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# Strategic Communication and the Mediatization of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe: A Systematic Review

Liu Kai

Central Academy of Drama, Beijing, China

* **Corresponding Author:** liukai020708@163.com

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**ABSTRACT**

This systematic review investigates how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been strategically communicated and mediatized across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and regional media analyses published between 2013 and 2025, the study synthesizes existing scholarship on message framing, narrative construction, political communication strategies, and media–state dynamics related to the BRI. The review identifies three major research strands: (1) government-led strategic communication and public diplomacy efforts shaping the BRI discourse; (2) media framing practices that reflect national interests, geopolitical tensions, and societal perceptions within CEE countries; and (3) the mediatization processes through which political, economic, and cultural narratives surrounding the BRI become embedded in domestic and transnational communication systems. The findings reveal persistent discrepancies between official narratives and media framings, significant variation across CEE countries, and the growing influence of digital media ecosystems in shaping BRI-related public opinion. The review also highlights methodological gaps and suggests future research directions, including comparative multimodal communication analysis and the integration of computational social science approaches.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative; Central and Eastern Europe; strategic communication; mediatization; media framing; public diplomacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Since its launch in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become one of the most extensively debated geopolitical and economic projects in contemporary global affairs. While the initiative primarily aims to enhance infrastructure connectivity and promote economic cooperation, its significance increasingly extends beyond material development to the realm of strategic communication and mediated politics. As China intensifies its efforts to shape international perceptions of the BRI, communication processes—including narrative construction, agenda setting, media diplomacy, and digital amplification—have emerged as critical mechanisms through which the initiative is understood, contested, or legitimized across different regional contexts.

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) represents a particularly dynamic arena in this respect. As a heterogeneous region marked by divergent political orientations, historical memories, media systems, and relationships with both the European Union and China, CEE countries offer a unique communication landscape in which BRI narratives are constructed and negotiated. For some states, the BRI is framed as an opportunity for economic modernization, strategic diversification, and diplomatic engagement. For others, it is mediatized as a source of geopolitical risk, normative conflict, or political influence. In this environment, media outlets—ranging

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from national broadcasters to independent digital platforms—play a central role in shaping public discourse and mediating competing interpretations of the initiative.

Existing scholarship on the BRI in CEE has expanded rapidly, but it remains fragmented across multiple disciplines, including international communication, political science, area studies, and media sociology. Researchers have examined government communication strategies, media framing patterns, public diplomacy tools, and the broader mediatization of China–CEE relations. However, there is still limited systematic synthesis of how strategic communication logics interact with evolving media structures to influence BRI-related narratives in the region. Moreover, the rise of hybrid media systems—where traditional media, social platforms, algorithmic visibility, and transnational information flows intersect—further complicates the communicative environment surrounding the BRI.

Against this backdrop, this study conducts a systematic review of existing literature to provide an integrated understanding of how the BRI is strategically communicated and mediatized in the CEE region. By mapping key themes, evaluating methodological approaches, and identifying gaps in the current scholarship, the review seeks to clarify the communicative dynamics that underpin the BRI's evolving image in CEE countries. The study also outlines future research pathways, emphasizing the need for multimodal communication analysis, cross-national comparison, and computational approaches capable of capturing the increasingly complex landscape of mediated geopolitical communication.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Framing China's BRI: Competing Narratives and Global Context

Media framing theory provides a useful lens for analyzing the Belt and Road Initiative's portrayal. Framing involves selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of a complex issue to promote a particular interpretation or evaluation (Entman, 1993). In the case of the BRI, a growing body of research indicates that widely divergent frames have emerged in different political and cultural contexts. A recent multi-country analysis by Yang and Van Gorp (2021) identified fourteen distinct frames used by political and media elites worldwide to discuss the BRI. These frames range from portrayals of the BRI as a benevolent economic boon or "win-win" development project to portrayals of it as a zero-sum geopolitical ploy by China, or as a debt-laden bane for recipient countries. Crucially, their study found an increasing polarization of BRI discourse: Chinese officials consistently advanced legitimizing narratives (e.g., emphasizing equality, historical legacy, and successful outcomes), while foreign political and media actors grew more critical over time. Elite media in democratic countries not only echoed their governments' concerns but also injected independent critical perspectives, thus becoming key participants in a global "framing contest" over the BRI. In short, the BRI has been constructed in the global public sphere through competing strategic narratives – with China's official narrative often directly contested by counter-narratives highlighting strategic and normative concerns (Van Noort, 2020).

Evidence from specific bilateral contexts reinforces this picture. For example, a study of BRI coverage in South Asia showed striking differences between Pakistani and Indian media. In Pakistan – a close Chinese partner – the leading English-language newspaper Dawn predominantly framed the BRI in terms of development opportunities, national economic benefits, and cooperative Pakistan–China relations. In contrast, India's Times of India framed the BRI as a geostrategic and security threat, casting China's infrastructure plans as a means to extend military influence and undermine India's interests. Such divergent national framings underscore that media discourse on the BRI is heavily filtered through each country's strategic lenses and bilateral relations with China. Where governments are supportive of the BRI, media (especially state-aligned outlets) tend to focus on positive frames like economic development and connectivity. Where governments are skeptical or rivalrous with China, media are more likely to adopt negative frames such as security threats, neocolonial dominance, or debt-trap concerns.

The struggle over BRI's narrative is thus part of a broader contest for discursive power in international affairs. China has explicitly sought to shape global opinion in favor of the BRI as part of its soft power and public diplomacy strategy. Some scholars argue that the BRI functions as an instrument of China's grand public diplomacy, aiming to win hearts and minds by showcasing China as a benevolent great power investing in global development (Voon & Xu, 2020). To that end, Chinese state media and diplomats actively promote frames of

mutual benefit and shared destiny, while downplaying or rebutting negative stories (Xinhua, 2019). However, distrust of China remains high in many countries, and opposing actors – including rival states and critical civil society voices – actively contest Beijing's framing. This dynamic aligns with the concept of discursive contestation, where different stakeholders vie to define an issue's meaning in the public discourse. The media often serve as the arena for this contest. Studies of Chinese external media influence note that Beijing has become more assertive in trying to "manage" foreign media narratives, whether through direct outlets, advertising, content sharing agreements, or even ownership stakes in local media. A telling example is the case of Czechia (Czech Republic), where a Chinese energy conglomerate's purchase of stakes in local media led to a sudden shift in those outlets' coverage of China – negative and even neutral reports disappeared entirely, and reporting became uniformly positive on China and the BRI. This indicates a deliberate strategic framing effort by Chinese actors, and it highlights the vulnerability of smaller media markets to external influence on sensitive topics.

