

# INTRODUCTION

**Tomasz Kamiński**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/8142-517-9.01>

Regions and cities are becoming increasingly more important elements of the international system. Together with other non-state actors, such as international organisations, multinational companies (MNCs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and terrorist groups, they have become inherent constituents of international relations. The “state-centric world” in which states operate as principal agents has been replaced by **the diverse “multicentric world” of various state and non-state actors.**

This trend is clearly visible when we look at the economic power of some American states (such as California or Texas) or of regions which use foreign policy to leverage their internal autonomy (such as Quebec or Catalonia). Regional governments are concerned with what has traditionally been defined as “low policy”: environmental issues, investment promotion, cultural and educational exchange, etc. It stands in contrast to “high policy” represented by the diplomatic and military security agenda of central governments.

The activities of regions and cities, as non-state actors, attracted considerable scholarly attention in the 1980s, and usually fall under the heading of ‘paradiplomacy’ (Cornago, 2010; Duchacek, 1984; Kuznetsov, 2015; Lecours, 2002). **Paradiplomacy is a part of the much broader process of “pluralisation” of diplomacy** in which diplomatic practices, institutions and discourses are no longer limited to traditional international diplomacy. Sub-state units are the main non-state actors which engage in paradiplomacy, an emerging area of academic scholarship (Cornago, 2013).

Local governments across the world are participating more and more actively in international relations (Tavares, 2016). They open trade and cultural missions abroad, join international networks of cooperation, and sign treaties and agreements with their partners from other countries. The subnational level of relations is exerting an increasing influence on the relations between European states and China, in particular in areas such as climate change and investment policy, in which local authorities play a vital role.

The fast development of the European Union's (EU) relations with China, starting about 25 years ago, would not have been possible without a growing network of links on all levels: supranational, interstate, and sub-state. At the sub-state level, **regional and local authorities in European countries have increased the number of contacts with their Chinese counterparts**, as European authorities are trying academic and business cooperation with them, and attract Chinese investors, students, and tourists.

The academic literature on EU-China relations has been largely reticent as regards the sub-state dimension. Even very recent publications ignore this phenomenon in the context of economic relations (T. Christiansen et al., 2018; T. Christiansen & Maher, 2017; Farnell & Irwin Crooks, 2016) and people-to-people dialogue (Burney et al., 2014). The first few publications regarding the cooperation between the EU and China on the regional level have been published only in the last few years (Kamiński, 2019b, 2019c; Skorupska, 2017; Skorupska et al., 2019).

Also, in the paradiplomacy literature there is no comprehensive analysis of the growing interconnections between European and Chinese regions. The existing studies concentrate either on intra-European activities among European regions (Tatham, 2015, 2016) or the paradiplomacy of Chinese regions (Liu & Song, 2019; Mierzejewski, 2016, 2018b; Summers, 2018a).

This book is the result of a three-year project conducted by the Faculty of International and Political Studies at the University of Lodz and the Polish Institute of International Affairs, funded by the National Science Centre. The aim of the project was to understand the role of cooperation between European and Chinese regions in the policy of the European Union as regards China.

The study involved the phenomenon of paradiplomacy, understood as foreign relations of subnational entities whose goal is to achieve economic,

cultural, and political benefits. It is assumed that **the empowerment of regions leads to the rise of regional authority in Europe and brings new challenges to the foreign policy of the state** (Tatham, 2018).

The book presents the specificity of the relations with China at the subnational level of the six largest EU countries in terms of population: Germany, France, Spain, Poland, Italy, and the UK<sup>1</sup>. It also analyses selected case studies of European regions cooperating with Chinese partners.

The analysis was based on a review of the literature and information gathered during a survey of all 82 regions in the five EU Member States included in the study (France, Spain, Germany, Poland, and Italy) and selected local government units in the UK. The survey was conducted in December 2016 and the first half of 2017. A questionnaire was distributed in paper and electronic versions to representatives of regional authorities (the units responsible for international cooperation). Some regions did not respond, and in the case of others, the obtained data was supplemented with information from the websites of the analysed local government units<sup>2</sup>.

The authors also conducted a series of interviews with representatives of the authorities of selected regions from the six surveyed countries, as well as with EU officials. In total, in 2017–2019, 16 interviews were conducted, out of which 12 were in the form of semi-structured extensive individual interviews, one was informal, and two were in the form of an e-mail exchange (written replies). 11 interviews were conducted in the surveyed regions: three in Germany, two in Spain, France, and Poland, and one in Italy and the UK. Additionally, interviews were conducted in the European Commission in the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) and Energy (DG ENER), in the European External Action Service (EEAS), with the person responsible for EU-China relations, and with diplomats from selected Member States (Polish and German diplomats).

