

BRIEFING PAPER

China's Twiplomacy in Europe in the Shadow of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Briefing paper

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ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (AMO)

Žitná 27/608

CZ 110 00 Praha 1

Tel.: +420 224 813 460

info@amo.cz

www.amo.cz

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Summary

- This paper analyzes the Twitter activity of official accounts of China's embassies in European countries during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, setting the timeframe from February 1, 2022, to February 28, 2023, with special attention devoted to the Chinese embassies in the V4 countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.
- During the considered period, the 24 embassy accounts published 25,065 tweets and retweeted other accounts 5,601 times. The activity of these accounts varied widely in intensity, content and interactions with other accounts.
- While the embassies in France, Switzerland, Italy and Spain tweeted most often, many others mostly functioned as amplifiers of other accounts, especially the Chinese embassies in Austria and Slovakia, where over 60 percent of their activity constituted retweets.
- Generally, the content published by the Chinese embassies gained little engagement – less than 10 likes per tweet. However, tweets with anti-US content and those reacting to local political issues in the respective countries were found to occasionally generate more engagement.
- Despite the fact that the use of the local language represents a crucial component of engaging with the local audience, some of the embassies, for instance, the Chinese embassies in Sweden, Finland or Estonia, did not publish content in the local language and others did not take advantage of the mutual intelligibility of some of the languages, such as Czech and Slovak.
- The analyzed Chinese embassy accounts coordinated their efforts in cases of crucial developments in the framework of China's overall foreign policy, such as the publication of the Global Security Initiative concept paper, US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and China's stance towards the war in Ukraine. However, the level of coordination, frequency of tweeting and content of tweets greatly varied, which hints at significant independence in Twitter activity of the accounts.
- The analyzed embassy accounts amplified the content published by other China-linked accounts, especially those run by the Chinese state media, diplomats, and foreign ministry spokespersons. However, the analyzed accounts rarely amplified the same tweets.

- Zooming in on the Central European countries, the embassy in the Czech Republic was by far the most active on Twitter, followed by embassies in Hungary and Poland, whereas the embassy in Slovakia mostly served as an amplifier for other accounts.
- The accounts of the Chinese embassies in Central Europe in general failed to actively engage with the local audience. Besides the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic which only reacted to tweets published by three Czech politicians, the other embassies did not interact with the local audience. The accounts thus mostly served as one-way channels for China's official messaging.
- The accounts of the Chinese embassies in the Central European countries predominantly depicted "positive energy" content showing China and its achievements in a positive light. A very limited proportion of content was devoted to the bilateral relations of China with the local countries, with the highest proportion in Hungary and no such content in Slovakia.
- On the issue of the war in Ukraine, which has directly affected the region and put China's position under the spotlight, the embassies in Central Europe carefully repeated China's official discourse, especially the need for a peaceful solution and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. Overall, Ukraine was not a major topic.
- Regarding the portrayal of the United States, the content published by the embassies in Central Europe remained mostly informative, with a spike in activity related to the visit of Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022. Other than that, only a few tweets published by the Chinese Embassy in Hungary depicted the US in a negative light. Nevertheless, other embassies, especially the Chinese Embassy in France, amplified narratives on US biolabs in Ukraine or labeled the US as the instigator of the war. With such content, China helped Russian disinformation to reach European audiences.
- Going forward, China's propaganda strategies may take advantage of various loopholes in Twitter's management policies and detection algorithms. For instance, the changes in verification policies may increase visibility of the content published by China-related accounts and result in higher engagement. Without proper management of the platform, Twitter can become one of the key avenues for spreading Chinese propaganda.

Introduction and Research Design

Impeded access to the global internet due to the “Great Firewall”, combined with government incentives for domestic technological innovation, has resulted in the development of China’s own internet environment tailored to domestic conditions. With China having banned Facebook, Twitter and other key Western social media networks, indigenous platforms and later applications, such as Tencent QQ, Weibo, Douban, Wechat, Douyin (TikTok) or Xiaohongshu, have come to dominate the domestic market. The cyberspace, originally seen as a platform for free debate, has gradually submitted to the growing restrictions set by the Chinese Communist Party, which has kept up with the latest technological changes. China’s approach to internet governance has been embedded in the concept of cyber sovereignty, which is a state-centered approach avowing that national governments are the ultimate authority in digital space. Based on this principle, the state has the right to govern and control the online space and data flows within its borders.¹

China’s management of cyberspace, has gone well beyond crude censorship, which has been in effect outsourced to private platforms themselves.² It has also included restrictions such as real name verification, rules for so-called self-media accounts and other measures.³ These measures have been designed to limit the potential for the spreading of content that would undermine the legitimacy of the Communist Party, or most importantly, lead to any real-life political activism.⁴ Crucially, the Communist Party has striven to keep the ability to “guide the public opinion” (舆论引导) on various internet platforms, leading to a highly-managed internet discourse, especially on politically sensitive topics. As argued by the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, “the internet has become the main battlefield of public opinion struggle. Whether we can withstand and win on this battlefield directly relates to the ideological security and political security of our country.”⁵

While the Chinese propaganda apparatus has created a comprehensive system of discourse management within China’s borders, the global cyberspace has presented a much bigger challenge for China. Chinese officials and experts have long lamented the lack of “international discourse power,” which has resulted in a passive role in the formation of international discourse on Chinese domestic and foreign policies and global issues. In effect, the Western dominance of key media and social networks has been seen as putting China on the defensive.⁶ As argued by Xi Jinping in 2016, while China has solved the issue of “being beaten” (thanks to Mao Zedong’s securing China’s independence) and “being hungry” (thanks to Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening-up), the issue of China being “scolded” (挨骂) has still not been solved, implying it is now a key task for China to project its great power image on the international stage.⁷ Xi has repeatedly issued instructions to “tell China’s story well” and “build a Chinese discourse and Chinese narrative system,” seeking to enlarge “a circle of friends who know and are friendly to China.”⁸ Xi has also stressed the need to use “new concepts, domains and expressions to better tell China’s stories and

the spiritual strength behind the stories,” which has in effect also included the use of foreign social media.⁹

In line with the overall guidelines of China's external propaganda work, Chinese efforts have concentrated on several areas. First, China's social media propaganda has been aimed at boosting its positive image abroad through depicting Chinese culture, ranging from cuisine and Chinese language to traditions, tourist destinations, technological advancements, economic achievements, and successful hosting of sport events, including the Winter Olympic Games. At the same time, Chinese propaganda has presented the supposed advantages of its political system. According to Xi Jinping, China should present to the world four images – those of a cultural great power, an Eastern great power, a responsible great power, and a socialist great power.¹⁰

Second, China has used social media platforms to explain and counter negative narratives and so called “discourse traps”¹¹ surrounding its policies and actions, especially in terms of sensitive issues, such as human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, or the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, China uses these platforms to defend its positions on international issues, such as the war in Ukraine.

Third, China seeks to delegitimize the Western democracies and especially the US, showing itself in a better light and as a positive actor in international relations. Similarly, Chinese propaganda commonly engages in ‘whataboutism’, a manipulative technique shifting attention from itself to real or imagined deficiencies in the US and other countries. This is coupled with the rhetoric of “double standards,” that are said to be unfairly applied to China, and frequent accusations of hypocrisy.

Finally, China also uses foreign networks to discredit activists, dissidents, and journalists critical of its policies and therefore limit the spreading of information negative towards China. For instance, China-linked disinformation campaigns have sought to discredit human rights lawyer Wang Qingpeng who tweeted about political prisoners in China.¹²

CATCHING THE BIRD

Twitter currently ranks as the 15th most popular social network globally and with its approximately 450 million active accounts¹³ it serves as an important channel to directly and promptly share opinions and statements with journalists, politicians and other users seeking the latest news updates.

