

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

A suspicious ally

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

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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 (18 to 70 years old), level of education, country region, and settlement density.² Here, we focus on the **Russian portion of the polling**, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.³
- Overall, the Russian respondents have a **predominantly positive view of China** (61% positive, only 16% negative, the rest being neutral) (*Figure 1*). This positive **perception of China is relatively stable** among the Russian public as 57% of the respondents declared no change in their views on China in the last three years, while more than 31% even noted their sentiments towards China improved (*Figure 2*). Only 12% of the respondents said their perception of China worsened over the past three years. The results reveal that among the surveyed European countries, Russia along with Serbia currently holds the most positive attitudes to China, differing significantly when compared to the views of the EU members.
- The positive views on China prevail across the demographics. Differences in perception of China have little to do with varying age, sex, level of education, or region of residence. Even the generation gap has little observable effect as both the oldest group of respondents aged 60 to 70 (67%) and millennials aged 30 to 39 (60%) perceive China largely positively.
- China was **the most positively perceived country** out of those surveyed (*Figure 3*). It is slightly ahead of Japan (59%), Germany (58%), and France (56%). On the other hand, the U.S. is viewed the most negatively (43%).
- In general, these findings may indicate the success of the Russian government and state media in **shaping a positive image of China**

among Russians. The image of a friend is to some extent built on anti-American (but not on anti-European) sentiments.

- The first China-related association among the Russian public is a **large population**, a characteristic especially popular among East European countries. Unlike in most of the surveyed countries, COVID-19 is not present among the top three associations in Russia, being behind the **Great Wall** and **technology** (*Figure 4*).
- Russians remain united in their positive attitude toward China **regardless of political preferences**. The majority of the voters of four main political parties presented in State Duma (i.e. United Russia, Communist Party of Russian Federation, A Just Russia, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) view China positively (62% to 68% of supporters of each party) (*Figure 17*).
- There is a slightly more visible contrast in views on China between those who are satisfied with President Vladimir Putin and those who oppose his policies. **Putin's supporters tend to hold more positive attitudes towards China** (69%) than his opponents (56%) (*Figure 18*). Drawing on the findings, it could be suggested that the state-propagated narratives about China and its image as a friend of Russia may have a more profound influence on the attitudes of President Putin's supporters. Overall, almost 40% of Russians are satisfied with Putin's policy on China, while only about 18% are dissatisfied (*Figure 21*).
- The results are similar – but less visible – when looking at the historical memory of Communism (*Figure 19*) and the self-identification with the East or the West (*Figure 20*). Those who perceive the Communist past positively and consider themselves part of the East are somewhat more positive about China. These results may suggest that **Russians do not associate China very strongly with any political force and ideology**. Thus, China seems to be beyond Russian domestic political debates but being an important part of Russians' geopolitical imagination as (perhaps the only relevant) potential ally in the ongoing confrontation with the West and particularly with the U.S.

- In terms of perception of various China-related issues, Russian respondents think about trade with China, Chinese investments, and Belt and Road Initiative positively. Subsequently, Russians are neutral about the Chinese military. On the contrary, negative feelings prevail towards China's **impact on the global environment** and China's **influence on democracy in other countries** (Figure 5).
- Russians believe that China has already overtaken the U.S. and the EU on the international stage. The respondents consider China to be **militarily stronger** than the U.S. and the EU but inferior to Russia (Figure 6).
- Economically speaking, China is even regarded as **the most powerful** when compared to the U.S., EU, or Russia (Figure 7). China is then viewed as significantly more important for Russia's economic development than the U.S. and the EU (Figure 10). Respondents also find China **culturally more attractive** than the U.S. and the EU (Figure 8).
- Slightly less than 36% of Russians consider the **human rights situation** in China to be good. A somewhat larger share of respondents evaluated human rights positively in other countries/entities, including the U.S. (39%), Russia (41%), and the EU (46%). Interestingly, only about 23% of the respondents described China's human rights situation as bad which is a smaller proportion than in the case of the U.S. (30%) and Russia (32%) (Figure 9).
- Russians **trust China** more than the West, but the voices of distrust are also present. While 39% of respondents declared that they trust China, 34% neither trust nor distrust it, and about 27% expressed distrust towards China (Figure 11).
- Subsequently, 61% of Russian respondents prefer their country's **foreign policy to be aligned with China** (Figure 12). The U.S. and the EU are less attractive allies to the Russian public, with 43% and 51% respondents declaring that they would prefer Russian's foreign policy to be aligned with those actors, respectively.

- When it comes to **5G network development**, most of the Russian population (70%) prefer to **rely on Chinese producers**, followed by those preferring Japanese (64%) and South Korean (53%) producers. 50% would agree on cooperating with the EU companies and 39% on cooperation with the U.S. (*Figure 13*).
- According to the public, Russian foreign policy priorities towards China should be **cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics, counter-terrorism** (79%), and **promotion of trade and investment** (76%), followed by addressing **cyber security** (73%) and **intellectual property rights** (72%). Preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion (50%) and advancing human rights and democratic reforms in China (45%) were seen as the least important aspects in Russian policy towards China (*Figure 14*).
- Russian respondents are **less likely to blame China for spreading COVID-19**, with 22% of respondents believing that the virus was artificially made in China and spread intentionally and 26% that suppose eating habits of Chinese people to be the cause of the spread of the virus. Russians are more inclined to believe that the virus was brought to China by the U.S. military (33%). Nevertheless, the scientific consensus that the virus jumped to humans naturally from animals is supported by the highest share of the respondents (38%) (*Figure 16*).
- China is seen as providing a lot of **help to Russia** when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic – almost half of Russians consider China as helpful. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents do not think the U.S. or the EU helped their country to battle the pandemic (*Figure 15*).
- Regarding the impact of COVID-19 on China, few respondents (17%) think that China's international reputation improved during the pandemic, which may imply most of them believe the opposite. Russians are more likely (24%) to believe that **China has gained economically** from the outcomes of the pandemic (*Figure 16*).

