



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

An unyielding alliance?

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Contents

Summary	2
1 Feelings towards China and other countries.....	6
2 Comparing the global powers.....	9
3 Serbian foreign policy towards China	11
4 COVID-19 pandemic	12
5 Views of China & political affiliation.....	13
Endnotes.....	14
About authors	15
About CEIAS	16
About Sinophone Borderlands.....	17

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 Serbian portion of the polling, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.³
- The Serbian public has a **decisively positive view of China**, with more than 60% of respondents reporting a positive or very positive view (*Figure 1*). The rest are split almost equally into those who are neutral and those who have negative or very negative views. Furthermore, almost half of the respondents stated that their **view of China has improved** over the past three years, and only around 16% that it worsened, with the rest stating that it stayed the same (*Figure 2*).
- Compared to the other countries included in the survey, **China is among the most positively viewed foreign countries** in Serbia, surpassed only by Russia and, perhaps surprisingly, Japan in the second place (*Figure 3*). On the other end of the scale, the Serbian public has **the most negative views** on North Korea, followed by the USA and the UK. These results make Serbia significantly different from the other surveyed European countries.
- Although **COVID-19** is among **the most common themes associated with China**, the survey shows that the most common first association with China for Serbians is that it has **"lots of people"** (*Figure 4*). Other frequent associations include **"Great Wall"** and **"big country"**, but also **"communism"** and **"cheap products"**. However, it should be noted that the latter two expressions do not necessarily carry negative connotations - Serbia has a socialist past that arguably had prosperous periods in terms of the country's economy and international standing, and also China's cheap products were highly appreciated as being affordable during the economic crisis of the 1990s and early 2000s.⁴

- The Serbian public has **generally positive views on** various aspects of China's international standing and cooperation, such as **trade, investments, military power, and the Belt and Road Initiative** (Figure 5). Even in the issues related to **the environment and political freedom**, which tend to be divisive in EU-China relations, the Serbian public has **only slightly negative** perceptions of China's impact on the global environment and influence on democracy in other countries.
- A **comparison with other global powers indicates China's capacities** in the eyes of the Serbian public: its perceived globally leading **economic strength** (Figure 7) and its **military power** that is seen as second only to that of Russia and parallel to that of the US (Figure 6). When it comes to social factors, Russia is seen as possessing the most **attractive culture** (Figure 8), and the US is the least attractive, with China and the EU in between. In terms of **human rights, China ranks the worst**, slightly behind the US, followed by Russia and then the EU, which is seen as the best in this area (Figure 9).
- The Serbian public sees **China, Russia, and the EU as the most important global powers for Serbia's development**, far above the US (Figure 10). However, the trust in Russia and China is far higher than that in the EU (Figure 11). In terms of **aligning Serbia's foreign policy with global powers**, the majority of respondents think the priority should be given to Russia, then China and the EU, and then finally the US (Figure 12).
- In terms of specific **foreign policy priorities** in Sino-Serbian relations, more than two-thirds of the respondents believe these should be **cooperation on global issues**, such as climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism, and **promoting trade and investment** (Figure 13). About half the respondents would support addressing intellectual property rights, cybersecurity, and human rights and political issues as priorities in Sino-Serbian bilateral relations. On the other hand, less than one third think that Serbia should focus on preventing China's geopolitical expansion.
- When asked about **cooperation on building the 5G network**, about half of the respondents think Serbia should cooperate with Japan, China, or the

EU. Only around one third would support cooperation with US or South Korean companies (*Figure 14*).

- The above noted pronounced general improvement of the Serbian public's view on China is likely connected to our finding that a vast majority of the respondents think **China helped Serbia the most with the COVID-19 pandemic** - more than 80% feel China helped, and more than 60% that it helped a lot (*Figure 15*). Russia is perceived as the second most helpful global power, with only around half of the respondents thinking the EU helped Serbia with COVID-19.
- When it comes to the **origin of COVID-19**, the survey found **there is no strongly prevailing opinion** in the Serbian public. Around 30% of the respondents agree with the current scientific consensus that the virus jumped naturally to humans from animals (*Figure 16*). However, a similar percentage believe different conspiracy theories - slightly over 30% that it was made artificially in a Chinese lab and spread intentionally and slightly under 30% that it was brought to China by the US military. Around one-fifth of the respondents attribute the spread of the coronavirus in humans to the consumption of bats and other wild animals by the Chinese. Perhaps in line with the view on China's aid, around one-third of the respondents think China's international reputation improved due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A slightly higher percentage think China also gained economically in this situation.
- Out of the respondents who reported their support for a specific political party, **the most positive views are reported among the supporters of the parties that have been in power since the increase in cooperation with China** - the Serbian Progressive Party and the Socialist Party of Serbia - both with around 70% positive and very positive views of China (*Figure 17*). Among a higher number of those who reported their political views are also supporters of two opposition parties - Democratic Party and Enough is Enough - who report slightly under 50% of positive and very positive views. Around one third in both cases see China as negative or very negative, even though the Democratic Party has a strong pro-democracy and pro-EU stance, and the Enough is Enough party firmly advocates promoting Serbia's national interests above all international ties.

