



European Right-Wing Populist Parties' Approach toward China: Between Anti-Globalization and Appeal for Diversified International Partnerships

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Abstract

Despite the fact that right-wing populist parties (RPPs) have gained increased prominence in the last 15 years in Europe and the amount of research regarding these parties has been on the rise, RPPs' attitude toward the People's Republic of China remains an understudied issue. The aim of this article is to examine questions that have not yet been thoroughly researched: how are the positions of right-wing populist parties (RPPs) on China shaped and how are they evolving, what causes such differing positions, and have there been any changes in the RPP's approach to China since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? This article aims to answer these questions by analyzing the policies toward China of selected political parties (primarily, Hungary's Fidesz, Italy's Lega Nord, France's Rassemblement National but also parties such as the Polish Law and Justice, and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland). This article underlines that RPPs' policies on China are formulated based on what they perceive the development of international politics can do "for the people." Their attitudes depend mainly on their stance toward free-market globalization, their need for alternatives in relations with the US and the EU, and their axiological perception of China.

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Introduction

Contrary to the prediction that following the initial shock concerning the COVID-19 pandemic there might be an opportunity for the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to strengthen their cooperation, there is a new pragmatic turn in dealing with China that is beginning to emerge amongst EU member states. China has seen its reputation "collapse in some of the EU countries that were its closest allies and partners" (Krastev and Leonard 2020, 14). This reputational breakdown marks a new stage in EU-China relations; however, there are great variations across the EU concerning the position on China. Among those, right-wing populist parties (RPPs)³ have gained increased prominence in the last 15 years in Europe. In a survey conducted for the European Council on Foreign Relations, there is an improved perception of China amidst the supporters of RPPs in most EU member states (Dennison et al. 2020). In fact, RPPs in the EU showcase a strongly diversified approach to China, ranging from the blatant anti-Chinese agenda of France's Rassemblement National's (RN) to the contradictory stances of Italy's Lega Nord (LN) and the more receptive attitude of Hungary's Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz).

As RPPs have become an important political force in the recent decades in Europe and continue to shape (even if indirectly) particular public policies, the main purpose of this article is to examine the so-far understudied attitude of RPPs toward China, shed light on their ever-changing and shifting position on China, explain the causes behind such differing positions and, finally, investigate whether there have been any changes in their approach to China since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many European RPPs have a rather positive stance toward Vladimir Putin's Russia (e.g. RN, Fidesz, Alternative für Deutschland [AfD]), but in the case of PRC, other variables are at play such as China's position as an economic superpower, China's communist ideology or Sino-US tensions. Additionally, these parties' positions as either a governing party or opposition also have had an effect on their stance toward China. For example, they may employ a strong anti-China strategy while being an opposition party but modify or even change their stance completely when in power. This article intends to answer these questions by analyzing policies on China (mainly from Hungary's Fidesz, Italy's Lega Nord [LN], France's Rassemblement National [RN] with an additional examination of parties that have been omitted in research so far, such as Poland's Law and Justice [PiS] and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland [AfD]). These geographically distributed cases representing post-communist and "old EU" states guarantee a broad overview of the studied issue.⁴ Due to the limitations of the analysis, the article focuses only on RPPs as they gain higher support than left-wing populist parties and are perceived to be a bigger

³ Researchers on European populism deploy a bewildering set of labels to classify European populist parties on the right (borrowing the classical left-right spectrum), such as "radical right populists," "populist radical right," "far right," "right-wing populism," "extreme right," and "populist right." In response, Pippa Norris (2019) conceptualizes two-dimensional cleavages (Pluralism-Populism and Authoritarian-Libertarian) to categorize populist and traditional mainstream parties in Europe. According to this new categorization, it would be more appropriate to refer to the parties in question as authoritarian-populist or authoritarian-right parties. However, for the sake of convenience and clarity, in this article, the term right-wing populist is adopted to refer to the populist parties under investigation. For more details, please refer to Norris (2019).

⁴ The cleavages in the post-communist societies run along slightly different lines than in the countries of Western Europe. An important issue of the RPPs in Central Europe is the attitude to the political system they represented before 1989. It can be expected that the RPPs from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) put greater emphasis on the communist regime of the PRC than Western European parties.

threat to the stability of European integration and politics. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis on the position toward China by left-wing populist parties could be an interesting future area of study considering their attitude toward economic globalization.

Arguably, the positions of RPPs toward China are the result of populism as a “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde 2004). Their attitude, therefore, results from RPPs’ perception of what is “good for the people” in their country’s relations with China and, depending on their interpretation of national interest, can shape various proposals of state foreign policies; foreign policy proposals of RPPs will vary, depending on the state, due to differing domestic, economic, and political situations. The article is based on secondary research as well as an analysis of statements and speeches of party leaders (China, in most cases, is absent in the political programs of RPPs). The starting point for the analysis is 2001. The level of support for right-wing populism in Europe increased after 1999 (TAP 2019). In 2001, China became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which is one of the reasons that it has become one of the key trading partners of the EU. Therefore, in its analysis of the statements of party leaders, this article has concentrated on parties’ positions in the twenty-first century.

The research consists of six parts. The introduction is followed by a literature review which points out the research gap in the studies of RPPs’ approaches toward China in the existing scholarship. The subsequent three parts explain the ideological content underpinning RPPs’ foreign policies, review these parties’ approaches to China throughout history, and analyze their approach to China since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusion presents a discussion on how the RPPs’ positions toward China vary among parties as an effect of their attitude to the axiological issues, globalization, and the perception of foreign partners (the EU, the United States [US]).

