



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

Economic optimism against all odds

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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 **Latvian portion of the polling**, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.³
- Latvian respondents overall demonstrate **neutral and even positive attitudes towards China**, with almost 42.3% viewing China in a very positive or positive light, and 30% having a neutral attitude (*Figure 1*). Interestingly, **China is overall viewed more positively than the USA** (*Figure 3*). Only 28% of the respondents have a negative or a very negative view of China, which is significantly lower than the survey-wide average across 13 countries – 45.3%.
- Curiously, COVID-19 has not led to a turn for the worse in the Latvian attitude towards China, with 52.5% of respondents not feeling any change over the recent three years, and **around 24% reporting that they see China in a more positive light than before** – the highest number among EU member-states that were included in the survey (*Figure 2*). Only Serbia (48%) and Russia (31%) demonstrate higher rates of China's image improvement. The results cannot be explained to be a successful Chinese charm offensive, as China's COVID-19 related image activities, e.g. gifts of masks and medical equipment, were scarce and had very little media coverage.
- **Latvian respondents primarily perceive China through the economic lens**, as they associate China with cheap products and mass production, AliExpress, technology, and a strong economy. The demographic aspect of overpopulation also has a strong impact on China's image in Latvia. Political associations such as communism, Mao Zedong, dictatorship, are present, but not prevailing (*Figure 4*).
- This finding is consistent with the **positive view of economic cooperation with China** – Latvia's respondents tend to have a positive outlook on trade with China, Chinese investment in the country, and the Belt and Road initiative,

scoring the highest positive attitudes in these sectors among surveyed EU members (Figure 5).

- The cultural sphere also does not spark controversy among the Latvian population, as **China is seen as culturally attractive by two-thirds of the respondents** (Figure 6). The political and security domains show an opposite dynamic, as China's military power, impact on the global environment and influence on democracies, and the human rights record are viewed negatively – these findings are consistent with other EU countries, but it should be noted that the critical respondents in Latvia are closer to the middle of the spectrum than elsewhere.
- **One-fourth of the respondents from Latvia trust China**, making it the most China-trusting country among the surveyed EU member-states. Interestingly, however, the trust towards China does not translate into Euro-pessimism – **Latvia also shows to have the highest percentage of trust towards the EU from among all surveyed countries (61%)**.
- Unsurprisingly, the **respondents with sympathy towards Communism in general, also share a positive attitude towards China (63%)**; but unexpectedly only under a half (44%) of the anti-communists hold a negative view of China, perhaps pointing towards the conclusion that the other half does not associate the current Chinese political system with pure Communist ideology (Figure 19).
- Additionally, the report confirms the societal divides among the Latvian population, most notably – polarization across linguistic lines. **The Latvian speakers see China in a significantly more negative light than the Russian speakers**, the divide also appears in the attitudes towards the United States and Russia (Figure 21, Figure 22). Interestingly, this division is not visible when it comes to the perception of being part of the East or the West - with both Latvian and Russian speakers overwhelmingly self-identifying themselves with the West (Figure 20). Among both language groups, we may notice that those self-identifying with the West have a more negative view of China than those considering themselves to be part of the East, yet the differences are rather small.
- **Language affiliations beat political ideology** when it comes to the attitudes towards China (Figure 18). The supporters of politically diverse political forces

associated with the Latvian-speaking parties and alliances (the social-liberal Attīstībai/PAR!, center-right Jaunā Vienotība, agrarian-conservative Zaļo un Zemnieku savienība, conservative Jaunā Konservatīvā Partija, right-wing national-conservative Nacionālā Apvienība) all demonstrate rather negative views on China (in the 34%–58% range), whereas the supporters of the so-called Russian parties (social-democratic Saskaņa, left-wing socially conservative Latvijas Krievu Savienība) are not nearly as pessimistic, with positive attitudes of 57% and 70%, respectively, and negative attitudes as low as 13% and 9%.

- And yet, the **linguistic factor does not seem to reveal the whole picture**, as even among the voters of the parties appealing to the Latvian-speakers, the numbers of positive approaches towards China are in the 21%–43% bracket, which is a relatively high average. The explanation could lie in the **prevalence of the economic rationale** among the Latvian speakers. Although not politically sympathetic towards China, they still see the country as a viable option for Latvian economic diversification and away from the reliance on Russia, thus effectively agreeing with the Russian speakers that China could be a partner for Latvia – especially in transport and logistics, as 62% of the respondents believe China could help Latvia's transit sector (*Figure 15*).
- Indeed, the **least controversial aspect of cooperation with China across all communities is economy** – and economy matters to the respondents, as they deem investment and trade promotion to be of the utmost priority for the national foreign policy towards China (*Figure 14*). Another proof that Latvia's respondents believe there is still room for cooperation with China, is the tendency to choose positive agenda points – e.g. economy, climate change, epidemic control, and counter-terrorism – over critical ones, such as cybersecurity, intellectual property rights, human rights, and the prevention of China's global expansion.
- Unlike China, the US, and Russia, the **EU overwhelmingly seems to be the uniting factor** across the linguistic communities, being seen as a foreign policy ally, a trustworthy actor, a good partner for the construction of 5G networks – and providing the biggest help in COVID-19 relief by far (*Figure 13, Figure 16*).
- The data in general point towards the conclusion that Latvians of all linguistic communities **do not want to use China as a systemic counterbalance to the EU**,

but simply still believe in the benefits that the economic cooperation with China could bring – a belief that elsewhere in the EU has already dwindled.

