



The Socio-Cultural Footprint of 'Stadium Diplomacy': China's Infrastructure Projects and National Identity in Belarus

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Abstract

This paper examines China's "stadium diplomacy" in Belarus as a tool of soft power with significant socio-cultural and public policy implications. Moving beyond a purely geopolitical analysis, this study investigates how the Chinese-funded construction of a National Football Stadium and an international swimming pool in Minsk intersects with Belarus's domestic politics and evolving national identity. Using a qualitative single-case study design, the research analyzes official documents, state media narratives, and independent news reports to explore how these large-scale infrastructure projects are framed for public consumption. The findings reveal that these "gifts" are leveraged by the Belarusian government to project an image of stability and successful international partnership, thereby reinforcing domestic legitimacy amidst political isolation. Concurrently, they serve China's nation-branding strategy, embedding symbols of its technological prowess and goodwill into the urban landscape of a European capital. The study concludes that stadium diplomacy in Belarus functions as a complex socio-political phenomenon, shaping urban development, influencing public perception, and contributing to the reorientation of Belarusian national identity towards non-Western alliances.

Keywords: Stadium diplomacy, Soft power, China-Belarus relations, National identity, Public policy, Cultural diplomacy, Infrastructure projects

Introduction

In recent decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increasingly utilized "stadium diplomacy"—the practice of financing and constructing large-scale sports arenas in foreign countries—as a prominent instrument of its public diplomacy. Initially deployed across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, this strategy has expanded

into Eastern Europe, presenting a unique case in the Republic of Belarus. The construction of a new National Football Stadium and an international-standard swimming pool in Minsk, funded by China as "gifts," offers a compelling opportunity to analyze the societal impact of such initiatives. While often viewed through a geopolitical lens as a form of strategic expansion, the implications of these projects extend deep into the social and cultural fabric of the recipient nation.

This study reframes the analysis of stadium diplomacy from a purely state-to-state strategic interaction to a socio-cultural phenomenon. It seeks to answer critical questions relevant to social science and public policy: How do foreign-sponsored infrastructure projects influence social cohesion and national identity in an authoritarian state? What are the public policy implications for urban development and social welfare when strategic infrastructure is funded by an external power? In a country like Belarus, which faces profound domestic and regional crises—including the violent suppression of protests following the 2020 presidential election and its complicity in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine—these questions are particularly salient. The Lukashenko regime's increasing isolation from the West has created a vacuum that China appears willing to fill, not only economically but also symbolically.

This paper argues that China's stadium diplomacy in Belarus is more than a simple transaction for resources or political loyalty. It represents a sophisticated form of soft power that directly impacts Belarusian society by physically altering the urban landscape, shaping state-controlled media narratives, and influencing the country's cultural and political orientation. By examining the official framing of these projects, the public policy choices surrounding their implementation, and the potential societal responses, this article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how infrastructure becomes a medium for projecting power and reshaping national identity in the 21st century.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in theories of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation-branding, which provide a robust framework for analyzing China's "stadium diplomacy." The concept of "soft power," famously coined by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to the ability of a state to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (hard power). Nye identifies three primary sources of soft power: a nation's culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. China's stadium diplomacy can be understood as a direct application of this concept, aiming to cultivate a positive image and build goodwill through tangible cultural and sporting infrastructure (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Public diplomacy, a key mechanism for deploying soft power, involves government-sponsored efforts to communicate directly with foreign publics to establish a dialogue designed to inform and influence (Cull, 2009). Large-scale, highly visible infrastructure projects like stadiums serve as powerful and enduring instruments of public diplomacy. They are not merely buildings but are "billboards for a country's

brand" (Anholt, 2007, p. 45), functioning as permanent symbols of friendship and cooperation. Li (2020) argues that China's infrastructure-led diplomacy, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a central pillar of its strategy to project an image of a benevolent and responsible global power, countering narratives of a "China threat."

