

The Normative Influence of the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe

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Laia Comerma 

Abstract

This article analyses how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is used as a tool to spread Chinese normative language and soft power in the European Union (EU), as well as the potential governance effects of the BRI. Through in-depth elite interviews and comparative qualitative analysis of the BRI Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between EU countries and China, it provides a comprehensive overview of the content of the MoUs, most of which are not publicly available. It finds that, while little normative influence can be seen, the MoUs represent a partially successful exercise of soft power. However, growing scepticism and even resentment towards China are emerging among EU BRI countries. This, paired with the securitisation of Chinese foreign direct investment that originated from the paradigm shift in EU trade policy towards economic security, has led to greater unity in the EU and a more antagonistic vision of China by its Member States.

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Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, memorandum of understanding, normative influence, soft power

Department of Social and Political Science, Pompeu Fabra University (UPF)–Barcelona Institute of International Studies (IBEI), Barcelona, Spain

Corresponding Author:

Laia Comerma, Department of Social and Political Science, Pompeu Fabra University (UPF)–Barcelona Institute of International Studies (IBEI), Passeig de la Generalitat, 65, 4t 1a, 08500 Vic, Barcelona, Spain.

Email: lcomerma@ibei.org



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Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), presented in 2013, is Xi Jinping's landmark connectivity project. It aims to promote connectivity in the fields of trade, infrastructure and currency through multi-layered international collaboration among states and international organisations (Minghao, 2016). The BRI involves at least sixty-three countries, including eighteen in Europe (Garcia Herrero and Xu, 2017). It was conceived as part of China's export promotion policies to sustain its economic growth and development and support the "Go Global" campaign, which fosters outward investment and the quality and competitiveness of Chinese companies to reduce excess capacity at home. Externally, it aims to shape China's image as an international leader, as well as leverage China's comparative advantages in infrastructure development finance and manufacturing capacity (Li, 2019).

Europe initially greeted the BRI as an economic opportunity, in line with the broader image of China, which wove de-securitised narratives around the BRI to improve its soft power in Europe and promote its domestic interests (Jakimów, 2019). Yet, as the perception of China in Europe shifted towards that of a "systemic rival," "economic competitor," and "strategic partner" (European Commission, 2019), the BRI increasingly came to be seen as a security threat, while the anticipated economic benefits largely failed to materialise. Academic literature has offered various interpretations of the BRI. Some have described it as a key part of China's overall foreign policy (Callahan, 2016; Horsley, 2019) and as promoting an alternative set of norms known as the "Chinese model" of development. Others have viewed it as an incoherent, piecemeal strategy born out of a fetching slogan (Hameiri and Jones, 2018; Jones, 2020; Narins and Agnew, 2019).

This analysis is based on a literature review, three in-depth case studies and ten structured interviews with European Union (EU) and national officials and experts. It shows that, while the BRI was expected to increase China's soft power and normative influence in Europe, these expectations have largely failed to materialise due to a variety of factors (the EU's own regulatory framework, general disappointment around the implementation of the memoranda, and a shift in the EU's policy towards China), albeit with relevant exceptions. However, the secretiveness of the MoU documents and the presence of Chinese normative language in them seem to indicate the sensitivity of the China issue within the EU. Whether this can undermine Europe–China relations warrants further consideration.

State of the art

The BRI as a Soft-Power Tool

The BRI has been described as the normative link between China's domestic development and its global orientation (Huang, 2016; Johnson, 2016). On the one hand, some analysts suggest that it reflects a shift from "keeping a low profile and biding its time" to becoming a global leader whose norms and rules are duly reflected in international

institutions and a “game maker” (Qiu, 2015). On the other hand, some view the BRI as a tool to export illiberal political norms and give China normative legitimacy (Shi and Trigkas, 2021) or, at least, a way of challenging existing international development norms (Minghao, 2016) and promoting Chinese soft power (Zhou and Esteban, 2018).

Hypothesis: The Belt and Road Initiative is used to introduce Chinese norms in the European Union.