Originally, Twitter was mostly used only by Chinese state media, with the China Daily account established already in 2009 and the Xinhua account in 2012. However, the Hong Kong protests in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic prompted China to adopt a more active Twitter strategy in order to gain another tool to spread its official narratives around the world. Prior to 2019, only a handful of Chinese embassies and diplomats used Twitter accounts.¹⁴ However, since 2019, there has been a coordinated push to establish a broad presence of official accounts linked to Chinese embassies and diplomats on the platform. As Twitter is blocked in China, the presence of Chinese diplomats has created an apparent paradox, leading to China generally downplaying the role of its presence on the platform. When asked why China is opening accounts on a platform not accessible in China, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua

Chunying, said that “We are just adding an extra channel to share information and communicate with people in other countries.”¹⁵

The appearance of official accounts on Twitter has been linked to the general more assertive foreign policy under Xi Jinping, who has stressed the “fighting spirit” of Chinese diplomats, tasked with promoting China’s story well.¹⁶ In a more extreme form, this development has been linked to the phenomenon of so-called “wolf warrior diplomacy” due to the style characterized by assertiveness, nationalism, and the aggressive defense of China’s interests. This term has been widely used since 2020 when Chinese diplomats engaged in a series of high-profile conflicts with foreign governments and officials, notably with Australia, the United States, and Canada. The strategy behind wolf warrior diplomacy involves the use of confrontational language and tactics, aggressive rhetoric, and sharp criticism of foreign governments and their policies. This approach may include personal attacks on individual politicians and diplomats to defend China’s interests and to push back against criticism of China’s policies on issues such as human rights, trade, and territorial disputes.¹⁷

Such an approach has also been criticized for damaging China’s relations with other countries and after the former Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, one of the most infamous wolf warrior diplomats, was transferred to the department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs in January 2023, experts speculated that the overall communication of Chinese diplomats could soften.¹⁸ However, it seems that the strategy will not change significantly during Xi Jinping’s third term, with any changes mostly tactical.¹⁹

Beyond the tweets published by China-related accounts, automated, otherwise coordinated or fake accounts may significantly contribute to content reaching a wider audience. Such accounts may, of course, also operate separately and conduct campaigns regardless of the official accounts. For example, the “50-cent army” is believed to be paid by the Chinese government to spread pro-China messages and manipulate online discussions both in China and abroad.²⁰ Rather than being a highly coordinated ‘army’, it is more likely a mix of government officials, journalists, and other individuals employed by the Chinese government, who use a variety of tactics to manipulate online discussions, including creating fake accounts, using bots to amplify their messages, and harassing or threatening individuals who express views that are critical of China.

For instance, in 2014, Twitter suspended fake accounts that heavily promoted China’s policies in Tibet. These tweets, written in both Chinese and English, attacked politicians meeting with the Dalai Lama, positively depicted Chinese infrastructure projects in Tibet, and showed videos of contented locals and their culture.²¹ More recently, Twitter detected a campaign around COVID-19, using the hashtag #USAVirus to directly accuse the US of being the origin of the virus.²²

While the coordinated behavior of accounts sharing pro-Chinese messaging suggests Chinese involvement, it is always challenging to attribute such behavior directly to China or any other government, for that matter. However, the strong pro-Chinese narratives and interests of the Chinese government in the interpretation of these topics suggest that these campaigns were likely linked to the Chinese government. Even if such campaigns were outsourced to external providers, the costs of running campaigns are relatively accessible, with a month-long campaign involving 200 bot accounts tweeting at least 150 times a day costing about \$1,400.²³

BENEFITING FROM TWITTER POLICY HOLES

China's propaganda strategies may take advantage of various loopholes in the platform's management policies and detection algorithms. The issue has become more salient after the purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk in October 2022 and the follow-up changes in moderation and verification policies. The role of China as one of the largest non-US revenue sources for the company, and the business interests of the owner in China through his other companies, such as Tesla, are putting into question the willingness of Twitter to continue to limit the spread of Chinese (and Russian) propaganda via the platform.²⁴

Still, over recent years, Twitter has taken a variety of steps to combat the spread of propaganda and disinformation by Chinese state-affiliated actors on its platform. However, although Twitter blocked political and state-media advertising in 2019, this policy has been circumvented through the purchase of advertising space by non-state affiliated entities. While Twitter has implemented auto-detection technology to prevent state-affiliated entities from advertising, it is not always effective, and new accounts not officially linked to the government can still pay for promotion.

Twitter identifies and blocks accounts that violate its policies, however, it has faced major challenges in addressing coordinated campaigns, which is time and resource-intensive and requires continuous updates of algorithms. Consequently, detection may often be delayed, and content may reach a wide audience before it is taken down. Again, the internal changes in Twitter including large-scale lay-offs since late 2022 have brought the company's ability to monitor content into question.²⁵

Another important measure is account labeling, whereby accounts can be identified as state media, a method also employed by other social media such as Facebook. Twitter assigns labels to diplomats and government entities, identifying accounts that are not solely used for personal purposes and engage in discussions on geopolitical issues. As part of the visibility filtering system introduced in 2020, Twitter reduced user engagement with the content produced by state-affiliated media.²⁶ However, while the labeling of media sources has been somewhat effective, only a small number of Chinese diplomats have been labeled as having government affiliation.²⁷ Moreover, in spring 2023, Twitter changed its labeling policies several times. Some previously unlabeled Western public media, such as BBC and NPR, received labels only to have them removed again in April 2023. This change of policy also included some of the China-linked accounts, for instance Xinhua news or journalists working for Chinese state-media, which are currently not labeled.²⁸ There are also signs that the visibility filtering system has been revamped in 2023, leading to increased engagement for Chinese state-affiliated media.²⁹

Finally, with the current blue-tick verification policies, China-related accounts may also seek to increase their visibility on Twitter through purchasing subscriptions, increasing the probability of appearing on a user's timeline.

The importance of effective Twitter policies was evident during the protests against COVID-19 restrictions that erupted in various cities around China in November 2022, following a fatal apartment building fire in Urumqi. Twitter belonged among the most important sources of information as video evidence and photos from the protests circulated on the platform and the app has seen a dramatic increase in

downloads (via Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) in China.³⁰ However, Twitter's capabilities to control Chinese-language spam were lacking, and previously dormant or freshly created accounts flooded the platform with photos of young women advertising "dating" services, including pornography and gambling, using hashtags of the names of cities where the protests were happening, such as Shanghai or Beijing.³¹ Consequently, this content limited the visibility of relevant information, making it more difficult for Chinese-speaking users to access essential information about the protests. Although this behavior shows signs of automation, further investigation suggests that these campaigns were not necessarily related to the protests. The nature of the content was commercial, featuring likely real URL links and contact information, and it started appearing before the fire and the protests erupted and continued after they had ended.³² These cases highlight the importance of properly analyzing China's and Chinese-language activities on Twitter and the necessity of updating Twitter's management policies to detect and limit behavior contributing to the dissemination of propaganda, disinformation and the flooding of social media with coordinated campaigns which may thwart users from accessing relevant information.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODS

This paper analyzes the activity of official Twitter accounts of China's embassies in European countries³³ during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, setting the timeframe from February 1, 2022 to February 28, 2023. This analysis contributes to the wider debate on China's behavior on Twitter as it addresses previously unanswered questions regarding the patterns of content posting, engagement and most importantly coordination of the embassy accounts. Special attention is devoted to the Chinese embassies in V4 countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Due to their geographical proximity to Ukraine, large influx of refugees and the resolute political and economic support for Ukraine of the majority of the V4 countries, especially at the beginning of the invasion, it is crucial to analyze the narratives that China's embassy accounts spread in this region.

The dataset was gathered using the Twitter API, followed by data cleaning and detailed analysis in Python. The API allows the systematic downloading of publicly available data, such as the date and time of posting, tweet content, number of likes and retweets, and the automatically detected language. For each account, Twitter currently allows downloading of the 3,200 most recent tweets, including retweets. This research focused solely on textual content, therefore, no attention was paid to visual content which sometimes accompanied the tweets.

China's Twitter Presence in Europe

China entered the European Twitter space in 2013 with the account of China's mission in the European Union.³⁴ The first account of an embassy in a European country was, however, established much later, in 2017, when the account of the embassy in Slovenia appeared, followed by Italy a year later. During the next two years, Chinese embassy accounts mushroomed all over Europe. Whereas China's embassies in France and Italy managed to build a robust base of followers amounting to tens of thousands, the rest of the accounts have a much lower number of followers, usually between one and five thousand followers.

