EXPERT FORUM

CHINA WATCH

FEBRUARY, 2022

Views from the East on Beijing's influence in the Black Sea region

UKRAINE

How much risk is China willing to take for the sake of Russia. The coordination between Moscow and Beijing, as viewed from Kyiv

by Leonid Litra, Senior Research Fellow, New Europe Center, think tank from Kyiv

Russia's relations with China are something to watch closely these days. The partnership between the two got a greater importance after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent aggression of Russia against Ukraine.

It is precisely the weakening of Russia after the military invasion of Ukraine that led to the increase of Moscow's cooperation with Beijing amidst the growing international isolation of Vladimir Putin and the economic hardships following the Western sanctions.

In general, despite closely cooperating with Russia, China avoided to take sides that would clearly back Russian actions. Although certain sympathy towards Russian ideas could be noticed, Beijing in practice tried to keep distance from getting involved into Russian-Ukrainian war, by abstaining on key voting in the UN and deliberately being silent on Ukraine. Most to blame from a Ukrainian perspective was Chinese backing of Russian narrative on certain issues related to Ukraine, including the message that "Ukraine crisis" is a result of western interference. At the same time, Beijing used this opportunity to get a profitable energy deal with Russia.

The growing power of China along with the lasting war waged by Russia in Ukraine made Beijing show increasing appetite to play a more active role. Since 2020, **China's neutrality in relation to Ukraine has been fading away and replaced by a greater support of Russian narratives on multiple occasions**, let alone the latest backing of Russian security grievances in relation to the US and NATO.

It was widely accepted until recently that there was no formal coordination of the Russian and Chinese positions on the foreign policy agenda; the recent statements prove the contrary. On the eve of the Russian-Chinese summit on the occasion of the opening of the 2022 winter Olympic games, the Russian president published an article in the Xinhua media outlet where it states that **"The foreign policy coordination of Russia and China is based on close, coinciding approaches to solving global and regional problems. Our countries play an important stabilizing role in the modern, far from simple, international situation, contributing to the processes of democratization of the system of interstate relations in order to make this system fairer and more inclusive. We are working together to strengthen the central coordinating role of the United Nations in world affairs, we strive to prevent the erosion of the international legal system, at the center of which is the UN Charter." (1)**

This shows that **the greater cooperation between China and Russia actually turns into an alliance that is mainly aimed to reduce the US influence and defend the authoritarian governance models.** The forming alliance derives also from the latest backing of Russia by China when it comes to Kremlin's security grievances. However, even in this case, one should notice that Russians communicate China's support in a nuanced way. The Russian summit transcript underlined that China's leader supported Putin's demands on security guaranties and of non-enlargement to NATO. However, the Chinese transcript does not mention this. Instead of clear backing Putin's position, the statement of Xi is vague and refers to mutual support on questions affecting each other's core interests. (2)

China's support for Russia, however, comes with a price. As in the past, Beijing has benefited from the Kremlin's difficult relation with the West by getting sweet energy deals with Russia; this time this is no exception. Aside from the existing gas contracts, Gazprom will supply an additional 10 billion cubic meters a year to China from the Yuzhno-Kirinskoye gas field, against which the US has imposed sanctions.(3) Beijing takes advantage of the Russian weakness but also shows that it is ready to help Moscow avoid US sanctions and defend its junior partner. The coordination between Russia and China shows that Beijing is acting as an observer while Russia is the lead force. However, the more Russia is in conflict with the West, the Chinese importance for Russia increases and this relation becomes instrumental for Russia's survival.

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1. *http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67694*
2. *https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3492248.html*
3. *https://wyborcza.biz/biznes/7,177151,28080684,chinski-wist-gazpromu.html?disableRedirects=true*

The foundations of the Sino-Russian alliance

> **"AMERICANS ARE SAFER IN KIEV THAN THEY ARE IN LOS ANGELES … OR ANY OTHER CRIME-RIDDEN CITY IN THE US"**
> **CHINESE PRO-KREMLIN PROPAGANDA**

China is thousands of kilometers away from Ukraine but the Russian-Ukrainian war is of significant interest for Beijing. This is not only for reasons related to Ukraine but also for the wider agenda of China and Russia which is often overlapping when it comes to the West. Their propaganda efforts are reinforcing each other's position regardless of the existence of formal or informal coordination.

