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# Masks Off: Chinese Coronavirus Assistance in Europe

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## Summary

As the coronavirus crisis spread across Europe in March, several countries found themselves desperately short of masks, respirators, test kits, and even health-care staff as they struggled to contain outbreaks. With the EU and the United States initially slow to respond, China stepped into the vacuum. This paper looks at prominent Chinese coronavirus-related donations to Europe between March 12 and April 20, 2020, as well as at the Chinese media coverage and narratives that accompanied them. The prominence of donations was assessed using open-source data on donations from the Chinese authorities or from Fortune 500 or similarly large Chinese companies to European national governments, sister cities, and individual clinics and institutions. Assistance came in many forms and included financial support for the procurement of personal protective equipment, the dispatch of Chinese doctors, free access to cloud-based coronavirus diagnostic tools, and donations of testing kits and ventilators.

Three points emerge from this analysis. First, Chinese assistance stretched well beyond the high-profile cases of hard-hit Italy and Spain to countries large and small. During the five-weeks period studied, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and large Chinese companies made 70 prominent donations to 27 countries across Europe. The numbers and distribution of prominent donations of coronavirus-related assistance paint a picture of Beijing's widespread "mask diplomacy" in which countries' needs alone were not strictly reflected in the help they received. Coronavirus infection rates alone do not fully explain the variance in Chinese assistance, suggesting that allevi-

ating the health crisis may have been only one of many purposes behind the CCP's decisions.

Second, the donations by Chinese authorities and companies coincided with China's national and economic interests. China's state apparatus at the state, province, and city levels made donations, but the majority of prominent ones were from the Chinese private sector and foundations connected to it. However, with the CCP exercising an ever-growing level of control over the private sector, the distinction between public and private donations is not clear-cut and Beijing typically trumpeted both as evidence of its generosity. The perception-shaping potential of the donations is likely to have been one of the main drivers behind Chinese coronavirus assistance in Europe.

Finally, Chinese donations were accompanied by a sustained communications and diplomatic push aimed at a global audience. The vast majority of the coronavirus assistance to Europe was promoted via all available channels. On state media, embassy websites, and social-media platforms, the authorities used the Chinese donations to Europe to deliver the CCP's story. The positive messaging was also a way to pivot discourse about the pandemic away from its own failures in the early months of the outbreak. In parallel to the "shared future for mankind" narratives promoted by embassies every time donated medical supplies arrived in Europe, the CCP also showed a harder edge during the pandemic, much to the irritation of many European countries. Furthermore, since the period covered by this paper, Beijing has been doubling down on its newly assertive public diplomacy in Europe and beyond.

## Introduction

The boxes began arriving at airports across Europe in March. Draped in images of the flag of the People's Republic of China, they contained personal protective equipment (PPE) for European countries hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. As the health crisis spread across the continent, several European countries found themselves desperately short of much-needed masks, respirators, test kits, and even staff as they struggled to contain outbreaks. In those early days, pleas for assistance from the European Union went unheeded and the United States was noticeably absent. In this vacuum, and eager to deflect from its own failings in responding to the virus at home, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came bearing gifts for Europe. Italy received a team of doctors and 30 tons of donated equipment from the Chinese government on March 12. Before long, large Chinese corporations such as Alibaba and Huawei joined the effort, announcing donations of millions of masks, gloves, and test kits.

Questions soon arose about whether altruism was truly the main driver behind Chinese generosity. In late March, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, cautioned against some countries' "politics of generosity" and explained that Europe was caught in the midst of "a global battle of narratives."<sup>1</sup> Chinese aid was there to show that the world's most reliable superpower now sat in Beijing, not Washington or Brussels. Simultaneously, the CCP was trying to shift the blame and rewrite the script by casting doubt on the origin of the virus.

What is more, some of the Chinese donations turned out to be purchases made by European authorities. For the most part, however, European leaders initially received the Chinese assistance as reciprocal aid. When China had earlier struggled to contain its coronavirus outbreak, the EU provided tons of supplies and, at Beijing's request, did so discreetly. In contrast, Chinese assistance to Europe was marked by

flashy branding and attention-grabbing photo opportunities showing CCP officials bestowing supplies upon grateful European counterparts.

This paper looks at prominent Chinese coronavirus-related donations to Europe in March and April 2020 as the pandemic crisis erupted as well as at the Chinese media coverage and narratives that accompanied them. Three points emerge from this analysis. First, Chinese assistance stretched well beyond the high-profile cases of hard-hit Italy and Spain to countries large and small. Second, the donations by Chinese authorities and companies coincided with China's national and economic interests. And, third, Chinese donations were accompanied by sharp rhetoric and coercive behavior, which was aimed at a global audience and conducted on social media and in the traditional press.

