

European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19

Differences and common ground across the
continent

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Summary

China is seen negatively - with few exceptions

- This report is a result of a wide-scale **study¹ of public opinion in 13 European countries** on China conducted in September and October 2020, on a research sample (n = 19 673) representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density.²
- Overall, **views of China in the surveyed countries are predominantly negative**, with respondents in 10 out of 13 countries reporting significantly more negative than positive views. Populations in **Western and Northern Europe** tend to have the most negative views, **Eastern Europe** holds positive views, and **Southern and Central Europe** find themselves in between, while still being predominantly negative (*figure 1*).
- **Swedish** respondents reported the most negative feelings (*figure 2*), with altogether 60% holding very negative or negative feelings of China, and only 12% reporting positive or very positive feelings of China (the remaining 28% seeing China neutrally). Countries with decisively negative popular views include **Germany, France, the UK, and the Czech Republic**. On the opposite end, **Russian and Serbian respondents** have the most positive view of China with almost 60% of respondents having very positive or positive views. The only EU country having a predominantly positive view of China is **Latvia**, where about 43% of respondents had positive views of China, compared to 28% having negative views. The four **Visegrad countries** (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) end up somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, although with prevailing negative sentiments.
- The picture is similar when looking at how respondents themselves evaluate the **change in their views of China** within the last three years (*figure 3*). The British report the most significant worsening of the view of China with more than two-thirds of respondents declaring their views of China worsened and only about 6% saying their views improved. Other countries where the views of China significantly worsened are Sweden, France, and Germany. Serbia is by far the country with the most

significantly improved image of China - almost half of the respondents found their view of China getting better, compared to 16% who found their views worsening. Russia and Latvia also have more respondents reporting their views of China improving rather than worsening.

Views of China-related issues: Only trade seen positively

- When looking at various aspects of interactions, only **trade with China is perceived predominantly positive** in most countries - exceptions being France, the UK, and Sweden who lean slightly negative (*figure 4*). In comparison, **Chinese investments** are perceived somewhat more negatively, with only a minority of countries leaning to the positive - such as Serbia, Russia, Latvia, and Poland (*figure 5*). Chinese investments are the most negatively perceived by respondents in Sweden, France, and Germany. Similarly, the **Belt and Road Initiative** is perceived somewhat positively in Serbia, Russia, Latvia, Italy, and Poland, while the remaining countries lean towards negative perceptions (*figure 6*).
- When looking at the perception of the **Chinese military** (*figure 7*), only Serbian respondents have decisively positive views, reflecting the historical experience of the 1999 NATO intervention, during which the Embassy of China was bombed as well. This experience has created a lasting shared experience between Serbia and China. Interestingly, Russians have a rather neutral perception of the Chinese military, suggesting that even though there are positive sentiments and strong political links, the military remains the area where some suspicions might exist. Responses in the other surveyed countries are decisively negative, especially the Czech Republic, Sweden, or Germany.
- The most negatively perceived issues are **China's impact on the global environment** (*figure 8*) and **China's effect on democracy in other countries** (*figure 9*), where respondents in all thirteen countries have decisively negative perceptions.
- This suggests that even in countries where there is a generally positive attitude towards China, there is a recognition of the downsides. Moreover, it emphasizes that even after four years of the Trump administration during which China attempted to present itself as a

responsible power in terms of global environment protection, European respondents still did not recognize it as such. Overall, **China's soft power** in Europe still seems to be very limited - and the limitations appear even more visible when scratching beneath the surface.

Great power struggle? Europe not choosing between the U.S. and China

- **Comparing views of China with the U.S. and Russia**, in most countries the U.S. is seen the most positively of the three powers (*figure 10*). This is apparent especially in Poland, Hungary, the UK, but also in Sweden, Italy, and the Czech Republic. In two EU countries - **Slovakia and Latvia** - Russia is the most positively viewed country. This is to a large extent due to the sizable Russian minority in Latvia and the long-standing Pan-Slavic sympathies in Slovakia. Beyond the EU, **Serbian and Russian** respondents are far less positive about the U.S. than China and Russia.
- **Limitations of China's soft power** are again visible when looking at how **little trust** China enjoys among the respondents compared to the EU, U.S., and Russia (*figure 11*). In most countries, the EU and the U.S. are by far the most trusted actors. Only Russian and Serbian respondents trust China more than they trust the EU and the U.S.
- In the remaining 11 countries, the **EU is trusted the most, far ahead of the U.S., with Russia, and China** last. There are only slight variations in this picture, such as the UK where the trust to the U.S. comes close to the EU, reflecting their traditional transatlantic directions and also skepticism among parts of the population towards the EU. Other countries where there is relatively high trust in the U.S. are Hungary, Poland, and Italy. In Slovakia and Latvia, the trust of the EU is high (Latvia has the highest trust towards the EU from among all the countries), while the trust of the U.S. is lower than that of Russia.
- Overall, only in Russia and Serbia, can one more or less clearly see the **strategic division between "the East" and "the West"** manifested by more positive attitudes towards China and Russia and more negative ones towards the EU and the U.S.

- However, in the remaining 11 countries, a more complex picture emerges, in which the views of great powers are driven by **long-standing national sentiments** rather than clear divisions between the East and the West or the escalating U.S.-China tensions.
- There is a clear link between these views of foreign actors and the **foreign policy preferences** for how closely the respondents want their countries to be aligned with the EU, U.S., China, or Russia (*figure 12*). In 11 out of 13 countries, respondents favor alignment with the EU, including in the UK and Poland (although here the margin is close to the second-placed U.S.). Among the EU member states, generally, the U.S. is the second most preferred option. However, in Slovakia and Latvia, Russia is the second most favored preference. In Russia, most respondents want to be aligned with China, ahead of the EU and the U.S. In Serbia, the numbers are quite close, but Russia is the most favored foreign partner to be aligned with, and the U.S. the least favored.
- The specific issue of **5G networks** reflects these policy preferences, as respondents show preferences for cooperating with companies of some countries while rejecting others (*figure 13*). In most countries, respondents decisively favor cooperation with companies from the **EU**, followed by those from **Japan** and the **U.S.** Perhaps interestingly, fewest respondents wanted to cooperate with **South Korea**, including in Italy, Spain, Hungary, or Poland. **Chinese companies** belong among the least favored to cooperate with on the construction of the 5G networks, especially in Sweden, the Czech Republic, the UK, France, and Germany.
- The major exception is Russia, where respondents favor cooperation with **Chinese companies**. At the same time, Russian respondents are also the most positive about cooperation with Japanese companies when compared to other surveyed countries. In Serbia, Japanese companies are also favored the most, narrowly ahead of the EU and Chinese companies.
- Comparing the major powers on perceived **economic power**, in most surveyed countries, China is perceived by the respondents as more powerful when compared to the U.S., Russia, and the EU. Only the Polish are visibly more confident about the U.S. economic power, while British,

Spanish, Italians, or Hungarians find the U.S. and Chinese economic power to be about equal. Respondents are much more skeptical about the economic power of the EU, which is scored significantly weaker than the U.S. and China – and in France and Italy even much weaker than the Russian (*figure 14*).

- When it comes to **military power**, the EU is ranked far below the remaining great powers (*figure 15*). In most countries, the U.S. is seen as the most powerful militarily, slightly ahead of Russia and China. Exceptions are Russians themselves, who are more confident about their own military and who also find the Chinese military more powerful than the one of the U.S. The respondents in Slovakia and Serbia also find Russia to be slightly more powerful militarily than the U.S.
- The **situation is reversed** when assessing the **human rights conditions**. The human rights situation in the EU is seen as significantly better than the one in the U.S. on the second spot, and in most countries far ahead of Russia and China (*figure 16*). Even respondents in Russia and Serbia recognize the EU human rights conditions to be the best among the four powers, although not with such significant differences.

Policy preferences: Trade, human rights, or something else?

- It is interesting to look at specific policy preferences concerning China. Although as we have just seen there are significant differences in terms of views of China, there is perhaps **surprising common ground** when it comes to preferred policy towards China.
- **Cooperation on global issues** tends to be the most preferred policy option across Europe, with all countries' respondents selecting it either as the first (such as Germany, Russia, Italy, Hungary), second (Sweden, Spain, France) or third (the UK) most preferred policy towards China (*figure 17*). This is probably also the result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Addressing cybersecurity** is the most severe security issue and perceived as one of the most important policies to take towards China across the 13 countries, especially in the UK, Spain, France (*figure 18*). In

comparison, **preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion** is universally seen as one of the least preferred policy options (*figure 19*). Interestingly, although addressing **intellectual property rights** does not score as the top policy priority in any of the countries, Russian respondents support this policy the most when compared to all other countries, followed by Sweden, Latvia, and Italy (*figure 20*). These answers suggest that Europeans do not see China as a direct geopolitical threat and/or are not willing to stand up to it, yet they do perceive some related security issues, especially when it comes to cybersecurity.

- Advancing **human rights and democracy** is another popular policy preference, supported especially strongly by the respondents in Sweden, Poland, Italy, Germany, and the UK, though much less so in Russia, Latvia, Serbia, and Slovakia (*figure 21*). On the other hand, the **promotion of trade and investment** appears as one of the most preferred policies in Latvia, Serbia, Russia, and Hungary, reflecting that China is perceived in these countries to a large extent as an economic partner and an opportunity (*figure 22*). In France, economic diplomacy appears as the least preferred policy option (*figure 23*).
- In five major EU countries, we asked respondents about their preference for a **national or EU-level “China-policy”** (*figure 24*). Polish respondents showed the most enthusiasm for leading the EU policy formation on China - almost half of them picked that option, followed by about 30% in Germany and 25% in Italy. In France and Spain, only about 15% of respondents wanted their country to lead the EU policy formation on China. Instead, more than a third of French respondents wanted their country to have an independent policy on China, followed by only slightly fewer Italians. In Spain, most respondents preferred to follow the EU policy on China - about 35%.

COVID-19: Where did it originate and who provided help?

- When asked about **how much China, the EU, the U.S., and Russia helped** their country during the pandemic, significant numbers of respondents saw China providing help in most countries (*figure 25*). Sweden was an exception in this regard, where only 10% of respondents agreed. On the

other hand, respondents in two EU countries – Italy and the Czech Republic – recognized China’s help more than anyone else’s. Italy also had by far the most respondents who recognized the help of Russia when compared to other EU countries. Also, Russian and Serbian respondents were far more likely to recognize China’s help, in the Serbian case even more than the help of Russia.

