinese foreign policymaking. This is important because, compared to its Western counterparts, China’s foreign policy apparatus has a distinct and rather opaque institutional and political structure. Thus, a solid understanding of Chinese foreign policy helps to better explain China–EU relations. To this end, this subsection explains, in turn, the nature of Chinese foreign policy, China’s recent ‘assertiveness’, history and collective memory, foreign policy interests and principles and foreign policy structure and actors. The interpretation and (mis)understanding of Chinese foreign policy by Western countries (including the EU) is also a focus throughout this subsection.

Contrary to conventional thinking, modern Chinese foreign policy is a new endeavour, despite the country’s long history. After almost a century of foreign occupation and civil war, the PRC was founded in 1949. Quickly thereafter, China became embroiled in internal convulsions. During the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, China even closed some of its diplomatic missions abroad. It entered the world scene only in 1971, after it replaced Taiwan at the UN. Since then, the country has cultivated relations with its Western counterparts, such

as the US and the EU. In this respect, China is quite similar to the EU and its Central and Eastern Member States: they are all newcomers to modern foreign policymaking.⁴² Given this relatively short history, Chinese foreign policy has until recently been built through pragmatic ‘learning-by-doing’ and has often been reactive to the foreign policy actions of others. Recently, however, Chinese foreign policy has become more seasoned and outspoken, with far-reaching and consequential impacts around the world. This has led analysts and policymakers alike to view China’s new ‘assertiveness’ with varying degrees of apprehension (see e.g., French 2017; M. J. Green 2017).

He and Feng (2012) date this new ‘assertiveness’ to 2007, when China launched an anti-satellite test and argued that ‘it is normal for China—a rising power—to change its policy to a confident or even assertive direction because of its transformed national interests’. Western academia currently holds three views on China’s ‘assertiveness’: First, realists explain it through the theory of changes in power position and coin this phenomenon ‘the Thucydides Trap’⁴³ (Allison 2015). The second view, with an inward-looking perspective, argues that domestic dynamics, such as rising ethno-nationalism and oscillating economic performance, produced the need for such assertiveness (Liao 2016). The third view contends that the alleged ‘assertiveness’ is nothing new; the allegation is a scare tactic deliberately deployed by the West (Johnston 2013; Jerdén 2014). Whether or not China’s (new) ‘assertiveness’ exists, China has maintained a unique and consistent set of defensive foreign policy interests and principles. As such, an analysis of these interests and principles is imperative.

A better understanding of China’s foreign policy interests and principles requires first and foremost an examination of China’s history and its collective memory. This task is important because the history of China has few parallels with that of the West, and as a result, China has a unique historical narrative informing its policy (Z. Wang 2012). Through cultural exportation, maritime exploration and a system of investiture and tribute, just to name a few, China was the pyramidion of East Asia for centuries. Nonetheless, this superiority was challenged by imperialist European powers and Japan, from the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) to the Second World War, a period often referred to as ‘the century of humiliation’. After 1949, China became mired down in internal convulsions and external East–West confrontations, and it only stepped into mainstream IR in the early 1970s. This traumatic historical experience, compounded by the West’s fear of the Chinese communist regime, nourished a profound sense of victimhood and of an ‘existential’ threat posed by the West. Since 1971, China had to quickly adapt to a Western-oriented international order through, for instance, economic statecraft, traditional and soft-power diplomacy, UN vetoes, representation in Western-oriented institutions (e.g., the WTO) and the creation of China-backed institutions (e.g., the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB). This history explains China’s emphasis on national sovereignty and its inevitable, yet well-deserved rise on the global stage (Y. Wang 2014). Hence, this should not be overlooked by Western scholars and policymakers alike.

It then follows that a distinct set of foreign policy interests and principles have emerged through this unique history. Ones pertaining to and affecting China–EU relations are prioritised here and explained in further detail. First, the five principles of peaceful coexistence, first conceived in the Sino-Indian Agreement of 1954, have been the flagship of Chinese foreign

⁴² The relatively short history of CEECs in foreign policymaking is elaborated in detail in section 3.1.8.2

⁴³ Drawing upon the Greek historian’s metaphor, Allison contends that when a rising power rivals a ruling power, there is often imminent danger. Such was the case when Athens challenged Sparta, or when Germany challenged Britain a century ago. After analysing historical records, she concludes that 12 of 16 cases over the past 500 years ended in wars, which were damaging for both powers involved.

policy. Simply put, China prizes respect for territorial integrity and the full exercise of national sovereignty above all. Second, and equally important, China, driven by its ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’, calls for a new, multipolar world order based on the belief that the current world order is Western-centric and thus places developing countries such as itself in a disadvantageous position. These points do not contravene China’s recent shift in foreign policy direction (i.e., its peaceful rise, peaceful development or ‘new assertiveness’). At the 19th National Congress of the CPC, Xi confirmed this by stating that ‘China’s development does not pose a threat to any other country. No matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion’ (2017, 54). These points have appeared in every Chinese policy paper on the EU, in which China supports European integration and sees the EU as an attractive partner for its advocacy multilateralism and multipolar world order (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2003; 2014a; 2018b).

Having explained China’s key interests and principles in foreign policy, it is now important to list the *dramatis personae* of Chinese foreign policy and, by extension, Chinese political influence in Europe. Unlike most Western countries, where foreign policies are primarily attributed to the head of state and/or the head of government along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), China has a unique and opaque system of foreign policymaking. The 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Party Congress held in 1978 entrenched the concept of collective leadership as a response to Maoist one-man rule. Although this has increased checks and balances within the Chinese leadership, it has complicated the Party apparatus and thus slowed down the decision-making process.

In China, civil servants may have a Party position, a state position or both. This essentially creates a dual structure in policymaking. During the elections held in October 2022,⁴⁴ the Central Committee of the CPC elected 205 full members and 171 alternate members. Amongst the 205 full members of the Central Committee, 24 were elected to the Politburo, and from these, seven were elected to the Standing Committee of the Politburo. These seven members each carry responsibility for a particular policy, and they form the apex of the CPC’s collective leadership. The highest executive organ, the State Council, is composed of one premier, four vice premiers, and five state counsellors, all of which are state positions. Under these four leading bodies are the various ministries, departments and agencies. Each of these entities has a Party secretary (a Party position) that outranks the minister/director (a state position).

⁴⁴ This thesis was written between August 2019 and August 2024. As such, the result of the elections held in October 2022 will be used for the research. Elections are scheduled roughly every five years, with the next one scheduled for October 2027.

Figure 6. Organisation of the CPC.

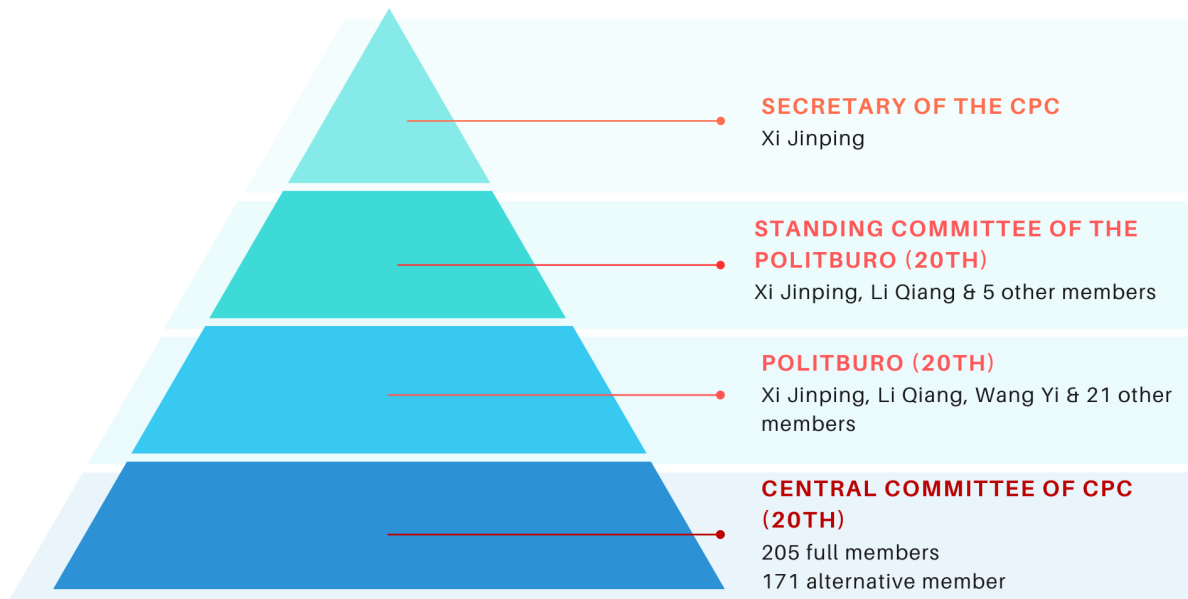


Figure 7. Organisation of the State Council.



There are several important implications of this complex structure: First, one civil servant may have multiple positions and serve on different bodies, thus carrying various responsibilities.⁴⁵ Second, this structure demonstrates the importance of the Party and Party ideologies in Chinese policymaking. Third, this bureaucratic structure is very hierarchal. Fourth, vertical reporting lines render horizontal policy coordination difficult, even within the

⁴⁵ For example, Li Keqiang is often referred to as the premier of the PRC. This, however, is his state position. His Party position is the Party Secretary of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. These two positions, simply put, make him the second most powerful civil servant in China.

same body. For example, in Chinese diplomatic missions abroad, the ambassador, *chargé d'affaires* and political counsellors report to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), but the economic counsellors report to the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM). Once reports arrive in Beijing, the two ministers report separately to the State Council (state positions and state route), whilst two Party secretaries report separately to the Central Committee, Politburo and/or the Standing Committee (Party positions and Party route). Furthermore, it is notable that the minister of foreign affairs (Wang Yi) and minister of commerce (Wang Wentao) do not hold significant Party positions, as neither is a member of the Politburo or the Standing Committee. Wang Yi, however, is one of five state counsellors in the State Council. Currently, the only seasoned former diplomat serving in the 25-member Politburo is Yang Jiechi.⁴⁶ This demonstrates that, as many argue (see e.g., Deng and Wang 2005; Lu 2018; Barnett 2019; Lanteigne 2019), Chinese foreign policy is not the priority of the collective leadership, and the country's foreign policy serves first and foremost the Party's domestic agenda. However, the pinnacle of Party leadership does have expertise in foreign policy. For example, the International Liaison Department of the CPC is nested within the Party apparatus and is currently headed by Song Tao, who previously served as attaché in Delhi and ambassador to Guyana and the Philippines.

Given the discussion above, it is unlikely that the EU occupies a prioritised position on the agenda of the Politburo and its Standing Committee. In fact, relations with the EU have historically been dealt with through various diplomatic missions, MOFA/MOFCOM and the State Council. For these reasons, President Xi's visit to Brussels in 2014, the first Chinese president visit to the EU capital, was seen as very significant. It is, nonetheless, important to note that Xi's visit took place a decade after the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi visited China. Overall, China's relations with the EU are arguably less confrontational than those with other countries, though issues such as Taiwan and Tibet do occasionally spring up (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2003; 2014a; 2018b). That said, as policy papers note, from the Chinese side, the primary focus of China–EU relations is trade and commerce. In 2003, when China had a clearer vision of its new foreign policy direction (i.e., China's peaceful rise or peaceful development), it chose the EU as the addressee of its first foreign policy paper. Since 2008, China established its Mission to the EU (a function previously carried out by the Embassy of China to Belgium).

Apart from the traditional foreign policy actors described above, there are other sets of actors in the Chinese system that partake, albeit indirectly, in Chinese foreign policymaking and contribute to China's political influence in the EU and its Member States. In fact, two sets of actors are pertinent to this research. The first set is related to Chinese investments in Europe and comprises state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies. Whilst these actors are motivated by commercial and business interests at first glance, SOEs are linked directly to the CPC and thus serve the Party's political interests. In fact, many of the top executives of these SOEs are hired through the 'revolving door'. For their part, some private companies have non-

⁴⁶ In the researcher's opinion, Yang's *curriculum vitae* is an exemplary trajectory of a successful Chinese diplomat and helps readers understand the dynamics between Party and state positions as well as their progression. His career chronology is as follows: 1998–2000 and 2004–2005: vice minister of foreign affairs (state position), member of the Party Committee of the MOFA (Party position); 2000–2004: China's ambassador to the US (state position); 2005–2007: vice minister of foreign affairs (state position), vice secretary of the Party Committee of the MOFA (Party position); 2007–2013: minister of foreign affairs (state position), vice secretary of the Party Committee of the MOFA (Party position); 2013–2017: state counsellor (state position), member of the Party Committee of the State Council (Party position); 2017: member of the Politburo (Party position).

transparent ownership structures and, though direct links with the CPC cannot be clearly identified and attributed, the case for indirect links can often be made.

The second set of actors consists of journalists and scholars who promote Chinese positions abroad. A wide array of institutions, both inside and outside China, engages in this effort. Examples of these institutions include the Chinese People's Associate for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the China-CEEC Think Tanks Network and the China-CEE Institute. Chinese journalists and scholars are either ordered directly or nudged subtly by their superiors to present China in a favourable light. As recently revealed by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz), some foreign journalists and scholars have even been approached through social media, such as LinkedIn (Deutsche Welle 2017).

To conclude, China's foreign policy, though very new, is deeply rooted in its unique history, namely in the defining narrative of 'a century of humiliation'. This history gave birth to a distinct set of interests and principles. China has been quickly adapting to and positing itself in a world order that it says is dominated by the US and the West. Chinese foreign policy and its influencing efforts in Europe have been driven by a myriad of actors, both traditional ones (e.g., MOFA) and non-traditional ones (e.g., SOEs and scholars). Whilst most of the time their works and efforts have complemented one another, it should come as no surprise that sometimes these actors have generated friction and conflicts amongst one another. That being said, they all serve the overarching interests of the Party and the government. For Western observers, the Chinese bureaucratic system is rather unique and opaque, and this has an impact on Chinese foreign policymaking. This peculiarity must be seriously taken into account by Western observers, researchers and stakeholders.

5. CHINA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DE-EUROPEANISATION OF HUNGARIAN AND CZECH FOREIGN POLICIES, 2010–2020

This thesis has so far examined the global socio-political and economic climate against which this research took place in Chapter 1, provided a literature review on relevant scholarship in Chapter 2, constructed the conceptual and theoretical frameworks within which this research is conducted in Chapter 3 and painted the contextual background in Chapter 4. Hereinafter, the thesis proceeds onto its three empirical chapters. The aim of this first empirical chapter is twofold: The first section examines in turn the bilateral relations between China and the two case study countries before the analytical timeframe of this thesis. In doing so, it paints an important backdrop against which China's engagement with and contribution to the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian and Czech foreign policies between 2010 and 2020 can be better contextualised, analysed and understood. The second section then proceeds to the gathering and analysing of empirical evidence with regard to China's engagement in and contribution to these dynamics. More specifically, it examines its organisational and institutional influence in both countries in the form of the '17+1' framework as well as its political and economic influence in both countries.

5.1. Background: Bilateral Relations Pre-2010

5.1.1. Sino-Hungarian Relations Pre-2010

To start with, this subsection examines Sino-Hungarian bilateral relations before 2010. Many scholars and informed observers have commented on the recent improvement of the bilateral relations between these two countries and the pivotal position that China occupies within Hungarian foreign policy (see for example, China.org 2012; Matura 2018; Koleszár 2021). That said, this pivotal position is in fact a continuation of the repositioning first set forth by previous left-wing, MSZP governments under the premierships of Péter Medgyessy⁴⁷ (2002–2004), Ferenc Gyurcsány (2004–2009) and Gordon Bajnai⁴⁸ (2009–2010). That is to say, the revitalisation of Sino-Hungarian relations coincided with the Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy prior to the country's accession to the EU and with the further Europeanisation of Hungary's foreign policy in the post-accession period. In other words, the Europeanisation of a Member State's foreign policy and the strengthening of bilateral relations between this Member State and a third country are not mutually exclusive and can indeed take place at the same time. This has at least been the case for Hungary.

It is also important to understand in the grander scheme that EU foreign policy vis-à-vis China as the *référéntiel* for the (de-)Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy is not constant. Indeed, over the past two decades or so, the EU went from originally believing in inducing changes in China, most notably democratic changes, through closer engagement (European Commission 2003) to now seeing China as 'an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' (European Commission 2019). This change in policy, or *référéntiel*, is nonetheless anchored to

⁴⁷ Péter Medgyessy and Gordon Bajnai were independent in terms of party affiliation during their respective premierships. However, their cabinets were primarily composed of MSZP members. As such, the thesis considers them left-wing, MSZP prime ministers.

⁴⁸ See footnote 47.

core EU norms and values. Therefore, to correctly measure and analyse the (de-)Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy, it is vital to trace the continuities and changes in Hungarian foreign policy. Moreover, Hungarian foreign policy can be understood as having de-Europeanised only if and when changes in the opposite direction to the wider EU foreign policy occur.

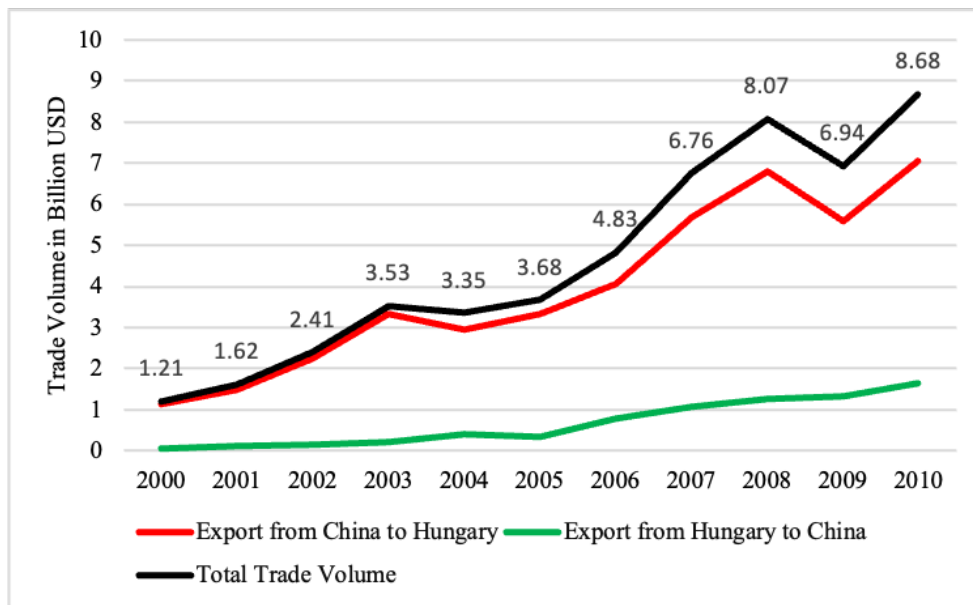
The revitalisation of Sino-Hungarian relations began in August 2003, when Medgyessy became the first Hungarian PM to visit Beijing since 1959. Following the visit, Medgyessy created a special post within the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) for the development of Sino-Hungarian relations and for the coordination of China-related matters amongst Hungarian ministries, departments and other relevant bodies. It is difficult to determine whether this post was created at the expense of the staff and resources dedicated towards the Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy. That being said, this revitalisation of bilateral relations and the subsequent dedication of more diplomatic personnel and resources to them must be posited in the wider EU foreign policy vis-à-vis China. At that time, the EU believed China could change through closer economic cooperation and political engagement, and thus it sought warmer relations with China itself. In other words, Hungary's foreign policy mirrored that of the EU. Medgyessy's two successors increased the frequency of high-level contacts and conducted official visits on an almost annual basis, including three visits by Gyurcsány (2005, 2007 and 2008) and three visits by Medgyessy in as ex-PM (2008, 2009 and 2010). In return, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Budapest in 2004, during which both countries signed a joint declaration elevating bilateral relations to that of a 'Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation', a mechanism frequently employed by China to show its willingness to foster closer ties with the country in question. This joint declaration was followed by a visit in 2009 by then Vice President Xi Jinping.

These high-level official visits, supplemented by ministerial- and departmental-level visits, have resulted the deepening of Sino-Hungarian relations on all fronts. With regard to culture and education, for instance, a Chinese-Hungarian bilingual public elementary and secondary school opened in September 2004, and the first Confucius Institute in Hungary opened in December 2006 within Eötvös Loránd University; a Hungarian culture week was held in Beijing in September 2005, whose opening ceremony was attend by Gyurcsány, and given its success, year-long 'Hungarian Season' expositions were held in Beijing and Shanghai between 2007 and 2008, whose opening ceremonies were again attended by Gyurcsány. To facilitate trade and connectivity, the Bank of China (Hungary)⁴⁹ was established in Budapest in February 2003, and Hainan Airlines⁵⁰ made its inaugural flight between Beijing and Budapest in August 2004. These developments kick-started the rapid increase in trade volume between the two countries. The total trade volume increased by almost 50% after the revitalisation of Sino-Hungarian relations (from \$2.42 billion in 2002 to \$3.54 billion in 2003). As Figure 8 shows, the two countries witnessed more substantial growth thanks to Hungary's accession to the EU and the further consolidation of bilateral relations. With \$8.68 billion, the total bilateral trade volume peaked in 2010, just as Fidesz-KDNP took power.

⁴⁹ Bank of China (Hungary) Ltd. was established on 10 February 2003 as a *zártkörűen működő részvénytársaság* (private limited company) in accordance with Hungarian laws. On 20 April 2020, it was rebranded as Bank of China (CEE) Ltd., with Budapest as its headquarters and branches in Prague, Vienna, Belgrade and Bucharest.

⁵⁰ Hainan Airlines was the first private Chinese airline established amidst 'Reform and Opening-Up' policy, and Hungarian-American investor George Soros was a major shareholder between 1995 and 2000. Between 2000 and 2021, HNA Group was the parent company of Hainan Airlines. The Group, though nominally privately owned, was known for its close ties with the Chinese government and had participated significantly in various business dealings across Europe. After HNA Group's declaration of bankruptcy in 2021, Liaoning Fangda Group took control of Hainan Airlines.

Figure 8. Sino-Hungarian trade volume, 2000–2010.



Source: <https://oec.world/en>

An explanation of the successive MSZP governments' rapprochement with China could perhaps sought in the ideological similarities between the Chinese communist government and the Hungarian left-wing governments. Yet, upon closer look, the peculiarities associated with 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and the general inclination towards liberal democracy, rights and freedoms across the Hungarian political spectrum reveals important ideological tensions. The continuation of MSZP governments' China policy by the current Fidesz–KDNP government is rather surprising, especially considering the past behaviours of their leadership. In its inception years, Fidesz, founded in 1988, was one of the driving forces behind the downfall of the communist regime in Hungary, and it was a fervent supporter of Western integration and the democratisation of Hungary (Palonen 2011). In fact, amidst the Tiananmen Square incident, a young Orbán led demonstrations in Budapest in protest against the Chinese government's actions and in support of the Chinese student protestors. These were the primary reasons for the frozen relations between Hungary and China during Orbán's first premiership (1998–2002). Although the two countries' foreign ministers, János Martonyi and Tang Jiaxuan, signed a joint declaration of friendly relations in 2000 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2000), in the same year, the Orbán government made several moves and gestures that further damaged bilateral relations. More notably, Hungary closed its Consulate General in Shanghai, and Orbán conducted a half-hour-long meeting with the Dalai Lama (Koleszár 2021). Furthermore, whilst serving as the opposition to Medgyessy's MSZP–SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats) government, Orbán continued his confrontational stance vis-à-vis China.

Prior to the 2010 parliamentary elections, Orbán started to shift his stance on China from a confrontational to an enthusiastic one. In fact, during the electoral campaign, the two leading contending parties—Fidesz and MSZP—showed a great interest in China. In February 2010, incumbent MSZP foreign minister Péter Balázs made an official visit to China. The key achievement of his visit was the opening of the Hungarian Consulate General in Chongqing in March 2010. Balázs's visit was followed by a visit of the chairperson of MSZP, Ildikó Lendvai, in March 2010. For his part, Orbán visited China in December 2009 in his capacity as president of Fidesz, and as a result of this trip, political relations between the CPC and Fidesz were officially established.

Following the general collapse of the Hungarian political left, partially caused by the infamous ‘Őszöd speech’ and the ideological repositioning of Fidesz, the Fidesz–KDNP alliance enjoyed a landslide victory in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Their government’s subsequent divorce from a value-based foreign policy that centres around human rights, freedoms and democracy in order to foster closer ties with China is more characteristic of *realpolitik* and political pragmatism. This shift was primarily driven by economic interests, as Hungary was in a dire position economically, desperate for new sources of investment and capital inflow. Just two months after coming into power, Orbán terminated Hungary’s extension talks with the IMF. As evidenced by the trade data in Figure 8, China had the potential to be a viable solution for Hungary, and close relations would be the key to the country’s economic recovery. Quintessential to *realpolitik*, in a time of deep economic crisis, instead of cooperating with existing Western partners, Orbán sought out increasingly powerful China, who was willing to help Hungary shore up its economy without imposing strict economic demands and political commitments. This motivation based on economic interests then quickly translated into the repositioning of Hungary’s foreign policy direction and the general rapprochement between the two countries.

In short, Sino-Hungarian relations prior to 2010 were mainly been characterised by the conscious rapprochement with China initiated by Orbán’s predecessors, which in turn translated into Hungary’s subtle decoupling from EU foreign policy. Referring back to the three main elements of de-Europeanisation as conceptualised and elucidated in Chapter 3, the shifts in Hungary in this period constitute more the deconstruction of professional roles and structural disintegration than the repudiation of foundational norms. For its part, China’s main mechanism of engagement during this period was predominately political and/or economic influence, given the very recent rapprochement between the two countries. Logically and understandably, as the two countries deepened their ties, China would employ further mechanisms to engage with and possibly contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy. Having examined Sino-Hungarian relations prior to 2010, the following subsection analyses China’s engagement and contribution with Czechia in the same period.

5.1.2. Sino-Czech Relations Pre-2010

This subsection examines the bilateral relations between China and the second case study country, Czechia. Though in the same vein as the previous subsection, with the temporal focus of this examination being approximately 2000–2010, the decade before the analytical timeframe of this thesis, it is important to posit the starting point of this historical overview at the collapse of communism in the region and the establishment of Czechia (and its predecessor Czechoslovakia). This is because since its foundation, Czechia (and formerly Czechoslovakia) has viewed China with great interest, but it has been torn between the promotion of economic and business needs and the pursuit of a value-based foreign policy. This divergence between ‘business’ and ‘values’ has continued to be an *idée fixe*, even to this day, in Czech political, media and social discourse.

The promotion and defence of human dignity, human rights and civil society have been the cornerstone of modern-day Czech foreign policy, as corroborated by various documents published by the Czech MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2011; 2015b). The origin of this cornerstone can be traced to Czechoslovakia. The first president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, who prided himself on being a ‘president-philosopher’, wanted to cut ties with the dubious and ‘dirty politics’ of the previous communist regime and instead

promote moral values and a sense of good in politics. To this end, amongst other actions and endeavours, Havel invited two global spiritual/religious leaders, Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama, to Prague. In the 1990s, Havel also extended invitations to various Chinese dissidents in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident. Havel's 'solidarity' with those who suffer from oppression (Ondřej et al. 2013; Fürst 2010) and his 'moralistic diplomacy' (Tubilewicz 1999) resonated with young urban liberals and conservatives alike as well as the mainstream media; however, these policies did not receive support from many other business and political elites, whose interests were always in reaping economic benefits from China, a huge Asian market. Furthermore, the rapprochement between Czechoslovakia and Taiwan was another thorn in the side of Prague–Beijing relations. Taiwan opened its Representative Office (equivalent to an embassy) in Prague as early as in 1992, and throughout the 1990s, the two parties organised several high-level visits, with some at the state level. The metaphorical narrative of Taiwan being the 'small yet smart David' who is constantly threatened by China, the 'big and blunt Goliath', resonated well with the Czechoslovak public, as this dynamic reminded it of its precarious relations with Nazi Germany prior and during the Second World War and then the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The already cold Sino-Czech bilateral relations took another dive when Czechoslovakia was split into two sovereign states, Czechia and Slovakia, during the Velvet Divorce on 31 December 1992. From Beijing's point of view, the split reduced the prestige of the former republic, and the newly formed Czechia became relatively less important than its neighbours (郑非 [Zheng Fei] 2013). The nascent state of Czechia was disappointed in the economic results of its investments in China thus far. The most significant and talked-about Sino-Czech project at the time was the enlargement of an existing thermal power plant in Shentou, Shanxi Province. The enlargement, highly supported by then PM Miloš Zeman, was valued at \$400 million, and the deal was signed during Zeman's official visit to Beijing in 1999. Yet, when the final contract was at last approved in 2001, the final value dropped to \$280 million. On other fronts, several Czech industry leaders—such as Tatra (producer of heavy off-road trucks), Škoda (a heavy industries conglomerate) and Zetor (manufacturer of agricultural machinery)—either failed to gain a foothold or failed to expand their existing presence in the Chinese market. In fact, most Sino-Czech ventures either went bankrupt (in the case of Hunan-Desta Forklift Truck Manufacturer) or simply remained stagnant (in the case of Lang Fang Pan Víkovice Environment Engineering, sponsored by the Czech government).

Politically speaking, newly formed Czechia was dominated by right-wing political elites who were under the strong influence of 'anti-communist intellectual dissent' (Fürst 2013, 61). As such, compared to Hungary and newly formed Slovakia, Czech political elites continued to champion the value-based foreign policy spearheaded by the former Czechoslovak political elites, and the country's relations with China took a drastic downturn after the Velvet Divorce. In short, Sino-Czech relations in the 1990s were marred by differing political views, but there was an overall consensus that such views should not affect the bilateral trade and commercial agenda, despite the meagre results yielded by respective investments and projects thus far.

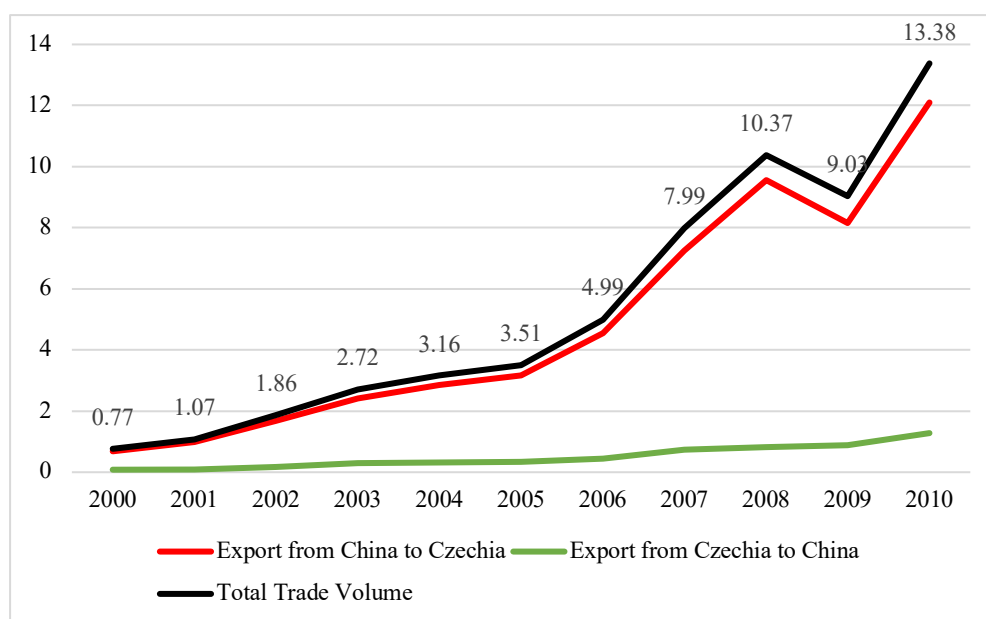
That said, Czechia's political changes in the early 2000s (its accession to the EU) proved its economic and political worth and thus elevated its status in the eyes of the Chinese (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2023). Immediately after Czechia's accession, the number of visits by Czech representatives to China at the regional, parliamentary and ministerial levels increased. A year after, in 2005, then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Prague, 18 years after a previous visit by former Premier Zhao Ziyang. The then Czech government under ČSSD

and the premiership of Jiří Paroubek saw this visit as a political success and a sign of the rapprochement in bilateral relations.

