

## **Schengen visa marketing in China: the street-level competition to attract tourists to Europe**

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### **Abstract**

Before COVID-19, visitors from China, representing the world's largest outbound tourism market in terms of total spend, were a prime target for the European tourism industries. Yet, their mobility was constrained by the Schengen visa requirement for any trip to a European Union (EU)'s Member States. While literature on Schengen visa policy has highlighted the repressive practices of street-level bureaucrats processing visa applications abroad, this article seeks to understand how Schengen visa policy is implemented when the objective is to attract potential visitors rather than drive them away. The paper's core argument is that the economic imperative to attract Chinese tourists to Europe is turning local consular cooperation from Schengen into local consular competition. To support this claim and using ethnographic methods, the paper develops the concept of visa marketing to analyse the race to attractiveness between French and Italian consulates based in Beijing, the capital of China. Visa marketing refers to the use of visa procedures (receipt conditions, reliability, processing speed, etc.) by consulates as sales arguments to advertise the destination they represent. In essence, the article presents a case of domestic actors appropriating common visa regimes, engaging in a competition to entice foreign consumers to their territories.

### **Keywords**

visa policy – Schengen local cooperation – China – discretion – border bureaucracies

## Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, China was the world's largest outbound tourism market in terms of travellers and expenditure, with 170 million Chinese citizens travelling abroad and injecting \$262 billion in the global economy (World Tourism Organization 2019). The European Union (EU) has been an important destination for Chinese tourists. In 2019 alone, more than 5 million Chinese tourists visited Italy, while France welcomed 2.2 million Chinese visitors, who contributed over €3.5 billion euros to the national economy, constituting 7% of the total tourism expenditure (Atout France 2023). In other words, the Chinese visitors represented a significant financial gain for the European tourism industries, and their mobility was sought after, despite being subject to Schengen visa requirements for travelling in Europe.

The Schengen visa is a travel document to cross EU common external borders. It is required for around a hundred nationalities, most of them from the Global South. Little is known, however, about the implementation of the Schengen visa policy in third countries whose nationals are considered 'desirable' for the EU's economy such as 'big-spender'-type tourists from China, while citizens of high-income countries are exempt,<sup>1</sup> producing a 'global mobility divide' (Czaika, de Haas, and Villares-Varela 2018; Mau et al. 2015). Granting access to any Schengen country<sup>2</sup> and valid for three-month stays for tourism, family visit or business purposes, Schengen visas are issued – or denied – to foreigners by national consulates according to harmonized practices.<sup>3</sup> The Community Code on Visas (also known as the Visa Code) provides the legal framework for instructing the applications; however, it also leaves great room for discretionary power and national interpretation. Ethnographic research on the Schengen visa regime has highlighted how consular officials used national discretion to implement repressive and dissuasive visa-issuing practices, especially in low-income and/or refugee-sending countries (Alpes and Spire 2014; Infantino 2019; Scheel 2019; Zampagni 2016).<sup>4</sup>

This article seeks to explore how national consular officials implement the EU common visa policy to attract Chinese tourists to their territory. I argue that the economic imperative to attract Chinese visitors to Europe turns Schengen visa implementation into a local consular competition. To support this claim, I develop the concept of 'visa marketing' as a set of national practices of implementing and appropriating common Schengen visa rules. 'Visa marketing' refers to the use of visa procedures (reception conditions, reliability, processing speed etc.) by consulates as sales arguments to advertise the destination they represent. Drawing on an ethnographic study of Schengen visa implementation in Beijing, the article focuses on French and Italian consulates to examine their practices of appropriation of Schengen visa rules to develop travel incentives in an inter-state race for tourists. By investigating visa marketing practices and documenting the incentive dimension of the Schengen visa, this research sheds a new light on the scholarship on the Schengen visa regime, and more broadly on border bureaucracies, which has mostly and rightly focused on frontline agents' restrictive practices (Borrelli et al. 2023).

To analyse how EU Member States' consulates compete for Chinese tourists, the article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on visa policies, highlighting their dual function of attracting desirable mobile subjects while repressing unwanted migration forms. It identifies a gap in documenting everyday bureaucratic practices aimed at attracting visa applicants. The second section elaborates on the relational approach to implementation, to analyse visa marketing as the result of interdependencies between various street-level actors. The third section explains the ethnographic methods employed for this research. The fourth section operationalizes the concept of visa marketing, focusing on the street-level competition between the French and Italian consulates in Beijing. These consulates are engaged in a race for attractiveness through two sets of visa marketing practices:

the outsourcing of visa applications to private providers and the reduction of visa application processing time.

### The Janus face of visa policies

Janus-faced immigration and visa policies, as argued by Joppke (2021), consist of simultaneously ‘fending off the bottom’ and ‘courting the top’. The European Commission echoes this duality, characterizing EU common visa policy as ‘a tool to facilitate tourism and business, while preventing security risks and the risk of irregular migration’ (European Commission 2018). In essence, visa policies serve a dual role: encouraging the mobility of beneficial travellers for the economy while keeping undesirables at a distance.

