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IDENTITY AFFIRMATION THROUGH CROSS-
LOADING? LITHUANIA'S VALUE-BASED
FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CHINA AND THE
'TAIWANESE REPRESENTATIVE OFFICE'

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Identity Affirmation Through Cross-loading? Lithuania's Value-based Foreign Policy Towards China and the 'Taiwanese Representative Office'

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Abstract

On 18 November 2021, the inauguration of the 'Taiwanese Representative Office' in Vilnius—whose unprecedented name diverges from the official denomination adopted by other EU Member States—sparked a harsh response by Beijing and drew international attention to the limits of the EU's 'One China' policy. Enquiring into the drivers of this decision through the analytical lens of cross-loading as a form of horizontal and informal Europeanization whereby EU Member States lead the way by means of informal groups of like-minded countries outside European institutions, a twofold rationale inspires this paper. First, this work attempts to contribute to the conceptualization and operationalization of cross-loading by offering some original insights on the theoretical interplay between processes of Europeanization and IR theories, notably social constructivism, sociological institutionalism and role theory. Second, this paper investigates the triangular relations among EU Member States, Taiwan and China bridging the domestic and European levels and shedding the light on established practices and forms of engagement. Relying upon a qualitative textual analysis and original semi-structured interviews, this paper argues that the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office is part and parcel of an attempt to cross-load a value-based repositioning by Vilnius vis-à-vis Beijing and Taipei, ultimately informed by an act of tripartite identity affirmation which rests upon interrelated traits of state, collective-European, and role identity.

Keywords

Cross-loading; Europeanization; Identity Affirmation; Leadership; Informal Groupings; Social Constructivism; Sociological Institutionalism; Role Theory; Taiwanese Representative Office; Value-based Foreign Policy; 'One China' Policy.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CEECs	Central and Eastern European Countries
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
EEAS	European External Action Service
EETO	European Economic and Trade Office in Taipei
EPC	European Political Cooperation
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HR/VP	High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
NB6	Nordic-Baltic 6 (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden)
NB8	Nordic-Baltic 8 (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden)
PRC	People's Republic of China
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

In July 2021 the Lithuanian government announced the opening of a ‘Taiwanese Representative Office’ in Vilnius with the aim of enhancing economic and cultural ties with Taipei. While it has been constantly stated by Lithuanian authorities that the Office does not entail any diplomatic recognition (Šimonytė, 2022), the inclusion of ‘Taiwan’ in its approved name sets an unprecedented case which diverges from the common denomination—‘Taipei’—adopted by the European Union (EU) Member States. In addition, the decision was taken unilaterally without prior discussion within European institutions and was followed by an exceptional implementation of trade and diplomatic countermeasures by Beijing which condemned the Lithuanian decision as an ‘extremely egregious act’ against China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Xinhua, 2021).

To the best knowledge of the author, there has been a single attempt to analyse the Lithuanian decision from a theoretical perspective in peer-reviewed publications which highlights the atlanticist nature of the choice (Banka, 2023), with some descriptive endeavours to grasp its origins in recent Sino-Lithuanian relations (Andrijauskas, 2022a; 2022b). This paper contextualizes the Lithuanian decision within the broader EU foreign policymaking by addressing the following questions: *Why has Lithuania decided to allow the opening of a ‘Taiwanese Representative Office’ in Vilnius whose name diverges from the denomination widely accepted in other European countries? Is this an attempt to distance itself from EU common practices or to lead the way towards a change in EU foreign policy?*

Being part of a community built upon norms and practices, EU Member States undergo and contribute to a process of Europeanization of foreign policy defined as the ‘transformation in the way in which national foreign policies are constructed... in the consequent internalization of norms and expectations arising from a complex system of collective European policy making’ (Tonra, 2000: 229). Member States ‘upload’ their preferences onto the European level

through institutional channels and ‘download’ or adapt to pressures, appropriate behaviors, and common practices (Wong and Hill, 2011: 1-3). However, this paper revolves around an informal and horizontal form of Europeanization—i.e., cross-loading—whereby Member States lead the way and contribute to EU foreign policy by exercising mutual influence independent of mediation by EU actors and institutions through coalitions of like-minded countries (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019: 515). As opposed to a rationalist-intergovernmentalist approach (Czulno, 2021), I rely on a sociological institutionalist perspective interspersed with intuitions from role theory and social constructivism (Breuer, 2012). Thus, cross-loading consists of exchanges of ‘ideas, norms and ‘ways of doing’ things’ among Member States anchored in the EU as a socialized environment establishing logics of appropriateness in terms of practices and values and as a social community where Members learn from one another through interaction or example (Major and Pomorska, 2005: 1; Checkel, 2005). Furthermore, by scrutinizing the Lithuanian decision to allow the opening of the ‘Taiwanese Representative Office’ through the analytical lens of cross-loading, this paper offers innovative theoretical insights into its conceptualization, operationalization and its interplay with International Relations Theory, namely social constructivism.

Far from judging the merits of the Lithuanian decision, the aim of this paper is to grasp the domestic and European roots and implications underpinning the choice by scrutinizing how it was justified by foreign policymakers. However, since ‘[c]ross-Strait relations are the main, if not exclusive lens, through which European politicians and decision-makers look at Taiwan’ (Wacker, 2016: 520), the ties between EU Member States and mainland China are considered part of this analysis. This paper argues that behind Lithuania’s symbolic decision related to the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius, there is an attempt to lead the way through cross-loading towards a value-based repositioning vis-à-vis China and Taiwan ultimately informed by an act of tripartite identity affirmation.

This paper is divided into three main parts. The first part introduces the theoretical framework which addresses the conceptualization, operationalization, and motivations behind the process of cross-loading. The second part provides an overview of the substance and practical implementation of the EU's 'One China' policy and Lithuania's foreign policy towards Taiwan with its contextualization in broader Sino-Lithuanian relations. The third part is devoted to the analysis of the Lithuanian decision related to the Taiwanese Representative Office as a case of cross-loading, focusing on Lithuania's path to leadership, the followership of like-minded EU Member States and the value-based roots of the decision in Vilnius' state, role, and collective-European identity.

Methodology

Intentionality and causality are central to the process of cross-loading (Wong, 2017). Indeed, policy or normative convergence (output) cannot be considered as a *prima facie* confirmation of cross-loading owing to intervening variables and spuriousness. Presuming an input-oriented rationale, cross-loading requires Member States which intentionally lead the way and, when successful, the evidence of an impact on the would-be followers' choices. Thus, a meticulous enquiry into bilateral exchanges, informal and preparatory discussions assumes vital importance. Accordingly, the author relies on a twofold methodological approach. First, I adopt a qualitative textual analysis of media sources, especially Lithuanian English-language online newspapers and public broadcasters. Second, in addition to public interviews and speeches, I draw on original data from 13 semi-structured interviews conducted between April and July 2022 to triangulate media sources and detect underlying intentions. Interviewees include diplomats and policymakers from EU Member States and institutions (see Appendix 1) and are numbered to ensure anonymity.

2. Theorizing Cross-loading: Concept, Process and Drivers

Drawing from sociological institutionalism, this part introduces an innovative theoretical framework which provides an overview of the concept, process, and motivations behind cross-loading. The first section draws a distinction between cross-loading and de-Europeanization by outlining three distinctive conceptual features, while the following section deals with the operationalization of the process of cross-loading in terms of leadership, interactions, learning process, and followership. Throughout an interplay between sociological institutionalism and social constructivism, the final section addresses the motivations behind an act of cross-loading, where the latter is theorized as a permissive framework accommodating rationalist and reflectivist drivers.

2.1 Conceptualizing Cross-loading: Europeanization Beyond Institutions

Cross-loading is defined as the ‘mutual influence which the Member States exert on each other, independent of mediation by EU institutions’ (Hill and Wong, 2011: 218). As opposed to the bidirectional, vertical, and institutionalized model of uploading and downloading, cross-loading draws the attention to voluntary and horizontal patterns of exchanges and coordination (Bulmer and Radaelli, 2004: 7). The defining feature lies in the fact that a decision or initiative is discussed, promoted, implemented outside European institutional fora, with Member States preferring horizontal bilateral or mini-lateral contacts with specific counterparts.

