

# Slovak public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19

Caught between values and conspiracies

Matej Šimalčík | Richard Q. Turcsányi  
 Kristína Kironská | Renáta Sedláková

# Slovak public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19

Caught between values and conspiracies

**Authors:** Matej Šimalčík | Richard Q. Turcsányi  
Kristína Kironská | Renáta Sedláková

The publication benefitted from further research assistance by Andrej Findor and Jiří Čenek, to whom the authors wish to express their gratitude.

# Contents

<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1 Feelings towards China and other countries.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2 Comparing the global powers.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3 Slovak foreign policy towards China .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4 COVID-19 pandemic .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5 Views of China &amp; political affiliation.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Endnotes.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>About authors .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>About CEIAS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>About Sinophone Borderlands.....</b>	<b>17</b>

## Summary

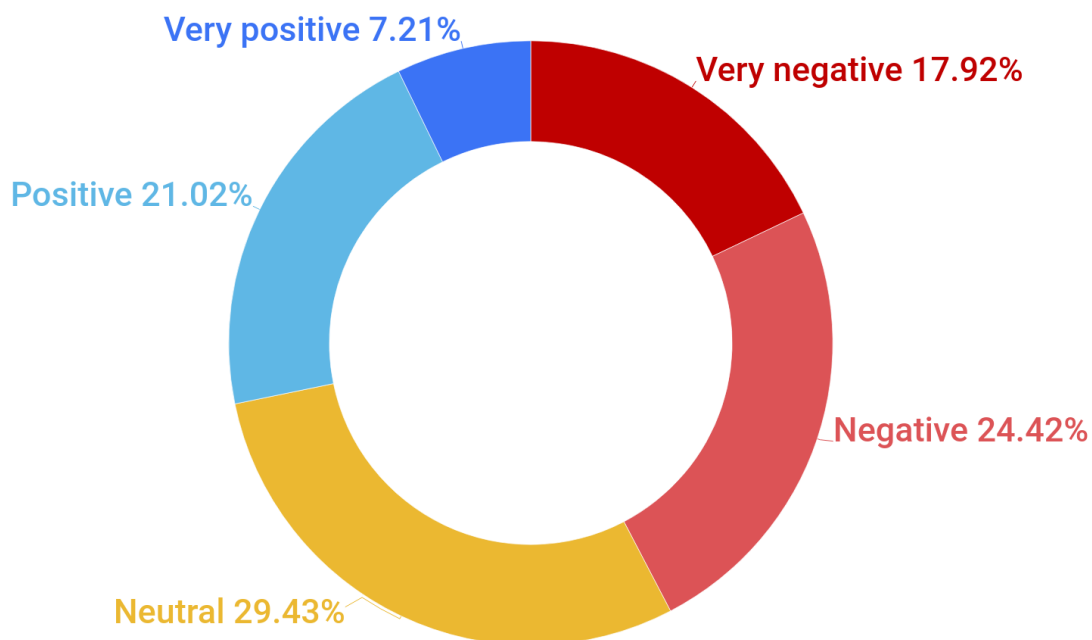
- This report is a result of a wide-scale **study of public opinion on China in 13 European countries**,<sup>1</sup> conducted in September and October 2020, on the research sample representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density.<sup>2</sup> Here, we focus on the **Slovak portion of the polling**, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.<sup>3</sup>
- Overall, the Slovak public **leans towards a negative view of China** – 42% of respondents see China negatively, 28% positively, with the rest having neutral views (*Figure 1*). As such, China appears **among the most negatively-perceived countries** in Slovakia from among those surveyed. At the same time, the USA is viewed even more negatively, and so is Israel and North Korea. On the positive side, France is viewed the most positively, followed by Japan, the UK, Germany, and Russia (*Figure 3*).
- The **first associations** of the Slovak public related to China in 2020 are related to China being a **populous and a big country** with a well-recognized **culture and history**. **COVID-19** is another of the main associations, highlighting the fact that Slovaks see the link between the pandemic and China. **Communism** as well as **cheap products** are further labels often appearing in relation to China. However, human rights or environmental issues did not come up very often. On the other hand, many people mention slanted eyes, which has a negative and racist connotation in the Slovak language (*Figure 4*).
- The Slovak public prefers that their country **aligns its foreign policy** the most **with the EU**, followed by Russia, China, and the USA on the last spot (*Figure 12*). This includes also **decision-making in sensitive areas** like the **5G network development**, where the vast majority of the population (65%) would prefer to rely on EU producers of 5G equipment, followed by those relying on Japanese producers (44%). Subsequently, **32% would use Chinese equipment**, 29% US equipment, and 25% the South Korean for building the 5G networks (*Figure 13*).

- As for **Slovak foreign policy priorities** towards China, **cooperation on global issues** like climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism are seen as the most desirable ones (66%). Preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion is the least desirable priority (36%). **Half of the population (48%) supports advancing human rights and democratic reforms in China** (Figure 14).
- These results reveal the **long-standing divisions between the West and the East** – while Western Europe and the EU remain popular, a large part of the population holds favorable views of Russia and sees the USA negatively. China does not seem to be the main pole in these considerations.
- The respondents who lean towards **seeing themselves as part of the East perceive China significantly more positively** than those who self-identify as part of the West (Figure 19).
- There are **noticeable differences between the voters of various political parties**, however, they are not overly polarized. Discounting the neutral views, **negative views of China are more prevalent than positive views among voters of all major political parties**. Negative views of China outweigh the positive ones mostly among voters of parties critical of China. At the same time, the difference between negative and positive views is quite small among voters of more China-friendly political parties (Figure 17).<sup>4</sup>
- The difference in views of China is somewhat more visible when looking at the **2019 presidential election**. Those who voted for the current president **Zuzana Čaputová** tend to have a **more negative view** of China than the voters of her opponent **Maroš Šefčovič** (Figure 18).
- When compared with other major global powers (EU, USA, Russia), **China is generally seen less favorably than the EU and Russia**, while being seen **less negatively than the USA** (Figure 3).
- China is seen as a **powerful international actor**. In **military power**, China (5% weak, 77% strong) is believed to be far **stronger than the EU** while only slightly lagging behind Russia and the USA (Figure 6).
- However, when it comes to **economic power**, China is seen as the **strongest actor**, with 80% of Slovaks seeing China as economically strong (Figure 7).

