



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

Desirable partner versus a source of concern

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## 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 a research sample representative with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region, and settlement density.<sup>2</sup> Here, we focus on the **Polish portion of the polling**, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.<sup>3</sup>
- Overall, the Polish public **leans towards a negative view of China** (41.5% negative, 31.7% positive, the rest has neutral views) (*Figure 1*), and as such, China appears **among the most negatively-perceived countries** in Poland from among those surveyed. At the same time, Israel is viewed even more negatively, and so are Russia and North Korea. On the positive side, the United Kingdom is viewed the most positively, followed by the USA, Japan, France, and Germany (*Figure 3*).
- A significant portion of the Polish population (48.6%) has **changed its views of China in the last three years**. The views of 34% of Poles 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 (*Figure 2*).
- The **first associations** of the Polish public related to China in 2020 are **COVID-19** and **China being a populous country**. **Great Wall** and **communism** are other main associations. **Economy, technology, and mass production** are further labels, which are suggesting acknowledgment for China's rapid economic rise. On the other hand, multiple respondents associated China with **cheap labor, exploitation, cheap and poor quality products**, as well as **forgery** (*Figure 4*).
- The Polish public prefers that their country **aligns its foreign policy** the most **with the EU**, followed by the USA, China, and Russia 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 (70.7%) would prefer to rely on EU producers of 5G equipment, followed by those based in the USA (58.1%) and Japan (54.2%). Subsequently, **32.1% would use Chinese equipment** and 30.1% the South Korean for building the 5G networks (*Figure 13*).

- As for **Polish foreign policy priorities** towards China, **cooperation on global issues** like climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism are seen as the most desirable ones (74.5% respondents agree), followed by addressing cybersecurity (71.7%), promotion of trade and investment (70%), advancing human rights and democratic reforms in China (68.2%), and addressing intellectual property rights (60.3%). **Preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion** is the least desirable policy, however, it is **still approved by more than half of respondents** (53.3%) (Figure 14).
- On the issue of the EU's policy toward China, 13.6% of respondents think Poland should follow it, 45.6% think **Warsaw should take the lead in setting EU-China policy**, while 19.4% prefer Poland to carry out independent China policy. The rest is undecided (Figure 15).
- The respondents who lean towards **seeing themselves as part of the East more often perceive China positively** (38%) than those who self-identify as part of the West (32.8%). "Easterners" also more often perceive China negatively (47.6%) in comparison to "Westerners" (43%). Consequently, fewer of them (14.4% to 24.2%) tend to perceive China neutrally (Figure 21).
- Interestingly, **the view of the communist past of Poland has little impact on feeling toward China**. Both those who perceive the communist period of Poland negatively and positively tend to have negative feelings toward China (43.6% and 43.2% respectively). However, positive feelings toward China are slightly more common among those who view the communist past positively (37.4%) than negatively (31.6%) (Figure 20).
- These results reveal the **long-standing national sentiments** rather than divisions between the West and the East drive Polish public view on great powers. Western Europe and the EU, as well as the USA, remain popular. A large part of the population holds unfavorable views of Russia. **The attitude towards China is more ambiguous**, it is seen both as a desirable partner and a source of concern.
- There are noticeable differences between the voters of various political groups, however, they are not overly polarized. Negative views of China are more prevalent than positive views among voters of all major political groups except the Left (Lewica). However, voters of the Left are also the most divided on the

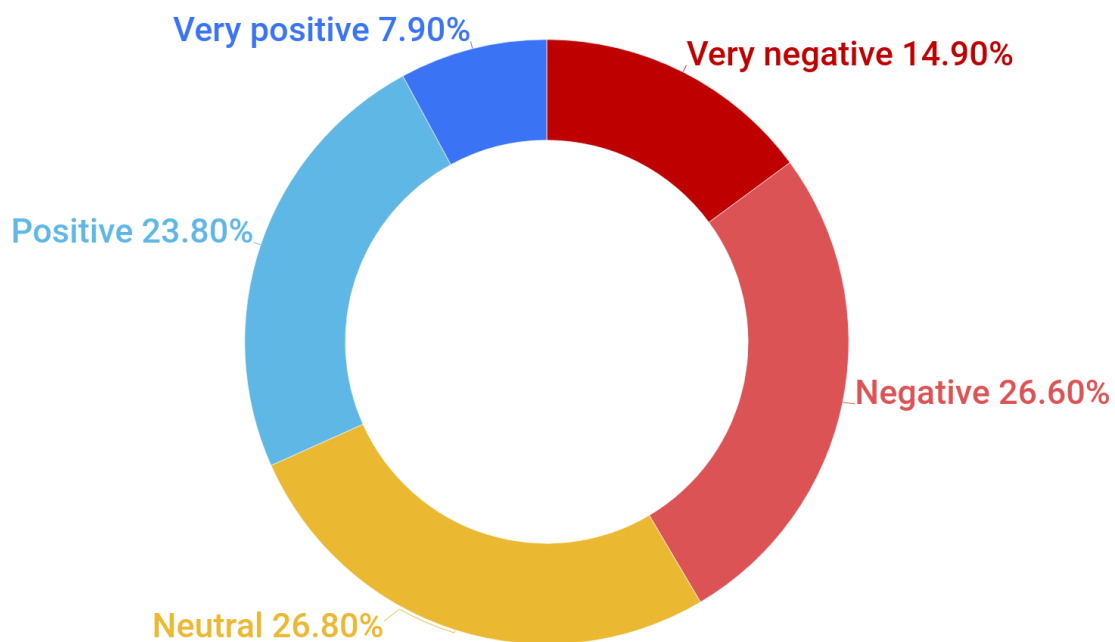
issue, with 34.1% of them holding a positive view of China, 33.3% negative, and 27.7% neutral. Almost half of the voters of the Polish Coalition (49.2%) and the United Right (47.7%) view China negatively (*Figure 19*).

