

FRAMING CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

the unexpected power of local
narratives

About the report

This report is the collective work of a team of people spread across multiple countries and working in time zones spanning more than half of the world. Desk research was supported by colloquia and research assistance from the Global Voices community.

For citation purposes, the report can be attributed to the [Civic Media Observatory](#), Global Voices. Any errors or omissions should be addressed to info@globalvoices.org.

A project of [Global Voices](#), the Civic Media Observatory is a research project of Global Voices, a global network of bloggers and online activists dedicated to understanding across communities, nations and languages, using the power of our network to connect people with a diversity of perspectives and experiences.



Project Team

Samanta Azpurua, Andreas Bloom, Nwachukwu Egbunike, Emre Demir, David Gardas, Mahlet Fantahun, Giovana Fleck, Arzu Geybullayeva, Sultan Gülsün, Aizat Shailoobek kyzy, Azza Moghazy, Myat Myat Mon, Isolda, Morillo, Mong Palatino, Yevgeniya Plakhina, Maria Repnikova, Alessandra Soler.

Coordinating editors: John Kennedy, Asteris Masouras, Niva Yau

Project leads: Alex Esenler, Filip Noubel, Georgia Popplewell, Ivan Sigal

Illustrations by: Giovana Fleck

Image on p. 45: *Container port in Shenzhen, China* by Nikada, used under a Canva Pro license

Cover illustration, design and layout: Georgia Popplewell

We collectively built our methodology with input from Tim Davies, Alex Esenler, Oiwan Lam, Asteris Masouras, Georgia Popplewell, Taisa Sganzerla, Ivan Sigal, and Filip Stojanovski.

To see our methodology and learn more about this project, visit <https://globalvoices.org/special/observatory/>. For further information or questions, email cmo@globalvoices.org.

Stichting Global Voices

Kingsfordweg 151
1043GR Amsterdam
The Netherlands
<https://globalvoices.org>

December 5, 2022



This report was authored by Global Voices and may be shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC-BY-SA-4.0) License.

Table of Contents

About the report	2
Executive summary	5
Project scope	6
Research objectives	6
Why narrative analysis of the BRI matters	7
About the dataset	7
1. China's relationship to the world	12
The rise of Chinese soft power	15
2. A more nuanced view of China	18
The unexpected power of local narratives	18
The promise and perils of job creation	19
The dream of access to the Chinese market	20
Made in China: Quality and reliability of Chinese services and products	20
Local anti-Chinese racism and demonization	21
The international drumbeat: Key global narratives about China	22
Influence on democratic politics in partner states	22
Telecommunications investment and infrastructure	24
Tourism, education and image-making	25
3. The usual suspects: Claims about China	26
Support for the BRI	26
China is willing to help when others won't	26
The BRI provides genuine benefits to partner countries	27
China is the target of unfair criticism, often from countries with dubious records	27
Opposition to the BRI	28
China has no respect for the citizens of BRI target countries	28
Chinese influence has a negative impact on the local culture in partner countries	29
Chinese interventions and projects in other countries damage the environment	29
Chinese companies are inherently corrupt	31
China takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of weaker countries	31
The BRI provides a smokescreen for China's covert aims	31
Pragmatic narratives	32
For political parties in partner countries, the BRI and relations with China are useful	
political tools	32
China is an essential part of the global geopolitical landscape	32
4. Transnational patterns	34
Elite capture	34
Turkey	34
Greece	35
Czech Republic	37
Caught between East and West	37
Turkey	38
Brazil	38
Nationalism as counter-narrative	39

Kyrgyzstan	40
Kazakhstan	42
Who's the neo-colonial power now?	43
Nigeria	43
5. China looks at itself	45
China makes possible unprecedented industrial progress in BRI host countries	46
While Western countries exploit, China lifts countries up through economic development and industrialization	46
The US instigates issues between China and other countries	47
China must vigorously counter anti-Chinese propaganda from other nations	47
6. Methods	48
Civic Impact Score	49
How to use the Airtable database for analysis	50
Full description of the data set	51
Themes and frames	51
Analysis of civic impact scores for themes and narrative frames	58
Media items	60

Executive summary

In our investigation of China's Belt and Road initiative, we analyzed how local perspectives either support or counter China's ambitions, and how China advances narratives that bolster its drive for global power. Working with local researchers and writers around the world, we dissected narratives about the intersection of Chinese technology transfer, soft power, communications, and public information about infrastructure investment and development.

The Chinese government announced the first elements of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, in the form of international infrastructure development projects branded with reference to the Silk Road trade routes. This grand narrative grew in concert with Chinese investment in a multitude of transport corridors, ports, and other key infrastructure projects, to the point that the Belt and Road initiative was incorporated into the Chinese constitution in 2017. This creation of a grand strategy for global economic influence in parallel with a master narrative to support that vision is indicative of China's top-down, centralized approach to planning and governance.

Beijing has frequently created effective narratives that place China at the center of development and influence. Yet our research uncovered an often-contentious dynamic between the grand narratives promoted by China and its proxies and agents, and the diverse local narratives of citizens, activists, journalists, and governments. We observed the power of local narratives to influence, and sometimes even halt, Chinese development ambitions. We noted attempts by China to wield influence through local, often elite proxies, either to support its perspectives or suppress public discussion. We also observed other countries attempting to build up counter-narratives that promoted their own vision of development, often in competition or uneasy cooperation with the Chinese vision.

The BRI is a narrative with imperial, world-ordering scope, backed by billions of dollars, with a goal to organize the world in accordance with a specific vision. This narrative is a projection of possible futures that emanate from a center of power—the polar opposite of the vision of networked societies and their manifestation, for instance, in open communications technologies. Networked societies, with their many nodes of power and influence, are bursting with local, ephemeral narratives, and, at least aspirationally rely on deliberation and debate to construct a collective vision of the world.

Can master narratives survive in an age of networked information systems? If those systems are designed, as the Chinese internet is, to serve the interests of powerful institutions, will the world-building narratives it promotes be echoed by citizens? When alternative perspectives are presented to oppose or neutralize centrally created master narratives, the latter still often win out. Master narratives enjoy the backing of well-resourced state media. They project the real-world impact of Chinese investment on infrastructure and economic development. And certainly, China's approach evoked a response from the G7 countries, which in 2022 made a \$600 billion commitment to fund global infrastructure branded as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure.

However, the influence of such grand narratives may be limited over time. In September 2021, the Chinese government rolled out a new plan and accompanying narrative called the Global Development Initiative.¹ Since then, Chinese officials have discussed the Belt and Road Initiative with less frequency, and its future as an organizing logic for Chinese international relations is uncertain.² Perhaps this shift is in response to changes in international relations, which in turn suggests that the effectiveness of the Belt and Road narrative has reached its limit. The Global Development Initiative, as a brand, lacks the flair and scope of the BRI; it could be mistaken for a UN project, or something created by a think tank in Washington or Brussels. And perhaps that anonymity is intentional: a project with a name that sounds like nothing, a screen for influence in the wider abstraction we call the “global.”

Project scope

Global Voices’ research into China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) looks at the intersection of Chinese technology transfer, soft power, communications, and public information about infrastructure investment and development. Working with local researchers and writers around the world, we explore how local perspectives either support or counter China’s ambitions, and how China advances narratives that bolster its drive for global power.

This research comprises a dataset of qualitative research and analysis focused on influential media narratives and key media sources. We analyzed 748 media items that illustrate local perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative in 14 countries, identifying and analyzing the narrative frames and themes at play. We also published 37 stories based on this dataset that synthesize the analysis.

The data analysis and stories unpack the narratives being used to support or oppose the BRI, explain specific histories, and discuss the actions of activists, politicians, and businesspeople of influence, as well as explore the effects of BRI projects on local economies, societies, ecosystems, and media spaces. Stories cover a range of topics, from infrastructure development to anti-Chinese sentiment to environmental issues, and are referenced throughout this paper.³

Research objectives

The objective of the research is to provide nuanced and locally grounded perspectives on the influence and effects of the BRI around the world, and create a base of analysis and evidence from which to explore claims about China’s role. A close examination of China’s interaction with local economies, politics, and media spaces complicates the often simplistic narratives of China as villain or hero popular in mass media descriptions of China’s international development activities.

¹ Amitrajeet A. Batabyal, “China has a new global development initiative, but who will actually benefit from it?”, The Conversation, August 4, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/china-has-a-new-global-development-initiative-but-who-will-actually-benefit-from-it-187561>.

² Andreea Brînză, “What Happened to the Belt and Road Initiative?” The Diplomat, September 6, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/what-happened-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

³ “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Deal or steal?” Global Voices, <https://globalvoices.org/special/belt-and-road-observatory/>.

The project presents overarching narrative frames that help readers understand the context and subtext of debates about the BRI, and a range of detailed, contextually specific narratives that help readers explore and understand how China's expansion into global infrastructure development and influence operations plays out in different countries.

Why narrative analysis of the BRI matters

Narrative frames underpin claims that advance or oppose both ideas and material outcomes.⁴ They are the often unspoken assumptions or ideologies that inform the worldviews through which we understand and interpret information we encounter in the world. Narratives help shape information into language that is familiar to local communities. Analyzing their effects requires us to both identify them and to be explicit as to their meaning.

In our research, narrative frames about the Belt and Road Initiative emerge empirically out of a close reading of a range of media items examining China's presence, activities and influence in over a dozen BRI partner countries. These include journalistic texts, videos, photographs, social media posts, government press releases and statements, academic texts, research reports, public opinion polls, and other media. We also include Chinese perspectives to illustrate the complexity and diversity of narratives in complex information ecosystems.

Narratives are not static; they change over time in reaction to events and changes in attitudes and policies. The narratives in the dataset should thus be understood as belonging to a specific context in terms of both time and place.

About the dataset

The dataset underlying this research was built using Global Voices' [Civic Media Observatory](#) methods, based on qualitative analysis of narratives and themes in mainstream media, social media, other online media, and offline media. The research does not employ statistical methods and the data is not statistically representative: quantitative statements about the data refer only to the material in the set.

Researchers completed analysis between January and August 2021, focusing on themes, narrative frames and media items from Brazil, China, Czech Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Turkey and Venezuela.

Researchers identified 124 narrative frames, which are presented in the dataset.⁵ They are organized into three top-level categories, called Tier 1 frames in the dataset: Pro-China, Anti-China, and Pragmatic (see Table I). Within those categories, the narratives

⁴ Connie Moon Sehat, "Why the News Frame Matters (part 1 of 2)", Global Voices, February 9, 2017, <https://newsframes.globalvoices.org/2017/02/09/why-the-news-frame-matters/>; "Spotting the News Frame," Global Voices, April 3, 2017, <https://newsframes.globalvoices.org/2017/04/03/spotting-the-news-frame/>.

⁵ Belt and Road Initiative dataset, [Narrative Frames table](#).

are organized into 27 meta-narratives, called Tier 2 frames in the dataset. These meta-narratives apply in multiple countries, and include frames such as “the BRI does more harm than good,” and “Chinese-produced goods are of poor quality” (see Table II). Within each meta-narrative are a third category of narrative, called Tier 3 frames in the dataset, which are more local in focus and relevant in a particular context and country. All 124 narratives, complete with description and context, are linked in the dataset to the analysis of specific media items.

Researchers also identified 39 themes, similarly organized into 11 meta-categories such as “Economy and trade” and “Human rights” (see Table III).⁶ and linked to analysis of specific media items.

To understand how narratives function in information ecosystems and which themes are prevalent, we performed in-depth readings on media items. We explored context, subtext, accuracy, credibility and potential to cause harm. The dataset consists of 748 items composed primarily of social media and editorial media items representing 12 languages and 311 media sources.⁷ Researchers also annotated media sources with descriptions of political and financial influences, editorial direction, and content policies, to help the reader to understand the intention, context and subtext behind the media items from different media sources.

In most cases, we examine media items in terms of the national contexts of the countries studied, looking not only at what the Chinese are saying, but also local media, international media, citizens in relevant countries, and experts.

When exploring the dataset, it is important to understand that the number of narratives or themes within a certain top-level or meta category is a product of researchers’ decisions about what is relevant. They are not meant to represent a comprehensive catalog of all of the pro- or anti-China narratives in the world, but to help the reader to navigate the dataset.

We refer to information from the dataset throughout this report in footnotes. We reference media item entries in the dataset by author, publication, date, and a hyperlinked item number in the dataset. The full dataset is publicly available on Airtable.⁸

⁶ Belt and road Initiative dataset, [Themes table](#).

⁷ Belt and Road Initiative dataset [Media Items](#) and [Media Sources](#). See the methods section for further analysis of media items.

⁸ Civic Media Observatory Belt and Road Initiative dataset, <https://airtable.com/shrsENxI8Nr0Xg4xG/tbl1AecENFUSVAySt/viwUpjVaW6hY3sxR1?blocks=bipspIVrheGOOjpty>.

Table I: Top-level narrative frames

Top-level narrative frames	Number of detailed narratives	Percentage of items asserting top-level narrative
Pro-China	36	34.8%
Anti-China	60	53.7%
Pragmatic	24	23.4%
No top-level narrative	4	2.3%

Table II: Meta-narrative frames

Meta-narratives	Number of detailed narratives	Percentage of items asserting meta-narrative
BRI partner countries are changing their ways to appease China	1	0.3%
China always puts its own interests ahead of others'	3	6.8%
China has no respect for the citizens of BRI target countries	6	8.8%
China is an essential part of the global geopolitical landscape	4	3.9%
China is going to triumph	2	1.7%
China is inherently corrupt	7	5.5%
China is the target of unfair criticism, often from countries with their own dubious records	8	3.5%
China is willing to help when other countries won't	5	8.3%
China should look out for the interests of other countries and not just its own	4	1.5%

China takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of weaker countries	4	6.0%
China uses deception to further BRI and foreign policy goals	4	4.1%
China will always have an unfair advantage because of its scale and wealth	6	2.4%
Chinese influence has a negative impact on the local culture in partner countries	4	4.7%
Chinese people have great respect for the cultures of partner countries	2	0.5%
Chinese-produced goods are of poor quality	2	4.0%
Countries are using Chinese technology to surveil and control their citizens	3	1.3%
Countries doing business with China need accurate information about China and the BRI	3	4.7%
Countries shouldn't be afraid they will be ideologically tainted by association with China	1	0.5%
Countries which have similarities with China succeed under the BRI	2	0.9%
For political parties in partner countries, the BRI and relations with China are useful political tools	2	1.6%
Local politicians and elites are the true beneficiaries of alliances with China	3	3.2%
Other countries need to stand up to China	6	10.6%
The BRI does more harm than good	4	10.3%
The BRI provides a smokescreen for China's covert aims	6	4.7%
The BRI provides genuine benefits to partner countries	14	20.9%

Miscellaneous (non-BRI narratives)	14	14.2%
Miscellaneous (non-China related narratives)	4	1.7%

Table II: Meta-themes

Meta-themes	Number of detailed themes	Percentage of items referencing meta-theme
Crime and corruption	1	2.0%
Cultural perceptions	2	18.0%
Economy and trade	9	41.8%
Environment	1	6.1%
Health	3	13.0%
Human rights	5	7.2%
Infrastructure development	4	15.4%
International relations	8	39.6%
Media and journalism	1	3.1%
Soft power and implementation tactics	3	6.4%
Technology	2	7.0%

For a detailed explanation of the Civic Media Observatory methods and analysis of our dataset, please see our methods section.



1. China's relationship to the world

The evolution of the BRI reflects China's historical ambivalence about its role as a player in global geopolitics. Defining itself as the center of the known and civilized world, China during centuries of imperial rule only intermittently saw the need to explore the world. Its most successful maritime explorer, Zheng He, traveled to East Africa in the early 15th century. He was subsequently criticized by the court for his colonial ambitions, and saw his writings about his journeys destroyed. When the Chinese Communist Party took over China in 1949, they retained this insular attitude. Mao Zedong's infamous Cultural Revolution, from 1966-1976, opposed both traditional Chinese culture and foreign influences.

China returned to exerting its presence in the world in the late 20th century. Only after it established itself as a major economic power, however, did it see a need to use soft power as a geopolitical instrument to further its economic, political, cultural and military ambitions. For Beijing, reviving the ancient Silk Road, the important network of trade routes that linked Asia, the Middle East and parts of Europe from the 1st to the 15th century, was a useful metaphor to express its global ambitions.

In 2013, following decades of policies designed to advance China's economic integration into the global economy, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced plans to build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.⁹ These plans are now collectively referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative, a strategy to accelerate China's global influence.

⁹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml
"Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian President," ASEAN-China Centre, October 2, 2013, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

The framework of the BRI, however, was as ambiguous as its reach was ambitious. In its first two years, domestic and international scholars on Chinese foreign policy debated the meaning of the Belt and Road for both China and the world. In 2015, the first Belt and Road white paper, titled “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” was published by the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, providing insights into the top-down expectations of Belt and Road development around the world.¹⁰

This paper frames the BRI as a foundation upon which China will interact with global actors.¹¹ It highlights five main areas of focus: policy coordination, connectivity, trade facilitation, financial integration and the fostering of people-to-people bonds.¹² According to the paper, for China, the key to building the BRI was to enhance the interconnectedness between China and its partner countries across these five areas.

Creating such interconnectedness requires a common basis of understanding between Chinese and host country officials. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has invested heavily in diplomatic trips and on hosting forums to increase interactions between high-level officials.¹³ These interactions have yielded official strategic partnerships which provide the framework for state-led cooperation, area-focused cooperation committees, and alignment of domestic development plans with China’s economic plans. In most partner countries relations between local elites and China have grown exponentially under the Belt and Road Initiative.

The BRI’s emphasis on connectivity has attracted a great deal of attention worldwide. Connectivity goals include basic transportation, energy and digital technology infrastructure to connect China and partner countries. This part of the Belt and Road has accelerated the participation of China’s state policy banks, which were created by the State Council in 1994 to support state economic policies. They are now also being used to issue state-backed loans to third countries as the financial engine of this policy.¹⁴

After infrastructure development, facilitating trade is the BRI’s next priority. In partner countries that do not yet have mature economic relations with China, trade facilitation tends to focus on removing logistical barriers to trade, enhancing investment laws and improving trade by expanding export and import permits for products. When partners already have mature economic relations with China, as is the case with the Southeast Asian states, the focus is on promoting regional economic integration and creating a friendly business environment for China.

