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POLICY BRIEF 10

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Rethinking China's COVID-19 Aid Diplomacy in Europe: Key Policy Recommendations

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This policy brief re-examines China's COVID-19 aid diplomacy in Europe during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, focusing on the scope of donation and associated disinformation. China's aid diplomacy in Europe was widely seen as an attempt to demonstrate China's global pandemic response capacity while obscuring the CCP's early missteps during the outbreak. This brief uses a novel dataset to provide fresh insights and important distinctions into the underlying motivations behind China's aid efforts. Along the EU's strategic autonomy agenda, this brief provides key policy recommendations to improve the EU's pandemic preparedness, and to upgrade its role in shaping global health governance by urging the EU to secure a pandemic treaty and diversifying supply chains to move beyond the current globalism-statism divide.

Policy Recommendations:

- **Strengthen the EU's capacity to manage global health risks through more active cooperation with non-EU partners via the EU's Global Health Strategy and Global Gateway.**
- **Develop a more comprehensive EU-wide strategy to counter disinformation narratives amplified by the CCP's growing media apparatus, by investing more in the EU's media literacy.**
- **Bolster the pandemic preparedness and resilience of the EU's emergency response capabilities by diversifying and upgrading supply chains.**

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, as Europe replaced China as the world's second epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, European governments were caught largely unprepared with insufficient stockpiles to provide health workers and people with life-saving medical equipment to

protect themselves. Additionally, the rapid and unpredictable spread of the coronavirus made it challenging to anticipate the scale of personal protective equipment (PPE) needed. Although China was the world's largest manufacturer of personal protective equipment (PPE) before the pandemic and was rapidly expanding production while enforcing a brutal but effective lockdown domestically, the sudden and massive surge in global demand of PPE together with the adoption of various export restrictions in China and OECD countries significantly disrupted PPE supply chains. This led to serious shortages and occasional conflicts, known as 'mask wars', between EU statesⁱ. However, before China became a top seller of life-saving PPEs to desperate European governments, also China had insufficient stockpiles in January 2020. To replenish those, the CCP leadershipⁱⁱ launched a quiet PPE import operationⁱⁱⁱ to procure about two billion facemasks from OECD countries. As Europe then faced its own shortages and diminished stockpiles, various European actors with China ties sought to obtain more PPEs. In exchange, however, China's leadership requested European leaders to make public requests and express gratitude^{iv}, no matter how small the donations were proportionally to purchases. As a result, China's Covid-19 aid diplomacy became seen as a coordinated attempt by the CCP to project the image of China as a 'responsible great power' to both domestic and foreign audiences. While the CCP demonstrated a significant capacity for extra-territorial mobilization, however, it is also remembered for obscuring the CCP's early missteps that prevented a timely containment of the pandemic's outbreak.^v

Over the past three years, as China's Covid-19 aid diplomacy received heightened scrutiny

from the European press and researchers, EU policymakers have raised their apprehensions about the CCP's strategic objectives and reinforced assertiveness. For a time, Europe's anxiety was also compounded by an unfavourable contrast between China's domestic pandemic response which appeared more effective at saving lives than was the case in liberal democracies. The CCP's concentrated power appeared more capable in dealing swiftly with a global public health crisis than European democracies with their lengthy legal processes constraining emergency powers.^{vi} Moreover, while large OECD democracies like the USA, the UK and Germany were, before Covid-19, seen as leading the global health agenda together with multilateral institutions like the WHO, as with the 2013-2016 Ebola epidemic in Western Africa, some such as the UK were too busy domestically or too inward-looking, such as the US under Trump, to lead a global pandemic response. In contrast, China and other non-OECD actors acted as first providers. This signalled the diminishing global health leadership of OECD donors and the WHO. While empirical research partially substantiated the factors influencing these perceptions, several retrospective studies^{vii} adopted a more systematic approach to examine recent data regarding China's distribution of PPE to Europe and other regions. These studies unveiled a more intricate and nuanced portrait of China's Covid-19 diplomacy, highlighting its fragmented nature and the transient nature of its impact. Building on those findings, this policy brief provides a fresh perspective by leveraging insights from a novel dataset^{viii} that provides a more accurate picture of China's COVID-19 aid diplomacy in Europe, notably aid volumes per capita, and total donations per country from the CCP and other Chinese

donors across recipient countries. The main objective of this brief is to make sure the post-pandemic assessment of China's Covid-19 aid diplomacy in Europe is based on solid evidence, and to help further inform the EU's efforts by providing key policy recommendations to improve the EU's pandemic preparedness and resilience against the evolving pro-CCP's disinformation ecosystem.

