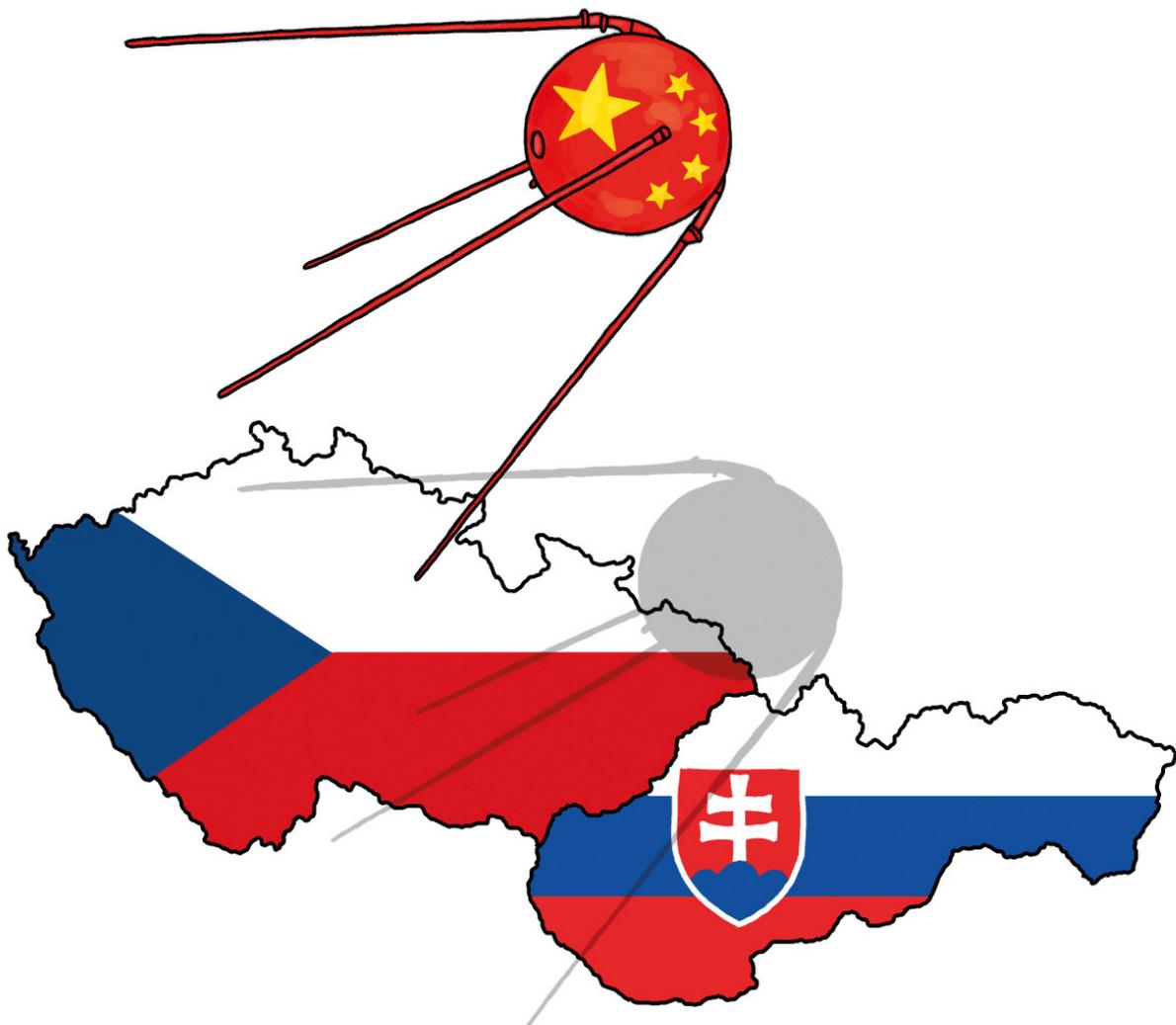


ANALYSIS

From East with Love: Dissecting Pro-China Bias in Czech and Slovak Alternative Media

Veronika Blablová, Peter Dubóczy, Pavel Havlíček, Matej Šimalčík,
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Analysis

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Summary

- Even prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a significant confluence of Russian and Chinese narratives was observable in alternative media outlets across Central Europe.
- This analysis focuses on China-related narratives which were disseminated by the six most-read online alternative media understood as spreading pro-Kremlin narratives in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The study analyzed Sino-Russian narrative confluence on five specific topic clusters: 5G, Chinese investment, Hong Kong protests, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.
- While China and Russia's external propaganda work differently, following distinct objectives and tactics, the convergence of messaging through similar channels and matching audiences found in Central Europe warrants attention.
- Alternative media closely reflect mainstream media discourse on the issues of Chinese investment and 5G, as identified by previous MapInfluenCE studies, yet this study reveals that the discourse on Hong Kong and Taiwan issues often follows Chinese propaganda points and localizes the issue to domestic audiences. An example of that is the narrative comparing the status of Taiwan to the issue of "Sudetenland" present in Czech alternative media.
- The analysis has shown that the proclaimed intention of the analyzed alternative media to publish 'alternative points of view' also translates into publishing Chinese party-state's views.
- The analyzed alternative media do not use manipulative techniques that are obvious at first sight. Instead, they employ subtle strategies, such as smuggling in specific quotes out of context, muddling facts, giving added prominence to Chinese and Russian voices, and deliberately omitting crucial information.
- The analyzed alternative media often cited foreign voices at the expense of local perspectives. Moreover, the quoted experts were often of dubious background.
- In the Czech Republic, Sputnik predominantly covered international events without a local angle, which may be explained by the tendency to reprint articles from its other language versions. At the same time, Parlamentní listy

provided more localized discussion, while Aeronet only occasionally commented on the issues in extensive commentaries.

- In Slovakia, most of the content of the alternative media was sourced from the local press agencies which allowed the media to hide articles exhibiting pro-Chinese narratives, disinformation and conspiracies. In several cases, the information was directly reprinted from official Chinese or Russian sources.
- Articles based upon Russian sources (e.g. Russia Today, Sputnik, or TASS agency) often discussed the relationship between Russia and China, describing it as mutually beneficial and as a counterweight to the Western liberal world order.
- Chinese sources quoted by the Slovak alternative outlets included the Global Times, Xinhua, and China Daily. Russian sources which were reprinted were RT (former Russia Today), the Strategic Culture Foundation, Politikus, RBC, Iarex, and the Czech localized version of Sputnik. Therefore, in addition to articles from Slovak press agencies, the content of the selected media also consists of content taken over from Russian state-owned and controlled media or from Kremlin-friendly organizations that can be considered extended hands of Russian interests.
- Discourse on Hong Kong largely carried Beijing's communicated position, which consists of claims of meddling by "external forces" in China's internal affairs and objections against "color revolutions."
- Even though Chinese sources were at times used by the Slovak alternative outlets, they did not feature as prominently as Russian sources. This suggests the Slovak alternative media scene is not particularly inclined to promote pro-China messaging (this does not imply that such articles do not appear, though).
- A persistent trend was mentioning the conflict between the US and China, illustrated for instance by trade war, the restrictions on Chinese companies, putting Huawei on the US "blacklist" or the US relations with Taiwan. The articles discussing these topics were mostly favoring China. This suggests that, for the Slovak and also Czech alternative media, the China topic is being instrumentalized in their crusade against the US and the global West.

Introduction

Media represent a crucial tool for providing frameworks for general interpretation and understanding of events and the dissemination of information. Thus, media not only report about social reality, but they help shape reality. Especially on remote subjects, detached from personal experience of the reader, such as the news from distant countries, the audience relies on impartial and factual reporting of media. Not surprisingly, given the role of media as shapers of local perceptions, various actors, starting with political and economic elites and ending with foreign powers, have long sought access to media in order to influence and manipulate narratives. In Central Europe, both Russia and China tick the box of such powers. Their influence efforts, however, have been previously analyzed separately, leaving the question of whether Russia and China coordinate in spreading narratives largely unanswered.

The series of previous analyses conducted by MapInfluenCE revealed a significant convergence of Chinese and Russian narrative efforts in Central and Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria, Russia Today and China Today have shared not only the office but even a publisher.¹ Russian disinformation servers in the Visegrád countries increasingly defend Huawei and help spread disinformation advantageous to Beijing, a trend observable in the cases of the Hong Kong protests and the nature of the outbreak of COVID-19. These outlets also grant ever greater space to Chinese ambassadors and officials to publish their op-eds² and present official Chinese talking points, unchallenged.

While China and Russia's influence efforts operate differently, following different objectives and tactics, the convergence of messaging through similar channels and to matching audiences in Central Europe warrants attention.

This analysis focuses on China-related narratives which were disseminated by online alternative media understood as spreading pro-Kremlin narratives in two Central European nations, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It seeks to answer crucial questions on the extent to which Chinese and Russian narratives overlap, which factors allow mutual reinforcement, as well as similarities and dissimilarities found in their respective media strategies.

The paper analyzes Sino-Russian media confluence on five specific topics (5G, Chinese investment, Hong Kong protests, Xinjiang, and Taiwan) in order to determine positions of pro-Kremlin media on China. It provides a comprehensive and unique analysis of key China-focused topics and sheds light on the logic of functioning of the alternative media ecosystems.

The analysis links to previous studies published by MapInfluenCE on China's image in Central European media (2018),³ media coverage of Chinese investment and 5G networks buildup (2020),⁴ and a special paper on Chinese propaganda and disinformation in Central Europe (2020).⁵ This analysis combines the know-how used previously in mapping Chinese narratives in traditional media in V4 countries with specific knowledge of the Czech and Slovak alternative media environment which spreads pro-Kremlin narratives in the region.

Research design and methodology

In recent years, research on Czech and Slovak alternative media has attracted considerable attention from local researchers. This influx of attention has resulted in a broadened knowledge of, for example, manipulative techniques applied by alternative media⁶ and the functioning of the alternative media websites, including the motivation based on its profits from advertising.⁷ Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that none of the previous studies have been devoted to the analysis of the China-Russia nexus thus far. Therefore, this paper focuses on the currently under-researched area of media confluence between two authoritarian regimes using reporting of alternative media outlets targeting the Czech and Slovak audiences for the case study.

To determine which online media outlets should be analyzed, MapInfluenCE created a list of alternative media utilizing already available studies and databases. The Czech list merged information provided by Atlas Konspirací⁸ and Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI).⁹ In the case of Slovakia, the initial selection was carried out on the basis of the public database of the Konšpirátori.sk¹⁰ watchdog initiative, as well as reports from the Analytical Unit of the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic.¹¹

It is important to mention that the lists do not employ a single methodology and differ in categorizing the alternative media. These differing methods include labeling outputs as “disinformation and conspiracy media,” “pro-Kremlin,” or simply terming them “anti-system websites.” For the analysis, MapInfluenCE decided to apply the term “alternative media” to differentiate them from the mainstream media as the selected media often refer to themselves as “alternative.”^{12,13} This term is broadly defined in previous research as “media that challenge the established channels and put forward alternative approaches and perspectives that contradict or diverge from an experienced dominant discourse in the mainstream media.”¹⁴ The “alternative” nature of the media can be demonstrated not only in reference to the published content but also the ways the news are produced, often utilizing clickbait and generally lacking in compliance with the ethical and unbiased journalistic work and transparency standards.

In addition to the above-mentioned definition framework, the specifics of selected alternative media also include a long-term non-critical adoption of some pro-Russian and anti-system narratives. In both Czech Republic and Slovakia, the disinformation ecosystem seems relatively diverse and well established. There are around 70 prominent online information sites that may be labeled as spreading information often aligned with the Kremlin-friendly narratives.¹⁵ This “information laundering,”¹⁶ hiding of original sources combined with the building of networks to systematically spread disinformation, seems to be one of the trends of recent years.¹⁷

While MapInfluenCE acknowledges instances of pro-Kremlin narratives being found in the selected media, the problem, however, lies in the absence of evidence (with one exception) which would directly point to the links of the media to Russia. Thus, at this point, it is possible to talk only about alternative media’s preference for

Russia over the West. Nevertheless, the media frequently take over statements by Russian government officials, show anti-systemic sentiments, and engage in non-factual criticism of Western structures such as the EU and NATO – conveying messages and narratives which are in line with Russia’s information operations and interests.¹⁸

The resulting list of alternative online media was narrowed down to the three outlets most popular among the local audiences.¹⁹ MapInfluCE then searched for reporting on five China-related topics which appeared in the alternative media outlets in the period from January 2019 to June 2021. Topics selected for the analysis included Chinese involvement in the 5G networks build-up, Chinese investment in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and three topics specifically sensitive for the Chinese leadership and frequently debated in Czech and Slovak media - Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.