In China, soft power (软实力, *ruan shili*) is primarily a top-down, party-led project, regarded as complementary to hard power and part of China’s “comprehensive national strength” (综合国力, *zonghe guoli*) (Sørensen, 2017). Under Xi, soft power is focused on “telling China’s story well, transmitting China’s voice (中国声音, *Zhongguo shengyin*) well, and interpreting Chinese characteristics (中国特色, *Zhongguo tese*)” (Sørensen, 2017). These efforts aim to counter the “China threat” narrative and the intensified security dilemma dynamics due to China’s rise, as well as to convey the image of a peaceful and responsible great power.

However, China’s projection of soft power has two main weaknesses. First, by focusing on regime survival and the construction and stabilisation of national identity, it portrays “Chinese” and “Chinese characteristics” in opposition to hostile “others,” which holds scant appeal to international audiences. Second, much of a country’s soft power comes from its civil society, whose capacity is curtailed in a state-controlled and state-led system such as China. Therefore, China’s soft power is based on the exploitation of its traditional culture rather than current creations. Finally, like Russia, China has found itself a victim of “negative” soft power (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016), when Western media has seized on policies in Xinjiang or Hong Kong to reinforce negative frames of Chinese behaviour.

The BRI’s normative influence

The BRI is a “moving concept” (Grieger, 2016), with no general document that details its overarching aims, strategy or modes of governance. It is a key component of Xi Jinping’s strategy for a Global China and the main vehicle for its internationalisation in the economic and trade spheres. At the same time, its major political and ideological component raises questions about whether it is also internationalising Chinese norms. The implementation of the BRI is reportedly a contestation of international norms that do not align with China’s state-directed economic model (Marcoux and Sylvestre-Fleury, 2022). Interestingly, the BRI may not actually be promoting an alternative to the existing liberal order, as the normative content of its key policy documents is pro-market and pluralist (Jones, 2020). However, China is using it to selectively maintain the status quo and challenge the emergence of international norms less consistent with its economic model (Marcoux and Sylvestre-Fleury, 2022). In academia, the BRI is portrayed as a form of “multilayered multilateralism” or “multi-channel diplomacy,” a new set of institutions – in coalition with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – that aims to support Chinese ideas, aspirations and norms, establish a

“community of shared destiny” (Callahan, 2016; Du and Ma, 2015; Vangeli, 2018; Yang, 2018; Zhou and Esteban, 2018), consolidate China’s new role in norm-setting and diffusion, and translate China’s economic power into political advantages by reshaping the regional institutions and their economic orders (Feng, 2019).

The normative influence of the BRI is understood here as the presence of Chinese norms, values and rhetoric in the memoranda signed by EU Member States. The norms that the BRI aims to promote are defined in various documents, such as “Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road” (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015) and even “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” This confrontation primarily occurs during the implementation phase, where BRI projects are challenging global governance norms related to investment, aid, and social and environmental protection due to China’s adherence to a different regulatory and governance regime. In response, the EU has declared that cooperation with China on the BRI should be contingent on its adherence to existing market rules and international norms (European Commission, 2016). This paper therefore examines whether the BRI memoranda signed by Member States contain Chinese normative language and explores the governance implications for the EU.

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyse China’s normative influence on EU development investment and connectivity governance, as well as the values reflected in the BRI MoUs signed between China and EU Member States (Supplemental Material, Table 1). The research methodology involved two main components: a qualitative comparative analysis of the MoU texts and structured elite interviews of relevant EU officials, national politicians and experts from Czechia, Lithuania and Italy. Furthermore, a literature review was carried out to identify the various projects in which the MoUs have materialised across the EU. Through this approach, this paper seeks to establish the outcomes of these “declarations of commitment” in terms of investment and infrastructure.

The texts in question are difficult to obtain: only the Italy–China MoU was public, whereas the others required either filing a request to the relevant ministerial authority or conducting a significantly more exhaustive search. A short reminder of the laws regulating their publicity is therefore relevant. EU documents are regulated by Article 15 of the Treaty of Lisbon, which enshrines the right of citizens and residents of EU countries to access the documents of EU institutions. Some documents are proactively published in an e-library, whereas others require a written request for access (European Commission, n.d.). In the latter scenario, a response must be given within fifteen working days. For exceptions to this transparency rule, the EU institutions must set out a specific rationale for why access to the requested information cannot be provided. The number of exceptions is also limited (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2001).

