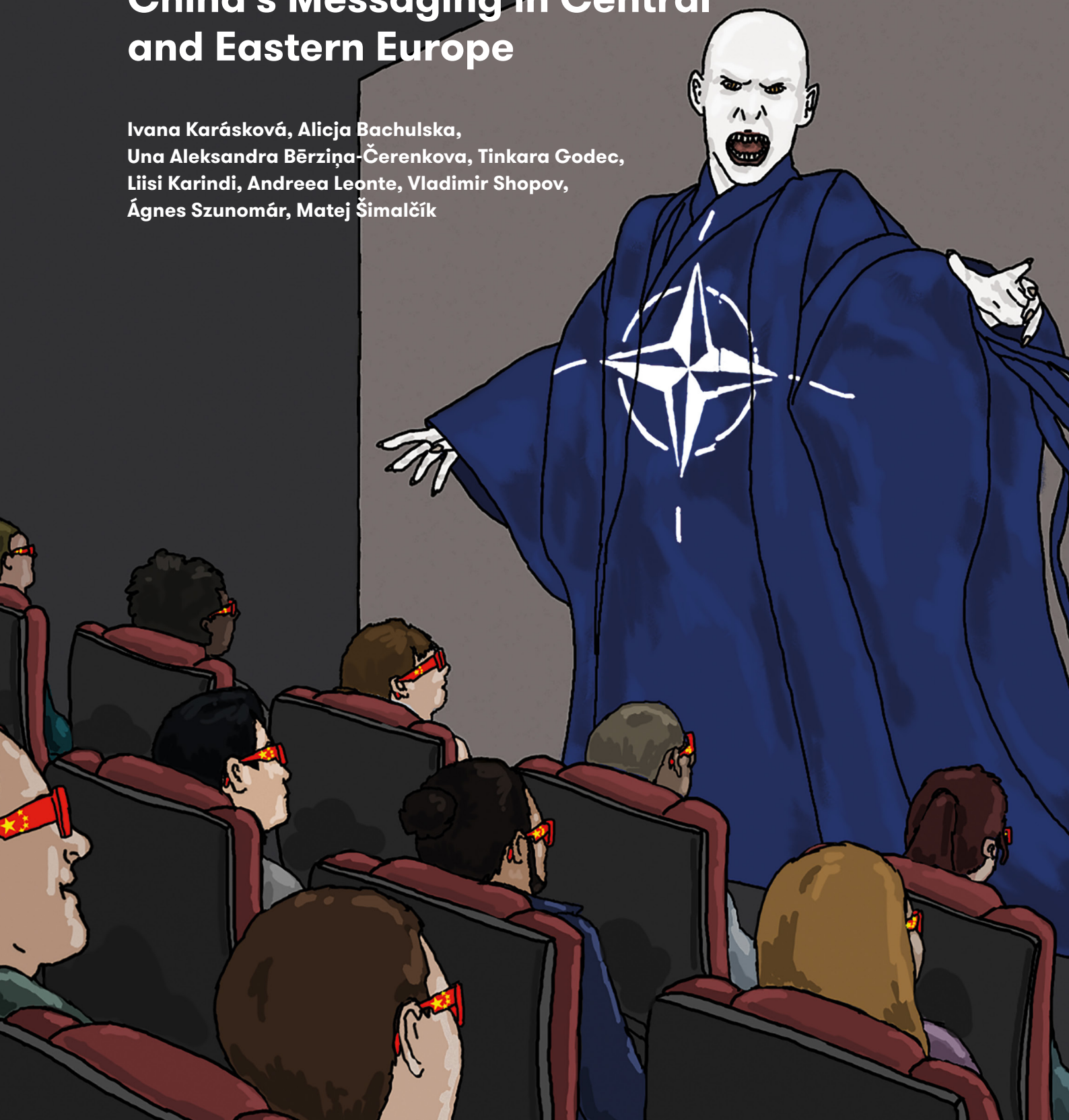


# Backing Russia on Ukraine: China's Messaging in Central and Eastern Europe

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# **BACKING RUSSIA ON UKRAINE: CHINA'S MESSAGING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

## **Briefing paper**

May 2022

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# Summary

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- The briefing paper analyzes Chinese messaging on war in Ukraine targeting nine NATO and EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e., Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania.
- Specifically, it focuses on narratives produced from February 1 to April 19, 2022, by Chinese embassies, the state news agency Xinhua, the local versions of China Radio International (CRI) and other outlets.
- Based on the intensity of Chinese messaging on Ukraine, the analyzed countries can be divided in two groups: a) countries experiencing a high intensity of Chinese messaging (Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland, Romania), and b) countries with close to no messaging from the Chinese side (Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia and Slovenia).
- Across the analyzed countries, the messaging focused on four themes – China, the US (and by extension NATO), the European Union and Russia.
- In three countries, China Radio International (CRI) portrayed NATO as “Voldemort,” a pop-culture character and the main villain in the Harry Potter series. The similarity of content confirms the assumption that CRI articles are mere translations from Chinese originals. While the “Voldemort narrative” may not go down well in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which perceive NATO as a security guarantor, the message may reflect a global narrative China spreads regardless of the local sensitivities towards the issue.
- In Bulgaria, China’s two main media strategies have been to convey and support Russian narratives and communicate its own positions on the war. During the first days after the Russian attack, China was notably silent. It was only after intensifying accusations of complicity with Russia that Beijing began to push its own statements. But the prevalence of other, non-Ukraine-related content highlights the overall unease of China towards the war and its preference to deflect it as much as possible in its media posture.
- In Czechia, China used three main narratives: the destabilizing role of the US and NATO, China’s neutral and responsible position during the crisis, and economic and security impacts of the war on the European Union. The media presence of the embassy has been modest, as the tasks were delegated to more activist CRI Czech. The efficacy of this strategy is, however, questionable.

- In Estonia, China has become less visible in public messaging to a broader audience since 2019. It has not made efforts to produce a specific content for the Estonian audience or to localize the messages, most likely in order not to antagonize the local population.
- In Hungary, China is not among the most active international players. CRI Hungary presents itself as an objective source of information and avoided expressing opinions on the war in Ukraine directly. However, it managed to convey its messages indirectly by reposting and quoting Russian sources.
- In Latvia, China resorts to second-hand messaging as it recycles narratives created for global, rather than local audience. The overall China's approach to messaging remains the same as seen during COVID-19, without any active engagement with the Latvian society.
- In Poland, China's messaging regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been visibly pro-Kremlin. The official diplomatic rhetoric has been relatively mild, while Chinese state-affiliated media have been blaming the US and NATO for the conflict. As the societal sensitivity to pro-Kremlin propaganda in Poland is high, this kind of approach seems ineffective.
- In Slovakia, the official Chinese channels are not particularly active when it comes to spreading propaganda on the war in Ukraine. Chinese messages focused mostly on positive communication, highlighting China's proclaimed commitment to peace and diplomatic resolution of the conflict. However, the vitriolic messaging has been taken over by the local proxies from far-right and far-left political parties.
- In Slovenia, China does not seem to be particularly interested in trying to shift the domestic narrative, at least not through public channels. Yet this may change if Slovenia – under the new government – changes its official position into an even more China-skeptic narrative.
- In Romania, China has tried to portray itself as an advocate of peace. China contrasted itself with the US which was portrayed as a cynical, dishonest and decadent actor, driven only by its selfish interests.



