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The Belt and Road Initiative influence on Poland's and the Czech Republic's business operations

Wpływ Inicjatywy Pasa i Szlaku na działalność gospodarczą Polski i Czech

Abstract

This paper discusses the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on business in Poland and in the Czech Republic during the years 2015–2023 as the main "land bridge" between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. The BRI was launched by President Xi Jinping in September 2013 and involved directly more than 150 countries worldwide with a total investment of more than 1 trillion USD. The main objective of this study is to compare the influence of BRI on Poland's and the Czech Republic's economies and the business management of large companies in strategic sectors, as well as to elucidate China's interests in the CEE region. This paper also discusses the potential business threats and concerns regarding sovereignty and the increasing indebtedness of businesses, along with their possible international implications. The article allows to identify the Polish and Czech companies with Chinese capital and the potential influence that Chinese investors may have on business management, ranging from telecommunications and security sectors to food and chemicals. The most influenced sectors are among others IT and security which may involve vulnerabilities not only for Central and Eastern Europe but also for the European Union.

Keywords

China, BRI, Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Poland, Czech Republic, global business management

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule omówiono wpływ Inicjatywy Pasa i Szlaku (BRI) na biznes w Polsce i Republice Czeskiej w latach 2015–2023 jako głównego „mostu lądowego” między Unią Europejską a Euroazjatycką Unią Gospodarczą. BRI została zainicjowana przez prezydenta Xi Jinpinga we wrześniu 2013 r. i bezpośrednio zaangażowała ponad 150 krajów na całym świecie, a łączna kwota inwestycji wyniosła ponad bilion dolarów. Głównym celem niniejszego badania jest porównanie wpływu BRI na gospodarkę Polski i Republiki Czeskiej oraz zarządzanie biznesem dużych firm w sektorach strategicznych, a także wyjaśnienie interesów Chin w regionie Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. W niniejszym artykule omówiono również potencjalne zagrożenia biznesowe i obawy dotyczące suwerenności i rosnącego zadłużenia firm, wraz z ich możliwymi implikacjami międzynarodowymi. Treści zawarte w artykule pozwalają identyfikować polskie i czeskie firmy z kapitałem chińskim oraz potencjalny wpływ, jaki chińscy inwestorzy mogą mieć na zarządzanie tymi firmami, od sektorów telekomunikacji i bezpieczeństwa po żywność i produkty chemiczne. Do najbardziej narażonych sektorów należą IT i sektor bezpieczeństwa, co może wiązać się z zagrożeniami nie tylko dla Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, ale także dla Unii Europejskiej.

Słowa kluczowe

Chiny, BRI, Euroazjatycka Unia Gospodarcza (EEU), Polska, Czechy, globalne zarządzanie biznesem

JEL: F02, F13, F50, O19

Introduction

In 2013, the Chinese government decided upon a new initiative which was enshrined into the Chinese Constitution and was supposed to make the world better developed in an economic sense and also to help promote socio-economic cooperation among the countries. This initiative was named the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Belt symbolizes the investments made along the land road, and the Road represents the maritime route into Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. The land routes that China aims to establish as a mechanism to improve political, economic, and cultural ties among the involved countries start in central and western regions of China, pass through Central Asia, West Asia, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and end in Western Europe (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). Furthermore, the entire BRI concept involves both land and sea trade transportation roads and construction projects through economic corridors. The BRI-related construction projects in Europe target countries that are catching up with infrastructure, mainly Central, East, and Southeast Europe (Gruebler, 2021). Hence, BRI has helped China impact different economies through the power of international organizations such as the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Furthermore, some CEE political leaders have promoted BRI's investments, mainly consisting of loans with their associated financial risks, as an alternative to European Union grants which do not have to be paid back, generating divided positions toward China's loans, as the case of the Budapest–Belgrade railway project which opted for Chinese loans (Gruebler, 2021). In 2015–2023, China invested 1 trillion USD in more than 70 countries, including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic countries (Dygas, 2022).

According to some studies, Poland, Austria, and the Czech Republic are perceived by China as the "gateway" countries for BRI to the EU (Cameron et al., 2021). Previous to BRI, in 2012, the Chinese government had already created a framework for cooperation called the 17+1 Platform with the Baltic countries, Balkan countries, and the Visegrad Four (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, known as V4), which later became an integral part of BRI and has consisted on heads of governments summits, dual decision-making, and coordination functions (Szunomár et al., 2020). China's interests in the region vary from political to economic. China has used BRI in the CEE region as a vehicle to divide Europe as BRI has been described with a narrative of desecur-

itisation, portraying China as a non-security or threatening issue, as a strategy of soft power (Jakimów, 2019). Nonetheless, in 2019 Poland and the Czech Republic, which were important China's economic and political partners, signalled intentions to exclude Chinese Huawei from their 5G networks, also claiming espionage (Kavalski, 2019).