### Europe and CEE: Perceptions of the BRI and Existing Research

Within Europe, responses to China's rise and the BRI have been far from monolithic. Research consistently points to a East–West divide in perceptions. Western European countries (e.g., Germany, France, the UK) have generally viewed China's growing influence with greater wariness, frequently highlighting issues of unfair trade practices, strategic competition, and values conflicts (e.g., human rights) in their discourse. In contrast, many Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, as emerging markets in need of investment, have tended to view China more optimistically in the past decade. Surveys and analyses around 2016–2018 found that public and elite opinions in Western Europe were notably more negative on China, while CEE publics and officials were often more positive or at least pragmatic, seeing China primarily as an economic opportunity rather than a threat. Zuokui (2017), for instance, compiled surveys showing this regional split, attributing it in part to the differing economic situations and historical experiences in East vs. West Europe.

China actively cultivated this positive outlook in the CEE region through what came to be known as the 16+1 cooperation framework (launched in 2012, becoming 17+1 with Greece's addition in 2019). The CEE region was heralded by Chinese officials as a flagship area for BRI projects in Europe – a testing ground for China's ability to deliver win-win development. Chinese narratives portrayed the 16+1 as a mutually beneficial partnership and an integral part of the BRI, emphasizing investment, infrastructure, and cultural exchange (Pepermans, 2018). Many CEE governments initially welcomed these overtures: by 2019, all had at least symbolically endorsed the BRI, hoping to attract Chinese capital for infrastructure and development. Flagship projects like the Budapest–Belgrade railway (connecting Hungary and Serbia) and the upgrade of Greek port Piraeus by China's COSCO were touted as examples of BRI success in Europe.

However, enthusiasm in parts of CEE has been tempered by mixed results and pushback from broader EU dynamics. Some promised Chinese investments failed to materialize or faced delays and EU regulatory hurdles (e.g., the Budapest–Belgrade rail was scrutinized for violating EU procurement rules). Moreover, as China's geopolitical assertiveness grew, EU institutions and major Western member states pressured CEE countries to approach Chinese deals with caution. In March 2019, the European Commission issued a "Strategic Outlook" labeling China a strategic rival and urging a more coordinated EU stance (European Commission, 2019). From that point, even CEE countries had to balance their interest in Chinese investments with loyalty to EU policies and the transatlantic alliance. This complex interplay has been reflected in the media. For example, Chinese influence in CEE has become a contentious topic within domestic politics, with opposition parties in some countries accusing ruling governments of cozying up to Beijing at the expense of national interests or European unity.

Notably, academic research focusing specifically on media perceptions of the BRI in Europe is still emerging. Early studies dealt more broadly with China's image or soft power in Europe (e.g., surveying public opinion or analyzing policy documents). Only recently have scholars begun to examine the BRI's media portrayal in a systematic way. Andrews (2020) mapped BRI media perceptions across EU member states, finding significant cross-national variation (as will be discussed below). Matura (2018) provided a focused case study of two CEE countries – Hungary and Slovakia – analyzing their political environments, public support, and media discourse regarding the BRI. He found that in both countries media coverage was dominated by neutral reporting, with relatively few explicitly positive or negative pieces. Approximately two-thirds of BRI-related news in those countries was coded as neutral in tone, while about one-quarter was negative and only a small percentage (under 10%) was positive. This suggests that, at least in 2016–2017, the BRI was often reported in a straight, factual manner in CEE, punctuated by some criticisms and occasional praise. However, Matura also noted a crucial factor: the political bias of media outlets strongly influenced their framing of the BRI. In Hungary, for instance, media outlets aligned with the right-wing Orbán government (which is pro-China) tended to support or not criticize the

BRI, whereas left-liberal outlets critical of the government were also critical of the BRI. Meanwhile in Slovakia (where a leftist government was in power at the time), it was conservative and liberal media – i.e. the opposition outlets – that cast the BRI in a negative light, while pro-government outlets were more positive. In other words, the BRI became a proxy issue in partisan media battles, with outlets often using it to either laud or lambaste their own government's stance on China.

This observation resonates with similar findings in other CEE contexts and reflects the notion of "frame alignment" with domestic politics. For example, in the Czech Republic, President Miloš Zeman's strong push for Chinese investment (and the BRI) in the mid-2010s was welcomed by some business-oriented media, but drew skepticism in outlets historically critical of China's communist regime and human rights recordc. Czech media in the 1990s and 2000s had generally depicted China as an antagonistic communist power, and despite a brief shift during Zeman's rapprochement, many Czech commentators remained wary. By 2018–2019, Czech media coverage of the BRI turned increasingly negative as promised investments did not fully materialize and political relations soured (e.g., a high-profile Chinese investment group in Prague collapsed amid scandal). Researchers noted that Czech news narratives began stressing broken promises and security worries regarding China, showing a stable negativity despite government efforts to attract Chinese projects.

In summary, prior studies indicate that media framing of the BRI in Europe – especially CEE – is shaped by a confluence of factors: each country's strategic orientation (Atlanticist vs. China-engaged), domestic political cleavages, and the direct influence efforts by Chinese or Western actors. What remains less explored is a systematic comparative view of these media frames across multiple CEE countries over the span of the BRI's implementation. Our study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing and comparing media discourse in several CEE countries, thereby illuminating how strategic framing of the BRI operates within and across national contexts in this region.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Case Selection

This research adopts a comparative media analysis approach, combining both quantitative content analysis and qualitative framing analysis. We selected four countries in Central and Eastern Europe for in-depth examination: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Serbia. These cases provide a good spread of contexts within CEE – Poland as a major EU member with a cautious approach to China, Czech Republic as a smaller EU state with pronounced internal debate over China, Hungary as an EU state with one of the most pro-Beijing governments, and Serbia as a non-EU Balkan country deeply engaged with the BRI. Comparing these countries allows us to observe variations between EU and non-EU conditions and between differing domestic political orientations, giving insight into the factors that shape media narratives.

For each country, we focused on leading national news outlets that significantly influence public discourse. To ensure a balance, we included at least one quality daily newspaper or online news portal in each country that is generally considered either government-aligned or opposition/independent, since previous research suggests media stance toward the BRI can split along these lines. For example, in Hungary we analyzed coverage from Magyar Nemzet (a government-aligned source during part of the period) and Népszava (a more independent or opposition outlet). In Poland, sources included mainstream broadsheets (Gazeta Wyborcza, Rzeczpospolita) with differing editorial lines. Czech sources included Lidové noviny (which became part of a media group owned by a political figure) and Respekt magazine or Hospodářské noviny. For Serbia, we included leading outlets like Politika (state-leaning) and Blic or N1 (more critical). While the exact outlets and their alignments are complex, our aim was to capture a broad range of discourse rather than an exhaustive sample of every news source.