Soon after Wen's visit, PM Paroubek, on an official visit to Japan, made a stopover in Beijing and met with President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao to promote Czech business interests in China, most notably a Škoda–Volkswagen deal and Czech investment in the construction works for the Beijing Olympics in 2008. In the first half of 2009, Czechia held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union, being the second CEE Member State to do so (with Slovenia being the first during the first half of 2008 and Hungary the third during the first half of 2011). From China's point of view, this further increased Czechia's stature and relative importance in the CEE region and the EU as a whole.

Largely thanks to China's changing (or better, ameliorating) perception of Czechia due to the latter's accession to the EU, bilateral trade experienced a substantial increase. As demonstrated by Figure 9 below, prior to Czechia's accession to the EU, Sino-Czech bilateral trade remained relatively steady. The significant increase took place after the country's accession, going from \$3.16 billion in 2004 to \$13.38 billion in 2010, the first year of the analytical timeframe of this thesis. Compared to Figure 8, this volume is much greater than Sino-Hungarian trade between 2000 and 2010. This increase was due to various reasons: first, Czechia's accession to the EU; second, increasing bilateral visits in the 2000s at the ministerial level or below; and third, the willingness of Czech political elites to diversify from West-oriented trade dependency and further develop existing commercial ties with Asian countries (Kořan 2010).

Figure 9. Sino-Czech trade volume, 2000–2010.



Source: <https://oec.world/en>

In spite of this, the opposition to the Czech government—the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, or OSD)—and the media highlighted the general lack of outcomes of the government's pro-China policy and the poor economic results yielded by Chinese investments in Czechia compared to those in other East Asian countries, such as South Korea. Furthermore, Czechia did not experience a great rapprochement in its bilateral relations with China, as experienced by many of its CEE neighbours. The ODS government led by Mirek

Topolánek that replaced the social-democratic ČSSD government reconsidered and reoriented the country's foreign policy direction and priorities: Czechia's relations with China were placed on the backburner except for Chinese issues that have long been near and dear to the hearts of Czech (and formerly Czechoslovak) political elites, namely Tibet, Taiwan and China's human rights record. PM Topolánek's government issued a statement in light of the Tibetan unrest in March 2008 (Government of the Czech Republic 2008) and Topolánek threatened to boycott the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics that same year (Reuters 2008). Topolánek's Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg even went as far as comparing the Beijing Olympics to the Nazi Olympics held in Berlin in 1936 (Radio Prague International 2008).

In the late 2000s, many commentators argued that out of all EU Member States, Czechia had the worst relations with China, and according to the European Council on Foreign Relations' (ECFR) analysis of relations between EU Member States and China, Czechia ranked as the most assertive human rights supporter and most critical of China out of all EU-27⁵¹ (Godement et al. 2011, 8–9). As Czechia continued to pursue its value-based foreign policy, political contacts between the two countries decreased and were occasionally supplemented and substituted by visits of regional representatives, business lobbyists and persons of no direct political and/or economic interest. Perhaps one of the most important visits during this time was a delegation led by Livia Klausová, the first lady of Czechia and wife of President Václav Klaus, to Beijing in 2012. This visit aimed to unofficially promote Czech business and Czech culture in China (namely the broadcasting of Krtek, the 'Little Mole', a cartoon character developed by Czech cartoonist and illustrator Zdeněk Miler, on Chinese television) (China Daily 2012).

To conclude, unlike its neighbour Hungary, Czechia did not experience a major rapprochement with China in its bilateral relations in the 2000s, the decade prior to the analytical timeframe of this thesis. The growing bilateral trade and increasing number of bilateral visits from the mid- to late 2000s were more likely the results of Czechia's accession to the EU, which improved the country's stature in the global arena and prompted China to view the country as having more worth and value. This was unlike Hungary, whose rapprochement with China was spearheaded by Orbán's socialist predecessors, such as Medgyessy and Gyurcsány. In other words, whilst the Sino-Hungarian rapprochement was a direct result of the governing party's foreign policy and actions, the Sino-Czech one was more a by-product of the general political and economic development of Czechia. In spite of this, compared to the trade volume between Hungary and China, the trade volume between Czechia and China in the 2000s was substantially higher, with the most significant increase witnessed after Czechia's accession to the EU. The question now is the following: would Czechia's and Hungary's different starting points in their bilateral relations with China by 2010 place the two countries onto a different course of de-Europeanisation, where China's engagement and contribution would also differ?

5.2. China's Contribution to the De-Europeanisation of Hungarian and Czech Foreign Policies 2010–2020

Having painted a backdrop of Sino-Hungarian and Sino-Czech relations prior to 2010, this section examines China's engagement with, and possibly contributions to, the de-

⁵¹ The analysis and subsequent report drafted by the ECFR in 2011 included 27 EU Member States. This, at that time, included the UK (who exited the Union in 2020) and excluded Croatia (who joined the Union in 2013).

Europeanisation of the national foreign policies of these two countries. It proceeds as follows: The first subsection examines China's organisational/institutional influence in both Hungary and Czechia, primarily under the auspices of the '17+1' framework. The second and last subsections then study China's political and economic influence in Hungary and Czechia, respectively.

5.2.1. Organisational/Institutional Influence in Hungary and Czechia

This subsection turns its attention to China and examines how China has used organisational and institutional influence—namely through the '17+1' framework—in Sino-Hungarian and Sino-Czech bilateral relations, how this influence has prompted, catalysed and/or engaged with changes in the national foreign policies of these two countries and how the framework may have offered a path for the circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes. Before proceeding to this analysis, it is first crucial to understand the genesis of the '17+1' framework, its intertwined relations with the BRI and 'Made in China 2025' and the economic results that it yielded between 2012 and 2020. This is because economics and trade relations have been not only the flagship of Chinese foreign policy in the region but also pivotal in Hungarian and Czech foreign policy during the period of analysis. Furthermore, it is logical to assume that the more economic results '17+1' yields, the more likely China is to exert more influence in these two countries. It would also mean that these two countries would be more likely to welcome more Chinese investments and further disengage from EU common foreign policy norms, routines, procedures and 'ways of doing things'.

China's use, or at least its intention to use, organisational/institutional influence as a key mechanism to engage with the CEE region can be traced back to early as 2011. In June 2011, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Budapest and announced China's plans to revitalise economic and trade relations with the CEE region (China Daily 2011b) and build an institutional platform through which it could engage with the countries in the CEE region. Less than a year later, in April 2012, Wen paid an official visit to Poland, the first since Premier Zhao Ziyang's visit to Warsaw in 1987. Apart from meeting with his Polish counterpart, Wen also met with the heads of government of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. What was initially believed to be an *ad hoc* meeting organised by Polish PM Donald Tusk⁵² eventually turned into an annual meeting, and this meeting in Warsaw would be considered the first '17+1' summit.

After the creation of the framework, China immediately proceeded to the further institutionalisation of the '17+1' in order to better engage with the European countries involved and increase the effectiveness of its organisational influence in the region. In September 2012, China established the '17+1' Secretariat⁵³ with the objective of coordinating amongst Chinese ministries, departments and bodies involved in this framework and communicating with their CEE counterparts. To this end, the Secretariat also requested the 17 CEECs to assign a national

⁵² It is interesting to note how Tusk's opinion on China and the '17+1' has changed over time, from when he organised the first '17+1' summit in Warsaw to when he became the President of the European Council (2014–2019).

⁵³ The inaugural holder of the Secretariat was Song Tao, then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. The current holder of the post is Deng Li, who is also the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Since 2015, the Secretariat also has a special envoy to the CEE at the ambassadorial level, and the post has since been occupied by Huo Yuzhen, who previously served as the Chinese ambassador to the Czech Republic and Romania.

coordinator that should ideally have the rank of deputy minister.⁵⁴ In other words, the further institutionalisation of the '17+1' framework meant that the participating CEECs had to dedicate more diplomatic resources and personnel to fostering ties with China, which itself constitutes an institutional framework that allows for the circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes by EU Member States. However, the actual level of de-Europeanisation depends on how Member States in question engage and participate in this framework. Furthermore, just weeks after the first summit in Warsaw, the '17+1' framework was articulated in a document entitled 'China's 12 Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries'. In it, China pledged to set up a special \$10 billion credit line and an investment cooperation fund of \$500 million, and to increase trade to \$100 billion by 2015. Amongst the non-economic pledges were the expansion of tourism and the enhancement of cultural and educational cooperation. It is important to note that, to date, this is the only written articulation of the expected goals of the '17+1' cooperation.

Before proceeding, it is important to first understand the intertwined relations amongst '17+1' and the BRI to better understand China's organisational influence in the CEE region. In September 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt and a month later the establishment of the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road, which collectively have come to be known as the BRI. The genesis of the BRI followed a similar pattern to that of the '17+1', in that China realised the strategic interest in integrating Eurasia. Only two years later, China published a document entitled 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', serving as the articulated basis of the BRI. According to this document, the BRI aims to enhance five types of connectivity between Asia, Europe and Africa: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade, financial integration and people-to-people relations (State Council of PRC 2015). To this end, for instance, a Silk Road Fund was established with a total capital of \$40 billion and ¥100 billion (roughly amounting to \$56 billion); furthermore, the AIIB was set up with a capital of \$100 billion; it has so far invested in 175 projects, amounting to \$34.81 billion.

One type of connectivity—policy coordination—that the BRI aims to enhance is worthy of further explanation. The document 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' does not provide a clear definition of 'policy coordination'; as such, its nature and extent is theoretically unclear. Policy coordination is a process of 'mutual adjustment of the interests, goals and actions of collective actors in the international system' that often engenders the diffusion of ideas and promotes policy innovations (Busch and Jörgens 2012, 221). According to policy documents and scholarly analyses, policy coordination in the context of '17+1' encompasses all policy areas, because it serves as the foundation for the four other types of connectivity (Vangeli 2017; Y. Chen and Wu 2019; Alves and Lee 2022). As such, matters related to foreign policy are also one of the areas in which policy coordination is sought and executed. In other words, EU Member States who participate in the '17+1' framework and, by extension, its policy coordination can constitute de-Europeanisation should the policy outcome go against the EU's common foreign policy norms, routines, procedures and 'ways of doing things'.

⁵⁴ Since the restructuring of the Hungarian MFAT in 2014, Márta Mészáros has been the national coordinator for Hungary. She also serves as the director general of the China Department. Between 2012 and 2014, Mészáros served as the coordinator of Sino-Hungarian bilateral relations within the PMO. Prior to 2012, Mészáros worked in the private sector. Her career trajectory is characteristic of the 'new faces' appointed by Orbán and Szijjártó since 2012/2014.

A striking similarity between the ‘17+1’ framework and the BRI is that both contain very few articulated goals and concrete action plans. In fact, Chinese scholars, experts and policymakers have been travelling across Europe to gain insights and recommendations from their local peers. This has been mind-boggling for European experts and observers, as both the ‘17+1’ and the BRI are Chinese initiatives. This, however, is mainly due to China following the Asian tradition of inductive thinking, whilst the West uses its deductive thinking traditions to understand Chinese initiatives (Matura 2018, 142). As a result, China initiated the Silk Road Think Tank Network (SiLKS), with its first summit held in 2015 in Madrid, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences opened its first overseas branch—the China–CEE Institute—in Budapest in 2017.

One of the key differences between the BRI and the ‘17+1’ framework is that, whereas the BRI is purely economic in nature (as manifested mainly through investments, FDI and infrastructural projects), the ‘17+1’ framework is an institutional platform through which China primarily asserts economic influence through similar endeavours but also entails political and normative influence in the CEE region. To China, Hungary is one of the key regional players in the BRI. However, the word ‘BRI’ itself is rarely mentioned in the Hungarian political discourse and media (Matura 2018, 142). The reason behind this is that Sino-Hungarian relations are either conducted bilaterally or under the ‘17+1’ framework. Furthermore, BRI projects in the CEE region are negotiated and executed through the ‘17+1’ framework anyway, so the BRI would add an additional, and rather meaningless, label to their relations. To clarify, therefore, this thesis examines all BRI projects in the region through the lens of the ‘17+1’ framework and treats the ‘17+1’ framework as the primary tool of China’s organisational influence in the region.

To conclude, the ‘17+1’ framework is the implementation of the BRI in the CEE region, which encompasses both EU Member States and non-Member States. As Xi said in the Czech daily newspaper *Právo*, the ‘17+1’ is a pilot project of China’s diplomacy in the region and a pioneering and flagship platform for multilateralism with Chinese characteristics. With the introduction and further institutionalisation of the ‘17+1’, China has positioned itself as the key external actor in the region. Unlike the EU and NATO, which for one are not home-grown organisations and for two rest on the Western principles of political and economic reforms, the ‘17+1’ framework is a home-grown platform initiated by CEECs that focuses on multilateral cooperation without the need to implement political and economic reforms. This unique framework provides a platform for Czechia and Hungary (as well as other CEECs) to intensify their relations with China, and it is through this unique framework of ‘17+1’ that China exerts (greater) political and economic influence in Hungary and Czechia.

5.2.2. Economic and Political Influence in Hungary

Since its economic boom in the early 2000s, China has become one of the world’s largest FDI home countries, ranking first globally for the first time in 2020 with a total of \$153.71 billion in outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) (CGTN 2021). According to the American Enterprise Institute’s (AEI) China Global Investment Tracker, during the analytical timeframe of this thesis (i.e., 2010–2020), the EU received \$261.85 billion in OFDI,⁵⁵ of which \$11.15 billion (merely 4.26% of total OFDI) went to the EU Member States within the ‘17+1’

⁵⁵ Considering that the official withdrawal of the UK from the EU was on 31 January 2020, Chinese OFDI in the UK between 2010 and 2020 was included in the calculation.

framework.⁵⁶ Despite this meagre percentage, Hungary received the highest amount of Chinese OFDI in the time period observed, with \$3.63 billion, followed by Greece, with \$3.56 billion. By comparison, Poland received only \$1.09 billion and Czechia \$0.86 billion. However, turning to the Hungarian perspective, a different picture can be observed. According to the Hungarian National Bank (Magyar Nemzeti Bank, or MNB), between 2010 and 2020, Chinese inward foreign direct investment (IFDI) fluctuated between 2% and 3% of overall IFDI in Hungary, thus ranking China consistently as the fourth largest FDI contributor in Hungary, after the US, South Korea, Japan and India (MNB 2021).

Despite its low share, Chinese FDI in Hungary was catalysed by push-and-pull factors. For China, government policies and initiatives, such as the BRI and the '17+1' framework, have been instrumental in pushing Chinese companies to invest abroad. For Hungary, Orbán's reorientation of the country's foreign policy under the auspices of the 'Eastern Opening' demonstrates the country's receptiveness towards IFDI in general, but particularly towards Chinese IFDI. Furthermore, the '17+1' framework has provided an institutional platform through which the frequency of high-level governmental and business-to-business contacts has increased. In fact, Hungary was the first EU Member State to sign a memorandum of understanding on the BRI with China, in June 2015, and create the first BRI working group, whose first meeting was held in 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2016). Hungary's eagerness to participate in Chinese-led initiatives and thus dedicate greater diplomatic resources and personnel to these efforts constitutes an outcome of the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy, as described in section 6.2.4. Having looked at the broad strokes of Chinese FDI in Hungary, what follows is a closer examination of Chinese projects in various key Hungarian economic sectors, with a focus on their nature and results.

Hungary's chemical sector is the first economic sector that witnessed significant Chinese investment. Between February 2010 and October 2011, in three separate transactions, the Chinese Wanhua Industrial Group acquired a 95% share in BorsodChem. Amounting to a total of \$1.96 billion, Wanhua's acquisition received great media attention and saved BorsodChem from the brink of collapse. Following the acquisition, Wanhua has significantly increased its presence, not only in Europe—through existing BorsodChem subsidiaries in Italy, Croatia and Czechia—but also around the world, through subsidiaries in Brazil, Russia and Turkey, and has become the world's third-largest manufacturer of plastic raw materials and isocyanates (e.g., TDI, MDI).⁵⁷ In 2011, Wanhua opened another TDI production plant, a project financed by Bank of China (Hungary). In 2016, Wanhua teamed up with another early Chinese entrant to the Hungarian market—Huawei—to establish a European communication centre in order to facilitate knowledge and information exchange amongst Chinese companies in the region. In 2017, Wanhua announced its intention to build an environmentally friendly chlorine plant with a grant of €79 million financed by the China Development Bank and disbursed by the Hungarian Development Bank.

Since its acquisition of BorsodChem, Wanhua has also built an industrial park, worth €200 million, near the existing plant in Kazincbarcika in the north-east of Hungary. In 2014, Wanhua concluded a strategic cooperation agreement with the newly restructured Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), and Szijjártó pledged his government's support for companies investing in and occupying this industrial park, for example in the form of tax

⁵⁶ Chinese OFDI in Greece has been included in the calculation.

⁵⁷ Isocyanates are chemicals used in the manufacture of various foams, fibres and coatings, which are increasingly used in the automobile industry.

allowances (Völgyi and Lukács 2021, 182). Similarly, China's MOFCOM and the Ministry of Finance attach great significance to the park, which is now called the Sino-Hungarian BorsodChem Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone. Taking stock, Wanhua's activities in Hungary are exemplary of the overall Chinese activities in Hungary and the wider '17+1' region, in that when a business activity is as impactful as Wanhua's acquisition of BorsodChem, it would often seize local governments' attention, and business-to-business activities would often be elevated to higher-level government-to-government cooperation. This method, that is, building political leverage and controlling key industries or technological know-how through economic investment, is one of the key methods through which China engages with Hungary and the wider CEE region. Such engagements are bound to have an impact on the de-Europeanisation of the foreign policies of these CEECs, and more specifically the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy, given the sheer amount of Chinese FDI in the country.

The information and communications technology (ICT) sector has been one of the key cornerstones of Sino-Hungarian economic relations, and the introduction of the '17+1' framework catalysed Chinese activities in this sector. Huawei, Lenovo and ZTE are the earliest entrants to these markets and the main Chinese companies active in the Hungarian ICT sector. Since then, Chinese and Hungarian governments have turned Hungary into a Central European hub from where the entire European market is served. As early as in 2009, in other words, before Orbán's return to power, Huawei opened its European supply centre in Hungary, supplying products not only to Europe but also to Russia and the Middle East and North Africa region. Given the institutionalisation of Sino-Hungarian relations in the form of the '17+1' framework and the organisational influence that China exerts therein, Hungary became an even more fertile ground for Chinese ICT companies. In 2012, ZTE established its European regional network operation centre in Hungary, and in the following year, the company opened a call centre and a repair centre. In 2013, Huawei opened a logistics centre in Bátorbágy and concluded a strategic cooperation agreement with the Orbán government, allowing its domestic supplier, Comlink, to open its first overseas plant in Hungary. More recently, in 2020, Huawei opened a research and development centre in the country, celebrating the company's 15 years of continuous operation there.

Apart from these market expansion activities, Huawei and ZTE have also played a role in the development of Hungary's telecommunications infrastructure. Between 2010 and 2015, ZTE built the LTE network for the Norwegian telecommunications company Telenor's operation in Hungary in a deal amounting to roughly €200 million (Reuters 2010). With ZTE being chosen over Telenor's typical partners, such as Ericsson, Nokia and Siemens, this marked the latest inroad to European infrastructure for Chinese companies. In 2019, Telenor and ZTE commenced their 5G pilot network in Győr and concluded a cooperation agreement with the local Széchenyi István University to allow its engineers to carry out 5G-related research and testing (Yettel 2019). British Vodafone and German Telekom have also been working with Huawei in the testing of the 5G network in Hungary. These developments are crucial, because Western observers and governments have always assigned an implicit security threat to China's involvement in the 5G rollout overseas (see for example, Brake 2018; Kaska et al. 2019). Whether or not Telenor, Vodafone and Telekom would use Chinese companies to roll out their 5G networks in Hungary depends very much on their parent companies and their home country's regulations. Needless to say, the Hungarian government and businesses (even foreign businesses with operations in the country) are generally more welcoming of Chinese involvement in the ICT sector, and this involvement so far has very much been in line with the goals of the '17+1' framework (and the BRI) from the Chinese side and the 'Eastern Opening'

policy from the Hungarian side. In 2019, despite US pressure, Szijjártó confirmed that Hungary would involve Huawei in the country's 5G rollout.

Another contentious sector in overall China–EU relations that encountered a breakthrough in Hungary is the renewable energy sector, specifically with regard to solar panels. Solar panels are a main point of contention in China–EU trade disputes (Voituriez and Wang 2015), and as recently as 2018, the EU ended its trade restrictions over Chinese solar panels (Reuters 2018b). This sector is particularly dear to China as well, because in 2019, seven of the world's 10 largest solar panel manufacturers were Chinese. Chinese involvement in Hungary's renewable energy sector started in 2009, amidst China–EU disputes, when Chinese company Greensolar purchased a small Hungarian manufacturer, Energosolar. With this acquisition, the Chinese company also acquired the Hungarian company's intellectual property, technological know-how, industry expertise and experienced staff. Since then, Greensolar has helped Hungary build eight photovoltaic power stations. Under the Orbán government, Chinese involvement in this sector further intensified. This culminated in an agreement to construct the largest solar park in the CEE region by China National Machinery Import & Export Corporation (CMC) in Kaposvár. Heralded as a major success of the 'Eastern Opening' by the Hungarian government and of the '17+1' by the Chinese government, this project is worth Ft 32 billion (roughly €100 million) and will allow Hungary to become carbon-neutral by 2050 (Emerging Europe 2019). Once completed, CMC plans to set up a regional centre in Kaposvár in preparation for its further expansions in the CEE region.

The transportation and logistics sector is arguably the most important pillar of Sino-Hungarian economic relations. There are several reasons for this: For China, transportation and logistics are closely related to the very few spelt-out goals of the '17+1' (and by extension, the BRI). Without good transportation and logistics on the ground, it would be harder for China to really gain a foothold in Europe, physically but also figuratively speaking. On the other hand, transportation improvement and infrastructure-building is a key sector not only for Hungary but also for the entire V4 region, as Orbán reiterated during the Hungarian presidency of the V4 Council (Government of Hungary 2021b). Orbán also understands the strategic location that Hungary occupies in the heartland of Europe, thus making his country a great hub for transportation and the distribution of Chinese goods. This self-perception and China's past actions (e.g., Huawei's supply centre) have greatly increased Orbán's expectation of Chinese investment in Hungary's transportation and logistics sector.

However, in this key sector, results have been disappointing for both China and Hungary, which in turn has had a political impact on their bilateral relations. Recognising the importance of transportation and logistics for both countries, Wen and Orbán signed a framework agreement as early as in June 2011 for the construction of a Chinese logistics zone in Hungary. A year later, a state-owned enterprise associated with the government of Shandong province, Shandong Dihao International Investment, acquired the land and facilities to construct the zone, and in 2015, the project was completed (China Daily 2018). The Central European Trade and Logistics Cooperation Zone, as it came to be known, is the first Chinese logistics zone built overseas and consists of an exhibition centre in Budapest, two logistics parks in Csepel Port near Budapest and a logistics park in Bremen, Germany. The Zone is also connected by rail to the existing cargo trainline between Changsha and Budapest since April 2017. In the future, Hungary and China hope the zone will be connected to the '21st Century Maritime Silkroad', which runs from Shanghai or Ningbo in Central China, via Shenzhen in Southern China, to the Chinese-owned Piraeus port in Greece. From there, it should run to Budapest via Belgrade via cargo railway connections. In other words, for the Zone to truly

become the biggest Chinese logistics centre in Europe and for Hungary to really benefit from its geographical location, a railway connection between Budapest and Piraeus is crucial. Yet, this is where results have been disappointing.

The proposed Budapest to Piraeus railway connection has been hailed as the hallmark project of the BRI and the '17+1' framework, since it would pass through Budapest, Belgrade, Skopje and Athens, four capitals of countries involved in the '17+1'. In November 2013, during the '17+1' summit in Bucharest, China, Hungary and Serbia discussed this railway connection, and in 2015, China signed separate deals with the two countries on the refurbishment of existing tracks. For the Hungarian segment (with a total length of 152 km), a joint venture—Kínai–Magyar Vasúti Nonprofit Zrt—was set up between Hungarian national railway company MÁV, the China Railway International Corporation and the China Railway International Group. The project would cost around Ft 550 billion (approximately €1.5 billion), and the joint venture would be responsible for the bidding, contracting, management and supervision of the project (MÁV 2016). Though the construction of the Serbian segment commenced in 2017, the Hungarian segment has experienced significant delays. These were largely due to the EU's initiation of infringement proceedings against Hungary in 2016, with the EU citing the lack of transparency and the suspected corruption in the deal (Spike 2016).

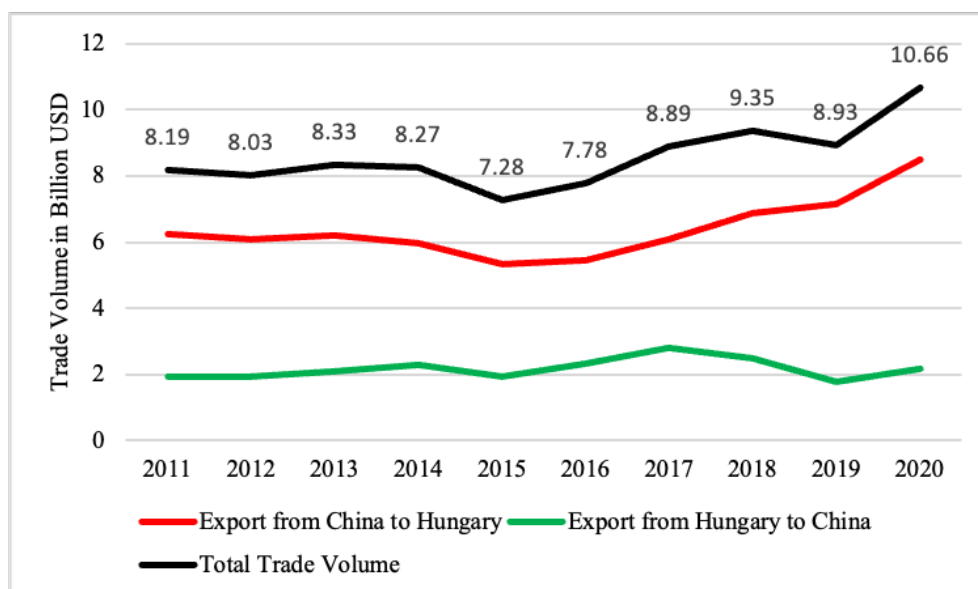
According to the original plan, the Hungarian segment was supposed to be completed by late 2017, coinciding with the annual '17+1' summit to be held in Budapest in April or May 2017 and in advance of the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2018. In 2016, when Hungary was preparing for its upcoming summit, it became clear that this project would not be realised on time. Both sides, disappointed in one another, decided to postpone the summit to November 2017 and downgraded its political profile. The summit was not widely covered by Chinese and Hungarian media, and Orbán spoke about Premier Li Keqiang's presence in Budapest as being an official visit to the country rather than his attendance of the '17+1' summit. In 2019, a new Sino-Hungarian joint venture, composed of different Chinese and Hungarian entities, won the bid to construct the ill-fated railway connection, with financing from the Hungarian government and the Exim Bank of China (Joo 2019). This project is expected to be completed by the end of 2025.

It is, however, important to understand here that China's employment of political and/or economic as well as normative influence would not have been as effective if Hungary had not opened its doors to Chinese influence. As a result of his continuous efforts, Orbán has managed not only to bolster Sino-Hungarian economic ties but also to present Hungary as the most trustworthy partner in the region and the most viable gateway for China to the rest of Europe. Hungary's self-presentation as such has resulted in a quiet and subtle competition for China's favouritism in the region. For instance, when Chinese state-owned company China Overseas Engineering Group (COVEC) withdrew from a \$477 million project for the construction of a segment of Poland's A2 highway in June 2011, Hungarian media linked this decision to Wen's visit to Budapest, which took place at the same time, and blamed the Poles for not knowing how to conduct business with China (HVG 2011; see also, China Daily 2011a). However, when Polish President Bronisław Komorowski's visit to China in December 2011 led to the signing of a bilateral 'strategic partnership' agreement, Hungary was left disheartened and frustrated, because it understood that this is a tool frequently employed by China in order to show its willingness to foster closer ties with the country in question. Hungary's reaction was understandable, given that Poland had not been an enthusiastic and committed partner in the region and that Hungary had been the total opposite. Whereas many CEECs have welcomed Chinese investments with great caution and continued to pursue a value-based foreign policy

vis-à-vis China, Orbán chose to do the opposite: His uncritical approach and continued reiteration of the importance and benevolent nature of Chinese investments have not only demonstrated his fidelity to Beijing but also enhanced the general nature of Chinese diplomacy in the EU (Godement et al. 2011). In fact, Orbán's words and actions have led some experts and scholars to suggest that he is somewhat of a spokesperson for Chinese interests in Europe (see for example, Orenstein and Kelemen 2017).

Despite his and his government's incessant and arduous efforts, Orbán did not achieve the expected economic results. As Figure 10 shows, though the bilateral trade volume peaked a year after Orbán arrived in office (i.e., in 2011) with the total amount being \$8.81 billion, this figure is actually the result of continuous year-to-year growth. There has not been a drastic increase from the period before 2010, with the annual total trade volume lingering between \$8 and \$9 billion. Between Orbán's return to power in May 2010 and the implementation of the '17+1' framework in April 2012, according to the AEI, China's FDI in Hungary amounted to \$2.11 billion. Although this was a substantial increase from the period prior to 2010,⁵⁸ the entirety of this FDI came from the three transactions carried out by Wanhua Industrial in its control and ultimate acquisition of BorsodChem. Furthermore, although Wen Jiabao and Li Keqiang promised loans for development projects in Hungary in June 2011 and April 2012 respectively, none these have materialised thus far.

Figure 10. Sino-Hungarian trade volume, 2011–2020.



Source: <https://oec.world/en>

In addition, several major infrastructure projects pushed forth by Orbán have, to date, either remained unimplemented or been repeatedly delayed. For instance, since 2010, Orbán has urged the Chinese to build a direct, high-speed railway connection between Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport and Budapest Keleti train station, a much-needed connection given the severe traffic congestion between these points (HVG 2012; 2019). This project would also, in Orbán's eyes, foster closer relations between MÁV and China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), thus paving the way for future cooperation. Just as the project entered its

⁵⁸ According to the AEI, the only Chinese direct FDI in Hungary prior to 2010 was a real estate construction project by Sinoma, amounting to \$170 million.

design phase, the Chinese decided to halt it. Though China has not given the exact reasons behind its decision, several developments possibly contributed to this: For a start, the bankruptcy of Hungary's flag carrier, Malév Airlines, in February 2012 led to the temporary closure of Terminal 1 and a significant decrease in passenger traffic. In the same month, Hainan Airlines, a codeshare partner of Malév Airlines, terminated its direct flight between Budapest and Beijing. As such, the direct, high-speed train connection between the airport and the train station lost its economic significance for China to a large extent. Moreover, the restoration of the direct flight between Warsaw and Beijing by LOT Polish Airlines in May 2012 and the opening of a Bank of China branch in Warsaw in June meant that Poland could position itself as the most trustworthy partner in the region and the most viable gateway to the rest of Europe for China. It came, therefore, as no surprise that the '17+1' was launched in Poland on 26 April 2012.

