

ANALYSIS

# How Moscow and Beijing Weave Tales for Warsaw: The Cases of Sputnik and China Radio International

Alicja Bachulska





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## **Analysis**

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*Data analysis* – To access all data on Chinese activities in Central Europe, visit us at [www.mapinfluence.eu](http://www.mapinfluence.eu).

The publication was prepared within the project **MapInfluenCE** (previously known as ChinfluenCE), that focuses on both China and Russia's influence in Central Europe, specifically within the Visegrád nations of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. The comparative nature of the project enables identification of the strategies and tactics employed by China and Russia and discern the convergences and divergences in their respective approaches. The project is designed and run by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a Prague-based foreign policy think tank and NGO. The preparation of this paper was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

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# Summary

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- COVID-19 pandemic has worked as a catalyst accelerating Russian and Chinese efforts to shape international media landscapes to their advantage. Although there is no clear evidence of Moscow and Beijing coordinating their efforts in the information sphere, there are specific signs of convergence between their respective state-backed media narratives.
- State-affiliated media catering to international audiences have been identified as important instruments enabling Moscow and Beijing to promote their respective narratives. In Poland, those include Sputnik in the case of Russia and China Radio International (CRI) in the case of China. The former is Moscow's major state-controlled international outlet, while the latter is one of Beijing's oldest media catering to foreign audiences. Despite having "radio" in its name, its activities go beyond traditional broadcasting and include an extensive online presence in social media and beyond.
- To understand potential convergences between Russian and Chinese media narratives in Poland, this study offers a quantitative and qualitative analysis of op-eds published by Sputnik Poland and CRI Poland on the COVID-19 pandemic and China between January 2020 and December 2021. These two topics have proven to generate a lot of controversies and emotional responses, thus providing fertile ground for potential disinformation.
- In total, 153 pieces were identified for in-depth analysis, among which 103 were published by CRI Poland and 50 by Sputnik Poland. Their coverage of China was either fully positive (100 percent in the case of the former) or neutral (70 percent in the latter case).
- When it comes to Sputnik Poland, the most frequently discussed topics included economic losses due to the pandemic, the USA, China's domestic economic situation, Beijing's measures against COVID-19, Russia, EU, social problems, and Sino-American trade war.
- Although most of Sputnik's pieces were neutral in tone in their assessment of China during the pandemic, there were several texts which included wording very similar to that often promoted by the Chinese propaganda apparatus. Moreover, there was one piece officially produced by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Sputnik, in which Beijing appealed to foreign media to "respect the facts and objectively evaluate China's fight against the pandemic."

- As far as CRI Poland is concerned, its coverage included topics such as the USA's "Cold War mentality" and perceived decline, international cooperation (with Beijing's role in the WHO as a prominent motif), stigmatization of China by foreign powers as well as China's good practices and contributions (e.g. vaccines). The unclear origin of the virus was brought up a lot, also in the context of conspiracy theories (e.g. on Fort Detrick).
- Systemic competition with the US and attempts to discredit Washington's domestic and foreign policies have been the overarching theme of most of CRI Poland's commentaries. Yet, the outlet's pieces were often incoherent and unconvincing due to poor editing, linguistic errors, and propaganda new-speak, which made its coverage appear rather unprofessional.
- Importantly, there were several instances of parallel efforts by Sputnik to use Chinese sources and by CRI to quote Russian ones to back up their respective narratives.
- CRI Poland specifically used Russian media sources to legitimize claims about Fort Detrick, a facility hosting a US military lab, targeted by Beijing as a potential source of the pandemic to divert international attention away from Wuhan.
- While CRI's coverage might please China's central government, it seems fundamentally ill-suited to the Polish audience, thus its attractiveness and visibility seem limited. Compared to the Chinese outlet, however, Sputnik Poland appears more grounded in local realities of media freedom – its language and format are more suited to the local media landscape, as Sputnik Poland attempts to portray itself as a medium nurturing "independent thinking".
- Analysis of commentaries published by Sputnik Poland and CRI Poland indicates that both outlets worked at least partially towards achieving similar goals, such as fueling distrust towards the US as the global hegemon.
- Yet, the Russian and Chinese outlets seem to conduct their information activities in Poland in parallel rather than in tandem. This does not mean, however, that in the future closer cooperation between Chinese and Russian media outlets can be ruled out.



# Introduction

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The future of Sino-Russian cooperation in producing and spreading disinformation has become a widely debated topic in recent years. Especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many observers have pointed towards convergence of Beijing and Moscow's interests in promoting narratives detrimental to Western democracies' image and legitimacy. Over the past three decades, Russia and China have strengthened their ties in political, military, economic, and ideological domains, forming what some have labeled an "informal alliance."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, shared interests notwithstanding, there still exist considerable differences in specific tactics implemented by Moscow and Beijing in advancing their goals.

While Russia has been widely acknowledged as an extremely active actor when it comes to disinformation for many years now, China is a relative newcomer in this domain. Existing research suggests that there are some areas where both China and Russia have tried to expand their footprint in Western democratic countries' information spheres at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the past decade Chinese and Russian entities have signed several cooperation agreements aimed at closer media cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, representatives of various Chinese and Russian internet media outlets gathered virtually at the 2021 China-Russia Internet Media Forum to "promote multilateralism, combat false information, safeguard equity and justice in cyberspace, and contribute more to the friendly ties between the two countries."<sup>4</sup> According to Zhou Shuchun, publisher and editor-in-chief of China Daily, nearly 30 Russian and Chinese internet media outlets have cooperated over the past five years, "exchanging more than 100,000 articles of various kinds."<sup>5</sup> Participants of the forum also pledged to "focus on the common interests of the two countries, tell stories of bilateral friendship and deepen cultural exchanges, in order to enhance mutual trust between China and Russia."<sup>6</sup>

Media controlled by Beijing and Moscow appear to have similar strategic goals: to promote the non-democratic setups and values underpinning them while directly or indirectly weakening the appeal of Western-style democracy in the international arena. Both Moscow and Beijing perceive Washington's dominant position on the global stage as a systemic challenge to their regimes, while US-led alliances and partnerships are perceived as threats to their national interests and security.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Russia and China have engaged in one form or another in exploiting existing tensions and splits within democratic societies to sow discontent and undermine solidarity. Media remains an important tool in spreading these strategic narratives, with both Moscow and Beijing investing heavily in their international media outlets. Although the convergence of certain strategic interests between Moscow and Beijing is a fact, currently we do not possess enough evidence to support the argument that Russia and China coordinate their activities in the Western information sphere.<sup>8</sup> However, in order to be able to notice this kind of concerted effort in the future, it is necessary to first understand how these two actors construct their respective arguments and narratives and what their activities mean for the situation on the ground in different countries.

