



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

Making friends, making inroads

The CCP's influence activities in Estonia

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Executive summary

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) interests in NATO's northeast frontier are being challenged by Estonia, a country increasingly aware of the risks these interests pose to national and European security. In recent years, Estonia has rejected the PRC's involvement in port infrastructure, blocked PRC companies' plans to build an underwater tunnel to Finland and publicly abandoned Beijing's "16 + 1" bloc of Central and Eastern European countries.

In public reports published since 2018, Estonian security services have repeatedly named China as a threat to both national security and the international rules-based order. As one of a handful of states to openly reject China's attempts to build a pliable new Eastern Bloc, Estonia is a crucial arena for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political influence operations.

This report presents the first-ever overview of CCP influence agencies' efforts to cultivate Estonia's policymakers over the last two decades. Away from public attention, actors linked to the CCP's foreign affairs, propaganda and united front systems have used outwardly unofficial exchanges to try to co-opt Estonian politicians, national and local government officials, academics and business leaders into supporting CCP goals that often conflict with Estonia's long-term strategic interests. For instance, three former ministers have been employed by a lobbying company representing Huawei, a PRC-owned telecommunications company, in its bid to build Estonia's 5G network.

While punishing the Estonian government when it crosses Beijing's so-called red lines — such as hosting the Dalai Lama — the PRC has built ties to Estonian cities and municipalities, seeking to undermine national policies from within.

One significant success in this regard involves a group of municipalities in northern Estonia that wanted to proceed with a Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel project — potentially financed and built by Chinese companies — despite the central government's concerns. Another example involves a former minister of culture and current member of parliament who has advocated for the lifting of China's non-market status — a position that is at odds with Estonian and EU interests.

If the CCP's influence operations in Estonia continue to be ignored by local authorities, the PRC will build on its limited successes to undo the principled stance against totalitarianism that has defined independent Estonia's history. The "no-limits" partnership between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping has much to gain if Estonian decision makers are quietly cajoled into alignment with the PRC party-state's geopolitics.



0 Introduction: The CCP's blueprint for the Baltic challenge

The People's Republic of China has demonstrated a disproportionate interest in influencing Estonia's policymaking. While being one of the smallest members of NATO and the European Union, Estonia offers China a geopolitical prize with its strategic assets: ports, transportation networks and digital infrastructure.

In 2017, without public discussion, the backbone of Estonia's internet infrastructure was sold to CITIC Group, a People's Liberation Army (PLA) linked company.¹ This poses a direct threat to the security of Estonia, the EU and NATO, especially if China were to share intelligence with Russia or use its ownership to disrupt essential services. In this regard it is worth noting that the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA) and the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO CCDCOE) are both based in Tallinn.²

As one of Europe's most outspoken critics of authoritarian regimes, Estonia presents a challenge to China's interests in the region. For several years, Estonia's intelligence agencies have openly listed China as a threat to Estonia, citing such areas of concern as recruitment and intelligence gathering, economic security and investments in infrastructure.³

In 2022, Estonia and Latvia publicly joined Lithuania in its abandonment of the PRC's "16 + 1" geopolitical scheme, thus dealing a potentially fatal blow to the increasingly discredited analogue of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central and Eastern Europe. One of the reasons behind the decision could have been China's increasingly intimate relations with Russia — the primary security threat to Estonia and its Baltic neighbours — and the PRC's refusal to condemn Russia's war in Ukraine.⁴ As a joint statement issued by Moscow and Beijing noted at the time, "friendship" between Russia and China "has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation."⁵

Estonian intelligence services have also raised concerns about China's stance on the war in Ukraine. In particular, the 2022 Estonian Internal Security Service report states that

[t]he Chinese Embassy in Tallinn closely monitors the development of the Ukrainian issue in the Estonian media, uses the Kremlin's rhetoric in its statements, but avoids openly taking sides.⁶

¹Cain Nunn, "China's Poly Group: The most important company you've never heard of", *The World*, 25 Feb. 2013; "Corporate Identity", Poly Group.

²Frank Jüris, "Estonia's Evolving Threat Perception of China", The Prospect Foundation, 28 Apr. 2022.

³Harrys Puusepp, *Estonian Internal Security Service Annual Review 2019–2020*, KAPO, 2020; Jürgen Klemm, *Estonian Internal Security Service Annual Review 2020–2021*, KAPO, 2021; idem, *Estonian Internal Security Service Annual Review 2021–2022*, KAPO, 2022; *International Security and Estonia 2020*, Välisluureamet, 2020; *International Security and Estonia 2021*, Välisluureamet, 2021; *International Security and Estonia 2022*, Välisluureamet, 2022; *International Security and Estonia 2023*, Välisluureamet, 2023.

⁴"Foreign affairs undersecretary discusses Russia with Chinese ambassador", ERR, 4 Mar. 2022.

⁵"中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于新时代国际关系和全球可持续发展的联合声明", Xinhua, 4 Feb. 2022; "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development", Kremlin, 4 Feb. 2022.

⁶Klemm, *Annual Review 2021–2022*, p. 23.



The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service's 2023 report added that

[s]ince the beginning of the war, the Chinese media has clearly sided with Russia, spreading Russian narratives and calling the US the real culprit of the war while painting Ukraine and the countries that support it, including the Baltic states, as puppets of the US.⁷

The PRC party-state copied Moscow's Soviet-era methodology and adapted it for its own political influence operations. Acting outside official state-to-state relations, the CCP uses a variety of agencies and front organisations to cultivate politicians, business figures, national and local government officials and academics in order to bring them into alignment with the party-state's goals. Recent studies have shown the global impact of CCP influence operations in Australia, New Zealand, Europe, the United States and elsewhere.⁸

After Estonia had regained its independence from Soviet occupation in 1991, CCP influence activities began targeting the political elite, seeking to coerce the country into the orbit of the world's remaining Leninist power. Although China's success has been partial, its influence activities have reached the highest levels of Estonian politics. For example, Powerhouse, a company that has lobbied on behalf of Huawei, employs three former Estonian ministers, which demonstrates that lucrative contacts can provide access to the corridors of power.⁹

This study is the first comprehensive attempt to investigate the CCP's influence activities in Estonia.¹⁰

The starting point and focus of this report are not the influence operations' targets in Estonian society but rather CCP influence actors themselves, their institutional links, working principles and methods. Drawing from Chinese-language sources, this report will describe CCP actors as precisely as possible, with the goal of increasing public understanding of the Chinese party-state and its exchanges with Estonian counterparts.

The CCP chooses different approaches to influence foreign countries depending on the resources it has at its disposal. While Chinese diaspora organisations co-opted by the CCP's united front system have been central to influence activities in, e.g., Australia, their role in Estonia — where the Chinese community is small — has been rather limited. This report only briefly discusses the united front and propaganda work, fo-

⁷ *International Security and Estonia 2023*, p. 65.

⁸ Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping", Wilson Center, Sep. 2017; Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's influence in Australia*, Hardie Grant, 2018; Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden hand: exposing how the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the world*, Hardie Grant, 2020; Hsu Szu-chien and J. Michael Cole (eds.), *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, Eastbridge, 2020; Ralph Weber, "Unified message, rhizomatic delivery: A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland", Sinopsis, 18 Dec. 2020; Livia Codarin, Laura Harth and Jichang Lulu, "Hijacking the mainstream: CCP influence agencies and their operations in Italian parliamentary and local politics", Sinopsis, 20 Nov. 2021.

⁹ Holger Roonemaa, "Huawei tagauks Eestis. Appi palgati valitsusele lähedased eksministrid", *EPL*, 13 Feb. 2020; Andres Einmann, "Isamaa Huawei-ohu koosolekul osales Huawei lobist", *Postimees*, 21 Feb. 2020.

¹⁰ A 2020 series in *Postimees*, one of Estonia's largest-circulation newspapers, briefly examined China's influence in Estonia, but with far less detail and granularity. See: Holger Roonemaa, Mari Eesmaa and Sabine Bērziņa, "Trojan panda. The heavy hand of Chinese soft power", *Postimees*, 4 Sep. 2019; Holger Roonemaa, Mari Eesmaa and Inese Liepiņa, "Chinese intelligence increasingly setting sights on Estonia", *Postimees*, 5 Sep. 2019; eadem, "Chinese investments come with golden handcuffs", *Postimees*, 6 Sep. 2019.



cusing instead on the CCP foreign affairs system's influence work and the multitude of forms it takes in its interactions with different target groups.

The **first section** of the report describes key agencies of the Chinese party-state active in influence operations in Estonia.

The **second section** discusses influence operations targeting Estonian political parties, particularly the actions carried out by the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD).

The **third section** explores how CCP influence agencies — such as the Chinese People's Association for Friendship for Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) — target Estonian local governments and business leaders to cultivate positive sentiment for Chinese interests while bypassing the country's national policy.

The **fourth section** investigates a CCP-linked Chinese university administrator's success in aligning personal career development with the Party's goals while holding high-level positions in Estonian academia, including as head of the Chinese student association in the Baltics.

Sino-Estonian relations have mostly been analysed from the vantage point of economic cooperation. China's aggressive foreign policy has accentuated the security dimension. **Since economic relations are minuscule, the security aspect is expected to dominate the bilateral agenda for the foreseeable future.** This preliminary study tries to tackle this challenge by answering some basic questions about the CCP's influence activities in the Baltic country. Who are the CCP actors carrying out influence activities in Estonia? What are party-state actors doing? How do they describe their work? Who do they target?

The analysis in this paper is based on open sources in Chinese and other languages. The views and opinions presented are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of his employer or any other organisation. No allegations of impropriety are made about any organisations or individuals mentioned.



1 Bypassing foreign policy: Some key CCP political influence agencies

The CCP's influence activities are not carried out by a single entity. Organs across the party-state employ some of the classic Leninist methods of influence work to manipulate foreign societies. This chapter introduces some of the party-state bureaucracy active in Estonia.¹¹

CCP propaganda is designed to create a positive image and challenge criticism. It is carried out by a dedicated group of party-state organs coordinated by the CCP Central Propaganda Department and includes state media and multiple cultural exchange organisations.¹² At the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, the so-called mask diplomacy vividly illustrated the CCP's propaganda efforts, which involved mobilising vast resources in an attempt to create an image of China as a responsible partner.

China's influence activities also employ united front work (统一战线工作), a strategy that was first successfully implemented by the Bolsheviks, who created temporary strategic alliances with other political parties and movements in order to consolidate power in Russia and trigger a global communist revolution. The CCP used the same tactic to take power in China by alternately allying with and against the Nationalist Party (KMT).¹³ Today, the united front's foreign activities largely consist of employing the Chinese diaspora and elites in foreign countries for the benefit of the CCP. This has been thoroughly studied in New Zealand, Australia and the Czech Republic.¹⁴ In Estonia's neighbourhood, examples of united front work can be found in Finland and Sweden, where united front agencies have organised the Chinese diaspora to defend China's interests on foreign policy issues, such as China's claims on Taiwan, the South and East China Seas and the Hong Kong protests.¹⁵

Besides the propaganda and united front systems, the CCP's influence network involves foreign affairs agencies, whose efforts to cultivate Estonia's national and local politics are the main topic of this study.

In contrast to many Western countries, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not the most important institution that formulates foreign policy. The latter is coordinated on a higher level and involves different institutions. The work of China's foreign affairs system is guided by the party's Central Foreign Affairs Work Commission (FAWC, 中

¹¹Parts of this report, especially those on the International Liaison Department, previously appeared in Frank Jüris, "China's influence activities in Estonia", ICDS, 25 Sep. 2020.

