

Press Release

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The “2019 Defending Democracy: Comparing Authoritarian Influence Operations” Press Release

The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) this morning hosted the “2019 Defending Democracy: Comparing Authoritarian Influence Operations” panel at the TFD headquarters in Taipei. TFD President Ford Fu-Te Liao delivered the opening remarks, and the speakers included Dr. Martin Hala, Director of AcaMedia and Sinopsis.cz, and Mr. Xiao Qiang, founder and editor-in-chief of China Digital Times.

In his opening remarks, TFD President Liao said that the panel today is to investigate the authoritarian regimes’ influence operations by sharing experiences and information about the regimes’ penetration tactics in different countries, especially as authoritarian regimes evolve with technological advancements. President Liao said that a democracy prizes the co-existence of a plurality of opinions and views, however differences can be radicalized and antagonism between camps intensified with disinformation and mal-intentioned schemes.

“In the end, the democratic equilibrium could be shattered and democratic elections could be easily manipulated in the authoritarian regimes’ favor,” said President Liao. He also pointed out that there have been indications that China is learning its tactics from Russia, and “Taiwan stands in the forefront of China’s influence and is a testing ground for and the major target of its tactics.”

Dr. Martin Hala in his presentation said that since the end of the WWII, Russia has efficiently presented itself to Eastern Europe as a defender of traditional and Christian values against the decadent West and European Union. In addition, since the beginning of this decade, Eastern Europe has also seen the People’s Republic of China (PRC) building up its influence “at a lightning speed.”

Surprisingly though, Dr. Hala said, this swift build of PRC influence “has not met any protest from Russia,” and rather some cooperation has been seen. However, he also pointed out that there are currently no formal agreements between Russia and the PRC in Eastern Europe, making such cooperation difficult to study and document.

“The cooperation is hidden,” said Dr. Hala. “We can only guess and refer to analogical examples, especially in central Asia.”

Dr. Hala also pointed out that Russia and China “have very different approaches in their influence operations” due to their different geopolitical positions. Russia is on the decline and does not seem to have a larger, strategic operation; on the other hand, China is a rising power that is more efficient and has a long-term vision.

Following Dr. Hala’s presentation, Xiao Qiang spoke about the digitalization of influence operations and how technology has become a tool for eroding democracies through disinformation and propaganda campaigns.

Mr. Xiao said that in addition to spreading propaganda within China, the PRC since 2003 has started to create a “positive public environment for China’s diplomacy and interests in the world.” This goes beyond using the PRC-owned Xinhua News to tout the PRC rhetoric, and includes training journalists in other countries to penetrate foreign news outlets and more clearly understand the ideologies of the audience in different countries.

Dr. Hala echoed this phenomenon saying that there have also been increasing examples in Eastern Europe of the PRC bribing local elites and public figures to use their voices to spread PRC messages to the masses. He also mentioned reports of growing numbers of Chinese students learning Eastern Europe languages to better understand the local environment, and considered it as “an organized effort to upgrade their localization tactics.”

“It’s wrong to say that the PRC’s disinformation campaign is not as sophisticated as Russia’s,” said Mr. Xiao, who went on to point out that the PRC’s tactic of deceiving the masses through mixing the truth with disinformation makes it even more challenging to expose.

While both speakers acknowledged some form of cooperation between Russia and China — mostly borrowing each other’s Internet bots to spread disinformation — they also noted the friction and distrust among the two sides.

“It seems like Russia and China do not do joint operations at this point, because of

different work styles,” said Dr. Hala, with Xiao adding that there is also mistrust between the two powers.

However, Mr. Xiao said that something to be aware of is how the PRC has been creating an image that democracies being against them is “a conflict between civilizations” while it is rather a conflict between democracy and dictatorship.

“The most dangerous aspect of this idea is that it might become a self-fulfilling prophecy,” said Mr. Xiao. “This is something we do not want to see.”

When asked what the solutions are to countering PRC and Russian influence operations, Dr. Hala said that understanding the problems is essential before devising solutions. This is also why efforts are being made to analyze and describe the mechanics of the influence and interference operations.

On the other hand, Mr. Xiao emphasized the importance of exposing the influence operations, especially through clear and simple language for the masses to understand. An example would be the recent protest in Hong Kong against a proposed extradition law that would allow Hong Kong suspects to be sent to China to face trial.

“Hong Kong is probably the first time Xi Jing-ping has been pushed back a little bit,” said Mr. Xiao. “Some people say that Hong Kong will be punished by this; but I think that if there is one defeat, a second and third one will follow.”

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