**The “City of Despair” or the “Harbour of Hope”?**

**Media Coverage of Duisburg in China and Russia**

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**Abstract**

This exploratory study addresses the question of how the city of Duisburg is presented in the foreign media in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and in relation to China in general. For the analysis, we selected key official media online platforms in the Chinese and Russian languages, and analysed the content of news reports, statements by the government officials and academic experts that include mentions of the city of Duisburg within the framework of the BRI. Our findings show that Duisburg is often portrayed as (1) an important strategic BRI partner and (2) the city of transformation, development, and business opportunities. However, concerns are expressed about the future role of Duisburg given the changing trajectory of the EU-China and Germany-China relations.

This paper unfolds in four parts. In the Introduction we outline the main discourses in which the mention of Duisburg is embedded. Against these discursive backgrounds, in Parts 2 and 3 we discuss examples extracted from the media sources. In the Conclusion we present our findings.

1. **Introduction: Major discourses**

The mention of Duisburg is embedded in two parallel discourses circulated in the media. The first is the official discussion of the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative as an important part of China’s new development model of “Dual Circulation” and its positive impact on the economic development of participant countries in Europe. The second covers the current discussion of the EU-China, Germany-China relations and the building by the European countries of a new railway infrastructure as a potential competitor of the Chinese BRI.

The concept of “Dual Circulation” was formulated by the Chinese Communist Party leadership as part of China’s 14th Five Year Plan (2021-2025). The main target of the policy is to stimulate economic growth through domestic consumption and production. Dual Circulation encompasses domestic and international circulations. A circulation here can be understood as “the smooth operation of supply chains, production, logistics, sales, and consumption”.[[1]](#footnote-2) According to Liu Yuanchun, Executive Director of the Centre for Political Economy Studies of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics at Renmin University in Beijing, China’s export-oriented economic growth has so far relied primarily on international circulation. Now, as the Chinese economy has matured significantly, the current growth model should accordingly transit to greater reliance on domestic circulation. Put simply, to further boost its economic growth, China must primarily rely on its own domestic market. That said, it is by no means an isolationist approach, and international circulation is certainly not excluded. Rather it becomes complementary to the domestic circulation.[[2]](#footnote-3) As China’s President Xi Jinping emphasized in one of his speeches in 2020:

“Prioritizing domestic circulation does not imply doing business behind closed doors. Instead, its main intention is to integrate domestic and international markets by stimulating domestic demand, and to boost stronger sustainable development in China through the better utilization of international and domestic markets.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

The BRI provides a framework for the synergy of two circulations with the main goal of boosting international economic exchange that will eventually contribute to the domestic prosperity of China. The global COVID-19 pandemic brought heavy economic losses to the BRI participant countries and worldwide. However, the crisis also brought about new opportunities. For example, traditional logistic services have given way to the fast expansion of rail transportation between China and Europe. In other words, transportation by air and sea has become slower and more costly in the context of the ongoing COVID crisis. This gave an opportunity for railways between China and Europe to grow in significance as a more reliable means of transportation. As assessed by Fang Hui, Professor at the Institute of International Economics and Trade, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative not only guaranteed safe, smooth and stable logistics during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, but also accelerated the growth of exchange against the odds of worldwide economic downturn.[[4]](#footnote-5) The journalists of *workercn.cn* go even further, calling the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative a “destiny bond” (*mingyun niudai*) between China and Europe. It connects the vast Eurasian continent and makes it possible for a train from Chongqing to reach Duisburg in only 16 days. This connection breaks the limits of time and space and changes the history of logistics.[[5]](#footnote-6) The success of the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative is seen as the direct proof of the fast development of the BRI.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The above discourse is widely circulated in the media, with Duisburg frequently being mentioned as Europe’s largest inland port, destination of the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative, and Germany’s only “China Town”.