The book maps Sino-European contacts at the regional level in an attempt to close the gap in knowledge. Until now, we have not known what the network of contacts with China at the regional level looks like and what the

---

<sup>1</sup> The research project was conducted before the UK left the EU.

<sup>2</sup> In Germany, the survey was completed by eight out of 16 *Länder*. Information on the others was obtained from another survey.

determinants and institutional forms of inter-regional partnerships are. We present a detailed analysis of subnational contacts between European and Chinese regions in the 6 analysed states, illustrated by case studies of most interesting regions from each country.

The major findings of the book have already been presented in a shorter and more analytical form in a report published by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (Skorupska et al., 2019). The interactions between subnational and supranational (EU) level relations with China has been presented in a separate paper (Kamiński, 2019c).

At the beginning of our study we put forward a few hypotheses to be tested in our research. Some of them have been confirmed fully, but some only partially, which shows that not all our initial intuitions, based on anecdotal observations, turned out to be correct.

*Hypothesis 1. European regions try to “Europeanize” their interests, but in the institutional system of the EU foreign policy there are hardly any effective mechanisms to do so. Due to this fact, the impact of regions on the EU policy towards China is limited.*

This hypothesis was only partially confirmed. There are hardly any communication channels or information flows between regional authorities and Brussels; as a result, the impact of regions on the EU’s policy towards China is limited. On the other hand, the willingness to “Europeanize” the regions’ interests in relations with China was not confirmed by the research. The analysed regions did not show such ambitions. They have preferred to develop their relations with China in collaboration with national governments.

*Hypothesis 2. In their contacts with Chinese partners, regional authorities concentrate mainly on their regional goals and not on the implementation of political priorities of the central government or the EU.*

The hypothesis has been fully confirmed. Regional relations with China are conducted largely autonomously and are based on regional and not national or European interests. Although regional activities have to fit within the framework of national foreign policy, they are rarely coordinated on the state level.

*H3. Although interregional interactions between European and Chinese regions have been growing rapidly in the last decade, they are still inadequate in relation to their potential and European needs.*

The hypothesis has been confirmed. We have shown a significant increase in the number of links in the last few years, in particular after a larger opening of the Chinese side to cooperation, under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative. Interviews with regional authorities also confirmed that there is potential for further development of contacts with China on the regional level, visible in many different areas: economic, academic, cultural, and people-to-people contacts. On the other hand, some regions have become more cautious, pragmatic, or sometimes even reluctant. Instead of intensive exchange of official visits, they want to focus on activities that may bring reciprocal benefits.

*H4. The scope of cooperation between regions goes beyond traditional topics (e.g. economy, academic exchange, culture) and covers also new areas such as local management, regional development, urban planning and environment.*

The hypothesis has been partially confirmed. Paradiplomatic relations with China are becoming more complex and include an increasing number of topics. Climate change and environmental protection have become one of the most important themes in the case of many regional links. However, the economic cooperation and academic exchanges clearly dominate the agenda of subnational contacts between the EU and China.

*H5. European regions have more and more contacts with Chinese provinces from the Central and Eastern part of the country, hence also less developed Chinese regions have collaborated with their European counterparts.*

The hypothesis has been confirmed. The number of regions involved in cooperation on both sides is growing. While it is still the regions of East China that have the most contacts with European partners, almost all regions from the Chinese interior are also developing cooperation with Europe. Such provinces as Sichuan and Chongqing have several European partners.

The book is divided into seven chapters. In the first chapter the authors present a general overview of the main findings of their research. They characterise EU-China subnational relations on the basis of the survey results, as well as from the Chinese perspective. The next six chapters are focused on individual countries included in the study, showing subnational relations with China in each of them. In the concluding chapter, we try to reflect on the major factors which determine the contacts of European regions with Chinese ones, speculate about future trends, and propose potential paths for further research. The book was written before the COVID-19 pandemic and the final decision on Brexit, therefore it does not cover the consequences of these events.

\* \* \*

As the editor of the book and the research coordinator in the project I would like to thank all the people who have contributed to this book. Apart from my co-authors, responsible for particular chapters, I would like to thank research assistants who helped us at different stages of our work. In particular I would like to stress the role of Sylwia Matusiak, who was responsible for conducting the survey. It was difficult work which she managed brilliantly.