- China is seen as a **powerful international actor** (*Figure 6*). In **military power**, China (4.1% weak, 84.2% strong) is believed to be far **stronger than the EU** (63.4% strong) while only slightly lagging behind Russia (86.1%) and the USA (91.4%).
- When it comes to **economic power** (*Figure 7*), China is perceived as the **second strongest actor** (4.1% weak, 84.8% strong), slightly behind the USA (89.4% strong), but stronger than the EU (77.7%) and Russia (59.4%).
- Chinese **culture** is seen as **attractive** (10.9% unattractive, 70.1% attractive), slightly behind the EU (73.7% attractive), but ahead of the USA (68.9%) and Russia (53%) (*Figure 8*).
- At the same time, the **human rights situation in China is perceived very poorly** (*Figure 9*). Only 11% of respondents think it is good, while 67.7% think it is bad. Russia's human rights situation is perceived even worse (8.4% bad, 71.1% good). The situation in the EU (72.2% good, 7% bad) and the USA (63.1% good, 12.1% bad) is viewed much better.
- Despite being perceived as a powerful and economically strong country, as well as culturally attractive, China is **not seen as a trustworthy partner** (*Figure 11*). Only 9.4% of Poles trust China, while 57.5% distrust it. The EU and the USA are seen as far more trustworthy than China, with 44.9% and 37.1% of respondents trusting them. However, a larger portion of people does not trust Russia (72.9%).
- Concerning China, Poles' **most negative feelings are** about China's **impact on democracy** in other countries, as well as **on the global environment**, followed by China's **military power**. However, Poles are generally **more positive** toward **trade and investment** with China, along with the **Belt and Road Initiative** (*Figure 5*).
- China is often viewed as **important to Polish development** (67.5% of respondents think it is important), however not as often as the EU (85.4%) and the USA (77%). Russia is also perceived as important by the majority (55.3%) of respondents (*Figure 10*).

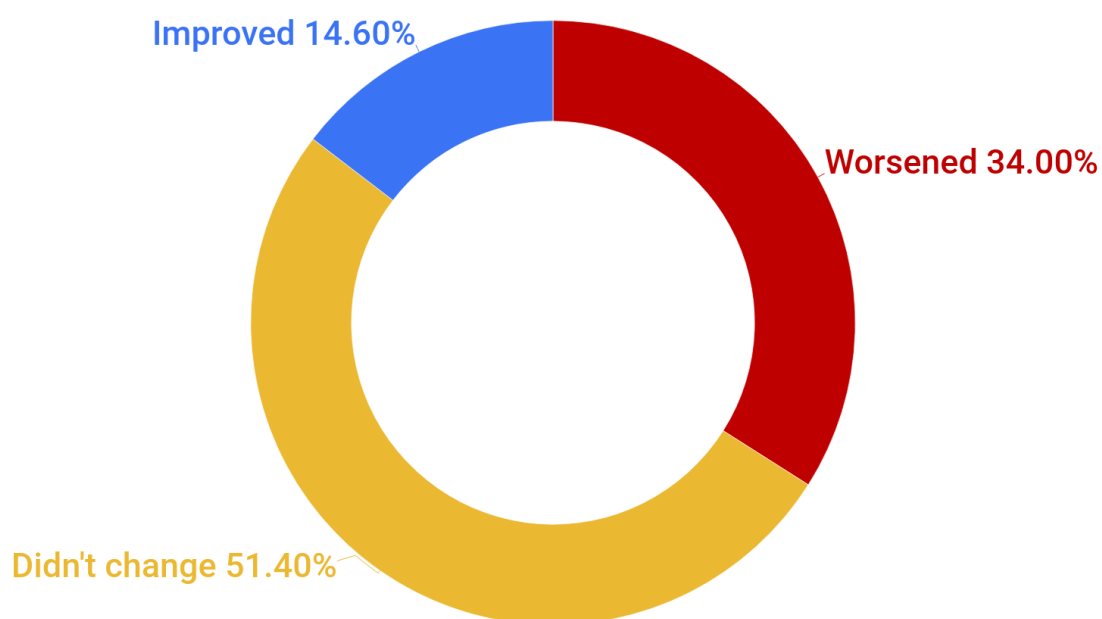
- The majority of respondents agree Chinese investment can revitalize the Polish economy (57.5%) and China can offer an alternative market of Polish export (55.9%). However, the public is much more divided on the issue of Chinese companies building publicly funded infrastructure in Poland. Only 31.3% of respondents think they should be allowed to do it, while 34.8% are against it (Figure 16).
- China has been seen as providing less help than the EU in the **COVID-19** pandemic, with 35% of respondents agreed it helped, compared to 59.3% in the case of the EU. However, China is slightly ahead of the USA (29.2%) and way ahead of Russia (5.6%) (Figure 17).
- Significant sections of the Polish public are **willing to consider various conspiracy theories** about the **origin of COVID-19**. While only 11.6% believe that COVID-19 was brought to China by the US military, and 26.3% think that the virus spread because of Chinese people eating bats and other wild animals, almost **half (48%) believe it was intentionally spread by China** (Figure 18). This was the most among all 13 surveyed countries.
- A significant portion of the Polish public believes that China gained economically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (45.9%). However, only a small section thinks that China's international reputation improved (12.6%) (Figure 18).

