

# **RHETORICS OF THE CRISIS**

A GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF FOREIGN POLICY  
COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

The event currently unfolding during the pandemic of COVID-19 requires that we start to sort out facts and thoughts. As a Grassroots Think Tank for Foreign and European Affairs, Polis180 aims to be part of the monitoring of the event and to provide an overview of foreign policy dimensions of the pandemic.

At Polis180, we think that the crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a situation which starkly encapsulates foreign policy narratives and framing strategies. Political leaders' choices of words in foreign communications during this crisis are not anecdotal: they are framings of the reality and reveal the way in which governments perceive their position in a global or regional order and deliver an image of the role they intend to play in it. This publication examines more closely government narratives relating to COVID-19 as frames supporting their attitudes towards other global or regional actors and as revealing political agendas. This publication presents the foreign policy framing in twelve countries on five continents.

We chose to react swiftly to the event unfolding. Most events happening after the end of April were excluded. That is why we will publish an update of this publication in several months' time when the situation should allow retrospective view of the findings published here.

Stay tuned into <http://www.polis180.org/>!

Have a good read!

Bettina Böhm and Claire Saillour

## SUMMARY

### POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE AGE OF TWITTER

This publication highlights patterns of strategic communications aimed at domestic and international audiences. Twitter is an indispensable platform, as public opinion has become the target of global communication. Social media are now spaces where misinformation and disinformation spread; they form the environment in which politicians need to communicate to be heard.

The Nigerian government (page 11) is using Twitter to appease domestic public opinion pressure yet using 'classical' communication channels (press releases) to handle its communications to China with more prudent language. Other governments are using lower-ranking officials to push aggressive narratives – employing a two-tier communication strategy. In Brazil (page 4), President Bolsonaro emphasizes Brazilian-Chinese friendship whilst lower-ranking officials fuel domestic racist and nationalist narratives. China (page 5) is following a similar strategy towards the US. The remarkable porosity between external and domestic communication shows how statements are intentionally placed, especially when they contain manipulative content, like in Iran (page 9).

- Heads of states seem to emphasize solidarity and cooperation, while less prominent politicians get their hands dirty and feed out more conflictual narratives, often addressing the domestic audience.
- Transnational information streams blur the line between statements for domestic and international audiences even further.

The framing of the pandemic is also increasing the visibility of geopolitical ambitions and power shifts.

### COVID-19 ACTS AS A TREND-ACCELERATOR

The pandemic offers a platform for the expression of ambitions for power and the strengthening of strategic influence. The most obvious finding is China's attempt to position itself as a responsible global leader – in opposition to the US. Other countries are seizing the chance to assert regional power aspirations during the crisis, such as Kazakhstan (page 10), India (page 8), France as an influential 'partner' in Africa (page 6) or Poland in countries of the Eastern Partnership (page 12).

Framings of the pandemic mirror current international relations. Mutual recrimination on handling the health crisis is following existing relational patterns. On the one hand, the rhetorical confrontation lies in the rivalry between different political regimes, as can be seen in the US-Chinese blame-game (page 15) or between Russia and the 'West' (page 13). Authoritarian regimes have been presenting an image of friendly multilateralism and efficiency in tackling the pandemic, pointing to the contrast of failures by Western liberal democracies. On the other hand, regional conflicts fueled by nationalism or religious rivalry, for instance between Saudi Arabia and Iran (page 14) or India and Pakistan, are simply being reframed with new COVID-19 vocabulary. States that are subject to sanctions – such as Iran or Russia – both blame the crisis on those restrictions and demand that they be lifted.

- Governments are framing the crisis in pre-existing narratives, diverting attention from their own failures by blaming traditional rivals, fueling these conflicts further.

