

# WHO IS IN CHARGE OF THE POST COLD WAR WORLD?

*Chinese Influence  
operations in  
Academia, Media &  
CSOs  
The case of Georgia*

By Civic IDEA  
July, 2020

**Who is in Charge of the Post-Cold War World?**

**Chinese Influence Operations in Academia,  
Media and CSOs:  
The Case of Georgia**

by

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## FOREWORD

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The Georgian think tank Civic IDEA has been researching and monitoring China's activities in Georgia for over three years now. Its Chair, the former Georgian Minister of Defense, [Tinatin Khidasheli](#), argues that the growing uncontrolled and unbalanced Chinese power constitutes a threat for Georgia's national security and democratic development.

Working on a Chinese influence operation has raised a lot of eyebrows in Georgia. The country's research and monitoring institutions are so heavily preoccupied with Russian influence operations, propaganda and manipulation techniques studies and Russia makes so much of an effort to feed this work that there is not that much room left for other initiatives.

We will be publishing the second report about Chinese Economic Power in September 2020 but this report addresses the issues of political influence operations in academia, the media and CSOs in Georgia with a comparative view from the experiences of Western democracies.

## WHY CHINA? AND WHY CHINESE INFLUENCE OPERATIONS?

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Here we start with the 2013 Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) where the so-called [Document #9](#) (*Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere*) was distributed. This so-called Document #9 is a blueprint of CCP fears of defeat unless the major security threats were not properly addressed and neutralized. And here comes the part where long, complex and thorough research and study of Chinese policy prove to be important and urgent for established democracies or ones under democratic transition.

Document #9 lists seven threats to the CCP and its controlling power. [These are:](#)

1. *Promoting Western constitutional democracy in an attempt to undermine the current leadership and socialism with a Chinese system of governance.*
2. *Promoting “universal values” in an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership.*
3. *Promoting civil society in an attempt to dismantle the ruling party’s social foundation.*
4. *Promoting Neoliberalism, attempting to change China’s basic economic system.*
5. *Promoting the West’s idea of journalism, challenging China’s principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to Party discipline.*
6. *Promoting historical nihilism, trying to undermine the history of the CCP and the New China.*
7. *Questioning reform and opening and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.*

The message was loud and clear. Even clearer was the second part of the document about the work of ideological sphere where it lists four necessary measures for tackling the problems. These are:

1. **Strengthen leadership in the ideological sphere.**
2. **Guide our party members and leaders to distinguish between true and false theories.**

We must not permit the dissemination of opinions that oppose the Party’s theory or political line, the publication of views contrary to decisions that represent the central

leadership's views or the spread of political rumors that defame the image of the Party or the nation.

3. **Unwavering adherence to the principle of the Party's control of the media.** We need to strengthen education on the Marxist perspective of the media to ensure that the media leadership is always firmly controlled by someone who maintains an identical ideology with the Party's Central Committee under General Secretary Xi Jinping's leadership.
4. **Conscientiously strengthen the management of the ideological battlefield.** We must reinforce our management of all types and levels of propaganda on the cultural front, perfect and carry out related administrative systems and allow absolutely no opportunity or outlets for incorrect thinking or viewpoints to spread... strengthen the guidance of public opinion on the Internet, purify the environment of public opinion on the Internet and improve and innovate our management strategies and methods to achieve our goals in a legal, scientific and effective way.

Since 2013, these measures have been brought to life on multiple occasions and the world has witnessed massive waves of human rights abuses, restrictions over religious groups and media organizations, arrests of human rights activists and lawyers, [detentions of more than a million Muslims](#) and so on. Simultaneously, we are observing Chinese actions to dominate Asia and expand its economic strength worldwide through the [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#) along with other similar global projects. "Xi has made it very clear that his ambitions do not stop with the Asia-Pacific region," says the CFR's [Economy](#). "He is looking to remake global order—the rules of the road—in ways that suit China more."

And again, going back to Document #9, it has been said by most of China's scholars that the document brought to light the policy of making those seven subject areas, identified as threats to the CCR, off-limits for teaching at Chinese universities. The ideological battle identified in the document constitutes a prohibited sphere in academia as well. ["Are we still a university if we are not even allowed to talk about civil rights and press freedom?"](#) asks a Shanghai-based law professor in an interview and he is no exception to those dissent voices in Chinese academia who usually ask to stay anonymous for fear of persecution.

Year after year, Chinese interest in Georgia grows and so does the scope and size of educational programs and cooperation in academia. This country of fewer than four million inhabitants enjoys an almost full spectrum of academic benefits from the People's Republic of China:

- *Official state-sponsored programs;*
- *Semi-private initiatives directly on the part of universities;*
- *Research and scientific funds;*
- *Nationwide language classes for secondary schools;*
- *Multiple Confucius Institutes and academic centers;*
- *Media outlets;*
- *Support of civil society initiatives, etc.*

An obvious question is why? Why is the interest so large and multi-dimensional? Why is China so engaged in a small state like Georgia? Why is it spending so many resources and capital on a tiny economy far from its borders? One might be appreciative without understanding the real political agenda of the PRC.

**It is no secret that education enterprises in a one-party state with little or no academic freedom come with a high price of political and psychological influence.**

If we have learned anything from the 70 years of Communist Party rule in Soviet Georgia, it is that a network of the party chapters and state agencies are intertwined and social organizations, religious entities, universities and research institutes are all working jointly for one common purpose which is to strengthen, reinforce and magnify the Communist Party's policies and viewpoint both at home and abroad.

In both the Soviet Union and Chinese cases, they all come together in one united front which is an overall policy and methodology of instituting and fixing the Communist party standing. United Front operations, as the name suggests, have a comprehensive but covert nature. Mao Zedong called them China's "Magic Weapons" because "it's meant to harm us without us noticing."

Mao's vision of Communism was rather simple.

**“Every comrade must be helped to understand that as long as we rely on the people, believe firmly in the inexhaustible creative power of the masses and hence trust and identify ourselves with them, we can surmount any difficulty, and no enemy can crush us while we can crush any enemy. “**

Crushing the enemy ultimately means crushing it all: the enemy's ideology, value system, freedom and institutional organization. It is no surprise, as we already saw, that a well-structured and well-

communicated party document directly demands as much. Consequently, the "hammer" is represented in various forms depending on the circumstances. One of those hammers is exactly the Confucius Institute acting for the same purpose in a covert and deceptive way. As already explained, it is no longer a secret that there is a whole movement within the Western academic community demanding the closure of Confucius Institutions which act as weaponry of the Communist Party ideology in their respective countries.

Sometimes people ask rather naïve questions as to the difference between US or EU and Chinese-run academic programs. As easy and simple as it might sound, there is a need for explanation. One invites students to free and democratic states with an unrestricted and uncontrolled academic environment and also free from any political party interference and party politics, transparent in nature and open for criticism and a diversity of opinions while the other is run by the appropriate chapters of the Communist party, strictly structured and ideologically scrutinized.

Studying and learning under those circumstances makes all the difference as to the vision and approaches our children grow up with.

So, answering multiple WHY questions one can find several explanations; however, I will go for the most obvious and simple one starting with Georgia's strategic geography for the BRI and its strategic partnership with the USA. I believe that it is exactly because of these two elements that Georgia fell under Chinese interests. As the Rand Corporation's definition of the influence operations says, it is all about the **"competitive advantage over an opponent"** and this is exactly what China tries to do by organizing massive and expensive programs to involve as many Georgians as possible in a short period of time.

