

BRIEF

CHINA'S INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES IN ESTONIA



| FRANK JÜRIS |

With the exception of a series of articles in *Postimees* in 2019, China's influence in Estonia has not been studied before.¹ There is every reason to study the subject, as the company Powerhouse, which lobbies on behalf of the Chinese company Huawei, employs three former Estonian ministers, whose abundant contacts provide access to the corridors of power and, as exemplified by Marko Pomerants, also to the closed-door Question Time in the *Riigikogu* (Estonian Parliament).²

China's influence activities include propaganda work (宣传工作), which paints a positive picture of China and rejects any criticism.³ This was vividly illustrated in the "mask diplomacy" at the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, which was used in an attempt to create the image of a responsible partner. To fend off criticism, the European External Action Service unit tackling disinformation was pressured by China to alleviate accusations of China spreading misinformation.⁴

Influence activities also include united front work (统一战线工作), the idea for which originates from the Bolsheviks, who created temporary strategic alliances with other political parties and movements in order to grab power in Russia and trigger a global communist revolution. The Communist Party of China (CPC) used the same tactic to take power in China by alternately allying with and against the Nationalist Party (KMT).⁵ Today, the united front's foreign activities largely consist of employing the Chinese diaspora, but also the elite of foreign countries, for the benefit of the CPC, as has been thoroughly studied in New Zealand, Australia and the Czech Republic.⁶

In our neighbourhood, striking examples can be found in Finland and Sweden, where the united front has organised the Chinese diaspora to defend China's interests on issues concerning islands in the

South and East China Seas, the Hong Kong protests and Taiwan. The Finns Party's MPs Mika Niikko and Ville Vähämäki are founding members of the technology company Realmx, whose CEO, Hang Si, supported Niikko's election campaign with €5,000. In addition, Jenni Chen-Ye concealed her ties with the Finnish united front organisation when she ran for the Vantaa council.⁷ Influence activities also include foreign affairs work (外事工作/对外工作), which, according to Song Tao (宋涛), Minister of the CPC Central Committee's International Liaison Department (ILD, 对外联络部), is a symbiosis of party, public sector and NGO diplomacy that essentially consists of four grips (抓)—political parties (政党), research (调研), contacts (人脉) and image (形象)—which can be used to promote foreign relations and a positive image of the party to the international community, and through which central authorities can learn from foreign experience.⁸

INTERNATIONAL LIAISON DEPARTMENT

The history of the ILD is closely linked to the history of the CPC's foreign relations, as upon its creation in 1951 it was led by Wang Jiaxiang (王稼祥, 1906–74), who studied in Moscow and served as an ambassador. It is understood that the predecessor of the ILD was the Communications Office (交通局), which was formed in 1927 and was responsible for communicating with the Comintern and other partners and tried to export the revolution to other parts of Asia through the Chinese diaspora.⁹ In January 2011, before Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the CPC, he spoke at a meeting dedicated to the 90th anniversary of foreign affairs work (as old as the CPC) and the 60th anniversary of the ILD, saying that the latter was established to be responsible for the CPC's relations with foreign

parties. Xi stressed that the Party's foreign affairs work had an important role in total diplomacy (总体外交), as it allowed the party to build a positive image on the international stage, to gather information and to support the central authorities in decision-making.¹⁰

Today, the ILD is interested not in exporting the communist revolution but in establishing contacts with foreign political elites who will support the CPC's policies in their countries and help create an international consensus on issues important to China.¹¹ On Taiwan, for example, inter-party relations are particularly useful with countries that do not have formal relations with Beijing.¹² The biggest achievement for the department is the widespread support for Beijing's position on the South China Sea, which was approved by more than 240 parties and 280 think-tanks and NGOs.¹³ In addition, the ILD collects intelligence and recruits agents.¹⁴ In the 2015 report of the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) it is said that ILD, which focuses on international relations and intelligence activities, supported Chinese military intelligence in its activities.¹⁵ The ILD is active in Central and Eastern European countries that do not have large Chinese communities.

Czech politicians often go to the ILD during their visits to China and host its officials at the China Investment Forum in Prague.¹⁶ After a National Cyber and Information Security Agency's (NUKIB) report criticising Huawei, the leader of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, Vojtěch Filip, went on a fact-finding mission to China, where he met ILD Vice Minister Guo Yezhou (郭业洲). After his return, Filip defended Huawei in the media, contradicting the NUKIB threat assessment.¹⁷

The ILD's discursive power came to light when a delegation led by ILD Vice Minister Wang Yajun (王亚军) visited Iceland, where local politicians had the impression of a courtesy visit while the ILD presented it as an introduction of Xi Jinping's Thought to Icelandic parties. The meetings also discussed the Belt and Road Initiative and human rights, and China had the opportunity to present its vision, in which economic development is more important than fundamental rights, to a member state of the UN Human Rights Council at the time.¹⁸