The economic interest and preferences of foreign direct investment (FDI) from China in the CEE region are the cost and quality of labour in specific sectors that China is growing, consisting of a skilled labour force cheaper in the V4 countries than other EU countries (Szunomár et al., 2020, p. 42). From the CEE countries, the V4 countries are the ones showing the highest trade flows with China, whereby Poland has received the majority of the Chinese exports thus deficit values are high too, and since 2012, the highest increase in Chinese imports has been in Poland (79%) and the Czech Republic (68%) (Szunomár et al., 2020, pp. 35–36). Between the years 2012 and 2018, the highest increases in exports were from the Czech Republic (above 50%) and Poland (43%) (Szunomár et al., 2020, p. 36). From total outward China's FDI (foreign direct investment) to the CEE countries, the V4 received 75%, mainly because these countries belong to the European Union and also, they had previously attracted investment from other countries such as Western Europe, Japan, and the United States (Szunomár et al., 2020, p. 42). China's primary interests for FDI in V4 countries are electronics, telecommunications, transportation, and the chemical industry (Szunomár et al., 2020, p. 43). However, most of the CEE countries have little tangible outcomes to show as a result of China's BRI and trade and investments have grown at a slower pace than China's rhetoric indications (Kavalski, 2019). Despite these slim results, China has established key agents, companies, and links in Poland and the Czech Republic in strategic sectors to exercise its influence and soft power in these two countries and advance its interests. It will be discussed how this happened in the following sections.

Additionally, the military threat posed by BRI investments is primarily indirect but potentially serious. It arises from the dual-use nature of much of the infrastructure and technology deployed by Chinese entities in Poland and the Czech Republic. Key aspects include dual-use infrastructure: Chinese investments in critical logistics and transport infrastructure, such as seaports (e.g., Gdynia), railways (e.g., Rail Baltica), and energy grids, can be repurposed for military logistics. Chinese laws, particularly the 2017 National Intelligence Law and the Transportation

Act, compel Chinese companies to cooperate with military authorities if requested. This poses a sovereignty risk and a latent military threat, especially in NATO-aligned countries. Companies like Huawei and ZTE, involved in building 5G infrastructure in both countries, present significant vulnerabilities. Western intelligence agencies have raised concerns that such technology could be used for espionage, cyber warfare, or the disruption of communications during a conflict. The investments in electronic scanners (e.g., Nuctech equipment in Polish borders, seaports, and airports) allow Chinese companies access to sensitive data related to cargo, movements, and logistics. This data can be exploited for both commercial and strategic purposes, including military intelligence. The presence of Chinese nationals and CCP-affiliated individuals in the management boards of companies in strategic sectors (e.g., CEFC, CITIC in the Czech Republic) raises concerns about undue foreign influence. These agents may facilitate decisions aligned with Chinese geopolitical strategies rather than host country interests. Chinese firms benefit from extensive state subsidies and preferential policies, allowing them to outcompete local businesses and monopolize sectors essential to national resilience (e.g., electronics, logistics, pharmaceuticals). Over time, this economic dependency can translate into strategic vulnerability. Acquisitions in the food, chemical, energy, and engineering sectors may allow technology transfer and exploitation of EU-funded innovations. This threatens not only economic competitiveness but also gives China potential control over supply chains vital in times of geopolitical tension. The military threat is embedded in the structural dependencies and strategic footholds established by Chinese investments under the BRI. While not an overt military occupation, the infrastructure, data access, and economic control serve as enablers of coercive diplomacy or hybrid warfare tactics that could be deployed in the event of a geopolitical confrontation.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study methodology to analyse the influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on business operations and management practices in Poland and the Czech Republic between 2015 and 2023. This is an intensive period of BRI investments and diplomatic relations in Poland and the Czech Republic which also shows some divergence in approach and changes in the government of the