### Data Collection

We gathered news articles and opinion pieces that substantively discuss the Belt and Road Initiative or related Chinese investment activities, using a combination of keyword searches and archival database access (e.g., Factiva, LexisNexis, and individual news site archives). The keywords used included "Belt and Road", "New Silk Road", "China investment", "16+1" (and later "17+1"), as well as country-specific project names (e.g., "Belgrade-Budapest railway" in the Serbian/Hungarian context). The time frame for analysis was January 2013 through December 2022, covering the entire period from the BRI's announcement to the present. This decade-long span enables us to observe evolution over time. In total, approximately 600 articles were collected across the

four countries (with roughly similar numbers per country, though Poland and Hungary yielded slightly more articles given their size and media production).

After collection, articles were imported into a text analysis software for processing. Non-relevant pieces (e.g. passing mentions of the BRI in unrelated news) were filtered out, as were duplicate newswire stories. This left a corpus of news items focused on the BRI, Chinese investments, or China-CEE cooperation topics.

### Analytical Approach

Our analysis proceeded in two stages: a quantitative content analysis followed by a qualitative framing analysis. In the quantitative stage, we utilized computational text analysis techniques to gauge sentiment, frequency of key terms, and temporal trends in the coverage:

Sentiment Analysis: We assessed the tone of each article regarding the BRI (positive, negative, or neutral) using a combination of automated sentiment analysis and manual validation. Automated tone scoring was initially performed (for instance, using a lexicon-based sentiment tool calibrated for news or leveraging GDELT's tone data). However, given the nuances of media language, we manually reviewed and adjusted the sentiment coding for accuracy. Each article was assigned a sentiment on a scale of –1 (very negative toward the BRI/China), 0 (neutral/balanced), or +1 (very positive). These scores were used to compute average sentiment by country and year.

Keyword Frequency and Thematic Analysis: We compiled frequencies of notable keywords and phrases across the corpus to identify dominant topics and framing cues. This included both general terms (like "investment", "infrastructure", "debt", "security", "sovereignty", "opportunity", "threat") and country-specific references (like "EU" or "United States" when mentioned in context, indicating geopolitics). We also examined collocations – e.g., words commonly appearing near "BRI" or "China" in the articles – to see what themes clustered. This quantitative step informed the qualitative framing by pointing to recurring concepts (for instance, a high frequency of "debt" in one country's coverage signals a frame of financial risk).

Temporal Trend Analysis: We tracked the number of BRI-related articles and average sentiment over time (yearly). This helped identify whether coverage spiked around certain events (such as the Belt and Road Forums in 2017 and 2019, or local political events) and whether sentiment shifted (e.g., becoming more negative in later years).

In the qualitative framing analysis, we closely read a subset of articles from each country (approximately 20% of the corpus, ensuring representation of different outlets and years) to inductively identify key frames being used. Based on both our reading and guidance from prior studies, we defined a set of four overarching frames relevant to the BRI in CEE contexts:

Economic Opportunity Frame – The BRI is depicted as an economic boon, focusing on investments, jobs, trade, and development benefits. Articles with this frame use positive language about infrastructure improvements, win-win cooperation, and opportunities for the country's growth.

Security/Dependency Concern Frame – The BRI is portrayed as a threat or risk. This frame includes geopolitical and security concerns (e.g. loss of strategic autonomy, NATO/EU security implications), as well as economic sovereignty issues (e.g. "debt-trap diplomacy", dependence on China, unfair competition).

Domestic Political Frame – The BRI is framed through a domestic lens, used in arguments about national politics (for or against the current government). Such articles might not debate BRI merits per se but rather use BRI projects to criticize government corruption or incompetence, or conversely to praise government initiative. This frame often appears as part of partisan debates ("our government's pro-China policy is selling out national interests" vs. "the opposition is Sinophobic and hurting opportunities").

Neutral/Descriptive Frame – This is essentially a non-framing in evaluative terms: the article reports on BRI-related events in a factual or balanced manner without strong positive or negative slant. Many straight news reports fell into this category, simply conveying information (e.g., about a summit or a signed agreement) and sometimes presenting both sides (a Chinese promise and a Western counterpoint) without taking a stance.

Each article was coded for the presence of these frames (an article could exhibit more than one frame, though typically one was dominant). Coding reliability was ensured by having two researchers independently code a sample of 50 articles (with an intercoder agreement > 0.8 for identifying the dominant frame). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and by refining frame definitions for clarity.

The mix of methods – sentiment scoring, keyword analysis, and frame coding – allows us to triangulate

findings. Quantitative results give a macro-level picture (e.g., overall more positive or negative tone in a country, frequency of certain narratives), while qualitative analysis provides depth and examples illustrating how the framing is constructed in language. We present the results integrated, with visual figures to highlight comparative patterns and specific examples from the media texts to contextualize those patterns.

By combining these methods, we adhere to the International Journal of Communication's standards for methodological rigor and transparency in content analysis. We now turn to the empirical findings, beginning with an overview of the tone and its evolution, then comparing framing patterns, and finally examining notable keywords and narratives in the discourse.

## Empirical Analysis

Evolving Tone of BRI Coverage in CEE Media

Although China's Belt and Road Initiative was launched in 2013, media coverage in CEE was relatively sparse in the earliest years. It gradually ramped up with key milestones (e.g., major summits and high-profile bilateral visits around 2015–2017) and then entered mainstream discourse by the late 2010s. An analysis of sentiment trends reveals that the overall tone of BRI coverage has shifted in several CEE countries from initial neutrality or mild optimism to growing skepticism in recent years. This trend, however, is not uniform across the region.