1 Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1: Feeling towards China among Latvian respondents⁴

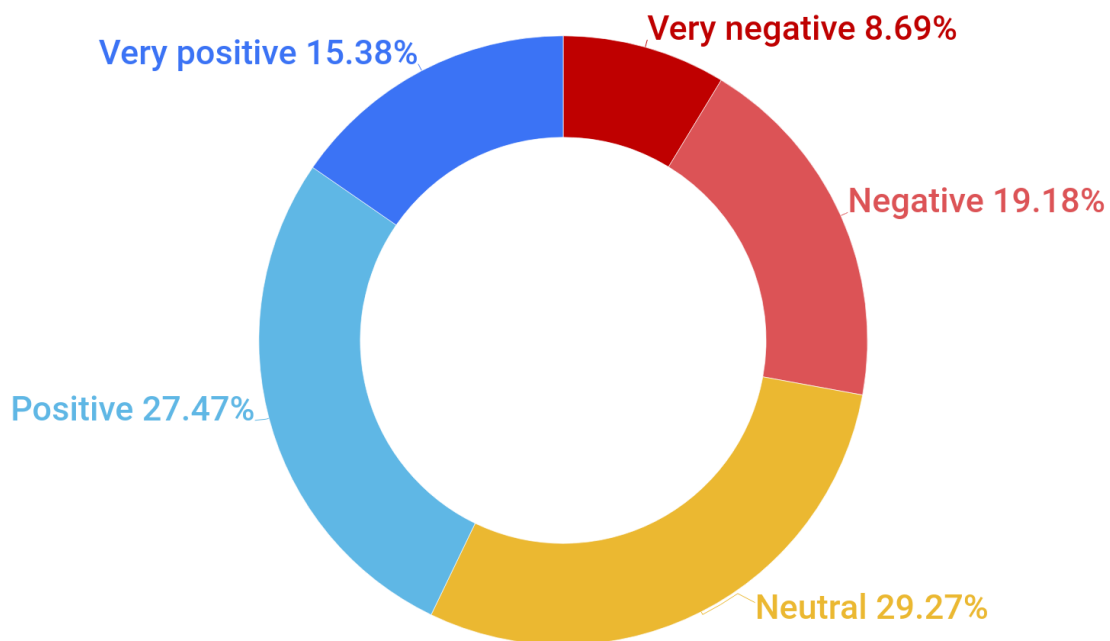


Figure 2: Change of feeling towards China among Latvian respondents in the past three years⁵

