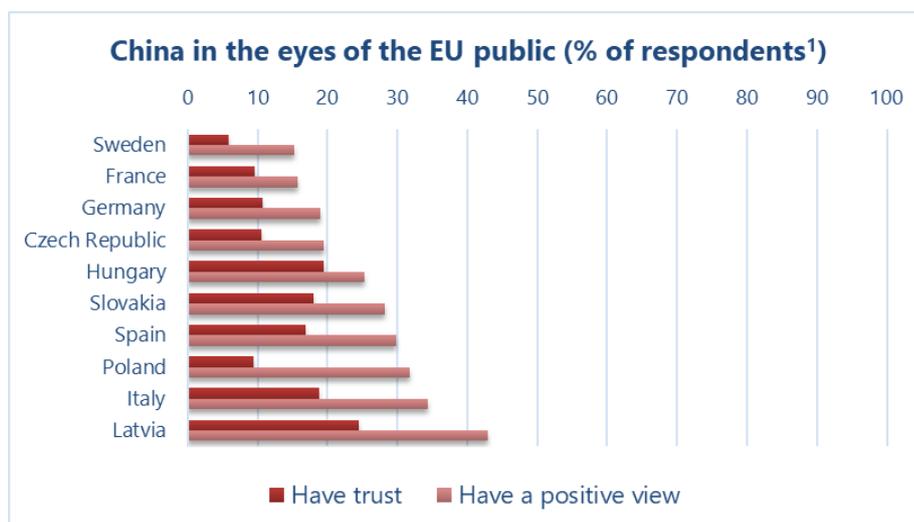


European Public United on China: selective cooperation in spite of negative perceptions

The extensive unique public opinion survey, conducted as part of the Sinophone Borderlands project in ten EU countries, shows solid common ground among the general public in terms of negative (and worsening) perceptions of China, while at the same time preferring EU-China cooperation on global issues. This provides a positive starting point for a unified and strong EU position vis-à-vis China.

Key recommendations

- The EU and its member states should take into account public opinion when conducting relations with China. In fact, EU-China relations have become a matter of public discussion, hence, public opinion is likely to influence the policies of the EU and its member states.
- Considering the public perception of China, the EU institutions and governments should continue insisting on European values in their relations with China, while at the same time working with China on critical issues of global governance. The EU's three-sided definition of China as a "partner, competitor and systemic rival" is a good starting framework but it requires specification.
- The relatively small differences between the public views of China in EU member states and low variance within individual countries are conducive preconditions for developing a unified European China policy. Relations with China are and will remain an important factor for achieving internal coherence of the EU and its member states, as well as its common ability to speak and act internationally.



¹ Feelings towards China were measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as "very negative" (0-20), "negative" (21-45), "neutral" (46-54), "positive" (55-79), and "very positive" (80-100). Here only "positive" and "very positive" (merged) are visualized.

The respondents were asked „How much do you trust or distrust the following countries/entities?“ and offered 7 options: strongly distrust, distrust, somewhat distrust, neither trust nor distrust, somewhat trust, trust, strongly trust. Here the options somewhat trust, trust, and strongly trust (merged) are visualized.

What is the problem?

The EU and its member states are in the process of recalibrating their approach towards China, which has become one of the most important foreign policy challenges. This adjustment is driven by various factors including changes in China's domestic and international behaviour, growing tensions between China and the U.S., and the generally changing international environment in which the EU finds itself.

The EU has long been called "divided" on various issues, with foreign policy in general and China in particular being often raised as key concerns. Some national governments have been criticized for being "pro-China", while others have been seen as looking at their own narrowly defined goals and sacrificing long-term interests and core values of the EU as a whole. Public discussions on China sometimes even evolve into fighting between seemingly contradictory positions of those favouring economic exchanges or cooperation with China, and those emphasizing human rights issues or political and security implications. China itself has been criticized for stirring up these divisions by focusing on larger member states on the one hand, and groups of countries (such as in Central and Eastern Europe) on the other.

