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# COVID 19 LIBERAL VIEWS AND RESPONSES FROM DEMOCRACIES

WEDNESDAY WEBINAR SERIES BY CIVIC IDEA IN PARTNERSHIP WITH FNF — SOUTH CAUCASUS APRIL - MAY' 2020



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# July, 8th, 12:00 Tbilisi Time Join our Zoom Webinar Live COVID 19: LIBERAL VIEWS AND RESPONSES WORLDWIDE Be Aware or Be Next



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# **DISCUSSION #10** NEW SECURITY CHALLENGES BROUGHT BY COVID-19: LIBERAL VIEWS AND RESPONSES WORLDWIDE / BE AWARE OR BE NEXT

# **SPEAKERS**:

Tauno Tohk Strategic Communication expert at the European External Action Service

Martina Hrvolova Program Officer for Europe and Eurasia at the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE)

Ani Kintsurashvili Lead Researcher at Civic IDEA, Georgia

# **MODERATOR:**

Tinatin Khidasheli Chair, Civic IDEA, Former MP & MOD, Georgia

On July 8, Civic IDEA finalized the series of the weekly webinars with the broad overview concerning China's growing influence in the Post-pandemic world. The experts from European External Action Service and Center for international Private Enterprise highlighted the interests of the Chinese Communist Party, BRI's impact on Chinese corrosive capital derived from the examples of various countries and Beijing's leverage on information and economic space strengthened by Georgia's Chinese experiences. "The Chinese influence operations occupied a big part of our previous discussions from the very first day to the ninth webinar. We were talking about the start of the virus, its implications, the reactions all over the world including the ones from China the ways the information was manipulated and also the responses from Moscow about whatever was said by Beijing"- mentioned the panel moderator and Chair of Civic IDEA Tinatin Khidasheli.

#### COMPARISON OF SINO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

Russian media outlets comprising "Russia Today" and "Sputnik" have been actively promoting (copying, translating & spreading) the information and narratives coming from China and its media sources. For instance, the fake news concerning the US-financed Lugar Lab in Georgia has been echoed both by Chinese and Russian disinformation agents including not only media, but politicians and government/foreign ministry representatives (i.e. Lavrov, Zakharova and Geng Shuang). These examples point out the certain pattern of coordinated actions including the similar language and common contents streaming both in Chinese and Russian deception campaigns.



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It is exceptionally interesting whether the akin pattern has been detected by the European Union based on the manipulative mechanisms launched in the member states.

Indeed, China's growing influence is a relatively new topic for the European Union, as previously it has been focusing on Russia's foreign policies and actions and China was usually left behind. The last six months have shown tremendous changes in the EU's attitude towards China. We have seen the changing mood regarding 5G and Chinese-led HUAWEI, before and after the COVID crisis. It has become a wake-up call for the EU special bodies and triggered their mainstream awareness. In reality, the Geographic proximity is not a big issue for Beijing anymore and its decisions have been pointedly affecting the European Union and other distant (from China) countries. "Beijing has been working hard to control the narrative on the pandemic and also used the pandemic to promote its governmental system, to share how it is working better than compared to democracies."- mentioned EEAS advisor, Tauno Tohk. Undeniably, Chinese authorities are also censoring sensitive topics, i.e. the events around Taiwan and the WHO, responses to the virus and so on. "We see the increase of Chinese interests in the variety of fields, in entertainment or social media... So far, the infiltration has been successful on many levels here. The United States is now considering to ban TikTok. However, it is difficult to fully liberate the state from Beijing's influence, as the world has become too dependent on the technologies provided by China."- noted lago Tsitaishvili.



Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that China is an important global economic player having significant leverage on the international decision-making processes concerning such topics, as pandemic or global warming. Therefore, states are obliged to decide on what terms are they going to cooperate with China.

During the past several months, we have seen China's increasing assertiveness in the social media activities of Chinese officials. In other words, Beijing has shown the ultimate will to attack individual states through spreading rumors and conspiracy theories about them. Compared to Russia, China is a relatively new player in global disinformation space. "China is entering a Russian-style disinformation field, but its sophistication is different, the motivation is different..."-Tauno Tohk.

Another point that distinguishes China from Russia is associated with the exploitation of the divisions within the societies where they practice disinformation. "Chinese narratives often concern themselves, concern things happening in China, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and so on. This is very different from what Russia has been doing"- Tauno Tohk. However, recently, we have seen changes in this notion as well. For instance, China has disclosed a peculiar focus on George Floyd protests in the United States. Together with that, previously, there has not been much attention drawn to Chinese propaganda mechanisms in the west. The Chinese media outlets not only spread positive narratives about China, but also suppress the information or criticism that do not serve their interests.



"What distinguishes China is that while promoting positive narratives about themselves, they have been also practicing the suppression of information and the suppression of criticism. So, on one hand, we have a reputation-building which many countries do, on the other hand, it is the same positive propaganda but in combination with suppression of critical voices... This is also where the media freedom question comes in, because the suppression of information, as always has been the part of Beijing's tool-box. We all know about China's domestic censorship, but we also see the aim of China to control information also outside of their borders."

