world power

development

hardworking

large population

tradition

large country

Communism

authoritarian

lack of freedom

COVID-19

rice

food

Great Wall

technology

forgery

dog eating

exploitation

work

modern

culture

new number 1

greatness

pollution

dictatorship

trade

lack of rights

production

economy

innovation

history

technologically advanced

economic power

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

Longing for economic engagement amid general distrust

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Contents

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 Italian portion of the polling, building on the previously published report comparing the results across the 13 countries.[3]

- Overall, the Italian public **leans towards a negative view of China** (42% negative, 23.5% neutral, 34.5% positive) *(Figure 1)*. China is the fourth most negatively perceived country in Italy, with only Vietnam, Israel, and North Korea considered in a more negative light. Interestingly, another East-Asian state, Japan, enjoys the status of the most positively perceived country, followed by the UK and the US *(Figure 3)*.

- More than a third (38.5%) of the respondents assert that their **image of China has worsened** during the previous three years, while only 17% acknowledge an improvement *(Figure 2)*.

- The **most common association** related to China is COVID-19 *(Figure 4)*. This may relate to both a negative perception of China as being the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to a more positive account, as **China is considered the country that helped Italy the most during the pandemic** *(Figure 18)*. "Technology," "number 1" and "communism" also rank high as terms commonly related to China. On the contrary, "lack of freedom" and "lack of rights" are seldom associated with China.

- The most negative feelings stem from **China's impact on the global environment**, the influence of China on **cybersecurity**, and **economic espionage** *(Figure 5)*. The Italian public also holds a negative perception of China's **military power**, as well as its **influence on democracy in other countries** and its **rise as a major global power**. However, China's **technological development** enjoys a positive consideration, and the same goes for **trade** with China, Chinese **investments, and Belt and Road Initiative**. These results seem to highlight that economic exchanges with

China are seen relatively positively in Italy, making it somewhat different from other European countries.

- In the eyes of the Italians, the **EU** is considered the **most positive international partner** Italy should **align its foreign policy** with, followed by the US, Russia, and lastly China *(Figure 12)*.

- As far as the development of **5G technology** is concerned, 61.5% of the respondents support Italy's cooperation with the EU companies, followed by 51% favoring cooperation with Japanese companies and 47.5% with the U.S. companies. A lower portion of respondents (36.5%) would employ Chinese technology, and only 29% would turn to South Korea's technological support in this matter *(Figure 13)*.

- Regarding the relationship with Beijing, 33% of respondents believe that Italy should pursue an **independent China policy** while 24.5% think it should take the lead in the EU's China policy. Only 16% agree that Italy should follow the EU's China policy *(Figure 15)*.

- The **Belt and Road Initiative** (BRI) is seen as beneficial for Italy by 37.5% of respondents, although overall about half of Italians have a neutral stance regarding the initiative *(Figure 17)*. Tellingly, Rome and Beijing signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI in March 2019, making Italy the only G7 country and founding member of the EU to do so. Against this backdrop, there is also general agreement with the idea that **Italy should cooperate more with China** (48% agree, 36% neutral, 16% disagree) *(Figure 16)*.

- Subsequently, among the policy options, **cooperation on global issues** such as **climate change**, **epidemics control**, and **counter-terrorism** are seen as the most desirable policies towards China, whereas preventing Chinese **geopolitical expansion** emerged as the least desirable choice. Advancing **human rights** and **democratic reforms** in China, and the **promotion of trade and investments** receive roughly an equal deal of consensus as global policy options from the Italian public *(Figure 14)*.

- There are considerable differences among the voters of various political parties when it comes to their views of China. The most positive views of China are among those voting for the center-right party "Forza Italia",

while the most negative are the voters of the two biggest Italian right-wing parties, "Lega" (the League, previously known as "Northern League") and "Fratelli d'Italia" (Brothers of Italy). The voters of the "Movimento Cinque Stelle" (Five Star Movement) and the center-left party "Partito Democratico" (Democratic Party), currently forming the ruling coalition, appear somewhere in between *(Figure 20)*.

- **Compared to other major global powers**, China is the least trusted partner among Italians, with a combined 46.5% expressing different degrees of distrust and 13,5% strong distrust. A combined 19% said they trust China to some extent. Moscow scores better than Beijing, with 23% of the respondents expressing trust, but lags significantly behind the US (37%) and the EU (43%) *(Figure 11)*.

- China is viewed as the **most powerful country in economic terms** (84% of the respondents consider it strong and only 4% weak). The US slightly lags behind China, while the EU is seen as the weakest, being overtaken by Russia *(Figure 7)*. However, in terms of **importance for Italy's development**, the EU is perceived as the most important actor, followed by the US and China, with Russia ranking fourth *(Figure 10)*.

- **Human rights violations** in China are considered the most severe compared to the other powers (62% see the situation in China negatively, and only 12% hold a positive view). Half of the respondents (51%) agree that human rights are violated in Russia (only 18% disagree). Interestingly, a nearly equal number of respondents see the safeguard of human rights in the US as negative (34%) and positive (35%), revealing that a clear majority does not exist in this regard. Human rights protection in the EU enjoys a good reputation, with 60% praising the situation as good and 12% seeing it negatively *(Figure 9)*.

- In terms of **military might**, the US continues to be perceived as a powerful or very powerful country by a large majority of respondents (87%). Such a portion reaches 85% in the case of Russia, 78.5% for China, and only 36.5% for the EU *(Figure 6)*.

- The EU emerges as the most **culturally attractive** subject, with Russia being the least. The US and China lay somewhere in between, with the US considered slightly more attractive than China *(Figure 8)*.

- The largest share of respondents believe that the novel coronavirus **jumped naturally from animals to humans**. The second most credible theory of COVID-19 origin according to the Italian respondents is the one according to which the **virus was artificially made in a Chinese laboratory spread intentionally**. The least credited view is the one according to which the coronavirus was brought to China by the US military in 2019 *(Figure 19)*.

