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THE MAIN OBSTACLES TO EU PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN CHINA

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The article is devoted to the key obstacles that complicate the implementation of public diplomacy programmes of the European Union in China. The relevance of this study is due to the existing efforts of Brussels to significantly strengthen its political influence not only in the countries neighbouring the EU but also in the Asia-Pacific region. *Methods.* The methodological basis of the research is social constructivism (the concept of “Normative Power Europe”), which pays great attention to norms in international relations. The empirical basis of the study involves official EU documents, expert reports and publications of Russian and foreign scholars. *Analysis.* The article examines the main actors and areas of public diplomacy of the European Union in China. The impact of restrictive measures by the Chinese government on EU public diplomacy as well as the EU foreign policy strategy towards China are analyzed. *Results.* In China, the EU’s public diplomacy faces a set of different challenges: administrative barriers from the Chinese government; ambivalence of the EU’s foreign policy towards China; the shortcomings of the existing EU public diplomacy system (lack of financial and human resources as well as a “mediocre” assessment of the effectiveness of public diplomacy programmes). According to the authors, the commitment of the EU political elites to certain values and norms that constitute “Normative Power Europe” creates serious challenges for the implementation of the EU’s public diplomacy in China. *Authors’ contribution.* K.A. Morari identified key actors and areas of public diplomacy of the European Union in China. In addition, A.N. Marchukov highlighted the main obstacles that hinder Brussels’ attempts to “win the hearts and minds” of the Chinese public.

Key words: public diplomacy, digital diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, normative power, foreign policy, European Union, China.

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ОСНОВНЫЕ ПРЕПЯТСТВИЯ ДЛЯ ПУБЛИЧНОЙ ДИПЛОМАТИИ ЕС В КИТАЕ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Данная статья посвящена ключевым препятствиям, которые осложняют реализацию программ публичной дипломатии Европейского союза в Китае. Актуальность данного исследования обусловлена существующим стремлением Брюсселя значительно усилить свое политическое влияние не

только в соседних с ЕС странах, но и в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе. *Методы.* Методологической основой исследования выступает социальный конструктивизм (концепт «нормативной силы» ЕС), придающий особое значение нормам в международных отношениях. Эмпирической базой исследования служат официальные документы ЕС, экспертные доклады и публикации российских и зарубежных ученых. *Анализ.* В статье исследованы основные акторы и направления публичной дипломатии Евросоюза в Китае. Проанализировано влияние ограничительных мер со стороны китайского правительства на публичную дипломатию ЕС, а также внешнеполитическая стратегия Евросоюза по отношению к Китаю. *Результаты.* Публичная дипломатия Европейского союза в Китае сталкивается с целым рядом различных вызовов: административными барьерами со стороны китайского правительства; амбивалентностью внешнеполитического курса ЕС по отношению к Китаю; изъянами существующей системы публичной дипломатии ЕС (недостатком финансовых и кадровых ресурсов, а также «посредственной» оценкой результативности программ публичной дипломатии). По мнению авторов, приверженность политических элит ЕС определенным ценностям и нормам, составляющим его «нормативную силу», создает серьезные проблемы для публичной дипломатии Евросоюза в Китае. *Вклад авторов.* К.А. Морарь выявила ключевые акторы и направления публичной дипломатии Евросоюза в Китае. А.Н. Марчуков выделил основные препятствия, которые мешают попыткам Брюсселя «завоевать сердца и умы» китайской общественности.

Ключевые слова: публичная дипломатия, цифровая дипломатия, культурная дипломатия, нормативная сила, внешняя политика, Европейский союз, Китай.

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Introduction. In recent years, the European Union has been persistently looking for opportunities to strengthen its political position in the international arena. One of the tools that contributes to the growth of Brussels' global influence is public diplomacy, a form of diplomacy in which an international actor seeks to influence public opinion abroad [31]. The European Union is persistently trying to exert pressure on the political elites of several countries around the world, drawing substantially on the possibilities of cultural diplomacy, advocacy, scientific, and educational cooperation [21; 23; 35; 38; 47].