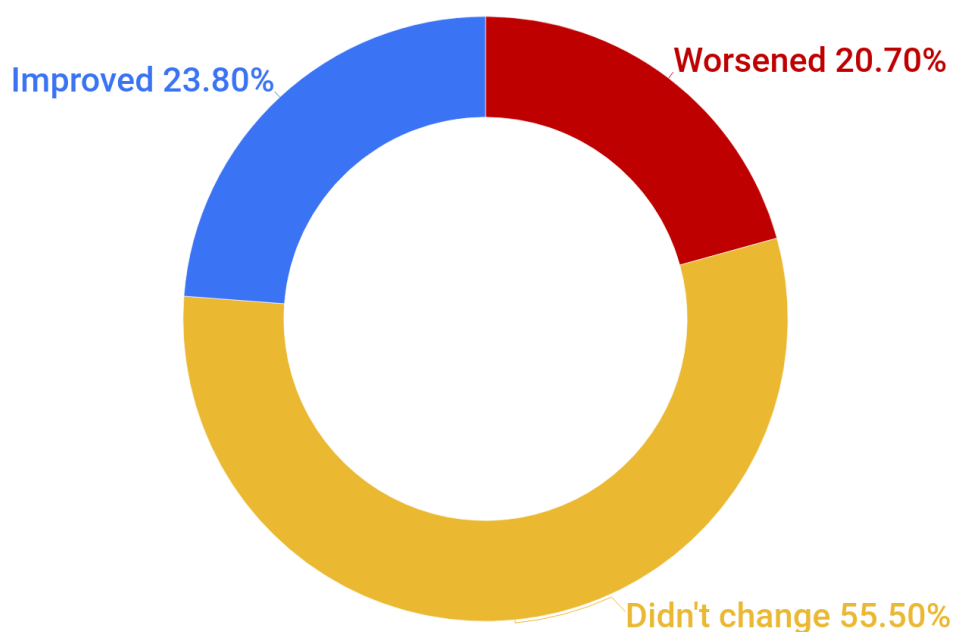


Figure 3: Feeling towards select countries among Latvian respondents⁶

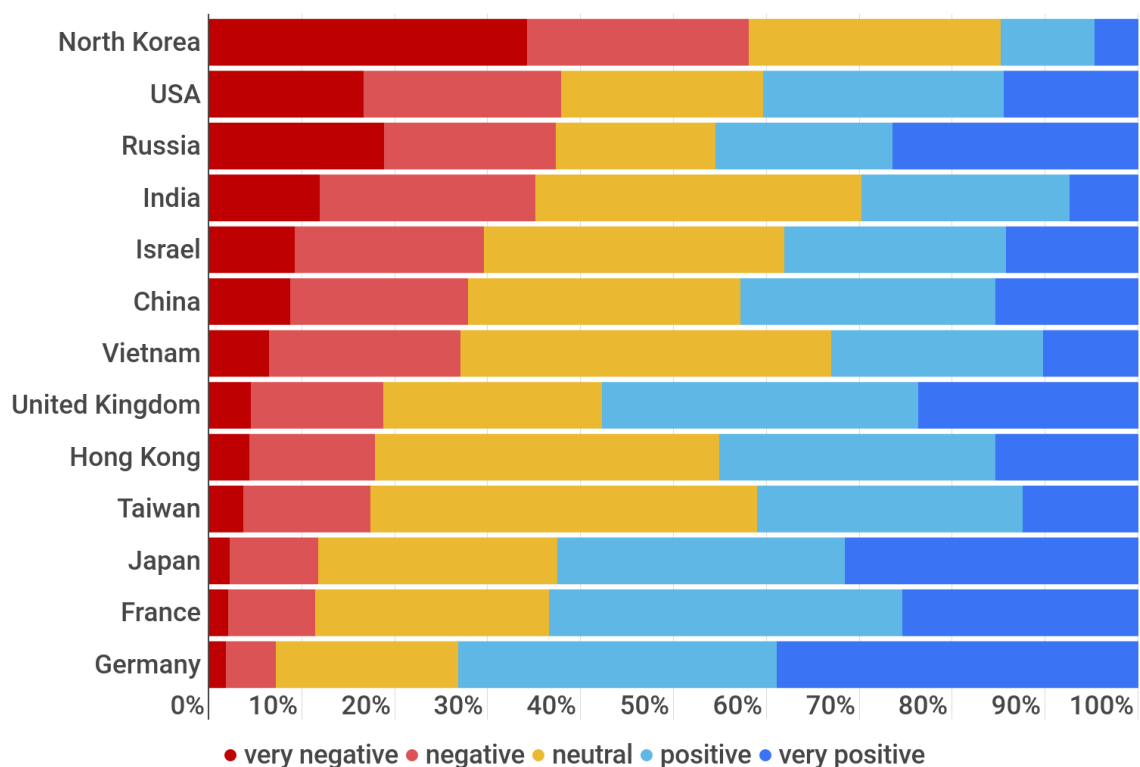
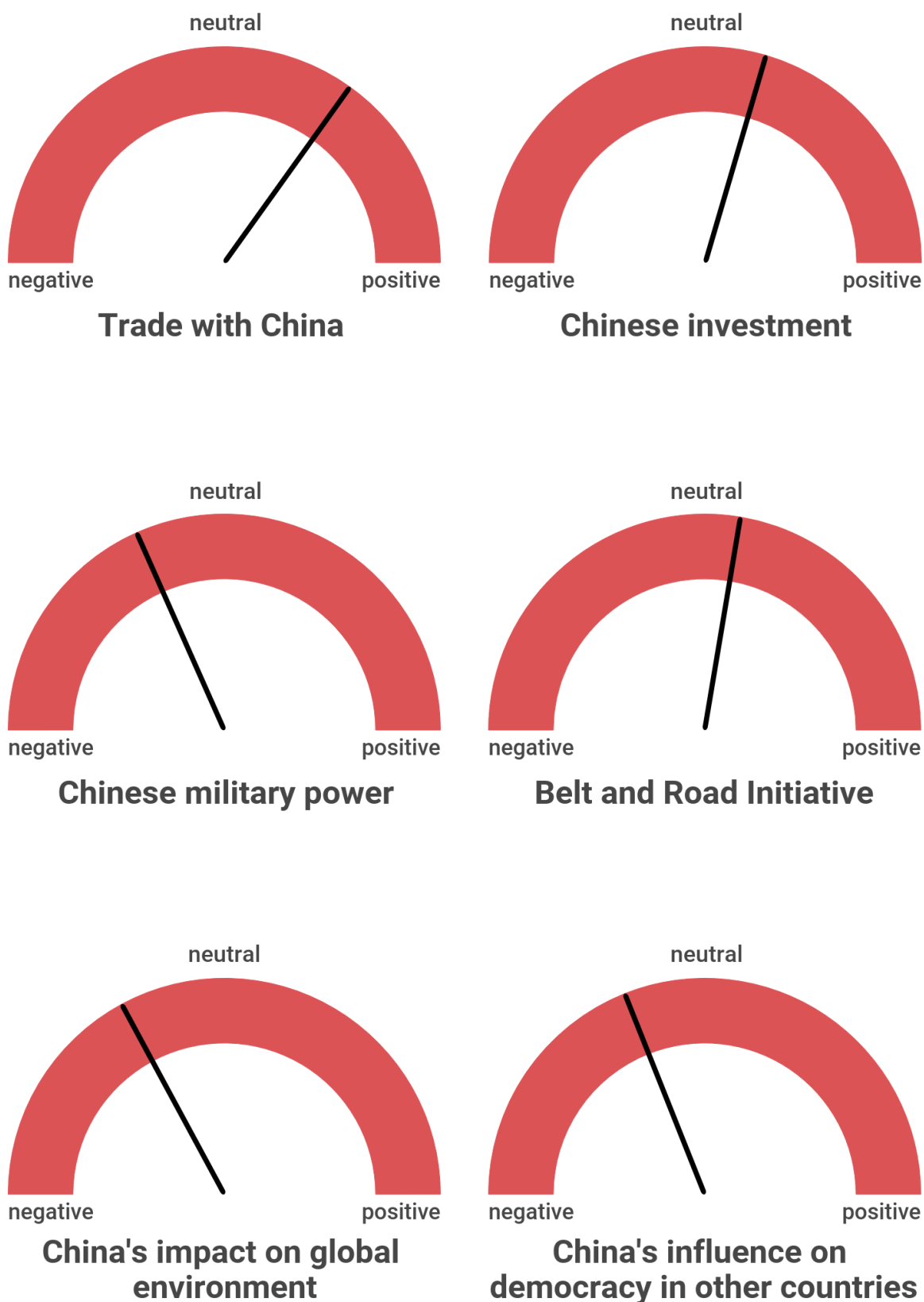


