



# Lithuania's Experience in Combating Hybrid Threats

Policy Report

## **Author:**

**Lukas Andriukaitis**, External Contributor

**Patrik Szicherle (ed.)**, Research Fellow

**Centre for Democracy & Resilience**



## **About the project**

This policy report is part of a series of briefs aiming to map the best (and in some cases, worst) practices in Europe in self-defense against the malign influencing practices of authoritarian states; primarily China and Russia. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author; GLOBSEC does not assume any responsibility for them or their subsequent use.

## Executive summary

- **Lithuania has been at the forefront of fighting hybrid threats since gaining independence in 1990.** Efforts to reduce Russian influence and potential threats began in the 1990s when Lithuania actively sought to join the EU and NATO, eventually becoming a full member in 2004. Lithuania was also one of the first European countries to recognize the dangers of relying too heavily on authoritarian regimes, as evidenced by Gazprom's sudden gas price hike in 2008.<sup>1</sup>
- **Russian threats have helped Lithuania strengthen its resilience.** The Russian aggression faced by Lithuania has driven the government to adopt a "total or comprehensive defense" approach to national security, which utilizes a variety of military and non-military measures implemented by the government in partnership with the local population to deter and resist foreign aggression.
- **Lithuania incurred China's wrath by allowing Taiwan to open a representation in Vilnius.** While China does not pose a direct military threat, its malicious influencing efforts are a concern, particularly since Sino-Lithuanian relations have worsened due to the establishment of the Taiwanese representation in Vilnius. China is also becoming a significant player in deploying hybrid capabilities, especially in maritime actions in the South China Sea and in using its cyber warfare doctrine in global diplomacy.
- **China's swift and aggressive response to Lithuania's policies, based on hybrid activities, caught global attention in late 2021 and sparked European unity.**<sup>2</sup> While the economic response of China was discussed the most broadly, the accompanying disinformation campaign was equally significant. The campaign was conducted by Chinese authorities and non-state actors, such as trolls and bots.<sup>3</sup> These elements are crucial components of China's disinformation machine, used not only in Lithuania but also globally.
- **A lack of understanding.** China lacks a deep understanding of the countries in the region, and as a result, its disinformation operations are less effective compared to Russia. Beijing has started to adopt Kremlin's narratives, such as presenting Lithuania as a failed state dependent on the West or a fascist country.

1 Reuters. (2008). Gazprom to hike Lithuania natural gas price – report. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/gazprom-lithuania-idUKL0212217920080102>

2 Judy Dempsey. (2022). China's Bullying of Lithuania Spurs European Unity. Carnegie Europe. Link: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/86208>

3 Marius Laurinavičius. (2020). Marius Laurinavičius apie Kinijos "trolliu armijos" paslaptis: tai, kas vyksta Rusijoje, gali pasirodyti tik vaiku zaidimas. 15 min. Link: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/prenumerata/poziuris/marius-laurinavicius-apie-kinijos-trolliu-armijos-paslaptis-tai-kas-vyksta-rusijoje-gali-pasirodyti-tik-vaiku-zaidimas-1218-1320272?copied>

## Recommendations

- **Act early.** Lithuania recognized its dependence on authoritarian regimes, particularly Russia, in time. By taking action early, it became the first EU nation to be independent from Russian natural gas transfers, mainly through the use of flexible floating LNG terminals.
- **Promote the country's experiences in the EU.** Lithuania should lead the promotion of best practices in combatting hybrid threats, especially among states in Central and Southern Europe who are hesitant (e.g. Hungary, Greece). Lithuania's experiences as part of the Soviet Union, and a similar economic and societal background make it a credible promoter of such practices in these regions.
- **Chinese and Russian methods are often similar.** Both countries target Lithuania with malicious influencing tools. Along with Moscow, Beijing seeks to polarize society, exploit rifts between political and business elites, and sow distrust among Western allies and democratic countries worldwide.
- **Watch out for Chinese companies' strategic/critical infrastructure.** The exact economic and security implications of using Huawei's 5G equipment are unclear. Several Western countries, such as Poland and Estonia, have imposed restrictions on Huawei's solutions due to national security concerns. In 2020, a Lithuanian critical infrastructure company issued a tender for the development of its smart IT equipment. This attracted significant attention from Chinese firms, with one offering to install upgrades to economic and energy security systems free of charge in exchange for system management rights. Critical infrastructures must be protected against these efforts.

