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The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism led to a strengthening of democratic values worldwide, with many former socialist countries embarking on a transition to democracy throughout much of the developing world. Today, ideological rivalry and strategic competition between democratic and authoritarian powers are on the rise, and the latter are waging cognitive warfare to undermine free and open societies. The international context of the early Cold War and the communist threat across the Strait in East Asia was hardly conducive to democratisation in Taiwan. However, Taiwan still managed the transition to democracy during a unique moment in world history, and it was probably the most rapid expansion among democracies that the world has ever witnessed.

Today, Taiwan boasts close to thirty years of successful democratisation. During the transition to democracy, both Taiwan and the Baltic countries have demonstrated the willingness to fight for freedom, liberty, and self-determination. Fostering a robust and vibrant civil society is one of the most important steps toward strengthening democracy in Taiwan and the Baltic countries today. Collaboration and solidarity are critical for building economic, social, and political resilience to deter authoritarian aggression. The Baltic states, and Lithuania in particular, have been keen observers of the Russian occupation of Ukraine. Lithuania is not just a spectator in this conflict, but is also a staunch political and economic ally of Ukraine, actively lending support to Ukraine's

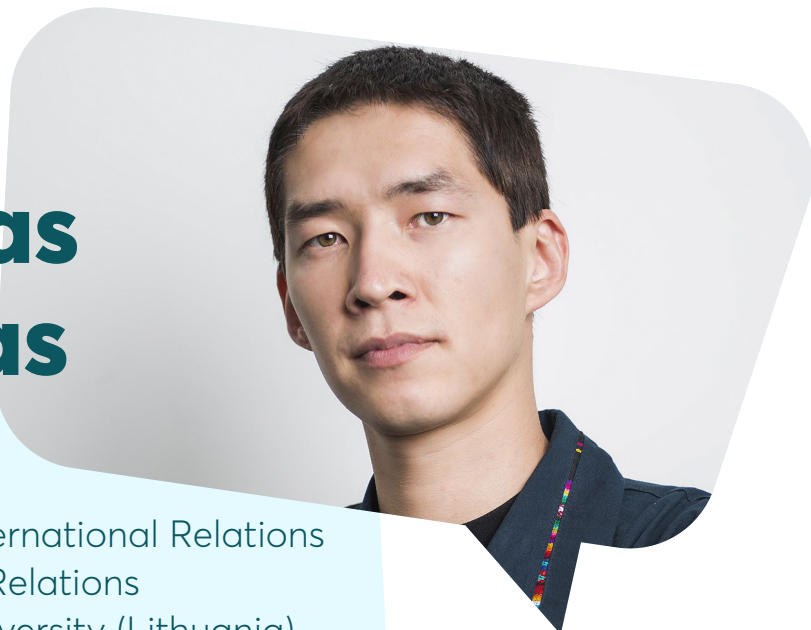
democratic transition. The case of Ukraine can reveal parallels to Taiwan, as both are smaller, democratic nations threatened by a larger, authoritarian neighbour. Many lessons can be learned from this conflict, and it stands out as an example of just how crucial a factor civic resilience is for fostering a sense of determined national resistance in face of a stronger aggressor.

Today, when false news and misinformation can spread across the world in a matter of seconds, it is of high importance to equip people with the basic knowledge on how to detect and verify disinformation. This is especially the case in the information space of post-Soviet nations, where social media and news tabloids are exploited by trolls as tools for spreading anti-governmental narratives which seek to portray countries like Lithuania as failed states. These types of narratives are especially rife among people with lower media or digital literacy skills, who are also more susceptible to fake news. This project will seek to encourage people to improve their civic resilience by strengthening their media literacy skills and improve their civic involvement. It will also promote a balanced view of political processes and positive attitudes towards civic engagement among citizens with lower media or digital literacy skills. It is necessary to accelerate this educational work and to encourage people in the regions to take interest in civic society and participate in its proceedings. Due to this, Civic Resilience Initiative (CRI) and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) jointly initiated the creation of this disinformation guide for readers to quickly learn the basics of how to withstand online manipulation. With this guide, we hope to empower readers to be more proficient and more responsible online information consumers.

