

WEEK 24, 2021

THE EPOCH TIMES

# CHINA INSIDER



## FOREIGN BUSINESSES IN CHINA

PUT IN A BIND WITH NEW LAW

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## OPINION

# Italy Is Turning Away From the Chinese Communist Regime

PINGPING YU

A piece of breaking news appeared on various popular Chinese-language websites on June 7 claiming that the Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi had admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic had originated in Italy in a virtual interview by Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI). The Chinese reports claimed that Italy had mistaken COVID outbreaks in Milan, Genoa, and Venice in the summer of 2019 for influenza.

This soon was exposed as fake news. The Italian embassy in Beijing issued a statement that afternoon, saying that "The Italian Embassy strongly emphasizes that the content of the article concerning the Prime Minister's remarks is a complete lie and that the information has no basis whatsoever."

This happened shortly after Italy's recent veto of Beijing's attempted takeover of LPE, a Milan-based semiconductor manufacturer, on March 31.

There is no way of knowing if the fake COVID-19 origins report was Beijing's retaliation for the aborted deal but it certainly didn't ease tensions between the two countries.

## Expert: 5 Reasons Italy Is Cooling Its Relationship With China

Italy's blocking of the Chinese acquisition was an abrupt change in course for the European nation that had been growing a close relationship with the

Chinese regime in Beijing.

In 2019, Italy under the leadership of former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, became the first G7 country to embrace China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), against the advice of the United States and other G7 members.

In 2020 when the pandemic hit, Italy was the most impacted country in Europe. China donated 31 tons of personal protective equipment and virus testing kits to Italy in March 2020, as well as a dozen medical experts to support the health response.

Italy had also been one of the most pro-China EU members in recent decades. Between 2000 and 2019, Italy received 15.9 billion euros (\$19.25 billion) in Chinese investments, making it Europe's third biggest beneficiary. Recent financial troubles saw numerous China-based companies acquire a number of Italian businesses. As of 2020, more than 400 Chinese groups held stakes in 760 Italian companies across "highly profitable or strategic sectors."

One of the best-known acquisitions was that of the AC Milan football club for 740 million euros (\$788 million), previously owned by former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

But the change in approach to China didn't surprise experts like Cheng Chin-mo, director at the department of diplomacy and international relations of the Tamkang University in Taiwan. "This demonstrates the unravelling of China's diplomacy in Europe," Cheng told The

Epoch Times. "There are five reasons why this is bound to happen."

Although China's "mask diplomacy" strategy helped ease some immediate supply shortages for Italy, the country can't forget that China's cover up of its coronavirus outbreak caused the catastrophe in the first place, Cheng said. Italians have seen four million COVID-19 infections, and almost 127,000 deaths from the disease caused by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) virus. The pandemic was devastating for Italy's already struggling economy, causing a 13 percent drop in per capita income in 2020 while the economy contracted by almost 11 percent. Free facial masks are just not enough to clear the clouds, Cheng said.

Chinese money was enthusiastically welcomed in Italy when the BRI MoU was signed in 2019. But the country has since found no material benefit from the collaborations.

Cheng Chin-mo, director, department of diplomacy and international relations of the Tamkang University in Taiwan

Secondly, China has made itself with a bad reputation in business ethics and conduct over the past decade, Cheng said, adding that Chinese businesses and investors are known for violating local regulations and agreements, which deeply upsets Europeans who value integrity. "Chinese money was enthusiastically welcomed in Italy when the BRI MoU was signed in 2019. But the country has since found no material benefit from the collaborations," he added. "On the contrary, some century old Italian businesses have turned for the worse or even went bankrupt after they started partnering with China."

Thirdly, China's "wolf warrior diplomacy" has turned many former fans off, Cheng said. In response to the EU's sanctions in March over the regime's genocide of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement that the sanctions were based on "nothing but lies and disinformation." It asked Brussels to "reflect on itself [and] face squarely the severity of its mistake" and stop "interfering in [China's] internal affairs."