# Research design and methodology

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This paper examines two major internet media outlets active in Poland in spreading Russian and Chinese narratives: Sputnik Poland and China Radio International (CRI) Poland. Because of stringent legislation limiting foreign ownership of media in Poland, non-Polish entities cannot own majority shares in the country's traditional media. Yet these regulations do not apply to online media, similarly to the situation in other V4 countries such as Czechia and Slovakia.<sup>9</sup> That is why the digital sphere is where we can find foreign entities catering to Polish audiences. Moreover, given the relative lack of control over the content of such portals by state organs, internet media have attracted a lot of attention as instruments facilitating the spread of misinformation by both individuals as well as state and non-state-affiliated organized groups.

Sputnik is Russia's major state-controlled international internet outlet and a subsidiary of the Rossiya Segodnya enterprise, established internationally in 2014 and active in Poland since 2015. As an outlet offering space to pro-Russian voices, it amplifies narratives critical of the Western democracies while targeting already disenfranchised audiences in need of confirmation of their opinions.<sup>10</sup> China Radio International is Beijing's state-owned broadcaster founded in 1941 and airing in Polish since 1968.<sup>11</sup> Although it has "radio" in its name, its activities go beyond traditional and online broadcasting. CRI has its local websites in many regional and national languages, where its journalists publish numerous pieces ranging from news to commentaries. Recently, it has also become very active in non-Chinese social media, most prominently on Facebook, where it has engaged in producing and disseminating interactive content including short videos and competitions.

A considerable part of what both Sputnik Poland and CRI Poland have published in recent years is what both outlets label "opinions" or "commentaries". Existing research on Sputnik Poland points out that pieces that can be categorized as news are mostly neutral and relatively objective when it comes to their language, however, propaganda and manipulation are more likely to be found in op-eds written by Sputnik journalists and external contributors.<sup>12</sup> Although there has been no previous large-scale research on CRI Poland, a similar trend was noticed by the MapInfluenCE team in its initial analysis: the most emotionally-loaded and controversial pieces have been found in the "commentaries" section of the CRI Poland website.

Based on these preliminary assumptions, MapInfluenCE decided to focus specifically on op-eds and commentaries to identify opinion-forming narratives used by both outlets. COVID-19 and pandemic-related content relating to China were chosen as topics generating strong emotional reactions in Polish society and thus having a considerable potential to deepen social polarization and political divisions.<sup>13</sup> Special attention was given to content depicting China's self-presentation in the context of the pandemic (in CRI's texts) and Russia's attitude towards it (as represented in Sputnik's pandemic coverage related to China). Articles were identified through keyword searches (e.g. "China", "COVID-19" and "coronavirus"), website scraping,

and additional manual searches.<sup>14</sup> This way, the MapInfluenCE team has identified a dataset of 153 commentaries published in both media outlets (103 in CRI and 50 in Sputnik) since the outbreak of the pandemic (i.e. January 2020) until the end of 2021. Texts were subsequently coded according to their tone concerning China, while main themes and agenda setters were identified to understand what topics and authoritative voices both outlets use to legitimize their narratives.

The results of this study are not exhaustive when it comes to the scope of potential misinformation or disinformation fueled by both outlets in relation to the pandemic and beyond. Instead, the paper offers a contextualized and in-depth insight into how Sputnik Poland and China Radio International Poland construct their narratives around the COVID-19 pandemic and China, a topic which will remain at the center of the global debate on security, politics, and socio-economic effects of health crises for some time to come. What follows is a brief overview of Russia and China's activities in the Polish information space, followed by a detailed content analysis of the dataset comprising of China-related commentaries published by Sputnik Poland and CRI Poland in 2020 and 2021.

# Russia's activities in Polish information space

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Because of geographic proximity, history of repeated conflicts as well as Moscow's current aggressive foreign policy (best exemplified by the annexation of Crimea in 2014), Russia's behavior remains the biggest and the most serious international security threat for Poland.<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, with the advent of digital technologies and their impact on wide-scale usage of online media as the main sources of information, the spread of disinformation has become a major global problem with detrimental effects on the resilience of many democracies. When it comes to Poland, sowing discontent towards democracy as a political system as well as fueling confusion, fear, and distrust towards authorities and Western-led international organizations and allies have been among Russia's main goals in the Polish information sphere. Kremlin-approved narratives have begun to appear in so-called "alternative media," but their attribution to specific political actors outside of Poland has been difficult. Nevertheless, given their specific modus operandi, it has been widely acknowledged by local experts and decision-makers that Poland has been the target of Moscow-led hybrid warfare, with information warfare being one of its crucial components.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to the most prominent topics exploited by Russia, one could identify narratives of Poland's alleged Russophobia and lack of sovereignty, attempts to deepen social divisions and exploit Poland's existing antagonisms and distrust towards its allies and neighbors, or presenting it as a country partially responsible for the outbreak of World War II, just to name a few.<sup>17</sup> Since 2018, Russia's disinformation efforts in Poland have focused increasingly on topics such as refugees and migrants, members of the LGBT community, Ukrainians in Poland, and vaccines.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Kremlin-promoted narratives are often, and quite paradoxically, in line with arguments voiced by Polish ultra-nationalists: narratives found on websites of different far-right organizations often mirror the language used by Kremlin-backed sources.<sup>19</sup> Saturating Polish virtual space both directly (through state-controlled media) and indirectly (through local actors with similar views) with specific messaging works in Russia's long-term interest.<sup>20</sup> According to Moscow's logic, exploitation of internal tensions should undermine Poland's resilience domestically, while harnessing international perception of Warsaw as an irrational and "oversensitive" actor should further alienate it on the global scene. As a result, Moscow hopes for pro-Russian voices to emerge in the European public debate (e.g. on lifting the sanctions imposed on Russia after it annexed Crimea), which in turn would translate into an increase in the Kremlin's indirect bargaining power within the EU.<sup>21</sup>