In fact, when Malév Airlines started to find itself in financial trouble in 2010, Orbán pushed forth the idea for Hainan Airlines' then parent company HNA Group to acquire Malév. The negotiations were headed by Hungarian Capital Company's (Magyar Tőkeárnyaság) Sándor Demján, one of Hungary's richest people. Both parties initially agreed to found a new airline, yet the negotiations ultimately failed (The Budapest Beacon 2015). Whilst it remains unclear why, the most prevailing reason from the Chinese side was probably that HNA Group was merely interested in acquiring a majority stake in the new airline, but the Hungarian government feared that this would violate EU regulations. After this failure and following the resignation of Tamás Fellegi, then Minister of National Development, there was no one from the Hungarian side to lead the negotiations. Adding insult to injury, the ambitious proposal for a cargo railway connection between Záhony in eastern Hungary and Khorgos in western China fell through. With Khorgos being the largest dry port in the world, should this railway connection be established, Hungary would truly become China's gateway to Europe, which would thus significantly boost the country's economic and political clout. Instead, around 2011–2012, China became more focused on discussing a railway connection between itself and Austria. Due to various construction reasons, this connection would bypass Hungary altogether. This Chengdu–Vienna connection was ultimately realised in 2018 (ÖBB 2018), coinciding with the opening of the Austrian Consulate General in Chengdu.

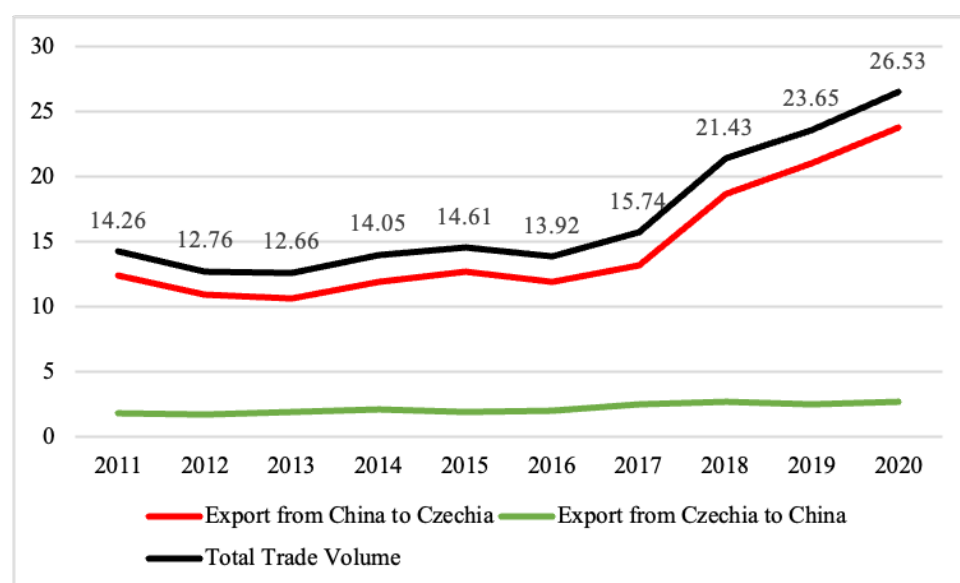
5.2.3. Economic and Political Influence in Czechia

As said in the previous subsection, based on data from the AEI's China Global Investment Tracker, the EU received \$261.85 billion in Chinese OFDI during the analytical timeframe of this thesis (i.e., 2010–2020). Yet, only \$11.15 billion in OFDI (merely 4.26% of the total OFDI) went to the EU Member States within the '17+1' framework,⁵⁹ of which Czechia received the fourth highest amount, at \$0.86 billion, after Hungary with \$3.63 billion, Greece with \$3.56 billion and Poland with \$1.09 billion. This meagre amount can largely be explained by Czechia's value-based foreign policy (for example, the Havelian pro-Tibet, pro-Taiwan and pro-democracy stance), which greatly dismayed China, and the strategic importance that China placed on other EU Member States and their (larger) economies. That being said, Czechia has been 'long viewed by China as a spring board country for its interests across the European Union' (Santora and Goeij 2019) due to its strategically convenient location in Central and Eastern Europe as well as its relatively lower costs of living and doing business.

⁵⁹ Chinese OFDI in Greece was included in the calculation.

Diplomatic relations between Czechia and China warmed up in the mid-2010s: In September 2015, Zeman travelled to Beijing and attended a military parade commemorating the end of the Second World War as the only EU head of state (Fürst 2018, 127). In a quid pro quo move, Xi visited Prague in March 2016. During these two visits, both sides signed numerous investment and cooperation agreements worth billions of euros. Unlike in other CEECs, Chinese investments in Czechia were carried out mainly by one nominally private conglomerate—CEFC China Energy—whose ownership and funding are to this day unclear and opaque (A. Chen and Lopatka 2017). This Shanghai-based conglomerate’s activities did yield outcomes, notably an increase in bilateral trade.

Figure 11. Sino-Czech trade volume, 2011–2020.



Source: <https://oec.world/en>

Before proceeding further, it is important to first understand the role that a nominally private conglomerate—CEFC China Energy—plays in China’s economic diplomacy abroad and, more specifically, how this translates into China’s political and economic influence in Czechia. Due to the overall lack of transparency and information on the innerworkings of Chinese companies and the extent of their ties to the CPC, it is difficult to pinpoint and thus explain the specific mechanisms through which Chinese political elites seek to influence Chinese commercial actors overseas, such as SOEs and private companies. Most of the people who hold high positions within these companies are indeed CPC members, and some have even held governmental posts, but the exact process through which and the criteria according to which these people are hired and/or appointed are rarely made public. There is evidence that appointments to the helm of these companies are often directly, if not at least intimately, linked to the CPC (Norris 2016, 72). Here, two examples can be cited: Wang Yilin was elected in 2012 as a member of the CPC’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (a purely political post, at least nominally), and then in 2015 was appointed as Chairman of China National Petroleum Corporation; Wang Yupu, who served as the CEO of the state-owned petroleum giant Sinopec, stepped down in 2017 and became the Director of State Administration of Work Safety (E. Ng 2017).

With regard to private companies, the picture is far more nuanced and complex. Perhaps surprisingly to many in the West, many top executives of private companies have ties with the CPC, and in fact, membership of the CPC is an unwritten requirement for getting ahead in the

business world in China. For example, according to the CPC's mouthpiece the *People's Daily*, the co-founder of Alibaba Group, Jack Ma, is reported to have been a member of the CPC since his university years. The CEOs of China's two largest internet giants Baidu and Tencent are acknowledged by the CPC's Central Committee 'for their contribution to reform and opening up China's economy' (CNBC 2018). This is however not to say that the CPC is a safety net for these companies and their top executives. If anything, the CPC's support for these executives oscillates, depending on various factors, such as time, location, issues at hand and the administration in charge. On the other hand, these executives often behave in a way that is against the CPC's expectations (Hung et al. 2015; X. Yu et al. 2015). The oscillating support of the CPC and the unpredictability of the executive at home are expected to be replicated, if not amplified, abroad. This is due to the simple fact that the CPC lacks a presence abroad, and by extension power and authority there. From this point of view, the CPC is expected to have better control over SOEs than private companies abroad (Norris 2016, 41).

In light of these understandings and observations, Norris (2016, 27) argues that the 'principal-agent theory offers a useful conceptual framework for unpacking the dynamics governing the interaction of the state and the private sector'. Zhang Shuxiu (2016, 27) indirectly concurs with Norris by asserting that China's economic diplomacy or statecraft 'is a complex process involving how a range of relevant policy actors (as agents) concerned with a policy issue work with or against one another to carry out a proposed course of action'. To put it differently, there may be a discrepancy between expected and actual results when the goals and interests of the CPC (as the principal) and enterprises (as the agent, be it state-owned or private) clash, or when information between the two parties is not shared in a correct and timely manner. Factoring targeted investment states (e.g., Czechia and Hungary) into the equation, if Chinese enterprises abroad fail to deliver the promised investments and yield the expected results, this would damage the reputation of China and bilateral relations between China and the targeted state in question.

A good example to illustrate the above point is COVEC in Poland. COVEC is a subsidiary of China Railway Group, a state-owned enterprise and one of the world's largest construction and engineering groups. In 2009, COVEC became the first Chinese company to win a public works contract in an EU Member State and was tasked with the construction of a section of the A2 motorway between Warsaw and Łódź. What began as a win-win situation for both parties turned into a fiasco as then PM Donald Tusk pledged to connect the A2 highway to the German border in preparation for the European Football Championships that Poland would co-host with Ukraine. In June 2011, Poland cancelled the contract, and both parties blamed the other for this failure, souring bilateral relations between Poland and China and raising questions about China's structural investments in the EU (Cienski 2011; Kanarek 2017). In most cases, remedial work must be done to compensate for the failure and repair China's reputation. Depending on the specific situation, China may choose to replace the lapsed Chinese enterprise abroad with another company that China deems to be more capable of carrying out its economic statecraft. Alternatively, China may choose to abandon the failed endeavour completely (as was the case with COVEC) and make amends through other forms of investment or cooperation.

In this research, Norris and Zhang's conceptual framework of the principal-agent theory acts as a great tool to understand China's economic statecraft and political influence in Czechia. After Zeman's visit to Beijing in September 2015 and Xi's visit to Prague in March 2016, Chinese economic interests and activities were primarily represented by CEFC China Energy, which, despite what its name suggests, focuses more on financing energy investments

than on energy production (Allen-Ebrahimian and Tamkin 2018). Based on the evidence gathered by Chinese journalist Ji (2018) after his extensive and in-depth investigation, CEFC's chairman, Ye Jianmin, had built a reputation for himself both in China and abroad as being 'not only an entrepreneurial giant, but also a major figure on the international political stage' and that he was 'fighting overseas for the country's [China's] discursive power'. As Ji explains, Ye had the 'ability and boldness in manoeuvring and integrating political and economic resources' through the use of his network, which includes high-ranking Party members and retired military officials. Furthermore, Ye had 'a deep understanding of how to use the foreign to bolster his own domestic importance'. Therefore, CEFC and its top executive, Ye, essentially act as China's agent in Czechia. This configuration is rather quite different from China's activities in Hungary, where a variety of Chinese agents operate and where no one Chinese agent dominates the others.

Thanks to an extensive and quick-growing investment portfolio and his connections with political and economic elites both at home and abroad (Allen-Ebrahimian and Tamkin 2018; Ji 2018), Ye gives the impression that CEFC, albeit a private company in nature, is an agent acting abroad to safeguard China's core interests and push forth the country's agenda. Both political and economic elites from China and abroad bought into this image, and China invested a great amount of political capital until Ye was arrested in 2018 for corruption and other scandals. At its height, CEFC China Energy was ranked amongst the Fortune Global 500 in 2016, with \$41.9 billion in revenues in the preceding year. It had investments related to the energy sector in Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa (Stevenson 2017), of which the more significant ones were a 51% stake in Kazakhstan's KMG International, an oil and gas company with units and subsidiaries in France, Spain and Romania (A. Chen and Rose 2015). In October 2017, CEFC China Energy purchased a 14.16% stake in Rosneft, Russia's second-largest oil company after Gazprom, for \$9 billion (Cang and Guo 2017).

After the construction of the '17+1' framework and Zeman's September 2015 visit, it was clear to China that the Czech president (if not other political elites and/or the entire country) was courting Chinese investment. Indeed, after Zeman's visit to Beijing, a bundle of agreements was signed between China and Czechia, all of which involved CEFC China Energy. These agreements included the purchases of the following: the Slavia Prague football club; a few historical residential and commercial buildings, one of which was meant to be repurposed as CEFC China Energy's European headquarters (Marečková 2015); a 50% stake in Czech low-cost leisure airline Smartwings (which owns 30% of Czech Airlines, the national flag carrier of Czechia); a 79.4% stake in Lobkowicz breweries; a 49% stake in Empresa Media, a Czech media company and publishing house whose TV programme—TV Barrandov—frequently interviewed Zeman; and other minority stakes in various Czech companies. In addition, CEFC China Energy increased its holdings in J&T Group, a Slovakia-founded investment group with its largest portion of investments in Czechia, from 5% in the previous year to 10%. It was also in 2015 that the CEO of CEFC China Energy, Ye, was appointed as Zeman's economic adviser (iDNES 2015). The nature of this appointment was opaque, not least because Ye's exact role was not spelt out. That said, the rare appointment of a foreign businessman as the Czech president's economic adviser without much public debate or scrutiny suggests the following: First, a fast warming of Sino-Czech relations, not only on the state-to-state level but also on other levels of governance and even on a people-to-people level; second, a lack of transparency in the Czech government's (or at least, Zeman's) dealings with China and its main agent in the country, CEFC China Energy; and last, the prominent and decisive role of CEFC China Energy in China's economic statecraft in Czechia, and more so, the potential shift of Czech foreign policy in the future (Allen-Ebrahimian and Tamkin 2018).

Xi's visit to Prague in March 2016, as a quid pro quo to Zeman's visit to Beijing in the previous year, resulted in the signing of 17 agreements, totalling €8 billion in worth. The official Czech governmental document, and interestingly enough not the 17 agreements themselves, reveals the pivotal role that CEFC China Energy played and would play in the negotiation, introduction and execution of these agreements (President of the Czech Republic 2016f). More tellingly, CEFC China Energy was directly involved in three agreements amounting to €1.64 billion, one of which entailed the total buyout by CEFC of the entirety of Železárny Podbrezová, a leading engineering firm, and another entailed the purchase and refurbishment of the Fortuna Arena, Slavia Prague's football stadium. Furthermore, in anticipation of Xi's visit, CEFC already acquired a 50% to 90% stake in leading Czech online travel agency Invia (Novotný 2016). That said, the most significant deal in 2016 was the proposed increase in CEFC's shares in J&T Group from the previous 10% to 50%. This was significant for several reasons: First, the initial increase from 5% to 10% was only proposed, negotiated and executed in September 2016, and as such, the proposed substantial increase within such a short amount of time points to the fast-growing footprint of CEFC (and China in general) in Czechia. Furthermore, at the time of this proposition, J&T Group was already involved in two other agreements—one, a €5 billion strategic partnership with China's Ping An Bank, and another an €800 million investment agreement with China Development Bank. This means that in less than a year, CEFC China Energy had become the key player in deals worth a total of €7.5 billion. In other words, CEFC's prominence as the agent of China's economic statecraft can be deduced from its involvement in J&T Group. In fact, at one point, CEFC China Energy sought to make J&T Group the core of its international investments in Czechia and the surrounding region (Ji 2018).

However, evidence pointing to the lack of realisation of CEFC's dealings in Czechia began to surface in early 2018. In November 2017, Patrick Ho, a Hong Kong ophthalmologist turned politician, was arrested in the US along with Senegal's Foreign Minister Cheikh Gadio on corruption and bribery charges. Ho was one of the few that established and funded CEFC China Energy. In March 2018, Ye was arrested in China on similar charges in Xi's widespread anti-corruption campaign (as it claims), and around the same time, it was revealed that CEFC China Energy had €450 million in unpaid debts in Czechia, mainly to J&T Group. In May 2018, it was announced that the Shanghai-based state-owned enterprise CITIC Group would repay this €450 million to J&T. However, after a week of inaction, J&T Group announced that it had taken over the stakes of CEFC and installed crisis management in CEFC's Europe headquarters (Reuters 2018a). At the same time, it was revealed that CEFC's proposed acquisition of a 50% stake in J&T never materialised during the two years after Xi's visit.

Before the arrests of Ho and Ye as well as the subsequent revelations with regard to CEFC's dealings with J&T, evidence pointing to the lack of realisation of proposed Chinese investments (involving CEFC or not) had already surfaced. The centre-right-leaning Czech newspaper *Lidové noviny* conducted an extensive investigation into the degree to which the promised Chinese investments had materialised in March 2016, exactly a year after Xi's visit to the country. Merely one of the nine dealings that were promised and expected to be actioned—CEFC's total buyout of Železárny Podbrezová for €72 million—was actually realised. The reasons behind this lie on both sides: For Czechia, the Czech National Bank intervened to block eight dealings that were in the planning stage, five of which involved either CEFC or J&T (Menzelová 2017). For China, however, the picture is far more complex. On the surface, it became apparent that CEFC's finances had become problematic. For example, further abroad, CEFC lacked the money in mid-2018 to make payments on its investments after

its plans to, as mentioned, purchase Rosneft in Russia (Blas and Mazneva 2018) and KMG International (Sorbello 2018). As accusations of corruption and other financial crimes against CEFC's executives started to mount both in China and abroad (Ji 2018), Xi, who aimed to wipe China clean of corruption (with or without ulterior motives), had to withdraw his backing for CEFC as the main agent of China's economic statecraft in Czechia.

To sum up, CEFC's significant investments in Czechia (and elsewhere), albeit often unfulfilled or ill-fated, solidified the company's role as an agent of China's economic statecraft and by extension political influence abroad. By 2018, towards the end of the analytical timeframe of this thesis, it was evident that the case of CEFC refutes the assumption that the CPC is able to fully control its agents abroad, especially when private companies, as opposed to SOEs, are in play. As the principal-agent theory suggests, when the interests of the principal (i.e., China) and the agent (i.e., CEFC) conflict, or when the information that two parties possess is asymmetrical, the agent's activities may not yield the results that the principal hoped for. In the case of the CEFC, the problem is the latter than the former. More concretely speaking, the information on financial resources of the CEFC and Ye was opaque, and the exact nature of the relationship between Ye and Czech political elites, such as Zeman, was ambiguous.

Interestingly enough, in April 2019, Zeman still insisted on having Ye as his economic adviser, despite the latter having been imprisoned in China for more than a year. This insistence was rather bizarre, considering that the cordial, if not warm, relationship between Ye and China had clearly deteriorated a year prior. Therefore, the exact relationship between Ye and Zeman was unclear, to say the least, and arguably not much known by China. Czech, Chinese and international scholars, media outlets and informed observers have not yet been able to unearth the exact relationship between Zeman and Ye or explain the precise role that Ye and CEFC played in China's economic statecraft and political influence in Czechia. That said, it is safe to say that the fruition of Chinese investment in Czechia or the lack thereof was motivated by push-and-pull factors: For China, there was an interest and a goal to exert economic influence in Czechia, hoping to translate it into political influence. For Czechia, there was a desire amongst some political elites, with Zeman in the lead, to court China and reap benefits from the warming of bilateral relations.

6. HUNGARY

As said previously, this thesis operates on the assumption that, for de-Europeanisation to occur, a Member State must have previously attained a certain level of Europeanisation (Copeland 2016). Therefore, to understand the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy during the thesis's analytical timeframe, from 2010 to 2020, this chapter proceeds as follows: The first section establishes the level of Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy prior to 2010 and in doing so sets these Europeanisation gains as a central benchmark against which de-Europeanisation is established and its extent measured. The second section studies the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy in accordance with the outcomes and indicators set out in section 3.5, namely discursive, substantive and organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation, between 2010 and 2020. The third and final section concludes with some summative remarks for the chapter.

6.1. Background: Europeanisation of Hungarian Foreign Policy Pre-2010

6.1.1. Europeanisation of Institutions and Procedures

Like its CEE neighbours, Hungary primarily saw its relations with the EU as external relations until its application for accession in 1994 (Denca 2008, 13). Despite the multifaceted nature of the accession negotiations, the Hungarian MFA became the primary representative of the Hungarian government in the negotiation process. This was a daunting task: the negotiations proved to be far more complicated and technical than Hungary had originally imagined, and the range of individual chapters and subject matters associated with the accession went beyond the political and economic diplomacy hitherto familiar to Hungary in its experience in engaging with and acceding to other Western-led multilateral organisations, such as NATO (Palánkai 1999; M. A. Smith and Timmins 2018).

Despite these challenges, the Hungarian MFA coordinated across various ministries and collected expert opinions from relevant bodies in order to form national positions on various complex legal, political and economic matters. As such, for the Hungarian MFA, the negotiation process greatly enhanced its role and status, challenged its capacity and know-how and broadened its functions and responsibilities. After its accession in 2004, Hungary had to change how it saw its relations with the EU, as these relations were no longer 'external' or 'foreign' in the traditional sense of the words. This change also led to the question of how Hungary would conduct its post-accession relations with the EU. The experience of other EU Member States pointed to three possibilities: one, continued orchestration by the MFA (like in most Member States); two, a separate Ministry for European Affairs but possibly still nested within the existing MFA (like in the case of Austria or France); or three, central coordination across ministries by the PMO (like in the case of Finland⁶⁰).

In the case of Hungary, its government opted for the third option, with the locus shifting from the MFA to the PMO. Some scholars have seen this move as being in line with the overall centralisation of power pushed forth by successive Orbán governments (Szente 2013; Kákai 2020; 2021). On 1 January 2005, the State Secretariat for Integration and External Economic

⁶⁰ Compared to other EU Member States, Finland has a unique system for coordinating EU affairs and formulating the country's EU policies. This activity is conducted by the Ministerial Committee on EU Affairs, which is chaired by the prime minister and attended by various relevant ministries, departments, subcommittees and Finland's Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels. See <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/government/eu-affairs>.

Relations was split from the MFA, moved into the PMO and renamed the Office for European Affairs. Some MFA personnel also moved into the new Office, including Péter Györkös who, until the accession, served as the state secretary for integration and external economic relations and the director general for EU coordination within the MFA. Györkös led this newly established Office for European Affairs, which was primarily tasked with the allocation of EU funds through national development projects and with the inter-ministerial/inter-departmental coordination of governmental policies related to Hungary's EU membership. More broadly speaking, this move can also be seen as the internalisation of EU affairs within the Hungarian government.

Despite the administrative (and physical) move described above, matters related to foreign affairs, including the CFSP and EU external relations (such as enlargements, the neighbourhood policy and humanitarian assistance), remained within the portfolio of the MFA. These matters were dealt with under the direction of a state secretary from 2002 to 2010 and of a deputy state secretary since 2010. (This apparent downgrade of CFSP- and EU-related matters in the Hungarian MFA since Orbán's arrival to power is a point elaborated further on below.) Yet, after a short stint of 20 months within the PMO, the Office for European Affairs returned to the MFA, and the original institutional arrangement was restored under a government decree (Government of Hungary 2006). The decree also stipulates that the minister of foreign affairs is responsible for both foreign policy and matters that arise from Hungary's membership of the EU (Government of Hungary 2006). This dual responsibility is highly pertinent to this chapter, as the Hungarian MFA is the main locus for (de-)Europeanisation.

This is, however, not to say that the MFA is a dictating force that decides on the country's foreign policy direction. There are a few compelling explanations for this: One is the special political system of Hungary. The ruling Fidesz–KDNP alliance has won three⁶¹ consecutive legislative elections with constitutional supermajorities, thus allowing Orbán to reshape the country to his advantage and exert his power and influence almost unchecked. As such, Orbán has played a vital role in formulating the country's foreign policy. Second, the government decree requires the MFA to coordinate its policies with other ministries on matters outside the realm of foreign policy that are still matters that arise from Hungary's membership of the EU. For example, the MFA is required to coordinate with the Ministry of Defence on CSDP-related matters, including crisis-management operations, and with Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement on infringement proceedings before the European Court of Justice (Government of Hungary 2006).

6.1.2. Europeanisation of Preferences and Interests

Accession to the EU, and by extension the subsequent induction into the legal and institutional framework of the CFSP, is a major turning point in the national foreign policy of each Member State. This is especially the case for the CEECs of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements (see e.g., Fenko and Lovéc 2015), as these countries, until their accession, had a narrower perspective in their foreign policy outlook. Along with Poland and the Czech Republic, Hungary's accession to NATO in 1999 offers a great example of the extent to which a country's perspectives, and hence preferences and interests, can be expanded as a result of accession to these Western-led organisations. In view of this experience, the Hungarian foreign policy elites expected that EU

⁶¹ On 3 April 2022, Fidesz–KDNP alliance won its fourth consecutive legislative election. However, since this election falls outside the analytical scope of this thesis, this electoral victory will be excluded from the analysis.

membership would push the country to the forefront of not only European politics but also international affairs (Denca 2009).

In a similar vein to NATO membership, the political debates, decision-making and policy implementation that would arise from Hungary's EU membership and its participation in the CFSP required the formulation of new perspectives, preferences and interests on matters and issues beyond the traditional scope of Hungarian foreign policy (Csanády and Törő 2013). Furthermore, some perspectives, preferences and interests were formulated not as an expression of Hungary's national interests *stricto sensu* but as a show of understanding and acceptance that these perspectives, preferences and interests are significant to other Member States (e.g., the Sahel for France and West Africa for Portugal) (Pomorska 2017). In more concrete and practical terms, Hungary's foreign policy did indeed expand, both in depth and in breadth.

The deeper and more comprehensive intelligence gathering through information-sharing, consultations and exchanges within the Correspondance Européenne (COREU) communication network best exemplifies the in-depth expansion of Hungarian foreign policy. The inclusion of Hungary, a country with a rather small diplomatic network and low intelligence-gathering capacities, in the COREU has made more mechanisms and channels of communication available. Moreover, the constant flow of information amongst the CFSP working groups and relevant national bodies/committees has provided more insights into matters that are otherwise relatively unknown to Hungary. Consequently, this expansion in depth brought more matters to the attention of Hungarian foreign policy elites and thus greatly expanded the breadth of the country's foreign policy. These matters often related to regions (such as the Great Lakes Region, Latin America and the Maghreb), countries (such as Myanmar and North Korea) or themes (such as humanitarian assistance and international development) that had hitherto not been discussed by Hungarian foreign policy elites beyond mere generalities. The reason behind this was simple: these matters did not affect the country's direct and primary foreign policy interests. That said, EU membership itself did not involve Hungary more actively and directly into these matters. It did, however, thrust the country into a range of matters towards which it, as an EU Member State, could no longer feel indifference or disinterest, as these matters may be dear to Brussels and/or other Member States.

As evidenced above, Hungary's accession to the EU and its participation in the CFSP not only expanded the depth and breadth of the country's foreign policy but also increased the country's willingness to tackle more global issues in order to increase its international profile. In the 2008 governmental resolution on its foreign policy strategy, Hungary confidently stated that, as the EU increasingly becomes a genuine political actor in the global area, the country wishes to project its 'global interests' through its participation in Union policies, the CFSP and the CSDP (Government of Hungary 2008). After Hungary's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2011, its MFA reiterated that the strengthening of the country's international profile is the goal of the Hungarian government, and, in order to do so, the country is willing to look more into geographically and geopolitically distant areas such as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and certain parts of Asia and the post-Soviet region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011, 38). Despite limited diplomatic wherewithal and years of financial austerity, the perspectives, preferences and interests of Hungarian foreign policy have greatly transformed—namely, become more Europeanised and more globalised—due to Hungary's EU membership. This, incidentally and perhaps paradoxically, paved the way for Hungary's subsequent policies of 'global opening' and 'Eastern Opening', which are often considered as emblematic of the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy.

Whilst the discussion above highlights the ‘downloading’ of Europeanised preferences and interests from Brussels, Hungary has also ‘uploaded’ a fair share of its foreign policy preferences and interests onto Brussels, with the most notable one being the country’s stance on the Western Balkans. With regard to its southwestern neighbourhoods, Hungary has held the strong belief that EU and/or NATO membership, or at least the prospective thereof, is the strongest incentive to ensure security and political stability in the region (Pomorska 2017). As such, motivated by this strategic interest, Hungary has long advocated the integration of Western Balkan countries into the EU and/or NATO. In the case of Croatia, a country that shares an immediate border with Hungary, its accession to NATO in 2009 and the conclusion of its EU accession negotiations in 2011 have made it the poster child of the transformability of the region.

Given the successful example of Croatia, Hungary has continuously maintained its support for and endorsement of the candidacies of Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, whilst insisting that ‘the European values be fully respected and the accession criteria be fully met’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011, 22). Amongst the shared European values and political criteria to accede to the EU, one that is particularly near and dear to Hungary is the treatment of Hungarian minorities in these candidate countries. Furthermore, Hungary was one of the first countries that recognised the independence of Kosovo in 2008, and since then Hungary has played an active role in Kosovo’s economic development and normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia (Géci–Sherifi 2014; Lachert and Gönczi 2021). In more tangible terms, Hungary has shared its experience in the accession negotiation process, particularly in matters related to administrative and legal preparations, the use of EU funds and institutional capacity-building. This supportive outreach has not only been extended bilaterally from Hungary but also from Poland, Czechia and Slovakia through their V4 platform (Visegrád Group 2010; 2011; 2021). In fact, the V4 format of regional cooperation without any permanent institutional framework, both before and after the four countries’ accession, has emerged as a viable model for cooperation amongst the Western Balkan countries.

In short, the experience of Hungary regarding foreign policy preferences and interests before and more notably after its accession to the EU has demonstrated the country’s ability to partake in the process of change operating between an (emerging) European institutional centre and domestic structures of governance. On the one hand, EU membership has expanded the depth and breadth of Hungary foreign policy, which prompted Budapest to ‘download’ a significant number of preferences and interests from Brussels. On the other hand, as an active participant in this process of change, Budapest has uploaded its own preferences and interests onto Brussels and in doing so has used the EU, along with its policies and apparatus, to pursue matters of strategic significance to itself.

6.1.3. Europeanisation of Strategies and Actions

On 31 March 2004, on the eve of Hungary’s accession to the EU, the country adopted a new national security strategy (NSS), replacing the old one, which had been adopted only two years prior. This meagre time difference between the publication of the two NSSs hinted at the (substantial) changes that EU membership would bring to Hungary. Understandingly, this new strategy was tasked with the redefinition of Hungary’s interests, aims and preferences and its aims in light of its EU accession.

In the first section of the NSS, Hungary defines 'security' in a rather broad and comprehensive way, highlighting the fact that the notion contains 'besides the traditional political and defence components, [...], *inter alia*, economic and social, including human rights and minority rights-related, as well as environmental elements' (Government of Hungary 2004). Furthermore, Hungary also defines, as its national security interests, 'the enhancement of community methods, the increase of the effectiveness of the CFSP, the enhancement of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) as a means of CFSP, and the integration of Hungary in the institutional structure of the European Union' (Government of Hungary 2004). The third section of the NSS declares that the CFSP would 'represent an ever increasingly important framework of Hungarian foreign policy'. As an EU Member State and through its participation in the CFSP, Hungary was to play a greater role in world affairs, and its foreign policy interests and objectives were to be better amplified. This, as the NSS states, would be otherwise unachievable for a country like Hungary, given its small size and limited diplomatic capabilities (Government of Hungary 2004). This redefinition and restatement of Hungary's national security interests highlights the level of Europeanisation on the eve of the country's accession to the EU as well as Hungary's willingness and vested interests in further Europeanisation after its accession.

With that being said, the foreseeable close and embedded relationship between Hungarian foreign policy and the CFSP presented two discernible challenges for foreign policy elites in Budapest. First, the willingness and determination to use the CFSP as an amplifier of Hungary's national interests and foreign policy objectives meant that the country had to actively participate and compromise during the decision-making process of the CFSP. This is not something that Hungary was willing to do or was capable of doing. Second, the preservation of some of Hungary's interests and objectives, often ones that could not be achieved through the CFSP, meant that there would be a conscious avoidance of the full dilution of its interests and objectives into a concerted European policy. In short, based on the NSS of 2004, it was clear that Hungarian foreign policy, in the incipient stage of its EU membership at least, would be shaped and harmonised by the CFSP, but there were already hints that Hungary was not willing to be fully dictated by the CFSP.