- According to 29% of the respondents, China has gained economically from the COVID-19 pandemic, but most (41%) do not agree. Finally, a **majority of 58% do not think that China's reputation has improved** as a result of the epidemiological crisis *(Figure 19)*.

1   Feelings towards China and other countries

Figure 1:   Feeling towards China among Italian respondents[4]

Very positive 7.31%

Very negative 17.32%

Positive 27.13%

Negative 24.72%

Neutral 23.52%
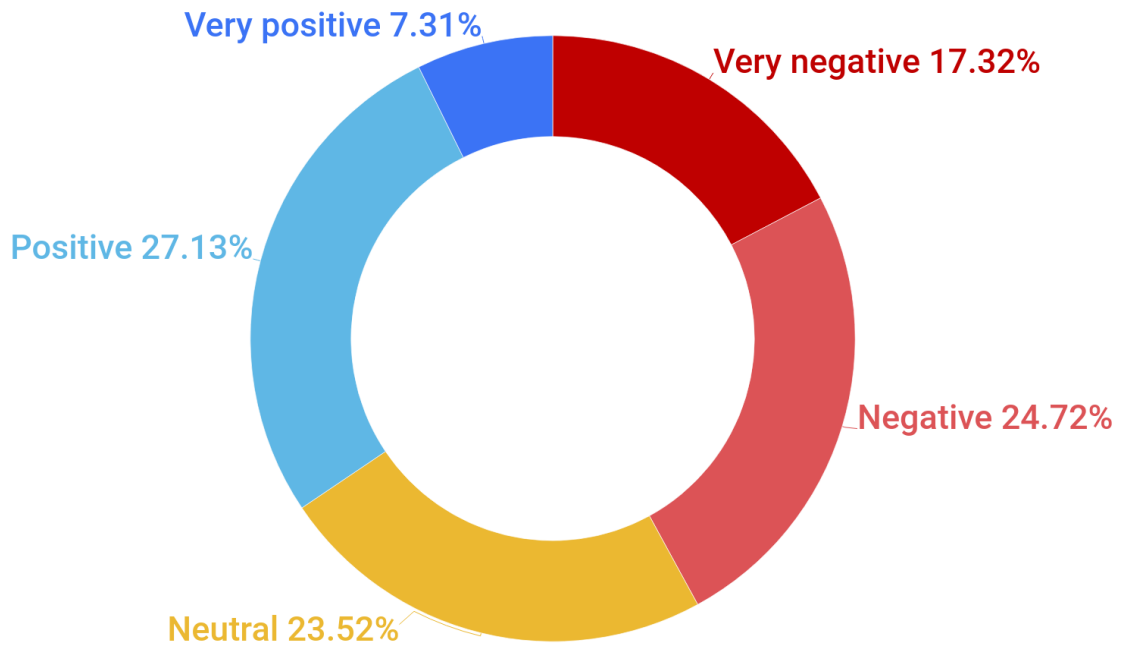
Figure 2:   Change of feeling towards China among Italian respondents
in the past three years[5]