selected countries toward China. The analysis was conducted using secondary data sources, including government documents and reports from Poland and the Czech Republic, publications and datasets from think tanks such as Bruegel, academic literature and peer-reviewed articles, company filings and publicly accessible information regarding foreign direct investments (FDIs), and media reports and corporate press releases. The researchers focused on collecting data relevant to: the scope, sectoral distribution, and structure of Chinese investments, the presence and influence of Chinese companies in strategic business sectors (e.g., telecommunications, infrastructure, logistics, food, chemicals, security), indicators of foreign influence on business management, such as board composition and acquisition of local firms. The perceived and actual threats are related to sovereignty, security, and economic independence. Data triangulation was applied by cross-referencing findings from academic sources, official documents, and independent media outlets. The study also reviewed case-specific data, such as the involvement of CEFC in the Czech Republic and Huawei's operations in both countries, to understand deeper business and political ramifications. The methodological framework was inductively built to identify common patterns, threats, and anomalies in the Chinese approach to foreign business management through the BRI. As empirical quantitative data was limited, the focus remained on qualitative insights and pattern recognition from case examples. The observations of business management changes are quite relevant for the comparison of the economic effects of BRI on Poland and the Czech Republic. The objective was to elucidate both economic outcomes and political-security implications of BRI's footprint in Central Europe.

BRI and its importance in the CEE region

The situation of global business management under BRI has been analysed in the literature from different perspectives. The business management of companies in Europe during the COVID-19 period was very demanding, putting many companies and SMEs on the edge of bankruptcy mainly due to the severe lockdowns, global value chain disruptions, and the demand decrease (Dygas, 2022). In contrast, China managed to increase its global economy share between the two pandemics, SARS-1 and COVID-19, from 8% in 2003 to 20% in 2020 (Devonshire-Ellis, 2020). Although the literature is abundant in this

area, the knowledge on how the BRI has influenced business management in Poland in 2015–2023 is rather limited and can be still treated as a research gap. Most of the studies concern the Polish-Chinese relationship in the context of BRI (Górski, 2018; Kostecka-Tomaszewska & Czerewacz-Filipowicz, 2019; Lubina, 2017). The deep analysis regarding the direct influence on Poland in the period 2015–2023 is limited so far, but there are analyses of the BRI perceptiveness which can contribute to that. One of them is the research made by the Bruegel research team in 2018 which showed that besides the Asian region, the countries from other regions involved in BRI perceived the Chinese initiative as moderately positive (Garcia Herrero & Xu, 2019). In February 2023, there was a closed-door event organised by the Bruegel Research Team regarding BRI transformation and its impact on Europe. The main conclusion was that the image of China and the BRI project's perceptiveness deteriorated due to the increased indebtedness of the countries involved in this initiative. The authors shared the latest findings from their research, showing that the BRI has transformed itself from an economic to a much broader strategy with a politically security-oriented focus in an anti-Western tone (Bruegel, 2023).

The BRI is also treated by some authors as an effort from the Chinese government to create global connectivity, diplomacy, and business management worldwide (Syed & Ying, 2019). The vision of how the BRI may become beneficial to local businesses in keeping their business sovereignty is not clear. The interesting fact is that BRI managed to engage many international organizations, more than 20 United Nations agencies, and funds, and in this sense, the Chinese government received a mandate as the funder of the Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC) to assist the countries in reaching sustainable development which China itself still did not reach out (GREEN-BRI, 2020). The important characteristic of the BRI in general is the asymmetry of the investments. The Chinese government strictly regulates and controls access to the Chinese market for companies from other countries. That is why some authors have described the BRI as a risk or a threat to international business (Hemmings, 2020). The aspect of the BRI's influence on international business management, especially on multinational corporations, has been confirmed by many authors (Buckley, 2020; Li et al., 2022; Visvizi et al., 2019). It has also been confirmed that BRI influenced international law and governance (Nurgozhayeva, 2020). The CEE region is still appealing to China's BRI because the CEE region is the gateway to Western EU

countries. In the literature, there are case studies of Chinese companies such as CEFC China Energy which acted as an agent of the state and tried to influence the energy business along with the BRI investment in the Czech Republic in 2015–2018 (Garlick, 2019), Hungary and Slovakia (Matura, 2018) or in Poland (Bartosiewicz & Szterlik, 2018; Choroś-Mrozowska, 2019; Pendrakowska, 2018). However, research on how China has influenced businesses and their management in the CEE countries is scarce.

Some studies focus on the CEE region to understand how China approaches Europe. For example, Gruebler (2021) analyses how BRI has increased the economy and connectivity in Europe, especially considering the 16+1 initiative with the CEE region. Other authors study the importance of China in the CEE countries, such as Kavalski (2019), who focuses on the 17+1 Platform as a broader scope of BRI, identifying the main reasons for CEE to join this platform and proposing three different narratives that motivate their participation. Furthermore, BRI has been used as an internal differentiator of the CEE region, whereby some CEE countries are more deserving of Chinese investments than others, such as the countries of V4 (Poland, Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia) (Kavalski, 2019).

