

China's Soft Power in Europe

Falling on Hard Times

Edited by: Ties Dams, Xiaoxue Martin and Vera Kranenburg

Peer reviews by: Richard Turcsanyi, Plamen Tonchev, Tim Summers, John Seaman,
Tim Rühlig, Miguel Otero-Iglesias, Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai



A Report by the European
Think-tank Network on China (ETNC)
April 2021

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Executive summary

- Based on separate analyses of 17 countries and EU institutions, this report concludes that Chinese soft power in Europe – defined as the ability to influence preferences through attraction or persuasion – has fallen on hard times.
- Developing soft power has been a pillar of Chinese foreign policy and remains a stated goal of China's long-term policy orientation.
- We identify three prominent Chinese approaches to developing soft power in Europe: promoting Chinese language and culture; shaping China's image through the media; and using the secondary soft-power effects of economic prowess.
- Recently, and over the last year in particular, China has become more assertive in attempting to shape its image by expanding its toolkit, particularly to enhance its political messaging. This includes the systematic use of social media.
- On the importance of China's economy, the lines can often be blurred between the attractiveness of economic cooperation and the pressures of economic coercion. Withholding market access for European firms and products has long been an observed practice of reactive Chinese diplomacy, but an increasingly formalized development of sanctioning mechanisms, including “unreliable entity lists” and export control legislation, is a cause for growing concern.
- In other words, market access, trade and investment opportunities are perhaps the single largest factor determining China's appeal in Europe, but also a major source of its coercive power.
- Different patterns of Chinese soft power projections can be seen across four groups of countries analysed in this report:
 - In the first group (Austria, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia), China does not appear compelled to actively project its soft power, mostly because of the lack of public interest in these countries.
 - In Italy and Greece, China's soft power approach aims to arrest the trend of a deteriorating image and is geared towards damage containment.
 - In Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain and the UK, perceptions of China are clearly becoming less favourable, and Beijing is struggling with growing vigilance.
 - Finally, in Czechia, Denmark, France, and Sweden, China's soft power is clearly in a state of free fall.
- In turn, EU institutions appear to follow the trend described in the third group, of growing vigilance, as the risks posed by China's geopolitical ambitions increasingly underlined.
- A number of factors have driven these trends, from the fallout of COVID-19 to Chinese domestic developments (including in Xinjiang and Hong Kong) and the impact of growing US-China rivalry. These factors ultimately appear to be more substantive drivers of European perceptions and attitudes towards China today than the traditional sources of soft power.
- In response, the Chinese government's public messaging in Europe has become increasingly proactive, even aggressive, including through the imposition of sanctions.
- These new methods, though deployed differently across the continent and aimed in part at a Chinese political audience, point to Beijing's objective to increase its sway over Europe by influencing related discourse. They are presumably designed to prevent negative publicity and criticism, rather than achieve likeability.
- An open question can thus be raised: has China become less interested in growing its appeal than in exercising its influence?

Foreword

The European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) is a gathering of China experts from various European research institutes. It is devoted to the policy-oriented study of Chinese foreign policy and relations between China and European countries, as well as China and the EU. The ETNC facilitates regular exchanges among participating researchers with a view to deepening understanding within the European policy and research community and the broader public about how Europe, as a complex set of actors, relates with China and how China's development and evolving global role are likely to impact the future of Europe. The network's discussions and analyses take a decidedly 'bottom-up' approach, accounting for the various aspects of bilateral relations between European countries and China, and the points of convergence and divergence among EU member states, in order to examine EU-China relations in a realistic and comprehensive way.

The network was first launched on the initiative of the Elcano Royal Institute and the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) in Brussels on 6 November 2014. This meeting brought together experts from eleven EU member states, as well as observers from EU institutions. The ETNC members decided to meet in a different European capital every six months and the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) joined Elcano and Ifri in their efforts to move the project forward. The network now includes members from 21 research institutes in as many countries, and each participates on the basis of equality.

The ETNC strives for independent policy research and analysis and, since its inception, is entirely funded by its participating members. The topics considered in ETNC reports are debated and decided upon collectively by its members. The views and analysis provided in each chapter of this report are thus the sole responsibility of the signed author or authors and do not in any way represent the views of all ETNC members, participating institutes, or the institutes with which the authors themselves are affiliated.

The editing of this year's report has been led by the Netherlands Institute for International Relations 'Clingendael', with editorial review provided from Ifri, the Elcano Royal Institute, the Institute of International Economic Relations (Greece), the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House in the UK), the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) and the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (Slovakia), with active participation from all ETNC members.

Previous ETNC Reports:

- *Mapping Europe-China Relations: A bottom-up approach* (November 2015)
- *Europe and China's New Silk Roads* (December 2016)
- *Chinese Investment in Europe: A country-level approach* (December 2017)
- *Political Values in Europe-China Relations* (December 2018)
- *Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry* (January 2020)
- *COVID-19 and Europe-China Relations* (April 2020)

Please visit www.etnc.info for more information on the ETNC.

Does China still care about soft power? Assessing the diversity of approaches in Europe

Ties Dams, Tim Rühlig and Plamen Tonchev

At first glance, 2020 seems to have been an *annus horribilis* for China's image in Europe. A recent report by the Sinophone Borderlands project, which surveyed 19,673 Europeans in thirteen countries on their opinions of the People's Republic of China (PRC), found that respondents in ten of the thirteen countries report significantly more negative than positive views.¹ Latvia is the only European Union (EU) member state of the thirteen surveyed countries (and also the only one covered by this report), in which positive opinions of China outweigh negative opinions; the other two countries are Russia and Serbia. The Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes survey shows that unfavourable views of China reached historic highs in many countries during 2020. Moreover, most respondents thought China had done a bad job in handling COVID-19 and China's President Xi Jinping's approval rates among publics of advanced economies were reported to be plummeting.²

All this comes after a period during which China has steadfastly tried to gain soft power among the world's publics, including in Europe. In 2007, President Hu Jintao fired the starting shot on China's quest for soft power, by saying that:

The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture. [...] We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country.³

Xi Jinping subsequently picked up the baton. At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, Xi proclaimed one of China's 2020–2035 goals to be the following:

We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's soft power.⁴

These lofty ambitions, however, contrast sharply with the background of escalating Sino–US tensions, so-called 'wolf warrior diplomacy', concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic and China's deteriorating image in many corners of the world. It is against this backdrop that this seventh European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) report seeks to explore Chinese soft power in Europe today.

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- 1 Richard Q. Turcsányi *et al.* (2020), 'European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Differences and Common Ground across the Continent', CEIAS and Sinophone Borderlands, November, <https://sinofon.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-final.pdf>.
 - 2 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang (2020), 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries', Pew Research Center, October, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries>.
 - 3 *People's Daily* (2007), 'Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress', October, <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90785/6290144.html>; Joseph S. Nye Jr (2015), 'The Limits of Chinese Soft Power', *Project Syndicate*, July, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-07?barrier=accesspaylog>.
 - 4 Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada (2018), 'China's Soft Power is on the Rise', *China Daily*, February, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201802/23/WS5a8f59a9a3106e7dccc13d7b8.html>.

The ETNC approach: country-level analysis from eighteen leading European think tanks

To gain deeper understanding of China's changing soft power in various European countries, this report looks into:

- Activities and priorities of the Chinese government to build and/or utilize its soft power in Europe over the last decade or so;
- European perceptions of and responses to China's soft power, as deriving from its cultural diplomacy, but also from soft-power aspects of its economic, diplomatic and security policies;
- Assessments of China's soft power approach to Europe.

The report compiles the findings of eighteen researchers from leading European think tanks and universities, reporting on seventeen countries and the European Union's institutions. It builds on previous ETNC publications covering *Political Values in Europe–China Relations* (December 2018), *Europe in the Face of US–China Rivalry* (January 2020), and *COVID-19 and Europe–China Relations* (April 2020).⁵

Each country-chapter addresses the three main issues mentioned above, and, where relevant, adds insights into the impact of COVID-19, the role of Chinese diaspora communities in China's soft power approaches, the way in which social media are utilized for soft power ends, the extent to which economic cooperation involves significant soft-power policies of Beijing, and whether the ongoing Sino–American stand-off impacts popular and political debate on China. This introductory chapter distills the main findings covered in the report, and assesses the evolution, reception and measure of success of China's changing soft-power approaches to Europe.

The essence of China's soft power

Asking whether enhancing its soft power in Europe is still a viable strategic priority for China raises a number of conceptual issues that are beyond the scope of this report to resolve, but are nonetheless worth mentioning. Indeed, ever since Joseph Nye coined the term,⁶ soft power has been a widely discussed concept, leading to an intensive discussion among practitioners along with a body of academic literature arguing over the extent and the ways in which it can be applied to China.⁷

The purpose of this report is not to offer an innovative theoretical argument on the notion of soft power, nor to perform an exegesis of Chinese and European concepts of soft power. Rather, this report aims to map and identify differences in China's soft-power policies in various European countries, and to gauge European receptions of and responses to these policies. Here, a working definition of soft power that fits two seemingly opposing criteria has been used: on the one hand, narrow enough to make sure that each country-chapter covers the same sets of policies and, on the other hand, broad

5 For a full list of ETNC publications, see <https://etnc.info/>.

6 Joseph S. Nye Jr. (1990), 'Soft Power', *Foreign Policy*, Autumn, no. 80, pp. 153–171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580?seq=1>.

7 Li Mingjiang (2008), 'China Debates Soft Power', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 287–308, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mingjiang-Li-3/publication/31202353_China_Debates_Soft_Power/links/5e5f85734585152ce8053e5b/China-Debates-Soft-Power.pdf; Joseph S. Nye (2012), 'China and Soft Power', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 151–155, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10220461.2012.706889?scroll=top&needAccess=true>; Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Fujia Lu (2012), 'Thinking Hard about Soft Power: A Review and Critique of the Literature on China and Soft Power', *Asian Perspective*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 565–589, http://groupsites.hum.aau.dk/cgs_studier/siv_public/eksamensplaner/Eksamen%20E19/1.%20Semester/Eksamen/Eksamen_fs_2018/Reeksamen/Blanchard%20and%20Lu%20Thinking%20hard%20about%20soft%20power.pdf.

enough to account for differences in China's soft-power approaches to various European countries, and differences in the notion of soft power between these countries and China itself.

An inherent conceptual difficulty in assessing China's soft power relates to the Asian giant's growing economic weight, a key feature of its international image. Three examples will help illustrate this methodological dilemma. From the Swedish perspective, the conceptual scope of 'China's soft power' clearly excludes economic appeal, as the current state of Sino-Swedish relations points to growing economic interdependence, while China's image is deteriorating dramatically. In Greece, China is systematically trying to bolster its economic presence through a culture-focused image-boosting strategy. Last but not least, in many countries young Europeans enrol at Confucius Institutes in the hope that, given China's economic prowess, command of the Chinese language will improve their career prospects.

Nye states that soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or payment, adding that the main sources of a country's soft power are its culture, political values and foreign policies.⁸ On the extent to which the notion of soft power applies to the Chinese state, Nye argues that military power and economic prowess often have secondary soft-power effects and that this is important in applying the notion to the Chinese case.⁹ Thus, Chinese investment in a European country may be accompanied by forceful image-boosting policies, or not. Hence, investment can provide an opportunity to increase China's soft power, but an investment *per se* is not automatically a sign of soft power. The investment may reflect the ability to affect others to obtain the preferred outcomes through payment, and so in and of itself falls outside the definition of soft power, but a possible PR campaign accompanying that investment would be included, even if *stricto sensu* it cannot be divorced from the actual payment.

For the purpose of this report, China's soft power is thus defined as follows:

The ability of the Chinese government to influence the preferences and behaviour of foreign actors through attraction or persuasion, rather than through direct interventions that involve either coercion or payment.

The toolkit: taking stock of China's soft-power approaches

China's soft-power approaches to European countries consist of three broad sets of tools. The basic tool is the promotion of Chinese culture and exchanges in education and research. The second set of tools, which has gained prominence in some countries, are soft-power aspects of economic cooperation. Last but not least, China's soft-power toolkit includes an ever more visible third element of social media use and political messaging.

Culture promotion and educational exchange

As Hu's 2007 statement highlights, the promotion of Chinese culture is the foundation of China's soft-power policies. On this count, China employs a uniform, one-size-fits-all approach.

In all countries reviewed here, except for Sweden, Confucius Institutes (CI) have been positioned as the flagships of Chinese cultural promotion and educational exchange, albeit often with varying degrees of controversy. In many countries, *Hanban*, the Chinese governing organization of the CIs worldwide,

8 Joseph S. Nye Jr (2012), 'China and Soft Power', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 151–155, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10220461.2012.706889?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

9 Nye (2012), 'China and Soft Power'.

has sought to achieve a substantial increase in the number of CIs. Most countries report that CIs also facilitate the so-called Confucius Classrooms (CC), i.e. partnerships with secondary schools to teach Chinese language and culture. Sweden is the only country that does not have CIs and CCs anymore. In most countries, the number of CIs is stable. In almost one-third of countries the number of CIs has recently decreased. In Portugal as well as in Greece, meanwhile, a new CI is expected to be launched.¹⁰ Most recently, the Danish Music Confucius Institute has announced the termination of its activities.

	Volume <i>What is the number of CIs in respective country/EU?</i>	Trend <i>Has there been an increase or decrease in CIs recently?</i>	Controversy <i>Is there significant controversy in the public debate surrounding CIs?</i>
Austria	2	Stable	No
Czech Republic	2	Stable	No
Denmark	1	Decrease	Yes
France	21	Increase	Yes
Germany	19	Stable	Yes
Greece	2 (3)	Increase (planned)	No
Hungary	5	Stable	No
Italy	16	Stable	No
Latvia	1	Stable	No
Netherlands	2	Decrease	Yes
Poland	6	Stable	No
Portugal	5 (6)	Increase (prospected)	No
Romania	4	Stable	No
Slovakia	3	Stable	No
Spain	8	Stable	No
Sweden	0	Decrease	Yes
United Kingdom	30	Stable	No

Chinese embassies throughout Europe organize cultural events and festivities. Only in the Swedish case has China officially terminated cultural exchange; here, also, informal exchanges persist. Most countries report the establishment of a national China Cultural Centre (CCC) in the past decade. The mission of CCCs is to promote Chinese culture among the general European public through art exhibitions, calligraphy courses and dragon boat races, etc.

In Portugal, Greece and Italy, the notion of cultural kinship is systematically put forward by China. Greece and Italy are addressed as China's fellow 'ancient civilizations'. Notably, at the behest of China, in 2017 the Greek government hosted the first Ancient Civilizations Forum, which brought together ten countries, including Italy. In China's messaging to Lisbon, Portugal's colonial past in Macau plays an important role. In addition, cultural ties are often pursued through channels of 'paradiplomacy', or diplomatic ties between subnational levels of government, such as twin cities or regions.

Soft-power aspects of economic cooperation

China's economic cooperation with European countries has significant secondary soft-power effects. Two frameworks that are primarily aimed at serving China's economic – and broader – interests are particularly worth mentioning in this respect: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and 17+1 grouping in Central and Eastern Europe. Of the seventeen reporting countries, ten have signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with China on the BRI: Hungary (2015); Romania (2015); Czech Republic (2015);

¹⁰ For Greece, the announcement was made in 2019, as it was for Portugal.

Poland (2015); Slovakia (2015); Latvia (2016); Greece (2018); Portugal (2018); Austria (2018) and Italy (2019). The Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia are members of the China-led 17+1 initiative. Thus, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia take part in both initiatives.

Soft-power activities can be integral elements of both policy frameworks. In Poland, Slovakia and Latvia, for example, many events relating to sport, music, film, martial arts, books, theatre and folks arts are held under the 17+1 banner. Interestingly, not all such cultural activities come in the 'shadow' of economic cooperation. In Slovakia, rhetorical emphasis on economic opportunities hardly matches reality. Although Latvia has a strong interest in economic cooperation, China focuses on cultural appeal instead. China's soft-power approach to Greece, including its proactive cultural diplomacy, is viewed mainly as a vehicle for the pursuit of economic goals. In other countries, such as Austria and Hungary, China focuses almost entirely on economic cooperation, by using even cultural events to deliver economic messages.

Media, social media and political messaging

The third part of China's toolkit – media, social media and political messaging – is the most dynamic. Over the past decade, China has been investing in its presence in the traditional European media space. It has done so in three ways: first, by setting up European-national branches of Chinese media outlets; second, by establishing partnerships and institutional cooperation between Chinese and European press agencies and media outlets; and third, by reaching out more actively to European media outlets in the form of op-eds and interviews, and the purchase of advertisements.

	Chinese European-language media <i>National branch of Chinese state-media publishing/broad-casting in local European language</i>	Partnership <i>Partnership agreements of local media (newspapers/news agencies) with Chinese state media</i>
Austria	Yes	Yes
Czech Republic	Yes	Yes
Denmark	No	No
France	Yes	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes
Greece	No	Yes
Hungary	Yes	Yes
Italy	Yes	Yes
Latvia	No	Yes
Netherlands	No	No
Poland	Yes	Yes
Portugal	Yes	Yes
Romania	Yes	Yes
Slovakia	No	No
Spain	No	Yes
Sweden	No	No
United Kingdom	Yes	No

Only a few countries have national branches of Chinese media. China Radio International (CRI) broadcasts in the local language in the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Poland and Romania. France has the biggest national presence of Chinese traditional media, with *Xinhua* and *China Global Television Network* (CGTN) broadcasting French content alongside CRI, and the newspaper *Le Figaro* publishing the 'China Watch' supplement by *China Daily*. The Czech Republic traces pro-Chinese

coverage to Czech media outlets owned by Chinese investors. Of particular note in this context, the British media watchdog Ofcom has recently revoked CGTN's licence to broadcast.¹¹

More common are partnership and cooperation agreements. As part of the BRI, Greece's state television and China's National Radio and Television Administration have signed an agreement for the exchange of content. In addition, the Greek state news agency has signed a MoU with *Xinhua*. *ANSA*, Italy's most prominent news agency, has also signed a partnership agreement with *Xinhua* as part of the BRI MoU, which has led to *ANSA* publishing translated articles by *Xinhua*. Between 2013 and 2020, 75 per cent of the news published on China by *ANSA* came from *Xinhua*. In Romania, *Xinhua* is also present and has a partnership agreement with the national press agency *AGERPRES*. In Germany, *Xinhua* has signed an agreement with the German news agency *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* (DPA) for paid cross-postings of *Xinhua* articles on DPA platforms, with the aim of placing positive coverage of China's Belt and Road Initiative on the DPA's platforms.

In the last couple of years, Chinese officials have been making forays into the world of social media like Twitter and Facebook, even though they are banned in China. China is demonstrating a more proactive stance and a more assertive tone, often reacting vehemently to an increasingly politicized public debate on China in many European countries, and using social media to reach a wider audience. This fairly recent development seems to stem more from global competition with the United States, rather than from a soft-power strategy specifically tailored to various European audiences.

In almost all countries, there is a surge in social media activity by Chinese diplomats. The Chinese mission to the EU was one of China's first diplomatic missions to open a Twitter account in 2013, which is currently one of the most prolific of all. A number of events have led to an increase in Chinese official social media activity throughout Europe: the Sino-US rivalry and criticism by US officials over social media; the protests in Hong Kong and the introduction of the National Security Law; and the COVID-19 crisis.

As has been widely reported in European media and been analysed in more detail in the ETNC's last report,¹² COVID-19 brought forward more audacious Chinese positive messaging via social media. While some PRC embassies have tweeted pictures of European officials gratefully receiving Chinese medical supplies, others have indulged in 'wolf warrior diplomacy',¹³ with France and Sweden as cases in point. Germany points to another aspect of China's inroads into European social media, stating that Twitter and Facebook uncovered thousands of Chinese fake accounts in 2019, including bots that were programmed to disseminate Chinese propaganda.

European reception and responses

Having taken stock of China's European soft-power toolkit, the question arises of how this toolkit is received, and whether its use has a beneficial impact on China's soft power? In answering these two questions, reporting countries can be categorized into four groups. Notably, no hard lines exist between these groups.

11 *BBC* (2021), 'Ofcom Revokes Chinese Broadcaster CGTN's UK Licence', February, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-55931548>.

12 ETNC (2020), 'COVID-19 and Europe-China Relations: A Country-level Analysis', April, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_special_report_covid-19_china_europe_2020.pdf.
[COVID19 and Europe-China Relations \(ifri.org\)](https://www.ifri.org/).

13 'Wolf warrior diplomacy' describes an aggressive style of diplomacy purported to be adopted by Chinese diplomats in the 21st century, under Chinese leader Xi Jinping's administration.

In Group A, China enjoys very little to no interest as a topic of political or popular debate. In Group B, political elites and, to a lesser extent, the general public have a considerable interest in cooperating with China, and China enjoys a significant degree of soft power, but is slowly losing appeal. In Group C, China has suffered significant soft-power losses, although its economic attractiveness persists as a factor to be reckoned with. In Group D, gaining soft power no longer seems to be a viable – or even active – strategy for China anymore.

Group A. No need for particular soft-power efforts: Austria, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia

Five countries report that China is hardly, if at all, a topic of interest in public discourse.

In Hungary, China enjoys an ‘extraordinarily amicable relationship’ with the Orbán government, despite a lack of media and public interest, or media coverage. Beijing thus has no need for a soft-power strategy and indeed deploys few of its soft-power tools. The Chinese Embassy in Budapest’s social media accounts record hardly any traffic at all. In Austria, despite the country’s accession to the BRI, a lack of public interest and close connections with the political elite paint a similar picture for China: the absence of a public debate and a strategy on China facilitates the promotion of Beijing’s positions. In Poland and Slovakia, a similar lack of interest is the status quo, but this may be changing in light of China’s assertiveness in COVID-19. In Portugal, deep cultural, historic and economic ties are the basis of a close relationship with Beijing, which Lisbon is trying to maintain despite increased US pressure. Here, too, China is said to have no need for a specific soft-power strategy.

Interestingly, China’s soft power seems to be at its best where it is aimed at elite outreach and met with public indifference.

Group B. Damage control: Italy and Greece

The situation in Italy and Greece is different from the countries in group A, and indeed more complex. In these countries, China is reported to enjoy considerable soft power, and yet its appeal is diminishing. China can be said to be in ‘damage control mode’ as a result of changing perceptions among political elites and the general public.

Both in Italy and Greece, China has pursued strong soft-power messaging along economic and cultural lines alike. Yet, in both countries, cracks are appearing in what seemed to be a remarkably positive image of China over the past decade. There is a growing sense that the volume of Chinese investment in Greece is disappointing relative to initial expectations and the secondary soft-power effects of Chinese economic prowess are fizzling out. In Italy, the main perception of China before 2008 was that of a threat to Italian strategic industries. Then China successfully built its image as an economic partner and the negative stance of successive Italian governments turned into a welcoming attitude towards Chinese capital and business. As the first destination of Beijing’s ‘mask diplomacy’ in 2020, Italy was arguably one of China’s biggest successes, with a positive effect on perceptions of China among Italian citizens. Although the general trend in attitudes towards China remains positive, 2020 saw the Italian government increasingly acting on a view of China as a competitor.

Group C. Struggling with growing vigilance: Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain and the UK

Six countries display a roughly similar negative trajectory of perceptions of and responses to China’s attempts to project its soft power. Over the last decade, interest in China has slowly increased and a positive predisposition towards Chinese culture has been recorded, but negative attitudes towards China-related political issues have been gaining traction. China’s appeal is dwindling and its soft-power approach is viewed in an increasingly politicized manner, while economic attractiveness remains an important factor in what is left of China’s broader appeal.

Since 2018, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) have become considerably more sceptical and vigilant towards China. To a lesser extent, the same can be said of the Netherlands, Latvia and Romania. COVID-19 has been a turning point for Romania, as the pandemic has led to a worse perception of China and this has become the newest barrier to Sino-Romanian exchange. In Latvia and the Netherlands, sentiments towards China are not unequivocally negative, but they are described as increasingly vigilant across the spectrum of engagement. In the Netherlands, recent reports point to the risks posed by research and education cooperation with China. Furthermore, after the release of a 'China Policy Note' by the Dutch government in May 2019, the Dutch parliament demanded that the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs adjust the language on human rights to make it more critical of China. Latvia is an exception, in that COVID-19 has not changed perceptions of China significantly. The Spanish government has maintained a generally positive rhetoric on China, despite the upgrading of its investment screening in strategic industries, and its critical stance on matters relating to the South China Sea, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. For all the countries in group C, China's economic appeal remains strong, even if its economic might is increasingly seen in the light of geopolitical competition. The direction of UK policy towards China is not set and, while relations have clearly deteriorated, the Chinese side continues to make an effort to avoid a free fall in its soft power. A new Chinese ambassador will soon take up his post in London and that may have an impact on the Chinese approach.

Group D. Facing a free fall: the Czech Republic, Denmark, France and Sweden

In the Czech Republic, Denmark, France and Sweden, perceptions of China are assessed to have reached such negative levels that no soft-power strategy is likely to be effective. Negative sentiments are driven by perceptions of China's political system, but also by COVID-19, and in most cases exacerbated by Chinese public messaging. Either in tweets or interviews, Chinese officials have been very aggressive in attempting to quell criticism over Chinese policy with regard to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Huawei, 5G and COVID-19, but this has clearly backfired: increasingly critical political attention is being paid to these issues and China's growing influence as a superpower generally.

Survey data collected by the Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey in autumn 2020 suggests that general perceptions of China in Sweden, France and the Czech Republic have been worsening.¹⁴ An ECFR survey finds a similar trend in Denmark.¹⁵ Key drivers of negative sentiments on China among the Danish political elite, in turn, are the domestic political situation in China, Sino-US rivalry and the revelation in Danish media of Chinese covert influence operations. In the Czech Republic, Chinese push-back on Czech-Taiwan relations has also added to a more negative view. In France and Sweden, the Chinese government seems to have unabashedly let go of its ambition to gain soft power, with China's respective embassies adopting a tone and style of messaging that is outright aggressive and undermining.

Nota bene: the EU

EU institutions seem to follow best the trend described in category C, as they are increasingly highlighting the risks posed by China's geopolitical ambitions. Since the Eurozone crisis began in 2009, the EU has begun to perceive economic cooperation with China more and more in this light. The new Commission has adopted the moniker of being a 'geopolitical commission', which has led to stronger language on economic issues and human rights. China's communication campaign during

14 Tim Summers, Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Simalcik, Kristina Kironska and Renata Sedlakova (2020), 'British Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19', Central European Institute of Asian Studies and Chatham House, <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/UK-poll-report.pdf>.

15 Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard (2020), 'Europe's Pandemic Politics', ECFR, June, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview.pdf.

the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an intensely critical debate on China within EU institutions, questioning the intentions behind 'mask diplomacy' and pointing to systematic disinformation on Beijing's part. China's posture has awakened the EU to the global 'battle of narratives', a term coined by High Representative of the European Union Josep Borrell.

Assessing China's soft-power efforts in Europe

All of this does not bode well for China's soft power ambitions in Europe. Culture, education and research exchange are received in many countries with growing caution, if not in an increasingly politicized manner; the appeal of China's economic sway is important but it is also proving limited with a view to secondary soft-power effects; and external events that expose the differences in political values between China and European countries are dealing a blow to China's image in European eyes.

Regardless of the many ways in which China has tried to project its soft power in Europe over the past decade, the impact of these attempts seems to be negligible compared to other factors. These include China's domestic political set-up, COVID-19 and Sino-US rivalry. Ultimately, China's measure of attractiveness or persuasiveness flows to a large extent from its economic presence or weight in European countries. Economics takes a back seat only when discourse on China becomes considerably politicized. In many countries where China's image is cracking or deteriorating, economic pull factors limit the damage somewhat. Ironically, China's appeal is greatest where interest in China is smallest. In addition, in many of these countries, economic cooperation with China is increasingly seen in a geopolitical light.

At the same time, the expanding toolkit used by China points to Beijing's objective to increase its sway over Europe by influencing related discourse. In other words, it is becoming more assertive in shaping its image. Faced with growing geopolitical tensions with the US and criticism over the origins, outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 virus, China is demonstrating a more pro-active stance and even aggressive modes of public messaging, presumably aimed at preventing negative publicity and criticism, rather than achieving likeability. To this end, China is investing in the systematic use of social media. Since this is a qualitatively new feature of China's strategy, it is still too early to draw conclusions about its impact and effectiveness.

Most recently, the imposition of Chinese sanctions against individuals and institutions from the EU and the United Kingdom – including independent researchers that are members of the ETNC network – in retaliation for Western sanctions against Chinese individuals accused of grave human rights violations in Xinjiang have paved the way to an escalation in tensions between Europe and China. Even before these developments, however, it had become clear that Beijing's efforts to developing soft power across the continent were increasingly ineffective. In fact, diplomatic spats and Beijing's aggressive, and at times hostile, 'wolf warrior diplomacy' suggest that China may not be as interested in increasing its soft power in Europe as in the past. In a sense, China is increasingly communicating that it prefers to be respected, if not feared, rather than liked. Put differently, Beijing today seems less interested in its appeal than in gaining coercive power.

China's soft power in Austria: building on the power of nonchalance

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Summary

China's soft power effort appears to be reaching only a small segment of the Austrian public, as both its media presence and exchanges in education and culture remain of limited scale. By contrast, Chinese diplomats maintain extensive connections to Austrian economic and political elites through a multitude of bilateral associations. Hence, Chinese soft-power efforts seem to be directly reaching decision-makers, rather than indirectly by creating an enabling environment. Moreover, China's soft power in Austria appears to stem from its economic weight. The PRC's messaging tends to revolve accordingly around economic themes. Crucially, Austria's nonchalance towards China, manifested through its lack of public debate and strategy, might be enhancing China's soft power in the Alpine republic.

Introduction

Chinese diplomats in Austria have been seeking to interact with the Austrian public through established media outlets, which have published several interviews and op-eds by the current Chinese ambassador, Li Xiaosi. The first months of the COVID-19 crisis witnessed a significant amplification of the Chinese Embassy in Vienna's media presence, as both interest in China¹⁷ and the embassy's engagement increased. In January 2020, the Chinese ambassador notably took part in a panel discussion on the Austrian national public service broadcaster, *ORF*. In general, the Chinese diplomat's presence in Austrian media has been less controversial and seems to have gained only limited attention, especially compared to other European countries, such as France¹⁸ and Sweden. Except for an interview about the protests in Hong Kong, which Ambassador Li gave to the national radio station *Ö1* in August 2019,¹⁹ the media interventions of the Chinese ambassador have not triggered any further reaction by Austrian stakeholders. Furthermore, even though the Twitter account of Ambassador Li is one of the most followed profiles of Chinese diplomats stationed in Europe, its impact on the Austrian public remains negligible. First, its followers seem for the most part not to be Austrian.²⁰ Moreover, only around ten

16 The author would like to thank Adam Urosevic for his valuable input to this chapter, as well as express his gratitude to the AIES team, especially Werner Fasslabend, Velina Tchakarova, Michael Zinkanell, Sofia Maria Satanakis, Christoph Schwarz, Katrin Süß and Christoph Lhotka, for their support throughout this research.

17 In Austria, the term 'China' experienced a substantial increase in both Google web searches and YouTube searches between January and March 2020 (see trends.google). Furthermore, an analysis of major Austrian media organizations (*ORF*, *Kronenzeitung*, *Der Standard*, *Wiener Zeitung*, *Die Presse*, *Kurier*, *Kleine Zeitung*, *Heute* and *Oe24*) shows that media coverage on China in Austria has significantly expanded since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. Markedly, the number of media articles including 'China' in the title jumped from a monthly average of 40 in 2019 to over 130 between January and November 2020.

18 Marc Julienne (2020), 'France: Between Healthcare Cooperation and Political Tensions with China amid COVID-19', in John Seaman (eds), *COVID-19 and Europe-China Relations*, report by European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), April, pp. 21–24, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_special_report_covid-19_china_europe_2020.pdf.

19 See *ORF* (2019), 'Hongkong: Botschaft in Wien droht mit Chinas Eingreifen', 20 August, <https://orf.at/stories/3134314/>.

20 Similar to the official Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy in Hungary, followers of the account of the current Chinese ambassador seem to originate from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, as well as China. For analysis of the Chinese Embassy in Hungary's Twitter account, see Tamás Matura (2020), 'The Chinese COVID-19 Information Campaign in Hungary: Keeping a Low Profile', in Ivana Karásková *et al.*, *China's Propaganda and Disinformation Campaigns in Central Europe*, Prague, Czech Republic: Association for International Affairs (AMO), pp. 27–28.

per cent of the tweets and re-tweets are tailored to the Austrian public.²¹ This suggests that the Chinese ambassador's communications on Twitter are not specifically directed towards the Austrian public, but rather a global audience.

The presence of Chinese media in Austria, as well as media cooperation between both countries, are of modest scope. First, major media organizations, such as *China Global Television Network (CGTN)*, have not established German channels. Second, while some Chinese media offer content in German, such as *China Radio International (CRI)*, *Xinhua* or the *Beijing Rundschau*, they do not seem to shape their message for the Austrian public. Nonetheless, a noteworthy media cooperation is the partnership concluded in 2012 between the Austrian Journalists Club (ÖJC) and CRI. This cooperation was reaffirmed in 2018 through a [memorandum of strategic collaboration](#), which included the organization of joint events, media-research projects, exchange trips for journalists, as well as the opportunity for young Austrian journalists to work for one year in the German-language editorial team of CRI.²² In addition, this partnership has also enabled the joint production of the German programme 'Tandem-China', which is currently broadcasted on the community channel *Okto*. Moreover, in certain cases the involvement of Chinese media is less apparent. In particular, *APA OTS*, a subsidiary of the Austrian Press Agency, is distributing press releases from *Xinhua Silk Road* and *CGTN* through a partnership with the US-based company *PR Newswire*, which itself partners with major Chinese media companies.²³

As both the media presence of Chinese diplomats and of Chinese media organizations remain small-scale in Austria, China's capacity to influence directly a broad segment of Austrian public opinion seems to be relatively restricted.

China's soft power seems predominantly to reach Austrian elites

In contrast to China's rather minor influence on the broad Austrian public, Chinese diplomats in Vienna have been actively seeking to engage with specific segments of Austrian society, particularly political and business elites. Between January 2019 and February 2020, three-quarters of the events and meetings attended by the Chinese ambassador to Austria, which also included members of the Austrian public, featured prominent personalities and were held in an exclusive setting.²⁴ Of these, about three-quarters were attended by officials still in office, and one-quarter by retired officials.²⁵

Since 2017, the Chinese Embassy in Austria has invited representatives of major Austrian media organizations, state actors, academics and entrepreneurs to 'Embassy Talks' held by Chinese academics and politicians on various economic, political and foreign affairs topics. Furthermore, Chinese diplomats have established strong connections with numerous associations in Austria, seeking to strengthen bilateral relations. At least fourteen associations, which participate in bilateral exchanges between both countries,²⁶ maintain formal or informal ties to the Chinese Embassy in Austria on a regular basis.

21 This appears through an analysis of the Chinese ambassador's Twitter account during the time period between 17 May and 17 September 2020. Of the 499 tweets and re-tweets, only 52 either referred in any way to Austria or involved an Austrian user.

22 *APA OTS* (2018), 'Kooperationsabkommen zwischen ÖJC und CRI in Peking verlängert', https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20181112_OTS0055/kooperationsabkommen-zwischen-oejc-und-cri-in-pekings-verlaengert-bild.

23 *PR Newswire*, 'Media Partners', retrieved from <https://www.prnasia.com/m/media/partners/?b=0> (accessed 15 October 2020).

24 An event or meeting is defined as exclusive if participation in the event is either restricted to certain persons and only by invitation, or through membership in an association, linked to specific professional requirements, not advertised publicly or entails a high entry price (>200 euros).

25 These include elected officials, governmental representatives and high-ranking bureaucrats.

26 In this context, the focus lies on associations that either mention the deepening of bilateral relations in their mission statement or in effect regularly engage in bilateral relations. These associations are led by Chinese nationals, Austrian stakeholders, and members of the Chinese diaspora in Austria. For a detailed study of the latter, see Gerd Kaminski and Xu Fangfang (2018), 'Overseas Chinese Associations in Austria', *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 9, pp. 85–120.

In particular, bilateral associations provide Chinese diplomats in Austria with platforms to engage and establish close relationships with Austrian stakeholders, thanks to the organization of conferences and informal events around a wide range of thematic areas. Additionally, as several associations have built extensive networks of ties to various stakeholders in China, these bilateral associations also enable Chinese actors to interact directly with members of Austrian society. These networks include both local governments and agencies of the central government, such as the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) and the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In conclusion, the absence of a significant communication effort focused on shaping Austria's public opinion is in sharp contrast to the Chinese Embassy's active attempt to build relationships with domestic economic and political circles. This indicates that China's communication principally aims at Austria's elites rather than the broader public. China's soft-power effort in Austria thus tends to follow Joseph Nye's one-step model, in which soft power is directly aimed at policy-makers, rather than indirectly by targeting public opinion and creating an enabling environment.²⁷

Education and culture: small-scale impact despite diverse spectrum of actors

Educational exchanges between Austria and China seem to be restricted by the limited scale of existing bilateral initiatives. For instance, the overall number of Austrians studying Chinese is still low, despite an increase in educational establishments offering Mandarin Chinese courses. Even though successive Austrian governments have supported the further development of Chinese-language initiatives, no Chinese-language programmes, similar to the UK's Mandarin Excellence programme,²⁸ have been initiated. Likewise, scholarship programmes by both Chinese state actors – for instance, the Chinese Scholarship Council – and Chinese companies have only been awarded to a few recipients. Huawei's Seed for Future programme has, since its launch in 2014, enabled 50 Austrian students to participate in a two-week educational trip to China.²⁹ Nevertheless, Huawei's scholarship programme has seen the involvement of high-level Austrian politicians. In 2015, then Austrian President Heinz Fischer participated in the signing ceremony of a memorandum of understanding between Huawei and two Austrian universities of applied science (*Fachhochschulen*).³⁰ Furthermore, in 2019, the awarding ceremony was held in Vienna's townhall in the presence of both Vienna's mayor and the Chinese ambassador to Austria.

At the same time, higher-educational institutions in both countries have increasingly formed partnerships. Such bilateral partnerships are in particular facilitated by educational networks such as the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (OeAD), which operates a cooperation office in Shanghai, and the Eurasia-Pacific Uninet (EPU). Moreover, Chinese educational establishments have in recent years sought to increase further their visibility in Austria. In 2019 and 2020, the Job, Training and Education Fair (BeSt³) in Vienna, which is jointly organized by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research and the Austrian Employment Service (AMS), placed a particular focus on China and was attended by several Chinese universities.

27 Joseph S. Nye Jr (2011), *The Future of Power*, New York, NY: PublicAffairs, pp. 95–97.

28 The Mandarin Excellence programme intends '[...] to get at least 5,000 pupils on track to fluency in Mandarin Chinese [by 2020] [...]' (British Council). It is funded by the UK's Department of Education and implemented by both the British Council and the Institute of Education. See Institute of Education, 'Mandarin Excellence Programme', <https://ci.ioe.ac.uk/mandarin-excellence-programme/>.

29 Huawei (2019), 'Huawei Studierendenwettbewerb 2019: Siegerehrung im Wiener Rathaus', <https://www.huawei-university.at/de/node/31>.

30 APA OTS (2015), 'Huawei erweitert Studentenprogramm um neue Partner', https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20150401_OTS0038/huawei-erweitert-studentenprogramm-um-neue-partner-bild.

Art exhibitions and classical music concerts represent the principal medium of cultural exchange between both countries. Austria plays host each year to several Chinese New Year concerts. Since its inauguration in 1998 in Vienna, the Grand Chinese New Year Concert, which is organized by the Chinese company WU Promotion, has been held 24 times in Austria and more than one hundred times throughout Europe. Moreover, cinematography has recently also received increased attention, with the organization of the Shanghai China Film Festival in Vienna and Salzburg in May 2019.³¹ Lastly, the importance of Chinese cuisine as a cultural soft-power medium for Austria was underlined by the presentation of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office's (OCAO) plan to promote Chinese cuisine during a visit by OCAO's director to the Chinese Embassy in Austria in 2017.³² In particular, to meet the growing popularity of Chinese regional cuisines, and after efforts by the Chinese Embassy in Austria and various Chinese diaspora associations, the regulations on employment of foreigners were changed to allow specialty chefs from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to work in Austria for up to three years.³³

Following a broader trend of gradual diversification in China's cultural diplomacy in Europe,³⁴ Chinese cultural activities in Austria involve a diverse spectrum of actors, such as Chinese diplomats in Austria, cultural associations, Chinese-language schools and private companies, as well as both local and national government institutions. Although most cultural events include the participation of Chinese state actors, their involvement is in some instances less apparent or indirect. For example, the opera 'The Diaries of John Raabe', which was performed in Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna by the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group, was supervised by the Propaganda Department of the Provincial Party Committee of Jiangsu.³⁵ The latter received an award last year for this project from the CCP-controlled China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration.

Although cultural diplomacy still represents an important aspect of subnational relations between both countries, particularly for sister-city relations, it has taken a secondary role on a national level, especially compared to economic and technological exchanges. Because of the secondary role of cultural diplomacy in the Austria–China relationship, as well as the limited scope of educational cooperation between both countries, China's soft power from cultural and educational exchange seems to be reaching only a small segment of the Austrian population.

However, this might soon change, as the coming 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Austria and the PRC in 2021 will provide an opportunity to intensify significantly cultural exchanges. In particular, a cooperation agreement between Austria's *Kunsthistorisches Museum* (Museum of Art History) and the Palace Museum in Beijing concerning a large-scale exhibition was signed in 2018.³⁶ Furthermore, the forthcoming founding of a Chinese culture centre in Vienna, which was welcomed in the cultural exchange programme signed in 2018 during President Alexander Van der Bellen and Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's historic state visit to China, is likely to

31 *The Paper* (2019), '2019中国上海电影展在奥地利举办' [translated by author: 2019 China Shanghai Film Festival Held in Austria], https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3427759.

32 Chinese Embassy in Austria (2017), '国务院侨办主任裘援平访问奥地利' [translated by author: The Director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, Qiu Yuanping, in Visit to Austria], <http://www.chinaembassy.at/chn/xwdt/t1441350.htm>.

33 Änderung der Ausländerbeschäftigungsverordnung (2016), BGBl II 178/2016, https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBlA_2016_II_178/BGBlA_2016_II_178.html.

34 Alessandra Cappelletti (2017), 'Chinese Cultural Diplomacy in the European Context: Between Sophistication and Lack of Self-confidence', *EU-China Observer*, no. 4.16, pp. 9–13.