# China's approach to messaging on Ukraine in Central and Eastern Europe

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Ivana Karásková

The briefing paper analyzes the Chinese messaging on war in Ukraine targeting nine NATO and EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e., Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania. Specifically, it focuses on narratives produced by the Chinese embassies and, in several countries, also the state news agency Xinhua, the local versions of China Radio International (CRI) and other outlets. The analysis covered the period from February 1 to April 19, 2022, encompassing time shortly before and after the Russia's invasion in Ukraine.

It must be underlined that the level of China's presence and attention to local environment varies significantly across Central and Eastern Europe. While some embassies of the People's Republic of China have been very active in the region, others keep lower profile in terms of the frequency of posting texts on their websites, establishing and maintaining their social media accounts, and presenting the official positions to the local audiences through ambassadors' or *chargés d'affaires*' op-eds in news outlets. Similarly, CRI is present in only five out of nine countries which were analyzed for the briefing paper, i.e., Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. The messaging of the local version of Xinhua has only been analyzed in Romania. These limitations need to be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Thus, the main aim of the briefing paper is not to quantify and compare the frequency and scope of outputs produced by various Chinese actors in the region, but to map and summarize broader themes that China has tried to communicate to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which are simultaneously the members of the EU and NATO. The narratives may be especially of interest to those countries which border on Ukraine and are directly affected by the war.

Based on the intensity of Chinese messaging on Ukraine before and after Russia's invasion and also the infrastructure in place, the analyzed countries can be broadly divided in two groups: a) countries experiencing high intensity of Chinese messaging (Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland, Romania), and b) countries with close to no messaging from the Chinese side (Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia,<sup>1</sup> and Slovenia).

The Chinese messaging focused on four main actors – China itself, the US (and by extension NATO), the European Union and Russia. The China-focused narratives tried to portray the country as peace-loving, respecting international organizations, such as the United Nations, and adhering to the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. The United States was blamed as the main culprit for the Russia's 'pre-emptive' invasion of Ukraine as well as a decadent and hypocritical great power.

NATO was portrayed as an extended hand of the US influence and in some countries (e.g., Czechia, Poland and Hungary) referred to as “Voldemort,” a pop-culture character and a main villain in the J. K. Rowling’s books, and as an entity disrupting international relations. The similarity of content confirmed the assumption that CRI articles were mere translations from Chinese originals. While the “Voldemort narrative” may not go down well in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which perceive NATO as a security guarantor, the message may reflect a global narrative China spreads regardless of the local sensitivities towards the issue.

Interestingly, the European Union was portrayed as a victim of US imperialism and as an actor which needs to stick to its ‘strategic autonomy’ – in other words, free itself from the US and correct its allegedly misleading and aggressive posture towards China.

The ‘victimization’ narrative was also applied to the aggressor itself. Russia was depicted as a casualty which was forced to attack Ukraine in a pre-emptive move to guard itself against the US. The real victim, Ukraine, was largely downplayed in the Chinese messaging. While it was presented as a sovereign country, its agency was consistently downplayed. Interestingly though, China did not seem to repeat the Russian narrative on alleged neo-Nazism in Ukraine.

The following chapters survey in detail specific actors, narratives and channels of communication used by China for targeting audiences in nine different countries of Central and Eastern Europe regarding the topic of the war in Ukraine.

# Bulgaria: From silence to deflection

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Vladimir Shopov

China has been expanding its media presence in Bulgaria over the course of the last few years in terms of the content, distribution and engagement with media outlets.<sup>2</sup> While the country has continued to utilize its official channels of communication, such as the site of the Chinese embassy<sup>3</sup> and CRI Bulgaria,<sup>4</sup> there has been a marked shift to generating channels of communication which are much more central to the media ecosystem. This has been accomplished through strengthening institutional ties with legacy media organizations such as Bulgarian National Television,<sup>5</sup> the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency<sup>6</sup> and the Union of Bulgarian Journalists<sup>7</sup>. The other instrument of rising media presence is through various cooperation and content agreements with online and printed media outlets such as 24 Hours,<sup>8</sup> Trud,<sup>9</sup> dir.bg<sup>10</sup> and epicenter.bg,<sup>11</sup> among others. While social media presence of Chinese organizations and outlets has also intensified, it remains a more peripheral approach to public opinion influence.

The analyzed sources for this briefing paper include the above-listed outlets as well as the webpages of the Chinese Embassy to Bulgaria and CRI Bulgaria and other less overtly political Facebook pages such as Studio Vitosha<sup>12</sup> as well as mainstream Bulgarian media outlets (BNT, Nova TV, and bTV). In a significant overall development, China has been increasingly utilizing less politicized means of communicating its messages. Studio Vitosha is one such example in which two Bulgarian-speaking young Chinese ladies narrate various story lines and provide expansive imagery to convey party-approved content. For instance, on Xinjiang by showcasing its cuisine, culture and nature. Their popularity has been increasing and the personal blog now has almost 122,000 followers even if the details of CRI are provided as contact mail. Notably, the page has not been utilized since February 2022 to push Ukraine-related content.

Since Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, Beijing has been planting content with a quite pronounced structure. Its two main media strategies have been to convey and support Russian narratives and communicate its own positions on the war. As for the former, Chinese sources have emphasized the stipulated responsibility of NATO for the outbreak of the conflict by ignoring Moscow's security interests.<sup>13</sup> Beijing also pushed quite extensively, and in concert with Russia, the stories about the supposed presence of biological laboratories in Ukraine, implying the development of biological weapons on Ukrainian soil.<sup>14</sup> China has also stepped in to dilute accusations of war crimes in Bucha, calling for "verifications of facts."<sup>15</sup> Notably, this effort has been also enhanced by public silence, particularly during the first couple of days after the Russian attack. It was only after intensifying accusations of complicity with Russia and activities at the UN that Beijing began to push its own statements and appeals for

peace.<sup>16</sup> This gap in the timeline of Chinese narratives is an important characteristic of the media activities of the country over the last few months.

Another content line pushed by Chinese sources in Bulgaria relates to the need of a 'strategically independent' Europe.<sup>17</sup> This is used in reference both to the wider geopolitical context but also as a lens for interpreting European political events such as the French Presidential election. However, China has sought to continue to provide much content relating to other issues of interest, such as US activities in Taiwan and denying any resemblances to the situation in Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> Various outlets have also continued to publish extensive information on other China-related topics such as 'Zero COVID policy,' economic developments, etc., in an effort to partially sideline the Ukraine war in Beijing-supported media content.

Beijing's media engagement on matters relating to the war on Ukraine falls within its usual intensity and reach and does not appear to have extended in the current context. The main media narratives are in line with the official positions of the country as is the actual timing and focus of the planting of this content. Chinese-sponsored media stories and items mostly serve to amplify Moscow's angle with sufficient emphasis on Beijing's own stance.

But the prevalence of other, non-Ukraine-related content highlights the overall unease of China towards the war and its preference to deflect it as much as possible in its media posture. The constant supply of 'other news' is a testament to this.

Another interesting feature of the current media situation in Bulgaria relates to the extensive use of Chinese content by Russia-friendly media outlets without Beijing necessarily being particularly insistent. Rather, pro-Russian circles are keen to construct a counter-narrative to that of Moscow's rising international isolation by over-emphasizing Chinese engagement and support. A potentially significant longer-term impact of this approach could be the rise in the number of media outlets which publish pro-Russian and pro-Chinese content as a matter of editorial policy.