- In terms of **ideological alignment**, a much larger percentage of those who see themselves as closer to the East view China as positive or very positive (around 70%) when compared to those identifying more with the West (slightly over one half) (*Figure 18*). Similar percentages are seen with regards to Serbia's communist past (*Figure 19*) - those having a positive view of communism are more likely to have positive views of China.
- Overall, the results of this survey suggest that **Serbia might have an unyielding alliance with China**, with public opinion improving over time and unaffected by views on socio-political issues. When we also take into account the outlined high regard for Russia in both economic and socio-political aspects, this report provides valuable insights for considerations about Serbia's path toward the EU. While the EU is seen as important for Serbia's development, the public seems to trust China and Russia much more, while also seeing these countries more favorably than leading EU countries such as Germany and France. The positive views on China are likely rooted in aspirations for economic cooperation, but perhaps even more importantly - security. The EU is seen as the weakest of the four global powers, especially in terms of military power. In a region of developing economies with long-standing unresolved territorial issues, peace and prosperity seem to be critical concerns for the Serbian public.

1 Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1: Feeling towards China among Serbian respondents⁵

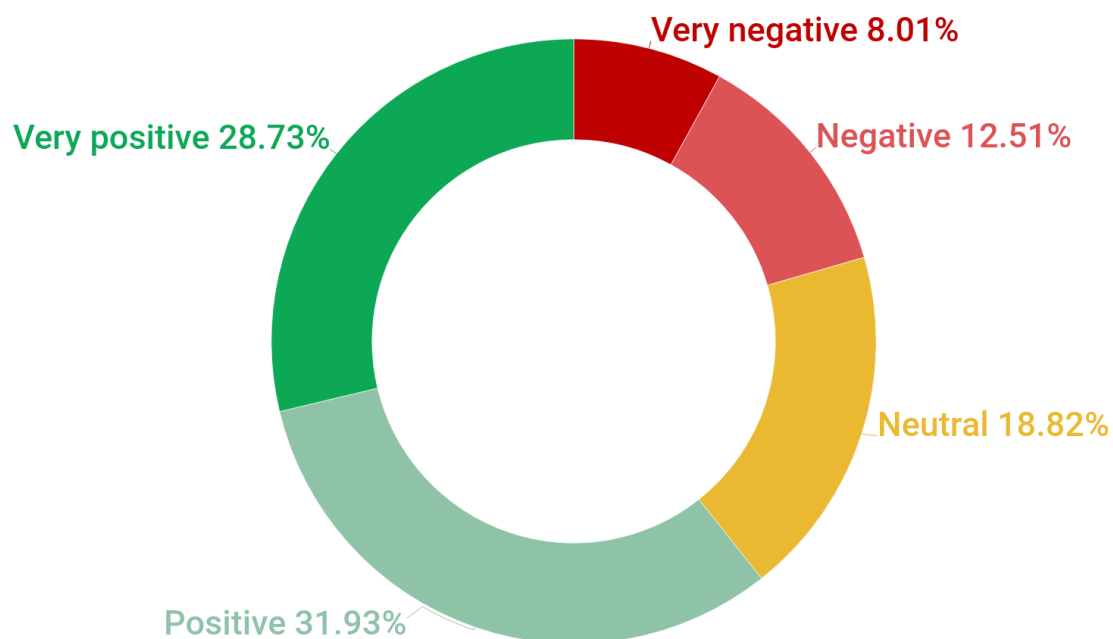


Figure 2: Change of feeling towards China among Serbian respondents in the past three years⁶

