

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

Facing COVID-19's negative impact

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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 a research sample representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density.² Here, we focus on the **Spanish portion of the polling**, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.³
- Amid the pandemic, a **relative majority of the Spanish population has expressed negative views on China** (43% negative, 29.8% positive, 27.2% neutral) as well as the **degradation of their perceptions** of the Asian country **in the past three years**, in line with a similar dynamic among other surveyed EU countries (*Figure 1 & Figure 2*). China appears as **one of the most negatively-perceived countries** in Spain, but negative perceptions of China do not score far above those of the U.S. At the same time, the share of positive views on the US remains 8 percentage points higher. This suggests that a considerable part of Spanish society still holds neutral views of China, while Spaniards are more divided between the positive and negative views when it comes to the U.S. (*Figure 3*).
- Worsening views of China are a recent trend and likely to be a result of being the origin of the new coronavirus. **COVID-19 is by far the most common association** which comes to the minds of most Spaniards, with other associations appearing often being **large population, Communism, and technology** (*Figure 4*).
- Triangulation of the survey data with that of other polls suggests that other significant international China-related issues, namely the US-China trade war and technological competition or China's activities in Hong Kong, have only been secondary factors of the degradation of China's image in Spain. Even as a vast majority of Spaniards (76%) have expressed worries about US-China tensions,⁴ data from the survey shows that globally, this has not translated into negative perceptions over trade with China or Chinese investment. Spaniards also maintain **positive perceptions of Chinese technology** and are **relatively neutral**

when it comes to **cooperation with Chinese companies on 5G**, although they express a **higher preference to cooperate** with the companies from the **EU and Japan** (Figure 14). This may suggest a limited impact of the debates and risks associated with the US-China technological competition on the image of China in Spain.

- In contrast, data from our survey (Figure 19), as well as from the YouGov Cambridge Globalism project,⁵ show that Spaniards are **highly critical of China's early management and responsibility in the COVID-19 outbreak**. Also, the significant gap between the share of respondents whose perceptions of China have worsened (41.6%) and those whose perception improved (17.1%) (Figure 2) contrasts with the **relatively stable or resilient image of China before the pandemic**. Data from the Eurobarometer shows no increase of Spanish negative perceptions of China between 2017 and 2018, i.e. after the start of the US-China trade war.⁶ Similarly, the Barometer of the Elcano Royal Institute has registered a stable valuation of China (5 points out of ten compared to a 5.02 points average over the 2012-2020 period) until early 2020.⁷ Data from the Pew Research Center provides a more nuanced picture. It reveals an increase of negative Spanish perceptions of China from 2017 to 2019 (from 43% to 53%), but it also confirms that the **bulk of the degradation** (from 53% to 63%) has taken place at an **accelerated rate between 2019 and summer of 2020**.⁸
- As for Hong Kong, the elaboration and adoption of the national security law and the related mass civil protests, have gathered significant media coverage in the Spanish media, highly critical of China. But data from our survey suggest this may have had only a limited impact on Spanish perceptions of China. **Support for Hong Kong autonomy**, for instance, **remains rather limited** (27.9% agree, 21.7 % disagree) and Spaniards express neutral attitudes towards Hong Kong people (with an average score of 54.99%), without any special sympathy compared to other groups like Taiwanese (54.82) Russians (53.52), or even Chinese (53.91), while Tibetans (57.78) or Americans (58.01) score slightly more positively. It is very likely that the **development in Hong Kong remains secondary** in Spain, and is **determined through the prism of the independence of Catalonia**. Cross-tabulation suggests that **opposition**

to a referendum on Catalonia's autonomy is a determining factor of Spaniard positioning on the **autonomy of Hong Kong**, but also the **self-determination of Tibet** (Figure 21 & Figure 22).

- Increasingly negative perceptions of China do not apply to people-to-people exchanges and Chinese citizens. Spaniards hold **positive perceptions of Chinese students, Chinese tourists, and the Chinese community overall**, while they have **negative views on Chinese politicians** (Figure 6).
- Spaniards hold a **slightly positive view of the trade with China, neutral view of Chinese investments**, and lean towards negative sentiments on other issues including Belt and Road Initiative, and especially China's impact on the global environment, Chinese military power, and China's influence on democracy in other countries (Figure 5).
- The **top policy priorities** towards China as seen by the Spanish public include **addressing cyber-security** (68.9% of respondents) and **cooperation on global issues** like climate change (68.6%) (Figure 15). However, it is likely that these **do not indicate a genuine inclination for cooperation with China**, but rather that they arise as a necessity due to concerns over China's impact on the global environment and cyberattacks coming from China (Figure 5). **Advancing human rights and democratic reform in China is another policy priority**, echoing largely negative perceptions of the human rights situation in China (Figure 10) and concerns about its influence on democracy in other countries (Figure 5). Preventing China's geopolitical expansion is the least preferred policy priority.
- China is recognized as a **powerful international actor on par with the U.S.** It is ranked similarly to the U.S. and Russia in terms of military capacities, significantly above the EU (Figure 7). It is also considered as the **global economic and technological power** roughly on par with the U.S (Figure 8). As such, China's importance for the Spanish economy is seen again similar to the U.S., with the EU being the most important in this regard (Figure 11). In terms of cultural attractiveness, China comes second, after the EU and ahead of the U.S. and Russia (Figure 9). However, **China is not**

seen as a trustworthy partner with figures similar to that of Russia, and below that of the U.S., and more significantly that of the EU (*Figure 12*).