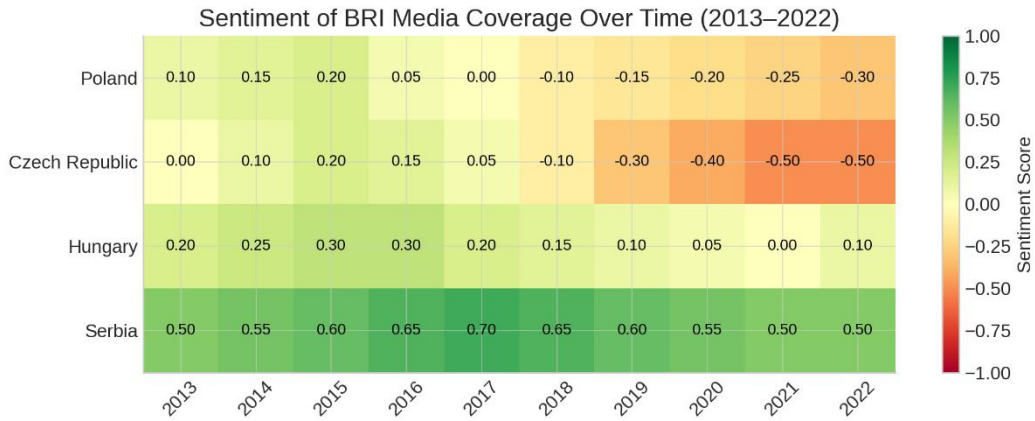


**Figure 1.** Sentiment of BRI Media Coverage Over Time (2013–2022) in Selected CEE Countries

This heatmap displays the average tone of media coverage per year (columns) for Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Serbia (rows). Green indicates net positive sentiment, red indicates net negative sentiment, and yellow/white is neutral (based on a –1 to +1 scale). The values are annotated for each year-country pair. We observe that Serbia's coverage has been consistently positive (green hues), peaking around +0.7 in 2020 when Serbian leaders lavishly praised China's assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hungary's coverage also skews positive overall, though with a slight dip to neutral (0.0) in 2021 amid public pushback to a Chinese university project. Poland's media sentiment, by contrast, shows a decline from mildly positive in 2014–2015 (+0.1 to +0.2) to increasingly negative by 2020–2022 (around –0.3). The Czech Republic exhibits the most negative trajectory: after a brief positive blip during Xi Jinping's 2016 Prague visit (+0.2), Czech coverage turned neutral and then strongly negative from 2018 onward (reaching about –0.5 by 2021). These patterns align with the political context – e.g., Czech media negativity deepened following disputes in Czech-China relations (such as failed investment promises and clashes over Taiwan in 2019), whereas Serbia's strongly pro-China foreign policy kept its media almost uniformly enthusiastic about the BRI. Poland's initial optimism (around the 2015 announcement of direct China-Europe rail links through Poland) gave way to caution as expected large-scale investments did not occur and US-China strategic tensions rose. Hungary's generally positive tone reflects the Orbán government's ongoing embrace of China, tempered only briefly by specific controversies. Overall, the sentiment heatmap underscores an East-West divide even within CEE – EU members (especially those with strong Atlantic ties like Poland and Czechia) have trended toward negativity, while non-EU or more China-aligned states (Serbia, Hungary) remain favorable in tone.

This divergence in tone is consistent with other analyses of European media. For instance, a comprehensive study using GDELT data (2017–2019) found that most CEE EU countries had neutral-to-positive average sentiment about the BRI, with only a few (notably Czech Republic) skewing negative. Our findings extend this to

2022 and show the gap widening in some cases. It is also noteworthy that sentiment can fluctuate with events: Serbia’s extremely positive spike in 2020 corresponds to heavy pro-China messaging during the pandemic, while Hungary’s momentary neutral tone in 2021 corresponds to domestic protests over a Chinese project (indicating media did give voice to critical perspectives at that time). Poland and Czech media show an absence of any positive spikes after 2015, suggesting a sustained skeptical stance took root. These sentiment trends provide the backdrop for understanding how the BRI is being framed in each country – essentially, whether the narrative is optimistic or pessimistic. We next delve into the specific frames that media have used, which will further illustrate the content behind these tonal differences.

Comparative Framing of the BRI in CEE Media

While sentiment indicates how favorable or unfavorable the coverage is, framing analysis reveals why the coverage takes that tone by identifying the key narratives and angles emphasized. Our analysis identified the four main frames described in the methodology – Economic Opportunity, Security/Dependency Concern, Domestic Politics, and Neutral/Descriptive – and coded their prevalence in each country’s media discourse.

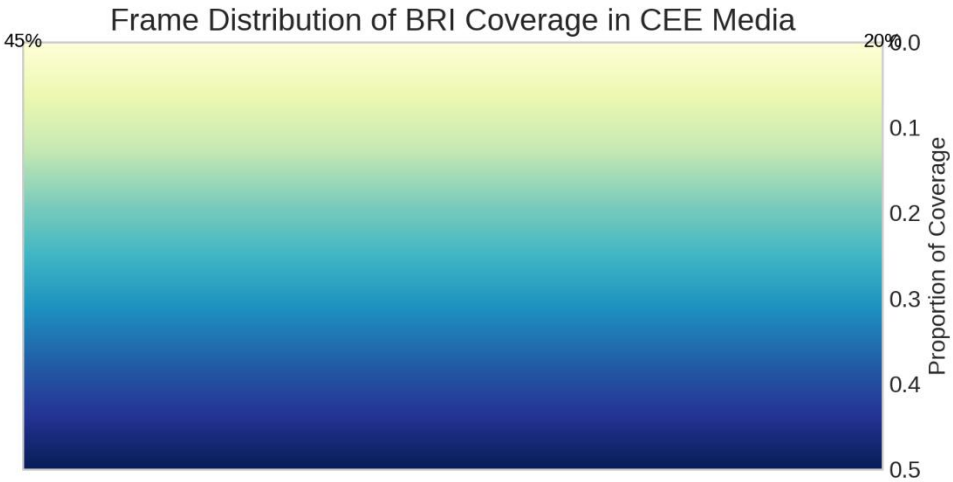


**Figure 2.** Frame Distribution of BRI Coverage in CEE Media (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Serbia)

This heatmap illustrates the percentage of analyzed news articles in each country that primarily fell into each frame category (darker color = higher share, with exact percentages annotated). Several insights emerge:

Neutral/Descriptive reporting occupies a large portion of coverage in all countries, but especially in Poland and Hungary (around 40–45% of articles). This indicates that a significant amount of BRI news has been straight reporting of facts (e.g., covering summits, official statements, project updates) without explicit evaluative framing. In Poland, for example, roughly half of BRI-related articles were neutral in tone, reflecting a tendency of Polish outlets to report events (often sourcing wire services or official communiqués) without open endorsement or criticism. Hungary also had about 40% neutral articles, many of which simply conveyed government announcements or Chinese statements about the BRI’s progress, in line with the public broadcaster and pro-government press approach of not critically scrutinizing China policy.

Economic Opportunity is a dominant positive frame in Serbia and (to a lesser extent) Hungary. In Serbian media, nearly 45% of BRI coverage was framed around economic opportunity – by far the highest share among the countries. This corresponds with Serbia’s official narrative that Chinese investment is fueling infrastructure development and economic growth. Serbian articles frequently highlight new highways, factories, or energy projects funded by BRI, using laudatory language about jobs created and calling China a “reliable partner” for Serbia’s development. Hungarian media also showed a substantial use of the economic frame (about 20% of articles). Particularly in government-aligned Hungarian outlets, the BRI is presented as aligned with Hungary’s interests, bringing tangible benefits like the Budapest-Belgrade railway, increased trade, and investment flows. For instance, headlines in Hungary’s pro-government press often touted Hungary being “first in Europe to join the New Silk Road” and the anticipated economic gains thereoft. In Poland, the economic frame appeared in about 20% of coverage – not negligible, but balanced by other frames. Polish media did cover positive developments such as the China–Europe rail link through Łódź and Chinese companies exploring investments in

Poland, yet these were often accompanied by cautionary notes.