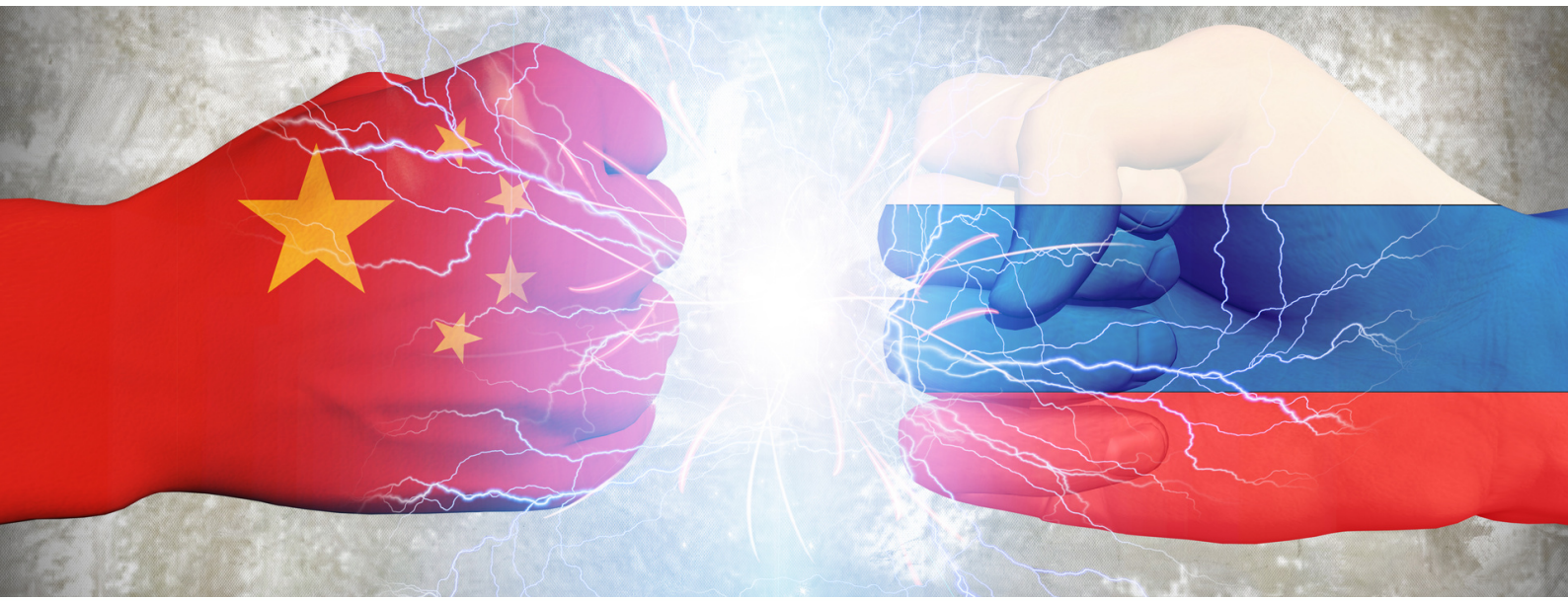
Both countries are working to undermine US soft power, deepen the trans-Atlantic divide, erode European unity, impair the reputation of the liberal institutions and democratic principles as well as discredit free media. China is more frequently reproducing Kremlin's narratives on Ukraine when these comply with the interests of Beijing: anti-West and anti-US.
Russian and Chinese tools in Asia and Europe differ. In Europe, Beijing is deploying economic instruments; its political influence, on the increase over the last decade, is deriving from its economic power. In contrast, Moscow is using diplomatic procrastination, cyber-attacks and special operations (including with Novichok) because it has less money than China.