However, earlier academic studies and their few individuations of empirical cases focused on a different conception of cross-loading (Tonra, 2015). While the role of EU institutions was still absent or minimal, the central indicator became the process of ‘identity reconstruction’—i.e., ‘the socialization of interests and identities’ (Wong, 2006: 325)—based on the underlying assumption that horizontal exchanges and interactions outside formal institutions resulted in shared perceptions, convergent interests and policy transfers with

evident normative connotations (Wong, 2005; 2007). For instance, some empirical cases associated with cross-loading—e.g., the Polish attempt to gather consensus and build a coalition in support of the Eastern Partnership (Normann, 2012)—are fundamentally outcome-driven.

In their landmark contribution, Aggestam and Bicchi (2019) provided a renewed contextualization of the process of cross-loading which constitutes the theoretical basis for this paper. The creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the evolution of the double-hatted figure of the High Representative (HR/VP) retaining the task of agenda-setting and policy proposal, and the abolition of the Council's rotating presidency with its institutional channel to upload national preferences did not enhance centralization and consistency in formal EU foreign policymaking (Vanhoonacker and Pomorska, 2013; Reynaert, 2012), but crystallized a framework where Member States attempt to lead the way by promoting change informally relying on coalitions of like-minded states. This is the case of Sweden's recognition of Palestine in 2014, with Stockholm breaking away to lead, inspire and persuade other Member States to follow (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019: 524). In other words, cross-loading is not limited to sporadic instances of horizontal Europeanization but is part and parcel of a new direction of governance in EU foreign policymaking, where informal patterns of interaction have assumed equal dignity and relevance of the vertical processes of uploading and downloading (*ibid*).

If Member States bypass European institutional channels and leadership requires a unilateral precedent diverging from common European positions, how does cross-loading differ from cases of re-nationalization or de-Europeanization (Tonra, 2018)? Müller et al. (2021) suggest three elements to observe de-Europeanization. First, the latter entails the 'reconstruction of professional roles' in exclusively or predominantly national terms (*ibid*: 524). Member States by means of their representatives challenge common understandings or attempt to re-centralize policymaking channels by championing national interests and re-nationalizing

bureaucratic-governmental structures. Second, there is a ‘repudiation’ of core procedural and substantive norms of the EU—which delineate the ‘fundamental and foundational aspects’ of EU foreign policy—beyond mere contestation (ibid: 525). Substantive norms (e.g., democracy, rule of law, human rights) as well as procedural norms (e.g., information sharing, consensus-seeking) constitute the normative identity of the EU as a community of values and practices (Manners, 2002; Bicchi, 2011). Third, de-Europeanization entails the ‘structural disintegration of collective policy-making institutions’, which manifests itself through various degrees of ‘disengagement’, i.e., continuous lack of commitment to contribute to EU foreign policymaking, and ‘circumvention’, i.e., the reliance and loyalty to alternative frameworks such as groupings or other international institutions (Müller et al., 2021: 526).

On these premises, I propose three conceptual attributes differentiating cross-loading from de-Europeanization. First, as opposed to a full-fledged circumvention, cross-loading involves a temporary elusion of EU institutions without transfers or reduction of commitment, loyalty, and contribution to the EU bodies, which encompasses the unwillingness of a state to spur an official position, statement, declaration, policy tool as well as the absence of a relevant discussion in intergovernmental bodies at different levels (Thomas, 2021: 620). Second, instead of a repudiation of fundamental EU norms, a Member State cross-loads initiatives, preferences, and positions by referring to both European substantial and procedural norms or common positions which constitute the basis of the debate. Indeed, the concept of cross-loading addresses the informal interaction patterns occurring within the EU and not because of the EU (Major, 2005: 186), preserving the European framework as ‘the overarching practice’ anchoring cooperation among Member States (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019: 518). Third, as opposed to efforts of unilateral re-nationalization of procedures and preferences, cross-loading entails a formal or informal ‘declaration of intent’ by the leading state to encourage a change whose scope goes beyond national borders. As a form of horizontal Europeanization, there is a long-

term goal of progressive ‘collectivization’ of the change towards a contribution at the EU level. Having addressed the conceptualization of cross-loading, it is worth turning to the operationalization of its process.

2.2 The Process of Cross-loading: Leadership, Learning and Followership

How does the process of cross-loading unfold? The procedural aspects of cross-loading have received scant academic consideration, with limited epistemological guidance on how the process may be operationalized. This section aims to contribute to the operationalizability of cross-loading by providing some indicators elucidating how it unfolds in terms of leadership, interactions, learning process, and followership.

2.2.1 Cross-loading as a Leadership Mechanism

The process of cross-loading has been theorized as an informal and horizontal vehicle of leadership (Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 2020: 14-15). Leadership can be defined as a ‘process in which an actor purposely seeks to influence and guide activities in a group towards collective goals, decisions, and desired outcomes’ (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019: 519). Drawing from the field of sociological institutionalism and role theory (Aggestam, 2021), leadership is conceived as a ‘social role’ which is formed in the interaction with followers (Aggestam and Johansson, 2020). Hence, the legitimacy, authority, and effectiveness of a leader are determined by a two-way relationship with its counterparts, as opposed to hegemonic or relative power (see Young, 1989). The relational essence of cross-loading offers a suitable channel for would-be leaders considering that, notwithstanding the creation of the EEAS and HR/VP, EU Member States tend to accord a representative role to these bodies, reinforcing the presence of horizontal intergovernmental instincts in foreign policy (Aggestam and Johansson, 2017: 1216-1217).

Additionally, as a form of Europeanization, the process of cross-loading aims at innovating or shaping an existing situation. Accordingly, leaders are ‘agents of change’ through interactions ‘structuring or restructuring’ situations, perceptions, and expectations (Bass and Stogdill, 1990: 19-20). In line with the abovementioned concept of ‘collectivization’, the actions of leading Member States have intended shared goals and collective outcomes and cannot be conceived as a unilateral undertaking (Beach and Mazzucelli, 2007). Finally, while literature distinguishes among different types of leadership based on how the latter is exercised (Parker and Karlsson, 2014: 584-586), two conceptualizations are relevant to this paper. In the process of cross-loading states tend to employ forms of directional leadership, i.e., the attempt to pave the way by setting a unilateral example (Malnes, 1995: 92), or ideational leadership, where the leader tries to ‘shape followers’ preferences by providing intellectual guidance’ creating knowledge and altering perceptions of an issue (Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 2020: 14). Thus, cross-loading rests on the presence and of an ideational or directional attempt to lead the way by a Member State.

2.2.2 Interactions and European Institutions

Cross-loading rests on patterns of interactions outside formal European institutional channels. Drawing from Börzel and Risse (2012: 5), according to the quality of interactions two main types of cross-loading can be distinguished: direct and indirect. Direct cross-loading occurs when horizontal interactions between the leader and would-be followers can be observed. Interactions may take various forms (e.g., persuasion, exchange of information, experiences or analyses, provision of guidance) and involve several actors at multiple levels (Howell, 2004). Contacts take place at the level of governments (e.g., high-level meetings or visits), diplomats (e.g., regional departments, embassies, political directors), and Members of Parliament (MPs). In the case of the 2014 Swedish recognition of Palestine, interactions were limited to the level

of informal party-political contacts (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019: 524). Constant issue-specific personal, departmental, and national interactions can assist a process of elite socialization whereby a ‘gradual internalization of cooperative habits and common views’ ensues among the structures of Member States and may be facilitated by previously institutionalized coordination reflexes (Smith, 2000: 617). Transnational networks encompassing epistemic communities and civil society matter in the process of cross-loading as they may hinder or ease both the leader’s transmission and the follower’s internalization (Tocci, 2011: 1-5; Hill and Wallace, 1996: 6).

Leadership by example does not require interactions—i.e., indirect cross-loading—and revolves around the mechanism of emulation, where a state ‘learns from or copies a successful exemplar’s or cultural peer’s norms and practices’ (Lenz, 2013: 215). Member States draw rational lessons (‘functional emulation’) or share values, identity, and ideas with the leader (‘normative emulation’) (Börzel and Risse, 2012: 9-10).