Figure 4: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?⁷



Figure 5: Perceptions of certain China-related issues among Latvian respondents⁸



2 Comparing the global powers

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

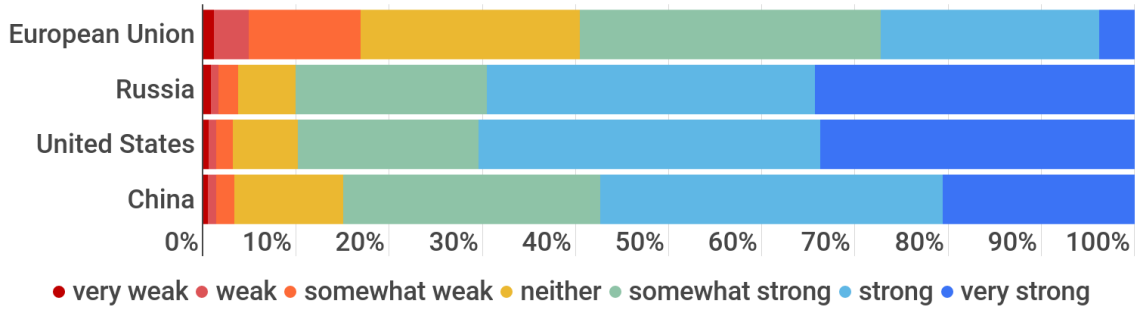


Figure 7: How economically strong do you consider the following countries/entities?

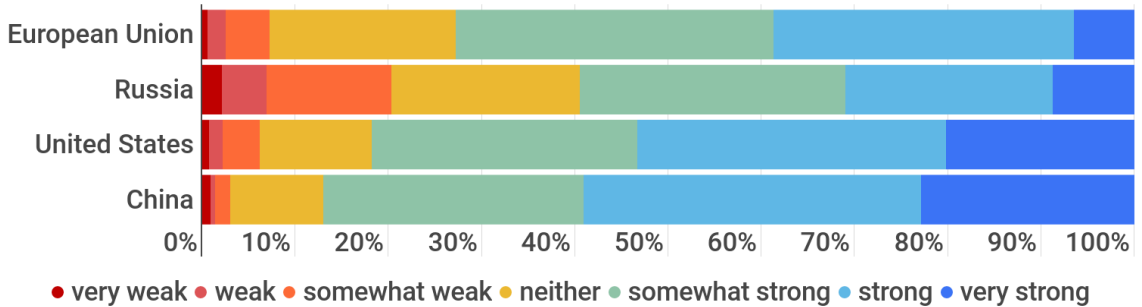


Figure 8: How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries/entities?

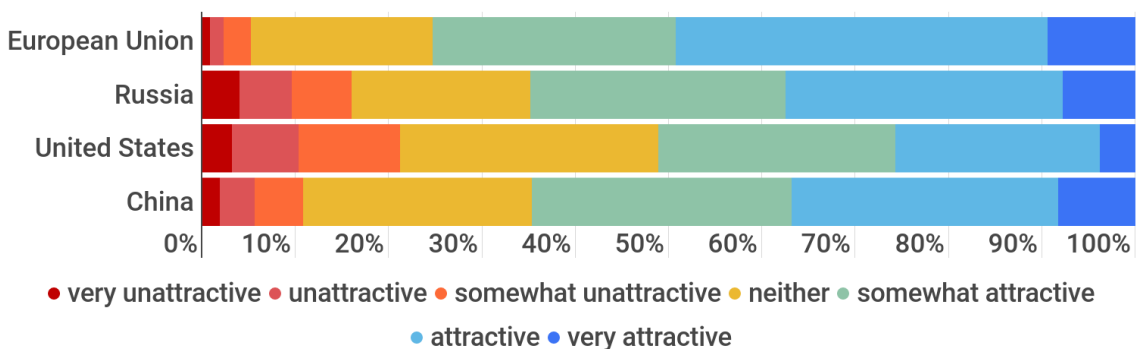


Figure 9: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?

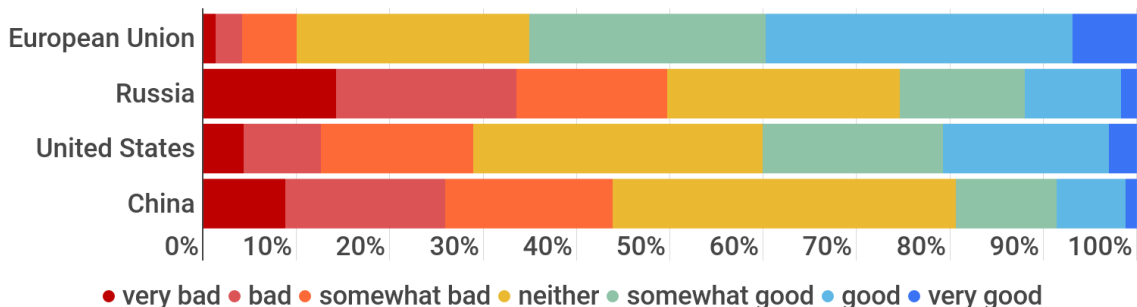


Figure 10: How important are the following countries/entities to the economic development of Latvia?