# Czechia: Propaganda falling on deaf ears

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Ivana Karásková

Since 2012, China aimed at mergers and acquisitions of media outlets in Czechia, published PRC ambassadors' op-eds, and offered to the print media cooperation through paid supplements. In its attempts to manipulate the discourse, China focused on spreading "positive energy" with the aim of presenting China as a peaceful rising power offering global inclusive initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the '16+1 format'.<sup>19</sup>

The chapter analyzes two main sources of Chinese narratives in Czechia: Chinese Embassy in Prague and China Radio International (CRI Czech). The Chinese Embassy in Prague has been quite shy on its website regarding its public messaging on the war in Ukraine. It has to be noted, however, that the embassy is currently led by Chargé d'Affairs Zhang Maoming, as the Ambassador Zhang Jianmin returned to Beijing at the end of February 2022. The chargé d'affaires met with Czech journalists on March 13, 2022. The readout mentions his response to one question on Ukraine, where he reiterated China's six-point plan on Ukraine and stressed "we have to maintain the goals and principles of the Charter of the UN and respect the principle of indivisibility of security and take into account the reasonable security interests of the parties involved." He continued stressing the need "to focus on the long-term stability of the region and to build a balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism."<sup>20</sup>

On March 30, Zhang authored an op-ed titled "China's position on question of Ukraine is legitimate and constructive."<sup>21</sup> The piece appeared in *Parlamentní listy*, one of the most prominent and widely read Czech 'alternative' information source.<sup>22</sup> The aim of the article, Zhang claimed, was to debunk disinformation and misinterpretation which were spread by "some people" in order to defame China. The article tried to portray China as a responsible great power, following international norms set by the UN, and a country providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine. On the sanctions on Russia, Zhang stated: "they have had a serious impact on the lives of ordinary people in Europe, including the Czech Republic, and many businesses have been put in a difficult situation as a result. If sanctions continue to escalate, they could trigger a serious crisis in the global economy [...]. More than 140 of the 190 UN Member States are not participating in the sanctions against Russia, which is proof that the vast majority of countries in the world are approaching the issue of sanctions with caution and responsibility."<sup>23</sup> He also used the opportunity to claim that Ukraine is not Taiwan as Ukraine is "a sovereign state." Last, he also mentioned China's support of EU's "independence and autonomy,"<sup>24</sup> while completely omitting any mentions of NATO.

In the analyzed period, the embassy's Twitter account (established in February 2020 and followed by 2,921 accounts) published only 7 tweets in Czech and English on Ukraine, reposting the official China's position as conveyed by diplomats and MFA spokespersons, and highlighting the humanitarian aid sent to Ukraine. The tweets generated negligible engagement.

The embassy's Facebook account (created in May 2015 and followed by almost 30,000) has been more active, posting a number of videos and photographs per day. Yet most of the posts focus on spreading the "positive energy," such as videos of pandas, cuisine, cultural festivities, China's science and technology achievements, etc. The handful of posts which touched upon Ukraine referred to similar content as shared by the embassy's website and Twitter account. The embassy does not actively engage the audience in comments, thus the engagement is created mostly by passive liking and occasional short exchanges among the account fans.

CRI Czech, on the other hand, has been very active both on its website and Facebook page. In the analyzed period, it published 42 texts on Ukraine, ranging from news to propaganda and disinformation pieces. The news mostly appeared at the beginning of the invasion, which seemed to have caught the CRI Czech unprepared, and in case of new developments (such as in the case of a Russian advance in Donbas). The commentaries started to appear later on. Yet even before the invasion, the outlet also carried declarations of Wang Yi stated at Munich Security Conference<sup>25</sup> and statements of Hua Chunying, the Spokesperson at MFA,<sup>26</sup> on the expansionism of NATO as a cause of the war.

Gradually the CRI Czech has adopted more activist approach, citing Russia's arguments on the cause of the invasion, and adjusting its rhetorics towards blaming the US for the war. Already on February 25, an article claimed: "Without Washington's relentless pursuit of NATO expansion and fanatical incitement of tensions between Moscow and Kiev, the war would never have broken out in the region. Instead, the US has been a major boss behind the effort to manipulate Ukraine for US gains, and this ultimately provoked Russia to strike back."<sup>27</sup> It followed by forecasting: "the NATO enlargement may strengthen the dependence of European allies on the United States. The larger the bloc grows, the harder it will be to achieve consensus. This will gradually cripple France's influence, Germany and the UK in the region, and will increase their dependence on their big boss." It concludes: "Kiev was manipulated and then left alone. [...] There was no choice but to take military action in response to Washington's hostility and NATO's growing activities in and around Ukraine."<sup>28</sup>

Over the months following the invasion, three main topics fully developed in CRI Czech reporting on Ukraine: (1) the destabilizing role of the US and NATO (including the topic of biological laboratories), (2) China's neutral and responsible position during the crisis, and (3) economic and security impacts of the war on the European Union.

The US was described as amoral, hypocritical, and profiting from the war.<sup>29</sup> The outlet framed the Ukraine-Russia war as direct result of a deal between the US administration and US arms producers and as a futile attempt on side of the US to stop its decline from power. A couple of articles also discussed the question of biological laboratories located on the Ukrainian soil, hinting COVID-19 may have originated there.<sup>30</sup>

NATO has been portrayed as a prolonged hand of the US influence, a main cause of the conflict, and labeled as “brain dead.”<sup>31</sup> One notable piece (which has also appeared in Polish and Hungarian versions of CRI) called NATO a “Voldemort”. It followed by claiming: “America’s chain of political manipulation is as bad as ‘black magic.’”<sup>32</sup> The piece carried a visual of the anti-American mural depicting the Statue of Liberty as death on the wall of the former American Embassy in Tehran, Iran (the reverse image search revealed the mural was created in April 2018). The very same picture was used in Polish and Hungarian versions of the article, confirming the assumption that CRI articles are mere translations from Chinese originals.

One article managed to blame the US and in the same time praise China in a rather peculiar mix of arguments: “One suspects that when the US had to accept that it would not be able to push Ukraine into Russia’s backyard as a nuclear-armed NATO state with a substantial short-range biological weapons industry [...], it decided to at least impose an operation on Russia that would prevent this and, moreover, protect the oppressed Russian-speaking population in Donbas. This issue in the Donbas has also been kept in a state of conflict for years. It would be enough for the people in the Donbas and perhaps elsewhere in Novorossiia to have the same rights as the Uyghurs and Tibetans in China, and Ukraine would not have to have any conflict in its east.”<sup>33</sup>

The EU was portrayed as a political and economic victim, mostly through adopting the sanctions which, according to the outlet, caused supply chains disruptions, inflation, and high prices of energy and food.<sup>34</sup> The outlet argued: “So Ukraine is suffering. So does the EU and, to some extent, many other countries in Eurasia, including China, as this situation is severely disrupting supply chains. Practically the whole world is suffering, because this unfortunate situation is reflected in a huge increase in the prices of everything, but certain capitalist circles – particularly in the US – are enjoying it very much.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, the EU should “be wary of crossing the line of Washington, which is trying to make China the scapegoat for its failures, using the Ukraine crisis to drive a wedge between China and the EU and push the EU to consider China a ‘strategic adversary.’”<sup>36</sup> The articles called for the EU to uphold its ‘strategic autonomy,’ warning the EU would otherwise lose its importance.

It is notable that CRI Czech has adopted a mixed approach towards the terminology, using simultaneously “a war,” “a special operation” (mostly, but not exclusively, when describing the Russian position) and “a conflict.”