The USA's presence in Georgia is almost two decades ahead of China but the Chinese try not to lag behind these years with the size of its programs and the scope of its coverage being it in the educational or any other field. Large programs coupled with expensive and effective information campaigns could beget the desired results.

One might agree or disagree with some of the points in this informative and self-explanatory report of Chinese influence operations in Georgia but it is absolutely clear that the strategy of influence operations works like this piece of old wisdom:

**“If you wait by the river long enough, eventually the bodies of your enemies will float by.”**

## INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN ACADEMIA WORLDWIDE

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In November 2019, the European media broke a story about Prague's [Charles University](#) being "shaken by a scandal over secret Chinese payments to four of its faculty members amid concerns that Beijing could use its ties with some Czech politicians to build influence in academia." Following an inquiry about the facts, the university fired all those involved and initiated a close review of all of the activities from various centers and institutions part of or affiliated with it.

A couple of months after the Charles University scandal, another piece of information became available involving yet another EU country. This time it was Estonia.

In February 2020, [Eesti Ekspress](#), an Estonian news outlet, published a story claiming that the University of Tartu forbade a journalist from publishing an article on Huawei. The news came in the aftermath of the University of Tartu and Huawei Technologies signing an agreement of understanding about common intentions in November 2019.

"In light of the current findings, we can see how vulnerable universities are to foreign influence. We believe this is a broad risk," said Jakub Riman, a Charles University faculty spokesperson, to the Financial Times in the same interview. Similar was the sentiment of Estonians discovering modern-day censorship in their iconic university. However, these are only two cases in the sea of problems presently being faced by Central and Eastern European countries as well as a lot of other states in different parts of the world.

Chinese sharp power, as we observe it today, similar to its Russian alternative, comes to each country with specific narratives and adapted scripts although there are resemblances one cannot ignore.

In phase one, China enters the desired region, territory or state with an investment promise. These promises are sometimes even followed by some money and business projects; particularly, in infrastructure.

- **In phase two**, it tries to confirm and formalize its long-term interests and plans. Therefore, an assortment of memorandums of understanding is signed, business councils, friendship forums and boards are formed, and parliamentary cooperation and diverse official institutional set-ups are initiated in order to ensure existing but more importantly future successful cooperation.
- **Finally, in the third phase**, state-owned business and political establishment are followed by China's Communist Party ideology and academic influence. Cultural and educational

diplomacy is the end phase when the Chinese language and culture are promoted, Confucius Institutes are created for full ideological support and special scholarships are offered for students to study in China and further develop their human capital.

In her article for the [China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe \(CHOICE\)](#), entitled “Countering China’s Influence Campaigns at European Universities,” Ivana Karaskova compares the case with responses to Russian soft power and claims that policies should be similar due to high risks.

*“The Central and Eastern EU member states are in general vulnerable given the financial constraints at even the leading universities... while there is a strong interest in maintaining and developing cultural and academic cooperation with China, European universities should introduce due diligence before dealing with certain Chinese entities. For example, there is less risk in the Confucius Institutes teaching Chinese language and culture, but they should not be used as a handy outsourcing tool for teaching about Chinese politics, society, and so on.”*

There was a large burst and massive launch of Chinese Language Council International (**Hanban**) and **Confucius Institutes** (CIs) years back at Western universities. China has established 516 Confucius Institutes in 142 countries around the world. Our research proves that it is exactly because of bringing the Chinese political agenda to the university campuses worldwide, there is a sharp protest against CIs. Thus, we are witnessing a backlash within EU member states as well as in some other Western democracies raising concerns over the clash of narratives promoted by CIs and academic freedom. As a result of the controversy, the very first Confucius Institute ever opened in Europe (Stockholm University, 2005) [was closed in 2015](#) following criticism from staff and the public. As of now, all CIs in Sweden are shut down, along with the [termination](#) of exchange programs between China and Sweden.

Here is an abstract from the EU briefing, entitled [“Foreign Influence Operations in the EU,”](#) published by the EU Parliamentary Research Service in July 2018.

- “In the 'soft' academic sphere, the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) typically funds the establishment of the CI, providing teachers and material, whereas the local university provides the infrastructure, administration and management.
- CIs promote the Chinese language and culture, including the official Chinese narrative on Tibet and Taiwan, which often clashes with academic research at the host institutions. Some critics assert that CIs work to spread a favorable vision of the 'China model' of development, silence discussions about issues censored in China (such as the Tiananmen

Square massacre) and 'correct' the perception of China as a hard-authoritarian state that violates human rights."

As mentioned above, the problem is not limited to the EU. Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan are among the states which routinely and increasingly "[scrutinize Chinese influence operations and vehicles.](#)"

- In 2013, the Canadian Association of University Teachers urged Canadian universities and colleges to [close down their Confucius Institutes](#).
- In 2014, the American Association of University Professors [recommended](#) the same for US universities.
- In 2017, the US National Association of Scholars urged all universities to close their Confucius Institutes.
- In 2018, US lawmakers introduced a [bill on Countering the Chinese Government and Communist Party's Political Influence Operations Act](#), requiring investigations and a subsequent unclassified report. The bill would require CIs to register as foreign agents.

If we make a small departure from the university-specific question and look at the matters from a wider perspective, we will see that already in 2018, the intelligence services of many Western democracies, and some others even earlier, were raising their voices about Chinese influence operations and their effects on their societies. For instance, according to the [report by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service](#), "Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the US are seeking stronger cooperation to address China's influence as anxiety about the challenges is 'clearly deeper' in these countries than in the EU." The Canadian Security Intelligence Service report obviously is not the only one addressing the issue and stressing cooperation, information exchange, experience sharing and strong resilience strategies.

**A**nalyzing the experiences of various democracies regarding Chinese sharp power at the university level and in academia, navigating throughout diverse sources and reading expert materials leaves us only wondering what the future has in store for my country, Georgia, where academic freedom is fragile, university budgets scarce, research funding close to non-existing and China being as close as never before moving forward full scale, both politically and economically.

## INFLUENCE OPERATION IN ACADEMIA, GEORGIA

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As we saw in the previous section, the interests of the Chinese state are paramount in international academic cooperation. However, it is to be underlined:

**“The rules and agreements of other countries are followed in so far as they do not conflict with China’s interests. If they do, they can and must be ignored and every effort must be made to enforce China’s rules.”**

The aforementioned is the claim of Mart Laanemets, from the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, in a [brief](#) issued in April 2020 entitled “[Academic Co-operation with the People’s Republic of China: Dangers and Temptations.](#)”

In this respect, the Georgia case is no different. In this section, we will discuss various Sino-Georgian academic programs and education cooperation policies and show that Chinese authorities are actively engaged in Georgia’s academic realm through official, diplomatic, university-level and private channels. By description, of the three-phase Chinese soft power operation outlined above, Georgia clearly stands at the third level where a full-scale Chinese Communist Party ideological operation is on with research funding, various operational centers and sponsorships, scholarship funds for students, etc.

Special webpages, [Sinology](#) and [sinomedia.ge](#), run by Georgians who graduated from Chinese universities tell the story of China's endeavors in Georgia, including in education matters. They proudly say that "there is a significant growth of interest in learning Chinese as well as studies in China. An opportunity for studying in China for Georgian citizens comes from the government of China as well as from the Confucius Institute."