# 1 Feelings towards China and other countries

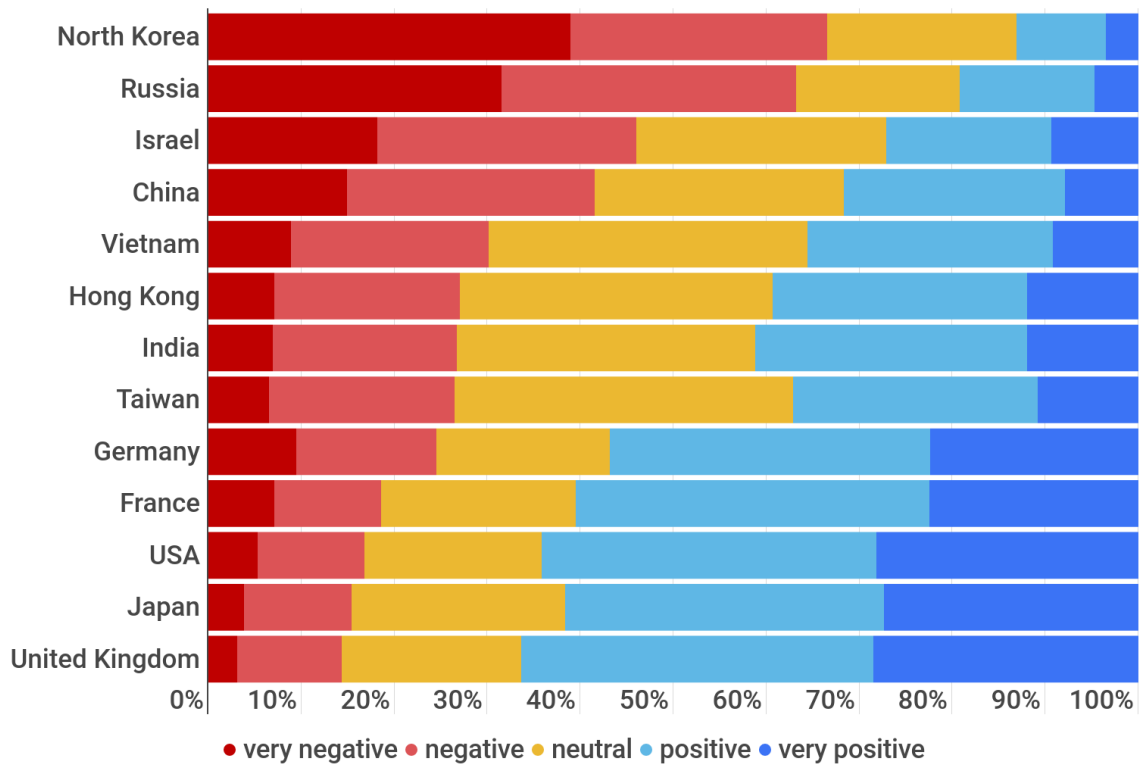
**Figure 1:** Feeling towards China among Polish respondents<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2:** Change of feeling towards China among Polish respondents in the past three years<sup>5</sup>



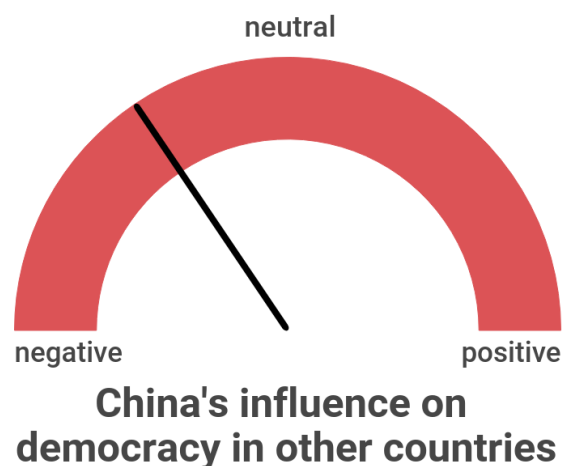
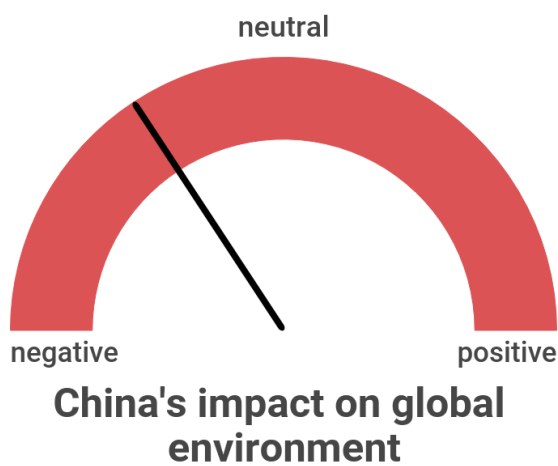
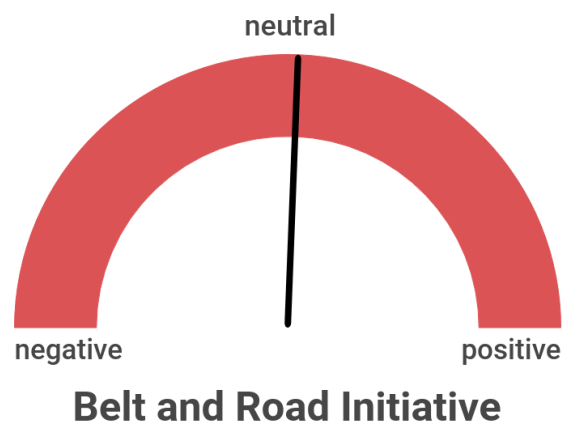
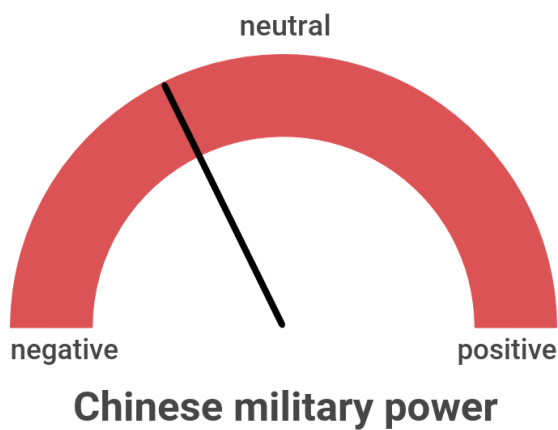
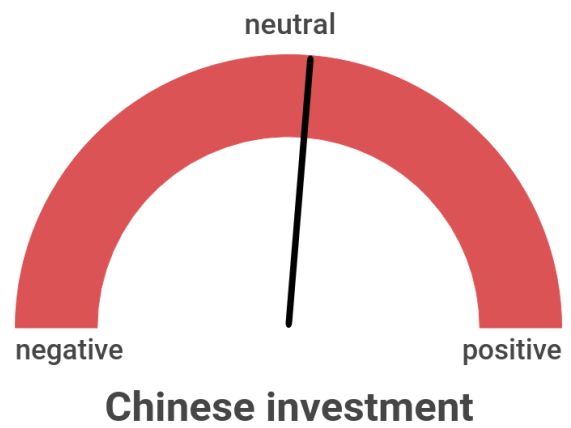
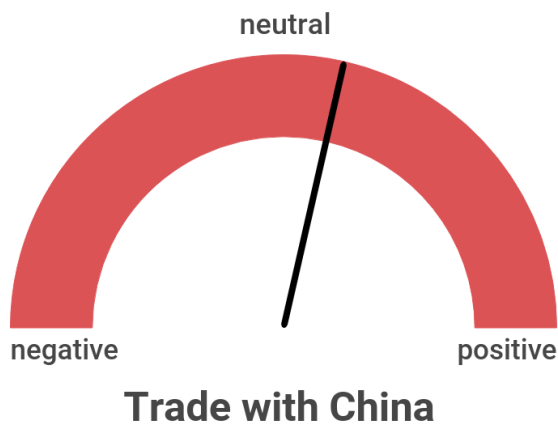
**Figure 3:** Feeling towards select countries among Polish respondents<sup>6</sup>