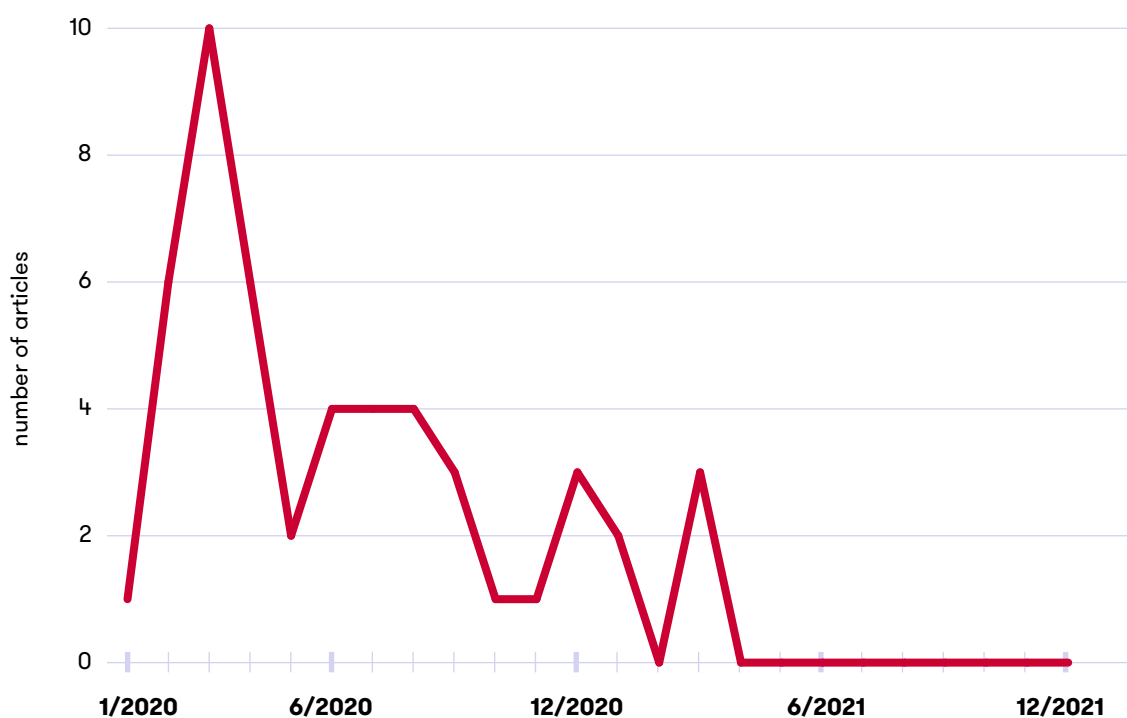
Although websites of unknown provenance have been widely acknowledged as the main sources of Russian disinformation in Poland, Sputnik Poland has been also active as an overtly pro-Kremlin actor in the Polish information sphere. In the second half of 2021, the average number of total monthly visits to Sputnik Poland's website

was around 1,25 million, with most of them originating in Poland from direct engagement with the outlet.<sup>22</sup> Compared to the popularity of local Polish media, with monthly visits of up to 100 million, these numbers seem unimpressive.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Sputnik Poland does attract some segments of local audiences, especially those with anti-establishment views. The outlet focuses on economic and political affairs, with a considerable focus on domestic and international developments relating to Russia and Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> Last but not least, representatives of fringe political parties (such as paleolibertarian and Eurosceptic Janusz Korwin-Mikke) have been also identified as agenda setters overrepresented in Sputnik's coverage.<sup>25</sup>

# Sputnik Poland's opinion-forming pieces on COVID-19 and China

Compared to CRI Poland, Sputnik Poland's coverage of COVID-19 in connection to China was considerably lacking behind. In the analyzed period, MapInfluENCE identified 50 pieces that met the project's criteria when it comes to both form (i.e. opinion pieces) and subject matters (i.e. China and COVID-19). A possible explanation for this trend is that Russia's motivation to extensively engage in influencing Polish public opinion in connection to the pandemic was, at least initially, limited compared to China as the source of the pandemic.

**GRAPH 1: EVOLUTION OF COVERAGE OF CHINA AND COVID-19 IN SPUTNIK POLAND'S COMMENTARIES (JANUARY 2020 - DECEMBER 2021)**



Overall, most pieces were neutral in tone, with a considerable portion being positive towards China and not a single example of negative coverage. Most of the pieces were anonymous. Among those which were authored, many were produced by Sputnik's Poland correspondent Anna Sanina, and Wiktor Bezeka, Sputnik's regular journalist. When it comes to the most frequently discussed topics, economic losses due to the pandemic (mentioned in 64 percent of all pieces), USA (58 percent), China's domestic economic situation (48 percent), Beijing's measures against COVID-19 (44 per-

cent), Russia (28 percent), EU (26 percent) as well as social problems (20 percent) and Sino-American trade war (20 percent) were among the most prominent ones.