This publication also makes visible rapidly emerging global power shifts. Despite US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's attempt to regain control over the US image by insisting on global solidarity, the national-isolationist positions of President Donald Trump seem to give China space to affirm its global leadership ambitions. China is actively communicating about gestures of solidarity, seeking to project a powerful image. President Xi Jinping's speeches underline the country's belief in a globalised and multipolar world. Many governments are careful in their communication about China, such as Brazil and Kazakhstan, who are attempting to strengthen economic and political ties with it. Nigeria also seems to handle relations with China cautiously, in the face of domestic uproar. Open criticism of international organisations such as the World Health Organisation by the US is fueling narratives presenting it as a world power giving up its responsibilities as a global leader. In

this context, the EU seems currently unable to play the role of a third global power and mediator. Will the strongly emphasized European solidarity (see Germany page 7) strengthen its capacity of resilience to the crisis and secure its position as a third global player? This remains to be seen.

- The COVID-19 pandemic might be an accelerator of power shifts in international relations, or simply reveal them.

## 1. BRAZIL

*Isabel Hartwig*

### **President Jair Bolsonaro on 24 March 2020:**

"We reaffirmed our bonds of friendship"<sup>1</sup>

Jair Bolsonaro's election victory marked the beginning of unstable times for Brazil's relationship with China. He announced his policy as no longer being on "friendly terms with communist regimes",<sup>2</sup> but then changed his course once he took office, calling China a "great cooperation partner".<sup>3</sup> Since that country is Brazil's most important trading partner, it is of no surprise that Bolsonaro now stresses their "friendship" in the COVID-19 crisis, giving reassurances that Brazil is standing "in solidarity with China in fighting the epidemic".<sup>4</sup> Given this rhetoric, the diplomatic strategies of his entourage may come as a surprise.

### **Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro on 18 March 2020:**

"Whoever watched Chernobyl will understand what happened. Replace the nuclear plant with the coronavirus and the Soviet dictatorship with the Chinese."<sup>5</sup>

On Twitter, Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president's son, blamed China for spreading the virus. The country accused him of "infecting the friendship" with "a mental virus",<sup>6</sup> thus escalating the situation and forcing Brazil into a position of appeasement. This might allow China to advance its own interests more easily.<sup>7</sup> The Brazilian Chamber of Deputies apologized "for the thoughtless words",<sup>8</sup> while Bolsonaro claimed he had "never offended the Chinese people," calling this view "totally unreasonable."<sup>9</sup>

### **Education Minister Abraham Weintraub on 6 April 2020:**

"Geopolitically, who can come out stronger, in relative terms, from this world crisis?"<sup>10</sup>

Brazil's Education Minister Abraham Weintraub described the pandemic as China's geopolitical strategy, adding a racist dimension by mocking a supposedly Chinese accent. What looks like an ill-considered attack could serve a purpose for Jair Bolsonaro, who lost support for trivializing the virus. Weintraub's allegations divert the attention to China and sought to mobilise the president's supporters.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, the hashtag #TradeBlockadeOnChinaNow has been trending.

Jair Bolsonaro himself kept remarkably quiet, but tweeted about a phone call with China's president, stressing their "friendship", "commercial ties" as well as "information and actions"<sup>12</sup> regarding COVID-19. It becomes clear that their relationship is rooted in Brazil's economic but also medical dependency, since China supports Brazil with essential equipment. Strengthening this "friendship" will thus likely be important to stabilise Brazil's economy and public health, as well as Bolsonaro's power.

## 2. CHINA

*Claire Saillour*

### **President Xi Jinping on 26 March 2020:**

“At such a moment, it is imperative for the international community to strengthen confidence, act with unity and work together in a collective response. We must comprehensively step up international cooperation and foster greater synergy so that humanity as one could win the battle against such a major infectious disease.”<sup>13</sup>

Xi emphasizes unity and cooperation against a common enemy, shifting the focus away from China as the country of origin of the virus. He picks up the narrative of a new world-order under a Chinese initiative, one that he has pursued since the introduction of the Belt and Road policy in 2013. At the same time, Xi’s narrative expands his role as a considerate Father of the Nation to an international level.

### **Spokesperson Zhao Lijian on 12 March 2020:**

“When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!”