An overwhelming majority of the texts were translations and did not reveal the identity of the journalists. However, five texts<sup>37</sup> were authored by a Czech author writing under the name Karel Pavlíček, a special correspondent for China Media Group, which operates CRI branches. These texts featured some of the most peculiar arguments and better grammar structure and stylistics. Yet even these pieces did not attempt to localize the topic for the Czech audience. One piece<sup>38</sup> was authored by Bradley Blankenship, a freelance American journalist and a self-proclaimed political analyst, whose Twitter account claims his writings appeared in CGTN, RT (formerly Russia Today), China Daily and Global Times.<sup>39</sup>

The articles have been promoted on Facebook, where CRI Czech has been present since 2013, attracting an astonishingly large amount of followers (over 1 million).<sup>40</sup> A large portion of the following accounts, however, belongs to foreign nationals from the Middle East, Latin America and Africa, or may be in fact fake accounts. On

Facebook, CRI Czech focuses on both spreading the “positive energy” (similarly to the Chinese embassy’s tactics) and promoting its own Ukraine-related articles published on its website. The engagement the posts generated has been limited (given the abnormal size of the readership base) and came in a form of short reactions by the Czech language speakers who quite often agreed with the presented line of arguments. Interestingly, the texts published by CRI Czech have been also regularly republished by AC24, a Czech website considered to publish conspiratory content and anti-system messages,<sup>41</sup> increasing the outreach to the Czech audience.

To sum up, the media presence of the embassy has been modest, as the tasks were relegated to more activist CRI Czech. The efficacy of the strategy may be, however, questionable, as the recent sociological survey revealed that the Czech society’s leaning has been strongly anti-Kremlin,<sup>42</sup> a position formed already in 2021 in connection to the report revealing the Russian military intelligence’s involvement in the explosion at a Czech ammunition depot.<sup>43</sup>



# Estonia: Tiptoeing around the Ukraine issue

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Liisi Karindi

Since experiencing some scrutiny by the local media and the national security institutions in Estonia in 2019,<sup>44</sup> China has become less visible in public messaging to a broader audience. This is also due to the fact that since 2021 the local newspapers have policies in place which hinder publishing of “Chinese propaganda” as part of their paid advert service. This channel of communication was used by the Chinese Embassy in Tallinn before.<sup>45</sup>

As a response, the political section of the Chinese Embassy in Tallinn launched an English-language newsletter China Watch which is sent to a selected audience in Estonia.<sup>46</sup> According to the introduction to the newsletter, the aim is to provide the readers with “various perspectives [...] to understand China, an old, modern and fast developing count[r]y of diversification with over 5,000 years of civilization and history” and thus combat the “ignorance, misunderstanding, stereotype and disinformation about China.”<sup>47</sup> However, the newsletter has not touched upon the topic of Ukraine so far, but has focused on economic, business, cultural and other spheres of life in China.

Other channels of public communication of the Chinese Embassy in Tallinn include the official website,<sup>48</sup> its Facebook page<sup>49</sup> (created on July 29, 2020, regular postings every few days, 185 followers, 141 likes) as well as Twitter account<sup>50</sup> (joined August 2021, 198 tweets, 644 followers). The content mostly consists of reposts of statements by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and articles published by China Daily and Xinhua as well as statements by the embassy itself concerning China-Estonia relations (such as the denouncement of China-related content of the recent Estonian security report).<sup>51</sup>

The topics of posts and articles focus on China’s economic development and trade, innovation and space, culture and traditions. More recently a content on food security has emerged which probably links to the crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. Except for Twitter, Ukraine comes up as a topic only within the reposts of the high-level meetings or phone call reports or as statements made by the MFA at the regular press conferences.<sup>52</sup> Interesting to note is that even on the day of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, i.e. February 24, 2022, the embassy’s two reposts on Facebook covered topics of economic growth and recovery in China, whereas the reposts on Twitter dealt with sport topics.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, on Twitter, the Embassy shared a China Daily article on February 22 on Zhang Jun’s (China’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations) speech at the UN Security Council’s meeting on Ukraine in New York just the day before. He was quoted as saying that “China always makes its own position according to

the merits of the matter itself,” emphasizing China’s belief that “all countries should solve international disputes by peaceful means in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.”<sup>54</sup> In order to better understand the Chinese way of seeing the “merits of the matter” it is important to pay attention to the explanation of the situation in Ukraine at the end of the article: “Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday signed two decrees recognizing the ‘Lugansk People’s Republic’ and the ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ as independent and sovereign states. He later instructed Russian armed forces to ensure peace in the two areas.”<sup>55</sup>

After the invasion, on February 25, 2022, the embassy shared on Twitter the Xinhua news of Xi’s phone call with Putin the next day in which Xi informed again that China would decide on its position “based on the merits of the Ukrainian issue itself.”<sup>56</sup> Next, on March 18, the embassy shared the MFA report on the video call between Xi and Biden as a result of which the two leaders directed their teams “to take concrete actions to put China-US relations back on the track of steady development, and make respective efforts for the proper settlement of the Ukraine crisis.”<sup>57</sup> The following posts shared on March 22 and March 25 highlighted China’s stance on Ukraine issue focusing on the entitlement of the countries to take their own position and “push for Ukraine’s return to peace at an early date.”<sup>58</sup> The only person whom the embassy has retweeted so far on the issue is Wang Lutong, Director General for European Affairs, MFA, and a former Ambassador to New Zealand. According to his account, Wang joined Twitter in March 2022, has 64 tweets, 4,202 followers and shares “personal view” – even though his account name sounds quite official (@WangLutongMFA). His tweets, however, make use of the same kind of information as already shared by the embassy and thus add little value to the existing sources.

China has not made any efforts to produce a specific content for the Estonian audience or to localize the messages concerning its position on Russia’s war in Ukraine. The selection of reposts on Facebook and Twitter indicates that Chinese Embassy in Tallinn has no intention to antagonize Estonians by engaging in any aggressive information campaigns and limits its sharing activities to the most relevant posts in the Estonian context.<sup>59</sup> The overall message intends to portray China as “neutral” with strong emphasis on peace talks (even though indicating that it is Ukraine that needs to be turned again peaceable) and avoiding presentation of any hostility towards the US (which together with NATO has in China’s domestic discourse become the main culprit behind the war in Ukraine). Thus, China seems to lack interest in publicly raising any issues in Estonia in this regard.

# Hungary: Remaining ‘objective’

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Ágnes Szunomár

The Hungarian government has been following a pro-China policy since 2010. As a result the Chinese-Hungarian relations are exceptionally good. Consequently, when it comes to Chinese soft power tools such as spreading information via various online and offline channels, China is certainly not among the most active players in Hungary. The explanation is simple: there is not much left to do since the environment, including the state, public actors as well as major media outlets (majority of them owned directly or indirectly by the Hungarian state) are all supportive of China. Indeed, China is reaching out to the Hungarian audience with mainly neutral China-related news about natural beauty spots, sport successes and cultural highlights, while Hungary-specific narratives are almost totally missing from the agenda.

When it comes to China shaping the Hungarian public discourse, sources to watch are the Chinese Embassy in Hungary and the Hungarian version of China Radio International (CRI Hungary). Both the embassy and CRI Hungary operate websites and social media channels. The embassy joined Facebook and Twitter relatively late, in October 2019.<sup>60</sup> Its Facebook account has 1,700 followers, while the content it provides is practically the same as on its Twitter account. CRI Hungary also has a Facebook page that seems to be much more popular (98,000 followers) although the posts themselves don't attract much attention.