Three years after Hungary's accession, its national foreign policy and security strategy was partially redefined, or better, clarified, in a 2007 document. This new 'strategy for European policy' highlights the significance of the EU and the complementary transatlantic relationship fostered by NATO in the 'common preparations for, and responses to global risks' (Government of Hungary 2007). Although it confirms Hungary's trust in the 'EU machinery' and other Member States to protect Hungary's interests, the strategy warns about Hungary's potential complacency about the EU's ability to provide guaranteed security and pursue Hungarian national interests on the global stage. Whilst there were doubts about the EU's ability, the strategy states that, in its own interests, Hungary should take on a more active role in shaping the CFSP and projecting its interests and objectives onto the EU level.

Taking stock of the strategies published in 2004 and 2007, it is clear that the conditions of its EU membership required Hungary to further harmonise its policies with the common and concerted EU foreign policy, and quite frankly, Hungary itself was interested in this process in an attempt to play a greater role in international affairs and use the CFSP as an amplifier of its foreign policy interests and objectives. The 2007 strategy emphasises that Hungary wishes to become not only a beneficiary or 'consumer' of everything that the EU has to offer but also a contributor to or 'producer' of EU foreign policy. That said, the two documents hint at the

possibility of Hungary's willingness to derail from EU common policy if the latter were unable to meet Hungary's needs.

6.1.4. Europeanisation on the Eve of the EU Presidency

Hungary held its rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union (hereinafter 'Presidency') in the first half 2011, a historic moment not only for Hungary but also for the EU. For Hungary, only the third country from Central and Eastern Europe to hold the Presidency (after Slovenia in the first half of 2008 and the Czech Republic in the first half of 2009), this was its first, long-awaited Presidency. For the EU, the Hungarian Presidency coincided with the launch of the European External Action Service (EEAS). Created by the Treaty of Lisbon and formally launched on 1 January 2011, the EEAS serves as the EU's diplomatic service under the leadership of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP). In conjunction with the foreign and defence ministries of EU Member States and other EU institutions, such as the Commission, Council and Parliament, the EEAS implements the Union's CFSP. As stipulated by Article 27 of the TEU, the establishment of the EEAS and the HR/VP replaced the Member State holding the rotating Presidency as the central linchpin for common foreign policy.

The transfer of responsibilities from the Presidency to the EEAS, a permanent body for the administration, conduct and representation of the CFSP, pushed Hungary into uncharted territory. Whilst Spain and Belgium, the first two countries in the Presidency trio (another novelty introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon) oversaw the preparatory phase of this transfer, Hungary assumed the Presidency simultaneously with the EEAS first becoming operational. As such, Hungary was the first Presidency to carry out a reduced number of tasks in CFSP matters and decide on the future mode of coordination between the Presidency and the EEAS on CFSP matters. In other words, Hungary was to play a defining role in the further development and Europeanisation of the EU's CFSP apparatus.

Despite this challenging and delicate task, the collaboration between the EEAS (and HR/VP) and the Hungarian MFA turned out to be a great example of not only a practical separation of responsibilities between the two parties but also a fruitful cooperation between the two on all levels of CFSP decision-making and implementation. For example, to ensure the same level of representation for the EU at international meetings and events, the HR/VP had in numerous instances delegated tasks to the Hungarian MFA and foreign minister. As such, during the Hungarian Presidency, the country's foreign minister on several occasions presented the EU's joint stance on the CFSP and other common policy matters (such as international development and trade relations) at these meetings and events. Although without official deputies, the HR/VP, through its trailblazing experience with Hungary, today entrusts the foreign minister of the Presidency with being its unofficial deputy.

In more concrete terms, Hungary, as the holder of the rotating Presidency and the unofficial deputy of the HR/VP, represented the EU in its external relations in a number of politically and militarily hostile locations, such as Tripoli, Minsk and Tehran. Through the conveyance and expression of the EU's joint interests and positions on issues pertaining to these regimes, Hungarian diplomatic missions and their personnel, serving as the outposts and field agents of the EEAS, embraced a much greater role and a higher profile and transmitted messages that were quite a bit more assertive than what they were previously acclimatised to, given their cautious foreign policy and limited diplomatic capacity. In these challenging milieus, where political and economic sanctions were applied as primary EU foreign policy

instruments and where local regimes were often hostile towards the EU (and the West in general), Hungarian diplomatic missions diligently acted upon the instructions from the HR/VP and continuously sent valuable feedback from the ground to the EEAS.

Closer to Hungary and the EU, the Hungarian Presidency witnessed the official conclusion of the accession negotiations with Croatia, which started in 2005, and the Hungarian government heralded this as its main achievement during its Presidency. The Western Balkans, an area with a large Hungarian diaspora and a war-torn past, have always been the cornerstone of Hungarian foreign policy. Hungary believes that their prospective membership of Western-led multilateral organisations, such as NATO and the EU, is the only way to ensure peace and stability in the region (Government of Hungary 2004; 2006; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011). As such, Hungary played a vital role in Croatia's accession negotiations, both before and during its Presidency. In fact, the Hungarian government invited the Committee of Permanent Representatives to meetings every day in order to ensure that all chapters would be closed (Hungarian Presidency 2011). Thanks to its efforts, the highly complex chapters of, *inter alia*, financial and budgetary provisions, judiciary and fundamental rights and competitions were all concluded during the Presidency. Orbán stated that Croatia may be used as a model for the entire Western Balkan region, and the Hungarian government repeatedly pointed out that EU membership could be a reality for the region and the region could be stabilised by none other than the EU (Hungarian Presidency 2011). Here, as exhibited, there is trust that the Orbán government placed in the EU's foreign policy apparatus and machinery, especially vis-à-vis the Western Balkan region. This trust might be surprising to some, given the general EU-sceptic stance of Orbán and his government, most notably in recent years.

At the end of 2011, Hungary published an official review of its Presidency—the single most challenging foreign policy endeavour since its EU accession in 2004. Despite the reduced role of the Presidency caused by the transfer of responsibilities to the EEAS, the Hungarian MFA played a crucial role in coordinating across ministries and other relevant bodies in Budapest, orchestrating Presidency-related programmes and activities and collaborating with the EU and its institutions before, during and after the Presidency. The successful completion of these complex operational and organisational responsibilities offered Hungary a great opportunity to reflect upon its now broadened foreign policy perspective. Given its multifaceted nature and purpose, this review has since served as a key anchor of Hungary's foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011). First, the review conducts an audit of the aims and objectives of the Presidency, which it viewed as having been highly successful (see also, Hungarian Presidency 2011). Second, the review reorientates and systematically redefines Hungarian foreign policy purposes and objectives in a fast-transforming global environment. Third, the review reassesses the dimensions and conditions of Hungarian foreign policy, and in doing so provides an explanatory framework for its intentions and motives.

This extended review was published under the title 'Hungary's Foreign Policy After the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011). The content of the review has less to do with the EU and the CFSP than the title may suggest; instead, it is more concerned with how the EU, along with its policies and institutions, fits into the overarching scheme of Hungarian foreign policy. The review (re)defines 'the subject of Hungary's Europe policy [as consisting] of the policies dealing with the institutions of the EU and the policies falling within their competence (EU policy), on the one hand, and of Hungary's bilateral relations with European countries (European bilateral policy), on the other hand' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011, 27). Hungary

recognises that the EU would remain weak on the world stage without a ‘well-functioning CFSP’, and to this end, the review has identified two main tasks for the future: first, Hungary, as a Member State, ‘must act in order to improve the functioning of the EEAS, and thereby to enhance the efficiency of the CFSP and the CSDP’, and second, ‘Hungary must do its utmost to strengthen the Hungarian presence in the EEAS and to improve the domestic conditions for [its] participation’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011, 33).

In addition to this, the review makes several important conceptual observations. It recognises and stresses the importance of the coexistence of the CFSP and national foreign policies, thus creating a dual-level foreign policy system unique to the EU and its Member States. When Hungary and the EU share similar values and interests, the CFSP can be seen as an add-on to or amplifier of existing Hungarian foreign policy in conveying these values and interests and translating them into concrete policy actions. The review acknowledges that by conducting its national foreign policy, Hungary (or any other Member States for that matter) contributes towards the CFSP on the global stage, and it is Hungary’s duty to ensure solidarity so as to not undermine the political consensus required for an effective CFSP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2011, 35). To synthesise, for Hungary, the CFSP and its national foreign policy are two separate apparatuses within the same system, and whilst an effective CFSP based on solidarity is important, the review leaves one important question unanswered: Which shall prevail when there is a conflict between Hungarian foreign policy and the CFSP?

6.2. De-Europeanisation of Hungarian Foreign Policy 2010–2020

The general overview presented in the previous section focused on a few emblematic signs of the Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy induced by the country’s accession to the EU in 2004 and its subsequent induction into the CFSP. As explained, Hungary’s active participation in the political debates, decision-making and policy implementation of the CFSP, as well as the country’s rotating Presidency in 2011, prompted and cemented the Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy in terms of procedures, structures and processes. That said, the level of Europeanisation of the country’s foreign policy preferences, interests, strategies and actions remains uneven, and some retained their national character. The extended review published after the Hungarian Presidency in 2011 provides an explanatory framework for this and delimits the boundaries between the CFSP and Hungarian foreign policy. It is, thus, against this backdrop that the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy between 2010 and 2020 is established and its extent measured. To this end, the rest of this section is organised as follows: The first subsection briefly outlines the programme and the actions of Fidesz–KDNP since coming into power in 2010 and so provides a contextual background for the examination of the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy. Then, mirroring the elements as well as the outcomes and indicators of de-Europeanisation as presented in section 3.5, the remaining three subsections examine, in turn, the discursive, substantive and organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy between 2010 and 2020.

6.2.1. Contextual Background

This section situates Hungary’s foreign policy within the broader political and institutional context of the 2010s. This period marked a notable shift in Hungary’s foreign policy orientation, whereby the Orbán government’s pursuit of ‘illiberal democracy’ created a space for more autonomous foreign policy decisions that often clashed with EU positions. Experts interviewed for this study described Hungary’s foreign policy since 2010 as lacking a coherent long-term strategy. As one former Hungarian diplomat observed, ‘Hungary has no foreign policy in the

traditional sense; it is reactive, *ad hoc*, and often dictated by short-term political gains rather than strategic calculations'.⁶² Interviewees highlighted that this shift was not necessarily the result of a grand geopolitical reorientation per se but rather of a series of pragmatic adjustments responding to domestic political imperatives. One scholar remarked: 'Hungary's foreign policy is not based on a grand strategy but more on a process of trial and error. Decisions are made reactively, driven by domestic political considerations rather than a long-term vision of where the country should be positioned internationally'.⁶³ To better understand this, it is thus important to examine the domestic political background against which Orbán rose to power in 2010 and against which the subsequent shift in foreign policy took place.

In the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections, the Fidesz–KDNP alliance obtained a landslide victory, securing 262 out of 386 seats in the Hungarian national assembly, Országgyűlés. This ended the six-year tenure of the socialists (MSZP), who lost 131 seats, and allowed the co-president of Fidesz—Orbán—to arrive into power. Orbán heralded this as a historical moment and stated that 'a new social contract evolved in the polling booths, when Hungarians showed an unprecedented agreement in overthrowing the old system and decided to build a new system of national cooperation' (Government of Hungary 2010a). Orbán and Fidesz–KDNP politicians argued that the socialists' 'vicious circle of lies' and their liberal policies had put Hungary onto a treacherous economic path. The 'vicious circle of lies' refers to former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány's infamous 'Őszöd speech', in which Gyurcsány not only used profane language but also confessed that he had lied to the general public during the previous parliamentary elections in order to secure re-election. The ensuing mass protests and the government's inability to contain the political fallout of the speech led to the collapse of the MSZP and more broadly speaking the Hungarian political left (Körösenyi et al. 2017).

Amidst this political milieu of low trust in the government and profound polarisation, since arriving into power in 2010, Fidesz has increasingly reiterated that the Hungarian nation is in danger due to domestic evil emanating from the leftist camp and international conspiracies since the regime change of 1989 (Johnson and Barnes 2015). To Fidesz, these two sources of evil are intertwined, because the MSZP presided over an EU- and IMF-mandated austerity programme in an attempt to shore up the Hungarian economy amidst the global financial crisis. As such, Hungary lost its economic autonomy and by extension its political sovereignty. Instead of political and economic liberalism, Fidesz has proposed a different route towards modernisation, one that is based on Christian values, strong sovereignty and the protection of the Hungarian diaspora (Johnson and Barnes 2015; Scheppele 2014). It is motivated by a high level of distrust of the EU and its institutions, such that Fidesz stirred Hungary in another foreign policy direction, thus paving the way for the de-Europeanisation processes and outcomes that the rest of this chapter will illustrate.

To this end, Fidesz–KDNP has ushered in a series of political and legal changes: for instance, it altered the electoral law such that Fidesz–KDNP's second victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections required only 45% of the votes to secure the two-thirds majority required to push for further political and legal changes, including constitutional amendments. Moreover, it required CSOs receiving €20,000 per year in foreign funds to register as foreign-funded organisations; required the State Audit Office to conduct annual financial audits of CSOs that report more than €55,000 in income; introduced the controversial media law that, amongst others, imposes high fines on media outlets whose contents are deemed 'politically

⁶² Interview with a former diplomat of the Hungarian MFA. Online (Google Meet), 06/06/2025.

⁶³ Interview with a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Vienna specialising in Hungary's foreign policy and populism. Online (Google Meet), 05/06/2025.

unbalanced'; criminalised individuals and groups that give assistance to asylum seekers; and allowed the government to rule by decree in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although some of these changes were reversed or altered due to public outcry and/or EU protests, the Fidesz–KDNP government has continuously attacked public institutions and the rule of law, increased its executive and legislative power and curtailed human rights.

It is interesting, or rather surprising, to see that the leader of a coalition that has enjoyed consecutive electoral successes at the polls would so consistently highlight the vulnerabilities of the Hungarian nation and the dire situation that the country finds itself in. The extreme right Jobbik Party adopted a similar position after the outbreak of the global financial crisis (Akçali and Korkut 2012). Admittedly, Eurosceptic language has been on the rise in many countries since 2008, but even in the case of the UK, which has now left the EU, the 'Leave' campaigners acknowledged certain advantages of the EU. The continuous flow of EU regional and structural funds has not slowed down Orbán and Fidesz–KDNP's Eurosceptic language, and to date, Hungary is the only country who has presented a geopolitical reorientation, an alternative to EU integration and thus an articulated and elaborated basis for the circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes.

To be sure, however, Fidesz–KDNP's rejection of political and economic liberalism is not full and outright. In terms of the economy, Fidesz–KDNP's 'economic nationalism' has retained some quintessential liberal policies, especially in the realms of trade and tax; the government does, however, champion the increase of state ownership of the economy (Johnson and Barnes 2015). Orbán wants neither a minimalist neoliberal state nor a conventional welfare state; instead, Orbán wants to build a unique Hungarian state that combines neoliberal tax and social policies, paternalist policies on utilities and people's livelihoods and a larger role for the state in economic affairs (Voszka 2018). In a similar vein, in terms of politics, Hungary does not want to leave the EU, like the UK has; instead, it wishes to reform the EU from within. In a Fidesz rally ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections, Orbán stated that 'after communist bureaucracy [...] we don't want new dictates this time from Brussels [...] we don't want to leave the EU at all [...] we want to keep our sovereignty and we don't want to find ourselves in a united states of Europe, instead of integration' (Reuters 2021).

Fidesz–KDNP's Eurosceptic stance, as well as its newly implemented laws and structural changes, have pitted Hungary against the EU. The first open confrontation between the EU and Hungary, though, was instigated by the new media law put forth by the Fidesz–KDNP government just as Hungary assumed its EU Presidency. To the EU, the new media law, which gave the government extensive powers in domestic media, was a turn towards communist-era conservative authoritarianism, and thus it was heavily criticised. When Orbán presented his Presidency programme in the EP, Green Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) taped their mouths shut in protest whilst holding placards reading 'censored' (Schult 2011). In response, Orbán fiercely defended the media law and emphasised that it was a matter of domestic affairs and hence not to be intertwined with the Presidency. Amidst the Hungarian Presidency, Orbán continued to defend his government's policies from domestic and international critics in his speech on the occasion of Hungarian National Day, which commemorates the anniversary of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution against the Austrian Empire. Referring to the liberal-left camp as 'the ones that organised from home to discredit the Hungarians', Orbán reiterated that his party 'stands by the Hungarians. It showed the door to IMF, introduced taxes on banks, imposed a crisis tax, and reclaimed the pension system from the hands of the stock-market sharks' (Government of Hungary 2011b).

To further clarify, Orbán held his first premiership between 1998 and 2002. As established by the previous section, this was prior to Hungary's accession to the EU, and thus, the country was experiencing a great level of Europeanisation (or, more broadly speaking, Westernisation). In fact, it was during Orbán's first premiership that Hungary joined NATO, alongside Poland and Czechia, and Hungary's EU accession negotiations were terminated close to Orbán's first premiership. Instead, this chapter, and by extension this thesis, focuses only on Orbán's premiership since 2010, during which the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy that will be measured here was established. Having briefly outlined the programme of Fidesz–KDNP since it came into power in 2010, the following three subsections provide a more detailed examination of the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy between 2010 and 2020.

6.2.2. Discursive De-Europeanisation

As described and explained in Table 4 in section 3.5, the discursive de-Europeanisation of a Member State's foreign policy is understood to entail elements of the following: Member States recognise China's economic and/or political model as successful or even superior to that of their own or that of the EU, Member States refer to China as a legitimate alternative model of governance and Member States increasingly provide declaratory support for Chinese positions on key issues. With these outcomes and indicators in mind, this subsection studies the discursive de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy within the analytical timeframe of this thesis, between 2010 and 2020.

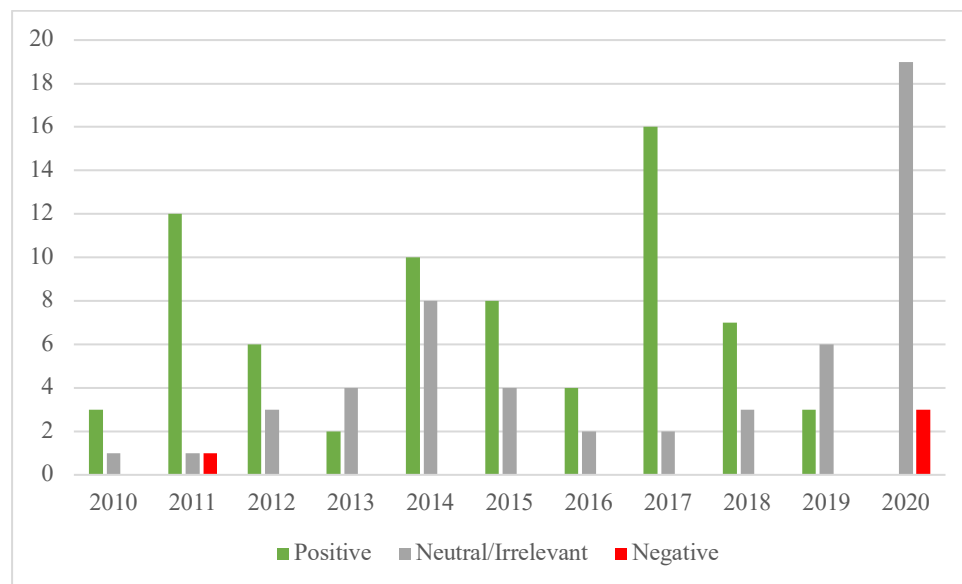
In order to trace and understand the discursive de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy, the empirical evidence of this subsection is gathered from PM's Viktor Orbán's speeches, interviews and publications from between 2010 and 2020, all of which are readily available on governmental websites in Hungarian. The decision to solely focus on the PM's speeches, interviews and publications is justified by the ever-changing governance structures in Hungary since Orbán's arrival into power in 2010, which has resulted in the centralisation of the PM's and PMO's power, a point further elaborated in subsection 6.2.4 on the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Hungary. Researchers have referred to these changes as the wider 'presidentialisation' of power in Hungary (Tóth 2017; Poguntke and Webb 2005). In other words, the words and discourse of Orbán carry enough weight that the examination and analysis of this empirical evidence can yield sound observations and arguments. Another, more practical consideration is that analysing the speeches, interviews and publications of all Hungarian foreign policy elites (e.g., the foreign minister, deputy ministers and state/parliamentary secretaries) would be a very time-consuming exercise that is beyond the scope of this thesis, which deals with multiple aspects of foreign policy de-Europeanisation. Moreover, given the 'presidentialisation' of power in Hungary, the political positions expressed by the PM often serve as an important reference for other foreign policy actors.

The operationalisation of this exercise is as follows: First, all speeches, interviews and publications from during the analytical timeframe are tallied. Second, the keyword *kína* (Hungarian for 'China') is searched for to single out ones that contain this word (also meaning 'Chinese'). Third, those in which a mention is detected are thoroughly translated by using online translation and examined, and the mention is then classified as 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral/irrelevant'. To be classified as 'positive', the mention of China is in line with the outcomes and indicators of discursive de-Europeanisation as described in Table 4 of section

3.5 and as explained earlier. To be classified as ‘negative’, the mention of China is not in line with the aforementioned outcomes and indicators. In other words, a negative mention of China is critical of China, whether or not the criticism is in line with the EU’s criticism of China. To be classified as ‘neutral/irrelevant’, the mention of China constitutes simply an example given in subjects and areas impertinent to this research, a use of Chinese proverbs or sayings (which Orbán is known for), or, more recently, a reference to China’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Then, once the classification is completed, the data are coded, graphed and analysed in their entirety. That said, individual attention is given to speeches, interviews and publications that are worthy of in-depth analysis.

Between 2010 and 2020, Prime Minister Orbán produced 562 speeches, interviews and publications, 128 of which contain a mention of or reference to China, constituting nearly a quarter of the total. This sheer proportion indicates the strategic importance that Orbán and Hungary accord to their relations with China. Referring to Figure 12 below, some general trends can be fleshed out and interesting observations made.

Figure 12. PM Orbán’s speeches, interviews and publications with mentions of China.



In the 128 speeches, interviews and publications, there were 71 positive, 53 neutral/irrelevant and 4 negative mentions. Mentions started to peak in 2011, with a total of 14, coinciding with Orbán’s geopolitical and geoeconomic reorientation *keleti nyitás* and the subsequent intensification of bilateral contacts, trade and overall relations. They also peaked in 2014 and again in 2017 at 18, though the latter contained more positive responses. This trend can be explained by China’s introduction and implementation of the ‘17+1’ framework as well as the further intensification of bilateral relations. However, after the peak in 2017, mentions fell during the two subsequent years. In 2020, that is, the last year of the analytical timeframe of this thesis, 0 positive but 3 negative mentions were recorded, whilst the remaining 19 neutral/irrelevant responses were related to the Covid-19 pandemic and China’s handling thereof.

Having examined and analysed some general trends between 2010 and 2020, some individual speeches, interviews and publications with mentions of and references to China warrant specific attention. In a speech given on the occasion of the China–Central and Eastern European Countries Economic and Trade Forum held in Budapest in June 2011, Orbán praised

China's 'loyalty to a few principles, which we here in the West have turned our backs on in recent times' (Government of Hungary 2011f). Amongst the 'principles' were the moderation of consumption, dignity of work and work ethic and a rejection of debt, which Orbán likened to 'sin'. Furthermore, Orbán drew similarities between the two countries' vision for the post-crisis world: 'China and Hungary, we understand the new world; we understand its new rules and simple truths. Both our countries have firmly committed themselves to a value creating, work based economy. Work and the respect for value creation constitute our common foundations' (Government of Hungary 2011f). This statement clearly recognises the validity and success of the Chinese economic model, a model that is equal to if not better than the Hungarian and EU models, and in doing so, Orbán rejects the EU model as the best model for Hungary to emulate. Elsewhere, Orbán continued to promote his vision for a multipolar world and highlight the strategic importance of Central and Eastern Europe, such as in his speech given at the London School of Economics (Government of Hungary 2011j).

Between December 2010 and March 2015, on 10 separate occasions, Orbán made the same reference to China: He highlighted that in Hungary, only 55% of people of working age are employed, which is below the 65% EU average, and yet this figure is 75% in the US and 85% in China. Therefore, China is far more economically competitive than Hungary, the EU and the West in general, and in order for Hungary to be economically competitive, this figure must be increased in the near future (Government of Hungary 2010c; 2011i; 2011c; 2011d; 2011e; 2012a; 2012b; 2014a; 2015). The juxtaposition of employment rates of the EU and China is another way of presenting China's economic model as superior to that of the EU. More tellingly, this statement was made on a wide variety of occasions, including in a national TV interview (i.e., HírTV's Playoff programme), during the inauguration of the House of Europe, at meetings with EU officials, at gala dinners and during events co-hosted with governments or organisations of other Member States. In other words, Orbán is not shy about pointing fingers at Hungary and the EU's lack of economic competitiveness and about praising China's economic prowess and competitiveness in front of different audiences.

Interestingly enough, the first negative mention of China was recorded in 2011, in a speech given by Orbán during the inaugural meeting of the National Economic and Social Council in Budapest on 11 October 2011, shortly after Hungary held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union between January and June 2011 (Government of Hungary 2011h). In this speech, Orbán gave an overview of European economies, highlighted the ills therein and explained that Hungary did its utmost during its Presidency but that its efforts alone would not be able to remedy these ills. Orbán further emphasised the overall precarious state of the global economy, stating that China is slowing down and the US is struggling. Despite this negative reference, this speech was by no means an attack on China. On the contrary, Orbán reiterated the need to steer the Hungarian economy into safe waters, a statement that could later be corroborated by the government's reorientation under the auspices of *keleti nyitás* in the years to come.

For Orbán, Hungary's national interests, be they political or economic, were his government's top priorities. Orbán reaffirmed that 'just as in 1848, Hungarians did not let anyone to dictate from Vienna, and just as in 1956 and 1990, Hungarians did not let anyone to dictate from Moscow, today, Fidesz will not let anyone to dictate from Brussels or anywhere else' (Government of Hungary 2011b). In a speech at the EP to mark the end of the Hungarian Presidency, Orbán once again emphasised that neither Brussels nor any other European government is in a position to tell Hungarians what to do and what not to do, and that the more this is assured, the more support he would garner for the European project at home

(Government of Hungary 2011g). With this series of statements, Orbán essentially presented himself as the national champion of Hungarian foreign policy discourse and the protector of the country's national interests. These statements further answer the question left by the review conducted by the Hungarian MFA after the country's EU Presidency (2011): Essentially, when the CFSP conflicts with Hungarian foreign policy, the latter triumphs, and if Brussels dictates otherwise, Orbán would stir the country further away from the EU and its institutions and potentially oppose the European project.

As experts interviewed noted, there is one fundamental reason, rooted in Hungarian domestic politics, that explains this systematic use of Eurosceptic rhetoric and anti-Brussels narratives. According to a senior academic specialised in China–Hungary relations, ‘The government’s language painted the EU as an external actor imposing alien values, which served to legitimise its own domestic agenda’.⁶⁴ Another interviewee underscored the instrumental nature of such rhetoric, stating: ‘These attacks on Brussels were less about foreign policy in the traditional sense and more about energising the domestic political base. The government needed an external “enemy” to consolidate its support, and the EU was the easiest target for this narrative’.⁶⁵ Painting Brussels in such a negative light was the opposite to Orbán and his government’s stance vis-à-vis China, one characterised by a positive undertone.

Such speeches related to China were also given at the annual Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp. For context, this camp is a large-scale academic workshop and Hungarian-Romanian cultural exchange platform that is held annually in Băile Tuşnad, Romania, where a large diaspora of Hungarians resides, some of whom are able to vote in Hungarian elections due to their dual citizenship. However, since coming into power in 2010, Orbán has turned this event into a platform that projects Fidesz’s (often controversial) policies, which led their Romanian counterparts to shy away from this event for fear of repercussions. After winning the 2014 parliamentary elections, in a speech given on the occasion of the 25th of the camp, Orbán said that in order to deliver Hungary from its dangers, ‘anything can happen’, and ‘not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful’, referring to Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey as the ‘stars’ in international economic performance (Government of Hungary 2014b). Orbán had the political wherewithal to accomplish this given his two-thirds parliamentary majority, tight grip on the judiciary and the intertwining of the executive and the legislative domains.

This statement was substantial and impactful, in that it provided an articulated basis for the eventual shift in Hungary’s foreign policy direction, and it encompassed all three elements of de-Europeanisation as described in section 3.2.2: For a start, delivering Hungary from its dangers entails the conscious decoupling from the EU and its institutions. In other words, Orbán points to a redefinition of the country’s previously Europeanised policy agenda, positions and priorities in narrow, national terms, thus paving the way for counter-socialisation and counter-Brusselisation through the government’s subsequent actions. Second, referring to Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey as ‘stars’ in international economic performance constitutes open resistance to, if not a total repudiation of, EU norms, values and ‘ways of doing things’ as well as the EU’s overall model. It is common knowledge that these countries do not often see eye-to-eye with the EU on issues related to democracy, human rights and the

⁶⁴ Interview with a senior expert in China–Hungary relations and founder of a China-focused research institute. Online (Google Meet), 30/06/2025.

⁶⁵ Interview with a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Vienna specialising in Hungary’s foreign policy and populism. Online (Google Meet), 05/06/2025.

rule of law, and they often run into conflict with the EU's value-based, normative foreign policy. Last, any attempts to foster warmer and closer relations with these countries will entail Hungary's disbandment of, disengagement from and circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes. China, as the targeted third country of this research, has various mechanisms and tools at its disposal to engage with and contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Hungary's foreign policy. It is already evident that China's mere existence provides an alternative model of governance for Hungarian political elites; an alternative to EU-backed liberal governance and European cooperation on foreign policy and/or economic affairs.

Whilst praising the success of China's economic and political model, Orbán was not shy about highlighting and criticising the EU's shortcomings. Based on Orbán's speeches, interviews and publications from 2010 to 2020, the criticisms that he levelled against the EU can be divided into three general categories: the EU as an illegitimate institution that failed to maintain European identity and protect the European community; the EU as a bloated bureaucratic Leviathan that has become an ineffective and ungovernable body; and the EU as an neo-imperialistic actor that has sought to erode the sovereignty, independence and nationalism of its Member States (see for example, Sata 2023; Coman and Leconte 2019; Sadecki 2022; Mendelski 2019). In a 2017 speech before the EP, Orbán claimed that 'when we criticise the European Union, it is because we want to correct [its] mistake and reform the European Union. It is in our opinion that this is the only way for people to regain confidence in European institutions' (Government of Hungary 2017b). In a contribution to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in September 2016, Orbán stated that 'the essence of Hungarian thinking is simple: the European Union is rich but weak. This is the worst possible combination of qualities' (Bayer 2016). In a speech given on 7 March 2017 during the swearing-in ceremony of new 'border hunters', Orbán said, 'We cannot rely on Brussels and the European Union; on the contrary, they make our work harder' (Government of Hungary 2017a). To Orbán, it is these shortcomings that prompted his government to shift towards China, whom he sees as a success story.