- Russia, unlike the other countries participating in the study, shares more than the 4,000 kilometer-long border with China. As seen from the results, most Russians might hold a positive view of China, nevertheless, the perception of the “yellow peril”, which arose in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is still strong amongst the public (*Figure 22*). More than one-third of respondents agree with the statement that a significant part of the population of the Russian East are Chinese, while only 27% disagree. Moreover, 37% of respondents believe that China has plans to annex the Russian Far East and Siberia in the medium future. Almost 40% and 47% of Russians agree with the statements that China controls natural resources and arable lands of eastern Russia, respectively. Environmental concerns are the most prominent – 57% of respondents consider Chinese enterprises in the Russian borderlands to be a threat to the local environment.

1 Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1: Feeling towards China among Russian respondents⁴

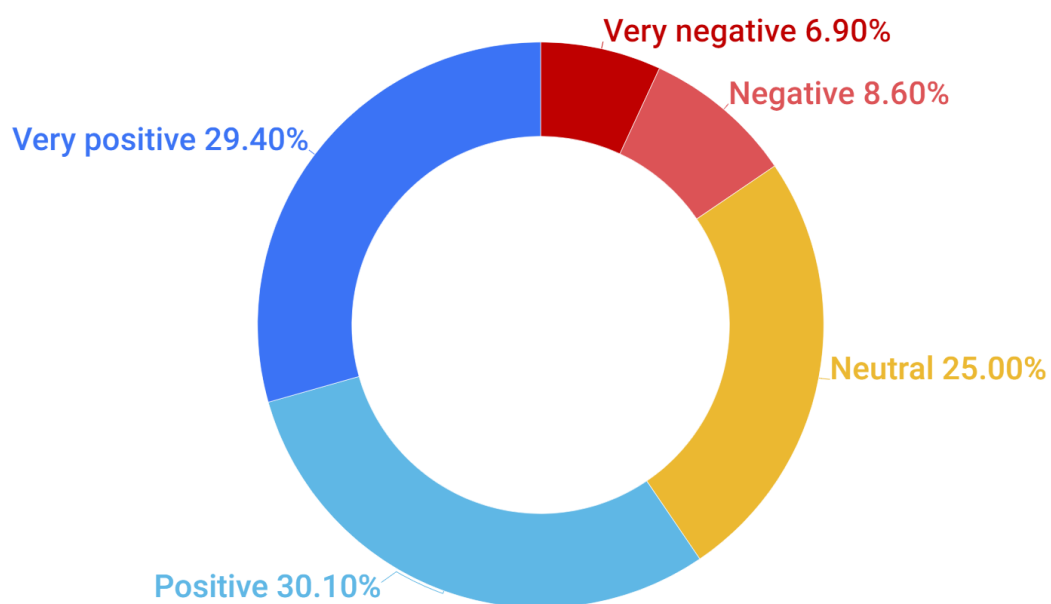


Figure 2: Change of feeling towards China among Russian respondents in the past three years⁵

