

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

Ripe for European leadership?

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Summary

- This report is a result of a wide-scale **study of public opinion on China in 13 European countries**,¹ conducted in September and October 2020, on the research sample representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density.² Here, we focus on the German portion of the polling, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.³
- Public opinion of China in Germany is **primarily negative** (*Figure 1*) and **worsening** (*Figure 2*). Over 60% of Germans see China as either negative or very negative, while only about 19% have positive feelings (the remaining being neutral). Moreover, close to half of Germans indicate that their perception of China got worse over the last three years with only 13% seeing improvement.
- Regions of **former East Germany** are significantly **more positive of China**, with Sachsen-Anhalt being the most positive and Schleswig-Holstein being the most negative one (*Figure 3*). The respondents from former East Germany who hold positive views of the Communist past are also much more positive about China than those who see their Communist history negatively (*Figure 22*). Compared to that, the negative perceptions of China run across the political spectrum with **only marginal differences among the voters of different political parties** (*Figure 21*). The voters of Die Linke, however, are somewhat more positive of China, followed by the voters of AfD.
- Overall, it may be suggested that there is a relatively **broad consensus** within Germany when it comes to China - or at least more so than in other countries. This solid common ground domestically may be one of the **stepping stones for a potential German leadership role within the EU** when it comes to the Union's China policy.
- Asked more specifically for the European context, about 30% of the respondents want to lead the EU's China policy with another 20% prefer to follow the EU's lead. Almost 20% favor an independent China

policy. The remaining 30% have no opinion or are undecided (*Figure 18*).

- Germans are not negative about all China-related issues. **Trade with China is seen as rather neutral**, although Chinese investments are perceived as slightly negative. The same holds for China's Belt and Road Initiative. These perceptions stand in contrast to **China's growing military power, China's influence on democracy in other countries, and China's impact on the global environment** that meet **strong negative feelings** and perceptions among Germans (*Figure 6*).
- China's image in Germany is also rather negative when compared with the views of other states (*Figure 4*). Of the selected countries respondents have been asked to assess, **only North Korea ranks worse, while China is on par with Russia**. Democratic countries in both Europe and Asia are perceived in a much more positive light. China's Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong also scores considerably better than the overall country. The U.S., however, is seen somewhat less positively in Germany than other democratic countries are. Moreover, compared to other European countries, Germans have somewhat more skeptical views of the U.S. Again, this may suggest a space for the potential leadership role within the EU.
- Compared to other great powers, China is seen as the **most influential global economic power** and is also almost on par with the military strength of the U.S. and Russia (*Figure 8*). Subsequently, China is perceived to be of **greater importance to Germany's economy** than the economic relations with the U.S. and Russia (*Figure 11*).
- Germans also find China to be more **culturally attractive** than the U.S. and Russia. In this category, however, China is by **far outperformed by the cultural attractiveness of the EU** (*Figure 9*). Similarly, the **human rights** situation in the EU is seen as much more positive than in the other three political entities, with **China ranking lowest in this category** (*Figure 10*).
- Germans have the **lowest level of trust in China** compared with Russia and the U.S., with both entities also scoring rather low (*Figure*

12). Compared to that, the German respondents hold a rather **high trust in the EU**. This is also reflected in the **German's preferences** in the buildout of **5G networks** (Figure 14). Broad support for cooperation in this field is limited to the EU partners, followed by great margins by Japan, South Korea, the U.S. – and China ranking last.

- Overall, Germans want their **foreign policy** to be **aligned** most with the **EU**, followed by a significant gap with the U.S., Russia, and **China being the last one** (Figure 13).
- When it comes to **foreign policy preferences towards China**, **cooperation on global issues** like climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism rank first, likely influenced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. **Almost equally important** for Germans is the **promotion of human rights and democratic reform** in China as well as addressing **cybersecurity** (Figure 15).
- These responses paint a picture in which **China is a necessary partner**, although one that is **seen with suspicions and criticism**. Given Germany's export orientation, the **promotion of trade and investment ranks remarkably low** among the preferences of Germans for their country's China policy.
- Importantly, most Germans believe that **defending human rights** in China **comes with economic costs** (Figure 16), yet they are **still willing to prioritize it** (Figure 17).
- During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, Germans **acknowledge support from the EU** and do not see any meaningful help from the U.S., Russia, and China, although China ranks somewhat better than the other two great powers (Figure 19). This may again point towards Germans **seeing themselves as rather independent and self-sufficient within the EU** in terms of foreign policy and when facing a crisis like the COVID-19.
- In terms of **COVID-19 origin**, most Germans **agree with the scientific consensus** that the **virus jumped naturally to humans from animals**, although the respondents are almost equally as likely to attribute the spread of the virus to "Chinese people eating bats and other wild

animals” (Figure 20). Almost **a fourth of the German population** believes in a **conspiracy theory** that the **virus was artificially made in a Chinese lab and spread intentionally**.

- Overall, the results of this survey suggest that **Germany might be in a position to lead the EU policy on China**. Compared to other EU countries, Germans find themselves in all major issues somewhere **near the average EU positions**, although leaning slightly towards the more **skeptical** side. Combined with the relatively **solid domestic consensus** and preference for the EU's own path, Germany may prove to be the country tipping the EU balance in one way or another – even if it would not choose to be, or be explicitly accepted as a leader. It is even more significant in this regard that **Germany as the major economic partner of China** in Europe has the **public willing to prioritize human rights over the economy**. Cooperation on global issues, however, still slightly outperforms human rights promotion.