Despite Orbán's rather positive discourse vis-à-vis China and its success, the question now is whether the EU has shifted its discourse in a similar, namely positive, direction. As explained earlier, given the constantly changing nature of both EU and national foreign policies, if Hungary and the EU were moving in the same direction, be it positive or negative, Orbán's discourse would not be considered de-Europeanisation, in fact anything but. On the contrary, if they were diverging, then Orbán's words would be considered discursive de-Europeanisation. Looking closer, the EU's discursive stance vis-à-vis China did change throughout the analytical timeframe of this thesis. The Treaty of Lisbon and the subsequent establishment of the EEAS and the role of the HR/VP led to a more strategic effort to coordinate the EU's relations with China. This culminated in the 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council' by the HR/VP and the European Commission on the elements of a new strategy on China (European Commission 2016). This paper aims to put the EU's own interests forward, with mutual respect for and reciprocity of rules and key demands (e.g., the 'One China' and 'One Country, Two Systems' policies). The paper expresses the EU's concern about China's economic slowdown but remains hopeful and optimistic about China–EU cooperation in various policy areas and domains. Overall, the discursive approach is cautiously optimistic.

This positivity did not last long. In 2018, in a speech at the plenary session of the EP on the state of EU–China relations, HR/VP Mogherini's words became more restrained, highlighting that both parties do not see eye-to-eye on many issues, all whilst acknowledging the fruitful cooperation between the two on various issues and policy fronts. A series of issues

and events, such as the Hong Kong security law and Xinjiang Uyghur re-education camps, in the late 2010s pitted the two parties against one another and led to the souring of bilateral relations. This ultimately culminated in the EU–China Strategic Outlook of 2019, where the EU labelled China an ‘economic competitor’ and a ‘systemic rival’ (European Commission 2019), thus reflecting a drastic change in its balance of assumptions about its relations with China. The Covid-19 pandemic tilted the balance even further, with many European policymakers and informed observers pointing to China’s attempts to exploit the political and economic vulnerabilities of Europe during a pandemic.

Therefore, comparing the directions of Orbán’s and the EU’s discourse on China, it is clear these have diverged quite significantly, with each heading the opposite way. Using the EU’s discourse as a *référentiel*, Orbán’s emphasis on national sovereignty and interests, his praise of China’s success and his criticism of multilateral governance and trans-governmental networks, such as the EU, and the core liberal values at the very heart of Europeanised governance constitute the discursive de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy. There is a clear link between Hungary’s discursive support for China as a successful economic and political model both at home and abroad and its emphasis on, or championing of, an illiberal democracy that disassociated the country from the harmful/ineffective elements of the EU and its system. Therefore, the positive mentions of and references to China also serve as an international justification of Hungary’s domestic reform agenda and foreign policy reorientation under the auspices of *keleti nyitás*, which is the main subject of the next subsection dedicated to the substantive de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy.

That being said, it is interesting to observe three negative responses in 2020. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic dominated most of the mentions recorded in 2020, the lack of a single positive mention is striking, and this is exacerbated by three negative references. In a press statement given at the Bled Economic Forum, a speech given at the opening of a consultancy and an interview given on Kossuth Radio’s ‘Good Morning, Hungary’ programme, Orbán criticised the lack of more substantial Sino-Hungarian economic cooperation, stating that many promised investment projects failed to materialise and that Hungary should be less reliant on Chinese investment (Government of Hungary 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). Some examples of said failed investment projects will be described later in this chapter. This is the first time Orbán was so verbal about his dissatisfaction with Sino-Hungarian relations. However, determining whether these statements led to a shift in Hungarian foreign policy vis-à-vis China falls outside the analytical timeframe of this thesis.

6.2.3. Substantive De-Europeanisation

As described and explained in Table 4 in section 3.5, substantive de-Europeanisation of a Member State’s foreign policy that relates to external drivers is understood as the following: Member States provide support for Chinese interests and positions through substantive foreign policy actions, even at the expense of the cohesion and effectiveness of EU foreign policy, and Member States’ discursive rejection of EU common foreign policy norms, routines, procedures and ‘ways of doing things’ translates into resistance to ‘procedural norms’ and ‘fundamental norms’. With these outcomes and indicators in mind, this subsection studies the substantive de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy within the analytical timeframe of this thesis, between 2010 and 2020.

The main foreign policy initiative of the Orbán government related to China has become known as *keleti nyitás*, or ‘Eastern Opening’, which advocates a major geopolitical and

gloeconomic shift. As such, the ‘Eastern Opening’ initiative will also form the main empirical basis for the analysis of substantive foreign policy actions. The ‘Eastern Opening’ must be contextualised in Hungary’s partial decoupling from the EU, or, in the words of Müller et al. (2021, 527), Hungary’s disbandment of, disengagement from and circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes. This partial decoupling commenced soon after Orbán arrived in power and began building a new system to replace the ‘turbulent decades’ of liberal democracy (Bozóki 2011). To this end, Orbán replaced all important positions, including those in the ‘independent’ offices, such as the Office of the President and the Constitutional Court, with servile, pro-Orbán Fidesz politicians as part of an effort to facilitate the redefinition of Hungary’s previously Europeanised policy agenda, positions and priorities. Placing strong emphasis on national interests and sovereignty in foreign policy, this led to a redefinition of important foreign policy orientations in narrow, national terms as well as initiatives that promoted counter-socialisation and counter-Brusselisation within Hungary’s foreign policy institutions. These changes raised concerns both at home and abroad that Hungary was shifting away from the ideals of liberal democracy and moving towards illiberal authoritarianism (Sedelmeier 2014; 2017).

Putting Hungary’s interests first, Orbán reaffirmed that ‘just as in 1848, Hungarians did not let anyone to dictate from Vienna, and just as in 1956 and 1990, Hungarians did not let anyone to dictate from Moscow, today, Fidesz will not let anyone to dictate from Brussels or anywhere else’ (Government of Hungary 2011b). In the speech at the EP to mark the end of the Hungarian Presidency, Orbán once again emphasised that neither Brussels nor any other European government was in a position to tell Hungarians what to do and what not to do, and that the more this is assured, the more support he would garner for the European project at home (Government of Hungary 2011g). With this series of statements, Orbán essentially presented himself as the national champion of Hungarian foreign policy discourse and the protector of Hungary’s national interests. These statements further answer the question left by the review conducted by the Hungarian MFA after the country’s EU Presidency (2011): Essentially, when the CFSP conflicts with Hungarian foreign policy, the latter triumphs; and if Brussels dictates otherwise, Orbán would stir the country further away from the EU and its institutions and potentially oppose the European project.

Orbán’s insistence on his policies that place Hungarian interests first and his growing friction with EU institutions about Hungary’s controversial domestic reforms translated into a geopolitical and glloeconomic reorientation meant to alleviate the pressure emanating from the EU (and the West in general) about his illiberal, authoritarian rule. This reorientation ultimately culminated in an alternative policy path known as the *keleti nyitás*, or ‘Eastern Opening’. In a speech given for the ninth Hungarian Permanent Conference (Magyar Állandó Értekezlet, or MÁÉRT), a body that gathers ethnic Hungarian diasporas from neighbouring countries, Orbán first gave the rationale behind the ‘Eastern Opening’: Hungary no doubt belongs to the Western world, but ‘from now on, this fact appears in a different context. To put it in a simplified or caricatured way, we are sailing under the Western flag, but in the world economy an eastern wind blows. And the sailor who does not take into consideration according to which wind to rotate the sails will likely to doom himself and his cargo’ (Government of Hungary 2010b). In other words, Hungary’s circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes, in the form of the *keleti nyitás*, was first and foremost motivated by its economic interests rather than the country’s lack of compatibility, or disagreement, with the EU’s value-based policies.

At this point, it is difficult to conduct a definite scientific analysis of the full implications of Fidesz–KDNP’s policy of ‘Eastern Opening’ in terms of substantive foreign

policy action, because, despite the rhetoric of explanation and elaboration, the policy itself has yet to be formulated properly and drafted in governmental documents. It is, thus, difficult to clearly identify the intended objectives and then compare them with the ultimate results achieved. Therefore, researchers must rely on governmental communication and speeches to get a sense of the aims of this policy reorientation. In a meeting with members of the Committee on Foreign Relations held in November 2010, then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Zsolt Németh explained that his government's shift towards Asia was due to the continent's growing economic significance and that 'the future of the world economy and politics are increasingly inclined to Asia, therefore both Hungary and the European Union need to consider the deepening relations with this region as their main interest' (HVG 2010). In 2011, the Ministry of National Economy in its 'Hungarian Growth Plan' provided some articulated goals:

Through the Eastern trade development, Hungarian companies may enjoy higher profits, thanks to the growing import needs of these dynamically developing economies (China, India, Russia, and South Korea). In the case of Asia, the Hungarian export is expected to grow twice as fast in the region compared to the previous average, and to reach a share of 10 percent from its current 6 percent by 2015. (Ministry of National Economy 2011)

As demonstrated, the motives behind the 'Eastern Opening' are mainly economic in nature, and Orbán wishes to be the opportunistic 'sailor' who will lead his country in the right direction.

Ideologically speaking, the conservative, pro-Fidesz proponents of the 'Eastern Opening' commonly stress the perceived economic ills of the EU, including its political and regulatory structure, the declining confidence in the euro, the 'colonisation of the European periphery' by the metropolitan centre and the declining level of education, research, development and innovation (Szretykó 2013). However, liberal-left critics of the policy raise the concern that a geopolitical and geoeconomic reorientation towards the 'East' would open the doors for 'Eastern' styles of political systems and leadership, and that the collaboration with 'Eastern' political and economic elites would further alienate Hungary from its Western allies and partners and damage the already-fraught relationship between Hungary and the EU (Tölgyessy 2012; Sárközy 2013).

In response, the Fidesz–KDNP government has argued that the 'Eastern Opening' ensures new raw materials, opportunities and markets for Hungarian firms. Then State Secretary for Foreign and Economic Affairs Péter Szijjártó explained that the government's 'Eastern Opening' policy rests on four pillars, which correspond to four geographical regions: first, building closer links to the Far East, especially China, given the country's economic clout in the world economy and Hungary's advantageous position, as it has the largest Chinese diaspora in Central and Eastern Europe; second, strengthening ties with the Caucasus and Central Asia, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, as their products and supply chains fit well with the Hungarian market; third, becoming more visible in the Arab world, with a focus on the region's energy and energy products; and fourth, seeking further cooperation with the Western Balkans (Government of Hungary 2013; Szretykó 2013; Kálan 2014). In short, Hungary's foreign policy repositioning is more economically driven and less politically motivated.

Apart from the perceived economic benefits associated with the 'Eastern Opening', this geopolitical and geoeconomic reorientation is well-grounded in Hungarian history—in

(Neo-)Turanism. This geographical and ethno-cultural concept traces its origins to the Middle Ages, during which both Western and Eastern (i.e., Turkish, Byzantine, Arab and Persian) sources emphasise the Asiatic origins of the Hungarian people (Akçalı and Korkut 2012, 602). Around the Enlightenment, the concept of Turanism first came into being and began to penetrate Hungarian political and intellectual elites as a counterweight to the Western depictions of Hungarian historiography and the rising influence of pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism. Turanists believe that the Hungarian people need to embrace their cultural, political and economic affinities with Eastern peoples, including the Turks of Turkey, the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, the aboriginal peoples of Siberia, Tatars, Mongols and even Manchus, Koreans and Japanese (Akçalı and Korkut 2012). According to Vámbéry, one of the earlier supporters of Turanism and the founder for the first Turkology department in Europe, China also falls within the Turanist outlook, because China has always been home to many Turkic, Hunnic and Mongolic peoples (Vámbéry 1895).

The political and socio-economic situation in both Hungary and the EU after 2008 provided a great breeding ground for the revitalisation of Turanism, which has become better known as Neo-Turanism. Neo-Turanism allows disorientated, disaffected people to mythologise their historical past (Ptaszyńska et al. 2010) and see the Western heritage and affinities of Hungary as ‘degenerate and diabolical’ (Tamás 2009). Proponents of Neo-Turanism offer quick answers and solutions to what are, in their eyes, the socio-economic ills instigated by the global financial crisis, including unemployment, poverty, cultural decadence, economic stagnation and immigration. The modern political situation in Hungary in which Fidesz has found itself since coming into power in 2010 has many similarities with the historical political situation in Hungary that first gave birth to Turanism. As such, the Fidesz–KDNP government has set forth similar policies, such as non-allied politics, economic unorthodoxy and hostility towards political and financial elites. Doing this has enabled Orbán to depict Western liberals and capitalists, including those of the EU, as the protagonists that threw Hungary into political and economic disarray in the early 2000s. Therefore, the ‘Eastern Opening’, a policy reorientation based on Hungary’s historical traditions and national sovereignty, aims to rectify the unbalanced relations between Hungary and the West and steer the country towards the East.

After securing power in May 2010, the centre-right Fidesz–KDNP government under the leadership of Orbán continued the pro-China policies of the previous leftist governments and sought to greatly enhance Sino-Hungarian bilateral relations. In August 2010, Deputy PM Zsolt Semjén and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly János Latorcai met Vice Premier Hui Liangyu and National People’s Congress Vice Chairman Lu Yongxiang in Beijing to discuss the enhancement of bilateral relations and then attended the sixth Northeast Asia Investment and Trade Expo in Changchun (China.org 2012). Two months later, in October, Orbán visited China, marking his first visit in his capacity as PM, and attended the closing ceremony of the World Expo in Shanghai, where the Hungarian pavilion received a silver medal of excellence. This was rather farcical because as the leader of the opposition, Orbán had fiercely criticised the MSZP government’s investment in this project. Orbán’s visit to Shanghai facilitated meetings at the highest level and also enabled him to experience the economic success of China firsthand. In fact, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao personally accompanied Orbán on his visits to the factories of Huawei and ZTE, which later became some of the earlier Chinese companies that entered the Hungarian market. These high-level visits were further supplemented by ministerial-level visits, including by Minister of National Development Tamás Fellegi in December 2010, and visits by Hungarian businessmen and entrepreneurs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2021).

In other words, upon securing power, Orbán immediately opened his country's doors to more political and economic cooperation with China. By this time, China had been speaking the 'language' of political and/or economic influence for nearly a decade. This synchronicity opened the door for the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy actions. In September 2010, Orbán refused to meet with the Dalai Lama, a rather surprising move considering Orbán's warm relations with the Dalai Lama in the past. His refusal can be seen as a further symbolic gesture of his government's pro-China policy. As said before, any shifts towards China entail shifts away from the EU. In this case, Orbán's refusal to meet with the Dalai Lama and, by extension, to support the latter's political agenda points at his government's resistance to EU foundational norms that prize human rights, the rule of law and democracy. For China, Orbán's refusal signalled the success of its normative influence, which provided fuel for further engagement on this front. Towards the end of his first year in power, Orbán had strengthened Sino-Hungarian relations so greatly that Hungarian media claimed that Hungary, after Greece and Portugal, was China's third bridgehead in Europe (24.hu 2010).

Substantive de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy intensified during the third Orbán government (2014–2018). In outright resistance to EU procedural and foundational norms, Hungary was not shy about vetoing EU joint statements or resolutions that could be seen as harmful to its new partners under the 'Eastern Opening' policy, especially China. For instance, when the EU issued a joint statement in July 2016 on China's legal defeat in the South China Sea dispute, Hungary (and Greece) chose not to condemn China,⁶⁶ whilst the UK, France and Germany wanted to make clearer references to Beijing. During and after the European migrant crisis, Hungary remained critical of and defiant towards EU policies. And more recently, Hungary, together with Poland, threatened to veto the seven-year EU budget over the inclusion of rule-of-law stipulations. To be clear, however, despite Orbán's estrangement from and confrontation with the EU, he does not wish to lead the country out of the Union (this was recently reaffirmed in a Fidesz rally (Reuters 2021)), simply because Hungary is a net beneficiary of EU development funds and the CFSP acts in some respects as an amplifier of Hungarian foreign policy. Furthermore, as one think-tank director explained: 'Hungary's alignment with Chinese positions in multilateral forums is tactical rather than ideological. It seeks economic dividends and political leverage rather than sharing Beijing's worldview'.⁶⁷ Therefore, Orbán's actions and behaviours should be understood as political manoeuvres and machinations.

6.2.4. Organisational/Institutional De-Europeanisation

As described and explained in Table 4 of section 3.5, organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of a Member State's foreign policy is understood as the following: Member States redefine organisational priorities and structures for cooperation with China; Member States dedicate more foreign policy resources and personnel to the advancement of their relations with China; and Member States engage in institutionalised dialogue with China (including with think tanks and academic institutions), which provides counter-socialisation and counter-Brusselisation. With these outcomes and indicators in mind, this subsection studies the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy in the analytical timeframe of this thesis, from 2010 to 2020.

⁶⁶ Croatia also chose not to condemn China, but this was mainly due to its own dispute with Slovenia over the Piran Bay rather than not wanting to offend China (Gotev 2016).

⁶⁷ Interview with a think-tank director and academic expert on China–Central Europe relations. Online (Google Meet), 21/06/2025.

Studying populist radical right (PRR) parties' impact on the de-Europeanisation of national foreign policy, Müller and Gazsi (2023) argue that their impact on the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of a Member State depends primarily on two factors: foreign policy preferences and the action capacity of the PRR party in question. To explain, foreign policy preferences in this context can range from a hard commitment to repositioning the country's foreign policy in line with alternative, at times opposing, priorities, norms and values to a pragmatic choice for the relative continuity of foreign policy from previously Europeanised gains. Action capacity refers to the amount of political, institutional and legal constraints the PRR party in question may face whilst implementing its set of foreign policy preferences.

Whilst these two factors set forth by Müller and Gazsi (2023) offer a valuable starting point, this subsection, building and extending upon their framework, emphasises the roles of external actors in shaping national foreign policy preferences. As this subsection shall demonstrate, foreign policy preferences are not formed in isolation, nor are they exclusively the product of domestic ideology or political pragmatism. They are rather subject to ongoing influence by external actors, particularly ones—such as China—that can provide economic incentives, alternative modes of governance and/or elite-level engagement. In this light, the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy must also be understood as a product of both political dynamics emanating from the domestic sphere and mediated shifts coming from the outside. Given that Fidesz and its junior coalition partner KDNP are widely recognised as PRR parties, this subsection adopts Müller and Gazsi's two-factor framework but complements it with an external dimension that foregrounds China's role as an external actor in shaping Hungary's evolving foreign policy.

After returning to power in 2010, Orbán introduced a new civil service law after just one month in office, which allowed for the sacking of civil servants without justification. Through this law, Orbán immediately replaced non-partisan bureaucrats with party loyalists (J.-W. Müller 2016, 44). Initially, Orbán did staff the MFA with seasoned diplomats, notably by reappointing János Martonyi, who had previously served as foreign minister during Orbán's first premiership (1998–2002). Martonyi, a multilingual lawyer and seasoned diplomat best known for his technocratic expertise and strong penchant for the EU (and NATO), played an important role in the accession negotiations of Hungary and the initial Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy. In the second Orbán cabinet (2010–2014), Martonyi managed, for the most part, to pursue a value-based foreign policy, despite the government's gradual estrangement from the EU and its introduction of the 'Eastern Opening'. In short, in conjunction with the empirical evidence given previously, during its first term in power, Fidesz under the leadership of Orbán was primarily focused on domestic politics and the dismantling of checks and balances in the country's constitutional framework; little to no attention was given to the country's foreign policy and its institutional framework. That said, as will be demonstrated later, this period marked the consolidation of domestic power, which paved the way for the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy during Fidesz's next term in power.

Orbán's landslide victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections further enabled him to decouple from the EU, to de-Europeanise the country's foreign policy and to pursue his pro-China policies. In Hungary, one of the hallmarks of this period was the intense personalisation and politicisation of diplomacy, though this trend arguably started prior to 2014. This enabled Orbán to execute an even more intensive and extensive restructuring of the country's foreign

policy apparatus. For a start, Orbán decided to rename the MFA the MFAT, thus signalling the important role that trade relations and the ‘Eastern Opening’ would play in the years to come. This name change was followed by the appearance of 200 or so new faces in the ministry, with corresponding numbers either being dismissed or relocated to other ministries (Balogh 2014a). It was just now becoming apparent how dissatisfied Orbán must have been with Martonyi, despite the latter’s loyalty and his sweeping reforms of the ministry in 2010. For three months, former Deputy PM Tibor Navracsics filled the position of foreign minister until the young, agile Péter Szijjártó, Orbán’s true favourite, permanently replaced Martonyi. Szijjártó had previously worked at the PMO as the spokesperson for Orbán and had simultaneously developed an extensive trade portfolio independent of the governmental ministries, namely the MFA, Ministry of National Economy and Ministry of National Development. Following Martonyi’s dismissal and Navracsics’s short stint, Szijjártó transferred his entire trade portfolio to the newly renamed MFAT. Once installed, Szijjártó rapidly restructured the entire ministry’s personnel, structures, mechanisms and processes and argued, ‘In order to fulfil the interests of the country, a new type of foreign policy is needed, which is completely determined by foreign trade interests’ (Hungarian National Assembly 2014). As a result, all six undersecretaries were replaced, and only one out of 10 assistant undersecretaries kept their job (Balogh 2014a). Amongst the victims of Szijjártó’s purge was Enikő Győri, the undersecretary in charge of EU relations who was now leaving to serve as the Hungarian ambassador to Spain. Her departure brought up the question of which ministry or body would deal with Hungary’s relations with the EU from this point forward.

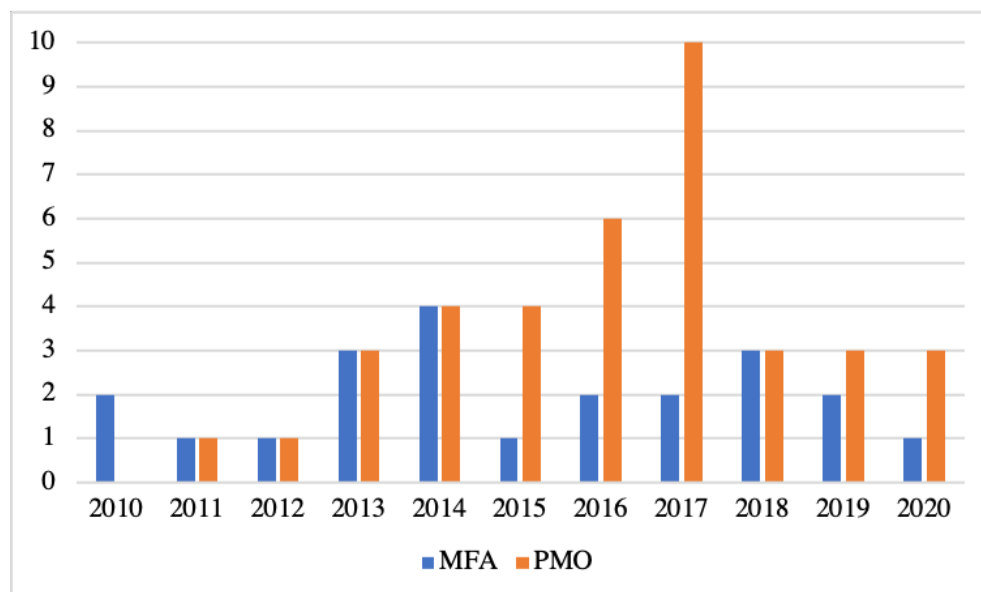
Before 2010, 14 out of 30 institutional units composing the MFA dealt with EU affairs and Hungary’s relations with EU Member States. Then the MFA and foreign minister relied on one undersecretary and five specialised undersecretariats, each with its unique geographic or thematic specialisation. Out of these five undersecretariats, one focused on the defence and security aspect of the CFSP, one focused on EU affairs and one focused on Hungary’s relations with EU Member States, the EEA, Switzerland and Western European microstates. The remaining two undersecretariats dealt with Hungary’s relations with the rest of the world (P. Müller and Gazsi 2023, 404). Similarly, economic and trade-related matters were dealt with by five specialised undersecretariats and did not feature prominently in the MFA. With the arrival of Szijjártó to office and the subsequent renaming of the ministry, three new vice undersecretariats were created, each with a regional focus: regions and countries termed ‘East’ (including, China, Central Asia, Russia and Eastern Europe), regions and countries termed ‘South’ (including the Middle East, Africa, Oceania and the rest of Asia), and the entire Euro-Atlantic community (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary 2019). Given the escalating tensions between Brussels and Budapest over issues such as the curtailment of media and press freedom and the encroachment on judiciary independence, the Hungarian Ministry of Justice and its minister, Judit Varga (2019–2023), took on a more prominent and rather unusual role in the Hungarian representation in Brussels, including participating in the EU’s General Affairs Council, a job usually carried out by a Member State’s foreign minister (Government of Hungary 2021a). This means that the MFA would be less needed for the coordination of EU affairs. By 2019, Szijjártó supervised six undersecretaries and 11 vice undersecretariats, none of which were focused on EU affairs, whilst bilateral relations with EU Member States fell under the portfolio of one vice undersecretariat concerned with the country’s bilateral relations with Canada and the US.

In conjunction with Szijjártó’s reorientation of Hungary’s foreign policy priorities and his extensive overhaul of the institutional framework of the MFA, another top priority for Orbán after the victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections was the further strengthening of the

PMO's power, namely by assuming more foreign policy competences and responsibilities. Although this is not unique to Hungary—many countries, including EU Member States, have experienced the 'presidentialisation' of governance structures (Tóth 2017; Poguntke and Webb 2005)—Orbán's actions have had a more far-reaching impact. The PMO was initially founded in 2011 as a body that assists with the PM's daily activities, with only 27 units in its organigram. By 2019, however, its organigram had expanded to include over 200 units, including ones that deal with the renovation of the Buda Castle, the national film industry and 'patriotic and military education'. When Győri left the MFAT, the head of the PMO, János Lázár, wanted to move the EU-related portfolio to the PMO under his supervision, whilst Navracsics insisted that it should stay within the MFAT. However, as Navracsics left Hungary to assume his new role as the EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport under the Juncker Commission, Lázár had his way, and this portfolio remains under the PMO until this day. Even with the appointment of Szijjártó as the new minister of foreign affairs and trade, many foreign policy competences and related matters remained within the PMO under Orbán's close supervision, with the PMO's foreign-policy-related resources and staff significantly increased.

Apart from the formal reallocation of authority and competences in foreign policy matters, informal and administrative changes to the PMO and the MFA further weakened the role and independence of MFA staff with regard to EU and CFSP affairs. Discussions on foreign policy matters increasingly take place behind the doors of the PMO, and salient foreign policy decisions are made there more often than before as a result. The staff of the MFA are under more pressure to act in accordance with the PMO and to protect and defend Hungarian national interests abroad, whilst diplomats abroad find their role to be limited to the top-down implementation of foreign policy decisions made by the PMO (P. Müller and Gazsi 2023, 407). The new civil servant law introduced in 2011 requires civil servants to be 'professionally loyal', and as such any deviation from the expectations above could be seen as being professionally disloyal and thus constitute grounds for dismissal (Government of Hungary 2011a). To ensure maximal loyalty, the MFA under Szijjártó recruited a high number of new staff, many of whom had close relations with him, to senior positions, and a high number of young and inexperienced staff, many of whom came from Fideszlitas (the youth organisation of the Fidesz party) and pledged allegiance to Fidesz and its foreign policy priorities (Gergő 2012; HVG 2014). In other words, party loyalty and the willingness to implement Fidesz's foreign policy priorities are prioritised over skills and experience in diplomacy.

Figure 13. Rules of organisation and operation modifications in the Hungarian MFA and PMO.



Taking stock of all these institutional and organisational changes statistically, Figure 13 shows the number of rules of organisation and operation⁶⁸ (ROO) published in *Magyar Közlöny*, the official journal of the Hungarian government, between 2010 and 2020. Within the analytical time scope, 38 different ROOs have been identified for the PMO and 22 for the MFA/MFAT. As evidenced here, the third Orbán government⁶⁹ (2014–2018) experienced the greatest institutional and organisational volatility. Therefore, the other top priority for Orbán after his re-election in 2014 was the deconstruction of professional roles, as manifested through institutional and procedural renationalisation.

Furthermore, Orbán's estrangement from and confrontation with the EU has resulted in organisational and institutional changes within the government. In order to better communicate and articulate his government's stance within but also outside the EU in an attempt to secure more support, Orbán instituted a new office within the PMO in October 2015, known as the Cabinet Office. This office, having the status of a governmental ministry, covers a wide range of competences and responsibilities, including communications, public relations, information and foreign affairs. In 2018, the Office further expanded with the establishment of an International Communications Office, and its spokesperson ranks as state secretary. Since its establishment, the Cabinet Office has been headed by Antal Rogán, whom observers have called 'the number-three man in Hungarian politics today' (Balogh 2014b). Prior to this post, Rogán, a long-time Orbán supporter, served as the mayor of Budapest District V from 2006 to 2014, a district that houses key political, financial and commercial institutions. This detailed institutional arrangement, the high ranks of these bodies and personnel and the hiring of Rogán highlight the importance that Orbán attaches to the country's image abroad. With Orbán as the PM, Zsolt Semjén as deputy PM, János Lázár as the minister for PMO and Antal Rogán as the minister for the PM's Cabinet Office, the third Orbán government witnessed the greatest level of centralisation of power, and the PMO has essentially become the 'flagship institution' for all governmental matters, especially ones related to foreign policy (Stumpf 2016). These actions and measures have led to institutional/procedural renationalisation, notably in the form

⁶⁸ *Szervezeti és Működési Szabályzat*.

⁶⁹ It would be the second Orbán government if his premiership between 1998 and 2002 were excluded, since during this period Hungarian foreign policy experienced great Europeanisation.

of counter-Brusselisation through bureaucratic reorganisation and centralisation. As a security expert observed: 'Hungary's institutional structures have been hollowed out. Decision-making is concentrated in a small circle around the prime minister, leaving little room for traditional diplomatic input'.⁷⁰ This centralisation has facilitated swift policy shifts but has also undermined long-term consistency.

Hungary's soured relations with the EU also meant the intensification of bilateral relations with non-traditional allies. Orbán's 'Eastern Opening' and the institutionalisation of China's engagement with the CEE region were the push-and-pull factors that further catalysed Sino-Hungarian relations. This, as well, has had a lasting impact on the organisation of Orbán's third and fourth governments, resulting in Hungary giving greater priority and commitment to other multilateral (e.g., '17+1') and bilateral frameworks. The Secretariat of the '17+1' framework requested 17 CEECs to assign a national coordinator, ideally with the rank of deputy minister. In other words, the further institutionalisation of the '17+1' framework meant that the participating CEECs had to dedicate more diplomatic resources and personnel to fostering ties with China. Since the restructuring of the Hungarian MFAT in 2014, Márta Mészáros has been the national coordinator for Hungary. She also serves as the director general of the China Department. Between 2012 and 2014, Mészáros served as the coordinator of Sino-Hungarian bilateral relations within the PMO. Prior to 2012, Mészáros worked in the private sector. Her career trajectory, being an ally of Orbán and coming from the PMO, is characteristic of the 'new faces' appointed by Orbán and Szijjártó since 2012/2014. Similarly, the PMO has undergone significant changes as well. Prior to 2012, it had no departments or desks that dealt with economic affairs or trade, but in 2012, coinciding with the introduction of the '17+1' framework, the PMO established a state secretariat of foreign affairs and trade, with Szijjártó being the first to hold the post. Once Szijjártó assumed the post of foreign and trade minister in 2014, a China desk (and a Russia desk) was created within the Deputy State Secretariat for the Development of Eastern Relations. This organisational configuration, which remains in place to this day, highlights the importance of the 'Eastern Opening' and China's pivotal position therein.