What do we know about the foreign policy positions of right-wing populist parties?

The existing literature on European right-wing populism has largely ignored RPPs’ approach to China. Firstly, the general foreign policies of European RPPs are an under-researched area in both Western and Chinese academic circles. Secondly, the discussion on the policies of these parties toward China is still missing, although Western academia has been making efforts to fill the aforementioned research gap by focusing more attention on populist politicians’ foreign policy over the past dozen or so years (e.g. Liang 2007, Swyngedouw et al. 2007, Verbeek and Zaslove 2015).

Populist parties’ international agenda toward particular countries remains largely unaddressed among Western scholars’ prolific work on European populism so far. Much recent research has a special focus on populism’s historical origins and political platforms, its voter patterns and electoral success, its impact on public policy, and government participation.⁵ This is due to populism’s nature as a direct response to the perceived domestic economic and social problems as well as its comparative marginal place in European politics. However, the evolving party politics plus the increasingly blurred boundary between domestic and international politics in Europe require more academic attention on RPPs’ international agenda.

⁵ Some examples of this research include Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, Chrysosgelos 2011, Liang 2007, Mudde 2004, Mudde 2007, Norris 2019, Özdamar and Ceydilek 2019, Rivero 2019, Shields 2007, Verbeek and Zaslove 2017, and Zaslove 2008.

The Western academic circle reacted to this trend rather rapidly as more researchers have begun to address RPPs' foreign policy in the last 15 years. Liang's edited volume (2007) deals with the foreign policy of RPPs in Europe such as the Austrian far-right, Belgium's Vlaams Blok (now known as Vlaams Belang), Denmark's People's Party, and France's Front National (presently known as Rassemblement National). Angelos-Stylianos Chrysosgelos' research (2010; 2011) contributes to this body of knowledge by outlining RPPs' positions on transatlantic relations, EU-Russia relations, the Middle East, and the global economic and financial systems, focusing specifically on their attitudes to aid and development assistance. Verbeek and Zaslove's work (2015) analyzes the relationship between populism and foreign policy in general by looking into the case of Italy's Lega Nord. Other research on this issue includes the examination of the impact of populist parties' political radicalization on international policy developments and relations (Balfour et al. 2016). Two recent contributions to this area are Özdamar and Ceydilek's empirical study (2019) of the foreign policy belief systems of seven European populist far-right leaders (Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Geert Wilders, Nigel Farage, Jimmie Åkesson, Frauke Petry, and Norbert Hofer) and Escartin's analysis (2020) of the extent to which RPPs in power shape EU foreign policy, which focused on the case of Italy's LN and Hungary's Fidesz. Despite all this research, the policy of RPPs toward China remains largely ignored.

The situation is similar in Chinese academic circles. The past 10 years saw a rapid increase in research of European populism among Chinese researchers. According to the database of Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), which is the largest and most-used online academic database in China, there were only six journal articles published on the subject of European populism between 1990 and 2010. Between January 2011 and October 2020, there were 99 articles on the same subject. Nevertheless, it is quite unfortunate that Chinese scholars have largely missed RPPs' foreign policy.⁶ Given the expansion of RPPs in the European political sphere, the increasingly important role played by China in the globalization processes, and the growing significance of China as a strategic partner for the EU, it is of utmost academic urgency to research RPPs' approaches and attitudes toward China.

Populism and foreign policy: The increasing links between domestic and foreign policy

Globalization in the modern world has led to a gradual disappearance of the distinction between domestic and international politics. Domestic events spill over into the international context, and at the same time, international events affect domestic and even local affairs (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). In the post-Cold War era, globalization has substantially increased the interdependence between national and foreign policies. This trend is particularly revealing in Europe where integration has created a multi-level decision-making and governance fabric; EU member states' interdependence is institutionalized and written into legally binding treaties. The common currency, the European Single Market, the Schengen regime as well as the newly agreed recovery fund package in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have blurred the boundaries between regional, national, and European competencies in unparalleled ways (*cf.* Bache 2012). Furthermore, the process of European integration has turned a substantial part of member states'

⁶ Similar to Western scholars, Chinese academics focus most of their attention on the historical conditions of the European rise of populism, the variations among RPPs (for example, between left and right, Western and Eastern Europe), case studies in member states, its impact on European integration, etc.

previously exclusive domestic politics into a pan-European one. For example, in recent years, changes in domestic politics led by Polish and Hungarian right-wing governments have provoked outcries from the European Union (Zamecki and Glied 2020). In short, EU member states' autonomy is "arguably constrained as the boundaries defining sovereign states have become blurred" (Balfour et al. 2016, 16). Regulations created at the EU level shape the framework of economic activity in the member states. This is often raised by populist parties, e.g., when they accuse the EU of its regulations facilitating the penetration of national markets by foreign entities or that the EU norms limit the freedom of economic activity and hinder competition with entities from countries that do not have such strict environmental standards (like China).