In a now infamous Tweet, Zhao Lijian, spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, raises the question of US responsibility for the virus.<sup>14</sup> This fits into a strategy of blurring China’s responsibility for the global pandemic. It indicates that besides the narrative of unity, Chinese officials are targeting views that question Chinese intentions or aid and they are trying to exert influence on foreign leaders. In April, Chinese diplomats contacted German ministries and their employees, seeking to encourage them to make more positive statements about China’s COVID-19 strategy.<sup>15</sup> Further, there are signs of coordinated troll-campaigns linked to China on social media around the globe, praising China’s efforts<sup>16</sup> and spreading a very pro-China perspective.

### **Spokesperson Hua Chunying on 16 April 2020:**

“Chinese medical supplies arrived in South Africa, with love, as expressed by local newspaper. We always stand together with our African brothers & sisters.”<sup>17</sup>

main donor of development aid for African countries (a position historically taken by the EU) and continuing the narrative of international solidarity. This campaign faced massive criticism when reports of alleged mistreatment of Africans in Southern China by officials came to light.<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese government has taken the chance to seize control over the global COVID-19 narrative:<sup>19</sup> China is presenting itself as the victorious survivor of the virus who is now offering massive medical assistance, know-how and equipment to countries in need. The COVID-19 pandemic has given China the chance to introduce itself to the world as a responsible global leader and to oppose US dominance.

China is reinforcing its ambitions to become the

### 3. FRANCE

*Esther Luigi and Claire Saillour*

**President Emmanuel Macron on 25 March 2020:**

“Thank you to our German, Swiss, Luxembourgish neighbours, who have taken into their care around thirty severely ill patients, as we had ourselves done a few weeks ago for our Italian neighbours. This is what true Europe also is: solidarity.”<sup>20</sup>

The French government is praising EU “solidarity”. “Success-story”<sup>21</sup> statements issued along with European partners at the end of March highlight (sometimes symbolic) bilateral solidarity gestures, stressing the role of EU coordination. This narrative aims to balance the sheer absence of such solidarity in the first weeks of the crisis and the strictly domestic concern of some member states, including France. It also aims to counter the dominating impression of bad management and division between Member States, which had been fueled from both outside<sup>22</sup> and within<sup>23</sup> the EU.

At the same time, France is calling for stronger fiscal ‘solidarity’ when advocating a European response to the pandemic. The disagreement between EU Member States about the form this fiscal solidarity should take – ‘Coronabonds’ or other measures like the ESM – highlights that the meaning of solidarity itself is multifold.

**President Emmanuel Macron on 13 April 2020:**

“We have to help our neighbours in Africa [...] by massively cancelling their debt.”<sup>24</sup>

The notion that France should support ‘Africa’ is deeply rooted in the French narrative of a ‘special’ relationship with the continent, and France’s position is thus unsurprising. France needs to appear as a reliable strategic partner for African countries, and it has been advocating within the EU and globally<sup>25</sup> for big creditors<sup>26</sup> to accept broad relief for bilateral debt. The French government’s rhetoric during this crisis is thus carefully crafting an image of a global player that cares about its partners.

A key foreign policy aim of Macron’s presidency is to strengthen the EU under the influence of French leadership. Presenting France as the European ‘champion of solidarity’ during the COVID-19 crisis is in line with these efforts. At the

same time, France is protecting its traditional interests in and through the African continent, using the momentum to gain influence and to subtly challenge China’s image as a friendly superpower both in the EU and on the African continent, against a background of diplomatic tension between France and China.<sup>27</sup>



#### 4. GERMANY

*Luisa Kern and Lukas Hochscheidt*

**Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas and Minister of Finance Olaf Scholz on 6 April 2020:**

“We need a clear expression of European solidarity in the corona pandemic. Germany is willing.”<sup>28</sup>

The joint letter of Finance Minister Olaf Scholz and Heiko Maas, Minister of Foreign Affairs, – both members of the Social-Democratic Party – reflects the ambiguous approach to the EU Germany adopted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the one hand, the German government wished to be perceived as strongly pro-European, taking the lead in European debates and keeping the Union together. On the other hand, since the 2008 financial crisis, Chancellor Angela Merkel had repeatedly opposed stronger fiscal solidarity measures in Europe, advocating austerity policies and rejecting any kind of direct transfers. This time again, Germany was one of the strongest opponents of a common European debt mechanism (Coronabonds) as a means of budgetary support for the most affected member states.