The resulting dataset consists of 1,484 articles published by the Czech alternative media outlets and 815 texts published in Slovakia. The articles were filtered, using a specific set of keywords, in Newton Media Search media archive. The comprehensiveness of the dataset is thus dependent on the search engines used by the database. Subsequently, the filtered articles were assessed individually, omitting irrelevant media outputs. The resulting dataset was coded according to a number of criteria, including the type of the text (e.g., article, news, commentary, interview, reprinted article, etc.), sub-themes (topics discussed in relation to the main issue), and agenda-setters (authors of the texts and quoted individuals or institutions). The analysis considered the agenda-setters as presented by the media, with the stated affiliations and job occupations.

Owing to the specific characteristics of alternative media, authors of this study created specific categories of “reprinted articles” and “commented news.” The first refers to articles reprinted from other media without further editorial value. The latter refers to a reprinted article that was further commented on by the authors to provide insights and reactions to the information presented by the original article.

Another layer of the analysis focused on the identification of sentiment on a three-point scale, coding the media outputs as positive, negative, or neutral towards China. The sentiment expressed towards China was coded solely on the basis of the parts of the texts attributed to the author, omitting quotes and comments provided by external agenda-setters.

The Czech Republic: Alternative equals pro-Kremlin?

Veronika Blablová, Pavel Havlíček

MapInfluencE analyzed three Czech alternative online media outlets - Parlamentní listy, Aeronet, and Sputnik. The three outlets were chosen based on their high level of popularity among the readers of alternative websites.

Unlike the other two alternative media outlets, Sputnik Czechia (in this chapter referred to only as Sputnik) is directly linked to the Russian state. It currently operates in 30 different languages, including Czech and Slovak,²⁰ so it was of particular interest as the outlet conveying pro-Kremlin narratives.

Parlamentní listy has been the most prominent and widely read alternative information source in the Czech Republic, serving as a gateway between the mainstream and fringe information ecosystems. With a monthly readership reaching into the high-hundred-thousands,²¹ it is certainly the best established and most profitable media source. Parlamentní listy often reaches out to politicians and political parties, offering a platform to share their views and promote readership. This is probably the most controversial element since the outlet is often the only site where the most fringe voices receive such a prominent audience. The editorial policy is based on clickbait and, as such, often attracts highly polarizing or even self-contradictory views. Even the server's owner admitted that "mistakes" frequently occur, and that the media is mostly motivated by the desire to maximize profit.²²

Aeronet, the third media outlet selected for analysis, has a high level of conspiratorial content focusing on complex and often convoluted anti-US messaging. Its author "VK," which refers to the "Principal" or "Head of Carousel," is signed under the overwhelming majority of written contributions. He described his work as "guerilla journalism" that is supposed to open people's minds and challenge the supposedly US and Western-driven discourse in the country.²³ The expansion of the outlet is connected to the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 when Aeronet doubled down on the heavily pro-Kremlin and anti-Western rhetoric and stepped up its activities.

The three alternative media selected for analysis combine different approaches, specifically click-bait strategy and business-oriented logic (e.g. Parlamentní listy), weak editorial policy, conspiratorial and sensational content explaining the world order (Aeronet), and direct pro-Kremlin propaganda (Sputnik).

The analysis revealed that a significant portion of the outputs published by the three alternative media were only reprints of articles, commentaries, tweets, or Facebook posts lacking any editorial input or context. It is possible to identify certain patterns showing that some websites, namely Vasevec.cz (website initiated by Jiří Paroubek, former Czech Prime Minister), were reprinted regularly. Otherwise, the

sources of the majority of the reprinted articles seem to be chosen on a random basis and did not appear systematically. While Sputnik reprinted several articles from its other language versions, including Russian, it also used articles published in Western mainstream media such as The New York Times, Washington Post, etc. Unlike in the case of two previous media sites, Aeronet seems to operate on a different model where all its content was “home-grown” with its editor-in-chief “VK” authoring most of the content on China.

The analyzed media also often refrained from mentioning the text's author. This is crucial to note as the methodological approach also focuses on the role of agenda-setters, including journalists, as they play an important role in framing the discourse, in terms of choosing the reporting angles, quotes, and expert comments. Since the authors were rarely mentioned, their contributions could not be analyzed in detail. It is evident that the functioning of alternative media to a large extent erases the boundary between journalists and other contributors as the media publish and reprint commentaries and blog posts authored, for example, by politicians and economists, sometimes without indicating their affiliations and expertise.

Additionally, the analyzed media often employ a clickbait strategy, motivating the readers to click and view their website via using appealing, shocking, or otherwise intriguing headlines. This tendency applies to the majority of articles, including the ones categorized as news despite lacking any sentimental value. The headlines also often do not necessarily correspond with the content of the actual article.

5G: ENTER THE ‘EXPERTS’

The discussion on potential Chinese involvement in the 5G buildup in the Czech Republic was depicted in 290 articles on the analyzed alternative media websites, comprising 168 outputs in *Parlamentní listy*, 108 in Sputnik, and 14 in Aeronet. These media outputs were predominantly reprinted articles (33 percent) and news (32 percent), followed by commentaries (12 percent), interviews (10 percent) articles (7 percent), and other types (6 percent).

MapInfluenCE previously conducted an analysis of narratives on 5G buildup in mainstream media allowing for a comparison.²⁴ Similar to mainstream media, the 5G issue was to a large extent synonymous with the Chinese company Huawei. ZTE, another Chinese company, was mentioned rather sparsely, usually as a contextual reference to another Chinese company. The key themes related to this issue, therefore, referred to the security risks and warnings issued in various countries, with particular attention paid to the United Kingdom²⁵ and Germany, and the Five Eyes (an intelligence alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the US). As in the mainstream media, articles focused on available strategies for 5G buildup and cooperation with partners, especially the US and the EU,²⁶ including the toolbox for 5G security. Consequently, the 5G issue was a significant point of discussion during Mike Pompeo's visit to the Czech Republic²⁷ and Andrej Babiš' visit to the US.²⁸

The framing provided by the alternative media requires closer attention. Huawei was perceived as a security risk considerably less often - in 50 percent of all analyzed articles compared to 72 percent in the case of the mainstream media outputs published

IMAGE 1: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO 5G ISSUE AND CHINA IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE CZECH MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)



in 2019-2020. Instead, these media often chose to omit the contextual background and offered a reduced perspective of the Huawei issue, portraying it as part of the trade war between China and the US.²⁹ Such an oversimplification then left the reasoning leading to the adoption of measures unexplained, contributing to distorted impressions among readers.

Some authors argued that the US attempted to prevent China from being the leader in technology and therefore it issued the security warning against Huawei and decided to ask Canada to arrest Huawei FCO Meng Wanzhou.^{30,31} Other articles reminded of the Snowden affair³² and activities of the US intelligence³³ and suggested that China behaves in the same way as the US did in the past.³⁴ Other narratives emphasized the US pressure on its allies to refrain from cooperation with Huawei.³⁵ Comments on the Chinese involvement in the 5G buildup in the Czech Republic often provided an opportunity to reflect on attitudes of agenda-setters towards the US. As a result, such articles diverted the course of the debate towards the US and refrained from adequately addressing China.

Inevitably, the issue of 5G was frequently mentioned alongside another analyzed topic - the Chinese investment. These articles usually mentioned the Belt and Road Initiative, Czech President Miloš Zeman's visits to China and his comments on 5G, and potential China's involvement in a tender for nuclear power plant Dukovany-II. President Zeman also warned against China's reprisals due to the Czech negative stance on cooperation with Huawei, talking about the threat of Chinese divestment and negative impacts on Czech companies such as consumer loan provider Home Credit or car manufacturer Škoda with direct interests in China.³⁶ Thus, the frequent

co-occurrence of 5G and investment issues in the media debate on Czech-China relations may also be explained by these assumptions.

National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NÚKIB), which issued a security warning on Huawei in December 2018, was sometimes subjected to criticism from the alternative media. For example, the articles argued there was a lack of evidence for the NÚKIB's move.^{37,38} The criticism also applied to the Czech Security Information Service (BIS), which frequently mentioned China in its security reports, and its Director Michal Koudelka who was labeled as a "security risk for the country" due to focus on China and Russia while omitting the supposed threats posed by the West.³⁹ The criticism of intelligence services was to a large extent driven by President Zeman, who has long been counted among the most vocal supporters of cooperation with China and Russia.

Another significant narrative identified in the articles referred to China's technological prowess, stressing the attractiveness of the country for researchers⁴⁰ and the unparalleled research potential of Huawei.⁴¹ One article even mentioned that Huawei cell phones are among the most secure on the market as they cannot be infiltrated by intelligence agencies.⁴² These excerpts show how cooperation with China is often depicted as a necessity due to its prowess in technological research and development, while the security risks are downplayed.

Besides these tendencies, MapInfluenCE identified crucial differences among the analyzed media. In general, Sputnik predominantly covered the international agenda concerning 5G, especially the rivalry between the US and China. It is also crucial to emphasize that Sputnik often omitted to mention the security warning issued by Czech authorities and instead stressed the role of the US intelligence services. This may be caused by Sputnik's tendency to reprint articles detached from the local debates.

Parlamentní listy, on the other hand, focused more attention on the domestic debate in the Czech Republic, often providing space for comments of Czech agenda-setters. It featured topics explaining the functioning of 5G and 5G buildup in the Czech Republic, for example, the 5G conference held in Prague,⁴³ lawsuits issued by Huawei,⁴⁴ cooperation between Huawei and PPF Group,⁴⁵ and Prime Minister Babiš meeting with the Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic following the security warning on Huawei.⁴⁶ Another interesting issue was the comparison of Russia and China and potential threats that they represent, with several agenda-setters determining China posed greater risks.^{47,48} Notably, compared to the other analyzed media, Parlamentní listy endeavored to balance the discourse. For example, negative comments on China regarding abuse of technologies to gather data and categorize its population⁴⁹ were featured and space was provided to views supporting the stance presented by NÚKIB⁵⁰ and criticizing the pursuit of low-cost solutions to the detriment of security concerns.⁵¹

Compared to Sputnik and Parlamentní listy, Aeronet approached the 5G topic as a part of a larger analysis of the development in the world. Aeronet often emphasized its exclusive access to sources of information, allegedly also from the Chinese embassy in Prague,⁵² and published exhaustive commentaries on the issue. For instance, Aeronet stated that it knew the content of the cybersecurity authority's (NÚKIB's) report,⁵³ despite the fact that the officials refrained from providing detailed information. It also warned of Huawei using arbitration against the Czech Republic to prevent

other EU governments from “spreading US propaganda” against Huawei.⁵⁴ Aeronet also mentioned the alleged US strategy to control the EU 5G networks, standing behind the pressure on the EU countries to refrain from cooperation with Huawei.⁵⁵ The narrative that 5G networks will be used in efforts to bolster state surveillance and control of people’s lives was also present. For example, one article warned against 5G in general, referring to the social credit scheme in China, using the words “5G concentration camp.”⁵⁶

The sentiment analysis revealed that alternative media were neutral on China with only several cases of positive or negative attitudes towards China. These results are rooted in the methodological approach outlined in the introductory part of this paper. As the sentiment analysis considered solely the excerpts of the articles contributed by the authors, the resulting sentiment is predominantly neutral. On the other hand, it is crucial to note that it does not necessarily mean that the impression of the article as a whole was neutral. The authors of the texts navigated the discourse with the help of the agenda-setters that they decided to quote. This practice was already apparent in the mainstream media analysis in a previous MapInfluCE study⁵⁷ and may therefore be perceived as a common strategy applied by various media.