¹²See also: Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing dictatorship: Propaganda and thought work in contemporary China*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016; David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy", *The China Journal* 57, Jan. 2007; James Farley and Matthew D Johnson, *Redefining Propaganda in Modern China: The Mao Era and Its Legacies*, Routledge, 2020; Mareike Svea Ohlberg, "Creating a favorable international public opinion environment: External propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a global concept with Chinese characteristics", PhD thesis, Heidelberg, 2014.

¹³Jichang Lulu, "United Frontlings Always Win", *China Heritage*, 25 Sep. 2017.

¹⁴Brady, "Magic Weapons"; Alex Joske, "The Party speaks for you", *Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief Report* 32, 2020; Martin Hála, "United Front Work by Other Means: China's 'Economic Diplomacy' in Central and Eastern Europe", *China Brief* 19.9, 9 May 2019.

¹⁵Päivi Koskinen and Kirsi Skön, "Kiinan „taika-ase” tähtää Suomeenkin", YLE, 15 Mar. 2020; eidem, "Kokoomus erotti Kiinan kontrolliverkostoon sotkeutuneen kaupunginvaltuutettunsa Vantaalla – „Päätös oli yksimielinen", YLE, 23 Mar. 2020; Kirsi Skön, "Perussuomalainen Kiina-ilmio: käsikirjoitus", YLE, 16 Mar. 2020; Pär Nyrén, "Kinesiska Kommunistpartiets enhetsfront", Stockholm Free World Forum, 29 May 2020.



央外事工作委员会), while its everyday work is managed by its office, whose current head is PRC foreign minister Wang Yi.

The People's Republic of China, contrary to its name, is a CCP-led dictatorship — “people” being but a euphemism for “party”. In its external messaging and interactions with foreign dignitaries, the CCP likes to downplay the role of the party and emphasise the role of the people in its political system. For this same reason, China's foreign affairs work is a combination of governmental and non-governmental diplomacy. The guiding ideology of Chinese non-governmental diplomacy is people's diplomacy (人民外交), which is meant to “uphold the party's leadership” through “simultaneously developing governmental and non-governmental diplomacy” (官民并举) by forging friendships that “lay the foundation for [favourable] public opinion” (夯实民意基础). These relationships are meant to transcend national boundaries, time, space and civilisations.¹⁶

The PRC exploits knowledge asymmetries to its advantage. **Many of China's foreign affairs interactions are with unprepared foreign dignitaries, bypassing traditional state-to-state diplomacy.** Instead of official diplomatic representations, these interactions use so-called people's organisations. Despite their name, these have nothing in common with civil society, but are an embodiment of the Leninist party-state.

People-to-people diplomacy (民间外交) activities are meant to influence foreign societies outside state-to-state channels. The most active institutions in the PRC foreign affairs system that carry out non-governmental diplomacy are the International Liaison Department (ILD, 对外联络部) and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会).¹⁷

The Shanghai branch of the CPAFFC provides a standard explanation of the difference between governmental and non-governmental diplomacy: the former involves only official channels of communication, while the latter is more complex and dates back to the PRC's early years, when China had to use unofficial channels of communications to receive international recognition.¹⁸

Non-governmental diplomacy consists of public diplomacy (公共外交), which is practised by many governments, and **people-to-people diplomacy, which is unique to China.** People-to-people diplomacy — defined as “watering down the government's role” (淡化政府色彩) through foreign exchanges by Chinese citizens and friendship groups — **aims to shape foreign public opinion of China independent from the changing nature of party politics.**¹⁹

Their naming notwithstanding, People's Associations for Friendship with Foreign Countries (PAFFCs) are in fact party-state entities that coordinate foreign affairs work at the central and subnational levels. PAFFCs are managed as units or nameplates of their respective local Foreign Affairs Offices (FAOs, 外事办公室). The central-level CPAFFC is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the sub-national level, FAOs serve as offices of the Central Foreign Affairs Work Commission under local party committees.²⁰

¹⁶陈啸, “人民外交、公共外交和民间外交, 这三者有啥区别与联系?”, Shanghai PAFFC via Wechat, 10 Oct. 2020.

¹⁷Codarin et al., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁸陈啸, *op. cit.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Codarin et al., *op. cit.*



2 The CCP International Liaison Department's grip on Estonian politics

What the CCP terms foreign affairs work, encompassing broader activities than traditional diplomacy, is central to the PRC's influence activities in Estonia. Song Tao 宋涛, a former head of the CCP Central Committee's International Liaison Department, has described foreign affairs work as a symbiosis of party, public and people-to-people diplomacy. Song talks of foreign affairs work's four "grips" (抓): on political parties (政党), research (调研), contacts (人脉) and image (形象). These elements can be used to promote foreign relations and a positive image of the party to the international community, as well as help central authorities learn from foreign experiences.²¹

One of the most important institutions in China's foreign affairs system — responsible for party-to-party diplomacy — is the International Liaison Department (ILD). The history of the ILD is closely linked to that of the CCP's foreign relations. It was created in 1951 and first led by Wang Jiaxiang 王稼祥, who studied in Moscow and served as China's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. It is understood that the predecessor of the ILD was the CCP Communications Office (交通局); formed in 1927, it was responsible for communicating with the Communist International (Comintern) and other partners and attempted to export the revolution to other parts of Asia through the Chinese diaspora.²²

In January 2011, before Xi Jinping became CCP general secretary, he spoke at a meeting dedicated to the 90th anniversary of foreign affairs work (as old as the CCP) and the 60th anniversary of the ILD, saying that the latter was established to be in charge of the CCP's relations with foreign parties. Xi stressed that the party's foreign affairs work had an important role in governmental and non-governmental diplomacy — together known as "total diplomacy" (总体外交) — as it allowed the party to build a positive image on the international stage, gather information and support central authorities in their decision-making.²³

Today, the ILD is interested not in exporting the communist revolution but in establishing contacts with foreign political elites who will support the CCP's policies in their countries and help to create an international consensus on issues important to China.²⁴ When it comes to Taiwan, for example, inter-party relations are particularly useful with countries that do not have formal relations with Beijing.²⁵ **The biggest achievement for the ILD is the widespread support for Beijing's position on the South China Sea,** reportedly endorsed by more than 240 parties and 280 think tanks and NGOs.²⁶

In addition, the ILD collects information and fosters long-term relationships with foreign elites.²⁷ In a 2015 report, the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) said that

²¹宋涛, "不断推进党的对外工作理论和实践创新", 人民日报, 28 Sep. 2019.

²²David Shambaugh, "China's 'quiet diplomacy': The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party", *China: An International Journal* 5.1, 2007.

²³"习近平强调: 党的对外工作要继续往开来再创辉煌", china.com, 15 Apr. 2011.

²⁴Julia Bowie, "International Liaison Work for the New Era: Generating Global Consensus?", in Julia Bowie and David Gitter, *Party Watch Annual Report 2018*, Center for Advanced China Research, 18 Oct. 2018.

²⁵David Gitter and Julia Bowie, "The Chinese Communist Party International Department: Advancing 'One China' Behind the Scenes", *Global Taiwan Brief* 1.2, 28 Sep. 2016.

²⁶Bowie, "International Liaison Work for the New Era".

²⁷Shambaugh, *op. cit.*; Brady, "Magic Weapons", p. 5.



Figure 1: Kalev Kallo, former chairman of the Estonia-China parliamentary group, shaking hands with ILD deputy head Qian Hongshan in Beijing. Source: [ILD](#).

the ILD supports Chinese military intelligence in its activities.²⁸ **The ILD is particularly active in Central and Eastern European countries, where the CCP does not have at its disposal enough united front groups or large Chinese communities to help it reach mainstream politics.** Czech politicians used to meet with ILD cadres during their visits to China and hosted them at the China Investment Forum in Prague.²⁹

For instance, after a Czech National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NÚKIB) report criticising Huawei, the leader of the local communist party, Vojtěch Filip, went on a fact-finding mission to China, where he met ILD deputy head Guo Yezhou 郭业洲. After his return in January 2019, Filip defended Huawei in the media, contradicting the NÚKIB threat assessment.³⁰

A similar scenario played out in Estonia following an October 2019 visit to China by Kalev Kallo, the former chairman of the Estonia-China parliamentary group. During his visit, Kallo met with ILD deputy head Qian Hongshan 钱洪山. A few months later, Kallo gave an interview to Estonian media, stating that the “security concerns” over Huawei “have become a matter of faith.” As in Filip’s case, Kallo’s comments were counter to the conclusions drawn by Estonia’s security agencies.³¹

The ILD is also active in the Nordics. The ILD’s discourse power came to light when a delegation led by ILD deputy head Wang Yajun 王亚军 visited Iceland in 2018. Local politicians participated in what they interpreted as a “courtesy visit”. In China, the

²⁸Jichang Lulu and Martin Hála, “A new Comintern for the New Era: The CCP International Department from Bucharest to Reykjavík”, Sinopsis, 16 Aug. 2018; *Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2015*, BIS, 1 Sep. 2016, p. 9.

²⁹Martin Hála, “Between the European Union and Eurasia: 16+1 and China’s Reenactment of Eastern Europe”, in Hsu Szu-chien and J. Michael Cole (eds.), *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, Eastbridge, 2020; Janek Kroupa and Zdislava Pokorná, “Čína lovila české poslance před klíčovým summitem. Byli za tím její zpravodajci”, Seznam zprávy, 26 Feb. 2020.

³⁰Sinopsis and Jichang Lulu, “The importance of Friendly Contacts: The New Comintern to Huawei’s rescue”, Sinopsis, 24 Jan. 2019; “V kauze Huawei nejde o konkurenční boj,“ míní poslanec Pirátů Lipavský. „Je to ideologický hlupák,“ reagoval šéf KSČM Filip”, Česká televize, 22 Jan. 2019.

³¹“钱洪山会见爱沙尼亚议会爱中友好小组代表团”, ILD, 28 Oct. 2019; Hannes Sarv, “Kallo: ohud seoses Huaweiiga on usu küsimus”, ERR, 13 Feb. 2020.



visit was described as introducing “Xi Jinping Thought” to Icelandic political parties. The meetings, which included discussions on the Belt and Road Initiative and human rights, gave China an opportunity to explain to a then-member state of the UN Human Rights Council that, in Beijing’s view, economic development is more important than fundamental rights.³²

2.1 The four grips

This section investigates the ILD’s exchanges with major Estonian political parties, beginning with the ILD’s efforts in 2008 to establish a cooperation agreement with the Estonian Social Democratic Party, when public sentiment towards the PRC and its ruling party was considerably less critical than a decade later.

Exchanges between the ILD and Estonian politicians enable the CCP to follow closely domestic, regional and EU-wide developments and provide Chinese solutions to local issues that, with the help of local interlocutors, consider social and cultural sensitivities. The ILD has organised forums aimed at generating positive sentiment towards the CCP, while its policy goals target rising, active and fading stars from the left, right and centre of the Estonian political landscape. The objective of these forums is to build personal ties that facilitate continued support regardless of who is in power.