EU institutions are still relevant in the process of cross-loading. First, horizontal exchanges do not exclude parallel discussions within institutional fora (see Pomorska, 2008: 38-39). Therefore, cross-loading and uploading are not mutually exclusive. Second, besides strict intergovernmental bodies with representatives perorating national preferences, the European institutional framework includes a role for other institutions whose positions may impact upon leadership and its perception. For instance, while the European Parliament has limited ‘hard powers’ of decision in foreign policy and external action, its ‘soft powers’ of pressure and advocacy employing deliberative and declaratory mechanisms can legitimize and assist cross-loading (Jančić, 2016: 132). Third, as a form of Europeanization, leadership through cross-loading is imbued with European norms, practices, and official positions upon which the leader carefully acts and that limit or widen its entrepreneurial space of manoeuvre (Roth, 2011). The common denominator to the different types of cross-loading remains the innermost process of social learning.

2.2.3 The Underlying Process of Learning

From a sociological institutionalist perspective, behind the informal and horizontal interactions or indirect example provided by the leader to the would-be followers a process of social learning operates (Pomorska, 2008: 16). Drawing from Levy (1994: 283), the latter entails changes of existing views, development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures ‘as a result of the observations and interpretation of experience’. Cross-loading relies on a cognitive and formative dimension, where EU Member States voluntarily learn from one another by sharing information, analyses, and policymaking structures (Tonra, 2015: 183). As for leadership, learning does not require interactions. Indirect cross-loading and leadership by example may lead to ‘experiential learning’, where the leader provides a test or case study for other Member States (Levy, 1994: 283-284; Czulno, 2021: 1249-1250). For instance, the successful ‘German model’ of pragmatic cooperation with China in the mid-1990s based on silent diplomacy on human rights and strict adherence to the ‘One China’ policy had a ‘demonstrative effect’ on the French weak ties with Beijing, concurring to the normalization of their relations in 1994 and the commitment not to sell arms to Taiwan (Wong, 2006: 69-72).

Cognitive change through learning can occur at multiple levels of the ‘belief system’ (De Flers and Müller, 2012: 28). States interpret experiences differently according to their peculiar ideational or material factors—e.g., culture, economic size, history—which filter down examples to diverse perceptions, relevance, and outcomes. The impact may lead to some degree of identity reconstruction, where shared definitions of interests and norms among policymaking elites are detectable (Wong, 2017: 151). Yet, the process of cross-loading is a dialogical progression where the leader deals with active recipients whose reactions may require adjusting expectations, ambitions, or discourse. Member States ‘reacts in creative ways’, as they ‘emulate, distance themselves from, or relaunch a practice’ in a ‘co-constitutive dialogue’ (Aggestam and

Bicchi, 2019: 519). The process of cross-loading is, therefore, ‘centrally decentralized’ as followership rests on the willingness of like-minded countries.

2.2.4 Followership: Like-Mindedness and Informal Groupings

As a social process, cross-loading presumes the presence of a leading Member State and followers which provide implicit or explicit legitimacy and authority (Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 2020). Outside EU institutions, interactions tend to occur bilaterally or mini-laterally within informal groups of like-minded countries.

Informal groups consist of Member States ‘that are both keen and capable of committing their energies and resources in a specific foreign policy dossier’ (Amadio Viceré, 2021: 4). If informal groupings have a long-lasting tradition in EU foreign policymaking at least since the establishment of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) and predominantly informed by a collective action logic, the post-Lisbon institutional framework contributed their consecration as a mechanism of informal governance (ibid; Amadio Viceré, 2022; Hill, 2004; Delreux and Keukeleire, 2017). Informal coalitions can be built ad hoc for an issue-specific purpose or upon pre-existing more or less institutionalized groups. Germany cross-loaded its appeasing approach towards Russia to Poland between 2008 and 2014 by promoting an activity of ad hoc coalition-building and, after the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, exercised shared leadership with France through the ‘Weimar Triangle’ (Czulno, 2021: 1254-1258). Instances of permanent informal groups of EU Member States are the Nordic-Baltic cooperation (NB6) or the Visegrád Group.

Coalitions are flexible in both delineation and evolution. Both leaders and followers ‘implement small policy changes, observe their effects, learn through trial and errors’ (Levy, 1994: 283-284). Since adherence is ultimately voluntary the leader cannot fully control the selectivity of the members, although a concentric ‘layered structure’ of the group sometimes

emerges (Elgström, 2017: 226). Leadership is not a mere process of recruitment but relies on the ‘characteristics’ of the followers (Hermann, 1986: 169). Suitably, the concept of like-mindedness grasps the proximity of experiences, practices, values, capabilities, interests, and perceptions among countries which—contrarily to concessions and logrolling emphasized by intergovernmentalists (Thomas, 2021)—represents the precondition for a successful cross-loading. Like-minded countries can share ideational and normative affinities or material interest-based similarities (Dyduch, 2021). Like-mindedness is sensitive to the process of social learning but also sieves its impact on the would-be follower.

Therefore, in operational terms, cross-loading is a differentiated and selective process in expectations and effects owing to followers’ idiosyncrasies and the potential presence of signs of followership at different levels (e.g., legislative bodies, preparatory committees).

2.3 The Motivations Behind Cross-loading: a Social Constructivist Paradigm

Cross-loading as a process of horizontal and informal Europeanization is substantially silent on the reasons behind a state’s choice to lead the way towards change. Thus, cross-loading is a permissive analytical framework able to accommodate rationalist and reflectivist drivers. For instance, Germany cross-loaded a conciliatory approach towards Russia to Poland and other Member States to preserve its economic ties and protect its interests (Czulno, 2021), while the Swedish recognition of Palestine was part of a new normative orientation of its foreign policy (Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019). For the purpose of this paper, a productive interplay between sociological institutionalism and social constructivism can be adopted.

From a social constructivist standpoint, the structure of the international system, states and their behaviors are constructed upon inter-subjective beliefs and meanings stemming from ideas, identities, and interactions (Hurd, 2008). States allocate meanings to reality through the prism of identity, i.e., ‘a property of international actors that generates motivational and

behavioral dispositions' (Wendt, 1999: 224). However, the emphasis on identity and its cultural, historical, and social attributes 'does not contradict strategic action and subjective rationality', but qualifies them (Aggestam, 2004: 90). Indeed, values, historical experiences, and norms are 'cultural raw materials' which delineate identities and interests (Weldes, 1999: 10). Thus,

'national interests are social constructions created as meaningful objects out of the intersubjective and culturally established meanings with which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood' (Weldes, 1996: 280, emphasis added).

Drawing from Wendt (1999: 224) and Alexandrov (2003), it is worth distinguishing among three co-constituted dimensions of identity: state, role, and collective. State identity refers to 'shared beliefs about the Self and the Other' (Alexandrov, 2003: 36) or a 'consciousness and memory of Self as a separate locus of thought and activity' shared by the population of a state on the basis of collective memories, historical experiences, language (Wendt, 1999: 225-226). Role identity goes beyond pre-social intrinsic properties and denotes the position occupied by a state in a social group (ibid). The concept of collective identity blurs the distinction between the Self and the Other through the cognitive process of identification which is usually partial and issue-specific (ibid: 227-229).

These conceptions of identity can be productively considered through the cognitive and relational corrective lenses of sociological institutionalism. The latter shares a constructivist holist ontology where parts exist and are constructed 'only in relation to wholes' (Fearson and Wendt, 2005: 53; Jung, 2019). Additionally, it posits that institutions as social and relational environments rooted in shared norms, values, and practices define Members' identity in 'socially appropriate ways' and shape the formulation of their preferences (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 949; Finnemore, 1996: 342).

State identity complements, coexists, shapes and is sensitive to a European-collective identity throughout continuous Europeanization. While an in-depth discussion of the contested meaning of European identity is beyond the scope of this paper (see Risse, 2009) and far from

civilizational interpretations, I conceive it in normative and social terms. Normatively, European rules, norms and values are not merely regulative, but ‘constitutive’ as ‘their purpose and explicit aim is to establish a clear identity and to pursue decisive collective action’ (Tonna, 2003: 742). There is wide consensus on some basic components of this identity, notably the values of liberal democracy, social market economies and the peaceful resolution of disputes along with procedural norms and the adherence to common positions (Hyde-Price, 2004: 108). Socially, Member States share a sense of belonging and like-mindedness to a group which delineates the external ‘Other’ according to shared attitudes, behaviors, practices, and common interests (Matonytė and Morkevičius, 2009: 969).