Nowadays, national governments typically have their own Freedom of Information (FOI) laws, which have traditionally established agencies that provide these kinds of legal documents upon request, usually within fifteen working days. However, lacklustre

enforcement of those laws has been widely documented (Banisar, 2006; Dragos and Neamtu, 2017; Lidberg, 2009). As a result of these issues, the relevant documents could not be obtained from four EU countries (Supplemental Material, Table 2). Such a high degree of obscurity is striking, as these texts are merely a non-binding declaration of intentions. This is probably due to the highly politicised context in which they were signed and the antagonistic narrative against the BRI in Europe, which may have encouraged EU Member States not to publish the MoUs despite the fact that in some cases they were easily accessible in Chinese.

Discussion

The MoUs consist of eight sections. The first two set out the principles and objectives of cooperation. It is therefore conspicuous that the rhetoric is highly representative of Chinese normative language, inspired by “Xi Jinping Thought” and following the exact same principles and structure outlined in the National Development and Reform Commission (2015), with repeated mentions of mutual trust, common development and cooperation, extensive consultation, prosperity, win–win progress, friendship between peoples, harmony, and respect, to name but a few. As such, the MoUs can be seen as a vehicle for Chinese norms, but using a language that resembles and appeals to the existing liberal internationalist framework while taking on a different connotation or subjective meaning in the Chinese domestic context. However, the MoUs promote respect for the existing global economic regime (World Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development), while recognising the Asian Development Bank and the AIIB. As a result, they are not so much a counter-institutionalisation initiative (Zürn, 2018) as an attempt to integrate or accommodate Chinese-sponsored institutions within the prevailing regime.

While the MoUs are not treaties *per se*, they do structure norms and cooperation within the BRI, as any investment that does materialise is governed by a patchwork of bilateral investment treaties (BITs) between China and BRI countries, which are in turn connected to thousands of third-party treaties through the Most-Favoured Nation clause. This can be conceptualised as an “invisible” BRI multilateral investment treaty (Chaisse and Kirkwood, 2020). Interestingly, all the documents establish an amicable dispute settlement mechanism. The BRI gave China an opportunity to develop its own proposal for an investor–state dispute settlement (ISDS) by providing a platform to escalate it and have it adopted by its European partners through the MoUs. This would have raised it to the level of an international norm. However, China still relies on pursuing claims under the applicable BIT. Similarly, the absence of an institutionally established dispute resolution system, whether soft or hard, in the Comprehensive Agreement of Investment will pose problems for the BRI’s overall success in Europe and its underlying *raison d’être* (Xu, 2022).

The World Trade Organisation could also be tasked with the adjudication of certain BRI disputes (Chaisse and Kirkwood, 2021). This matters because the status quo is suffering a legitimacy crisis and reeling from accusations of lack of transparency, corruption,

problems with victim protection and State-Owned Enterprises-related claims, and limiting the sovereignty of host states (Fan, 2020; Yin, 2019). Currently, the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law Working Group III is the main multilateral space where states are discussing a reform proposal. Meanwhile, Chinese policy on the matter is quite vague, which is why the BRI offered China an opportunity to present its own ISDS counterproposal.

Based on the comparative analysis, I have identified two variables that define the content of the memoranda: time and geography (Supplemental Material, Figure 1). The MoU with Hungary is a notable exception. It was the first MoU signed between an EU Member State and China and departed from the basic structure due to the fundamental fact that said structure had not yet been developed at the time. The MoU was strictly a political declaration of intentions that, when taken together with its Cooperation Plan, resulted in the most comprehensive of all the MoUs analysed. Considering Hungary's self-identification as an "illiberal democracy" and its poor rule of law record, it has developed a unique relationship with China and received the most substantial Chinese capital flows in the region (Szunomar, 2017). The earliest MoUs are more schematic and there is almost no variation among the texts, which follow the BRI framework of five priorities as the main areas of cooperation nearly word for word. It would appear that China came to the various governments with a predetermined text that barely underwent an amendment or negotiation process. These MoUs were signed in the context of 17+1 summits, whereby most early signers of MoUs belong to this parallel forum and aimed to benefit from Chinese investment to boost their economic development.