35 Wu Promotion (2019), '原创歌剧《拉贝日记》欧洲巡演', 2019' [translated by author: The European Tour of the Original Opera "The Diaries of John Raabe"], <http://www.wupromotion.com/zh/international-tour/dance-theatre-a-opera/1194-opera-diary-of-john-raabe-europe-tour-2019>.

36 *Wiener Zeitung* (2019), 'Österreich–China: Von Pandabären bis zur Großausstellung', *Wiener Zeitung Online*, 28 April, <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/welt/2006774-Oesterreich-China-Von-Pandabaeren-bis-zur-Grossausstellung.html>.

expand significantly China's cultural presence in Austria.³⁷ Indeed, Chinese culture centres not only act as soft-power actors by organizing cultural events, but also as platforms for cultural activities, by facilitating collaborations between various state actors and civil society in both the host country and China.³⁸

Moreover, in recent years, Chinese diplomats' communication in Austria has primarily been related to economics rather than culture. As becomes evident through an analysis of the report on the events attended by the Chinese ambassador published on the embassy's website, the messaging in Austria of Chinese Ambassador Li tends to be dominated by economic themes, such as China's economic development. Furthermore, cultural events have also been used as a carrier for showcasing China's economic achievements. The Permanent Mission of the PRC to the United Nations, along with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), which is led by China's former Vice-Minister of Finance, Li Yong, have notably organized an exhibition titled 'Intangible Cultural Heritage along the Silk Road and Poverty Alleviation in Ethnic Minority Areas of China'.

In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a central part of China's official narrative in Austria and, more generally, a vehicle to reinforce China's 'discourse power'.³⁹ The Chinese Embassy in Austria organized and participated in several events on the initiative, commissioned a study on its economic implications from a renowned Austrian institute,⁴⁰ as well as contributed a chapter to a book centred on the BRI's significance for Austria.⁴¹

Austria's lack of public debate and strategy on China

Similar to South-East European countries,⁴² China's soft power in Austria seems to emanate largely from its economic weight. Conversely, the focus on economic issues of China's communication in Austria might indicate that Chinese diplomats are not only aware of this, but are also shaping their messaging accordingly.

The Belt and Road Initiative has found an especially strong echo among major Austrian economic stakeholders, which, as a result, have played an important role in the promotion of the initiative within Austria. Strikingly, of the nineteen events specifically themed on the BRI that China's Ambassador Li Xiaosi has attended since 2017, sixteen were initiated by local Austrian actors. In this context, the Vienna Chamber of Commerce and Industry (*Wirtschaftskammer Wien*) has been an active advocate, publishing a position paper calling for the Austrian government to participate in the BRI as well as in the 17+1 cooperation⁴³ and organizing several events in support of this project.

However, as the recent EU Coalition Explorer by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) shows, China policy is neither a priority for Austria, nor a source of controversy among political parties

37 'Kulturaustauschprogramm zwischen der Regierung der Volksrepublik China und der Regierung der Republik Österreich für die Jahre 2018 bis 2021' (2018), *Kunst und Kultur*, III, Artikel 16, Kulturzentren.

38 Zhang Xiaoling and Guo Zhenzhi (2017), 'The Effectiveness of Chinese Cultural Centres in China's Public Diplomacy', in D. Thussu *et al.* (ed.), *China's Media Go Global*, London: Routledge, pp. 185-198.

39 Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg (2020), *Die lautlose Eroberung Wie China westliche Demokratien unterwandert und die Welt neu ordnet*, Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, pp. 182-183.

40 Julia Gruebler *et al.* (2018), 'Economic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative for CESEE and Austria', Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), wiiw Policy Note/Policy Report no. 23, June, p. 14.

41 Bernhard Müller *et al.* (2018), *Die Neue Seidenstraße: Vision – Strategie – Wirklichkeit. Mit einem Österreich Schwerpunkt*, Urban Future Edition, Wiener Neustadt.

42 Plamen Tonchev (2020), 'China's Soft Power in South-East Europe', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue on South-East Europe, April, p. 24.

43 Wirtschaftskammer Wien (2017), *Für Wien: Die Neue Seidenstraße*, November 2017.

and the general public.⁴⁴ The lack of a broad-based public debate is particularly apparent from the rare media coverage on China. Reports by local media regarding China's influence in Europe, such as Huawei's involvement in the 5G roll-out, China's influence on Confucius Institutes and Chinese investments in Austria, are mostly limited to reiterating developments outside Austria – generally in Germany or the US – and have failed to investigate the situation within Austria. For example, while most media reports on controversies surrounding Confucius Institutes that were published in Austrian traditional media during the last three years have mentioned the existence of two Confucius Institutes in Austria, none of them further examined their connection to Chinese state actors, as well as their entanglement with Austrian society.

This is also mirrored by the marginal role that China has taken in Austrian politics. First, parliamentary debates on topics related to China have generally been limited. During the recent reading of the foreign direct investment (FDI) screening regulation in Austria's national council, Chinese investments were generally mentioned in parallel to takeovers from the US and the Arab world. Second, contrary to other EU countries, such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, Austria has still to publish a policy paper detailing its relationship with China. While the previous Austrian government did recognize China's geopolitical significance⁴⁵ and instituted a sparsely staffed China desk,⁴⁶ it did not formulate a China strategy. Lastly, reflecting a broader lack of formal exchange mechanisms between academia and policy-makers,⁴⁷ the Institute of Sinology at Vienna University, which is one of the biggest institutes in the field in German-speaking countries, seems not to be involved in the Austrian government's policy-making process on China.

The lack of debate and strategy regarding the PRC reflects the Alpine republic's non-confrontational approach towards China, as well as its long-standing lack of geopolitical ambition beyond its traditional area of influence in the Western Balkans. During the first months of the COVID-19 crisis, the Austrian government notably distinguished itself by its reticence to engage with China on potentially contentious issues.

Crucially, while the PRC's soft-power resources in Austria might be limited, its ability to capitalize on these resources is likely to be enhanced by the absence of a public and political debate, coupled with the lack of a China strategy, as well as the largely missing link between policy-makers and China experts. Indeed, the power conversion – namely '[...] the capacity to convert potential power, as measured by resources, to realized power, as measured by the changed behaviour of others'⁴⁸ – remains largely unchecked. Hence, Austria's nonchalance towards China might well represent the PRC's most effective source of soft power.

44 European Council on Foreign Affairs (2020), *EU Coalition Explorer 2020*, July, <https://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer>.

45 Adam Urosevic (2020), 'Austria and the Growing US–Chinese Rivalry: From Cold War Neutrality to European Solidarity?', in Mario Esteban and Miguel Otero (eds), *Europe in the Face of US–China Rivalry*, report by European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), January, pp. 35–38.

46 Alfred Gerstl (2020), 'Pompeo Goes to Vienna: No Consensus on China and Russia between the US and Austria', Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEAIS), *CEAIS Insights*, 23 September, <https://ceias.eu/pompeo-goes-to-vienna/>.

47 Stefan Thaler (2020), 'Politikberatung funktioniert in Österreich auf Zuruf', *APA Science*, 10 July, https://science.apa.at/dossier/Politikberatung_funktioniert_in_Oesterreich_auf_Zuruf/SCI_20200610_SCI87896357854962060.

48 Joseph S. Nye Jr (1990), 'The Changing Nature of World Power', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 105, no. 2, p. 177.

Post-COVID: a debate in the making?

The recently formed Conservative–Greens government in Austria announced its intention to elaborate a comprehensive China policy – *eine gesamtstaatliche Länderstrategie zu China*.⁴⁹ This could represent a major step in providing the necessary strategic outlook and structure for Austria's relations with China.

Moreover, although the COVID-19 crisis has not induced a major change in Austria's non-confrontational approach towards China,⁵⁰ it seems to have entrenched Europe's more assertive stance towards Beijing. Importantly, views on China have been hardening in Germany.⁵¹ In contrast to Austria, for example, a considerable number of German politicians have engaged in a policy discussion surrounding Huawei's involvement in Germany's 5G network.⁵² As an overwhelming majority of Austrians follow German politics either regularly or occasionally,⁵³ Germany's debate on China might well in the medium term spill over into Austria. Thus, a change in the Alpine republic's nonchalant approach towards Chinese influence might well be externally induced rather than emerge domestically.

49 Austrian Federal Chancellery (2020), 'Aus Verantwortung für Österreich. Regierungsprogramm 2020–2014', *Die neue Volkspartei* and *Die Grünen–Die Grüne Alternative* coalition, Vienna, January, p. 131.

50 Lucas Erlbacher (2020), 'Austria: A Non-confrontational Road to European Economic Sovereignty', in John Seaman (eds), *COVID-19 and Europe–China Relations*, report by European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), April, pp. 9–13.

51 Noah Barkin (2020), 'Why Post-Merkel Germany will Change its Tune on China', *Politico*, 8 March, <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-post-merkel-germany-will-change-its-tune-on-china/>.

52 Björn Alexander Düben (2020), 'Try as it Might, Germany isn't Warming to Huawei', *The Diplomat*, 9 January, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/try-as-it-might-germany-isnt-warming-to-huawei/>.

53 Conrad Seidl (2018), 'Österreicher sehen Deutschland als wichtig, aber nicht als Vorbild an', *Der Standard*, 27 December, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000094808388/oesterreicher-sehen-deutschland-als-wichtig-aber-nicht-als-vorbild-an>.

China's soft power in the Czech Republic: almost a fiasco

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Summary

China's public image in the Czech Republic has worsened significantly since the positive U-turn in Czech–Chinese political relations and signing of the agreement on the Czech–Chinese strategic partnership during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Prague in 2016. Media and political opposition to and critical perception of China has prevailed over the Czech government's pragmatic pro-business attitude. In Czech mainstream public debates, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is perceived as a geopolitical expansion that poses a challenge to the Western democratic system and its security. Expectations of the Czech partnership with China are, in principle, prioritized by the economic outlook; however, this argument has been reversed because of poor inflows of Chinese investments. Moreover, the issues of values and human rights abuses significantly harm China's soft power, as the communist regime in China fails to appeal to the post-communist Czech liberal democracy. Meanwhile, Chinese diplomacy loses face with its efforts against visitors to the Czech Republic that it views as unwelcome, such as the Dalai Lama, Tibetan exile representatives and Chinese dissidents, and cannot cope with the rising Czech sympathy for Taiwan. Current Czech public opinion now stands against China in almost all aspects, even including the economic perspectives.

China's political networking agenda

The Czech view of China has been always polarized and ideologized, and the Czech state's official attitude towards the People's Republic of China (PRC) fluctuates according to which government is in power at the time and its foreign policy orientations. The historical memory of the communist regime strongly shapes Czech domestic perceptions of and narratives on China's international image. From the point of view of China's soft power, the Czech Republic became one of its most difficult destinations in Europe, because of an unwelcoming environment where Czech media, non-governmental organizations and liberal–conservative think tanks were critical of China. Efforts by China and pro-Chinese Czech circles to balance the China-critical mainstream opinion contribute to domestic polarization in this regard.⁵⁴

China's long-time efforts to improve its national profile were conducted on several parallel levels. Its political lobbying through building '*guanxi*' networks focused primarily on business lobbies and China-friendly political parties, which, in the case of the Czech Republic, are mostly left-wing. The Czech Communist Party and part of the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) are China supporters, while the right-wing parties are very selective in their pro-Beijing attitudes, with their interest in doing business with China balanced with criticism of human rights issues and their support for Tibet and Taiwan. Chinese diplomacy has extended its political dialogue with members of the currently ruling populist ANO party, and also with the far-right populist SPD, which is not a member of the government coalition. The recent Chinese charm offensive launched along the 17+1 platform for cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe increased support for

54 David Hutt (2019), 'China Influence Aggravates Czech Republic's Political War', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 22 November, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-influence-aggravates-Czech-Republic-s-political-war>.

economic diplomacy-related activities, such as investment and business forums and the establishment of new think tanks for Czech–Chinese dialogue. Also, two Czech associations for relations with China were established, with both specializing in economic diplomacy and consulting: the Czech–China Chamber of Mutual Cooperation,⁵⁵ and the New Silk Road Infrastructure Development and Technology Association, the latter established by former premier Petr Nečas. Some former top-level Czech politicians took leading positions at these new associations, including former prime ministers Petr Nečas (Civic Democratic Party, ODS), Bohuslav Sobotka (ČSSD) and Jiří Paroubek (ČSSD), former Foreign Minister Jan Kohout and former Minister of Defence Jaroslav Tvrdík (both from ČSSD), former EU Commissioner for Enlargement Štefan Füle, and Jan Zahradil (ODS), a member of the European Parliament-based EU–China Friendship Group. Moreover, a bilateral inter-party political dialogue between the Social Democratic Party and China's Communist Party was launched in 2017, although Czech domestic media portrayed these ties as a dubious involvement.⁵⁶

In addition, China promotes its 'people-to-people' agenda by inviting Czech VIPs to receptions and celebrations, and by organizing conferences and meetings with Chinese think tanks. It also invites groups of Czech academics, think-tank members and regional politicians to China for several-day package tours that involve visiting regional cities, high-tech venues and attractive tourist destinations (including in Tibet).

Public diplomacy so far focuses mainly on traditional festivals, such as organization of the Lunar New Year, exhibitions and occasional music performances. The two Confucius Institutes that have been established so far in the Czech Republic, namely in Olomouc and Prague, remain unnoticed by the Czech media, except for negative coverage echoing allegations of Chinese state efforts in spreading the official image of the PRC. However, the Czech–Chinese Centre at Charles University for the study of New Silk Road affairs, which was secretly sponsored by the Chinese Embassy in Prague, was closed after two years of existence because of allegations of non-transparent funding and criticism from a group of Sinologists for its pro-Chinese bias. The Czech media portrayed this affair as a scandal and saw the centre as Chinese intrusion into the Czech university environment.⁵⁷ If any single successful Chinese public relations (PR) project in the Czech Republic can be spotted, the case of soccer club Slavia Prague, which was sponsored by Chinese energy company CEFC, ought to be highlighted. The soccer club was taken over by the Chinese investment company CITIC Group in early 2018 after CEFC collapsed, and later in 2018 the majority stake was sold to Chinese real-estate company Sinobo. Meanwhile, CEFC's Chairman Ye Jianming, who was also an economic adviser to Czech President Miloš Zeman, disappeared and was jailed for fraud in China. Backed by Chinese cash, the Slavia Prague team achieved a breakthrough season in 2018–2019 by reaching the quarter finals of the UEFA Europa League (and again in 2020–2021), and in 2019–2020 qualified for the UEFA European Champions League.

China's worsening image in Czech media

The Czech media scene creates a mostly hostile environment for China's efforts to balance the negative narratives and to introduce its official understanding of the Chinese reality to the Czech public. In the Czech Republic, China is considered one of the least popular countries in the whole

55 Smíšená česko-čínská komora vzájemné spolupráce, http://www.czechchina.com/?page_id=9665.

56 'ČSSD: Dokument o spolupráci s čínskými komunisty? Podepíšeme, ale teď ještě ne [ČSSD: Document on Cooperating with Chinese Communists? We'll Sign, but Not Yet]', *Tiscali*, 16 June 2016, <https://zpravy.tiscali.cz/cssd-dokument-o-spolupraci-s-činskými-komunisty-podepiseme-ale-ten-jeste-ne-278715>.

57 'Po aféře s česko-čínskými konferencemi opustí univerzitu tři akademici [Three Academics are Leaving a University for Czech–Chinese Conference Allegations]', *iDNES.cz*, 5 November 2019, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/cesko-cina-konference-balaban-odchazi.A191105_194533_domaci_zaz.

world.⁵⁸ Chinese state-controlled media resources fail to convince Czech audiences and to rid Chinese messages of the stigma of being perceived as plain communist propaganda. China Radio International and its online website in the Czech-language version, as well as the Chinese Embassy website, are scarcely effective in the Czech environment in terms of quality and quantity.

Minor Czech extreme right and left and populist media outlets that disseminate anti-EU and anti-liberal narratives serve mostly as sources of pro-Russian propaganda, but in parallel they present some content about China. Other pro-Chinese coverage can be traced in Czech media sources owned by Chinese investors, such as the Czech agency Medea Group (consisting of several printed media outlets and one television channel), of which CITIC Group now owns 57 per cent. Besides this, Czech company PPF Group, which is active in China, has completed the CME media group acquisition (Central European Media Enterprises, for USD 2.1 billion), which includes 30 television channels in five post-communist states. Furthermore, the PPF Financial Group, the main pro-China lobby in the Czech Republic, has become a main sponsor of Sinoskop, a web-based Sinological platform that provides comparatively moderate views on China,⁵⁹ and opposes the hard-line conservative Czech website Sinopsis, which is funded by the US agency the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Sinopsis,⁶⁰ which is based in Charles University, is the top opinion-maker with regard to China in leading mainstream media sources, such as Czech TV, Czech Radio⁶¹ and several traditional as well as web-based media sources, which range from left to liberal-conservative.

According to another Czech NED-sponsored project ChinfluenCE, carried out by the (Czech) think tank Association for International Affairs (AMO), Czech debates have long been dominated by critical and negative China coverage.⁶² Meanwhile, some China-owned media belonging to the Czech Medea Group, which absorb Chinese funding, abstain from negative narratives about China. The tough media narratives that underline the concurrent politicization and polarization of the Czech debates are also spreading to the Czech Parliament (especially to the Senate, the Upper House), academia and intelligence circles. The conservative majority in the Czech Senate proposed establishing an Investigation Committee for Chinese and Russian Influence, as well as initiating China-critical debates that would focus on security allegations.⁶³ Facing these critical narratives in the Czech Republic, the Chinese ambassador's chosen media outlets for interviews and delivering speeches, such as the Czech Communist Party-related newspaper *Haló Noviny* and the off-mainstream populist website *Parlamentní listy*, represent China's low-standard media platforms for presenting adequate PR-related information.

China's soft-power score: the panda lost to the pangolin

The China-unfriendly public environment and rising wave of anti-communism in the Czech Republic, together with the poorly managed public relations of Chinese diplomacy, make China's soft power a mission impossible. Czech-Taiwan relations pose an additional obstacle. China's series of defeats in its contesting of Taiwan's charm offensive in the Czech Republic can be illustrated by Prague's demand

58 'Czech have Best Relation to Slovaks, Worst to China – Poll', *info.cz*, 13 August 2019, <https://www.info.cz/czech-news/czech-have-best-relation-to-slovaks-worst-to-china-poll>.

59 Sinoskop was transformed into Asiaskop, see www.ssiaskop.cz.

60 See <https://sinopsis.cz/en/>.

61 Vít Vojta (2020), 'Analýza: Česká televize a český rozhlas v případě informování o Číně zřejmě porušují vlastní kodex [Analysis: Czech Television and Czech Radio Appear to be Violating their Own Code When Reporting on China]', *Sinoskop*, 11 March, <https://www.sinoskop.cz/analyzy-komentare/analiza-ct-cro>.

62 See https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/AMO_Vytv%C3%A1%C5%99en%C3%AD-pro%C4%8D%C3%ADnsk%C3%A9-agendy-v-%C4%8Cesku-akt%C3%A9%C5%99i-jejich-role-a-vazby-.pdf

63 'Poslanci chtějí zkoumat ruský a čínský vliv. Hrozeb je víc, namítl Zaorálek [MEPS Want to Examine Russian and Chinese Influence. There are More Threats, Zaorálek Protested]', *iDNES*, 28 December 2019, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/vysetrovaci-komise-vliv-autoritativnich-rezimu-snemovna.A191218_143207_domaci_kop.

for a change in wording of the Prague–Beijing sister cities agreement, namely its demand for the removal of the ‘one China principle’ clause, which was included in the agreement under the previous city representation.⁶⁴ Beijing did not accept Prague’s initiative and unilaterally cancelled the twin-cities agreement, as well as retaliating by cancelling several planned music performances in China by Czech orchestras that included ‘Prague’ in their official name.

Following this diplomatic dispute, Shanghai similarly suspended official contacts with Prague as well. Subsequently, Beijing decided not to lend a panda to Prague Zoo, as had originally been planned, while Prague City Council signed a twin-cities agreement with Taipei instead, and received a pangolin from Taiwan to replace the missing panda.⁶⁵ The successful Taiwan series continued, with Taiwan offering an official visit to Czech Senator Jaroslav Kubera, the Czech Senate’s President at the time. Despite the disagreement of the Czech Foreign Ministry, the Czech government of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Czech President Zeman, Senate President Kubera, who was now the Czech Republic’s second most important state representative, decided to go to Taiwan. However, with Kubera’s unexpected death in January 2020 shortly after the dispute arose, public speculations were sparked about the excessive pressure from the Chinese Embassy and President Zeman, which were documented by an unauthorized letter likely issued by the embassy to the office of the Czech President.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, despite facing Chinese verbal threats of economic retaliations, Kubera’s successor as Czech Senate President, Miloš Vystrčil, announced his decision to visit Taiwan, thus immediately becoming a rising media and political star.⁶⁷

Assessment and special points: the Czech–Chinese estrangement

The Czech mainstream media and political debate are increasingly critical of China, as they become ever more focused on issues like security, human rights, Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The hot media debate and domestic politicization have turned to the theme of national dignity and values in policy, which should not be sacrificed to business.

The Chinese pro-BRI and 17+1-related narratives failed because of minimal economic outcomes in the Czech Republic, with foreign direct investment of about EUR 1 billion, which was found to be disappointing even by the pro-Chinese Czech President Zeman.⁶⁸ With the end of the ‘honeymoon’ period since 2012, when the Czech Republic’s rapprochement with China had seemed promising, without economic results, and because of political reasons, the pro-China policy is becoming more of a burden and a difficult task to defend from the hostile media.

Taiwan has emerged as an additional theme amid diplomatic disputes that originated on the Prague city-level and rose to become an official state-level diplomatic issue. In the Czech mainstream media,

64 Stuart Lau (2019), ‘Prague Cuts Sister-City Ties with Beijing amid “Tangible Anger” over Pro-China Policies’, *South China Morning Post*, 8 October, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3032045/prague-cuts-sister-city-ties-beijing-amid-tangible-anger-over>.

65 Natálie Maráková (2020), ‘Pangolin Instead of Panda for Prague? Turnaround in Czech–Chinese Relations’, *FNF Europe*, 24 January, <https://fnf-europe.org/2020/01/24/pangolin-instead-of-panda-for-prague-turnaround-in-czech-chinese-relations/>.

66 ‘Dopis čínské ambasády určený Hradu je podle Vystrčila mrazivý a zavání vyhrožováním [According to Vystrčila, the Letter from the Chinese Embassy to the Castle is Frosty and Smells of Threats]’, *CT24*, 20 February 2020, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3051004-ani-babis-si-nepral-kuberovu-cestu-na-tchaj-wan-byla-spolecna-oficialni-pozice-rekl>.

67 Kathrin Hille (2020), ‘I am a Taiwanese’: Czech Senate President Addresses Parliament in Taipei’, *Financial Times*, 1 September, <https://www.ft.com/content/fb018ddd-2591-4355-94b1-602ff2b025af>.

68 “‘Nejsem spokojen, investujte v Česku víc’, řekl Zeman v čínské televizi [“I am Not Satisfied, Invest More in the Czech Republic”, Zeman Said on Chinese Television]’, *iDNES*, 25 April 2019, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/zeman-cina-investice-rozhovor-kritika.A190423_173856_domaci_zaz.

China is unfavourably linked to Russia, as these countries are seen as non-democratic and aggressive actors that jeopardize Czech liberal democracy, the EU and the US. The COVID-19 crisis has been regarded in the Czech Republic as yet another negative contribution to China's internationally spoiled image.

The Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic Zhang Jianmin has become exposed to sharp criticism by the Czech media and even by Prime Minister Babiš.⁶⁹ The Czech case indicates that the currently existing communication style of Chinese diplomacy fails to cope with the open public space of a liberal society, in which it is difficult for China to gain sympathy because of its coercive practices and language. The currently poor Chinese PR agenda has thus lost the enhanced public position that was achieved by the two previous Chinese female ambassadors Huo Yuzhen and Ma Keqing.

69 'Czech PM says China's Ambassador Should Go', *Taipei Times*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2020/03/11/2003732472>.

The hardships of Chinese soft-power promotion in Denmark

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Summary

At a time when Denmark's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China seems to hang in the balance, Beijing's inability to wield any soft power in Denmark takes on added significance. For years, Chinese soft power promotion has been spearheaded by the Chinese embassy and various Confucius and cultural institutes, whose outreach activities largely follow a standardized formula based on China's traditional culture as well as language programmes. However, the impact of these activities has been negligible, as demonstrated by the increasingly negative popular, media and political perceptions of China in Denmark.

Introduction

When Denmark and the People's Republic of China (PRC) celebrated their 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2015, the foreign ministers of the two countries wrote a joint article in a Danish newspaper, praising the bilateral relationship and declaring that 'we will be sincere friends and close partners'.⁷² Five years later, their 70th anniversary was largely passed over in silence. While the COVID-19 pandemic surely had a disruptive effect on planned activities to mark the anniversary,⁷³ the current political atmosphere between Copenhagen and Beijing offers few opportunities to heap praise on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that has guided Danish–Chinese relations since 2008.⁷⁴ Indeed, relations got off to a rocky start in 2020 with the erecting outside the Danish Parliament of a temporary 'pillar of shame' in support of the Hong Kong protests⁷⁵ and a cartoon in *Jyllandsposten* with coronavirus-like symbols in place of the five stars on the Chinese flag⁷⁶ – two incidents that prompted the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen to launch a public relations (PR) offensive against the offenders on its webpage.⁷⁷ Quite symptomatically, the embassy's public outbursts, and demands for an apology

70 The author would like to thank Anna Brueckner Johansen and Silke Hult Lykkedatter (both of NIAS) for their assistance in the data-collection process.

71 This chapter is written on behalf of the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

72 Martin Lidegaard and Wang Yi (2015), 'Deepening China–Denmark Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Building a Model for China–Europe Cooperation', Copenhagen: *Udenrigsministeriet* [Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 11 May, <https://um.dk/en/about-us/the-ministers/speeches-and-articles-by-former-ministers/martin-lidegaard-speeches-and-articles/deepening-china-denmark-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

73 According to interviews conducted with Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials in March and May 2020.

74 For a more detailed account, see Andreas Bøje Forsby (2020), 'Danish–Chinese Relations: Business-as-Usual or Strategic Disruption', in Kristian Fischer and Hans Mouritzen (eds), *Danish Foreign Policy Review 2020*, Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/3506655/Danish_foreign_policy_review_DIIS_2020.pdf.

75 The 'pillar of shame' was a private initiative taken by Amnesty International Denmark in collaboration with the Danish artist Jens Galschiøt and supported by several left-leaning Danish political parties; see AI Denmark, <https://amnesty.dk/nyhedsliste/2020/skamstoette-rejst-foran-christiansborg>.

76 See *Jyllandsposten*, 27 January 27, <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/tegning/ECE11898365/dagens-tegning-coronavirus/>.

77 Chinese Embassy in Denmark (2020), 'The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark', homepage, <http://dk.china-embassy.org/eng/>.

in the case of the cartoon, were not only flatly rejected by the Danish government,⁷⁸ but also produced a backlash in Danish media that was fully in line with current public perceptions of China in Denmark.

Understood strictly in terms of the Chinese government's ability to influence Denmark through attraction and persuasion, rather than through coercion or economic incentives, Beijing has very little in the way of soft power. Its arsenal of soft-power instruments is somewhat limited and largely derived from the realm of China's traditional culture and civilizational heritage. More importantly, these cultural-promotion activities are overshadowed by widespread negative sentiments against China in Denmark, fuelled by Beijing's growing assertiveness and the hardening of Chinese President Xi Jinping's authoritarian regime. As such, China's likeability is dwindling, much to the frustration of current Chinese Ambassador to Denmark Feng Tie, who, at the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in Denmark in spring 2020, gave several public interviews in which he lamented the negative publicity that China receives in the Danish media.⁷⁹

China's approach to soft power promotion in Denmark

The arrival in April 2019 of two giant pandas to Copenhagen Zoo stands out among China's recent soft-power initiatives in Denmark. At the inaugural event, then Chinese Ambassador to Denmark Deng Ying declared that:

Amity between the peoples holds the key to sound relations between states. [...] The two fluffy charmers Xing Er and Mao Er [the pandas], travelling thousands of miles to Denmark, give the best footnote to the ever-refreshing and lasting friendship between China and Denmark.⁸⁰

Yet although the panda event had been planned for years, no high-level Chinese officials attended the event, while public perceptions far from mirrored the enthusiast words of the ambassador (see below).

In addition to its panda diplomacy, the Chinese government has taken several other initiatives that are often found in its soft-power promotion package. Most prominently, it has established a number of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs), starting in 2007 with a CI at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), followed in 2009 by a CI at Aalborg University (AAU) and then in 2012 the world's only Music Confucius Institute, located at the Royal Danish Academy of Music. Nearly all other Danish institutions of higher education have been offered – but have declined – to host a CI,⁸¹ and both CBS and AAU have subsequently decided to terminate their CI arrangements following, especially in the latter case, growing media scrutiny of the specific institutes.⁸² Yet another setback came in early 2021, when it was announced that the Music Confucius Institute will also close down,⁸³ leaving Denmark with only one CI and a few CCs (see Table 1).

78 Marchen Gjertsen and Sofie Gøttler (2020), 'Statsministeren svarer Kina igen [The Prime Minister Responds to China]', *Jyllandsposten*, 28 January, <https://jyllands-posten.dk/indland/ECE11903365/statsministeren-svarer-kina-igen/>.

79 See, for example, Julie Almann Larsen (2020), 'Kinesisk ambassadør: Danmark og Vesten viser ikke et objektive billede af Kina [Chinese Ambassador: Denmark and the West Do Not Provide an Objective Image of China]', *TV2 Nyheder*, 20 April.

80 Deng Ying (2019), 'Speech by Ambassador MME Deng Ying at the Kick-Start of China–Denmark Giant Panda Joint Research Programme', Embassy of the PRC in Denmark, 13 April, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cedk/eng/zdqx/ca/t1654017.htm>.

81 The author has been involved in this process and has discussed the issue confidentially with colleagues over the years.

82 For an overview, see Jens Ejsing (2019), 'Kina i gymnasiet og på universitetet: »Man lukker en diktaturstat ind i klasseværelset« [China in High Schools and Universities: "A Dictatorship is Let into the Classroom"]', <https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/kina-i-gymnasiet-og-paa-universitetet-man-lukker-en-diktaturstat-ind-i>.

83 See the Facebook webpage of the Music Confucius Institute, 4 January 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/MusicConfuciusInstitute/posts/1782055018621035>.

Table 1

	CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES	CONFUCIUS CLASSROOMS
Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in Denmark (2020)	– IBA Confucius Institute at International Business Academy in Kolding	– Niels Brock Handelsgymnasium – Næstved Gymnasium – Tietgens Handesgymnasium – Stenhus Gymnasium – Støvring Gymnasium

Other instruments of Chinese soft-power promotion in Denmark include an annual celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year, an occasion for the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen to invite local friends and partners as well as the local Chinese community. The embassy also takes part in organizing other traditional types of cultural outreach activities, including lantern festivals, dragon boat events, food-tasting arrangements, artistic shows by visiting Chinese dance troupes and Chinese film screenings, etc.⁸⁴ Some of these activities are co-hosted by the China Cultural Centre (CCC) in Copenhagen, which was inaugurated in 2014 as the first of its kind in Northern Europe.⁸⁵ The CCC also holds various exhibitions and offers courses in the Chinese language, calligraphy and martial arts to raise awareness of Chinese traditional culture. Furthermore, some cultural activities take place at the municipality level as part of the Danish–Chinese friendship city programme, involving 30 such partnerships, most of which seem to be largely inactive.⁸⁶ Finally, a few small-scale private Danish initiatives also indirectly assist China in its soft-power promotion, by contributing to the dissemination of knowledge about China⁸⁷ and by fostering closer people-to-people bonds between Denmark and China.⁸⁸

Beyond such cultural activities, the Chinese are not very active in promoting their own narrative or projecting a positive image of China in Denmark. There are no systematic or concerted efforts to offer ‘a Chinese perspective’ to the Danish public, such as the *China Watch* inserts that are found in several European newspapers. Nor has the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen been nearly as assertive in its PR campaigns as Chinese embassies in some other European countries, even if the present ambassador, Feng Tie, has engaged the Danish media more frequently than his predecessors. Apart from bemoaning the ‘biased’ Danish media (see above), Ambassador Feng has been embroiled in a public dispute with the US ambassador to Denmark concerning China’s presence in the Arctic region – a dispute that is likely to inflict reputational costs on both parties.⁸⁹ The Chinese Embassy also uses social media tools like WeChat and Facebook (in Chinese) as part of its outreach activities, but these are directed specifically at Chinese exchange students, tourists and local Chinese communities.⁹⁰

Danish perceptions and responses

Danish perceptions of the PRC can be usefully divided into popular, media and political perceptions. With respect, first, to perceptions of China among the Danish *population*, there are only a few available

84 See the homepage of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark, ‘Culture and Arts’, <http://dk.china-embassy.org/eng/zdgx/ca/>.

85 The centre is, unlike the CIs, solely operated/financed by Beijing; for an overview, see <https://www.ccccph.org/about/>.

86 Information has been pieced together from different sources, as no publicly available overview of the friendship city arrangements exists.

87 For example, the Danish–Chinese Association; see its webpage: <https://www.dansk-kinesisk.dk/om/>.

88 For example, the Friendship Association Denmark–China: http://www.venskab-danmark-kina.dk/html/english_summary.htm.

89 Feng Tie (2020), ‘Kinas ambassadør: USA bruger Kina til at dække over egne interesser i Grønland [China’s Ambassador: The US Uses China to Cover its Own Interests in Greenland]’, *Altinget*, 13 May, <https://www.altinget.dk/forsvar/artikel/kinas-ambassadoer-usa-bruger-kina-til-at-daekke-over-egne-interesser-paa-groenland>.

90 See the link to the Facebook account: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/chineseindenmark/?ref=timeline>; and WeChat account: <https://kina.um.dk/en/about-us/press/connect-with-us-online/>.

data points. According to a Eurobarometer survey from 2017, no fewer than 59 per cent of Danes held an overall negative view of China, while 32 per cent expressed positive views.⁹¹ These numbers have become even more unbalanced today, as documented by a recent Pew opinion poll, which showed unfavourable views of China among three-quarters of the Danish population.⁹² Another recent ECFR survey in nine EU countries suggested that Danish (and French) perceptions of China have changed the most during the COVID-19 crisis, with a stunning 62 per cent of respondents claiming that their views have worsened.⁹³

The Danish *media* coverage of China is overwhelmingly negative. One way to illustrate this is to examine daily editorials of the three largest Danish newspapers (*Politiken*, *Jyllandsposten* and *Berlingske*), as they are broadly reflective of the underlying policy debate. During an 18-month period (1 January 2019–1 July 2020), 61 editorials discussed China as their main topic, covering a diverse array of issues including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hong Kong crisis, Huawei, panda diplomacy, Greenland, the trade war and human rights. The great bulk of these editorials (that is, 59) depicted China in either negative or highly negative terms.⁹⁴ A similar picture emerges from the media coverage of what was supposed to be a key asset of Chinese soft power: the arrival in 2019 of the pandas to Copenhagen Zoo. Examining all newspaper articles on the topic in six Danish newspapers over a three-month period, the large majority (35 out of 51 articles) pursued a critical or highly critical perspective, focusing for instance on the cost of hosting the pandas, the strings attached to the panda gift and the more assertive line in Chinese foreign policy over the past decade.⁹⁵ Only four articles pursued a positive perspective, while neutral ones were mostly short descriptive news pieces.

In parallel, *political* perceptions of and responses to China have grown increasingly negative in Denmark, even if government officials are generally less vocal and more moderate in their criticism than members of the opposition parties. The observed shift has been under way for some time and seems to have been generated by three key drivers:⁹⁶ 1) the hardening of the PRC's communist regime under Xi Jinping; 2) the confrontational China policies adopted by the Trump administration in the US; and 3) the revelation in the Danish media of a range of covert Chinese influence activities, which in the most prominent case elicited a constitutional breach by the Danish police authorities to please the Chinese.⁹⁷ In late 2018, the shift in political atmosphere was for the first time on full display during an extraordinarily China-critical parliamentary debate titled 'The growing pressure from China', where all political parties voiced their concern about the trajectory of China's political development.⁹⁸ Two years later, in another comprehensive and highly charged parliamentary debate on China, specifically directed at the political situation in Hong Kong, the debate concluded with a joint resolution in which

91 Special Eurobarometer ref. 467 (2017), 'Public Opinion', survey requested by the European Commission, December 2017, p. 81, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2179>.

92 Laura Silver *et al.* (2020), 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries', *Pew Research Center*, 6 October, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

93 Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard (2020), 'Europe's Pandemic Politics', ECFR Policy Brief, June, p. 16, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview.pdf.

94 Data retrieved from InfoMedia, available from the author upon request. Two editorials adopted a neutral perspective.

95 Articles collected two months ahead of and one month after the arrival of the pandas on 3 April 2019 from *Politiken*, *Jyllandsposten*, *Berlingske*, *Information*, *Kristeligt Dagblad* and *Ekstrabladet* (using InfoMedia). Data available from the author upon request.

96 For a more detailed account, see Forsby (2020), 'Danish–Chinese Relations', pp. 84–87.

97 Because of successful lobbying by the Chinese Embassy in 2012 ahead of then President Hu Jintao's state visit to Denmark, Danish police authorities actively prevented pro-Tibetan demonstrators from exercising their right to freedom of expression; see Forsby (2020), 'Danish–Chinese Relations', pp. 84–87. For other examples, see Andreas B. Forsby (2018), 'Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics', *Asia Dialogue*, 18 December, <http://theasiadialogue.com/2018/12/18/diplomacy-with-chinese-characteristics-the-case-of-denmark/>.

98 Folketinget [Danish Parliament], 7 December 2018, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20181/vedtagelse/v36/index.htm>.

nearly all the Danish MPs expressed their 'deep concern with the human rights situation in China' and 'called upon the government to work together with like-minded countries to keep criticizing [China]'.⁹⁹ In fact, the current Danish government has generally been very careful to coordinate its approach and to state its views jointly with Denmark's partners, notably within the EU. For instance, while Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofoed has made several statements on the Hong Kong crisis¹⁰⁰ and the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁰¹ that are critical of the Chinese government, his public views have stayed within the boundaries set by official joint statements from the Foreign Affairs Council of the EU.¹⁰²

Overall assessment

Chinese soft-power activities in Denmark are based on a fairly standardized template, where traditional Chinese culture is promoted by the Chinese Embassy as well as several cultural institutes. In recent years, these activities have faced some headwinds, as illustrated by the growing scrutiny of the Confucius Institutes in the Danish media. However, the larger point being made here – about the hardships of Chinese soft-power promotion in Denmark – is that the cultural dimension hardly plays any role in determining public, media and political perceptions of China. Indeed, the increasingly negative image seems primarily to be caused by China itself, by its growing assertiveness and deepening authoritarianism, even if the United States' recent hard-line stance towards Beijing seems to affect these changing perceptions as well.

While Chinese soft power is thus very limited in Denmark in terms of attractiveness or likeability, we may finally ask whether this is also true in the broader sense of persuasion. From various cases of covert Chinese influence activities in Denmark, we know that representatives of the Chinese Embassy often seek to persuade the Danish side by either emphasizing economic opportunities or resorting to threats of negative economic consequences if the Danish side is unwilling to accommodate Chinese interests.¹⁰³ Such persuasive measures resemble hard rather than soft power.

Ultimately, China's soft power crisis is likely to undermine the 2008 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Denmark and China. While the two sides have yet to reach an agreement on a new joint work programme to replace the current one that expired at the end of 2020, the Chinese Ambassador to Denmark recently made a sobering appeal: 'Facing the huge pandemic and the profound changes in the world, China and Denmark need to transcend the differences in ideology and social system and focus on cooperation'.¹⁰⁴ Pragmatism now seems to be the new guiding principle of the bilateral relationship.

99 Folketinget [Danish Parliament], 21 December 2020, https://www.folketingstidende.dk/samling/20201/vedtagelse/V43/20201_V43.pdf.

100 Jeppe Kofoed (2020), 'Svar på spørgsmål 133 fra Eva Flyvholm (EL) [Answer to Question 133 from Eva Flyvholm (EL Party)]', *Det Udenrigspolitiske Nævn*, Bilag 165, 25 June, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20191/almdel/UPN/bilag/165/2221103.pdf>.

101 See Mathias Seidelin *et al.* (2020), 'Danmark kræver international kulegravning af coronaudbrud [Denmark Demands International Investigation of Coronavirus Outbreak]', *Jyllandsposten*, 17 April, <https://jyllands-posten.dk/premium/indland/ECE12082900/danmark-kræver-international-kulegravning-af-coronaudbrud/>.

102 For a recent example of how the Danish foreign minister sticks to the EU line, see his letter to the Foreign Relations Committee of the Danish parliament, <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20191/almdel/uru/spm/133/svar/1675554/2217336/index.htm>.

103 For an introduction to some of these cases, see Forsby (2018), 'Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics'.

104 'Ambassador Feng Tie and Ambassador Thomas Østrup Møller Celebrate Chinese National Day', Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark, 1 October 2020, <http://dk.china-embassy.org/eng/zd/gx/t1821000.htm>.

China's waning soft power in France

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Summary

China has sought to build its attractiveness and soft power in France over the years through a number of channels, which include deepening linguistic and cultural connections, expanding its presence in French media, developing a network of elite connections, underlining the pull factors of its economy and, more recently, crafting a political narrative to suit rising discontent with the United States. Despite these efforts, China's soft power in France has been in steep decline, notably in the context of its aggressive public diplomacy in the country during the COVID-19 crisis and the broader attention this has drawn to China on other fronts, including human rights, and Xinjiang and Hong Kong in particular. Amid a wave of criticism directed at China, building soft power no longer appears a prominent part of Beijing's country-specific strategy in France, and while France's political elite has been slow to respond to worsening public opinion, changes are afoot.

The dimensions of China's soft power in France

Over the last fifteen years, China's soft power in France has developed broadly through a range of linguistic, educational, professional and cultural exchanges and an expanding presence in the French media landscape. This has been coupled with the forging of a network of elite connections, an increasingly powerful draw of economic opportunities and the construction of a tailored political narrative that seeks to frame China as an effective governance model and a stabilizer in the multilateral system, particularly in a context of American unilateralism.

An active cultural and media presence

On the cultural and linguistic front, Confucius Institutes represent the most visible form of China's soft power. Since the first Confucius Institute in France was established in Poitiers in 2005, the number has risen sharply, with over 20 currently in operation, including in overseas departments and territories (La Réunion and French Polynesia).