**Minister of Finance Olaf Scholz on 19 May 2020:**

“Winston Churchill once said: ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste.’ We should use this crisis as an opportunity to advance European integration.”<sup>29</sup>

Almost two months later we can perceive a much more direct and less hesitant approach to handling the crisis. The French-German recovery fund proposal from 18 May marks a sharp and ambitious U-turn in the German policy towards the EU.<sup>30</sup>

This new approach will have important consequences for Germany’s reputation among its fellow European partners. Due to its categoric opposition to any fiscal solidarity taking the form of common debt mechanisms, Germany’s reputation – especially among Southern European countries – had initially suffered badly in the course of the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> What solidarity (and ‘friendship’) meant for the German government was perceived as merely symbolic action by its European neighbours.<sup>32</sup>

Now that Germany has changed course on the issue of common European debt, its neighbours are likely to change their perception as well. The French-German proposal proves most of the previous criticism wrong:

Moving away from the camp of opponents of a more integrated fiscal union (the so-called ‘frugal states’), Germany now assumes its joint responsibility alongside France to put Europe back on track. This more adequately represents the “clear expression of European solidarity” pledged back in April.

## 5. INDIA

*Paul Dießelberg*

**Minister for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi on 26 April 2020:**

“The Tablighi Jamaat [virus] spread is a Talibani crime.”<sup>33</sup>

Prime Minister Modi’s nationalistic government has reacted hostilely to Tablighi Jamaat, a multinational Muslim missionary movement that – according to the government – would support a “corona jihad”.<sup>34</sup> This fits well with the succession of political and legal hostilities against Indian Muslims and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Modi’s archenemy, as well as the continued occupation of the isolated and deeply contested Kashmir region.

**President Narendra Modi on 13 March 2020:**

“Together, we can set an example to the world, and contribute to a healthier planet.”<sup>35</sup>

While the governing Bharatiya Janata Party backed harsh anti-minority measures during the pandemic, it also wants to play an internationally supportive role, positioning India as a leader in crafting global responses to the coronavirus. This is especially the case inside the heavily conflicted South-Asian Regional Organization.<sup>36</sup>

The still ongoing raid on Jammu and Kashmir, a new citizenship law that blatantly discriminates against Muslims as a signal against Pakistan and now the measures and rhetoric to fight the coronavirus: Against this background Modi’s Hindu-nationalistic government exploits COVID-19 for the implementation of his regional objectives. He calls for the containment of terrorism coming from Pakistan via Kashmir and India’s own detachment from the region to become a stand-alone world leader, especially in light of the ongoing rivalry with China.

By presenting India as a leader in developing global responses to COVID-19, while countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan or Iran are failing to do so, Modi tries to achieve a single goal: India’s hegemony in South Asia. While putting national problems on hold, he is hoping to build an excellent international reputation for his country. At the same time, India is looking north-east towards China. Although the two superpowers have had a difficult relationship in the past (especially with Pakistan, where China is actively investing), they now want to “emerge stronger [with] new heights after the pandemic”.<sup>37</sup>

Islamophobia is spreading in society, but India presents itself as a regional conflict solver and promotes an image of progress, thus showing that future global power competitions will not take place between just the US and China but will include India. Whether India’s growing global and regional influence will change the balance in the global power struggle between China and the West will only become apparent after the pandemic.

## 6. IRAN

J.S.

### Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on 22 March 2020:

“The US govt has declared a few times that they are ready to help #Iran with medicines to fight the #CoronaOutbreak. That’s strange. Firstly, based on the words of your own officials, you face shortages in the US. [...]”<sup>38</sup> “You’re accused of having created #Coronavirus. [...] You could be giving medicines that spread the virus or cause it to remain. Experience shows you can’t be trusted & you do such things.”<sup>39</sup>

Khamenei’s statement is ripe with conspiracy views, attributing the outbreak of the virus to the US. Focusing on the onset of the crisis, Khamenei is denying any responsibility on the Iranian regime’s side. His wording reflects a deep mistrust and hostility towards the US. Anti-American positions have been a cornerstone of the Iranian regime’s foreign policy narrative.<sup>40</sup>

### Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on 29 March 2020:

“US has gone from sabotage & assassinations to waging an economic war & #EconomicTerrorism on Iranians—to #MedicalTerror amidst #covid19iran. This even ‘exceeds what would be permissible on the battlefield.’ STOP aiding WAR CRIMES. STOP obeying IMMORAL & ILLEGAL US sanctions.”<sup>41</sup>

Zarif is framing the current crisis in Iran as a consequence of US sanctions, which are seen to be part of an extensive history of anti-Iranian US-American actions. Stopping short of sharing Khamenei’s conspiracy views, Zarif is describing the sanctions as “medical terror” and their consequences as “war crimes”. Zarif is trying to gain support from a broad international audience for disregard of the US sanctions, emphasizing their unlawfulness.

The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to be one of the countries worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>42</sup> Being a centre of the initial outbreak of the virus, Iran is the worst-hit Middle Eastern nation. The current [11 May 2020] number of officially reported cases of COVID-19 has reached 109,000, more than 6,600 people have already died.<sup>43</sup>

The current situation presents an unforeseen opportunity for the regime to call on the international community to put pressure on the US to lift the sanctions. Refusing all aid offers from the US, Iranian officials have been keen to praise China for its support, indicating a further strengthening of those relations<sup>44</sup> (in total Iran has received help from dozens of countries<sup>45</sup>). The two

statements are in line with the fundamental anti-American stance of the Iranian regime. Stressing that it is the victim of unjust sanctions and is a strong advocate for international cooperation, the Iranian regime is trying to use the crisis to activate global support for the relief of all sanctions.

## 7. KAZAKHSTAN

*Luisa Podsadny*

**President Qasym-Jomart Toqayev on 16 March 2020:**  
 “We are witnessing the extremely negative impact of the coronavirus on the global economy. In fact, we are talking about a transformation of the entire global economic system.”<sup>46</sup>

In his television address, the Kazakh president frames the COVID-19 crisis as primarily an economic crisis. The Kazakh economy is suffering badly from falling prices for oil, which is Kazakhstan’s most important export commodity. However, a global transformation is something from which Kazakhstan, as an emerging economy, might profit.

**Qasym-Jomart Toqayev on 11 April 2020:**  
 “I sincerely thank Mr Jack Ma, worldwide known entrepreneur and good friend of our people, for his generous humanitarian assistance to my country. He in fact has shown that solidarity matters a lot in these extremely complex circumstances. Together we shall definitely overcome.”<sup>47</sup>

Kazakhstan is among other countries profiting from the donation of essential medical equipment by the Chinese business magnate Jack Ma. Kazakhstan is moving closer to China, repeatedly praising its solidarity and handling of the crisis.

**Qasym-Jomart Toqayev in a phone call with President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon on 9 April 2020:**  
 “Kazakhstan is the second largest trading partner of Tajikistan, and we are interested in further increasing the bilateral trade turnover, in particular, through mutual supplies of food products.”<sup>48</sup>

In a regional context, Kazakhstan means to preserve its status as the dominant player in Central Asia. It does so primarily by talking of intensifying its – so far rather limited<sup>49</sup> – trade relations with its Central Asian neighbours, such as Tajikistan.

The Kazakh regime, including the first Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev, does not communicate extensively on the foreign policy dimension of the COVID-19 crisis. Kazakhstan’s general calls for international solidarity are in line with the country’s concept of a multi vector foreign policy.<sup>50</sup> However, repeated references to China suggest that the COVID-19 crisis might strengthen the already growing Chinese influence in Kazakhstan. This impression is reinforced by the absence of Russia

and the Eurasian Economic Union in Kazakhstan’s crisis communication. Within Central Asia, Kazakhstan strengthens its claim to regional dominance by showing its diplomatic skills and good intentions.

## 8. NIGERIA

*Bettina Böhm*

### Minister of Foreign Affairs Geoffrey Onyeama on 9 April 2020:

“Invited the Chinese Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr Zhou Pingjian, to communicate @NigeriaGov’s extreme concern at allegations of maltreatment of Nigerians in Guangzhou, #China and called for immediate Chinese Govt. intervention.”<sup>51</sup>

Nigeria has been one of many African governments addressing COVID-19 news reports of Nigerian and other African nationals being subject to bad, alleged racist, treatment in Chinese cities such as Guangzhou.<sup>52</sup> Videos that circulated rapidly on national TV and social media put pressure on the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Geoffrey Onyeama to meet with the Ambassador of China to Nigeria. The issue was at first framed as a communication problem: “[Nigerian] officials in China made it clear that the communication could and should have been better”,<sup>53</sup>

### Minister of Foreign Affairs Geoffrey Onyeama on 24 April 2020:

“As the World’s largest black nation, it behoves on us to defend the dignity of blacks and Africans anywhere in the world”<sup>54</sup>

Criticised for his initial mild diplomatic reaction, Onyeama met with the Chinese Ambassador three more times and presented Nigeria as champion of the rights and dignity of all Africans. However, the choice of words used was marked by restraint as the Chinese ambassador was “invited” to “further deliberate” on the situation. Amidst persistent domestic outrage on social media, illustrated by the key-word #chinamustexplain, Onyeama went on to speak of “disappointment” in the context of Nigeria’s “excellent relations with the people and Government of China”,<sup>55</sup>

There is an obvious difference between the way the Nigerian government framed the alleged treatment of Nigerian nationals to Chinese officials (presenting it first as a communication issue, then inviting the ambassador to “deliberate further”), and the way it communicated with its domestic audience (explaining it as an unacceptable situation, one to which the

Nigerian government was responding firmly and communicating clearly its disappointment to the Chinese authorities).

This tension can be partly explained by Nigeria’s ongoing debt-relief negotiations with China, to whom it owes 10% of the national debt.<sup>56</sup> Oil is Nigeria’s main commodity export, but with prices plummeting its revenue is vanishing.<sup>57</sup> The way in which the crisis unfolds may symbolize an unequal relationship, but this situation should also be of concern to China: Nigeria is a pivotal partner for China’s “South-South” strategy, and at the moment 70% of Nigerians hold positive opinions of China.<sup>58</sup> The current tension could affect this very positive image, one which China is carefully crafting with development aid, medical diplomacy, and economic support.

## 9. POLAND

*Ricarda Lindau*

**Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on 11 April 2020:**

“Polish-Italian friendship is intertwined with our history. Poland would be a different country were it not for the heritage of Italy, which shaped our culture and art so profoundly. Our national anthem emphasizes the unique role of Italy as a place from where Poles could embark on the path to Polish independence.”<sup>59</sup>

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki expressed his solidarity with Italians in an article for the newspaper *La Repubblica*. Poland’s conservative Law and Justice government makes use of historical narratives in its foreign policy, often referring to the heroic martyrdom of Poles. During the current crisis, Morawiecki has used positive references as a justification for solidarity with Italy. Italy is, indeed, one of Poland’s top five trading partners, but lags far behind the 25% trade share of Germany.<sup>60</sup> As a non-member of the Eurozone, Poland does not engage publicly in the economic solidarity debate, instead Morawiecki refers to the Renaissance past and shared Catholic faith. There are few actions beyond this symbolic statement, although Poland sent a team of doctors and protective equipment to Italy<sup>61</sup> – but only in early April.<sup>62</sup>

**Minister of Foreign Affairs Jacek Czaputowicz on 8 April 2020:**

“We cannot leave anyone on their own in this crisis. That is why we supported the European Commission’s proposal to reallocate EUR 140 million of Neighbourhood Policy funds for the immediate needs of the EaP countries in their fight against coronavirus. We have also agreed to earmark a portion of the International Visegrad Fund for combating the impact of the pandemic in the partner countries under the V4 East Solidarity programme.”<sup>63</sup>

Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz gave assurances of Poland’s support for the Eastern Partnership countries in a video conference with the other Visegrad countries: Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

The Visegrad Group is an alliance that enhances Czech Republic’s, Hungary’s, Poland’s, and Slovakia’s regional weight within the EU. But even Poland’s borders with these neighbours remain closed until now (with exceptions for daily cross-border commuters).<sup>64</sup> These countries have so far issued only one common response during COVID-19 times with regard to the Eastern Partner-

ship (EaP).<sup>65</sup> Poland was one of the initiators of the project in the neighbourhood region and lobbied for a special focus on EaP countries during an EU video conference of ministers.<sup>66</sup> While the Polish government has shown some solidarity with countries with which it usually has close connections, its main attention during the COVID-19 crisis has been on domestic affairs and the presidential elections – originally scheduled for May 10 but now postponed to a later date.<sup>67</sup>

## 10. RUSSIA

*Dr. Anastasia Vishnevskaya-Mann und Lukas Baake*

### **The Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations on 2 April 2020:**

“We regret that a small group of states championing sanctions-based policy appeared unready to respond to the call of the UN Secretary-General and refused to cast aside politicized approaches and interests.”<sup>68</sup>

This statement presents the Western countries as an inhibiting and hostile factor and an obstacle to international solidarity and cooperation. Russia’s narrative regularly contrasts this with its own benign intentions to help other countries and alleviate the situation in the world. According to this self-image, Russia is a defender of international cooperation as well as an able and potent agent on the international scene, willing to help. Promoting this narrative, Russia has been trying throughout the pandemic to take advantage of the situation in order to improve its bargaining posture and achieve a lifting of sanctions against itself and its allies, including Iran.

### **Russian Foreign Ministry on 12 April 2020:**

“Amid the fast spread of the Coronavirus around the globe we are concerned by the attempts of some states to blame others for the worsening situation domestically. [...] This is exactly how we treat the accusations against the World Health Organization voiced by the US government”.<sup>69</sup>

The Russian government uses every opportunity to present itself as a benevolent promoter of a multipolar world order and a reliable partner, as opposed to the US. America which, so the argument goes, has imposed on the world a unipolar order with itself as a hegemon, but fails to run it with respect and responsibility. In this statement the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses Donald Trump’s accusations against the World Health Organisation in order to promote its own image as an upholder of the global order. Moreover, it stresses how erratic and unreliable the US is.

The statements made during the crisis reinforce two images: that of Russia as a reliable and responsible actor open to international cooperation but surrounded by Western states that value ideological prejudices over mutually beneficial cooperation and that of the US, incapable of sticking to the rules of a multipolar world order. Hence, the narrative during the COVID-19 crisis can be

seen as a continuation of the Russian foreign policy rhetoric before the pandemic.

## 11. SAUDI ARABIA

*Sidra Yousaf und Paul Dießelberg*

**Council of Ministers chaired by King Salman on 20 March 2020:**  
 “Iran bears direct responsibility for the outbreak of corona infection.”<sup>70</sup>

This statement was officially proclaimed at a meeting of the Council of Ministers of Saudi Arabia. With this claim Saudi Arabia wants to highlight the long-standing sectarian tensions in the Persian Gulf that exist between the kingdom and its arch-enemy Iran. Simultaneously, it presents the improbability of any regional cooperation, especially towards the ongoing pandemic.