Simultaneously, Duisburg is also mentioned in relation to other themes that have recently attracted growing attention by the media. These include firstly the increased tension in the Germany-China relationship and secondly the EU initiative of railway construction as an alternative strategy to the Chinese BRI. The discussion of the current status of the Germany-China relationship mainly revolves around the topics of the September 2021 German federal election and the position on China of the newly elected chancellor Olaf Scholz, the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Free Democratic Party. There are concerns that Germany’s new government may choose a hard line on China that potentially may undermine business exchange between two countries,[[7]](#footnote-8) including those between China and Duisburg. Nevertheless, despite the concerns, it is notable that the Chinese state media takes a more balanced approach on this issue and is less speculative and more positive with respect to the future of the Germany-China relations. For example, the *Global Times*, a daily news outlet under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party’s mouthpiece the *People’s Daily*, published repeatedly on the possible worsening of the Germany-China relations. However, despite apparently eye-catching titles, such as for example *“German coalition govt may change China policy, but to ‘Germany’s own jeopardy’”*[[8]](#footnote-9); “*China-Germany business ties in jeopardy as Merkel makes exit?”*[[9]](#footnote-10)*,* the main message remains clear. It is that the two countries have strong business ties as Germany has become an economic bridge between China and Europe, and bilateral partnership has been mutually beneficial for both countries. Of course, some twists and turns are possible, but a fundamental shift in Germany’s new government policy toward China is unlikely.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Another topic recently covered in the media is the European Commission’s initiative to build an international transportation network as an alternative to the Chinese BRI. In previous years, as an alternative to China’s BRI, the EU put forward several strategic cooperation frameworks to connect Europe and Asia. Examples include the 2018 Europe-Asia Connectivity Strategy and the EU-Japan Connectivity Partnership negotiated in 2019.[[11]](#footnote-12) The EU’s approach, however, has been criticized for lacking a coherent implementation strategy. Most recently, it was reported that there were plans to invest over 40 billion euros in the building of new roads, railways, and information channels.[[12]](#footnote-13) This initiative is said to be specifically developed to compete with the Chinese BRI.[[13]](#footnote-14) This consequently raises the question of the future role of Duisburg, given its strategically important geographic location and its current role in the BRI. As the South China Morning Post put it, “Germany’s ‘China city’ nervously eyes the future”.[[14]](#footnote-15)

1. **Duisburg as Germany’s only “China Town” and the “Harbour of Hope”**

In the Chinese official media within the thematic framework of the “Dual Circulations” policy, the BRI and China-Europe Freight Train Initiative, Duisburg is often described as (1) an important strategic BRI partner and (2) the city of transformation, development, and business opportunities. Below are some examples collected from several key state websites. These are [*yidaiyilu.gov.cn*](http://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn)*, xinhuanet.com,* and *cctv.com.* [*Yidaiyilu.gov.cn*](http://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn)is one of the most authoritative online information platforms on the BRI. As of 1 December 2021, the Chinese language version of [*www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn*](http://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn)contained 330 articles published between 2014 and 2021 that mention Duisburg. The website is hosted by China’s State Information Center and is run under the guidance of the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the BRI. There are 843 mentions of Duisburg by Xinhua (*xinhuanet.com*), China’s major state news agency. Duisburg is mentioned 373 times by China Central Television CCTV ([*www.cctv.com*](http://www.cctv.com)). The English-language edition of the Global Times (环球时报) has 137 mentions of Duisburg.

1. **Duisburg as a strategic BRI partner**

Most frequently Duisburg is mentioned as the China-Europe Freight Trains’ terminal destination in Europe. It is referred to as an “important hub”, “host of over 100 Chinese companies”, “China town”, a “partner for strategic cooperation”, and “Europe’s logistics centre”. The frequent reference to Duisburg in this context is rather straightforward: the BRI is an accelerator of China’s “Dual Circulation” policy; the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative is an important part of the BRI; Duisburg is the destination of the China-Europe trains and therefore it is one of the key strategic partners of China in Germany. It is fair to say that Duisburg has become an indispensable part of this context.