Some controversy has arisen, mainly related to principles of academic freedom. In some cases, Confucius Institutes in France have been established as independent 'associations', removed from their host institutions as a way to safeguard academic and institutional independence from their French counterparts. This was the case of the Confucius Institute in Lyon until September 2012, when a new co-director was appointed on the Chinese side who sought to integrate the institute formally into the university. The French side reportedly refused the change of status and a failure to find a compromise ultimately resulted in the withdrawal of funding from the Chinese leading institution, the *Hanban*, as well as the closure of the institute.¹⁰⁵ Four other institutes have been closed in France since 2013, although there has been no public discussion about the circumstances.

Despite some debates about the implications for academic freedom, the Confucius Institutes on the whole have been welcomed and even sought after by their host institutions and communities, so

¹⁰⁵ G. Lee and F. Villard (2013), 'Fermeture de l'Institut Confucius de Lyon', *Communiqué*, 25 September, <https://gregorybarrylee.weebly.com/fermeture-de-linstitut-confucius-de-lyon.html>.

long as they do not appear to counter academic independence and well-established political values like freedom of speech. French officials have not moved to exclude Confucius Institutes from French universities. On the contrary, during his first state visit to China as French president in 2018, Emmanuel Macron explained that culture, and language in particular, is a 'strategic' element of France's bilateral cooperation with China and called for 'mutually developing the role and the presence of Confucius Institutes and *Alliances Françaises*'.¹⁰⁶

Beyond establishing Confucius Institutes, France and China have both worked to develop vibrant university exchanges, including the facilitation since the early 2000s of mutual degree recognition agreements and the later development of twelve Franco-Chinese Institutes for University Cooperation to connect elite institutions.¹⁰⁷ France is the European country with the most students studying in China (before the COVID-19 pandemic), roughly 11,000, while over 30,000 Chinese students were studying annually in France as of 2019.

Chinese media outlets have also expanded their presence in France over the last decade, and are now becoming more active on social media as well. *Xinhua*, *CGTN*, and *China Radio International* all present content in French and have multiple outlets throughout the country. Since 2015, the *China Daily* also publishes its 'China Watch' supplement in *Le Figaro*, one of the most widely circulated French daily newspapers.¹⁰⁸ Still, the overall impact of Chinese media in France does not appear particularly significant, and French media remain one of the most outspokenly sceptical platforms on China in the country.

Economic pull factors, a tailored global narrative and elite connections

In addition to broad efforts aimed at developing people-to-people ties and cultural understanding at the societal level, economic pull factors and the draw of business opportunities are also an important dimension of China's soft power in France. The economic prospects created by China's rise largely explain the high number of French students studying in China. Recently, Confucius Institutes have been established at French business schools, notably the Neoma Business School in Rouen and ESCP in Paris, while others, such as EM Lyon, ESSCA, or Skema Business School, have established a campus in China. This further attests to the utility of studying the Chinese language and culture for developing economic prospects for future business leaders.

While economic opportunities can often speak for themselves, China has not hesitated to brandish such opportunities in packaging itself as an indispensable partner. Meanwhile, French companies drawn to the Chinese market largely steer clear of political issues and act as a moderating force in public policy. Indeed, both France and China have traditionally sought to separate economic exchanges from more sensitive diplomatic and political relations, and the risks of economic ramifications from political fallout on the French side have never been far from sight. The example of French businesses being targeted and boycotted in China in 2008, as political tensions rose over unrest in Tibet and calls from France's then President Nicolas Sarkozy to boycott the opening ceremony of the Beijing Summer Olympics, has served as a prime example over recent years of the economic repercussions of pressing China too hard.

106 Présidence de la République (2018), 'Transcription de la conférence du Président de la République au Grand palais de Chine', 1 January, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/01/12/transcription-de-la-conference-de-presse-du-president-de-la-republique-au-grand-palais-en-chine>.

107 Ambassade de France en Chine (2018), 'Les instituts franco-chinois de coopération universitaire: quand l'excellence française rencontre l'excellence chinoise', *Service de coopération et d'action culturelle*, April, https://cn.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/2018_brochure_ifc_fr-2.pdf.

108 'China Watch' has also been published in the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *El País*, among many others, though over the last two years a number of these dailies have stopped carrying the supplement.

At some level, China's political narratives also serve to develop China's soft power. On issues of governance, China has sought to build a narrative of effective, 'meritocratic' government and, in the wake of the global financial crisis and the later rise of populism in the West, is increasingly assertive in its challenges to the effectiveness of democratic political systems. China's narrative at the international level has also sought to convey various messages, one of opposition to Western (particularly US-led) hegemony, and one of a benign, rising power that seeks to reinforce the role of a more 'democratic' multilateralism in the international system, particularly in the context of American unilateralism under Donald Trump.

Cultivating relationships among economic, social and political elites has also been an important dimension of the relationship in which both China and France are actively engaged. The France–China Foundation, for instance, whose Board includes top-level political and business figures from both countries, has developed a network of established elites and works to cultivate connections among young leaders with a view to strengthening and deepening bilateral ties. Moreover, China's image has benefited from the vocal and forceful support of certain influential figures in the French public policy sphere, notably former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who have forged deep connections with the People's Republic of China (PRC) since their times in office. Another example is former French Minister of the Economy and Finance Jean-Louis Borloo, who was a member of Huawei France's Board until July 2020. As the former Mayor of Valenciennes, he was instrumental in settling the deal with Huawei to display (for free) facial recognition cameras in the northern French city.¹⁰⁹ Borloo's seat on the Huawei Board is now occupied by Jean-Marie Le Guen, a former MP and former Secretary of State for Relations with Parliament, who is also a member of the Paris City Council. He also sits on the Boards of Swissport and Gate Holding, two subsidiaries of the major Chinese conglomerate HNA.

From soft power to 'wolf warrior' during COVID-19 and beyond

Over the last year, and particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the channels of China's soft-power development in France have been overshadowed by a much more aggressive public diplomacy. While China has sought to highlight its successes in combating the novel coronavirus and position itself as an indispensable partner – for example, staging the delivery of medical supplies with media campaigns targeting both French and Chinese audiences and adopting a slogan picked up from renowned French author Victor Hugo ('United, we will vanquish') – it has also engaged in a muscular form of 'wolf warrior' diplomacy. This aggressive approach has particularly taken the shape of a much more visible presence by the Chinese Embassy in France and Chinese Ambassador Lu Shaye, in both traditional and social media (Twitter and Facebook), as well as postings from anonymous diplomats on the Chinese Embassy's website.

As the pandemic reached its first peak in France and Europe in spring 2020, the Chinese Embassy's discourse aggressively targeted the French media and experts, as well as MPs, for their stance on China, which the embassy considered biased and unfounded. It also retaliated by attacking the French response and particularly sensitive elements of its shortcomings, including high infection and mortality rates in care facilities for the elderly.¹¹⁰

109 A. Izambard (2020), 'Usine, lobbying... Barré dans la 5G, Huawei tente de se relancer en France', *Challenges*, 29 July, https://www.challenges.fr/high-tech/usine-lobbying-barre-dans-la-5g-huawei-tente-de-se-relancer-en-france_721124.

110 M. Julienne (2020), 'France: between healthcare cooperation and political tensions with China amid COVID-19', in J. Seaman (ed.) et al., *COVID-19 and Europe–China Relations: A Bottom-Up Analysis*, European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), April, pp. 21–24, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/ouvrages-ifri/covid-19-europe-china-relations-country-level-analysis>.

The aggressive counter-narrative strategy continued during summer 2020 as the National Security Law was imposed in Hong Kong, and new revelations on the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang triggered a public outcry in France, negative media coverage and tougher stances by French MPs and government officials. In March 2021, the Chinese embassy also issued a staunch warning to French MPs not to visit Taiwan and, in the ensuing public exchanges, lashed out against an individual French researcher. Following this, and subsequent sanctions levied by China against members of the European Parliament (including the French MEP Raphaël Glucksmann), European institutions and independent scholars and research institutes, the Chinese ambassador was summoned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the second time in less than a year, a situation without precedent in the history of the bilateral relationship.¹¹¹

Perceptions and responses in France

On the whole, since at least 2020, building soft power in France no longer seems to be a priority for Beijing, and any attempts in this direction have been largely unsuccessful.

The limits of China's soft power in France

Political narratives often run up against China's actions and contradict many of France's core political values, wherein China encounters significant pushback from civil society and the media. China's cultural appeal is largely counteracted by its political features, wherein cultural expression is heavily censored and directed by politics and is not broadly appealing to a French audience. The most recognizable Chinese artists tend to be dissidents, such as Ai Weiwei.

The geopolitical narratives of multilateral cooperation and building resistance to US hegemony have, on the whole, translated into a greater call for boosting French and European sovereignty in order to resist both American and Chinese pressure and power politics. The draw of economic opportunities in China has been increasingly counterbalanced by competing economic interests that are creating more structural problems in the bilateral relationship. These factors have all directed the French government towards a 'less naïve' approach and a more measured stance on China in recent years, particularly with the rise of human rights and rule-of-law issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

China's recent aggressive diplomatic stance has only reinforced this structural trend. Recent polls show a notable downgrading of perceptions of China in France. Annual surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center indicate that, in 2020, French respondents holding an 'unfavourable' view of China rose to 70 per cent from an average of 55 per cent over the last decade, very close to the peak of 72 per cent in 2008.¹¹² Another survey conducted in mid-April 2020 by the *Fondation pour l'innovation politique*, while France was in lockdown because of COVID-19, showed that two-thirds (67 per cent) of respondents were 'worried' about China's attitude on the international scene, although 74 per cent answered as such for the United States.¹¹³ The result represents a marked shift (+19 points) from a similar survey that the foundation conducted in September 2018, when only 48 per cent of French respondents said they were 'worried' about China. A survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in spring 2020 further confirmed the impact of COVID-19 on perceptions of

111 Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (2021), "Evènements: Chine (22 mars 2021)", 22 March, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/chine/evènements/article/chine-22-03-21>.

112 L. Silver, K. Devlin and C. Huang (2020), 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries', Pew Research Center, 6 October, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

113 V. Delage (2020), 'COVID-19 – Etats-Unis, Chine, Russie: les grandes puissances inquiètent l'opinion', *Fondation pour l'innovation politique*, 18 June, <http://www.fondapol.org/etude/covid-19-etats-unis-chine-russie-les-grandes-puissances-inquietent-lopinion/>.

China in France, wherein 62 per cent of respondents reported that their view of China had 'worsened' during the crisis.¹¹⁴ A survey conducted by the Palacký University Olomouc in September 2020 further confirmed that, for 52.6 per cent of French respondents, their self-assessed view of China has worsened over the last three years (compared to only 8.1 per cent who said it had improved).¹¹⁵

China remains overlooked in the French policy debate, but change is afoot

COVID-19 has indeed drastically increased negative public opinion towards China in France. Yet it has not immediately translated into a strong political stance towards the PRC. The French government has been reticent about taking action on the Chinese Embassy's aggressive publications, on the situation in Xinjiang or the National Security Law in Hong Kong. However, a clear bottom-up trend is now developing in France, with public opinion, the media, as well as French MPs from the national and European Parliaments, becoming increasingly vocal about China. Nine French MPs from both national chambers and from various parties have joined the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), an international cross-party group of legislators working to develop common approaches to China among democratic countries.¹¹⁶ Within the European Parliament, Raphaël Glucksmann (Socialists and Democrats) is a strong voice supporting the Uyghurs in France, as well as Nathalie Loiseau (Renew Europe), who is vocal on China as a whole. It seems, then, that China is emerging in the public debate in France, likely because of China's global assertiveness and the Chinese Embassy's aggressiveness, and the French executive may soon follow.

This evolution also impacts economics, as we witness a rising awareness in France that China is not only an outlet for exports or a source of foreign investment, but also a political mastodon with global ambitions that promotes opposite values and divergent understanding of the rule of law, human rights and multilateralism.

Ultimately, it seems as though Beijing's soft-power strategy in France was never a real success and that it is no longer a strategy. Particularly, the Chinese Ambassador to France appears keener to hit back at critics of China at the expense of China's image, rather than show restraint and promote dialogue. This counterproductive strategy is likely aimed at satisfying the leadership in Beijing, rather than preserving the bilateral relationship with France.

114 I. Krastev and M. Leonard (2020), 'Europe's Pandemic Politics: How the Virus has Changed the Public's Worldview', *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 24 June, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview.

115 M. Julienne, R. Turcsanyi, M. Simalcik, K. Kironska and R. Sedlakova (2020), 'French Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Political Distrust Trumps Economic Opportunities', Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 24 November, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/french-public-opinion-china-age-covid-19-political-distrust-trumps>.

116 See Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), <https://ipac.global/#main>.

Germany: strong economic appeal and competing values

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Summary

This chapter looks first at China's use of its traditional soft power toolkit in Germany and identifies three partly non-transparent channels of influence that China has used over the past ten years. In an export dependent economy like Germany's, China's economic appeal remains an important factor that continues to indirectly influence the behavior of German economic and political actors. Recently, this economic appeal and the non-transparent channels of Chinese influence have been more broadly debated and viewed more critically in Germany. As Germany appears willing to question China's economic appeal, and openly criticize Chinese methods of influence, the effectiveness of Chinese soft power has dwindled. Consequently, China has had to become more assertive and use coercive measures to shape its image. German reactions to this assertiveness are largely negative, with criticism towards China intensifying. The country's authoritarianism remains the main obstacle to an overall positive view of China in Europe's largest economy.

China's indirect influence loses efficiency

“For many years, I've been trying to convey a more positive image of China to Germans, but – I must say honestly today – that I have not succeeded in doing so sufficiently.” These words were written in 2019 by China's departing ambassador on his last day in office at the end of seven years in Berlin.¹¹⁷ The letter, initially confidential, was directed at large German foundations, and DAX-listed companies. Ambassador Shi Mingde was seeking funding for a project to inject more positive views of China into the German debate. It is one example of China's strategic moves to influence German debates and perceptions.

China's government has mostly relied on a more traditional toolkit to exert soft power in Germany in the last decade. Its efforts have largely been effective and beneficial to China's image. This toolkit includes education and research cooperation, cultural exchanges and the two governments building on already extensive economic and political relations. Examples include the creation of the High-Level China-Germany People-to-People Exchange Dialogue Mechanism in May 2017 or the establishment of Confucius Institutes at German universities. Governmental cooperation has additionally enabled education exchanges for many years, led by the German-Chinese Steering Group for Education.¹¹⁸ Such initiatives are part of the foreign affairs strategies of all major powers and serve to spread soft power legitimately, transparently, and mutually, within the partner countries' borders.

However, China's state-affiliated agencies have also sought to expand their influence in partly non-transparent ways in Germany. China increasingly attempts to shape opinions in the realm of ideas through a focus on media cooperation, lobbying, and research cooperation. These initiatives have

117 Giesen C., Mascolo G. (2020). „Chinas Botschaft warb in Deutschland um Geld“, Süddeutsche Zeitung Online, 15 January 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/china-deutschland-china-bruecke-1.4757650>.

118 Federal Ministry of Education and Research Website (2020), “China - a strong partner in education, research and innovation” <https://www.internationales-buero.de/en/china.php#frameworks>.

sought to promote a positive image of China while trying to crowd out negative narratives. Beijing also seems to be interested in tapping into German influence networks in order to shape European perceptions of China.

Media cooperation

China's outgoing ambassador Shi's letter promoted a project called "Chinareporter", attempting to raise 250,000 EUR through direct approaches to German organizations.¹¹⁹ The letter, which contained the ambassador's explicit request for confidentiality, is an exceptional insight into the way Beijing is trying to influence public opinion in Germany in a non-transparent way. However, the initiative has yielded few results to date, as German organizations have shown little interest in funding it. In another instance, China's state media outlet Xinhua proposed and signed an agreement in 2018 with the German news agency DPA (Deutsche Presse-Agentur) for paid cross-postings of Xinhua articles on DPA's platforms with the aim of placing positive coverage of China's Belt and Road Initiative.¹²⁰ German experts condemned the move, explaining that German media outlets were being instrumentalized by China so it can improve its image through a credible newspaper.¹²¹

Lobbying and elite exchanges

A group of German politicians, advisors and business representatives also from Chinese companies have established "China Bridge", a club patterned on the US-German friendship project "Atlantic Bridge".¹²² It is a non-profit organization that says it aims for a better understanding of China in Germany and Europe. Its events bring together prominent personalities from Germany's political and business elites with their Chinese counterparts. Board members include the Director of Government Relations of Alibaba Group Europe and the Head of Corporate Communications of Huawei in Germany. The list of all members, however, is confidential.¹²³ The project received explicit endorsement¹²⁴ from the Chinese embassy.

Research cooperation

Chinese representatives approached Freie Universität Berlin to enter into an agreement with Hanban, an affiliate of China's Ministry of Education, for financing an endowed professorship.¹²⁵ Hanban promotes the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language and runs the Confucius Institutes. The Confucius Institutes have drawn criticism in Germany for preventing open, uncensored discussions in German university lectures as Hanban-approved teaching staff may hold dual-posts in the host

119 Mascolo G., Peters S., Strunz B. (2020), „Gescheitertes Projekt: Gute China-Nachrichten gegen Geld?“, Tagesschau Online, 15 January 2020 <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/chinareporter-dax-101.html>.

120 Xinhua Silk Road Information Service (2018), "Xinhua CEIS, DPA ink agreement to promote information exchanges", May 15 2018, <https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/96223.html>.

121 Cui M. (2018), „Chinas Propaganda in deutschen Medien“ (2018), Deutsche Welle Online, 28 September 2018, <https://www.dw.com/de/chinas-propaganda-in-deutschen-medien/a-45656084ed>.

122 Website China-Brücke (2020), <https://www.china-bruecke.org/>.

123 Von Salzen C. (2020), „Was es mit dem neuen Netzwerk auf sich hat – und warum die Mitglieder geheim bleiben“, Der Tagesspiegel, 6 June 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bundestagsvizepraesident-friedrich-und-die-china-bruecke-neues-netzwerk-mit-pekking/25878256.html>.

124 Riecke T. (2020), "CSU-Politiker Hans-Peter Friedrich schlägt Brücke zu China" (2020), Handelsblatt, 15 January 2020, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/neues-netzwerk-csu-politiker-hans-peter-friedrich-schlaegt-bruecke-zu-china/25435996.html?ticket=ST-3576179-cAeD2XCyaXjfdUgSDPFP-ap2>.

125 Sternagel F. (2014), „Chinas Charme-Offensive auf deutsche Universitäten“, Die Welt, 27 September 2014, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article132683795/Chinas-Charme-Offensive-auf-deutsche-Universitaeten.html>.

university.¹²⁶ The agreement between Freie Universität Berlin and Hanban included clauses that bound the university to Chinese law and laid it open to potential political pressure. Consequently, Berlin Senate Chancellery had urged¹²⁷ Freie Universität to renegotiate the agreement in February 2020. The controversy surrounding Confucius Institutes in Germany does not stop at the Chinese government's financing channels. German federal states Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg are also partly funding these institutes. This was met with much criticism when media reported about this issue.¹²⁸ Concerns about "taxpayers' money financing the implementation of the Chinese Communist Party's policies"¹²⁹ had been voiced in Germany's south.

These three channels of influence show China's efforts at successfully exercising soft power in Germany in the last decade in a partly non-transparent manner. Only recently, some of these activities are debated more broadly and viewed more critically. In addition, in an export dependent economy like Germany's, the economic appeal of the Chinese market continues to influence German corporate perceptions in favor of China.

The strong appeal of China's economy and culture

Although there is no consensus among academic circles on whether the aspect of China's economic attractiveness belongs to the traditional soft power debate, it is certainly an important factor that influences the preferences and behavior of Germans without direct intervention. This chapter will concentrate on this aspect in the following section.

The appeal of China's market for German companies acts as a strong pull in shaping German actors' behavior towards China. This became evident, for example, when former Volkswagen CEO Herbert Diess declared that he knew nothing about human rights violations in China's northwestern region of Xinjiang where more than one million people from the Muslim minority are held in detention camps.¹³⁰

China's economic pull factor is evident at the regional level, where some federal states maintain excellent relations with China. For example, North Rhine Westphalia's state capital, Düsseldorf, has one of Germany's largest Chinese business communities. The nearby city of Duisburg is considered the "most favorite China-location in Germany", because it is the European landing point for the inter-continental Belt and Road Initiative's train route.¹³¹ The number of Chinese businesses in Duisburg has doubled since it hosted a visit from President Xi in 2014.¹³² Consequently, the University of Duisburg-

126 Zeit Online (2019), „Konfuzius-Institute: FDP warnt vor chinesischem Einfluss an deutschen Unis“, 29 November 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-11/konfuzius-institute-china-hochschulen-fdp-kritik>.

127 Warnecke T. (2020), "FU muss umstrittene China-Professur nachverhandeln", Der Tagesspiegel, 25 Februar 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/senatskanzlei-haelt-vertrag-fuer-nicht-akzeptabel-fu-muss-umstrittene-china-professur-nachverhandeln/25579972.html>.

128 Spinrad V. (2020), „Im Namen des Konfuzius“, Süddeutsche Zeitung Online, 22 June 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/bayern-landtag-beckstein-konfuzius-sprachinstitute-1.4944150>.

129 Cornette V. (2020), „Ärger um Förderung der Konfuzius-Institute in Bayern“, BR 24 Online, 2 February 2020, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/aerger-um-foerderung-der-konfuzius-institute-in-bayern,RpSJofY>.

130 BBC (2019), "VW boss 'not aware' of China's detention camps", BBC News Online 16 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/business-47944767/vw-boss-not-aware-of-china-s-detention-camps>.

131 Knieps S. (2019), "Wie Düsseldorf zum beliebtesten deutschen China-Standort wurde", Wirtschafts Woche, 20 November 2019, <https://www.wiwo.de/my/unternehmen/it/chinesische-investitionen-wie-duesseldorf-zum-beliebtesten-deutschen-china-standort-wurde/25245998.html?ticket=ST-10526-hmzm11WpK9AW1cMTfvCV-ap4>.

132 Oltermann P. (2018), Germany's 'China City': how Duisburg became Xi Jinping's gateway to Europe", The Guardian, 1 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/01/germanys-china-city-duisburg-became-xi-jinping-gateway-europe>.

Essen has one of the largest Chinese student populations in Germany. Some high schools in Duisburg offer Mandarin language classes from seventh grade, alongside English and French.¹³³

The economic pull factor is probably the most effective structural factor in shaping China's image. Close business ties often result in a general reluctance to antagonize Beijing publicly. Two senior Asia experts of the German government made this clear in an online discussion in May 2020, pointing to China's importance as an "economic motor" and highlighting plans to extend economic and supply chain cooperation with China. They opposed the "scapegoating" of China over the COVID-19 pandemic as "all countries have lessons to learn".¹³⁴

Several years of government enabled people-to-people exchanges have established a generally open and positive attitude towards China's culture. A MERICS study in 2018 about the interest in China and China competence in Germany has found that China's importance at universities has been growing since the 90s.¹³⁵ German students, in particular, are interested in Chinese culture and language. Universities therefore offered more and more China-related educational opportunities. This shows that China wields cultural soft power in Germany. However, the number of students who have studied in China and who started studying Chinese language in Germany peaked in 2013/2014.¹³⁶ The same MERICS study found that business representatives are most interested in China knowledge such as basic language skills or an understanding of the Chinese governance system. This shows that some interest in China's culture and language is tied to economic interests. A large proportion of university students is also likely to aim at equipping themselves with China knowledge in preparation for entering the job market.

The question remains, however, whether the obstacles to an overall more positive image for China in Germany can readily be overcome, or whether the differences are more deep-rooted. Despite China's economic attractiveness, the German business sector increasingly recognizes China's entrenched authoritarian profile. One case being when the Federation of German Industries (BDI) described China as a "systemic rival" in its policy paper in January 2019. This could be a sign that the era of a uniform pro-Chinese sentiment in the German economic sector is coming to an end. In addition, above examples such as the decline of student numbers studying Chinese or the ambassador Shi Mingde's statement show that the effectiveness of Chinese soft power activities is dwindling. Consequently, Chinese representatives have become more assertive in Germany and increasingly use coercive measures, especially since the COVID-19 crisis has begun.

China's assertiveness and increased proactivity in shaping its image

Recently, China's embassy in Berlin and the Chinese government have become more assertive in seeking to shape debates in Germany. For example, China's ambassador Wu Ken issued a veiled threat to the German car industry in China should Germany follow US demands to ban telecoms group Huawei from participation in German 5G telecommunication networks.¹³⁷

133 Oltermann P. (2018), Germany's 'China City': how Duisburg became Xi Jinping's gateway to Europe", The Guardian, 1 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/01/germanys-china-city-duisburg-became-xi-jinping-gateway-europe>.

134 Barkin N. (2020), "Watching China in Europe - May 2020", German Marshall Fund, Newsletter, <https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2020/05/05/watching-china-europe-may-2020>.

135 Stepan M., Frenzel A., Ives J., Hoffmann M. (2018), „China Kennen, China Können“, MERICS, p. 11 <https://merics.org/en/china-kompetenz>.

136 Stepan M., Frenzel A., Ives J., Hoffmann M. (2018), „China Kennen, China Können“, MERICS, p. 57 <https://merics.org/en/china-kompetenz>.

137 Business Insider (2019), "Streit um 5G und Huawei: China droht Deutschland – und der Autoindustrie", 15 December 2019 <https://www.businessinsider.de/wirtschaft/streit-um-5g-und-huawei-china-droht-deutschland-und-der-autoindustrie/>.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Chinese embassy and its diplomats were covered more often in German media while they also increased their use of social media channels. China's current ambassador Wu Ken has used several media appearances to stress the Chinese system's ability to deal with the crisis and the need for a strong government hand to ensure a decisive response.¹³⁸ In another instance, Chinese diplomats used social media channels to urge German officials at the Federal Foreign Office to report on China's handling of the coronavirus crisis in a positive manner.¹³⁹ The use of social media channels rather than conventional diplomatic ones was an unusual move by the Chinese side with a coercive feel to it.

China's attempts to influence German opinion through social media have also intensified and often become more assertive. Twitter and Facebook uncovered thousands of Chinese fake accounts in 2019, including bots on their platforms programmed to disseminate Chinese propaganda.¹⁴⁰ However, this has not only been an issue in Germany. Other European countries experienced similar issues with fake accounts, which has led twitter to label posts by Chinese state-affiliated accounts.¹⁴¹

Increase of debate on China's influencing activities and coercive measures

German discussions on Chinese soft power have been very limited around a decade ago. In recent years, however, the debate has intensified, alongside the intensification of China's activities. Debates were increasingly concentrating on the three channels of influence: China's interference in the media, lobbying and influence of elite circles and concerns around risks in research cooperation. Furthermore, the above-mentioned increasingly assertive activities have been widely covered by the media. Representatives of the Chinese government now use social media propaganda campaigns, non-transparent influencing strategies or threats to German companies.

A critical discussion of China's influence has also emerged in the German think tank community, often focusing on Chinese political influence activities (covert, coercive, corrupt or "sharp power"). A joint think tank report by MERICS and the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) from 2018 initiated a debate in German media and policy circles on the challenge posed by increased Chinese government efforts to confront liberal democracies and European values.¹⁴² This debate is still ongoing. In October 2020, another GPPi report drew attention to the risks of research cooperation with non-democracies, including China, and called for fundamental rethinking of such cooperation.¹⁴³

With the outbreak of COVID-19 and China's subsequent forcefully defensive public diplomacy, the number of negative media reports about Beijing's crisis management and its efforts to increase its influence has grown. The growth in unfavorable coverage of China shows that the strident diplomatic efforts to improve China's image in Germany have backfired. An extreme example was the tabloid

138 Wu K. (2020), „Mit internationaler Hilfe kann die Krankheit besiegt werden“, Tagesspiegel Online, 21 February 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/china-und-das-coronavirus-mit-internationaler-hilfe-kann-die-krankheit-besiegt-werden/25567244.html>.

139 Tagesspiegel (2020), „China kontaktierte heimlich deutsche Beamte“, Tagesspiegel Online, 26 April 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bundesregierung-bestaetigt-einflussversuch-china-kontaktierte-heimlich-deutsche-beamte/25774498.html>.

140 Gensing P., Kumpfmüller K. (2019), „China investiert in Medien: Propaganda als Exportware“, Tagesschau Online, 20 August 2019, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/china-hongkong-113.html>.

141 Twitter Website (2020) „New labels for government and state-affiliated media accounts“, 6 August 2020, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/new-labels-for-government-and-state-affiliated-media-accounts.html.

142 Benner T., Ohlberg M., Poggetti L., Shi-Kupfer K., Weidenfeld J. (2019), „Authoritarian Advance“, MERICS & GPPi study, <https://merics.org/en/report/authoritarian-advance-responding-chinas-growing-political-influence-europe>.

143 Baykal A., Benner T. (2020), „Risky Business: Rethinking Research Cooperation and Exchange with Non-Democracies“, GPPi study <https://www.gppi.net/2020/10/22/rethinking-research-cooperation-and-exchange-with-non-democracies>.

Bild's reply to the Chinese embassy's letter of complaint to an article calculating what China ought – in *Bild's* view – to pay Germany as a compensation for mismanaging COVID-19.¹⁴⁴ In response, *Bild's* editor-in-chief harshly criticized China's President Xi Jinping in an online video, along with the Chinese system as a whole.¹⁴⁵ The German magazine *Der Spiegel* also published a Coronavirus story under the headline "Made in China".¹⁴⁶ Such reports have shaped mainstream opinion on China in Germany.

Critical views of China are on the rise

The results of a survey from Pew Research Center released in October 2020 show that the unfavorable perception of China has been at its highest level since the Pew Research Center began carrying out surveys on this topic in Germany 15 years ago.¹⁴⁷ 71 percent have had an unfavorable perception of China, an increase of 15 percent over last year. Another EU-funded representative survey in late 2020 conducted by the Sinophone Borderlands project, compared how favorable Germany assesses different countries including European states, Asian democracies and the United States.¹⁴⁸ The survey revealed that Germans have comparatively the worst perception of China. This could be a consequence of the relatively negative media coverage of China's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and related public diplomacy initiatives in Germany.

The findings of a poll conducted by the Körber-Stiftung and the Pew Research Center during the first wave of COVID-19 in May 2020 showed that Germans increasingly acknowledge China's status as a great power, but rather disapprove of its authoritarian system. 37 percent of German participants thought the US-German relationship was more important than Sino-German relations, while 36 percent prioritized relations with China.¹⁴⁹ This means that in Germany, relations with Beijing are coming to be ranked alongside those with Washington. This represents a significant shift since 2019, when 50 percent of respondents prioritized US-German relations, while only 24 percent prioritized amity with China. In addition, another part of the survey revealed that even though Germans recognize China as a global power, they are not in favor of China's political system. 71 percent of Germans think that with a more transparent system in China, COVID-19 would have turned out to be less harmful.¹⁵⁰

144 Bild (2020), "Coronavirus: China is celebrating, the world is suffering", Bild Online, 4 August 2020, <https://www.bild.de/politik/international/bild-international/coronavirus-china-is-celebrating-the-world-is-suffering-72209248.bild.html>.

145 Bild (2020), „Bild chief editor responds to the Chinese president“, Bild Online, Video <https://www.bild.de/politik/international/bild-international/bild-chief-editor-responds-to-the-chinese-president-70098436.bild.html>.

146 Der Spiegel (2020), "Wenn die Globalisierung zur tödlichen Gefahr wird", Der Spiegel Online, 31 January 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/coronavirus-wenn-die-globalisierung-zur-toedlichen-gefahr-wird-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000169240263>.

147 Pew Research Center (2020), "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries", survey, 5 October 2020 https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/pg_2020-10-06_global-views-china_0-05/.

148 Turcsányi R. et al. (2020), "European Views of China in the Age of COVID.19", survey by Sinophone Borderlands project, https://sinofon.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DE-poll-report_noSBN.pdf.

149 Körber-Stiftung and Pew Research Center (2020), "German Worldviews in Times of COVID-19", survey, p. 6 https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/the-berlin-pulse/pdf/2020/Koerber_TheBerlinPulse_Sonderausgabe_Grafikteilenglisch.pdf.

150 Körber-Stiftung and Pew Research Center (2020), "German Worldviews in Times of COVID-19", survey, p. 7 https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/the-berlin-pulse/pdf/2020/Koerber_TheBerlinPulse_Sonderausgabe_Grafikteilenglisch.pdf.

China's authoritarianism remains off-putting to Germans

China's persistent and comprehensive authoritarianism is likely to remain the major obstacle to a systematic improvement of China's image in Germany. The gaps between the two countries' political systems and value sets are becoming more visible as the debate intensifies and becomes more critical. Furthermore, political issues are becoming part of mainstream debate on China. Human rights, rule of law and civil society issues such as the case of political refugees Ai Weiwei (dissident artist) or Liu Xia (the wife of Nobel prize winner Liu Xiaobo who died in detention), the German foreign minister's criticism of and urge to withdraw the Hong Kong National Security law at Wang Yi's visit to Germany in September 2020 or the difficulties China's foreign NGO law poses for German foundations working there – all these are matters that have been widely reported on German media.

In view of the emerging criticism surrounding China's soft power campaigns, coercive behavior, and political issues, further decline in Chinese soft power is likely. Commenting on China's general conduct during the COVID-19 crisis, the German president of the European Chamber of Commerce in China, Jörg Wuttke, argued that although "China has lost soft power", it retains strong economic pull over European companies.¹⁵¹ Going forward, German decision-makers will struggle to navigate between an increasingly perceptible conflict of values and their pursuit of economic interests.

¹⁵¹ Yan J. (2020), „Wuttke: „China hat an Soft Power eingebüßt““, Deutsche Welle Online, 11 May 2020, <https://www.dw.com/de/wuttke-china-hat-an-soft-power-engeb%C3%BC%C3%9Ft/a-53394180>.

The thrill is gone: China's diminishing appeal in Greece

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Summary

China's soft-power strategy has had two interconnected strands: the pledge of Chinese investment that would help the Greek economy; and cultural diplomacy that is actively promoted by Beijing. An assessment of these elements shows that, after a decade of close Sino-Greek relations, China's appeal is diminishing. A sense of unmet expectations, the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical developments in the broader region are key factors that have negatively affected Beijing's capabilities to project its soft power in Greece.

China's approach to soft power in Greece

China's soft power in Greece is primarily a mixture of economic statecraft and cultural diplomacy. While the Asian giant's economic prowess does not quite fit Joseph Nye's definition of soft power, it accounts for a large part of the generally positive image that Beijing has managed to craft in Greece over the past fifteen years or so. Engulfed in a severe fiscal and economic crisis for more than a decade, Greece saw China as a valuable source of investment capital and, at times, a powerful political ally. The large-scale investment in the port of Piraeus by the Chinese conglomerate COSCO is a highly visible project in the framework of the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative. Consecutive Greek governments have sought to attract Chinese investment, but also to increase the volume of Greek exports to the vast Chinese market.¹⁵²

The second element of China's soft-power push – cultural diplomacy – has always been a prominent feature of Beijing's policies in its relations with Athens. China has continuously pointed to a special sense of cultural *rapprochement* or even kinship between the two countries – in fact, Beijing has been promoting a narrative of Sino-Greek cultural fraternity. For instance, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Greece in November 2019, the Chinese media extolled his agreement with then Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos 'to contribute to the wisdom of ancient Eastern and Western civilizations to building a community with a shared future for mankind'.¹⁵³

The 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games, which were held in Athens and Beijing, respectively, provided many opportunities for the exchange of visits and related expertise. The period from September 2007 to September 2008 was declared the 'Cultural Year of Greece in China'. More recently, 2017 was the Greece-China Year of Cultural Exchanges and Cooperation in Creative Industries. Additionally, 2021 is slated to be the Greece-China Year of Culture and Tourism.

At the behest of Beijing, Athens hosted in April 2017 the first Ministerial Conference of the states invited to the so-called 'Ancient Civilizations Forum' (ACF), a loose club with unclear eligibility criteria

152 Plamen Tonchev (2019), 'Xi's Visit to Greece: Four Questions Waiting To Be Answered', China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 20 November, <https://chinaobservers.eu/xis-visit-to-greece-four-questions-waiting-to-be-answered/>.

153 'China, Greece to Pool Wisdom for Community with Shared Future for Mankind', *Xinhua*, 11 November 2019, http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zyxw_4/t1717301.htm.

and membership.¹⁵⁴ A second edition of this annual meeting took place in Bolivia in July 2018 and another one in Beijing in September 2019. The fourth meeting is to be hosted by Peru, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic there is no clarity at present on its format or whether it will be organized.

Given that Greek citizens understandably take pride in the rich history and culture of their nation, related initiatives easily make headlines and go down well with the Greek general public. Presumably, the imagery of a glorious antiquity does indeed unite Greece and China, albeit in very different ways. In the case of Greece, it seems to be a nostalgic look at a vaunted past and a much-needed injection of national pride after a severe decade-long slump. For instance, Shi Zhiqin, Executive Manager of the One Belt-One Road Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University, is on record stating that 'without the Greek tradition, neither the US nor the EU could build their sublime, enduring and advanced political foundations'.¹⁵⁵ This is only one of the innumerable examples of flattering statements made by Chinese officials, who miss no opportunity to stress the glory of Greece's ancient civilization, as well as what is touted as spiritual kinship between the two nations – and then present this as a self-evident incentive for close Sino-Greek cooperation in modern times.

One of Beijing's standard soft-power tools is the promotion of Chinese culture through Confucius Institutes, of which there are currently three in Greece – hosted by Athens University of Economics and Business, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the University of Thessaly. An agreement signed during Chinese President Xi's visit in November 2019 envisages the creation of a Centre for Chinese Studies as a joint endeavour of the Greek Laskaridis Foundation and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), although this has not yet become fully operational. While exchanges between educational institutions in China and Greece are limited at present, the Greek government plans to attract many foreign students, including from China, in the years to come.¹⁵⁶ At the same time, the University of the Aegean has launched an online facility for Chinese-language classes. In the film industry, a Greek diplomat has directed a co-production¹⁵⁷ and there are reports of other joint endeavours coming up.

While there is no acquisition of Greek media outlets by Chinese investors, Chinese authorities are making a deliberate effort to promote a positive image of the country in Greek media. In May 2016, an agreement was signed by China and Greece on regular cooperation between their state news agencies: the *Athens-Macedonian News Agency (AMNA)* and *Xinhua*.¹⁵⁸ In November 2019, a memorandum of understanding was signed by Greek state television and China's National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). The English edition of the Greek daily *Kathimerini* frequently publishes stories released by *Xinhua*.¹⁵⁹ The Chinese-language newspaper *China Greece Times*,¹⁶⁰ published in Athens

154 Apart from Greece and China, the other countries represented at the launching conference in Athens were Bolivia, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Mexico and Peru. India and Mexico have not attended any meetings since 2017, Bolivia missed the one in Beijing, while Armenia joined the forum in 2018.

155 'Beijing: Greece to Become the Singapore of the Mediterranean' (translated), *Economistas*, 28 February 2019, https://www.economistas.gr/oikonomia/9000_pekino-i-ellada-na-ginei-i-sigkapoyri-tis-mesogeioy.

156 Kerin Hope (2020), 'Greece Deploys Cultural Heritage to Lure Foreign Students', *Financial Times*, 13 January, <https://www.ft.com/content/0d1a29be-2af8-11ea-a126-99756bd8f45e>.

157 'Interview with Vassilis Xiros: Sharing a Consul General's Passion for Film', *CGTN*, 9 July 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/7841544d774d4464776c6d636a4e6e62684a4856/index.html>.

158 General Secretariat for Information and Communication, 'Cooperation Agreement between the National Agencies of Greece and China, ANA-MPA and Xinhua, Signed Today at GSIC' (translated), GSIC Press Report, 19 May 2016, <https://media.gov.gr/symfonia-synergias-metaksy-ton-ethnikon-praktoreion-elladas-kai-kinas-ape-mpe-kai-xinhua-ypegrafi-simera-sti-ngee/>.

159 Margarita Pournara (2017), 'Greece-China Journalistic Cooperation' (translated), *Kathimerini*, 22 April, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/906384/article/epikairothta/ellada/dhmosiografikh-synergasia-elladas---kinas>.

160 'China Greece Times', Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Media-News-Company/China-Greece-Times-1480319618714126/>.

since 2005, communicates China-friendly content, as do several Facebook pages, although their following is rather limited. While the Chinese community in Greece is growing, mostly through buyers of real estate and Golden Visa holders, travel restrictions because of the pandemic halted this trend in 2020.

Perceptions of China in Greece

A study carried out in 2018 shows that views of China in Greece until that time were conditioned by a cocktail of four different, and to a certain extent conflicting, narratives: (1) the conviction that China is still a developing country that faces considerable socio-economic challenges, despite its spectacular achievements over recent decades; (2) the perception of an authoritarian regime in China, which does not fully respect the rights of its citizens; (3) a somewhat 'transactional' attitude, in the hope that China can be a financial backer and potential ally against the oft-vilified West European creditors in the midst of the protracted financial crisis in Greece; and (4) the fuzzy image of a civilization as glorious as the Greek and presumably a cultural 'relative'.¹⁶¹ While Greece has not yet crawled out of the financial crisis, which led to the expectation that China could be a useful ally, Greece's attitude towards Western partners has become markedly more positive lately. Furthermore, recent surveys suggest that Greek society has grown more suspicious of China and Chinese pursuits in Greece.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, references to the much-touted cultural kinship between the two nations have been replaced by Beijing's calls for joint action against the impact of the health crisis. The official Chinese rhetoric is that the two countries are working side by side during the outbreak and that this will provide further impetus to bilateral relations.¹⁶² While Chinese donations have elicited positive statements by the Greek government, they are a small fraction of the overall volume of medical equipment purchased from China by Greek donors and then delivered to the Greek national health system.¹⁶³ The Greek Ministry of Health was represented at a seminar on the exchange of experience on combating the pandemic that was organized by China on 13 March 2020 in the framework of the 17+1 format.¹⁶⁴ In addition, Greece was one of only four European countries to take part in a 'Belt and Road International Cooperation Conference: Combating COVID-19 with Solidarity' on 18 June 2020, the other three European countries being Hungary, Serbia and Belarus.¹⁶⁵

By and large, Greek authorities are responding positively to China's persistent efforts to take initiatives in relation to the pandemic and to portray itself as a responsible global stakeholder. Yet the general mood in society is not as friendly. Chinese donations are largely perceived by the general public as a damage-control campaign on the part of Beijing.¹⁶⁶ A large number of Greek citizens hold China

161 Plamen Tonchev and Angelos Bentis (eds) (2018), 'China's Image in Greece, 2008–2018', Athens: Institute of International Economic Relations, October, p. 7, https://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/China-Image-in-Greece_9-10-2018.pdf.

162 China's Ambassador to Greece Zhang Qiyue (2020), '48 Years of Friendship and Cooperation', Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Hellenic Republic, 5 June, <http://gr.china-embassy.org/eng/zxqx/t1786853.htm>.