On the one hand, States acknowledge the imperative of open borders and participation in the ‘global race’ for most valuable foreigners (Shachar 2006; Skeldon 2009). To capitalize on the advantages of economic globalization, States actively promote preferred forms of international mobility. Visa waivers, for instance, have proven to be an effective strategy in attracting tourists and business individuals (Gülzau, Mau, and Zaun 2016; Mau et al. 2015). The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) allows citizens of ‘high-volume and low-risk’ 39 countries to visit the United States (US) without applying for a visa. In 2017, tourists from VWP countries generated 190 billion and supported 1million jobs in the US (Kolker and Platzer 2020). Conversely, restrictionism may substantially impede States’ competitiveness, as visa restrictions not only have a detrimental effect on tourism but also result in a 25% reduction in bilateral trade and investment (Neumayer 2011). Selective long-term visa policies are also typically viewed as means to attract financial and human capital, specifically targeting ‘desirable’ migrants such as high-skilled workers (Boucher and Cerna 2014; Cerna 2014), international students (Geddie 2015), or wealthy investors. Following the 2007 global financial and economic crisis, European policymakers have developed golden visas and citizenship-by-investment programmes as ways to entice and cherry-pick highest-value immigrants.

These highly selective devices, offering long-term residence in exchange for financial investments, are designed to enhance national competitiveness despite the recession (Cerna and Czaika 2016; Gaspar and Ampudia de Haro 2020; Sumption and Hooper 2014). The global race for capital sparks competition between countries, each leveraging its comparative advantages to persuade ‘high potentials’ to choose their destination over others (Wagner 2016). The competition for attracting international mobile elites hinges on nation-branding strategies – promotional campaigns of a country’s image to attract visitors, investments and business opportunities (Aronczyk 2013). This can include advertising a country’s way-of-life to convince potential immigrants to select the destination and settle there. Hence, immigration and visa policies serve an objective of economic prosperity, with States competing to attract the most desired forms of mobility. However, the literature referenced above primarily focuses on policymaking and large-scale comparative analysis, frequently overlooking the operational intricacies within the ‘black box’ of street-level administrations responsible for processing cases on a day-to-day basis. In essence, there is a notable gap in understanding the dynamics of the ‘global race for elites’ at the policy implementation stage.

On the other hand, literature on the Schengen visa policy has extensively engaged with the study of its implementation, which is mostly restrictive. Historically, the Schengen visa policy was conceived by Member States as a compensatory measure to free movement within the EU’s territory and has been relying on reinforced control at the common external borders (Guild and Bigo 2003; Guiraudon and Joppke 2001; Meloni 2006). This repressive conception of border control is reflected

at the implementation level. Following Michael Lipsky's central approach of 'street-level bureaucracy' (Lipsky 1980) and using ethnographic methods, scholars have studied national visa officials' routines when processing visa applications. Empowered with significant discretionary power under the Visa Code, those street-level bureaucrats are primarily tasked with detecting applicants suspected of planning to settle in the destination country after entering with a tourist visa (Infantino and Rea 2012). They implement this bureaucratic mission by processing applications with a 'suspicion by default' (Zampagni 2016). They deal with the law to build local and moral categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' applicants, profiled on age, gender, occupation and religious characteristics (Alpes and Spire 2014; Infantino 2019; Scheel 2018). Besides, the restrictive approach is reinforced by local cooperation between different consulates operating in the same third country. For example, Infantino's work highlights the cross-national differences in implementation and the primacy of 'national styles' in the interpretation of the Visa Code by the French, Belgian and Italian consulates in Morocco. To limit this variation, Member States are encouraged to cooperate and harmonize their practices. While the Visa Code provides that the EU delegation in the country of implementation monitors the Schengen local cooperation, inter-state contacts mostly take place via informal channels. National agents from different Member States build 'communities of practice' where knowledge and expertise are shared to achieve a common understanding of 'migration risk' and limit cross-national divergences in implementation (Infantino 2021). As Infantino outlines, 'national state actors rely on "other Europeans" to develop [...] appropriate ways of securing Europe' (Infantino 2019, 223). She also notes, however, that state actors do not exchange knowledge about domain of national competition, such as facilitations granted for businesspeople. Hence, little is known about implementation and cooperation practices when it comes to compete for desired travellers.

This article aims to explore the interface between Schengen visa implementation and national competition, addressing the two identified gaps. It first seeks to uncover how frontline bureaucrats implement visa policy not to restrict but to encourage international mobility. Second, it delves into the street-level dynamics of the 'global race' for human and financial capital, connecting it to intra-Schengen consulates' relations. Therefore, the objective of this article is to document visa marketing practices, showcasing how they articulate bureaucratic discretion and inter-state relations, but with the objective of attraction instead of repression.

