



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

Covert propaganda operations in plain sight
The CCP united front system's media network in Europe

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Executive summary

The European operations of the China News Service (CNS), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) united front system's main propaganda agency, and its extensive network of media outlets in the continent have so far largely escaped the scrutiny applied to other propaganda organs.

The CNS network's dominance of Europe's Chinese-language media landscape poses challenges for European institutions.

- CNS coordinates a global network of ostensibly private, independent diaspora media groups that help inject CCP propaganda narratives into both Chinese diaspora and local mainstream discourse. While these entities avoid the public suspicion PRC foreign-language media have aroused, they have been more successful in dominating part of Europe's information landscape.
- CNS's activity lies at the symbiotic intersection of propaganda and united front work, two instruments of authoritarian influence. This symbiosis helps the CCP influence European politics and shape the information landscape to serve the party's policy goals.
- United front work and propaganda operations should be understood as hybrid and information warfare activities, as defined by European institutions. This should make these PRC activities as concerning as comparable Russian operations.
- Evidence suggests that at least some CCP-coopted media in Europe may be political, rather than commercial enterprises, relying on capital injections from their owners or the party-state to continue operating.
- CNS and other propaganda organs target Chinese-language speakers with content that distorts reality, creating systemic problems for European societies.

EU and national agencies should take coordinated action to address these challenges.

1. EU institutions and national governments should establish a **scheme requiring foreign influence agencies to register** and implement it effectively, in order to increase the transparency of actors capable of interfering in democratic processes.
2. Communications and media regulatory authorities should **proactively screen media organisations** and other propaganda organs for possible violations of publishing laws and regulations.
3. European private and public media organisations should **cease all cooperation with CNS and its network**.
4. EU institutions and national governments should seek ways to **support genuinely independent Chinese diaspora media** without links to CCP influence organs.
5. EU and national agencies should put in place a **screening mechanism** to ensure that only media organisations without links to CNS or other influence organs can receive EU and national grants or other forms of support.
6. Publicly-owned and private media in Europe should establish **Chinese-language services to offer news as well as practical information** to Europe's Chinese-speaking population, so as to compete with propaganda organs' domination of the media landscape.



0 Introduction: A global influence machine unnoticed

The expansion of Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中国共产党) propaganda¹ in the global media space has received considerable attention in the last few years. *China Daily* inserts in major Western newspapers and other cooperation with PRC external propaganda organs have been discussed widely. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the world was taken aback by the Russian-style aggressive rhetoric and actions of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) diplomatic corps, in what has been labelled "wolf warrior diplomacy" (战狼外交). This novelty only revealed to international audiences the rhetoric that was already present in PRC official documents and propaganda as well as in content reproduced by Chinese-language diaspora media globally. In this diaspora environment, the **China News Service (CNS, 中国新闻社)**, a united front propaganda organ, acts as the centre of a global network of ostensibly independent news outlets. These outlets reproduce propaganda content from CNS, while their own original content typically toes the party line, further attracting the party's favour.

The PRC **propaganda system** and some of its key external propaganda organs have been studied for decades.² The State Council Information Office (SCIO, 国务院新闻办公室), which often organises press conferences for foreign audiences, has long been recognised as an external nameplate for party, rather than government, propaganda organs.³ Key external propaganda units such as the China Global News Network (CGTN, 中国环球电视网) and China Radio International (CRI, 中国国际广播电台) have been subject to Western media scrutiny, with CGTN even losing the UK licence it used to broadcast in Europe. Similarly, PRC propaganda work using tools commonly associated with Russian disinformation campaigns such as bots and fake social media accounts is regularly discussed in reports by think-tanks and government agencies.⁴ Governments and societies are able to identify these overt operations

¹This paper understands propaganda as public communication with a political agenda, as "an integral aspect of Communist Party governance – a vital tool in the authoritarian toolkit of deep social management" (James Farley & Matthew D. Johnson, "Introduction", *Redefining Propaganda in Modern China: The Mao Era and Its Legacies*, ed. by James Farley & Matthew D. Johnson, Routledge, 2021, p. 1). Propaganda is management of public opinion "by social suggestion rather than altering other conditions of the environment or in the organism" (*ibid.*, p. 3). Propaganda chiefly consists of engineering a favourable discourse landscape, normalising CCP proxies, utilising "constructive opponents" and neutralising critical voices, rather than just obvious self-praise (Jichang Lulu, "Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster", Sinopsis, 26th Nov. 2019). The CCP deploys propaganda as a means of control and as a tool to boost great power nationalism, for which successful party historical narratives are crafted under the concept of "telling China's story well" (Farley & Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 sq.).

²David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy", *The China Journal* 57 (2007); Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007; Mareike Svea Ohlberg, "Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics", PhD thesis, University of Heidelberg, 6th Mar. 2013. In PRC politics, 'system' refers to a suprabureaucracy comprising organs united by a common set of tasks under the supervision of a senior party leader (Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform*, 2nd ed., Norton & Company, 2003, p. 218; Tsai Wen-Hsuan & Wang Zhou, "Integrated Fragmentation and the Role of Leading Small Groups in Chinese Politics", *The China Journal* 82 [2019]).

³Established in 1991 as the state nameplate for the Office of External Propaganda (中央对外宣传办公室) under the CCP Central Committee, it has since 2014 been reduced to an external name of a subunit of the Central Propaganda Department (中央宣传部), the agency coordinating the propaganda system (Ohlberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 303 sqq.; Jichang Lulu, Filip Jirouš & Rachel Lee, "Xi's centralisation of external propaganda: SCIO and the Central Propaganda Department", Sinopsis, 25th Jan. 2021; "中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室", 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室).

⁴Carne Colomina, Héctor Sánchez Margalef & Richard Youngs, "The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world", European Parliament, Apr. 2021, pp. 6 sqq.; Jake Wallis,



as propaganda or biased sources, due to their visibility and often overbearing language.

Less obvious to governments and societies are the propaganda operations of the **united front system**, another major component of the party-state apparatus. The system, co-ordinated by the **United Front Work Department (UFWD, 中共中央统战部)** under the CCP Central Committee, is tasked with coopting non-party entities both at home and abroad and using them for CCP policy goals.⁵ As a recent report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) shows, the **China News Service (CNS, 中国新闻社)** – the united front system’s key propaganda organ – runs a global network of coopted Chinese-language diaspora media outlets, at times covertly owning or funding them.⁶ The CNS network’s operations allow the CCP to dominate Chinese-language media and disseminate propaganda among Chinese-speaking groups globally. This manipulated content then spills into their broader societies, through cooperation with mainstream media and the cooption of local elites.

CNS’s media network is a decentralised system of **nodes**, media organisations guided or controlled by CNS. While the propaganda and CNS links of these organisations are institutional, the united front system often engages individuals within the organisations, favouring their leadership as representatives of diaspora communities. The media outlets reproduce CNS or other PRC propaganda content or create original content aligned with CCP policies. This way, the propaganda and united front systems work in a symbiotic partnership, boosting each other’s impact and promoting the same CCP policy goals.

These operations, run by united front and propaganda cadre, match the definition of **hybrid warfare** identified as a threat by EU institutions, since they produce a distorted reality. They should be a major concern for European and other institutions and should be viewed on par with the work of standard external propaganda organs.

Understanding CNS’s structure as a nexus between external propaganda and united front work abroad is key to effectively countering these narratives and influence operations. Furthermore, according to its own cadre, at least a crucial part of the external propaganda system is now gearing up for a new style of more precisely targeted propaganda abroad, auguring an intensification of this threat to European societies.⁷

“Twitter data shows China using fake accounts to spread propaganda”, The Strategist, 12th June 2020; Joshua Kurlantzick, “How China Ramped Up Disinformation Efforts During the Pandemic”, Council on Foreign Relations, 10th Sept. 2020; Christina Nemr & William Gangware, “Weapons of Mass Distraction: Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age”, Park Advisors, via U.S. Department of State, pp. 20 sqq.

⁵Gerry Groot, “Managing transitions: the Chinese Communist Party’s united front work, minor parties and groups, hegemony and corporatism”, PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1997; Alex Joske, “The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising united front work”, Synopsis, 23rd July 2019; idem, “The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s united front system”, ASPI Policy Brief 32 (2020).