Similarly, Chinese ambassadors sometimes created separate accounts where they further amplified China's messaging. One of the most popular ones in Europe was that of the former Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Liu Xiaoming. The choice to also be active on Twitter via a personal account seems to have been down to the personal communication style of respective ambassadors – for example, while the previous Chinese Ambassador to Poland, Liu Guangyuan, created a personal Twitter account during his posting in 2018-2021, his successor in the role did not. Lower-level diplomats, such as the Chinese General Consul in Belfast, Zhang Meifang, have also established their own Twitter presence. The following analysis, however, only focuses on the embassy accounts.

During the considered period, the 24 embassy accounts published 25,065 tweets and retweeted other accounts 5,601 times. The activity of these accounts varied largely in intensity. The embassies in France, Switzerland, Italy and Spain tweeted most often – for instance, the embassy in France published on average 13 tweets a day. Interestingly, embassies in Central Europe – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – were more active than Chinese embassies in some Western European countries, such as those in Germany or the United Kingdom. The account of the Chinese Embassy in Ukraine remained dormant during the whole period – its last tweet was published in January 2022. The activity of this account was very sparse even prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as it only tweeted several times a month and hardly ever retweeted other accounts.

Instead of creating their own content, some embassies functioned as amplifiers of other accounts, which is especially visible in the case of the Chinese embassies in Austria and Slovakia where over 60 percent of their activity constituted retweets. On the other hand, the embassies in Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Serbia, Spain and Switzerland adopted the opposite strategy and hardly ever retweeted other accounts.

TABLE 1: TWITTER ACCOUNTS OF THE CHINESE EMBASSIES IN EUROPE (AS OF MAY 2023)

country	Twitter handle	number of followers	number of followed accounts	account established in
Albania	ChinaembassyT	3 299	379	April 2019
Austria	chinaembaustria	6 788	677	January 2020
Belgium	ChinaEmBE	1 001	141	April 2022
Croatia	ChinaEmbCroatia	1 184	26	November 2021
Czech Republic	ChineseEmbinCZ	3 989	376	February 2020
Estonia	ChineseEstonia	1 250	65	August 2021
Finland	ChinaEmbFinland	1 155	34	December 2019
France	AmbassadeChine	59 800	1 193	August 2019
Germany	ChinaEmbGermany	7 652	260	December 2019
Greece	Chinaemb_Hellas	3 724	361	July 2020
Hungary	ChineseEmbinHU	6 018	166	October 2019
Ireland	ChinaEmblreland	5 084	182	February 2020
Italy	AmbCina	46 400	161	May 2018
Malta	ChinaEmbMalta	2 025	117	April 2020
Netherlands	ChinaEmbNL	5 650	189	June 2020
Poland	ChinaEmbPoland	6 640	159	July 2019
Portugal	ChinaEmbPt	2 467	296	November 2021
Serbia	EmbChina_RS	4 452	84	May 2020
Slovakia	ChinaEmbSVK	5 131	200	February 2020
Slovenia	ChinaEmSlovenia	4 886	291	December 2017
Spain	ChinaEmbEsp	27 600	2 076	September 2019
Sweden	ChinaEmbSweden	1 052	115	February 2022
Switzerland	ChinaEmbinCH	6 920	841	May 2021
Ukraine	China_Ukraine_	863	18	March 2020
United Kingdom	ChineseEmbinUK	43 000	44	November 2019

**TABLE 2: TWITTER ACTIVITY OF THE CHINESE EMBASSIES IN EUROPE
(FEBRUARY 2022 – FEBRUARY 2023)**

	tweets	retweets	total activity
Albania	183	41	224
Austria	1 165	1 794	2 959
Belgium	1 663	67	1 730
Croatia	90	65	155
Czech Republic	1 675	1 056	2 731
Estonia	390	15	405
Finland	76	4	80
France	5 043	906	5 949
Germany	650	376	1 026
Greece	516	54	570
Hungary	1 079	172	1 251
Ireland	338	42	380
Italy	2 464	68	2 532
Malta	195	51	246
Netherlands	288	38	326
Poland	786	98	884
Portugal	174	69	243
Serbia	129	5	134
Slovakia	87	211	298
Slovenia	81	41	122
Spain	2 410	10	2 420
Sweden	595	163	758
Switzerland	4 323	29	4 352
United Kingdom	665	226	891

Data retrieved via Twitter API.

GENERATING ENGAGEMENT VIA ANTI-US CONTENT

The quantity of tweeting or retweeting, however, does not always translate into engagement. The median values depicted in the boxplot below show that tweets published by Chinese embassies in Europe usually received a low number of likes, with most of the embassies receiving less than 10 likes per tweet.

In terms of the volume of engagement, the accounts of the Chinese embassies in Italy, France and Austria clearly stand out. In the case of the Italy and France, it is likely a result of a large base of followers compared to the rest of the analyzed accounts. However, China's embassy account in Austria has a low number of followers and its content is to a large extent based on retweets, rather than its own content. As for the most popular content published by China's Embassy in Austria, several political topics received a lot of engagement, such as a flag-raising ceremony at Tiananmen Square, China's position on the war in Ukraine, the 7th plenary session of the Communist party's Central Committee held in October 2022, and China-EU relations. However, the followers constantly interacted with content depicting Chinese ethnic groups and their colorful outfits, which caused the higher median number of likes, compared to the rest of the accounts.

Lack of general engagement does not mean that the content may not sometimes go viral, as evident from the outliers depicted in the boxplot. A tweet published by China's Embassy in Ireland managed to gain immense traction despite the otherwise low number of reactions to the content authored by the embassy.

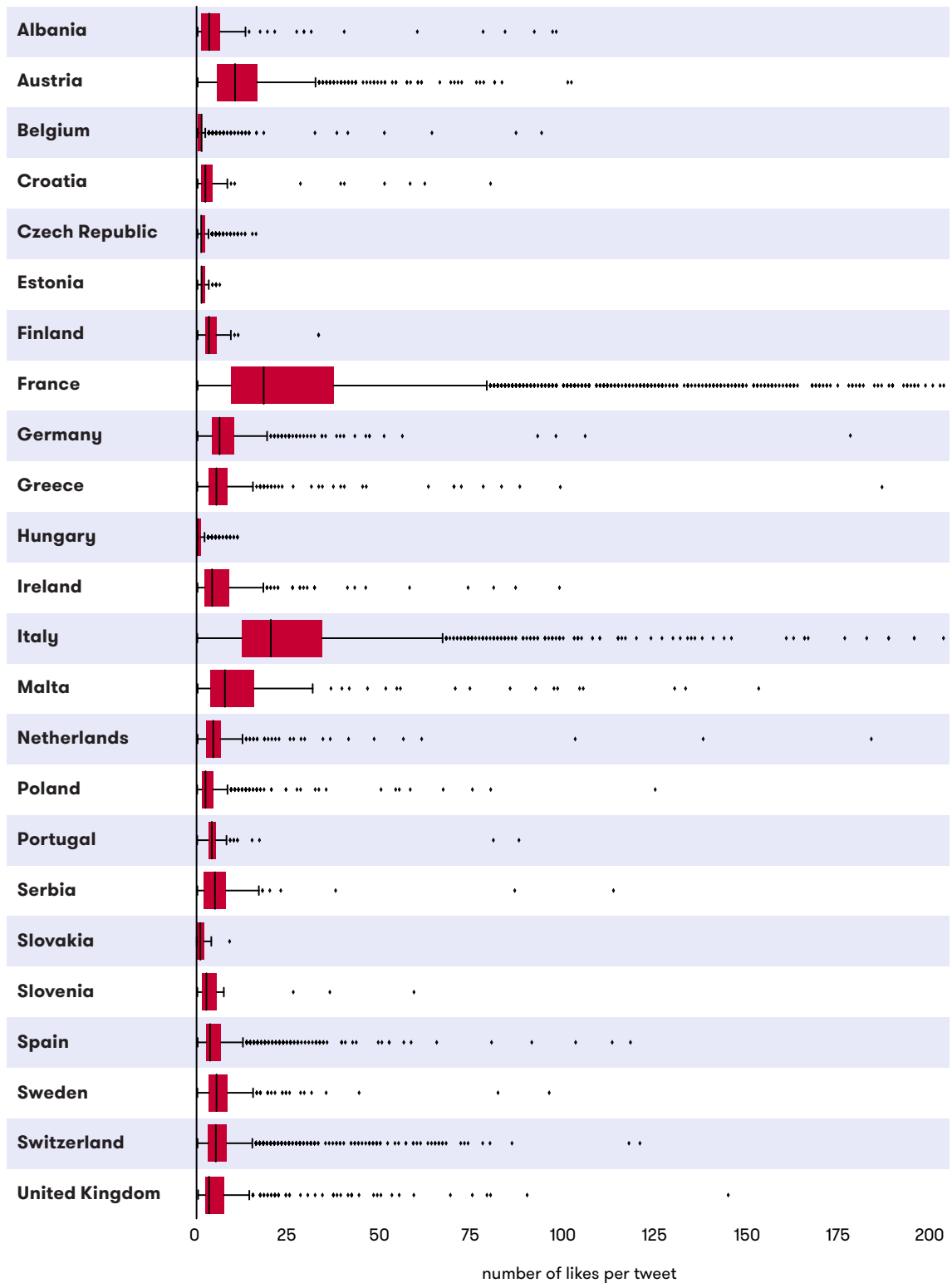
This account commented on a tweet published by then British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and ended up as the most successful tweet published by Chinese embassies in Europe. In the video, Boris Johnson argued that the United Kingdom would do all it can to “hold China to its commitments so that Hong Kong is once again run by the people of Hong Kong for the people of Hong Kong”.³⁵ In reaction to his tweet, the Chinese Embassy in Ireland used the sensitive debate on the Northern Ireland Protocol, which was part of the Brexit deal and which London aimed to unilaterally change. This unusually high amount of engagement shows that the localization of a narrative enables the content to reach wider audiences.

The most popular comments under this tweet mostly countered this narrative – users pointed out China disrespecting its promises not to change the Hong Kong system for 50 years after the handover, shared the famous image of the “tank man” near Tiananmen square, and quoted China's official narratives rejecting foreign interference in its domestic affairs. On the other hand, many users also commended China's reaction, posting thumbs-up or otherwise supportive emojis and gifs.

As Twitter algorithms focus on the number of reactions, despite the negative engagement, China's narratives portraying a foreign government in a negative light soaked into many timelines. In the following days, ten different accounts tweeted exactly these two sentences. Some of the accounts did not attribute these words to China's embassy, which allowed the origin of the narrative to be blurred.

Similarly, tweets depicting the US in a negative light earned a significant amount of engagement. Out of the 153 tweets which gained over 200 likes, 71 percent focused on political topics, with half of them being content critical towards the US. In this respect, 56 percent of the US-focused content was tweeted by China's Embassy

GRAPH 1: NUMBER OF LIKES ACQUIRED BY THE CHINESE EMBASSIES IN EUROPE (FEBRUARY 2022 – FEBRUARY 2023)



Boxplots show data distribution based on first quartile (25th percentile), median and third quartile (75th percentile). The whiskers then show minimum and maximum values (determined by the interquartile range) and the dots represent outlier cases.

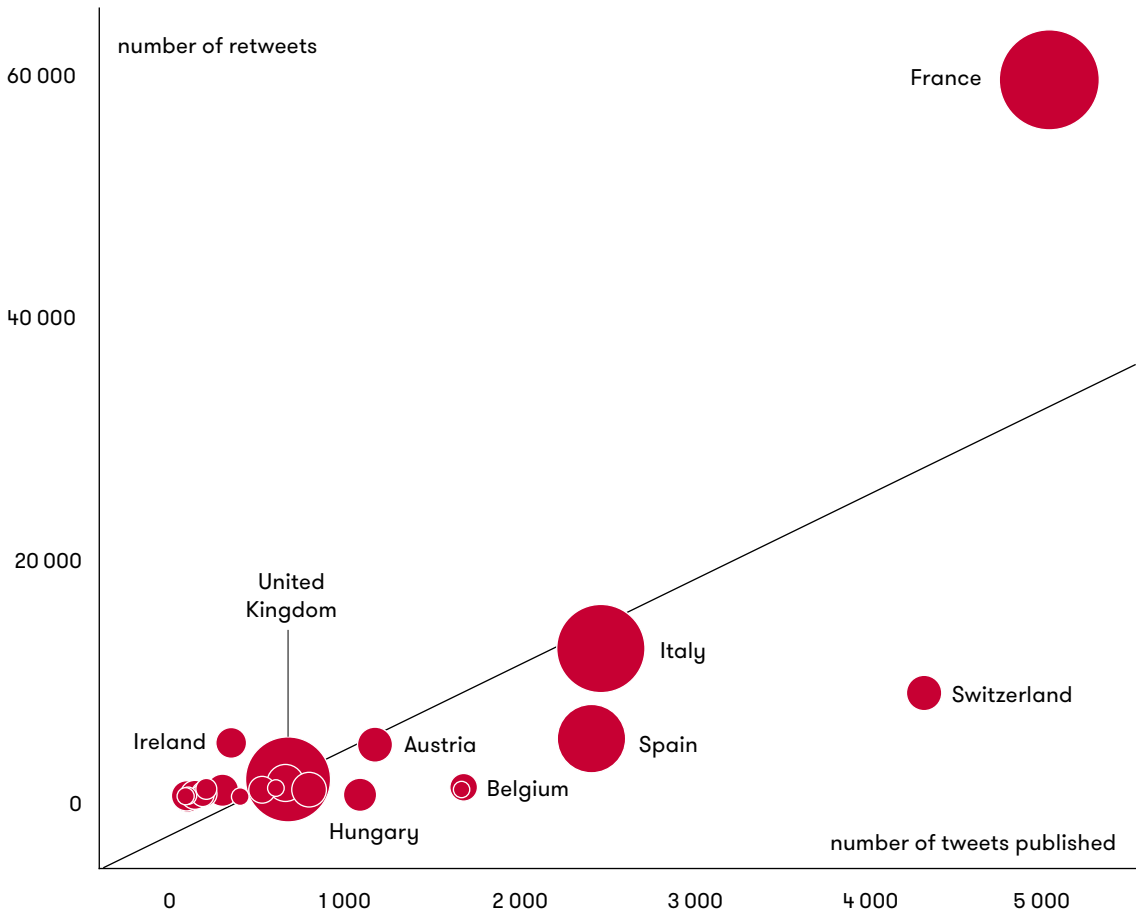
For the purposes of this visualization, the x-axis range was limited to 200 likes in order to show the distribution in detail. Consequently, outliers with values over 200 likes are not included in the graph.

Data retrieved via Twitter API.

in France and 28 percent by China’s embassy in Italy. For instance, the account in France thanked Jean-Luc Mélenchon, member of the French National Assembly, for his support of the One-China Policy³⁶ and labeled the US as the author of the “crisis in Ukraine” and the country that is gaining the most from the conflict.³⁷ Another tweet published by the embassy informed about US biological military activities in Ukraine and another one claimed that 90 percent of Chinese internet users think that the US is a “hegemonic” and “tyrannical” country when it comes to Ukraine. A different tweet informed about US military intervention in Syria which left 350,000 people dead and alleged that the US military bases stole oil from the country. This account also underlined China’s preference for “peaceful development” and rejection of “hegemonism” and “expansionism,” contrasting China with the US.

The Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy in France has become notorious for its rather aggressive style of communication, often spilling into diplomatic disputes. For instance, in March 2021, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned China’s Ambassador Lu Shaye due to repeated insults and threats targeting French politicians and China analyst Antoine Bondaz in the context of the EU sanctions on

GRAPH 2: ENGAGEMENT OF THE CHINESE EMBASSY ACCOUNTS IN EUROPE BASED ON THE AMOUNT OF TWITTER ACTIVITY AND NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS (FEBRUARY 2022 – FEBRUARY 2023)



Data retrieved via Twitter API.

Chinese officials involved in human rights abuses in Xinjiang.³⁸ With the largest number of followers and publishing the second highest number of tweets, the account of the Chinese Embassy in France was also the most successful in garnering engagement. As the visualization below shows, the key to engagement is clearly a combination of a high number of followers and the quantity of content, with anti-US content being a potential contributing factor.

In a similar vein, the Chinese Embassy in Italy warned NATO that “after destabilizing Europe, it should stop trying to destabilize Asia and the whole world.”³⁹ The same account reminded its followers of NATO’s bombing of the former Yugoslavia in 1999 which caused the death of three Chinese citizens.⁴⁰ The US, then, either directly or indirectly through its dominance of NATO, was thus clearly a favorite target of negative content by the embassies.

HITTING A LANGUAGE BARRIER

One of the key pillars of China’s information operations is an increasing effort to localize the narratives so that they are more appealing to the local audience. As part of this effort, China produces content in local languages, though often of disputable quality.

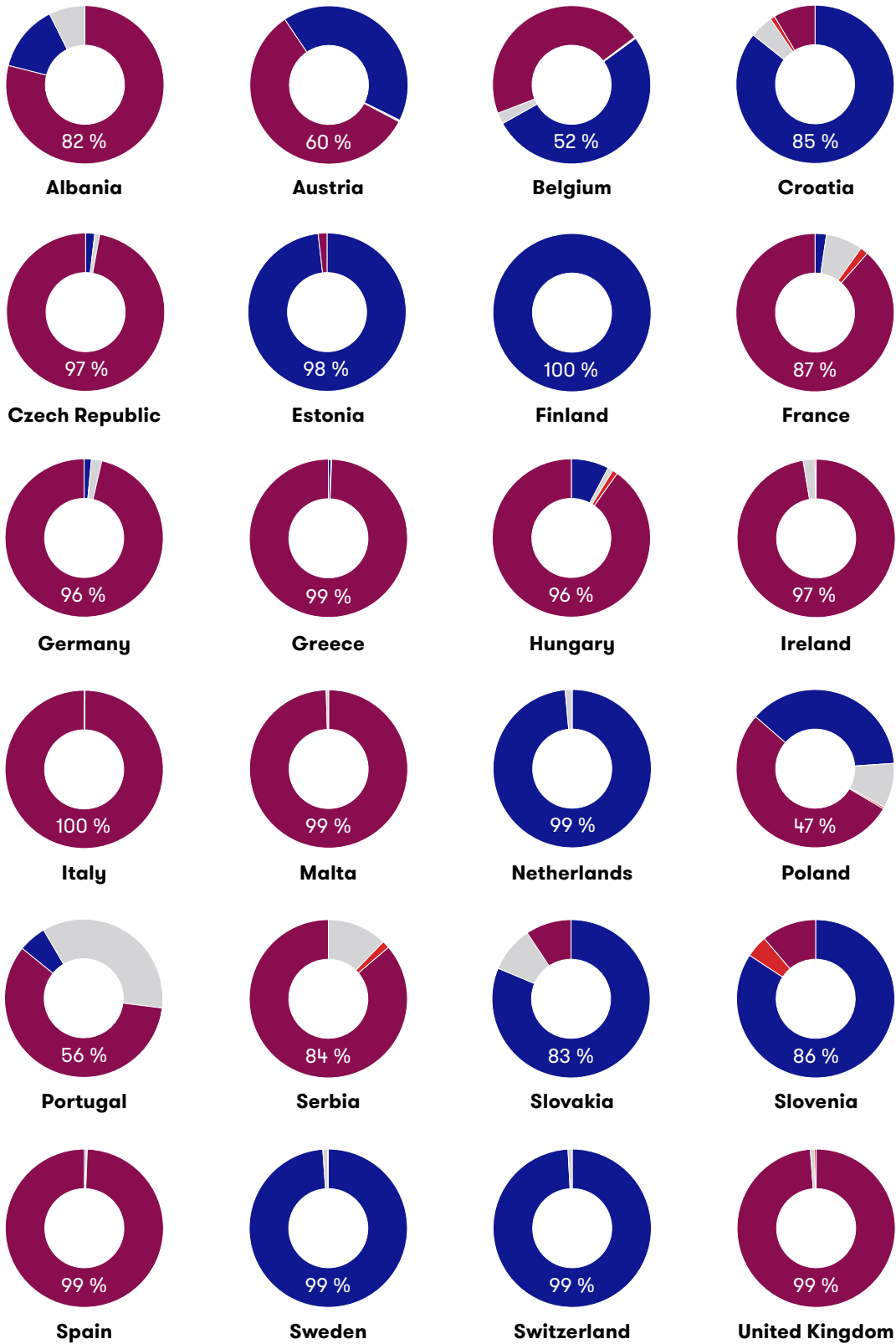
Some of the accounts of Chinese embassies in Europe publish almost exclusively in local languages, such as the Chinese embassies in Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Serbia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Albania and Greece. However, other embassies almost only tweet in English, such as in Sweden, Switzerland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Estonia, Finland or the Netherlands.

There is no identifiable pattern in the language choice. The fact that a language is less-spoken does not appear to be a determining factor. The embassy accounts do not take advantage of the similarity of some local languages. For instance, the account of China’s Embassy in Slovakia predominantly tweets in English, which significantly limits its potential audience. The embassy account also does not reuse or retweet content published by the embassy in the neighboring Czech Republic, despite the mutual intelligibility of these languages.

On the other hand, in the case of Chinese embassy accounts, utilization of the local language does not seem to materialize into more engagement with the content. It may be a contributing factor in the case of the accounts of China’s embassies in France and Italy which enjoy the largest amount of engagement. However, when comparing the engagement of embassies tweeting in the local languages, such as the Czech Republic, Serbia and Hungary and those tweeting in English, including Slovakia, Estonia or Croatia, it seems that the language does not seem to make any impact in terms of engagement.

GRAPH 3: LANGUAGE DISTRIBUTION OF CONTENT PUBLISHED BY THE CHINESE EMBASSY ACCOUNTS IN EUROPE (FEBRUARY 2022 – FEBRUARY 2023)

■ English ■ Chinese ■ local language ■ undetermined



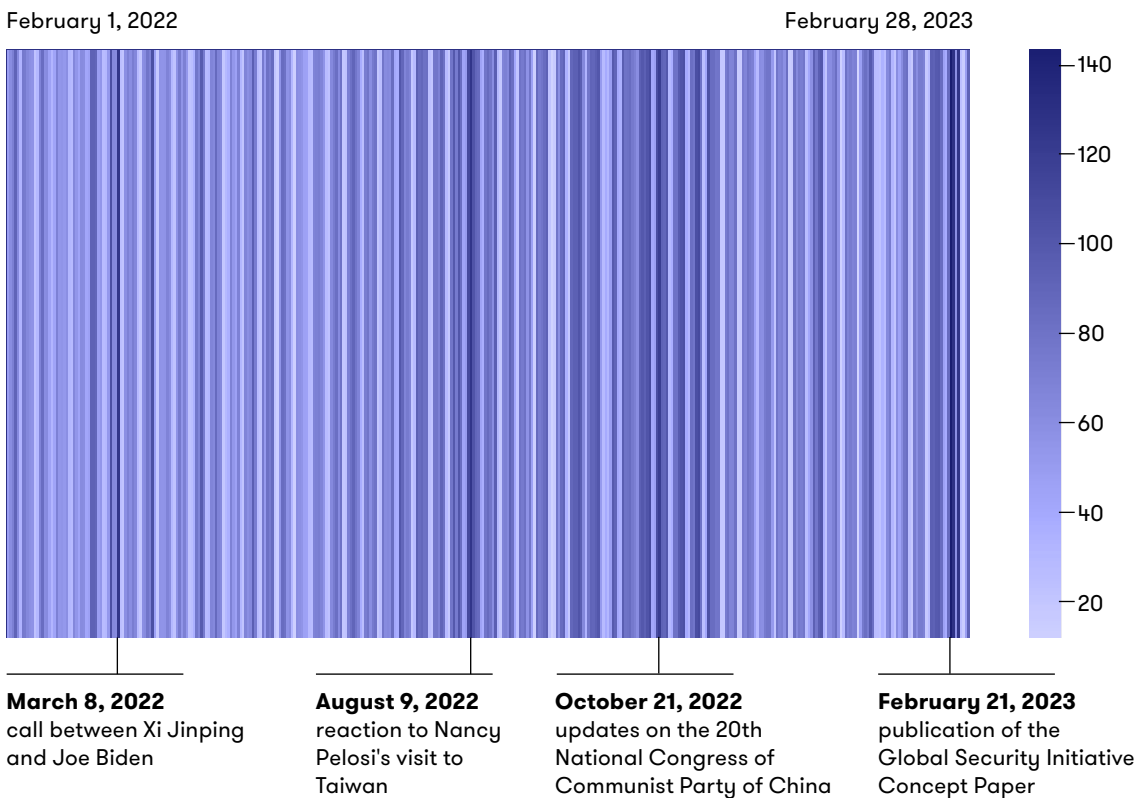
Data retrieved via Twitter API.

In case English is the country's official language, it is visualized as a local language.

COORDINATING ON POLITICAL ISSUES

As evident from the visualization below, accounts of China's embassies in Europe usually tweeted a similar amount of content, on average 63 tweets daily. The spikes in activity were mostly caused by the increased activity of a single account, such as China's Embassy in France, but did not represent any coordination of the analyzed accounts.

GRAPH 4: DAILY FREQUENCY OF TWEETING OF THE CHINESE EMBASSIES IN EUROPE (FEBRUARY 2022 - FEBRUARY 2023)



Data retrieved via Twitter API.

The highest number of tweets was published on February 21, 2023, when the embassies published a total of 144 tweets. As this was only a few days before the anniversary of the Russian invasion, it would be expected that the main focus of the topics would be the war in Ukraine. Instead, except for the Chinese Embassy in France, none of the analyzed accounts tweeted about the developments in Ukraine or China's stance on the war. The rise in numbers was driven by the publication of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) Concept Paper which was heavily promoted by the embassies – 14 embassies informed about the paper – and the Chinese embassies in France and Italy posted long threads offering details of the initiative, which purports to offer China's view on achieving lasting global security. Whereas this case clearly shows the ability of Chinese embassies to coordinate their efforts, it also shows that

the level of coordination remained limited as only about half of the embassy accounts published information about the GSI, whereas the rest of the accounts published different content.

Other examples also show that the accounts concentrate on politically important topics with different intensities. The second highest number of tweets was published on August 9, 2022, which was largely a result of Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan shortly before as 37 percent of the 126 tweets focused on this topic.

The account of the Chinese Embassy in Switzerland devoted only one of its tweets to this issue, despite being the most actively tweeting account, and the accounts in Malta, Greece and Austria did not mention Pelosi's visit at all. The largest number of tweets providing China's stance on Pelosi's visit were published by Chinese embassy accounts in France and Hungary. Despite the fact that Pelosi's visit angered China and heavily impacted US-China relations, some of the embassies did not promote China's official reaction to this sensitive issue at all.

The activity of Chinese accounts also increased on March 8, 2022, when Xi Jinping spoke with his US counterpart Joe Biden and discussed the war in Ukraine. Chinese embassy accounts shared information on China's stance towards the war in Ukraine, emphasizing the need for negotiations and China's humanitarian aid. Another peak could be identified on October 21, 2022, which was mainly related to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

AMPLIFYING THE VOICE OF CHINA

In some cases, the analyzed accounts used the same hashtags, regardless of the language of the target audience. Special attention was devoted to the Olympic Games held in Beijing in February 2022 when the embassies frequently used the hashtags #Beijing2022, #BingDwenDwen (official panda-like mascot of the Beijing Olympic Games) and #TogetherForASharedFuture (official motto), calling on "people from all countries to transcend differences, come together under the banner of the Olympics, and join hands to address global challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change and build a better world after the pandemic."⁴¹

The accounts of Chinese embassies also coordinated their efforts when it came to political issues. In October, these accounts informed about the National Congress of the Communist Party and employed the hashtag #20thCPCNationalCongress. Otherwise, other politically sensitive topics appeared, such as #5G, #Afghanistan, #BRI, #BRICS, #COVID19, #CPC, #China, #Chinese, #EU, #HKSAR25 or #Hongkong, #HumanRights, #Pelosi, #SCO, #Taiwan, #TwoSessions, #Ukraine, #XiJinping, #Xinjiang.

Names of the Chinese provinces and autonomous areas were often used as hashtags. Other hashtags appeared rather sparsely and were used by single embassies only. Some of the accounts, especially the account of China's embassies in the Czech Republic, Greece and Spain used hashtags in local languages. However, when it came to the key political messaging, even these accounts applied the above mentioned hashtags in English.

Overall, the analyzed accounts mostly retweeted the posts of the accounts of Chinese state media (@CGTNOfficial, @ChinaDaily, @globaltimes, @XHNews, @PDChina, @RenminDeutsch) and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@MFA_China), its speakers (@SpokespersonCHN, @WangLutongMFA) and ambassadors (@AmbQinGang, @CGMeifangZhang, @ChinaEUMission, @AmbZhenZeguang). Besides, these accounts often retweeted @Chengdu_China and @Beijing2022, the account focused on the Winter Olympics.

Each embassy mentioned or interacted with different accounts and with different intensities. Several embassies constantly mentioned the same account. The Chinese Embassy in the United Kingdom mentioned the account of its Ambassador Zheng Zeguang (@AmbZhengZeguang) 69 times, which was also the most tagged account. The Chinese Embassy in France interacted with other Twitter accounts most often, especially Hua Chunying (@SpokespersonCHN), tagged 50 times, CGTN France (@CGTNFrancais), 40 times, and the account of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 times (@MFA_China).

Only a few accounts were tagged by multiple Chinese embassy accounts, comprising the official account of CGTN (@CGTNOfficial), Charles Michel (@Charles-Michel), the Chinese Ambassador to the UN (@ChinaAmbUN), @FacebookWatch, @SpeakerPelosi and @YouTube.

In the cases when the embassies retweeted the same accounts, it rarely involved the same content. Only 69 tweets, representing less than two per cent of all the tweets retweeted, were retweeted by more than two embassy accounts in Europe. As for the content of these tweets, 23 of them focused on Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and assertions that Taiwan belonged to China. Four tweets delineated China's position towards the war in Ukraine and two criticized NATO.

Zooming into the V4 Countries

Central European countries, with the exception of Hungary, have stood at the forefront of political and economic support to Ukraine from the onset of the invasion. In April 2023, the Czech, Slovak and Polish prime ministers pledged their intentions to continue to support Ukraine.⁴² Such vocal support contrasts with China's continuously proclaimed neutrality on the war, overshadowed by its reluctance to condemn the invasion, the high-level meetings with Russian counterparts and adherence to the "no limits" partnership and proclamations such as that China and Russia are driving "changes unseen for a hundred years."⁴³ The Czech President, Petr Pavel, even warned that it was in "China's interest to prolong the status quo" as it may "push Russia to a number of concessions."⁴⁴ Due to the obvious contrasts in perceptions of the war in Ukraine, it is thus crucial to analyze the Ukraine-related content published by the embassy accounts to Central Europe.

Twitter does not belong among the most popular networks in Central European countries. Other social media, such as Facebook, Instagram or TikTok all report considerably more users than Twitter. The largest part of the population using Twitter is, according to data released in early 2023, currently in the Czech Republic – about 1.4 million users, meaning 13 percent of the population.⁴⁵ In the rest of the Central European countries, the share of the population on Twitter is at or below 10 percent – 4 million users in Poland (10 percent)⁴⁶, about 800 000 in Hungary (8 percent),⁴⁷ and 400 000 in Slovakia (7 percent).⁴⁸

Consequently, the Twitter audience in Central European countries is limited, which also likely explains the low engagement with the content published by the Chinese embassies compared to the most popular accounts elsewhere in Europe, such as those of the embassies in France, Switzerland, Austria and the United Kingdom, where the proportion of the population using Twitter is much higher – for instance about 34 percent in the United Kingdom⁴⁹ and 21 percent in France.⁵⁰

During the analyzed period, the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic tweeted the most often resulting in a total of 1675 tweets, followed by Hungary with 1079 tweets and Poland with 786 tweets. The account of the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia was the third least active of all the analyzed embassy accounts in Europe and published only 87 tweets during the considered period.

Usually, the tweets posted by these accounts did not receive substantial attention. By far the most liked and retweeted content mentioned Chinese President, Xi Jinping, saying that China appreciated the traditional friendship with Poland and treats Poland as a priority partner in Europe, which was tweeted by the account of the Chinese Embassy in Poland and received over 1300 likes. Overall, the tweets published by the Chinese Embassy in Poland were more popular than the content published by the embassies in the rest of the Central European countries.

The account of the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic disabled the comment section which partly limits the spread of its content on Twitter as the number

of comments is one of the metrics which determine the appearance of the content on other users' timelines. This step was likely motivated by the high proportion of content negative towards China that was routinely appearing in the comments.

INTERACTING WITH THE LOCAL AUDIENCE

Engaging with the local audience and stakeholders may contribute to higher engagement. However, the Chinese embassies in Central Europe only interacted with (i.e. tagged or replied to comments) a rather limited spectrum of actors. Importantly, even in the rare cases of interaction, the reactions of the Chinese embassies did not spark any significant engagement or specific attention.

The Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic responded to a tweet published by Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Lipavský (@JanLipavsky), in which he welcomed the release of the UN Human Rights report on Xinjiang in September 2022. The embassy reacted with a long thread of comments, arguing that “the US and some Western forces seek to destabilize Xinjiang and use it to contain China” and that “Xinjiang has enjoyed sustained economic growth, social harmony and stability, better living standards, cultures thriving [...] and freedom of religious beliefs and religious harmony.”⁵¹

As for other interactions, the account reacted to a meeting of a Czech Deputy Foreign Minister, Martin Dvořák, with Thinlay Chukki, Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Chinese Embassy commented that it was a serious violation of the political commitment to the One-China Policy and sent an incorrect signal.⁵²

Finally, the embassy account posted a picture under a tweet published by Czech Senator, Pavel Fischer, informing about China conducting a cyber-attack on Ukraine's military and urging governments to leave the 16+1 format (platform for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries).⁵³ The embassy reacted with a screenshot from the Twitter profile of the Ukraine Security Service (SBU) commenting that the SBU was not investigating such a case of cyberattack.⁵⁴ Other than these instances, the embassy in Prague did not significantly try to engage with local actors, despite commonplace commentary by politicians critical of China.

The Chinese Embassy in Hungary did not interact with any local politicians or journalists at all. The only account that this embassy tagged several times was @facebookwatch with over 80,000 followers. This Twitter account shared short videos and memes unrelated to China. The account of the embassy in Hungary tagged this account when depicting life in Xinjiang or sharing a link to a livestream of a press conference on Xinjiang, showing the region's culture and historical heritage.⁵⁵ Apart from the Xinjiang-related content, other tweets showed Chinese children singing during the Olympics, traditional dance performances or a Hungarian national living in Shanghai. Interestingly, the Chinese Embassy in Belgium tagged the same account several times as well, with several tweets also focusing on Xinjiang and a series of tweets focused on traveling to Tibet. The @facebookwatch account is now defunct.

As for the Chinese Embassy in Poland, its account also rarely engaged with the local audience and other accounts were tagged by the embassy usually only once. The account tagged Konrad Niedzwiedzki, Polish speed skater competing at the Winter Olympic

Games, and the official profile of the Polish Olympic Committee. Besides, this account interacted with @Go2Warsaw, the official account of the Warsaw Tourist Office. The Chinese Embassy in Slovakia did not tag or reply to any comments of other users at all.

Regarding retweets of other accounts, the embassies retweeted similar accounts, however, with different frequencies. The Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic was by far the most active and retweeted the account of the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, more than 550 times, also Xinhua News, retweeted almost one hundred times, and accounts of Wang Lutong, Director General for European Affairs at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Apart from these China-linked accounts, the embassy in the Czech Republic retweeted accounts informing about the Winter Olympic Games and Paralympic Games.

The embassies in Poland and Hungary retweeted the same accounts as the embassy in the Czech Republic, however, much less frequently. For instance, the embassy in Hungary most often amplified the account of Hua Chunying (47 times). The embassy in Poland most frequently retweeted the account of Wang Lutong (43 times). In comparison with the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic, the embassies in Poland and Hungary hardly ever retweeted local accounts, not even during the Olympic Games. The account of the embassy in Slovakia retweeted the same Chinese official accounts and, similarly to the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic, also retweeted content on the Olympics.

SPREADING POSITIVE ENERGY

As already outlined above, China's propaganda targeting external audiences seeks to spread China's perspective on both domestic and world events and draw a positive image of the country, employing information and visuals depicting China's history, culture, traditions, travel destinations, technological achievements, etc. These strategies are also reflected in the most frequently occurring topics found in the dataset.

As apparent from the graph below, the tweeting patterns of the embassies in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are largely similar. About a quarter of the content published by them focused on China's history and culture. Often accompanied by #DiscoverChina or #AmazingChina, such tweets depicted Chinese forests and mountains, harvest at rice fields, pandas, dragons, Chinese cities and provinces, holiday celebrations, Chinese movies, art, etc.

Similarly, these accounts devoted significant attention to achievements in various research areas, education and innovation, such as developments in robotics and information technologies, digitization, additive technologies, the automotive industry and 5G. Moreover, significant attention was paid to China's achievements in space, ranging from the launch of new space vehicles, satellites, and scientific experiments to missions to China's space station Shenzhou and the life of taikonauts (Chinese astronauts).

Forming another large set of content were tweets depicting the Chinese Communist Party and its gatherings, especially the 20th National Congress which was held in October 2022. Such topics appeared in over 30 percent of tweets published by the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia, representing their most frequent category.

GRAPH 5: FREQUENCY OF TOPICS PRESENTED IN THE TWEETS OF THE CHINESE EMBASSY ACCOUNTS (FEBRUARY 2022 – FEBRUARY 2023)**Czech Republic****Hungary****Poland****Slovakia**

Data retrieved via Twitter API.

Apart from general domestic policy news, the content frequently depicted President Xi Jinping meeting with other world leaders, delivering speeches or awarding medals. Other Chinese leaders, such as Chinese Prime Minister, Li Keqiang, and Chinese chief diplomat, Wang Yi, were also referenced. Due to the low number of tweets by the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia, the presentation of China's position towards the international system and its political initiatives represented a crucial proportion of the overall content it published.

Chinese embassies in Central Europe often depicted China as an economically prosperous and technologically advanced country. This included content on infrastructure projects, industrial advances, trade exchange statistics, projections of economic growth, the constant process of opening to the outside world and cooperation with international organizations. The content also often emphasized the Chinese government's poverty reduction efforts.

Only a limited proportion of the content published by the embassies in Central Europe focused on human rights and politically sensitive issues, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan or Hong Kong. For instance, when referring to Xinjiang, the content showed a positive atmosphere in the area, successful harvests, economic growth and social development. Only a few tweets mentioned the government's policies,

presented by China as parts of an anti-extremism and anti-terrorism strategy, that in effect amount to systematic repression.

Besides these usual topics, the 2022 Winter Olympic Games held in Beijing created a major opportunity for China's external presentation, even as the games were accompanied by controversy over China's human rights record and pandemic policies. Accounts of Chinese embassies in the V4 countries tweeted about China's preparedness to host the games, especially in terms of the pandemic measures, often congratulated teams from European countries on their achievements, and shared photos of enthusiastic visitors.

SIDESTEPPING BILATERAL RELATIONS

Bilateral relations were perhaps surprisingly not a key focus for the Chinese embassies' accounts in Central Europe. The embassies in the Czech Republic and Poland depicted bilateral relations with China in about 7 percent of their tweets, and the embassy in Hungary in about 14 percent. In Slovakia, the embassy refrained from depicting mutual relations at all, and solely published content related to Slovakia when a Chinese girl won a breakdance competition held in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.

As for the Czech Republic, the Chinese embassy congratulated the Czech Republic during public holidays, informed about Feng Biao, the new ambassador appointed in October 2022, and promoted the 73rd anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Similarly, the account reported about the farewell meeting between the outgoing Ambassador, Zhang Jianmin, and the Czech President, Miloš Zeman, and China's position towards the Czech Senate's resolution regarding Taiwan. Some of the tweets emphasized the importance of the mutual relations and China's willingness to cooperate with the Czech side.