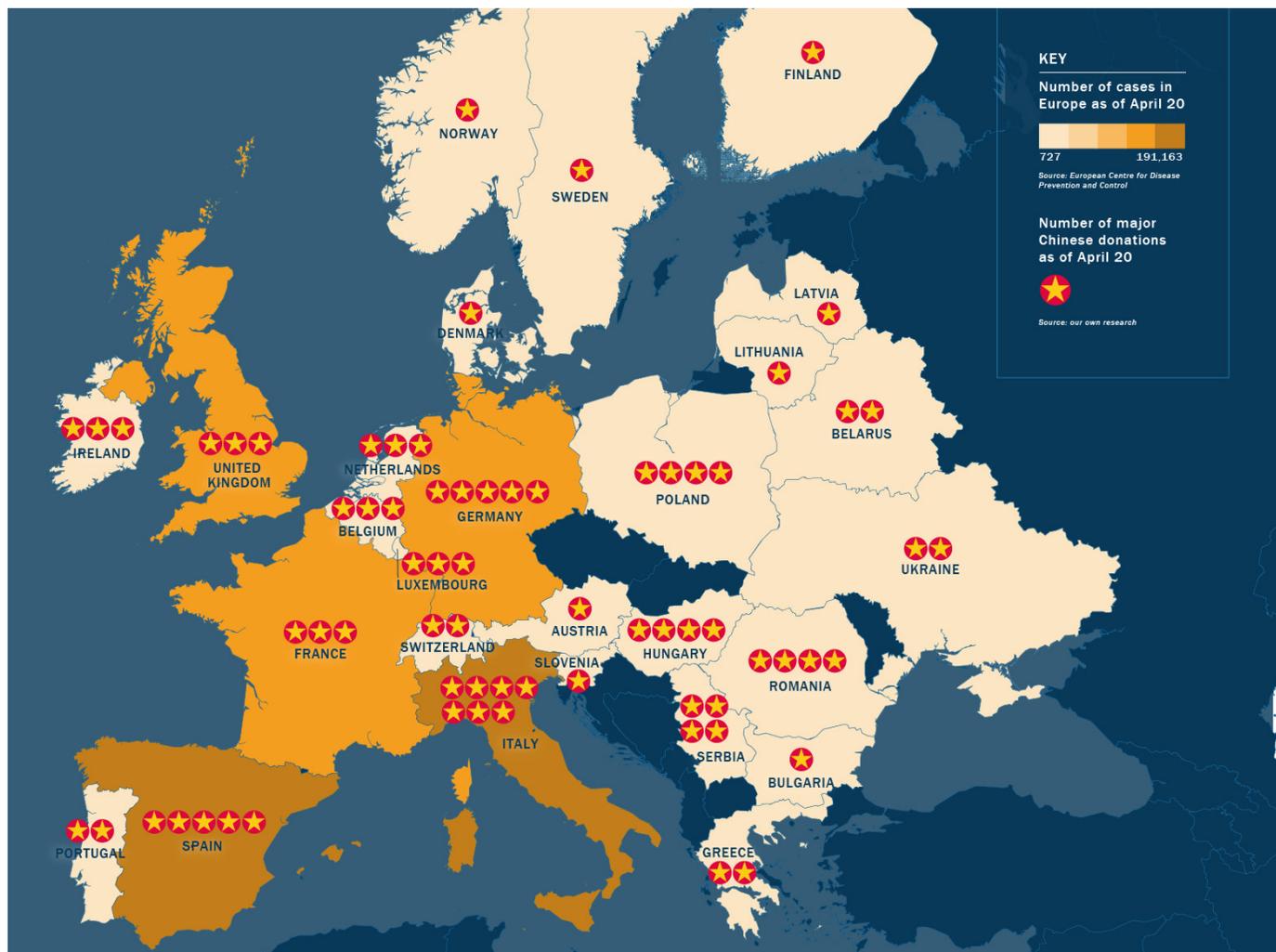
## Mapping China's Assistance

The analysis for this paper is based on a mapping of instances of prominent Chinese coronavirus-related donations of assistance to European countries between March 12 and April 20, 2020. The prominence of donations was assessed based on studying open-source data concerning donations from the Chinese authorities or from Fortune 500 or similarly large Chinese companies to European national governments, sister cities, and individual clinics and institutions. Assistance came in many forms and included financial support for the procurement of PPE, the dispatch of Chinese doctors, free access to cloud-based coronavirus diagnostic tools,<sup>2</sup> and donations of testing kits and ventilators. The size of identified donations varies from at least 1,000 items of PPE to hundreds of thousands of masks and teams of doctors. The mapping excludes instances where it was unclear whether supplies had been in fact purchased by European authorities rather than donated. Donations by smaller companies, individuals, or in-kind contributions were not monitored either, and, given that the identification of prominent

1 Josep Borrell, "EU HRVP Josep Borrell: The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating," European External Action Service, 24 March 2020.