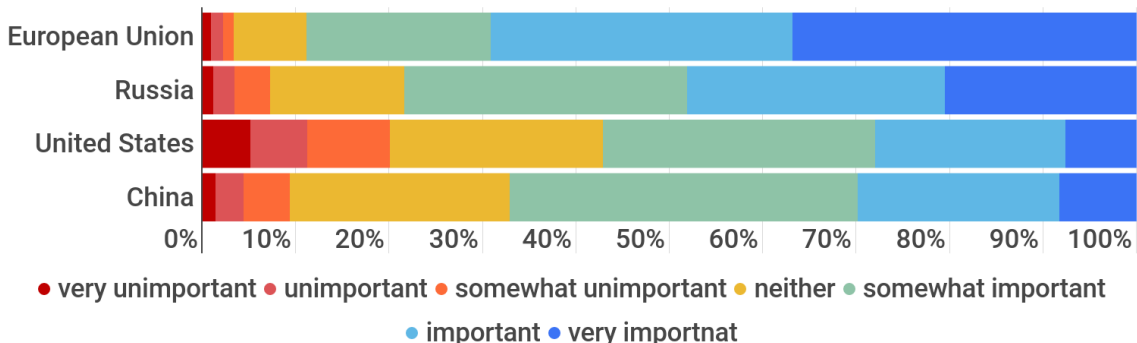
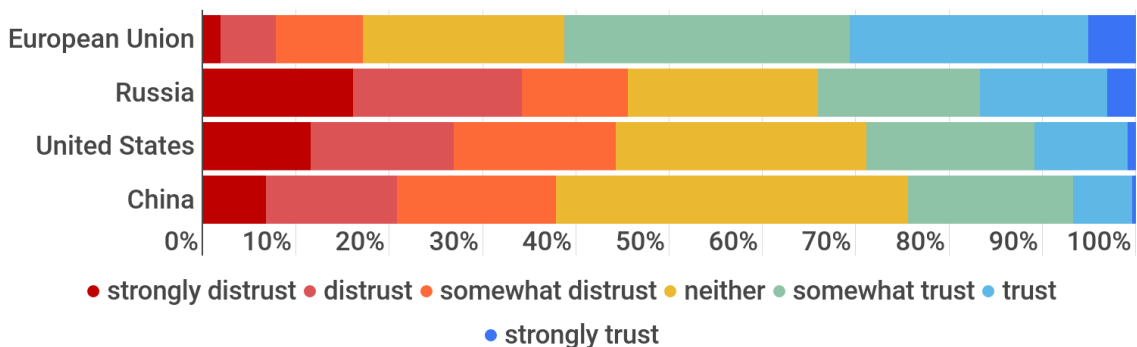


Figure 11: How much do you trust the following countries/entities?



3 Latvian policy towards China

Figure 12: How closely should Latvian foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all; 10=completely)⁹

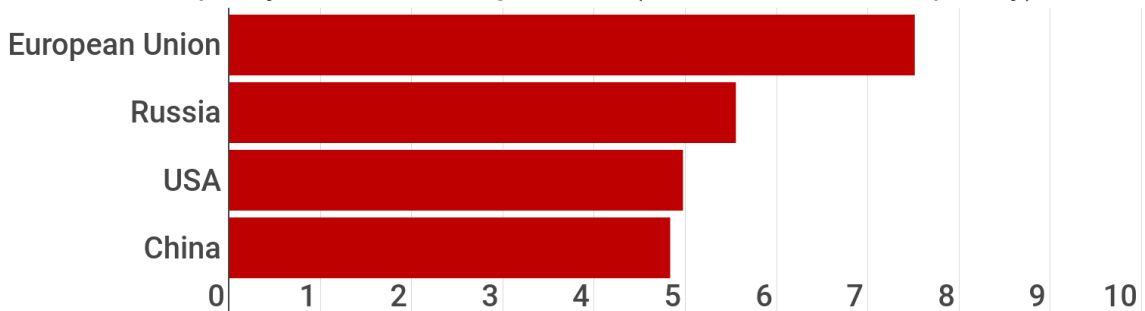


Figure 13: Should Latvia cooperate with the following countries in building its 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)

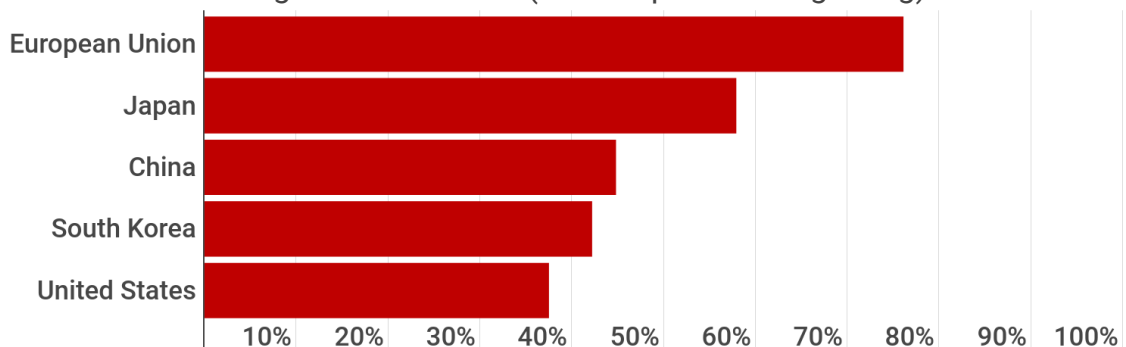


Figure 14: What should be Latvian foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)

