

ANALYSIS

From the Fringes to the Forefront: How Extreme Parties in the European Parliament Can Shape EU-China Relations

Kara Němečková, Ivana Karásková



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Analysis
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List of abbreviations

AfD	Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland)
AKEL	Progressive Party of Working People (Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζομένου Λαού)
APPF	Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations
BE	Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda)
BfV	Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz)
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BSW	Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance–Reason and Justice (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht–Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit)
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CRI	China Radio International
DP	Homeland Movement (Domovinski pokret)
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EEAS	European External Action Service
EH Bildu	Euskal Herria Bildu (Basque Country Unite)
EKRE	Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond)
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs)
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission
ID	Identity and Democracy
IDCPC	International Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party
KSČM	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy)
LPV	Latvia First (Latvija pirmajā vietā)
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament
MES	Market Economy Status
MP	Member of Parliament

NI	Non-Inscrits
PCF	French Communist Party (Parti communiste français)
PiS	Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)
PVDA	Workers' Party of Belgium (Partij van de Arbeid van België)
PvD	Party for the Animals (Partij voor de Dieren)
PVV	Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid)
RN	National Rally (Rassemblement National)
S&D	Socialists & Democrats
SPD	Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie)
SRTA	Silk Road Think Tank Association
SWP	German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik)
UAE	United Arab Emirates
US	United States of America

Executive summary

- European societies are facing significant challenges due to geopolitical tensions and foreign interference in domestic politics, including election manipulation and disinformation campaigns.
- China, though newer to electoral interference in Europe compared to Russia, is increasingly sophisticated and active in its attempts to influence European elections and decision-making through various means, including political influence, information manipulation, bribery and espionage.
- China often engages with individual European Union (EU) member states; however, it recognises that significant policy initiatives and legislation originate within EU institutions, especially the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP).
- The EP, which will approve the European Commission formed after the June 2024 elections and participate in the legislative process that may enhance or dilute EU policy tools regarding China, is of special importance.
- Yet it is particularly the EP which seems susceptible to security risks, as illustrated on scandals such as Quatargate, alleged payments from Russia to European politicians processed by an outlet called Voice of Europe, and the recent arrest in Germany of an aide to MEP Maximilian Krah for espionage.
- Although the controversies have drawn attention to these issues, the outgoing EP may not implement new measures. This challenge remains for the next European Parliament and Commission. The June elections could create a different political setting, potentially unprepared to address foreign interference or criticise China.
- This study highlights China's strategies to influence European politics and examines the roles of far right- and left-wing parties in the European Parliament, particularly with regard to China-related votes. Both the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) and Left groups within the EP are expected to gain seats. The ID group may even become the third largest faction.
- Additionally, the study examines the public stances on China held by leading candidates from national far-right and far-left parties, who are expected to play significant roles in the next European Parliament. By analysing their publicly available comments about China, the research identifies areas of alignment or discord with China's positions. This analysis provides insights

into how these candidates might vote on China-related motions if elected, offering a preview of potential dynamics within the next European Parliament regarding China.

- The analysis of voting behaviours from 2019 to March 2024 within the European Parliament's Identity and Democracy (ID) and Left groups reveals a consistent pattern of opposition to resolutions addressing foreign interference and EU-China relations, demonstrating a shared scepticism towards mainstream EU stances on China.
- The motivations behind these voting patterns vary among national parties within each group, reflecting deep divisions and diverse perspectives that influence EU parliamentary decisions on foreign policy and international relations.
- Far-right parties within the ID group, despite shared characteristics like euroscepticism and nationalism, exhibit varied opinions on economic policies and security measures, influencing decentralised voting behaviours on China-related issues.
- The Left group also shows significant internal fragmentation and diverse stances on China, making it challenging to discern a coherent political line, with individual parliamentarians' perspectives heavily influencing voting behaviours.
- The anticipated gains for both far-right and far-left wings in the European Parliament are likely to favour more China-friendly votes, potentially softening rhetoric and reducing support for more assertive stances against China.

Introduction

This study assesses the current European Parliament's (EP) position on China and discusses how predicted gains in seats by far right- and left-wing political parties may influence any new EP stance on China. It starts by briefly discussing the methods that China uses to approach European politicians, building on the groundwork laid by the authors in a study commissioned by the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (APPF) and published in November 2023.¹ These methods range from financial support for sympathetic candidates or parties, digital influence campaigns to prevent China-critical politicians from gaining prominence and even to cyberattacks. Publicising these tactics helps in our understanding of how China might attempt to shape policy decisions within the EU that are favourable to its geopolitical and economic interests.

The second part of the study analyses voting patterns related to China-focused votes during the outgoing 2019-2024 term of the European Parliament. By examining the voting of current MEPs from the Identity and Democracy (ID) and the Left groups – both of which are expected to gain seats – insights can be gleaned into their perspectives on China.

Additionally, the study reviews the public stances on China held by leading candidates from national far-right or far-left parties, who are poised to play a significant role in the next European Parliament. By scrutinising publicly available comments which these candidates have made about China, the research aims to identify any alignment or discord with China's positions. This part of the study provides a deeper understanding of the parties' views on China, offering a preview of how they might vote on China-related resolutions if elected. While these public comments do not definitively predict future voting behaviour, they offer valuable insights into the potential dynamics within the European Parliament concerning China.

China's objectives and instruments in the European Parliament elections

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has encountered significant difficulties in its relationship with China, necessitating a comprehensive recalibration of its policy frameworks. This shift reflects the EU's efforts to address emerging economic, political, and security challenges, spurred by China's prioritisation of its companies, the promotion of values at odds with the EU, and a pro-Russian stance following Moscow's aggression in Ukraine. This dynamic has significantly influenced the EU's China agenda, taking into account China's global ambitions.

The EU's gradual recalibration has led to the introduction of several legislative measures, some directly triggered by China's actions, while others, though not explicitly naming China, have profound implications for the EU-China relationship. Notable among these are the Critical Raw Materials Act and the EU investment screening framework, designed to manage dependencies on Chinese imports and protect sensitive sectors from undue Chinese investment. Furthermore, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) illustrates Europe's dedication to maintaining environmental standards without compromising competitiveness. Additionally, the agreement banning products made with forced labour, a response to China's treatment of its Uyghur population in Xinjiang, underscores Europe's commitment to addressing human rights violations.

All these efforts were put under the umbrella of 'de-risking', announced in March 2023 by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.² This statement signifies an ever more visible shift in the EU's approach, stressing not only the bloc's growing regulatory assertiveness vis-à-vis China but also highlighting a noticeable change in the internal perception of and interaction with China.

As economic concerns and security implications increasingly overlap, a blurring of the boundaries between national sovereignty and EU-level decision-making has become more visible.³ While foreign and security policy primarily falls under the jurisdiction of individual member states, granting the Council a predominant role, other key actors are also involved. The EU foreign and security policy is conducted by the European External Action Service (EEAS), which manages the EU's diplomatic relations with other countries outside the bloc. On issues relating to the common foreign and security policy, the EU is represented by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP). The European Parliament also plays a significant role as it will approve the European Commission that will emerge from the June elections. As a key participant in the legislative process, the EP has the ability to either enhance or dilute the EU's array of policy tools concerning China. Consequently, fully grasping the EU's stance on

China now entails not only an understanding of individual member states' perspectives but also a focused examination of the roles played by other actors—chiefly, the European Commission which drafts and the European Parliament which approves China-related legislation.

China has been aware of the significant role the EU institutions play in shaping the bloc's policy towards it.⁴ Thus it has become increasingly important for China to engage with and potentially influence legislators at not only the national but also the European levels. This strategic interaction seems inevitable as China seeks to navigate EU policies to create a favourable environment for its rise as a global power.

China's strategic objectives focus on bolstering its global standing through economic growth, political influence, and technological advancements, while simultaneously protecting its vital interests. These interests, consistently emphasised by various Chinese leaders, are centred on maintaining the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and promoting the stable development of China's economy and society. The prioritisation of the CCP's interests as central to national interests is a constant and unchanging element.⁵ China's so-called 'core interests', which Beijing perceives as non-negotiable, include long-lasting priorities concerning Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and regional stability in Xinjiang and Tibet, in addition to the South China Sea, which has become a pivotal area of interest following Xi Jinping's ascent to the position of General Secretary of the CCP in late 2012.⁶

What does it mean for Europe? Economically, China needs access to the European market⁷ to stimulate its economic growth. Sustaining market access is not only crucial for selling goods but also for gaining access to European technologies, which are vital for China's technological advancement.⁸ Geo-strategically, as China deals with its increasingly tense relations with the United States amidst a backdrop of intensifying great power rivalry, Europe's role becomes even more critical. In China's view, if Europe was to reduce its perceived dependence on the United States, it could potentially align more closely with Chinese geopolitical interests.⁹

Building on the significance of Europe in both economic and geo-strategic terms for China, party-to-party diplomacy emerges as a crucial mechanism for the Chinese Communist Party. Through such diplomatic efforts, the CCP aims to establish and sustain connections with European political entities.¹⁰ According to a comprehensive longitudinal study by MapInfluCE,¹¹ which scrutinises the development of relationships between the CCP and various political parties in Central and Eastern Europe, it is clear that the CCP initially engages with natural allies, typically local communist parties, upon entering a new region. It then prioritises outreach to the parties in the government. Gradually, the outreach extends to other parties, including those in the opposition which are likely to secure parliamentary representation in forthcoming electoral cycles. China has tried to approach many left-leaning parties, followed by centrist and eventually right-of-centre parties, in order to encompass the entire political spectrum deemed relevant.

Engagement activities routinely include reciprocal delegation visits, individual meetings with politicians, outreach to 'friendship groups' within national and European parliaments and thematically focused dialogues. The coordination of most of these activities is undertaken by the International Department of the Central

Committee of the CCP (IDCPC),¹² a body under the party's Central Committee, in charge of establishing and maintaining relations with foreign political parties. The objectives of the IDCPC include promoting core foreign policy interests (such as the international isolation of Taiwan, fending off international criticism concerning Tibet and Xinjiang, and promoting territorial claims in the South China Sea), legitimising the CCP's rule domestically as well as internationally, and fostering a positive image of China.¹³ The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC)¹⁴ may also be involved.