- Spaniards display a **clear policy preference for alignment with the European Union**, rather than with the U.S. or China (*Figure 13*). The EU is considered a trustworthy partner in contrast with the other global powers. In terms of the **rollout of 5G, Spanish public opinion favors cooperation with EU companies**, ahead of the cooperation with the Japanese companies. Cooperation with Chinese companies is favored about the same as the cooperation with the U.S. companies (*Figure 14*).
- These **EU-friendly preferences** also apply to **China policy** as the majority of respondents (50.7%) advocates for a **policy framed at the EU-level** rather than at the national one (*Figure 15*).
- Importantly, China's image differs between voters of traditional parties (PSOE and PP) and Unidas Podemos, which hold more positive perceptions of China, and voters from Ciudadanos (54), Vox (55.4%), and the Republican Left of Catalonia (58.6), whose negative perceptions all score above 50% of respondents. However, the share of negative perceptions remains superior among all the main Spanish parties, except for PSOE voters (38.4% positive, 38% negative) (*Figure 20*).
- China's **assistance amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been acknowledged by almost half the population** (48.8%). It scores well below the EU's assistance (66%) but far above that of the United States (19.7%) (*Figure 18*). Cross tabulation reveals that positive perceptions of Chinese assistance are more often associated with a positive image of the country) which suggests that **Chinese public diplomacy may have partly achieved a damage control objective**. At the same time, it has **failed to decouple the pandemic from its outbreak in China** as more than 40% of the respondents have directly linked COVID-19 with an intentional (41%) release from a Chinese laboratory (*Figure 19*).

1 Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1: Feeling towards China among Spanish respondents⁹

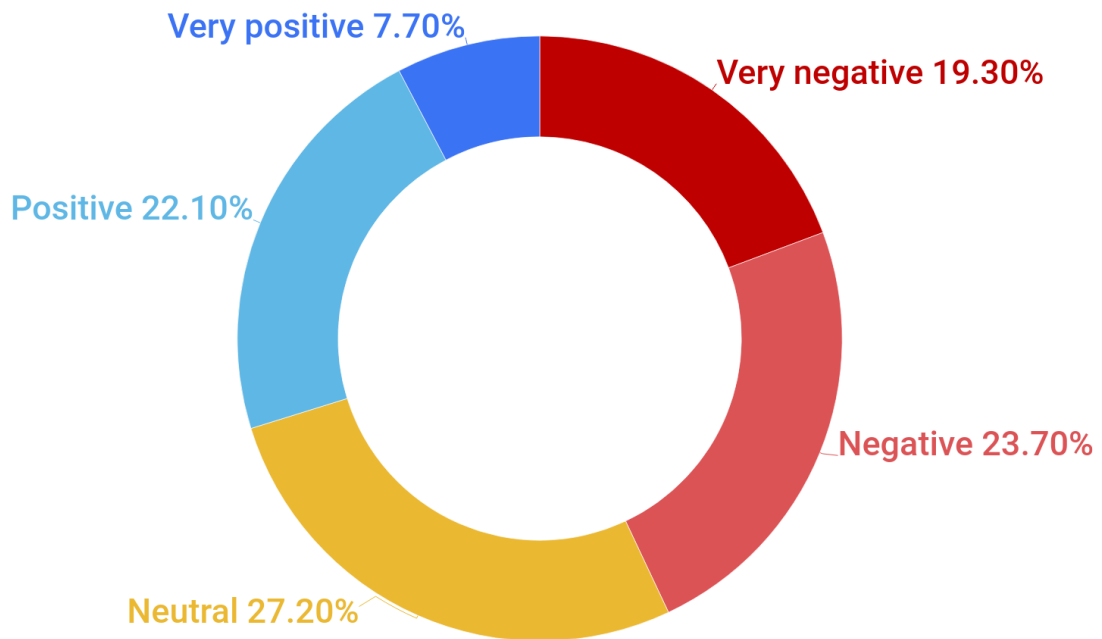


Figure 2: Change of feeling towards China among Spanish respondents in the past three years¹⁰

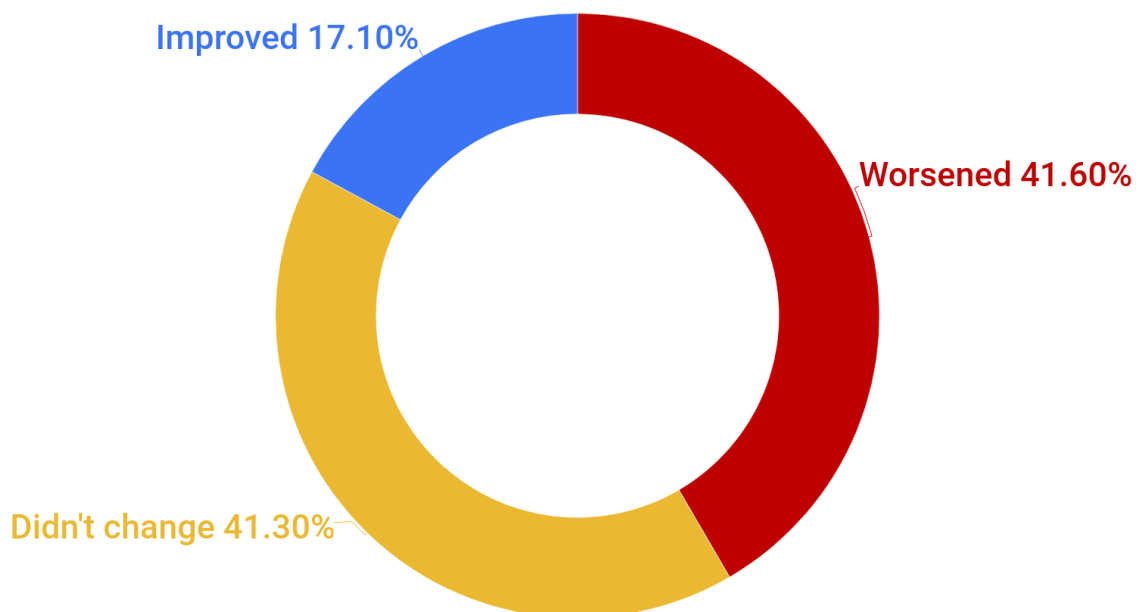


Figure 3: Feeling towards select countries among Spanish respondents¹¹

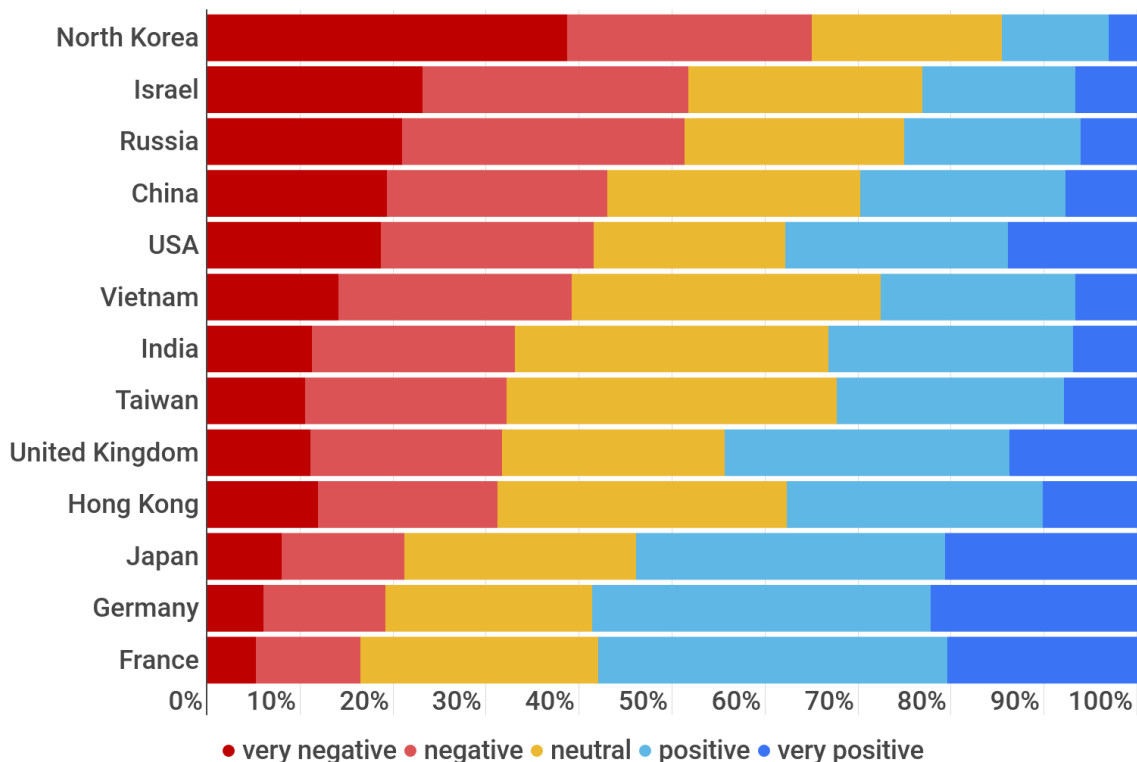


Figure 4: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?¹²



Figure 5: Perceptions of certain China-related issues among Spanish respondents¹³

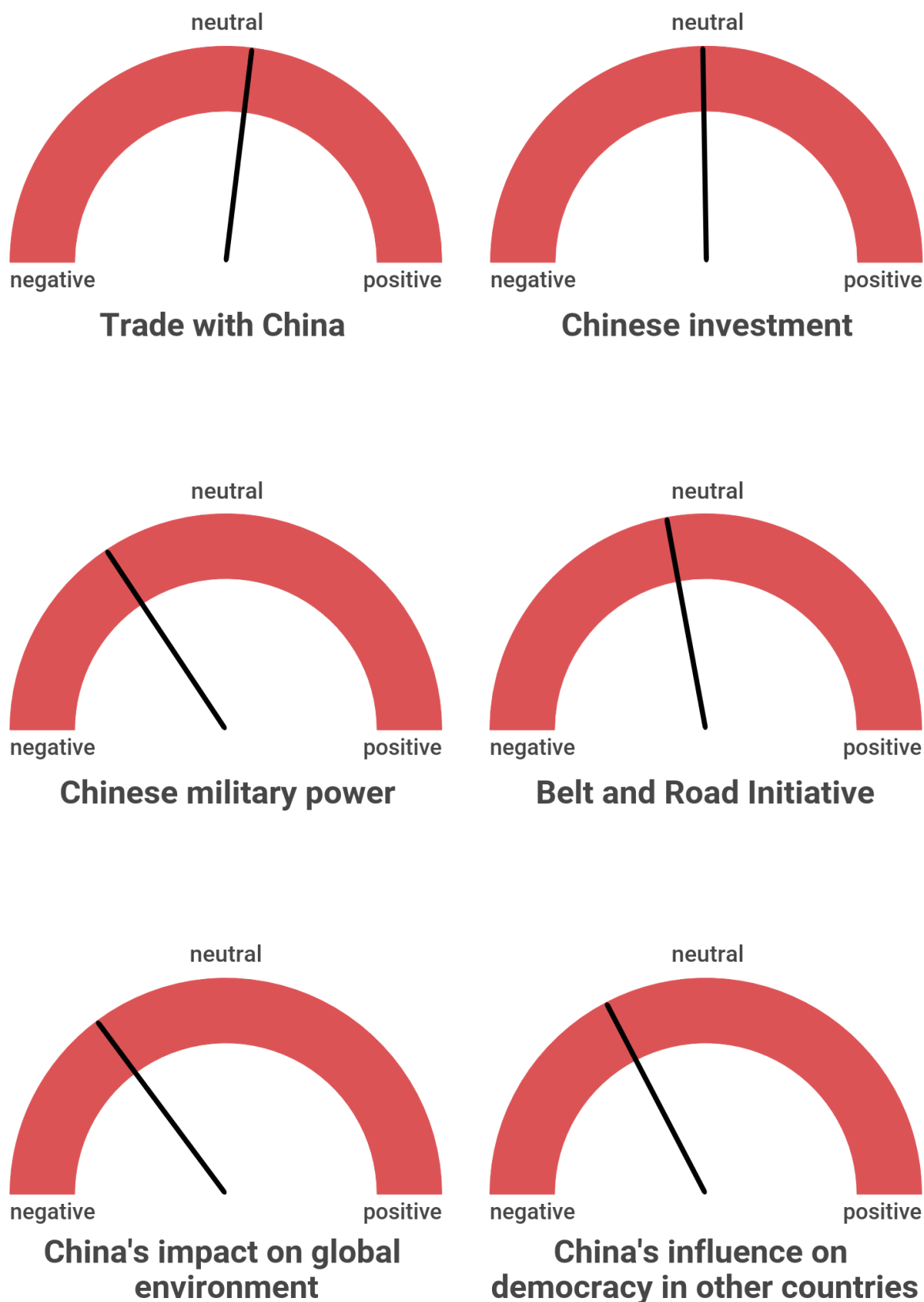
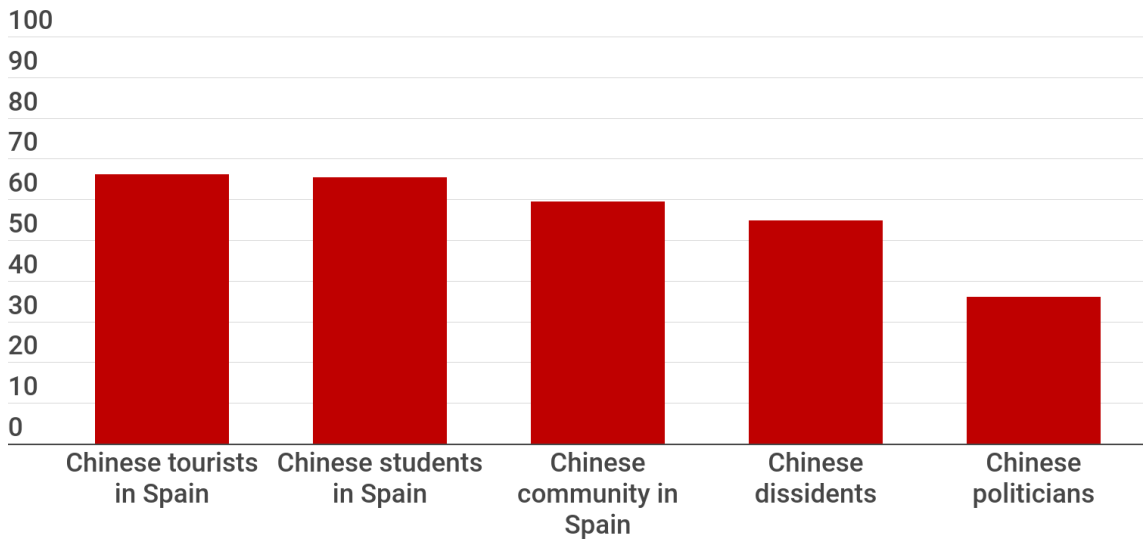


