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China's Narratives on Russia's war on Ukraine in Central Europe

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Summary

- Russia's war on Ukraine has placed China in a challenging position in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland regarding its relationship with Russia. However, it has also provided an opportunity for China to leverage the situation to promote its own narratives.

- In official communications in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, China has maintained a relatively restrained approach when it comes to commenting on the war. However, Chinese state media have been actively directing propaganda toward these countries regarding the war, often involving local intermediaries.

- As shown by the case of the China Radio International localized content and the messaging of Slovak political actors, these narratives have focused on shifting the blame for the Russian invasion onto the US and NATO, portraying the EU as taking the heavy brunt of the US-provoked economic war on Russia whilst denying agency to Ukraine, highlighting China's role as a potential peacemaker, and portraying China and Russia as key building blocks of a new, better world order.

- Although China's primary objectives have centered on exploiting the situation to undermine the US and enhance its own global image, in practice, they have echoed Russian propaganda positions.

- Overall, there does not appear to be a substantial distinction in the general narratives on the war disseminated by China worldwide and the propaganda in Central Europe reflects the global narratives pushed by Beijing.



Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 has put China in a difficult position of balancing different interests. Beijing has tried to maintain a stance that would, at the same time, 1) avoid endangering the strategic cooperation with Russia, China's key global partner in countering the US 'hegemony', 2) limit the damage to ties with the Western world, which is still China's main economic partner, and finally, 3) maintain the image of China as a responsible country that respects international law and provides a positive contribution to global affairs.

In effect, China has neither condemned Russia for the war, nor has it extended direct support to its neighbor in terms of military assistance, despite earlier references to a "no limits" partnership between the two countries. China has also positioned itself as an actor that is willing to contribute to the peaceful resolution of the war, even while stopping short of concrete proposals apart from the document colloquially but inaccurately often referred to as "China's peace plan."¹

However, one area where China has strongly backed Russia in its war is the global narrative landscape, taking advantage of the invasion to aid its global propaganda designed to spread distrust of the United States and the West in general.

This paper looks at the narratives on the war employed by China in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. These Central European countries provide an interesting example as they have been on the receiving end of China's charm offensive over the past decade, connected with China's diplomatic initiative, the 16+1 format. China's position on the war has further damaged China's relations with these countries, already troubled by unmet economic expectations, security issues, ties with Taiwan, and disputes over China's human rights record.

The paper analyzes the official Chinese communication and actions regarding Russia's war on Ukraine in the three countries, and the local responses. Then, it will provide a case study of China's propaganda about the war in the Czech version of China Radio International, a state-owned media outlet, to identify the key narratives as employed in the local context.

¹ The document, titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis," lists 12 key points of China's stance on the war, without introducing specific proposals for achieving peace. Whereas the document stresses that Beijing respects international law and, specifically, the sovereignty of "all countries", there is no mention of which side is the one breaking international law and engaging in aggression. The title of the document itself only refers to a "crisis". In the document, China does not call for Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine and does not specify the shape of the Ukrainian borders. The cessation of hostilities, which China calls for, would thus in effect mean freezing the extent of Russia's occupation. Moreover, China also criticizes sanctions against Russia and implicitly accuses NATO of responsibility for the war (while doing so explicitly elsewhere). However, there are also some positive points, such as an appeal to avoid nuclear escalation or calling for providing humanitarian assistance. See "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis," Foreign Ministry of the PRC, February 28, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.



1 China's Reaction to the War and Central Europe

The eruption of the war has had far-reaching consequences for China's ties with the EU countries, most of which have supported Ukraine from the beginning. Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic stand out in this context as they have not only unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion, but have also led in terms of support for Ukraine, be it accepting refugees (especially Poland and the Czech Republic) or facilitating military assistance.

China sent several diplomatic missions into the region after Russia's full-scale invasion, whose goals included explaining China's position on Ukraine. The head of the think-tank part of one of the delegations, a prominent Chinese CEE scholar Liu Zuokui, wrote that the goal of the visit was to "explain China's position, refute fake information, clear up misunderstandings."²

The members of the delegation claimed that CEE views on China's role in the Russian war are "emotional," unnecessarily influencing the bilateral cooperation.³ This echoes China's efforts to avoid the issue of the war influencing the broader China-EU ties as Beijing continues to support the EU's strategic autonomy efforts, singularly interpreting them as distancing from the US.