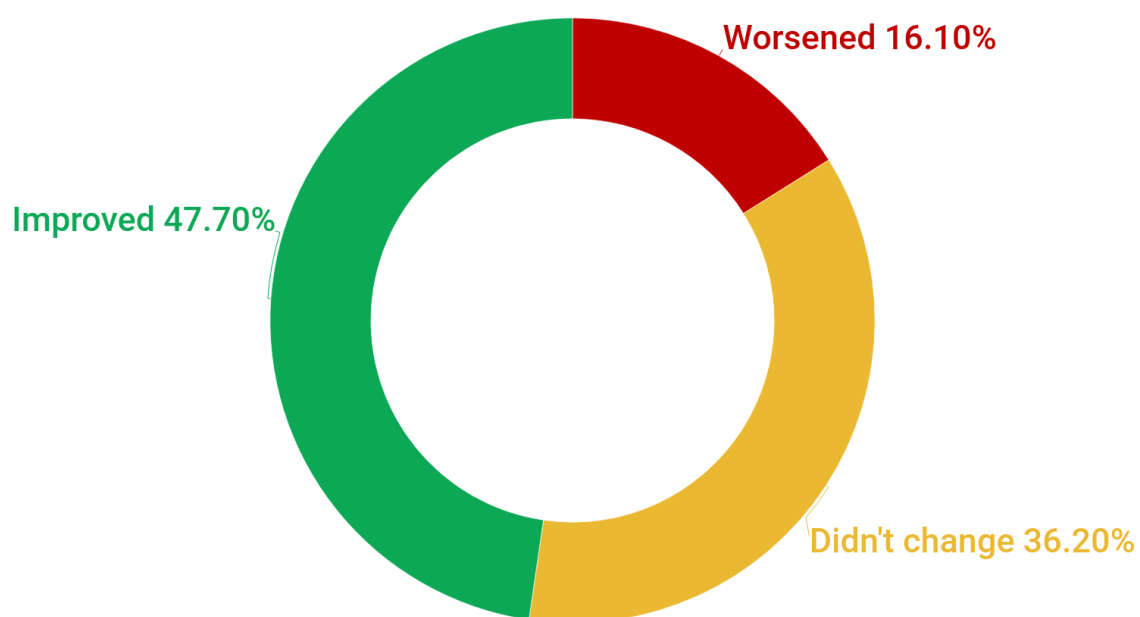


Figure 3: Feeling towards select countries among Serbian respondents⁷

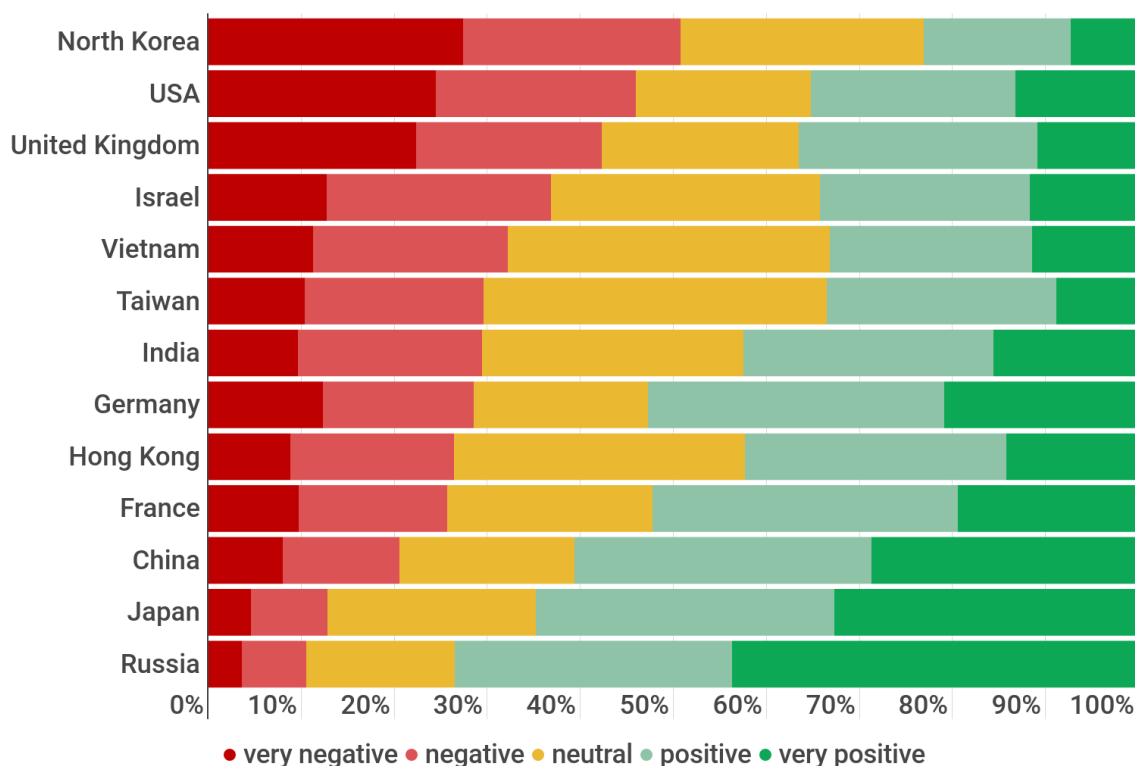


Figure 4: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?⁸

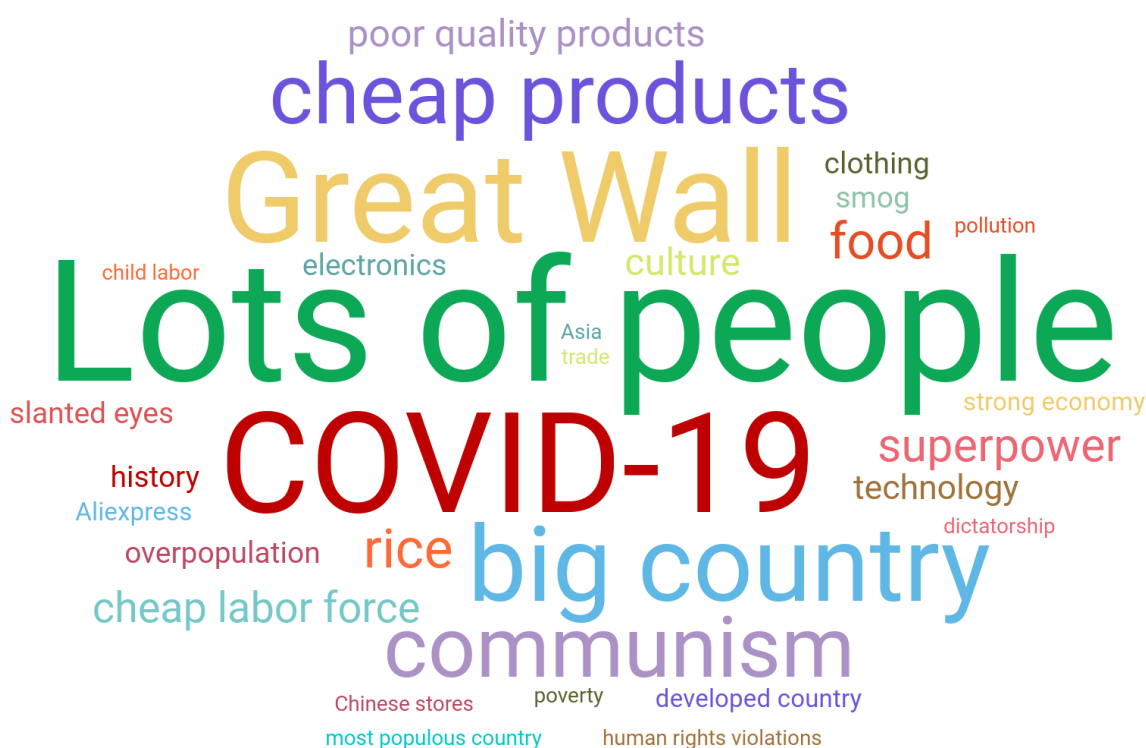
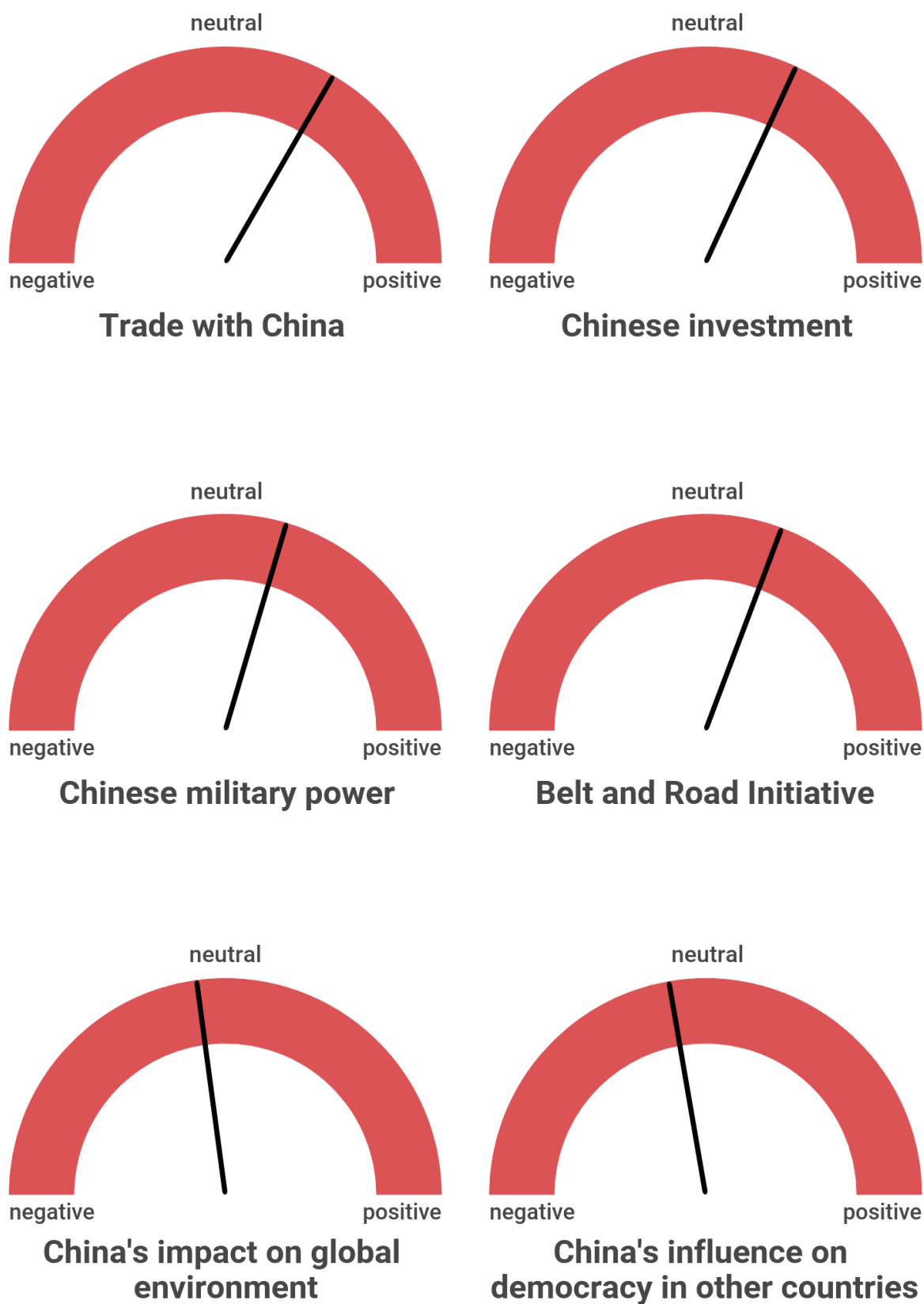