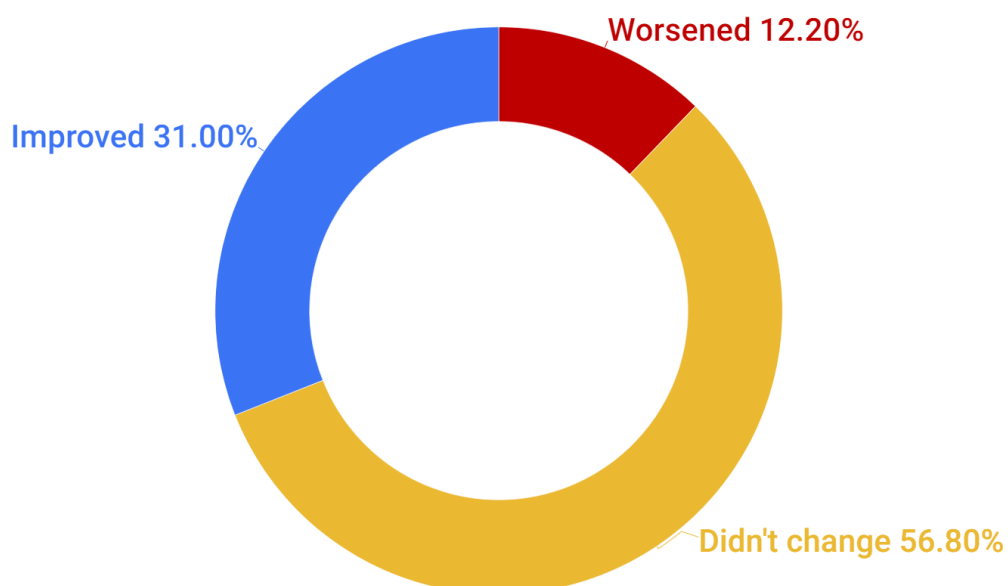


Figure 3: Feeling towards select countries among Russian respondents⁶

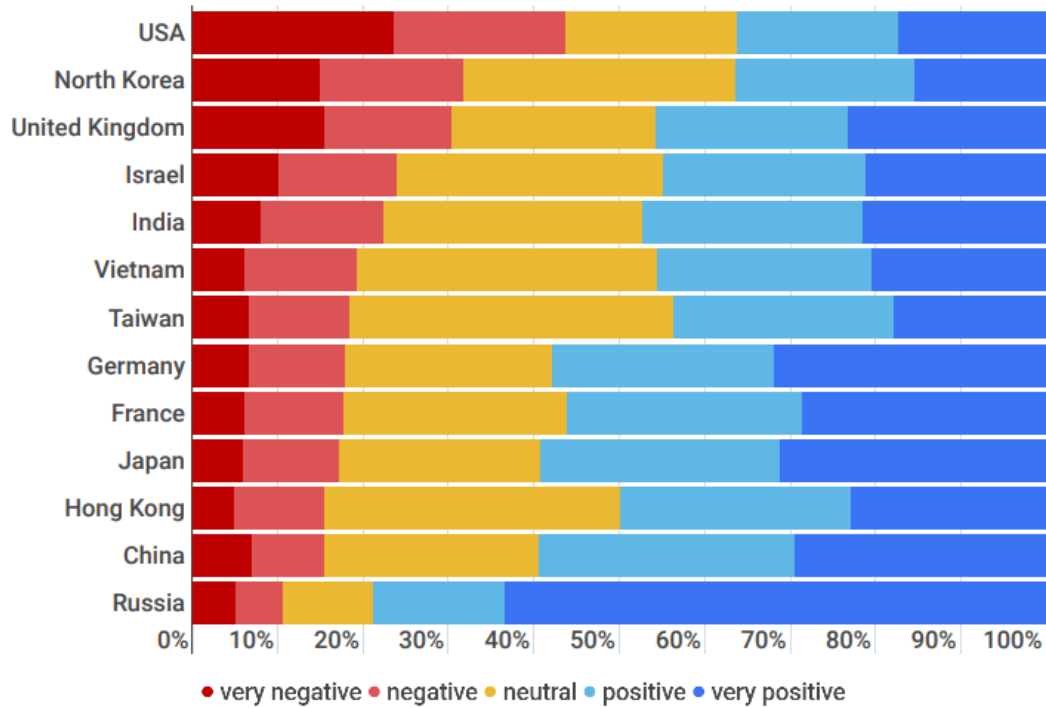
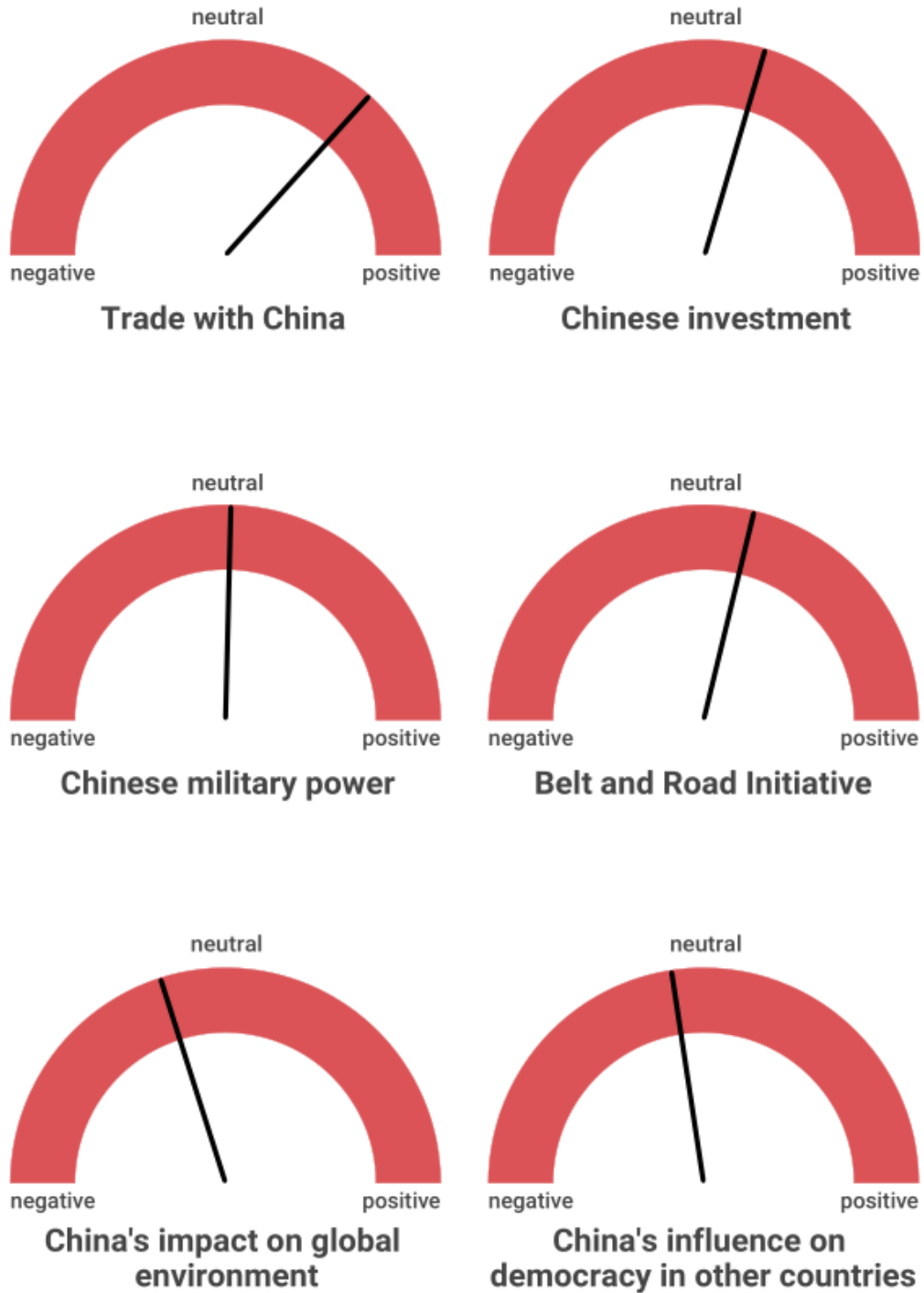


