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The author's name, 'KONSTANTINAS ANDRIJAUSKAS', is written in a bold, dark red, sans-serif font.The title 'SINO-LITHUANIAN RELATIONS IN 2020: SHEDDING THE MASKS?' is displayed in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font, arranged in four lines.

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# Introduction

As of the end of 2020, for obvious and rather gloomy reasons the People's Republic of China (PRC) has actually increased its topical relevance in the world, as well as in Lithuania, in comparison with the previous year which itself already seems to be a distant memory. When the present author's introductory analytical study of China's growing presence in the largest, southernmost Baltic state, which focused particularly on the unprecedented downgrade in its relationship with Beijing in 2019,<sup>1</sup> was published in mid-February 2020, a deliberate choice was made to postpone the discussion of then-emerging global health crisis. The current publication is therefore somewhat predetermined by the first one, and should be interpreted as its – hopefully – consistent continuation with some unavoidable overlap between them both.

The World Health Organization (WHO) belatedly declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern' on 30 January, as the travel-intensive Chinese New Year holidays had already made an impact on the rest of the planet. The Chinese zodiac's 'Year of the Rat' could not have started more inauspiciously, considering both the rapid spread of the virus within and without the country, and the rodent's widespread association with contagion and, in particular, the deadliest pandemic to be recorded in human history, namely the mid-fourteenth century Black Death. The WHO finally recognised the proliferating contagion as a pandemic on 11 March, precisely the day upon which Lithuania was celebrating its thirtieth anniversary of independence from the Soviet Union. By that time the virus had already penetrated the country, causing the rise of its first wave.

As will be shown below, the Year of the Rat proved to be almost as trying as the previous Year of the Pig for Sino-Lithuanian relations. The current paper therefore attempts to objectively update the former assessment of China's presence in Lithuania, and the state of their bilateral relationship in general as of the end of 2020. Based on open, publicly-available primary and secondary sources in the Lithuanian and English languages, it first outlines two key China-related trends that continued from the previous year in Lithuania,

namely the further securitisation of the Asian giant and the collateral intensification of the human rights narrative towards it. Then follows a brief evaluation of the state of their economic relationship immediately before and during the 2020 health crisis, and a separate discussion of the particularly instructive 5G issue. Next to be addressed is the pandemic factor itself, as well as the related outcome of Taiwan's unprecedentedly large profile in Lithuania. Before getting to the conclusions, a concise presentation is made of the rather surprising Chinese entry into the Lithuanian sporting sphere.

It is somewhat obvious but yet still necessary to emphasise the fact that the views that are expressed in this paper reflect the opinion of its author, and not those of any institution to which he is affiliated or with which he is in partnership, and were based on publicly-available official documents, statistical data, academic and think-tank publications, news reports, and pieces of investigative journalism. Whenever possible, English language sources are provided. Any errors or omissions are, most certainly, the responsibility of the author.

## 1. Vestiges from 2019: towards Lithuania's Securitisation of China?

After the landmark 'National Threat Assessment 2019' by Lithuanian intelligence bodies,<sup>2</sup> which identified for the first time Chinese espionage activities as posing a threat to the country's national security, the 2020 edition had become much anticipated by the local 'China watchers'. The document that was published in early February by the State Security Department and the Second Investigation Department under the Ministry of National Defence partially fulfilled expectations by highlighting 'ongoing malicious use' of Chinese cyber-capabilities for acts of hacking and spying that had been observed in Lithuanian cyberspace. Particularly interesting was the charge that, in order to establish contacts with selected targets in Lithuania in the early stages of recruitment operations, Chinese intelligence uses fictitious accounts on LinkedIn,<sup>3</sup> the only major social media platform of Western origin that is officially allowed to function in the PRC.

As if to confirm such allegations, the massive September 2020 data leak from the Shenzhen Zhenhua Data Information Technology open-source intelligence company, which has connections to the Chinese military and intelligence services,<sup>4</sup> revealed that it had been gathering personal information on at least five hundred Lithuanian politicians, diplomats, journalists, business people, and other prominent individuals over a span of several years.<sup>5</sup> It is no wonder then that the topic of China within Lithuania's military and intelligence community experienced a further, although incomplete, shift towards what the influential international relations scholars who belong to the Copenhagen School describe as 'securitisation', i.e. an extreme version of politicising a certain subject, and thereby transforming it into a matter of national security.<sup>6</sup>

Though much less apparent, such a trend has also increasingly become a feature of the political establishment. One of the most telling recent examples of this was an article that was published in June 2020 which was inspired by Beijing's recent decision to apply national security legislation in Hong Kong, but actually amounted to a full indictment against the assertive turn in Chinese domestic and foreign policies, calling for Lithuania to decidedly choose between liberal democratic allies and a 'totalitarian and predatory

Chinese communist regime'.<sup>7</sup> Notably, the piece was co-authored by two prominent members of the then-opposition Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, one of the country's two largest political parties. Among the co-authors of the article was the party's leader who would become Lithuania's next foreign minister.

