

How Are China and Russia Responding to and Capitalizing on the Coronavirus Crisis?

GMF Experts

As the coronavirus pandemic spread from China to Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world, all governments scrambled to try to contain it or at least slow it down to avoid healthcare services becoming overwhelmed as they have in some places. While these efforts are still playing out and the pandemic will remain a global challenge for months at least, the repercussions for international politics are being hotly discussed. One key part of this discussion is a battle of narratives about whether authoritarian or democratic political systems are best suited for dealing with the pandemic. Below GMF experts on China, on Russia, and on authoritarian disinformation give their views on how these two authoritarian powers—one where the coronavirus originated and one where the authorities initially tried to downplay the threat—are attempting to shape the international narratives about the pandemic to their advantage.

A Double-Edged Sword for China

It is still unclear that China's government is meaningfully capitalizing on the crisis. Even now, it is fighting a rearguard action to push back against the opprobrium that it has faced internally and externally over its handling of the critical early stages of the coronavirus's spread. This has been a real legitimacy crisis for the Chinese Communist Party and for Xi Jinping's entire governing model, and Beijing's primary aim has been to counteract that narrative. That it has been partly successful reflects the immediacy of countries' needs. China now has the medical-supply capacity that most others lack, placing it in an essential role. Politicians and analysts alike have also magnified the "China as savior" story as a counterpoint to leadership failings elsewhere, whether as a genuine critique, as an attack line against their existing targets (such as the EU), or as a means to shame others into upping their game. But the Chinese government's efforts to take advantage of this through propaganda and disinformation have been a double-edged sword, eliciting a backlash even from many foreign officials and political leaders who would happily have suspended the politics of blame during the crisis itself. As a result, Beijing is also fighting on a second front against criticism of its "aggressive" information tactics, and the deficiencies of the masks and tests it has supplied, in addition to all the questions around its original culpability. As on so many other issues, there is a pervasive sense of lack of reciprocity—where European assistance to China during the peak of its own outbreak was given discreetly, at the Chinese government's request, its own provision of supplies has been politically theatrical, from soaring "Health Silk Road" videos to boxes of face masks from Huawei. The contrast to a decade ago during the eurozone crisis is striking. Then, China's modestly helpful behind-the-scenes role earned it a lot of credit at an existential

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moment for the European project. This time Beijing's behavior has exemplified the argument that it is at least as much a systemic rival as a partner.

Andrew Small, senior transatlantic fellow, Asia program

Russia Sees its Worldview Vindicated

Russia clearly perceives the coronavirus pandemic as a welcome opportunity to advance its systemic rivalry with Western democracies. The Kremlin sees its own worldview vindicated that open societies, democratic institutions, and multilateral arrangements are unfit for handling heightening global turmoil, whether it be economic, security, or health crises. Consequently, its propaganda at home and disinformation abroad contrast seeming Western failure with alleged Eastern—in China as much as Russia—success in containing the pandemic. While touting the superiority of its own nationalist and autocratic model of government in the information space, Russia also discovered the soft power of aid deliveries. Directed at core Western democracies, including Italy and the United States, as well as to fledgling ones, such as Serbia, these supplies of medical materiel and personnel are to portray Russia as a decisive and benign actor. Besides these propagandistic openings, the current epidemic hands Russia further opportunities. One of these is utter distraction from the many controversies facing the Kremlin. Whether the dramatic spat over oil production, the Syrian tragedy, the extension of President Vladimir Putin's rule, or the socioeconomic situation in Russia, all these issues have effectively disappeared behind the coronavirus. Another effect is the severe weakening of Russia's immediate neighbors. All of them are part of what the Kremlin sees as its sphere of influence; most of them find themselves in conflict with Moscow, and none of them will be spared political, economic, and social disruption as a result of the pandemic. With Western partners likely to be absorbed in their own recovery, the Eastern European stage is set for Russia to go on the offensive.

Joerg Forbrig, senior fellow and director for Central and Eastern Europe

China Takes a Page from Russia's Playbook

China is using the coronavirus outbreak to its advantage in the information domain. Its goals appear to be twofold. First, the government aims to highlight the strengths of its response to the crisis, while casting Western governments as comparatively feckless. This is part of a much broader strategy of positioning its governance model as an attractive alternative to liberal democracy. Second, China aims to position itself as a capable partner for the United States' traditional allies in Europe at a moment when anxieties about the absence of U.S. leadership run high. It does all this while casting doubt about the origins of the virus. To do that, it appears to be taking a page out of Russia's playbook. It is using some of the same tactics and putting them to use toward the same goal—sowing doubt. Those tactics include using official channels to propagate multiple, conflicting conspiracy theories—including by amplifying the conspiratorial claims of fringe media outlets—and then using a sprawling state media apparatus to boost them. This marks a shift in China's information-manipulation strategy from one that has traditionally been more subtle—focused on denying critics access to the information space, rather than flooding the information space with content that is false or misleading.

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