# The China Review

VOLUME 21
NUMBER 2
MAY 2021

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Greater China

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

The Pandemic that Wasn't

Included in the Social Sciences Citation Index

# The China Review
## An Interdisciplinary Journal on Greater China
Volume 21 | Number 2 | May 2021





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香港中文大學出版社
The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press
cup.cuhk.edu.hk | HONG KONG, CHINA

ISSN 1680-2012

*The China Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (May 2021), 5–33

# *Chinese Public Diplomacy and European Public Opinion during COVID-19**

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***Abstract***

While the profile of China has been growing in Europe in recent years, COVID-19 has put the country at the center of the attention of both policymakers and the general public. Because of this shift, the role of public opinion may be more important than ever in orienting the strategic choices that the European Union (EU) faces in its China policy. However, we lack a systematic understanding of European attitudes

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* Authors are listed in alphabetical order by surname. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project "Sinophone Borderlands—Interaction at the Edges" (CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791). The article has benefitted from the research assistance of Renata Sedlakova, Andrej Findor, Kristina Kironska, Jiri Cenek, Matej Simalcik, and other members of the research team working on Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey 2020. In addition, Jerdén's work was supported by the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation (MMW2013.0162).

toward China and the role that Chinese public diplomacy plays in shaping them. As such, this article addresses two research questions. First, what was the content and style of China's public diplomacy in the EU during the pandemic? Second, what did European public opinion of China look like during the pandemic? To tackle these questions, we use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including our own extensive public opinion data, to focus on ten representative EU member states. Through our research, we find a visible correlation between the intensity, style, and content of China's public diplomacy in Europe during COVID-19 and European public opinion on China. Future research could further explore this link and try to establish and test the casual direction.



Like no other issue since at least the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, the COVID-19 pandemic has put China at the center of global conversations. From the epidemic's initial outbreak in Wuhan and spread to other parts of China and the world to donations and sales of much-needed Chinese medical supplies and heated debates about political responsibility for the pandemic, this is the first global crisis in which China has been in the spotlight all along. This attention, in turn, highlights the importance of China's international reputation and efforts of the Chinese government to shape foreign perceptions of the country.

Even setting aside the specific emotional circumstances of the pandemic, the importance of public opinion in shaping other countries' policies toward China can only be expected to increase since China's role in world affairs is getting more visible and leaders feel the need to respond to public opinion. As China takes up more space in political and media discussions around the world, the direct and indirect channels between popular views of the country and policies toward it will become more pertinent. However, research on the topic has three shortcomings. First, although there are some cross-country opinion polls available, these are limited to respondents in a relatively small number of the world's most advanced economies.[1] We thus have limited knowledge of how publics in other countries view China. Second, most relevant opinion polls include only a small number of questions related to China. There is thus little information on many aspects of what foreign populations think of the country. Third, little is known about the potential impact of Chinese public diplomacy on varying public attitudes toward China.

The Chinese government's attempts to shape foreign perceptions of itself—its public diplomacy—is one among several factors that influence its international reputation.[2] Many observers both prior to and during the pandemic have identified a new, more combative approach for making China's voice heard and defending the country's interests abroad—what is sometimes called "wolf warrior diplomacy."[3] However, the debate is hampered by a reliance on anecdotal examples. The lack of systematic research on China's activities over time and across different countries makes it difficult to determine the degree to which its public diplomacy really has changed as well as the impact of possible change on foreign perceptions of China. To gain a better understanding of these issues in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article answers two research questions. First, what was the content and style of China's public diplomacy in the European Union (EU) during the pandemic? Second, what did European public opinion of China look like during the pandemic?

The answers to these two questions allow us to compare the relationships between various characteristics of China's public diplomacy toward individual member states and the public opinion of China in these EU countries. It should be emphasized that we do not argue that China's public diplomacy has directly led to these images. We recognize that other factors could explain public attitudes toward China, including preexisting views, lobbying from other countries (such as the United States), different levels of economic exposure, and benefits from cooperation with China and other countries, among other factors.[4] Nonetheless, we propose that the link between China's public diplomacy and the image of China is an area worth studying. Moreover, we suggest that, indeed, there are some indications that different types of China's public diplomacy have contributed to the overall image of China in these countries. In particular, our findings paint a picture in which the EU countries that have experienced a more confrontational approach from China also have had more negative views, and vice versa, a more low-key approach from China in other countries is correlated with less negative views. We hope future studies will attempt to test whether a clear causal link and direction can be established, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

The choice of Europe as a case study was made for good reasons. When the pandemic appeared, China's international relations had already been through a few tumultuous years. The new "strategic competition" paradigm adopted by the U.S. government in late 2017 shifted the basis

of the entire West's engagement with China.[5] In 2019, the EU began framing China as a "systemic rival," in addition to being a partner and competitor.[6] Meanwhile, there has been growing U.S. pressure on its European allies to take a clearer stance against China. For its part, Beijing has attempted to persuade Europe to adhere to a nonaligned position in the context of heightened tensions.[7] In short, Europe's stance on China is one key determinant for how the new-fangled Sino-U.S. rivalry will shape international politics in the coming years. Moreover, European public opinion on China—and China's degree of success in shaping this opinion—will be a factor in orienting the strategic choices that the EU faces in its China policy.

In what follows, we answer the two research questions by using a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods, focusing on ten EU member states: the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden. China's public diplomacy in Europe is studied through primary and secondary sources as well as semi-structured interviews. The content and style of China's policy is then analyzed and grouped according to different patterns. The analysis of European public opinion on China draws on new data from a large-scale opinion poll on European perceptions of China that was conducted in September and October 2020—the Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey.[8]

## 1. Previous Research on China's Public Diplomacy and European Public Opinion of China

This section discusses existing research on China's public diplomacy, with a special focus on recent developments and European public views on China. The organization, style, and development of China's public diplomacy have been thoroughly examined in the literature.[9] The topic has received wider attention, as observers claim to have identified a new, more combative style in China's official communication aimed at foreign audiences. With reference to a popular Chinese action movie, this has been commonly termed "wolf warrior diplomacy" in the wake of an intensifying discussion throughout 2020. Dean Cheng, for example, declares that "far from maintaining a low profile, today's Chinese diplomats are often both pushing controversial Chinese narratives and loudly countering foreign criticism."[10] Despite the limited room for public discussion about sensitive matters of state policy in China, domestic voices have recently criticized combative diplomatic approaches.[11]