**(2) Duisburg as the city of development and opportunities**

Another description of Duisburg portrays the city as the place of transformation, development and business opportunities. This description is closely connected to the BRI and the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative. The common narrative is within the following logic: the BRI offers Duisburg a great opportunity for economic and technological development. This description is enhanced by creating the contrast of Duisburg before and after joining the BRI. Duisburg before joining the BRI is presented as a small city with high unemployment rates. Duisburg shares the fate of a typical European Rust Belt city: it underwent the industrial decade followed by reconceptualization of its functions and physical reconstruction. In their article Zhang Weilian and Huang Hancheng provide a detailed account of Duisburg’s transformation from becoming the “City of Despair” (*juewang zhi cheng*) into the international transportation hub, home to over 120 Chinese businesses and the vibrant fast-growing logistics centre Duisport.[[15]](#footnote-16) Additionally, many media reports discuss the future opportunities brought by the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative. These include the opening of new routes to let more Chinese cities join the initiative; the digitalization of logistic services; and an increase in the number of trains running between China and Duisburg. All these are the ripening fruits of China’s plan to create a new modern digitally advanced model of logistics that will benefit China, Duisburg and other European cities.[[16]](#footnote-17) In this Duisburg is believed to be “the lucky one” (*yidaiyilu de xinyuner*), and the luck is brought to it by China’s BRI.[[17]](#footnote-18)

However, it would be misleading to think that the narrative of China’s bringing the old German city back to life was exclusively created by the Chinese media to propagate the successes of the BRI. Of course, the story of Duisburg’s successful transformation has become popular in the Chinese media as it resonates with the overall discourse on the successes of the Chinese Communist Party’s initiative to connect countries for business and trade. But this narrative partially originates from German media and speeches of German government officials, and is later picked up by the Chinese media and blended into its reporting on the BRI that mostly target China’s domestic readership. For example, the framing of Duisburg as the “China Town” (*zhongguo cheng*),[[18]](#footnote-19) “Harbour of Hope” (*xiwang de gangkou*)[[19]](#footnote-20) was reportedly first expressed by Duisburg officials. The 40-minute documentary produced by China’s Central Television in 2017 broadly features Duisburg as part of the BRI. In the documentary the CCTV journalist asks the Mayor of Duisburg, **Sören Link** and the CEO of Duisport, Erich Staake, to describe in their own words what benefits the cooperation with China has brought to Duisburg. The responses were highly positive.[[20]](#footnote-21)

Additionally, in the Chinese media there are mentions of Duisburg’s own efforts to transform itself from the “Rust Belt” city to the smart city of green growth and high-tech advancement. This reference is not always connected to the BRI content, but presented as a general introduction to the city’s history and current status.[[21]](#footnote-22)

To explore how Duisburg is presented in the official Russian media we consulted several major state television channels, such as [www.1tv.ru](http://www.1tv.ru) (Pervii Kanal) [www.vesti.ru](http://www.vesti.ru) (Rossiya 24), [www.russia.tv](http://www.russia.tv) (Rossiya 1), [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com) (Russia Today); state newspapers such as Izvestia ([www.iz.ru](http://www.iz.ru)), Rossiyskaya Gazeta ([www.rg.ru](http://www.rg.ru)), Argumenty i Fakty ([www.aif.ru](http://www.aif.ru)), Kommersant ([www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru)), Vedomisti ([www.vedomosti.ru](http://www.vedomosti.ru)), Moskovskii Komsomolets ([www.mk.ru](http://www.mk.ru)), Gazeta.ru ([www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru)), The Moscow Times ([www.themoscowtimes.com](http://www.themoscowtimes.com) ), Moskovskiye Novosti ([www.mn.ru](http://www.mn.ru)); and other popular state news agencies such as Russia Today ([www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com)), RIA Novosti ([www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru)), and Iterfax ([www.interfax.ru](http://www.interfax.ru)). We searched for the related reports with the key word “Дуйсбург” (Duisburg) for the time period in between 2010 and 2021.