Figure 4: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?⁷



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



2 Comparing the global powers

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

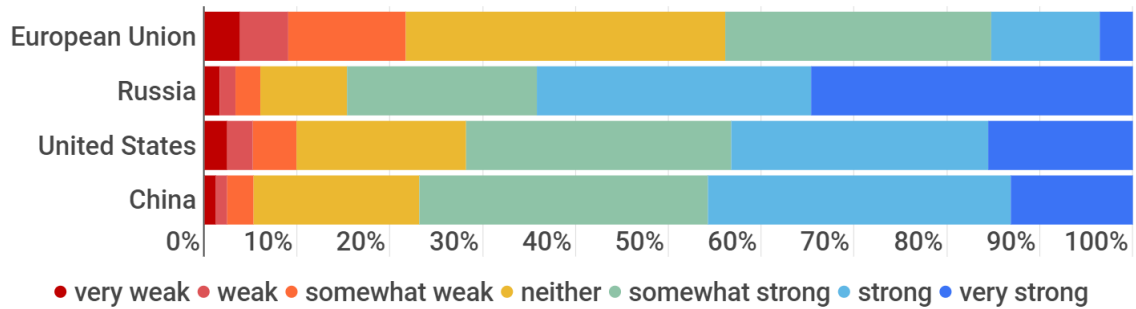


Figure 7: How economically strong do you consider the following countries/entities?

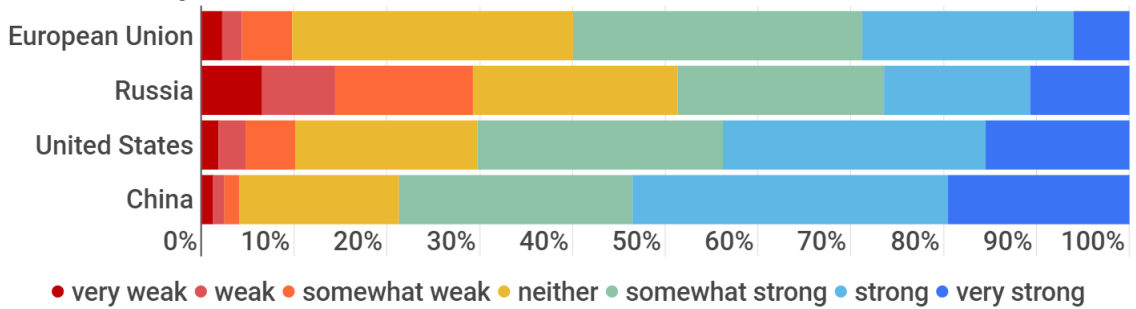


Figure 8: How culturally attractive do you consider the following countries/entities?

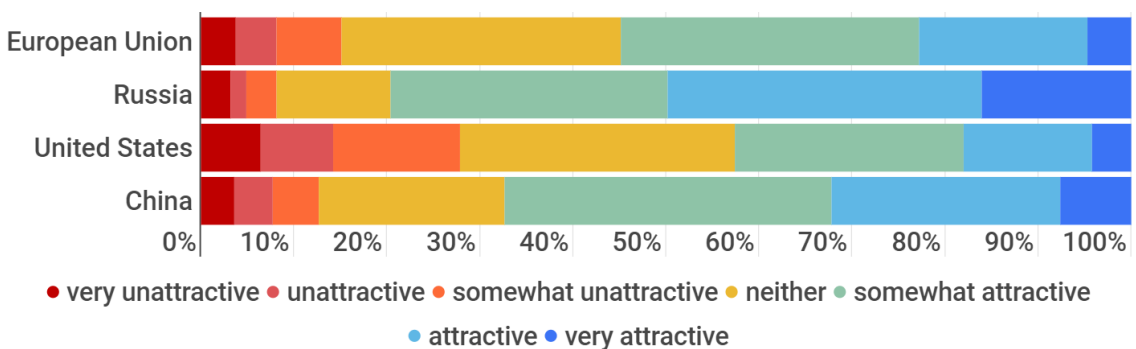


Figure 9: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?

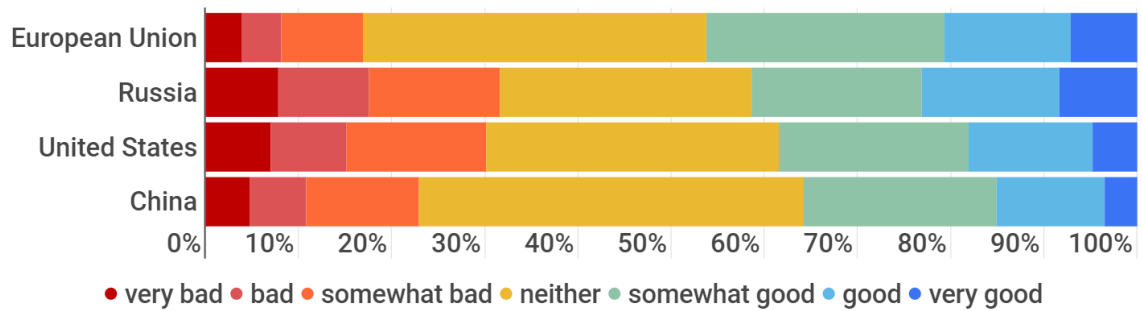


Figure 10: How important are the following countries/entities to the economic development of Russia?

