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Kowalski, Bartosz

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China's Mask Diplomacy in Europe: Seeking Foreign Gratitude and Domestic Stability

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cca**Bartosz Kowalski** 

Abstract

The analysis discusses domestic sources of China's diplomatic offensive in Europe following the outbreak of Covid-19, with a focus on the central and eastern parts of the continent. By examining selected case studies of countries competing for Chinese medical supplies in the time of the global crisis, it demonstrates how the party-state leadership with "Xi Jinping at the core" has been promoting the narrative of its transparent and timely response to the outbreak of the pandemic, while at the same time nurturing its image as a (benevolent) global leader in the struggle against the coronavirus. The article argues that mask diplomacy has served two overlapping domestic and foreign policy goals: aiming to cover up China's leadership's failure to contain the pandemic in its initial stage, while also turning acts of foreign gratitude to its advantage in seeking domestic public approval and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party governance.

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Keywords

China, Chinese foreign policy, China's domestic policies, mask diplomacy, Central and Eastern Europe, China–Europe relations, soft power, Covid-19

Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Łódź, Poland

Corresponding Author:

Bartosz Kowalski, Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of International and Political Studies, University of Łódź, Łódź, Poland.

Email: bartosz.kowalski@uni.lodz.pl



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Introduction

Since March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, China has become the key country in the dispersal of strategically important medical supplies, transferred both in the form of donations and regular commercial transactions. Thus, until the first wave of the pandemic in Europe was largely curbed and medical supplies stocked up, relations with China were dominated by competition for medical equipment resources needed to fight the epidemic. When in mid-March 2020, the official number of coronavirus infections worldwide exceeded those in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the shifting of the negative trend was welcomed with ill-concealed enthusiasm by the *People's Daily*. The press organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) published an infographic illustrating the global wave of infections headed by the phrase "the tide is turned!" (*People's Daily*, 2020a). One has to bear in mind this schadenfreude in analysing the domestic policy motivations behind the transfers of Chinese medical supplies and its accompanying narratives in Europe, a series of efforts that were labelled "mask diplomacy."

This analysis focuses on China's crisis diplomacy towards selected non-European Union (EU) and EU member countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which since 2012 have been co-operating together under the 16 + 1 (17 + 1) format (Kowalski, 2017). These are the Czech Republic (a country on a collision course with China over its "core interests"); Romania and Poland, countries that have become increasingly sceptical regarding China's policies (an attitude that is largely a function of their security co-operation with the USA); and, on the other side of the spectrum, Serbia (China's closest political partner in Europe). Apart from these four, the medical assistance provided by China was also welcomed by other EU countries, including Spain, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands, and also by the UK, despite reports that some of the Chinese-made equipment (test kits, personal protective equipment [PPEs], and ventilators) were below standard or defective (Brattberg and Le Corre, 2020). The impression of low-quality equipment, though later rectified, could have a rebound effect in terms of influencing Europeans' views on China through mask diplomacy, an issue discussed in the final section of this analysis.

However, the aim of this analysis is not to debate the structure, forms, and financial details of medical supply transfers between China and the aforementioned four CEE countries, but rather to examine – on the one hand – how mask diplomacy translates into mollifying public opinion abroad, and – on the other hand – how the diplomatic offensive carried out alongside the pandemic co-operation has been used domestically in order to secure regime stability and political campaigning.

These questions are framed within the context of the domestic sources of China's foreign policy, which receives ongoing scholarly attention but often plays a secondary, or at best complementary, role to international factors in main theoretical discussions explaining foreign policy, particularly in neo-realist and neo-liberal ones (Bhalla, 2005: 205–207; Lai, 2010: 19–42). Nonetheless, based on the study of several cases of China's foreign conduct from the Mao era onwards, Lai (2010: 43–133) suggests that China's foreign policy has largely been driven by the survival of its political and economic regime, as well as the top leader's position, and its domestic political agenda. Accordingly,

Zhu (2008: 123) points to the strong internal dynamics behind China's foreign policy after 1978, most notably domestic stability considerations, which, in turn, constitute a central concern for the CCP to stay in power and to secure its popular legitimacy through the strengthening and manifestation of its ruling capacity (Zeng, 2016: 122–127).

In order to examine the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy behind China's (corona)crisis diplomacy, the first part of the analysis evaluates the Chinese leadership's delayed response to the Covid-19 outbreak and its political aftermath. In the second part, the article seeks to answer how and why the selected countries' senior officials decided to co-produce (or not) the Chinese propaganda and, lastly, how these actions have been reflected in the available public opinion polls.

Assessing China's Response to the Covid-19 Outbreak and Its Internal Policy Effects

In assessing the rationale for mask diplomacy, one has to first examine how the Chinese party-state leadership initially mishandled its response to the disease outbreak, criticism of which would later be forestalled by diplomatic actions aimed at mollifying domestic and external audiences. According to the information delivered by the CCP's Secretary General and the PRC Chairman Xi Jinping (2020a), the top leadership of the party-state debated the coronavirus as early as 7 January, and the Chinese branch of the World Health Organization (2020: 1) was informed about the pandemic on 31 December 2019. However, the official information on the outbreak of the new virus only appeared in China's central media on 20 January – that is, three weeks after the spread of the disease could have been prevented (Lai et al., 2020: 2).

Why did the Chinese authorities not take any official action until then, but rather censor whistleblowers and conceal relevant information from its own citizens and the global public when the said information could have significantly reduced the scale of the outbreak? The current crisis has made evident the extent of the problems related to the centralisation of the political system in China in recent years – primarily in terms of the distribution and control of information and the decision-making process (Lee and Jung, 2019: 5). In other words, what China needed in order to effectively tackle the outbreak was, on the one hand, an autonomy in local decision-making and, at the same time, central leadership decisions in commanding and co-ordinating preventive actions over a larger area of the country. The problem lies in the balance of both elements, which – as January's response demonstrated – has been distorted by the centralising agenda of Xi Jinping's rule.

Almost in parallel to the disease outbreak, the party leadership began political campaigning aimed at securing regime stability in the face of the crisis. To this end, on 25 January, Xi Jinping designated a Central Leading Group (CLG) for the response to Covid-19, headed by the Prime Minister Li Keqiang and CCP's chief soft-power architect Wang Huning as his deputy. The group comprised Xi Jinping's close political aides: the head of the CCP Propaganda Department, Huang Kunming; the director of the CCP's Central Office, Ding Xuexiang; Beijing's mayor, Cai Qi; and the Minister of Public

Security, Zhao Kezhi. The other members included Foreign Minister Wang Yi; Secretary General of the State Council Xiao Jie; and vice-premier and former head of the CCP's United Front Department, Sun Chunlan (Government of the PRC, 2020). Therefore, judging by the personal composition of the group, one may infer that its main task was political: to co-ordinate actions of propaganda and the security apparatus as well as to influence the international public.

As a result – as Chairman Xi Jinping instructed the CCP Politburo in early February – various units responsible for implementing the directives of the CLG headquarters in Beijing were established in different regions of the country, which set in motion the response to the disaster (Xi, 2020a). As scholar Zhao Suisheng has pointed out by implying that only top-down actions have brought results, the party-state leadership tried to divert attention from the fact that it was its increasingly authoritarian rule that made Chinese society incapable of a proper and timely response to the crisis, including that of disease prevention. For this reason, Zhao said, the mainstream public opinion in China, which was largely supportive of China's stance in the trade conflict with the USA, in this case had almost entirely turned against the government (quoted in Mai, 2020).

Notwithstanding this fact, China managed to turn around its primary domestic attention on mere regime survival through propaganda, to eventually bringing the pandemic under control in the months to follow.

The CCP Goes Back to Yan'an

As the late historian Gao (2018: 499) indicated in his seminal study, Mao Zedong's ultimate goal in launching the Rectification Movement was to elevate his absolute status as the CCP's ruler and to prevent the party from splitting along the way. To this end, Mao utilised a combination of didactic tactics (transformation through education, and examination of the party cadres) and suppressive tactics (purges). Taking this into account, Xi Jinping's political response to the pandemic outbreak, as briefly examined below, essentially echoes, and may have been directly inspired by, the political assumptions behind Mao's Rectification Movement of 1942–1944.

At the February Politburo meeting, Xi Jinping attributed the problems with prevention and crisis management to the formalism and bureaucracy among party cadres who were to be held accountable or removed from office (Xi, 2020a). Framing the severe crisis as resulting from mistakes committed by the lower party ranks, and not from the faulty political line drawn by the leader, allowed the CCP leadership to play down its responsibility and to keep the party and society in check.

Xi Jinping's Politburo remarks were immediately paired with a purge of party officials in the Covid-19 epicentre of Wuhan and Hubei province (Zheng, 2020). At the same time, the task of CLG's crisis management in Hubei was assigned to Chen Yixin (as deputy of Sun Chunlan), the head of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPLAC). On 8 February, speaking to the local CCP officials in Hubei, Chen identified the need to establish a system of accountability for the party cadres in order to evaluate their activities, investigate their political consciousness, and to “deal

firmly with those who do not complete their task” (China Court, 2020). Moreover, in July of the same year, Chen put forward the CPLAC’s pilot programme of educating and rectifying the party cadres and the judiciary, explicitly hailing the Yan’an Rectification Movement as a role model (CPLAC, 2020).

These actions demonstrate how the (corona)crisis has been used by Xi Jinping as a tool to expand political control through purges and calls for the rectification of cadres, or integrating suppressive and didactic tactics. Although the rectification campaign was not set in motion by Xi Jinping in 2020 but was already in place when he took full party-state powers in 2013 (Blanchette, 2019: 139), it was the pandemic that created an additional impulse to revamp the cadre examination system, envisioned to enforce ideological discipline and control over party members, the state, and society. Therefore, one can seek to explain the current political practices of Xi Jinping by placing them on a continuum rooted in Communist China’s formative experience in Yan’an. As Chang (2019: 902) has noted, these practices although “[t]emporarily downplayed and partially discredited in the reform era [...] have made a comeback with a vengeance in the new century.”

Motivations behind Mask Diplomacy

Among several noteworthy scholarly assessments of the rationale behind mask diplomacy, Verma (2020) notes that the PRC utilised medical transfers both “for coercive diplomacy and for winning hearts and minds,” and also for domestic propaganda purposes (though this argument is not elaborated further). Another study also points to the soft power function of China’s global health diplomacy, which, however, contrary to the EU and the USA, has been well received in the developing countries, thus indirectly expanding China’s role in the global system as “benevolent actor,” at the expense of the US hegemonic position (Gauttam et al., 2020). Accordingly, Smith and Fallon (2020) argue that China frames medical assistance within its efforts of cultivating foreign friendships, which – despite problems related to transparency and the quality of the supplies – will in the long-term play a significant role in the process of reconfiguration of the world order.

This analysis, however, focuses decisively on the domestic–foreign nexus behind China’s mask diplomacy, drawing from Waltz’s (2001: 81) assumption behind the second image of international relations, where internal defects can be used to explain various forms of external acts of the state. Thus, in the context of the above summary of CCP’s initial response to the Covid-19 outbreak, mask diplomacy can be viewed as serving external but also domestic political ends – securing regime stability in face of popular domestic anger.

For this reason, an international diplomatic offensive was launched with almost every direct communication between Xi Jinping and foreign leaders in March serving as a tool to reassure that the Chinese attitude in the fight against the pandemic has, from the very beginning, been open, transparent, and responsible; that China has been willing to cooperate with the international community without reservations; and – pursuant to the domestic political agenda – that it has been resolutely safeguarding the lives and health

of the Chinese people (Xi, 2020b). The CCP's actions have also been legitimised by the official support of over 300 of its foreign partnership political parties and organisations (mostly from developing countries), which has been reproduced domestically to present Xi Jinping and the party leadership as the “fundamental reason behind China’s remarkable results in the fight against the epidemic” (International Liaison Department of the CCP, 2020).

Accordingly, as Soula et al. (2020: 6) demonstrated, the extent of Chinese transfers of medical aid to Europe was not necessarily interdependent with Covid-19 infection rates, suggesting, that, apart from purely medical considerations, improving China’s image as a global leader, shaping its narrative about its coronavirus response, and strengthening its influence were also important factors. Therefore, the potential coming from “donation ceremonies,” and the expressions of gratitude given by the representatives of the recipient countries in the presence of Chinese diplomats, should be seen as one of the key drivers behind China’s coronavirus assistance. Images of grateful European leaders assisted by PRC diplomats mostly came from CEE: Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Czech Republic’s Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić as well as Italy’s Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio (Soula et al., 2020: 6).

Because the transfers of Chinese medical supplies (no matter if purchased or donated) to Europe were in large part co-ordinated by the Chinese embassies, it appears that, in the critical moment of global competition for strategic resources, preference or priority in obtaining the supplies was given to countries enjoying good political relations with China or those in which providing “help in form of sale” could potentially translate into an improvement of China’s image. This was evidenced by the physical presence of the PRC’s ambassador at the hand-over ceremonies in the respective receiving countries. At least two examples, of the Czech Republic and Serbia, strongly suggest that this could have been the case.

Donation Ceremonies in the Czech Republic and Serbia as Seen from Beijing

The outbreak of the pandemic in the Czech Republic has come at the time of a fundamental reconfiguration of its China policy. From late 2019 through 2020, Czech–China relations have been deteriorating due to issues pertaining to security risks related to collaboration with Huawei; Taiwan; unfulfilled investment promises; and changes in the composition of the Czech political scene. During the outbreak of the epidemic in Europe, on 10 March 2020, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš announced that he would demand that China change its ambassador to Prague, Zhang Jianmin, due to an attempt to blackmail the Czech authorities over Taiwan (Kowalski, 2020: 12–17). However, only ten days later, on 20 March, Babiš, together with Ambassador Zhang and Interior Minister Jan Hamáček, welcomed the first medical transport of protective equipment purchased from China on the tarmac at Prague airport.

More importantly, in terms of the internal policy function of mask diplomacy, the event received coverage in the *People’s Daily*, under the headline “Help that truly arrives

on time.” It was reported that the first transport of medical supplies arrived in Prague on 18 March, and had been awaited “since midnight” by the Prime Minister and his cabinet members. As the article noted, transports from China have been reported in all of the main Czech media outlets, and social media were full of expressions of gratitude for the giving of a helping hand at the most critical moment. It also took into account the donations made by the Chinese diaspora and Chinese companies in the Czech Republic (Yu, 2020).

Of particular relevance is a remark trying to explain the reasons for shortages in medical protective equipment, not only in the Czech Republic, but in the whole CEE: “However, as in many Central and Eastern European countries, restricted by the division of labor within the EU, the Czech Republic’s domestic production capacity of medical supplies is limited” (Yu, 2020). Such opinions disseminated by the Chinese official media only substantiate the perspective of “the battle of narratives” announced just a few days earlier by the head of EU diplomacy, Josep Borrell, who warned that the PRC would use the current crisis to undermine the EU’s cohesion and trust in the USA, and also to disseminate the notion that at a critical moment European countries can count only on Chinese help (Borrell, 2020).

However, with regard to influencing foreign audiences, the effects of Chinese “mask diplomacy” in the Czech Republic turned out to be considerable. According to a STEM institute survey, as many as 45 per cent of the Czech respondents believe that it was China that helped the Czech Republic during the pandemic, while only 32 per cent think that help was provided by the EU. The public view of China is unexpectedly positive, as Czechs perceive the commercial transfers of medical supplies from China in terms of free aid. Researchers largely attribute these distorted perceptions to Chinese propaganda and disinformation activities, which were all the more effective, as the Czech government members, led by Babiš, came to officially welcome the first deliveries of masks and respirators at the airport. According to STEM, in the particular case of the Czech Republic, the Chinese propaganda efforts translated into greater confusion on the part of the public, as most Czechs were unable to answer whether the coronavirus originated in China or Europe. However, as STEM explains, the public confusion may be related not only to the Chinese government’s disinformation efforts, but also to the general disorientation of the Czech public in relation to foreign affairs and their distrust of official information (Palata, 2020; Figure 1).

In an almost identical scenario to that which took place in Prague, the plane with medical equipment and epidemic experts, which landed in Belgrade on 21 March, was greeted on the tarmac of the airport by PRC’s Ambassador Chen Bo and Serbian President Alexander Vučić who, in a tribute-like gesture, “affectionally kissed the Chinese flag” (CCTV, 2020). The event, also reported by the *People’s Daily*, was headlined with a quotation made by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić’s foreign policy advisor Nikola Stojanović: “China’s prevention and control experience is timely, effective and professional,” which implicitly gives credit to China’s own domestic, and allegedly faultless, response. The coverage also cited President Vučić asking for China’s help and assistance, as the only country able to provide aid to Serbia in a time of difficulty (Han, 2020: 17).

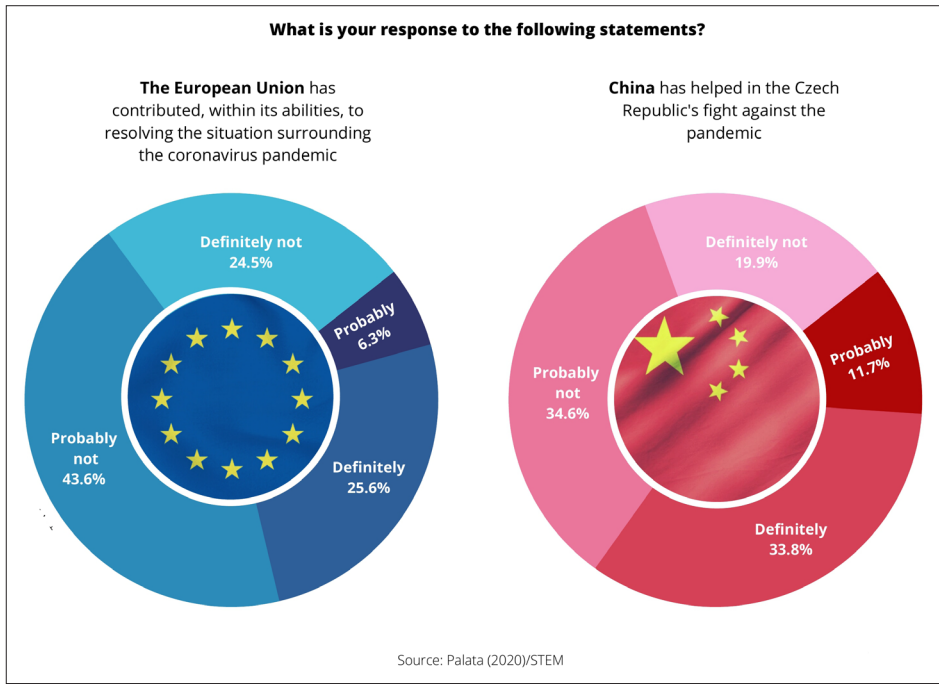


Figure 1. Czech Perception of the EU and China's Help during the Pandemic.

However, in terms of seeking “foreign gratitude,” Vučić’s televised address on 15 March was also of great importance. In the speech, he informed the audience that he had earlier sent a letter to Xi Jinping, whom he called “a friend and brother of Serbia,” asking for help, thus juxtaposing China’s benevolence with the EU’s alleged egoism. This was highly appreciated by Ambassador Chen Bo who met with Vučić two days later and said that his “speech was widely circulated on China’s social media, with more than 800 million hits” (Embassy of the PRC to Serbia, 2020a). The next day, Chen Bo repeated her point in an interview on Serbian state-television *RTV* by stating that President Vučić’s words about trusting China and looking forward to China’s support were repeatedly searched on Chinese social networking sites. Hundreds of millions of Chinese netizens “liked” the message, which Chen evaluated as an expression of their willingness to provide support for the fight against the epidemic in Serbia (Embassy of the PRC to Serbia, 2020b). The following statement by Prime Minister Brnabić for China Central Television continued in the same vein. Framing Beijing’s help almost as providential, Brnabić stated that “China has saved [our] jobs, now it is saving [our lives],” and announced the construction of a monument of gratitude to China in Belgrade, once the pandemic is over (Milenkovic, 2020).

Therefore, in the case of Serbia, it is the authorities and the government-controlled media that are primarily responsible for China's soft power successes, while substantial EU aid is at best underestimated. The notion has been created, in part, by the aforementioned gestures and pronouncements of the whole spectrum of high-ranking Serbian and Chinese officials. Moreover, the success of mask diplomacy has been possible due to the extensive use of public spaces by Serbian authorities (Vuksanovic, 2020). To express gratitude, bridges and buildings in Belgrade were illuminated in red, and the big billboard of the pro-government tabloid in the city centre showed a photo of Xi Jinping with a slogan reading, both in Serbian and Chinese, "Thank you, Brother Xi." All of these gestures were scrupulously monitored and appraised by Chinese netizens (Hu, 2020) and state media (*Xinhua*, 2020). The narratives praising Chinese help (and criticising the lack thereof from the EU) were further reinforced by social-media campaigning. According to an analysis of Twitter posts for the period of one month, from 9 March to 9 April, such notions were predominantly (some 72 per cent) produced by an army of bots and fake accounts (Digital Forensic Center, 2020).

Although the government of Serbia classified the financial details of Covid-19 donations, and the extent to which Chinese help was in fact purchased through regular commercial transactions remains unknown, mask diplomacy – actively supported by Serbia's state-apparatus and state-controlled media – has succeeded in creating an impression of China as the biggest donor, at the expense of the EU. According to a survey conducted in March 2020, almost 40 per cent of Serbs thought that China provided the country with the most aid, and only 17.6 per cent attributed this role to the EU (Institute for European Affairs, 2020; RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2020; Figure 2).

“Decongesting Communication Channels” with the US Allies in CEE: Romania and Poland

A contrasting case in terms of using recipient countries' officials for China's propaganda purposes is provided by Romania and Poland, whose political elites are among the most pro-US oriented in CEE (and the EU). In Romania, China has spread the same official line as in the rest of Europe: that the leadership's response to the virus was timely, that the methods employed to fight the pandemic were accurate, that Western attacks on China are ideologically driven (and that the virus could have originated in the USA), and that China is a benevolent helper to countries in need. However, as researchers Prisacariu and Ozon (2020) have pointed out, the effects of Chinese propaganda efforts were limited, mostly due to the fact that no senior Romanian official agreed to accompany representatives of the PRC embassy during the “welcoming ceremonies” of deliveries of medical supplies. Moreover, by posting pictures of Serbian, Hungarian, and Czech state leaders personally welcoming Chinese medical supplies, the PRC embassy in Bucharest also suggested the kind of gratitude that China would expect from the Romanian government (Prisacariu and Ozon, 2020). The reluctance of Romanian senior officials to take part in “welcoming ceremonies” with Chinese representatives can be perceived as yet another expression of loyalty to the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),

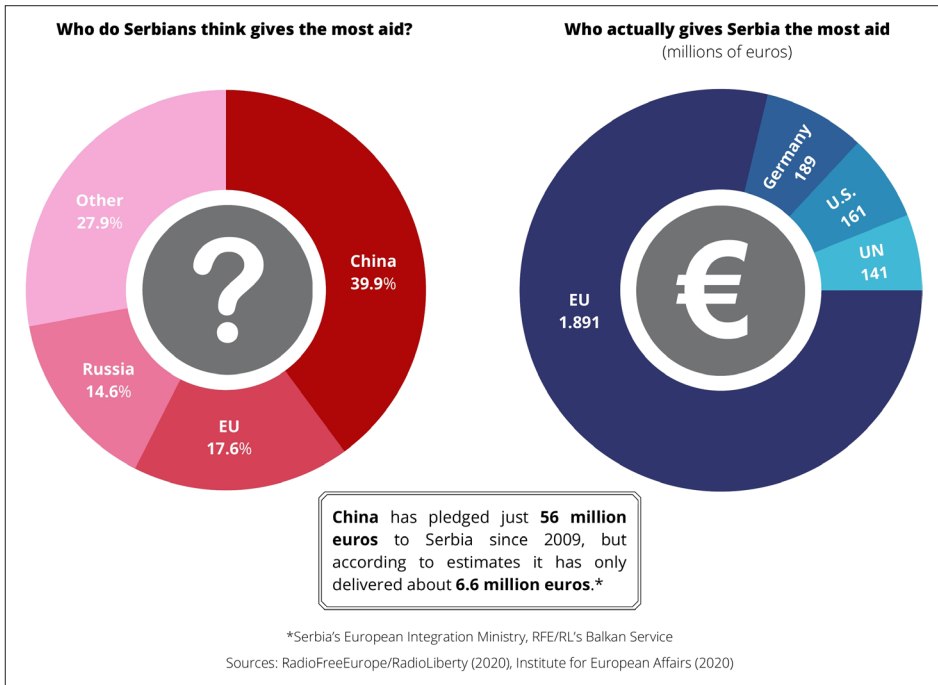


Figure 2. Serbian Perception of Foreign Aid.

and the USA, which is also demonstrated in the distancing from Huawei as a possible supplier of 5G services in the country, as well as switching from China to the USA in a nuclear deal (Rosca, 2021).

A slightly different situation occurred in Poland, where senior officials also abstained from taking part in joint ceremonies with Chinese embassy representatives. When the first huge batch of medical supplies arrived from China at Warsaw airport on 14 April, it was received personally by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, but not in the presence of the Chinese ambassador. This suggests that although the Polish authorities were cautious not to legitimise Chinese help, they at the same time tried to use the arrival of medical supplies for their own internal political goals: that is, to demonstrate their effectiveness in organising supplies amid the global competition for resources. To this end, during the press conference on the airport tarmac, Morawiecki expressed thanks to President Andrzej Duda (from the same political camp) for his talks with Xi Jinping, which helped in “decongesting communication channels” and accelerated transports from China (Kancelaria Premiera, 2020).

This was a reference to a 25 March phone conversation, which, again, was reported on the front page of the *People's Daily* (2020b), and which quoted President Duda as saying that China has taken timely and decisive measures to effectively contain the

spread of the epidemic, and has supported Poland in the face of the severe and urgent need for medical supplies. Additionally, in the context of employing expressions of gratitude in the service of domestic political campaigning in the PRC, it should not be overlooked that, as early as 2 February, President Duda had sent a letter of sympathy to Xi Jinping. The letter, circulated widely and in full in Chinese media, states that “Undoubtedly, the measures taken by the Chinese government were quick and decisive, and prevented the epidemic from spreading. It not only saved the Chinese people. It also saved the people of other countries. Poland highly appreciates this!” (Embassy of the PRC to Poland, 2020). According to the US ambassador in Warsaw, Georgette Mosbacher, the March call from President Duda was demanded by China in exchange for the medical supplies. What is more, Chinese officials reportedly tried to exert similar pressure on the German government as well (Erlanger, 2020).

However, despite these behind-the-scenes efforts, in terms of convincing foreign audiences, Poland’s example proved negative, and in the wider European context adds to the largely meagre effectiveness of mask diplomacy. As shown in a survey of the European Council on Foreign Relations conducted in Poland and eight other EU countries, China as the key ally in fighting the pandemic was identified only by Italians (25 per cent of the respondents), one of the countries worst hit by the coronavirus. The pandemic crisis has also negatively affected public opinion of China. In a total of nine countries, the perception of China has only improved for 12 per cent of the respondents; for 40 per cent, it has not changed, and for 48 per cent it has deteriorated; in eight of the nine countries, the perception of China has markedly worsened (Krastev and Leonard, 2020: 15–16).

Accordingly, as reflected in a Central European Institute of Asian Studies opinion poll covering thirteen European countries (including Poland, Serbia, and the Czech Republic, but not Romania), the general perception of China has worsened during the pandemic across Europe, apart from in Serbia and Russia (Turcsányi et al., 2020: 11; Figure 3). In terms of juxtaposing Chinese help vis-à-vis the EU, only Czechs, Italians, and Serbs recognised China’s help during the crisis more than that of the EU (Turcsányi et al., 2020: 23; Figure 4). This may further substantiate the argument that mask diplomacy met China’s goals of winning hearts and minds in countries where the official reception of “Chinese benevolent gifts” were co-produced by the local senior officials (e.g. by attending welcoming ceremonies).

Yet another survey demonstrates that in January 2020, nearly half of the respondents in the USA, Germany, and France perceived China’s growing influence negatively, and, after the outbreak of the pandemic, negative views of China increased by at least 10 per cent across all three countries (Transatlantic Trends, 2020: 30–31). The increasingly negative perception of China across the developed economies is further confirmed by the PEW opinion poll (Silver et al., 2020). This, again, shows that the pandemic only accelerated already evident trends in public perceptions of China, and that crisis diplomacy, in general, has not proved successful in neutralising the negative perceptions of the country.

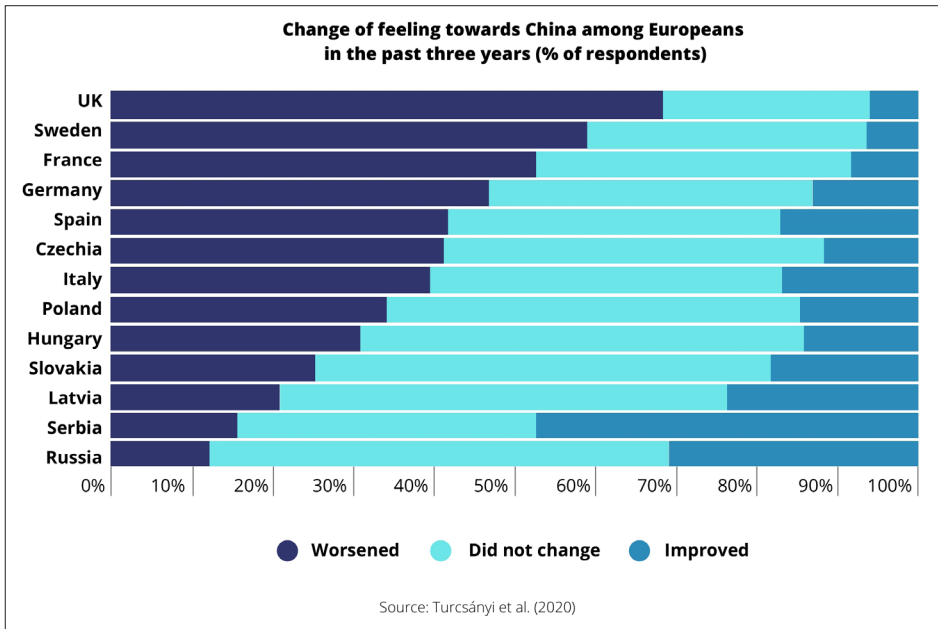


Figure 3. European Perception of China.

Conclusion

From an international perspective, China's mask diplomacy as a tool for winning the hearts and minds of Europeans has proved to be a largely unsuccessful propaganda operation, as the image of the country has worsened substantially in almost every European country. This is clearly reflected in relevant public opinion surveys that have been conducted so far. An exception in this regard are the few countries in which China managed to organise "welcoming ceremonies" in the presence of the highest-ranking officials, improving its image and swaying the public to believe that the country can be a more reliable partner in a crisis than the EU, while also effectively spreading confusion in terms of the responsibility for the outbreak of the global pandemic. In Europe these were Italy, the Czech Republic (whose prime minister apparently decided, or was pressured, to overlook the existing tensions with the PRC in order to gain access to the strategic medical resources), and Serbia, Beijing's all-weather friend, actively co-producing Chinese narratives. Therefore, one may conclude that Chinese propaganda efforts would fall on fertile ground mostly in populist and often Eurosceptic governments, unless constrained by loyalty to the USA.

Furthermore, China's acts of generosity, in the form of timely medical deliveries, appear to be contingent upon fulfilling the expectations towards the recipient countries to demonstrate gratitude publicly in the presence of the Chinese ambassador, or

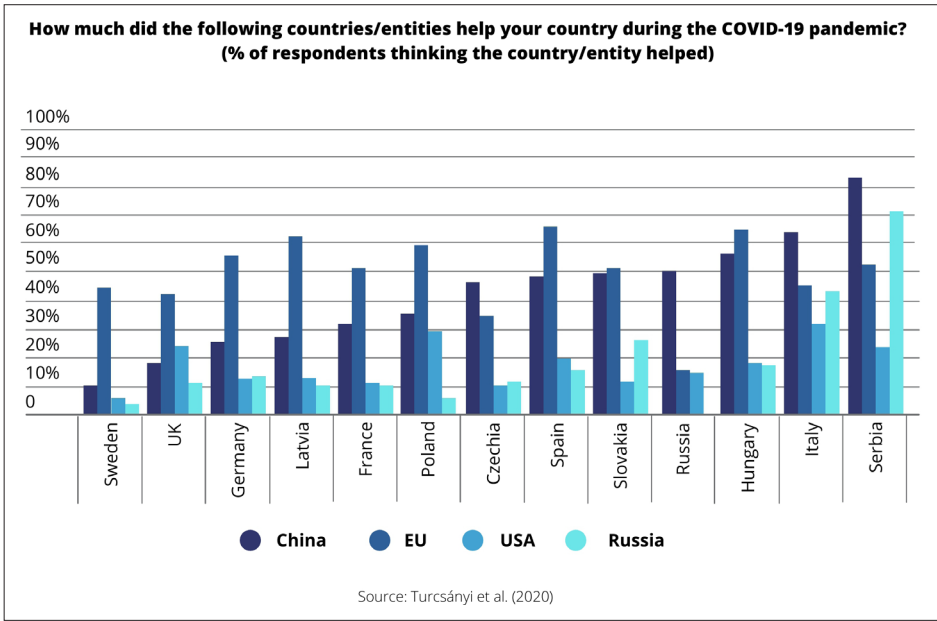


Figure 4. European Perception of Foreign Help.

exhibited otherwise, such as in the form of the senior officials’ public praise for Xi Jinping’s and CCP’s leadership in the fight against coronavirus. Moreover, in countries where state apparatus actively co-produced Chinese narratives, public perception has been distorted when it comes to recognising whether medical supplies from the PRC were purchased through regular commercial transactions or were donated, while also leading to greater public confusion regarding the origins of Covid-19.

As such, the anti-epidemic co-operation and the relevant diplomatic and propaganda efforts have played a role mainly in relation to China’s well-established partners or countries, which, amidst the crisis, succumbed to Chinese demands for public recognition. Despite the few abovementioned achievements, the international outcome of mask diplomacy is rather limited, at least among the majority of developed countries. However, this should not overshadow the internal rationale behind mask diplomacy, carried out in pursuit of foreign gratitude and acts of public recognition towards China’s crisis management, attributed to the allegedly smooth and swift decisions of the party-state leadership, and the personal merits of Xi Jinping. This served as a powerful domestic propaganda tool aimed at neutralising the anger of the Chinese public by revealing foreign gratitude in the official media.

Last but not least, several research questions arise from the analysis: how does the domestic–external nexus pertain to internal stability and the preservation of China’s political and economic regime? To what extent does (crisis) diplomacy serve to secure

top leader's legitimacy and position in the political system? In what way do domestic factors inform the foreign policy decision-making process? What are the systemic factors behind China's initial botched response to the pandemic outbreak, and, conversely, what made its later achievements possible? Last but not least, how does Xi Jinping politically utilise an internal and external crisis for consolidation of power and control over the party-state and society, and, accordingly, to what extent does the current political culture of the CCP stem from Mao's political strategy deployed in Yan'an? These issues could not be adequately addressed in this analysis but can inform future research on mask diplomacy and on internal considerations behind China's foreign policy more broadly.

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ORCID ID

Bartosz Kowalski <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5991-8663>

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Author Biography

Bartosz Kowalski is an assistant professor at the Department of East Asian Studies of the University of Łódź, Poland, and researcher of its Center for Asian Affairs. His research focuses on China's foreign policy, relations between China and Central Europe, and modern political history of Xinjiang.

Email: bartosz.kowalski@uni.lodz.pl