2 Helene Fouquet, "Alibaba Pitches Diagnostic Tool to Europe in China Outreach Move," Bloomberg, 19 March 2020.

Figure 1. Prominent Chinese Coronavirus Donations in Europe, March-April 2020.



cases was based on open source data, it is also possible that cases were missed because they were not reported.

The analysis shows that, during the five-week period studied, the CCP and large Chinese companies made 70 prominent donations to 27 countries across Europe. (See Figure 1.) This was the case for EU members states and non-EU countries alike. Italy received the most (seven), followed by Germany and Spain (five each), and Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Serbia (four each). A summary comparison of the distribution of prominent donations from China across Europe and the need for these in terms of the

scale of countries' coronavirus infections is presented below.

According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control,<sup>3</sup> the five countries reporting the most coronavirus cases by the end of April were Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France.<sup>3</sup> All received prominent donations from China, in varying amounts and forms, but there are noteworthy variations. Spain and Italy, the two most

<sup>3</sup> European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, "COVID-19 situation update for the EU/EEA and the UK, as of 25 June 2020," 25 June 2020.

affected countries in Europe, both received a great amount of Chinese assistance, but Spain, with a higher rate of coronavirus cases per capita received less than Italy. Likely owing to the closeness of its bilateral relations with China, Italy was the largest recipient of prominent donations, including receiving millions of masks as well as three teams of doctors. No Chinese medical team was sent to Spain. The two EU heavyweights, France and Germany had almost identical rates of cases per capita, but Germany received two more prominent donations despite the fact that its handling of the virus was heralded as the more effective of the two.

During the period covered, most Eastern European countries had much lower coronavirus case rates per capita than Western European countries, yet they received an equal or in some cases higher number of prominent donations from China. Hungary and Serbia, both known for their friendly ties to China, but also Poland and Romania received four prominent donations each. Hungary, for example, received prominent donations from Fudan University and Huawei as well as Bank of China and the China Construction Bank. Poland received assistance from the Chinese state as well as from Alibaba, Huawei, and Xiaomi. Outside of the EU, Belarus received the same amount of prominent donations as Portugal despite the fact that the latter had much higher total and per capita infection numbers.

The Nordic countries, some of which have had tense relations with China, did not receive many prominent donations despite having some higher per capita infection rates than some of the countries in Eastern Europe that were the recipients of more prominent donations. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden each had one prominent donation. Denmark, for example, received a donation of 500,000 masks, 50,000 tests and 5,000 suits from the Jack Ma Foundation. At the same time, much smaller Luxembourg received the same number of prominent donations (three) as Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

To sum up, the numbers and distribution of the prominent donations of coronavirus-related assis-

tance paint a picture of Beijing's widespread "mask diplomacy" across Europe in which the assistance countries received was not necessarily a reflection of their actual needs. In other words, coronavirus infection rates alone do not fully explain the variance in Chinese assistance. This suggests that alleviating the health crisis may have been only one of many purposes behind the CCP's decisions to provide support.

### State and Companies in Sync

Among the prominent donations identified in this report, some came from China's state apparatus at the state, province, and city levels. However, the majority of them were from the Chinese private sector, and in particular the Alibaba group, its co-founder Jack Ma, and foundations connected to them. That said, with Beijing exercising an ever-growing level of control over the private sector, the distinction between public and private donations is not clear-cut and Beijing typically trumpeted both sources as evidence of its generosity.

The "private" sector is less private in China than in democratic, free market systems. First, many of the largest corporations and banks in China are state-owned. Conglomerates such as COSCO Shipping or the state-owned steel conglomerate HBIS, which made prominent donations, are under the direct control of state entities. Second, nominally private entities can still have significant ties to the government; for example, Huawei with its owner's ties to the military and opaque ownership structure. Lastly, under Xi Jinping, the CCP has been strengthening its control over all Chinese corporations. For instance, all non-state-owned companies are now required to host a party cell that ensures compliance with laws, regulations, and the CCP's policy goals.<sup>4</sup> As recently as September 2019, for example, the government was increasing the number of officials working with Alib-

<sup>4</sup> Katja Drinhausen and Nis Grünberg, "[The Party leads on everything: China's changing governance in Xi Jinping's new era](#)," Mercator Institute for China Studies, 24 September 2019.