The ILD website describes the department’s work in terms of four “grips”, with one of them being a grip on political parties. To date, the CCP claims to have established relations with more than 600 political parties and organisations in 160 countries.³³ Former ILD head and former vice chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Wang Jiarui 王家瑞 has said that high-level exchanges with foreign parties, whose members are a source for policy planning and shaping public opinion, represent preventive diplomacy (预防性外交), strategic communication (战略性沟通) and far-reaching impact (深远性影响).³⁴

The ILD established relations with the Estonian Social Democratic Party (SDE) in December 2008.³⁵ According to Randel Länts, the SDE’s then-general secretary, the exchanges began when he visited China with the European Socialists and received an invitation for the SDE to visit.³⁶ Länts was probably referring to the delegation of young politicians led by Philip Cordery, secretary general of the Party of European Socialists, that met with Uyunqing (乌云其木格), vice chair of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, and Wang Jiarui.³⁷

In April 2009, ILD deputy chair Chen Fengxiang 陈凤翔 met with the speaker of the Estonian Parliament, the Estonian foreign minister and representatives of the SDE and the Centre Party in Tallinn.³⁸ In December of that year, an SDE delegation led by the party’s deputy leader, Indrek Saar, paid a return visit to China, where they met Politburo member and vice chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Wang Gang 王刚, ILD head Wang Jiarui and deputy head Liu Hongcai 刘洪才.³⁹

³²Lulu and Hála, *op. cit.*

³³“我部简介”, ILD.

³⁴王家瑞, “努力开创党的对外工作新局面”, 人民日报, 3 June 2014.

³⁵“爱沙尼亚社会民主党”, ILD.

³⁶Argo Ideon, “Eesti sotside delegatsioon kohtub Hiina kompartei juhtidega”, *Postimees*, 27 Nov. 2009.

³⁷“中国共产党对外交往活动(2008年)”, china.com, 13 Apr. 2011.

³⁸“中联部副部长陈凤翔访问爱沙尼亚”, MFA, 8 Apr. 2009.

³⁹“王刚会见爱沙尼亚客人”, 人民网, 1 Dec. 2009.



Figure 2: SDE deputy head Indrek Saar shakes hands with CPPCC vice chairman Wang Gang in Beijing, December 2009. Source: [中国政协新闻网](http://www.zgxp.com.cn) via Sogou.

According to Peeter Kreitzberg, a member of the delegation, the Chinese had previously expressed a desire to sign a cooperation agreement between the CCP and the SDE, but the delegation to China did not have the party's authority to do so.⁴⁰ Signing a cooperation agreement with the CCP little over a year after it had violently repressed a Tibetan uprising might have been too much for SDE voters to accept.⁴¹ In the SDE's defence, human rights issues in China were allegedly raised in the meetings, probably in the spirit of changing China through trade and dialogue.⁴²

In addition to bilateral meetings, the ILD organises forums for foreign political parties, where it can present the CCP's policies and governance principles to create a positive international image of the party. The ILD calls this activity its "image" grip.⁴³

The ILD organised the "Meeting of Political Parties from China and CEE" (中国-中东欧政党对话会) in Budapest in 2016 and Bucharest in 2017. The latter was inaugurated by Liu Yunshan 刘云山, the fifth highest-ranking official on the Politburo Standing Committee at the time, who oversaw the party's ideological machinery. This was a prelude to the ILD's global political party dialogue, which was attended by 300 parties from 120 countries. The dialogue culminated with an adoption of the Beijing Initiative that outlined a China-centric new world order.⁴⁴

In May 2010, Estonia's then-minister of justice Rein Lang (Reform Party), and former prime minister Mart Laar (Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, IRL), participated in the first China-Europe High Level Political Parties Forum.⁴⁵ There, according to the State Council Information Office (SCIO) — at the time a government nameplate for the CCP Office of External Propaganda, later absorbed into the Central Propaganda De-

⁴⁰Ideon, *op. cit.*

⁴¹Tenzin Younten, "When Olympics Come, Tibetans Suffer", Bitter Winter, 25 Jan. 2022.

⁴²"Länts: sotsid arutasid Hiinas majandus- ja kultuurisuhteid", BNS, 6 Dec. 2009.

⁴³"我部简介", ILD.

⁴⁴Lulu and Håla, *op. cit.*; "中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会 北京倡议 (全文)", 新华, 3 Dec. 2017.

⁴⁵"出席中欧政党高层论坛的政党及政党组织", 人民网.; Kalev Kallo, "Hiina töötaks koos Euroopa parteidega", *Kesknädal*, 7 Sep. 2011.



partment — the leader of the Party of the European Left and the European United Left –Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL), Lothar Bisky, criticised selective coverage of China in Western media. The then-prime minister of Latvia, now a European Commissioner, Valdis Dombrovskis, said that Europe and China should work together to create a new global financial system and learn from each other how to strengthen the supervision of financial markets.⁴⁶

On the one hand, the visit to China seems to have had no impact on Laar's stance on the regime, as he unofficially met with Dalai Lama as prime minister and defence minister in 2001 and 2011, respectively.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Rein Lang in an opinion piece over a decade later still remembered fondly that visit to China. Lang argued that Estonia should maintain a positive stance towards China and advocated greater co-operation with the PRC's private owners' class and the Chinese diaspora to influence the CCP politics.⁴⁸ Lang's article proved that the "change through trade" approach — however insufficient it had proved with Russia — remained attractive when it came to China. The case of Lithuania — where an anti-Hong Kong demonstration with PRC embassy staff and Chinese diaspora participation in 2019 turned into a brawl — shows how it is China's influence that grows in Europe, rather than Europe's imagined ability to influence PRC politics from the outside.⁴⁹

The ILD's third grip — on "contacts" — involves developing people-to-people relations and creating a network for China's healthy and stable external relations.⁵⁰ Former ILD head Wang Jiarui explained this as informal exchanges with China-friendly ruling and opposition parties, political organisations, think tanks, journalists, NGOs and countries with which China has no diplomatic or party-level relations. This strategy involves consistently cultivating people who know China and are friendly towards China, with the aim of finding a common language and mutual understanding.⁵¹

Among Estonian politicians, Kalev Kallo participated in the China-Europe High-Level Political Parties Forum in 2011 and 2013.⁵² In 2016, Randel Länts of the SDE, the former head of government relations for the consultancy company Miltton, also took part in the forum. Miltton has been known to provide public relations services to the PRC embassy in Tallinn.⁵³ The 2013 forum was also attended by Charles Michel, leader of the Belgian Reformist Movement (Michel was prime minister of Belgium from 2014 until he became president of the European Council in 2019).⁵⁴

The Forum of Young Political Leaders of Central and Eastern Europe, held in Beijing at the end of October 2015, was attended by Mailis Reps, a council member of the Estonian Centre Party. Reps served as the country's minister of education and research, first from 2005 to 2007 and again from 2016 to 2020.⁵⁵ In September 2016, before assuming the post of minister of education for the second time, Reps, as chair of the

⁴⁶“中欧政党高层论坛新闻发布会”, SCIO, 26 May 2010.

⁴⁷Berit-Helena Lamp, “Mart Laar kirjutas dalai-laamale raamatu”, *Postimees*, 19 Aug. 2011.

⁴⁸Rein Lang, “Hiina üle otsustamiseks on veel vara”, *Postimees*, 1 Mar. 2023.

⁴⁹“Hong Kong solidarity rally in Vilnius met with Chinese counter-protesters”, LRT, 23 Aug. 2019; “Lithuania hands note to China over incident during Hong Kong support rally in Vilnius”, LRT, 2 Sep. 2019.

⁵⁰“我部简介”, ILD.

⁵¹王家瑞, *op. cit.*

⁵²Indrek Veiserik, “Sorry, USA! Aga Hiinast sai just maailma suurim majandus!”, *Kesknädal*, 22 Oct. 2014; “陈凤翔会见波罗的海三国政党领导人”, ILD, 23 Apr. 2013.

⁵³“爱沙尼亚社会民主党国际书记兰德·兰茨”, ILD, 12 May 2016; “Randel Länts”, Miltton; Roonemaa et al., “Trojan panda”.

⁵⁴“China and Belgium”, MFA.

⁵⁵“Mailis Reps”, ILD, 24 Oct. 2015.



Figure 3: Centre Party MP Mailis Reps interviewed at the Forum of Young Political Leaders of Central and Eastern Europe in Beijing, October 2015. Source: ILD.

Estonia-China parliamentary friendship group, received a China Tibet Cultural Exchange Group dispatched by the SCIO and led by the director of the Information Office of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Jigme Wangtso. At the meeting, Reps expressed interest in the developments in and a desire to travel to Tibet (there is no evidence of the trip taking place).⁵⁶

In 2017, Urve Tiidus, a member of the Riigikogu and Estonia's former minister of culture, attended the Forum of Young Political Leaders of Central and Eastern Europe in Bucharest, which was dedicated to the BRI.⁵⁷

It is important to highlight that the ILD seeks contacts from all sides of the political spectrum — left, right and centre — and not only with well-established politicians but also with those no longer in office. Retired politicians and former ministers are valuable targets. Stepping out of the limelight in most cases negatively impacts their income and public visibility, whereas their value lies in the network of contacts — in the public and private sectors alike — that they keep. In addition, **the ILD targets junior or relatively unknown local-level politicians for talent prospecting, with the goal of grooming future cabinet members** to ensure that Chinese interests are represented at the highest levels of government — regardless of the outcome of elections.

Finally, the ILD's "research" grip" refers to the need to supply the PRC central government with information on international relations and regional developments, party politics and changes in societies.⁵⁸ In May 2014, a delegation from the Estonian parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, led by then-chairman Marko Mihkelson, met in Beijing with ILD deputy head Zhou Li 周力 to discuss, among other things, the situation in Ukraine.⁵⁹ China wanted to understand how the US and its allies were responding to Russia's aggression in Europe — i.e., they sought to gain information

⁵⁶“中国西藏文化交流团访问爱沙亚”, 人民网, 22 Sep. 2016.

⁵⁷“Riigikogu eelinfo reedest pühapäevani, 14. –16. Juulini”, Riigikogu, 13 July 2017.

⁵⁸“我部简介”, ILD.

⁵⁹“周力会见爱沙尼亚议会外委会代表团”, ILD, 7 May 2014.



Figure 4: Former Estonian foreign minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus meeting with ILD vice head Zhou Li in Beijing, 2015 Source: [ILD](#).

that could help Beijing to anticipate the international response to its actions in Hong Kong, the South China Sea and Taiwan.

According to Wang Jiarui, researching and monitoring international developments allows China to take the initiative on global issues that are vital to Beijing, as well as to propose a palatable “China Solution” (中国方案).⁶⁰ In 2015, at a meeting in Beijing with then-Estonian foreign minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus (until recently the finance minister), Zhou Li said that he wanted to deepen contacts with the Reform Party and share governance experiences. Zhou Li also introduced the Belt and Road Initiative, which the foreign minister found useful for all participating countries.⁶¹

Party-to-party exchanges with major parties in Estonia enable the ILD to collect information not only about party politics but also about domestic, regional and EU-level developments. This improves the CCP’s decision-making and gives Party leaders the opportunity to propose “Chinese solutions” to both domestic, regional and EU issues. Once “Chinese solutions” have been adopted by local politicians, local audiences can be inculcated with them.

2.2 The ILD and a former culture minister

An example of non-governmental diplomacy in action was an all-expenses-paid trip to China for political and academic representatives from the Baltic states and Romania. In exchanges with PRC actors, the Estonian minister of culture was given the impression that her “China expertise” was increasing when, in reality, she was being groomed to advocate for Chinese interests — particularly, the lifting of the EU’s non-market status.