In official communication directed at the three countries, China has not prominently focused on the Ukraine issue. On the contrary, it seems to have downplayed it, likely because it is aware of its controversial nature in the local context. A study by the MapInfluencE project on the activities of Chinese embassies on Twitter (now X) has shown that Ukraine was a marginal issue in their communication, coming up as a subject in between 1 and 5 percent of tweets by the accounts of embassies in the three countries.⁴

The embassies have translated the Chinese position into local languages and put them on their websites but have largely stuck to the official talking points of the Chinese foreign ministry in other communications. Chinese ambassadors to the three countries have also touched upon the Chinese position on the war in articles and interviews for local media, sometimes subsuming China's perspective under the larger framework of the Global Security Initiative (GSI),⁵ seeking to uphold the image of China as a constructive actor in maintaining international peace and security.⁶

At the same time, a more aggressive face of Chinese efforts has been detected in Czechia. The owner of Facebook and Instagram, Meta, took down an influence operation run from China that targeted Czechia in September 2022. The social media posts spread

² "China CEEC Think Tank Network - 17 Plus 1 Think Tank," https://www.17plus1-thinktank.com/article/1535.html?source=article_link.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Veronika Blablová. China's Twiplomacy in Europe in the Shadow of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Praha: Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO), 2023, <https://mapinfluence.eu/en/chinas-twiplomacy-in-europe-in-the-shadow-of-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

⁵ GSI was proposed by China's leader Xi Jinping in 2022, forming a triad together with the Global Development Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative. These initiatives have been used by China to propose its own vision of an international order. GSI builds upon long standing principles of Chinese foreign policy, highlighting, among others "legitimate interests of all countries" as well as "common security". In effect, the Chinese proposal is mostly targeted at the US and its system of alliances, which China has long criticized as reflective of "Cold War mentality." See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html.

⁶ "Velvyslanec České lidové republiky v České republice Feng Biao psal o Globální bezpečnostní iniciativě - Velvyslanectví České lidové republiky v České republice," http://cz.china-embassy.gov.cn/cze/xwdt/202305/t20230523_11082286.htm; Zdeněk Nevělik, "Nový čínský velvyslanec Feng Piao pro Právo: Peking nebude nikdy usilovat o hegemonii," *Novinky*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-novy-cinsky-velvyslanec-feng-piao-pro-pravo-pekings-nebude-nikdy-usilovat-o-hegemonii-40416147>; "Ambassador to Poland Sun Linjiang published a signed article - Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Poland," http://pl.china-embassy.gov.cn/sghd/202203/t20220310_10650375.htm.



by the campaign criticized the Czech government and its policy on Ukraine, accusing the Czech government of being a US or EU “puppet” and warning against antagonizing China.⁷

The reactions to China’s position on the war and its diplomatic overtures have been mixed in the three countries. In the Czech Republic, the government, composed of a coalition of right-of-center parties elected in late 2020, has vowed to “review” ties with China, rowing back on the period since 2012 when the Czech Republic courted China both politically and economically.

Czech President Petr Pavel has remained skeptical of China playing a positive role in the war, saying “it is in China’s interest to prolong the status quo.”⁸ The Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský has expressed concerns about China’s support for Russia, and said that he did not consider China’s “peace plan” as a “real plan”.⁹ The Czech Foreign Ministry also communicated its concerns about the China-Russia partnership during meetings with the visiting Chinese envoy Jiang Yu. At the same time, the Minister of Defense, Jana Černochová, has claimed she “does not care” if it is China that contributes to the solving of the war, as long as there is someone willing and able to bring an end to it.¹⁰ The Chinese position has found more direct support among the small parties outside of the parliament with limited political impact, such as among the communist party (KSČM) representatives.¹¹

Meanwhile, in Poland, the ruling United Right coalition assumed a much less critical stance toward China before the outbreak of the war, continuing a policy of engagement. This was also accompanied by hopes in some quarters, such as in the Presidential Office of Andrzej Duda, that China could be used to put pressure on Russia. Duda traveled to the Beijing Olympics shortly before the invasion, hoping to persuade China’s leader Xi Jinping to influence Putin and prevent a war. However, with the outbreak of the war and China’s position on it, Chinese-Polish ties have been damaged. Polish officials reportedly refused to meet with the visiting delegation of the Chinese CEE envoy, Huo Yuzhen, during her visit to the region in April/May 2022.¹² After a meeting with China’s Ukraine conflict envoy, Li Hui, in May 2023, the Polish side called on China to “condemn Russia’s aggression, and exert pressure on Russia to return to compliance with the principles of international law”.¹³

Finally, in Slovakia, traditionally quite reserved in its China policy in contrast to the Czech Republic and Poland (both officially strategic partners of China), the government elected in 2020 reaffirmed the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country, putting the development of ties with China on the back burner. At the same time, China’s potential role in bringing the war to an end was praised by representatives of SMER-SD and Republika. The two then-opposition parties, known for their nationalistic rhetoric and disapproval of the Slovak government’s support for Ukraine, lauded the Chinese proposal, contrasting it with the alleged unwillingness of the West and Ukraine to negotiate peace. Both parties have also engaged with Chinese official representation both in Slovakia and

⁷ “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China and Russia - Meta,”

<https://about.fb.com/news/2022/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-china-and-russia>.