In the context of Russian invasion in Ukraine, the embassy's website shows practically no content. New posts are typically of administrative nature, such as notices on opening time of the consular section, or information on the requirements for COVID-19 testing before traveling to China. Similarly, Qi Dayu, the Ambassador to Hungary, has not been very visible lately and the embassy seems to keep a rather low profile. However, China's position is quite clear. At the end of 2021, the ambassador published an op-ed in a pro-government Hungarian daily on the right of all peoples to democracy. The piece stated “democracy is not Coca-Cola, so that syrup produced in the United States can be blended with the same flavor all over the world.”<sup>61</sup>

The embassy's Facebook page offers a little more, yet not much more. Posts include neutral news on China, most of them being translations of centrally produced news, with a very little content directly related to Hungary (e.g. President Xi's visits all over China, successes of the Winter Olympics and cherry trees in bloom). On February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine there was no activity on the page at all. The first Ukraine-related post was published on March 7, reporting on Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's phone conversation with Péter Szijjártó, the Foreign Minister of Hungary, on the safety of Chinese citizens in Ukraine and Hungary's much appreciated contribution to ensure their smooth evacuation.<sup>62</sup> Further posts did not deal with the events of the war either. Even if posts mentioned Ukraine, those were mainly

related to humanitarian aid that China has been providing<sup>63</sup> and the Chinese support for the peace process.<sup>64</sup>

While the embassy tends to report less on global issues and events, CRI Hungary is very active in showing political and security developments all over the world. An average of 20-25 news items are posted on the website on a daily basis, most of them being shorter posts, almost all of which are also posted on CRI Hungary Facebook page. CRI Hungary has been very active not only in terms of the amount of news, but also in terms of the content related to the war in Ukraine. However, most of these posts were not necessarily about the war itself but about Chinese (and Russian) stances as regards the conflict.

Already in late January and early February 2022, there were a few short pieces on how the Chinese and Russian leadership saw bilateral cooperation (“there is no upper limit to the level of Sino-Russian trust”<sup>65</sup>) and on Putin's opposition to Ukraine's NATO membership.<sup>66</sup> The first – but short – post on February 24 was about Putin to launch military operation in Donbas, emphasizing that Putin stressed he was not launching an attack against Ukraine but the aim was “to resolve the Ukrainian issue.”<sup>67</sup> During the following days, most of the posted news were about the crisis in Ukraine, with the occasional appearance of other topics, such as the Winter Olympics. From the end of March and the beginning of April 2022 onwards, the proportion of posts dealing with the war on Ukraine dropped, giving way again to more neutral topics. These included the statements of the Chinese Foreign Minister and spokespersons, with only a few statements related to Hungary. One of these was the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech on March 15, in which he said that Hungary was just a puppet in the eyes of the great powers that can easily be sacrificed.<sup>68</sup>

CRI Hungary tried to present itself as an objective source of information since it avoided expressing opinions directly, but eventually it did express them indirectly, by using RT's (formerly Russia Today) articles, sometimes even quoting President Vladimir Putin and not referring to other, more critical sources. Consequently, CRI Hungary's posts filtered information heavily (for example, they reported on humanitarian corridors, but not on the fact that there is no real way out through them<sup>69</sup>) and provided unbalanced content on issues such as the Bucha massacre (adding only “all accusations must be based on facts”<sup>70</sup>). The portrayal of the US as the supreme evil has been a central element (and not only in the context of the situation in Ukraine). The most bizarre moment was when, in one – relatively longer – post, CRI Hungary compared the United States to Voldemort, who breaks the international order by supporting Ukraine to join NATO.<sup>71</sup>

# Latvia: Staying aloof

Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova

China has not been an active player on the information front in Latvia. Previous research into China's narratives in the Latvian information space suggests that when it comes to China's official messages in Latvia, an "original content remains very limited and no Latvia-specific narratives have been created"<sup>72</sup> – an approach that can be called "second-hand messaging."

Although scarce, original content normally is communicated via op-eds and interviews with the Chinese diplomats on two local media platforms: the online news outlets NRA.lv and Delfi.lv (curiously, sometimes republished on the official Chinese Embassy to Latvia's website<sup>73</sup>). The most recent interview with Liang Jianquan, the China's Ambassador to Latvia, dates back to February 15, 2022, and already contains a mention of the Ukraine crisis, as the interviewer asks how will China react because "during the 2022 Winter Olympics, a military conflict may break out between Russia and Ukraine."<sup>74</sup> The ambassador used the familiar wording: "We call on all parties to keep a clear mind on relevant issues, to refrain from escalating tensions and exaggerating crises, to resolve differences through dialogue and consultation, and to make a constructive contribution to maintaining international and regional peace and security."

Unlike in neighboring countries, Chinese embassy's personnel in Latvia is not visible, and no embassy accounts are active on Twitter. China's narratives are usually being distributed through the Facebook accounts of the embassy (437 followers, 4-5 posts a day, mostly reposts from Xinhua News Facebook page in English), and the Confucius Institute at the University of Latvia (724 followers, several posts a month), all generating almost no engagement. No local CRI office in Latvian exists thus the Latvian language comes a distant second to English for China's public communication in the country.

All the more interesting is the fact that the messaging on Russia's war in Ukraine has been coming out of the official Facebook account of the embassy in Latvian. The first Ukraine-related post appeared on February 16, 2022, eight days before the invasion started but already during a significant Russian military build-up near the borders with Ukraine. The post was a translation of the press conference of Wang Wenbin, the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, calling for "all sides [...] to create conditions for a political solution to the Ukraine crisis."<sup>75</sup> The next day, Wang was quoted in Latvian again: "I have noticed that the Russian side has recently announced that the West has carried out 'information terrorism' on the issue of Ukraine, and that February 15 is the 'Day of Propaganda Failure' of the United States and the West."<sup>76</sup>

Until April 19, 2022, altogether fourteen messages in Latvian were posted on the topic of Ukraine. Most of them were translation of Chinese MFA statements with

references to the original like the one above. Yet some posts also contained highly polemic statements without references, such as “[t]he US-led expansion of NATO to the east is the main cause of the crisis in Ukraine,”<sup>77</sup> and “[r]ecent biological experiments of the United States in Ukraine has caused great concern on all sides, but it is only the ‘visible part of the iceberg.’”<sup>78</sup> All such texts regularly lack spaces between words, suggesting they have been copied and posted by a non-Latvian speaker.

Anti-US rhetoric is the dominating topic across most messages, including translations into Latvian, direct English reposts and links (e.g., “U.S. military complex to benefit from Russia-Ukraine conflict: ex-Pentagon analyst”<sup>79</sup>). Among the posts not directly related to the US, a Xinhua repost containing South China Morning Post quote stood up. The post focused on “[w]hy Russia-Ukraine conflict will not derail China-proposed BRI?”<sup>80</sup> which may deem relevant to Latvia as the country is a signatory of a Memorandum of Understanding on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), although no active projects are taking place.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the local traditionally inactive Chinese embassy has picked up pace on posting Ukraine and Russia-related content in Latvian, for the most part containing strong critiques of the United States and its responsibility. The posts and reposts also signal China’s “neutrality” on the issue and hold promise that the “conflict” will have no effect on China’s plans for Eurasian connectivity. This claim is unsubstantiated as the war clearly has an effect on the connectivity. To add to all the issues impeding BRI projects from taking shape in the region, none of the Baltic states, including Latvia, would accept any form of logistic cooperation with China hinging on Russia and Belarus due to the Russia’s attack on Ukraine.

Still, although with new motives, the overall China’s official approach to messaging in Latvia remains the same as seen during COVID-19. It contains translations, reposts, virtually no country-specific content apart from some interviews with diplomats and no active engagement with the Latvian society.