⁶Alex Joske et al., “The influence environment: A survey of Chinese-language media in Australia”, ASPI Policy Brief 42 (2020), pp. 7 sqq.; Alex Joske, “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work”, China Brief 19.9 (9th May 2019). See section 3.1 for a European example of covert funding.

⁷In June 2021, the head of China Media Group (CMG, 中央广播电视总台), the central external propaganda organ that comprises CRI and CGTN, declared that the organisation would target international youth through a new “Influencer Studio” (网红工作室) (David Bandurski, “Influencers, Activists and Diplomats”, China Media Project, 22nd June 2021). Additionally, CMG will focus on adapting content to different groups rather than continuing its “one-size-fits-all” approach (*ibid.*). CMG journalists should act as “dip-



This policy brief uses findings from previous literature and original research on case studies to signal the policy implications of the propaganda activities of CNS's European nexus. The paper begins by describing key external propaganda and united front entities, showing CNS's institutional position as the united front work system's main propaganda organ primarily targeting the Chinese diaspora, and explains how their activities fit EU definitions of hybrid and information warfare (sections 1 and 2). Then, using European case studies, the brief shows CNS nodes' links to PRC influence organs, some of which amount to covert ownership, and describes their own united front and propaganda work aimed at local diaspora and mainstream politics (section 3). The brief concludes with policy implications and recommendations sketching ways for European agencies should to tackle the threats to democratic institutions posed by an increasingly authoritarian regime (sections 4 and 5).

The united front system, a core structure of an authoritarian party-state, claims an extra-territorial right to represent European communities it defines as Chinese.⁸ Research exposing its propaganda activities, which seek to "guide public opinion" among these groups, can hamper these often covert operations. The party-state's organs do not welcome such transparency: days before the publication of this brief, a CNS story relayed a PRC embassy's condemnation of a Sinopsis event where some of its findings had been presented. The embassy accused Sinopsis's "so-called 'experts'" of "engag[ing] in anti-China activities" and "wantonly vilify[ing] Overseas Chinese".⁹

The EU and national governments should counter the CCP united front system's efforts to dominate Europe's Chinese-language media space, protecting the rights of the communities this foreign authoritarian regime claims to represent.

lomats" and defend and promote the party line abroad (*ibid.*). This language resonates with statements by the Swiss CNS node presented in this brief (section 3.3).

⁸Ray Wang & Gerry Groot, "Who Represents? Xi Jinping's Grand United Front Work, Legitimation, Participation and Consultative Democracy", *Journal of Contemporary China* 27.112 (15th Feb. 2018); Joske, "The party speaks for you". For more on the PRC's treatment of what it considers to be the Chinese diaspora, see James Jiann Hua To, "Hand-in-Hand, Heart-to-Heart: Qiaowu and the Overseas Chinese", PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2009.

⁹"中国驻捷克大使馆驳斥捷所谓中国问题专家涉华诬蔑抹黑", 中国新闻网, 24th July 2021; "驻捷克使馆发言人驳斥捷克所谓中国问题专家涉华诬蔑抹黑", 中华人民共和国驻捷克共和国大使馆, 23rd July 2021; "Mluvčí velvyslanectví ČLR v ČR vyvrátil pomluvy a očerňování Číny ze strany takzvaných českých odborníků na otázky týkající se Číny", 中华人民共和国驻捷克共和国大使馆, 23rd July 2021; "Workshop: CCP information warfare and PRC Wolf Warrior diplomacy", Sinopsis, 16th July 2021. Illustrating the network role in propagating CCP views, the embassy's condemnation was also reproduced by one of the CNS-linked media outlets discussed in this brief ("中国驻捷克使馆发言人驳斥捷克所谓中国问题专家涉华诬蔑抹黑", 使馆网, via 布拉格时报, 26th July 2021; see section 3.2).



1 United front work and propaganda as hybrid warfare techniques

CNS's propaganda and other activities fit the EU definition of hybrid warfare: the agency runs a global network of covertly-guided or even covertly-owned coopted media outlets. Moreover, the general concepts of CCP united front and propaganda work fall within the EU's understanding of hybrid and information warfare.

The European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's foreign affairs agency, has defined *hybrid warfare* as the centrally designed use of covert and overt tactics adopted by military and non-military actors, "ranging from intelligence and cyber operations through economic pressure to the use of conventional forces".¹⁰ EEAS further defines *information warfare* as one of the key components of hybrid warfare. Information warfare involves "denying or distorting facts" that can lead to the manipulation of politicians and populations.¹¹ Disinformation, a component of information warfare, is defined as verifiably "false or misleading information" disseminated for political or economic purposes.¹² PRC propaganda operations fit into the concept of "manipulation of the information space" — they suppress critical voices and flood the media space with often fabricated or distorted positive content.¹³

1.1 CCP propaganda: The struggle for discourse power

CCP propaganda often consists of false or misleading information, adjusting statistics and reality to show the party-state in a better light and creating falsehoods about party critics. These tactics are mainly employed when reporting on politically sensitive issues, such as Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, or natural catastrophes such as the SARS and Covid-19 epidemics. A European Parliament think-tank report recognises the struggle for narrative control as a key part of disinformation campaigns, "a threat to free and fair elections".¹⁴ The PRC has long struggled for "discourse power", indeed the control over narratives abroad, a fight that has intensified under Xi Jinping, a struggle in which the UFWD plays an increasingly crucial role.¹⁵ To achieve this, CCP uses tactics such as "borrowing a boat to go out to the sea" (借船出海), in which a PRC propaganda organ uses a foreign media outlet as a platform to spread CCP-friendly content through, e.g., paid inserts or content-sharing agreements, avoiding scrutiny and reaching a wider audience.¹⁶ *China Watch*, a *China Daily* supplement

¹⁰"Food-for-thought paper 'Countering Hybrid Threats'", EEAS, via Statewatch, 13th July 2015; "About the European External Action Service (EEAS)", EEAS, 25th Nov. 2019.

¹¹"Food-for-thought paper 'Countering Hybrid Threats'".

¹²"EU Code of Practice on Disinformation", European Commission, Sept. 2018.

¹³"Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Shaping Europe's digital future", European Commission, 19th Feb. 2020.

¹⁴"Institutions and foreign interferences", European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, June 2020.

¹⁵Matthew D. Johnson, "Safeguarding socialism: The origins, evolution and expansion of China's total security paradigm", Synopsis, 16th June 2020, p. 31; Gerry Groot, "The CCP's Grand United Front abroad", Synopsis, 24th Sept. 2019.

¹⁶Brady, *op. cit.*, ch. 7; eadem, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping", Wilson Center, 18th Sept. 2017, p. 10; Jichang Lulu, "China's state media and the outsourcing of soft power", University of Nottingham China Policy Institute blog, 15th July 2015.



inserted in Western media newspapers, is an often-debated application of these tactics.¹⁷

As the examples presented in this brief show, the operations of the nodes of CNS's European network contribute to this struggle for narrative control. The Rome-based *Cina in Italia* (世界中国), a magazine incorporated into a CNS product, openly claims to struggle for discourse power in Italian mainstream society.¹⁸ Furthermore, the co-operation (also involving PRC external propaganda organs) of the Spanish CNS node Ouhua News (欧华报) with the Spanish state news agency EFE, which helps spread CCP narratives throughout the Spanish-speaking world, can be understood as an attempt to reach out to mainstream society to win "discourse power" for the CCP.¹⁹ Likewise, attempts by the Belgian CNS node *Capital News* (华商时报) to establish itself as an influential player among both Brussels' elites and Chinese diaspora communities in the Benelux appear to be in line with this policy.²⁰ Furthermore, the Swiss CNS node presented in section 3.3 ran a smear campaign aimed at the Czech public in 2020 against the Czech Senate speaker after he had visited Taiwan. Despite the lack of evidence to support the accusations, the disinformation operation had potential to create distrust towards Czech and Taiwanese democratic institutions, one of the goals of authoritarian regimes' hybrid and information warfare.²¹