- Few respondents across all 13 countries believe that **China’s international reputation** improved as a result of COVID-19. Even in Serbia, only 30% thought so, while in Russia it was about 16%, and even less in the remaining countries (*figure 26*).
- In comparison, many more respondents feel that **China has gained economically** as a result of the pandemic - in Hungary about half of respondents thought so, followed by Spain and Poland. At the other end, less than 15% of Swedish respondents agreed.
- Regarding the **origin of COVID-19**, only in Sweden more than half of the respondents agreed with the prevailing **scientific consensus** that COVID-19 jumped naturally to humans from animals (*figure 27*). Most respondents agreed with this origin theory in Germany, Latvia, Russia, France, Italy, and the UK. In the remaining countries, more respondents believe in **conspiracy theories** when it comes to the origin of COVID-19. In Poland, almost half of respondents thought that COVID-19 was **artificially made in a Chinese lab and intentionally spread internationally** - an “anti-China” conspiracy theory. Significant amounts of respondents in other countries agreed with this theory, including those in Spain, Hungary, Latvia, the UK, but also in Serbia. This may be regarded as another sign of limitations of China’s soft power and its international trust when even among believers in conspiracy theories in countries with more positive general views of China (such as Serbia and Latvia), many respondents still believe that China would intentionally want to spread the virus globally.
- In comparison with the belief in “anti-China” conspiracy theories, in all of the countries except Russia fewer respondents believe in the “anti-U.S.” conspiracy suggested by some Chinese officials that the **U.S. army brought the COVID-19 to China**.

- Besides, many respondents in Sweden (more than half), the UK, and Germany or France thought that COVID-19 has “spread due to **Chinese people eating bats and wild animals**” - a theory reported by some mainstream media yet criticized as factually unsubstantiated and strengthening cultural stereotypes.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic** has been the major issue driving the European public opinion of China at the time of conducting the survey. In most countries, respondents reported COVID-19 to be the most common association of China, especially in Italy, France, UK, Germany, and Spain. In Sweden and the Czech Republic, the most common associations were **dictatorship** and **communism**, respectively. In Latvia, COVID-19 appeared only on the eighth spot, while the most common association was its **large population**, similar to Slovakia and Russia.

1 Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1: Positive feelings towards China across European nations (% of respondents)³

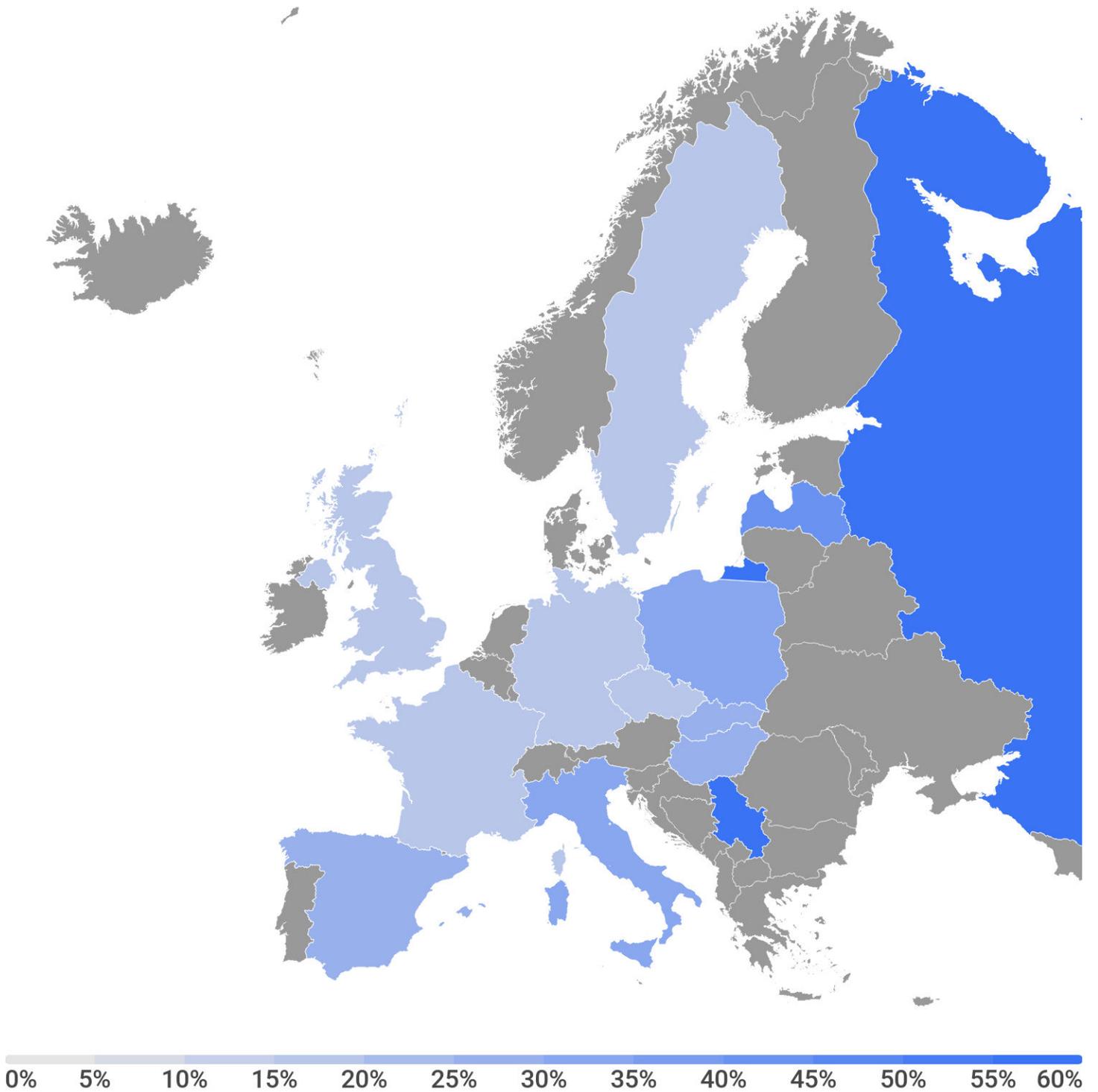


Figure 2: Feeling towards China among Europeans (% of respondents)⁴

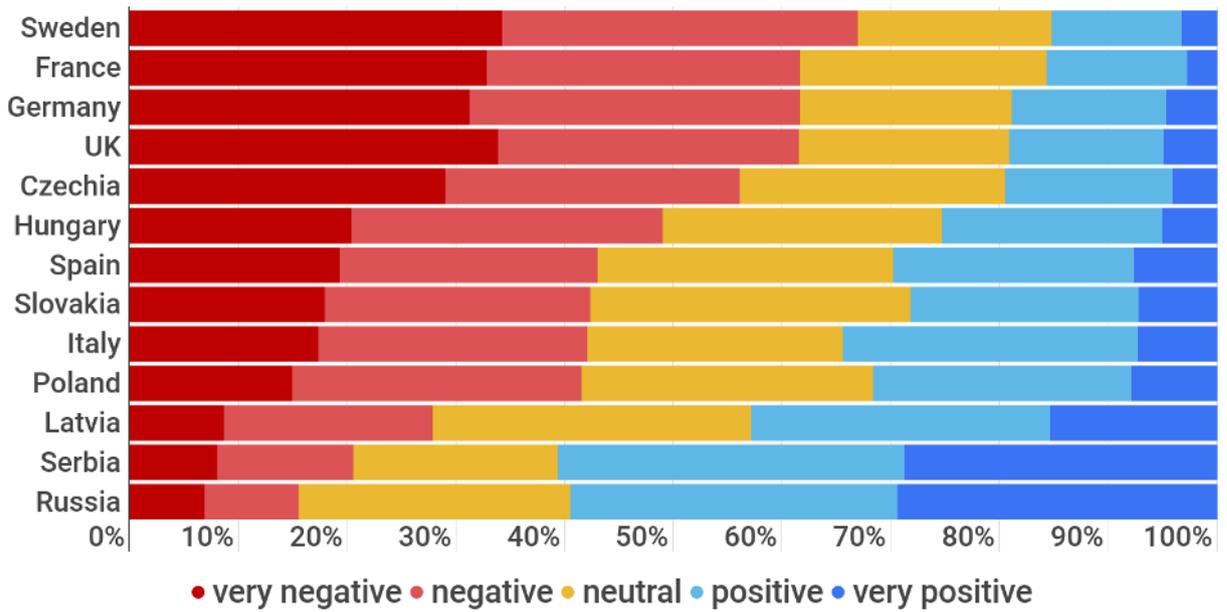


Figure 3: Change of feeling towards China among Europeans in the past three years (% of respondents)⁵

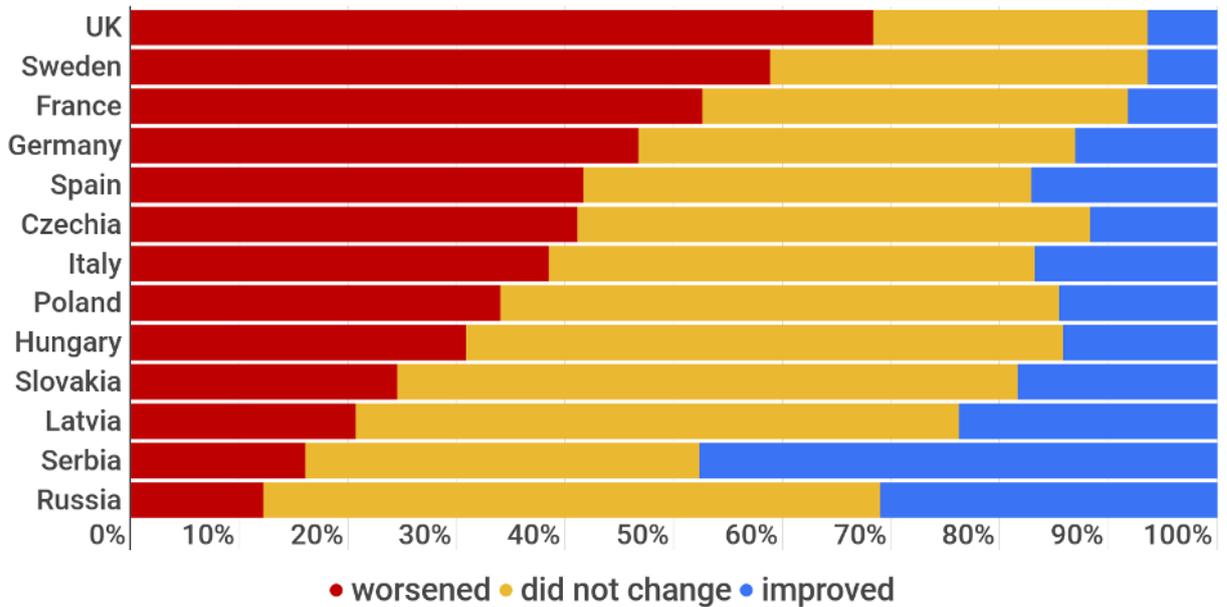


Figure 4: Perceptions of trade with China among Europeans (mean values)⁶

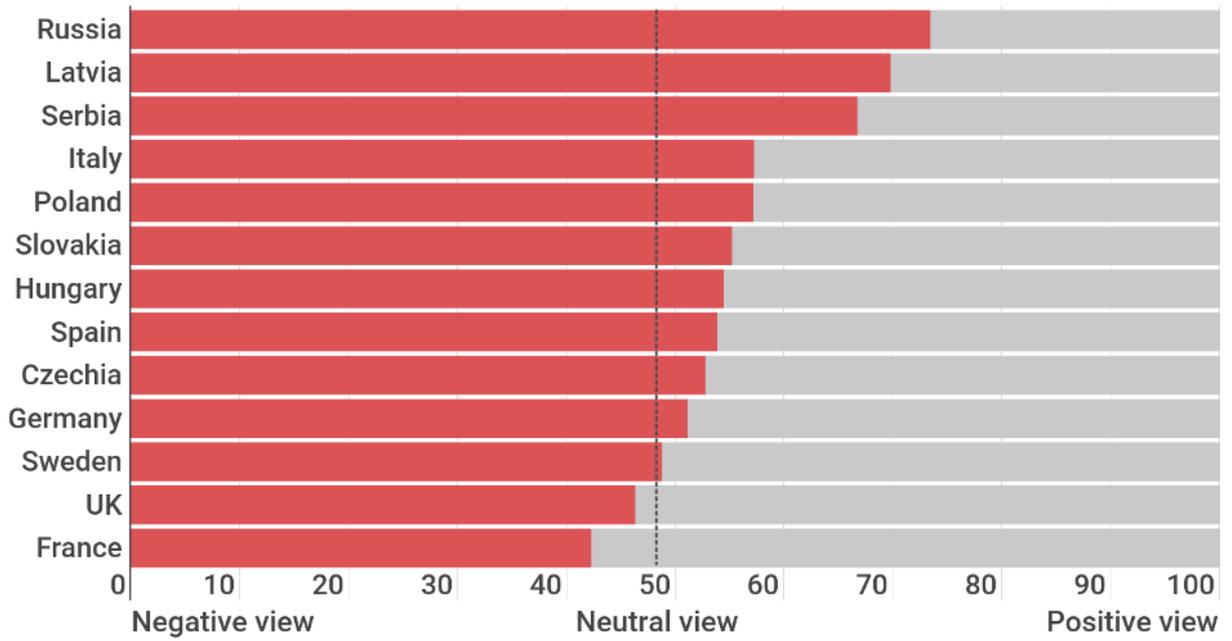


Figure 5: Perceptions of Chinese investments among Europeans (mean values)⁷

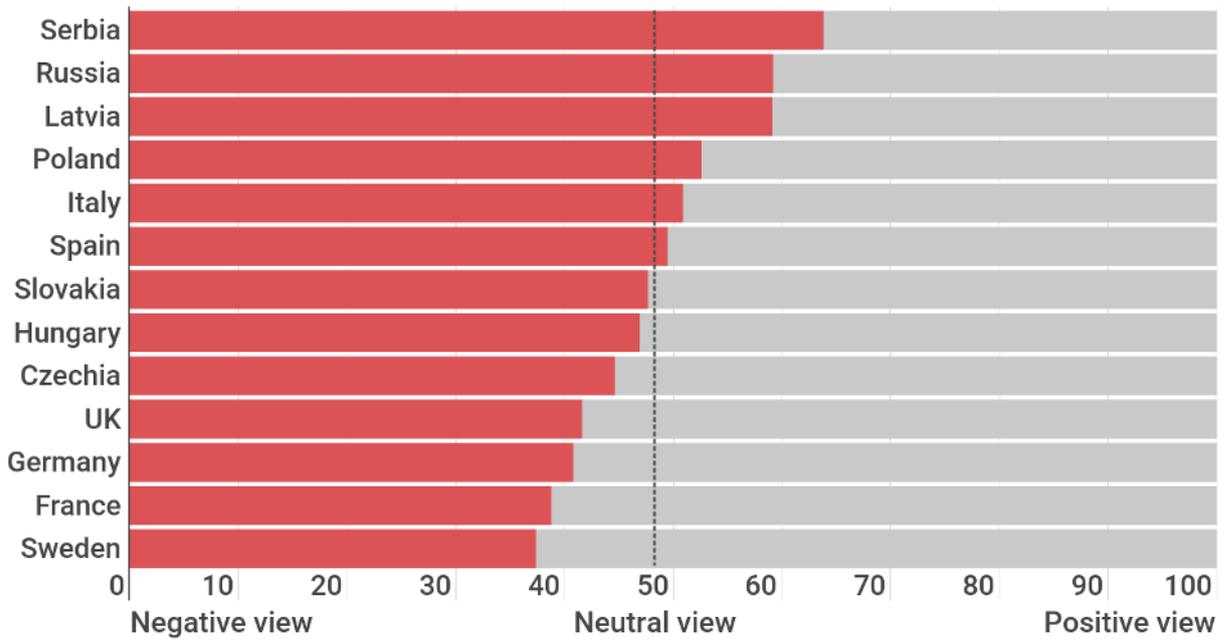


Figure 6: Perceptions of Belt and Road Initiative among Europeans (mean values)⁸

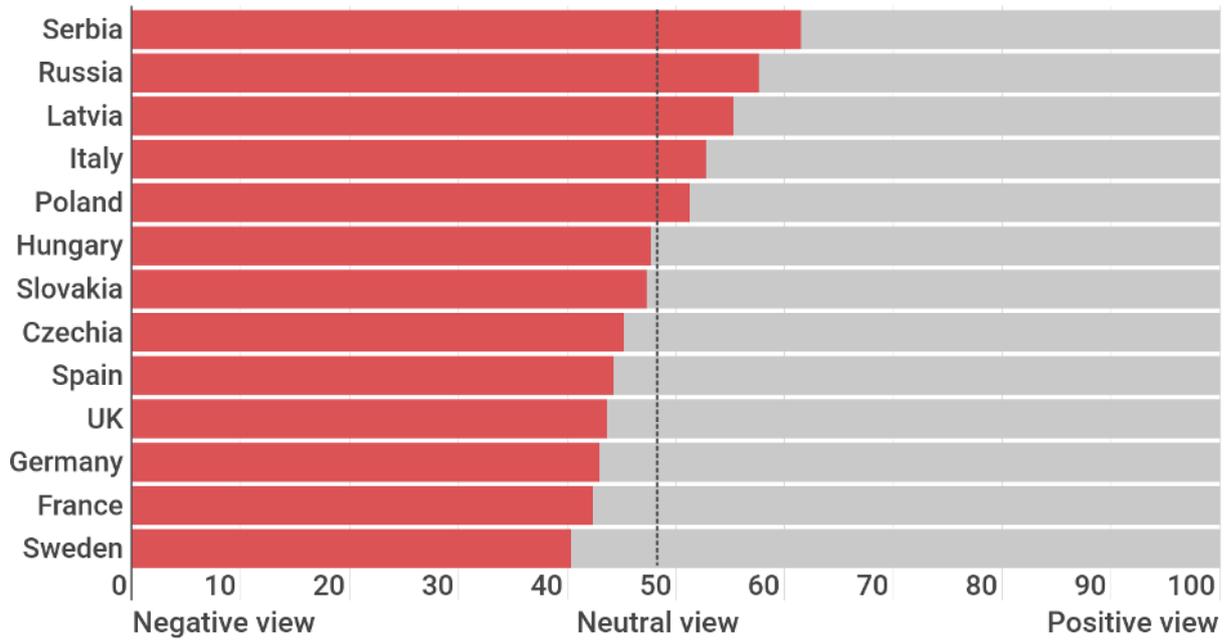


Figure 7: Perceptions of Chinese military power among Europeans (mean values)⁹

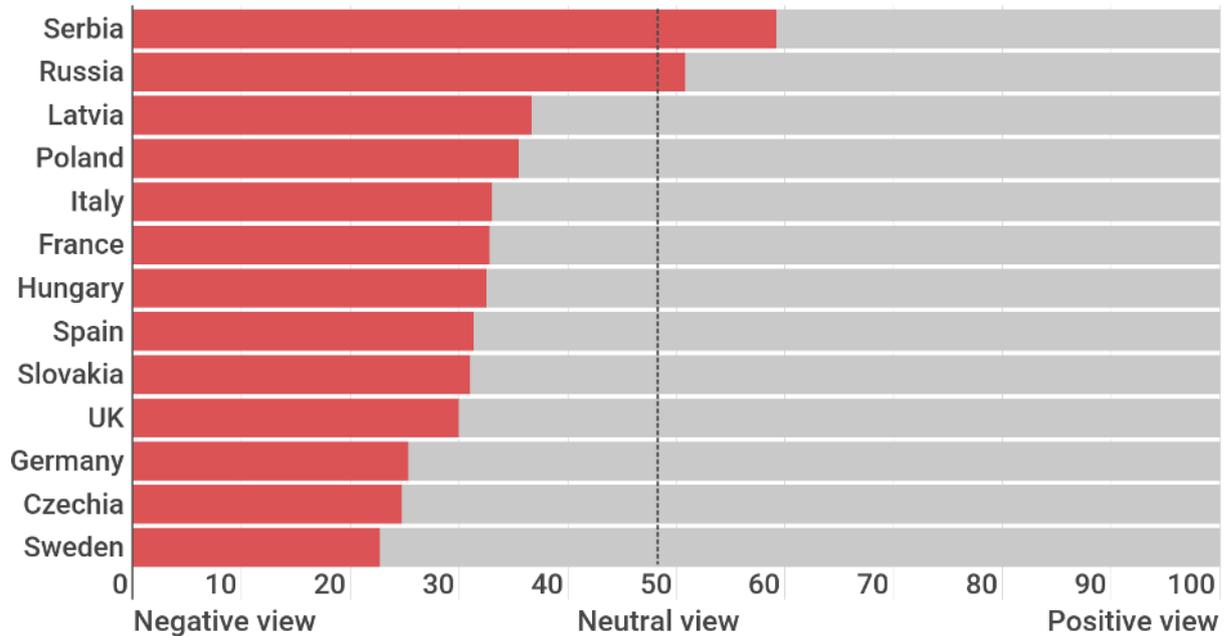


Figure 8: Perceptions of China’s impact on the global environment among Europeans (mean values)¹⁰

