

**MAPPING THE SCOPE OF CHINA'S
SOFT POWER IN ESTONIA**

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Executive Summary

1. China's soft power focus is in South and Southeast Asia. However, China's traditional and mass culture, successful development in science and technology (S&T), and grand foreign policy initiatives are sources of soft power that impact how Estonia's government and public perceive China.
2. While Beijing's domestic political values do not inform its projection of soft power, Tallinn perceives China mainly through the prism of the latter's state-centric governance model and consequently sees most of China's deployments of supposedly "soft" power as sharp. This perspective resonates with public opinion. A 2021 survey confirms this perspective.
3. While Confucius Institutes (CIs) are currently suffering from reputational loss, especially in the West, they play a key role in China's projection of soft power. The CI at Tallinn University opened in 2010 and continues to offer language courses, classes and workshops on Chinese calligraphy and painting, traditional Chinese medicine, business culture and cooking.
4. China's successful S&T development has made cooperation with China inevitable for the European Union, including Estonia. Indeed, the technological aspect of China's opening is salient for Estonia as (i) a digital nation with critical communication infrastructure and (ii) a small country and, therefore, an easy target for Chinese efforts at cultivating dependency.
5. China's successful S&T development has also brought Chinese companies to Estonia. They include Huawei Technologies Eesti, ZTE Corporation and Tencent Estonia. However, Estonia is aware of its vulnerability in view of Beijing's espionage practices. Huawei and ZTE have thus attracted most of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service's (EFIS) attention.
6. While not a top recipient of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Estonia signed two agreements related to the BRI (the Silk Road Initiative Memorandum and Digital

Silk Road Agreement) with China in 2017. EFIS sees the BRI, considered by Beijing as a vehicle for the projection of Chinese soft power, as an attempt by China to build a paternalistic world order.

7. In 2012, Estonia joined the 16+1, a foreign policy forum designed by Beijing for Central and Eastern European countries. In August 2022, Tallinn left it, citing China's Ukraine stance and called for Western infrastructure investments to rival the BRI. To the Estonians, China's war stance seems hostile, giving rise to unfavourable comparisons of Beijing with Moscow.
8. While the Estonian public recognises human rights violations in China and Beijing's authoritarian behaviour towards Taiwan, Tibet and Hong Kong, their perception of China seems more positive than the government's. In a 2023 survey, half of Estonian respondents reported either a "very positive" (8%) or "mostly positive" (42%) view of China.
9. The trend, however, may be inclining towards a more negative opinion given that youths (respondents aged 15–24) are wariest of China (38% reported "mostly negative" and 12% "very negative" views).