The Chinese Association for International Understanding (CAFIU, 中国国际交流协会) is an ILD front organisation that supplements its diplomacy.⁶² Nominally a non-profit group, the CAFIU was established in 1981 and gained international recognition

⁶⁰王家瑞, *op. cit.*

⁶¹“周力会见爱沙尼亚外长、改革党副主席彭图斯·罗西曼努斯”, ILD, 22 Jan. 2015.

⁶²Gitter and Bowie, *op. cit.*



in 2003 when it acquired consultative status at the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The CAFIU's stated goal is to improve international understanding of China through interaction with political entities, research institutes, NGOs and international organisations.⁶³

In May 2016, a delegation of 19 representatives from political parties, NGOs, think tanks, media and industry from the Baltic states and Romania, led by Estonian parliamentarian and former minister of culture Urve Tiidus, met in Beijing with ILD deputy head and CAFIU advisor Liu Hongcai 刘洪才 and CAFIU's deputy secretary-general Zheng Yao 郑瑶.⁶⁴

During their stay in China, the delegation visited several government-affiliated think tanks, research institutes and provincial level foreign affairs offices, where they listened to presentations about the CCP's policy interests in what appeared to be non-governmental settings. For instance, the delegation listened to the presentations by experts from the China Institute of International Studies and the Development Research Center of the State Council on the Belt and Road initiative, the Maritime Silk Road, the 13th Five-Year Plan and the 16 + 1 cooperation format. During a trip to Fujian province, they met separately with the vice president of the Fujian People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Li Lin 黎林 and the vice chairman of Quanzhou city committee of the CPPCC, Li Jinping 李冀平.⁶⁵

According to CAFIU, the delegation understood that the depiction of China in Western media is one-sided. Tiidus, who had visited China before, said that every visit helps to improve the understanding of the country and its people. A University of Tartu senior researcher in international relations, Maria Mälksoo, was surprised that China is willing to discuss the BRI with such a small country as Estonia. Viljar Veebel, from the Baltic Defence College, stressed the importance of Estonia's geographical location on the east-west axis, while parliamentarian Andrei Novikov hoped that China and Central and Eastern European countries would join forces in international capacity cooperation (国际产能合作).⁶⁶ According to the foreign visit's expenditure declaration, the 10-day trip to China cost Tiidus 36 euros, while Novikov declared a cost of 500 euros, which included daily allowances.⁶⁷

No less important than funding the trips was China's engagement with representatives of small EU states. Indeed, it is often the recognition and not the remuneration that flatters. In a separate case, unrelated to the delegation's visit to China, Estonian marine scientist Tarmo Kõuts, holding both Estonian and NATO security clearances, was arrested in September 2020 on charges of spying for Chinese military intelligence. He was paid a meagre 17,000 euros for his betrayal.⁶⁸

According to the deputy director of the Estonian Internal Security Service (KAPO), Aleksander Toots, Kõuts "was motivated by traditional human weaknesses, such as

⁶³"The Chinese Association for International Understanding (CAFIU)", CAFIU; "简介", CAFIU.

⁶⁴"中国国际交流协会对外交往大事记 (2016 年度)", CAFIU.

⁶⁵肖兰, "中东欧国家非政府组织联合考察团访华", CAFIU; Xiao Lan, "The Joint NGO Delegation from CEEC Visited China", CAFIU.

⁶⁶肖兰, *op. cit.*; Tristan Kenderdine, "China's Trade Policy Shift as International Capacity Cooperation Policy Rebranded", Russian International Affairs Council, 25 Feb. 2020.

⁶⁷Anneli Ammas, Tuuli Koch and Cätriin Vuks, "Lähetused Uus-Meremaast Helsingi ja Riiani", *Postimees*, 24 July 2016.

⁶⁸Holger Roonemaa and Michael Weiss, "Top NATO Scientist With Security Clearance Busted Spying for China", *The Daily Beast*, 19 Mar. 2021.



Figure 5: Urve Tiidus, chair of the Estonia-China parliamentary group, giving a speech at a united front group's trade conference in Tallinn. Source: 中国侨商联合会 via WeChat.

money and a need for recognition.” The package of pampering included trips to various Asian countries, stays in luxury hotels and meals at Michelin-starred restaurants.⁶⁹

Tiidus reflected on the 2016 trip by writing on her blog that she admired China’s willingness to interact with small countries and share its vision of the BRI with all who show interest. She explained that China’s non-governmental diplomacy included flattery; presentations were punctuated with claims that “Eastern Europe is the future of the European Union.” The BRI was depicted in a positive light with an emphasis on improving international trade and providing win-win solutions for participants but without mentioning any potential threats. Importantly, discussing China’s desire to be lifted from its non-market status, Tiidus concluded that the effort would have no significant effect on Estonia or other Northern European countries.⁷⁰

In 2019, Tiidus, together with Aivar Paidla, head of the Estonian translation unit at the European Economic and Social Committee, attended an Estonia-China Investment and Trade Exchange Conference in Tallinn. The event was also attended by representatives from the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC, 中华全国归国华侨联合会) and the China Federation of Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurs (中国侨商联合会).⁷¹ The ACFROC is an official part of the CPPCC, while the China Federation of Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurs is registered under the ACFROC.⁷² According to Joske, “the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese is a peak united front body for ethnic Chinese with overseas links.”⁷³

The CPPCC is the highest-level national consultative body comprised of non-CCP parties, mass organisations and elites. It is subservient to the CCP and serves the purpose of consolidating opinions in the fields of politics, economy, society and cul-

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Urve Tiidus, “Kuidas hoomata tuhat korda suuremat rahvast?”, Urve Tiidus blog, June 2016.

⁷¹ “爱沙尼亚-中国投资贸易交流会在塔林举行”, 中国侨商联合会 via WeChat, 19 Oct. 2019.

⁷² Joske, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.



ture.⁷⁴ This is possible due to the participation of all the relevant decision-makers inside and outside the party — such as CCP elders, intelligence officers, propagandists, academics and businesspeople. In addition to providing a platform for different interest groups to develop messages and distribute them domestically, it also enables the CPPCC to shape the perception of China and the CCP abroad by tapping into its members' contacts with businesspeople and cultural figures — without raising suspicion about hidden agendas among foreign targets.⁷⁵

The Estonia-China Investment and Trade Exchange Conference, where the united front bodies were targeting Tiidus and Paidla, was a significant event for China. Paidla's employer, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), has a say in granting China market status. Paidla's attendance at the conference was a symbolic victory for the CCP — even if his position as translator likely had no bearing on the EESC's decision-making. (Despite this, in 2020, China lost its bid to force the EU to recognise it as a market economy.)⁷⁶ Similarly, Tiidus's role and involvement in formulating Estonia's policies towards the PRC has been and continues to be insignificant.

2.3 Parliamentary friendship with the CCP

The Estonia-China parliamentary group, established in 1997, currently has 14 members representing parties in power and in opposition.⁷⁷ Fully funded trips (like the one discussed above) could be the reason why the group is still popular among Estonians. At its peak in 2011, the friendship group had 51 members out of the 101-member Parliament.⁷⁸ Yet, despite such popularity, China is not even among Estonia's top-ten trading partners.

Over the years, Chinese influence has grown disproportionately to its economic insignificance. In 2011, despite the parliamentary group's large membership, the Dalai Lama still visited Estonia and even met with Estonian politicians in Parliament.⁷⁹ In 2019, the head of Parliament's foreign affairs committee approached the chairman of the Parliament's Tibet support group on behalf of the Chinese ambassador to inquire about her plan to meet members of the Tibetan government and parliament in exile in Riga. In the end, she did not go to the meeting due to the European Parliament election campaign.⁸⁰ That same year, former Estonian interior minister Marko Pomerants attended a closed-door security briefing in the Parliament on the threat posed by Huawei. At the time, Pomerants was working for Powerhouse, a communications company that was lobbying for Huawei in Estonia.⁸¹

In state visits, the Estonia-China parliamentary group has served as a host; in the early 2000s, its members met with Jiang Zemin, the former CCP's general secretary and former premier and chairman of the National People's Congress Li Peng.⁸² The

⁷⁴Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, *The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics*, Project 2049 Institute, 14 Oct. 2013, p. 33.

⁷⁵Hsu and Cole, *op. cit.*, pp. 30–31.

⁷⁶“爱沙尼亚-中国投资...”; “China loses landmark WTO dispute against EU”, *The Japan Times*, 16 June 2020.

⁷⁷“Estonia-China parliamentary friendship group”, Riigikogu.

⁷⁸Merje Pors, “Hiina ja USA parlamendirühmad on riigikogus kõige menukamad”, *Postimees*, 7 Apr. 2011.

⁷⁹“Dalai-laama jõudis Eestisse”, Delfi, 16 Aug. 2011.

⁸⁰Roonemaa et al., “Trojan panda”.

⁸¹Andres Einmann, “Isamaa Huawei-ohu koosolekul osales Huawei lobist”, *Postimees*, 21 Feb. 2020.

⁸²“江泽民主席会见爱沙尼亚议长萨维”, Office of the Chargé d'Affaires of the PRC in Lithuania, 14 June 2002; Argo Ideon, “Jiang Zemin kutsus Eestit avastama Hiina turgu”, *Postimees*, 13 June 2002; “李鹏



Estonia-China parliamentary group regularly interacts with representatives from the NPC, the CPPCC, the ILD, Chinese companies and the Chinese embassy in Tallinn and has hosted a CCP Propaganda Department delegation on Tibet.⁸³ Each of these institutions represents the CCP and promotes its interests in the region, with a recent focus on the BRI and China's 16 + 1 cooperation format.

In a 2019 interview, Kalev Kallo, the long-time chair and vice chair of the group (he served in the role from 1999 until 2019, when he was convicted for corruption and forced to leave Parliament), described the platforms and exchanges as necessary for improving mutual understanding and deepening cooperation. But Kallo, who has travelled to China 14 times since 1988, failed to concede in the interview that his support for Chinese interests — such as the enlargement of the 16 + 1 format and the construction of the Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel — became indistinguishable from those of the CCP.⁸⁴

Similarly to the Estonian Parliament, the European Parliament had its own European Parliament EU-China Friendship Group (EUCFG), which counted Estonian MEP Yana Toom as a member. The EUCFG was formed between 2005 and 2006 at the initiative of Gai Lin 盖琳, who in 2015 became a member of the overseas council of Liaoning province's PAFFC.⁸⁵ The EUCFG was suspended at the end of 2020 following a report on Chinese influence activities by Sinopsis.⁸⁶

Yana Toom's EUCFG membership paid off when her travel bill to Beijing and Lhasa in August 2016 was picked up by the CPAFFC.⁸⁷ Toom returned the favour in May 2017 when she appeared on the Russian TV show *Sunday Night with Vladimir Solovyov*, which is popular with Estonia's Russian-speaking audience. On the show, Toom promoted the BRI and said that Chinese projects were by nature apolitical and that the development model China offered to the world was based on pragmatism.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, Estonia's own experience with China tells a different story. After Estonian politicians had gone ahead with their unofficial meetings with the Dalai Lama in 2011, the Chinese market was closed for several years to Estonian dairy products.

In November 2019, Toom visited Beijing and Shanghai to attend a China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) roundtable and the China-CEEC subnational co-

会见爱沙尼亚议会爱中友好小组成员”, 人民网, 9 Sep. 2000; “李鹏会见爱沙尼亚议会爱中友好小组成员”, 新华, 8 Sep. 2000.