RE-EXAMINING CHINA'S COVID-19 AID TO EUROPE: IS A FRIEND IN NEED A FRIEND INDEED?

China's unprecedented medical aid to Europe prompted discussions regarding the CCP's strategic purposes, often labeled as "mask diplomacy." However, this line of argument remained limited to partial empirical evidence. While the CCP's medical aid diplomacy has a long history, particularly in Africa^{ix}, it has, in recent years, concomitant with a rising China, developed into a more complex health diplomacy driven by various actors with different interests. To re-assess the scope and possible geopolitical motives behind China's Covid-19 aid diplomacy in this

new context, it is essential to move beyond surface-level data points. Based on the most systematic dataset on China's global Covid-19 donations to date, the allocation pattern and monetary value of China's donations to Europe appear more nuanced than what mainstream media, by highlighting China's aid to Italy and Serbia in particular, conveyed during the first wave of the pandemic.

As far as per capita distribution is concerned, Figure 1 shows significant variations in aid allocation. In addition to EU countries being hit unevenly, the explanations behind such gap vary from country to country. Although countries such as Portugal, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Belarus received significant assistance from Chinese donors, this did not make headlines as was the case for other countries that received fewer donations. When, for example, Italy asked China for help, Germany and France had previously refused to deliver PPE to Lombardy, the most affected region in Europe then. Therefore, when the CCP sent a medical team to Italy on March 12, 2020, the only one to an EU member state, Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio was quick

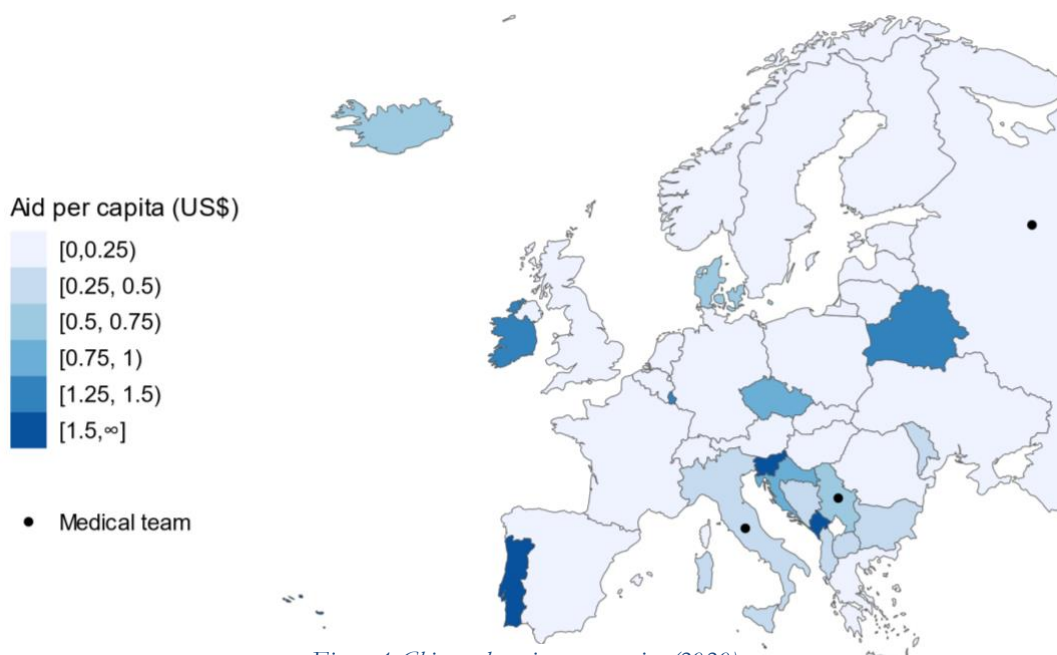


Figure 1 Chinese donations per capita (2020)

to link China's timely help with Italy's (controversial) BRI membership. Nevertheless, when pro-CCP media started to reframe China's aid to artificially improve China's image, Italian independent media debunked the disinformation^x while the goodwill China garnered by helping Italy proved short-lived.