A primary motivation for this diplomatic effort on the Chinese side is to garner foreign endorsement of the CCP and its policies, which may manifest as congratulatory communications on significant occasions. In the short term, China aims to secure overt expressions of support for its policies to showcase extensive global backing. This objective explains why summaries of meetings and events released by China often include endorsements from foreign figures, strategically timed to coincide with major Chinese political events, such as the CCP congress or an anniversary of the CCP. The more enduring goal is to cultivate a network of influential voices who can seamlessly integrate their support for China and its objectives into European discourse.¹⁵

Of course, engaging in dialogue with foreign counterparts is a part of the work of parliamentarians and an integral component of the democratic process. It is also important to stress that European politicians follow their own agenda in their dealings with China. Their viewpoints and actions related to China often reflect the ideological foundations of their political stances and may primarily represent the perspectives and strategic interests of an individual or a political party. Additionally, these actions and positions may be strategically aimed at appealing to their voter base and could play a significant role in domestic political contests.¹⁶

Fostering party-to-party relations and maintaining official communications, including through various 'friendship groups' within the national parliaments, represent a legitimate means of interaction. However, more contentious methods have also emerged.

China has already demonstrated its capability and resolve to meddle in electoral processes across different global contexts.¹⁷ One such covert tactic involves offering financial incentives to political parties or individuals who might be in a position to influence policy in China's favour. For instance, there have been reported cases where Chinese entities have provided substantial funding to political campaigns or party functions, aiming to secure favourable policy decisions once these parties or individuals gain power.

In 2019, Australia faced an alleged attempt to infiltrate its parliament when a Liberal party member, Nick Zhao, was reportedly offered AUD 1 million by Chinese operatives to run as a candidate for a parliamentary seat in Melbourne.¹⁸ Zhao was later found dead in a hotel room before he could testify about the offer in court.¹⁹ Similarly, in Canada, intelligence reports have suggested that Chinese diplomats and intermediaries attempted to manipulate election results.²⁰ The Chinese consulate in Toronto secretly offered funding to 11 candidates in the 2019 federal election, placing agents in MPs' offices, co-opting former Canadian officials, and launching campaigns against politicians seen as threats by China.²¹

Additionally, offering incentives to voters can influence public opinion and electoral behaviour. China has engaged its overseas communities to back certain candidates via comprehensive campaigns both online and offline. It has even tried to directly sway election results through vote buying, showcasing a sophisticated strategy of utilising its diaspora to shape international political environments in line with its strategic goals. To connect with the diaspora, China frequently employs social media platforms like WeChat, which are especially popular among individuals of Chinese descent who depend on them for news and communication.²² These platforms also serve as valuable tools for Chinese political actors to mobilise donors and volunteers, and they provide a means to intimidate detractors.²³

Indeed, China does not shy away from applying pressure or even coercing those who voice criticism of its policies. This is evident in various instances where economic or diplomatic pressure has been used to marginalise or silence critical voices within European countries, effectively attempting to control the narrative and stifle such voices. A notable example is the intimidation²⁴ and subsequent disinformation campaign against Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil following his 2020 visit to Taiwan. A Swiss organisation that cooperates with the China News Service approached a Czech media outlet with the claim that Vystrčil had received a clandestine payment of USD 4 million for his visit to Taiwan to be used for a future presidential campaign.²⁵

A more recent case, in and around 2021, revolved around the hacking of email accounts of all European Union members of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), and 43 United Kingdom parliamentarians, by the Chinese APT31 hacking group in order to stop these MPs from criticising China.²⁶

China's endeavours to directly intimidate and coerce have already attracted attention and provoked various countermeasures, such as the freeze of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) from the European side in reaction to China's sanctioning of MEPs in March 2021.²⁷ Seven Chinese hackers, who were involved in compromising IPAC members' computers, were charged with intrusion by the United States in March 2024.²⁸

Furthermore, China actively establishes platforms that promote narratives aligning with its interests and engages in sophisticated propaganda and disinformation campaigns designed to shape European public opinion to support its geopolitical goals. These campaigns are often multifaceted, utilising a mix of traditional media outlets and social media platforms to disseminate pro-Chinese viewpoints.

China-affiliated actors use media and social media campaigns to primarily "present China's authoritarian regime as benign, to promote China as a model for governance and information management in developing countries, (...) to encourage openness to Chinese financing and investment, (...) suppress criticism of the country's domestic policies and the activities of China-linked entities abroad, and to win foreign policymakers' vocal support for the regime's positions."²⁹

China has a history of providing platforms to European politicians, especially those on the far-right or far-left, which are aimed at European audiences. For example, a Czech case study of China Radio International (CRI), which broadcasts in several European languages, demonstrated that CRI promotes anti-establishment political figures by republishing their articles. In return, fringe political parties and groups,

ranging from the extreme left to the conservative right, frequently share and redistribute Chinese content.³⁰

Last but not least, China's (cyber-enabled) electoral interventions have already encompassed no fewer than 10 elections in seven distinct countries, primarily concentrated within the Asia-Pacific region.³¹ These interventions included hacking into voter registration databases, hacking into the servers of parliaments, or launching spear phishing attacks against political candidates or political campaigns to gather intelligence. China has a documented record for its cyber operations in Europe, particularly its targeting of the European diplomatic corps. European institutions have also been victims of cyberattacks executed by hacking groups backed by China.³²

Extreme political parties gain seats

Awareness of foreign interference activities targeting the European Parliament and its members has heightened in recent times, fueled by scandals such as Quatargate, alleged payments from Russia to European politicians processed by an outlet called Voice of Europe, and the recent arrest in Germany of an aide to MEP Maximilian Krah for espionage.³³ However, despite this increased awareness, effectively addressing interference remains a daunting challenge that the next European Parliament and Commission must confront. The outcome of the June European Parliament elections could reshape the political landscape, potentially leading to a shift in attitudes toward China and a reluctance to confront the challenges posed by foreign interference in democratic processes.

Therefore, this study is particularly timely as it not only familiarises the reader with China's objectives and tactics in attempting to influence European politics but also examines the current and potential future roles of extreme right- and left-wing parties in the European Parliament, particularly with regard to China-related votes. It explores the positions on China of the Identity and Democracy (ID) and Left groups, both of which are anticipated to increase their representation.

A note of prudence is, however, warranted. While the views and prospective electoral gains of these groups are scrutinised, it is crucial to clarify that they are evaluated independently of any direct associations with China's strategies in the region. This clear distinction is essential for assessing the broader political dynamics and potential vulnerabilities within the EU without implying direct connections between these parties and undue Chinese influence.

The current composition of the European Parliament consists of seven political groups, plus non-inscrit members.³⁴ The three largest groups—European People's Party (EPP), Socialists & Democrats (S&D), and Renew Europe—often form coalitions, sometimes including the Greens, to create a governing bloc. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group represents the fifth strongest fraction and includes conservative, right and far-right parties. Some of the far-right parties already participate in governing coalitions in the EU member states, such as Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) or Perussuomalaiset (the Finns Party). In February 2024, ECR was joined by the Reconquête party of controversial far-right French politician Éric Zemmour.³⁵ Also Hungary's Fidesz party, which left EPP, may join ECR after the elections, as it has already been extended invitations.³⁶

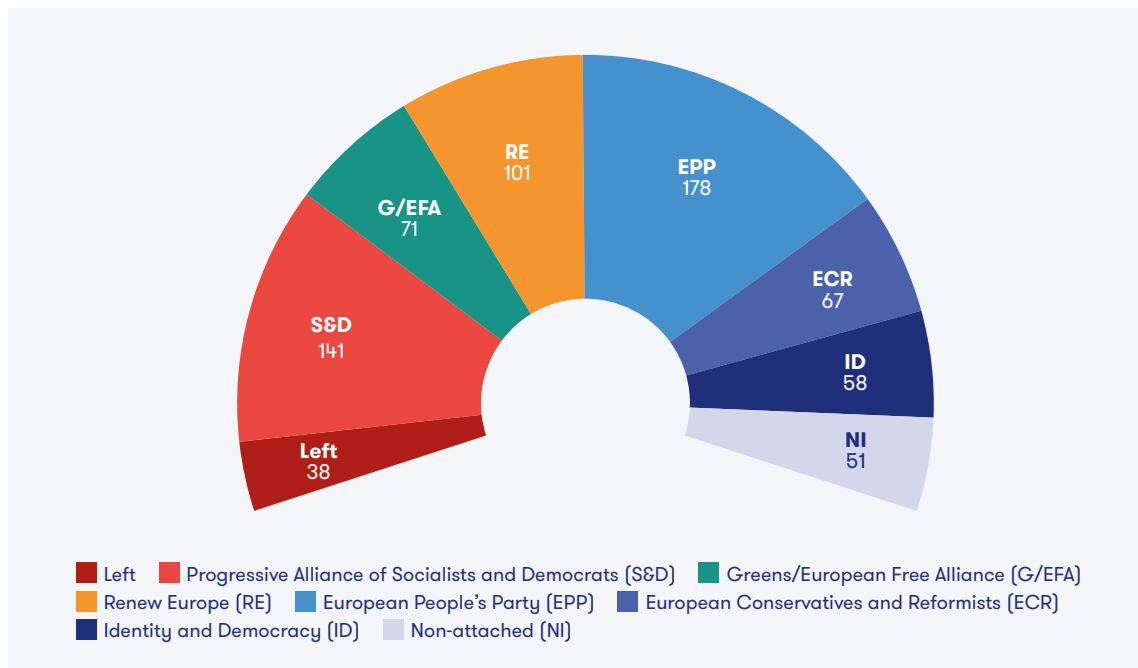
Identity and Democracy (ID), the sixth strongest group, is known for its far-right, extremist, and populist parties like Austria's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The group is described by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) report as an 'alliance of convenience', frequently divided on foreign and security issues.³⁷ The future influence of far-right groups in the European Parliament depends not only on the number of seats they gain but also on the national contexts of the elected MEPs, which can temper their

stances depending on whether their party is in government at home (such as in the case of Lega, which is described in detail below).

Looking ahead to the June 2024 elections, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) forecasts³⁸ significant shifts: the Left is expected to grow from 38 to 44 seats, potentially reaching 57 if Italy’s Five Star Movement joins them instead of the Greens. ID is projected to increase from 59 to 98 seats. Conversely, the Greens, EPP, and S&D are expected to lose seats, while ECR could grow from 68 to 85 seats. This potential increase could make ECR the third largest group, especially if Fidesz joins them, enhancing their position but possibly diluting their stance on Russia and strengthening anti-Western sentiments, which some ECR members harbour.

The NI (Non-Inscrits) currently includes a few right-wing parties like Fidesz. The dynamics within this group could shift dramatically depending on election outcomes and party alignments.