Evidently, all of these educational programs focus on awareness-raising about the country, its language, culture, customs and traditions. The agreement signed between the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia and the People’s Republic of China provides 20 scholarships as a start for educational cooperation each year for young Georgians to receive higher education at Chinese universities. These grants are typically allied to bachelor's, master's, doctoral and scientific programs. Additionally, young scholars are obliged to take a [one-year Chinese language course](#) in one of the relevant universities. Scholarships, covering tuition, travel, full board and a stipend to study in China,

are announced twice a year in winter and summer and allow all interested parties to enjoy the benefits of programs allocated for international students by the Chinese government.

Comprehensive [information](#) about these particular scholarships is also placed on the official website of the World Scholarship Forum. The web highlights that these scholarships are rather large covering everything from tuition fees, living expenses, accommodation and some business travel.

To be clear, cooperation is not limited to state scholarships. It constitutes only a small portion of the exchange possibilities for Georgians to travel to China for educational purposes. One can assume that the only purpose of such official agreements is to open more doors for many more similar initiatives. Correspondingly, we are observing numerous private initiatives playing into the larger strategy of positive image building and influence over public perception for even stronger Sino-Georgian ties. The [education programs of the Confucius Institutes](#) are among these “private” initiatives. According to [Georgian students](#) who have already benefited from the program, usually the student grants under Confucius Institute are for one-year language programs, also covering all of the costs associated with studies, travel, board in China and a monthly stipend.

Another initiative available for Georgian students is the [UNESCO/People's Republic of China \(The Great Wall\) Co-Sponsored Fellowships Programme](#) which mainly also offers full benefit for a one-year language teaching program.

One more initiative comes from a [consortium of universities](#) called “[Star for Georgia and China](#)” created under the official guidance of the Masaryk University. The “Star for Georgia and China” consortium is responsible for promoting education in China and Chinese universities among Georgian students.

The partner universities from Georgia include the *University of Georgia* and *Sabauni* as well as some regional schools and universities. As for the Chinese side, the universities are the *Shenzhen Polytechnic*, the *Liaoning Institute of Science and Engineering*, the *Chongqing Normal University*, the *Shanghai Polytechnic University* and the *Lingnan Normal University*. The “[Star for Georgia and China](#)” project is multi-dimensional and attracts students and professors not only by offering scholarships and education in China but also in partner universities across Europe. For example, exchanges were taking place between the Georgian Sabauni university and Coimbra University in Portugal as well as exchanges with the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, Professionshøjskolen UCC in Denmark, etc., for a period of three years between 2016-2019.



[About project](#) ▾ [Partners](#) ▾ [Contact](#) [Outcomes](#) ▾ [Conferences](#) [Project's Meetings](#) ▾ [Online Platform](#)

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## Partners

### Consortium partners

The consortium includes **12 partners** from **6 countries** which participate in the Erasmus+ Programme including Partner Country institutions representing main and other cities both with and without Erasmus+ KA2 experience

[Partners meeting](#)

[Partners meeting](#)

The consortium includes 2 types of higher education institutions: **European HEIs** with solid experience in teacher training and teachers' continuous professional development; and **Georgian and Chinese HEIs** that are both in need of and eager to receive training on these matters.

The EU partners in the consortium are well known European Universities with relevant experience in the target field. Additionally, provided their existing international collaborations, they are already well-familiar with the education systems in the partner countries, and have established connections with some partner institutions as well, which helps to minimize introductory work in the beginning of the project.



### 12 partner institutions

- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Chongqing Normal University</a><br/>China</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Liaoning Institute of Science and Engineering</a><br/>China</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Lingnan Normal University</a><br/>China</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Ltd Sulkhan – Saba Orbeliani Teaching University</a><br/>Georgia</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Masaryk University</a><br/>Czech Republic</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Professionshøjskolen UCC</a><br/>Denmark</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Shanghai Polytechnic University</a><br/>China</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">Shenzhen Polytechnic</a><br/>China</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <a href="#">University of Coimbra</a><br/>Portugal</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">University of Georgia</a><br/>Georgia</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">University of Zugdidi</a><br/>Georgia</li> <li>&gt; <a href="#">University of Ruse</a><br/>Bulgaria</li> </ul> |
|---|--|---|

Additionally, several Georgian universities individually, and with the support of Georgian local municipalities, cooperate with Chinese entities. While the *Tbilisi Open University* has been creating motivational [videos](#) about the exchange programs in China, the *Georgian Technical University (GTU)* opened a Chinese language research center.

There are two official Confucius Institutes in Georgia. The first one opened in 2010 at [the Free University of Tbilisi](#) and the other one in 2017 at the [Tbilisi Open University](#). It is not officially opened as a CI at the [Batumi State University](#) (BSU), but there has been an agreement between the two institutions

offering students free Chinese language courses since 2017. The information available on the BSU webpage specifically says that the cooperation agreement between the BSU and the CI is not limited to coaching in the Chinese language and involves teaching a variety of other subjects. In 2018, the Confucius Institute started offering special free language programs to students of the largest and most popular [Tbilisi State University](#) with the opportunity of continuing free education in China. Finally,



there is an interesting fact about another Georgian university affiliated with the Georgian Orthodox Church, [St. Andrew's Georgian University](#), which claimed to have a Confucius Institute from 2015. The university has hosted multiple ceremonies and events with the Chinese Ambassador in Georgia.

Another University is [the Caucasus School of Governance \(CSG\)](#) within the Caucasus University that also participates in the Chinese scholarship programs. As reported on their webpage, CSG students have been granted government scholarships to continue their studies at the Shanghai University of Political Science and Law.

On a broader scale, the Georgian Ministry of Education and the Chinese Embassy in Tbilisi signed an agreement in 2019 about the popularization of China and the Chinese language and culture in Georgia. Within the framework of this agreement, free Chinese language classes are being introduced in Georgian secondary schools from the [5<sup>th</sup> grade](#) as a second foreign language together with one European language. The Ministry of Education is planning [to train Georgian teachers](#) for them to effectively conduct the Chinese language courses.

It is an interesting fact by itself that in contrast with Western universities where CIs are either already shut down or being reviewed, year after year Georgia is opening university doors to CIs as well as to other similar initiatives (see the opening of the Chinese Institute of International Education below).

Furthermore, [Georgian state universities](#), e.g. the [GTU](#) are beneficiaries of the cooperation offered from various Chinese universities. Among them are the [Beijing Institute of Technology](#) and the [Peking University](#). They provide [scholarships](#) covering the expenses for full academic, exchange and summer programs. It is highly notable that the [Beijing Institute of Technology](#) is a leading center for

military research which is among the 14 institutions that are allowed to issue doctoral degrees in China. "The Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT) is designated a very high risk for its top-secret security credentials, a high number of defense laboratories and



## Beijing Institute of Technology

北京理工大学

Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT) is designated very high risk for its top-secret security credentials, high number of defence laboratories and defence research areas, and deep involvement in weapons research.

BIT is one of the 'Seven Sons of National Defence' supervised by MIT. It is a leading centre of military research and one of only fourteen institutions accredited to award doctorates in weapons science. In 2017, China's Ministry of Education ranked BIT and Nanjing University of Science and Technology as the country's top institutions for weapons science. BIT has received the most defence research prizes and defence patents out of all China's universities. 31.80% of BIT graduates in 2018 who found employment were working in the defence sector.

