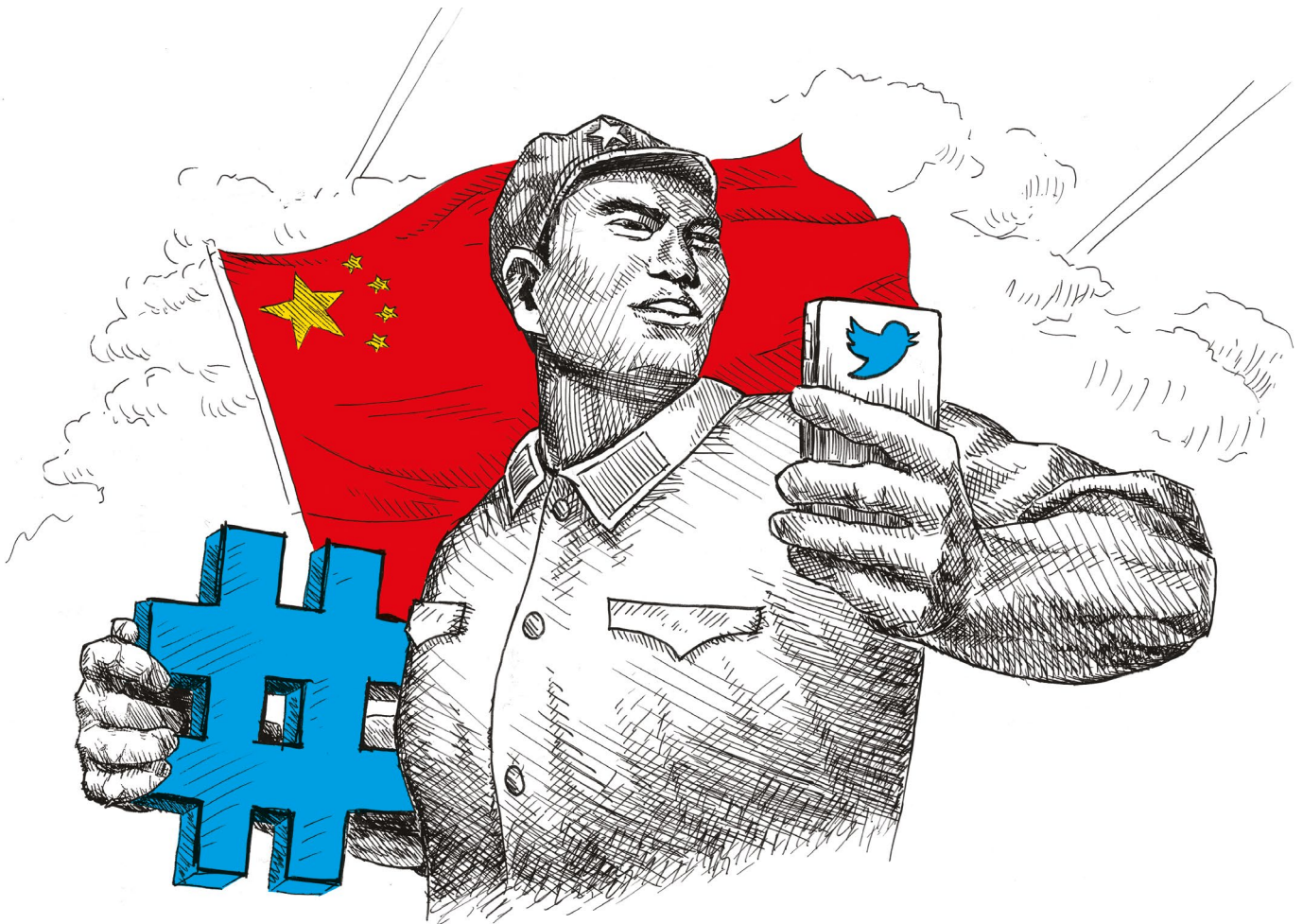


BRIEFING PAPER

# China's propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Central Europe

Ivana Karásková, Alicja Bachulska, Tamás Matura, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík



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# **China's propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Central Europe**

**Ivana Karásková, Alicja Bachulska, Tamás Matura, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík**

## **CHINA'S PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS IN CENTRAL EUROPE**

### **Briefing paper**

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# Summary

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Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, China's external propaganda has been working hard on damage control, including enlisting the help of Chinese state entities' social media accounts on international platforms.

At first Beijing's propaganda focused on deflecting international criticism over its domestic response, however, it soon gained an offensive edge, spreading disinformation over the origin of the virus, engaging in 'wolf warrior' diplomacy including attacking other countries' responses and fighting social media 'battles' with representatives of foreign governments.

The 'march' of Chinese diplomats to social media seems to have been motivated as much by explicit instructions from above as by the bottom-up initiative to impress superiors within the Chinese party-state apparatus.

In Central Europe, Chinese state-backed entities had not been prominent actors in cyberspace until the 2019 Hong Kong protests. Before that China's modus operandi largely focused on passively boosting its image and spreading 'positive energy' about China. The defense of Chinese positions has reached a wider audience thanks to local Chinese Embassies' outreach to some traditional media and the help of local pro-China proxies.

Attempts to influence perception of the Hong Kong protests in Central Europe laid the foundation for propaganda efforts around COVID-19. In a short succession Chinese Embassies in Visegrád countries (V4), with the exception of Czechia, set up accounts on both Twitter and Facebook.

A novel aspect of China's propaganda efforts has been the usage of disinformation tactics copying Russia's hybrid operations playbook and targeting the same audience which is disillusioned with the West. The interplay of pro-China and pro-Russia narratives in cyberspace has been apparent in Central Europe, where China has utilized the same alternative media outlets which often spread Russian narratives.

The effectiveness of the Chinese external propaganda is, however, questionable, as it lacks broader customization and originality, often recycling the same themes and using the same principles as seen prevalent in China's domestic propaganda.

While the most powerful pro-China narratives are still communicated through traditional media as well as local intermediaries, China has been quickly adapting its propaganda to cyberspace amidst the changing environment. An intensification of its efforts to influence narratives is thus to be expected.





# Chinese propaganda on COVID-19: Eldorado in Czech cyberspace

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Filip Šebok and Ivana Karásková

The COVID-19 pandemic harmed China's image across the globe. Since the outbreak China's external propaganda apparatus has been working hard on damage control, including enlisting the help of Chinese state entities' social media accounts on international platforms. However, while at first Beijing's propaganda focused on deflecting international criticism of its domestic response, it soon gained an offensive edge, spreading disinformation over the origin of the virus and attacking other countries' responses.