6.3. Conclusive Remarks

This empirical chapter has, in turn, examined the Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy between 2004 and 2010, the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy between 2010 and 2020 (covering all three elements of the concept as described in section 3.2.2). In short, Hungarian foreign policy experienced a great level of Europeanisation prior to the start of the analytical timeframe of this thesis, namely 2010. The first Orbán government (1998–2002) and the subsequent left-wing Medgyessy government (2002–2004) played an instrumental role in Hungary's accession to the EU. The two subsequent left-wing governments led by Gyurcsány and Bajnai witnessed the further Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy, a process which arguably peaked during the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Perhaps as a surprise to some, Hungary's stance vis-à-vis China shifted as early as in 2002, when the left-wing governments were in power; in other words, well before Orbán's return to power in 2010. If anything, Orbán's pro-China policy is a continuation and further intensification of previous left-wing governments' policy, despite the ideological differences and the quarrelling between the two camps. Retrospectively speaking, as the Europeanisation

⁷⁰ Interview with a professor of security studies with regional expertise in Central Europe. Online (Google Meet), 27/06/2025.

of Hungarian foreign policy peaked during the country's Presidency in the first half of 2011, Hungarian leaders already started to look elsewhere. By the end of the Presidency, the Review published by the Hungarian MFA made it quite clear that the country saw the CFSP and its national foreign policy as two separate apparatuses within the same system. More concretely speaking, the CFSP serves as an amplifier of Hungarian foreign policy on the international stage. When the two systems conflict, experiences, notably during Orbán's tenure (2010–now), have shown that national foreign policy triumphs the common foreign policy.

When Orbán regained power in 2010, Hungarian foreign policy started to experience a major reorientation—the 'Eastern Opening'. As a result of this reorientation, Hungary experienced and exhibited the three main elements of de-Europeanisation in its national foreign policy. As explained earlier, this policy reorientation is based on Hungary's historical traditions (i.e., [Neo-]Turanism) and national sovereignty, and it aims to rectify the unbalanced relations between Hungary and the West and steer the country towards the East. Following the introduction of the 'Eastern Opening', Hungary experienced a great level of structural disintegration, specifically related to the disbandment of and disengagement from EU foreign policy structures and processes: Not only was the MFA renamed MFAT in order to better reflect the importance that Orbán attaches to economics and trade, but major foreign policy institutions also underwent significant organisational transformations and personnel changes. Since 2014/2015, leadership, staff and resources dedicated to the EU and EU-related matters have been kept to a minimum; instead, new leadership, staff and resources have been installed to dedicate more resources towards the 'Eastern Opening', with China being one of the main targets.

Thanks to the Hungarian government's reorientation, Sino-Hungarian bilateral relations enjoyed substantial growth and densification during the analytical timeframe of this thesis, i.e., between 2010 and 2020. In addition, before China's involvement in the country (and by extension, the wider region) was institutionalised in the form of the '17+1' framework, Hungary had already secured major Chinese investments, mainly through Wanhua's acquisition of BorsodChem. These developments could well have incentivised Hungarian foreign policy officials to further pursue the country's 'Eastern Opening' and thus de-Europeanise its national foreign policy even further. Since the inauguration of the '17+1' framework in 2012, there has been a greater willingness of both countries to cooperate further. As such, Chinese FDI in Hungary experienced a steady increase, and Chinese business activities in Hungary have also greatly expanded, covering many key sectors.

Based on the analysis in this chapter and the previous one, for its part, China has three mechanisms at its disposal to engage with and contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy: interest-based, norm-based and institutional mechanisms. These correspond, respectively, to material incentives such as political and economic support, normative influence aligned with ideological affinity and the creation of embedded organisational linkages. Whilst analytically separated in this thesis for clarity, the empirical analysis shows that these mechanisms have operated not in isolation but in concert. Most notably, the institutionalisation of Sino-Hungarian relations through platforms such as the 17+1 initiative—while a clear example of an institutional mechanism—has also served as a channel for advancing political and economic interests as well as for diffusing normative positions that challenge EU-aligned values. This convergence of mechanisms underscores the mutually reinforcing nature of China's engagement and its capacity to shape Hungarian foreign policy preferences in ways that contribute to a gradual de-Europeanisation.

It is difficult to assess and determine in more concrete terms the extent to which China has directly contributed to the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy and the extent to which Hungary embraced these changes at its own initiative by turning to China as a partner and alternative model. However, as China's engagement in the country intensifies and institutionalises, perhaps an interactive dynamic develops, where the more economic and political benefits Hungary can reap from China's activities, the more Hungary is willing to modify its foreign policy structures and processes even further in order to be more receptive and welcoming to China's advances. That being said, Sino-Hungarian relations have not been all sweetness and light. Several major projects, such as the Budapest–Belgrade railway connection and the acquisition of Malév, have failed to materialise to date. This has led Hungary, China or both to temporarily downgrade their political ties, as evidenced by the 2017 annual summit of '17+1' held in Budapest.

To conclude, the analysis in this chapter has demonstrated that Hungary's foreign policy under the Orbán administration between 2010 and 2020 exhibited multiple dimensions of de-Europeanisation, facilitated in part by China. The insights gathered from expert interviews reinforce the argument that this process was neither linear nor the result of a coherent strategic plan on the part of Orbán and his government. Instead, it was rather an outcome of domestic political dynamics and opportunistic external engagements. As one senior academic on China–Hungary relations observed, 'Hungary's engagement with China is not rooted in ideological alignment but in pragmatic considerations. The government is leveraging relations with Beijing to assert its independence from Brussels and to extract economic benefits'.⁷¹ This view highlights how Hungary's foreign policy decisions, especially ones vis-à-vis China and the EU, are guided more by transaction gains than by a fundamental normative shift. A former Hungarian diplomat described the situation succinctly: 'China is useful to Hungary because it allows Orbán to send a message to Brussels that he has other options. It is more about political signalling than actual economic transformation'.⁷² This perspective underscores the instrumental nature of Hungary's external relations, with China playing a symbolic yet limited role in influencing Budapest's broader geopolitical orientation. Another expert further emphasised the domestic political drivers behind Hungary's foreign policy trajectory: 'The government's primary audience is internal. Relations with external actors like China are shaped as much by their utility in Hungarian domestic politics as by any grand strategy'.⁷³ Overall, whilst China's engagement with Hungary has contributed to discursive and substantive aspects of de-Europeanisation, its influence remains contingent on Orbán's domestic political calculus and Hungary's position within the EU framework. The institutional structures of Hungarian foreign policymaking, increasingly centralised around the PMO, have enabled swift foreign policy pivots but also eroded long-term strategic coherence.

⁷¹ Interview with a senior expert in China–Hungary relations and founder of a China-focused research institute. Online (Google Meet), 30/06/2025.

⁷² Interview with a former diplomat from the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Online (Google Meet), 06/06/2025.

⁷³ Interview with a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Vienna specialising in Hungary's foreign policy and populism. Online (Google Meet), 05/06/2025.

7. CZECHIA

This empirical chapter dedicated to Czechia operates on the same assumption as the previous chapter dedicated to Hungary; that is, for de-Europeanisation to occur, a Member State must have previously attained a certain level of Europeanisation (Copeland 2016). As such, both empirical chapters adopt the same structure moving forward. To understand the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy during the thesis's analytical timeframe, from 2010 to 2020, this chapter proceeds as follows: The first section establishes the level of Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy prior to 2010, and in doing so, sets these Europeanisation achievements as a central benchmark against which de-Europeanisation is established and its extent measured. The second section studies the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy in accordance with the outcomes and indicators set out in section 3.5, namely discursive, substantive and organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation, between 2010 and 2020. The third and final section concludes with some summative remarks for the chapter.

7.1. Background: Europeanisation of Czech Foreign Policy Pre-2010

7.1.1. Europeanisation of Institutions and Procedures

Similar to its CEE neighbours (Hungary, for the purposes of this thesis), Czechia saw its relations with the EU as external relations, and this configuration lasted until Czechia's ultimate accession to the Union in 2004. However, in contrast to its neighbouring countries (and thus Hungary), Czechia had (and still has) a particularly rigid constitution with a complex and difficult formula for amendments. Since its adoption in 1992, the Czech Constitution has been amended only eight times. With respect to the subject of this empirical chapter, that is, the (de-)Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy, the country's accession to the EU ushered in the most far-reaching constitutional change, resulting in Act No. 395/2001 Coll., which was passed on 18 October 2001 and entered into effect on 1 June 2002 (Syllová 2002, 38). In the decade since its adoption, the Czech Constitution stipulated that international law could achieve supremacy over Czech law only with regard to human rights and basic freedoms, two concepts deeply rooted in the Czech foreign policy identity and traditions (Waisová 2006; Waisová and Piknerová 2012; T. Weiss 2011). The amendment, however, requires Czechia to comply with its obligations arising from international law and grants supremacy to international law over Czech law as long as the former is ratified by the Czech Parliament. It then provides the criteria and procedures for the ratification of international law in the Czech Parliament. In short, this amendment redefined the relations between Czech law and international law, thus paving way for the installation, or 'downloading', of EU laws in Czechia.⁷⁴ On 14 November 2002, another constitutional amendment (i.e., Act No. 515/2002 Coll.) was passed to allow for a referendum on Czechia's EU membership. In other words, two out of the eight constitutional amendments in Czechia were passed as the country geared up for its accession to the EU. This type of structural change is unparalleled in other CEE Member States.

This, of course, was not the only institutional and procedural development in relation to Czechia's accession to the EU. Both before and after the accession, the country witnessed further developments in terms of its institutions, procedures and processes. This was due to, first, the fact that Czech foreign policy was in a constant state of change and adaptation, and

⁷⁴ The exact wording of this constitutional amendment, i.e., Act No. 395/2001 Coll., can be found here: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2001-395>.

second, that the political preferences of the Czech political elites often resulted from quarrels and compromises amongst themselves. The best demonstration of this is found when examining the institutions responsible for handling EU-related affairs in Czechia both before and after the accession. The main actors of Czech foreign policy are the parliament, the government and the president, whose roles and responsibilities are briefly outlined in the Constitution. Though the Czech MFA was the main representative of the Czech government in its EU membership negotiation process, a separate inter-ministerial body—the Committee for European Integration—was primarily responsible for the coordination across various ministries and the collection of expert opinions from relevant bodies in order to form national positions on various matters related to the accession. In November 2001, the Czech government renamed this Committee the Council for European Integration and appointed then Vice PM and Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kavan as the executive chairman. In light of the imminent accession, in April 2003, the Czech government created the Committee for the European Union, a working body that was to determine and coordinate Czech positions on the EU: at the government level, the Committee defined strategic interests, formulated positions and expressed opinions on matters that arose from the country's EU membership; at the working level, the Committee discussed and approved the installation of the Czech Permanent Representative at the meeting of the EU Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) (Government of the Czech Republic, n.d.; Marek and Baun 2011, 54). Until 2007, this Committee was largely managed by the Czech MFA (Beneš and Karlas 2008, 73)

After its accession, Czechia, like its neighbours, faced the same question: how would it conduct its post-accession relations with the EU? Out of three possibilities (one, continued orchestration by the MFA; two, a separate Ministry for European Affairs but possibly still nested within the existing MFA; and three, central coordination across ministries by the PMO), Czechia initially opted for the first option, whereby the Czech MFA continued to be at the forefront in dealing with EU affairs. That said, a major institutional change came about in preparation for Czechia's Presidency of the Council of the EU (hereinafter 'the Presidency') that would take place in the first half of 2009.⁷⁵ In January 2007, the Second Topolánek Government (a coalition of the rightist ODS, the centrist Christian Democrats, or KDU-ČSL, and the Green Party, SZ) established the position of minister of European affairs nested within the Office of the Government. This position did not have the apparatus of an actual ministry and was thus considered a minister without a portfolio. At first glance, one could argue that the creation of this post was fitting and needed for the upcoming Presidency; and there is certainly some truth to this argument. Diving a bit deeper, it becomes clear that its creation was prompted by the quarrels and compromises amongst the Czech ruling elites.

Administratively speaking, the creation of this post enabled the PMO to be the main player in EU-related matters. This move—the centralisation or 'presidentialisation' of power—has been quite common in CEECs (see for example, Poguntke and Webb 2005). Politically speaking, the creation of this post and the appointment of then Deputy PM Alexandr Vondra as the inaugural minister of European affairs were meant to counterbalance the political power and influence of Foreign Minister Karl Schwarzenberg.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the establishment of this post garnered a fair share of criticism and created institutional ambiguity. In fact, at its very inception, conflicts between Vondra and Schwarzenberg immediately arose, though in the

⁷⁵ Czechia was the second Member State during the 2004/2007 EU enlargements to hold the Presidency, with the first being Slovenia during the first half of 2008 and the third being Hungary during the first half of 2011.

⁷⁶ In the Second Topolánek Government, both PM Topolánek, and Deputy PM and Minister of European Affairs Vondra were members of ODS. Minister of Foreign Affairs Schwarzenberg, however, was non-partisan and nominated by the Green Party.

end both managed to find a compromise (Beneš and Karlas 2008, 70). To this day, this post still functions, though it was vacant between 2010 and 2021 (i.e., the analytical timeframe of this thesis), a point elaborated further in section 7.2.4. At the time of writing, the incumbent minister, Mikuláš Bek, is one of the key actors in the Czech Presidency during the second half of 2022.

In short, Czechia's accession to the EU in 2004 triggered a great deal of institutional and procedural adaptations that can be seen as the outcomes of Europeanisation, most notably and importantly manifested through the constitutional amendment of Act No. 395/2001 Coll. In the post-accession period, the country's institutional and procedural framework continued to adapt and develop. However, it would be unsound to assess these adaptations and developments as the most rational, most effective and most appropriate for the country in its effort to further Europeanise and align itself with Brussels. As demonstrated above, many of these adaptations and developments were the result of quarrels and compromises amongst Czechia's political elites. This demonstrates that the Czech political arena is plagued by conflicting interests and ambitions, which have hampered the country's process of Europeanisation despite its achievements in this regard.

7.1.2. Europeanisation of Preferences and Interests

Czechia's EU membership negotiations and its eventual accession have greatly impacted Czech national identity and national politics, which in turn have formed a crucial basis for the formation of Czech foreign policy preferences and interests. As explained in great detail in section 3.8.1, Czech (or more correctly so, Czechoslovak) government identified positively with the Soviet Union prior to the fall of communism and viewed the capitalist West with antagonism. After the fall of communism in 1989, Czechoslovakia (and later Czechia) constructed a diametrically opposite identity: the country distanced itself from the post-Soviet space (notably from Russia) and considered itself as having been 'kidnapped' from the West (Kundera 1983). It is therefore in the country's destiny to 'return to the West' (True 2004; Drulák and Königová 2005; Drulák 2012), and the best way of achieving this is through NATO and EU accessions (Moisio 2002; Bugge 2003; Pomorska 2017; Marek and Baun 2011, 28). Despite this, Czechia's EU accession was a contentious issue amongst the country's political elites in the 1990s. In fact, of all the countries that acceded to the EU during the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, Czechia was the only country that had an organised opposition (Grabbe 2006) to accession. Although the rightist ODS, the ruling party until 1998 under the premiership of Václav Klaus, supported EU accession, the party did develop a critical stance on the country's accession and on European integration as a whole. As Fawn put it, 'while desiring EU and NATO membership, they [ODS, or more broadly speaking the Czechs] want them largely on Czech terms' (Fawn 2004).

However, the Czech government crisis of 1998,⁷⁷ which led to the ousting of Václav Klaus as the leader of ODS and as the PM, and the actual lengthy and arduous accession negotiations changed the confident stance of the Czech political elites. From mid-1998 onward, as Miloš Zeman assumed the premiership, the country's EU accession negotiations were approached in a non-political or even non-politicised manner that was dominated by executive politics. A consensus quickly emerged across the Czech political arena that the country's EU

⁷⁷ This crisis was mainly caused by the financial irregularities of the ruling ODS party and the revelation of ODS's secret bank accounts in Switzerland. This caused a rift within the ODS and a snap election was called in 1998, which resulted in the victory of ČSSD under Miloš Zeman.

membership was a must, and this could be achieved only by technocrats without being subject to much political discussion. This, of course, had an impact on the democratic process in Czechia (Marek and Baun 2011, 5). From then until 2010 (the start of the analytical timeframe of this thesis), Czech political elites' actions fully embraced the idea of EU integration, yet their ideas sometimes indicated otherwise.

After Czechia's accession to the EU in 2004, various political parties' understanding of and thoughts about the country's membership diverged even more and often contradicted each other. With a great deal of simplification, the major dividing line was between the leftist ČSSD and the rightist ODS. For ČSSD, traditional nation-states can no longer effectively deal with the myriad of issues and challenges in the modern era. As such, the only way for such nation-states to thrive, or at least survive, is through international cooperation and global governance. Therefore, for ČSSD, the EU was not only an amplifier of the country's voice but more importantly the source of legitimate governance itself (ČSSD, n.d.; Kořan 2011, 16). On the other hand, ODS defies the neoliberal and neo-idealist stance of ČSSD and believes that the EU is simply a platform through which Czech national interests could be better projected and protected. That said, ODS sees large regional and international organisations such as the EU as an impediment to the country's domestic governance that can sometimes hinder domestic political elites' ability to rule. In other words, whilst the EU has its usefulness, ODS strongly believes that it is up to Czechia to ensure its own survival, and only realist and pragmatic rule can help the country successfully navigate modern-day issues and challenges (Kořan 2011, 16). In this respect, ODS's stance in Czechia shares great similarities with Fidesz's stance in Hungary. It is therefore no coincidence that it was under the rule of these realist and pragmatic parties that Czechia and Hungary began to warm up to China, a point elaborated below.

Nonetheless, one cannot simply argue that this dividing line between the two major political parties in Czechia over their approaches towards the EU negatively affected the countries' relationship with the Union. In fact, both political parties supported the ratification⁷⁸ of the Lisbon Treaty (Matějková 2010; Keil and Marši 2008). The only logical explanation for their unanimous support is the idea of 'the return of the West' in the minds of all Czech political elites since the foundation of the modern state in 1989. However, on the eve of its EU Presidency, Czechia had not ratified the Lisbon Treaty. For this reason, other Member States that had yet to ratify the Treaty turned their attention to Czechia, as they were curious to learn whether Czechia would remain defiant or would quickly ratify it (and even play a mediating role for other Member States). In the end, it was the latter.

In very simple terms, the main obstacle behind the delayed ratification was ODS. The Party had to construct a discursive and/or normative framework to support the ratification and somehow align the Treaty with the Party's foreign policy identity and reasoning. In the end, after a painful process, ODS interpreted, in very realist and pragmatic terms, the Treaty as a way to strengthen the geopolitical and geoeconomic clout of the EU, and by extension Czechia (Beneš 2010; Braun 2010, 117–18, 140). Indeed, the EU's role as a global actor was significantly scaled up during the Czech Presidency in the first half of 2009. For example, Czechia hoped to stabilise the economic situation in the eurozone and the EU in the aftermath of the global financial crisis originating from the US, and the country played a mediating role in the Russia–Ukraine gas dispute as well as in the Gaza conflict. Yet, Czechia's (or more specifically ODS's) rationale for backing the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty was quite

⁷⁸ On 18 February 2009, the Chamber of Deputies ratified the Lisbon Treaty. On 6 May 2009, the Senate ratified the Lisbon Treaty. It is interesting that both ratifications took place during Czechia's EU Presidency. Finally, on 3 November 2009, the ratifications received Presidential Assent.

different from the rationale of ‘older and Western’ Member States. The country’s more-or-less unanimous backing was rooted in its anxiety as a small and vulnerable state that seeks constant protection from bigger allies in the face of at times questionable influences from bigger geopolitical players such as Russia and China (Beneš 2010, 38–39).

It is important here to highlight one of the most striking and complex cases of the Europeanisation of the preferences, interests and perceptions of Czech foreign policy caused by the country’s accession to the EU—the rapprochement of Czech–German bilateral relations. The modern history of Czech–German bilateral relations has been plagued with annexations, wars and extermination. In fact, in the lead-up to the Second World War, Nazi Germany first annexed the Sudetenland, and Czechoslovakia became the main target of the Nazis’ *Generalplan Ost*. Understandably, since the foundation of its modern state, Czechia’s stance vis-à-vis Germany has been characterised by realism, defence and pragmatism, and the country saw Germany as a potential danger (Handl 1997; Eberle and Handl 2016). However, Czechia’s desire to accede to the EU meant that a reset of Czech–German bilateral relations was inevitable. This ultimately culminated in the normalisation and rapprochement of their bilateral relations in the form of the Czech–German Declaration in 1997, whereby some of the historical ills of both sides were addressed. For its part, Germany became a strong supporter of Czechia’s accession negotiations, which made Czech political elites decrease their Germanophobia (Handl 2008, 162).

Another unique case of the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy, in the forms of both ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’, was manifested through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It would be logical to assume that Eastern Europe would be a priority for Czech foreign policy prior to the accession, given that Czechia finds itself in the same geographical and geopolitical region. The reality, however, indicates otherwise. Prior to accession, Czech foreign policy essentially did not prioritise Eastern Europe for the same reason that the country had a strong desire to ‘return to the West’ (Tulmets 2010; Kundera 1983). Eastern Europe emerged in Czech foreign policy as an important foreign policy priority only after the country’s accession in 2004, a clear sign of the ‘downloading’ mechanism of Europeanisation at work. Soon after, Czech foreign policy elites reconfigured their priorities and objectives in order to better reflect the priorities of the EU, one of which was the ENP (Kratochvíl and Horký 2010, 71). Nonetheless, Czech foreign policy elites did not simply wish to ‘download’ the ENP into their national foreign policy, and in fact they wished to also ‘upload’ their preferences and interests onto Brussels to construct and execute the ENP. The foreign policy elites in Prague believed that, given their country’s historical experience, Czechia understands Eastern European countries better than the traditional ‘old’ Member States, and as such Czechia is more suitable for assisting them with their accession (Kratochvíl and Horký 2010, 71). Furthermore, as Czechia has, since its foundation, viewed Russia antagonistically, in the zero-sum game that it plays, the more Eastern European countries join the EU, the more vulnerable Russia will be and the more protected Czechia will be. In more concrete terms, the EU Association Agreement with Albania came into force during the Czech Presidency, and Czechia has played a crucial role in the EU’s potential enlargement in the Balkans.

In sum, prior to 2010 (i.e., the start of the analytical framework of this thesis), Czech foreign policy preferences and interests experienced a substantial level of Europeanisation. Despite the rift between the two major political parties in Czechia—ČSSD and ODS—the entire Czech political spectrum generally supported the country’s accession to the EU and the subsequent ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. As said, this was largely due to the shared general desire to ‘return to the West’ amongst Czech political elites. However, given its realist and

pragmatic outlook on domestic issues and international challenges, it was difficult for the ODS to find a discursive and normative framework to justify its support for these endeavours. In other words, despite its support, for parties like ODS, the Europeanisation of foreign policy preferences and interests has been superficial at best, and ones that were Europeanised have arguably not been internalised. This means that, when opportunities arise, these parties may sway in another direction. Notwithstanding these observations, two successful examples of the Europeanisation of preferences and interests can be found in the normalisation and rapprochement of Czech–German bilateral relations as well as the ‘downloading’ and ‘uploading’ of the ENP.

7.1.3. Europeanisation of Strategies and Actions

As discussed above, the Europeanisation of institutions and procedures in Czechia led to the Europeanisation of preferences and interests, which in turn translated into the Europeanisation of strategies and actions. This subsection explores the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy strategies and actions through a sampling of several Europeanised outcomes that were the result of the country’s EU membership.

A clear case of the Europeanisation of strategies and actions is Czechia’s policy vis-à-vis Germany, especially during the German Presidency in the first half of 2007 and the Czech Presidency in the first half of 2009. The primary goal of the German Presidency was to lift the EU up from the conundrum and fatigue caused by the rejection of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (or the so-called ‘Constitutional Treaty’) and rebuild the confidence of Member State governments and EU citizens in the EU project. With regard to the Constitution Treaty, Czechia presented an interesting case: There was debate, but not much on the Treaty itself; instead, debates focused on the trivial aspects of the documents and on whether a referendum should be held. As both pro- and anti-EU campaigners were drawing up their battle plans to gain support for their respective causes, the Czech government, composed of a fragile and fractious centre-left coalition (ČSSD, KDU-ČSL and the Freedom Union–Democratic Union [US-DEU]) under the premiership of Stanislav Gross, was predominantly pro-European; however, President Václav Klaus, a Thatcherite economist and a candid Eurosceptic, spoke against the Treaty, and his opinion would have had a major impact given the popularity he enjoyed around that time. In the end, despite ODS’s opposition, a referendum on the issue was to be held in 2006 alongside the parliamentary elections. The selection of this date was strategic because by then, most EU Member States would have voted ‘yes’ and politicians and informed observers believed that the Czechs would not want to break up the overall consensus across the Union.

Despite this division within the Czech government, and despite the ultimate rejection of the Constitutional Treaty, Czechia and Germany found common ground on this matter after intensive rounds of discussion, and Czechia decided to support Germany’s actions during its Presidency in the first half of 2007 (Handl 2008, 138–41). In leading up to the Czech Presidency of 2009, Germany provided a great deal of support and guidance as the Czech government prepared for this historical moment and endeavour. In fact, Handl, like many others, has argued that Germany was the most important bilateral partner during the Czech Presidency, and without Germany’s systemic cooperation, the Presidency would have yielded much poorer results (Handl 2010, 135). Despite having three other Presidencies in between, the German and Czech Presidencies shared around 70% of preferences and interests. One could argue that what might divide the warm Czech–German bilateral relations are no longer

historical and political issues but possibly the resentment of some Czech political elites of Germany's future dominance of the EU and its affairs.

An interesting and subtler case of the Europeanisation of strategies and actions is Czechia's policy towards Russia, as changes in this policy could have been caused by Europeanisation, given the country's EU membership, or by other factors. Since its modern foundation, Czechia has always viewed Russia as a potential or major threat, and Czech foreign policy has considered the latter as the 'other', as in a geopolitical player that is diametrically opposed to Czech and its foreign policy identity. As explained previously, this has been one of the main reasons behind Czechia's strong desire to 'return to the West' and Europeanise its foreign policy preferences and interests to align better with the EU and its policies. Gearing up towards its accession to NATO and the EU, Czechia shifted its perspective and began to view Russia through the lens of security and geopolitics (Mareš et al. 2020). It was only in the beginning of the last decade (coinciding with the start of the analytical timeframe of this thesis) that Czech–Russian bilateral relations experienced a relative degree of de-securitisation and pragmatism (Kuchyňková 2011). In 'Conceptual Basis of Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic', the country states that it wishes to seek good, mutually beneficial relations with Russia and 'welcomes strengthening of cooperation in all areas of common interest' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2011, 16).

As said, it is difficult to determine what was/were the main contributing factor(s) in the overall de-securitisation and pragmatism in Czech–Russian relations in the early 2010s. A major external factor was the overall normalisation of Russian–Western relations after the 'Russian reset' in 2009 under then US President Barack Obama and then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. However, the overall de-securitisation and pragmatism of Czech–Russian relations must be posited within and thus understood through the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy. In fact, it was during the Czech Presidency that these positive trends started to occur (Kuchyňková 2010). It is true that Czechia was still one of the EU hardliners when it came to issues such as Russia's WTO entry, EU–Russia relations, NATO–Russia relations and visa liberalisation, and it is also true that Czech–Russian relations began to sour from the mid-2010s, most notably with the Russian annexation of Crimea and military involvement in the Donbas region. Today, Czechia's strategies and actions vis-à-vis Russia remain within the realm of CFSP's strategies and actions.

To briefly conclude, the Europeanisation of Czech institutions and procedures laid down the groundwork for the Europeanisation of Czechia's preferences and interests. As this subsection has shown, these Europeanised preferences and interests were then translated into concrete Europeanised foreign policy strategies and actions. In the two small case studies described above, in relations with Germany, the Europeanisation of Czech strategies and actions was pronounced and profound; and in relations with Russia, since the CFSP does not replace national foreign policy and since Brussels does not (and cannot) dictate the route through which Member States wish to conduct their bilateral relations with third countries, Czechia has been a hardliner (despite a brief honeymoon period in the early 2010s), and yet, its strategies and actions do not break the overall consensus of the EU on Russia.

7.1.4. Europeanisation on the Eve of EU Presidency

Czechia assumed the Presidency of the Council of the EU between January and June 2009, being only the second state to do so from the Member States of the 2004/2007 enlargements. This was not an easy task for Czechia: First, many observers were sceptical about Czechia's

abilities and potentials, given the country's status as a medium-sized, new Member State. Second, the government that prepared for and executed the Presidency was led by Mirek Topolánek and the ODS, and then Czech President Václav Klaus, all of whom were well known for their Euroscepticism. Within the EU, the Czech Presidency had to deal with the unclear fate of the Lisbon Treaty (given the rejection of the first Irish referendum) as well as the global financial crisis and its impact on the EU. Further afield, the Czech Presidency had to tackle pressing issues such as the Russia–Ukraine gas dispute, the Gaza War and the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War. Despite all these challenges, Czechia was largely successful and effective in managing its Presidency and, in doing so, Czech foreign policy underwent further Europeanisation. What follows is a brief overview of the Czech government's preparation process for the Presidency as well as some of the priorities of the latter, with a particular focus on the process and outcomes of Europeanisation.

The preparation for the Presidency went underway right after the formation of the Second Topolánek Government in January 2007. Despite ODS's mild level of Euroscepticism, Topolánek and his government saw the Presidency as a great way to shape the EU and its policies and push Czechia to the forefront of EU and international affairs.⁷⁹ The overall preparation for and coordination of Presidency matters were headed by Alexandr Vondra, the deputy PM and first minister for European affairs, though the ultimate decision-making powers rested with the PM and other relevant ministers. This preparation engendered ambitious and far-reaching priorities (Lehtonen 2009), especially as evidenced by the Presidency's motto 'Europe without Barriers'. It was clear that the Presidency aimed at removing obstacles of any sort between Member States to create a competitive EU that could tackle internal and external challenges. In the end, the priorities were condensed and concisely summarised in the three Es: 'Economy, Energy and European Union in the World'. The latter—'EU in the World'—had a strong external, CFSP dimension, mainly focusing on EU enlargement, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and transatlantic relations.

Despite all this, the Czech Presidency was plagued by infighting in the domestic political arena. The governing centre-right coalition (composed of ODS, KDU-ČSL and SZ, and led by Topolánek) stood on very shaky ground after the 2006 parliamentary elections because of their evenly balanced results as well as Topolánek's reliance on party defectors in order to form the coalition. Moreover, through the preparatory phase and the actual Presidency, the governing coalition did not conclude an 'agreement of toleration' with the opposition in order to avoid any potential dispute that could in turn hinder the Presidency.⁸⁰ In the end, the Second Topolánek Government crumbled after not surviving a vote of no confidence on 24 March 2009; in fact, several members of the ruling coalition voted against Topolánek. On 8 May, a caretaker government was set up, headed by Jan Fischer, who chaired the Czech Presidency for its remainder. Though a change of government in the midst of an EU Presidency is not uncommon (with France and Finland being the most recent examples), a change of government due to a vote of no confidence is rather rare. Therefore, when assessing the

⁷⁹ Quite on the contrary, President Klaus believed that the Presidency was unimportant (see for example, D. E. Miller 2017).

⁸⁰ In contrast, during the preparatory phase of the Slovenian Presidency, the ruling centre-right coalition headed by Prime Minister Janez Janša signed an agreement to secure 'domestic peace' which stated that the opposition parties would not attack the ruling coalition during the country's Presidency (Kajnc 2012). This agreement was officially called the 'Agreement on the Co-operation of Political Parties, the Group of Unconnected Deputies and Representatives of National Minorities in the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia for the Successful Implementation of the Preparation and Presidency of the EU'.

Presidency's success and effectiveness, it is clear that Czechia's EU responsibilities and priorities succumbed to the infighting and domestic interests of the political elites.