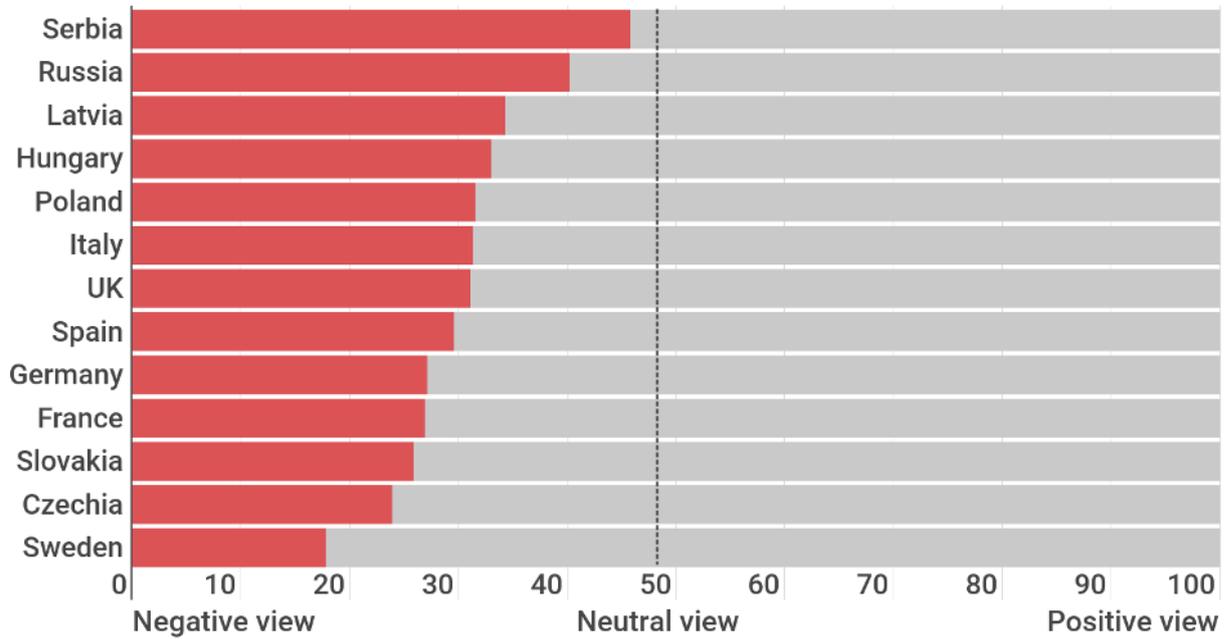
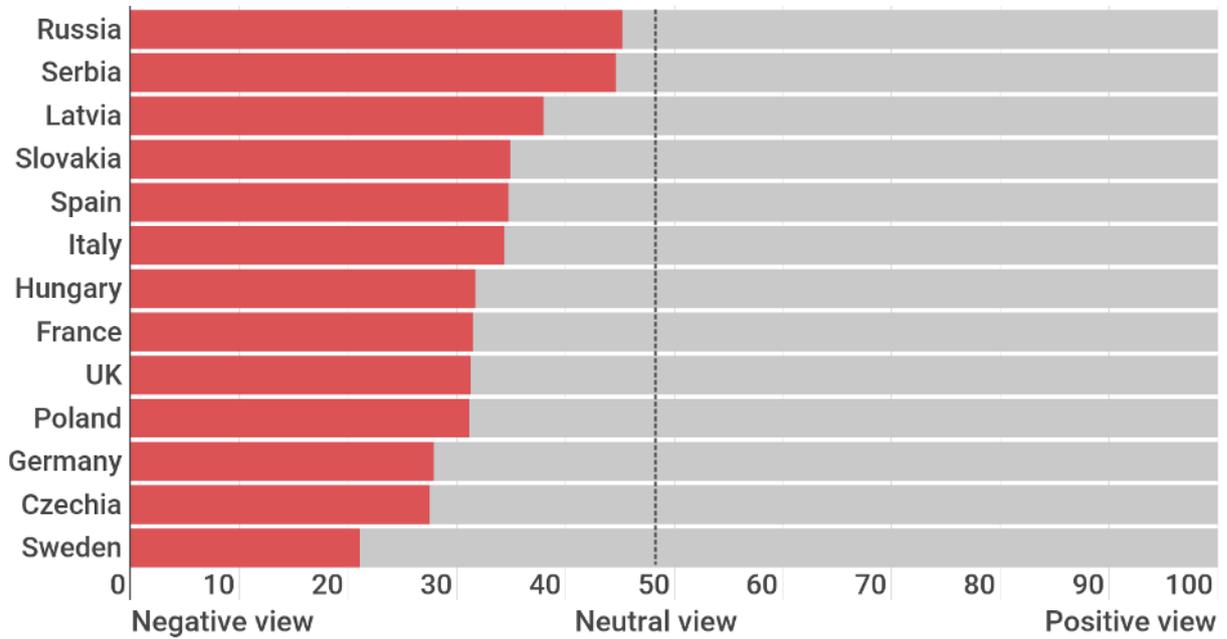


Figure 9: Perceptions of China’s effect on democracy in other countries among Europeans (mean values)¹¹



2 Comparing the global powers

Figure 10: Positive feeling towards major powers among Europeans (% of respondents)¹²

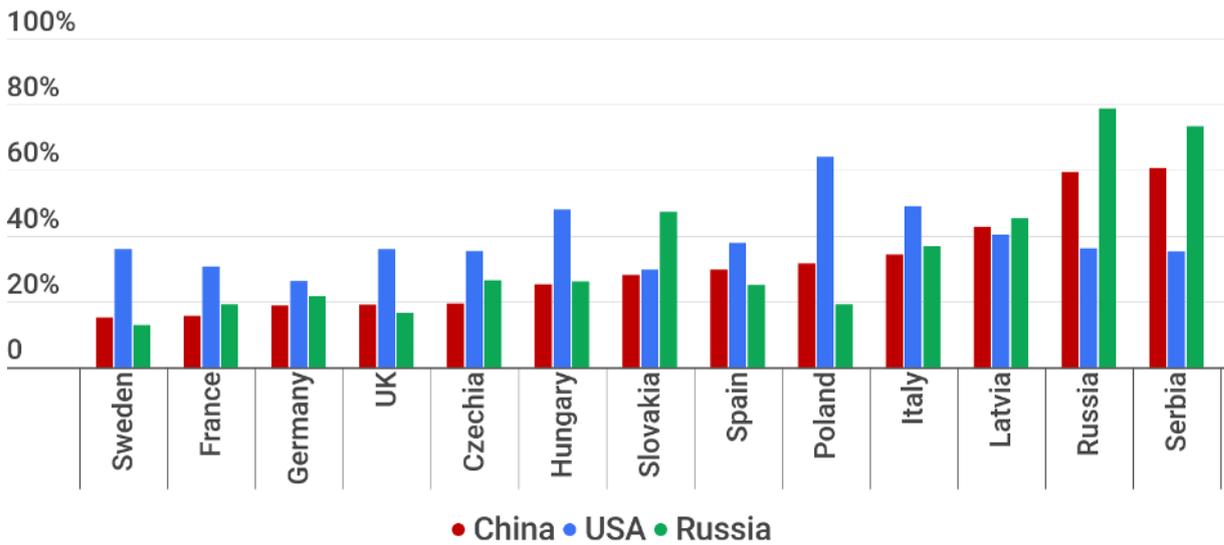


Figure 11: How much do you trust the following countries/entities? (% of respondents)¹³

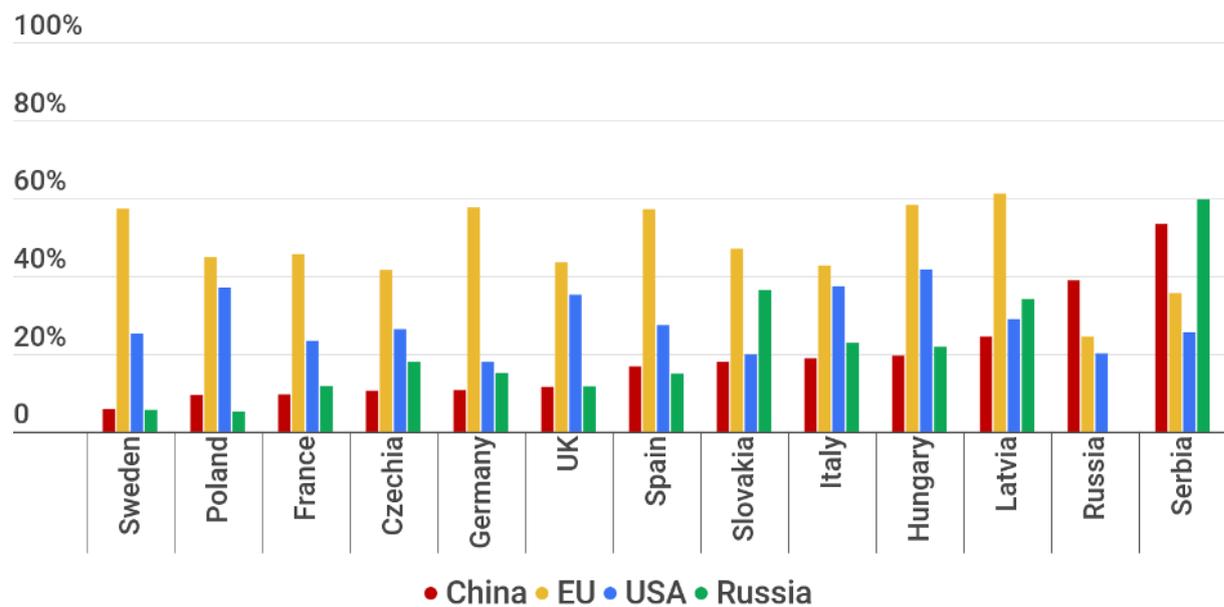


Figure 12: How closely should your country's foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (mean values; 0=not at all, 10=completely)¹⁴