These alleged divisions within Europe are not reflected in European public opinion, as demonstrated in a new unique public opinion survey conducted in ten EU countries (Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Latvia; the survey also included three non-EU countries: UK, Serbia, Russia). The opinion poll was conducted in September and October 2020, online on nationally representative research samples with a total of 19 673 respondents. [The survey report](#) revealed that the public attitudes towards China across the EU members states are relatively similar, especially when compared with Russia and Serbia. This policy brief focuses on these similarities in order to propose recommendations for EU's China policy which would be based within broad public preferences.

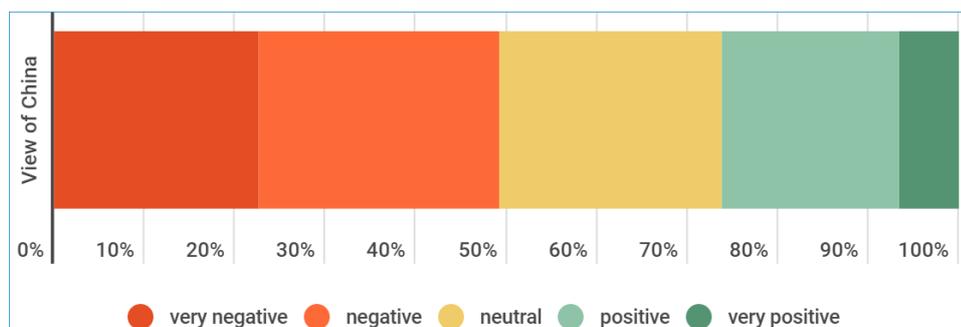


Figure 2
**Feelings towards
China in the surveyed
EU countries
(mean values²)**

² Feelings towards China were measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale.

Europeans are relatively united in terms of their views of China and their preference for various policy options, with little differences across the member states and supporters of various political parties. The public image of China in the EU is predominantly negative, and it has become significantly more so recently as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the worsening human rights situation in China, cyber security issues, and increasingly confrontational displays of Chinese foreign policy. Of all the surveyed EU member states, negative perception of China is strongest in Sweden (67% of respondents) followed by France and Germany (both 62%). Latvia is the only surveyed EU member state in which positive sentiment towards China (43%) outnumbers negative views (28%). Furthermore, all EU countries considered, China is not seen as a trusted international partner and addressing cybersecurity is one of the key concerns regarding China.

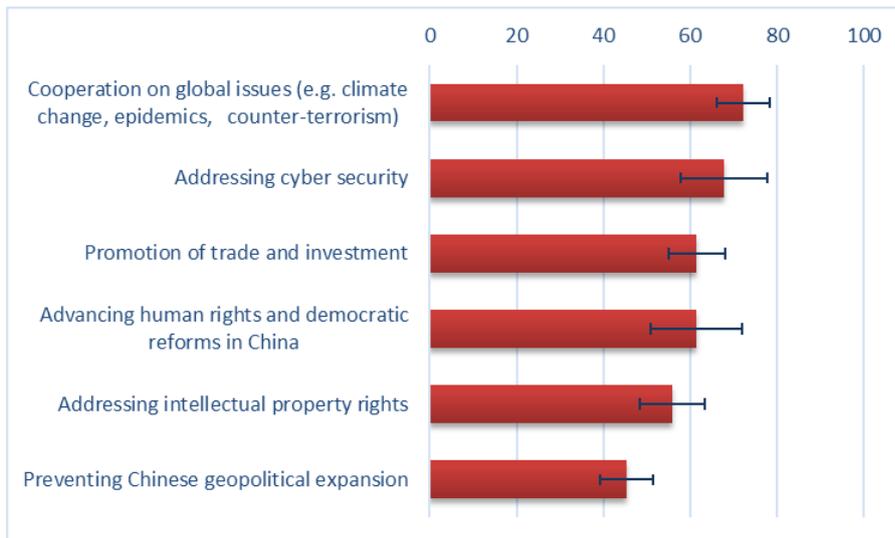


Figure 3

Desired national foreign policy priorities on China (% of respondents agreeing³)

³ Desired foreign policy priorities were given as multiple choices. The chart shows the combined mean values for the surveyed EU countries. Individual values for each country are given in the referenced report. Bars indicate standard deviations.