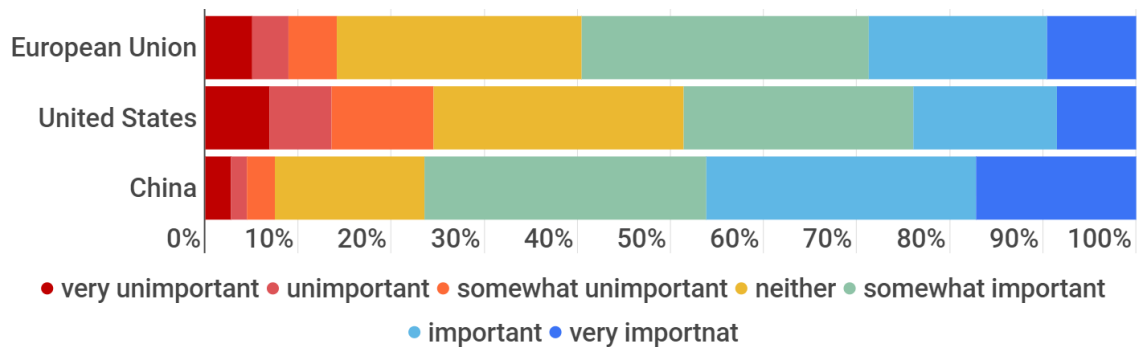
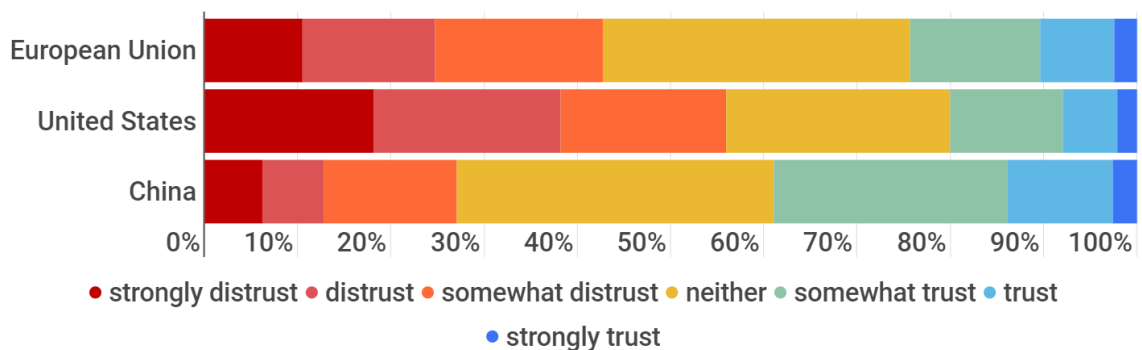


Figure 11: How much do you trust the following countries/entities?



3 Russian foreign policy towards China

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

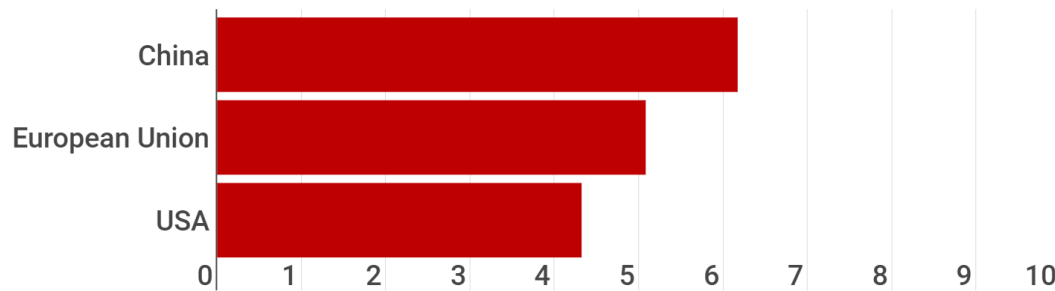


Figure 13: Should Russia cooperate with the following countries in building its 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)

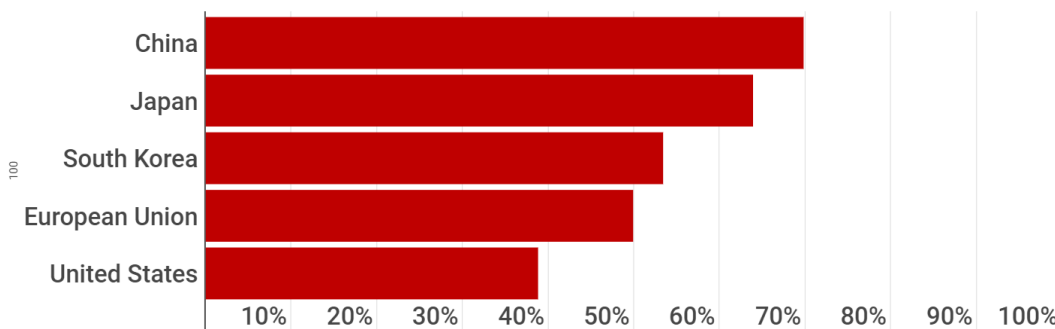
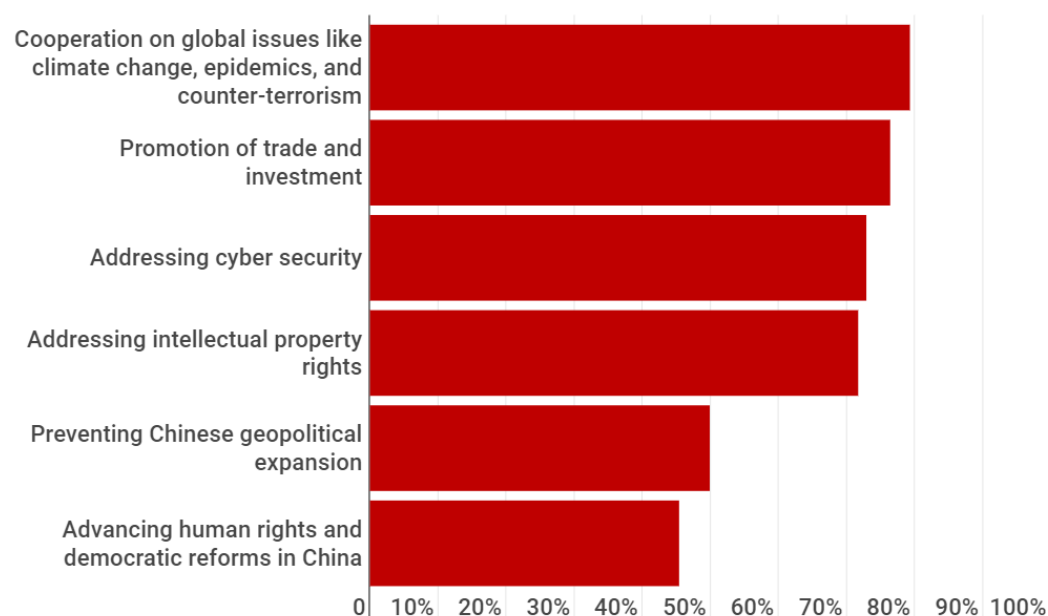