In Italy, the landing of China's medical team in Serbia on March 21st, 2020, occurred after the EU's decision on March 15th to prohibit PPE exports to non-EU nations, including Serbia and others covered by the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement policy. The authoritarian trend in Serbia's government under Aleksandar Vučić, coupled with the country's EU accession fatigue and disagreements on Kosovo even prior to the Covid-19 crisis, made Serbia's government elites more receptive to China's Covid-19 diplomacy. Additionally, China's information manipulation was magnified through the Serbian media controlled by Vučić's government^{xi}, inaccurately portraying China as Serbia's primary foreign donor rather than the EU.

Considering these variations in media coverage raises questions about the underlying motives of Chinese donors. Examining the combination of government donations with associated media operations in Italy and Serbia, a more plausible interpretation emerges – pro-CCP actors were likely motivated by a blend of commercial and geopolitical considerations. More specifically, China's Covid-19 aid diplomacy reflects a calculated effort to strengthen ties with strategic European government elites, and to project a positive image of the CCP's role in responding to criticisms to domestic and international audiences.

While 39.6 % of China's overall donations to Europe came from the party-state, one key feature largely overlooked by the research literature is that most donations came from other Chinese donors. For example, Jack Ma/Alibaba Foundations represented 22.6 % of all Chinese donations to Europe. Figure 2 provides a comprehensive overview of Chinese donations to the ten largest recipients in Europe, encompassing contributions from

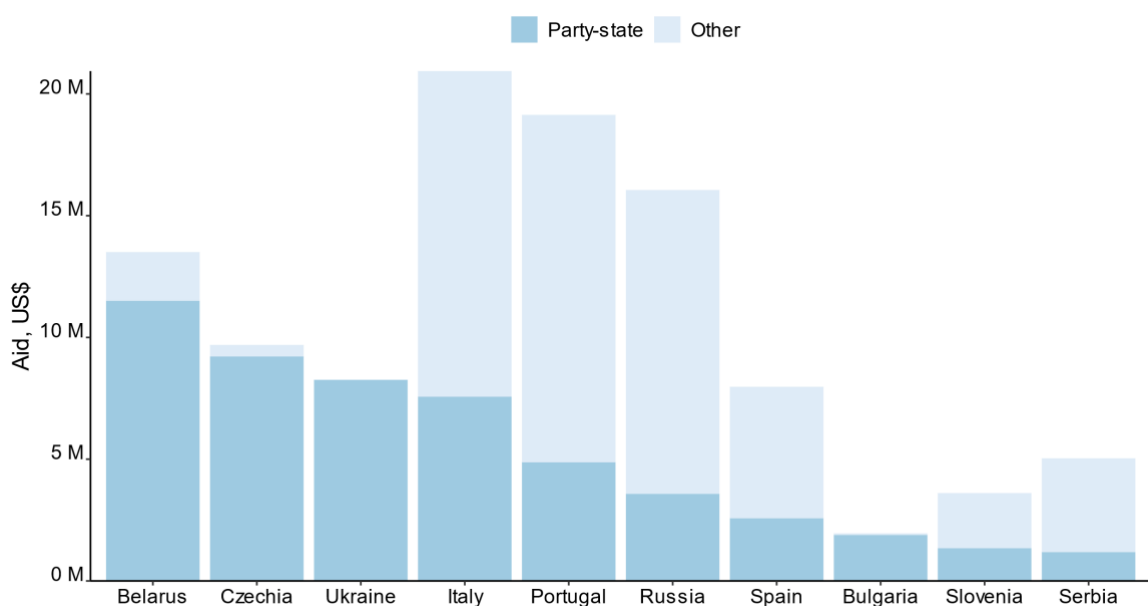


Figure 2 Chinese donations per country (2020)