Improved 16.80%

Worsened 38.50%

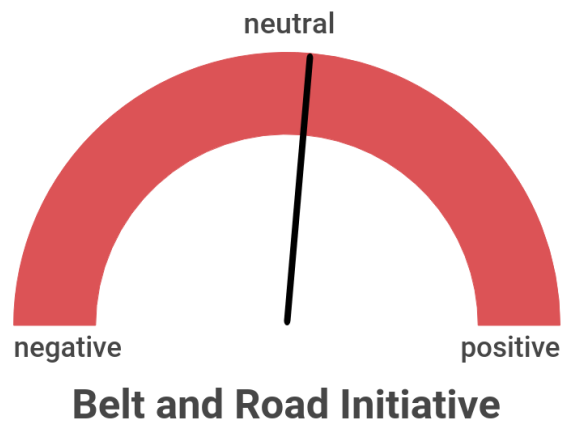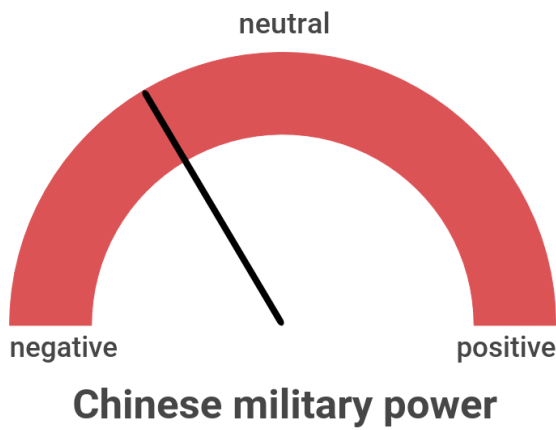**Didn't change 44.70%**
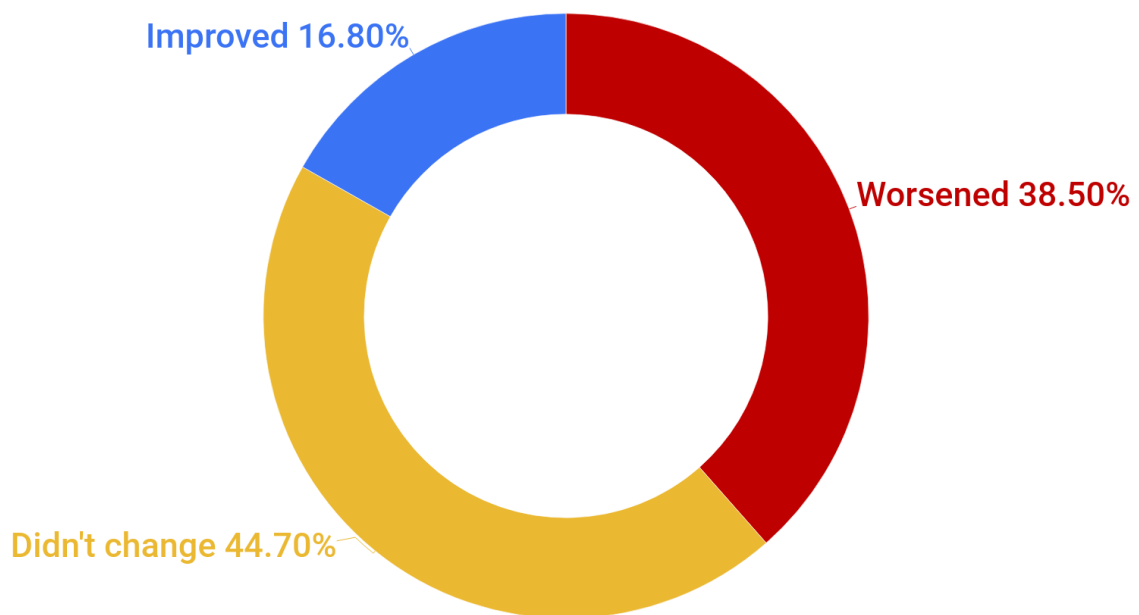
Figure 3: Feeling towards select countries among Italian respondents[6]
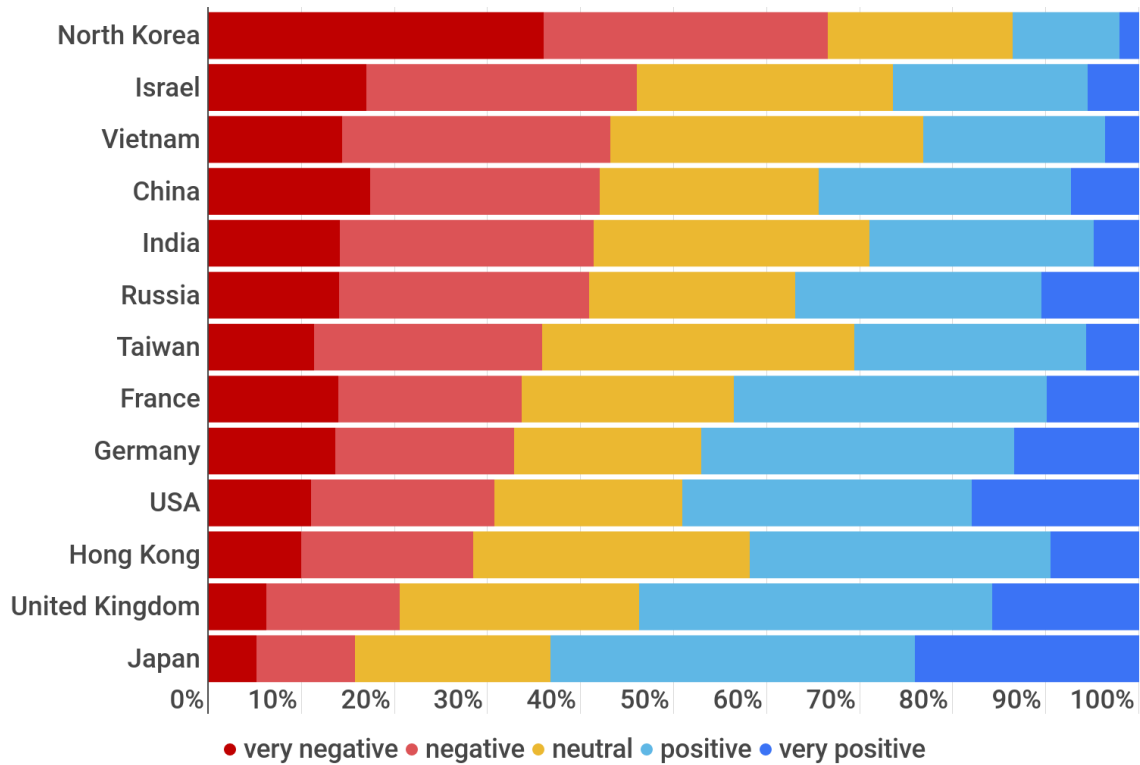
Figure 4: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when China is mentioned (most frequent answers, only 10+ mentions)?[7]
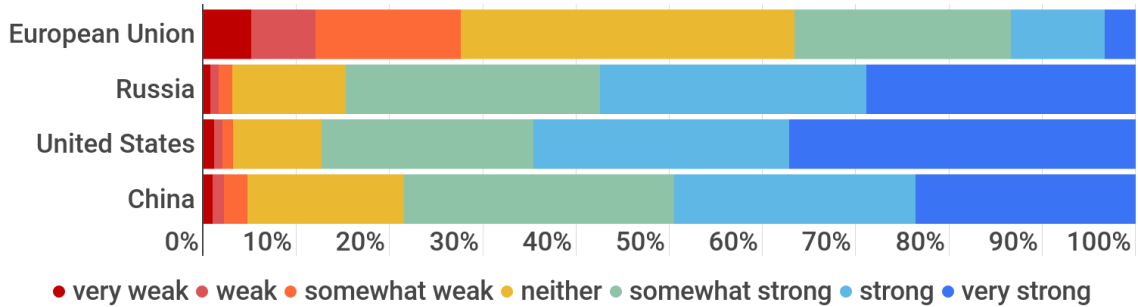
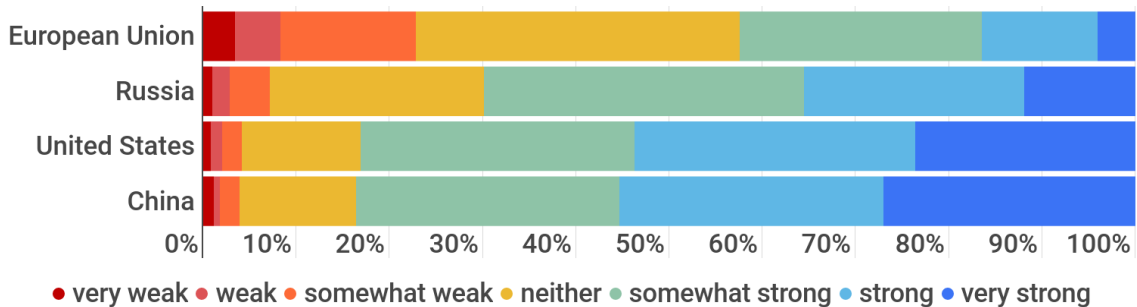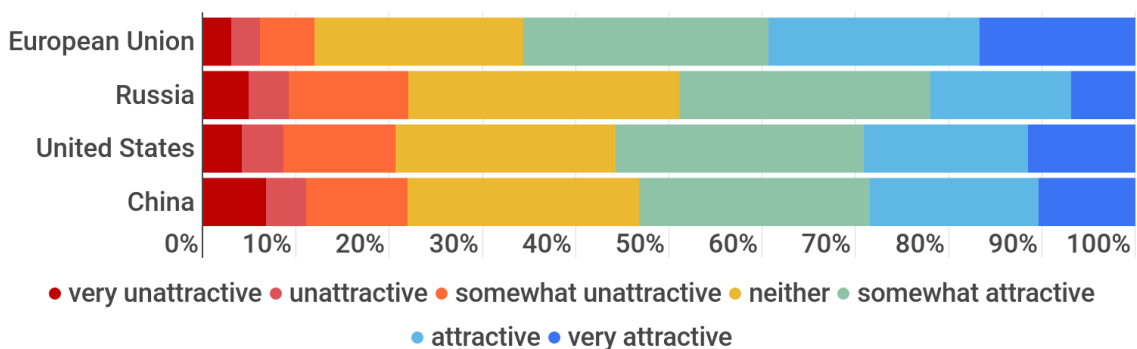**Figure 5:**   Perceptions of certain China-related issues among Italian respondents[8]