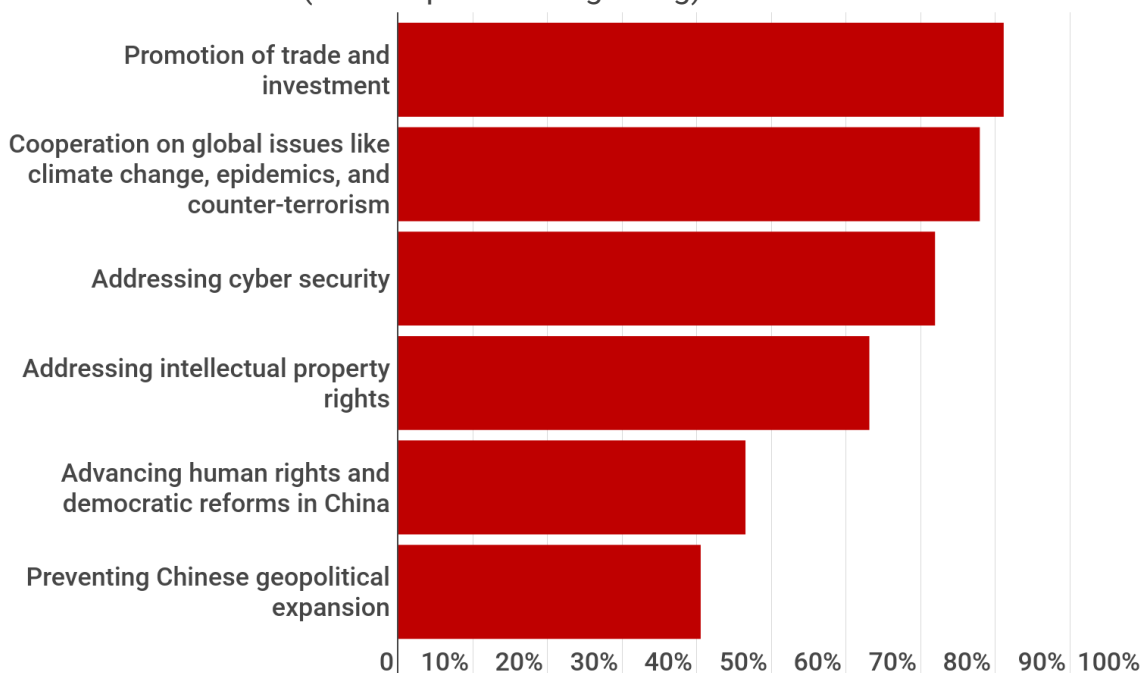
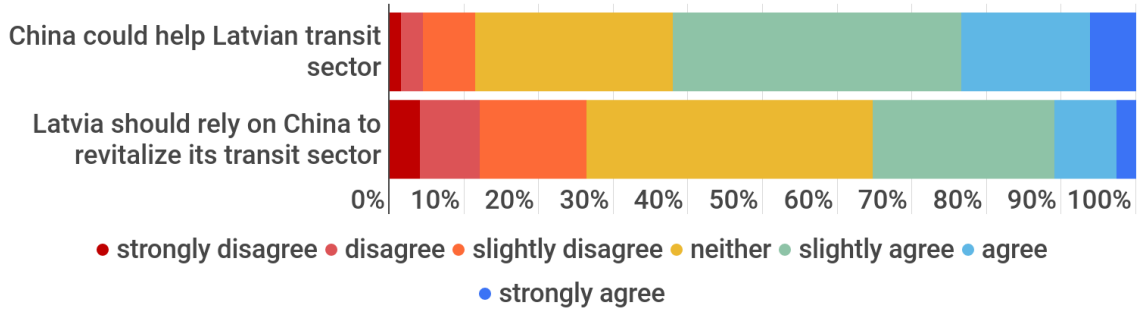


Figure 15: Latvians' views of China's potential to revitalize the Latvian transit sector (% of respondents agreeing)



4 COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 16: How much did the following countries/entities help Latvia during the COVID-19 pandemic?¹⁰