#### - Tauno Tohk

In addition to that, China blocks all the undesired foreign correspondence within its borders. The Chinese Communist Party plays the role of the gatekeeper, in order to conceal the happenings inside the country. This occasion complicates the assessment of news and events by the Western alliances and societies, since they highly rely on foreign media sources operating in China.

## **BOOSTED REPUTATION OF CHINESE ONLINE PLATFORMS AND TECHNOLOGIES**

Beijing's technological entrepreneurship, including its high-tech firms and online platforms, loom large all over the world. Their social media applications differ from twitter, Facebook and other western platforms in terms of the context and thus, are becoming especially popular among the youth. Besides, they enfold different attitudes, norms and legal background causing distinctive implications (i.e. export of Chinese censorship regime to different countries). These circumstances in-



duce breaches in data protection mechanisms. Chinese Communist Party is able to request needed information from the Chinese companies operating worldwide. Consequently, there are difficulties with their compliance with certain general rules since they might turn against Beijing's interests. "We have already seen in media questions about TikTok content policies and data policies and a month ago, there was news about Zoom suspending accounts of activists in response to demands by the Chinese authorities and we also have seen the research from Canadian researchers, about which assets abroad become a subject to Chinese censorship regime"- Tauno Tohk.

Considering the current reality, where there exists a lot of ambiguity around the Chinese high-tech companies, it becomes important to constantly observe and research new happenings around them. Moreover, cooperation between different independent researchers, state and non-state parties is crucial for the effective monitoring of Beijing's foreign policy implications.

## **CHINESE CORROSIVE CAPITAL**

"It has been very exciting to work on "corrosive capital" (financing that lacks transparency, accountability, and market orientation flowing from authoritarian regimes into new and transitioning democracies!); it is the term that the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) coined already three years ago. We are one of four core institute of National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and affiliated with the US Chamber of Commerce. We were founded in 1993 on principal that economic freedom and political freedom are linked and today our work is as



vital as it was back then, because worldwide many democracies face both internal and external challenges"- mentioned by Martina Hrvolova, Program Officer at CIPE.

Nowadays, Authoritarian states, including China have prayed for the openness of modern economies, while in fact, prompted the creation of corrosive capital for instance, in Western Balkan states, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, South-East Asia, MENA region or Latin America. "The flow of state connected investments from Authoritarian governments to democracies, has been actually growing exponentially for quite some time and during COVID, these governments have stepped up their efforts to the point of influencing, how the public in the recipient countries, views the authoritarian regimes."- Martina Hrvolova. Indeed, many recipient countries face the negative effects of the corrosive capital reflected on democracy, human rights or generally on governance. The money invested by the authoritarian countries, whether it is a state or private enterprise, has detrimental effects on the quality of democratic institutions. This is certainly an alarming trend which at the end, might cause global democratic backsliding.

"We see the continued need for local initiatives that reduce the negative effects of corrosive capital on democratic governance. Vulnerable democracies around the world have governance gaps that are exploited and exacerbated by the corrosive capital from the Authoritarian co-untries."

- Martina Hrvolova.



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It becomes crucial for the victim countries suffering from corrosive capital, to identify those gaps in institutions and address them effectively through customized tailor-made programs. "It is also very important that the private sector plays its own constructive role in dealing with corrosive capital... Despite the unprecedented economic growth over the part 30 years, but we are currently at that point when the growth is slowing and the businesses must play the positive role in reducing corruption, not being part of the problem, improving their own governance and that way also reducing inequality to generational wealth for greater and wide number of citizens" - Martina Hrvolova.

#### CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN GEORGIA

Before moving to China's social media leverage in Georgia, it is crucial to highlight particular economic aspects which result in Georgia's increasing dependency on Chinese companies. It is noteworthy, that geographic proximity does not represent the challenge in the modern world and the recent "Belt and Road Initiative" and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China form the basis for further Sino-Georgian cooperation. The agreements between these two states comprise the various political, social and economic sectors that in overall, affect the precise perception of China in Georgian society. Moreover, the recent corona crisis did not have a substantial effect on the growing economic relations and it is less presumable that these tendencies are going to change in the post-COVID world. "I believe that if the western democracies decide to restrict,



ban, limit or sanction Chinese companies' performance in different economic or digital sectors, Beijing's attention towards the developing states will only grow in the post-pandemic world. Since, the developing states are less transparent and more open for corrupt dealings, money-laundering and misconduct of the certain processes, which we have for instance seen on Georgia's examples."- noted Ani Kintsurashvili, lead researcher at Civic IDEA.