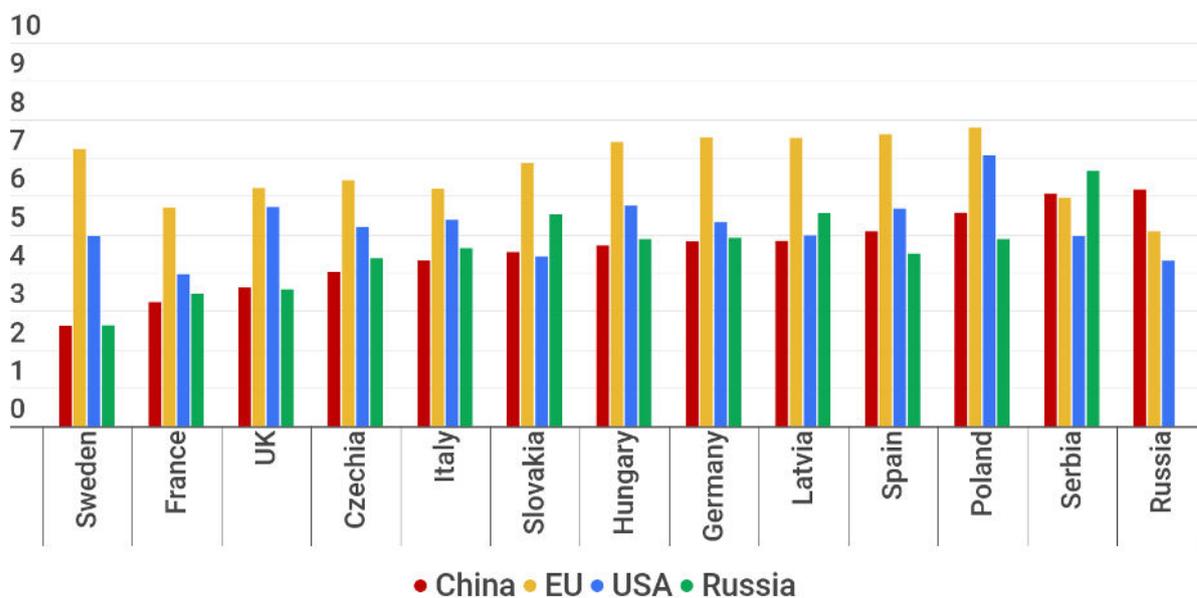


Figure 13: Should your country cooperate with the following countries in building the 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)

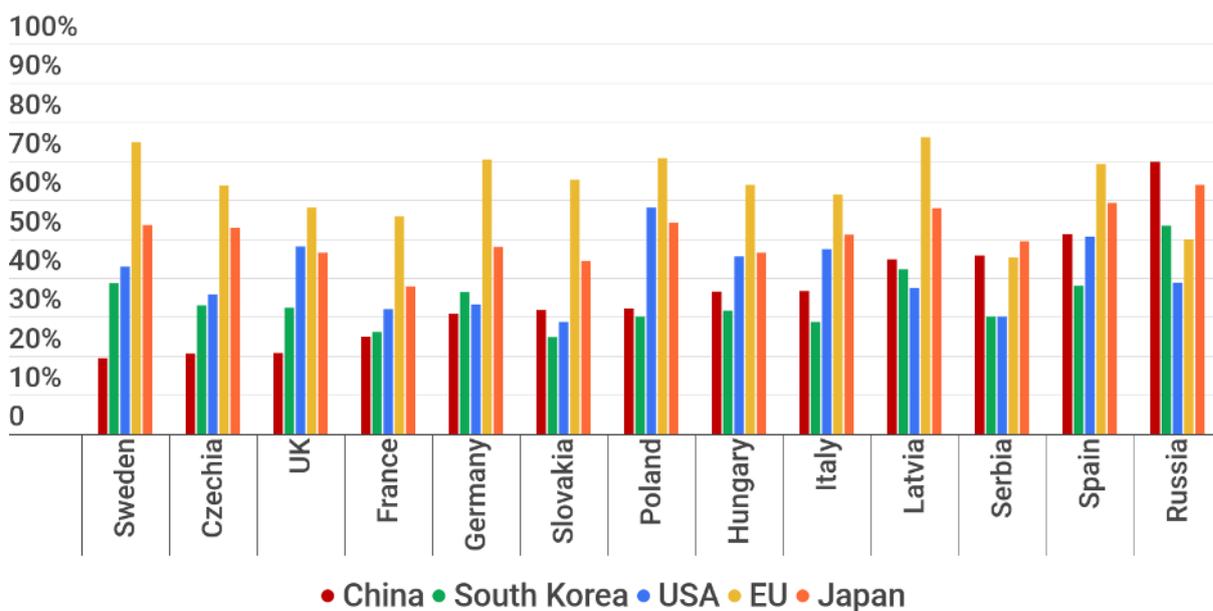


Figure 14: How economically powerful do you consider the following entities? (% of respondents finding it strong)¹⁵

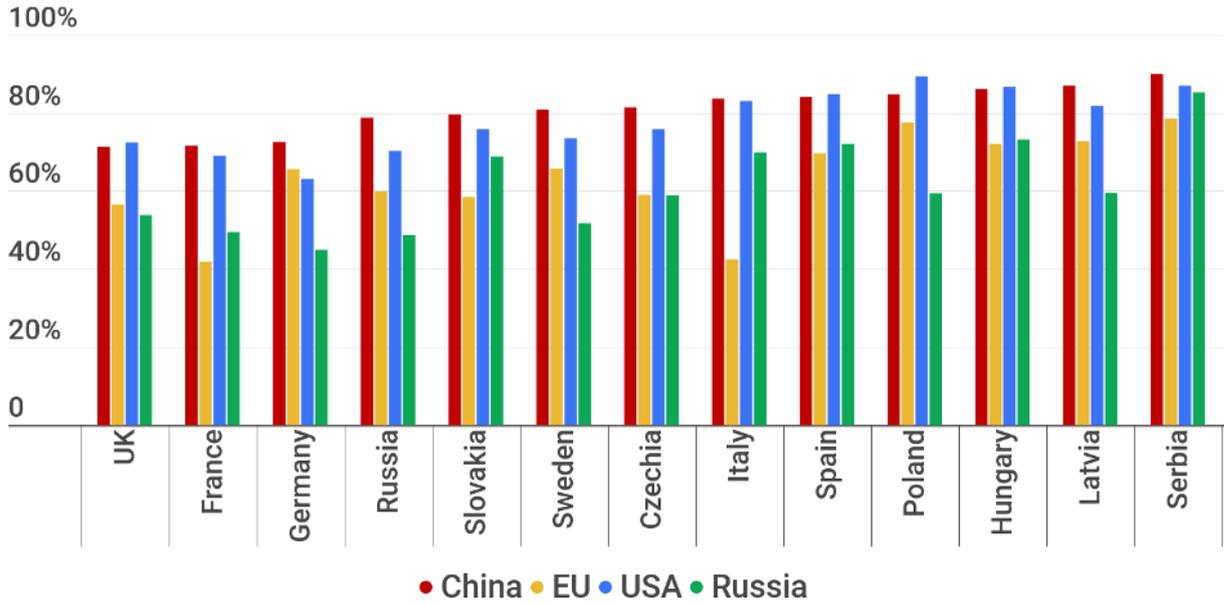


Figure 15: How militarily powerful do you consider the following entities? (% of respondents finding it strong)¹⁶

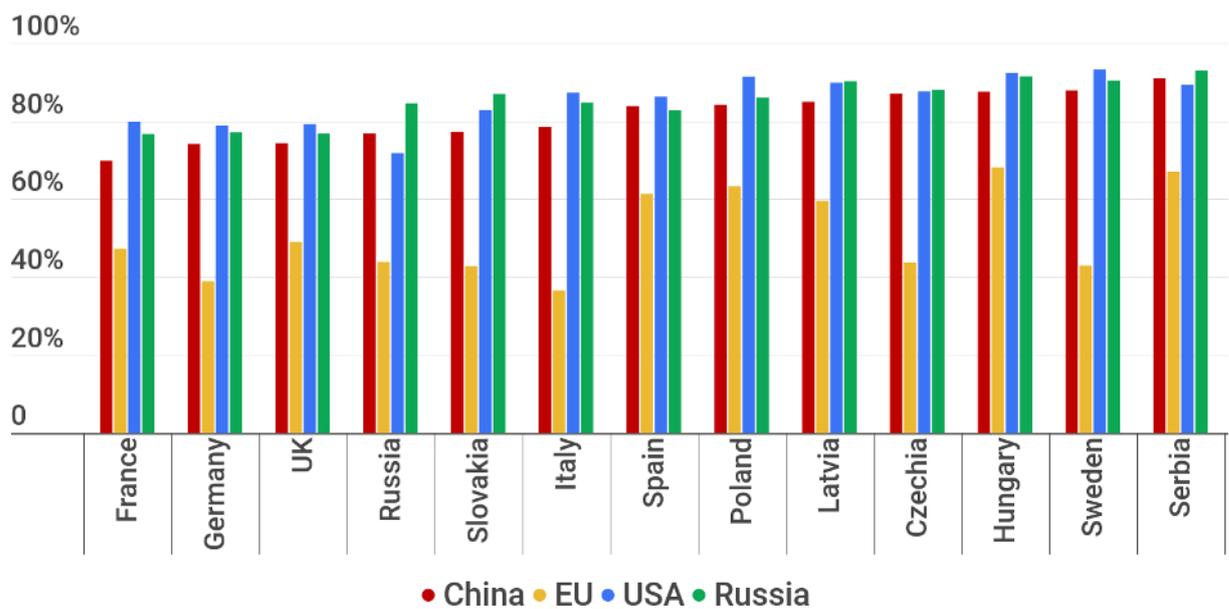
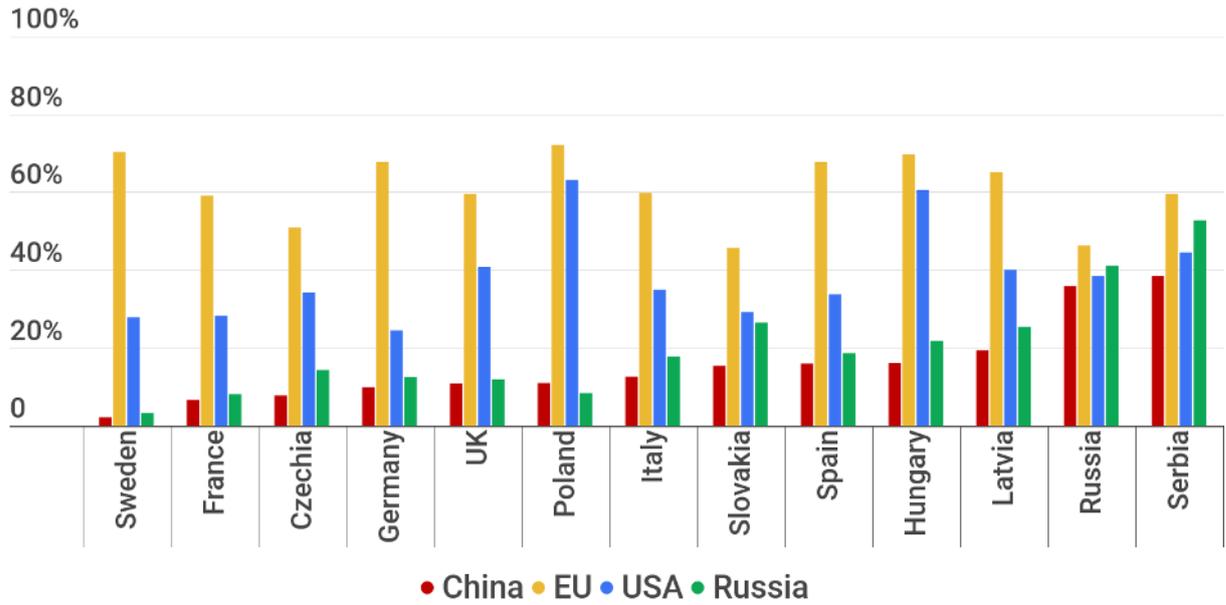