Duisburg is moderately covered in the above sources, with maximum coverage of 349 mentions by RIA Novosti and the lowest number of mentions, only one, by The Moscow Times. The vast majority of the reports related to Duisburg cover a broad range of topics such as sports, culture, society, science, crime, COVID-19 crisis management, immigration, its status of twin city with the Russian city Perm, etc. When Duisburg is mentioned in connection to the BRI and China-EU train networks it is most often referred to as “a German port city”[[22]](#footnote-23), without any specific positive or negative connotations. The focus in the reports is put on the role of the BRI on the development of the Central Asian and Russian cities.[[23]](#footnote-24)

1. **The future of Duisburg amidst EU-China tensions**

As discussed previously, the topic of Duisburg as part of the BRI and China-Europe Freight Train Initiative is inherently embedded in the wider discourse on EU-China and Germany-China relations. The EU’s decision in March 2021 to impose sanctions over human rights abuses in Xinjiang was met with an immediate response by China, which sanctioned 10 EU officials. This was followed by the EU’s decision to pause the ratification of a new investment pack with Beijing.[[24]](#footnote-25) Most recently, the US and EU held a high-level meeting of the U.S.-EU Dialogue on China in Washington where the issues of joint approach to China, close economic cooperation with China, as well as “ongoing human rights abuses and violations in China, including the systemic repression of ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang and in Tibet, and the erosion of autonomy and democracy in Hong Kong” were discussed.[[25]](#footnote-26)

Within the above context, in the Western media September’s German federal election and the change of government sparked discussions on the new approach which German politicians must adopt in dealing with China. All these gave rise to concerns over the future of the BRI in Europe and Germany-China relations.[[26]](#footnote-27) Nonetheless, the Chinese state media takes a confident, moderately optimistic stance. That is, the current tensions between the EU, Germany and China are acknowledged by the Chinese state media. However, instead of engaging in speculative predictions, most reports focus on a long-term perspective, claiming that tensions do exist, they come and go, but cooperation remains most important. This standpoint was also reflected in the video speech by China’s Vice Premier Liu He at the Hamburg Summit in October 2021. Liu He called for a closer China-EU cooperation and stressed the importance of “mutual understanding through dialogue and discussion” in order to “reach consensus on some issues of common concern” (中欧应当通过对话和讨论增进相互理解，力争在一些普遍关心的问题上取得共识).[[27]](#footnote-28)

The Russian media does not report in depth and in length on the EU-China relationship, but does mention the EU’s initiative to invest over 40 billion euros in building new transportation infrastructure between Europe and Asia. Thus, *Russia Today* (the Russian language edition) with reference to the original article published in *Handelsblatt[[28]](#footnote-29)* reports on Europe’s strategy to constrain China’s BRI growing influence.[[29]](#footnote-30) The tone of the report is rather neutral, but still with some degree of criticism. For example, it is said that the planned investment of 40 billion euros can hardly compete with the BRI and there are no clear projects and strategies presented on how exactly the plan is to be implemented. Interestingly, other Russian online news media quickly pick up the topic, but adjust it to the Russia’s perspective possibly to make the topic more relevant and appealing for the Russian readership. For example, Novie Izvestija published an article under the title of “The EU wants to build its own “Silk Road” without China and Russia” (*Евросоюз хочет создать свой «Шелковый путь» без Китая и России*).[[30]](#footnote-31) The report also quotes *Handelsblatt* but adds that the EU’s initiative targets not only China, but Russia too. Interestingly, there is no mention of Russia in the original *Handelsblatt’s* article. The author of the report also consults two Russian academics, one of whom calls the EU’s initiative “a fantasy”. The tone of the report is rather critical. For example, it is said that the EU’s initiative is being developed “in secret”, it is not feasible given the fuel crisis in Europe, lack of financing, and slow bureaucratic work. This critical tone apparently fits into the official discourses of strengthening Russia-China relations and “evergreen” tensions between Russia and the EU.