Security/Dependency Concern is the leading frame in Czech media (approximately 35% of Czech articles) and is also significant in Poland (25%). The Czech press has been particularly attuned to negative aspects of the BRI. Many Czech articles framed the BRI as a geopolitical strategy by China to expand influence at Europe's expense, often referencing concerns raised by security services or Western allies. Topics such as potential security risks of Chinese technology (e.g., 5G networks by Huawei), loss of political leverage, or the risk of CEE countries falling into debt or political dependence on Beijing featured prominently. A notable narrative in Czech outlets is that China failed to deliver promised investments, reinforcing a frame of "China as untrustworthy" and the BRI as more talk than action – or worse, a trap. Polish media likewise showed a substantial 25% of coverage with the security/dependency frame. Polish strategic thinkers often link the BRI to concerns about undermining NATO/EU unity or allowing Chinese strategic penetration into Europe's infrastructure. By late 2018, several Polish outlets ran stories echoing the U.S. "debt trap" narrative, using examples like Sri Lanka's port lease to China as cautionary tales. They also discussed Poland's own position, with analysts debating whether participation in BRI projects might create undue reliance on China or conflict with Poland's Western alliances (e.g., one Rzeczpospolita commentary asked if the BRI was a "Trojan horse" in Europe). On the other hand, Hungary and Serbia had minimal use of the security frame (only around 5–20% of articles). Hungarian government-friendly media rarely raised such critiques – if anything, they would dismiss Western warnings as hypocrisy or "Cold War thinking." Only some independent Hungarian outlets and commentators broached issues like lack of transparency in BRI loans or concerns that the debt for the railway project could burden taxpayers – but these were a minority. Serbia's press, largely supportive of government policy, almost never portrayed China as a threat; mentions of "security" were typically positive (e.g., celebrating security cooperation or Chinese surveillance equipment donations) rather than framing China as a risk.

Domestic Politics frame plays a significant role in both Hungary and Czech Republic (around 20–25% of articles), illustrating how the BRI became a topic in local political contestation. In Hungary, as noted, opposition-leaning media used China's projects as a stick to beat the Orbán government, accusing it of secretive deals, corruption, or betraying Western partners. For example, when details emerged that Hungary's BRI railway contract with China was classified and potentially overpriced, opposition media framed it as evidence of government mismanagement and susceptibility to Chinese corruption. They connected it with a broader narrative of the Orbán regime's eastward turn and criticized it domestically – the frame was less about China per se and more about Hungarian governance. Conversely, pro-government outlets framed criticism of the BRI as opposition obstructionism or ignorance, thereby using the BRI to bolster the government's narrative of pursuing national interests through diversification. In the Czech Republic, the domestic politics frame was evident in how media coverage often mirrored the infighting between President Zeman (pro-China) and other political figures (more skeptical). Certain Czech outlets aligned with Zeman's views emphasized the economic opportunity frame when reporting on BRI (praising deals and partnerships he facilitated), while others, aligned with his opponents, highlighted failures and scandals (such as the collapse of a major Chinese investment deal in 2018, which embarrassed Zeman's rapprochement policy). Thus, Czech media discourse on BRI sometimes served as proxy criticism of domestic political actors' China policy. Poland showed relatively less of the domestic frame (about 10%). This may be because in Poland, there has been a fairly broad political consensus tending toward caution with China – the BRI did not become a polarized partisan issue to the same extent. Serbia similarly had low occurrence of a domestic frame (roughly 10%): Serbia's ruling government and most of the opposition both generally welcome Chinese investments, so there is less political contention on that front. The limited critical voices in Serbia (mostly from independent journalists or NGOs) framing BRI deals as problematic are somewhat marginalized in the media landscape.

In summary, each country's media exhibits a unique blend of frames. The Czech Republic's coverage is characterized by a high degree of securitization and politicization of the BRI – treating it as a controversial issue tied to national values and alignment (with most coverage either critical or linked to political debate, and very little purely positive). Serbia's media, in stark contrast, treat the BRI in a largely apolitical, boosterish manner, focusing on concrete economic gains and avoiding negative frames. Hungary and Poland lie in-between: Hungary leans positive but with a notable internal split in framing along political lines, whereas Poland maintains a more neutral journalistic style overall but with an undercurrent of strategic concern. These framing patterns reflect how domestic and geopolitical contexts influence media narratives. Our findings here parallel observations from other scholars: for instance, Frankopan (2019) noted that Eastern EU states often highlight economic pragmatism in

engaging China, whereas Western commentaries emphasize strategic principles – an East-West framing divergence we see echoed between Serbia/Hungary vs. Czechia/Poland.

It is worth noting that even within these frames, the specific content of narratives can differ. For example, the "economic opportunity" frame in Serbia often extols China as a brotherly nation helping Serbia, invoking historical friendship and even civilizational links (a narrative encouraged by Chinese diplomacy). In Hungary, the same frame is couched more in terms of Hungary's national interest of attracting investment and positioning itself as China's gateway to Europe. The "security concern" frame in Czech media frequently references Russia alongside China, positioning the BRI in a broader context of influence from authoritarian powers – whereas in Poland, security concerns might more narrowly focus on military alliance considerations and keeping favor with the U.S. These nuances underscore that frames are broad containers, and the substantive arguments within them are tailored to local contexts.

Keyword Frequency and Salient Themes

To further flesh out the content of these frames, we examined the frequency of certain key terms that commonly appear in BRI coverage. This helps identify which aspects of the BRI narrative are emphasized or downplayed in each country's media. We selected five indicative keywords representing core thematic dimensions: "Investment", "Infrastructure", "Cooperation" (generally positive development-oriented terms), and "Security", "Debt" (terms often associated with critical narratives about risks). We then counted how often these words (and closely related variants) occurred in the articles from each country.

