



China and Central Europe: much ado about nothing?

Gabriela Pleschová: China in Central Europe: seeking allies, creating tensions. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022, 168 pp. ISBN: 978-1-80037-184-2

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This book offers close to a panoramic view of the most pressing issues underlying the dynamically changing sets of relations between Central European (CE) countries and China in the twenty-first century. In doing so, it mobilises social science approaches to conceptualise China's challenge in the region and aids the reader in their understanding of CE countries' idiosyncratic responses to it. The chapters are, thus, not just rich empirically, they are also explicitly argumentative and conceptually informed.

Each chapter is usefully structured by a puzzle that leads to a substantive discussion. The introduction sets the stage for China–CE relations and lists the key findings. This is followed by chapter two providing a general treatment of Beijing's soft power efforts to sway the region in its favour. Then, Pleschová plunges into dissecting China–CE relations in a systematic fashion. She first discusses Hungary by focusing on its unorthodox China-policy and Orbán's newfound identity discourse situating Hungarians between East and West. She continues in chapter four with the puzzle of Chinese–Polish rapprochement (1996–2017), which proved to be ephemeral yet remarkably intensive, while it lasted. In chapter five, the focus is on the pervasive distrust Czech experts seem to exhibit towards China. Then, to complete the V4 (Visegrád Group) roll call, chapter six takes the reader to Slovakia and explains the initial support for, and subsequent rejection of, Huawei's involvement in developing the country's 5G network. Before concluding, chapter seven zooms out, as did chapter two, to provide a broader view. It mobilises prospect theory to answer why and how support for granting market economy status to China in the European Parliament evaporated before the deciding vote in 2016, and the key role representatives from Central Europe played in this change.

The book is exemplary in its recognition that saying anything meaningful about China–CE relations entails first theorising these ties in some way. In fact,

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this is partly an empirical necessity. CE countries' China policy is diverse as it reflects their own individual issues and concerns in the relationship. Rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach, Pleschová adjusts the conceptual setups to each country-case. In addition, the transparent presentation of data collection and methodology underpinning her different analyses allows readers to track how the arguments are made and on what empirical ground. Though this design makes direct comparability between countries more difficult, chapters two and seven fill the gap by offering more general accounts. Thus, readers looking for nuanced country cases as well as broader regional analyses will find both in the book.

The arguments in the book are strong in general, but some of them provoke further queries. For instance, to explain China's soft power failure in Central Europe, Pleschová stresses CE publics' ability to tell that China's self-portrayal in the region is a deception hiding, among other things, the regime's human rights abuses (p. 25). One issue is that this kind of inconsistency is not unique to China, the other is that Central European publics are likely to be prejudiced towards the West. Pleschová helpfully admits that in Poland and the Czech Republic, China's low standing is related to the high popularity of the USA (p. 20). Yet, this larger interplay between Chinese and American (Western) influence, and the reasons for CE publics' variegated attitude towards it, is not explored to better contextualise the argument.

Another such query can be asked about the specific objectives of China's foreign policy in the region. The book is in large part about China's failure, yet the terms of what constitutes success/victory for Beijing do not receive sustained discussion. The author speaks of turning CE countries into allies (p. 9), of converting "its former rivals into friends" (p. 148), and of convincing CE representatives to advocate for China's interests in the EU (p. 149). The chapters do not explain why these are necessarily sensible goals in Beijing's perspective, or that they are borne out by China's foreign policy strategies. The book assumes, rather than demonstrates, that China aims to engineer a fundamental transformation of CE countries' foreign policy.

Finally, Pleschová reproduces a common portrayal in which China is to blame for its failure to sway Central Europe. Such explanations result from approaching China and the CE countries bilaterally, instead of considering them as heavily influenced by global dynamics. This approach evidently yields fine-tuned country cases, but it also comes with an over-estimation of China's agency to produce a particular status quo in these relations. There is no doubt that Chinese behaviour is a key factor in changing these ties. Another such influence is the stratification of international politics into Eastern and Western camps, and the constraints this puts on China's ability to shape relations with CE countries.

None of these queries are to deny the merits of the book. They are simply meant to push forward a conversation and to draw out questions more fully that the chapters brought to the foreground. Overall, the book is an easy-to-digest yet sophisticated crash course into China-CE relations, with a focus on how and why much of what China does in the region is counterproductive. It will be of interest to anyone looking to better understand this part of the world, and the multifaceted efforts China makes to influence its international politics.



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