Trade with China

Chinese investment

Chinese military power

Belt and Road Initiative

China's impact on global environment

China's influence on democracy in other countries
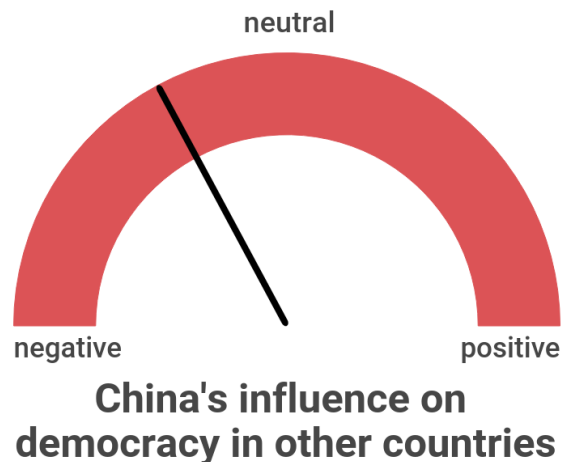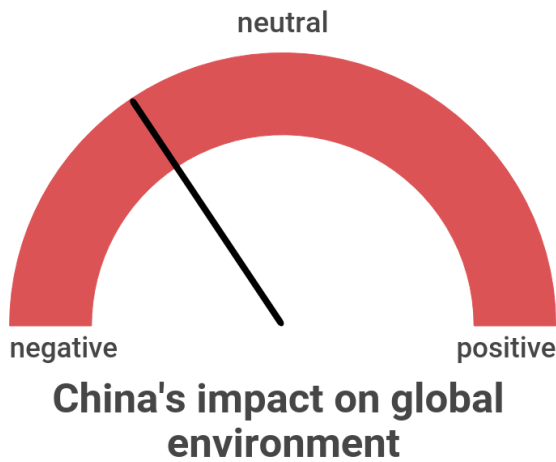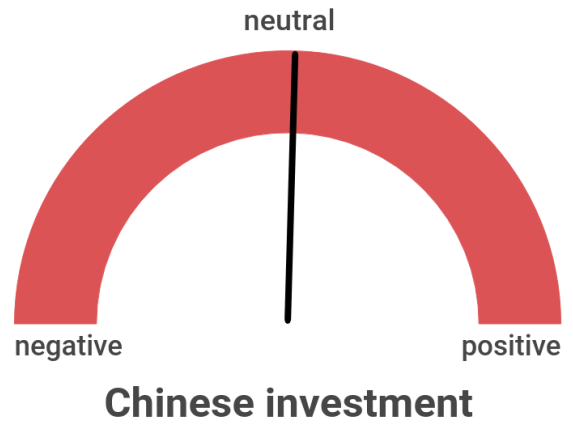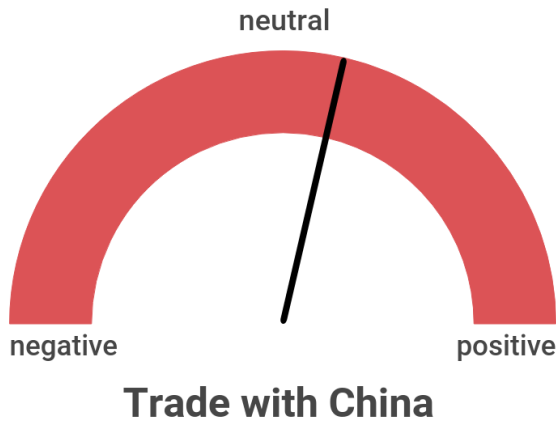
2   Comparing the global powers

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

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

● very weak ● weak ● somewhat weak ● neither ● somewhat strong ● strong ● very strong

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

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

● very weak ● weak ● somewhat weak ● neither ● somewhat strong ● strong ● very strong