¹⁰ “Full Text: Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road,” Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, April 0, 2017, <http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2017/0410/c22-45.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Niva Yau, “Operational Reality of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia”, in “China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Ambitions, Risks and Realities”, Special Issue 2, OSCE Academy, http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/BRI_08_07.pdf.

¹⁴ Tristan Kenderdine and Niva Yau, “China’s Policy Banks Are Lending Differently, Not Less,” *The Diplomat*, December 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/chinas-policy-banks-are-lending-differently-not-less/>.

The financial integration aspect of the BRI is known for China's efforts to internationalize the Chinese renminbi to counter the effects of potential economic sanctions from the United States, which could otherwise disrupt China's economy.¹⁵ Belt and Road financial integration also focuses on setting up regional developmental financial institutions and supporting monetary policies in partner countries that are favorable to China's interests.

Accompanying and buttressing the infrastructural, economic, and policy priorities of BRI is China's deployment of soft power. The creation and expansion of people-to-people relationships is both a means and an end for the BRI and both Chinese state and non-state actors play a role in this domain. Soft power projects to promote people-to-people bonds span everything from the establishment of Confucius Institutes for citizens of other countries to learn Chinese, to the promotion of Chinese traditional medicine, university partnerships, cultural exchanges, international broadcasting, social media commentary and campaigns, and claims of a shared history in many contexts.¹⁶

In October 2017, the Belt and Road Initiative was incorporated into the Chinese Constitution.¹⁷ In 2018, the second BRI white paper was released, calling for a decentralization effort to increase the Initiative's aims.¹⁸ By now, it is clear that the Belt and Road Initiative is an integral part of Chinese policy. A comprehensive understanding of this grand strategy in any given country or region requires a holistic understanding of the interests of both the partner country and China. At the same time, as the Initiative is dependent on the willingness of partners to participate, it is important to pay close attention to the choices of local elites.

The Belt and Road Initiative is known under different names in Chinese and local languages. Its full name in Chinese is Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Development Strategy (丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路发展战略), often abbreviated in media and official speeches as 一带一路 (One Belt, One Road, sometimes rendered in English as OBOR). As it makes references to historical precedents going back to the 1st century, in both Chinese and other languages it is referred to as the "new Silk Roads," with components such as its telecommunications and technology activities described as the "Digital Silk Road," and the term the "Health Silk Road" used in reference to China's global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

¹⁵ Christer Ljungwall and Viking Bohman, "Mending Vulnerabilities to Isolation," *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 162, Issue 5, 2017, 26-33, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2017.1401905?journalCode=rusi20>.

¹⁶ Niva Yau, "Operational Reality of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia", in "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Ambitions, Risks and Realities", Special Issue 2, OSCE Academy, http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/BRI_08_07.pdf.

¹⁷ Wade Shepard, "Why China Just Added The Belt And Road Initiative To Its Constitution," *Forbes*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/25/why-china-just-added-the-belt-and-road-initiative-to-its-constitution/?sh=2fea895642ab>.

¹⁸ "Three-year Action Plan for Advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (2018-2020), Belt and Road, May 22, 2018, <https://beltandroad.hktdc.com/en/official-documents/three-year-action-plan-advancing-belt-and-road-initiative-2018-2020>.

The massive scale of the BRI can be captured by a glance at its financials. According to Reuters, citing a Refinitiv database, as of June 2020, the projects affiliated with the BRI cost some \$3.7 trillion, and involved more than 2,600 projects.¹⁹

The BRI over the past few years has faced numerous challenges, including stalled debt renegotiations, a steep decline in peak annual lending, mounting public debt owed to China by BRI partners, and significant project implementation problems.²⁰ China also faces the rise of the G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) partnership, which has been presented as an alternative to the BRI, and the February 2022 announcement that the European Union has allocated \$170 billion for a similar BRI alternative focused on Africa.²¹

Also noteworthy are the challenges China faces in negotiating relationships between BRI partner countries that are in conflict with one another. The most salient example is how China's heavy investment in Ukraine became a liability for Beijing as Russia amassed troops near Ukraine's border, then massively escalated the war in 2022. In the words of the *Wall Street Journal*: "Beijing is aware that by so closely aligning China with Russia on European security issues, it risks further alienating Europe and pushing countries on the continent further into the orbit of the U.S."²²

The rise of Chinese soft power

The concept of soft power, the incorporation and promotion of a nation's interests through culture, economy, diplomacy, education and tourism, was foreign to China until the 1990s. Following the translation of Joseph Nye's articles and books on soft

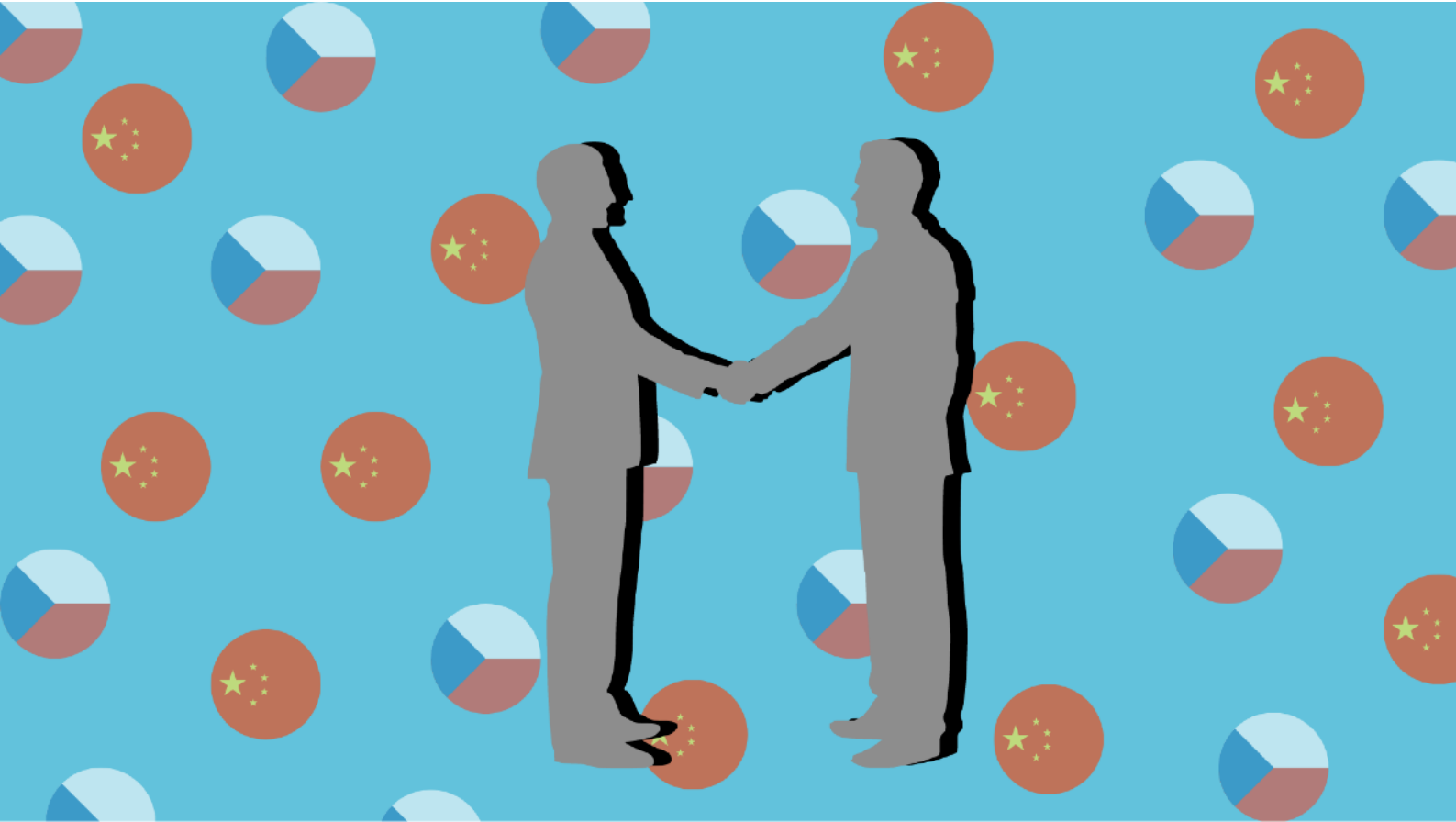
¹⁹ Steve Holland and Guy Faulconbridge, "G7 rivals China with grand infrastructure plan," Reuters, June 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/g7-counter-chinas-belt-road-with-infrastructure-project-senior-us-official-2021-06-12/>.

²⁰ Data from a study released in December 2020 from a Boston University study showed, in the authors' words, that BRI lending had "fallen off a cliff." The study found the BRI stalled in debt renegotiations in various countries, and identified the peak in lending by China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China, two of the main financial institutions involved, at \$75 billion in 2016 followed by a "collapse" landing at just \$4 billion lent in 2019. The study also found that BRI loans from those two Chinese banks totalled \$462 billion between 2008 and 2019, comparable to \$467 billion lent out by the World Bank during the same period. James Kynge, "China pulls back from the world: rethinking Xi's 'project of the century,'" *Financial Times*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/d9bd8059-d05c-4e6f-968b-1672241ec1f6>; James Kynge, "China curtails overseas lending in face of geopolitical backlash," *Financial Times*, July 12, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/1cb3e33b-e2c2-4743-ae41-d3ffffa4259>. Data in a report from the AidData international development research lab at the US-based William & Mary Global Research Institute found \$385 billion in hidden debt among 13,427 Chinese development projects worth a total \$843 billion. Alex Wooley, "AidData's new dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects worth \$843 billion reveals major increase in 'hidden debt' and Belt and Road Initiative implementation problems," AIDDATA, a Research Lab at William & Mary, September 29, 2021, <https://www.aiddata.org/blog/aiddatas-new-dataset-of-13-427-chinese-development-projects-worth-843-billion-reveals-major-increase-in-hidden-debt-and-belt-and-road-initiative-implementation-problems>

²¹ Stuart Lau and Barbara Moens, "EU tempts Africa away from Chinese influence," Politico, February 15, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-tempts-africa-away-from-chinese-influence/>.

²² Lingling Wei, "Beijing Weighs How Far to Go in Backing Putin on Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/beijing-weighs-how-far-to-go-in-backing-putin-on-ukraine-11645050771>.

power began to be widely discussed in China in 2012-2013, and his seminal book *Soft Power and American Foreign Policy* was translated into Chinese in 2013.²³ While many Chinese leaders were initially dismissive of the concept as a foreign import, by the early 2000s variations of the theory were increasingly prevalent in Chinese media and political circles. Beijing came up with the notion of the “Chinese Dream” in 2012,



mimicking the United States concept of the American Dream.²⁴ Relying on its economic success domestically and abroad, China assumed many people abroad would buy into the notion of Chinese Dream, but in practice, promoting this concept proved challenging, and it became evident that Beijing needed to create and promote stronger narratives to compete with the West.

While China’s definitions and priorities have shifted over the years, BRI narratives continue to focus on two key ideas: merging the BRI with China’s foreign policy mandates and portraying it as a predominantly economic strategy.

²³ Barthelemy Courmont, “Soft Power Debates in China,” *Academic Foresights*, No. 13, January-June 2015, http://www.academic-foresights.com/Soft_Power_Debates_in_China.html, and Joseph S Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

²⁴ “The Chinese Dream is a desire for happiness, similar to the dreams of the people of other countries.” Michael A. Peters, “The Chinese Dream: Xi Jinping thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 49, Issue 14, 2017, 1299-1304, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131857.2017.1407578>.

Political and economic elites in countries where China has deployed projects often treat the BRI merely as a new investor—one with large financial resources, specific technical and infrastructural knowledge, and few requirements regarding environmental standards and human rights impact assessments. In some cases, China has been posited as an alternative to other economic actors, such as Japan, Russia, Turkey, the EU or the US.

China launched its Confucius Institutes in 2004 on the model of the Alliance Française, the British Council, and Germany's Goethe-Institut, investing billions of dollars annually in educational and cultural exchanges. This represented a major shift: China recognized that being a world power is not limited to economic dominance but requires more visible political engagement. This transition was not easy, given that Chinese diplomacy relies to this day on statements of neutrality and non-interference.²⁵ Yet the Chinese clearly believed that establishing a cultural presence was an effective way to create support, hence the decision to deploy hundreds of Confucius Institutes over a short period of time.²⁶ And yet, this model has had mixed results: while Confucius Institutes remain active in non-Western BRI partner states such as Kazakhstan and Kenya, they have been shut down in many Western nations, often because of attempts by Confucius Institute staff to interfere in the academic freedom of host institutions.²⁷

²⁵ Earl Conteh-Morgan, "China's non-interference dilemma," Asia & the Pacific Policy Society, August 2, 2018, <https://www.policyforum.net/chinas-non-interference-dilemma/>.

²⁶ Confucius Institute, Wikipedia, last accessed April 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucius_Institute.

²⁷ Tory Shepherd, "University students and staff face increasing threats, foreign interference inquiry finds," The Guardian, March 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/mar/25/university-students-and-staff-face-increasing-threats-foreign-interference-inquiry-finds>.



2. A more nuanced view of China

Although our research surfaced many dominant narratives opposing Chinese influence, our findings complicate the simplistic hero/villain paradigm often promoted in relation to China.

For local populations, the Belt and Road Initiative often has both positive and negative consequences. Usually announced as a boost for the local economy, BRI projects promise local employment, introduction of new technology, advanced manufacturing methods, new communications infrastructure, rapid urban development, and the opening of the Chinese market to local goods and services. Other benefits on offer include access to vaccinations and advanced medical care, and education, including scholarships or access to Chinese universities.

Much of the commentary about the BRI focuses on whether China's stated commitments are met, and who benefits or suffers because of the Chinese presence. Elite capture, corruption, local nationalisms, anti-Chinese bias, quality of implementation, interference with local politics, and fears of Chinese neo-colonial interventions are topics that surface consistently in the countries studied.

The unexpected power of local narratives

In our research we found that local narratives, perhaps surprisingly, influenced the direction and outcome of Chinese efforts to implement BRI-funded projects. Local pushback sometimes delayed, altered and in rare cases even caused investments to be canceled.

The gap between the promise of BRI projects and the reality of their implementation is not something Chinese representatives, from company officials to diplomats, media

professionals and educational staff, are able to acknowledge publicly. Some BRI partner countries also have significant censorship regimes, which may dampen local criticism, but in many BRI partner countries citizens are, at least in theory, able to share their views and feelings openly.

Political and economic elites, who are often institutionally and sometimes personally invested in the success of BRI projects, often echo Beijing's optimistic language. According to our analysis, this is as true in countries with democratic governance, such as Greece or Peru, as in more autocratic countries such as Kazakhstan.

A Global Voices story by Isolda Morillo about local opposition to Chinese investment in Peru quotes former Peruvian president Martín Vizcarra praising Chancay, a BRI-funded port, calling it “one of the best port offers in all of South America.”²⁸

In a story by Andreas Bloom about Chinese-funded infrastructure in Greece, an analyst remarks that “The BRI provides a holistic platform, a vision for all the business activities of both state and non-state Chinese companies.”²⁹ Greece represents a particularly interesting case, the story notes, as Greek shipping elites pushed for Chinese investment in Greek shipping and port infrastructure before the advent of the BRI. China's investment in Greek ports is a key topic in Greek media coverage of Sino-Greek relations, as another of Bloom's stories observes.³⁰

Among non-elites in partner countries, however, opinions of the BRI are often at odds with both China's official line and that of local elites. In the following sections we highlight key areas of contention.

The promise and perils of job creation

Many of the BRI countries studied for this research are considered “developing” in development economics terms.³¹ Some of the countries—Greece, Turkey and Egypt, for instance—have also been deeply affected by recession, which was exacerbated by the pandemic.

In general, local political and economic elites in the partner countries studied endorse BRI projects and echo Beijing's promises of massive job creation for the local population, thus serving as key vectors for this positive narrative.

²⁸ Isolda Morillo, “New Chinese-led port project faces backlash from local residents and environmentalists in Peru,” Global Voices, March 5, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/03/05/new-chinese-led-port-project-faces-backlash-from-local-residents-and-environmentalists-in-peru/>.

²⁹ Andreas Bloom, “China's Belt and Road megaproject in the Mediterranean: Was it the Greek shipping tycoons who sealed the deal?” Global Voices, July 8, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/07/08/chinas-belt-and-road-megaproject-in-the-mediterranean-was-it-the-greek-shipping-tycoons-who-sealed-the-deal/>.

³⁰ Andreas Bloom, “Diverging narratives on the Belt and Road Initiative in Greece and China,” Global Voices, September 14, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/14/diverging-narratives-on-the-belt-and-road-initiative-in-greece-and-china/>.

³¹ World Economic Situation and Prospects 2021, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Statistical Annex, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2021_ANNEX.pdf.

Our research found that in BRI partner countries, reactions from local communities often follow similar patterns. There is initial enthusiasm in the hopes that the BRI will support local economies, followed by disappointment. This is due to several factors. Chinese companies and projects often only employ low-skilled local workers. Securing jobs might require payment of bribes. Locals may also have little understanding of Chinese work culture, particularly attitudes about labor rights, which can cause conflict. Job creation and distribution can also become a divisive issue when a local or Indigenous community opposes a large infrastructure or extractive project. In such cases, some community members may be excluded from employment on the basis of their identity, while others may boycott work opportunities. Companies also sometimes bring workers from other regions or from China. In some contexts, the abuse of labor rights prompts retaliation, including crude anti-Chinese discourse, very often over social media, and even physical attacks against Chinese populations and businesses.