various sources, including nominally private enterprises^{xii}, foundations such as Alibaba, and smaller donors such as universities. The data highlights an additional layer of variation among Chinese donors, revealing significant disparities in the scale and nature of donations across different European countries. While Belarus and Portugal continue to be major recipients, the differentiation between donations by the party-state and other Chinese contributors unveils distinct patterns. Notably, the predominant share of the CCP's donations to Belarus suggests a primarily geopolitical motivation behind its Covid-19 diplomacy. Conversely, the substantial shares of donations by private entities to Portugal and Italy imply a more commercially driven approach in China's Covid-19 diplomacy. The contrast between Russia and Belarus is explained by the substantial donation from Jack Ma/Alibaba Foundations reaching the former but not the latter. Moreover, while the CCP's donations to Serbia received much media attention, their value was smaller than for Slovenia and Bulgaria that have smaller populations.

CHINA'S COVID-19 DISINFORMATION IN EUROPE: NEVER LET A GOOD CRISIS GO TO WASTE?

The brief empirical data analysis and series of media events presented above highlights the substantial impact of media representations on the perception of China's Covid-19 diplomacy in Europe. Notably, the CCP's intensified media engagement in the information domain reflects a discernible shift towards employing a more diverse array of tools. Throughout 2020, the CCP's media apparatus executed a multifaceted information manipulation campaign in

Europe, employing various disinformation tactics, with a specific focus on emphasizing China's PPE donations to the region in addition to framing the Covid-19 as an American creation^{xiii}. But the size and allocation pattern of the CCP's donations raises questions about the motives of the CCP in using donations to reward strategic partners and raises questions of China as a responsible provider of urgent medical aid.

While China's PPE donations were sometimes framed by China's state media as 'reciprocating' Europe's preceding PPE donations to China in early 2020, pro-CCP media also sought to frame donations as a gesture of generosity^{xiv}. Given how Beijing asked Brussels to help China discreetly^{xv}, what the EU did by donating over 56 tonnes of medical supplies via its Civil Protection Mechanism in the framework of a simple request-and-acceptance mechanism, the CCP's subsequent disinformation efforts praising China's role while denigrating^{xvi} the EU's Covid-19 response and highlighting failures of solidarity, did not sit well with European authorities.

It was against this backdrop that the EU's head of foreign policy Josep Borrell denounced on April 13 a "politics of generosity" to express a growing sense of unease over how Beijing strategically communicated its medical help to CCP-friendly European elites such as the ones in Italy and Serbia, and also called on the EU to stand ready for a "struggle for influence" in a "global battle of narratives"^{xvii}.

In response, pro-CCP media claimed that China's PPE donations to Europe were simple acts of 'friendship'^{xviii}. However, in contrast to discrete PPE donations by overseas Chinese living in Europe that were driven by grassroots solidarity^{xix}, donations by Chinese state actors

were made widely visible by repeatedly orchestrating handover ceremonies in airports with photos of PPE boxes with the China Aid logo stamped on them. In retrospect, pro-CCP media sought to boost China's positive image globally by using various media platforms to highlight the CCP's successful response to Covid-19 and positive global contributions, contrasting them with perceived shortcomings in Western democracies^{xx}. As a result, China's Covid-19 aid became inevitably politicised, making it largely impossible for Europe to perceive it as purely humanitarian. Instead of adhering to more standard and depoliticised humanitarian aid procedures, the CCP's deviation from traditional diplomatic channels raised concerns and added a layer of ambivalence about its intent.

In countering CCP influence in Serbia and other non-EU Balkan states, the EU must avoid a zero-sum mindset. Recognizing that both China and the EU will continue playing significant roles in the region, the EU should find innovative ways to enhance Balkan integration into the EU while balancing tensions with China to focus more on fostering positive EU-Balkan relations. And the EU also needs to recognize that the perception of China's COVID-19 aid and economic support in the Balkans can outweigh factual information about larger EU investments and grants, with implications for governments like Serbia's whose active opportunity-seeking behaviour^{xxi} could be used to renegotiate EU integration conditionalities.