Figure 14: What should be Russian foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)



4 COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 15: How much did the following countries/entities help Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic?¹⁰

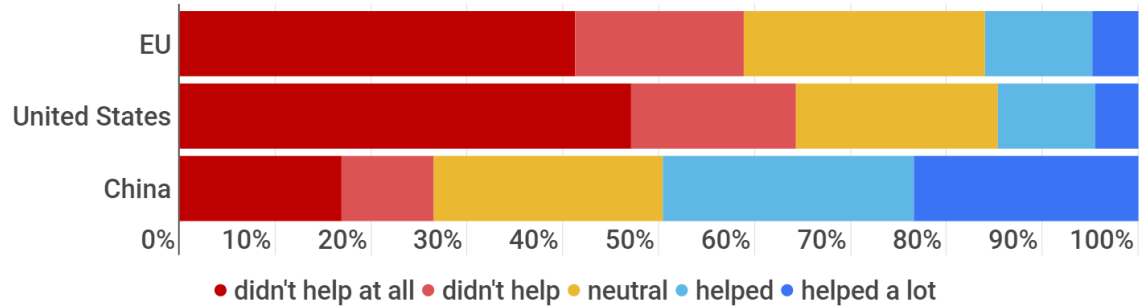
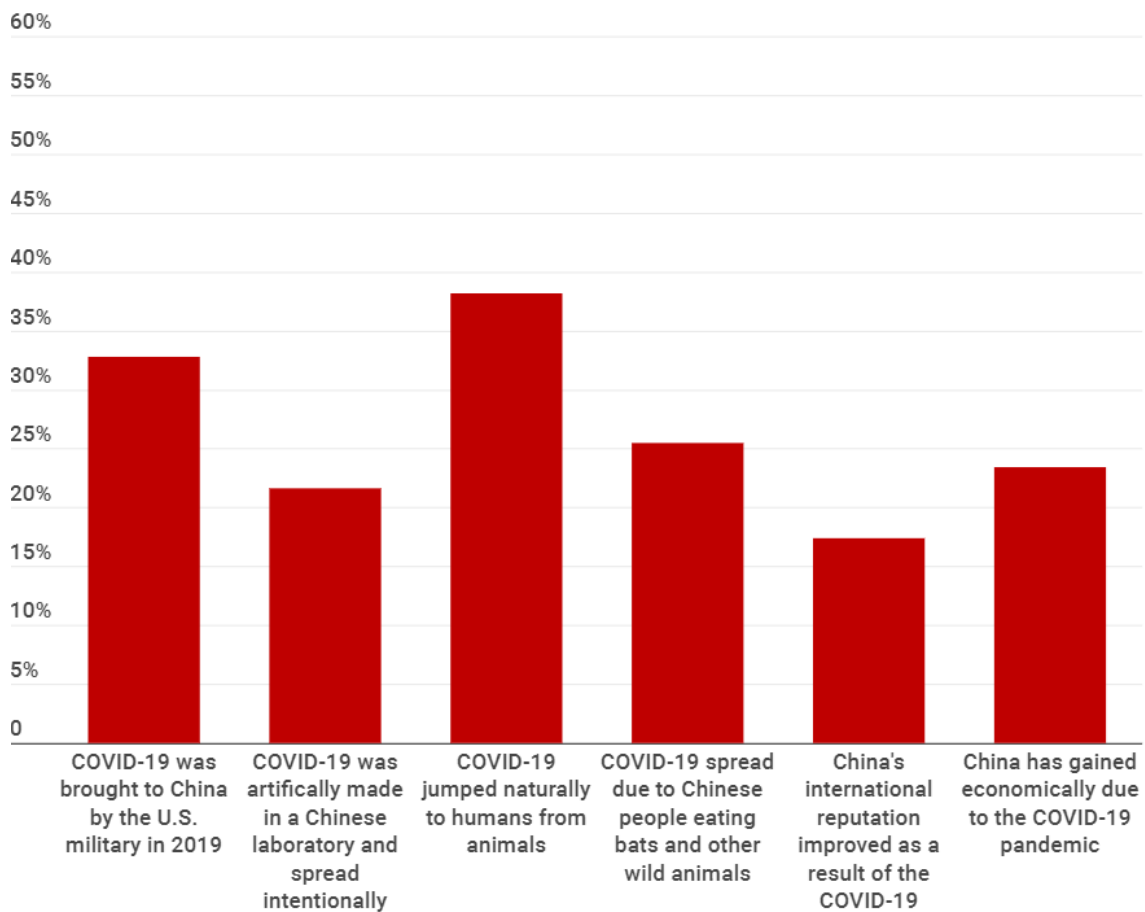