Furthermore, Member States assume a role identity in the EU social community or informal sub-groups. Leadership as a social role requires recognition by followers. In the case of small Member States, literature shows that immaterial resources such as credibility, experiences, issue-specific knowledge, and resonance of the argument (e.g., appeal to EU norms and values) are crucial for successful leadership (Nasra, 2011: 167). From a social constructivist perspective, Member States’ foreign policymakers perceive and interpret interests and threats by means of traits of state and collective-European identity, where the latter establishes logics of appropriateness delimiting the sociological context of cross-loading (Olsen and March, 2004). Succinctly, cross-loading entails the presence of leaders assuming a role identity—recognized by its followers—who break away by promoting stances related to their state identity within the perimeter of a collective-European identity.

In this sense, cross-loading may not only entail some degree of identity reconstruction through the process of social learning (Harmsen and Wilson, 2000: 17; Wong, 2017), but on the part of the leading Member State, it substantiates an ‘affirmation’ of a tripartite composite identity which filters the decisions of its foreign policymakers whether value-based or interest-driven. Identity affirmation—i.e., the exposition of its multi-dimensional and -layered

identity—is not necessarily the goal of a state’s foreign policy, but an inherent act underlying the functioning of cross-loading. The state and collective-European dimensions of identity are not sufficient for a genuine act of affirmation:

Identity affirmation is dependent on role-playing, and impossible without it... states choose to enact roles such as 'leader'... in particular situations in order to make their identity affirming behaviour in international politics meaningful (McCourt, 2011: 1600, emphasis added).

Further dimensions and layers of additional identities may come into play. However, cross-loading requires the interplay of the co-constitutive state, collective-European, and role dimensions.

3. Lithuanian-Taiwanese Relations and the EU’s ‘One China’ Policy

The significance of the decision of Lithuania to concede the opening of the ‘Taiwanese Representative Office’ with this name cannot be grasped without enquiring into the broader relations between Vilnius, Beijing, and Taipei along with the EU’s ‘One China’ policy and its practical implications. The latter is addressed in the first part, while the following sections provide an overview of the Lithuanian-Taiwanese ties since 1990, with particular attention to the events characterizing the last four years which marked a turning point for Lithuania’s foreign policy.

3.1 The EU’s ‘One China’ Policy: Substance and Practical Implications

The European relations with Taiwan are regulated by the long-standing ‘One China’ policy, as opposed to Beijing’s ‘Principle’ (interviews 5, 6). While there is no joint written definition, Beijing’s interpretation of the ‘One China’ Principle was codified in its first EU Policy Paper in 2003 and reiterated in its updated versions (MOFA, 2018). It states that Brussels and EU Member States should refrain from having ‘any contact or exchange of an official or governmental nature’ with Taiwanese authorities, host any visits of political figures, support

Taipei's accession to international organizations where statehood is required, and sell material usable for military purposes (MOFA, 2003; Christiansen et al., 2018). Despite the basic commitment not to establish official relations and recognize Taiwan's de jure statehood, the EU's 'One China' policy has assumed nuanced interpretations over time based on historical context, pressures by Member States, and European interests. In the 1970s, along with the progressive normalization of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and European countries, Taiwan 'did not exist for' the European Community, which excluded Taipei from its Generalized System of Preferences in 1975 (Lim and Winkler, 2012: 177). However, Taipei's economic growth and its 2002 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) led to its identification as a 'separate customs territory' (Tang, 2005: 316). The third shift in perception occurred in the 2000s when it was labelled as an 'economic and commercial entity' (Hsieh, 2020: 697).

These functional shifts were exacerbated by two aspects. First, since the early 1980s, a process of reciprocal institutionalization of non-official relations driven by the desire of Western European countries to safeguard existing exchanges led to the establishment of associations, offices, cultural centers, and chambers of commerce in Taipei and some European countries (Mengin, 2002: 140). An institutional upgrading of EU-Taiwan relations was implemented between 1987 and 1994, when the Taiwanese missions in European capitals were renamed 'Taipei Economic and Cultural Office' or 'Taipei Representative Office' and certain diplomatic privileges and immunities were granted to their staffs (Su, 2013: 540). Meanwhile, in 1989, France led the way to upgrade Member States' offices in Taipei by renaming them and appointing foreign ministry personnel (Tubilewicz, 2008). In 2003, the EU established the European Economic and Trade Office (EETO), subsequently compartmentalized within the EEAS, which 'is responsible for all policy areas' including 'political, economic, trade, or other issues such as human rights' (EEAS, 2021a: 6; Wacker, 2016). Far from being merely symbolic,

these changes reflected a broadening of the scope and intensification of cooperation (Su, 2010). With the opening of the Lithuanian Trade Representative Office in November 2022, sixteen Member States and the EU have offices in Taipei, although their structure, tasks and personnel vary (Krumbein, 2023: 9). For instance, some Member States administer the offices as part of their diplomatic structure with appointed diplomatic staff (e.g., Germany, France, Italy), while others only maintain a presence limited to trade and investment activities with technical experts and officials, such as Spain and Sweden (ibid: 9-10).

Second, since the ‘One China’ policy is also associated with the intergovernmental common foreign and security policy (CFSP) (Hsieh, 2020), the post-Lisbon spectrum of competences concurring to the practice of EU-Taiwan relations is prone to differentiated engagement and interpretation. With the exception of the EU’s exclusive competence on trade, Member States retain authority over foreign policy, state recognition, trade promotion and facilitation which include non-binding memoranda of understanding (MoUs), cultural exchanges, visits, and cooperation initiatives (Adriaensen, 2016; interviews 7, 8). This framework leaves each Member State room for manoeuvre as to the quantity and quality of engagement with Taipei according to their interpretation of the ‘One China’ policy (interviews 5, 7, 8), although Beijing has been attempting to discourage any divergence from its vision.

Despite annual consultations and dialogues in various sectors, EU-Taiwan relations remain relatively limited and underdeveloped. Taipei is the EU’s 12th trading partner, although its relevance in the sector of semiconductors, global value chains, and as a like-minded partner in the region makes it an important strategic actor (Krumbein, 2023: 14; EEAS 2022). The EU has expressed its concern on some human rights issues in Taiwan, including the death penalty, and established the EU-Taiwan Human Rights Consultations in 2018, but its normative power encounters obstacles in the triangular relations with China (Krumbein, 2023: 15-20). While the European Parliament sent its first official delegation to Taiwan only in November 2021 and

has been pushing for the negotiations of a Bilateral Investment Agreement, the goal of the Commission and EEAS remains a more cautious preservation of the status quo in cross-Strait relations with cooperation wherever desirable (interviews 5, 8).

A recent trend of discontent among EU institutions and Member States towards Beijing has been accompanied by a growing interest in Taipei. After the Council approved restrictive measures against Chinese individuals for violations of human rights in Xinjiang, China adopted countermeasures against some European and national MPs, which led the European Parliament to freeze the approval of a comprehensive investment agreement. Furthermore, among EU countries there is growing skepticism concerning the Chinese promises under the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 framework¹, with various Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) testing the ground for cozying up with Taipei (Garlick and Qin, 2023; Lai, 2021).

3.2 Lithuania's Foreign Policy Towards Taiwan and its Europeanization

As part of the PRC-oriented Soviet bloc, Lithuania refrained from having contacts with Taiwan. Commercial ties remained insignificant owing also to Taipei's anti-communist stance. The increasing international isolation of the 1980s induced Taiwan to promote a new 'flexible diplomacy' toward Central and Eastern Europe subordinating ideology to the pragmatic need of export markets and economic partners (Tubilewicz, 2000: 38; 2005). If some post-USSR newly independent countries striving for foreign assistance succumbed to Taipei's economic promises—e.g., Latvia established consular representations with Taiwan between 1992 and 1994—Lithuania did not follow owing to a new government led by former communists (Vitkus, 2019: 312). The new 1996 right-wing government confirmed its adherence to the 'One China'

¹ Officially known as 'Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC Cooperation)', the 16+1 framework was launched in April 2012 as a semi-institutionalized format for cross-dimensional cooperation and included Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Greece joined the framework in 2019 (17+1). The number of members decreased after Lithuania's withdrawal in 2021 (16+1), followed by Latvia and Estonia in 2022 (14+1).

policy and labelled ties with Beijing as a ‘priority’ (Tubilewicz, 2002: 801). Fearing Taiwan’s diplomatic comeback, the PRC adopted a proactive approach rightly after Lithuania restored independence. The United Nations (UN) Security Council permanent seat granting Beijing the right to veto the new Baltic states’ membership and its vast market able to absorb their exports were sufficient trump cards for Lithuania to recognize and cooperate with the PRC (Tubilewicz, 2004: 902). With timid increases in total trade in absolute terms, Taipei saw no urgent need to establish a trade office in Vilnius, with the office in Riga serving all Baltic states (Tubilewicz, 2007: 83-97).

As a national strategic goal, Lithuania joined the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2004. Aware of its foreign policy priorities—notably the Eastern neighborhood and energy security—the vocal attitude adopted to upload its preferences onto the EU level earned Vilnius the reputation of ‘new cold warrior’ and ‘troublemaker’ with backfiring effects (Jakniūnaitė, 2015: 76). For instance, the demand to include additional guarantees about energy supplies and frozen conflicts in Moldova and Georgia to launch the negotiations of a partnership and cooperation agreement with Russia in 2008 remained isolated claims (Pastore, 2013). Yet, compared to the other Baltic Republics, Vilnius progressively presented itself as the ‘leader of the region’ through a proactive approach towards its neighborhood and by promoting closer and democratic ties with Eastern Europe (e.g., Ukraine) (Vilpišauskas, 2013: 136). The 2008-9 parliamentary elections and Grybauskaitė’s presidency instated a pragmatic and constructive stance characterized by intense cooperation with Nordic-Baltic countries and the general ‘expansion of Lithuania’s coalition-power’ with targeted Member States (Janeliūnas, 2021: 192-199).

On Taiwan, Schucher observes that new Member States which joined the EU in 2004 ‘rather than altering the EU’s China or Taiwan policy... wanted to become part of the EU’s relations and benefit from its cooperation programs’ (2007: 30). Furthermore, the

circumscribed regional priorities advanced through the 2013 Lithuanian rotating presidency of the Council and the growing EU-China relations towards a strategic partnership crystallized a pragmatic approach towards Beijing, with Lithuania pushing for negotiating a bilateral investment agreement. Despite sporadic tensions—e.g., Grybauskaitė’s meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2013—Lithuania took part in the then ‘16+1’ format established in 2012 to promote direct investment, commercial and cultural exchanges between China and CEECs (Kuczyńska-Zonik and Stepniewski, 2021).

Thus, since joining the EU, Lithuania has been a proactive member which learnt the relational dynamics of leadership at its expense. Ties among Lithuania, China and Taiwan have been predominantly functional, pragmatic, and relatively Europeanized until recently.

3.3 Sino-Lithuanian Relations and Taiwan: A Three-year Turn

Despite promising initiatives (e.g., 2018 Trade and Investment Forum in Beijing), 2019 represented the ‘watershed year’ in Sino-Lithuanian relations since their establishment in 1991 as it ‘bore witness to the combination of a normative and security agenda’ (Andrijauskas, 2019: 27) at the onset of the current downturn and shift towards Taipei (interviews 2, 3).

On the security side, China’s economic assertiveness in Europe led to a rapid and expanded securitization of Beijing’s presence, especially in CEECs (Kavalski, 2021). A relatively large export-import imbalance (€666 million in 2018), investment in strategic sectors (e.g., transport infrastructures), and the inclusion of China’s espionage as a threat to national security in the 2019 intelligence report caused major discontent in Lithuania (Andrijauskas, 2020a: 6-9). Additional preventive measures adopted by Vilnius included a MoU on 5G security with Washington signed the following year (Beniušis, 2020). On the normative side, numerous incidents were precursors of a definitive downturn between Beijing and Vilnius. Lithuania became more vocal about violations of human rights in China. For instance, in July 2019

Lithuania joined 21 other countries in a letter addressed to the UN human rights bodies expressing concerns for the respect of human rights in Xinjiang (Andrijauskas, 2019: 28). The peak of tension occurred in the so-called ‘August 23 Incident’, when a rally supporting Hong Kong protests met a violent wave of counter-protesters including members of the Chinese diaspora and diplomatic staff in Vilnius (Aušra, 2019), a case of so-called ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy which denotes a confrontational stance towards criticisms of the Chinese government (Martin, 2021). In this vein, as former Foreign Minister Linkevičius advocated for the meaningful involvement of Taiwan in the World Health Assembly in 2020, China imposed bans on Lithuanian wheat exports ‘just for mentioning Taiwan’ (interview 2). It is against this domestic and European backdrop that a new government implemented a value-based model of cooperation paving the way for an array of like-minded followers.

4. The Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania: What’s in a Name?

Since 2020 a new government supported by a coalition agreement signed by the Homeland Union, the Liberal Movement and the Freedom Party agreed on a value-based foreign policy (interviews 1, 2, 4) actively opposing ‘any violation of human rights and democratic freedoms’ (Sytas, 2020). The following year, two months after being the first country to withdraw from the 17+1 format of cooperation with China, Lithuanian authorities announced the decision to allow the opening of a ‘Taiwanese Representative Office’ (henceforth ‘Office’) formally inaugurated on 18 November 2021. This decision is puzzling insofar as the approved name of the office diverges from the common denomination—‘Taipei’—adopted for the Taipei’s offices in 19 EU Member States and their 16 counterparts in Taiwan (EEAS, 2022). The decision was adopted unilaterally without prior discussions within European institutions.

The following part draws the attention of the reader to the decision related to the Office and its broader context within Sino-Lithuanian relations to show why it can be considered a

case of cross-loading. The second and third sections deal with the unfolding of cross-loading by looking at leadership and followership respectively over the post-decision period, while the final part investigates the motivations behind the choice.

4.1 Demystifying Lithuania's Decision: Cross-loading or De-Europeanization?

The main proponents and supporters of the decision to allow the opening of the Office with this name were Foreign Affairs, Gabrielius Landsbergis, and his Deputy, Mantas Adomėnas (interviews 1, 3), in 'coordination' with the Parliament which amended the laws of the civil service and budgetary institutions to create the legal bases also envisaging a future Lithuanian office in Taiwan (interview 4). All Lithuanian interviewees confirmed that the issue of the Office cannot be separated from the past systematic pressures exercised by Beijing and the broader Sino-Lithuanian relations (interviews 1, 2, 3, 4). Besides past incidents, three weeks after the announcement of the Taiwanese Office in July, Beijing recalled its ambassador and, following the opening in November, unilaterally downgraded its diplomatic relations with Vilnius to the level of chargé d'affaires, renamed the Lithuanian embassy in Beijing, and invited the Lithuanian diplomatic staff to hand in their accreditation cards (Lau, 2021a; interviews 1, 2).

In line with horizontal Europeanization, the decision was not raised in European institutions (interviews 1, 3, 5, 8). The core reason is that foreign policy and trade promotion remain national competences without any obligation to discuss related issues at the EU level (interviews 1, 2, 3).

While the name of the Office diverges from the customary practice of EU Member States, it does not constitute a repudiation of substantial or procedural EU norms. As Prime Minister Šimonytė (2022) explained, as opposed to an embassy, the Office is 'a representation of the people with whom we want to be in closer contact' in cultural and economic terms and

does not differ from Taipei's offices in the other Member States. Since the announcement of the Office, it was constantly stated that Lithuania's position remains rooted in the EU's 'One China' policy (ibid) and the EU Commission along with the European Council ascertained the Office's compliance with the policy (Everington, 2021). As a diplomat puts it, Taiwanese people have 'the right to choose the name' of their office and Lithuania has 'the right to decide on the limits' of the 'One China' policy as for too long Beijing's linguistic interpretation 'has been imposed... without questioning, being silent because of economic interests' (interview 2).

Interestingly, from the triangulation of different interviews, it emerges that the problem was not the name of the Office. Indeed, following the wave of Chinese diplomatic sanctions, to strengthen its position vis-à-vis China and facilitate communications, Vilnius requested good offices to the EEAS before the inauguration of the Office (interviews 1, 2). The Chinese representatives maintained a strict red line, as the problem was the opening of the office itself in the current historical moment where the Chinese global position has changed since the last Taipei's representation in Europe was established in Bratislava eighteen years ago (interview 5). Beijing's increasingly stringent interpretation of the 'One China' Principle is well-known by the European Commission, where only in recent years the Chinese delegation in Brussels has asked for renaming 'Taiwan' in some issue-specific decisions (interview 8).