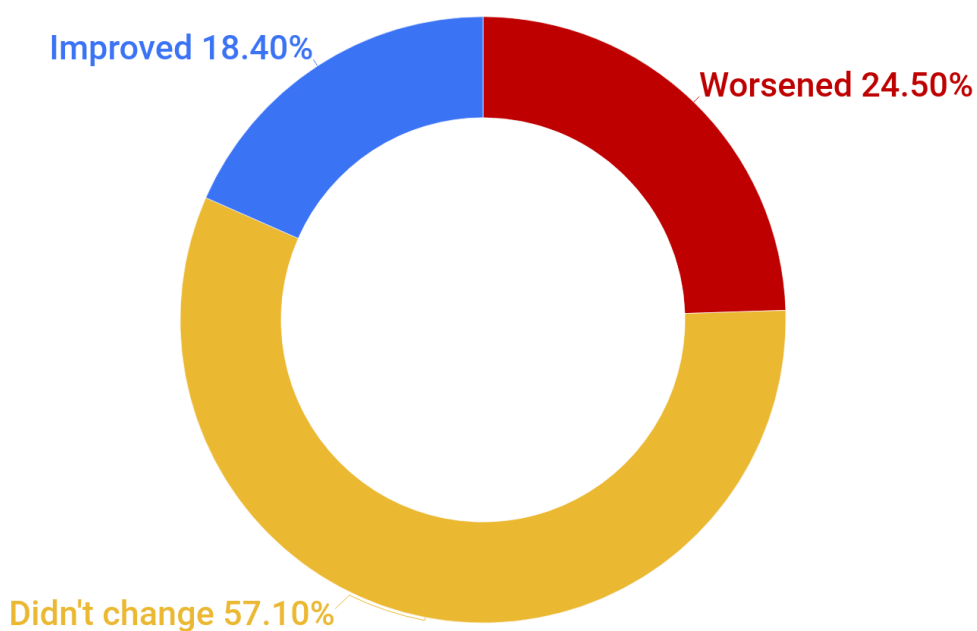
- Despite being perceived as a powerful and economically strong country, China is **not seen as a trustworthy partner** (Figure 11). Only 18% of Slovaks trust China, while 40% distrust it. The USA is seen as more trustworthy than China (20%), while at the same time, a larger portion of people doesn't trust the USA (48%). The **USA is thus a more polarizing actor in the Slovak society than China**.
- A significant portion of the Slovak population (43%) has **changed its views of China in the last three years** (Figure 2). The views of a quarter of Slovaks have worsened in this period. The large volume of people whose views have changed suggests that the **perception of China is quite dynamic** and people of different views are not fully entrenched in their positions. The high degree of malleability is in line with previous Eurobarometer findings, which have shown large year-on-year changes in perception of China between 2016 and 2018.<sup>5</sup>
- Interestingly, concerning China, Slovaks' **most negative feelings are** about China's **impact on the global environment**, followed by China's **military power** and its **impact on democracy** in other countries. The only aspect of China where Slovaks are generally more positive is **trade with China** (Figure 5).
- **COVID-19** has been identified as linked to China (Figure 4), yet almost half the population sees China as helping to deal with the pandemic. A similar share of respondents saw EU as helping to deal with the spread of the virus (Figure 15).
- Considerable portions of the Slovak public are **willing to consider various conspiracy theories** about the **origin of COVID-19**. Almost 23% believe that COVID-19 was brought to China by the US military, while 31% think it was intentionally spread by China. Also, 33% think that the virus spread because of Chinese people eating bats and other wild animals (Figure 16).
- Only a **small portion of the Slovak public** believes that the **Chinese position in the world has improved as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic**. 24% of Slovaks think that China has gained economically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and 13% think that China's international reputation improved (Figure 16).