⁸ Lily Bayer, “China doesn’t want peace in Ukraine, Czech president warns,” Politico, April 25, 2023,

<https://www.politico.eu/article/trust-china-ukraine-czech-republic-petr-pavel-nato-defense/>.

⁹ “Lipavský v rozhovoru vyzval k jednotnějšímu postoji EU a USA vůči Číně,” ČTK, May 24, 2023,

<https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2369612>.

¹⁰ “Mír na Ukrajině by mohla pomoci sjednat Čína, shodla se Černochová s Metnarem,” Hospodářské noviny, April 4, 2023, <https://domaci.hn.cz/c1-67190170-mir-na-ukrajine-by-mohla-pomoci-sjednat-cina-shodla-se-vernochova-s-metnarem>.

¹¹ Kateřina Konečná (@konecna.k), “Je důležité, že spolu Čínská lidová republika a Ruská federace hovoří,”

Facebook, April 2, 2023,

https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=781332713348939&set=a.768305117985032&paipv=0&eav=AfaRfrjn1b3703nPWfps6cNLOrgBYMiQd6C0FS-2Hmq3vTYwbOEFdcPqYzfzV9s-orA&_rdr.

¹² Piotr Maciej Kaczynski, “How China Lost Central Europe,” Balkan Insight, August 15, 2022,

<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/15/how-china-lost-central-europe/>.

¹³ “Poland urges China to pressure Russia to end war in Ukraine,” Reuters, May 19, 2023,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-says-china-should-put-pressure-russia-end-war-2023-05-19/>.



Brussels on the issue.¹⁴ In effect, these parties thus served as amplifiers for China's intended messages, even if China's narrative would not easily penetrate the local audience solely using direct channels. With SMER-SD successfully creating a government coalition after the September 2023 elections, the government's policy on the Ukraine issue has shifted significantly, and it can be expected Bratislava will also seek closer relations with Beijing.

2 Case study of China Radio International (CRI) in Czechia and Poland

As discussed in the previous section, China has tried to explain its position on the war and promote its 'peace plan' in Central Europe, although to a limited extent due to the largely non-receptive environment. Despite the recent trends of 'wolf warrior diplomacy', Chinese diplomats have mostly stuck with the official talking points set by the foreign ministry in their communication.¹⁵

However, Chinese official diplomatic channels are not the only instruments for communicating the Chinese position. To study how the Chinese narratives on Russia's war on Ukraine reached audiences in the Central European countries, this study selected the Chinese state-run media, China Radio International (CRI), for analysis.¹⁶ Specifically, the study focuses on the Czech and Polish language versions of the official website as the site does not operate in Slovak. To compensate for this, the study offers an overview of the communication of those Slovak political actors who have gradually become the most influential voices replicating Chinese messages.

2.1 CRI's Messaging in Czechia

While a majority of the content on CRI is produced centrally or sourced from other Chinese state media and later translated into local languages, there is also some content that is specific to the country, oftentimes created with the help of local contributors or by reposting content published in friendly and/or cooperating outlets elsewhere. This analysis will focus on the latter, as it gives indication of the adaptation of general narratives to the local environment, whereas the general content published by CRI can be assumed to be largely the same for all its language mutations globally.

CRI has had Czech programming since 1968, while its website was established in 2003.¹⁷ Interestingly, Czech CRI has over 1 million followers on its Facebook page, which appear to be mostly bots or fake accounts.

The analysis studied the articles on the CRI website published under the "From Czechia" and "Opinions" sections, as they include the most original content (i.e. written specifically for the Czech audience). The analysis examines the content in these sections published between January and August 2023.

There are two broad categories of articles published on the CRI website in the two sections. The first category is articles featuring interviews or reports from events (some of them co-organized by CRI itself) also sometimes with references to articles about the events published in other media. These usually feature one, sometimes more, people

¹⁴ "Ficovi sa páči čínsky mierový plán pre Ukrajinu, s Remišovou okomentovali aj stíhačky Mig-29," SITA, March 5, 2023, <https://sita.sk/cinsky-mierovy-plan-je-podla-fica-racionalny-remisova-pripomenula-ze-vyzyva-k-teritorialnej-integrite-vsetkych-krajin/>.

¹⁵ The trend of Chinese diplomats, formerly known for mostly passive and restrained behavior, to publicly and assertively defend China's image, denounce all critics of China and engage in confrontational rhetoric which became noted in 2017 under the broader influence of the changes in China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolf_warrior_diplomacy.

¹⁶ For a primer on CRI localization of Chinese narratives in the Czech Republic, covering also the issue of cooperation with local commercial radios, see the study by Ivana Karásková.

¹⁷ "Dezinformace o Ukrajině šířené Čínou v podání Českého rozhlasu pro zahraničí", Centrum proti hybridním hrozbám, not dated, <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/dezinformace-o-ukrajine-sirene-cinou-v-podani-cinskeho-rozhlasu-pro-zahranici.aspx>.



as “talking heads”. The other category is CRI original content, published by its own contributors and collaborators, or reposted from other Czech media. During the period under study, 60 articles were published in these sections that touched upon Russia’s war on Ukraine, not counting unrelated references without further elaboration.

