

# The relationship between Eastern Europe and China through the Belt and Road Initiative

MOTIVATIONS TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE BRI  
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STUDENT NUMBER: 20172356

## Abstract

This master thesis is conducted on the topic of the Belt and Road Initiative that was launched by China in 2013. All ten Eastern European countries have become a member of the project since it was started. This thesis focuses on the motivations behind these countries to form a partnership with China through the Belt and Road Initiative. The relationship between the Eastern European countries and China has been looked at through the theories of realism and authoritarianism. Hence could be determined whether the countries' political background and China's political stance of authoritarianism was of influence on the motivation for the Eastern European countries to join the BRI.

To answer the research question, different types of data have been gathered. First, quantitative data was gathered on the GDP of China and the Eastern European countries, as well as the total trade between the latter and China. These numbers were then put together to see how economically dependent the Eastern European countries are on China. Then qualitative data sources in the form of newspaper articles and journal articles were gathered on the topic of the Eastern European countries in relation to the BRI as well as China, and on the Eastern European countries' political background. These sources were analyzed on the basis of realism to find out the motivations for the Eastern European countries to join the BRI. The sources on the political background of the Eastern European countries and their relationship with China were analyzed on the basis of authoritarianism, to find out if there was a trend to be found between their political stance and their contact with China.

The research showed that for all then Eastern European countries one of the motivations was to start a partnership with China as a great power to, in turn, gain in economic power themselves. This was especially prevalent for Belarus, Poland and Russia as these countries have the most strategical geographical location for the planned routes of the BRI and therefore China will be more inclined to invest in these countries. The economic gain was less prevalent for Bulgaria and Slovakia as these countries are less strategically placed and do not have strong ties with China as of yet. Another motivation that came forth was that of security. Security through partnering with China was most important to Belarus and Ukraine. Both countries fear (further) annexation by Russia and hope to gain a powerful ally in China and maintain their autonomy. For the Czech Republic autonomy is a motivation as well.

However, in Czech's case the country wants to be able to become more autonomous and less dependent from the EU.

To the question whether China's political stance of authoritarianism plays a role in the decision of the Eastern European countries to form a partnership with China through the BRI not one conclusive answer can be given. There is a correlation between the political background of the following countries in their relationship with China in the past and present: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. For these countries it could be said that they strengthened their ties with China whenever a right-winged or pro-Russian government was in power and when a left-winged government came to the rise, they tended to turn their attention to the West. However, such a correlation was not found for Romania, Russia and Slovakia.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Introduction.....	4
Problem formulation .....	5
Literature review .....	7
Belt and Road Initiative; purpose .....	7
Previous research; China and Eastern Europe .....	9
Methods .....	11
Data sources .....	11
Research methods .....	11
Theory.....	13
Realism.....	13
Authoritarianism.....	15
Research .....	19
Belarus .....	21
Bulgaria .....	22
Czech Republic.....	23
Hungary.....	24
Poland .....	25
Republic of Moldova.....	26
Romania .....	27
Russian Federation .....	28
Slovakia .....	30
Ukraine.....	31
Analysis.....	33
Realism.....	33
Authoritarianism.....	36
Conclusion .....	39
Reflections and limitations.....	42
Works Cited .....	44

## Introduction

In 2013, president Xi Jinping announced a new international project, called the 'Belt and Road Initiative', also known as 'One belt, one road'. This foreign policy project is aimed at connecting East Asia with Western Europe through two different roads. One is the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the other is the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road' (Mayer, 2018, p. 2). Xi Jinping announced that through the BRI, he hopes to enhance development in and create deeper bonds between Europe and Asia. Since then, Beijing has put a substantial amount of funds aside for the creation of the BRI project (Clarke, 2017).

Up until now, all ten Eastern European countries have become a member of the BRI (Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2019). This raises the question as to why all these countries have become a member and what their motivation is for becoming a member of a project led by China.

The IR theory of realism is a theory through which the behavior of states within the international system can be explained. The most important aspect of realism is the notion that the international system is anarchic; there is no world government or leader. States are power-seeking and their actions are mostly based on their own gain in power (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 38). To avoid chaos in the international system, realists note that there are two or more great powers in the system that balance each other. The other states usually align themselves with one of these great powers for their own security (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 46). Realism might explain the reasons for the Eastern European countries to become a member of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Furthermore, it is interesting to see that the Eastern European countries form a partnership with an authoritarian regime, even though they are in closer geographical proximity with the more liberal and democratic EU. This makes one wonder if China's political stance of authoritarianism plays a role in the decision of the Eastern European countries to form a partnership with China through the BRI.

In this paper, the focus of the research will be on the motivations behind the Eastern European countries for becoming a member of the BRI, while looking at their relationship with China from a realist point of view. Their political background will also be taken into account to further examine their motivations.

## Problem formulation

As explained in the previous section, the focus of this paper is on the motivations for the Eastern European countries to become a member of the Belt and Road Initiative. The problem formulation surrounding this thesis is based on the following quote by Lee and Zhang: “The similarity between Eastern European state socialism and China today is the political monopoly of the Communist party-state, or as Sabel and Stark put it, “a blockage of democracy.” (Lee & Zhang, 2013). The problem formulation this paper will be focusing on is:

*How can the IR theory of realism explain the partnerships between China and the Eastern European members of the BRI and does China’s authoritarianism play a role in their relations?*

To determine which countries can be classified as Eastern European countries, the United Nations Statistics Division methods have been used. Through this data, the following countries have been determined to be Eastern European countries as well as BRI member countries:

- Belarus
- Bulgaria
- Czech Republic
- Hungary
- Poland
- Republic of Moldova
- Romania
- Russian Federation
- Slovakia
- Ukraine (Statistics Division United Nations, 2019) (Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2019)

As mentioned in the previous section, all ten Eastern European countries have become a member of the Belt and Road Initiative. Through this problem formulation, a trend can be found on how the political background of the Eastern European countries might be of influence to what great power in the international system they choose to partner up with. As there is no world government, weaker states tend to align themselves with a great power

within the international system (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). Logically, such a weaker state will have certain motivations to align itself with a great power. These might be related to their geographical location, economic ties or political background. The information that will come from the research to answer the problem formulation will answer the question if change in the political environment of a country can be an indication of a change in alignment with great powers as well. A sudden change in alignments between countries might disrupt the balance in the international system. Even though this paper focuses on the Eastern European countries and China, the framework of this research could also be applicable to a different great power and the weaker states that tend to align with that power.

## Literature review

This section of the dissertation will be aimed at exploring previous research on the topic of the Belt and Road Initiative. It will further explore theories that have been used in previous research on similar topics.

### Belt and Road Initiative; purpose

The first question that arises when investigating the Belt and Road Initiative and its creation, is what is the purpose of this initiative? Nadège Rolland (2017) has delved deeper into this question in his article *China's "Belt and Road Initiative": Underwhelming or Game-Changer?* From a Western point of view, the BRI is mostly viewed as an economic strategy from China to expand their economic presence abroad and to increase their export (Rolland, 2017). This is often viewed at in a rather skeptical way. Many experts feel that the BRI and its related projects will not generate enough opportunities for China to overcome their excess capacity and create a higher demand (Rolland, 2017). Furthermore, this skepticism from Western experts is enhanced, because of the lack of a clear authoritative leadership within the Belt and Road Initiative. China has not come forth with a detailed plan on the different initiatives that are supposed to be encompassed by the Belt and Road Initiative. Western experts do not feel that the BRI will become a successful project, because of China's ongoing national economic problems as well as the opposition from certain countries and locals towards infrastructure projects lead by China (Rolland, 2017).

Naturally, as Rolland describes, the BRI comes with a very different picture when looked at through the eyes of Chinese experts. Articles written by Chinese authors, therefore, shed a different light on the potential of the BRI (Rolland, 2017). As Roland explains, the BRI emerged first for economic reasons. Xi Jinping became the vice-president of China in 2008, the year of the global financial crisis. Furthermore, two years later, in 2010, former president Barack Obama made a change in the United States' foreign policy strategy and shifted its focus from the Middle East to East Asia (Rolland, 2017). These were all reasons for China to change their game and come up with a new strategy to claim their place in the world as an economic giant. Until around 2013, however, China did not change its tactics much and still had a heavily state involved economic strategy.