**IMAGE 1: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS APPEARING IN SPUTNIK POLAND'S COMMENTARIES IN CONNECTION TO CHINA AND COVID-19 (JANUARY 2020 - DECEMBER 2021)**



At the very beginning of the pandemic, Sputnik Poland's opinion pieces on China and COVID-19 centered around the very development of the health crisis and its global spread. Several pieces pointed towards its impact on the EU-China relations and global economic environment more broadly. A lot of attention was paid towards examining Beijing's measures against COVID-19, which were described in detail in different contexts (e.g. in a laudatory piece based on accounts of a foreign student in Wuhan, who was quoted saying that "having studied in China for five years, I can say that nothing is impossible for this country"<sup>26</sup>).

Interestingly, in the first quarter of 2020, two opinion pieces were indirectly alluding to conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19. In a text from February 4, Sergey Mstislavsky, a representative of ATC Air Service Ltd, was quoted saying that "[he is] of course, not an advocate of conspiracy theories, and it is certainly a coincidence (laughs), but it is impossible not to recall how in 2003, when atypical pneumonia was raging in China, the epidemic coincided with a period of serious economic disagreement between China and the US."<sup>27</sup> In another piece from March 5, 2020, on the economic impact of the pandemic, Dimitri Speck, a commodity market expert, was quoted saying that "it is hard to understand why there is so much noise around this disease [COVID-19] right now", also suggesting some hidden motives behind the outbreak.<sup>28</sup>

Another interesting element was an opinion piece praising Huawei's resilience in the face of both the pandemic and Washington's sanctions: an anonymous author

has claimed that “under the current circumstances, [...] the purchase of Chinese 5G equipment and technology may be the only possible solution not only for developing but also for developed countries.”<sup>29</sup> This statement was followed by pro-Huawei arguments often used by the firm in its PR efforts, stressing potential delays in 5G implementation if a ban was to be imposed and its further effect on economic growth in the already stagnating global economy. Around the same time, an anonymous opinion piece was also published by Sputnik, in which the author focused on the negative effects of the pandemic on cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) states.<sup>30</sup> The piece, full of factual errors, presented CEE as a region much more willing to closely cooperate with China compared to Western Europe. Yet again, the issue of Chinese 5G technology was brought up and framed through counterfactual lenses. According to the piece, “in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, the issue of installing or banning Chinese telecommunications equipment is not on the agenda – local networks have been operating on this equipment for a long time.”<sup>31</sup> Although local networks have, indeed, relied on Huawei solutions for years, the claim about CEE states’ unproblematic approach towards the Chinese firm is entirely false. In fact, many countries in the region have been especially eager to cooperate with Washington to secure their 5G networks, with most of them joining the US-led Clean Network program.<sup>32</sup> It is unclear whether these errors were the result of a lack of knowledge and research or whether they were intentional.

An interesting example of Sputnik’s opinion piece related to the pandemic and China was written by a local public figure, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Poland’s President in 1995–2005. In a text from late March 2020, the author accuses both the current Polish government and the opposition of using the pandemic for political ends, using the example of Donald Tusk’s accusations against China and Russia for their information warfare against the West.<sup>33</sup> For Kwaśniewski, these allegations were groundless, while China, Russia, and Cuba were the only countries that had been actually offering help in the early stages of the pandemic. In his words, “I, a useful idiot, can see that China, Russia, and Cuba are offering real help to Italy, and unlike clinical idiots, I don’t care about propaganda when I see people dying. I know that when the Russians, Chinese, or Cubans discover a vaccine against the coronavirus, the sick will receive it, and when the Americans make the discoveries, most of the sick will die because they would not be able to afford the life-saving drug.”<sup>34</sup>

Another category of related opinion pieces written in cooperation with non-Sputnik contributors included a few interviews with both Polish and foreign public figures, such as politicians and researchers. For example, in an interview with political scientist Fyodor Lukyanov, one can find statements highlighting China’s newfound assertiveness and conviction about its political, ideological, and moral correctness in the context of Beijing’s crisis management.<sup>35</sup> In another interview with an Italian historian Marco Gervasoni, one can learn about the potential for deglobalization after the pandemic, with statements suggesting the EU’s potential dissolution and general weakening.<sup>36</sup>

What stood out in Sputnik’s coverage was the frequent use of Chinese sources to support its narrative. In total, Chinese experts, academics, politicians, and state-affiliated media were quoted 56 times in 50 pieces. Importantly, the first piece that included wording very similar to that often promoted by the Chinese propaganda apparatus



was published in late May 2020. It was anonymous and explained why, according to the author, Donald Trump had lost interest in the trade deal with China.<sup>37</sup> The piece has claimed that the then president of the US was focusing on external threats, such as China, to distract the American public from the country's internal problems. It has also accused the US security services and political elites of promoting the narrative of China intentionally leaking COVID-19. The article's finishing lines could have been taken straight from Beijing's propaganda playbook: "all these conjectures without evidence are not supported by even the traditional, closest allies of the US, let alone the rest of the world. And does it make sense to waste energy on it now? Isn't it better to fight the epidemic, restore the economy and return to normal life? The voters are far more concerned with the real problems of each individual family than with the invented geopolitical threat."<sup>38</sup> This kind of close similarity can be purely coincidental, yet it shows the alignment of Moscow and Beijing's official narratives under specific circumstances.

Nevertheless, a text officially authored by a Chinese state entity was also found on the Sputnik Poland website. In late January 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an article written specifically for Sputnik, in which Beijing appealed to foreign media to "respect the facts and objectively evaluate China's fight against the pandemic."<sup>39</sup> The article presented arguments often used by the Chinese government to direct international audiences' attention away from its mishandling of the crisis in late 2019, such as repeated self-assurances about China's top performance in pandemic management and Beijing's close cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) in this realm.