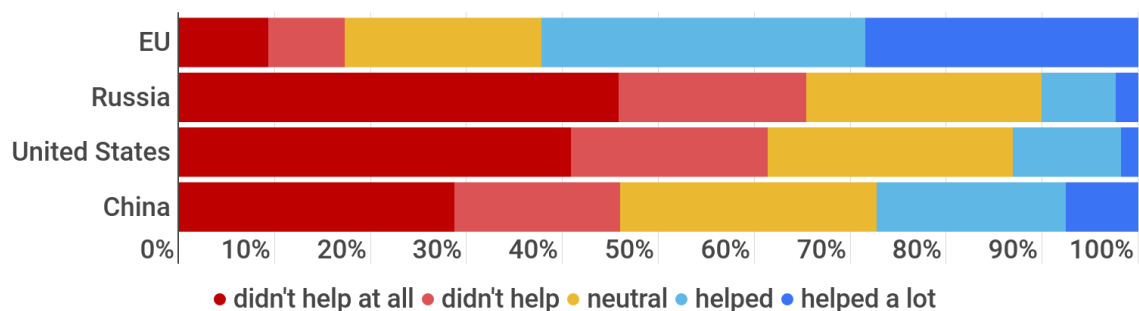
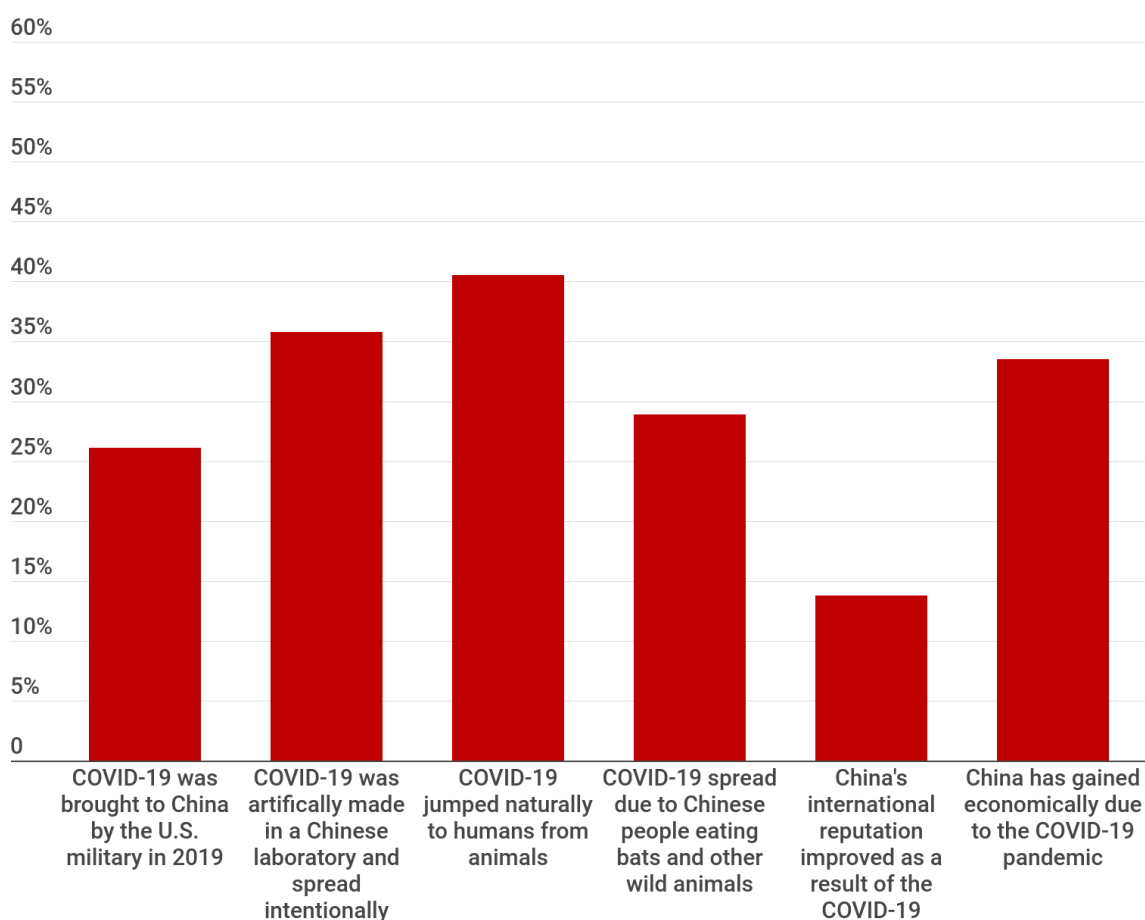


Figure 17: Latvian views on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)



5 Views of China & political affiliation

Figure 18: Feelings on China among voters of political parties polling over 5%¹¹

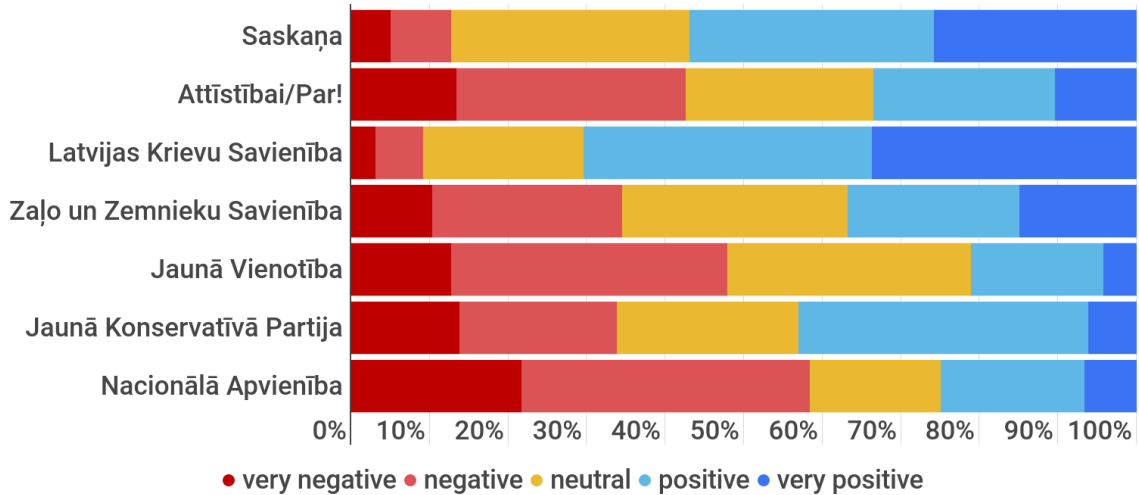


Figure 19: Feelings on China according to respondents' perception of Latvia's Communist past¹²