Whereas the positive articles underscored China’s technological development,^{58,59} the negative sentiment was evident in mentions emphasizing the vulnerability of critical technological infrastructure⁶⁰ and the connection of Huawei to the “communist dictatorship.”⁶¹

The analysis identified 175 agenda-setters involved in the debate, the majority of whom were quoted once. If they appeared more than once, this was usually the result of duplicate posts of the same comments. This was especially evident in the case of the NÚKIB’s security warning and Czech President Miloš Zeman’s comments criticizing NÚKIB⁶² and endorsing cooperation with Huawei in Hungary⁶³ and other countries. Among other political representatives, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, Senator Pavel Fischer, and Member of European Parliament Alexandr Vondra were frequently quoted in the articles. Whereas Babiš took a rather neutral stance, Fischer and Vondra took a negative stance towards cooperation with China.

As previously suggested, the media scarcely provided the name of the authors, resulting in a lack of data for a detailed analysis. However, it is possible to identify the role of former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek as a significant contributor to the debate on China as he frequently publishes comments on China-related issues. Apart from the former Prime Minister, several journalists could be cited as focusing frequently on the topic, such as Barbora Richterová, Marek Korejs, Radim Panenka, Zuzana Koulová, and Daniela Černá.

The articles lacked insights from experts, including China analysts, economists, or experts on technologies. Moreover, a closer look at the results shows that 24 percent of agenda-setters quoted by the alternative media as experts were from China and 14 percent from Russia. Sputnik, in particular, often quoted experts from Russia and provided considerable space for Chinese officials or experts. A similar trend was found in another MapInfluCE analysis conducted in Poland.⁶⁴ For instance, one Chinese analyst emphasized that “the Czech-China relations have always been friendly,” mentioned the benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative, and warned that “if the Czech Republic misses the opportunity to cooperate with China, its place will

be taken over by Hungary or Slovenia.⁶⁵ Consequently, the discourse lacked insights from local experts and, instead, provided space for uncritical comments disregarding the issue of security risks.

In the case of *Parlamentní listy*, MapInfluCE identified various Czech politicians and also Huawei representatives (including its Vice President for Central and Eastern Europe and Nordic Region Radoslaw Kedzia) commenting on the issue. Kedzia dismissed any links between Huawei and the Chinese Communist Party,⁶⁶ while Mika Lauhde, Huawei's Vice President for cybersecurity and privacy protection, promoted the company in general and claimed Huawei has not dealt with any serious cybersecurity incident in the past 30 years.⁶⁷

Aeronet significantly differed from both Sputnik and *Parlamentní listy* as it refrained from using quotes and the article authors remained anonymous.

CHINESE INVESTMENT: TOO MUCH, TOO LITTLE, TOO BAD?

This chapter draws conclusions based upon 208 media outputs with the majority being news (30 percent), closely followed by reprinted articles (27 percent), commented news (13 percent), interviews (13 percent), articles (7 percent), and others (10 percent). *Parlamentní listy* published the highest number of outputs amounting to 135, Sputnik referred to the Chinese investment in 63 cases and Aeronet in 10 cases.

The key focus regarding Chinese investment largely stayed within the Czech boundaries far outpacing other countries in terms of its primacy. Compared to other analyzed issues, the debate surrounding Chinese investment was logically more tailored to the local context, limiting the international context to occasional mentions of the Belt and Road Initiative⁶⁸ or situation in other countries, including Italy where the Chinese investments were supposedly beneficial as “the investors do not endeavor to buy the technologies to bring them [to China].”⁶⁹ Similar comments were also evident in an article on Iran emphasizing the economic benefits brought by Chinese tourists.⁷⁰

The investments (or lack thereof)⁷¹ were often mentioned as contextual background to Czech-China relations, including, for example, news on President Zeman's visits to China, especially the debate on his potential visit to the 17+1 summit in spring 2020.⁷² Also, other crucial themes were linked to Miloš Zeman, such as sport diplomacy due to famous Czech athletes, Jaromír Jágř and Pavel Nedvěd, accompanying him to China.⁷³

Similar to the findings from the analysis of Czech mainstream media,⁷⁴ operations of Chinese company CEFC, whose shares were acquired by the Chinese state company CITIC in 2018 due to CEFC's bankruptcy, dominated the discourse. However, the alternative media rarely referred to concrete examples of Chinese investment in the country, with the Slavia Praha soccer club being presented as the most successful investment.⁷⁵ On the other hand, the media often provided information on Czech companies PPF, Home Credit, and Škoda as it regards their involvement in the Chinese market.⁷⁶

Inevitably, media outputs analyzed by the study often focused on economic cooperation with China in general, also mentioning the specific character of the

IMAGE 2: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO CHINESE INVESTMENT IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE CZECH MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)



Chinese business practices.⁷⁷ This led to several mentions of the alleged uniqueness of the Czech Republic as being the “gate” for the strategic investment from China.⁷⁸ Interestingly, several articles provided space to traditional Chinese narratives of the peaceful nature of China⁷⁹ and one article emphasized the benefits of “cheap and high-quality Chinese products leading to lower costs for the Czech population.”⁸⁰ Nevertheless, these articles promoting Chinese investment were rather scarce, with the majority of articles focusing on factual information and news updates.

The cancellation of the sister city agreement between Prague and Beijing and later Shanghai, as well as subsequent twinning with Taiwanese capital Taipei, reopened the debate on China’s potential reprisal and anticipated losses of Chinese investment. Therefore, a common comparison emerged between investment provided by China and Taiwan. Of course, this also incorporated other topics, such as cultural diplomacy and related cancellation of planned concerts of the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra in China.⁸¹ Perhaps most importantly, the tensions between Prague and Beijing provided a space to use the issue in domestic political infighting. The analyzed articles often quoted political representatives, such as President Miloš Zeman⁸² or Tomio Okamura,⁸³ leader of the right-wing populist political party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), who criticized the Prague Mayor Hřib and the potential negative impact of his moves on Czech-China relations. Later, similar narratives were targeted at the Senate President Miloš Vystrčil due to his visit to Taiwan in autumn 2020.⁸⁴ At the same time, the opposite narratives were featured. For example, the Greens (Zelení) called for Czech exit from the 16+1 format, due to the growing and non-transparent Chinese efforts to influence Czech politics.⁸⁵

Several articles touched upon European concerns regarding China and its promises of infrastructure investment and its policy of ‘divide and rule’⁸⁶ as causing internal divisions of the continent.⁸⁷ Apart from this, the articles sparsely addressed the EU-China relations, concentrating predominantly on the local debate.

As in all other case studies researched for the paper, outputs published by Aeronet offered unique and exhaustive explanations. A series of articles provided information on the relations between CEFC and Slovak J&T company, resulting in statements that Chinese investments were in fact funds drained from Slovak banks which were previously supposedly siphoned off by Chinese mafia. Moreover, Aeronet suggested that Ye Jianming, CEFC chair and an advisor to President Zeman, was a member of the Fujian mafia⁸⁸ and Aeronet labeled this affair “Operation Little Mole” (Krtěček).⁸⁹ Another article of this series assumed that the Chinese mafia paid for a part of the campaign of (unsuccessful) presidential contender Jiří Drahoš.⁹⁰ As appearing in all of the analyzed issues, it is also important to note that Aeronet often employed conspiracy theories concerning Israel, for instance, claiming that Du Wei, the Chinese Ambassador to Israel, was killed by Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, on a request of the US administration.⁹¹

Many of the relevant articles were neutral with only a minority being positive or negative. The positive attitude towards China was expressed, for instance, in exclusive articles authored by Zhang Jianmin, Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic, as he promoted the Belt and Road Initiative⁹² and mentioned that Chinese companies investing in the Czech Republic “bring tangible benefits.”⁹³ Other interesting outputs were commentaries written by former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek praising both the Chinese investment and system of education⁹⁴ and evaluating the Chinese investment in soccer club Slavia as “simply great.”⁹⁵ One of the positive articles also presented China as a geopolitically responsible country, stressing its peaceful and cooperative nature.⁹⁶ Indeed, these narratives are typically employed by Chinese officials attempting to present China as a cooperative and peace-loving partner with a long and rich history.⁹⁷ The narratives are also employed when emphasizing the difference between Chinese and US actions, therefore presenting China as an alternative and liable partner for cooperation.

The negative comments were found in contrasting the investment from China and Taiwan. Karel Schwarzenberg, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, labeled Chinese investment as “funny”⁹⁸ and another author, Jan Ziegler, likened Chinese investments to a Loch Ness monster, quipping that “everybody speaks about it, but nobody has ever seen it.”⁹⁹

A total number of 125 various agenda-setters contributed to the discourse on Chinese investment with the majority quoted personas being Czechs (85 percent), showing the local character of this issue. At the same time, 5 percent of the agenda-setters were of Chinese origin and 4 percent from Russia.

The debate was largely formed by politicians (37 percent), with President Miloš Zeman being the most prominent voice, followed by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and other representatives of the Office of the President, comprising Vratislav Mynář, Chancellor of the Office, and Spokesman Jiří Ovčáček. Otherwise, the agenda-setters were quoted mostly once, and if more frequently, it was mostly a repetition of previously mentioned comments. For instance, Andrej Babiš’ remark on the lack of Chi-

nese investment in the Czech Republic was constantly recycled by the journalists.¹⁰⁰ Noticeably, Zeman's comments on the issue have shifted to be mostly neutral, despite being a long-term proponent of intensified cooperation with China. He frequently simply stated that Chinese investment remained low.¹⁰¹

As mentioned in case of the other analyzed issues, Jiří Paroubek was among the most active authors, followed by journalists Radim Panenka, Daniela Černá, Zuzana Koulová and Marek Korejs. Apparently, despite the Chinese investment being one of the core and long-term topics regarding China, the discourse still lacked profound expert contributions. This may be caused by multiple factors. The alternative media may regard the experts as unnecessary components of the debate and chose not to publish their insights or the media may be prone to give voice on the issues to other actors, who are not necessarily experts in the field. It may also be caused by the reluctance of the established scholars to provide their comments to alternative media outlets.

HONG KONG: VEXED BY THE CITY

An analysis of the coverage of Hong Kong in the alternative media considered 211 media outputs with the majority being news (48 percent), followed by reprinted articles (22 percent), commentaries (14 percent), interviews (9 percent), and other types (7 percent). *Parlamentní listy* covered the issue most extensively with 119 outputs, whereas *Sputnik* published 90 articles and *Aeronet* only two texts.

Undoubtedly, the key themes related to Hong Kong were the protests against the extradition law,¹⁰² including the introduction of the new National Security Law. Alternative media also focused on protest-related violence and comparison of police and protesters' behavior.¹⁰³ Logically, the articles often quoted proclamations of the Chinese political representatives and endeavored to explain the position of China on the situation in Hong Kong.¹⁰⁴ Hence, "one country, two systems" and interference into internal Chinese affairs were among the most frequent topics representing the contextual background to the protests. The alternative media also extensively covered, again, the tensions between the US and China, including the US Human Rights and Democracy Act,¹⁰⁵ altering the legal status of Hong Kong, and imposing mutual sanctions.

Unlike in the case of the two previous case studies, which also draw data for comparison from the previous studies of mainstream media, *MapInfluenCE* identified clear narratives used by the Chinese political representatives and Chinese media. The articles often stressed China's 5,000-years-long history¹⁰⁶ and the colonial past of Hong Kong, emphasizing that Hong Kong under the rule of the United Kingdom was not democratic.¹⁰⁷ Another intriguing narrative stressed the "double standards" of other countries and media, comparing the protests and the police response to protests elsewhere, including Barcelona, Paris, or the US.¹⁰⁸ These findings show that the proclaimed intention of the analyzed media to publish alternative points of view may also translate into publishing China's official propaganda. Consequently, if lacking further context and expert explanations, it may considerably impact the reader's interpretations of the issue.