Figure 5: Perceptions of certain China-related issues among Serbian respondents⁹



2 Comparing the global powers

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

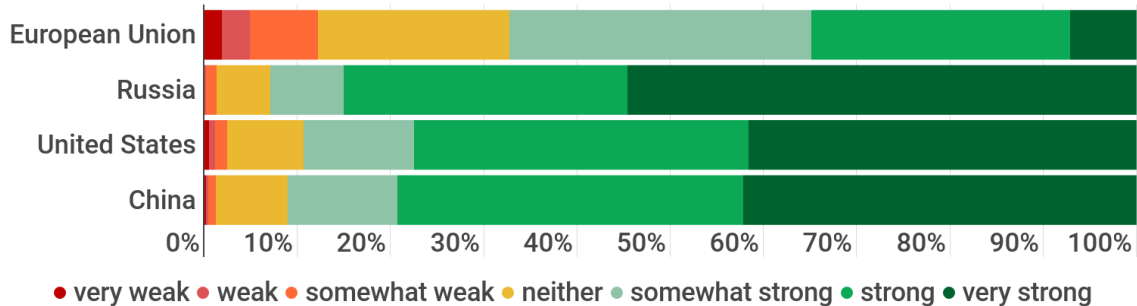


Figure 7: How economically strong do you consider the following countries/entities?