Figure 6: Feelings towards Chinese people among Spanish respondents¹⁴



2 Comparing the global powers

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

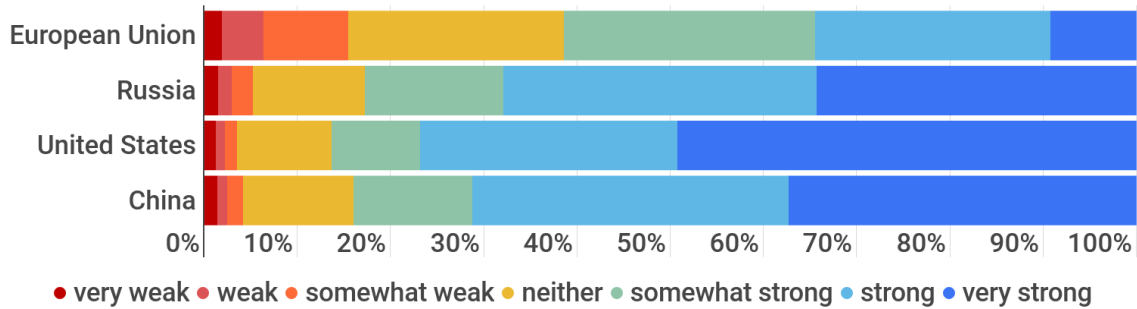


Figure 8: How economically strong do you consider the following countries/entities?

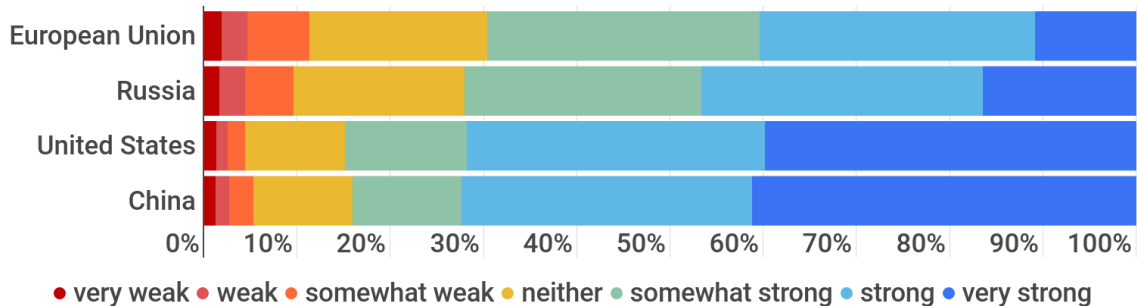


Figure 9: How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries/entities?

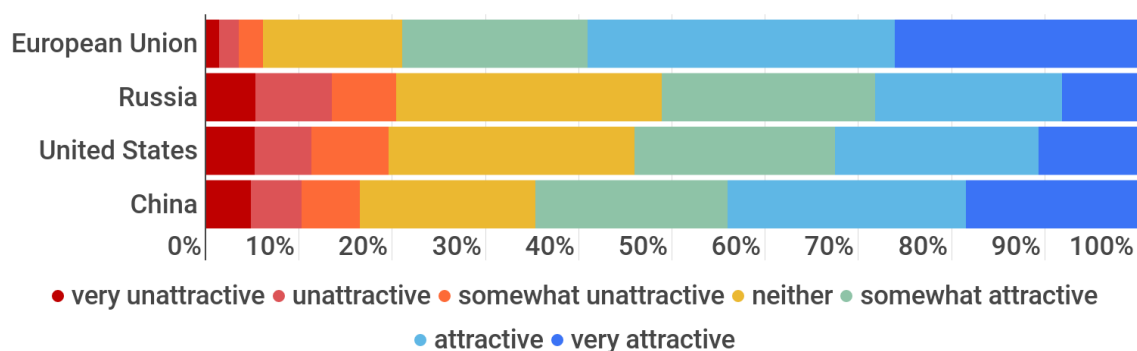


Figure 10: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?