Relations with China play a special role for the European Union, given the close economic ties between the two geopolitical actors as well as the significant political influence of the Chinese state in world politics [5; 15]. It is no coincidence that as far back as 2003 the European Union announced the beginning of a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China, realising what dividends such cooperation in the economic sphere could bring. However, despite significant successes in bilateral trade, for many years Brussels accumulated complaints against Beijing in various spheres of social life. These covered matters such as the intellectual property protection of European companies, violations of human rights, the use of undemocratic methods

of public administration, etc. [24]. Ultimately, these differences in relations between the EU and China were reflected in the EU foreign policy document “EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council (March 21–22, 2019)”, in which Beijing is considered both a strategic partner and a systemic competitor of Brussels [16]. Here, systemic competition refers to the ability of China's political regime, which is often labelled as authoritarian in the West, to challenge the Western liberal international order led by the United States and the EU.

In 2023, the EU has continued to adhere to an ambivalent foreign policy strategy towards China, taking into account the persistence of old problems and the emergence of new challenges in bilateral relations. For example, in recent years, Brussels has accused China of interfering in political processes in Europe, spreading disinformation around COVID-19, as well as supporting Russia in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, etc. In the current situation of tension between the EU and China, the use of public diplomacy programmes is of particular importance. It is believed that some of them (for example, cultural diplomacy) can minimise the existing mutual hostility between countries [32; 43].

Unfortunately, the European Union's public diplomacy in China is insufficiently researched in modern scientific literature [18]. Probably, the shortage of important publications in the area is explained by the complexity of the analysis of public diplomacy's supranational actors. As a rule, existing studies are more devoted to the practical aspects of the implementation of public diplomacy programmes by the European Union for communication with Chinese society than to the obstacles faced by European diplomats in China [37; 39; 45]. However, understanding the scale of the challenges is extremely important for developing an effective strategy of public diplomacy in this country. A realistic, comprehensive perception of threats is necessary not only for European diplomats but also for other actors in world politics who rely on public diplomacy in China as a foreign policy instrument. The authors admit that some of the challenges that the European Union faces in China may also be an obstacle for national states (the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia).

Considering the organisation of political power in China, it may seem (especially from a Western perspective) that the existing political regime in China causes challenges for the EU. However, the rather complex structure of the political and organisational structure of the EU should not be ignored either. It can influence the EU's foreign policy in different parts of the world. Given the above, it can be assumed that the EU's public diplomacy in China faces a set of challenges, among which the Chinese government's administrative barriers are not the only obstacles. This assumption is the working hypothesis of this study. The current study aims to find the most significant obstacles to the EU's public diplomacy that prevent Brussels from qualitatively improving relations with China.

Methodology. The methodological basis of the study is social constructivism, which considers the relationship between states as determined by ideational factors [42]. According to social constructivists, norms are of particular importance in international relations since they form the foreign policy of international relations actors [20; 22; 42, etc.]. Proponents of this approach are convinced that the subjects of world politics already have a certain value worldview before choosing a suitable scenario for their foreign policy actions [19].

The "Normative Power Europe" concept, proposed by one of the supporters of social constructivism, I. Manners, is of great importance for the current study. According to it, the European Union can constitute "normality" in the international environment through its "normative components" (liberty, democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, etc.) [28]. Promoting standards, values, and principles of the "European project," the EU seeks to strengthen its influence in various regions of the world [29]. As for public diplomacy, it is the main instrument for the diffusion of European norms in China [37].

The empirical basis of the study is the official EU documents defining its foreign policy behaviour. In addition, this research is based on expert reports and publications by recognised scholars that make it possible to understand the strategy and tactics of EU public diplomacy in China.

Analysis. The main actors and directions of EU public diplomacy in China. Before analysing the EU public diplomacy challenges in China, it is necessary to reveal the key political actors that are involved in public diplomacy practice in this country. In addition, it is important to identify the most significant public diplomacy areas used by European diplomats in Chinese territory.

The most important institution of the EU's public diplomacy is *the Delegation of the European Union to China*, which was opened in 1988 in Beijing. It coordinates the efforts of the EU member states in the field of public diplomacy, regularly organising joint events both with the diplomatic institutions of European countries and their cultural institutions. Such interaction is often very productive since it allows the participating parties to save significant financial resources, especially small countries with their limited budgets for public diplomacy. It is noteworthy that, despite the importance of cooperation with China for the European Union, its Delegation in Beijing does not have a special department dealing with public diplomacy, unlike the EU Delegation in Washington [44]. The staff of the Political Affairs, Press, and Information Section handle all issues related to the public.