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

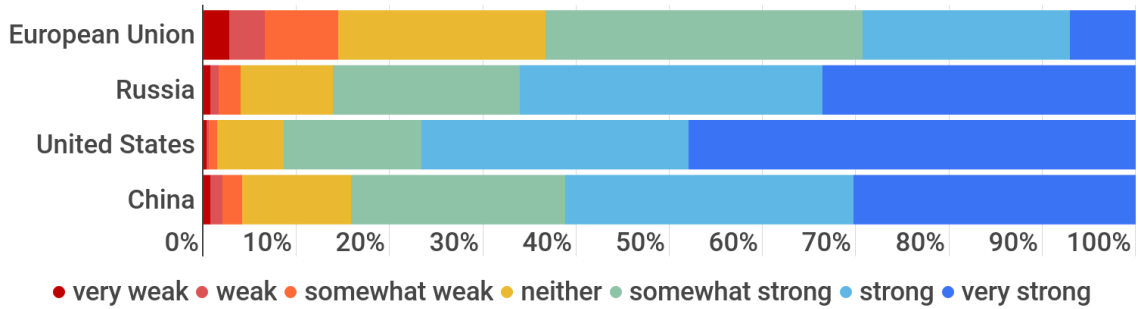


**Figure 5:** Perceptions of certain China-related issues among Polish respondents<sup>8</sup>

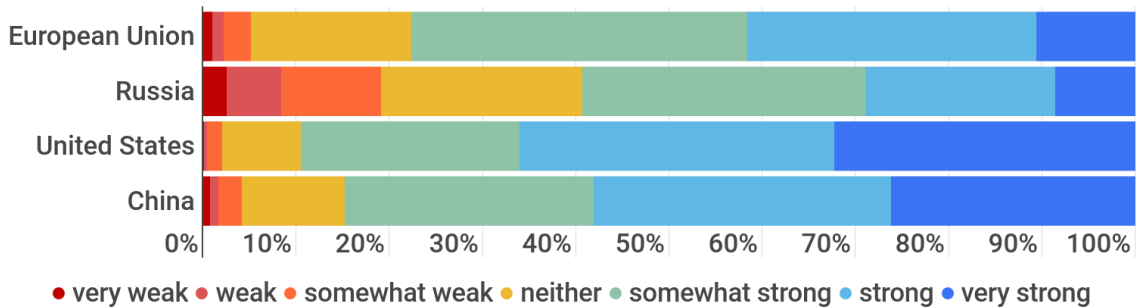


## 2 Comparing the global powers

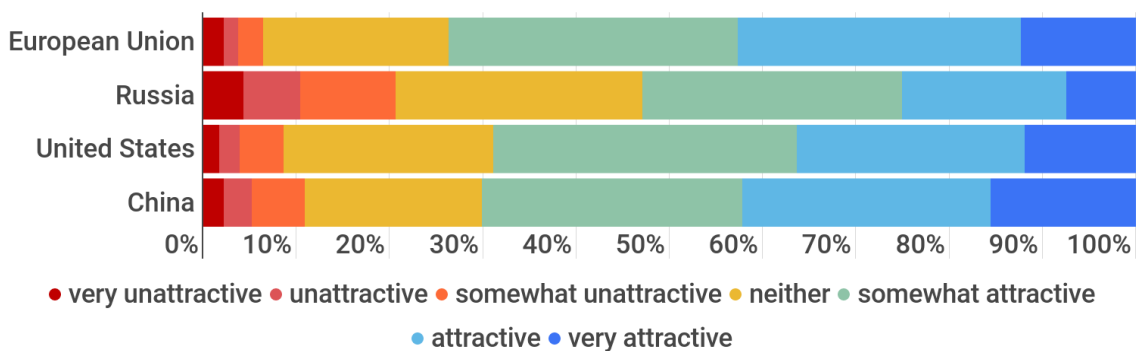
**Figure 6:** How militarily strong do you consider the following countries/entities?