⁸³Dmitri Dmitrijev, “Eesti-Hiina parlamendirühm külastab koos Balti kolleegidega Hiinat”, blog of Dmitri Dmitrijev MP, 23 Aug. 2018; “全国人大中国—爱沙尼亚友好小组代表团访问爱沙尼亚”, Embassy of the PRC in Estonia, 27 Sep. 2019; “李超大使举行爱沙尼亚议会爱中友好小组招待会”, Embassy of the PRC in Estonia, 8 June 2018; “曲喆大使举行爱沙尼亚议会爱中友好小组聚会”, Embassy of the PRC in Estonia via Secretariat for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 23 Nov. 2017; “驻爱沙尼亚大使李超与爱议会爱中友好小组举办交流活动”, Embassy of the PRC in Estonia via Sina, 17 June 2019; “中共代表团访问爱沙尼亚”, 新华, 15 Nov. 2018; “华建敏会见爱沙尼亚议长”, 人民日报 via NPC, 25 May 2010; “中国西藏文化交流团访问爱沙尼亚”, 新华, 21 Sep. 2019; “全国政协外委会副主任刘洪才访问爱沙尼亚”, Embassy of the PRC in Estonia, 10 July 2018.

⁸⁴“爱沙尼亚资深政治家、议会对华工作组主席: ”中国发生了美好巨变”, 光明日报, 18 Dec. 2019.

⁸⁵Jichang Lulu, “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China Friendship Cluster”, Sinopsis, 26 Nov. 2019.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid.; Yana Toom, “Deklaratsioon parlamendiliikmete osalemise kohta kutse alusel kolmandate osapoolte korraldatud üritusel”, European Parliament, 9 Sep. 2016; Laurens Cerulus, “Beijing's influence in European Parliament draws fresh scrutiny”, Politico, 26 Nov. 2020.

⁸⁸Yana Toom, “Яна Тоом — о том, как в программе Соловьева обсудили новую инициативу Китая”, Yana Toom's Bureau, 14 May 2017.



operation promotion symposium. This time, her travel was paid for by the ILD.⁸⁹ On 12 May 2020, the Estonian parliament passed two amendments to the Electronic Communications Act concerning the regulation of technology used in Estonia's telecommunications networks. On 17 May, Toom defended Huawei with whataboutism that blamed the US for crimes Huawei would not have a chance to commit.⁹⁰

⁸⁹Cerulus, *op. cit.*; Yana Toom, "Declarations of participation by Members in events organised by third parties", European Parliament, 11 Dec. 2019.

⁹⁰"Yana Toom: Bad Huawei and good America", ERR, 17 May 2020.



3 No city too small: CCP influence operations at the local level

The CCP values subnational relations as an alternative channel to influence foreign audiences, especially when national-level relationships are in flux.⁹¹ For almost 30 years, the CCP has had some success cultivating local-level interlocutors through party-controlled agencies devoted to what it calls “people-to-people diplomacy”. By watering down and obscuring the connections to the party-state, the CCP can establish relations with partners who might not even be aware that they are dealing with the CCP or promoting its interests, which may sometimes conflict with the national government’s policies or the country’s long-term interests.⁹² **Through local-level interactions, the CCP has sought access to strategic infrastructure in Estonia, which has created opposition and pressure at the local level towards the national government’s reluctance to embrace Chinese involvement.** These developments should concern not Estonia but also the EU and NATO. In an increasingly interconnected world, the CCP’s access to member states’ strategic infrastructure impacts all member states and allies.

3.1 CPAFFC’s inroads: From the Soviet to the democratic era

The Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (中国人民对外友好协会) is a key CCP influence agency targeting subnational governments. In Estonia, the CPAFFC has spent nearly two decades cultivating local leaders, a strategy that has at times resulted in the endorsement of PRC initiatives at the subnational level that clash with the interests and policies of the Estonian government.

The CPAFFC portrays itself as a non-government entity, while in fact, it is a “people’s diplomacy” organisation in China’s foreign affairs system that receives guidance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on policy and working principles. CPAFFC-overseen exchanges between sister cities are meant to target local governments, politicians and NGOs through unofficial channels to gather support for CCP policy goals, such as the BRI and the “One-China principle”. They also work to establish a foothold for future influence work.⁹³ Previous research has studied aspects of CPAFFC influence activities in the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Poland, the UK, New Zealand and the US.⁹⁴

⁹¹Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, “Uncovering China’s Influence in Europe: How Friendship Groups Coopt European Elites”, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020, p. 12; Jichang Lulu, “Confined discourse management and the PRC’s localised interactions in the Nordics”, Sinopsis, 22 Oct. 2018.

⁹²陈啸, *op. cit.*

⁹³Lulu, “Repurposing democracy”.

⁹⁴Codarin et al., *op. cit.*; Olga Lomová, Jichang Lulu and Martin Hála, “Bilateral dialogue with the PRC at both ends: Czech-Chinese ‘friendship’ extends to social credit”, Sinopsis, 28 July 2019; Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “Mapping China-in Germany”, Sinopsis, 2 Oct. 2019; Lucrezia Poggetti, “China’s growing political influence in Italy: a case study of Beijing’s influencing tactics in Europe”, in *The art of deceit: How China and Russia use sharp power to subvert the West*, ed. by Andrew Foxall and John Hemmings, Henry Jackson Society, Dec. 2019; Weber, *op. cit.*; Lukasz Sarek, “The CPAFFC as the party-state’s guardian of Polish regions’ relations with China”, Asia Explained, 7 Dec. 2020; Hamilton and Ohlberg, *op. cit.*; Brady, “Magic Weapons”, p. 34; John Dotson, “China Explores Economic Outreach to U.S. States Via United Front Entities”, *China Brief* 19.12, 26 June 2019; Emily de La Bruyère and Nathan Picarsic, “All Over the Map: The Chinese Communist Party’s Subnational Interests in the United States”, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 15 Nov. 2021.



Traditionally, the CPAFFC's local partners are "China friendship associations", first established in the 1950s and modelled after Moscow-led friendship societies.⁹⁵ The first record of a Sino-Soviet Friendship Association (SSFA, 中苏友好协会) visit to Tallinn dates back to 1959 and led to the establishment of the association's Estonian branch.⁹⁶

According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then-CPAFFC chief Chen Haosu 陈昊苏 visited Tallinn and Tartu in April 2008 at the invitation of the post-Soviet-era Estonia-China Association (ECA, 爱沙尼亚中国协会).⁹⁷ As reported in *Voice of Friendship*, a CPAFFC publication, Chen visited Norway and Estonia following invitations from the Norway-China Association and the ECA. In Estonia, Chen met with local leaders of Tallinn, Tartu, Rakvere, Viljandi and Kuresaare. Chen's visit to Estonia facilitated early direct exchanges between the CPAFFC and the ECA, which was established in 2007 to "enhance friendly exchanges [...] and strives to become an accomplished friendship-with-China organisation."⁹⁸

The following month, ECA's head, the Social Democratic Party politician Peeter Kreitzberg, left on a ten-day visit to China where he met Chen Haosu.⁹⁹ The trip exemplified the CPAFFC's role in the CCP's use of non-governmental and local-level exchanges to seek access to critical infrastructure. During the trip, the ECA delegation met a deputy chair of the Zhejiang province's branch of the CPAFFC. At that meeting, Kreitzberg announced that Tallinn and Hangzhou were developing exchange activities, while the ports of Tallinn and Ningbo had signed a freight agreement.¹⁰⁰

Although Estonia's national government was never convinced of the feasibility of the Muuga terminal project in Maardu (and China eventually pulled out of the project),¹⁰¹ it is, nevertheless, significant that such a collaboration has ever been considered for a port that has both commercial and military value for Estonia. Muuga is Estonia's deepest commercial port and it has been used by NATO vessels.¹⁰² Today, China has access

⁹⁵Codarin et al., *op. cit.*

⁹⁶Nikolai Dolinski, "Hiina-Nõukogude Sõprusühingu delegatsioon Tallinnas", *Ringvaade „Nõukogude Eesti“* nr 47, Nov. 1959, Estonian Film Database.

⁹⁷"中国同爱沙尼亚的关系", MFA, May 2020. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs website appears to give incorrect dates for the visit. According to both CPAFFC publication *Voice of Friendship* and Xinhua, the visit took place on 20–24 April, not in May. See: "爱沙尼亚副议长: 北京奥运会将促进中国的发展", *新华*, 22 Apr. 2008.

⁹⁸Xu Fenghua, "CPAFFC President Chen Haosu and his party visit Norway and Estonia", *Voice of Friendship*, May 2008.

⁹⁹"中国同爱沙尼亚的关系"; "5月21日爱沙尼亚社会各界人士、驻爱使团及旅爱华人、华侨和留学生陆续来到中国驻爱沙尼亚使馆吊唁", Embassy of the PRC in Estonia, 21 May 2008; "国际友好组织和个人纷纷发来慰问函电向灾区人民表示关心和慰", *Voice of Friendship*, 19 May 2008, p. 8; for the English-language translation, see Geng Zifeng, "International Friendship Organization and Personages Send Letters of Sympathy to People in Earthquake-it Areas", *Voice of Friendship* 150, Aug. 2008, p. 12:

It is likely that the Estonia-China Association, Estonia-China Friendship Association and Estonian-Chinese Union all represent a CPAFFC partner organisation, the Eesti-Hiina Selts (Estonia-China Association) registered in 2007 in Tallinn. See "Peeter Kreitzbergi mälestuseks", *Kesknädal*, 9 Nov. 2011; "e-business Register", RIK Registrate ja Infosüsteemide Keskus, accessed in July 2023.

¹⁰⁰"爱沙尼亚中国友好协会代表团访问浙江", Zhejiang FAO.

¹⁰¹Roonemaa et al., "Chinese investments come with golden handcuffs"; "Ansip ei vaimustu Muuga kontainerterminalist", *Delfi*, 14 Feb. 2008. In 2003, Andrus Ansip as the mayor of Tartu met during a visit to China with CPAFFC head Chen Haosu. See: "中国同爱沙尼亚的关系".

¹⁰²"Eestit külastavad NATO laevad", Estonian Defence Forces, 25 July 2022; "NATO tunnustus Tallinna Sadamale", Tallinna Sadam, 20 Apr. 2016.



to about a dozen ports in Europe; yet at the time, Beijing was interested in expanding this network to service its own naval ships and project power abroad.¹⁰³

In 1995, Kreitzberg served briefly as minister of education and culture (Centre Party), but his political career took off in Tallinn, where he served as vice mayor (from 1996 to 1999) until being elected to Parliament. After an unsuccessful presidential run in 2001, he served as vice president of the Parliament from 2001 to 2005. In 2003, Kreitzberg became the Estonia-China parliamentary group's chairman; in 2005, he joined the Social Democratic Party.¹⁰⁴

The ECA's activity ceased with Kreitzberg's death in 2011.¹⁰⁵ After a four-year hiatus, a similarly named association was established in 2015. Although no direct links with the old association are known, members of the new Estonia-China Friendship Association (ECFA, 爱沙尼亚中国友好协会) also have ties to the CPAFFC. One member of ECFA's board, Marika Katarina Arendia Elita von Wolsky, was previously an entrepreneurship advisor at the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ECCI), which interacted with the CPAFFC at least since 2003.¹⁰⁶

The ECFA's networks also overlapped with PRC interests in Estonian infrastructure. Von Wolsky's partner in an NGO promoting pan-European and pan-Eurasian cooperation is the businessman Martin Napa, who declared bankruptcy in 2016.¹⁰⁷ In 2015, Napa and a former Reform Party parliamentarian, Tõnis Kõiv (currently chairman of Rae Parish council), acted as representatives for the Hong Kong businessman Thomas Fok (霍文芳), who unsuccessfully sought to acquire the Estonian gas company Eesti Gaas to start exports to China.¹⁰⁸ According to Kõiv, Fok was also interested in developing a Baltic logistics centre in Tallinn and setting up manufacturing of high-tech goods.¹⁰⁹

The late Henry Fok (霍英東), Henry Fok's father, was — according to the former legislator and author Christine Loh — Hong Kong's "ultimate pro-China business tycoon", who had allegedly proven his loyalty to the CCP during the Korean War by smuggling weapons and medicine to China.¹¹⁰ Henry Fok reached the upper strata of Chinese politics by serving as vice chairman of the leading united front body, the CPPCC, between 1993 and 2006.¹¹¹

In 1992, Thomas Fok was arrested at JFK International Airport in New York for conspiring to smuggle weapons through the United States to Croatia. He was charged with illegal import of weapons into the US and with conspiring to launder cash from

¹⁰³Frank Jüris, "The Talsinki Tunnel: Channelling Chinese interests into the Baltic Sea", International Centre for Defence and Security, 3 Dec. 2019.