The sources and authorship of the articles provide an interesting perspective on the editorial line of CRI. CRI has cooperated with Naše Pravda and iportal24.cz, two left-wing newspapers. Naše Pravda is a direct continuation of Haló Noviny (ceased publication in 2022), the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM)-affiliated newspaper, while iportal24.cz was founded by Haló Noviny’s former contributors. Furthermore, CRI organized a “media and think-tank forum” in cooperation with iportal24.cz in June 2023. At the event, Chinese Ambassador Feng Biao praised the two outlets as those who “bring an objective view on China’s development”, which in practice means publishing content favorable to China. CRI has also regularly reposted articles from the two sites when they have touched upon China. CRI has also been cooperating with AC24 in Czechia, a known disinformation website.¹⁸

2.1.1 KEY NARRATIVES ON THE WAR SPREAD IN CZECHIA

What were then the key narratives on the Ukraine war appearing in the localized content on the CRI Czech version website? The review of the articles has identified five key narrative lines on the war and China’s position on it.¹⁹

NATO and the US are responsible for the war

The war is presented as the result of US and NATO pressure on Russia, repeatedly being referred to as a conflict between the US and Russia. One of the articles claims that the “key question that resonates is not whether the entry of the Russian army into Ukrainian territory was or was not justified, but why Russia was forced to do this.”²⁰ The US is said to have long planned such a conflict and is using Ukraine as an instrument to achieve its goal of weakening Russia. By extension, several articles claim that the real goal of the US is ultimately to target China and link the explanation of the war to the increased tensions in Asia-Pacific, where China is said to be facing a similar challenge from the US and its allies. Instead of focusing on the Russian aggression, the articles often accuse the West of waging an “economic conflict” against Russia and China, taking advantage of the war against Ukraine. The US and NATO are said to be willing “to fight until the last Ukrainian” and to extend the toll to “every Czech, Slovak, Lithuanian or Latvian.”²¹

The EU’s Position on the War is Subservient to the US and Self-Harming

The EU, and Czechia, specifically, is almost universally presented as subservient to US interests over Ukraine. The sanctions on Russia are said to be hurting the EU economically, while the US keeps profiting from the war through increased arms deliveries, energy exports, and more broadly, by tying Europe with the US economy because of the

¹⁸ Filip Šebok, “Czechia: A Case Study of China’s Changing Overseas Propaganda Efforts”, *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/czechia-a-case-study-of-chinas-changing-overseas-propaganda-efforts/>.

¹⁹ This is not meant to be an exhaustive account of all Chinese narratives on the war, as past studies have identified different narratives, such as disinformation on the US biological weapons program in Ukraine. The study focuses solely on localized content in the given period. “Case Study Analyzes China Radio International’s Tactics - CEDMO,” <https://cedmohub.eu/case-study-analyzes-china-radio-internationals-tactics/>; “Dezinformace o Ukrajině šířené Čínou v podání Čínskému rozhlasu pro zahraničí - Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky,” <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/dezinformace-o-ukrajine-sirene-cinou-v-podani-cinskeho-rozhlasu-pro-zahranici.aspx>.

²⁰ Robert Fish, “Jak Rusko ohrožuje svět,” CRI, February 17, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/02/17/ARTIHjJ4LpNuCPJi5EdLTAbs230209.shtml>.

²¹ Luděk Růžička, “Mír bude jen pouhá iluze dokud se Washington a jeho stoupenci vzdají své snahy o hegemonii,” CRI, February 23, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/02/23/ARTIZXYalseu7DR0eqyk1U3S230223.shtml>.



decoupling from Russia since the outbreak of the war. The efforts to “de-risk” ties with China are similarly seen as damaging for the EU. One of the articles, for instance, claims that the US has “forced its allies into imposing more sanctions than it has implemented them itself.” Another maintains that NATO’s “conflicts have served the political and economic interests mainly of the US, and not the security of member countries.”

Ukraine is a Pawn of Foreign Interests

Ukraine is often overlooked as an actor in the war and in international politics, which is seen as a broader geopolitical conflict between the US and NATO on the one side and Russia on the other. In effect, Ukraine as such is often presented as devoid of agency. When mentioned, it is usually in a negative light. An article titled “Ukraine lacks subjectivity on the global arena”, criticizes the Ukrainian leadership, saying that “because they are not educated and, crucially, not well-versed in politics, they are not educated and capable as war leaders”.²² The Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is referred to as a “representative of NATO forces’ high command in Ukraine.” In reference to China’s peace initiative, the article calls on Ukraine to act rationally, implying that Zelenskyy is not sufficiently aware of the importance of China’s proposal.²³