Blurring boundaries is also happening in the field of foreign policy. Competing political actors and their differing concepts of national interest are challenging the traditional way of foreign policymaking (Hill 2013). In Europe, globalization and Europeanization have led to a "domestication" of foreign policy as external challenges become more crucial at the national level (Balfour et al. 2016). At the same time, political parties have also become increasingly important actors in foreign policymaking (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). In that context, the influence of RPPs on the foreign policy of its countries can be observed, even if these parties are not part of government coalitions. For instance, Akkerman (2018) points out the direct and indirect influence of RPPs on immigration policymaking: direct influence comes through holding executive power, while indirect influence is due to the electoral pressure on incumbents from RPPs. The analysis of the position of RPPs toward China must therefore take into account whether the party is in power or is the opposition. The party in power has other instruments to influence public policies. In relation to the position on China, it is also important to note that when a party comes to power, it may change its stance toward such things as economic relations with China compared to the position it presented while in opposition. Parties in power take much more responsibility than when they are in the role of the opposition. Another important factor is also what the party competition looks like in a given party system. Fagerholm emphasizes that parties tend to "respond to rival parties by shifting their position in the same direction" and that niche parties, like RPPs, "do not generally respond to shifts in public opinion, but rather to opinion shifts among their own supporters" (2016, 505).

In these new circumstances, European populist leaders have become known for their skills in localizing global complexity. Swyngedouw et al. refer to this populist strategy as "the jumping of scales technique" (2007, 83-84). In populist language, international migration, organized crime, and cross-border terrorism are national problems. For example, in the discourse of France's *Rassemblement National*, European integration is responsible for France's declining economy and the resulting immigration accounts for unemployment, crime, and the French identity crisis in general (Liang 2007). Consequently, once immigration is curtailed, the related domestic problems will be solved. Cadier (2019) emphasizes that populists in office regard foreign policy as an extension of domestic politics even more than mainstream political parties.

The ideological attachment of RPPs' foreign policy

The most popular and concise definition of populism as a thin ideology is based on a central dichotomy: "the people" versus "the elite." In the populist view, society is primarily divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the pure people against the corrupt elite; thus, politics should be an expression of the general will of the former (Mudde 2007). This thin ideology does not possess a fully clarified or coherent argument about the political, economic, and social issues

in the real world. That is why populism can be attached both to “the Left” and “the Right.” It cannot exist without assigning itself to other, more fully-fledged political ideologies such as socialism, liberalism, nationalism, or radical-right ideology (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). Therefore, European right-wing populism⁷ is based on a combination of populism, radical-right thinking, and authoritarianism. A large number of radical-right and far-right parties in Western Europe have adopted a populist worldview and succeeded in making electoral gains in the last 15 years. Apart from populism, they adopt nativism and authoritarianism as the core of their ideologies (Mudde 2007). Regarding economic policies, their most visible feature is the opposition to economic globalization.⁸

RPPs’ ideology is also visible in their foreign policy programs. As populism is rooted in the idea of the authentic voice of the people, the national interest (“people’s voice”) becomes the basic starting point in their conceptualization of the international political agenda (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017); such an ideological orientation results in RPPs’ inconsistency on most international issues. European populists have become known for their “changing views on most foreign policy issues” (Özdamar and Ceydilek 2019, 138). RPPs’ positions on a certain foreign policy issue, which is not as straightforward as expected, is always contingent upon whether they perceive the result as able to benefit the “people” (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). Such examples are easy to find. On the one hand, this inconsistency is obvious in these parties’ stance on general foreign affairs foreign issues: the French RN changed its attitudes toward Russia during and after the Cold War in a rather radical way (Shields 2007); the Austrian Freedom Party held contradictory positions on relations with the US and Russia (Meyer 2007); after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the European RPP leaders downplayed their anti-Americanism and adopted more friendly attitudes toward the US; the Italian LN initially supported globalization when it began as a free-market, neo-liberal political movement claiming to represent Northeastern Italy but shifted to an anti-globalization stance in the late 1990s after its leaders portrayed globalization as a threat to the European-style welfare regime, local employment, and cultural identity (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). On the other hand, these RPP attitudes toward Europe further exemplify their inconsistency in foreign policy. LN’s position on European integration is based on its own evaluation of the expected effect of integration on the northern region of Italy. It supports European integration when it is viewed as a strengthening factor for the region’s position in Italy and Europe. For example, the party used to defend the idea of a Europe of the regions, which is in sharp contrast to its current opposition to the integration perceived as a threat to Northern Italy’s economy and cultural identity. In a similar vein, France’s RN’s euro attitude has experienced a similar turn from support to opposition. In turn, PiS in Poland maneuvers from a position that “Polexit” is impossible to slogans that “the dictate of the EU” is a threat to Polish identity – a culture based on Catholicism and Poland’s decision-making sovereignty (GPC 2020).

⁷ Similar to the controversy surrounding the name of this “family of parties,” there are a number of suggestions for the label of ideology espoused by these parties, such as radical-right populism or national populism.

⁸ Right-wing populists differ in economic policy to a large extent. For instance, some, like the Freedom Party in Austria, opt for free markets but seek to retain extensive welfare benefits for existing citizens. Others, like Nigel Farage, argue that lower economic growth is a price worth paying if it would reduce the influx of migrants and increase the number of jobs for Britons. On the other hand, others, like Marine Le Pen in France and similar figures in Eastern Europe, propose economically left-wing policies such as more state aid for troubled industries and restrictions on the free flow of capital and goods (therefore, they are termed as left-wing populists by some scholars). For more information, please see Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Rivero 2019; Zaslove 2008.

Therefore, contrary to the common understanding, RPPs are not fundamentally anti-globalist or anti-EU. Their positions on those issues and consequent development of international policies also depend on internal policy challenges (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015) and are rather contingent upon what they perceive as beneficial for the ordinary citizens of their countries.