# Poland: Cognitive mismatch

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Alicja Bachulska

In recent years, the activities of individuals and institutions representing the interests of China in Poland have been expanding in both their thematic scope and scale. In the local context, Chinese state-affiliated media and diplomats have been especially active in promoting anti-US narratives and spreading so-called “positive energy” related to Beijing’s perceived domestic and international successes. Especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this kind of efforts became increasingly visible with Chinese entities advancing their activities in the Polish digital domain.

In the context of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, the Chinese Embassy in Poland, China Radio International (CRI) Polish, as well as some local media appear as the most active actors in spreading Beijing’s position. The Chinese embassy published on its website three communiqués by Wang Yi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, in early March. The first appeared just three days after the war had broken out and included China’s five-point position on the “Ukraine issue,” based on rhetorically supporting sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, advocating common security, exercising restraint, encouraging diplomatic efforts, and promoting the UN Security Council’s “constructive role” in de-escalation.<sup>81</sup> The second communiqué was published in early March and reaffirmed Beijing’s so-called “four musts” approach towards Ukraine, reiterating its support for the principles of the UN Charter, respect for security concerns of all parties involved, willingness to resolve disputes by peaceful means, and hope for long-term stability in Europe.<sup>82</sup> Simultaneously, another statement by Wang Yi was published, this time focusing on preventing a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, yet again reiterating Beijing’s official rhetoric on the need to minimize the scale of human suffering and “depoliticizing” the war.<sup>83</sup>

The messaging coming from the Chinese Embassy in Warsaw has been mild, seemingly trying to achieve an image of China as a benevolent actor working towards quick yet sustainable conflict resolution. This position, however, stands in striking contrast to the rhetoric found in Chinese state-affiliated media in Poland. CRI Polish’s official website and its Facebook profile have been very active when it comes to spreading the more aggressive type of Beijing’s messaging, which illustrates the convergence of certain strategic interests between China and Russia. In this context, the first commentary appeared on the outlet’s website on February 13, 2022.<sup>84</sup> It accused the US and NATO of fueling the conflict between Russia and Ukraine for the sake of expanding its own sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, thus “limiting Russia’s strategic security space.” In the days leading up to the invasion, a few similar articles were published, strengthening the same interpretation of events, and limiting Ukraine’s role to being a “victim” of Washington’s power politics.<sup>85</sup> One day after the beginning of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, CRI’s Polish commentary labelled it a “special military operation” to “demilitarize” the country, bluntly mirroring Kremlin’s rhetoric.<sup>86</sup>

In early March, many among CRI's pieces began pointing out the alleged US biolabs on the Ukrainian soil, which, according to the outlet, used to work on "many dangerous viruses," clearly hinting at their potential role in spreading COVID-19.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, one of them quoted Russian sources to promote a claim that the US side cooperated with Ukraine on a "project using bats as carriers of biological weapons."<sup>88</sup> In late March, multiple pieces blamed the US not only for "provoking" the conflict, but also for using it to maximize the gains of its military-industrial complex<sup>89</sup> and displaying "double standards" regarding refugees from Ukraine and other countries.<sup>90</sup> Another theme prominent in CRI Polish's pieces centered around the role of the EU in the conflict, with multiple calls for Europe to escape the "American trap" of economic sanctions by advancing its "strategic autonomy," understood as non-alignment with the US on core issues.<sup>91</sup>

In April, one piece criticized the choice of several European countries to ban the letter "Z" from public display due to its pro-Russian connotations and called it an example of "political correctness" incompatible with the values of diversity and tolerance.<sup>92</sup> CRI's most peculiar criticism of the US included a pop-culture comparison with Harry Potter's archenemy, Voldemort. In a piece from late April, Washington's policies regarding Ukraine were compared to Voldemort's "black magic," as they both allegedly disturb order and illustrate "mad desire for absolute control."<sup>93</sup>

As far as CRI Facebook page is concerned, it has been promoting its commentaries, often accompanied by cartoons trying to ridicule the US in the context of the war in Ukraine.<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, although CRI remains a niche outlet in Poland, its recent promotion of blunt pro-Russian content has resulted in some organic engagement on its Facebook profile, unlike the situation from before the war, when most of the engagement seemed to have been artificially generated. In some extreme cases, CRI's posts have attracted hundreds of commentaries and reactions from Polish Facebook users, most of them criticizing the Chinese outlet for spreading pro-Russian propaganda and pointing towards Beijing's own problems with the rule of law and human rights.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, an article on Ukraine by Sun Linjiang, China's Ambassador to Poland, was published in a local daily Trybuna on March 10, 2022.<sup>96</sup> This left-leaning outlet has been notorious for cooperating with Chinese diplomats and media, including Xinhua press agency. In the latest piece by the ambassador, he reiterated Beijing's official position on the situation in Ukraine by arguing that the "issue" has been "complicated," while NATO eastward expansion's negative effect on Russia's security has been an "indisputable fact." The overall tone of the article was visibly aiming to legitimize Moscow's interests in the context of the current war.

Overall, China's messaging regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine in the Polish information space has been visibly pro-Kremlin. Although the official diplomatic rhetoric has been relatively mild, Chinese state-affiliated media have been blaming the US and NATO for the conflict and have portrayed Ukraine as a passive actor with no agency of its own. This type of messaging has been accompanied by extreme clumsiness in the choice of specific wording, giving an impression of crude and ineffective rhetoric. Especially in Poland, where social sensitivity to pro-Kremlin propaganda is high, this kind of approach seems ineffective.



# Slovakia: Local proxies take charge

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Matej Šimalčík

Among the global powers, China is a relative latecomer when it comes to public communication of its ideas about international affairs to the Slovak audience. Instances of heightened activity typically concerned situations closely linked to the China's core interests, such as the 2019 protests in Hong Kong against the Beijing proposed extradition law, or the 2020 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, both issues having a high relevance for the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

This chapter analyzes Ukraine-focused narratives produced by two types of sources. First source is the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia – its official website, and its Facebook<sup>97</sup> and Twitter<sup>98</sup> accounts. The embassy's presence on social media is a relatively new phenomenon. Both profiles were created only in February 2020, at a time when China found itself in a position where it needed to salvage its souring public image in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, a failed venture as public opinion polls revealed.<sup>99</sup>

The second group of sources includes messaging by Slovak politicians known to sympathize with China. Previous research found that Chinese propaganda and disinformation have a far wider reach when shared by local proxies rather than only via official channels.<sup>100</sup> Local disinformation media outlets are not included here, as access to the most impactful ones was blocked upon the decision of the National Security Authority shortly after the war broke out, thus not playing a major role in spreading the Chinese narratives.<sup>101</sup>

However, Slovak audiences may consume not only the narratives put forth by Chinese actors located in Slovakia (and their proxies), but also in the neighboring Czech Republic, due to linguistic proximity and general intelligibility of the languages. Hence, media like the Czech edition of the China Radio International (CRI) which primarily targets the Czech audience, may also have an impact on the audience.

In the official channels, China has so far not been particularly active in sharing its views on the war in Ukraine. In the examined period, almost no original content attributable to the embassy staff was found. The embassy's activity was limited mostly to reposting content produced by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other Chinese institutions, and their representatives.

Interestingly, in the early days of the war, the embassy did not post any statements concerning Ukraine. First social media posts regarding the war started appearing only in mid-March, almost three weeks after the war started.