The wolf warrior debate follows a decade of intensive discussions about Chinese foreign policy change.[12] Much of the analysis on a more combative Chinese public diplomacy repeats earlier explanations for a more "assertive" China, particularly seeing it as a result of shifting perceptions of China's relative power in the international system. However, some observers have also suggested other factors, such as an elevated role of the foreign ministry in China's policymaking structure,[13] or the effects of Xi Jinping's personal leadership on China's wider political culture.[14] The United States, moreover, revised its overall China policy during the Trump administration (2017–2021), toward more overt strategic competition across all policy fields. As part of this shift, Washington stepped up efforts to convince and pressure allies and partners to increase their vigilance toward maintaining close relationships with China.[15] Against this background, a combative Chinese public messaging could partly be understood as a perceived defensive measure to fend off criticism in a more hostile foreign environment. The debate about China's public diplomacy intensified further during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As China tried to counter international criticism of its initial handling of outbreak, it got involved in a "narrative battle" with the United States over the political responsibility and handling of the pandemic.[16]

Despite the popular resonance of the term "wolf warrior," there are good reasons to be cautious about using it as an analytical concept. To begin with, the term clearly carries negative normative connotations. In addition, to facilitate the accumulation of empirical and theoretical knowledge, it is advisable whenever possible to stick with more general terms to allow comparisons across cases. Although much has been written about what is seen as a new style of Chinese public diplomacy, the debate leaves us with a few questions. Most definitions of what constitutes wolf warrior diplomacy are vague. Granted, much of this writing is aimed at a general audience, and one should perhaps not expect precise definitions according to academic standards. Nonetheless, the ambiguous descriptions make it difficult to know what kind of phenomenon we are talking about. To our knowledge, moreover, there has so far not been any attempt to verify the claim through systematic temporal comparisons across China's public diplomacy in different countries and contexts. In a European context, a study published in April 2020 by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) offers a first, partial look at China's public diplomacy practices in Europe during the

COVID-19 crisis.[17] The report notes variations in messaging across countries, identified as ranging from "low-key" to "charm offensive" to "provocative or aggressive" diplomacy.

In addition, the discussion has revolved around the effects of combative Chinese public diplomacy.[18] At the time of writing, evaluating the effects of China's alleged new type of public diplomacy on other countries' policies is difficult. Little time has passed, so potential policy effects are likely to materialize beyond the completion of this article. Moreover, the most important policy effects might be indirect. For better or for worse, China's public diplomacy might influence European public opinion, which in turn might impact policy. However, we also know little about how China's recent public diplomacy is received by foreign publics and how it shapes wider attitudes toward China. Attempts to connect views to certain causes are accompanied by several difficult methodological challenges. Yet studying the variation of Chinese public diplomacy in different countries and the views of China in these countries will give us some clues.

Along with China's sustained economic growth and increased footprint around the world, the country is becoming more widely discussed among politicians and in the mass media. When an issue becomes a topic of public debate, public opinion will have a greater probability to impact policy, especially in democratic societies. That is to say, the formulation of policy becomes less the prerogative of a limited number of policy elites. Public attitudes toward China can thus be expected to have a growing impact on how the outside world handles relations with the country. Much research on foreign views of China has concentrated on political decision makers, academic circles, and media reporting. However, there are also many public opinion polls available. In a European context, some studies are limited to a single country,[19] while others allow us to compare views of China in several different countries.

The Pew Research Center provides a very useful resource. The latest poll data were collected between June and August 2020.[20] Pew has asked the same questions over several years, thus enabling insights into the development of European views of China over time. When we zoom in on the past few years, a trend toward more negative views is clearly visible. Between 2016 and 2020, unfavorable opinion of China rose at an average of 15 percentage points in the countries for which data are available (Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Moreover, all available countries except for Italy saw

notable increases in negative views between 2019 and 2020 (i.e., before and after the outbreak of the pandemic). In 2020, unfavorable opinion of China varied between 62 percent (Spain) and 85 percent (Sweden) in the nine countries polled. The survey also shows that faith in Xi Jinping's international leadership is low in Europe. The share of respondents professing no confidence that Xi will do "the right thing" in world affairs ranges from 70 to 82 percent. In the seven countries also included in the 2019 poll, moreover, the figure increased between 9 and 21 percent in one year.

The Eurobarometer poll was conducted on behalf of the EU. The survey included questions about China in 2016, 2017, and 2018.[21] In 2018, it was reported that 36 percent of respondents (EU28 average) held a positive view of China, while 53 percent had a negative view. The most negative views were reported in Sweden (72 percent of respondents), while a few other countries had more than 60 percent of respondents reporting negative views—Germany, Luxemburg, France, Denmark, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands. The highest share of respondents having positive views was reported in Cyprus (60 percent), Romania (65 percent), and Croatia (63 percent). Unfortunately, no data for 2019 and 2020 are available on the specific question of European views of China, making it impossible to use this poll to evaluate the situation after the emergence of COVID-19.

A poll commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in September 2019 included 12,263 respondents from all 28 EU member states (the methodology contains no information on the number of respondents from each countries).[22] The results show that more Europeans view China as a competitor (45 percent) than as a partner (25 percent). Moreover, while 50 percent of respondents agree that their own country shares economic interests with China, the figure is only 9 percent when it comes to political interests and common values. Together with Institut Montaigne and the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Bertelsmann Stiftung is also responsible for the Transatlantic Trends survey. The poll includes the views of the French and German publics on China's growing influence. The latest poll from 2020 shows that negative views outweigh positive ones, a pattern that was strengthened in both countries during the pandemic.[23] The survey also asks whether the respondent's own country should take a tougher or less tough approach to China on a range of issues. The results show an overwhelming support in both countries for the former over the latter, especially concerning climate change,

human rights, and cybersecurity. An April 2020 survey from the European Council on Foreign Relations contained 11,000 respondents from ten EU member states.[24] Besides Italy (25 percent), no country ranked China as the most important ally during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, in each country except for Bulgaria, the share of respondents saying that their views on China had worsened during the pandemic far outweighed those who said that their views had improved.

As seen in this overview, available opinion research gives valuable insights into Europeans' views of China. Nonetheless, the field contains a few notable gaps. First, the number of frequently covered countries is limited, with an aggregated bias toward larger and richer EU member states. Opinion research on countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), in particular, is scarce. While more powerful countries such as Germany and France may exercise an outsized influence on EU policy, the future direction of Europe's stance toward China will ultimately be decided by the entire EU. Attention to a greater variety of EU states in opinion research will thus contribute to a more complete understanding of not only their bilateral relationships with China, but also EU-China relations as a whole. Second, most polls are not specifically focused on China, and thus include only a few questions and an emphasis on general attitudes. We thus have scarce knowledge of European views of many aspects of China, the policies of the Chinese government and preferred policies related to China. Finally, there have been few attempts to explain the drivers of European public opinion of China. For example, how does China's public diplomacy in Europe impact local views? This is partly due to an incomplete picture of the dependent variable—a result of the gaps described in the previous two points. Besides more large-scale and detailed surveys to alleviate these gaps, combining quantitative opinion research with qualitative case studies of various countries would also help us to better understand the mechanisms behind European views of China.

## 2. Method

To answer the two research questions proposed in this article, we combine qualitative and quantitative methods to focus on ten EU countries: the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden. This allows us to compare the countries among themselves and also to zoom in on the identified patterns shared among subgroups of countries and describe them in more detail.

The ten countries were selected with a few factors in mind. First, the composition provides a sampling of countries across a range of subregions within the EU, to include Northern, Western, Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, focusing in large part on the larger countries in each, as they are more consequential for common EU policy. Second, it reflects the diversity of European responses to COVID-19 and different patterns in bilateral relations with China. Moreover, to complement the bias toward the most advanced economies seen in much opinion research on the topic, half of our cases consist of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. As such, Germany and France were included as the major countries in the EU as well as in Western Europe. Spain and Italy are meanwhile representatives of Southern Europe and the two countries in Europe to be first hit seriously by COVID-19. Furthermore, we have included Sweden as the representative of Northern Europe and also as a country that has experienced turbulence in its bilateral relations with China in recent years, not least connected to a more confrontational approach from Chinese public diplomacy in the bilateral relationship.[25] Sweden has moreover implemented a distinct policy approach toward COVID-19, with an emphasis on government recommendations rather than mandatory "lockdowns." From among the CEE countries, we selected Latvia as the representative of the Baltic region and included all four Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) as they differ vastly in terms of domestic politics as well as in their relations with Brussels and Beijing.[26] While including all 27 EU member states would have provided a more complete picture, this was not possible for practical reasons concerning data collection and the space constraints of the article. While the ten countries are not perfectly representative of the EU as a whole, they offer a reasonable overview of the patterns in question at the member-state level. Hence, our approach focusing on the dynamics within the EU members states goes well beyond what often remains a bird's-eye perspective of analyzing EU-China relations.

### a. Methods for Analyzing Chinese Public Diplomacy

The analysis of China's public diplomacy in the ten EU countries under study (research question 1) is drawn from reviews of primary and secondary sources when possible given linguistic constraints (we have consulted material in Czech, English, French, German, Slovak, and Swedish). The time frame of the analysis focuses on the "first wave" of

the crisis in Europe, starting in February and early March 2020, when cases of COVID-19 began to appear publicly and then rise exponentially, through the month of June, when many lockdown measures were significantly eased (though in a few cases more recent observations will also be worth noting). The analysis examines only messaging specific to COVID-19, on which China's public diplomacy was almost uniquely concentrated during the period under study, and not broader trends or topics outside of this realm.

Some relevant analysis published in media directly or indirectly controlled by the Communist Party, particularly the *Global Times*, was also consulted when relevant to China's public diplomacy efforts in a particular country. We did not examine material that was mainly targeting Chinese or overseas Chinese living in the respective countries since this article ultimately aims to assess the correlation between Chinese public diplomacy and public perception in the respective European countries. Thus, primary sources analyzed were official Chinese communications specific to the concerned countries posted via official social media accounts (namely Twitter) and/or local embassy websites, as well as op-eds written by or interviews conducted with Chinese officials in local media. Secondary sources included the April 2020 report on COVID-19 in Europe-China relations by the ETNC,[27] which served as a starting point for hypothesizing and analyzing consistencies and variation across countries. Over a dozen semistructured interviews were also conducted with local researchers with expertise on bilateral relations with China. These interviews were necessary to overcome linguistic barriers, fill in blanks where little public information was available, and test observed trends drawn from primary sources. We particularly focused the interviews on countries for which we lack specific expertise (Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Spain). They were conducted between August and early October 2020.

These methods naturally come with limitations. In our approach we conducted a systematic review of the most popular written media and of Chinese embassy website postings and communication through social media, but this may not provide a complete picture of Chinese public diplomacy in that it may miss some local-level outreach. Nevertheless, the source selection used in this study does allow for an assessment of all major, nation-wide Chinese public diplomacy actions. Perhaps more relevant are the potential limitations to the conducted interviews. Research agendas and biased perceptions of China's public

diplomacy cannot be ruled out when interviewing academic experts. A triangulation of several sources was thus used to help control these uncertainties, namely comparing interviews to the results of the primary and secondary sources.

Finally, to assess this material and arrive at our conclusions, all selected sources—primary and secondary sources and interviews—were textualized, investigated by means of a qualitative content analysis and structured along the lines of four themes.[28] Based on the observed Chinese public diplomacy communications and actions, these themes were (1) medical questions and medical assistance, (2) origin and responsibility for the pandemic, (3) political models and governance and cultural differences, and (4) multilateral cooperation. By means of several coding phases, Chinese public diplomacy themes in each country were mapped in a triangular matrix. The three "poles" of the matrix were "low-key," "positive messaging," and "negative messaging." Findings in each issue area and country were compared to findings of other issue areas in the same country and those across states. Each coding was accompanied by a brief description and justification of the attribution to one of the three poles or the respective mixture of several extreme values in the triangular matrix. This allowed for an overall assessment of the nature of Chinese public diplomacy in each country.

**b. Methods for Assessing Public Opinion**

To answer the second research question on European popular views of China, we consulted a large-scale public opinion survey that was designed and coordinated by the authors of this article. This survey is unique when compared to other surveys of European public opinion of China in terms of its combination of broad scope (including ten EU countries) and depth (asking many detailed questions). The entire questionnaire consisted of 355 items; only the most relevant parts are discussed in this article. The survey data collection was conducted by NMS Market Research agency through online panels in September and October 2020.[29] In each country, we have received 1,500 valid responses from the respondents selected based on five representative criteria: gender (male-female), age (18-70), education level (primary-secondary-tertiary), region within the country (NUTS 3), and settlement density (low-medium-high). In Latvia and Spain, a sixth representative criterion of national identification was also included with the intention to capture

the diverse composition of the countries, in Latvia in relation to the sizeable Russian-speaking minority and in Spain in relation to Catalan, Galician, and Basque minorities. The quotas were established based on Eurostat official data.[30] The deviation between quotas and the research sample was in most cases less than 2 percent.[31]

The questionnaire was translated into national languages from the English original by researchers of the survey team who are native speakers of the given languages and who have guaranteed accurate translation.[32] From among the questions that will be discussed here, we first consider the respondents' overall view of China. We tested this measure using a thermometer rating from 1 to 100, where 1 means cold, negative feelings, 100 means warm, positive feelings, while 50 means neutral feelings.[33] For visualization purposes, we grouped those answering on the scale of 1–19 as very negative, 20–40 as negative, 41–59 as neutral, 60–80 as positive, and 81–100 as very positive. We also included China in a list of other countries, allowing us to compare respondents' overall attitudes toward foreign countries.[34] We present the findings for China as well as comparisons with Russia and the United States as the three leading external powers with which the EU is generally dealing. The findings of this question also allow us to compare and validate our findings with other relevant opinion research, such as that conducted by Pew Research Center, while keeping in mind methodological differences.

Second, although we are unable to directly test changes in opinion over time, we asked respondents to self-estimate whether their views of China turned more positive or more negative during the previous three years. For this, we used a 7-point Likert scale: "significantly more positive," "more positive," "slightly more positive," "neither more positive nor more negative," "slightly more negative," "more negative," and "significantly more negative." In the visualization, we show only five categories for better visibility—we merged "more positive" and "slightly more positive" as well as "more negative" and "slightly more negative" into single categories. Third, in direct reference to COVID-19, we asked respondents how much they consider that China, Russia, the EU, and the United States helped their own country during the pandemic. For each of the four entities, respondents were asked to provide answers on a 1–10 scale, where 1 was "no help at all" and 10 represented "helped a lot." In the visualization, we show those answering 6–10 as recognizing the help of a given country/entity.

## 3. China's Public Diplomacy in Europe during COVID-19

In Europe, COVID-19 has generated a serious health crisis, but also a political and economic crisis that, as the virus was spreading on the continent in the spring of 2020, called into question European solidarity and for some the very foundation of the European project itself. As the crisis intensified, the responsibility for the outbreak and international health cooperation came into the spotlight. On the one hand, China's image management was caught on its back foot in part due to its role as the initial epicenter of the pandemic's outbreak. On the other hand, the crisis offered an opportunity for Chinese diplomats and state media to try bolstering the country's reputation as more and more countries faced challenges and China offered expertise and supplies. Hence, the crisis provides a unique opportunity to study the practice of Chinese public diplomacy in Europe because of the elevated level of attention that the pandemic has drawn to China. At no other time has China been so central to public debate across the continent on an issue of such immediate and widespread importance. This is even more the case since China has devoted enormous importance to public diplomacy in Europe at a time of geopolitical competition with the United States for influence in the region. Indeed, a study of China's messaging toward European publics during this period can provide a window into the practice of Chinese public diplomacy and how it reacts and adapts to heightened public scrutiny. Assessing the reasons behind the content and style of these public diplomacy efforts—for instance, whether diverging Chinese approaches are a reaction to different European perspectives or whether differences in the "war of words" between the United States and China explain variation—requires a different data set than the one underlying this article. What follows is rather an overview of Chinese public diplomacy in practice.

What was the content and style of China's public diplomacy in the EU during the pandemic? Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, some European countries had already experienced a notable shift in the tone of China's diplomacy toward what has been termed a "combative" approach, which was clearly seen in the cases of Sweden and the Czech Republic.[35] During the COVID-19 crisis, media reports indicate a spread of such diplomatic tactics that have often been referred to as wolf warrior diplomacy. To what extent is this perception of a shift in public diplomacy throughout the continent correct? The analysis that follows focuses in on the

commonalities and variations across Europe noted in previous research, namely the April 2020 ETNC study, and tests their veracity by examining China's public diplomacy as it related specifically to the COVID-19 crisis in the ten EU countries under study between February and June 2020. Whereas the ETNC study signaled only consistency and variation in a broad sense, this analysis delves deeper and better defines them.

### a. Consistency in China's Messaging: A Positive Discourse on China and a Battle of Narratives with the United States

Two key points of commonality that emerge in China's messaging relate to, first, the shaping of a positive discourse around China's management of the crisis and implications for its ability to provide a way forward for partners and the global community and, second, participation in a battle of narratives with the United States on the origins of the pandemic.

In the first instance, China sought to develop a positive narrative to counter many of the critiques that had arisen regarding its management of the crisis. Whereas the discourse began as defensive before case levels rose substantially in Europe—including efforts to counter xenophobia and anti-Chinese sentiment—it quickly transformed into an effort to shape a positive image of China as a country that ultimately was able to contain the virus to the extent that it became a provider of much-needed medical assistance in the form of equipment and expertise. Indeed, so-called mask diplomacy was a feature of China's public diplomacy across the continent, though some countries such as Italy, Spain, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia were targeted more than others, for example Germany and Sweden. In some instances, particularly Germany, China also sought to convey a message of strength related to the ability of its economy to rebound from the crisis and provide a response to the impending economic malaise. Multilateral cooperation was also a frequently mentioned talking point in China's public discourse, particularly as it faced critiques in many countries related to its influence on the World Health Organization (WHO).

U.S.-China competition was another feature that could be observed across many of the cases. While not an element of public diplomacy directed expressly toward the host country, Chinese and American diplomats regularly engaged in public arguments, through either social media or op-eds in the local press. The Chinese and American ambassadors in Poland, for instance, traded barbs on Twitter about the responsibility for and management of the crisis. Official Chinese embassy Twitter accounts

in other countries, including Spain, Slovakia, Italy, and France, posted statements or reposted messages from Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons Zhao Lijian (趙立堅) and Hua Chunying (華春瑩) that seemed specifically aimed at creating confusion about the origins of COVID-19 and targeting the United States. Beyond social media, many local ambassadors and embassy officials took their fight with the United States to local media outlets and communiqués on their embassy websites. Even in Hungary, where China's crisis diplomacy was less vigorous, the Chinese ambassador published an op-ed on 30 July in *Magyar Nemzet*, a local daily, as a "right of response" to American statements about the origins of the virus. Such active engagement in a battle of narratives with the United States is not locally specific but reflects a broader line set by Chinese media, particularly the *Global Times*, and Chinese officials in Beijing, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅).

### b. Variance in China's Messaging: From Low-Key to Proactively Positive to Openly Confrontational

Despite a level of commonality in China's messaging, it is striking that there are clear variations in the intensity, style, and content of China's public diplomacy across the ten countries observed, ranging from more low-key to proactive and positive to aggressive and confrontational.

In the first instance, the intensity of China's public messaging in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, and Slovakia was relatively low-key. This means that while Chinese officials posted in these countries did make some public statements or engaged with local media or on social media, both the frequency and visibility of these communications were muted or otherwise not noticeably out of the ordinary. This is not to say that China itself was not a topic of attention and sometimes fierce debate, as in the case of the Czech Republic, particularly when it came to securing medical supplies, which were received in some cases by high-level politicians and translated into relatively intense public exposure for China. Indeed, the Czech case is interesting because while specific messaging on COVID-19 was relatively low-key, China did not hesitate to be vocal and confrontational toward the Czech Republic, particularly against local politicians and media in the face of criticism on human rights, or following the September 2020 visit by a parliamentary delegation led by Czech Senate president Milos Vystrcil to Taiwan. Yet the direct public messaging from the Chinese side specifically around

COVID-19 in these four countries was muted in absolute terms and also less visible than in the other countries studied.

In the six remaining countries, China was a much more active participant in the public discussion, but with some very stark contrasts. In Italy, Poland, and Spain, China's public diplomacy was proactive and visible, with a high frequency of media interaction, public statements, and social media presence. For instance, China's ambassador to Poland, Liu Guangyuan (劉光源), is the only ambassador in the ten countries surveyed to have his own Twitter account, which was opened in March 2020. In each of these three countries, China's public messaging focused largely on the cultivation of a more positive image around China, its dealing with the crisis, and its ability to provide aid and assistance. The April 2020 ETNC study categorized this behavior as a "charm offensive," implying a dimension of seduction or praise directed to local audiences. In reality, it more resembles self-aggrandizement. In the case of Italy, for instance, there is evidence of the use of disinformation in building up the positive narrative around China, from misrepresenting comments by an Italian medical expert in China Global Television Network (CGTN) and the *Global Times* on 22 March and insinuating that the virus may have originated in Italy to the doctoring and circulation of a video of Italians singing the Chinese national anthem, seemingly in gratitude for China's assistance. At the same time, China's ambassador to Poland, where China also sought to cultivate a more positive image, struck a more nuanced tone than what was circulating elsewhere at the time, arguing for a more rational approach to researching the origins of COVID-19 while not explicitly denying China's responsibility. While the commonality here was a proactive Chinese approach aimed at building a positive image, what was also not seen from China in these countries was a confrontational tone toward the host country and local actors.

Meanwhile, in the cases of Sweden, France, and, to a lesser extent, Germany, China's public diplomacy was clearly more combative. This is not to say that China did not seek to build up its image as it did in other countries and paint itself as a valuable partner, but what sets these three countries apart is China's proactive targeting and even singling out of local media, researchers, and even parliamentarians who expressed critical views toward China. France is the most visible case. Though never taking issue directly and publicly with the French government, Chinese embassy communications regularly criticized media outlets and researchers who voiced criticism toward China and its account of the crisis. The ambassador frequently commented in the press in a manner that earned him the title of the

"undiplomatic ambassador."[36] One communication written by an "anonymous diplomat" and posted on the embassy's website on 12 April, which ultimately prompted an intervention on the part of the French foreign minister, and which has since been removed, was particularly harsh and provocative. In addition to chastising "Western" media, experts, and politicians, it also called out retirement home employees for "collectively deserting" their posts "from one day to the next . . . leaving their pensioners to die of hunger and sickness," highlighting and misrepresenting a particularly delicate and painful moment in the outbreak in France. Moreover, the post slandered 80 French parliamentarians for their stated support of Taiwan's handling of the crisis, insinuating that they backed racial slurs supposedly made by the Taiwanese government against the director-general of WHO, accusations that were unsubstantiated and strongly denied by the authorities in Taipei.[37]

In the case of Sweden, where the local government opted for voluntary rather than compulsory measures in combatting the virus, the *Global Times*, an English-language newspaper linked to the Chinese Communist Party, directly criticized the Swedish government's handling of the health crisis in the form of an op-ed calling upon the EU to condemn the Swedish approach. The Chinese foreign ministry declined to back the editorial, and the ambassador in Stockholm also seemed to distance himself from such a position, invoking the principle of noninterference. At the same time, the local embassy called critics of China's handling of the pandemic "cold-blooded," "hypocritical," as well as "selfish" and argued that some journalists were in a "bubble of hallucination."

In Germany, meanwhile, China's tone was much more nuanced. In a guest piece for the daily *Handelsblatt*, the ambassador expressed his "admiration" for how the German people were handling the pandemic. In another statement, the embassy declared that COVID-19 was not the time for ideological rivalry but rather that cooperation was required to save lives. At the same time, the embassy in Germany spoke of some German media coverage as a "political virus." Germany's leading boulevard paper, *Bild*, was at the center of Chinese criticism. In several open letters, the Chinese embassy accused *Bild* of spreading "defamation, "hypocritical lies," "nationalism," "xenophobia," and "anti-Chinese sentiments." All this culminated in a statement "warning" German media not to follow "anti-Chinese reporting." What was widely understood by Germans as an attack on the free press, while seemingly an isolated incident in the country's relations with China, demonstrates that certain actions can have an amplification effect that overshadows other messaging.

In sum, commonalities can be seen in China's public messaging across Europe, from communicating a positive image of its handling of the crisis to engaging in a battle of narratives with the United States and on the origins of COVID-19. Meanwhile, variations in the intensity, style, and content ranged from a low-key approach in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, and Slovakia to a proactive and positive approach in Italy, Poland, and Spain and to a more confrontational approach in France, Sweden, and, to some extent, Germany.

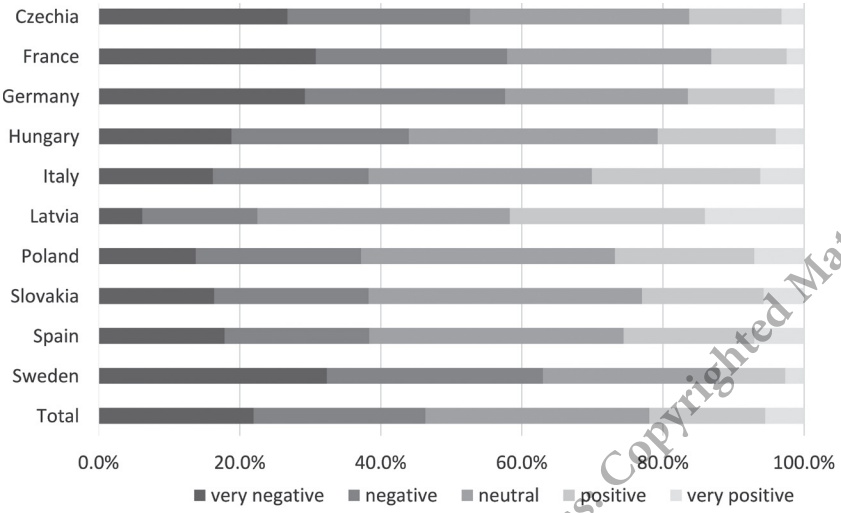
## 4. European Public Opinion of China during COVID-19

In this section we review the data collected in the Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey and cross-reference them with other available surveys in order to compare and triangulate the findings. We then discuss what these findings mean in terms of European public opinion of China, specifically in the "interim" period in between the first wave of COVID-19 in spring 2020 and on the eve of the second wave, which started escalating in early autumn the same year.

The overall view of China in the ten surveyed EU countries was predominantly negative (see Figure 1). In total, only about 22 percent of respondents held positive or very positive feelings, while about 45 percent held negative or very negative feelings of China. Swedish respondents reported the most negative feelings, with altogether 60 percent holding very negative or negative feelings of China and only 12 percent reporting positive or very positive feelings of China (the remaining 28 percent seeing China in a neutral way). Other countries were also decisively negative, especially Germany and France, but also the Czech Republic. On the opposite end, Latvia scored by far the most positive when compared to other countries, with only about 20 percent of respondents holding any degree of negative views of China and over 40 percent holding positive or very positive views. As such, Latvia was the only country from among those included where more people were positive than negative about China. Subsequently, Poland, Slovakia, Italy, Spain, and Hungary all had more than 20 percent of respondents holding positive or very positive views of China, while each had more than 30 percent of respondents with negative or very negative views.

The picture is similar when looking at how respondents self-evaluate the change in their views of China within past three years. In Sweden, almost 60 percent said their view had gotten worse or much worse, while about 6 percent considered that their view of China improved. Similar dynamics can

**Figure 1: Feelings toward China (percentage of respondents)**

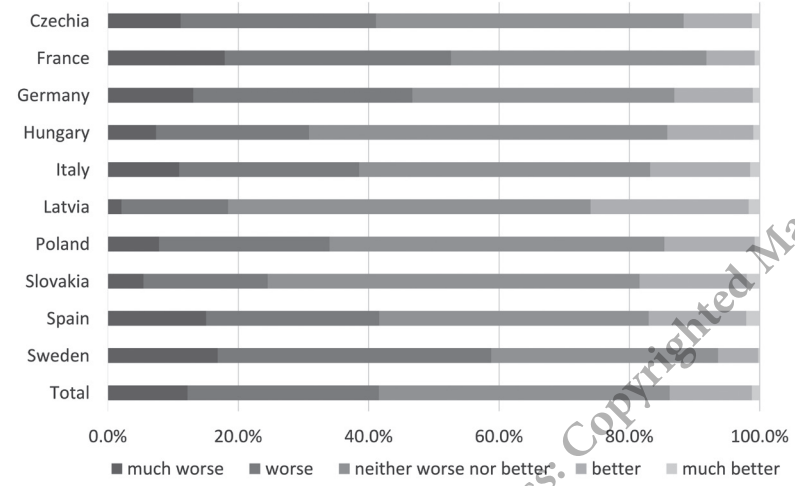



Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey (2020).

be observed in France, where more than 50 percent respondents report having a worse view of China. In Germany, Spain, and the Czech Republic more than 40 percent report having worse views of China than three years ago. By comparison, in Latvia roughly one-fourth of respondents report that their view of China improved over the past three years, while less than one-fifth say their view has gotten worse. This again makes Latvia the only country from those surveyed where more respondents report positive rather than negative change. Subsequently, in Slovakia roughly 24 percent of respondents report a negative change, compared to about 18 percent with a positive change. In Hungary, Poland, and Italy, the difference grows, with each having more than 30 percent of those who find their view of China has become worse, compared to about 15 percent of those who find it has become better.

It is also relevant to note that in all countries the number of respondents saying their views got much worse exceeded those that reported it got much better. Apart from Latvia, with only a small difference in favor of the former, the ratio between the two extreme answers varied between approximately 1:3 (Slovakia) to approximately 1:56 (Sweden). In other words, although a significant minority of respondents have come to view China more positively in the past three years, only a very small portion seem to have become very enthusiastic about the country.

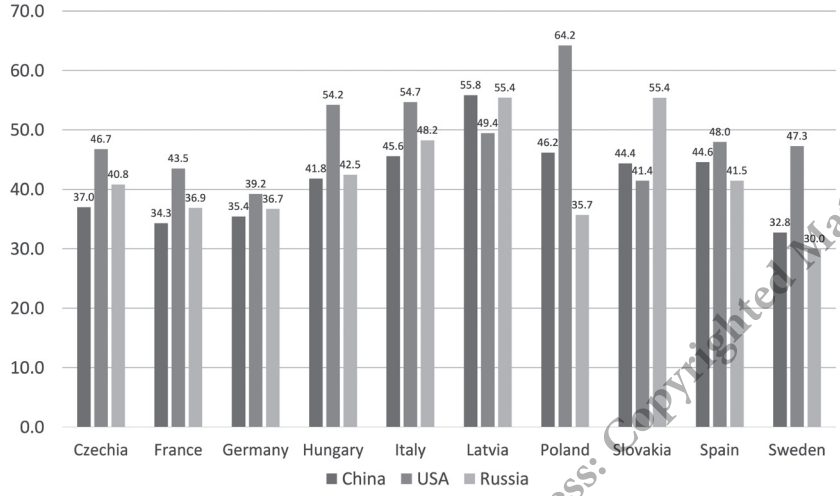
**Figure 2: Views of China—Self-Reported Change over the Past Three Years (percentage of respondents)**




Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey (2020).

To put the views of China in a wider context, we compare them with those of the United States and Russia (Figure 3). Here, we notice that in almost all countries the United States is perceived the most positively, with Russia and China being somewhat at a distance. An important finding in relation to our research is that the views of China and the United States do not seem to be balancing each other—suggesting that the growing tensions between the two do not translate into Europeans picking one side or another in terms of preference. Instead, various countries are influenced by specific factors when it comes to how these three external great powers are viewed. In line with expectations, Poland is the most positive about the United States from among all surveyed countries, and its views of Russia are among the most negative. This confirms the position of Poland as the most pro-Atlantic EU country after Brexit as well as its long-standing negative attitudes toward Russia. Germany and France, on the other hand, have more negative views of the United States compared with the other countries surveyed, but their views of China and Russia are even more negative. This may reflect growing support for strategic independence of the EU and willingness to play this role vis-à-vis its main Atlantic ally, but also toward the authoritarian competitors—Russia and China. Exceptions to the overall trend are Latvia and Slovakia, where the United States is perceived less positively than both China

**Figure 3: Feeling toward China, the United States, and Russia (mean values; 0 = cold, negative feelings, 100 = warm, positive feelings, 50 = neutral)**

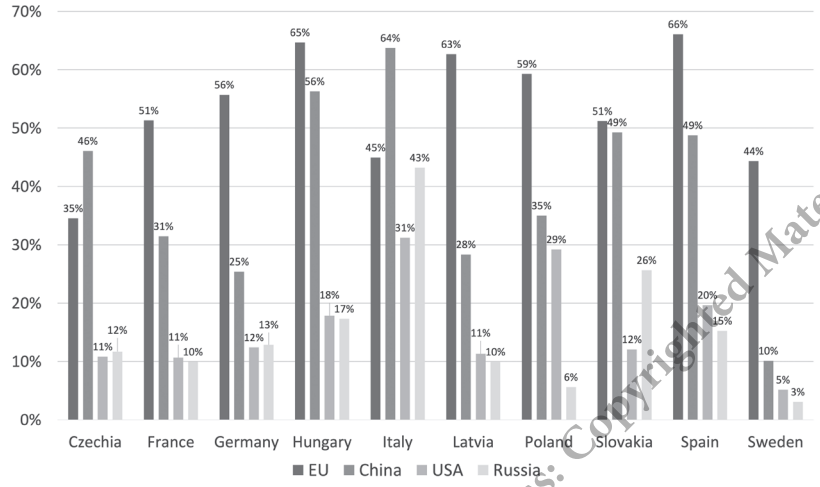



Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey (2020).

and Russia. In Slovakia, this is likely related to the long-existing positive views of Russia related to pan-Slavic sentiments, while in Latvia the results are related to the significant Russian minority.

When asked about how much China, the EU, the United States, and Russia helped their country during the pandemic (Figure 4), respondents in two countries—Italy and the Czech Republic—recognized China's help even more than that of the EU. In Italy, the first EU country massively hit by COVID-19, more than 63 percent of respondents agreed that China helped their country, with only about 45 percent saying the same for the EU. Italy also had by far the most respondents who recognized the help of Russia—more than 43 percent. In the Czech Republic, over 46 percent saw China providing help, compared to 34.5 percent noting the help of the EU. In Slovakia, roughly the same number of respondents agreed that China and the EU provided help—in both cases about half. Significant amounts of respondents saw China providing help in most other countries, such as in Hungary (56 percent), Spain (49 percent), Poland (35 percent), or France (31 percent). Sweden was an exception in this regard, where only 10 percent of respondents agreed that China provided help during the pandemic, significantly less than in all other surveyed countries.

**Figure 4: How Much Did the Following Countries/Entities Help Your Country during COVID-19? (percentage of those recognizing help)**




Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey (2020).

The poll results suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major factor in driving European public opinion of China. In the survey, respondents were asked to write what comes first to their mind in relation to China. In all surveyed countries, respondents mentioned COVID-19 as one of the most common associations with China. In Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland, France, and Hungary it was the most common association of China altogether, while in other countries it appeared among the top associations. In Sweden, the most common association of China was "dictatorship," while in the Czech Republic it was "Communism." In both cases it can be argued that COVID-19 did not change overall dynamics of the perceptions of China but instead accelerated preexisting patterns and attitudes. In Slovakia, the most common association of China was "large population," suggesting a relatively detached attitude of the local public.

Our findings from the Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey are generally in line with the other surveys discussed in the previous sections of the article, while in some respects offering more detailed insights into European views of China. Most generally, we can distinguish two groups among the ten studied countries. The first group consists of Sweden, Germany, France, and the Czech Republic, in which the populations have

notably negative views of China. Moreover, views have worsened significantly over the past three years. With the exception of the Czech Republic, these are also the countries who tend to give lower credit to China's help during COVID-19 and see China's own handling of the coronavirus crisis more negatively. The second group consists of Latvia, Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. By comparison, this group is less negative toward China; their views have worsened less (or not at all), and they tend to recognize China's help during COVID-19 more.

A few more general observations can be made based on the survey data presented in this section. First, as expected, COVID-19 has proven to play a crucial role in driving European public opinion on China at the time of the survey. When prompted, COVID-19 appeared as by far the most common association of China among respondents. Moreover, one can note that more positive attitudes toward China go hand in hand with a stronger recognition of China's help during the pandemic and also correlate with more positive views of China's handling of the coronavirus crisis. Italy and partly Spain were found to be comparatively more positive (or less negative) about China's handling of COVID-19 and also recognized China's help during the pandemic. Subsequently, respondents in both countries perceived China somewhat less negatively than the respondents in other countries. Conversely, Swedes found China to be of minimal help during the crisis and considered that China has done a poor job in handling the pandemic. Sweden is shown to hold the most negative view of China—and has also the most significant worsening of views. While this argument has been made in line with the research design of this article following the country-level findings, future studies may test the extent to which it would be verified at the level of individuals and their views.

Second, comparing the findings in this section with the previous section on Chinese public diplomacy, we find that, in general, China's more confrontational public diplomacy approach (the so-called wolf warrior approach) correlates with more negative views and a worsening image of China. Sweden is the most obvious example here, but these patterns are visible in France and Germany as well. However, in countries where China pursued more low-key public diplomacy positions (particularly Latvia, Hungary, and Slovakia) or proactive public diplomacy that largely avoided confrontation with local actors (Italy, Poland, and Spain), there was a positive correlation with more positive—or at least less negative—views of China.

Finally, and following on a similar note, while COVID-19 was identified as being the key driving force behind European public opinion of China at the time of the survey, Sweden and the Czech Republic are partial exceptions here. The two countries had seen their relations with China in the public spotlight even before the pandemic as a result of ongoing tensions in their bilateral relationships.[38] In this context, COVID-19 has primarily served as a catalyst for previously held images held by the Swedish and Czech publics. In Sweden, where political parties share some sort of consensus in terms of the relationship with China, this led only to a further worsening of the general image of China. The Swedish public was by far the most negative toward China, reporting the most significant worsening of China's image and also recognizing China's help in fighting the virus the least. In the Czech Republic, meanwhile, China has become an issue of domestic political contest among opposition parties holding very negative views of China in general and its role during the pandemic in particular, compared to the government parties being much less negative—if not openly positive.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has sought to analyze commonalities and variations in China's public diplomacy across a range of ten EU countries during the "first wave" of the COVID-19 crisis in the first half of 2020. This analysis then was correlated with European public opinion of China. We found an overlap between countries in which China took a more confrontational approach toward local actors, particularly the media, and the views of European publics, which in this case were negative (France, Sweden, and Germany). In countries where China was active but not confrontational in public diplomacy (Italy, Poland, and Spain), public opinion was comparatively more balanced and recognized more China's efforts in combatting the virus. In Latvia, where China's public diplomacy was notably low-key with some positive Chinese messaging, positive public opinion toward China was also the highest, while in Hungary and Slovakia the intensity of China's messaging was also low-key and nonconfrontational, and public opinion was more balanced. In the Czech Republic, public opinion trended more negative toward China despite its relatively low-key messaging in relation to COVID-19 specifically, while more the bilateral relations experienced tensions more generally.

It should be emphasized that correlation does not mean causation, as indeed the factors influencing public opinion are vast. China's public diplomacy, and in particular the narrow definition adopted in this article—communication by Chinese officials and official media toward the countries in question—is not the only factor weighing on the image of China. Other possible factors include media reporting of other aspects of China's foreign policy and the domestic situation in China, as well as the treatment of China by local politicians. Moreover, public diplomacy outside of the temporal scope of this study, that is, before the coronavirus crisis, is also a factor. The cases of the Czech Republic and Sweden illustrate this. Nevertheless, as the public opinion data show, the COVID-19 crisis galvanized attention around China and in seven of ten countries surveyed was the single most identifying factor associated with China. Never before has China figured so prominently on a question of such visible and immediate importance to the European public. Our findings suggest that public messaging by foreign state actors does matter in shaping the views of said country, particularly in a time of crisis, though at this stage we can identify only the clear correlation, without confirming cause and effect.

Our analysis also raises many further questions to be explored. Among these are the reasons for the observed correlations. Does public opinion follow public diplomacy, or can the variations in China's public diplomacy be explained rather by a catering of public messaging to what Chinese authorities already perceive public opinion to be? It is likely that broader factors at play can help explain variations. A deeper look at changes in public diplomacy before, during, and after the crisis would help to uncover these. A cursory examination suggests that, in some cases, China's public diplomacy seemed to change during the crisis, but in different directions. One direction of change is toward a more combative approach, wherein France offers a primary example. At no point in recent history have Chinese diplomats in France been so frequently and publicly confrontational, to the point where, for the first time, the Chinese ambassador was summoned for "consultations" by the French minister of foreign affairs on 14 April. The shift was perhaps not unexpected, as Lu Shaye (盧沙野), the new ambassador to France, appointed in the summer of 2019, had a reputation for more confrontational diplomacy from his previous posting in Canada.

Another change as seen in the case of Poland is from low-key to visibly proactive. One contextual element that helps explain this move

toward a more visible public diplomacy is the noticeable change in tone on the part of the Polish authorities, which had grown warier of China in recent years but softened their narrative in the context of the pandemic. Finally, in the case of the Czech Republic, China's public diplomacy shifted from markedly confrontational toward relatively low-key when concerning COVID-19, though on other topics China has retained a combative approach, particularly in relation to the visit of a Czech Senate delegation to Taiwan in September 2020. This shift during the first wave of the crisis can in large part be explained by the change in tone on the part of the Czech government, which before the crisis was more critical of China but shifted its narrative to play up its relations with Beijing during the pandemic. This would suggest that China's public messaging was sensitive to the narrative of the local national government. However, the case of France is curious in this regard, as the French government did not seem to take a more openly critical line on China in the context of the crisis. The causes of variance therefore need to be explored further. For instance, Chinese authorities might take the local public discussion about China into account when deciding on public diplomacy approaches. A high level of China-critical coverage in foreign countries could thus be hypothesized to positively correlate with a combative style of messaging.

A broader question is the implications of public opinion on national policy making and bilateral relations. A country's public diplomacy can help to shape public opinion, but to what extent do changes in public opinion impact the policies put in place toward that country? As was mentioned earlier, Europe has already been experiencing a shift toward a more complex policy on China that includes a recognition of a "systemic rivalry." What role does public opinion play in this policy shift, and what impact can China's public diplomacy ultimately have on shaping Europe's strategy toward China in one way or another? At perhaps no other time has it been as relevant as during the COVID-19 crisis.

## Notes

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香港中文大學出版社
The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press

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**The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin, Hong Kong**
**Tel.: +852 3943 9800 Fax: +852 2603 7355 Email: cup-bus@cuhk.edu.hk**
**Website: cup.cuhk.edu.hk**