Several opinion pieces published by Sputnik Poland included reiterations or paraphrasing of Beijing's official standpoints or most preferred policy outcomes. For example, in an anonymous text about Sino-German cooperation during the pandemic and its impact on EU-China relations from mid-2020, Merkel's non-confrontational and pragmatic approach towards Beijing has been described as a stabilizing factor for Europe as a whole.<sup>40</sup> This argument was further legitimized with a comment by Yang Mian, a Chinese researcher from the Communication University of China, who was quoted saying that "the EU would not blindly follow the US".<sup>41</sup> In another piece about diplomatic tensions between China and Australia, an explanation in line with Beijing's interests of why China had stopped importing coal was brought up in comments by Chen Hong, another Chinese researcher from East China Normal University.<sup>42</sup> Beijing's attempts to fight environmental pollution were presented as the main reason for China to halt coal imports from Australia, highlighting the former's alleged responsibility vis-à-vis global warming. Simultaneously, Canberra was portrayed as an actor that politicizes trade while displaying a "Cold War mentality". In Chen Hong's words, "China never takes into account the political conditions of trade and investment. Smart regulation and energy optimization are China's international obligations, not a pretext for so-called political pressure on Australia."<sup>43</sup> This kind of coverage aims at strengthening the image of China as a rational power and simultaneously portrays Australia as a "hysterical" actor, similarly to what Moscow has been trying to achieve in its own coverage of historical disagreements with Poland, among other issues.

Finally, one seemingly counter-intuitive element appeared in Sputnik Poland's coverage related to China and the pandemic, dealing with the Polish public's attitudes towards Chinese vaccines. In early March 2021, news broke out that Warsaw might be considering buying Chinese vaccines for COVID-19. The idea was quickly abandoned amid critical voices from both the public and experts, but in its immediate aftermath media reported extensively on the topic. In its opinion piece, Sputnik Poland based its argument on numerous quotes of Polish Internet users critical of Chinese vaccines, but rather sympathetic towards the Russian ones.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, comments from the Polish digital sphere seem to be cherry-picked to portray the Russian vaccine Sputnik V as a much more reliable option, yet unavailable in Poland for political reasons and Warsaw's alleged Russophobia. From this perspective, it seems that the demand to promote Moscow's vaccine abroad was stronger than its need to construct a China-friendly narrative. A similar trend was identified in Czechia, where Sputnik V was also the main focus of local debates and there was considerable reluctance on the side of Russia-backed journalists to portray Chinese jabs in a positive light.<sup>45</sup>

# China's activities in Polish information space

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Compared to Russia, China's activities in the Polish information sphere are a relative novelty. In the post-Cold War era, Poland and China did not maintain close relations until the 2008 global financial crisis. In its aftermath, Warsaw began to express its interest in cooperating with Beijing and this very interest met with China's demand, as the country was embarking on an ambitious quest to internationalize its capital and extend its political footprint around the globe. "Telling China's story well" has been an important part of these efforts: Beijing's propaganda machine was ordered by Xi Jinping to work internationally on strengthening the voice of the Party-state and, in turn, enhance China's "discursive power."<sup>46</sup> Beijing sees itself as a new norm-maker, able to shape international debates on China and its core interests, but also beyond. For a long time (until circa 2008), China's actions in the information sphere were seen as reactive as they mostly intensified in the context of controversial issues and allegations of human rights abuses or other breaches of international norms and standards promoted by liberal democracies. Over time, Beijing became more proactive in not only responding to Western countries' accusations of misconduct but also in spreading its own "positive energy", i.e. coverage that stresses pro-CCP communication aligned with its ideological discourse and focusses on optimistic and uncritical reporting.<sup>47</sup> In recent years, however, China's efforts to influence international debates gained a sharper edge. Especially with the COVID-19 pandemic and Beijing's increasingly assertive behavior, best epitomized by its "wolf warrior diplomacy,"<sup>48</sup> China has become a much more aggressive voice on the global stage.

In Poland, "telling China's story well" has taken various forms. Chinese diplomats began to regularly publish articles in various Polish media, most notably in a popular daily *Rzeczpospolita* and, more recently, for a web portal *Onet*. Their op-eds and interviews covered a range of topics, such as Sino-Polish cooperation, potential Huawei ban, Hong Kong protests, and Sino-American relations, just to name a few. Moreover, different Polish outlets started partnerships with their Chinese counterparts, especially around 2017, which was the official year of media cooperation under the 16+1 platform for exchanges between China and CEE countries. Most of the time, Beijing's messaging stressed only the positive aspects of cooperation, with many references to "win-win cooperation," "community of common destiny" and other slogans prioritized by the central government at a given time. The Chinese side has tried to build a non-critical image of the PRC, focusing on the perceived successes of the CCP leadership, its stabilizing role for the Chinese state and economy, and, by proxy, for the global markets and the international system based on multilateralism.

When the pandemic hit, however, Chinese media became much more offensive in their approach, with multiple assertions of superiority in crisis management and open criticism of Western democracies' handling of the pandemic. Moreover, Chi-

nese diplomats and state-affiliated media doubled down on their online efforts by intensifying their activities on Facebook and Twitter – a visible trend evident around the globe, yet with questionable results in terms of its efficacy and attractiveness of the narratives promoted by the Chinese side.<sup>49</sup> In Poland, the most visible and telling indication of Beijing's ambitions to influence the local public debate during the pandemic was a series of interactions between the then-Chinese Ambassador to Poland Liu Guangyuan and his American counterpart, Georgette Mosbacher. Given Warsaw's close ties to Washington in the post-1989 era, Sino-American strategic rivalry has had an impact on the ground in Poland as the country has tried to limit Huawei's involvement in the local market and has taken a more restrained approach towards cooperation with Beijing during Donald Trump's presidency. China has been aware of these conditions and has been continuously trying to undermine the image of Washington in its official messaging to the public in Poland. In early 2020, the Chinese and the US ambassadors engaged in a month-long public debate in local media as well as on Twitter, in which both sides accused each other of mismanagement and politicization of the pandemic.<sup>50</sup> Although their exchanges might not have reached very wide audiences, they were nevertheless telling as a sign of deepening frictions between the PRC and the US and their impact on third countries. Finally, China's presence in the Polish information space might not be impressive at first glance, yet its scope of engagement has been steadily developing over the last decade. As such, it should not be neglected, especially given Beijing's undisguised ambitions to shape global perceptions of China's rise and its impact on the international system, its underpinning rules, and values.