# 1 Feelings towards China and other countries

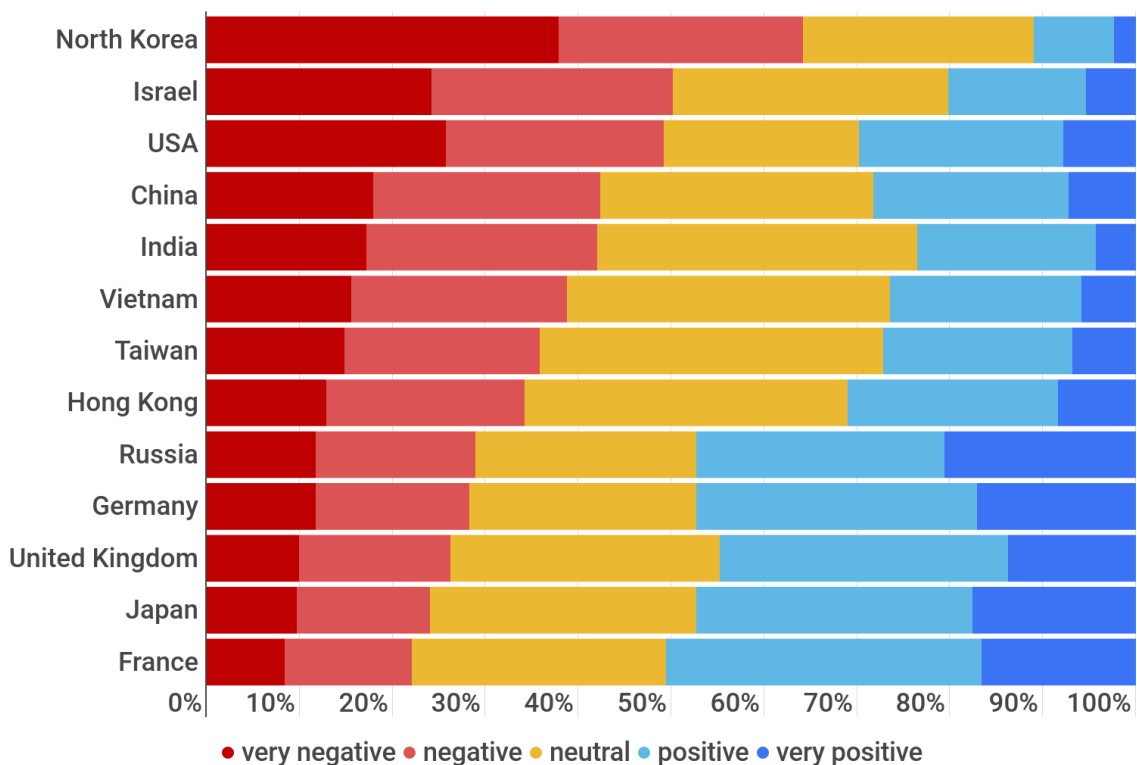
**Figure 1:** Feeling towards China among Slovaks<sup>6</sup>



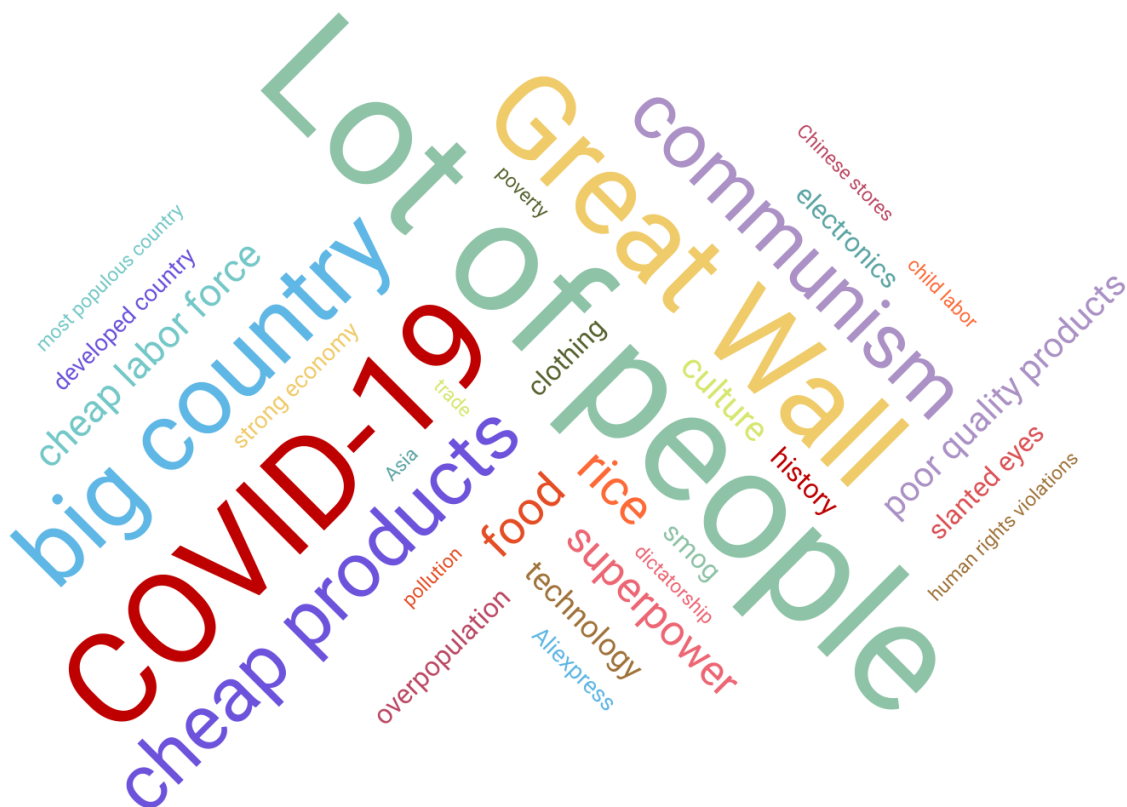
**Figure 2:** Change of feeling towards China among Slovaks in the past three years<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 3:** Feeling towards select countries among Slovaks<sup>8</sup>

