

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

ISBN: 978-9934-564-69-7

CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN THE NORDIC-BALTIC INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT: LATVIA AND SWEDEN

Published by the
NATO Strategic Communications
Centre of Excellence



Introduction

This is an executive summary of the three chapter report on China's influence in the information environment of the Nordic–Baltic region.

The authors and contributors to the study are:

- Russia's and China's influence in the Nordic–Baltic region by **Edward Lucas**
- China's influence in the Latvian information environment by **Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova** and **Egle Klekere**
- China's influence in the Swedish information environment by **Björn Jerdén** and **Vikings Bohman**

The report is aimed at understanding China's influence in the region, by undertaking analysis of China's communication tactics and tools, its strategic narratives and their prevalence in public discourse in the Nordic–Baltic region, illustrated by two case studies: Latvia and Sweden.

From the Nordic countries, Sweden was chosen for analysis due to its tense bilateral relations with China over the last few years, and encountering China's confrontational communication efforts, labelled as 'wolf warrior' diplomacy. From the Baltic States, Latvia was selected given the role of its capital, Riga, having been chosen as headquarters of the overseas representations of various Chinese institutions and public diplomacy activities in the Baltics. In contrast to Sweden, Latvia has experienced less attention from China's communication efforts.

The report looks at China's influence in two dimensions. First, it analyses avenues of China's influence in the countries of analysis; in this way, it tries to understand the commonalities and differences in China's approach to these countries. Second, it analyses how China's activities are reflected in the media space of the target countries. Thus, the report seeks to understand to what extent China's official 'frames' are converging with

the views expressed in local media, and potentially influencing public attitudes.

Methodology

Although there are a number of studies on China's strategic interests in the Nordic–Baltic region, not that much research has gone into China's influence in the information environment. This report analyses China's influence in this area in three stages:

First, the study identified eight avenues of influence which are used by China to achieve its strategic interests globally and tried to assess how each of them are applied in the Nordic–Baltic region. The following areas were assessed:

- United Front networks
- Parliamentary relations
- Academic relations
- Economic investments/exposure to the Chinese market
- Infrastructure development
- Espionage
- Diplomatic measures
- Public communication

Second, based on Chinese official sources and media, the study identifies the most evident issues in or about the target country on which China focuses its communication efforts. Those are broken down into 'official frames'—meaning frames that are "offered by state or other power-holding agencies"¹.

Third, the study analyses the target country's media content in the timeframe from 1 January–30 April 2021, to identify convergence between the previously determined Chinese official frames and frames that dominate Swedish and Latvian media.

For the purposes of this research, a frame is defined as a central organising idea for "making sense of relevant

¹ Cunningham, D., Browning, B., *The Emergence of Worthy Targets: Official Frames and Deviance Narratives Within the FBI. Sociological Forum, 19(3), 2004, pp. 347–369.*



events, suggesting what is at issue,"² while framing refers to the selection of some aspects of perceived reality, making them "more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."³

The goal is to validate the methodology and apply it to the remaining six Nordic–Baltic countries in future studies.

China's influence in the Latvian information environment

The study finds that China's information influence strategy in Latvia feeds into China's wider strategic interests: to keep a number of relatively friendly and non-antagonised countries within the EU, and to preclude an EU-US joint position against China.

The former objective is being pursued by spreading the message that cooperation with China yields great benefits for the involved nation, because China is a global economic leader, it has successfully tackled the COVID-19 pandemic, and it knows what the local strengths are and would like to create opportunities for them on the Chinese market.

China's approach to Latvia's public opinion is two-fold: **amplification of the cooperation narrative and abstaining from confrontation publicly, and covert push-back against non-flattering information about China.** In contrast to Sweden, no sign of China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy can be identified in Latvia.