Even outside of the overwhelming pandemic factor (see below), the Sino-Lithuanian diplomatic relationship has not been free of friction and controversy throughout 2020. Lithuania's head of state was spared a difficult decision of whether to attend the first presidential 17+1 summit meeting in Beijing due to its postponement thanks to the health crisis. Despite the signing of a controversial joint letter from the EU ambassadors to China calling for warmer ties by the then-Lithuanian envoy to Beijing in early May,<sup>8</sup> both parties to the bilateral relationship in question seemed to be drawing apart and pulling in opposite directions. Indeed, vocal reactions by the Chinese embassy in Vilnius to local political initiatives that were of concern to China have achieved a near-regular frequency throughout 2020. Lithuania, however, remained consistent with its previous policies by joining 38 other countries in blasting China over abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong at the United Nations in early October.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Sino-Lithuanian Economic Relations immediately before and during the Pandemic

Despite a series of diplomatic disagreements throughout 2019, the development of economic relations between the two countries seemed to be rather encouraging. In the last pre-pandemic year, the total Sino-Lithuanian trade grew by almost 16%, reaching €1.2 billion. Since Lithuania's exports to China increased faster than did imports from it, a huge trade imbalance (€277 million in exports against €929 million in imports), long an important issue in their economic relationship, narrowed somewhat (when compared to the €189 million against €855 million in 2018). As a result, China rose a little in the rankings of Lithuania's partners in terms of overall trade (to 17th), and in terms of imports (to 10th) and exports (to 20th) from the 19th, 12th, and 25th positions of a year earlier.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time and despite a somewhat lofty associated rhetoric by policymakers on both sides, China's significance as a source of foreign direct investment into Lithuania actually declined, with the Asian giant dropping to a remarkably modest fortieth place from the slightly higher 37th in 2018. To put that into perspective, Lithuania's own investment into China was four times larger in 2019 (€8.32 million against €35.5 million), making it the twelfth-most important destination for such economic activity.

That same year, on the more positive side, the number of visiting tourists from China continued to rise, registering a 9.5% increase to 21,135, that secured it twentieth position amongst Lithuania's principal markets for incoming tourism.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, some of these visits produced shocking incidents during which several crosses supporting the Hong Kong protests were defaced or thrown out at the Hill of Crosses, a globally unique religious site in the northern part of the country.<sup>12</sup>

Arguably, the mid-2019 surprise visit to Vilnius by none other than Jack Ma, one of the world's wealthiest people who is considered to be a global ambassador for Chinese businesses,<sup>13</sup> could not offset the extant publicity damage that was later done by his co-nationals. Although the seemingly logical Lithuanian expectations of major investment that could be associated with such a level of interest by the famous founder of the Alibaba Group have not so far material-

ised, the subsequent pandemic somewhat highlighted the related booming sphere of the two countries' economic cooperation, that of e-commerce.

Lithuania's extreme caution about possible Chinese investment into its transportation infrastructure, particularly the seaport of Klaipėda and the national railways, has not prevented other ways for them to exploit its widely-acknowledged comparative advantages in terms of logistics. The country's self-presentation as a transit hub at the centre of Europe proved to be successful enough to secure a steady growth of goods being sent from China throughout the last decade, almost reaching a staggering two thirds of all incoming parcels that were being handled by the state-owned Lithuanian Post immediately before the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of memoranda of understanding that have been signed between the two countries on jointly building the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and on strengthening postal cooperation in 2017 and 2018 respectively, the first ever Europe-bound, entirely postal Chinese train arrived in Vilnius from the Chongqing mega city in mid-April 2020, at the height of Lithuania's first coronavirus wave. Of its 42 containers that had been shipped across more than 10,000 km of land, only two were intended for Lithuanian customers, while the rest were destined to travel on to other European countries, thereby contributing to Vilnius' cherished goal of becoming China's logistical gateway to the continent for this type of transit, and allowing it to monetise much of the process itself.<sup>15</sup> However, the Lithuanian parliament's subsequent decision to get rid of a tax exemption for low-value shipments from outside the EU<sup>16</sup> would surely check the rapid growth of Chinese e-commerce platforms in general and AliExpress in particular within the country's small but fairly digitalised market. Brussels' own impending decision to implement such a policy union-wide is expected to further damage Lithuania's barely-achieved position in this increasingly important sector.

Lithuania's self-designation as a gateway for China into Europe has not been limited to traditional logistics. In fact, Jack Ma's visit to Vilnius could have been as much explained by an interest in another rapidly emerging local industry, that of financial technology (fintech). Largely thanks to the clear-cut expression of such ambitions in 2018 by important Lithuanian politicians, including the then-finance minister,<sup>17</sup> and the president herself,<sup>18</sup> some ten fintech companies of Chinese origin have established themselves in the country,



which ranked fourth in the 2020 Global Fintech Index.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, despite Lithuania's pledge to set up a fintech coordination centre for the increasingly controversial 17+1 initiative for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries, a mere 'network of fintech coordinators' was actually founded during the format's Vilnius High Level Fintech Forum in November 2019.<sup>20</sup> Such a downgrade reflected the general trend in Sino-Lithuanian relations that year, and probably signified growing attention towards the prior warnings from the country's intelligence agencies about cooperation with 'hostile states' in this sensitive sector.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Solving the 5G Issue the non-Chinese Way?

Fifth generation (5G) communications technology has recently become a particularly indicative question in Beijing's relationship with other countries. Similarly to and largely coinciding with the fintech issue, it has experienced initial securitisation in Lithuania with some curious peculiarities. Although China or its companies were not mentioned explicitly in this context, the 2020 National Threat Assessment outlined that the 'development of 5G technology without sufficient focus on the trustworthiness of the IT service or product provider may become a new risk factor'.<sup>22</sup> Lithuania's Ministry of Defence had previously indicated that Chinese technology will not be included in militarily sensitive installations.<sup>23</sup> Despite the natural attention to 5G in a country that prides itself on having the fastest public WiFi network worldwide, the entire issue was actually destined to be securitised due to a pretty specific challenge beyond the Chinese factor, namely the spectrum interference dispute with Russia, whose digital 'frequency occupation zone' created by military radar and satellite communications stations within neighbouring Kaliningrad exclave technically covers more than one-third of Lithuania.<sup>24</sup> It is no wonder then that China's potential role in 5G development has also invited additional scrutiny.

The latter point had largely been settled when Lithuania became the last Baltic state to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on 5G Security with the US in mid-September 2020.<sup>25</sup> Again without mentioning China explicitly, the document underlines 'the importance of encouraging the participation of reliable and trustworthy network hardware and software suppliers in 5G markets, taking into account risk profile assessments, and promoting frameworks that effectively protect 5G networks from unauthorised access or interference'. According to the signatories, 'a rigorous evaluation of suppliers should take into account the rule of law, the security environment, ethical supplier practices, and a supplier's compliance with secure standards and industry best practice'. Perhaps most tellingly, such an evaluation would look into '[w]hether network hardware and software suppliers are subject, without independent judicial review, to control by a foreign government', and whether they are financed and managed transparently, as well as promoting innovation, enabling efficiency, pursuing fair competition, and respecting intellectual property rights.

Considering the fact that Chinese companies, particularly Huawei, had already begun to establish themselves in this emerging sector within Lithuania, the memorandum emphasised that 'it is critical for countries to transition from untrusted network hardware and software suppliers in existing networks to trusted ones through regular lifecycle replacements'. The practical results of this document were not long to become apparent. Less than two months later, Telia Lietuva, the largest telecommunications and information technology company in Lithuania, which has legally been recognised as an enterprise of importance to ensuring the country's national security,<sup>26</sup> declared the initial phase of launching the 5G mobile network under a just-signed strategic partnership with another and more famous company of Swedish origin, Ericsson. Telia's press release revealed that Huawei's existing radio access network equipment will gradually be phased out over the next few years to be replaced with Ericsson's hardware.<sup>27</sup>

## 4. The Pandemic Factor in Sino-Lithuanian Relations

Lithuania registered its first COVID-19 case at the end of February, when consultation meetings on the matter between the Chinese ambassador and high-level representatives of the government in general, and the Ministry of Health in particular,<sup>28</sup> had already been conducted for about a month. During one such meeting a hotline between the embassy and the Lithuanian ministries of foreign affairs and health was established for the early warning and immediate exchange of relevant information.<sup>29</sup> While the virus began to slowly and quietly enter the country, the Lithuanian government announced the offer to provide humanitarian aid of €100,000 to an epidemic-stricken China that would be transferred through the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.<sup>30</sup>

Soon it was Lithuania itself that badly needed medical supplies to deal with a seemingly exponential upsurge of confirmed cases. On 20 March the Health Ministry revealed a deal to buy almost two million respirators and nearly six million facemasks, along with other pieces of personal protective equipment from China.<sup>31</sup> That same morning, the first Chinese humanitarian shipment arrived in Lithuania primarily as a result of the efforts that had been made by none other than China's most controversial tech company, Huawei. The aid package amounted to 20,000 protective masks and 120,000 pairs of gloves that had been packaged into 240 boxes which displayed stickers that glorified the Sino-Lithuanian friendship, and came when the country needed anything of the sort it could get. Notably, the shipment was delivered free of charge by KlasJet charter airline which belongs to the Lithuanian-origin Avia Solutions Group,<sup>32</sup> a nationally controversial company,<sup>33</sup> and one which has a rapidly increasing profile in China.<sup>34</sup> Curiously, while commenting on the story, the Chinese embassy in Vilnius also credited the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Lithuania.<sup>35</sup> Except for the embassy itself, it was precisely this just-established organisation which had become most seriously involved into the watershed 23 August diplomatic incident in central Vilnius a year earlier.<sup>36</sup>

While the Huawei-led humanitarian shipment became the single most important example of Beijing's so-called 'mask diplomacy' in Lithuania, subsequent efforts to acquire personal protective equipment on a decidedly commercial basis also proved to be controversial. According to the then-Lithuanian health minister, some of the

respirators that were delivered from China by April did not fit properly and were only between '40-80 percent effective'. To be fair, the quality issue did not automatically suggest any sinister motivations by the Chinese partners, as they agreed to exchange the defective batch for a new one,<sup>37</sup> and to apply more stringent control to their medical exports in general. In any case, it was hard to expect a truly faultless operation by the extremely overloaded and messy supply chains, and despite often undisclosed prices, sub-quality deliveries, and related documents that appeared to have been forged, Lithuanian importers who were seeking to profit from the situation were allegedly as much to blame as were Chinese producers.<sup>38</sup>

However, the logistical chain that was used for the shipments attracted public attention again, when an influential Lithuanian foreign and security policy analyst noticed that the Russia-based Volga-Dnepr Airlines which was heavily involved in the whole effort had military origins and allegedly strong links to that country's intelligence apparatus.<sup>39</sup> Tellingly, identical services being provided by this same charter airline for the northernmost Baltic state, Estonia, were followed up by the Russian media narrative which implied that it was Moscow which provided Tallinn with 'humanitarian aid',<sup>40</sup> thereby producing a twofold degree of fake news that obscured both the actual origins of the transaction in question and its purely commercial nature.

Meanwhile, curious shifts in China's official narrative regarding the pandemic could also be observed in Lithuania. In mid-February an op-ed by the Chinese ambassador in Vilnius<sup>41</sup> was published in one of the country's leading news portals, calling for mutual solidarity by referring to the lockdown experience of a Harbin-based Lithuanian student vlogger.<sup>42</sup> Barely ten weeks later, another major news outlet released a startling interview with the ambassador in which he claimed that there was no evidence that the virus had originated in his country at all.<sup>43</sup> While being the most clear-cut example of the pandemic-related 'wolf warrior diplomacy' in Lithuania so far, this initiative also marked a reaction to Taiwan's increasing profile in the country, a topic that merits a detailed exploration which is provided below.

It is still hard to grasp the mid-to-long-term impact of such actions on China's overall image in Lithuania, but one could logically expect a further decline from the surprisingly positive views of its influence in spring 2019 (45% positive versus 33% negative).<sup>44</sup> However, ac-

According to a representative study of Lithuanian societal perceptions of international politics and threats which was published in mid-2020, a total of 40% of respondents were undecided while answering the question of whether their country should prioritise economic interests to national security challenges in its relationship with China (33% agreed with such statement and only 21% disagreed). While only a fifth of respondents agreed that Chinese medical equipment that was being sent to Europe could be classed as benevolent aid without any underlying political goals (32% disagreed on the matter and 38% remained undecided), a total of 34% referred to China as a country that was friendly towards Lithuania (26% saw it as an unfriendly one and 40% were undecided).<sup>45</sup>

## 5. Taiwan's Growing Profile in Lithuania

Although neighbouring Latvia usually gained more attention in terms of Taiwan's profile in the Baltic states due to its hosting the island's only representative office in the region,<sup>46</sup> it was Lithuania that increasingly stood out and quite suddenly shook up the long-accepted status quo on this complex question. In April 2020, largely reacting to Taipei's remarkably effective handling of the pandemic and the assistance that had been provided to their country,<sup>47</sup> around 200 Lithuanian politicians and public figures sent an open letter to their president, asking him to support the island in its Beijing-inspired dispute with the WHO. The office declined to back Taiwan's membership there,<sup>48</sup> but the country's foreign minister called the head of the organisation,<sup>49</sup> asking him at least to invite representatives from the island to the forthcoming World Health Assembly as an observer. Although China predictably refused even to comprehend such an option, on 18 June, i.e. exactly one month after the assembly and on the exact day that the Lithuanian president delivered his first annual State of the Nation Address in the Seimas (the Lithuanian parliament), the Taiwanese representative to the Baltic states used the opportunity to speak about the island's handling of the pandemic on that same platform at the invitation of the then-opposition Homeland Union.<sup>50</sup> In August, the Lithuanian group of members of the national and European parliaments turned out to be by far the largest bloc in a joint public statement of support to Miloš Vystrčil,<sup>51</sup> president of the Czech senate whose planned visit to Taiwan caused a particularly nasty dispute with Beijing.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, the Taiwan issue entered into debates which revolved around the forthcoming elections for the Seimas, as several representatives of the centre-right and liberal political parties openly contemplated the so-called 'Iceland moment' which evoked the nationally-appreciated story of this small and distant state being the first to recognise Lithuania's independence from the Soviet Union. The recently created ultraliberal Freedom Party included in its electoral programme a clause which supported Taiwan's statehood and independence.<sup>53</sup> After the October election results brought to power forces which represented the right of the political spectrum, including the leading Homeland Union, the Freedom Party, and the Liberal Movement/Union which finds itself ideologically lodged in between the first two, their triple coalition agreement pledged that the new

government would carry out a 'values-based foreign policy,' stating explicitly that it 'will actively oppose any violation of human rights and democratic freedoms, and will defend those who are fighting for freedom around the world, from Belarus to Taiwan'.<sup>54</sup>

All of these Lithuanian initiatives raised entirely predictable ire from the Chinese embassy in Vilnius, while the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry 'tweeted' its appreciation of the coalition agreement.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the recent change in the status quo on this issue in Lithuania has been apparent beyond pure politics. Tellingly, on 8 October, i.e. a week after the unusually quiet mainland China's National Day celebration and just two days ahead of the National Day of the Republic of China, the Lithuania-Taiwan Forum to develop mutual cultural, scientific, economic, and political relations and to support the island's aspirations related to democracy, human rights, and self-determination was established in central Vilnius by some sixty prominent representatives of the host society.<sup>56</sup> Although it is yet hard to foresee the forum's work in practice, this framework definitely marks the sudden rise of Taiwanese soft power in the country and the Baltic states region in general. On the other hand, throughout 2020 Beijing has also registered notable successes in Lithuania related to this admittedly broad field, although its surprising advance took place through sports-related activities.



## 6. China's Soft Power Advance through the Sporting World

China's profile in Lithuania's sporting sphere has grown remarkably in 2020. On 7 September, exactly a year after the beloved national team's early dropout from the 2019 World Cup that was held in China, the Lithuanian Basketball Federation announced a sponsorship agreement with Huawei. Curiously, the federation's general secretary himself acknowledged that his entity had been looking into cooperation opportunities with eight big Chinese companies for some two years.<sup>57</sup> Huawei had already enjoyed a similar role until the previous sponsorship agreement had expired around 2016 without any public notice. This time, however, the company's profile seems to be even larger, as its name was attached to the title of the Lithuanian women's league. Although basketball cooperation between the two countries has quite deep roots, it usually worked the other way around, with some talented Lithuanian players and coaches having prominent positions in China's top league and even in its much-revered national team.<sup>58</sup>

If Huawei's recent publicity push through sporting activities had at least some history behind it, then a similar action by another controversial Chinese company proved to be even more remarkable. A sponsorship agreement in early 2020 with Hikvision,<sup>59</sup> the surveillance equipment manufacturer which has been sanctioned by the US government for its role in the ongoing Xinjiang security crackdown, has definitely helped one of Lithuania's top two association football clubs, Sūduva of Marijampolė, to remain in the race for the national championship, although it has been ultimately unsuccessful in the 2020 season. Despite Lithuanian football's obvious lag in terms of domestic popularity and international success when compared to basketball, it is still notable that one of Europe's recent national titleholders faces opponents in Hikvision Stadium while its players brandish the company's logo on their jerseys. Due to their mid-to-long-term nature, the actual soft power dividends for China in Lithuania related to all of these actions remain to be seen.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Sino-Lithuanian relations in the trying year of 2020 have experienced both a rather consistent continuation of some policies and topics from the previous twelvemonth and some significant qualitatively novel developments. Any consistency seemed to be undermined by the emerging health crisis, since the two countries were forced to attend to their own matters but also to recognise the global nature of the challenge. Notably, tackling the pandemic at the same time placed China in an exclusive position as the apparent source of the contagion and the immediate (in terms of medical equipment) and mid-term (in terms of a huge pool of the earliest-possible epidemiological data) means to deal with it. It is no wonder then that the Sino-Lithuanian relationship experienced a clear but short improvement in late winter and early spring, as Beijing was calling for solidarity across the globe and Vilnius desperately needed to acquire personal protective equipment.

With a gradual waning of the first wave in both countries, however, old wounds again reappeared and several new ones were added. The downturn came as China switched back to its assertive so-called 'wolf warrior' mode through a denial of the origins of the virus in the Lithuanian media, essentially obliterating previous publicity gains from its own 'mask diplomacy' as a result, while the profile of Taiwan suddenly ascended in the southernmost Baltic state which soon returned to its usual criticism of Beijing's human rights record. Among other qualitatively novel developments that have been addressed in this paper, two stand out in particular, namely the role of postal services in the Sino-Lithuanian economic relationship that was exposed by the supply chain crisis during the initial months of the pandemic, and Vilnius' apparent move towards solving the 5G issue by excluding Chinese companies from its development after all.

Admittedly, much of what Lithuania faced in terms of its conduct of Chinese policy throughout 2020 mirrored the coinciding experience of other Western countries, both near and far. Considering a clear-cut downward trend in the relationship in 2019, the two sides

seemed further to unmask themselves in the rather fateful Year of the Rat by exposing their largely contradicting long-term national interests and foreign policy principles. As of the end of 2020, other than for decidedly economic-based transactions in non-sensitive sectors such as food and light industry, and pandemic-related cooperation in the medical and biotechnological sphere, there seems to be not that much left of the previous bilaterally pragmatic common ground. The equation may rapidly change, however, if the EU in general and Lithuania in particular were to fail to quickly re-emerge from the pandemic on both medical and economic counts.

Almost all of the recommendations for policymakers that had been provided in the previous study on China's presence in Lithuania which was published in mid-February have turned out to be even more valid at the end of the year and with the continuing pandemic in mind. Indeed, the health crisis itself has exposed the fact that both countries are physically not that far from each other and belong to a complex supply chain that usually originates with the Asian giant. Unfortunately for Lithuania, the pandemic has resulted in the country's loss of most of its precious latecomer advantages which largely used to characterise both its relationship with China and the initial exposure to the virus.

Moreover, the need for cool heads in Lithuania is perhaps even more important now, as the country may risk jeopardising its highly important – biological – security and integrity during the much harder second wave if a careful balance is lost between the stable and adequate commercial deliveries of medical equipment of Chinese origin and its independent and value-based foreign policy. It is a huge relief that the allied Western countries have achieved remarkable breakthroughs in the crucial area of vaccine development, but many dark days probably await Lithuania before those shots become universally available. In other words, a gradual securitisation of China throughout 2020, although largely comprehensible considering the context in both of the countries and the world in general, should not blindfold Lithuania to the realities on the ground.

In a related manner, Beijing's harsh but remarkably effective fight against the virus within its borders does not automatically mean that the rest of the world, including Lithuania, should disregard not only the bad lessons that have been painfully learned there but also the good practice that has been offered by its response, although Taiwan does indeed provide a much more successful example

which is also better-fitting for another liberal democracy. Perhaps the most pressing good advice that developed Northeast Asia has to offer is a fundamental trust in science and expertise. It would be sad and dangerous if Lithuania and the Western world failed to do the same.

# Endnotes

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