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June
2020

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and
drugs

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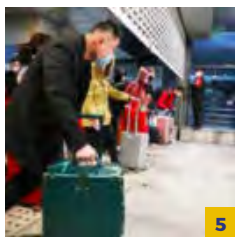


ROYAL JORDANIAN

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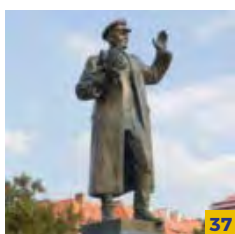
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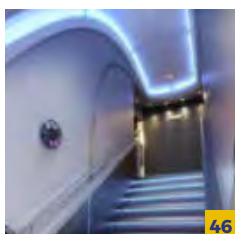
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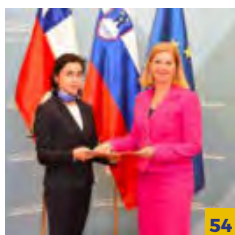
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Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

SUPER OR SUPINE?

The EU's craven response to bullying by China

On May 9, in a statement to mark the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, which launched Europe on the road towards the European Union, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, said "Our response to the corona virus will define our global rôle for years to come".

What he failed to mention was that the definition has been somewhat soiled by apparently caving in to Chinese pressure over an innocent-looking article the EU hoped to place in two leading Chinese newspapers, the China Daily and the People's Daily, with a potential readership of more than one billion. It was about the corona virus and specifically - if only in passing - mentioned China as its place of origin. The first case in the world occurred in Wuhan in the province of Hubei in November 2019, where it was referred to as "a novel form of pneumonia". It was thought to have transited from a wild animal to humans and the Chinese authorities temporarily closed and disinfected a wildlife and wild meat market - called a 'wet market' - where they suspected the outbreak

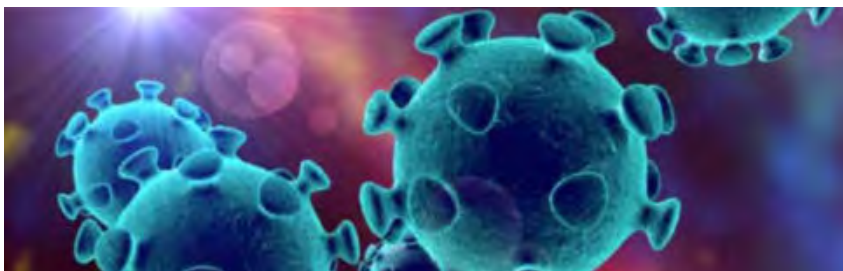
had begun. Since then, the Chinese have sought to play down the source of the outbreak, even accusing the United States military of bringing the virus to China. However, other agents of misinformation have got involved since then, especially Russia - the worst offender - and Iran, both of which have been spreading misinformation about the corona virus to cause confusion, to discredit the EU and, probably, to cause more deaths. But a bald statement that the virus originated in China was too much for Beijing. It insisted that the sentence be removed.

The controversy since then has been down to the fact that the EU ambassador to China backed down and acquiesced to Chinese demands without consulting Brussels or the other signatories to the article.

SARS-CoV-2, to give the virus its proper name, is the third severe coronavirus disease to appear this century. The others were the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome corona virus (SARS-CoV) and the Middle East Respiratory System corona virus (MERS-CoV). How it transferred from wild animals to humans



Wuhan's secretive Institute of Virology



is unknown. The viruses strongly resemble two types found in bats, but although consumers of bushmeat, as it's known, consume certain types of animals not normally seen as a foodstuff, nobody eats bats. Except cats, of course, but we don't eat cats, either, nor do we eat other predators by and large. SARS-CoV first emerged in 2002 in Guangdong, and was associated (rightly or wrongly) with the sale of civets at a local market.

Ten years later, MERS-CoV arrived. SARS-Cov-2, the cause of Covid-19, is very similar to the SARS-CoV virus, while MERS-CoV is only slightly different, although 35% of those who catch it die, despite some strange-sounding advice from the World Health Organisation (WHO): "Until more is understood about MERS-CoV, people with diabetes, renal failure, chronic lung disease, and immunocompromised persons are considered to be at high risk of severe disease from MERS-CoV infection. These people should avoid contact with camels, drinking raw camel milk or camel urine, or eating meat that has not been properly cooked." The WHO did not advise travel restrictions in connection with MERS-CoV. This disease, unlike SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2, did not originate in China, but has been experienced in Algeria, Austria, Bahrain, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Oman, Philippines, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, and Yemen. In this case, the intermediary species between bats, where it is thought to have started, and humans is the dromedary. As the WHO explains, "dromedary camels are the major reservoir host for MERS-CoV and an animal source of infection in humans. Strains of MERS-CoV that are identical to human strains have been isolated from dromedaries in several countries, including Egypt, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia." The worst outbreak was in Saudi Arabia, where 80% of the cases occurred. There seem to be no camels involved in the current pandemic.

SPIKING THE COPY

So here's the background to the current scandal over this bowdlerised article: the EU ambassador to China, Nicolas



Nicolas Chapuis, Ambassador of European Union to China

Chapuis along with the ambassadors of the twenty-seven EU member states, decided to mark the 45th anniversary of EU-China diplomatic relations by issuing what's called an "op-ed", that is an article designed to be published in a newspaper opposite its editorial column, hence "op-ed" - opposite the editorial.

The article contained a sentence that regretted the newly-arisen obstacles to what it called the "deepening EU-China cooperation", which was fine. However, the next sentence ran: "But the outbreak of the corona virus in China, and its subsequent spread to the rest of the world over the past three months, has meant that our pre-existing plans have been temporarily side-tracked as both the EU and China are fully mobilised to tackle what has now become a challenge of truly global proportions." It looks and sounds innocent enough, but not to the Chinese Communist Party. It is not acceptable to state that the Covid-19 outbreak started in China, even though it clearly did. Chinese social media sites have sought to blame the United States as

being the place where the virus originated and have also re-tweeted Iranian claims that the virus was "weaponised" in an American laboratory, which would be rather like inventing a machine gun that randomly shoots your own soldiers as well as the enemy and anyone else who happens to be nearby. But such is the appetite on social media for conspiracy theories that there is probably no notion too daft to be picked up and believed by someone. Some have even blamed the 5G smartphone network for causing and/or spreading the virus, which is scientifically ludicrous; some even attacked the masks that people need to avoid travel and to work from home. One has to suspect a hostile source for such errant and damaging nonsense. But it was not just the editing of the op-ed that has caused concern.

The incident came just two weeks after another scandal, first revealed in the New York Times, which alleged that a detailed report on scaremongering and disinformation had been watered down at the request of Beijing. In an article on 24 April, journalist Matt Apuzzo claimed that EU officials first delayed and then watered down a report on the spread of deliberate disinformation, even though, as he wrote, "The initial European Union report...was not particularly strident: a routine roundup of publicly available information and news reports." The report mentioned Beijing's attempts to deny the virus's origins, because the Chinese authorities are still trying to blame the United States for it. The report also mentioned China's criticism of France for being deliberately slow to respond to the pandemic as well as repeating the totally false claim that French politicians had used racial slurs against the head of the World Health Organisation. When the report was published, those references had been removed. At the risk of upsetting Beijing, I must repeat now clearly that France was no more bewildered and slow than most other countries (it acted more quickly than the UK, for instance) and that no French politician made racial comments about Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the WHO, at least not in public as China claimed and probably not at all. It was just a lot of lies and part of a complex global disinformation campaign, if the final EEAS report failed to say so. The fact is that some EU industries, including carmakers and farmers, rely on exports to China. Two-way trade between the EU and China was said to be worth €1.5-billion a day before the virus outbreak.



Xi Jinping shakes hands with Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing

DEADLY NONSENSE

A lot of disinformation is being circulated about the virus and the pandemic ; China is not the only culprit, nor the worst. In fact, the European External Action Service (EEAS) even has a web page debunking the more dangerous and outrageously untruthful stories, EUvsDisinfo.eu. You may think it's sad that some seek to make the current crisis worse for undefined political reasons. In Russia's case, it seems to be simple mischief ; sowing confusion in other countries and power blocs helps to reinforce Vladimir Putin's unassailable grip on his country's governance. Russia is undoubtedly the worst offender in the misinformation game. Its articles and statements sometimes read like a declaration of war, pushing to see how far the lies can go before it generates a response, like a bully picking on a bystander in a bar. The EU, of course, is not a military power so Putin probably feels safe. Moscow even funds a YouTube channel in German that claims the pandemic never happened. It had almost 900,000 views. What is surprising is Russia's complete faith that enough people will believe what is clearly palpable nonsense to make it worthwhile to keep pumping it out. Among the garbage being peddled as news by Russia's media outlets and trolls are claims that the whole pandemic is merely a front for a vaccination programme with DNA-altering properties to keep the public under control (currently scientifically impossible) ; that vaccine production is part of an agenda for a 'New World Order' (it sounds as if they got that idea from the three latest Star Wars movies, although I can't imagine Putin sees himself as the

Emperor Sheev Palpatine) ; that frequent handwashing is no protection (it is, because soap dissolves the lipid envelope of the virus) ; that zinc could kill the virus (it can't) ; that the pandemic is just a media scam (clearly not) ; and that Western media is hand-in-glove with the big pharmaceutical companies to boost their profits when China had already shown that the virus could be defeated with vitamin C (it can't). All of it is just wicked and dangerous nonsense but it's bound to find gullible takers in our highly-connected social media world of blogs, vlogs and Twitter feeds.

But China is also guilty of spreading disinformation. According to the EEAS "There is significant evidence of covert Chinese operation on social media. ProPublica uncovered a network on Twitter involved in a coordinated influence campaign with ties to the Chinese government." Britain's Daily Telegraph also found Chinese state media



Tiananmen Gate in Beijing

trying to circumvent the rules on political advertising on various social media platforms and buying advertising that praised China's handling of the pandemic while attacking the United States. According to the Daily Telegraph, "the ads are part of a worldwide propaganda campaign, coordinated across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and traditional media, attempting to depict China as a global leader in the fight against Covid-19 and drown out accusations that it made the crisis worse by trying to cover up its own outbreak." It's an attitude that might have pleased Mao Zedong, who wrote that "Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed." This is clearly politics, not war (at least, not in European eyes) but people are likely to die because of it, bloodshed or not.

The EEAS quotes the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) which analysed the spread of disinformation about the virus and concluded that "elements of China's diplomatic and state media messaging continue to demonstrate disinformation tactics more familiar to coordinated and persistent Russian state-sponsored disinformation. Chinese state efforts to contest the information domain are supported by coordinated, although not necessarily inauthentic, pro-China patriotic trolling." Journalists and activists not toeing the line have been arrested or expelled in all the states responsible for this outpouring of drivel.

We may laugh at the stories being peddled by the disinformation sources (mainly Russia and China but also Iran and Syria) but some people believe them, try out the various 'cures' they propose and think themselves safe. One social media site in Ukraine claims that drinking milk can help fight Covid-19 ; Aleksandr Lukashenko, President of Belarus suggests vodka as a cure, along with frequent saunas. At least his way would mean you died happy, I suppose. But this hostile propaganda has a very negative effect, especially when one in three people in Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK and the US claim to have seen "a great deal" of false or misleading information on social media and messaging apps, and when it is revealed that one in three British citizens actually believe that you can use vodka as a hand sanitiser. It would be a terrible waste of vodka ; soap and water works better and is cheaper. The BBC reported that in one province of Iran more people had died from drinking industrial-strength alcohol than from Covid-19, based on the false claim that it could protect you from the virus.



Chinese medical supplies to be sent to Italy

Even so, China's campaign seems to be working: by highlighting Beijing's "gift" of protective equipment to Europe, while pouring scorn on Europe's response to the virus, China has successfully swayed public opinion. Polls in some countries show citizens have more faith in China as 'a friend' and less faith in the EU. It's a propaganda war that China and Russia appear to be winning.

THE BLAME GAME

Once the New York Times article was published there was a flurry of outraged activity, including an on-line meeting by video link of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs committee. The EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, attended by computer link and faced some difficult questions, despite denying that the report on disinformation had been toned down.



© Wikipedia

German Christian Democrat MEP David McAllister

Committee chair and German Christian Democrat MEP David McAllister reminded members of a motion passed only two weeks earlier, condemning disinformation with regard to Covid-19. "The EU must become more resilient against crises in general," he said, "to stay

free of undue political and economic influence, such as from China and Russia, and that we must be ready to strategically communicate, to fight external disinformation, fake news and cyberattacks and to adapt continuously to the changing geopolitical landscape without ever compromising our core values." Bold words and clearly deeply felt, but some attending the meeting felt Borrell had let the side down. He denied the report had been weakened, and that he had been in any way involved. "I was not even aware of what was happening," he told MEPs, "I remember very well because the 24th was the day of my anniversary (birthday) and I was supposed to have a free afternoon, and on the afternoon of the 24, one of my friends from Spain told me 'have you heard the news that there is a problem or something with the publication of a survey of some external action communication related with disinformation? This was the first time I knew about it. Then I asked for information from my services and I was informed that in this time they were publishing the article and later, for sure, later that evening I had to be completely aware of what was happening.'" Borrell sounded unsure at that point and his usually near-perfect English faltered. He concluded by saying, however, that "I can assure you that I was not taking any pressure in order to create a publication that was biased due to any pressure from anyone." I have never heard the urbane and assured Borrell sound so flustered and unsure of himself. He assured MEPs, though, that he'd been unaware of the claim that his service had given in to Chinese pressure, if only because he had taken time off to celebrate his birthday. It did sound pretty weak, as excuses go. In fact it sounded as if he really had not been informed until it was too late to do anything about it and in any case, he didn't know what to do about it. Borrell firmly denied that the EEAS had caved in, though, even if not all members believed him.

Members of the committee demanded to see the report, both in its original form and also as published, to judge what changes may have been made. Borrell defended the EEAS and sought to refute the allegations of a cave-in. "I want to reaffirm that the European External Action Service recognises foreign disinformation and manipulation," he told the European Parliament committee. "It often targets our values, our interests and it is a critical challenge to our open and democratic societies. In accordance with the mandate of the European Council, our services initially focussed

on Russia's disinformation campaigns, coming from State and non-State actors. This has progressively been enlarged to cover other geographical areas, namely the Southern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. The coronavirus pandemic has now taken this work to a new global dimension." For most of us, the idea of deliberately making today's unpleasant circumstances worse is virtually unthinkable. Borrell explained the motivation for the state and non-state actors engaged in the disinformation campaign, which he called an "infodemic", a word we shall be hearing more of, no doubt: "First, there is a trend to portray Western democracies as weak, divided and unable to cope with the challenge, while those promoting such narratives try to present themselves as the most efficient and caring actors. Second, disinformation and harmful narratives pose a severe potential risk to our citizens, including to their health and to their trust in public institutions. Let me be blunt – disinformation can kill."



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MEP Mick Wallace of the United Left Group

A few came to Borrell's defence, among them, oddly, and possibly unintentionally, Irish MEP Mick Wallace of the United Left group, who was one of the few to be present in person and whose argument was hardly whole-hearted, being based more on the premise that Borrell was no worse than anyone else. "I'm not impressed with the report," he said, "I find there are no serious links or sources for a lot of what they're claiming and I find the report guilty of what it accuses others of: spreading disinformation. I mean, let's tell the truth. Do Europeans? Do Americans? Do Chinese? Do Russians? They all engage in spin and propaganda. Honestly, I'd be a bit concerned at the

direction Europe is going at the moment in its approach to China.” Indeed, Wallace argues, China comes out of the whole affair looking relatively good. “China acted swiftly to identify the mysterious virus,” he reminded MEPs, “informed the WHO and broke the chain of infection and there is no evidence of any suppression, and shouldn’t mature states have a basic requirement of evidence against others before making public accusations?” Fair enough, although Chinese propaganda is a fact of life, not a fantasy, and China’s allegations about France were simple fiction. But Wallace wasn’t finished. “How can this report talk about disinformation and not talk about Donald Trump, Boris Johnson ; I mean why aren’t we straight about these things? There’s too much racist rhetoric about China at the moment and a lot of it is disconnected from reality.” He said such activities are not in Europe’s long term interests. In any case, it was clear that not all those who had listened to Borrell defending the EEAS were convinced. Even the German Green MEP Reinhard Butikofer, who praised the report for being “useful” and “fair”, advised Borrell “please tell your press people not to lie to the media”.



Peter Stano Chief spokesperson for the EEAS

The chief spokesperson for the EEAS is Peter Stano, who, on the 28 April, told a media briefing at the European Commission: “It is the EEAS that has the mandate to counter disinformation. One of the main tasks is to monitor and document the cases of disinformation, and the aim here is to raise awareness.” He told journalists that it’s not just a case of calling out obvious falsehoods but also the people responsible for them “showing we know what you are doing, we know how you are doing it, so we raise awareness both for the audiences, for the public, to be aware that this is going on, this is circulating around, also showing the methods, the platforms, the outlets,

how it’s being spread.” The message, he said, is not just for the media, nor even for the public ; it’s also a message to the perpetrators: “we know what you are doing, you who are engaged in spreading disinformation.” In other words, we know, they know, we know they know, and they know we know they know, but that doesn’t seem to deter them much.

CRITICISM IS A ONE-WAY STREET

The originators of disinformation are remarkably thin-skinned when it comes to criticism of themselves, however. Censoring the ‘op-ed’ item has led for calls for the EU ambassador to China, Nicolas Chapuis, to resign and he has been given a public dressing down for his actions, although it’s hard to see what his other options were. But it’s not so much what he did as the fact that he didn’t consult with Brussels and his fellow-ambassadors before doing so. The chain of events was explained to journalists at a European Commission briefing on May 7 by the foreign affairs spokesperson, Virginie Battu-Henriksson. “The EU delegation to China was informed that the publication could only take place in the China Daily and in the Chinese language version with the agreement of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” she said. “The EU delegation to China made known its concerns to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China in no uncertain terms, both on the protest and on the request to remove the sentence that relates to the origin and spread of the corona virus. This request was made to allow publication and we made very clear that we had serious concerns about it.” It was clear that the journalists, most of them regular and experienced followers of EU affairs, were not happy, but Battu-Henriksson tried to reassure them. “The EU continues to advocate for a free press, and other human rights, actually, and freedoms, including voicing our views to our Chinese counterparts, and at all levels,” she said. “In this particular case, the EU delegation decided nevertheless to proceed with the publication of the op-ed with considerable reluctance, as it considered it important to communicate on very key messages on EU priority policies ; just to name a few, climate change and sustainability, human rights, multilateralism, and the global response to the corona virus. As I said, the full unedited op-ed was published on the EU delegation’s website and, actually, on several EU member states’ websites. It was also used on social media channels and distributed to Chinese media outlets, some of whom used it.”

The backlash was bound to hit Borrell and his team, facing onto the Rondpoint Schuman in Brussels. It’s his department, as spokesperson Peter Stano reminded journalists. “It’s the EEAS, actually, that has the mandate to counter in the field of disinformation,” he said. “One of the main tasks is to monitor, to document and to publish cases of disinformation, and the aim here is to raise awareness.” It could be argued that Chapuis was just doing that ; even getting most of the article into print in China was worth the effort. He is seen in EU circles as an expert in Chinese affairs and seems to have felt he’d got the best result he could, under the circumstances. The disinformation campaigns of China, Russia and others have become an issue of national security and NATO has become involved in countering them. Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg is concerned about the potential damage the lies can cause. “We have seen state and non-state actors try to take advantage of the pandemic to try to spread false and harmful narratives, and to try to divide us,” he warned, “so allies need to work closely together to identify, to monitor and to expose these efforts. An open and transparent press is the best bulwark against disinformation and propaganda.” An open and transparent press would seem to be absent from the countries responsible for distributing the disinformation, although China is very active in lobbying.