Figure 16: How positively or negatively do you assess the human rights situation in the following countries/entities? (% of respondents assessing it positively)¹⁷



3 Foreign policy towards China

Figure 17: Should cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism be your country's foreign policy priority on China? (% of respondents agreeing)

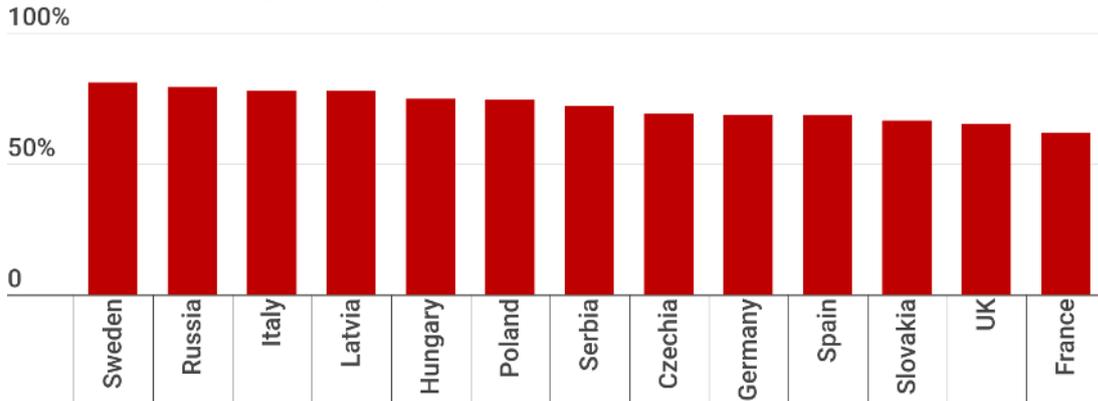


Figure 18: Should addressing cybersecurity be your country's foreign policy priority on China? (% of respondents agreeing)

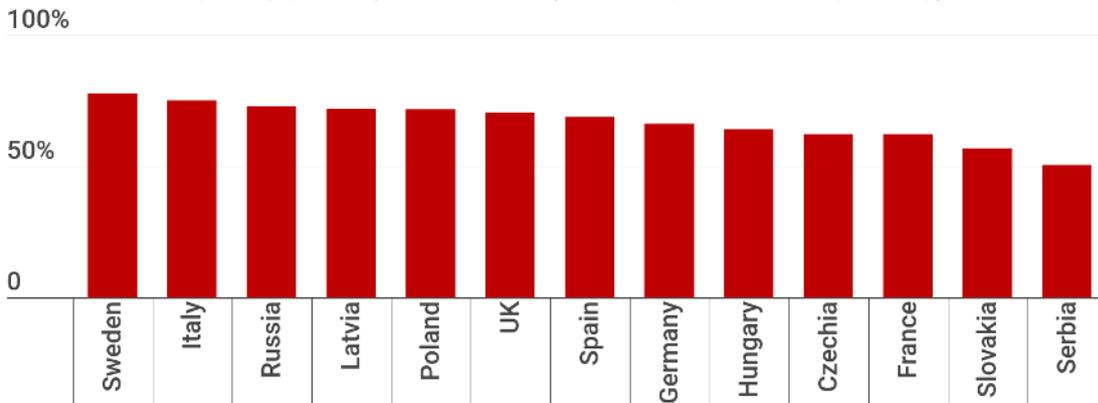


Figure 19: Should preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion be your country's foreign policy priority on China? (% of respondents agreeing)

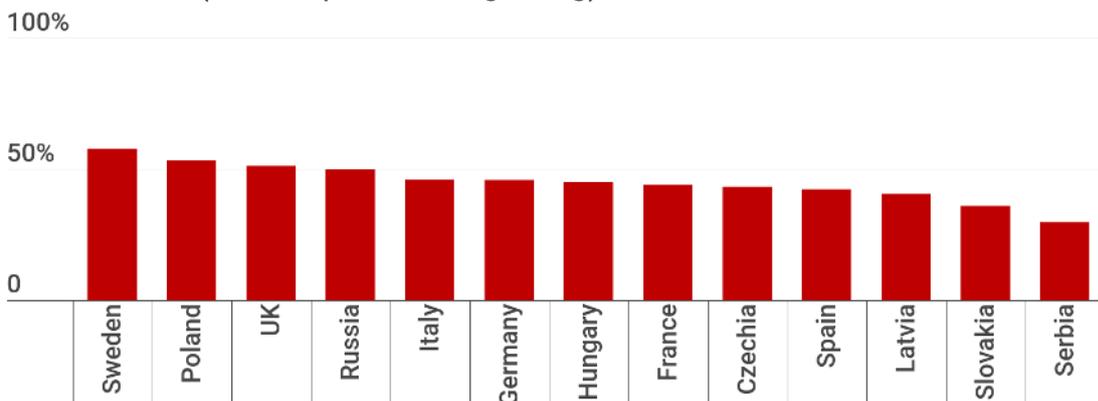


Figure 20: Should addressing intellectual property rights be your country's foreign policy priority on China? (% of respondents agreeing)

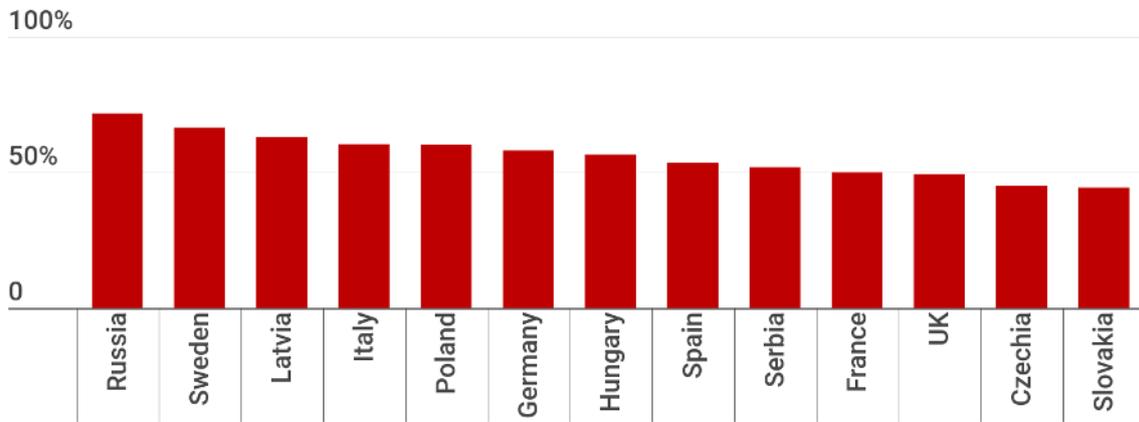


Figure 21: Should advancing human rights and democratic reforms in China be your country's foreign policy priority on China? (% of respondents agreeing)

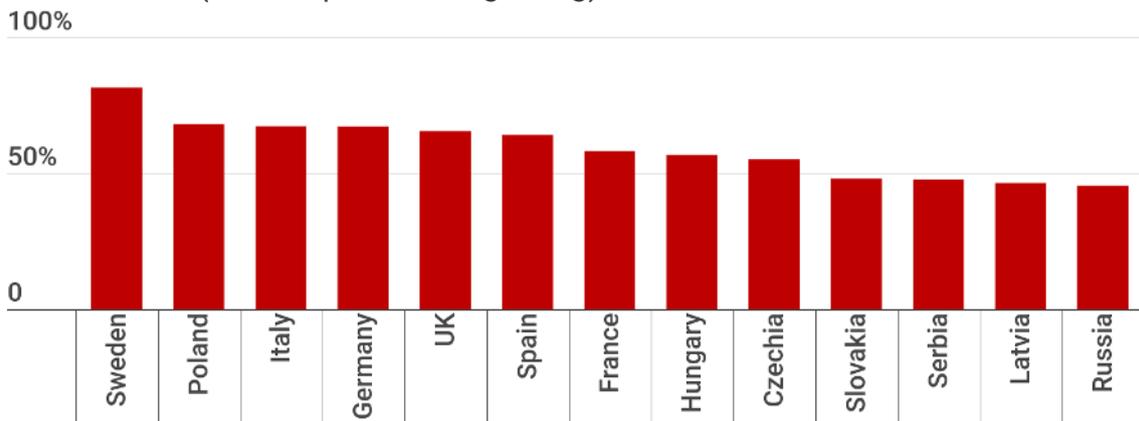


Figure 22: Should the promotion of trade and investment be your country's foreign policy priority on China? (% of respondents agreeing)