aba.<sup>5</sup> The new intelligence law adopted in 2017 also requires all citizens and organizations to collaborate with the security agencies.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Chinese coronavirus assistance to Europe, the authorities and state media frequently blurred the line between supplies given for free and those sold to European countries. In fact, several European governments purchased large quantities of medical supplies and PPE from Chinese companies. This ambiguity was echoed in the European press, with many reports mentioning Chinese medical supplies arriving in a country without more information on the means of their procurement. For instance, this was the case with the delivery of Chinese supplies to the Czech Republic on March 20, for which it is difficult to determine whether they were donated or purchased based on press reports.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese companies donating medical supplies to European governments had strong economic incentives to do so. Bank of China donated equipment to Ireland, a country in which it is in the process of buying one of the largest financial services firm and where it operates an aircraft leasing business.<sup>8</sup> Another Chinese state-owned bank made a donation to Hungary, where it plans to start corporate-lending operations this year.<sup>9</sup> HBIS, whose steel mill in Serbia exports millions of dollars' worth of steel to the EU every year, made a large donation to the country.<sup>10</sup>

Huawei, which is at the center of a geopolitical storm over its bids on large-scale 5G contracts in Europe, made numerous donations across the conti-

ment. It sent medical supplies to Greece, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Poland, among others. However, after EU High Representative Josep Borrell criticized China's "politics of generosity," Huawei announced it was halting its donations to European countries, saying that it did not want to get caught between China and the United States.<sup>11</sup> Based on its behavior, it was apparent that Huawei would not continue donating medical supplies if doing so would jeopardize its relationship with the regulators in charge of granting it access to European 5G markets.

### Promoting Gratitude

For China's government and its European embassies, highlighting Chinese assistance with photo opportunities and "donation ceremonies" was a way to promote the country's image and shape the narrative about its coronavirus response. The perception-shaping potential of the donations is likely to have been one of the main drivers behind Chinese coronavirus assistance in Europe.

As a Chinese medical team and PPE donation arrived in Rome on March 12, Italy's foreign minister, Luigi di Maio, took to social media to praise Beijing's aid.<sup>12</sup> Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić kissed the Chinese flag when welcoming a medical team to his country, which Chinese state media said underlined his country's "deep gratitude."<sup>13</sup> Such images of grateful European leaders supported China's projection of itself as a global leader. Throughout March and April, its diplomatic representatives were systematically present at photo opportunities to showcase the delivery of Chinese medical supplies, regardless of whether they were supplied by public or private-sector entities. Typically, these photos displayed boxes bearing the Chinese and recipient country's flags, alongside the

5 Josh Horwitz, "[China to send state officials to 100 private firms including Alibaba](#)," Reuters, 23 September 2019.

6 Murray Scot Tanner, "[Beijing's New National Intelligence Law: From Defense to Offense](#)," The Lawfare Institute, 20 July 2020.

7 Robert Muller, "[Czechs get first batch of sorely needed gear from China to fight coronavirus](#)," Reuters, 20 March 2020.

8 Barry O'Halloran, "[Bank of China donates 200,000 items of protective equipment to Ireland](#)," The Irish Times, 27 March 2020.

9 Beata Fojcik, "[Report: China Construction Bank to launch operations in Hungary](#)," S&P Global, 24 February 2020.

10 Reuters, "[Serbia asks for exemption from new EU steel import cap](#)," 15 January 2019.

11 Samuel Stolton, "[Huawei to 'scale down' supply of COVID-19 masks, after Borrell comments](#)," EURACTIV, 26 March 2020.

12 Luigi Di Maio, "[Ho delle cose importanti da dirvi. Seguitemi!](#)" Facebook, 12 March 2020.

13 CGTN, "[Serbian president kisses Chinese national flag as support team arrives](#)," YouTube, 22 March 2020.

company's logo. Messages about the donations in local languages were shared and amplified on the social-media feeds of local Chinese embassies.

Donations by large corporations like Alibaba and Huawei being promoted in a similar way to government ones blurred who was really behind these. In Romania, China's ambassador attended the formal handover to local authorities of supplies donated by Huawei. As a result, the embassy received positive press coverage for a private-sector donation.<sup>14</sup> In Denmark, two tweets from the Chinese embassy promoted a donation of 500,000 masks, 50,000 tests, and 5,000 suits from the Jack Ma Foundation. The second tweet also shared a letter written by an "ordinary Dane" who thanked Ma for his help.<sup>15</sup> In Ireland, the Chinese embassy not only advertised the arrival of masks, PPE, and testing kits from Ma and Alibaba, but also proceeded to actively engage, sometimes in Gaelic, users who replied to the post.<sup>16</sup>

Chinese state media outlets extensively covered corporations' donations to European recipients. For example, People's Daily<sup>17</sup> and Xinhua<sup>18</sup> published stories on 40,000 N95 respirator masks donated to

the Pitié-Salpêtrière University Hospital in Paris by a Chinese state-owned bank. Donations to Belgium also garnered significant attention from Chinese state media. A donation of 500,000 mouth masks and 30,000 test kits by the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation received a multi-platform coverage from China News Service, China's second-largest news agency.<sup>19</sup> On Xinhua, a donation of 20,000 face masks by COSCO became a story about the Port of Antwerp's gratitude.<sup>20</sup> The article opened with the Belgian port thanking COSCO before shifting the tone to "China and Belgium," emphasizing the quasi-ambassadorial role of the company and its donation.