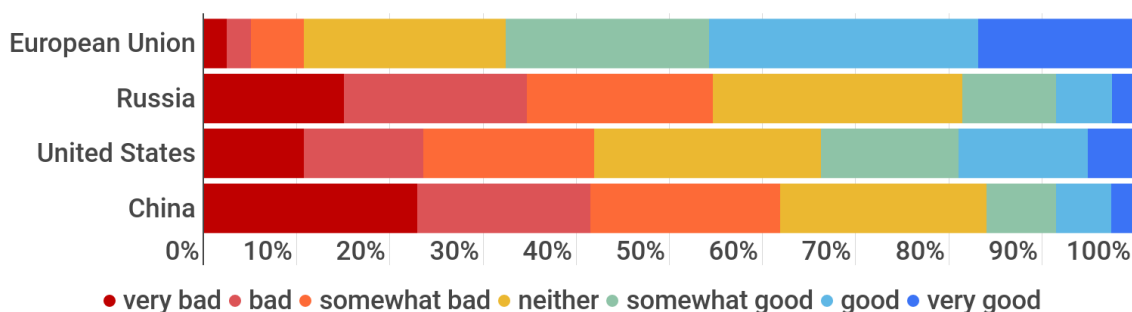


Figure 11: How important are the following countries/entities to the economic development of Spain?

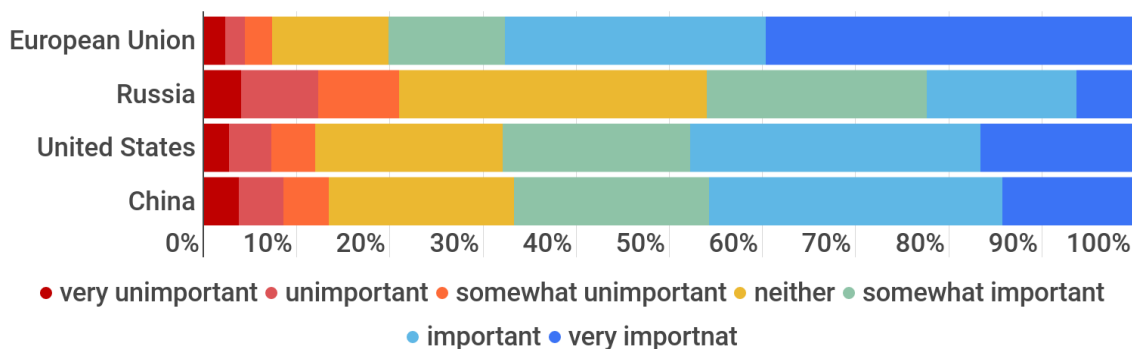
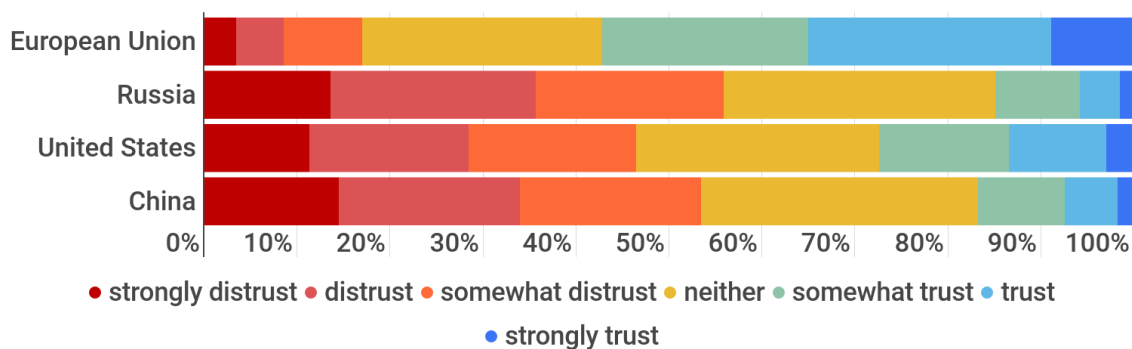


Figure 12: How much do you trust the following countries/entities?



3 Spanish foreign policy towards China

Figure 13: How closely should Spanish foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all; 10=completely)¹⁵

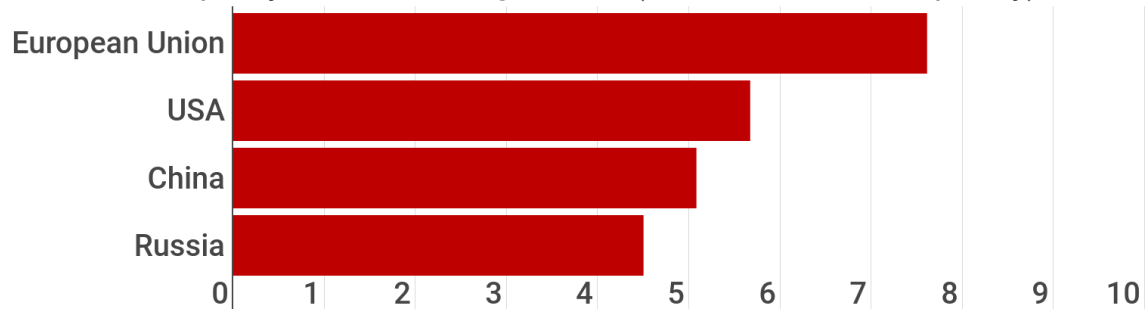


Figure 14: Should Spain cooperate with the following countries in building its 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)

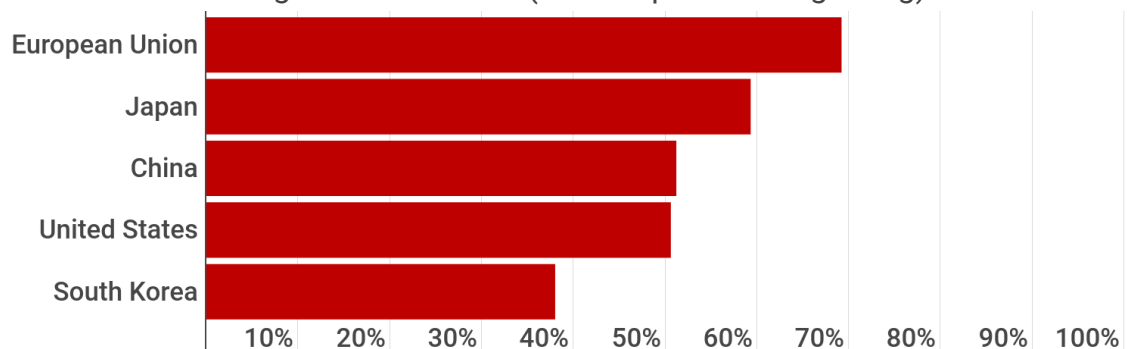


Figure 15: What should be Spanish foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)

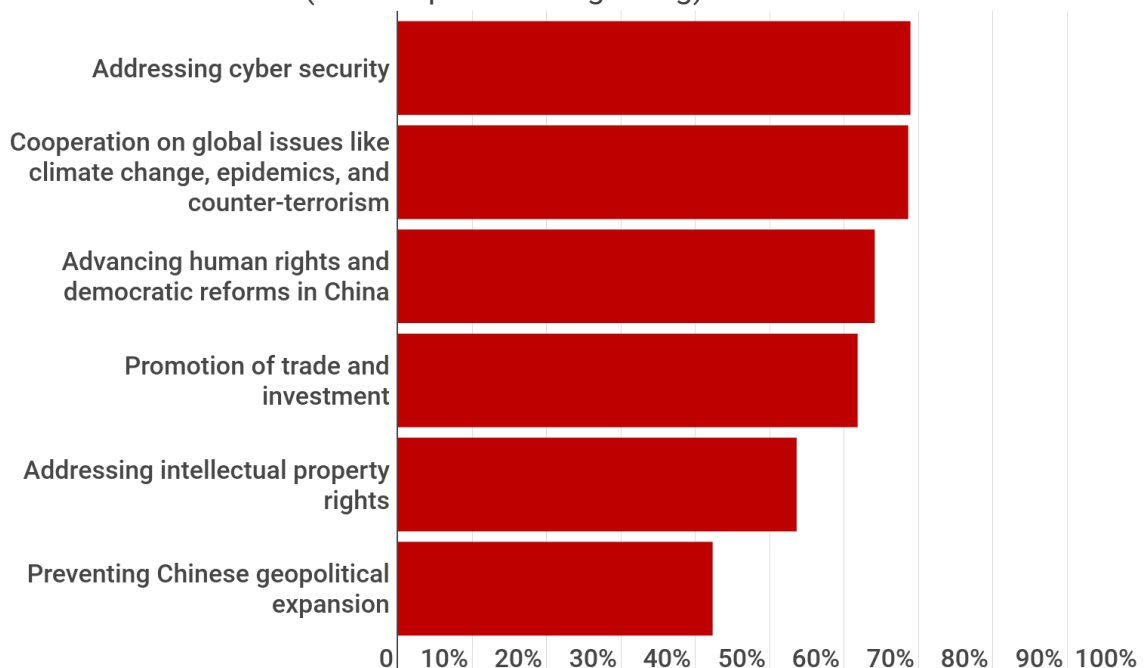


Figure 16: Should Spain pursue its own strategy towards China or contribute to an EU China strategy?

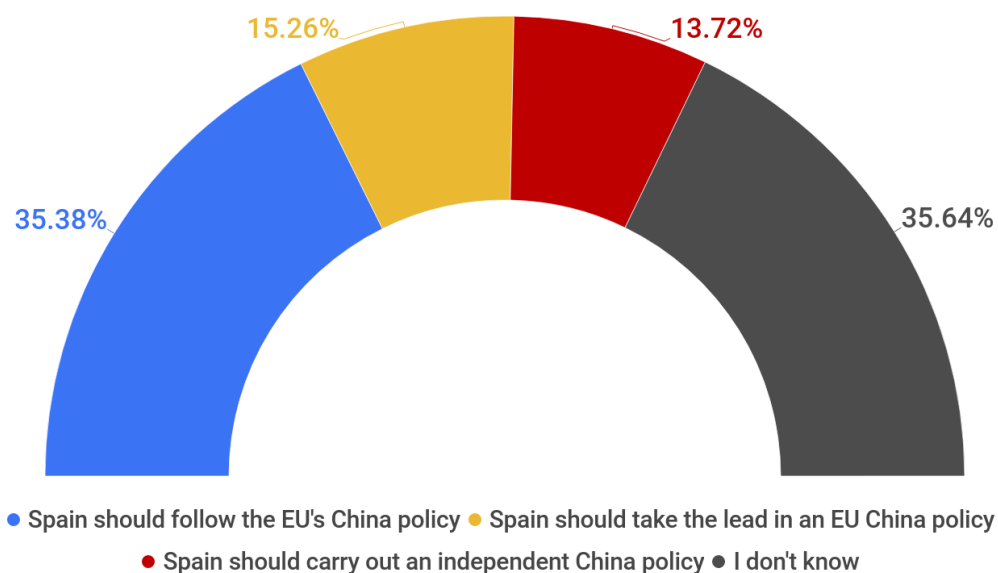
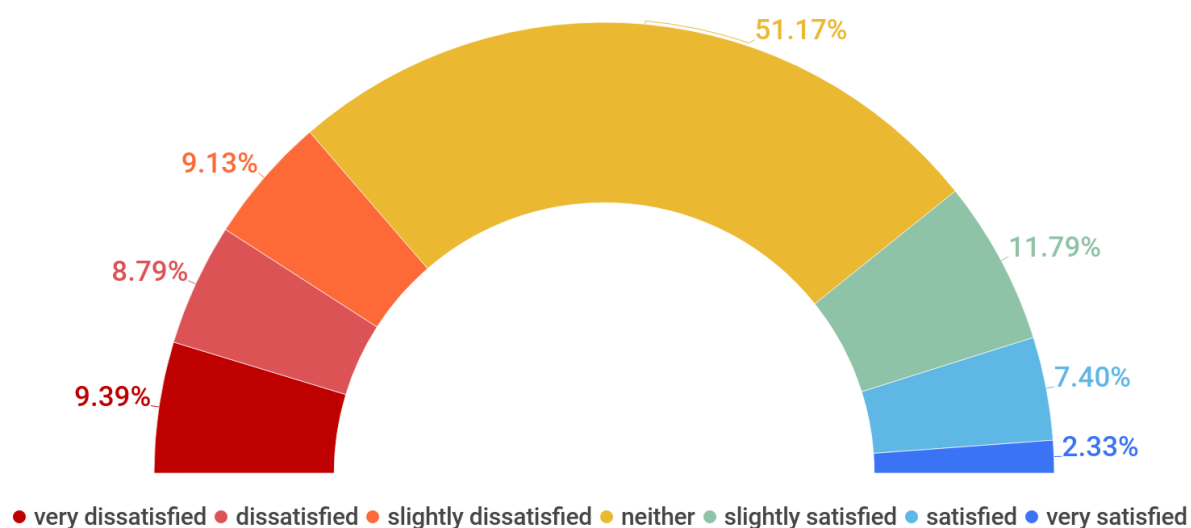