FIGURE 1: THE DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE CURRENT EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (2019–2024)

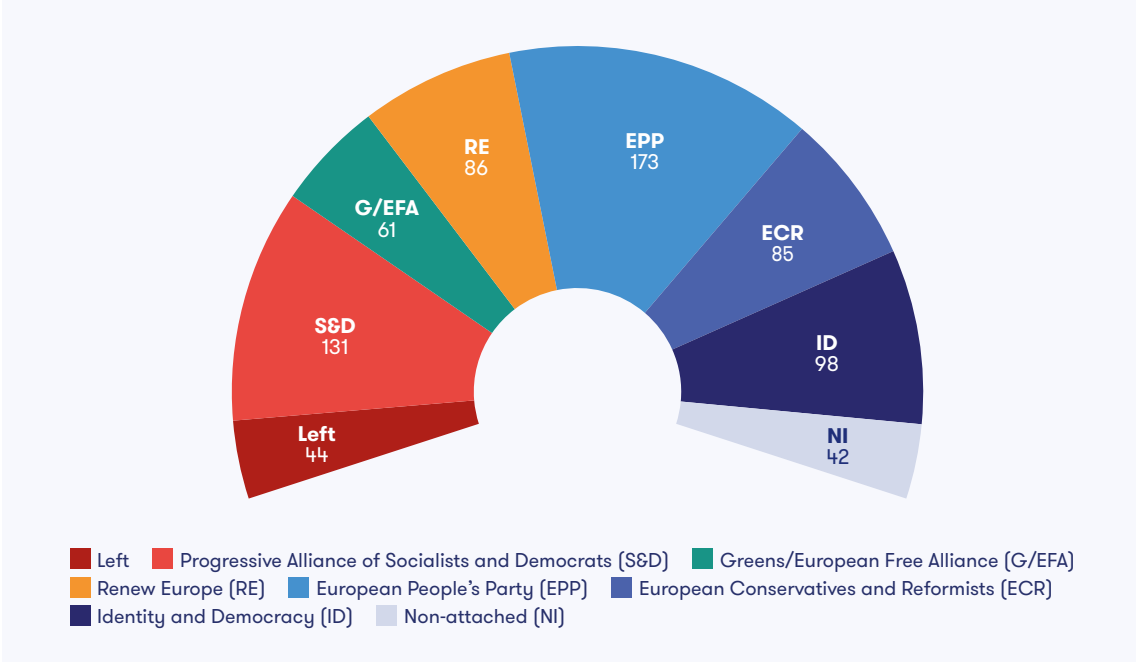


Source: Official website of the European Parliament.

With 361 votes needed for a majority in the next Parliament, the size of each political group determines its influence. The rise of both far-right and far-left parties could alter the legislative landscape, including the EU’s stance on China. It might lead to a tougher political tone or changes in existing and new initiatives, resulting in even more polarised debates within the European Parliament.

Moreover, the European Parliament elections may serve as an indicator that the extreme political parties may gain more public support in general elections (such as in the Netherlands), mobilising on issues such as perceived identity crisis, economic performance, costs of green policies and immigration. The rise of the far-right in

FIGURE 2: THE PREDICTION OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (AFTER JUNE 2024 ELECTIONS)



Source: Kevin Cunningham, Susi Dennison, Simon Hix, Imogen Learmonth, *A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections* (European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 2024), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-sharp-right-turn-a-forecast-for-the-2024-european-parliament-elections/>.

particular and the decline of centrist parties, potential partners to form a governing coalition with, may lead to an erosion of the ‘cordon sanitaire’, a refusal by mainstream parties to cooperate with radical or extremist political formations.³⁹ In the case of significant gains by the far-right in both European and general elections, a potent twin track approach of simultaneously voting in the European Council and European Parliament can be expected. Furthermore, a new European Parliament, which is to approve the European Commission President, may prefer a less China-sceptic position on China. This could lead to a reassessment of the priorities of the new Commission regarding China, although such outcomes remain highly speculative at this stage.

For both practical and analytical reasons, this study specifically focuses on the members of the European Parliament from the far-right (ID) and far-left (The Left) groups, which are expected to gain seats. While the outcome of the EP elections remains uncertain at the time of writing, potential scenarios vary.⁴⁰ These range from maintaining the status quo, where centrist parties continue to rule albeit with a smaller margin, and the European Commission persists with its de-risking agenda, to more radical scenarios where far-right parties gain substantially, while the far-left increases slightly the number of its seats. For the first time, the choices of these two groups could help shift the balance on China-related issues. Such a shift would mean the European Parliament becomes less critical of human rights abuses worldwide, including those in China. It may also complicate the legislative processes, as siding with other groups which may prefer to water down the de-risking agenda, may stall formulation of the EU’s policy toolbox towards China.

Methodology for assessing the ID and Left MEPs' stances on China

The following part analyses the patterns on China-related votes of the Identity and Democracy group (bringing together far-right political parties) and The Left (composed of far-left political parties). A note on methodology is relevant, as gathering the data and interpreting them presented several challenges. The timeframe for the analysis spans from 2019 till the finalisation of the study on 30 March 2024, thus omitting the last days of the current European Parliament.

It aims to identify similarities and differences in voting behaviours between and among these ideologically opposed groups, specifically in relation to China-centric proposals. Data collection involved compiling the votes of MEPs from the two groups from the official records of the European Parliament. Each vote was recorded as in favour, against, or abstained.

The methodology for selecting votes involved several key steps. Initially, all texts that explicitly referenced China were considered. To be included in the study, the voted text had to have China at its core. Texts that mentioned China in a neutral context without a clear stance towards China, such as the EU-China agreement on civil aviation safety, were excluded. Additionally, for texts that included critical sections about China but did not solely focus on China, the authors reviewed plenary session debates to ascertain whether the critical nature of the discourse on China could have decisively influenced MEPs in their voting decisions. Furthermore, the authors included votes on texts that, while not explicitly mentioning China, were conceived with China in mind and were clearly targeted at issues that are directly relevant to China. This comprehensive approach enabled the authors to capture a broad spectrum of the MEPs' stances on various China-related matters beyond the issue of human rights violations.

It is important to note that the intensity of the critical language found in the analysed texts varied, making it challenging to attribute MEPs' votes solely to the 'China factor'. Therefore, the data should be interpreted in conjunction with the MEPs' statements during plenary debates and considering the specific themes of the resolutions and reports. The compiled data is meant to provide insights into European extreme right and left wing parties' positions on specific issues rather than serving as an absolute measure or index of their critical posture towards China.

In total, 21 China-related votes were included in the dataset. These are listed in Annex I. For a more nuanced analysis, they were categorised into five thematic clusters: China's human rights violations in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet (9); China's interference and influence within the EU (4); EU policy towards China (3); Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific (3); and economic issues (2).

The authors initially evaluated the similarities and differences between the two groups regarding their stances on China. They then examined the positions on China

as articulated by MEPs from various political parties which are members of the ID and Left groups, attempting to determine whether these parties vote en bloc on such issues or whether the votes reflect individual MEPs' positions. Subsequently, the authors utilised the ECFR forecast published in February 2024⁴¹ to assess whether the perspectives held by far-right and far-left parties on China might gain greater prominence in the new European Parliament.

Forecasts, however, may not fully or accurately predict future events. National polls can be equally unreliable, especially since voter turnout fluctuates significantly within the European Union and for European Parliament elections is typically lower than for general elections.⁴² In general, countries like Belgium and Luxembourg, where voting is compulsory, consistently show higher turnout rates. On the other hand, Eastern European countries, such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic, often record lower interest in European elections,⁴³ which can be attributed to various factors including political disengagement and weaker European identity compared to older EU members.

Moreover, voter turnout tends to be influenced by several factors including political affiliations, attitudes towards the EU, and the perceived importance of the European Parliament. Those with a stronger attachment to the EU and who view the membership positively are more likely to participate in these elections. Making precise predictions about election results is challenging and thus should be approached with caution. Additional difficulties arise in predicting outcomes for parties projected to gain zero, or only one or two seats. For parties expected to gain more seats, trends can be observed, even if the exact number of seats remains uncertain. Last but not least, after the European Parliament elections, parties may decide to change groups. This could occur not only with defections from the ID to the ECR group but also from ECR to EPP.⁴⁴

Subsequently, the researchers examined public remarks about China made by current ID and Left MEPs, as well as their publicly acknowledged connections to Chinese embassies, organisations, and institutions to deduce their stances on China affairs. This scrutiny was also extended to prospective candidates for the June 2024 elections, with a particular focus on those with the highest likelihood of winning seats, as predicted by the ECFR forecast regarding seat gains. However, in several instances, the candidate lists for the elections were not available by the conclusion of the research. The remarks made by MEPs and candidates were obtained in their original languages and translated into English using online tools.

Different beds, same dreams: convergences and divergences between the ID and the Left on China

Despite the ideological differences of the ID and Left groups, there are some discernible trends on specific issues in which they tend to exhibit similar voting patterns. This includes opposition towards resolutions tackling foreign interference or the recommendation on EU relations with China. Deep divisions within each group, however, prevent the drawing of overarching conclusions. Instead, it proves more insightful to examine the diverse stances represented by the different national political parties and identify groupings that position themselves similarly on various issues across the two groups.

MEPs from both the ID and Left groups have consistently opposed resolutions addressing foreign attempts to influence EU decision-making. A notable instance occurred in 2019 when a resolution highlighting the risk of foreign electoral interference was overwhelmingly rejected by 94 per cent of MEPs from these groups. This outcome was to be expected since the resolution accused “anti-EU, right-wing extremists and populist candidates” of benefiting from these interferences and specifically named parties such as Italy’s Lega and Austria’s FPÖ. In oral explanations of their votes, representatives from both groups, namely Mick Wallace from Ireland’s extreme left-wing party Independents4Change, and Thierry Mariani from the French Rassemblement National (RN), disputed the allegations. They argued that there was no evidence to support these claims and criticised the resolution for targeting only a select few countries, including China.⁴⁵

MEPs from both the ID and Left groups generally hold views on China and Taiwan that diverge from mainstream EU positions. The MEPs predominantly opposed votes on EU-China relations and on the new EU-China strategy. Regarding the votes on the situation in the Taiwan Strait and on EU-Taiwan political relations and cooperation, the majority opted to abstain.

The recommendation to the Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on EU-China Relations, which advocates for a new approach to China, emphasising European open strategic autonomy, reciprocity, and cooperation with like-minded partners, calling for opposition to China’s human rights violations and suggesting de-risking from China, was opposed by 44 per cent of the MEPs from the ID and Left groups, while 24 per cent abstained.

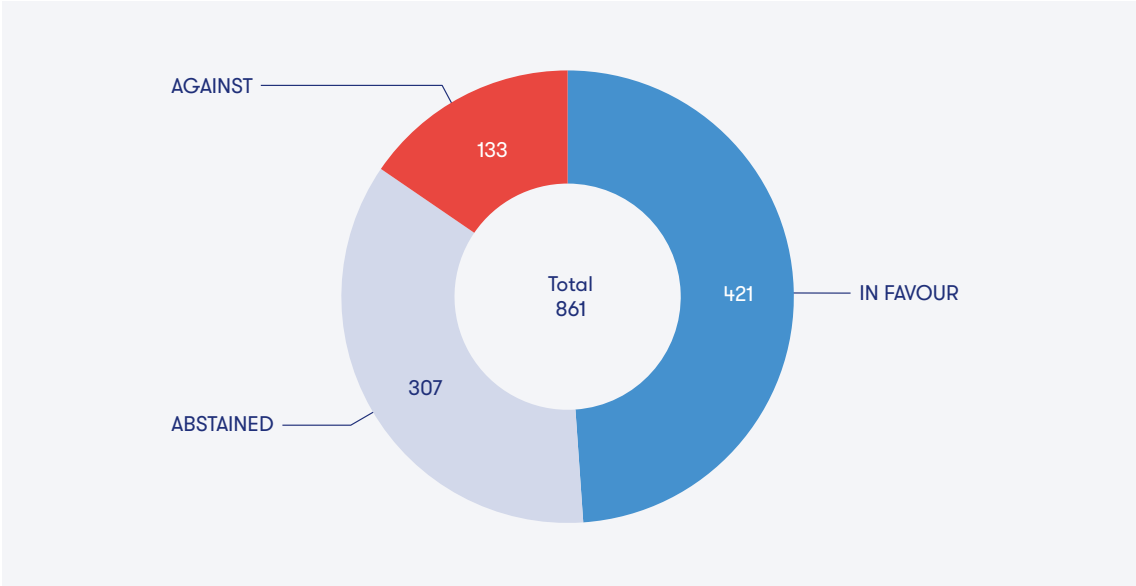
Political parties that voted against, likely rejected these proposals for different reasons. For instance, Maximilian Krah from the German AfD spoke against economic decoupling and sanctions on China, arguing that these measures harm Euro-

pean interests.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Manu Pineda from the Spanish United Left criticised the EU's current stance on China and advocated for deeper engagement with China, which he viewed as less of a threat to peace and international law than the US.⁴⁷

MEPs from Lega were among the minority that welcomed the proposal. Isabella Tovaglieri, an MEP from Lega, which is known for its China-sceptical stance, said during the debates that “China is a danger for Europe.” Evoking the Italian government’s decision to leave the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), she urged Europe to take the same approach in its dealings with China, which she considered an unreliable partner.⁴⁸

A consensus between the ID and Left groups on issues affecting the EU's economic and strategic interests vis-à-vis China can be observed. MEPs from both groups broadly supported a resolution that recognizes Chinese offshore fishing as a threat as well as a regulation aimed at shielding the EU and its member states from economic coercion by third countries. Additionally, the resolution on the security and defence implications of China's role in critical EU infrastructure garnered significant support, although this was entirely driven by votes from the ID group which has more MEPs than the Left.

FIGURE 3: VOTING OF THE ID AND LEFT MEPS ON HUMAN RIGHTS RESOLUTIONS (2019–2024)*



**The research was concluded on 30 March 2024.*

On the other hand, the current MEPs from the ID and Left groups are deeply divided over China’s human rights violations, particularly concerning Hong Kong and Tibet, with a slightly greater consensus on votes pertaining to Xinjiang. In defence of their positions, members of the Left often engage in ‘whataboutism’, pointing to what they perceive as the West’s own shortcomings to argue that the EU lacks the moral authority to criticise China. Some contend that the EU has weaponized human rights as a geopolitical tool and oppose using sanctions to address human rights abuses.

Meanwhile, some members of the ID who have opposed these resolutions believe that they fail to make an impact⁴⁹ and some generally believe that the EU should not prioritise improving human rights abroad, but rather focus on defending European interests. For instance, during a plenary debate on Hong Kong, Jordan Bardella, the leader of the Rassemblement National in the upcoming European Parliament elections, expressed that instead of focusing on China's actions in Hong Kong, the EU should be more concerned with China's activities in Europe and their potential threat to European interests.⁵⁰

The ID group on China: a gain for hardcore supporters and a loss for diehard opponents

After the June 2024 EP elections, right-leaning parties are anticipated to increase their seat counts, mirroring wider trends seen in national elections throughout Europe. In countries such as Italy, Sweden, Finland, or the Netherlands, there has been a notable rise in voter support for conservative and far-right parties. It is thus important to look closer at voting patterns within the factions which are likely to gain seats, especially on the far-right and far-left end of the spectrum. The ID is predicted to gain 40 seats, making the grouping the third largest with 98 lawmakers.

Far-right parties in the ID group, despite sharing certain similarities like euro-scepticism, nationalism, populism and anti-immigration positions,⁵¹ display diverse views on other critical issues such as economic strategies and security measures. These differences are particularly relevant to key concerns regarding China's rise and activities in Europe. Complicating the understanding of the group's trajectory is the fact that the ID group decided not to formulate a manifesto for the June 2024 EP elections, citing no need as the programme was already formulated when the group was founded.⁵²

Consequently, far-right parties do not form a homogeneous group, as evidenced by the voting behaviour of current ID MEPs on China-related matters. The voting within this group is largely decentralised, providing room for individual decision-making. Furthermore, the inclusion of Lega, which holds a strongly critical stance towards China, has significantly influenced the voting outcomes for the entire group.

In general, the ID group's concerns about China typically surface when European interests are at stake. The MEPs from the group tend to be less concerned by China's human rights violations. However, it has to be noted that significant exceptions exist. In 50 per cent of votes, ID MEPs voted against the proposals included in the dataset or abstained. Furthermore, of the 630 votes that were cast in favour of the voted texts, a significant number (408) were accounted for by Lega. When analysing the voting patterns across different resolutions, in only 10 cases, the majority of the ID MEPs supported the resolution. In the remaining cases, the majority either opposed it or abstained. This variability indicates that vote determination is influenced not only by political affiliation but also by the topic concerned.

There are discernible convergences within the ID group, particularly on economic issues. Regulation on economic coercion by third countries and resolutions on the implications of Chinese fishing operations on EU fisheries, and on the security and defence implications of China's influence on critical infrastructure in the European Union typically saw more unified support. This is in line with the traditional ID parties' approach which centres around domestic constituencies' economic priorities.

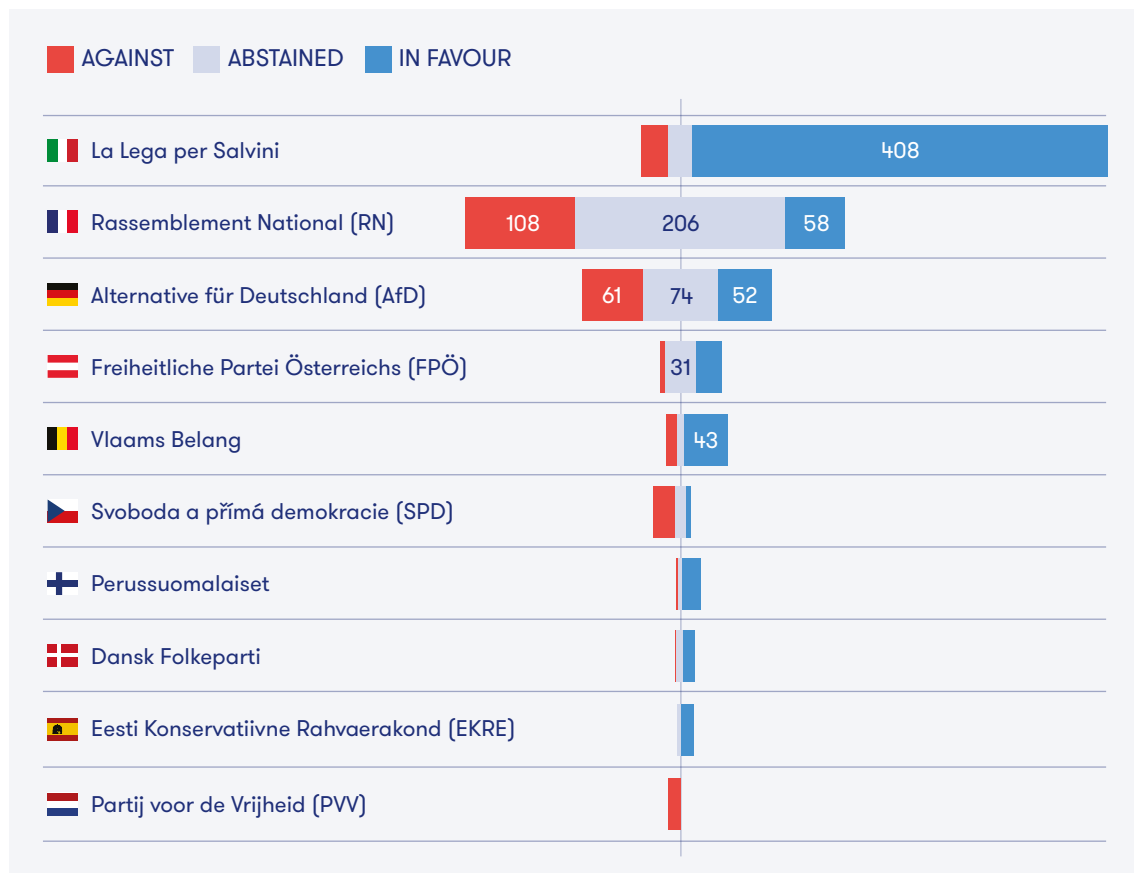
Additionally, regarding the resolutions condemning China’s human rights violations in Xinjiang, ID MEPs supported two out of three resolutions.

Curiously, there were significant levels of abstention, especially notable in the 2020 vote. Dominique Bilde, an MEP from Rassemblement National, provided insight into the mindset of some abstainers during the plenary debate. She pointed to “proven infiltration of radical Islam within this Muslim minority in China,” talked about “Islam-nationalism” and the necessity of maintaining China’s territorial integrity, echoing Beijing’s rhetoric. Bilde also shifted her focus to the situation of Christians in China, which was not the topic of the resolution.⁵³

Last, the MEPs have tended to be reluctant to support resolutions addressing the issue of foreign interference. This means that there is a selective alignment within the group based on the specific topic at hand.

According to the ECFR forecast, Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), France’s Rassemblement National (RN), Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), and Austria’s Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), all currently members of the ID group, may score the biggest gains. Their current voting patterns on China-related matters thus deserve special attention. It also helps to explain the peculiar dynamic of the whole group as well as forecast its likely attitude towards China after the June 2024 elections.

FIGURE 4: VOTING PATTERNS WITHIN THE ID GROUP ON CHINA-RELATED RESOLUTIONS AND REPORTS – OVERVIEW BY NATIONAL PARTIES (2019–2024)*



*The research was concluded on 30 March 2024.

MEPs from AfD, RN, and FPÖ have generally shown reluctance to support texts critical of China. The Rassemblement National recorded abstentions in 55 per cent of votes and votes against in 29 per cent. Moreover, the RN has voted en bloc, leading to the conclusion that the party consistently aligns its stance on China-related votes. On human rights issues, RN MEPs systematically abstained. The same pattern can be observed on votes pertaining to Taiwan. The representatives of the Rassemblement National have often raised concerns around the lack of reciprocity in trade and investments with China and advocated against letting foreign countries including China take control of European strategic sectors.⁵⁴ This is mainly in line with French far-right parties' traditional protectionism and explains why the Rassemblement National supported resolutions that stressed European economic and strategic interests.

MEPs from Rassemblement National subscribe to the Gaullist vision of relations with China. The interventions in plenary debates by RN's MEP Thierry Mariani provide insights into the party's stance on China-related matters. In a discussion on EU-China relations, he advocated for stronger trade protection vis-à-vis China and criticised the EU's alignment with US policies towards China. "We read there that one China remains the principle of our relations, but everything is done to undermine this principle of foreign policy,"⁵⁵ he said in the plenary debate. Mariani also condemned Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit to Taiwan, which he viewed as a provocation.⁵⁶ In another debate concerning Hong Kong in 2021, Mariani said that "the European Union has no influence in Hong Kong." According to him, there is "no interest in adopting hawkish rhetoric against China" and Europe should not be dragged into a new Cold War between the US and China.⁵⁷

Thierry Mariani is particularly knowledgeable on China, as he travelled to China more than 50 times in his capacity as a deputy of French residents overseas. In November 2021, he met with the Chinese Ambassador to the European Union Zhang Ming for a tête-à-tête in Brussels.⁵⁸

Another notable figure in the party's connection to China was Hervé Juvin, former advisor on ecology to Marine Le Pen, who was elected as an RN MEP in 2019 but has been non-inscrit since 2022. Juvin used to do business in China and has also travelled to China in the past. In October 2022, Juvin tweeted "Hervé Juvin and his colleagues, committed to the service of friendship between nations, welcome the opening of the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party."⁵⁹ Furthermore, in a blog piece from 2022, he praised China's human rights approach and expressed



JORDAN BARDELLA COMMENTS ON HONG KONG

“Before we get involved in what China is doing in Hong Kong, let’s use common sense and first worry about what China is doing in Europe.”

JORDAN BARDELLA, RASSEMBLEMENT NATIONAL, 18 JULY 2019⁶²

admiration for the Chinese regime.⁶⁰ The piece was shared by the Chinese mission to the EU in their weekly newsletter.⁶¹

The German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has displayed a voting pattern similar to the Rassemblement National, although its MEPs do not always vote en bloc, suggesting a degree of individual freedom on China-related issues. For instance, internal divisions in voting on recommendation concerning EU-China relations can be observed in which five MEPs abstained, two voted against and one supported the proposal. Similarly, some MEPs abstained on resolutions regarding Taiwan, while others supported them.

Maximilian Krah, until very recently the party's leader for the June EP elections, has consistently maintained a pro-China stance on various issues, frequently appearing on Chinese state-owned media to voice his opinions.⁶³ He has argued against the idea of decoupling,⁶⁴ described reports from Xinjiang as propaganda,⁶⁵ and stated that while maintaining good relations with China is beneficial for Europe, the EU should not involve itself in relations between China and Taiwan.⁶⁶ He has also commemorated the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Tibet Autonomous Region,⁶⁷ criticised the new China strategy as “neocolonialism” and argued that dialogue was necessary.⁶⁸



MAXIMILIAN KRAH COMMENTS ON CHINA

“Politics must be grounded in reality, and the resurgence of China is one such reality; the fact that good relations with China benefit Europe is a reality; and that Sino-Taiwanese relations have nothing to do with Europe is also a reality.”

MAXIMILIAN KRAH, ALTERNATIVE FÜR DEUTSCHLAND, 29 AUGUST 2020⁶⁹

Similarly, other candidates within the party have shown support to China and have criticised the values-based foreign policy practised by the current German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. MEP Christine Margarete Anderson has criticised the EU's moralistic approach⁷⁰ and panned Baerbock for comparing Chinese President Xi Jinping to a dictator, arguing that such rhetoric damages bilateral relations.⁷¹ Siegbert Droese, once labelled by media as a “radical” within the AfD party,⁷² has also advocated for the EU to respect the autonomy of foreign nations.⁷³

According to the chair of international relations at the University of Bonn, Gu Xuewu, “the AfD appears to be the most friendly German party to China.”⁷⁴ Media also reported that the party criticised the new German China strategy as “an effort to enforce green-woke ideology and US geopolitical interests.”⁷⁵

The party's foreign policy stance must have caught the attention of China. In June 2023, the AfD dispatched a three-member delegation to Beijing and Shanghai for a week-long trip.⁷⁶ Alice Weidel, the party's co-chair and a fluent Mandarin speaker, was among the members of the delegation. In the past, she criticised German Foreign Minister Baerbock for bringing up the human rights situation during her trip to China.⁷⁷

At the time this study was written, the party was embroiled in a public scandal. Maximilian Krah's Chinese assistant, Jian Guo, was arrested in April 2024 on allegations of spying on Chinese exiled dissidents in Berlin and providing information to China on European Parliament matters.⁷⁸ Jian Guo was perceived as a controversial figure even by some other members of the AfD. Nicolaus Fest, the then AfD delegation leader in the European Parliament, told the right-wing outlet *The European Conservative*: "Nobody knows what he is doing, nobody has any contact with him, nobody seriously thinks that he is there to achieve the goals of the AfD to move forward."⁷⁹ *t-online* has found evidence that Jian Guo had asked MEPs to travel to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, claiming exemptions for politicians regarding COVID-19 measures could have been obtained.⁸⁰

Maximilian Krah's own connections with China were also called into question. His dealings with China were described in a report by *t-online* from October 2023.⁸¹ Krah used to study in China and continues to maintain contacts there. In 2018, Jian Guo, who later became his parliamentary assistant, organised a trip to Shanghai for Krah. During the trip, he gave a lecture at a Fudan University event, hosted under the auspices of the Silk Road Think Tank Association (SRTA),⁸² which establishes contacts abroad on behalf of IDCPC.

When elected to the European Parliament, he became a member of the informal association of MEPs, the so-called "China-friendship group", which strove for closer cooperation with China.⁸³ Shortly after his election to the European Parliament, Krah initiated the foundation of a German-Chinese lobby association for German industry to connect German and Chinese businesses.⁸⁴ The vice-president and later the chairman of the association and Jian Guo's business partner later launched a German-language propaganda outlet called *Tendenzblick* in 2022. The website frequently reposts content from China Radio International and has featured extensive coverage of Krah who was the subject of one of the first articles on the page.⁸⁵

In 2019, Krah travelled to China again. According to *t-online*, the trip was paid for by the state-run technology group Huawei, state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and several city administrations.⁸⁶ During the trip, he met with three officials from the IDCPC which according to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) "operates effectively like an intelligence service of the People's Republic of China and can therefore be attributed to the Chinese intelligence service."⁸⁷

Jian Guo's arrest represents the second instance of foreign interference that has been reported on in the media in a short time. Petr Bystron, second on the AfD candidate list for the EP elections, was also recently mentioned in the media in connection to Russia and China. Revelations from the Czech counterintelligence service alleged he received payments from a pro-Russian network connected to Voice of Europe.⁸⁸

Both the AfD and Rassemblement National are expected to make significant gains in the elections. Based on their voting track record and proven links to China, they are likely to steer the ID group towards a more favourable view of China.

Another party among the ID group, the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), can be viewed as China's closest ally, yet with very limited impact as the party boasts only one MEP, Marcel de Graaff. He has consistently opposed any China critical resolutions. It must be noted that the dataset includes voting data for this party from 2019 only until October 2022, at which point de Graaff left the ID group and has since been non-inscrit. However, the party might rejoin the ID group after the elections. It is expected to make significant gains, potentially emerging as the biggest Dutch party in the EP elections.

De Graaf's public statements on the EU's China policy are in conformity with his voting record. In the past, de Graaf criticised the President of the European Council Charles Michel. In response to Michel's tweet which mentioned that the EU raised its concerns about Beijing's treatment of minorities in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet at the EU-China Virtual Summit, de Graaf accused Michel of being "arrogant, lecturing while being hypocrite and for interfering in the internal affairs of others."⁸⁹

Since de Graaf is leading the candidate list, it is likely that the party will keep its course on China after the June 2024 elections. With the estimated 10 seats out of 98, it might help push the political group towards a more pro-China position. Furthermore, in the November 2023 Dutch general election, PVV led by Geert Wilders emerged victorious, becoming the largest party in the House of Representatives and, eventually, participating in the coalition government.

La Lega per Salvini which currently holds 23 seats in the ID group has been an outlier in the group with its strong China-critical positioning. Its position has significantly skewed the results for the entire group. Of the 459 votes cast, 89 per cent were in favour of motions critical of China. The MEPs typically opposed resolutions related to foreign interference, which may not have been directly related to China. Their opposition could stem from concerns that these resolutions were implicitly directed at the parties of the ID group with one resolution even explicitly mentioning Lega's cooperation agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party and allegations of being open to accepting political funding from Russia.⁹⁰

Despite some MEPs defecting from Lega to Fratelli d'Italia, this shift did not alter the party's consistent voting behaviour. Lega's voting is strictly en bloc, underscoring a firm and collective stance on China that does not vary according to individual MEPs' preferences. This uniformity is reflected in their active participation in plenary debates, where they are among the most vocal critics of China.

For instance, Elena Lizzi has openly criticised the EU for enabling China's growing influence within Europe.⁹¹ Another MEP, Mara Bizzotto, believes that "China's communist dictatorship represents the greatest threat to our freedom and democracy," specifically mentioning the mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, China's violation of international law in Hong Kong and Chinese espionage activities within European institutions.⁹² MEP Anne Bonfrisco has been among the most active MEPs on the issue of China. She has criticised China for its repression of the Uyghurs,⁹³ and has presented three individual motions for resolutions directed at China.⁹⁴



MARA BIZZOTTO COMMENTS ON CHINA'S REGIME

“China’s communist dictatorship represents the greatest threat to our freedom and democracy. The coronavirus emergency, the war against Hong Kong in violation of international law and the Chinese spies inside European institutions are facts that clearly demonstrate this.”

MARA BIZZOTTO, LA LEGA PER SALVINI, 18.6.2020⁹⁵

Lega is projected to see a reduction in seats, dropping from the current 22 to just eight in the upcoming term. This significant decrease, alongside the anticipated gains by AfD and Rassemblement National, is expected to markedly alter the dynamics of China-related voting within the ID group during the next parliamentary term. The overall stance on China could shift as the influence of Lega wanes and other parties with a less-critical stance on China potentially increase their presence.

When it comes to other far-right parties within the ID group, during the 2019–2024 parliamentary term, Austria’s FPÖ held three seats. Its MEPs were somewhat more likely to condemn China’s human rights violations when compared to their counterparts in the AfD and Rassemblement National, supporting five out of eight human rights resolutions. However, they predominantly opposed or abstained from voting on other issues.

The Belgian Vlaams Belang, the Finnish Perussuomalaiset, and the Italian Lega make up the more overtly China-critical factions within the ID group. The Finnish party, which joined the ID group after the 2019 elections, returned to the ECR group following the 2023 parliamentary elections after a four-year hiatus. Their votes are recorded only during the time they were members of the ID group. During this time, they predominantly supported resolutions critical of China.

The lead candidate for the Finns, Vilhelm Junnila, has publicly criticised China’s rhetoric regarding the war in Ukraine on social media. With the departure of the Finns from the ID group, a notably critical voice against China is lost, further impacting the group’s overall stance on China-related issues.

The Belgian Vlaams Belang has also demonstrated strong anti-China sentiment, voting in favour of the studied resolutions and reports 70 per cent of the time. Unlike some other parties, Vlaams Belang MEPs do not vote uniformly as a bloc. The party’s lead candidate, Tom Vandendriessche, has been vocal in criticising China’s policies in Tibet and has called for a reassessment of relations with China.⁹⁶ According to the polls, the Vlaams Belang party is predicted to retain the current number of seats and will thus continue to represent the more China-critical voice of the ID group in the next parliamentary term.

The Czech party Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD) has predominantly voted against resolutions critical of China. The SPD, which won two seats in the EP elections in 2019, is expected to gain an additional seat in the upcoming elections. If the SPD does secure three MEPs, this is likely to further influence the ID group's votes in a direction more favourable to China. Representatives of the SPD have tended to downplay China's assertive behaviour on the global stage. For instance, in 2022, Ivan David, the current MEP who is seeking reelection, subtly suggested that the United States had provoked China into conducting military drills around Taiwan, resulting in the severing of communication lines with Washington.⁹⁷

The Danish Dansk Folkeparti and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) fall into a grey zone by voting rather in support of the resolutions and reports but not being critical of China in all aspects. Currently, the parties each have one MEP.

The voting records for Dansk Folkeparti include MEPs Peter Kofod and Anders Vistisen, who replaced Kofod in 2022 after his election to the Danish Folketing. Both MEPs generally voted in favour of resolutions, particularly those aimed at safeguarding European interests against China, such as economic coercion, security implications of China's involvement in critical infrastructure, and Chinese countersanctions. According to MEP Anders Vistisen, a lead candidate for the European Parliament elections: "Chinese dominance has evolved into a real threat to our cultural heritage and way of life."⁹⁸ Vistisen and Kofod have also consistently supported resolutions advocating for human rights and showed strong support for the resolution and the recommendation on Taiwan, in line with their party's pro-Taiwan stance.

In response to an official visit to China by Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen last year, the Danish People's Party announced plans to send a delegation to Taiwan but it appears the trip never materialised.⁹⁹

EKRE's MEP, Jaak Madison, has not opposed any resolution or report but abstained on a number of issues, including a resolution on foreign interference and two on Hong Kong. In the past, Madison openly criticised China's response to a report by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, which highlighted threats from China. "If until now the relations between China and Estonia have been quite friendly and constructive politically, unfortunately, with such moves they will not achieve anything positive and instead they [China] will seriously violate them. One argument for not allowing Huawei to grow its roots deeper in Europe," he said.¹⁰⁰

EKRE's top candidate for the June elections, Martin Helme, similarly exhibits a critical view of China. The Chinese Embassy in Estonia has accused him of stigmatising China,¹⁰¹ citing his comments that COVID-19 "has either been hatched or released from a Chinese biolaboratory."¹⁰² Another EKRE candidate, Anti Poolamets, has also expressed concerns about China's involvement in infrastructure projects, warning of potential strings attached.¹⁰³

Both EKRE and Dansk Folkeparti are expected to each gain one seat. Their future MEPs are likely to join the more China-sceptic camp in the ID group.

According to the forecast by the ECFR, the Greek Spartiátes (Spartans), the Latvian right-wing populist party Latvija pirmajā vietā (Latvia First, LPV) and the Croatian Domovinski pokret (Homeland Movement, DP) are all expected to make modest gains of one to two seats in the upcoming elections. They are also expected to

join the ID group. However, there is nearly no publicly available information on the parties' positioning on China. Members of the Latvian Saeima from the LPV party, including the party leader for the EU elections, Vilis Krištopans, visited China on a trip funded by the Chinese government.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Krištopans was heard saying that "Russia's invasion of Ukraine cannot affect bilateral relations between Latvia and China."¹⁰⁵ This indicates that at least the LPV will probably not be bolstering the camp of China-sceptics in the ID group.

While the stance of the parties currently within the ID could be estimated based on their previous voting patterns and the political line held by the parties in their countries of origin, the position of the new parties, which may likely join the ID group after the election, is more difficult to ascertain.

Since leaving EPP, Fidesz has been non-attached. The party has received invitations from both ID group and ECR but no decision has been made yet about whether its 14 MEPs, which the party is expected to add to in the June elections, will be joining one of the political groups in the next parliamentary term. Regardless of its choice, Fidesz is likely to advocate for a more China-friendly policy. According to research conducted by SWP, Fidesz unanimously rejected resolutions on the human rights situation in Hong Kong and the imposition of sanctions on EU institutions by China.¹⁰⁶ Due to the interests of the Viktor Orbán government to forge closer ties with China, Fidesz is unlikely to join the China-sceptic group. Furthermore, it might wield significant influence given its representation in a member state government and a voting presence in both the Council and the Parliament.

Last, Reconquête, anticipated to join the group with five MEPs, is expected to align with the voting patterns of Rassemblement National on China-related issues. Like RN, Reconquête lead candidate, Marion Maréchal, views China as an economic powerhouse from which Europe should reduce its dependence. In March 2024, Maréchal described Europe as an economic colony of China in a TV interview,¹⁰⁷ and has also recently questioned the efficacy of European climate policies in light of China's recent expansion of coal-fired power stations.¹⁰⁸

The Left on China: a cacophony of voices replaced by a more pro-China stance?

The Left, consisting of 22 parties, displays significant internal fragmentation and varied stances on issues related to China. This political group is particularly disjointed, with many of its parties represented by only one or a few MEPs. This diversity makes it challenging to discern whether consistent political guidelines exist across the group or if voting behaviours are primarily influenced by the individual perspectives of the MEPs.

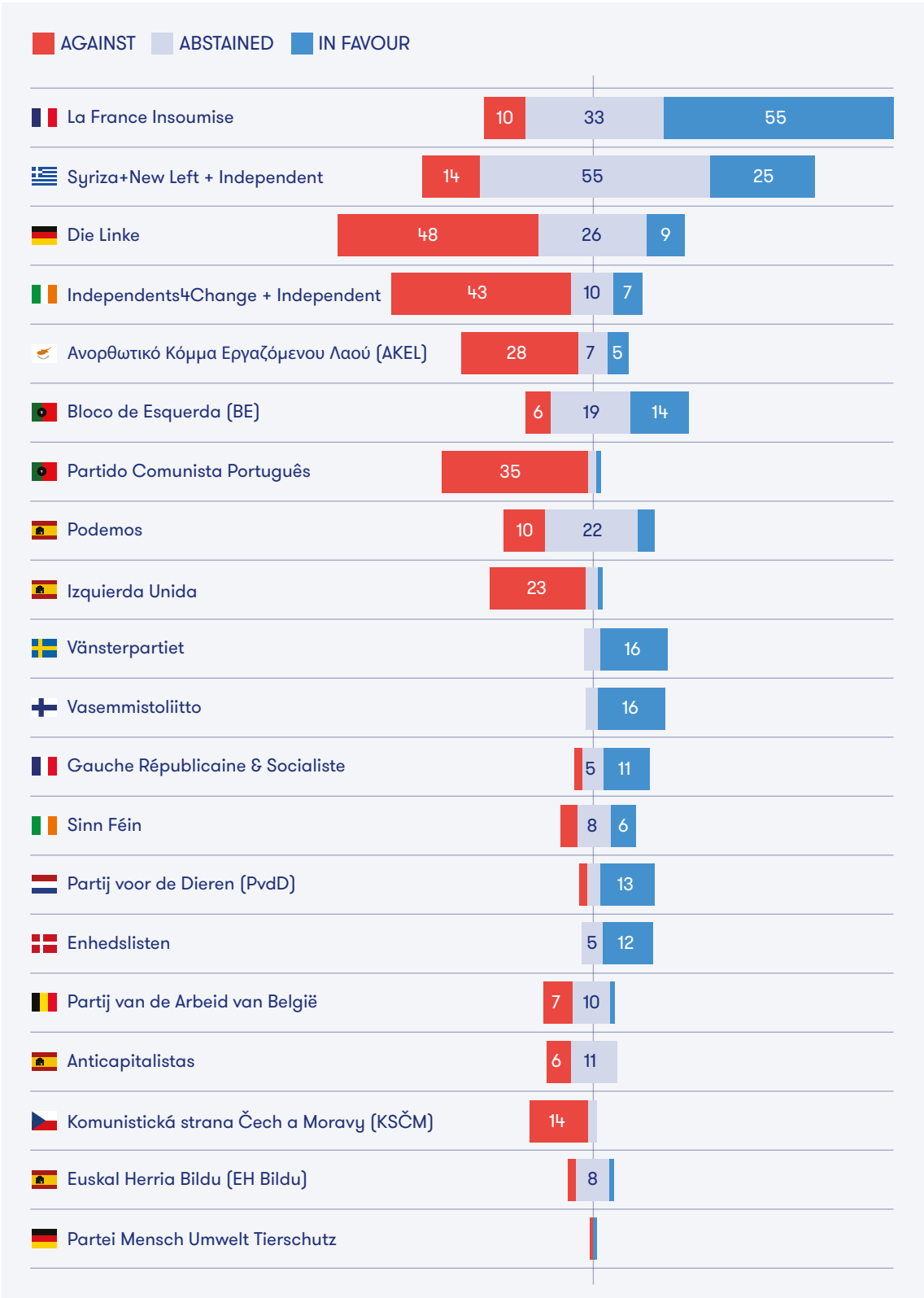
The Left's manifesto for the 2024 elections offers insights into the factors that unify the group, with a strong emphasis on social justice, ecological security, and a pacifist agenda.¹⁰⁹ Interestingly, while the manifesto does not explicitly mention China, it contains arguments and proposals that align with Chinese interests. For example, the manifesto criticises the EU for its “neocolonial style of domination” and advocates for a reboot of the EU’s “trade and financial relations with the Global South on a new basis.”¹¹⁰ It remains ambiguous whether the Left considers China as part of the so-called Global South, but China habitually identifies itself with this group and views itself as its leader. Furthermore, the manifesto calls for the de-dollarisation of international trade “to end the unilateral domination of the US dollar.” It also criticises the EU for its perceived subordination to the US and NATO, particularly in terms of augmenting military capacities for “worldwide interventions following NATO’s instructions and resolutions.”¹¹¹

The omission of China from the Left's 2024 election manifesto could have various reasons, such as not perceiving China as a significant actor relevant to the European Union, or challenges in achieving a consensus within the group. Interestingly, the same ambiguity does not apply to Russia, as the manifesto explicitly demands “a withdrawal of all Russian troops” from Ukrainian territory and proposes “sanctions against the Russian military-industrial complex.”¹¹² However, it discusses relations with Russia through the lens of the transatlantic agenda, opposing an “expansion of NATO and the new arms race in Europe” and advocating that neutrality and non-alignment should be Europe’s guiding principles.¹¹³

Neither the manifesto, nor the voting pattern in the current European Parliament provide a definite answer to the question of where The Left stands on China. The Left MEPs opposed the voted texts 37 per cent of the time, abstained in 34 per cent of cases, and supported them in 29 per cent.

The Left has actively used the proposal of amendments to articulate their views on China. MEPs Mick Wallace and Clare Daly from Independents4Change, along with Sandra Pereira and João Ferreira from the Portuguese Communist Party, and Manu Pineda from the United Left, have introduced several amendments echoing Chinese

FIGURE 5: VOTING PATTERNS WITHIN THE LEFT GROUP ON CHINA-RELATED RESOLUTIONS AND REPORTS - OVERVIEW BY NATIONAL PARTIES (2019–2024)*



*The research was concluded on 30 March 2024.

rhetoric on Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan issues, and the EU's sanctions regime. These amendments have called for promoting dialogue and cooperation with China,¹¹⁴ criticised the EU for adopting a confrontational policy that allegedly seeks to interfere with and destabilise China,¹¹⁵ and advocated for respecting the One China principle.¹¹⁶

In contrast, Emmanuel Maurel from the Gauche Républicaine & Socialiste and Manuel Bompard from La France Insoumise have proposed amendments suggesting that the eventual ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) should consider the ongoing human rights situations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.¹¹⁷

While a number of parties have consistently defended China's interests and routinely voted against resolutions and reports that criticise or condemn China's behaviour, others exhibited a more critical approach. The division line, curiously, runs also within individual parties.

Among those who are currently represented and who are likely to gain seats according to the ECFR is the German party Die Linke. The leader of Die Linke, Martin Schirdewan, who also serves as a co-president of the Left group, has openly rejected confrontation and promoted dialogue with Beijing. He engaged regularly with CCP representatives. For instance, in October 2023, he met with Liu Jianchao, the head of IDCPC.¹¹⁸ Schirdewan also congratulated the CCP on its 100th anniversary expressing the willingness of the Left group to further enhance in-depth dialogues with the CCP, play an active role, and promote Europe-China relations.¹¹⁹



MARTIN SCHIRDEWAN COMMENTS ON CHINA

“In the coming years, of course, it will also be vital to ensure that the rise of China is not met in the West with military aggression. Ironically, it might be here that we will miss Merkel’s devotion to Germany’s economic model the most: she always maintained a less confrontational stance on China, given that it has long been a loyal buyer of Made in Germany.”

MARTIN SCHIRDEWAN, DIE LINKE, 6 NOVEMBER 2021¹²⁰

However, internal dissent also exists within Die Linke. A candidate for the June 2024 elections, Carola Rackete, has openly criticised backing China's authoritarian leadership, arguing that a “left-wing party generally has to stand on the side of the oppressed.” And that, “we should not defend autocrats and dictators from any historical context just because they may have a left-wing history. Whether that is in

China, in Belarus, or in Russia. We have to take the position of civil society and have the anti-imperialist perspective as a unifying theme.”¹²¹

It is difficult to ascertain whether this view is held by more members of the party and it will be interesting to watch whether this reasoning gains more prominence if Rackete is elected, and influences the party stance on some of the resolutions condemning China’s violations of human rights.

In number of seats, the French delegation in the Left group is currently leading with six seats. It may gain up to four more seats, according to the ECFR forecast.¹²² The party *La Gauche Républicaine & Socialiste* seems divided on China issues. Although its MEPs voted in favour in 61 per cent, particularly on texts condemning China’s human rights violations, they have opposed resolutions concerning broader EU-China relations and those addressing foreign interference. Its lead candidate and a current MEP, Emmanuel Maurel, advocates for fair relations with China and a balanced policy towards Taiwan. He stressed in the report on the situation in the Strait of Taiwan, shortly after Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in September 2022, “conducting large-scale military activities and thus increasing the threat to Taiwan in response to this visit is obviously a pretext [from China] and we condemn it.” According to him, Europe needs to be united to “maintain the status quo, that upholds the principle of one China, but that is obviously a fervent defender of democracy in Taiwan.”¹²³ He initiated, together with Edouard Martin and David Borrelli, a stakeholders consultation on whether Market Economy Status (MES) should be granted to China. The overall majority (91 per cent) of respondents expressed their opposition to grant MES to China.¹²⁴

André Chassaigne, a candidate of *La Gauche Républicaine & Socialiste* for the upcoming elections and a current president of the Democratic and Republican Left group in the French National Assembly, was quoted in the *China Daily*, downplaying China’s actions in Tibet.¹²⁵

In this election cycle, *La Gauche Républicaine & Socialiste* is running on a joint list with *Parti communiste français (PCF)*, whose secretary-general Fabien Roussel gave an interview to *Xinhua* in 2021, congratulating the CCP on its 100th anniversary, commending China for its fight against COVID-19 and lauding China’s help to developing countries.¹²⁶ This affiliation raises questions about how these connections might influence the voting behaviour of MEPs from *La Gauche Républicaine & Socialiste* on China-related issues in the next European Parliament.

So far the MEPs most active on China-related issues come from the Irish party *Independents4Change*. Its MEPs have frequently defended China during plenary debates. Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, in particular, voted against resolutions and reports critical of China in 86 per cent of cases. Wallace employs rhetorical questions that often accompany the arguments, such as “(...) the idea that we have the right to lecture China about what’s going on in Hong Kong. Who, in God’s name, are we to be lecturing anybody?”¹²⁷ ‘Whataboutism’ is another frequent trait of the inputs as can be seen from Wallace’s comment: “[H]ow many times do we have to talk about the situation in Hong Kong? Yet the Saudi UAE genocidal war on Yemen hardly registers here. Why? Because the US and the EU are facilitating it? You want to talk about violations of fundamental freedoms, yet the concentration camps on the US-Mexican border don’t seem to exist. (...) China has just sent 4 000 tons of wheat to Syria, while EU sanctions are killing Syrians. Who is authoritarian?”¹²⁸

Both Wallace and Daly are also quite active in providing comments to Chinese state media.¹²⁹ An article published in April 2022 in *The Irish Times* claimed that since January 2021, Daly has been mentioned in 118 Chinese-language news items and Mick Wallace in 81.¹³⁰ Additionally, their speeches, which were subtitled in Chinese, gained considerable popularity in China.¹³¹ Particularly well-received was an interview given by Daly to the state-run *Global Times*, in which she stated, “I don’t see China as a threat at all,”¹³² and a speech where she advocated for the EU to sever its alliance with the US.¹³³

Similarly, Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan, an independent Irish MEP who sits with the Left, has advocated for deepening dialogue and cooperation with Beijing.¹³⁴

The Spanish EH Bildu, Irish Sinn Féin, Spanish Podemos, and various Greek parties have shown reluctance to support the European Parliament’s more critical proposals on China, opting to abstain on most votes. Spanish *Izquierda Unida* (United Left), and Belgian *Partij van de Arbeid van België* (PVDA), both largely opposed texts critical of China. Notably, an MEP for the Czech *Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy* (KSČM) and the *Partido Comunista Português* have predominantly voted against such resolutions and reports. The Czech Communist Party did not support any voted text, whereas the Portuguese Communist Party has cast a single vote in favour.

It is not surprising, given that, historically, KSČM has been a staunch ally of China, both in domestic and international contexts. Inter-party relations date back to the 1990s, with members of the Czech Communist Party frequently visiting China on propaganda tours. One less-reported instance involved the then Deputy Chairman, Václav Ort, who attended the Conference on Chinese ethnic policy in Xinjiang in February 2019. At this conference, 50 participants from 20 countries were instructed on how to “manage” ethnic minorities in multiethnic states by the CCP organisers.¹³⁵

Kateřina Konečná, the lead candidate of KSČM (which joined forces with two other small parties under one banner *Stačilo!*), has been highly critical of the current Czech government’s approach to Taiwan, saying she sees a shift towards a more aggressive and interventionist stance on China. According to her, Czech politicians commit “violations of the officially recognised One China principle”. She blamed “a US-funded NGO” for influencing Czech politics and decision-making.¹³⁶

Similarly, *Partido Comunista Português* has been a vocal advocate of China.¹³⁷ Notably, MEP Sandra Pereira has been very active in the EP plenary debates. Both communist parties have sent at least one delegation to China in the past.¹³⁸ However, these two parties are unlikely to steer the direction of the group. The ECFR forecast predicts that the Portuguese Communist Party will drop in its presence from four MEPs to just one, while the Czech Communist Party may not be able to retain the one seat it currently occupies.¹³⁹ Yet it is important to stress that predictions regarding the smaller parties may be particularly imprecise, while when it comes to larger delegations, the trends towards gaining or losing seats enable more accurate predictions.