Business malpractice and labor abuses are prevalent on BRI projects in certain African countries. Nwachukwu Egbunike's story on Chinese labor relations in Nigeria analyzes the collusion of local elites in malpractice by Chinese companies, and details labor abuses that sometimes take extreme forms.³²

The dream of access to the Chinese market

An incentive regularly cited by Beijing when a country signs on to the BRI is that its products or services will gain access to the 1.3 billion-person Chinese market. This opportunity, often boosted by local elites, seldom translates into reality. Yet it is leveraged by China as a potential reward for political alignment and used to castigate political opposition, including those who support Hong Kong, Taiwan, or criticize the treatment of ethnic minorities. When the promised economic bonanza fails to materialize, relations between small businesses and agricultural producers and elites in their sectors often break down, a dynamic observed in our research on Greece, the Czech Republic, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.³³

Made in China: Quality and reliability of Chinese services and products

Making products and services more accessible worldwide is a fundamental goal of the BRI. According to Beijing's definition, the BRI would permit goods to be produced and transported more quickly, at a cost more favorable to the buying power of economically developing countries. This partly explains the global success, for example, of Chinese mobile phones and social media platforms, and the widespread distribution of Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines, as well as local production in countries such as Egypt, Indonesia, Uzbekistan and Brazil.

³² Nwachukwu Egbunike, "Chinese investments in Nigeria flourish on a Silk Road of corruption," Global Voices, August 20, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/08/20/chinese-investments-in-nigeria-flourish-on-a-silk-road-of-corruption/>, and "Chinese firms in Nigeria face widespread labour abuse allegations, tainting bilateral relationship," Global Voices, September 22, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/22/chinese-firms-in-nigeria-face-widespread-labour-abuse-allegations-tainting-bilateral-relationship/>.

³³ Exportnews.gr, March 10, 2020, [BRI_1089](#); Jaromír Soukup, Týden, March 28 2016, [BRI_1198](#); Xinhuanet, May 4, 2019, [BRI_551](#); Simela Tsouchtidou, Euronews.com, November 11, 2019, [BRI_674](#).

Our research found that in partner countries, opinions on the quality and reliability of Chinese products and services from both elites and the general population tended to be more volatile and susceptible to change. With regard to Chinese communications technology, politicians were either highly supportive, possibly seeking tools of censorship and control of online communications, or strongly opposed, perceiving Chinese tech as a threat to cybersecurity.³⁴ Members of the general population, on the other hand, were more supportive, as Chinese goods and services tend to be more affordable compared with equivalent products from other countries.

Our research did find a strong current of negative commentary on the quality of Chinese goods. A story by Maria Repnikova, for example, explores the pushback and complaints from Ethiopian consumers about the quality of Chinese goods.³⁵

China's COVID-19 vaccines provide a rich example of shifting narratives regarding perceptions of quality.³⁶ As the rollout of vaccines began, and those developed in the West proved scarce, inaccessible or prohibitively expensive, Chinese vaccines provided a real alternative to millions of people globally and appeared to be a clear diplomatic win for Beijing.

At that stage, the perceptions of elites and citizens seemed to be aligned,³⁷ though, when offered the choice, elites tended to favor non-Chinese vaccines, and people in some countries refused the Chinese vaccine, or considered it a vaccine for the poor. Chinese vaccines highlighted socio-economic gaps in many societies because of the perceptions of their quality and efficacy. Even in Turkey, a close political and economic ally to China, opinion polls indicate strong reluctance to use Chinese vaccines.³⁸

Over time the situation changed even further: as the virus mutated, Chinese vaccines appeared to be less effective against the new strains than their Western or Russian counterparts.³⁹ Nor did China's poor record on data transparency and reliability help.

Local anti-Chinese racism and demonization

Anti-Chinese sentiment existed in many countries long before the introduction of the BRI, and has frequently grown in response to BRI projects, the increased presence of Chinese companies and workers, and most recently, the fact that COVID-19 virus was first identified in China.

³⁴ Nan Lwin, Irrawaddy, June 19, 2019, [BRI_10](#); Varshini Sirdhar, The Geopolitics, January 21, 2021, [BRI_52](#); Sotiris Panagiotis, To Βήμα, [BRI_671](#). See also the theme "[Chinese technology exportation](#)."

³⁵ Maria Repnikova, "China's reputation challenged by perceptions of low-quality projects and products in Ethiopia," Global Voices, October 12, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/10/12/chinas-reputation-challenged-by-perceptions-of-low-quality-projects-and-products-in-ethiopia/>.

³⁶ Theme: "[The COVID-19 vaccine](#)."

³⁷ Anadolu Agency, January 5, 2021, [BRI_70](#); Tom Fowdy, CGTN, January 2, 2021, [BRI_84](#); Africanews, June 18, 2020, [BRI_93](#).

³⁸ Emre Demir, "China's wavering COVID-19 diplomacy in Turkey," Global Voices, August 13, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/08/13/chinas-wavering-covid-19-vaccine-diplomacy-in-turkey/>.

³⁹ Eduardo Baptista, South China Morning Post, January 13, 2021, [BRI_92](#).

Chinese people are often the targets of verbal and physical attacks and discrimination,⁴⁰ with perpetrators often failing to distinguish between different categories of people and holding individuals unfairly responsible for the actions of the Chinese government or Chinese companies, the spread of COVID-19, or Beijing's policies against the Uyghurs. Members of long-established Chinese-descendant communities in many parts of the world have, for instance, been the targets of violence during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beijing is quick to claim such occurrences as attacks on the People's Republic of China and on Chinese people everywhere. This position echoes popular sentiment in many parts of the world, especially that expressed on social media in its failure to differentiate and in treating everything and everyone perceived as Chinese as one.⁴¹ This results in racist tropes such as the equating of Chinese people with the COVID virus, or framing Chinese eating habits as "unclean."

Brazilian president Bolsonaro is one powerful public figure who has engaged publicly and openly in anti-Chinese discourse and hate speech.⁴²

The international drumbeat: Key global narratives about China

Influence on democratic politics in partner states

China's pursuit of Belt and Road Initiative goals also affects democratic politics in partner countries, influencing political accountability, social control, regulation of local markets and geopolitical alliances.

BRI activities that benefit powerful individuals and groups have the potential to undermine democratic governance. In the Czech Republic, for instance, local corporate interests have become intertwined with political relationships as Chinese business figures leverage private investment in Czech companies to further Beijing's interests.⁴³

The pursuit of Chinese financing may also create conflict between governments and large enterprises that are also pursuing Chinese investment.

⁴⁰ VOA Burmese News, March 15, 2021, [BRI_1124](#); Facebook group "Кытайдын баскынчылыгына каршыбыз," Facebook, December 12, 2018, [BRI_830](#); Aizat Shailoobek kyzy, "In Kyrgyzstan, an ultranationalist group thrives on rising anti-Chinese sentiment," Global Voices, June 16, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/16/in-kyrgyzstan-an-ultranationalist-group-thrives-on-rising-anti-chinese-sentiment/>.

⁴¹ Ⴃႃႈ ၵႃႈ ၵႃႈ, Facebook, October 19, 2020, [BRI_668](#); ልዕልት, Twitter, September 17, 2020, [BRI_644](#).

⁴² Giovana Fleck, "Is Bolsonaro's anti-China rhetoric fueling anti-Asian hate in Brazil?" Global Voices, March 26, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/03/26/is-bolsonaros-anti-china-rhetoric-fueling-anti-asian-hate-in-brazil/>.

⁴³ David Gardas, "Why are Czech elites being captured by Beijing narratives?" Global Voices, October 8, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/10/08/why-are-czech-elites-being-captured-by-beijing-narratives/>.

Grassroots activists, civil society groups, and communities targeted by development projects may also find themselves in conflict with both their governments and local business interests backed by the Chinese, as in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁴

Grassroots groups and affected communities, however, may see their own government's lack of accountability as a more significant problem than Chinese support and funding. This dynamic has the potential to affect democratic governance, as in any classic rentier model, in which the state, its employees, proxies, and patrons, and the companies that benefit from its projects all individually benefit from association with Chinese investment and development strategies and therefore seek to protect that relationship, often to the detriment of other citizens. Our research and reporting show this dynamic playing out in different ways in Peru, Brazil, and Greece.⁴⁵ China is well known for its digital surveillance and the social control mechanisms to which it subjects its citizens, a factor which makes Chinese technology attractive to some clients in BRI partner countries, and highly problematic for others. There are Chinese companies, for instance, working in Latin America and Africa to deploy facial recognition and social control technologies which could be used to violate the rights of citizens.

The presence or deployment of Chinese technology in a country, however, does not necessarily mean that surveillance and control systems are actually implemented. Such systems require complex legal, socio-economic, and political adaptations, and their manifestations and effects are not a given.⁴⁶ Even China still has a piecemeal and indeterminate program of surveillance and social control. It has yet to build a system of digital social control that does not require the heavy involvement of traditional mechanisms of control such as prisons, detention camps, housing associations, and restrictions on movement policies, and other bureaucratic processes.

In countries physically proximate to China, the BRI can affect local markets and local politics. Chinese development creates new competition, with Chinese companies and traders offering new services and bidding on development projects. The Chinese presence also influences local politics, for example energizing opposition groups who denounce their own elites as anti-national because they seem to be pro-Chinese. This

⁴⁴ Aizat Shailoobek kyzy, "Is anti-Chinese sentiment in Kyrgyzstan strong enough to freeze a key Belt and Road Initiative project?" Global Voices, August 5, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/08/05/is-anti-chinese-sentiment-in-kyrgyzstan-strong-enough-to-freeze-a-key-belt-and-road-initiative-project/>

⁴⁵ Isolda Morillo, "Indigenous people denounce Chinese oil giant's extractions in Peru's Amazon Forest," Global Voices, June 7, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/07/indigenous-people-denounce-chinese-oil-giants-extractions-in-perus-amazon-forest/>; Andreas Bloom, "Greeks wage a court battle against Chinese-funded port that may poison the environment," Global Voices, May 27, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/05/27/greeks-wage-a-court-battle-against-chinese-funded-port-that-may-poison-the-environment/>; Giovana Fleck, "As Brazil increases exports to China, politicians play the blame game," Global Voices, April 22, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/04/22/brazilian-exports-to-china-blame-game/>.

⁴⁶ Mm7news, Facebook, April 28, 2021, [BRI_768](#); Xinhuanet, March 21, 2021, [BRI_720](#); Cesar Miguel Rondon, Twitter, December 1, 2020, [BRI_1190](#); Anna Gussarova, The Jamestown Foundation, April 8, 2020, [BRI_50](#).

is evident in countries with historical ties to China and populations of ethnic groups such as the Kazakhs and Uyghurs in Central Asia.⁴⁷

At the level of geopolitics, China presents its approach to development as superior to that of western nations, and especially to the more “interventionist” US approach, which uses democratic reform as a key lever and, in the view of the Chinese, violates other nations’ sovereignty. China seeks to convince partner nations that a diplomatic alliance with Beijing is a helpful counterweight to western power and influence, which is an attractive prospect for states such as Venezuela, Iran, and Russia that western nations have penalized with sanctions. China uses the sovereignty argument to claim that sanctions are variously illegal, bullying, unjustified, or a connivance. Underlying this argument is the assertion that the West has no right to impose political and economic penalties on countries that flout the US-led international order, or which do not have democratic political systems.⁴⁸

Telecommunications investment and infrastructure

The export and transfer of technology is a key feature of Beijing’s push to exert greater influence on world affairs. China in the past 20 years has demonstrated extraordinary prowess and competence in expanding its technologies to other countries, arguing that advanced technology is an essential component of rapid economic development, and technologies such as Huawei’s 5G and the e-commerce platform Alibaba are fundamental elements of China’s “Business and Trade Silk Road”.

In light of credible evidence of security loopholes built into Chinese communications technologies, mobile networks and social media platforms, activists, technologists, and politicians—often based in the West—have for years warned against the use and adoption of China-made technology. The contentiousness of the issue and the huge economic interests at stake in telecommunications markets have meant that this topic has been widely covered in mainstream media. The language used by politicians, journalists and social media users to describe this issue, however, often resembles Cold War rhetoric, and sometimes conflates valid concerns and anti-China sentiment that can veer into racist discourse.

Brazil provides a striking example of how the debate about China-made communications technology plays out,⁴⁹ and how the technology question is intertwined with other features of China’s relationship with partner countries. This story by Giovana Fleck, for instance, identifies a link between expedited access to

⁴⁷ Yevgenia Plakhina, “How Sinophobia is instrumentalized in Kazakhstan as a form of oppositional politics,” Global Voices, June 15, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/15/how-sinophobia-is-instrumentalized-in-kazakhstan-as-a-form-of-oppositional-politics/>.

⁴⁸ Wang Lijiu, 华语智库, April 16, 2019, BRI_692; Lijian Zhao, Twitter, September 4, 2029, [BRI_33](#); Al Jazeera, June 9, 2020, [BRI_146](#).

⁴⁹ Giovana Fleck, “Why Huawei was almost excluded from the 5G race in Brazil,” Global Voices, May 28, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/05/28/why-huawei-was-almost-excluded-from-the-5g-race-in-brazil/>.

Chinese COVID-19 vaccines and a decision by Brazilian authorities to allow Huawei to bid on a local 5G tender.⁵⁰

Tourism, education and image-making

Beijing has incorporated cultural and educational exchanges into its soft power interventions, on the model of similar initiatives by nations such as the USSR, USA, Turkey and France. Here, culture is approached from several different angles that overlap with the BRI strategy, including Confucius Institutes, tourism and international sporting competitions such as the Olympics.

Popular support for Beijing's education initiatives in BRI partner countries is often genuine, and thus offers positive reinforcement for the BRI and its approach. A Chinese education, whether self-financed or accessed with the support of a Chinese or a local grant, is seen by many as offering a triple guarantee: affordability, safety of the students inside China, and the prospect of obtaining a China-related job after returning home. Although Africans and Black students from other nations often experience racism in China, many still view an education there as a valid alternative to studying in Russia or the West.

Launched in 2004, over 600 Confucius Institutes around the world provide instruction in Chinese language and culture. Stories written by researchers Yevgenia Plakhina and Aizat Shailoobek Kyzy explore the effects of these cultural outreach projects in Central Asia, noting the opportunities for students to study Chinese locally and to obtain grants for university study in China.⁵¹

Political elites in certain BRI countries often promote educational opportunities in China as a means of increasing local Chinese-language capacity, which in many countries is insufficient to conduct business effectively with China.

Beijing views tourism not only as a way to attract visitors to China but also to impress them with the country's achievements, including in technology, business, and infrastructure. It also seeks to make Chinese tourists an influential force in BRI partner countries in order to gain economic and political leverage.

Many of these plans weren't disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of initiatives mixing tourism, culture and the (re)branding of China were abandoned, such as the Year of Tourism in China and Greece. Similarly, a threat by Beijing to "punish" the Czech Republic for establishing closer ties with Taiwan by boycotting tourism by its citizens, never materialized.

⁵⁰ Giovana Fleck, "How COVID-19 ramped up a simmering hostility between Brazil and China," Global Voices, March 10, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/03/10/how-covid-19-ramped-up-a-simmering-hostility-between-brazil-and-china/>.

⁵¹ Yevgenia Plakhina, "Chinese higher education programs attract increasing numbers of students from Kazakhstan," Global Voices, September 15, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/15/chinese-higher-education-programs-attract-increasing-numbers-of-students-from-kazakhstan/>, Aizat Shailoobek Kyzy, "Chinese soft power in Kyrgyzstan grows through culture and language," Global Voices, September 14, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/14/chinese-soft-power-in-kyrgyzstan-grows-through-culture-and-language/>.



3. The usual suspects: Claims about China

In this section we highlight some of the more persistent and influential narratives about the BRI. We also unpack other features, such as the power of local opinion, elite capture, geopolitical balancing acts, and nationalism.

Support for the BRI

Beijing has become acutely aware that the promise of jobs and instant GDP growth, and distributing vaccines is not enough to win the minds and hearts of local populations, or to compete with the soft power plays of its global rivals. Beijing, therefore, promotes the following narratives in Belt and Road Initiative countries, as well as globally, to bolster support for its activities. These narratives are also often relayed by supportive local elites, Chinese diasporas, and pro-Beijing foreign media.

China is willing to help when others won't

This claim supports a broader narrative asserting that China, unlike other world powers, has policy of non-interference⁵² and does not interfere in the sovereignty of other states. Beijing insists, for instance, that BRI projects have nothing in common with colonial models or economic imperialism, and that in cases such as Venezuela, they help overcome unfair embargoes and sanctions that most affect the local population and are essentially an attack on state sovereignty.

China's provision of COVID-19 vaccines, especially to less affluent countries with no reliable access to western vaccines, offered a strong opportunity to promote this narrative, although Beijing's "vaccine diplomacy" had mixed results in target countries. In Brazil, for example, Sinophobic narratives promoted by president Bolsonaro interrupted

⁵² Rosix Rincones Díaz, Correo del Caroní, February 2, 2019, [BRI_889](#).

the distribution of Chinese-made vaccines, and also exacerbated the country's COVID-19 toll.⁵³ In Turkey, public reception of Chinese vaccines was pragmatically critical.⁵⁴ Chinese vaccine deliveries to Africa often failed to reach promised targets.⁵⁵

The BRI provides genuine benefits to partner countries

This narrative is a counter to the perception that most of the benefits of the BRI flow to China, not to partner countries. A prominent expression of this narrative was the distribution and local production of COVID-19 vaccines, notably in places where western alternatives remained accessible. Here, Beijing maximized the opportunity for global image-making and branding of its “Health Silk Road” as yet another of the benefits the BRI offers partner countries.⁵⁶

In keeping with the Chinese domestic slogan of social harmony, Beijing insists BRI projects bring safety and stability to societies that are still in transition or experiencing social troubles. Digital technologies offered by China support this notion, including those that surveil citizens and monitor or censor social media. Local elites may also echo Beijing's messaging around social order, and combatting terrorism and criminality to justify the adoption of such technologies.

Other alleged benefits to partners include the economic integration opportunities offered by new transportation hubs, e-commerce and telecommunications, which facilitate trade and reduce costs for consumers. This especially applies in regions where countries remain isolated because of closed borders, a lack of rail transport or port facilities, and high custom levies.⁵⁷ Beyond regional trade, China offers access to the global economy by shipping goods to the ends of continents. Another benefit touted by Beijing is that goods and services from BRI partner nations gain preferential access to the Chinese market, though this does not always materialize.

China is the target of unfair criticism, often from countries with dubious records

According to this narrative, Chinese business and people are unfairly targeted by criticism, often by countries which themselves have questionable records in areas such as human rights. Recent allegations that China failed to contain the COVID-19 virus are also part of the victim narrative. China, Chinese communities overseas, and Chinese businesses are the victim of business ostracism, unfair discrimination, racism, and the unwillingness of people to recognize it as a world superpower.⁵⁸

⁵³ Igor Gielow, Everton Lopes Batista, Ana Bottallo, Folha de S. Paulo, January 12, 2021, [BRI_57](#); Nava Rodrigues, Twitter, January 12, 2021, [BRI_59](#); Jair Bolsonaro, Facebook, January 25, 2021, [BRI_83](#).

⁵⁴ Yeni Soluk, January 14, 2021, [BRU_992](#); Çağdaş Üngör, Serbestiyet, November 24, 2020, [BRI_932](#); Yıldız Yazıcıoğlu, Amerika'nın Sesi (VOA), April 15, 2021, [BRI_954](#).

⁵⁵ Bridge Beijing, June 2, 2021, [BRI_1178](#).

⁵⁶ Global Times, June 1, 2021, [BRI_970](#).

⁵⁷ China Briefing, May 20, 2021, [BRI_926](#).

⁵⁸ Wang Lijiu, 华语智库, April 16, 2019, [BRI_692](#).

Opposition to the BRI

Like any world power advancing its interests and projects, China is in competition with different actors within its partner countries, encountering strong resistance, obstacles, indifference, or conflict of interests with various political forces and elites. Other sources of opposition include segments of the population who see themselves as disadvantaged or threatened by the BRI, ideologists opposed to China and Chinese presence, and competing world or regional powers with well-established interests.⁵⁹ Of the many narratives that oppose China, the following are exemplary.

China has no respect for the citizens of BRI target countries

This narrative is advanced by people who have had bad experiences working on Chinese-run projects, doing business with Chinese people and companies, or studying in China. The arguments made often relate to China's alleged hidden agenda, which can include taking over local economies, monopolizing energy and natural resources, grabbing land because of border issues or in order to repay debts, marrying local women, and accessing local citizenship to introduce a powerful Chinese lobby, including in local politics and elections.⁶⁰

One of Beijing's most common arguments in advancing the BRI projects is that they help and sustain economic development by adding points to GDP growth, a cornerstone of the Chinese economic model since the start of reforms in the late 1970s. A key element of this socio-economic progress is the creation of jobs that, according to Beijing, primarily benefit the local population. Beijing typically focuses on the number rather than the quality of those jobs, paying scant attention to labor rights, just as it does at home, creating a dichotomy between Chinese and local perceptions and assessments of the labor situation.

Narratives about labor exploitation linked to BRI development surface in several countries, with labor casualization and rights violations reported across the board. In Nigeria, there are reports of grave mistreatment and abuses inflicted on local employees by Chinese employers.⁶¹ In Greece, labor unionists oppose the Chinese company COSCO's Piraeus port development both in terms of its impact on local businesses, and on China's flouting of labor rights norms.⁶² In Myanmar, BRI projects on the border are alleged to fuel demand for bride trafficking to China.⁶³

⁵⁹ Julett Pineda Sleinan, Fundación Andrés Bello – Centro de Investigación Chino Latinoamericano, January 25, 2021, [BRI_197](#).

⁶⁰ Sosialistiki Prooptiki, October 25, 2015, [BRI_78](#); @obidi____, Twitter, February 25, 2021, [BRI_236](#); Maria Cervantes, Reuters, December 24, 2020, [BRI_564](#).

⁶¹ console Hsk, Twitter, July 20, 2021, [BRI_1025](#); Sahara Reporters, April 15, 2020, [BRI_1028](#); Premium Times, July 8, 2021, [BRI_1173](#).

⁶² Christina Papastathopoulou, Efsyn, October 1, 2020, [BRI_12](#); Εργατική Αλληλεγγύη, Facebook, October 6, 2019, [BRI_746](#).

⁶³ Graeme Acres, Myanmar Now, October 9, 2019, [BRI_1066](#); U Thit Sin, Radio Free Asia, July 2, 2021, [BRI_1083](#).

Chinese influence has a negative impact on the local culture in partner countries

In some BRI countries, notably those decolonized in the recent past, national identity remains a fragile concept. Playing the nationalist card can mobilize people across social and ethnic lines, and be enough to create an attractive political agenda. Brazilian President Bolsonaro offered a typical example of this in positing China as a threat to national sovereignty, saying China could “buy *in* Brazil, but not Brazil [itself].”⁶⁴

Nationalists also present their cultures as being at risk, and claim that they are threatened by activities such as China’s mass production of traditional local products, or that China exoticizes their cultures in its promotion of mass tourism.⁶⁵ Nationalists in some cases turn to local histories in which China or Chinese people are portrayed as enemies, such as in the Krygyz national epic “Manas,” in which Chinese are traditional enemies. These old narratives have been amplified through demonstrations, social media content, and harassment such as the checking of work permits of Chinese migrants and business communities.⁶⁶ Local politicians, government officials and even law enforcement agencies have tolerated illegal or discriminatory actions against Chinese residents and people of Chinese descent, aware of the those groups ability to create anti-China discourse in local politics.

In predominantly Muslim countries, nationalist discourse may also use condemnation of the repression of Uyghurs in western China to argue against China's influence or presence.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, human rights activists and religious leaders use similar arguments to demand that their governments stop, freeze or entirely renounce BRI projects and cooperation with China.

Chinese interventions and projects in other countries damage the environment

Many BRI partner countries experience persistent opposition to projects linked to natural and energy resources, major infrastructures projects, and polluting industries. Such projects often pit local activists against local political and economic elites, with the former accusing the latter of failing to uphold existing regulation, creating lax legislation, or engaging in corruption to the benefit of major Chinese projects. As a Peruvian environmental activist quoted in a story by Isolda Morillo says: “Throughout

⁶⁴ Giovana Fleck, “How COVID-18 ramped up simmering hostility between Brazil and China”, Global Voices, March 10, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/03/10/how-covid-19-ramped-up-a-simmering-hostility-between-brazil-and-china/>.

⁶⁵ BBC Amharic, April 21, 2019, [BRI_942](#); Deacon Firew Seifu, Facebook, September 8, 2018, [BRI_919](#).

⁶⁶ Aizat Shailoobek kyzy, “In Kyrgyzstan, an ultranationalist group thrives on rising anti-Chinese sentiment,” Global Voices, June 16 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/16/in-kyrgyzstan-an-ultranationalist-group-thrives-on-rising-anti-chinese-sentiment/>.

⁶⁷ Azza Moghazy, Arabophone Chinese influencer divides public opinion in Egypt,” Global Voices, October 1, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/10/01/arabophone-chinese-influencer-divides-public-opinion-in-egypt/>.

the history of Peru, investments are located wherever they want, as long as they bring money, and the state or government allows this to happen.”⁶⁸

A story by Andreas Bloom quotes analogous comments from a lawyer discussing COSCO investments in the port of Piraeus, who says: “[The project] is being carried out without even remotely adhering to European environmental legislation or Greek legislation.”⁶⁹

A similar situation prevails in Kyrgyzstan, where rural environmental activism against oil refineries and gold mining is intertwined with nationalist Sinophobic narratives.⁷⁰

Environmental activism can be quite effective, especially when it harnesses connections with international networks that help raise awareness and attract media attention both locally and globally. While it is difficult to establish a causal link, it is notable that after many protests against China operating or opening coal mines, Beijing announced that BRI projects would no longer include coal extractions.⁷¹

Beijing also applies the primarily economic rationales that justify development projects in China to its BRI activities. Indigenous populations in Chinese regions such as Inner Mongolia and in Tibet, for instance, are frequently displaced in the name of economic progress. Those displaced populations are then offered employment opportunities, justifying Beijing’s claim that local populations are the first beneficiaries of development. China adopts a similar approach in some BRI projects. Beijing’s messaging is often relayed by local elites, as in the case of this statement by a Cambodian official commenting on a BRI dam project: “This is what Cambodians want but extremist human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch want Cambodians to continue using kerosene lamps in the 21st century.”⁷² This analysis, however, overlooks the fact that for many Indigenous communities, the destruction of the natural environment equates to the destruction of multifaceted identities that are inseparable from the natural world.

Nationalism and environmental concerns become intertwined in cases where the exportation of agricultural goods to China are perceived as a threat to local resources. Populist voices in Brazil, for example, have used the fact of large exports of Brazilian beef to China to accuse the Chinese of destroying Brazilian forests to satisfy its

⁶⁸ Isolda Morillo, “New Chinese-led port project faces backlash from local residents and environmentalists in Peru,” Global Voices, March 5, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/03/05/new-chinese-led-port-project-faces-backlash-from-local-residents-and-environmentalists-in-peru/#>,

⁶⁹ Andreas Bloom, “Greeks wage a court battle against Chinese-funded port that may poison the environment,” Global Voices, May 27, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/05/27/greeks-wage-a-court-battle-against-chinese-funded-port-that-may-poison-the-environment/>.

⁷⁰ Ayzirek Imanaliyeva, Eurasianet.org, October 22, 2020, [BRI_715](#); Aidai Erkebaeva, Katya Myacvchina, Kloop, November 6, 2019, [BRI_230](#); Mirlan Kadyrov, Radio Azattyk, February 17, 2020, [BRI_267](#).

⁷¹ Abigail Ng, “China’s pledge to end building coal plants abroad improves Belt and Road’s reputation, development bank says,” CNBC.com, September 24, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/24/chinas-pledge-to-stop-building-coal-plants-abroad-helps-bri-aiib.html>.

⁷² Mong Palatino, “Cambodia’s China-funded mega dam linked to rights abuses and loss of fisheries,” Global Voices, August 25, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/08/25/cambodias-china-funded-mega-dam-linked-to-rights-abuses-and-loss-of-fisheries/>.

demand and behaving like a colonizer.⁷³ These exports occur, however, with the full support of Brazilian authorities and many Brazilian businesspeople.

Chinese companies are inherently corrupt

This narrative was present in many of the countries we researched. In Venezuela, it is linked to the shrinking of that country's oil industry despite investment in energy infrastructure development.⁷⁴ In Nigeria, it surfaces in the form of discussion of the bribery of officials, fraudulent and potentially destabilizing business practices, and the abuse of workers due to lack of labor protections.⁷⁵ This narrative is also found in the Czech Republic and Ethiopia, mostly in relation to the co-optation of local elites and debt-trap diplomacy.

China takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of weaker countries

This narrative, common both globally and in local media ecosystems, shows up in relation to China's alleged use of debt to forge dependent relationships with other countries. In Venezuela, it surfaces in investigative reporting on covert loan terms.⁷⁶ Nigerians, similarly, express outrage over so-called "sovereign immunity clauses" tied to infrastructure funding.⁷⁷ In Kyrgyzstan, nationalist groups express fear that corrupt officials are signing away the country's sovereignty.⁷⁸ In Turkey, China's so-called "debt-trap diplomacy" is seen as resulting in untenably high costs for developing countries.⁷⁹

The BRI provides a smokescreen for China's covert aims

This narrative was especially prevalent in Central Asian and Southeast Asian partner countries, and includes claims that China is seeking to annex the territory of BRI partner states. Tajikistan, for instance, ceded 4% of long-disputed land to China in 2011.⁸⁰ In Kyrgyzstan, the leasing of land to BRI projects raised fears about annexation that led to protests.⁸¹ In Kazakhstan, a land code amendment favoring foreign citizens triggered

⁷³ Giovana Fleck, "As Brazil increases exports to China, politicians play the blame game," Global Voices, April 22, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/04/22/brazilian-exports-to-china-blame-game/>

⁷⁴ Francisco Olivares, Primer Informe, August 19, 2019, [BRI_244](#); Francisco Olivares, Primer Informe, August 26, 2018, [BRI_245](#); Angus Berwick, Reuters, July 7, 2019, [BRI_201](#).

⁷⁵ Ade Adesomoju, Premium Times, February 16, 2021, [BRI_204](#); @obidi__, Twitter, February 25, 2021, [BRI_236](#); Anadolu Agency, May 13, 2020, [BRI_1016](#); Matthew T. Page, United States Institute of Peace, September 1, 2008, [BRI_1010](#); Sahara Reporters, May 28, 2021, [BRI_1026](#); 'Tofe Ayeni, The Africa Report, September 2, 2020, [BRI_1039](#).

⁷⁶ Transparencia Venezuela (Miguelangel Caballero), YouTube, November 9, 2020, [BRI_134](#); Transparencia Venezuela, September 8, 2020, [BRI_137](#).

⁷⁷ Uche Igwe, LSE Blog, December 1, 2020, [BRI_228](#); Udora Orizu, ThisDay, July 29, 2020, [BRI_229](#).

⁷⁸ Akipress, YouTube, January 17, 2019, [BRI_570](#); New TV KG, YouTube, May 22, 2018, [BRI_823](#).

⁷⁹ Uğur Emek, Karar Gazetesi, June 13, 2021, [BRI_1087](#); Faruk Sevim, marksist.org, March 30, 2021, [BRI_1096](#).

⁸⁰ Svetlana Glushkova, Radio Azattyq, October, 6, 2011, [BRI_922](#), <https://airtable.com/shrsENxI8Nr0Xg4xG/tbl6bGv1PfkHeVd1X/viwq5sJKK4PSK0qxU/recSulJ9aBz8V4lw7?blocks=hide>.

⁸¹ New TV Kg, YouTube, May 22, 2018, [BRI_823](#); Alybek Musaev, Facebook, February 17, 2020, [BRI_867](#).

protests.⁸² In Myanmar, China's perceived support for the military junta through BRI projects has been seen as endangering the country's territorial sovereignty.⁸³

Pragmatic narratives

Many countries take a practical or realist approach to their relationship with China that is a reflection of power relations between the two parties. For some countries, an alliance with China is a useful counterbalance to the influence of other interests, as in the case of Central Asian states seeking a counterweight to Russia, or Turkey's careful positioning of itself between the West, Russia and the Middle East. The following narratives are examples of this approach.

For political parties in partner countries, the BRI and relations with China are useful political tools

Today many countries perceive China as a full-fledged political actor capable of competing with the US, the EU and former European colonial powers. Political parties in BRI partner countries such as Hungary and Venezuela take advantage of this competition both domestically and internationally, using China as a lever to navigate their relationships with Washington and Brussels.

The takeover of an oil refinery in Kyrgyzstan by a Chinese company is a good example of the restructuring of the political and economic space due to Chinese power. This act signals that Russia no longer fully controls this sensitive and strategic industry.⁸⁴

Similarly in Kazakhstan, the political opposition has played on fears of Chinese encroachment to shame the government, using populist arguments to suggest that local elites have sold themselves to foreign interests.⁸⁵

China is an essential part of the global geopolitical landscape

China has become a dominant figure in the world order, and sometimes challenges the fundamentals of that system. Beijing's interests differ strongly from and sometimes even clash with those of other world powers, as most recently illustrated by its rapprochement with the Taliban following its return to power in Afghanistan. China also ignores US-led embargoes against Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela, conducting business as usual with those countries.⁸⁶ In Central Asia and the Caucasus, China now rivals Russia in construction and control of economic

⁸² Gimran Yergaliyev, ZONA KZ, April 20, 2022, [BRI_49](#); Masa Media, March 22, 2021, [BRI_630](#).

⁸³ GIG Gaming Channel, Facebook, March 7, 2021, [BRI_1155](#).

⁸⁴ Aizat Shailoobek kyzy, "What a Kyrgyzstan oil refinery reveals about China's Belt and Road Initiative," Global Voices, June 9, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/09/what-a-kyrgyzstan-oil-refinery-tells-us-or-doesnt-tell-us-about-chinas-bri/>.

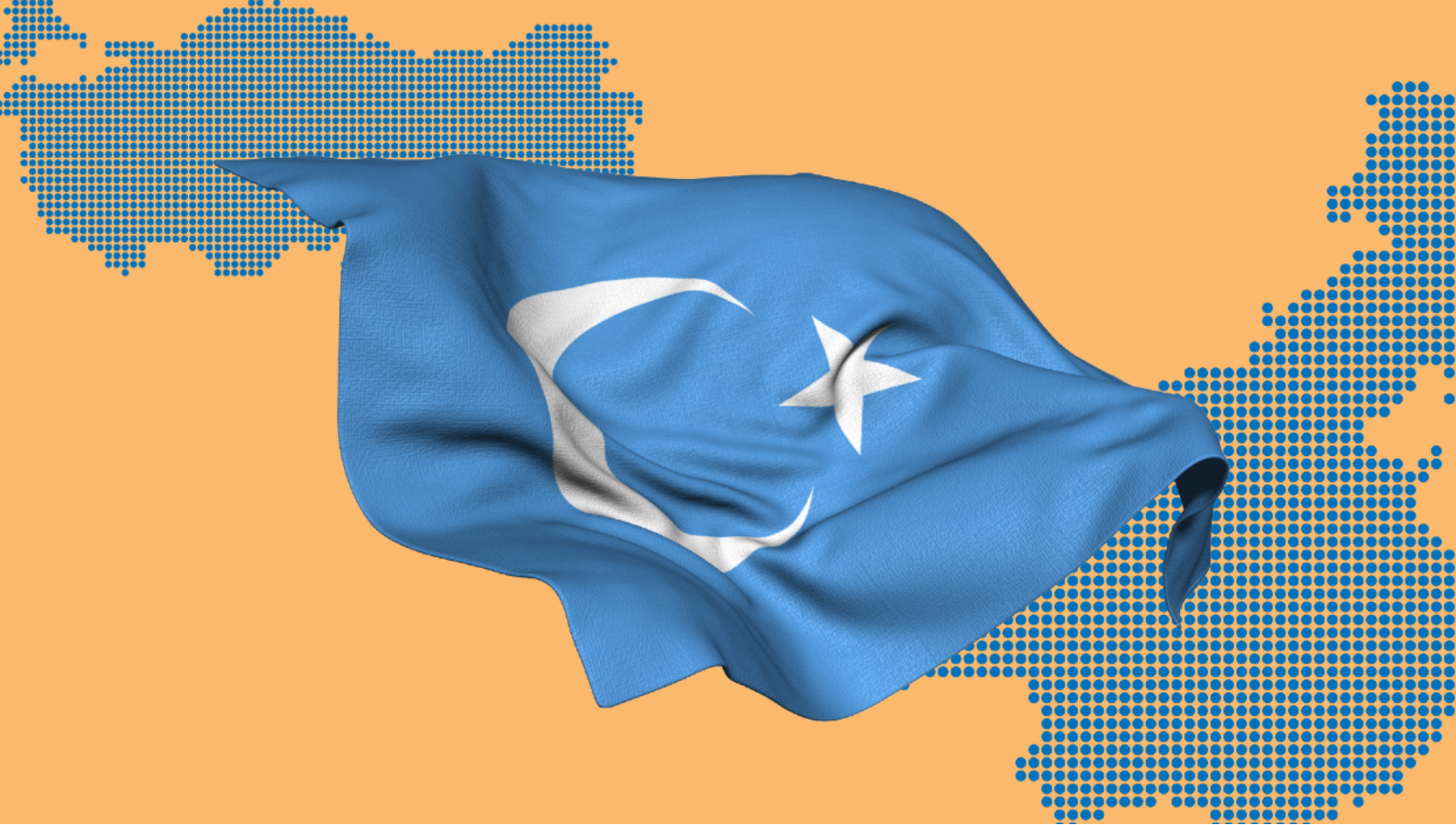
⁸⁵ Yevgenia Plakhina, "How Sinophobia is instrumentalized in Kazakhstan as a form of oppositional politics," Global Voices, June 15, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/15/how-sinophobia-is-instrumentalized-in-kazakhstan-as-a-form-of-oppositional-politics/>.

⁸⁶ Telesur, Facebook, December 1, 2020, [BRI_30](#).

integration, transport and pipeline routes.⁸⁷ In many African states, China offers access to capital and supports the development of key infrastructure projects, often framing the arrangements in ways that some interpret as “de-colonising.”⁸⁸ In Greece, where the EU has imposed economic restrictions without corresponding investment, China is building massive infrastructure in the port of Piraeus, one of the largest ports in Europe.

⁸⁷ Dmitry Mazorenko, vlast.kz, November 25, 2020, [BRI_47](#).

⁸⁸ Jian Junbo and Donata Frasheri, African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, October 1, 2014, [BRI_857](#).



4. Transnational patterns

Our researchers identified common narratives concerning participation in BRI projects in many of the countries we studied. In this section we highlight the most prominent, and explain how the issues play out in different contexts.

Elite capture

In numerous instances, China's soft power is facilitated through elite capture. Elites, as the shapers of laws and regulations and the owners of key industries, are often the clearest beneficiaries of BRI-facilitated relationships and investments. At the same time, the views held by local elites as they transition in and out of power frequently align with China's needs regardless of domestic political alignments.

Turkey

Turkey, arguably, provides the starkest example of the price political and business elites pay to receive BRI investment.

Officially secular Turkey has in recent years grown increasingly Islamist under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. With a shared Turkic heritage connecting Turkey to Xinjiang in western China, Turkey has been sympathetic to the Uyghur community's struggle against the Chinese state for more political, economic, cultural and linguistic rights. The country is also home to a large Uyghur community with close ties to the country's right-wing Islamist, conservative and nationalist political parties. China's severe crackdown on Xinjiang's Muslim Uyghur population under the guise of

antiterrorism policy has been judged by some to be genocide.⁸⁹ Turkey's ties to the Uyghurs has therefore tested its commitment to partnership with China.

As China's investments in Turkey have increased, Ankara has softened its policies on China and the plight of Uyghurs.⁹⁰ In March 2021, for example, Turkey, using COVID-19 quarantine measures as a pretext, placed a local Uyghur leader under house arrest during the visit of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi to prevent the leader from protesting Wang's visit.⁹¹ Throughout the pandemic, Uyghurs in Turkey also expressed fears they would be repatriated by the Turkish government to China in exchange for greater supply of China-made vaccines.⁹² In recent years, the Islamist AKP ruling party has also muted its criticism of China's ruling Chinese Communist Party.⁹³

The glossing over of this tension is especially apparent in an opinion piece President Erdoğan published in *Global Times*, a tabloid platform run by the Chinese Communist Party's official *People's Daily* newspaper.⁹⁴ Erdoğan puts forward a vision for a multilateral economic and security order, in which Chinese and Turkish development strategies work in harmony to secure the interests of both nations.

The extent of Turkey's compromise is also reflected on social media. A Turkish Ministry of Education "China Dream" propaganda exercise on Twitter targeted at middle school students was criticized for promoting the idea of a China where Uyghur concentration camps don't exist.⁹⁵ Also on Twitter, the mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, publicly lamented China's infamous 1990 massacre of 5,000 Uyghurs in Baren, Xinjiang.⁹⁶ This comment by Yavaş, who is known for having a strong nationalist stance, drew strong criticism from the PRC embassy in Ankara.⁹⁷

Greece

The Port of Piraeus is the largest port in Greece and one of the largest in Europe, as well as the country's most prominent instance of foreign direct investment, by way of the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO). In recent years, Greek banks have divested their interest in the domestic shipping industry and have been replaced by the Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, and Exim Bank of China, as the primary sources of financing.⁹⁸ In August 2021, approval was granted for

⁸⁹ Joel Gunter, "China committed genocide against Uyghurs, independent tribunal rules," BBC.com, December 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59595952>.

⁹⁰ Sinan Tavsan, Nikkei, March 26, 2019, [BRI_1097](#).

⁹¹ Dorian Jones, Voice of America, March 26, 2021, [BRI_973](#).

⁹² Dave Kang and Suzan Fraser, Associated Press, February 5, 2021, [BRI_971](#).

⁹³ Reuters, August 3, 2017, [BRI_1136](#).

⁹⁴ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, *Global Times*, July 1, 2019, [BRI_946](#).

⁹⁵ Yavuz Ağırlioğlu, Twitter, May 6, 2021, [BRI_1061](#).

⁹⁶ Mansur Yavaş, Twitter, April 5, 2021, [BRI_979](#).

⁹⁷ Çin Büyükelçiliği Ankara, Twitter, April 6, 2021, [BRI_980](#).

⁹⁸ Ilias Bellos, Ekathimerini.com, July 24, 2016, [BRI_661](#).

COSCO to increase its widely opposed ownership stake in the Piraeus facility to 67%.⁹⁹

Despite some opposition to BRI integration, our research showed how Beijing aimed to capture elite support from Greek policymakers across the political spectrum.¹⁰⁰ Also apparent was a pattern in which prominent political figures, once in power, backtracked on their earlier opposition to BRI investment in Piraeus, as well as the details and results, and adopted Beijing's "win-win" narrative.¹⁰¹ Mayors in nearby towns appeared eager as well to reap the benefits of Piraeus' financial windfall.¹⁰²

Greece's leftist Syriza party's shifting stance on BRI investment provides some of the most obvious examples of political opportunism. The party signed off on the COSCO-Piraeus deal shortly after gaining power in 2015, with Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras attending a BRI forum in Beijing in the final months of his term as prime minister in 2019.¹⁰³ Two months later, after Syriza was defeated in legislative election and became the official opposition, Tsipras joined forces with the many left-wing and grassroots voices opposing COSCO and similar projects.¹⁰⁴

More pointedly, Syriza's opposition to COSCO-Piraeus began not when the party became the official opposition in 2019; it was also its stated position prior to winning power in 2015. Longtime Syriza member and COSCO-Piraeus opponent Thodoris Dritsas embodied this spirit of contradiction when he was made shipping minister in September 2015 and signed off on the deal.¹⁰⁵

As with most of Beijing's overseas influence efforts, elites across the political spectrum engage in contradictory behavior. Around the time Tsipras was in Beijing, a pro-Syriza journalist chided then-opposition leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis—Greece's current prime minister—for being insufficiently pro-BRI, despite the Mitsotakis' consistently pro-COSCO position.¹⁰⁶

In one especially striking example, in late 2020, a pro-Mitsotakis newspaper concluded that Greece had not benefited from COSCO-Piraeus as much as expected, and had even begun to turn against the Chinese shipping giant.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁹ The Real News Network, December 12, 2017, [BRI_1160](#).

¹⁰⁰ Vangelis Mandravelis, Liberal.gr, November 27, 2020, [BRI_1166](#); Christina Papastathopoulou, Efsyn, December 23, 2020, [BRI_583](#); Ilias Bellos, ekathimerini.com, October 6, 2020, [BRI_180](#).

¹⁰¹ Greece Investor Guide, April 7, 2021, [BRI_628](#).

¹⁰² Belt and Road Advisory, September 15, 2019, [BRI_66](#).

¹⁰³ Yiorgos Christoforides, Facebook, April 26, 2019, [BRI_737](#).

¹⁰⁴ Ergatiki, Facebook, June 10, 2019, [BRI_746](#); Christina Papastathopoulou, Efsyn, February 24, 2021, [BRI_122](#).

¹⁰⁵ Nikos Galatis, Anoixtoparathyro.gr, April 9, 2016, [BRI_735](#).

¹⁰⁶ Christoforides, [BRI_737](#).

¹⁰⁷ Mandravelis, [BRI_1166](#).

Czech Republic

China was not on the radar of Czech political and economic elites until Miloš Zeman became president of the Czech Republic in 2013 and made a policy U-turn. Zeman warmed to Beijing and Moscow, courted Chinese investment, and declared China a key economic partner. Human rights concerns, the traditional political friendship with exiled Tibetan leaders, relations with Taiwan, all based on former president Václav Havel's policies, were rapidly abandoned. Zeman depicted Beijing as the future because of its large market, the promise of investment, and its potential as a source of wealthy tourists and foreign students.

Expectations reached their peak in March 2016 when Xi Jinping became the first Chinese president to visit the Czech Republic. Local elites read his presence in the Czech Republic as a clear signal that Beijing had elevated Prague to a privileged position within Central Europe, and was ready to intensify bilateral cooperation, trade, investments and possibly favor Czech businesses on the Chinese market.

Political and economic elites, including President Zeman, insist the Czech Republic cannot afford to antagonize a player as big as China in the name of Havel's heritage, and blame the opposition for exploiting the issue of China to advance their domestic political interests without any consideration for the fate of the Czech economy.¹⁰⁸ Zeman regularly refers in almost mythic terms to the unexplored Chinese market as a way to replace losses incurred by Czech businesses in Russia, framing China in the process as the "new Russia".¹⁰⁹

Perhaps the most emblematic example of the lengths to which Czech companies will go to guarantee their access to that mythical market is the case of Home Credit,¹¹⁰ a Czech high-risk lending company that was given access to a sector of the Chinese market that is usually closed to foreign companies. In return, Home Credit became China's most influential lobbyist in the Czech Republic, encouraging academics, media professionals, and business people to project a highly positive image of China, Chinese investment and the BRI to Czech audiences.

Caught between East and West

Many BRI partner countries are struggling to manage competing demands from the U.S. and Europe on the one hand, and China on the other. These tensions are manifest in the conditionality of development aid, technology transfer, energy transport routes, labor and environmental standards, and defense of international human rights norms.

We looked at factors such as elections in Greece and Brazil, and the impact of revelations of cultural genocide against the Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region for the domestic politics of Turkey and Egypt. Here we highlight the experiences of Turkey and Brazil.

¹⁰⁸ Jan Zahradil, Asiaskop, October 14, 2020, [BRI_573](#).

¹⁰⁹ Jaromír Soukup, Týden, March 28, 2016, [BRI_1198](#).

¹¹⁰ Lukáš Valášek and Jan Horák, Aktuálně, December 12, 2019, [BRI_1206](#).

Turkey

Turkey both exemplifies and complicates the idea of a country caught between competing ideologies. It is a BRI partner country, and also in NATO, with a long history of cooperation with the West. But it is also a potential competitor to China. It has similar ambitions of expanding its geopolitical and economic interests in Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Africa, and parts of Southeast Europe, areas that map to a considerable extent onto the former borders of the Ottoman Empire, where it previously held control and influence.¹¹¹

Ankara has created the concept of the Middle Corridor, an ambitious strategy that combines economic, cultural, diplomatic and sometimes military aspects.¹¹² The project promotes Turkey as a country of reference, as an economic and trading power, and as a strong diplomatic ally for other countries. In a number of cases, the same countries that China considers allies are defined by Turkey as opponents, if not enemies. Greece and Iran remain loyal friends of Beijing, for instance, while they clash with Ankara. Turkey has long-standing conflicts with Greece on maritime borders, refugees, and the status of a reunified Cyprus. It competes with Iran on religious influence in the Muslim world, and on politics in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Ankara supports the Organization of Turkic States, while Beijing has conducted a massive campaign of repression against the Uyghurs, its largest Turkic population.¹¹³

In recent years, Ankara has asserted more influence regionally. The recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and a possible reopening of the Turkish-Armenian border may indicate a growing regional role for Ankara to challenge China's influence in BRI partner countries in the region.

Generally, however, Beijing and Ankara refrain from openly commenting on possible divergences. The potential environmental impact of China's largest direct investment in Turkey, a coal-based power plant, for example, faces opposition from Turkish environmental groups, but is supported by Ankara.¹¹⁴

Brazil

Brazil has close economic ties with Beijing, but from the start of the pandemic in February 2020 President Jair Bolsonaro assumed a more aggressive position towards China. As a trade partner, China purchases \$67 billion in Brazilian exports annually,

¹¹¹ Emre Demir, "Turkey and China in the eastern Mediterranean: Partners or competitors?" Global Voices, September 10, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/10/turkey-and-china-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-partners-or-competitors/>.

¹¹² Emre Demir, "Kanal Istanbul, Turkey's Middle Corridor, and the Belt and Road Initiative, Global Voices, August 23, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/08/23/kanal-istanbul-turkeys-middle-corridor-and-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

¹¹³ Organization of Turkic States, <https://www.turkkon.org/en/turk-konseji-hakkinda>.

¹¹⁴ Arzu Geybullayeva and Sultan Gülsün, "Are Turkish environmental groups alone in criticizing the Beijing-Ankara economic integration?" Global Voices, August 11, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/08/11/are-turkish-environmental-groups-the-only-voices-critical-of-the-beijing-ankara-economic-integration/>.

three times more than the U.S. buys from Brazil.¹¹⁵ But Bolsonaro's mishandling of the pandemic made it necessary to find someone else to blame, so he and his allies targeted China.

COVID-19 vaccines were manufactured in Brazil by two laboratories, one producing Oxford/AstraZeneca, the other the China-developed Sinovac. The Chinese vaccine was the first to be approved by the Brazilian authorities but it also was the target of misinformation.¹¹⁶ Fueled by anti-China sentiment, far-right activists sowed doubt about the safety of the vaccine and promoted conspiracy theories involving China, some of which had originally circulated in English on QAnon groups, and were then translated into Portuguese.¹¹⁷ In an opinion column the conservative writer Rodrigo Constantino claimed that the CoronaVac was unsafe and called those who supported it "Chinese cattle" who benefit from the public's fear of the pandemic.¹¹⁸ This narrative created diplomatic animosity between the two nations, especially with regard to vaccine diplomacy.

Within Bolsonaro's circles, attacking China signaled loyalty to the government.¹¹⁹ Chinese communities in Brazil reported harassment and prejudice due to these narratives.¹²⁰ Although the Bolsonaro government adopted an anti-China position, there was dissonance between the rhetoric of the president and his closest allies, including his sons, and the actions of his administration. Both Vice President Hamilton Mourão and the Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply of Brazil, Tereza Cristina, remained personally dedicated to maintaining bilateral relations with China¹²¹. According to a report by the Brazil-China Business Council (CEBC)¹²²

Nationalism as counter-narrative

In nearly all of the countries studied, we observed narrative clusters in the spheres of nationalism and populism. This nationalism might be reflective of the agency countries try to maintain when participating in the BRI. But when nationalism takes

¹¹⁵ Chris Silva, Telegram, January 14, 2021, [BRI_61](#); Giovana Fleck, "How COVID-19 ramped up a simmering hostility between Brazil and China," Global Voices, March 10, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/03/10/how-covid-19-ramped-up-a-simmering-hostility-between-brazil-and-china/>.

¹¹⁶ Alexander Busch, Deutsche Welle, February 3, 2021, [BRI_160](#);

¹¹⁷ Giovana Fleck, "Why Huawei was almost excluded from the 5G race in Brazil," Global Voices, May 28, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/05/28/why-huawei-was-almost-excluded-from-the-5g-race-in-brazil/>; Rafael Fontana, Twitter, May 16, 2021, [BRI_710](#).

¹¹⁸ Rodrigo Constantino, Twitter, January 15, 2021, [BRI_62](#); Rodrigo Constantino, Diário de S. Paulo, January 13, 2021, [BRI_63](#).

¹¹⁹ Giovana Fleck, "As Brazil increases exports to China, politicians play the blame game," April 22, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/04/22/brazilian-exports-to-china-blame-game/>.

¹²⁰ Giovana Fleck, "Is Bolsonaro's anti-China rhetoric fueling anti-Asian hate in Brazil?" Global Voices March 26, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/03/26/is-bolsonaros-anti-china-rhetoric-fueling-anti-asian-hate-in-brazil/>.

¹²¹ Equipe Comex do Brasil, "Mourão e Tereza Cristina consideram sustentabilidade e tecnologia indissociáveis na relação Brasil-China", October 14, 2021. "<https://www.comexdobrasil.com/mourao-e-tereza-cristina-consideram-sustentabilidade-e-tecnologia-indissociaveis-na-relacao-brasil-china/>

¹²² Conselho Empresarial Brasil-China, "Investimentos Chineses no Brasil – Histórico, Tendências e Desafios Globais (2007-2020)", May 08, 2021. "https://www.cebc.org.br/2021/08/05/investimentos-chineses-no-brasil-historico-tendencias-e-desafios-globais-2007-2020/?cf_chl_tk=moPw1lIV_33pzia_iCpjLZAoV0i76iBSKd8CQqkxjb8-1652451546-0-gaNycGzNCL0

forms that are malignant or exploitative, rather than supportive of building a positive national identity, it can foster hate speech, and attacks on ethnic Chinese populations. The drivers of malignant nationalism are often a mix of economic inequality, a perceived loss of sovereignty, corruption of local elites, and genuine grievances against the behavior of the Chinese government or Chinese companies.