BIT's claimed achievements include producing the PRC's first light tank, first two-stage solid sounding rocket and first low-altitude altimetry radar. The university also states that it carries out world-class research on several areas of missile technology including "precision strikes, high damage efficiency, maneuver penetration, long-range suppression, and military communications systems and counter-measures". In 2018, BIT announced that it was running a four-year experimental program training some of China's top high school students in intelligent weapons systems.

BIT is the chair of the B8 Cooperation Innovation Alliance (B8协同创新联盟 or 中国兵器协同创新联盟), a group of eight Chinese research institutions that specialize in weapons science—the '8' in 'B8' stands for Chinese work for armaments, bingqi (兵器).



10 MAJOR DEFENCE LABORATORIES  
34 DESIGNATED DEFENCE RESEARCH AREAS



Aliases  
北京理工大学  
BIT

defense research areas and its deep involvement in weapons research." Therefore, the involvement of this particular institution on an academic level represents a high risk for Georgia's national security. Each year, they provide three doctoral [scholarships](#) for the following fields: chemical engineering, technologies and computer and electronic sciences as well as five additional scholarships for any level of studies by choice of the students (BA, MA or PhD). Further, they also offer several one-semester or summer school programs in chemistry, chemical engineering and technologies, computer science and technology, electronic science, technologies, etc.

Hereby, one can notice that the Chinese and Georgian universities are making tremendous steps regarding the promotion of the exchange programs, including in the fields of politics and international relations. If a decade ago, the only scholarship programs available for the best performing Georgian students were those of US and European universities, now this dynamic is changing.

It is important to note that China is not confined exclusively to the academic space of the capital city. It similarly stimulates educational collaboration with Georgian regions. In Adjara, the Batumi

Shota Rustaveli State University has signed a memorandum with the Georgia-China Friendship Association (GCFA). China's friendship associations are usually linked to the United Front and serve the expansion of the CCP's interests abroad. According to the Synopsis research, such friendship associations are "led by the *Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries* (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会). This system is analogous to the friendship associations (*общества дружбы*) with the Soviet Union, only more extensively developed.

The PRC friendship associations are one of the pillars of the global influence apparatus that employs United Front (*统一战线*) tactics to systematically advance the Party-state's interests abroad, invoking appealing vocabulary on "peace," "friendship," "cooperation" and "cultural exchange." To show the significance of the Georgia-China Friendship Association in all China-Georgia relations, it is worth mentioning that Jian Jun Zang, the CEO of the CEFC China Energy Company Limited, was elected as its president in 2016. The GCFA was founded by the Center for Georgia-Chinese Economic-Cultural Development headed by Ivane Chkhartishvili, an extremely controversial Georgian businessman,



former Vice Prime Minister and closest ally of Georgia's shadow leader Mr. Ivanishvili.

As stated in the GCFA's document released in 2018, 100 students from Adjara started various educational programs at the Science and Technology Changsha University.

Furthermore, along with Batumi, the delegation of Xinjiang Province visited Kutaisi. The mission was headed by Yangtin Political and Legal Secretary, Yin Dziendze. During meetings with the Kutaisi Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Chairman of the City Council, as well as the Deputy Governor of Imereti, the Chinese government representatives showed a specific interest in establishing exchange programs between Imereti and Xinjiang. Whenever there is a communication with the representatives of this very particular region, obviously one requires from the authorities to be extra cautious due to the challenges identified multiple times by our strategic partner. The most recent statement by the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, alone will serve the cause: "The United States will not stand idly by as the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] carries out human rights abuses targeting Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs and members of other minority groups in Xinjiang".

It is noteworthy that within the framework of the BRI initiative, the Chinese government is financing various research initiatives of Georgian scientists in the fields of natural science, engineering, healthcare and technology. These projects are part of the "[Science-Talent-Future](#)" action plan of the symposium of the Chinese National Natural Science Foundation and Georgia's Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation.

A symposium was [created](#) for the evaluation and selection of Georgian research groups for future academic advancement. As the [Georgian Innovative HR Hub](#) claims in its article, China, being the leader in the development of vocational education particularly in the fields of construction, agriculture, IT technologies and energy, works with Georgian students and teachers aiming at the enhancement of their skills for international market competitiveness. In 2018, representatives of the Chinese Ministry of Education organized meetings with their Georgian counterparts to increase the scope of these



programs.

In 2019, serious reforms were made in the area of maritime transportation after the official meeting of Natia Turnava, the Georgian Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, and Li Xiaopeng, the Chinese Transport Minister where prospective [exchange programs financed by](#)

[Chinese maritime universities](#) were discussed. The opening of the [Chinese Institute of International Education](#) in January 2020 was followed by the launch of the first Chinese-Georgian dictionary. The center itself serves the popularization of the Chinese language and educational opportunities among Georgians.



It needs to be highlighted that every meeting, every step in the process of Chinese-Georgian cooperation be it actual program implementation, the idea of an initiative or just promises made are actively broadcast by the Georgian media. There is always a special effort made by both parties for having all TV, print or online media present during these public events for full coverage. The frequency of the televised events (all bilateral meetings, public lectures of the Chinese ambassador, visits to universities, promises of multimillion investments, etc.) accompanied by the positive news of the promises and cooperation initiatives serve as the best propaganda goals of the CCP.

Consequently, these initiatives, projects, exchange programs, ceremonies and visits serve China's broader goals to infiltrate the professional and academic fields, affect their information space and thus endorse China as the primary and reliable partner for Georgia. These examples also demonstrate China's attempt to think and act broadly as it expands its influence over the information space at a national level.

**W**ith the decreasing number of scholarships to Western universities and the increasing interest from China, in a decade from now we will have a shifted reality of a new generation of Georgians with Chinese university degrees and a world vision as seen through the lenses of well-designed educational programs of the appropriate divisions of the United Front of the Chinese Communist Party.

## CHINA'S INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN THE INFORMATION SPACE

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Influence operations in media and civil society organizations, together with academia, constitute an important segment for shaping public debate and the public perception of China around the world. Chinese Communist Party operations in these three segments (academia, media and CSOs) have been present for a long time but we are all witnessing an acceleration of the process in recent years. Chinese Communist Party United Front linked players are acting in different parts of the world via propaganda, censorship, manipulation, surveillance and control over the telecommunications infrastructure. Georgia is no exception from this case.

According to the National Endowment for Democracy's (NED) report, entitled [\*Compromising the Knowledge Economy: Authoritarian Challenges to Independent Intellectual Inquiry\*](#):

**“ Authoritarian regimes grasp these connections and are exploiting vulnerabilities in open knowledge economies to discredit democracy as a viable political alternative, shore up their positions at home and facilitate the projection of their power and interests abroad. Among them, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is in a class by itself by dint of its population and wealth, but others — including Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey — are also systematically co-opting foreign partners, marginalizing or intimidating dissenters, controlling discourses and globalizing their preferred narratives.”**

We have selected two cases below for the full and clear understanding of the problem. The cases are very different in nature but show the extent of the problem rather significantly.