The RPPs' ideologies and their approach to China

When the dynamic between RPPs' ideological attachment and foreign policy positions are applied to their policies toward China, a number of hypotheses can be made. Firstly, European right-wing populists' anti-globalization sentiment is also valid in their approach toward China. Most RPPs have been firm in stating that globalization, in both economic and cultural terms, has affected local Europeans in a rather negative way; it is argued that neo-liberalism in the international trade regime destroys local production, lowers wages, and results in mass unemployment (Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Mamonova and Franquesa 2020). Furthermore, the uncontrolled exportation of foreign culture can pose a threat to national traditions and identities; the massive flow of immigrants is argued to be another curse. All in all, the RPPs' belief is that globalization is a threat that benefits the European elites and takes a toll on the livelihood of ordinary Europeans. As China's global influence continues to grow in economic and trade terms, it is likely to fall victim to RPPs' accusations. In their discourse, the continuous relocation of the production line from Europe to China and the competitive price of "Made in China" products have brought about immensely negative consequences to the manufacturing industry and the employment market in their own countries. In recent years, the rapid growth of Chinese investment in Europe is also interpreted in rather negative terms. Ironically, when Donald Trump was preoccupied with an anti-globalization agenda, China expressed its wish to push for greater openness of the global market. This simply goes against RPPs' anti-globalist and protectionist agenda. It is, therefore, predictable that China is to blame in RPP's negative discourse on globalization.

In the second place, European RPPs pursue a foreign-policy agenda with diversified international partnerships, which may indicate possible positive views of China. These parties' appeal to end the hegemony of the US in the international order and to build ties with Russia promises a relatively friendly tone for China. Cooley and Nexon (2020) rightly point out that some European RPPs promote an international system consisting of multiple great powers rather than one or two superpowers, envisioning a global order that privileges national sovereignty over liberal rights and values because such a multipolar international system will best serve their interests. In this sense, China can be perceived as effective leverage to oppose the USA and the "bureaucracy of Brussels." Thus, in some populists' view, China rises as a powerful challenging force to the current world order and grows to be an alternative partner (e.g., in Matteo Salvini's and Viktor Orbán's discourse).

To conclude, it is expected that there is no unified approach to China among European RPPs. RPPs' attitudes toward China depend mainly on their stance on free-market globalization, the perception of the need for alternatives to relations with the US and the EU, and their axiological assessment of the PRC's political system.

A historical review of RPPs' approach to China

The relation between the ideological identification and the foreign policy orientations of European RPPs indicates that their positions on China are also contingent upon the extent to which China's presence enhances or hinders their perceptions of the "interests of the people." Variations are expected among these parties, and changes are possible within one party over time since RPP's agendas in various European states are determined by national conditions.

The main dimension of attitudes toward China is likely to be grounded in economic terms. The past three decades witnessed a sharp increase in trade between the EU and China. The European Commission data shows that the PRC is the EU's largest source of imports and its second-largest export market as of February 2021 (Eurostat 2021). This "Chinese import shock" is seen as largely responsible for the increase in support for nationalist and radical-right parties (Colantone and Stanig 2018a). Globalization, by means of the Chinese import shock, also acted as a key structural determinant of the Brexit vote in that "the Leave share was systematically higher in regions that have been more exposed to the Chinese import" (Colantone and Stanig 2018b, 201).

Initially, the European RPPs did not take China seriously in foreign policy, given the latter's comparatively minor influence. Especially since for RPPs, the more important issue was migration from the Middle East and Africa. However, along with China's expansion in the global economy since its entry into WTO in 2001, extensive investment policy by the PRC's government and its growing importance as an economic partner for the EU, these parties began to address China in their political agenda. Still, important factors shaping the attitude of particular RPPs toward China are domestic issues, including the structure of the national economy and inter-party relations in the party system of the state.

Fidesz

The Hungarian Fidesz is one of the European RPPs that hold a friendly stance toward China. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was among the few European leaders who attended the Second Belt and Road Forum on International Cooperation in 2019, and Hungary was the only EU member state that did not sign the joint statement denouncing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for hampering free trade (Elmer 2018). The Hungarian government claims that national interest is above anything else, and it shall not accept any kind of external ideological pressure from the EU. During the 2019 forum in Beijing, Orbán stated that the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative coincides entirely with Hungarian national interests because the cooperation proposed under the Initiative is an important guarantee for maintaining the order of free trade and the freedom of the world economy (Government of Hungary 2019).

Building close ties with China is part of Hungary's "Eastern opening" strategy. In a speech delivered in 2010 after becoming Prime Minister, Orbán stated that there should be no doubt that Hungarians belong to the Western world, but from then on, this fact would imply another connotation: "we are sailing under the western flag, but in the world economy an eastern wind blows. And the sailor that does not take into consideration according to which wind to rotate the sails will doom himself and his cargo" (Jacoby and Korkut 2016, 500). China is, in fact, among the four pillars of Hungary's "Eastern opening" and is a primary target in Orbán's goal of re-framing Hungary's geopolitical associations to diversify exports and attract investment in infrastructure projects (Jacoby and Korkut 2016). Since Fidesz came into power in 2010, the Hungarian government has been building stronger economic and political ties with China by

facilitating Chinese business and investment, encouraging Chinese tourism in Hungary, and offering China its political support on certain international issues.⁹

Fidesz's rapprochement with China under the leadership of Orbán can be interpreted as an act of Euroscepticism (Hargitai 2020) and an effort to manage the pressure from the EU over his undemocratic changes. Politically speaking, China, along with Singapore, India, Russia, and Turkey, are models of successful illiberal and non-democratic countries for Viktor Orbán (Jacoby and Korkut 2016). Economically speaking, closer links to China promise to offer an alternative to European resources (the Hungarian order of Chinese vaccines in 2021 can serve as an example here). It somewhat complements Hungary's simultaneous movements away from the EU (Jacoby and Korkut 2016). As Orbán said in 2019, Chinese companies are making a substantial contribution to the modernization of the Hungarian economy, with Chinese investments in Hungary amounting to a record high of approximately USD 4.5 billion (Government of Hungary 2019). Therefore, China is part of Fidesz's appeal for diversified international partnerships.