From a perspective of narratives, Jakimów (2019) examines how China's BRI has used narratives of desecuritisation as a soft power strategy and has been successful in the CEE region, emphasizing that this narrative targets and works on the V4 countries' elites who view China and BRI as useful alternatives to Brussels' invasion of their sovereignty. Similarly, Vangeli (2019) has analysed the importance of Chinese think tanks to diffuse Chinese ideas in the CEE region, considering the intellectual work of these organizations as well as the policy knowledge and relations that they have with their counterparts in the CEE region. Furthermore, this cooperation of some Chinese think tanks with counterparts of the 16+1 Platform has served as "a leg and a laboratory for the BRI," at least exercising symbolic power (Vangeli, 2019).

Furthermore, Jakubowski et al. analysed how Poland had a potential role in supporting the transportation of goods on the route from China to the EU, thus supporting the BRI implementation, examining the commercial exchanges between China and Poland, and the cargo dynamics and infrastructure used (Jakubowski et al., 2020). Another study analyses the case of the Czech Republic and CEFC Energy, emphasizing Chinese economic diplomacy in the Czech Republic and assessing CEFC Energy's efforts to represent China's interests as an agent of the state from 2015 to 2018 (Garlick, 2019). However, little

research about how Poland and the Czech Republic have been influenced by the implementation of BRI projects in companies' management and operations has been done. This article sheds light on the ways China may influence these two countries by acquiring companies in strategic sectors and placing key agents in certain companies, including the possible risks and implications of such Chinese strategic moves.

Poland and the BRI's influence

Poland has a long tradition of investment relationships with China for more than 70 years (Burdelski, 2011). Poland cooperates with China in the format designed for the CEE–China cooperation that is known today as the 16+1 Platform, founded in Budapest in 2012 before the BRI was announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 (VSQUARE, 2018). The main goal of this platform was to promote BRI, but it became a gateway to Europe (VSQUARE, 2018). Poland is also high in the BRI Index countries' ranking, placing 17th out of 67 countries. Estonia had only a higher position than Poland (the 7th). This can be perceived as a way to become dependent on China which is not good for Poland's sovereignty. The Polish government approved the Polish Act of 24 July 2015 on the Control of Certain Investments, which aimed at screening investments in sectors of strategic importance for the economy, particularly for energy security and the defence industry. Despite this act, there are still ways by which the Chinese companies were somehow allowed to invest in Polish infrastructure and industry creating a direct threat to the local business management, especially to small and medium enterprises. It can be seen in the trade data. Poland had the highest trade deficit with China of 22,4 billion USD in 2020 (Paszak, 2021). In this way, Chinese companies impact Poland's business management as each of them is linked to the Chinese government. Table 1 shows the influence of chosen Chinese companies in Poland in the period 2015–2023.

The optimal strategy is to keep in the loop a couple of the Asian players, such as India and Japan, and not just focus on China (the old proverb assigned to Miguel Cervantes is commonly used in business: do not put all eggs in one basket). In Poland, there were 3737 registered Chinese companies as of 10th January 2023, and 70% of them started their operations in Poland during 2015–2023. In addition to that, 80% of all Chinese companies are located in the Mazovia region (COIG, 2023). The greatest threat to the

sovereignty of Polish business is the Chinese investment in the maritime industry and infrastructure because, according to the Chinese Law Transportation Act 2017, the Chinese affiliate companies need to cooperate with the Chinese Army (Groeneveld & Pankowska, 2022). As can be seen in Table 1, companies in Poland are already dependent in many sectors on Chinese investments, especially in infrastructure and industry, and the next step is electronic equipment and telecommunication infrastructure. The Chinese companies in Poland impact the value chains and the local business network. This creates a big challenge for Polish companies to protect their sensitive data and compete with Chinese products and services. Some of the Polish companies started to cooperate with Chinese partners, but in the long run, they risk being taken over by the aggressive Chinese capital.