1.2 CCP united front work: Coopting the diaspora and local elites

United front work is a Leninist tactic that aims to coopt non-party individuals and organisations and exploit them for party goals while ostracising critical voices.²² Propaganda associated with united front work can be viewed as a form of hybrid warfare. United front operates in spaces between the covert and overt, illegal and legal, and in these gray areas creates a network that links political interference, intelligence work, and organised crime with genuine community work, making it challenging for states to map and address using traditional methods.²³ This corresponds with EEAS's characterisation of hybrid warfare as "a centrally designed and controlled use of various covert and overt tactics [...] ranging from intelligence and cyber operations through economic pressure to the use of conventional forces. By employing hybrid tactics, the attacker seeks to undermine and destabilise an opponent by applying both coercive and subversive methods [...] Massive disinformation campaigns designed to control the narrative are an important element of a hybrid campaign. All this is done with the objective of achieving political influence, even dominance over a country in support of an overall strategy."²⁴

The way united front organs and other party-state institutions engage diaspora groups bears some resemblance the Russian government's exploitation of friendly civil soci-

¹⁷Louisa Lim & Julia Bergin, "Inside China's audacious global propaganda campaign", *The Guardian* (7th Dec. 2018); Koh Gui Qing & John Shiffman, "Beijing's covert radio network airs China-friendly news across Washington, and the world", Reuters Investigates, 2nd Nov. 2015.

¹⁸Filip Jirouš & Petra Ševčíková, "The China News Service in Europe: Symbiosis between propaganda and united front work", Sinopsis, forthcoming.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Lukáš Valášek & Helena Truchlá, "Propaganda: Česká média odhalila úplatky pro Vystrčila. Důkaz opaku Čína cenzuruje", *Aktuálně.cz*, 19th Nov. 2020; "中共統戰團體抹黑維特齊 外交部：戰狼式惡意炒作", 中央通訊社, 12th Nov. 2020.

²²Groot, *op. cit.*, pp. 4 sq.; Joske, *op. cit.*, pp. 7 sq.

²³Jichang Lulu, "Decoding united front work from Australia to Europe", Sinopsis, 15th June 2020.

²⁴"Food-for-thought paper 'Countering Hybrid Threats'".



ety organisations and individuals in Eastern Europe, whose radicalisation has in extreme cases led to their participation in military operations on the side of the Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine.²⁵

To tackle hybrid and information warfare, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy have pledged to continue supporting independent media and investigative journalists, including through financial and professional help, as they recognise them as “essential for the functioning of a democratic society”.²⁶ Furthermore, they believe that online platforms, advertisers and the advertising industry should assist in these efforts, as they possess the “ability to amplify, target and spread disinformation messages of malicious actors”.²⁷ While some Western digital companies — such as Facebook and Google — have already signed an EU code of conduct, PRC entities do not seem to be held to the same standards.²⁸ This is despite the growing popularity abroad of the social media platforms TikTok and WeChat, and the ability of both these platforms and other PRC-linked actors on Western platforms to help an authoritarian power to produce a distorted reality.²⁹ Similarly, no specific support programmes seem to be targeting Chinese-language media and other organisations that could effectively challenge the united front system’s dominance of the Chinese diaspora information landscape.

While the united front system’s propaganda work remains mostly unnoticed, PRC external propaganda organs have already been scrutinised and sanctioned in Europe. In February 2021, the UK media regulator, after pressure from activists, withdrew CGTN’s licence, as the television network broke regulation by broadcasting forced confessions.³⁰ After CGTN was expelled from the UK, the agency found a loophole in the French system, from where it is now again broadcasting to Europe.³¹ After pressure from victims of forced confessions, the French media regulator announced it was investigating the legality of CGTN’s conduct.³²

²⁵Sabine Fischer & Ivan Timofeev, “EUREN Interim Report –October 2018”, EU-Russia Experts Network on Foreign Policy, via EEAS; Eglė Murauskaitė, “Lithuanian and Baltic fighters in Eastern Ukraine –analysis”, Lietuvos nacionalinis radijas ir televizija, 18th May 2020; Vít Kubant, “Bývalý voják, pravoslavný kněz i „náčelnice štábu“. Koho zadržela policie kvůli vazbám na Donbas?”, iRozhlas.cz, 22nd Apr. 2021.

²⁶“Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan against Disinformation”, European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 5th Dec. 2018.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Fergus Ryan, Audrey Fritz & Daria Impiombato, “TikTok and WeChat: Curating and controlling global information flows”, *ASPI Policy Brief* 37 (2020).

³⁰“Decision –China Global Television Network”, Ofcom, 4th Feb. 2021; “Breaking: Chinese TV convicted for broadcasting forced confessions in UK”, *Safeguard Defenders*, 6th July 2020.

³¹“China’s CGTN may no longer broadcast in Germany after UK row”, *Deutsche Welle*; “Enquête sur la chaîne CGTN, la voix du régime chinois sur les écrans français”, *France Info*, 5th Apr. 2021; Nicolas Richaud & Marina Alcaraz, “Nouvelles polémiques autour de la chaîne publique chinoise CGTN qui a trouvé refuge en France”, *Les Échos* (12th Apr. 2021).

³²“Premières plaintes en France contre la télévision internationale d’Etat chinoise CGTN”, *Le Monde* (4th July 2021); “Lettre ouverte à Eutelsat des victimes de confessions forcées à la télé chinoise”, *Sud Ouest*, 12th Apr. 2021; Richaud & Alcaraz, *op. cit.*



2 The China News Service: A symbiotic nexus between united front work and propaganda

The China News Service, the PRC's second largest news agency, produces propaganda primarily targeting the Chinese diaspora, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao.³³ The state-owned agency has approximately 30 branches in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao as well as all around the world, including in Paris, Brussels, and London.³⁴ CNS is part of the united front system and since 2018 has been directly subordinate to the UFWD.³⁵ In 2018, a UFWD deputy head described the way the UFWD perceives CNS: "As an important propaganda unit of the United Front, CNS must adhere to the concept of 'newspapers run by politicians' and thoroughly carry out political awareness work. CNS's important mission is to do good united front propaganda work within Overseas Chinese affairs".³⁶ The fact that CNS resides at the intersection of the united front work and propaganda is even clearer at its sub-national branches, which co-organise events with organs from both systems.³⁷

2.1 CNS's evolution as a united front propaganda organ

CNS has stood at the intersection between united front and propaganda work since its inception in 1952. Its establishment was initiated by the then-head of the International Liaison Department (ILD, 中央对外联络部), an organ created from a part of the UFWD responsible for foreign relations and influence activities.³⁸ Liao Chengzhi 廖承志, a party leader whose responsibilities included diaspora affairs, was among the agency's architects.³⁹ Addressing its founding event, he explained that the agency's purpose was to counter "reactionary propaganda" targeting the diaspora: "organising Overseas Chinese into the patriotic United Front" was the first step in the "struggle for international friends' support" for "building New China".⁴⁰ Since its foundation, CNS has been led by party cadre with united front work, propaganda, and other political leadership positions.⁴¹ The current director, Chen Lujun 陈陆军, is a career propaganda cadre who previously served as *People's Daily* front-page editor and deputy chief of a Central Propaganda Department bureau.⁴²

³³"中国新闻社简介", 中国新闻社; "我们海外华文媒体的知心朋友", 草根智库的宗旨和团队, 25th July 2013, p. 7.

³⁴"中国新闻社简介".

³⁵Joske, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department"; "中央统战部直属事业单位 2020 年度公开招聘应届高校毕业生公告", 中华人民共和国人力资源和社会保障部, 14th Apr. 2020.

³⁶"中国新闻社召开年中工作会 谭天星提四点要求", 中国新闻网, 6th Aug. 2018.

³⁷"行走中国·2021 海外华文媒体高层重庆行将于 3 月 22 日启动", 中央统战部, 22nd Mar. 2021; "'海外华文媒体福建行': 家乡的一草一木让我动情", 国务院侨务办公室, 15th Nov. 2018; "38 家海外华文媒体走进福建宁德", 中国侨网, 15th Nov. 2018; "23 家海外华文媒体聚焦四川 '侨梦苑'", 中国新闻网, 16th Sept. 2017.