It should, however, not be forgotten that Fidesz did not always hold a positive opinion of China. Its Sinophile approach is, in fact, a shift from its earlier Sinophobic one. For a long time, Fidesz presented a rather skeptical stance toward China and Chinese activities in Hungary. For example, in their unsuccessful campaign in the 2006 election, Orbán called for restrictions on Chinese immigration in Hungary. Later, in 2008, he demanded the Hungarian government caution China against its human rights record and make Tibet an issue in Hungary-China diplomatic relations (Jacoby and Korkut 2016). In addition, on more than one occasion, Fidesz representatives have blamed Chinese merchants for causing social and economic problems such as smuggling or illegal immigration (Nyíri 2007). Nevertheless, since returning to power in 2010, Fidesz has considerably softened its anti-Chinese populist rhetoric and downplayed or even dropped its previous harsh criticism of China. Orbán's position should therefore be seen as purely populist, resulting from the actual needs and the assessment of benefits and thus a disregard for a clear ideological position. As discussed earlier, as of the end of 2021, Fidesz regards China as both an alternative partner to the West and a significant guarantee for the interest of the Hungarian people.

The opposition parties' policy proposals toward China also affect Fidesz. In Hungary, the opposition did not play the Chinese card in the previous electoral campaigns¹⁰; interestingly, the far-right Jobbik has the most consistent anti-Chinese stance among the main opposition parties. When in 2022, the united Hungarian opposition began to criticize Fidesz's Chinese policy (including support for the establishment of a branch of the Fudan University in Budapest), and a change in public opinion regarding China began to be noticeable (Dubravčíková et al. 2020; Koleszár 2021), Viktor Orbán softened his clearly pro-Chinese stance in the campaign (Standish

⁹ Hungary was the first European country to join China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2015. It also opposed the EU using any strong language in its statement on the South China Sea the next year. In 2021, Hungary blocked the European Union's proposed statement criticizing China over Hong Kong.

¹⁰ The domestic political situation regarding the direct electoral competitor matters in RPP's China policy. The challenges posed by Eric Zemmours for RN, the Forum voor Democratie for the Party for Freedom (PVV), the Fratelli d'Italia for LN are cases in point. RN, PVV and LN constantly modify their discourses on China according to the extent their rivals are questioning the China issue and competing for the dominating discursive power. The situation in Hungary is somewhat different. As the governing party, Fidesz is supposed to answer the challenges on governments' policy toward China raised by opposition parties. Nevertheless, the subject of China was largely missing in the previous electoral campaigns in Hungary over the past decade.

and Szalai 2021). This sort of departure is in line with the findings demonstrated in studies on RPPs' change in policy positions (Özdamar and Ceydilek 2019; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015).

Lega Nord

Italy's LN stands out as an interesting contrast to Fidesz, not only because of its anti-China position but also due to the consistency in its policy toward China. Founded in 1991, the Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania (rebranded as "Lega" in 2018 without changing the official name of the party) is a right-wing populist party advocating more autonomy for the country's wealthier northern region (Padania). In its populist rhetoric, the protection of Padania's interest was the primary goal of the party. As discussed in the previous part, LN shifted from a pro-globalization and pro-EU position to its current anti-globalization and Eurosceptic stance out of the concern that Padania's declining global and European competitiveness made it a victim of globalization and EU's politics. Its founder and former leader, Umberto Bossi, portrayed globalization as a threat to local production and local traditions (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). By similar logic, China is an object of LN's accusations. At the end of the 1990s, Bossi and other leaders of LN began to worry about China's upcoming entry into the WTO. They saw Chinese textile exports as a grave threat to Italy's local textile production. Bossi underlined the process of moving Italian manufacturing abroad. Thus, LN was irritated by the EU's push to abolish tariffs that, according to them, would expose European countries to competitors like China, and, as a result, European nations would not be able to protect their industries (Woods 2009). Next to immigration, protectionism became the primary concern of LN and the party called for the defence of Italian businesses from China (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). During its time in power in the coalition government led by Silvio Berlusconi between 2001 and 2006, LN made frequent requests to pass protectionist measures by introducing high tariffs against products (i.e. from China) (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Furthermore, in 2009, Roberto Cenni, supported by LN, became the first conservative mayor of Prato, Tuscany, and after taking office, he backed stricter regulations on Chinese trade and law enforcement officers' raids on Chinese garments companies (Esparraga 2017). LN has often raised the issue of Chinese counterfeits of Italian products.

Since taking the party leadership from Bossi in December 2013, Matteo Salvini persisted in LN's Sinosceptic tone. During his time in office as Deputy Prime Minister between June 2018 and September 2019 in the coalition government of LN and the Five Star Movement (M5S), he was quite suspicious of, if not outright opposed to Italy's rapprochement with China. When asked about his attitude toward China, he mentioned that "China is not a democracy and has a certain spirit of imperialism and control" (Reuters 2019). Salvini thus identifies with the Atlanticist position, at the same time disagreeing with M5S' argument stating that close ties with China safeguard Italy's national interest. Moreover, Salvini frequently comments that "Italy is China's colony," arguing that Italy joining the Belt and Road Initiative is an attempt by China to colonize it in economic terms (Giuffrida 2019). Regarding the issue of Huawei, Salvini staunchly opposes Chinese companies' involvement in Italy's 5G network (O'Neal 2020). In fact, he proposes to suspend Italy's relations with China altogether. Nevertheless, when he was in power and was asked about his inconsistency by journalists (that he claims to be against China but takes part in some joint activities with the PRC), he explained that "it is fine to encourage an economic understanding between our businesses, but this cannot be a Trojan horse that indulges Beijing's geopolitical projects" (Lanzavecchia 2020).