## A relational approach to Schengen visa implementation

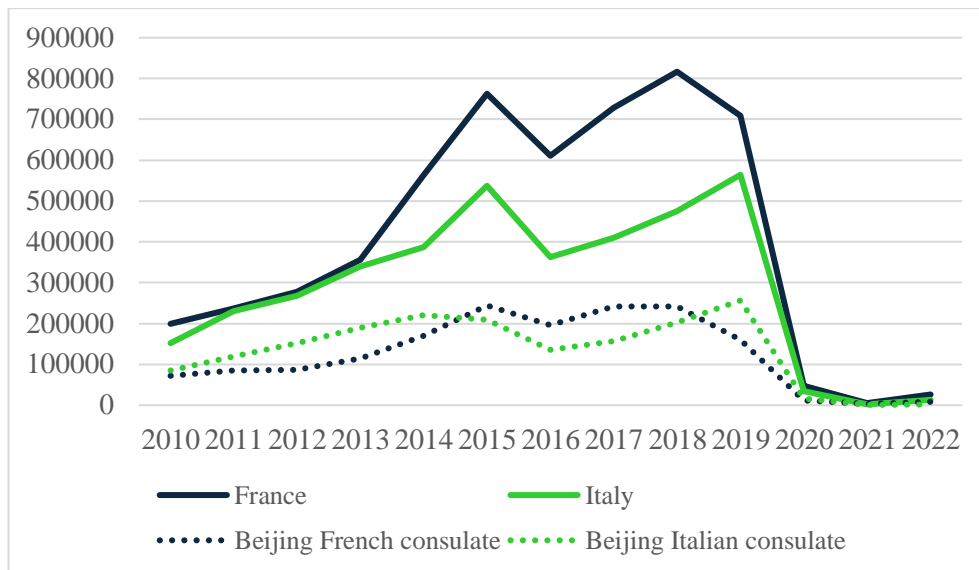
To study visa marketing practices, I adopt a relational approach to implementation. This framework allows for the examination of the social relationships which influence the daily practices of border bureaucrats (Darling 2022; Dubois 2014; Miaz and Achermann 2022). Existing research on immigration policy implementation highlights how discretion and decisions are 'socially embedded' within groups of professionals. Their daily interactions, including work routines or training, contribute to a tacit collective understanding of border security (Côté-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter 2014; Ostrand and Statham 2022).

The implementation of Schengen visa policy encompasses a large spectrum of actors that interact with each other. National consulates hold a pivotal role within this network of relationships. Operating under the hierarchy of their respective national administrations and of the European Commission, consulates also engage with various street-level intermediaries (Infantino 2023; Lindquist 2017). For instance, they often outsource logistical tasks to private service providers (Sánchez-Barrueco 2018; Infantino 2017a; 2017b). Moreover, visa officials based abroad tend to adjust their procedures based on their awareness of both facilitators' practices. For

example, Scheel (2019) observed how visa officials have become cautious of local travel agencies assisting visa applicants, suspecting potential document falsification. However, the situation in China is specific, as further explained in the following sections. State-owned travel agencies are accountable to Schengen countries' consulates under an EU–China agreement, binding them to submit pre-screened visa applications. In sum, border bureaucrats are embedded within a web of relationships which inform and influence their practices. Furthermore, in the context of Schengen cooperation, Member States' consulates interact with each other, bound by the Visa Code to harmonize their practices. As mentioned in the previous section, Infantino has analysed the formal and informal cooperation of Schengen consulates using the relational concept of community of practices, which Wenger (1998) defines as a social theory of learning. Building upon this definition, the present research seeks to investigate how national consular actors embedded within such community also engage in mutual learning and ultimately 'benchmark' their practices to be more competitive. Economic competition, including competition for tourism market shares, is recognized as a fundamental driver of policy diffusion from a national context to another, especially through emulation (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). Therefore, this article aims to document how Schengen visa policy implementation is transformed by national consulates competing for the same objective: attracting Chinese tourists to their destination. A relational approach to implementation allows for a comprehensive understanding of how competitive practices like visa marketing emerge through social learning and interdependency between street-level actors, involving comparison, emulation, and occasionally suspicion of each other's practices.