³⁸"中国新闻社辉煌六十年", 中国新闻社; David Shambaugh, "China's 'Quiet Diplomacy': The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party", *China: An International Journal* 1 (Mar. 2007). The ILD under the CCP Central Committee is in charge of "party-to-party" contacts (Lulu, "Repurposing democracy", p. 27).

³⁹"中国新闻社简介".

⁴⁰"廖承志", 中华人民共和国外交部; "从四十七个开始", 中国新闻社.

⁴¹"中国新闻社历届社领导班子成员名单", 中国新闻社; "暨南人怀念廖承志: 他是暨南大学复办最大的功臣", 华侨大学新闻网, 24th Sept. 2008; 张宇, "国侨办副主任、中新社社长刘泽彭主持开幕仪式", 中国新闻网, via Sina, 22nd Sept. 2003; "海南党史百名人物 | 林修德", 人民网, 9th June 2021; "著名报刊编辑金仲华", 上海市档案局, 25th June 2008.

⁴²"陈陆军任中国新闻社社长", 中新网, 8th Nov. 2019.



Figure 1: Tan Tianxing 谭天星 (middle), a deputy head of the UFWD, presiding over a CNS work conference in 2018. Image source: 中国新闻网.

2.2 CNS's global network: Keeping the diaspora close to the party

CNS has always been supervised or controlled by united front organs targeting the Chinese diaspora. CNS was supervised by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAO, 国务院侨务办公室), a state diaspora affairs organ until 2018, when OCAO was merged into the UFWD.⁴³

CNS guides a global network of nodes guiding public opinion among the Chinese diaspora. In order to gather part of this network under an umbrella organisation, in 2009 CNS initiated the establishment of the Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union (GCMCU, 世界华文媒体合作联盟).⁴⁴ The union has more than 700 members, with at least 94 in Europe.⁴⁵ Most organisations discussed in this brief are members of the union.⁴⁶ CNS's Forum on Global Chinese Language Media (世界华文传媒论坛) held biannually since 2001, gathers together hundreds of media workers, including leaders of different Chinese-language media organisations from the PRC and abroad, and high-level party officials.⁴⁷ The latest edition in 2019 was attended by dozens of European Chinese-language media representatives (including some of those discussed in this brief). The event also featured party cadres such as Xu Yousheng 许又声, a deputy head of the UFWD and former secretary of OCAO's party group, and Guo Weimin 郭卫民, formerly SCIO bureau chief and currently a member of the Central Propaganda Department's departmental affairs conference.⁴⁸ These and other platforms, in addition to direct contacts, serve as channels for the cultivation and co-ordination of media outlets coopted into CNS's network. These nodes then reproduce CNS propaganda content and actively participate in influence operations, as shown in the this brief's case studies.

⁴³“直属单位”，国务院侨务办公室；“政务服务”，国务院侨务办公室；“中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》”，中华人民共和国中央人民政府，21st Mar. 2018; Joske, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴“联盟成员”，世界华文媒体合作联盟；“中国新闻社简介”。

⁴⁵“联盟成员”。

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷“中国新闻社简介”。

⁴⁸“第十届世界华文传媒论坛境外嘉宾人员名单”，中国新闻网，10th Oct. 2019；“关于我们 About Us”，英国侨报；“Qui sommes-nous?”，欧洲时报文化中心；“在法中文媒体”，中华人民共和国驻法兰西共和国大使馆；“About Eur-Asia-Forum”，EurAsia-Forum；“第十届世界华文传媒论坛闭幕”，国务院侨务办公室，13th Oct. 2019；“第十届世界华文传媒论坛在石家庄开幕”，河北省生态环境厅，14th Oct. 2019。



3 Dominating the Chinese-language media space: CNS's network in Europe

CNS's global network comprises more than 90 nodes in Europe. These nodes, while ostensibly independent, are guided or controlled by this UFWD unit, and engage in propaganda — “guiding public opinion” among the Chinese diaspora and “struggling for discourse power” in wider European societies. Moreover, the nodes and clusters of united front groups that surround them also assist PRC influence organs in coopting local elites and manipulating the media landscape, much in the spirit of hybrid and information warfare. In fact, not unlike CNS itself, they combine propaganda and united front work, which underscores the symbiotic relationship between these two types of influence activity. Despite the robustness of this network, the intensity of its operations, and the level of involvement of the now well-known UFWD (including its covert ownership of the largest European node), it has so far been largely ignored by European scholars, media, and EU and national agencies.

The three CNS nodes presented in the case studies that follow establish these characteristics of the CCP united front system's propaganda operations in Europe.

In France (section 3.1), *Nouvelles d'Europe*, a diversified media group covertly owned by the UFWD, acts as CNS's main node in Europe, overseeing united front propaganda work across the continent. The *Prague Chinese Times* (section 3.2) constitutes a textbook example of a propaganda outlet embedded in a united-front cluster that engages with high-level local politics, including the last two Czech presidents. The *Times'* director's admission that the organisation has to be financed from his business ventures and that it subscribes to CCP policies suggests that other CNS nodes might also be driven by political rather than commercial interests. The CNS network's cross-national disinformation capabilities against prominent political targets have been displayed by its Swiss node, the Zurich-based *EurAsia Info* (section 3.3).

These nodes are not exceptional: similar goals, links and *modi operandi* are evidenced in other parts of CNS's European network.

The Rome-based *Cina in Italia* (世界中国) is a Chinese-Italian bilingual news outlet, originally a printed monthly magazine, that claims to be read by Italian businesspeople and distributed in, e.g., VIP airport lounges and embassies.⁴⁹ In 2011 *Cina in Italia* was subsumed under the CNS publication *China News Weekly* (中国新闻周刊), and thus officially became part of the core CNS network. Unlike most other nodes, the magazine also employs non-Chinese Italian staff, which helps it break the language and cultural barriers and making the outlet's declared goal of obtaining “discourse power within Italian society” more attainable.⁵⁰

In addition to the links to the CCP united front and propaganda bureaucracies typical of CNS nodes, the Madrid-based *Ouhua News* (欧华报) established a strategic partnership with EFE, the Spanish state news agency, in 2016.⁵¹ A year later, *Ouhua* mediated a meeting between the agency and PRC propaganda organs, as well as CNS. Since EFE's content is republished by Spanish-language media across the globe, cooperation with these entities can spread CCP narratives among global audiences.⁵²

⁴⁹Jirouš & Ševčíková, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*Ibid.*



3.1 France: A covertly UFWD-owned media network expanding in Europe

Nouvelles d'Europe (欧洲时报), the trading name of Guang Hua Cultures et Média (光华传媒集团), is the largest Overseas Chinese media network in Europe. Covertly controlled by the UFWD and partnered to the propaganda system, *Nouvelles d'Europe* uses multiple print and online channels in France and a network of branches throughout the continent to spread CCP propaganda shaping China's image among Chinese-language audiences.

3.1.1 *Nouvelles d'Europe*: A media outlet run by a propaganda worker

Nouvelles d'Europe was established in 1983 in Paris, followed by Guang Hua the next year, with Yang Yongju (Ju Séguin) in charge of both.⁵³

In 2007, Zhang Xiaobei 张晓贝 replaced Yang Yongju as head of Guang Hua.⁵⁴ Prior to joining Guang Hua, Zhang had spent 10 years working for the state-owned newspaper *China Daily*, ultimately controlled by the Propaganda Department.⁵⁵ According to its website, Guang Hua — apart from Paris — operates from offices in Beijing, Madrid, Rome, London, Frankfurt, and Vienna, and has liaison points in Brussels, Oslo and eight locations in Central and Eastern Europe.⁵⁶ Information in the French company registry states that Guang Hua's purpose is to publish and distribute daily news in Chinese language in France, a magazine focusing on China, and to support the Chinese diaspora in various areas, including commerce, finance, and real estate.⁵⁷ These services focus on establishing connections to the PRC through events targeting members of Chinese diaspora, from children and young students to adults. Such practical information and assistance then expose even those uninterested in politics to CCP propaganda.

