

## Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis 23

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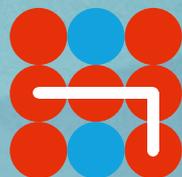
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# One China under media heaven: How Beijing hones its skills in information operations

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Hybrid CoE

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# One China under media heaven: How Beijing hones its skills in information operations

*"Traditionally, China's influence toolbox has contained a mixture of public diplomacy and propaganda targeting political and economic elites, but in recent years, it has added new tools and techniques to its influence portfolio and focused on new targets." – writes Dr. Ivana Karásková, a founder and project leader of MapInfluenCE and China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), and a lecturer on EU-China relations, China's geopolitics and foreign policy at Charles University, the Czech Republic.*

In comparison to the Russian Federation, China is a relative novice in deploying information operations in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), but it has been on a steady learning curve. **Traditionally, China's influence toolbox has contained a mixture of public diplomacy and propaganda targeting political and economic elites, but in recent years, it has added new tools and techniques to its influence portfolio and focused on new targets.** As a result, it is highly likely that China is now able to penetrate societies abroad more efficiently.

## Your voice is my voice

Before 2019, China's modus operandi in Central and Eastern Europe focused on boosting its image and spreading "positive energy" about the People's Republic of China. The China-positive narrative was spread by Chinese state-affiliated actors, but also via media that China invested in, and through local proxies.

While embassy statements and op-eds by ambassadors habitually fall under the category of public diplomacy, two other avenues for disseminating China's narratives deserve closer scrutiny. **As the MapInfluenCE<sup>1</sup> project – which has been mapping media discourse in Czechia, Poland,**

**Hungary and Slovakia – uncovered, China has attempted to influence the media (and hence the public) discourse on China by investing in the media sector in these countries.<sup>2</sup>** The research project revealed that after the nominally private Chinese company CEFC invested in the Czech company Empresa Media in 2015, the company's media outlets' discourse on China shifted dramatically. Not only did all negative mentions of China disappear, but so did neutral coverage, resulting in these media reporting on China in a positive manner only. Moreover, **it was not only the tone of the reporting that changed, but also the composition of the topics covered.** The media CEFC invested in covering the China-led Belt and Road Initiative with a frequency unparalleled in any of the other 40 Czech media outlets, both private and publicly owned. The research project was able to show that Chinese (co-) ownership changed the particular set of Czech media into a conveyor of messages broadly compatible with Beijing's worldview.

Where did the pressure for this shift in the media outlets' coverage originate from? Two explanations seem plausible. First, it can be assumed that the Chinese investor demanded the change in the tone of reporting. Or, second, that the Czech co-owner did not want to jeopardize the

1 Previously known as ChinfluenCE. See [www.mapinfluence.eu](http://www.mapinfluence.eu).

2 The strategy has been known as "borrowing a boat to go to sea".

Chinese investment by continuing critical coverage of China – the two explanations naturally being mutually compatible. In any case, the analysis of Empresa Media’s China coverage under a Chinese (co-)owner provided an iron-clad argument for including media in both EU-wide as well as national investment screening mechanisms.

**The MapInfluenCE project also found that China uses – at least in the Czech Republic and Slovakia – the same alternative media outlets that often spread Russian influence.** One reason for this could be that, paradoxically, rising awareness of Chinese influence disincentivized editors of the mainstream media to publish China’s narratives (especially if these were required without editorial changes, as in the ambassadorial op-eds). **Likewise, China intentionally targets the same audience that is disillusioned with the West, displaying strong similarities with Russian anti-Western narratives. The array of agenda-setters<sup>3</sup> supportive of pro-Russian discourse and featured in the alternative media is also almost identical to those who identify with pro-China causes. These identified agenda-setters include journalists, high-level officials, members of parliament, politicians and academics in Central Europe.<sup>4</sup>**

Further research is clearly needed to explain the choice of media outlets as well as the agenda-setters’ motivation for supporting China’s narratives. **Based on available evidence, it can be argued that Chinese and Russian information operations seem to be running in parallel, rather than in tandem. Still, some – if scarce – evidence of cooperation between Russian and Chinese media outlets has already been identified, such as the case of shared offices and the use of the same publishing company and editors by Russia Today and China Today in Bulgaria.**

The use of local politicians, ex-politicians-turned lobbyists, or entrepreneurs with business interests in China as “proxies” further complicates

the disclosure of China’s influence and its attribution.<sup>5</sup> **The motivation of these “proxies” is apparently diverse and ranges from utilizing China’s narratives for their own politico-economic goals to genuine admiration of the Chinese model.**

The “customization” of Chinese narratives to local audiences through either local media or “proxies” further increases the reach of China’s influence. It enables narratives to spread more organically, as they cannot be traced back to Chinese sources, which would be regarded with at least some suspicion.