China Can Contribute to the Peaceful Resolution of the War

It is often highlighted that China is a uniquely peaceful power, which stands in contrast to the Western saber-rattling and attempts to provoke war. The accusations that China is aiding Russia in the war effort are mostly dismissed. For example, former President Miloš Zeman is quoted as saying that China has distanced itself from the war and has not helped Russia. Another article notes the “trend of connecting China and Russia ... including nonsensical propagandistic insinuation, that through good ties with Russia, China is a party to the Ukrainian conflict.”²⁴ The typical narratives of China having never led an expansive war are often repeated to paint China as an actor that can make a unique contribution to the resolution of the war.²⁵

Articles often reference China's role in mediating the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. It is also often claimed that China acts pragmatically, which also puts it in an advantageous position to solve the Russian war against Ukraine. In one such case, a CRI article quotes the Czech Ambassador to Vietnam, Hynek Kmoníček, who claims that China has the advantage of a “non-ideological, pragmatic” view that is favored by many parties in peacemaking.²⁶ On the other hand, the US is seen as uninterested in any peacemaking efforts, as the continuation of the war serves its interests.

Russia and China Guarantee Stable and Prosperous World Order

The articles also present China and Russia as safeguards of a new multilateral order that stand in opposition to the old ‘hegemonic’ order led by the US. However, the bilateral aspect of the China-Russia relationship is often downplayed, instead, the partnership is presented in a broader framework of cooperation of non-Western countries within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, and other groupings. The narratives of

²² Roman Blaško, “Ukrajíně chybí subjektivita na globální úrovni,” CRI, June 5, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/06/05/ARTIIXwgZRhYa4IyPGulmTua230605.shtml>.

²³ Roman Blaško, “Vzájemné uznání je základ mírových rozhovorů,” CRI, April 28, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/04/28/ARTIHNTacWaOZA48c5PMOrOK230428.shtml>.

²⁴ Karel Pavlíček, “Francie odmítá izolaci od Číny,” CRI, August 3, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/08/03/ARTIqYA38QdKJq79S1fnW7V2230803.shtml>.

²⁵ Radovan Rybák, “Chmelár: Čína založí nový světový řád na vzájemně výhodných vztazích”, May 15, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/05/15/ARTI0dq6Jdky6NB7NmjQMHA9230515.shtml>.

²⁶ Radovan Rybák, “Kmoníček: Proč se Číňané vrhli do urovnávání světových sporů?,” CRI, May 22, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/05/22/ARTIzfYEcuH0p2fx56iBazhi230522.shtml>.



the inevitable domination of the China-led non-Western world are evidenced by the supposed failure of the Western countries to create a united front against Russia, the negative economic impact of sanctions on the West itself, and the trends of ‘dedollarization’ and other developments weakening the West’s position that are said to have been accelerated by the war. One of the articles argues that the whole world sees that China wants a world without wars and to establish a new world order, which the US is afraid of.²⁷

By looking at the narratives above, it is clear that the narratives on the war spread by China mirror the official line of the Kremlin. Apart from the lines of argumentation, the pro-Russian stance is also evidenced by the use of specific terms. For example, in articles directly authored by CRI (that is, not reposted) there are no references to Russian aggression, instead, the war is almost universally referred to euphemistically as the “Ukrainian crisis”, in line with China’s official communication. At the same time, the Chinese narratives are not completely identical to those spread by Russia. Instead, there are slight differences, for example, there is no reference to fascism in Ukraine and other narratives linked to Ukrainian domestic issues which have been one of the key Russian themes in justifying the war.

2.2 CRI’s Messaging in Poland

This section provides an overview of the coverage of Russia’s war on Ukraine by CRI Poland. CRI started airing in Polish in 1968. A Polish-language portal <https://polish.cri.cn> was launched in October 2003. In 2012 a Facebook page of CRI Poland was established. CRI Poland publishes regular news and commentaries on a broad range of domestic and foreign issues.

2.2.1 KEY NARRATIVES ON THE WAR SPREAD IN POLAND

Russia's invasion of Ukraine hardly affected CRI Poland’s editorial policy

One study based on a content analysis of CRI Poland publications in 2020-2021 concluded that “systemic competition with the US and attempts to discredit Washington’s domestic and foreign policies have been the overarching theme of most of CRI Poland’s commentaries.”²⁸ Many Ukraine-related publications by CRI Poland in 2022-2023 spread anti-US and anti-West narratives already circulating in the Polish infospace prior to the war.

NATO, US and Other Western Countries Are Responsible for the War

One of the first topical commentaries on the full-scale Russian war published by CRI Poland on 25 February 2022 stated, “Analysts believe that the US and other western countries are responsible for the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Although the US and NATO announced that they will not send troops to Ukraine, at the same time they announced the sending of additional military equipment and troops to some European countries with the goal to “protect” so-called NATO allies. This may further complicate the situation”.²⁹

Several articles published since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine present the US as an aggressive and militarist actor. A March 2023 piece titled, ‘European

²⁷ “Vábr: Spojené státy se snaží znovu ovládnout svět, protože se bojí Číny,” CRI, January 16, 2023, <https://czech.cri.cn/2023/01/16/ARTIS0qY1emEkqWz1o1x2swE230107.shtml>.