## Introduction: Early recognition

Since regaining independence in 1990, Lithuania has been a pro-democracy leader in the region, having experienced the value of democracy after more than a century of Russian occupation. Efforts to reduce Russian influence and potential threats began in the 1990s, when Lithuania sought to join the EU and NATO, and finally became a full member in 2004. Achieving full independence for Lithuania was not easy, as exports were heavily dependent on Russian markets until 2014, but Russia's occupation of Crimea was a wake-up call. The short-term impact on the Lithuanian economy was significant, but it prompted

businesses to fully reorient towards the EU and other Western countries.<sup>4</sup>

Lithuania recognized the dangers of relying on authoritarian regimes early on, such as when its main natural gas provider, Gazprom, hiked prices substantially in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, in the early 2010s, Lithuania was paying one of the highest gas prices in the EU.<sup>6</sup> This prompted Lithuania to strive for energy independence, which it finally achieved after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>7</sup> The experience had a significant impact on Lithuania's policies aimed at countering foreign malicious influence.<sup>8</sup> All of Lithuania's efforts to counter Russian influence

4 Bankai.lt. (2015). Dėl Rusijos efekto Lietuvos ekonomika neteks 0,5 mlrd. eurų, praneša „Danske Bank“ Link: <https://www.bankai.lt/infobankas/naujienos/del-rusijos-efekto-lietuvos-ekonomika-neteks-0-5-mlrd-129.html>

5 Gazprom to hike Lithuania natural gas price – report.

6 Euractiv. (2013). Lithuania looks for alternatives to counter Russia's high gas price. Link: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/lithuania-looks-for-alternatives-to-counter-russia-s-high-gas-price/>

7 Giedre Pescekyte. (2022). Lithuania now fully independent of Russian energy. Euractiv. Link: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/lithuania-now-fully-independent-of-russian-energy/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/lithuania-now-fully-independent-of-russian-energy/)

8 Rob Schmitz. (2022). Lithuania has become the 1st European country to stop using Russian gas. NRP. Link: <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/26/1101568189/lithuania-has-become-the-1st-european-country-to-stop-using-russian-gas>

within the country and region, as well as its strong value-based political stance, have prompted Russian propaganda to label it a “small, Russophobic nation.”<sup>9</sup>

Between 2014 and 2016, the Lithuanian government actively sought to become a “strategic economic partner” for China and expressed strong interest in the Chinese market.<sup>10</sup> However, tensions began to arise when Lithuania agreed to open a Taiwanese representation in the country. As with Russia,

Lithuania adopted a value-based approach and supported Taiwan, as it did Ukraine. This drew the anger of the Chinese Communist Party when Lithuania allowed Taiwan to name its representation after the country instead of the commonly used “Taipei” label. This confrontation resulted in a de facto economic war between Beijing and Vilnius, but it failed to force the Lithuanian government to back down.<sup>11</sup>

## Lithuanian-Russian relations: always stormy

While Western democracies only began to take the threat of hybrid challenges seriously after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine, and only began to fully recognize the threat of information operations after the events of the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit

vote,<sup>12</sup> Lithuania gained experience with Russia’s tactics years before others. Over a decade ago, as noted in the introduction, Gazprom suddenly raised gas prices for the small country almost overnight. This prompted the Lithuanian government to begin diversifying, and it decided to build a liquefied natural



9 Natalija Zverko. (2020). Russians see Lithuania as small, Russophobic country – interview with ambassador Bajarunas. LRT. Link: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1301536/russians-see-lithuania-as-small-russophobic-country-interview-with-ambassador-bajarunas>

10 Irytas.lt. (2015). A. Butkevičius: „Lietuva tampa strategine Kinijos partnere“ Link: <https://www.irytas.lt/lietuvsdiena/aktualijos/2015/11/26/news/a-butkevicius-lietuva-tampa-strategine-kinijos-partnere--2802834>

11 LRT. (2022). Trade with China will recover eventually, Lithuanian economy minister says. Link: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1833553/trade-with-china-will-recover-eventually-lithuanian-economy-minister-says>