1 Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1: Feeling towards China among Germans⁴

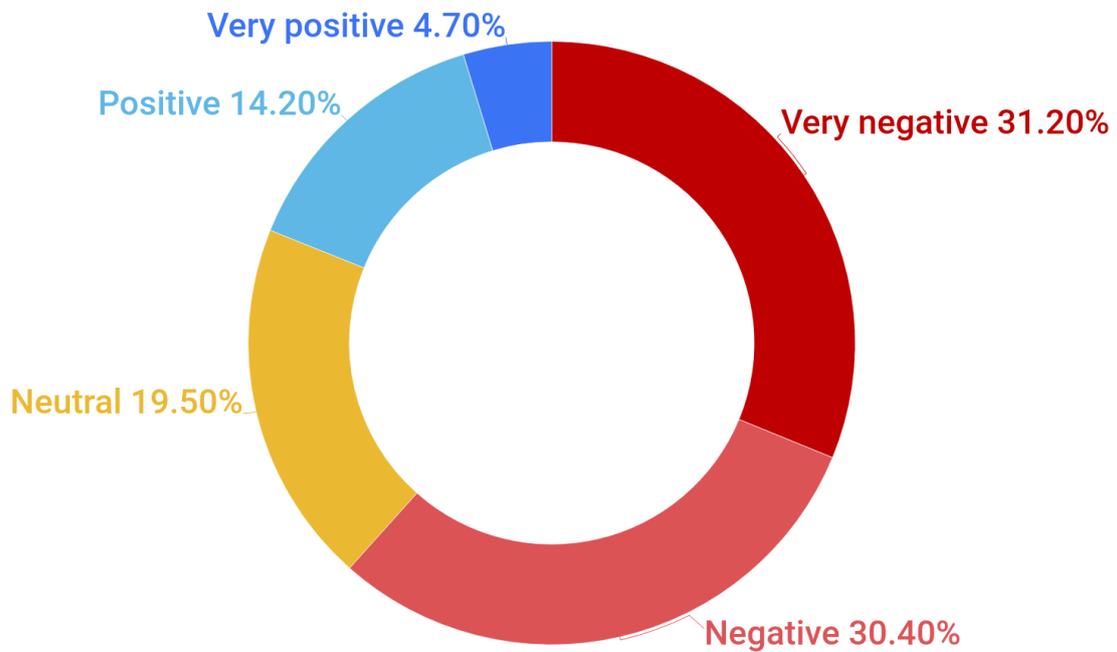


Figure 2: Change of feeling towards China among Germans in the past three years⁵

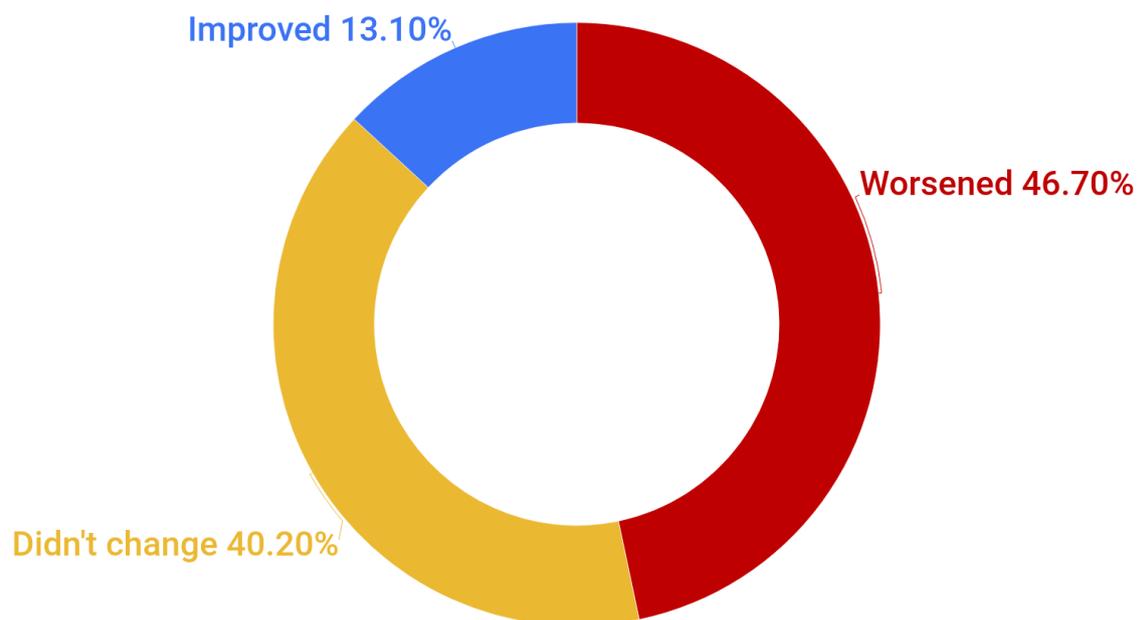


Figure 3: Positive feeling towards China among Germans across German *bundesländer* ⁶