**IMAGE 3: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO HONG KONG
IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE CZECH MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)**



Related to the notion of interference in the internal Chinese affairs are the attempts to portray the US (and sometimes also other Western countries) as instigators of the protests,¹⁰⁹ sometimes even naming specific organizations, such as the Human Rights Watch (HRW) or National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

It is noticeable that all these narratives were common to the presentation of the events provided by Chinese state television CGTN and it may be therefore assumed that the narratives employed by the Czech alternative media might have been to a certain extent inspired by Chinese media. CGTN also actively labeled the protesters as separatists, terrorists or simply stigmatized the young people as lacking knowledge of the previous colonial past.¹¹⁰ This tendency was rarely identified in the Czech alternative media. However, *Parlamentní listy* published a letter from an unspecified author from Hong Kong depicting the situation. Although not necessarily positive on China, this letter portrayed the protesters as unorganized groups of “bandits” damaging buildings and public infrastructure and disrupting traffic. The end of the article suggests that these activities were organized through a mobile app run in English, with a “white man” giving orders.¹¹¹ This highly likely refers to the application known as *HKmap.live* which, according to Hong Kong authorities, was used to attack police and track their movement. The app was subsequently removed from the Apple Store.¹¹² The author of the letter then distorted this information, suggesting that the protests were organized by foreigners. Interestingly, similar narratives were identified also in the analysis of Slovak media, suggesting a broader proliferation of Chinese narratives on the Hong Kong events into the local media.

As in the two previous case studies, the strategy of the analyzed alternative media largely followed the already described patterns. Whereas *Sputnik* mostly depicted international development, especially tensions between China and the US, *Parlamentní listy* chiefly reflected the debate on the issue in the Czech Republic. Authors critical

to China compared the situation in Hong Kong to the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1968 when referring to the possible military intervention. The news articles informed the readers about the extradition treaty between the Czech Republic and China and the proposals of the Czech liberal-conservative political party TOP09 to grant visas to asylum seekers from Hong Kong.¹¹³ Another article referred to the Czech Senate calling on Czech political representatives to boycott the upcoming Winter Olympic Games held in China.¹¹⁴

The debate in *Parlamentní Listy* focused on a wide range of issues, providing space to both positive and negative positions on the issue, suggesting attempts to balance the narratives on the analyzed events.

Compared to the other two media, Aeronet did not pay much attention to the Hong Kong developments. Nevertheless, for instance, it informed about CIA and National Endowment for Democracy (NED) “sponsoring, inciting and leading anti-China forces in Hong Kong” in an alleged attempt to incite a ‘color revolution’.¹¹⁵

Similar to the previous two case studies, the sentiment analysis shows the majority of coverage as neutral, with only several positive or negative mentions. However, these individual cases deserve a closer look. *Parlamentní listy* published two texts authored by Zhang Jianmin, Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic, emphasizing the supposed extremely violent and illegal nature of protests and “double standards” adopted by some countries and organizations that close their eyes to the protesters’ behavior.¹¹⁶ He also mentioned that China has effectively employed the “one country, two systems” policy which is supposedly the source of Hong Kong’s success.¹¹⁷

Another interesting commentary was written by Senator Jaroslav Doubrava, who is known for his trip to Crimea in 2018¹¹⁸ and his letters to the Chinese Ambassador criticizing planned visits to Taiwan initiated by the then President of the Senate Jaroslav Kubera.¹¹⁹ Senator Doubrava suggested that the Hong Kong government only intended to supplement the current legislation and the extradition law had nothing to do with limiting Hong Kong judicial independence. Furthermore, Doubrava predicted the diminution of Hong Kong’s significance to a large but unimportant port.¹²⁰

The outputs coded as negative were mostly reprints of social media posts. For example, Senator Tomáš Czernin, a proponent of common EU policy towards China,¹²¹ criticized the communist and totalitarian regime in China as having destroyed the remnants of democracy and freedom in Hong Kong.¹²² Former Member of Parliament and current Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský, known for his critical stance on China and Russia and their potential involvement in critical infrastructure,¹²³ raised the question of the existing Czech extradition treaty with China and its possible impacts¹²⁴ and Cardinal Dominik Duka emphasized the religious and human rights abuses in China in his open letter.¹²⁵

The analysis identified 123 agenda-setters involved in the discourse formation. Unsurprisingly, 70 percent of the speakers were of Czech origin but the alternative media, especially Sputnik, very often provided comments of Chinese agenda-setters (20 percent). Usually, the most prominent speakers were officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Minister Wang Yi.

The discourse was largely steered by politicians (38 percent). Among the Czech political representatives, Senator Pavel Fischer and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Tomáš Petříček frequently shared their insights on the issue. Politicians were

followed by journalists (22 percent), state administration (16 percent), and experts (16 percent). It is crucial to note that the dominance of politicians in the discourse is caused by the logic of the alternative media as they refrain from mentioning the authors of the articles, putting journalists in the background.

Former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek, as in all previous case studies, contributed with several commentaries on the issue. He emphasized China's resistance to turbulent protests, which were supposed to provoke a stern reaction from authorities but stayed within the city's boundaries instead. Meanwhile, he criticized Czech Senators for their efforts to strengthen ties with Taiwan, labeling them "useful idiots."¹²⁶ Paroubek also drew a parallel between the situation in Hong Kong and potential attempts of an American state, putting New York as an example, to seek independence.¹²⁷

Another frequent contributor to the debate, either as an author or mentioned as an expert, was Jan Campbell, likely a German citizen of Czech nationality,¹²⁸ who often provides comments on geopolitical issues to alternative Czech media. Concerning Hong Kong, he criticized the European Parliament resolution on the situation in Hong Kong, claiming its interference in internal Chinese affairs.¹²⁹ He also suggested that the Maidan protest organizers were "exported" to Hong Kong.¹³⁰

XINJIANG: A LOST WOR(L)D?

In comparison to previous case studies, the topic of Xinjiang was the least covered with a total of 55 mentions in the given period. This fact illustrates that there was little attention dedicated to the region, which is often associated with human rights violations perpetrated by the Chinese regime. *Parlamentní listy* has dedicated a total of 27 texts, followed by *Sputnik* (26) and *Aeronet* with just one article on the topic.

In the case of *Parlamentní listy*, the majority of articles approached the topic formally neutrally. Altogether 17 articles were reposted from other sources, ranging from Facebook accounts of Czech politicians to *Literární noviny* (a newspaper cooperating with Chinese state-owned *Guangming Daily*)¹³¹ and Czech mainstream media.

Three contributions favoring China's positions were identified in *Parlamentní listy* when Xinjiang was discussed. Two of them were written by the former Czech Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek, who has also featured prominently in the debates on 5G and Chinese investment. *Parlamentní listy* reprinted his texts from *Vaševěc* website. The remaining positive piece was written by Jan Campbell, mentioned already in the analysis of the debate on the Hong Kong issue.¹³²

On the other hand, the political commentaries and reprints featuring the Pirate MEP Markéta Gregorová, Senator Pavel Fischer as well as MP Vít Kaňkovský from the Christian Democratic Party (KDU-ČSL). They focused on the abuse of human rights, the totalitarian regime in China, and the concentration camps in Xinjiang.

Interestingly, in November 2019, *Parlamentní listy* published a common appeal by the Czech parliamentarians from across the party criticizing China for its human rights violations, torture as well as illegal sale of human organs. It directly states: "I believe we have the diplomatic tools to express our fundamental opposition to what is happening in China in the field of human rights - whether it is the imprisonment and torture of political opponents, religious and ethnic minorities and illegal organ

harvesting in the People's Republic of China, and therefore, it is extremely necessary for the Chamber of Deputies to comment on this fundamental issue."¹³³

Parlamentní listy also gave space to MEP Markéta Gregorová who spoke about the Chinese concentration camps, persecution as well as the need to impose economic sanctions against China on the occasion of awarding Ilham Tohti with the Sakharov Prize in December 2019.¹³⁴

In terms of topics selection, Uyghurs, human rights, concentration camps as well as Czech-Chinese relations played the most important role, but a number of others, including the “West,” sanctions, EU, US, external interference, or Islam featured prominently too. Terrorism and geopolitics were also listed among the topics, even if less frequently.

IMAGE 4: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO XINJIANG IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE CZECH MEDIA OUTLETS (2019-6/2021)



Due to an insufficient number of Aeronet-published articles on the topic (only one article), it is not possible to draw any substantial conclusions beyond looking at the general nature of the contributions, which typically reflect conspiratorial nature, high level of mistrust towards the EU, NATO, and above all the US, as well as frequent references to anti-Semitism.

The third analyzed media outlet Sputnik mostly focused on international perspective on the issues while Czech domestic politics played only a secondary role. Sputnik depicted the United States as the main villain and had a tendency to focus on the rivalry between the US and China. If the articles mentioned Russia, they referred to Russian disagreement with the US intervention in China's internal affairs.¹³⁵

Interestingly, none of Sputnik's articles could be characterized as negative towards China. When it comes to agenda-setters, it is once again the case that Sputnik extensively quotes Chinese and Russian officials, including the spokespersons of Chinese MFA, Minister Wang Yi, and a number of Russian analysts, such as Alexey Sarychev and Edvard Chesnokov. The inclusion of Chinese and Russian voices may have given Sputnik's narratives a particular leaning while being careful not to take

a side itself. Apart from foreign agenda-setters, the texts also featured the Czech regional politician Jiří Čunek and Senator Zdeněk Nytra.

TAIWAN: THE NEW PRESSURE POINT

The issue of Taiwan's depiction in the Czech alternative media outlets arguably brought the most interesting results. Czech media, including the alternative scene, have paid very close attention to the phenomenon (publishing more than 720 articles on the issue). The reason for such attention has been, above all, the visit of the Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil to the island at the beginning of September 2020. The topic also played a leading role in Czech domestic politics and became a point of contention among the political parties and individual politicians.

The media coverage was particularly dense between June and October 2020, connected to Miloš Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan and subsequent escalation of bilateral relations when the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi threatened Vystrčil would "pay a heavy price" for the trip.

IMAGE 5: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO TAIWAN IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE CZECH MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)



Parlamentní listy focused on domestic-driven agenda connected to the Czech political debate about Taiwan. The alternative media outlet published a number of critical texts on China (31), which were complemented by comments with a positive sentiment (26). Unsurprisingly, most of the latter quoted Chinese individuals and institutions (such as the Chinese Embassy in Prague, ministries of defense, foreign affairs, etc.). The site hosted a large amount of reprinted content (176) as well as com-

mentaries (55), some of which were politically heavily loaded and had polarizing views on China. While the overwhelming majority of articles were formally neutral, through the selection of agenda-setters and clickbait headlines, traces of manipulation are clearly visible.

Parlamentní listy covered several key topics in connection to Taiwan, such as Miloš Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan, One-China Policy in general, and the role of Taiwan in Czech-Chinese relations. A substantial space was given to domestic debate, geopolitical rivalry between the US and China (though proportionally with less emphasis than was the case of Sputnik), activities of the United States in the region with a particular focus on Taiwan and the Czech foreign policy, including vis-à-vis China and Taiwan, often portrayed as the continuation of the US activities.

The site focused very closely on the Czech landscape and politicization of the Czech Chinese relations, also in the context of Taiwan, by the domestic actors. Hence, it is not surprising that the President of the Senate Miloš Vystrčil was referred to in 272 cases, while the Czech President Miloš Zeman in 183 cases. Other individuals and institutions, such as the Prague Castle's Chancellor Vratislav Mynář (42 cases), Chinese advisor to Zeman Ye Jianming (3 times), or the now deceased Czech businessman with close links to China Petr Kellner and his PPF group were mentioned 15 times. On the other hand, Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib, who is known for his critique of the Chinese communist regime, appeared in 75 cases and the then President of Czech Senate Jaroslav Kubera in 148 instances.

The overwhelming majority of positive sentiment expressed towards China in Parlamentní listy was identified in reposted articles authored by Jiří Paroubek and press releases issued by a far-right political party of Tomio Okamura. Chinese official narratives appeared in reprints carried by Parlamentní listy. For instance, in October 2019, Parlamentní listy reposted the official proclamation of the City of Beijing rebuking Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib who questioned the "One-China clause" in a bilateral agreement with Beijing.¹³⁶ In another case from June 2020, Parlamentní listy reprinted the official statement of the Chinese Embassy in Prague titled "There Is Only One China in the World and Taiwan Is Its Part."¹³⁷

Parlamentní listy also published an interview¹³⁸ with Zhang Jianmin, the Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic, in which he reacted to allegations surrounding the death of Jaroslav Kubera who was supposedly under pressure from the Chinese embassy due to his intentions to visit Taiwan. Zhang Jianmin stressed that his last meeting with Kubera was calm and he mentioned a potential for change in his decision to travel to Taiwan, not referring to any pressure from the Chinese side.

A specific narrative related to the comparison between Taiwan and the so-called "Sudetenland," the Czech borderland with Germany and Austria, occupied and integrated by the Third Reich Nazi Germany in 1939, was used by several Czech stakeholders.¹³⁹ This included an interview with Rudolf Jindrák, the Head of the Foreign Affairs Office of Czech President Miloš Zeman.¹⁴⁰ A similar argument was repeated by the far-right politicians¹⁴¹ including Jiří Kobza. The foreign affairs expert of the SPD party compared the visit of Taiwan to a hypothetical meeting of the head of National People's Congress with members of a separatist movement requesting compensations from the Czechs for the expulsion of Germans after 1945 and demand return of German properties.¹⁴² This topic is often abused by the far-right and

far-left circles in Czech politics in order to mobilize their electorate by playing the nationalist card. The same comparison was also repeated by the leader of SPD Tomio Okamura.¹⁴³ He also added that the Taiwan visit would harm the Czech interests and only benefited the US.

Parlamentní listy also carried articles which mentioned China negatively. The negative position on China was mostly found in texts authored by both Czech and foreign politicians, such as the Club of Non-Engaged Non-Partisans (KAN) and its leader František Laudát, Miloš Vystrčil, Marek Benda, Tomáš Czernin, Jan Lipavský, Karel Schwarzenberg, Miroslav Jurečka, Alexandr Vondra, Miroslava Němcová, Václav Láska and Petr Fiala.

Former Minister of Culture Daniel Herman, for example, spoke about the Czech-Taiwanese relations in an article titled “In the Relations of Two Sovereign Countries, Nobody Is Eligible to Interfere.”¹⁴⁴ Former MP and the current Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský asked in his commentary a number of questions related to Taiwan, including what the WHO is going to do to recognize the added value of Taiwan in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic or what steps should the Czech Republic take to promote the status of the island within the organization.¹⁴⁵

Sputnik published a relatively large number of reprints published already by Czech and international media. Once again Sputnik’s central theme was the tensions between the US and China. If referring to Russia, the articles mentioned key events in Czech-Russian relations, such as Nord Stream 2 and the removal of a Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev’s statue. These issues were usually mentioned alongside references to China as these two countries sometimes appear in the media together, for example, in the discourse on Dukovany or security warnings issued by Czech intelligence services.

In addition, Sputnik gave extensive space to Chinese experts, politicians, and ministries’ representatives to comment on the issue of Taiwan. Some of the cases could be even perceived as blunt attempts to inject propaganda into the discourse.

While cases of open propaganda were relatively rare, they provide a very interesting view of the formation and spread of pro-China narratives by Sputnik. Articles seldom referred to Chinese sources directly (as was the case of the exclusive interview with the Chinese Ambassador published by Parlamentní listy), yet there were instances of Sputnik bringing forward a Chinese expert, such as when it carried an interview with Cui Hongjian, an expert from the Institute of Europe operating under the Chinese Institute for International Affairs. Cui gave a detailed account of Czech-Chinese relations and highlighted the risks of escalation of mutual relations, which was contrasted with the position of Brussels and other EU members.¹⁴⁶ Pro-China narratives were also put forward by individual Czech authors. The case to highlight is the text authored by Alena Novotná who wrote about the allegedly subordinate role of the Czech Republic to the United States, calling the Czech Republic “a useful idiot.” In the same article, two Czech extreme political voices were interviewed and instrumentalized to bash the opposition.¹⁴⁷ This specific article put forward anti-liberal arguments and opposed views critical towards China.

In other instances, Sputnik may have attempted to - at least in its self-assessment - strike a balance between two extreme poles, providing space to various voices. Thus, out of 202 texts, only a few articles were coded as downright negative on China (five)

and even fewer positive (three). However, it is worth emphasizing that the neutrality of texts has been achieved thanks to the choice of topics and experts.

Aeronet offered a predominantly Russia's view of the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China. Altogether 10 articles focused on a mixture of different topics, such as Zionism or the role of EU, NATO, and the United States. China itself was not at the center of attention for Aeronet. Interestingly, it is possible to trace a clear intention to engage with the domestic agenda and individuals, which the site opposes in their mutual disputes. Pavel Novotný, the Mayor of Prague District Řeporyje, who has previously commented on China and Russia affairs, has been quite a frequent commentator quoted by Aeronet.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, the most frequent topics appearing in media discourse may suggest that the narratives presented by the alternative media correlate to a certain extent with the findings identified in the mainstream media.

First, this trend may be partly explained by the number of reprinted articles coming from various both alternative and mainstream media sources, without additional editorial input, as well as the large number of articles categorized as news that were likely reprinted from the press agencies. Nevertheless, the analyzed Czech alternative media did not indicate press agencies as a source of their reporting.

Second, the crucial findings lie not in the most occurring sub-themes but their interpretation. The analysis has shown that the proclaimed intention of the analyzed media to publish alternative points of view may also translate into publishing China's views. This tendency, identified in the Czech (but also Slovak) analysis of the Hong Kong protests, suggests that Chinese narratives on the events proliferated into the local media. Identification of these narratives may be arduous as they are most obvious if put into context with the results of the MapInfluCE mainstream media analysis and compared with the narratives present in Chinese media. It means that the analyzed alternative media do not necessarily use manipulative techniques that would be obvious at first sight but instead, they employ subtle strategies of smuggling in specific quotes, confusing the facts, giving space to Chinese and Russian voices, or omitting crucial information.

It is possible to identify significant differences in terms of the focus of the media outlets. Whereas Sputnik predominantly depicted the international events, which may to a certain extent be explained by the tendency to reprint articles from its other language versions, *Parlamentní listy* provided a more localized discussion on the issues. Aeronet, on the other hand, only published original outputs constituting extensive commentaries on the issue.

The analysis of the Czech alternative media and their coverage of five crucial China-related issues has identified predominantly neutral sentiment which correlates with findings of the mainstream media analysis. However, it is crucial to emphasize that these results are anchored in the methodological approach, which only considers the excerpts of texts contributed by their authors. Consequently, the resulting

sentiment of the texts is undeniably shaped by agenda-setters. Therefore, the choice of quotes is a decisive element in formulating the narratives on events.

The analyzed alternative media frequently featured comments of foreign agenda-setters from China and Russia. While referring to China-related topics, publishing China's position on the issue is a natural part of the discourse as long as it is put into context and properly explained, which was not often the case in the analyzed coverage. Otherwise, it may considerably impact the reader's interpretation of the issue. This was particularly apparent in the lack of comments by Czech experts on China and a high number of comments on the issue provided by experts from Russia and China.

The professed effort of alternative media to showcase the plurality of opinions leads to the blurring of distinctions between relevant and irrelevant sources and the amplification of fringe voices. Likewise, the distinction between professional journalists and bloggers publishing their opinion articles, often without indicating their expertise, affiliation, or source of information disappears. This is also apparent in the tendency to anonymize the author, which means that the author may not be held accountable for the output.

Slovakia: Propaganda hidden in a plain sight

Matej Šimalčík, Peter Dubóczy, Michaela Ružičková, Barbara Kelemen

In Slovakia, the research of China-related narratives focused on three most-read online alternative media: Hlavné správy, Hlavný denník, and Infovojna. All of these media were at some point listed in the database of the Konšpirátori.sk watchdog initiative, which deals with the evaluation of websites with frivolous, misleading, fraudulent, conspiratorial, or propaganda content.¹⁴⁸ Currently, the website lists only Infovojna as the project was ordered by the court to delist Hlavné správy and Hlavný denník from the website after their respective publishers targeted Konšpirátori.sk with strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP). Although both media show an effort to re-profile themselves and therefore penetrate the mainstream media space through the publication of objective content (mostly through the takeover of the content of press agencies), it can still be stated that problematic content remains present in both cases.

Hlavné správy were removed from the database in March 2020 on the basis of a court decision, but the expert committee of the Konšpirátori.sk project continues to consider it problematic¹⁴⁹ due to the spread of manipulative and false information as it has reposted articles from websites such as Sputnik and RT, which are spreading Kremlin propaganda around the world, at least since 2014. The server Hlavné správy uncritically takes over problematic narratives, leaves no room for the comments of parties involved, manipulates their claims, publishes unfounded allegations, and does not verify their sources.¹⁵⁰

At the time of the selection of the analyzed media, Hlavný denník was still part of the aforementioned Konšpirátori.sk database.¹⁵¹ However, it was removed from the database in August 2021, following a court order. Hlavný denník publishes a mixture of conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives. Extreme right-wing politicians are also regular contributors, spreading openly racist statements. The site also uncritically spreads pro-Kremlin propaganda and anti-system narratives.¹⁵² According to the evaluation of Konšpirátori.sk, the outlet does not respect the basic principles of journalistic ethics. For example, it does not publish corrective reports and leaves available uncorrected reports that have objectively proved to be untrue. It does not publish possible reactions of the affected party, it liberally mixes up news articles and commentaries, it repeatedly publishes shocking false statements in order to increase traffic, sometimes correcting them later.¹⁵³

The last analyzed outlet Infovojna.sk still appears in the above-mentioned database of websites with disputed content with a rating of 8.8 points out of 10.¹⁵⁴ The website was established in 2015 and is operated by Norbert Lichtner, one of the founders of the conspiracy internet radio Slobodný vysielateľ. Unlike the first two selected

media, Infovojna does not shy away from its alternative orientation and in recent times it can be considered the most radical outlet in the selection. The problematic content and functioning of Infovojna.sk (e.g. compliance with standards and ethics of journalism) has similar characteristics as in the case of two other selected media - uncritical adoption of non-factual content, the presence of conspiracy theories, or the dissemination of hoaxes.

All three examined media have already established a track record of promoting pro-Kremlin narratives. Previous MapInfluenCE research also revealed that some of these media or authors publishing therein have also been engaged in spreading pro-China narratives.¹⁵⁵

Similar to the Czech case study, in the course of investigating the China-focused narratives in Slovak alternative media, MapInfluenCE focused on five topics that are considered to be central to the discourse on China: 5G networks (193 articles), investment (88 articles), Hong Kong (304 articles), Xinjiang (94 articles), and Taiwan (136 articles).

Similar to the Czech case, the analysis has revealed that the media discourse on China in Slovak alternative media bears similarities to the discourse previously observed in mainstream media.¹⁵⁶ Most China-focused content in the alternative media is sourced from the local press agencies, either TASR (a state-controlled news agency) or SITA (a privately-owned news agency). This trend has been especially prominent in the coverage of human rights-related topics. In the case of articles discussing China in relation to Taiwan, 60 percent of articles were sourced from press agencies, while in the case of Xinjiang, it was 69 percent. In the case of coverage of Hong Kong protests, articles originating from press agencies constituted as much as 80 percent of examined outputs. This trend was not as prominent in topics connected to Slovakia's economy and security topics. 40 percent of articles regarding Chinese involvement in the 5G networks and 20 percent of articles related to the investment, in general, came from the press agencies. Russian media were also an important source of content for the Slovak alternative media outlets. Except for Xinjiang coverage, Russian sources featured in at least 5 percent of articles across the analyzed topics. The largest share was identified among articles on Chinese investment, articles on which were sourced from Russian outlets in as many as 20 percent. By comparison, Chinese sources were quoted only in a handful of cases.

However, it does not mean that the Slovak alternative media discourse did not differ from the mainstream media reporting. Adopting press agency coverage may be a deliberate strategy, allowing for a prima facie perception of regular coverage of contentious topics, while at the same time publishing problematic content under the guise of neutrality.

5G DISCUSSION: REDUCED TO CHINA-US CONFLICT

Slovak alternative media outlets were highly active in their coverage of the 5G buildup. In total, the three media outlets selected for the analysis published 193 articles. In particular, Hlavné správy published 120 articles, Hlavný denník carried out 68 articles and Infovojna published 5 articles.

Looking at the sources of all these articles, 78 articles used one or both of the Slovak press agencies (TASR, SITA) as a source of information. This figure represents 40 percent of all the analyzed articles. In addition to Slovak press agencies, a foreign press agency (AP) was mentioned as the source in 9 articles (less than 5 percent of the dataset). We may assume that the analyzed media outlets were (with mixed success) trying to bring more unbiased and objective information, which can partly improve their image of an alternative and sometimes non-relevant source.

Articles attributed to specific authors made up 27 percent of all content relevant to the 5G topic. These articles in many cases included insights and opinions. Finally, some articles mentioned some other problematic media as a source, for instance, RT, Sputnik, the Strategic Culture Foundation, or the Czech outlet Aeronet. Hlavný denník also led in terms of publishing articles authored by specific authors. This outlet published authored articles in the period from April 2019 to mid-July 2019 and also from August 2020 to the end of April 2021. In the meantime (from the beginning of July 2019 to August 2020) the author of published articles was mostly specified as “the editorial board” (“hlavnydennik.sk”). In four cases, information from Slovak press agency TASR was provided. One of the articles came from the external author Elena Pustovojtová from the Strategic Culture Foundation.

Another outlet, Hlavné správy, published primarily news from Slovak press agencies (TASR and SITA) or foreign press agencies (AP). There were significantly fewer articles attributed to an individual author than in Hlavný denník. However, some of the published articles contained information from problematic sources such as RT (in three cases) and, to a larger extent, Sputnik (15 cases). One of the articles was written by Eugen Rusnák, a Russian citizen, whose real name is Yevgeny Palcev. He is known for regularly disseminating pro-Kremlin propaganda in Slovak information space, specifically in Hlavné správy, Zem a Vek, and Hlavný denník. He also happens to be linked to the Russia Today (RT) agency financed by the Russian state.¹⁵⁷

Interestingly, the alternative media outlet Infovojna was not very active in covering the 5G topic, as it published the fewest articles. In two cases, Infovojna took over content from Aeronet, a Czech alternative media, regularly spreading disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories.¹⁵⁸ One of Infovojna’s articles came from the portal Otevri svou mysl, which presents itself as an alternative source, but mainly disseminates pseudoscientific narratives.¹⁵⁹

When it comes to the particular content of the articles focusing on 5G, the analyzed media outlets mainly focused on the following sub-themes: restrictions on ZTE and Huawei, conflict dynamic between China and the US, as well as allegations of data collection and espionage by Chinese companies. Quite frequently, alternative media outlets were spreading narratives about 5G being used by the US to put pressure on China. The topic was therefore a part of the broader anti-Western narrative that conforms to prior criticism of the US, Germany, United Kingdom, and other western countries that have adopted restrictions against Chinese technology companies. At the same time, the narrative served as a means for glorifying China and partly Russia in the case of the announced cooperation of both countries in building 5G infrastructure.

Specifically, alternative media reported on the restriction of Huawei and ZTE activities in the United Kingdom and the United States (and later in Canada and New Zealand) under suspicion of Huawei’s spying activities. Liu Xiaoming, the Chinese

Ambassador to the United Kingdom, was regularly quoted on the matter, calling on the UK not to be subject to “US external interests.” According to Liu, the US planned to put pressure on Huawei and urge it to stop its contracts in the UK, where the technology giant was building a new 5G network. Liu also urged the UK to avoid “any kind of discriminatory measures against companies involved in the development of 5G. China expects a truly open and fair England to provide equal conditions in business for all.”¹⁶⁰

The restrictions of Chinese technological companies were associated with the trade black list including several Chinese entities. The US has included Huawei on this list, citing suspicion about the company’s links to the Beijing government, military, or intelligence services, which may obtain sensitive data via the company. China has described the allegations as rumors with no evidence, the narrative that was communicated persistently via official channels. In the analyzed media, the topic was interpreted as a part of the trade war between the US and China and the alternative media quoted Huawei CEO Zhang Fei and Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lu Kang on the issue.

Hlavné správy later brought the information about the eventual restriction of Chinese technology companies in Germany, partly based on the statements of Wang Weidong, Chief of the Economic and Commercial Department at the Chinese Embassy in Germany.¹⁶¹ According to him, “excluding Huawei in Germany for so-called national security reasons would be a discriminatory and unfair decision.” It would, the argument continued, create a bad signal of protectionism and an obstacle in bilateral relations. In August 2020, the media published a commentary on the Sino-US relations, citing another piece by the Global Times, and calling the US attitude towards China a declaration of a new Cold War.¹⁶²

IMAGE 6: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO 5G ISSUE AND CHINA IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE SLOVAK MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)



Interestingly, the analyzed media also disseminated Vladimir Putin's claims that the US is trying to push Huawei out of the market. These anti-US narratives were associated with Russia's announcement that it will launch a pilot 5G project on its territory.¹⁶³ Russian telecommunication company MTS was to cooperate with Huawei in building 5G networks in 2019 and 2020. According to *Hlavný denník*, China's cooperation with Russia was the result of US policy. As one of its articles stated: "a policy of maximum pressure using sanctions and fines leads to the creation of alliances, where the states that the US president wants to get to their knees join."¹⁶⁴

In June 2019, *Hlavný denník* published an article titled "The F-35 Fighter Is Operated by Chinese Chips. The Hysteria Over Huawei's 'Espionage' Is Falling Apart." In this article, the author spoke of "months of whipped emotions around the rampant espionage story of Chinese companies spying for the Chinese government."¹⁶⁵ Per the piece's author, the US and UK are unconcerned about security risks. Instead, the two nations view Huawei as a crucial economic competitor and symbol of China's dominance in the technological sector, prompting their outcry. Another example of *Hlavný denník*'s efforts to portray the US in a negative light may be found in an article titled "Donald Trump and His Trade Policy Are Guilty of Forming an Alliance Between Russia and China."¹⁶⁶

Another US-related narrative was the alleged influence of the US on the UK and other states, which sought to limit cooperation with Chinese technology companies. To strengthen this narrative, *Hlavný denník* often reprinted information from Russia Today (RT). In one particular article, it was argued that the United Kingdom is acting as if it was the "51st state of the Union."¹⁶⁷

In August 2020, a new topic of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. In this context, *Hlavný denník* published an article on "odd links between the coronavirus and the 5G," connecting the place where the virus originated (Wuhan) with a place where the 5G network was tested.¹⁶⁸ Interestingly, the outlet later labeled the article as false and instead referred to an article by Robert Barca, Slovak fact-checker of the international agency AFP verifying information disseminated on Facebook, who called the information a hoax.¹⁶⁹ This may be a result of the demand for credible information about the origin of the virus, but also a result of hyped sensibility towards non-factual content which appeared in the Slovak information space at the beginning of the pandemic.

One of the few topics that directly concerned the region of Central and Eastern Europe was the subject of US-Czech relations, and the cooperation of both nations on 5G security.¹⁷⁰ In this regard, articles about Mike Pompeo's visit to Europe, which he had started in the Czech Republic, appeared also in the alternative media.¹⁷¹ *Infovojna* connected Pompeo's visit primarily to the announced signing of a memorandum, or rather extended agreement on the security of 5G networks between the US and the Czech Republic, which the website described as dictated by the EU.¹⁷² The visit was framed in the context of Sino-US relations. In other words, the visit was also used by the media outlet as a segue to put forward a narrative bashing the US in particular and the West in general.

CHINESE INVESTMENT: CAUGHT IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF SUPERPOWER RIVALRY?

From among the five analyzed topics, the articles on Chinese investment displayed the greatest variance in both topics covered and contributing authors. However, one of the analyzed media, Infovojna, did not deal with the topic at all. Thus, the analysis of this topic is based only on the content of Hlavné správy and Hlavný denník.

While 20 percent of articles on Chinese investment were sourced from the Slovak press agencies (the lowest share among the five analyzed topics), a slightly larger share (22 percent) of articles were reprinted from or based on Russian sources. Interestingly, Chinese sources were almost unrepresented, with only one article originating from the Global Times.

In the coverage of Chinese investment, the analysis has identified as many as 147 different topics. Interestingly, Chinese investment in Slovakia was not among the top represented topic, accounting only for some 11 percent of articles.

IMAGE 7: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO CHINESE INVESTMENT IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE SLOVAK MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)



In July 2019, a meeting between President Zuzana Čaputová and Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi took place in Bratislava. During the meeting, President Čaputová raised the issue of human rights violations in China. As a result, the president faced intense backlash from the then pro-China government, as well as the ‘alternative media’ scene in Slovakia. Hlavné správy published an editorial attacking President Čaputová who purportedly “weakens the international position of Slovakia” as “the current approaches and speeches of President Čaputová are endangering

for example Chinese investment in Slovakia. The president must realize that she no longer represents a foreign foundation, but the entire Slovak Republic."¹⁷³

Interestingly, in the discussion of Chinese investment in Slovakia, the analyzed media omitted the issue of CEFC investment despite its close links to Slovakia. Compared to that, the issue of CEFC was covered more by the Czech alternative media.

Significantly larger shares of articles adopted an international perspective, covering topics related to the US and Sino-American trade war, relations with Russia, relations with EU, and infrastructure investment.

For example, Hlavné správy linked the issue of Chinese investment to the conflict in the Middle East and US involvement in the region. In light of the assassination of the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, Hlavné správy, in an article sourced from the Chinese jingoistic tabloid *Global Times*, claimed:

"If the US-Iran war broke out, it would cause great economic damage to China. China buys Iranian oil, and Americans strategically see Russia and China as their biggest competitors. The volumes of Iranian oil that China buys are huge, and China is much more dependent on oil from the Gulf countries than the United States. China has also invested in Iran and Iraq, as well as many Middle Eastern countries, and a war provoked by the Americans could help Americans destroy this Chinese investment, as well as reduce Iranian oil supplies to China."¹⁷⁴

Articles based upon Russian sources (e.g. *Russia Today*, *Sputnik*, or *TASS* agency) often discussed the relationship between Russia and China, describing them as mutually beneficial and as a counterweight to the Western liberal world order. To illustrate, Hlavný denník reprinted op-eds originally published by *Russia Today* and authored by the British commentator Tom Fowdy, who is known to publish pro-China commentaries in Russian and Chinese state-linked outlets. In one article, Fowdy argued that Russia has become a key piece in the Belt and Road Initiative puzzle, which may form one of the bases of the nascent Sino-Russian alliance. He argued that these "strategic links between Russia and China are no doubt strengthening" which will lead to a "shift in the balance of power on the Eurasian continent."¹⁷⁵ Fowdy's commentary on the conclusion of negotiations on investment agreement between China and the EU (CAI) followed the similar line of changing balance of power and US decline. In the article titled "The US Is Furious At the Sino-European Agreement. It Is Clear Who Is Defeated in 2020," Fowdy argued that "the US response [to CAI] is an act of despair from the losing party, which will only serve to deepen the divide between America and Europe created by Trump."¹⁷⁶

In linking the issue of Chinese investment to the Sino-American rivalry, Hlavný denník also displayed conspiratorial tendencies. For example, the outlet claimed that "Even before Maidan and the 'Crimean Spring' in 2014, Ukraine had the potential to become a close economic ally of China and could receive long-term investments worth \$50 billion from the alliance. However, the Americans did not like such prospects and carried out a coup in Kyiv."¹⁷⁷

Hlavné správy also presented a notably positive image of Chinese investment, using Chinese presence in Africa as an illustrative example. Quoting the *Global Times*, Chinese investment in Africa was described as benefiting the continent, while at the same time attacking the US. Specifically, the outlet argued:

“Over the past decade, Africa has come out of American influence, with China, in particular, taking over US positions. The recipe by which China has achieved this is relatively simple. Unlike Americans, China does not corrupt or assert its influence through bribed political elites but offers fair agreements and treaties. Thanks to the development of bilateral relations between China and a number of African countries, the economic position of African countries has also improved, but this does not suit Americans. They have the idea that the mineral wealth of African countries is only there so that American companies can dispose of it.”¹⁷⁸

It is clear that the outlet was relying on the narrative of ‘win-win’ cooperation between China and African states, which is often deployed by Chinese propaganda, despite growing evidence of problems with economic feasibility and security implications of Chinese investment in Africa.¹⁷⁹

HONG KONG: A “COLOR REVOLUTION” AND AN EXERCISE IN WHATABOUTISM

Protests were clearly a key topic in the monitored period as they spread in Hong Kong after the announcement of a proposal to change Hong Kong’s extradition law. As with the previous cases, most of the analyzed articles, 247 from 304 in total, were news directly taken from Slovak press agencies. That represents 81 percent of all the analyzed articles. These were neutral in tone, mostly taking into account the views and position of both (or more) mentioned parties and seeking to contextually inform about the development of the situation.