This guide offers necessary tools on how to verify information and to filter authentic news reports from the ones that distort the truth. Specifically, the tools provided will assist readers to: (1) better discern the difference between real and fake information online; (2) identify fake social media accounts and doppelgangers; (3) spot doctored images and manipulated videos ("deep fakes") online; (4) and provide users with recommendations on what to do when spotting disinformation.

This guide is aimed to increase the resilience of information consumers against the spread of disinformation, honing their skills in identifying and removing disinformation and supporting the dissemination of reliable news. This booklet has been put together with the same group of experts, who will lead the training program.

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As fellow liberal democracies in a particularly tense geo-strategic environment, the Baltic states and Taiwan are especially prone to disinformation by the world's two largest authoritarian powers, Russia, and China, respectively. In fact, they often serve as original testing grounds for such operations only to be used later in an upgraded and adjusted form against larger targets across the globe. It is therefore imperative to analyze and cross-compare the principal manifestations of such disinformation, particularly considering the unprecedented deepening of Sino-Russian collaboration in this malign domain.

The paper aims to address these matters at least superficially by focusing on three telling and somewhat interrelated practical examples of disinformation attacks that reveal increasing mutual learning if not outright cooperation between China and Russia, but also remaining differences in terms of methods used. Each of the cases are analyzed below in rough chronological order and follow a common approach that successively deals with (1) the overall political context behind them, (2) methods of disinformation deployed, and (3) actual results achieved thus far. Considering the paper's spatial limits as well as topicality and the state of current research, the focus will be given to manifestations of Chinese malign activities in Lithuania, with the Taiwanese case serving as a backdrop illustrative example where appropriate. In temporal terms, the last three years will be covered, coinciding with the pandemic, and in particular, explicit disinformation attacks by Beijing. First, however, will be an examination of Sino-Russian cooperation in this increasingly important domain.

The Basics of Sino-Russian Cooperation in Disinformation



Deepening Sino-Russian alignment has been one of the most important trends in international relations since the proclamation of their bilateral Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001, and (dis)information has arguably become a significant collaboration area between the two strategic partners. Starting with a pledge to “energetically enhance and develop exchanges and cooperation in [...] information,” the latter process led to the separate 2015 Agreement on Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security that defended a much broader understanding of related concerns than suggested by the usual Western approach of “cybersecurity”. Timing for the agreement was telling, as both partners had already entered a downward spiral in their relations with the West, with the 2014 breakout of Russo-Ukrainian hostilities still being fresh, and China preparing for the upcoming key 2016 elections in Taiwan as well as its own Party congress in 2017. Donald Trump’s presidential victory in the U.S., largely on the post-truth platform, only strengthened their views about the significance of the information environment and the rich opportunities to manipulate it.

Fast forward to the particularly crisis-prone year of 2022, and these trends seemed to have reached an entirely new level of development. Marking the closest alignment between the two authoritarian giants since the mid-20th century, the Joint Statement on International Relations released during Vladimir Putin’s visit to Beijing for the opening of the Winter Olympics (and just three weeks before the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine), reiterated their readiness to deepen cooperation in the field of “international information security” with China’s recently proclaimed Global Initiative on Data Security serving as one of its key inspirations. On the practical level, both Beijing and Moscow aim to secure their authoritarian regimes and increase their influence worldwide by limiting objective information internally through censorship and creating an

"alternative informational reality" both within the West and globally by pushing disinformation, with the liberal democracies themselves increasingly serving as targets. As shown below, unprecedented Sino-Russian cooperation in the "infodemic" against the West has also been witnessed in Lithuania.