China's diplomats in Latvia are not actively involved in shaping the country's public discourse. Although China's official frames can be found in the Latvian media, they mostly appear as translations from Chinese

international media outlets. Still, the increasing intensity of polemic content in the Latvian language on the Chinese embassy's social media, and Facebook page in particular, leads to the presumption that the situation could change in the future.

For the period of January–April 2021, **174 articles were selected for analysis—127 in Latvian language and 47 in Russian.** Each article has been analysed to look for China's frames (deployed by Chinese official actors and information sources) and/or counter-frames (competing views to those of Chinese sources).

For the time being, China is avoiding 'sticks' in its communication efforts towards Latvia, focusing instead on 'carrots', and promoting the idea of being a lucrative partner and appreciating Latvia. On the other hand, China's official frames have been met with opposing views in the Latvian media space, leading to the thought that the aspiration to maintain a positive image of the PRC is a continuing challenge. It was found that 73% of all analysed publications with a prevailing frame were dominated by counter-frames.

The study concludes that Latvian media (in Latvian and Russian languages) reporting on China's business and economics is the most convergent with China's official frames. Other largely unchallenged frames were 'Global leader' and 'COVID-19 success story'.

The Russian language media was found to be more accepting of Chinese official frames. Even if China's frames are not reproduced exclusively, they are more present than in the Latvian language media. This difference is starkly visible in commercial media that have both Latvian and Russian editorial boards (i.e. TvNet or Delfi), namely in their coverage of China's activities in the East Asia and its relations with the EU.

The study concludes that convergence with China's frames in Latvia's media discourse is not related to local Chinese influence activities. Mirroring of China's official frames is mostly a result of China's global strategy and international communication, including information

2 Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), 1989, pp. 1–37

3 Entman, Robert M., Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm, *Journal of Communication*, Volume 43, Issue 4, December 1993, pp. 51–58



spread by the Chinese state-controlled broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), and the official state-run press agency of the Xinhua News Agency. China's communication efforts **have also gained traction in Latvia's information environment due to the home-grown hopes of tapping into China's economic opportunities.** This view was the most pronounced by political elites and even amounted to a state priority in the early 2010s.

China's influence in the Swedish information environment

The case study provides an overview of Chinese activities that could influence the Swedish information environment, including activities of the United Front, espionage, and strategic investments. The report identifies the **Chinese embassy's intense public communication campaign as particularly important for shaping the information environment.** By vigorously denouncing its critics at all levels of Swedish society, the embassy has positioned itself as a frontrunner in the Chinese government's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy.

Based on a reading of Chinese official sources, as well as state- and party-owned media, the report distinguishes five 'frames' used in this effort. While predominantly focused on confrontation, China's public diplomacy also has a softer side which leaves the door open to cooperation for those willing to refrain from criticising China.

The study presents an analysis of the Swedish media coverage related to the 'Huawei question'—the recent discussion on whether to allow Huawei to participate in the auctions of frequencies for 5G networks. It covers a **period of four months (January–April 2021) and is based on a reading of a total of 119 media items** from some of the largest mainstream, business, and alternative media platforms, including editorials, op-eds and news features.

This analysis shows how some views in Swedish media converge with China's official communication around a number of ideas about Sino-Swedish relations. In short, these ideas revolve around the understanding that **China is an important global power with whom cooperation is required and unnecessary confrontation should be avoided, as opposing China would lead to costly consequences.** Because persuasion attempts are more likely to be successful if both sides share a basic level of common understanding, **such ideas could provide fertile ground for future attempts by China to shape Swedish perceptions.**

The study suggests it is unlikely that these 'converging views' circulating in Swedish public discourse are the direct result of Chinese influence. However, if ideas about China's importance and the costs of opposing it are exaggerated, this may induce unwarranted fears and hesitancy among policymakers dealing with sensitive questions in relation to China. This, in turn, **may encourage pre-emptive alignment of behaviours in the form of self-censorship or abstention** when it comes to decisions that could lead to Chinese reactions.

Prepared and published by the
NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

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November 2021