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Belt and Road and China's Attempt at Region Building in Central-East and Southeast Europe

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Abstract

This article analyses China's Belt and Road as a medium through which novel regional development ideas and practices are being generated, (re)articulated, and diffused, via a case study of its implementation in the broader region of Central-East and Southeast Europe (CESEE). The example of CESEE shows that via the Belt and Road, Chinese actors have advanced comprehensive region work based on social interactions, which includes regular high-level diplomatic exchange and quasi-institutionalisation as well as people-to-people relations, resting on the potent geoeconomic imaginaries of the New Silk Roads. This approach, in the case of CESEE, has allowed for regional co-operation to advance even in times of friction and uncertainties. Nevertheless, as region work is essentially a contentious endeavour, China's attempt at regionalism in CESEE has been challenged by the European Union (EU), the United States and regional actors who feel uneasy about China's advance.

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Keywords

Belt and Road, regionalism, Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe

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Introduction

This article analyses Belt and Road as a medium through which novel regional development ideas and region work practices are being generated, (re)articulated, and diffused, via a case study of the Belt and Road region work in the broader region of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (CESEE). The primary policy objective of the Belt and Road is “regional economic integration” (Zeng, 2016: 15), which is to be achieved via building new and upgrading existing linkages and interactions between myriad Chinese actors in various fields and at various levels, and their overseas counterparts. In CESEE, China has advanced the 17+1 platform (formerly known as 16+1), rendering CESEE a nested region within the global, mega-regional geoeconomic imaginary of the Belt and Road, while the quasi-institution of 17+1 itself has additionally served as a testing ground for the initiative (Vangeli, 2018a). Starting from the premise that China sees “regional groupings as useful in facilitating [its] integration into an increasingly dynamic regional economy” (Freeman, 2018: 85), and by looking at the level of policy discourse and diplomatic and expert exchanges, the article analyses how Chinese actors initiate various networking measures such as setting up (quasi) institutional mechanisms for discussion, mutual learning, and adjustment of policies; creating venues for interaction between experts and policymakers; and supporting novel economic thinking, planning, and actual development projects that aim to alter the economic geography of the countries – and for that matter, the regions involved.

These endeavours do not take place in a vacuum. With the Belt and Road, Chinese actors join a multitude of pre-existing region-building processes in the areas they venture into. Their agendas thus do not work in isolation from either the local or the global political and economic dynamics. Political, economic, and knowledge actors in the partner countries engage with the Chinese initiative in a proactive and creative way; the interactions of all these actors thus “co-produce” the new regional imaginaries (Mayer, 2017). The positions and actions of other external actors matter in the process as well.

A significant portion of the research on China’s regionalism foreign policy and the Belt and Road has focused on its immediate surroundings – that is East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia. In this sense, China’s attempt at region work in CESEE is a case of China’s regionalism foreign policy in action further away from its periphery. Moreover, China’s region work in CESEE takes place in the particular context of CESEE being historically considered an area that is “caught” in between the East and the West (Kuus, 2004). The contemporary regional identities of the countries that constitute it have been largely shaped through their incorporation into global capitalism and Western power structures (Bechev, 2011; Schimmelfennig, 2005). These processes have rendered an image of CESEE as the less-developed, “less European” part of Europe, and a subject of different regional perspectives and (di)visions. The Chinese understanding of the region, in particular, is a broad one – and includes seventeen countries socialised by China under the label “Central and Eastern European Countries”: sixteen post-socialist ones (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Slovakia), and Greece (which was added to the format in 2019). As we will see in this

article, the Chinese understanding of the region is sometimes contested and by no means the dominant one.

The goal of this article is to identify and analyse the different elements of region work under the Belt and Road framework in CESEE, as a particular aspect of the impact of the Belt and Road in one of the regions in which the initiative unveils. The goal of the article is not to assess in detail how successful Belt and Road's regional development efforts have been or what will be their actual socio-economic, political, and policy consequences for the countries involved and for China's global agenda. Its objective is rather limited to understanding how, through the webs of interactions that constitute the Belt and Road, China projects its own regional vision for CESEE and how this fits into the broader processes of regionalisation in CESEE.

In the quest for understanding the social processes and forces that (re)shape the discursive concepts of regions and practices of region work, the article devises a reflexivist sociological approach centred on the concepts of regional imaginaries, "region work," and the distinctive agencies in the process of region-building, emphasising the dialogues between endogenous regionalising forces on one side and China on the other, while also taking into account the impact of other exogenous drivers. The article proceeds as follows. First, the concept of region as a dynamic product of the interactions of various social forces is discussed, followed by the region work of the Belt and Road and some of the core practices that constitute it, in light of the case of its implementation in CESEE. Finally, based on the data from CESEE, the competitive aspects of the regional imaginaries diffused through the Belt and Road are analysed.