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

European Union
Russia
United States
China

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

● very unattractive ● unattractive ● somewhat unattractive ● neither ● somewhat attractive
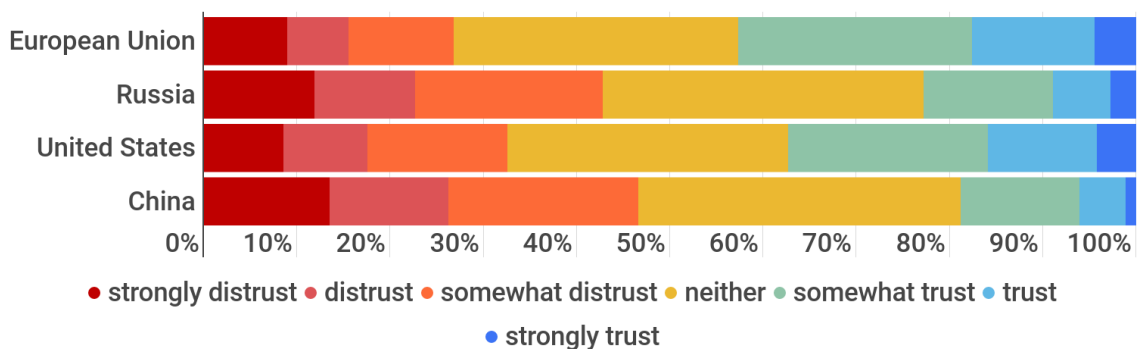● attractive ● very attractive

Figure 9: How do you evaluate the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?
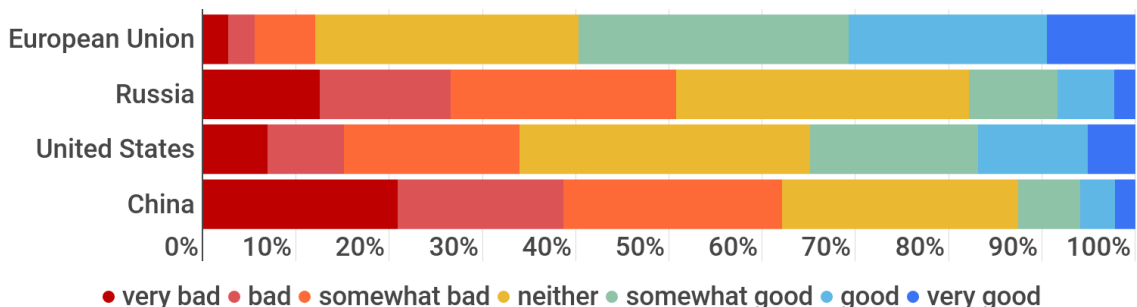
Figure 10: How important are the following countries/entities to the economic development of Italy?
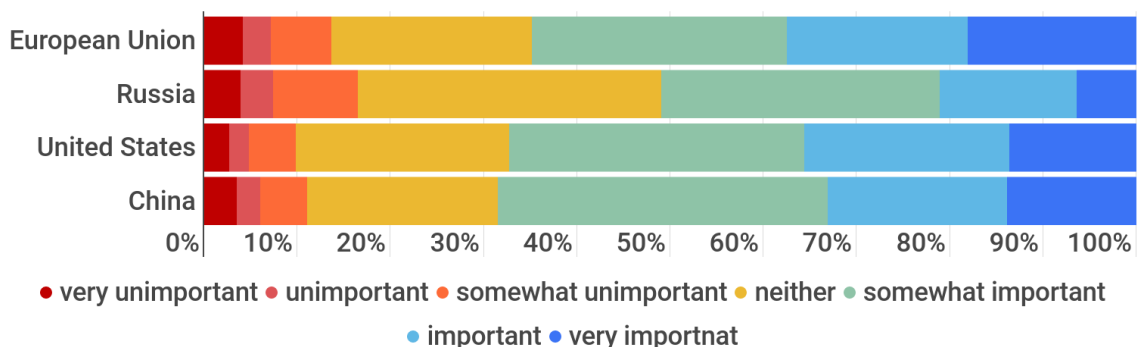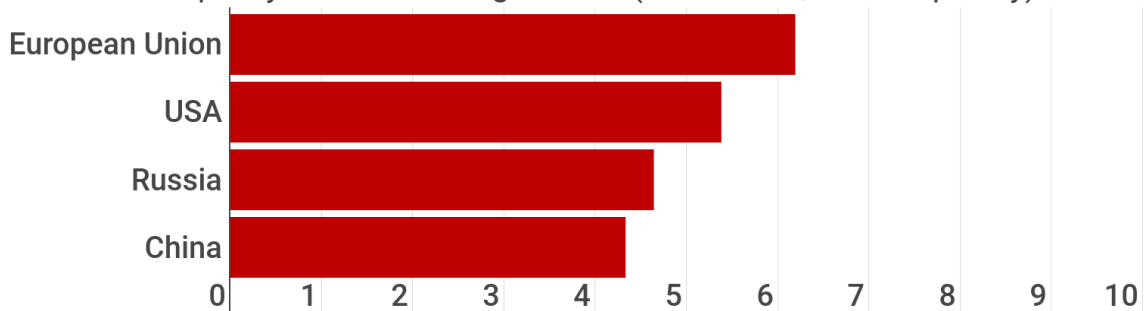

