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# Images of China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments

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Matura



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## Executive summary

- The paper summarizes the findings of a large-scale research project of **China-related debates** at the plenary sessions of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic since 1993 and the National Assembly of the Parliament of Hungary from 1990 till the end of 2018. It presents **the first and so far only study of the Czech and Hungarian parliamentary discourses on China of this complexity, depth and historical scale.**
- The Czech parliamentary discourse on China is more complicated than it appears at first sight. **Until recently (and even then owing to forces outside the parliament, most notably president Miloš Zeman), notions of China represented a marginal component of wider political debates.**
- Over the years, however, **China has gone from being a mere point of reference to a political topic in its own right.**
- **The Czech debate on China has gone from criticism to a honeymoon period and back to a rather critical standpoint** advocated by some of the political parties and individual MPs.
- Due to a combination of internal and external developments, **the parliamentary debate seems to be returning to where it started after 1989** – to seeing China as a morally bad, authoritarian, dangerous actor whose policies and initiatives need to be opposed, rather than welcomed. **The new spike in criticism of China in the Czech Republic, however, does not return the debate to its state in the 1990s as the debate on China has grown more diverse.**
- While positive notions of Beijing in the Czech Lower House fluctuate wildly, **negative views have been held in a more constant manner.** Despite repeated efforts to promote more friendly Czech-China relations, **there has always been an irrepressible opposition to this tendency.**
- Positive representations of China, Zeman's extravagances aside, have been closely tied to the logic of economic and business opportunities; **commercial pragmatism, not ideological conviction drives this stream of thinking.**
- **Pro-China views have become one of the regular topics used by the opposition against the Czech government,** regardless of the governing parties. **The debate on China in the Czech Chamber of Deputies is heavily influenced by and linked to Czech internal politics.**
- The debates have produced **two unequivocal defendants of a pro-China stance in Bohuslav Sobotka and Vojtěch Filip,** leaders of the Social Democratic and Communist parties, respectively. They were followed by others, most notably Social Democrat **Jiří Paroubek** or Communists like **Miroslav Ransdorf or Pavel Kováčik.**



- **At the other end of the spectrum stand Miroslav Kalousek, Miroslava Němcová, Zbyněk Stanjura or Jan Zahradník from the ODS, or František Laudát from TOP 09.**
- Views on China of current prime minister **Andrej Babiš** seem to be insufficiently pronounced. In the context of clear-cut promoters or critics of China, **Babiš seems to have taken a decidedly neutral stance.**
- While members of the **SPD have been surprisingly silent on the issue of China, Pirates** have joined those MPs who **hold clearly articulated stances critical of China.**
- **At the Hungarian national assembly the importance of China as a topic has been constantly growing. China-related issues, however, are still marginal** compared to domestic affairs or the European Union.
- **The rapprochement** launched by the socialist governments in the mid-2000s and the **'Eastern Opening' policy of the Viktor Orbán's government** since 2010 have dramatically increased the number of speeches on China.
- **Right wing parties** such as FIDESZ and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP, a close ally of FIDESZ) **used to be fierce China bashers while in opposition** and before they made a U-turn following their election victory in 2010.
- Compared to the Czech parliamentary discourse the Hungarian debate is ideologically less underpinned. **Both right and left wing Hungarian parties silently agree on the importance of China as an economic partner.**
- **Human rights and values have almost completely disappeared from the Hungarian parliament's agenda since 2010.**



## Recommendations

- In the Czech Republic, especially on the political right, the perception of China is ideologically driven which provides a healthy dose of skepticism towards Beijing. However, **viewing the People's Republic of China purely through an ideological lens risks fomenting various misperceptions** at the very moment when a critical understanding of the actor is ever more needed.
- **China emerges as a tool of domestic policy, that allows governments to promise the pursuit of the lucrative Chinese market** (regardless of the outcome), **while also providing the opposition with ammunition for criticism** based on China's human rights record and rising security concerns. **Political parties should not fall for easy political solutions, but come up with more nuanced policies on China.**
- The **conceptual deadlock**, in which promoters of intense economic links with China get accused of morally corrupt stances, while their opponents are told to hush their critique lest they endanger Czech Republic's economic chances, **is unhelpful. Human rights and economic diplomacy should not be seen as mutually exclusive categories.**
- **The positive trend of evolution of the debate on China at the Czech Lower House should continue as it brings about more informed and diverse understanding** of the nature of Chinese foreign policy and Chinese ambitions in the Czech Republic and more broadly in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.
- **Hungary should pay more attention to recent China-related trends in the region** (e.g. the case of Huawei and the proposal on the European investment screening mechanism).
- Given the potential for **conflicts between the traditional and natural allies of Hungary and China, it is of the utmost importance that MPs are alert to these tensions and the potentially damaging consequences** of preferring China at the expense of European partners.
- Not only the **Hungarian government but all parties in the Parliament should prepare a well-developed and balanced China strategy.**



## Introduction: Enter the Dragon

Ivana Karásková, Association for International Affairs (AMO)

China represents a peculiar focus of attention in the Czech Parliament's Chamber of Deputies (CoD). Neither a 'natural' topic like the European Union or NATO, nor an ever-looming, historically established problem or threat like Russia. For a long time, **China was geographically, politically and culturally far away.** The remoteness could be pointed to as perhaps the most distinctive feature – **until recently, of course, when it has been rather forcibly brought closer by the attempts of a specific group of political-economic players who have sought to cut the distance, as they claimed, for the Czech Republic's benefits, primarily of an economic nature.** Measured against the development of the parliamentary discourse, these attempts have not been particularly successful – but they have brought China closer to the general attention of the Czech political class and the broader public. **Whether the newfound intimacy is an exception to a long-term rule, or the beginning of a new trend, remains to be seen.** Most recent developments, such as the focus on the risks stemming from reliance on China-controlled technologies like those of Huawei or the drafting of a screening mechanism focusing on extra-EU investment, would seem to point to the latter.

**At the Hungarian National Assembly in the past few decades the importance of China as a topic has been constantly growing.** While China-related issues are still marginal compared to domestic affairs or the European Union, still, **the rapprochement launched by the socialist governments in the mid-2000s and the 'Eastern Opening' policy of Viktor Orbán's government since 2010 have dramatically increased the number of speeches on China.** The Hungarian political debate is mostly one-dimensional with economic issues dominating the agenda and value-based topics playing only a minor role. **Meanwhile ideology does not play any role, as both right and left wing parties silently agree on the importance of China as an economic partner, and topics like human rights are only mentioned by small liberal parties.** This, however, has not always been the case; **right wing parties such as FIDESZ and KDNP used to be fierce China bashers while in opposition and before they made a U-turn following their election victory in 2010.**

As ChinfluenCE<sup>1</sup> found through an **extensive mapping of media discourse on China**, the public discourse as presented by the media in the Czech Republic and Hungary is heavily politicized and stereotyped. Pro-Chinese attitudes have gradually become political mainstream in some of the well-established Czech political parties<sup>2</sup>. This is at least partially a result of consistent 'cultivation' of certain political groups by the envoys of Chinese interests which include not only official representatives of the People's Republic of China, but also Czech business groups with increasing economic interests in China. The Hungarian media discourse on China is mostly one-dimensional, focusing overwhelmingly on economic issues and the development of bilateral relations, while topics like political values, human rights, minorities or democracy are almost completely missing from the agenda. The Hungarian opposition has been silent on the issue of China, thus the discourse has been heavily influenced by government-connected agenda setters.

**The analysis of media outputs and subsequent network analysis in the Czech Republic and Hungary has revealed a complex web of relationships**

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1 The ChinfluenCE project maps China's influence in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland through e.g. media discourse mapping, study of links between Czech political and economic elites and pro-China business, etc. For more information on the project see [www.chinfluence.eu](http://www.chinfluence.eu).

2 Ivana Karásková, Tamás Matura, Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík. *Central Europe for Sale: Politics of China's Influence*. Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), 2018. <http://www.amo.cz/cs/chinfluence/central-europe-sale-politics-chinas-influence/>.



