

7. CEE-Taiwan Relations: Current State and Outlook Following the 2024 Taiwan Elections

Kristina Kironska

In recent years, EU-Taiwan, namely relations between Taiwan and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), have grown stronger. What do the 2024 Taiwan election results mean for the next four years of CEE-Taiwan relations?

The DPP's presidential victory implies a certain degree of continuity in Taiwan's posture towards the outside world, considering that foreign policy is in the hands of the president. In international affairs, it is expected that future President Lai Ching-te, set to assume office in May 2024, will increase ties with democratic countries and continue closer cooperation with like-minded countries, including the EU and its member-states.

However, a hung parliament, such as the one resulting from the 2024 elections in Taiwan, poses challenges for the ruling administration due to the absence of a parliamentary majority. The forthcoming government, likely consisting of DPP ministers (with President Lai expected to appoint a DPP premier, who in turn will appoint DPP ministers) will need to incorporate suggestions from other parties into its policies constructively. In the realm of Taiwan's foreign policy, in the previous electoral cycle (2020-2024), with the ruling party (DPP) holding a majority in parliament, there was a close alignment with the administration. This time, although differences will arise, particularly regarding relations with the PRC, ties with Europe are expected to remain unaffected.

The outcome of the parliamentary elections warrant careful consideration, as parliamentary diplomacy is particularly important for Taiwan's relations with Europe. Many European parliaments have demonstrated a tendency to be ahead of their executive bodies, promoting pragmatic cooperation with Taiwan, while the latter can officially maintain

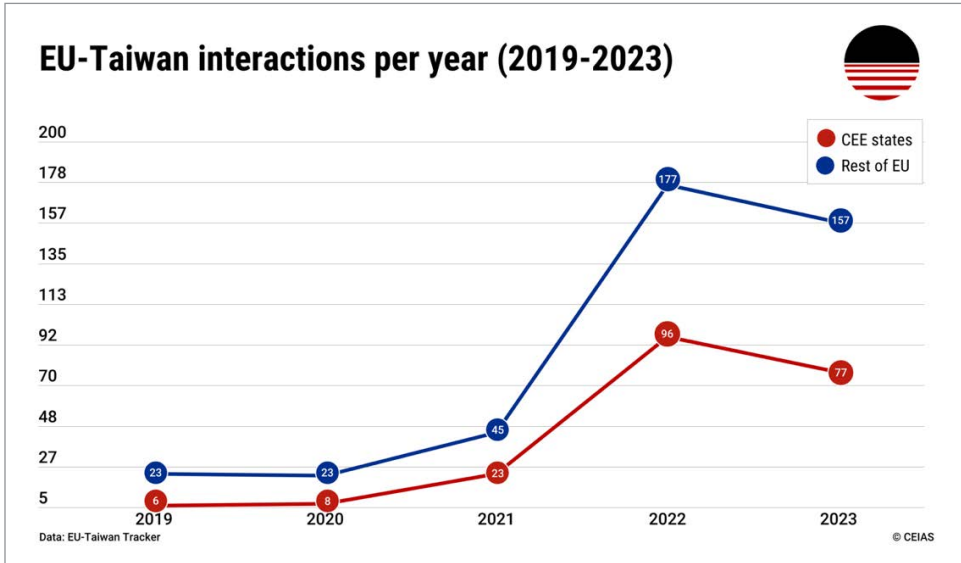
adherence to their respective one China policies. Thus, despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations, Taiwan has managed to cultivate robust informal and substantive connections, leading to flourishing engagement with Europe.

Strengthening Bonds: CEE and Taiwan Relations

A significant change to EU-Taiwan relations came with the adoption of the EU-China Strategic Outlook in 2019 and the launch of the Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021. These reflect the importance of Taiwan in line with the EU's de-risking approach towards China (rather than decoupling) and willingness to strengthen the EU's resilience by cooperating with like-minded partners. Moreover, in 2021, the European Parliament passed its first resolution on EU-Taiwan political relations, explicitly urging the European External Action Service, EU member-states, and the Commission to strengthen their political partnerships with Taiwan.¹

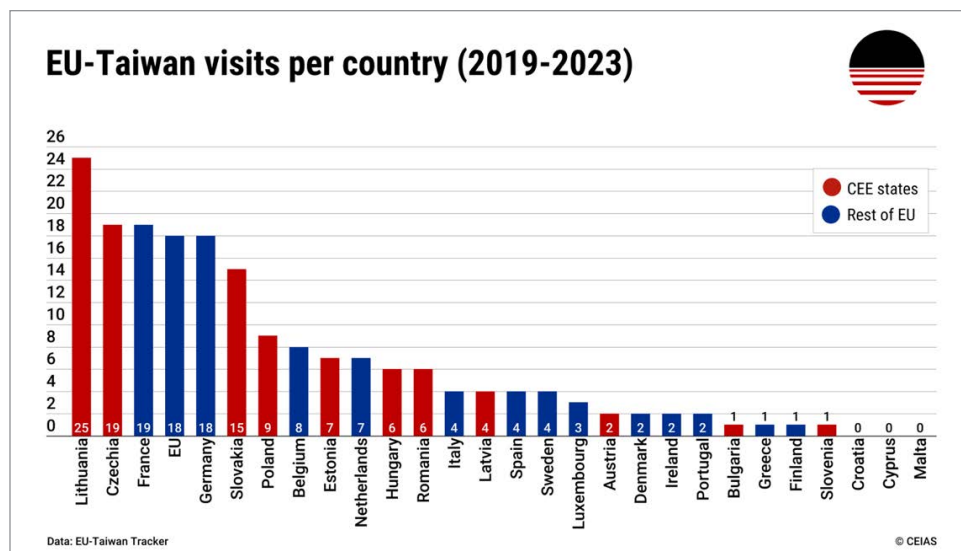
Over the years, according to the data collected by the CEIAS EU-Taiwan Tracker (an online tool developed by the author), EU-Taiwan relations grew stronger in all aspects, with interactions between the two sides growing six-fold between 2019 and 2023 (see Figure 1).² In 2019, only 23 interactions were recorded across the EU—these were governmental, economic, security, and cultural engagements, as well as mutual visits. Despite recovering from the pandemic, these increased seven-fold in 2022 to 177 recorded interactions, and in 2023 to 157 interactions. The CEE countries emerged as the primary contributors to the surge in interactions between Europe and Taiwan, accounting for over half of all engagements in 2022 and 2023 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: EU-Taiwan interactions per year (2019-2023)