CONCLUSION: KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Four years into the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainties persist about the effectiveness of pandemic preparedness efforts across Europe. Improving the EU's preparedness

effectively requires heeding the right lessons from China's unprecedented Covid-19 aid diplomacy in Europe. The EU's solidarity deficit exposed weaknesses resulting from the fragmented response of Member States, creating an opportunity for the CCP to act as first responder in countries such as Italy and Serbia. The pandemic highlighted a shift in responding to global health crises, with states taking the lead instead of underfunded international organizations like the WHO. In Europe, while Brussels and Member States recognised the need to improve emergency response capacity by augmenting PPE stockpiles and refining strategies for more equitable distribution as well as other positive steps to build stronger European health policies, fully realizing the EU's preparedness still requires more efforts, including a more strategic communication approach to highlight its capacity to provide timely emergency support. As the EU moves toward a swifter and more agile crisis management system, to avoid a repeat of piecemeal national approaches, it must ensure key agencies^{xxii} have sufficient resources and authority to effectively monitor outbreaks and activate emergency measures across borders as needed.

At the global level, the EU must continue developing its capacity to manage global health challenges through strengthened cooperation, as no government can solve cross-border pandemic issues by itself. This means substantiating the EU's Global Health Strategy and partnerships under the Global Gateway framework. For the Global Pandemic Treaty under negotiation that seeks to establish clearer protocols for international health cooperation, the EU should also play an active role in securing commitments from all the UN member states to timely health data

sharing, notably from China whose government still insists on voluntary terms without impinging on its policy space^{xxiii}, while addressing the geopolitical tensions and disinformation campaigns that can undermine cooperation.

To fulfil this role, the EU must maintain momentum on all fronts – from bolstering the resilience of emergency response capabilities by diversifying and upgrading supply chains, to advocating for transparent and equitable

global health governance. With determination and perseverance, the lessons learned from COVID-19 can continue guiding the development of stronger, more resilient health systems within and beyond Europe, to help prevent future pandemics from spiralling so far out of control.

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ⁱ Fuchs, A., et al. (2022). *Mask Wars: Sourcing a Critical Medical Product from China in Times of COVID-19*, University of Groningen. https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/html_publications/memorandum/gd194.pdf. Accessed 4 March 2024.

ⁱⁱ By this I mean the core Party-state leadership team also known as Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), with its seven "national level" leaders.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cooper, S. (2020). "United Front groups in Canada helped Beijing stockpile coronavirus safety supplies." *Global News*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6858818/coronavirus-china-united-front-canada-protective-equipment-shortage/> Also see Prasso, S. (2020). *China's Epic Dash for PPE Left the World Short on Masks*. Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-17/behind-china-s-epic-dash-for-ppe-that-left-the-world-short-on-masks>. Both accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{iv} Kowalski, B. (2021). "China's Mask Diplomacy in Europe: Seeking Foreign Gratitude and Domestic Stability." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*: 186810262110071.

^v Gu, E. and L. Li (2020). "Crippled community governance and suppressed scientific/professional communities: a critical assessment of failed early warning for the COVID-19 outbreak in China." *Journal of Chinese Governance* 5(2): 160-177.

^{vi} Pils, E. (2020). "China's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Fighting Two Enemies." <https://verfassungsblog.de/chinas-response-to-the->

[coronavirus-pandemic-fighting-two-enemies/](https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/html_publications/memorandum/gd194.pdf)
Accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{vii} Fuchs, A., et al. (2022). "Tracking Chinese aid through China customs: Darlings and orphans after the COVID-19 outbreak", Kiel Working Paper. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4216494 Accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{viii} This brief relies on a global dataset assembled for a three-year-long project funded by the Research Council of Finland that includes 2,547 donations made by China to 181 countries, territories, and multilateral organizations in 2020. Data collection involved meticulous sourcing from Chinese embassies' news archives, social media posts, relevant aid agencies, and major media outlets. To ensure accuracy, multiple sources were used to verify each donation event, such as local news media in sampled countries. The dataset was further enriched by incorporating previous research and datasets, and augmented with data covering the latter part of 2020 to more thoroughly capture China's aid during the specified period. The presented figures include public donations (party-state at national, provincial, municipal level) vs. other Chinese donors (enterprises, foundations, universities, individuals etc.). For more details, see Paltmaa, L., Aubié, H., Sookari, T. (forthcoming 2024) 'China's Covid-19 humanitarian aid campaign in 2020 - Global Humanitarianism or Rewarding Partners?', *Journal of East Asian Studies*.