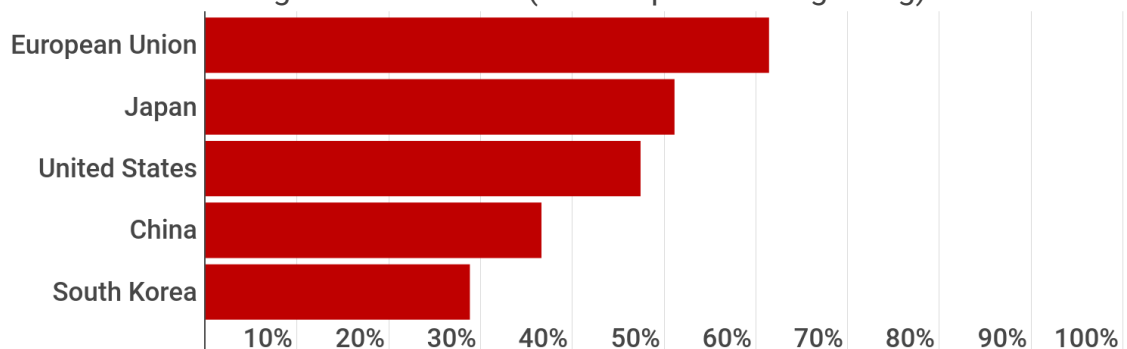**Figure 11:** How much do you trust the following countries/entities?

3   Italian foreign policy towards China

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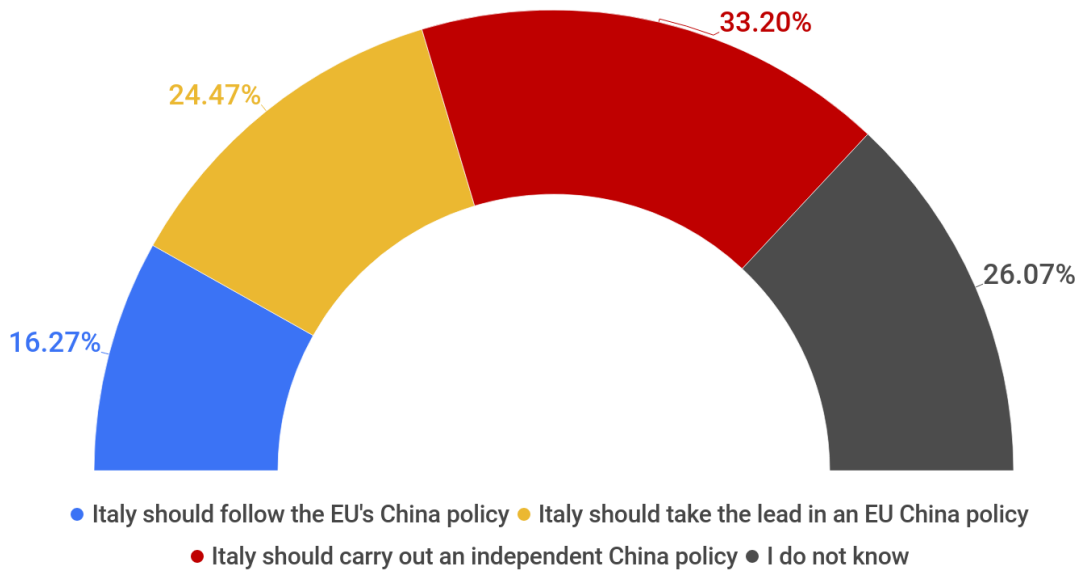

Figure 13:   Should Italy cooperate with the following countries in building its 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing)
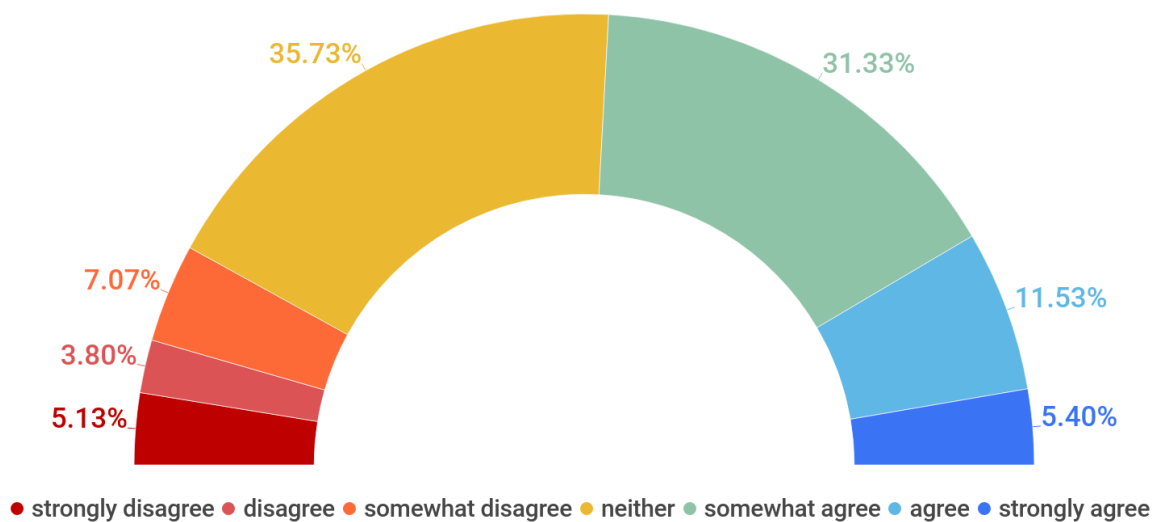