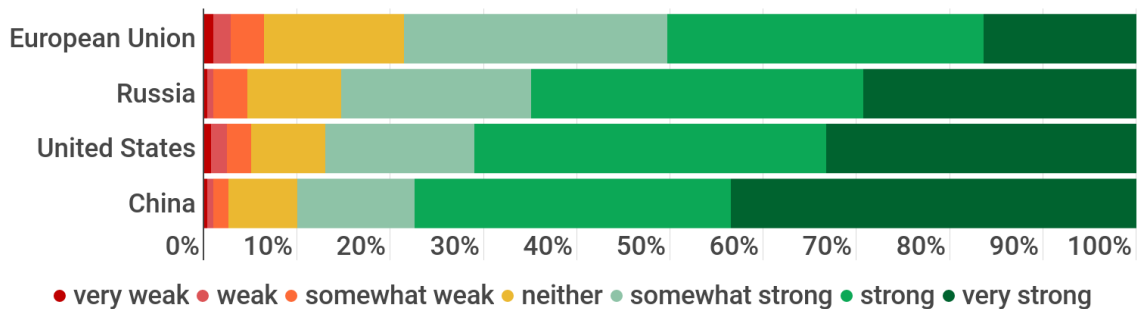


Figure 8: How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries/entities?

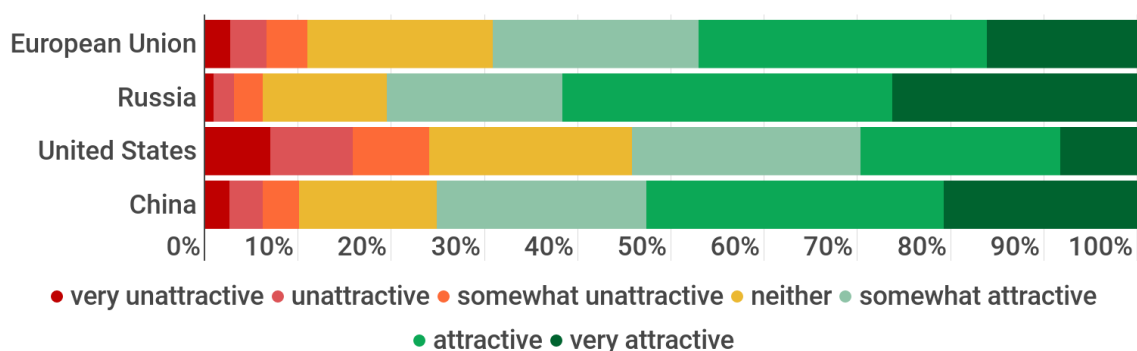


Figure 9: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?

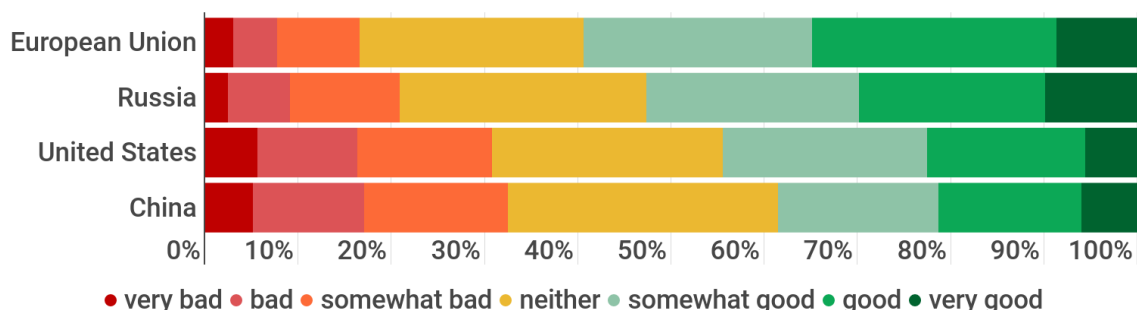


Figure 10: How important are the following countries/entities to the economic development of Serbia?