¹⁰⁴Madis Filippov, "Peeter Kreitzberg suri Hiinas", *Postimees*, 3 Nov. 2011; "Peeter Kreitzberg saadeti viimsele teekonnale", Delfi, 18 Nov. 2011.

¹⁰⁵"Peeter Kreitzberg suri Hiinas", ERR, 3 Nov. 2011. The association was deregistered in 2012. See: "e-business Register", RIK Registrate ja Infosüsteemide Keskus, accessed in July 2023.

¹⁰⁶"MTÜ Eesti Hiina Sõprusselts" teatmik.ee, accessed in July 2023; "Eesti Kaubandus-Tööstuskoda", Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

¹⁰⁷"Concordia asutamine (2010)", Conventus Terra Mariana, 11 Jan. 2010; "Martin Napa", Conventus Terra Mariana, 4 Dec. 2019.

¹⁰⁸Andres Reimer, "Chinese billionaire plans to buy Eesti Gaas", *Postimees*, 14 May 2015; "„Pealtnägija“: kohtus areneb ülisuur eraisiku pankrot", ERR 17 Feb. 2016.

¹⁰⁹Tõnis Kõiv, "Talinasse Hiina merevärav?", Tõnis Kõiv blog, 4 June 2015.

¹¹⁰Christine Loh, *Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong*, Hongkong University Press, 2019, p. 207.

¹¹¹Jonathan Cheng, "A life that reflected change", *The Standard*, 30 Oct. 2006.

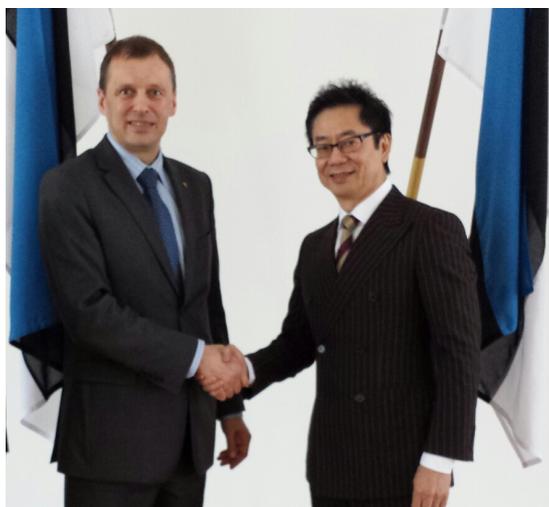


Figure 6: Tõnis Kõiv and Hong Kong businessman Thomas Fok in 2014 in the Estonian parliament. Source: Tõnis Kõiv's blog.

the transaction.¹¹² In 2016, Fok's business partners were arrested in China under suspicion of "illegally acquiring public savings". Their Liubao (Beijing) Investment Fund Management (六宝(北京)投资基金) company had been selling investments in fake energy-sector projects.¹¹³

Although it has not reached the older friendship association's level of prominence in national politics, the ECFA has been more active disseminating Chinese propaganda on social media. Posts on the ECFA's Facebook page have virulently attacked local criticism of China. At one point, they demanded an official apology from the Estonian government by saying it "should first pray in front of God, after that pray in front of the Chinese embassy in Tallinn and then ask for forgiveness from the PRC's ambassador His Excellency Mr Li Chao."¹¹⁴

The ECFA argued that failing to cooperate with China would jeopardise Estonia's ability to purchase protective gear from China during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The friendship association likely took this approach because Estonia's economic relationship with China was statistically insignificant. In 2022, for example, exports to China accounted for about 1% of the country's total exports, while imports from China were little more than 3.8% of the total.¹¹⁵

¹¹²Jim Mann, "Hong Kong Is a Top Gun in Arms Traffic", *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Jan. 1992.

¹¹³"香港霍氏旗下私募基金无法联系", 全球金融网, 11 Jan. 2016; "关于失联私募机构最新情况及拟公示第九批失联私募机构的公告", Asset Management Association of China, 2 Sep. 2016; 张婷婷, "霍英东之子涉 20 亿基金黑幕 银行行长参与“飞单”", 搜狐财经《潜望》, 21 June 2016; "香港霍氏旗下私募基金无法联系", 全球金融网, 11 Jan. 2016.

¹¹⁴"Selle asemel et amokki joosta, võiks palvetada kõigepealt Jumala ees, seejärel Tallinna Hiina Suursaadkonna ees ja paluda vabandust Hiina RV suursaadik T. E. Mr Li Chao ees", Estonia-China Friendship Association via Facebook, 21 Mar. 2020.

¹¹⁵"Visualizations", Statistics Estonia, accessed in July 2023; "Kahepalgeline Eesti! Kui õues lillepidu, siis vaename riigi tasandil EU ja USA tuules Hiinat, kui kõik pekkis, siis põlvitame Hiina ees", Estonia-China Friendship Association via Facebook, 21 Mar. 2020.



Another aspect of CCP propaganda that the ECFA ardently promotes is China's role in the Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel.¹¹⁶ In this regard, the ECFA is no different than its predecessor. Both **actively campaigned for China's access to Estonian strategic infrastructure** — from ports to energy to logistical hubs, **projects that are often dependent on local leaders who are not obliged or accustomed to thinking in national security terms.**

3.2 The CPAFFC's charm offensive

The CPAFFC's cultivation of the Estonian political landscape began at the subnational level and has been going on for nearly two decades, thus spanning more than half of the country's post-Soviet independent history. In 2003, years before the establishment of the Estonia-China Association, exchanges began between the CPAFFC and the Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities (AECM) on the initiative of the Chinese ambassador. For the AECM, the goal was to deepen economic and cultural cooperation with China. "For China, Estonia is a new and additional channel for communication with the EU", said the AECM's then chairman, Jaanus Tamkivi.¹¹⁷

It was an unequal relationship from the very beginning. The AECM, a voluntary union of Estonian urban and rural municipalities, was created to represent the common interests and development goals of local governments.¹¹⁸ The AECM's counterpart, the CPAFFC, despite portraying itself as a non-government entity, is a key CCP influence agency in the foreign affairs system targeting subnational governments. To some extent, such targeting has succeeded where three consecutive AECM activity plans between 2010 and 2021 prioritises cooperation with the CPAFFC.¹¹⁹

For the CCP, **the CPAFFC's relationship with Estonian cities and municipalities provided a channel to continue cultivating local politics while punishing the country for its national policy.** Estonia's relationship with China reached a low point in 2011 when Estonian politicians unofficially met the Dalai Lama — despite the Chinese embassy's protests. Shortly after, China changed gears in its local-level interactions: in 2012, the CPAFFC and the Xiamen PAFFC (a city-level equivalent) separately signed cooperation agreements with the AECM.¹²⁰

Besides bilateral meetings, the CPAFFC organises the China International Friendship Cities Conferences (中国国际友好城市大会), with a stated goal of promoting the establishment of sister cities that the CCP perceives as an influence channel. The AECM and its member cities have been invited to — and have attended — several editions of these conferences.¹²¹ Multiple Estonian cities have established coopera-

¹¹⁶"Kas Brüssel võib keelata Hiinal Helsingi-Tallinna tunneli rahastamise? Kas seljuhul rahastab Brüssel ise Finest Bay Area Development Oy sajandi suurprojekti?", Estonia-China Friendship Association via Facebook, 19 Mar. 2019. For additional reading on the Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel project and potential security risks, see: Jüris, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁷"中国同爱沙尼亚的关系"; *2003. aasta tegevusaruanne*, Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities, 2003; Oliver Rand, "Linnapea Jaanus Tamkivi sõidab Hiinasse", *Saarlane*, 7 Nov. 2003. In 2018 the Association of Estonian Cities changed its name to Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities.

¹¹⁸"English", Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities, accessed in July 2023.

¹¹⁹"Tegevussuunad 2018-2021", Association of Estonian Cities, 27 Feb. 2018; "Eesti Linnade Liidu tegevussuunad 2014-2018", Association of Estonian Cities, 4 Feb. 2014; "Eesti Linnade Liidu tegevussuunad aastateks 2010-2013", Association of Estonian Cities, 2013.

¹²⁰张华璐, "李建平副会长率全国友协代表团访问波海三国", CPAFFC, 13 Nov. 2012; "厦门市市民可参与的民间对外交往活动", Xiamen PAFFC, 11 July 2019.

¹²¹张骥, "波罗的海三国市长代表团访华", CPAFFC, 5 Dec. 2014; 张敏, "友城联合会工作组访问俄罗斯、爱沙尼亚、立陶宛", CPAFFC, 30 Sep. 2015.



tion agreements with Chinese counterparts, including Tallinn (with Beijing, Hangzhou and Chengdu), Maardu (Changchun), Tartu (Ningbo) and Narva (Xiamen).¹²² In 2019, Pärnu was on the verge of signing a cooperation agreement with Qingdao, but in the first half of 2023, Qingdao was still missing from Pärnu's friendship cities list.¹²³ While most of these partnerships are purely symbolic, some might be designed to match China's interests in Estonia. Maardu, with a population of just over 15,000, signed its second sister-city agreement with one of China's most populous cities, Guangzhou, in September 2021. The Muuga port in Maardu has been working to develop ties with China since at least 2008.¹²⁴

Comments from a leading official of one of the AECM's partners in China illustrate the political nature of these relationships. Qiu Yongcai 丘勇才, a former deputy chairman of the Xiamen PAFFC, explained in an interview that the role of "people's diplomacy" in China's foreign policy is to expand China's "circle of friends" by establishing friendships with cities, ports and schools. The cities' foreign exchanges help to promote the central government's proposed strategies, such as the "community of shared destiny", BRICS and the BRI.¹²⁵

The political focus goes beyond words. In 2016–18, the CPAFFC and its provincial branches promoted the BRI and 16+1 cooperation as important platforms for enhancing economic relations with China to Estonian policymakers, officials, subnational leaders, business owners and the public. It did so by organising events such as an anniversary reception, a business and culture exhibition and a folk concert.¹²⁶

Since 2019, Chinese companies have shown interest in financing and building the Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel.¹²⁷ The AECM's former chairman, Tiit Terik — currently vice mayor of Tallinn and a former culture minister — supported the project by stressing its local significance. "What is important is that this tunnel will benefit both Tallinn and its neighbouring municipalities, as well as all of Estonia", Terik said.¹²⁸

The central government turned down the project due to economic, security and environmental concerns. However, the Union of Harju County Municipalities (representing municipalities from Northern Estonia) wanted the central government to proceed

¹²²“北京市与塔林市友好合作协议”, City of Tallinn; “Tiiu Kirsipuu skulptuur Hiinas”, Eesti Kunstnike Liit, 17 Oct. 2019; Toomas Raag, “Hiinas Chengdus avati Eesti kunstniku skulptuur”, Pealinn, 8 Oct. 2019; “Kohalike omavalitsuste koostöö”, Embassy of Estonia in China; “Pekingi suhted”, City of Tallinn; “Maardu sõpruslinn Changchun”, *Maardu panoraam* 7, July 2014; “长春市与国外友好合作城市一览表”, Changchun Municipal People's Government; “Sõpruslinnad”, City of Maardu, accessed in July 2023; “Narva sõprus- ja partnerlinnad”, Narva city government.