Moving further afield, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the Russia–Ukraine gas disputes highlighted how a major geopolitical player like Russia could shake up the EU's near vicinity. In response to these developments, which fell within the ENP framework, Poland and Sweden spearheaded the initiative known as the EaP. In fact, the EaP was officially inaugurated during the Czech Presidency in Prague, and it became the cornerstone of the entire Presidency. The Presidency fervently supported the EaP and promoted it as a way to ensure democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation not only in the countries immediately involved (i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus,⁸¹ Georgia,⁸² Moldova⁸³ and Ukraine⁸⁴), but also on the entire European continent. With regard to Russia, the Czech Presidency took an assertive stance, in line with Brussels and many other Member States. The strategies and actions of the Presidency were a clear demonstration of the EU as an independent and substantial political player in international affairs.

Czechia assumed the Presidency at a time when the EU was undergoing enlargement fatigue and some (old, Western) Member States were opposed to further enlargements. During the preparatory phase, Czechia was caught by surprise when Slovenia blocked the accession negotiations of its neighbour Croatia due to the two countries' dispute over the Piran Bay. As a long-standing supporter of EU enlargement, Czechia made this issue a top priority of its Presidency. As such, the Presidency engaged in long diplomatic negotiations and manoeuvrings with France and other opponents on this issue. Czechia initially wished to play the role of a mediator in the dispute between Slovenia and Croatia but in the end backed down and allowed the two countries to resolve the issue bilaterally. Yet, despite Czechia's best intentions and efforts, on 23 April 2009 (towards the end of the Czech Presidency), the EU suspended the accession negotiations with Croatia. The talks did not resume until 11 September 2009 during the subsequent Swedish Presidency. This was no doubt detrimental to the Czech Presidency, but during the Presidency the EU nonetheless received a membership application from Albania.

In conclusion, the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy prior to its Presidency enabled the country deliver a relatively successful and effective Presidency, particularly with regard to the EaP and future enlargements (despite the setback caused by the territorial dispute between Slovenia and Croatia). In fact, the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy became more pronounced and concrete thanks to the Presidency. Yet, in spite of this, the Presidency was plagued by infighting amongst Czech political elites, largely due to their lack of willingness to put EU matters first. In other words, although Europeanisation had a far-reaching impact on structures and processes, strategies and actions and in some cases preferences and interests, these Europeanisation gains were not fully internalised by Czech foreign policy elites. It is against this backdrop of shallow Europeanisation that the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy is measured and assessed.

7.2. De-Europeanisation of Czech Foreign Policy 2010–2020

⁸¹ On 28 June 2021, the Belarussian MFA confirmed that the country would suspend its membership of the EaP.

⁸² On 23 June 2022, the European Council recognised Georgia as a potential candidate for membership.

⁸³ On 23 June 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to Moldova.

⁸⁴ On 23 June 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine.

The broad overview given in the previous section focused on a few important signs of the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy prompted by the country's accession to the EU in 2004 and catalysed by its subsequent inclusion in the CFSP. To sum up the above, Czechia's accession to the EU ushered in major structural change in the form of two amendments to its rigid Constitution, thus leading to a high level of Europeanisation in terms of institutions and procedures. This paved the way for the subsequent Europeanisation of the country's foreign policy preferences and interests as well as strategies and actions, which all culminated in a rather successful rotating Presidency in the first half of 2009. That said, it is important to note that Czechia was the only country during the 2004/2007 accessions that had an organised opposition, primarily led by the right-wing ODS. It is, hence, against this background that the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy between 2010 and 2020 is established and its extent measured. To this end, the rest of this section is organised as follows: The first subsection paints a broad picture of the Czech political scene, along its main players, in the early 2010s and thus sets the scene for the examination of the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy. Then, mirroring the elements, outcomes and indicators of de-Europeanisation as presented in section 3.5 and thus adopting the same methodology used in the case study of Hungary, the remaining three subsections examine, in turn, the discursive, substantive and organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy between 2010 and 2020.

7.2.1. Contextual Background

Before examining the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy between 2010 and 2020, it is vital to first paint a backdrop of the political scene in the early 2010s. This was a period of great changes in Czech domestic politics, which had an impact on the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy to come. In January 2013, Czech citizens elected, for the first time, the country's president through a popular, direct vote. This constituted a great break from the political traditions dating back to the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, where the country's president was indirectly elected by the parliament. This tradition of indirect presidential election was even carried onward by the communist regime (1948–1989/1990), the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic (1990–1992) and the Czech Republic (since 1992).

After Czechia's accession to the EU, the voting system of presidential elections had been high on the agenda of parties across the spectrum, and there had been at least six attempts by various parties to introduce direct, popular presidential elections. However, none of these attempts successfully made it through the parliament, due to not only disagreement within individual parties but also disagreement amongst parties. In the end, the ruling centre-right coalition, made up of ODS-TOP09-VV (later replaced by LIDEM) under the premiership of Nečas introduced a bill on this issue, and in late 2011 and early 2012, the bill was finally approved by both chambers of the parliament and became a law. The introduction and the passing of the law paint a complex picture of the Czech political scene. Around this time, the two chambers of the parliament were in fact led by different political parties. The centre-right coalition led by Nečas controlled the lower chamber, whilst the leftist ČSSD led by Bohuslav Sobotka controlled the upper chamber. Given their ideological differences, one would not have expected the bill to have been passed into law so swiftly.

One might argue the expedience was due to the overall will of political parties to push forth this change. The reality, however, indicated otherwise. After the 2010 legislative elections, both ODS and ČSSD were significantly weakened. The governing ODS lost 15% compared to the previous legislative elections, whilst the leading opposition ČSSD lost 10%. In other words,

other political parties (be it major or minor) and their political candidates had risen in the Czech political scene, and this would have to be reckoned with in the upcoming indirect presidential election scheduled for 2013. Furthermore, infighting within the two leading parties was rampant, and neither could come up with a good candidate. For example, the founding leader of ODS, Václav Klaus, held the presidency in 2003 and again in 2008. Whilst in office, Klaus left the ODS and became highly critical of the party's policies, and as such his relationship with the then ODS PM, Nečas, had soured and was complicated to say the least. The situation within ČSSD was not much better. When then ČSSD leader Zeman became the party's official candidate to stand in the upcoming presidential elections (regardless of whether this would be direct or indirect), ČSSD members failed to unite behind him. As a result, Zeman briefly quit politics and then returned in 2010 as the leader of a newly founded Party of Civic Rights (*Strana Práv Občanů*, or SPO, commonly referred to as Zemanovci, or 'Zeman's people'), which competed for ČSSD votes. In light of these quarrels and compromises, both parties realised it was best to change the voting system to give voters a say in this and also gain more political support and legitimacy from the voters. In fact, roughly two-thirds of Czech voters wanted direct presidential elections (Rybář 2014).

The passing of this law triggered a constitutional amendment, which, as said previously, was not an easy task. The 2012 constitutional amendment that ultimately introduced this change in the voting system did not actually change the president's former powers to a great extent. The sole exception was the increased independence of the president: Now, the president can be persecuted only for high treason or gross violation of the Constitution, and the Constitutional Court may consider removing the president from office if both chambers consent to such a procedure, with three-fifths of their members approving. In other words, the new 2012 amendment reduced the president's accountability towards the parliament, thus leading some scholars to claim that Czechia has a more powerful head of state (see for example, Slosarcik 2013; Rybář 2014). According to the new amendment, to be nominated the presidential candidate must secure the support of 10 senators or 20 deputies, or a petition with at least 50,000 signatures from Czech voters. During the election, the candidate who secures a simple majority wins. If neither candidate obtains a majority, then the two candidates with the most votes proceed to the second round. The newly elected president serves a five-year term and serves no more than two consecutive terms.

Both in the previous constitutional set-up and in the 2012 amendment, the Czech Constitution grants the country's president great powers. The president reserves the exclusive right to appoint the PM and appoint, at the former's request, cabinet ministers. The president also appoints key public officials, such as judges of the Constitutional Court and board members of the Czech National Bank. More pertinent to this thesis, the president wields significant powers in foreign affairs, such as the appointment and recalling of Czech ambassadors abroad as well as the negotiation and ratification of international treaties. In other words, although the president does not replace the role of the executive and the MFA, the new constitutional amendment does indeed posit the president at the forefront of Czech foreign policy. Therefore, the remaining parts of this section treat the president as the main target of analysis.

In fact, the presidential powers cited above have always been conditional. For a start, the right to appoint PMs and cabinet ministers has been constrained by the need for a vote of confidence in the lower chamber of the parliament. The cabinet is not constitutionally required to justify its actions to the president but to the parliament. Furthermore, the right to appoint high-ranking public officials is restricted by constitutional bodies such as the Constitutional

Court and the Senate. Finally, the president's activities in the realm of foreign affairs have been hindered by the lack of institutional and administrative capacity of the president's office. In fact, often, the negotiations of international treaties involve various ministries and governmental agencies, and the ratifications of international treaties involve the parliament, if not both the parliament and the Constitutional Court (as was the case with Czechia's accession to the EU in 2004).

In the lead-up to the 2013 presidential election, 11 politicians submitted their official candidacies. Amongst them, Jan Fischer, an independent candidate and former PM of a caretaker technocratic government, was the frontrunner earlier in the race. Joining Fischer was Karel Schwarzenberg, the then acting foreign minister and leader of the junior coalition partner TOP09. Other hopefuls included Jiří Dienstbier, a ČSSD senator, as well as Miloš Zeman, a former ČSSD PM who now joined the race as the leader of Zemanovci. In the first round, Zeman secured 24.21% of the popular vote, whilst Schwarzenberg obtained 23.40%, thus requiring them both to proceed to the second round. In the second round, Zeman won 54.80% of the vote, ultimately winning the election and thus becoming the first president elected through a popular, direct election. Interestingly enough, immediately before the run-off, Zeman changed his tactics and rhetoric by adopting a more nationalistic discourse and pointing to the fact that Schwarzenberg had spent time in exile during the communist regime and could thus represent 'foreign interests'. Zeman and his supporters, including incumbent President Klaus, (falsely) claimed that Schwarzenberg's father was a member of a fascist organisation. The populist and nationalist sentiments that Zeman catered to did have a positive impact on his campaign, and in the end, Zeman received comfortable majorities in regions that were badly hit by the economic crises of the 2000s.

As said previously, all presidents have historically enjoyed great powers, as granted by the Constitution. However, Zeman's position was further strengthened by the 2012 constitutional amendment, his triumphant win in the 2013 election and the political legitimacy given to him by a popular, direct election. Zeman's position was strengthened even more by the internal division, or near collapse, of the ČSSD and ODS. The ČSSD was split between supporting Zeman and Dienstbier, and some of the latter's supporters even supported Zeman in the run-off. The ODS lost significantly in the regional elections held in 2012, and its presidential candidate also performed poorly. Soon after coming into power, Zeman demanded the resignation of Nečas. This was arguably the first time the president held so much power in Czech history. Therefore, it is against this political backdrop that the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy is established and measured. With Zeman at the helm of Czech politics, the following three subsections provide a more detailed examination of the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy between 2010 and 2020.

7.2.2. Discursive De-Europeanisation

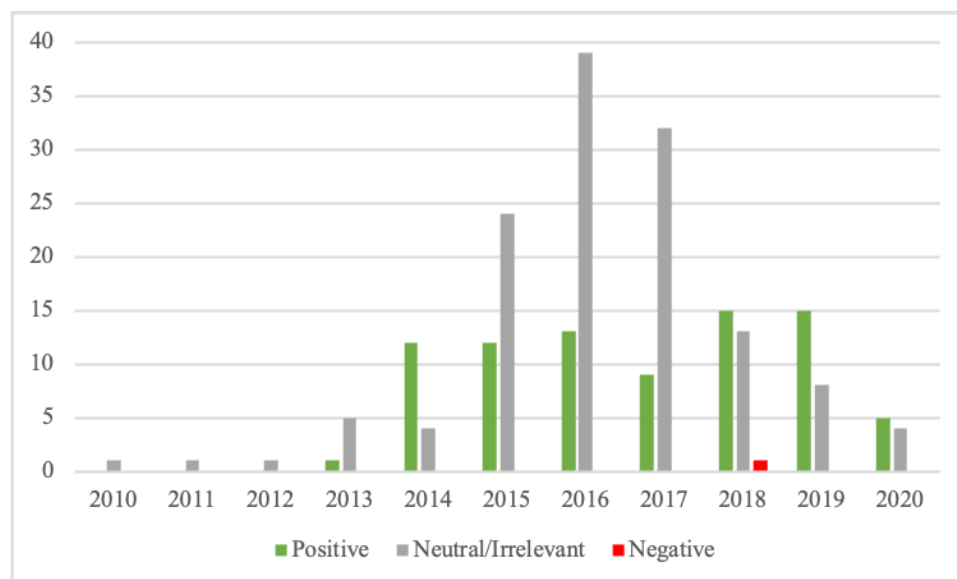
The analysis of the discursive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy again follows the criteria summarised in Table 4 of section 3.5. To reiterate, discursive de-Europeanisation of a Member State's foreign policy is understood as the following: Member States recognise China's economic and/or political model as successful or even superior to that of their own or that of the EU, Member States refer to China as a legitimate alternative model of governance and Member States increasingly provide declaratory support for Chinese positions on key issues. With these outcomes and indicators in mind, this subsection studies the discursive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy within the analytical timeframe of this thesis, that is between 2010 and 2020.

With the purpose of tracing and understanding the discursive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy, this subsection gathers its empirical evidence through the Czech president's speeches, interviews and publications from between 2010 and 2020, all of which are readily available on governmental websites in Czech. The choice to solely focus on the president's speeches, interviews and publications is justified due to the central and leading role that the president plays in Czech foreign affairs, although the president is just one of many actors responsible for the country's foreign policy formulation and conduct. As such, the words and discourse of the president carry enough substance that the examination and analysis of this empirical evidence can yield sound observations and arguments. Last, the timeframe of 2010–2020 covers two presidencies (Václav Klaus until 2013 and Miloš Zeman thereafter), and as such, both presidents' speeches, interviews and publications are subject to analysis.

The exact operationalisation of this exercise is as follows: First, all speeches, interviews and publications given or made by Presidents Klaus and Zeman during the analytical timeframe are gathered. Second, they are searched with the keyword *Čína* (Czech for 'China') to single out ones where the words 'China' or 'Chinese' are mentioned. Third, of the ones in which a mention is detected, a thorough translation by using online translation tool and examination of the text is conducted, and the mention is then classified as 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral/irrelevant'. To be classified as 'positive', the mention of China is in line with the outcomes and indicators of discursive de-Europeanisation as described in Table 4 of section 3.5 and as explained above. To be classified as 'negative', the mention of China is not in line with the aforementioned outcomes and indicators. In other words, the negative mention is critical of China, whether or not the criticism is in line with EU criticism of China. To be classified as 'neutral/irrelevant', the mention of China constitutes simply an example given in subjects and areas impertinent to this research, a use of Chinese proverbs or sayings (which Zeman is known for) or, more recently, a reference to China's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Then, once the classification is completed, the data are coded, graphed and analysed in their entirety. That said, individual attention is given to speeches, interviews and publications that are worthy of in-depth analysis.

Within the analytical timeframe from 2010 to 2020, Presidents Klaus and Zeman produced 1359 speeches, interviews and publications, 215 of which contain a mention of or a reference to China, constituting roughly 16% of the total. Compared to the data gathered in the case study of Hungary (i.e., 128 out of 562 total speeches, interviews and publications were related to China), the data in Czechia demonstrate the relative importance that Czechia accords to its relations with China, which is however much less than that of its Visegrád neighbour Hungary. Referring to Figure 14 below, some general trends can be identified and interesting observations made.

Figure 14. Presidents Klaus and Zeman's speeches, interviews and publications with mentions of China.



Of the 215 speeches, interviews and publications, 82 mentions were positive, 132 neutral/irrelevant and one negative. To begin with, President Klaus mentioned China only once per year between 2010 and 2012, and all of mentions are neutral/irrelevant. This goes to show President Klaus's generally sceptical attitude vis-à-vis China, fuelled by the ideological differences and overall low density of relations between Czechia and China during his presidency. Mentions of and references to China (especially positive ones) peaked between 2014 and 2019, coinciding with the presidency of Zeman and the subsequent intensification of bilateral contacts, trade and overall relations. This peak can also be explained by the introduction and implementation of the '17+1' framework by China in the region, which Zeman has spoken fondly of, as well as by the further intensification, or densification, of bilateral relations as a result of Czechia's involvement in this platform. Towards the end of the analytical period, as in the case of Hungary, most mentions of and references to China are related to Covid-19 and China's handling thereof, all of which are deemed neutral/irrelevant to this research.

What is interesting to note, however, is the high number of mentions of and references to China that are deemed neutral/irrelevant, especially compared to the data collected and analysed in the case study of Hungary. A closer look at these mentions and references provides a better understanding of Zeman and his personality as the main driving force of Czechia's rapprochement with China. In several instances, Zeman made cultural or historical references to China (President of the Czech Republic 2015a; 2015b; 2016a). When Chinese President Xi came to Prague in March 2016 on an official visit, Zeman proposed to plant ginkgo trees in the greenhouse of the Prague Castle, as ginkgo trees symbolise longevity in Chinese culture. In doing so, Zeman alluded to and hoped for long-lasting, close bilateral relations between the two countries (President of the Czech Republic 2016e). These mentions of or references to China, although deemed neutral/irrelevant⁸⁵, reveal that Zeman had a good knowledge of and a general penchant for Chinese culture, which he was more than willing to use and showcase in his effort to build closer relations with China.

⁸⁵ Some may think that such a reference is in fact positive, albeit not directly. For the purpose here, this research here, such a reference is deemed as neutral or irrelevant.

Moving forward, the 82 positive mentions of and references to China also deserve a closer examination, which paints a more nuanced picture of Czechia's rapprochement with China championed by President Zeman and the domestic reaction to this. Throughout the analytical timeframe, Zeman often defended his rapprochement with China; in other words, there was a sizeable, if not growing, domestic opposition to his stance on China. For example, in 2016, in light of Xi's visit to Prague, Zeman defended Xi's visit in an interview with Parliament Papers (President of the Czech Republic 2016b), with TV programme Prima Partie (President of the Czech Republic 2016c), with representatives of the Karlovy Vary region (President of the Czech Republic 2016d) and on several other occasions. The three examples cited above demonstrate that the domestic opposition came not only from the domestic political elite but also from regional political elites as well as the general public. Similarly, ahead of and after Zeman's visit to China in November 2018 on the occasion of the first China International Import Expo held in Shanghai, Zeman had to defend his visit and praise its results on national television (President of the Czech Republic 2018a; 2018b). The opposition intensified to the point that Zeman was being referred to as a Chinese agent, an accusation that he fervently denied (President of the Czech Republic 2019b; 2019c; 2019d; 2019e). Most notably, in a speech given on the occasion of the National Day of the People's Republic of China, Zeman stated that Angela Merkel would be a far more effective agent, since she visited China 12 times, whereas he visited only five times (President of the Czech Republic 2019d). This type of domestic opposition and the level of defence, or justification, are unparalleled, especially in comparison to Hungary.

Although Zeman greatly praised China's economic success over the past years and expressed his confidence in Chinese investments in Czechia and the wider Visegrád region, one key element missing in his discourse, as compared to Orbán's discourse, is that Zeman never went beyond the potential economic benefits that could be reaped from closer and warmer bilateral relations. In other words, Zeman, contrary to Orbán, never saw China as an alternative model of governance. Therefore, he never provided an articulated basis for a major shift in Czechia's foreign policy. The relations with China are simply based on mutual economic benefits. Zeman did not redefine Czechia's previously Europeanised policy agenda, positions and priorities in narrow, national terms, especially given the visible and vocal domestic opposition as illustrated above. Occasionally, Zeman criticised the EU's stance towards China, but according to a political scientist, 'Criticism of the EU served a dual purpose: appealing to populist sentiments at home and signalling to Beijing that Czechia was open to alternative partnerships'.⁸⁶

One China analyst commented: 'Zeman's approach to China was driven by a combination of economic promises and his own vision of positioning Czechia as a key interlocutor between the EU and China'.⁸⁷ As such, Czechia, under Zeman, never openly resisted or outright repudiated EU norms, values, 'ways of doing things' and its overall model. If anything, Zeman used Merkel's higher number of visits to China to justify his visits. However, Czechia's involvement, led by Zeman, in the '17+1' framework does entail the country's disbandment of, disengagement from and circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes, even if not fully. With this framework, China has better access to various mechanisms and tools to engage with and contribute to the de-Europeanisation of Czechia's foreign policy. It is clear that China's mere existence already provides some Czech

⁸⁶ Interview with a think-tank director and academic expert on China–Central Europe relations. Online (Google Meet), 21/06/2025.

⁸⁷ Interview with a senior research fellow specialising in China–Czechia–EU relations. Online (Google Meet), 16/06/2025.

political elites, such as Zeman, with an alternative model to the EU, even if it is merely an economic model.

For China, Zeman was a rare European ally who could push Chinese interests forward and inward in the EU. But this is not to say that he had had no domestic opposition from political parties and the media—a stark contrast to Orbán in Hungary (Tabery 2020). Political elites—notably from the opposition—scholars and informed observers accused Zeman of having taken advantage of the ambiguous role of the president to grab power, in a way similar to the ‘presidentialisation of power’ witnessed in Hungary (Tóth 2017; Poguntke and Webb 2005). As such, Zeman’s pro-China policy garnered a fair share of criticisms, and although he was elected twice as the country’s president, there was an overall consensus on the public’s discontent with Zeman’s pro-China policy, with only around 21% of Czechs approving of this whilst about 46% did not (Turcsányi et al. 2020). To China’s detriment, Zeman created the illusion that he was the sole decisive figure in Czech foreign policy, and this caused China to misjudge the Czech political arena and its general sentiment towards China (Qin et al. 2023). Similarly, China misjudged the pro-China policy of one political party, ČSSD, in ruling coalitions between 2013 and 2021 as the overall attitude of the Czech government, significantly disregarding Babiš and his ANO-led government’s (2017–2021) downgrading of the ‘economisation of diplomacy’ if not a sterner stance towards China.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe several instances in which Zeman expressed his doubts and scepticisms about Chinese investments in the country. The most notable example of this was an interview conducted by China Central Television (CCTV) (President of the Czech Republic 2019a). In the interview, whilst expressing his support for the BRI, Zeman voiced his concerns about the relatively low level of Chinese investments in the country and stated that many promised investment projects had failed to materialise. Some examples of these failed investments will be explained later on in this chapter. This interview is important in that this was the first time Zeman so openly expressed his disappointment, and he did so on CCTV rather than on Czech media outlets. Here, a similarity can be drawn with Orbán in Hungary. Assessing whether these statements of disappointment and concern led to a shift in Czech foreign policy vis-à-vis China falls outside the scope of this research.

7.2.3. Substantive De-Europeanisation

As described and explained in Table 4 of section 3.5, substantive de-Europeanisation of a Member State’s foreign policy is understood as the following: Member States provide support for Chinese interests/positions through substantive foreign policy actions, even at the expense of the cohesion and effectiveness of EU foreign policy, and Member States’ discursive rejection of EU common foreign policy norms, routines, procedures and ‘ways of doing things’ translates into resistance to ‘procedural norms’ and ‘fundamental norms’. With these outcomes and indicators in mind, this subsection studies the substantive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy in the analytical timeframe of this thesis, between 2010 and 2020. This subsection is particularly important for the case study of Czechia, as human rights as well as values and norms have been the cornerstone of its foreign policy since its modern foundation.

Here, it is important to note that Czechia had yet to introduce an articulated reorientation of its foreign policy in the generic sense, and specifically vis-à-vis China. As one think-tank director noted, ‘Czechia’s interventions in EU–China policymaking were selective

and driven more by domestic politics than by a clear strategic reorientation towards Beijing’.⁸⁸ In 2015, Czechia updated all strategic documents, setting the tone for and shaping the contours of the country’s foreign policy and its direction. These three strategies included the Foreign Policy Concept (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015b), the Security Strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015a) and the Czech Strategy in the EU (Government of the Czech Republic 2015). Whilst the first two documents were drafted by the MFA under Sobotka (ČSSD), the Czech Strategy in the EU document was drafted by the PMO. Since 2015 until the end of the analytical timeframe of this thesis, that is 2020, no strategic document with significance or relevance was published. Interestingly enough, when the ANO-led government under the leadership of Babiš came into power in 2018, the new government did not adopt any subsequent documents, despite the ideological differences between Babiš’s government and the previous Sobotka government. As one Czech academic observed, ‘Czechia’s foreign policy under populist leaders lacked coherence; it oscillated between strong pro-EU rhetoric and episodes of deliberate distancing from Brussels, often for domestic political gains’.⁸⁹ Therefore, it is safe to deduce that the ANO-led government still subscribed to most, if not all, of the tone and contours set by these documents.

This offers a stark contrast with Czechia’s neighbour Hungary and the policy of *keleti nyitás* championed by Orbán. Any ‘opening’ to the East, so to speak, in Czech foreign policy meant general cooperation with the East, such as Russia, China and Vietnam, and this policy was justified by the ‘economisation of politics’ supported by Zeman and the ČSSD (Fürst 2017). Former government officials and political elites turned lobbyists—such as Jaroslav Tvrdík (minister of defence 2001–2003), Jan Kohout (minister of foreign affairs 2009–2010) and Petr Nečas (PM 2010–2013)—also played an important role in shifting Czech foreign policy to the East (Fürst 2017). Despite the lack of an articulated reorientation of its foreign policy, as in the case of Hungary and its *keleti nyitás*, any reorientation to the East must be posited in Czechia’s partial decoupling from the EU, or, in the words of Müller et al. (2021, 527), Czechia’s disbandment of, disengagement from and circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes. For analytical purposes though, due to the lack of an articulated foreign policy reorientation, the empirical evidence for this subsection is gathered through the analysis of three issues that are pertinent to China’s core interests: Tibet and the Dalai Lama, Huawei and its potential security risks, and Taiwan and One China Principle.

One of the first effects of China’s engagement with and contribution to the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy, and the substantive policy change or shift it engendered, was demonstrated in October 2016 on the occasion of the Dalai Lama’s visit to Prague. Upon his arrival, the Dalai Lama was officially welcomed by Minister of Culture Daniel Herman from the Sobotka coalition government. A few leading representatives from the KDU-ČSL who were part of this coalition government also met the Dalai Lama in a private capacity. In response, the spokeswoman of the Chinese MFA, Hua Chunying, expressed ‘strong dissatisfaction with and strong opposition to’ the situation and urged ‘Czechia to move in the same direction as China and to use real actions to maintain the good momentum in current Sino-Czech relations’ (People.cn 2016). Zeman initially downplayed the importance that Czechia accorded to the visit of the Dalai Lama; for example, he tried to limit the possibility for the Dalai Lama to meet the crowd on a square near the Prague Castle by announcing a fire-fighting drill. Upon China’s protest, Zeman, realising the seriousness of this incident,

⁸⁸ Interview with a think-tank director and academic expert on China–Central Europe relations. Online (Google Meet), 21/06/2025.

⁸⁹ Interview with a political scientist specialising in Czech foreign policy and populism. Online (Google Meet), 19/06/2025.

threatened to not honour 88-year-old Holocaust survivor George Brady (who happened to be an uncle of Herman) with the state medal (Muller 2016).

To further ease China's negative reaction, which could undermine the efforts of Zeman and other Czech political and economic elites to attract Chinese investments to the country, the four highest-ranking Czech politicians—Sobotka, President of the Senate Milan Štěch, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Jan Hamáček (all members of the ČSSD) and Zeman—issued a joint statement to reiterate the importance of 'the strategic partnership between the two countries' and re-emphasise that 'the Czech Republic respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China, of which Tibet is a part' and that the 'private conduct of some Czech politicians does not mean changes in the official political line of the Czech Republic, and it would be unfortunate if anyone were to interpret it in this way' (Government of the Czech Republic 2018). The joint statement issued by Zeman and Sobotka is of great significance for insiders and interested observers. For one, Zeman and Sobotka rarely agreed on day-to-day political affairs, and yet, in the face of China's economic threat, they immediately set aside their infighting and united on the same front. By dissociating themselves from the Dalai Lama and by reaffirming their official stance, Czech political elites acted in line with China's wishes and defended China's core interests.

Interestingly enough, earlier in September 2016, the chairman of CEFC China Ye Jianmin had warned, in an interview with *Fortune*, that 'if one day the Czech Republic goes against China, we need pull back our investments to rethink our strategies there' (Cendrowski 2016). In retrospect, this statement must have been made in anticipation of the Dalai Lama's visit a month later. Had Zeman, Sobotka and other ruling elites failed to act in line with China's wishes vis-à-vis its core interests, the economic consequences for Czechia could have been detrimental. This example illustrates how China employs its economic statecraft in Czechia to mould the political elites in a certain direction on interests and issues that are deemed dear to its heart.

The next example—a diplomatic spat between Prague and Beijing over Huawei and its potential security risks—paints a nuanced picture of the substantive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy and China's engagement therewith and contribution thereto. Amidst the US–China trade war, in December 2018, a report of Czech national intelligence agency Security Information Service (BIS) pointed to China's economic, industrial and technological espionage in Czechia, and hence identified China as a threat (BIS 2018). Soon after, Czechia's National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NUKIB) issued a national security warning against Huawei (NUKIB 2018). It is, however, interesting to note and understand the backdrop of this issue: As early as in 2013, BIS already identified Chinese telecom giants Huawei and ZTE as potential security threats to Czechia, and in 2016, the Czech Ministry of Interior already excluded these two telecom giants from providing digital and telecommunications services. Yet it was only in late 2018, amidst the US–China trade war, that the US started to exert pressure on its traditional NATO/EU allies, subsequently creating a rift amongst Czech political elites about this issue (Hovet and Muller 2019).

As a consequence of BIS's report and NUKIB's subsequent warning, and in the midst of US pressure, PM Babiš decided to remove Huawei phones from his office and ordered their removal from several governmental ministries, including those of Industry and Trade, Finance, Health and Agriculture. It was only after these swift decisions were made that Babiš met with the Chinese ambassador to Czechia, Zhang Jianmin, to discuss the issue. The result of their meeting was even more confusing: For China, a day after the meeting, Zhang claimed that

Babiš had reassured him that BIS and NUKIB's warning against Huawei and ZTE did not represent the official stance of the Czech government and that the warning was based on misleading information and false pretences (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2020). Zhang further emphasised that the warning would have a negative impact on Sino-Czech bilateral relations and that Beijing fervently protested it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2020). Immediately, in response, Babiš accused Zhang of lying but did not explicitly demand an explanation or an apology (Novinky.cz 2019). Based on this, the Czech government's position on this issue was clear. It should be further pointed out that Babiš had always been sceptical about cooperation with China and had primarily focused on the EU, NATO and transatlantic relations, despite his populist background.

That said, in January 2019, in an interview with TV Barrandov (whose parent company, Empresa Media, is owned by CEFC China Energy), Zeman publicly questioned NUKIB's warning and Babiš's subsequent words and actions (President of the Czech Republic 2019f). In addition, Zeman invited Zhang and representatives from Huawei to Prague Castle (Pinhuang 2019). In April 2019, at the second BRI forum, Zeman reiterated his optimism about the construction of the 5G network in Czechia by Huawei. Zeman's positive attitude was warmly lauded by China, with Xi personally saying that 'China appreciates the President is able to publicly support China-related issues, including supporting Chinese technological and telecommunication companies' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2019b). In Beijing, Zeman stated again that the warning against Huawei was unfounded, a statement strongly welcomed by Huawei's founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei (T. Ng 2019). In this context, the second example demonstrates not only how China uses its economic statecraft to sway the words and actions of Czech political elites in its favour, but also how certain Chinese core interests can and do drive a rift amongst Czech political elites. Here, the substantive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy is a lot more nuanced and intricate, despite China's engagement and contribution.