Case Study 1: The "Infodemic" of the Pandemic

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared on March 11, 2020, coinciding with the day Lithuania was celebrating the 30th anniversary of its independence from the USSR. For several months leading up to it, the Chinese propaganda apparatus had been globally employed to initially downgrade the threat from the virus, and then to call for solidarity among the entire international community. Taiwan had its own particular role in this regard as the original whistle-blower who immensely contributed to the initial understanding of grave challenges faced by the authorities in Wuhan, the apparent birthplace of the would-be pandemic, and increasingly the rest of China as well. Ever since the first cases were reported in December 2019, the underlying goal of the Chinese party-state has been to escape responsibility for the health crisis. Russia, on the other hand, initially focused on pedaling criticism of the Western response to the pandemic, and then increasingly joined forces with China by highlighting their own alleged competence in comparison to the West, praising their benevolent provision of health-related public goods to the international community ("mask diplomacy"), and, most disturbingly, disseminating conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. Lithuania also witnessed these actions with some curious twists.



Lithuanian manifestations

Perhaps the single most significant example of China's disinformation on the pandemic in Lithuania occurred in late April 2020, when then-Chinese ambassador Shen Zhifei initiated an interview with one of the country's largest news portals (Saldžiūnas, 2020). Although partly addressing the imminent crisis related to the Lithuania-Taiwan bilateral relationship (see below), the conversation with a Lithuanian journalist known for his China-skepticism mainly dealt with Beijing's response to COVID-19. The ambassador's replies to the questions were based on both above-mentioned narratives that characterized Chinese global communication efforts at that point, namely denial of their responsibility for the pandemic as the primary narrative and calls for solidarity with them as an auxiliary secondary one. Somewhat contradicting his own presentation of China as a fully transparent and responsible actor, Shen questioned the thesis that the virus originated in his country, and repeatedly called for the need to await for scientific conclusions on this matter, while also briefly mentioning several conspiracy theories being spread worldwide, including some found on Chinese and Russian propaganda outlets. In addition, he doubted the whistleblowing credentials of Taiwan. Notably, in contrast to its own cross-Strait activities aimed at the island and Russia's coinciding information attacks against Vilnius by sowing doubts about official statistics on infections and deaths, and later, vaccine safety, China did not conduct a campaign-sized "social media effort" effort to target the Lithuanian government's response to the pandemic.

Assessment

Admittedly, the ambassador had a point when he essentially targeted subjective and accusatory designation of the "China virus" by then-U.S. president Trump and called for impartial scientific inquiry of its origins. However, Beijing's supposedly positive intentions were clearly debunked later by its own actions when a visiting team from the World Health Organization (WHO) was largely prevented from gathering scientific data that Shen and many of his diplomat colleagues worldwide had been referring to. Almost three years since the original outbreak, it seems safe to conclude that China has been neither transparent nor a truly responsible actor, and instead has resorted to its usual short-term tactics of cover-up during the outbreak's initial stages, thus immensely

contributing to the would-be pandemic. A relatively sudden rhetorical transformation from benevolent calls for solidarity to assertive denials coupled with proactive scapegoating as China dealt with its first wave was simultaneously witnessed in many other countries, and therefore suggests a targeted information campaign.



Delfi Plus RU Naujienos Video Verslas Sportas Veidai Laisvalaikis Projekt

Kinijos ambasadorius Lietuvoje: virusas kilo ne pas mus ¹²⁷



Vaidas Saldžiūnas


2020 m. balandžio 29 d. 05:31



Kas sako, kad koronavirusas kilo Kinijoje? Kas ir kodėl reikalauja Pekino atsakomybės? Tokias abejones pažėręs Kinijos ambasadorius Lietuvoje Shen Zhifei džiaugiasi dėl nuosaikios Vilniaus laikysenos, spinduliuoja optimizmu dėl dvišalių santykių ateities, bet kartu siūnčia nedviprasmišką įspėjimą: negalima kaltinti Kinijos dėl koronaviruso pandemijos, esą dar neaišku, kas kaltas. aA