163 Plamen Tonchev and Angelos Bentis (2020), 'Greece: Close – and Primarily Commercial – Cooperation between Greece and China', in John Seaman (ed.), *COVID-19 in Europe-China Relations: A Country-level Analysis*, Special Report of the ETNC, April, pp. 29–31, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/ouvrages-ifri/covid-19-europe-china-relations-country-level-analysis>.

164 'China Showcases Spirit of Sharing by Offering CEE Countries COVID-19 Insights', *Xinhua*, 14 March 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/14/c_138877712.htm.

165 'Joint Statement of the High-level Video Conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation: Combating COVID-19 with Solidarity', Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 19 June 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1790079.shtml.

166 Theodore Karaolanis (2020), 'How Effective is China's "Mask Diplomacy" in Europe?', *Euractiv.com*, 26 March, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/capitals-special-edition-how-effective-is-chinas-mask-diplomacy-in-europe/?fbclid=IwAR24A5f_u8cleDt6g-nozMhegmntQJm611qbxBHn-Plv10PBvLOz50YD1jg.

accountable for the pandemic, with 44 per cent of respondents in an April 2020 survey stating that China is responsible for the outbreak and spread of COVID-19.¹⁶⁷ In August 2020, 97 per cent of Greek respondents stated that the novel coronavirus was first detected in China and 45 per cent thought that Chinese authorities had punished the medical doctors who reported the initial cases.¹⁶⁸ Anecdotal evidence from social media confirms the negative mood in society.

Until the general elections held in July 2019, the populist government of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) sought to instrumentalize its overtures to China to express its anti-Western sentiments. The current right-of-centre New Democracy government prioritizes economic recovery and views Beijing as a valuable economic partner, although it is also more pro-Western and cautious with regard to China's authoritarian political model. Views of China are split in business circles. Greek shipowners have traditionally been close to China, one of the main customers of the large Greek commercial fleet. Small and mid-size enterprises are not particularly enthusiastic about the prospects of Chinese investment, or may even feel threatened, as is the case in the broader area of Piraeus sea port. Greek academia is increasingly reserved about the terms of cooperation with the Asian giant. Few optimistic voices among Greek researchers can be attributed to ideological considerations or personal agendas and inducements offered by Chinese sponsors. The Greek media cover China-related news in a fairly balanced manner.

A key determinant of Greece's changing attitude towards China over the past couple of years has been the return of geopolitics, both on a global scale and in Greece's neighbourhood. This has led to a rapprochement between Athens and its Western partners, notably the United States. The current Greek government is acutely aware of the stand-off between the US and China, but above all it needs support from powerful allies against an unpredictable and increasingly belligerent Turkey next door. The mutual defence cooperation agreement between Greece and the United States, renewed and upgraded in October 2019, certainly reassures the Greek political elite and the general public alike amid growing tensions in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean. Conversely, China has no role to play in this geopolitical conundrum: not only is it neither a security provider nor guarantor, but it is a security consumer, only interested in the pursuit of its economic goals in the region and leaving other actors to take the lead on security matters.¹⁶⁹

The current Greek government is actively seeking foreign investment from a number of other countries. Furthermore, since 2017, US investors have become very visible in Greece again, for example in the areas of shipyards, liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure, high-tech and real estate, etc. These developments are highlighted in a recent op-ed written jointly by the US Ambassador to Greece and the Greek Minister of Development and Investment.¹⁷⁰ As a result, China is gradually losing its main comparative advantage as a large potential pool of investment capital and, while it is still a major economic partner, it is no longer seen as the only one.

167 'COVID-19: Life with the Coronavirus and the Day After' (translated), Kapa Research, April 2020, p. 91,

https://kaparesearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/final_analysis_COVID19.pdf.

168 YouGov Cambridge Globalism 2020 survey, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/tw9r0y4j9/Globalism2020%20Guardian%20COVID%20China%20Attitudes.pdf.

169 Plamen Tonchev (2020), 'A New Kid on the Block? China in the Security Conundrum of the Eastern Mediterranean', Elcano Royal Institute blog post, 24 July, <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/a-new-kid-on-the-block-china-in-the-security-conundrum-of-the-eastern-mediterranean/>.

170 Adonis Georgiadis and Geoffrey Pyatt (2020), 'Elefsina as a Symbol of the Convergence of Greek and US Interests' (translated), *Kathimerini*, 5 July, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/1086024/article/epikairothta/politikh/ar8ro-ad-gewrgiadh-tzefrei-paiat-sthn-k-h-elefsina-symvolizei-th-sygklis-ellhnikwn-kai-amerikanikwn-symferontwn>.

The effectiveness of China's soft power in Greece

Notably, Greece has not seen the 'wolf warrior' type of Chinese diplomacy that has embittered a number of other EU nations. For all that, the two principal elements of China's soft-power approach to Greece – economic statecraft and cultural diplomacy – have not yielded significant results for the following reasons:

- While China and Greece continue to discuss their economic cooperation, the volume of Chinese investment has not met initial expectations and there has been controversy surrounding China's flagship project in Piraeus.
- It is increasingly recognized that China's proactive cultural diplomacy is primarily a vehicle for the promotion of Beijing's economic and political pursuits in Greece as an important gateway to Europe. While this may be a legitimate strategy, the 'cultural kinship' theory and China's 'charm offensive' are losing momentum.

Until recently, Greek society and elites used to have a fairly positive view of China,¹⁷¹ but this is changing – the perception of close Sino-Greek relations across the board has now fizzled out and only applies to specific areas of economic cooperation, such as transport and, in particular, shipping. Broader developments have also dented China's image. Beijing's rhetoric about a prominent human-centred dimension of its foreign policy and the promotion of world peace rings hollow to many Greek stakeholders amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Geopolitical challenges, too, have demonstrated the limited support, if any, that Greece can expect from China. All these factors lead to a decline in China's appeal and curb the effectiveness of China's soft-power strategy in Greece.

171 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang (2019), 'People around the Globe are Divided in their Opinions of China', Pew Research Center, 5 December, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/05/people-around-the-globe-are-divided-in-their-opinions-of-china/>.

Hungary: no need for a Chinese soft-power strategy

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Summary

Despite the strong political relationship between Budapest and Beijing, the actual soft power of China is limited in Hungary. Opposition political parties, the mainstream media and the general public are not fond of the People's Republic of China, and the COVID-19 pandemic has boosted negative feelings even further. The Hungarian government, however, still sees its connections to Beijing as important, based on the promise of economic opportunities and the two governments' similar political views. Chinese campaigns to influence the Hungarian public are almost non-existent, which may be explained by Beijing's pragmatism, as the supportive attitude of the Hungarian government renders such actions unnecessary.

China's soft-power activities

Given the extraordinarily amicable relationship between Budapest and Beijing, we may assume that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has invested ample resources into developing its soft power in Hungary. However, the level of soft power derived from Chinese activities on the ground have been rather limited in Hungary in the last decade, and Hungary does not represent a special case in this regard. Methods utilized by Beijing are similar to those that China has been employing in other countries in the region, including events related to the 17+1 grouping, a network of Confucius Institutes, high-level meetings, and educational and science exchanges, etc.

As presented in a recent publication by the MapInfluenCE project, China uses exclusively 'carrots' in its toolset, without the need to apply coercive methods in Hungary, as Budapest maintains very good relations with Beijing and from a political perspective offers a reliable business environment for Chinese companies and institutions.¹⁷² High-level political visits are frequent between the two sides. Hungary hosted the first China–Central Eastern Europe meeting in 2011, the sixth summit in 2017, and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has travelled to China several times, including to both Belt and Road Forums. Orbán's relationship to China, however, goes beyond pure economic pragmatism. He has mentioned China several times as a good example of a successful 'labour-based society', and as an alternative to 'speculation based' Western economies, which seems to coincide with his world view. As a sign of close political attitudes, the Hungarian government does not say a word about Beijing's human rights record, and even blocks multilateral mechanisms that would do so, and Budapest vetoes or threatens to veto EU decisions aimed against controversial PRC measures. At the same time, it must be emphasized that the Hungarian government's support for Beijing is founded in its own political calculus and worldview, rather than in the success of any proactive Chinese attempt to influence Budapest.

When it comes to the Hungarian media, the balance is not in China's favour. Unlike in other Central European countries, China has not increased its presence in mainstream media so far in Hungary,

172 I. Karaskova, A. Bachulska, B. Kelemen, T. Matura, F. Sebok and M. Simalcik (2020), 'China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe: The Logic and Power of Chinese Influence', *AMO Policy Paper*, pp. 45–52.

although there have been unconfirmed reports about some recent attempts to forge closer cooperation between the Hungarian and Chinese media. Hungarian media coverage on China has been very pragmatic, or valueless, in the past seven years. Most articles focus on China's general economic situation, its role in world politics and economics, and the development of Hungarian–Chinese relations. Topics like human rights, Tibet, the Dalai Lama or the protection of intellectual property rights are barely mentioned. Media sources believed to be close to the Hungarian government publish significantly more positive content about China, while media sources on the opposition side tend to be more negative. The share of negative news (and thus also the polarity of the discourse on China) has been constantly increasing in the past decade, and China thus does not enjoy a favourable image in Hungarian media.¹⁷³ Still, China has not engaged in a major public diplomacy campaign in Hungary in recent years, and even during the COVID-19 pandemic, it kept a low profile except for a short online brawl with the US Embassy in Budapest. As in most other European countries, the Chinese Embassy in Hungary was a latecomer to join Facebook and Twitter, only doing so in October 2019, although it has been very active on Twitter since, posting over 650 tweets (roughly three per day). Still, the Chinese Embassy's social media following is very low. As of mid-October 2020, the Twitter account was followed by 3,000 people, but closer scrutiny shows that the overwhelming majority of followers are not Hungarian. The Chinese Embassy's Facebook page, meanwhile, has 1,100 followers and its content almost mirrors its Twitter account, with the same news on Chinese politics, the fight against COVID-19, and the same videos or other news related to the beauty of China, technology and everyday life.¹⁷⁴

The number of Chinese university students in Hungary has been increasing rapidly, reaching 2,377 in 2019.¹⁷⁵ An impressive number of cultural and educational institutions have been established in Hungary, with five Confucius Institutes, a relatively large number given Hungary's size. Most of these institutes offer scholarships, public lectures and performances to their audiences. Their actual impact on Hungarian society, however, seems to be limited, as one of Hungary's Confucius Institutes privately confessed that the same approximately 500 people show up at their events on a regular basis. The China–CEE Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was established in Budapest in 2017. It publishes briefings on bilateral relations between China and its Central and Eastern European (CEE) partners that are written by local and regional experts paid by the Chinese. Furthermore, Corvinus University of Budapest (Hungary's most prominent economics and business university) and China's Fudan University launched a joint MBA programme in 2018. Subsequently, following a meeting with Prime Minister Orbán, Fudan University announced the establishment of its own independent campus in Budapest by 2024.¹⁷⁶ According to currently available information, the new Fudan University campus would like to educate 5,000–6,000 MA students in four different fields (Economics, International Relations, Medicine and Technology). In addition, the university will send its professors to the BA level of other Hungarian universities to teach as guest lecturers, thus introducing Fudan University's programmes throughout Hungary.¹⁷⁷ The exact details are still to be revealed, but given that there are currently 20,000–22,000 MA students in these four fields, the establishment of Fudan University will inevitably have a tremendous impact on Hungarian higher education and the mindset of future intellectuals in Hungary.

173 I. Karaskova, T. Matura, R. Turcsányi and M. Simalcik (2018), 'Central Europe for Sale: The Politics of China's Influence', *AMO Policy Paper*, no. 3, pp. 19–27.

174 Tamás Matura (2020), 'The Chinese COVID-19 Information Campaign in Hungary: Keeping a Low Profile', in I. Karaskova (ed.), *China's Propaganda and Disinformation Campaigns in Central Europe*, Prague: AMO, pp. 26–30.

175 Oktatási Hivatal [Hungary's Office of Education] (2019), '2.6.2. A Magyarországon tanuló külföldi hallgatók száma állampolgárságuk szerint [Section 2.6.2. Number of Foreign Students Studying in Hungary by their Citizenship]', https://www.oktatas.hu/felsooktatas/kozerdeku_adatok/felsooktatasi_adatok_koztetetele/felsooktatasi_statistikak.

176 Karaskova et al (2020), 'China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe', pp. 45–52.

177 *Index* (2020), '2024-ben megnyílnak a sanghaji Fudan Egyetem budapesti campusa [In 2024, the Budapest Campus of Fudan University in Shanghai May Open]', *Index.hu*, 17 September, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/09/17/mar_2024-ben_menyvilhat_a_hires_sanghaji_fudan_egyetem_budapesti_campusa/.

Although Hungary is home to the largest Chinese community in the CEE region, the Chinese diaspora's impact on the image of China is very limited, as they barely play any active role in spreading news about China in Hungary. The Chinese Embassy in Budapest cooperates with local Chinese diaspora in organizing cultural events, such as Spring Festivals, but these are mostly aimed at the Chinese community itself and those Hungarian people who are genuinely interested in the Chinese culture.

During the COVID-19 crisis, there have been some small donations by different Chinese institutions, including Fudan University, Huawei, China Railways and China Construction Bank, among others.¹⁷⁸ Despite all the Chinese efforts to minimize the damage caused by the pandemic, however, Hungarian public opinion has turned sour about China, with over 40 per cent of Hungary's population partially or fully believing that the virus was made artificially and spread intentionally by China.¹⁷⁹

Country-level perceptions

Debate about Chinese soft power is virtually non-existent in Hungary, as China has not done too much yet to draw public awareness to the issue. It was a unique moment when the topic of Chinese activities in Hungary reached the threshold for stimulating coverage in Hungary's mainstream media in August 2020. The Chinese Embassy in Budapest sent a letter to a Hungarian MP, reprimanding her about her previous statements concerning human rights violations in China. Besides such sporadic issues, however, the question of Chinese influence barely reaches the surface of public discourse within Hungary.

The especially cordial relationship between the Hungarian governing party and the Chinese is even more remarkable when the attitude of other political parties is taken into account. The main dividing line runs between the governing party and the opposition, rather than between right-wing and left-wing or liberal/progressive parties. The ruling party, *Fidesz*, was a vocal supporter of human rights and a critic of China for decades, only to make a major turn following its election victory in 2010. *Fidesz* has stopped criticizing China ever since. Moreover, it established party-to-party relations with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), sees Beijing as an important world power and regards bilateral relations between Hungary and China highly. Meanwhile, Hungary's opposition parties are neither particularly optimistic, nor even critical, about the global role of Beijing, and see China as a less important partner. Still, all mainstream Hungarian parties agree that cooperation with China offers important economic opportunities, and that it is in the interest of Hungary to develop business ties with China. *Fidesz* is the only party, however, to regard political cooperation as an important factor, while the other parties rather see the political dimension and differences in the political systems of the two countries as a source of risks. Furthermore, all parties except *Fidesz* deny the presence of shared values with China. This might be explained by the proximity of the worldview of Orbán's governing party and China, and by the fact that parties in government usually tend to be more cooperative with China than parties in opposition.¹⁸⁰

Assessment: the power of a mirage

Putting aside the personal interests of politicians on both sides, the main sources of Chinese soft power have been the promise of lucrative business opportunities and the high-level political cooperation of

178 Matura (2020), 'The Chinese COVID-19 Information Campaign in Hungary'.

179 R. Turcsányi et al. (2020), *European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Differences and Common Ground Across the Continent*, Central European Institute of Asian Studies Report, p. 24.

180 M. Simalcik, A. Bajerova, I. Karaskova, T. Matura, A. Ostrowska and B. Surdel (2019), 'Perception of China among V4 Political Elites', Central European Institute of Asian Studies Report, pp. 29–37.

two like-minded governments. China's soft-power activities focus on the (political) elite of Hungarian society and barely have any impact on the wider public. According to a recent public opinion survey, 55 per cent of respondents reported that their feelings about China have not changed in the past three years.¹⁸¹ Another 31 per cent have more negative views of China than before, while 14 per cent nurture more positive views. The same poll suggests that the majority of the Hungarian population sees the rise of China, cybersecurity issues, China's military power, the environmental impact and China's influence on democracy in other countries in a rather negative way. Only on technology and trade does China enjoy a positive attitude among Hungarians. Even though *Fidesz* voters tend to have the most positive views about China, it seems that a decade of political courtship between the Hungarian and Chinese governments has not been able to influence the generally negative attitudes about China, implying that Beijing's soft power among the Hungarian populace is very weak.

Since economic and business cooperation has proved to be more of a mirage than a tangible reality, its attractive power has been fading away in recent years. Other 17+1 countries have already expressed their disappointments in very straightforward ways, while the Hungarian government still presents itself as China's most reliable partner in the CEE region. It is hard to tell whether the Hungarian government's faith in China is founded on an unwavering hope for further Chinese investment or on the EU-level political calculations of Prime Minister Orbán, where a strong relationship with such a big illiberal country like China may serve as a bargaining chip with the European Union. Either way, China can count on the support of the current Hungarian government on many issues.

It remains to be seen, however, how the government in Budapest may react to the intensification of the US–China rivalry, although Hungarian society clearly remains pro-Western. The discrepancy between the policies of the Hungarian government and the attitudes of the wider public poses a risk to China, as a change of government in Hungary could easily lead to fundamental changes in Hungary's China policy.

¹⁸¹ Turcsányi et al. (2020), *European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19*; this report was the result of a wide-scale study of public opinion in thirteen European countries on China, conducted in September and October 2020.

Economy and culture: two tracks for China's soft power in Italy

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Summary

This chapter seeks to illustrate the modalities through which Chinese soft power has been developing in Italy. It demonstrates how Beijing's effort have primarily targeted two key areas: the economy and culture. Economic soft power has contributed to promoting the view of China as the main market for new opportunity; and culturally, China has been leveraging on the shared 'ancient civilization' narrative, as well as contacts in the academic sector. Ultimately, although Chinese efforts have contributed to maintaining a positive perception of China among Italians, more contacts between the Italian population and China, as well as increasing media coverage of China in Italy, have also led to a better understanding of the country, which includes its pitfalls.

Introduction

In Italy, China's soft power has been – and still is – running mainly on two tracks: the economy and culture. On one hand, China's soft-power practices are facilitated by the attractiveness of the economic opportunities, whether real or perceived, that China has to offer. This is often accompanied by allusions to the cultural aspect of the relationship, a rhetorical device often used by both China and Italy to prove their long-standing proximity. If in the past these two tracks were used by China mostly to court members of the Italian political and economic elites, now the same messages of economic possibilities and cultural proximity are communicated to the broader Italian public as well. The change of audience has undoubtedly been facilitated, and to some degree encouraged, by the wider use of social media by Chinese representatives.¹⁸²

Soft power through economic attractiveness

In Italy, perceptions of China and Chinese businesses and people have long been subjected to tension. Two main positions have coexisted over the past three decades, which can be summarized as the positive and pessimistic.

Members of the first group have seen opportunity in the economic rise of China – an idea shared by some entrepreneurs, especially big corporations, and high-level politicians with a personal connection to China, such as former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi. The second group, on the contrary, has viewed China's integration into the international system as a potential threat to Italy's economic well-being. This latter view was particularly influential during all the right-wing governments led by Silvio Berlusconi's party (alternately for the twenty years from 1994 to 2011) and was shared mostly by small and medium enterprises. In different ways, these two narratives influenced Italy's approach towards Beijing, leading to the adoption by Italy of a rather friendly approach towards China at the bilateral level, while often taking more confrontational stances at the European level, as in the case of the debate on whether to grant China market economy status, to which Italy was firmly against.

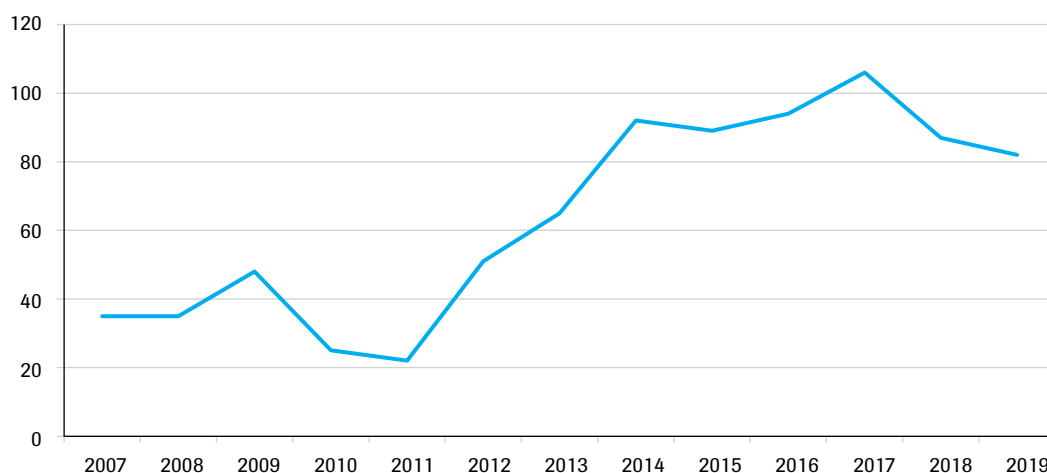
¹⁸² Francesca Ghiretti and Lorenzo Mariani (2020), 'Italy: Cooperation, Competition and Local Politics amid COVID-19', in John Seaman, *COVID-19 and Europe-China relations. A Country-level Analysis*, report by the European Think-tank Network in China (ETNC), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_special_report_covid-19_china_europe_2020.pdf.

Because of the peculiarities of the Chinese economy and the nature of its exports, between the 1990s and 2010, the main perception of China – especially under Italian right-wing governments – was mainly that of a threat to most Italian strategic sectors. Two factors brought about a slow but steady change in this view. First, the impact of the 2008 economic crisis forced Italy to look beyond its list of historic foreign investors. Second, the more China's economy grew and modernized, the more the view of China as an unfair competitor gave way to the image of a country with the potential of bringing new opportunities for Italian exports.

For these reasons, since 2013 the perception of China as an emerging and growing market that could offer Italy many opportunities has driven the recent welcoming attitude towards Chinese capital and businesses, as well as the active pursuit of contacts and access to China. This friendly attitude was directly promoted by the Italian government – led by the centre-leftist Democratic Party (PD) from 2014. Italy was among the first countries to join Chinese-led initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and was the only European country to send a high-level delegation to take part in the first Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Yet in those same years and within the same party (the PD), the perception of China as a competitor also developed, manifesting itself both in Italy's opposition to granting China its desired market economy status and in the February 2017 letter by the finance ministers of France, Germany and Italy to the European Commission that called for a European response to what are perceived as predatory Chinese investments in strategic sectors, leading to the development of a European investment-screening mechanism. The two perceptions cannot be labelled as belonging to one or the other political group, as different positions coexist within Italian political parties.

The idea that connecting with China would provide opportunities and a hedge against a competitive economic environment not only appealed to the business and political community, but also to younger generations who became increasingly interested in studying China and Mandarin to build their CVs. Thus, through the years, the number of Italian universities offering programmes on China Studies, courses of the Mandarin language, or related subjects, has increased dramatically. While in the past, framework agreements and academic exchanges were relegated mostly to language and humanities departments, the last decade has seen a significant increase in the number of partnerships involving science departments. To date, 932 collaboration agreements between Italian and Chinese universities have been signed, 300 of which are with top-tier Chinese universities.

Number of new academic agreements signed by Italian and Chinese universities per year



Source: Data set from the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), <https://accordi-internazionali.cineca.it/index.php?pag=AV>

Soft power through culture

Culture has always played a fundamental role in the rhetoric used by both China and Italy for their external projection. Both countries perceive themselves as 'cultural superpowers', with Italy and China occupying the first and second positions, respectively, in the number of UNESCO World Heritage sites.¹⁸³ It is therefore not surprising that cultural linkages are often used by both sides to give a sense of uniqueness to their relationship. However, this perception of a common historical relevance and shared artistic sensibility has been increasingly used by China to court Italy. Such a cultural reference represents a clear rhetorical tool, rather than something grounded in reality. However, the attempt at creating an idea of commonality among ancient civilizations, while not always successful, strikes the right chords with countries that have a glorious history but a rather disappointing present, such as Italy. In 2016, the Italy–China Cultural Forum was established, with the aim of increasing cooperation between the two countries in this area. During the past four years, China has been able to capitalize on this opportunity by amplifying the number of cultural events in Italy, such as exhibitions of Chinese paintings or archaeological artefacts, concerts of classical and lyrical music performed by Chinese artists, and film premieres.

It was against this backdrop that – to mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations – the two partners decided to celebrate 2020 as the 'Italy–China Year of Culture and Tourism'. The inaugural event took place on 21 January 2020, with speeches by high-profile Chinese and Italian figures such as, former minister and current President of the Italy–China Cultural Forum Francesco Rutelli, China's Minister of Culture and Tourism Luo Shugang and Italian Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini. On that occasion, reference to the long-standing connection between the two 'civilizations' of Italy and China was explicitly tapped into by Luo Shugang in his speech and the occasion was not missed to mention the Silk Road.

The cultural expression of China's soft power in Italy has not been relegated only to events or celebrations, but has been articulated in different shapes. Italy hosts numerous cultural entities linked to China that are multifaceted and rooted in national as well as local territory. Italy hosts sixteen Confucius Institutes, numerous associations that promote cultural relationships with China, and many Italian cities have partnerships with Chinese counterparts.

The significant number of Confucius Institutes and partnerships between Chinese and Italian universities should not come as a surprise. In fact, it follows a European and, arguably, global trend. Interestingly, in Italy the relationship with the Confucius Institutes remains rather positive.

One of the best assets these partnerships create are alumni networks, which are often used to promote further connections. One example of this is the gift sent by some Chinese alumni of Turin Polytechnic who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, collected money in China via WeChat to buy face masks that were then donated to Lombardy's civil protection.¹⁸⁴ The explicitly stated mission of many alumni networks, such as the one above, is the commitment to creating cross-border communities, which are

183 *Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo* (MiBACT) [Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities and for Tourism] (2020), 'Italia–Cina, Franceschini: dati turismo in forte crescita, al lavoro per far conoscere i luoghi meno noti [Italy–China, Franceschini: Strong Growth in Tourism Data, Working to Make Known the Less-known Places]', MiBACT Press Office, 21 January, https://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Comunicati/visualizza_asset.html_1140922796.html.

184 Leonardo Di Paco (2020), 'Coronavirus, ecco il regalo degli ex allievi cinesi al Poli: raccolgono 17mila euro e comprano mascherine [Coronavirus, Here is the Gift of Chinese Alumni to the People: They Collect 17,000 Euros and Buy Masks]', *La Stampa Torino*, 19 March, <https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2020/03/19/news/coronavirus-ecco-il-regalo-degli-ex-allievi-cinesi-al-poli-raccolgono-17mila-euro-e-comprano-mascherine-1.38612646>.

often also aimed at facilitating placements.¹⁸⁵ The example provided, as well as many others that can be publicly found on university websites, shows how these networks can be harvested to cultivate a positive perception of China and of China's relationship with Italy.

Media and social media: the perfect conductor for China's soft power

When it is not directly targeted at influencing the business and political communities, China's soft power passes through traditional media and social media platforms. In Italy, over the past few years, the social media accounts of the Chinese Embassy have become increasingly active, peaking during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On more traditional media, China's Ambassador to Italy Li Junhua has steadily increased his media appearances to discuss different issues. His words have largely been amicable and always stress the great relationship that links the two countries. After all, Italy has so far given little reason for China to adopt less amicable tones.

Italian news coverage of China has augmented in recent years, certainly following the signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2019. The more that China has become relevant on the global stage and for Italy, the more it has attracted the interest of Italian media, which have dramatically boosted their coverage of China. For example, newspapers such as *Il Foglio* and *Il Manifesto* have special editions on Asia in which China often features. This not only signals the growing importance of China for Italy, but also the growing interest in China among Italian readers. Indeed, news outlets would not increase the number of articles covering something that does not sell. Notably, however, more information on China does not always translate into improving the perception of China among Italians. More information, when fact-based and well informed – as often happens in the cases mentioned above – leads to better awareness and makes selling a standardized image of China harder. For example, until a few years ago, very few Italians would have known about the irredentist claims of the People's Republic of China towards Hong Kong and Taiwan, or what was happening in Xinjiang. Now, however, this type of information is more commonly covered by Italian news outlets.¹⁸⁶

As part of the MoU on the BRI, ANSA, Italy's most important press agency, has signed a partnership agreement with China's *Xinhua*. Since then, ANSA has been publishing a translated version of *Xinhua*'s articles. These are always labelled as *Xinhua*'s and not as ANSA's own news, but the Italian public might not be fully aware of the distinction. A rough initial data collection of the articles available on ANSA's website shows that between November 2013 and June 2020, about 75 per cent of the news

185 See, for example, Milan Polytechnic Alumni Groups, 'Alumni Italia-Cina [Italy-China Alumni]', <https://cm.alumni.polimi.it/en/alumni-italia-cina/>.

186 World editorial (2018), 'I campi di rieducazione per gli uiguri in Cina [Re-education Camps for Uyghurs in China]', *Il Post*, 10 September, <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/09/10/cina-campi-detenzione-uiguri/>; Giulia Pompili (2018), 'Per la Cina sono campi di rieducazione, il resto del mondo li chiama gulag [For China they are Re-education Camps, the Rest of the World Calls them Gulags]', *Il Foglio*, 18 December, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2018/12/18/news/per-la-cina-sono-campi-di-rieducazione-il-resto-del-mondo-li-chiama-gulag-229708/>; Pasquale Annicchino (2020), 'Un rapporto sulla persecuzione cinese contro "i musulmani più felici del mondo" [A Report of the Chinese Persecution of "the Happiest Muslims in the World"]', *Il Foglio*, 8 August, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2020/08/08/news/un-rapporto-sulla-persecuzione-cinese-contro-i-musulmani-piu-felici-del-mondo-330412/>; Paolo Salom (2019), 'Gli uiguri nei campi di detenzione: rieducazione dei musulmani cinesi [Uyghurs in the Detention Camps: Re-education of Chinese Muslims]', *Corriere della Sera*, 1 August, https://www.corriere.it/esteri/19_agosto_01/gli-uiguri-campi-detenzione-dramma-musulmani-cinesi-c4432d6a-b47f-11e9-a4d8-63bea28b5635.shtml; Simone Pieranni (2019), 'Cosa c'è nei Xinjiang Papers del *New York Times*? [What's in the Xinjiang Papers of the *New York Times*?]', *Il Manifesto*, 17 November, <https://ilmanifesto.it/cina-cosa-ce-nei-xinjiang-papers-del-new-york-times/>.

items published on China were from *Xinhua*. Furthermore, the overall amount of news on China covered by *ANSA* has significantly augmented since the signing of its agreement with *Xinhua*.

Conclusions

Italians have gotten to know more about China, in part thanks to direct Chinese efforts. This is indeed one way in which China has been attempting to exercise its soft power in the Italian peninsula. Nevertheless, being more in contact with another country and increasing the desire of its population to know more about it does not automatically translate into improved perception and attraction of same country. More information on China is also creating more awareness generally, which has the potential ultimately to hinder China's exercise of soft power.

Italy was the first European country to be the destination of what was then called 'mask diplomacy' and polls suggest that this indeed had a positive effect on the Italian population's perception of China.¹⁸⁷ According to recent Pew Research polling, 60 per cent of the Italian public consider China as an opportunity for the Italian economy and 52 per cent believe that the political influence of China in Italy is not excessive. Regarding the strategy that the Italian government should pursue with regards to China, 49 per cent of respondents believe that Rome should focus on the bilateral relationship, while 41 per cent would prefer a more Europe-led approach. Furthermore, the MoU with China on the BRI is perceived by two-thirds of the Italian population as a good deal for Italy. Nonetheless, the overall reputation of China with the Italian public is still poor, with 63 per cent of respondents having a negative perception of Beijing and 75 per cent having no confidence in Chinese President Xi Jinping.¹⁸⁸

To assess the impact of China's soft power is no easy task. We cannot ignore the possibility that the relatively positive opinion Italians hold of China could in part be because of a successful soft-power campaign. However, in spite of years of cultural and economic diplomacy, the element of attraction that might have truly boosted China's image in Italy most recently has been the success of China's fight against COVID-19. It is too early to assess whether Beijing's approach in managing the health crisis created a durable spillover effect on China's perception among Italians, but undeniably, for the first time, it conveyed the idea of China as a possible role model in crisis management. This has then spurred comparisons with the struggle of the Italian government, and Western democracies more broadly, in managing the pandemic. Perhaps we should be less concerned with outright public relations campaigns and elite linkages and instead become more attentive to China's ability to propose itself as an exporter of successful solutions for regional and global issues.

187 Ghiretti and Mariani (2020), 'Italy'.

188 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang (2020), 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries', *Pew Research Center*, 6 October, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

China's soft power in Latvia: cultural appeal, political hesitance

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Summary

China exerts its soft power in Latvia by increasing its cultural influence in areas such as language teaching, tourism, arts and education. The Chinese public diplomatic strategy was originally targeted at individuals already familiar with the Chinese language and culture, but in recent years it has refocused and expanded to the wider public. Latvia's strong interest in promoting its economic cooperation with China is unmatched by Beijing, which suggests that Latvia may not be one of China's top priorities. Over the last two years, however, China has been increasing its communication in Latvia to draw attention to international topics in which China is an involved party. Latvia's general attitude towards China has become more cautious, despite the strong mutual interest in economic cooperation between the two nations. The struggle to find a balance between the risks and gains of this relationship is central to assessing Latvia's policy towards China.

China's soft-power approach in Latvia

Actors involved in China's soft-power policy

The most active institution carrying out China's soft-power policy in Latvia is the Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its closely linked lower-level subordinate institutions, such as the Economic and Commercial Office, which reports on commercial matters. Although the website's targeted audience is the Latvian public, its content is clearly focused on China–US relations and China's stance on current political tensions.

The Confucius Institute and the Chinese Cultural Centre are the institutions particularly focused on promoting Chinese culture in Latvia. The Confucius Institute has been operating for almost ten years and has so far extended its activities to fourteen other Chinese-language classrooms and Confucius Classrooms.

While there is no Chinese-controlled media channel in Latvia, the Chinese Embassy tries to promote its agenda using local news outlets. A recent example was an interview by the Chinese Ambassador Liang Jianquan in the context of COVID-19.¹⁸⁹

While China may use its citizens' expatriate communities abroad as a resource for its public diplomacy strategy, this is not the case in Latvia, even though many Chinese residents there work as language teachers.

189 Ansis Ivans and Toms Ģigulis (2020), 'Ķīnas vēstnieks: "Vīruss ir nežēlīgs, bet cilvēkiem ir jūtas" [The Ambassador of China, 'The Virus is Cruel but People have Feelings']', *Delfi.lv*, 3 February, <https://www.delfi.lv/news/arzemes/kinas-vestnieks-virus-ir-nezeligs-bet-cilvekiem-ir-jutas.d?id=51850247>; Andris Kārkluvāls (2020), 'Latvijā epidēmija tiek novērsta labāk nekā citur Eiropā, vērtē Ķīnas vēstnieks [The Epidemic is Observed Better in Latvia than Elsewhere in Europe, Says the Chinese Ambassador]', *Delfi.lv*, 21 April, <https://www.delfi.lv/news/arzemes/latvija-epidemija-tiek-noversta-labak-neka-citur-eiropa-verte-kinas-vestnieks.d?id=52072881>.

Soft-power channels

The most active channels Beijing uses to project its soft power in Latvia are education and the promotion of culture. The Chinese government annually offers Latvian students around ten scholarships in social sciences, languages, politics and international law – subjects in which Chinese and Western values are notoriously different. This seemingly small number of Chinese-subsidized scholarships is, however, considerably larger than those offered by any other state and illustrates China's ambitions to promote its language and values to Latvian society.

Traditional Chinese cultural celebrations, such as the Spring Festival, are uncommon in Latvia and until a few years ago would go completely unreported. In stark contrast, however, in 2020 almost all Latvian mainstream media channels featured stories about this festival, and its expanding popularity is evident across much of Latvia. The establishment of the China Cultural Centre in October 2019 has clearly led to an expansion of Beijing's presence in Latvia's cultural life, as exemplified when Latvia's national television further publicized it by airing a prepared advertisement from the Riga China Cultural Centre. The Cultural Centre is a cooperation project based on the '17+1' grouping. Although some political figures have visited the events, these are open to the general public. Except for the Spring Festival celebrations, however, most of the events are known only to individuals who actively follow the China Cultural Centre or Confucius Institute – that is, individuals already familiar with the Chinese culture and/or language, since on many occasions the information is only available in Chinese.

In contrast, economic engagement is not high on the agenda of China's soft-power strategy in Latvia. The Chinese Embassy's Economic and Commercial Office provides news about China's economic growth, with occasional – and rather minimal – debriefs about the Office's activities in Latvia.

China's key messages in Latvia

A closer look at the Chinese Embassy's activities reveals four distinct aspects. *First*, it is noticeable that the information provided has a global context, and not much of it is related to Latvia in particular.

Second, in the last two years, the Chinese Embassy has brought up more politics-related content than ever before. China's position is more assertive when the PRC is criticized or seen as a threat. For instance, the Chinese Embassy has criticized news reports about Latvian intelligence agencies' analysis that Chinese special forces may be more active in Latvia in the future.¹⁹⁰ Such a change in approach may indicate that China is becoming more confident and is eager to demonstrate it in its foreign policy.

Third, there has been some change in the languages used for communications: until 2020, the only languages used were Chinese or English, meaning that the focus was on the existing Chinese-speaking community. However, since 2020, more and more announcements have been released in Latvian, especially on social media, such as Facebook. Content written in the Latvian language is mostly related to China's positioning in the international arena, such as its achievements in fighting COVID-19, or China's domestic concerns, where international opinion is divided on Hong Kong and Xinjiang, etc.

Finally, there are increasing references to Chinese news sources. Most of the information that is communicated by China to the Latvian public redirects the reader to articles published by Chinese state-owned media channels, thus illustrating Beijing's attempt to promote alternative sources of news that are not Western-dominated and instead represent China's perspective.

190 China's Embassy in Latvia (2019), 'Remarks of the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Latvia on LETA Reports on Chinese Activities in Latvia', Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Latvia, 30 December, <http://lv.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1728675.htm>.

Latvia's perception and responses to China's soft-power policy

Latvia's political elite has mixed feelings about China. Over the past ten years, the attitude has changed from very welcoming to more cautious. The Latvian Parliament and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs see China as a promising partner for Latvia's economic progress and the consensus appears to be that there is an even greater need for investment and cooperation between the two countries. While early cooperation has been exclusively focused on the economy, tourism and culture-related matters are also gradually being included.

Latvia's positive attitude towards China peaked in 2015, when the Latvian Parliament endorsed cooperation not only in the economic area, but also culturally, by mentioning the Confucius Institute as one of the best examples of Chinese-Latvian cooperation. However, by 2020 this spirit had changed, with the Latvian Parliament being more reserved in its considerations of Chinese investments and claiming they should be strictly monitored. The idea that investments offered by China are not trustworthy persists among Latvian politicians, even if – according to the Latvian Investment and Development Agency – there is no evidence of such claims to date.

The promising economic cooperation between states was launched within the (then) '16+1' format, followed by the creation of a special investment committee, but in 2018–2019, with raising perception of threats and security, Latvia's political elite made a U-turn in its China policy. Now the rise of cultural, scientific and educational exchange, which was previously encouraged, is seen as part of China's bigger soft-power strategy.

In the meantime, the Latvian general public's view on the PRC is much less clear-cut. The general media coverage on China has grown considerably, but China's image is neither markedly positive nor too negative.

Figure 1 The context of articles related to China in the online news outlet Delfi.lv

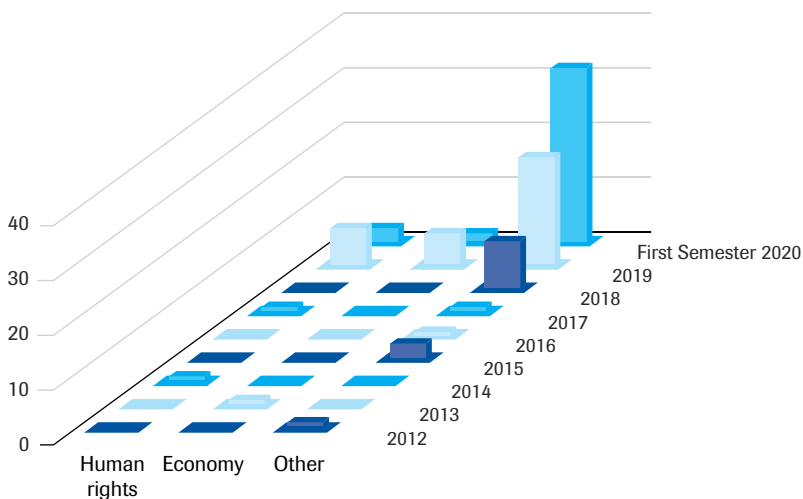
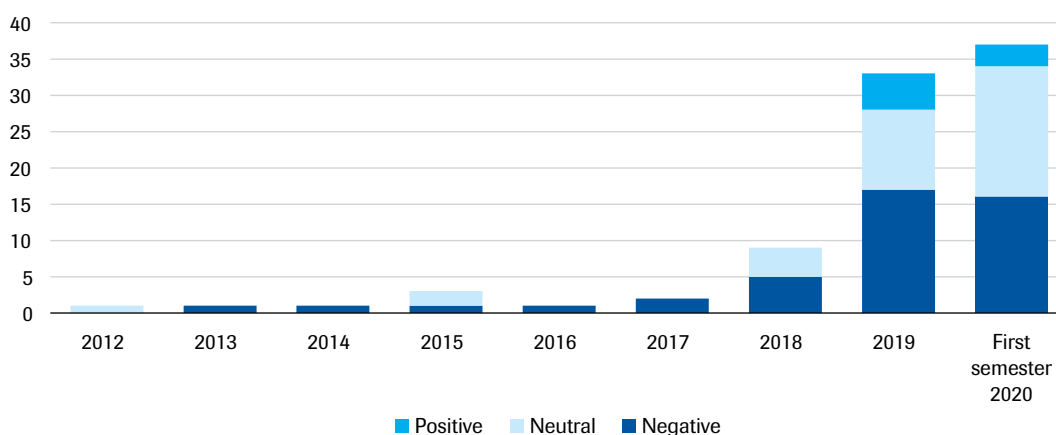


Figure 2 Attitude of China-related issues covered by the online news outlet Delfi.lv

A closer look at the gathered data shows that, on the issue of China in an international conflict, Latvian media either provide only factual information or are extremely critical of both sides and not only China. However, when the security issues relate to Latvia, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the EU, then China is considered 'the new Russia', because of its security services activities.

A large number of reports in 2020 relate to the COVID-19 pandemic, where opinions on China's global actions regarding COVID-19 differ. Chinese financing of the World Health Organization (WHO) is praised, especially after the United States terminated its payments to the WHO, whereas the quality of face masks bought from Chinese suppliers raised a national-level controversy.

Assessment of the effects of China's soft power in Latvia

Attitudes towards China are mixed in Latvia: while Beijing's actions are considered threatening to the existing international balance, economic and cultural cooperation are mostly seen as being attractive. Notably, according to the latest data, the Latvian public is the only populace within the EU that sees China as a predominately positive power.¹⁹¹ However, politicians' fears over security issues and debt traps have entered the discussion on potential economic gains, causing a noticeable shift in Latvia's policy towards China since 2018–2019. While trade, investments and logistics are generally interesting areas for cooperation with the PRC for Latvia, the push towards cooperation is fading, mostly because of lack of action and interest on China's side – so much so, in fact, that the most popular Latvian news outlet has created a segment to answer the question 'Why China is not coming' to analyse what has led to the loss of Beijing's enthusiasm about investing in Latvia.

Internationally, Latvia is interested in keeping its position with the EU and NATO policies in harmony, while at the same time having opportunities to cooperate with China. For instance, while the EU is sceptical of the '17+1' economic format, Latvia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkevičs emphasizes that China should not be categorized as black or white – 'a competitor or an ally'.¹⁹² He maintains that the EU should trust its member states to uphold EU values and, in the meantime, sustain balanced relations with China.

191 R.Q. Turcsányi *et al.* (2020), *European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Differences and Common Ground across the Continent*, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-report_3.pdf.

192 LETA (Latvian new agency) and *The Baltic Times* staff (2019), 'EU Should Find Balance in Relations with China while Protecting European Values', *The Baltic Times*, 2 April, https://www.baltictimes.com/eu_should_find_balance_in_relations_with_china_while_protecting_european_values/.

Conclusions

Beijing's most visible soft-power tool in Latvia is in the educational sphere, where Latvian students receive fully funded government scholarships to study in China – conditioned on fluency in the Chinese language. Language has significant meaning when analysing Beijing's activities in Latvia, particularly in its choice of the language of communication depending on the subject. For instance, cultural events are advertised mostly in Chinese or, rarely, in English, suggesting that China's focus is to maintain the existing Chinese-speaking community, but not necessarily to expand it.

On the other hand, the Latvian language is used predominantly when the Chinese Embassy reports international news on issues where the international community is divided. Furthermore, it always references Chinese state-owned media, which are available in English.

The Chinese Embassy itself is increasingly active in social media. Published content includes tourism promotion and posts about China's economic achievements, but there is not much focus on the PRC's relations with Latvia. On the contrary, however, the Chinese Embassy *is* active when China is criticized or is seen as a threat. Moreover, it keenly monitors Latvian news outlets and statements about China made by Latvia's political elite, condemning any portrayals of China in an excessively negative way.

There is a discord between Latvia's politicians and the general public on China's status. The common view is fairly similar: while five years ago Latvia was encouraging exchange with China and viewed cultural, scientific, education and economic cooperation as interesting for both countries, in recent years this has changed drastically. However, Latvia's general public sees China in a more positive light than do Latvian politicians. For Latvia's political institutions, previously praised economic investments and Confucius Institutes are now looked upon with scepticism and caution. Although there is no clear answer, they are considered as possible tools to strengthen China's global positioning.

From a solely economic partner for Latvia at first, China has now become a power whose military and geopolitical ambitions are seen as overshadowing the previous expectations of cooperation. The same tendencies can be found in Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports.

Ultimately, this raises questions about Latvia's political stance – whether it should label China as a partner and encourage cultural cooperation and economic development, or whether Riga should distance itself from Beijing and maintain its firm position in line with NATO and the EU. The answer is likely to be a combination of both, but finding the right balance will be a great challenge in the future.

Taking the stage, but missing the audience: China's soft power in the Netherlands

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Summary

Since the Dutch government published its long-awaited China strategy, 'The Netherlands and China: A New Balance',¹⁹⁴ in 2019, China has become a main topic of public debate to both Dutch elite and general audiences. This chapter presents the argument that China's soft-power policy to the Netherlands no longer operates just from a local-niche logic, but is in the process of incorporating a global-political logic, fuelled by rising Sino-American tensions as well as the COVID-19 crisis.

Business as usual? Soft-power policy according to a cultural-niche logic

Overall, the various long-standing activities of China's soft-power approach towards the Netherlands show an approach that is aimed at promoting Chinese culture and improving ties within niche fields.

Culture: showing China's best side

The Netherlands currently hosts Confucius Institutes in the cities of Groningen and Maastricht, since 2011 and 2016 respectively.¹⁹⁵ Leiden University hosted a Confucius Institute from 2007 to 2019, ending the partnership because 'the Confucius Institute's activities no longer align with the University's China strategy and the direction this has taken in recent years'.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, the Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands organizes and participates in cultural events, such as the celebrations of Chinese holidays.¹⁹⁷ In 2016, it also established the China Cultural Centre in the Hague to promote Chinese culture.¹⁹⁸ Another important tenet of Chinese soft power towards the Netherlands is panda diplomacy. In 2015, it was announced that the Netherlands would be allowed to have two pandas on loan from China.¹⁹⁹ The Chinese Embassy has since used these pandas heavily in its publicity.²⁰⁰ Moreover, as in many other countries, the Chinese community and Chinese students play a role in China's soft-power

193 The authors are very grateful to Ingrid d'Hooghe and Steven Langendonk for their input.

194 Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019), 'The Netherlands and China: A New Balance', May, <https://www.government.nl/documents/policy-notes/2019/05/15/china-strategy-the-netherlands--china-a-new-balance>.

195 Ingrid d'Hooghe and Brigitte Dekker (2020), 'China's invloed op onderwijs in Nederland: een verkenning [China's Influence on Education in the Netherlands: An Exploration]', Clingendael Institute, June, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/chinas-invloed-op-onderwijs-nederland>.

196 Leiden University (2019), 'Leiden University to End Agreement with Confucius Institute', February, <https://www.universiteit.leiden.nl/en/news/2019/02/confucius-instituut-en>.

197 *Stichting Chinese Culturele Evenementen Nederland* [Chinese Cultural Events Foundation in the Netherlands] (2020), 'Chinese New Year 2020 The Hague', <https://www.chineesnieuwjaar-den Haag.nl/en/>; and <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1358941.htm>.

198 China Cultural Centre in The Hague (2021), 'About Us', <http://www.cc Hague.org/en/aboutus.html>.

199 *CGTN* (2020), 'Chinese President, Dutch King Exchange Congratulations on Panda Birth', June, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-25/Chinese-president-Dutch-king-exchange-congratulations-on-panda-birth-RBK8Tu9W6l/index.html>.

200 See <https://twitter.com/ChinaEmbNL>.

approach. On his 2018 visit to the Hague, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was met with a jubilant crowd brought together by the Association of Chinese Students and Scholars in the Netherlands.²⁰¹ Sponsored by the Chinese Embassy's Education Department, the association is one of several assisting in and conducting the organization of cultural events, spreading a positive image of China in the Netherlands.

Niche: messaging to specific audiences

Many of China's soft-power activities are aimed at subnational-level governments or specific industries. This includes the establishment of 'sister ties' between Sino-Dutch cities and provinces, as well as visits and meetings between Chinese and Dutch delegations to strengthen ties.

Specific industries are often highlighted in statements by senior Chinese leaders. In his Keynote Speech at the China-Netherlands Business Forum in 2018, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang emphasized the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a business opportunity in ports, logistics and customs.²⁰² The Chinese government uses the BRI narrative to emphasize China as a reliable business partner. For example, the One Belt One Road Culture and Trade Promotion Association organizes international conferences and seminars on the BRI for businesses in, to name a few, Maastricht and Venray.²⁰³

Conflict and crisis: soft-power policy according to a global-political logic

Recent years have brought to the fore new aspects of Chinese engagement with Dutch public discourse. Two events triggered a change in China's soft-power policy, neither of which are specifically Dutch: the start of the US-China trade war in 2018 and the COVID-19 crisis of 2020. Both have revealed a more audacious form of Chinese soft-power efforts in the Netherlands.

Global: the Netherlands as a platform for Sino-US megaphone diplomacy

Xu's arrival in the Netherlands was accompanied by an advertisement in the Dutch quality newspaper *NRC*,²⁰⁴ in which Xu indirectly addresses US opposition to the use of Huawei's 5G capabilities in the Netherlands, writing:

Recently a country did something about a Chinese high-tech company under the guise of national security... [This] shows us how a country does everything to carry out political suppression. Without facts and proof. [...] What they did is anti-historical, anti-civilization, and is doomed to be unrecognized by the international community.

The advertorial set the tone for Xu's public diplomacy, which mostly consists of responses to criticism aimed at Chinese policies and activities to change the predominant negative narratives on China in

201 Bart Lelieveld (2018), 'Warm welkom en demonstratie bij bezoek Chinese premier [Warm Welcome and Demonstration at the Visit of the Chinese Prime Minister]', *Algemeen Dagblad*, October, <https://www.ad.nl/den-haag/warm-welkom-en-demonstratie-bij-bezoek-chinese-premier-a5aa798f/>.

202 *Xinhua* (2018), 'Full Text of Chinese Premier's Keynote Speech at China-Netherlands Business Forum', October, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/18/c_137541083.htm.

203 For example, see International Trade and Investment Center (2021), 'International Conference on Foreign Direct Investment in Europe: Extra Energy for Economic Expansion (E4)', <https://itic-global.com/international-conference-foreign-direct-investment-in-europe-extra-energy-for-economic-expansion-e4/>.

204 *NRC* (2019), 'De relatie tussen China en Nederland langs de juiste weg blijven bevorderen [Relations between China and the Netherlands Continue to be Promoted along the Right Path]', advertorial, May, [https://images.nrc.nl/IQ6SwkXdjoJgiXwtjSBfmedAYvk=/x/filters:no_upscale\(\)/s3/nrchub/clippings/NH/20190525/Advertisement-198947_116-jpeg-1.jpg?fbclid=IwAR1iKEhbL0p-9iRPE4iamZbhtZ1zAV4WihLkmDRfsQ1WBLqwU5gJkglhv0s](https://images.nrc.nl/IQ6SwkXdjoJgiXwtjSBfmedAYvk=/x/filters:no_upscale()/s3/nrchub/clippings/NH/20190525/Advertisement-198947_116-jpeg-1.jpg?fbclid=IwAR1iKEhbL0p-9iRPE4iamZbhtZ1zAV4WihLkmDRfsQ1WBLqwU5gJkglhv0s).

the Netherlands. This criticism comes from a variety of sources, such as Dutch media²⁰⁵ and research reports²⁰⁶ and, last but not least, the US Embassy in the Netherlands, which frames China as a threat to Dutch values and interests.

The Chinese Embassy's statements are published in English and/or Chinese on its official website²⁰⁷ and social media channels, which include Twitter,²⁰⁸ Facebook²⁰⁹ and WeChat. *De Volkskrant* refers to this as 'megaphone diplomacy', as China seeks influence in the Netherlands through its citizens and via (social) media by publicly spreading its own narrative.²¹⁰ The statements cover a range of topics, from China's human rights record,²¹¹ or the unrest in Hong Kong,²¹² to Chinese cyber espionage²¹³ and China's contribution to the global efforts to contain COVID-19.²¹⁴ However, the statements that are the most combative, and receive the most publicity, are those that respond directly to actions and statements by the US Embassy. Dutch newspaper.

In particular, tensions have run high concerning three issues: US lobbying to ban Huawei's 5G technology;²¹⁵ its efforts to stop the export of a high-tech extreme ultra-violet (EUV) light machine to China by Dutch company ASML over security concerns;²¹⁶ and its criticism of China's handling of the

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- 205 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Response from Ambassador Xu Hong to the Recent Dutch Media Report on Masks', March, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1763332.htm>.
- 206 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Response from Chinese Embassy Spokesperson to Dutch Media Reports on Chinese Students and Researchers in the Netherlands', July, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1796763.htm>.
- 207 See <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/>.
- 208 See <https://twitter.com/prcambnl?lang=en>; <https://twitter.com/ChinaEmbNL/status/1275789991256432640>.
- 209 See <https://www.facebook.com/chinaembnl/>.
- 210 Arnout Brouwers (2020), 'De opmars van de megafoondiplomat: 'Dit mes wordt heel snel bot'', *De Volkskrant*, February, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/de-opmars-van-de-megafoondiplomat-dit-mes-wordt-heel-snel-bot~be8bf06e/>.
- 211 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'What's False and What's True on China-related Human Rights Matters', July, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1794651.htm>.
- 212 See among others: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on the NPC's Decision to Include Hong Kong SAR National Security Legislation in the Agenda of the Upcoming Session', May, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1781405.htm>; Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on the Hong Kong-related Decision Adopted by the NPC', March, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/wjbyrth/t1860231.htm>.
- 213 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2019), 'Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on Dutch Media's Reports on Cyber Security Issues Related to China', December, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1726283.htm>.
- 214 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Arrogance and Prejudice are the Biggest Sins in the Way of Winning the War Against Coronavirus: An Open Letter to the Editorial Department of *De Volkskrant*', April, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1768640.htm>; Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'H.E. Xu Hong's Speech at the Webinar on COVID-19 Hosted by the *Diplomat Magazine*', May, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1781247.htm>; Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Who is Responsible for the Spread of COVID-19?', April, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1766656.htm>.
- 215 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2019), 'Remarks of the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands on the Demand of the US Ambassador to the Netherlands to the Dutch Government to Ban the Use of Huawei Equipment in the Construction of the 5G Network', June, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1670382.htm>.
- 216 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy Speaks on the Remarks of US Ambassador Pressing the Dutch Government to Block the EUV Machine Exportation to China', January, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1733600.htm>; Johan Leupen and Sandra Olsthoorn (2020), "'We zouden niet willen dat Nederland zwicht onder de politieke druk van de Amerikanen'" ["We Would Not Want the Netherlands to Yield to the Political Pressure of the Americans"], *Financieele Dagblad*, January, <https://fd.nl/economie-politiek/1330711/we-zouden-niet-willen-dat-nederland-zwicht-onder-de-politieke-druk-van-de-amerikanen>.

COVID-19 virus.²¹⁷ The Chinese Embassy accused the United States of exerting political pressure on the Dutch government, releasing a press statement stridently titled 'A Kind Reminder to Ambassador Hoekstra: Mind Your Proper Duties', which said:

Ambassador Hoekstra seems to enjoy slandering China and undermining Sino-Dutch relations. [...] We kindly suggest Ambassador Hoekstra does his homework before [he] openly comments on China.²¹⁸

The Chinese Embassy's statements are generally hit-and-miss because of lack of understanding about how to best reach the Dutch audience, often receiving a lukewarm response. Moreover, China's soft-power approach to Dutch audiences is not just about presenting China as an attractive partner for politics and business; it increasingly seems to reason from the assumption that a soft-power 'loss' for the United States is a 'win' for China if the US loss is greater than the damage done to China's own image in joining the mud fight.

Political: soft-power quagmires in the times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has shown Dutch audiences a China that attempts to showcase its political system as effective and superior to others at times, yet seems at other times more preoccupied with offering criticism as a line of rhetorical defence.

A first aspect refers to the topic of anti-Chinese racism, which the Chinese Embassy seized upon as an opportunity to fend off some criticisms. Since the spread of COVID-19, the Dutch National Discrimination hotline has recorded a record number of instances of anti-Asian racism. A spike was registered during the *Carnaval* celebrations (the Dutch Mardi Gras carnival) in late February 2020, when several callers reported people dressed up as 'Chinese viruses' in offensive costumes. Previously, on 3 February 2020, Chinese Ambassador Xu gave an interview on the topic of anti-Chinese sentiments in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹⁹ The newspaper article resulting from the interview emphasized Ambassador Xu's call to limit free speech, instead of the message that the Chinese Embassy opposed racism, and was headlined as such:

Chinese Ambassador Xu Hong warns: if he sees 'hurtful' comics in Dutch media about the coronavirus, he expects the Dutch government to hand out punishments. [...] His message is clear: China is not waiting for criticism.

This explains the Chinese Embassy's preference for advertorials and messaging via its own social media over interviews with the Dutch media, in which it has less control over the narrative.

In addition, the PRC showed a fairly audacious attempt at 'face-mask diplomacy' in the Netherlands. In March 2020, three Chinese state-owned airline companies donated face masks to KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, accompanied by an op-ed by Ambassador Xu, in which he cited the Dutch philosopher Erasmus – 'Give light, and the darkness will disappear of itself' – to stress the importance of the Netherlands working together with China. Later on, in a call with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, China's Premier Li said that China was willing to deliver medical supplies to the Netherlands.

217 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'Chinese Ambassador's Open Letter to the Dutch Friends', May, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1775542.htm>.

218 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2020), 'A Kind Reminder to Ambassador Hoekstra: Mind Your Proper Duties', April, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1765933.htm>.

219 Marije Vlaskamp (2020), 'Chinese ambassadeur over coronavirus: "Landen gebruiken deze ramp als politiek wapen tegen ons" [Chinese Ambassador on the Coronavirus: "Countries are Using this Disaster as a Political Weapon Against Us"]', *De Volkskrant*, February, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/chinese-ambassadeur-over-coronavirus-landen-gebruiken-deze-ramp-als-politiek-wapen-tegen-ons~b61c7f66/>.

Moreover, he said he hoped that the Dutch government would protect the 'safety and the convenience for the living of Chinese citizens [...] in the Netherlands with concrete measures'.²²⁰ This expression of conditionality seems to be unprecedented for Chinese leaders addressing the Netherlands.

Hit and miss? Assessing the impact of China's soft-power policy on Dutch audiences

When it comes to assessing China's soft-power policy, different responses by Dutch audiences to various aspects of the approach should be distinguished.

China's baseline soft-power policy, which focuses on culture and education, is received steadily in a more politicized manner. A number of reports have been published that do not discourage Sino-Dutch cooperation in these areas per se, but do warn against certain risks and dangers of becoming more entangled with Chinese influence. The University of Groningen, which hosts the most active of the Confucius Institutes, was forced to abandon plans to build a branch campus in Yantai, Shandong province, when these plans were heavily criticized by students and faculty, not in the least because these groups feared Chinese Communist Party (CCP) oversight on education.²²¹ Such events are in line with a recent report on Chinese influence operations within Dutch education and research sectors, which states that self-censorship is a problem among Chinese researchers in the Netherlands that is actively stimulated by the Chinese Embassy through various means. The avoidance of research topics that supposedly hurt the Chinese government's image has already led to the 'deterioration of the Dutch knowledge position on China', so the report states.²²²

Although most efforts to spread the BRI narrative happened at a subnational level, recent research shows some evidence that it has indeed contributed to a stronger Chinese voice of influence on national-level policy-making. Steven Langendonk argues that:

[The Belt and Road] narrative's reception in different subnational cohorts tilted important elements of the bargaining game to China's favour.²²³

In a survey conducted by the Clingendael Institute in January 2021 among approximately 9,300 Dutch respondents, China's rise as a superpower was ranked as the second biggest threat to European security after pressure from immigrants on Europe's external borders.²²⁴ On a scale from 1 (low impact) to 10 (high impact), the trend averaged a score of 7.43. Overall, the Dutch respondents across the political spectrum tended to share an increasingly negative perception of China. In another Clingendael survey conducted in February 2020 and published in March 2021, an overwhelming majority of

220 *Xinhua* (2020), 'Chinese, Dutch PMs Pledge Strengthened Cooperation amid COVID-19 Fight', April, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/07/c_138955277.htm.

221 Eva Hulscher (2017), 'Communistische Partij krijgt plek in bestuur RUG-campus China [Communist Party Gets a Place on the Board of the University of Groningen China Campus]', *RTV Noord*, November, <https://www.rtvnoord.nl/nieuws/186608/Communistische-Partij-krijgt-plek-in-bestuur-RUG-campus-China>.

222 D'Hooghe and Dekker (2020), 'China's invloed op onderwijs in Nederland' <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/chinas-invloed-op-onderwijs-nederland>.

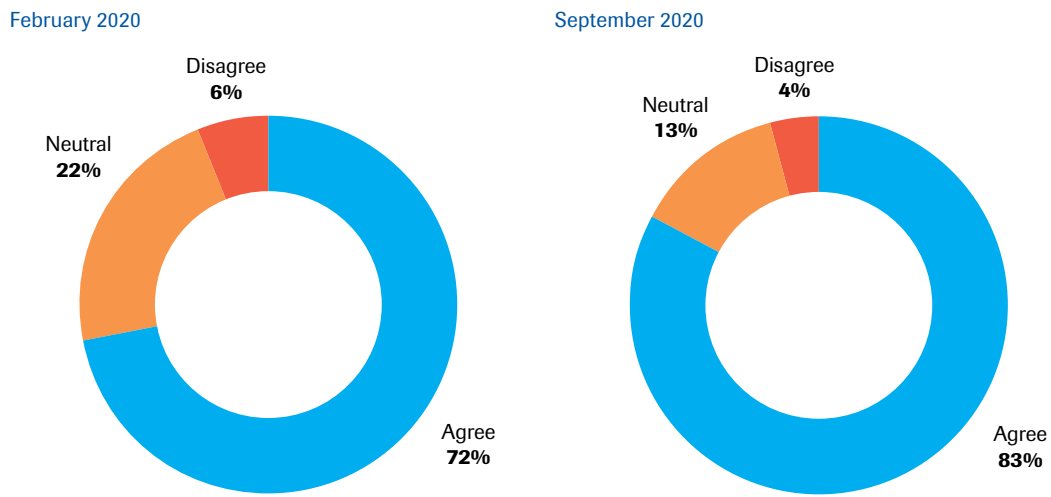
223 Steven Langendonk (2020), 'Discourse Power as a Means to "Struggle for Position": A Critical Case Study of the Belt and Road Narrative's Effects on Foreign Policy Formulation in the Netherlands', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 241–260, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-019-09649-4>.

224 Christopher Houtkamp, Bob Deen and Monika Sie Dhian Ho (2021), 'Nederlanders bezorgd over buitenland in de aanloop naar de verkiezingen: Polarisatie over migratie en klimaat, consensus over China' [Dutch Concerned about Abroad in the Run-up to the Elections: Polarization about Migration and Climate, Consensus about China]', Foreign Affairs Barometer Alert, Clingendael Institute, February, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/nederlanders-bezorgd-over-buitenland-aanloop-naar-verkiezingen>.

72 per cent of the nearly 23,000 Dutch respondents agreed that the Chinese regime is reprehensible because it violates the human rights and privacy rights of its population on a large scale.²²⁵ The Chinese government's reputation only worsened over time, as another survey in September 2020 (also covered in the March 2021 report) showed that 83 per cent of the nearly 15,000 Dutch respondents indicated that they agreed with this view when faced with the same question.

Figure 1 Survey results of Dutch public opinion on China held in February and September 2020

The Chinese regime is reprehensible because it violates the human rights and privacy rights of its population on a large scale



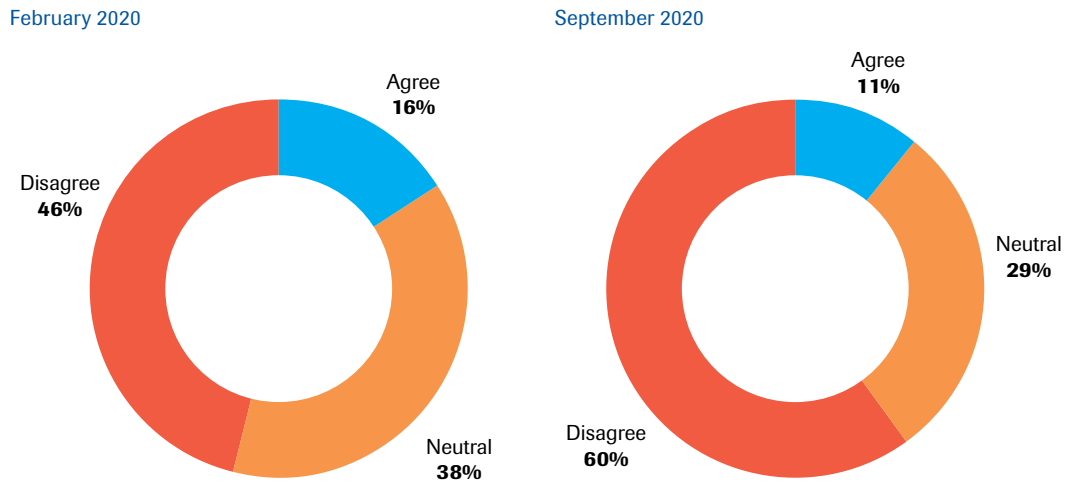
Source: Frans-Paul van der Putten, Christopher Houtkamp, Teun van der Laan and Monika Sie Dhian Ho (2021), *Dutch Views of China: Unfavourable and Deteriorating*, Barometer Alert, Clingendael Institute, March, p. 8, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Barometer_Alert_Dutch_views_%20of_China_March2021.pdf.

Moreover, in September 2020, 60 per cent of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the Chinese regime's performance is actually not so bad since it is lifting over one billion people out of poverty. In February 2020, only 46 per cent disagreed with this statement, showing that this argument has not been effective in improving the Chinese regime's image in the Netherlands.

225 Frans-Paul van der Putten, Christopher Houtkamp, Teun van der Laan and Monika Sie Dhian Ho (2021), *Dutch Views of China: Unfavourable and Deteriorating*, Barometer Alert, Clingendael Institute, March, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/dutch-views-china>.

Figure 2 Survey results of Dutch public opinion on China in February and September 2020

The Chinese regime's performance is actually not so bad, since it is lifting over a billion people out of poverty

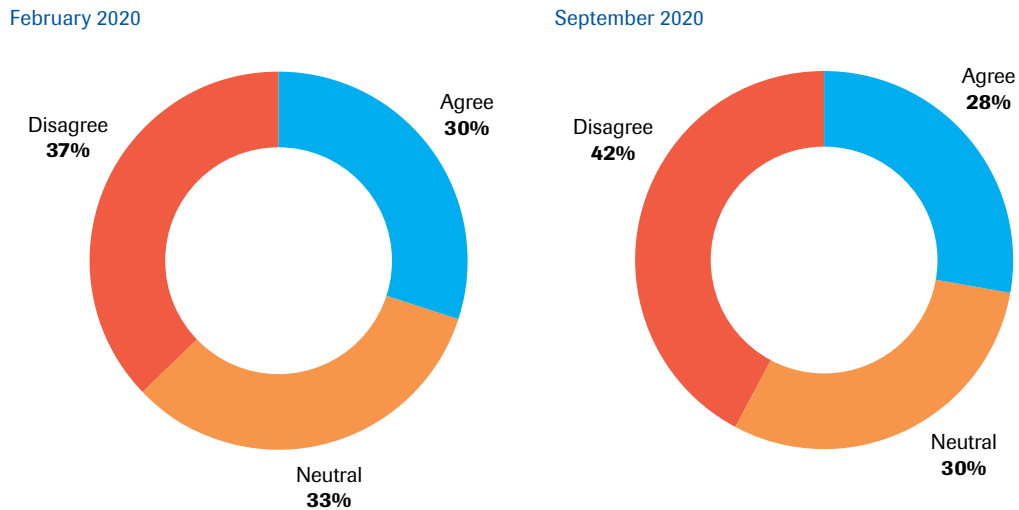


Source: Van der Putten *et al.* (2021), *Dutch Views of China*, p. 9, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Barometer_Alert_Dutch_views_%20of_China_March2021.pdf.

Furthermore, in September 2020, 42 per cent disagreed that China's economic growth and willingness to invest in the Netherlands presented major opportunities, with 30 per cent expressing neutrality and 28 per cent agreeing with the statement. This could suggest that respondents do not believe the Chinese government's assurances that economic relations with China are mutually beneficial as opposed to a one-way street. It is unclear whether and to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in the worsening perceptions of China, although it is evident that Dutch scepticism of China predates the pandemic.

Figure 3 Survey results of Dutch public opinion on China in February and September 2020

China is growing fast economically and wants to invest in the Netherlands. This presents major economic opportunities for the Netherlands



Source: Van der Putten *et al.* (2021), *Dutch Views of China*, p. 9, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Barometer_Alert_Dutch_views_%20of_China_March2021.pdf.

In conclusion, public diplomacy efforts by the Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands should mainly be seen in light of China's competition with the United States. Moreover, it shows a more brazen style of public diplomacy that is still in its experimental phase, leading to mixed responses. Recent years have seen Chinese diplomats take the global stage with so-called 'megaphone diplomacy', but this still often fails to reach the Dutch audience.

China's lukewarm soft power in Poland

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Summary

China's soft power and public diplomacy activities in Poland are not specifically tailored for the country. The People's Republic of China uses similar tools to those that it uses worldwide, including new instruments such as social media platforms (like Twitter) that are not publicly accessible in China itself. Lack of controversies about China's soft power in Poland means that there is no specific debate about this notion within Polish civil society and Polish authorities. However, the rather positive and indifferent attitude towards China that has been presented by Polish society and the mostly neutral media coverage of recent years are worsening because of the China's rising global assertiveness.

Overview of China's soft-power tools

What's old?

In Poland, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been using similar soft-power tools to those that it uses in other countries.²²⁶ The most visible instruments are Confucius Institutes (CI).²²⁷ There are six CIs and one Confucius Classroom in Poland. What is more, the Warsaw liaison for the first CI (at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow) was established in Poland in 2018. Confucius Institutes are responsible for promoting Chinese language, but also for organizing conferences not only about Chinese culture or history, but also current politics, etc. CIs are responsible for offering scholarships as well. Together with scholarships offered by the Chinese government (a result of an inter-governmental agreement), these are becoming one of the most important soft-power dimensions of China's charm offensive. Recently, the short-term scholarships offered by the Chinese side (the Chinese Embassy in Poland, and the ambassador himself, are most eagerly involved in the recruitment process) are becoming more popular among young Poles.²²⁸

Other soft-power instruments include celebrations of Chinese festivals, such as lunches or dinners in the Chinese Embassy in Warsaw at Chinese New Year (Spring Festival), anniversaries of the establishment of the PRC (1 October) and Chinese film presentations, for example about the situation in Xinjiang (which are attended by Polish scholars, experts and journalists), etc. In addition, during high-level bilateral visits, articles by Chinese leaders (such as Xi Jinping) are published in Polish daily newspapers. There are also various activities across Poland, such as visits, speeches and launching ceremonies, organized and attended by Chinese Ambassador.

226 This chapter uses notions of soft power, public diplomacy and, to some extent, propaganda – interchangeably, as it is difficult to distinguish precisely among the notions when it comes to Chinese activities. The author broadly defines all the notions as governmental efforts to influence other countries and their societies to support China's political objectives and create a positive image of China.

227 M. Przychodniak (2018), 'Confucius Institutes as a Tool for Promoting China's Interests', *PISM Bulletin*, 147 (1720), 26 October.

228 A. Bachulska (2020), 'When Beijing Met Warsaw: A Story of Continuing Courtship', in I. Karaskova, A. Bachulska, B. Kelemen, T. Matura, F. Sebok and M. Simlacik, *China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe: The Logic and Power of Chinese Influence*, Policy Paper for the MapInfluenCE project, Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), June, p. 39.

It is also worth mentioning the Chinese media activities in Poland. The rather old instrument is the Polish Section of *China Radio International* (CRI), which presents information in Polish, but mostly translated from *Xinhua* or focused on Chinese propaganda. It seems that Polish society's consciousness about the CRI and its activities is rather low. Since 2009, there has also been a Chinese publishing house in Poland – Time Marszałek Group (TMG), which publishes Chinese propaganda books. This entity was created by Adam Marszałek (an owner of Poland's Adam Marszałek Publishing House) and China's Anhui Publishing Group. TMG receives subsidies from China to publish selected Chinese books in the Polish language. Despite the fact that these books are not very popular, they are sent to libraries and their targets are students, young researchers and journalists.²²⁹

One specific dimension of soft power is cooperation at the local level – the so-called 'paradiplomacy' phenomenon.²³⁰ In China, however, the concept of paradiplomacy is not used, as the relations of regions (provinces and cities) with foreign entities are included within public diplomacy or viewed as soft power or people-to-people relations. Regional relations are focused on economic and social issues and are aimed at shaping positive opinions of China in the world. This dimension seems to be an important element of China's soft power in Poland. When it comes to tools, they include: the establishment of offices representing Polish regions in China, such as an office of the Łódzkie *voivodeship* (province) in Chengdu, China; partner regions and cities (such as China's Anhui province with Poland's Dolnośląskie *voivodeship*), as well as establishing direct railway cargo lines (for example, Łódź–Chengdu), and organizing fairs and exhibitions (expos) dedicated to the partner regions (for example, expos in Chengdu in Sichuan province and Ningbo as a 'showroom' for products from Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland). Other important activities by Chinese regions are visits by representatives of the provinces, one example being the visit of the Party Secretary of Sichuan province to Łódź and Kutno in 2016, as well as the establishment of offices for Chinese regions abroad (for example, Sichuan province has an office in Łódź), participation in regional forums, both bilateral (such as the Poland–China Regional Forums) and multilateral (such as associations of local leaders of the '17+1' grouping). Another tool is comprised of regional partners who, with their profile, meet the needs of a given province, for example, in terms of export opportunities (such as Sichuan province's cooperation with Central Europe, including Poland).²³¹

When it comes to China's soft power, it is worth mentioning the China-led '17+1' formula (cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe, which has existed since 2012 as '16+1' and in 2019 enlarged to '17+1' with Greece) and China's soft-power activities within this format. Although all the activities are focused on all seventeen Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, and not specifically on Poland, they may have an impact on Polish society, especially Polish youth. Under '17+1', there are various meetings (about sport, music, film, martial arts, books, theatre and folks arts, etc.) dedicated to young people. It seems that the aim is to create a positive perception of, and opinion on, China in the long-term perspective when these young people become political leaders in their countries.

What's new?

China has expanded its soft-power toolkit in the last two years. The PRC uses traditional and new media more extensively. In the case of traditional media (including websites), more interviews are

229 See <https://time.marszalek.com.pl/o-nas.html> (in Polish only), and the presentation by Ł. Sarek given during the webinar 'Mapping China's Footprint in the World', organized by Synopsis, 7 October 2020, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/workshop3/>.

230 Paradiplomacy is the relations of international subnational entities whose goal is to achieve economic, cultural and political benefits. See A. Kuznetsov (2015), 'Theory and Practice of Paradiplomacy', New York: Routledge. In this paragraph, the author refers to the report by A. Skorupska and J. Szczudlik (eds) (2019), *Subnational Dimension of EU–China Relations*, PISM Report, August, pp. 5, 37 and 39–40.

231 D. Mierzejewski (2018), 'The Roles of Local Governments in the New Silk Road', in C. Mendes (ed.), *China's New Silk Road: An Emerging World Order*, New York: Routledge.

given and articles written by China's Ambassador to Poland Liu Guangyuan. This is apparently an attempt to promote Chinese policy and narrative about the current hot topics in a positive way, such as the situation in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, ties with the United States, dealing with COVID-19, and 5G, etc., but also Chinese political events (such as the recent 5th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party), political initiatives (including the Belt and Road Initiative) and slogans (such as 'community of shared destiny for mankind'). There are also examples of the so-called 'inserts' in the Polish press – articles that are in fact commercial advertisements, with the aim of praising China's leadership for its domestic and foreign policies.²³²

When it comes to new media or the internet, the most visible change tackles those social media that are currently blocked in the PRC – mostly Facebook and Twitter. This is an example of a wider trend in China's public diplomacy, namely the launch of social media accounts for Chinese embassies and ambassadors.²³³ In the case of Poland, the Chinese Embassy's Facebook account was activated in August 2019, and Twitter in July 2019. Additionally, China's Ambassador to Poland Liu Guangyuan has had his own Twitter account since March 2020. Recently, the Polish section of *CRI* has also been more active, mostly on Facebook. Both Facebook and Twitter are widely used to disseminate China's foreign policy goals and activities, as well as to respond to (and/or correct) negative opinions about China's domestic or international behaviour.

The new elements in China's soft-power approach are also noticeable since the COVID-19 outbreak. The most visible is the extensive usage of social media to promote two main messages: China's successful fight against the virus, with President Xi Jinping as the mastermind; and that China is helping Poland and the world. When it comes to China's assistance for Poland, the PRC offered medical supplies, both commercially and as a donation. The Chinese Embassy in Warsaw and Ambassador Liu himself have posted extensively via social media about transports of medical supplies to Poland.²³⁴

Since the pandemic's outbreak in early 2020, Twitter has also been used by the Chinese and US ambassadors to Poland for direct and public exchanges of opinions (in English and Polish), mostly about COVID-19 management, which often are rather sharp.²³⁵ Poland is not involved in this conversation, which may give the impression that the country is a playing ground between China and the United States. In that sense, the two major powers are both trying to secure the upper hand when it comes to their right to speak and the prevalence of their narrative.

Pandemic-related new soft-power tools also include letters and report-like documents (in English and/or in Polish) about China's domestic – including economic – situation and its successful management of the health crisis, including for example the 30-page document in Polish titled 'Myths about China's Role in the Coronavirus Outbreak Spread by the United States', which was published earlier by *Xinhua*.²³⁶ It seems that such documents are prepared by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Chinese Embassy and sent to public institutions, think tanks and the media.

One new feature of China's soft power during the pandemic that is under the remit of local cooperation is a direct supply of medical goods from Chinese local governments (for example, from Sichuan and Guangdong provinces and Hongbo city) to their Polish partners (such as Łódzkie and Zachodniopomorskie *voivodships* and Opole city,) as well as video conferences to share experience

232 See, for example, the insert titled 'Xi Jinping: The Man who Brings Chinese Reforms into a New Era', which was published in *Rzeczpospolita*, one of Poland's main daily newspapers, in December 2018.

233 M. Przychodniak (2019), 'China's Public Diplomacy on Social Media', *PISM Bulletin*, 183 (1931), 20 December.

234 For more, see the Polish chapter in John Seaman and Marc Julienne (eds) (2020), *COVID-19 in Europe-China Relations: A Country-level Analysis*, ETNC Special Report, 29 April, pp. 50–53.

235 P. Uznańska and M. Fila (2020), 'The New US-China Battlefield over the COVID-19 Narrative: Poland', *The Diplomat*, 22 May.

236 Ibidem, and the report's source document: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/10/c_139044103.htm?fbclid=IwAR0yL7FeYxW0n6vZF4ghLdpqr0X_-EJdvrplErYUqllIOVjwUPSvPtUiE3AU.

in combating the virus (such as between Anhui province and Dolnośląskie *voivodship*). This local dimension of assistance in combating COVID-19 was strengthened further in the second half of 2020 during the second wave of the pandemic in Poland.

For now, China is less active in offering assistance at the central level, but it is worth mentioning that in early March 2021 China offered Poland its vaccines against COVID-19. However, this was Poland's initiative, as during a telephone conversation between Poland's President Andrzej Duda and China's Chairman Xi Jinping, Poland expressed its interests in purchasing Chinese vaccines because of problems with the supply of an adequate number of 'Western' vaccines.²³⁷

Towards more critical perception, responses and assessment

Opinion polls

Opinion polls about Polish society's perception of China do not specify whether or to what extent the opinion is a result of the PRC's soft-power efforts. Nevertheless, according to Eurobarometer in 2016, 2017 and 2018, Poland presented a rather positive perception of China: 42 per cent, 38 per cent and 42 per cent, respectively.²³⁸ The recent poll that was conducted and published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in June 2020 with the question 'How has your view of China changed during the coronavirus crisis?' resulted in the following: 14 per cent of Poles said that their views have improved, 43 per cent that their views have worsened and 44 per cent said that their views have remained the same.²³⁹ Similar results are presented by the recent poll conducted by the Central European Institute of Asian Research in September and October 2020: around 41.5 per cent of the Polish public views China negatively and very negatively, with 31.7 per cent positively and very positively. This poll also shows the change of feelings in Poland towards China: 34 per cent of Poles held worsened, 51.4 per cent had not changed and 14.6 per cent had improved their views.²⁴⁰ The reason why more people perceive China negatively might be the worldwide debate about Beijing's responsibility for the spread of COVID-19 globally, as well as China's rising global ascendance (including military power), combined with Beijing's rising assertiveness. Human right abuses and China's negative impact on democracy in other countries also play a role in China's perception in Poland as an untrustworthy partner.²⁴¹

Media coverage

When it comes to media coverage, the picture seems to correspond with opinion polls. According to the international ChinfluencE project, which has analysed Polish media on the subject of China in an economic and political context, with slightly more than 2,000 outputs published between January 2010 and June 2018, the results showed that views on China are mostly neutral (58 per cent) and positive (39 per cent), while negative assessments are marginal – only 3 per cent.²⁴² It should be highlighted that among these media coverages, most have a purely informative character without any specific

237 'Rozmowa z Przewodniczącym Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej Xi Jinpingiem [Conversation with the Chairman of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping]', 1 March 2021, www.prezydent.pl.

238 Skorupska and Szczudlik (2019), *Subnational Dimension of EU-China Relations*, pp. 12–13.

239 S. Dennison and P. Zerka (2020), 'Together in Trauma: Europeans and the World after COVID-19', *Policy Brief*, 29 June.

240 A. Brona, R.Q. Turcsányi, M. Šimalčík, K. Kironská and R. Sedláková (2021), 'Polish Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Desirable Partner versus a Source of Concern', March, <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PL-poll-report.pdf>.

241 *Ibidem*.

242 'Polish Media Analysis', MapInfluencE (formerly ChinfluencE) project, <https://www.mapinfluence.eu/en/polish-media-analysis/>.

assessment or emotional overtone (positive and/or negative). The frequency of China-related media publications rises during high-level visits and/or China and Europe-related summits.

When it comes to the Polish media debate on China during the COVID-19 pandemic, we find both positive and negative attitudes. Positive opinions are presented by epidemiologists and virologists, who often comment on the epidemic's situation, both in Poland and globally. They generally praise China for its quick lockdown and its activities to prevent the spread of the virus, such as social distancing, but they present a purely medical point of view. There are also negative opinions, mostly among China experts who perceive the PRC through the prism of political issues.

Authorities' response

China's soft-power approach towards Poland is not a topic of debate within the Polish authorities. One possible reason is the fact that there is no specific aggressive and/or unacceptable Chinese behaviour in Poland similar to, for example, the Swedish case. So far, there have been no controversies about the Confucius Institutes, China's ambassador to Poland is not as outspoken as in Sweden (at least in the public domain) and there is no noticeable (or public) China-led disinformation operation in Poland, etc. Even after the arrest in Warsaw of a Chinese citizen, a Huawei employee, in January 2019, China's reaction was rather soft, with the PRC's harsh criticism instead directed at the United States and not Poland as such.²⁴³ One reason could be that China did not want to make the Huawei issue high on the agenda, to avoid a spill-over effect and push Poland towards the United States, bearing in mind the close Poland-US ties. It seems that the Twitter conversations between the Chinese and US ambassadors to Poland is the second stage (after the Chinese Embassy's statements on its website in 2019) of US-China tensions that are visible on Polish soil. So far, there is not any official reaction from the Polish authorities.

The change in the Polish government's attitude towards China since 2017, from an enthusiastic to rather cautious approach, might be only partly connected with China's soft power in Poland. The main reason for this change is China's general or worldwide behaviour, such as its controversial investments in critical infrastructure or high-tech industries in other countries (such as the purchase of German robotics maker Kuka by China's Midea in 2016), the centralization of power in Xi Jinping's hands, lack of tangible results for Poland from the '17+1' format or the bilateral strategic partnership (such as Poland's rising trade deficit with China and less-dynamic high-level political dialogue), as well as close Poland-US ties under the former Trump administration.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Poland presented a goodwill gesture to China with the best example of a sympathy letter sent by Polish President Andrzej Duda to Xi Jinping in February 2020, or the telephone conversations between heads of state, prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs (in March and April 2020) about Poland's, and later China's, assistance with medical supplies.²⁴⁴ Even after the information that many of the Chinese surgical masks that Poland has purchased have fake certificates, there was not a heated negative debate about China. However, in the second wave of the virus in Europe in late 2020, the offer of Chinese assistance for Poland at the central level was not so apparent or promoted as it was in March and April 2020. Chinese attempts at pursuing vaccine diplomacy in Poland are mostly a response to Poland's consideration of purchasing Chinese vaccines.

It should also be underscored that the so-called 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' of the PRC in 2020 was among the reasons for critical statements about China by Polish politicians (including opposition

243 This refers to Chinese Embassy statements on its website after the Huawei employee's arrest, Pompeo's visit to Poland in February 2019, and the US-Poland joint declaration on 5G signed in September 2019.

244 See the Polish chapter in the ETNC Special Report by Seaman and Julienne (eds) (2020), *COVID-19 in Europe-China Relations*.

parties) and authorities. There are several noticeable examples. China's work on the National Security Law in Hong Kong led a group of Polish Members of Parliament to prepare a resolution that the PRC is seriously limiting Hong Kong's autonomy and breaking the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. The resolution appeals to China to withdraw the law. The document was prepared on 4 June 2020 – a symbolic date for both countries: the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, while in Poland the day of the first semi-free elections that started the end of Poland's communist regime. Moreover, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki published an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, in which he argued that security in Europe – in the sense of the upcoming 5G rollout – should be based on cooperation with the US and that 5G providers must not be controlled by authoritarian regimes – an apparent hint to China.²⁴⁵ Then at the end of 2020, Poland also expressed its doubts about the prompt conclusion of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) negotiations.²⁴⁶

However, the first months of 2021 might be assessed as a slight change of Poland's approach with regard to China. Polish President Duda's presence at the '17+1' online summit on 9 February, his telephone conversation with China's President Xi on 1 March, and two telephone calls between the Polish and Chinese ministers of foreign affairs are the best examples.

Conclusions

China does not pursue a specific soft-power approach towards Poland. All activities are, rather, part of China's wider public diplomacy strategy and Poland is not an important target in this domain. This leads to the conclusion that China's soft power in Poland is lukewarm.

Despite the fact that China was perceived in Poland rather positively in recent years, while Poland's media were mostly neutral, the PRC's recent assertive or even confrontational approach globally – such as its disinformation campaign over COVID-19, or limiting Hong Kong's autonomy – are reasons for worsening perceptions of China in Poland.

A slight change in Polish authorities' approach towards China does not mean the modification of Poland's policy towards Beijing. Poland wants to keep channels open to cooperation with the PRC. However, occasional positive references to China by the Polish authorities are used by Beijing to strengthen its soft power and public diplomacy. This serves as part of the 'Tell China's Stories Well' (*jiang hao zhongguo gushi*) campaign.

245 M. Morawiecki (2020), 'All of Europe Must Stand with America on 5G', *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 July; See also: [Marcin Przychodniak](#) (2021), 'The Rough "Strategic Relationship" between Poland and China', China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), 25 January, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-rough-strategic-relationship-between-poland-and-china/>

246 See <https://twitter.com/RauZbigniew/status/1341454786747641859>.

Portugal–China: passions and interests crafting ‘special’ relations?

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Summary

Portugal and China have maintained friendly, stable bilateral relations since diplomatic ties were (re-)established in 1975. Against the backcloth of close historical and cultural ties and pioneering East–West contacts, these relations have gained successive new impetuses over time, on account of such events as the successful handover process for Macao in the late 1990s, or the impressive flow of Chinese capital into Portugal in the last decade, which has placed the small and troubled peripheral EU country among the top recipients of China’s outbound foreign direct investment. The preferences and behaviour of Portuguese actors hence depend on these past and present dynamics (as well as on future expectations), rather than on any specific soft-power strategy orchestrated by China’s government.

The (soft) power of history

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity for what may be outlined as a Chinese soft-power operation in Portugal. China’s assistance to Portugal has included donations in the form of medical and personal protection equipment, as well as high-level institutional support to accelerate bureaucratic processes related to the import of equipment from China. Widely reported in the media and praised by several opinion-makers and politicians, the power of Chinese solidarity towards Portugal has been strengthened by the EU’s initial indecision and scant action, which, as argued elsewhere,²⁴⁷ left a void for China to fill. However, it is hard to discern any explicit attempt, either prompted by Chinese officials or local politicians, to instrumentalize China’s help, in contrast with what happened in many other parts of Europe. In fact, on the one hand, the traditional low profile of the Chinese Embassy in Portugal has been maintained, despite a pair of opinion pieces sketched by Chinese Ambassador Cai Run that were published in major Portuguese newspapers, praising China’s help as a response to the support that Portugal gave to China when the virus first emerged in China’s Hubei province.²⁴⁸ On the other hand, a traditionally disengaged political debate on China and apathetic public opinion have prevailed. The Portuguese media’s scattered interest in the twists and turns of the role played by China in the COVID-19 crisis did not dispel the perception of overall detachment. The US–China clash over COVID-19, however, seems to be causing an increased willingness to discuss Portugal–China bilateral relations in the context of the challenging balance of the China–Portugal–US triangle. Nevertheless, the debate is far from widespread, namely across political organizations.

Those engaged in searching for the very *raison d’être* of Chinese solidarity, even without neglecting the repayment logic put forth by Chinese Ambassador Cai, would hardly avoid bumping into the historical

247 C. Rodrigues (2020), ‘Portugal: “Everything is Worthwhile if the Soul is Not Small” – Relations with China amid COVID-19’, in J. Seaman (ed.), *COVID-19 and Europe–China Relations: A Country-level Analysis*, European Think-Tank Network on China.

248 ‘China will never forget the vote of solidarity with the Chinese community in Portugal unanimously approved by Lisbon City Council, as well as the game of the Portuguese 1st League between *Benfica* and *Sporting de Braga*, in which a panel saying ‘Go China, We Are Together’ in Chinese was displayed in the field. China will also never forget that the Portuguese, from the broadest circles, donated medical supplies or wrote encouraging comments on the internet to support Wuhan. [...] China is a nation that always reciprocates kindness. We never sit idly while friends are in trouble, nor will we hide any selfish interest behind our help’; China’s Ambassador in Portugal Cai Run, *Público*, 28 April 2020.

ties and long-standing friendship between the two countries as a prominent driver. In fact, official discourse on both sides has brought history out as a foundational block for mutual solidarity. Is this just empty rhetoric or something worth exploring further? Acknowledgement of the features of Portugal–China bilateral relations in the recent past suggests that it should not be discarded. Indeed, beyond rhetoric, the attraction and persuasive power of history seem to play a role in shaping the evolving framework of the relationship. Furthermore, if there is such a thing as a Chinese soft-power policy towards Portugal, historical ties seem to be at its core. The COVID-19 episode prompts a line of enquiry that, while pushing the conceptualization of soft power over and above government agency, also places Portugal in a somehow specific standpoint within EU–China relations.

The European country that knows China the best?

In 2018, during his visit to Beijing, Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa asserted that Portugal 'is the European country that knows China the best'. This statement, despite the protocolary context in which it was produced, effectively characterizes the particular nature that can be ascribed to Portugal–China relations. The five-century-old legacy of maritime discoveries, eliciting a 'universalistic', thus multilateral, view of the world order, emerges as a pervasive element. Moreover, several historical chapters, such as those regarding the former Portuguese territory of Macao, display the symbolic power detectable in claims such as 'Macao is a tribute to the tolerant spirit of Chinese emperors to the Portuguese presence over there', or 'we have been in China for more than 500 years and we have never had a conflict what so ever with the Chinese'.²⁴⁹

Portugal's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Augusto Santos Silva, adds force to this set of arguments. In a text about the Portuguese stance towards Europe and China, he wrote: 'Portugal is part of the European Union's relationship with China and has a specific relationship with the Asian giant, based on ancient and recent history, contemporary bilateral ties and the Portuguese capacity for intermediation between China and the Portuguese-speaking world'.²⁵⁰ Santos Silva's words add Portugal's pioneering role in establishing East–West relations in more recent history, marked by defining moments such as the smooth and praised handover of Macao to China in 1999 or the strategic partnership established in 2005. It is also worth recalling Chinese President Xi Jinping's appraisal of these events: 'In 1999, the two countries properly resolved the question of Macao through friendly consultations, setting an example for other nations to tackle issues left over from history'; and 'in 2005, China and Portugal established a comprehensive strategic partnership, which enabled their mutually beneficial cooperation to embark on a fast lane of development and deliver substantial benefits to the people of the two countries'.²⁵¹

Accordingly, whereas the symbolic power of history provides solid ground to ensure stable, close and arguably 'special' bilateral relations, more 'prosaic' interests are also there to affect perceptions and behaviour. The Chinese interest in Portugal's privileged position as a bridge, namely in the Portuguese-speaking world (more than 250 million people, including countries like Angola and Brazil), for example, is often used as an explanation for the particular attention paid by China to a small peripheral European country and economy. In turn, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the billions of euros that Chinese public and private companies pumped into the troubled Portuguese economy, which was thirsty for fresh money, fostered a very positive perception of China in Portugal. The Chinese 'helping hand' was then contrasted with the harsh attitude of the European Union–European Central Bank–International Monetary Fund 'troika'. According to Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa, the 'experience with Chinese investment has been very positive'.²⁵²

249 These two statements were made by Portuguese Ambassador to China, José Augusto Duarte, during an interview with *CGTN* (2018), transcribed on <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3051544d77554464776c6d636a4e6e62684a4856/index.html>.

250 Portugal's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Augusto Santos Silva (2019), *Público*, 9 June.

251 Chinese President Xi Jinping (2018), *China Daily*, 4 December.

252 Peter Wise (2019), 'Portugal PM Warns on EU Protectionism over China Investment Screening', *Financial Times*, 3 March.

The favourable, even enthusiastic, discourse on Chinese foreign direct investment, as well as on Portugal's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, evidences an overall positive valuation. Interestingly, it has prompted an idea that Portugal had become China's 'special friend' in the EU. The Portuguese government, although acknowledging those specificities rooted in history, has vigorously rebuffed an idea that, in essence, would place Portugal at odds with the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In Portuguese Foreign Minister Santos Silva's words, 'a myth has been created [...]. That makes no sense at all'.²⁵³ The 'universalistic' and multilateral principles shaping foreign policy prompt Portugal to dodge international tensions and dilemmas, without bringing into question its commitment to political frames of reference and values shared within the EU and NATO.²⁵⁴ A further question raised by foreign analysts is whether Portugal's position towards China is prominently driven by need.²⁵⁵ Without denying economic/financial interests as an important driver, and bearing in mind that this issue is far from being country-specific, need per se is not helpful when looking for any particularities in China-Portugal bilateral relations.

Cultural exchange shaping preferences and behaviour

When acknowledging the (soft) power accrued to historical ties, the cultural exchange dimension earns importance. It is no accident that culture is consistently and robustly present in the major formal documents configuring Portugal-China bilateral relations, such as, for example, the joint declaration to strengthen the strategic partnership agreement issued after Chinese President Xi's visit to Portugal in 2018.²⁵⁶ Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs Santos Silva, referring to Portugal-China relations, assertively states that 'culture is one of the most relevant domains to consolidate friendly relations between countries'.²⁵⁷ Not by chance, the preparation of the cultural events that would take place in Portugal and China during 2019 – commemorating 40 years of diplomatic relations and 20 years since the handover of Macao – were a key part of President Xi's agenda when he visited the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, in December 2018.

The festive atmosphere of 2019, with many Chinese cultural events taking place all over Portugal and vice versa, although relevant, does not conceal the soft power bestowed by the regular work of a number of Portuguese and Chinese institutions that consistently disseminate the 'very attractive and fulfilling'²⁵⁸ culture of China, as is the case with the Lisbon-based *Fundação do Oriente*²⁵⁹ and Macao Cultural and Scientific Centre,²⁶⁰ as well as the five Confucius Institutes (CIs) operating in Portugal.²⁶¹ CIs, in fact, have a high impact on local/regional communities, namely through the promotion of widely attended cultural festivals and events, often in cooperation with local actors (including local governments). Cultural promotion and exchange emerge as a major vehicle to shape preferences and behaviour in Portugal, compensating for the almost non-existent utilization of social media by the Chinese.

253 Peter Wise (2020), 'Lisbon Rebuffs Claims Portugal is China's "Special Friend" in EU', *Financial Times*, 19 January.

254 C. Rodrigues and J. Silva (2019), 'China and the US: A "Universalistic" Approach to Get Along with Both Powers', in M. Esteban and M. Otero-Iglesias (eds), *Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry*, European Think Tank Network on China.

255 See <https://www.dw.com/en/portugal-a-china-friendly-eu-nation-driven-by-need/a-47872582>.

256 See <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/download-ficheiros/ficheiro.aspx?v=2fd99222-ca9f-403c-91d9-1b1bbb8cfb7> (in Portuguese).

257 Interview with the weekly newspaper *Sol*, 3 December 2018.

258 Portuguese Ambassador in Beijing José Augusto Duarte (2019), 'Chinese Culture is Very Attractive and Fulfilling: Portuguese Ambassador to China', *People's Daily*, 13 December, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/1213/c90000-9640522.html>.

259 See www.orientepointo.pt.

260 See www.cccm.gov.pt/.

261 Five Portuguese universities shelter a Confucius Institute (CI): Aveiro; Coimbra; Lisbon; Minho; and Porto. There is an agreement to create a sixth CI at the University of Évora.

Without neglecting other cultural components and artefacts, language plays a prominent role. In fact, the attractive power of the Chinese language can be measured by the more than 130 Portuguese institutions, including universities, polytechnics, as well as secondary and basic schools that teach it. In the Portuguese public school system, with *Hanban's* strong support,²⁶² the number of students in 2019 grew 45 per cent in relation to the previous year, according to Portugal's Ministry of Education. In addition, the growing interest of Chinese people in the Portuguese language also works as a bonding element. To the thousands studying the Portuguese language in Portugal, many more do the same in the 32 Chinese universities offering Portuguese degrees. Easier access to highly paid jobs in China, simple curiosity about the 'Country of the Grapes'²⁶³ and the branding power of Portuguese individuals such as Cristiano Ronaldo are generally deemed as the attraction factors underpinning the interest in Portuguese-language learning.

The (soft) power of passions and interests

A mix of historical, cultural and economic ties colours the overall relational conditions between Portugal and China. This mix also underpins mechanisms generating attractive and persuasive power to influence the preferences and behaviour of Portuguese actors *vis-à-vis* China. Arguably, it also impacts on the specific, not to say 'special', relational status, drawing a distinction between Portugal and the other EU countries. Obviously, the impact extends to the policy realm. Together with the strong advocacy of multilateralism as a principle, the power of history has hitherto allowed Portuguese governments to handle a very good partnership with China perfectly, while soundly aligning with the 'natural' alliances established within NATO and the EU. The increased turbulence in international relations recently, however, is giving rise to new challenges. Still, Portugal seems to be eager to keep the relational balance, as evidenced by public statements issued by a wide range of politicians and government officers, from Portugal's prime minister to the president of the nation.²⁶⁴ This includes resistance and disavowal towards the United States' attempt to interfere in Portuguese national decision-making processes concerning China, namely Chinese investment in sensitive sectors and Huawei's eventual role in 5G developments in Portugal. Responding to then US Ambassador in Lisbon George Glass, who in September 2020 stated in an interview that 'Portugal now has to choose between its allies and China',²⁶⁵ Portugal's Minister of Foreign Affairs Santos Silva assertively said: 'in Portugal, the decision-makers are the Portuguese authorities, who make the decisions that interest Portugal, within the framework of the Portuguese Constitution and law, and the powers that the law attributes to the different relevant authorities'.²⁶⁶ Nevertheless, this state of affairs does not bring with it any admiration towards the Chinese (political and governance) model.

In sum, the role that Chinese soft power plays in Portugal–China relations relies on (historical and cultural) passions and (present and future economic) interests, rather than on any specific strategy orchestrated by China's government.

262 *Hanban* is the colloquial name of the Office of Chinese Language Council International, which acts as the Confucius Institutes' headquarters.

263 葡萄牙 (*Pútáoyá*) is Portugal in Chinese.

264 See <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/world/china-america-go-head-head-portugal>.

265 Vítor Matos (2020), 'EUA pressionam Governo: "Portugal tem de escolher agora entre os aliados e os chineses"',

[USA Pressures Government: "Portugal has to Choose Now between its Allies and the Chinese"], interview about 5G with US Ambassador to Portugal George Glass, *Expresso*, 26 September.

266 Interview with the Lusa agency (2020), 'Santos Silva Responds to the United States: Portugal is "Who Makes Decisions"', *Jornal Económico*, 28 September, <https://jornaleconomico.sapo.pt/en/news/santos-silva-respond-to-the-united-states-portugal-and-who-makes-decisions-641506>.

China's soft power in Romania: limited audience, limited impact

Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai

Summary

Cultural diplomacy and education are the most important facets of Chinese soft power in Romania. Direct experiences represent the predominant channel for Romanians to understand and come closer to China, but distance and different priorities mean that such contacts have only been limited so far and will become even more limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese brands such as Huawei and Lenovo are popular in Romania. Nevertheless, these do not much influence China's reputation and the perception of China in Romania. Most Romanians form their opinions about China based on mainstream media, which is too often against China. At present, political statements in Romania include only a few direct references to China. Most are indirect and point to the inclination to cooperate with partners from the Euro-Atlantic area, at the expense of China.

Appraising China's soft power in Romania

As the anti-China rhetoric in many countries of the EU is becoming increasingly dominant, in parallel with the ruptured ties between the US and China and the sharpening distrust between West and East, China's soft power is put to the test again. It is viewed with circumspection, in Romania, too. Not only as toolkit (often labelled as communist propaganda and vehemently rejected), but also because its assumed intention of increasing China's power and influence, both regionally and globally. The burning question arising from this context is: how attractive and persuasive can China still be in general, amid sustained attacks against it on all fronts? The answer definitely depends on a complex set of factors, including how China is labelled and whether it is understood or not. The Romanian case study is interesting from the perspective of the country's adherence to the Euro-Atlantic values and norms, and the positioning of Chinese values and norms in comparison to them.

Romanian respondents are not included in famous annual surveys (such as those conducted by the Pew Research Center), hence it is difficult to assess the perceptions of China in Romania, other than via the general tenor of mass media and political statements, or an argumentation based on the theory of measuring country image. Both paths are equally necessary.

Theoretical considerations

The theoretical approach to measuring country image reveals several interesting findings, starting from the following axiom. A country's image, understood as the 'reputation a nation enjoys at a given moment' and having four dimensions (functional, aesthetic, normative and emotional)²⁶⁷ is the result of interactions between country identity (self-perception), country branding (strategically communicated self-representation) and various other determinants (including the external perception of its governance, socio-economic situation, the foreign public's direct experiences related to that country,

267 According to the 4D model of country image, as defined by A. Buhmann and D. Ingenhoff (2015), 'Advancing the Country Image Construct from a Public Relations Perspective: From Model to Measurement', *Journal of Communication Management*, February, pp. 62-80.

stereotypes, mainstream media and other third-party influence). Any country's soft-power efforts can materialize if its image among the general public or in a given country is predominantly favourable and the general attitude towards that country is not hostile. In other words, in environments where a country's image is mainly negative or unfavourable, the majority of Chinese public diplomacy tools are doomed to failure (based on the lack of attraction power) and its influence is insignificant.

Norms and values are the starting point for accepting or rejecting China

From the perspective of the Western (Euro-Atlantic) set of norms and values (and Romania belongs to the Euro-Atlantic community), China's actions and soft-power tools are doomed to fail. Only a minority of European citizens come into direct contact with China and its people and culture, and even a direct contact does not ensure a correct understanding of the Chinese version of socialism as 'the only choice for the development of modern China'.²⁶⁸

Quality of governance is defined differently in China (with economic performance and social prosperity being its highest priorities) and the EU (where the broad definition attaches the same degree of importance to economic performance, social prosperity and political values – mainly democracy, human rights and the rule of law). Therefore, China's achievements in terms of economic development are not automatically an asset, as the larger concept of economic statecraft is not a useful instrument of soft power and its economic development is sometimes perceived as a threat. Borrowing European rhetoric, China is criticized in Romania from the perspective of the lack of reciprocity, level playing field and openness.

Cultural diplomacy is the most important component of Chinese soft power

Taking into account the dimensions of the Soft Power Index (that is, Culture, Education, Engagement, Digital, Enterprise and Government, as defined in the *Soft Power 30 Report*),²⁶⁹ and also the components of the Global Soft Power Index²⁷⁰ (with the three key metrics of Familiarity, Reputation and Influence, corresponding to the seven soft-power pillars: Business and Trade; Governance; International Relations; Culture-Heritage; Media-Communications; Education-Science; and People-Values), culture is the most valuable asset of China. This corresponds to the aesthetic dimension of the 4D model of the country image. Yet how strong are the Romanians' direct contacts with Chinese culture?

China's soft-power vehicles in Romania

The main channels of China's soft power in Romania

Culture, education, tourism and professional exchanges are among the key transmission channels of China's soft power in Romania. Participation in exhibitions (including book fairs), translation of literary works and research, and Chinese conductors leading the George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra during concerts marking special events (e.g. Chinese New Year, the 70th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Romanian diplomatic relations) are only some examples of an intense exchange at the cultural level. As of 2018, the number of Romanian students studying the Chinese language had

268 Xi J. (2017), *The Governance of China II*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, pp. 53 and 56.

269 J. McClory (coordinator) (2019), *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power*, Portland and USC Center on Public Diplomacy, <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf>.

270 BrandFinance (2020), *Global Soft Power Index 2020*, <https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/>.

exceeded 12,000.²⁷¹ Also in 2018, the number of Romanian tourists to China surpassed 600, and in 2019 almost doubled to 1,100.²⁷² However, they still represent a minority. Moreover, COVID-19 has become the newest barrier to direct contacts with China.

The '17+1' grouping of seventeen Central and Eastern European countries plus China, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are also soft-power vehicles. However, even though Romania was among the first EU countries to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China on the BRI, and the Silk Road Community Building Initiative was launched in Bucharest in September 2019,²⁷³ no relevant projects have so far been implemented in Romania. Furthermore, negotiations with China General Nuclear Power Group on the construction of nuclear reactors 3 and 4 at the Cernavoda nuclear plant were cancelled by the Romanian government after many years of talks.

Another potential enabler of China's soft power in Romania might be the popularity of Chinese products. Even if this is high for several brands (for example, Lenovo has the largest PC market share, while Huawei is the second largest player in the smartphone market in Romania), it seems that it does not positively influence China's reputation and the perception of China in Romania. The products may be good, but the producers' image is not. Huawei is one of the largest providers of equipment and solutions for the telecommunications industry and is the leader in 5G technologies, yet in this field, Huawei is labelled a 'security threat'. For Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, national security has to be ensured together with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners. In Iohannis's view, Romania should avoid the situation of 'critical systems being operated by companies that are not reliable', and Huawei's participation in the upcoming 5G auction (already postponed several times and now planned for the first half of 2021) will be decided by the Romanian Supreme Council of National Defence. The United States and Romania signed an MoU on 5G technology in August 2019, followed by a similar MoU between the United States and Poland, and in August 2020, the Romanians announced a legislative proposal to prevent entry into the 5G market for companies that raise suspicions. In September 2020, Huawei contested the actions taken by Romania and Poland at the European Commission. Brussels' response was unequivocal: EU member states have the right to decide whether to exclude companies from markets for reasons of national security.²⁷⁴

In conclusion, the explanation for this paradox is related to Chinese companies' image in Romania, as well as to the areas of interest of the younger generation (for whom country of origin is not the key purchase motivation, but the price-to-quality ratio). This lack of transfer from popularity to reputation is strongly influenced by unfavourable news in Romania's mass media, but also by the continuous US attacks against Huawei. In a practical sense, the positive effect of smartphones' popularity on China's reputation in Romania is cancelled out by the allegations against Huawei.

271 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Romania (2019), 'Ambasadorul Jiang Yu a participat la finala celei de-a 18-a ediții a Concursului de limba chineză pentru studenți "Podul Limbii Chineze" din România [Ambassador Jiang Yu Participated in the Final of the 18th Edition of the Chinese Language Competition for Students "Bridge of Chinese Language" in Romania]', 5 April, <http://www.chinaembassy.org/rom/picture/t1651718.html>.

272 Romanian National Institute of Statistics (2020), 'Acțiunile turistice organizate de agențiile de turism în anul 2019 [Tourist Actions Organized by Tourism Agencies in the Year 2019]', April, <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/tags/actiunile-turistice-organizate-de-agentiile-de-turism>.

273 The idea of building a network for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to cooperate among countries participating in the BRI was officially launched by the China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) at the end of the second BRI Forum in April 2019 in Beijing. The network focuses on cultural and people-to-people exchanges; see http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/24/c_138417400.htm.

274 R. Lupitu (2020), 'Comisia Europeană apără România și Polonia după ce Huawei a contestat că ambele țări îi blochează accesul pe piața 5G [European Commission Defends Romania and Poland after Huawei Despite that Both Countries Block its Access to the 5G Market]', *Calea Europeană*, 3 November, <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/comisia-europeana-apara-romania-si-polonia-dupa-ce-huawei-a-contestat-ca-amele-tari-ii-blocheaza-accesul-pe-piata-5g/>.

China's soft power actors in Romania

Among the enablers of China's soft-power transmission are activities undertaken by: friendship organizations (such as the China–Romania Friendship Association, Romanian–Chinese House and the Chinese–Romanian Association, known as 'ChinaRO'),²⁷⁵ cultural centres (including the Romanian Cultural Institute in Beijing, Chinese Cultural Centre 'Nicolae Milescu' in Iași and the Sino–Romanian Cultural Centre in Beijing),²⁷⁶ the Chamber of Commerce and Industry for Romania–China (a member of the EU–China Business Association) and more than ten twin cities. Moreover, in Romania there are four Confucius Institutes and many Confucius Classrooms.²⁷⁷ In 2016, Mandarin Chinese was included in the official list of foreign languages studied in pre-university education. Students from the private EuroEd School, in Iași, have Chinese as a compulsory subject for study in the syllabus, a programme approved by both the Romanian Ministry of National Education and Iași County School Inspectorate. At present, there are over 100 centres in Romania where Mandarin Chinese is taught, from kindergarten to university,²⁷⁸ but many of them have a low profile, meaning that such experiences are not propagated to Romanian society at large. There are also partnership agreements between Romanian and Chinese universities, including in medicine.

During the legislature of 2016–2020, the Parliamentary Friendship Groups with China (for the Romanian Senate and Chamber of Deputies) had around 20 members each. The majority were from the Social Democratic Party (which has a centre-left orientation, is currently in opposition and has a dominant pro-China attitude), but there are also several members from centre-right parties: the National Liberal Party (which is cautious with regard to China), Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, the Save Romania Union, the People's Movement Party and the Parliamentary group of national minorities.

Mass media and social media have the strongest impact on public opinion in general, and particularly with regard to China. They influence attitudes towards China, perceptions of China, as well as China's image in Romania, as most Romanians form their opinions about China based on mass media. Some international online media in the Romanian language are very critical of China (e.g. *Radio Free Europe Romania*, which is financed by the US Congress) and significant unfavourable comments from international journals are translated in Romanian newspaper articles. There are also some Chinese media in the Romanian language, such as *China Radio International*, *Xinhua* with a Facebook page in Romanian, and Romanian–Chinese House has its own magazine, which is published six times a year. Yet these all have a limited audience.

China's Embassy in Romania has been a dynamic actor and its activities intensified after Chinese Ambassador Jiang Yu presented her credentials in March 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese Embassy organized the participation of the Romanian authorities at the '17+1' video conference on 13 March 2020, in order to share information on preventing and controlling the pandemic, and it donated medical materials (even on behalf of Chinese twin provinces and cities). It is also worth noting that the Chinese Embassy in Romania has taken a position on accusations such as those related to the BRI 'debt trap', Huawei security threats and human rights in Xinjiang. Regarding

275 The China–Romania Friendship Association was established in 1958 in Beijing; the Romanian–Chinese House, an NGO with headquarters in Bucharest and fourteen branches in major Romanian cities, has existed since 2011; and the ChinaRO Association was established in 2014.

276 The Sino–Romanian Cultural Centre was launched in September 2019 in Beijing.

277 The four Confucius Institutes are in Sibiu, Cluj-Napoca, Brașov and Bucharest; and the many Confucius Classrooms include those in Deva, Constanța, Iași, Bacău, Sibiu, Miercurea Ciuc, Petroșani, Pitești, Hunedoara, Făgăraș, etc.

278 *China Radio International* (2020), 'Interviu – Prof. Univ. Dr. Luminița Bălan: Învățând limba chineză, reușim să cunoaștem mai bine o civilizație multimilenară [Interview – University Professor Dr Luminița Bălan: By Learning the Chinese Language, We Manage to Get to Know a Multi-millennial Civilization Better]', 13 July, <http://romanian.cri.cn/comunicare/descoperi/nd/3375/20200713/504607.html>.

the latter sensitive issue, according to the official Chinese position, this is not a matter of human rights, religion or ethnicity, but 'anti-violence, anti-terrorism and anti-separatism'.

The politicians' role is reflected by both official and unofficial statements, even if these are not accompanied by specific national policies. Generally, in Romania, these include only a few direct references to China. During the COVID-19 crisis, China's approach to the pandemic was once described as the 'golden standard' in a clarification of 19 March 2020 by the Romanian Ministry of Health, and the idea of cooperation with China as being necessary has been reiterated on various occasions. Nevertheless, such favourable statements are rare. Romania's Minister of Energy, Virgil-Daniel Popescu, has pointed on various occasions to the shortage of medical supplies and overreliance on imports from China, underlining support for production relocation to the EU (including Romania), in spite of higher costs. In addition, the preference for 'serious partners in the Euro-Atlantic area'²⁷⁹ is evident in former Prime Minister Ludovic Orban's statements, the most recent referring to the significant investment of around EUR 8 billion at the Cernavoda nuclear plant, where negotiations with China General Nuclear Power Group were severed in July 2020, five years after the MoU was concluded. As of October 2020, the project will be headed by a US firm, implemented by a consortium of companies from the United States, Romania, Canada and France, and financed by all stakeholders.²⁸⁰

Concluding remarks

The question of 'how attractive and persuasive is China in Romania?' is relevant, particularly in a country whose acting president firmly emphasizes that Romania's place is in the area of Euro-Atlantic values. A representative of centre-right politics through the National Liberal Party, Romania's President Klaus Iohannis believes that Romania can have economic and trade exchanges with China, but that Romania does not belong to the value system promoted by China and should thus not go too far into the field of cooperation with states situated outside the area of Euro-Atlantic values.²⁸¹ However, President Iohannis is cautious when it comes to joining the alliance against China that was proposed in July 2020 by then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Iohannis reckons that 'everyone is affected by changes in the balance of global power' and that Romanian diplomacy will give the appropriate response.

Official and unofficial political statements underscore that: (1) Romania's place is in the area of Euro-Atlantic values; (2) even if economic ties with China are not rejected, Romania should not go too far into the area of cooperation with states situated outside the zone of Euro-Atlantic values; (3) national security has to be ensured together with the United States and NATO; and (4) overreliance on Chinese imports should be avoided.

Among the multitude of usual soft-power instruments, the cultural and educational components of China's soft power are the most fruitful under the present circumstances. One can take note of the impressive interest in the Chinese language in Romania. Nevertheless, because of the lack of

279 *Forbes* staff (2020), 'Ludovic Orban, despre investițiile de la Cernavodă: „Obiectivul nostru este să realizăm investiții de 8-9 miliarde de euro în rețehnologizarea reactorului 1 și construcția reactoarelor 3 și 4” [Ludovic Orban, about the Investments in Cernavoda: "Our Goal is to Make Investments of 8-9 billion Euros in the Refurbishment of Reactor 1 and the Construction of Reactors 3 and 4"]', *Forbes*, 23 July, <https://www.forbes.ro/ludovic-orban-despre-investitiile-de-la-cernavoda-obiectivul-nostru-este-sa-realizam-investitii-de-8-9-miliarde-de-euro-retehnologizarea-reactorului-1-si-construcția-reactoarelor-3-si-4-175674>.

280 C. Cristea (2020), 'American Projects in Romania, US and Romania Sign Agreement on Cernavoda Nuclear Power Plant', 12 October, *Radio România Internațional*.

281 As Klaus Iohannis stated in the electoral debate with political scientists, opinion leaders and journalists, 19 November 2019, shortly before obtaining his second term as president on 24 November 2019.

propagation of positive experiences to a larger part of Romania's civil society, perhaps amid mistrust powered by mainstream media, the audience remains limited and, thus, so is the effect.

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the perception of China in Romania and has become the newest barrier to direct contacts with China. All the efforts deployed by China's Embassy in Romania to provide medical supplies – via donations or commercial deliveries – have been interpreted as propaganda hidden behind 'mask diplomacy'. Moreover, accusations regarding the low quality of sanitary protective materials have become generalized in mass media and the label of 'low quality' or even 'dangerous' has been assigned to the majority of such deliveries from China.

This Romanian case study confirms a relevant theoretical framework related to a partner country's image. The effects generated by soft-power tools depend on the environment where they are deployed. If this is a favourable environment (that is, where the acting country's image is positive), then the results are commensurate. If, on the contrary, the acting country is misperceived or presented in a bad light, not only can the results be modest, but public perception can become even worse.

Limits of China's soft power in Slovakia

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Summary

Slovak-China relations have for a long time been outside the main political focus for both sides. China has not been particularly active in Slovakia and its economic, political and social presence in Slovakia is smaller than in most other European countries. Similarly, the Slovak public, politicians and even businesses have not treated China with much attention – either in terms of criticism or as an opportunity. COVID-19, however, put China temporarily in the spotlight. While China's activity has modestly increased, Slovakia's new government also seems to be more willing to stand up openly for democratic values. In the meantime, parts of Slovak society have seen China as providing much-needed help during the pandemic, but others criticize it for spreading the virus and its propaganda.

China's soft-power approach in Slovakia: more of the same

Slovakia has never been a recipient of much of China's attention, not even compared to its Central European neighbours. Besides Slovakia's small size, this lack of interest could also be a result of long-term, low-profile attitudes of Slovak leaders, who have rarely challenged China,²⁸² unlike the neighbouring Czech Republic, which has gained international reputation for its support of Taiwan, Tibet and other topics regarded as 'sensitive' by China.²⁸³ However, China – as a global power with growing ambitions – has been increasingly present in Slovakia, as is well symbolized by the size of its embassy, which is among the largest in Bratislava in terms of the number of diplomats.

China has employed a set of tools to further its interests and soft power in Slovakia. In general, China's approach towards Slovakia does not differ substantially from its approaches elsewhere, with perhaps the only difference being that it is somewhat more muted when compared to other European countries.

There are currently three separate Confucius Institutes (CI) in Slovakia: two in Bratislava and one in Banská Bystrica. Universities in Trnava and Nitra have also been cooperating with these CIs. The number of CIs is relatively high given Slovakia's size, especially as two of them are located in the same city, which is uncommon. At the same time, the Slovak CIs do not seem very active based on their webpages. Their activity has rarely, if ever, appeared in media, and hence has questionable soft-power impact. From the public events worth noting, the CI at Comenius University in Bratislava organized a few public photography exhibitions on 'China's Tibet' at Slovak universities in 2017, which were meant

282 Barbara Kelemen, Kristína Kironská, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík and Richard Turcsányi (2020), *Slovakia and China: Challenges to the Future of the Relationship*, CEIAS, <https://ceias.eu/sk/slovakia-and-china-challenges-to-the-future-of-the-relationship-sk/>.

283 Alžběta Bajerová and Richard Turcsanyi (2020), 'Between Defender of Values and Faithful Ally: Czech Approaches to China in the Prism of Role Theory Approach', *Studia Orientalia Slovaca*, pp. 93–120, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338544866_Between_Defender_of_Values_and_Faithful_Ally_Czech_Approaches_to_China_in_the_Prism_of_Role_Theory_Approach.

to promote China's understanding of the issue.²⁸⁴ The timing of the events, half a year after Slovak President Andrej Kiska had met the Dalai Lama in October 2016, probably explains the motivation.

The Chinese Embassy in Slovakia has not been very successful in promoting its messages in the Slovak media. Some of the Chinese Embassy's articles were published in the 'alternative media', known also for spreading disinformation and being pro-Russian and anti-Western (such as *Hlavné správy* or *Parlamentné listy*). When asked, the Chinese diplomats suggested that this was because other mainstream media were not willing to publish the material. One of the few exceptions of the Chinese Embassy conveying its message through more respected media was through the economy-focused magazine *Trend*, which published a special issue completely dedicated to China. While most of the articles kept a reasonably critical angle of discussion, for instance when it came to economic exchanges with China, the issue also included Chinese Embassy-provided material with China's official lines. Later on, *Trend* published a paid advertisement article in which then Chinese Ambassador Lin Lin offered China's official narrative about the situation in Hong Kong. The article, however, attracted criticism and the Slovak magazine was accused of spreading Chinese propaganda and disinformation.²⁸⁵ One of the few other instances when Chinese Ambassador Lin appeared in reputable Slovak media was the interview with *Euractiv*, which differed from other publications, as here the journalist challenged the ambassador.²⁸⁶ Previously, the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia had not been willing to engage in such interviews.

China does not hold any obvious economic leverage over Slovakia, making it difficult to offer 'carrots' or to 'punish' Slovakia economically if it wished.²⁸⁷ Less than 2 per cent of Slovak exports go to China and the vast majority of these are realized by transnational automotive corporations. There are no significant Chinese investments in Slovakia, with the possible exception of a logistics warehouse near Galanta. However, it should be noted that there have been attempts by Chinese actors to purchase some important businesses in Slovakia – such as a US Steel factory, *Slovenské elektrárne* (Slovak power plants), Bratislava airport, and a major commercial television station. There have also long been discussions about the possible construction of a wide-gauge railway through Slovak territory and the establishment of terminals and logistical hubs, yet few concrete steps have been taken and it can be doubted whether the project will ever move on. Unlike all of its neighbours, Slovakia does not have a direct flight connection with China.

More recently, Chinese diplomacy has increased somewhat its activity in Slovakia, especially in relation to the Hong Kong protests which started in 2019, but even more so since the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020. The Chinese Embassy, for instance, opened a Twitter account in February 2020 and besides what can be seen as usual communication, it also retweeted some of the disinformation posts by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggesting that COVID-19 might not have originated in China. In general, however, the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia did not engage in any high-profile Twitter fights, as has happened in Budapest, Warsaw and elsewhere, and can instead be regarded as rather low profile.

284 Matej Šimalčík and Adam Kalivoda (2020), 'China's Inroads into Slovak Universities', CEIAS, <https://ceias.eu/sk/chinas-inroads-into-slovak-universities-2/>.

285 Šimalčík and Kalivoda (2020), 'China's Inroads into Slovak Universities'.

286 Lucia Yar (2019), 'Čínsky veľvyslanec: Snažíme sa nájsť najlepší spôsob, ako využiť centrálnu polohu Slovenska [Chinese Ambassador: We are Trying to Find the Best Way to Use the Central Location of Slovakia]', *Euractiv.sk*, 6 September, <https://euractiv.sk/section/vonkajsie-vztahy/interview/cinsky-velvyslanec-snazime-sa-najst-najlepsi-sposob-ako-vyuzit-centralnu-polohu-slovenska/>.

287 Ivana Karásková, Alicja Bachulska, Barbara Kelemen, Tamás Matura, Filip Šebok and Matej Šimalčík (2020), 'China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe: The Logic and Power of Chinese Influence', MapInfluenCE project, https://mapinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Chinas-Sticks-and-Carrots-in-Central-Europe_policy-paper_-1.pdf.

The Chinese Embassy did, however, post a critical letter, in which it objected to an article published by Slovak economic newspaper *Hospodarske noviny* regarding its coverage of the COVID-19 crisis in China. Interestingly, the letter was only published in Mandarin, which suggests that the target audience was not the Slovak public.²⁸⁸

Slovak perceptions and (few) responses

In general, China is not regarded in Slovakia as an attractive country – and this applies to Slovak public opinion, political representatives and even the business community. Compared to perhaps all of its neighbours, Slovak politicians have for a long time kept a rather low-profile approach *vis-à-vis* China. Although there have been some shifts between the left-wing and right-wing governments (with the left-wing being somewhat more positive towards China than the right-wing), neither side diverged too much in any direction. During the period from 2006–2020 (with a short exception from 2010–2012), Slovakia was governed by the social-democratic party SMER and its leader Robert Fico, who was a former member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party before 1989. Fico expressed interest early on in developing relations with China and paid an official visit to Beijing in 2007, where he refused to criticize China and talked highly about the economic potential of cooperation with China. In 2009, then Chinese President Hu Jintao even visited the Slovak capital Bratislava, allegedly to discuss China's involvement in the construction of Slovak highways.

No such project ever materialized in Slovakia, however, and the most lasting memory of the visit turned out to be a fight between local human rights protesters and pro-China supporters in front of the Slovak presidential palace. A few Slovak protesters were injured in the fight and these events were discussed for a long time, contributing to a negative image of China in Slovakia.²⁸⁹ Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, upon his return to the office in 2012, continued to talk positively about China, including at the then '16+1' platform's occasions, but Slovakia has done little more to attract China's favour, especially when compared to its Visegrád Four (V4) partners.²⁹⁰ On the contrary, Slovakia accepted the remaining Uyghur prisoners from Guantanamo Bay prison in 2013 and, in 2016, as noted above, Slovak President Andrej Kiska met privately with the visiting Dalai Lama. Both instances were met with criticism from China, which threatened retaliations.

While Robert Fico criticized his domestic political opponent Andrej Kiska for allegedly undermining Slovak economic interests when meeting the Dalai Lama, in reality there was little prospect of any significant economic benefits from the '16+1' platform and the Belt and Road Initiative. In both cases, Slovak participation can be regarded as rather lukewarm – neither the Slovak prime minister nor the Slovak president visited China during this period, not even for the '16+1' summit in Suzhou or the two Belt and Road Forums. The Slovak official line has always been that Slovakia is open to cooperation with China, but in reality Slovak officials have not put in any extra effort in this regard.²⁹¹

Overall, there are few if any relevant Slovak politicians who can be counted as China-friendly. Perhaps the only exception would be Ľuboš Blaha, a self-described Marxist who has attracted controversies

288 Ivana Karásková, Alicja Bachulska, Tamás Matura, Filip Šebok and Matej Šimalčík (2020), 'China's Propaganda and Disinformation Campaigns in Central Europe', MapInfluenCE project, http://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Mapinfluence_BRIEFING-PAPER_chinas-propaganda_A4_interaktivni_EN_01.pdf.

289 Gabriela Pleschová and Rudolf Fürst (2015), 'Mobilizing Overseas Chinese to Back up Chinese Diplomacy: The Case of President Hu Jintao's Visit to Slovakia in 2009', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1002347>.

290 The Visegrád Four, or V4, is a cultural and political alliance of four Central European countries: the Czech Republic; Hungary; Poland; and Slovakia.

291 Matej Šimalčík and Richard Q. Turcsanyi (2018), 'Pitfalls of Slovakia's Chinese Dreams', *Asia Dialogue*, 28 August, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/08/28/pitfalls-of-slovakias-chinese-dreams/>.

with his open support for communism as well as the spread of disinformation. Blaha held the position of Head of the Slovak Parliament's Committee for Relations with the EU – which was somewhat paradoxical given his open support of Russia and China and his criticism of the West in general, and the EU and US in particular. Blaha attracts sizeable crowds on social media, especially among the 'alternative media' followers, and he has repeatedly and vocally supported China on various instances, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁹²

The lack of interest on the part of Slovak politicians to invest 'political capital' in relations with China is mirrored by the lack of business interests. Only two Slovak companies participated in the 2018 Shanghai Expo²⁹³ and a similarly low number of Slovak businesses accompanied Deputy Prime Minister for Investments Ľubomír Vážny during his visit to China in 2015. As such, there is no systematic political and economic pressure to develop more friendly and active relations with China, as may exist in other countries. Lack of general knowledge of and interest in China goes hand in hand with this situation.

Based on available public opinion surveys, Slovakia does not stand out when compared to other European countries. According to the European Commission's *Eurobarometer* findings from 2018, 44 per cent of Slovak respondents held a positive view of China while 40 per cent held a negative view. This is somewhat more positive than the EU28 average (36 per cent positive and 53 per cent negative), but still more negative than nine other EU countries.²⁹⁴

Based on the Sinophone Borderlands survey, which in September 2020 asked respondents in ten EU countries about their views of China, 38 per cent of Slovak respondents had negative views of China and 23 per cent positive (with the rest being neutral).²⁹⁵ Compared to the 2018 *Eurobarometer* survey noted above, we notice a worsening of China's image – while in 2018 more Slovaks had positive views, the situation changed in 2020, when significantly more respondents leaned towards the negative side. Indeed, for another question on the same Sinophone Borderlands survey, over 24 per cent declared that their view of China had got worse over the previous three years, while 18 per cent thought that their view of China had improved. All in all, Slovakia again finds itself close to the EU average – while Sweden, France, Germany, the Czech Republic and Hungary are more negative about China, Poland, Italy, Spain and Latvia are more positive.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic,²⁹⁶ a public opinion survey conducted on 25 and 26 March 2020 found that China was seen as providing the most help in fighting the virus – altogether more than 67 per cent of respondents saw China as helping 'a lot' or 'somewhat', while fewer than 9 per cent held this view for Germany, and only 22 per cent for the EU. The second most help, according to the Slovak respondents, was provided by the Czech Republic – a view held by about 45 per cent – followed in third place by Russia, with about 25 per cent.²⁹⁷

292 Filip Šebok (2019), 'The Curious Case of the China-loving Slovak Parliamentarian Ľuboš Blaha', *Chinaobservers*, 26 August, <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-curious-case-of-the-china-loving-slovak-parliamentarian-lubos-blaha/>.

293 Yar (2019), 'Čínsky veľvyslanec [Chinese Ambassador].

294 European Commission (2018), *Special Eurobarometer 479: Future of Europe*, https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2217_90_2_479_ENG.

295 Richard Turcsanyi, Renata Sedlaková, Jiri Cenek, Kristina Kironska, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Marek Hruska, Adrian Brona, Una Berzina Cherenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Bjorn Jerden, Marc Julienne, Tamas Matura, Tim Ruhlrig and Tim Summers (2020), *European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Differences and Common Ground across the Continent*, Palacky University Olomouc, <https://sinofon.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-final.pdf>.

296 The following paragraphs appeared (in a slightly adjusted version) in the previous ETNC report.

297 Vladimír Šnidl (2020), 'Fakty vs. dojmy: Ako Slovensku reálne pomáhajú Rusko, Čína a Európska únia [Facts versus Impressions: How Russia, China and the European Union Really Help Slovakia]', *Denník N* [Diary N], 2 April, <https://dennikn.sk/1830536/fakty-vs-dojmy-ako-slovensku-realne-pomahaju-rusko-cina-a-europska-unia/>.

The Sinophone Borderlands survey found that in September 2020, just before the second wave of COVID-19 escalated in Slovakia, about half of Slovaks (49 per cent) recognized China's help during the pandemic – almost the same as Slovaks' recognition of help from the EU (51 per cent). Although the recognition of help from the EU increased significantly compared to the March 2020 survey, this still made Slovaks among the most positive in terms of China's help during the pandemic, only surpassed by Italians and Hungarians.

The high numbers recognizing Chinese help might have been the result of the public welcoming of Chinese supplies of medical equipment when (outgoing) Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, together with (outgoing) Interior Minister Denisa Saková, personally inspected the Chinese supplies at the airport and posed for a photograph of themselves inside the aircraft full of boxes purchased from China. There were no more welcoming parties by the new Slovak government or other high-level figures, however, although the Chinese Embassy organized at least one more event at the airport when donated supplies arrived (the highest-ranked Slovak official present then was the Secretary-General of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the third highest-ranked official at the ministry). The lowered willingness of Slovak representatives, and also some criticism of China's propaganda, might have resulted in a significant increase of the Slovak public's recognition of the EU's help, overtaking China's. It is also interesting to note that even this – still high – recognition of Chinese help during the COVID-19 crisis did not prevent the overall worsening of China's image in Slovakia over the previous years.

Assessment: will China become more of a hot topic in future?

Slovakia has long been regarded as a country divided between the West and East. However, it is Russia that plays the biggest role in this dichotomy, based on a long history of pan-Slavic sympathies, liberation after the Second World War and even the communist era (which some sections of Slovak society still look upon positively). In general, China appears in this East–West game as a junior partner of Russia and is perceived as such both by those who lean towards the West and the East.

China's soft-power policies in Slovakia have been similar to those in other countries but can be seen as somewhat muted, comparatively speaking. Chinese diplomacy struggles to persuade the Slovak public, politicians and businesses about the benefits of engaging more enthusiastically with China. At times, the Chinese Embassy's soft-power activities look at first sight as not being targeted at the Slovak audience at all.

The question is whether the temporary increase in China's profile in Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic will become a new normal. The new Slovak government and current Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová have already shown that they are willing to stand up against China and criticize it. If China's diplomats resort to 'wolf warrior' actions, it is possible that the future might bring China closer to the centre of Slovak public attention and attitudes might become more polarized among the public, as well as the political elite.

China's soft power in Spain: in damage-control mode

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Summary

The image of China is deteriorating in Spain. Disinformation seems to play a significant role in this process. Nevertheless, the valuation of China in Spain is similar to that of other countries with analogous characteristics. It can be argued that the positive and non-confrontational approach of Chinese public diplomacy in Spain has reduced the erosion of China's reputation and the polarization of views on China–Spain relations in the country.

China's soft-power approach in Spain

Chinese diplomacy has shown a significant commitment to promoting the Chinese language and culture in Spain, with an emphasis on the enormous cultural and linguistic wealth of both countries.²⁹⁸ The Chinese Cultural Centre of Madrid, the eight Confucius Institutes located across Spain (in Barcelona, Granada, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, León, Madrid, Toledo, Valencia and Zaragoza) and the eight Confucius Classrooms established in the provincial capitals of Andalucía have all played a major role in this area. This, together with the inclusion of Chinese as an optional language in compulsory secondary education, has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese-language learners, which exceeded 50,000 in 2019 according to China's *Hanban*.²⁹⁹

Also in the last few years, there has been a considerable mobilization of the Chinese community in Spain – around 230,000 people³⁰⁰ – who are actively involved in organizing cultural-promotion initiatives that attract a growing number of local populations, especially during festivities such as the Chinese New Year. Spain's Chinese community also had a visible role in supporting Spanish health and security services during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, critical voices against the Chinese government are not very audible. Therefore, Spain's Chinese community can be understood more as an asset than a spoiler for Chinese public diplomacy in Spain.

Cultural and linguistic initiatives remain the component of China's soft power with the greatest outreach in the Spanish population. Other elements – especially the promotion of bilateral trade and investment – are mainly aimed at Spanish political and business elites, and have been promoted within organizations such as the *Asociación de Amistad España–China* (Spain–China Friendship Association).³⁰¹

298 A. Badillo (2017), 'La lengua y la cultura en la relación de España y China [Language and Culture in the Relationship between Spain and China]', Working Paper, no. 5/2017, Madrid: Elcano Royal Institute, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/dt5-2017-badillo-lengua-cultura-relacion-espana-china.

299 F. Peinada (2019), 'El chino, el idioma de moda en los colegios privados de Madrid [Chinese, the Fashionable Language in Madrid's Private Schools]', *El Mundo*, 16 April, https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/04/15/madrid/1555320112_295206.html.

300 Spain's National Statistics Institute (2020), 'Población extranjera por sexo, país de nacionalidad y edad (hasta 100 y más) [Foreign Population by Sex, Country of Nationality and Age (Up to 100 and Over)]', <https://www.ine.es/jaxi/Datos.htm?path=/t20/e245/p04/provi/10/&file=00000008.px#!tabs-tabla>.

301 *Asociación de Amistad España–China* (2020), <https://amigoschina.org/>.

Chinese public diplomacy has become quite active since the outbreak of COVID-19. This is particularly apparent when looking at the official social media accounts of the Chinese diplomatic missions in Spain. The tone of Chinese public diplomacy in Spain has remained largely constructive and non-confrontational and has followed two clearly differentiated communication strategies. Until March 2020, it adopted an eminently defensive attitude, focusing on preventing the stigmatization of the Chinese community in Spain, the introduction of transport and communications restrictions with China, and avoiding criticism against Chinese authorities for their role in the origin and spread of the pandemic. As China moved past the pandemic, whose epicentre shifted to Europe, Chinese diplomacy became more assertive. From March 2020 onwards, China's official discourse began to emphasize the contribution of the Asian giant to curbing the spread of COVID-19, both thanks to the domestic measures that China had adopted and the assistance that it was providing to Spain: through donations from China's central and local governments, Chinese companies and the Chinese community in Spain, to commercial medical supplies and the sharing of good practices to fight the disease.³⁰²

China has projected itself as a top scientific and medical power that is capable of developing and producing state-of-the-art vaccines, medicines, health protocols and medical equipment.³⁰³ The contrast between these defensive and assertive phases was clearly evidenced by two interviews with Yao Fei, *Chargé d'Affaires* of China in Spain, in one of Spain's most listened-to radio morning shows on 24 February and 17 March 2020.³⁰⁴ The letter published in mid-May 2020 by China's Ambassador to Spain Wu Haitao in the newspaper *El Mundo* is also very illustrative of China's greater confidence.³⁰⁵

Chinese diplomacy's direct criticism of the Spanish media has been scarce and has generally focused on censoring attitudes considered racist³⁰⁶ against China or information that is considered 'malicious'.³⁰⁷

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- 302 The Communication on social media by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Spain has been more focused on business and official cooperation: Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 8 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 7 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 27 February 2020. Meanwhile, the Consulate General of China in Barcelona has put greater emphasis on the assistance provided by the Chinese community: Consulate General of China in Barcelona, [Twitter](#), 5 April 2020; Consulate General of China in Barcelona, [Twitter](#), 2 April 2020; Consulate General of China in Barcelona, [Twitter](#), 25 February 2020; Consulate General of China in Barcelona, [Twitter](#), 21 February 2020; Consulate General of China in Barcelona, [Twitter](#), 14 February 2020.
- 303 Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 5 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 2 April 2020; Embassy of the PRC in Spain, [Twitter](#), 31 March 2020.
- 304 F. Yao (2020), 'En China estamos pensando en enviar equipo de médicos y expertos en coronavirus a España [In China, We are Thinking of Sending a Team of Doctors and Experts on Coronavirus to Spain]', *Onda Cero*, 17 March, https://www.ondacero.es/programas/mas-de-uno/audios-podcast/entrevistas/yao-fei-china-coronavirus-espana_202003175e708a20cf7ab300010d2f7f.html; F. Yao (2020), 'Yao Fei, ministro consejero de la Embajada china en Madrid: "Algunos gobiernos han actuado de forma muy excesiva ante el coronavirus" [Yao Fei, Minister Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in Madrid: "Some Governments have Acted Very Aggressively in the Face of the Coronavirus"]', *Onda Cero*, 24 February, https://www.ondacero.es/programas/mas-de-uno/audios-podcast/entrevistas/yao-fei-coronavirus_202002245e538e010cf2a8ef178b4a3e.html.
- 305 H. Wu (2020), 'China y España combaten de la mano la COVID-19 e intensifican conjuntamente las relaciones bilaterales [China and Spain Fight COVID-19 Hand in Hand and Jointly Intensify Bilateral Relations]', *El Mundo*, 18 May, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/05/18/5ec12b16fdddf6bb8b45b3.html>.
- 306 P.M. Diez (2020), 'Indignación en China por un chiste racista en la serie "Aída", de Telecinco [Outrage in China over a Racist Joke in the *Telecinco* series "Aída"]', *ABC*, 5 May, <https://www.abc.es/noticias/20140521/abci-indignacion-china-aida-telecinco-201405211414.html>.
- 307 Embassy of the PRC in Spain (2019), 'Respuesta a las especulaciones malintencionadas que teje El País respecto a la información sobre Xinjiang [Response to Malicious Speculations that El País Weaves regarding Information on Xinjiang]', 26 November, <http://es.china-embassy.org/esp/sghd/t1719136.htm>.

Spanish perceptions and responses

During summer 2020, several opinion polls were conducted that showed an unambiguous deterioration of China's image in Spain and in other EU countries.³⁰⁸ This chapter will draw from another survey that confirms this situation, but also provides a more nuanced picture of the views of the Spanish population towards China, as in some areas China maintains a positive – or rather neutral – image, in absolute or relative terms.³⁰⁹ According to this poll, more than 26 per cent of respondents affirmed that their image of China had deteriorated, and 15 per cent affirmed that it had significantly deteriorated. This is not to deny that the reputation of China in Spain presented in this survey is similar to that of analogous countries. China's average valuation reached 45 points out of 100, akin to that of Vietnam (46), somewhat lower than that of Taiwan or India (49), but higher than that of Russia (42) and Israel (41). Japan (59) and EU countries like France and Germany rank well above, with a 61 points valuation.

Spanish people hold a nuanced view of China. On the one side, Spanish valuation of China's economic power (5.9 on a 1 to 7 scale) and technological development (5.8) stands out in both absolute and relative terms, on a par with that of the United States. Spaniards also appreciate the cultural attractiveness of China (5.4), which is only surpassed by that of the EU. On the other side, Spanish people are much less enthusiastic about the quality of life (3.5) and the human rights situation in China (3.0) and do not trust China much (3.2). China's scores for these last three issues are comparable to Russia's.

This diversity in the image of China in Spain is also clear when looking at the Spanish population's feelings towards some issues related to China. Spaniards hold positive or slightly positive feelings about Chinese technology (61 on a 0 to 100 scale), the promotion of Chinese language and culture (54) and trade with China (54). They have more neutral or slightly negative feelings about Chinese investments (49) and the rise of China as a great power (45), and quite negative feelings about the rise of China as a military power (31), the impact of China on the global environment (30) and Chinese economic espionage (27) and cyberattacks (25).

As for Spain's media coverage of China, analysis of the articles published by the two main Spanish newspapers, *El Mundo* and *El País*, over the second trimester of 2020, draws a clear distinction between news about human rights, which have a clearly negative tone, and news on other topics, which offer a more pluralistic overview (see Figure 1 below). Over the April–June 2020 period, more than one-third of the mentions about COVID-19's origin were negative and generally linked with insufficient phytosanitary conditions in Chinese markets³¹⁰ and the initial censorship of the outbreak in Wuhan.³¹¹ At the same time, both newspapers also emphasized some positive elements, including the assistance provided by

308 J. Oertel (2020), 'China, Europe, and COVID-19 Headwinds', Commentary, European Council on Foreign Relations, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_china_europe_and_covid_19_headwinds/; L. Silver, K. Devlin and C. Huang (2020), *Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

309 This internet survey was conducted in September 2020 of a representative sample of the Spanish population, including 1,501 persons; see R. Turcsanyi, R. Sedlaková, J. Cenek, K. Kironska, A. Findor, O. Buchel, M. Hruska, A. Brona, U. Berzina Cherenkova, M. Esteban, B. Gallelli, J. Gledic, P. Gries, S. Ivanov, B. Jerden, M. Julienne, T. Matura, T. Ruhlig and T. Summers (2020), *Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey*, Palacky University Olomouc.

310 L. de La Cal (2020), 'Una muralla de acero azul para sepultar el mercado de Wuhan, origen del coronavirus [A Blue Steel Wall to Bury the Wuhan Market, Origin of the Coronavirus]', *El Mundo*, 3 April, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/04/03/5e8720b621efa01f708b4577.html>.

311 J. Benitze (2020), 'Periodismo libre: los anticuerpos más eficaces contra la pandemia censora [Free Journalism: The Most Effective Antibodies against the Censorship Pandemic]', *El Mundo*, 26 April, <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/historias/2020/04/25/5ea3038121efa0716d8b4633.html>.

the Chinese community in Spain,³¹² China's progress in developing a vaccine³¹³ and the positive impact of Chinese domestic measures to curb the pandemic.³¹⁴

Figure 1 Valuation of Spanish media coverage of China by theme, 2020 T2, number of articles and percentages

Theme	Positive		Neutral		Negative		Total
Human Rights	1	2.8%	10	27.8%	25	69.4%	36
COVID-19	21	11.6%	123	68%	37	20.4%	181
Other	15	14.7%	66	64.7%	21	20.6%	102

Source: compiled by the authors.

Relations with China are beginning to enter the political debate, but it is not yet a salient issue. Spain's policy towards China has traditionally been a state policy, thanks to the consensus between the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party and the Popular Party on the convenience of maintaining privileged relations with China. However, Vox, a far-right populist party that is the third most represented in the Spanish Parliament, has emerged as a fierce critic of China, echoing the discourse of the US alternative-right. Several statements by leaders of Vox have provoked critical, but conciliatory, reactions from the Chinese Embassy in Spain, without naming the concerned politicians. These include Vox's Secretary-General Ortega Smith and Vox's President Santiago Abascal, who have consistently referred to the '[damn] Chinese virus' and to China's culpability in the spread of the pandemic.³¹⁵ Vox has also recently suggested the conspiracy of the synthetic origin of the virus and China's 'negligence and

312 A. del Barrio and X. Borrás (2020), 'Los cuatro benefactores chinos al rescate de España [The Four Chinese Benefactors to the Rescue of Spain]', *El Mundo*, 10 April, <https://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2020/04/09/5e8709fefdddf743b8b45f8.html>.

313 M. Ansele (2020), 'La vacuna: el único camino de regreso a la vida anterior [The Vaccine: The Only Way Back to the Previous Life]', *El País*, 31 May, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/04/01/5e83c739fc6c83b25e8b45db.html>; R. García-Abadillo (2020), 'China publica el primer ensayo clínico de una vacuna contra el coronavirus que es segura y crea inmunidad [China Publishes the First Clinical Trial of a Coronavirus Vaccine that is Safe and Creates Immunity]', *El Mundo*, 22 May, <https://www.elmundo.es/ciencia-y-salud/salud/2020/05/22/5ec7e788fc6c83f3338b465f.html>.

314 AFP (2020), 'El cierre de Wuhan puede haber evitado 700.000 casos de coronavirus [The Wuhan Shutdown may have Prevented 700,000 Cases of Coronavirus]', *El Mundo*, 1 April, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/04/01/5e83c739fc6c83b25e8b45db.html>; L. de La Cal (2020), 'China no registra casos por primera vez desde el comienzo de la pandemia [China Does Not Register Cases for the First Time Since the Beginning of the Pandemic]', *El Mundo*, 23 May, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/05/23/5ec8f8dafc6c83a4318b462a.html>; L. de La Cal (2020), 'Las autoridades chinas aseguran que "el brote de coronavirus en Pekín está controlado" [The Chinese Authorities Assure that "the Outbreak of Coronavirus in Beijing is Under Control"]', *El Mundo*, 18 June, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/06/18/5eeb5ac0fdddf66b8b4592.html>.

315 Alberto D. Prieto (2020), 'Abascal anuncia una moción de censura, culpa a China del virus y pide que España deje la OMS [Abascal Announces a Motion of Censure, Blames China for the Virus and Asks Spain to Leave the WHO]', *El Español*, 29 July, https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20200729/abascal-anuncia-mocion-censura-china-espana-oms/508949506_0.html; *El Español* (2020), 'La embajada china critica los "ataques" de Abascal tras hablar del "virus de la China comunista" [The Chinese Embassy Criticizes Abascal's "Attacks" after Speaking of the "Virus of Communist China"]', 30 July, https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20200730/embajada-critica-ataques-abascal-hablar-china-comunista/509200015_0.html; *El Plural* (2020), 'China se harta de Macarena Olona y responde con contundencia a Vox: "Es la peste del siglo XXI" [China is Fed Up with Macarena Olona and Responds Forcefully to Vox: "It is the Plague of the 21st Century"]', 13 April, https://www.elplural.com/comunicacion/internet/china-harta-macarena-olona-responde-contundencia-vox-peste-siglo-xxi_237673102; *La Vanguardia* (2020), 'La embajada china critica por racista a Ortega Smith tras hablar de "malditos virus chinos" [The Chinese Embassy Criticizes Ortega Smith as Racist after Talking about "Damn Chinese Viruses"]', 14 March, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20200314/474130186160/embajada-china-ortega-smith-racista-malditos-virus-chinos-coronavirus.html>.

criminal' early management of the pandemic, while supporting the US decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization.³¹⁶

The Spanish government has maintained a cooperative and supportive tone with Chinese authorities, similar to that used by Chinese authorities with their Spanish counterparts. This is evidenced by different statements made by the Spanish head of state and head of government and in the conversation between Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and China's President Xi Jinping in mid-March 2020, as well as during Head of the Chinese Communist Party's Foreign Affairs Office Yang Jiechi's diplomatic visit to Madrid in September 2020.³¹⁷ This has not, however, prevented the Spanish government from taking a series of initiatives towards China that could make Beijing uncomfortable, such as Spain's refusal to join officially the Belt and Road Initiative,³¹⁸ the upgrade of foreign investment screening in Spanish strategic sectors, or the emphasis on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea's regime as the basis on which to settle disputes in the South China Sea. This list also includes the promotion of democratic debate and respect for the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong as the best way to guarantee its autonomy, and the request to allow the dispatch of independent observers to Xinjiang.³¹⁹

Assessment

The volume of the Spanish population that engages in the public diplomacy initiatives organized by Chinese stakeholders in Spain is quite limited, leaving aside those related with Mandarin-language training. Chinese soft power in Spain is clearly lower than that of the EU, EU member states and other economically advanced democracies, but is similar to other authoritarian and/or non-high-income countries.

COVID-19 and growing public discussion about the differences in interests and values between Spain, Spain's traditional allies and China might be a factor behind the deterioration of China's image

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- 316 C. Campos (2020), 'Vox declara la guerra a la República Popular China: "Tiene que pagar por la expansión del virus" [Vox Declares War on the PRC: "You have to Pay for the Spread of the Virus"]', *El Español*, 21 October, https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20201021/vox-declara-guerra-republica-popular-china-expansion/529947521_0.html; J. Bocanegra (2020), 'China, Trump y las multinacionales: Vox consolida en la moción su antiglobalismo [China, Trump and Multinationals: Vox Consolidates its Antiglobalism in the Motion]', *El Confidencial*, 22 October, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-10-22/vox-discurso-elites-globalistas-mocion-de-censura_2799904/; J. Fernández-Miranda (2020), 'Abascal: "No me atrevo a negar que el virus haya sido creado" [Abascal: "I Dare Not Deny that the Virus Was Created"]', *ABC España*, 20 December, https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-abascal-no-atrevo-negar-virus-haya-sido-creado-202012200228_noticia.html.
- 317 *Digital 24 News* (2020), 'Xi Jinping habló por teléfono con Pedro Sánchez la noche del 17 de marzo [Xi Jinping Spoke by Phone with Pedro Sánchez the Night of 17 March]', 18 April, <https://digital24news.com/xi-jinping-hablo-por-telefono-con-pedro-sanchez-la-noche-del-17-de-marzo/>; Presidency of the Spanish Government (2020), 'Pedro Sánchez Stresses Importance of Strategic Relations between Spain and China', 3 September, <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/news/Paginas/2020/20200903sanchez-jiechi.aspx>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (2020), 'Palabras de SM el Rey al pueblo amigo de China [Words of His Majesty the King to the Friendly People of China]', Government of Spain, 6 February, <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/news/Paginas/2020/20200903sanchez-jiechi.aspx>.
- 318 M. González (2018), 'España rehúsa sumarse a la nueva Ruta de la Seda china [Spain Refuses to Join China's New Silk Road]', *El País*, 28 November, https://elpais.com/politica/2018/11/27/actualidad/1543348666_419111.html.
- 319 Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (2020), 'Encuentro Sra. Ministra con el Director de la Oficina de Asuntos Exteriores del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de China (PCCh), Sr. Yang Jiechi [Meeting of Madam Minister with the Director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Mr Yang Jiechi]', Government of Spain, 3 September, http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/NotasDePrensa/Paginas/2020_NOTAS_P/20200903_NOTA131.aspx.

in Spain.³²⁰ Disinformation could also be a very significant factor. Even if the Spanish population recognizes some support from China during the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation has taken its toll on China's reputation in Spain, as 41 per cent of the Spanish population directly links COVID-19 with an intentional release of the virus from a Chinese laboratory³²¹ and 36 per cent thinks that it is definitely true or probably true that the 'coronavirus was deliberately created and spread by the Chinese Government'.³²²

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the largely non-confrontational approach of Chinese diplomacy in Spain has allowed Chinese officials to maintain fluid working relations with most of Spain's political elites and media, thus softening the downward trend of China's reputation in Spain and keeping the level of polarity in the views about China in Spain in equivalent ranges to those of the image of Russia and the US.³²³ In addition, when asked about the foreign policy priorities for Spain in its relations with China, cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics and counter-terrorism received the highest support. From this perspective, Chinese public diplomacy in Spain can be regarded as part of a relatively successful damage-control strategy to preserve Chinese soft power in Spain.

320 Mario Esteban and Miguel Otero-Iglesias (2020), 'Spain Longs for a Stronger Europe in the Face of US-China Antagonism', in M. Esteban, M. Otero-Iglesias, U.A. Bērziņa-Čerenkova, A. Ekman, L. Poggetti, B. Jerdén, J. Seaman, T. Summers and J. Szczudlik (eds.), *Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry*, Madrid: Elcano Royal Institute, pp. 155-160.

321 R.Q. Turcsányi, M. Šimalčík, K. Kironska and R. Sedláková *et al* (2020), *European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Differences and Common Ground across the Continent*, Palacký University Olomouc and Central European Institute of Asian Studies, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-report_3.pdf#page=26.

322 YouGov-Cambridge Centre for Public Opinion Research (2020), 'Globalism 2020 Guardian COVID China Attitudes', fieldwork data, p. 3, <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/tw9r0y4ji9/Globalism2020%20Guardian%20COVID%20China%20Attitudes.pdf#page=3>.

323 Data from Turcsanyi *et al.* (2020), *European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19*, supports this last point.

China's dwindling soft power in Sweden

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Summary

With diplomatic relations steadily worsening, China's soft power in Sweden is dwindling. China has reduced its soft-power activities and suspended its official cultural cooperation. Coercion, rather than attraction, dominates China's diplomacy towards Sweden. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of newspaper articles, op-eds, annual government statements and subsequent parliamentary debates demonstrate that public and elite narratives are becoming increasingly critical of China. Several opinion polls also indicate an increasingly negative image of China in Sweden's general population, indeed becoming the most China-critical nation in Europe.

Introduction

For years, like all foreign diplomatic missions, the Chinese Embassy in Sweden aimed to enhance the soft power of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Promoting Chinese culture with activities ranging from cultural festivities to food festivals across Sweden, the PRC strived to improve its image and shape public and elite opinion. Since early 2020, however, China has officially suspended cultural exchanges between the two governments. The PRC decided not to renew a memorandum of understanding on cultural cooperation that expired in late 2019. Asked for the reason behind this decision, the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm cited the worsening diplomatic relations and that it hopes 'the Swedish side will reflect on the mistakes and take effective measures to create necessary conditions for the restoration of cultural exchanges'.³²⁵

Despite the end of official cooperation and the restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, informal promotion of Chinese culture is maintained. In the city centre of Stockholm, the China Cultural Centre continues to run events, courses and exhibitions promoting Chinese culture and language. In early 2020, China's Ambassador Gui Congyou virtually opened a cultural exhibition on Xinjiang organized in Uppsala by the *Nordic Chinese Times* and the Sweden–China Friendship Association.³²⁶ A recent report published by the Stockholm-based think tank *Frivärld* lists one of the organizing institutions, the *Nordic Chinese Times* (alongside several others), as part of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front work. Like in many other countries, United Front organizations in Sweden aim to spread the official authoritarian Chinese narrative and secure access to technological know-how for Chinese actors. Occasionally, they stage nationalist protests in Sweden. Apart from the *Nordic Chinese Times*, at least two more Chinese-language newspapers published in Sweden, the *Nordic Chinese Newspaper* and the *Green Post*, mirror China's official political discourse.³²⁷

324 We are grateful for comments on previous versions of this paper from several Swedish researchers and journalists.

Any mistakes are our own. Please note that Oscar Shao was an intern at UI during spring 2020.

325 Information obtained by the authors from the Chinese Embassy in Sweden.

326 Chinese Embassy in Sweden (2020), 'Remarks by Ambassador Gui Congyou at the Xinjiang Cultural Exhibition in Uppsala', Chinese Embassy in Sweden's website, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/sgxw/t1814396.htm>.

327 Pär Nyrén (2020), *Kinesiska Kommunistpartiets enhetsfrong och dess verksamhet i Sverige*, Stockholm: *Frivärld*.

In addition, two institutes with great personal overlap, the Swedish chapter of the Schiller Institute and the Belt and Road Institute in Sweden (BRIX), hold regular webinars that promote China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). During the pandemic, they particularly call for bilateral cooperation in the area of public health.

Swedish perceptions and responses

Despite these efforts, China's soft power in Sweden is weak and is further dwindling. According to representative public opinion surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, unfavourable views of China have drastically increased since 2018. Back then, 52 per cent of the Swedish respondents held negative views of China. By summer 2020, the share had risen to 85 per cent.³²⁸ Just like the Pew poll, another representative public opinion survey released in late 2020 had Sweden as the most critical country among all the surveyed European states, with a total of 66.9 per cent holding negative or very negative views of China. Supporters of all political parties represented in the Swedish Parliament seem to hold similarly negative views of the PRC. In comparison to the public image of other states, China turned out to hold one of the lowest favourability ratings. Only North Korea and – by slight margins – Russia performed worse than the PRC. Almost 60 per cent of Swedes indicated that their general view of China had worsened in the last three years. Strikingly, however, China's rather negative public image in Sweden does not imply that Swedes are critical of all kinds of engagement with China. The poll demonstrates that the promotion of Chinese culture and language is rated neutrally and slightly more than one-third of the Swedish population finds China's culture attractive.³²⁹ However, the interest of Swedish high school students to learn Chinese has declined by around 40 per cent since 2013.³³⁰

During the COVID-19 pandemic, neither China nor Sweden officially donated medical supplies to each other, but the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm offered to facilitate Swedish purchases from China.³³¹ Donations from Chinese companies have received little public attention in Sweden. Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, Swedish media coverage of China was mostly critical. Since 2003, coverage of China mentioning 'human rights' in the print media outnumbered those referencing 'business' (see figure 1 below).³³² This is a rough indication of a rather critical reporting, because it can be assumed that human rights coverage in relation to China is overwhelmingly critical. Reports on economic relations, in turn, are more diverse and can be positive, neutral or critical.

328 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang (2020), *Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 6 October, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

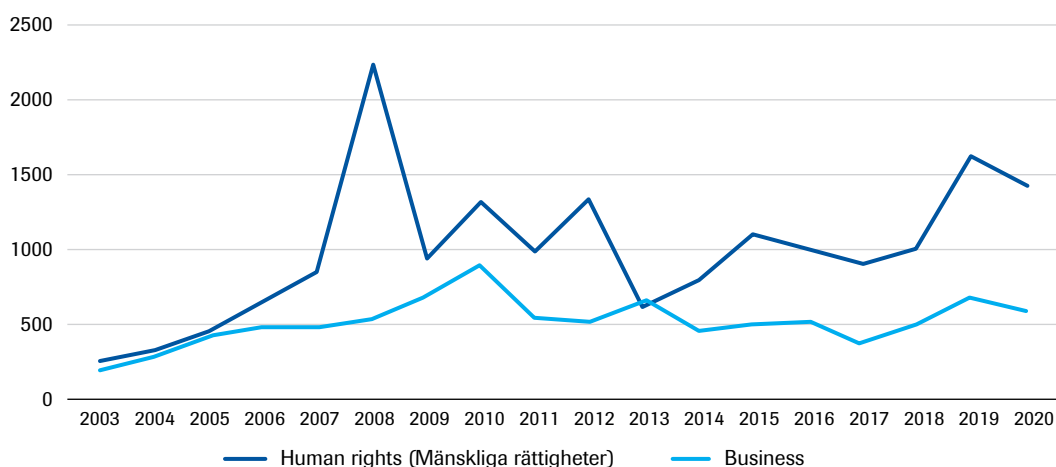
329 Tim Rühlig *et al.* (2020), *What Do Swedes Think About China? Insights from an Extensive Survey of Swedish Public Opinion of China*, UI Brief 8/2020, Stockholm: UI, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2020/ui-paper-no.-8-2020.pdf>.

330 Unpublished information obtained by the authors through Swedish public television from the Swedish National Education Agency (*Statens Skolverk*).

331 Chinese Embassy to Sweden (2020), 'Ambassador Gui Congyou had a Phone Call with Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden Ann Linde on Combating COVID-19', 20 March, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/sgxw/t1759040.htm>.

332 By using the media database Retriever, we have searched using the terms '*Kina mänskliga rättigheter*' [China + human rights] and '*Kina näringsliv*' [China + business] from the time period from 1 January 2003 to 31 December 2020. Duplicates of news agency items have not been removed, since they indicate how widely certain reporting was disseminated. The peak in reporting on economic issues in 2010 was because of the acquisition of Volvo by Chinese company Geely. The peak in human rights reporting in 2008 is mostly related to the Beijing Olympic Games, which came with human rights demonstrations. Growing human rights reporting since 2015 is because of a multitude of issues, including China's detention of Chinese-born Swedish-national book publisher and writer Gui Minhai (since 2016) – see the final section of this chapter.

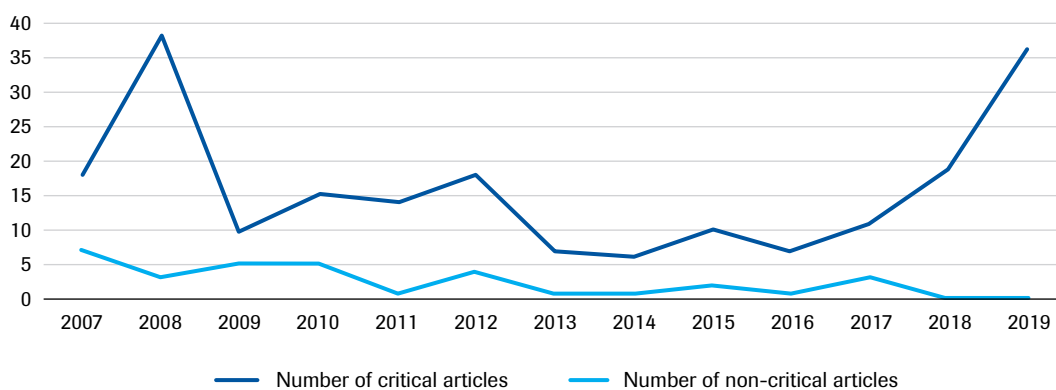
Figure 1 Annual coverage of China in Swedish print media: the number of times 'Kina' appears along with 'mänskliga rättigheter' (human rights) and 'näringsliv' (business sector)



Source: Retriever.

A qualitative content analysis of all editorials published in Sweden's four leading national newspapers similarly shows that critical commentary of China outnumbers non-critical references. Critical reporting was long coupled with optimism that China would ultimately liberalize. However, the share of critical editorials has risen dramatically since 2017 (see figure 2).³³³ Hopes of democratization have turned into warnings of a world led by a dictatorship.

Figure 2 Number of annual critical and non-critical editorials mentioning 'Kina' in Sweden's four leading newspapers (Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Aftonbladet and Expressen)



Source: Retriever.

333 We used the media database Retriever <https://www.ub.gu.se/sv/databaser/mediearkivet> with the search terms '*location: ledare*' and '*Kina*' [location: leader and China], limiting the sources to the four leading daily Swedish newspapers, namely *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*. We analysed the resulting 426 editorials by means of a qualitative content analysis and investigated: (a) which topics were covered; (b) how they are discussed; and (c) whether commentary was critical or non-critical of China. Non-critical statements include factual statements, positive statements about China, or statements with a generally neutral or positive tone when discussing China. Critical statements include statements that criticize Chinese policies, the country, or the PRC government.

Aiming to capture the discussion in the political elite, we have analysed the Swedish government's annual foreign policy statement (*utrikesdeklarationen*) and the subsequent discussion in the Swedish Parliament since 2008.³³⁴ The format of the government declaration that covers all important countries on an annual basis means that references to China have remained rather stable. In the subsequent parliamentary debate, we find an increase in references to China.³³⁵ In the analysed period, Swedish parliamentarians of opposition parties tended to hold more China-critical speeches, regardless of party affiliation. For years, critical comments about Chinese policies, in particular the PRC's human rights record, were coupled with more pragmatic statements on the need to cooperate economically. Since 2019 at the latest, even the discussion of economic relations has become more sceptical, emphasizing the risks stemming from economic dependence. Hence, references to China in Sweden's parliamentary debates have become more critical.

It is therefore no wonder that Sweden's Parliament accepted a new 'government communication' on China in 2019 without major objections.³³⁶ In this communication, the Swedish government identifies a wide range of critical issues, including China's authoritarianism, human rights abuses, lack of transparency, un-level playing field and selective application of international law. Even in fields where the Swedish government sees the need for and the value of cooperation, such as environmental and climate change as well as economic cooperation and World Trade Organization reform, it points to differences in position between Sweden and China.³³⁷ From the time of the current Chinese ambassador's arrival to Sweden in 2017 until early 2020, Ambassador Gui Congyou has been summoned to the Swedish Foreign Ministry no fewer than 40 times.³³⁸ Even more critical of China are politicians in Swedish local governments. Citing various human rights concerns, several cities and other subnational authorities have terminated their cooperation agreements, such as sister-city contracts with China, since 2015. In June 2020, the last Swedish municipality closed its Confucius Classrooms. Similarly, no Swedish university continues to host a Confucius Institute – notably, as Stockholm University was the first European university to open a Confucius Institute back in 2005.

Explaining China's dwindling soft power in Sweden

What explains China's rather negative image in Sweden in both the public and among Swedish elites despite the PRC's efforts to strengthen its soft power, as described in the first section of this chapter? The worsening political relations and China's coercive diplomacy towards Sweden seems the likeliest explanation. At the core lies China's detention and treatment of Gui Minhai, a Chinese-born Swedish-national book publisher and writer of Chinese politics, who worked at and owned Causeway Bay Books

334 We analysed all foreign policy declarations (*utrikesdeklarationen*), the 2019 government communication on China and the subsequent discussions after the release of both types of documents in Sweden's Parliament since 2008. We investigated: (a) which topics were covered; (b) how they are discussed; (c) how lengthy references to China were; and (d) whether the coverage of China is critical or non-critical.

335 The particularly low number of references in 2017 is a result of Trump's election as US president, which dominated the foreign policy debate. The recent peak of the China discussion is partly a result of the centre-right Moderate party talking a lot about China. The Moderate party's leader, Ulf Kristersson, is outspoken on China and holds a critical perspective.

336 *Utrikesdeklarationen debatt* 2018/19, Anf. 94 Fredrik Malm (L), Anf. 119 Hans Rothenberg (M); *Utrikesdeklarationen debatt* 2019/20, Anf. 27 Hans Wallmark (M), Anf. 37 Hans Wallmark (M), Anf. 70 Håkan Svenneling (V), Anf. 87 Lars Adaktusson (KD). *Sveriges Riksdag* [Swedish Parliament] (2019), 'Utrikespolitisk debatt [Foreign Policy Debate]: kammakt 2018/19:20190213ud', Swedish Parliament website, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/_H6C120190213ud.

337 Government of Sweden (2019), 'Approach to Matters Relating to China: Government Communication 2019/20:18', Government of Sweden website, <https://www.government.se/4adb19/contentassets/e597d50630fa4eaba140d28fb252c29f/government-communication-approach-to-matters-relating-to-china.pdf>.

338 Ingrid Thörnqvist (2019), 'SVT Nyheter erfar: Kinas ambassadör uppkallad till UD 40 gånger [SVT News Learns: China's Ambassador Called to the Foreign Ministry 40 Times]', *SVT News*, 15 November, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/kinas-ambassador>.

in Hong Kong when he was abducted from Thailand in 2015. Over the years, China not only changed the allegations against Gui, but questions his Swedish citizenship and has denied him Swedish consular support. When the Swedish branch of the international writers' association PEN awarded Gui Minhai the Tucholsky Award in late 2019 and Swedish Minister of Culture and Democracy Amanda Lind attended the ceremony, Chinese Ambassador Gui unsuccessfully tried to force PEN to withdraw the prize, warning of 'consequences' for Sweden.³³⁹ Subsequently, Swedish film screenings were cancelled in China and the China–Sweden Joint Committee on Economic, Industrial and Technical Cooperation was cancelled. However, a new Swedish cultural attaché to Beijing received a visa without major challenges.³⁴⁰ Economic relations remain unaffected. In the two years before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, both the volume and number of investments were at a record high, as was bilateral trade.³⁴¹ However, Swedish public perception remains negative despite such economic cooperation, perhaps as it is shaped instead by political and diplomatic issues.

Since the arrival of China's Ambassador Gui, the Chinese Embassy has frequently criticized Swedish media, singling out and threatening politicians, journalists and researchers.³⁴² The ambassador not only echoes Beijing's general accusation that Western media has 'a habit of criticizing, accusing and smearing China',³⁴³ but also goes after individuals and threatens Sweden with China's power.³⁴⁴ One recent example is an editorial in the *Global Times*, a nationalist newspaper owned by the Chinese Communist Party's daily paper *Renmin Ribao*, criticizing Sweden for 'surrendering' to the coronavirus and calling upon the EU to condemn Sweden's COVID-19 policy.³⁴⁵ A spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry declined to comment, in an act of implicit distancing from the article.³⁴⁶

In sum, despite some nuances, coercion – rather than attraction – dominates China's diplomacy towards Sweden. China's dwindling soft power in Sweden is not the exclusive result of specific developments in the Nordic country, but it is embedded in a wider international discourse in Europe and the United States that is becoming more critical of China. It is plausible and reasonable to assume, however, that the specific dynamics of China's coercive diplomacy towards Sweden shape the public image of China and explain the comparatively strong deterioration of the PRC's soft power in Sweden.

339 Chinese Embassy to Sweden (2019), 'Chinese Embassy Spokesperson: Awarding a Criminal is a Sheer Farce', Chinese Embassy to Sweden website, 7 November, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/gdxw/t1713886.htm>.

340 Authors' interview with a Swedish official, Stockholm, October 2020.

341 Jerker Hellström *et al.* (2019), *Kinesiska bolagsvärvar i Sverige: en kartläggning [Chinese Corporate Acquisitions in Sweden: A Survey]*, Stockholm: FOI; Viking Bohman and Nicola Nymalm (2020), 'Kinesiska investeringar i Sverige: från framgång till fara? [Chinese Investments in Sweden: From Success to Danger]', *Internationell Politik*, vol. 78, no. 1, pp. 93–105.

342 Chinese Embassy to Sweden (2020), 'Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on Comments from *Frivärlds*', Chinese Embassy to Sweden website, 16 May, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/mtfw/sgfyryw/t1779757.htm>; Chinese Embassy to Sweden (2019), 'The Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Response to the Question in a *SVD* Article', Chinese Embassy to Sweden website, 23 August, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/mtfw/sgfyryw/t1691160.htm>; Chinese Embassy to Sweden (2020), 'Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on the Comments of Leader of Swedish Moderate Party on the Case of Gui Minhai', *Chinese Embassy to Sweden website*, 2 January, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/mtfw/sgfyryw/t1729310.htm>.

343 Chinese Embassy to Sweden (2020), 'Ambassador Gui Congyou Gives Interview with SVT on the Role of Media and Swedish Media's Reporting on China', Chinese Embassy to Sweden website, 17 January, <http://www.chinaembassy.se/eng/sgxw/t1733543.htm>.

344 Björn Jerdén and Viking Bohman (2019), 'China's Propaganda Campaign in Sweden, 2018–2019', *UI Brief 4/2019*, Stockholm: UI.

345 *Sina* (2020), '环球时报社评：瑞典向新冠病毒投降将害人害己 [Global Times Editorial: Sweden's Surrender to the Novel Coronavirus will Harm Others and Itself]', *Sina* website, 13 March, <http://news.sina.com.cn/w/2020-03-13/doc-iiwxstf8830379.shtml>.

346 Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020), 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on March 16, 2020', Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website, 16 March, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1756582.shtml.

Limited appeal: China's soft power in the United Kingdom

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Summary

This chapter assesses the extent of China's soft power in the United Kingdom (UK) by examining the approach of the Chinese government and how China is perceived in the UK. Available polling data suggests that 'unfavourable' views of China clearly exceed 'favourable' views. Media coverage of China in the UK tends to be critical. UK Parliamentary interest in China has grown – partly in response to developments in Hong Kong – and negative views of China dominate parliamentary debates. These factors demonstrate that China's ability to influence actors in the UK through attraction or persuasion – that is, China's soft power – is limited. One consequence is constraints on the development of greater engagement between the UK and China.

Introduction

Prior to 2020, there was arguably a degree of indifference towards China across the UK, even given China's growing economic and political clout,³⁴⁷ but in 2020 the debate about China entered a new phase. Sparked by COVID-19, attention increasingly focused on a range of controversial issues: developments in Hong Kong; human rights in China, in particular in the north-west region of Xinjiang; and the involvement of Chinese company Huawei in developing 5G networks in the UK.

These discussions about China have been driven by a number of factors, including the way that the Chinese government seeks to present itself in the UK, developments in China and how they are reported in the media, and domestic British politics and policy debates. This chapter looks at these factors to assess the extent of China's soft power in the UK, understood as the ability of the Chinese government to influence UK actors through attraction or persuasion.

China's approach in the UK

China's public diplomacy in the UK is led by the Chinese Embassy and its consulates. An overview of their publicized events in 2020 suggests that most activity was focused on business and political circles, more than cultural or educational spheres,³⁴⁸ although 2020 may not be typical because of COVID-19. In the first phase of the pandemic, the Chinese and British governments emphasized solidarity and British support for China's efforts to tackle the novel coronavirus, including through charity events. Once the severity of the outbreak in the UK was clear, however, criticism of China

³⁴⁷ Kerry Brown (2019), *The Future of UK-China Relations*, Newcastle: Agenda Publishing, p. 3.

³⁴⁸ Author's analysis of news and events posted on the website of the Chinese Embassy in London in 2020 (mainly Ambassador Liu's events and remarks).

grew in political circles,³⁴⁹ and Chinese public diplomacy became more focused on defending China's position.

This defensive mode was a wider feature of Chinese public diplomacy in the UK in 2020, with Chinese Ambassador Liu Xiaoming and other senior diplomats active in giving numerous media interviews. As well as COVID-19, the content of most of these interviews was to defend Chinese policy in relation to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Huawei and 5G. More proactive messaging from Chinese diplomats – including on Twitter from late 2019 – highlighted familiar tropes of 'win-win cooperation', and in response to COVID-19 included the notion of building a 'community of shared future for humankind', a foreign policy idea that stresses common global challenges and argues that joint action by states is needed to address them.³⁵⁰ The Chinese Embassy also joined the pushback against anti-Asian sentiment in the UK. Meanwhile, the Chinese Embassy in London and researchers in China who follow developments in the UK have tended to argue that the UK's departure from the European Union – commonly known as Brexit – offers an opportunity for greater commercial cooperation, including for the City of London.³⁵¹

The Chinese Embassy has engaged in outreach to the Chinese community in the UK and to Chinese students, who numbered 120,000 in 2018–2019, up from just under 90,000 in 2014–2015,³⁵² and Chinese Ambassador Liu has highlighted the potential for collaboration with the UK in education.³⁵³ In 2020, there were 30 Confucius Institutes in the UK alone, compared to 103 in the EU-27.³⁵⁴ There have been occasional critical comments about Confucius Institutes,³⁵⁵ but to a much lesser degree than in the United States or Australia. Cultural activities such as art exhibitions and film festivals have been initiated by both sides, although often these have been local rather than national, based on links between cities, such as Shanghai and Liverpool. Other regular cultural activities have included Chinese-language film distribution in the UK by both commercial and non-profit organizations. The majority of the audience for Chinese-language films are Chinese students in the UK, and these activities have had limited wider impact in raising the profile of Chinese culture and its diversity, while the economic benefits have not been well captured in media reporting. UK interest in Japanese and Korean culture tends to be greater.³⁵⁶

However, it is developments in China and the way they are reported that have the biggest impact on perceptions of China in the UK, rather than the activities of Chinese diplomats.

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- 349 Foreign Affairs Committee (2020), 'Viral Immunity: The FCO's Role in Building a Coalition against COVID-19', https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmaff/239/23903.htm#_idTextAnchor000; Matthew Henderson, Alan Mendoza, Andrew Foxall, James Rogers and Sam Armstrong (2020), 'Coronavirus Compensation: Assessing China's Potential Culpability and Avenues of Legal Response', The Henry Jackson Society, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/coronaviruscompensation/>; Chris Patten (2020), 'China's Nasty, Lying, Bullying Communist Regime Must Face Judgement over Coronavirus', *Mail on Sunday*, 10 May.
- 350 Liu Xiaoming (2020), 'Pull in the Same Direction and Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind', speech delivered at Chatham House, 3 March, <http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/ambassador/t1751448.htm>.
- 351 For example, Dong Yifan (2020), 'Partnership has Positive Potential: China-UK Cooperation Can Enter a New Stage in the Post-Brexit Era', *China Daily Global Edition*, 5 February.
- 352 Kathy Daniels (2020), 'The Recruitment and Integration of International Chinese Students', in Michael Natzler (ed.), *UK Universities and China*, Higher Education Policy Institute, p. 65.
- 353 Liu Xiaoming (2019), 'China Wants to Build Deeper Educational Links with Britain', *Financial Times*, 26 November.
- 354 Data collated by the author from http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm. This compares to 29 Confucius Institutes in December 2016; see Tim Summers (2017), 'Brexit: Implications for EU-China Relations', Chatham House Research Paper, p. 14, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/05/brexit-implications-eu-china-relations>.
- 355 There are brief references in both the April and November 2019 reports by the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee.
- 356 I am grateful to Hiu Man Chan for her input on these topics.

Perceptions of China and the debate in the UK

Survey data collected by the Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey in autumn 2020 suggests that general perceptions of China in the UK have been worsening, and that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on China's reputation in the UK, with nearly two-thirds of respondents reporting negative feelings towards China and slightly more saying that their views had worsened over the last three years.³⁵⁷ A YouGov poll conducted in May 2020 found that 47 per cent of the 2,258 respondents saw China becoming a superpower as 'more of a threat', compared to 11 per cent who said China was 'more of an opportunity'.³⁵⁸ A 2020 Pew Research Center poll on global attitudes towards China found that 74 per cent of those questioned in the UK had an 'unfavourable' opinion of China, compared to 22 per cent with a 'favourable' opinion, a significant change from 55 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively, in 2019.³⁵⁹ A separate survey by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, which was published in June 2020, found that 60 per cent saw the Chinese government as a 'force for bad' rather than good, and that attitudes had worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous polling carried out in November 2018 also showed unfavourable views outweighing favourable ones by 37 per cent to 23 per cent (with 40 per cent neutral).³⁶⁰

These surveys do not reveal why unfavourable views tend to dominate, but the Sinophone Borderlands Survey shows that news media still play a significant role in the formation of views about China.³⁶¹ There has long been a tendency to focus on negative aspects in British media reporting of China; for example, in broadsheet reporting of China and Africa in the 2000s, a common picture was 'a benign West being undermined by a ruthless and unscrupulous China'.³⁶² Negative framing also dominates much recent media coverage of China.³⁶³

The UK Parliament's interest in China has grown since 2019 (see Figure 1 below), mainly because of Hong Kong, where developments continue to attract a high degree of attention in the UK given Britain's status as Hong Kong's former colonial power. From January 2008 to the end of 2020, there were 119 parliamentary debates about China (in the Commons, Lords and Westminster Hall). Just under 40 per cent of these were about Hong Kong (mostly from 2014 onwards), with 37 of these 47 debates on Hong Kong occurring in 2019 or 2020. The number of wider China debates increased in 2020, with sixteen debates compared to eight in 2019.³⁶⁴ In addition to Hong Kong, issues relating to human rights were prominent, with twelve debates on human rights (mainly Xinjiang and Tibet) during 2019 and 2020. A brief review of the transcripts of these debates further supports the conclusion that criticism of China is the dominant theme in parliamentary discussions of China, including debates on Hong Kong. In summer 2020, a new China Research Group was formed by Conservative Party parliamentarians,

357 Tim Summers, Richard Q. Turcsanyi, Matej Simalcik, Kristina Kironska and Renata Sedlakova (2020), *British Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19*, Central European Institute of Asian Studies and Chatham House, <https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/UK-poll-report.pdf>.

358 See <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/science/survey-results/daily/2020/05/19/b9b94/1>.

359 Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang (2020), *Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 6 October, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

360 Wilfred M. Chow, Enze Han and Xiaojun Li (2019), 'Brexit Identities and British Public Opinion on China', *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 6, pp. 1369–1387, at p. 1379.

361 For earlier discussion of the relationship, see Colin Sparks (2010), 'Coverage of China in the UK National Press', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 347–365.

362 Emma Mawdsley (2008), 'Fu Manchu versus Dr Livingstone in the Dark Continent: Representing China, Africa and the West in British Broadsheet Newspapers', *Political Geography*, no. 27, pp. 509–529, at p. 520.

363 For example, the author's analysis shows that all except four of the 35 'Big Reads' on China in the *Financial Times* published during 2020 frame developments in China in negative terms, with none positive (the four exceptions frame China in neutral terms).

364 Data collated from Hansard (the British parliamentary record) by the author on 27 June 2020, updated on 29 January 2021.

many of whom are outspoken critics of the Chinese government. It has developed a significant media presence and established a newsletter to disseminate views about China.

China does not, therefore, appear attractive to most UK parliamentarians, a factor that significantly constrains effective Chinese soft power in the UK.

Assessment

Discussion of China in the UK grew significantly, at least in the first half of 2020,³⁶⁵ and those with sharper and more critical views have the wind in their sails. The idea of China as a country with 'unattractive' politics has become a strong feature of public discussion and is reflected to some degree in the government's policy responses to a wide range of issues, from developments in Hong Kong to the decision in July 2020 to reverse the UK government's long-standing policy of encouraging Huawei to invest in the UK (following a combination of US sanctions and opposition to Huawei in the governing Conservative Party). The government's tone hardened further in the latter part of 2020, including in relation to developments in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, with parliamentary criticism of China growing. The fact that China's government was more effective in dealing with COVID-19 than the UK's (as measured in numbers of cases and deaths) has done little to alter those views; on the contrary, critics of China intensified their attacks on the Chinese system throughout 2020 for somehow creating the pandemic in the first place, and recent survey data suggests that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on China's reputation.³⁶⁶

The attractiveness in the UK of other facets of contemporary China varies. While Chinese history and, to some extent, cinema are often well-received features of Chinese culture, there is still sometimes a tendency in the media to frame Chinese history, popular culture and even food in negative terms, especially in the tabloid press.³⁶⁷

There are, however, some in the UK who find China's economic growth, middle class and innovative companies attractive as markets or partners, while many in the education and scientific communities want to respond to the scale and depth of work done in China by developing closer ties. Others have positive views of Chinese culture, traditions, history and food.³⁶⁸ These voices advocating working with China are currently marginalized in the policy debate in the UK, and efforts to promote them rarely make it through the great wall of media negativity on China. Meanwhile, the UK itself engages in active promotion of its own soft power in China (and globally), through media campaigns, scholarships, the promotion of British arts and culture, as well as an active social media presence.³⁶⁹

In conclusion, therefore, there is little evidence of any significant Chinese soft power having been successfully exercised in the UK over recent years. Given that coverage of China and the UK's policy

365 However, data from Google Trends suggests that interest may have declined in the second half of 2020, returning to pre-COVID-19 levels; see <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=GB&q=China>.

366 Summers *et al.* (2020), *British Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19*. See also Tim Summers (2020), 'UK: Sharpening the China Debate amid COVID-19', in John Seaman, ed., *Covid-19 and Europe-China Relations: A Country-level Analysis*, Special Report, European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), 29 April, pp. 74–76, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_special_report_covid-19_china_europe_2020.pdf.

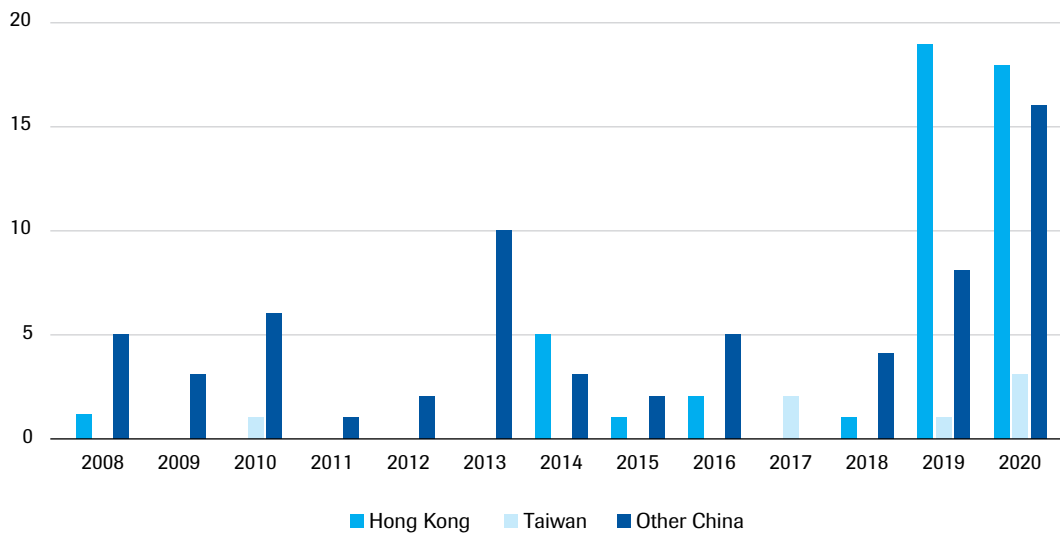
367 Sparks (2010), 'Coverage of China in the UK National Press', pp. 355–363.

368 Based on further analysis of the data collected for Summers *et al.* (2020), *British Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19*.

369 Pawel Surowiec and Philip Long (2020), 'Hybridity and Soft Power Statecraft: The "GREAT" Campaign', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 168–195. The UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office has explicitly dedicated resources to the promotion of British soft power; see FCO, *Annual Report & Accounts 2018-2019*, pp. 32–33, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/827788/FCOAnnualReport201819.pdf.

debate about it have taken a much more critical and negative turn, that looks unlikely to change. The impact on bilateral relations of this aspect of UK–China interaction is to constrain and limit the scope for engagement. It also undermines the argument sometimes made that China's ruling Communist Party has undue influence in British politics, or that China poses a significant (even existential) threat to the UK or its system of government.³⁷⁰ Given the lack of evidence to support such assertions, they look more like an effort to mobilize support for policies that target China, either out of sympathy for Washington's turn to strategic hostility, or because their advocates fear an uncertain future in which the UK's global influence is in decline.

Figure 1 UK parliamentary interest in China



370 For example, the claim made by the authors of the *Hidden Hand* that 'Britain has passed the point of no return and any attempt to extricate itself from Beijing's orbit would probably fail' (cited in the *Mail on Sunday*, 10 July 2020); see Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg (2020), *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World*, London: Oneworld Publishers.

China's communication strategy towards the EU: increasingly sceptical reception

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Summary

The Chinese diplomatic mission has been very active in communicating and engaging with its Brussels audience. Through its communication activities, the Chinese government attempts to project ideas of itself as a reliable economic partner, improves its image as a political entity, and desecuritized narratives over its geopolitical ambitions. At the European Union (EU) level, China's image is debated mainly in economic, but also geopolitical and normative, terms. In these three areas, the EU's positioning has grown increasingly sceptical over the past few years, a trend that has consolidated since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷¹

Introduction

The Chinese government relies on a variety of actors to implement its communication strategy at the EU level. Chinese state media have played a prominent role in this. For instance, *Xinhua*, *CCTV* and *China Daily* all have European branches. *China Daily Europe*³⁷² and its Bureau Chief³⁷³ have a strong presence on Twitter, and additionally, in 2010 it launched *China Daily European Weekly*,³⁷⁴ with the aspiration 'to better serve its goal of being a newspaper that provides a window for China to be understood by and understand the world'.³⁷⁵ In 2014, the 'Xinhua Europe' app was also launched by the European Regional Bureau of the *Xinhua* news agency.³⁷⁶ Although *Xinhua* is far from being the most trusted news agency in Brussels, its development on the European territory is fast and it is supported by significant financial means and human resources.³⁷⁷

In addition to Chinese media, other actors also support China's communication activities in other areas. For instance, through its various messages, China's Chamber of Commerce to the EU – which was

371 Please note that this chapter has been written in October 2020, before the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in December 2020 as well as the tit-for-tat sanctions in March 2021 and the subsequent rise of EU-China tensions. Since then, China's communication and propaganda strategy has significantly hardened.

372 See <https://twitter.com/ChinaDailyEU>. *CCTV* and *Xinhua* have accounts but a very limited amount of followers/inactive: *Xinhua*: <https://twitter.com/XinhuaEurope>; *CCTV*: <https://twitter.com/eurobreaking>.

373 See <https://twitter.com/chenweihua>.

374 Each edition has 32 pages and is distributed in about 30 European countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and France, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-01/21/content_11892924.htm.

375 See http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-01/21/content_11892924.htm.

376 See <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1195257.htm>.

377 For instance, the 'Xinhua Europe' App was supported at the time of its launch in 2014 by more than 200 local reporters and 150 experienced journalists, according to official statements; see <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1195257.htm>.

established in 2018 – sustains China's image as reliable economic partner.³⁷⁸ Other institutions, such as the Chinese Cultural Centre, promote the Chinese language and culture. Europe is also the region with the largest number of Confucius Institutes in the world (187 in 2020).³⁷⁹

The Chinese government's soft/sharp-power actors on the European territory are numerous. This chapter does not intend to map them all, nor to look at them from an institutional perspective. Instead, it identifies the key messages of China's public diplomacy towards the EU. With this aim, it focuses on the activities of China's Mission to the EU because of its centrality and activeness in terms of communication in Brussels.

China's discourse promotion at the EU level: key messages

The Chinese Mission to the EU has pursued a comprehensive strategy to push forward specific narratives in recent years, and is often at the forefront of Chinese diplomatic initiatives in Europe. It was one of the first of China's diplomatic missions to open a Twitter account in 2013 and, as of October 2018, was the most prolific Twitter account of all.³⁸⁰ Overall, the Chinese Mission today has a strong presence on social media, with active accounts on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. It has also leveraged its online presence, as well as engaged directly with local audiences more traditionally, through various events, addresses and interactions with local media such as *Euractiv*, *EUObserver* and *Politico*. The Chinese Mission has organized specialized events reaching out more directly to Brussels' academic, political and business community. These have included public presentations of certain policies or Chinese government plans, addresses at business forums or the European Parliament,³⁸¹ the organization of study trips to China for EU officials,³⁸² as well as engagement with the EU–China Friendship group.³⁸³ In parallel, the Chinese Mission's activities have included cultural promotion addressing a more mainstream public, both through events³⁸⁴ and scholarships (such as the EU Window, a programme for learning Mandarin Chinese, which has been ongoing since 2006).³⁸⁵

There have been three fundamental and interrelated underlying objectives in China's communication strategy at the EU level over the past seven years: first, to build political/economic trust with European

378 In its mission statement, China's Chamber of Commerce to the EU (CCCEU) mentions 'Establish a good image for Chinese enterprises in participating in a new round of international cooperation', as one of three key missions, <http://en.ccceu.eu/gywm/shjs/>. During COVID-19, the CCCEU also communicated on mask donation; see http://en.ccceu.eu/2020-04/08/c_125.htm. See also 'China Ready to Share its Experience with EU to Jointly Fight COVID-19', <http://en.ccceu.eu/c/2020-03-03/487343.shtml>; 'Global Survey: China Continues to Win High Public Confidence', <http://en.ccceu.eu/c/2020-03-05/487347.shtml>; CCCEU (2020), 'China's vital bridge to Europe: On the occasion of CCCEU's first anniversary', 8 April, http://en.ccceu.eu/2020-04/08/c_123.htm; Zhou Lihong (2020), 'One Year On, We Grow Together', CCCEU website, 8 April, <http://en.ccceu.eu/c/2020-04-08/487449.shtml>.

379 See http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm.

380 Zhao Alexandre Huang and Rui Wang (2019), 'Building a Network to "Tell China Stories Well": Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter', *International Journal of Communication*, 13, p. 2991.

381 For instance, in 2016, then Chinese Ambassador to the EU Yang Yanyi addressed the European Parliament on three occasions: (1) on the EU's obligation to honour the World Trade Organization's rules and Market Economy Status for China; (2) on the Belt and Road Initiative; and (3) on the 13th Five-Year-Plan of the Chinese government.

382 Ambassador Yang's address to EU officials going on the study tour: 'deepen your insights of China and better appreciate the rationale lying behind China's foreign policy', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1204073.htm>.

383 In 2014 at the re-launch of the EU–China Friendship Group, Ambassador Yang said 'We particularly appreciate the [EU–China Friendship] group's deep appreciation of and kind support for China's stance on issues pertaining to its sovereignty and territorial integrity'; see Xinhua (2014), 'Members of European Parliament Re-launch EU–China Friendship Group', *China Daily*, 9 October, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-10/09/content_18710503.htm.

384 Such as the annual China Open House day, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/16/c_137470612_2.htm; or the Chinese Fashion Night, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1308023.htm>.

385 See <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zglx/t530089.htm>.

partners by promoting the image of a rising power ready to engage in multilateralism; second, and the other side of the coin, to desecuritize narratives over China's geopolitical aims; and third, to legitimize domestic policies and China's current political path and to seek recognition and acknowledgement of its political system. These messages have been adapted to a European audience, for instance by highlighting what China's growth means for the EU or EU-China cooperation.³⁸⁶ The specifics of these themes have been adjusted according to the changing context, but the aims have remained largely uniform and consistent.

More specifically, over the past two years, China's communication strategy in Europe has aimed at actively projecting China as an economic partner vital for the EU, at desecuritizing narratives over Huawei's 5G network, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and '17+1', at underscoring China's presumed commitment to multilateralism versus the presumed unilateralism of the United States, as well as legitimizing China's stance on certain issues, including its human rights situation and the trade war with the United States.³⁸⁷ Overall, the Chinese government's communication strategy has tried to glorify China's actions and positions in contrast with the US, at a time of prolonged trade and technological tensions between the two countries. To be sure, such strategy is first designed and fine-tuned in Beijing, by the powerful and centralized propaganda apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party. Very similar – or even identical – sentences can be identified on repeated occasions, indicating a clear and well-prepared aim to push such views forward.³⁸⁸

These themes match the Chinese Mission's overall narrative over the past seven years, which has been relatively constant through time. Promotion of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' began to take pace in 2014. Although China's advancing of its position *vis-à-vis* the United States is relatively recent (since 2019), China communicated in a critical manner on Japan on a few occasions from 2013 to 2015.³⁸⁹ Since 2015, China has been particularly active in promoting a positive image of its economic and political model, by highlighting the success of specific policies³⁹⁰ and its economic progress.³⁹¹ Similarly,

386 (2014), 'Reforms in China and the EU Offer New Opportunities of Cooperation', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1127903.htm>; Chinese Mission to the EU (2015), 'Seminar on the "Two Sessions" of China and its Impact on China-EU Relations', 26 March, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1251105.htm>; Chinese Mission to the EU (2015), 'China-EU Relations: Celebrating 40 Years of Friendship and Beginning a New Journey', an article by Ambassador Yang, in which she wrote 'China is embracing the "New Normal", while the EU is bracing for a new stage in its development. In this context, it is more important than ever for China and the EU to build on the past and chart the way forward to further bilateral relations and upgrade cooperation', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1277177.htm>; H.E. Ambassador Yang Yanyi (2015), 'China's New Normal and its Relevance to the EU', *The European Sting*, 17 April, <https://europeansting.com/2015/04/17/chinas-new-normal-and-its-relevance-to-the-eu/>.

387 For instance, by directly or indirectly slamming protectionist attempts and retreating from multilateralism.

388 On three different occasions, current Chinese Ambassador to the EU Zhang Ming used the exact same words to refer to the ramifications of the COVID-19 outbreak for the economy. He said its impact is 'limited, short term and manageable' in interviews with *Euronews* (3 February 2020) and with *Bloomberg* (11 February 2020), as well as in a joint press briefing with the EU-Asia Centre (18 February 2020).

389 'Japan, in contrast, has failed to take action over the past 70 years to heal the deep wounds that its aggressive and ferocious wars have inflicted on the people of Asia', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t113625.htm>. Ambassador Yang in a 2014 interview said: 'Japan never came to terms with its aggressive history. They try to deny history and revise their own pacifist constitution', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1122838.htm>; and in an article for *The Brussels Times* in 2015, Ambassador Yang wrote: 'They purposefully blur the nature of war between aggression and resistance and try to depict Japan as a victim of the war', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1292626.htm>.

390 'Why has China achieved so much success? The fundamental reason is that we have found the right path suited to China's realities. This is what we call the socialist path with Chinese features. This path is leading us into a new era and will lead us to greater success', keynote speech by Chinese Ambassador Zhang Ming, 28 November 2017, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1515214.htm>.

391 'China has a very strong, powerful, strategically-minded, far-sighted, extremely committed and determined, and highly intelligent, capable and action-oriented leadership', remarks by Ambassador Yang Yanyi, 1 September 2015, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1293343.htm>.

messages of reassurance and desecuritization can be traced back to the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, when the debate was arising over China's investments in EU countries.³⁹² In 2017, the Chinese Mission also started dismissing allegations of its divide-and-rule tactics.³⁹³ Finally, the Mission's voicing of its position on other issues related to its interests including Taiwan,³⁹⁴ the South China Sea³⁹⁵ and its Market Economy Status³⁹⁶ has also been constant over the last seven years.

China's image projection has been both proactive and defensive.³⁹⁷ On the one hand, Beijing has articulated views of itself as a benign power, responsible stakeholder and reliable partner,³⁹⁸ as well as instructed the EU audience of its policies. On the other, it has also pushed back on specific issues that are perceived as harming China's national image and interests, or as illegitimate "interferences in China's internal affairs". These reactive narratives have sometimes been aggressive in some instances,³⁹⁹ while others have also been promoted with a more didactic and reassuring tone.⁴⁰⁰

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese Mission's communication strategy has been consistent with its narrative and activities over the past few years, placing particular emphasis on pushing forward the Chinese model of response as a paradigm of good governance and stability, in comparison to other governance systems. At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the Chinese Mission in the EU was rather defensive, mainly conveying messages of reassurance regarding the outbreak's impact and justifying China's measures.

However, from March 2020 onwards, the tone shifted towards a more confident and bold attitude, glorifying China's success and international cooperation efforts. The Chinese Mission in the EU has also used its communications to dismiss US accusations and depoliticize China's aid. Besides communications, China has taken concrete actions, and in particular made various donations, including

392 From an interview with Ambassador Yang in 2014: 'Answering to concerns about the ultimate goal of Chinese investment and the leverage they may offer on European affairs, Ambassador Yang believes that any such concerns are unfounded and are based on past history', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1122838.htm>.

393 Some even misunderstood it as China's 'divide-and-rule' tactics against the EU. However, such concerns and misunderstanding are totally unfounded, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1514353.htm>.

394 See <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1306697.htm>.

395 See <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1367332.htm>; <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1379431.htm>; <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1379543.htm>; <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1380206.htm>; <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1380851.htm>.

396 For 2015, see <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1326812.htm>; for 2016, see <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1336411.htm>.

397 On China's defensive soft power in relation to Hong Kong, see D. Loh (2017), 'Defending China's National Image and "Defensive Soft Power": The Case of Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution"', *Journal of Chinese Political Sciences*, 22, pp. 117-124, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11366-016-9419-x.pdf>.

398 For example, in 2015, 'China pursues a policy of peace, development and cooperation. We adhere to the path of peaceful development', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1292626.htm>; and in 2016, 'China is fully committed to shouldering our due international responsibility and strengthening communication and coordination with the EU on international and regional issues with major implications', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1353923.htm>.

399 Replying to an accusation on human rights in 2013, the spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU: 'I would suggest he [Mr McMillan-Scott, VP of the European Parliament] read carefully the White Paper on Progress in China's Human Rights issued recently by the Chinese Government', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1043713.htm>.

400 *EurActiv* interview with Ambassador Yang Yanyi (2015): 'With the Chinese economy entering the "new normal" and transformation of its growth model, it is natural and normal that some European companies show a certain degree of uneasiness', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1276423.htm>; Remarks by Ambassador Yang (2014): 'experts, commentators and investors alike have adopted an excessively negative view of China's prospects, exaggerating current problems and touting China's sudden fragility', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1305929.htm>; and in an article by Ambassador Yang (2016), 'While our European friends' concerns and worries could be appreciated, they failed to get the real picture. The truth is China is making real good stories. Yet, unfortunately and regrettably, China has been made victim of "bad stories"', <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/mh/t1337379.htm>.

one directly to the EU (packages to the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre).⁴⁰¹ The large propaganda campaign that surrounded this donation led to diplomatic tensions with the EU and a readjustment of the EU's own responses and communication strategy *vis-à-vis* China. Diplomatic tensions between China and several member states also emerged after several Chinese diplomats posted in Europe openly criticised the local management of the crisis (*see for instance chapter on France in this report*).

The EU's responses and perception of China

EU-level perceptions and responses to China have undergone significant changes in recent years. Over 2018 and 2019, the EU became an increasingly sceptical receiver of China's soft-power strategy (which was increasingly seen as 'sharp power' instead), with more communications pointing to the risks posed by China's geopolitical ambitions. For instance, in 2018, a European Parliament (EP) resolution on EU–China relations expressed more concern regarding China's influence in Europe and expressly called on China to be a responsible actor.⁴⁰² Most notably, in 2019, the EP issued a resolution expressing deep concern about China's technological presence⁴⁰³ and the European Commission's Strategic Outlook pointed to the security implications that China's geopolitical goals raise for Europe.

The soft-power dimension of economic relations has gradually deteriorated in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, as the EU began to perceive the China–EU relationship as unbalanced and became concerned regarding China's control of strategic sectors. These views have surfaced at EP debates⁴⁰⁴ and were present in various EU leaders' declarations.⁴⁰⁵ The perception of China as an unfair economic player is reflected in EU documents such as the 2016 'Council Conclusions of the EU Strategy on China'⁴⁰⁶ or the *2019 Strategic Outlook*.⁴⁰⁷ Fatigue over the lack of progress in this field has become increasingly evident, as reflected by various leaders' comments.⁴⁰⁸

401 See <https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/eu-allocates-chinese-aid-to-italy-to-fight-against-the-pandemic/>.

402 See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0343_EN.pdf.

403 See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0156_EN.pdf.

404 In the debate, China has been described as 'not a fair economic partner' because of the lack of bilateral economic reciprocity; see European Parliament debate (2019), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2019-04-03-ITM-017_EN.html; EPP group, 'We have no choice but to counter forcefully unfair competition and hostile behaviour from foreign state-owned firms from China, which try to acquire European companies in order to take control of key technologies, infrastructure and expertise', https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/politico-brussels-playbook-saving-the-china-summit-rescuing-the-g7-everyones-pet-projects/?utm_source=POLITICO&utm_campaign=e1461f117f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_06_04_05_05&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_10959edeb5-e1461f117f-190595335.

405 At his hearing, HR/VP Josep Borrell said reciprocity and a level playing field must be the basic principles of our relationship in trade investment and connectivity, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20191008RES63704/20191008RES63704.pdf>; EU Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan said: 'Our approach to China should entail rebalancing our trade relationship and addressing unfair trading practices', <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20191004RES63483/20191004RES63483.pdf>.

406 'The Council believes that more ambitious reforms in China towards liberalizing its economy, reducing the role of the state-owned sector, and creating a level playing field for business would open new market opportunities.'

407 China is referred to as an 'economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership', <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

408 In April 2020, then EU Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan declared that aside from the delays in negotiations, 'there had been little concrete progress' on market access, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2020-001096-ASW_EN.pdf.

Regarding human rights, the EP has been particularly vocal and critical on China's increasing domestic repression. For instance, over the last few years, the EU has issued critical declarations on the situation in Xinjiang⁴⁰⁹ and Hong Kong,⁴¹⁰ as well as regarding individual human rights defenders.⁴¹¹

The arrival of the Geopolitical Commission has injected new impetus in the EU's policy debate on China. Even before taking the Presidency of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen had already stressed the need for the EU to redefine its relations with China.⁴¹² At the press conference following the 2020 EU–China Summit, President von der Leyen's language was notably stronger on economic issues and human rights.⁴¹³

Besides being enshrined in a number of declarations, negative perceptions of China have surfaced in the policy debate and began to materialize in concrete actions. For instance, the EU's scepticism towards Beijing's geopolitical ambitions has materialized in the EU's coordinated participation and messages at the Belt and Road Forum and in the EU's active attempts to counter the Belt and Road narrative.⁴¹⁴ Most notably, concerns about Beijing's influence over strategic sectors and perceptions of China as an unfair competitor have motivated policies such as the Investment Screening Mechanism in 2019. Similarly, as of May 2020, imports from China account for the highest number of EU trade defence measures: 93 of the existing anti-dumping and anti-subsidy measures target China, followed by Russia (10) as a distant second.⁴¹⁵ Hence, the EU's reticence to trust China on a number of economic and international issues highlights the inefficiency of China's soft-power attempts towards the EU.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent Chinese centralised communication campaigns, the critical debate has intensified. Overall, China's perceived bold and repetitive moves have underscored the competition of narratives between political systems. The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced existing concerns over China's geopolitical intents, human rights situation and economic influence in strategic sectors.⁴¹⁶ Additionally, China's partial censoring of the EU Ambassador to China's op-ed⁴¹⁷ and alleged pressure over the European External Action Service's (EEAS) disinformation report on COVID-19 pushed the debate further,⁴¹⁸ as concerns rised about China resorting to direct interference and disinformation to protect its image.

409 HR/VP declaration (2018), https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/52881/statement-spokesperson-situation-xinjiang_en; 'European Parliament Resolution of 18 April 2019 on China, notably the Situation of Religious and Ethnic Minorities' (2019), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0422_EN.html; European Parliament press release (Dec 2019), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191212IPR68927/china-must-close-its-re-education-camps-for-uyghurs-in-xinjiang-meps-say>.

410 See https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/66484/declaration-high-representative-behalf-european-union-hong-kong_en.

411 Such as Liu Xiabo and Lee Ming-che, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0308_EN.pdf; or the four Hong Kong publishers, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0045_EN.pdf.

412 Ursula von der Leyen vowed to define relations with a more self-assertive China, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3026809/incoming-eu-chief-ursula-von-der-leyen-vows-define-relations>. She 'suggested that Europe needed to pay more attention to China, whose threats had been "overlooked" by many politicians in the EU', <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3017023/ursula-von-der-leyen-nominated-lead-european-commission-will>.

413 See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_1162.

414 For instance, using the term 'connectivity' instead of the official Chinese expression.

415 See <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2144>.

416 These had been present for years; see European Parliament (2018), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0343_EN.pdf.

417 Delegation of the European Union to China (2020), 'Censorship of an Op-Ed by the Ambassador of the EU and Ambassadors of the 27 EU Member States to China', press release, 8 May, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/78805/censorship-op-ed-ambassador-eu-and-ambassadors-27-eu-member-states-china_en.

418 See Jennifer Rankin (2020), 'EU "Watered Down" Report on Chinese Disinformation on COVID-19', *The Guardian*, 27 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/eu-watered-down-report-on-chinese-disinformation-about-covid-19>.

At the EU level, the debate over China's image has been largely driven by observations of China's domestic situation and the overall debate over its international standing (rather than by China's self-promotion).⁴¹⁹ However, during the COVID-19 crisis and in its aftermath, the EU has specifically reacted to China's communication strategy, questioning its credibility and the instrumentalization of foreign aid, and potential disinformation actions, in addition to Russia's well-known actions. EU leaders have voiced dissatisfaction with China's communication campaign and exposed the intentions behind China's 'politics of generosity', with High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell explicitly underlining the 'geopolitical component' and 'struggle for influence' behind China's aid.⁴²⁰ Additionally, China's donations during the pandemic have prompted an adjustment in the EU's own narrative in response. Various EU leaders have highlighted the EU's donations and initial support to China, in reaction to Beijing's self-positioning as Europe's saviour.⁴²¹

The EU's pushback on China's communication strategy has continued since the peak of the crisis. After the EU-China strategic dialogue, HR/VP Borrell slammed an allegedly biased portrayal by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs of his statements as 'selective and unacceptable'.⁴²² Similarly, only a few months after the scandal over China's influence over the EEAS disinformation report (as noted above), new plans to tackle disinformation explicitly mention China as engaging in campaigns targeting the EU in order to undermine the democratic debate and improve its own image.⁴²³ These reactions represent a turning point in the straightforwardness with which the EU has responded to the Chinese government's soft-power attempts. The EU now appears fully willing to engage in the battle of narratives.

Conclusion

China has pursued a comprehensive communication strategy towards the EU through various Brussels-based institutions, including the Chinese Diplomatic Mission. This strategy has been rather active, encompassing a wide target audience and channelled through a variety of means, including social media. China's approach towards soft power at the EU level is clearly based on an element of repeating certain key messages that portray images of how China wishes to be seen by its EU counterparts.

However, obstacles to the Chinese government's communication strategy in Europe remain legion, as China's image projection lacks credibility among part of the EU and EU member states' leadership. The debate over China's image at the EU level is framed in normative, geopolitical and economic terms – that is, it is discussed in terms of its human rights situation, its international standing (or geopolitical ambitions) and fairness in the economic relationship. In all these three areas, the EU's perception has grown increasingly sceptical. COVID-19 has further accelerated this trend.

419 Actually, much of the discussion on China has been driven by specific events (such as the Hong Kong protests and developments in Xinjiang). For instance, most resolutions by the European Parliament are on specific cases (such as the cases of the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Academy and Ilham Tohti in 2016; Liu Xiaobo and Lee Ming-che in 2017; the situation of the Uyghurs and of Hong Kong in 2019), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/d-cn/documents/ep-resolutions>.

420 HR/VP Josep Borrell: 'we must be aware there is a geo-political component, including a struggle for influence through spinning and the "politics of generosity"', https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en.

421 See https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77766/implications-covid-19-external-action-eu-remarks-hrvp-josep-borrell-afet-sede-droi-committee_en.

422 See <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3088505/eu-calls-out-chinese-state-media-distorting-officials-remarks>.

423 See https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf.