



Weekly Briefing

**Albania external relations briefing:
A race against time and information for COVID-19**
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A race against time and information for COVID-19

Introduction

For the end of January and the entire month of February, the most frequent headline in Albania was coronavirus. COVID-19, as it is now scientifically named, withdrew everyone's attention while trying to make sense of what was going on in China and specifically in Wuhan. As tragic images from China were flooding the news circles, uncertainties and fears were the keyword to every conversation. In the interconnected world of the 21st century, it is normal for information to "globalize" in real-time. Nevertheless, how reliable and verifiable is the information that crosses language barriers, many filters (perhaps biased) and finally gets the nuances of sensation for the sake of a catchy headline? In the midst of this informative confusion, where most of the outlets are inclined to create heat rather than shed some light into real events, the perplexity of everyone was tangible and transparent.

Speaking about China and on China: perspectives from Albania in the heat of COVID-19

Analysis about China and on China should be two very different concepts! Certainly, anyone who has an opinion, insights, ideas or otherwise can speak about China, but this type of information remains at a perceptive level. Once again, globalized information, with all its importance and advantages, many times cannot be objective, especially in areas where quarantine is applied. Whether in Europe (or in the entire world), it is accepted or not, the only based-on-real facts information in a situation like this comes from Chinese sources. Those who are present at the forefront of the fight against this epidemic are the ones whose information should be taken at face value: doctors, volunteers, Wuhan citizens, service members, Chinese online platforms, academic reports and of course official sources of the Chinese Government.

In a country like Albania, where little is known about China, the narrative about PRC is more speculative than based on facts. The influx of alarmist views flooded the country and these voices achieved what they were aiming for: fear. Although geographically far from the outburst area, for Albanians the news was initially met with panic, skepticism, and definitely, a series of conspiracy theories that sought to discover the starting point or "patient zero".

The first phase of news coming from China where in the majority of the cases a mere translation of what was written in the western media, no direct information from Beijing was displayed and the official discourse coming from Chinese Government sources was sidelined. It was bizarre to realize that suddenly everyone was "an expert" and started commenting about

China – but on what grounds? In the first days of the outbreak, what was considered news was a copy-paste of the European media outlets, then Albanians living in China were the sources of commentaries and analysis and then, at least, declarations from Chinese authorities were made public. However, even when Chinese sources were cited, the texts were coming from other countries commentaries and media outlets (Euronews, BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, RAI, etc.) it is difficult to find in Albania an article citing Xinhua, People’s Daily, CCTV or any other Chinese based information. This was not due to a language barrier, since all the above mention have English language platforms - it is impossible not to realize that there is tendency, a very biased one, when it comes to understanding China, even in times of crisis like the one living in 2020.

Trying to make sense of China through the difficult times of the COVID-19 is distorted and misguided; trying to make sense of country’s reality via information channels of others, is absolutely wrong.

Official sources – speaking on China for the Albanian audience

There have been two cases where the Chinese Embassy has expressed an official position on the situation specifically for the Albanian audience: on February the 3rd, H.E. Ambassador Zhou Ding published an article entitled "*Together to maintain global health security*", released in the top three newspapers in Albanian language (Panorama, Gazeta Shqiptare, Shekulli). In his paper, Ambassador Zhou reassured Albanians that China's maximum efforts to prevent the spread of the epidemic are a priority. The Chinese Embassy is maintaining close and continuous communication with relevant Albanian Government institutions in response to the epidemic. Currently, there are not many Albanian citizens in China, but the Chinese government and people will make every effort to maintain their security and resolve their concerns in a timely manner - Ambassador Zhou continued.

On February the 13th, an event with the theme “*Solidarity for the Fight against the New Coronavirus Epidemic*” organized by the Chinese Embassy and the Municipality of Tirana, took place in the capital where the Mayor and the Ambassador stressed the importance of solidarity and support in times of need. In the event, held in the heart of Tirana, Ambassador Zhou highlighted the determination of the Chinese Government into defeating the epidemic by stating: “*The Chinese people have endured all sorts of difficulties in their thousands of years of history, but have never failed. We are a people with cohesion, perseverance, wisdom and reflective spirit. Once we overcome this difficulty, we will become stronger.*”

As in Albania, the general mood towards China is quite friendly, it was important to enhance support and stress the solidarity in a single event. In addition, it resonated with the

public because many news outlets of visual and written media were present and by all considerations, it was welcomed and applauded. After some days of the COVID-19 becoming secondary news and headlines, everything changed when the first cases in Italy were conformed, then, the conversation and the attention shifted, again.

When the “threat” is close to home

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), restricting the movement of goods and people seemed to have worked in China, where the rate of new infections has plunged. However, by the end of February, the cases in the nearby Italy started increasing, and then the tones changed, the comments changed and of course, the attitude changed.

The emergence of Italy as a new” hub” for the virus alarmed Albanians, again. The large number of Albanians living in Italy was of course the first concern, but also the interconnectivity in logistics (by air, land and sea) is indeed intense, so the possibilities of spreading rise at maximum levels. But how was the Italian narrative absorbed in Albania and how it is different when compared to the discourse about China?

First and foremost, the official declarations of the Italian Government were translated and made public immediately, the Italian press and commentaries were made available in real time, and this time around, the alarmism was subtler and more delicate.

Naturally, for Albanians, Italy is a well-known territory, mindset and reality, and understanding how Italy was reacting to the spread of the virus was easy. In contrast, China for the majority of Albanians is a distant, unknown reality – and when the unknown is accompanied with fear, as the saying goes - fear of the unknown is the cornerstone of irrationality.

As China races against time to defeat COVID-19, there is another battle to fight, the one on misperceptions

Sadly enough, to this public health emergency in China, some attitudes, comments and opinions from the rest of the world has been neither cordial, nor fair. It is our argument here that an extremely difficult situation like the one under COVID-19 just unveiled what the real “China-antagonists” had to say or comment, usually with no Chinese experience in their background, those sentiments were there, now they just had a chance to express themselves. The viral nature of social media was exacerbating ignorance and due to this trend, stigmatizing of entire communities were at the order of the day.

Fueling animosity and prejudice towards a country is mistaken anyway; fueling biased and xenophobic ideas in times of catastrophes is wicked and evil. However, these voices remained at the margins and did not have any large impact – humanity, after all, prevailed.

On the other hand, another symbolism of misperception on China is how the building of two hospitals in just over a week was perceived with astonishment, while for foreigners who have a first-hand experience with China or lived there, this was something normal knowing the construction and engineering capacities of large-scale projects in PRC.

Conclusions

As the whole world is committed to express solidarity to the Chinese people, it is only fair to state that the gigantic measures taken within the Chinese territory are impressive and appear effective. As WHO expert Bruce Aylward, also a top Canadian epidemiologist, spoke out on China's epidemic response, after visiting Wuhan on the lockdown: *"I just thought it's so important that we recognize the people of Wuhan and China -it is should be recognized, the world is in your debt."*

This too shall pass, as all human conditions have a temporary nature! While the fight against COVID-19 in China is the order of the day, a distinct salute should be given to the first responders; doctors, nurses, military staff and more, who did not spare their own life for the sake of helping others. Those are the faces of the real heroes in modern time, as they pay the ultimate sacrifice for their country and their people.