Picture 1: **Ambassador Shen's interview remains the single most prominent example of the pandemic-related Chinese disinformation in Lithuania**



Case Study 2: Breakthrough in Lithuanian- Taiwanese Relations

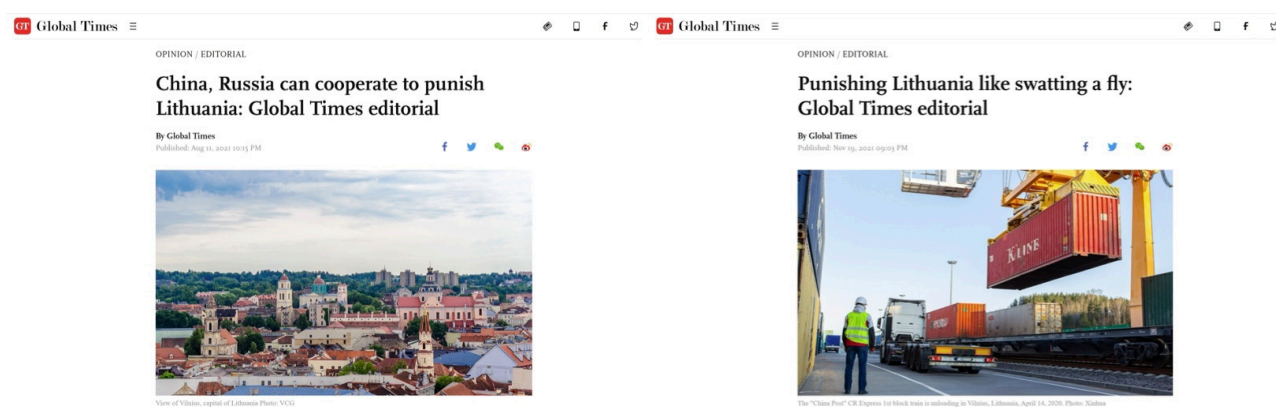
Context

It was indeed the pandemic that provided a clear impetus for a breakthrough in Lithuanian-Taiwanese relations. Just weeks before the above-analyzed interview, largely reacting to Taiwan's remarkably effective handling of the virus and the Taiwanese medical assistance provided to Lithuania, around 200 Lithuanian public figures sent an open letter to President Gitanas Nausėda, asking him to support the island's larger role at the WHO pretty much in sync with China's recent calls for global solidarity, but against its wishes in this particular case. Although then-Lithuanian foreign minister Linas Linkevičius later personally advocated for Taiwan on this matter, it was the election of a new center-right government at the end of that year that marked a decisive shift away from Beijing. Directed by the new foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, Lithuania officially proclaimed a "values-based foreign policy" that led to two key relevant decisions made public the following year: withdrawal from the China-led "17+1" multilateral cooperation platform with Central and Eastern European countries, and the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius. This caused a particularly harsh retaliation from Beijing, including in the information domain.

Lithuanian manifestations

Naturally, it was China's resultant multi-dimensional economic coercion against Lithuania that attracted global attention at the end of 2021, but one could easily miss a crucial informational component in this entire development. Indeed, Beijing coordinated its economic and diplomatic pressure on Vilnius with a full-scale disinformation and smear campaign characterized by the following traits. In terms of messaging, the main Chinese narrative directed at Lithuania itself fo-