The first case is of US-based online video conferencing company *Zoom*. on June 10, 2020, *Axios* reported that “Zoom had shuttered the account of Chinese-American democracy advocate, Zhou Fengsuo, after he organized a virtual commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre using the application.” A Zoom spokesperson confirmed to *Axios* that the account had been closed “to comply with local law.” What the “local law” argument manifestly meant in this case was the concern of the Chinese government communicated to the company as they forbid free discussion of the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy movement and violent events. Eventually, the account was re-activated as the inquiry did not find grounds for the closure. Also, it is important to note that the account was US-based.

A year before Zoom's action, another online company, [LinkedIn](#), blocked [Zhou's account](#) from being visible in China, telling him in a message it was because of "specific content." LinkedIn, similar to Zoom, restored his account after large media attention.

Why the case is important is due to the fact that Zoom has done extensive product development in China and later admitted that the closure had been triggered by a request from the Chinese government. As for LinkedIn, being almost the only social network not blocked in China, it actively adapts to "local laws and regulations" in order to keep the platform going.

Chinese government interference is not limited to influence over companies and private entities. Recently, in April 2020, we witnessed yet another influence operation by Beijing in Brussels where they tried to block the release of [the EU Covid-19 Disinformation Report](#). The report was finally published but Chinese diplomats in Brussels effectively managed to soften the language that brought about rather heated debates in the European Parliament and a grilling of Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The [New York Times](#) broke the story on April 24 saying: "Bowling to heavy pressure from Beijing, European Union officials softened their criticism of China this week in a report documenting how governments push disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic according to documents, e-mails and interviews." Responding to the criticism, Mr. Borrell, as the EU's top diplomat, pledged that ["EU will not again give in to Chinese censorship"](#) as reported by POLITICO.

Considering business giants or European leaders bowing to the Chinese government and the Communist Party, it is not difficult to predict how "strong" and "resilient" a small state like Georgia might be to Beijing's influence operations in the information space or elsewhere.

In the following sections, we will discuss various issues associated with Chinese involvement in the media, influence operations over CSOs, 5G narratives related to Georgia and telecommunications infrastructure development such as Huawei.

The case of Georgia is particularly interesting today as no precise perception of China has yet been instilled in Georgian society. The CCP knows perfectly well that before gaining an economic or political influence in a given country, it is crucial to establish optimistic outlooks through inciting the state's information area. Thus, in order to create a generally positive image, China carries out its propaganda through diverse schemes and activities, all accompanied with massive media coverage: encouraging bilateral agreements between universities, initiating government scholarships for students and scientists, establishing language and education centers, financing local media outlets and CSOs, giving sponsorships for various groups and organizations, five-star study trips to China, etc.

Today, additionally due to the pandemic crisis, all of those traditional forms of action and news stories are coupled with a mainstream massive campaign to influence media outlets and news consumers across the globe regarding the coverage of Covid-19 and understanding the coronavirus outbreak, spread and development. Georgia is no exception either. While some aspects of this effort



are in line with traditional public diplomacy, many others are covert, coercive and potentially corrupt. Most of the time, information is twisted in an unprecedented manner. For instance, the Chinese ambassador in Georgia held a [press conference](#) on March 23, 2020 to tell the Georgian public nothing less than the story of the Chinese effectiveness “in the early detection and prevention of the virus spread.” All

of the Georgian media took the story with no critical views, no comments, no analysis but just the misleading and manipulative quotes aired by the ambassador.

## CHINA'S LEVERAGE OVER THE MEDIA

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Beijing actively invests its financial and intellectual resources in the promotion of Chinese culture and policies not only through educational programs but also by promoting exchanges and experience-sharing trips for Georgian journalists, NGOs and members of the expert community as well as by the direct sponsorship of special media segments about China.

One of the Chinese media platforms in Georgia is the MultiMedia Platform 4U. It is part of a larger Chinese "[GBTimes platform: Bringing China Closer](#)" network. According to their web page, GBTimes is a "uniquely placed media and trade facilitation company" that operates between China and the rest of the world. Established in 1994 in Finland, it "contributes to a greater understanding between China and the West and offers European and Chinese clients a range of cost-effective cross-cultural communication services. Our aim is simple: We are a bridge between China and the rest of the world."

What is not said in the company's self-introduction is that 60% of its shares belong to the government-owned China Radio International (CRI) which, according to its CEO Mr. Zhao's [statement](#), "paid several million euros a year" to his company for producing radio programming. In the same interview with Reuters, Mr. Zhao stated that they have never hidden their ties and connection with the Chinese government as "there's nothing to hide." The company was originally established in Finland but it has partner media outlets and runs programming across Europe from Hungary to Italy as well as in Thailand, Australia and the USA, etc. The Georgian 4U is also part of the network with three radio stations and a larger internet presence.

GBTimes was involved in several scandals across Europe. As the Finnish media reported in 2019, the investigation was on and [CEO Mr. Zhao](#) "is suspected of committing aggravated fraud between 2012 and 2016." According to their English language website <https://gbtimes.com>, June 5, 2020 was the last day of their life and Mr. Zhao said his [farewell](#) to all readers "due to financial reasons."

In Georgia, GBTimes was in charge of organizing [media trips](#) to China covering the purposes of tourism, art, sports, lifestyle, health, business, new technologies and society. These fully financed two-three week-long visits, called "Discover China," serve the goal of discovering China as presented by the



### My Dear Friends,

These are the last few days of gbtimes.com. Due to financial reasons, we can no longer serve our friends out there. The site will be permanently offline after the 5th of June, 2020. We sincerely thank you all for your support during all these years!

We made the first version of what evolved to be gbtimes.com already in 2004. Together with a few friends, we wanted to introduce China to Western readers in order to narrow down the gap between the image of China in the West and the reality of China at home. With your support, we had a great 16-year run!

Now that we must say farewell to you, my friends, I personally feel very sentimental. This site meant a lot to me and to the whole team, but it is you that have given the true meaning to all our efforts. Consequently, I thought this is the right time to share with you the story behind the reason why I started this site in the first place.

In the late 1990s, during my first few years in Europe, I met a Finnish business man who said to me that he will never go to China as long as China remains like Soviet Union was. I asked him if he had had any business with China at all, and he told me he hadn't. I was shocked. It was not simply because I am Chinese and love my country but also because the comments from that Finnish gentleman demonstrated a huge gap between the image that people had of China in the West and the reality of China. Moreover, the distorted image had even suppressed

hosts and tour organizers as progressive, technologically advanced, fast-growing and even “capable of building a whole new city out of the needs of the local population in seven months” as was mentioned by one of the Georgian journalist participants of the program in a 2019 in an interview with Civic IDEA.



The program brings together dozens of journalists (each year) representing print and online media, TV broadcasters and radio. Besides Beijing, they travel to different cities and regions like Lishan, Hangzhou, Wuzhen, Shanghai and so on. While traveling all around China, along with beautiful and amazing cultural and historical sights, they pay visits to the Chinese MFA and various other governmental institutions both at the national and regional levels. A compulsory part of the

program is a visit to settlements with the minority populations where Chinese representatives demonstrate how well treated and appreciated, they are "against the arguments of propaganda Western media." It is also part of the program to show that the government is constantly building new cities prioritizing the needs of minorities.

Participants visit a special school for public servants where they are introduced to speedy and advanced systems of training for bureaucracy, again meeting the needs of the local population. There are more than a dozen social media (Facebook is most popular in Georgia) pages and blogs of Georgian journalists who participated in these programs writing not only about the beauty and amazing places they visited but also about the villages and settlements, institutions and educational programs demonstrating the most humane and socially oriented policies of the Chinese authorities while serving the needs and the requests of their citizens.