The predominance of press releases in the alternative information space of Slovakia can be explained by the fact that the analyzed alternative media have long been characterized by an effort to get rid of the anti-system label, or an effort to join the media mainstream. However, the reason may also be that Chinese activities were not perceived as an attractive topic for the Slovak audience, unlike the case with topics related to the Russian Federation. This is despite the fact that the protests in Hong Kong is one of the few topics, through which China has managed to penetrate the Slovak information space by the means of an advertorial in Trend magazine.¹⁸⁰ The hypothesis is also evidenced by the fact that only a minimum of commentaries from Slovak authors appeared in the analyzed content. The articles written by specific authors made up approximately 15 percent of all content relevant to the topic (47 articles in total).

These articles in some cases included the authors’ insight and opinion on the topic. More often, however, comments and analyses reprinted from foreign news portals or research institutes were found. Particularly problematic were those that drew from Chinese or Russian sources, some of which are detailed below. Chinese sources quoted by the alternative outlets included the Global Times, Xinhua, and China Daily. Russian sources which were reprinted were RT, the Strategic Culture Foundation, Politikus, RBC, Iarex, and also the Czech localized version of Sputnik.

In 57 articles that were not based on reports from any of the Slovak news agencies, the alternative media drew from Russian sources in 27 cases, and Chinese in 7 cases. The finding may be based on a long-term trend of adopting Russian narratives in the

case of analyzed alternative media. In the case of Russian sources, it was primarily the Czech localized version of Sputnik, which in 10 cases appeared in Hlavné správy. In some cases, however, the outlet also used the above-mentioned Russian sources. In the case of Hlavný denník, five articles drew information from RT, while the other five articles were reprints from the Strategic Culture Foundation. When it comes to the Chinese sources, the most used source was the Global Times.

IMAGE 8: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO HONG KONG IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE SLOVAK MEDIA OUTLETS (2019-6/2021)



Expectedly Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, was one of the most frequently mentioned actors. Specifically, she was mentioned in 58 articles, which represents 19 percent of all analyzed content. Carrie Lam, so to speak, personified the official position of Beijing which was continuously built on arguments of the sovereignty of the territory of China, of which Hong Kong is necessarily a part.

Beijing's second essential communicated position which appeared in the alternative media was a staunch objection to the interference of "external forces" in China's internal affairs. Similar statements were directed mainly at the US and the United Kingdom, and later, after the suspension of extradition treaties, also against Canada, Australia, and Germany. More problematic narratives were spread in connection with the US, especially if Russia also entered into the conversation. For example, Zhang Hanhui, the Chinese Ambassador to Moscow, directly warned against externally inciting and conducting unrest with the promise of "adequate retribution."¹⁸¹ He did

so in a statement for the Russian media, to which Maria Zakharova, a Spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also reacted.

In her claim, she pointed to the “analogous behind-the-scenes influence of the protests in Moscow and Hong Kong,” in which the ‘media-propaganda machinery of foreign states’ is supposed to participate. She also offered cooperation in the field of information to Beijing. According to her, Moscow was to be able to provide findings on the Western interference in the “internal affairs of Russia and China.”¹⁸²

Hlavné správy provided an interesting glimpse at sources it uses and the international connections among different platforms – the original statements were taken over from the Russian media RBC and Politikus, yet the article was also shared by *České národní listy*.¹⁸³ The texts included Chinese official rhetoric, which described the protests as manifestations of terrorism. Within this narrative, Hlavné správy took over an article from Russian media portal Iarex, devoted to the situation at the international airport in August 2019. The actors were described as “pro-American rioters.” The key problem, however, was the incorrect comparison of the situation to the attacks of September 11, 2001. According to the article, Hong Kong protesters should, like US citizens, understand that the fight against terrorism is a top priority for China too. As such, they should comply in pursuit of their own “self-interest.”¹⁸⁴

In essence, MapInfluencE research into alternative Slovak media reporting on Hong Kong discovered a strong meta-narrative of the “color revolution,” followed by dubious comparisons to the Ukrainian maidan and the rhetoric of foreign forces influencing public opinion and directing the protests themselves. This was also the case of the Czech alternative media reporting. Protests were often described as an instrument of a hybrid war waged against the Chinese regime, which is to be supported by the US consulate (specifically Julie Eadeh) or the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its “extended arm” in the pro-democracy opposition of Hong Kong.¹⁸⁵ The underlying narrative referred to alleged support from the US, which intentionally used financial tools and violent strategies similar to those applied in Ukraine, Nicaragua, or Venezuela.

Marek Molnár, one of the authors writing for *Hlavný denník*, included the Hong Kong protests in the category of “viable protests” directed by the Pentagon. In his article, he tried to point out the similarities of several protest movements on a global scale.¹⁸⁶ He compared the situation in Hong Kong with the protests for the independence of Catalonia. This specific article can serve as an example of the willingness of alternative media to draw information from Russian sources. In this case, it was a transcript of a commentary by an author operating under the Strategic Culture Foundation. According to the 2020 US Department of State report, the Strategic Culture Foundation is directed by the Foreign Intelligence Service and is closely affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia.¹⁸⁷ In a sense, it can be regarded as a channel of the Russian state’s interests and propaganda.

Molnár also focused on the draft of the US Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. However, while citing an article from the Chinese official media *Global Times*, he decided to extract and directly mention pro-China statements only. Chan Yung, pro-Beijing Vice-Chairman of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, said: “the Americans will not ‘free’ Hong Kong” and spoke only of destabilizing measures. Tian Feilong, an Associate Professor at Beihang Uni-

versity's Law School in Beijing, said the appeals of protesters holding American flags and photos of Donald Trump only confirm that they are cooperating with external forces to jeopardize Hong Kong's fundamental interests.¹⁸⁸

Wang Yi, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, also called the US intervention in China's internal affairs a part of efforts to halt Beijing's progress and restart the Cold War. He expressed his views in an interview for RT, which was subsequently shared by Hlavný denník.¹⁸⁹

Eugen Rusnák (real name Yevgeny Palcev who also contributed on the issue to Czech alternative media) also wrote one of his few articles for Hlavné správy on the topic of Hong Kong.¹⁹⁰ He took over the statement of Hector Constant Rosales, Permanent Representative of Venezuela to the United Nations in Geneva, which was originally published by the Chinese state agency Xinhua. Rosales criticized external interference in China's internal affairs.¹⁹¹ According to him, Chinese action led to the stabilization of the situation. He also expressed the belief that "China will continue to realize the dream of a dignified and prosperous life for its people, contributing to the construction of a more just, equal and peaceful world."¹⁹²

Hlavné správy has also argued that the reason for protests, apart from the already mentioned US support, is not the controversial bill itself. One article expressed a belief that the problem lays in the "unrestricted neoliberal economy" of Hong Kong, which led to economic uncertainty for the people in the city.¹⁹³ The above-mentioned chain of recycling the news among different platforms was again applied, when České národní listy literally took over the article from Hlavné správy.¹⁹⁴

A common phenomenon found in the majority of texts focusing on Hong Kong was the technique of 'whataboutism', where not only alternative media but also representatives of the Chinese regime pointed to protests in Western states. The aim of the technique was to divert attention to other issues such as protests in Barcelona, the Yellow Vests protests in France, and later the unrest after George Floyd's death in the US. Carrie Lam talked directly about the so-called "double standard."¹⁹⁵ Before Emmanuel Macron's four-day visit to China in 2019, France and the EU were officially criticized by the Chinese Embassy in Paris. According to the statement, France is hypocritical and has to "show sympathy" for the Chinese actions in Hong Kong, as it has itself undergone violent demonstrations.¹⁹⁶

Carrie Lam was followed by Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo in the number of mentions and statements, which only proves the tense nature of relations between China and the US and summarizes optics under which the communication of the situation in Hong Kong took place. With the US presidential election, Joe Biden's name expectedly began to be mentioned. In one of the articles on Hlavné správy, which was reprinted from the Czech version of Sputnik,¹⁹⁷ Biden was identified as a candidate of the American "deep state" group due to his "apparent dementia" and affectability.¹⁹⁸ The articles claimed that in the background of the decision-making on economic sanctions labeled "for Hong Kong" against Beijing is to be a certain gray eminence, which is trying to undermine the interests of China with its puppets (in this case Biden).

XINJIANG: FROM THE PLIGHT OF UYGHURS TO US-CHINA CONTEST

The media coverage of the Xinjiang issue during the monitored period has primarily focused on questions related to human rights violations and how this permeates into US-China relations. Overall, the coverage demonstrated little intricate analyses of the topic but rather focused on factual reports, most likely due to the low profile of the issue in Slovakia. Where reports engaged in a deeper analysis, these were predominantly commentaries or articles republished from other foreign media and translated into the Slovak language. There were few exceptions to this rule but in general, the Xinjiang issue was covered by Slovak media not as a main topic per se but rather in the wider context of the US-China relations and its potential to influence the relationship. Indeed, a large part of articles used the issue to discuss wider tensions between the two countries, or the topic was only mentioned alongside broader discussion about the future of the relationship.

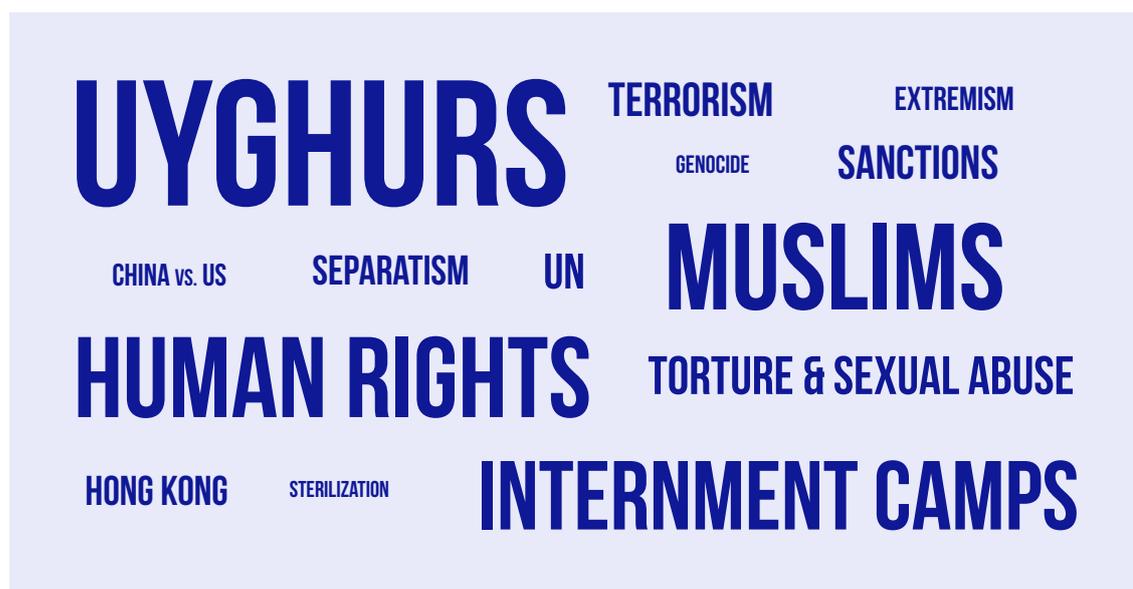
The majority of analyzed articles were taken directly from Slovak press agencies and were reported in a neutral manner with few articles expressing a rather negative sentiment towards China. In many cases, the reports were limited to a few sentences informing the reader on what had happened rather than providing analyses of the topic. On occasions in which the article might have portrayed a more negative sentiment, this was usually due to direct citations of actors who expressed their strong opinions on the topic or re-published commentaries taken from foreign media. There has been little to no coverage by analyzed media that featured commentaries by local experts, most likely because the topic is often perceived as too distant or foreign for the Slovak audience.