The Becoming of Regions

Regions may be the cornerstones of the global political economy (Acharya, 2007; Buzan and Ole, 2003; Katzenstein, 2015), but they are not fixed categories; rather "a region *becomes* in material and symbolic processes" (Paasi, 2010: 2299). The "state of becoming" is what defines a region – a transient category, it (re)appears and disappears and has a different meaning across time and space, in the imagination of different actors (both internal and external to the region in question), in policy practices, and in lived experiences. The material and discursive practices through which these regions are constructed and reproduced – as well as contested – originate in different fields and take place at different levels of political and social life, and include:

material and symbolic cultural practices such as regional naming and the choice of other symbols; they come into being in stories, novels, songs, poems, films, and other artefacts that give rise to social classifications, stereotyping, and distinctions. (Paasi, 2010: 2299)

While regional imaginaries are shaped by simplified representations of the real world, they themselves also carry a significant normative prescription of what a particular region should look like and how it should be achieved. As such, regions are inherently "subject[s] to discursive struggles over mapping and naming" (Jessop, 2012: 7), while

the process of region making is shaped by divergent if not “competing regional imaginaries” (Jessop, 2012: 12). The weight, appeal, and success of these imaginaries are not arbitrary (Jessop et al., 2008: 1160); rather, this dynamic reflects broader power constellations and relations, “hegemon[ies] and hierarchi[es],” and “spheres of influence [and] interdependencies” in the fields of (geo)politics and (geo)economics (Jessop, 2012: 16–18), as well as the power dynamics within the domestic contexts of the societies involved.

Regional imaginaries, in this sense, are not only powerful tools of power projection from above and outside, but also quite potent and significant mobilising forces from within the regions where they operate. Actors originating from and inhabiting the areas that are subjects of the region-making endeavours exercise their own agency in the process by promoting their own visions and actively interacting with external ones. Their positions, however, rather than resembling a perfectly rational choice, are fuzzy and shaped by various interests, identities, and sentiments, as well as the impact of geopolitical and geoeconomic trends and impulses. In the case of CESEE, for instance, the quest for defining the region and positioning it in the West or the East (or in between them) – driven by both the internal debates on identity, belonging, and orientation as well as the external agendas of European, Euro-Atlantic, or Eurasian integration – has been the central historical force that has (re)shaped CESEE (Bianchini, 2015; Neumann, 1999; Todorova, 2005). These debates, given the nature of the ever-changing meaning of regions, are very much an ongoing matter.

The various actors who participate in the process of negotiating various regional visions speak from different positions of power and have different amounts of resources at their disposal. Comparatively more resourceful external agents who engage locals in asymmetrical relations have a particular role in shaping regions, as they possess the power to reproduce or disrupt existing taxonomies and classifications and create new ones; to (re)structure ideational systems; and ultimately “to make groups, to constitute them, to divide them, or to destroy them” (Eagleton-Pierce, 2013: 64–65). Historically, this process has involved a lot of “hard power” work, including violence and coercion. In between the fifteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century, European empires have infamously drawn and redrawn national and regional borders of various areas around the world, not the least in what is today referred to as CESEE, while, during the Cold War, regions around the world were greatly shaped by the great power competition between Washington and Moscow.

External diplomatic endeavours, however, do not always come with such a sharp edge. With the global shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics (Cowen and Smith, 2009), economic flows, external economic strategies as well as the actions of multi-national enterprises and banks have been increasingly reshaping the economic structure of regions by changing the way they have been integrated in the global economy (Frankel, 2005). Economic developments have been complemented by political ones, as powerful actors such as international financial institutions, development agencies, or supranational entities have promoted their own visions for regional development co-operation. Moreover, a significant part of the region-building work has come in softer, subtler ways,

through the production of knowledge – for example, through the proliferation of analytical and expert discourses of authoritative and resourceful actors, both organisational and individual, working in the field of knowledge production (Stone, 2011).

Different regions around the world have also come into being in a different manner. The broader area of CESEE (not necessarily defined the way Chinese planners define it in the context of the Belt and Road), with its complex historical legacy, is an important case in point. CESEE has been shaped by the legacy of socialism, the post-socialist transition, and the 2008 global financial crisis as the lesser developed and subaltern part of Europe. The understanding and stereotyping of CESEE as the “other” Europe have persisted despite the achievements of individual CESEE countries. In the post-crisis era, China has picked this general idea (or stereotype) of CESEE as the less-developed part of Europe up and tried to fit it in its own global vision of the Belt and Road. This has been a significant change to the way China has approached the region. While China and the individual countries in CESEE had intriguing and far from uniform relationships during the Cold War and in the 1990s, it is only in recent years, and in particular in the post-crisis era, that their interactions have intensified and re-oriented towards contemplating “regional co-operation” with the CESEE countries joining China-led formats – while at the same time, navigating the changing tides in the global political economy.