4. https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/28/russia-ukraine-crisis-china-diplomacy-social-media-twitter/

The foundations of the Sino-Russian alliance

Apart from these, Russia also weaponizes the energy trade, which created a lot of headache for the markets lately.
The model of divide and rule has been at the core of Russian policy in Europe for a long time. Principled bilateralism with the most influential EU member countries and projects that undermine the EU cohesion have been the main instruments; Nord Stream 2 project is one of the most relevant examples of such initiative causing deep divisions in the Union until recently. China has also amplified the Russian propaganda which targeted greater division in the West. For instance, after Washington decided to withdraw US embassy staffers from Kyiv in January 2022, they repeated the Russian narrative that "Americans are safer in Kiev than they are in Los Angeles … or any other crime-ridden city in the US".
But China is learning quickly from Russia and in recent years has been tougher when conducting its operations. The aspirations to seduce and create admiration for Beijing are still in place, but they do not work all the time. In a recent publication, Charon and Vilmer from the French think tank IRSEM notice that there is a "russification" of the Chinese influence operations, which shows greater ambition of China and readiness to use more tools.

The foundation of the Sino-Russian alliance seems to be solid and strengthening every year. At the same time, despite keeping the appearances of perfect partnership, China and Russia have a number of issues which might create tensions.



The foundations of the Sino-Russian alliance

These have to do with strategic issues such as the nuclear capability, divergences in the Arctic, competition in Central Asia, (7) though also on more minor but disturbing issues such as spying by China inside Russia and the tough negotiation stance and uncompromising position of Beijing when negotiating with Moscow.(8)

On the issue of Ukraine, the behavior of Russia and China is very distinct. While Russia annexed Crimea and has been waging war against Ukraine for eight years, China is making visible efforts to stay away from any scenario of using force. In turn, this has made the Ukrainian leadership show an increased interest towards China. President Zelenskyy and the head of his party in the parliament David Arahamia praised China on various occasions for the way it has managed the Covid pandemic or for its economic governance model. Most probably these are just diplomatic openings understandable given Kyiv's dire situation: there is no indication that the opinion is shared by the wider public or the independent analysts' community. Some even consider Zelenskyy's open expressions of admiration for China as a desperate attempt to draw more attention to Ukraine by the U.S.

In 2021 China was included on the list of strategic partners of Ukraine, which many associate with president Zelenskyy's personal desire and the will to diversify Ukraine's foreign policy and stimulate US interest for Ukraine. In reality, the Ukraine-China strategic partnership remains mostly on paper. Scandals such as the failed acquisition of the "Motor Sich" company are a sign of the complexity of this relation, which grew sour when Ukraine signed a statement at the UN Human Rights Council which was then withdrawn following pressure from China.

THE UKRAINIAN-CHINESE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WAS LARGELY A CLUMSY ATTEMPT TO FEND OFF RUSSIA AND DRAW THE ATTENTION OF THE US

5. *https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/28/russia-ukraine-crisis-china-diplomacy-social-media-twitter/*
6. *Chinese influence operations. A Machiavellian moment, IRSEM, https://www.irsem.fr/report.html*
7. *https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-will-china-do-if-russia-escalates-in-ukraine/*
8. *https://ecfr.eu/publication/its-complicated-russias-tricky-relationship-with-china/*

Ukraine and Taiwan are not comparable cases

China's interest in Ukraine is often explained through the lens of Beijing's own agenda in Asia. With the Chinese assertive policy in the East of South China Sea and the issue of Taiwan on the table, Beijing is trying to gauge the U.S. resolve as well as the power of the Western sanctions. This is one of the reasons why Ukrainian experts believe that, aside from Russia's own reasons to attack Ukraine, China is also pushing Moscow in challenging the West, to keep Washington busy and thus less focused on Asia. A military move against Taiwan or a possible aggression against the Japanese Senkaku Islands are only a few examples of how China could benefit from Putin's war in Ukraine. This scenario would have serious implications for the global balance of power and the existing security arrangements and treaties.

Coupling the issues of Ukraine and Taiwan has been a trend in the international media lately. Indeed, the capability of NATO to respond to the crisis around Ukraine and impose meaningful costs on Russia for escalation in Ukraine is influencing the analysis of how effective could be the US response to possible future crises in the Taiwan Strait or the China Sea. Both Ukraine and Taiwan are democracies and therefore regarded as an existential challenge by their bigger and autocratic neighbors: the Russian and Chinese populations may draw inspiration and question the regimes. However, despite certain similarities, the case of Ukraine and Taiwan should be considered separately.