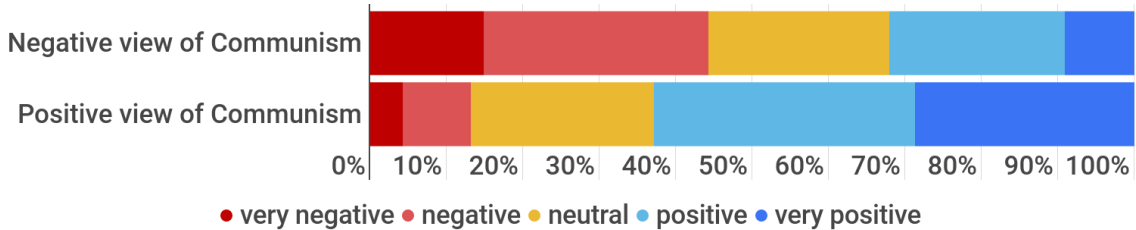


Figure 20: Feelings on China according to respondents' identification with the global West or East¹³

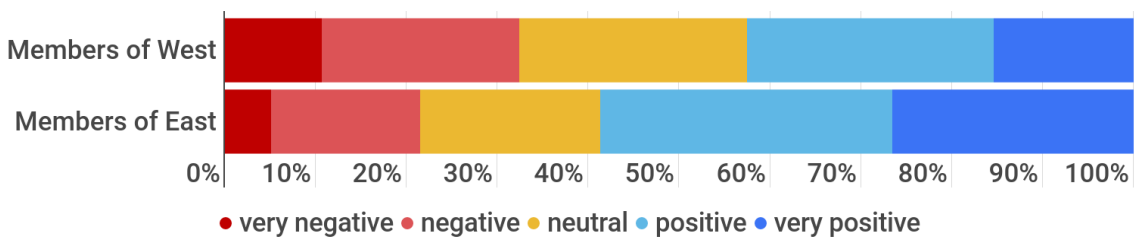


Figure 21: Feelings on China based on respondents' language preference¹⁴

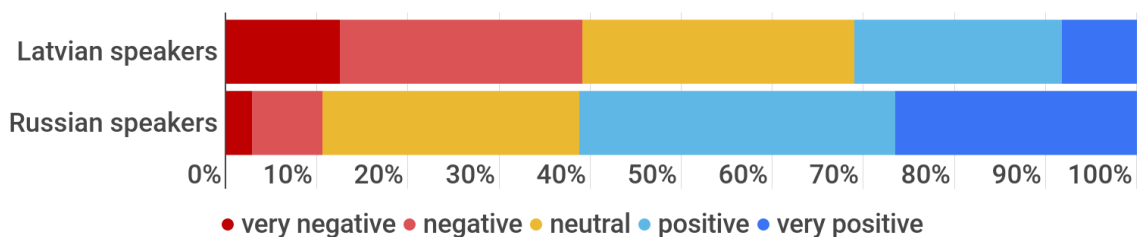
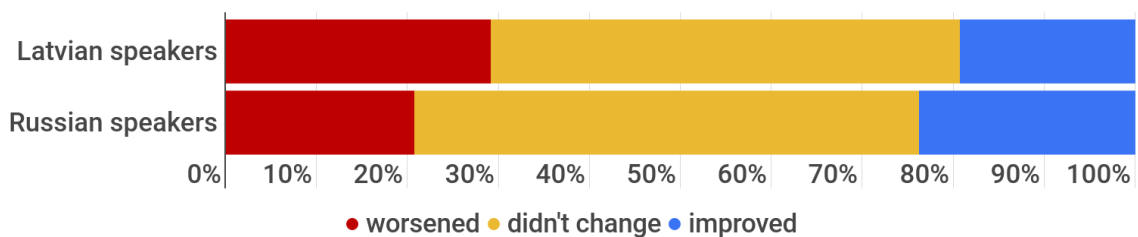


Figure 22: Change of feelings on China in the past three years based on respondents' language preference¹⁵




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 = 1552; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the Latvian 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 Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Čeněk, 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 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).
- ⁷ 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.
- ⁸ 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.
- ⁹ 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.
- ¹⁰ 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).
- ¹¹ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the political parties are as follows: Saskaņa – 260, Attīstībai/Par! – 134, Latvijas Krievu Savienība – 98, Zaļo un Zemnieku Savienība – 87, Jaunā Vienotība – 71, Jaunā Konservatīvā Partija – 65, Nacionālā Apvienība – 60.
- ¹² Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the categories are: Negative view of Communism: 605, Positive view of Communism: 348.
- ¹³ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the categories are: Members of West: 910, Members of East: 177.
- ¹⁴ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the categories are: Latvian speakers: 947, Russian speakers: 606.
- ¹⁵ Supra note 5 (mutatis mutandis). For n-values see supra note 14.

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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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