The third and last example paints a murkier picture, and it sums up the current state of Sino-Czech relations, the substantive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy towards the end of the analytical timeframe of this research and China's ability to engage with and contribute to this de-Europeanisation. This example relates to what is perhaps China's thorniest issue: Taiwan and the One China Principle. In the second half of the 2010s, Prague and Beijing were in the process of drafting and ironing out their sister cities agreement in the hope of boosting local-level cooperation. This effort of pushing forth city-to-city cooperation traces its origin to 2016, when China and Czechia signed their strategic partnership agreement. In it, Czechia reaffirms its support for the One China Principle and its respect for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite these affirmations, the agreement, drafted by the MFA on the Czech side, does not explicitly mention Taiwan or how it factors into Sino-Czech relations and the strategic partnership. On the day that this strategic partnership agreement was signed, 29 March 2016, Mayor of Prague Adriana Krnáčová (ANO) and Mayor of Beijing Wang Anshun also agreed to forge a sister cities agreement between the two capitals. The controversy in the late 2010s was about the inclusion of a clause on Taiwan on the initiative of China, according to members of the opposition of Prague city council, stating that Taiwan is 'an inalienable part of Chinese territory' (Johnstone 2016). To the opponents, the wording of the prospective sister cities agreement (city-to-city level) would have surpassed the wording of the strategic partnership agreement (state-to-state level).

The negotiation efforts took a 180-degree turn as Zdeněk Hřib (Pirate Party) assumed the mayorship of Prague in November 2018. Hřib, who is known for his pro-European and pro-

democracy leanings and who completed a student exchange programme in Taiwan, defied China and criticised the inclusion of the clause, stating that the One China Principle is ‘a complicated matter of foreign politics between two countries’ and thus ‘has no place in a sister cities agreement’ (Tait 2019). A year after arriving in the mayoral office, Hřib terminated the agreement negotiations due to the stalemate caused by the inclusion (or exclusion) of this clause on Taiwan (Lazarová 2019a). This triggered a series of harsh responses by both sides: To start with, the Chinese embassy in Prague called Hřib and the city council’s decision a ‘breach of faith’ and warned of economic retaliation. In response, Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček rebuffed the Chinese threats (Wu 2019). Although later, Babiš and Petříček reassured China of their government’s support for the One China Principle, they did not explicitly criticise Hřib’s decision, which can be explained not only by their respect for the autonomy of local governments guaranteed by the democratic system but also by their own inherently China-sceptic views. That said, Hřib’s decision was harshly criticised, understandably and unsurprisingly so, by Zeman and the leader of the KSČM Vojtěch Filip (Bajerová 2019). This rift amongst Czech political elites regarding China and its core interests was nothing new, as demonstrated by the example of Huawei above.

China was swift in its retaliation (at least in non-economic respects): The country’s Ministry of Culture cancelled the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra (PKF)’s tour in China, although Ambassador Zhang tried to convince Czech Cultural Minister Lubomír Zaorálek that the tour was cancelled at the PKF’s request. Zaorálek, who had previously served as foreign minister under the Cabinet of Sobotka and who in 2014 proclaimed a ‘golden age’ in terms of cooperation with China, threatened that if China did not reverse its decision, the cultural cooperation between China and Czechia would be completely suspended (Lazarová 2019b). Once again, in a rift with other Czech political elites, Zeman urged everyone to weigh in on the potential political and economic consequences of Chinese retaliation, such as refusing to further finance the Slavia Praha football club and redirecting Prague-bound flights to other CEECs (iDNES 2019). Admittedly, when the negotiation of the sister cities agreement first started in 2016, some opposition members of the Prague city council had already expressed their concerns about China’s use of its economic statecraft, in this case in the form of economic blackmailing, should the agreement not include clauses catering towards China’s core interests. Evidence that recently came to light reveals that it was actually the Czech side who first added the provision in support of the One China Principle in the hope that this could bring in more investments and yield more economic benefits. Nevertheless, by late 2019, Czechia’s political will and acts had not engendered the expected benefits, thus causing widespread disappointment amongst Czech political elites across different levels of governance.

This issue was exacerbated further in January 2020 with the signing of a sister cities agreement between Prague and Taipei. This led Shanghai, which already had a sister cities agreement with Prague, to temporarily suspend its agreement for the reason that Prague had violated the One China Principle by treating Taipei as a capital and by signing a sister cities agreement with the city (Shen 2020). Hřib responded in a tweet that Prague was still keen to cooperate with Shanghai despite having signed an agreement with Taipei, but also highlighted that the only major cooperation between the two cities to date had been the training of Shanghai’s fire rescue team by their Prague counterparts, which was financed by Home Credit. In other words, despite Hřib’s China-sceptic views, the lack of Chinese investments in Prague and the lack of realised cooperation between Prague and Shanghai were all factors that pushed Prague towards Taipei. In fact, this type of dissatisfaction with Chinese investment (or the lack thereof) transcended all levels of governance and was a sentiment shared by almost all Czech political elites. In January 2020, Zeman, well known for his pro-China stance, rejected an

invitation to attend the ‘17+1’ summit to be held in Beijing on the grounds that investments promised by China had thus far not materialised in Czechia (Elmer 2020). A month later, in February 2020, the president’s spokesperson Jiří Ovčáček announced that CEFC China Energy’s Ye’s advisory role to Zeman had been terminated (Seznamzpravy 2020).

To sum up, the three examples cited and explained above paint a not-so clear-cut picture of the substantive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy. As a China analyst pointed out, ‘relations with China became a symbolic issue, where political elites sought to showcase Czechia as a bridge between Europe and Asia while simultaneously undermining EU consensus on Beijing’.⁹⁰ On the one hand, by reorienting itself towards the East and cooperating with China, despite not having a spelt-out policy like the *keleti nyitás* in Hungary, Czechia decoupled from the EU to some extent. Against the backdrop of, or at least with the promise of, Chinese investments in the country, various Czech political elites turned their backs on their originally value-based foreign policy, provided support for Chinese interests/positions and rejected EU procedural and fundamental norms. That being said, domestic opposition against such foreign policy actions and discourses has always been strong. When the promised investments failed to materialise, many Czech political elites, including even Zeman, started to act accordingly and differently. This goes to show the shallow level of substantive de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy and the relatively weak power of China in engaging with and contributing to this phenomenon.

7.2.4. Organisational/Institutional De-Europeanisation

As previously described and explained, organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of a Member State’s foreign policy is understood as the following: Member States redefine organisational priorities and structures for cooperation with China, Member States dedicate more foreign policy resources and personnel to the advancement of their relations with China and Member States engage in institutionalised dialogue with China (including with think tanks and academic institutions), which provides for counter-socialisation and counter-Brusselisation. With these outcomes and indicators in mind, this subsection studies the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy in the analytical timeframe of this thesis, from 2010 to 2020.

After becoming the first Czech president elected by a popular, direct vote, Zeman’s presidential power was solidified, and his political legitimacy, at least in his understanding, was greater. His main aim became to weaken or even shake the position of Nečas and his centre-right coalition, and he was not shy about expressing his goal in various speeches and interviews. One might question Zeman’s reasoning, considering that the 2012 constitutional amendment that allowed for a direct vote in presidential elections had been introduced and passed during Nečas’ premiership. However, as said previously, the introduction and implementation of the law was more of a political compromise amongst the major parties in the Czech political arena, and considering that Zeman and Nečas came from different sides of the political spectrum, Zeman was not grateful for Nečas’s actions. If anything, he wanted to replace Nečas and solidify his presidential powers through the appointment of one of his political allies as the PM.

⁹⁰ Interview with a China analyst at a Prague-based think tank specialising in Czech foreign policy. Online (Google Meet), 25/06/2025.

In fact, immediately upon arriving to office, Zeman started to butt heads with Nečas and his cabinet, especially with regard to foreign affairs (one of the powers or prerogatives guaranteed and strengthened by the new constitutional amendment in 2012). The first chance to contest and shake the government occurred as early as March 2013, shortly after Zeman had assumed the presidency. The matter revolved around the appointment of new Czech ambassadors to Moscow and Bratislava, arguably two very key positions. Towards the end of March 2013 (after less than a month in office), Zeman announced that he would appoint the wife of Václav Klaus, Livia Klausová, as the Czech envoy to Bratislava. Notwithstanding the formal reasons given for this endorsement, it was clear that Zeman was paying a favour, or saying ‘thank you’ for the support that Klaus had given him during the presidential election in 2013. Interestingly enough, Klausová attacked the wife of Schwarzenberg, Therese Hardegg, for her Austrian nationality and for the fact that Hardegg did not speak fluent Czech, rhetoric motivated by chauvinistic and nationalistic sentiments and very much in line with Zeman’s rhetoric during the presidential election. Subsequently, Zeman announced that he would appoint former Czech astronaut and communist MEP Vladimír Remek as the Czech envoy to Moscow. Both appointments were refused by Schwarzenberg, who cited as the main reason that both Klausová and Remek were not seasoned career diplomats.

The dispute between Zeman and Schwarzenberg ultimately escalated into a ‘war’, so to speak, as both refused to compromise, and this had a paralysing effect on the overall circulation of Czech envoys abroad. Both claimed the other disregarded constitutional conventions in ambassadorial appointments. Schwarzenberg accused Zeman of attempting to ‘introduce customs that are fairly close to a presidential system’ (Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013), whereas in reality Czechia remains a parliamentary democracy, despite the introduction of a popular, direct vote in presidential elections. The personal disagreement over these appointments between Zeman and Schwarzenberg ultimately culminated in a clash between the president and the government. In June 2013, Nečas’s personal scandal involving a mistress surfaced and, compounded by the already existing clash, Nečas’s government fell.

The question then became who would form the new government. Nečas’s ODS announced that it would form another coalition and appoint another PM. However, Zeman was very clear in his opposition by repeatedly saying that he did not want a Nečas cabinet without Nečas. Finally on 24 June 2013, despite other parties’ opposition (including the ČSSD’s), Zeman declared that he would task the independent Jiří Rusnok with forming a technocratic government. It is interesting that Rusnok was the former finance minister under Zeman’s cabinet (2001–2002) and the former minister of industry and commerce under Vladimír Špidla’s (ČSSD) government (2002–2003). In other words, Rusnok’s exact political independence is up for debate.

The above example shows that earlier in his presidency, Zeman did not hesitate to challenge the government and appoint people to positions in the realm of foreign affairs. As said, Jiří Rusnok assumed the premiership on 25 June 2013. Since then, the institutional organisation of the Czech MFA remained stable and consistent, even beyond the analytical timeframe of this research, i.e., 2020. In concrete terms, every PM had one foreign minister exclusively, except for Andrej Babiš, who appointed Martin Stropnický as the foreign minister in his first cabinet and Tomáš Petříček in his second cabinet (with Jan Hamáček being the acting foreign minister for four months in between). This level of stability is unparalleled in most European countries. Specifically with regard to China, after Rusnok’s short stint as PM between 10 July 2013 and 29 January 2014, during Sobotka’s and Babiš’s governments, Martin Tlapa remained the deputy minister of foreign affairs for non-European countries and economic

and development cooperation. As such, Tlapa had consistently been the country coordinator for Czechia under the '17+1' framework. This level of consistency and stability was unseen in other CEECs involved in this framework.

In sum, unlike Hungary, whose foreign policy and diplomatic apparatus experienced great changes during the consecutive premierships of Orbán, the Czech apparatus remained stable and consistent. At the institutional level, efforts to embed China-friendly policies were constrained by strong pro-European currents in Czech society and parts of its political elites and diplomatic corps. As a senior Czech foreign policy expert remarked: 'While Zeman and his circle pushed for deeper ties with China, the MFA and other institutions remained largely committed to EU positions, creating internal tensions'.⁹¹ Despite the quarrels between Zeman and Schwarzenberg earlier on during the former's presidency, the MFA and its personnel remained stable. There is no significant evidence that points to the organisational/institutional de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy. The only exception is the appointment of Ye Jianming as Zeman's economic adviser. This appointment, as well as its opacity and complexity, has already been explained. That being said, the mere appointment of an economic adviser does not measure up to the level of de-Europeanisation that Hungary experienced.

7.3. Conclusive Remarks

This empirical chapter has, in turn, examined the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy between 2004 and 2010 and the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy between 2010 and 2020 (covering all three elements of the concept as described in section 3.2.2). In short, Czech foreign policy experienced a great level of Europeanisation prior to the start of the analytical timeframe of this thesis, in 2010. This is most evident in the Europeanisation of the country's institutions and procedures, such as the two constitutional amendments induced by the country's accession to the EU. This Europeanisation of Czech institutions and procedures provided the groundwork for the Europeanisation of its preferences and interests, which were in turn translated into concrete Europeanised foreign policy strategies and actions. This trend of Europeanisation arguably peaked during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2009.

Czechia's stance vis-à-vis China started to shift in the mid-2000s during the premierships of Paroubek (ČSSD), Topolánek (OSD) and Nečas (OSD), with the latter two being quite interesting to observe and analyse, given the OSD's ideological differences with the CPC. Arguably, Sino-Czech relations reached their apex during the presidency of Zeman, and they were further strengthened, or legitimised so to speak, by the latter's direct election. However, the overall shift in Czechia's China policy was never a direct result of a shift in foreign policy direction but more so a by-product of general political and economic developments in Czechia. Indeed, Zeman greatly praised China's economic success over the past years and initially expressed his confidence in the realisation of Chinese investments in the country. That said, unlike Orbán, Zeman (or other Czech political elites for that matter) never aspired to more than the potential economic benefits that could result from closer Sino-Czech relations. In other words, Zeman did not see China as an alternative model of governance and did not redefine the country's previously Europeanised policy agendas, positions and priorities in narrower, national terms. As explained above, there had consistently been sizeable, vocal domestic opposition against Zeman's pro-China policy, and unlike Orbán, Zeman often had to justify his engagement with China.

⁹¹ Interview with a senior Czech foreign policy expert. Online (Google Meet), 16/06/2025.

The introduction of the '17+1' framework and Czechia's involvement therein does signify the country's disbandment of, disengagement from and circumvention of EU foreign policy structures and processes, even if the country's involvement therein is non-substantial. This is because this framework gives China more access points to national- and EU-level foreign policymaking and better equips it with various mechanisms and tools to engage with policymaking processes. For its part, China saw Zeman as a rare European ally that was keen on pushing China's interests forward and inward into the EU. However, China misunderstood the importance that Zeman and other pro-China Czech political elites placed on the economic benefits they expected to be derived from Sino-Czech relations, and at the same time underestimated the domestic opposition (be it political or public) against Zeman and these elites. Therefore, when the promised Chinese investments failed to materialise and the materialised ones failed to yield the expected results, Zeman and these pro-China elites quickly voiced their concerns, and some even shifted their stance.

Although Czechia's involvement in the '17+1' framework and its shift in foreign policy towards the East must be posited as the country's partial decoupling from the EU, these changes can be explained by the 'economisation of politics' rather than a systemic shift, as witnessed in Hungary with its *keleti nyitás*. As such, from a research and analytical point of view, there has been little evidence to understand the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy and more importantly China's engagement with it and/or contribution to it. The three issues that are near and dear to China's core interests and examined above demonstrate that, although China was able to sway the opinions of some Czech political elites, its influence on Czech foreign policy lacked weight and substance and domestic opposition to China transcended matters, issues and all levels of governance.

Unlike the case of Hungary, here it is easier to assess and determine in concrete terms the extent to which China directly contributed to the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy and the extent to which Czechia embraced these changes at its own initiative without China's influence: China's ability to influence Czech foreign policy was very much determined by the concrete economic benefits it had been able to bring to Czechia in a positive correlational manner. In other words, should Chinese investments fail to materialise, China's ability to influence Czech foreign policy would be greatly hindered. And this was indeed the case. In fact, during Zeman's presidency and Babiš's premiership, Czechia reverted to its value-based foreign policy, such as by pursuing closer relations with Taiwan, much to China's dismay.

To conclude, the analysis of this chapter has shown that Czechia's foreign policy between 2010 and 2020 reflected a complex interplay between de-Europeanisation tendencies centred around Zeman and several political and diplomatic elites and the pro-European leanings grounded in Czech society as well as other political and diplomatic elites. In this environment, China played a very nuanced role. Expert interviews and empirical evidence reveal that Czechia's engagement with China was less about a coherent strategic shift and more about domestic political manoeuvring by certain elites, such as Zeman. As one Czech academic explained, 'Czechia's approach to China was inconsistent. While Zeman pushed for stronger ties, there was no institutional consensus, and much of the policy was symbolic rather than substantive'⁹². A China analyst further observed: 'Beijing saw Czechia as a test case within the EU. It tried to use Prague to soften the EU's collective position, but Czech institutions largely

⁹² Interview with a Political Scientist with research focus on Czech foreign policy and populism. Online (Google Meet), 16/06/2025.

resisted these overtures'⁹³. A think-tank director added that 'populist leaders in Czechia used China as a rhetorical tool, signalling an openness to alternative partnership while remaining deeply embedded in the EU framework'⁹⁴. This highlights that de-Europeanisation dynamics were often superficial, shaped by short-term political considerations rather than a genuine reorientation. Ultimately, whilst China's engagement did provide some avenues for discursive and selective substantive de-Europeanisation, Czechia's strong institutional ties to the EU and its domestic political pluralism constrained Beijing's influence. The foreign policy apparatus, in contrast to Hungary, retained a commitment to European norms despite political pressure from certain leaders.

⁹³ Interview with a China Analyst at a Prague-based think tank specialising in Czech foreign policy. Online (Google Meet), 17/06/2025.

⁹⁴ Interview with a Think-Tank Director and Academic Expert on China-Central Europe relations. Online (Google Meet), 17/06/2025.

8. CONCLUSION

Building upon the more recent concept of de-Europeanisation and its relevant literature, this thesis has examined the role of external actors—particularly China—in engaging with and contributing to the de-Europeanisation of national foreign policy in EU Member States. It has argued that the influence of external actors has become an increasingly relevant yet underexplored factor in understanding how and why certain Member States diverge from EU policy norms, practices, procedures and ‘ways of doing things’. Whilst much of the literature on de-Europeanisation has, understandably, focused on internal dynamics of the EU and individual Member States—such as domestic contestation, institutional fatigue or elite backlash—this thesis has demonstrated that the presence of (powerful) external actors can also shape the direction and intensity of Member States’ foreign policy preferences, norms and trajectories. Through a comparative, small-*n* case study of Hungary and Czechia, this research has shown that China’s influence, exerted through political, economic, normative and institutional means, can reinforce, accelerate or interact with domestic drivers of de-Europeanisation. In other words, China has engaged with and contributed to the de-Europeanisation of these Member States’ national foreign policies, but the extent and effectiveness thereof vary between the cases.

The central research question that guided this research was: *how and under what conditions can an external actor like China contribute to the de-Europeanisation of a Member State’s foreign policy?* In response, this thesis developed a novel analytical framework that builds on the (de-)Europeanisation literature and the broader tradition of institutionalist theory. It distinguished three mechanisms through which external actors may exert influence: interest-based (material incentives of a political and/or economic nature), norm-based (ideational or ideological alignment) and institutional (formal or informal organisation engagement). This triadic framework was informed by Carlsnaes’s typology of foreign policy motivation but adapted in line with the rational choice and sociological institutionalist logics more commonly used in (de-)Europeanisation scholarship. Each mechanism offers a distinct pathway through which external actors can shape the foreign policy preferences, behaviours and institutional commitments of EU Member States.

The thesis also emphasised that the impact of these external mechanisms is never automatic. Their effectiveness is conditioned by a set of domestic factors—most notably, the preferences and agency of political elites, the ideological disposition of governing coalitions and the capacity of national institutions to either internalise or resist external influence. By applying this framework to two rather contrasting case studies—Hungary and Czechia—this research provided a grounded, comparative account of how de-Europeanisation dynamics emanating from external actors played out in practice during the analytical timeframe, that is, between 2010 and 2020.

In the case of Hungary, the empirical evidence of this research points to a substantial and strategically coordinated process of de-Europeanisation in the country’s national foreign policy. The populist right-wing Fidesz party and its junior partner KDNP, under Orbán’s leadership, have actively distanced themselves from EU foreign policy positions. As shown, China’s multidimensional engagement has reinforced the de-Europeanisation of Hungarian foreign policy: First, interest-based mechanisms—such as high-profile, big-ticket investment projects (e.g., the Budapest–Belgrade railway), financial support and other behind-closed-doors diplomatic access—have provided material incentives for Budapest to cultivate closer ties with Beijing. Second, norm-based mechanisms resonated with the Hungarian political

elite's critique of liberal-democratic norms championed by the EU and their admiration for China's alternative mode of governance, which is often framed as more efficient and pragmatic than liberal models. And third, institutional mechanisms—including the country's participation in the '17+1' framework and the elevation of bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership—have created platforms for repeated interaction and embedded alignment with China's foreign policy interests.

Together, these mechanisms have enabled the Hungarian government to shift its national foreign policy away from the EU mainstream consensus whilst still formally remaining within EU structures. More importantly, this research has shown that this shift is not merely rhetorical or symbolic: Hungary has repeatedly blocked or delayed EU foreign policy statements critical of China, abstained from common positions on human rights issues and promoted bilateralism over EU-level coordination and engagement vis-à-vis China. In this sense, Hungary represents a relatively consolidated case of externally reinforced de-Europeanisation, where foreign policy preferences and actions have been reshaped through both internal political will and sustained external engagement. That said, whether this trend will continue, especially beyond the analytical timeframe of this research, is questionable, especially given that China's offering to Hungary has somewhat failed to meet the latter's expectations.

By contrast, the case of Czechia reveals a more ambiguous and nuanced pattern of the de-Europeanisation of national foreign policy. Whilst the country has experienced moments of rhetorical divergence, particularly under the presidency of Zeman and the premiership of Babiš, these diverging moments did not result in substantial structural or institutional shifts away from the EU mainstream. Within the analytical timeframe of this research, China attempted to influence Czech national foreign policy by leveraging all three mechanisms outlined previously: First, interest-based engagements included promises of economic investments, the development of infrastructure and enhanced bilateral political and trade relations. Second, norm-based influence was evidenced by Zeman's public praise of China and criticism of EU 'interference' in Czech domestic political affairs. And third, institutional mechanisms, in the same vein as the Hungarian case, included Czechia's participation in the '17+1' framework and various bilateral agreements, as well as the Czech government's inclusion of Beijing-affiliated, or perhaps -backed, 'advisers'.

However, unlike the Hungarian case, these efforts were met with mixed results. Whilst some Czech elites welcomed closer ties with China, others—within the MFA, civil society and opposition parties—voiced their concerns about China's human rights record, transparency in bilateral relations and the lack of tangible economic benefits for Czechia. As a result, Czech foreign policy between 2010 and 2020 was marked by inconsistency, constantly vacillating between pro-China and pro-EU orientations and between signals of Europeanisation and of de-Europeanisation. The eventual decline in enthusiasm about China amongst the Czech political elite following unmet expectations of economic investments, political transitions due to newly elected governments and growing security concerns shared across the political spectrum suggests that China's influence in Czechia was relatively shallow and that its engagement with and contribution to the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy is reversible. This reflects the importance of domestic contestation and institutional pluralism in mediating external influence. With the current Czech government warming its ties with Taiwan, it can be argued that Czechia will revert to its Europeanised foreign policy trajectory, extending beyond the analytical timeframe of this research.

Taken together, these two case studies demonstrate that the de-Europeanisation of national foreign policy, driven by external actors, is contingent, differentiated and context-dependent. It is important to bear in mind that China's multidimensional mechanisms of influence do not function in a political vacuum; rather, they intersect with local political configurations and dynamics and are filtered through national-level institutions and discourses. Where external mechanisms meet a receptive domestic environment, as in the Hungarian case, the likelihood of substantial de-Europeanisation of foreign policy is higher. Where domestic resistance, institutional resilience or elite fragmentation exist, as in the Czech case, China's influence may be diluted, blocked or reversible.

Theoretically speaking, this thesis makes several contributions to the existing literature: First, it extends the concept of de-Europeanisation beyond its conventional focus on internal dynamics, and in doing so, it offers a more holistic explanation that incorporates the role of external actors in understanding the de-Europeanisation of national foreign policy. This is timely research in light of the increasing role of geopolitical competition in shaping EU Member States' behaviours and the overall contestation of EU foreign policy, both from within and from without. Second, the thesis offers a clear and operationalisable framework—based on interest-based, norm-based and institutional mechanisms—that can be applied in future comparative studies of external influence on Member States' foreign policies. Third, this thesis highlights the value of combining rationalist and constructivist logics within a single explanatory model, demonstrating that material incentives, normative resonance and institutional embeddedness can all play a role in shaping the trajectories of national foreign policies.

Empirically speaking, the thesis provides a detailed and context-sensitive account of Hungary and Czechia, two Member States that are (often) considered outliers within EU foreign policy. It shows that even within the same region, under the same geopolitical pressures and in light of the same external actor utilising similar mechanisms of influence, national responses can diverge significantly. This underscores the need to consider both external pressures and domestic mediating factors when analysing foreign policy change in individual Member States as well as in the EU as a whole.

From a policy point of view, the empirical findings of this thesis carry significant implications for the future of the EU's CFSP and academic research on this subject matter. As the findings demonstrate, the ability of external actors like China to engage bilaterally with Member States, especially those with Eurosceptic or illiberal tendencies, poses a challenge to the cohesion and effectiveness of EU foreign policy. Addressing this requires more than policy coordination at the EU level: It demands a deeper understanding, both theoretically and realistically, of how Member States internalise, negotiate or resist pressures emanating from abroad. Strengthening institutional capacities, promoting transparency in foreign policy engagement and investing in public diplomacy may help reinforce EU alignment and limit the space for strategic divergence.

Finally, this study opens up several avenues for future research. Whilst China has been the focus here, other external actors—such as Russia, Türkiye and even the US—may pursue similar strategies and merit comparative analysis. Furthermore, the scope of the case studies can be expanded to EU candidate countries in the Balkans and the Caucasus, as these countries could be in the process of Europeanisation and de-Europeanisation concomitantly. Further afield, the framework developed in this thesis could be fruitfully applied to other policy domains beyond foreign policy, including digital governance, migration or development cooperation,

all of which are policy areas that the EU does not have exclusive control over. Longitudinal studies would also help assess the durability of external influence and whether de-Europeanisation is a temporary deviation or part of a longer-term realignment.

In conclusion, this thesis has argued that external actors, under certain economic and political conditions, can play a substantial role in shaping EU Member States' foreign policies in ways that challenge the cohesion and effectiveness of EU foreign policy. Through a comparative analysis of Hungary and Czechia, it has shown that de-Europeanisation and external actors' contribution thereto constitute a multidimensional process, shaped by the confluence of external mechanisms, the domestic political environment and domestic agency. Recognising and addressing this intersection is essential for scholars and policymakers concerned with the future of European integration and the EU's capacity to act collectively in an increasingly contested international order.

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Annex 1: Abstract (English)

This thesis advances the conceptual and empirical boundaries of Europeanisation studies by investigating the phenomenon of *de-Europeanisation* in EU foreign policymaking. Whilst existing scholarship has largely focused on internal political, institutional, and normative drives of de-Europeanisation of Member States' national foreign policy, this study examines the role of *external actors*—specifically in this case, China—in shaping foreign policy orientations of said Member States. The research applies this novel analytical standpoint and framework to two Central and Eastern European Member States: Hungary and Czechia.

Through a cross-national, longitudinal case study design, this thesis traces the Europeanisation dynamics pre-2010 and juxtaposes them with the de-Europeanisation dynamics between 2010 and 2020. It identifies three external mechanisms through which China has contributed, regardless of the extent and the effectiveness thereof, to de-Europeanisation: economic and political interests, normative alignment, organisational/institutional engagement. These mechanisms are analysed in tandem with domestic-level enabling factors, such as the rise of populist governments, strategic pragmatism amongst the executive and weakened commitment to EU “ways-of-doing-things”.

This study draws on extensive review of primary and secondary sources, as well as elite interviews with academics, policy analysts, and former diplomats specialising in CEE-China relations. This study finds that, whilst Hungary demonstrates more assertive, government-led de-Europeanisation trajectory, Czechia reveals a more contested and fluctuating pattern driven by intra-governmental competition and shifting political alignments. The extent and effectiveness of China's engagement with these phenomena have very much been dependent on domestic factors.

The thesis concludes that de-Europeanisation is not solely a domestic, internal phenomenon, but one increasingly conditioned by external actors in geopolitically competitive environment. By reconceptualising de-Europeanisation to include external actors, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the EU's normative vulnerabilities and the limits of cohesion in its Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Keywords:

Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation, EU foreign policy, external influence, Central and Eastern Europe

Annex 2: Zusammenfassung (Deutsch)

Diese Dissertation erweitert die konzeptionellen und empirischen Grenzen der Europäisierung-Studien, indem sie das Phänomen der De-Europäisierung in der außenpolitischen Entscheidungsfindung der EU untersucht. Während sich die bestehende Forschung weitgehend auf die innenpolitischen, institutionellen und normativen Triebkräfte der De-Europäisierung der nationalen Außenpolitik der Mitgliedstaaten konzentriert hat, analysiert diese Studie die Rolle externer Akteure – in diesem Fall speziell Chinas – bei der Prägung außenpolitischer Orientierungen der genannten Mitgliedstaaten. Der neuartige analytische Ansatz und Rahmen wird auf zwei Mitgliedstaaten Mittel- und Osteuropas angewendet: Ungarn und Tschechien.

Im Rahmen eines länderübergreifenden, longitudinalen Fallstudiendesigns zeichnet diese Dissertation die Europäisierung -Dynamiken vor 2010 nach und stellt sie den De-Europäisierung-Dynamiken zwischen 2010 und 2020 gegenüber. Sie identifiziert drei externe Mechanismen, durch die China – unabhängig von deren Reichweite und Wirksamkeit – zur De-Europäisierung beigetragen hat: wirtschaftliche und politische Interessen, normative Angleichung sowie organisatorisch/institutionelle Einbindung. Diese Mechanismen werden im Zusammenspiel mit fördernden Faktoren auf nationaler Ebene analysiert, wie dem Aufstieg populistischer Regierungen, strategischem Pragmatismus in der Exekutive und einer geschwächten Bindung an die „Handlungsweisen“ der EU.

Die Studie stützt sich auf eine umfassende Auswertung von Primär- und Sekundärquellen sowie auf Interviews mit Experten, politischen Analysten und ehemaligen Diplomaten mit Spezialisierung auf CEE-China-Beziehungen. Sie kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass Ungarn einen deutlich selbstbewussteren, regierungsgeführten De-Europäisierung-Kurs verfolgt, während Tschechien ein stärker umstrittenes und schwankendes Muster aufweist, das durch innerstaatlichen Wettbewerb und wechselnde politische Ausrichtungen geprägt ist. Das Ausmaß und die Wirksamkeit von Chinas Einfluss auf diese Entwicklungen hingen in hohem Maße von nationalen Faktoren ab.

Die Dissertation kommt zu dem Schluss, dass De-Europäisierung nicht ausschließlich ein innerstaatliches, internes Phänomen ist, sondern zunehmend durch externe Akteure in einem geopolitisch wettbewerbsorientierten Umfeld geprägt wird. Durch die Neukonzeption von De-Europäisierung unter Einbeziehung externer Akteure leistet diese Forschung einen Beitrag zu einem tieferen Verständnis der normativen Verwundbarkeiten der EU und der Grenzen des Zusammenhalts in ihrer Gemeinsamen Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik.

Stichwörter:

Europäisierung, De-Europäisierung, EU-Außenpolitik, externer Einfluss, Mittel- und Osteuropa