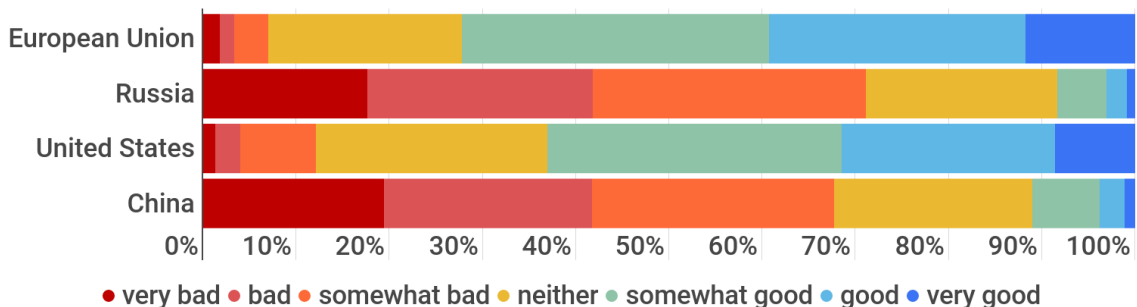
**Figure 7:** How economically strong do you consider the following countries/entities?



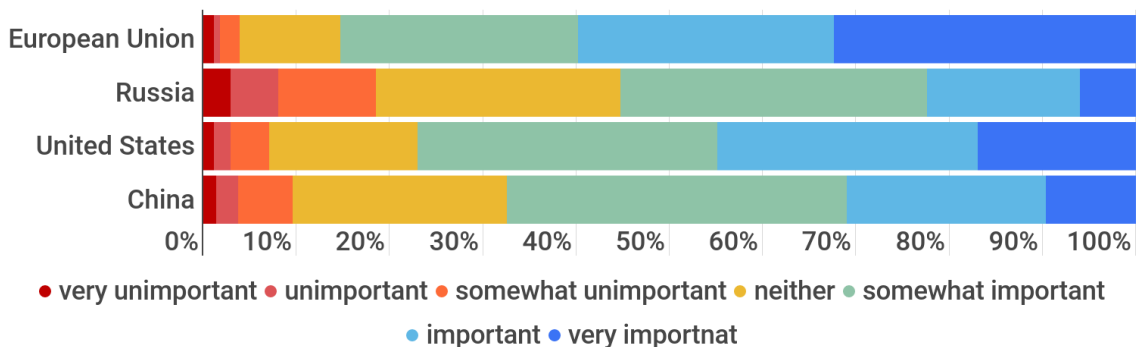
**Figure 8:** How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries/entities?



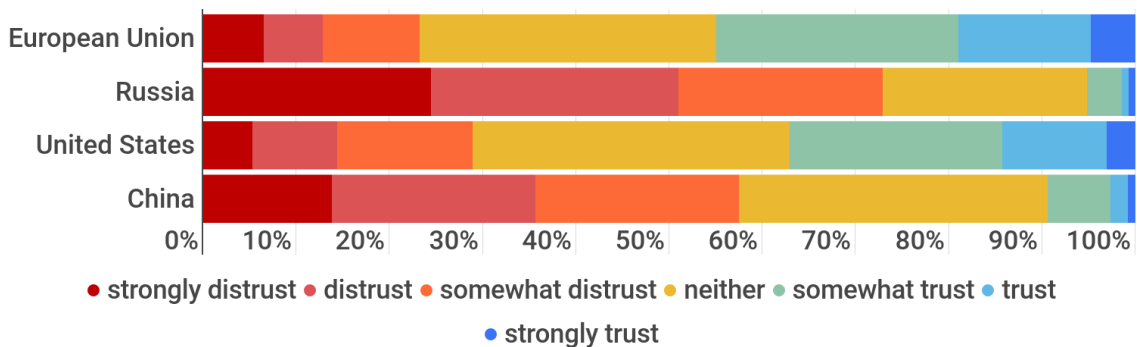
**Figure 9:** How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?