Region Work Under the Belt and Road

If one follows the conventional definition of regionalism as a comprehensive tendency encompassing “structures, processes and arrangements” that lead towards coherence, convergence, and linkages within a particular region, then the Belt and Road “is a regionalist programme” (Mayer, 2017: 17). The underpinning concept of Belt and Road is connectivity. Andornino (2017) situates the Belt and Road in China’s grand strategy of connective leadership, which can be defined as:

a power of social change that generates leader–follower relationships between/among nation-states through involving and empowering nation-states to change patterns of interaction between/among them, as well as the patterns of interaction between the nations-states and the global society. (Tian, as quoted in Andornino, 2017: 13)

In practice, the Belt and Road advances five types of connectivities, or rather five aspects of connectivity (National Development and Research Commission, 2015): (1) the communication, co-ordination, and alignment of developmental policy agendas between China and its partner countries; (2) physical connectivity and infrastructure; (3) economic linkages (trade and investment); (4) financial linkages; and (5) people-to-people contact. Jointly, the five dimensions lay the contours of a comprehensive connectivity-based development. All of these connectivities are paradoxically rooted in the ideas of sovereignty, national development, and national “policy rights” to choose an appropriate developmental model (Vangeli, 2018c), while at the same time, they work towards relativising the importance of the national scale of development (Sum, 2019) by

proposing various aspects of regional development as – to use Jessop (2013) concepts – vertical integration (with China); horizontal linkages and networks between countries that share similar interests or are portrayed as complementary in the grander scheme of things; transversal linkages that seek to link the special zones, hubs, and nodes; and removing scales by resorting to digitalisation and bringing Belt and Road into space. Taking into account the multiple dimensions and the sheer ambition of the initiative, Qoraboyev and Moldashev (2018) analyse Belt and Road from the perspective of “comprehensive regionalism.” However, as connectivities are to be established and advanced jointly between China and a number of other actors, and often between two or more non-Chinese actors, the region work of the Belt and Road starts with the intensifying and densifying networking interactions around specific policy issues.

The region work of the Belt and Road, thus, in some ways is similar to Yeo’s (2010) account of networked regionalism, which itself draws from and approximates Katzenstein’s (1996, 2015) and other works on Asian regionalism. Networked regionalism is a loose form of regionalisation that is open-ended; suitable for “outward looking” states; significantly driven by “Track 2” diplomacy as well as by both national and sub-national actors; and characterised by an issue-based rather than centralised leadership and management. Belt and Road certainly ticks some of these boxes: it is developed in an open-ended and flexible way, in accord with Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) incremental, experimental, and inductive approach towards policymaking and governance (Lejano et al., 2018); it is based on the outward orientations of China and its partner countries; it relies on the interactions of myriad – including subnational – actors (Kamiński, 2019) and aims to promote an issue-based agenda for co-operation.

At the same time, the region work of the Belt and Road is significantly divergent from the experiences of networked regionalism in Asia. Unlike the examples of decentralised, bottom-up networked regionalism in Asia (even if certain countries, such as Japan, had a more pronounced role in its development), China’s Belt and Road is a much more centrally co-ordinated version of it, in the sense that Chinese actors effectively manage the Belt and Road webs of interaction – while allowing enough space for interaction and feedback. Moreover, while both China and its partner countries under the Belt and Road framework are outward-oriented, they are not facing the same direction, but rather they are facing each other: China is proactively seeking economic expansion around the world, whereas most of the Belt and Road countries – including the dependent capitalist CESEE economies (Nölke and Vliegthart, 2009) – are predominantly on the lookout for economic inflows. Finally, while the Belt and Road tries to develop an issue-based agenda and, the central role of China – even though often rhetorically downplayed – is at its core, meaning that a central issue is the relationship between China and the partner countries and regions. In sum, therefore, the region work of the Belt and Road, while cognate to the Asian experience with networked regionalism, especially in terms of its reliance on the web of social interactions as a main vehicle to advance it, has substantial idiosyncratic features that make it stand out as a distinctive one.

The region work of the Belt and Road is even more distinctive from the Western experience of regionalism, and, in particular, from the processes of European

integration. Rooted in the ideal of political reconciliation and aiming to create a supra-national polity, European integration, in addition to boosting linkages, has advanced through reform, transformation, and the “pooling of sovereignty” (Kühnhardt, 2007) of the participating countries. In this sense, the European regionalist project can be best understood as one working through protruding formal institutions and rules. As opposed to it, the Asian – and, in particular, the Chinese – regionalist experience is one founded on the idea of “shelving disputes,” with no desire to create new polities or common institutions (but rather to preserve national sovereignty), and is best understood as working through relationships and practices rather than rules and regulations (Kavalski, 2009). Finally, the Belt and Road as a regionalist endeavour also differs from other Eurasian regionalist programmes, in particular the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, in the sense that while the Russian approach rests on a fixed understanding of geography and geopolitics, the Belt and Road is much more functionalist, pragmatic, and flexible in orientation (Kaczmarek, 2017; Qoraboyev, 2018).

