



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### **ICT's Vincent Metten speaks about EU Tibet policies at World Parliamentarians' Convention on Tibet**

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*Following are the prepared remarks delivered by Vincent Metten, Brussels-based EU Policy Director of the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), at a panel discussion at the 7th World Parliamentarians' Convention on Tibet in Riga, Latvia, on May 9, 2019. The panel session was moderated by Matteo Mecacci, ICT president. Other panelists were Jonathan Stivers, staff director of the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China; Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy; and Csaba Sógor, member of the European Parliament from Romania.*

#### **Introduction**

This presentation will try to give a helicopter view of EU-China relations and put the Tibet issue in a broader perspective.

My presentation will be divided into three parts:

- The EU-China institutional architecture;
- The EU's lack on unity on China vis-à-vis human rights and Tibet;
- Recent developments in EU-China relations.

#### **1) The EU-China institutional architecture**

The EU's relationship with China is multifaceted and complex. The relation is based on three pillars: a political dialogue, an economic and sectorial dialogue, and the people to people's dialogue (latest one). There are many different actors involved and the decision-making processes between the three major Institutions (the Commission, the European Parliament and the EU Council) is quite complex.

The most relevant EU-China meetings for Tibet are:

- The EU-China Summit (one meeting per year);
- The EU-China High Level Strategic Dialogue (one meeting per year);
- The EU-China Human Rights dialogue (one meeting per year).

In 2016, the EU adopted a strategy on China, which provides the policy framework for the EU's relationship with China for the coming years, and clearly states that "the promotion of human rights will continue to be a core part of the EU's engagement with China." But one main problem in the EU is that human rights are not mainstreamed in other areas of cooperation between the EU and China.

There have been 37 rounds of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue so far, and no one can say that this has been an effective mechanism to improve the situation on the ground. Several NGOs including ICT are critical about this process and have asked the EU on several occasions to review this instrument to make it more effective.

The last Human Rights Dialogue took place in Brussels on 1 and 2 April 2019, and seems to have been again a difficult one. The new EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Gilmore, a former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ireland, delivered some opening remarks. Mr. Gilmore succeeds to Mr. Lambrinidis, appointed Head of the EU delegation in Washington. Mr. Lambrinidis went to Lhasa in its official capacity in 2013. This was an important political mission but unfortunately nothing concrete came out of it. Mr. Lambrinidis was willing to push for instance some cooperation project on bilingual education, but this was never implemented.

One component of the dialogue is a meeting between Chinese delegates and representatives of the civil society. But China declined to attend the meeting, which was mentioned in the EEAS press statement.

## **2) The EU's lack of unity on China vis-à-vis human rights and Tibet**

What we notice is that the 28 EU Member States are facing increasing difficulties in speaking with one voice to address China's human rights record. Beijing is skillful at using this European division to amplify it. Let me highlight some examples.

### *The Belt and Road initiative (BRI or OBOR)*

The first example concerns the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched by President Xi in 2013 and is an open competition for global leadership, and a way to reshape the international system, putting China at its centre.

There is no official list or comprehensive compilation of countries or organizations that have already signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with China. But according to Xinhua, so far, China has signed 123 cooperation documents with 105 countries. There are 2 types of agreements: Joint declarations or MoUs, which are not legally binding but a tool that can be used for political or diplomatic objectives. Within the EU, the following countries have signed MoUs with China on OBOR: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia (in 2016), Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Italy in 2019. Italy has become the first G7 country to sign an MoU with China. This has created tensions with some other EU Member States and also with the US administration.

China hosted the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in Beijing on 25-27 April 2019. 37 Head of States and Governments were represented, including Mr. Orban (Hungary), Mr. Kurz (Austria), Mr. Tsipras (Greece) and Mr. Conte (Italy).

Interestingly, the Handelsblatt published an article in April last year about a report by EU ambassadors criticizing China's Belt and Road Initiative. The report, which was endorsed by 27 EU Member States – Hungary was the only exception- criticised the BRI, saying it “runs counter to the EU agenda for liberalizing trade and pushes the balance of power in favor of subsidized Chinese companies.”

### *The 16+1 platform of cooperation*

Another example of European division is the 16+1 initiative between China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries. This platform of cooperation is heavily linked to the BRI. It has now turned into the 17+1 platform -as Greece has joined the group recently. There is certainly a link to the acquisition by COSCO company of the controlling share of the Greek port of Piraeus (a 35 year concession).

The Belgrade-Budapest Railway is a case in point. The European commission blocked this project as it was going against EU rules (public tender) and EU authorities are waiting for a more transparent bidding process to be adopted.

According to some media reports, 89 percent of projects that are labelled as part of the BRI have been implemented by Chinese companies, and China remains reluctant to welcome foreign investments. So it certainly is not a two-way street.

The 16+1 is likely to remain a platform for Central and Eastern European countries and Greece to compete for Chinese investments but not much more than this. 16+1 has been successful in constructing political and institutional foundations for future cooperation. But its weight and role should not be overestimated today.

### *Chinese growing influence in Europe*

A 2018 report entitled 'Authoritarian Advance: Chinese growing political influence in Europe' published by the influential think tanks MERICS (Mercator Institute for China Studies) and the Global Public Policy Institute warned that "China's rapidly increasing political influencing efforts in Europe and the self-confident promotion of its authoritarian ideals pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy as well as Europe's values and interests."

What we notice today is that Beijing has traditionally had links with mainstream parties and former communists in Europe; now it's building ties to right-wing populists or extreme right movements such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or anti-immigrant nationalists like Austria's Freedom Party and others.

China has also stepped up its outreach in recent months, coinciding with the campaign for EU-wide elections to the European Parliament in May.