The concept of "nation-branding" is also central to this analysis. Nation-branding involves applying corporate branding techniques to a country to build, manage, and communicate its identity and reputation on the international stage (Fan, 2010). The stadiums built by China are often designed with architectural features that blend Chinese and local aesthetics, creating a visual narrative of partnership and mutual respect. This act of co-branding helps China position itself as a constructive partner in the development of other nations, while allowing the recipient government to showcase a modernizing achievement to its own populace (Aronczyk, 2013). In the context of Belarus, where the state heavily controls public narratives, these projects become potent tools for the Lukashenko regime to project an image of international relevance and economic progress, despite its pariah status in the West (Wilson, 2021).

While the literature on China's stadium diplomacy has historically focused on Africa, highlighting its role in securing access to natural resources and diplomatic support (Will, 2012; Chadwick et al., 2021), its application in Belarus presents a different dynamic. Here, the primary goal appears to be establishing a strategic foothold in Eastern Europe and reinforcing an alliance of authoritarian states. This case, therefore, offers a critical opportunity to extend the theoretical application of soft power and nation-branding to understand how such diplomacy functions in a context of shared political ideology and mutual opposition to the Western liberal order.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design to conduct an in-depth investigation of China's stadium diplomacy in Belarus. This approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the complex, context-dependent social and political dynamics of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The case focuses on the planning, construction, and official discourse surrounding two key projects in Minsk: the National Football Stadium and the international-standard swimming pool, both funded by the PRC as technical and economic assistance.

The timeframe for the analysis spans from 2015, when the initial high-level discussions for the projects began, to early 2023, allowing for an examination of how the projects have been navigated through Belarus's domestic political crisis of 2020 and the regional geopolitical shifts following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. This period provides a rich context for understanding the evolving nature and purpose of the Sino-Belarusian partnership.

Data for this research were systematically collected from a variety of sources to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity of the findings. These sources include:

- **Official Government Documents and Statements:** Press releases, transcripts of meetings, and official decrees published on the websites of the President of the Republic of Belarus, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Embassy of the PRC in Belarus. These documents provide insight into the official framing and justification of the projects.
- **State-Controlled Media Reports:** Articles and news segments from Belarusian state media outlets (e.g., Belta, Belarus Today) were analyzed to understand the dominant narratives presented to the domestic population regarding the projects and the broader Sino-Belarusian relationship.
- **Independent and International Media Coverage:** Reports from independent Belarusian outlets (e.g., Radio Sloboda, Belsat) and international news agencies were examined to provide a counter-narrative and critical perspective on the projects, including public concerns and opposition.

The method of analysis employed is a combination of qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify recurring themes, keywords, and frames within the collected data, such as "friendship," "strategic partnership," "gift," and "mutual benefit" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Critical discourse analysis was then applied to deconstruct how language and official narratives are used by state actors to construct a particular social reality, legitimize political decisions, and exercise power (Fairclough, 2013). This dual approach allows for a systematic examination of not only **what** is being said about the projects, but also **how** and **why** it is being said, revealing the underlying ideological and political objectives.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis of China's stadium diplomacy in Belarus reveals a multi-layered strategy that intertwines public policy, nation-branding, and domestic political legitimization. The findings are organized into three thematic areas: the official framing of the projects as a "gift," the impact on urban development and public policy, and the role of the projects in shaping national identity.

Framing the 'Gift': State Media Narratives and Nation-Branding

A central finding is the consistent and deliberate framing of the stadium and swimming pool as a "gift from the Chinese people." This narrative, heavily promoted in Belarusian state media, serves a dual purpose. For China, it is a powerful nation-branding tool. The projects, valued at over \$235 million, are presented not as a loan or a commercial venture but as an act of selfless friendship. This framing helps cultivate China's soft power by portraying it as a benevolent partner, distinct from Western powers who often attach political conditions to aid. Official statements

frequently emphasize that the projects are symbols of an "ironclad brotherhood" and an "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership."