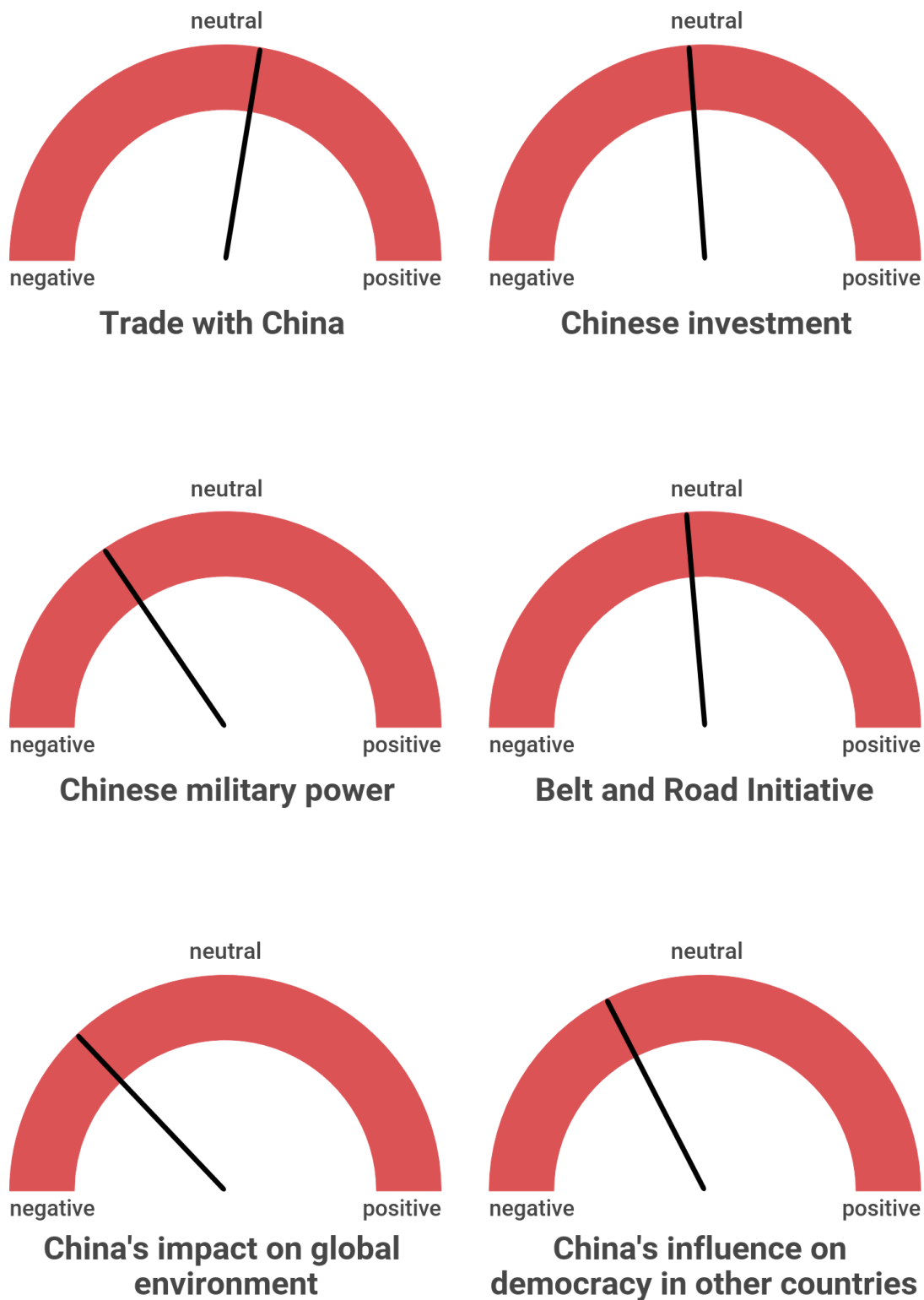


**Figure 4:** What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?<sup>9</sup>



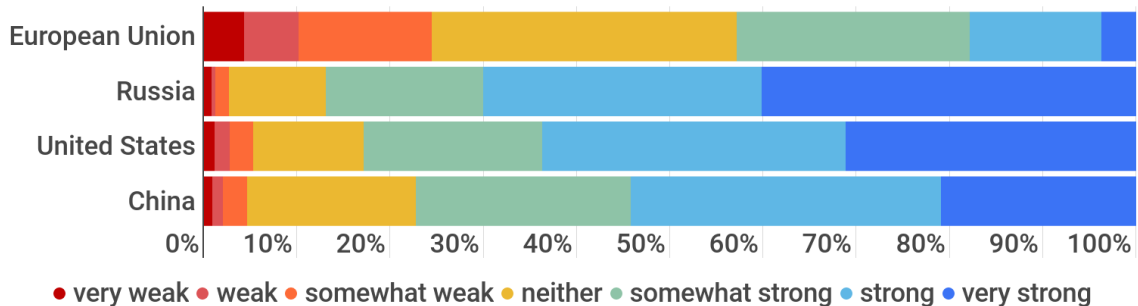


**Figure 5:** Perceptions of certain China-related issues among Slovaks<sup>10</sup>

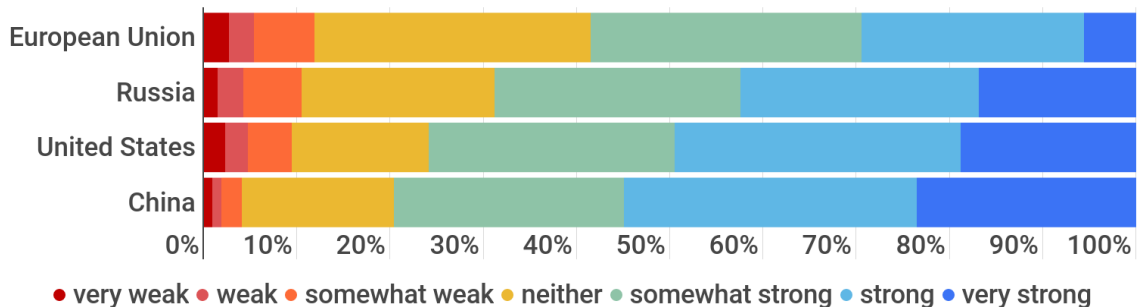


## 2 Comparing the global powers

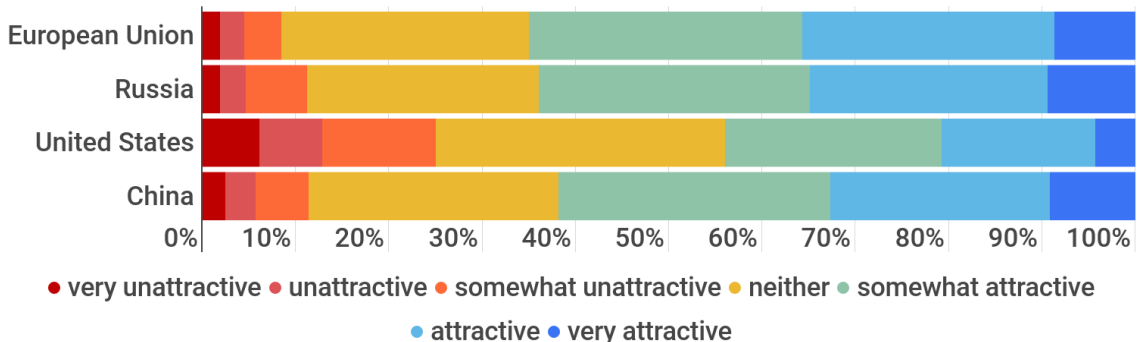
**Figure 6:** How militarily strong do you consider the following countries?