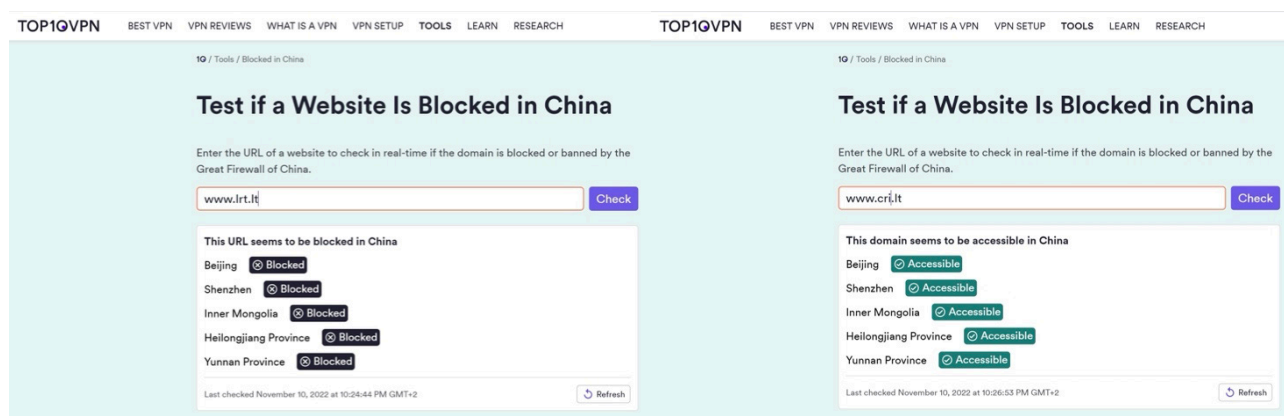
cused on the supposedly deadly blow the country's economy would suffer because of the policies by the "incompetent and unsovereign" government, while the broader narrative directed at the West in general added a thesis that Lithuania is a "lawless and irrational troublemaker" not to be trusted by anyone. As far as intensity was concerned, according to Lithuanian defense officials, Chinese disinformation attacks against their country jumped from about four unique cases per month to more than a hundred even before the Taiwanese office's actual opening (Chiriac & Martisek, 2022), which was still low in comparison to some 2,400 pieces of disinformation directed at Taiwan daily (Becerra, 2022).



Picture 2: **The Chinese *Global Times* conducted an entire disinformation campaign against Lithuania, borrowing Russian narratives**

In terms of messengers, China found a plethora of local distributors who consciously or not spread or even augmented this narrative, including fringe media and, most disturbingly, some Lithuanian politicians and even part of the national and global business elites. Often this was done by unintentionally following the talking points of Chinese English-language propaganda outlets, such as CGTN and the particularly jingoistic *Global Times* (Žvinakytė, 2022). The latter went as far as actually offering China to "join hands with Russia and Belarus...and punish" Lithuania (*Global Times*, 2021a) which would supposedly be as easy as "swatting a fly" (*Global Times*, 2021b). Notably, this pair of Eastern European authoritarians seemed to have answered the call, as their media contributed to the dissemination of the narrative that Lithuania's foreign policy was harmful to itself (MND, 2022, p. 8). In exchange, the Chinese propaganda apparatus increasingly borrowed

decades-old Russian narratives falsely depicting Lithuania as a failed state without a future. Finally, Chinese-language messengers targeting the host society should not be ignored in this case either as their actions have contributed to a popular mobilization in China that ranged from outbursts of rage on social media to consumer boycotts of Lithuanian goods. Besides other means, Beijing seems to have ensured control of domestic discourse on the matter by blocking Lithuanian news websites, including the country's main public broadcaster LRT.



Picture 3: **To sustain its propaganda domestically, China even blocked the official website of Lithuania's main public broadcaster**

Assessment

In many ways, the aims behind Chinese disinformation in Lithuania and Taiwan are remarkably similar and approximate to Russia's aims as well. Beijing has been particularly targeting the current governments in both countries due to their bolder policies towards it in comparison to the main political opposition, be that the Lithuanian center-left or the Taiwanese pan-Blue coalition. Along with Moscow, it works towards polarization of Lithuania's society, cracks among the political and business elites, and general disillusionment in fellow Western allies and liberal democratic values. Due to the relative lack of mutual awareness in comparison to Russia, Chinese information operations in Lithuania were not as effective to begin with, and therefore have increasingly borrowed from the usual Russian narratives, presenting Lithuania as "failed/dependent/fascist". Thus far, however, these campaigns have been counterproductive as the current governments of both Lithuania and Taiwan seem stable enough and defiantly pursue their policies, including those aimed at deepening de facto bilateral relations.