Figure 14:   What should be Italian foreign policy priorities towards China? (% of respondents agreeing)
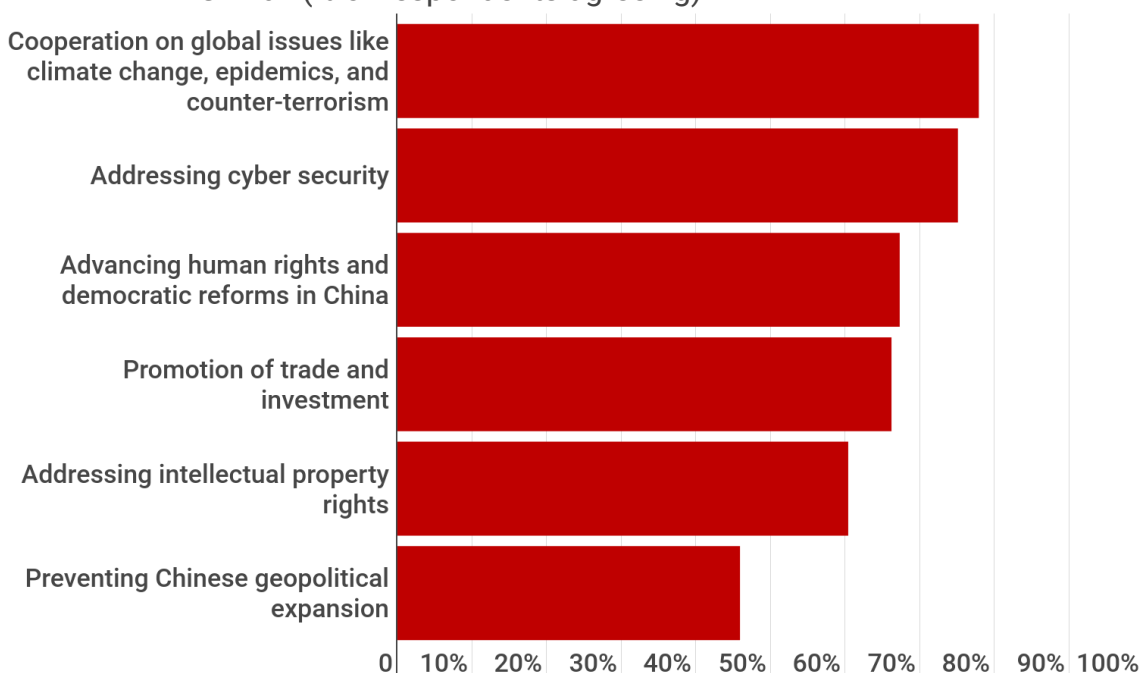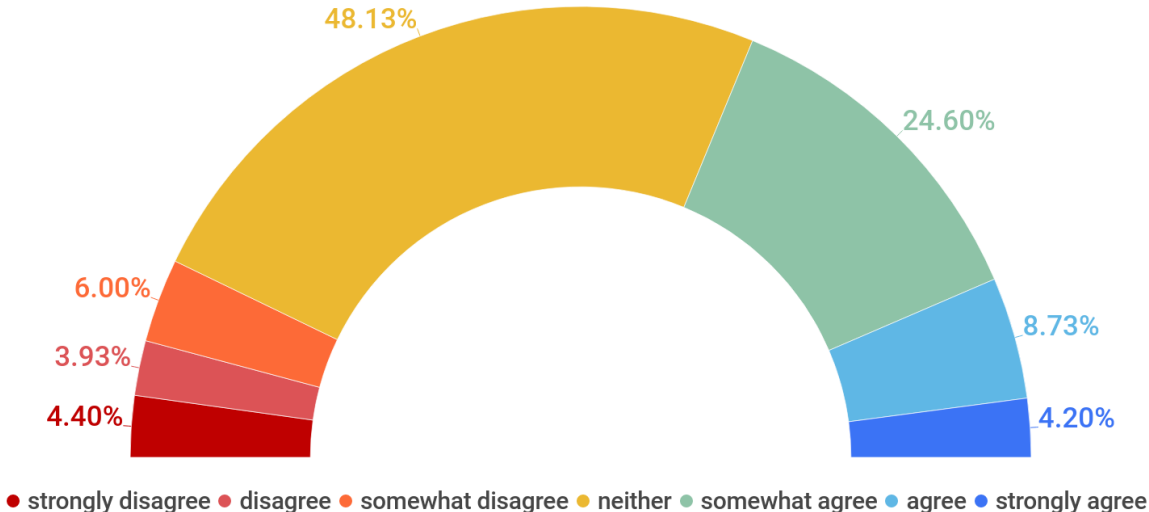
Figure 15: Should Italy pursue its own strategy towards China or contribute to an EU China strategy?

33.20%

24.47%

26.07%

16.27%

- Italy should follow the EU's China policy ● Italy should take the lead in an EU China policy
- Italy should carry out an independent China policy ● I do not know

**Figure 16:** To what extent do you agree or disagree that Italy should cooperate more with China in the future?

35.73%

31.33%

7.07%

11.53%

3.80%

5.13%

5.40%

● strongly disagree ● disagree ● somewhat disagree ● neither ● somewhat agree ● agree ● strongly agree

Figure 17: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the BRI will be beneficial for Italy?

