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Geopolitical symptoms of COVID-19: Narrative battles within the Eastern Partnership

The spread of the latest Coronavirus strain is not simply a health crisis. It has long taken on a geopolitical dimension. China and Russia are engaged in a ‘global battle of narratives’ over who is the most generous international power. In the geopolitical competition for Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, the European Union (EU) struggles to cut a good figure. The COVID-19 crisis could bring an EaP crisis.

As countries around the world scale up efforts to prevent the overwhelming of their health systems, a global form of ‘health diplomacy’ is taking shape. China and Russia are challenging the EU in a battle of narratives to win the hearts and minds of those most vulnerable to the virus by delivering the most medical aid and equipment. In this battle, not only actions, but also perceptions decide who the winners and losers are.

The ‘masks policy’ also targets the EaP, which is a multilateral framework developed by the EU involving countries from Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. These countries are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and its side effects, including widespread disinformation. As the virus is here to stay for an unpredictable amount of time, the unfolding crisis might affect the EU’s credibility and attractiveness with long-term negative consequences for the EaP.

The EU's credibility and attractiveness on trial – COVID-19 as a stress test

The EU's reaction to COVID-19 is unlikely to be considered a point of reference by EaP countries. In the absence of an EU-wide response mechanism, Member States displayed a lack of unity and coordination in the early days of the pandemic. Borders re-acquired their ancient meaning of protective walls against foreign threats, which came with a high price tag. Unevenly and independently from one another, EU countries have restricted the right to free movement, one of the most emblematic achievements of European integration.

In contrast, China's allegedly [effective crisis response](#) is likely to be perceived as a better alternative. At the same time, Russian authorities report low numbers of infections and reject local media reports, indicating COVID-19 might be spreading fast, as [fake news](#). This might raise many eyebrows in Western Europe. However, EaP countries, which are geographically closer to Russia and more exposed to its state-controlled media, are prone to choosing another interpretation: whereas in the EU everything is chaotic, China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin have everything under control.

This perception could reboot the continuing competition between democratic and authoritarian governance models. Transparent, yet lengthy, decision-making processes, in which individual freedoms and collective security must be carefully weighed to ensure each measure's proportionality, are tested against those allowing less time-consuming, yet freedom-constraining, decisions without checks and balances. To deal effectively with crises, democracies must proclaim states of emergency granting the authorities powers that clash with the very democratic principles underpinning

them: restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly, privacy and the right to vote. While democracies demonstrate that they cannot contain the spread without resorting to such measures, authoritarian systems seem to experience their finest hour.

This narrative that autocracies are 'better equipped' to deal with crises finds a particularly fertile ground in post-Soviet countries with a preference for 'strong' leaders, limited media pluralism and independence and a weak civil society. In Belarus and Azerbaijan, strongmen like [Lukashenko](#) and [Aliyev](#) have decided to follow Russia's way of dealing with the crisis. In countries with semi-functioning democracies such as Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, China and Russia's allegedly successful crisis management may well enhance their 'soft power' at the expense of the EU.

Political leaders from the EaP could also be inspired by examples from within the EU. [Viktor Orbán](#) from Hungary, [Boyko Borisov](#) from Bulgaria and [Mateusz Morawiecki](#) from Poland are misusing the 'temporary' restrictive measures to further their nationalist and populist agenda. First signs of such a negative spill-over are already visible in Moldova. The country's pro-Russian President Igor Dodon, who faces re-election later this year, has declared a [state of emergency](#) whose material and temporal scope of application goes beyond what would be necessary and could target '[unwanted media opinion](#)'.

Public relations battle – room for improvement in EU communications strategy

The EU is losing the information battle, triggered by China and Russia, over who is the most generous international partner in the EaP. It is true that on 30 March 2020 the

EU announced an [emergency support package](#) amounting to €840 million to tackle the virus and its short- and medium-term effects. This assistance is of great importance since all EaP countries, to a varying degree, suffer from a weak healthcare system, lack administrative capacities and have limited budgetary room for maneuver to cushion the shock for their economies.

However, a golden rule for successful public relations is ‘to get your story out first’. Earlier than the EU, China and Russia announced they would deliver aid for [Moldova](#) and [Ukraine](#) amidst the global scramble for medical and personal protective equipment. At that point, Schengen Area Member States had already decided on [closing the external borders](#) to their Eastern neighbours for an initial period of 30 days. From one day to the next, the suspension of visa-free travel for Georgian, Moldovan and Ukrainian citizens puts the most tangible benefit of the EaP on hold.