**which influence China policy in the two countries.** The authors thus decided to focus on **a systematic mapping of both Parliaments' plenary sessions on China** which should enable a determination of political parties' views, identify new agenda setters<sup>3</sup> and serve to dig out China-related themes and topics which occur and would otherwise have gone unnoticed by general public.

**This policy paper presents the first and so far only study of the Czech and Hungarian parliamentary discourses on China of this complexity, depth and historical scale. The Czech team researched stenographic transcriptions of political debates which were held in the Czech parliament** (in the form of plenary sessions at the Chamber of Deputies<sup>4</sup> and plenary sessions at the Senate) **for the past 25 years**, since the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the formation of an independent Czech Republic, creating a dataset unique in its timespan. Researchers used the digital parliamentary database<sup>5</sup> to obtain stenographic transcripts<sup>6</sup> of references related to China. More than 441 transcripts of Czech parliamentary sessions were then read and 151 key agenda setters (members of the Parliament, ministers of governments, etc.) were identified. The research also focused on the identification of topics of the debates, sentiments of actors (neutral, positive or negative to China<sup>7</sup>), sentiments of political parties and keywords showing specific interests of policy representatives. During the process, researchers were in frequent contact with the parliamentary library as they discovered missing documents, deficiencies in search algorithms, wrongly classified documents, etc., and had to invent a number of creative solutions (e.g. dividing the search phrases to overcome a problem of search errors occurring each time more than 1,000 search results were found, using scraping tools, etc.).

Simultaneously, **the Hungarian team mapped China-related debates that were held between 1990 and late 2018 in the Hungarian unicameral parliament.** They identified altogether 1,090 occasions when China was mentioned at the plenary sessions of the Parliament during the last eight terms. Around two-thirds of these occasions were (as in the Czech case) not relevant (e.g. MPs quoted Chinese proverbs, or China was merely mentioned in a list of countries). Eventually, the team found 125 China-related topics (e.g. China's foreign relations, Tibet, Chinese fake products, Hungarian visa policy towards the Chinese, etc.) mentioned in the past 28 years. Obtaining the data was not easy, as records of the national assembly were available for online search only after 1998. For the first two parliamentary cycles (1990-1994 and 1994-1998) speeches were uploaded as well, but no search engine was available for separating speeches on China from the whole dataset (data were packed in separate files speech-by-speech). Only after an extra effort was it possible to obtain the data in a text format which could then be processed outside of the library building.

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3 Czech parliamentary elections in October 2017 brought into politics new parties. Hungarian parliamentary elections were held in April 2018 with no new parties acquiring representation.

4 Given the fact that Hungary has a unicameral parliament and for comparative reasons, this policy paper brings about only the results of mapping China-related debates at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. Debates on China at the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic are to be analyzed and the results will be released to the public in a separate policy paper (in Czech).

5 Digital database could be accessed via <http://www.psp.cz/sqw/hp.sqw?k=183>. Search terms "Čína Číně Čínu Číny Činou čínský čínská čínské Číňan Číňané" were applied to the database of stenographic transcripts and irrelevant references (searching errors) were manually deleted from the dataset.

6 Researchers focused solely on stenographic records of speeches in the Parliament and excluded documents which neither allowed to determine the author of the speech act nor carried any measurable sentiment (e.g. resolutions of the Chamber of Deputies, Decisions of the Speaker, EU documents, etc.).

7 To determine the polarity of texts, the researchers used the same methodology as was applied during the earlier phases of ChinfluenCE media discourse mapping. For academic text on methodology see e.g. Ivana Karásková, "China's Image in the Czech Republic: Media Reflection of Elite Policies" (conference paper, 12th Pan-European conference on International Relations, 2018).





initiatives need to be opposed, rather than welcomed. Only this time, the discourse has the potential of developing in the direction of the formulation of a clear-cut 'China threat', typically related to or stemming from seemingly intrusive and dangerous Chinese influence.

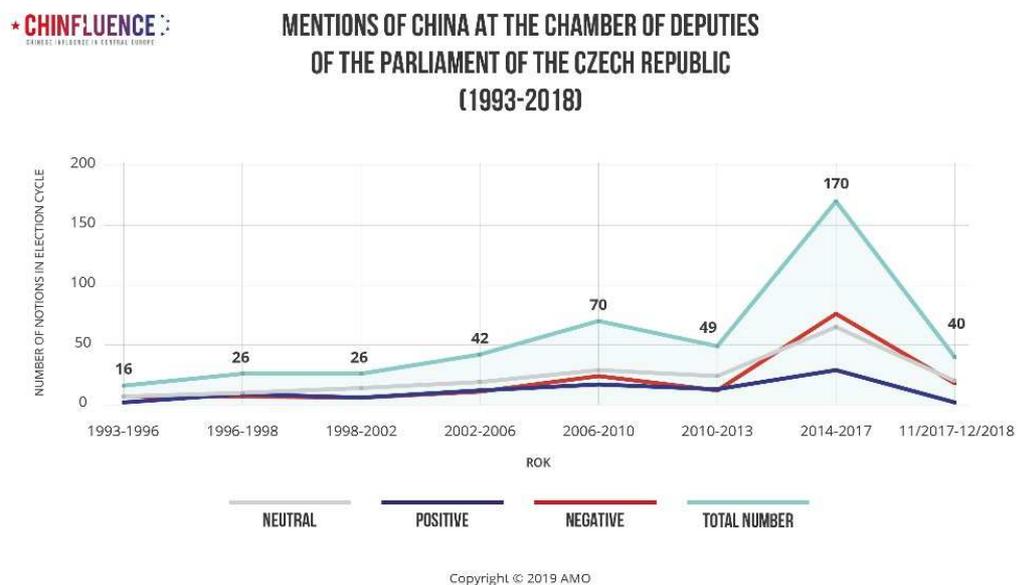


## China in the Czech Chamber of Deputies: Cloudy with a Chance of Business Opportunities?

Ivana Karásková and Alžběta Bajerová, Association for International Affairs (AMO)

**The Czech Parliament started its independent existence in 1993 with a strongly imbued sense of politically constructed right and wrong, with China apparently falling into the latter category.** Not that the People's Republic of China was discussed too often on the parliamentary premises during the first election cycle (1993-1996): only 16 mentions were made of it, and in almost half of them China was not discussed substantively, but rather as an example of a general trend or was brought up in a set of other actors.<sup>8</sup>

**Graph 2: Mentions of China at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic (1993-2018)**



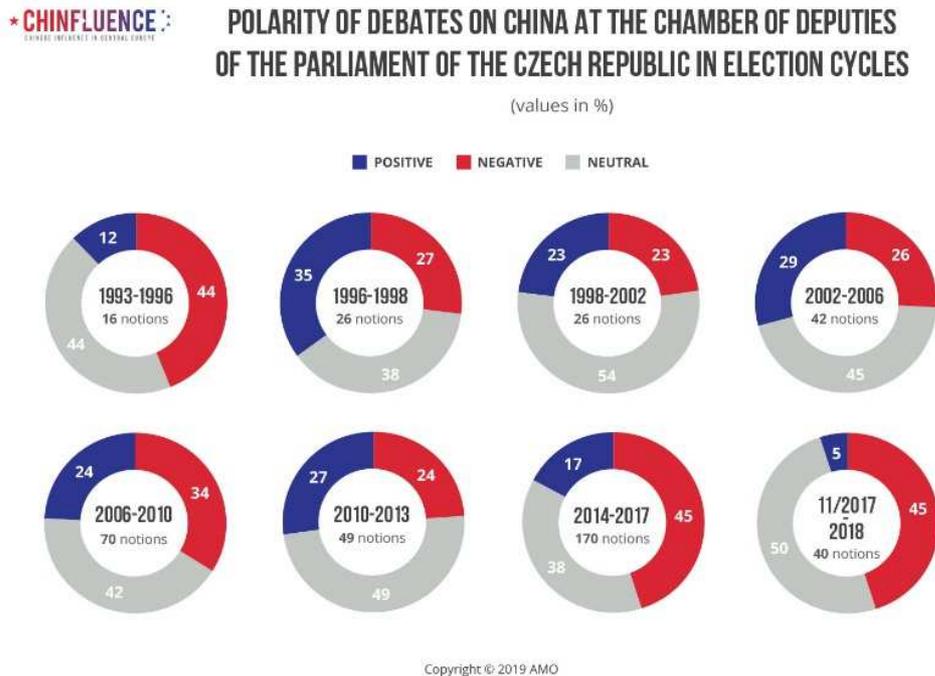
Significantly, however, **just over 10 % of the utterances were positive during the first election cycle.** The positiveness was at the same time limited to examples<sup>9</sup> as well, with the notable exception of a Communist MP raising the issue of Prime Minister's Václav Klaus' visit to Taiwan and the negative effect that it might have on relations with China

8 E.g.: "If a former Communist party member was voted to lead our country, we would become the only country in Europe comparable with such states as Castro's Cuba or Communist China." Notion of MP Oldřich Vřcha, Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, 26. 1. 1993, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1993ps/stenprot/002schuz/so02006.htm>. Or "Deployment of forces in Yugoslavia was approved by UN Security Council, so it was decided by superpowers such as Russia or China." Notion of MP Jiří Payne, Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, 8. 12. 1993, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1993ps/stenprot/015schuz/so15049.htm>.

9 "Trade with CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and China dropped, these are actually one of the few promising territories, if we take into account the discriminative approach of the West." Notion of MP Zdeněk Vortlíček, Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, 8. 7. 1994, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1993ps/stenprot/021schuz/so21019.htm>.



Graph 3: Polarity of debates on China at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic in election cycles



This proportion changed considerable **during the second Václav Klaus government** from 1996 till 1998 when, for the first time, **the sum of positive references to China outnumbered the negative notions**. The Czech Republic found itself facing a significant slow-down in its economic growth – and, not surprisingly, in almost half of the cases the discussants in the CoD mentioned China in relation to the Czech economy<sup>10</sup>, pointing to its role as a potential export market.

The parliamentary discourse on China then became effectively **‘neutralized’** during Miloš Zeman’s term as prime minister from 1998 to 2002. The proportion of neutral references to the country reached a new (and never again achieved) high of 54 %. Not surprisingly, almost all mentions of China were made using it as an example or one of several references. **Astonishingly, the state of human rights in the PRC ceased to be a topic**. The general trend continued during the successive Social Democratic governments of Vladimír Špidla, Stanislav Gross and Jiří Paroubek from 2002 to 2006. **China’s economic rise started being reflected and used as a potential prod to reinvigorate the Czech (and more broadly European) economy**. Out of 42 mentions of the PRC, only 3 concerned human rights during this period.

The tumultuous period of **Mirek Topolánek’s governments** (and those of his successors, after the coalition led by him fell in 2009 in the midst of the Czech Republic’s EU presidency) demonstrated a trend that came to be repeated and further exacerbated during latter periods. On the one hand, China continued to be heralded as a unique economic opportunity, especially in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath which Beijing handled relatively more successfully than the Western powers. **A recurrent theme of economic diplomacy (and its alleged hindrance by the human rights agenda) took hold in the Czech political discourse**. On the other hand, at the very same moment, the Olympic games in

<sup>10</sup> However, all the notions were rather vague, again mainly falling into the category of an example or a brief utterance about China’s economic potential.



Beijing created a good opportunity for critical voices to vent their disappointment with and concern over the state of human rights in the PRC.

**The following period of prime minister Nečas's government continued the trend, but it is not insignificant that it was during his time in office that the share of positive accounts of China outnumbered the critical voices. Nečas himself was the first politician in the Czech government to push for a more intense economic relationship with China while suggesting giving up the promotion of human rights.** Nečas branded the previous Czech human rights-oriented foreign policy to China pejoratively as “dalailamism” (creating a neologism) in 2012, although he did not pronounce it at the Parliament but at a trade fair in Brno. There, he mentioned China's investment potential and branded the country as a “strategic opportunity”. Still, even during this period China continued primarily to be a point of reference for more general trends, such as perceived economic opportunities in the BRICS countries, rather than a topic (much less a concern) in its own right. The trend, however, started and mirrored China's interest in the region in the form of the so far rather vague 16+1 platform. China was therefore regarded as a great opportunity, but still within rather fuzzy outlines.

**The stale waters of the China agenda in the Czech Parliament stirred dynamically in the following period.** The government of Bohuslav Sobotka played a central role as it focused on intensifying relations with Beijing in order to attract investment and increase Czech exports to China. Sobotka himself frequently spoke at the Parliament in favor of China and repeatedly listed his government's achievements in solidifying the relations. His position partly stemmed from his role as the prime minister, partly from the fact that he was often forced to defend the pro-China policy of his government from opposition at the Parliament. Sobotka's government also came up with a redefinition of the foreign policy agenda. The process involved a fierce debate on human rights being omitted from the agenda. Debates on the issue continued later on and were triggered by various other documents concerning China.

Although the role of Sobotka was crucial in setting the tone on China in a given time period, it was perhaps less publicly visible than the actions of the first directly elected Czech president **Miloš Zeman**. He embraced China in a style comparable in a Central European context to that of the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, complementing the trend of Sobotka's strongly pro-China government. Zeman's dramatic embrace of the pro-China stance, culminating with the controversial visit of the PRC's president Xi Jinping to Prague in 2016, more than tripled the number of instances China was mentioned in the CoD debates. **For the first time in contemporary Czech history, China was not primarily discussed in references to other issues, but rather as a topic in its own right** – but definitely not in the way the Czech president intended. **Almost three-times as many mentions of China in the CoD were negative than positive.** The negative mentions focused no longer just on the issue of human rights in the country or specifically Tibet (though these were given renewed relevance in the tussle over the Dalai Lama's visit to Prague half a year after the PRC's leader), but rather dealt with a set of **new problems**, mainly the presence and activities of pro-Chinese ‘protesters’ during Xi Jinping's visit and too many security measures. As China grew closer, it provoked an irritated reaction.

Moreover, the rise in negative mentions on China seems to be a continuing case. **During the last measured period** (November 2017 till the end of 2018), **China has been mentioned in the CoD more often than during a typical four-year term.** Significantly, **negative mentions outweigh positive ones by a ratio of 9 to 1.** New negative topics arose in this period, mainly revolving around China's intelligence service operating on Czech territory and Czech counterintelligence security concerns. While half of the utterances in this period were neutral (typically those related to economics), it is hard not to conclude that the Czech parliamentary discourse has settled on a new standard – one that is



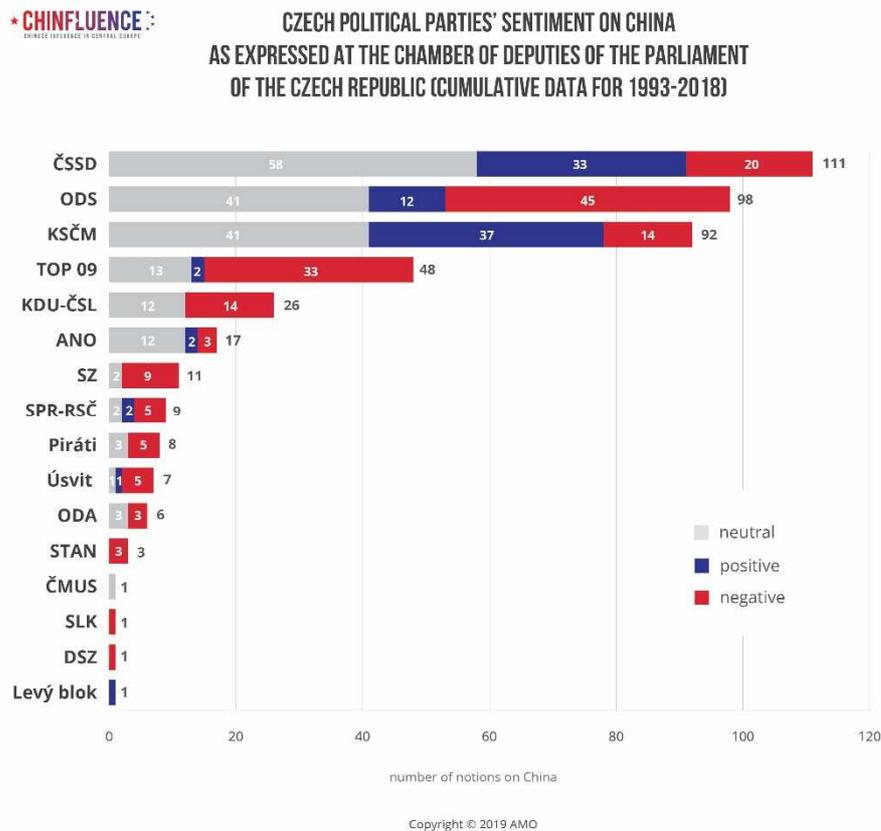
critical towards China and suspicious of its motives. Looking for a symbol of this turn, the case of Huawei might represent not just an isolated outlier but rather a more general illustration of a larger trend.



## Who's Who in the Czech Parliamentary Discourse on China

Czech political parties in the CoD represent various positions towards China – from almost uniformly critical (such as the TOP 09 or - though admittedly less resolutely - the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana - ODS) to generally forthcoming (such as the members of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy - KSČM) or, to a slightly lesser degree, Czech Social Democrats (Česká strana sociálně demokratická - ČSSD).

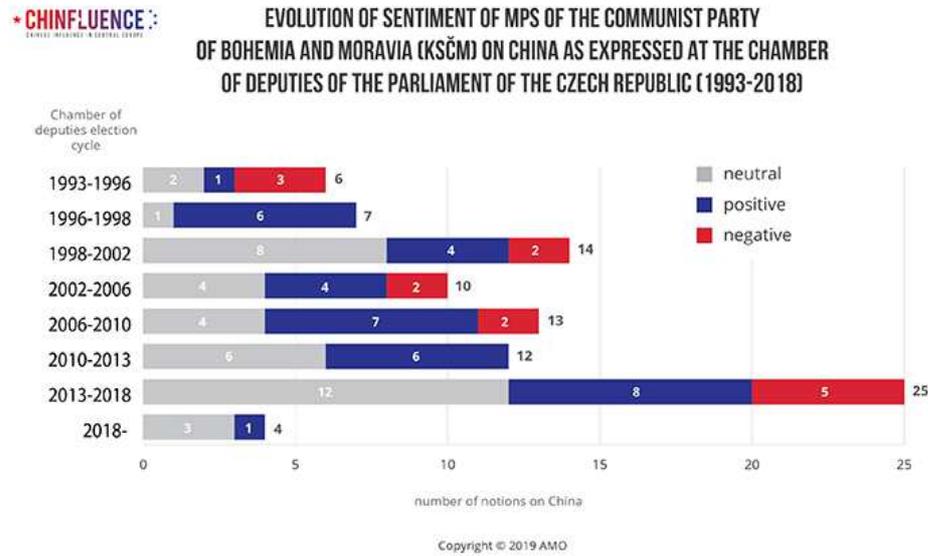
**Graph 4: Czech political parties' sentiment on China as expressed at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic (cumulative data for 1993-2018)**



The apparent simplicity of the right-left divide is at the same time generally valid – and slightly misleading. It is true that TOP 09 and ODS - until the disintegration of the Czech political system in 2013, the leading parties of the moderate right - have always been critical of China due to a strongly embedded ideological aversion to its political system, while both left-wing parties have shown opposite tendencies. At the same time, the parties (with the exception of TOP 09 which, however, has been a part of the political spectrum for a much shorter period of time than its aforementioned peers) have been both more internally diverse, and more flexible over the course of time than the first image would warrant. The Communist party, on the other hand, is by far the most reliable and long-term positive voice on China in the Czech parliament. As the graph indicates, there are occasional opinion deviations, however it needs to be highlighted that those include just brief and policy-unrelated mentions, such as listing the world's biggest polluters or giving examples of unethical treatment of animals.



Graph 5: Evolution of sentiment of MPs of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) on China as expressed at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic (1993-2018)

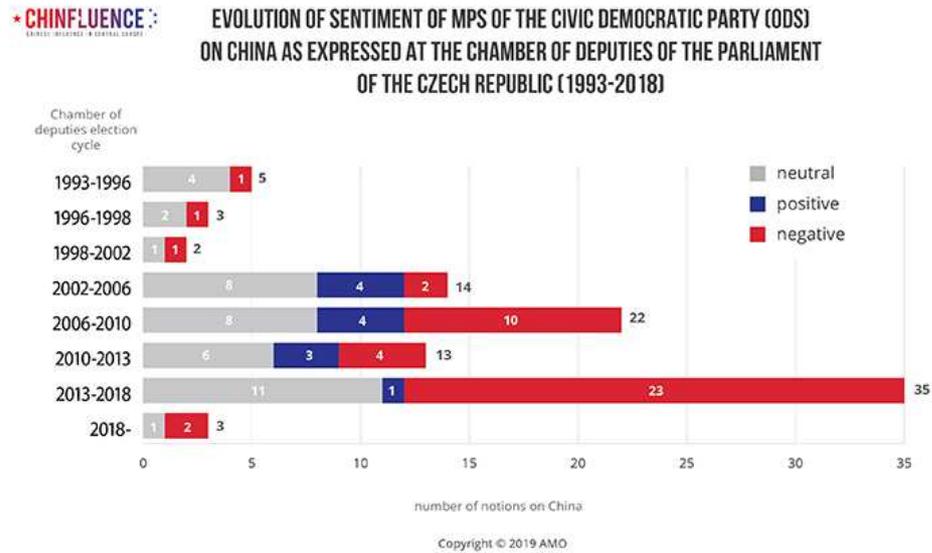


On the political right, **ODS, just like TOP 09** under both Karel Schwarzenberg and Miroslav Kalousek, **broadly illustrates an ideological opposition to the PRC and its political system** in the Czech Parliament. While its members may not have shared such **pro-Dalai Lama attitudes as the Green Party** (Strana zelených - SZ) during its stint in the government, they do represent a typical feature of the center-right part of the Czech political spectrum that sees China through the prism of anti-communism. However, **even the solidly China-skeptic ODS exhibits traits of what might be called ‘pragmatic commercialism’**, as evident during the period when **Mirek Topolánek<sup>11</sup> and Petr Nečas** stood at the helm of the government. Both prime ministers **found it hard to escape the pull of a rapidly growing Chinese economy, and have actually indulged in one of the formative ideas of the post-2008 financial crisis period, that of a tension between external promotion of human rights and the interests of economic diplomacy, thus inadvertently paving the way for Miloš Zeman’s and Bohuslav Sobotka’s government’s much more heavy-handed reformulation of this idea.**

<sup>11</sup> While Topolánek was an economic pragmatist, his stance was much more nuanced. During his premiership, he met with the Dalai Lama and refused to travel to the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008.