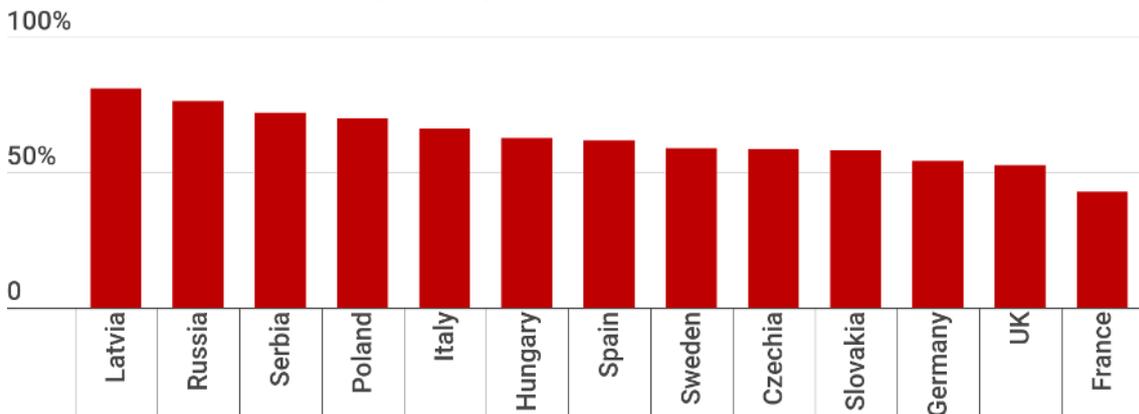


Figure 23: Foreign policy priorities on China across European countries (% of respondents agreeing)

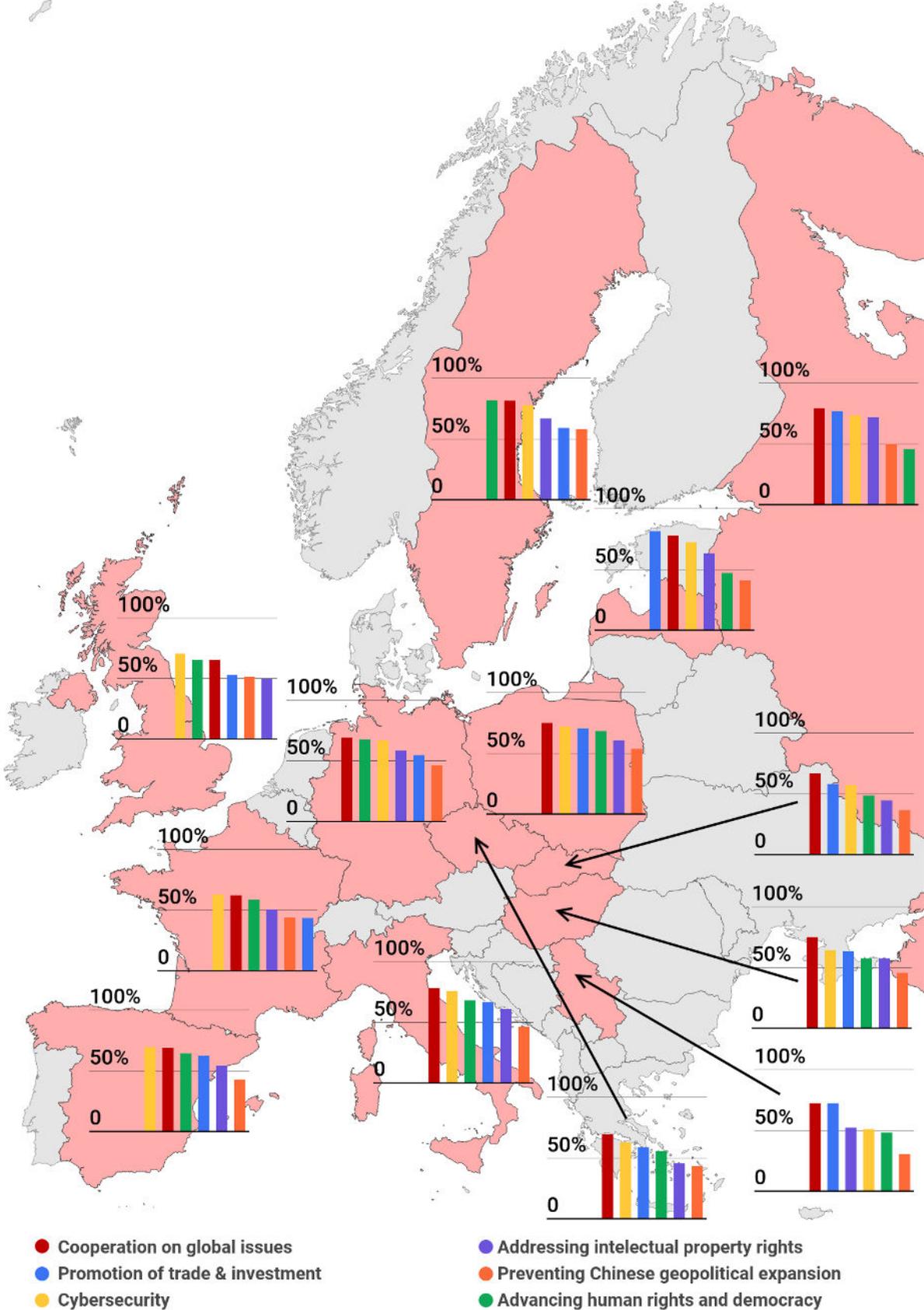
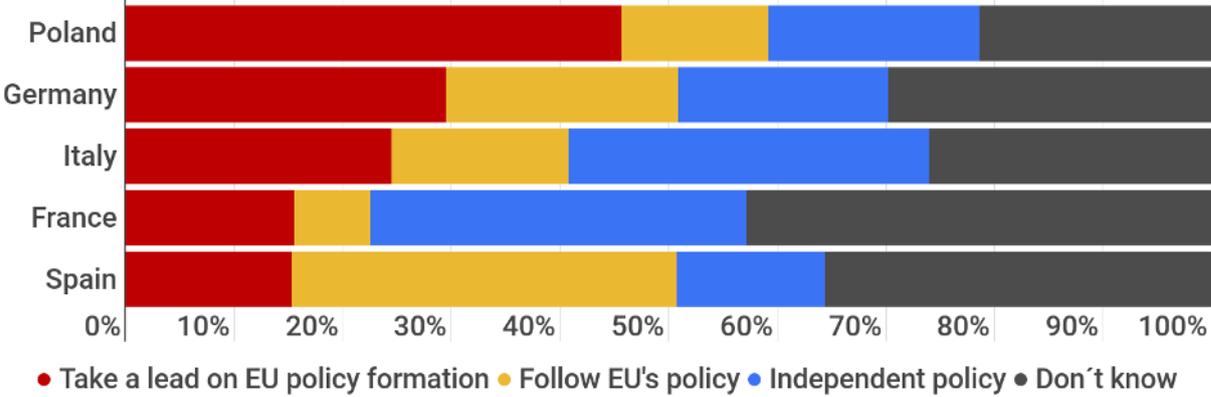


Figure 24: Should your country have an independent China-policy or contribute to a common EU policy?



4 China & the COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 25: How much did the following countries/entities help your country during the COVID-19 pandemic? (% of respondents thinking the country/entity helped)¹⁸

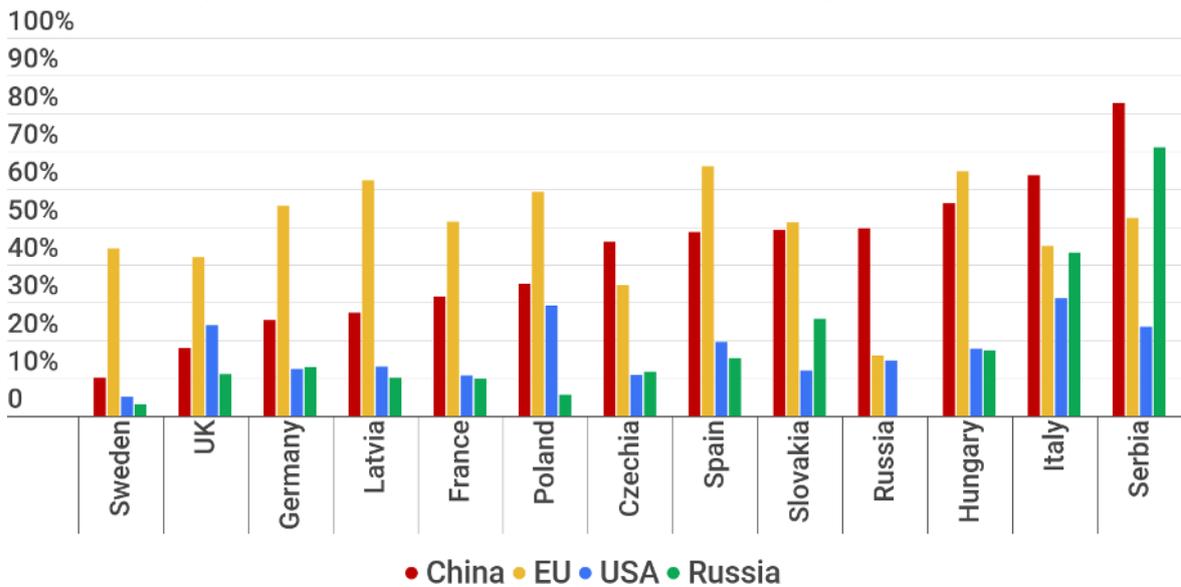


Figure 26: How did China's global position change in light of COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing with the statements)