On the other side, Polish companies are interested in the Chinese market, but only 1% of Polish export of their goods goes to China (VSQUARE, 2018). It shows how difficult the process of investment in China could be for Polish companies as the management of the business is strictly regulated by the Chinese government. Companies that want to enter the Chinese market have to transfer their know-how and technology. Additionally, a "Zero COVID" policy of the Chinese government made the operational activities for all foreign companies in China much more troublesome. Business management with China is very specific because Polish companies can do business in China only when they understand and accept *guanxi*, which means Chinese business network and relations as the foundation of business management. There are examples of Polish companies that managed to establish a business in China with the support of PAIH (The Polish Agency for Trade and Investment), but these companies are rather small and medium (e.g., Bella Farmacja or Miraculum) and they are not operating in strategic sectors in China using quite often e-commerce cross-borders platforms which some of them are controlled by the Chinese government. PAIH also placed a guide for Polish companies that want to enter the Chinese market entitled "The business in China: How to avoid the problems" (Pyffel & Radosław, 2013). The Polish companies also need to be very vigilant in case of cyberattacks and data leaking of technology and patents, which happens from China as well. This is also a potential threat impacting the business management of Polish companies. Another aspect that Polish companies need to face up is the high competitiveness of Chinese companies in Poland due to the subsidies received by Chinese companies from the Chinese government (Sarek, 2018).

Table 1. Chinese companies' influence on business in Poland in 2015–2023

Investor	Sector	Potential impact on business management	Comments
China Security & Fire	Security	Very high	National security at risk (Konsalnet was bought by 110 million EUR)
Haier, Midea, Hisense	Household appliances, HVAC, electronic	High	Plans to take over 35 existing household appliances factories
Huawei, ZTE	Telecommunications	Very high	Providing 5G infrastructure. Huawei was banned by Donald Trump in the USA
Hutchinson Ports (China Communications Construction Company (CCCC))	Maritime industry and infrastructure	Very high	Infrastructure construction in the seaport Gdynia
GLP, CGL	Logistics real estate	Very high	70% of the share in logistics real estate in Poland
The Belt and Road Initiative Organization, China Railway, ABII	Infrastructure and transport	Very high	Project CPK – 8 billion EUR – live in 2028
Ningbo Tuopu Group in Europe	Automotive – electrical batteries and spare parts for electric vehicles	High	The first plant of this company
Geely	Izera EMP vehicles	High	The contract signed with ElectroMobility Poland (EMP)
Sinohydro	Infrastructure and industry	Very high	Lublin–Chełm power transmission line, Wrocław's channel waterway system
Zhonglu Fruit Juice	Food industry	High	The acquisition of Appol opened the way to the European market of fruit concentrates
AliExpress	Logistics	Very high	The regional logistic hub in Poland
Stecol	Infrastructure and industry	Very high	Łódź bypass (S14), a section of A2 highway (Mińsk Mazowiecki–Siedlce), Rail Baltica (Czyżew–Białystok)
Nuctech	Electronics	Very high	Scanners placed on the Polish rail borders crossing, in the airports and seaports
Yifan Pharmaceuticals	Pharmaceuticals	High	Acquisition of the insulin producer Bioton
Sunningwell	Infrastructure and industry	Very high	Acquisition of ISD Huta Częstochowa
Zhejiang XCC Group	Infrastructure and industry (metal)	Very high	Acquisition of FŁT Group and trademarks from Boryszew Group
Tencent	Gaming industry	High	Acquisition of Bloober Team, Cenega, Muve, QLOC

Source: authors' compilation of the publicly accessed information about Chinese investment in Poland in 2015–2023.

A good example is the dominance of the Chinese IT business in Poland. Most mobile operators offer smartphones produced by Chinese companies that were not even known a couple of years ago. A similar situation occurs in retail chains such as Media Expert, which sell household appliances such as washing machines, TVs, and freezers. The majority of these products originate from China. Customers have a limited choice of production origin when buying technical equipment such as computers, smartphones, printers, TVs, flat screens, and so on. Another area is the textile business in Poland where Chinese exporters invested in lots of commercial galleries across Poland and moved their textile goods from open-air bazaars to luxury commercial malls in major cities in Poland. These are tangible examples of how Chinese businesses can grow if there is a slot for them to step in. China is also active in international organizations such as WHO, IMF, and others, which also impact business management on a global scale. Chinese banks (e.g., Bank of China, China Construction Bank, Haitong Group) are involved in BRI and have managed to establish their branches in many countries worldwide to support BRI financing globally.