Graph 6: Evolution of sentiment of MPs of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) on China as expressed at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic (1993-2018)

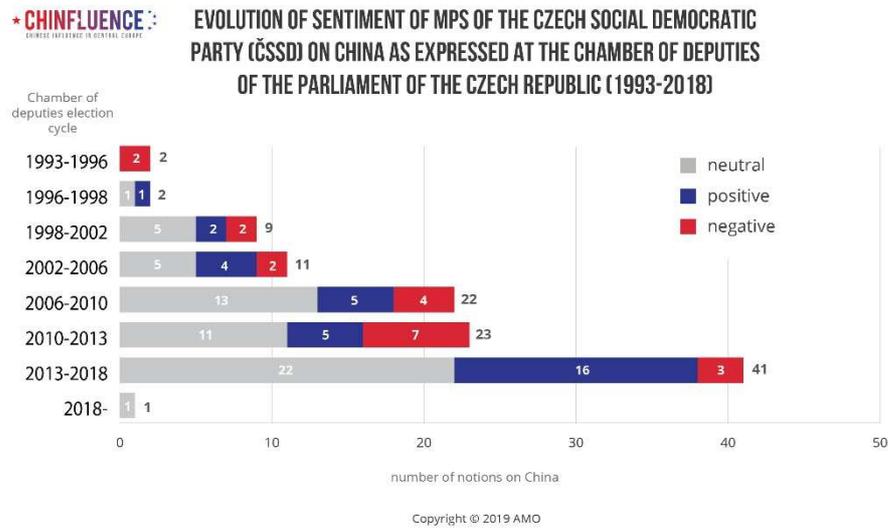


The case of the current president highlights the importance of changing attitudes with the passing of time. **When speaking about China during their time in opposition** - under Zeman's leadership - in 1993-1996, **the Social Democrats actually sounded much like the ODS**. That shows that Zeman had not always harbored strong pro-China views, but much like Topolánek or Nečas he failed to escape the 'Chinese charm offensive' later on. Zeman usually receives considerable attention from Xi Jinping (unlike from Western leaders), which contributes to his friendly attitude towards China.

**In later periods** (2006-2010 or 2010-2013) **the party**, while clearly exhibiting mostly neutral-to-positive attitudes towards Beijing, **contained voices standing on the other side of the divide**. These were, however, effectively neutralized and replaced by an almost unanimously positive message spread by the party during the stint of prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka.



**Graph 7: Evolution of sentiment of MPs of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) on China as expressed at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic (1993-2018)**



Based on this finding, just as on the skyrocketing number of critical mentions of China by ODS members while in opposition from 2013 till 2017, it can be convincingly argued that, among other roles, **pro-China views have actually become one of the regular topics used by the opposition against the government, regardless of the governing parties.** Governments on the other hand, tend to promote a moderate, pro-business agenda. More generally, this observation leads to a conclusion that, to a greater rather than lesser degree, **the debate on China in the CoD is heavily influenced by and linked to Czech internal politics.**

An even more detailed insight into the parliamentary debate can be provided by looking at individual politicians<sup>12</sup> - a perspective that has an advantage of differentiating between politicians in a position of power and the rest of MPs.

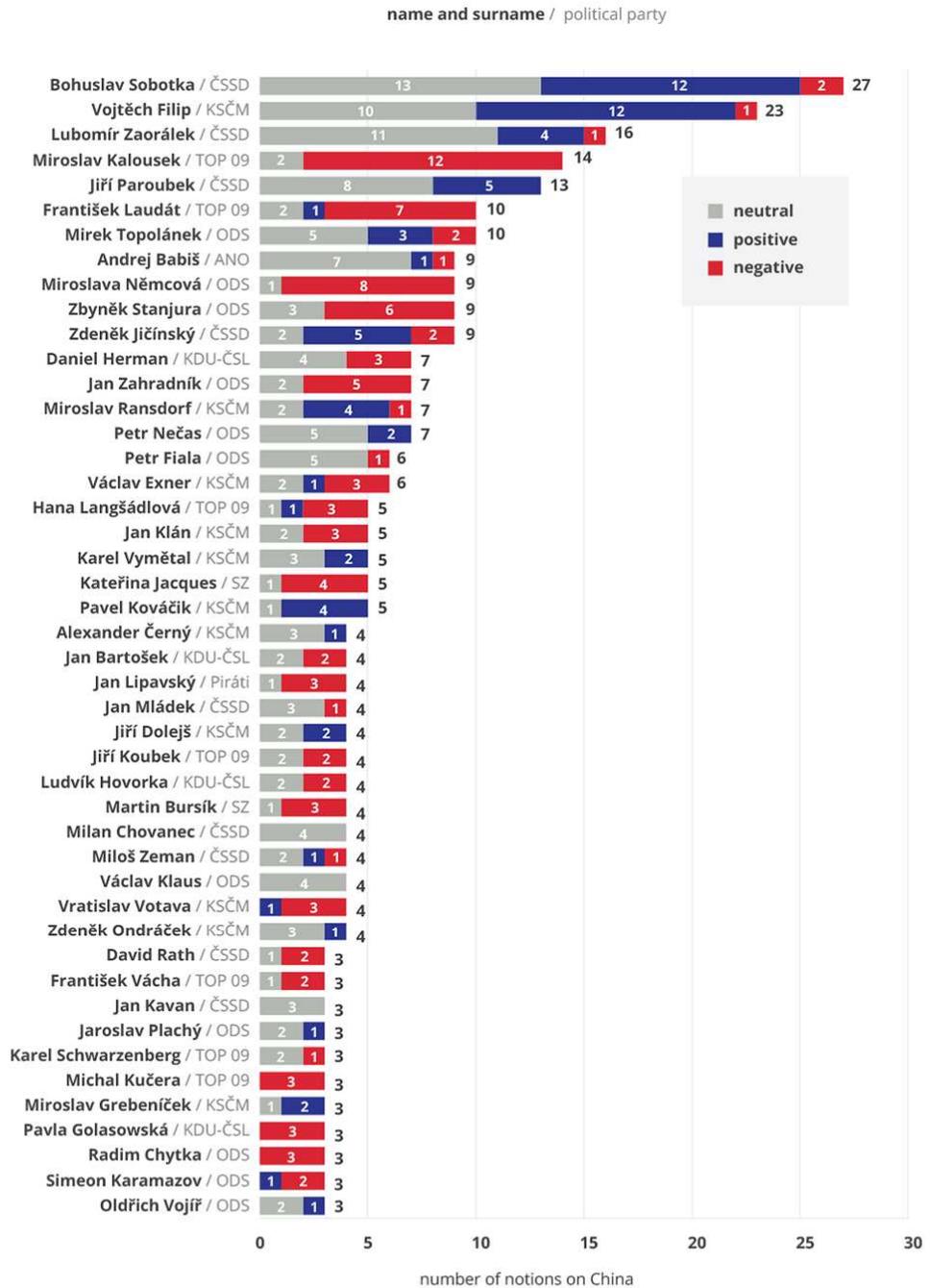
<sup>12</sup> The analysis identified 151 people (members of the Parliament, members of the government, etc.) who spoke within the discourse since 1993. Only those who entered the discussion more than three times, were visualized.



Graph 8: Sentiment of MPs' mentions on China at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic (cumulative data for 1993-2018)



## SENTIMENT OF MPS' MENTIONS ON CHINA AT THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES OF THE PARLIAMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC (CUMULATIVE DATA FOR 1993-2018)



The analysis of debates (based on digitalized transcripts of speeches) at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic identified 151 people (MPs, members of the government, etc.) who mentioned China (since 1993 to December 2018). Only sentiments of those who spoke at least three times were visualized.

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The debates have produced **two unequivocal defendants of a pro-China stance in Bohuslav Sobotka and Vojtěch Filip**, leaders of the Social Democratic and Communist parties, respectively. At **the other end of the spectrum stands Miroslav Kalousek, an ideologically positioned (and vocal) voice of opposition to the deepening of Czech-China relations**. He has found several other fellow travelers on the political right, such as **Miroslava Němcová, Zbyněk Stanjura** or **Jan Zahradník** from the ODS, or **František Laudát** from TOP 09, who have been opposed by Social Democrats like **Jiří Paroubek** or Communists like **Miroslav Ransdorf** or **Pavel Kováčik**. Interestingly, the views on China of current prime minister **Andrej Babiš** seem to be as nuanced (or insufficiently pronounced, according to the perspective) as in other areas. In the context of clear-cut promoters or critics of China, **Babiš seems to have taken a decidedly neutral stance**.

Other 'newcomers' to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic have been the far-right Svoboda a přímá demokracie Tomio Okamura (Freedom and Direct Democracy - Tomio Okamura, SPD) and Česká pirátská strana (Piráti, Pirates). **While members of the SPD have been surprisingly silent on the issue of China, Pirates have joined those MPs who hold clearly articulated stances critical of China**.

## Summary and Recommendations

While ideologically underpinned and generally adhering to the left-right divide, the Czech parliamentary discourse on China is more complicated than it appears at first sight. What needs to be added, however, is that **until recently (and even then owing to forces outside the parliament, most notably president Miloš Zeman), the mentions of China represented a marginal component of wider political debates**. Whether this trend has inexorably shifted with China's political, economic, military and technological rise, and with its presence more acutely felt in the region of Central Europe, remains to be seen.

The Czech debate on China was seemingly negative from the very beginning of 1990s, however, nearly all mentions were just brief mentions of China and examples. While the mentions clearly illustrate an overall perception of China, they fail to qualify as a political debate. In 2008, when the economic crisis hit the Czech Republic, the country ceased to perceive China only as a flagrant example of a human rights abuser, but gave way to a more positive view of China as an economic opportunity for Czech companies. In 2012-2013, China became interested in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, leading to intensification of the positive economic narrative. What followed was a Czech-China honeymoon period filled with friendly discourse of present and planned achievements, but simultaneously criticized by the opposition due to a new set of issues that came along with the intensified contact. As the economic dream failed to come true (and CEFC, a herald of Chinese investments in the Czech Republic, was bailed out by the Chinese state-owned CITIC in 2018), the defending voices went rather silent or limited themselves to references to the current state of affairs. To summarize, **over the years China went from being a mere point of reference to a political topic in its own right**.

Should China start to occupy a more important locus in Czech political debates, two features resulting from the analysis above are worth keeping in mind:

**Firstly, especially on the political right, the perception of China is ideologically driven**. These roots provide a healthy dose of skepticism towards Beijing, and force the Czech political elites and the public to periodically revisit the more unsavory features of the Chinese regime, including the lack of democratic governance, rule of law, suppression of civic and basic human rights, or the oppression of minorities (e.g. Uighurs, Tibetans, etc.). On the other hand, viewing the People's Republic of China purely through an ideological lens risks fomenting



various misperceptions at the very moment when a critical but also clear-eyed understanding of the actor is ever more needed.

At the same time, the research showed that when in government, the right-wing oriented ODS showed greater inclination towards China, while there was no great support for China in the left-wing ČSSD before it seized a majority in the CoD right at the time of the rise of Chinese interest in Central and Eastern Europe. **China therefore emerges as a tool of domestic policy, that allows governments to promise the pursuit of the lucrative Chinese market** (regardless of the outcome), while also providing the opposition with ammunition for criticism based on China's human rights record and rising security concerns. **This tool is likely to be used in the future, regardless of parties' positions on the political spectrum** (with the notable exception of the Communist party).

While the principled, human rights-oriented standpoint is justifiable and deeply-rooted in Czech modern political tradition, it has been repeatedly criticized with reference to the needs of economic diplomacy and development of mutually beneficial trade and investment relations<sup>13</sup>. **This has created a conceptual deadlock** in which those promoting more intense economic links with China get instinctively accused of morally corrupt stances, while their opponents are told to hush their critique lest they endanger the Czech Republic's economic chances. **Both views are unhelpful as human rights and economic diplomacy are not mutually exclusive categories.**

During the past 25 years, **the Czech debate on China in CoD went from criticism to honeymoon period and back to a rather critical standpoint** advocated by some of the political parties and individual MPs. **The new spike in criticism of China in the Czech Republic, however, does not return the debate to its state in the 1990s as the debate on China has grown more diverse.** Especially from 2016 onward, the negative mentions were focused mainly on security issues (CEFC, security intelligence warnings, global politics, Huawei), political issues (demonstrators during Xi Jinping's visit, Zeman's pro-China activities), economic issues (trade imbalance, absence of investments) and ecology (air pollution). **The positive (yet rather slow) trend of evolution of the debate on China at the Czech CoD should continue as it brings about more informed and diverse understanding of the nature of Chinese foreign policy and Chinese ambitions in the Czech Republic and more broadly in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.**

13 Ivana Karásková, "Highjacking the Czech Republic's China Policy", V4 Revue, October 27, 2016, <http://visegradrevue.eu/hijacking-the-czech-republics-china-policy/>.



# It's the economy, stupid: Neutralizing the Hungarian discourse on China

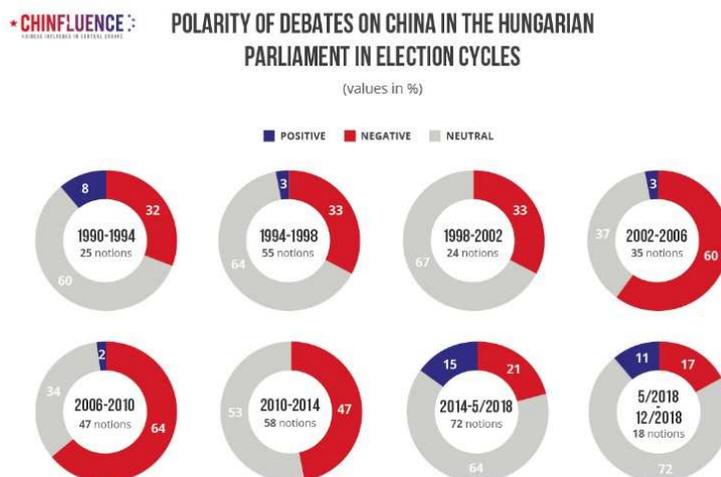
Tamás Matura, Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies (CEECAS)

As the ChinfluenCE analysis mapping the Hungarian media from 2010 to mid-2017 revealed, unlike in the Czech republic, the media discourse on China in Hungary was dominated by texts focusing on economic issues such as trade and investment, while topics like Tibet, human rights, political values or democracy were almost completely missing from the agenda. It is also noteworthy, that Hungarian politicians on the side of the opposition parties barely mentioned China in the media - mostly the government party formed the media discourse. However, when it comes to parliamentary discourse, the situation is more complex, as **almost every party has made some comment on China since the early 1990s, and the attitude of parties and their politicians has changed dramatically from time to time.**

Hungary has a unicameral parliament today, with 386 MPs between 1990 and 2014, and 199 since 2014. China itself is not a widely and frequently discussed topic; our research identified 335 occasions when China was mentioned in a significant way in the debate, out of which 184 were highly significant, while in another 151 cases China was merely mentioned as an example or listed among other countries. Besides these 335 occasions, a few hundred other occurrences without significance were excluded from the research, e.g., MPs quoting an (allegedly) Chinese proverb, or the Speaker mentioning the country in connection to bureaucracy.

The number of utterances shows a somewhat strange volatility, as it was quite low during the first term (1990-1994), while it doubled in the second term (1994-1998) just to fall back to its original level in the third term (1998-2002) and to start a gradual increase later on. Numbers tripled between the fourth and the seventh term. When we look at the topics of the debate it seems that **the Hungarian political elite was slightly behind the times, as MPs started to talk about the Tiananmen incident and human rights in the second term** (16 times in 1994-1998), which contributed highly to the number of utterances, while the topic was mentioned only twice during the first term. This might be explained by the rapid change of the Hungarian domestic political and economic environment and the democratic transition between 1990 and 1994 which certainly distracted political attention from communist China.

Graph 9: Polarity of debates on China in the Hungarian Parliament in election cycles.