Having specified the general tenets and a negative definition of the region work of the Belt and Road, we now zoom in to its ideational pillars and the different sets of practices that constitute it, by drawing on the case of its implementation in CESEE.

Webs of Interactions and (Quasi-) Institutionalisation

The core practice of advancing the Belt and Road is the proactive and creative networking diplomacy that involves a continuously expanding volume and scope of actors. The Belt and Road comes into being through webs of interactions, consisting of official summits, formal channels for interaction, various Belt and Road associations and co-ordination mechanisms, instruments and platforms; thus, while not an institution in itself (as it lacks headquarters and organisational bureaucracy) and not running primarily on formal institutional logic, the advancement of the Belt and Road is supported both by high-level summitry and the creation of various soft/quasi-institutions. The setting up of novel platforms and mechanisms for interaction has been part of the broader endeavour of the Chinese leadership to advance its position as an animator of collective action in global politics, exercise a mobilising power, but also to fill in the gaps in the systems of global and regional governance (Heilmann et al., 2014). Importantly, these soft/quasi-institutions have served the purpose not of transforming the national political systems and policy-making arrangements, but rather of facilitating the networking and co-ordination between China and the countries involved. Thus, although the webs of interaction have been conceived and co-ordinated by Chinese actors, they are intended to allow for meaningful co-ordination and two-way interaction, giving them a certain flexibility.

At the same time, while the language and imaginaries of regionalism have permeated throughout all of the Belt and Road documentation and communication, Chinese actors have infused Belt and Road into multi-lateral regional fora for interaction and exchange (Jakóbowski, 2018), including the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum, the China and the Pacific Islands Forum (CPIF), and the platform for Cooperation between

China and the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), also known as 17+1 (after the original group of “16+1” was expanded to include Greece in 2019). The Belt and Road and these region-specific platforms link up together under the framework of “multi-channel diplomacy.” The initiative’s “official” summits and associations are the highest level channels for communication, providing a guiding vision and framework for all other interactions. The global vision is then localised and translated in the specific regional contexts via the existing regional platforms, whereas the regional platforms also serve as a venue both for generating policy ideas that are later implemented on the bilateral level, and contextualising projects that are otherwise discussed and implemented bilaterally at the regional level. Therefore, the regional platforms serve to link together the global vision and the regional context, and to provide a regional context to bilateral projects. It is then, ultimately, that the regional platforms provide the link between the global Belt and Road meta-narrative, and the bilateral-level developments, all of them working together in a nested constellation.

The regional platforms for co-operation themselves serve as venues where through ceremonial, ritualistic repetition a new set of symbols, a new vernacular of co-operation and a new worldview proliferate (Vangeli, forthcoming). Moreover, the regional platforms for co-operation have a vibrant life of their own in between the largely ceremonial international meetings. In the framework of co-operation with CESEE, China has in the course of just several years initiated the establishment of a number of sectorial dialogues, associations, working groups, and other forms of soft or quasi-institutions, in fields as varied as tourism, healthcare, education, culture, or maritime relations, to name a few (Song and Pavličević, 2019). These different mechanisms have been seated in various countries – an attempt to downplay the centrality of China and boost other hubs. This issue-based quasi-institutionalisation, however, has not aimed to replicate or compete with existing institutional frameworks in the region, but to optimise the linkages between China and the participating countries in specific policy areas. To what extent these quasi-institutions have lived up to their mission, however, is up for debate, as reports from the ground suggest that some of them exist in name only. On the other hand, the frequent video calls and communication between China and CESEE during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that sometimes endeavours that were thought of as existing in name only – such as the often overlooked 17+1 regional healthcare co-operation mechanisms as well instruments of the so-called Health Silk Road – can be activated and utilised on demand.

“People-to-People” Socialisation

In the period in between the high diplomatic events that involve heads of governments of the Belt and Road countries, Chinese actors advance networked regionalism by engaging a number of other actors from all sectors and at the various levels of the hierarchy, and facilitating the communication and co-ordination between them. The diplomatic activity of a plethora of Chinese actors – diplomats in the conventional meaning of the term and “non-diplomats” alike, ranging from public officials, representatives of

state-owned enterprises, and knowledge institutions, both at the national and provincial level – has sharply increased with the Belt and Road. These activities, while often perceived through their potential to lead to material outcomes, are first and foremost considered significant deliverables in themselves, according to Chinese authoritative sources (Stec and Liu, 2018). Such networking activities are at the core of region-building endeavours, adding a participatory component to them. Additionally, the significance of people-to-people relations has been explained by reference to the understanding of Chinese strategic culture as centred on relationships (Eszterhai, 2018). Furthermore, the expansion of these activities is commensurate not only with the growing ambitions but also with the growing resources that Chinese actors have at their disposal.