²⁸ Alicja Bachulska. How Moscow and Beijing Weave Tales for Warsaw: The Cases of Sputnik and China Radio International. Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), 2022, 8, https://mapinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Mapinfluence_policy-paper_CRI-Sputnik-Poland_A4_web_03-2.pdf.

²⁹ “Obserwacja: Wyjście z kryzysu ukraińskiego leży w rozwiązaniu politycznym,” CRI, 25 February, 2022, <https://polish.cri.cn/news/china/3875/20220225/738399.html>.



observers highly praise China's position on the crisis in Ukraine' cites former Polish consul in Shanghai Sylwester Szafarz as saying, "A clear link exists between the provocative US role towards Russia through the promotion of the Ukrainian crisis and towards China through increasing tension on the Taiwan issue".³⁰

In another commentary, "The US is keen on gaining total control over the world, Europe and Asia/Pacific and in doing so it uses "color revolutions" and its agents, e.g. NATO, by expanding it further to the East", CRI Poland resonates.³¹ It portrays Russia's war on Ukraine as a US war against Russia with the use of Ukrainian troops, speaks about the failed US-organized "Belarusian Mайдan", and claims that the US is aiming to create an anti-Chinese alliance in the Asia-Pacific through establishing neo-colonial relations with a number of countries. The article contrasts China's foreign policies with the US's and highly praises China's role in assisting developing countries and making the world more secure.

In similar fashion, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reacted negatively to the US decision to provide additional military assistance to Ukraine in July 2023 saying that it provoked a broad concern among the international community. "Interested parties should not add fuel to the fire and escalate the crisis in Ukraine even more", the article said citing the MFA and avoiding any mention of Russia.³²

In addition to the US, CRI Poland casts the responsibility for the Russian aggression against Ukraine on NATO. One commentary says, "Since the end of the Cold War, NATO carried out six rounds of expansion to the east, provoking the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, creating a division in the security sphere in Europe, and eyeing the Asia and Pacific region".³³ Following the NATO-provoked Yugoslavia disintegration in Europe, catastrophic interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, the US-ruled organization intends to destabilize Asia and Pacific, the article claims.

US Has Secret Bio-Labs in Ukraine

CRI Poland disseminated Russia's narratives concerning US biologic laboratories in Ukraine and elsewhere. One March 2022 CRI Poland article says, "What are the US's actual intentions? What are they doing exactly? The US should explain their activities in the sphere of military biological research in the country [Ukraine] and abroad, and accept a multilateral control which would address the doubts of the international community".³⁴

An earlier analysis of China-related commentaries published by Sputnik Poland and China Radio International (CRI) Poland in 2020 and 2021 found that especially since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, a convergence of anti-Western narratives became increasingly clear.³⁵ It concluded nevertheless that no sufficient evidence exists that China and Russia coordinate their activities in the information sphere. Another study found that the promotion of pro-Russian content on the CRI Poland Facebook page resulted in an

³⁰ "Europejscy obserwatorzy wysoko ocenili stanowisko Chin w sprawie kryzysu na Ukrainie," CRI, 3 March 2023, <https://polish.cri.cn/2023/03/03/ARTImRGWM2Ej39pfarR9EQ1p230303.shtml>.

³¹ "Rzykanckie dążenia USA do destabilizacji Azji-Pacyfiku," CRI, 29 August, <https://polish.cri.cn/2023/08/29/ARTIoa7jO2gNjf3BAAq8GkMb230829.shtml>.

³² "MSZ Chin: Zainteresowane strony nie powinny dolewać oliwy do ognia, żeby jeszcze bardziej zaostrzyć kryzys na Ukrainie," CRI, 10 July 2023, <https://polish.cri.cn/2023/07/10/ARTIkgpVV9vQpq3gcZv1Q2wc230710.shtml>.

³³ "Komentarz: Czy NATO chce sprowokować chaos w regionie Azji i Pacyfiku?," CRI, 12 July 2023, <https://polish.cri.cn/2023/07/12/ARTIlyrM8Tr7IHUTDaXB9L2z230712.shtml>.

³⁴ "Komentarz: Światowa opinia publiczna zwraca uwagę na amerykańskie laboratoria biologiczne na Ukrainie," CRI, 9 March 2022, <https://polish.cri.cn/news/china/3875/20220309/741345.html>.