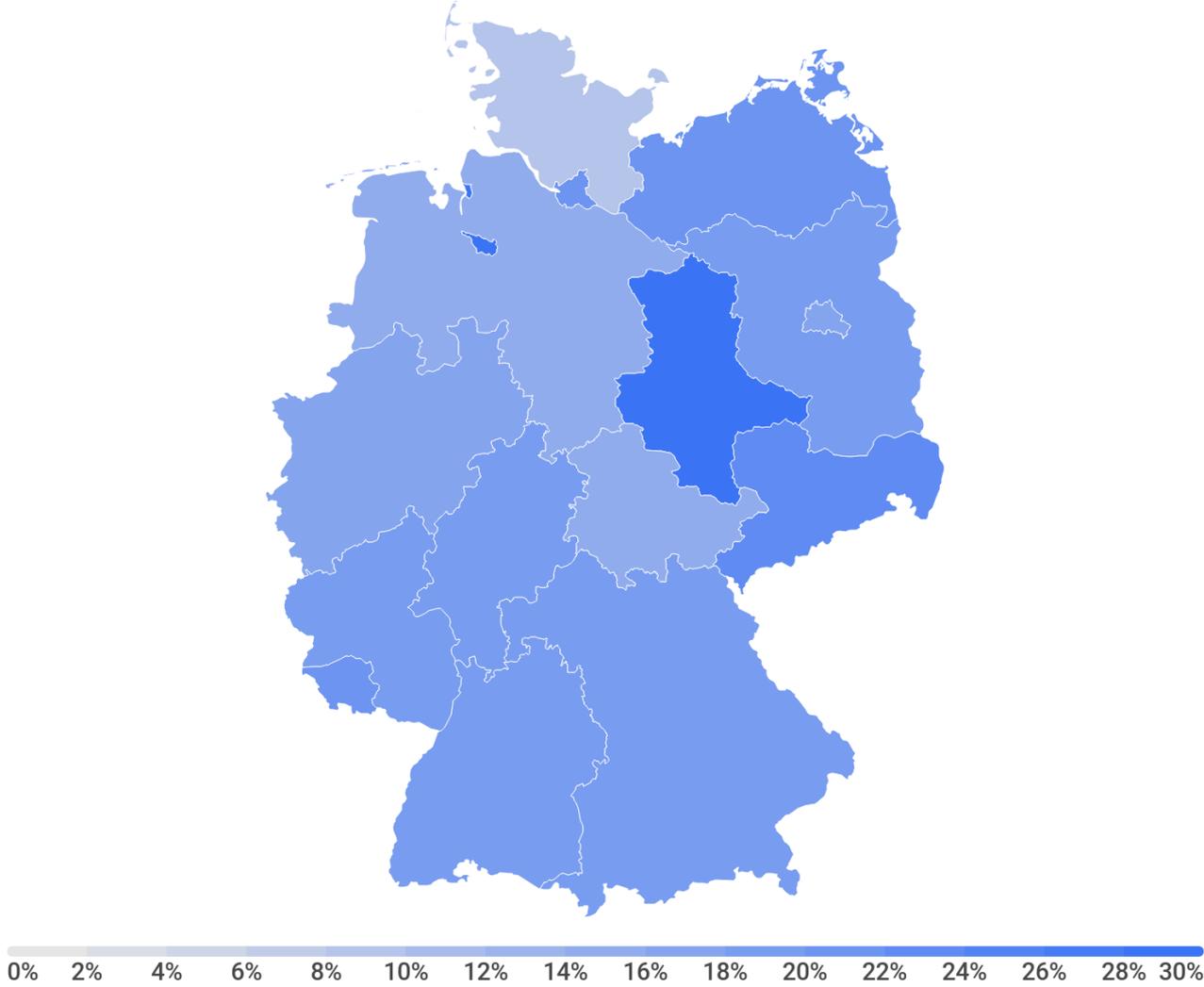


Figure 4: Feeling towards select countries among Germans⁷

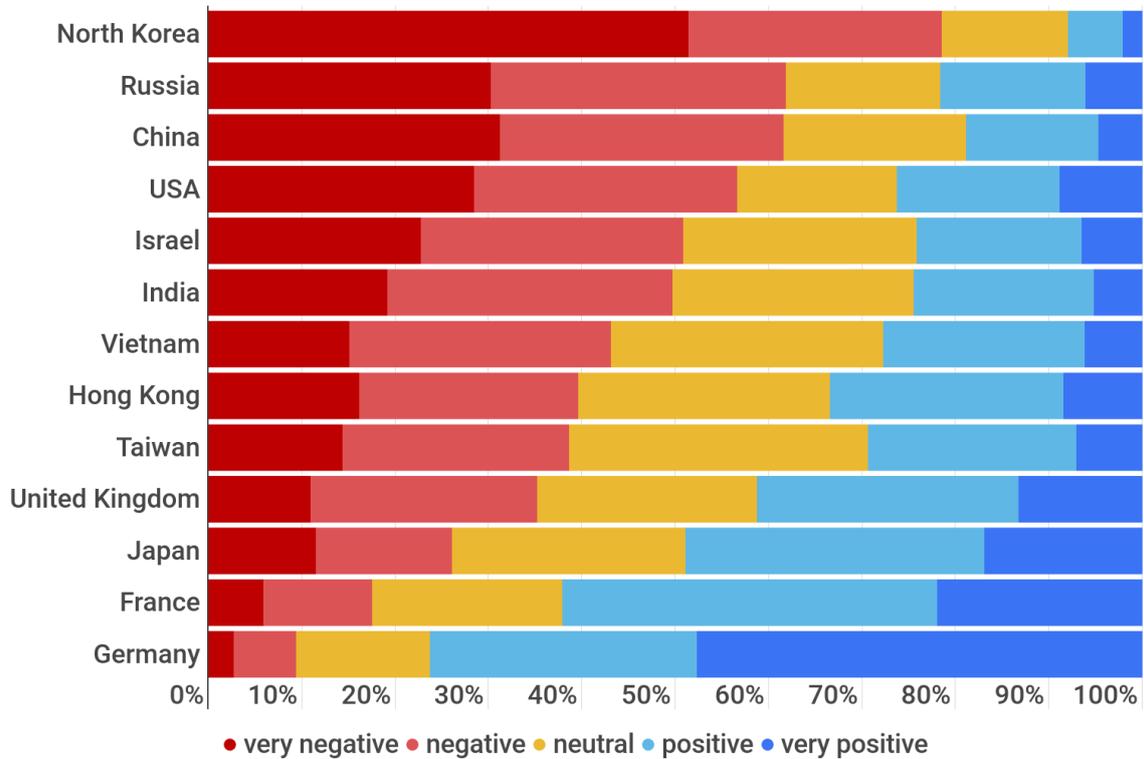
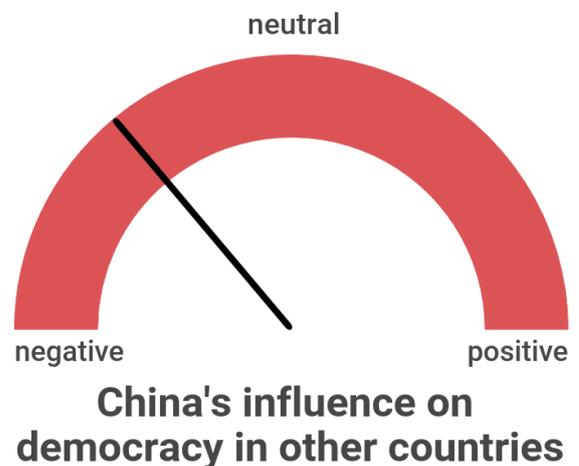
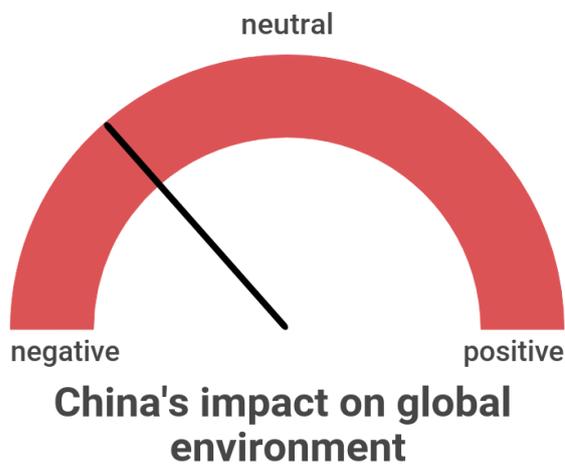
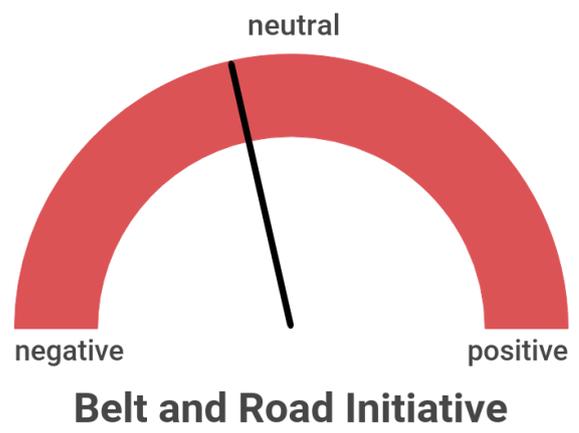
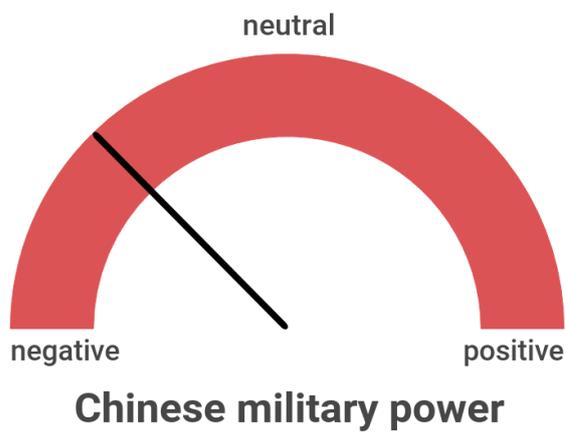
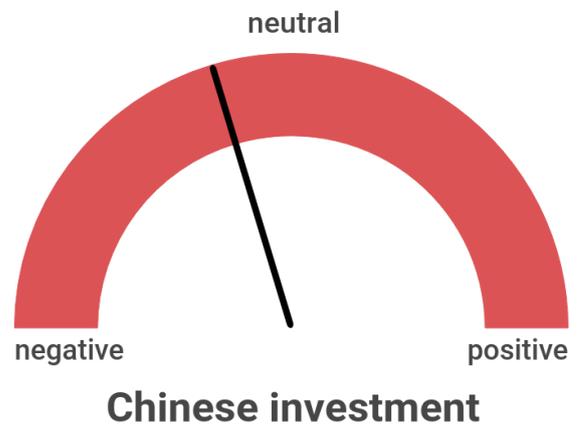
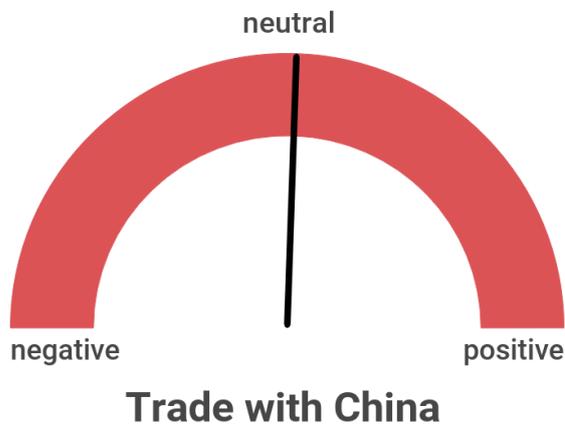


Figure 5: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)⁸



Figure 6: Perceptions of certain China-related issues among Germans⁹



2 Comparing the global powers

Figure 7: How militarily strong do you consider the following countries?

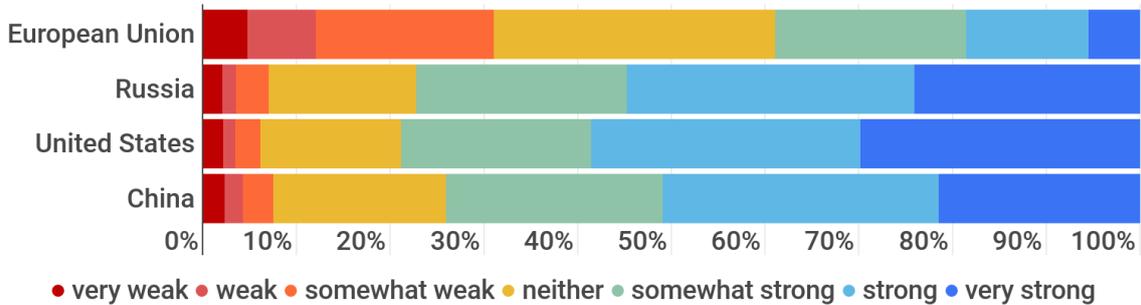


Figure 8: How economically strong do you consider the following countries?

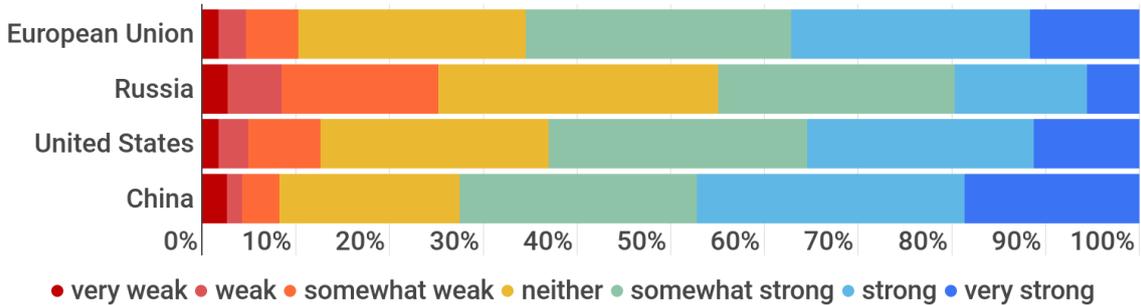


Figure 9: How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries?

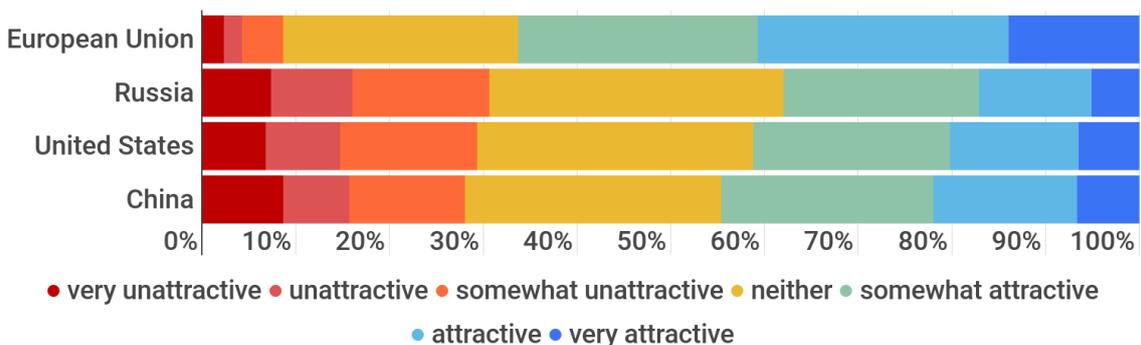


Figure 10: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries?

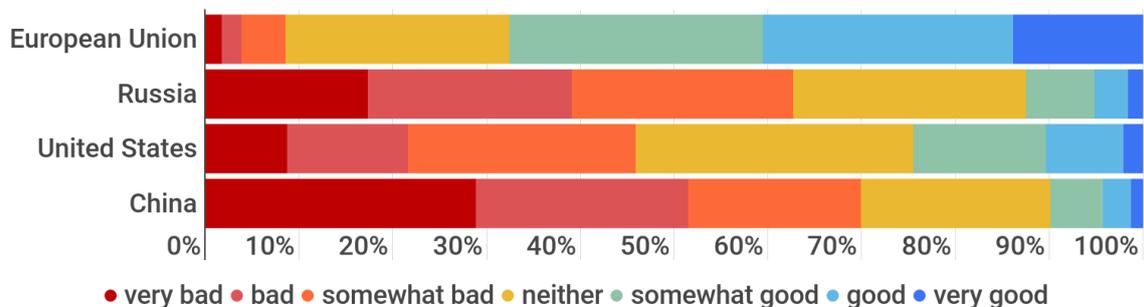


Figure 11: How important are the following countries to the economic development of Germany?

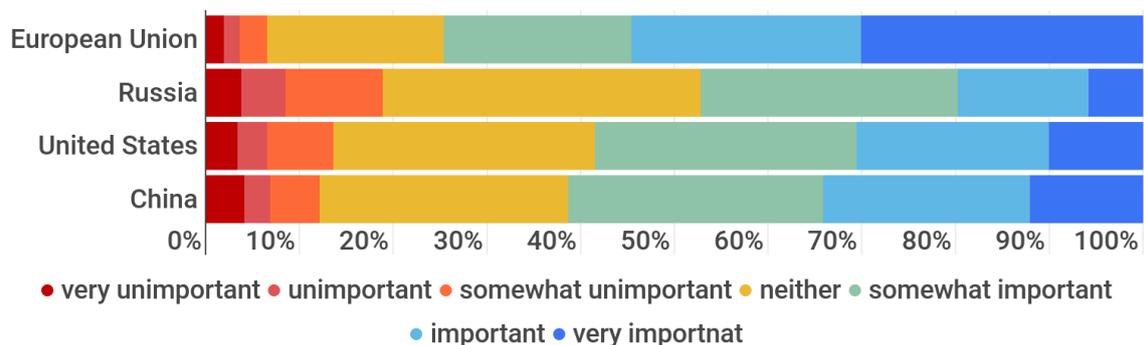
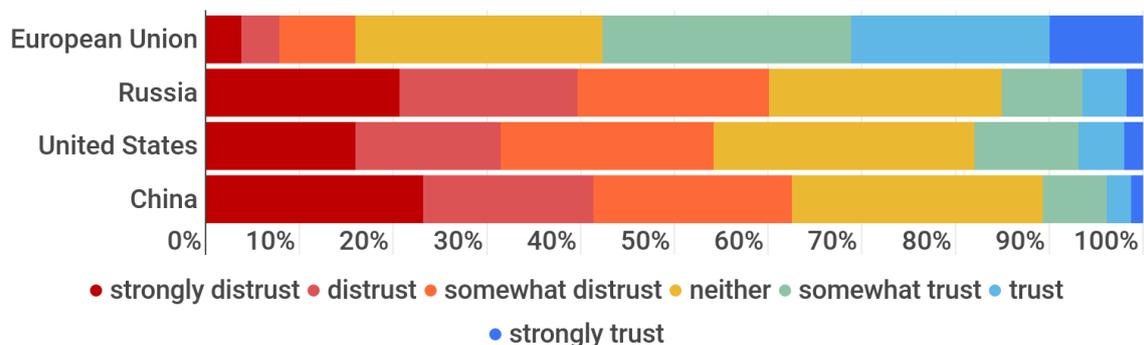


Figure 12: How much do you trust the following countries?



3 German foreign policy towards China

Figure 13: How closely should the German foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all;

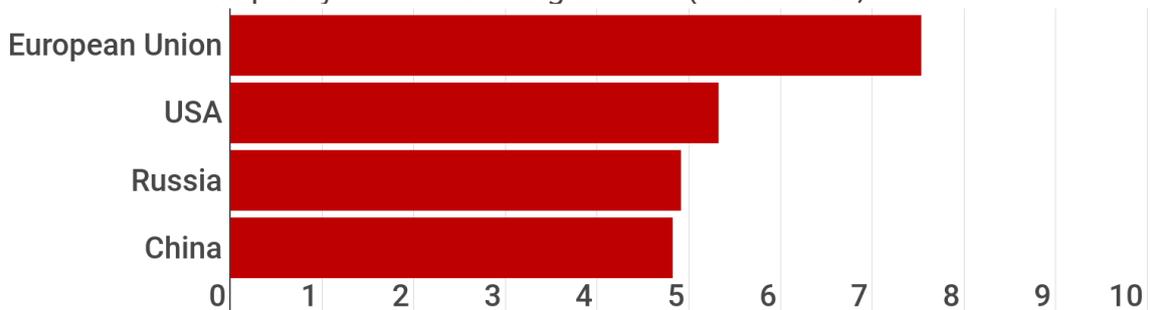


Figure 14: Should Germany cooperate with the following countries in building the 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)