Xi Jinping decided that, when he reached the higher positions within the Chinese Communist Party, it was time that the state would become less involved and that the market should be



the main indicator to decide the country's focus. This is when Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative. One of the objectives of the BRI is to connect Eurasia and stimulate market growth. The main way China plans to achieve this goal is through infrastructure investment in countries outside its own borders (Rolland, 2017). This is part of China's strategy, because this is where the expertise of many state-owned enterprises lies. This is all part of the economic strategy of the BRI. However, that is not the only purpose of the BRI. Another part of the strategy behind the BRI is security for the country itself. By investing in infrastructure in neighboring countries and creating market chances, China hopes to bring stability in the countries surrounding its borders. Not only does China strive for more stability with the creation of infrastructure and an increasing economic development, there are further underlying reasons for China to invest in neighboring countries. Many of these countries are authoritarian states, which are favored by China over democratic states (Rolland, 2017). China believes that by investing in these countries, it will deepen their bond and will make these states more likely to follow China's lead.

The security aspect of the strategy behind the BRI goes further than only the countries directly surrounding China. The creation of a belt across Eurasia directed by China is also a way to ensure economic security. By creating their own economic belt, China hopes to be less dependent on the sea routes for energy, because of the possible troubles that could occur on the Strait of Malacca (Rolland, 2017). China fears that the strait may be blocked in the future due to piracy in the area or because of a possible blockade by the United States' navy. By creating their own route over land, China plans to be less dependent on the strait for their energy resources (Rolland, 2017).

Further security strategy behind the BRI is focused towards the United States as China's biggest competitor on the global market. In the eyes of Chinese experts, the United States will not let any other country rise to the top (Rolland, 2017). China has decided to direct its attention towards the West by connecting Eurasia and therefore avoiding facing the United States directly. One of the main reasons for doing so is because the U.S. is seen as a security threat by China because of its military strength as well as its naval presence. Another reason for doing so, is to challenge the U.S. on the market after Obama decided to direct American foreign policy focus towards East Asia instead of the Middle East (Rolland, 2017). Finally, China feels that by creating the BRI and thereby making themselves a stronger economic

competitor, the BRI member countries as well as China's neighboring countries will change their objectives from opposing China's political views towards the sense of importance of working together (Rolland, 2017). In this sense, not only does the creation of the BRI add to more security for China, it can also be seen as a political move. By connecting Eurasia and leading this project, China changes the international order by placing itself in the middle and making other countries dependent on China through their coalition (Rolland, 2017).

#### [Previous research; China and Eastern Europe](#)

Several previous research papers have been found on the relationship between China and the Eastern European countries through the BRI. However, the main focus of these researches was on the economic reasons behind the partnership and not specifically on the Eastern European countries, but rather on the CEE countries. One example is the paper of Bogdan Góralczyk called *China's interests in Central and Eastern Europe: enter the dragon*. In this paper, Góralczyk looks into the relationship between China and the CEE countries and the implications for the EU. He first looks into the 16+1 summit, a project that was started before the BRI. This project consists of 16 CEE countries and China. Góralczyk explains that there are opportunities through the summit, but that the obstacles are currently too big for China to execute its plans. One of these obstacles is the mistrust by the EU, which stopped China to start building on its 350-kilometer-long railway through Belgrade and Budapest. Góralczyk then moves on to OBOR, which is the old name for the Belt and Road Initiative. As Góralczyk describes, OBOR is further build on the 16+1 summit and at the same time the summit has been incorporated in OBOR. China worked hard on promoting the BRI within Europe, but it did not see the response it hoped for. Through OBOR as well as the 16+1 summit China has been mostly active in the Visegrád countries according to the author. The author further mentions that China is not investing in regular infrastructure projects in these countries, but rather in new and innovative projects. Góralczyk then describes that the EU has no need to be worried about OBOR. China still has the largest trade with countries such as Germany and the UK in comparison to the CEE countries. However, Poland is seen as a very important partner within OBOR. Góralczyk states that the reasons for that are purely economic for China and that political willingness for a country is less important than their economic potential. Góralczyk concludes his paper that, according to China, OBOR offers benefits for both sides and that China has shown that it is willing to invest in the CEE countries. On the other hand, the CEE countries are not sure what to think of OBOR and

whether it is a threat or an opportunity and have therefore been hesitant about the implementation of OBOR projects. The author states that the solution for this would be for the CEE countries to form a union and focus on the cultural side of their relationship with China (Góralczyk, 2017).

Another example is the paper of Emilian Kavalski called *China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central and Eastern Europe*. Kavalski tries to find different motives for the CEE countries to join the BRI than the economic reasons. Kavalski states early on that many of the CEE countries see China as an alternative for the EU. The author states that through the official statements made by the CEE countries, four different narratives arrived as reasoning to join the BRI. These were “*We are European*”, “*We are independent Europeans*”, “*We are distinct East Europeans*” and “*We are who we say we are*”. The first narrative means that these CEE countries join the BRI to affirm their status as a European country. These countries use the BRI to show that they are committed to the EU and to liberal democracy and to put a stand against Russia. The second one is rather the opposite, as here the countries become a member of the BRI to show that they can act independently from the EU and do not favor liberal democracy and hold in fact a pro-Russian policy. The third narrative means that these CEE countries find themselves to stand out from the other CEE countries and are worth more for China to invest in. The fourth and last narrative means that CEE countries use the BRI to reassert their own identity as viewed differently by other countries. As the CEE countries are divided among these narratives, this might form a problem for China, as China cannot pick sides and must be careful about these identities to have the BRI remain a whole. Kavalski ends the paper by stating that China emphasizes that the BRI is a project with economic goals and not political ones (Kavalski, 2018).

## Methods

This section of the paper explains through which methods the research will be conducted to be able to answer the problem formulation. First, the data sources used for this research will be further explained. Then, the exact methods of analyzing the data sources will be laid out.

### Data sources

To answer this paper's research question, this paper relies on document analysis. This means that for this paper a qualitative research method has been chosen. A qualitative research method allows for more interpretation by the researcher. The documents that will be used as data sources for this research are secondary data sources. They comprise of academic articles as well as newspaper articles. Academic data bases have been used to come to both types of data sources. The final sources have been selected based on their topic. Articles about the Eastern European countries and their connection with the BRI have been used as well as articles that investigate the countries current and past ties with China. Furthermore, academic papers and news articles on the political background of the Eastern European countries have been used to see how their political background connects to their decision to become a BRI member. These types of data sources have been chosen, because they can be verified as reliable sources.

Besides the qualitative data sources, data will also be gathered about the Eastern European countries' GDP and their total trade amount with China. This data is meant as economical background data to understand how depend the countries are of China when it comes to their economy. The total trade amount will be compared to the GDP to come to a percentage of the GDP for a clear overview of the economic dependence on China by the Eastern European countries.

### Research methods

The newspaper articles and the journal articles on the topic of the Eastern European countries in their relation to the BRI and China will be looked at through the theory of realism. Document analysis will be used as a research method. While keeping in mind the major aspects of realism, as to be explained in the next section, the reason for the Eastern European countries to become a member of the BRI and start a partnership with China will be determined. Furthermore, the articles on the political background of the Eastern European countries and the articles on the relationship between these countries and China

will be analyzed while looking at authoritarianism as a theory. By doing so, can be determined whether China's political stance of authoritarianism is of influence on the decision of the Eastern European countries to join the BRI.

## Theory

The major theory used for this thesis is the international relations' theory of realism. This theory is used to look at why the Belt and Road Initiative is an important step for China and its relations with the Eastern European countries that have become a member of the BRI. For this research the focus will mainly be on realism to find out the reasons for the Eastern European countries to become a member of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### Realism

Realism has three main ideas according to one of the best-known realists, Hans J. Morgenthau. The first main aspect of realism according to Morgenthau is the importance of human nature within the international relations' studies. Morgenthau describes human nature in this sense as naturally looking for power and very self-interested. This is reflected in the way countries interact within the international system. Countries interact with one another purely for their own interest and to gain in power (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 38). In turn, their reciprocal behavior may turn violent and may lead to war. In short, realists see human nature as selfish and bad (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 38).

The second main aspect of realism is a logical next step from the previous one; as humans are naturally power-seeking, international politics are based on the same presumptions. The goal of international politics is power. The thought behind that is that the international system is anarchic, meaning that there is no overall leader of the international system. Therefore, a balance of power is needed to avoid chaos within the system. Within the international system, there are countries with a satisfying amount of power and countries without a satisfying amount of power. The last group will strive to gain more power whereas the first group will strive to maintain their current status of power (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 39). Through this constant struggle for power, the balance of power within the international system will continuously be corrected (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 39).