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

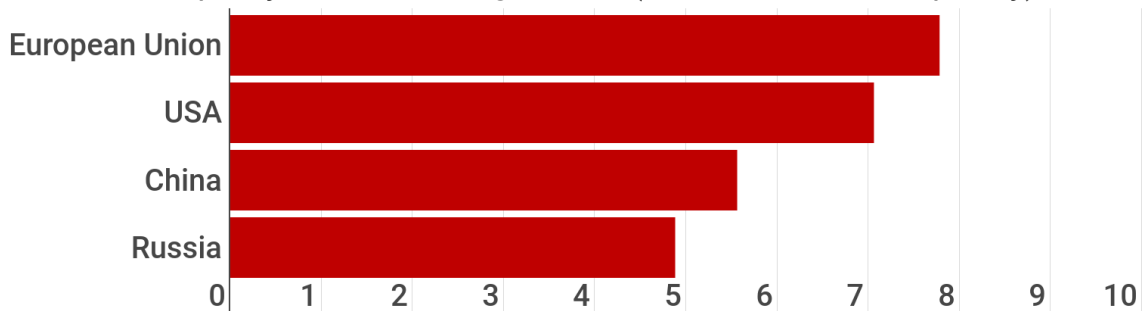


**Figure 11:** How much do you trust the following countries/entities?

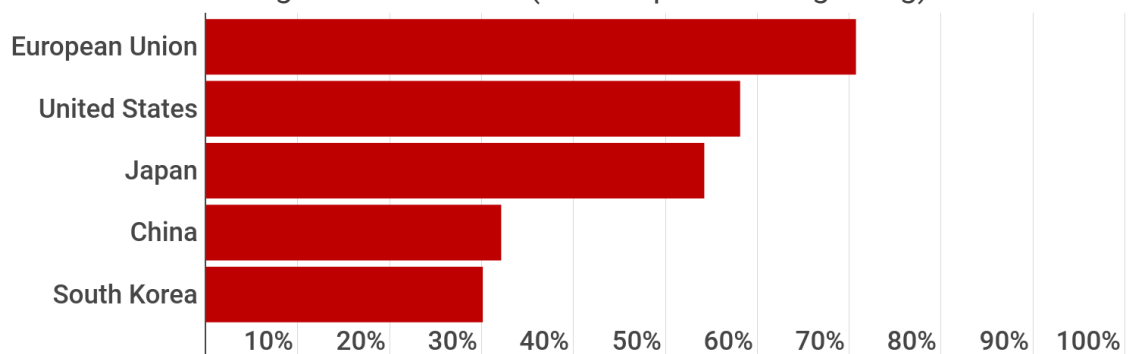


### 3 Polish policy towards China

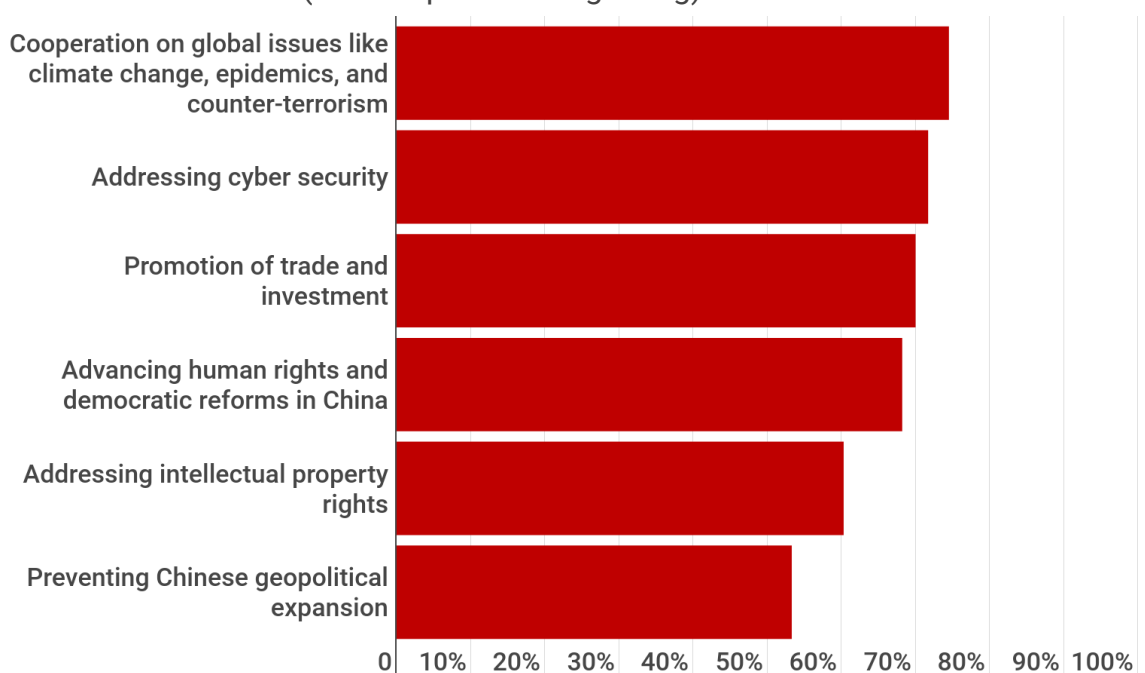
**Figure 12:** How closely should Polish foreign policy be aligned with the policy of the following actors? (0=not at all; 10=completely)<sup>9</sup>



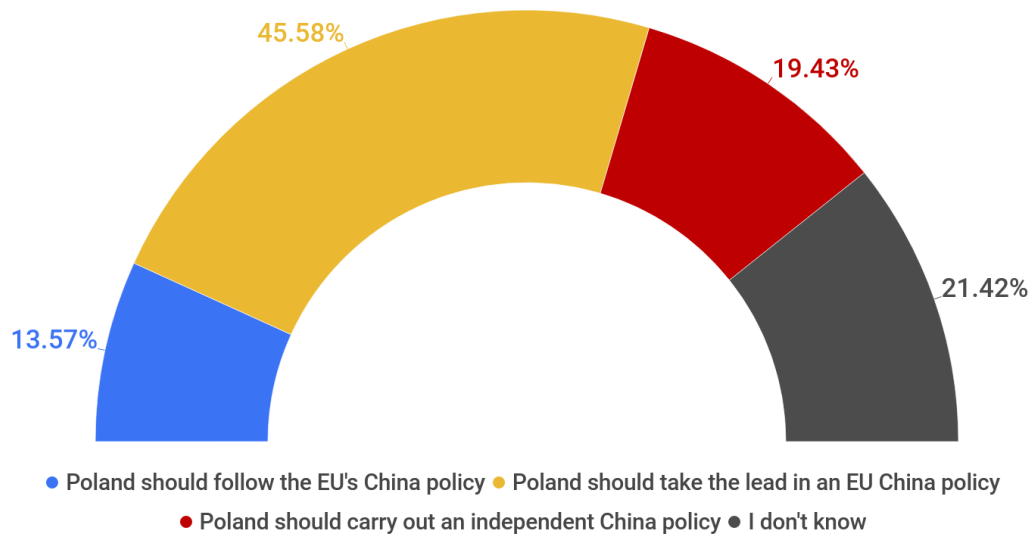
**Figure 13:** Should Poland cooperate with the following countries in building its 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)