Duisburg is not directly mentioned in the above reports. However, there is one news article about Duisburg published by the Hong Kong based South China Morning Post. The author of the article, Finbarr Bermingham, selects an eye-catching title: “As Angela Merkel’s exit approaches, Germany’s ‘China city’ nervously eyes the future” and reflects on the future of Duisburg amidst the current tensions in the EU-China and Germany-China relations.[[31]](#footnote-32) This paper quickly attracted attention of China’s state media. On the next day after the publication of the article, the *Global Times* published a critical discussion of the original.[[32]](#footnote-33) The central message of the assessment is that the Germany-China relation remains stable, trade exchange between two countries is growing and there is a potential for united fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper quotes China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, pointing out that under the current circumstances it is important that Germany and China stick to the principle of multilateralism and provide mutual support in foreign affairs. *Global Times* also repeatedly quotes Johannes Grünhage, Duisburg Head of China Affairs, to demonstrate that high political rhetoric in Brussels and Berlin is one thing and business on the ground at the local level is another thing: “We are not Berlin or Brussels…our main focus is cooperation with the Chinese people and businesses, at the moment we are running a number of economic, cultural and political collaborative projects (with China)”.[[33]](#footnote-34)

1. **Conclusion**

In this exploratory paper we addressed the question of how the city of Duisburg is presented in mass media in China and Russia. We qualitatively analysed official discourses by examining news, statements by government officials and opinions of academic researchers. We first presented major discourses in which representation of Duisburg is embedded. The main background discourse in China is the discussion of the new “Dual circulation” development model with the BRI as one of the main facilitators of it. We showed that in the Chinese state media, Duisburg consistently appears as an essential part of the BRI, specifically in the content related to the China-Europe Freight Train Initiative. Secondly, Duisburg is often positively portrayed as the city of economic transformation and growth mainly stimulated by its active participation in the BRI. Similarly, in Russian media Duisburg is often mentioned as the “German port city” in the news on the BRI. However, thematically, in contrast to the Chinese media, Russian coverage of Duisburg is much broader. It includes regular reports on a multitude of topics ranging from sports to COVID-19 crisis management. Secondly, as we demonstrated Duisburg is also mentioned in the context of EU-China and Germany-China relations.

To sum up, because of its specific geographical location, its functioning as an international logistic hub and its role in the BRI, Duisburg has relatively high visibility in the Chinese and Russian media. Despite the ongoing tensions between the EU and China, the representation of Duisburg in the Chinese media is highly positive, optimistic, and future-oriented, which contrasts with the more neutral tone used in the Russian media.

It is noteworthy that in the Chinese and Russian media, the city image constructed of Duisburg is appropriated to the mainstream official narratives. This makes the content more appealing and informative to the domestic readership. Of course, a highly positive representation of Duisburg in the Chinese media may at first seem in service to propagating the successes of the BRI to the Chinese public. But such representation also sends positive signals to the Chinese businessmen and investors. The message is clear: Duisburg is part of the BRI, and it is thus a city of multiple business opportunities.

Additionally, the Chinese and Russian media reports often include references to German media (news, statements by government officials, etc.). This reveals that the city’s image is not constructed by one party in isolation from others, but rather is a product of co-creating.

Finally, the present study is limited to the analysis of official discourses only. A complementary examination of informal “unfiltered” narratives on social media circulated for example by representatives of business community and the general public in Germany, China and Russia would certainly contribute to a better understanding of the issue.

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3. <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-10/29/content_5555726.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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5. <http://www.workercn.cn/34067/202111/01/211101034201630.shtml> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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16. <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/jyjl/e/202102/20210203038700.shtml> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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