During the trip to China, the journalists usually record promotional videos about the most impressive moments of their trips. The interesting and impressive part is played by the above-mentioned "4U platform" and its special China programming run by partner radio stations with online TV platforms.

The 4U platform is run in four languages: Georgian, English, Russian and Chinese. The 4U has three partners that include JAKO FM, LIFE FM and Shokoladi. Almost a year ago, the 4U started a daily programming called “Discover China.” It consists of a news program and an interactive talk show with Chinese and Georgian public figures from diverse fields including actors, writers, politicians, etc., who have been to China and were beneficiaries of at least one of their state-run programs. According to

their website, they have already run about 200 tracks. According to one [journalist](#) from Xinjiang: “JAKO FM, which belongs to the international media holding GBTimes, is one of the most listened-to radio stations in Georgia. The radio station’s audience has the ability to tune-in and watch a wide range of exclusive video and audio programs on the radio or via Facebook and other public media platforms.”

"Discover China" is gradually gaining more popularity. It is worth mentioning that one of the frequent guests of 4U programs is Georgia's former Ambassador to China, David Aptsiauri, who was rather popular during his service years in China as well. In March 2018, the Chinese news agency, *Home and Abroad News Press*, awarded him "[Man of the Year in the News.](#)" Currently, Mr. Aptsiauri serves as a researcher at the Levan Mikeladze Diplomatic Training and Research Institute affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. According to their Facebook page, Mr. Aptsiauri keeps visiting China as an invited professor at the Beijing University of International Business and Economics. He also researches the Silk Road Initiative as a model of global economic cooperation. Additionally, he was invited to the [Shandong University](#) of Finance and Economics and the Cintai International Business and Economics University (Shandong Province) where he gave presentations and lectures to Chinese and foreign scholars and researchers, PhD and master’s students from Europe and students from Yemen, Asia, Latin America, Africa and Georgia. His case is the best for demonstrating how Georgian officials are included in the Chinese agenda while officially serving their countries and are contributing to the cultural exchanges with China, the popularization of China, etc.

## MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY REPORTS ON CHINESE INTERFERENCE

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Influence operations, unfortunately, also target some Georgian media and CSOs. They involve various influencers and opinion-makers and their multiplier effect is tremendous.

Georgia has a pluralistic and competitive although politically polarized media environment. It is extremely diverse in news reporting on all matters, including those China-related. Regardless of the political bias, there are still independent and relatively neutral media platforms. The online news portal [www.bm.ge](http://www.bm.ge) is one of these. It is monitoring both the positive and negative developments of China's economic activities in Georgia and also tries to report on world news in this respect. On the other hand, the government-supported media mostly show China as a reliable partner and a success story of its government's policies. For instance, [Imedi TV](#) constantly reports the developments around the new Silk Road (BRI) and portrays China as Georgia's important investor and an economic priority without considering any risk factors. Lately, we have seen long and positive reports about the effective Chinese fight against and defeat of the pandemic as opposed to failing democracies. The narrative of a successful Chinese combat action against Covid-19 vs the failing Europe and the USA is a rather popular topic for the media in support of the ruling party. It is the same media that mock liberal democracies and minorities, etc. It is hard not to notice that the mainstream Kremlin media (e.g., *Sputnik-Georgia*) go in line with the Chinese Communist Party rhetoric and republish all of the official Beijing content.

As for the rest of the Georgian media, we do not see that much of their own stories, findings or analysis of Chinese content because they normally prioritize discussions about Russia as a main foreign policy threat and challenges caused by the occupation of a part of Georgia.

China is only now slowly attracting the interests of Georgian journalists and the traditional media. It is also true that a large majority of Georgian journalists have participated in one way or another in various trips and study visits organized by the Chinese embassy or the 4U platform. We face the problem of hesitation every time our investigative pieces hit the media and by the reaction of the journalists and their choice of stories one can easily guess who is already aligned with CCP narratives.

Different from the traditional media, the online media shows more courage and interest in investigative journalism and the search for the truth. There are some small online outlets and Facebook pages more and more actively focusing on Chinese business activities in Georgia, professionally challenging the Chinese narratives.

Similar to the media, Georgia has a very vibrant civil society. Its representatives are directly or indirectly involved in every aspect of the political, economic or social life of the country. They monitor, research, report, investigate, advocate and lobby a diverse spectrum of issues. For obvious reasons, most of the attention from Georgian NGOs, independent associations or think tanks is drawn to Russia's policies in Georgia as it is in media reporting. Russia is the main target of reports or policy recommendations. However, there are exceptions to the rule and some of the organizations are involved in the research and policy analysis of other players such as the EU, the USA, China, Turkey, Iran, etc.

Overall, local civil society organizations are gradually showing their interest in China and its growing influence in Georgia. They analyze the optimal benefits that the country gains from these relations but they also maintain checks on corruption and other violations involving Chinese investment companies.

Largely, there is a need for more substantial research and long-standing programs to address the problem, study the root causes and find the dynamics for prevention.

## TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE: HUAWEI, 5G AND WESTERN SENTIMENTS

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Alongside the development of information technology, the communications needs of the world's population are changing. The flow of global information will increase five times by the end of 2024 which will be principally noticeable in urban settlements. This means that 4G networks will not be able to function effectively which automatically raises the need for modernized networks.

The tech giant in the field of telecommunications, [Huawei](#), which is considered to be the main Chinese provider of 5G technology worldwide and which is also quite popular in Georgia, has been accused by the Americans of providing information to the Chinese government, illegal banking machinations and, consequently, of posing a threat to US national security.

In 2019, the US Department of State released the remarks of a conference, entitled [“Huawei and Its Siblings, the Chinese Tech Giants: National Security and Foreign Policy Implications.”](#) The conference was part of a large-scale dialogue, “Multilateral Action on Sensitive Technologies (MAST),” which, alongside Huawei, focused on other tech giants around the world and their activities. According to this particular document, the US Department of Justice exposed the company for:

- ❑ **Theft of trade secrets**
- ❑ **Conspiracies**
- ❑ **Fraud**
- ❑ **Obstruction of justice**
- ❑ **Bank machinations**
- ❑ **Money laundering**
- ❑ **Violations of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA)**
- ❑ **Illegally assisting Iran**

These violations are mainly related to the well known [case of Huawei and Skycom](#) which we broadly discuss below. The same document addresses the Chinese Communist Party's leverage on Huawei.

Additionally, it is crucial to note that Huawei has been breaching US sanctions on Iran for years, violating its terms with regard to the companies that are registered and working in the United States. The [Reuters](#) news agency did an extensive investigation on the matter. There are several publications dedicated to this issue.

Today, the US government prohibits Huawei from doing business with American companies without their official permission. Alongside the United States, the governments of Australia, New

Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom have blamed Huawei for various illegal machinations including the leakage of critical information.

A special Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre Oversight Board has been created in the UK, reporting to a Cabinet Minister. Five reports have already been submitted for evaluation and review with all being publicly available. Later in 2020, there was another report issued by the UK House of Commons (*Debate Pack: Number CDP 2020/0045, 3 March 2020, "Security Implications of Including Huawei in 5G" by Georgina Hutton, Nikki Sutherland and Joanna Dawson*) where a whole set of new potential vulnerabilities has been added to the use of 5G equipment. The report refers to the findings of US and Australian counterparts as well as various allegations against Huawei and concludes that "the evidence we heard during our evidence session did little to assure us that this is not the case."