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, where a perceived loss of sovereignty has empowered destructive and hateful forces in the country, the BRI experience has been bitter for many.

A March 2021 Facebook post from former prime minister Sapar Isakov,¹²³ is a useful example of the frustration felt by political elites' in response to years of setbacks in the country's attempts to roll out BRI. In the post, Isakov accused former president Sooronbai Jeenbekov of ruining the good relationship Jeenbekov's predecessor had established with China. The post concerned a China-supported thermal power plant in the capital Bishkek that had become mired in scandal to the point that Isakov and a number of his peers were detained.

Freshly refurbished in 2017 thanks to a \$386 million loan from China's Exim Bank, in January 2018, a boiler malfunction shut down the plant, leaving thousands in Kyrgyzstan's capital without food or heating in the depths of winter and resulting in several deaths. Public accusations of bribery and corruption followed when the contract for reconstruction of the power plant was awarded to a Chinese company with insufficient public oversight.¹²⁴

Nationalist and populist narratives proliferated around the fallout surrounding the Bishkek power plant accident, which is commonly seen as the point at which much of Kyrgyzstan lost its appetite for BRI projects. Another source of disillusionment was the actions of the Chinese mining company Fuld Gold, which became the target of protests in June 2018 when angry residents accused the company of releasing excess levels of cyanide into the lands surrounding the mining activities.¹²⁵

Sinophobic attitudes grew in tandem with BRI investments and the accompanying scandals. One reader's Facebook response to an Akipress news agency story concerning poison leaked into the surrounding environment by the Chinese-owned Junda factory aimed equal venom at the Kyrgyz officials she holds both corrupt and responsible.¹²⁶ In another case, local residents claimed pollution from Chinese mining company Zhong Ji was responsible for livestock deaths in the area. When residents demanded a halt to Zhong Ji operations, local administrators blamed residents and

¹²³ Sapar Isakov, Facebook, March 1, 2021, [BRI_615](#).

¹²⁴ Nurjamal Djanibekova, "Kyrgyzstan: Power plant blame game threatens political showdown," Eurasianet, May 18, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-power-plant-blame-game-threatens-political-showdown>.

¹²⁵ Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, June 13, 2018, [BRI_613](#).

¹²⁶ Nura Gaparova, Facebook, June 14, 2018, [BRI_795](#).

farmers themselves for the losses, resulting in the perception that even local administrators have taken "the Chinese side."¹²⁷

In a third incident, a February 2020 protest against a Chinese-backed logistics center in the district of At-Bashy included allegations that the local government had sabotaged operations at a China-owned oil factory in order to award the fuel contract to a Russian firm instead.¹²⁸

For many Kyrgyz citizens outrage at the detention of Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Uyghur children and adults in Chinese camps in Xinjiang has provided additional motivation for opposing BRI projects, with some, including nationalists, using Sinophobic language on social media platforms to express their opposition.¹²⁹

In tandem with the accumulation of environmental, political and social costs of Kyrgyzstan's participation in BRI has come the rise of a formerly obscure group of nationalists now commonly known as Kyrk-Choro.¹³⁰ The group, which has a centuries-old poetic prophecy of Chinese occupation as its origin story, predates Beijing's formal BRI efforts by several years. Kyrk-Choro rose to prominence in 2013 when, in close partnership with Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Internal Affairs, the group was directly involved in the deportation of thirty "illegal" PRC citizens.¹³¹ The following year, Kyrk-Choro had assumed the role of morality police, creating a national scandal when it raided a karaoke club in Bishkek's Taatan Chinese center, filming the intrusion and spreading the video online.¹³² Kyrk-Choro would not have grown to its current size and level of influence without having joined and organized numerous anti-Chinese protests around BRI projects in recent years.

In 2018, as the world started to learn about the existence of internment camps for Turkic peoples in Xinjiang, Kyrk-Choro responded by organizing a rally in front of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek.¹³³ Driven by concern about Kyrgyz people detained in Chinese camps, the protest demanded that Kyrk-Choro be given access to the records of all Chinese companies to ensure that all Chinese employees have working visas, with the intent to deport "illegals."

Kyrk-Choro expanded in 2019 to the point where it was leading other civil activist groups. The group held two rallies in January alone, expressing open opposition to the presence of Chinese migrants in Kyrgyzstan and promoting narratives conflating

¹²⁷ Aidai Erkebaeva and Katya Myacvhina, Kloop, November 6, 2019, [BRI_230](#).

¹²⁸ Mirlan Kadyrov, Radio Azattyk, February 17, 2020, [BRI_267](#).

¹²⁹ Кытайдын баскынчылыгына каршыбыз Facebook Group, Facebook.com, November 21, 2020, [BRI_1001](#).

¹³⁰ Aizat Shailoobek kyzy, "In Kyrgyzstan, an ultranationalist group thrives on rising anti-Chinese sentiment," Global Voices, June 16, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/16/in-kyrgyzstan-an-ultranationalist-group-thrives-on-rising-anti-chinese-sentiment/>.

¹³¹ OK.ru, December 28, 2018, [BRI_660](#).

¹³² Kloop, December 30, 2014, [BRI_659](#).

¹³³ Zulaika Topchubaeva, Kaktus Media, December 20, 2018, [BRI_598](#).

BRI debt with Chinese occupation, and fears of land seizure over Kyrgyzstan's failure to repay BRI loans and jobs going to Chinese, workers instead of locals.¹³⁴

Later in 2019, Kyrk-Choro again partnered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, this time on an inspection of Chinese, Pakistani and other businesses employing migrant workers.¹³⁵ During a "visit" to the Junda oil refinery, Kyrk-Choro "activists" admitted to finding only legal Chinese workers and more local than foreign workers on the refinery premises.

In February 2021, several members of Kyrk-Choro shared an array of anti-China views in an interview with a Global Voices researcher.¹³⁶

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's experience with the BRI resembles Kyrgyzstan's, with local elites championing expanded market access to Chinese markets for participating countries, as well as access to Chinese goods and services in domestic markets. Kazakhstani elites also advocate for Kazakhstan to play a role in Turkey's Middle Corridor, as an inner Asia route between China and Turkey.¹³⁷

But with the BRI also came anti-China protests, fears of Chinese territorial expansion and, despite a number of educational exchanges in recent years, evidence that Kazakhstan is home to some of the most potent anti-China sentiment in Central Asia.¹³⁸

One key element that emerged through our research is the role technology plays in Kazakhstan's BRI experience. As part of the larger "Digital Kazakhstan" partnership, Dahua Technology, a Chinese video surveillance equipment company reportedly supported a COVID-19 contact tracing project to be used as a pretext for strengthening the surveillance of residents in Kazakhstan's capital, Nur-Sultan.¹³⁹ Kazakhstani civil society pushed back against attempts to expand surveillance in Nur-Sultan using facial recognition technology imported from China with the support of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.¹⁴⁰

China's influence over Kazakhstani geopolitics might be most evident in the story of Kazakh activist Serikzhan Bilash, who supported and documented the cases of ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uyghurs held in China's internment camps for Muslims. Bilash

¹³⁴ Sanjar Kalmatai, January 7, 2019, [BRI_572](#).

¹³⁵ Sputnik.kg, January 16, 2019, [BRI_599](#).

¹³⁶ Aizat Shailoobek kyzy, interview with Kyrk-Choro members, February 15, 2021, [BRI_586](#).

¹³⁷ Dmitry Mazorenko, Vlast.kz, November 25, 2020, [BRI_47](#); Rakhmetolla Kudaibergenov, EU Reporter, July 26, 2021, [BRI_1130](#).

¹³⁸ Temur Umarov, Carnegie Moscow Centre, March 22, 2021, [BRI_631](#); Gimran Yergaliyev, Zonakz.net, April 20, 2020, [BRI_49](#); Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan, November 28, 2016, [BRI_1185](#).

¹³⁹ Anna Gussarova, Jamestown Foundation, April 8, 2020, [BRI_50](#).

¹⁴⁰ Chris Rickleton, Eurasianet.org, October 17, 2019, [BRI_51](#).

fled Kazakhstan in September 2020 after narrowly avoiding a seven-year prison sentence for his work.¹⁴¹

Who's the neo-colonial power now?

Nigeria

Our research on Nigeria shows a critical view of BRI participation based on recent experiences of losses and abuses associated with BRI projects, tempered by Nigeria's past experience with Western powers.

For Nigeria, the no-strings-attached nature of BRI investments has come at a steep price.¹⁴² For some of the countries featured in this report, concerns about the BRI are centered on effects such as possible territorial loss, but Nigeria's concerns have been primarily economic.¹⁴³ With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic there emerged a narrative of Nigeria falling victim to vaccine nationalism, in light of both the Health Silk Road's failure to deliver meaningful pandemic relief, and the overall absence of Western support.¹⁴⁴

While the public perception of China in Nigeria is still largely positive, counter-narratives show that many also see neocolonial attitudes underlying China's actions, are concerned that China's intentions remain unclear, and believe that China's relationship with Nigeria is extractive and too often abusive.¹⁴⁵

One of the largest concerns is a "sovereign immunity" clause written into many BRI loans in Nigeria.¹⁴⁶ Nigeria's House of Representatives, the country's lower legislative body, first uncovered this issue, and between legal opinions and social media discussions that specific worry gave way to concerns over more direct and upsetting revelations associated with BRI.¹⁴⁷

A related example surfaced in Nigeria's House of Representatives, with Minister of Transportation Rotimi Amaechi's July 2020 claim that upwards of US\$500 million in

¹⁴¹ Laura Pitel, Christian Shepherd and Max Saddon, Financial Times, February 25, 2021, [BRI_46](#).

¹⁴² Keith Bradsher and Adam Nossiter, New York Times, December 5, 2015, [BRI_1017](#).

¹⁴³ Abiola Odutola, Nairametrics, October 29, 2019, [BRI_1177](#).

¹⁴⁴ Nwachukwu Egbunike, "COVID-19 vaccine in Africa: Caught between China's soft-power diplomacy and the West's vaccine nationalism, Part I," Global Voices, February 1, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/02/01/covid-19-vaccine-in-africa-caught-between-chinas-soft-power-diplomacy-and-the-wests-vaccine-nationalism-part-i/>.

¹⁴⁵ Jian Junbo, Beijing Review, February 8, 2007, [BRI_852](#); Onye Nkuzi HR, Twitter, February 15, 2021, [BRI_214](#); Nwachukwu Egbunike, "Belt and Road Initiative projects ramp up Nigeria's favorable perception of China," Global Voices, June 7, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/06/07/belt-and-road-initiative-projects-ramp-up-nigerias-favourable-perception-of-china/>.

¹⁴⁶ Uche Igwe, London School of Economics blog, December 1, 2020, [BRI_228](#); Udora Orizu, This Day, July 29, 2020, [BRI_229](#); Laure Deron, The Diplomat, August 12, 2020, [BRI_232](#); Dapo Okubango, Twitter, July 29, 2020, [BRI_234](#).

¹⁴⁷ Udora Orizu, ThisDay, July 29, 2020, [BRI_229](#); Dapsieb, Twitter, July 29, 2020, [BRI_234](#).

funding for rail upgrades would be lost if questions continued to be raised by the Nigerians about the terms of BRI loans.¹⁴⁸

Nigeria has allegedly experienced many labor and human rights violations related to BRI activities.¹⁴⁹ One of the more striking cases is that of Onyinye Onwuegbusi, who, along with four colleagues in southwestern Nigeria's Ogun state, burned to death in July 2021 when their Chinese employer started offloading gas canisters near the dormitory where Onyinye and others were cooking.¹⁵⁰

Photos and details of this story first appeared on Twitter, bearing the hashtag #JusticeforOnyi, but because the Nigerian government banned Twitter the month prior to Onyinye's death, Nigerian media largely failed to pick up the story.

There are many other examples of mistreatment of Nigerian workers. Two Chinese ceramics companies in Kogi State, for example, have faced allegations of abuse, sexual harassment, industrial slavery, and maltreatment of Nigerians.¹⁵¹ A Chinese couple in Abuja locked up eight Nigerian employees for four months.¹⁵² The Inner Galaxy Steel Company in southeastern Nigeria's Abia state was described as a "Chinese modern-day slave camp" based on the abuse experienced by Nigerian workers at ¹⁵³ Chris Abiodun, an employee at the Hongxing Steel Company in Lagos, was disfigured in an industrial accident while on the job; the plant owners were accused of having no safety plan.¹⁵⁴

The Lagos state government has launched investigations into some of these incidents, but the accused perpetrators rarely experience repercussions. The common perception that Chinese companies abuse their Nigerian employees with impunity is largely substantiated.

On occasion, the Nigerian government has been willing to investigate allegations of BRI-linked abuses, but with few concrete results. In 2021, the Ogun state legislature summoned two Chinese companies accused of inhumane treatment of their employees.¹⁵⁵ The lower House also directed the country's police chief to investigate the situation of 1,000 Nigerian employees held captive in abysmal conditions by their Chinese employer.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ Dyepkazah Shibayan, The Cable NG, July 29, 2020, [BRI_231](#).

¹⁴⁹ Nwachukwu Egbunike, "Chinese firms in Nigeria face widespread labor abuse allegations, tainting bilateral relationship," Global Voices, September 22, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/09/22/chinese-firms-in-nigeria-face-widespread-labour-abuse-allegations-tainting-bilateral-relationship/>.

¹⁵⁰ Clinton Abuchi, July 19, 2021, [BRI_1024](#); Console Hsk, Twitter, July 20, 2021, [BRI_1025](#).

¹⁵¹ Gbenga Omokhunu, The Nation, February 9, 2021, [BRI_1029](#).

¹⁵² Adelani Adepegba, The Punch, July 2, 2021, [BRI_1030](#).

¹⁵³ 99% OPPRESSED (WIKILEAKS), Twitter, August 12, 2020, [BRI_1038](#).

¹⁵⁴ Samson Folarin, The Punch, February 13, 2018, [BRI_1042](#).

¹⁵⁵ News Agency of Nigeria, Pulse Nigeria, July 8, 2021, [BRI_1170](#).

¹⁵⁶ James Kwen, Business Day, January 9, 2020, [BRI_1171](#).



5. China looks at itself

While Chinese narratives about the BRI were not the main focus of our research, we did spend some time looking at Chinese media to unpack and corroborate claims made in other countries.

Chinese-language content published by Chinese state media is targeted primarily at domestic audiences. Official Chinese narratives about the Belt and Road Initiative are by default positive, delivering a message of success by virtue of the leadership of China's leader Xi Jinping. Chinese narratives stress that the Initiative brings only positive changes to host countries, highlighting China's unique position as a benefactor in the world. In cases where the BRI fails, Chinese narratives follow the general tone of Chinese foreign policy, targeting the United States as a source of tension between China and the host country, and never mentioning issues caused by Chinese actors.

In all of the countries studied, official Chinese narratives put subtle emphasis on the idea that a positive bilateral relationship is a precondition of successful development in partner countries. When relationships fail, the default Chinese position is to question whether the partner is reliable. When faced with a local anti-China movement pressuring the government to call off an infrastructure project in Kyrgyzstan, for example, Chinese media questioned whether or not Kyrgyzstan was a

stable partner, and whether China should continue to pursue trade initiatives which benefit the country.¹⁵⁷

The following narratives are not formally part of the project dataset, as they examine Chinese narratives in China rather than in partner countries. We reference media items in the dataset when relevant.

China makes possible unprecedented industrial progress in BRI host countries

In most of the countries studied, official Chinese narratives described Chinese investments and companies made available through the BRI as driving unprecedented economic development to the host country that would be unfeasible without Chinese investment. China, in this equation, is portrayed as benevolent and interested in boosting local economic development. Referring to an energy investment in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, Xinhuanet, China's official news agency, says "In this Central Asia country virtually without any industrialization, China's Zhongda Company is deeply integrated into the local development process, writing a win-win story of Belt and Road Initiative with hard work."¹⁵⁸ Xinhuanet talks about Venezuela in similar terms, claiming that the "...government has been trying to escape from economic difficulty through developing its economy beyond relying on oil export. Chinese governments are actively supporting this and are often praised by the Venezuelan government."¹⁵⁹

While Western countries exploit, China lifts countries up through economic development and industrialization

China describes its economic role as uplifting development and industrialization, while calling Western countries exploitative. In some cases, for example in Venezuela and Nigeria, China pays special attention to the colonial history of the host country and contrasts its own foreign policy approach with that of the West. For example, regarding Venezuela, the China International Strategic Review says: "The United States need not have direct confrontation with Venezuela, it can disrupt the country by meddling economically and achieve the American goal. The cooperation between China and Venezuela is based on commercial principles and win-win, China is willing to assist in negotiation and hosting talks, but it will not intervene in the domestic politics of Venezuela."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ 金十数据, sina.com, February 25, 2020, [BRI_913](#). "由于距离上的优势（东邻中国），吉尔吉斯斯坦近年来在中资的助力下尝到了不少甜头。而此次取消合作[工业贸易物流中心的项目]的决定，无疑将会令这个中亚国家在中国投资者心中的形象大打折扣" (Given its geographical advantage (bordering China in the East), Kyrgyzstan has benefited a lot from Chinese investments in recent years. Due to the cancellation of this cooperation [logistics hub], there is no doubt Chinese investors are disappointed in this Central Asian country.)

¹⁵⁸ [Quote \(BRI_827\)](#): "在这个几乎没有重工业的中亚国家，中大石油深度融入当地发展进程，以实干书写着“一带一路”合作共赢的生动故事。

¹⁵⁹ [Quote \(BRI_1031\)](#): "委内瑞拉政府为走出经济困境，努力尝试摆脱依赖石油出口的单一发展模式。中国企业积极响应并参与，受到委方高度赞赏。

¹⁶⁰ Guo Jie, IGCU, [BRI_771](#).

The US instigates issues between China and other countries

Where issues arose between China and a partner country, Chinese narratives consistently cited the United States as the source of tension. For example, Chinese media claim that anti-China protests in Kyrgyzstan were supported by American aid agencies: "Since Autumn 2018, there have been many anti-China protests in Kyrgyzstan, criticizing China's Xinjiang policy. But in fact, these anti-China sentiments are promoted by American funded Russian language media in Central Asia, which have been translated into Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages. These anti-China sentiments created by America are not the end of this chess game between China and Central Asian states; it's probably only the start."¹⁶¹

Similar assertions are made about the resistance to Huawei in Brazil: "Under the Trump administration, the United States has been applying pressure towards the Brazilian government regarding Huawei, polarizing the opinions within the Brazilian government."¹⁶²

China also asserts that US-led Western media has created a distorted understanding of China's Xinjiang policy in Turkey and the Middle East.

All of these cases highlight the importance of understanding the international contexts of narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative.

China must vigorously counter anti-Chinese propaganda from other nations

China sees global competition with the U.S. as the main driver of anti-China narratives, and seeks to counter them with a better image of China. This involves telling better stories about the BRI, but takes many other forms. For example, a Chinese "online influencer" living in Egypt who speaks fluent Arabic is employed by the China Media Group to "tell the truth about China" to Arabic-speaking audiences.¹⁶³

China also puts emphasis on human relations successes associated with the BRI. In one example cited as a classic success of Chinese workers abroad, after living in Nigeria for nine years, Kong Tao, the general manager of a state-owned Chinese company, was awarded the title of tribal chief.¹⁶⁴ Kong learned the local language and culture, built local connections, and used this knowledge to facilitate the work of his

¹⁶¹ Wang Lijiu, Weixin, April 16 2019, [BRI_692](#); Yang Jin, Weixin, February 24, 2020, [BRI_693](#): "在美国政府紧盯中国、视中国为全球最大竞争对手的当下，通过非政府组织（NGO）这种相对隐蔽的手段在中国周边地区，尤其是对中国西部近邻中亚各国进行渗透，是美国政治机器展开反华工作的新态势，值得我们警惕。"Currently, as the American government is targeting China, seeing China as the biggest competitor, the Americans are using hidden methods through NGOs to infiltrate and create anti-China sentiments in the Central Asian countries bordering China's western region.

¹⁶² Qian Xiaoyan, YICAI, February 26, 2021, [BRI_719](#): "此前在特朗普政府执政期间，美国曾就华为问题向巴西政府施加压力，使得巴西政府内部形成了两派不同的意见。"

¹⁶³ Azza Moghazy, "Arabophone Chinese influencer divides public opinion in Egypt," Global Voices, October 1, 2021, <https://globalvoices.org/2021/10/01/arabophone-chinese-influencer-divides-public-opinion-in-egypt/>.

¹⁶⁴ 国资小新 (Guozi Xiaoxin), Weibo, May 05, 2019, 真人生赢家, 央企小伙在非洲当上酋长, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404368684062781631>.

company. Kong was reportedly the key person who successfully negotiated Nigeria's adaptation to Chinese railway gauge standard, the first in Africa. "Facing all issues working in Nigeria, Kong Tao didn't give up, all he thought about was how he could integrate more with the local communities. By now, local residents can see all that Kong Tao has done for them, and they are expressing their gratitude in the enthusiastic African way."¹⁶⁵

Education is another important arena for the building of human relations. In Kazakhstan, the Chinese Embassy has hosted a large event annually since 2016 to connect Kazakhstani alumni of Chinese institutions with Chinese students studying in Kazakhstan. A Kazakhstani attendee at one such event is quoted as praising the Chinese's government's generous scholarship program for having, "changed her life", calling it "the best way a foreign country can help people in another country".¹⁶⁶

6. Methods

The Global Voices Civic Media Observatory uses a research method deployable in relation to key events and trends to find, assess, describe and analyze information, grounded in the following:

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE — to clarify subtext and context

EDITORIAL RIGOR — to ensure that research analysis is impartial

CIVIC IMPACT SCORE — to evaluate material based on potential benefit or harm to civic discourse, in accordance with international human rights norms

SUGGESTED ACTIONS — to recommend tactics to inform journalistic coverage, support content moderation and platform governance strategies, and help frame research, to promote the protection of human rights within the media environment

Themes:
What people
talk about

The core of the Civic Media Observatory is the INVESTIGATION — the focus of the research in a given instance. Investigations are organized around two categories: THEMES — events, trends or phenomena; and NARRATIVE FRAMES — the dominant narratives being used to debate themes.

Frames:
How they talk
about it

The researchers working on an Investigation categorize, analyze and assign a measure of civic impact to MEDIA ITEMS — social and other online media, mainstream media and offline content — and suggest further ACTIONS to be taken.

The Civic Media Observatory research process is a highly iterative process, in which the initial set of themes and narratives identified and

¹⁶⁵ 国资小新, May 5, 2019, [BRI_824](#).

¹⁶⁶ Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan, November 28, 2016, [BRI_1185](#). "在中国学习的经历改变了她的人生，这正是一个国家帮助另一个国家的人民改变命运的最好方式。她真诚地感谢培养她的中国母校和老师。" "The experience of studying in China changed my life, this is the best way a foreign country can help change the fate of those in another. I sincerely thank my alma mater in China and all Chinese teachers."

defined at the beginning of the research are refined as events surrounding the subject under investigation evolve.

Researchers work in AIRTABLE, a relational database, which allows for rich interlinking of media sources, themes, narrative frames, media items, and languages, as well as granular analysis of dozens of metadata fields we use to annotate media items. This approach helps us to build consistent responses to questions about the accuracy, truthfulness, verifiability, and ideological leanings of media items, as well as deeper analysis of context and subtext.

Researchers work together to discuss and edit their analyses, and every item is reviewed by at least two researchers.

The Observatory employs research methods based on qualitative analysis of narrative themes and trends in mainstream media, social media, and other online and offline media. The research does not employ statistical methods and is not meant as a representative sample; all quantitative statements about the data refer only to the material in the set. For example, relatively few items in the dataset focus on surveillance. That absence is not meant as a reflection of the relative importance of surveillance but rather represents a decision by the research team to focus on a relatively narrow set of themes and frames that, during the research period and in the countries studied, were sources of contention and national importance, and provided story angles that are less prominent in mainstream media.

Civic Impact Score

The Civic Impact Score is a normative evaluation scale that categorizes media items according to their potential benefit or harm to civic discourse. The Civic Impact Score is based on international human rights norms, and help researchers evaluate the potential effects of a media item on civic discourse. The score serves as an indicator or guide based on researcher knowledge, rather than as a calculated score based on a summation of other factors. Scores must be supported by analysis and recommended actions. To guide assignment of the civic impact score, researchers answer all CMO method questions that are relevant to a particular item provide a justification for why they assigned that score.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ A coordinating editor (who is usually not part of the local research team), will check the analysis for logical consistency and will question a score that does not accord with the logic of the other questions. For example, if a researcher applies a positive civic score to an item that makes claims unsupported by evidence (an objective measure), that score will be questioned by the reviewer.

SCORING



- 3** hateful, inciting, illegal, disinforming or otherwise harmful material, with a large audience, coordinated activity and likely to result in harm
- 2** hateful, inciting, illegal, disinforming or otherwise harmful material without mass audience or coordinated activity; or false or misinforming material with a mass audience
- 1** false, misinforming, inaccurate or biased material
- 0** material containing no substantive information/knowledge
- +1** generally accurate material with little influence or importance
- +2** accurate, original material that has value and importance
- +3** accurate, highly original material that expands understanding and deserves a wide audience

How to use the Airtable database for analysis

The dataset offers numerous points of entry for curious readers and researchers interested in exploring relationships within the data.

To begin, note that the Airtable database comprises seven interrelated tables: Items, Media Sources, Themes, Narrative Frames, Stories, Locations, and Related Items. Any of these tables can be a starting point for inquiry. It is useful to begin with an overview of the data in order to familiarize yourself with the possibilities for search. Themes, Narrative Frames, and Stories are all excellent starting points.

Media Sources

The Media Sources table has 748 entries, each of which is categorized as one of the following: editorial media, social media, online other, and offline other. Researchers interested in exploring items on Facebook, for example, will find that there are 122 linked Facebook items in the dataset.

Themes

Themes, or topics that researchers have found to be of significant interest surrounding the BRI in public discourse during the period of research, can also be searched by looking at “meta-themes” such as “Infrastructure development” or “Soft power and implementation tactics”. Researchers interested in understanding discussions about infrastructure, for example, could start with the theme “Shipping, ports and canals” and find 76 items to explore.

Narrative Frames

Narrative frames, or the underlying assumptions and attitudes that people use to understand themes, are a powerful way of navigating the dataset. Users interested in

exploring, for example, China's investment in countries, will find a narrative frame called: "China is willing to invest in countries with struggling economies when other countries won't." Within that narrative frame, there are 23 media items that use a version of that argument.

Stories

The Stories table presents 37 articles based on the analysis of narratives, themes and media items in the dataset. Stories cover a range of topics and are linked to the media items, narratives and themes they examine. They provide a useful entry point into the dataset for people who are interested in analysis of the topics researchers explored.

Filters

Airtable has a filter function, a flexible and powerful tool that allows users to sort the data according to their interests. Filters may be applied to any of the tables. Importantly, users may apply multiple filters in order to refine results.

For example, a user may wish to explore stories about the environment in the Stories table. Adding a filter that searches for stories that use the word environment in their description will yield a set of eight records.

Similarly, users interested in the factuality of the data set could, in the Media Items table, use the filter called "Are the key claims in the media item true?" Selecting for this field reveals 495 items that are true, 50 items that are false, 77 items that were partially true/false and 123 items for which the researchers were unable to ascertain whether the claims were true or not. Adding a second filter, "Civic impact", reveals that 17 of those false items were assigned negative (-2) or highly negative (-3) ratings, suggesting that they are in some way harmful as well as false.

Advanced tools

Airtable offers other, powerful tools for sorting and comparing data. These include:

- **Views**, which allow users to create multiple selections of the data, in order to compare results, or to present the data in different formats, such as Gantt charts or Kanban boards, groups, field sorting, and color codes.
- **Groups**, which allow users to, within a view, organize media items by specific fields. Like filters, users can add multiple nested groupings to view data in different ways.

Users can also download the data as a .csv file.

Full description of the data set

Themes and frames

Researchers identified 39 detailed themes (events, trends or phenomena) and 124 detailed narrative frames (how people/media debate themes) in this investigation. The full list of [themes](#) and [narrative frames](#), including theme and frame descriptions, are available in the database.

To better identify patterns and aid with accessibility, the research also presents themes and narrative frames organized under higher-level categories. These themes and frames are areas where researchers focused their energies and were compiled

using a tightly controlled editorial process centering on topics researchers. Items which fall outside of existing themes and frames are considered to be outside of the scope of research, unless the researcher can make a good case for the addition of a new theme or frame to accommodate the item. This is an iterative process that occurs over time, as news narratives and themes evolve in response to events.

Table IV: Themes Overview

Meta-themes	Percentage of items reflecting theme
Crime and corruption	2.0%
Themes: Crime and fraud	
Cultural perceptions	18.0%
Themes: Chinese attitudes toward local populations Perceptions of China and the Chinese	
Economy and trade	41.8%
Themes: Chinese investment in other countries Economy and trade Energy Finance Labor Legal battles Manufactured goods Natural resource extraction Tourism	
Environment	6.1%
Themes: Environment	
Health	13.0%
Themes: COVID-19 Public health The COVID-19 vaccine	
Human rights	7.2%
Themes: Authoritarian model of governance Censorship China's human rights record Human rights Surveillance	
Infrastructure development	15.4%
Themes: Infrastructure development Shipping, ports and canals Transportation development Urban development	
International relations	39.6%
Themes: BRI as foreign policy China vs the USA China's influence in individual nations Economic sanctions Influence in international/regional organizations International relations Military Territorial sovereignty and land grabbing	
Media and journalism	3.1%
Themes: Media and journalism	
Soft power and implementation tactics	6.4%
Themes: Co-optation of elites Cultural and educational exchange Soft power	
Technology	7.0%
Themes: Chinese technology exportation Technology	

Table V: Narrative Frames**Overview¹⁶⁸**

Anti-China	
Meta-narrative frames and detailed narratives grouped under anti-China	Percentage of items asserting narrative
BRI partner countries are changing their ways to appease China	0.3%
Narratives: Governments of BRI partner countries are opportunistically changing their human rights norms to appease China	
China always puts its own interests ahead of others'	6.8%
Narratives: The only winner under the BRI is China BRI partner countries are pawns in the geopolitical battle between the West and China China is motivated primarily by self-interest	
China has no respect for the citizens of BRI target countries	8.3%
Narratives: Chinese investments are detrimental to local labor Africans should talk openly and boldly about the racism/discrimination they face from Chinese people China operates as a neo-colonial force in partner countries The success of large-scale BRI projects like is built on the backs of workers—they deserve to be treated well Ethnic minorities bear the brunt of the negative consequences of Chinese investments	
China is inherently corrupt	5.5%
Narratives: Chinese companies are inherently corrupt China is resorting to illegal actions to avoid facing US sanctions for trading with Venezuela The Chinese government considers itself above international law Without civil society's oversight, China would be given free rein to wreak havoc in partner countries China is nefariously shifting blame to other states for COVID-19 BRI projects are often a cover for criminal activity Chinese media downplay problems faced by BRI projects	
China takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of weaker countries	6.0%
Narratives: China uses debt to forge dependent relationships with other countries China takes advantage of other countries' vulnerabilities to increase its wealth and power Venezuela is deeply in debt to China, and any repayment strategy seriously compromises Venezuela's cashflow BRI partner countries assume loan burdens than their economies are unable to handle	
China uses deception to further BRI and foreign policy goals	4.1%
Narratives: China conceals the terms and conditions of loans to recipient countries as a power tool China's soft power tactics are duplicitous China and partner countries often over-hype BRI projects China has opportunistically begun showing support for the Maduro government to counter criticisms from the Venezuelan opposition and elsewhere	

¹⁶⁸ Meta-frames may contain detailed frames mapped to multiple top-level frames. As such, meta-frames may appear under multiple top-level frames.

China will always have an unfair advantage because of its scale and wealth	2.4%
Narratives: COSCO's hold over Piraeus makes Greece a Chinese protectorate Cheap Chinese exports are hurting local markets and producers Huawei's deployment of 5G will undermine Brazil's sovereignty Chinese conglomerates' monopolistic behaviour in beneficiary countries signals the death of small and medium-size businesses China's diversification of its sources of commodities is hurting partner countries No matter how hard you try, you'll always end up getting into bed with the Chinese	
Chinese influence has a negative impact on the local culture in partner countries	4.7%
Narratives: China is seeking to impose its culture and values on partner nations Chinese emigration is damaging to Kyrgyz society Chinese investment threatens local culture and tradition Chinese presence in X [country] is becoming too dominant	
Chinese-produced goods are of poor quality	4.0%
Narratives: COVID-19 vaccines developed by China are not safe Products, infrastructure and tech from China are of low quality	
Countries are using Chinese technology to surveil and control their citizens	1.3%
Narratives: China is exporting digital dictatorship One insidious benefit BRI partner countries gain is access to surveillance technology Smart Cities are harmful to society	
Local politicians and elites are the true beneficiaries of alliances with China	3.2%
Narratives: Local elites are the true beneficiaries of alliances with China Partnership with China primarily benefits Chinese companies and local elites, while ordinary people are shortchanged or forgotten Politicians use BRI projects to stay in power and gain wealth	
Other countries need to stand up to China	7.1%
Narratives: China should be condemned more strongly for violating the rights of its own citizens Violence against Chinese property is justified	
The BRI does more harm than good	10.3%
Narratives: Chinese interventions and projects in other countries are damaging to the environment China is seeking to control other countries' natural resources COSCO/PPA's Piraeus project is a threat to the urban fabric of the surrounding area The potential harm that could be caused by the BRI outweighs any benefits it could bring	
The BRI provides a smokescreen for China's covert aims	4.5%
Narratives: China is using less economically advanced countries as testing grounds for vaccines without proper transparency and accountability China is seeking to annex areas of BRI partner states The BRI is a pretext for China to export its social control strategies to other countries BRI projects are part of China's military footprint China is exerting influence on Venezuelan politics	
Miscellaneous (non-BRI narratives)	8.7%

Narratives: The Chinese and their culture are weird | China is legitimizing Myanmar's military junta | The relationship between China and Venezuela has failed | China is to blame for COVID-19 | The Chinese have no respect for the rights of workers | Communist China has no freedom | People in Myanmar should have the right to criticize China on social media

Pro-China

Meta-narrative frames and detailed narratives grouped under pro-China	Percentage of items asserting narrative
China is going to triumph	1.7%
Narratives: There's nothing the Chinese cannot do China will prevail over the US (or over the West)	
China is the target of unfair criticism, often from countries with their own dubious records	3.5%
Narratives: Criticize China all you want, but they handled the pandemic well Drawing attention to China's attempts at political influence in the Czech Republic is a form of espionage Critics of China's efforts to spread its influence abroad are partisan activists or paid by the US China must vigorously counter anti-Chinese propaganda from other nations Other countries should respect China's sovereignty and refrain from commenting on Chinese domestic affairs The US instigates issues between China and other countries US critiques of Chinese business practices are more about gaining a competitive advantage than alleged ethical concerns China is not an enemy of Myanmar's people	
China is willing to help when other countries won't	8.3%
Narratives: China is the only COVID vaccine producer to share its products widely and generously China is willing to invest in countries with struggling economies when other countries won't China makes possible unprecedented industrial progress in BRI host countries BRI projects are the equivalent of Marshall Plan investments Where Europe shows trepidation, China steps in	
Chinese people have great respect for the cultures of partner countries	0.5%
Narratives: Chinese people are willing to practice/adopt the culture of partner countries China is good to migrant workers	
The BRI provides genuine benefits to partner countries	20.9%

Narratives: Chinese investments are essential | The Belt and Road Initiative brings only positive benefits | Without Chinese investment developing nations would be unable to develop their infrastructure | China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) is engaging in responsible development in Piraeus | BRI project opponents are short-sighted and lacking in vision | Beneficiary countries should view BRI investment as a vote of confidence in their potential | Partner countries need to increase the pace of integration into the BRI | BRI's investments in infrastructure are enhancing Greece's international linkages | Chinese-Greek relations are a win-win for shipping | The China-Africa relationship offers many valuable lessons about foreign relations for countries seeking influence on the African continent | While Western countries exploit, China lifts countries through their economic development and industrialization | Smart Cities are good for society | China's investments in environmentally-friendly initiatives will raise the environmental compliance bar for partner countries | Bureaucracy is standing in the way of China-partner relations