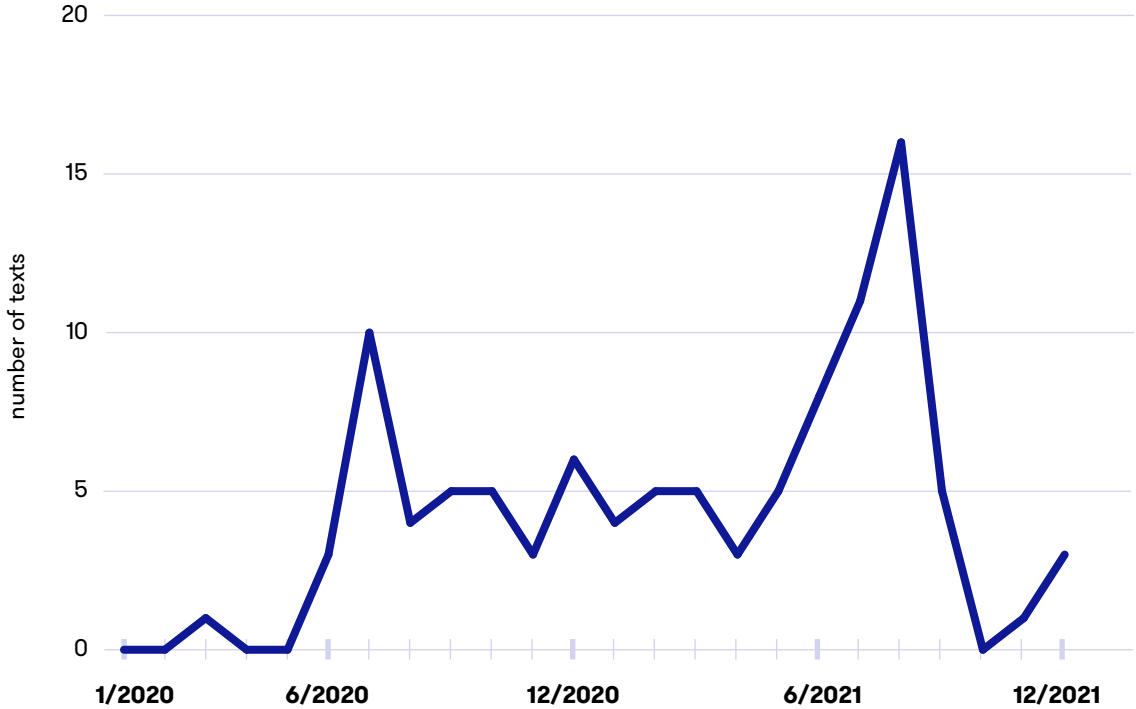
In this context, China Radio International Poland is an interesting case. Established in 1941 as China's foremost medium catering to foreign audiences, it began airing in Polish as early as 1968.<sup>51</sup> When it comes to its online presence, CRI established its Polish website in 2003, while its Warsaw office opened in 2006. Its Facebook profile, set up in 2014, has a surprisingly large audience: with over 318,000 followers as of December 2021, it exceeds profiles of Poland's most prominent media, such as dailies *Rzeczpospolita* (over 141,000 followers), *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* (around 20,000 followers) or a popular tabloid *Super Express* (over 208,000 followers). However, compared to the average number of total monthly visits to its official website, CRI Poland's large Facebook following raises concerns regarding its authenticity. In the second half of 2021, the average number of total monthly visits to the CRI Poland's website was around 50,000.<sup>52</sup> Surprisingly, most of them originated in Germany (almost 46 percent), followed by Poland (almost 43 percent) and Singapore (over 11 percent).<sup>53</sup> Moreover, over 45 percent of traffic on the CRI Poland website came from referrals from CRI's Esperanto webpage, suggesting it was at least partially artificially generated.<sup>54</sup>

# China Radio International’s opinion-forming pieces on COVID-19 and China

Compared to Sputnik Poland, the sheer number of commentaries relating to China and COVID-19 published by CRI Poland was significantly bigger, amounting to 103 texts – more than twice as many as those published by Sputnik Poland in the same period. As the source of the pandemic, China has been especially motivated to control the international coverage of COVID-19 and all related matters, which explains why it published an excessive number of commentaries relating to this issue in the last two years.

For Sputnik, the pandemic seems to be more of an additional theme to be exploited alongside other topics, such as the weaknesses of Western European states and the US or erosion of the world order led by democratic states but, as such, it is not directly linked to Russia.

**GRAPH 2: EVOLUTION OF COVERAGE OF CHINA AND COVID-19 IN CRI POLAND’S COMMENTARIES (JANUARY 2020 – DECEMBER 2021)**



When it comes to CRI Poland’s pieces, their tone was overwhelmingly positive. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was not a single text portraying China in a bad light.

In terms of form, almost all commentaries were very short, not allowing for nuanced coverage or in-depth analysis. One of the distinguishing features of CRI Poland's commentaries was their poor editing, with countless examples of grammatical and stylistic errors as well as CCP newspeak, incomprehensible for most people in Poland and evocative of the pre-1989 propaganda. Compared to the Chinese outlet, Sputnik Poland's reporting seemed very professional in terms of editing standards and accessibility for local audiences. Moreover, the vast majority of CRI's commentaries were anonymous. Only one piece was non-anonymous: an op-ed by Piotr Gadzinowski, a member of Poland's Democratic Left Alliance – a party known for its links with the pre-1989 communist political elites.<sup>55</sup> The author is a frequent contributor to CRI's website, yet the op-ed was particularly important as it concerned simultaneously the pandemic (and more precisely Chinese vaccines) as well as Polish domestic politics (the dilemma of whether Poland's President Andrzej Duda could get a Chinese-made jab). The text was published in early March 2021 when the news broke out about Warsaw potentially buying vaccines from China. As a direct response to those developments, the op-ed included a relatively detailed assessment of opinions of different members of the Polish state to the question of whether Poland should purchase Chinese jabs, with no radical conclusions. Other than that, all CRI Poland commentaries were anonymous, which gave the impression that their most important aim was to present the official views of Beijing rather than the opinions of individual journalists.