The findings of the report are based on China's 2017 National Intelligence Act according to which China can request 5G consumer individuals and organizations to cooperate with Chinese intelligence agencies and provide relevant information to them. The United Kingdom is actively cooperating with partner countries to impose certain restrictions on the services offered by Huawei and thus ensure its national security.

**A**lthough Huawei is considered to be a private company, it and its sister technology giants are easily influenced by the Chinese Communist Party and effectively pursue their policies not only in China but all over the world. Accordingly, Huawei is effectively using technological devices to provide intelligence and critical data to the Chinese government, directly threatening US national security. Therefore, we can conclude that the challenges related to Huawei are less technical and more associated with political and geopolitical challenges.

Huawei is not the only company that fell under the restrictions and sanctions of multiple countries. The Chinese *Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment Corporation* (ZTE) is being restricted worldwide since it also represents a Chinese government intelligence tool and is widely distributed internationally. In 2018, Australia, like the United States, imposed bans on the two companies which are "under the unofficial control of a foreign government" and cut them off from 5G projects. That same year, the Japanese government banned the 5G networks of Huawei and ZTE. There were certain

[limitations](#) imposed on these companies by the governments of France, Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany and Canada.

The new 5G networks represent a unique security challenge as long as their core functions mostly depend on software and not hardware. This makes the 5G faster than it is today but at the same time leaves it vulnerable to potentially harmful cyber-attacks. The main [risk for national security](#) remains that all 5G network providers (or its local government) can decrypt any flow of information or even disrupt the operation of the entire network.

Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, unlike the United States and Britain, EU states had divergent views on 5G technology and its Chinese providers. Once President Trump signed an executive order in May 2019 adding Huawei to the US trade sanctions list, Washington put pressure on European allies to likewise blacklist the company. He warned European states of the potential security risks [threatening the transatlantic alliance](#). According to the [Japan Times](#), despite the resistance that came from Eastern European countries, France and Germany decided not to ban Chinese companies trading in the 5G network in order to diversity suppliers. Moreover, in 2019, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, essentially stated that she did not want any EU country to ["upset the Chinese"](#) by restricting or banning Chinese companies. It is evident that Germany and France as the leading countries in the European Union have a special weight within the member states. Consequently, the European Union has become one of the foremost consumers of 5G technologies dominated by Chinese companies and the European market has turned into the primary market.

On May 6, 2020, during the web talk organized by Civic IDEA, entitled ***"COVID 19: Liberal Views and Responses Worldwide: UK and US Response,"*** the Director of International Security Studies at the RUSI, Neil Melvin, stated: "We took our eye off the ball and that is clear with HHuawei, I mean where is the 5G Western alternative? These are the kindd of things we need to start thinking about. We actually should address strategically economic state-craft questions and do not leave space for others to move into." This argument/concept justifies China's world leadership regarding the delivery of 5G technology. During the same panel, the former Commander of the US Army Europe and Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the CEPA, [Ben Hodges](#), noted: "I cannot believe that the United States working with Ericsson and Nokia cannot come up with a better option."

The rapid change of the situation in post-Covid Europe seems to be the continuation of General Hodges's optimism. Already in June 2020, Western European countries began to reassess the pros and cons of the Chinese suppliers and started to select safer alternatives. For example, the German company, [Telefonica Deutschland](#), is creating a 5G nuclear mobile network in Germany using Ericsson

equipment and saying that the safety of the new generation of services will be guaranteed by the choice of a Swedish supplier. Germany's three main operators are cutting ties with Huawei for the reason that they have a special social responsibility to provide secure networks. Furthermore, in early July, [Telecom Italia](#) announced the exclusion of Huawei from the 5G tender because of the potential surveillance from the Chinese government. As for France, the French cybersecurity agency ANSSI has already encouraged French mobile operators to avoid cooperation with the Chinese company. Just like in the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom, critical views concerning Chinese tech giants are increasingly heard in the leading states of the European Union, forecasting the further cessation of cooperation with them. It is very likely that Chinese companies will also be [blacklisted](#) in Europe in the foreseeable future.

It is noteworthy mentioning that during the Covid Crisis, Russian and Chinese propaganda machines completely shifted towards demonizing the European Union and other Western democracies which may justify their distrust of Chinese companies and the awakening of critical opinions. Particularly striking are those myths associated with the coronavirus carrying the common narrative



and presenting democratic states as less effective in the fight against the pandemic. These myths are disseminated mainly through social media sources. This why Facebook, Google and Twitter CEOs often have to answer the critical questions coming from the institutions of various states. Recent [reports](#) from the European Union as well as from the United States and Great Britain

accused China and Russia of being responsible for these disinformation narratives.

# CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA, THE CASE OF TIKTOK

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Following the global digital advancement, China's technology firms have developed not only hardware and software technologies but also a number of social media outlets that gained huge popularity all over the world. At first sight, unharmful apps might involve security risks while reflecting and serving the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. Over the past several years, a variety of reports and investigations made by journalists and different state governments suggest that the Chinese authorities and their trusted actors have been affecting large-scale communications flows through surveillance, control, censorship and propaganda. Therefore, various governments and private companies in the US, UK, Thailand, India and several other states have taken certain unavoidable measures to reduce the negative consequences caused by the [CCP's control over the media and the internet](#). Below we will discuss the case of the internationally circulated Chinese application TikTok and the security risks attached to it.

In 2018, there were 80 million [TikTok](#) users in the US and 400 million users in China registered on the app. Due to boredom as a result of the pandemic, the number of TikTok users has increased tremendously worldwide. This occasion creates global concerns since the app contains various security risks, consequently posing challenges regarding content moderation and data privacy.

TikTok has been also denied by multinational social media and technology companies, Facebook and Apple. Previously, [Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg](#), warned about TikTok's censorship of the Hong Kong's protests calling on Western countries for the establishment of a clear internet regulation framework. In winter 2020, [Apple](#) also expressed concerns regarding the surveillance made by TikTok through iPhone gadgets. Evidently, the application, while being opened, could read the content on the clipboard. Simultaneously with this occurrence, TikTok was enlisted in the EU's Code of Practice on

Disinformation. Particularly, the EC fears that TikTok can become a victim of the CCP's censorship and thus cause infringements of transparency. On June 9, the European Data Protection Bureau decided to form a task force that will be responsible for the coordination of actions and the creation of overviews concerning TikTok's performance within the [European Union](#).