In the case of promoting regionalism in CESEE, socialisation – or the so-called people-to-people exchanges – occupy a central role for China. In late 2017, for the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the establishment of the 16+1 platform (as it was called back then), China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a list of 233 achievements, which included a total of eighty-five people-to-people events – the largest of any group of activities undertaken to promote regional co-operation (Dazhongxiao, 2017). The people-to-people exchanges include professionals in a variety of fields and representatives of all sorts of institutions and sectors, ranging from artists to youth leaders to journalists. At times, Chinese experts and policymakers have often referred to the 16/17+1 format as an endeavour with a pronounced people-to-people component.

The different participants in the people-to-people exchanges, however, carry a different weight. In that sense, of particular relevance are the interactions between knowledge actors, and especially think tanks, which comprise the “Track 2” diplomatic channel. In recent years, Chinese think tanks and research institutes have gained importance and visibility, as they have been increasingly considered as playing one of the key roles in the globalisation of the Chinese state (Menegazzi, 2017). The work of individual think tanks, and also the establishment of think tank forums and “knowledge networks” (Stone, 2013), have been important instruments of driving forward the Belt and Road and its regionalist approach. In the case of CESEE, the 16+1/17+1 Think Tank Network has played an important role in diffusing new ideas of regional co-operation and economic development, by contributing to the alignment of frames and creating inter-subjectivity between Chinese and CESEE knowledge actors (Vangeli, 2019).

The increasing volume and diversifying scope of people-to-people events mean that an ever-increasing number of actors become socialised by China in novel China-led formats. However, for a non-Chinese participant in these formats, the novelty is not only having interaction with a great number of Chinese representatives, but also interacting with an even greater number of other non-Chinese participants, which, in the case of the regional cooperation platforms, happen to be people from the same region. In that sense, through these events, China brings together representatives of various countries in one room who otherwise may have not been interacting within the particular framework of negotiating a novel geoeconomic vision, if at all. It thus creates the conditions for unintended consequences (Kavalski, 2019) as an outcome of not only the China–CESEE interactions but also the intra-CESEE interactions within a China-led format.

Geoeconomic Imagination

The high-level and people-to-people exchanges are the key sets of practices through which the region work of the Belt and Road is carried out. In other words, they give a form to the content of the new geoeconomic imaginaries of a transcontinental, if not global, mega-region in which different regions and sub-regions are nested, interlinked (vertically, horizontally, and transversally), and interdependent. In that sense, while the Belt and Road has a global scope and aims to create a transcontinental networked mega-region spanning Eurasia, Africa, and beyond, the building blocks of this vision are the various imaginaries of different (sub)regions that lay in these areas.

The vision for new regional economic architecture under the Belt and Road framework is based on the notion of within-region and cross-regional corridor-based development (Maçães, 2018) – a normative legacy of the Chinese and, more broadly, the East Asian developmental experience (Asian Development Bank, 2014; Brunner, 2013; Hong, 2018). The proposed geography of economic development of the Belt and Road therefore envisions different economic macro-corridors of the Silk Road Economic Belt (New Eurasian Landbridge, China–Mongolia–Russia Corridor, China–Central Asia–West Asia Corridor, China–Indochina Peninsula Corridor, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Corridor) as well as the ports and land–sea projects that are part of the Maritime Silk Road, which, when zooming out are interlinked together, and when zooming in branch into different (sub)corridors, development zones, nodes, hubs, and projects. For instance, CESEE is imagined as part of the New Eurasian Landbridge but also the Maritime Silk Road, and could potentially link up with the West Asia Corridor, while at the same time it is imagined as a host of several regional economic initiatives: the China–Europe Land-Sea Express (a subject of closer regional co-operation between Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary) and the associated Danube–Aegean waterway (bringing together Greece, North Macedonia, and Serbia); the Danube region (including Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria), the Amber Road (with Poland at the centre, involving the rest of the Visegrad countries and the Baltic countries), and so on.