12 BBC. (2018). Russia ‘meddled in all big social media’ around US election. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46590890>

gas terminal on the Baltic Sea to show Russia that it had to compete on the gas market.<sup>13</sup> As a result of this decision, Vilnius was able to break free from Gazprom's dependence within a decade through the use of flexible floating LNG terminals.<sup>14</sup>

In 2018, a report by the European Values Center (EVC) categorized EU member states based on their approach to the hybrid threats posed by Russia. Eleven were said to be “in denial” of the threat, while some were “hesitant” in formulating a response. Greece was labeled a “Kremlin collaborator.” Meanwhile, Lithuania, facing constant threats ranging from gas pricing to information attacks, established itself as a European leader in resilience and received the highest score (15 out of 15) in the EVC's ranking, closely followed by Sweden and the UK with scores of 13.<sup>15</sup> The report praises Lithuania as a “full-scale defender” displaying justified concern over Russian malign influence and leading the European response by coordinating efforts among the government, intelligence agencies, and civil society. Lithuania prioritized information and cyber security issues, leading some of its ministries to become active in fighting these threats. The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry established a Strategic Communication Group that actively maintains a social media presence and coordinates anti-disinformation efforts with journalists, NGOs, and academia. The Ministry of National Defense has also published several manuals on resisting Russian influence and defending against invasion if necessary. There have even been instances of the Lithuanian radio and television commission suspending Russian state-owned broadcasters over their radical claims about Lithuania.<sup>16</sup>

The threat of Russian aggression towards Lithuania has prompted the government to adopt a “total or comprehensive defense” approach to national

security. This approach involves utilizing a variety of military and non-military means, carried out by the government in collaboration with the local population, to prevent and resist foreign aggression. This approach was defined in the 2017 Lithuanian National Security Strategy.<sup>17</sup> The strategy outlines a plan to improve psychological defense and resilience among the population.<sup>18</sup> In 2021, the latest update of the strategy was confirmed and has started to be implemented with a particular focus on the psychological defense and resilience of Lithuanian citizens.<sup>19</sup> The strategy is constantly being revised, updated, and re-adopted by the Lithuanian Parliament, indicating that the authorities take information operations and their effects seriously.

13 Lithuania has become the 1st European country to stop using Russian gas.

14 Charlie Duxbury. (2022). How Lithuania cut its ties to 'toxic' Russian gas. Politico. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-lithuania-cut-its-ties-to-toxic-russian-gas/>

15 European Values. (2018). 2018 Ranking of countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's subversion operations. Link: <https://www.europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2018-ranking-of-countermeasures-by-the-eu28-to-the-kremlin-s-subversion-operations.pdf>

16 2018 Ranking of countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's subversion operations

17 2017 Lithuanian National Security Strategy: [https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/rs/legalact/TAD/TAIS.262943/format/OO3\\_ODT/](https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/rs/legalact/TAD/TAIS.262943/format/OO3_ODT/)

18 Stephen J. Flanagan et al. (n.d.) Detering Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance. RAND. Link: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2700/RR2779/RAND\\_RR2779.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2779/RAND_RR2779.pdf)

19 Gailė Jaruševičiūtė-Mockuvienė. (2021). Seimui pateikta atnaujinta Nacionalinio saugumo strategija. Delfi. Link: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/seimui-pateikta-atnaujinta-nacionalinio-saugumo-strategija.d?id=88711691>



## Angering the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

While China does not pose a direct military threat to Lithuanian security, its malign influencing efforts do, especially since the deterioration of Sino-Lithuanian relations due to the establishment of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania. Additionally, China is becoming a significant player in deploying hybrid activities, particularly in the disputed South China Sea. China is also employing its cyber warfare doctrine as a part of its global diplomacy.

The Seimas' National Security and Defense Committee (NSDC) is one key player responding to the threats China poses on the societal level and

holds regular meetings on this issue.<sup>20</sup> The NSDC is also preparing a “National Agreement on Defense” while providing regular, binding instructions to the government on countering hybrid threats. The agreement includes plans for creating cyber forces in Lithuania, hosting an allied military division, strengthening the Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union financially, enhancing national air defense capabilities, preparing a State Defense Plan by 2023, and preparing the population for resistance and armed resistance.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Lithuanian intelligence services are preparing their annual assessment of the threats to national security. The report is not yet