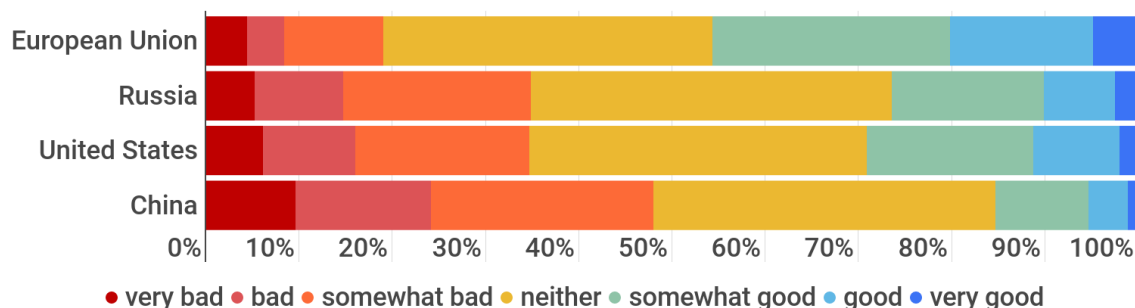
**Figure 7:** How economically strong do you consider the following countries?



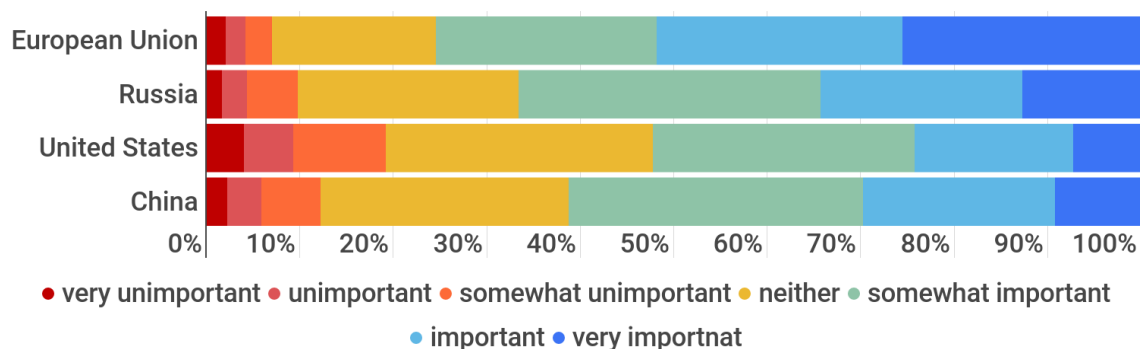
**Figure 8:** How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries?



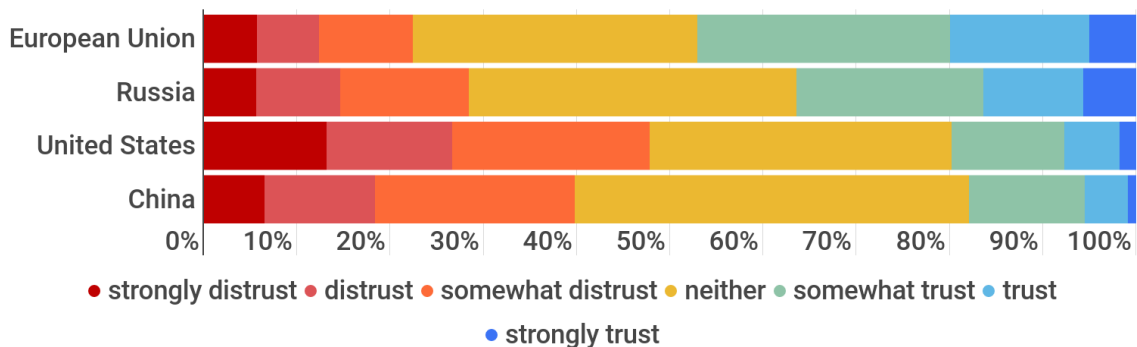
**Figure 9:** How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries?



