

The ongoing 21<sup>st</sup> century is determined as the age of cities. It is the century, where there are changes in the perception of responsibility for the world which is around us, the society or the environment. The great migration of people to the metropolis and the increasing rate of urbanization around the world indicate that change is happening right before our eyes. This trend means that cities are beginning to play an increasingly important role in shaping the fields and sectors so far reserved exclusively for state entities, including international relations and cooperation on such levels as environmental protection, educational programs or urban transport.

However, this cooperation is a phenomenon happening in the background of a great politics, on the sidelines of events shown in the media or on the margins of public interest. Meanwhile, out of nearly 900 European cities over 50.000, a large part has been maintaining advanced international relations with other cities on the European continent for several decades. More and more often, along with the increasing globalization, cities are looking for partners outside the borders of the Old Continent, very often in Asia. In recent years, there is a clear trend in finding partners among Chinese cities, whose development is unbelievably fast and even fascinating.

The aim of the project is therefore to examine the scale of cooperation between the cities of the European Union's (EU) Member States and those located in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Middle Kingdom is today, just after the United States, an economic leader who challenges the world with the latest technology, social, military and cultural development. The state expands its power in the interstate dimension among others by means of the implemented Belt and Road Initiative, but it also promotes the cooperation of Chinese provinces and individual cities with their international counterparts. As the PRC and the European Union are the closest partners in the economic sense, Beijing authorities see a real need to increase the international role of cities in dialogue with Europe. However, do a similar approach present the authorities of EU Member States or Brussels officials?

This question is important because the issue of city diplomacy has been poorly described in the scientific literature and there is almost no publications regarding the mutual work between European and Chinese cities. The role of cities is usually neglected in most of books on foreign policy strategies, tools, goals and actions. Meanwhile, the growing importance of multi-level governance in the modern world seems to prove that this can be a fundamental mistake. Cities are increasingly becoming sub-national actors in the international arena, and their significance is definitely increasing. Therefore, their activity on the global scene seems to be an extremely interesting issue and implies a number of questions.

Our goal is to find answers to such issues, as i.e. what is the model of cooperation between European and Chinese cities? What are the decisive factors for successful cooperation with the PRC? What is the role of institutionalization (ie. existing agreements, offices abroad, etc.) for this process? To what extent is national diplomacy coordinated with regional and European policy towards China? And what are the goals of European cities in their relations with Chinese counterparts?

Our research will be divided into three stages. The first one will concern the creation of a survey sent to all cities of the European Union (with over 50,000 inhabitants) - based on the obtained answers, we will create a map of cities that are actively cooperating with Chinese cities. In the second part, we will conduct case studies in selected ten cities - different in size, demographic and economic potential - to find out what motivations are driving their cooperation with China. In the third part, on the basis of interviews with representatives of the European Commission and the European External Action Service, we will try to understand the role that cities play in the EU's policy toward China.

The project will lead to publishing two scientific articles a book presenting the overall results of the project.

Our project will not only contribute to a better understanding of the little-explored aspect of Euro-Chinese cooperation, but it can also influence better political use of cities in the foreign policy of the Member States and the European Union itself. Cities activities can be important political instrument. Chinese take this into account in the political planning, Europeans should do the same.