20 Irytas. (2022). L. Kasčiūnas: nacionalinis gynybos susitarimas bus parengtas per tris-keturias savaites. Link: <https://www.iryta.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2022/03/23/news/l-kasciunas-nacionalinis-gynybos-susitarimas-bus-parengtas-per-tris-keturias-savaite-22818508>

21 Delfi. (2022). Partijų lyderiai pasirašys susitarimą dėl nacionalinio saugumo stiprinimo. Link: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/partiju-lyderiai-pasirasys-susitarima-del-nacionalinio-saugumo-stiprinimo.d?id=90735821>

published, but it is highly probable that both Russia and China will play a prominent role in it.<sup>22</sup>

The improvement in Lithuanian-Taiwanese relations became truly prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when approximately 200 Lithuanian public figures sent an open letter to the Lithuanian president, requesting support for a larger role for Taiwan at the WHO.<sup>23</sup> The letter emphasized Taiwan's successful management of the coronavirus and the medical aid they provided to Lithuania. Former Lithuanian Foreign Minister, Linas Linkevičius, already had a strong pro-Taiwan stance,<sup>24</sup> but the policy shift from Beijing to Taipei for Lithuania only came after the recent change of government. The incoming center-right government and Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis declared a "values-based foreign policy" upon taking office<sup>25</sup> and the "values-based foreign policy" manifested in two decisions that angered the Chinese Communist Party: Lithuania withdrew from China's 17+1 group and successfully encouraged others to do the same, then allowed Taiwan to open its representative office under its own name rather than "Taipei," symbolizing a shift in Lithuania's focus in its relationship with China.<sup>26</sup>

China swiftly responded with economic and informational coercion efforts against Lithuania, which received widespread attention in late 2021.<sup>27</sup> While China's economic response was the most visible and widely discussed, the CCP's hybrid influence campaign was equally important. Actors involved in disinformation campaigns included Chinese authorities, non-state actors, fake accounts, bots, and trolls.<sup>28</sup> The actors involved (such as Chinese diplomats on social media,<sup>29</sup> or GlobalTimes.cn<sup>30</sup>) in the campaign and their methods were classic

examples of China's disinformation strategy, as summarized by the Atlantic Council in December 2020. These actors are key components of China's disinformation machinery and are used not only in Lithuania but globally.<sup>31</sup>

Lithuania's support for democratic Taiwan led to a low point in Sino-Lithuanian relations in late 2021 to early 2022. As China aims to prevent Lithuania from supporting the independence of Tibet and Taiwan, the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius<sup>32</sup> in November 2021 faced significant resistance from the CCP, as previously noted. The fallout from Lithuania's support for Taiwan led to a decline in Sino-Lithuanian relations in late 2021-early 2022. In response to the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius in November 2021, the CCP regime launched an economic war, as both China and Lithuania imposed sanctions on each other. China imposed an export embargo and banned imports from Lithuania, effectively removing the country from the Chinese customs system. Despite these efforts, the Lithuanian economy was barely impacted. According to a senior economist from the National Bank of Lithuania, the dispute with China had not affected the short-term development of the country's economy, even though exports to China decreased significantly in February 2022.<sup>33</sup> After realizing that its strategy had no impact on Lithuania's economy or politics, China began informally imposing sanctions on the small Baltic nation by warning companies that they could face difficulties in maintaining commercial ties with China if they sourced components from Lithuania. German Continental company became a test case for this policy.<sup>34</sup>

22 GRĖSMIŲ NACIONALINIAM SAUGUMUI VERTINIMAS 2022: [https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/LT-el\\_-\\_pdf](https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/LT-el_-_pdf)

23 Bernardinai. (2020). Atviras laiškas Prezidentui, raginantį plėsti politinius ryšius su Taivanu. Link: <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2020-04-22-ragina-plesti-politinius-rysius-su-taivanu/>

24 Vaidotas Beniušis. (2020). L.Linkevičius paragina PSO pakviesti Taivaną į tarptautinę asamblėją. Link: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/-linkevicius-paragina-psy-pakviesti-taivana-i-tarptautine-asambleja-56-1317466>

25 Delfi. (2021). Trims Seimo nariams – skambus Taivano įvertinimas: dėkoja „mažai, bet drąsiai“ Lietuvai. Link: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lietuonia/trims-seimo-nariams-skambus-taivano-ivertinimas-dekoja-mazai-bet-drasiai-lietuvai.d?id=89087961>

26 Ignas Jacauskas. (2022). Atidaryta Lietuvos prekybos atstovybė Taivane. Link: <https://www.delfi.lt/verslas/verslas/atidaryta-lietuvos-prekybos-atstovybe-taivane.d?id=91675323>

27 China's Bullying of Lithuania Spurs European Unity.

28 Marius Laurinavicius apie Kinijos "trolliu armijos" pasiplaptis: tai, kas vyksta Rusijoje, gali pasirodyti tik vaiku zaidimas.

29 Ekspertai. (2021). „Global Times“: Lietuva yra antikiniško judėjimo Europoje avangardas. Link: <https://ekspertai.eu/-global-times-lietuva-yra-antikiniško-judejimo-europoje-avangardas/?comm=1>

30 Mario Giannangeli. (2022). China using 'Russia playbook' as massive disinformation campaign mounted in Lithuania. Express. Link: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1554418/china-latest-lithuania-russia>

31 Dexter Roberts. (2020). China's Disinformation Strategy: Its Dimensions and Future. Atlantic Council. Link: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CHINA-ASI-Report-FINAL-1.pdf>

32 Generally, Taiwan's representations use the label "Taipei" instead of the country's name.

33 LRT. (2022). Ekonomistas: ginčai su Kinija kol kas neturi įtakos Lietuvos ūkio augimo perspektyvoms. Link: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/verslas/4/1616639/ekonomistas-gincai-su-kinija-kol-kas-neturi-itakos-lietuvos-ukio-augimo-perspektyvoms>

34 Matthew Reynolds and Matthew P. Goodman. (2022). China's Economic Coercion: Lessons from Lithuania. CSIS. Link: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-economic-coercion-lessons-lithuania>

The EU was forced to get involved when the common market was threatened by external sanctions from China. As a result, the bloc filed a complaint against China at the WTO.<sup>35</sup> In response, the EU began developing an Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) to discourage economic attacks on its member states.

The Sino-Lithuanian case demonstrates that small nations are better protected against great powers as members of international institutions, even if they cannot completely shield them from the effects of hybrid influence campaigns.<sup>36</sup>

Staying in the economic realm, it should be noted that Lithuania was the first country to exit China's "17+1" group and encouraged others to do the same. At the time, Gabrielius Landsbergis stated that the divisive format needed to be transformed into a more "efficient" 27+1 format, encompassing all EU member states. The Lithuanian Foreign Minister emphasized that the unity of the EU played a vital role in addressing various challenges, such as the vaccine rollout and tackling the pandemic.<sup>37</sup> The example set by Lithuania, with no significant negative consequences from leaving the 17+1 group, was followed by Estonia and Latvia in August 2022.<sup>38</sup>

Another economic concern is the spread of Chinese IT and surveillance technology in Lithuania and the region. Chinese firms are eager to build strategic IT infrastructure in the Baltic states. In 2020, a Lithuanian

critical infrastructure company issued a tender for the upgrade of its smart IT equipment, attracting significant interest from Chinese companies, with one firm offering free upgrades to economic and energy security systems in exchange for management rights. Five Chinese-linked companies participated in the tender, and two of these were jointly owned by the Chinese government.<sup>39</sup> As the Lithuanian Energy Distribution Regulator (ESO) is considered a critical part of Lithuanian infrastructure, it closely works with the Lithuanian State Security Department and the National Security Commission of the Government, who made the decision to eliminate Chinese companies from the tender due to national security threats.<sup>40</sup> The growth of Chinese IT and surveillance technology companies in Lithuania and the region raises concerns about China's objective to extend long-term influence over strategic sectors and establish its enterprises globally.

One example is Huawei, the world's largest telecoms-equipment manufacturer and leading 5G developer, which has faced allegations of espionage and data transfers to the CCP in various countries, such as the US, Canada, Australia and Poland. Despite the absence of concrete evidence of significant vulnerabilities in Huawei technology, several Western countries, like Poland and Estonia, have imposed restrictions on its solutions due to national security concerns.<sup>41</sup>

## Soft and sharp power efforts

The opening of Huawei's base in Lithuania in 2010 led to the company using soft power tactics to improve its societal standing. For example, Huawei supported the Lithuanian Basketball Federation between 2014 and

2016, which can be considered its first major publicity campaign in the country. Despite this, there have been no public scandals associated with Huawei in Lithuania.<sup>42</sup>