The third main aspect of realism is that realists view history as continuous and cyclical. This means that realists do not hold the view that the world can become an exponentially growing and better place, but that history will continue to repeat itself. For example, wars will continue to follow after a period of peace, because the same actions and mistakes will be made as have happened in the past (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 39). As long as the

balance is in place, there will be peace. However, if the power balance is broken, war will happen (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 40).

These are the main aspects of the classical version of realism, that rose shortly after the second World War. Classical realism may have a rather negative view of the international system, but that can be understood when looking at the time it arose. The Second World War could not be avoided and came shortly after the First World War. Classical realism came to be as a critical opposite view to liberalism (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 37). For this thesis, neo-realism will also be taken into account. Whereas the aspect of classical realism that countries only interact with each other for their own personal gain in power is an important aspect for this thesis, the standpoint that there will always be conflict between countries because of different interests is not one that is held for this thesis, nor is the notion that countries seek for power due to the ill nature of human beings (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 38). That is why neo-realism is best suited for this thesis.

Neo-realism is somewhat less harsh than classical realism and focuses less on human behavior as the drive behind states' behavior within the international system. Instead, within neo-realism the focus is on the structure of the world system as the base for the reason states behave the way they do (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 46). Neo-realism too holds the idea that the international system is anarchic without one leading state to control all other states. Although in neo-realism this aspect is somewhat more important than in classical realism. The most held notion within neo-realism is that essentially all states' governments have the same functions to perform, however, how states are able to perform depends on their capabilities. And that again, is based on their level of power, which differs greatly between states. Another way to look at the balance of power is that there are often two great powers within the international system who balance each other out and therefore create the balance of power (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 46). In the past, these two great powers were the U.S. and the Soviet Union. One could argue that currently the two greatest powers within the international system are still the U.S. and now China, however, the EU and Russia may also be seen as great powers within a multipolar system instead of a bipolar one. The weaker states with less power are then inclined to form partnerships with either of the great powers so they can still maintain their autonomy (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 46). This means that when countries form partnerships and cooperate, they do so to gain in

power and to be able to remain autonomous. Which great powers the smaller states form alliances with, depends on different factors such as common interests as well as their geographical location (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 46).

Lastly, another dilemma arises from the fact that there is no world government and that is the one of state security. In essence, because there is no world government, there is also no world military or police to protect a state if they are under attack by another state. That means that states can only rely on their own powers to protect themselves. One way for a state to feel more secure is to try and gain in power. However, if one state suddenly gains in power, this may make other states feel insecure in return (Shimko, 2010, p. 42). This security dilemma is one of the most important aspects within neo-realism to understand the behavior of the states within the international system (Shimko, 2010, p. 42).

When looking at the relationship between China and the Eastern European countries, the countries' level of power will be looked at in the sense of economic power. Research will be conducted to see if the countries have a security threat from another state and might form a relationship with China to gain in economic power, to better defend themselves, but also to be able to maintain their autonomy.

### Authoritarianism

The other important aspect of this paper is that of China's authoritarianism and how this plays a role in their connection with the Eastern European countries that are part of the Belt and Road initiative. Therefore, the second theory of this research will be that of authoritarianism itself. In this case, Juan Linz's theory and definition of authoritarianism will be used to look at China's political situation as well as that of the Eastern European countries mentioned earlier.

Linz differentiates authoritarian regimes from democratic and totalitarian regimes on certain aspects. First of all, Linz states that his definition and conceptualization of authoritarian systems does not look at the policies of these states (Linz, 2000, p. 160). Linz notes that the focus of his conceptualization is mostly on how these types of regimes use their power and how the citizens of the states are involved in the entire political process (Linz, 2000, p. 160). Authoritarian regimes are defined by having a limited political pluralism that is not responsible. This means that, unlike democratic systems, there are no unlimited number of



political parties that can participate within the political system of the state (Linz, 2000, p. 161). These limited political parties are independent from the regime itself. This, however, does not mean that these political parties can fully move independently. Even though these parties are not under control of or have ties to the current rulers of the regime, the rulers do in the end have influence on the existence of these parties and their movements (Linz, 2000, p. 161). Another important difference between political parties or groups within a democratic regime and an authoritarian one, is that while in a democratic regime these parties are strongly dependent on the citizens that are able to vote on them, this is not the case in an authoritarian regime. Despite the fact that these parties may have strong support from citizens, this support does not give the parties power in that sense. There is some form of voting by citizens within authoritarian regimes, but that is not the main source of political power for the parties. The main source of political power for a political group or party is the support of the current leaders. This is one of the main distinctions of an authoritarian regime, a political group or party can gain in power based on the trust that is put into them by the current rulers (Linz, 2000, p. 161). In the end, interest groups gain in political power by having their leaders mix in with the current leading group. That way, they gain in trust from the current leaders and so also in power. This results in a final elite group of people with more or less the same background (Linz, 2000, p. 161). So, this group is basically created top-down and not a pre-formed group to begin with (Linz, 2000, p. 162).

The following part of the definition of an authoritarian regime according to Linz is that these types of systems do not have a clear ideology. They do, however, have what Linz calls distinguished “mentalities” (Linz, 2000, p. 162). Linz has chosen this distinction, because an ideology is mostly created and written down by an intellectual. An ideology is also usually towards a future the way the writer imagines and wants it to be. A mentality is the opposite in that way, in the sense that it is based on the past and the present. Furthermore, whereas ideologies are more rational, mentalities are about feelings and emotions (Linz, 2000, p. 162). Linz states that authoritarian regimes have mentalities instead of ideologies for several reasons. Since mentalities are not as official as ideologies and are more based on emotions, they are not seen as a set of rules and therefore mentalities are not easy to be bound by for rulers as well as subjects. On top of that, mentalities are, for example, less fit for educational purposes and have a lower chance to clash with religion within a regime or even with

science, due to the fact that there are no clear rules or boundaries (Linz, 2000, p. 163). The fact that mentalities are not as binding as ideologies brings along a few issues. It is almost impossible to find clear ideas that steer the regime on a range of subjects and questions, like legal actions (Linz, 2000, p. 163). This is as opposed to ideologies, which do have clear ideas, often hard to understand for outsiders.

For the leaders of an authoritarianism regime this vagueness of the rules and ideas of mentalities are of good use. This vagueness means that the leaders do not need a 'mobilized crowd' that supports them to remain in power (Linz, 2000, p. 164). Since mentalities are focused on the now rather than having a clear image of how the future should be, there are less possibilities for clashes between groups with a different view on politics. These clear ideas simply do not exist within mentalities. Therefore, leaders of an authoritarian regime do not need the support of a large crowd (Linz, 2000, p. 164). This in turn makes it easier for the leaders to maintain power and to create the limit on the number of parties that participate within the political sphere of the regime.

Logically, the next defining trait of an authoritarian regime is the lack of support of a mobilized mass. This results directly from the fact that these regimes do not have clear ideologies. Without clear ideologies, there is a diminishing factor for a mobilized mass as the regime does not hold clear ideas for the public to stand behind. That also means the public is less likely to identify themselves with the leaders of such a regime. This is mainly an issue for groups of people for whom clear ideas are important, such as religious groups or scholars (Linz, 2000, p. 164).

The last defining trait of authoritarianism is that there is no clear definition of who has the executive powers. This means that executive powers can conveniently shift so the leaders of the regime can gain in power (Linz, 2000, p. 159).

In short, authoritarian regimes can be recognized by having a limited number of parties participating within the political system, they do not have clear ideologies but rather mentalities, they do not have a mobilized crowd and the executive powers are ill-defined.

Authoritarianism will be used as a theory to look at the current and past political background of the Eastern European countries. Their political background and any changes in their political stances in the past will be compared to their past and current relationship with

China to find out if China's authoritarian politics might be a deciding factor for the Eastern European countries in their decision to partner up with China.

## Research

In this section of the paper, the research that has been conducted to answer the problem formulation will be explained. Firstly, economic data is gathered regarding China as well as the ten Eastern European member parties of the BRI. The data that has been gathered for the countries is their GDP in the year 2017. Then, for the Eastern European countries, the total amount of trade, meaning import and export, that the countries had in 2017 with China is gathered. The total trade is then compared to their GDP to calculate the percentage the total trade makes up of the GDP per country. The economic data is used as background data to determine how important China is as an economical partner for the Eastern European countries.

In the following section, each country will be looked at in connection to their history with China and the Belt and Road Initiative. Per country will be looked at their economic ties with China as first. Continuing, opportunities for either China and the respective Eastern European country as partners within the BRI will be researched. All the while, the theory of realism will be kept in mind to investigate why the Eastern European countries have decided to become a member of the BRI and enhance their ties with China. Per country, their political background since the Second World War will be looked at. This timeline has been chosen, since several of the Eastern European countries did not exist in their current state before the Second World War. Some of these countries came to be after the fall of Nazi Germany, but some others only after 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union. In general, the political background since the independence of the Eastern European countries will be taken into account. Any recent changes in their political environment, for example from going a left-wing ruling coalition to a right-wing coalition, will be investigated in relation to the development of their relationship with China. This way, research can be done on whether China's political stance of authoritarianism is of influence to the Eastern European countries in their decision to become a member of the BRI.

In the following table, one can find the GDP for all countries involved (in 2017):

Country	GDP (purchasing power parity) 2017
<b>China</b>	\$23,210,000,000,000
<b>Belarus</b>	\$179,400,000,000
<b>Bulgaria</b>	\$153,500,000,000
<b>Czech Republic</b>	\$375,900,000,000
<b>Hungary</b>	\$289,600,000,000
<b>Poland</b>	\$1,126,000,000,000
<b>Republic of Moldova</b>	\$23,720,000,000
<b>Romania</b>	\$483,400,000,000
<b>Russian Federation</b>	\$4,016,000,000,000
<b>Slovakia</b>	\$179,700,000,000
<b>Ukraine</b>	\$369,600,000,000

*Table 1: GDP in 2017 (CIA, 2019)*

Next, the total trade numbers of import and export between China and the respective Eastern European countries will be looked at and compared to the respective countries' GDP to calculate the percentage:

Country	Total trade in US \$ 10.000 (2017)	Percentage of GDP
<b>Belarus</b>	144875	0.8%
<b>Bulgaria</b>	213823	1.4%
<b>Czech Republic</b>	1248868	3.3%
<b>Hungary</b>	1012657	3.5%
<b>Poland</b>	2122656	1.9%
<b>Republic of Moldova</b>	13188	0.6%
<b>Romania</b>	560228	1.2%
<b>Russian Federation</b>	8422089	2.1%
<b>Slovakia</b>	531444	3.0%
<b>Ukraine</b>	738029	2.0%

*Table 2: Trade with China (China Statistics Press, 2018)*

## Belarus

As can be seen in table 2, the trade between Belarus and China only accounts for 0.8 percent of Belarus' total GDP. When only looking at the numbers, China does not seem an important partner for Belarus. However, that is not the case. There are more strategic reasons for Belarus to become part of the BRI and become partners with China. For Belarus, China is the better option compared to either Europe or Russia. From the Belarusian point of view, the great powers in the international system are the European Union, Russia and China. China is willing to invest in the country; capital that can be well used to tackle its economic difficulties (Rousseau, 2012). Lately, Belarus has been having more and more issues in trading with Russia, as both countries' leaders do not see eye to eye (Thomas, 2019). After the annexation of Crimea, Belarus too fears to be annexed by Russia. Therefore, strengthening its ties with China makes for a great ally when necessary (Thomas, 2019). Furthermore, both countries have come to the agreement that all trade between the two will be conducted in their respective currencies, meaning that automatically the euro or the Russian ruble are left out (Rousseau, 2012). This clearly shows that the two countries mean to engage economically independent from the other great powers that are active within the region.

So, what are the opportunities for China when investing in Belarus? This question can be answered by looking at an investment example. That example is the project Great Stone Industrial Park, located in Belarus. This project is meant to spark the interest of Chinese technology companies and to have them invest in Belarus. Furthermore, this project is of great importance for the Belt and Road Initiative; it will make for a tax-free entry for Chinese companies into the regions surrounding Belarus, like Russia and Central Asia (Thomas, 2019). However, most importantly is the strategic geographical location of Belarus within Europe. It is located at the exact point where the Belt and Road Initiative is to connect Europe with Asia, with the main focus on Germany (Thomas, 2019). This makes Belarus an especially interesting partner for China within the Belt and Road Initiative.

When looking at the previous paragraphs, both countries seem to have great benefit in becoming economic partners through the BRI. Next will be looked at the political background of Belarus and if authoritarianism could play a role in the contact between China and Belarus. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) creates the yearly Democracy Index,

which measures how democratic a country is. This measurement is done by creating 60 indicators which are grouped among five different categories; civil liberties, political culture, political participation, functioning of government and electoral process and pluralism. In 2018, China was placed on 130 out of the 167 countries. China is classified by the EIU as an authoritarian regime. Belarus places 133<sup>rd</sup> on the scale (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). That means that Belarus too is labeled as an authoritarian regime. Belarus' current president, Alexander Lukashenko, was chosen for the first time in 1994, through an election. After Belarus became an independent state in 1991 the country tried to adopt a democratic system. However, this did not last when Lukashenko became president (BBC, 2019). Lukashenko increased his executive power shortly after becoming president. He was re-elected in 2001, although many believed the elections were not fair. After his re-election in 2006, the West again stated their believe the election was unfair and the EU enforced a visa-ban on Lukashenko. Several years later, in 2008, this ban is lifted again by the EU, with the hope that it will encourage Belarus to become more democratic (BBC, 2019). Since then, Lukashenko has been re-elected four times in total, still being the current president of Belarus. Belarus currently especially scores low on political pluralism, which is the same category China also scores the lowest on. In both countries there is little room for political groups to come forward and be voted on during an election.

### Bulgaria

The trade Bulgaria has with China accounts for 1.4 percent of their total GDP, which is not a small amount. When looking at that, China seems an important economic partner for Bulgaria. More than that, just as with Belarus, joining the Belt and Road Initiative and becoming close partners with China offers more opportunities for Bulgaria. Several of Bulgaria's main cities, like Sofia, Burgas and Varna, could become major logistic points on the new Silk Road, either on land or on the maritime road. These cities can further connect China with Central Europe. This is an opportunity for Bulgaria to grow as a player within the international system. Not only will their ties with China make for economic benefits, but it will also give them a strategic place on the map to create connections between Eurasia (Draganov, 2018).

So far, Bulgaria has not been the main focus for China as an investment for the Belt and Road Initiative. Even though Bulgaria has geographically strategic cities, its infrastructure

needs work for these cities to become fruitful (Draganov, 2018). There have been plans by China to work on Bulgaria's infrastructure, but most of these have not yet been put to work (Filipova, 2019). Compared to other Eastern European BRI member states, Bulgaria is not of most strategic importance to China. However, China has recently signed a contract to start working on the infrastructure of the port of Varna (Filipova, 2019). This could lead to further opportunities for both countries. For China this would create a new direct route to connect Eurasia and for Bulgaria the renewed infrastructure could lead to more economic benefits.

When looking at the political background of Bulgaria, it ranks number 46 on the Democracy Index. This means the country is not authoritarian, but is classified as a flawed democracy. A flawed democracy does have fair and democratic elections. However, these types of countries do have weaknesses in other aspects, in the case of Bulgaria its *Political culture* is very weak (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). Politically seen, Bulgaria's government is described as a parliamentary republic (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). In 2007, Bulgaria is able to join the EU. However, Bulgaria is still suspected of being plagued by corruption by the EU and is summoned to tackle this issue. In 2009, the center-right party GERB wins the elections, making Boiko Borisov prime-minister of Bulgaria. Although Borisov resigned in 2013, after mass protests in the country, he became the prime-minister again in 2014, forming a center-right coalition with the party Reformist Bloc. The current president is Rumen Radev, who was elected following the 2017 elections, supported by the opposition. Borisov is still the prime-minister under Radev, but Radev has made himself strong to tackle corruption (BBC, 2018). Clearly, the political system in Bulgaria does not resemble that of China, as there is more democracy and pluralism at the base of the system.

### Czech Republic

For the Czech Republic, China is an important trading partner. The total trade between the two countries consists of 3.3 percent of Czech's total GDP. Economically seen, the strategic partnership that Czech Republic has with China since entering the Belt and Road Initiative is of great importance. In 2019, China and the Czech Republic announced at the Czech Days to strengthening their ties even further, as both countries say there are more opportunities for cooperation (Feng, 2019). Up until now, the entering of the Belt and Road Initiative has meant for the Czech Republic a rise in the number of Chinese tourists due to the opening of new direct flights between the two countries. However, the promised investments by China



have yet to be seen (Kafkadesk, 2019). Like the aforementioned Belarus, the Czech Republic also hoped that by strengthening its ties with China, it could become more independent from the EU. The Czech Republic has been disappointed in their return to the West and has shifted its priorities from the market in the west to that of China (Kafkadesk, 2019). And just as with Belarus, the Czech Republic opens up opportunities for China as an entrance to the rest of Europe, specifically Germany (Kafkadesk, 2019).

The Czech Republic places as 34<sup>th</sup> on the Democracy Index. This means that the country is classified as a flawed democracy. During the 1990s, the Czech Republic was more or less opposed to creating ties with China and had a strong focus on becoming a bigger partner and player within the EU. This was during the times that the Czech Republic was led by a humanistic president who had rather anti-communists views and who worked strongly towards a democratic governance. However, when the political environment changed in the Czech Republic and the leading political parties become more right-wing, Czech started to rebuild the relationship with China. The current Czech president, Milos Zeman, has been greatly outspoken about building a relationship with China and becoming the gateway to Europe for China (Kafkadesk, 2019).

### Hungary

Hungary places the highest when looking at the percentage of the total trade with China compared to its GDP; 3.5 percent. So, economically seen China deems a very important partner of Hungary, as their GDP would rate a lot lower without the trade with China. Hungary is also said to be the first European country to become a member of the Belt and Road Initiative (Macri, 2019). Again, becoming a member of the Belt and Road Initiative means more for Hungary than only economic opportunities. Hungary used to be part of the Soviet Union and is now a member of the European Union. However, as of late the country has begun to shift back to the eastern side. In 2010 the right-wing party Fidesz came to the rise and is currently still the biggest party in the parliament (Macri, 2019). That is the moment when Hungary shifted its focus from the West to the East. Not only has the country started to look for a new partner in China, it has also been strengthening its ties with Russia (Macri, 2019). There are more political reasons for Hungary to become partners with China. By becoming a partner with China, the country will attain a better place within the

international political system. It will then have ties with at least two great powers within the system: the EU and China.

When looking at the Democracy Index, Hungary places as 57<sup>th</sup>, categorized as a flawed democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). The country may not be classified by the EIU as an authoritarian regime, yet the right-winged party Fidesz does lean more to authoritarian regimes than it does to the western democratic states. It seems to be a pattern for former Soviet Union states to first turn to democracy and follow the way of the Western European countries, but as this does not seem fruitful and the economy does not rise from becoming an EU member, these countries turn back to the East and adopt a right-wing political stance. This also goes for Hungary, as described in the previous paragraph. Hungary is looking to strengthen its ties with China as an authoritarian country with similar political standpoints (Macri, 2019).

## Poland

For Poland, the total trade with China amounts to 1.9 percent of its GDP. This is a substantial number and makes China an important economic partner for the country. For China, Poland is strategically situated on the World map, as it is surrounded by seven different countries, of which Russia and Germany are of most importance (Meiling, 2019). Through the BRI, China is able to ship export products more easily across the borders of Poland. It could be said that, because of Poland's central location within Europe, the BRI cannot be properly put in place by China and therefore, Poland is an important BRI partner to China (Gorski, 2016). Unlike some of the aforementioned countries, Poland does not seem to be on the look-out for a new great power to align with. There do not seem to be reasons for Poland to become partners with China and to be more independent from either the EU or Russia. Since the revolution of 1989, Poland is known to open up its borders to as much foreign trade as possible (Majman, 2019). Therefore, the possibilities of further trade with China and an increase in economic growth seem to be the major reasons for Poland to become a member of the BRI.

Poland is close to Hungary on the Democracy Index, scoring just a bit higher on place 54. This means that Poland is also classified as a flawed democracy. Before 1989 Poland was a communist regime. After the revolution the country opted to reform to a democracy with elections held for the public. The first elected president, Walesa, immediately strived to

create a liberal free-market system for Poland (BBC, 2018). It was not until 2015 that the political climate in Poland started to change and made a shift to the right. That was when Andrzej Duda, who was a member of the Law and Justice right-wing party, became the president of Poland (BBC, 2018). One characteristic of this party is that the party is known to be a critic of the European Union. That same year, Poland became an official member of the Belt and Road Initiative (Meiling, 2019).

### Republic of Moldova

When looking at the economic numbers, the Republic of Moldova seems to be the least dependent on China for its GDP. The percentage of total trade with China is only 0.6 percent of the country's total GDP. However, again this does not automatically mean that China is not an important partner to the Republic of Moldova. Just as Belarus, the Republic of Moldova is not a European Union member state. Instead, Moldova has an association agreement with the EU. For China, this poses opportunities, as the association agreement states that there are no restrictions to form trading agreements with other parties, as long as they do not cross the trading agreements that come with the association agreement with the EU (Haitas, 2018). Thus, China and Moldova have the opportunity to authorize a free-trade zone. Currently, an agreement has yet to be signed, but the negotiations between the two countries have already begun (Haitas, 2018). Were Moldova a member state of the EU, such an agreement would not be possible. Even though Moldova is only a small country within Europe, it could be argued that an agreement of free trade between the two countries could motivate other Eastern European countries that are non-EU states to start a similar agreement with China, opening up further opportunities for China to enter the European market (Haitas, 2018).

Moldova is one of two countries in this list to be labeled as a hybrid regime by the Democracy Index. The country places as 79<sup>th</sup> on the list (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). A hybrid regime is labeled as such when a country does have elections, but it cannot be established whether these elections are fair. The government may be controlling of the political parties participating within the system and therefore be of influence of the political pluralism. There is also a high chance of corruption occurring within these types of governments (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 elections took place and the communist party received the most votes. Into the 2000s,

during the reign of the communist party, Moldova still looks to Russia and even considers adopting Russian as the official language. It is only due to protests of nationalists that this proposal is not taken into action (BBC, 2019). After around 2002, relations with Russia deteriorate regarding the dispute around Trans-Dniester. The region holds a referendum to become part of Russia, but it is opposed by the Moldavian government and not supported by the Western countries. Starting 2009, the political environment changed in Moldova and the Liberal Democratic Party received the most votes in the election. Starting this election, Moldova turned pro-western and started negotiations with the EU. Several years later, however, in 2016, the new coalition was a pro-Russian one again (BBC, 2019). China and Moldova started their official partnership in 1992 and begun discussing a free-trade zone in 2017 (Haitas, 2018).

## Romania

The amount of trade Romania has with China makes up of 1.2 percent of Romania's GDP. That makes China a relatively important economic partner. For China, Romania offers opportunities as a partner within the BRI as well. Romania signed an agreement with China to join the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015. Romania offers several opportunities for China. Arguably, the most important opportunity with regard to the BRI is that Romania has the largest port connected to the Black Sea (Pencea & Oehler-Şincai, 2015). The country is also connected to the Danube-Black Sea channel which connects the Black Sea with the North Sea and its neighboring countries (Pencea & Oehler-Şincai, 2015). For Romania, an important benefit of becoming partners with China is that China has all the knowledge and resources to help improve Romania's infrastructure (Pencea & Oehler-Şincai, 2015).

On the Democracy Index, Romania places as 66<sup>th</sup>, making the country a flawed democracy. The country scores especially low on the category *Political participation*. This means that engagement by the public with the politics of the country is low due to different factors (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). The partnership between Romania and China goes back a long way, starting with official diplomatic relations in 1949 (Haitas, 2018). During the times when the communist Nicolae Ceauşescu was the president of Romania (1974 – 1989), Romania played a key part in creating good relations between the U.S. and China. The relationship between Romania and China in that time was greatly based on the negative relationship both countries had with the Soviet Union. Their partnership was an opportunity

for both countries to free itself from the ties of the Soviet Union and to become a more independent player within the international system (Haitas, 2018). After 1989, Romania swayed away from communism, which changed the relationship between the two countries, making their bond less strong than before. The change came forth, because Romania shifted their attention towards the EU and strengthening their ties with the Western countries (Haitas, 2018). After the fall of the communist government, the political environment in Romania changed towards a more centrist regime and even further to the left with the Social Liberal Union coalition in 2012 (BBC, 2018).

### Russian Federation

The relationship between China and Russia differs somewhat from the other Eastern European countries as Russia is one of the other great powers within the international system. As trading partners, the two countries are important associates, since the total trade between China and Russia amounts to 2.1 percent of Russia's GDP. Relations between China and Russia have not always been good, but the two countries started their strategic partnership in 1996 (Sakai, 2019). Both countries have their reasons to work together even more, especially within the Belt and Road Initiative. Russia is perhaps not the most eager partner within the BRI, as the country feels that the partnership may not be equal, due to China's better economic status as of late (Sakai, 2019). However, since Russia is currently not on good terms with the West, it is more or less dependent on China for its economy. Even so, Russia prefers to see itself as the great power controlling Central Asia, rather than China (Sakai, 2019). In April of this year, president Putin attended the Belt and Road forum in China. At the forum, Putin expressed himself more willing to participate within the BRI. However, in an effort to maintain autonomy Putin made the suggestion to incorporate other projects into the BRI, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This is a project that was meant to be led by Russia to connect Eurasia for further trading opportunities, quite similar to the BRI. Even though the project still exists, funds have been lacking from Russia's side to further expand the project (Dasgupta, 2019). For Russia, this is not only a way to make itself a bigger player within the BRI, but also to quietly build on the existing criticism by the West towards China for its strategy to build the BRI on its own, without fellow leadership or discussion with the western countries (Dasgupta, 2019).

For China, Russia makes for an important partner of the Belt and Road Initiative as the most direct and shortest road of the plan to connect Europe with Asia would go straight through Russia (Sakai, 2019). This is the main road that will travel further through Belarus onto Western Europe. Furthermore, China lacks certain resources which it could best obtain from Russia, such as oil (Sakai, 2019). Russia still has strong influences in Central Asia, in the areas of trade and security. Therefore, it would be unwise for China to try to bypass Russia as a partner within the BRI.

Unsurprisingly, Russia is categorized as an authoritarian state on the Democracy Index, placing as 144<sup>th</sup> country on the list (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). The Russian regime scores low on pluralism, as the number of political groups participating within the political system is profoundly limited (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). Furthermore, the country scores very low on *Functioning of government* meaning that corruption levels are high and elected representatives have very limited influence on policy making (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). The relationship between China and Russia has not been stable in the past, with only short moments wherein the countries tried to form a partnership. However, their relationship became stronger and more stable since the two countries agreed on a bilateral relationship in 1989. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia tried to repair its ties with the U.S. and the EU, but this did not turn out as fruitful as Russia hoped. That is when Russia again turned to China and the two countries declared each other as a friendly country (Ying, 2016). Since then, their relationship has been on the rise. Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union Boris Yeltsin became the first elected president of Russia. Yeltsin used to be a member of the Communist Party, but when he was elected as president, he participated independently from a political party. Yeltsin held more liberal ideas than the Communist Party (Berger, 2007). It was around that time that Russia first looked towards the West and then turned to China. Around 1999 current president Putin took over as president. Putin is a member of the political party United Russia, which does not hold clear ideologies (Roberts, 2012, p. 189). During the time that Putin has been president, he has asserted more power towards himself and diminished the power of Russia's citizens (BBC, 2019). One example is that Putin has decided that regional governors are now chosen by the government and no longer through elections (BBC, 2019).

## Slovakia

For Slovakia, China is an important economic partner as the total trade between the two countries makes up for 3 percent of Slovakia's GDP. However, when looking at the Belt and Road Initiative, not much Chinese influence can be found in Slovakia. Many of the beforementioned countries have a strategic partnership with China, whereas Slovakia does not. Up until now, Slovakia has not been much active within the BRI, nor before the BRI was initiated by China. In 2007, the prime minister of Slovakia at the time, Robert Fico, member of the left-wing party Direction – Social Democracy (SMER), visited China to strengthen their economic ties. Nevertheless, this political investment in China became less during the following years and the prime minister did not attend the 16+1 Summit in China in 2016 (Turcsányi, Kironská, & Šimalčík, 2018). Again, in 2017 at the Belt and Road Summit there were no Slovakian representatives present. The trade between the two countries has actually gone down since the establishment of the BRI (Turcsányi, Kironská, & Šimalčík, 2018). Furthermore, Slovakia is not situated on any of the main trading routes incorporated in the BRI plans. That also makes Slovakia less of an interesting partner for China to invest in nor does it make for an important strategic partner. Slovakia's economic position does not offer China any benefits either as the country's economy is rather small. In terms of resources and infrastructure, there are not many opportunities to find in Slovakia as well (Turcsányi, Kironská, & Šimalčík, 2018).

Slovakia places as 44<sup>th</sup> on the Democracy Index, making the country a flawed democracy. It scores well on the category *Electoral process and pluralism*, meaning that there is no limited on the number of political parties participating in elections and the elections are deemed to be fair. However, on *Political culture* and *Political participation* it scores relatively low, around 5.5 on the 10-point scale (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). That means that there is a relatively low perception of democracy by the population and that there is not much engagement by the population within the political system (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). Politically seen, Slovakia has been through some phases after the forming of the country in 1939. Right after the Second World War, up until 1989, the country, which was again merged with the Czech Republic as Czechoslovakia, was ruled by communists. Hereafter, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia was the leading party. During the 90s, Slovakia worked on becoming more democratic and building on their relationship with

Europe, gaining membership to the EU in 2004 (BBC, 2019). Starting 2013, however, the country swifts to the far-right.

## Ukraine

The total trade between Ukraine and China makes up for 2 percent of Ukraine's GDP, which is not an insignificant amount. Entering the Belt and Road Initiative opens up further opportunities for Ukraine. The relationship between Ukraine and China has been positive since 1994, a few years after Ukraine became independent from the Soviet Union. Their relationship improved when Leonid Kuchma became the president of Ukraine (Rousseau, 2012). At the same, Kuchma also started making propositions with the Western countries as well as Russia (BBC, 2019). When Yanukovych became the president of Ukraine, the ties between China and Ukraine became even stronger. There were political reasons for that, as Ukraine tried to distance itself from Russia but also from the EU (Rousseau, 2012). Ukraine specifically took a step away from Russia, as the country felt that it was not seen as an autonomous party (Rousseau, 2012).

For China, Ukraine offers benefits as a partner within the BRI as well. Again, Ukraine is strategically placed on the world map as an entrance way for China to Europe. Furthermore, Ukraine also provides economic benefits, as the country does well on the heavy industry market and has resources to offer China which the latter lacks (Rousseau, 2012).

Furthermore, the country not only offers a route through land from China to Europe, but also through the Black Sea, as Ukraine has eighteen harbors, including Crimea (Pochtovyuk & Semenikhina, 2017).

On the Democracy Index, Ukraine is listed as number 84, making the country a hybrid regime. The country scores especially low on *Functioning of government* (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). Again, this means that elected politicians have little influence, especially on policy-making and that there is a higher level of corruption within the country (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). As mentioned earlier, right after Ukraine declared itself as independent, the politics in the country were westward bound, while maintaining relations with Russia as well in an attempt to balance out the two powers surrounding Ukraine. At the same time, Ukraine also changed to a democratic constitution (BBC, 2019). In 2005, Yanukovych became the president of Ukraine, being known as a pro-Russia politician. This was after the Orange Revolution, which started after suspicions arose that the 2004



election was not conducted fairly and the results were not true. After Yanukovych became the president, a coalition is formed between Party of Regions, of which Yanukovych was a member, the Communist party but also the Socialist Party (BBC, 2019). The government's pro-Russian stance becomes clearer when the country decides to cease their efforts to come to an association agreement with the EU. Due to mass protests from the public, Yanukovych is forced to flee to Russia. That is when Yanukovych's opposition takes over (BBC, 2019). In 2014, Russia annexes Crimea, to the surprise of the EU and the U.S., who in turn impose strict sanctions on Russia. China, on the other hand, chose to not take a stance against Russia and remained quiet about the subject (Ying, 2016). Shortly after the annexation of Crimea and the fleeing of Yanukovych, a new president was elected with a pro-Western stance, Petro Poroshenko (BBC, 2019). Since 2015, Ukraine's politics have focused further on their ties with the EU and the country has signed the association agreement with the EU as well (BBC, 2019).

## Analysis

In this section of the paper, the findings from the previous section will be further analyzed on the basis of the theory to answer the research question. Per country the findings from the document analysis will be further analyzed.

### Realism

As mentioned before, for Belarus the three great powers in the international system that it could align itself with are China, Russia and Europe. Russia, however, is seen as a security threat by Belarus. Belarus fears it may lose its autonomy since Russia has annexed Crimea. Since there is no world government, there is also no agency to protect Belarus if this were to happen. That is also why Russia has been able to annex Crimea without being stopped. An alignment with China, as a country with a higher economic power than Russia, is an opportunity for Belarus to gain in power. China is willing to invest in Belarus, which in turn can increase Belarus' economic power. For China, Belarus as a partner through the BRI also means an increase in power. Belarus is strategically placed within Europe, meaning that creating a route from Asia to Europe will go through Belarus to reach Germany. This will make trading with Western Europe easier for China and means an increase in economic power.

The story is different for Bulgaria. Bulgaria has no significant security issues and therefore, this is not the reason for Bulgaria to become a member of the BRI and align itself with China. For Bulgaria, becoming a BRI member means more economic opportunities and thus an increase in economic power. This is a way for Bulgaria to become a more powerful state in the international system and a strategically important state between Western Europe and China. For China, Bulgaria's three ports at the Black Sea offer opportunities to connect Eurasia and therefore expand its economic power through the BRI. However, Bulgaria is not the most strategically placed country for the BRI routes and is therefore not the main focus for China to invest in.

Through the research of the economical background of the Czech Republic has been determined that China is a big economic partner of the Czech Republic. Therefore, becoming a part of the BRI for the Czech Republic means a grow in economic powers. Furthermore, like Belarus, Czech too has stated that they wanted to become more independent from the EU. Even though, theirs is not a security issue, it can be deemed as wanting to maintain their

autonomy from the EU. By aligning themselves with China, Czech can become more autonomous from the EU and gain in economic power through their partnership with China.

Hungary is economically seen the most dependent on China from all of the Eastern European countries. Hungary does not have security-related reasons to align itself with China. Even though the country used to be part of the Soviet Union and declared itself independent, it currently still is on good terms with Russia. Hungary seems to strategically align itself with Russia as well as with China, to spread its chances in growing in power. If the relationship with either of the great powers would deteriorate, Hungary will still have the other power left as an ally.

Poland is somewhat similar to Bulgaria in their reasons to start a partnership with China through the BRI. The country has no security threat from the surrounding great powers like Russia and the EU. China is an important economic partner for Poland and therefore a significant opportunity for Poland to grow in economic power. Poland opens its borders to as much foreign trade as possible to gain in economic power, which makes it only logical for Poland to become a member of the BRI. As Poland is centrally located within Europe, it makes for a strategic partner for China too. By connecting Poland to the BRI, it will be easier for China to further expand its economic power through trade with Europe.

The Republic of Moldova, too, has no current security threats and therefore no direct security reasons to align itself with China. However, its ties with the EU are not as strong as the aforementioned countries, because Moldova is not an EU country. Aligning itself with China does offer the opportunity for a free-trade zone with China, of which both countries could benefit. For Moldova, this could lead to more trade with China and thus an increase in economic power. It could be argued that, because Moldova is not an EU member state, the EU is not the great power that Moldova can align itself with. That is why China would make for a better great power to align itself with through the BRI. That way, Moldova is still part of a bigger group of states forming Eurasia.

For Romania too the main reason to become a member of the BRI is to gain in economic power. Romania can offer China access through the Black Sea as Romania holds the largest harbor at the Black Sea. In return, China will invest in Romania's infrastructure. Through better infrastructure Romania can further gain in economic power. During the research, no

security threats for Romania come forth, meaning Romania did not enter the BRI for security reasons.

Russia is an interesting BRI member to look at, because both Russia and China are seen as great powers within the international system. Through the BRI Russia does not per se align itself with China. The country is more or less reliant on China for its economy as it is on bad terms with the West. So, to maintain its economic power, Russia needs to work together with China. This cooperation is purely for Russia's own benefit. Russia still tries to assert its power through the BRI as not to become dependent upon China as the BRI's leader by bringing in the EAEU. This shows that Russia is intimidated by China's power and tries to build its own power and influence in the BRI by wanting to combine the two projects. China, too, needs Russia as a member of the BRI for economic reasons. Without Russia as a member, China cannot connect Europe and Asia directly and would have to create a large detour to avoid Russia. For both countries, their partnership through the BRI is a necessity rather than a choice.

As of now, the relationship between China and Slovakia is relatively new. China is an important economic partner for Slovakia and therefore, Slovakia's membership to the BRI is mainly to gain in economic power. That said, from the research derived that since Slovakia became a member of the BRI, its government has put sparse effort in strengthening the ties with China. Likewise, for China Slovakia is not the most interesting partner to invest in. As Slovakia is not situated on any of the main routes of the BRI, the partnership with Slovakia will not mean much of an increase in power for China. Even though there could be opportunities for Slovakia in terms of economic power, the country needs to start investing in a political relationship with China first.

For Ukraine, there are several reasons to partner up with China. Ukraine is under security threat by Russia, especially after the annexation of Crimea. Joining the BRI and aligning itself with China, is a means for Ukraine to distance itself from Russia and maintain its autonomy. Furthermore, by leaving Russia aside, Ukraine is in need of a new great power to align with to increase in economic power. For China, Ukraine makes for an important partner within the BRI because of Ukraine's strategical location and its harbors. To expand its power through the BRI, Ukraine is a significant ally.

## Authoritarianism

Both countries, China and Belarus, are labeled as authoritarian countries. Elections in Belarus are deemed to be unfair and not democratic and that is why Lukashenko could be elected as president up until five times. The fact that China and Belarus are both authoritarian regimes may contribute to Belarus aligning itself with China. The country is not willing to align itself with Russia, due to security issues, but it could have strengthened its ties with the EU. However, as the EU has spoken negatively about the undemocratic and unfair elections in Belarus, Belarus would have to make changes to its political climate before being able to align itself with EU. From this point of view, China would make the better partner as China does not condemn the political culture in Belarus.

Bulgaria, on the other hand, is labeled as a flawed democracy and is not an authoritarian state. When looking at Bulgaria's relations with China, its membership of the BRI does coincide with the country's political stance changing further to the right. All the while, the country is ordered by the EU to dive into their corruption issues. Just as Belarus, Bulgaria's political may be of influence behind their motivation to partner with China, as China does not involve itself with Bulgaria's national policy's.

The Czech Republic too is labeled as a flawed democracy and not authoritarian. It can still be argued that China's authoritarianism plays a role in Czech's decision to create a partnership with China. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Czech used to be opposed to the idea of having closer ties with China. This was during the time that Czech had a pro-Western government and was working on strengthening its ties with the EU. When the political environment in Czech changed to the right-wing, Czech also decided to change its focus from the EU to China. Therefore, it could be argued that the change to a more conservative government made Czech look for a partner with similar political views.

Hungary too is categorized as a flawed democracy. From the research, however, came forth that since the right-winged party Fidesz has become the leading party in Hungary, the Hungarian government has turned its focus from the West to authoritarian states situated in the East. As both Russia and China are authoritarian states, again it can be argued that China's political stance of authoritarianism is an extra reason for Hungary to align itself with China and turn away from the West.

Again, Poland is not an authoritarian state but a flawed democracy. Poland too shows the trend of Eastern European countries that they turn to China for a partnership when their political environment shifts from left-winged to right-winged. The Law and Justice party of Poland was a right-winged party that was critical of the EU. When this party received the most votes and became the leading party, is when the Polish government turned to China as a partner. Therefore, again it can be argued that China being an authoritarian regime instead of a left-winged regime, made China a more attractive partner for Poland.

Moldova comes closer to an authoritarian regime, being a hybrid regime with no clear democracy. Looking at the political background from Moldova, here too a pattern between the relations with China and the changes in political environment can be found. Moldova and China started their strategical partnership in 1992, when the communist party was in power in Moldova. Their discussion of the free-trade zone began in 2017, when again there was a right-wing government in power with a tendency to lean to the East. This is a pro-Russian coalition. It can therefore be argued that Moldova has been leaning to authoritarian regimes as of late.

Romania is a flawed democracy and therefore on a general basis, the country does not come close to being an authoritarian state. During the communist rule the relationship between China and Romania grew stronger when both countries had a negative relationship with Russia and thus turned to each other for a partnership. When the country shifted to a left-wing government, their relationship deteriorated somewhat. However, Romania's membership to the BRI came to be during the rule of the left-wing Social Liberal Union coalition. Therefore, it cannot be said that for Romania, China's political stance of authoritarianism was of influence when the country became a member of the BRI.

Russia and China are both authoritarian regimes and in that respect are very similar. Both countries have a communist background too. However, in the case of Russia it is hard to argue that China being an authoritarian regime is a reason for Russia to turn to China as an economic partner, as both countries are great powers in the international system. What can be said, however, is that unlike the West, China has not put harsh sanctions on Russia on their annexation of Crimea. China has not condemned any of Russia's latest actions and is, therefore, still very open to cooperation. Ever since the two countries decided on a bilateral

relationship both countries have been on good terms, even when the West speaks negatively about either country.

Slovakia is labeled as a flawed democracy and thus is not close to being an authoritarian regime. However, in 2013, when the BRI project was announced by China, Slovakia changed from a left-wing government to a right-wing government. On the other hand, it was the left-winged prime minister Robert Fico who first visited China to start the basis of their relationship. Therefore, when looking at Slovakia, there is no correlation to be found between their political background and their relationship with China.

As Ukraine is a hybrid regime, its political environment comes close to that of an authoritarian regime. Both China and Ukraine have been on good terms since the presidency of Kuchma in 1994. As Kuchma's foreign policy was towards balancing out the great powers surrounding the country, it makes sense that the government also reached out to China during that time. Around the time that China announced its BRI project and Ukraine became a member, the government was a pro-Russian one and turned away from the West. It can, therefore, be argued that Ukraine's political stance was of influence in their contact with China. As Russia too is an authoritarian regime and Ukraine's government shifted from ties with the West to ties with the East, it coincides for Ukraine to also turn to China during the same period.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explain the reasons behind the Eastern European countries and China to create a partnership through the Belt and Road Initiative with the IR theory of realism in mind and further investigate whether China's political stance of authoritarianism played a role for the countries to work together. The IR theory of realism was used as the basis to analyze the gathered data on the relationship between the Eastern European countries and China. Furthermore, authoritarianism as a theory was also used to determine whether the Eastern European countries' political background and China's authoritarian regime was of influence for the countries to form a partnership. Therefore, the following problem formulation was formulated to be researched within this paper:

*How can the IR theory of realism explain the partnerships between China and the Eastern European members of the BRI and does China's authoritarianism play a role in their relations?*

In order to answer the problem formulation data was gathered from news articles as well as scholarly journal articles regarding the relationship between the Eastern European countries and China, as well as the Eastern European countries' political background. Through document analysis these articles were analyzed through the theories of realism and authoritarianism. The following conclusion can be made on the analysis of the gathered data.

The main reason for the Eastern European countries and China to form a partnership through the BRI is that of economic power gain. For all ten Eastern European countries there are economic opportunities by becoming a partner with China through the BRI. Economic gains through the BRI are less prevalent for China with the countries Bulgaria and Slovakia. There are economic opportunities for the both Eastern European countries through the BRI, however, this does mean for Slovakia that the country needs to put more effort in their relationship with China on the political level. The countries which may have the biggest gain in economic power through the BRI are Belarus, Poland and Russia as these countries are most strategically placed for the BRI routes. Belarus is situated at the exact point to connect to connect Western Europe with Asia, so there are high chances for China to invest in Belarus. Poland, too, is has a great geographical location as it is centrally located within Europe and is surrounded by seven different countries. This makes Poland an important BRI



partner for China and will have China motivated to invest in Poland. Russia's relations with the West have deteriorated ever since the country annexed Crimea. Due to sanctions put on the country by the EU and the U.S. the country is more or less forced to partner up with China to maintain its economic power and grow as a great power. China also needs Russia as a member of the BRI, for Russia is situated at one of the main planned routes of the BRI. Without Russia as a member of the BRI, China would have to build a much larger road to bypass Russia. Russia also has resources China depends upon. So, for China too having Russia as a member of the BRI means a gain in economic power.

For two countries one of their main reasons to become allies with China through the BRI is that of security. Those are Belarus and Ukraine. Ukraine has felt threatened by Russia ever since Russia annexed Crimea. As there is no world government to protect states, Russia has been able to annex Crimea without interference. As Ukraine is also not an EU member and therefore does not have strong ties with the EU, the country was in need of another great power to align itself with. Becoming a partner of China through the BRI also is a means for Ukraine to maintain its autonomy. Belarus, too, fears Russia's presence ever since the annexation of Crimea. Thus, becoming a partner of China through the BRI means aligning itself with a great power in the international system and hence better security through the partnership. It also means that Belarus has more security to maintain its autonomy. For one more country, autonomy is an important reason to become a member of the BRI and that is the Czech Republic. Through the research came forth that Czech means to become less dependent on the EU for their economic power and has therefore partnered up with China.

For the second part of the problem formulation, whether China's political stance of authoritarianism played a role in the decision for the Eastern European countries to become a member of the BRI, the answer differs per country. For the following countries, a correlation was found between their past and current contact with China and their political background: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. Belarus is also an authoritarian regime and has received criticism from the West on their undemocratic elections. That is when Belarus turned to China, which does not meddle in their national politics. Bulgaria, too, has received criticism from the EU for corruption within the political system. Bulgaria was led by a right-wing government when it began to strengthen its ties with China. For the Czech Republic a trend can be found that the

country turned to the EU when it was led by a left-wing government, whereas it turned to China when the country is lead by a right-wing government. The exact same trend can be found for Hungary. Poland, too, changed it focus to China when it was led by a right-winged government. For the Republic of Moldova, the same trend can be found. Their strategical partnership with China started during the reign of the communist party and the country started serious discussions on a free-trade zone with China during the reign of the pro-Russian party. Ukraine also became a member of the BRI when the country had a pro-Russian government and the country turned away from the West.

However, there is no correlation to be found for Romania, Russia and Slovakia. In the past, there seemed to be a correlation between Romania's political stance and their contact with China, but the country became a BRI member during the left-wing government rule. Even though Russia is also an authoritarian regime it is difficult to say that both countries being authoritarian regimes is of influence on Russia becoming a member of the BRI. That is because Russia is more or less forced to become a member of the BRI to maintain its economic power due to sanctions by the West. For Slovakia no correlation can be found either. Slovakia was led by a right-wing government when they became a member of the BRI. Yet, the relationship between China and Romania began when Romania was led by a left-wing government.

## Reflections and limitations

In this section will be reflected upon this research and the methods that were used to answer the problem formulation. Any limitations that were met while conducting the research will be explained.

First off, the Belt and Road Initiative is a relatively new project as it was announced in 2013. The project being rather new means that there is not a lot of data to be found on the project. The BRI is still in its beginning stage and much of the project has yet to come to action. This made it hard to find information on the Belt and Road Initiative in relation to some of the Eastern European countries.

The method used in this paper to research the collected data was document analysis. As this is a type of qualitative analysis it means that the research was done on the basis of interpretation by the researcher. Within qualitative research there is a tendency to subjectivity by the researcher. I have tried to avoid this as much as possible by using reliable sources as newspaper articles and journal articles, however, as these are secondary sources a complete avoidance of subjectivity might not be possible.

Another aspect from this research might also have led to a bias, and that is the chosen IR theory of realism. By using this theory, only one perspective is given on the relationship between the Eastern European countries and China. For future research, it would be interesting to incorporate another IR theory, such as liberalism, to shine a different light on the relationships and perhaps find other reasons for the countries to enter the BRI.

Furthermore, many of the newspaper and journal articles to be found were written by European researchers, who might have a Western view on the BRI and the relationships between the Eastern European countries and China. For future research it would be interesting to find further articles written by Chinese authors to learn more about the Eastern view on the relationships between these countries through the BRI. However, for this research, these articles were hard to obtain as not many English articles were to be found written by Chinese authors on the topic.

Lastly, another limitation within this research is the choice to look at all ten Eastern European countries and their motivations for becoming a member of the BRI. This choice was made to be able to find a trend in the reasons to join the BRI, however, this also meant

that no in-depth research could be done for every country. If fewer countries were chosen for this research more data could be gathered and researched per country. Then perhaps more or different motivations to become a member of the BRI will be found. This, too, would be possible to be conducted in future research.

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