Figure 17: Satisfaction of Spanish respondents with their government's policy towards China



4 COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 18: How much did the following countries/entities help Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic?¹⁶

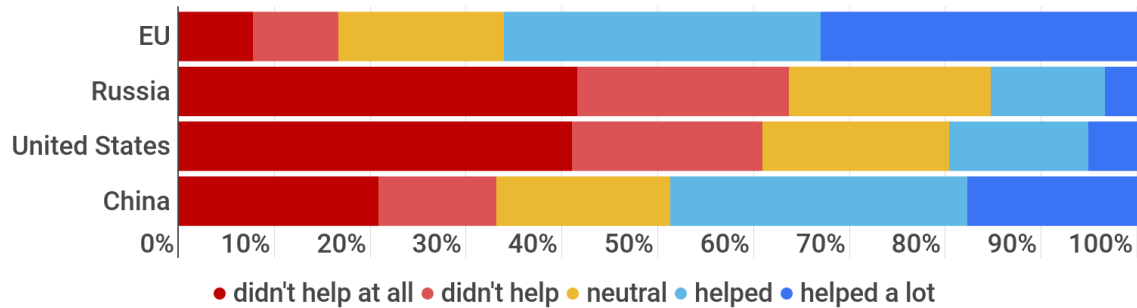
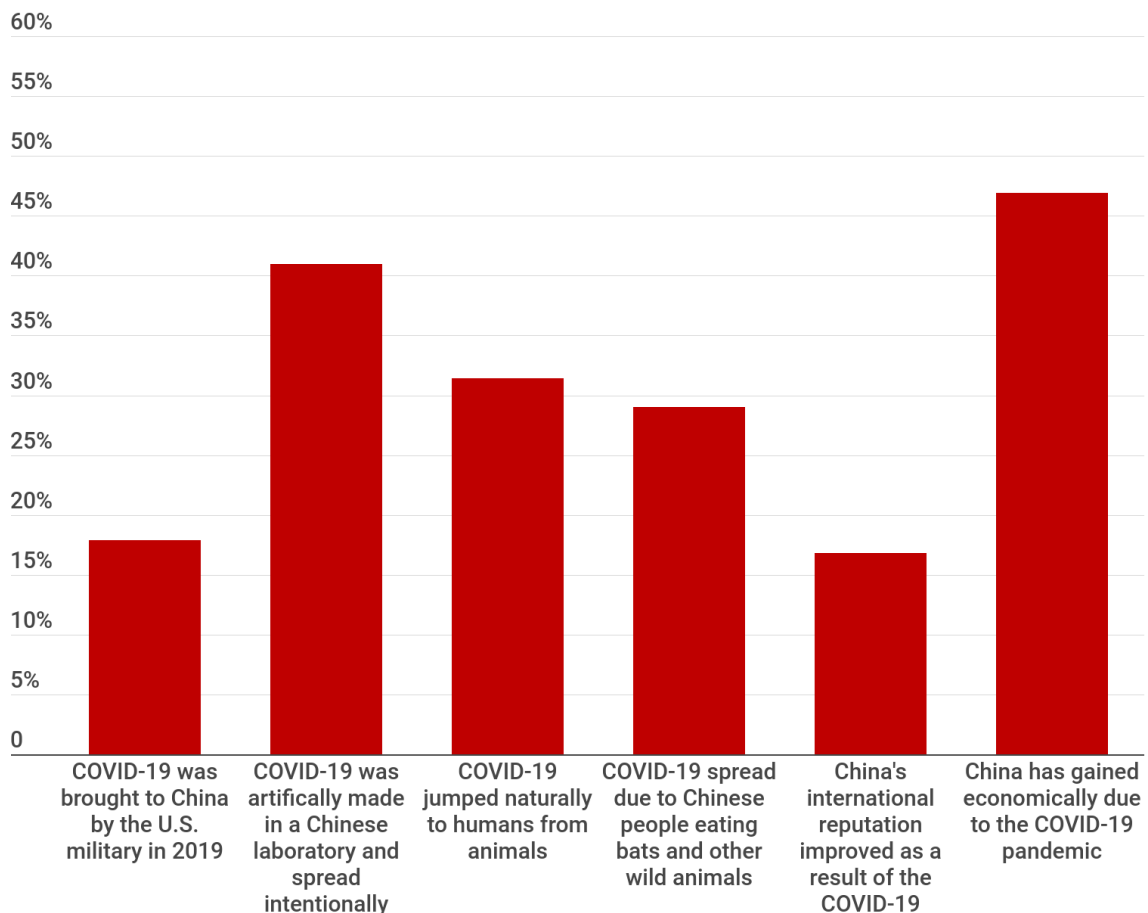


Figure 19: Spanish views on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)