Taiwan is a well-established democracy and world leader in micro-chip production. China has been testing for some time the ability of Taiwan to mobilize for defending itself, as well as the US commitment to the island. The notable element is that president Biden has ruled out sending troops to Ukraine for defending it against Russia, but remains carefully ambiguous about a possible military intervention to help Taiwan. China may therefore feel a stronger deterrence effect than Russia. Moreover, the US response in Ukraine depends on the main NATO partners such as Germany and France, which complicates the equation since Berlin and Paris have a different approach on restraining Putin and thus the US response can only go as far as its European allies would be willing to follow. (9)

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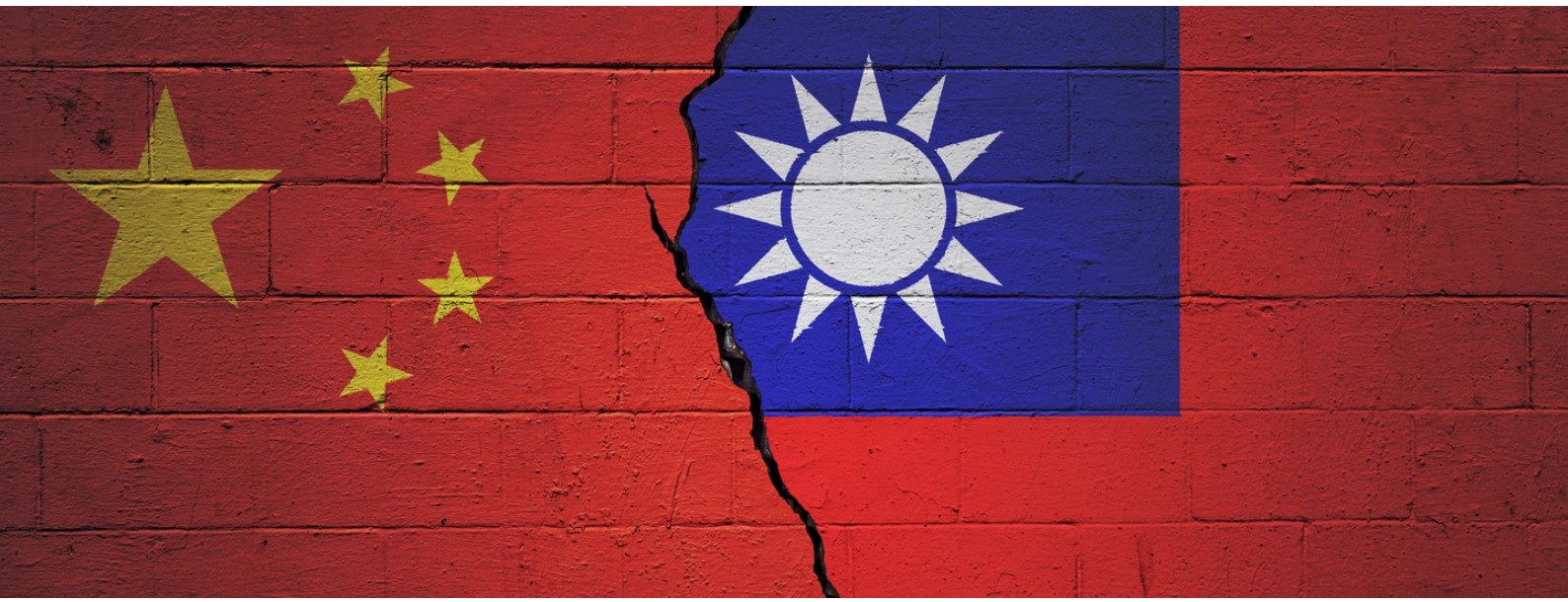
9. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/01/china-ukraine-putin-xi-jinping/621206/

Ukraine and Taiwan are not comparable cases

Some analysts add that Xi wants to be sure that any takeover of Taiwan should be an outstanding success and therefore, since there is no certainty about such an outcome today, a military invasion of Taiwan is not on the agenda for this decade. (10) If so, this means that Xi will evaluate carefully how the US and its allies respond to the Russian escalation and if their sanctions are enough to stop the Russian aggression. The arsenal of sanctions deployed by the West against Russia are of paramount importance for China, too. So far China chose not to break them, with minor exceptions. A new wave of sanctions and their effectiveness against Russia would let China understand how credible are the western economic tools of war and how they would work in Asia.

However, sitting on the fence forever is not possible. China must at some point take a stand on the issue of sanctions: either enforce them or help Russia mitigate their impact. They cover a broad area, from the financial sector, state-owned companies and export control.(11)



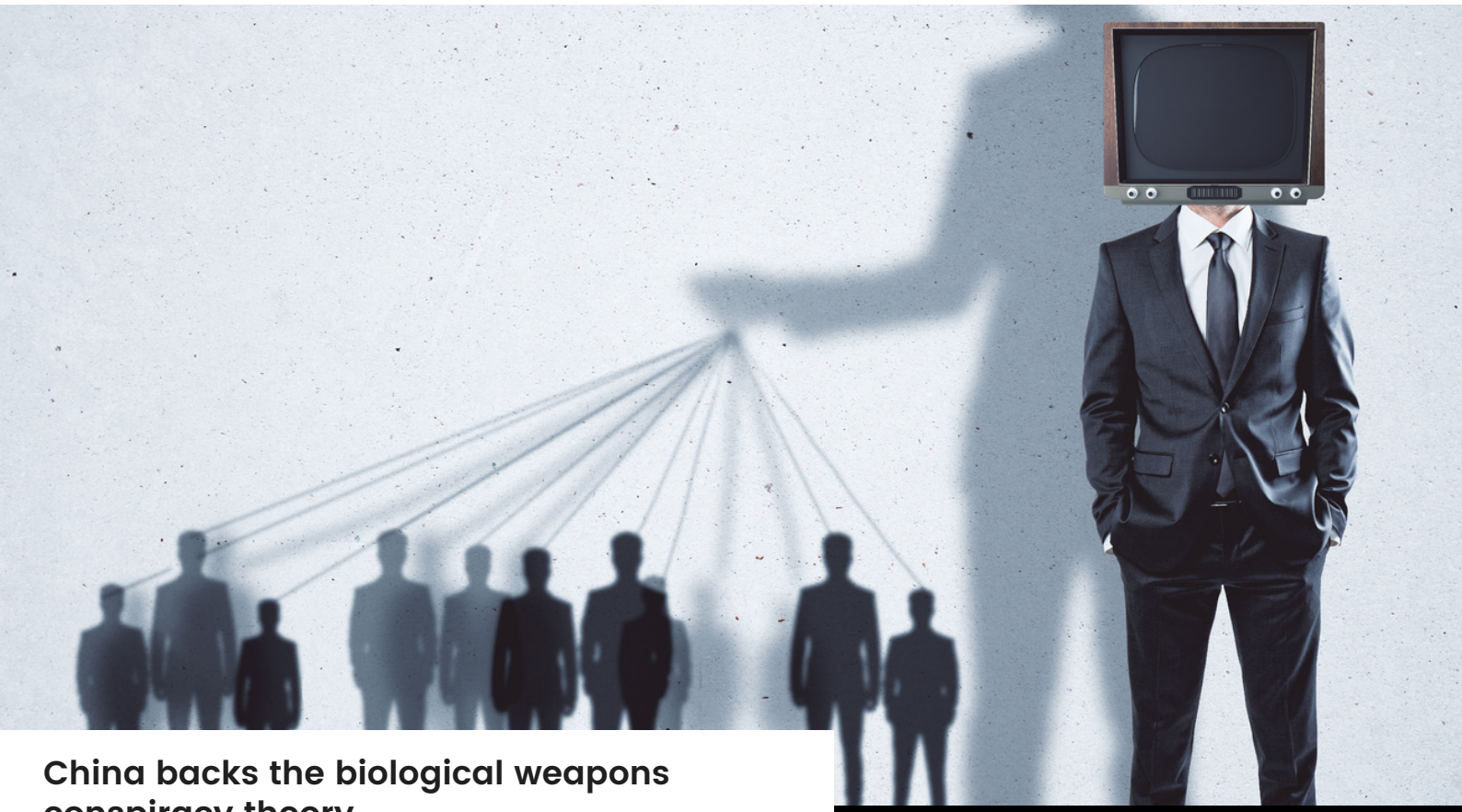
10. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-will-china-do-if-russia-escalates-in-ukraine/
11. https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/how-will-china-respond-to-the-russia-ukraine-crisis.pdf

China's potential benefits of the Russian aggression

If the Russian aggression turns into an attrition war, Beijing and Moscow are likely to behave differently because of their diverging development trajectories. Russia is a declining power by all measures and thus wants to compensate for its weakness by creating problems for the Western alliance and the surrounding democracies. By contrast, China is a rising power that has traditionally taken less risks and showed more patience. The current international order, which it tries to gradually skew to its advantage, serves its interests better than a state of complete anarchy which Russia risks producing. Such a difference in views may create serious cracks in their alliance.