As much as it is focused on (re)imagining economic geographies, Belt and Road is also about “spirit” and belief. Conceptualised as an endeavour to contribute to ameliorating the effects of the global financial crisis 2007–2008, the geoeconomic vision behind the Belt and Road is not necessarily rooted in empirical reality but rather in the promise of future economic development. Aside from its material impacts of economic co-operation, the narration of economic success itself is also normative in nature, as it unveils a vision for regional economic development and regional co-operation and the steps to achieve it. At the same time, the geoeconomic imagination unleashed through the social interactions under the Belt and Road in the medium and long term set a standard for evaluating the economic success of the Belt and Road – and, in case of failures are sources of similarly potent narratives of disillusionment due to unfulfilled promises (Turcsányi, 2020).

There are several pillars upon which the Belt and Road geoeconomic imagination rests. The co-operation in connective infrastructure development is its foundation; as Chinese

policymakers and experts often argue, if one wants to develop economically, it is essential to build a road first. The CESEE projects most talked about in Belt and Road interactions are highways that are part of Trans-European corridors eschewed by Western financiers as well as railways that provide land–sea and/or North–South connections (often perceived as relatively less developed than East–West routes), and seaports on the Aegean, Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea coasts. These projects are not only intended to serve as merely connecting point A to point B, but rather as “public goods which enable wider economic activity” (Vangeli, 2018b), in terms of both the actual (re)construction work and the intended and unintended consequences they bring, in terms of new flows of goods, people, and ideas within and across borders – all of which are seen as a justification of bold moves such as borrowing via the “tied loans” scheme. In terms of the translation of imagination to practice, infrastructure co-operation offers plenty of examples: several highways in the non-European Union (EU [Western Balkan]) countries (Vangeli, 2018b), the China–Europe Land–Sea express railway and other highway projects in the EU-members of 17+1 (Paszak, 2020), and ports on various coasts developed by Chinese shipping giants. Nonetheless, the narratives of success surrounding these projects have, at times, been challenged by concerns about financial sustainability and cronyism (Grgić, 2019; Vangeli, 2018b), which is a significant taint on the reputation of the Belt and Road in the region.

Equally important for the advancement of the new geoeconomic imaginary of the Belt and Road is the narrative of the so-called production capacity co-operation (PCC; Kenderdine and Ling, 2018), or rather the pooling of resources to restart and turn around previously underperforming industrial capacities. PCC refers to the emergence of China as a new source of capital, ideas, and know-how, while also leaving the possibilities for tripartite co-operation (i.e. the one including other regional and external actors) open (Qiu, 2015). Renewed industrial capacities are envisioned as benefiting from the improved connective infrastructure; in combination with other equity investments as well as greenfield projects, they have the potential to change the make-up of regional supply and value chains and therefore the economic landscape of regions and countries. CESEE has featured prominently in the programmes of the growing number of PCC funds that proliferated in China under the Belt and Road banner (Kenderdine and Ling, 2018), and is also featured in the vision for the construction of Overseas Economic and Trade Zones, Industrial Parks, and Logistics Zones, while investment is one of the central themes of 17+1 interactions. The assessments of how this translates into practice are mixed. While Chinese investment in the region (including both PCC and other equity investment) is on the rise, it is yet to meet the quantitative expectations in the region. At the same time, the qualitative debates on Chinese investment in CESEE are not immune to the fears that they are simply a way to export China’s overcapacity and pursue its objectives in technological advancement. Scholars in CESEE and beyond have also been scrutinising the governance, environmental, and labour impacts of the Belt and Road projects (Tsimonis et al., 2020), arguing that to truly benefit the region, these projects need to comply with international best practices and standards. Nevertheless, despite all of the points of concern, what sustains the appeal of the narrative of China as a source of investment is the global zeitgeist of uncertainty and the image of China as a potential contingency option, in particular for the economically less prosperous countries in CESEE.

This geoeconomic vision centred on infrastructure and (re)industrialisation as pillars of regional co-operation, the Belt and Road reinforces the shift towards a “geoeconomic social” and development driven through infrastructure (investment), creating new markets and rewiring existing ones, with national governments playing a key role in the process (Cowen and Smith, 2009; Gambino, 2018). In the context of CESEE, this “brick and mortar” geoeconomic approach is precisely the novelty that China brings, as it is different from other regionalist narratives that have been heavily focused on history, national identities, security, democratisation and human rights, or (neo)liberal economic reforms. This approach – resonating with the general sentiments in the post-global financial crisis era – has managed to inspire a whole range of opportunistic attitudes towards China in the region, which however have not gone unchallenged, thereby leading to the emergence of different camps of the “China Opportunity” and the “China Threat” (Pavličević, 2018b).

Belt and Road and Competing Regional Imaginaries in CESEE

With the Belt and Road, China emerges as another external contributor to debates on the make-up of regions and to processes of shaping regional dynamics. The regional imaginaries Chinese actors promote are expressions of novel geoeconomic readings of the regions and areas in question, in terms of their present geoeconomic and geopolitical circumstances and, even more broadly, their historical (and future) trajectories.