THE ILD'S FOUR GRIPS

The ILD website describes the department in terms of its four "grips", one of which is the grip on political parties (抓政党). To date, the CPC has established relations with more than 600 political parties and organisations in 160 countries.¹⁹ The former ILD Minister and current Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Wang Jiarui (王家瑞), said that high-level exchanges with foreign parties, members of which are a source for policy planning and public opinion, represent the nature of preventive diplomacy (预防性外交), strategic communication (战略性沟通) and far-reaching impact (深远性影响).²⁰

The ILD established relations with the Estonian Social Democratic Party (SDE) in December 2008.²¹ According to Randel Länts, the then General Secretary of the party, the exchanges started when

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he visited China with the European Socialists and received an invitation for the SDE to visit.²² 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 (王家瑞), Minister of the ILD on 4–10 December.²³ In April 2009, the Vice Minister of the ILD, Chen Fengxiang (陈凤翔), met with the Speaker of the *Riigikogu*, the Estonian foreign minister and representatives of the SDE and the Centre Party in Tallinn.²⁴ In December the same year, an SDE delegation led by the party's Deputy Leader, Indrek Saar, paid a return visit to China, where they met the Politburo member and Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Wang Gang (王刚), and the ILD Minister, Wang Jiarui (王家瑞), and Vice Minister, Liu Hongcai (刘洪才).²⁵ According to Peeter Kreitzberg, a member of the delegation, the Chinese had previously expressed a wish to sign a cooperation agreement between the CPC and the SDE, but the delegation to China did not have the party's authority to sign.²⁶

In addition to bilateral meetings, the ILD organises forums for foreign political parties, where, besides establishing relations, it can present the CPC's policies and governance principles in order to create a positive international image of the Party. The ILD calls this activity its image grip (抓形象).²⁷

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 opened by Liu Yunshan (刘云山), the fifth-highest-ranking official in the Politburo Standing Committee, who was in charge of the ideological machinery at the time. This was a prelude to the ILD's global political party dialogue, which was attended by 300 parties from 120 countries; the dialogue culminated in the adoption of the Beijing Initiative, which outlines a China-centric new world order.²⁸ In May 2010, representatives of the Estonian Reform Party and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL) participated in the first China–Europe High Level

deputy head of the then Estonian–Chinese friendship group, participated in the China–Europe High-Level Political Parties Forum in 2011 and 2013.³⁴ In 2016, Randel Länts of the SDE, who currently heads government relations for the consultancy company Miltton, took part in the forum. Miltton is known for providing PR services for the Chinese embassy in Tallinn.³⁵ The 2013 forum was also attended by Charles Michel, leader of the Belgian party Reformist Movement, who became prime minister of Belgium in 2014 and president of the European Council in 2019.³⁶ 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 board member of the Estonian Centre Party, who has been the Minister of Education and Research since 2016.³⁷

The research grip (抓调研) refers to the need to supply the central government with information on international relations and regional developments, party politics and changes in societies.³⁸ On 7 May 2014, a delegation from the *Riigikogu* Foreign Affairs Committee, led by its chairman Marko Mihkelson, met in Beijing with Zhou Li (周力), Vice Minister of the ILD, to discuss, among other things, the situation in Ukraine.³⁹ It is important for China to know how the US and its allies are responding to Russia's aggression in Europe; this helps Beijing plan its actions in Hong Kong, the South China Sea and Taiwan.

According to Wang Jiarui, researching and monitoring international developments will allow China to take the initiative on issues that are important to it in order to propose a “China Solution” (中国方案).⁴⁰ At a meeting with Estonian foreign minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus in Beijing in January 2015, Zhou Li said that he wanted to deepen contacts with the Reform Party and exchange experiences of governance. Zhou Li introduced the Belt and Road Initiative, which the foreign minister found useful for all participating countries.⁴¹

It is a mistake to think that China's foreign policy is pursued only in the foreign ministry. The ILD has been in active contact with various Estonian political parties in order to influence local developments. Estonian politicians should be aware of the CPC's goals in establishing foreign contacts if they want to protect society from external influence, to adhere to the requirement of transparency, and to prevent being caught in the grip of the party.

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Political Parties Forum.²⁹ Here, the leader of the Party of the European Left and the EUL/NGL,³⁰ Lothar Bisky, criticised the selective coverage of China in the Western and European 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 on how to strengthen supervision of financial markets and the internal market.³¹

The grip on contacts (抓人脉) is responsible for developing people-to-people relations and creating a network of contacts for China's healthy and stable external relations.³² Wang Jiarui interprets this as informal exchanges with China-minded governing and opposition parties, political organisations, think-tanks, the media, NGOs and countries with which China has no diplomatic or party-level relations, in order to consistently cultivate people who know China and are friendly to the Chinese, with the aim of finding a common language and mutual understanding.³³ Among Estonian politicians, Kalev Kallo, a member of the Centre Party and at the time

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