The content on bilateral relations published by the Chinese Embassy in Hungary was richer in contrast with the Czech Republic, likely because the relations and range of common activities between China and Hungary are also wider. The embassy actively informed about the meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, and Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó. Further content informed about economic cooperation, such as a project on photovoltaic and battery storage, and the Budapest-Belgrade Railway. The tweets depicted Hungarian students traveling to China, cooperation between Chinese and Hungarian universities and Chinese-Hungarian bilingual schools. Overall, the tweets on the benefits of cooperation were more frequent than in the case of the Czech Republic.

The depiction of bilateral relations by the Chinese Embassy in Poland resembled the patterns previously identified in the case of the Czech Republic. Some tweets celebrated the friendly bilateral relations and several tweets informed about a call between Polish President Andrzej Duda and Chinese President Xi Jinping. As for any concrete economic projects or specific examples of cooperation, the Twitter account only informed about a Chinese Day organized at the Confucius Institute at the University of Wrocław.

In general, the embassies in Central Europe often depicted local teams and athletes competing at the Winter Olympics and other sports events, without generating much engagement.

TIPTOEING AROUND UKRAINE

Zooming in on the topic of Ukraine, the analyzed accounts most often repeated official narratives on the war in Ukraine without any additional input – China's support for a peaceful solution, the importance of negotiations and dialogue, and China's constructive role in the conflict. Consequently, the embassies often quoted Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, speaking at a conference or having a phone conversation with his counterparts. Besides, China's provision of humanitarian aid by the Chinese Red Cross was often emphasized.

Regarding the volume of the content devoted to the issue, the largest proportion was published by the Chinese Embassy in Slovakia, amounting to 9 percent, while it was between 1 to 3 percent in case of the other embassies. Overall, Russia's war on Ukraine and related developments were thus not a significant topic for the embassy accounts.

Noticeably, China's official discourse continuously refused to use the words "invasion" or "war" and instead referred to the Russian aggression against Ukraine as the "situation," "question," "issue" or "conflict." Interestingly, despite the presence of anti-US narratives, such as those on US biolabs in Ukraine or the US' responsibility for the war, these narratives were shared less often compared to attempts to inform positively about China's role in the conflict.

This stands in stark contrast with other embassies, especially the Chinese Embassy in France as described in detail in the previous chapter, which published content showing the US involvement in the war in Ukraine.

As for the quantity of content focusing on the US, the embassies in Central Europe only referenced the US in 1 to 5 percent of the total tweets published. The tweets often informed about a call between China's President, Xi Jinping, and US President, Joe Biden, and later also their meeting in Bali, Indonesia. The content also focused on the economic dimension of mutual relations, especially the trade volume. The analyzed accounts also focused on Taiwan, especially Nancy Pelosi's visit which China opposed, and emphasized its One-China Principle and the "US Cold War mentality." The embassies also claimed that the Taiwan question is solely China's internal affair and that it was different from the Ukraine "issue."

Besides the criticism of Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the US-related content mostly stayed in a rather factual form. However, several tweets published by the Chinese Embassy in Hungary showed a strong negative sentiment towards the US. One such tweet, for example, said that "the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows the world how deceptive, hypocritical and dangerous the United States are." Another tweet suggested that the US Navy was involved in blowing up the Nord Stream pipelines. Despite the obvious negativity, these tweets received almost no attention, with zero likes.

Conclusion

The activity of China's embassies in Europe on Twitter largely varies in terms of frequency and patterns of tweeting, and the nature of the published content. The embassy accounts show few signs of content sharing and do not seem to be aware of the inter-intelligibility of some of the local languages. In most cases, the embassy accounts serve as amplifiers of other official Chinese accounts, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its spokespersons, and help to spread content published by various Chinese media.

The embassy accounts have shown an ability to coordinate their Twitter activity, especially when it comes to politically sensitive topics, for instance China's official stance towards Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the war in Ukraine and the promotion of the Global Security Initiative. Similarly, the embassy accounts informed heavily about China's domestic political developments, such as the 20th National Congress. Furthermore, the Olympic Games provided a unique opportunity for drawing a positive image of China and using local athletes to highlight positive relations. The coordination also included the use of the same hashtags and in some cases retweets of the same content as shown in the case of Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.

The content provided by the embassy accounts generally receives little engagement. However, this analysis shows that using local narratives that stir up reactions among the local audience may result in content widely circulating on the platform, as the tweet of China's embassy in Ireland regarding Boris Johnson's video showed. Should China become able to identify such points of friction and employ these strategies more often, the content of China's embassies in Europe may become more capable of influencing the public debate on important topics.

Such content remains, however, rather scarce. The analyzed accounts continue to mostly provide positive coverage of China's culture, history and technologies, and inform about China's official position on various issues. The attacks against governments are largely limited to the US, which also forms the content with most engagement.

Regarding the Chinese embassies in Central Europe, their accounts mostly produced content positively depicting Chinese culture, history and language, research achievements, economic developments and infrastructure projects and informing about Chinese domestic politics and international engagements of China's leaders.

Whereas the Chinese Embassy in Hungary depicted specific cases of cooperation between the countries and tweeted about bilateral relations most often, the content of the rest of the accounts in Central Europe lacked any added value and creativity, and stayed rather factual, emphasizing the benefits of relations and their long history and informing about exchanges of political leaders.

Concerning Ukraine, these accounts were very cautious and most often repeated official narratives on the war in Ukraine – China's support for a peaceful solution, the importance of negotiations and dialogue, and China's constructive role in the conflict. Overall, the coverage of the war in Ukraine was rather sparse, and it was not

a key focus, with local embassies trying to maintain a low-profile on the issue. This may reflect China's awareness of the sensitivity of the issue in the Central European countries. Nevertheless, other embassies, especially the Chinese Embassy in France, amplified narratives on US biolabs in Ukraine or labeled the US as the instigator of the war. With such content, China helped Russian disinformation to reach European audiences.

The accounts of the Chinese embassies in Central Europe in general fail to actively engage with the local audience. Besides the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic which only reacted to tweets published by three Czech politicians, the other embassies did not interact with the local audience. The accounts thus mostly serve as one-way channels for China's official messaging.

While until recently the visibility of China-linked accounts was curtailed on Twitter, the changes since the new ownership of Twitter may significantly alter the landscape and create more opportunities for spreading propaganda and disinformation. The removal of state affiliated media labels may blur the origin of China-supported narratives and combined with the introduction of the blue tick subscription, which is supposed to provide better visibility to the content, may contribute to China-linked accounts reaching a wider audience and garnering higher engagement. Similarly, other loopholes in Twitter management policies and poor detection mechanisms in the case of the Chinese language may allow China-related accounts to spread their content unimpeded.

Author



Veronika Blablová is a Data Analyst at China-focused projects Map-InfluenCE and CHOICE, which have been designed and coordinated by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), Czech Republic. She is also a Project Coordinator of the Future CHOICE programme, mentoring a new generation of China scholars from Central and Eastern Europe. Veronika programs in Python and uses Power BI to gather, clean, analyse and visualise data in order to bring evidence on various China-related topics, ranging from China's information operations to tracking Chinese financing of research of key and emerging technologies at Central European academic institutions. She participated in the DFRLab's Fall 2022 Digital Sherlock training focused on open source investigative techniques and social media monitoring. Veronika graduated from Security and Strategic Studies at the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, and initially joined AMO as a Research Assistant in September 2020, contributing to a large-scale discourse analysis of Chinese propaganda in Central European media. During her studies, she interned at the Czech Embassy in Lithuania and the Czech Television and volunteered at non-profit human rights organisations Amnesty International and Egyptian Front for Human Rights. Her diploma thesis focused on Chinese external propaganda, specifically narratives spread by CGTN and its multiple language variations.

✉ veronika.blablova@amo.cz [@VBlablova](https://twitter.com/VBlablova)

About MapInfluenCE

The publication was prepared within the MapInfluenCE (previously known as ChinInfluenCE) project, which maps China and Russia'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' 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.

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Footnotes

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