For the Belarusian government, this narrative is a tool for domestic political legitimization. President Alexander Lukashenko personally and repeatedly championed the projects, positioning their realization as a testament to his "diplomatic genius" and ability to secure powerful allies. At the official groundbreaking ceremony in June 2020, just weeks before the contentious presidential election, officials lauded the projects as evidence of Belarus's stable development and international prestige. This timing was not coincidental; the projects were leveraged as a form of electoral propaganda, showcasing a tangible achievement to the public at a time of growing political discontent. The architectural designs themselves reinforce this narrative, with plans to incorporate both Belarusian national ornaments and Chinese design elements, visually symbolizing the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the fusion of the two cultures.

Table 1. The Multi-Faceted Promotion of China's National Interests via Stadium Diplomacy

Interest Domain	Mechanisms of Promotion
Political	Strengthening bilateral ties with authoritarian regimes; securing diplomatic support for core policies (e.g., "One-China" policy); expanding influence in regions where Western presence is receding.
Economic	Providing "bound" aid and loans that require use of Chinese contractors and materials; creating markets for Chinese goods; securing access to strategic resources and infrastructure corridors (e.g., BRI).
Military-Defense	Deepening military-technical cooperation and gaining access to the defense sectors of partner countries.
Socio-Cultural & Ideological	Framing projects as "gestures of goodwill" to foster a positive public image; embedding symbols of Chinese culture and friendship in foreign landscapes; promoting the "Chinese dream" as a development model.
Image Information &	Cooperating with local media to shape public opinion; countering narratives of the "China threat" by showcasing tangible contributions to local development; using high-visibility projects for nation-branding.

Interest Domain	Mechanisms of Promotion
Sports	Demonstrating adherence to the principle of "sport is beyond politics" to maintain diplomatic channels; aligning projects with China's goal of becoming a "world football power" by 2050.

**Source: Compiled by the authors based on a synthesis of the literature.*

Urban Development and Public Policy Implications

The implementation of the stadium and swimming pool projects has significant public policy implications for Minsk's urban development. The Belarusian state committed to providing cleared construction sites and all necessary infrastructure (roads, utilities, communications) at its own expense. This represents a substantial domestic investment to facilitate the Chinese "gift." The decision-making process, however, lacked public consultation, a common feature of governance in Belarus. The choice to build the new football stadium in the 50th Anniversary of October Park, requiring the felling of a significant number of trees, drew criticism from local environmental activists and residents. Petitions and public appeals to relocate the stadium to the site of an older, existing arena to preserve the green space were ignored by city authorities.

This highlights a key public policy challenge: when strategic infrastructure is funded by an external power under an agreement between heads of state, local community interests and environmental standards can be sidelined. The projects are fast-tracked under presidential decrees, bypassing standard regulatory and public feedback mechanisms. Furthermore, the agreements stipulate that the design and construction are carried out according to Chinese standards and by Chinese general contractors (Beijing Urban Construction Group and Beijing Construction Engineering Group), with Chinese labor also brought in. While Belarusian officials claimed local materials and workers would be used, the primary control remains with the Chinese side. This model limits the project's potential to stimulate the local construction industry and raises questions about long-term maintenance and integration with local urban planning norms.

National Identity and Geopolitical Reorientation

At a deeper level, the stadium projects contribute to the ongoing reorientation of Belarusian national identity. For three decades, Belarus has navigated a complex identity between Russia and Europe. The post-2020 crackdown and subsequent Western sanctions have accelerated a decisive pivot away from the West. In this context, China is presented as a powerful, reliable, and ideologically compatible alternative. The new stadium and swimming pool will become prominent landmarks in Minsk, serving as permanent, physical reminders of this strategic alignment. They are tangible manifestations of a state policy that seeks to define Belarusian identity

not in terms of European integration, but in terms of Eurasian and non-Western partnerships.