3.1.2 Serving CNS and the united front system

Guang Hua is part of a European network linked to CCP united front organs and, in fact, owned by a UFWD front. According to the company's corporate filings, Guang Hua has been 90%-owned by the Yazhou Wenhua Enterprises (亚洲文化企业有限公司) since 1992.⁵⁸ That remained the case as of April 2018.⁵⁹

As ASPI's research first revealed, the OCAO established Yazhou Wenhua as a front in Hong Kong prior to the 1997 handover, and its current shareholders comprise UFWD and OCAO subsidiaries and individuals identified as OCAO officials.⁶⁰ In 2011, the

⁵³“集团历史与现状”, 欧洲时报; “杨咏桔、梁源法获颁欧洲“华文传媒终身荣誉奖”, 欧洲华文传媒协会, 15th Jan. 2013; “Guang Hua Cultures et Média”, SocieteInfo.

⁵⁴“Procès-verbal des délibérations de l'assemblée générale extraordinaire du 15 février 2007”, Guang Hua, via Figaro Entreprises, 15th Feb. 2007.

⁵⁵抱梦斋, “《法国 60 华人》张晓贝: 投身报业 其乐无穷”, 雪花新闻, 30th June 2018; “中国日报社情况介绍”, 中国日报.

⁵⁶“集团历史与现状”, 欧洲时报.

⁵⁷“Guang Hua Cultures et Média Company Profile”, D&B Business Directory; “Guang Hua Cultures et Média”; “Procès-verbal des délibérations de l'assemblée générale extraordinaire du 15 décembre 2003”, Guang Hua, via Figaro Entreprises, 23rd Jan. 2004. The size of the company's operations can be indicated by its revenue, which in 2016 totalled over €6m (“Guang Hua Cultures et Média”, Figaro Entreprises).

⁵⁸“Cession de parts sociales”, Guang Hua, via Figaro Entreprises, 23rd July 1992.

⁵⁹“Procès-verbal des délibérations de l'assemblée générale extraordinaire du 31 mars 2018”, Guang Hua, via Figaro Entreprises, 18th Apr. 2018.

⁶⁰Joske et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 22 sq.



Figure 2: *Nouvelles d'Europe* chair Zhang Xiaobei (middle) at the PRC consulate in Düsseldorf, 2015. Image source: 中华人民共和国驻杜塞尔多夫总领事馆.

remaining 10% of Guang Hua's shares was transferred to Zhang, who is also a Yazhou Wenhua director.⁶¹

Nouvelles d'Europe often reproduces CNS content showing the PRC in a positive light or directly praising the party.⁶² While the media group publishes content covering key developments in European countries, such as elections in Spain or Covid-19 vaccination in Germany, it mainly (re)produces PRC news, so that Overseas Chinese "understand the affairs of their home regions" in China.⁶³ Furthermore, the media group is a member of the Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union, a CNS-led association that participates in the coordination of the global network.⁶⁴

3.1.3 Cooperation with the propaganda system: State publishers and a Confucius Classroom

Nouvelles d'Europe's ties to the CCP propaganda system go beyond the propaganda background of its director.

In 2009, Guang Hua set up a joint venture — the Paris-based publishing house Édition Horizon Oriental (东方书局出版社) — with a provincial propaganda organ. Guang

⁶¹ "Acte de cession de parts sociales", Guang Hua, via Figaro Entreprises, 15th Apr. 2011; "周年申报表", 亞洲文化企業有限公司 / Ya Zhou Wen Hua Enterprises, Limited, via Hong Kong Companies Registry, 18th Apr. 2020.

⁶² "学者以三大历史性事件阐释华侨华人与中共百年紧密联系", 中新网, 20th May 2021; "学者以三大历史性事件阐释华侨华人与中共百年紧密联系", 中国侨网, 20th May 2021; "学者以三大历史性事件阐释华侨华人与中共百年紧密联系", 欧洲时报, 20th May 2021; "网红大熊猫'奇一'出现蛙步行走 官方: 未见外伤及疼痛反应", 中新网, 22nd May 2021; "网红大熊猫'奇一'出现蛙步行走 官方: 未见外伤及疼痛反应", 欧洲时报, 22nd May 2021; "浙江侨界开展初心之旅: 从家乡之变看见中国未来", 中新网, 21st May 2021; "浙江侨界开展初心之旅: 从家乡之变看见中国未来", 中国侨网, 22nd May 2021.

⁶³ "许多德国人竟想推迟第二针, 只为出门度假! 刚松绑就闹剧频出, 政府气不打一处来", 欧洲时报, 20th May 2021; "马德里大区选举人民党获胜 系'西班牙政治周期的变化'", 欧洲时报, 7th May 2021; "法国欧洲时报传媒集团 (GUANG HUA MEDIA SARL) 简介", 欧洲华文传媒协会; "集团历史与现状".

⁶⁴ "联盟成员". On the Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union, see section 2.



Hua and Zhejiang Publication United Group (浙江出版联合集团有限公司)), a company owned by the People's Government of Zhejiang Province.⁶⁵ Guang Hua owns a 40% stake in the company, and the United Group had owned the remaining 60% until November 2019 when it transferred its shares to one of its subsidiaries.⁶⁶ Since its establishment, Horizon Oriental has been chaired by Zhang Xiaobei.⁶⁷

Horizon Oriental's mission is to introduce "Chinese bestsellers" in French to French readers.⁶⁸ This should especially include children's books, novels, travel guides, and books on China and its culture.⁶⁹ In 2017, the publishing firm expanded to London to translate and introduce Chinese books to British society.⁷⁰ *Nouvelles d'Europe* further claims that the Horizon Oriental has been expanding to "the former French and British colonies in Africa".⁷¹

A similar operation involving the publication of "Chinese bestsellers" can be found in Poland. As with Guang Hua, a province-level state-owned publishing group, in the Polish case from Anhui, acts as the key partner, with an ownership stake in the foreign publisher. PRC organs then fund the translation and publication of Chinese books, often containing overt CCP propaganda, which in this way reaches the Polish public.⁷²

Furthermore, Guang Hua had cooperated with Hanban (国家汉办), the former PRC organ behind the global network of Confucius Institutes. Hanban, linked to the propaganda and united front systems, was replaced with a new structure in 2020, which, however, only further consolidated the Confucius Institutes' links to the propaganda system.⁷³ In 2009, Guang Hua and Hanban established a Confucius Classroom in Paris, which was later approved as a Chinese testing centre.⁷⁴

3.2 Czech Republic: A textbook case of united front-propaganda symbiosis

The *Prague Chinese Times* (布拉格时报) is the most prominent Chinese-language media outlet in the Czech Republic. It is owned by individuals deeply embedded within Czech and pan-European united front structures. The newspaper's owner and director, who concurrently chairs the country's largest united front group, claims he finances it himself, which suggests the *Times* may be a non-commercial enterprise. Furthermore, the platform promotes his united front endeavours, as well as similar activities by multiple key local diaspora organisations. Thus, not unlike CNS itself,

⁶⁵“frf04”; “浙江出版联合集团有限公司”, 企查查, 28th July 2021; “Zhejiang Publishing United Group 浙江出版联合集团”, Global Century Press 环球世纪出版社; “杨咏桔、梁源法获颁欧洲“华文传媒终身荣誉奖””.

⁶⁶“Procès-verbal des délibérations de l'assemblée générale extraordinaire du 28 novembre 2019”, Édition Horizon Oriental, via Figaro Entreprises, 28th Jan. 2020; “浙江出版传媒股份有限公司”, 企查查, 28th July 2021.

⁶⁷“Édition Horizon Oriental”, Societe.com.

⁶⁸“Histoire illustrée de la peinture chinoise –Édition Horizon Oriental”, chine-info.com, 19th Feb. 2021.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰“集团历史与现状”.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Lukasz Sarek, “Money, greed and propaganda: A Chinese publishing house in Poland and its local partners.”, Mapping China's footprint in the world III, 13th Oct. 2020; idem, per litteras, May 2021.

⁷³Filip Jirouš & Jichang Lulu, “The CCP International Liaison Department's operations in the Czech Republic”, Sinopsis, forthcoming.