On June 29, right after the military tensions between China and India, the Indian government [banned](#) 59 Chinese apps,

## Appendix

- |                     |                                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. TikTok           | 31. Mi Video Call – Xiaomi        |
| 2. ShareIt          | 32. WeSync                        |
| 3. Kwaif            | 33. ES File Explorer              |
| 4. UC Browser       | 34. Viva Video – GU Video Inc     |
| 5. Baidu map        | 35. Meitu                         |
| 6. Shein            | 36. Vigo Video                    |
| 7. Clash of Kings   | 37. New Video Status              |
| 8. DU battery saver | 38. DU Recorder                   |
| 9. Hello            | 39. Vault- Hide                   |
| 10. Likee           | 40. Cache Cleaner DU App studio   |
| 11. YouCam makeup   | 41. DU Cleaner                    |
| 12. Mi Community    | 42. DU Browser                    |
| 13. CM Browsers     | 43. Hago Play With New Friends    |
| 14. Virus Cleaner   | 44. Cam Scanner                   |
| 15. APLUS Browser   | 45. Clean Master – Cheetah Mobile |
| 16. ROMWE           | 46. Wonder Camera                 |
| 17. Club Factory    | 47. Photo Wonder                  |
| 18. Newsdog         | 48. QQ Player                     |
| 19. Beutry Plus     | 49. We Meet                       |
| 20. WeChat          | 50. Sweet Selfie                  |
| 21. UC News         | 51. Baidu Translate               |
| 22. QQ Mail         | 52. Vmate                         |
| 23. Weibo           | 53. QQ International              |
| 24. Xender          | 54. QQ Security Center            |
| 25. QQ Music        | 55. QQ Launcher                   |
| 26. QQ Newsfeed     | 56. U Video                       |
| 27. Bigo Live       | 57. V by Status Video             |
| 28. SelfieCity      | 58. Mobile Legends                |
| 29. Mail Master     | 59. DU Privacy                    |
| 30. Parallel Space  |                                   |

including the TikTok social media platform, claiming serious risks for [India's](#) sovereignty and national security. ByteDance avoided the immediate response to India's allegations.

Georgia, being a valuable participant of China's BRI project, is also becoming gradually dependent on China's digital influence through Huawei, 5G or even TikTok. The latter has been extremely popular during the pandemic among young Georgians as well as current or former members of the government. During pandemics, [TikTok-registered Georgians](#) enjoyed a series of videos from the former Prime Minister of Georgia Mr. Ivanishvili. Unfortunately, many totally ignored the adequate



assessment of the risks associated with this application. TikTok has been actively promoted by local ISPs, show-business representatives and famous Georgian individuals. Nevertheless, one important aspect threatening Georgia's sovereignty did not stay unnoticeable. While official China recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia, TikTok decided to shuffle the cards. It lists the Russian-occupied regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as separate independent states during the registration procedure. The [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia](#) tackled the problem in a timely fashion, claiming that they will always intervene while the occupied regions are being mentioned as separate units.

Apparently, this occasion did not prevent the Georgian population from further using this application. TikTok stays as a key entertainment source for them creating the ground for the emergence of additional challenges. Therefore, government and civil society institutions should seriously address this issue, monitor TikTok's usage (not only locally, but globally) and raise the awareness of the Georgian population.

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# CONCLUSION

## 8 STEP INFORMATION OPERATION

BY BRUCE SCHNEIER

### Step 1:

Find the cracks in the fabric of society — the social, demographic, economic, and ethnic divisions.

### Step 2:

Build audiences, either by directly controlling a platform (like RT) or by cultivating relationships with people receptive to those narratives.

### Step 3:

Seed distortion by creating alternative narratives, e.g. contradictory alternative truths, that distorts the political debate.

### Step 4:

Wrap those narratives in kernels of truth. A core of fact makes falsehoods more believable and helps them spread.

### Step 5:

Conceal your hand. Make it seem as if the stories came from somewhere else.

### Step 6:

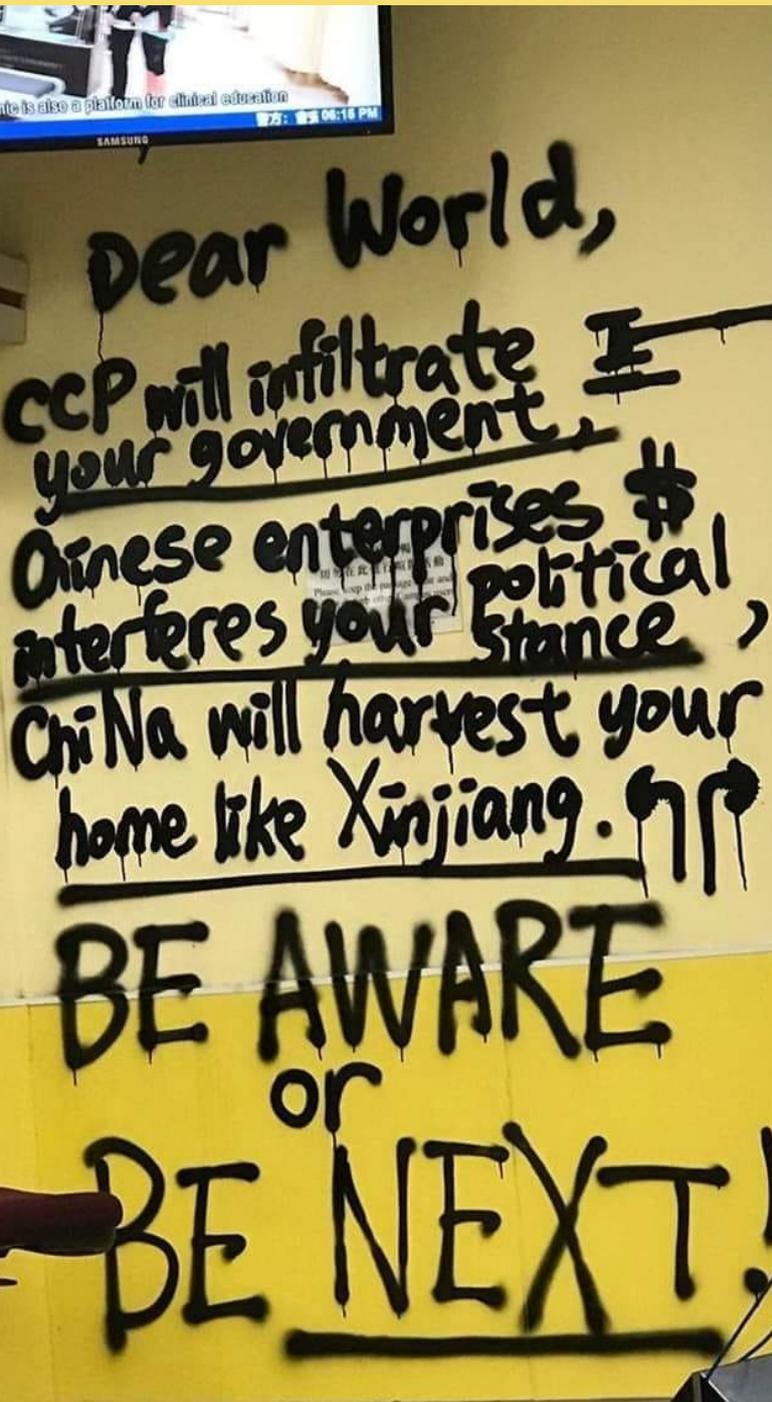
Cultivate proxies who believe and amplify the narratives, by the so-called “useful Idiots”

### Step 7:

Deny involvement in the propaganda campaign.

### Step 8:

Play the long game. Engage in multiple operations.



## WHO IS IN CHARGE OF POST COLD

### WAR WORLD?

INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN ACADEMIA,  
MEDIA & CSO  
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- **Influence Operations in Academia Worldwide**
- **Influence Operation in Academia, Georgia**
- **China's Influence Operations in the Information Space**
- **China's Leverage over the Media**
- **Media and Civil Society Reports on Chinese Interference**
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**Peer review by Martin Hala**



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