In 2020, in addition to blaming China for the COVID-19 pandemic, Salvini also supported Hong Kong on his social media channels. Currently, LN has the sharpest position toward China among the main political parties. To sum up, Italy's LN is a case of a European RPP that holds a rather negative but consistent position on China, with the cause of their concerns being focused on the regional labour market and the economy. Complaints about “Chinese imperialism” mainly stem from economic anxieties but an axiological element in LN's rhetoric is also noticeable.

Rassemblement National

France's Rassemblement National (previously known as Front National [FN]) is another European RPP that holds a consistent anti-China position. Established as a far-right party, RN incorporated a series of populist elements in its subsequent development. Since the 1980s, FN/RN has made immigration its core concern, focusing on French culture and tradition with a definition of national identity that stresses ethnicity rather than values. Meanwhile, the idea of protecting French people's interests motivates RN to be vocal on a wide range of issues such as European integration, law and order, and France's high rate of unemployment. Since the 1990s, RN has gradually shifted to a right-wing populist ideology that combines nationalism and authoritarian political values with strong populist rhetoric.

When it comes to relations between France and China, the word “protectionism” dominates RN's discourses. China is described as a “thief,” an enemy, and a threat. RN's Sinophobic position can be regarded as an extension of its Euroscepticism. In condemning the EU's commercial policy, RN's former leader Jean-Marie Le Pen accuses the EU of promoting an extremely liberal agenda that fails to protect European industries and instead supports the benefits of the countries outside Europe, particularly China (Vasilopoulou 2010). According to RN, the open border policy practiced by the EU exposes French interests to excessive competition with the US and China (Stockemer 2017). RN, under the new leadership of Marine Le Pen, persists in its hardline stance toward China. In her book published in 2012, Marine Le Pen accuses the elites (at both the French and EU levels) of negating the manufacturing industry's relocation from Europe to China over the past 30 years; in her opinion, the reality is dramatic and has, in fact, involved all economic sectors in France (Le Pen 2012). According to Le Pen, China is the culprit behind the massive unemployment and income decline in France (2012). In addition to the social dumping, Le Pen argues that China practices monetary dumping with erratic measures, which consequently results in imbalances in the international monetary system. She refuses to recognize Beijing as a market economy, complaining that the absurd EU rules do little to protect the European market (Front National 2015b) and argues that “quasi-free trade with China has been devastating to the French and European industries”; moreover, the huge discrepancies in legal, social and environmental standards between China and Europe are responsible for the millions of European jobs losses subsequently replaced by Chinese workers (Le Corre 2017). Thus, in her rhetoric, China is not simply a threat but a crisis (“*la crise chinoise*”) (Front National 2015a).

In recent years, RN has emphasized the excessive dependence of the supply chain of goods on China and the need to protect the French market against goods from the PRC (Chenu 2019; Androuet 2020). Given the changing attitudes of French political parties and the French public toward China, RN's position is not so different from the political mainstream.

Other cases of RPPs

The above-mentioned cases illustrate the very typical stances of RPPs toward China and the arguments for the anti- or pro-China position. However, other RPPs are also worthy of attention. In 2016, Britain's UKIP, a forerunner for the Leave campaign before Brexit, claimed that what China had been and will be doing would impoverish the British people by their control of British companies and the consequent creation of unemployment. The British National Party, a far-right nationalist grouping, also depicts China as the enemy (Esparraga 2017). Their position stems from reluctance toward “laissez-faire globalism.” In contrast, Germany's AfD stresses the positive impact of Germany's partnership with China: its representatives believe that the rise and revival of China is an imminent reality and that good relations with China are beneficial for Europe. In their view, China's Belt and Road Initiative is a valuable addition to the global economy and brings development to the continental countries. A member of the European Parliament from AfD stated that “if Europe wants to be an independent global player” instead of “an American vassal,” “it must nurture a good relationship,” “trustful partnership,” and even “true friendship” with China (Free West Media 2020). Criticism of China also appears in AfD's discourse in the context of economic competition and fears of “selling off” the German economy to China (Weidel 2019). This may give the impression of inconsistency in AfD's appeal. However, apart from slogans about the need to protect the national economy, which is typical for RPPs, AfD's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) opposed the resolutions condemning China (Becker and Hail 2020).

Another noteworthy RPP is Poland's PiS, whose stance on China is an interesting example of pulls and pushbacks. Different from some populist parties in Europe, PiS' more multi-faceted stance stems from the fact that it is the ruling party. With its potentially important role in the Belt and Road Initiative, Poland was interested in closer cooperation with China, which was exemplified by the visit of the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, to China and his good relationship with President Xi Jinping. However, there are politicians within PiS that are reluctant to China (e.g. former Minister of National Defence, Antoni Macierewicz); this fact, coupled with the lower-than-expected investment benefits from the BRI, bring some doubts about closer cooperation with China, even on barely economic grounds. In addition, relations with the PRC have been worsened by PiS due to the US' position on Huawei's investments in 5G infrastructure in recent years. Poland remains under the significant influence of the United States, which is considered the most important ally on account of the threat from Russia. Therefore, we can observe an internal tension in the policy toward China in PiS (Bachulska 2021). One faction that is keener to cooperate with China argues on the basis of economic terms. This group sees the PRC entities as potential new investors in numerous (and usually large-scale) investment projects of PiS' government. This is particularly true if the Polish government foresees a likely reduction in the investment flows from the EU. Possible investments by the PRC in transport infrastructure including the New Central Polish Airport, located 40 km from Warsaw, were considered. Their hope is that Poland could play the role of a broker for Chinese investments and therefore benefit from Chinese activities in the EU. The reluctant faction emphasizes China's incompatibility with the international security architecture based on the dominant role of the US, as the latter is seen as crucial in Poland's security.