### **Upping the ante: From positive messaging to rewriting narratives**

**The rather defensive mode of operation, focusing on “positive energy” vis-à-vis China, changed considerably in 2019.** Similarly to other regions in Central and Eastern Europe, China expanded its public diplomacy and propaganda in order to rewrite the narrative on the protests in Hong Kong. Chinese ambassadors in CEE countries placed op-eds in media outlets, explaining the Chinese take on the protests. Interestingly, despite different languages, most of the articles included an identical sentence referring to a “brighter future for Hong Kong” once the protests ceased, which suggests a coordinated effort. The articles were found in six Central and Eastern EU member states’ media as well as in non-EU member countries such as North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

In the case of Estonia in 2019, the publication of an article in the most renowned mainstream daily, *Postimees*, was facilitated by a PR company hired by the Chinese embassy. It is possible that this represented the first case of experimenting with new tactics and/or intermediaries in the region. **China also increased its commercial cooperation with media outlets through paid supplements.** In connection with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary

<sup>3</sup> Agenda-setters are those who set the agenda in the media and through this process also influence which topics are perceived as relevant by the public.

<sup>4</sup> For a full list of agenda-setters identified in Central Europe through media discourse analysis, see the results of MapInfluenCE social network research at <https://mapinfluence.eu/en/czech-social-network-analysis/> (available in English, Czech, Polish, Hungarian and Slovak).

<sup>5</sup> For further details on “proxies”, see the interactive map visualizing the relationships among key actors: <https://mapinfluence.eu/en/czech-social-network-analysis/relations-between-political-elites-and-pro-china-business/> (available in Czech and English); Karásková, Ivana, Matura, Tamás, Turcsányi, Richard Q., Šimalčík, Matej. Central Europe for Sale: The Politics of China’s Influence. Policy Paper, March 2018. Prague, Czech Republic, Association for International Affairs (AMO). [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AMO\\_central-europe-for-sale-the-politics-of-chinese-influence.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AMO_central-europe-for-sale-the-politics-of-chinese-influence.pdf)

of establishing bilateral diplomatic relations, the Chinese embassy in the Czech Republic produced an eight-page supplement for *Právo*, one of the local nationwide dailies. The text was obscurely labelled “theme and commercial supplement”. The articles were exclusively positive about China and were signed by the daily’s reporters, misleading readers into believing that the supplement was a regular news piece by the daily.

**Chinese state-affiliated actors have intensified their presence in social media, mostly on Facebook and Twitter.** China Radio International – which on top of English, German, Italian, French, Portuguese, and Spanish broadcasts runs internet sites in seven other EU member states’ languages<sup>6</sup> – has increased its activities. It is noteworthy that Chinese state-affiliated accounts have not, until recently, produced original content. Instead, they have mostly shared and retweeted content created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing or by Chinese news agencies. At least in some CEE countries, however, this has changed recently. The Czech version of CRI has been flirting with its own content, recording video messages produced by the “Mole Studio”, referring to the animated character in a series of Czech cartoons for kids. In May 2020, the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia published an infographic targeting the local audience and “debunking” 16 myths about China’s response to Covid-19.

**Furthermore, China has enlarged and utilized its pool of “proxies”.** It was discovered that researchers from Charles University were being paid by the Chinese Embassy in Prague to lecture on the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, a Czech “independent think tank” – Sinoskop – was proved to be sponsored by local pro-China businesses to steer the debate on China towards a more favourable stance.

In April 2019, China tested its first case of a fake video targeting Central European audiences. The manipulated video attempted to show Czech President Miloš Zeman on a visit to Beijing. In the video, Zeman, filmed only from the back and partially in profile, steps out of a diplomatic car,

walks towards an unidentified elderly lady who is sitting outside a restaurant, and hands her a gift and his cane. The video is unconvincing as the strict security procedures that are commonly put in place for visits by foreign dignitaries to China require the Chinese police to empty the street. Hence, the appearance of an ordinary person so close to a foreign head of state is highly unlikely. Moreover, the restaurant featured in the video is hardly a place for a foreign delegation to visit. Far more interesting than the obscure video itself is the method of its delivery to Czech media outlets. The video was sent to Czech journalists from a fake Hong Kong Free Press email address, but using the real name of a journalist who works for the outlet.