In December 2018, a so-called Tibet delegation of the Chinese National People's Congress (NPC) came to Europe and paid a visit to the European Parliament before going to Denmark. They had several meetings, including with MEP Nirj Deva, the Chairman of the unofficial EU-China Friendship Group in the European Parliament. In November 2018, Mr. Nirj Deva travelled again to Beijing for an event on innovation. A media article by Bloomberg has revealed that his economy class airfare was upgraded to business by his Chinese government hosts, who also picked up his hotel bills and expenses. Once there, Deva and his group, who have no formal role representing the European Union, were given better access than the EU's official delegation in Beijing.

Such Chinese delegations have free access to our countries and territories, as it is also the case for Chinese journalists, tourists... but the opposite is not true. China is limiting or blocking access to Tibet to our citizens. There is a clear lack of reciprocity in terms of access to respective territories. Following the adoption of the US Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, the issue is more and more taken into consideration at the political level in Europe. ICT has organized a conference on reciprocal access to Tibet in the European Parliament in November last year. The issue has been mentioned in several EU documents in particular resolutions and reports adopted by the European Parliament.

The EU High Representative Ms. Mogherini made the following significant statement after the adoption by the European Parliament of a resolution in human rights in China in April this year: “We have called on the Chinese authorities to allow reciprocal access to Tibet for European journalists, diplomats, and families/” This is certainly an issue on which delegates present today can play an active role. You can introduce official requests to visit Tibet, ask your Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide information about the number of officials requests addressed to Chinese authorities to visit Tibet and how many were accepted, rejected or not answered to, you can organize debate on reciprocity in your respective countries, adopt legislative acts on this issue...

Another important development on this issue is the adoption by the European Parliament of a resolution on human rights violations sanctions, which “strongly condemns all violations of human rights across the globe” and calls on the EU Council to “swiftly establish an autonomous, flexible and reactive EU-wide sanctions regime that would allow for the targeting of any individual, state and non-state actors, and other entities responsible for or involved in grave human rights violations.” This is an inspiring development for all delegates today present.

In addition to blocking our citizens to access Tibet, Beijing has adopted a more aggressive diplomatic position on meetings with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, stepping up its pressure on the EU and its Member States to block meetings of heads of government, ministers and members of Parliament with the Tibetan spiritual leader, in some cases even cancelling official visits and delegations as retaliation against the countries who refused to give in to this pressure.

China’s second policy paper on the EU released in December 2018 specifically tells the EU that “it should not allow leaders of the Dalai group to visit the EU or its member states in any capacity or under any name to carry out separatist activities, not arrange any form of contact with officials from the EU and its member states, and not support or facilitate any anti-China separatist activities for “Tibet independence.”

Another way through which China is trying to influence the public opinion in Europe is by inserting Chinese official media articles into European media. Several European newspapers are for instance publishing inserts provided by Chinese official media such as Xinhua or the China Daily. In Belgium, Le Soir publishes such ads on a regular basis. ICT has introduced a complaint at the “Council for Journalistic Deontology” which was accepted in the name of confusion between ‘information’ and ‘publicity’. We are waiting for the decision of this body, which is not legal binding.

In France, in addition to Le Figaro, Le Monde has published a few weeks ago its first Chinese propaganda adds coinciding with the visit of Xi Jinping to France. In Germany, the Süddeutsche Zeitung seems to have decided last year to discontinue supplements from the Chinese Communist Party’s China Daily. This is certainly another area where we all need to be vigilant and counter any Chinese attempt to use national media to diffuse their narrative and propaganda.

### **3) Recent developments in EU-China relations**

For a few months now, we have been witnessing some interesting developments in Europe, in particular since EU Member States started to discuss on how to protect 5G networks from potential security risks such as those attached to Huawei Technologies Co. Several EU Member States are in the process of re-assessing their bilateral relations with China and adapting them to this changing context.

A European Commission review of EU-China relations published on 12 March acknowledges that “China is simultaneously a cooperation partner, with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives ... and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”

MEP Jo Leinen, who is heading the EU-China Delegation of the European Parliament recently said of China: “From a friendly partner, in a few years it changed to an unfriendly competitor”. He cited industrial policy as well as human rights violations including the detention of Muslim Uyghurs and called for a ‘rougher tone’ from the EU. “China has lost the battle in the U.S. and is on the way to losing the battle in Europe,” he said.

Europe is adopting an increasingly critical stance toward China more in line with the US, Australia and Canada. But Beijing wants to avoid Europe joining with the US and others in an anti-China front.

During the last visit of President Xi to Europe, President Macron was willing to give a more united image of Europe and invited German Chancellor Merkel and President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker to join the meeting. President Macron wants to give a more united image of Europe and he also asked to set up a more balanced multilateral framework.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me conclude by saying that we witness some growing awareness in Europe about Chinese increased influence and by the risks it can represent on some strategic sectors as telecommunication. The risk of cyberattacks and espionage is becoming more apparent. Germany’s domestic intelligence agency has for sentence warned of Chinese attempts to infiltrate political and business circles through LinkedIn.

In February 2019, Lithuania’s intelligence services are reported to have accused China of recruiting its citizens to engage in espionage activities and influence public opinion on issues such as Tibet and Taiwanese independence.

According to some EU officials, the idea that the EU and China might get closer as a result of President Trump was always exaggerated, yet there was a real window of opportunity which China has failed to grasp and that Europe’s traditional focus on Russian infiltration is now shifting to include China.

Nevertheless, despite these developments, we are far away from a 180-degree shift of EU policy on China, in particular when it comes to sensitive issues such as human rights, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Tibet...

We certainly need a change of script. Europe can stand up for its values and interests by ensuring that its engagement with China remains principled. But to do so, the EU must put human rights at the centre stage in its discussions with China, not relegate it to the wings.