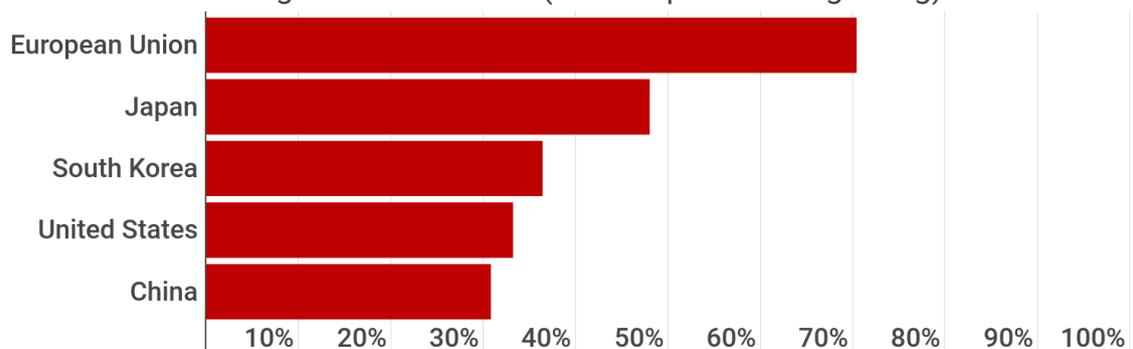


Figure 15: What should be the German foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)

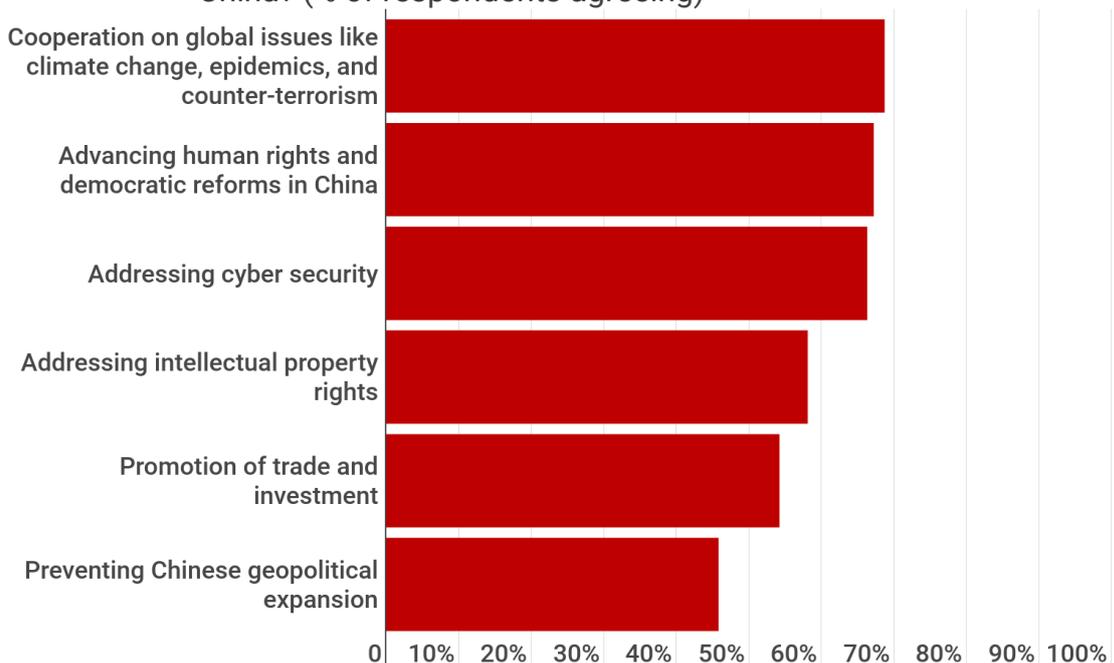


Figure 16: Do you believe that defending human rights in relations with China comes with economic costs for Germany?

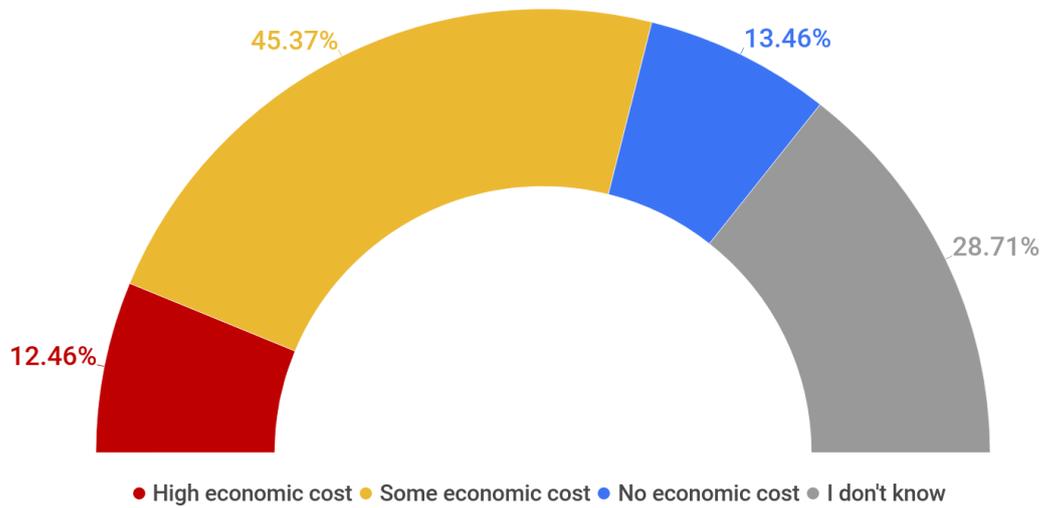


Figure 17: Do you agree or disagree that Germany should prioritize human rights in its dealings with China even if it comes with economic costs?