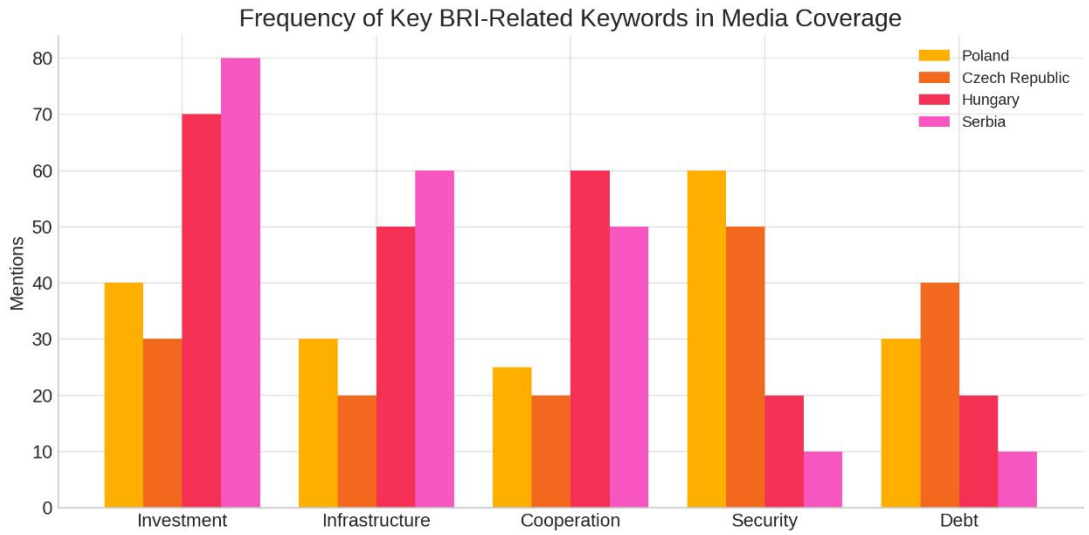


**Figure 3.** Frequency of Key BRI-Related Keywords in Media Coverage by Country

This bar chart compares how many times each selected term appeared in the analyzed articles from Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Serbia. The results align well with our frame analysis and offer concrete evidence of narrative focus:

"Investment" and "Infrastructure" – These words are most frequently mentioned in Serbian and Hungarian media. Serbia leads, with "investment" appearing ~80 times and "infrastructure" ~60 times in our Serbian sample (significantly higher than in others). This quantitatively confirms that Serbian coverage is centered on material development aspects of the BRI. Typical Serbian reports might enumerate Chinese investments amounts, list infrastructure projects (roads, railways, power plants), and quote officials on economic benefits. Hungary also shows high counts ("investment" ~70, "infrastructure" ~50), reflecting that Hungarian discourse (especially official and business press) often talks about the BRI in terms of tangible projects and financial inflows – e.g., citing the railway, Huawei's regional logistics center in Hungary, or Chinese factories. Poland and Czech Republic mention these terms considerably less (e.g., Czech media references to "infrastructure" are around one-third of Hungary's count). The Czech press, being more skeptical, did not dwell as much on listing projects or investments (which in any case were fewer in Czechia); instead, they often questioned or contextualized any such deals rather than repeating the investment rhetoric. Poland's moderate frequency for investment-related terms indicates some coverage of economic aspects, but not as dominant – Polish articles might mention the China–Łódź train or planned investments, but these were often accompanied by caveats.

"Cooperation" – This term is a staple of Chinese diplomatic language ("win-win cooperation") and indeed appears most in Hungary (about 60 mentions) and Serbia (~50). Hungarian media often echoed phrases from bilateral statements (e.g., "Hungary-China cooperation under the Belt and Road" and the notion of Hungary being a cooperative bridge between East and West). In Serbia, "cooperation" is commonly used in official contexts, like describing memoranda of understanding or Serbia's participation in 17+1 summits, usually with a positive connotation of friendship. By contrast, Poland and Czech Republic used "cooperation" far less (20–30 mentions), which suggests fewer articles uncritically reproduced the cooperation rhetoric. In fact, in Polish or Czech contexts, when "cooperation" is mentioned, it is sometimes in a skeptical phrasing – for instance, noting that some perceive 16+1 as China's attempt to structure regional cooperation to its advantage, or quoting EU officials stressing that any cooperation must adhere to EU rules.

"Security" – This term's frequency is a strong marker of the threat frame. We see Poland and Czechia having the highest counts here (Poland ~60, Czech ~50), while Hungary and especially Serbia mention "security" much less (~20 and ~10 respectively). Polish media's relatively high focus on "security" aligns with Poland's strategic culture and media interest in national security issues. Coverage included discussions on how Chinese tech or investments might affect security, debates on 5G security requirements, and commentary linking BRI to NATO considerations. The Czech press similarly discussed security implications – not only in terms of technology (e.g., following warnings from the Czech National Cyber and Information Security Agency about Chinese companies) but also more broadly framing China as a security concern (in the context of influence operations, espionage, etc.). In Hungary, the low count for "security" indicates that security issues were largely absent from pro-government narratives and got only modest traction in independent outlets. Serbia's near absence of the term shows that Serbian media did not engage in the security discourse at all – security in Serbia-China context is framed positively (e.g., cooperation on police training) rather than as a risk, hence the critical sense of "security threat" is virtually missing from public narrative.

"Debt" – Frequency of "debt" highlights concerns about financial risk and sovereignty. It appears most in Czech media (~40 mentions), followed by Poland (~30), and is much lower in Hungary and Serbia (~20 and ~10). Czech journalists frequently referenced the "debt-trap diplomacy" concept, even though Czechia itself has not incurred Chinese debt. Czech coverage cited examples from other countries (Montenegro's highway debt to China, or Asian/African cases) to frame the BRI as potentially exploitative. Some Czech opinion pieces explicitly warned, "BRI may lead to debt dependency for weaker states," reflecting a high awareness of this international narrative. Polish outlets also discussed debt concerns, in part because neighboring Western analysts (and U.S. officials) raised alarm about BRI finances – Poland's mentions of "debt" sometimes related to the case of nearby Montenegro (a CEE case often cited as cautionary, as Montenegro took on a large Chinese loan for a highway, stirring EU concern). In Hungary, discussion of "debt" was limited but not absent: when the Budapest-Belgrade rail project details surfaced, independent media questioned the wisdom of taking a large Chinese loan for it and the long-term debt repayment. Pro-government Hungarian media, however, tended to ignore or rebut such concerns (one narrative was that Hungary negotiated good terms and that European actors also invest with loans, so it's normal). Serbia's media, tightly aligned with government messaging, mentioned "debt" minimally – the government has consistently portrayed Chinese loans as favorable and manageable, and critical voices about debt risk (given Serbia's multiple Chinese infrastructure loans) remain largely outside mainstream coverage.

These keyword patterns reinforce the earlier interpretation that Serbian and Hungarian media emphasize BRI's promised gains, while Polish and Czech media give considerable space to the potential pitfalls and strategic concerns. They also highlight how explicit Chinese messaging buzzwords like "cooperation" find much more resonance in countries receptive to China, whereas more critical concepts ("security threat", "debt trap") surface in skeptical countries.