The two RPPs in Eastern Europe, Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's PiS, are expected to be more anti-communist and hence more anti-China, given their historical experience. Nevertheless, these two parties' present approaches toward China showcase an interesting contrast. Regardless of their

rather similar axiology-based anti-China tone in earlier days, Fidesz and PiS hold different perceptions of China at the moment. The former proposes to build closer ties with China and hopes to bring huge economic benefits for the Hungarian people (though Orbán also refers to China to support Hungary's illiberal democratic regime as an alternative to that of Western Europe). Compared to Fidesz's rather positive stance toward China, PiS seems more reserved. This contrast could be attributed to PiS' added emphasis on the axiological differences between China and the West, as well as Poland's strong inclination toward the US.

In conclusion, European RPPs' policies toward China demonstrate two remarkable features. Firstly, there is no unified approach to China among the right-wing populists in Europe, even though they share similar ideological underpinnings. Secondly, an individual party may change its position on China quite drastically. Moreover, the pro- or anti-China stances presented by these parties indicate that, on the one hand, their Sinophobia is an extension of their anti-globalization sentiment in which China is primarily portrayed as a threat to the local production and the root cause for the sluggish local economy. On the other hand, the Sinophile orientation is a reflection of their appeal for diversified international partnerships in which China could act as an alternative partner to Western hegemony. Likewise, for some Eurosceptical RPPs, China is a counterbalance to Brussels. Additionally, one can notice that both the pro- and anti-China camps use the economic benefit/national interest argument to defend their approaches; such is the nature of populism. Populists are eventually constrained by the electorate. All in all, "the appeal to the masses will not be made on ideological lines, but on what attracts most votes: Chinese direct investment in Poland or the fear of the Dragon taking French jobs" (Esparraga 2017, 3). The attitudes of RPPs toward China also clearly show the inconsistency in the appeal of RPPs, resulting from the blurred ideological foundations of populism.

Thus, another variable that exerts even more impact on the changes of attitude toward the PRC other than nativist, anti-immigrant, axiological perspectives, or the geopolitical and economic situation of the state is RPPs' position in the government, especially if it is a ruling party. For example, Fidesz changed its stance after becoming the governing party; it also partially happened with Poland's PiS. Even Matteo Salvini, who presented himself as a consistent opponent of the PRC, began to conduct business with China during his term in government.¹¹ Finally, the attitude of RPPs toward China is heavily contingent on the RPPs' earlier attitude toward the USA. Parties that are keen to cooperate strongly with the US (especially under Trump's presidency) are less favorable to China.

¹¹ Another Italian populist party – leftist Five Star Movement (M5S) – can also be used as a case of a shift in policy toward China upon becoming the governing party. Starting from its establishment in 2009 to 2018, the M5S had a rather skeptical attitude toward China. The M5S founder, Beppe Grillo, shared skepticism of the Italian government on Chinese takeovers in strategic sectors and strongly protested against China's trade practices in the past (Garcia-Herrero and Sapir 2017). However, after coming into office in June 2018, M5S led an unprecedentedly active policy toward China (Poggetti 2018), i.e., the government set up a special "China Task Force" under the Ministry of Economic Development and made explicit its intent to position Italy as a leading European partner in cooperation with China's Belt and Road Initiative. In August 2018, Italy signed four bilateral agreements with China (Buzzetti 2018) and became the first G7 country that signed a memorandum of understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative with China (Horowitz 2019). As M5S' members in Italy's populist government argue, collaboration with China promises to revive the sluggish Italian economy, create its own opportunity, and serve the interest of the Italian people. Italy's officials from the M5S also appreciate China's efforts to provide medical supplies (Coratella 2020). Furthermore, as recently as August 2020, Grillo criticized Italy's realignment with the US and pushed for strengthening ties with China.

Although the positions of RPPs on China vary among the parties, a recent turn toward a more hostile attitude is observable. This can be interpreted with the use of axiological arguments and by applying a geostrategic logic. From the axiological point of view, amongst the frequently raised issues are matters of communism, human rights, and authoritarianism.¹²

RPPs' policy toward China in times of COVID-19

Against the backdrop of increasing distrust toward China among European citizens and the hardening tone toward China by certain European politicians, some RPPs, although not having undergone a dramatic shift, have gradually turned to a more critical stance toward China, e.g. France's RN and the Netherlands' PVV. This is in line with the falling public assessment of China during the months since the pandemic outbreak (Silver et al. 2020). The assessment of China during the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened (Krstev and Leonard 2020), however, the “coronavirus diplomacy” of the PRC might have created some minor exceptions to this trend. For example, China's medical equipment sales have been initially well-received by parts of Europe.¹³ The right-wing populist politician who praised the Chinese support the most is probably the founder of the Serbian Progressive Party and the President of Serbia, Aleksandr Vučić.

On the one side are the Sinophobic parties. LN has continued its anti-China rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its leader Matteo Salvini doubted the good intentions with which China sent the urgently needed medical advisory group and resources to Italy in March 2020. On March 25, he and his LN colleague Giorgia Meloni posted on their personal social media accounts a piece of unconfirmed information claiming that a news program aired in 2015 about Chinese lab experiments and research on other coronaviruses was “proof that the novel virus had originated in that same lab” (Nardelli and D'Urso 2020). A few days later, Salvini took things one step further and stated that “if the Chinese government knew [about the virus] and didn't tell it publicly, it committed a crime against humanity” during a debate session in the Senate (Ferraresi 2020). In regard to this conspiracy theory, Marine Le Pen did not express a clear opinion but stated that it was legitimate to wonder if the virus had escaped from a laboratory. At the same time, she was quite aware that 40% of her supporters in the first round of the presidential election in 2017 believed that the coronavirus was intentionally made, and 15% believed that it was accidentally made (Lepelletier 2020). Other representatives from France's RN underlined the danger of excessive dependence on a foreign country in supplies of medicine and medical protective equipment (Bardella 2020). Though not explicitly stated, it is obvious that China is viewed as an unreliable partner, which highlights the thesis that China is critically regarded as the Trojan horse of economic globalization.

¹² It is also visible among other RPPs not studied here. For example, the Netherlands' Party for Freedom (PVV) and Geert Wilders have questioned the fairness of competing with Chinese companies. PVV underlines the systemic rivalry and the differences in values, implying that the Chinese engage in industrial espionage while emphasizing the threats associated with Chinese investments. Wilders refers to China as the “Trojan dragon” in Europe (PVV 2019). Recently, RPPs presenting axiological challenges have exposed the issue of Hong Kong and Huawei's 5G infrastructure. In turn, the True Finns party in Finland mentions the concerns for the natural environment due to the activities of the Chinese. Britain's UKIP presents a broader axis of geopolitical concerns, with Nigel Farage calling for a “more tough” stance against China – a stance that can be understood through his ties with the former President of the US, Donald Trump.

¹³ E.g., reactions of Polish citizens on social media when President Xi Jinping promised to support Poland in a phone discussion with President Andrzej Duda.

In contrast, on the other side are the pro-China parties. In March 2020, the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán welcomed the flight from China that brought supplies to help Hungary battle COVID-19, expressed his gratitude for China's contribution to containing the spread of COVID-19, and communicated his hopes for future bilateral economic cooperation. This type of discourse indicates that the appreciation of Chinese aid and its efforts in combating the pandemic offer more justification for their quest for a partnership with China that would serve as an alternative to a partnership with the West. At the same time, other RPPs' critique of China proved even more valid since China's global oligopoly of the production of medical resources weakened the capacity of European countries to effectively respond to the virus (such voices were particularly loud in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe). Both of these narratives claim to protect people's interests, i.e. the health and security of the public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion and Conclusions

Additional research on European RPPs' policies on China is necessary as these types of parties have seen greater electoral success and have entered mainstream politics at a time when relations between the European Union and China have become increasingly multi-faceted. The analysis in this article has demonstrated the following: European RPPs do not hold a unified position on China, and their positions on China are contingent upon whether they interpret relations with China as benefiting or damaging "the well-being of the people." Their either pro- or anti-China position is based on the argument that engagement with China either enhances or harms people's well-being: China can be perceived as a threat to the national economy and (increasingly) as an axiological rival or an alternative partner to the US and the EU in international relations. Another important variable turns out to be the position of a given RPP in government and its current attitude toward the US.

This logic is also true of RPPs' approach toward China during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the early days of the chaotic competition for medical equipment to the subsequent efforts to acquire COVID-19 vaccinations in Europe, both pro- and anti-China voices can be heard among the RPPs. The parties' pro or anti-China positions have been strengthened during the crises caused by the pandemic. What is noteworthy is that Europe, in general, has toughened its attitude toward China since the beginning of the pandemic. Within such an environment, the anti-Chinese voices seem to be taking the lead not only among mainstream politicians but also among RPP leaders, at least for the moment. For some European right-wing populists, "the threat of China" might be exploited as a new source of political power.

This research mainly deals with these parties' preferences in their policy toward China, but it is of equal or even more significance to investigate the effect of RPPs on the policies toward China at both the state and European levels. Firstly, as evidence shows, the mainstream in Europe has been absorbing the national-populist and right-wing agenda over the past decades, which "in whatever form, will have a powerful effect on the politics of many western countries for many years" (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 207). The issue of immigration serves as a salient case for this point. Being a rather marginal subject in the closing decades of the 20th century, immigration has now successfully found its way into the political agenda of almost every EU member state, a result attributable primarily to the efforts of RPPs. Another example is the never-to-be-underestimated role of Britain's UKIP in bringing about the Brexit vote. Secondly, RPPs in government can exert a direct impact on policy outcomes. For instance, a pro-China stance by an RPP in government has

the capacity to determine the decision-making at both the state and European levels. Such examples are not difficult to find. Besides, the ongoing debate over sanctions on Russia provides a very recent case. Apart from the above-mentioned research possibility, it must be admitted that this research's scope omits to encompass certain points. Firstly, RPPs' voices about China's stance on issues such as Taiwan, human rights, and climate change are absent. Secondly, there are intricate differences between RPP parties in government and those in opposition as their different statuses exert influence on their rhetoric on China. Those limitations, however, create opportunities for more nuanced and meticulous future research endeavours.

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