35 China's Economic Coercion: Lessons from Lithuania.

36 Bryce Barros and Krystyna Sikora. (2022). China's sanctions regime and Lithuania: Policy responses for European institutions. Hinrich Foundation Report. Link: <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Chinas-sanctions-regime-and-Lithuania-Alliance-For-Securing-Democracy-Hinrich-Foundation-August-2022.pdf>

37 Stuart Lau. (2021). Lithuania pulls out of China's '17+1' bloc in Eastern Europe. Politico. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/lithuania-pulls-out-china-17-1-bloc-eastern-central-europe-foreign-minister-gabrielius-landsbergis/>

38 ERR News. (2022). Estonia, Latvia withdrawing from China's 16+1 cooperation format. Link: <https://news.err.ee/1608682231/estonia-latvia-withdrawing-from-china-s-16-1-cooperation-format>

39 State Security Department of Lithuania, Second Department of Operational services under the Ministry of National Defense, NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT ASSESSMENT 2021, Vilnius.

40 Joana Lapieniė. (2021). Lietuvos ir kaimyninių šalių žvalgybos perspėja – Kinija siekia sukurti sistemą, kur visi veiktų pagal Pekino standartus. LRT. Link: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1359658/lietuvos-ir-kaimyniniu-saliu-zvalgybos-perspėja-kinija-siekia-sukurti-sistema-kur-visi-veiktu-pagal-pekino-standartus>

41 Aivar Pau. (2019). Rainsalu assures: Estonian-US 5G declaration is not directed against Huawei. Postimees- Link: <https://news.postimees.ee/6820396/reinsalu-assures-estonian-us-5g-declaration-is-not-directed-against-huawei>

42 Xinhua. (2014). China's Huawei sponsors Lithuanian basketball team. Link: [http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off\\_the\\_Wire/2014-08/01/content\\_33112129.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2014-08/01/content_33112129.htm)

According to media reports, by 2017, Huawei had rapidly gained traction in the Baltic states and became the third-best-selling phone manufacturer in the region.<sup>43</sup> However, in 2022, a significant drop in sales was reported for Huawei in the Baltic states. This suggests that China's hybrid influencing activities have become a persistent aspect of Sino-Lithuanian relations.

China's use of sharp power,<sup>44</sup> characterized by manipulative tactics to "erode the independence of institutions,"<sup>45</sup> was made apparent in the interview with Chinese Ambassador Shen Zhifei on Delfi. It in late April 2020.<sup>46</sup> The interview, conducted by a Lithuanian journalist skeptical of China, mainly focused on Beijing's response to COVID-19, but also addressed the ongoing bilateral crisis between the two countries. The ambassador's answers to the journalist's questions were based on China's well-known propaganda tactics, including manipulative statements.

Contradicting his own claims of China's transparency and responsible approach to the pandemic as a global player, Zhifei cast doubt on the origin of the virus in China and repeatedly called for a scientific conclusion. He also incorporated conspiracy theories promoted by Russian and Chinese propaganda into his argument.<sup>47</sup>

The activities of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Xinhua News Agency Bureau, and the Overseas Chinese Association of Lithuania are also worth monitoring, as they may be contributing to the spread of anti-Lithuanian narratives for English-speaking audiences worldwide. Xinhua News Agency, in particular, has been very active in this regard.<sup>48</sup> Lithuania has developed strong ties with Taiwan, with cooperation in various fields including social, economic, and political. This proactive approach to Taiwan is a departure from China.<sup>49, 50</sup> The development shows that Lithuania has strong views



43 VZ. (2017). „Huawei“ toliau didina telefonų rinkos dalį, taip pat ir Lietuvoje. Link: <https://www.vz.lt/informacines-technologijos-telekomunikacijos/2017/07/29/huawei-toliau-didina-telefonu-rinkos-dali-taip-pat-ir-lietuvoje>

44 While Huawei's publicity stunt that can be considered as a soft power effort seeks to improve public opinion on the firm and thus Chinese companies overall, sharp power has more malicious intents.