Figure 16: Views of Russians on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)



5 Views of China & political affiliation

Figure 17: Feelings on China among voters of political parties polling over 5%¹¹

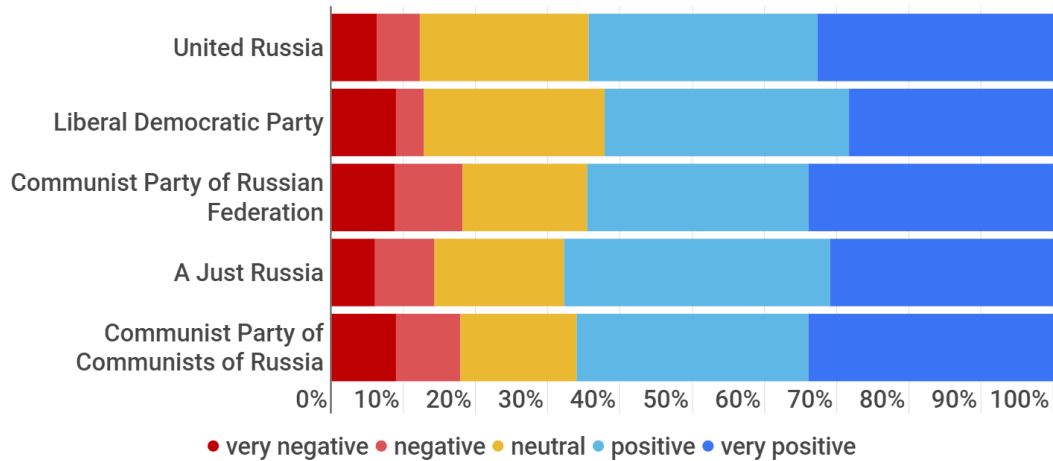


Figure 18: Feelings on China according to respondents' satisfaction with President Vladimir Putin's policies¹²

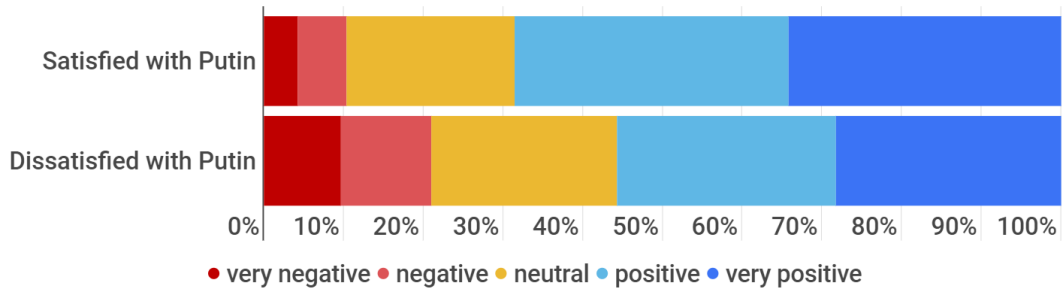


Figure 19: Feelings on China according to respondents' perception of Russia's Communist past¹³

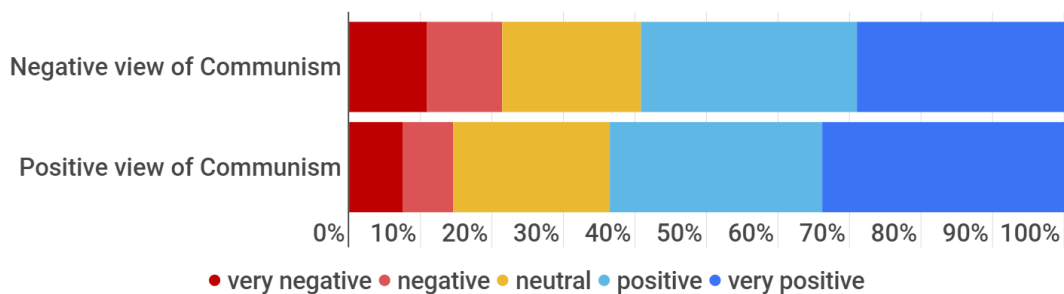


Figure 20: Feelings on China according to respondents' self-identification with the global West or global East¹⁴