Russia is certainly counting on China to challenge NATO and the West in general, but Beijing proved before that it can take advantage of this situation. It is interested in cheap gas supply from Russia, and given the Western sanctions, the Kremlin will have no alternative other than accepting China's offer. At the same time, China has its own interests in Kyiv which diverge from the Russian agenda. **Ukraine is one of the most important suppliers of agricultural products, including grains and corn. A serious escalation of the conflict would hamper the harvest and the export of Ukrainian products, which is precisely what we start to see these days. From a broader perspective,** China will adapt its strategy so that to gain something out of the Russian aggression, depending on the Western response to it. Irrespective of the result of the war in Ukraine, China is a keen observer, will keep its cards close to the chest and exploit any situation exclusively for increasing its own influence and power.

by Leonid Litra, Senior Research Fellow, New Europe Center, think tank from Kyiv



China backs the biological weapons conspiracy theory

The social media in Eastern Europe is almost entirely dominated by one narrative, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. How the invasion is presented by politicians, influencers, and media outlets that have a pro-Kremlin approach is very different from reality.

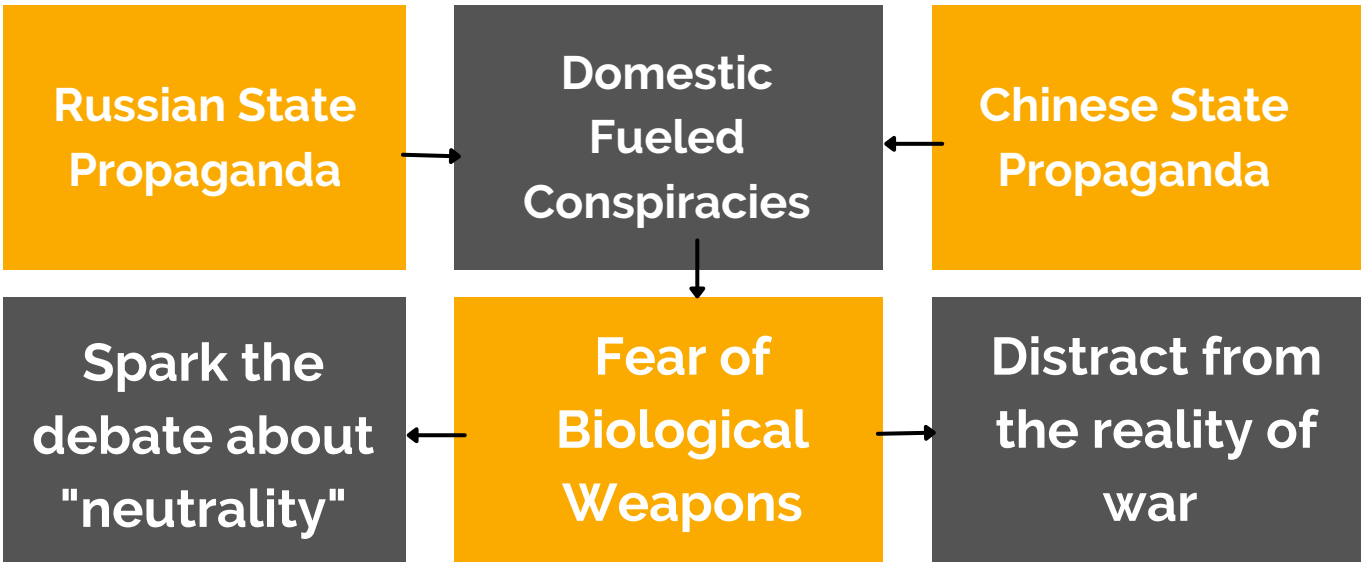
The biggest narrative promoted by Russia's disinformation agenda is that Eastern Europe needs to remain neutral and not interfere in a war that might bring security risks for its population. The fear of retaliation from Russia mixed with anti-Western and anti-EU narratives are the main themes that started the disinformation campaign.