**Figure 10:** How important are the following countries to the economic development of Slovakia?

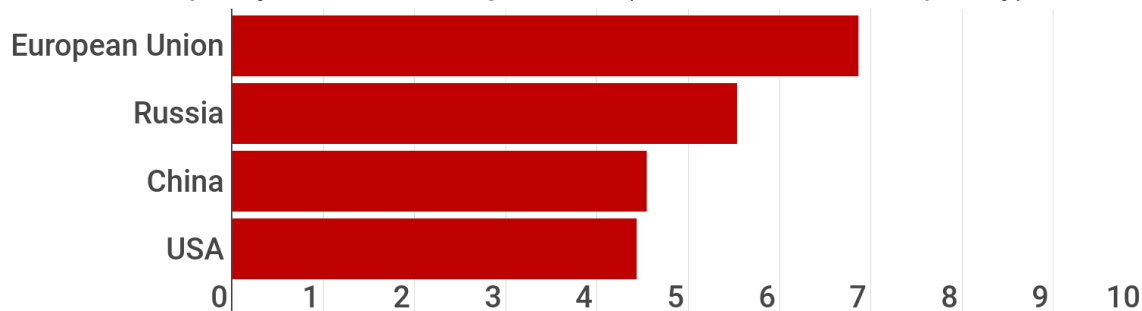


**Figure 11:** How much do you trust the following countries?

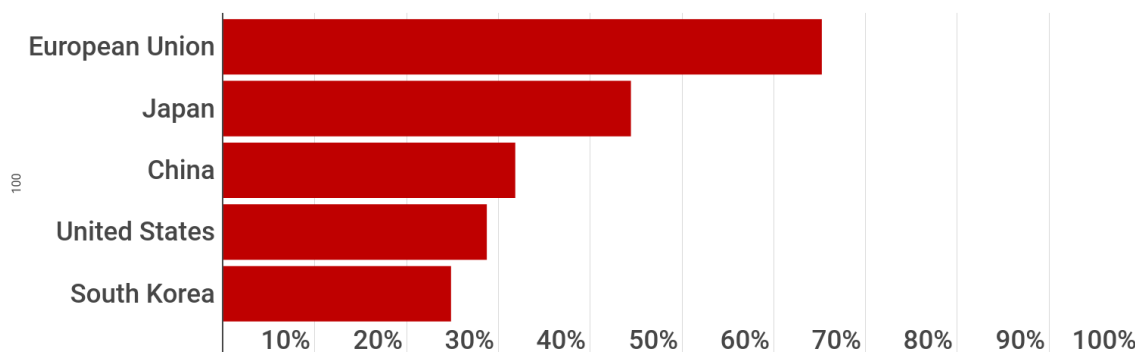


### 3 Slovak foreign policy towards China

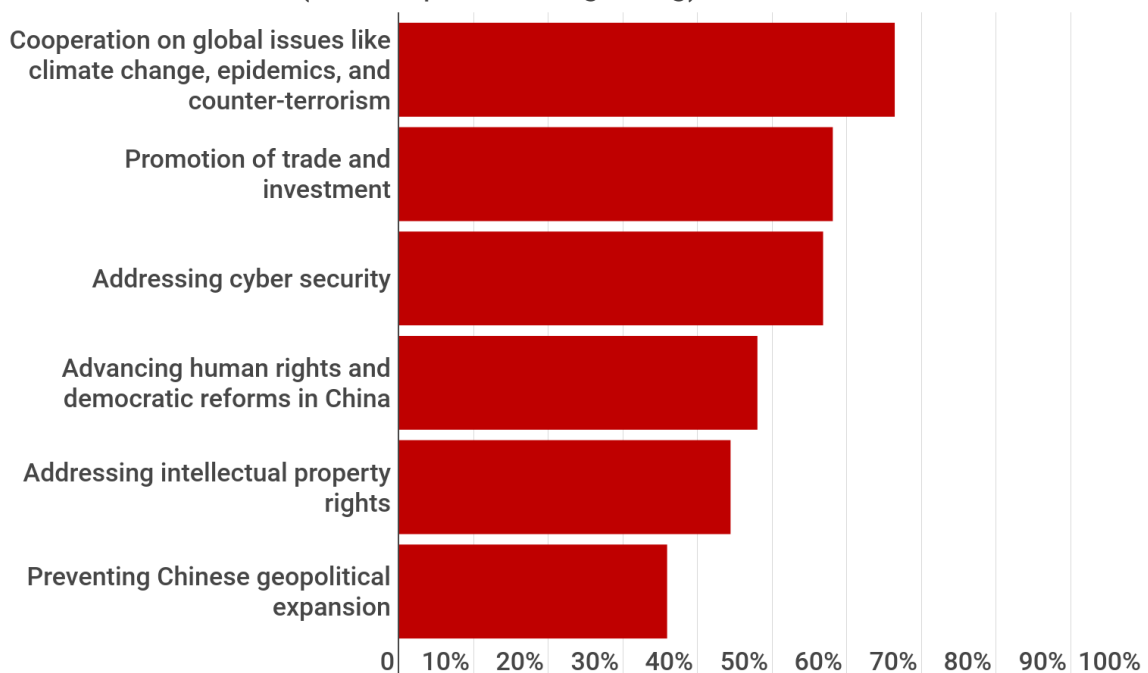
**Figure 12:** How closely should the Slovak foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all; 10=completely)<sup>11</sup>