**Minister of Hajj and Umrah Mohammed Banten on 1 April 2020:**  
 “As we are talking about the global pandemic, from which we have asked God to save us, [...] we have asked our brother Muslims in all countries to wait before doing [Hajj] contracts until the situation is clear.”<sup>71</sup>

In a historic decision, the Minister for Hajj announced that Saudi Arabia has urged up to two million Muslims to wait to participate in the annual Hajj pilgrimage until clarity about the COVID-19 pandemic is achieved. Such an unprecedented step, not taken even during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic or during the MERS epidemic in 2012, increased uncertainty and was met with sharp international criticism from Muslim countries.

Saudi Arabia currently finds itself in an unusual and ambivalent situation concerning its security and power: Riyadh is using the COVID-19 pandemic as a weapon in its ongoing propaganda war, blaming Iran and Qatar (#قطر هي كورونا, “Qatar is Corona”)<sup>72</sup> – and thus the Shia Muslims – for spreading the virus in the Sunni Arab world. This fits in with a series of sharp hostilities between the two powers, as was also demonstrated recently by Iran’s bombing of the Aramco oil fields in September 2019 (“our 9/11”).<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, the kingdom has announced a ceasefire in Yemen, continues to adhere to the Vision 2030 project, has initiated OPEC+ negotiations and presents itself as modern and progressive. In reality, however, Saudi Arabia must admit its own weaknesses: the inconsistency on updates related to Hajj while being scrutinized by 1.8 billion Muslims globally, threatens Saudi Arabia’s historical, cultural and political influence over the Islamic world. Whether a visibly nervous and shaken Saudi Arabia can still become an important partner of

the West or whether it is currently aggravating regional and economic conflicts between the different players in the Middle East, US and Russia, remains to be seen.



## 12. UNITED STATES

*Christoph M. Abels*

**President Donald J. Trump on March 16 2020:**

“The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!”<sup>74</sup>

In this Tweet, Trump refers to the “Chinese Virus” for the first time. By using this term, or similar ones like “Wuhan Virus”, he implicitly blames China for the economic problems the US economy is now facing. The narrative of the Chinese Virus is subsequently being picked up by different US officials. Although Trump has stressed the close cooperation between China and the US,<sup>75</sup> he has reverted to using the term “Wuhan virus”.<sup>76</sup>

Given widespread anti-Chinese sentiments present in large parts of the Trump administration (also seen in the context of the trade dispute), attributing the virus and its fallout to the Chinese supports US viewpoints in what is emerging as a major standoff between China and the US – a new type of cold war, as analysts have recently argued.<sup>77</sup>

**Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on 17 March 2020:**

“I also want to call attention to the Iranian regime’s misinformation campaign surrounding the origination of the Wuhan virus. Instead of focusing on the needs of the Iranian people and accepting genuine offers of support, senior Iranians lied about the Wuhan virus outbreak for weeks.”<sup>78</sup>

Pompeo picks up on two issues here: 1. The ongoing attempt by the Iranian leadership to spread disinformation about the US as being the creator of COVID-19. 2. By using the term “Wuhan virus”, he picks up Trump’s wording and repeats the blaming of China. Both aspects reproduce common enemy stereotypes that are used repeatedly by the Trump administration.

**Mike Pompeo on 11 April 2020:**

“The U.S. is providing a robust assistance package to our close friend and Ally #Italy. Our Italian friends have been working around the clock to contain #COVID19, and this assistance will help bolster their efforts. We will defeat this by #StandingTogether.”<sup>79</sup>

The statement reflects a broader narrative about the US role in the fight against COVID-19. Pompeo said in a press statement, the US has been leading the “world’s public health and humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic”.<sup>80</sup>

US government communication in the current crisis does not fundamentally differ from non-crisis patterns. It stresses the country’s role as a global leader while blaming the usual suspects. Given that China and Iran have arguably made major mistakes in their crisis management, the criticism from the US is not surprising and fundamentally just adds another dimension to pre-existing reasons to criticise these states.

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