The Czech Republic and the BRI's influence

The Sino-Czech relationship is not new and has been intricate throughout time. The diplomatic relationship started in 1942 with Czechoslovakia, sharing common points of cooperation and understanding, including mutual support, technological cooperation, technical and economic assistance, trade cooperation, and even education and culture (Jiang, 2022). China-Czech relations continued after the Czech Republic gained independence on January 1st, 1993, but more distant and more focused on trade because of political differences (Jiang, 2022). Despite the Czech Republic's approach to China differing from that of Poland from 2015 to 2019, China established closer ties and made more significant investments with the Czech Republic during that period. In the time when the Czech Republic became an independent country, led by the presidency of Václav Havel, the Czech Republic had an orientation toward Taiwan, showing a distance from mainland China. Furthermore, in the 1990s Czech Republic's public sphere was shaped by Havelian pro-Taiwanese, pro-Tibetan, and anti-communist discourse (Garlick, 2019). However, in 2015 under President Miloš Zeman's administration, the relationship with mainland China was restarted, bringing the countries closer

(Szunomár et al., 2020, p. 20). The new administration emphasized cooperation with China which was manifested in varied ways, including more cooperation and promotion of BRI, frequent high-level diplomatic visits including presidents and foreign affairs ministers to discuss more cooperation and BRI, increment in bilateral trade amounting USD 10 billion for five consecutive years since 2015, greater financial cooperation, and higher interconnectivity (Jiang, 2022). In 2015, President Zeman surprisingly appointed Ye Jianming, CEFC China Energy chairman, as his advisor. He was representing CEFC Group, which was investing in the country with an unprecedented record. Between 2015 and 2020, the total stock of foreign direct investments from China to the Czech Republic ranged from 224.3 to 1,198.43 million USD (National Bureau of Statistics of China (China Statistics Press, 2021). By 2023, China represented Czech Republic's 2nd largest trading partner, with Chinese imports into the Czech Republic valued EUR 36.638 billion and EUR 2.438 billion of Czech exports to China (Embassy of the Czech Republic in Beijing, 2024). Financial services were also opened during this period. The Bank of China, the first Chinese bank in the Czech Republic, opened a branch in August 2015 to promote economic activities between China and the Czech Republic (Bank of China, 2018), and the Bank of Communications – Prague Branch was opened in May 2019 for main banking services such as loans, deposits and cross-border trade transactions for companies (Bank of Communications, 2019). In 2017, China Eastern Airlines launched new flight routes from Xi'an to Prague (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025), and Prague became an important tourist destination, with around 619,000 visitors from China who visited the capital city of the Czech Republic in 2018 (Kafka Desk Prague Office, 2009).

Most of China's investment in the Czech Republic had been through CEFC China Energy. This company was a private company offering financing for energy investments, acting as a Chinese state agent, coordinating strategies to raise the political and economic influence of China in the Czech Republic through the use of economic incentives (Garlick, 2019). In May 2018, the Chinese government took over the company via CITIC, a state-owned enterprise, after CEFC's director was detained in China (Garlick, 2019). CEFC already had invested in different strategic sectors in the Czech Republic, including breweries, some real estate, and financial services. Furthermore, CEFC acquired 60% of the shares of the Slavia Prague club and purchased its stadium (Dębiec & Jakóbowski, 2018). Up to 2023, one of the main partners of the Slavia Prague club has been CITIC Group (SK Slavia Praha, 2023), which

Table 2. Chinese companies' influence on business in the Czech Republic in 2015–2023

Investor	Sector	Potential impact on business management	Comments
BorsodChem Group	Chemicals	High	Agricultural and pharmaceutical production under control
ZTE Czech SRO	Telecommunications	Very high	Providing 5G infrastructure
BYD	Transportation	Very high	It supplies helicopters for the Czech police
CEFC	Investments	Very high	Acquired Pivovary Lobkowicz, Slavia Prague club and its stadium, and manages assets of over 1.5 billion EUR
CITIC Group	Investments and banking	Very high	Shareholders of various breweries, hotels, a stadium, travel agencies, and CEFC assets.

Source: authors' compilation of the publicly accessed information about Chinese investment in the Czech Republic in 2015–2023.

is one of the largest conglomerates from China, encompassing financial services, advanced materials, and intelligent manufacturing, to create opportunities around the world for its shareholders (CITIC, 2022a). CITIC Group foundation was supported by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, and this group is considered a pilot for reforming the national economy and a window of China's opening to the rest of the world (CITIC, 2022b). In the Czech Republic, Zheng Fan, an important Chinese investor, has been registered as the chairman of the board for CITIC Europe Holding since 2015 (Kurzy.cz, 2024). This investor has become a state agent involved in the management of different companies in the Czech Republic. Additionally, as Slavia Prague is a renowned club, then it generates revenues for Chinese investors and it is an important venue for China to influence business management and implement soft power on supporters of sports. Table 2 shows the influence of Chinese companies in the Czech Republic during the period 2015–2023.