Another important actor in Brussels' public diplomacy in China is *the EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC)*, which has been an official

partner of the European External Action Service (EEAS) since 2017. It consists of organisations engaged in cultural diplomacy. There are two EUNIC clusters in China (in Beijing and Hong Kong) that include both cultural organisations (for example, the Alliance Française, the Austrian Cultural Forum, the Goethe Institute, the Danish Cultural Institute, the Polish Institute, etc.) and diplomatic institutions of EU member states (the Consulate of the Czech Republic, the Embassies of Cyprus, Estonia, Sweden, Spain, etc.). The EUNIC regularly organises events in the field of cultural diplomacy aimed at promoting European cultural values among the Chinese public. For example, in 2022, the International Festival of Inclusive Culture (DAWA) was organised in Shanghai, designed to contribute to diversity and inclusivity through art.

The European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, established in 2000 to protect the economic interests of European companies, can also be considered an actor in EU public diplomacy. It strives to intensively interact with various groups of the Chinese public (government officials, lobbyists, scholars, businessmen, etc.) to create the most attractive conditions for European business in China. Currently, the organisation operates in nine Chinese cities: Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chengdu, Chongqing, and Tianjin, and unites over 1800 members, including such well-known companies as Bayer, Enel, IKEA, Louis Vuitton, etc.

In the West, the public diplomacy taxonomy proposed by the British historian N.J. Cull is often used to analyse public diplomacy [9]. According to this reputable scholar, there are five main areas of public diplomacy: cultural diplomacy (organisation of cultural events abroad); exchange programmes (educational and professional visits abroad); advocacy (PR campaigns); international broadcasting (activities of international TV and radio companies); and listening (public opinion surveys). This classification is also characteristic of digital diplomacy, a kind of public diplomacy that exists exclusively in the virtual space [10; 25].

The analysis of EU public diplomacy in China has shown that the most popular directions of interaction between European diplomats and Chinese audiences are cultural diplomacy, exchange programmes, and advocacy. In more

detail, the EUNIC focuses exclusively on the organisation of cultural events; the European Union Chamber of Commerce relies on media campaigns to promote the business interests of European companies in China; and the EU Delegation uses all three areas mentioned above. As for listening and international broadcasting, their role in EU public diplomacy in China is almost invisible.

It is noteworthy that Brussels pays great attention to the dissemination of information about its political institutions and foreign policy. There are two main reasons for this strategy. Firstly, the Chinese audience is not sufficiently aware of the political and economic structure of the EU and its foreign policy guidelines. Secondly, crises have shaken Europe over the past decade (uncontrolled immigration, economic turmoil, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) had a certain negative impact on EU's image in China [46].

To increase the recognition of the EU in China, Brussels has launched the project "EU Policy and Outreach Partnership in China," whose budget was 2 million euros in 2019. One of its key goals is to form an EU image among the Chinese public as a strong, cohesive actor focused on dialogue [17].

A significant role in the dissemination of information about European integration among Chinese students and faculty belongs to the Jeanne Monnet programme. It supports the establishment of EU study centres at university campuses, allocates research grants, assists in organising scientific events, etc. [12; 14]. The grantees of the programme are such well-known educational institutions in China as Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, Fudan University, Shanghai University, etc.

The EU cultural diplomacy in China includes various events through which Chinese citizens get the opportunity to learn more about the European cultural heritage (music, painting, architecture, etc.). One of them is the annual EU Film Festival, which opens up the cinematic art of the EU member states to the general public. Another well-known example of Brussels' cultural diplomacy in China is the celebration of Europe Day, an important date for Europeans, marking the beginning of European integration.

EU exchange programmes in China are represented by some projects aimed at improving

mutual understanding between European and Chinese society. First of all, it should be mentioned the world-famous academic exchange programmes “Erasmus+” that allow Chinese students and teachers to learn more about the EU educational system through scientific and educational visits [3; 11; 14].

Special attention should be also given to joint projects in the field of technical cooperation, playing a significant role in EU public diplomacy in China (EU North Asia Aviation Programme, projects in the field food safety regulation, programmes in the fields of environment, green economy, wildlife protection, etc.) [7;37]. This type of cooperation can be considered as exchange programmes since it is based on building a dialogue through solving common problems in the technical field.

The similar goal is pursued by European and Chinese “think tanks” that seek to discuss the most pressing issues of bilateral relations: the development of economic relations after the COVID-19 pandemic, the fight against climate change, respect for human rights, etc. Among those involved in EU science diplomacy in China are such European organisations as the Swedish Institute of International Relations, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, the Egmont Royal Institute of International Relations, the Mercator Institute of Chinese Studies, the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), etc.

The Chinese government’s restrictions as an obstacle to EU public diplomacy. By looking at the EU’s public diplomacy in China, it cannot be overlooked that the Chinese government seeks to limit any activity of foreign states aimed at exerting political influence on the Chinese public. The spread of Western political values (primarily the values of liberal democracy) seems to China’s political elites to be a threat to the existing regime [40], since it is based on several other ideological foundations. The EU is no exception, whose “normative power” can compete with the Chinese Communist Party’s ideology.

It is not surprising that the national government took some measures that complicated the activities of public diplomacy actors from foreign countries. A special law was specially prepared that regulated the activities of international non-governmental organisations;

popular Western social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) were banned; the activity of many international broadcasters (for example, the BBC) was suspended. The Chinese government’s restrictions had become a serious challenge for EU public diplomacy actors involved in EU public diplomacy, forcing them to adapt to new conditions.

First, it should be noted that academia often considers non-governmental organisations as the most important subject of public diplomacy since they usually demonstrate high level of public confidence (because of their autonomy from the state). The law on non-governmental organisations adopted in China in 2016 obliged foreign organisations to cooperate with national state organisations that were primarily interested in developing China’s cultural, scientific, and technical ties with their counterparties. As a result, Brussels’ ability to use non-governmental organisations to promote its political agenda was severely limited.

The ban on using Western social networks greatly complicated the work of European diplomats with Chinese youth, since the younger generation traditionally shows considerable interest in such platforms. Moreover, it is believed that Facebook is extremely effective in establishing trusting relationships with subscribers, and Twitter can serve as a valuable instrument for advocacy.

International broadcasting faces difficulties in China too. For many years, the news channel “Euronews” (partially subsidised by the European Commission) has been an important Brussels’ media tool. In China, the EU cannot use Euronews programmes for advocacy, which makes it impossible to broadcast political messages to a wide audience.

Undoubtedly, China’s restrictive policy towards the public diplomacy of foreign countries has become a serious obstacle to the dissemination of European values and norms among the Chinese audience. Nevertheless, the European Union is still finding ways to promote its influence in China. For a long time, European diplomats have used popular Chinese social networks Weibo (the Delegation of the European Union) and WeChat (the European Union Chamber of Commerce) as alternatives to Facebook and Twitter [4]. The activity on Weibo is the most successful example of EU digital diplomacy in China. By

February 2023, the EU Delegation to China had managed to gather 566,000 Chinese subscribers on its Weibo page [41]. At present, the current page is actively used by EU diplomats to promote European culture and the EU brand.

Ambivalence of the EU's foreign policy towards China and public diplomacy.

The document "EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council (March 21–22, 2019) is a vivid example of the ambivalence of EU foreign policy towards China. As mentioned earlier, in accordance with this document, the EU considers China both an important partner for economic interests and a systemic rival [16]. In the context of the development of EU-China relations, such formulations in the official document look frankly unfriendly towards Beijing. Speaking of rivalry, US foreign policy also periodically affects the political and economic interests of the European Union (it is enough to turn to Trump's presidency). Nevertheless, the American state is not considered by Brussels as a systemic rival. The reason is to be found in the values and norms shared by the EU, the USA, and China.

The EU's commitment to liberal democratic values prevents European elites from perceiving China as an ideologically close subject of international relations (unlike the United States). From the perspective of the majority of EU member states, China shows disregard for democratic values and norms in its domestic and foreign policies. Many of these values have a sacred character for Europeans. They are also reflected in some fundamental documents of the European Union [33]. It seems that EU political leaders perceive China as a kind of "violator of universal norms" that cannot be trusted because of its "otherness." This image of an "ideological rival" constructed by the EU political establishment seems to influence Brussels' foreign policy. As a result, the EU's foreign policy is becoming more intolerant and suspicious of the Chinese government. Such an attitude is extremely dangerous for the development of dialogue with China, since part of the Chinese public may see criticism of the national political regime by the European Union as criticism of Chinese society and its citizens.

The EU's "normative power" also reduces to a certain extent the possibility of effective use of public diplomacy by Brussels. The fact is that

the EU's ability to form "normality" in international relations implies that the EU has all the necessary grounds for this. Ian Manners considers a special Europe's historical experience and the legal nature of the European Union as a basis for "Normative Power Europe" [28]. The problem is that at a certain stage, this "normative leadership" of the EU turns into the conviction of Brussels in its "exceptionalism" [6; 30; 34]. A similar situation is observed in China, where the EU seeks to play the role of a "mentor," explaining to a "mentee" (China) the importance of following the rules established by the West [37]. It is obvious that China, with its rich thousand-year history and current large-scale influence in the modern system of international relations, requires a more respectful (equal) attitude. The lack of understanding of this fact by European elites complicates the EU's public diplomacy in China.

Flaws of the EU public diplomacy system as a challenge.

An analysis of the literature on EU public diplomacy demonstrates that the EU public diplomacy system suffers from a set of significant shortcomings that negatively affect the promotion of the EU's influence in China. One of them is the financial and personnel deficit that has existed in Brussels for many years [1; 13]. The lack of necessary resources often hinders the development of new forms of public diplomacy (for example, digital diplomacy), forcing Europeans to continue to rely on traditional approaches in the field. It is not surprising that today the EU digital diplomacy is not always able to effectively solve foreign policy tasks [36]. It is still in dire need of diplomats with the necessary competencies as well as hired public relations specialists capable of generating new ideas [2].

Some authors note that EU diplomats in many countries around the world do not demonstrate the ability to set up communication with foreign followers on social networking sites, despite the existing belief in the expert community that establishing a dialogue with the audience is a necessary condition for effective digital diplomacy [8; 26; 27]. A similar statement is true for EU public diplomacy in China. The EU delegation staff also avoids direct interaction with the Chinese public on the social network "Weibo," especially when communication concerns acute and controversial topics of bilateral relations. Such a strategy hinders the emotional rapprochement of

European diplomats and the Chinese audience by fostering an internal conflict of values between the two sides [36].

The conservatism of EU public diplomacy is also clearly manifested in the unwillingness to expand the social media arsenal used in China, although new social media platforms could help to increase audience reach. In addition, Chinese social networking sites like Douban and Tiktok could open up significant opportunities for communication with a youth audience. However, EU diplomats are in no hurry to try new social network sites, focusing on the means of communication they are familiar with (Weibo and WeChat).

Another important problem with EU public diplomacy is the lack of a coherent system of public diplomacy evaluation [2]. Brussels still does not have high-quality methods to assess the effectiveness of programmes implemented abroad. From our point of view, the efforts of European diplomats to assess the effectiveness of the implemented measures based on counting the total number of participants are erroneous. Methods are needed that would clearly show how the planned programmes contribute to the achievement of specific EU foreign policy goals, including in China [2].

Results. The study shows that EU public diplomacy in China faces a number of different obstacles. A significant part of them is caused by the commitment of the European Union to certain values and norms. In other words, the EU's "normative power" creates a set of problems for its public diplomacy in China. It is perceived as a threat by China's political regime. In response, the Chinese government is trying to limit the spread of "alien" norms among the Chinese population through administrative barriers.

In addition, the commitment of the EU political elites to liberal democracy values and the encouragement to disseminate them in China from a position of "normative" authority complicate the establishment of trusting relations between European diplomats and the Chinese public. Brussels also sees "other" in Beijing, based on the fact that some of their values and norms do not coincide.

The imperfection of the EU public diplomacy system also negatively affects diplomatic activities in China. The financial difficulties do not allow EU public diplomats to hire the necessary experts

in the field of media and PR; personnel shortages limit the scope of activities; and the lack of a reliable system of public diplomacy evaluation prevents an objective assessment of the outcomes of diplomatic work. As a result, the EU's public diplomacy in China looks rather old-fashioned, relying on such traditional instruments of public diplomacy as cultural diplomacy and exchanges in their most primitive form (organisation of fine art exhibitions, film festivals, music events, etc.). Unfortunately, EU public diplomats in China tend not to generate new ideas as much as their American colleagues do through innovative public diplomacy areas (hip-hop diplomacy, skateboard diplomacy, virtual exchanges).

From the authors' point of view, the European External Action Service needs to modernise the existing system of public diplomacy and also take into account the specifics of the countries where it is planned to use certain public diplomacy programmes. In countries where socially significant values and norms differ markedly from the European version (China, Russia, Turkey, etc.), the EU's "normative power" will continue to face significant opposition from the local public and political elites that can adversely affect bilateral relations. Brussels needs to rethink its place in world politics, recognising that at present its ability to use "normative power" at the global level has its limitations. Such a vision would undoubtedly have a beneficial effect on EU public diplomacy, which could become less ambitious and more in line with existing socio-political conditions.

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