Subsequent MoUs add areas of cooperation to the BRI framework, walking back instead of policy coordination commitments. There are more mentions of friendship and regional cooperation. In a way, these MoUs try to situate the BRI and Europe's participation in the grand scheme of things, within the economic and investment regime, and to define their interaction by stating that it must be complementary or secondary to obligations arising from more solid institutions, such as the EU itself. Overall, more caveats, conditions and clauses are introduced to restrict the scope and style of cooperation, beyond declarations of intentions, friendship and good-will. The basic text is harder to identify in the most recent MoUs, which have undergone a more extensive process of negotiation and amendment. These states are southern European countries, with more developed economies that suffered significantly during the 2008 financial crisis, which was when they opened their doors to Chinese investment in most cases. This variation could signal that, while wanting to participate in the BRI and extend their cooperation with China to reap the potential economic gains, they were more prudent with regard to the content and language of the texts and insisted on overseeing mechanisms.

This evolution should be put, first, in the context of a changing perception of China in the EU, from economy-focused "constructive engagement" to "principled pragmatism," greater complexity and the tripartite conception of a "systemic rival," "economic competitor," and "strategic partner" (European Commission, 2019). As an EU official pointed out, it is "not systematic but systemic, which means that [China] is promoting

a different system, a different governance model” (Anonymous 2, 2022). Secondly, it should be considered in the context of greater oversight of foreign direct investment (FDI) by the EU and increased caution advised to its Member States in their dealings with China. One example is the FDI screening mechanism, which is stated to be “a country-agnostic mechanism,” not about “decoupling from China [...] but about having a more comprehensive vision of what are [EU] interests and how this investment can impact the EU, not just in terms of economic interests but also security considerations.” As a result, it “has allowed Member States to look in a more coherent way [at] the different investment coming from China” (Anonymous 2, 2022).

BRI Governance in Europe

While Chinese normative language in BRI memoranda has arguably penetrated the EU, which corroborates the suggested hypothesis, the BRI’s governance influence in the implementation phase has been weak because of the EU’s regulatory framework. As one expert notes,

The European geopolitical and geoeconomic space with the European (and the whole “Western” world) seems quite immune, except for some examples in the Balkans. The Chinese challenge in terms of values and norms does not work in most of the EU, except merging of post-communist and Chinese corruption practices and bureaucracies in several states. (Fürst, 2022)

Real influence “is more informal and the spreading of norms per se eventually is blocked [...] by EU norms and the fact that there is a rule of law here” (Anonymous 1, 2022). The “Commission is supposed to enforce the rules, but the enforcement of the rules in itself is discretionary [...] so political considerations do matter,” and they are not only related to China, but to the EU partner itself (Anonymous 1, 2022). Another official further explains, “[The EU’s] regulatory frameworks are reasonably well structured for the most part to withstand some of those influences that would otherwise be coming in” (Anonymous 3, 2022), while the core risk is the corrosion of regulatory systems in the EU partner countries, especially in the Western Balkans. Importantly, the fact that investment negotiations have been carried out en bloc by the European Commission since it acquired powers in foreign investment in 2009 reduces the power of initiative and veto of individual Member States with regard to foreign investment, thus making a state-to-state strategy less effective at the EU level.

The main normative contribution of the BRI has been a general paradigm shift in connectivity and infrastructure development policy. “It is the end of the notion that investment flows are neutral”; the BRI has manifested that investment flows “have a security aspect that just needs to be taken care of” (Anonymous 1, 2022). It has shifted the perspective to focus also on EU security and political interests when committing to development projects, and not just the cost–benefit analysis of infrastructure investment commitments or of infrastructure as a foreign policy tool. Two main perspectives

coexist among EU officials on how the BRI has influenced the essence and existence of the Global Gateway, following the institutional lines of the Parliament and the Commission. While the former sees the Global Gateway as a counter to the BRI, the latter perceives that it is “not a strategy against China” but “an inclusive platform [...], an offer of partnership with third partners [...] under the principles of sustainability and level playing field” (Anonymous 2, 2022). Thus, the Commission believes that to portray the Global Gateway solely as a response to the BRI prevents from considering the EU’s own interests, strategy and tactics, irrespective of China (Okano-Heijmans, 2022), and even deems the Global Gateway as “unrelated to the [BRI],” as