Case Study 3:

Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine



Context

As previously mentioned, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine occurred in the backdrop of unprecedented cooperation with China, including in the information domain. Contrary to the previously discussed case studies, Chinese disinformation efforts related to Ukraine were not specifically directed at Lithuania. However, the potentially international system-shifting significance of this war to the entire world, Taiwan included, supports the need for a separate analysis. Crucially, Russia's military campaign against Ukraine, coupled with its malign activities against the West, are closely observed in Beijing due to their demonstrative effects on the efficiency of various weapons systems and military doctrines, the nature of Western, particularly American, responses, and other traits that would be potentially important in China's own conflicts, especially over Taiwan.

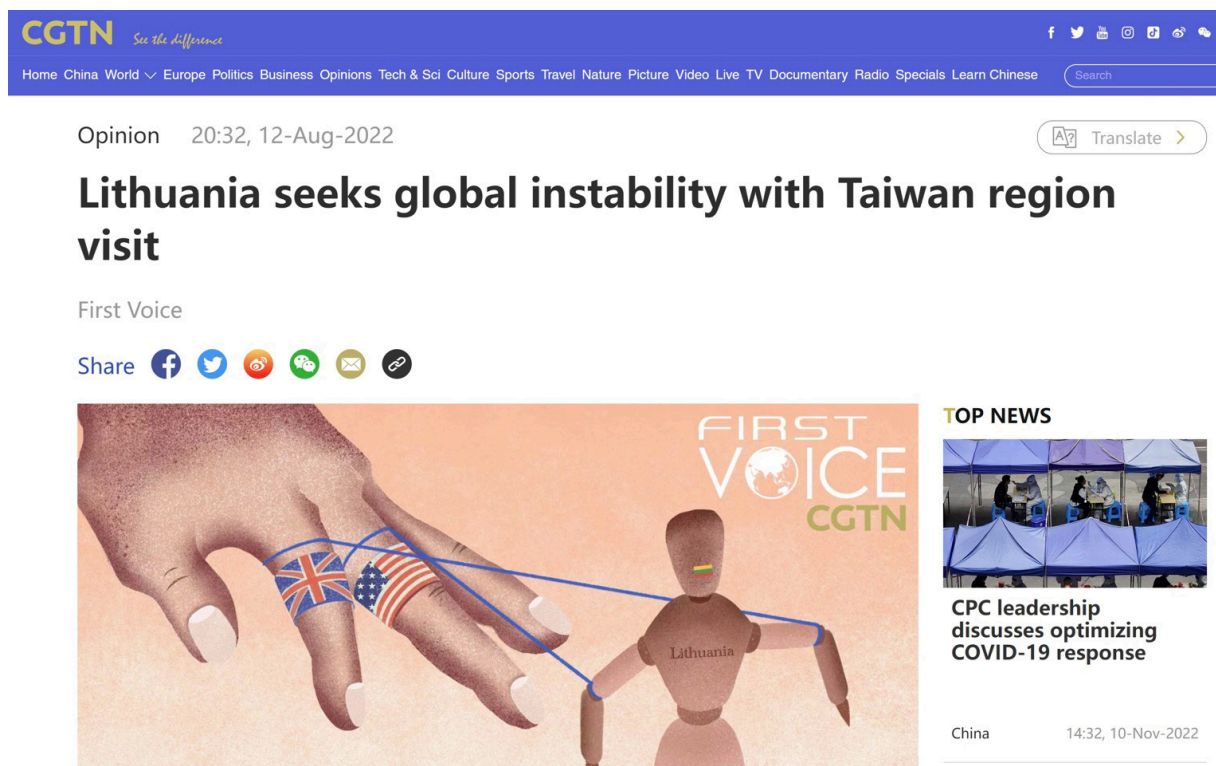
Lithuanian manifestations

Beijing's most malign activity regarding the coverage of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has been its adoption of Moscow's related narratives to such a degree that a respected American outlet called China "Russia's most powerful weapon for information warfare" (Dwoskin, 2022). Indeed, as Russian state news channels have been increasingly blocked in Europe and restricted in much of the rest of the world, largely due to a limited crackdown by American social media giants, the entire Chinese propaganda apparatus has rapidly turned to a rather crude amplification of Russian disinformation. This has ranged from usage of Moscow's deceptive vocabulary calling the largest hostilities in Europe since the Second World War a "special military operation" to dissemination of its principal talking points, fake news and conspiracy theories, such as a "neo-Nazi" Ukraine, the conflict as a result of aggression by Kyiv and NATO, U.S. biolabs allegations, and the Bucha mas-

sacre as a staged event (RSF, 2022). Some of these efforts may have penetrated Lithuania through China's external English or Russian-language messaging, but due to the country's comparative lack of exposure to Chinese outlets and a sensitive bilateral relationship context, no particularities of note have been detected thus far.

Assessment

It seems safe to conclude at this point that China's messaging about Russia's invasion of Ukraine has still been somewhat reactive to military and political developments on the ground. Despite overall support for Moscow, particularly in the information domain as opposed to the military one, Beijing has become increasingly uneasy about a close association with Russia's military incompetence as well as natural comparisons between the Ukrainian and Taiwanese manifestations of resistance to a seemingly overwhelming neighboring power. As a result, Chinese coverage of the war has been progressively more nuanced without, however, losing the key tenet of less vocal and more tacit backing of Russia.