## Methods and data

The following account of Schengen visa marketing practices in China is based on a two-month field research conducted in Beijing before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Relying on immersive observations and interviews, this qualitative method has proven extremely valuable in documenting the everyday practices of the administration. While my research<sup>6</sup> primarily dealt with the French consulate, I also had the opportunity to conduct several interviews and observations with other Schengen States represented in Beijing during my stay. To effectively analyse the relational dimension of implementation and understand how it is influenced by the race for attractiveness, I chose to centre this paper on two Member States: France and Italy, both major Schengen visa providers in China (refer to Figure 1). While France remains the leading Schengen visa provider in China and the first destination visited globally, Figure 1 reveals that the French and Italian consulates in Beijing are in close competition for the number of visas processed. The results presented in this paper are based on the period before COVID-19. The pandemic led to prolonged travel restrictions, especially in China, since Chinese nationals were the first population subject to travel bans in early 2020. Additionally, Chinese authorities imposed overseas travel restrictions that were only lifted in 2022. The immobilization of Chinese nationals within their national borders resulted in an unprecedented decline in Schengen visa issuance (–96% between 2019 and 2022), as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Schengen visa applications processed by France and Italy in China (2010-2022)  
 Author elaboration based on the European Commission's 'Statistics on short-stay visas issued by the Schengen States'.

To analyse competitive implementation practices, I collected two types of primary data. Firstly, I carried out ethnographic observations in French and Italian visa application centres in Beijing, as well as in French consular visa offices. Visa application centres (VAC) are private facilities owned by visa processing companies to which consulates delegate logistical tasks such as appointment management, public reception, and biometric data collection. Secondly, I carried out semi-directed interviews ( $n = 26$ ) with French, Italian and other Schengen countries' visa agents; consular and diplomatic officials; VAC managers; representatives from the national tourism development agencies and officials from the EU delegation and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), all based in Beijing.<sup>7</sup> Interviews with stakeholders other than French and Italian counterparts are primarily employed for triangulation and data verification purposes, aiming to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the context of Schengen visa implementation in China. In comparison with other contexts where Schengen visas are a sensitive issue, and scholars experience tremendous difficulties in obtaining field access (Satzewich 2015; Scheel 2018; Spire 2017), interviewing national visa officials, and securing permission to visit and observe consulates and VAC has been relatively easy. This facilitated access was enabled by a context where the perception of migration risk is notably low, which I will further explain in the next section,<sup>8</sup> leading street-level bureaucrats to be less suspicious and more incline to accept outside observers such as academic researchers. The results presented in this article are also informed by interviews with visa policymakers in Brussels (European Commission) and in Paris (Ministries of Home Affairs and Foreign affairs), textual analysis of a corpus of EU and national institutional reports on visa policy, and Schengen visa statistics published by the European Commission since 2009.<sup>9</sup>

## Results

### *The making of 'marketable' Chinese visa applicants*

China stands as an exemplary case study for the analysis of migration and border policies meant to enhance attractiveness. Primarily viewed as 'consumers' by European public authorities, wealthy Chinese visitors embody the desirable mobility sought by the 'incentive' side of Janus-faced visa policies. Before accounting for



visa marketing practices aimed at attracting them to Europe, I first delve into the social and historical construction of such desirability, along with the marketability recently attributed to Chinese visa applicants. Chinese citizens have been subject to the Schengen visa requirement to travel to the EU since the adoption of the very first joint ‘negative list’ in the early nineties (Gisti 1991). In addition, overseas travel has long been banned by the Chinese communist regime, any foreign interference viewed as counter-revolutionary, and international tourism as ideological treason (Arlt 2006; Biao 2007). Travel abroad has slowly been allowed by the regime since 1985, but only official delegations could visit Europe for professional or diplomatic purposes. In 2004, the Chinese government and the EU signed an authorized destination status (ADS) agreement, a Chinese bilateral agreement that allows guided tourist groups to travel to state-approved destinations (Coles and Hall 2011; Paradise 2022; Tse 2013). ADS agreements allow state-owned travel agencies (referred to as ‘ADS’ agencies) to sell and promote all-inclusive travels to these authorized destinations. ADS agencies are also required to cooperate with European consulates and pre-screen visa applications to ensure they are genuine and compliant with Schengen regulations. During trips to Europe, ADS tour operators supervise the guided groups to avoid overstaying and ensure the entire group returns to China. In return, visa applications for ADS tourists are simplified. The ADS system offers two major advantages to EU countries. On the one hand, they can benefit from this new outbound tourism market, made up of the Chinese middle class, who are beginning to have the financial means to travel and consume abroad. On the other hand, they can rely on state-owned ADS agencies to pre-screen visa applications and conduct initial migration risk identification. Therefore, this agreement has enabled the categorization of Chinese visa applicants as low-risk and ‘high-yield’ tourists.

The desirability of Chinese visitors increased after the 2007–2009 economic and financial crisis. To support domestic demand against the effects of the global recession, the Chinese government revised the national holiday system: Chinese workers were allowed to travel inside and outside the country at any time of the year, and no longer during official holiday period only (York and Zhang 2010). Combined with double-digit growth (10.6% in 2010) and the ‘recreational turn’ of Chinese society (Nyiri 2011), this interventionist measure has helped boost outbound tourism, with 112 billion Chinese tourist arrivals abroad in 2012. In the same year, China became the world’s top tourism source market, with more than \$102 billion spent abroad (World Tourism Organization 2019). In parallel, the recession led European authorities to start paying more attention to the tourism sector and its impact on growth and jobs, and how it could be boosted by attracting new outbound tourism markets (Antonakakis, Dragouni, and Filis 2015; Ekonomou and Halkos 2023). The financial means and shopping behaviour of Chinese visitors have caught the interest of high-profile destinations such as France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany (Taunay, L’hostis, and Johnson 2020). With this awareness came a concern about visa requirements, seen as a barrier to tourism growth from new outbound tourism markets (Macías-Aymar, De Pedro, and Pérez 2012). In May 2012, G20 Tourism ministers, known as the T20, released a joint statement recognizing tourism as a driver of growth and committing to improving visa facilitation as a means of stimulating international tourism (T20 2012). The European Commission closely followed the T20 recommendations with a series of communications and legislative proposals aimed at better aligning the common visa policy with growth objectives (European Commission 2012; 2014). In 2014, the EU started negotiations with the Chinese government to sign a visa facilitation agreement, but the process is currently blocked by a lack of Chinese concessions on the return and readmission of irregular migrants (Stefan 2018). In other words, the Schengen visa requirement for Chinese nationals is not likely to be lifted.

To attract Chinese tourists while maintaining Schengen visa requirements, European countries have developed several incentive strategies tailored to the

Chinese outbound tourism market. These include, for example, the introduction of WePay and Alipay cashless payment systems in large department stores and international airports, as well as strong destination marketing involving both public and private actors (Corigliano 2011; Yang, Reeh, and Kreisel 2011). Most EU destinations have also increased the resources allocated to their consulates in China to allow visa processing capacity to keep up with growing tourist demand. The most common measures include the creation of additional staff positions in existing visa services, the opening of new consular sections in tier-2 Chinese cities, and the transfer of administrative and logistical burdens to outsourced visa processing companies. These incentives account for the increase in the influx of the issuance of Schengen visas in China, reaching almost 3 million in 2019 (compared to 780,000 in 2010), and Chinese visitors to Europe, exceeding 25 million nights in 2016 (Eurostat 2018).

Incentive measures have been documented in other contexts than China, although not to the same extent. In former colonies of Member States, consulates have implemented specific procedures, such as fast-track appointments, which are reserved for local elites only (Dupont 2022; Infantino 2019). These facilitations serve a balance between accommodating the diplomatic relations and mitigating ‘migratory risks’. However, it is noteworthy that concerns about migratory risks coexist with attractiveness policies in China. During my fieldwork, I noted several instances where bureaucrats tended to be more suspicious of applicants from northern provinces of China, where the unemployment rate is higher and income significantly lower than in major urban areas.

Visa officials therefore ensure that ‘fake tourists’ do not take advantage of the attractiveness policy, which primarily targets the Chinese urban middle-upper class. The following sections will zoom on two specific sets of visa marketing practices deployed by the French and Italian consulates in Beijing to attract so-called ‘desirable’ Chinese tourists.

### *Delegation as a form of competition: the use of ‘VIP’ versus ‘low-cost’ private providers*

The first set of practices deals with the use of the service provided by the visa application centres as a selling point for the destination. Since the early 2000s, consulates have outsourced administrative and logistical burdens to private visa processing companies (VPCs), who are now responsible for dealing with the public and transmitting their applications to the consulates, which remain responsible for deciding whether to grant or deny visas (Sánchez-Barrueco 2018; Infantino 2017b). Initially largely deregulated (Bloom 2015), delegation to VPCs is now controlled by the Visa Code. For instance, this regulation sets the standard fee to be paid by visa applicants, which cannot exceed half of the amount of the visa fee, i.e. 40 euros.<sup>10</sup> In each third country or region where they issue visas, States subcontract to one of the few companies in this quasi-monopoly market (Infantino 2017a). In Beijing, the French consulate is represented by TLS Contact, a company part of the French multinational Teleperformance, whose outsourcing activities have historically been developed in China. The Italian consulate is represented by VFS Global, the worldwide VPC leader. Below, I show how both consulates are competing for tourist appeal through commercial services offered by their respective visa application centres.

First, the French consulate relies on a ‘VIP’ customer experience to advertise France as a high-end destination and attract wealthy visitors. The French visa application centre is located inside one of Beijing’s most spectacular buildings, the Parkview Green *Fāng Caodì* shopping mall. Under an eco-friendly pyramid-shaped glass structure, the mall houses a six-star hotel, major art exhibition halls and luxury



stores such as Rolex, Tesla, Van Cleef & Arpels etc. According to the head of the French consulate,

Our provider strategically chose this mall to open our centre because this is the most beautiful and the most expensive building in town. It is an amazing location, ideal for attracting the rich.