Draghi's political position is the fourth factor, Cheng said. Draghi, who holds a very friendly attitude toward the United States and the EU, described his foreign policy as "strongly pro-European and Atlanticist, in line with Italy's historical anchors." Contrary to his predecessor, Draghi, who was elected in February, has shown clear determination to seek alliance with the United States. Shortly after his appointment, Draghi reaffirmed Rome's membership in NATO and the historic friendship between Italy and the United States. The vetoing of the LPE deal is seen as a signal of the new administration's focus on stemming Beijing's political and economic influence in Italy, Cheng said.

Lastly, Cheng pointed to the global environment, which is turning against China. The U.S.-led international effort to curb communist China's global expansion



Italian PM Giuseppe Conte and Chinese leader Xi Jinping during a welcoming ceremony at Villa Madama in Rome on March 23, 2019.

and human rights abuses, as well as the investigation in China's role in the outbreak of the pandemic, have encouraged G7 countries to openly speak and act against the CCP's atrocities, which they had avoided for many years fearing hurt to their business relationship with China. Meanwhile, Europe is growing much more wary of the threat the CCP's poses to nation's security after the CCP's infiltration tools such as Huawei and the Confucius Institute were exposed.

## Italy Still Influenced by the CCP's Overseas Propaganda

However, public sentiment toward the Chinese regime may take some time to change, as many Italian national media outlets have been frequently publishing pro-regime content and the mindsets of their journalists have been infiltrated quite deeply by CCP propaganda. Francesco Galietti of the Rome-based think-tank Policy Sonar told Breitbart that "the Chinese have 100 percent infiltrated Italian media."

Breitbart also revealed in a June 7 report that an Italian-language video series on "Xi Jinping's Classical Quotes" developed by Chinese state-owned China Media Group had been broadcast on Italy's Mediaset and the Chinese-language outlet Cinitalia.

The National Associated Press Agency (ANSA), Italy's equivalent to The Associated Press or Agence France Presse, has also been publishing up to 50 Italian language

wire articles per day from Xinhua News Agency, the state-run wire service for the Chinese Communist Party. Again, ANSA does not disclose to its readers that the Chinese government runs and approves all Xinhua content," the report read.

Italian national newspaper Il Giornale has been publishing CCP propaganda regularly since 2019. A May article in Il Giornale suggested that reports about the CCP's genocide of the Muslim Uyghur people were a mere "media manipulation of events" crafted to use "human rights concerns" to further America's foreign policy agenda, echoing the regime's party line.

The Breitbart report also noted that a magazine published by Cinitalia "openly admits that it produces its Italian content in association with the Chinese Embassy in Italy."

Il Giornale is owned by former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who was critical of the CCP until he sold the AC Milan soccer club to Chinese investors for \$788 million in 2017 due to financial troubles. Since then, Il Giornale's China-related content have looked very similar to the CCP's propaganda.

## New Era in EU-China Relations

EU members, including Italy and Hungary, are starting to push back on the CCP's coercion both economically and politically.

The EU condemned the Chinese regime's human rights record in a conference earlier this year, and France sent a warship and submarine to the South

China Sea for a "freedom of navigation" patrol in February.

On May 22, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said in a statement that the Baltic nation does not see itself as part of Beijing's "17+1" platform for EU member states and five Balkan countries anymore, according to the Baltic News Service. He said the Chinese platform was "divisive" from the EU's point of view and called on EU members to pursue "a much more effective 27+1 approach" for its communication with China.

Hungarian premier Viktor Orban, who has reportedly built cordial ties with the Chinese regime, including massive joint business projects, and has several times this year blocked EU statements denouncing the Chinese regime's record on human rights, had to pause a planned project with China's Fudan University amidst massive protests this month. His government has since announced a referendum on the project.

Pingping Yu has been a writer, translator, and researcher for The Epoch Times since 2007. She covers a variety of topics related to China, with a strong focus on human rights, economy, and business.

Sophia Lam contributed to the report.

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.



An aerial view of the port city of Trieste in Italy which China is considering for its Belt and Road Initiative.

## CCP VIRUS

## Spread of COVID-19 Variants Around the World Could Be Seen as 'Next Pandemic': Taiwan Health Official

ADAM MOLON

The continuous mutation of the CCP virus, with multiple variants circulating around the world, could be described as the "next pandemic," a top Taiwanese health official has warned.