Lithuania's stance towards China and Taiwan followed the direction indicated by EU positions and policies. For instance, the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) approved a resolution condemning the 'genocide' in Xinjian after the Council had adopted sanctions against Chinese individuals two months before (Seimas, 2021a). The Taiwanese Representative Office and the substantial increase in cooperation with Taipei are consistent with the EU Commission's 2016 'Elements for a new EU strategy on China' and the subsequent 'Council Conclusions on China', which underline the 'commitment to continuing to develop its relations with Taiwan and to

supporting the shared values underpinning its system of governance’ (European Commission, 2016; Council of the EU, 2016).

Moreover, since the 2019 ‘August incident’ the EU has been increasingly central to the Lithuanian foreign policy discourse and direction. Besides preserving solid trade relations, President Nausėda stated that Lithuania bases its bilateral relations with China on ‘common EU values’ (2019: 9). The government’s decision to leave the 17+1 framework two years later was not only justified by the Foreign Minister as resulting from its economic failure to deliver, but from a need for EU Member States to ‘act together along with EU institutions’ and outside divisive formats (Lau, 2021b). Over and above rhetorical justifications, the withdrawal from the 17+1 framework represents a concrete response to the call for unity and consistency among EU Member States clearly readable between the lines of the 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook (European Commission, 2019; interview 8). Finally, Lithuania’s desire to ‘bring its contribution’ at the European level (interview 4)—by cross-loading its value-based repositioning vis-à-vis China and Taiwan—is evident in the concerns of then Deputy Foreign Minister Pranckevičius after the Chinese diplomatic sanctions:

‘It is a wake up call in many ways, especially for fellow Europeans to understand that if you want to defend democracy, you have to stand up for it... China is trying to make an example out of us—a negative example, so that other countries don’t necessarily follow that path’ (LRT, 2021, emphasis added).

Lithuania’s decision to allow the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office can be reasonably considered a case of attempted informal and horizontal Europeanization—cross-loading—in line with substantial EU norms with the aim to promote a collective repositioning among EU Member States towards Taipei and Beijing. It is worth considering how Lithuania has progressively become a leader and gathered support by looking at the process of cross-loading.

4.2 Lithuania's Path to Leadership

Various academics highlighted Lithuania's attempt to lead the way towards enhanced engagement with Taiwan and resilience vis-à-vis Chinese pressures (Ferency, 2022; interview 10). However, the tortuous path to full-fledged leadership and the intentionality behind cross-loading need proper clarification.

Initially, Lithuania's disengagement from the 17+1 framework was planned to occur quietly, without an official declaration to avoid further tensions with Beijing (interviews 2, 4). Only after the opening of the Office signs of leadership became manifest. Recognition of potential and effective leadership was implicit in Beijing's upgrading of scale and scope of sanctions. Vilnius was temporarily removed from China's customs clearance system and secondary sanctions were imposed prohibiting the access of products with Lithuanian components to disrupt supply chains and add political pressure of EU countries (Dempsey, 2022; Blockmans, 2021). Meanwhile, since October 2021 six visits took place between Vilnius and Taipei at different levels including Lithuanian high-level public officials—e.g., Deputy Minister of Economy and Innovation—along with the launch of unprecedented economic and cultural initiatives, such as the establishment of an Economic and Trade Forum, a joint Center for Semiconductors and Material Sciences in Vilnius, and talks on Science and Technology, among others (CEIAS, 2022). More importantly, there was an intensification of bilateral contacts between Lithuania and other Member States mainly at the diplomatic level between Ministries and inter-parliamentary level (interviews 1, 4). Only after the opening of the Office and the wave of Chinese sanctions, did Latvia and Estonia begin asking concrete questions about the process and implications of withdrawing from the 16+1 framework and the help from Taiwan to mitigate Chinese coercion (interview 1). As a Lithuanian diplomat succinctly put it, 'since we became a lab, we have to share our results' (interview 2). A Latvian MP confirmed bilateral inter-parliamentary exchanges arguing that Lithuanian colleagues asked 'to

do the same' and rename their Taipei's Office in Riga (Balčiūnas, 2022). Besides bilateral contacts, interviewees emphasized the importance of being a model (interview 1)—indirect cross-loading—as 'an example works by itself helping to create a movement' (interview 4).

Crystallizing a shift in discourse and leadership ambitions, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister vocally urged the other EU countries to abandon the divisive and ineffective 16+1 framework (Take, 2022). Regarding Beijing's coercion and the importance of economic diversification with like-minded partners, he stated:

'This is what Lithuania is doing... leading the way and, surely... many other countries in central and eastern Europe are thinking about doing the same' (ORF, 2022; emphasis added).

This is not an isolated case of leadership. Vilnius was the first country to recall its ambassador from Russia after the latter launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and to ask for investigations of war crimes and crimes against humanity (Krasnodębska, 2022).

However, the process of cross-loading cannot be detached by parallel uploading onto EU institutions reinforcing Lithuania's leadership. Facing diplomatic and economic sanctions, Lithuania raised the issue in EU institutions (interviews 1, 3). After an initial joint statement by HR/VP Borrell and Trade Commissioner Dombrovskis condemning China's 'political pressure and coercive measures', the European Commission initiated a WTO dispute complaint and adopted a €130 million scheme to support Lithuanian companies (EEAS, 2021; Bankauskaitė and Milasius, 2022). Interestingly, an EU official underlined that the 2022 EU-Taiwan Trade and Investment Dialogue was an attempt by the Commission to upgrade—to the level of Director-General—and broaden the scope of cooperation with Taipei reflecting the positions of 'states like Lithuania' and the demands of the European Parliament (interview 8).

Indeed, in October 2021, the latter adopted a landmark report—the first debate and vote on a comprehensive report focusing solely on EU-Taiwan relations (European Parliament, 2021a)—pushing for an enhanced partnership, a Bilateral Investment Agreement, and for renaming the EETO to 'European Union Office in Taiwan' to reflect broader relations

(European Parliament, 2021b). The report explicitly welcomes the Taiwanese Office in Lithuania (ibid). Meanwhile, Lithuanian MEPs have been extremely active in promoting the Lithuanian case in Committees and organizing informal roundtables on Chinese coercion and cooperation with Taiwan (interviews 1, 9). Frequent exchanges on Taiwan occur in socialized transnational networks—notably the Formosa Club² and Taiwan’s Friendship Groups in national parliaments—to share news or concerns among lawmakers, politicians and civil society across countries and the EU level (interview 9). In September 2022, a new resolution by the European Parliament welcomed the intention of Lithuania to open a trade office in Taipei and called on ‘other Member States who do not yet operate a trade office in Taiwan to follow this example’ and to strengthen their relations with the island (European Parliament, 2022).

Thus, traits of directional and ideational leadership through cross-loading and successive auxiliary uploading can be observed. Lithuania attempted to show another practical interpretation of the ‘One China’ policy and contribute to a value-based perception of Taiwan. It also led by example leaving the 17+1 and diversifying its ties towards Taipei.

4.3 Vilnius’ Initial Impact: Delineating an Informal Group

Leadership as a social role presumes the presence of like-minded followers and findings show that Vilnius contributed to an initial trend of renewed perception and repositioning of EU Member States towards Taiwan and China’s presence in Europe (interviews 5, 6, 7, 11).