There are three important caveats that determine the dynamics between China’s regional vision, the dispositions of CESEE actors, and other externally promoted regionalist ideas in CESEE. First, as China itself has only recently assumed the role of a proactive global actor that engages in such endeavours, its contribution is novel and distinctive from local and other external discourses, despite any similarities that may exist. Second, different regional imaginaries promoted by different actors are predisposed to compete with each other to a varying extent. Third, the increasing tensions in the relations between China and two other global actors who have a much more significant presence in CESEE – the United States and the EU – are increasingly reflected in the domain of competing regionalisms as well.

The first step in outlining a vision for a particular region is creating a list of the countries that comprise it. In some cases of regional co-operation, China engages with pre-existing regional groups (such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Pacific Islands Forum) or with clearly defined groups of countries (e.g. the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation includes all African countries that have bilateral relations with China). Nevertheless, in the case of CESEE, Chinese policymakers have used their dominant position to determine the roster of countries involved in 17+1, or rather the symbolic power to (re)create groups and their boundaries (Vangeli, 2018a). CEEC/CESEE itself has been a historically contested concept with no final consensus on its borders or the criteria for belonging to it. A number of regional formats for co-operation in CESEE or including various CESEE countries have been established by external actors as well as actors in the region, with varying memberships (e.g. Central European Free Trade Agreement, Central

European Initiative, the Visegrad Group, the Three Seas Initiative, etc.). The grouping by China somewhat approximates the grouping of CESEE countries by international economic actors (e.g. the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or the International Monetary Fund), which is in line with the geoeconomic approach towards regionalism under the Belt and Road. Voices from CESEE and beyond have sometimes problematised such reading of the region, as it essentially brings together both EU and non-EU member states, which have different structural and regulatory characteristics, which in turn affect the development of the relations with China and the advancement of the Belt and Road and have at times even suggested reshaping or even abolishing the format. The geoeconomic reading of the region by China has also disregarded pre-existing (sub)regional groupings and identities, such as the ones of Visegrad Group, the Baltics, and the Balkans. Nevertheless, none of the CESEE countries have actually abandoned the format as a result of this, but rather have tried to use it to advance their own interests despite their remarks – and moreover, outsider countries have shown interest in joining it, further bringing into question the criteria of belonging (the first such case was Greece; there has been also a manifestation of interest in the past by Ukraine, while other countries, such as Austria and Belarus, have been involved in the webs of interaction as observers).

The interpretation of different regions under the Belt and Road is not aimed to operate as an exclusive, new form of identification of regions, but rather to add a supplementary identity layer to them as part of the initiative. The different regions become part of the Belt and Road only through the particular reading of their trajectory and circumstances by Chinese actors, which can sometimes run counter to the identifications and feelings of the local actors. For instance, in line with their geoeconomic perspective, Chinese policymakers and experts have been framing the CESEE region as part of the Global South (Kowalski et al., 2017), which has been also contested by actors in the region who have embraced the strong identitarian component (e.g. by proclaiming, during official 17+1 gatherings, that “we are not Africa!”); nevertheless, even those that have questioned or outright rejected this notion in theory have engaged with the Chinese-promoted South–South co-operation practices. Additionally, contemporary CESEE (except Greece) has a shared post-socialist experience, which aside from determining its developmental trajectory of dependent capitalism (Nölke and Vliegenthart, 2009) has also shaped its identity in relation to the rest of Europe. CESEE’s and China’s understanding of the socialist legacy is divergent and can be a source of friction (Turcsányi and Qiaoan, 2019). However, regardless of the discomfort that ideological divergences bring, they were not an obstacle for the voluntary participation of the CESEE countries in the Belt and Road and China-led regional endeavours, and tacitly engaging with the Chinese narration of the shared history of socialism (Vangeli, 2018a).

Despite having managed to get the locals on board – or perhaps, precisely because of managing to successfully establish a novel regional web of interactions – China’s region work in CESEE has been strongly challenged by other global actors, in the first place the EU and the United States. Critical voices in Europe have blamed China for “carving out” a piece of Europe and pursuing a “divide and conquer” approach through Belt and Road in CESEE, in the process also assigning a fair share of the blame to CESEE governments for bifurcating