### Telling China's Story to the World

In recent years, Xi Jinping has exhorted the CCP to "tell China's story well, and properly disseminate China's voice."<sup>21</sup> To this end, the vast majority of Chinese coronavirus assistance to Europe was promoted and advertised via all available channels. On state media, embassy websites, and social-media platforms, the Chinese authorities used the donations to Europe to deliver the CCP's story to a global audience.

Social-media platforms, and Twitter in particular, were critical for the CCP's narrative push in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The number of tweets posted by the accounts of Chinese officials and diplomats and state media increased from around 9,000 a week in early March to around 15,000 by April 20 (see Figure 2).

The increase in Chinese diplomats' activity on Twitter since the start of the crisis shows that it is now a key tool for Chinese official communications.

14 Claudiu Sima, "[Ambasada Chinei alături de companiile chineze active pe piața din România continuă să doneze echipamente de protecție necesare în lupta contra Covid-19](#)," mobilissimo.ro, 17 April 2020.

15 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark (@ChinaInDenmark), "[Jack Ma's donation of essential equipment delivered](#)," Twitter, 27 March 2020; Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark (@ChinaInDenmark), "[A letter from a Danish citizen to the Chinese Ambassador reads 'As an ordinary Dane I just want to thank your country and particularly mr. Jack Ma for his kind help to our country'. The message will be passed on. @foundation\\_ma](#)" Twitter, 27 March 2020.

16 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Ireland (@ChinaEmbIreland), "[Donations from Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma and his Alibaba Group will arrive in Ireland today, including 300,000 masks, 30,000 testing kits, 3,000 protective suits. The delivery first touched down in Belgium on Mar.23 along with donations to other EU states](#)," Twitter, 26 March 2020.

17 Yishuang Liu, "[ICBC Paris fait don de 40.000 masques médicaux N95 aux établissements de santé français](#)," People's Daily Online, 20 March 2020.

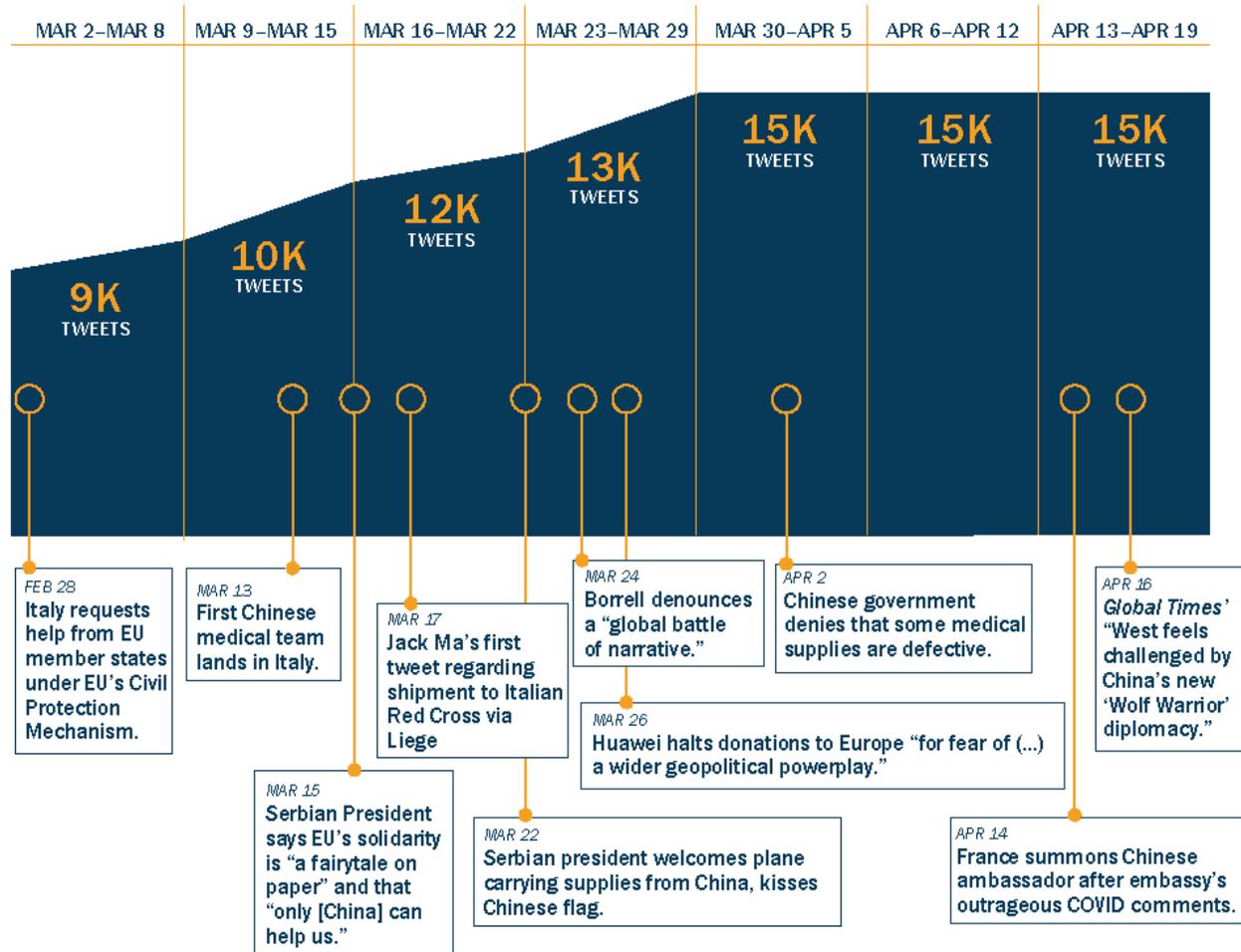
18 Liu Fang, "[Spotlight: As China recovers from COVID-19 blow, Chinese rush to Europe's rescue](#)," Xinhua, 26 March 2020; Xinhua, "[\(COVID-19\) Des Chinois mobilisés pour faire don de masques médicaux aux établissements de santé français](#)," 19 March 2020.