Miscellaneous (non-BRI narratives)

4.7%

Narratives: The US sanctions are illegal and unjustified | Chinese people should not be blamed for COVID-19 | The Middle Corridor is essential for Asia-Europe trade and Turkey's integration with its region | US sanctions have harmed the trade relationship between China and Venezuela | Chinese vaccines are effective

Pragmatic

Meta-narrative frames and detailed narratives grouped under pragmatic

Percentage of items asserting narrative

China has no respect for the citizens of BRI target countries

1.5%

Narratives: China ignores local stakeholders at their peril

China is an essential part of the global geopolitical landscape

3.9%

Narratives: Diplomatic alliance with China is helpful as it allows for a balance of power against US / Russia and reinforces independence | China's influence in international organizations is a useful counterbalance to that of the US and/or Russia | Greece needs Chinese economic and political influence to balance excessive EU/US influence | Chinese presence in partner countries could help to counterbalance Russian political influence

China should look out for the interests of other countries and not just its own

1.5%

Narratives: The BRI should entail a two-way cultural exchange | China should give imports from partner countries a fighting chance | China should export more of its good stuff, and less of its harmful stuff | To successfully implement the BRI, China should work actively to prevent conflict between BRI countries

Countries doing business with China need accurate information about China and the BRI

4.7%

Narratives: Discussions around Huawei's 5G are important for the future | Brazilian media does not have sufficient understanding of China to cover it properly | Brazilians need to remain vigilant about technological developments in China

Countries shouldn't be afraid they will be ideologically tainted by association with China	0.5%
Narratives: China is a communist country only in name, so partner countries can have pragmatic economic relationships without being influenced by its political system	
Countries which have similarities with China succeed under the BRI	0.9%
Narratives: Countries whose cultures are compatible with China's prosper under the BRI Political and societal opposition in host countries causes China to rethink getting involved in those countries	
For political parties in partner countries, the BRI and relations with China are useful political tools	1.6%
Narratives: Bolsonaro's attacks on China hurt Brazil, not China Political parties in BRI partner countries use competing stances on China for political leverage	
Other countries need to stand up to China	7.8%
Narratives: BRI partner countries must be careful to ensure they derive actual long-term benefits from the arrangement BRI development shouldn't mean uncontrolled, unmonitored growth The US must work with its partners/allies to limit China's influence in the Mediterranean Having a foreign policy toward China that is different from the regional status quo is a mark of a country's independence	
The BRI provides a smokescreen for China's covert aims	0.4%
Narratives: BRI projects primarily serve a geopolitical agenda	
Miscellaneous (non-BRI narratives)	3.9%
Narratives: Any vaccine is better than no vaccine Capitalism, generally, is destructive to labour relations, not just the BRI	
No Category	
Meta-narrative frames and detailed narratives not grouped	Percentage of items asserting narrative
Miscellaneous (non-China related narratives)	1.3%
Narratives: Canal Istanbul is a threat to Turkey's environment, economy and sovereignty The Canal Istanbul project is necessary to protect the security of the Bosphorus Turkey's Blue Homeland doctrine is Eurasianist and nationalist discourse in disguise The Middle Corridor is inefficient and economically unattractive	

Analysis of civic impact scores for themes and narrative frames

The items categorized under a single frame or theme may be true or false, popular or unpopular, useful or harmful. The following charts show the theme and narrative frame groupings by civic impact score of the items attached to the themes and frames. Across most themes and all top-level frames, researchers identified a variety of items with both positive and negative civic impact. While themes and narrative frames help us understand the focus of media items in our selection, themes and frames alone do

not allow us to fully explain a media item's civic impact, or potential benefit or harm in civic discourse.

Figure I: Meta-themes and Civic Impact Score

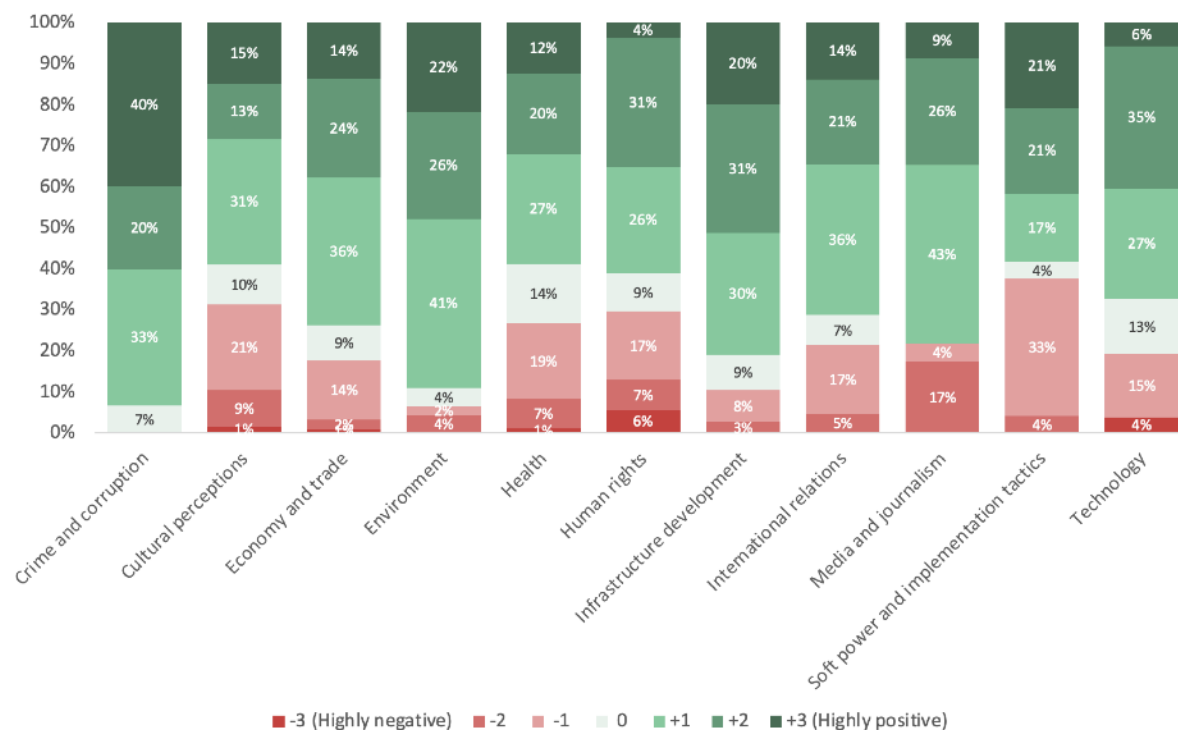
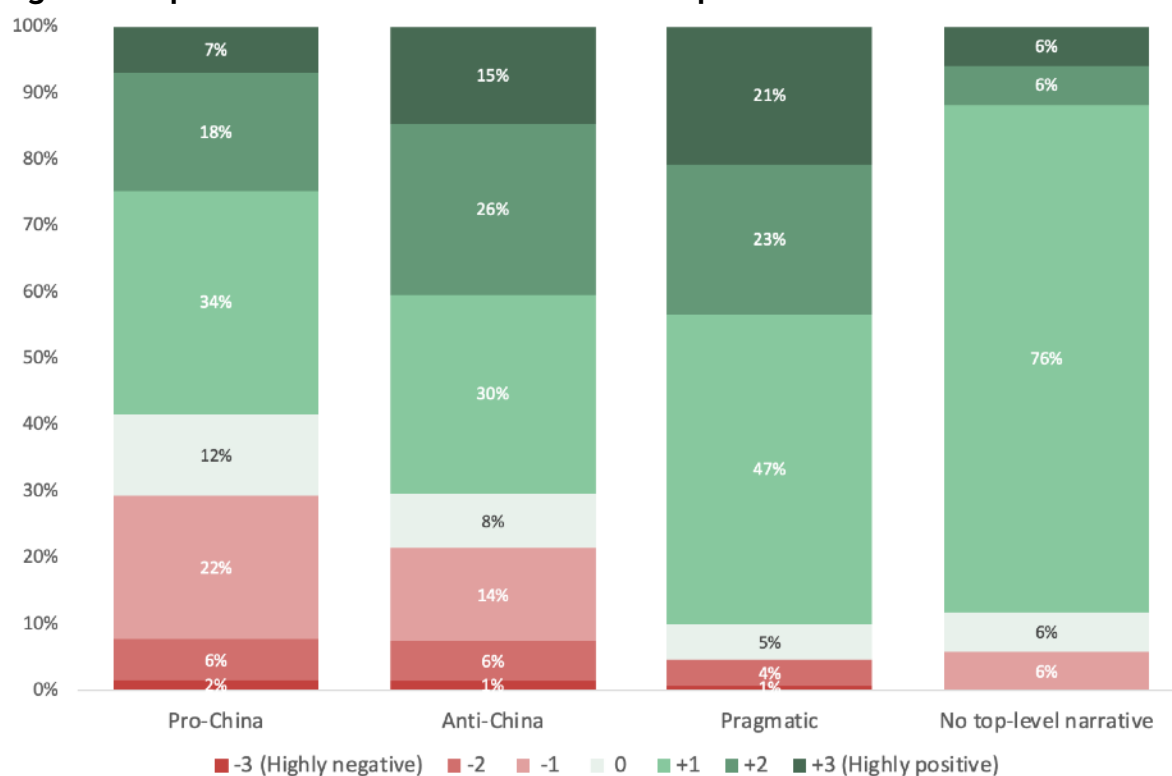


Figure II: Top-level narrative frames and Civic Impact Score

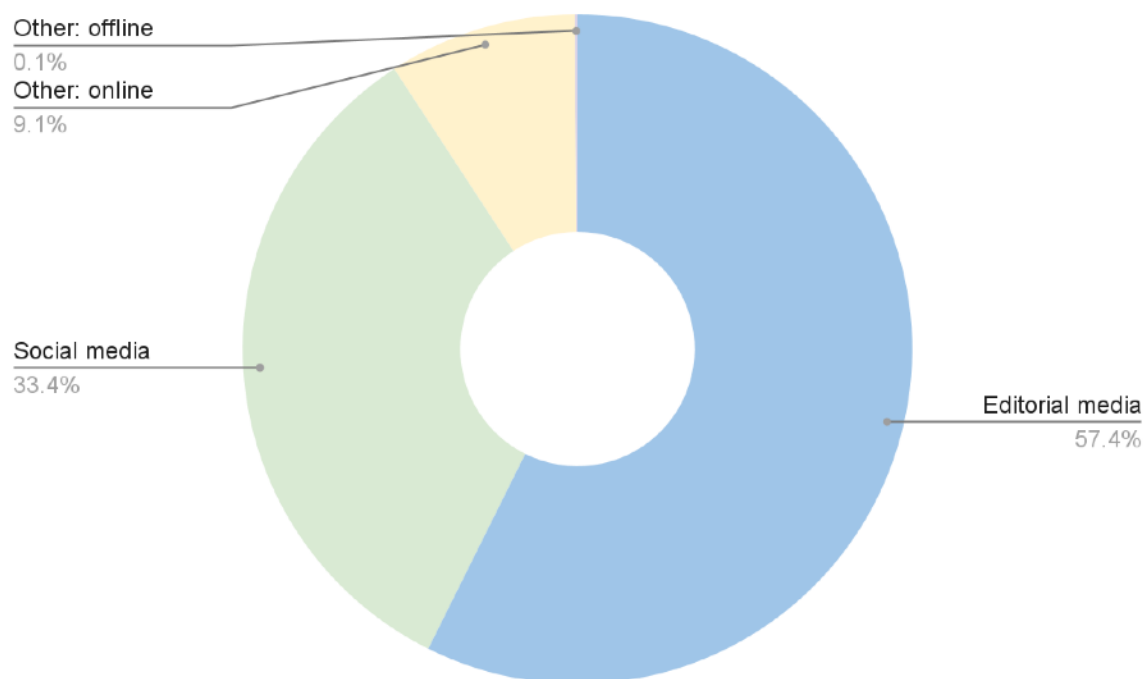


While these percentages offer a useful sense of what the data set contains, readers and researchers should focus on the descriptive and contextual explanations of items.

Media items

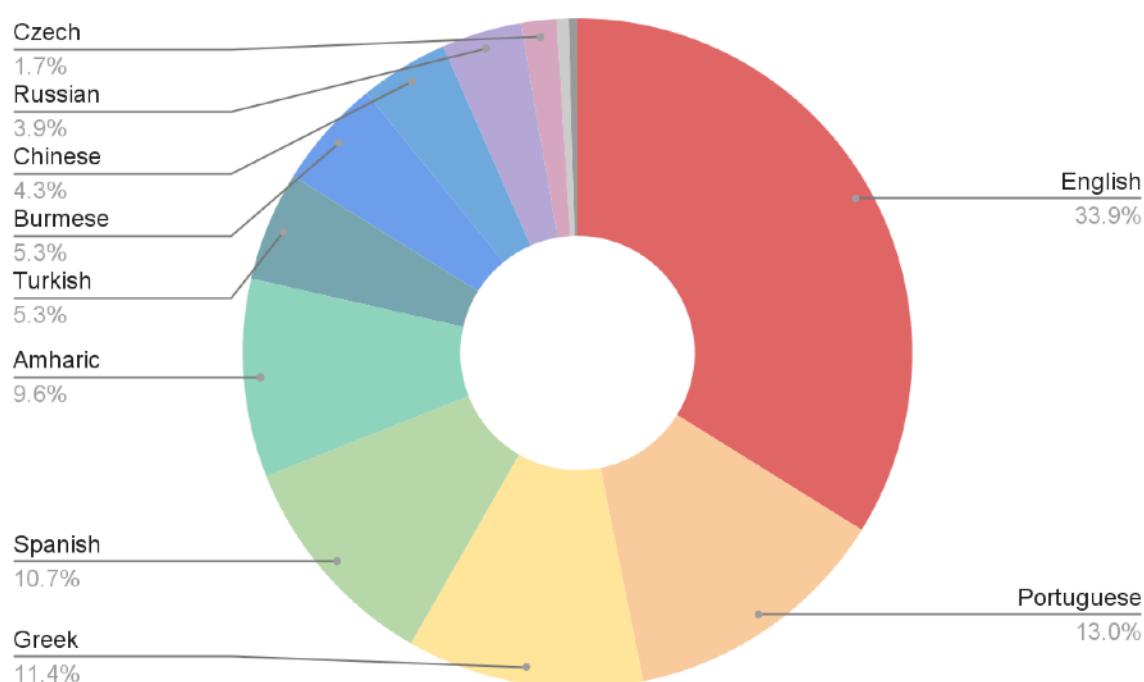
The media item consists of 748 items composed primarily of social media and editorial media items representing 12 languages (see Figures III and IV).¹⁶⁹

Figure III: Media items by media item type



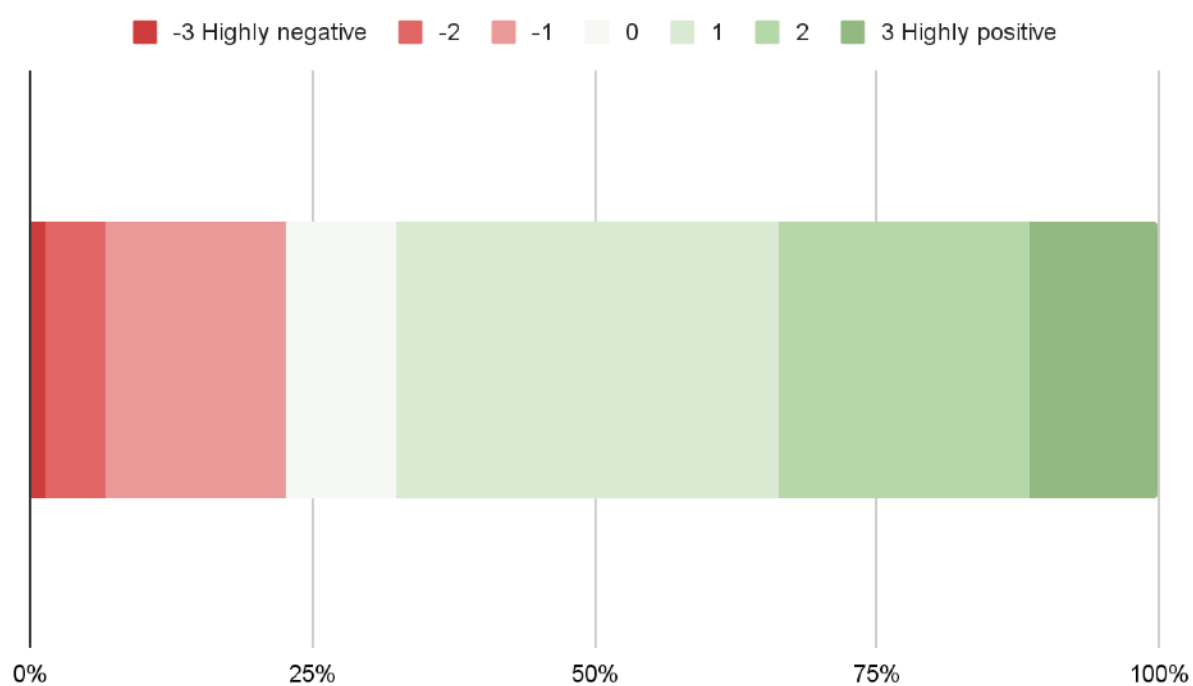
¹⁶⁹ Media item type is determined by where (platform, website, source) the media item is found. For example, editorial media items are items produced by an editorial media source and published on an editorial media sources own platform whether that be a newspaper, website, broadcast channel. While social media items are found on social media platforms, they could be authored by editorial sources.

Figure IV: Media items by language



In the dataset, 1.3% of items were assigned a -3 civic impact score; 5.3% a -2 score; 16.0% a -1 score; 9.8% a 0 score; 33.8% a +1 score; 22.2% a +2 score; and 11.5% a +3 score (see Figure V).

Figure V: Media items by civic impact score





Stichting Global Voices
Kingsfordweg 151
1043GR Amsterdam
The Netherlands
<https://globalvoices.org>