⁷⁴“法国欧洲时报传媒集团 (GUANG HUA MEDIA SARL) 简介”; “École chinoise et Classe Confucius”, Les amis de Nouvelles d'Europe; “Tests et Concours”, Les amis de Nouvelles d'Europe.



the paper serves as a propaganda unit of the local united front network. Its director has echoed party vocabulary on the “guidance of public opinion” as the outlet’s long-term policy.

The *Prague Chinese Times* is a textbook example of an ostensibly independent diaspora media outlet with close ties to PRC influence organs from the united front and propaganda systems. Its owner and his network actively participate in political work and even engage the Czech political elite. The whole cluster of entities surrounding the *Times* seeks to position itself as the organic representation of the local Chinese diaspora, and as a mediator of interactions between PRC officials, the diaspora and the wider Czech society. Through his ownership of a dominant media outlet, the director boosts his own profile by regular positive coverage of his ventures and partners. The political and propaganda aspects thus reinforce each other symbiotically, creating a united front-propaganda perpetuum mobile.

3.2.1 The *Prague Chinese Times*: A propaganda outlet at the heart of a coopted diaspora cluster

The *Prague Chinese Times* is at the centre of a united front cluster in the Czech Republic. According to its official website, it was established in 2010 and is a collaborative project of entities including the Czech China Association for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification (捷克中国和平统一促进会), nominally the top united front group in the country.⁷⁵ Zhou Lingjian 周灵建, the paper’s director and the sole shareholder of the company behind it, concurrently presides over the Czech Qingtian Hometown Association (捷克青田同乡会), the largest united front group in the Czech Republic.⁷⁶ The paper shares a villa with a Chinese language school and several united front groups.⁷⁷

According to an interview by a CNS publication, at some point Zhou “took over the responsibility for all operational costs” of the *Times*.⁷⁸ While he claims to finance the outlet to keep himself informed, he has also stated that the newspaper has “always maintained the correct guidance of public opinion”, standard party-speak for keeping media content in line with party policy, showcasing the political nature of the media organisation.⁷⁹ This suggests that the newspaper may be a non-commercial enterprise, needing capital injections to continue operating.

⁷⁵“关于我们”，布拉格时报。On the global network of reunification associations see John Dotson, “The United Front Work Department Goes Global: The Worldwide Expansion of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China”, *China Brief* 19.9 (9th May 2019). For more on the Czech case, see Filip Jirouš, “The Chinese United Front in the Czech Republic: Methods, goals and organizational structure”, MA thesis, Charles University, 2020, pp. 59 sqq.

⁷⁶“捷克周灵建：从洗碗工到华媒社长”，中新经纬，via 腾讯网，25th Sept. 2018; “中国新闻界代表团访问《布拉格时报》”，世界中文记者，19th Aug. 2017; “Prague Chinese Times”，Databáze periodického tisku pro veřejnost; “Výpis z obchodního rejstříku: CVA administrative center s.r.o., C 90231 vedená u Městského soudu v Praze”，Veřejný rejstřík a sbírka listin, 6th June 2021.

⁷⁷Filip Jirouš, “The Role of Coopted Diaspora Groups in Czech and European United Front Work”, *China Brief* 20.16 (16th Sept. 2020); idem, “The Chinese United Front in the Czech Republic”, p. 177.

⁷⁸“捷克周灵建：从洗碗工到华媒社长”；“关于我们”，中新经纬。

⁷⁹“捷克周灵建：从洗碗工到华媒社长”；“中国新闻界代表团访问《布拉格时报》”。On the “guidance” concept, see David Bandurski, “Guidance of Public Opinion 舆论导向”，China Media Project, 5th Nov. 2013.



3.2.2 Friends in high united front places

The *Prague Chinese Times* has a content-sharing agreement with CNS and is a member of the CNS-led Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union.⁸⁰ It often participates in the CNS network's events: in 2018, it hosted the annual forum of the Association of Overseas Chinese Media in Europe (欧洲华文传媒协会), initiated by the French news group *Nouvelles d'Europe* (see section 3.1).⁸¹ The *Times* has additionally participated in numerous events organised directly by CNS, local governments in the PRC, and by OCAO, the Overseas Chinese affairs agency later absorbed by the UFWD.⁸²

Through its director and his organisations, the newspaper is linked to several local and provincial-level united front organs. During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the Qingtian and Zhejiang UFWD and branches of All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC, 中华全国归国华侨联合会), the primary united front body targeting Overseas Chinese, tasked Zhou and his group with distributing masks and other supplies to ethnic Chinese living in the Czech Republic and Italy.⁸³ Zhou and his cluster regularly participate in propaganda events organised by the local embassy or the reunification association, on which the *Times* then reports.⁸⁴ In 2021, Zhou and the Qingtian association's honorary chair Chen Naike 陈乃科, a National People's Congress delegate and deputy chair of the Zhejiang province equivalent of ACFROC, were appointed as two of the 100 Qingtian "double-recruitment, double-attraction ambassadors" (双招双引大使) by the Qingtian UFWD, meaning they should work to attract money and talent to their hometown.⁸⁵ The cluster thus participates in the CCP's controversial talent recruitment efforts, in which PRC local party-state organs and united front groups abroad play a major role.⁸⁶

The newspaper's cluster is additionally involved in a pan-European united front network, which maintains contacts with PRC united front organs and European politicians. Zhou chairs the Brussels-based European Chinese Youth Federation (欧洲华侨华人青年联合总会), a trans-national united front body with links to central united front organs as well as politicians in the Benelux and the European Parliament.⁸⁷ The federation's first chair, Fu Xuhai 傅旭海, who remains an active member of the group, has been a specially invited member (i.e., a non-voting guest) of the Zhejiang People's Political Consultative Conference, executive deputy chair of the Zhejiang branch of ACFROC's youth organisation, and was appointed a Qingtian "overseas propaganda and culture ambassador" (海外宣传文化大使) in 2019.⁸⁸

⁸⁰ "关于我们"; "联盟成员".

⁸¹ "欧洲华文传媒协会第十三届年会布拉格开幕", 欧洲华文传媒协会, 17th Aug. 2018.

⁸² "中国新闻界代表团访问《布拉格时报》".

⁸³ Jirouš, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁸⁵ "青田聘百名华侨当双招双引大师助力新时代华侨要素回流", 捷华通讯 512.24 (8th Apr. 2021), p.11. A French Qingtian united front leader stated he would use this platform for propagating Qingtian's policies and projects in order to "make more people understand Qingtian" ("双招双引全球联盟"成立! 100名青田侨界精英携手招商引资、招才引智!", 青田侨报, via 青田县人民政府, 30th Mar. 2021).

⁸⁶ Alex Joske, "Hunting the phoenix: The Chinese Communist Party's global search for technology and talent", *ASPI Policy Brief* 37 (2020).

⁸⁷ Jirouš, "The Role of Coopted Diaspora Groups..."

⁸⁸ "傅旭敏", 浙江省归国华侨联合会, 22nd Nov. 2016; "省政协十二届二次会议开幕青田籍侨界委员齐出席", 青田网, 28th Jan. 2019; "浙江省侨界青年联合会: 第一届会长团名单", 浙江省归国华侨联合会; "青田海外宣传文化大使 傅旭海 欧洲华侨华人青年联合总会会长", 青田网, 5th May 2019. For more on the consultative conference and its role in international influence operations, see Peter Mattis, "The Center of Chinese Influence: the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference", *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, ed. by Hsu Szu-chien & J. Michael Cole, Camphor Press, 2020.



Figure 3: *Prague Chinese Times* owner Zhou Lingjian (blue suit, behind the president) as a member of Czech President Miloš Zeman's April 2019 business delegation to the PRC. Image source: [Czech-China Centre](#).