Another factor in effective public diplomacy is the power of visual content, which is intuitive and easy to retrieve. Whereas the loads of supplies covered with Chinese flags, the trucks decorated with Russian-Italian flags and the medical staff descending military planes engrave themselves on people’s memories, Commission announcements built around dry figures are less able to win over hearts and minds. Even though EU assistance will likely turn out more effective, both in terms of quantity and [quality](#), China and Russia have so far shown they know better how to maximize the geopolitical cost-benefit ratio.

Western societies are likely to debunk China and Russia’s ostentatiously energetic deliveries of masks, tests and ventilation machines as media-effective [Trojan horses](#) in a battle for geopolitical influence and

nation branding. EaP societies, in contrast, might be happy to take up the narrative that, while European solidarity initially appeared to be a rare commodity, China and Russia generously helped them in their darkest hour.

Looking ahead – avoiding the crisis post-crisis

Global recession, destabilized national security, social tensions – the expected effects of COVID-19 are already blowing wind in the sails of [globalization critics](#). As [in the past](#), in times of great struggle, human nature tends to retreat to the perceived comfort of its own small community. If European integration is understood as globalization on a small scale, then unsettling times await the EaP. While ‘social distancing’ is the command of the hour, neither EaP countries nor the EU can afford neighborhood distancing.

The strategic relevance of the EaP will not vanish once the COVID-19 crisis is over. The framework is of high importance for the aspirations of reform-minded EaP countries to become European-style democracies with a functioning rule of law framework and access to the EU internal market. This refers in particular to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which have signed highly beneficial Association Agreements. For these countries integration with Europe will remain a priority after COVID-19. The EU’s external policy objective of creating stability and prosperity at its borders, an EaP priority, will even take on more relevance since the virus is expected to have a particularly strong impact on the EU’s Eastern neighborhood.

Therefore, the EU should, first, stop conceptualizing the EaP as a ‘good deed’. Decision-makers should be reminded that the EaP is founded on the premise that the EU and its neighborhood are

interdependent. Exporting stability and prosperity costs less than importing instability and poverty. Just as the EU is not a good Samaritan but rather a community of interests, so the EaP is not an altruistic project but an investment whose returns will impact – positively or negatively – the EU itself. In the battle of narratives, the EU cannot afford to lose the EaP.

Second, the EU should include strategic communications as a separate priority item within its [agenda for 2019-2024](#). Strategic communications at institutional level would imply better transmission of information on EU actions, clearer definition of narratives and more decisively countering disinformation/tackling misinformation. Instead of [‘listening’ first](#), the Commission's Directorate-General Communication (DG COMM) should become more pro-active and focus on advertising and marketing its messages. The EU's messages need to be simple, comprehensible and widely disseminated. Juxtaposing the EU's reaction and China's active narrative-shaping in the COVID-19 crisis clearly shows that the EU is unable to 'sell itself', with a likely impact on public opinion for years to come. This is a serious blow for the von der Leyen Commission, whose key objective is to be a [‘geopolitical Commission’](#) and create a stronger Europe in the world.

Third, the EU's credibility, marked by the degree of its success in upholding democracy, rule of law and human rights within its borders, is of paramount importance for its ability to be a transformative power and to promote European values and norms beyond its borders. How can the EU credibly and legitimately ask its Eastern neighbours to comply with European values, if Member States refuse to do so? When EU countries misuse the current crisis and decide to play with democratic rules, rather than by them,

the Commission should swiftly and resolutely make use of the legal toolbox on hand. This includes the [Cooperation and Verification Mechanism \(CVM\)](#), [Rule of Law Framework](#), [infringement proceedings](#) before the European Court of Justice and, as a last resort, [Art. 7 of the Treaty on the European Union](#). As this toolbox is far from adequate, the crisis should be turned into an opportunity to engage in an all-encompassing dialogue on new instruments, which could then be successfully exported to the EaP. Protecting EU founding values requires continuous, enhanced and cumulative engagement on behalf of the supranational institutions of the Union, the Member States and EU citizens. Rather than adopting a [“nobody's perfect”](#) approach, the EU must lead by example.

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