In all the surveyed EU member states, cyber security ranks at least third when it comes to policy priorities in cooperation with China. For Spanish and French respondents, cybersecurity is even the most important policy priority towards China. Moreover, [in Germany](#), which is China's largest trading partner in the EU, there is support for more emphasis on human rights, even while it is acknowledged that this would translate into economic costs. Almost 44% of German respondents are willing to pay an economic price, with only 19% disagreeing with a prioritization for human rights at that cost. In fact, in most EU countries, Europeans do not see trade and investments with China very positively. Hence, while China remains one of the key EU external economic partners, European public opinion has lost much of the enthusiasm for economic exchanges with China.

However, despite the negative views and the lack of trust, Europeans still want to cooperate with China when it comes to global issues, such as climate change, pandemics, and counterterrorism, and they do not want to engage in a geopolitical struggle with China.

Moreover, while the human rights situation in China is recognized as very problematic and support for policies highlighting human rights exists, in most countries human rights concerns are ranked after the preference for cooperation on global issues and addressing cyber security. To understand these results, one needs to take into consideration the timing of the survey amid a global pandemic that might have brought the need for global cooperation to the attention of the respondents. Still, the high priority of cooperation on global issues is also in line with Europeans' view of China's global environmental impact as one of the most negative aspects of Chinese international activities, roughly on par with actions of the Chinese military or China's impact on democracy in other countries. Besides, Europeans sceptic view on engagement in geopolitical struggle could also be a sign of little confidence in Europe's own international power.

Why is this issue important for understanding China's presence in Europe?

As a democratic polity, the EU and its member states should strive for policies which enjoy broad public support. In fact, public opinion is likely to influence policies especially on issues which become matters of extensive public discussions. Engaging in relations with China opens many challenges in this regard especially because of the contradictory characteristics of China and its international roles, identified also by the EU framework of seeing China as a "partner, competitor, and rival", all at the same time. In the meantime, China and the EU-China relations have become a matter of public discussion.

At present, there is a solid common ground among the citizens of various EU member states when it comes to China, which is a positive starting point for a common EU position vis-à-vis China. Moreover, looking inside the individual EU countries, in most cases (including Germany, France, Sweden, or Poland) there is a near consensus on the general view of China among the voters of various political parties. Again, this can be interpreted as a good signal and efforts should be made to preserve this situation and avoid politicization. If China becomes a dividing issue within the EU member states or among them, it would be more difficult to foster a stable and functional policy approach. Besides, a more divided EU might make it easier for external forces to block or even hijack the EU's 'China policy' against the wishes and interests of its citizens.

Read the research that informed this brief:

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 Gledić, Peter Gries, Sergei Ivanov, Björn Jerdén, Marc Julienne, Tamás Matura, Tim Rühlig, and Tim Summers: *European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19. Differences and common ground across the continent* (Palacky University Olomouc, 2020)

Available at: <https://sinofon.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-final.pdf>

This policy brief has used survey data produced as part of Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges, a research project of Palacky University Olomouc, Czech Republic, financed by the European Regional Development Fund (CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791). As part of the project, a large scale (n=19 673) survey in 13 European countries was conducted in September and October 2020 studying public attitudes towards China and many related issues. The survey is the most comprehensive and detailed survey of European public opinion on China. Information about the project, its partners and publications are available at www.sinofon.cz/surveys.

This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA18215 - China In Europe Research Network, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research, career and innovation.

<https://www.cost.eu/>

<https://china-in-europe.net/>

Get in touch with the authors:

Richard Turcsanyi, Palacky University Olomouc richard.turcsanyi@upol.cz

Jelena Gledić, University of Belgrade jelenagledic@gmail.com

Tim Rühlig, Swedish Institute of International Affairs tim.ruhlig@ui.se

Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Riga Stradins University una.berzina-cerenkova@rsu.lv