This process is not without societal tension. Independent media reports and online commentary reveal a degree of public skepticism. Citizens question the true cost of the "gift," speculating about undisclosed concessions made to China, such as access to the country's potash industry or strategic enterprises. Derogatory nicknames like "China Arena" and comments lamenting that Belarus is being placed in the same category as developing African nations reflect an undercurrent of concern about the country's sovereignty and its slide into dependency. Thus, while the state promotes the projects as symbols of strength and friendship, for a segment of the population, they symbolize a loss of autonomy and a future as a "European province of China."

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that China's stadium diplomacy in Belarus is a sophisticated exercise in soft power with profound societal implications. The analysis extends the existing literature by demonstrating how this strategy is adapted to a European authoritarian context, where the objectives are less about resource extraction and more about ideological alliance-building and strategic positioning. The Belarusian case illustrates how the physical and symbolic power of infrastructure can be harnessed by both the donor and recipient states for mutual political gain.

From a theoretical perspective, this case provides a compelling example of Nye's (2004) concept of soft power in action. China is not coercing Belarus but attracting it through a highly visible cultural offering. The "gift" of the stadiums creates a sense of obligation and fosters a narrative of partnership that is difficult for Western powers to counter. This aligns with the principles of public diplomacy, where long-term relationship-building is prioritized. The projects become a permanent fixture in the host country's capital, continuously communicating a message of Chinese friendship and capability long after the ribbon-cutting ceremony (Cull, 2009).

The discussion must also address the implications for Belarusian society. The top-down implementation of the projects, devoid of public consultation, reinforces the authoritarian nature of the political system. It demonstrates that major urban development decisions are driven by high-level political calculations rather than the needs or desires of the local community. This can create a disconnect between the state's nation-branding efforts and public perception. While the government celebrates the projects as a national achievement, some citizens may view them as symbols of an unwelcome foreign influence and a government that prioritizes geopolitical maneuvering over local concerns like environmental protection and public participation (Wilson, 2021). This tension between the official narrative and public sentiment is a critical aspect of how soft power is received and contested at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, the study highlights the instrumentalization of sport and culture for political ends. The Belarusian government's claim that "sport is beyond politics" is contradicted by its use of the stadium projects to bolster its own legitimacy and by its severe repression of athletes who participated in the 2020 pro-democracy protests. China, too, manipulates this ideal to maintain diplomatic channels and advance its interests under a guise of apolitical cooperation. This politicization of cultural infrastructure ultimately serves to strengthen the authoritarian alliance between Minsk and Beijing, creating a shared space—both physically and ideologically—that stands in opposition to the liberal-democratic values espoused by the West.

Conclusion

This paper has examined China's stadium diplomacy in Belarus, reframing it as a socio-cultural and public policy issue rather than a purely geopolitical one. The analysis demonstrates that the construction of the National Football Stadium and swimming pool in Minsk is a multi-functional tool of soft power. For China, it is a strategic investment in nation-branding, projecting an image of a generous and powerful global partner while securing a strategic foothold in Eastern Europe. For the Lukashenko regime, these projects are vital instruments for reinforcing domestic legitimacy, signaling international relevance in the face of Western isolation, and physically embedding the country's geopolitical pivot to the East into its capital's landscape.

The study's primary contribution to the social science literature lies in its detailed exploration of the societal impact of such infrastructure diplomacy within an authoritarian context. It reveals how foreign-sponsored projects can become sites of political contestation, where official narratives of friendship and progress clash with public concerns over sovereignty, environmental degradation, and lack of democratic process. The case of Belarus shows that the effectiveness of soft power is not guaranteed; it is mediated by the domestic political environment and can simultaneously generate goodwill and resentment.

Ultimately, the Chinese "dragon" has effectively used these high-visibility projects to deepen its influence over the Belarusian state. In doing so, it contributes to the consolidation of an authoritarian regime and aids in the redefinition of Belarusian national identity away from Europe and towards a new Eurasian alignment. As China continues to expand its global footprint through infrastructure, further research is needed to understand the long-term social, cultural, and political consequences for recipient nations, particularly how these monumental "gifts" reshape not just city skylines, but also the identities and futures of the societies that live in their shadows.

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