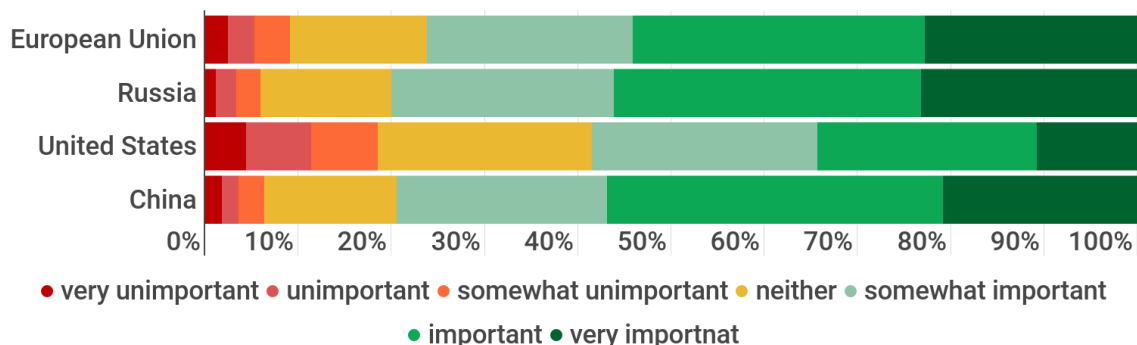
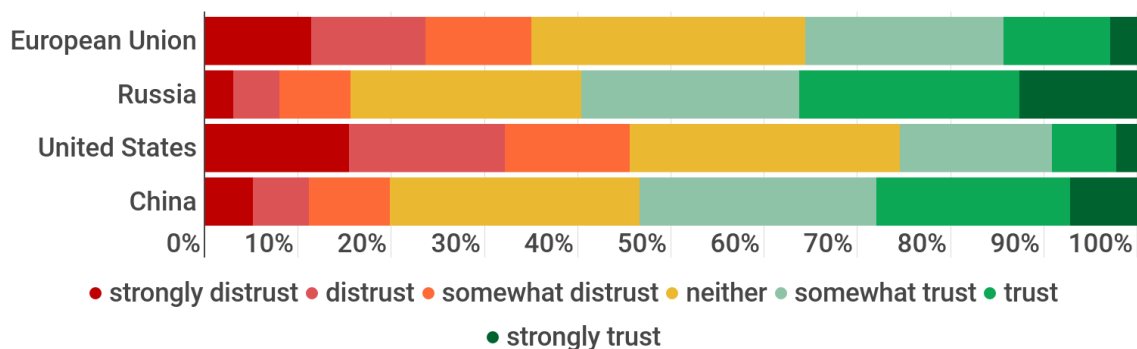


Figure 11: How much do you trust the following countries/entities?



3 Serbian foreign policy towards China

Figure 12: How closely should Serbian foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all; 10=completely)¹⁰

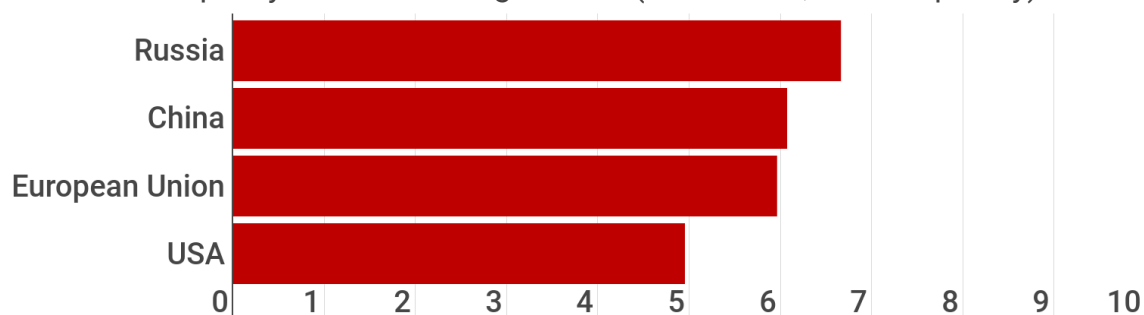


Figure 13: What should be Serbian foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)

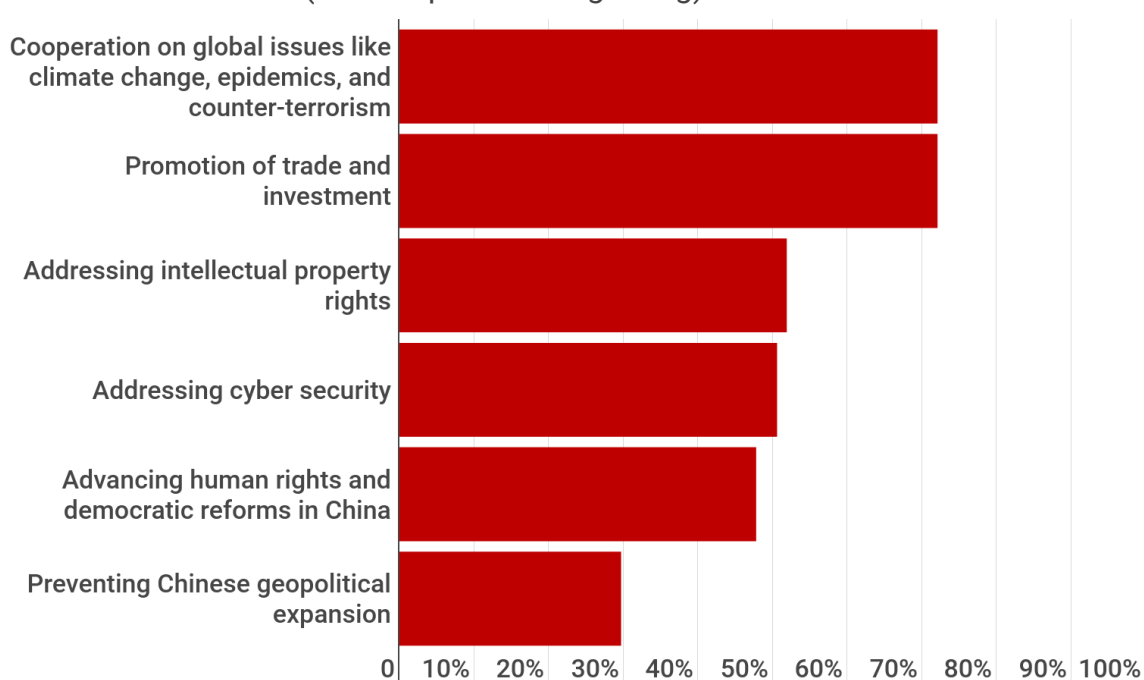
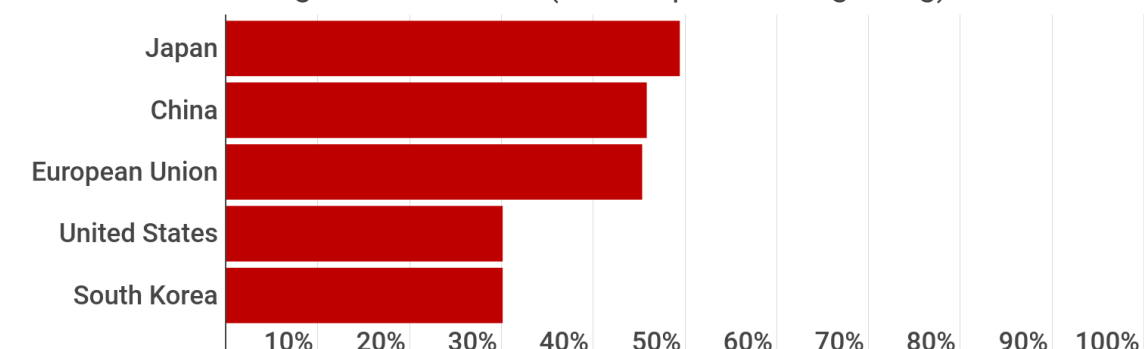