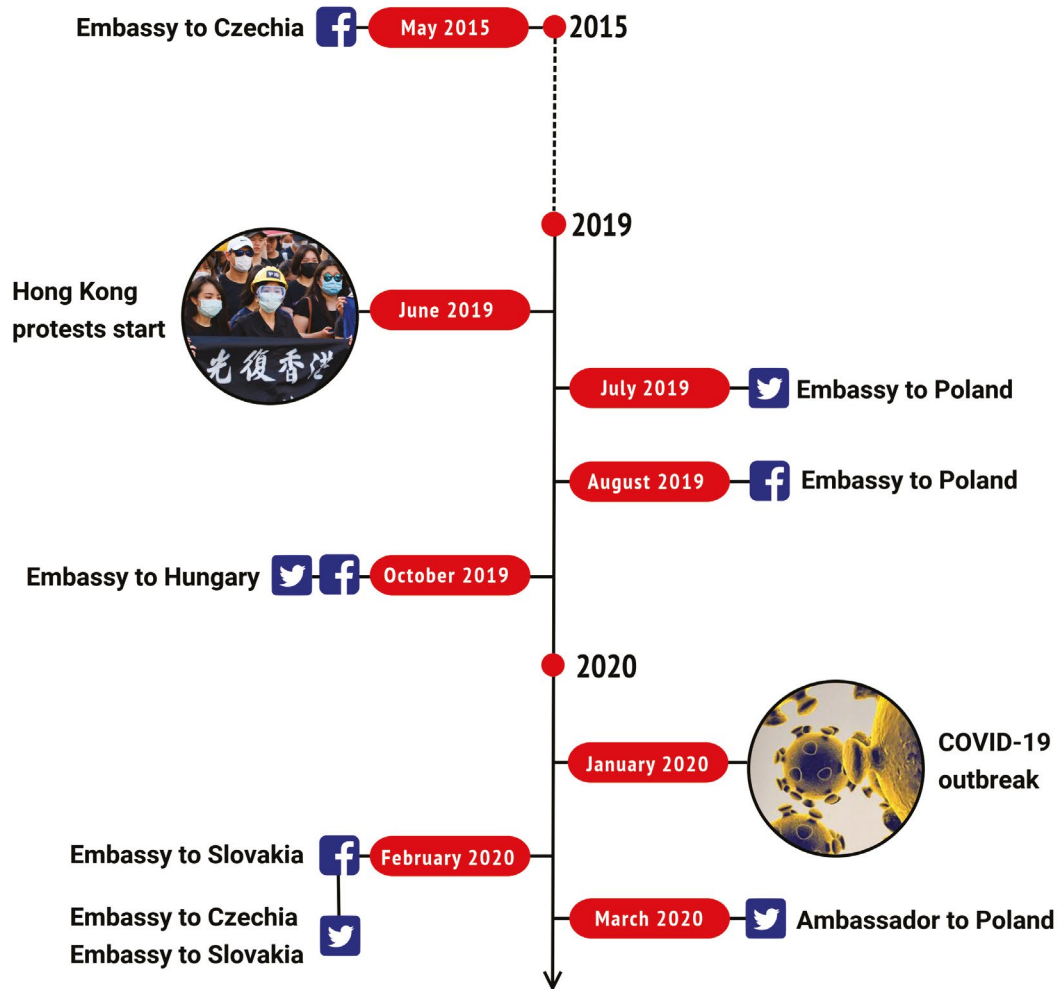
China has capitalized on the cyberspace infrastructure it had been putting in place for some time. In April 2019, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Hua Chunying called for a more activist diplomacy on social media by Chinese diplomats to improve China's "discourse power".<sup>1</sup> Several Chinese diplomats have gained notoriety thanks to their assertive presence on Twitter, the most visible being 'wolf warrior' Zhao Lijian, a former diplomat in Pakistan and currently a spokesperson at the Chinese MFA.<sup>2</sup> The accounts of diplomats complemented already established accounts of Chinese state media, chief among them CGTN, China Daily, and Xinhua.

The 'march' of Chinese diplomats to social media seems to have been motivated just as much by explicit instructions from above as by the bottom-up initiative to impress bosses at the MFA, realizing an assertive defense of Chinese positions has become a new pathway to career advancement.

Zooming in on Central Europe, Chinese state-backed entities had not been prominent actors in cyberspace until last year. Until 2019, China's modus operandi focused on passively boosting its image and spreading 'positive energy' about China. The defense of Chinese positions has reached a wider audience mainly thanks to local pro-China proxies rather than due to China's propaganda effectiveness. Yet, China is now increasingly reaching the local audience directly in an effort to rewrite narratives.<sup>3</sup> Attempts to influence the perception of Hong Kong protests in Central Europe laid foundations for a new approach, and propaganda efforts on COVID-19 have followed suit. In all four Visegrád countries, the Chinese Embassies set up accounts on both Twitter and Facebook in a short succession. Only a year ago, it was only the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic who had a Facebook account.

PICTURE 1: CHINESE EMBASSIES IN V4 ON TWITTER AND FACEBOOK

## Chinese Embassies in V4 on Twitter & Facebook



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### LOOK WHO'S TALKING: CHINA'S INCREASED ACTIVITY ON CZECH SOCIAL NETWORKS

Currently three main official outlets spreading China's external propaganda operate in Czech cyberspace, chief among them China Radio International (CRI) broadcasting in the local language. CRI's Facebook page has an incredible number of 850,000 fans, a significant part of which are obviously fake accounts. A vast majority of CRI posts consist of reposts of Chinese state media accompanied by Czech translations (often in broken Czech). Yet what is unique of CRI in Czechia is its effort to

customize its content to the audience. In videos from “The Little Mole Studio” (named after a Czech cartoon character popular at home and also in China), Czech-speaking Chinese presenters talk about the domestic Chinese response to COVID-19, alleged China-Czech cooperation on fighting the pandemic, etc.

In February, CRI offered Czech and Slovak students of the Chinese language 20 EUR if they recorded a video supporting China during the pandemic, with clearly prescribed slogans that had to be included. The CRI page has also started to advertise its posts in order to reach a wider audience.

The Chinese Embassy’s Facebook page, created in 2015, was one of the early examples of its kind in Europe. The Embassy’s Twitter account followed relatively late as it was set up after the COVID-19 outbreak in February 2020. During the pandemic, both accounts have exhibited a similar content make-up. A vast majority of posts have consisted of retweets/reposts of Chinese state media or state institutions accounts that do not have any specific relation to Czechia. Apart from translations to Czech which accompany these posts, there is very little original content or a ‘personal touch’ in comparison to the China Radio International Facebook page. Most posts contain a similar message – all of them discuss Czech-China cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasize China’s supplies or donations of medical material to Czechia by various Chinese entities.

What is perhaps more interesting, is the content production regarding the domestic situation in China. Here, the propaganda stresses positive personal stories of ordinary people affected by the pandemic, the resilience of the Chinese economy, the use of technology to fight the pandemic and the alleged transparent, open and responsible attitude of the Chinese authorities. Other entities – such as the WHO, foreign countries’ representatives or even individuals – are widely quoted praising China in order to build more legitimacy for China’s pandemic management. Czech President Zeman’s statements – such as his witty remark comparing demands for compensation from China for spreading COVID-19 to asking compensation from the United Kingdom for causing the mad cow disease – were widely circulated in Chinese media.

Apart from ‘mask diplomacy’ achievements, Chinese social media accounts in Czechia have also targeted the US, including reposts of disinformation narratives on COVID-19 originating in the US. However, this content was not customized to the local audience, which points to a rather passive reposting of content created elsewhere. No content attacking the Czech COVID-19 response was identified.

## **FROM MOSCOW WITH LOVE**

A novel aspect of China’s propaganda efforts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been the usage of disinformation tactics in a copy of Russia’s hybrid operations playbook. Globally, China seems to intentionally target the same audience which is disillusioned with the West, displaying strong similarities with Russian anti-West narratives.

The interplay of pro-China and pro-Russia narratives in cyberspace has been apparent in Central Europe too. The MapInfluCE project<sup>4</sup> uncovered that China

has utilized – at least in Czechia and Slovakia – the same alternative media outlets which often spread Russian narratives, such as *Parlamentní listy*, an outlet often carrying Chinese Ambassador Zhang Jianmin's op-eds. In one of his recent interviews<sup>5</sup> for the outlet he repeated the official line about the unclear origin of the virus, pointing to the COVID-19 case in France from December unrelated to China.

It is, however, too early to say whether the Chinese and Russian disinformation operations work in parallel or in tandem. Also the effectiveness of Chinese external propaganda in Czechia is questionable, as it lacks broader customization and originality, often recycling the same themes as seen in domestic propaganda. These not only fall on deaf ears, but provide amusement to a number of Czechs who flood the comment section with negative posts, pictures of Tibetan or East Turkestan flags or the cartoon character Winnie the Pooh (who is said to bear likeness to Chinese leader Xi Jinping). The most powerful pro-China narratives are still communicated through the traditional media as well as local intermediaries, with Czech President Zeman, who reaches a much wider audience, being their champion. China has been, however, a fast learner in adapting its external propaganda in cyberspace to the changing environment. An intensification of its efforts to influence narratives is thus to be expected.

# COVID-19 and China's changing propaganda tactics in Slovakia

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Matej Šimalčík

China has never been at the top of the political agenda in Slovakia. The ruling SMER – Social Democracy party, in power from 2006 until March 2020 besides a short interval between 2010-2012, initiated the development of trade interactions with China, often forgetting about security or human rights issues.

However, 2020 has so far seen a changing policy towards China on the part of the Slovak government. The change has been motivated by two main factors.

First, general elections in February resulted in the Social Democrats losing their grip on power. The new government was formed by a wide coalition of mostly right-of-center parties, which tend to have a more value-based view of China, putting more focus on human rights and protecting democracy from China's influence.<sup>6</sup> Due to this change, we have recently seen numerous government officials calling on China to release the Panchen Lama,<sup>7</sup> the second-highest-ranking monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and a political prisoner since the age of six, allowing Taiwan to participate in the World Health Assembly,<sup>8</sup> and condemning Beijing's attempt to unilaterally impose security legislation on Hong Kong.<sup>9</sup>

Second, Slovakia, like virtually every other country, had to deal with the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about a newfound interest in China, its internal politics, and international ambitions.

However, these developments did not occur in a vacuum, without any reaction from China. On the contrary, they were unveiled against the backdrop of Chinese propaganda spreading in Slovakia. Moreover, it appears that the pandemic was a major factor in the Chinese Embassy changing its approach to pro-Chinese propaganda in Slovakia.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE EMBASSY JOINS SOCIAL MEDIA

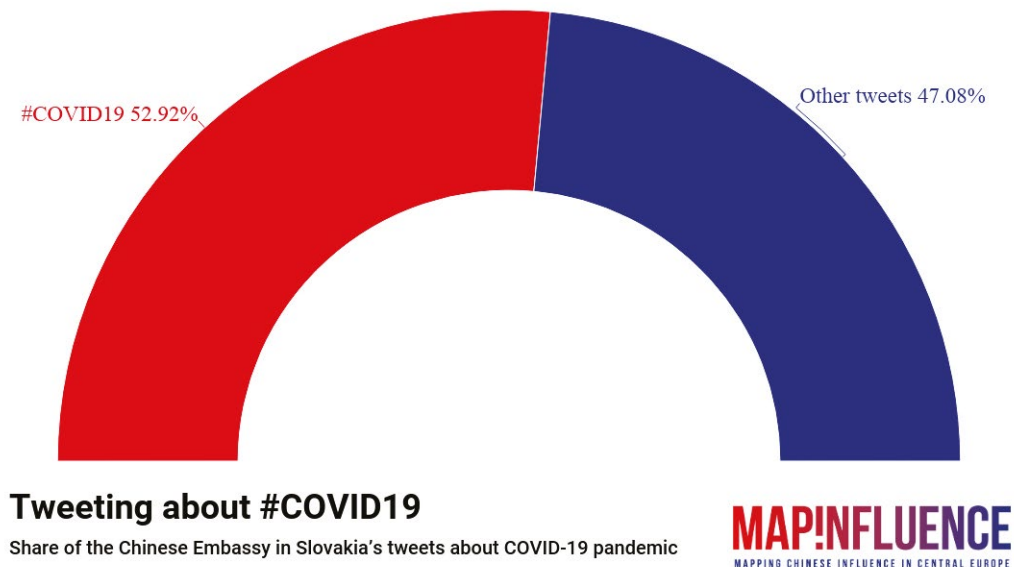
After years of a notable absence on social media, the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia created both Facebook<sup>10</sup> and Twitter<sup>11</sup> accounts in February 2020. This activity fits within the broader trend of Chinese diplomats getting on international platforms in order to fulfill Xi Jinping's directive to "tell the China story well".

As both social media accounts were created only in February, they do not have a large follower base yet, which limits their potential impact on the Slovak public. Nevertheless, China's approach to social media showcases the general trends in which the country's approach towards communicating with foreign audiences has recently been going.

Interestingly, almost 40 percent of the Embassy's followers on Twitter created their accounts in 2020, which suggests that there is a large number of bots following the account. At the same time, a large portion of followers are the accounts of other Chinese Embassies and diplomats.

Naturally, the Embassy has dedicated a majority of its focus to the COVID-19 pandemic. More than half of the tweets posted since the account was opened in February 2020 included the hashtag #COVID19 in some variation.

#### GRAPH 1: SHARE OF THE CHINESE EMBASSY IN SLOVAKIA'S TWEETS ABOUT COVID-19 PANDEMIC



However, many of the tweets are of poor quality. They appear to be a result of automated translation of Chinese or English language source materials, missing the nuances of the Slovak language which translates some English terms in more than one way, thereby resulting in a different meaning than the original.

#### #RUMORBREAKING

After various stakeholders within the Slovak security community (both state actors and NGOs) started to engage in strategic communication about the pandemic and China's role in the breakout, the Chinese Embassy launched a campaign aimed at breaking purported rumors about China and the pandemic. So far, 13 infographics were published on Facebook and Twitter which "debunk" the supposed myths about the origin of the virus, expediency, and transparency of China's response to the outbreak, its influence over the WHO, and Taiwan's response to the virus. Overall, these infographics can be characterized as a mix of truth-bending, misinformation and creative semantics. This was a part of a larger coordinated campaign targeting other EU member states, as similar infographics and articles were posted by Chinese

Embassies in Berlin, Warsaw and Athens. An article on 24 myths was also published by the Chinese news agency Xinhua.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, the campaign which was originally supposed to contain 16 “broken myths” ended at 13. This was most likely due to the strong backlash from the Slovak public on the Embassy’s Facebook page. The “truth” of these “myths” was in all cases purported to be based on either unspecified scientists or rationality, even in cases where the original “myth” was not connected to any question of science, such as the question of Taiwan’s accession to the WHO or the fate of Dr. Li Wenliang, the doctor from Wuhan who first noted cases of a SARS-like pneumonia and was later reprimanded by the police for “spreading rumors”.

**PICTURE 2: CHINESE EMBASSY’S RUMOR BREAKING CAMPAIGN IN SLOVAKIA**

## Chinese Embassy's #RumorBreaking campaign


<p><b>× Mýtus</b></p> <p>Vírus COVID-19 bol vyvinutý v čínskom laboratóriu.</p> <p><b>1.</b></p> <p><b>Fakt ✓</b> podľa vedcov</p> <p>Všetky dôkazy poukazujú na to, že SARS-CoV-2 má pôvod v prírode.</p> <p><b>16 Corona Rumors</b></p>	<p>MYTH: Virus COVID-19 was developed in a Chinese lab.</p> <p>FACT (according to scientists): All the evidence points to the natural origin of SARS-CoV-2.</p>
<p>MYTH: SARS-CoV-2 was released from a Wuhan lab as a result of an accident.</p> <p>FACT (according to scientists): The Wuhan Institute of Virology has no connection to the origin of the virus.</p>	<p><b>× Mýtus</b></p> <p>SARS-CoV-2 bol vypustený ako výsledok laboratórnej nehody na Wu-chanskom virologickom inštitúte.</p> <p><b>2.</b></p> <p><b>Fakt ✓</b> podľa vedcov</p> <p>Wu-chanský virologický inštitút nemá nič spoločné s pôvodom vírusu.</p> <p><b>16 Corona Rumors</b></p>
<p><b>× Mýtus</b></p> <p>Nový koronavírus je čínsky vírus, pretože prišiel z Wu-chanu.</p> <p><b>3.</b></p> <p><b>Fakt ✓</b> podľa vedcov</p> <p>Oficiálny názov vírusu je SARS-CoV-2. Wu-chan je miesto, kde bol prvýkrát hlásený prípad COVID-19, ale nie je to nevyhnutne miesto, odkiaľ pochádza.</p> <p><b>16 Corona Rumors</b></p>	<p>MYTH: The new coronavirus is the Chinese virus because it spread from Wuhan.</p> <p>FACT (according to scientists): The official name of the virus is SARS-CoV-2. Wuhan is the place where the 1st case was reported, not necessarily the place of its origin.</p>
<p>MYTH: China knew about the outbreak since mid-November, but kept it a secret for 45 days.</p> <p>FACT (according to scientists): Chinese authorities got a 1st report about a pneumonia of unknown origin on December 27 and made it public on December 31.</p>	<p><b>× Mýtus</b></p> <p>Už v polovici novembra Čína vedela o prepuknutí COVID-19, ale zadržala informáciu 45 dní.</p> <p><b>4.</b></p> <p><b>Fakt ✓</b> podľa vedcov</p> <p>Čínske úrady najprv dostali správu o zápale pľúc neznámeho pôvodu 27. decembra a prvé oznámenie o prepuknutí zverejnili 31. decembra.</p> <p><b>16 Corona Rumors</b></p>
<p><b>× Mýtus</b></p> <p>Čína zadržala kľúčové informácie o epidémii, ktorá viedla k celosvetovej pandémie.</p> <p><b>5.</b></p> <p><b>Fakt ✓</b> podľa vedcov</p> <p>Čína to oznámila svetu čo najskôr a uchýlila sa k najprísnejším opatreniam na kontrolu epidémie, ktoré ostatným krajinám poskytli 6 týždňov, aby sa pripravili na prepuknutie.</p> <p><b>16 Corona Rumors</b></p>	<p>MYTH: China withheld key information about the epidemic which caused a global pandemic.</p> <p>FACT (according to scientists): China published information as soon as possible and adopted control measures which bought the world 6 weeks to prepare for the outbreak.</p>



**MYTH:** China tried to keep information under cover by arresting doctors.

**FACT (according to scientists):** No doctors were arrested for spreading information. On the contrary, doctors who reported the disease to superiors were rewarded.

✗ **Mýtus**



**6.**

**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedcov

Čína sa pokúsila potlačiť informovanosť o epidémii zaľknutím lekárov, ktorí mali o tom informovať.

Žiadni lekári neboli zatknutí za informátorstvo. Naopak, lekári, ktorí hlásili chorobu svojim nadriadeným, boli ústrednými orgánmi odmenení.

16 Corona Rumors

✗ **Mýtus**



**7.**

**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedcov

Čína vybielila jej potvrdené prípady a prípady úmrtia na COVID-19.


Čína bola transparentná v počte potvrdených a zomrelých prípadov, a splnila si svoju povinnosť informovať verejnosť.

16 Corona Rumors

**MYTH:** China doctored the statistics on confirmed infections and fatalities.

**FACT (according to scientists):** China was transparent about the number of infected and fatalities, and fulfilled its obligation to inform the public.

✗ **Mýtus**



**8.**


**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedcov

Čína manipulovala s WHO, aby unikla globálnej kritike.

WHO je nezávislá medzinárodná organizácia so 194 členmi a je nemožné, aby si ju ktorýkoľvek štát prispôbil svojej vôli.

16 Corona Rumors

✗ **Mýtus**



**9.**

**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedcov

Kontinentálna Čína bráni Taiwanu vo vstupe do WHO, čo ohrozilo zdravie ľudí na Taiwane.

Taiwan, ktorý je súčasťou Číny, nemá právo vstúpiť do WHO, lebo členom WHO musí byť suverénny národ. Napriek tomu je kanál technickej komunikácie a spolupráce medzi ostrovom a WHO otvorený.

16 Corona Rumors

**MYTH:** Mainland China blocks Taiwan's accession to WHO, endangering the health of the Taiwanese.

**FACT (according to scientists):** Taiwan is a part of China and is not entitled to join an international organization, as only sovereign states can do so. Nevertheless, there are channels of communication open between the island the WHO on a technical level.

✗ **Mýtus**



**10.**


**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedy a racionality

Taiwan informoval WHO 31. decembra o prenose nového koronavírusu z človeka na človeka, ale varovanie ostalo bez povšimnutia.

Taiwan to neoznámil WHO. Hľadal informácie od WHO po tom, ako mesto Wu-chan verejne nahlásilo prípady neznámeho zápalu pľúc.

16 Corona Rumors

✗ **Mýtus**



**11.**

**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedy a racionality

Číňania sa nakazili novým koronavírusom pri konzumácii netopierov.


Netopiere nie sú súčasťou čínskej stravy.

16 Corona Rumors

**MYTH:** Taiwan informed the WHO about human-to-human transmissions on December 31 but the warning was ignored.

**FACT (according to science and rationality):** Taiwan did not inform the WHO. It looked for information from WHO after Wuhan published information about cases of pneumonia of unknown origin.

✗ **Mýtus**



**12.**

**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedy a racionality

Čína znovu otvára mokré trhy s divočinou.

Čína nemá tzv. "mokré trhy s divočinou". Krajina prijala právne predpisy a zakázala nezákonný lov a obchodovanie divokých zvierat.

16 Corona Rumors

✗ **Mýtus**



**13.**

**Fakt** ✓  
podľa vedy a racionality

Revizia Wu-chanu, čo sa týka počtu potvrdených prípadov a úmrtí, ukazuje, že Čína v prvých dňoch prepuknutia COVID-19 zakryla veľký počet prípadov.

Revizia dát vykonaná mestom Wu-chan je bežná medzinárodná prax, ktorá sa zaznamenala aj vo Veľkej Británii, Španielsku, a pod. Na zabezpečenie presnosti revidovaných čísel použiť Wu-chan online systémy na porovnávanie a doplnenie čísel, a faktista offline prostriedky na zhrnutie úplných údajov zo všetkých miest súvisiacich s chorobou.

Corona Rumors

**MYTH:** China is re-opening the wet markets selling wildlife.

**FACT (according to science and rationality):** China does not have so-called "wet markets selling wildlife". It adopted a law banning hunting and trade with wild animals.

**MYTH:** Wuhan's revision of infection and fatality statistics shows that it concealed a large number of cases in the early days of the outbreak.

**FACT (according to science and rationality):** Data revision done by Wuhan is a standard international practice which was done also in the UK, Spain, etc. To ensure accuracy of the revised data, Wuhan used online systems to compare and complete the numbers, as well as online tools to compile the complete data from places affected by the disease.



## SLOVAK MEDIA: FINDING INTERNAL RESILIENCE?

Besides engaging on social media, the Chinese Embassy has relied on a more traditional approach to spread propaganda and disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic – local Slovak proxies in the media industry and in politics.

In the past, the Chinese Embassy used *Trend* magazine to spread China's view of the world to the Slovak public. In 2019, the Embassy purchased ad space which was used to publish a propaganda-ridden advertorial about the Hong Kong protests.<sup>13</sup> The advertorial was met with stern criticism from fellow journalists. The Embassy was set on using space in *Trend* again in 2020.<sup>14</sup> The magazine was supposedly approached by the Embassy, which wanted to purchase ad space to publish another advertorial on the COVID-19 pandemic and China's successful response to the outbreak. The magazine's editors opposed the request, as the ad allegedly contained grossly misleading and false claims.

Facing rejection from mainstream media, the Embassy had to resort to using fringe media outlets. In May 2020, the *Slovak National Newspaper* published an interview with Sun Lijie, the Chinese Ambassador.<sup>15</sup> The interview largely focused on the benefits of Chinese mask diplomacy. While the media outlet in question is in and of itself a marginal one, it has a symbolic value. The newspaper and its online version are published by Matica Slovenská, a publicly financed cultural and scientific institution. Its history goes back to the 19th century when it was originally founded by leaders of the National Revival movement.

## LOCAL PROXIES PROVE THEIR VALUE

Yet the most effective way for the Chinese Embassy to get its message on the pandemic across included neither the threat of abuse from Slovak media nor the Embassy's social media presence. The most effective propaganda medium was found by using local political proxies to spread Chinese talking points. This has been recognized in the past as one of China's key tools to influence foreign perceptions of China.<sup>16</sup>

The most notorious proxy for China in Slovakia is Ľuboš Blaha, an MP for the Social Democrats and a self-proclaimed Marxist, who is known for regularly engaging in virulent anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric. Blaha has recently been posting on Facebook about China's mask diplomacy, in which he juxtaposes supplies of masks and other protective equipment from China with the purported lack of aid from the EU and the US. Blaha regularly described the supplies as "aid" even though a substantial majority of the supplies material was of a commercial nature.<sup>17</sup> The MP also peddled the idea that there is a possibility that the virus originated in the US and was deployed against China as a biological weapon.<sup>18</sup>

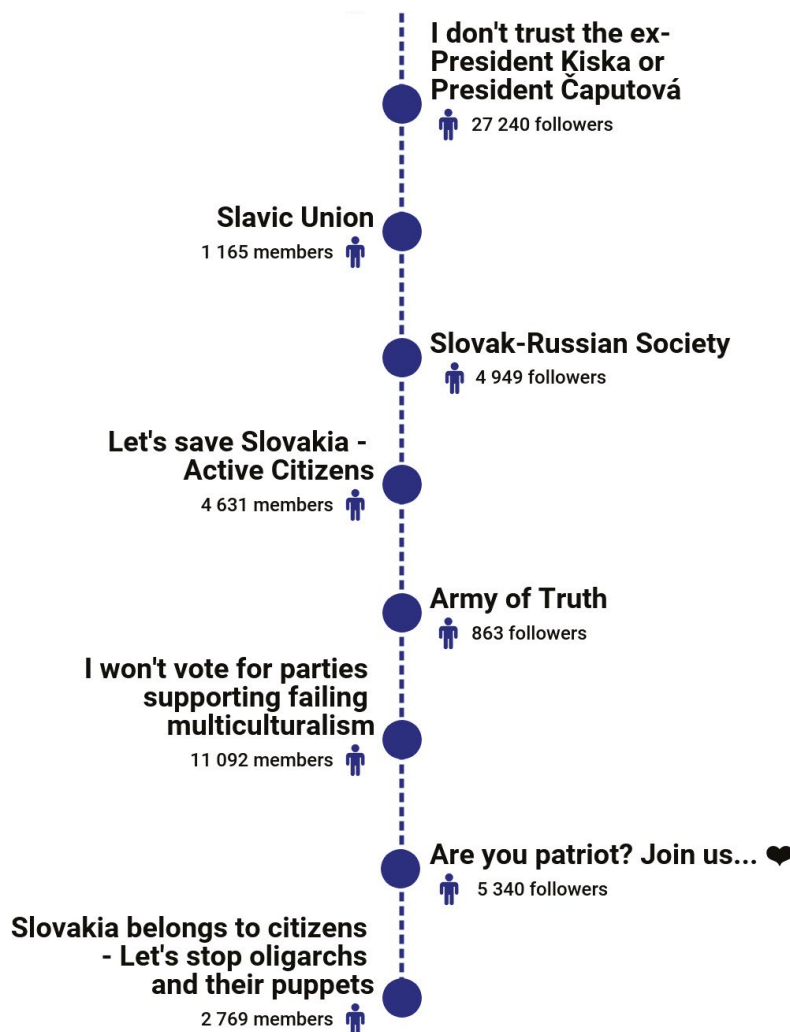
Unlike the Embassy's own social media posts, propaganda and disinformation posted by Blaha had a wide reach. The post about the possible origin of the virus in the US was liked by 2,800 people and shared 970 times – a high amount by Slovak standards.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the post was shared by pages promoting neo-Nazi content, pro-Russian propaganda, and anti-liberal messages. Together, the shared posts received over 5,000 interactions from accounts with almost 100,000 followers.<sup>20</sup>

One of the posts on “Chinese aid”, titled “When all the bad Communists are suddenly helping Europe”, was even more successful – it was liked 5,500 times and shared 1,800 times.<sup>21</sup> Bolstered by a network of like-minded Facebook pages and groups (collectively counting almost 140,000 followers) which shared the post, 8,500 people eventually interacted with this post.<sup>22</sup>

The list of Facebook pages and groups demonstrates the growing alignment between pro-Chinese and pro-Russian channels for spreading disinformation and propaganda. Growing synergies between the two countries’ hybrid warfare tactics in Europe is a trend that has been accelerating with the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

**PICTURE 3: NETWORK OF FACEBOOK PAGES AND GROUPS SHARING PRO-CHINA PROPAGANDA BY ĽUBOŠ BLAHA**





**Network of Facebook pages and groups sharing pro-China propaganda by Ľuboš Blaha**

Source: Facebook page of Ľuboš Blaha / Crowdtangle



The COVID-19 pandemic has sent the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia into propaganda overdrive. Besides relying on traditional tools for spreading propaganda, the Embassy started using relatively new tools as well. However, these newly established social media accounts are not yet reaching their full potential. Due to their recent establishment, the Facebook and Twitter accounts currently have a low amount of followers. Nevertheless, we can estimate that social media will soon play a more pivotal role in China's communication strategy in Slovakia. This seems to be the trend elsewhere in the world, with some of China's social media 'wolf warriors' even securing promotions, thereby reinforcing the trend.

As a result, hybrid threats, misinformation, and propaganda deployed by China will play an increasingly important role in Slovakia's security environment.

# Beijing and Washington's Twitter diplomacy: The Sino-American battle of narratives goes local in Poland

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**Alicja Bachulska**

With the rapid development of the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020, China and the US have stepped up their strategic rivalry – a process evident in international politics since at least 2016 and Donald Trump's election as the US president. One might call this a 'battle of narratives', which constitutes a crucial element of the competition between the US and China and one that has a direct impact on countries that cooperate with both Beijing and Washington.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war of ideas has moved from the so-called trade war and technological competition to topics of systemic efficiency and responsibility for the pandemic. A substantial part of this debate has taken place online, most notably on Twitter – a medium mainstreamed as a diplomatic tool by Donald Trump and now also commonly used by Chinese diplomats abroad, despite Twitter being banned in China. At some points, online exchanges have taken quite an intense form – for example in Poland, where the Chinese Ambassador Liu Guangyuan engaged in a months-long public debate with his US counterpart Georgette Mosbacher.<sup>24</sup> The heated nature of their interactions and the high level of the blame game involved has made it increasingly difficult for observers to engage in an informed debate on the topic without going to extremes.

The whole situation can also be seen as a localized representation of the Sino-American rivalry, this time focusing on "winning hearts and minds" of the general public in Poland, a country that has developed close ties with the US since 1989.<sup>25</sup> Warsaw has seen Washington as its security guarantor, given the continued Russian threat in Eastern Europe. Yet, it has also developed ties with Beijing, especially after the 2008 global financial crisis. Now, together with the rise in Sino-American tensions, Poland has found itself between a rock and a hard place when it comes to Beijing's and Washington's attempts to influence Polish public opinion about the role of the two actors in fighting the pandemic. This debate not only concerns the health crisis per se but also extends towards more general and politically charged topics, such as the two powers' global leadership and their role in setting international norms and standards in third countries like Poland.

The beginning of the current Twitter debate between the representatives of the US and China in Poland was preceded by an opinion piece written by Ambassador Mosbacher and published on a popular Polish news portal, *Onet*, on March 23, 2020.<sup>26</sup>

The text was a critique of China's initial attitude towards the novel coronavirus and a response to previous opinions voiced by some Chinese representatives (for example, Zhao Lijian) on the virus' origin and its potential connections with the American military.<sup>27</sup> Although various conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 have circulated online since the beginning of the outbreak, these conspiracy theories' official endorsement by some Chinese diplomats in mid-March is seen as a defining moment that has enabled the increased spread of disinformation on the topic.

In Poland, in response to Ambassador Mosbacher's initial piece, her Chinese counterpart published a response in the same medium, where he accused the US of "spreading a political virus".<sup>28</sup> Two similar pieces soon followed with one in early April<sup>29</sup> calling for others not to discredit China for its international efforts to fight the pandemic, and one in mid-May<sup>30</sup> praising the Polish government's response to the crisis, while critiquing the American government's decisions. These articles laid the groundwork for a more dynamic debate, which has been unfolding on Twitter since mid-March 2020 and has rapidly accelerated.

Georgette Mosbacher's Twitter account was established in August 2018,<sup>31</sup> as she took office in Warsaw around the same time, while her Chinese counterpart's was only created in March 2020,<sup>32</sup> although he also started working in Poland in 2018. It seems that the move was at least partially motivated by Beijing's need to amplify its own stance during the pandemic through a medium that has become increasingly popular worldwide as a diplomatic and soft power tool. The Chinese Embassy in Warsaw also has its own Twitter account, which was set up in July 2019,<sup>33</sup> and has promoted Ambassador Liu's tweets in the past few months. The debate between the two Ambassadors began once Mosbacher started to promote her initial opinion piece from the *Onet portal*.

At first, her tweets and Liu's responses were quite mild. Over time, however, their exchange has become more heated, with timely responses published bilingually (in Polish and English) in order to reach a wider audience. Interestingly, both sides have been trying to appeal to the local population by evoking certain narratives that continue to stir emotional debates in Polish politics. For example, in one of her responses to Ambassador Liu, Mosbacher stated that "Poles understand what communist propaganda is" since "they have suffered from it". The comment seems to have been among one of her most widely shared tweets in this debate, as by late May it had been re-tweeted over 3,000 times. Meanwhile, Mosbacher's Chinese counterpart praised the Polish government's efforts in fighting the pandemic (for instance, its new policy known as the "anti-crisis shield"<sup>34</sup>) and has pointed towards alleged similarities between Poland and China as equally "diligent and bold" nations.<sup>35</sup>

## SCREENSHOT 1: TWITTER EXCHANGE BETWEEN AMBASSADOR MOSBACHER AND AMBASSADOR LIU ON MAY 14 AND 15, 2020<sup>36</sup>



The American Ambassador's arguments have centered around the Chinese Communist Party's initial mistakes and its lack of transparency at the initial stage of the epidemic, while her Chinese counterpart has largely reverted to statements and use of language taken straight from the Party's propaganda playbooks (like with on the need to build "a community with a shared future for mankind"<sup>37</sup>). The Chinese side's most used line of argument has been to present an official timeline of Beijing's response and compare it to Washington's. Both sides have been accusing each other of distorting the facts and politicizing the crisis for the sake of their own domestic political needs.

The blame game accelerated even further with accusations of online trolling voiced by the American side.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, tweets by both Ambassadors generated quite a lot of traffic from mostly new, anonymous Twitter accounts, posting in shoddy Polish and English, and often pretending to be local users (for instance, by using Polish names or nicknames). Most of them have unilaterally praised China's response and attacked Donald Trump's administration and its decisions. These activities have raised a few eyebrows, especially given their bluntness and almost complete lack of sophistication.



**SCREENSHOT 2: TWITTER EXCHANGE BETWEEN AMBASSADOR MOSBACHER AND AMBASSADOR LIU ON APRIL 29, 2020<sup>39</sup>**

**Liu Guangyuan** @AmbLiuGuangYuan · 29 kwi  
 Madam Ambassador, you don't know China, you even don't know your own country. 3 months after the CDC issued coronavirus warning, there are 1 million cases and 59,000 deaths in US. It's a humanitarian disaster. @USAmbPoland

**THE TIMELINE OF THE UNITED STATES' RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

120 replies, 23 retweets, 195 likes

**Liu Guangyuan** @AmbLiuGuangYuan · 29 kwi  
 What has your government done to protect lives? Who is playing politics to spread virus in your country? Who is scapegoating but still doing nothing to control the epidemic? The US authorities owe its people and the world an explanation. @USAmbPoland

70 replies, 20 retweets, 178 likes

**SCREENSHOT 3: 'REALITY CHECK' TABLE POSTED BY THE CHINESE AMBASSADOR TO POLAND LIU GUANGYUAN ON MAY 12, 2020<sup>40</sup>**

**Liu Guangyuan** @AmbLiuGuangYuan · 12 maj  
 In the moment of crisis, the wise build bridges and the foolish build walls. It is time for some US politicians to overcome their absurd mind-set of "always blame China" and respect the TRUTH. bit.ly/2yRQNoO

<p><b>Reality Check of US Allegations Against China on COVID-19</b></p> <p><b>1. Allegation:</b> COVID-19 is "Chinese virus"  <b>Reality Check:</b> WHO has made it clear that the naming of a disease should not be associated with a particular country or place.</p> <p><b>2. Allegation:</b> Wuhan is the origin of the virus  <b>Reality Check:</b> Being the first to report the virus does not</p>	<p><b>Reality Check of US Allegations Against China on COVID-19</b></p> <p><b>7. Allegation:</b> China is reopening wildlife wet markets  <b>Reality Check:</b> There are no so-called "wildlife wet markets" in China. China has passed legislation banning all illegal hunting and trade of wild animals.</p> <p><b>8. Allegation:</b> China's cover-up resulted in the spread of the virus</p>
<p><b>Reality Check of US Allegations Against China on COVID-19</b></p> <p><b>13. Allegation:</b> China has been spreading disinformation about COVID-19  <b>Reality Check:</b> China has all along been open and transparent in information release. On the contrary, some US politicians, scholars and media outlets that are hostile to China have kept slandering and attacking China. China is a victim of disinformation.</p> <p><b>14. Allegation:</b> The Chinese political system is the root cause</p>	<p><b>Reality Check of US Allegations Against China on COVID-19</b></p> <p><b>19. Allegation:</b> China is responsible for the global spread of COVID-19  <b>Reality Check:</b> There is zero legal basis for holding China accountable and making it pay for COVID-19. Essentially, some US politicians are trying to shift the blame out of domestic political agenda.</p>

122 replies, 33 retweets, 184 likes

**SCREENSHOT 4: US AMBASSADOR TO POLAND GEORGETTE MOSBACHER ACCUSING CHINA OF SPREADING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA THROUGH ONLINE TROLLING IN POLISH ON APRIL 30, 2020**



**SCREENSHOT 5: US AMBASSADOR TO POLAND GEORGETTE MOSBACHER ACCUSING CHINA OF SPREADING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA THROUGH ONLINE TROLLING IN ENGLISH ON APRIL 30, 2020**



China's propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Central Europe

This kind of exchange of opinions (and to a certain degree, half-truths) between the representatives of America and China appears unprecedented in the Polish on-line sphere. From the perspective of the two actors' diplomatic missions, this very



debate can be perceived as a necessary task amid an ongoing attempt to restore their respective countries' image abroad. However, in the context of China's authoritarian political setup and the CCP's long-term normative goals like shifting international cooperation standards to more closely reflect Beijing's core interests, engaging in this kind of discussion risks walking a fine line between legitimate PR efforts and disinformation.

Although Twitter is less popular than Facebook in Poland, many of its active users come from influential professional backgrounds, such as journalism, politics, and academia. While the content published on Twitter in Poland might not reach that many recipients, the profile of this platform's local users suggests that tweeting can help the respective stakeholders to amplify their voices and opinions among the country's elites. So far, Warsaw has not officially responded to this verbal jousting. The actual impact of this kind of debate on Polish decision makers and broader society remains unknown, and the lack of statistical data allows for informed guesses only. While China is becoming more attractive as a tourist destination and used as an exotic reference point in local debates about economic growth, its political appeal seems to be much less prominent.

Nevertheless, China has become a proactive actor trying to shape local debates for its own sake. Despite the general public's presumed lack of awareness of that fact, it seems crucial to observe the future development of this kind of effort, which will probably accelerate even further and might at some point impact the wider Polish society's perception of China.

# The Chinese COVID-19 information campaign in Hungary: Keeping a low profile

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**Tamás Matura**

One of the most renowned movies in communist Hungary was *The Witness* by Péter Bacsó. The satire film was made in 1969 and banned immediately by the state authorities for a decade. Much of the film's dialogue has become part of Hungarian folklore, and is still frequently quoted today. In a particularly ironic scene, the main antagonist Comrade Bástyá (Bastion), a military general, learns from a briefing that nobody plots to kill him. In his outrage he says: "What? They don't even want to kill Comrade Bástyá anymore? Am I worth nothing?" When it comes to Chinese influence campaigns in Central Europe there is a feeling that Hungary was left out of such activity. Is Hungary not worth the effort? Or are there other reasons for the low level of Chinese actions to try to shape Hungarian public discourse amidst the pandemic?

The Hungarian government has been following a pro-China policy since 2010, and it has disrupted European unity vis-à-vis China in many instances, at least according to criticism from some international observers.<sup>41</sup> The pandemic has not led to any changes in its position on China, as the Hungarian government has expressed its gratitude for Chinese help and support on various occasions.

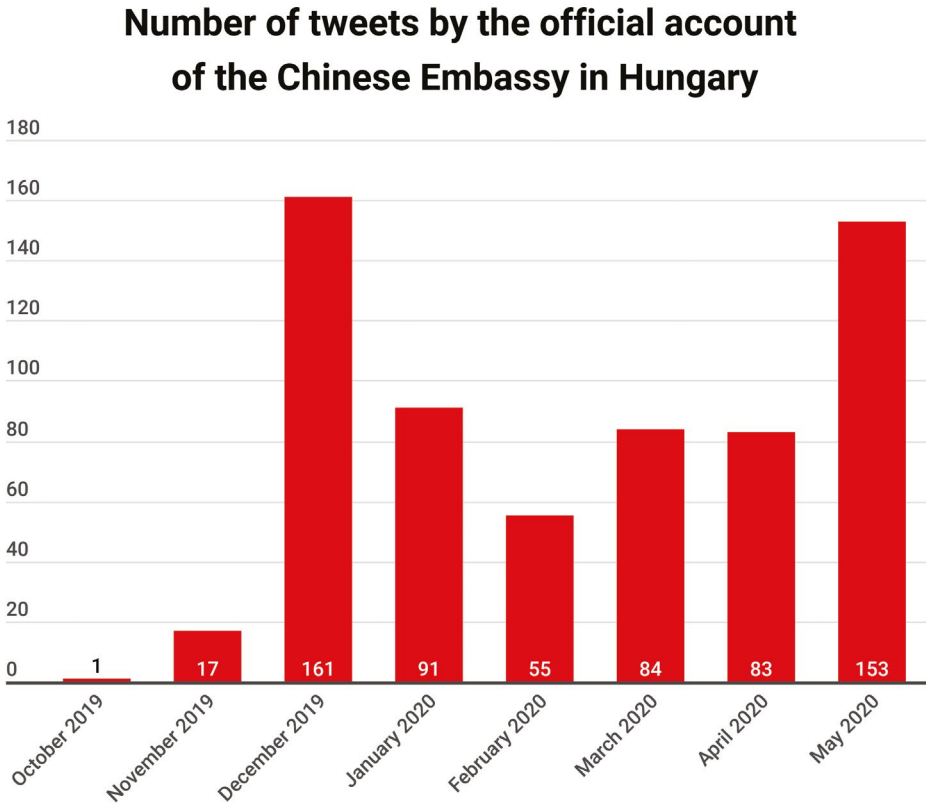
Budapest was among the first to send aid to Beijing and local governments have also sent medical equipment to China. Of course, ever since the virus began to spread in Europe, Hungary has been importing medical equipment from China. The first airplane landed in Budapest on March 23, 2020, to be followed by another hundred flights between Budapest and various Chinese cities in recent months to deliver over 100 million masks and other equipment. Over 99 percent of the cargo was purchased by the Hungarian government; while there have been some smaller donations by different Chinese actors as well.

In line with previous findings<sup>42</sup>, the Chinese side has not engaged in a major public diplomacy campaign in Hungary. Duan Jielong, the Chinese Ambassador to Hungary, published an op-ed in a Hungarian daily (considered by most to be a government mouthpiece) and has given some interviews to online news websites and radio stations. In his public appearances he thanked Hungary for its help and called for solidarity in fighting the pandemic and generally repeated official Chinese talking points. As to the potential impact of such publications it is telling that the op-ed on the Facebook page of the daily it was published in only received two comments, seven shares and 22 reactions. The Ambassador's other interview has gained 11 comments, two shares and 29 reactions. When put in the context of the high follower counts

(15,000 and 56,000 respectively) on the Facebook pages of these two major media outlets, this is not an impressive response.

As in most other European countries, the Chinese Embassy in Hungary was a latecomer to join Facebook and Twitter, only doing so in October 2019. The two accounts were opened at almost exactly the same time on the October 23 and 24. With a market share of a mere 3.4 percent of all social media accounts in Hungary, Twitter holds less importance than in the other three Visegrád countries. Still, the Chinese Embassy has been very active since the opening of its Twitter account, as it has posted over 650 tweets (accounting to almost three tweets a day). As of late May the account was followed by 2,137 accounts, but after closer scrutiny it turns out that 98 percent of these followers are not Hungarian. There is a suspiciously high share of followers from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, of which the researcher was able to confirm no more than 40 Hungarian-owned accounts. The average number of likes of each of the Embassy's tweets is below three, while 54 percent of the tweets have received zero likes and 45 percent received zero retweets. As a sign of the excellent language competency of the Embassy, almost every single tweet features a short description in Hungarian.

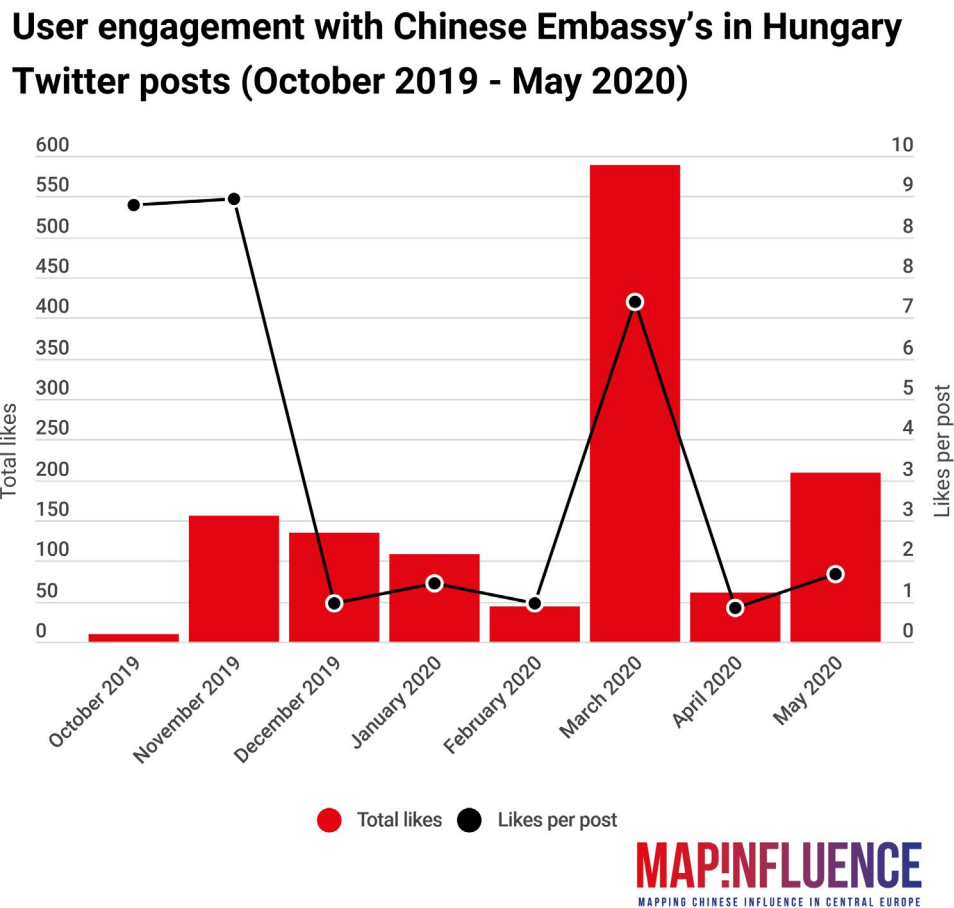
**GRAPH 2: NUMBER OF TWEETS BY THE OFFICIAL ACCOUNT OF THE CHINESE EMBASSY IN HUNGARY (OCTOBER 2019 - MAY 2020)**



**MAP!NFLUENCE**  
MAPPING CHINESE INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

The Embassy's Twitter account features two major types of content: news on China related events (like the fight against the coronavirus and the two meetings of the national assembly) and tabloid style content about the natural beauty of the country, technology news or everyday life in China. As the chart below shows, the number of likes (and other kinds of engagement) has always stayed in the range of about 50-200 per month between October 2019 and late May 2020. The only exception was March when one single tweet about the arrival of masks from China to Hungary received almost 400 likes (out of which only 47 were from a public profile), 25 comments and 105 retweets. However, none of the comments and retweets were made by Hungarians.

**GRAPH 3: USER ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINESE EMBASSY'S IN HUNGARY TWITTER POSTS (OCTOBER 2019 - MAY 2020)**



The Facebook page of the Embassy has 898 followers and its content almost mirrors its Twitter account with the same news on Chinese politics, the fight against coronavirus, and the same videos or other news related to the beauty of China, technology and everyday life. Its impact is slightly higher with the number of likes and shares per post in the range of 10 to 20. Just like the Embassy's tweets, all Facebook posts offer a short description in good Hungarian.

The Hungarian version of China Radio International (CRI) has only offered 200 pieces of news in Hungarian on its website for the last two months and older

publications cannot be found. CRI has made the surprising editorial decision to present its news mostly in a written format (transcripts) with the audio version to be found at the bottom of each new piece, reducing its functions as a normal radio station. What makes the Facebook page of CRI Hungary particularly interesting is the suspiciously high number of its followers. With almost 65,000 followers it is the ninth most popular Facebook page of any Hungarian radio station. How is it possible to have such low amounts of engagement while having such a high number of followers? Most of CRI's posts receive less than three likes, rarely going above ten.<sup>43</sup> In comparison, each of the last ten posts of the page of the US Embassy in Budapest (63,000 followers) received on average over 70 likes, though nothing is shared in the Hungarian language. Since Facebook does not provide data on the individual followers of pages, it is not possible to check the approximate share of potentially fake accounts among the followers of CRI Hungary. Still, based on the extremely low number of engagements it can be concluded that the impact of CRI Hungary's activity on Hungarian society is marginal at best.

It is important to note that none of the China related pages and websites introduced above have been engaging in 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, spreading fake news or videos attacking US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.<sup>44</sup>

So, is Hungary not worth the effort? Quite the opposite. Given the cooperative approach of the Hungarian government towards China in the last decade,<sup>45</sup> the Chinese government has no reason to directly influence or actively intervene in the domestic discourse to change public perceptions. It is the Hungarian government itself that promotes the success of Beijing in fighting the virus and emphasizes the importance of China.<sup>46</sup> Even the text of official communiqués released by the Hungarian government (and thus most of the ensuing media coverage) never used the verbs "to buy" or "to purchase" regarding medical equipment coming from China, and prices are never mentioned either.<sup>47</sup> Instead, the government employs phrases like 'arrival', 'delivery' or "in transit" to describe how the equipment gets to Hungary. Hence, unlike in Czechia, even most of the opposition parties agree that Sino-Hungarian relations are of high importance.<sup>48</sup> Beijing could not create a better official Hungarian discourse on China even if it attempted to.



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# About MapInfluenCE

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This publication was prepared by the MapInfluenCE (previously known as ChinfluenCE) project, which maps China's influence in Central Europe, specifically Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

The internationally acclaimed project has utilized various tools such as media analysis to uncover who shapes China discourse in the Visegrád countries and why, the mapping of agenda-setters to reveal links between pro-China businessmen and local political elites, an analysis of changes in political parties' positions on China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments during the past 30 years, etc.

Through a variety of outputs (media articles, interviews, research reports, open as well as closed door events and briefings of stakeholders), MapInfluenCE broadens and shapes expert as well as public debates on China's influence and activities in the region of Central Europe. MapInfluenCE findings were widely quoted in European, US and Australian press, mentioned in e.g. the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2018 Annual Report or the Reporters without Borders' report on the vulnerability of media, and presented at the European Parliament or to a delegation of US Congressmen and Senators. The original approach of MapInfluenCE set the tone and inspired journalists, think tankers and NGOs both within and outside of the region, who later conducted similar analyses on the media image of China and agenda-setting, drawing on the project's methodology and techniques.

The international team has published more than 20 policy and briefing papers in five different languages (English, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovak), authored articles and were quoted in numerous local as well as international media including The Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, China Digital Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Politico Brussels Influence, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Diplomat, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Le Temps, Radio Free Europe and more.

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