45 Christopher Walker. (2018). What is "Sharp Power"? *Journal of Democracy*, 29 (3). Pp. 9-23. Link: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>

46 Delfi is one of the most popular Lithuanian media outlets. See the article here: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/kinijos-ambasadorius-lietuvoje-virusas-kilo-ne-pas-mus.d?id=84158423>

47 Zach Dorfman. (2021). How countries amplify COVID disinformation. *Axios*. Link: <https://www.axios.com/2021/02/17/coronavirus-misinformation-china-russia-iran>

48 Xinhua. (2022). Why was Lithuania wrong? Link: <http://english.news.cn/europe/20220106/651d3959329a43feb00fc20f209e1d58/c.html>

49 Why was Lithuania wrong?

50 TV3. (2022). Metusi Kinijai iššūkį Lietuva įgija pranašumą, kurio pavydėtų net Vokietija ar Prancūzija. Link: <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/uzsienis/metusi-kinijai-issuki-lietuva-igija-pranasuma-kurio-pavydetu-net-vokietija-ar-prancuzija-n1133399>

about China and its influence, with the majority of the population having negative opinions towards the Chinese government and its actions. Data suggests that China's efforts to extend its influence and soft power in Lithuania may have limited success in shaping public opinion and perceptions. 43% of

Lithuanians consider China to be a threat to the country, which is tied for second in the nine-country GLOBSEC 2022 poll, only trailing Czechia (50%). 41% of the Lithuanian population say that the Chinese government threatens their identity and values, while only 7% consider the regime to be inspiring.<sup>51</sup>

## Actors and narratives

China's response to Lithuania's policies resulted in increased economic and information pressure on the country, which received global attention in late 2021 and prompted a united response from Europe.<sup>52</sup> The disinformation campaign was aimed at discrediting Lithuania's political and social systems, as well as spreading false narratives about the country's actions towards China. The goal of the campaign was to create confusion and sow discord within Lithuanian society, as well as to undermine the country's reputation on the global stage. The effectiveness of the disinformation campaign is still being studied, but it is clear that it was part of China's overall effort to exert influence and pressure on Lithuania.<sup>53</sup> China's response to Lithuania's policies was swift and expected, encompassing multi-dimensional economic and information coercion that captured worldwide attention in late 2021 and spurred European unity. The accompanying disinformation campaign was just as important as the economic response, involving state actors such as the state-owned CGTN and the Global Times media outlet, as well as non-state actors such as fringe media outlets Ekspertai.eu<sup>54</sup> and Bukimevieningi.lt,<sup>55</sup> politicians like social-democrat Gintautas Paluckas and his party,<sup>56</sup> and

Ramūnas Karbauskis and the farmers-greens,<sup>57</sup> and businessmen like Kristijonas Vizbaras<sup>58</sup> and Kęstutis Černeckas.<sup>59</sup> Some experts have expressed concerns about Chinese interference in Lithuanian elections, but no proof has been provided thus far.<sup>60</sup>

The disinformation campaign portrayed Lithuania as a country under the control of foreign interests, lacking independence and autonomy in its decision-making process. These narratives were designed to discredit Lithuania and undermine its standing in the international community, ultimately serving the interests of the Chinese government. Additionally, the narratives aimed to sway public opinion and create divisions within Lithuanian society, further weakening the country's ability to resist Chinese influence.<sup>61</sup>

China's propaganda also borrowed Russian narratives used against Lithuania for decades, depicting the country as a failed state without an economy or future, with Nazi or fascist tendencies in society.<sup>62</sup> A noticeable alliance between China and Russia can be seen regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as the Chinese propaganda machine amplifies pro-Kremlin narratives.<sup>63</sup>

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## Conclusion: An authoritarian wedding

In conclusion, both China and Russia are using similar methods to target Lithuania with disinformation campaigns, attempting to polarize society, divide political and business elites, and sow distrust among allied countries in the West and among democratic nations globally. China's understanding of Lithuanian society is not as strong as Russia's, so its disinformation operations are less effective. As a result, China has started to borrow Russian narratives and present Lithuania as a failed state dependent on the West or a fascist country.<sup>64</sup>

The campaigns by China and Russia have been unsuccessful due to Lithuania's increased resilience to foreign malign influence over the past decade. This has proven advantageous for Vilnius, as they learned from early experiences with authoritarian influence and made appropriate policy decisions.

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▸ Vajnorská 100/B  
831 04 Bratislava  
Slovak Republic

▸ +421 2 321 378 00  
▸ info@globsec.org  
▸ www.globsec.org