In the last two weeks, we have seen a new narrative emerging in Romania, the legitimation of the Russian invasion due to the presence of 30 so-called chemical laboratories in Ukraine. China and Russia are the main agents that claim the existence of a hidden agenda in Ukraine.

The narrative tries to create a different perspective of the invasion and also to distract from the war crimes and atrocities committed in Ukraine. The reality of war is replaced by Russia's intentions to protect its citizens from a biological weapon that the USA created in Ukraine. This narrative is not new, we can see it also in Georgia being spread years ago by the Russian propaganda machine. Same old tactics, but with a different audience, Eastern Europeans.

The main promoters of these narratives are Russia and China. The Russian ministry of foreign affairs posted a tweet accusing the US and Ukrainian governments of running a secret biological program inside the country. The Kremlin regime claimed that its army had discovered evidence of an emergency clean-up to hide the evidence of this program. The false allegations were quickly amplified by China, which supported the claims during the UN security council debate on the matter.

For years, Russia has claimed that former Soviet countries were manufacturing biological weapons at laboratories funded by the United States. Recycling this topic seems to gather popularity in the echo-champers most affected by fake news and conspiracy theories.
Who are the domestic agents that spread this disinformation in Romania? We are going to analyze the main online media outlets, influencers, and public groups that support this narrative.



Disinformation sources – The Information War in Romania

1.Radio Gold FM Romania

"Russia's invasion is linked with the secret biological laboratories in Ukraine"

Radio Gold FM is a well-known disinformation website in Romania that often promotes disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories. They have been extremely active in promoting anti-Western and Pro-China narratives, and have played a significant role in promoting the China and Russia-backed story of the existence of biological weapons in Ukraine. Iosefina Pascal is a popular anti-western influencer in Romania, mainly famous due to her anti-vax narrative during the pandemic. Nowadays, her rhetoric has adapted, and claims she has made an investigation confirming China and Russia's story in Ukraine.

Following the main story published on RadioGoldFM, another replica website romaniareala.com shared it, being reposted 95 times on social media on pages and groups with a total reach of 1,379,814 people. On her own Facebook profile, Iosefina Pascal gathered more than 100,000 people that viewed her content regarding this theory.

2. Metropola TV

Metropola TV is a Television station in Bucharest, owned by the city hall of Voluntari, a small town near Bucharest, where the mayor is Florentin Pandele the husband of Gabriela Firea, the former mayor of Bucharest. She is a prominent figure of the Social Democrat Party from Romania. Metropola TV is a well-known television station online and on TV for spreading disinformation narratives. They have been active in spreading the biological weapons theory. They have over 65,000 followers on Facebook and 4,358 interactions on this topic on their page in the last 30 days. Videos from the TV show "Mădălin Ionescu Show" on this topic quickly went viral on Facebook.

Disinformation sources – The Ukraine Information War

3.InformațieLibera.ro

"China gives US an ultimatum – Admit the existence of biological weapons in Ukraine"

This website quickly became popular in recent months and heavily supported the Russia-China biological weapons theory.

Officially, the website has a small audience on its own Facebook page, 11,000 followers. It is massively shared on Facebook Groups such as "Romania 2024 – Together for a Romanian president", and by influencers such as Mihai Lasca, former member of the AUR Party.

The online monitoring was made using Crowdtangle.

Quoted articles

https://radiogoldfm.ro/invazia-rusilor-si-virusurile-periculoase-din-laboratoarele-militare-din-ucraina-iosefina-pascal-la-gold-fm/

https://radiogoldfm.ro/legaturile-dintre-laboratoarele-din-ucraina-si-familia-biden-iosefina-pascal-la-gold-fm/