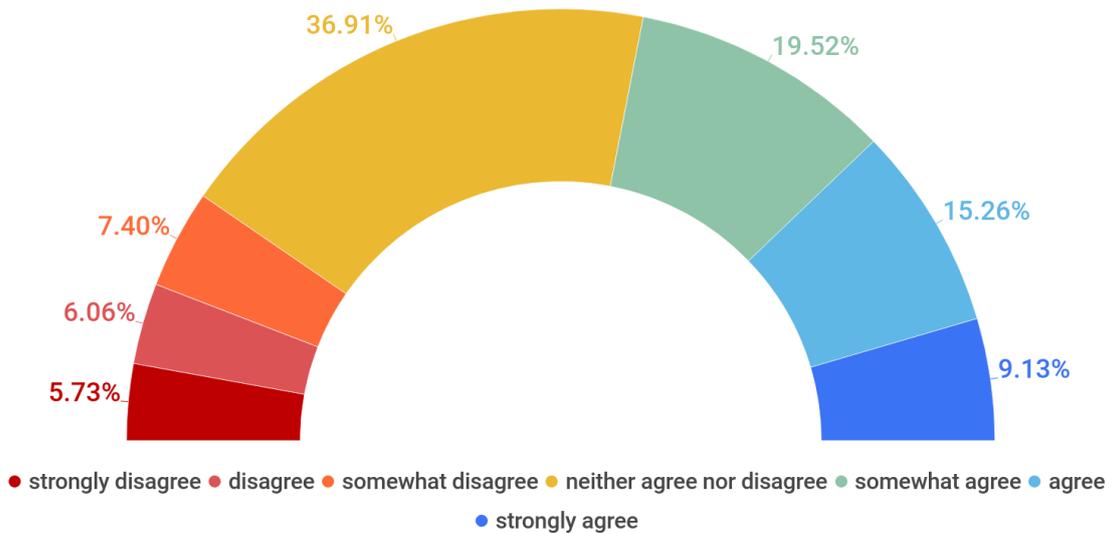
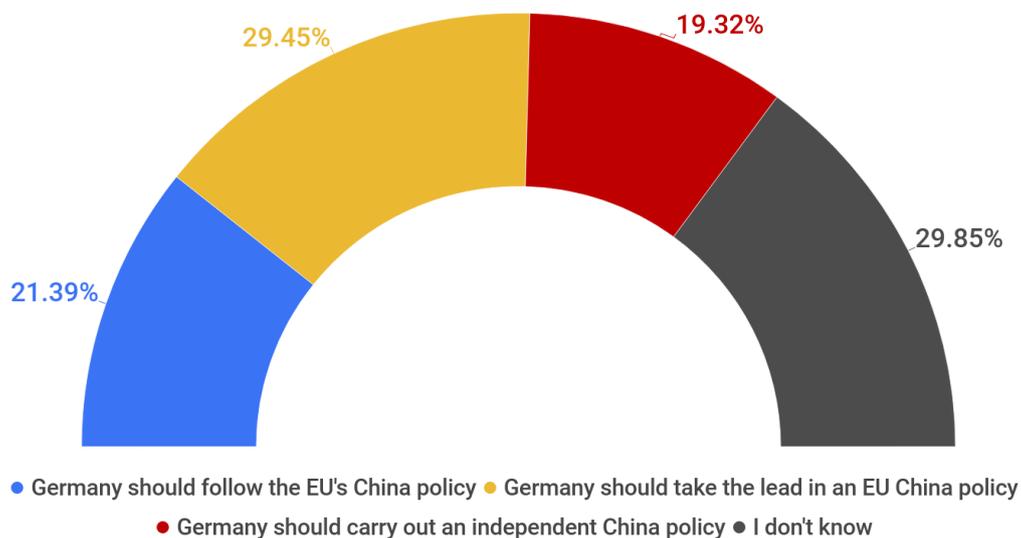


Figure 18: Should Germany pursue its own strategy towards China or contribute to an EU China strategy?



4 COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 19: How much did the following countries help Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic?¹¹

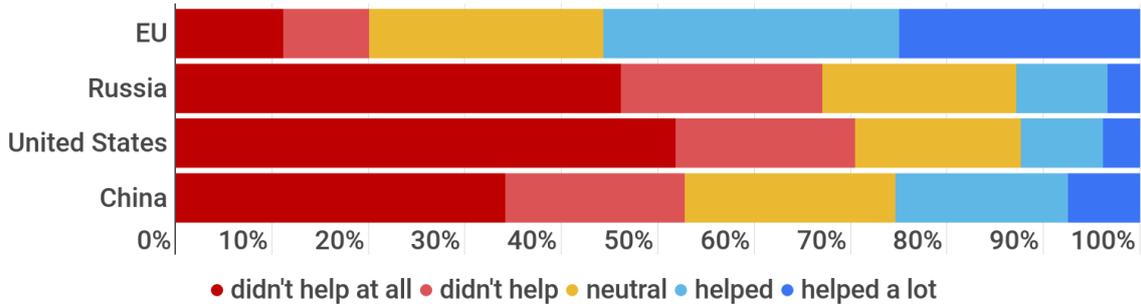
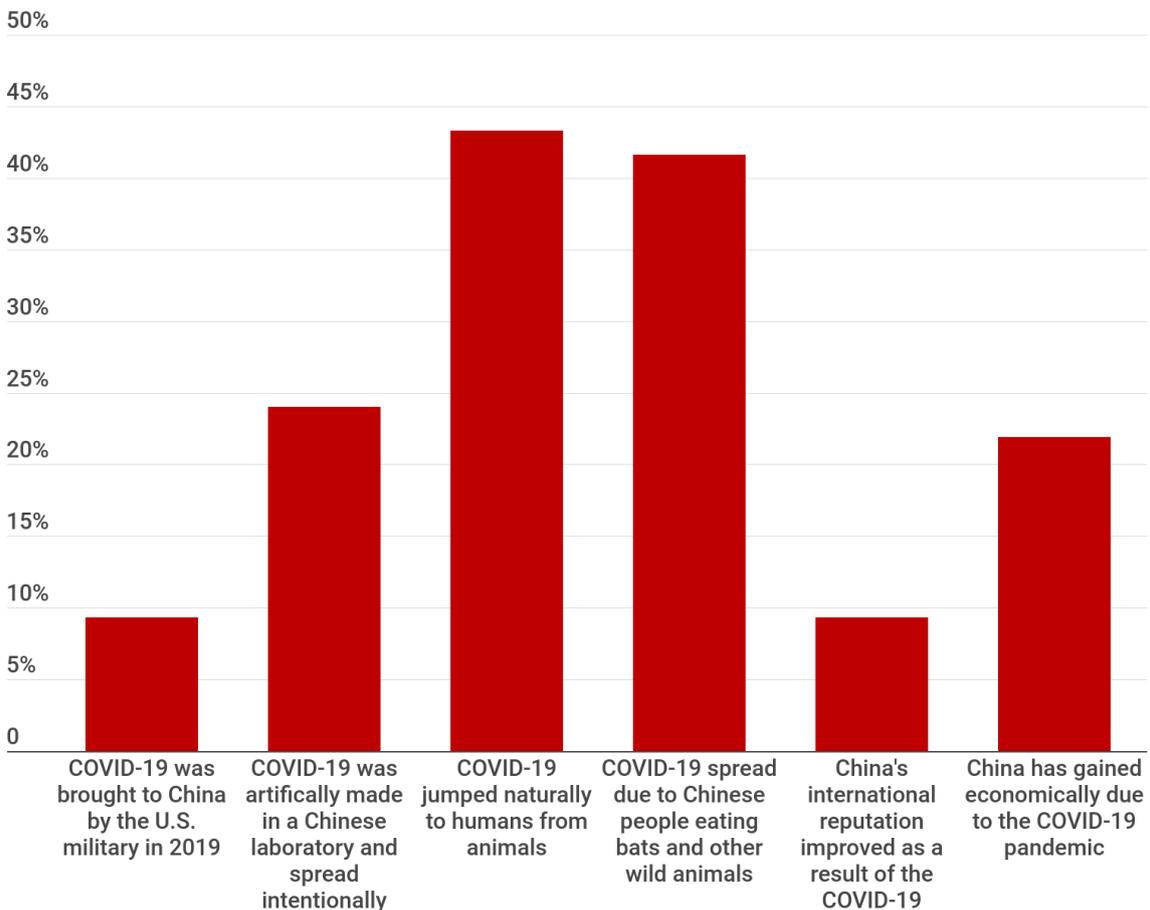