Together with the Sino-Georgian economic deals, Chinese social media platforms and high-tech companies experience a high level of popularity within the Georgian population. In 2018, Huawei accounted for 8.76% of the Georgian market and with 5G technologies its impact on Georgian market is growing, since 5G has been already adopted by various network providers in Georgia. "The problem here is that they are not reliable and even TikTok has the problems of content moderation and data privacy. Just to refer to one case that happened recently, while official China recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia, TikTok decided to shuffle the cards. It has inclined Russian-occupied regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as separate independent states during the registration procedure. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia has timely tackled the problem; however, this case did not affect its relevancy among young Georgians."- Ani Kintsurashvili. Undoubtedly, there is a problem of raising awareness among the Georgian population which needs to be effectively addressed by the government and the civil society organizations. Nevertheless, we have seen that the Georgian government representatives themselves use TikTok and the informal leader oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili himself has recorded videos on this



application. "While the government is supposed to raise awareness of the Georgian population, somebody has to initially raise the awareness of the Government"- Ani Kintsurashvili.

NGO, Academia and media platforms in Georgia are also actively financed by the Chinese entities. Chinese authorities are actively engaged in Georgia's academic realm both through official, diplomatic, university level and private channels. Evidently, they focus on awareness--raising about the country, its language, culture, customs and traditions. They provide various grants and scholarships to students from various both public and private universities. Besides, young scholars are obliged to take a one-year Chinese language course in one of the relevant universities. "If a decade ago, only scholarship programs available for best performing Georgian students were to the US and European Universities, now this dynamic is changing. We will see the shifts among the new generation of Georgians, the shifts regarding their opinions and the vision of the world."- Ani Kintsurashvili.

As a matter of fact, Beijing actively invests its financial and intellectual resources in the promotion of Chinese culture and policies not only through educational programs but also by encouraging exchanges and experience-sharing trips among the Georgian journalists, as well as by direct sponsorship of the special media segments about China. Georgian MultiMedia Platform 4U represents such media group, which is in charge of organizing media trips to China covering the purposes of tourism, art, sports, lifestyle, health, business, new technologies



and society. Those fully financed two-three week-long visits called "Discover China" serve the goal as named, of discovering China as presented by the hosts and tour organizers, that is progressive, technologically advanced, fast-growing. During the trip to China, the journalists usually record the promotional videos about the most impressive moments of their trips.

Therefore, Sino-Georgian relations are constantly improving in terms of not only the economy, but also information space. These tendencies are less likely to change in the post-COVID world since the sanctioned or limited Beijing might concentrate all its efforts on the developing states.

#### HOW CAN WE DEFINE A CHINESE NARRATIVE?

Nowadays, in this post-pandemic world, there are many discussions devoted to the narratives China or Sino-Russian propaganda mechanisms are developing. However, for many countries (especially for the developing ones) concepts and definitions of the so-called "Chinese narrative" are not clear. There exists still the belief that Mao's communist party was superior to the Soviet one that emerged from Leninism. What is China trying to tell to the world as their story that needs to be pinned in our minds and in our understanding? - Asked Tinatin Khidasheli, Chairperson of Civic IDEA.



One can assume, the first and foremost goal of Chinese Communist Party is to legitimize their political system. Coronavirus outbreak was effectively used by the Chinese government to boost the narrative about them being the most effective crisis managers, to show comparably how well the communist rule works during the emergency. "The spread positive messages about China were about how well is China doing, how it was responsible, transparent actor that sacrifices to save the rest of the world"- Tauno Tohk. Nevertheless, time has passed and the world saw the negative upshots behind China's artificial image. Chinese media has been particularly destructive towards the United States, politicizing the virus and spreading anti-US messages about its "inefficiency" in the fight against the pandemic.

Another very important aspect regarding Chinese narrative is well-featured in its "debt trap" economic diplomacy. Balkan States, Latin America and even Central Asia are expressly suffering from the mentioned financial approach. "There may be severe consequences for the Western Balkan countries' European Integration prospective as their public debts are growing. They may eventually have problems meeting the European Union accession criteria."-- Martina Hrvolova. Nonetheless, the population and the decision-makers do not fully realize the damaging outcome the corrosive capital and the public debt might prompt.



In the post-COVID reality, the states will need more money and more capital for repairing the damage the world is facing during the past several months and we do not know what is going to happen next. Where is that money going to come from? What is the source that the world expects? Considering China's economic growth, there are expectations that the "free" money is concentrated in there. What is the strategy of democracies to counter the effect of that big money intervention?

– asked Tinatin Khidasheli.

COVID-19 is a global challenge and it requires global coordinated response. We have clearly seen that Beijing is trying to use the pandemic to shore up its support with budget short-falls, making the countries dependent on itself. Therefore, the close partnership, ensured transparency and joint containment policies are crucial for the reduction of the internal shortages, as well as the Chinese influence. At last, International Financial Institutions need to carefully monitor the money expenditure for it not to be used by certain states to pay-off the Chinese loans.

"One way or another, we anyway have to talk to China, but we have to be realistic about what to expect or what we can achieve and of course, in the end, we have to protect our democratic values"

- Tauno Tohk.



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