Alongside designer and high-tech boutiques, the visa application centre is aimed at an elite clientele looking to apply for a visa to France. The premium service is particularly representative of this target. TLS Contact Beijing charges 33.50 euros for the premium service and 28.50 euros for the standard service.<sup>11</sup> For this supplement, premium users usually benefit from separate, faster, and more comfortable processes than the standard service. The TLS Contact centre in Beijing goes well beyond this logic and treats premium users as luxury customers. When I visit the place for the first time, the premium lounge was brand-new and had just been renewed (see Figure 2). I take note of the following description:

Separate space, large windows with a panorama of Beijing's skyline, no waiting, lounge music, and designer furniture. Buffet with tea, coffee, and French fine pastries (macarons, canelés de Bordeaux, madeleines). There are about twenty coffee tables with two or three armchairs where applicants sit. Next to them, the TLS Contact employee sits on a stool, and he/she enters the applicants' information on a digital tablet. As the manager explains to me: 'The customer should not have to move or stand. We are coming to them'. She adds: 'We designed a true VIP experience'.

The renovation of the premium lounge was commissioned by the French consulate. For the Head of the consular section, the visa application centre, and particularly the premium service, are designed as a showcase of the French destination for a local elite that is perceived as sensitive to signs of social prestige:

I wanted to get rid of the post-office-like counters. The customer must be served seated. He sits in an armchair, while the employee sits on a stool, to draw a distinction. We need to focus on this rich clientele.



**Figure 2.** TLS Contact France premium service (promotional picture)

The premium service at the French visa application centre is an eloquent example of visa marketing practices. The application process follows a ‘customer experience’ marketing strategy that aims to offer a unique and pleasurable experience to the customer and to bring added value, differentiation and competitive advantage to the company (Jain, Aagja, and Bagdare 2017). Here, the visa marketing strategy is to honour the social status of elite applicants while introducing them to the so-called French sense of hospitality. The selection of refined, typically French pastries is an example of a nation-branding strategy to promote France as a classy destination. Furthermore, such practice also informs the shift from a bureaucratic frame (‘the counter’) to a market frame (‘the clientele’), deepening the neo-managerial turn of visa administrations that began with outsourcing.

The Italian consulate and its provider VFS Global are pursuing an opposite strategy, based on a low-cost business model. The traditional model of low-cost competition is based on economies of scale, elimination of costly services and drastic price cutting (Berman 2015). While the Visa Code imposes a maximum amount for standard service fees, there is no legal provision for a minimum amount. When responding to the Italian consulate’s call for tenders, VFS Global took advantage of this legal loophole to create ‘an extremely aggressive bid’<sup>12</sup> in terms of prices, outperforming rival companies such as TLS Contact. Indeed, the Italian visa application centre in Beijing charges very competitive rates: the standard service fee is 10 euros. It also charges a group rate for ADS travel agencies of just 8 euros. The price gap between the French and the Italian providers is therefore significant (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Service fees at TLS Contact France and VFS Global Italy in Beijing

	Standard service fee	ADS group fee	Premium service fee
TLS Contact France	28.50 euros	-	33.50 euros
VFS Global Italy	10 euros	8 euros	30 euros

In addition, the Italian VAC offers a minimal and frugal service to visa applicants. During my visit, I noted that the VAC is located in the basement of an average mall in downtown Beijing. The place is quite noisy and lit by neon lights. The furniture is made of plastic material in the colours of the Italian flag, which stands as another but cheaper form of nation-branding (see Figure 3). In addition, other characteristics of the low-cost model can be identified, such as the charging of any additional service. The premium option costs 30 euros, the return of one’s passport through a courier service costs 6 euros, photocopies are charged 0.40 euros per page etc.

This low-cost model is particularly aimed at ADS travel agencies that sell all-inclusive trips, including visa fees and service fees, to multi-destination tourists, who generally visit two to three Schengen countries within 10 days. To reduce their costs, ADS travel agencies are encouraged to submit visa applications to the Italian consulate rather than other Schengen destinations, as the Head of the French consulate explains:

When VFS Global started cutting prices, I had a meeting with the largest ADS travel agencies, those that lodge at least 10 000 visa applications with [the French consulate] each year. They all told me ‘TLS Contact service is excellent, VFS Global sucks, but we save 18 to 20 euros per applicant with VFS Global because it is a cheaper service fee for the same visa’. When you multiply by the number of visa applications they have to lodge, they can save up to 200 000 euros in one year. How is it possible to compete with that?



**Figure 3.** VFS Global Italy visa application centre (promotional picture)

Visa application outsourcing in China is a relevant example of inter-state competition for attracting tourists through visa procedures. The two Schengen States are appropriating common rules for the regulation of providers, in order to develop distinct comparative advantage strategies (VIP service on the one hand, low-cost service on the other), that are clearly defined in relation to and in competition with one another. The relational approach to implementation unveils the interaction and interdependence among street-level actors, who shape their practices based on their understanding of others'. This dynamic is exemplified by VFS Global's self-described 'aggressive' price cut and the meeting between the Head of the French Consulate and ADS travel agencies, which demonstrates he tried to gather information on their practices, and ultimately influence them to choose TLS Contact's services.