5 Views of China & political affiliation

Figure 20: Feelings on China among voters of political parties polling over 5%¹⁷

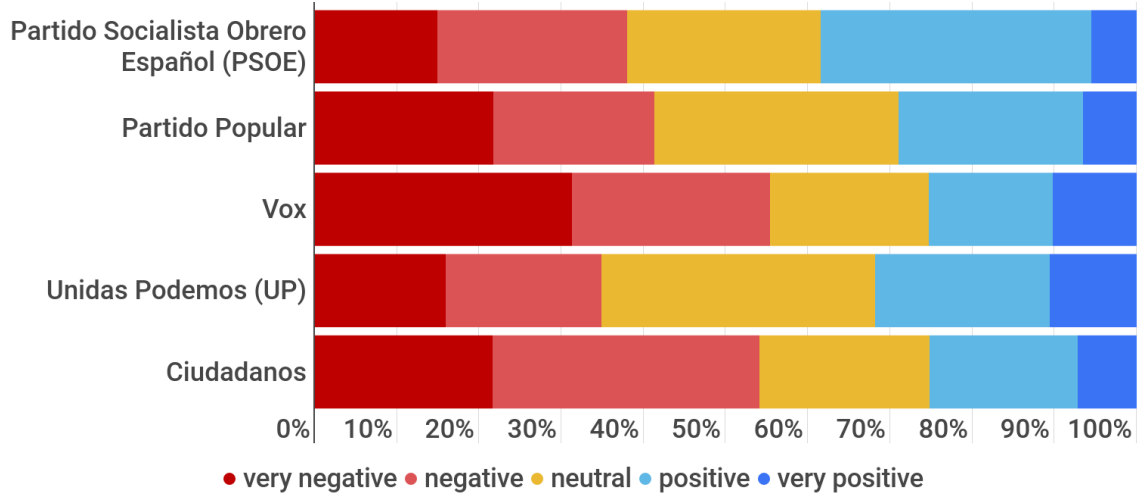


Figure 21: Support for the autonomy of Hong Kong among Spanish respondents according to their support of the independence referendum for Catalonia¹⁸

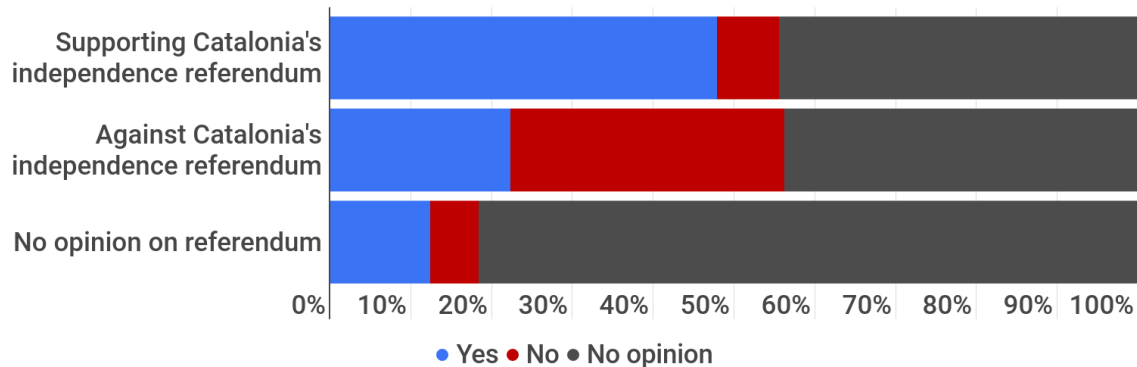
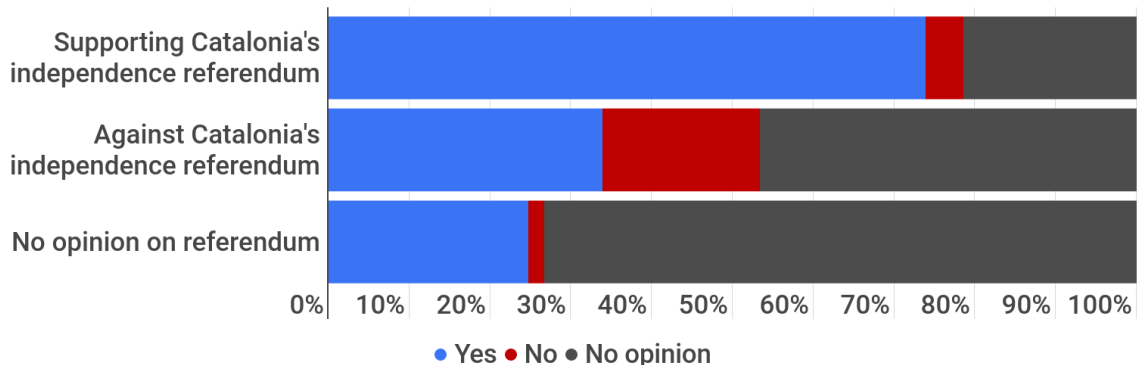


Figure 22: Support for self-determination of Tibet among Spanish respondents according to their support of independence referendum for Catalonia¹⁹



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 Spanish population from age 18 to 70 with respect to gender, age, education, settlement 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 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
- ⁴ Survey: *Europe's view of China and the US-Chinese conflict* (2020). Bertelsmann Stiftung. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/eupinions_China_DA_EN.pdf#page=6.
- ⁵ YouGov Cambridge Globalism 2020 survey. <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/tw9r0y4ji9/Globalism2020%20Guardian%20COVID%20China%20Attitudes.pdf#page=3>.
- ⁶ European Commission (2017). *Special Eurobarometer 467: Future of Europe*. European Commission (2018). *Special Eurobarometer 479: Future of Europe*.
- ⁷ Barómetro del Real Instituto Elcano. March 2020. http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/a7051e66-9052-4543-9fb3-0112a48e4c82/41BRIE_Informe_Abril2020.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=a7051e66-9052-4543-9fb3-0112a48e4c82#page=6.
- ⁸ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, Christine Huanfg (2020). *Unfavorable views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.
- ⁹ 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).
- ¹⁰ 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.
- ¹¹ Supra note 9 (mutatis mutandis).
- ¹² 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.
- ¹³ Feelings towards China-related issues have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each characteristic.
- ¹⁴ Feelings towards Chinese people have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The chart shows the mean value for each characteristic.

- ¹⁵ 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.
- ¹⁶ 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).
- ¹⁷ Supra note 9 (*mutatis mutandis*). N-values of the political parties are as follows: Partido Socialista Obrero Español - 255, Partido Popular - 138, Vox - 166, Unidas Podemos - 132, Ciudadanos - 111.
- ¹⁸ N-values for the categories of respondents according to support for the Catalonia independence referendum: Supporting Catalonia's independence referendum - 429, Against Catalonia's independence referendum - 821, No opinion on referendum - 251.
- ¹⁹ Supra note 18.

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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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