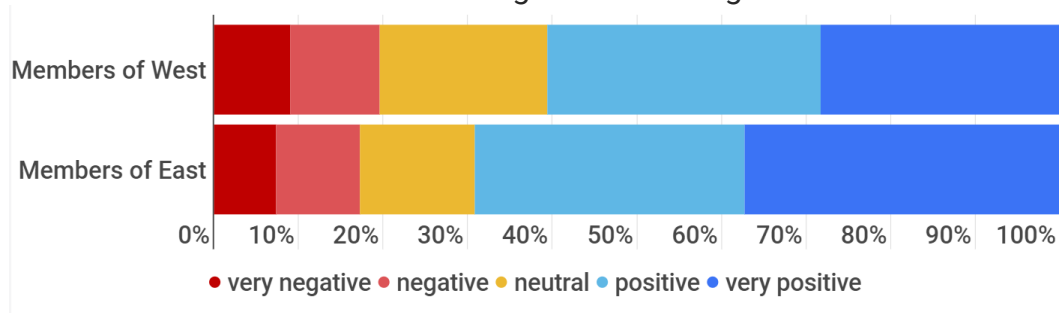


Figure 21: Satisfaction with President Vladimir Putin's activities towards China

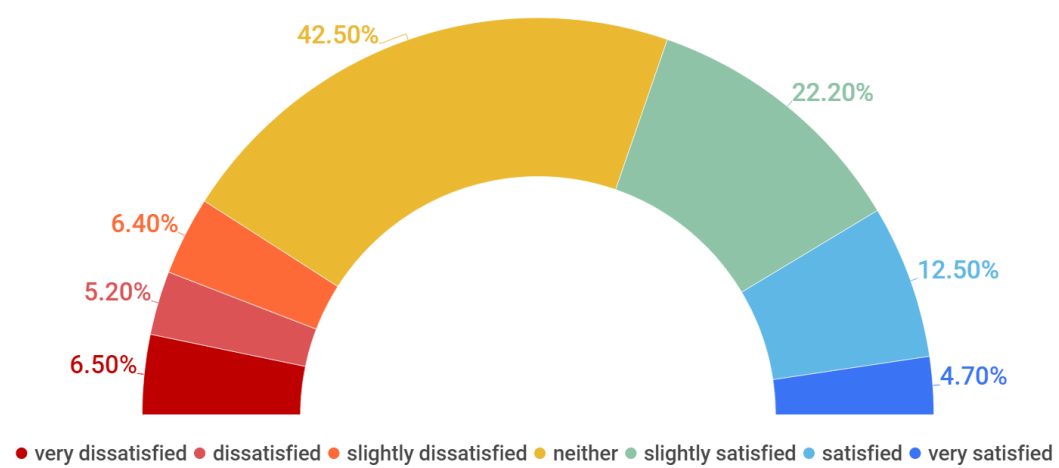
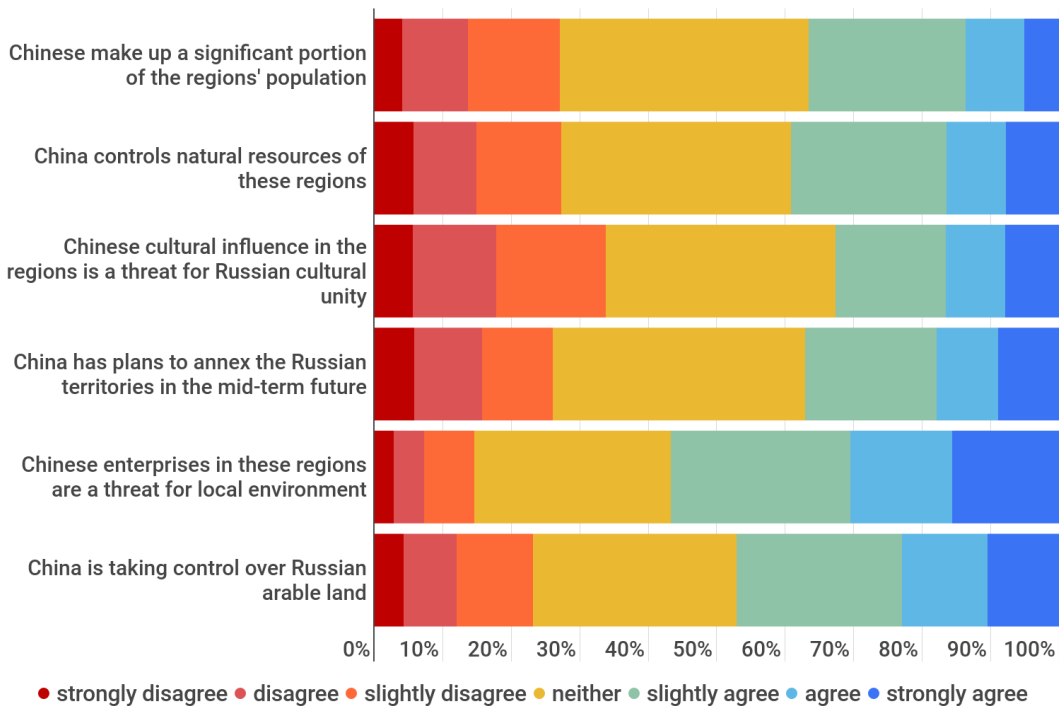


Figure 22: Views of Russians on Russian Far East and China



Endnotes

- ¹ Turcsányi, Richard Q., Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Čeněk, Kristina Kironská, 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 Rühlig, and Tim Summers. 2020. "Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey." Palacky 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 = 1540; unless indicated otherwise, all charts in this report calculate with this number of respondents in the survey. The sample is representative of the Russian 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 Simalcík, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková, Jiří Čeněk, 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 Rühlig, 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: United Russia – 199; Liberal Democratic Party – 177; Communist Party of Russian Federation – 132; A Just Russia – 88; Communist Party of Communists of Russia – 55.
- ¹² Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the categories are: satisfied with Putin: 589; dissatisfied with Putin: 613.
- ¹³ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the categories are: negative view of Communism: 319; positive view of Communism: 901.
- ¹⁴ Supra note 4 (mutatis mutandis). N-values for the categories are: members of the West: 555; members of the East: 354.

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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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Editor: Richard Q. Turcsányi

Layout and cover design: Matej Šimalčík

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Published by:

Central European Institute of Asian Studies
Murgašova 2, 811 04 Bratislava, Slovakia
www.ceias.eu
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© Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020

ISBN: 978-80-8239-004-2



ISBN 978-80-8239-004-2