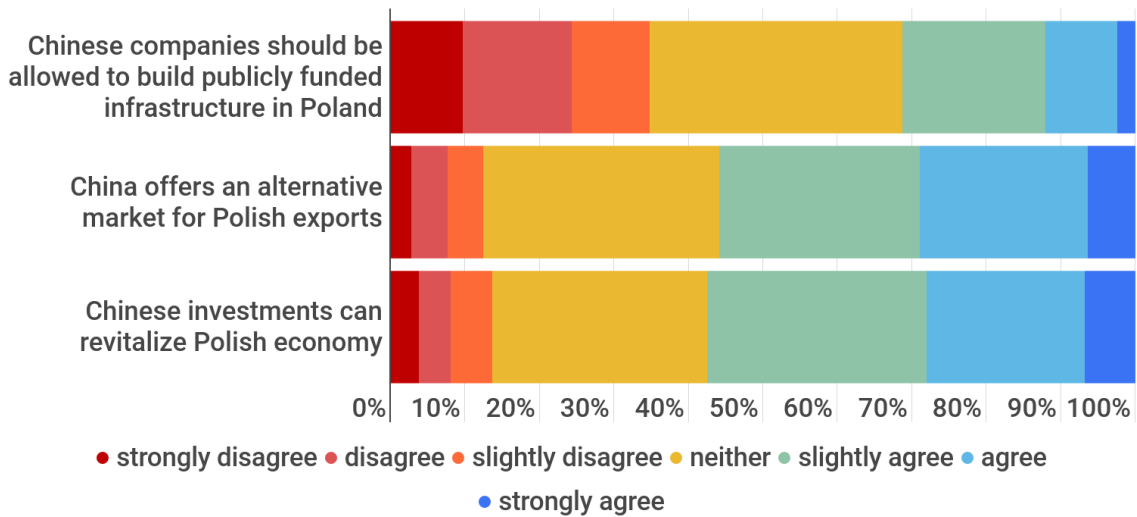
**Figure 14:** What should be Polish foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)