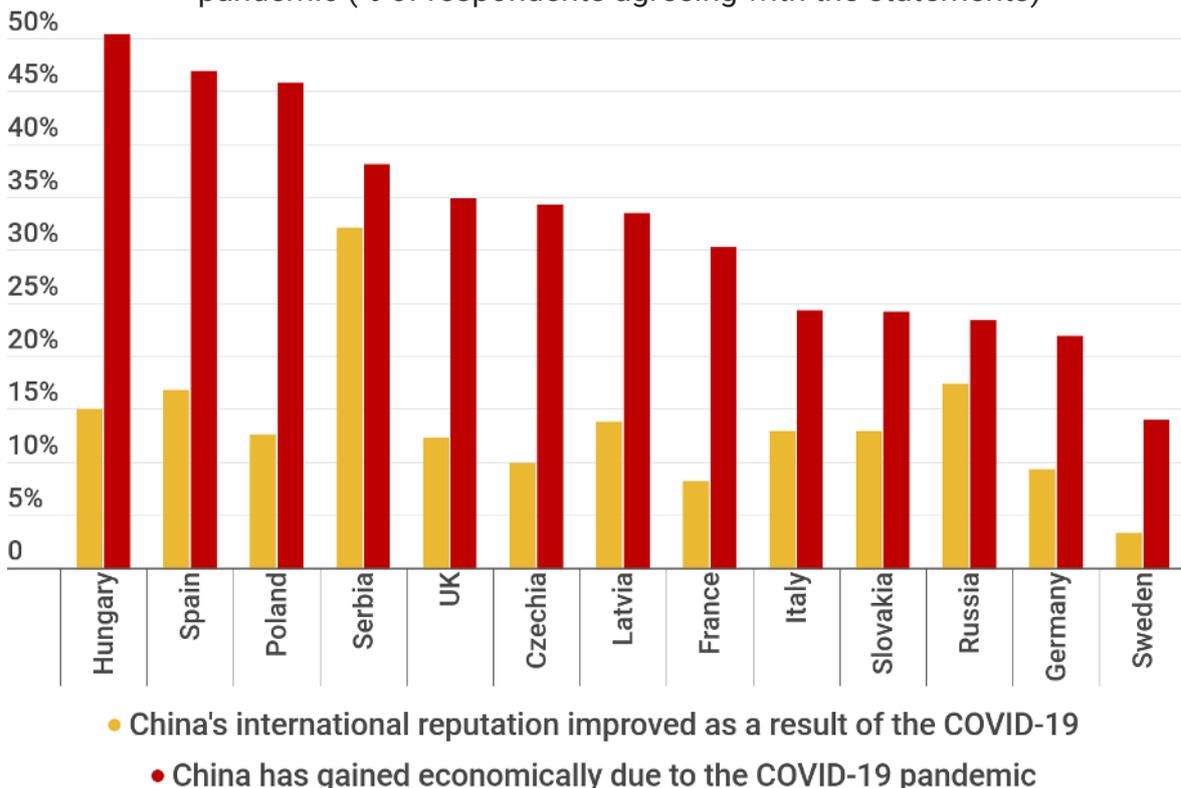
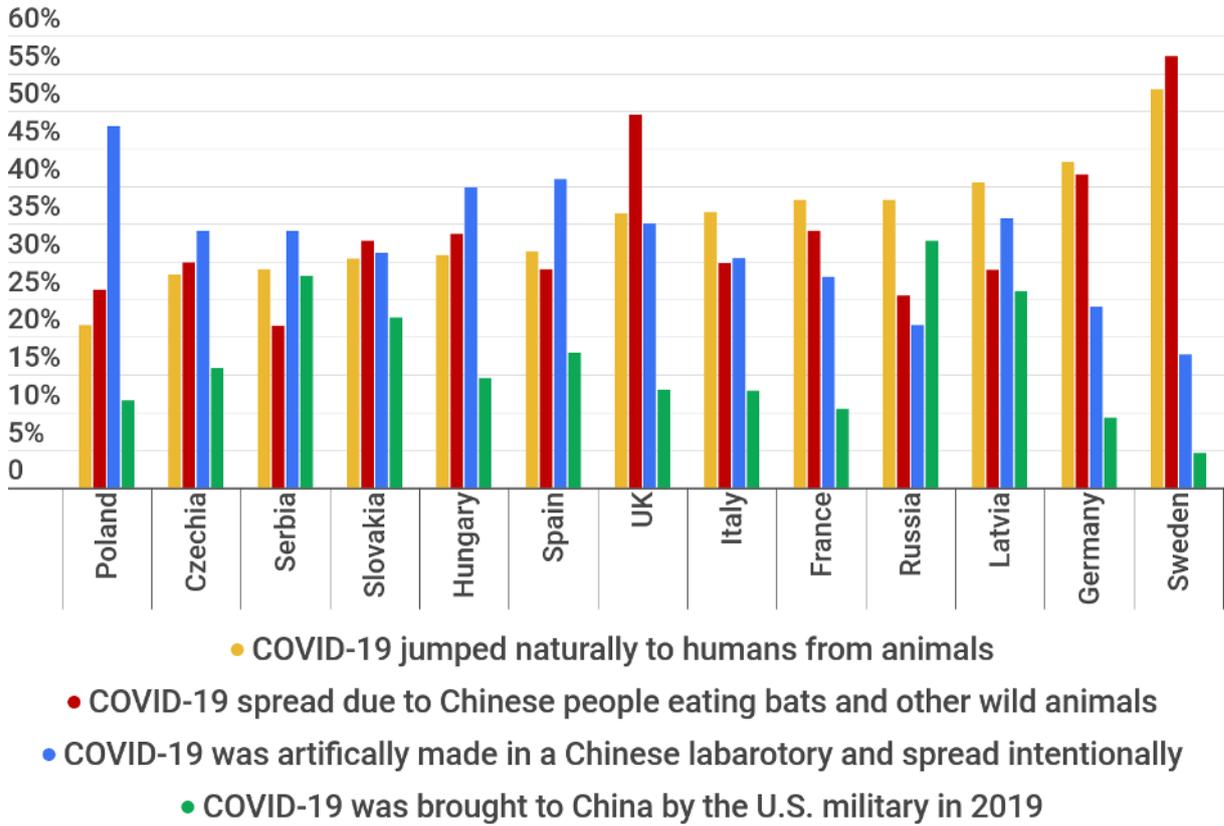


Figure 27: Do you agree with the following statements about the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic?
 (% of respondents agreeing with the statements)



Endnotes

- ¹ Turcsányi, Richard Q., Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Čeněk, Kristina Kironská, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Matej Hruška, Adrian Brona, Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Björn Jerdén, Marc Julienne, Tamás Matura, Tim Rühlig, and Tim Summers. 2020. "Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey." Palacký University Olomouc. Preparation of the dataset has been supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project "Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges", CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.
- ² N = 19 673; of this: Czechia (n = 1 506), France (n = 1 530), Germany (n = 1 501), Hungary (n = 1 504), Italy (n = 1 500), Latvia (n = 1 552), Poland (n = 1 503), Russia (n = 1 540), Serbia (n = 1 500), Slovakia (n = 1 502), Spain (n = 1 501), Sweden (n = 1 534), United Kingdom (n = 1 500). Unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the countries' population from age 18 to 70 with respect to gender, age, education, localization within the country, region, settlement density, and size of settlement. In Latvia, Russia, and Serbia, the data was weighed according to education due to the difficulties to keep education quota in data collection. Data was collected online between September and October 2020.
- ³ Feelings towards China (and other countries have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as "very negative" (0-20), "negative" (21-45), "neutral" (46-54), "positive" (55-79), and "very positive" (80-100). Here only "positive" and "very positive" (merged) visualized.
- ⁴ Supra note 3.
- ⁵ Respondents were offered 7 options: much worse; worse; slightly worse; neither worse nor better; slightly better; better; much better. "Worsened" includes options much worse; worse; slightly worse. "Did not change" includes option neither worse nor better. "Improved" includes options slightly better; better; much better.
- ⁶ Perception of various China-related issues have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each country.
- ⁷ Supra note 3.
- ⁸ Supra note 3.
- ⁹ Supra note 3.
- ¹⁰ Supra note 3.
- ¹¹ Supra note 3.
- ¹² Supra note 3. Only "positive" and "very positive" (merged) visualized.
- ¹³ The respondents were asked „How much do you trust or distrust the following countries/entities?" and offered 7 options: strongly distrust, distrust, somewhat distrust, neither trust nor distrust, somewhat trust, trust, strongly trust. Here the options somewhat trust, trust, and strongly trust (merged) are visualized.
- ¹⁴ Desired foreign policy alignment has been measured on a 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each country. Desired foreign policy alignment with Russia was not asked in Russia, hence its omitted in the chart.

- ¹⁵ The respondents were offered 7 options: very weak, weak, slightly weak, neither weak nor strong, slightly strong, strong, and very strong. Here, the options “slightly strong”, “strong”, and “very strong” are visualized (merged).
- ¹⁶ Supra note 15.
- ¹⁷ The respondents were offered 7 options: very negatively, negatively, somewhat negatively, neither positively nor negatively, somewhat positively, positively, and very positively. Here, the options “somewhat positively”, “positively”, and “very positively” are visualized (merged).
- ¹⁸ Perceived COVID-19 help provided by the mentioned entities has been measured on a 0 (didn't help) to 10 (helped a lot) scale. The responses were grouped as “didn't help at all” (0-2), “didn't help” (3-4), “neutral” (5), “helped” (6-7), and “helped a lot” (8-10). Here, only options “helped” and “helped a lot” are visualized (merged).

About CEIAS

The Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank based in Bratislava (Slovakia), and with branches in Olomouc (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria).

The main goal of CEIAS is to spread knowledge about Asia among scholars and experts in Central Europe and beyond, while also informing the public about Central European activities in Asia.

To this end, CEIAS conducts and publishes its research, organizes public seminars and conferences, supports education on Asian topics, and communicates with the local, regional, and international media.

CEIAS activities focus mainly on international relations and security studies in East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia. CEIAS cooperates with a number of experts and similar organizations in the region and beyond.

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About Sinophone Borderlands

The Sinophone Borderlands - Interaction at the Edges is an excellent research project based at the Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic. The project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund, project no. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.

The main idea of the project is to explore how the Chinese-speaking world interacts with other worlds, including those at its border (Slavophone, Tibetophone, Turco-Persophone, or Austroasiatophone worlds), as well as those who may be more distant (such as Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone, and others).

The Sinophone Borderlands research team consists of researchers from various disciplines under three main Research Groups - Political Science, Anthropology, and Linguistics. This allows for a cross-disciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural comparisons which pushes the academic studies of China and Asia beyond the limits of current disciplinary and national frameworks.

The Sinophone Borderlands is a research project that engages primarily in activities such as publishing academic journal articles, books, or participating in conferences and workshops.

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European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Differences and common ground across the continent

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