In one of the first posts, the embassy retweeted the post of the Chinese embassy in Poland (itself retweeting People's Daily) about Chinese aid to Ukraine.<sup>102</sup> The embassy also shared the readout of the video call between Xi Jinping and Joe Biden. It highlighted a quote by Xi Jinping: "Countries should not come to the point of meeting on the battlefield. Conflict and confrontation are not in anyone's interest. Peace and security are what the international community should treasure the most."<sup>103</sup>

In a similar spirit, the embassy also shared the press release about the phone call between Wang Yi, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba. Key information about the Chinese official position and Ukrainian reaction was highlighted: “China’s basic attitude on the Ukraine issue is to promote peace talks. China will continue to play a constructive role in its own way. Minister Kuleba agreed with China’s views and thanked China for its humanitarian assistance to Ukraine.”<sup>104</sup> Similar ideas were shared following various meetings of Chinese officials with the EU representatives.<sup>105</sup>

The topic of refugees has also featured in the official communication. Two types of comments were made. Concerning the Chinese nationals fleeing Ukraine via Slovakia and other neighboring countries, the embassy shared the comments of Wang Wenbin, the Spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressing gratitude for the support provided in extracting the stranded Chinese nationals.<sup>106</sup> The only reflection of the war on the embassy’s website also concerned the fleeing Chinese citizens, albeit limited to practical information for the fleeing Chinese.<sup>107</sup>

The embassy also shared Wang’s thoughts on Ukrainian refugees and their comparison with refugees from other areas of the world. “Refugees from Ukraine deserve sympathies while the refugees from countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America are not worth compassion. This is unacceptable double standard,” the embassy retweeted.

It is apparent, that in Slovakia the embassy focuses mostly on positive communication. The necessity of diplomatic resolution of the conflict while stressing its own provision of aid to alleviate the impact of the war is highlighted. Negative comments, such as attributing the blame for the war to the West and NATO expansion, are largely suppressed.

While the official Chinese communication on Ukraine in Slovakia may be lackluster, communication of local proxies that promote Chinese viewpoints on the conflict has been far more impactful. This is not a new development – similar dynamics could be observed concerning the spread of Chinese propaganda and disinformation on the origins of COVID-19.<sup>108</sup>

One of the most vocal proxies in Slovakia is Ľuboš Blaha, a Member of the Parliament from the Smer-SD, a populist leftist and nationalist party. Shortly after the war started, Blaha posted on Facebook a theory on bioweapon labs in Ukraine purportedly established by the US.<sup>109</sup> The post was liked by over 9,000 Facebook users, shared over 1,400 times, and received some 1,100 mostly supportive comments. The post was also shared across various Slovak and Czech Facebook pages that typically cater to nationalist, pro-Russian, and anti-system audiences.

In Blaha’s post, three key narratives can be observed. First, Blaha points out the Russian claim of US-funded biolabs in Ukraine. Second, Blaha cites Chinese sources to reinforce the claim: “According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US should publish data on military laboratories in Ukraine and around the world.” Third, he links the issue to the COVID-19 pandemic: “The Chinese talk about hundreds of American biological laboratories around the world. Let me just remind you that one laboratory was also funded by the US administration in Wuhan. And yes, coincidentally, coronaviruses were studied there. And Biden’s chief health adviser, Fauci, confirmed this.”

The purpose of the post was to reduce the credibility of the Ukrainian government over its purported involvement in the production of weapons of mass destruction, while at the same time creating an air of legitimacy for Russia and highlighting the supposed US responsibility to conflict, a mainstay of current Chinese messaging on the Ukraine war. In this instance, quoting Chinese talking points was supposed to lend credibility to the biolab claims. In Blaha's own words: "You don't have to trust Lavrov, because yes – propaganda is spread during conflicts. It is spread by both sides. But when China also asks about biological labs, and when Nuland confirms their presence and when it is openly talked about on American television, we should obviously take note of this."

On a different occasion, in the aftermath of the Bucha massacre, Blaha called for an independent international investigation.<sup>110</sup> Blaha raised concerns about the truthfulness of Ukrainian claims about Russia committing atrocities in Bucha, as "neo-Nazi battalions are fighting on the Ukrainian side" towards which Blaha "never had confidence in their humanity and truthfulness." Due to this "the only way to find out the truth about Bucha is to wait for the results of the international investigation. And among the investigators should be neutral countries like China, Brazil or India, not just Western propagandists."

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, far-right politicians also expressed sympathies to China amidst the war in Ukraine. Marián Ďuriš,<sup>111</sup> a member of the Presidium and a self-styled foreign policy expert of the far-right Republika Party, highlighted on his Facebook page the nature of the China-Russia partnership that can potentially help Russia to avoid Western sanctions.<sup>112</sup> However, in Ďuriš' view, China aiding Russia to avoid the sanctions is not a problematic behavior in and of itself, but merely a cause of weakening international position of the EU and the US. He further concludes that the Slovak government, which supports sanctioning Russia, is not acting in the interest of Slovak citizens but rather in the interest of foreign powers. Ďuriš also took China's side after Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary General, called on China to condemn the Russian aggression. In reaction, Ďuriš posted that China "does not require lectures from those who break the international law. We do not forget who bombed our embassy in Belgrade."<sup>113</sup>

Interestingly, both Blaha and Ďuriš' party boss Milan Uhrík have in the past participated in China-organized junket trips, which can to some extent help explain their pro-Chinese attitudes.<sup>114</sup>

In Slovakia, the official Chinese channels are not particularly active when it comes to spreading propaganda on the war in Ukraine. Chinese messages focused mostly on positive communication, highlighting China's claimed commitment to peace and diplomatic resolution of the conflict. This is largely in line with the previous instances of an embassy's restrained style of communication, making the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia an exception in the surging 'wolf warrior' approach seen elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Vitriolic messaging has been typically taken over by the local proxies. Both ideological and pragmatic reasons can help to explain this phenomenon. Proxies typically come from amongst both far-right and far-left political extremes, to whom, on one hand, China allures ideologically. Thus promoting Chinese viewpoints helps Slovak proxies to assuage the demand of their electorates for anti-systemic messaging.

# Slovenia: Keeping silent, so far

Tinkara Godec

Besides business stakeholders, such as Huawei, Hisense and other Chinese companies, the only source of Chinese activity is the Chinese Embassy to Slovenia. However, it has a relatively small media and social media presence. While its website<sup>115</sup> is occasionally updated, there is no media outlet in Slovenia that would be directly connected to China, such as CRI. The embassy has also only one social media account, as it is active on Twitter.<sup>116</sup>

Before the Russia's invasion in Ukraine, China has not been particularly active in Slovenia. It reacted only on occasions which directly affect EU-China or bilateral relations, such as the recent short-lived diplomatic spat caused by Prime Minister Janez Janša when he called Taiwan a "neighboring country" of China.<sup>117</sup>

The embassy's Twitter account has been updated regularly (13 tweets in April, occasionally more than one tweet per day), however, it mostly retweets other official Chinese government accounts, such as the China Daily newspaper and similar accounts. The account was opened in 2017 and has since accumulated over 4,000 followers.

Out of the tweets that were published in the analyzed period, only two tweets mentioned Ukraine directly, and a few touched on the topic of security, conflict and cooperation in the international community. The first Ukraine-related tweet was just a link to the official statement made by the Chinese MFA,<sup>118</sup> while the other consists of a link to the response<sup>119</sup> by Wang Shunqing, the Chinese Ambassador to Slovenia, to a letter<sup>120</sup> authored by Žiga Vavpotič, the President of the Slovenian-Chinese Business Council. Vavpotič called for Chinese neutrality in the war in Ukraine.

The response by the ambassador was published in the digital edition of a Slovenian national newspaper Delo on March 26, 2022.<sup>121</sup> The position assumed by ambassador might be characterized as "expected" by standards of China's usual positions in the international community. Ambassador Wang emphasized that China is not involved in the "Russo-Ukrainian conflict,"<sup>122</sup> and expressed concern for lives of civilians that are endangered by it. According to Wang, China's position on the Ukraine "issue" is based on four premises: respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations, the goals and principles of the Charter on the United Nations, as well as "the legitimate security concerns of all countries and support of all efforts to resolve the crisis peacefully."<sup>123</sup> He reaffirmed that China is in communication with all parties based on these four points. Furthermore, the piece stressed China's commitment to providing humanitarian aid, as well as its efforts to support the evacuation of civilians out of the most dangerous zones. Lastly, in the letter, Ambassador Wang calls for "abandon[ing] the Cold War mentality and the bloc division and to create a balanced, efficient and sustainable regional security structure [in order to achieve] the long-term peace and stability of the European continent."<sup>124</sup> The bulk of the letter thus summarizes the

Chinese position on the Ukrainian war, and only the very last two sentences mention Slovenia directly.

Wang called both Slovenia and China peaceful countries, and stated China is ready to join Slovenia in the promotion of building “a community for the common future of humanity, which would open a bright and beautiful future to the world.”<sup>125</sup> What can be deduced from the letter, which is the only direct source of China’s messaging on the war in Slovenia, is that China does not really mind what Slovenia’s foreign policy strategy is, as long as it does not directly jeopardize China’s assets in Slovenia.

Apart from the letter, no public messaging specifically aimed at Slovenians regarding the war in Ukraine have been made by China. The one remaining tweet, linking to an official statement by the Chinese MFA and Wang Yi’s statements which were published on the website of the embassy, could hardly be characterized as aimed at Slovenians, since these were neither translated nor mentioned Slovenia.

Similarly, no explicit Slovenia-tailored messaging could be found on the embassy’s social media. Not even when the so-called ‘anti-Huawei bill’ was overturned in the Slovenian Parliament,<sup>126</sup> or when Prime Minister Janez Janša called Taiwan a country and announced an exchange of representative offices.<sup>127</sup>

It seems that China is not particularly interested in Slovenia’s position on international matters. Although Slovenia offers its full support to Ukraine and strongly opposes Russia’s invasion, China does not seem to be involved in trying to shift the domestic narrative, at least not through public channels. Yet this may change if Slovenia – under the new government – shifts its official position into an even more China-skeptic narrative.

# Romania: Amidst war, messages of peace

Andreea Leonte

Three main sources of Chinese messaging could be found in Romania – Chinese state news agency Xinhua, China Radio International (CRI Romania) and the Chinese Embassy in Bucharest. In February, just before the beginning of the invasion, the three channels published altogether 20 posts on Ukraine. Perhaps the most authoritative source out of the three, the embassy, communicated on the matter via its Facebook page and shared only links to Xinhua articles in English without any commentary. These links emphasized that the US was preventing dialogue by exaggerating war threats,<sup>128</sup> implying that it was unlikely the war would start. CRI Romania and Xinhua both called for respecting the Minsk Agreements<sup>129</sup> and addressing security problems through multilateralism.<sup>130</sup> All three channels called for the “Ukraine problem” to be resolved through dialogue in a peaceful manner.

On the day of the invasion, CRI Romania was the most vocal source on the subject, with four posts reporting on the situation in Ukraine. The embassy’s Facebook page had two posts, one reminding about the fact that NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, killing three journalists and leaving many injured, and that the US along with some allies were still trying to provoke China by intervening in China’s internal affairs in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan.<sup>131</sup>

Throughout February, CRI Romania was by far the most active, with a total of 23 posts about Ukraine, most of them in the form of short stories. The embassy restrained itself to conveying China’s official position, including a recommendation to “abandon the Cold War mentality.” Xinhua, on the other hand, carried a mix of war reporting, official statements and opinions, centered on the mediating role the UN should play<sup>132</sup> and the calls on the US to stop dividing the world along ideological lines and cease misinforming about China’s supposedly “real” intentions.<sup>133</sup>

In March, Xinhua replaced CRI Romania as the most active Chinese platform reporting on Ukraine, with a total of 59 posts, compared to 31 pieces produced by CRI Romania and 21 posts shared by the embassy. In all three cases, the type of posts diversified since February. Xinhua reiterated, among other things, the fact that China would like to play a constructive role in facilitating Russia-Ukraine talks.<sup>134</sup> Some articles drew attention to the moral decay of the US<sup>135</sup> and to the allegedly serious human rights violations committed by the US including against Asian Americans. Several posts accused the US to operate biological laboratories on the Ukrainian soil.<sup>136</sup> Additionally, the US was urged not to harm China’s “legitimate interests”<sup>137</sup> in its relations with Russia, nor to resort to “indiscriminate sanctions” in handling the conflict.

The embassy emphasized China's peace-loving nature, while encouraging diplomatic solutions, avoiding indiscriminate sanctions,<sup>138</sup> and renouncing the 'Cold War mentality'.<sup>139</sup> It also emphasized the importance of maintaining stable relations between China and the EU. Additionally, three posts warned the US not to intervene in Taiwan<sup>140</sup> and not to sow discord in the South China Sea.<sup>141</sup> Another post highlighted "questions raised by the international community" about biological laboratories on the Ukrainian soil.<sup>142</sup>

In comparison to Xinhua and the embassy, the CRI Romania had the most aggressive tone regarding the US, mentioning not only the alleged operation of biological laboratories in Ukraine, but also hinting hidden economic interests.<sup>143</sup> Interestingly, some articles categorically denied China knew about Russia's "military operation" in Ukraine before it happened.<sup>144</sup>

By April 2022, all three platforms focused on two issues. First narrative revolved around encouraging the EU to form its own vision of China, distinct from that of the US.<sup>145</sup> A part of this narrative promoted an intensification of bilateral dialogue to act as a 'stabilizing factor in a turbulent world'.<sup>146</sup> The second narrative focused on the alleged hypocrisy of the US in dealing with its partners, on whose shoulders it places most of the burden, while pursuing financial and economic gains for itself.<sup>147</sup> Only two posts mentioned Romania directly when mentioning that China donated \$150,000 to the Romanian Red Cross.<sup>148</sup>

To conclude, the Chinese narrative in Romania about the war in Ukraine, as expressed by Xinhua, CRI Romania and the embassy, was mainly aimed at promoting the perception of China's peaceful and non-confrontational nature, its proactivity in sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine and its zeal as an advocate of peace. China contrasted itself to the US which was portrayed as a cynical, dishonest and decadent actor, driven only by its selfish interests. The EU, on the other hand, has been presented as a victim of US actions. The EU, according to the Chinese narrative in Romania, will suffer huge negative consequences under the irresponsible leadership of the US. While Russia has been also portrayed as a victim of the US, its security concerns were presented as legitimate.

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# About CHOICE

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The publication was prepared within the China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) collaborative platform. CHOICE is a think net of China experts providing informed analysis on the rising influence of the People's Republic of China within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. It is the largest network of China experts in the Central and Eastern European region, with more than 100 contributors from 30 different countries.

The network focuses especially on current issues in China affairs, maintaining a prolific publishing schedule so as to address up-to-date issues in real time. This includes multiple articles per week as well as monthly podcasts and cartoons. Debates, webinars, mentoring sessions, summer school, and more formats further highlight CHOICE's ability to engage experts and stakeholders via a myriad of avenues.

CHOICE is run by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a Prague-based foreign policy think tank and NGO.

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## Footnotes

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