Former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin

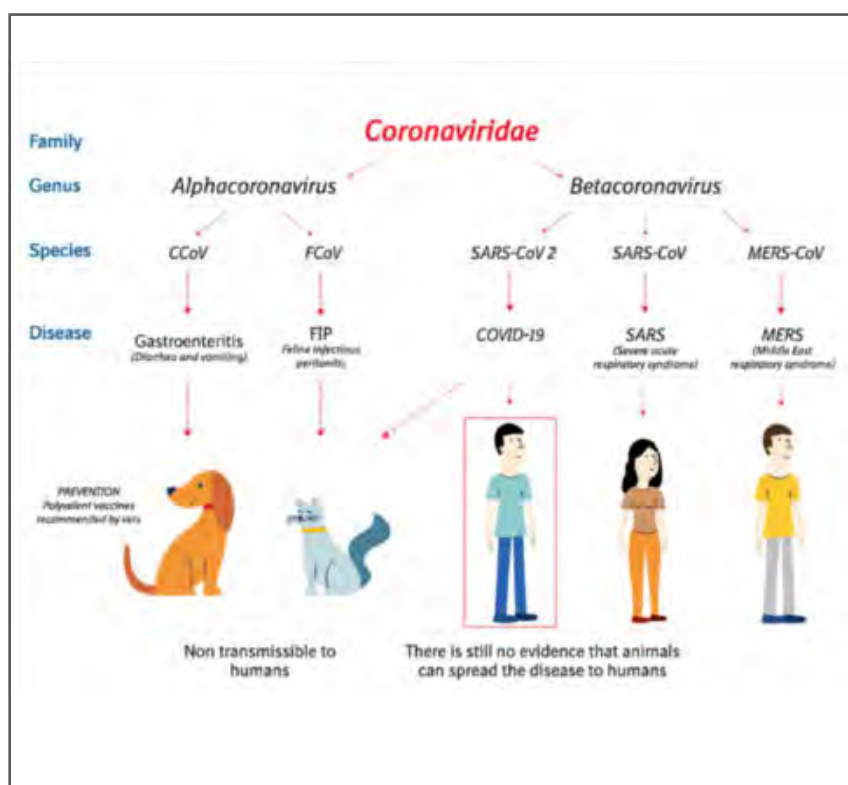
The Fondation France Chine, for example, headed by former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, has offices in Paris and Shanghai, while Chinese views are being put across to legislators by European experts, to the annoyance of the campaign group, Corporate European Observatory. In a recent press release, it wrote that “lobbying in Europe on behalf of this

authoritarian regime appears to be largely taking place under the radar. While the public clearly has a right to know what paid lobbyists of all stripes - including those working on behalf of non-EU member state governments - are up to, and how they might be influencing our politicians and our futures, we continue to be denied that right by the EU's own failure of lobby transparency rules."

HISTORICAL TRUTH, HISTORICAL FABLE

China has been no stranger to fabrication and falsehood throughout its long history. Even the works of the great scholar Confucius have been subjected to some enhancement, according to John Keay in his fascinating book, 'China - a History'. Writing of works that may or may not have been the work of Kong Qiu, as he was more properly known, Keay notes that "their compilation in the forms that survive today resulted from several 'layers' of scholarship, not to mention dollops of blatant fabrication, spread over many centuries." Enhancing the historical records of heroes real or imagined is a pastime that was common in Europe, too ; who can forget Charlemagne's messenger, Roland, famed in the oldest surviving example of French literature, the Song of Roland, the almost certainly fictional King Arthur and Robin Hood and the Hungarian hero who impaled people and was turned by fiction into a vampire, Vlad Dracul? Some existed, some didn't, but many people could tell you stories about them, most of them dreadfully exaggerated and with only the most tentative link to truth. It's a worrying thought that long after the Covid-19 epidemic is over, some people may be able to relate stories about it that owe more the China's Foreign Affairs Ministry or Russia's troll factories than to actual facts. How many of the falsehoods will live on in public beliefs?

Let's take a look at the reality, not as seen through the deliberately screwed up view of hostile propagandists but according to the science. Corona viruses in their more recent and dangerous forms are explained in detail in the Journal of Clinical Microbiology. "The viruses SARS-CoV (betacoronavirus), 229E (alphacoronavirus), HKU1 (betacoronavirus), NL63 (alphacoronavirus), OC43 (betacoronavirus), and MERS-CoV (betacoronavirus) can all cause infections in humans.



However, betacoronaviruses are the most important group because they comprise the most highly pathogenic viruses against humans, including SARS-CoV-2, MERS-CoV, and SARS-CoV. The highly pathogenic MERS and SARS coronaviruses originated in bats, however the origin of the newly emerged SARS-CoV-2 remains debatable. Investigations have revealed that the SARS-CoV strains detected in market civets were transmitted from horseshoe bats. These viruses were found to be phylogenetically related to SARS-CoV in bats from China, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Africa. In addition, the genome sequences of SARS-CoV strains isolated from humans were highly similar to those in bats." Of course, China and the United States may well go on blaming each other for the virus but it seems more likely that we should blame bats, most especially members of the rhinolophidae family, the horseshoe bats. Even so, no-one seems to have much idea of how a bat virus crossed over into humans. There has to have been an intermediary species that acted unconsciously as the vector but its identity remains a mystery.

Before this pandemic comes to an end we can expect lots of fabrications and lies. Most people in Europe see the disease as a reason to work more closely together (subject to 'social distancing', I suppose) and to cooperate to find a way through it. Others, especially Russia, China, Syria

and Iran but there are more players in this strange game, see it as an opportunity to cause confusion, unhappiness and death in countries they don't care about or against which they hold a grudge. Just as some countries or regions are easing restrictions on travel, work and exercise, and as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) is warning Europe to brace itself for a second wave of infections, expect more scare stories, more false 'cures', more anti-government propaganda, anti-European fake news and so on. Even when the fight against the virus is done, the spreaders of false stories will still be at work and cleaning up after them could take years. As the 19th century English preacher C.H. Spurgeon put it: "If you want truth to go round the world you must hire an express train to pull it ; but if you want a lie to go round the world it will fly ; it is as light as a feather, and a breath will carry it. It is well said in the old proverb. 'a lie will go around the world while truth is pulling its boots on.'" It's an old saying also repeated by the late fantasy writer, Terry Pratchett, in a book called 'The Truth', which is about a newspaper's attempt to expose a conspiracy to change a state in favour of the most powerful. It's funny how fact and fiction can have so much in common, isn't it?

T. Kingsley Brooks



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Vaxholm Fortress, Stockholm archipelago, Sweden

STEFAN LÖFVEN

The Nordic Model endures

In 1766, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce a constitutional law to abolish censorship. To commemorate this event, the Swedish Tourist Association launched what became known as the 'Swedish Number' in April 2016. This was a telephone number – now discontinued – that connected callers from all over the world to random Swedes, anywhere in Sweden to talk about anything they wanted...anything at all.

Using Swedish citizens as ambassadors to answer the calls, the Swedish Tourist Association wanted to introduce citizens

of the world to the true culture, nature and mindset of Sweden and its people.

To create 'The Swedish Number', the Swedish Tourist Association partnered with Intelcom, a leading provider of contact solutions, to create one of the largest switchboards in the world that supported incoming phone calls 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Their cloud-based contact centre was used to register ambassadors and connect all calls. The switchboard was designed to randomly choose one of the Swedish ambassadors for each call.

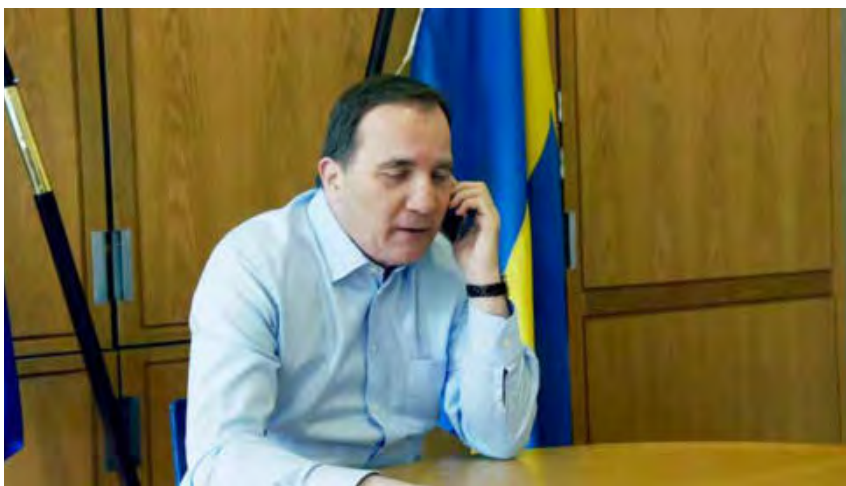
In troubled times, many countries try to limit communication between people, but Sweden did just the opposite. So instead, it became the first country in the world with its own phone number which gave Swedes the opportunity to answer the calls, express themselves and share their views on any subject they chose.

Even the Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven took calls for 'The Swedish Number' on April 14, 2016 and spoke to a number of - sometimes - bewildered citizens from around the world.

This level of openness and personal freedom is hard to come by in the world today and countries that do enjoy them are of course, keen to preserve them.

Together with economic and social policies, as well as cultural practices, Sweden is firmly rooted in what is known as the 'Nordic Model of social democracy', an object of fascination and almost a sort of bellwether for the health of social democratic politics around the world.





Prime Minister of Sweden Stefan Löfven answering the Swedish Number

A PANDEMIC STRIKES

Sweden caused a global stir and came under scrutiny with its controversial approach to fighting Covid-19. Instead of tight lockdowns, Swedish authorities encouraged citizens to use common sense, work from home if possible, and not gather in crowds over 50. Primary schools stayed open, as were bars and restaurants, with images showing people enjoying drinks and crowding streets.

According to health authorities, the aim was to slow the pace of the virus. Sweden, which has a population of about 10 million, has in this manner avoided overwhelming its health care system so far. But instead of the slow burn among healthy people that the Swedish leadership had wanted, the virus has ripped through the nation's nursing homes.

Other European nations expressed concern about Sweden's relatively "soft approach" to fighting the coronavirus but Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, during a press conference in mid-May, defended his country's strategy, pushing back on the notion Sweden has taken a "business as usual" attitude toward the pandemic.

"Life is not carrying on as normal in Sweden," he said. "Many people are staying at home, which has had a positive effect on limiting the spread of the virus. Of course, we are painfully aware that too many people have lost their lives due to COVID-19."

He did acknowledge Sweden's estimated 3,582 deaths, which was far higher, per capita, than its Scandinavian neighbours Finland, Norway and Denmark, who all took a stricter approach.

But he was also quick to point out that Sweden is constitutionally different from many other democracies.



Stefan Löfven

Critics who deplore Sweden's so-called lax approach to Covid-19 do not seem to understand that this approach is to a great extent determined by fundamental constitutional constraints. By law and by tradition, Swedish politicians cannot tell the various government agencies what to do, and these agencies count relatively few political appointees among their staff.

There is a famous quote from US President Dwight Eisenhower in 1960 where he said: *'Sweden exemplifies paternalistic socialism which gives rise to high rates of suicide and drunkenness, and a lack of ambition is discernable on all sides !'*



Stockholm Central station

However, Stefan Löfven, the 33rd Prime Minister of Sweden quite clearly contradicts that particular image.

BEGINNINGS

Stefan Löfven was born on 21 July 1957 in Aspudden, a southern suburb of Stockholm. His father had already died and his mother, unable to raise two children on her own without a sufficient income, placed Stefan in an orphanage when he was 10 months old. Sometime later, he was taken into the care of foster parents who resided in the town of Sollefteå, in mid-northeast Sweden.

At the time of his adoption, it had been agreed that his birth mother would regain custody of him when she was able to. However, she never came to take him back.



Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and his spouse Ulla Löfven

His foster father, Ture Melander was a lumberjack and later a factory worker, while his foster mother, Iris Melander, was employed as an in-home caregiver. And it was only after meeting Ulf, his long-

lost brother, that the young Stefan found out his real name of Löfven.

He began his schooling in Sollefteå and later attended the local High School before embarking on a 48-week welding course at a career training centre in Kramfors.

Despite the financial difficulties he faced, he enrolled at Umeå University, in northeastern Sweden and began a course in social science; however, he dropped out after 18 months and went back to study various trade union courses.

THE LURE OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

In 1967, Löfven was drafted into the Swedish Armed Forces for his mandatory military service. He was assigned to the Swedish Air Force and served as a munitions systems specialist until 1977. On his return to civilian life, he had to find a job and it was in the northern port city of Örnsköldsvik that he had the opportunity of putting to the test his knowledge and skill as a welder with military vehicles manufacturers, Hägglunds & Soner.

It was also during this period that he met his future wife, Ulla Margareta who was active as a representative for the local branch of a trade union.



Stefan Löfven and wife

A leader by nature, with a keen sense of social justice, he soon became a favourite among his group of workers who elected him as their representative in the union.

With his leadership qualities, it was only natural that he went on to hold a succession of posts in the Swedish Metalworker's Union.

He rose through the ranks to become a member of its national council. He was



Olof Palme

elected deputy member of its executive board (1989–95), its vice president (2002–05), and ultimately the president (2006–14) of IF Metall, the union formed through the merger of the Swedish Metalworkers' Union and the Swedish Industrial Union.

But Stefan Löfven's political career began in earnest when, with the strong support from union members, he was appointed as an executive member of the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP). Founded in 1889, the SAP is the oldest political party in Sweden and has led successive governments for most of the period since 1932.

In fact, Löfven's admiration for this party goes back a long way. At the age of thirteen, he became a member of the Youth League of the party and was active in various capacities throughout his teens. Ultimately, Löfven's involvement and subsequent total immersion in party politics owed very much to the inspiration provided by the revered Social Democratic Prime Minister, Olof Palme who was assassinated in Stockholm in 1986.

The major breakthrough for Stefan Löfven came in January 2012. Following a damaging article published by a Swedish newspaper in 2011, claiming mismanagement of public funds, the then leader of the Social Democratic Party, Håkan Juholt handed in his resignation.

The executive board of the Social Democratic Party unanimously elected Stefan Löfven as its leader in an internal ballot. It was in April 2013, that he was officially confirmed as the new leader at the party's annual congress. What's more, following this move, Löfven also became the leader of the opposition in the Swedish Parliament – the Riksdag – despite the fact that at the time, he did not have a seat.

BUMPY RIDE TO THE TOP

Henceforth, the face of the Social Democrats would be that of its leader, Stefan Löfven who led them into the 2014 Swedish general election, as well as those for the European Parliament.

Despite losing one seat, the Social Democrats retained their position as Sweden's largest party in the EU parliament.

However, the Swedish general election resulted in a hung parliament. Although the party succeeded in ousting the centre-right government of Prime Minister Frederik Reinfeldt which had ruled since 2006, the overall result was far from satisfactory.



Fredrik Reinfeldt former Swedish Prime Minister

Having won some 31% of the vote, the Social Democrats announced that they would be forming a minority government with the Green Party, under the premiership of Stefan Löfven who was duly elected to the post of Prime Minister in October of that year.



Swedish National Assembly

Being a pragmatist and recognising the relative weakness of the coalition in power, Löfven announced that he wanted a bipartisan agreement between the government and Alliance opposition parties based on cooperation and not on conflict. He promptly announced his government's top priorities: a reduction in unemployment, improvements to the education system and an even more efficient social security and pensions infrastructure.

The newly-formed Swedish government faced a severe crisis soon after taking office and all but fell in December 2014. Parliament rejected the proposed budget and Löfven was forced to call for snap elections the following March. But he was fully aware that this would result in important gains for the right and especially far-right parties. So, putting all his negotiating talents to use, he succeeded in striking a deal with the opposition Alliance which, at the time, was led by the Moderate Party.

It was agreed that the government would remain in power on condition that it accepted the budget proposed by the opposition. Plans for the snap election were scrapped as both the government and the opposition Alliance worked hard to keep the far-right and anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats (SD) on the sidelines.

THE MIGRANT CRISIS

In 2015, Europe witnessed the arrival of some one million refugees, fleeing war zones and the political turmoil in the Middle East and Africa. Due largely to the country's generous welfare system and its open society, Sweden experienced the largest per capita influx for any country as over 160,000 migrants applied for asylum, overwhelming its social service facilities.



Stefan Löfven, Chairman of the Social Democratic Worker's Party, speaks in Vasa Park in Stockholm on 25 August 2013

This crisis, coupled with the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris that resulted in the deaths of over 130 people incited the far-right Sweden Democrats to not only accuse the migrants of depleting the welfare system but also to exploit the fear in the population that Islamist terrorists were entering Sweden, posing as refugees.

The government had no choice but to begin tightening Sweden's open borders and to harden its policies on immigration. However, even after denying refugee status to around 80,000 asylum seekers, Löfven's government continued to advocate for

his party's and his country's traditional support for an inclusive social welfare programme.

Despite these very serious challenges, the Swedish government forged ahead. Throughout Löfven's premiership, the economy experienced an annual growth of over 2% in GDP, inflation remained low and the unemployment rate fell from 8.0% in 2014 to 6.3% in 2018. But the downside was the increase in violent crime. Although much of it was thought to be gang-related, the far-right Sweden Democrats accused asylum seekers and blamed the government for its lax immigration policies.

The 2018 general election was fast approaching, and the Sweden Democrats were already looking forward to a populist anti-immigration backlash that would put them firmly in the role of kingmakers in parliament. But things didn't quite work out the way they wanted them to. All the parties that made up the government coalition refused any alliance with the Sweden Democrats whom Löfven described as: 'A neo-fascist, single-issue party which respects neither people's differences nor Sweden's democratic institutions.'

However, although Löfven's Social Democrats came first at the close of the polls, their 28.5% share of the vote proved one of the party's worst performances to date. In fact, the government coalition as a whole managed only about 40% of the vote; clearly an insufficient figure to establish majority rule.

With two weeks remaining in the current government term, Löfven rejected the opposition's call for his resignation. This led to a vote of confidence towards the end of September 2018 which he lost. This set the stage for long, drawn-out negotiations to determine who would govern Sweden.

Sweden had to make do with a caretaker government and Prime Minister until



Stefan Löfven on the way to the Social Democratic Party Headquarters



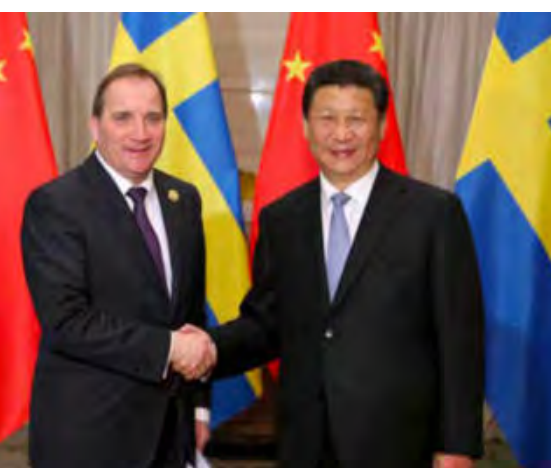
A demonstration against the Sweden Democrats in October 2010

finally, in January 2019, an agreement was reached between Löfven's Social Democrats, the Greens, the Liberals and the Centre Party. The Left Party agreed to abstain from voting against Löfven. This agreement resulted in the reinstallation of the minority coalition government of the Social Democrats and the Green Party which was officially sworn in on 21 January 2019.

NORDIC MODEL IN ACTION

Globalisation has been hotly debated in the world for quite a while now. Some reject it for its potential negative impacts, but many see globalisation as a force that should be embraced, with potential benefits for jobs, wages, social security, trade and critical global issues like climate change.

Among EU leaders, Stefan Löfven has probably a unique perspective on working people's concerns, having started his career as a welder on the factory floor, rather than gliding into politics with a degree from an elite university or a top law firm.



President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Stefan Löfven of Sweden

Unsurprisingly, he is an ardent advocate of this view, which corresponds almost exactly to the beliefs and principles of what has become known world-wide as the Nordic Model.

The Nordic model is essentially a method of governance adopted by what are known as the Nordic countries in Europe: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. Naturally, the outcomes are not identical in all these countries but generally speaking, it has yielded good results in terms of growth, employment and competitiveness, but also gender equality, living conditions and open-mindedness.

In a speech at New York University in 2014, Stefan Löfven said: 'Sweden has made a moral choice: to give every individual the chance to succeed in life. We will create a common society, which means that our common support must be the strongest when the individual needs it the most... this is perhaps the most crucial and basic explanation of the Nordic model.'

Since 2014 and the premiership of Stefan Löfven, the Swedish government is made up of an equal number of men and women. This aimed to put into focus the concept of gender equality both at home and abroad. It is in fact, the world's first feminist government. The policy of gender equality and of a feminist government aims at providing conditions for men and women to develop without obstacles, prejudices and stereotypes.

But of course, the main pillars of this model remain firstly, an economic policy focused on full employment ; secondly, a universal and generous welfare system and thirdly, a well- organised labour market.

MAKING HEADWAY IN FOREIGN POLICY

From the outset, in the area of foreign policy, Stefan Löfven has made moves that some have qualified as courageous and others as reckless.

As far back as October 2014 on the day of his inauguration as Prime Minister and in his Policy Statement to the Swedish Parliament, he announced that his government would officially recognise the State of Palestine.

This decision which was made by Löfven's government without formally consulting its allies heralded a wider policy shift that had at its heart the aim of asserting a new diplomatic weight around the world. The speed of their post-election announcement surprised a number of countries, including of course Israel.

Until then and under a centre right government, Sweden had been close



President Donald J. Trump and Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven participate in a joint press conference in the East Room at the White House, in 2018

to Washington, active in Western military operations and a vocal proponent of EU market reform. In making it the first major European country to recognise the Palestinian state, Sweden's new centre left government looked like it was suggesting a change of direction on several of those fronts.

In 2014, shortly after Stefan Löfven's government began work, Sweden became the first country in the world to formulate and pursue a feminist foreign policy. This policy which was launched by the then Swedish Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström was hailed by some as progressive and dismissed by others as provocative.