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

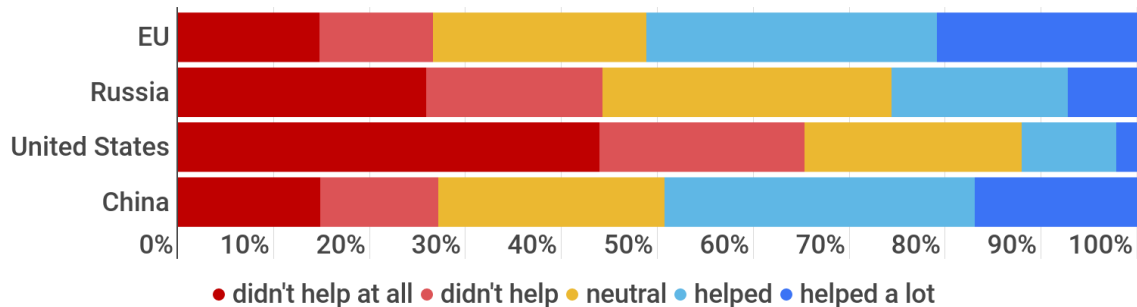


**Figure 14:** What should be the Slovak foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)

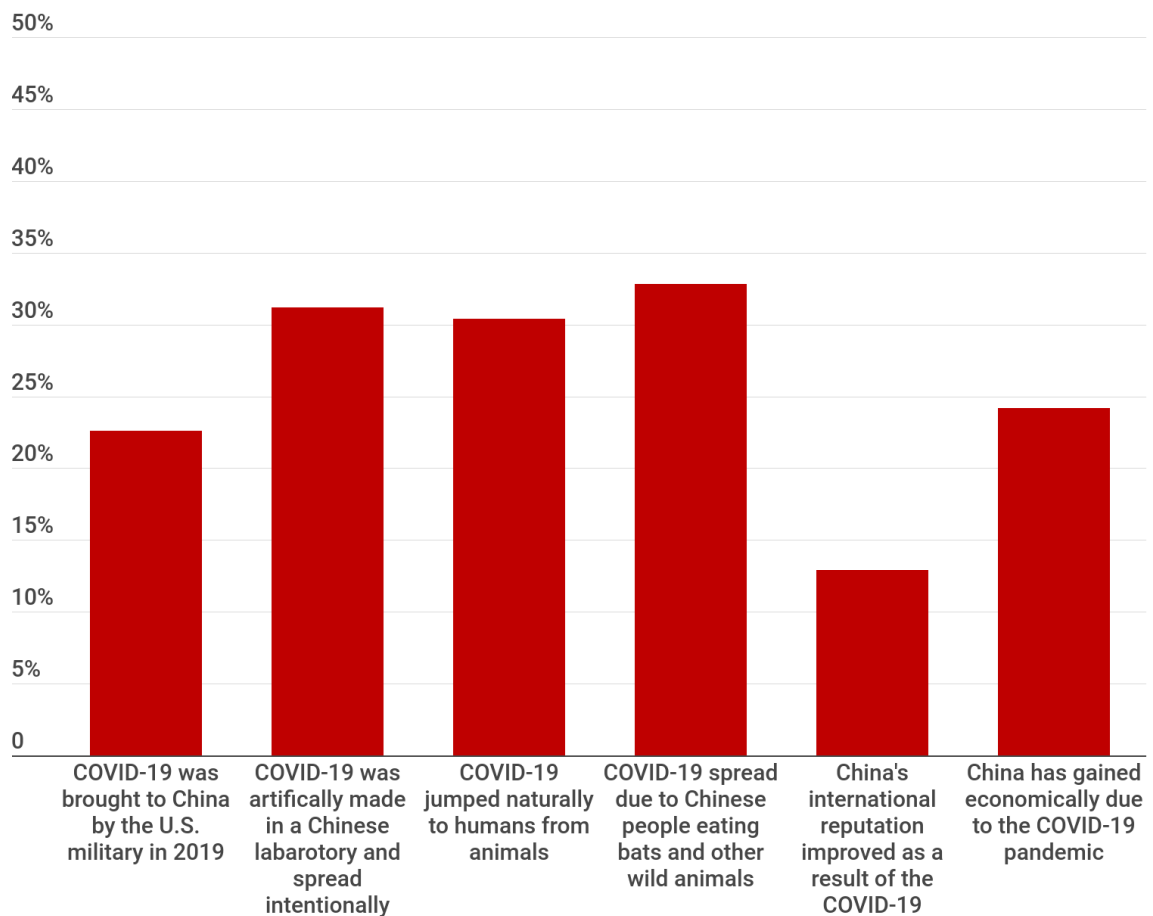


## 4 COVID-19 pandemic

**Figure 15:** How much did the following countries help Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic?<sup>12</sup>