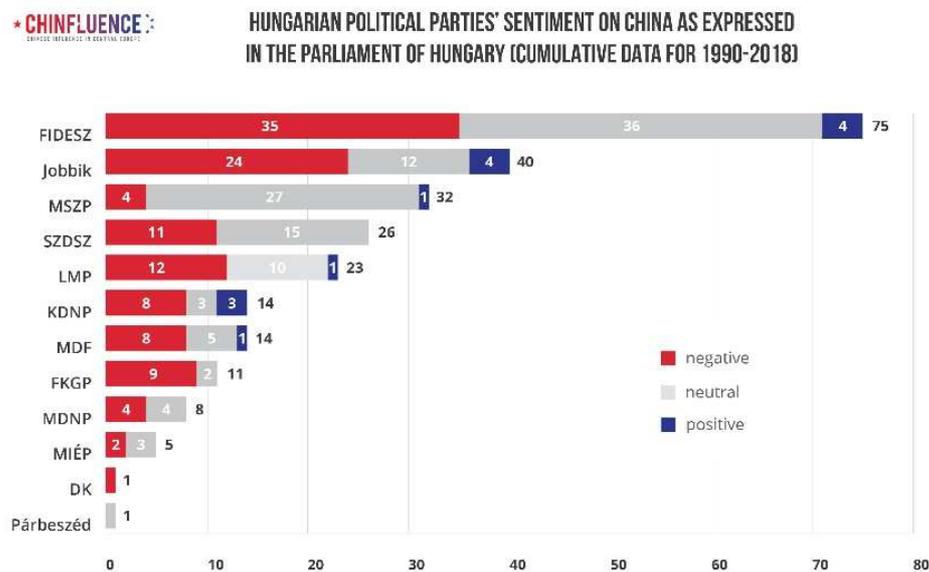


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When it comes to the polarity of the debate on China, it is remarkable how negative MPs have been on the matter. **Negative utterances have always outnumbered positive ones by a wide margin, though with fluctuations.** Topics targeted by these negative comments have been changing as well. While issues like human rights or Tibet dominated the first two decades of the analyzed period, bilateral economic relations and censorship in China were the most frequently recurring topics from 2010. The share of negative sentiments grew gradually between 1990 and 2010, while it started to decrease from 2010 to reach its lowest point in 2018. The sources of negative comments were almost exclusively right wing or liberal parties between 1990 and 2010. **Members of FIDESZ made by far the most anti-Chinese comments in Parliament during the first five terms. Their attitude, however, dramatically changed following the landslide victory of the party in 2010. They almost totally stopped criticizing China** as 33 out of their 35 negative comments were made before 2010. This can be easily explained by the U-turn of prime minister Viktor Orbán himself, who was well known for his anti-communist sentiments following the change of the regime and who even met the Dalai Lama during his first term as prime minister. He, however, embraced a very different attitude by late 2009, when he established party-to-party relations between FIDESZ and the Communist Party of China, and launched the ‘Opening to the East’ policy as a re-elected PM in 2010. He visited China in 2010, 2014 and 2015, and again in 2017 when the two governments elevated bilateral relations to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership.<sup>14</sup>

**Graph 10: Hungarian political parties' sentiment on China as expressed in the Parliament of Hungary (cumulative data for 1990-2018)**



Meanwhile, **the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP, a successor of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) has always been the most neutral on China since 1990. As a leftist party, MSZP cannot allow itself either to criticize China or to admire it too much being a formerly communist party itself.** It was the socialist government led by PM Péter Medgyessy (2002-2004) and successive

<sup>14</sup> See Tamás Matura, “Absent political values in a pragmatic Hungarian China policy”, in Political values in Europe-China relations, eds. Tim Nicholas Rühlig, Björn Jerdén, Frans-Paul van der Putten, John Seaman, Miguel Otero-Iglesias, Alice Ekman (ETNC Report, 2018).



socialist cabinets (2004-2010), that started a rapprochement with Beijing after 2003, as the leadership of the party realized the economic importance of China following Hungary's EU accession. As a consequence, critical remarks by the opposition parties of the time (mostly by FIDESZ) skyrocketed and the share of negative mentions of China almost doubled and reached 60 % the period of 2002-2006 and 66 % between 2006 and 2010. **Following the victory of FIDESZ in 2010 MSZP had no moral ground or political intention to switch sides and to turn itself into a China basher**, thus the share of all negative comments gradually fell to 47 % between 2010 and 2014 and later to 21 and 17 % in the period of 2014-2018 and since May 2018 respectively. Two new parties gained seats in the Parliament following the general elections in 2010; both turned out to be highly critical of China. **Jobbik, a radical far-right movement has had the second most negative attitude on China since 2010, while LMP, a liberal-green movement came third. The main difference between the approach of the two highly different parties is that while Jobbik focuses on Hungarian national interests in its critical remarks on China (Chinese immigration, fake products etc.), LMP has been vocal about the status of human rights in China, Tibet or about the Falun gong.** In this regard, LMP behaves very similarly to SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats), one of the most important liberal parties of the transition period, which spent six terms in the parliament and governed the country in coalition with MSZP through three terms, and finally ceased its operations in 2014. MPs of SZDSZ were the most critical towards China between 1990 and 2014, as 42 % of their comments were negative, 58 % neutral and they did not make any positive remarks. SZDSZ utterances usually included topics like human rights, Tiananmen and Tibet.

**In sum, the right wing and liberal parties of the Hungarian parliament have always been anti-Chinese, the Hungarian Socialist Party has been mostly neutral, while FIDESZ has totally changed its attitude, as it turned itself from a China basher into a mostly neutral, occasionally even pro-Chinese political entity.** However, none of the Hungarian parties can be described as consistently pro-China.

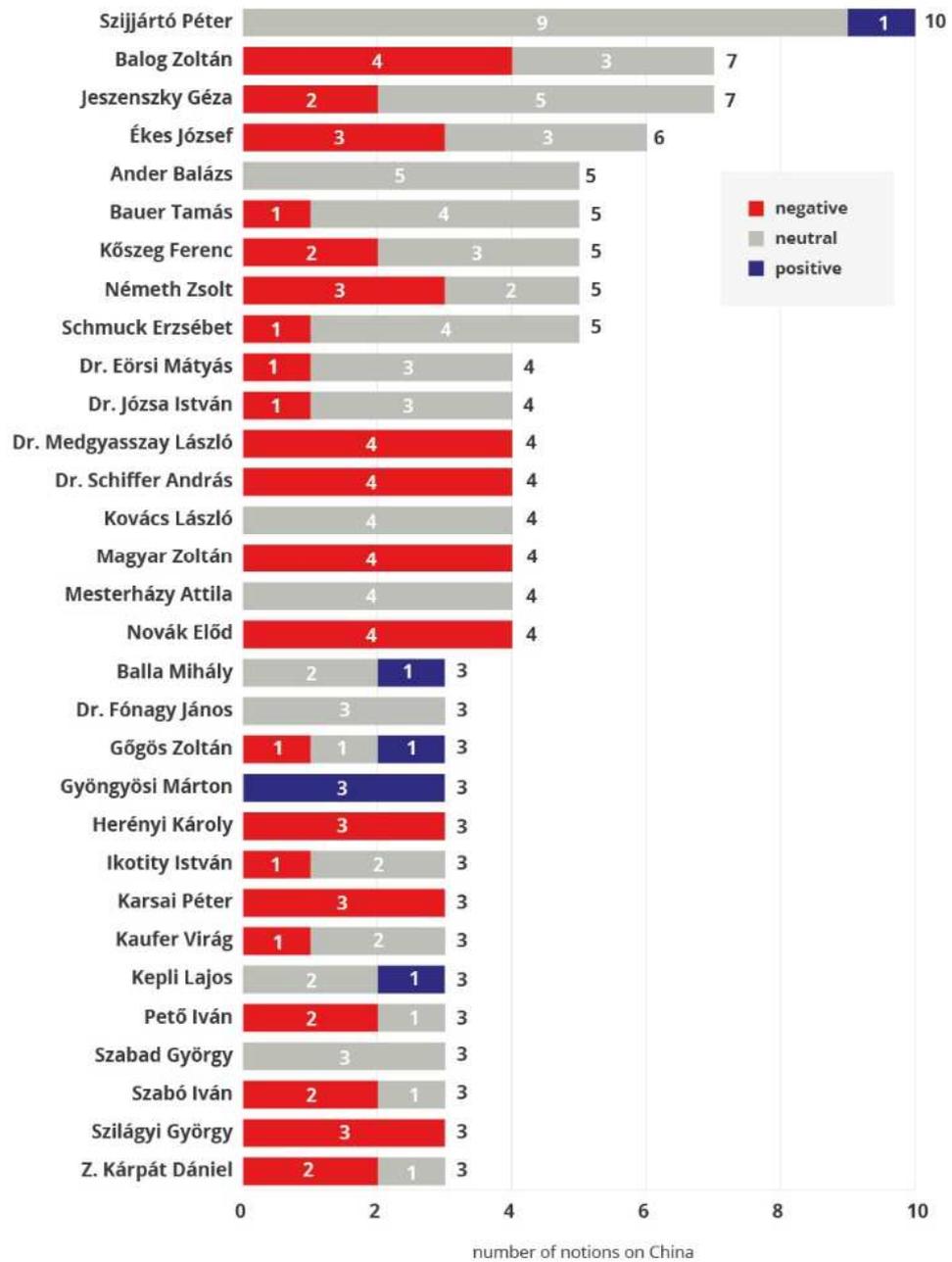




Graph 12: Sentiment of MP's mentions on China at the Parliament of Hungary (cumulative data for 1990-2018)