19 Xinhua, "[Half million donated face masks land in Belgium en route to Italy, with more to come](#)," China News Service, 14 March 2020; China News Service (@Echinanews), "[A plane carrying Chinese medical supplies for Europe landed in Liege, Belgium. The supplies were donated by two charities -- Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation and comprise half a million face masks, which will be sent to Italy](#)," Twitter, 13 March 2020.

20 Xinhua, "[Port of Antwerp in Belgium thanks COSCO's donation of 20,000 face masks](#)," 28 March 2020.

21 David Bandurski, "[The Fable of The Master Storyteller](#)," China Media Project, University of Hong Kong, 29 September 2017.

Figure 2. Tweets from Chinese State Media and Official Accounts, March-April 2020.



Source: Hamilton 2.0

Many Chinese embassies in Europe, and beyond, have only recently joined Twitter. The Chinese embassy in Germany opened an account in December 2019 and that in Italy in May 2018. The embassy in the United Kingdom joined the platform in November 2019, although the country’s historical ties to Hong Kong and aspirations to a “golden era” in relations with China might have suggested the embassy would have engaged earlier in this means of communication. The Chinese mission to the EU stands out with its account having been active since 2013. In some countries, the ambassadors have separate accounts. In all these cases, use of hashtags (#) and ats (@) varies, demon-

strating differing levels of fluency with the platform’s functionalities.

To some extent, the CCP’s communication efforts during the pandemic have been a continuation of its preexisting propaganda and talking points. On April 16, China Daily carried a text by Foreign Minister Wang Yi titled “Following Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy to build a community with a shared future for mankind through international cooperation against coronavirus.”<sup>22</sup> The concept of “Xi Jinping

22 Wang Yi, “Following Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy to build a community with a shared future for mankind through international cooperation against COVID-19,” China Daily, 16 April 2020.

Thought” made its first official appearance in 2017,<sup>23</sup> while the idea of “a community with a shared future for mankind” can be traced back all the way to 2012.<sup>24</sup>

The “shared future for mankind” concept highlights the positive strand of the CCP’s discourse. Much of the announcements, articles, and social-media posts accompanying the donations of medical supplies to Europe highlighted humanity’s shared oneness and the fact that all the countries in the world were fighting the virus together. Private companies that supported the aid effort echoed this messaging. One example of this narrative convergence was around an Alibaba donation of 1 million masks arrived in Rome on March 18, less than a week after the Chinese government had flown in a medical team to Italy. Both efforts were promoted by the Chinese embassy using the same hashtag: #ForzaCinaeItalia.

Alibaba, Jack Ma, and their affiliated foundations were particularly active in spreading a positive narrative around the Chinese aid effort. On March 16, Ma’s very first post on Twitter announced an aid package for the United States. In March and April, most of his posts on the platform advertised donations to countries around the globe. His account quickly gained traction: as of April 20, while Ma had only tweeted 17 times, he had over 500,000 followers. The hashtag #OneWorldOneFight, which punctuated many of his tweets, matched the CCP’s rhetoric so well that state media and diplomats occasionally used it in their communications.<sup>25</sup>

For the CCP, the positive messaging was also a way to pivot discourse about the pandemic away from its own failures in the early months of the outbreak. In suggesting that there were only two sides in the battle against the virus—humanity and the virus itself—the CCP was able to portray any criticism of the Chinese

authorities as a win for the virus. As one commentary published by Xinhua put it, “enough blame game and finger-pointing (...) the pointless bickering comes at the cost of an efficient and effective response to the pandemic.”<sup>26</sup>

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However, the positive messaging is only half the story. In parallel to the “shared future for mankind” narratives promoted by embassies every time donated medical supplies arrived in Europe, the CCP has also showed a harder edge during the pandemic. Some Chinese diplomats actively denigrated European democracies to present China’s authoritarian model as the most effective way to run a country. A CCP-orchestrated bot campaign promoting Chinese donations to Italy occasionally used the #shame hashtag, referring to the alleged inaction of the EU.<sup>27</sup> In Serbia, the Chinese ambassador encouraged this perception by obfuscating the EU’s role in coronavirus-related assistance to the country.<sup>28</sup> Chinese state media devoted much space to President Vučić calling EU solidarity “a fairy tale on paper” and saying that “the only country that can help [Serbia] is China.” Stories like “Serbia thanks China for aid, blasts lack of EU help” show how, in addition to trumpeting Chinese donations, Beijing’s messaging shifted to more actively denigrating the EU just as it did the United States

23 Xinhua, “CPC Constitution enshrines Xi’s thought as part of action guide,” 24 October 2017.

24 Hu Jintao, “Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on November 8, 2012,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, 27 November 2012.

25 Alliance for Securing Democracy, [Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard](#), The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

26 Xinhua, “Commentary: Cooperation only right choice for humanity in war with virus,” 25 March 2020.

27 Francesco Bechis and Gabriele Carrer, “How China unleashed Twitter bots to spread COVID-19 propaganda in Italy,” Alkemy in partnership with Formiche, 31 March 2020.

28 Chen Bo (@AmbChenBo), “Железара Смедерево-права снага челичног пријатељства. ХБИС заједно са Србијом у борби против вируса КОВИД-19. @SerbianPM,” Twitter, 26 March 2020.

and other democracies.<sup>29</sup> The Chinese embassies in Germany,<sup>30</sup> the Netherlands,<sup>31</sup> and in the United Kingdom<sup>32</sup> clashed with media critical of Beijing.

The behavior of the Chinese embassy in France is an excellent illustration of Chinese diplomats' new, harsher tone. On March 28, it published on its website an unsigned statement by one of its diplomats that stated:

Asian countries, including China, have been particularly effective in their fight against coronavirus because they have a sense of community and civility that Western democracies lack. (...) Some people (...) envy the effectiveness of [China's] political system and hate their own country's inability to do as well!<sup>33</sup>

A few days later, the embassy posted a text on its website stating that its "factual and well-sourced" information had been "twisted" by the media. "Factual" information from the embassy included statements such as "some in the United States and in other Western countries (...) fabricate lies and mislead their

people."<sup>34</sup> On April 14, France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the ambassador following the publication of another text implying that pensioners were left to die by French authorities.

Chinese donations were also at times accompanied by assertive, coordinated, and behind-the-scenes diplomatic pressure. For instance, in April, German press reported that Chinese diplomats had pressured German officials to commend the Chinese government's response to the pandemic.<sup>35</sup> In another example, the Chinese embassy in the Czech Republic exerted considerable behind-the-scenes pressure to suppress public praise of the Taiwanese authorities for their assistance in fighting coronavirus.<sup>36</sup> Several Chinese embassies in Europe characterized local press reports or public officials commending Taiwan's response to the crisis as "misrepresentation"<sup>37</sup> or "driven by very suspicious political motivations."<sup>38</sup>

Chinese officials and state media also used disinformation tactics. For example, the spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry and her deputy shared a video of Italians singing "Thank you, China" from their balconies, footage later shown to have been misleadingly edited.<sup>39</sup> The deputy spokesperson from the same ministry amplified conspiracy theories suggesting that the coronavirus originated in the United States rather

29 Variations of the story ran on CGTN (CGTN, "[Serbia thanks China for aid, blasts lack of EU help](#)," 18 March 2020), Xinhua (CGTN, "[Serbia thanks China for aid, blasts lack of EU help](#)," Xinhua, 19 March 2020), and on CGTN's YouTube channel (CGTN, "[Serbia thanks China for aid, blasts lack of EU help](#)," YouTube, 18 March 2020).

30 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Federal Republic of Germany (@ChinaEmbGermany), "[Die jüngsten Berichterstattungen der @BILD über China entbehren nicht nur wesentlicher Fakten u. genauer Zeitabläufe sondern auch Mindestmaß an journalistischer Sorgfaltspflicht und Fairness. Die Informationspflichten der IHR hat China rechtzeitig erfüllt](#)," Twitter, 16 April 2020.

31 Ribiao Chen (@RibiaoChen), "[Arrogance and prejudice are the biggest sins in the way of winning the war against #Coronavirus #COVID\\_19 An Open Letter to the Editorial Department of @Volkskrant](#)," Twitter, 11 April 2020.

32 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (@ChineseEmbinUK), "[On 19 April, the Mail on Sunday @mailonline published a letter from the @Chinese-EmbinUK on the newspaper's unjustified comments on the effectiveness of China's fight against #COVID19](#)," Twitter, 19 April 2020.

33 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the French Republic, "[Systèmes politiques et lutte contre l'épidémie : le grand dilemma](#)," 28 March 2020.

34 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the French Republic, "[Qui se connaît lui-même ne se plaint jamais d'autrui: Observations d'un diplomate chinois en poste à Paris](#)," 5 April 2020.

35 Annelie Naumann and Christian Schewpe, "[China will deutsche Beamte zu Propagandisten Machen](#)," Welt, 12 April 2020.

36 The Czech News Agency, "[China criticizes Czech Republic for accepting Taiwanese medical aid](#)," Expats.cz, 20 April 2020.

37 Zeng Rong, "[Embassy Spokesperson's letter to The Economist on its unjustified comments on China's fight against the COVID-19](#)," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1 April 2020.

38 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the French Republic, "[Lettre du Porte-parole de l'Ambassade de Chine en France à la rédaction de L'Obs au sujet de l'appel signé par des élus français sur Taiwan](#)," 6 April 2020.

39 David Puente, "[Coronavirus. La propaganda cinese e il montaggio fake del video «Grazie Cina»](#)," Open, 20 March 2020.

than in China.<sup>40</sup> A few days later, Chinese state media changed their story and alleged that the virus had in fact originated in Italy. It appears that the aim of these stories was not to create a specific alternative view on the origin of the pandemic. Rather, the Chinese propaganda apparatus tried to spread the idea that the real origin of the virus could never be known for certain.

Two things stand out from the communications and diplomatic push that accompanied Chinese medical donations to Europe. First, the CCP attempted to spread its propaganda far beyond its domestic audience. Many Chinese officials have embraced Twitter, a platform banned in China, as their preferred medium for communication. This means the dozens of tweets promoting Chinese donations, just like the many televised interviews and online presentations given by Chinese ambassadors in several European capitals, were clearly directed at a European and global audience. Second, Beijing showed unprecedented assertiveness during the period studied. On more than one occasion, Chinese officials tried to strong-arm European governments into spreading the CCP's narratives. And those narratives went far beyond the ostensibly benign proclamations on "humanity's shared oneness" as Chinese diplomats, even at the highest level, were pushing demonstrably false information and denigrating the systems of government of the very countries they professed to help.

In the end, "telling China's story" bore many of the hallmarks of information manipulation, defined as "the coordinated use of social or traditional media to manipulate and influence public debate by deliberately spreading or amplifying information that is false, misleading, or distorted."<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The CCP's embrace of a more assertive communications posture has come across starkly during the coro-

navirus crisis in Europe. The "donation ceremonies" and the embassies' loud promotion of Chinese generosity show that the assistance was less about altruism and more part of a strategy to deflect criticism for China's handling of the coronavirus and burnish its image as a global leader, including sometimes by criticizing the EU and European governments. In addition, donations by some Chinese companies, most notably Huawei, look as though they were mainly meant to foster future business and investment opportunities.

### *The sharp rhetoric, bullying, and attempts at coercive behavior that accompanied Beijing's assistance campaign have alienated many European countries.*

The sharp rhetoric, bullying, and attempts at coercive behavior that accompanied Beijing's assistance campaign have alienated many European countries. Resorting to platitudes like the "community with a shared future for mankind" to paper over its own failures in relation to the coronavirus outbreak in China, its propaganda apparatus has undermined governments already under stress due to the health crisis, and pushed disinformation about the origins of the virus. What is more, since the period covered by this paper, Beijing has been doubling down on its newly assertive public diplomacy in Europe and beyond, a development with which Europe, the United States, and others will have to contend with increasingly. In recent months, polling data from various sources shows that public attitudes toward China have become significantly more negative on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>42</sup> This may yet cause the CCP to reassess its "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy.

40 Ben Blanchard, "[China government spokesman says U.S. army might have brought virus to China](#)," Reuters, 12 March 2020.

41 ASD Team, "[A Note on Coming Updates to the Authoritarian Interference Tracker](#)," Interference Matters Blog, 17 June 2020

42 Bertelsmann Foundation, German Marshall Fund of the United States, and Institut Montaigne, "[Relations with China](#)," Transatlantic Trends 2020, 30 June 2020; European Council on Foreign Relations, "[Europe's pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public's worldview](#)," 24 June 2020.

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