**IMAGE 2: REPRESENTATION OF KEY TOPICS APPEARING IN CRI POLAND'S COMMENTARIES IN CONNECTION TO CHINA AND COVID-19 (JANUARY 2020 - DECEMBER 2021)**



When it comes to the topics most frequently touched upon in CRI Poland's commentaries on China and COVID-19, the most prominent ones included the USA's "Cold

War mentality” (brought up in 68 percent of all pieces), the USA’s decline (58 percent), WHO (46 percent), international cooperation (41 percent), stigmatization of China (40 percent), Beijing’s contribution to global stability (40 percent), China’s good practices (35 percent), the unclear origin of the virus (34 percent), China as a victim of fake news (30 percent), Beijing’s help to developing countries (23 percent), Washington’s “anti-science attitude” (19 percent), Chinese vaccines as a global public good (15 percent) and Fort Detrick (10 percent).

In the early stages of the pandemic (i.e. its first six months), there were not many op-eds on the topic published by CRI Poland. This might have been because of the still-developing epidemic situation in the PRC, which made Chinese state-affiliated media reluctant to promote narrowly defined narratives about the crisis. Over time, however, a set of coherent interpretations of the causes and effects of the pandemic have emerged from CRI’s commentaries. On the one hand, the outlet’s op-eds focused on presenting China’s own accomplishments in fighting the pandemic (“positive energy”), while on the other hand, its coverage has been rooted in a deep-seated assumption about the PRC being itself a victim of not only this health crisis, but the US-led disinformation campaign and containment policy, thus also constructing a negative narrative.

To back up its claims, CRI Poland has referred to a whole range of arguments and journalistic tactics. One of the most prominent, evident in almost 70 percent of all studied pieces, was to accuse Washington of politicizing the pandemic on both the domestic and international fronts: internally in competition between the Democrats and the Republicans (“Mike Pompeo turned into a ‘lying machine’ (...) to gain political capital”<sup>56</sup>) and internationally to blame China for the pandemic and to escape responsibility for the spread of the virus in the US (“terrorism in search of the origin of the virus”<sup>57</sup>). According to this type of messaging, the political flaws of the American democracy are inherently interconnected with its systemic ills, which translate into social polarization, growing income disparities, racial problems, and police brutality, among others. Washington’s approach to fighting the pandemic has been also labeled by CRI Poland as “anti-scientific” and “anti-intellectual”<sup>58</sup>.

Moreover, by describing the US political system as one based on “extreme selfishness”, capital gains are portrayed as the dominant interest of the American political elites, while values serve as a smokescreen to hide human exploitation.<sup>59</sup> In this context, it is not only China that has been presented by CRI Poland as a victim of the US government, but also American citizens (“during this coronavirus disaster, the never-ending ‘nightmare’ cruelly crushed the ‘American Dream’ in the hearts of many”<sup>60</sup>). Historical parallels have been also frequent, with several references to the total number of coronavirus deaths in the US surpassing the number of US victims of World War II and the Vietnam War.<sup>61</sup>

When it comes to the intensity of coverage, there were two periods with more frantic publishing of the CRI Poland’s commentaries: mid-2020 (i.e. July 2020) and mid-2021 (i.e. July-August 2021). In the case of the former, it was most probably due to the stabilization of the pandemic situation within China after the first wave of the epidemic, which enabled Beijing’s propaganda apparatus to focus on developing a more coherent story about its own perceived successes vis-à-vis Western countries problems. As for the latter, late spring and early summer of 2021 were the period

when the WHO proposed its second investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 in China, while the US special services were preparing their own report on the matter. In response, China intensified its efforts to shift international attention to the role of the US in the pandemic, most prominently by calling for an inquiry into Fort Detrick<sup>62</sup> – a facility hosting a US military lab, which had been closed in mid-2019 due to breaches of containment.<sup>63</sup> Those developments were used by Beijing in a global campaign to insinuate the facility’s role in potentially initiating the pandemic. CRI Poland joined these efforts, with its first commentary mentioning Fort Detrick published on June 1, 2021.<sup>64</sup> In total, the facility and its alleged role in spreading COVID-19 were mentioned in 10 percent of all commentaries.

Importantly, Russian media sources have also been used to legitimize CRI Poland’s claims about Fort Detrick. In a piece from late July 2021, an article by a Russian journalist and historian Sergei Latyshev was quoted to promote the notion that Washington had been trying to blame China for the outbreak, “but China is more trustworthy than the US on the traceability of COVID-19.”<sup>65</sup> Tellingly, the same Russian author was referred to by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its official stance on Fort Detrick controversies just one day before the release of the commentary mentioned above.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, when CRI Poland mentioned another conspiracy theory about COVID-19 origin, namely about the US army bringing coronavirus to Wuhan, it did so by referring to Russian sources (“Russian media believe the US military team brought the virus to Wuhan when it participated in the World Military Games in mid-October 2019”<sup>67</sup>).