Feminist foreign policy is based on the notion that more women means more peace ; that it's a matter of involving and engaging women in peace processes and that this is good for both peace and security in every country.

At a meeting at the UN Security Council in 2017, Wallström said: "Throughout the world, women are neglected in terms of resources, representation and rights. This is the simple reason why we are pursuing a feminist foreign policy - with full force, around the world."



Prime Minister of Sweden Stefan Löfven and French President Emmanuel Macron



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden Margot Wallström the day after the terrorist attack in Stockholm in April 2017

The policies in question include among other initiatives, efforts to educate women in Saudi Arabia and Iran – not without controversy – to enhance their economic empowerment, initiating a public debate in Rwanda about the role of fathers, working to stop female genital mutilation, and funding international projects in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Stefan Löfven himself has been at the forefront of sustained initiatives in the field of Swedish foreign policy, with visits to many countries on all continents in view of contributing to the creation of peace and security through preventive measures, peace diplomacy and stable bilateral relations. The Swedish government is also developing partnerships on a broad front – in the EU, the Nordic and Baltic regions, the UN and the OSCE as well as NATO and other partners.

As far as NATO is concerned, Stefan Löfven has stated that Sweden will not apply for NATO membership. In a recent interview, he said: *“This is not a smart thing to do. We are convinced that we won’t have a safer Europe if you move the frontiers of NATO to touch those of Russia. Sweden and Finland today act as buffer zones and it is safer for Sweden and Finland, as well as for Europe.”*

So, Sweden will continue its policy of military non-alignment but will remain an active partner of NATO in a number of important cooperation programmes worldwide.

Sweden is also actively pursuing concrete initiatives for global nuclear disarmament. In December 2019, in what was the first ever address by a Swedish leader to the South Korean parliament Stefan Löfven vowed to continue cooperative efforts to achieve lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. Pointing to the North Korean nuclear

issue, he highlighted the need for joint efforts to tackle the problem and promised such efforts from the Swedish government.

In his push towards more international cooperation, Löfven visited Iran in 2017 and held talks with Ali Khamenei in view of improving economic relations.

He also travelled to India, where he led a large delegation to the Mumbai Summit in 2016, before welcoming Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Stockholm in 2018. The two leaders signed agreements to strengthen defence and security cooperation and held talks to chart out a future roadmap of cooperation in sectors such as trade and investment, science and technology, clean energy and smart cities.

Sweden and the United States have strong economic ties with the US as the third largest Swedish export trade partner. American companies are the most represented foreign companies in Sweden.

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) which is under negotiation between the EU and the United States is a deal that aims to promote trade and economic growth and it is expected to be the biggest trade agreement ever negotiated.

For Löfven, this deal is extremely important for Sweden but he has insisted that some sort of mechanism be implemented that will not be detrimental to social conditions and would guarantee human rights.

The next general elections in Sweden are due to be held in September 2022 and Stefan Löfven and his Social Democrats will again confront their old political rivals.

But with each passing year and the profound transformation of Swedish society in the last ten years, it has become slightly more difficult to predict the exact nature of the future governance of that country.



President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Hassan Rouhani and Prime Minister of Sweden Stefan Löfven

Sweden isn't by any measure the most extreme example of an anti-immigrant backlash. Across Europe, the United States, Russia and the rest of the world, there are much more alarming nationalist and nativist uprisings.

But when even a small minority in one of the most welcoming and tolerant societies starts tapping into an undercurrent of resentment and fear of the 'other', some suggest it can trigger a tectonic shift with unpredictable consequences that can take generations to restore.

Hossein Sadre



Stefan Löfven during a “summer speech” in Stockholm



TURN ON, TUNE IN, DROP OUT (OF SIGHT)

The darknet gains drug seekers during the pandemic

For Timothy Leary, the acid-fuelled revolution whose prophet he had been didn't really happen. President Richard Nixon called him "the most dangerous man in America", but he never was. Later in life, he claimed that the "drop out" message just meant "drop out of conformity" ; in other words, be different. But when he spoke at the Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park in 1967, drop out meant what everyone thought it meant, and he made that very clear: "Turn on, tune in, drop out. I mean drop out of high school, drop out of college, drop out of graduate school." Most of those who dropped out during the flower-power hippy era, even at Leary's University of California Berkeley college, where he gained his PhD (without having dropped out, of course), dropped back in again when faced with the prospect of having to earn a living. Sticking flowers in your hair, popping acid tabs and having unrestrained sex is all very well and endlessly amusing but eventually playtime has to come to an end for all of us. Leary died at his home in Beverly Hills in 1996 at the age of 75, not exactly forgotten but not regarded as very important. Among those who took his

advice and dropped out before sitting their degrees, some did quite well: Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg, for instance. But another drop-out, Steve Wozniak, came back and finished his degree after co-founding Apple. Many of the UC Berkeley alumni at that time of protests against the Vietnam War saw Leary and his slogan as a distraction from politics and therefore unwelcome. As the Cal Alumni magazine, California, puts it: "At Berkeley, politics still matter. Timothy Leary not so much."

We can only speculate on what he would have made of the lockdown and the sudden upsurge in drug usage that has resulted from it. He may not have been surprised, though, that much of the interest is coming from people who were young in the hippy era, and who may have adopted his slogan as the leitmotif of their youth. But time moves inexorably on. You can almost imagine groups of elderly men rushing around on their mobility scooters in packs ; Hell's Granddads. And Hell's Grannies, too, of course, all with their inevitable slogan, borrowed from Faron Young's first number one country-and-western hit in 1955, Live Fast, Love Hard, Die

Young, or in the case of our wild, drug addled, sex-obsessed granddads and grannies, 'Live Fast, Love If You Can Still Manage It, Die as Late and You Can Get Away With'. Even so, although old folks may be keen to cling to life, they're not averse to taking chances. After all, they've got less to lose than the young. I know it's been said that if you remember the hippy era 60s you probably weren't there, but even so they can cherish what memories remain unscrambled by whatever they took at the time. They are not the main consumers, however.

According to a research brief by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Covid-19



Two girls smoking pot during an outing in Cedar Woods, Texas in May 1973

© Wikimedia

pandemic and the resulting lockdown has had a profound effect on the market in illicit drugs. “Many countries across all regions have reported an overall shortage of numerous types of drugs at the retail level, as well as increases in prices, reductions in purity and that drug users have consequently been switching substance (for example, from heroin to synthetic opioids) and/or increasingly accessing drug treatment. Some countries in the Balkans and in the Middle East, where measures are not so strict during the day, have, however, reported less disruption. The overall impact on bulk supply is reportedly more heterogenous, both across drugs and across countries.” So, faced with long periods of isolation, many have upped their consumption of alcohol, but others have been looking to recreational drugs to ease the boredom, with the real change being in the choice of drug.

I’LL GO NO MORE A MARKETING

In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, drug dealers have been facing a hard time. With everyone supposed to stay at home, those standing around on street corners waiting for customers, or else driving round and round pre-set routes, stand out and the police have been arresting them in droves. The big city dealers had built networks in rural or small industrial towns, often using very young teenagers as their on-street dealers, away from the risks of the big city, and pressured into doing the dealing. They called the system ‘county lines’ and there are signs that they’re continuing, with young people still being forced by their gangster bosses to market their goods, even though the police, on the lookout for lockdown rebels, have been spotting and picking

them up easily because their customers are in lockdown, too. You will not be surprised that some drugs dealers are taking advantage of the coronavirus to smuggle their products, as reported by the UK’s Home Office in April: “£1-million (€1.12-million) of cocaine that was hidden in a box of face masks was seized by experienced officers at the Channel Tunnel yesterday.”

Even so, the price of party drugs, like cocaine, has fallen in some places, with some street dealers stooping to giving two-for-the-price-of one offers, or even buy-one-get-one-free, referred to in the UK as BOGOFs. The loss of income for some people as a result of the lockdown is encouraging some to turn to illicit ways of earning a living, such as trading in narcotics, the UNODC fears.

However, according to the on-line site Dazed, many users are still finding supplies easy to obtain. An article on the Dazed website quotes a 26-year-old health worker: “I still get the same texts every Friday from the same people,” he explains to the site, “Many have reduced their hours slightly, although one guy is still keen to advertise his 24-hour service.” Dazed reports that not much has changed in the illicit drugs trade, despite the coronavirus crisis. “I still hop into the passenger seat,” Thomas tells Dazed. “It didn’t even cross my mind to get in the back for social distancing, and (my dealer) didn’t seem to care.” Thomas does however now wash his hands after the deal, and cleans the baggies with hand sanitiser. That’s reassuring. But for many, buying coke has begun to seem pointless. After all, what’s the use of buying party drugs if there are no parties?

But cannabis, now, that’s different. Demand has risen, even if the market is

largely by-passing street corner dealers. Dazed reports that the market for it has changed, too, quoting a 25-year-old from Cardiff, who says her weed use has definitely increased during lockdown “for two reasons”. She explains that it’s in part because of “boredom and having very little else to do”, as well as not knowing “how easy it will be to get some whenever I like, or how long this lockdown is going to go on for”, leading her to pick up more than she would usually need.



For many people, though, especially the older customers who would feel uneasy meeting a drug dealer, even if they knew how to get in touch with one, the answer is the darknet. It’s a concern that has been studied by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), which reports: “The cannabis market is a large one and many regular cannabis users may have decided to stock up, anticipating market disruption during the lockdown period. To some extent, this is observed in the data where an increase in online trade via darknet markets, driven largely by cannabis products, can be seen in February and March.” The UNODC says there are no signs of cannabis supplies drying up while at the same time demand is rising from bored adults in lockdown. It does fear, however, that if demand stays high after the pandemic recedes, it could lead to more trafficking in future.

OUT OF SITE, OUT OF THEIR HEADS

The report looks at three of the largest darknet markets, Agartha, Cannazon (which specialises in cannabis and cannabis products) and Versus. The darknet, as if you didn’t know, is a network that exists within the internet but which you need special software or authorisation to access. It was



Cash and drugs seized from dealers who used food delivery services



An abandoned squat during the coronavirus confinement

originally set up to allow untraceable communication without any form of oversight or control but is also much used by criminals and by whistleblowers wanting to keep their anonymity when contacting the media. According to the EMCDDA report, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increase in activity levels over the first three months of 2020, mainly for cannabis.

“The data on cannabis is suggestive of two competing but related drivers – those buying volumes of cannabis for physical resale have reduced their activities anticipating resale may be more difficult due to social distancing measures. At the same time, established buyers or possibly new buyers who are seeking cannabis for personal use or for use among their social network are increasing their activities on the market.” The report says that, surprisingly, cannabis prices seem to be decreasing for large volume purchases but remaining fairly stable for more normal amounts.

The EMCDDA is worried that there have been increased referrals to encrypted messenger services, which would make it more difficult to monitor what’s happening. It also reports the decline in demand for the types of drugs most used at large social events, presumably because there aren’t any. But this is not small-scale stuff, the report says. “The estimated value of cannabis products sold via Cannazon, a market devoted to cannabis products, reached approximately €4.3-million between January and March 2020, representing a volume of 1.6 metric tonnes.” The report says that some vendors seem to be trying to reassure their customers by telling them that they will maintain a “business as usual” attitude, while for the party drugs they’re trying to stimulate demand through a variety of sales techniques more familiar from

grocery sales, such as discounts and lower ‘minimum order’ quantities.

I must admit I was surprised to discover that the darknet drug sellers get reviews from their customers. It gives a whole new meaning to the expression “trip” advisor. The EBCDDA report looked at the period 1 January to 31 March, so admits that things may have changed, but its authors mainly examined the reviews, as well as the level of activity. “Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered, including vendor listings/posts, buyers’ feedback reports of sales (henceforth called reviews) and posts on forum threads. The darknet markets crawled (to access quantitative and qualitative data) were Agartha, Cannazon and Versus. A total of 50,475 reviews from across the three markets were accessed (Agartha: n=10,126 ; Cannazon: n=37,433 ; Versus: n=2,916). Additional qualitative data were accessed, primarily from discussion forums, including dread, hidden answers, the hub 3-forum, envoy forum, didw-forum, club2crd-forum, avengers2-forum, flug-forum ; over 850 posts were accessed on these threads.” The aggregated monthly reviews reveal a gradual overall increase in market activity of just over 25%. However, as the report points out, this is mainly down to Cannazon, which saw by far the biggest upsurge in trade.

The report actually looks at sales across the EU, including at that time the UK, from where most of the drugs were sent. The UK is the point of origin for 47% of the sales, with Germany supplying around 30%, with considerably smaller sales from France (6%) and Spain (4%). The rôle of the Netherlands seems to have diminished from previous levels, now standing at 4%. The leading country in satisfying the demand for recreational drugs around the EU would seem to be the UK. “A distribution of the drugs by (a) reported shipping country reveals between-country differences in



Methamphetamine

this market: the United Kingdom is an important point of origin for shipping across all drug classes and predominates for opioids and sedatives (mainly benzodiazepines), with an important role also for the trade of cannabis, cocaine and dissociatives/psychedelics. In this data set Germany is prominent in the non-cocaine stimulants category, probably reflecting its position in respect to amphetamine and methamphetamine use.”

In the reports analysis, Austria is the biggest supplier of stimulants, with opioids and sedatives mainly coming from the UK. These are relatively small markets, though, compared with cannabis. “The most common weight category of cannabis product sold is 10 g, with a mean price of €125,” says the report. “The most common weight sold in the United Kingdom and Germany was 28 g (one ounce) and 10 g respectively, with corresponding mean prices of €196 and €136. Note that in most of the EU, multiples of 5g are standard whereas in the United Kingdom, this is true for multiples of 7g (quarter of an ounce). The value of cannabis products sold in this market between January–March 2020 is estimated at €4.3-million, representing 1.6 metric tonnes.” That is a lot of weed.

WORDWIDE MARKET

What about other drugs and other countries? With the key months for the opium harvest in Afghanistan being March to June, the 2020 opium harvest is taking place during the Covid-19 crisis and it could be affected if the large labour force needed is not able or willing to travel to the areas where the opium poppy is grown in the country, according to the UNODC. “This may be due to mobility restrictions imposed by the Government or non-state actors, or by the spread of the Covid-19 virus itself, which may deter workers from travelling or reduce the workforce available due to sickness. A shortage of poppy-lancers has already been observed in the western and southern provinces of the country, mainly due to the closure of a border crossing with Pakistan. However, women in poppy-growing households appear to be increasingly engaged in the poppy-lancing process, as do people who lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 crisis. The decline in international trade resulting from the pandemic could also lead to a shortage in the supply of



An arms dealer in Dara Adamkhel, Pakistan

acetic anhydride, a precursor vital to the manufacture of heroin, which is not produced in Afghanistan. Such a shortage could lead to a reduction in the manufacturing of heroin or push it outside the country or even the region.”

When I was last in Afghanistan, there was talk of measures to encourage farmers to grow an alternative crop, but there isn't one that both suits the dusty soil there and is so valuable on world markets. My Mujahideen hosts smiled at the idea; the drugs trade was largely keeping them in 7.62 mm ammunition for their Kalashnikovs and Afghanistan is a very big country. Driving back down towards Peshawar from the Khyber Pass, we saw the fortress-like homes of the major drugs barons, some empty and silent, some with prominent armed guards.

Most people there carried guns or used bodyguards, like a local trade union chief I interviewed, whose two enormous bodyguards were armed with what looked like C96 Mauser machine pistols, even though they were almost certainly replicas manufactured by hand in the workshops of Dara Adamkhel, with a more normal semi-automatic action. Dara Adamkhel is an odd little town where every workshop sells guns, holsters, ammunition or something related to firearms, all made by hand, which putative customers would test by coming out of the little shops and firing into the air. The hitching rails outside made them look like a scene from a western, although it was camels tied to them, not horses. One of the trade unionist's bodyguards opened the bottles of soft drinks we were offered with his teeth, some of which were metal, I noticed. I was offered a Kalashnikov AK47 to buy, but it was of local manufacture and the action was

actually copied from a German World War I Gewehr 98 bolt-action Mauser rifle. I didn't buy it.

There are reports that coca plant eradication in Colombia is going ahead and is working at reducing supplies of cocaine. Another blow to its production has been caused by the shortage of petrol, which used to come from Nicaragua and which is needed in cocaine production. Large scale seizures at European ports, however, suggest that trafficking by sea is still going on. Peru reports falling cocaine prices and transportation problems which are affecting output. In Bolivia, the socio-political conflicts of October/November 2019 had already affected the coca leaf market and cocaine production, as the premature withdrawal of the eradication task groups caused a reduction in eradication compared with the previous year. More cocaine on world markets from some countries, less from others, in other words.

But let's stick with cannabis for now. The UNODC report suggests the market is thriving under lockdown. “Continued large-scale seizures of cannabis products in the Middle East and North Africa suggest that cannabis resin trafficking to Europe is not being disrupted by the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are indications that the lockdown measures in Europe may lead to an increase in demand for cannabis products, which could intensify drug trafficking activities from North Africa to Europe in the future. (The) Local nature of cannabis implies trafficking will remain unaffected. In general, trafficking in cannabis may not be affected in the same way as trafficking in heroin or cocaine, given that cannabis production often takes place near consumer markets and traffickers are

thus less reliant on long, transregional shipments of large quantities of the drug.”

In Africa, five countries have legalised cannabis farming for pharmaceutical or industrial use, and a number of companies have formed partnerships with others overseas to produce and export it. Cannabis needs a lot of water, so Uganda is an ideal country in which to grow it. Wages are low, too, so it's cheap, but it's also grown in Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Ghana. Two types of cannabis are grown in Africa, depending on the location: the industrial type, which is tall and contains very little of the psychoactive ingredient, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), while the other - familiar from windowsills in top floor Amsterdam apartments - is short, with a lot of leaves. It, of course, is rich in THC and goes to pharmaceutical companies. The industrial kind produces hemp, for use in rope-making and textiles, the other is used in various medicines. Presumably (although it hasn't been proved), some slips out to be used by people who want to smoke it, which people in Africa have been doing since at least the 14th century. However, it's only in South Africa that it's legal to smoke the stuff, as *The Economist* explained: “A court ruled that prohibition violated the right to privacy”.



Over 100kg of cannabis concealed in wooden doors

STOP ME AND BUY ONE

Meanwhile, darknet trading continues, largely untouchable, says the EMCDDA report. “The overall increase in sales evident on the three darknet markets

examined is reflected in an increase in drug-related discussions on forums around darknet markets over the monitoring period (January–March 2020). Many vendors have tried to convey to buyers that they are operating ‘business as usual’, without delays to delivery. For example:

Eutyone, New batch available. 500kg in stock.

2. 4fbca, 5faec-2201, New Synthetic Cannabinoids.

3. 5cladba, hep, sgt78, mdpep, always stock available, stable supply.

4. Etizolam, Only 1kg in stock.

Now delivery to USA, Canada, UK no delayed for corona virus.

And there are more, in case you're worried. The report lists several. Here is another example:

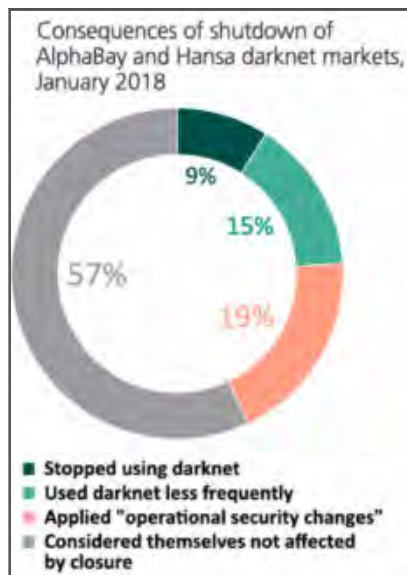
We provide one of the best quality Cocaine that you can find right now in Europe!

+ It is shipped from a calm (drug trading) wise country!

- *Our product is not from Germany or Netherlands!!!*
- *Everything what we sell goes straight from brick.*
- *Transported directly to us by Ship.*
- *Never Bashed.*
- *Never Cutted.*

To keep you safe from getting caught, every order is send in a decoy. Our packages easily go through X-RAY scans and dogs. Many double-checks before sending! As I mentioned, all orders are send from a calm (drug-trading) wise country in Europe. So there is a significantly higher chance that it will not get caught in a post or by shipping with courier. (Mostly HOT zone countries posts are getting more checks from customs before letting packages go through)

That must make reassuring reading for the darknet's customers, even if the spelling and punctuation are highly suspect (and who would want a package that had ‘been through a dog’?). Still, some of the traders have been flagging up the difficulties they're facing during the pandemic, presumably to encourage the sense of urgency regular users may be feeling. Perhaps business isn't quite as brisk as the ENCDDA and its law enforcement EU partner, Europol, actually fear.



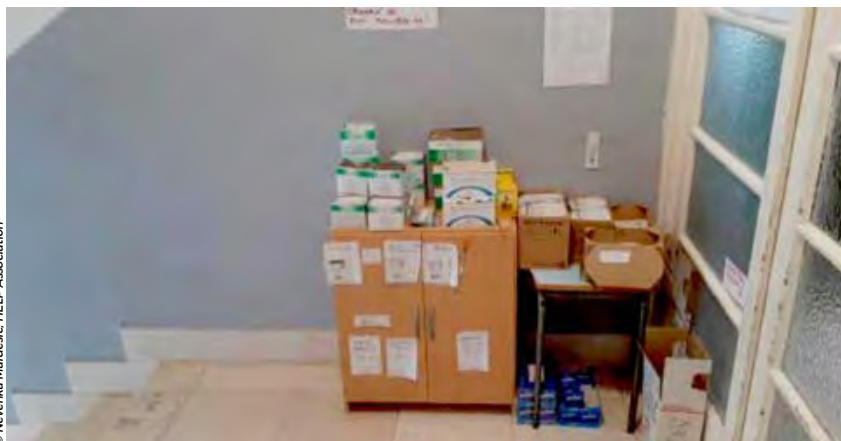
Source: UNODC calculations based on Global Drug Survey 2018 data: detailed findings on drug cryptomarkets. Available from Dr. Monica Barratt, Drug Policy Modelling Program, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, Australia.

According to Ireland's Drug and Alcohol Information and Support website, the problems there are much the same as in the rest of Northern Europe. "Cannabis is the most widely used drug in Europe and accounts for almost 40% of the entire drug market, according to a new EU drugs report," it says. "The estimated market value of cannabis is €9.3-billion annually. This is within a range of €8.4 to €12.9-billion. It is followed by heroin – which is worth an estimated €6.8-billion (between €6 and €7.8-billion) and is responsible for a significant proportion of drug-related deaths and social costs. This is followed by cocaine (€5.7-billion), amphetamine (€1.8-billion) and MDMA/ecstasy (€0.67-billion). New psychoactive substances are also a serious and growing market, but due to large

number of different substances falling under this heading and the speed with which new products are introduced – it's difficult to put a market value on their worth."

There are other drugs, of course, the synthetic ones often produced in domestic kitchens or small commercial premises, which, as the UNODDC mentions, have remained unchanged during the pandemic. "Where there is domestic manufacture using domestic precursors, as is the case of mephedrone and other popular synthetic drugs in the Russian Federation, no major impact on the domestic drug market is visible." In the European Union, synthetic drugs are mainly seen as party drugs and it appears that their production has diminished, almost certainly because of the global pandemic. "Synthetic drug production in the European Union (amphetamine, MDMA and methamphetamine) relies on chemicals imported from East Asia," says the UNODDC, "and partly on chemicals trafficked within Europe. In the Czech Republic, the closure of borders has led to a reduction in the availability of precursors for methamphetamine production and a lack of methamphetamine in the market is expected."

Even an apparent decrease in drug use may not be the good news it seems at first glance. "Drug supply shortages can go together with an overall decrease in consumption (for example, of drugs that are mostly consumed in recreational settings such as bars and clubs)" says the UNODC Research Brief, "but may also, especially in the case of heroin, lead to the consumption of harmful domestically-produced substances, as well as more harmful patterns of drug use by people with drug use disorders.



Self-service spot providing harm reduction material, managed by clients themselves, in a low-threshold service in Split, Croatia, during the COVID-19 pandemic

In terms of alternatives, some countries in Europe have warned that heroin users may switch to substances such as fentanyl and its derivatives. An increase in the use of pharmaceutical products such as benzodiazepines and buprenorphine has also been reported, to the extent that their price has doubled in some areas.”

GETTING LOW, GETTING HIGH

The long-term effect of the coronavirus crisis is hard to predict, but increased poverty looks likely to be the outcome for many. While glum people in rich countries try to cheer themselves up with narcotics, the people living in poor countries may be increasingly pressured, by gangsters or just by circumstances, into producing more drugs. The UNODC thinks things could be especially bad in Latin America. “Latin America is expected to suffer the worst economic crisis in its history, with a contraction of 5.3 per cent, comparable only to the Great Depression of 1930 (5.0 per cent reduction). The economy of Mexico, the third largest producer of opium poppy worldwide, is expected to contract even further than the regional and global average (by 6.5 per cent), as the economy of the United States, its main commercial partner, is also expected to shrink. In Colombia, Peru and the Plurinational State of Bolivia, the Andean countries that produce almost all coca worldwide, the economy is expected to shrink by 2.6, 4.0 and 3.0 per cent, respectively. In Latin America overall, based on conservative estimates, the percentage of people living below the poverty line is expected to increase by 4 percentage points (from 30 to 34 per cent), and extreme poverty by 2 percentage points (from 11 to 13 per cent), mostly because of the inadequate social protection systems in the region.”

People will always be willing to turn to growing drugs when their options shrink. Years ago, I went to report on banana production in the Caribbean, at a time when growers were protected under what was then the EU’s Lomé Convention (now called the Cotonou Partnership), which gave them some protection from disaster, helping out in the event of hurricane damage and giving them easy market access into the EU for their product. The United States had raised an objection at the WTO, claiming it unfairly discriminated



(A) Rolling machine (B) Cannabis spliff or joint (C) Broken up Cannabis (D) Book of rolling papers

against what were called ‘dollar bananas’ - bananas grown on US-owned plantations on the South American continent. The US won its case and the Lomé Convention arrangements were scrapped. It hadn’t happened by the time I interviewed a small farmer in St. Lucia, whose bananas were packed on the farm for Marks and Spencer in the UK. Bananas provide a year-round income, not a single or double harvesting season, so they are a unique crop for a small family business where very hilly conditions rule out more conventional food plants. “What will you do if it’s no longer profitable to grow bananas?” I asked. He shrugged. “It’s good soil and a good climate for coca leaves,” he replied, “after all, it’s not far from here to the United States.” I wonder if he ever did switch to coca? Sadly, I suspect the drug barons are harsher people to work for than Fyffe’s.

It’s ironic, really. The scientific community and health professionals are looking for drugs to treat or prevent Covid-19 while a lot of other people are looking for drugs to help them forget

about it. The measures put in place to control the spread of the coronavirus are undoubtedly having an effect on the drugs market. In most cases, more are being seized at ports and on borders because of more cautious checks. The traffickers are likely to adapt and there are signs that some are now distributing drugs in the mail. There have also been reports of dealers dressing as medical personnel to evade police checks. There seems little doubt that the use and supply of illicit drugs will change as a result of the pandemic, even if nobody knows exactly how. Of one thing you can be certain, though: whether it’s through the darknet or from a street deal or that man you ring up whose real name you don’t know, the drugs trade will continue. The dealers will continue to deal, the users will continue to use. Even in a crisis such as the one we’re living through, Timothy Leary’s instruction for an enjoyable life will go on being followed by many.

Robin Crow



NIST TESTS FORENSIC METHODS FOR GETTING DATA FROM DAMAGED MOBILE PHONES

*Researchers put law enforcement hacking tools to the test.
The darknet gains drug seekers in lockdown*

Criminals sometimes damage their mobile phones in an attempt to destroy evidence. They might smash, shoot, submerge or cook their phones, but forensics experts can often retrieve the evidence anyway. Now, researchers at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) have tested how well these forensic methods work.

A damaged phone might not power on, and the data port might not work, so experts use hardware and software tools to directly access the phone's memory chips. These include hacking tools, albeit ones that may be lawfully used as part of a criminal investigation. Because these methods produce data that might be presented as evidence in court, it's important to know if they can be trusted.

"Our goal was to test the validity of these methods," said Rick Ayers, the NIST digital forensics expert who led the study. "Do they reliably produce accurate results?"

The results of the NIST study will also help labs choose the right tools for the job. Some methods work better than others, depending on the type of phone, the type of data and the extent of the damage.

The study addresses methods that work with Android phones. Also, the study covered only methods for accessing data, not decrypting it. However, they can still be useful with encrypted phones because investigators often manage to get the passcode during their investigation.

To conduct the study, NIST researchers loaded data onto 10 popular models of phones. They then extracted the data or had outside experts extract the data for them. The question was: Would the extracted data exactly match the original data, without any changes?

For the study to be accurate, the researchers couldn't just zap a bunch of data onto the phones. They had to add the



NIST computer scientist Jenise Reyes-Rodriguez uses the JTAG method to acquire data from a damaged mobile phone.

© R. Press/NIST

data the way a person normally would. They took photos, sent messages and used Facebook, LinkedIn and other social media apps. They entered contacts with multiple middle names and oddly formatted addresses to see if any parts would be chopped off or lost when the data was retrieved. They added GPS data by driving around town with all the phones on the dashboard.

After the researchers had loaded data onto the phones, they used two methods to extract it. The first method takes advantage of the fact that many circuit boards have small metal taps that provide access to data on the chips. Manufacturers use those taps to test their circuit boards, but by soldering wires onto them, forensic investigators can extract data from the chips. This is called the JTAG method, for the Joint Task Action Group, the manufacturing industry association that codified this testing feature.

Chips connect to the circuit board via tiny metal pins, and the second method, called “chip-off,” involves connecting to those pins directly. Experts used to do this by gently plucking the chips off the board and seating them into chip readers, but the pins are delicate. If you damage them, getting the data can be difficult or impossible. A few years ago, experts found that instead of pulling the chips off the circuit board, they could grind down the opposite side of the board on a lathe until the pins were exposed. This is like stripping insulation off a wire, and it allows access to the pins.

“It seems so obvious,” said Ayers. “But it’s one of those things where everyone just did it one way until someone came up with an easier way.”

The chip-off extractions were conducted by the Fort Worth Police Department Digital Forensics Lab and a

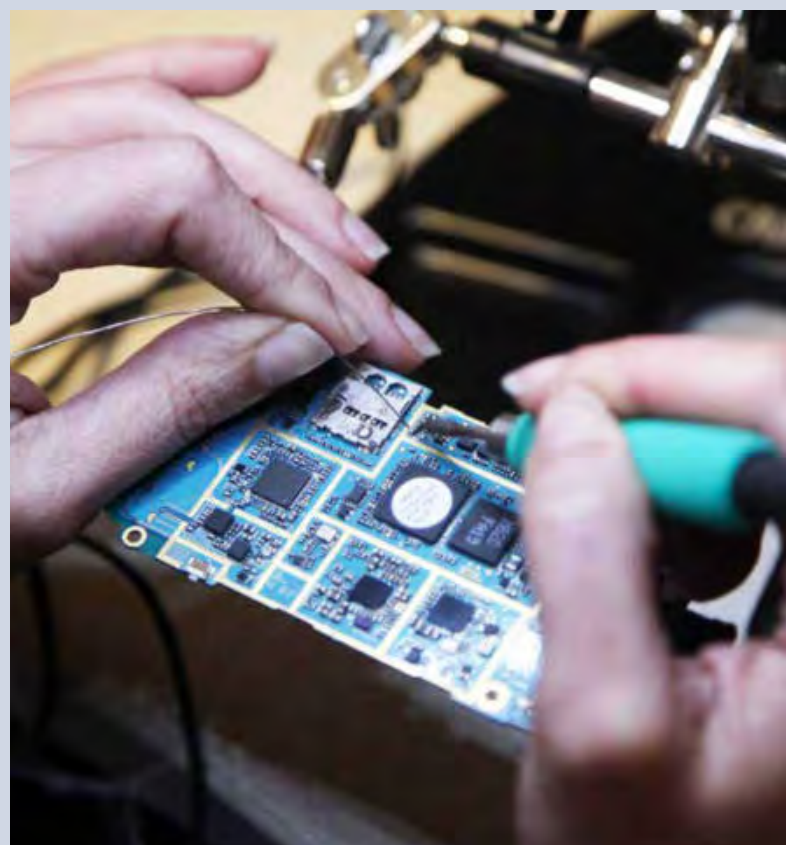
private forensics company in Colorado called VTO Labs, who sent the extracted data back to NIST. NIST computer scientist Jenise Reyes-Rodriguez did the JTAG extractions.

After the data extractions were complete, Ayers and Reyes-Rodriguez used eight different forensic software tools to interpret the raw data, generating contacts, locations, texts, photos, social media data, and so on. They then compared those to the data originally loaded onto each phone.

The comparison showed that both JTAG and chip-off extracted the data without altering it, but that some of the software tools were better at interpreting the data than others, especially for data from social media apps. Those apps are constantly changing, making it difficult for the toolmakers to keep up.

The results are published in a series of freely available online reports. This study, and the resulting reports, are part of NIST’s Computer Forensics Tool Testing project. Called CFTT, this project has subjected a wide array of digital forensics tools to rigorous and systematic evaluation. Forensics labs around the country use CFTT reports to ensure the quality of their work.

“Many labs have an overwhelming workload, and some of these tools are very expensive,” Ayers said. “To be able to look at a report and say, this tool will work better than that one for a particular case — that can be big advantage.”



Digital forensics experts can often extract data from damaged mobile phones using the JTAG method.



A EUROPEAN JOINT OPERATION DISMANTLES A VAST TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANISATION WHOSE ACTIVITIES YIELD € 680 MILLION

A highly skilled and dangerous foreign organized crime organization has been recently disbanded following a complex investigation carried out within the framework of a Joint Tactical European Task Force. This is the first time in European history that such a large scale multi-police operation has been conducted against such a vast criminal enterprise. About 450 police and customs officers including special intervention teams, carried out raids in Poland, Lithuania, the United Kingdom and Spain in the early hours of the day with the help of Europol and Eurojust, targeting leaders of this long-term active, highly skilled and dangerous criminal network. Among the criminals were nationals of Lithuania and other EU countries, involved in large-scale drug and cigarette trafficking, assassinations and money laundering.

The operation, co-named “Icebreaker”, was composed of the Lithuanian Criminal Police Bureau, the Polish Police Central Bureau of Investigation, the British HM Revenue

and Customs, the Estonian Central Criminal Police under the Police and Border Guard Board and the Spanish Guardia Civil and Policia Nacional.

The suspect ringleader – a 48-year-old Lithuanian citizen, was arrested in Spain. 21 suspects were arrested in Poland, Lithuania, Spain and the UK. 40 house searches resulted in the seizure of € 8 million in cash, diamonds, gold bars, jewelry and luxury vehicles as well as the discovery of hidden compartments used to smuggle drugs and psychotropic materials. Significant quantities of illegal cigarettes were also confiscated.

The extent of the damage done by this organised crime community is significant: these criminals are believed to have gained an estimated € 680 million for the period 2017-2019 alone as a result of their illegal activity.

This criminal group was trafficking narcotics and tobacco into the United Kingdom, the cash was



subsequently illegally smuggled to Poland. The money was laundered through currency exchange offices then invested in real estate in Spain and other countries. This crime group's leaders and members used counter surveillance and counter-intelligence measures to try to thwart law enforcement officials, as well as sophisticated encrypted communication devices.

Under the umbrella of Europol and Eurojust, it took several months of meticulous coordination between law enforcement officials and prosecution officials to prepare this operation "Icebreaker".

The inquiry, which was launched by the Lithuanian authorities in 2016, was then referred to Estonia, Poland and Europol to help collect evidence against top-level leaders of this network. After criminal ties were identified in all of these nations, the investigation was then quickly expanded to the United Kingdom and Spain.

In November 2018, the creation of an Operational Task Force between all five countries and Europol had a catalytic impact on the size and scope of the investigation, thereby promoting the implementation of a collective plan to target the entire network.

Joint Investigation Teams were formed between the participating countries with the assistance of Eurojust, due to the demanding investigative measures undertaken at international level.

During the days of action this smooth cross-border cooperation was mirrored on the field. 3 Europol experts were deployed to Lithuania and Poland to provide operational support tailored to their needs. Lithuanian, Spanish and Polish police officers were also deployed on-the-spot in the participating Member States to promote the exchange of information between their national authorities in real time.

Throughout the days of joint action, Europol collaboration

helped law enforcement and judicial authorities in the field to monitor the action in real time, while making it possible to rapidly evaluate new data as obtained during the action and to change the plan as needed.

The Operational Task Force formed at Europol has created a forum for law enforcement from different countries to work closely together on this case and to share operational information regularly. Based on this, researchers were able to apply modern and sophisticated field-specific techniques to efficiently locate and arrest suspects.

James Lookwood





Extent of China's New Silk Route/Silk Road. Red is land route and the blue is the sea/water route

PANDAS CAN BITE

China is not as cuddly as it likes to pretend

Pandas are members of the ailuropodidae family, a very small family of mammals evolutionarily (but not very closely) linked to bears and racoons, now believed to be closer to bears. They are thought of as peaceful, vegetarian creatures that eat only bamboo, which they have to do for up to 75% of their waking hours - 16 hours a day - because it has so little nutritional value. Pandas are believed to munch on other types of vegetation from time to time and also to eat eggs, small animals, carrion, and to forage in farmland for pumpkin, kidney beans, wheat and domestic pig food, although bamboo makes up by far the bulk of their diet. They have been known to attack humans, too, although given the inroads humans have been making, bringing industry and

development into the Yangtze Basin region where most of them live - dams, roads, railways, factories - one can sympathise if they occasionally lose their tempers. The great panda, ailuropoda melanoleuca, is held in high regard in China as a national symbol, but not high enough to prevent encroachment on its habitat. And if a male great panda was annoyed with you, you wouldn't want to stay around and argue ; they can be almost two metres long and weigh up to 160 kilos. Of course, China's other great symbol is the dragon, a fiercer beast but entirely fictional. One would probably think twice before cosying up to either, but a lot of people involved in European politics and administration seem to be doing so.

China has been heavily involved in lobbying the European Union. The coronavirus lockdown has been providing an ideal opportunity to do so, like many other lobbyists at present, 'under the radar'. Indeed, there has been an upsurge in lobbying generally by all sorts of groups, aided by the fact that many of the lobbying meetings have to be held through visual communication apps and are not therefore subject to the usual lists of visitors to the Commission building. They enter only via a computer or smartphone link and some of the meetings have not been entered into the official records, according to the Corporate Europe Observatory (COE), a pro-transparency NGO. Much of the lobbying has been aimed at toning down tough new restrictions on certain industries and activities on

the basis that they're not appropriate while the coronavirus outbreak is continuing. For example, the medical industry have called for a moratorium on stricter safer rules for medical equipment, the European Banking Federation has asked the European Commission to suspend an anti-tax-avoidance directive, as well as a requirement to report bank account information. It's hard to see how a viral pandemic justifies that ; criminality remains illegal, even when lawyers are unwell. The plastics industry has written to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, urging her to think again about the 'Single Use Plastics Directive'. They got short shrift. The steel and cement industries, big polluters, have asked the Commission to postpone the date on which they report their carbon emissions, but again it seems the Commission was not sympathetic.

According to German Green MEP Sven Giegold, writing for Brave New Europe, an NGO opposed to neo-liberalism in Europe, car industry lobbyists want to prevent a tightening of CO2 emissions rules, airlines are campaigning to prevent more taxes on kerosene, farming groups, backed by the political centre right, want to delay the 'farm to



© greens-efa

German Green MEP Sven Giegold



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen saying that the European Union was grateful for China's support shortly after her telephone conversation with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang

fork' initiative for more sustainable agriculture, and Business Europe, the most powerful lobby association in Brussels, wants all climate and environmental consultations to be suspended. The Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš, wants the EU to forget the Green Deal completely. Reading the list offers no great surprises, although it is sadly depressing. These are, in most cases, industries using the pandemic to postpone compliance with rules, often proposed years ago, and designed to make the world safer, cleaner or more honest, simply because they can boost their profits that way. Even something as nasty as the SARS-CoV-2 virus shouldn't really get the blame for acts of egregious human venality.

Given the current circumstances, however, it's not so surprising that companies and sectoral industries bodies should be vying for cash hand-outs, and in most of Europe it's Brussels that holds the purse strings, just as in the United States it's Washington. Despite the way in which it is being generously spread about, bail-out money is in finite supply ; everyone wants a share before it runs out. After the EU countries' faltering response when

the crisis first arose, there has been a rather sudden awareness that the EU must be seen to act or lose all credibility. With business wanting financial help and the economy in freefall, it was clear that money must be found. "We are not talking about billion, we are talking about trillion," said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. In fact, even that scary-sounding figure - a one followed by twelve zeros - is unlikely to be enough and no-one has yet said how much of any help on offer will be in the form of grants or loans. Loans, of course, have to be repaid. Meanwhile, the Commission has relaxed its rules on state aid, which means that the majority of bail-out funds will be coming from national treasuries. Interest rates globally have never been so low, so money is 'cheap', in banking terms ; whether it will remain so throughout the several generations needed to pay off the debt, if it ever can be repaid, remains to be seen.

ENTER THE DRAGON

That aside, however, China has jumped on the 'lobby-while-it's-easy' bandwagon, using its 'soft power' in Europe, and its wealth has allowed it to hire policy experts and think tank

members to argue its various cases on Beijing's behalf. COE reports how willingly European tech lobbyists have been trying to exert influence on behalf of China, the company ranked last in the world for internet freedom. To make things worse, the EU's lobby transparency rules mean that all this persuasion is largely going on in secret. It's complicated by the fact that contacts between lobbying firms and commissioners or their staff normally begin with a telephone call, in which the caller is urged to make contact by one of the apps that allow the caller to be seen and to see whoever they're calling. It's how the Commission conducts its midday briefings with journalists these days and also how the European Parliament holds many of its committee meetings. But they start as telephone calls, even if they quickly turn into visual contacts ; when does a phone call, which does not have to be logged, turn into outright lobbying, which does? In the United States, lobbyists are required by law to register if they are representing foreign governments. As a result, the US watchdog Open Secrets can show that Chinese telecoms giants spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on agents seeking to influence decision-makers on trade, telecoms and even the coronavirus.

Take China Telecom, for example. According to Open Secrets, China Telecom hired Ogilvy Group to target the US with lobbying, public relations campaigns and other operations designed to influence throughout the first half of 2019, "including 'social media research and analysis, influencer identification' and 'audience analysis'". The strategy was to use third-party 'influencers' to 'reinforce a positive narrative' about China Telecom with tactics such as posting content on social media, publishing research briefs and opinion pieces and submitting information to policymakers. One assumes we're talking only positive information here.

The China Telecom campaign didn't end there, says Open Secrets. "In October 2019, China Telecom inked a new agreement



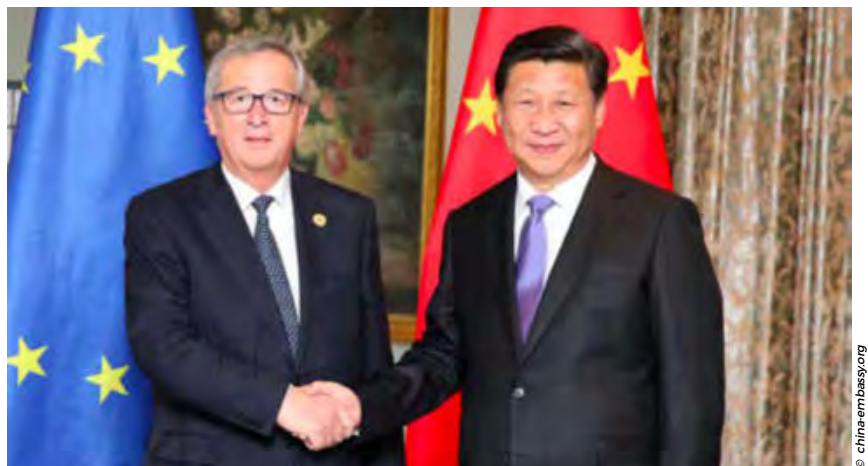
Ke Ruiwen Chairman and Chief Executive Officer China Telecom



Joe Yu, president of the public relations and influence capability of Ogilvy China. Ogilvy office in Shenzhen, China

with Levick Communications, a PR firm with a history of handling crisis communications for high-profile cases. Levick was promised a \$45,000 (€42,000)-per-month retainer from China Telecom and a \$400 (€370) hourly rate for crisis communications support. Originally slated to last through the end of that year, China Telecom's arrangement with Levick continued through at

least March 2020." These agreements were all logged under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), as they must be under US law. No such law exists in Europe and the EU's Transparency Register contains no mention of the Government of the People's Republic of China. But as a chambermaid carrying a huge bug-killer spray said of her insect targets when she knocked on the door of my



Xi Jinping and former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker

hotel room, near Lake Victoria, “Just because you can’t see ‘em doesn’t mean they’re not there!”

The lack of true transparency is regrettable, especially with China so keen to press ahead with President Xi Jinping’s ‘Belt and Road initiative’, his recreation of the historic Silk Road which was established as an East-West trade route in the 2nd century BCE. Back then, the journeys made along it were most often on foot, camel or horse, and stayed that way throughout its history ; Xi’s version is rather more ambitious. The Belt and Road Project aims to establish direct transport links, by land, sea and electronic means, between China and a great many other countries around the world. China’s current strategy has remained fairly constant: form direct links with individual countries or groups of nations. That sidesteps the European Union and in so doing subtly weakens it. For example, if you want to pick an EU member state that worries the people in Brussels, you could hardly choose anywhere better than Hungary under its autocratic leader, Viktor Orbán. You get the feeling that he and Xi would have a lot in common. China has set up a programme called 16+1, or CEEC, which stands for China and Central and Eastern European Countries, which co-ordinates think tanks and events all over Europe.



Huawei Technology in Shenzhen, China

Run in conjunction with the highly-respected CASS business school at City, University of London, it is itself based in Budapest.

MAKING FRIENDS IN ODD PLACES

COE also highlights a body called ChinaEU, which serves as a major lobbyist for Chinese interests in Europe. It’s a lobby for businesses,

based in Brussels but with an office in Beijing, promoting business cooperation between China and Europe. On its website, under the entwined flags of China and Europe, it says: “Areas where ChinaEU excel include organizing events and providing advice to its partners regarding the development of new digital services in the EU. In particular, ChinaEU assists Chinese and EU businesses in identifying new partnerships and promoting their digital applications and innovative services in the European markets. Where relevant, ChinaEU also shares its expertise on the applicable EU regulatory framework, including through trainings and events.” That’s pretty comprehensive. Now the European Commission has begun to sit up and take notice, especially as China seems to be trying to forge closer links with extremist and anti-immigrant parties like Alternatif für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Austria’s Freedom Party and Lega Norte in Italy. The Commission produced a communication in 2019 that sets out some of its concerns, despite welcoming closer relations overall. “Yet there is a growing appreciation in Europe



Professor Cai Fang, the Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences making a speech about “Opportunities and Challenges of 16+1 Cooperation”

that the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted,” says the Communication. “In the last decade, China's economic power and political influence have grown with unprecedented scale and speed, reflecting its ambitions to become a leading global power. China can no longer be regarded as a developing country. It is a key global actor and leading technological power. Its increasing presence in the world, including in Europe, should be accompanied by greater responsibilities for upholding the rules-based international order, as well as greater reciprocity, non-discrimination, and openness of its system.” Meanwhile, Bloomberg is quoted as mentioning that “Multiple European diplomats said that China has taken an unusual degree of interest in the EU elections, and especially what populist candidates might mean for the bloc's China policies.”

Italy and Greece have both got involved with the Belt and Road project, perhaps attracted by their own wealth of strategically useful ports and by the austerity forced upon them by the EU, in the eyes of the populists, and by their own governments' profligacy in the eyes of others. In Greece's case, Goldman Sachs arranged credit default swaps that allowed it to borrow a billion euros without the sum appearing as national debt, thus arguably making things worse. In March of last year, China signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Italy and a number of Italian lobbyists are now working on China's behalf, according to COE. One is left to wonder how the locals who live near and maybe work in the ports feel about the Chinese buy-out. One hopes they fare better than the bees mentioned in a poem by the 18th century English poet, washerwoman and early feminist, Mary Collier: “So the industrious bees do daily strive To bring their loads of honey to the hive ; Their sordid owners always reap the gains, And poorly recompense their toils and pains.”

Not that I'm accusing China of being sordid, merely of being the owner. But maybe in this globalised world the actual ownership of a place of work - even a strategically important place of work - is of less importance than the labour laws which are applied. A former EU employee I know worked for a while in China and found the long working hours a bit of a strain. He was glad to get back to Brussels.

China has changed. It is now imposing its greater influence on those with which it trades. As the publication *The Diplomat* notes: “China is moving from a ‘strategic partner’ (as depicted for more than 15 years in EU parlance) to a ‘negotiating partner.’ Ideally, the EU needs to find a balance of interests with China as an ‘economic competitor’ in the pursuit of technological leadership, and as a ‘systemic rival’ promoting alternative models of governance.” In other words, Europe, wake up and smell the...tea.

WHO'S CALLING?

There has been far less concern over Huawei, despite its lobbying to win the contract to provide Europe's 5G network, which it has been doing in partnership with the other Chinese

tech giant, ZTE. It has employed lobbying agencies around the EU, including in Brussels, but Huawei is privately owned, despite retaining close relations with the Chinese government and is generally seen as less of a threat.

No doubt Beijing would be happy to see Huawei and/or ZTE get that contract - after all the new Belt and Road initiative includes digital, as well as physical, connections and it would be happy see the network in Chinese hands. Huawei has no obvious link with ChinaEU. It is, however, the co-funder of the Brussels Academy for China and European Studies (BACES), an academic platform and think tank shared by Renmin University of China, Sichuan University, Fudan University and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). The other co-funder is the China Scholarship Council and the Academy has links with the Confucius Institutes, of which there are well over a hundred in Europe, organising cultural exchanges, language learning and such like, but controversial because they actively stifle debate on Tibet, Taiwan and other sensitive issues. They have been closed down at some universities, according to Corporate Europe Observatory,



Brussels Academy for China and European Studies (BACES) conference in Brussels, 3 October 2019

for being too closely linked with Beijing. Huawei is also a major user of corporate lobbying companies, allegedly declaring €2,190,000 for 2017 and with a Brussels office very near the European Parliament. In its EU Transparency Register, Huawei revealed procurement funding of €2,956,199, which means money received through public funding from the European Commission or indirectly through EU-funded programmes in the member states.

From the Chinese government's point of view there could be no better founder and president of ChinaEU than Luigi Gambardella. He is a well-known and high-profile lobbyist for the telecoms industry and chairs the board of the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association. He is a big supporter of Beijing and boasts a unique "worldwide network of top-level industry decision-makers, governments, regulators and trade organisations." The website of ChinaEU writes: "Luigi Gambardella has long and extensive experience as an international leader in the telecoms field, and in all things digital. Luigi has for several years stewarded international relations as Vice President of Relations with International Institutions and Organizations for Telecom Italia, and from 2011 to 2014 he has chaired the Executive Board of the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association (ETNO)." With such connections, he should have no problems lobbying for "a connected digital single market" and - among other things - "annual EU-China summits". Beijing also wants an "EU-China Year of tourism". Better wait until after the pandemic for that one, although the Italy-China Year of Culture and Tourism has already begun. On the side lines of the opening ceremony on January 21, ChinaEU held an exclusive event in Rome. You may not be surprised. It seems unlikely, under current circumstances, that many people have taken advantage of the travel opportunities.

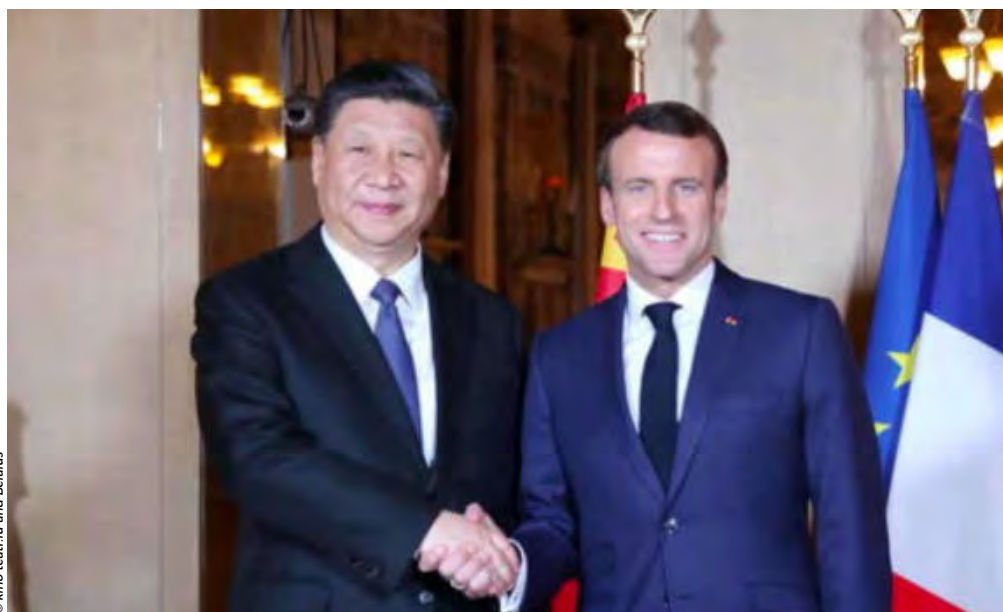
One of ChinaEU's partners is Tencent, listed as one of the world's ten most valuable brands and the



Maria Cristina Russo, Director for International Cooperation, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, European Commission and Deputy Director General Zhao from the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology, International Department in December 2019 during their meeting to discuss the way forward for the preparation of the joint EU-China roadmap for R&I cooperation

owner of the social media platform WeChat, which boasts a billion users. In that capacity, it developed and deployed one of the world's largest and most technologically sophisticated censorship systems. If you want true free speech, and accept there may be risks from trolls and Russian fake news, you don't want to let China get involved. Tencent also helped develop China's 'Social Credit System', which is due to come into effect this year. This is a nightmarish concept which will award or deduct credit points from every Chinese citizen, depending

upon their behaviour, using data from facial recognition technology (which is still not 100% reliable), financial credit and on-line activity to assess if they're 'good citizens' or not. George Orwell never foresaw anything quite so far-reaching but it seems that under this system Big Brother is not only watching you but monitoring your every move. At least Winston Smith could hide around the corner from that all-intrusive camera. Xi Jinping seems to subscribe to Lenin's dictum, quoted by Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their 1936 book, *Soviet Communism*:



French President Macron and Xi Jinping

“Liberty is precious - so precious that it must be rationed.”

To promote the Belt and Road Initiative - normally referred to as One Belt One Road (OBOR) or the New Silk Road, as China likes to call it - China has developed a number of think tanks, among them the Silk Road Think Tank Network, which is located at the Department of International cooperation of the Development Research Centre of the State Council of the PRC under the leadership of the Secretary-General. It has an important rôle - several, in fact, according to its website. “The Secretariat is tasked with first, strengthening collaboration among its members and partners while promoting knowledge sharing and common development of members and partners ; second, boosting the influence of the Silk Road Think Tank Network and affording high-calibre intellectual support for the “Belt and Road Initiative” ; third, conducting cooperative research, discussion and exchanges with members regarding the priorities of the “Belt and Road Initiative” ; fourth, jointly organizing the Silk Road International Forum and related

special conferences with relevant institutions ; fifth, facilitating the network communication and online platform development, including the publications of SiLKS Newsletter, database, and e-SiLKS update, etc. ; sixth, making daily work contacts with members and partners and providing service and support for them.”

The organisation has the support of the France China Foundation, which has offices in Paris and Shanghai and has links with former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin of the right-leaning UMP party, who is also a former member of the European Parliament. He was a speaker at the Silk Road International Forum, held in a variety of places, where he is reported as saying “We are opposed to conflict and in support of cooperation as China does. Cooperation is the key to global balance. Now in Europe, we have seen opportunities brought about by the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ and I think we should take the chance.” You may recall that Raffarin has long been friendly towards China, arguing for Europe to lift its arms embargo against the country during

a state visit there in 2005. However, the France China Foundation (FCF) should not be confused with La Fondation France-Chine (FFC), whose aims, according to its website, are research into better mutual understanding between France and China of each other’s politics, economics, culture and so on.

One of its leading lights is former French Socialist politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who had to step down as Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund after allegations that he had sexually assaulted a hotel maid in New York. Other allegations followed and DSK, as he likes to be called, stepped out of the limelight. Meanwhile, the Silk Road International Forum remains a very active body. If the Belt and Road plan goes ahead, it will create a vast web of interconnected countries and continents with China right at its centre.

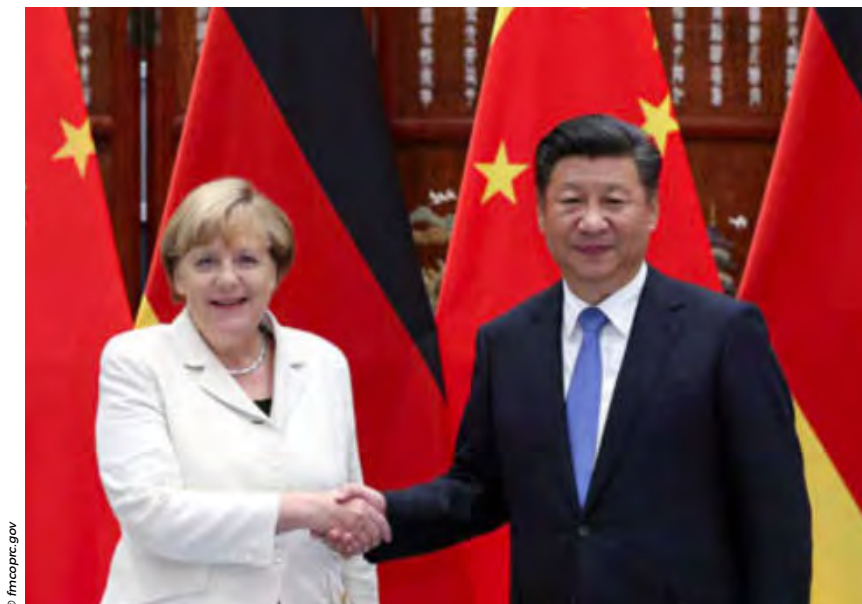
SPANNING THE WORLD

The Belt and Road idea sounds like a good one. The Washington-based Centre for Global Development (CGD) sets out its basic premise: “As envisioned, BRI spans at least 68 countries with an announced investment as high as \$8-trillion (€7.4-trillion) for a vast network of transportation, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure linking Europe, Africa, and Asia. It is an infrastructure financing initiative for a large part of the global economy that will also serve key economic, foreign policy, and security objectives for the Chinese government.” It all sounds rosy, offering some seriously poor countries the chance to develop world-spanning connections they could not normally afford. The question arises, however, of what this would mean for national debt, as the CGD report points out. “It remains unclear the degree to which BRI, a Chinese-led bilateral initiative that seeks to employ some multilateral mechanisms to achieve its financing goals, will be guided by multilateral standards on debt sustainability.”



© Wikipedia

Dominique Strauss-Kahn President for France of the Fondation France Chine and former head of the International Monetary Fund



© fmc optic.gov

Xi Jinping and Angela Merkel Chancellor of Germany

WHO PAYS WHAT TO WHOM?

The idea for the OBOR, though, was conceived to help China's expansion, as one might expect, and help it out of a jam. It was first presented by a former deputy director of China's State Administration of Taxation, Xu Shanda, in a submission to China's Ministry of Commerce in a proposal titled the 'Chinese Marshall Plan.' Not surprisingly it was warmly received because of its obvious benefits for the Chinese economy, especially in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis.

It was formally announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013. "In short, this so-called Marshall Plan would be a roundabout subsidy," reports the OGD, "keeping Chinese industry and production robust, employment in place, and GDP growth high. Such projects would literally and figuratively pave the roads for Chinese goods and services to enter new markets, as one of the explicit goals of Xu's strategy was also to find outlets for China's excess production capacity." China invested trillions in creating the overcapacity to ward off the worst effects of the global financial crisis, and like Roosevelt's 'New Deal', it worked. John Maynard Keynes would have approved. Possibly. But he would also have foreseen the consequences.

The problem now is to turn that over-capacity to advantage, as suggested by He Yafei, vice minister of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, writing in the South China Post. "The most important thing is to turn the challenge into an opportunity by 'moving out' this overcapacity on the basis of its development strategy abroad and foreign policy. In so doing, China will share her developmental dividends with other developing nations for common prosperity." In other words, OBOR

provides an opportunity to use up quite a lot of China's over-production in a profitable way and with the country in which it is deployed subsequently paying for it in the end.

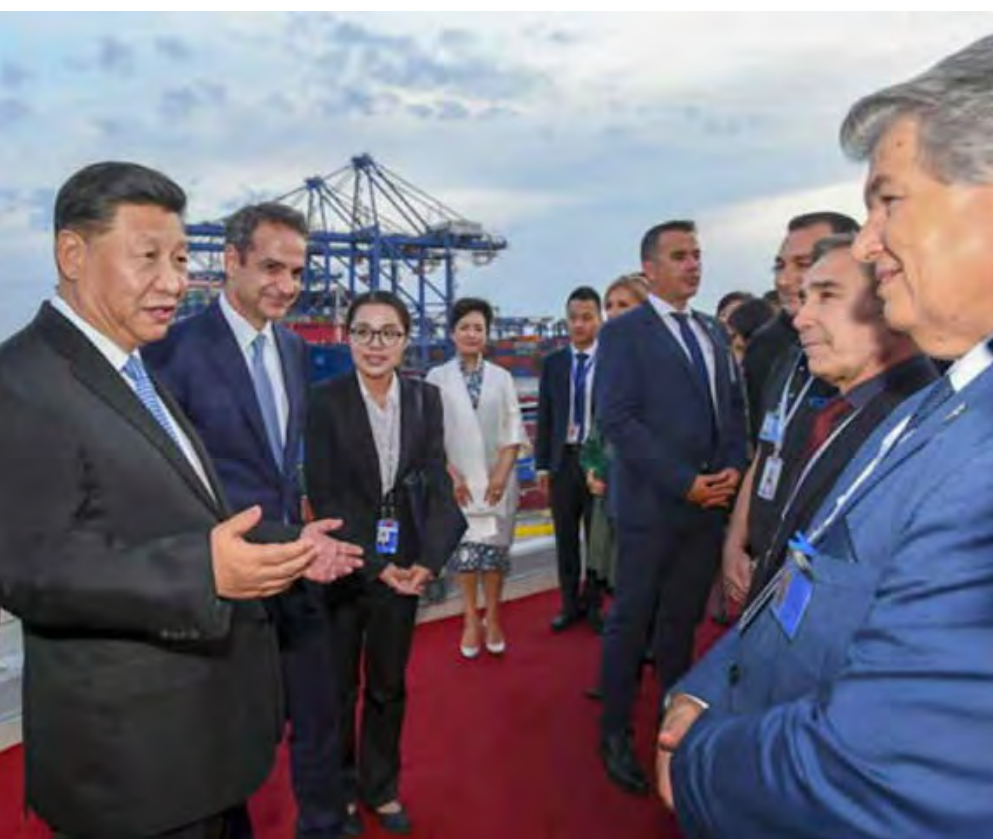
The issue comes under close examination in a report for the Vienna Institute of International Economic Studies report, written by Philipp Heimberger, Mario Holzner and Artem Kochnev. "Since 2013 and under the project name Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or New Silk Road, (China) pursues the ambitious project to connect China with its neighbouring states, the Asian continent in general, and Africa and Europe with enhanced infrastructure by land and sea. The BRI routes are not described very precisely. But rather a variety of construction projects is carried out under the umbrella term 'New Silk Road', financed by Chinese banks, designed by Chinese construction companies and to a large part executed by Chinese workers with Chinese building materials. Accordingly, the cost estimates vary immensely ; they range from around US\$ 1,000-billion (€924-billion) up to US\$ 8,000-billion (€7,392-billion)."

But Chinese lobbying continues, apparently based on the idea of divide and rule. The Stockholm-based Institute for Security and



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The port of Piraeus in Greece



© Kiro-teatr.ru and Belarus

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis visiting the port of Piraeus on November 2019

Development Policy cites an instructive example of how Beijing works. “Beijing has for years been successfully operating on a strategy where it offers economic and financial carrots to individual EU member countries in need for investment.

For instance, through investing substantial funds into the Greek port of Piraeus, Beijing’s policymakers learned, that Greece would return the favour by, for example, vetoing a joint EU statement on human rights in China.”

The ISDP report also highlights concern over the involvement of Chinese companies run by the government, state-owned enterprises (SOE), which have in the past shown themselves to be poorly controlled and governed. “Generally, Chinese supply-driven projects are victim to waste, inefficiency and unaccountability. For these reasons, it remains to be seen whether the initiative can rise above these problems. At the same time, the structure of SOEs make these concerns even more

critical. Typically, SOEs import Chinese materials, equipment and labour. One can easily envisage how this arrangement would be ripe for tension, resentment and distrust between SOEs and local populations.” On the other hand, it could provide an extensive global trade project that will potentially cover a region of some 68 countries with a combined population of 4.4 billion people.

So what should the EU do? Nobody seems to have a coherent answer to that question, although it has been an issue for quite a long time. The Washington-based Brookings Institute, a non-profit public policy organisation, notes that: “The lack of strategy to address China’s growing role in Europe has been compounded by domestic instability within Europe. Powerful capitals including Paris, Berlin and London are mired in political turmoil or stagnation. The coming months are unlikely to produce better results. The EU will continue to face domestic and regional challenges.” From China’s perspective, it’s

clear that Beijing expects a more cooperative line from Brussels on issue such as Taiwan and Tibet, despite apparently liking the EU’s unity, even when trying to disrupt it. “Despite events including Brexit, the EU has remained committed to the direction of integration, pressed ahead with reforms in response to challenges and played a major role in regional and international affairs,” China’s EU policy document says, as quoted by the Chinese news agency Xinhuanet. “As major participants in and contributors to world multipolarity and economic globalization, China and the EU share extensive common interests in upholding world peace and stability, promoting global prosperity and sustainable development and advancing human civilization, making the two sides indispensable partners to each other’s reform and development.”

From where we all stand right now, many of us in self-imposed or legally required isolation and with the World Health Organisation warning that we may never be free from the coronavirus, it’s hard to predict any sort of future. With much vital work suspended, Planet Earth would seem to be running on empty, unless the kleptocrats’ cash reserves, hidden from tax authorities in offshore tax havens can be traced and put to use. That seems unlikely as long as so many of their friends remain in positions of power. The Belt and Road project was always meant to be long term. By the time our grandchildren are asking why it was never built after all, the world will have moved on, even if no-one can predict its direction. But in the meanwhile, expect much more arm-twisting from a China determined to punch above its already considerable weight. That way we may discover whether China more closely resembles a panda or a dragon. I suspect the latter, but a real one.

Tobias BOWMAN-GRANT



© Novinky.cz

The statue of Marshal Ivan Konev

HEROES, VILLAINS AND SPIES

The cold war heats up in Prague

Years ago, I went to Budapest to make a television programme about two men still being punished for their rôles as spies for NATO during the Soviet era. While I was there, I went to visit what is now called Memento Park (I think it was still called 'Statue Park' back then). It was - and still is - a remarkable collection of statues and memorials that had once adorned (if that's the right word) the streets of Budapest in celebration of how the Soviet Union had liberated Hungary from the Nazis. They were, well, rather peculiar, as I recall, with one I didn't understand looking remarkably like Mary Poppins in her Julie Andrews guise. I was unaware of anything remotely magical taking place there in Hungary's recent history, even if there are still some unexplained matters concerning the 1956 uprising and the way in which Russia brutally

suppressed it so quickly, its tanks already on the way well before the uprising. Back then, when I visited, various mementoes of the Communist past were still available to buy, if you knew where to look. My Hungarian cameraman kindly bought one thing from a street market on my behalf because, being Hungarian, he would get a better price than I would have got as a foreigner.

I paid him back, of course ; I think it cost US\$5. It is a small bust of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known, of course, as Lenin, a casting from an original by the Hungarian sculptor István Kiss which probably sat on the desk of some minor bureaucrat in Communist Hungary. It still sits above my desk to this day, needing just the occasional bit of buffing up with metal polish. It is a piece of history, albeit not really mine.

But statues are dangerous things because of their symbolism. Think of poor old Ozymandias, the Greek name for Rameses II, the 13th century BCE pharaoh whose shattered statue (or quite a lot of



© Edm

Bust of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov better known as Lenin



The Victory Memorial to Soviet Army in Riga, Latvia

it), found in the trackless Egyptian desert, was acquired by the British Museum in 1817. It inspired the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley to compose a poem to show how a great monarch of antiquity had almost disappeared from history, virtually forgotten. He quoted the supposed inscription to underline the futility of present power and pride: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings ; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Of course, today's 'mighty' can easily glance at the statue, if they're in London, but they may not despair. No-one in power ever really appreciates the brevity of their time in the spotlight ; all that effort to climb the slippery pole only for the next generation to forget their names and what they did. Very few are ever remembered with affection and in many cases not at all, so commemorative statues are supposed to keep them in the public mind, if not always in the public heart.

Take for example the sculpture commemorating the defeat of the Nazis that stands in Victory Park, in the Latvian capital, Riga. Its official title is the "Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders" (In Latvian it reads "Padomju Latvijas un Rīgas atbrīvotājiem no vācu fašistiskajiem iebrucējiem").

It has become a matter of some controversy because some nationalist Latvians see it as celebrating Soviet rule over their country, which was often harsh and seldom welcomed. Similarly, Tallinn's 'Bronze Soldier'

was erected by the Soviet era rulers of Estonia in 1947 to commemorate the war dead, but in 2007 the Estonian government moved it to the less prominent Defence Forces Cemetery, along with the bodies of some of the fallen who had been buried near its original location (some of the bodies were reclaimed by relatives and shipped back to their homeland) but it was considered a terrible insult in Moscow. Crowds rioted outside the Estonian embassy there and there were cyberattacks on a variety of Estonian institutions and government bodies. Tensions were raised between East and West ; both remember the war, the massive death toll and celebrate the overthrow of the Nazis. But they remember things differently.

DON'T MENTION THE WAR

It's worth remembering that Germany had organised the most powerful invasion force in history to invade Russia in Operation Barbarossa. The Hungarian army, for instance, joined those of Italy, Finland, Romania, Croatia and Slovakia, not to mention 152 divisions of the German army, in Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union. Hitler had ordered a 'Vernichtungskrieg', as he called it - a war of outright destruction with the aim of causing maximum damage and casualties, leading towards the rapid seizure of Moscow. The Soviet Union, after initially losing vast swathes of territory and hundreds of thousands of troops and civilians, fought back harder than Hitler had

expected or his intelligence services had believed possible.

Even so, the Soviet 'liberations' of Eastern Europe may not have been seen that way on the ground by everyone. One of those who led the Red Army was Ivan Stepanovich Konev, a Marshall of the Soviet Union in charge of the Eastern Front. He was the one who led the victories in much of Eastern Europe, seizing countries that had fallen to the Nazis (or were initially sympathetic to them) but not necessarily giving them the sort of freedom they may have hoped for once the swastikas had been removed. Now the removal of a memorial to Konev has led to claims of death threats and to media stories that sound more like the elements of a John Le Carré novel.

The removal of the statue was ordered by Ondrej Kolar, Mayor of Prague's Sixth District, and it was bound to provoke a reaction from Moscow, bearing in mind what happened in Tallinn and Riga. In this case, the Czech media, police and secret service suggested that Moscow had sent an assassin to kill Kolar, using the poison ricin which, the stories claimed, the assassin had brought with him in his suitcase. Another district mayor, Zdenek Hrib, supported the idea and has subsequently received death threats. A third mayor, Pavel Novotny, has also been warned that his life may be in danger for wanting to erect a memorial to the so-called 'Russian Liberation Army', a division of Soviet



Marshal of the Soviet Union Ivan Stepanovich Konev



Alexander Litvinenko dying from polonium poisoning

prisoners of war integrated into the German army who fought to liberate Prague. Moscow considers them to be Nazi collaborators.

Enter Andrei Konchakov, at which point the storey enters the realm of the surreal. Konchakov is the head of the Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Prague, but a Czech television channel and other media are claiming he is a Russian intelligence officer working undercover. The Russian embassy in Prague claimed on its Facebook page that Konchakov (whom it did not name) was the victim of an anti-Russian 'slander' campaign and that the embassy had been obliged to request police protection for him. Czech media claims that Konchakov

brought the poison ricin, a toxin that occurs naturally in the beans used to produce castor oil, in his suitcase when he arrived in Prague on 14 March. When asked about it, he told Czech media that he had been carrying a bottle of antiseptic and some confectionary.

It may all be a media scare story in the febrile political atmosphere of the Czech Republic, but the problem is that Russia has form when it comes to using deadly poisons on its perceived enemies.

In 2006, the victim was Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian spy who had fled to England and begun working for the British intelligence agency, MI5. It's now thought he

may have been poisoned twice or even three times after his first dose of radioactive poisoning with polonium-210 merely made him very ill. The two men accused of the killing, Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun, both of whom deny it, travelled to London three times before Litvinenko's death, leaving a radioactive trail wherever they went, according to investigators.

The judge who presided over the inquiry into the murder at the Royal Courts of Justice, Sir Robert Owen, has said there is prima facie evidence that the Russian state was behind it.

Then we move forward to 2018 and the attempted murders of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, in Salisbury.

The weapon of choice on this occasion was the Russian nerve agent Novichok. The Skripals survived - narrowly - but it was a clumsy attack, leaving considerable evidence at or near the scene. Seven miles north of Salisbury, in Amesbury, a man found what looked like a perfume bottle in a litter bin and gave it to the woman with him, Dawn Sturgess. She sprayed it on her wrist to try it out and died fifteen minutes later. The two suspected of carrying out the attack and named by police were later revealed in reality to be senior officers in Russia's main intelligence service, the GRU, and with different names and ranks. It's interesting that although Russia always denies murdering its citizens abroad, it always leaves a hint that its agents may, indeed, have been involved, just to frighten anyone else who might be thinking of speaking out against the Kremlin. Putin likes his citizens overseas to be frightened, to know he's a killer. And that he knows where they live.

THE PAST HAUNTS THE PRESENT

Prague was the home, of course, of Franz Kafka, a German-speaking writer of short stories and novels, such as *The Trial*, *The Castle* and *Metamorphosis*, many based upon the idea of an over-complicated bureaucracy and the impossibility of finding a way through the maze of rules, departments and faceless bureaucrats. His works gave rise



Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia



© David Sedlecký/Wikicommons

Ondrej Kolar, Mayor of Prague during the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for the monument to Maria Theresa in the park on the Powder Bridge in Prague

to the expression 'kafkaesque', meaning the helplessness of the individual, crushed by authority in an authoritarian world. If you ever go to Prague you can still visit his tiny house, very near the castle, which was a bookshop when I was there. I bought a book there about golems, which have long links with Prague and the Jewish faith. They were animated figures, made from clay and, in the stories, brought to life with holy writings. Some were good, some bad, and of indeterminate gender. They are most closely associated with the 16th century Rabbi of Prague, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, who is supposed to have created a golem out of clay from the banks of the Vltava River and brought it to life to defend the Prague ghetto from anti-Semitic attacks and from pogroms. Kafka would have

appreciated, perhaps (or at least not been surprised by) the widening rift between the Czech Republic (part of Bohemia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in his day) and Russia over something as seemingly trivial as a bronze statue. The entire affair fits the word 'Kafkaesque' rather well.

The first time I went to Prague was not long before the Czech Republic joined the European Union. I had hired a local camera crew (cameraman and sound recordist) and I had to visit the new European Union representation there, where a reception was being held for the great and the good of Prague, the country's political people, hosted by the EU's administrative people. As we pulled up at the address, my cameraman uttered an exclamation of surprise. "What's up?" I asked.

He told me it had been the Cultural Centre of Russian arts and sciences in the Soviet period and that he had filmed there many times before. We entered, he filmed a lot of Czech politicians sipping sparkling wine (I don't think it was real champagne but it could have been) with their European Union hosts before the background of a large sculpture featuring a rippling European flag. In other words, one that looked as if it was flapping in the wind but which was, in fact, rigid, hanging, it seems, just where a large Soviet flag had once been. We spent some time there, I interviewed a few people and then we left. "Well," I said to the cameraman, "has the place changed much?" The cameraman shrugged. "The flag's a different colour," was his only answer.

Konev, though, is a divisive figure. Yes, he helped drive the Nazis out of the places they had seized in Eastern Europe and he was deputy to Marshall Georgy Zhukov in the capture of Berlin. But as far as many Czechs are concerned, he didn't bring them liberty, just an alternative form of occupation and foreign domination, albeit less ghastly than the Nazis. He was also involved in suppressing the Hungarian uprising against Russian rule in 1956 and for preparing the suppression of the 'Prague Spring' in 1968, not to mention assisting with control in East Germany during the building of the Berlin Wall.

A hero of Soviet Communism, then, but not of the West, at least once World War II was over. Not hugely admired, either, in the European countries that became part of the Soviet power bloc, as my cameraman commented when I asked what it was like in the days of Soviet rule. He thought for a moment, then said "My father was forced to learn German when the Nazis were in charge. I was forced to learn Russian when their people took over. I want to make damned sure that my son speaks Czech."

The statue to Konev, erected in 1980, had been vandalised repeatedly and daubed with graffiti, which is theoretically why it was proposed to move it from the leafy and relatively wealthy residential District 6, home to several embassies, to a less central (some might say less visible) place. Opinion about the Soviet era is much divided in the Czech Republic, as it is



© Wikipedia

Protestors encircle two Soviet tanks, during the first days of the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia in 1968

in many other supposedly 'liberated' countries. Moscow, however, saw the move as 'vandalism' which would "not remain without an appropriate response". Russia may be a very long way philosophically from its Communist past but it's determined to see the heroes of the Soviet Union honoured for ever, even if they're turning in their graves at what Russia has become. Today's outraged oligarchs and United Russia apparatchiks and party members would probably have appalled Konev and Zhukov, both of whom were devoted Communists who attended regular political refresher classes throughout their lives, even - in Zhukov's case - when he was out of favour with the Kremlin and in internal exile. Zhukov's statue, an equestrian one, is situated appropriately in Red Square, near Lenin's tomb and the Kremlin. It has been erected since I was last in Moscow and no-one would seriously challenge the suitability of its existence or positioning.

POISONING RELATIONSHIPS

But let's get back to the Czech statue problem and Andrey Konchakov who, though born in Moscow, has been working in the Czech Republic for several years, according to the media, only being granted diplomatic status last year. He has denied being a spy and that he brought ricin into the country, but then he would, wouldn't he? He graduated from the National Research Nuclear University and would appear to an academic with wide interests that don't appear dangerous. However, his arrival in

Prague flashed a warning light with the Czech security service, the BIS, which warned the Czech police that he could be a danger to local politicians. How did they know? No-one is saying, but the mayors remain under police protection, as does Konchakov, who, according to the Russian embassy, also feels under threat. What he has become is a symbol of Russia's determination to hold sway over those countries that were once its satellites and also of the deep political divide in the Czech Republic itself.

The President of the country is Miloš Zeman, a controversial populist who wants to break away from the human rights-based foreign policy inherited from the first post-Communist President, Vaclav Havel, and move instead towards strengthening ties with Russia and China, instead of with NATO and the European Union. Zeman opposed the moving of the statue and his spokesman criticised the operation taking place during the coronavirus crisis. Prague authorities said it was the ideal time because there would be fewer people in the streets and less risk of protests or violence. There is supposed to be a form of lockdown in Russia, too, but that didn't prevent attacks by masked nationalist extremists on the Czech embassy in Moscow or its consulate in St. Petersburg. The Kremlin remained silent about the attacks, during which violent demonstrators called the Czechs "whores" and who threatened that Russian tanks would again roll through the streets of Prague, saying "Russia is everything,



Václav Havel with former leader of the 1968 Prague Spring, Alexander Dubček in Prague for the visit of the late Pope John Paul II

the rest is nothing," which makes even Stalin's proclamations seem mild. They also accused the Czechs of "justifying Nazism".

Dissident leader-turned-president Vaclav Havel confers with Alexander Dubcek, by then.

Indeed, rather than denounce the violence, the Kremlin rushed a law through the Duma to say that the destruction or damage of Russian military graves or war memorials would be punishable by a massive fine or up to five years of forced labour. How exactly they intend to impose this extraterritorial legislation is left unsaid. Perhaps the thugs who threatened Prague with Russian tanks know more than they're saying. Meanwhile, the Russian embassy wrote a letter to the Czech authorities, accusing them of trying to worsen Russian-Czech relations through this act of "vandalism" which "would not remain without a response".

One assumes that Russia knows that the whole issue with the statue is to do with internal Czech politics and nothing to do with insulting a famous Russian or trying to affect relations. Russia, however, seems to find the prospect of turning such things into a patriotic '*cri de cœur*' irresistible. Russia likes to be scary and its attempts at imposing its will extra-territorially is what lies behind problems on Moldova's northern border and in Eastern Ukraine. Of course, it has its allies, usually well organised, throughout



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President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman



U.S. President Barack Obama signing the Magnitsky Act into law in the White House's Oval Office in December 2012

its former sphere of influence. The Czech Communist Party, for instance, described the removal of the vandalised statue as “brutal and amoral” and that to do so during the coronavirus lockdown was “cowardly”. That view has been shared and much publicised by President Zeman, although the decision to move the statue was passed by the local council in September last year. The plan was to install it, safe from vandalism, in a new “Museum of the Twentieth Century”, planned for next January. Where the statue formerly stood, the idea is to erect a Prague Liberation Memorial. As if to pour oil on the fire, however, Prague mayor Zdenek Hrib is to rename the square where the Russian embassy stands after Boris Nemtsov, anti-Putin opposition leader who was murdered in the streets of Moscow. Putin’s way of dealing with his opponents is not what you would call political, unless arguments come out of the barrel of a gun. As long as Russian politics is, as Mao might have put it, “politics with bloodshed” (he wrote that politics is war without bloodshed and war is politics with bloodshed) then we can’t really expect more grown-up politics from its neighbours. But it would seem sensible to douse the flames, rather than poking Russian pride with a sharp stick.

LET’S ALL GET INVOLVED

The unfortunate affair has prompted criticism from afar, especially over Russia’s claim to extraterritorial jurisdiction. As the Washington-based German Marshall Fund of the

United States (GMF) put it, “People acting in good faith and in line with the jurisdiction of their own country could still be punished in Russia under it”. It advises caution for anyone travelling to Russia or a Russia-friendly country in case they are arrested. The new law, it argues “is also inappropriate in light of the way Russia treats war memorials and graves of other countries on its own territory.” GMF points out that despite an agreement between Russia and the Czech Republic signed in 1999 over the mutual maintenance of war graves, those of Czech legionnaires killed in Russia during the First World War are untended and “in the highest state



Sergei Magnitsky

of deterioration”. The GMF wants to see the Magnitsky Act applied by more countries, and more fully, to punish those who abuse and breach their own and international law. It was signed into United States law by Barack Obama in 2012 and the EU is in the process of imposing it in Europe, too, although the coronavirus crisis will undoubtedly delay it. Sergei Magnitsky, you may recall, was a senior accountant working for a British firm as an auditor who, in 2008, found evidence of a \$230-million (€213-million) corruption scandal with links to the Kremlin. While he was still investigating, he was accused of tax evasion, imprisoned without trial for a year, denied his medicines and regularly beaten by prison guards. He died in his cell in 2009. Nobody linked to his death (which many categorise as murder) has ever faced justice in Russia but a few have been promoted.

Russia still wants to rattle its sabres, although Russia’s central bank has been forced to cut its benchmark interest rate by half a percentage point to 5.5% as the economy suffers from the double blow of a collapse in the oil price and a slump in demand for other commodities. Meanwhile its death toll from the coronavirus has reached more than 10,000 a day. One of those who has tested positive is the prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin. Its room for manoeuvre may be shrinking, but that won’t stop the jingoistic rhetoric and threats. It has no legal jurisdiction in the Czech Republic or anywhere outside its own borders, of course, but it continues to act as if it does. Why use the subtle art of persuasion when a threat of violence does the trick and has the added bonus of stirring up another country’s domestic politics?

But back to the row over a statue. Russia’s Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu has now called on his Czech counterpart, Lubomir Metnar, to give the statue back to Russia, with the Russians generously picking up the tab for transporting it.

Metnar, however, has reported that he cannot override the Prague municipal authorities ; it’s their statue to dispose of as they see fit. Handing it back to Russia does



© army.cz

Czech Defence Minister Lubomir Metnar



© kremlin.ru

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Vladimir Putin

sound like a sensible solution, if the various civic figures can be persuaded. At least back there it won't (presumably) suffer regular vandalism. Konev's daughter has also expressed a wish for the statue to be returned. Russia is justifiably proud of its war record and of its soldiers, whatever they may have done after the war was won. Russia lost more of its troops - around twenty-six million - and it also killed more Nazi soldiers than any other allied nation. My own father mainly served in East Africa as a Military Policeman but my father-in-law, who was a British 'Tommy' fighting across Europe always said that in his opinion, and in the opinions of his fellow-soldiers, it was Russia that won the war, more than any other nation. It paid the highest price but it also achieved the most in putting an end to the obscenity of Nazism.

Konchakov himself has not been helping to dampen the anger that the moving of the statue has caused, posting on his Facebook site fairly provocative photographs of the boards around the original site with pro-Russian protesters waving flags. He has also appeared in photographs taken before the statue was removed, posing with the Russian motorcycle gang the Night Wolves in front of the Konev statue. Russia has more diplomats in the Czech Republic than in any of its other former satellites and Prague believes as many as 40% of them could be spies. Of course, there's no way to know if that's true. Meanwhile, the vandalism continues. The boards erected around the plinth where the statue stood now bear the words "Koněv = vrah", which means Konev = assassin, hardly a friendly message. Society and opinion in the Czech

Republic, always divided, seem to be fracturing further, but that, of course, plays into Moscow's hands. The Kremlin seems to subscribe to the Biblical claim that "If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand" (St. Mark, Ch. 3, v. 25). And it will continue in its endeavour to make the division deeper, presumably hoping that if it does fall, it will fall Moscow's way.

Konev undoubtedly did rout the German forces from the Czech Republic, with or without the help of others. But he replaced one lot of external control by a foreign power with another. In any case, it seems unnecessary and somewhat extreme to threaten to go to war over where Konev's statue stands. It's history. Over-reaction on either side can only serve to destabilise things further. The Roman poet Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus)



© ČTK

Miloš Zeman and Vladimir Putin

warned that "Force, unaided by judgement, collapses through its own weight". That could be a useful aphorism for Putin to take to heart, though it's highly unlikely that he will. But if Konev had been a liberator who went on to ensure the Czech Republic's continuing freedom, instead of enforcing its continuation under Soviet rule and then later helping to suppress an attempt to escape from under it, the people would have loved him and kept him in their collective memory, regardless of statues. He could himself have quoted Horace with confidence: "Exegi monumentum aere perennius" - "I have erected a monument more lasting than bronze".

Jim Gibbons



© gov.ru

Russian diplomat Andrei Konchakov



© Roche

ROCHE'S COVID-19 ANTIBODY TEST RECEIVES FDA EMERGENCY USE AUTHORIZATION AND IS AVAILABLE IN MARKETS ACCEPTING THE CE MARK

- The serology test has a specificity greater than 99.8% and sensitivity of 100% (14 Days post-PCR confirmation)
- The high specificity of the test is crucial to determine reliably if a person has been exposed to the virus and if the patient has developed antibodies
- Roche will provide high double-digit millions of tests already in May for countries accepting the CE mark and in the U.S. under Emergency Use Authorization, further ramping up capacities thereafter
- The test is available on Roche's cobas e analysers which are widely available around the world

Roche announced that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has issued an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) for its new Elecsys® Anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibody test. The test is designed to help determine if a patient has been exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and if the patient has developed antibodies against SARS-CoV-2. Roche has already started shipping the new antibody test to leading laboratories globally and will ramp up production capacity to

high double-digit millions per month to serve healthcare systems in countries accepting the CE mark as well as the U.S.

“Thanks to the enormous efforts of our dedicated colleagues we are now able to deliver a high-quality antibody test in high quantities, so we can support healthcare systems around the world with an important tool to better manage the COVID-19 health crisis,” said Severin Schwan, CEO Roche Group. “I am in particular pleased about the high specificity and sensitivity of our test,

which is crucial to support health care systems around the world with a reliable tool to better manage the COVID-19 health crisis.”

“Our best scientists have worked 24/7 over the last few weeks and months to develop a highly reliable antibody test to help fight this pandemic,” said Thomas Schinecker, CEO Roche Diagnostics. “Roche is committed to helping laboratories deliver fast, accurate, and reliable results to healthcare professionals and their patients.”



© Fda

Roche's SARS-CoV2 antibody test, which has a specificity greater than 99.8% and 100% sensitivity (14 Days post-PCR confirmation), can help assess patients' immune response to the virus. As more is understood about immunity to SARS-CoV-2, the test may help to assess who has built up immunity to the virus.

With extensive global manufacturing capabilities, Roche will be able to deliver high double-digit millions of tests per month. Hospitals and reference laboratories can run the test on Roche's cobas e analysers, which are widely available around the world.

For countries with specific regulatory requirements, local approval timelines apply. In addition there may be other country-specific regulations, such as import requirements, which will determine when the test becomes available locally. Roche will work closely with the respective regional representatives to ensure we appropriately support local registration efforts.

ABOUT ANTIBODY TESTING

An antibody test, also called a serology test, is used to determine whether a person might have gained immunity against a pathogen or not. The human body makes antibodies in response to many illnesses. In the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, antibody tests need to be able to specifically detect antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 with no cross-reactivity to other similar coronaviruses, which could generate a false positive result and thus wrongly indicate potential immunity. A false positive result happens when a person

receives a positive test result, when they should have received a negative result. False positives are particularly critical when we do not know how many people in a given population have had COVID-19. As of 24 April 2020, no study has evaluated whether the presence of antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 confers immunity to subsequent infection by this virus in humans.

ABOUT ELECSYS ANTI-SARS-COV-2 SEROLOGY TEST

Elecsys® Anti-SARS-CoV-2 is an immunoassay for the in-vitro qualitative detection of antibodies (including IgG) to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in human serum and plasma. Through a blood sample, the test, which is based on an in-solution double-antigen sandwich format, can detect antibodies to the new coronavirus causing COVID-19, which could signal whether a person has already been infected and potentially developed immunity to the virus. Based on the measurement of a total of 5272 samples, the Elecsys® Anti-SARS-CoV-2 assay has 99.81% specificity and shows no cross-reactivity to the four human coronaviruses causing common cold. This means it can lower the chance of false positives due to the detection of similar antibodies that may be present in an individual, but are specific for coronaviruses other than SARS-CoV-2. Elecsys® Anti-SARS-CoV-2 detected antibodies with 100% sensitivity in samples taken 14 days after a PCR-confirmed infection. The importance of specificity and sensitivity of a particular test will be dependent on its purpose and disease prevalence within a given population.

Hospitals and reference laboratories can run the test on Roche's cobas e analysers, which are widely available around the world. These fully automated systems can provide SARS-CoV-2 test results in approximately 18 minutes for one single test, with a test throughput of up to 300 tests/hour, depending on the analyser.

ABOUT ROCHE

Roche is a global pioneer in pharmaceuticals and diagnostics focused on advancing science to improve people's lives. The combined strengths of pharmaceuticals and diagnostics under one roof have made Roche the leader in personalised healthcare – a strategy that aims to fit the right treatment to each patient in the best way possible.

Roche is the world's largest biotech company, with truly differentiated medicines in oncology, immunology, infectious diseases, ophthalmology and diseases of the central nervous system. Roche is also the world leader in in vitro diagnostics and tissue-based cancer diagnostics, and a frontrunner in diabetes management.

Founded in 1896, Roche continues to search for better ways to prevent, diagnose and treat diseases and make a sustainable contribution to society. The company also aims to improve patient access to medical innovations by working with all relevant stakeholders. More than thirty medicines developed by Roche are included in the World Health Organization Model Lists of Essential Medicines, among them life-saving antibiotics, antimalarials and cancer medicines. Moreover, for the eleventh consecutive year, Roche has been recognised as one of the most sustainable companies in the Pharmaceuticals Industry by the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices (DJSI).

The Roche Group, headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, is active in over 100 countries and in 2019 employed about 98,000 people worldwide. In 2019, Roche invested CHF 11.7 billion in R&D and posted sales of CHF 61.5 billion. Genentech, in the United States, is a wholly owned member of the Roche Group. Roche is the majority shareholder in Chugai Pharmaceutical, Japan.



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Aircraft cabin with disruptive biotechnology solutions for aviation security operations

BOMB-SNIFFING ELECTRONIC NOSES TO DETECT COVID-19 IN AIRPORTS AND AIRPLANES

Airbus and Koniku Inc. have made a significant step forward in the co-development of a solution for aircraft and airport security operations by extending research activities to include biological hazard detection capabilities, as well as chemical and explosive threats.

The disruptive biotechnology solution, which was originally focused on the contactless and automated detection, tracking and location of chemicals and explosives on-board aircraft and in airports, is now being adapted in light of the COVID-19 crisis to include the identification of biological hazards.

Based on the power of odor detection and quantification found in nature, the technical solution, developed to meet the rigorous operational regulatory requirements of aircraft and airport security operations, uses genetically engineered odorant receptors that produce an alarm signal when they come into contact with the molecular compounds of the hazard or threat that they have been programmed to detect.

“The technology has a very quick response time of under 10 seconds in best conditions,” Julien Touzeau, head of product security for the Americas at Airbus, told the Financial Times. “With this level of maturity it’s an incredible result and hopefully it will improve over time.”

Airbus and Koniku Inc. entered into a cooperation agreement in 2017, leveraging Airbus’ expertise in sensor integration and knowledge of ground and on-board



© Airbus

Koniku's sensors

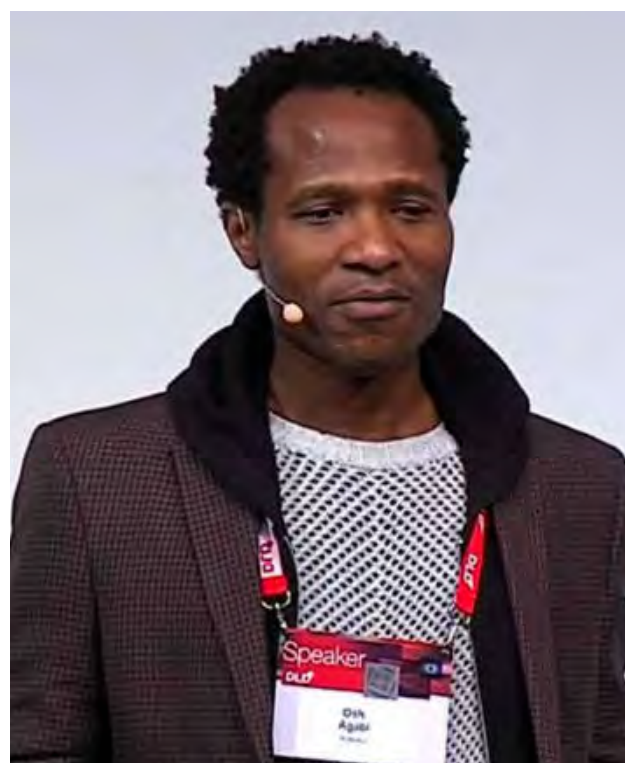
security operations within the aviation and defense industries, as well as Koniku's biotechnology know-how for automated and scalable volatile organic compound detection (via their Konikore™ platform).

"We are now adapting our development activities to include the detection and identification of biological hazards including pathogens such as the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 with encouraging signals as of today. COVID 19 is a warning shot and it cannot be business as usual," says Osh. Agabi, founder & CEO, Koniku Inc.

According to M. Agabi "Most infections and diseases cause slight changes to the composition of our breath and sweat, which then produce distinct odors. If we can detect those odors, we can detect the presence of those infections. This approach has been demonstrated successfully with cancer-smelling dogs, and detecting influenza A in breath. However, training dogs to sniff out the specific, subtle smell indicating any given disease is time consuming, unreliable and expensive. The smell-cyborgs we are building have that same ability to detect the presence of organic volatile compounds and small variations in people's breath."

"Our technology, which is being developed to meet the rigorous regulatory requirements of airport security operations, uses genetically engineered odorant receptors. Those receptors screen molecules in the air and produce a signal when they come into contact with the molecular compounds of the hazard or threat that they have been programmed to detect. » Furthermore M. Agabi asserts "by programming the DNA of the cells that make up these receptors to react to the compounds that appear in infected people's breath or sweat, we believe we will be able to quickly and reliably screen for COVID-19 and determine whether a person is infected."

According to Airbus: "With in-situ testing planned for Q4 2020, Airbus is demonstrating its ability to accelerate traditional research cycles in a real-time environment in order to develop and bring to market a game-changing, end-to-end, security solution at convincing scale and speed, thereby contributing to the continuous improvement of security in the air transport ecosystem, while increasing operational efficiency and improving passenger experience."



Osh. Agabi, founder & CEO, Koniku Inc

THE CORONA FINANCIAL IMPACT

Hoping for a restored confidence in the economy

With the great lockdown behind us, in the second phase of the pandemic we step outside and look the fire breathing dragon in the eye, trying to assess from which direction the wind will blow.

The total Corona cases have doubled since last month to officially 5,610,000 worldwide with officially 348,322 lives taken. The USA, Brazil and Russia are on top of the table while China - according to official numbers - has dropped from the 9th position to the 14th position after Iran, India, Peru and Canada as I am writing.

The most recent polls show Joe Biden getting ahead of Donald Trump by 48-40 with 11% undecided, and a 42.9% approval rating of how Trump is handling the Corona crisis versus 49% in the previous month. Putin's popularity rating is on a steep decline to 59% versus 69% in February, and Brazil's Bolsonaro is coming heavily under fire. Since the crisis he has lost two health ministers, one was fired, the other one resigned and his opponents are calling for his impeachment. The Chinese communist party on the other hand recently held their big annual agenda summit in which they told people that everything is normal in China, and that they have defeated the Covid-19, capitalizing their popular image especially compared to the US and the UK's disastrous response to the crisis. On the other hand the European Union has called out the World Health Organization "WHO" for an independent investigation into the origins of the

deadly disease, however given the controversies linked to the role of China and WHO around the pandemic one may wonder to what extent one or the other will be ready to answer some very legitimate questions. The ongoing rooster fight over who did what and who did it the best is actually a disguise on the geopolitical power struggle and eventually a reshuffle of the cards that is going on since March - see the article of the last issue "The Geopolitics of the Corona" - with repercussions that the average citizen will notice in the long term only when the dust has settled.

The average citizen, while trying to navigate in the unknown waters is in some cases developing a growing scepticism and a certain rebelliousness to each directive coming from the central power characterized by a lack of confidence in the system, and for now is solely focused on the economies of daily life and its outlook in the near future.

Governments would like people to spend as they did before the pandemic, however the spending will depend on the employment, and the employment will depend on the economy, and the economy will depend on whether or not there is going to be a vaccine to tame the beast.

Nevertheless with no vaccine in sight for the time being, the current conditions are likely to prevail so far for the rest of 2020, with the innovation and cash the only options for relief.



© Shealah Craighead/jpg

US President Donald Trump



© Daniel Schwen/Wikicommons

Former Vice President Joe Biden

The looming impact of the Corona on the economy is manifested by a shrinking global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The figures are out and they are not rosy: the American GDP shows a decline of 4.8% in the first quarter of 2020, while the Euro-zone economy has contracted by 3.8% over the same time period. For the first three months of the year the French, Spanish, Italian, and German economies have reported a decline by respectively 5.8%, 5.2%, 4.7%, and 2.2%, with Germany reporting its largest monthly fall in retail turnover since 2007.

With a drop of 5.8%, France reports its largest GDP drop since 1949, knocked down by 8 weeks of lockdown. The fall appears like a monster compared to the -1.6% during the debt crisis of 2009, and more severe than the -5.3% of 1968 caused by 10 million workers going on a nationwide strike for ten weeks. All those drinks and meals that people didn't order, all those things and services they didn't buy, all those entertainment facilities that they didn't enjoy, all those trade deals and investments that were cancelled or postponed, all those travel and holiday spendings that did not happen under the lockdown, seem to have been more fatal to the economy than a global debt crisis and a paralyzing general strike that even made it to the history books.



Building complex of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt am Main, Germany

China on the other hand, in an unusual move has ditched its 2020 growth target for the first time since 1994 - ever since it began revealing its GDP objectives (usually 6%). While the extent of the Covid-19 impact on the Chinese economy is unknown, we already have a brutal 6.8% drop of its GDP for the first quarter of 2020.

These gloomy GDP numbers so far cover the first quarter of the year, and we still have nine months to go to reach the final outcome over one complete cycle. Economists are expecting an estimated fall of 2.4% of the World GDP

in 2020 with -5.2% in the US and -7.3% in the Eurozone, and thus a confrontation with a short-term recession that may be around the corner.

But while the economy in the near future looks like an empty desert, the S&P Global Ratings Economists forecast a rebound in the global growth by 5.9% in 2021. Historical data from the previous pandemics show that in those cases most of the effects were confined within the first three to four months after the outbreak of the pandemic: in case of SARS in Hong Kong in 2003, the economy was severely impacted in the second quarter, but the third and fourth quarters saw a prompt recovery (GDP 1% up versus the previous year) and in case of the Spanish flu in 1918-19, in Canada the retail sales jumped suddenly 8% in January 1919 after four months of negative growth.

First of all we should bear in mind that the ultra weak consumption rate caused by the great lock-down is in fact



a positive shock on savings, which will partly be spent in the quarters following the pandemic. Also the reallocation of consumption from one quarter to another, a well-known consequence of major disasters, will surprise us in the recovery phase. For example the 9/11 terrorist attack led to a substantial reallocation of consumption from the third to the fourth quarter in 2001.

According to the ECB, the French have saved nearly 20blnEUR in March, taking the total savings currently to more than 60blnEUR since the lockdown started. Italian households have put aside 2.8blnEUR, the Spanish 10.1blnEUR, and in the UK bank deposits have jumped to 13.1bln£. Only in Germany bank deposits have dropped as it appears the Germans like to have their savings in cash with them in times of crisis, hence the bank withdrawals. With these savings piled up, the German insurer Allianz sees a total of 400blnEUR extra savings by the end of the year, which amounts to 3% of the EU economy.

Even the Americans have learnt to save. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis, the total dollars held in saving deposits has jumped to 10.2trillion dollars, up 4.4% from March to April, regardless of the 2% drop of the personal incomes nationwide in the recent months.



To help people start spending, a 2.3 trillion dollars of the stimulus package is being deployed by the US Federal reserve, while in Europe the members of the European Parliament are calling for a €2 trillion recovery fund, made out of public and private investments. The funding is supposed to come from clean sources, such as taxing tech and digital giants and major polluting companies.

On the other hand according to the Financial Times, with the Coronavirus the world's richest economies will be facing at least 17 trillion dollars in public debt. The government liabilities of the OECD countries have risen from 109% to 137% this year, and it will continue due to aid packages and the fall in tax revenues. But again the governments can sell their public debt on the markets, and this is when the piled-up savings come in handy. For example in Italy last week in a record-breaking €22bn of bond issue, €14bn was bought directly by retail investors, showing that the extra household cash has found its way into the local bond market, relieving the government debt.

A while ago the subject of Corona bonds was brought up in Europe. Some member states such as Italy, France and Spain were in favor of issuing mutualised European debt papers to raise money on the markets and so to say find a common solution to a common problem, to dismay of the northern and richer member states who categorically refuse to burden the debt of their poorer neighbours in the EU within their conservative fiscal policies. The concept of the Corona bonds, taboo for some and an excellent solution for others, has ever since become a divisive factor in the EU.

Italy claims to have lost faith in the EU altogether considering the lack of support of the member states in recent months, accusing the Netherlands of lack of solidarity. In another open letter to Italian mayors and regional governors accused the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte of not being ethical in the current crisis. But on May 18th in an unprecedented move Macron and Merkel announced a Marshall plan of 500 billion Euro aid package to be borrowed on the financial markets and to be dispersed into the European economies, especially

those that are the hardest hit by the Coronavirus (Italy and Spain).

Under this plan, M&M propose a grant, meaning that the member states receiving the funds will not have to repay in cash but that their liabilities would be added to the EU budget to which each member state's contribution varies depending on the size and the state of their economy. The plan is still in foundation as the 27 member states should first agree on the grant characteristic of the aid package. Recently the "Frugal four" – The Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Finland presented their counter-offer to the Franco-German initiative; the aid money must be repaid. The ball is now in the court of the Commission, to be continued.

A restored confidence in the Europe project may be on the way or not, depending on to what extent the European neighbours manage to agree on their money, and a common political approach. Just like the BRICs that developed from an economic unit into a political block, the European project needs a similar approach.

The US on the other hand who has been through a rough struggle with the Coronavirus, may or may not come out of this like an American hero, depending on to what extent they manage to curb the toll on human lives and the economy. Last but not least China, amid its ambitions to dominate the world seriously and literally, may or may not benefit from the timing, depending on whether or not they will win the ongoing cold war.

With all the cash and innovation that are going to be deployed in the real economy in the coming months, there is a good probability that the West will be able to absorb the shock post-Covid, provided that the health policies put in place by the central governments start to kick in and the pandemic stays limited in time. The piled up household savings and the direct government interventions are the luxuries the rich countries can enjoy to fix the damages of a pandemic. The rest of the world however leads a very different life, which we will discuss in the next issue.

Vianne Savoli '

NEWS IN BRIEF

HONGKONG AIRPORT IS THE FIRST IN THE WORLD TO INSTALL A FULL BODY DISINFECTION DEVICE

Persons using the facility will have a temperature check before entering an enclosed channel for the 40-second disinfection and sanitizing procedures

Airport Authority Hong Kong (AA) is applying the latest disinfection technologies, including disinfection channels, antimicrobial coating and autonomous cleaning robots, at Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) to protect passengers and airport staff from COVID-19 infection.

HKIA is the world's first airport where "CLEanTech", a full-body disinfection channel facility, is trialled in live operation. Persons using the facility will have a temperature check before entering an enclosed channel for the 40-second disinfection and sanitizing procedures. The interior surface of the channel is equipped with antimicrobial coating which can remotely kill virus and bacteria on human bodies and clothing by using the technologies of photocatalyst and "nano needles". Sanitizing spray is also applied for instant disinfection. The channel is kept under negative pressure to prevent

cross-contamination between the outside and inside environment. Currently, the facility is designated for use by staff who take part in public health and quarantine duties at the airport in relation to arriving passengers.

Meanwhile, the AA is conducting a pilot test of applying antimicrobial coating at all passenger facilities. An invisible coating to destroy germs, bacteria and viruses is applied to high-touch surfaces in the terminal, including handles and seats of Automated People Movers and passenger buses, smart check-in kiosks and check-in counters, toilets, seating area in the terminal, baggage trolleys, elevator buttons, and more. After completion of the trial in May, the AA will consider implementing it as a long term disinfection measure.

Autonomous cleaning robots are also deployed to ensure thorough disinfection of public areas and passenger facilities in HKIA. Intelligent Sterilization Robot, equipped with ultra violet light sterilizer and air sterilizer, is deployed round-the-clock in public toilets and key operating areas in the terminal building. The robot can move around autonomously and sterilize up to 99.99% of bacteria in its vicinity, including both the air and object surfaces, in just 10 minutes.



MORE US ACTIONS AGAINST HUAWEI

The Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) announced plans to protect U.S. national security by restricting Huawei's ability to use U.S. technology and software to design and manufacture its semiconductors abroad. This announcement cuts off Huawei's efforts to undermine U.S. export controls. BIS is amending its longstanding foreign-produced direct product rule and the Entity List to narrowly and strategically target Huawei's acquisition of semiconductors that are the direct product of certain U.S. software and technology.

Since 2019 when BIS added Huawei Technologies and 114 of its overseas-related affiliates to the Entity List, companies wishing to export U.S. items were required to obtain a license. However, Huawei has continued to use U.S. software and technology to design semiconductors, undermining the national security and foreign policy purposes of the Entity List by commissioning their production in overseas foundries using U.S. equipment.

"Despite the Entity List actions the Department took last year, Huawei and its foreign affiliates have stepped-up efforts to undermine these national security-based restrictions through an indigenization effort. However, that effort is still dependent on U.S. technologies," said Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross. "This is not how a responsible global corporate citizen behaves. We must amend our rules exploited by Huawei and HiSilicon and prevent U.S. technologies from enabling malign activities contrary to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests."

Specifically, this targeted rule change will make the following foreign-produced items subject to the Export Administration Regulations (EAR):

- (i) Items, such as semiconductor designs, when produced by Huawei and its affiliates on the Entity List (e.g., HiSilicon), that are the direct product of certain U.S. Commerce Control List (CCL) software and technology ; and
- (ii) Items, such as chipsets, when produced from the design specifications of Huawei or an affiliate on the Entity List (e.g., HiSilicon), that are the direct product of certain CCL semiconductor manufacturing equipment located outside the United States. Such foreign-produced items will only require a license when there is knowledge that they are destined for reexport, export from abroad, or transfer (in-



Huawei Technology in Shenzhen, China

country) to Huawei or any of its affiliates on the Entity List.

To prevent immediate adverse economic impacts on foreign foundries utilizing U.S. semiconductor manufacturing equipment that have initiated any production step for items based on Huawei design specifications as of May 15, 2020, such foreign-produced items are not subject to these new licensing requirements so long as they are reexported, exported from abroad, or transferred (in-country) by 120 days from the effective date.

AGENCY KICKS OFF WORK ON BULGARIAN NATO COMBAT IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM UPGRADE

The NATO Communications and Information (NCI) Agency has begun work on a project to upgrade several of Bulgaria's air defence radars, aircraft and naval vessels to the new NATO Combat Identification System.

Equipment using the current standard, Mode 4, must be upgraded to Mode 5. In time, Mode 5 will be used for all NATO operations.

Bulgaria's Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the NCI Agency signed in November 2019 a technical arrangement and a statement of work. The Agency held a kick-off meeting in January 2020 in Sofia, Bulgaria, to begin the project.

The Agency, who is the acquisition agent for Bulgaria, will acquire the Mode 5 upgrade for various platforms: 16 air defence radars, six Navy vessels, six helicopters and two transport aircraft.

"This is a challenge faced by many NATO Nations, as Mode 4 is being phased out of operations. We are happy to support Bulgaria in their investment in technology to improve NATO operations," said Rene Thaens, Head of the Electronic Warfare and Sensors Branch of the NCI Agency. The Electronic Warfare and Sensors Branch of the Agency runs this project.

The project is funded by the Bulgarian MoD, and currently has a value of 10.3 million EUR for phase 1, which is focused on priority upgrades. With the addition of a second



US Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross



phase to upgrade additional platforms, the value of the project will increase further. The next milestone is the end of the feasibility study in which the details of phase 2 will be defined.

The air defence radars will be upgraded first, and are expected to be completed at the end of 2020.

NIST TOOL COULD HELP HOSPITALS REPURPOSE ROOMS FOR DISINFECTING N95 MASKS

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals across the United States are disinfecting N95 masks by placing them in repurposed rooms or shipping containers injected with a disinfectant known as vaporized hydrogen peroxide, or VHP. A new tool from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) can help hospitals and medical professionals determine which rooms should be used to disinfect N95 masks. The tool estimates the amount of VHP masks would receive and suggests that larger rooms containing fewer objects, with less-reactive surfaces and slower ventilation, maintain VHP concentration the best.

“Hospitals have used VHP systems to disinfect isolation rooms after a highly infectious person has left,” said Andrew Persily, chief of NIST’s Energy and Environment Division. “Now there are efforts underway to do the same to disinfect masks.”

For hospitals, choosing and configuring rooms to house the N95 disinfection processes means accounting for conditions that vary from room to room, such as size, airflow and surface materials. These factors influence VHP concentration and, in certain cases, could prevent masks from receiving effective doses.

“Even if you’re hitting a room with a huge dose of VHP and you’re assuming it’s all going on your masks, a lot of it may be going on your walls or ceiling,” said Dustin Poppendieck, a NIST environmental engineer and the developer of the new tool. “Then you might not be disinfecting as effectively as you think.”

VHP’s interactions with various materials came into focus for Poppendieck in the early 2000s, before he joined NIST, when he studied the chemical’s ability to disinfect post office rooms containing anthrax-causing bacteria.

Those experiments revealed that VHP deposits onto certain surfaces much more readily than others. For example, tile floors consume much less VHP than does carpet, which can reduce the VHP concentration in a room by as much as 10 times.

Now, the data from those experiments has become the foundation of the new NIST tool — packaged into a spreadsheet — that models where VHP settles after being injected into a room.

By entering important parameters related to a room’s size, materials and ventilation into the spreadsheet, users get estimates of how much VHP would actually deposit onto the masks versus being lost through leaks or absorbed by surfaces, Poppendieck said.

The tool can help hospitals and other institutions make more informed decisions when choosing and adapting rooms for mask disinfection. However, it is not a one-stop shop, Poppendieck cautioned. Facility management, safety professionals and infection control experts would still need to work together to determine how to apply VHP safely and effectively.

“It should be a unified approach if you’re going to do this, and this tool is just one small piece of the puzzle to figure out how to appropriately disinfect masks using VHP,” Poppendieck said.



Masks being decontaminated: Credit Courtesy of Battelle



N95 Particulate Respirator Mask with Valve

NEWLY ACCREDITED EUROPEAN AMBASSADORS



© gov.ua

H.E. Mrs Natacha Díaz Aguilera, Ambassador of the Republic of Cuba presents her Letter of Credence to President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky



H.E. Mrs Gloria Navarrete(left), Ambassador of the Republic of Chile presents her Letter of Credence to Nataša Prah, Head of Diplomatic Protocol of the Republic of Slovenia Nataša Prah (right)



H.E. Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Belarus H.E. Mr. Anatoly Kalinin presents his Letter of Credence to the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, Dumitru Socolan



Ambassador of Iceland, H.E. Mr. Gudmundur Arni Stefansson presents his Letter of Credence to the President of Nepal, Smt. Bidhya Devi Bhandari



© Oman Observer

H.E. Mrs. Laetitia Van Asch, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands presents her Letter of Credence to His Majesty Haitham Bin Tarik Sultan of Oman.



Renaud Salins, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the French Republic presents his Letter of Credence to His Majesty Haitham Bin Tarik Sultan of Oman.



H.E. Mr. István Manno, Ambassador of Hungary presents his Letter of Credence to Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland



H.E. Mr. Rafal Poborski, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Poland presents his Letter of Credence to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev.



The first woman Greek ambassador to the United States, H.E. Mrs. Alexandra Papadopoulou, presents her Letter of Credence to President Donald Trump.



H.E. Mr. Roman Vassilenko, The Ambassador of the Republic of Kazakhstan to presents his Letter of Credence to the President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová,



H.E. Mrs Malena Mard Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sweden presents her Letter of Credence to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin



H.E. Mrs Ekaterini Nassika Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic presents her Letter of Credence to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin



H.E. Mr. Geza Andreas von Geyr Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany presents his Letter of Credence to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin



H.E. Mr. Pierre Levy Ambassador of the French Republic presents his Letter of Credence to Vladimir Putin

TIMELESS CHIC

Standout Fashion and Beauty trends

By Clara Bauman

Sustainable fashion is everywhere

Equally focused on style and the environment, more and more brands are aiming to create fashion designs that are more 'responsible', sustainable and/or Fair Trade certified. Here are 3 of the best:



© American Vintage

(journal.americanvintage-store.com)

Blue Jeans 'go green'

Not only does the American Vintage range continue to expand, but it also becomes more environmentally responsible with the arrival of Eco-Denim, an eco-designed cotton canvas that requires less water to produce.

This denim joins the VEGI T-shirt, tinted with 100% vegetable dyes, further proof of efforts at sustainability by the French brand.

For love of the sea

More than a success story (7500 outlets in over 100 countries!), the Danish brand Pandora is also an example of sustainable and environment-friendly fashion: they design, produce and commercialise high-end jewellery at democratic prices by utilising mainly recycled gold and silver. Their workshops in Thailand fully meet the standards set by LEEDS (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), an international label with very strict environmental observance guidelines.

And since this brand has quite a reputation for its designs, each one more ravishing than the other, we take delight in discovering its latest collection called 'Ocean', which is dedicated to seashells, symbols that have been used in jewellery since time immemorial. There are also designs based on marine flora and fauna, on a background of exotic colours (lagoon blue, coral pink...)



© Pandora



© Pandora



© Pandora

(fr.pandora.net)



© Veja

(veja-store.com)

Sneakers that have as much inner as outer beauty

When François-Ghislain Morillion and Sébastien Kopp, the founders of the French brand Veja (2004) tell us about their vision and their brand's history, it's all about ecology, transparency, fair trade ... and style.

A pair of Veja sneakers represents the coming together of technology, a highly stylised minimalist design and environment-friendly materials (organic cotton from Brazil, natural rubber from the Amazon jungles for which the tappers are paid a fair price and recycled cardboard packaging...) Last but not least: Veja sneakers also come in 'vegan' models and are among the most acclaimed by young people, as well as fashion bloggers and fashion influencers.

Prices range from €85 to €250 according to the model.

TIMELESS CHIC

Standout Fashion and Beauty trends

By Clara Bauman

Jumpsuits suit everyone

A firm favourite for some, a stylistic enigma for others, the jumpsuit nevertheless has many assets: it is practical, easy to wear and it 'transcends trends'.



© Vera Mont

Lovers of powdery colours, rejoice ! This summer, pastel shades, 'nude tones' and sugar-coated candy shades will be the absolute rage ; beware of an overdose !

The Vera Mont jumpsuit matches exactly the colour codes for this summer: in powdery pink with an ultra-feminine cut.



© Betty Barclay

Confinement may be over, but certainly not comfort ! With Betty Barclay, even the most casual jumpsuit displays a mad beauty...at all times.

A shopping list



① Sleeveless jumpsuit, inspired by the 'tube top' Guess (guess.eu)



② Jumpsuit with a wrap-over effect, Gerry Weber (gerryweber.com)



③ Jumpsuit with straps and ruffles, Scotch & Soda (scotch-soda.com)



④ Jumpsuit with long sleeves and 'blazer' neckline Arket (arket.com)



⑤ Jumpsuit with balloon sleeves, & Other Stories (stories.com)



⑥ Long-sleeved and belted jumpsuit American Vintage (journal.americanvintage-store.com)



⑦ Jumpsuit with flounced braces Guess (guess.eu)

BOOKS



A NEW IRELAND

By Niall O'Dowd

HOW EUROPE'S MOST CONSERVATIVE COUNTRY BECAME ITS MOST LIBERAL

It's not your father's Ireland. Not anymore. A story of modern revolution in Ireland told by the founder of Irish-Central, Irish America magazine, and the Irish Voice newspaper.

In a May 2019 countrywide referendum, Ireland voted overwhelmingly to make

abortion legal; three years earlier, it had done the same with same-sex marriage, becoming the only country in the world to pass such a law by universal suffrage. Pope Francis's visit to the country saw protests and a fraction of the emphatic welcome that Pope John Paul's had seen forty years earlier. There have been two female heads of state since 1990, the first two in Ireland's history. Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, an openly gay man of Indian heritage, declared that "a quiet revolution had taken place."

It had. For nearly all of its modern history, Ireland was Europe's most conservative country. The Catholic Church was its most powerful institution and held power over all facets of Irish life.

But as scandal eroded the Church's hold on Irish life, a new Ireland has flourished. War in the North has ended. EU membership and an influx of American multinational corporations have helped Ireland weather economic depression and transform into Europe's headquarters for Apple, Facebook, and Google.

With help from prominent Irish and Irish American voices like historian and bestselling author Tim Pat Coogan and the New York Times's Maureen Dowd, *A New Ireland* tells the story of a modern revolution against all odds.



THE HABSBURGS

Martyn Rady

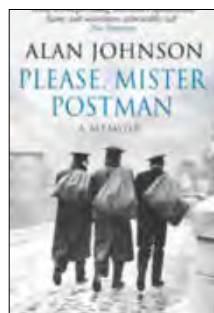
THE RISE AND FALL OF A WORLD POWER

'The Habsburgs is gripping, colorful, and dramatic but also concise, scholarly, and magisterial... History on an epic scale!' Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *The Romanovs* and *Jerusalem: The Biography*
In *The Habsburgs*, Martyn Rady tells the epic story of a dynasty and the world it built - and then lost - over nearly a millennium.

From modest origins, the Habsburgs grew in power to gain control of the Holy Roman Empire in the fifteenth century. Then, in just a few decades, their possessions rapidly expanded to take in a large part of Europe stretching from Hungary to Spain, and from the Far East to the New World. The family continued to dominate Central Europe until the catastrophe of the First World War.

With its seemingly disorganized mass of large and small territories, its tangle of laws and privileges and its medley of languages, the Habsburg Empire has always appeared haphazard and incomplete. But here Martyn Rady shows the reasons for the family's incredible endurance, driven by the belief that they were destined to rule the world as defenders of the Roman Catholic Church, guarantors of peace and patrons of learning. The Habsburg emperors were themselves absurdly varied in their characters - from warlords to contemplatives, from clever to stupid, from idle to frenzied - but all driven by the same sense of family mission. Scattered around the world, countless buildings, institutions and works of art continue to bear witness to their overwhelming impact.

The Habsburgs is the definitive history of a remarkable dynasty that, for better or worse, shaped Europe and the world.



PLEASE, MISTER POSTMAN

Alan Johnson

In July 1969, while the Rolling Stones played a free concert in Hyde Park, Alan Johnson and his young family left West London to start a new life. The Britwell Estate in Slough, apparently notorious among the locals, in fact came as a blessed relief after the tensions of Notting Hill, and the local community welcomed them with open arms.

Alan had become a postman the previous year, and in order to support his growing family took on every bit of overtime he could, often working twelve-hour shifts six days a week. It was hard work, but not without its compensations - the crafty fag snatched in a country lane, the farmer's wife offering a hearty breakfast and even the mysterious lady on Glebe Road who appeared daily, topless, at her window as the postman passed by...

Please, Mister Postman paints a vivid picture of England in the 1970s, where no celebration was complete without a Party Seven of Watney's Red Barrel, smoking was the norm rather than the exception, and Sunday lunchtime was about beer, bingo and cribbage. But as Alan's life appears to be settling down and his career in the Union of Postal Workers begins to take off, his close-knit family is struck once again by tragedy...

Moving, hilarious and unforgettable, *Please, Mister Postman* is another astonishing book from the award-winning author of *This Boy*.



TRUMP AND CHURCHILL

By Nick Adams

Foreword by Newt Gingrich

DEFENDERS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

As seen on The Dennis Prager Show!
Trump and Churchill both fought valiantly to protect Western Civilization, and while fighting different forms of tyranny, Trump could very well be to the twenty-first century what Churchill was to the twentieth.

What do Winston Churchill—the eloquent, eternally quotable wordsmith, pudgy politician of fifty years, wealthy aristocrat, wartime Prime Minister of England—and Donald Trump, the 6'4", brash, Twitter happy, political neophyte, billionaire entrepreneur—have in common?

In his new book, complete with never-before-told anecdotes, bestselling author Nick Adams explores how both leaders, with seemingly nothing in common, turned their day's prevailing politics on its head.

In doing so, they both endured shockingly similar battles instigated by the political establishment seeking their destruction.

Trump's and Churchill's unorthodox approach to both domestic and international relations has rescued Western Civilization from the brink.

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**THE FUTURE
IS YOU**



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