Mentioned posts

https://www.facebook.com/metropolatv/videos/912656962741959

https://www.facebook.com/radiogoldfmromania/posts/5211844998854457

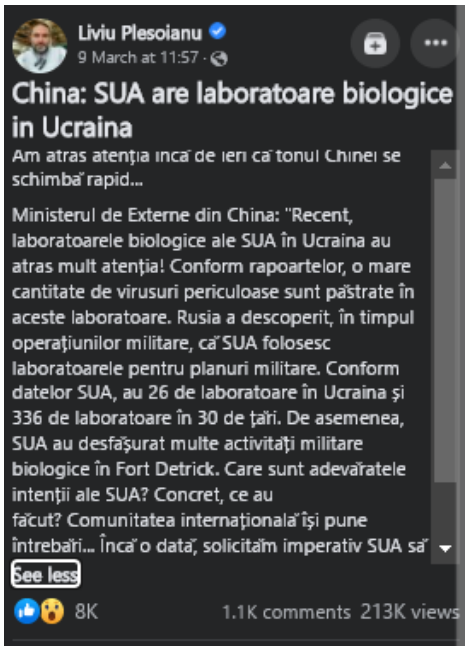
https://www.facebook.com/radiogoldfmromania/posts/5215388185166805

Disinformation sources – The Ukraine Information War

Influencers

Liviu Pleșoianu

Liviu Pleșoianu is a Romanian influencer and a former Member of Parliament (Romania). He has recently published a book called „The truth about the Great Reset", a growing conspiracy theory during the pandemic, that the World Economic Forum plans the creation of a tyrannical world government. He has over 124,000 followers on his public profile. He promoted a video with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he backs the biological laboratories theory gaining over 211,000 views and 10,000 shares.



https://www.facebook.com/liviuplesoianu.oficial/videos/669671557677795/

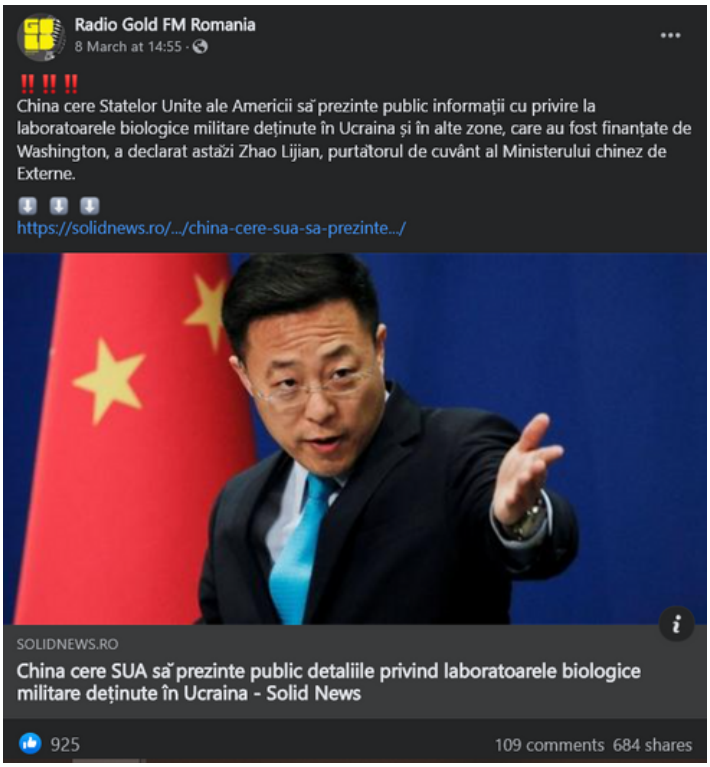
Dan Tomozei

Between 1992–2010, Dan Tomozei worked in the local and national press in Romania, where he was a correspondent, editor, editor-in-chief, producer at big media trusts such as Mediafax and PRO TV. He has nationalistic beliefs and is an open fan of the communist regime in China. Since October 2010, he has been an expert in the Romanian language section - Radio China International and has moved to live in Beijing.

He is very active on his website. He is constantly shared on Romanian disinformation groups and websites such as Qmagazine.ro.

He has backed and spread the recent theory, portraying China as a reasonable agent that wants to protect itself, Europe, and the world from the USA's interests in developing harmful biological weapons.

The main state agents present in Romania, respectively the website and social media profiles of China Xinhua News-Romania and the Chinese Embassy have remained silent and have not promoted this theory openly. There is only one post on China Xinhua News-Romania that calls for transparency on the issue and quotes the speech of the Chinese foreign ministry.



http://dantomozei.ro/2022/03/10/china-si-rusia-cer-transparentizarea-a-peste-200-de-laboratoare-biologice-americane-sub-supiciunea-covid-19/

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This monitoring is supported by a grant from THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY