

PROMOTING CHINA'S DIGITAL MANAGEMENT MODEL IN CEE: CASE OF BULGARIA

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October 2021

SUMMARY

The brief presents the media activities of China's diplomats in the CEE region in a post-pandemic context. The first section analyses a series of publications and interviews from May to June 2021, authored by the People's Republic of China Ambassador to Bulgaria, Dong Xiaojun. The second section is devoted to the possible implementation of the "Chinese digital governance model" in Bulgaria. The final part concerns the opinion of the PRC by the Bulgarian general public and its possible implications for a bilateral agenda as well as feedback given by Bulgarian officials regarding Chinese proposals.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Along with the pandemic, Chinese diplomats have promoted a post-pandemic "Chinese digital management model". Such solutions are promoted in the countries of the region considered by Beijing as developing nations.
2. Due to the fact that Chinese diplomats are limited by domestic propaganda, China is employing internally produced narratives to globally promote state management solutions supported by economic indicators in other countries. Implementation of such methodology might be limited in most CEE countries due to the lower demographic potential and lack of technological capabilities.
3. Currently, China's active media strategies that present solutions for pandemic governance in the long term might be combined with China's smart city project proposals. In the face of the US-led anti-Huawei coalition in the region, Beijing might try to push other high-tech companies to accelerate cooperation, as has been observed in Romania.

INTRODUCTION

Unquestionably, China's active media strategy in Central and Eastern Europe has been going on since the beginning of the pandemic. Some take it as a hybrid threat; others lean toward backing the "Chinese model". One component of China's active media strategy offensive is a series of essays published by PRC diplomats in the leading media of countries in the CEE. What arguments are being discussed by the Chinese? Is this having a real impact on the perception of China in the CEE region? The following paper analyzes Bulgaria's leading media publications, where articles and interviews with Ambassador Dong Xiaojun were published during the first seven months of 2021.

AMBASSADOR DONG XIAOJUN'S PUBLICATIONS IN BULGARIA

In this regard, one should note two writings by the Chinese diplomat, Dong Xiaojun: "Choice of history, choice of the nation" on the CCP's contribution to China's modernity and prosperity, and "New development ideas leading to the development of a high-quality Chinese economy", both published in the locally popular newspaper

"Земля/Zemlya". On May 10, 2021, the ambassador highlighted the effectiveness of China's local authorities in preventing the spread of the pandemic. Moreover, he praised Hubei province's achievements, which, with its capital in Wuhan - according to initial findings - has been widely recognized as the origin of the coronavirus. According to information provided by Ambassador Dong, 321 of the "Fortune 500" international companies still have their headquarters or businesses in Hubei. As argued by Dong, the province is recognized as a developing research and academic center, where 1.6 million students learn in approximately 130 higher education institutions. In addition, Dong highlighted the aesthetic features of the province, which is perceived as the "province of a thousand lakes". Such a narrative consistently improves the general perception of the city and the region itself. It is also, of course, a rebuttal to claims regarding the origin of the coronavirus.

In the second article, the message conferred to the wider audience seems to be more significant from the perspective of a global implementation of the Chinese model. The ambassador referred to the growth of China's GDP, which in the first half of 2021 - according to Chinese data - increased by 12.7% YOY. Ambassador Dong Xiaojun argues that five main features have a decisive impact on the economic performance of the PRC: the dynamics of growth in the innovation sector; coordination of cooperation to promote sustainable development; transformation into a "green economy"; promotion of multilateralism along with an openness of the PRC to the "outside world" and a deep integration into the world economy, as well as an improvement in the living standards of "ordinary people". Furthermore, Dong elaborated that the total number of R&D personnel in the PRC for the last eight years had been the highest globally. However, this should not come as a surprise due to the great demographic potential of the PRC. Furthermore, in 2020, the ratio of China's R&D expenditure to GDP was 2.4%, an increase of 0.34% compared to 2015. As explained by Ambassador Dong, Beijing applies a set of specific tax regulations and integrative incentive policies to improve the innovation of domestic enterprises and accelerate modernization and industrial transformation. It is believed that the expansion of urbanization is also contributing to the growth of the innovation sector in China. According to the Seventh Population Census conducted in 2020, the urbanization rate stood at 63.8%. What is more, the Chinese diplomat

emphasized the role of rural areas and the revitalization process in China, which is reflected in the modernization of agriculture. In the first half of 2021, Beijing created 50 new agricultural and industrial parks and 298 additional cities were regarded as agricultural and industrial ones.

In other words, China's presented picture is ideational, and the set of publications of Ambassador Dong Xiaojun aims to promote the "Chinese model of the socialist state" regarding the economic and political management against the backdrop of the global health and trade crisis caused by the pandemic.

The Chinese "code of conduct" is presented as a remedy for a range of problems - especially with the prospect of further pandemic waves. Undoubtedly, the CCP has been trying to stimulate post-pandemic economic growth with its continuous internal reforms and has achieved satisfactory results in this regard, the ambassador said.

WHO IS CHINA'S DIGITAL GOVERNANCE MODEL FOR?

Going further, we should investigate whether the adaptation of such a model of governance in developing countries (to which the Chinese narrative is mainly directed) is possible? Would the "China model" become possible to implement outside China, considering a significantly smaller technological potential and a marked difference in demographics? In this matter, it is crucial to analyze the data provided by Ambassador Dong. The Chinese diplomat stressed that China had been successful in tackling unemployment in the post-pandemic realm. During the first six months of 2021, 6.98 million new jobs were created in China, meeting 63.5% of 2021's overall target. To compare the potential of both China and Bulgaria, we should keep in mind that Bulgaria's population in 2020 totaled 6.94 million.

According to Dong Xiaojun, improving people's living conditions enhances economic growth and is the key to "social vitality". Governmental services management through the network is also strongly supported in China. The plan "Hulianwang + zhengfu fuwu [Internet + government services]" aims to deliver certain administration services reachable across the web, thus becoming available "at the interregional level". Yet, the prevailing motivation in digitizing the nation is possible due to society's already existing

and deeply rooted autocratic control and management system. These ideas are stimulated by the desire to develop "social engineering", where everyone knows what to do and, most importantly, what not to do.

Another message directed to the Bulgarian audience appeared in the popular news outlet "24 hours" on July 1, 2021. In the article authored by Dong Xiaojun, entitled "The CCP attributes Chinese wisdom to global governance", the ambassador distinguished four main advantages of the CCP's governance model: continued strengthening of the party and building long-term plans for state management; listening to the "voice of the people"; fighting corruption and the CCP's contribution to promoting integrity and implementing new political practices in many countries worldwide. According to the ambassador, Chinese political philosophy and management concepts have been refined over the years to "institutionalize a new party management practice that brings Chinese wisdom to the practices of managing global threats and challenges." Dong Xiaojun also articulated the practical aspects of "social management", which, according to the ambassador, positively impacted the economic progress made in other developing countries. In addition, the ambassador emphasized that the CCP is the largest party in power globally, which "not only works for the progress of humanity, but also advocates open cooperation, mutual benefit, and promotes common, global prosperity through its development."

Regarding the effectiveness of "social management" during the rapid spread of the pandemic, in an interview with Eurocom, Ambassador Dong affirmed that China was able to contain the pandemic domestically in such a short time due to the establishment of a unified central leadership. He admitted that all cities and provinces were assigned their responsibilities. Thus, in an archetypical state management model, "everyone knows what to do". The second aspect mentioned by Dong was the implementation of an unprecedented, wide-ranging response to the public health crisis across the country. It constituted a prevention and social control system involving all citizens and executed an "early detection, early reporting, early isolation, and early treatment" system. In this regard, Dong indicated a remarkable mobilization of the best physicians and virology experts and the most modern equipment, which significantly helped reduce the mortality rate. Lastly, Ambassador Dong pointed out the timely and transparent communication

between government and society, the rapid construction of new hospitals, and the mobilization of medical personnel throughout the country to help areas with higher infection rates.

PUBLIC OPINION OF CHINA IN BULGARIA. ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT?

What impact does such a narrative have on the actual perception of China in Bulgaria? According to the Pew Research study in December 2019, the positive view of the PRC in Bulgaria is above average for the CEE region. The research includes results from six countries (the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary), of which 55% of the PRC in Bulgaria was positively perceived by Bulgaria (median of selected countries in the region: 43%). At the same time, 20% of the respondents showed a negative approach toward China (median: 36%). China is best perceived in Bulgaria (55%), Poland (47%), Lithuania (45%), while the negative perception was the highest in the Czech Republic (57%), Slovakia (48%) and Hungary (37%).

The above illustrates a paradox because the PRC's best results are shown in countries with a comparatively low political and investment cooperation level. At the same time, negative opinions of respondents are reported by citizens of countries whose investment and political relations with China are relatively high.

Given the recent events linked to Lithuania dropping the 17 + 1 format, as can be observed, positive public opinion about the PRC's activities in the country do not resemble the government's official position in Vilnius.

Moreover, the poll also asked about the level of confidence in President Xi Jinping. In Bulgaria, 32% of the respondents said they trust the Chinese leader, while 23% indicated a lack of confidence in Xi Jinping. In this perspective, the key point from the Chinese point of view is the rate of people who did not have a clear picture of Xi Jinping. As many as 45% of the respondents (the second highest result in the region after Hungary: 51%) were unable to assess the performance of the CCP's leader.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that with the rather positive perception of China in Bulgaria, the publications of Ambassador Dong Xiaojun are dedicated to filling the knowledge gap about Xi Jinping. Improving the approach to Xi Jinping, who is focused on consolidating power, promotes the use of "selected and experimented in China" management schemes regarding the state economy and society. This perception directly points to the inclusion of the "Chinese digital governance model" in the agenda for China's technological projects between Beijing and Sofia. Last year, Bulgaria joined the US-led coalition against Huawei, which means that implementing a project with the Shenzhen-based tech giant is unlikely.

However, some new developments in the region indicate that China has not given up on the smart city projects in countries backed by the US. The latest example is the recently completed "smart car parking" project in Timisoara, Romania. Another of China's major tech companies, ZTE, was responsible for its implementation.

In fact, ZTE may well try to take over Huawei's role in a smart city project (worth 1.5 bn EUR), signed by Sofia and the Chinese telecommunications company in 2019. This might come as no surprise, as China Construction Third Engineering Bureau – known for its cooperation with ZTE – was once appointed to develop information technology-related infrastructure in Bulgaria.

Moreover, this Chinese tech campaign in Bulgaria is supported by some policymakers in the country. Yanaki Stoilov, Bulgarian minister of justice, commented on the possible adaptation of Chinese solutions. In a letter addressed to the participants of an international conference on the centenary of the establishment of the Communist Party of China, Stoilov wrote: "I am convinced that China's experience and political leadership in strategic planning, as well as the consistency of the reforms being carried out, is a very useful [model] for Bulgaria and deserves serious attention". The Bulgarian politician also emphasized that the PRC achieved impressive successes in the international arena over the past few decades. Without doubt, it is the desired response to the Beijing narrative. However, considering the theoretical implementation of the "Chinese model" in Bulgaria,

the issues of civil and human rights and democratic standards under the tutelage of the European Union remain the main obstacles for China.

This policy brief was written as part of the research project (no 3/A549DO/2020), "Sino-American political and economic interactions in the time of COVID-19", and supported by the University of Lodz.

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