Wu Chung-hsiun, president of Taiwan's Development Center for Biotechnology (DCB) and director of the Biotechnology and Pharmaceutical Industries Promotion Office of Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA), told The Epoch Times that he thought it was too early to predict the end of the COVID-19 pandemic "because this [virus] ... keeps mutating and is still infecting people around the world."

"So, actually, maybe we can consider that as the next pandemic," he said.

Wu's comments were made in advance of the DCB's annual Taiwan Biotech Forum on June 10. The forum, which included presentations by vaccine makers Pfizer and AstraZeneca, featured the theme "Preparing for the Next Pandemic."

The forum was held only days after U.S. Sens. Chris Coons (D-Del.), Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), and Dan Sullivan (R-Ark.) visited Taiwan—flying in on a U.S. Air Force C-17 cargo plane—to announce a donation of 750,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses. Duckworth said during the stopover that "the United States will not let [Taiwan] stand alone" and that the vaccine donation "also reflects gratitude for Taiwan's efforts to send PPE [personal protective equipment] and other supplies to America in the early days of the pandemic."

Taiwan has received vaccine shipments from U.S.-based Moderna and UK-based AstraZeneca, but authoritarian China reportedly blocked democratic Taiwan's plans to purchase vaccines from the German firm BioNTech.

Wu said a Taiwan-produced vaccine may be available by July at the earliest, and expressed serious concern about the quality of vaccines that Chinese firms have proposed to provide to Taiwan, stating Taiwan is more confident in and comfortable with

U.S.-produced vaccines. He noted, unlike COVID-19 vaccines produced by American firms, vaccines from Chinese firms are produced using attenuated, or weakened, coronaviruses, which can be dangerous if the coronaviruses aren't killed or sufficiently weakened.

Taiwan became very good [economically] in the last year, because we kept everything normal, everything steady.

Chang Chi-feng, vice president, Taiwan's Development Center for Biotechnology

"[Chinese vaccine makers] are using the attenuated virus. That kind of approach could cause very serious side effects if the attenuation part is incomplete. So, that could cause infection rather than immu-

nization," Wu said.

"The Pfizer, the Moderna, the [AstraZeneca] [vaccines] ... we could have very clear public information about those, and they are coming from reliable sources that we use to corroborate. So, I think, in that aspect, that's one of the major justifications that we tend to use the Pfizer and Moderna [vaccines], etcetera. And also, we have the capability to manufacture those if needed."

Wu noted that many members of the DCB's management team hold degrees from both U.S. and Taiwanese universities, and robust scientific and academic interaction means Taiwanese and U.S. scientists share a common language and philosophy. "We share the same philosophy as people in the States because we have our higher education," he said. "Our thinking process, pretty much, is in line with the scientists or the academic in the States. So, when we exchange information, we know exactly, when we say 'A,' we mean 'A,' and you hear 'A' literally ... when we try to do something

and try to find collaborators in the States, it's very easy because we communicate, we speak the same language."

Following the onset of the pandemic in 2020, Taiwan was able to keep schools and businesses open while also implementing effective pandemic defense measures, which resulted in strong economic performance. Taiwan achieved annual GDP growth of nearly 3 percent in 2020, higher than China's for the first time in three decades.

"Taiwan's goal for the pandemic is to keep economic growth steady," DCB Vice President Chang Chi-feng told The Epoch Times. "Taiwan became very good [economically] in the last year, because we kept everything normal, everything steady."

More than a year later and with the arrival of the UK variant, the Taiwanese government has for the first time decided to closed all its schools and has introduced other restrictions while saying that it isn't planning to introduce a full lockdown, but will instead adjust the strictness of restrictions as needed.

Wu stated sharing his expertise in pandemic management is one way in which Taiwan can continue to contribute to the global community. "Our national capability, actually we can contribute a lot," he said. "Taiwan is experienced in fighting the pandemic. ... Taiwan can help."

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Wu Chung-hsiun, President of Taiwan's Development Center for Biotechnology and Director of the Biotechnology and Pharmaceutical Industries Promotion Office of Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs.



Chang Chi-feng, vice president of Taiwan's Development Center for Biotechnology.





TRUTH *and* TRADITION

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