The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, and Latvia represent the most like-minded countries and would-be followers. Besides long-standing ties and cooperation reflected in frequent visits and MoUs, the current Czech government openly listed Taiwan as a priority partner in Asia in its action plan (interview 12). Taiwan is the third Asian investor in the country

² The ‘Formosa Club’ is a cross-party interparliamentary platform launched in 2019 under the initiative of the chairs of the Taiwan Friendship Groups of the European Parliament and the Parliaments of France, Germany and the United Kingdom to promote and strengthen European ties with Taiwan (Taipei Times, 2019).

and shares a similar experience of democratic transition with Czechia (ibid). Prague had intense informal communications with Lithuania which reinforced like-mindedness also rooted in common experiences, e.g., Beijing's threats after the Czech Senate speaker visited Taipei in 2020 (ibid; Blanchard and Tian, 2020). Since October 2021, Slovakia showed signs of functional emulation (CEIAS, 2021). The country welcomed a Taiwanese delegation of 66 government officials and business representatives concluding 7 MoUs and subsequently established the Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation (Reid, 2021; Coutaz, 2022). Additionally, both Prague and Bratislava expressed discontent with the 16+1 framework—a format with 'neither substance nor future' according to the Czech Foreign Minister Lipavský (Lau, 2023)—and were the only two countries covertly visited by the Taiwanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu in late 2021 (Reuters, 2021; interview 12).³ Estonian and Latvian lawmakers took part, with Lithuanian colleagues, in joint visits to Taiwan and both states contacted Vilnius bilaterally to express discontent and ask for guidance to disengage from the deluding 16+1 framework (interview 1). Tallin and Riga officially withdrew from the latter in mid-August 2022 along with the intention to enhance cooperation with Taipei following Lithuania's example (LRT, 2022). Besides the failure to deliver of the 16+1 framework, these decisions should not be detached from the geopolitical exigencies of the three Baltic states and the annexed preferences of their pivotal strategic ally, the United States, as well as from internal and external security concerns which have led to an erosion of trust towards Beijing in recent years, notably in relation to Russia-China joint military exercises, trade imbalances, foreign direct investment in strategic sectors, and alleged propaganda and espionage campaigns (Scott, 2018; Vargulis, 2023: 12-27; Veebel and Ploom, 2023: 51-58).

³ In 2023, the Joseph Wu visited Brussels, Prague, Warsaw and Milan, where discussions included the opening of a second Taipei Representative Office in Italy (Tzu-hsuan, 2023).

Among the EU Member States within the Nordic-Baltic cooperation (NB8)—an informal semi-institutionalized forum meeting monthly at different levels whose members share significant normative like-mindedness on China (interviews 1, 2, 3)—besides Latvia and Estonia, Sweden was the only state exhibiting concrete signs of followership. In April 2022, Stockholm’s Parliament approved a non-binding proposal to expand cooperation with Taiwan and to rename the Swedish Trade and Investment Council in Taipei as ‘House of Sweden’, i.e., the name of the building in Washington D.C. hosting the Swedish embassy (Cheng-yu and Tzu-hsuan, 2022; Johansson, 2023). While the parties’ motions do not mention the Taiwanese Representative Office, ‘the decision of Lithuania had a huge impact’ in informal discussions towards the adoption of the proposal (interview 13). Yet, despite growing commercial and investment ties with Taiwan and increasing tensions due to China’s ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’, Stockholm’s economic dependence from Beijing may hinder followership (Tam-Sang, 2022: 10-12).

Slovenia constitutes a case of arrested followership after initial experiential learning. Praising Lithuania, the former Prime Minister announced ongoing work to exchange non-diplomatic representatives and offices under the name ‘Taiwan’ (Lau, 2022), angering Beijing which terminated contracts with Slovenian businesses and investment deals (Waterfield and Tang, 2022). While the Lithuanian case pushed each Member State to re-evaluate its position towards China, the new Slovenian government has showed reticence (interview 11). Other Member States expressed condemnation of Chinese sanctions and the willingness to extend cooperation with Taiwan but remain cautious not to displease Beijing (Rudakowska, 2022). For instance, while Poland was listed as a member of the so-called ‘Dumpling Alliance’⁴ with significantly institutionalized ties with Taipei, also shown by the opening of the Foreign Trade

⁴The term ‘Dumpling Alliance’ was coined by the Taiwan Digital Diplomacy Association to label four CEECs—Lithuania, Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia—particularly active in economic and cultural interactions with Taipei (Šimalčík et al., 2023: 4).

Office of the Polish Investment and Trade Agency in Taipei in September 2018, its relations with China remain solid (Šimalčík et al., 2023: 4; Jerzewski, 2023: 98-104). On the other extreme are big EU countries which, despite statements of solidarity have a solid interdependence from China and issued recommendations to Vilnius for renaming the Office (interviews 1, 2, 3).

From a preliminary assessment, Lithuania's leadership by example and initial activity of coalition-building has been recognized by early cases of followership functionally or normatively motivated according to the country-specific idiosyncrasies, mainly in CEECs. Yet, fragmentation towards Taiwan and China persists among EU states with potential polarization, since Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic alone were responsible for more than 68% of the interactions across the security, political, economic, cultural and social domains between Taipei and EU actors (Member States and EU institutions) from 2019 to 2022, earning them the role of 'Vanguards' (Šimalčík et al., 2023: 4-15).

4.4 Lithuania's Foreign Policy as Identity Affirmation: What Pragmatism?

By leading the way, Lithuania attempted to cross-load a repositioning vis-à-vis China and Taiwan symbolically manifested in the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office. What are the motivations behind it?

The current coalition government agreed on a foreign policy defending 'those fighting for freedom around the world, from Belarus to Taiwan' (Sytas, 2020). However, the withdrawal from the 17+1 framework and the enhanced cooperation with Taiwan have also been associated with a self-interested pragmatic step towards diversification of trade ties, reduced interdependence from Beijing, and strategic attention to Taipei, notably in the semiconductor sector (ORF, 2022). Although values and pragmatism can converge, three main indicators suggest that the former tend to shape the perception of the latter: origins, context, and cost-benefit assessment of Lithuania's position.

Interviews indicate that the Foreign Minister and his Deputy were the main authors behind the government's stance (interviews 1, 2, 4). Before the elections, in a joint op-ed titled *Lithuania – it's time for choosing*, they expressed the intention to leave the 17+1 framework and support Taiwan as a 'de facto independent democratic state governed by the rule of law' (Adomėnas and Landsbergis, 2020), i.e., to choose between the 'totalitarian and predatory Chinese Communist regime' and liberal democratic partners (ibid; Andrijauskas, 2022a: 5). When dealing with China, the new government unified two previously separate tracks—interests and human rights—ensuring that economic interests would not prevail over values (interviews 1, 3). This stance is consistent with a context of value-based diversification of ties—i.e., avoiding intense collaboration with authoritarian economies (interview 2)—and the enhancement of cooperation with like-minded counterparts on a global scale (Landsbergis, 2022). For instance, in line with the 2021 EU Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Lithuanian government broadened cooperation and diplomatic relations with Australia, South Korea and Singapore and fostered ties with Japan (ibid; URM, 2022). Literature and past experiences show the cost of engaging with Taiwan on value-based terms (see Long and Urdinez, 2021). Despite a low interdependence from China, as Lithuanian exports of goods approached US\$270.3 million in 2021 (UN Comtrade, 2022), the support of Taipei amounting to more than US\$1.2 billion of credits and funds for Lithuanian industries and a US\$600 million credit agreement with the US (Sytas, 2021; 2022), Chinese restrictions on Lithuanian businesses are expected to decrease Lithuania's GDP growth by 0.1% to 0.5% in 2022 and by 0.3% to 1.3% the following year, besides mounting discontent among companies and public opinion (Andrijauskas, 2022a: 7). Accordingly, recent reports show that Lithuania's economic ties with China in terms of indirect trade, accounting for the effects on supply chains, entail high exposure and vulnerability (Sebeň et al., 2023: 12-15) and that its relations with Taipei 'are yet to prove [...] that values-based foreign policy can, indeed, be pragmatic' despite promises (Andrijauskas, 2023: 92).

In strategic terms, Lithuania's re-positioning toward Beijing and Taipei fits into Washington's plans, leading some authors to pinpoint the 'super atlanticist' nature behind the opening of the Office (Banka, 2023). While the preferences of the US may have impacted upon broader Lithuanian foreign policy towards China to some extent, notably in the context of the turbulent Trump Administration and the growing Sino-Russian drills, this vision underestimates the European and domestic factors, including historical experiences, and fails to account for individual decisions (Andrijauskas, 2022a: 4). With regard to the Taiwanese Representative Office, despite unsurprising political and financial support, the Biden Administration showed signs of discontent due to the lack of knowledge and coordination with Vilnius on the issue (interview 12).