### *Time is money: the competition for faster decision delays*

The second set of competitive practices examined in this article deals with visa processing time. While Article 23 of the Visa Code requires visa applications to be processed and decided within a maximum of two weeks from the date of the lodging, several Schengen consulates in China use faster decision delays for visa-marketing purposes. From a symbolic point of view, the length of the waiting times affects the users. Waiting is a hallmark of social organization and distinction. Those with the least resources often wait the longest, while those whose social value is emphasized by the authorities tend to wait less (Auyero 2012; Schwartz 1975). In other words, reducing waiting and processing times for Chinese visa applicants aims to signal their desirability for European countries and encourage them to choose their destination.

As the head of Swiss Tourism in China explains, Switzerland was one of the first Schengen countries to use fast delays as a selling point in the early 2010s:

We would approach ADS travel agencies and promised them faster and more reliable visa procedures than our competitors. The objective was to convince them to lodge visa applications at the Swiss consulate and by doing so, to schedule a maximum of overnight stays in Switzerland.

Switzerland's visa marketing strategy was quickly emulated by France. In a speech celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Sino-French relations in 2014, French

Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius launched a new scheme to ease visa procedures for Chinese tourists: the visa in 48-hours. The French consulates in China would guarantee a decision on the application within 2 calendar days instead of 15 from the date of the lodging. This measure helped increase the number of visa applications by 35% between 2014 and 2015. In 2015, the number of Chinese tourists in France exceeded 2 million for the first time.

Following the visa marketing strategies of France and Switzerland, Italy announced in 2016 that Italian consulates in China would process visa applications within 36 hours. Fieldwork research revealed that in practice the delays were even shorter than those officially communicated by France and Italy. According to one of the French visa agents, actual delays are on average 24 hours, and sometimes even less:

We deliver in 24 hours without any problem, but the consulate cannot publicly commit to it. When I say 24 hours, it is in fact the time lapse during which the application is inside the consulate. It arrives in the morning and leaves the next day. ADS travel agencies put pressure for the part at the provider to be included in the 24-hour delay. So, this only leaves us a couple of hours to process visa applications.

For French visa agents, the race for shorter delays means less time to carry out all the verifications before issuing a visa:

During off-peak season, each visa agent has 80 applications to process every day. Within a 7-hour working day, it leaves 4 minutes to process one application, which is enough when you are a little experienced. However, during peak season from May to October, it's up to 150 applications every day. It means you have less than two minutes per files. It is not enough to carry out all the verifications.

Visa marketing strategies focused on reducing delays are based on and contribute to a culture of standards and performance within the border bureaucracy. Driven by inter-Schengen competition and the attractiveness objective, visa marketing imposes productivity pressures on agents. To meet the deadlines expected by ADS agencies, visa officers acknowledge issuing visas without thoroughly checking applications' details. The members of the French consulate hold the Italian consulate responsible for maintaining a competitive climate in relation to delays. They suspect Italy of issuing visas in less than three hours without having time for controls, such as checking applicants' travel history in the Visa Information System (VIS), a shared database linking EU consulates. Officially and during the interviews, Italian stakeholders said they process visa applications in 36 hours, denying rumours of faster delays. As the head of the French visa service points out, the issue of delay is a national reserved domain:

My Italian colleague swears he respects all the controls, that everything is fine. Anyway, if he does not control all the applications, he will never tell me.

In 2014, France was subject to an infringement proceeding (Article 258 TFEU) after being reported to EU authorities in Brussels. The European Commission opened a procedure for 'failure to implement certain obligations under EU legislation on document security'.<sup>13</sup> There was no follow-up, but the case fuelled mutual distrust between France and Italy, who were suspected of filing the complaint to the Commission. A representative of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met in

Paris, summed up this tension between solidarity and rivalry between the two Schengen partners:

This is what is difficult within the EU. We have a duty of solidarity. We also have a similarity with the southern countries [of the EU], in terms of tourist attractiveness. With Italy we are on the same market. It's just that we are a hub, whereas they are not. So, the Italians do all these things to bring Chinese tourists to their country.

The competition for visa processing times in China shows how national consulates are appropriating the Visa Code and the lack of provision for minimal delays to promote fast decisions to Chinese tourists and ADS travel agencies as a selling point for their destination. What was originally a visa marketing measure (advertising short delays to attract more tourists) has shifted into a form of visa dumping, as national actors override legal obligations to meet ever shorter deadlines and stay ahead of the race for attractiveness. Bringing attention to this practice highlights the interdependent relationships and social learning dynamics shaping Schengen visa policy implementation. The emulation to meet increasingly tighter deadlines and the mutual accusations of dumping are integral parts of the social learning process, where national players compare and assess each other's performance, to adjust their own practices. Similarly, the pressure exerted by travel agencies and the arbitrating role of the European Commission underscore the social network of relationships within which national consulates operate.