³⁵ Alicja Bachulska. How Moscow and Beijing Weave Tales for Warsaw: The Cases of Sputnik and China Radio International. Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), 2022, https://mapinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Mapinfluence_policy-paper_CRI-Sputnik-Poland_A4_web_03-2.pdf.



increase of organic engagement which sometimes resulted in multiple negative reactions from Polish Facebook users.³⁶

China as a Constructive Actor Striving for Peace

The coverage of the Russia war against Ukraine by CRI Poland portrays China as a positive, peaceful, and constructive actor in the international arena. Beijing's calls for immediate de-escalation and peace talks are reiterated in many publications. One August 2023 CRI Poland publication cites a Chinese MFA official who spoke about China's six-point initiative on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine and a few tranches of humanitarian assistance sent to Ukraine as examples of China's "constructive role in alleviating the humanitarian situation in Ukraine."³⁷

Ukraine-related CRI Poland publications show seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in the Chinese position. On the one hand, Beijing speaks about the need to prevent escalation of the war and sovereignty of all countries. For example, reporting about the July 2023 meetings of the UN Security Council on the Russia-Ukraine war and the position of the Chinese representative to the UN, CRI Poland wrote, "Geng Shuang stated that concerning Ukrainian issue China has always advocated that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be protected."³⁸ On the other hand, CRI Poland consistently lambasts western assistance to Ukraine and avoids directly criticizing Russia for its waging war on Ukraine's territory. This contradicts the Chinese statements in support of all countries' sovereignty, because amid ongoing Russian military aggression, in the absence of Western assistance Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity would be further jeopardized. Whereas official Chinese rhetoric has largely been based on calls for peace and de-escalation, the CRI Poland editorial policy took an anti-western approach, which favored the Russian position and denied agency to Ukraine.

3 Chinese Narratives on the War Spread in Slovakia

Given the absence of a CRI version for the Slovak audience, this section will zoom in on the spread of Chinese narratives by local political actors who have proven most successful as communicators of messages aligned with Beijing's stance.

China as a Constructive Peacemaker

In general, the topic of China's position on Russia's war on Ukraine has not received much attention in the Slovak information space and has appeared only sporadically. Some actors, however, have taken up the topic on their agenda, primarily at the beginning of the year, when China announced its interest in the mediation of peace negotiations. The narrative emerging at the time was that China could be a positive protagonist in the peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with its initiative being contrasted with the EU or US position.

Such a narrative was presented, for example, by the leader of the SMER-SD party, Robert Fico. In a Facebook post from mid-February, he argued that "if the US and the EU had behaved in the same way as China, the war could have been over in Ukraine. China is proposing a peace plan on 24 February. The US and its vassal the EU will wage

³⁶ Alicja Bachulska. Poland: Cognitive mismatch, in: *Backing Russia on Ukraine: China's Messaging in Central and Eastern Europe* (Ed. Ivana Karásková). Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), May 2022, 24, https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/CHOICE_policy-paper_Backing-Russia-on-Ukraine_04_web.pdf.

³⁷ "MSZ ChRL: Chiny dostarczyły Ukrainie kilka transzy materialnej pomocy humanitarnej i są gotowe kontynuować własne działania w tej sprawie," CRI, 23 August 2023, <https://polish.cri.cn/2023/08/23/ARTI9Wz7dsvGEW8IQG8eUpJG230823.shtm>.

³⁸ "Chiny apelują o zapobieganie eskalacji konfliktu między Rosją a Ukrainą i promowanie politycznego rozwiązania kryzysu," CRI, 27 July 2023, <https://polish.cri.cn/2023/07/27/ARTIXTZID8KxMDOt4Fxc3qs230727.shtml>.



war to the last Ukrainian, without victory."³⁹ The topic also occurred in the Slovak information space after French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Beijing where he met with the Chinese president. While the visit was criticized in many quarters in Europe, Fico pointed to the rationality of Macron's actions and the possible positive impact on the EU's building of strategic autonomy in defense and foreign policy.⁴⁰

Milan Uhrík, MEP and leader of the far-right political party Republika, also expressed his support for the Chinese peace plan for Ukraine. In a Facebook post at the end of March 2023, he expressed his conviction that the draft peace plan "represents the most realistic and best starting point at the moment for ending the bloody conflict, restoring (world) peace and, above all, normal life for all of us".⁴¹ According to Uhrík, a peace plan for Ukraine requires politicians who can "reach a normal agreement".⁴² Even Fico, in the aforementioned post, claimed that he was only interested in peace, something the media allegedly do not want to hear about. Both politicians and frequent disseminators of non-factual content have thus reinforced the notion that the solution to Russia's war on Ukraine is simple and requires only negotiations, but is prevented by actors such as the EU and the US, which are pursuing their own interests in the region. At the same time, they emphasize a peaceful path that does not reflect Ukraine's interests and they refuse to label Russia as the aggressor.

³⁹ Robert Fico (@robertficosk), "Prečo Smer-SD nepustili tento týždeň do žiadnej diskusnej relácie, hoci sme boli v NR SR navrhovateľmi hlavných tém," Facebook, February 19, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/401845797966393/posts/768499024634400>.