Curiously, unlike with the other topics, articles on Xinjiang did not usually cite or republish Chinese-controlled media or actors with overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards China, besides a few exceptions. This mainly included articles that cited the Chinese authorities, mainly the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while omitting any kind of counter-arguments or analyses.¹⁹⁹ At the same time, citing government officials and their justification for the measures in Xinjiang without any meaningful analyses sometimes directly contributed to perpetuating the Chinese narrative in otherwise rather neutral articles.

While at the beginning of the monitored period the coverage largely focused on the reporting of what is happening in Xinjiang, reports of detention camps, and Uyghur minority, the coverage gradually shifted towards framing the issue as a part of the Sino-US rivalry. Indeed, as the time proceeded, and the US began to mention potential sanctions for Beijing's conduct in Xinjiang, articles often referred to the trade war, US blacklist, and the Chinese tech companies such as Huawei and ZTE. Some articles eventually mentioned the Xinjiang issue only in passing while focusing on wider US-China tensions.²⁰⁰

Other important topics were the issues of torture and genocide that were mentioned, at least in passing, in the articles. Several articles could be classified as expressing a negative sentiment towards China, such as when it described the situation in Xinjiang as 'ethnic assimilation' and criticized Beijing for its misconduct. Most of the articles were published by *Hlavný denník* in a form of re-published commentaries written by Lawrence Franklin, who previously worked for former US Secretary of

IMAGE 9: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO XINJIANG IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE SLOVAK MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)



Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and is presently employed by the Gatestone Institute.²⁰¹ Hlavné Správy and Infovojna did not express negative sentiment to China in the analyzed dataset.

The mentions of various actors have been somewhat balanced, given the predominantly factual nature of the analyzed reports. Logically, members of the US and Chinese administrations such as Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and Mike Pompeo were most prominently featured. Other frequent mentions included António Guterres, Dominic Raab, and Adrian Zenz, a German anthropologist focusing on Xinjiang and Uyghur issues.

TAIWAN: A STAR OUTSHINING BEIJING?

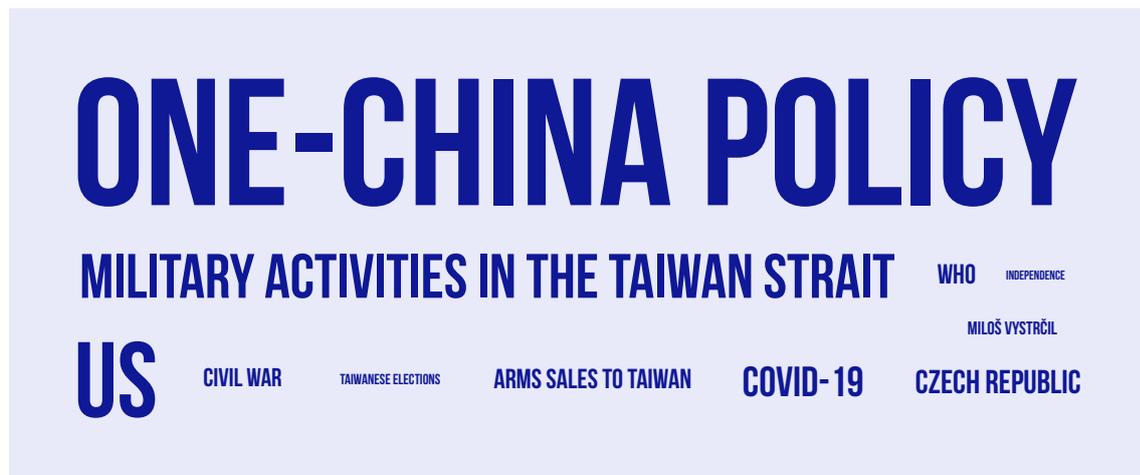
When it comes to coverage of Taiwan, there is a significant difference in the coverage volume among the three analyzed media. While Infovojna barely touched the subject (only two articles were identified in the dataset), Hlavný denník mentioned the island-nation in 41 articles and Hlavné správy discussed Taiwan in 93 texts.

The discussions on China and Taiwan in the alternative media focused largely on the discussions of Taiwanese independence, One-China policy, military buildup in the Taiwan Strait, as well as on the two entities' relations with the US.

With a few exceptions, almost all the analyzed articles included at least a rudimentary discussion of the 'One-China Principle' and China-Taiwan relations.

Coronavirus was another prominent topic discussed in articles dealing with China and Taiwan. Most of the articles discussed the prospects of Taiwan's membership of the World Health Organization (WHO) and China's opposition to it, as well as Taiwan's initial communication with the WHO at the beginning of the new coronavirus outbreak.

**IMAGE 10: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS CONNECTED TO TAIWAN
IN ANALYZED ALTERNATIVE SLOVAK MEDIA OUTLETS (2019–6/2021)**



Interestingly, articles discussing China and Taiwan portrayed China almost exclusively in a negative light. This was especially prominent in the articles discussing Taiwanese mask donations, which included quotes from some of the loudest critics of China that can be found in Slovakia. To illustrate, Hlavné správy, in one of their original articles, quoted Peter Osuský, Deputy-Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Slovak National Council, saying that mask donations from Taiwan were granted “thanks to R.L. Tseng, who is the Ambassador of Taiwan, even though he cannot be titled as such due to the unacceptable pressure of the red comrades from Beijing.”²⁰²

Still, some articles could be seen as glorifying Chinese response to COVID-19, while at the same time recognizing the successful handling of the virus by Taiwan. Such was the case for example in the article published by Infovojna, which in November 2020 claimed: “Officially, the disease has been eradicated. It is hard to believe that at the beginning of the year, Wuhan was depopulated.”²⁰³

As previously noted, most Taiwan-focused content in the alternative media was taken from mainstream press agencies. This was especially the case of Hlavné správy, where 67 percent originated from one of the two Slovak press agencies.

Nevertheless, Slovak alternative media also sourced their Taiwan-focused content from less traditional sources. Generally, these can be categorized into two groups – Russian state-backed content providers (i.e., Sputnik) and far-right media (e.g., Breitbart, or Fox News).

Articles sourced from the far-right outlets tended to exhibit a thoroughly negative perspective on China in relation to Taiwan. Two topics featured prominently here: China’s militarization and Taiwan’s relationship with WHO. On the other hand, articles sourced from Sputnik, exclusively republished by Hlavné správy, focused on Chinese and Taiwanese militarization efforts, as well as the triangular China-Taiwan-US relationship.

Hlavné správy managed to find and report positively on parallels between Chinese modern history and Slovakia’s clerical-fascist past. In the article titled “Chiang Kai-shek and Tiso, Or China Is Not Slovakia,” an anonymous author discussed how China and Slovakia deal with the historical memories concerning “two men born in

October 1887,” i.e. Jozef Tiso, the President of the Slovak Republic, a short-lived de facto puppet state of Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945, and Chiang Kai-shek, the President of Republic of China, who relocated to Taiwan following the loss in the Chinese Civil War against Mao Zedong’s Communists. According to the article, China is able to deal with its historical memory in a more desirable fashion than Slovakia as “in the big and ‘undemocratic’ China it is no secret that ‘certain’ Chiang Kai-shek lived and was the President of China. In small and democratic Slovakia, saying that ‘certain’ Tiso lived and was ‘the first President of the Slovak Republic’ is suspicious at best, and maybe even dangerous. While in China they are able to decently commemorate people who lived in the past and influenced in whatever way – from the point of view of Chinese Communist present ‘negatively’ – here in Slovakia it is utterly unnecessarily the other way around.” The article was later on removed from the Hlavné správy website.

CONCLUSION

MapInfluenCE’s analysis has revealed that the media discourse on China in Slovak alternative media in the selected period bears striking similarities to the discourse previously observed in mainstream media. In the course of investigating the China-focused narratives in Slovak alternative media, five topics were important in the discourse: 5G networks, investment, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.

Not only were these topics the same in the mainstream and in analyzed problematic media, but most of the analyzed content was also sourced from the local press agencies and therefore was mostly factual and unbiased. Copying the neutral coverage provided by the press agencies allows the media to conceal articles exhibiting pro-Chinese narratives, disinformation, and conspiracies. However, in several cases, there was information taken over from official Chinese or Russian sources, uncovering the ruse.

The process of profiling into objective news stories can also be considered problematic in a sense that even originally neutral reports are delivered to a susceptible audience that is following the media precisely because of their past predominantly problematic content and alternative view. However, this may be considered a radical hypothesis and might require more detailed research in the future.

Most of the analyzed content was focused on the topic of protests in Hong Kong, while many of these articles were only citing news from Slovak press agencies. That can be explained by the fact that the analyzed websites are trying to get rid of the anti-system label or to join the media mainstream, as mentioned above. Also, Chinese activities are not perceived as an attractive topic for the Slovak audience, unlike the case with topics related to Russia.

Despite the fact that the analyzed media attempted to publish more unbiased information, they still often carried information cited from other problematic media. The Chinese sources quoted by the alternative outlets included the Global Times, Xinhua, and China Daily. Russian sources which were reprinted were RT (former Russia Today), the Strategic Culture Foundation, Politikus, RBC, Iarex, and the Czech localized version of Sputnik. Therefore, in addition to articles from Slovak press

agencies, the content of the selected media also consists of content taken over from Russian state-owned and controlled media or from Kremlin-friendly organizations that can be considered extended hands of Russian interests.

In several cases, the Chinese officials were cited, mostly Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, who was one of the most frequently mentioned actors (along with President Xi Jinping, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang, and other Chinese officials). Lam personified the official position of Beijing on Hong Kong protests and represented the arguments of the unquestionable territorial integrity of China including Hong Kong. Another Beijing's essential communicated position which appeared in the analyzed media was an objection against the interference of "external forces" in China's internal affairs. Several articles included Chinese official rhetoric, which described the protests in Hong Kong as manifestations of terrorism. Also, the discussions on China and Taiwan in the analyzed media focused largely on the issue of Taiwanese independence, One-China Policy, military buildup in the Taiwan Strait, as well as on the two entities' relations with the US. The content related to the topic of Taiwan portrayed China almost exclusively in a negative light, but on the other hand, some of the articles glorified the Chinese response to COVID-19.

Even though Chinese sources were at times used by the analyzed alternative outlets, they did not feature prominently. A far more prominent source were Russian sources. This suggests that the Slovak alternative media scene is not particularly inclined to promote pro-China messaging (this does not imply that such articles do not appear, though).

However, a persistent trend was mentioning the conflict between the US and China, illustrated for instance by trade war, the restrictions on Chinese companies, putting Huawei on the US "blacklist" or the US relations with Taiwan. The articles discussing these topics were mostly favoring China. This suggests that for the Slovak alternative media China topic is being instrumentalized in their crusade against the US and the global West.

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About MapInfluenCE

The publication was prepared within the MapInfluenCE (previously known as ChinfluenCE) project, which maps China and Russia's influence in Central Europe, specifically Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

The internationally acclaimed project has utilized various tools such as media analysis to uncover who shapes China discourse in the Visegrád countries and why, the mapping of agenda-setters to reveal links between pro-China businessmen and local political elites, an analysis of changes in political parties' positions on China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments during the past 30 years, etc.

Through a variety of outputs (media articles, interviews, research reports, open as well as closed door events and briefings of stakeholders), MapInfluenCE broadens and shapes expert as well as public debates on China's influence and activities in the region of Central Europe. MapInfluenCE findings were widely quoted in European, US and Australian press, mentioned in e.g. the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2018 Annual Report or the Reporters without Borders' report on the vulnerability of media, and presented at the European Parliament or to a delegation of US Congressmen and Senators. The original approach of MapInfluenCE set the tone and inspired journalists, think tankers and NGOs both within and outside of the region, who later conducted similar analyses on the media image of China and agenda-setting, drawing on the project's methodology and techniques.

The international team has published more than 20 policy and briefing papers in five different languages (English, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovak), authored articles or were quoted in numerous local as well as international media including Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, China Digital Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Politico Brussels Influence, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Diplomat, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Le Temps, Radio Free Europe, etc.

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

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Association for International Affairs is a non-governmental non-profit organization founded in 1997. The mission of AMO has been to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs through a broad range of educational and research activities. Thanks to its activities in the Czech Republic and abroad and 20-year tradition, AMO has established itself as the Czech leading independent institution in the field of international relations and foreign policy.

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Footnotes

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