

Standing With Taiwan: Lithuania Hit By China's Media Maneuvers

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1. News Highlights

On November 28, 2021, Matas Maldeikis, Chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament's Friendship Group with Taiwan, led a delegation of the country's parliamentarians to Taiwan to participate in the "2021 Open Parliament Forum" and to meet President Tsai Ing-wen. It was the culmination of a breakthrough in Taiwan-Lithuania relations: On March 23, the Lithuanian government proposed to its

parliament to amend legislation in order to station a commercial representative in Taiwan; On July 20, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it would establish a representative office in Lithuania; Between October 26-29, a Taiwan economic and investment delegation visited Lithuania and signed six memoranda of cooperation, including on semiconductors; On November 18, the "Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania" was officially established.¹

1. Lithuanian legislators arrive in Taiwan, see "Lithuanian Parliamentary Delegation Visits Taiwan to Participate in Open Parliament Forum," *Public TV News*, November 28, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/Mk5LpW>; Lithuanian legislators visited President Tsai Ing-wen, see "Lithuanian Parliamentary Delegation: This Trip to Taiwan Shows Unity," *Central News Agency*, November 29, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/958gEj>; Lithuania announces it will set up a commercial office in Taiwan, see "Lithuania Amends Law to Take One Step Further Toward Establishing an Office in Taiwan," *Central News Agency*, March 25, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/jgZ2dm>; Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announces it will establish a representative office in Taiwan in Lithuania, see "Taiwan Will Establish a Representative Office in Lithuania, Opening a New Page of Cooperation," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan, July 20, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/n5d29X>; Taiwan Economic and Trade Mission to Lithuania, see "Central Eastern Europe Economic and Trade Mission to Lithuania Creates New Milestone for Taiwan-Lithuania Economic and Trade Cooperation," National Development Council of Taiwan, 2021 October 28, <https://reurl.cc/Krak1M>; Taiwan Representative Office in Lithuania was established, see "Taiwan Representative Office in Lithuania Officially Established for Bilateral Cooperation to Open a New Page," *Central News Agency*, November 18, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/jgZ2dm>.

In response, the CCP imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions, including suspending railroad passenger transportation, halting the issuance of food export licenses, and canceling negotiations on agricultural and livestock products, in an attempt to coerce Lithuania to change its decision. On August 10, the Chinese Foreign Ministry recalled its ambassador to Lithuania and asked the latter to recall its ambassador in China. On November 21, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced it was downgrading the relations between the two countries to the level of chargé d'affaires.² In addition to the multi-level political and economic coercion exerted on Lithuania, the CCP also strengthened the effect with media manipulation (see the attached figure). This article focuses on the CCP's different media manipulation strategies, both internally and externally, and explores their possible impact on relations between the two countries.

2. Security Implications

2-1. Propaganda strategy to let out internal pressure

The CCP has placed the highest priority on internal propaganda in order to solidify its authority. In the face of diplomatic defeats, the CCP has continued to escalate its rhetorical threats against Lithuania to provide an outlet on pressure in response to rising nationalism in the country. For example, after Lithuania publicized that it was strengthening relations with Taiwan in March, the CCP convergence media kept silent about it due to the sensitivity of the matter. It was not until July when Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs brought up the issue that the CCP published "A serious warning to the DPP authorities: colluding with external forces to provoke 'Taiwan independence' will only be self-defeating" and pointed out that "the responsibility for Taiwan relationship issues is completely

2. For the CCP's economic coercion of Lithuania, see "China Extends Retaliation to Lithuania for Cutting Orders, Canceling Negotiations on Agricultural and Livestock Deals," *Central News Agency*, August 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/GbyY13>; China's Foreign Ministry recalls its ambassador to Lithuania, see "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Speaks on China's Decision to Recall Ambassador to Lithuania", *People's Daily Online*, August 10, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/2oGOWn>; the Chinese Foreign Ministry downgraded diplomatic relations with Lithuania, see "China Decides to Downgrade Diplomatic Relations to Chargé d'affaires Level," *People's Daily Online*, November 22, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/EZlvDA>.

in Lithuania”. When the establishment of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania was finalized, the CCP convergence media issued emotional comments such as “Lithuania will pay the price for betraying trust and justice” and “Lithuania has made a mistake but is still full of excuses.”³

Secondly, the CCP propagates conspiracy theory. To divert from its own ineffective governance. The CCP encouraged its convergence media and Internet influencers to spread bias and misinformation that attributed Lithuania’s diplomatic behavior to a political conspiracy. For example, the CCP cited suspicious information sources to report that “Lithuania is part of the global ‘black jail network’ of the US”, alleging that the US had transferred Muslim terrorist suspects to the “black prisons”

in Lithuania. This has been spread on the Chinese internet in many forms, including news reports, short videos, quick answers, and satirical cartoons. After the establishment of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania, the social media hashtag “#Lithuania_violently_treat_refugees_with_military_force_and_dogs” was pushed by the CCP convergence media and made its way to become a “hot search” on Weibo with numerous persuasive posts of violent images from unknown sources.⁴

2-2. Relatively restrained external propaganda strategy

The CCP’s foreign propaganda content, on the other hand, has been deliberately selected to curry favorable international opinions. Take China Global Television Network (CGTN), the foreign-

3. The CCP convergence media’s remarks on Taiwan’s relations with Lithuania, “A Serious Warning to the DPP Authorities: Colluding with External Forces to Provoke ‘Taiwan Independence’ Will Only be Self-defeating,” *Xinhua*, August 10, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/xEmQOV>; “The Responsibility for the Taiwan Relationship Issues is Completely in Lithuania,” *People’s Daily Online*, September 17, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/EZ0RpR>; “Lithuania Will Pay the Price for Betraying the Trust and Justice,” *Xinhua Net*, November 19, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/dxMGxg>; “Lithuania Has Made a Mistake but is Still Full of Excuses,” *Xinhua Net*, November 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/zWaNY6>.

4. CCP manipulation of conspiracy theories, “Lithuania is a Part of US Overseas ‘Black Jail Network’”, *Xinhua*, November 24, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/Q6qbZ9>; “#Lithuania_violently_treat_refugees_with_military_force_and_dogs”, *Weibo*, November 22, 2021, https://weibo.com/a/hot/ce2cb0db7583990c_0.html?type=grab.

language news network of CCTV, as an example: the CCP's foreign propaganda has been quite restrained with fewer relevant news than domestic ones; the CGTN also did not follow the CCTV to translate offensive comments such as "Lithuania's treachery is detestable, and its sophistry is pathetic", but chose to publish more rational comments instead such as "Lithuania's security must not be at the cost of China's interest". In addition, the Facebook page of the CCP's Haixia Daobao (Strait Herald), which is dedicated to propaganda on Taiwan, did not mention a single word about Lithuania and Taiwan-related news, and this shows that the CCP's external propaganda is different from the domestic one, and tries to downplay unfavorable issues.⁵

The CCP's media operation also uses the words of Lithuanian experts to endorse it. For example, the article "Lithuania is in

danger" published by *CCTV.com* quoted a so-called Russian newspaper "Free Press" as saying that "the Lithuanian government has driven itself into a dead end" and claimed to quote the deputy chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament's Economic Committee as saying that "less than a year from its establishment, the new Lithuanian government is already at war on many diplomatic fronts". The author also claimed to interview one of the "Lithuanian Independence Act" signatories who emphasized that "Lithuania does not have an independent foreign policy and is willing to be a pawn of the US" while quote a member of the Lithuanian Science Council as saying that "the Lithuanian government shows a tendency to 'go against the people'". These all aim to undermine the Lithuanian government's foreign policy.⁶

5. The remarks of the CCP's convergence media concerning Taiwan's relations with Lithuania, Lithuania's Treachery is Detestable, and Its Sophistry is Pathetic," *CCTV.com*, November 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/em2OLx>; John Gong, "Lithuania's Security Mustn't be At the Cost of China's Interest," *CGTN*, November 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/82m10X>.

6. For the CCP using endorsement from local experts, see "Lithuania is in Danger," *CCTV*, August 21, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/82ap0R>.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. China's cultural infiltration into Lithuania becomes concern

As discussed above, to counter Lithuania's strengthened relationship with Taiwan, the CCP takes a coercive approach, but its media operation inside China is different from that outside China. Similarly, the CCP also handles economic issues with Lithuania with both soft and hard measures. After Lithuania announced its withdrawal from the 17+1 cooperation between China and Central/Eastern European (CEE) countries, the CCP levered economic retaliation on Lithuania while, on the other hand, continued to publicize the benefits of its economic and trade cooperation with other European countries through its convergence media, highlighting the economic gains Lithuania was missing out on. It's obvious that the CCP has been using a "stick and carrot" strategy on Lithuania. It is also worth

noting that, aside from threats, the CCP is also making use of sugarcoating the tactics of influencing with money, power, and cultural exchange. For example, the Confucius Institute has taken root at Lithuania's Vilnius University since 2010. Not only Chinese language and qigong courses are offered, but also annual summer camps for high school and university students, Confucius Institute scholarships, and convergence media coverage on every local Chinese language competition by China's convergence media.⁷ The CCP's long-term cultural infiltration in Lithuania may serve as the basis for media manipulation and future social divergence.

3-2. CCP's media manipulation may intensify Lithuania's anti-China sentiment

Although the CCP takes different approaches for inside and outside the country on media operations in terms of

7. Lithuania announces withdrawal from China 17+1, "Lithuania Withdraws From China 17+1 Cooperation, Calls on EU Countries to Follow up," *Central News Agency*, May 24, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/YjA9gl>. For more information on the results of economic cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European countries, see "Working Together to Create a Better Future for China: Central and Eastern Europe Economic and Trade Cooperation," *People's Daily Online*, June 10, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/ye3rR2>; for the activities of the Confucius Institute in Lithuania, see the official website of the Confucius Institute at Vilnius University, <https://reurl.cc/n58O7n>; for the Chinese language competition in Lithuania promoted by CCP, see "Lithuania Holds Online 'Chinese Language Bridge'," *People's Daily Online*, May 8, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/bnOEV6>.

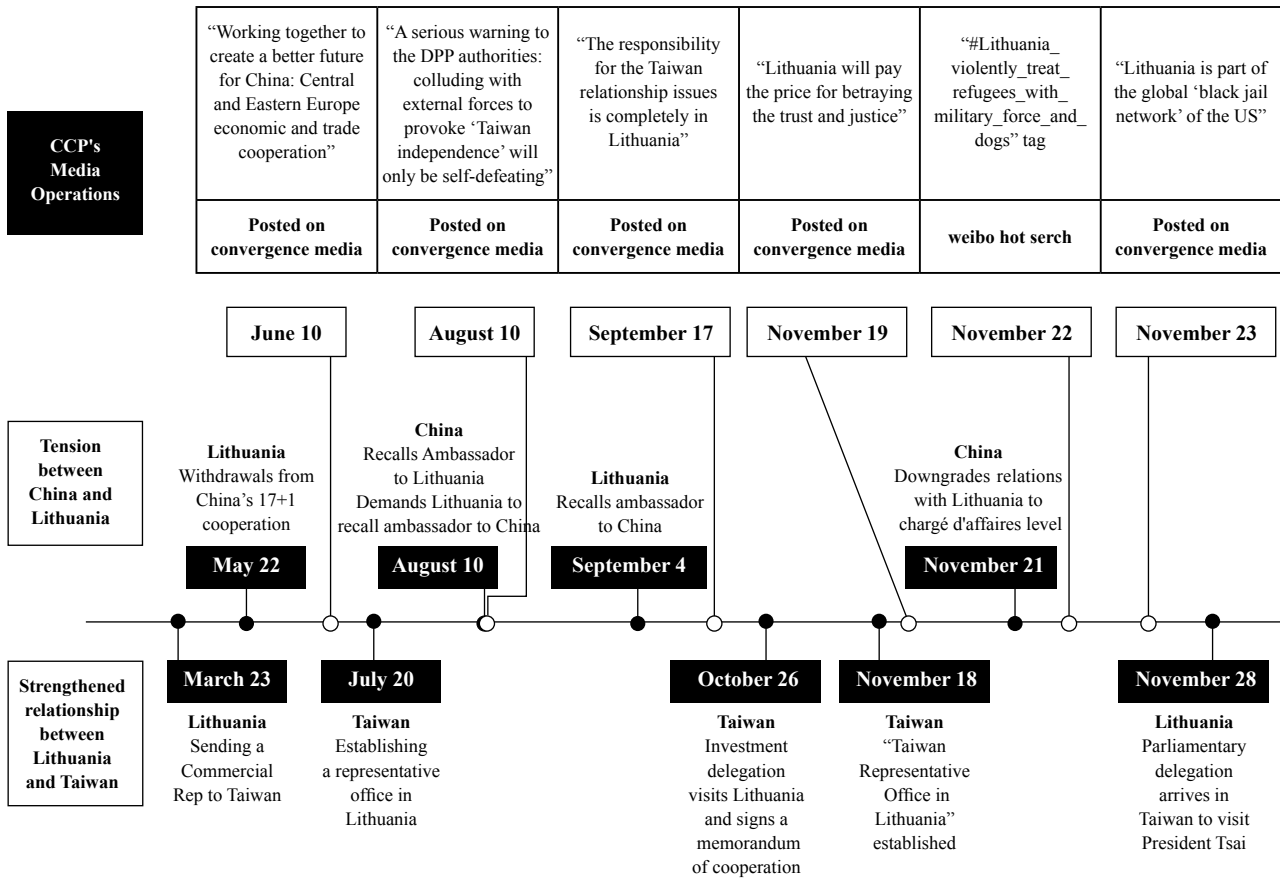
Lithuania's relations with Taiwan, this distinction is difficult to maintain on the global Internet where information flows freely. Once the internal nationalism is ignited, the CCP may have to show its "fighting posture" and become even more aggressive to the outside world. This would eventually affect its foreign policy maneuvers and put it in a difficult position. For example, the editorial "Let's talk straight about Lithuania" published by the CCP's *Huanqiu Network* is essentially internal propaganda, but its content is extremely denigrating and humiliating to Lithuania. Not only does it refer to Lithuania as a small country, but also uses words such as "mosquito", "rat" and "flea" to describe the country. "You may be threatened and denigrated in Chinese media headlines, but those you can resist," said Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, indicating the spillover effect of the CCP's internal propaganda.⁸ This is likely to aggravate resentment of the Lithuanian public

against China and is not conducive to the CCP's expectation that Lithuania will change its mind.

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8. The CCP's convergence media commented on Lithuania, "Let's Talk Straight About Lithuania," *Huanqiu Network*, November 21, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/YjaXEX>; the Lithuanian foreign minister made a statement, "Lithuania's Foreign Minister Believes the Country Has Set an Example for the World in Resisting Pressure From China," *RFI*, November 25, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/OkY4R7>.

Timeline of Lithuania's Strengthened Relations with Taiwan and CCP's Media Operations



Source/diagram: from publicly available information compiled by Shu-Ting Liu