From a social constructivist perspective, the preeminence of liberal and democratic values needs further clarification about their roots and functioning as cognitive filters for interests. In a speech at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Lithuania's Prime Minister addressed her government's foreign policy:

The fight for freedom is in the country's DNA. Lithuania was the first to declare independence from the Soviet Union in 1990... The first country that officially recognised Lithuanian independence was tiny Iceland. It was a courageous step for a small country with very significant economic exposure toward the USSR... It inspired us to support people who are fighting for freedom and need some countries to be their Iceland' (Šimonytė, 2022; emphasis added).

Besides corroborating the importance of small countries' leadership—role identity—the extract traces the origins of Lithuanian value-based foreign policy in the state's identity and historical experiences, in line with other policymakers (interviews 1, 4). This so-called 'Iceland Moment' among liberal and conservative parties concurred to a trend of 'securitization' of China and normative turn towards Taiwan among Lithuania's elite (Andrijauskas, 2020b: 3-4, 15-16) which rests on *traits* of state and collective-European identity serving as exclusionary criteria for 'othering' Beijing.

Lithuania's collective memory—'who we are' and 'where we come from' (Ehin and Berg, 2009: 2)—of the violent suppression of basic freedoms under the USSR, in addition to its various occupations since its independence in 1918, has nestled in the state's identity over its post-Soviet democratization and informed its foreign policy and the perceptions of interests and threats, especially towards its Russian neighbour (Mole, 2012: 50; Graney, 2019). For Lithuanians, democratic values are 'not something natural' (van Leeuwen, 2022).

Since 2019, China's presence in Lithuania has been intertwined with Soviet memories and progressively associated with the perception of an illiberal threatening 'Other' exacerbated by the media (Kavalski, 2021; Milne, 2022; interview 6). For instance, the '23 August' incident occurred on the occasion of the pro-Hong Kong demonstration organized by the current Deputy Foreign Minister Mantas Adomėnas on the thirtieth anniversary of the 'Baltic Way', a historic peaceful protest across Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania in support of independence (interview 1). The same year a Chinese tourist desecrated a Catholic pilgrimage site emblem of national independence and destroyed a cross symbol of solidarity with Hong Kong (interview 2; Kavalski, 2021: 86). Furthermore, the Chinese Communist Party newspaper suggested Beijing and Moscow to 'join hands' and 'punish Lithuania' after the opening of Taipei's Office (Feng, 2021). The 'othering' of Beijing coincided with enhanced like-minded cooperation with Taipei. A letter from 200 politicians and public figures sent to the Lithuanian President expressed the unacceptability of Chinese pressures and asked for supporting Taipei's accession to the World Health Organization which inspired Lithuania's Foreign Minister to demand the observer status (LRT, 2020; interview, 2). The willingness to adopt concrete actions to defend shared values translated, among others, into the donations to Taipei of more than 250,000 jabs since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic as, quoting Lithuania's Foreign Minister, 'freedom-loving people should look out for each other' (Sytas, 2020; Lau, 2021c). Additionally,

similar experiences with threatening neighbouring entities, translated into practical cooperation and exchanges in areas such as cybersecurity and disinformation (interview 1).

An underlying sense of collective-European identity in social and normative terms has been constantly evoked in Lithuania's repositioning towards China and Taiwan. Socially, the passage from a 17+1 to a '27+1' approach was a reaction to Beijing's attempt to divide and rule EU Member States (Lau, 2021b) and the support of like-minded partners through EU membership was crucial for the opening of Taipei's Office (interview 1). Normatively, besides the abovementioned references to EU values and policies, the pivotal Resolution of the Seimas on Directions in Foreign Policy explicitly centralizes the fundamental values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and Beijing's challenge to the 'EU's unity and essential interests of the Community' (Seimas, 2021b).

Connecting traits of state and collective-European identity with the intention to perform the role identity of leader progressively recognized by its followers, I argue that an act of tripartite identity affirmation informs the decision of Lithuania to allow the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office and its broader value-based stance vis-à-vis China taken by the current coalition government.

5. Conclusion

Relying upon an ad hoc theoretical framework which draws on sociological institutionalism and social constructivism, this paper argues that the decision of Lithuania to allow the opening of a Taiwanese Representative Office—which findings show symbolically summarizing a value-based repositioning vis-à-vis China and Taiwan—constitutes a case of cross-loading ultimately informed by an act of tripartite identity affirmation.

As a case of horizontal and informal Europeanization, the temporary elusion of EU institutions was motivated by the intergovernmental nature of the competence in the field of

foreign policy and trade promotion. The decision was justified with reference to the EU's substantial and procedural norms and aimed to spur a collective change among EU Member States. Indeed, by leaving the 17+1 framework with China, enhancing cooperation with Taipei, and promoting a new practical interpretation of the EU's 'One China' policy along with a renewed value-based perception of Taiwan, Vilnius traced an intentional path indicating directional and ideational leadership which emerged clearly after the announcement of the Taiwanese Representative Office and was fostered by a principled resilience to China's unprecedented reaction as well as by Lithuania's auxiliary uploading onto EU institutions leading to concrete support by the Commission. From a preliminary assessment, the attempt to lead the way by example and direct persuasion at different levels through bilateral and multi-lateral exchanges produced an initial delineation of a layered informal group of like-minded Member States including an inner circle with the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, and Slovakia showing concrete signs of normative or functional emulation and another sub-group of cases of arrested or potential followership such as Sweden and Slovenia. Heterogeneity exists in the approach within and across groups, with Vilnius and Prague being the most vocal countries on Taipei compared to Bratislava and Warsaw's 'practicality-based approach' or the initial followership of Riga and Tallin in disengaging from China (Šimalčík et al., 2023: 10-11).

Interpreted through a social constructivist perspective, findings show that Lithuania's value-based foreign policy towards China and Taiwan is deeply rooted in traits of state identity as a cognitive filter for the perception of interests and threats towards a 'constructed' pragmatism. Soviet collective memories intertwined with cases of Chinese 'wolf warrior diplomacy' progressively reinforced the image of a threatening 'Other' and, in line with the 'Iceland moment' in liberal and conservative parties, concurred to a symmetric like-minded engagement with Taiwan. Additionally, a social and normative sense of European identity reflected in the constant reference to EU shared norms, interests, and membership flanked by

a role identity resting on Lithuania's experiences, its willingness to lead the way, and its recognition by following Member States drive to the conclusion that an act of tripartite identity affirmation motivates the re-positioning of Lithuania towards China and Taiwan within the context of cross-loading.

In August 2022, Lithuania was the only EU state to publicly back the debated visit of then US Senate Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan, vocally opposed by President Biden's military advisers and followed by unprecedented military exercises by Beijing (Rettman, 2022). While the opening of the 'Lithuanian Trade Representative Office' in Taipei in November 2022 did not diverge from established practices, it met the condemnation of Beijing which dispatched more than sixty military planes around the island. At the time of writing, a comprehensive assessment of Lithuania's cross-loading attempts is premature, notably against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale aggression of Ukraine since 2022 and its repercussions on broader international politics. Taipei capitalized on the opportunities for like-minded cooperation with EU Member States in support of Kyiv, for instance by sending humanitarian aid for Ukrainian refugees and delivering armed drones to Ukraine's armed forces through Poland or ambulances via Romania (CEIAS, 2022). Meanwhile, Beijing's position on the conflict may cement or mitigate the perception of a Sino-Russian nexus among some EU Member States, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, re-evoking identity-based Soviet reminiscences or shifting foreign policy choices towards mere security-oriented and geopolitical drivers.

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Appendix 1: List of Interviews

- Interview 1:* Diplomat, Republic of Lithuania, online (10 June 2022).
- Interview 2:* Diplomat, Republic of Lithuania, online (22 June 2022).
- Interview 3:* Diplomat, Republic of Lithuania, online (4 July 2022).
- Interview 4:* Policymaker, Republic of Lithuania, written (24 June 2022).
- Interview 5:* EU official, online (21 April 2022).
- Interview 6:* EU official, online (22 April 2022).
- Interview 7:* EU official, online (28 June 2022).
- Interview 8:* EU official, online (17 June 2022).
- Interview 9:* Member of the European Parliament, online (20 June 2022).
- Interview 10:* Expert, think tank, online (23 June 2022).
- Interview 11:* Diplomat, Republic of Slovenia, online (4 July 2022).
- Interview 12:* Diplomat, Czech Republic, online (7 July 2022).
- Interview 13:* Policymaker, Sweden, online (5 July 2022).