China has invested in strategic sectors in the Czech Republic and placed key loyal individuals in companies of interest to continue its influence on business management in the country, for instance, an increase in the energy and engineering sector. CEFC invested in ŽDAS from the engineering industry which produces metallurgy, machinery, customized engineering production, nuclear and waste processing equipment, forming and forging technology, and rolling mills technology (ZDAS, 2021). As for the management board, Zheng Fan is the Chairman of the Management Board, and

Wenliang Li is a Member of the Management Board. Zheng Fan has been registered in the Czech Republic as a member of supervisory boards of different companies including ŽDAS, Florentinum Asset, and as a member of the CITIC statutory body and thus being a shareholder in companies such as Invia.cz, Pivovary Lobkowicz Group, Invia International, Pivovar Vysoký Chlumec, TS Plzeň, Protour Precession Rolling Turbine, Příkopy Property Development, Karmelitská Hotel, Eden Arena, Pivovar Uherský Brod, Le Palaish Praha, Rychtář Brewery, Pivovar Jihlava, Pivovar Protivín, Pivovar Klášter, Pivovar Černá Hora (Hlídač, n.d.). All these companies are of economic importance in the country and have Chinese agents on their management boards, making them susceptible to the needs and interests of China and threatening their sovereignty.

Furthermore, in the chemistry industry, BorsdoChem Group, a company producing polyurethanes, rubber, artificial sweeteners, agrichemicals, and products for the pharmaceutical industry, was acquired by China's Wanhua Industrial Group in 2011 (BorsodChem MCHZ, 2023b). In addition to producing strategic materials for the food, pharmaceutical, and agrichemical industries, this Chinese group has access to the know-how of these industries in the region and can transfer technology, expertise, and knowledge supported by the European Union. Moreover, BorsdoChem Group has received grants for projects from the European Union. For example, the project "Innovation and expansion of

CHA/DCHA production at Borsodchem" intends to grow its technological level via investment in research and development to innovate CHA and DCHA products and their production processes, along with the reduction of waste and lower CO₂ emissions (BorsodChem MCHZ, 2023a). As Wanhua is the owner of the group, part of the innovations, know-how, and experience will be transferred to China. BorsodChem Group also operates and distributes natural gas and electricity locally generated by the company's premises (BorsodChem MCHZ, 2023c) which can give it some control of energy in the CEE region that is dependent on the production of energy from other parties.

The case of ZTE Corporation is one the largest telecommunications manufacturers from China that provides wireless solutions and opened operations in the Czech Republic, which is of strategic importance in terms of human resources and geographic location (ZTE, n.d.). However, in 2019, PM Andrej Babiš ordered a ban on the use of ZTE and Huawei devices by government officials (Kavalski, 2019). Regardless of the technological ban, China's influence and potential impact on business management are high in the telecommunications, transportation, and banking services, as shown in Table 2. Furthermore, China's threats have been acknowledged by the Czech intelligence agency Security Information Service (BIS). In its 2023 annual report, this intelligence agency labels China as a major security issue, highlighting the main threats and their impact, ranging from politics and society to finances and cybersecurity. Such threats include China's decisions which highly intertwine politics with economic interests; that is to say, economic projects involve political objectives. Also, there is an indoctrination of Chinese people reinforcing the values of a communist dictatorship model that contradicts the Czech governmental system and democratic values. China also utilizes aggressive trading and lending practices, cyber-espionage and cyber-attacks that may escalate into military threats, information gathering including contents, location, and participants of events where China is negatively discussed, approaching academicians to disseminate propaganda and entice them with hospitality to create a positive image of China, and acquisition of know-how and advanced technologies via joint ventures, manufacturing processes, research and development, and academic exchanges (Security Information Service, 2023).

Moreover, in terms of threats in the areas of economy, the Czech Republic still shows an above-average vulnerability as by 2023 the imports from China represented EUR 25.40 billion, whereas Poland's imports in the same year were valued in EUR 31.68 billion (Merics, 2024). Comparing the

size of imports, making a proportion of imports of goods from China between the Czech Republic and Poland, the import volume of the Czech Republic from China represents 80.1% of Poland's import volume, despite the Czech Republic having less than one-third of Poland's population. Similarly, the Czech Republic's export volume was valued at EUR 2.44 billion and Poland's EUR 3.08 billion, thus Czechia's exports to China represent 79.2% of Poland's export volume. Furthermore, in the area of FDI, in the period of 2000–2023, China invested EUR 1.9 billion in the Czech Republic and EUR 2.5 billion in Poland (Merics, 2024). This means China's FDI in the Czech Republic represents 76% respect to China's FDI in Poland. Therefore, in terms of imports, exports, and FDI from China, the Czech Republic is more vulnerable than Poland.