This notable trend can be attributed largely to the proactive efforts of the so-called vanguards, a term introduced by CEIAS in its publication “Beyond the Dumpling Alliance.”³ The group of vanguard countries comprises Slovakia, Poland, Czechia, and Lithuania, nations that have exhibited heightened levels of activity in both political and economic relations with Taiwan over the past years. Among them, Czechia and Lithuania stand out with the highest frequency of mutual visits (see Figure 2). Moreover, Czechia became the first non-diplomatic ally, in 2020, to have a senior politician, Senate President Milos Vystrcil, deliver a speech at the Taiwanese Parliament, where he famously proclaimed “Wo Shi Taiwan Ren” (“I am Taiwanese” in English).⁴

Figure 2: EU-Taiwan visits per country (2019-2023)



Motivated by growing skepticism regarding China's capacity to deliver economic benefits, the vanguard countries shifted their focus to Taiwan as the next East Asian cornucopia.⁵ Political interactions between Taiwan and these four nations have paved the way for the establishment of new economic partnerships in areas such as investment, trade, and research and development.

Czechia and Lithuania in particular have adopted a high-visibility symbolic action approach, raising Taiwan's visibility and thus fostering faster-paced relations. Following the 2024 elections in Taiwan, Czech President Petr Pavel was the first European head of state to congratulate Lai Ching-te on his electoral victory. Also, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis congratulated the newly elected President. These instances represent a significant departure from the established European practice of congratulating the Taiwanese electorate without explicitly naming the new President-elect and emphasizing support for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and adherence to the one China policy.

This strategy, however, comes with considerable downsides, such as the high-risk potential for coercive measures from China against the

European partner (as has been the case with Lithuania) and the risk of domestic politicization (as has been the case in Czechia), the latter leading to potential slowdowns in case of political changes.

On the other hand, Slovakia and Poland have embraced a practicality-based approach, resulting in lower risks of Chinese reaction or coercion. This approach focuses on the steady development of relations in specific agendas and minimizes politicization. It comes with the trade-off of less visibility for Taiwan and may not reflect a significant impact on public opinion about Taiwan in these countries.⁶

There are additional nations in the CEE region, like Austria and Hungary, that despite exercising caution in pursuing political relations with Taiwan (for various reasons) enjoy mutually beneficial economic relations. In fact, their economic engagement with Taiwan sometimes surpasses even that of the vanguard nations, albeit without a pronounced eagerness to champion Taiwan in their political agenda.

Parliamentary Diplomacy: Engagement with Europe following the 2024 Elections

In February 2024, the newly convened parliament elected the controversial former mayor of Kaohsiung and 2020 presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu (KMT) as its speaker. Since he hails from the opposition, there is potential for friction that could also impact the efficiency of parliamentary diplomacy.

Insider reports from the parliament, however, suggest that Han has expressed willingness to continue engaging with European partners by both hosting and sending out delegations. Indeed, another Czech delegation is in preparation to visit Taiwan soon. Additionally, there is talk of a Romanian delegation, which could contribute to the development of a growing relationship (currently, there are no representative offices in Romania or Taiwan).

To ensure the continuity of parliamentary diplomacy and support overseas engagements, the parliament must avoid transferring tensions and frictions into its diplomatic endeavors. It should also maintain the infrastructure established in the previous term by Han's predecessor

and build upon it. This includes the International Affairs Working Group and the Department of International Affairs, both units within the parliament responsible for comprehensively managing all matters related to parliamentary diplomacy. The new parliament, and particularly its speaker, should recognize that parliamentary diplomacy is a crucial instrument for enhancing Taiwan's international profile in Europe.

Endnotes

- 1 Vladimira Lickova and Kristina Kironska, "Taiwan's quasi-diplomatic interactions with Europe: representative offices," CEIAS Insights, December 14, 2023, <https://ceias.eu/taiwans-quasi-diplomatic-interactions-with-europe/>.
- 2 Kristina Kironska, et al, "EU-Taiwan Relations Tracker" [online tool], CEIAS, 2024, <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker>.
- 3 Matej Simalcik, et al, "Beyond the Dumpling Alliance: Tracking Taiwan's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe," CEIAS, March 2023, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CEEtaiwan_paper_final_PRINT.pdf.
- 4 Kristina Kironska, et al, "EU-Taiwan Relations Tracker" [online tool], CEIAS, 2024, <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker>.
- 5 Matej Simalcik. et al, "Beyond the Dumpling Alliance: Tracking Taiwan's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe," CEIAS, March 2023, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CEEtaiwan_paper_final_PRINT.pdf.
- 6 Kristina Kironska and Matej Simalcik, "Twenty Years of Friendship and Cooperation Between Slovakia and Taiwan" [presentation], Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs in Taipei, November 17, 2023.