**Figure 15:** Should Poland pursue its own strategy towards China or contribute to an EU China strategy?

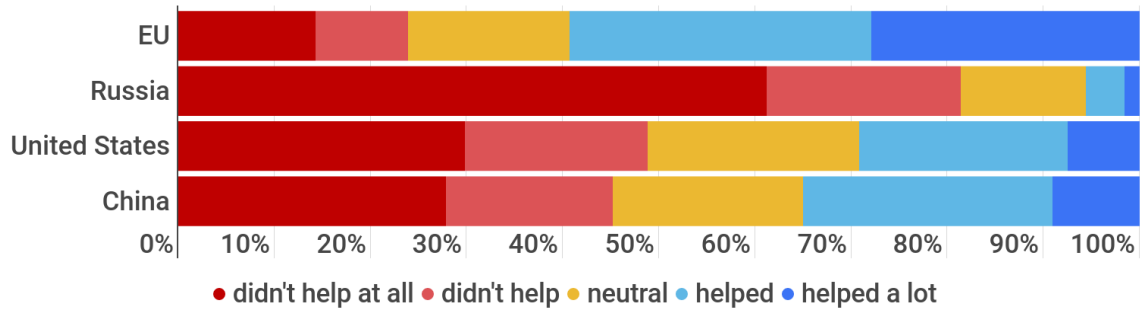


**Figure 16:** Do you agree with the following statements about Sino-Polish economic relations?

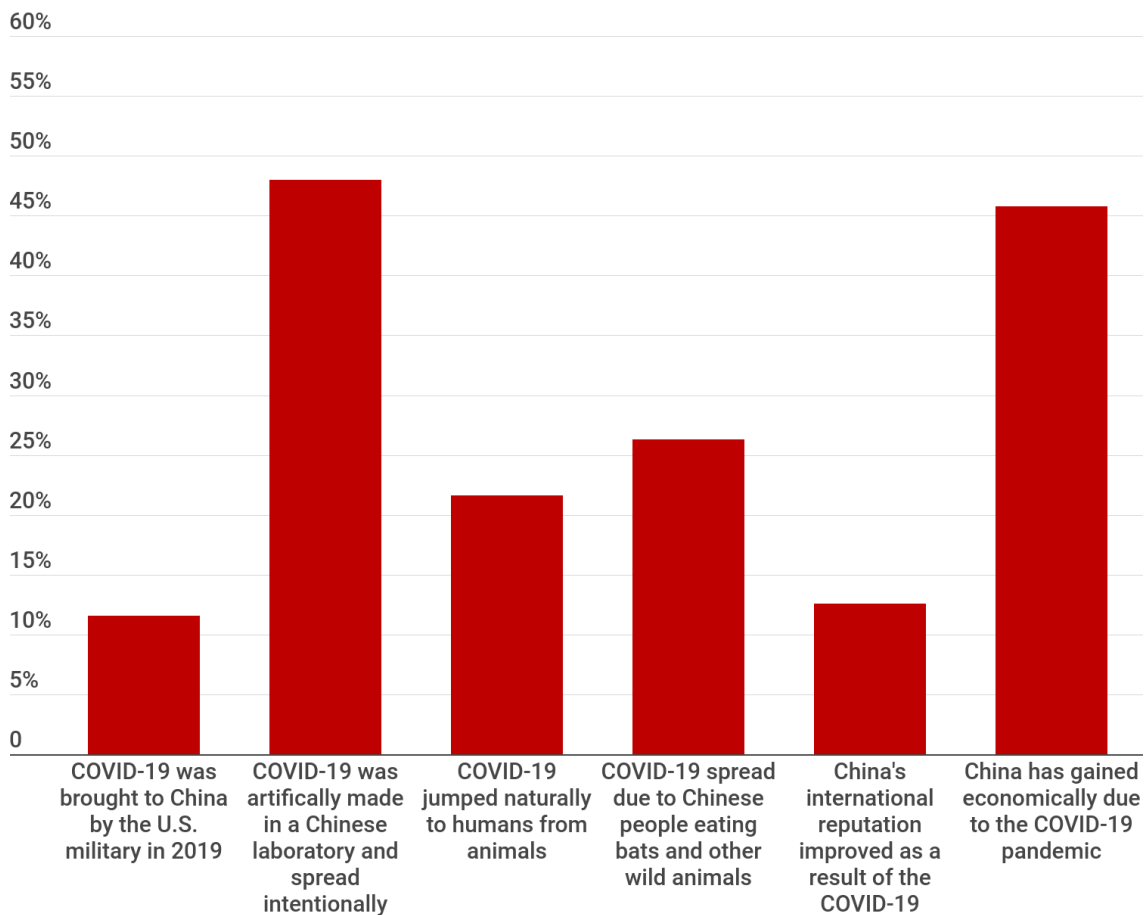


## 4 COVID-19 pandemic

**Figure 17:** How much did the following countries/entities help Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic?<sup>10</sup>

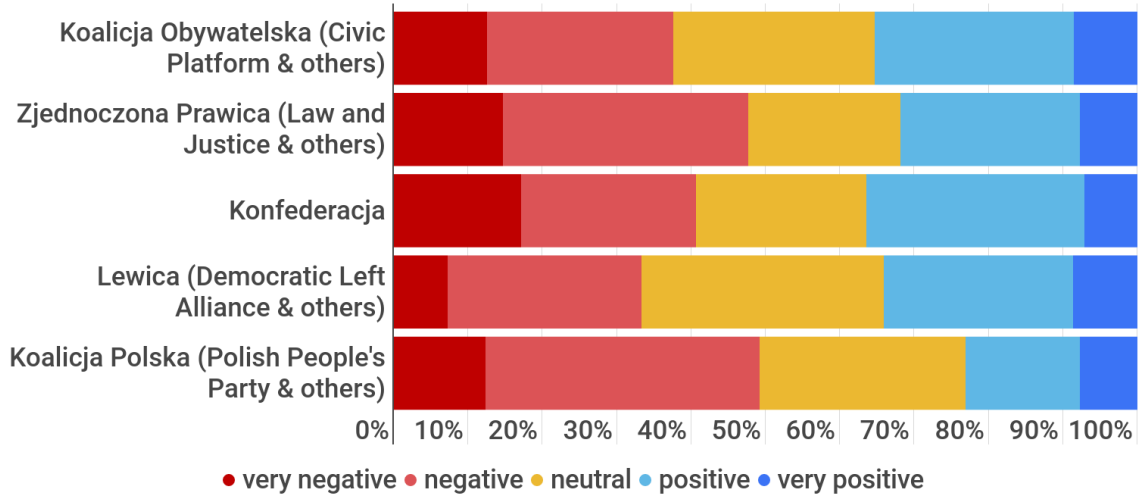


**Figure 18:** Polish views on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)

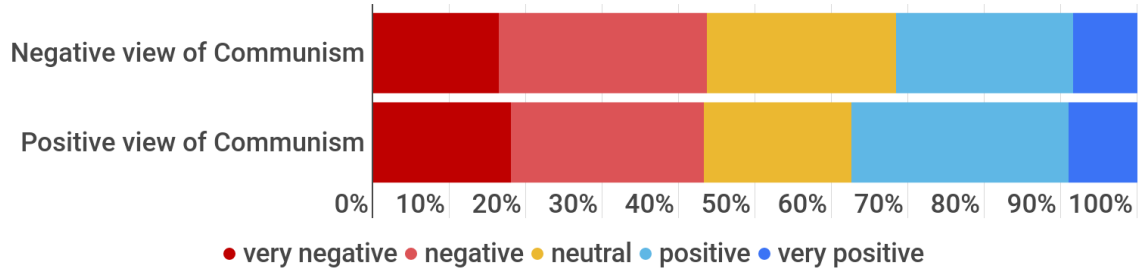


## 5 Views of China & political affiliation

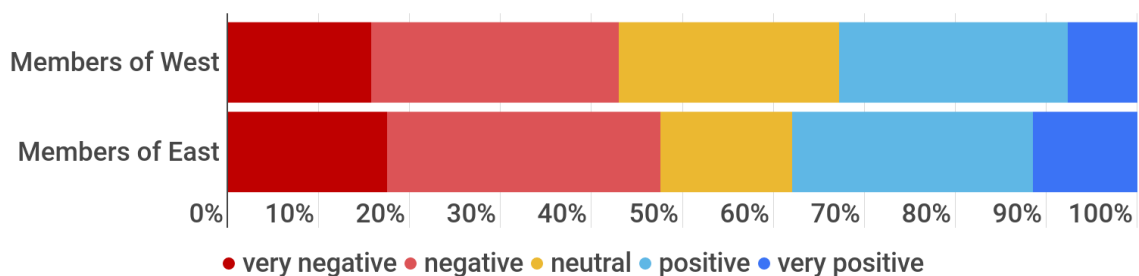
**Figure 19:** Feelings on China among voters of political parties polling over 5%<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 20:** Feelings on China according to respondents' perception of Poland's Communist past<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 21:** Feelings on China according to respondents' identification with the global West or East<sup>13</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 = 1503; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the Polish 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.
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</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>5</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>6</sup> Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis).
- <sup>7</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>8</sup> 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.
- <sup>9</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>10</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>11</sup> Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the political parties are as follows: Koalicja Obywatelska – 328, Zjednoczona Prawica – 285, Konfederacja – 170, Lewica – 138, Koalicja Polska – 65.
- <sup>12</sup> Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the categories are: Negative view of Communism: 830, Positive view of Communism: 155.
- <sup>13</sup> Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values of the categories are: Members of West: 966, Members of East: 166.

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## 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).

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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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## Polish public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19: Desirable partner versus a source of concern

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