Significantly more than just a counterpart to the [BRI], [...] about the European Union shifting the way it thinks about how it does external action, and [...] recognizing its own interests in the way that it works with external partners. (Anonymous 3, 2022)

In this setting, cooperation is possible “with partners who are open and willing to apply the same frameworks for openness, transparency, governance sustainability,” which “de facto limits the possibility for collaboration under BRI projects for the most part because the means of delivering on the two sides are probably quite different” (Anonymous 3, 2022), even if both will inevitably find themselves “in the same places” (Anonymous 3, 2022).

Implementation of the Memoranda

Substantial projects arising from the BRI MoUs are few and far between in Europe, and even more so in EU countries. Overall, the literature reveals a general underperformance of the BRI (Bartosiewicz and Szterlik, 2018; Cabral, 2020; Cok and Motosh, 2017; Kironská and Turcsányi, 2017; Mariani, 2021; Nazari, 2020, Pendrakowska, 2018; Popescu and Brinza, 2018). The two main exceptions are Greece, with COSCO’s investment in the Port of Piraeus (Comerma, 2023; Le Corre, 2018; Marantidou, 2014), and Hungary, with the Budapest–Belgrade line. The former is suspected of having violated EU environmental regulations (Tsimonis et al., 2022), while the latter is suspected of having infringed public procurement regulations (Kynge et al., 2017). In Central and Eastern European countries, it is unclear where the 17+1 Platform ends and the BRI starts, which is why for these countries there is no major difference between the pre- and post-MoU scenarios, but instead as a result of having a closer political relationship with China, which equally applies when the relation turns sour.

More specifically, the case of Czechia portrays that the combination of a “lack of clear outcomes” and an “increasingly assertive position of China towards the partners,” made it more “difficult to talk within the framework of 16+1 about sensitive issues” (Anonymous 6, 2022) and ultimately led to its demise and that of the BRI. Lithuania, instead, shows a discrepancy between the political elite, which saw a “political incentive to change the bilateral ties” with China, and society, which is “not really overly positive towards the [...] government’s change in policy towards China” (Anonymous 7, 2022).

Finally, Italy's participation is portrayed as a token involvement, the feat of incorporating a Western European country and a G7 member to the BRI, for which the country paid "a very high political cost [...] but did not get in return anything in terms of trade" (Fasulo, 2022). This goes back to the fact that signing a non-binding agreement had a different meaning for Italy than for China, for which "the non-binding was still a political commitment, and for the international audience that agreement was politically sensitive" (Fasulo, 2022). Also, it appealed to the subjective idea of the Silk Road, which has positive historical connotations in Italy's imagination, as a time "when [Italy was] the richest country in the world" (Fasulo, 2022). Yet, Italy's domestic context has changed substantially, from "a huge consensus on building a stronger relationship with China in order to get economic return later" (Fasulo, 2022) to coalition infighting (Dossi, 2020) and, ultimately, a re-examination of the nature of its relationship with China that led to its non-renewal of the Memorandum following substantial European and American pressure.