Figure 20: Views of Germans on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)



5 Views of China & political affiliation

Figure 21: Feelings towards China among voters of political parties polling over 5%¹²

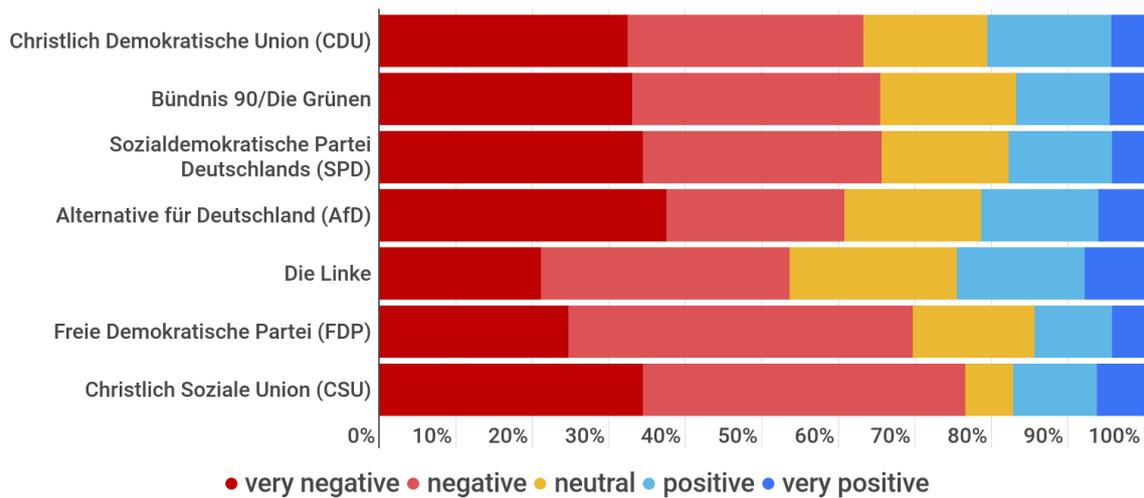
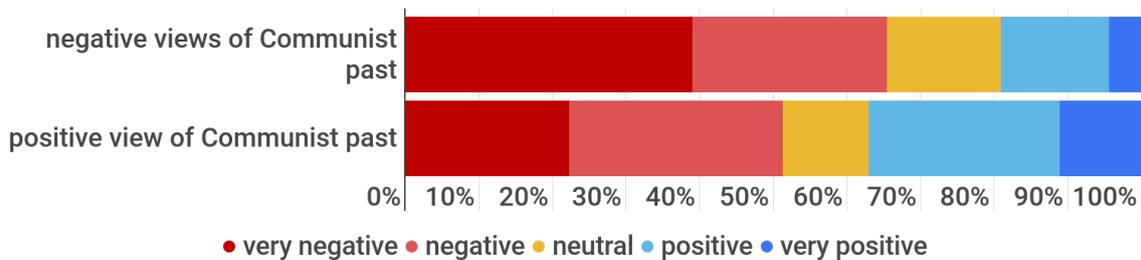


Figure 22: Feelings towards China among East Germans according to their perception of East Germany's Communist past¹³



Endnotes

- ¹ Turcsanyi, Richard, Renata Sedlakova, Jiri Cenek, Kristina Kironska, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Marek Hruska, Adrian Brona, Una Berzina Cherenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Bjorn Jerden, Marc Julienne, Tamas Matura, Tim Ruhlig, 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 = 1501; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the German population from age 18 to 70 with respect to gender, age, education, localization within the country, region, settlement density, and size of settlement. Data was collected online in September and October 2020.
- ³ Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šímalčík, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Cenek, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Matej Hruska, Adrian Brona, Una Aleksandra Beřziņa-Cerenkova, Mario Esteban, Beatrice Gallelli, Jelena Gledic, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Björn Jerdén, Marc Julienne, Tamás Matura, Tim Ruhlig, Tim Summers (2020). *European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Differences and common ground across the continent*. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc
- ⁴ Feelings towards China (and other countries) have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as "negative" (incl. very negative: 0-20 and negative: 21-45), "neutral" (46-54) and "positive" (incl. positive: 55-79 and very positive: 80-100).
- 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 Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for individual *bundesländer* are: Baden-Württemberg (166), Bavaria (227), Berlin (74), Brandenburg (60), Bremen (14), Hamburg (48), Hesse (104), Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (28), Lower Saxony (143), North Rhine-Westphalia (302), Rhineland-Palatinate (71), Saarland (20), Saxony (83), Saxony-Anhalt (50), Schleswig-Holstein (63), Thuringia (48).
- ⁷ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis).
- ⁸ The respondents were asked an open-ended question "What first comes to mind when you hear about China?" The answers provided by 10 or more respondents are visualized.
- ⁹ Feelings towards the China-related issues have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each characteristic.
- ¹⁰ 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.
- ¹¹ 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).
- ¹² Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the political parties are as follows: Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU) – 204, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen – 197, Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) – 163, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – 163, Die Linke – 114, Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) – 69, Christlich Soziale Union (CSU) – 64.
- ¹³ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the options are: negative views of Communist past (136), positive views of Communist past (162). To determine respondent's perception of the East Germany's Communist past, they were asked the question "If you were raised in Eastern Germany, do you perceive the communist past from 1949 to 1989 as positive or negative?", which was measured on a 0 (very negative) to 100 (very positive) scale.

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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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German public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Caught between values and conspiracies

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