3.2.3 Partnering up with PRC propaganda organisations

The paper has ties to the propaganda system as well. It cooperates with the *Xinmin Evening News* (新民晚报) and the *Tonight News Paper* (今晚报), state-owned media outlets under the Shanghai and Tianjin party committees respectively.⁸⁹ In 2017, the *Prague Chinese Times* leadership hosted a delegation from the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA, 中华全国新闻工作者协会), a mass organisation linked to the propaganda system.⁹⁰

3.2.4 The *Times* and Czech presidents

The *Prague Chinese Times* united front cluster has also engaged Czech politicians going as high as the last two presidents. Zhou, the director of the newspaper, claims to have been friends with the former president Václav Klaus, who has frequented Zhou's restaurant in Prague since 2002, and joined the current president Miloš Zeman's delegation to China in 2019.⁹¹

In recent years, the group has helped organise high-profile Chinese New Year celebrations attended by Czech senators, ministers and other prominent politicians.⁹²

3.2.5 Avoiding public scrutiny

In 2020, Zhou's cluster and the newspaper received an unprecedented level of attention from Czech mainstream media, which revealed further links to PRC organs and a PRC state-owned company. These interactions also showed the cluster's preference for avoiding public scrutiny of their political links.

⁸⁹“关于我们”;姜微,“上海报业改革:打造传媒新“旗舰””,人民网,13th May 2014;“上海报业集团”,企查查,26th June 2021;“今晚报”,中国报协网, via 人民网,28th Aug. 2012;蒋子文,“传媒湃 | 天津海河传媒中心改革细节披露:内设机构削减60个”,澎湃新闻,11th Apr. 2019;“天津海河传媒中心”,企查查,19th June 2021.

⁹⁰“中国新闻界代表团访问《布拉格时报》”.

⁹¹Jirouš, *op. cit.*

⁹²Idem, “The Chinese United Front in the Czech Republic”, pp. 82 sq.; Jan Rychetský, “Nefotit Kubera! Sakra, proč? Oslava čínského nového roku. Zpovídali jsme Filipa i Zahrádila.”, *Parlamentní listy*, 18th Jan. 2020.



In March, Czech police raided Zhou's export-import warehouse after a Czech company attempted to use it to sell medical supplies to local hospitals at several times the regular price during a state of emergency declared due to the pandemic.⁹³ The police also confiscated several boxes of medical supplies intended for Italian Overseas Chinese, as part of a pan-European operation led by Qingtian united front organs, to which Zhou contributed his company's transportation capabilities.⁹⁴ The police and government apologised for mistakenly confiscating the Italy-bound goods from Zhou, who posed as an unaffiliated businessman, and sent new medical supplies to the Italian government. The subsequent police investigation found no violation of Czech law, and the Ministry of the Interior decided to cover the Czech company's losses. The reimbursement totalled over 8600% of the protective gear's original cost and was not paid to the company's official representative, but to Russian oligarch-linked lawyers.⁹⁵

Later that year, the *Times* attracted the attention of a mainstream Czech newspaper as the Chinese outlet exclusively reported on an exchange between PRC organs and Czech communists.⁹⁶ Journalists from the Czech paper tried to interview *Times* staff to obtain more information about the exchange, but only received a vague answer and then the Chinese paper deleted the article describing the gift exchange from their website.⁹⁷

3.3 Switzerland: A cross-national disinformation campaign on behalf of the CCP

In a rare case of a CCP disinformation campaign, in late 2020 a Swiss CNS node attempted to smear the Czech Senate Speaker in Czech media, claiming he had received a substantial bribe for a recent visit to Taiwan from the island nation's officials. When that failed, the CCP propaganda apparatus turned the story at Chinese-language speakers. The operation shows the PRC-friendly propaganda organisations' cross-national mobilisation capabilities, and perhaps heralds a turn towards Russian government-style disinformation campaigns. The CNS node behind the campaign has united front and propaganda links and claims to do "media diplomacy work", and wants to serve as a "messenger between China and Europe" and transmit "good content on China to local mainstream society". It was perhaps in this spirit that they ran the smear campaign.

3.3.1 *EurAsia Info*

The Switzerland-based Chinese-English language online news site and newspaper *EurAsia Info* (欧亚时报) covers Swiss-China and European news. It was established

⁹³Lukáš Valášek, "Confiscated face masks imported by an influential Chinese representative in Czechia", *Aktuálně.cz*, 26th Mar. 2020.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

⁹⁵Lukáš Valášek & Adéla Jelínková, "Za zabavené roušky Hamáček vyplatil 26 milionů advokátům blízkým ruským oligarchům", *Aktuálně.cz*, 25th Mar. 2021.

⁹⁶Lukáš Prchal & Michal Tomeš, "Roušky z Číny převzal Filip od společnosti, která chce stavět Dukovany. Čtvrtinu zásilky zaplatil přítel kmotra Mrázka", *Deník N* (23rd Oct. 2020). The *Times* wrote about ILD and state-owned China General Nuclear Power Group (CGN, 中国广核集团) donating medical supplies to Czech hospitals, and municipalities around the nuclear power plant Dukovany, where CGN wanted to participate in a government tender for expanding the plant. The gift was to be distributed by the leadership of the Czech Communist Party (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy), a key partner of the CCP in the Czech Republic.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*



Figure 4: *EurAsia Info* director Zhu Ailian at the 2019 CNS-organised Forum on Global Chinese Language Media. Source: 中国新闻网.

in 2012 by Zhu Ailian 朱爱莲, who serves as the paper's director.⁹⁸ Since 2015 it has been owned by the company *EurAsia Info GmbH*.⁹⁹ The organisation's other two main representatives are its chairman Michael Winkler and executive assistant Robert J. Mojzes, who both work as consultants.¹⁰⁰ In February 2021, Zhu became the company's controlling shareholder and sole legal representative, while Winkler remains a minority shareholder (he had previously been the majority shareholder).¹⁰¹

3.3.2 Trans-national united front work

CNS provides *EurAsia Info* with support in news, information and technology, as confirmed by a CNS vice-director while visiting the media organisation in 2018.¹⁰² Zhu has also attended meetings of the CPPCC and the National People's Congress as a foreign media reporter, and the 2019 CNS-organised Forum on the Global Chinese Language Media as *EurAsia*'s representative.¹⁰³

Zhu also actively participates in Swiss and European trans-national united front groups, like the leaders of CNS affiliates elsewhere.¹⁰⁴ She serves as the honorary and acting chair of the European Jiangxi Hometown Association (欧洲江西同乡会), whose Europe-wide membership includes a vice-chair of the Czech reunification association (see section 3.2).¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸“关于欧亚时报”，欧亚时报；Ralph Weber, “Unified message, rhizomatic delivery: A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland”, Sinopsis, 18th Dec. 2020, p. 31.

⁹⁹“关于欧亚时报”；“*EurAsia Info GmbH*”，Handelsregisteramt des Kantons Zürich.

¹⁰⁰Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 31 sq.

¹⁰¹“Mutation *EurAsia Info GmbH*, Winterthur”，Handelsregisteramt des Kantons Zürich, 15th Feb. 2021; “*EurAsia Info GmbH*”.

¹⁰²Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 32; “中新社新闻代表团参访瑞士欧亚时报(图)”，中国桥网, 19th June 2018; Lukáš Valášek & Helena Truchlá, “Čtyři miliony dolarů pro Vystrčíla.” Čiňané se pokoušejí očernit předsedu Senátu”, Aktuálně.cz, 11th Nov. 2020.

¹⁰³Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 33; “瑞士侨胞在两会：切实感受到中国新时代新风貌“一带一路”备受关注”，中共中央统一战线工部；“第十届世界华文传媒论坛境外嘉宾人员名单”.

¹⁰⁴Jirouš, “The Role of Coopted Diaspora Groups...” For a similar case, see section 3.2.

¹⁰⁵Weber, *op. cit.*; “首届理事会会议纪要 Founding Board Members”，European Jiangxi Chamber of Commerce 欧洲江西总商会; Jirouš, “The Chinese United Front in the Czech Republic”，pp. 59–63. For more on the global network of reunification associations, see Dotson, *op. cit.*



3.3.3 Links to the propaganda system

In addition to its united front links, *EurAsia Info* also has ties to the propaganda system. Zhu is a member of the World Association of Chinese Mass Media (WACMM, 世界华文大众传播媒体协会), an international Chinese media organisation partnered with the ACJA (see section 3.2).¹⁰⁶

3.3.4 A cross-national disinformation campaign against the Czech Senate speaker

In November 2021, without disclosing their *EurAsia Info* affiliation, Winkler and Mojzes contacted several Czech media outlets claiming they had proof that the Senate speaker had received 4 million US dollars for his high-profile visit to Taiwan in August that year.¹⁰⁷ The “evidence” mainly consisted of dead links and social-media posts that shed little light on the accusations’ veracity.¹⁰⁸ At the 2019 forum, Zhu stated that what the outlet “wants to do the most is to be a messenger between China and Europe, and pass on China’s good stories and good content to local mainstream society”, and to do good “media diplomacy work”.¹⁰⁹ Although the smear campaign targeting the Senate speaker may not be generally considered “good content”, the attempt to reach out to mainstream European society was in line with this ambition.