⁴⁰ Robert Fico (@robertficosk), "Nech boli Macronove motívy v číne akékoľvek, správal sa racionálne," Facebook, April 14, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/401400371344269/posts/799102028240766>.

⁴¹ Milan Uhrík • Republika (@ing.milan.uhrik), "Podporujeme čínsky Mierový plán pre Ukrajinu," Facebook, March 29, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/445260620296824/posts/826537402169142>.

⁴² Ibid.



The West Does Not Want Peace in Ukraine

Overall, the issue of Chinese involvement in peace negotiations with Russia has also served to undermine the West and the US. Typical claims were that the West had behaved in an aggressive and arrogant manner, which itself was supposed to have initiated the building of an alliance between Russia and China. A prime example of this rhetoric was a Telegram post in mid-March 2023 by Ľuboš Blaha, a well-known pro-Kremlin disinformant and deputy chairman of the SMER-SD party.⁴³ He claimed that "a strong bloc is forming between Russia and China against US imperialism. This is where the West has driven them with its arrogance. While the West lives in its liberal bubble, the whole world is turning its back on it - in Asia they well remember American crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Vietnam. They know who is evil and who is good. The world needs balance and peace. Until America and its minions understand this, there will be no peace. Let us keep our fingers crossed for peace!"⁴⁴ Blaha was thus clearly contributing to the narrative of the need for peace brokered by the two powers, regardless of the fact that the aggression against Ukraine was perpetrated by Russia itself, and the resulting peace deal would likely unfairly deprive Ukraine of territory and fail to respect its interests.

The topic was also addressed in several posts by problematic former politician Eduard Chmelár, who mostly parroted the position of Chinese President Xi Jinping that the only way to end the Ukrainian conflict is a political agreement, not by arming Ukraine.⁴⁵ Although Chmelár has also warned of the threats of China's assertive foreign policy, his rhetoric is typical of the glorification of the diplomatic performance of the Asian state. In his statements, Chmelár also pointed to other "indisputable achievements of Chinese diplomacy" in the world (e. g. the restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia).⁴⁶ In this context, he presented the opinion that "China does not threaten European interests in any way and treats them with more respect than the US".⁴⁷ Therefore, in his view, "it is not in our interest to open a new Cold War front against China. And certainly not to orient our foreign policy more towards the US than towards our European partners. China is not our enemy and it is not only useless but also reprehensible to make an enemy of it."⁴⁸

⁴³ Ľuboš Blaha (@LubosBlahaSmer), "To fakt dnes idú americkí vojnoví zločinci moralizovať o vojne na Ukrajine?," Telegram, March 20, 2023, <https://t.me/LubosBlahaSmer/809>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Eduard Chmelár (@ChmelarEduard), "Progresívci ohrozujú záujmy Slovenska aj Európy," Facebook, April 12, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/477747501064144/posts/609759457862947>.

⁴⁶ Eduard Chmelár (@ChmelarEduard), "Svet sa musí vrátiť od rivality k spolupráci," Facebook, March 11, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/477747501064144/posts/591067016398858>.

⁴⁷ Eduard Chmelár (@ChmelarEduard), "Progresívci ohrozujú záujmy Slovenska aj Európy," Facebook, April 12, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/477747501064144/posts/609759457862947>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.



Conclusion

Russia's war on Ukraine has put China in a difficult position in relation to Central Europe, because of its ties with Russia, but has at the same time presented an opportunity to take advantage of the war to spread its own narratives. While in official communication, China has remained relatively restrained in commenting on the war in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, Chinese state media have targeted these countries with propaganda on the war, using also local interlocutors.

As shown by the analysis of the China Radio International localized content and the messaging of Slovak political actors, these narratives have focused on shifting the blame for the Russian invasion onto the US and NATO, portraying the EU as taking the heavy brunt of the US-provoked economic war on Russia, denying agency to Ukraine, highlighting China's role as a potential peacemaker, and portraying China and Russia as key building blocks of a new, better world order. While China's efforts have mainly been focused on taking advantage of the situation to attack the US and to improve its own image, both long-term goals, in effect, they have parroted Russian propaganda points.

The study has also shown how the Chinese narratives can be woven with the local narratives spearheaded by political forces and media, potentially playing more effectively into local sensitivities, while, at the same time, giving these forces a platform for spreading their views. In general, there seems not to be a significant difference between narratives on the war spread by China globally. The analysis of the Czech version of CRI demonstrates that this Chinese state media outlet has become closely embedded into a specific political and media network in the Czech Republic. Together with the detected coordinated inauthentic behavior on social networks, it is clear that China is becoming more involved in the domestic political and social issues of the targeted countries, apparently learning from Russian influence operations.



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AMO is a non-governmental not-for-profit Prague-based organization founded in 1997. Its main aim is to promote research and education in the field of international relations. AMO facilitates the expression and realization of ideas, thoughts, and projects in order to increase education, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.



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