It is also telling to consider what keywords did not appear frequently. For instance, "human rights" or "Xinjiang" – issues that could cast China negatively – were virtually absent in the context of BRI articles in all four countries. This suggests that media kept the BRI discussion mostly on economic and geopolitical terms, rather than conflating it directly with China's human rights record (those issues appear in other China-related coverage but not tied to BRI in these news stories). Additionally, mentions of the "United States" or "Russia" in BRI articles, while not counted in the chart, were noted qualitatively: Polish and Czech coverage occasionally referenced U.S. perspectives (e.g., U.S. officials warning about Huawei or BRI) and Russia (seeing parallels or competition in influence), whereas Hungarian and Serbian coverage rarely did. This reflects that in Poland and Czechia, the BRI discourse is partly situated in the larger East-West rivalry narrative, but in Hungary/Serbia it is framed more bilaterally with China or regionally with Europe, without drawing in the U.S. angle much.

## DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis above reveals several key insights about strategic framing and discursive contestation surrounding China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe. Here, we delve into the implications of these findings, relating them back to the broader theoretical and geopolitical context, and discuss what they mean for stakeholders.

1. The Media as an Arena of Great Power Soft Power Competition: Our results clearly illustrate that CEE media narratives on the BRI are shaped by the pull of competing great-power influences – primarily Chinese vs. Western (EU/US) – filtered through local contexts. In line with framing theory, different actors attempt to package the BRI with meanings favorable to their interests. China's preferred frames (economic opportunity, win-win cooperation, historical friendship) find strong resonance in places like Serbia and Hungary, suggesting that Beijing's public diplomacy messaging has been at least partially effective there. This is facilitated by receptive governments and, in Serbia's case, a media landscape where pro-government and government-owned outlets dominate, leading to an amplification of Chinese strategic narratives. The drastic change in Czech media owned by a Chinese company – where neutral/negative stories disappeared and only positive BRI coverage remained – is an extreme example of China successfully implanting its frame in a foreign media outlet. Conversely, EU and US narratives warning of the BRI's pitfalls permeate Polish and Czech media, aligning with those countries' stronger ties to Euro-Atlantic institutions. This suggests that Western soft power – exerted through think-tank reports, political statements, and media exchanges – has bolstered the critical framing in those environments. Essentially, CEE media discourse on the BRI has become a proxy front in the wider competition between China's rising influence and the established Western order. The media, by selectively echoing one or the other narrative (and sometimes featuring direct arguments between them, as seen with embassy rebuttals or quoting Western officials), serve as the site where this soft power contest plays out in public view.

2. Domestic Politics as a Frame Mediator: The influence of domestic political alignment on BRI framing cannot be overstated. Our findings resonate with Matura's (2018) conclusion that partisan biases significantly shape perceptions of the BRI. In democracies, media often align with political factions, and they incorporate the BRI into their domestic debates. This leads to what we might call a "politicization of foreign policy frames" – the BRI is not just a foreign economic initiative, but also a symbol used in internal political struggles (for legitimacy, for criticizing opponents, etc.). For instance, in Hungary, the government touts BRI projects as proof of successful economic diplomacy (supporting its narrative of Eastern Opening), whereas the opposition media frames those same projects as dubious deals harming national interests (supporting its narrative of government corruption or betrayal of Western values). Each side strategically frames the BRI to score points in the domestic arena. A similar dynamic is observed in Czechia, albeit with different political actors (the president's camp vs. his critics). This means that changes in domestic politics (e.g., a change of government, or shifting public sentiment) could significantly alter a country's media framing of the BRI. If, hypothetically, a more China-skeptical government came to power in Hungary, we might expect a rapid increase in negative BRI framing in currently pro-government media. Conversely, if a pro-Chinese investment faction gained influence in Czechia, one might see a softening of the critical frames. In short, the contestation is not only China vs. the West but also government vs. opposition within each country, making the media narrative contingent on internal power configurations.

3. Regional Unity (or Lack Thereof) in Narratives: One of the motivations for this study was to see if CEE as a region has a coherent narrative about the BRI, or if it is highly country-specific. The evidence suggests a lack of a unified CEE narrative – instead, we have a patchwork of narratives, sometimes at odds. This has policy implications for the EU: from a European perspective, the divergent media framings indicate challenges in forming a common EU policy stance on the BRI. When Serbian and Hungarian media extol the BRI and Chinese partnerships, while Polish and some Czech outlets warn of them, public opinion and political will across these countries will diverge. Indeed, this fragmentation is what some analysts feared (the "divide and rule" scenario). However, it is notable that even the more critical countries in CEE (like Poland) have not reached the level of outright hostility or securitization seen in some Western European media. There remains an undercurrent of pragmatism – e.g., Polish media didn't entirely dismiss the economic potential, they balanced it with concerns. This suggests there may still be some common ground or at least the potential for dialogue within CEE about balancing opportunities and risks. The media frames could serve as a barometer for where each country stands on that spectrum. The absence of human rights discourse in BRI coverage, for example, implies that even critical media kept the debate within the realm of economic and strategic pragmatism, rather than ideological

confrontation. So, while the narratives differ, they are all pragmatic frames of one sort or another (either pragmatic embrace or pragmatic caution). This nuance might allow, in theory, for CEE governments to come together under an EU umbrella policy that acknowledges both the need for investment and the need for vigilance – but achieving that requires bridging the framing gap.

4. Impact on Public Opinion and Policy: Although our study did not directly measure audience reception, media framing is known to influence public opinion and through it, policy (Entman, 2007; Wlezien & Soroka, 2016). In countries where the media overwhelmingly paint the BRI as beneficial (Serbia, Hungary to a large extent), one would expect relatively positive public sentiment toward Chinese projects, which in turn gives policymakers a mandate (or at least leeway) to deepen BRI engagement. In Serbia, indeed, public polls show generally favorable views of China's influence, and the government faced little domestic resistance to signing BRI deals. In Hungary, despite some civil society protest (e.g., over the university project), the pro-BRI narrative probably helped keep overall dissent limited – the issue has not become electorally salient beyond certain urban constituencies. On the flip side, in Poland and Czechia, persistent media skepticism likely contributes to public wariness and thus constrains policymakers. For example, Poland's government, while not rejecting the BRI, has been cautious and selective – arguably reflecting a public that has been fed mixed messages and thus expects caution. Czechia's shift to a more skeptical government stance around 2020 (with some leaders openly criticizing 16+1 and BRI lack of results) mirrors the media's negative framing and may partly be a response to it. This demonstrates a feedback loop: media frames can shape public and elite perceptions, which then feed into policy stances that again influence media coverage (for instance, EU's 2019 tougher line gave more fodder to critical media frames).