Another recurring theme in CRI Poland’s commentaries was a narrative of China’s contributions to global stability and peace as well as its support for developing countries during the pandemic. As early as in June 2020, one of the commentaries stated: “China’s initiatives guide international anti-epidemic cooperation” and “while the fight against the pandemic continues, practice shows that China is Africa’s most reliable partner in an age of uncertainty.”<sup>68</sup> The theme of assistance, especially to developing countries, was present in 23 percent of all texts in the studied period. Once China developed its own COVID-19 vaccines, the topic began to appear increasingly often alongside the narrative of international help and support, forming what has been referred to as Beijing’s “vaccine diplomacy.”<sup>69</sup> One of the arguments used by CRI Poland to support China’s stance on its positive contribution to international anti-pandemic efforts has been based on the assumption that unfair distribution of vaccines was a problem caused by Western states and institutions due to hoarding (“vaccine nationalism”<sup>70</sup>), as opposed to China’s “responsible attitude” and “selfless” motivations. Similar reiterations of Beijing’s official rhetoric on domestic and international pandemic management were also to be found in quotes from Xi Jinping and other high-level representatives of the party-state.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, in several articles about China’s help for developing countries, their support for Beijing’s crucial territorial claims has been highlighted (“Arab states always side with China over its core interests, such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan”<sup>72</sup>).

The positive coverage of China in the context of the pandemic in CRI Poland was further legitimized by a selective and often out-of-context usage of authoritative voices from Western media and institutions. However, when the same Western entities (e.g. Bloomberg or Pew Research Center) voiced concerns about China’s handling of



the pandemic, CRI Poland's was quick to attack them for "distorting facts", falsifying data, and being "part of a broader war over public opinion."<sup>73</sup> Throughout the studied period, the WHO has been the main point of reference in presenting data in line with Beijing's interests, while references to "independent trials" were highly criticized. The results of WHO's report on the origins of the virus, published in March 2021 and concluding that COVID-19's potential lab origin was "highly unlikely", were often used to back Beijing's interpretation of the early stages of the pandemic. Moreover, scientists skeptical or distrusting of Chinese data were labeled "pseudoscientists".

One of the main takeaways from the analysis of CRI Poland's commentaries is somehow paradoxical: in the context of the pandemic, the Chinese state-affiliated outlet has been portraying China as a victim of the US, yet Washington has been simultaneously presented as an omnipotent hegemon and in the state of ultimate decline. In the same vein, Western media outlets and institutions have been interchangeably used to either legitimize Beijing's arguments, as a reliable source of data and opinions when in line with those of the PRC or as proof of Western coordinated manipulations aimed at containing China's rise. CRI Poland, however, seemed not to care too much about this contradictory treatment of Western sources and its underlying implications.

# Conclusion

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Quantitative and qualitative analysis of op-eds on China and the COVID-19 pandemic published by Sputnik Poland and CRI Poland between January 2020 and December 2021 indicates that both outlets worked at least partially towards achieving similar goals, such as fueling distrust towards the US as the global hegemon.

In the studied period, Sputnik Poland's coverage focused mostly on the economic effects of the pandemic and the implications of the Sino-American rivalry. Meanwhile, CRI Poland tried to balance between negative coverage, such as discrediting Washington's policies and "vaccine hoarding" by Western countries, and "positive energy" relating to China's perceived contributions to global stability, e.g. by promoting vaccines made in the PRC and highlighting Beijing's support for developing countries.

From China's perspective, information security constitutes a crucial part of its "comprehensive national security" – a concept referring to Beijing's increased need to maintain stability and one-party rule by controlling almost all aspects of socio-political and economic life and considering them to be of strategic importance.<sup>74</sup> In this context, CRI Poland's work is primarily aimed at trying to create a more China-friendly perception among local audiences in order to advance Beijing's long-term interests, such as limiting critical public debates regarding the PRC. Yet, while CRI's coverage might please China's central government, it seems fundamentally ill-suited to the local context, thus its attractiveness and visibility in Poland seem limited. Compared to the Chinese outlet, however, Sputnik Poland appears more grounded in local realities of media freedom. Its language and format are more suited to the local media landscape, as Sputnik Poland attempts to portray itself as a medium nurturing "independent thinking", while CRI Poland is the CCP's mouthpiece and does not even try to conceal it. Yet, both outlets share a similar underlying logic: to advance the strategic interests of respectively Moscow and Beijing.

Nevertheless, despite certain convergences in terms of promoted narratives, currently, they seem to conduct their information activities in Poland in parallel rather than in tandem. This does not mean, however, that in the future closer cooperation between Chinese and Russian media outlets can be ruled out.

# Author

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# About MapInfluenCE

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The publication was prepared within the MapInfluenCE (previously known as ChinfluenCE) project, which maps Russia and China's influence in Central Europe, specifically Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

The internationally acclaimed project has utilized various tools such as media analysis to uncover who shapes China discourse in the Visegrád countries and why, the mapping of agenda-setters to reveal links between pro-China businessmen and local political elites, an analysis of changes in political parties' positions on China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments during the past 30 years, etc.

Through a variety of outputs (media articles, interviews, research reports, open as well as closed door events and briefings of stakeholders), MapInfluenCE broadens and shapes expert as well as public debates on China's influence and activities in the region of Central Europe. MapInfluenCE findings were widely quoted in European, US and Australian press, mentioned in e.g. the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2018 Annual Report or the Reporters without Borders' report on the vulnerability of media, and presented at the European Parliament or to a delegation of US Congressmen and Senators. The original approach of MapInfluenCE set the tone and inspired journalists, think tankers and NGOs both within and outside of the region, who later conducted similar analyses on the media image of China and agenda-setting, drawing on the project's methodology and techniques.

The international team has published more than 20 policy and briefing papers in five different languages (English, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovak), authored articles or were quoted in numerous local as well as international media including Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, China Digital Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Politico Brussels Influence, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Diplomat, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Le Temps, Radio Free Europe, etc.

MapInfluenCE is designed and run by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a Prague-based foreign policy think tank and NGO.

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Association for International Affairs is a non-governmental non-profit organization founded in 1997. The mission of AMO has been to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs through a broad range of educational and research activities. Thanks to its activities in the Czech Republic and abroad and 20-year tradition, AMO has established itself as the Czech leading independent institution in the field of international relations and foreign policy.





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