To provide a more nuanced view, it is also important to note that Portugal has another left-wing party in the group, *Bloco de Esquerda* (BE), which does not share a position on China with the Portuguese Communist Party. Its coordinator and candidate for the June elections, Catarina Martins, explained the party’s absence from the state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping, saying that she “doesn’t dance where there are no human rights.”¹⁴¹ Yet she has also criticised the EU for siding with the US on China issues and alleged the US destabilised Xinjiang.



SANDRA PEREIRA COMMENTS ON CHINA-US RIVALRY

“[I]t is concerning that the European Union and its institutions, as demonstrated by the current debate and the resolution in this Parliament, are becoming an echo chamber for the confrontation strategy promoted by the Trump administration against the People’s Republic of China. The European Parliament not only associates itself but also acts as a promoter of an unacceptable disinformation operation that seeks to provide coverage for the campaign against China after the failed attempt by the United States of America to create a focus of destabilisation in the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang.”

SANDRA PEREIRA, 17 DECEMBER 2020¹⁴⁰

Evidently, within the Left, there are parties that are critical of China. This group includes Danish Enhedslisten (Red/Green Alliance), Sweden’s Vänsterpartiet, the Dutch Partij voor de Dieren (Party for the Animals, PvdD), and Finnish Vasemmistoliitto. These parties have consistently supported all resolutions addressing China’s human rights violations. However, there have been some abstentions among these parties on issues such as security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, EU-China relations, relations with Taiwan, and electoral interference.

The France Insoumise could also be considered part of this critical faction, as it has overwhelmingly supported resolutions condemning China’s human rights abuses. However, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s party—as evidenced by the voting on texts included in the dataset—has distinctly opposed the prevailing approach of European policy towards Taiwan and China in the European Parliament.

It is anticipated that the Left will see significant electoral gains in Germany, France, and Ireland. In Germany, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), a newcomer to the European Parliament, is projected to secure eight seats. One of the party’s lead candidates, Thomas Geisel, who previously served as the Mayor of Düsseldorf, has been an advocate for enhancing cooperation with China across economic, trade, cultural, and other sectors.¹⁴² Another BSW candidate, Michael Lüders, has raised doubts about the viability of European policies aimed at decoupling from China.¹⁴³ Given these positions, it is likely that the BSW may enhance the camp of more China-friendly MEPs within the group.

Conclusion

European societies are currently facing a challenging environment characterised by geopolitical tensions and escalating efforts by hostile foreign entities to interfere in domestic politics. These interventions include attempts to manipulate elections and widespread disinformation campaigns, which pose significant threats to the Europe's political landscape.

Democratic societies depend fundamentally on the electorate's capacity to make informed decisions. Furthermore, it is imperative for the electorate to ascertain whether their representatives—be they candidates or incumbent parliamentarians—adhere to democratic values or are swayed by autocratic influences.

In comparison to Russia, China may be a relative newcomer to electoral interference in Europe. Yet with its increasingly sophisticated expertise and operational acumen, there is growing evidence to suggest that it is actively seeking to influence European elections and decision-making. As illustrated in the opening section of this study, China utilises a complex and ever-expanding array of tools, from leveraging political influence through established party-to-party contacts to engaging in information manipulation and acts of bribery and espionage.

While China, along with other international actors, may continue to primarily engage with individual EU member states, it is keenly aware that significant initiatives, which could have a great impact on Chinese policies, originate and are deliberated on within EU institutions.

The European Parliament seems particularly susceptible to security risks. Amidst a backdrop of scandals such as Quatargate, alleged payments from Russia to European politicians processed by an outlet called Voice of Europe, and the recent arrest in Germany of an aide to MEP Maximilian Krah for espionage, MEPs have advocated for enhancing the parliamentary security infrastructure.¹⁴⁴ They have proposed mandatory security training for both MEPs and staff, improved screening processes, and the development of sophisticated systems to detect foreign interference, ensuring these measures do not impinge on EP autonomy. Additionally, there remains a significant oversight gap concerning the over 2,000 parliamentary assistants.

While the controversies have brought increased attention to these issues, the outgoing European Parliament may not be in a position to implement any new measures. This challenge remains for the next European Parliament (and the next European Commission) to tackle. However, the results of the June elections may usher in a different political setting, one which may not be ready to address challenges stemming from foreign interference in democratic processes or be critical of China.

Therefore, this study is particularly timely as it not only familiarises the reader with China's objectives and tactics in attempting to influence European politics but also examines the current and potential future roles of extreme right- and left-wing parties in the European Parliament, particularly with regards to China-related votes.

It critically explored the positions on China of the Identity and Democracy (ID) and the Left groups, both of which are anticipated to increase their representation.

The main findings from the analysis of voting behaviours within the European Parliament's ID and Left groups reveal some consistent patterns, particularly in their approach to foreign interference and EU-China relations. Despite the ideological disparities between these two groups, they share common ground in their opposition to resolutions aimed at addressing foreign interference in EU decision-making and specific strategies concerning China and Taiwan. This opposition is evident in their consistent voting against EU-China relations resolutions and abstaining from votes concerning the situation in the Taiwan Strait and EU-Taiwan political relations and cooperation. These trends suggest a broader, albeit complex, scepticism toward mainstream EU stances on China, indicating an alignment in certain policy areas across these ideologically distinct groups.

Further insight is gained by considering the motivations behind these voting patterns, which vary significantly among the national parties within each group. For instance, Maximilian Krah of Germany's AfD articulated opposition to economic sanctions and decoupling strategies with China, arguing that such measures negatively impact European interests. Conversely, Manu Pineda of Spain's United Left criticised the EU's current policies towards China, advocating for deeper engagement and portraying China as a lesser threat than the United States. These positions highlight the deep divisions within each group and underscore the importance of examining the diverse perspectives and rationales of different national parties to fully understand the dynamics at play in EU parliamentary decisions regarding foreign policy and international relations.

Following the June 2024 European Parliament elections, right-leaning parties are expected to see an increase in their seat counts, a reflection of broader trends observed in national elections across Europe, particularly in countries like Italy, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands where conservative and far-right parties have gained significant voter support. The ID group is projected to secure an additional 40 seats, bringing their total to 98 lawmakers and potentially even positioning them as the third largest group in the Parliament.

Despite sharing common characteristics such as euroscepticism, nationalism, populism, and an anti-immigration stance, far-right parties within the ID group exhibit a range of opinions on other critical issues like economic policies and security measures, which are particularly pertinent given China's growing influence and activities in Europe. This lack of a unified platform allows for decentralised voting behaviours among ID MEPs, particularly on China-related issues. The inclusion of parties like La Lega, which holds a notably critical view of China, has also significantly shaped the group's overall voting outcomes, underscoring the fact that concerns about China within the ID typically arise when European interests are perceived to be at risk. The Left group in the European Parliament also exhibits a significant internal fragmentation and a variety of stances on issues related to China. The substantial diversity within the group, with many parties represented by only one or a few MEPs, complicates the ability to discern a coherent political line, suggesting that individual MEP perspectives might heavily influence voting behaviours. This fragmentation within

the Left underscores the challenge of pinpointing a collective stance on international relations, particularly concerning China.

The Left's 2024 election manifesto's criticisms of the EU's neocolonial approach and advocacy for restructuring trade and financial relations with the Global South hint at a potential alignment with China, which often positions itself as a leader of the Global South. Moreover, the manifesto's call for the de-dollarization of international trade and criticism of the EU's alignment with US and NATO military policies reflect a broader geopolitical perspective that might indirectly favour China's positions against the US hegemony.

In contrast to the vague position on China, the manifesto takes a clear stance on Russia, demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and proposing sanctions against the Russian military-industrial complex, while also critiquing NATO expansion and advocating for neutrality in Europe. This distinct approach to Russia and the ambiguous references to China indicate a complex and possibly contentious internal discourse on foreign policy within the group. As the Left is expected to gain seats in Germany, France, and Ireland, the influence of new members, like Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), could steer the group towards a more China-friendly position. It is especially the BSW candidates who advocate for increased cooperation with China and question the EU's strategy of de-risking.

Overall, the political landscape within the European Parliament is shifting, with anticipated gains for both far-right and far-left wings that are likely to favour more China-friendly votes. As these groups increase their representation, the dynamic within the EP is expected to evolve toward a stance that is less critical of China. This shift could make it increasingly difficult to promote or sustain China-sceptic policies, as the balance of power may tilt towards those advocating for stronger ties with China.

This shift could manifest in softened rhetoric, reduced support for strong trade or human rights stances against China, and increased advocacy for engagement and cooperation. Such changes would affect the policy debates and resolutions within the European Parliament. As such, understanding these electoral dynamics and their potential impact on EU policies is crucial for stakeholders and policymakers who need to anticipate and respond to the changing geopolitical landscape.

ANNEX I: ANALYSED CHINA-RELEVANT MOTIONS VOTED ON BY THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (2019–MARCH 2023)

Vote	Date of the vote
Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes	10 October 2019
Situation of the Uyghur in China (China-cables) § 1/3	19 December 2019
The PRC national security law for Hong Kong and the need for the EU to defend Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy	19 June 2020
Forced labour and the situation of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	17 December 2020
The crackdown on the democratic opposition in Hong Kong	21 January 2021
Chinese counter sanctions on EU entities and MEPs and MPs	20 May 2021
Hong Kong, notably the case of Apple Daily	8 July 2021
EU-China strategy	15 September 2021
EU-Taiwan political relations and cooperation	20 October 2021
Violations of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong	20 January 2022
Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation	9 March 2022
EU and the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific	7 June 2022
Human rights situation in Xinjiang, including the Xinjiang police files § 4	9 June 2022
The situation in the Strait of Taiwan	15 September 2022
Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation	1 June 2023
Deterioration of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, notably the case of Jimmy Lai	15 June 2023
Economic coercion by third countries – Accord provisoire – Am 78	3 October 2023
The implications of Chinese fishing operations on EU fisheries and the way forward	17 October 2023
EU-China Relations	13 December 2023
The abduction of Tibetan children and forced assimilation practices through Chinese boarding schools in Tibet	14 December 2023
The security and defence implications of China’s influence on critical infrastructure in the European Union	17 January 2024

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Footnotes

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