Despite the lack of hard evidence to support the accusations against Vystrčil, the disinformation operation still forced him and the Taiwanese authorities to respond and deny the accusations, and created at least some level of doubt and distrust towards these democratic institutions.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, PRC media reprinted the original disinformation without any corrections, and both *EurAsia Info* and the WACMM accused both Taiwanese media and the Western actors of false reporting, creating a disinformation echo chamber.¹¹¹ In short, while the operation’s results in the Czech Republic proved underwhelming, the propaganda machine redirected the disinformation operation at Chinese-language speakers in the PRC and in Taiwan, where it perhaps did fare better.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶“本会理事媒体一览”, 世界中文记者; Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 31; Martin Hála, Filip Jirouš & Petra Ševčíková, “How the CCP Mobilized a Cross-Border Disinformation Campaign Against the Czech Senate Speaker”, *China Brief* 21.7 (12th Apr. 2021).

¹⁰⁷Valášek & Truchlá, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁸陳韻聿, “中共外圍組織試圖抹黑維特齊 找錯對象背景反曝光”, CNA, 12th Nov. 2020.

¹⁰⁹“瑞士《欧亚时报》社长朱爱莲: 努力成为中欧之间的传播使者”, 中国新闻网, via Sina, 9th Oct. 2019.

¹¹⁰Valášek & Truchlá, “Propaganda: Česká média odhalila úplatky pro Vystrčila. Důkaz opaku Čína cenzuruje”; “中共統戰團體抹黑維特齊 外交部: 戰狼式惡意炒作”.

¹¹¹“中共統戰團體抹黑維特齊 外交部: 戰狼式惡意炒作”; “捷克议长拿了 400 万美元“好处费”才去台湾访问”, 凤凰新媒体, 13th Nov. 2020; “台湾中央社已沦为“落井下石”的媒体?”, 世界中文记者, 27th Dec. 2020.

¹¹²Hála, Jirouš & Ševčíková, *op. cit.*



4 Conclusions: A robust influence machine

This policy brief has discussed the European and global activities of the China News Service, an agency at the intersection of united front work and propaganda. CNS's network in Europe comprises **nodes** — media organisations guided or controlled by CNS. The nodes' leaders often have united front positions in their country of residence as well as in the PRC, and are favoured by PRC organs as representatives of their diaspora communities.

CNS and its network engage in activities analogous to the work of external propaganda organs such as the *China Daily* and CGTN, which are largely known to general audiences. As this brief has shown, these activities fit European institutions' definitions of **hybrid and information warfare**, which make them at least as concerning as comparable Russian government operations. The Swiss node's attempted smear campaign proves the CNS nexus' capabilities for trans-national disinformation operations aimed at creating distrust towards democratic institutions. Nevertheless, European institutions and societies have so far paid little attention to CNS nodes. Such ignorance of PRC influence operations is further underscored by the fact that no European media or state institutions seem to have noted *Nouvelles d'Europe*'s ownership by a UFWD front, despite the size of the media group network and its mention in a high-profile think-tank report. The French case further shows best how CNS nodes often combine the provision of practical services to Chinese communities with propaganda, thus reaching even apolitical audiences.

The case of the *Prague Chinese Times* can serve as a textbook example of a coopted diaspora media outlet deeply embedded within local united front structures. While “guiding public opinion”, i.e., keeping media content in line with party policies, among the local diaspora, the newspaper's leadership also engages Czech political elites including the current president and his predecessor. Likewise, the Swiss, Spanish and Italian nodes have been trying to reach out to European mainstream media and politics. *EurAsia Info*, the Swiss newspaper, strives to play a “media diplomacy” role, while *Cina in Italia* has declared its ambition to gain “discourse power” within Italian society.

All nodes presented discussed in this brief are also linked to the propaganda system, again revealing their nature, as well as showing the symbiotic links between united front and propaganda work. Both types of political activities seek to create a PRC-friendly international environment, producing a distorted reality that favours an increasingly authoritarian and hostile power.

The funding mechanisms and ownership structures of the Czech, French and Italian nodes suggest that these media outlets are political, rather than commercial, enterprises. The *Prague Chinese Times* owner's assertion that he has taken over responsibility for its expenses and *Nouvelles d'Europe*'s covert ownership by a UFWD front point to the possibly non-commercial nature of media in CNS's network.

Given Xi's consolidation and strengthening of the united front work and propaganda systems, PRC political interference could become an even more serious threat



to European societies.¹¹³ A Propaganda Department deputy head recently asserted that external propaganda operations need to be tailored to specific foreign audiences rather than continuing the one-size-fits-all approach.¹¹⁴ This new focus, now officially announced, should primarily target young audiences, and could prove a game-changer in the effectivity of authoritarian propaganda aimed at European societies. European institutions should pay special attention to these new tactics of PRC propaganda organs, as well as influence activities described in this brief.



Figure 5: PRC embassy political counsellor Chen Jianjun 陈建军 (front row, purple tie) next to *Nouvelles d'Europe* chair Zhang Xiaobei (left) and *Prague Chinese Times* owner Zhou Lingjian (right) at the 13th Conference of the Chinese Media Association in Europe, organised by the *Prague Chinese Times* in Prague. CNS deputy editor-in-chief Zhang Lei 张雷 (next to Zhou) represented the agency at the event. Image source: 海外网

¹¹³On the reforms, see, e.g., Joske, “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department”; idem, “The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group”; Lulu, Jirouš & Lee, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴Bandurski, “Influencers, Activists and Diplomats”.



5 Policy recommendations

In order to tackle the challenges posed by the hybrid and information warfare operations conducted by CNS, its network, and PRC external propaganda organs:

1. EU institutions and national governments should establish a **scheme requiring foreign influence agencies to register**, and implement it effectively in order to increase the transparency of actors that could potentially interfere in democratic processes. Lessons should be drawn from the design and implementation of the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and the Australian Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS). If *China Daily* is on the FARA list, then CNS should be required to register as a foreign agent as well.
2. Communications and media regulatory authorities should **proactively screen media organisations** for links to the CNS and other propaganda organs for possible violations of publishing laws and regulations. They should not wait for NGOs or think tanks to point to ethical, security and other issues.
3. European private and public media organisations should avoid serving CCP propaganda goals and **cease all cooperation with the CNS**, its nodes, and other external propaganda organs such as CRI, CGTN or the *China Daily*. In particular, EFE, the Spanish state news agency, should sever its ties with the CNS, *Ouhua Media* and propaganda organs including the *Global Times*.
4. EU institutions and national governments should seek ways to **support genuine Chinese diaspora** media by providing them with subsidies and technical support. Such help should be conditional on their lack of links to PRC influence and propaganda organs.
5. EU and national agencies should establish a **screening mechanism** to ensure that only media organisations without links to the CNS or other influence organs receive EU and government grants or other support. The criteria and proceedings of the process should be made **transparent** to all parties and the public.
6. Publicly-owned and private media in Europe should establish **Chinese-language services to offer news as well as practical information** (such as coverage of visa and commercial policy changes) to Chinese-language speakers. This way, media adhering to journalistic principles can compete against CCP-controlled agencies, which endeavour to give authoritarian propaganda a monopoly over the Chinese-language media space. EU institutions and national governments should only support these projects after a **screening process** establishes they have no links to PRC influence organs, in line with the EU's declared support for independent media outlets.

To ensure their effective implementation, these measures should be coordinated between EU and national government agencies, so as to prevent authoritarian organs from exploiting local legal loopholes.



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