¹²³Eno-Gerrit Link, “Linn küsib volikogult aktsepti Hiina miljonilinnaga sõbrustamiseks”, *Pärnu Postimees*, 13 June 2019; “Välissuhted: sõpruslinnad”, City of Pärnu government.

¹²⁴“Tutvustus ja asukoht”, Maardu City Government, accessed in July 2023; “广州”国际朋友圈”增至94城”, China News Service, 3 Sep. 2021; “广州市与爱沙尼亚马尔都结为国际友好合作交流城市”, Guangzhou FAO, 3 Sep. 2021.

¹²⁵“厦门市民可参与的民间对外交往活动”, Xiamen PAFFC.

¹²⁶徐玖男, “中国与爱沙尼亚、拉脱维亚、立陶宛建交25周年招待会在京举行”, CPAFFC, 13 Sep. 2016; ““上海之帆”‘一带一路’爱沙尼亚经贸人文巡展”在塔林举行”, 新华, 11 Sep. 2017; ““一带一路”上海之帆经贸人文巡展在爱沙尼亚塔林举行”, China-Central and Eastern European Countries Economic and Trade Cooperation Network, 18 Sep. 2017; “孙德兰秘书长陪同全国对外友协文化交流部调研组一行赴沈阳市委宣传部调研”, Liaoning PAFFC, 16 July 2018.

¹²⁷Built quietly over the years, these local-level contacts can become useful to China's foreign policy at strategic junctures. The Tallinn-Helsinki private sector's lead project, which seeks to build a tunnel connecting the capitals of Estonia and Finland, is an excellent example. Jüris, *op. cit.*

¹²⁸“Tallinn council chair: Tunnel with Finland would benefit all of Estonia”, BNS via ERR, 14 June 2019.



with preliminary studies despite those concerns.¹²⁹ In April 2021, the governments of Estonia and Finland signed a protocol of common intent putting the project under the management of both countries, thereby making it part of the planned Trans-European Transport Network.¹³⁰ Estonia's Reform Party (in power at the time of writing this report) is supportive of the tunnel project. Its 2023 election platform says that the project is in

Estonia's national interests and the government should find ways to support the project. Tallinn-Helsinki potential tunnel should be economically feasible, and in cooperation with trustworthy private capital transparently financed.¹³¹

The CPAFFC's interactions with Estonian policymakers and political leaders at the EU, national and subnational levels help the CCP to promote its interests in Estonia and create positive sentiment toward its BRI projects. Even when these projects are not in Estonia's long-term strategic interests or fully supported by the central government (as is the case of the Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel), these relationships enable the CCP to pressure the central government to implement policies that the CCP favours.

3.3 CCP propaganda funded by Tallinn taxpayers

Partnerships that the CPAFFC establishes with local governments can then be used by other party-state agencies involved in influence activities. A propaganda offensive in Tallinn offers one example.

The capital's sister-city agreement with Beijing has provided a framework for holding annual Chinese New Year celebrations. Ostensibly apolitical, the events are produced by a PRC government agency within the propaganda system. **Local authorities are unlikely to understand the institutional affiliation and motives of their Chinese counterparts.** This is even less likely among common citizens, **making the partnership a convenient vehicle for CCP propaganda.**

Tallinn's exchanges with Beijing began in 1992 and a sister-city agreement was signed in 1998. In 2008, Tallinn-Beijing relations reached a new high when mayor Edgar Savisaar led a delegation to China and met with CPAFFC head Chen Haosu and Beijing Mayor Guo Jinlong. Before that visit, only multilateral-level exchanges had occurred under the auspices of the Association of Estonian Cities or during business delegations' interactions with Chinese counterparts.¹³²

During Mayor Savisaar's trip, Tallinn agreed to follow Helsinki's lead and start organising the Chinese New Year celebrations, promising to provide financing and human resources for the events.¹³³ Despite the local Chinese community being minuscule, Chinese New Year has been celebrated in Estonia since 2009 — and every year since 2011.¹³⁴ In 2021, the celebrations cost Tallinn around 60,000 euros. In 2022, a vir-

¹²⁹Joakim Klementi, "Harjumaa Omavalitsuste Liit tahab Helsingi tunneli eriplaneeringu algatamist", ERR, 14 Aug. 2020.

¹³⁰"Estonia to sign intent agreement to build tunnel with Finland", ERR, 23 Apr. 2021; "Economic affairs minister: Tallinn-Helsinki can only be state project", ERR, 23 Apr. 2021.

¹³¹*Reformierahonna valimisiprogram 2023 Kindlates kätes Eesti*, Reformierakond, 14 Jan. 2023, p. 25.

¹³²"Pekingi suhted", City of Tallinn, 16 July 2018.

¹³³"Visiit Hiina Rahvavabariiki Pekingisse, Ningbosse ja Hangzhouisse", City of Tallinn, 12 Nov. 2008.

¹³⁴"Hiina uusaasta", City of Tallinn, 3 June 2021.



tual program was held due to COVID-19 restrictions. That program cost an estimated 10,400 euros.¹³⁵

The partnership's propaganda potential was made clear during the Tallinn mayor's 2008 visit when the delegation attended the 2008 Hangzhou international friendship cities mayors' summit. According to the Hangzhou Foreign Affairs Office, organising mayors' summit was part of the city's "external propaganda offensive" that reached a foreign audience of 11 million.¹³⁶

The institutional background of the PRC organiser of the Chinese New Year celebrations, presented to the Estonian side as apolitical cultural events, indicates that the party-state sees these events as a vehicle for propaganda. The Beijing Culture and Tourism Bureau (北京市文化和旅游局) provides both experts and content for these festivities. In the Chinese political system, the domain of culture belongs to the propaganda machinery. The bureau's head, Chen Dong 陈冬, was previously an assistant inspector at the Beijing Propaganda Department.¹³⁷ The vice head of the bureau, Pang Wei 庞微, is also a career propaganda cadre, with previous postings as vice head of the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Press and Publication and the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio and Television. She currently oversees the work of the bureau's subordinate unit — the Beijing Overseas Cultural Exchange Centre (BJOCEC, 北京市海外文化交流中心).¹³⁸

The BJOCEC states on its website that it has organised "Happy Chinese New Year" celebrations and cultural events in 30 countries, including Estonia.¹³⁹ According to the BJOCEC, the celebrations in Finland and Estonia have already become "a highly anticipated local winter holiday and an important social welfare project for the local governments." In the eyes of propaganda workers, the localised and market-orientated approach has enabled Chinese culture to take root by cultivating understanding, raising awareness and promoting love towards China.¹⁴⁰

Propaganda cadres have been directly involved in the Tallinn events. Pang Wei attended the 2019 edition.¹⁴¹ In 2021 and 2022, the BJOCEC provided a virtual program for the celebrations that were shared on the Tallinn city government's social media platforms. The closing credits of the 2022 virtual show listed Chen Dong, the bureau's chief, as the producer and Pang Wei as the executive producer.¹⁴²

¹³⁵Johannes Tralla, "Analüütik Hiina uusaasta üritusest: Peking loodab draakonite abil mõjujõudu suurendada", ERR, 12 Feb. 2021.

¹³⁶"市外办: 建立国际友城互鉴互动长效机制", Hangzhou FAO, 26 Apr. 2009; "Visiit Hiina Rahvavabariiki Pekingisse, Ningbosse ja Hangzhouisse", City of Tallinn, 13 Nov. 2008.

¹³⁷"陈冬任北京市文化和旅游局局长 宋宇不再担任", [Chen Dong will replace Song Yu as the director of Beijing Culture and Tourism Bureau], 中国经济网, 29 Nov. 2019; "政府信息公开", 北京市文化和旅游局 via Baidu. In 2018, the Beijing Culture Bureau and the Beijing Municipal Commission of Tourism Development were integrated into one entity with the name of Beijing Culture and Tourism Bureau. See 倪伟, "北京市文化和旅游局挂牌 官网已上线", 北京报, 16 Nov. 2018.

¹³⁸"庞微任北京市文化局副局长晋秋红接任石景山区委组织部长", 中国经济网, 11 Dec. 2014; "政府信息公开"; "北京市海外文化交流中心", 北京市文化和旅游局, 30 Sep. 2021.

¹³⁹"关于我们", 北京市海外文化交流中心.

¹⁴⁰"发布会实录: 北京努力打造具有世界影响力的国际文化节庆活动, 助力国际交往中心建设发展", Beijing FAO, 27 Sep. 2020.

¹⁴¹"民乐系师生应邀赴芬兰、爱沙尼亚参加2019“欢乐春节”活动", 中央音乐学院, 11 Mar. 2019; "驻爱沙尼亚大使李超出席“欢乐春节”室内演出专场", MFA, 14 Feb. 2019.

¹⁴²"中国广播民族乐团与您共度“欢乐春节”——北京市海外“欢乐春节”系列活动即将全球上线", 中国广播民族乐团 via Wechat, 10 Feb. 2021; "Hiina uusaasta 2021", City of Tallinn via Facebook, 12 Feb. 2021; "Hiina uusaasta tervitusprogramm 2022", Tallinn Culture & Sports Department via YouTube, 31 Jan. 2022.



Through these superficially apolitical events, the CCP’s propaganda organs work to improve the PRC’s image by engaging sceptical audiences. In 2021, media coverage of the celebrations quoted one audience member: “Of course, I have heard that China is not that democratic, and about the issues with Tibet and the Dalai Lama, but here in the pictures it sure looks pretty.”¹⁴³

¹⁴³Tralla, *op. cit.*



4 CCP united front work and Estonian academia

In 2022, the Estonian Internal Security Service’s annual report devoted a paragraph to the activities of the CCP’s united front agencies, noting that their objective was “to control members of the Chinese communities living abroad and to ensure their ideological purity and loyalty.” The report added that the CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD) and its subordinate agencies coordinate “the activities required by the CCP concerning Chinese communities abroad and their organizations, including in Estonia.” The picture accompanying this chapter of the report shows a UFWD deputy head posing with a group of overseas Chinese community leaders, including a senior university administrator who has been active in Estonia and Australia.¹⁴⁴

4.1 Academia’s role in united front work

United front work is a political model for consolidating power by forging alliances to support the CCP’s policy goals. Its overseas functions include political influence and interference, intelligence gathering and technology transfer (a topic that has been researched extensively in Australia).¹⁴⁵ According to a 2021 report, the united front work system

comprises an array of agencies, led from the party centre by a leading small group chaired by a Politburo Standing Committee member and coordinated by the United Front Work Department (中央统一战线统战部, UFWD) under the Central Committee.¹⁴⁶

The Chinese diaspora is one of the main targets of the CCP’s united front work. Agencies in the CCP’s united front system — such as the UFWD and the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification — guide or control networks of nominally independent diaspora organisations around the world. In countries with large Chinese communities, such as Australia, united front-linked organisations often vocally support PRC policy and have at times served as vehicles for influencing local politicians.

Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) are often explicitly guided by education officials at PRC diplomatic missions and maintain exchanges with the united front agencies in China. As Joske notes:

Numerous Chinese students and scholars’ associations, which are united front groups for Chinese international students, have been involved in suppressing academic freedom and mobilising students for nationalistic activities.¹⁴⁷

4.2 The Baltic Chinese Association

Estonia, with a tiny Chinese community of around 400 people, lacks the networks of the united front-linked diaspora groups found in countries like Australia.¹⁴⁸ However, one Estonian organisation that shares some of the characteristics of these global

¹⁴⁴Klemm, *Estonian Internal Security Service Annual Review 2020–2021*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁵Joske, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁶Codarin et al., *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁴⁷Joske, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁸“Rahvastik kodakondsuse, soo ja elukohta (asustuspiirkond)”, Statistics Estonia, 31 Dec. 2021.



networks has gained a high profile, with its founder becoming a senior academic administrator and opinion leader on issues concerning China.

The Baltic Chinese Association (BCA, 波罗的海华人联合会) — also known as the Baltic Chinese Students and Scholars Association (BCSSA, 波罗的海中国学生学者联合会) — was established in 2013 and claims to have more than 500 members from Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia.¹⁴⁹

Yin Jie 殷杰, a BCSSA member and former doctoral student at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, is known for harassing critics of China, including Hong Kong students, on social media and posting personal details about them on pro-China Facebook pages.¹⁵⁰ This is similar to other examples of harassment involving Chinese Students and Scholars Associations on campuses in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US.¹⁵¹

According to the BCSSA's website, the chairman of its board is Zhang Xiaotian 张啸天, who completed a doctorate at the University of Tartu in 2013. The Estonian Research Information System notes that, since 2017, Zhang has held the positions of deputy vice president of Shanghai University (SHU) and director-general of SHU Global in Shanghai.¹⁵²

A photograph of Zhang and a top UFWD official appeared in the 2021–22 Estonian Internal Security Service annual report's section on united front work.¹⁵³ The picture was from an event in April 2016, when Zhang participated in the "39th Overseas Chinese Association leaders study group" (第 39 期海外华侨华人社团负责人研习班) in Xi'an, together with 53 Chinese leaders from Central and Eastern Europe. They were there to "improve overseas Chinese leaders' quality, promote team building and simultaneously encourage combining the construction of the BRI and national development with personal career development." The event was attended by Tan Tianxing 谭天星, then a deputy head of the UFWD and the secretary-general of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China.¹⁵⁴

The 2016 group photograph featured in the intelligence service's report was not Zhang Xiaotian's only participation in united front events. In September 2019, Zhang participated in SHU's United Front Symposium dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Zhang gave a speech as SHU's International Department's director, in which he shared his experience studying and working abroad for ten years, expressed gratitude for working at SHU after returning to China and discussed his determination to repay the kindness to the motherland.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹“波罗的海中国学生学者联合会章程”, Baltic Chinese Students & Scholars Association, 15 Sep. 2013.

¹⁵⁰Kertu Liisa Mooste and Ode Maria Punamäe, “Tartu ülikooli Hongkongi tudengid langesid tagakiusu ohvriks”, *Postimees*, 5 Aug. 2020.

¹⁵¹Laura Mannerling, “Hong Kong students in UK call for action over pro-China threats and harassment”, HKFP, 31 Mar. 2020; Lin Yang, “China-Sensitive Topics at US Universities Draw More Online Harassment”, VOA, 20 Nov. 2020; Gerry Shih and Emily Rauhala, “Angry over campus speech by Uighur activist, Chinese students in Canada contact their consulate, film presentation”, *Washington Post*, 14 Feb. 2019; Daniel Hurst, “They're being watched’: Chinese pro-democracy students in Australia face threats and insults”, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2021; Steven Chase, “McMaster student union strips Chinese club's status amid allegations group is tool of Chinese government”, *The Globe and Mail*, 26 Sep. 2019.

¹⁵²“Xiaotian Zhang”, Estonian Business School; “Xiaotian Zhang”, Estonian Research Information System.

¹⁵³Klemm, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁵⁴“第 39 期海外华侨华人社团负责人研习班结业”, 4 Apr. 2016; “谭天星”, China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, 24 Sep. 2019.

¹⁵⁵叶秦和, “上海大学统一战线庆祝新中国成立 70 周年座谈会召开”, SHU, 27 Sep. 2019.



Figure 7: Participants in the 39th Overseas Chinese Association leaders study group, attended by United Front Work Department deputy head Tan Tianxing (first row, centre) and BCSSA chairman Zhang Xiaotian (first row, first from left). Source: 中新网.

Beyond the Baltic Chinese Association, Zhang has achieved remarkable success as an administrator at some of Estonia's top universities. Soon after finishing his doctorate, Zhang was appointed to senior university administration posts in Estonia. In 2014–15, he served as the chief specialist in international cooperation at the University of Tartu rector's Strategy Office, which is responsible for relations with Asia.¹⁵⁶ In 2020–21, he held the post of vice-rector of the Estonian Business School — the oldest privately owned business university in Estonia. From 2017 to 2022, he also served as vice rector of science at Kazakhstan's University of International Business.¹⁵⁷ As of 2022, Zhang was associate deputy vice chancellor at Curtin University in Australia.¹⁵⁸

In Estonia, Zhang has promoted cooperation with China by organising business forums. Between 2009 and 2015, his companies Raatuse International Trade and Baltic China Group organised four Baltic-China annual business conferences.¹⁵⁹ Conference speakers diversified over the years. In 2010, all speakers were from academia.¹⁶⁰ In 2012, the speakers' list featured local-level leaders from Scandinavia, a Chinese diplomat in Tallinn and an Estonian policymaker.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶“8.juunil toimub Baltic-China Annual Business Conference”, Enterprise Estonia, 20 June 2015; “Member”, Baltic Chinese Association; “Xiaotian Zhang”, Estonian Research Information System.

¹⁵⁷Ibid.; Irina Karachun, “Lecture from Xiaotian Zhang ‘E-Commerce Development’”, Belarussian State University, 6 Sep. 2022; “2017 UIB-Finland Science & Research Week”, University of International Business, 10 Oct. 2017.

¹⁵⁸“Professor Xiaotian Zhang”, Curtin University; “Xiaotian Zhang, PhD”, LinkedIn, accessed in July 2023.

¹⁵⁹“Baltic-China Business Platform”, Raatuse International Trade; “Baltic China Group”, Yellow.Place; “Estonia”, Statistics Estonia, last modified May 2023.

¹⁶⁰“Baltic-China Annual Business Conference”, City of Tallinn, 2 June 2010.

¹⁶¹“Baltic-China Annual Business Conference”, University of Tartu, 19 Sep. 2012.



However, one of the most interesting speakers at the conference that year was Tan Hongxin 谭鸿鑫, the president of Coway International TechTrans (科威国际技术转移). Coway, a subsidiary of Tsinghua University, was established in 2002 under the Tsinghua International Technology Transfer Centre (清华国际技术转移) with the aim of introducing foreign technology and scientific know-how to China.¹⁶²

The conferences Zhang co-organised evolved into high-profile events, attracting the participation of senior Estonian figures and entities linked to the CCP's influence agencies. By 2015, the conference had gained bipartisan political support. Chinese ambassador Qu Zhe 曲喆 and the head of the Estonian parliament's Foreign Affairs Commission, Hannes Hanso, both gave speeches. Another speaker was Mark Hedley of the China-Britain Business Council, a British lobby group that brings together some of Britain's largest companies and promotes trade and investment with China.¹⁶³ The council was founded in 1991 with the backing of the 48 Group Club, a London-based NGO dedicated to promoting trade between the PRC and the UK.¹⁶⁴

In January 2016, Zhang participated in an event organised by the Tallinn University Confucius Institute (CI) to promote BRI. At that gathering, Zhang gave a presentation on the status of China's development, bilateral economic relations and the implementation of BRI.¹⁶⁵ The Confucius Institutes are part of the PRC's propaganda apparatus. In 2010, Estonia hosted the man overseeing the propaganda system at the time, Li Changchun 李长春, at the opening of Estonia's only CI, at Tallinn University.¹⁶⁶ In November 2020, Zhang and Chinese ambassador Li Chao published companion articles in the Estonian business daily *Äripäev* calling for greater economic interaction with China.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶²“2020 第二届长三角城市群青年人才创新论坛暨“科创新动能”科技成果转化张江峰会”，浦东国际人才港 via 上海国际人才网, 20 Oct. 2020; “Core business”, Coway International TechTrans; “中心简介”，清华大学国际技术转移中心。

¹⁶³“8. juunil toimub Baltic-China Annual Business Conference”，Enterprise Estonia, 20 June 2015; Tõnis Kõiv, “Baltic-China majanduskonverents”，Tõnis Kõiv's blog, 29 June 2015; “Contact us”，China-Britain Business Council; “Find an adviser”，China-Britain Business Council.

¹⁶⁴Hamilton and Ohlberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–58.

¹⁶⁵“吴岩参赞参加孔子学院公共外宣活动”，MOFCOM, 29 Jan. 2016.

¹⁶⁶“李长春出席爱沙尼亚塔林大学孔子学院揭牌仪式”，新华, 23 Sep. 2010.

¹⁶⁷Xiaotian Zhang, “Xiaotian Zhang: Hiina järgmine Suur Plaan, *Äripäev*, 29 Nov. 2020; Li Chao, “Hiina sursaadik Eestis: Hiina kiiresti taastuva majanduse võimaluste jagamine”，*Äripäev*, 30 Nov. 2020.



5 Conclusion

CCP influence activities in Estonia are a multi-system effort that involves actors from the CCP's foreign affairs, propaganda and united front systems. The International Liaison Department actively interacts with several major parties in Estonia through meetings, sponsored trips and organised conferences designed to continue support for PRC interests, regardless of who is in power.

For instance, the ILD has — through sponsored trips to China, effectively engaged with a former minister of culture — who advocated for lifting China's non-market status against the best interests of Estonia and the European Union.

At the same time, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, also from the foreign affairs system, has used cooperation and sister cities agreements, sponsored trips and conferences to push Estonian policymakers, the business community and political leaders from European, national and subnational governments to advocate for and implement policies favourable to the PRC.

Target groups unfamiliar with China's political system and either unaccustomed or not required to think in national security terms have channelled CCP propaganda, supported BRI projects and engaged with a Chinese-backed Hong Kong businessman with a dubious background. Officials in Tallinn, without fully understanding their partner organisation's ties to the CCP propaganda system, have enabled and funded the dissemination of CCP propaganda for more than a decade through co-organising Chinese New Year celebrations.

The CCP's multi-system influence activities in Estonia demand a complex response based on rigorous research and reporting using Chinese-language sources. This is the spirit in which this report is presented: to raise awareness among different target groups and invite a broad public discussion on Estonia's long-term foreign and security policy goals.



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