

The Rise of China in the Information Domain?

Measuring Chinese Influence in Europe during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Abstract:

The coronavirus pandemic has invited an overflow of disinformation in Europe and therefore has been an entry point for foreign influence operations from rival authoritarian countries. In this respect, the literature agrees that Chinese disinformation operations became more aggressive, and China joined Russia as a major EU rival in the information domain. A key problem in this regard is how to evaluate the influence of foreign disinformation in Europe and elsewhere. This paper argues that measuring public opinion perceptions about major state actors can help gauge the impact of foreign influence operations. Analysing the results of a 19 countries survey and approximately twenty-one thousand responders the paper attempts to measure and compare European public opinion perceptions about China and Russia during the pandemic. The results resonate with and substantiate the position of many scholars who have called the Covid-19 crisis an 'infodemic' and show that China was more successful than Russia in influencing public opinion perceptions in Europe during the pandemic.



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From a pandemic to an 'infodemic' and the rise of Chinese influence operations in Europe

The coronavirus has cost us dearly—in lives and in livelihoods—and has also accelerated many technological changes in the way we work, communicate, and do politics. A digital revolution was already being discussed at the end of the previous century, but the pandemic is now greatly increasing its scope and speed across a wide range of sectors.¹

Relatedly, the pandemic has invited an overflow of disinformation, to such an extent that both the EU and the WHO have stated that, in the time of coronavirus, we are dealing not only with a pandemic but also with an 'infodemic'.²

Apart from causing sub-optimal public decisions that may cause loss of life domestically, the 'infodemic' thesis suggests that the virus has also been an entry point for disinformation and foreign influence operations in the West.³ Starting with Moscow's hybrid warfare on Ukraine, the focus of attention was on Russian disinformation operations across the full spectrum of social and traditional media, as well as an intricate web of relations with the fringes of the European political system.⁴ The main goal of these operations was to promote Russian strategic narratives in Europe, project Russian (soft) power, and increase Moscow's influence and ability to sway targeted European audiences.⁵

China too has been caught red-handed using disinformation to meddle in Taiwanese elections in 2019 and in 2020. In general, however, Taiwan is facing a constant flow of disinformation originating in Mainland China.⁶ However, it was only during the coronavirus pandemic that Beijing's Communist regime emerged as a major player in the information domain—or, at least, it was during this time that more people in Europe realised that China may be bigger than Russia when

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- 1 For examples of 'Covid-impact assessments' see: Soto-Acosta, Pedro, "COVID-19 pandemic: Shifting digital transformation to a high-speed gear", *Information Systems Management* 37, no. 4 (2020), pp. 260–266; Hantrais, Linda, Paul Allin, Mihalios Kritikos, Melita Sogomonjan, Prathivadi B. Anand, Sonia Livingstone, Mark Williams & Martin Innes, "Covid-19 and the digital revolution", *Contemporary Social Science* (2020), pp. 1–15; Barua, Suborna, "Understanding Coronanomics: The economic implications of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic", *Electronic Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2 (2020).
 - 2 "Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic: Promoting Healthy Behaviours and Mitigating the Harm from Misinformation and Disinformation", World Health Organization (23 September 2020); European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, The European Council, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee Of The Regions, Tackling Covid-19 Disinformation - Getting The Facts Right, Join(2020), 8 final (Brussels, 10 June 2020).
 - 3 On the domestic effect, see: Nguyen, An & D. Catalan, "Digital mis/disinformation and public engagement with health and science controversies: fresh perspectives from Covid-19", *Media and Communication* 8, no. 2 (2020), pp. 323–328; on the international perspective, see: Jackson, Dean, COVID-19 and the information space: boosting the democratic response (Washington, D.C.: International Forum for Democratic Studies, 2021).
 - 4 O. Friedman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicization* (London: Hurst, 2018); A. Lanoszka, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe', *International Affairs* 92/1 (2016), pp. 175–95; A. Rácz, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015); P. Krekó et al., *Europe's New Pro-Putin Coalition: The Parties of 'No'*, Institute for Modern Russia and Political Capital Institute (2015).
 - 5 See: L. Roselle et al., "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power", *Media, War & Conflict* 7/1 (2014), pp. 71–4; On Russia's use of 'soft power' in Ukraine, see: V. Hudson, "'Forced to Friendship'? Russian (Mis-)Understandings of Soft Power and the Implications for Audience Attraction in Ukraine", *Politics* 35 (2015), pp. 330–46; K. Geers (ed.), *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression Against Ukraine* (Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications, 2015). On the same issue in the Baltic States, see: M. Winnerstig (ed.), *Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) (2014).
 - 6 Blanchette, Jude, Scott Livingston, Bonnie S. Glaser & Scott Kennedy, *Protecting democracy in an age of disinformation: lessons from Taiwan* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021).

it comes to disinformation.⁷ In late 2020, after Twitter's removal of hundreds of thousands of accounts linked to Chinese disinformation operations, a report by the Stanford Internet Observatory verified that a Chinese operation that was originally focused on the Hong Kong protests had switched to pandemic disinformation in a coordinated manner.⁸ Both Russian and Chinese information operations have adapted to the Covid-19 crisis.⁹ China was already active in the information domain before, with a rather sophisticated arsenal of computational propaganda, but Beijing has copied from the Russian playbook during the pandemic to target many western publics in an unusually aggressive manner.¹⁰ In the end, Europe and the West have been left to fend off both the internal production of disinformation and conspiracy theories about the virus and the rising inflow of Russian and Chinese propaganda.¹¹

Information is key to forming opinions and making decisions, so public opinion matters increasingly more to both domestic and foreign policies.

When it comes to the latter, a key problem is how to ascertain the degree of efficiency of influence operations in Europe and elsewhere. Information is key to forming opinions and making decisions, so public opinion matters increasingly more to both domestic and foreign policies. If the coronavirus is accelerating the digital transformation of the world, then competition for the hearts and minds

of the public in cyberspace will become an even more central element of international relations.

Measuring public opinion and especially perceptions about major state actors in a post-Covid world is an important step towards understanding the impact of foreign influence operations, as well as recognizing global trends. Between 24 August and 12 September 2020, a survey was fielded with approximately twenty-one thousand respondents in 19 European countries. Among other political issues, it also measured European public opinion perceptions about China and Russia during the pandemic.¹²

⁷ Scheidt, Melanie, "The European Union versus External Disinformation Campaigns in the Midst of Information Warfare: Ready for the Battle?", College of Europe EU Diplomacy Paper 01/2019 (2019).

⁸ Miller, C., V. Molter, I. Garcia-Camargo & R. DiResta, Sockpuppets Spin COVID Yarns: An Analysis of PRC-Attributed June 2020 Twitter takedown (Stanford, CA: Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center, 2020).

⁹ Lucas, Edward, Jake Morris & Corina Rebegea, Information and Chinese information operations during covid-19 (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2021); see also: Polyakova, Alina, "The Kremlin's Plot against Democracy: How Russia Updated Its 2016 Playbook for 2020", Foreign Affairs 99 (2020), p. 140.

¹⁰ Kliman, Daniel, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Kristine Lee, Joshua Pitt & Carisa Nietsche, "Dangerous Synergies: Countering Chinese and Russian Digital Influence Operations", Center for a New American Security (May 2020); see also: Sukhankin, Sergey, "COVID-19 as a tool of information confrontation: Russia's approach", The School of Public Policy Publications 13 (2020);

¹¹ Vèriter, Sophie L., Corneliu Bjola & Joachim A. Koops, "Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Internal and External Challenges for the European Union", The Hague Journal of Diplomacy 15, no. 4 (2020), pp. 569–582.

¹² European Liberal Forum (ELF), Alliance of Liberals and Democrats Party (ALDE), and International Republican Institute, European Fringe Party Survey (Brussels: IPSOS, 2020).

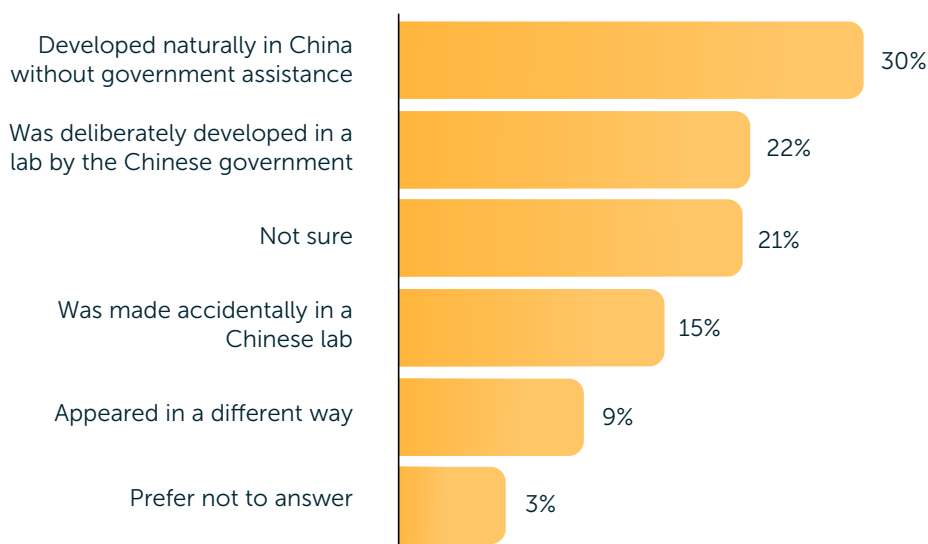
The results confirm once again the extent of misinformation and disinformation about Covid in the public eye; in this respect, they resonate with and substantiate the position of many scholars who have called the Covid-19 crisis an 'infodemic'. This means that disinformation creates serious problems for policymakers. But it also means that the coronavirus crisis has been yet another entry point for foreign influence in Europe.

Measuring Chinese influence on European public perceptions about Covid-19

One of the aims of Chinese influence operations in Europe was to obfuscate the virus' origins and muddled Chinese attempts to contain the spread. In this respect, the initial rumour mill about Covid-19's origins was weaponized and led to an 'arms race' of narratives.¹³ The results of the survey resonate with this 'infodemic' thesis, both on domestic and international levels. Apart from its geographical origins, there is little consensus about the virus, which speaks volumes about the level of confusion among the public.

Opinion on current COVID strain

"From what you have seen or heard, do you think it is most likely the current strain of the coronavirus..?"

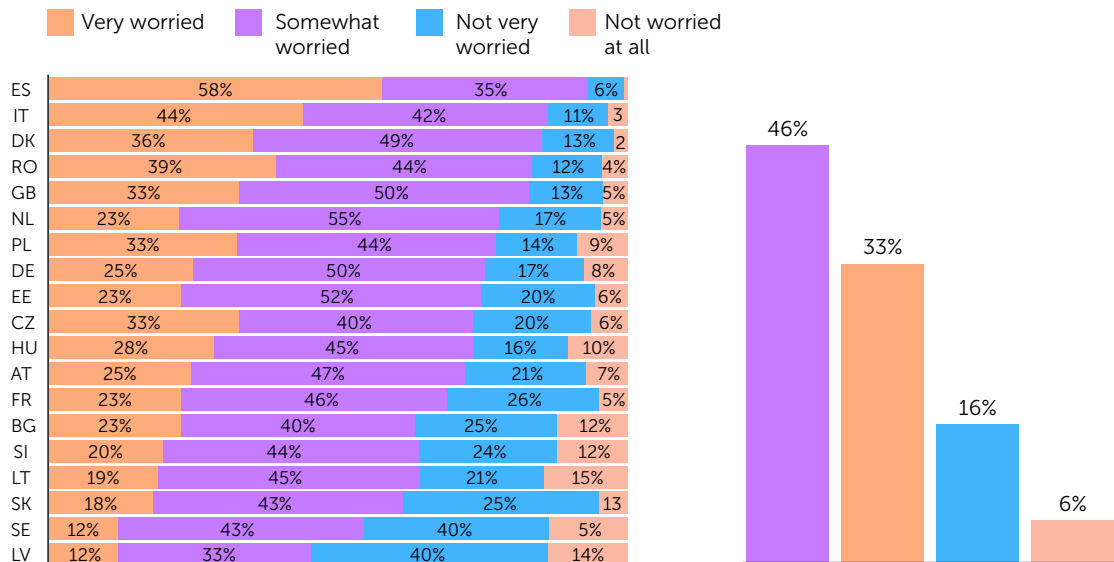


A large percentage of respondents believe that Covid-19 developed naturally in China without government assistance, whereas 58% of respondents believe that it was either intentionally or unintentionally developed in a Chinese lab, or they are simply not certain regarding the origin of the virus. In addition, almost one in ten believe it appeared in a different way, indicating a lack of credible information sources or high levels of misinformation.

¹³ Bandeira, Luiza, Nika Aleksejeva, Tessa Knight & Jean Le Roux, Weaponized: how rumors about Covid-19's origins led to a narrative arms race (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2021).

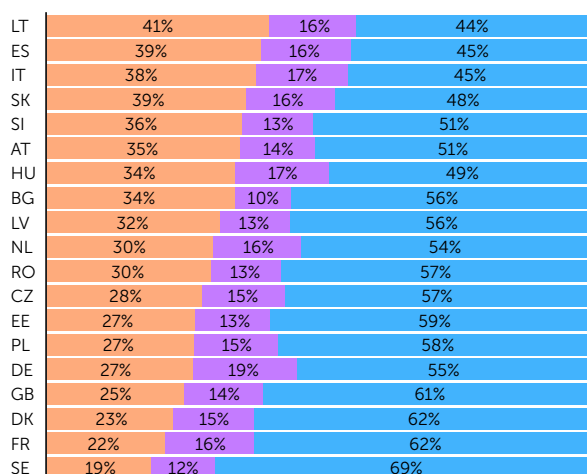
Misinformation and uncertainty probably exacerbate stress levels in society, with most people feeling worried about the spread of Covid-19. Overall, 79% of respondents were very or somewhat worried, with high values in countries that were particularly hard hit during the first waves (Spain, 93%, and Italy, 86%).

How worried are you about the spread of coronavirus in your country?

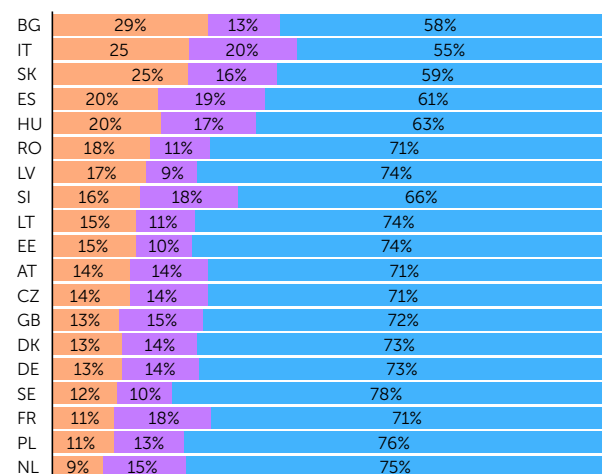


Another aim of Chinese influence operations was twofold: to discredit the handling of the crisis by specific countries, leaders, and organizations, as well as to exaggerate the ability of China to cope with the crisis domestically and provide assistance to others.¹⁴ The overall objective was to portray the Communist regime as an effective, socially responsible system of governance and China as a conscientious global leader.¹⁵

Did China have an important and effective role in fighting COVID-19 in your country?



Did Russia have an important and effective role in fighting COVID-19 in your country?



Very important & effective Neither important nor effective Not important & effective

¹⁴ See, for example: Biscop, S., "Coronavirus and Power: The Impact on International Politics", Security Policy Brief 126 (Brussels: Egmont, 2020).

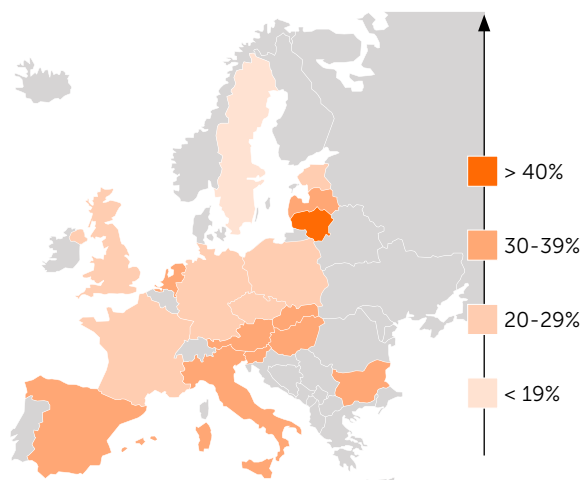
¹⁵ Brandt, J. & B. Schafer, "Five Things to Know About Beijing's Disinformation Approach", German Marshall Fund of the US (30 March 2020); see also: Cook, Sarah, Beijing's Global Megaphone, Freedom House (January 2020).

Our results show that China's approval ratings were quite positive, with an average of 29% percent of respondents across the 19 countries under examination answering that China had an important and effective role in fighting Covid-19 in their respective countries. Russia's approval ratings were, by comparison, much lower at 16%.

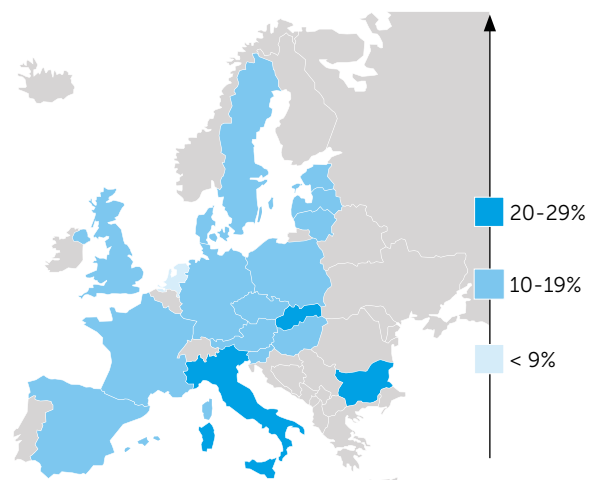
This comparison suggests that, although it copied the aggressive stance of Russia, China's disinformation operations were much more effective at influencing public perceptions in Europe. This might be due to the recent but also historical tensions between some EU Member States and Russia, but it may also be correlated with the hypothesis that European publics are by now aware of Russian disinformation methods and tactics, whereas China has only recently entered the European information domain.

Indeed, a geographical depiction of the same data seems to substantiate this hypothesis. The Baltics and Central and Eastern Europe are apparently conscious of Russian influence operations, but they are less wary of and more susceptible to Chinese operations. Lithuania is a case in point, where a whopping 41% of respondents said that China had an important and effective role in fighting Covid-19 in their respective countries, whereas only a slim 15% approved Russia's role there during the pandemic.

Positive perception of China



Positive perception of Russia



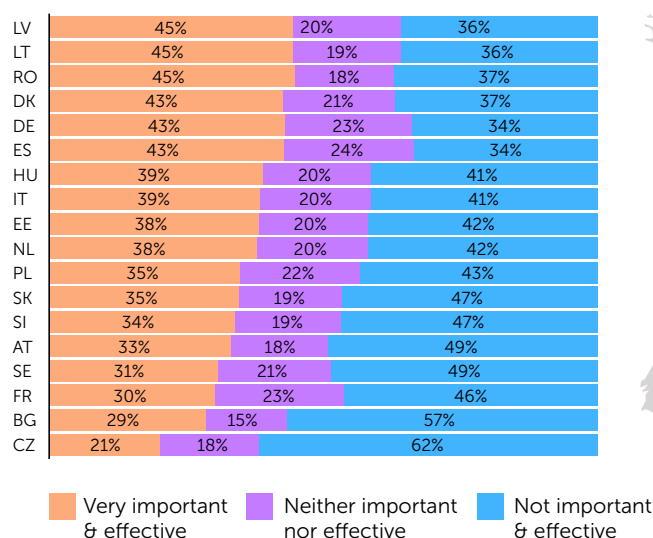
In contrast, respondents from Italy, Slovakia, and Bulgaria maintained high approval rates for both China and Russia. The outlying results in Italy can probably be explained by its vulnerable position at the beginning of the pandemic. At the outbreak of the virus, Italy was the focus of early Chinese disinformation operations.¹⁶ The spread of disinformation supported the Chinese narrative of praising Beijing's response both domestically and internationally.¹⁷

¹⁶ Caniglia, Costanza Sciubba, "Signs of a new world order: Italy as the COVID-19 disinformation battlefield", Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review 1, no. 3 (2020).

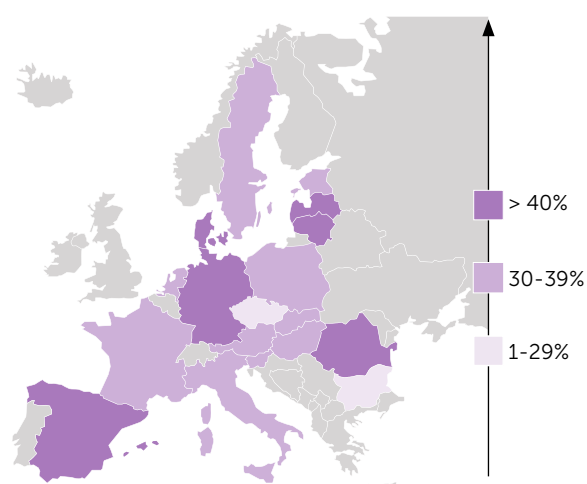
¹⁷ Bernard, Rose, Gemma Bowsher, Richard Sullivan & Fawzia Gibson-Fall, "Disinformation and epidemics: Anticipating the next phase of biowarfare", Health security 19, no. 1 (2021), pp. 3-12.

In comparison, the EU scored higher than both China and Russia, but the margin did not leave much room for complacency. Overall, only 38% of respondents consider the EU to have played an important and effective role in fighting Covid-19 in their Member States, with a range from 21% in Czechia to 45% in Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania. National governments scored spectacularly higher than the EU, with approval rates reaching 80% in Denmark, 72% in the Netherlands, and 71% in Germany. On the lower end, respondents from Poland had the least to say about the role of their government in fighting the pandemic, with only 36% replying that it was important and effective—still higher than the 35% for the EU.

Did the EU have an important and effective role in fighting COVID-19 in your country?



Positive perception of EU



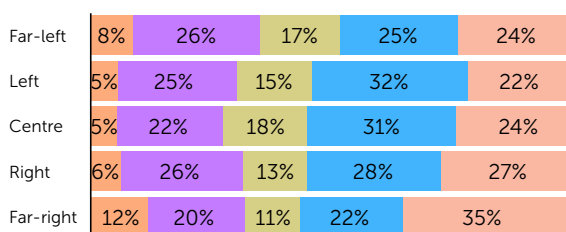
Further analysis suggests that there is little meaningful variation of Chinese approval rates based on the political self-identification of the respondent. Both the left and the right spectrum showed similar results, from 30% to 34% respectively, and even 27% identifying with the answer that China had an important and effective role in fighting the pandemic in their country. This came in stark comparison to the corresponding approval rates of Russia; different political identifications correlated with opposite views of Russia. Respondents on the right and the far right of the political spectrum were more positive towards Russia (21%–27%), whereas those on the left and the far left feel that Russia is not an important and effective partner in fighting Covid-19. Finally, perceptions based on age suggest that, although the basic trendline of approval ratings remains the same, younger respondents between 18 and 34 years old generally hold more positive views of both China and Russia. In Italy, 48% of those between 18 and 34 years of age believe that China was important and effective in fighting the pandemic, whereas 42% of respondents in that age bracket in Bulgaria believe the same about Russia.

The results are far from conclusive but at the very least offer an interesting snapshot of public perceptions in Europe during the pandemic, in which China—

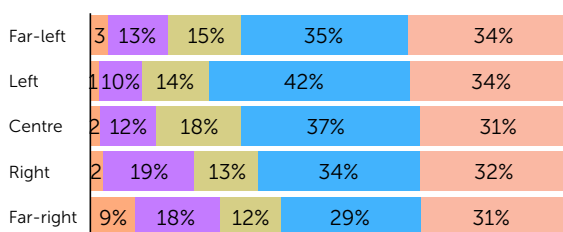
and, to a lesser degree, Russia—has found and exploited penetration points to influence public opinion. And although the EU approval rates are generally higher, Chinese influence is comparable to positive views on the bloc's role in fighting the pandemic. What is more, based on political developments that took place later (e.g., vaccination rollout delays in the EU, national vaccination programmes using Chinese and Russian vaccines), it is valid to assume that both Chinese and Russian influence in Europe have increased further since the survey was conducted.

Perception based on Left-Right Spectrum

Did China have an important and effective role in fighting COVID-19 in your country?



Did Russia have an important and effective role in fighting COVID-19 in your country?



Very important & effective Important & effective Neutral Not important & effective Not worried at all

Finally, the survey did not cover the entirety of the EU, and it was missing data from important non-EU regions such as the Western Balkans. The latter is indeed significant and needs more attention in future research, not only because it is an EU enlargement region but also due to Russian and Chinese disinformation in the area being more intense than usual in the context of the pandemic. Combined with delays in European assistance regarding the pandemic, this may have instilled a public perception of 'abandonment' that could easily be manipulated in the near future. Nevertheless, the results seem to substantiate the claim that both China and Russia have used the Covid-19 pandemic as leverage in influencing public opinion perceptions in Europe. This raises additional questions on the future impact of online disinformation and foreign influence, the intensification of great power competition, and the devolution of the liberal international order into a more multipolar world.

Multipolarity and disinformation in Cyberspace: EU Policy Recommendations

In a seminal 1990 article for Foreign Affairs, Charles Krauthammer described the end of the Cold War as the 'unipolar moment' of the United States, which was the unchallenged superpower of the world.¹⁸ Krauthammer was quick to point out that this was not a permanent condition of the international system and that multipolarity would return, in time. The return of multipolarity has been a much-debated hypothesis in international relations.

¹⁸ Krauthammer, Charles, "The unipolar moment", Foreign Affairs. 70 (1990), p. 23.

More recently, in the book *World Order*, Henry Kissinger described systemic-wide challenges, namely, the changing nature of the sovereign state, the reaction to globalization, and the lack of effective global governance as the factors that are pulling the liberal world order apart.¹⁹ Other scholars have argued that there was something inherently unbalanced in a unipolar world or that a multipolar arrangement produces more equitable results and therefore great powers tend to prefer it.²⁰ Others still see the relative decline of US power and the rise of emerging powers as the root cause of multipolarity.²¹ Although the literature still debates the root causes of multipolarity, the rise of China and Russia, among others, means in practice that a multitude of actors are becoming assertive and challenging the established international order, along with its norms and institutions.²²

Foreign influence is nothing new, but information technology has increased the scope and the intensity of the tools states have at their disposal to influence foreign publics.

This new multipolarity is different in the way information and communication technologies have given plenty of non-military options for capable states to project their power. Foreign influence is nothing new, but information technology has increased the scope and the intensity of the tools states have at their disposal to influence foreign publics—to such an extent that states now fight in cyberspace for the minds and hearts of the population.²³ Our societies depend on networks

not only to exchange money and products, fulfil bureaucratic procedures, provide healthcare, and organize energy supplies but also to form opinions that will lead to collective decisions.

Existing geopolitical conflicts, interstate rivalries and ideological confrontations have gone cyber: far from being an egalitarian ‘global village’, the Internet has become a ‘virtual battlespace’.²⁴ Revisionist states, but also terrorist groups and other non-state actors, are using cyberspace to their maximum advantage in order

19 Kissinger, Henry Alfred, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

20 For example, see: Thomas, S. M. & Sacko, D. H., *The Unipolar World: An Unbalanced Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Chari, C. (ed.), *War, Peace, and Hegemony in a Globalized World* (Routledge, 2008).

21 Jacques, M., *When China rules the world: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (Penguin, 2009); Clegg, J., *China’s Global Strategy: Towards a multipolar world* (Pluto Press, 2010); Stuenkel, O., *Post-Western World: How emerging powers are remaking global order* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

22 Ward, Steven, *Status and the challenge of rising powers* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

23 Brady, Anne-Marie, “Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): China’s Foreign Propaganda Machine”, *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (October 2015), pp. 51–59; Galeotti, Mark, “Controlling Chaos: How Russia manages its political war in Europe”, *European Council on Foreign Relations* (1 September 2017); Kendall-Taylor, Andrea & David Shullman, “How Russia and China Undermine Democracy: Can the West Counter the Threat?”, *Foreign Affairs* (2 October 2018); Doshi, Rush, “China Steps Up Its Information War in Taiwan”, *Foreign Affairs* (9 January 2020); Legucka, Agnieszka, “Russia’s Long-Term Campaign of Disinformation in Europe”, *Carnegie Europe* (19 March 2020).

24 Manjikian, Mary McEvoy, “From Global Village to Virtual Battlespace: The Colonizing of the Internet and the Extension of Real-politik”, *International Studies Quarterly* 54/2 (2010), pp. 381–401.

to apply more pressure on liberal democracies.²⁵ Competition in the information domain during the pandemic is proof that every crisis adds an additional pressure point on the liberal international order.²⁶

To deal with this distinct possibility now and in the future, the EU should:

- **Equip the EAAS with a clear mandate and appropriate funding to monitor, research, and counter Chinese disinformation.** Raising public awareness of disinformation operations and exposing strategic narratives has proven its value against Russian influence in Europe.²⁷ The results of the survey suggest that Russian disinformation is less effective in penetrating European publics. But, as it currently stands, the EU does not have adequate resources to fight disinformation from China. In this respect, the EU must build on the success of the East StratCom unit and expand its scope to include China and other disinformation actors.
- **Integrate strategic communications and counter disinformation efforts on every level of European foreign policy and external action.** Foreign influence and disinformation are not standalone foreign policy tools, but they permeate and complement all other foreign policy tools and objectives. Similarly, countering disinformation should be streamlined into the EU's external action and its dealings with all regions and key partners, i.e., accession countries, the Eastern Partnership, and African and Southeast Asian nations. In addition to centralised EEAS efforts, EU delegations also need dedicated StratCom teams.
- **Consider the creation of a 'tech ambassador' or an EU delegation that deals exclusively with technological hubs and non-state actors.** Such an institutional innovation can boost EU cyber diplomacy and the representation of EU interests, standards, and values online. If public opinion is formed online, and if disinformation and foreign influence are using more and more sophisticated technological tools to influence public opinion, then our efforts should focus on working with the most capable partners to coordinate efforts, align priorities, and develop tools to counter disinformation.
- **Undertake European legislative initiatives to inhibit the 'political economy of disinformation'.** Beyond exposing disinformation, attention needs to be given to legal frameworks concerning traditional media and digital platforms. On the one hand, Europe could use more strict rules of ownership and control of local media outlets, by foreign state-owned enterprises. On the other hand, a new approach to the liability of platforms over the content they publish is needed.
- **Call for an international 'Cyber Treaty' that will enact and enforce ethical standards for state behaviour in cyberspace.** Modelled on its leadership in environmental governance, the EU should strive to become a leader in the ethical regulation of technology, the creation of cyber-norms, and the development of international frameworks for cooperation in cyberspace. Many regulatory frameworks are in place (e.g., GDPR) and others are either underway or being updated (AI and NIS2). The EU could use this momentum to call for a binding international agreement in collaboration with the US and other liberal democratic partners.

²⁵ Brady, Anne-Marie, "Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): China's Foreign Propaganda Machine", *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (October 2015), pp. 51–59; Galeotti, Mark, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia manages its political war in Europe", *European Council on Foreign Relations* (1 September 2017); Kendall-Taylor, Andrea & David Shullman, "How Russia and China Undermine Democracy: Can the West Counter the Threat?", *Foreign Affairs* (2 October 2018); Doshi, Rush, "China Steps Up Its Information War in Taiwan", *Foreign Affairs* (9 January 2020); Legucka, Agnieszka, "Russia's Long-Term Campaign of Disinformation in Europe", *Carnegie Europe* (19 March 2020).

²⁶ Campbell, Kurt M. & Rush Doshi, "The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order", *Foreign Affairs* (18 March 2020); for the opposite view, see: Drezner, Daniel W., "The Song Remains the Same: International Relations After COVID-19", *International Organization* (2020), pp. 1–18.

²⁷ García, Villar, Juan Pablo, Carlota Tarín Quirós, Julio Blázquez Soria, Carlos Galán Pascual & Carlos Galán Cordero, *Strategic communications as a key factor in countering hybrid threats*, European Parliament Research Service (2021).

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