Picture 4: Chinese English-language outlets continued a disinformation campaign against both Lithuania and Taiwan in the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Conclusions and Recommendations for Resilience

The three examples of Chinese disinformation against Lithuania (but not limited to it) analyzed above indeed highlight expanding mutual learning and even outright cooperation between Beijing and Moscow. This tactical approximation comes from the general trend in the Sino-Russian relationship and China's apparent recognition that its strategic partner's propagandistic toolbox is in some ways superior, particularly because of China's lack of familiarity with its targets who are potentially more resilient to its malign activities. As a result, Beijing could not resist the urge to borrow even the most outlandish disinformation narratives from Moscow, including those aimed at Vilnius and Kyiv. As far as fake news and conspiracy theories are concerned, the direction of Sino-Russian collaboration has been shifting from China being the main source of pandemic-related disinformation to serving as a key amplifier of Russian narratives targeting Lithuania or Ukraine.

Recommendations for resilience suggested by the case studies of Chinese disinformation against Lithuania are applicable to other democracies. Moreover, its increasing approximation to that of Russia means that usual defensive measures directed at the latter should also be effective to counteract China. The basic recommendations are therefore somewhat standard and universal, namely consistent focus on (1) raising awareness, (2) improving civic education, particularly digital and media literacy, and (3) a whole-of-nation approach

unifying governmental and societal initiatives. Chinese specifics do, however, offer at least two additional areas of concern to be tackled: (1) critical information infrastructure, both of soft- and hardware kind, and (2) civic responsibility by political and economic elites to prevent the spread of foreign disinformation. Needless to say, the main guiding principle in this regard should be transparency. Finally, Sino-Russian cooperation and mutual learning in disinformation should lead to liberal democratic (including Baltic-Taiwanese) common response and experience-sharing. It is the hope of the author that this brief paper will contribute to such collaboration.



Conclusions and Recommendations

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Edited by Chris Cutrone

Vilnius, Lithuania

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