### SENTIMENT OF MPS' MENTIONS ON CHINA AT THE PARLIAMENT OF HUNGARY (CUMULATIVE DATA FOR 1990-2018)



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A quick look at the development of individual politicians' attitudes towards China also offers some interesting conclusions. First, based on their speeches, **none of the Hungarian MPs could be labeled as 'a friend of China'**. Although Márton Gyöngyösi (former vice-chair of the Foreign Committee) of Jobbik seems like an advocate of China at first glance, his speeches merely admitted the importance of China as a major economy and an important partner, and claimed that the 'Eastern Opening' policy was originally an idea of his party, later adopted by FIDESZ. Anti-Chinese sentiments are clearly stronger on the right and liberal side of the national assembly. **The most adamant, value-based and consistent critic of China was András Schiffer of the liberal-green LMP, as his speeches about China always touched upon human rights, Tibet or the Falun Gong movement:** "... as we know, the central government in China supports the crack-down on the Falun Gong sect and the state assists forced organ transplantations."<sup>15</sup>

Others, like László Medgyasszay (KDNP), Zoltán Magyar (Jobbik) or Péter Karsai (MDF) criticized Chinese products (e.g. fake honey or milk products) but did not target the Chinese state itself. Előd Novák of Jobbik extensively criticized the internet censorship of China, but he predominantly used it as a comparison of the intentions of the Hungarian government. The case of Zoltán Balog and Zsolt Németh is particularly noteworthy. Both MPs are members of FIDESZ and though their contribution to the debate includes negative and neutral comments as well, their timing was interesting.

**Balog was a fierce China basher in 2008-2009, criticized the human rights records of Beijing, attended a protest for Tibet in front of the Chinese Embassy in Budapest and called for EU level action against China. Meanwhile, he was significantly more balanced in his speeches in the Parliament, compared to his other public appearances:** "... the PRC's Tibet policy created tensions between the authorities and the local population, due to the colonization, intentional alteration of ethnic shares, the forced changes of (people's) identities and due to the violence against local political movements. (...) We propose an amendment to the resolution (of the Parliament) to confirm that all parties of the Parliament and the Republic of Hungary consider good relations with the PRC of utmost importance."<sup>16</sup>

**His critical attitude totally disappeared following the victory of FIDESZ.**

Similarly, Zsolt Németh was highly critical of China during his years in opposition (1990-1998), while he embraced a pragmatic and neutral approach in government (1998-2002 and since 2010). However, this seems to be a general attitude of politicians in governmental positions, as **ministers, state secretaries and other officials have been highly neutral in their speeches (by 83 %).**

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15 Notion of MP András Schiffer in the Parliament of Hungary, speech Nr. 212. 13 April 2015, (in Hungarian), [http://www.parlament.hu/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai?p\\_auth=gZju7S2Z&p\\_p\\_id=pairproxy\\_WAR\\_pairproxyportlet\\_INSTANCE\\_9xd2Wc9jP4z8&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=1&p\\_p\\_state=normal&p\\_p\\_mode=view&p\\_p\\_col\\_id=column-1&p\\_p\\_col\\_count=1&\\_pairproxy\\_WAR\\_pairproxyportlet\\_INSTANCE\\_9xd2Wc9jP4z8\\_pairAction=%2Finternet%2Fcplsql%2Fogy\\_naplo.naplo\\_fadat%3Fp\\_ckl%3D4o%26p\\_uln%3D64%26p\\_felsz%3D212%26p\\_szoveg%3D%26p\\_felszig%3D212](http://www.parlament.hu/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai?p_auth=gZju7S2Z&p_p_id=pairproxy_WAR_pairproxyportlet_INSTANCE_9xd2Wc9jP4z8&p_p_lifecycle=1&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-1&p_p_col_count=1&_pairproxy_WAR_pairproxyportlet_INSTANCE_9xd2Wc9jP4z8_pairAction=%2Finternet%2Fcplsql%2Fogy_naplo.naplo_fadat%3Fp_ckl%3D4o%26p_uln%3D64%26p_felsz%3D212%26p_szoveg%3D%26p_felszig%3D212).

16 Notion of MP Zoltán Balog in the Hungarian National Assembly, Speech Nr. 188. 20 May 2008, (in Hungarian), [http://www.parlament.hu/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai?p\\_auth=gZju7S2Z&p\\_p\\_id=pairproxy\\_WAR\\_pairproxyportlet\\_INSTANCE\\_9xd2Wc9jP4z8&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=1&p\\_p\\_state=normal&p\\_p\\_mode=view&p\\_p\\_col\\_id=column-1&p\\_p\\_col\\_count=1&\\_pairproxy\\_WAR\\_pairproxyportlet\\_INSTANCE\\_9xd2Wc9jP4z8\\_pairAction=%2Finternet%2Fcplsql%2Fogy\\_naplo.naplo\\_fadat%3Fp\\_ckl%3D38%26p\\_uln%3D148%26p\\_felsz%3D188%26p\\_szoveg%3D%26p\\_felszig%3D188](http://www.parlament.hu/orszaggyulesi-naplo-elozo-ciklusbeli-adatai?p_auth=gZju7S2Z&p_p_id=pairproxy_WAR_pairproxyportlet_INSTANCE_9xd2Wc9jP4z8&p_p_lifecycle=1&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-1&p_p_col_count=1&_pairproxy_WAR_pairproxyportlet_INSTANCE_9xd2Wc9jP4z8_pairAction=%2Finternet%2Fcplsql%2Fogy_naplo.naplo_fadat%3Fp_ckl%3D38%26p_uln%3D148%26p_felsz%3D188%26p_szoveg%3D%26p_felszig%3D188).



## Summary and Recommendations

Compared to the Czech parliamentary discourse the Hungarian debate is ideologically less underpinned. **Only small, liberal parties care about value-based issues in a consistent manner, while bigger right wing parties used the topic of China as a political tool against leftist governments before 2010 and have embraced a pragmatic, neutral stance ever since. Meanwhile left wing parties remain mostly neutral towards China.**

**Human rights and values have almost completely disappeared from the agenda since 2010, while topics related to the economy, trade and investment have been dominating the discourse.** There is virtually no substantive debate in the Hungarian parliament about the importance of China, as major parties all silently agree on the need for further development of bilateral economic relations. This is particularly interesting in times when skepticism about and criticism of China is on the rise across the European Union, including within the most significant economic partners of Hungary, such as Germany. If the EU moves towards a more assertive China policy, the Hungarian government and the parties in the Parliament may find themselves in a new and probably unexpected environment. Based on the parliamentary discourse one may develop the impression that the perception of MPs about China is sketchy, sometimes one-dimensional. **Given the rapid rise of China as a global power and the potential of conflicts between the traditional and natural allies of Hungary and China, it should be of the utmost importance that MPs are alert to these tensions and the potentially damaging consequences of preferring China at the expense of European partners.**

The recent visit of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Budapest and to other Central European countries is a clear sign that the presence of China now has a global significance. Issues like the case of Huawei and the proposal on the European investment screening mechanism all call for more reflections on the Hungarian side, and **not only the government itself but also all parties in the Parliament should prepare a well-developed and balanced China strategy.**



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