## Infodemics by China

**The outbreak of coronavirus presented an opportunity not to be missed. China used the already established avenues, but changed its tactics by borrowing new techniques from the Russian information operations playbook.** The regime continued with its attempts to rewrite the discourse towards “positive news” about China and redoubled its efforts to utilize praise from foreigners to support the Chinese Communist Party and China’s image at home to counter home-grown dissatisfaction with the initial slow response to and cover-up of the epidemic. A prime example is former French Prime Minister Raffarin’s statement that was published through Xinhua: “The Chinese government has manifested extremely effective organization and mobilization ability, which is exactly the advantage of the Chinese system”.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese media do not seem to have focused on Central and Eastern Europe, unless Beijing’s help was praised by local statespersons (such as Serbian President Vučić’s or Czech President Zeman’s remarks), and instead **highlighted Western Europe’s divisions and alleged incompetence (as opposed to the purported Chinese unity in fighting the virus), and actual or potential negative news connected to high-ranking European**

<sup>6</sup> I.e. Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Greek, Hungarian, Polish and Romanian.  
<sup>7</sup> Di Yingna, Gao Tianding, 中国人民正在为全人类作贡献——抗击疫情海外观点综述 [The Chinese people are “contributing to all humankind” – A summary of overseas views on fighting the epidemic], Xinhua, March 5, 2020. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-03/05/c\\_1125668197.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-03/05/c_1125668197.htm).

**politicians, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel being tested for coronavirus.**

The cautious use of social media accounts, established during and shortly after the protests in Hong Kong, gave way to more assertive and in some cases openly aggressive “wolf warrior diplomacy”. The unusually harsh tone, set by a few frontrunners, such as the current spokesperson of the MFA, Zhao Lijian, or former ambassador to Canada Lu Shaye, was quickly emulated by many other Chinese diplomats, who clearly realized that the new style is expected from others too, and that a failure to jump on the bandwagon could threaten their position. The new style duly attracted a number of followers and set the stage for the use of new tactics for spreading disinformation on the “real” origin of the new coronavirus, pointing to the US or Italy as the epicentres of the outbreak. This aptly illustrates how diplomacy can be a part of interference tactics.

Chinese state-affiliated actors started placing advertisements promoting their posts on social media and offering money to supporters. **ProPublica’s research tracked how the government-linked influence accounts that had previously targeted political dissidents and the Hong Kong protests shifted their focus to the coronavirus outbreak, placing ads on posts promoting China-positive views.** Moreover, the China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) research found that China Radio International (CRI) offered – through a closed Facebook group – Czech and Slovak students of the Chinese language 20 euros if they recorded a video supporting China during the epidemic, with clearly prescribed slogans that had to be included. During the epidemic, CRI broadcasting in Czechia also placed a number of ads for its posts and increased its Facebook followers to a staggering 850,000,<sup>8</sup> most of which were clearly fake

accounts or accounts whose owners do not speak any Czech. It is worth noting that not all campaigns manage to achieve a real impact; China has still not been able to fully customize the content and, as a result, its post on alleged non-Chinese origins of the coronavirus was liked on Facebook by only a handful of followers, including those who could not possibly understand the information in broken Czech.

**Last but not least,** according to an article by Jessica Brandt and Bret Schafer from the Alliance for Securing Democracy, **China has started piggybacking on other disinformation channels as Chinese profiles on social networks now more habitually share Russia Today, Sputnik and Iranian PressTV content.** It is, however, too early to say whether these disinformation channels work in parallel or in tandem. While China, Russia and even Iran clearly share (some) interests, the mutually reinforcing effect of anti-Western narratives may not be the result of a shared strategy.

### **Modest so far, more to be expected**

**Although China is a relative novice in using information operations in Central and Eastern Europe, it has already succeeded in establishing a network of supportive “proxies” who, whilst having diverse motives, help to disseminate Chinese narratives.** Beijing also utilizes channels of communication previously established in the region by Russia, and has started employing disinformation tactics, including fake videos. **Given the tightening of the Chinese system at home and deteriorating relations with both Europe and the United States, further exploration and exploitation of techniques used by other malign international actors is to be expected. China seems to be a fast learner.**

<sup>8</sup> In comparison, the CRI Facebook site in Poland – a country with a population four times bigger than that of Czechia – has only 3,500 followers.



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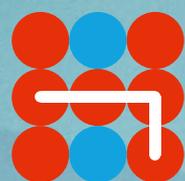
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