^{ix} Youde, J. (2010). "China's health diplomacy in Africa." *China: An International Journal* 8(1): 151-163.

^x Ghiretti, F. and L. Mariani (2021). One Belt One Voice: Chinese Media in Italy.

<https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/one-belt-one-voice-chinese-media-italy> Accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{xi} Hasanbegovic, A. (2020). [\(In\)Stability over democracy: national populism, media manipulation and creeping authoritarianism in Serbia](https://repository.gchumanrights.org/items/9b171e1f-ea65-437b-bcb4-057f137b4a86). PhD Diss. <https://repository.gchumanrights.org/items/9b171e1f-ea65-437b-bcb4-057f137b4a86> Accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{xii} See 'Factsheet: Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation's Global Donations and Efforts to Combat Covid-19' available at: <https://www.alizila.com/factsheet-jack-ma-foundation-alibaba-foundations-coronavirus-donations-and-efforts/> Accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{xiii} Charon, P. and J.-B. J. Vilmer (2021). "Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment." Report by the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), Paris, Ministry for the Armed Forces. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367252670_Chinese_Influence_Operations_A_Machiavelli_an_Moment Accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{xiv} Soula, E., et al. (2020). Masks Off: Chinese Coronavirus Assistance in Europe. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/masks-chinese-coronavirus-assistance-europe> Accessed on 28 Feb. 2024.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} See for example how the Chinese embassy in Paris accused Western democracies of reckless behavior and alleged French health care workers left elderly people to die in nursing homes: Chinese envoy to France defends country's 'goodwill' amid coronavirus diplomatic row – POLITICO <https://www.politico.eu/article/lu-shaye-chinese-envoy-to-france-defends-country-goodwill-after-coronavirus-diplomatic-row/> Accessed on 28 Feb 2024; see also how other Chinese diplomats criticised on social media platforms how European countries handled the crisis: How China used the media to spread its COVID narrative — and win friends around the world (theconversation.com) <https://theconversation.com/how-china-used-the-media-to-spread-its-covid-narrative-and-win-friends-around-the-world-160694> Accessed on 28 Feb 2024.

^{xvii} See [My view on China and EU-China relations | EEAS \(europa.eu\)](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/my-view-china-and-eu-china-relations_en)

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/my-view-china-and-eu-china-relations_en Accessed on 28 Feb 2024.

^{xviii} See China's Humanitarian Aid: Cooperation amidst Competition (csis.org)

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-humanitarian-aid-cooperation-amidst-competition> Accessed on 28 Feb 2024.

^{xix} Ceccagno, A. and M. Thunø (2023). "Digitized diaspora governance during the COVID-19 pandemic: China's diaspora mobilization and Chinese migrant responses in Italy." *Global Networks* 23(1): 90-105.

^{xx} See Pandemics & propaganda: How Chinese state media creates and propagates CCP coronavirus narratives | HKS Misinformation Review (harvard.edu)

<https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/pandemics-propaganda-how-chinese-state-media-creates-and-propagates-ccp-coronavirus-narratives/> Accessed on 28 Feb 2024. See also Image control: How China struggles for discourse power | Merics <https://merics.org/en/report/image-control-how-china-struggles-discourse-power> Accessed on 28 Feb 2024.

^{xxi} Vangeli, A. (2021). "Western Balkan discourses on and positioning towards China during the COVID-19 pandemic", The Prague Security Studies Institute. <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/43-western-balkan-discourses-on-and-positioning-towards-china-during-the-covid-19-pandemic> Accessed on 4 March 2024.

^{xxii} In particular between the EC's Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), as well as the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

^{xxiii} See Huang, Y., et al. (2024). "China and the WHO pandemic treaty: a dive into stance, underpinnings, and implications." *Frontiers in Public Health* 12: 1335751.



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