## Conclusion

This article documents the practices of Schengen visa marketing adopted by the French and Italian consulates based in Beijing, China. Following a relational approach of implementation, this research focuses on the dynamics of competition between the two Member States' administrations, although they are bound by the implementation of EU common visa policy to regulate the crossings of EU common external borders. While the literature on border bureaucracies – included on Schengen visa policy – extensively and legitimately underlines the suspicion and restriction towards candidates to mobility, this study on visa marketing presents a rare situation where administrative discretion is used for attractiveness purposes, hence in favour of applicants. Furthermore, the implementation of attractiveness reflects the neo-managerial transformation of border bureaucracies. They embrace the cult of efficiency, relying on productivity indicators (number of applications, processing times etc.) as well as explicitly portraying users as customers. The implementation of visa marketing practices is also based on the delegation to service providers, indicating the partial privatization of visa policy. The relational approach to implementation enables us to understand visa marketing as the result of social interactions between street-level actors. National consulates perform visa marketing practices by emulating, outperforming, or differentiating from each other's. This conceptual framework also makes it possible to seize the role of private players such as private providers or Chinese state-owned travel agencies which, under the terms of the EU–China ADS agreement, are granted with an unexpected power to choose the Schengen consulate where they lodge group visa applications, based on the most advantageous visa marketing procedures.

While facilitating practices reserved for 'wanted' travellers had been documented in other contexts of visa policy implementation, those tend to fall under an exceptional regime. By comparison, the Chinese case stands as a relevant example of the largescale renegotiation of the balance between objectives of control and attractiveness of Janus-faced visa policies. Similar trends could be observed in other third countries perceived as 'emerging markets' by Member States, such as India for



instance. The objective of attractiveness depends on the social construction of the Chinese visa applicants' desirability, understood as high potential for touristic consumption and low risk of irregular migration. The provisions of the EU–China agreement allow Europeans to rely on the controls carried out by Chinese authorities, especially in the pre-screening of Schengen visa applications. As a result, European authorities may focus on tourism promotion and use the Schengen as a tool of attractiveness, through visa marketing, and not only as an instrument to curb on the migratory risk. However, this race for Chinese tourists has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. With international travel and visa issuance halted, the impact of the sanitary crises has been particularly significant in China. For almost three years, the Chinese government imposed a ban on non-essential travel outside the country. This development underscores the ambiguity of the spatial control enforced by the Chinese regime over its population. While it serves as a crucial condition for the desirability of travellers targeted by incentive measures, it can also be tightened abruptly, adversely affecting the economic interests of European countries, making visa marketing practices obsolete.

## Notes

1. Regulation 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement.

2. The Schengen countries include 23 EU Member States (all of them except Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Romania) and 4 non-EU States (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland).

3. Regulation 810/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas (Visa Code).

4. The case studies of Schengen visa implementation are all situated in Middle East and North African region (Infantino 2019; Spire 2008; Scheel 2018) and in West Africa (Alpes 2017; Zampagni 2016).

5. The exact period of the fieldwork is not specified to ensure additional confidentiality of the respondents. This study was approved by the Université de Montréal's ethical committee (certificate no. CERAS-2018-19-115-D).

6. This article is based on a doctoral project comparing Schengen visa issuance practices in China and in Algeria, defended at Université de Montréal in 2022.

7. Visa agents: France (3), Italy (1), Belgium (3), Netherlands (1) Norway (2), Spain (2), Switzerland (2)

Diplomatic officials: France (3), Italy (1), Delegation of the EU (1), IOM (1)

Heads of national tourism development agencies: France (1), Italy (1), Switzerland (2)

VAC Managers: France (1), Italy (2).

8. The rate of non-issued visa is a relevant indicator for assessing the level of perception of migration pressure by European actors: in China, it is at 3–5% for the studied period, whereas in North Africa countries such as Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, the average denial rate stands between 25% and 40%.

9. The results presented in this article are part of a completed doctoral thesis which compared Schengen visa implementation by French consulates in China and in Algeria using a multiscale analysis.



10. At the time of the fieldwork, the visa fee in force was 60 euros (article 16). As a result, the service fee could not exceed 30 euros (article 17). Since the entry into force of the Visa Code recast in February 2020, the visa fee is now 80 euros. As a result, providers can charge up to 40 euros for the standard service.

11. Depending on sources (consulates, VAC website), fees are alternatively expressed in euro or in renminbi, the official currency of the People's Republic of China. To ease the understanding of the competition between the French and the Italian consulate, fees are all expressed in euro in this article.

12. Interview with a representative of VFS Global for Southeast Asia.

13. Infringement procedure INFR(2013/2257) against France, procedure closed on 18 June 2015.

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