Figure 14: Should Serbia cooperate with the following countries in building its 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)



4 COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 15: How much did the following countries/entities help Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic?¹¹

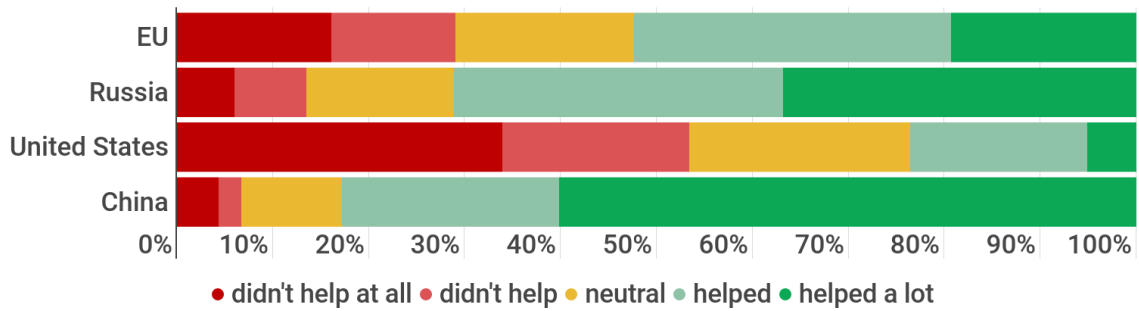
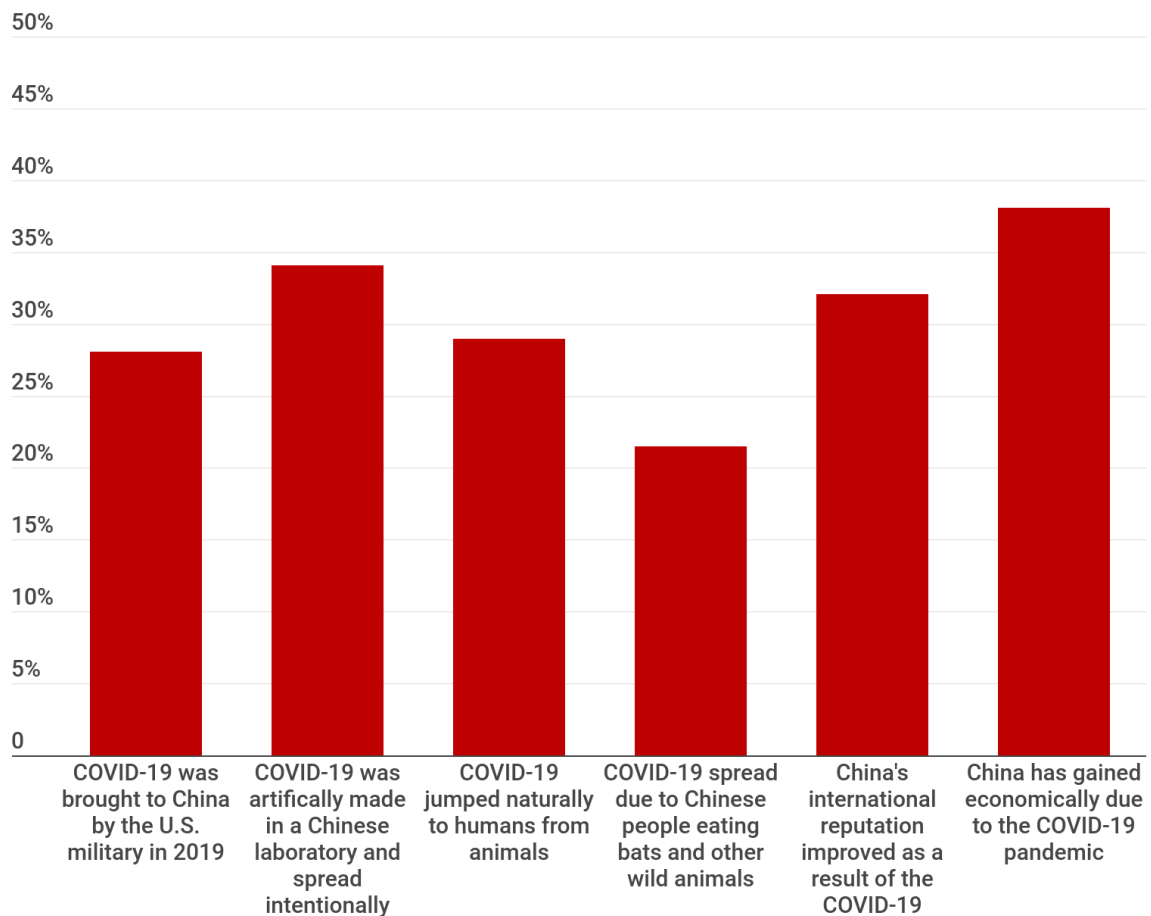