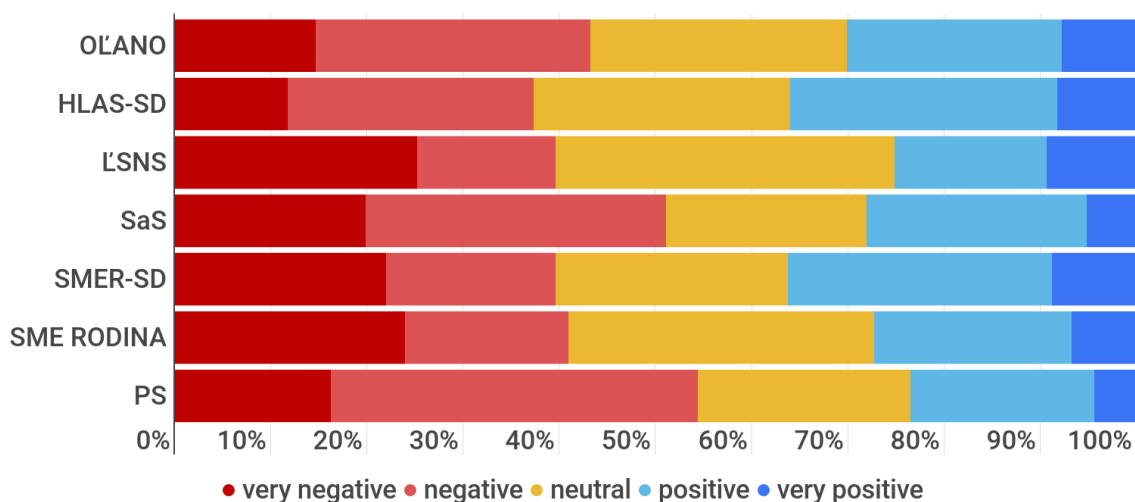


**Figure 16:** Views of Slovaks on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing with the statements)

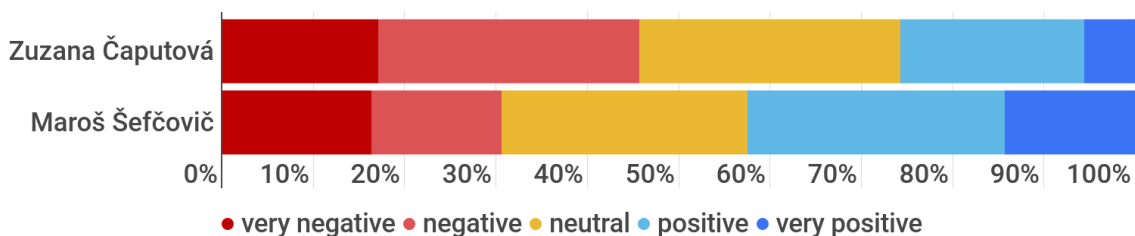


## 5 Views of China & political affiliation

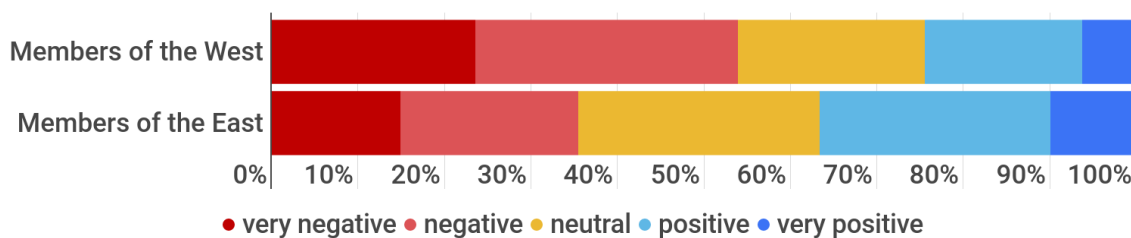
**Figure 17:** Feelings towards China among voters of political parties polling over 5%<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 18:** Feelings towards China according to the respondents' voting preference in the 2019 presidential election<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 19:** Feelings towards China according to respondents' identification with the global West or East<sup>15</sup>



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> N = 1502; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the Slovak 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 between 1 – 25 September 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Cenek, Andrej Findor, Ondrej Buchel, Matej Hruska, Adrian Brona, Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-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
- <sup>4</sup> For a discussion of how political parties in Slovakia approach China see: Šimalčík, Matej, Alžběta Bajerová, Ivana Karásková, Tamás Matura, Agnieszka Ostrowska, Bruno Surdel. 2019. Perception of China among V4 political elites. Bratislava: CEIAS. <https://ceias.eu/perception-of-china-among-v4-political-elites/>.
- <sup>5</sup> European Commission. 2016. Special Eurobarometer 451: Future of Europe. European Commission. 2017. Special Eurobarometer 467: Future of Europe. European Commission. 2018. Special Eurobarometer 479: Future of Europe.
- <sup>6</sup> 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).
- <sup>7</sup> 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.
- <sup>8</sup> Supra note 6 (mutatis mutandis).
- <sup>9</sup> 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.
- <sup>10</sup> 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.
- <sup>11</sup> 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.
- <sup>12</sup> 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).
- <sup>13</sup> Supra note 6 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the political parties are as follows - OĽANO: 206; HLAS-SD: 180; ĽSNS: 139; SaS: 96; SMER-SD: 91; SME RODINA: 88; PS: 68.
- <sup>14</sup> Supra note 6 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the presidential candidates are: Zuzana Čaputová: 609, Maroš Šefčovič: 245.
- <sup>15</sup> Supra note 6 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the options are: members of the West: 483; members of the East: 430. To determine respondent's self-identification with the global West or East, they were asked the question "Do you consider yourself to be part of the West or the

East?”, which was measured on a 0 (West) to 100 (East) scale. The responses were grouped as “members of the West” (0-40), “in-betweeners” (41 -59), and “members of the East” (60-100).



## About authors

**MATEJ ŠIMALČÍK** | Executive Director, CEIAS



simalcik@ceias.eu



@MatejSimalcik

**RICHARD Q. TURCSÁNYI** | Program Director, CEIAS | Senior Researcher,  
Sinophone Borderlands, Palacký University Olomouc



turcsanyi@ceias.eu



@RQTurcsanyi

**KRISTÍNA KIRONSKÁ** | Research Fellow, CEIAS | Senior Researcher,  
Sinophone Borderlands, Palacký University Olomouc



kironska@ceias.eu



@KristinaKi6

**RENÁTA SEDLÁKOVÁ** | Senior Researcher, Sinophone Borderlands,  
Palacký University Olomouc



renata.sedlakova@upol.cz



@sedlakor

## 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.

### Connect with us online:



<https://www.facebook.com/CEIASeu/>



[https://twitter.com/CEIAS\\_eu](https://twitter.com/CEIAS_eu)



[https://www.instagram.com/ceias\\_eu/](https://www.instagram.com/ceias_eu/)



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/ceias-eu/>



<https://www.ceias.eu>



[office@ceias.eu](mailto:office@ceias.eu)

## 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.

### Connect with us online:



<https://www.facebook.com/SinophoneBorderlands>



<https://twitter.com/SinophoneE>



<https://www.sinofon.cz>



[sinofon@upol.cz](mailto:sinofon@upol.cz)

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

**authors:** Matej Šimalčík, Richard Q. Turcsányi, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková

**Editor:** Richard Q. Turcsányi

**Layout and cover design:** Matej Šimalčík

Unauthorized use of the work is a breach of copyright and may be subject to civil, administrative or criminal liability.

### **Published by:**

Palacký University Olomouc  
Křížkovského 8, 771 47 Olomouc, Czechia  
[www.vydavatelstvi.upol.cz](http://www.vydavatelstvi.upol.cz)  
[www.e-shop.upol.cz](http://www.e-shop.upol.cz)  
[vup@upol.cz](mailto:vup@upol.cz)

Central European Institute of Asian Studies  
Murgašova 2, 811 04 Bratislava, Slovakia  
[www.ceias.eu](http://www.ceias.eu)  
[office@ceias.eu](mailto:office@ceias.eu)

© Authors

© Palacký University Olomouc, 2020

© Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020

ISBN: 978-80-971575-7-9



ISBN 978-80-971575-7-9