

“When Brussels meets Beijing: Challenges and Opportunities for Europe”: project portfolio

1. Introduction to the problem and context

The framework for this project is the relations between the European Union (EU) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). As that is quite a broad field, the practical focus quickly became the soft power manifestations of the PRC within the EU, specifically in Estonia. This pivot was influenced by two major reasons. First, according to the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, such displays of power have become more frequent and possess the potential to influence both the internal and foreign policies of sovereign European states. Secondly, a recent case in Estonia, where the parliamentary Estonia-China friendship group had their visit financed by the People's Republic of China.

Soft power is the ability of a state to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. It derives from a country’s culture, political values, and foreign policies, especially when perceived as legitimate and morally appealing. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) strategically employs soft power to boost its global standing, using for example cultural diplomacy via the Confucius Institutes in over 150 countries to promote language and cultural exchange. In Estonia, the PRC uses soft power strategies focusing on cultural diplomacy, economic engagement, and education. However, such initiatives may create divisions within the EU, foster dependency on Chinese investments, and subtly shape public opinion to align with Beijing’s interests.

In Estonia, parliamentary friendship groups stand to carry the country’s foreign policy through communication with other national parliaments around the world. On the flip side, they can also be used as tools of promoting foreign soft power through the customary foreign visits that are often paid by the hosting nation. In September 2024, 6 Estonian MPs visited the PRC over 10 days. Although the flights to China and back were financed by the Estonian state, all the other expenses including meals, accommodation and visits were taken care of by the PRC. Some of the aforementioned MPs have prior to the visit and after showed some pro-PRC tendencies. Group chairman and deputy speaker of Riigikogu Toomas Kivimägi for instance is a vocal supporter of the “One China Policy” and is against opening an official Taiwanese representation in Estonia. Due to the lack of regulation and transparency, it is hard to estimate the effects that the visit had on the vision of the autocratic PRC in the eyes of the visiting MPs.

Subsequently, we chose to focus on raising awareness regarding the PRC's soft power manifestations, its influence, and on advocating for better legislations in the EU in order to prevent similar cases from happening again in the future.

2. Applied activities

The goals of our project were to gain an overview of EU-PRC affairs, learn the basics of political communication and advocacy skills, familiarize ourselves with the PRC's foreign policy and to then employ this knowledge, drawing attention to the People's Republic of China influence in Europe and attempting legislative change in Estonia to curb the country's parliamentary visits to be a tool of soft power.

2.1 Action plan

Activity and short description	Timeframe (which month)	Stakeholders	Person (name + study field)
Narrowing down the topic and area of focus, attending lectures	September-October	-	All
Profiling, situational analysis, legal analysis (target & objectives)	October	-	Henrik Hansson Kirke Freiberg Pauline Springer
Mid-term feedback session & review	October	-	All
Work on policy brief	October-November	-	Henrik Hansson Kirke Freiberg Pauline Springer
Work on campaign proposal	November-December	-	Miikael Raun
Work on communication plan	November-December	-	Md Rokibur Rahaman
Advocacy strategy & lobbying tactics plan	December	-	Henrik Hansson Margarete Trumm
Assembling the advocacy package	December	-	All
Reaching out to the EEAS	December	EEAS	Miikael Raun
Publishing the advocacy package online	December	General public	Margarete Trumm
Assembling the portfolio and final presentation	December	-	Margarete Trumm

Activity and short description	Timeframe (which month)	Stakeholders	Person (name + study field)
Attending the final presentation	December	-	All

2.2 Course of action

- Attended several lectures and a workshop with our supervisor regarding EU-PRC relations, lobbying and advocacy.
- Completed independent readings recommended by our supervisor.
- Created an action plan and outlined our project's goal, what to research, and the steps we needed to take.
- Profiled, researched, and analyzed the current situation of our chosen topic, particularly focusing on Estonia's policies and legislation.
- Finally assembling and publishing what is the main outcome of this project: a 10 page advocacy package.

3. Assignments, roles and pairings

Each member of the group was assigned a role by the project supervisor, along with specific pairings that had to coordinate on specific areas.

- External Communication – Rokibur
- Campaign – Miikael
- Policy & Advocacy – Pauline (unit lead), Henrik & Kirke (legal)
- Secretary – Margarete

Roki–Pauline

1. The External Communication(Ex Comm) person-in-charge (PIC) needs to seek agreement with the Policy unit on the core messages of the project.
2. Ex Comm PIC needs to compile a general stakeholder list (for coalition building) to Policy Unit members for more effective profiling.
3. The communication plan and policy interventions need to be consistent.

Miikael–Margarete

1. The secretary needs to ensure the Campaign PIC allocates time and human resources for events realistically.
2. The Campaign PIC consults with the secretary on the feasibility of the operational details of

public engagements.

Henrik–Kirke

1. The Policy unit needs to ensure the situational analysis is up-to-date while the unit lead is away.
2. Policy analysis of the selected topics must be within the legal context.
3. There must be a wider range of policy intervention options beyond the Estonian institutions.

4. Stakeholders

- **General public in Estonia:** to inform Estonian citizens about the implications of PRC influence on political integrity and national sovereignty.
- **Estonian parliament and committees:** to influence policy and legislative change. Campaign's focus is on the Foreign affairs committee, the EU committee and the foreign ministry.
- **Media Outlets:** essential for widespread dissemination and public discussion on PRC's influence strategies.
- **Relevant professionals and academics:** China scholars, Universities, various academic institutions.

4.1. Stakeholder communication

Since one of the objectives of this project and the advocacy package is to gather the relevant information into a compact, clear document in order to raise awareness on the issue, we decided to make it into a free access source. This was done by putting together an online portfolio on the Carrd website. By doing so the advocacy package can be used as a learning material or a starting point for other similar projects. We found this to be suitable since during the course of putting together the advocacy package, we ourselves had trouble finding examples of what an advocacy package should look like, which significantly complicated the process. Link here: <https://brusselsmeetsbeijing.carrd.co/>

As part of stakeholder communication, we decided to touch base with the European External Action Service (EEAS). EEAS is the diplomatic service in charge of executing all international relations of the European Union. An inquiry was sent to Anitta Hipper, EEAS' lead spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy of regions including Asia Pacific.

She is also in charge of the EEAS communication regarding inquiries about security policy and disinformation. We asked EEAS to assess our problem statement and whether the institution sees a need for better EU-wide legislation regarding officials accepting travel costs and/or gifts from certain third countries.

5. Mid-term results and feedback

- The policy brief and advocacy strategy were part of the first phase that was completed by mid-term
- Our main question by this time was how much of the advocacy package, if any, are we supposed to implement.
- The main feedback we received was to stay realistic on what we can achieve and to definitely discuss the issue with our supervisor. We were also recommended to better define soft power and its various manifestations.
- After a lengthy discussion with our supervisor, we decided that the advocacy package itself will not be implemented but will instead serve as the main deliverable of this project.
- It was also recommended that we contact the life course managers to be sure we are fulfilling all requirements, which influenced our decision to publish the advocacy package as an open source online.

6. Summary of results

The final outcome of our project is an **advocacy package** that consists of the following components:

- 4-page communication plan
- 4-page campaign proposal
- 3-page policy brief
- 1-page advocacy strategy
- 1-page lobbying tactics plan

The ownership of the project outcome belongs to its authors, but the advocacy package is publicly available through the online portfolio.

Resources

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