

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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