In terms of security, the Czech Republic has less vulnerability than Poland as the Czech Republic has limited the participation of Huawei in the implementation of 5G infrastructure, has designed mechanisms for FDI screening, and has set guides for public institutions on how to restrict Chinese applications and equipment (Stec & Legarda, 2024). In the political realm, both countries have above average vulnerability as both of them have signed formal BRI memorandums of understanding with China and do not have experts and trained people in China in the government, and Poland is an official member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), but Czechia is not (Stec & Legarda, 2024). Lastly, in terms of public views toward China, both countries, the Czech Republic and Poland, share a similar public view of 19% favourable image in the Czech Republic and 18% in Poland, whereas the unfavourable image in Czechia is just 49% and 71% in Poland (Merics, 2024). This indicates certain distrust and scepticism of Czechs and Polish people toward China, hence China's efforts in influencing not only in economic terms, but also utilizing other means of soft power.

Consequently, China's main interest in the CEE region is to create a positive image among the public. In the Czech Republic, it has pursued a closer relationship to generate prestige among the public and extend its influence on the rest of Western Europe. For China, Prague has been visualized as a place of transit, not only for tourism but also for businesses. However, with the government of President Petr Pavel that started in 2023, the relations with China have been cooling down. The Sino-Czech relations have been freezing in the last three years. Moreover, the Czech Republic has become a closer partner to Taiwan and has even agreed on military cooperation (McVicar, 2023). Regardless of this cooled relationship, loyal agents are already

operating and influencing the decisions of some important businesses in the country, securing their positions, providing information, observing the business environment, and looking for more opportunities for Chinese businesses.

Conclusion

Although BRI and China's economic influence on the CEE region remains small compared to other regions of Africa or Asia, its investment in strategic sectors in the region gives it a voice and a vote on companies and sectors of importance for the region. China has allocated loyal agents to companies in the CEE region to make it a gateway to Western Europe, to transfer knowledge and technology, to create a better image, and to exercise its soft power.

Taking into consideration the above data and the material presented, the main conclusion is that China had a significant and rather negative influence on Polish business management sovereignty in 2015–2023. The BRI is sponsored by the Chinese government, so politics was highly involved in all investment projects. The main problem is still the lack of a common viewpoint on BRI project goals to be achieved by the decision-makers and policymakers in the Polish government. The magnitude of the Chinese investments in critical infrastructure in Poland during the analysed period should be of big concern today. The authors of this article accessed public data and information and the conclusions should give a trigger for the Polish government, the Czech government, and EU policymakers to revise the strategy of cooperation with China, especially in protecting Polish and Czech companies from Chinese investors who are the agents of CCP which is a threat to the global business.

BRI projects can be considered as a potential debt trap which can lead to a problem for the

involved countries in getting into insolvency or losing their sovereignty. The big issue is still corruption, which China can take advantage of to benefit from that in the longer term. Polish business management is based heavily today on technology which is produced in China, and additionally, through the practice of mergers and acquisitions, the Chinese government can much easily set up the strategy for its Chinese companies in Poland or the Czech Republic. The influence of that fact was presented in the case of Poland, where the scanners produced in China were used for cross-border control and the transit of traded goods. It is necessary to add that there is a business asymmetry, which means that if a foreign company wants to start a business in China, it needs to make a joint venture with a Chinese one and transfer its know-how and technology. Additionally, each Chinese company that operates abroad must have in its structure CCP members which can also result in a threat to foreign partners. In addition to that, another important characteristic of BRI investment projects is the trade-off between time, quality and cost. The actual costs on average are 30% higher than the business estimates which might influence the investment decisions of the governments to go for BRI (OECD, 2018).

Another important conclusion is that China stepped into and kept trying to influence international organizations, especially UN agencies, particularly IMF which in 2018 launched the China-IMF Capacity Development Centre to help countries assess their sustainable external debt financing capacity in BRI. In this sense, the business becomes more influenced by politics and Chinese technology, which can spy on the contract terms, solutions, and patents, having access to sensitive data of the companies not only in Poland. The conclusion has also a military aspect. All of the infrastructure along BRI, especially seaports, airports, and railways connecting different countries, may also be used in a military sense by China.

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