Figure 16: Serbian views on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)



5 Views of China & political affiliation

Figure 17: Feelings on China among voters of political parties polling over 5%¹²

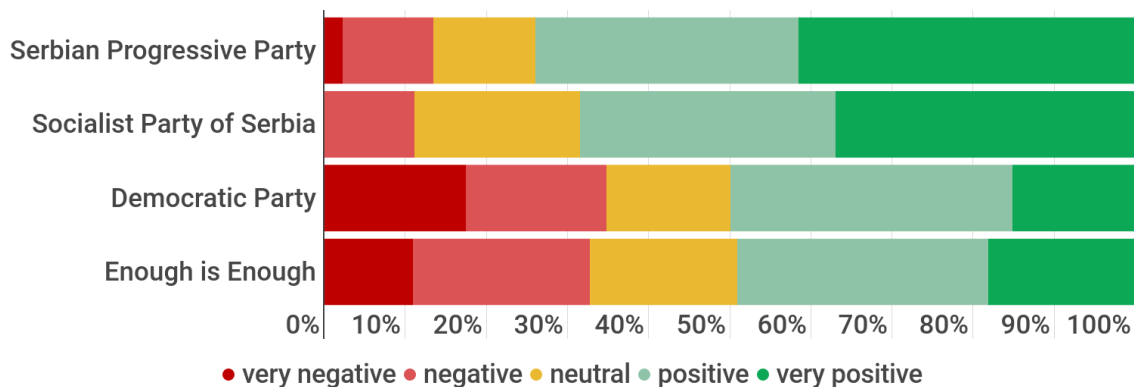


Figure 18: Feelings on China according to respondents' self-identification with the global West or global East¹³

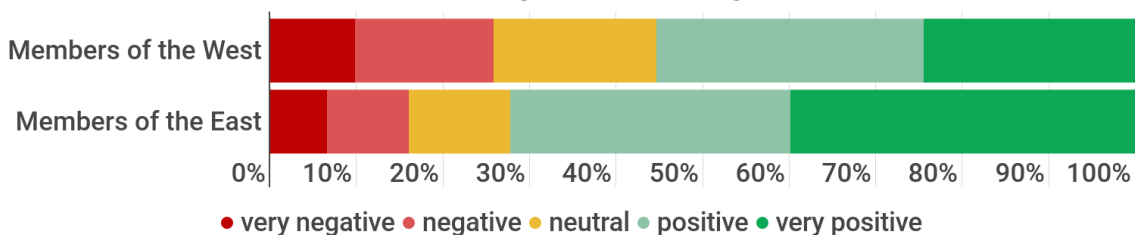
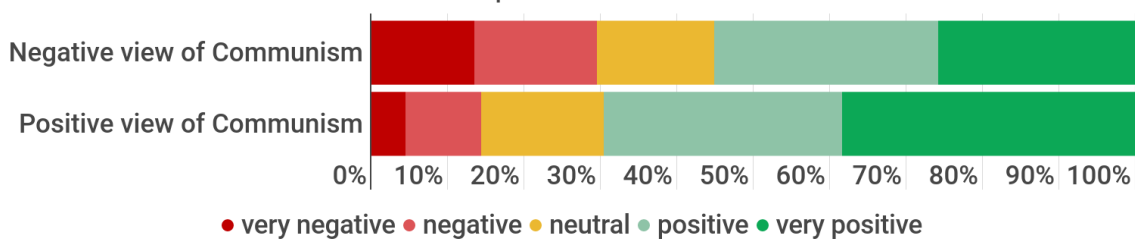


Figure 19: Feelings on China according to respondents' perception of Serbia's Communist past¹⁴




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 = 1500; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the Serbian population from age 18 to 70 with respect to gender, age, education, localization within the country (region), and settlement density (size of settlement). Data was collected in September and October 2020. While the data was generally collected online, responses from 147 participants in Serbia were collected face-to-face as it was difficult to reach participants with lower levels of education who were underrepresented in online panels.
- ³ 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
- ⁴ Gledić, Jelena (2020). Formal vs. Informal Chinese Presence: The Underbelly of Hope in the Western Balkans. In *Shadow Economies across the New Silk Road*, ed. Eva Hung & Tak-wing Ngo, pp. 163-182. Amsterdam University Press.
- ⁵ 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).
- ⁶ 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.
- 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 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: Serbian Progressive Party - 357, Socialist Party of Serbia - 53, Democratic Party - 46, Enough is Enough - 54.
- ¹³ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the categories are: members of the West: 511; members of the East: 426.
- ¹⁴ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the categories are: negative view of Communism: 488; positive view of Communism: 382.


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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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