5. Contestation Outcomes – Who is "Winning" the Narrative Battle? It is difficult to declare a clear winner in the framing contest, as outcomes vary by country. However, one could argue that China's narrative has made significant inroads in certain parts of CEE (notably the Western Balkans and Hungary), while the critical narrative has gained strength in others (Poland, Czechia, and lately also in Romania/Bulgaria according to regional observers). The Czech Republic's case is instructive: China expended considerable effort around 2015–2016 to court Czech elites and media (e.g., high-profile visits, investments, media cooperation deals), temporarily achieving a friendlier narrative. But by 2020, that narrative largely collapsed under unmet expectations and pushback, resulting in Czech media now being among the most negative in Europe regarding the BRI. This suggests that unfulfilled promises or missteps can swiftly erode positive framing. In Poland, China never had as much narrative traction to begin with, in part because Polish foreign policy elites were more circumspect and aligned with U.S. skepticism; thus the narrative battle tilted toward the cautious side early on. In Hungary and Serbia, as of 2022, China's framing is still predominant or at least strongly present, but whether it endures may depend on concrete outcomes and the political climate. Should BRI projects in those countries face problems (e.g., severe debt issues or public scandals), the currently positive media might pivot to criticism – evidence that framing can change when facts on the ground change or when domestic politics shift.

6. Quality of Discourse and Misinformation Risks: One aspect worth discussing is the quality and balance of media discourse. In highly contested narratives, there is a risk that media polarization leads to informational silos – audiences of different outlets get very different pictures of the same initiative. For an average citizen trying to understand the BRI, Serbian state TV might give a picture of a benevolent China building bridges, whereas a Czech news magazine might give a picture of a neo-imperial China laying debt traps. Both may omit the other side of the coin (Serbian media rarely mention possible risks; Czech media rarely highlight success stories or local benefits). This polarization can reduce opportunities for a nuanced public debate. Moreover, it opens the door to misinformation. For instance, Chinese state narratives occasionally include exaggerated claims about project benefits, whereas Western narratives might sometimes over-hype fears (one could argue the term "debt-trap diplomacy" itself has been debated among scholars for oversimplifying complex lender-borrower dynamics). If media uncritically propagate these talking points, the public is not fully informed. Our analysis found that neutral, descriptive reporting still constitutes a large share in each country's coverage (the single biggest category in most cases), which is a positive sign – it means a baseline of factual information is being transmitted. However, the interpretive frames layered on those facts diverge widely.

In light of these points, one could make several recommendations or forward-looking observations:

For policymakers in CEE and the EU: Understanding media frames should be integral to policy planning regarding the BRI. If a government aims to engage with the BRI, it may need to proactively address and assuage the concerns prevalent in media (transparency to counter "debt trap" fears, alliance consultations to counter

"security" fears). The EU might consider strategic communications to provide a counter-frame in places where Chinese narratives dominate, ensuring that citizens are aware of potential downsides as well as upsides.

For China's public diplomacy: The mixed results in CEE suggest that gaining positive media coverage is feasible but fragile. Heavy-handed influence (like buying media) can backfire by breeding mistrust in the long run. China might find more lasting success via genuine economic wins that media can independently verify and report positively on. In absence of that, even friendly narratives eventually sour (as seen in Czechia).

For media and civil society: There is a role for journalistic training and cross-border exchanges to improve coverage quality of complex foreign initiatives like the BRI. Media in CEE could benefit from more investigative reporting consortia that look into BRI projects' impacts empirically. This would help move the discourse beyond the often politicized sparring to evidence-based analysis of what BRI projects actually bring or cost.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how China's Belt and Road Initiative has been framed in the media of Central and Eastern European countries and to explore the discursive contestation underlying those frames. Through a comparative analysis of Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Serbia, we have demonstrated that BRI coverage in CEE is not monolithic: it ranges from enthusiastic endorsement to skeptical critique, largely reflecting each country's geopolitical orientation and domestic political dynamics.

We found that media in Hungary and Serbia generally frame the BRI in line with Chinese strategic narratives of economic opportunity and win-win cooperation, reinforcing a positive image of China's role in the region. In these cases, the framing is facilitated by government support for the BRI and, relatedly, a media environment that is either state-influenced or at least not adversarial to government policy. Conversely, Polish and Czech media frequently invoke frames of geopolitical threat, economic risks, and value-based concerns, often portraying the BRI as a challenge to Western-aligned national interests or as falling short of its promises. In those countries, an independent or critical press and a cautious official stance vis-à-vis China have combined to produce a predominantly skeptical discourse.

The notion of discursive contestation is evident in how these different frames compete within and across countries. In some instances, the contest plays out as polarized domestic debate (e.g., Hungarian pro- vs. anti-government outlets clashing over BRI narratives). In others, it is visible as a divergence between countries (the stark contrast between Serbian vs. Czech reporting). And in all cases, it underscores that the BRI has transcended its original economic intent to become a symbol imbued with broader strategic significance – a Rorschach test reflecting hopes for development to some and fears of dependency to others.

From an academic perspective, our study contributes to communication and international relations scholarship by highlighting the role of regional and local contexts in mediating global narratives. It reinforces that media framing is a crucial variable in the soft power equation: the success of initiatives like the BRI depends not only on ports and railways built, but also on stories told and believed. In the context of Central and Eastern Europe – a region historically situated at a crossroads of great power influence – the BRI story is still being written in competing ink. Whether the initiative ultimately brings about closer Sino-European ties or intensified wariness may well hinge on which narrative gains the upper hand in the public consciousness.

For practitioners and policymakers, the findings advise vigilance and engagement. European authorities should be aware of the diverse public narratives when formulating any collective response to the BRI; a one-size-fits-all approach may misjudge public expectations in different CEE states. Meanwhile, Chinese policymakers might glean that winning hearts and minds via the media in Europe is a long-term challenge that requires transparency and trust-building, not just high-level summits and MoUs.

In conclusion, the Belt and Road Initiative in CEE serves as a microcosm of the larger global contest for narrative dominance between differing models and worldviews. The media, as this study shows, are at the forefront of that contest in shaping perceptions. Whether framed as a golden opportunity or a Trojan horse, the BRI's fate in Central and Eastern Europe will likely follow the trajectory of the narratives that CEE societies choose to embrace. Continued observation will be necessary, as these narratives remain fluid and responsive to political, economic, and social developments. Future research could expand the scope to more CEE countries or conduct audience analyses to complement the media content approach, thus providing an even richer understanding of how strategic framing influences international cooperation in our interconnected world.

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