EU's stance on China – a claim that has been contested by scholars in the region (Matura, 2019). The region work by China in CESEE has been seen as a political threat since it has circumvented Brussels and has further deepened the divide between different European countries and the EU institutions; as an economic threat since it has advanced Chinese economic interests in Europe, while also promoting a new, disruptive economic architecture of the region of CESEE and beyond; and as a normative threat, as China's attempt at regionalism in CESEE has been developed in sync with the Chinese practices of international cooperation, while evading or breaching some of the EU norms. In response, the EU has reasserted its structural power in the region (Pavličević, 2018a), both in terms of streamlining the China policy of its member states and asserting itself among candidate countries (Pavličević, 2019). The United States has also voiced concerns with and countered China's regionalism foreign policy in CESEE (Mitchell, 2018). For the United States, CESEE – which American policymakers and experts also frame as “New Europe” – is a region of strategic importance, with CESEE countries being closely aligned with US foreign policy objectives even when some Western European countries are not (Lansford and Tashev, 2005). Notably, the American knowledge and civil society actors who had played a pivotal role in shaping the region's ideological transition and its identity as part of the West, in recent years have challenged the agenda on China in CESEE, by securitising the co-operation with China and, in particular, the Belt and Road. China's region work in CESEE has also diverged from the visions and efforts by other non-Western actors, Russia (whose regionalist logic greatly revolves around energy policy), and Turkey (whose regionalism in the Balkan Peninsula is based on the idea of translating historical and cultural proximities into economic and political influence). Nevertheless, despite the divergence and even potential competition in some areas between China and all other external actors, it is primarily the EU and the United States who have attempted to put a check on China's regionalism foreign policy in CESEE.

The combination of external pressure and the tendency of various CESEE actors to reinforce their alignment with the US and the EU in the global arena in times of uncertainty and friction, as well as the shift in the thinking of local actors feeling uneasy about China's rise, have weakened the position of China in some of the countries in the region – in particular, in the Czech Republic (Garlick, 2019) and Poland (Lubina, 2017). Novel issues such as Huawei, 5G security, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, as well as older issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and human rights, are (re)introduced to the China debates in CESEE. While affecting national debates on China to a certain extent, these developments have so far primarily reverberated in the regional and global “China watching” community and in mainstream media, but have had a limited effect at the level of regional co-operation with China. So far, no country officially left the 17+1 format citing any of these issues. Moreover, as China and the CESEE countries have continued to co-operate with China under the Belt and Road, in 2019 they were unexpectedly joined by Greece in the first expansion of the format. Annual “17+1” summits, joint statements, and joint projects have carried on over the years, and CESEE governments have used the co-operation with China to strengthen their own international positions, thereby adding more and more content to the China–CESEE ties (Karásková et al., 2020). Chinese

policymakers themselves have continued to not only maintain but also increase the resources invested in developing regional co-operation with CESEE. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020 – despite the controversies surrounding China’s global role – the regional co-operation channels have served to facilitate China’s aid and export of medical equipment to the region, while the geoeconomic narratives of the Belt and Road, adapted to the new reality to include a greater role for healthcare and digital infrastructure, ensure the topicality of China-led co-operation for CESEE in times of yet another global crisis.

Conclusion

The Belt and Road in its goal of (re)connecting national economies is, to a great deal, driven by novelty, experimentation, and even improvisation (or what Chinese experts and policymakers often call “learning by doing”) – but at the core of these endeavours are the numerous social interactions at all levels. Through these interactions, as a regionalist initiative, Belt and Road promotes a vision of a different economic (and political) geography of the world, proposing new transcontinental integrated networks of nested regions – with China having a major input in how these processes unveil, in dialogue (albeit an asymmetrical one) with the partner countries, including the ones from CESEE. Belt and Road regions are (re)imagined through the emerging economic linkages within and in between them, and between them and China; and as such, they are the building blocks of the grand geoeconomic vision that underpins the initiative.

The example of CESEE shows that, via the Belt and Road, Chinese actors are setting out a new vision for the region based on a geoeconomic imaginary centred on connectivity, infrastructure, and (re)industrialisation, and are advancing comprehensive region work based on this vision. In the case of CESEE, China’s approach has been relatively appealing as it has managed to win over local representatives who have joined and are actively participating in the China-led regional interactions and do not cause disruptions of the regional co-operation even when there are tensions on the national level. The Chinese vision for the region, however, has not been widely accepted, and has not become the mainstream and the key driver of regional co-operation, but has nonetheless added a new layer and new elements to the existing plethora of CESEE regional identities. As region work is often a contentious endeavour, and one that cannot develop in isolation from global political and economic trends, China’s attempt at regionalism in CESEE has been challenged by other external actors in CESEE, such as the EU and the United States, and by local actors feeling threatened by China’s rise. Therefore, the process of redrawing regional maps, despite the case of the Belt and Road bringing a lot of novelty in terms of practices and ideas – as China is a new global actor that pursues regionalisation abroad also confirms some of the age-old tenets of the study of global politics and economics: aspiring powers and their projects will sooner or later face backlash from actors who subjectively feel endangered by them. Therefore, future studies of China-led regionalism should disentangle the challenges emerging at the intersection of China’s proposition, local feedback, and external response.

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