

Reports of growing Chinese espionage and scandals in the academic and business sphere relating to undercover Chinese efforts to improve the image of China in the Czech Republic through selected academics and business leaders have soured relations between Prague and Beijing. The rector of Charles University recently faced calls for him to resign after it emerged that the Chinese had quietly funded some of the university's conferences in Prague and it came to light that consumer loans provider Home Credit, which has business interests in China, had paid a PR agency to work on improving China's image in the Czech media.

In an exclusive interview for Czech Radio Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček said greater transparency is needed so that firms and institutions would not be vulnerable to pressure from Beijing for them to further China's interest in the Czech Republic in whatever way.

*"It is an accepted practice in the world that private companies support various conferences or research, so the fact that Home Credit co-financed a conference of this kind is nothing unusual, but it should be made quite clear who is behind the event, who is paying the bill. This problem has also touched Charles University. We need an ethical codex, certain guidelines regarding the way in which private companies can support various activities, be it conferences or research."*

Reports of growing Chinese as well as Russian efforts to gain more influence in the country have led the Czech lower house to debate the setting up of a special commission which would monitor the influence of authoritarian regimes on Czech affairs. Minister Petříček says he would welcome such a move.

*"Such a commission could contribute to the debate on how to offset the influence of foreign regimes on Czech affairs. It is our duty to strengthen our democracy and make our society more resilient to the threat of disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks from abroad."*

The debate regarding the need to protect the country against the influence of heavyweights such as China and Russia, is still ongoing in Parliament, where deputies appear to be divided on whether the task of monitoring this threat should be left to the counter-intelligence service or boosted by a special commission.

Politicians say the dangers are manifold. Some have pointed to the fact that Prime Minister Andrej Babiš' agro-chemical business empire Agrofert, which he placed in trust funds to avoid a conflict of interest, has loans to the tune of 1.5 billion crowns in Chinese banks. Asked whether this might not make the prime minister more inclined to downplay the danger of Chinese influence, Mr. Petříček said he saw no reason for concern.

*"We see eye-to-eye with the prime minister on the need to seek a pragmatic relationship with China i.e. we must carefully balance our values and business interests, and be prepared to hold an open debate on all issues, including human rights."*