48.13%

24.60%

6.00%

3.93%

8.73%

4.40%

4.20%

● strongly disagree ● disagree ● somewhat disagree ● neither ● somewhat agree ● agree ● strongly agree
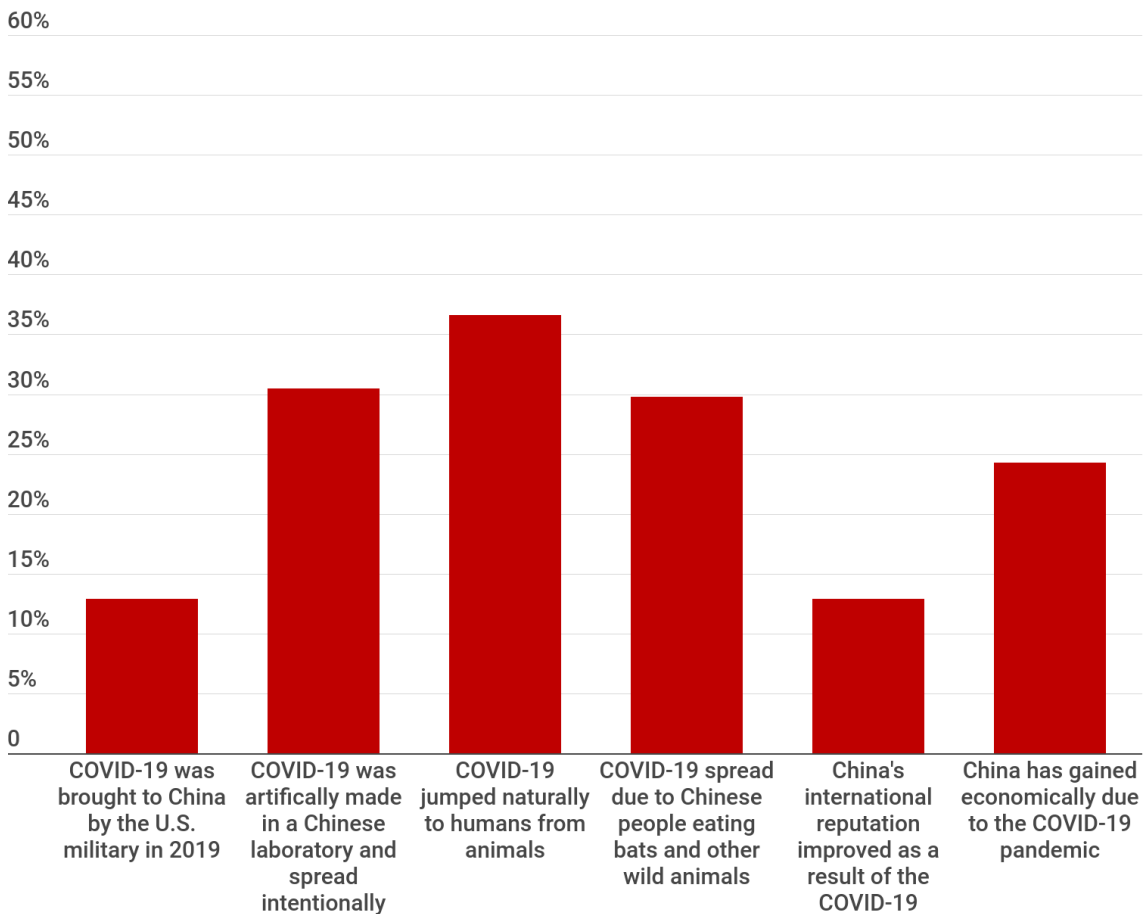
4 COVID-19 pandemic

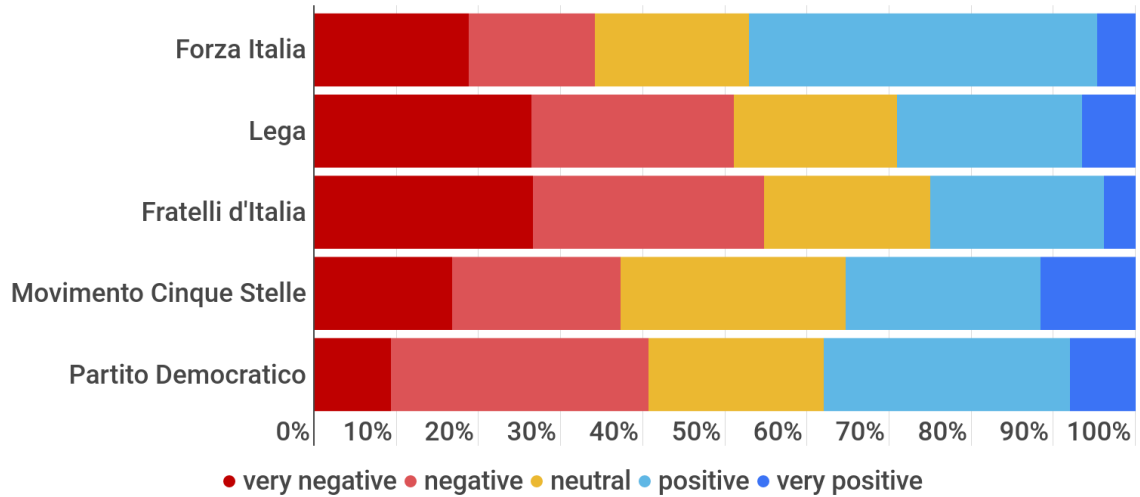**Figure 18:** How much did the following countries/entities help Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic?[10]
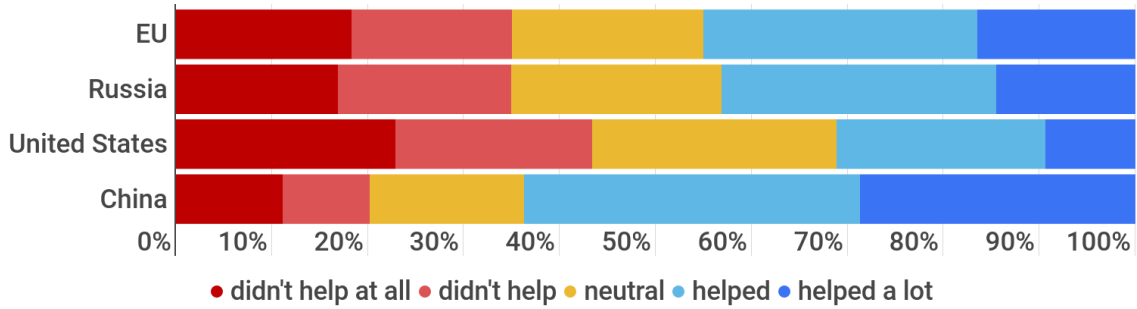
Figure 19: Italian views on the COVID-19 pandemic (% of respondents agreeing)

5 Views of China & political affiliation

Figure 20: Feelings on China among voters of political parties polling over 5%[11]

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 Italian 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, Bjǒrn 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: Forza Italia - 85, Lega - 294, Fratelli d'Italia - 129, Movimiento Cinque Stelle - 217, Partito Democratico - 153.

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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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