The case studies confirm a shift in perceptions, to the point that "if there is any possibility [of cooperation on infrastructure and connectivity], it is through EU institutions" (Fasulo, 2022), even if only theoretically, as "the EU–People's Republic of China dialogue is currently going through a chilled period" (Fürst, 2022). It appears that "it would be quite hard to put forward cooperation in those sectors [...], because especially from the EU part there is this sense of this rivalry mounting towards China," as the EU's relationship with China appears to lean more towards rivalry than partnership, which was "the two ends of how China was defined in [the 2019 EU–China Strategic Outlook]" (Anonymous 5, 2022). The EU–China Connectivity Platform, established in 2015 with the aim to explore opportunities for further cooperation in the area of transport and enhance governance synergies between the EU's approach to connectivity and the BRI (Wang et al., 2017), is "in a big freezer because there are no more projects attached to it" (Chapuis, 2022). In fact, the platform has met with limited success, as only five expert group meetings took place between 2016 and 2019 (November 2016 in Beijing, May 2017 in Brussels, July 2018 in Beijing, November 2018 in Brussels and July 2019 in Beijing). At the same time, an aura of dissatisfaction has dispelled the sense of ambition of 2015 that came with the list of potential transport infrastructure projects defined in those meetings (Gehrke, 2019; Gruebler, 2021). The Platform's initial aim was also weakened by Member States' individual policies and the very signature of the BRI memoranda, which limited "the EU's capacity [...] to influence global connectivity and to act with a single voice in the realm of the Common Foreign and Security Policy" (Anonymous 4, 2022) and illustrated the persisting divisions among Member States, especially those in Western and Central Europe, with regard to their policies towards China.

Conclusion

In sum, the BRI Memoranda signed by European countries include a substantial amount of Chinese normative language, which has been subsumed by the Member States that have joined the initiative. The MoUs are a partially successful soft-power

exercise, as EU Member States have joined the BRI and even broken FOI laws by not making the MoUs public, stoking a sense of mistrust around these texts that ultimately led Italy to publish them online. While the main objective of the memoranda, according to EU Member States, was to attract Chinese investment to their countries, assuming that China follows a nationalist economic policy, the BRI has so far failed to deliver this result in most Member States. The changing perspective of China among EU elites has, as a consequence, undermined China's soft power. This illustrates some of the limitations of Chinese soft power, which largely relies on providing economic opportunities, a narrative that is easily sabotaged by China's exercise of sharp power. In the case of the BRI, this threat has materialised in the shape of so-called debt trap diplomacy. The EU regulatory framework has largely blocked Chinese norms and governance practices through barriers such as requiring environmental studies, demanding certain labour standards, etc. EU norms have only been infringed when Member States have failed in their implementation or oversight duties (Tsimonis et al., 2022).

Overall, there is a general sense of disappointment among the Member States that joining the BRI related to the economic benefits they expected to obtain from that move, which paired with the securitisation of Chinese FDI arising from the paradigm shift, has favoured greater unity in the EU and a more pragmatic view of China by its Member States. Achieving a single voice is a "work in progress" (Anonymous 2, 2022), but since 2019 there has been a growing consensus to which the EU has contributed significantly. Chinese perceptions and soft power in Europe have worsened, translating into a more antagonistic political discourse and the "demonization" of the BRI. Although Chinese procurement and investment rules are more flexible, and China attempted to pursue the BRI's expansion in Europe in a coordinated manner through platforms such as 17 + 1 – now 14 + 1 – the "lack of clear outcomes," low responsiveness, "lack of implementation and progress on the Chinese side" (Anonymous 6, 2022) and the fact that Member States felt coerced to not discuss sensitive issues on these platforms have resulted in stalemate and disapproval. Moreover, for China, the point of the BRI "was never for others to come, the reciprocity issue was never solved" (Fasulo, 2022). If the BRI is to succeed and deliver in terms of promoting EU–China cooperation in connectivity and infrastructure development, normative differences in the governance of its projects will inevitably need to be reconciled.

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Availability of Data and Material

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ORCID iD

Laila Comerma  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7517-2021>

Supplemental Material

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Author Biography

Lia Comerma is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy of the Brussels School of Governance (VUB) under the ERC project 'Europe in US-China rivalry' (SINATRA). She completed her PhD at the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and the Barcelona Institute for International Studies (IBEI). Her doctoral dissertation, "The influence of the EU-China economic relationship towards the reconfiguration of the economic regime of global governance", analyses the norms, rules and institutions structuring the foreign policy relation between China and the EU, and how they are being reformed due to their interaction in the fields of investment, trade, and development infrastructure. Her research fields of interest are foreign policy analysis, Chinese and EU foreign policy, and EU-China relations. She holds an MSc in International relations from the London School of Economics (LSE) and a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from UPF-UAM-UC3M.