

CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE EU: IMPLICATIONS FOR EU POLICY, NATIONAL SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Testimony by Dawa Tsering, President of the Tibetan Community in the Netherlands

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the time to share about the experience I and others of the Tibetan Community in Europe have with intimidation and threats from China.

Imagine your country is being invaded and you have to leave Tibet, leaving your parents behind. Now imagine moving across the world, starting a family, building a new life. Here you meet people who have the same roots and share a similar fate like you. You start getting involved and you support your community in coming together and living the culture you and your parents had to leave behind. It feels like you found a little bit of home, far away from home. Then, suddenly, you and your family members start receiving disturbing phone calls in the language spoken by those who invaded your country whenever you are about to attend meetings that revolve around the topic of your home. Never the exact same calls but always the same style and the timing never fails. They are watching you. They know where you are and know where you are going. How does it feel?

[pause]

It is frightening, this I can tell you. This is my story, the reality me, my family and many other Tibetans have to live with. I was born in Tibet and had to flee the country in my twenties as life has become unbearable under Chinese oppression. It broke my heart but I had to leave my parents behind. Seven years ago, I moved to the Netherlands with my wife. We started a family and I got involved with the Tibetan Community Netherlands which I now have the honor to be the president of. In the Netherlands, we are a community of about 1.000 Tibetans and come together to support and help each other and to organize culture and language activities for anyone interested. Similar Tibetan communities exist in countries all over the world.

Although our activities are primarily of cultural nature, we always knew that the Chinese Communist Party is not happy to see Tibetans coming together and organize amongst each other but their presence was mainly felt when we, for instance, joined a Tibet demonstration

that was interrupted by CCP supporters who would shout and try to take pictures and videos of us.

In 2020 however, something changed. I, my family members and other Tibetans from our community started to receive disturbing calls. The first call I received caused a lot of confusion. A message was left on my mailbox that I should come to the Chinese embassy, as an important document was waiting for me there. If I do not come - so the message - it will be destroyed which could hold negative consequences. Meanwhile, my family members received similar messages. It all seemed very suspicious to us, as nobody expected to receive any documents from the embassy. We did not go. Until this day, I am still wondering what would have happened if any of us went.

Since then, the calls have not stopped. They are usually not the same but differ slightly from each other. Sometimes, a phone call comes from a person, but mostly an automated message is played when I pick up the phone or if not, it is left on my voicemail. Sometimes a Dutch number is shown, and sometimes it's an international sender or anonymous. The first call was in mandarin, later messages were in Dutch or recorded in multiple languages usually including mandarin in first or second position. While I mentioned the call to the Chinese embassy as the first call I have received, other calls would concern the delivery of packages or similar. Let me play an example to you:

[plays audio example]

I receive calls like this every week and every time I am about to go to a meeting that concerns anything related to Tibet. Whether this is in the Netherlands or abroad doesn't really matter.

But it's not just me as the president, receiving calls like this. I have heard from about 50 people in my community that they have been targeted independent from their level of involvement in the community. Some of the calls are more personal than what I've previously described. Sometimes, people get called and are asked about a family member of theirs. The caller would then ask if they know a specific person which is usually a relative that is still living in Tibet. Nothing much more will be added to the conversation. On other times, relatives from Tibet will call themselves, asking their family members in the Netherlands to stay away from any political or social gatherings as this will have negative consequences for them.

Just like this, one of my friends who was actively involved in organizing social events for the community, was video-called by his parents and brother and was shaken to the core when he saw Chinese officials standing behind them. His family begged him to stop his involvement with projects like this as otherwise, they will be punished. Tibetans from France told me that

they first had been contacted through their mobile and later via their landline which caused them to fear that eventually, people will knock on their doors.

Finally, access to Tibet is another way the Chinese government is putting pressure on us. While now, most of us are being denied a visa, it is not clear why some people do get visas and others do not. This unclarity intensifies the worries amongst Tibetans to come under the attention of the Chinese government. It might mean that they will not ever be able to return to Tibet and see their family again. Unfortunately, there are many more examples that I could share but I would like to shift focus to speak shortly about the effect that this has on us as individuals and our community.

On an individual level, the effects of such experiences are very personal. I myself get quite nervous from these calls. I feel like I am being watched constantly and every step of me is being tracked. It is a scary thought to think about how much they actually know about me and my family and what they could do to us. I don't have contact with my family in Tibet anymore and have given up on any plans to once return to visit them in Tibet. Since 2020, this has become part of my life and I now have accepted it as something I need to deal with or ignore whenever possible. It even serves me as a motivation and a reminder to keep going.

Amongst the community, however, this is not the general reaction. Self-censorship is a huge problem that I observe from those Tibetans who are directly affected or hear these stories from their family members or friends. I see people withdrawing from their community involvement and staying away from any event or happening that could be interpreted politically. Moreover, there are many who have cut ties with their family in Tibet and stopped using Chinese communication channels like WeChat and Weibo which are often the only means by which Tibetans from within Tibet can reach their family in exile. Effectively, this leads to a disconnect and less and less information exchange between both communities. Since we feel the presence of China this way in the Netherlands, I have seen the numbers of participants at our cultural events declining. Not to a dramatic extent yet but from a long-term perspective, this trend is alarming. How will we be able to teach our children about our precious Tibetan culture when doing so provokes threatening phone calls and puts our family in danger?

[pause]

I am here today, not only to share our experiences with you but also to warn about the devastating effects China's interference can have and already has on the Tibetan community in the Netherlands and elsewhere. We are living in a free country with liberties and rights that are being infringed by China. This needs to stop. Most of the Tibetans in Europe have the citizenship of the country where they are living. It is important that they are protected by their respective governments against Chinese pressure and threats on them and their family in Tibet.

Thujeche! Thank you for your attention!