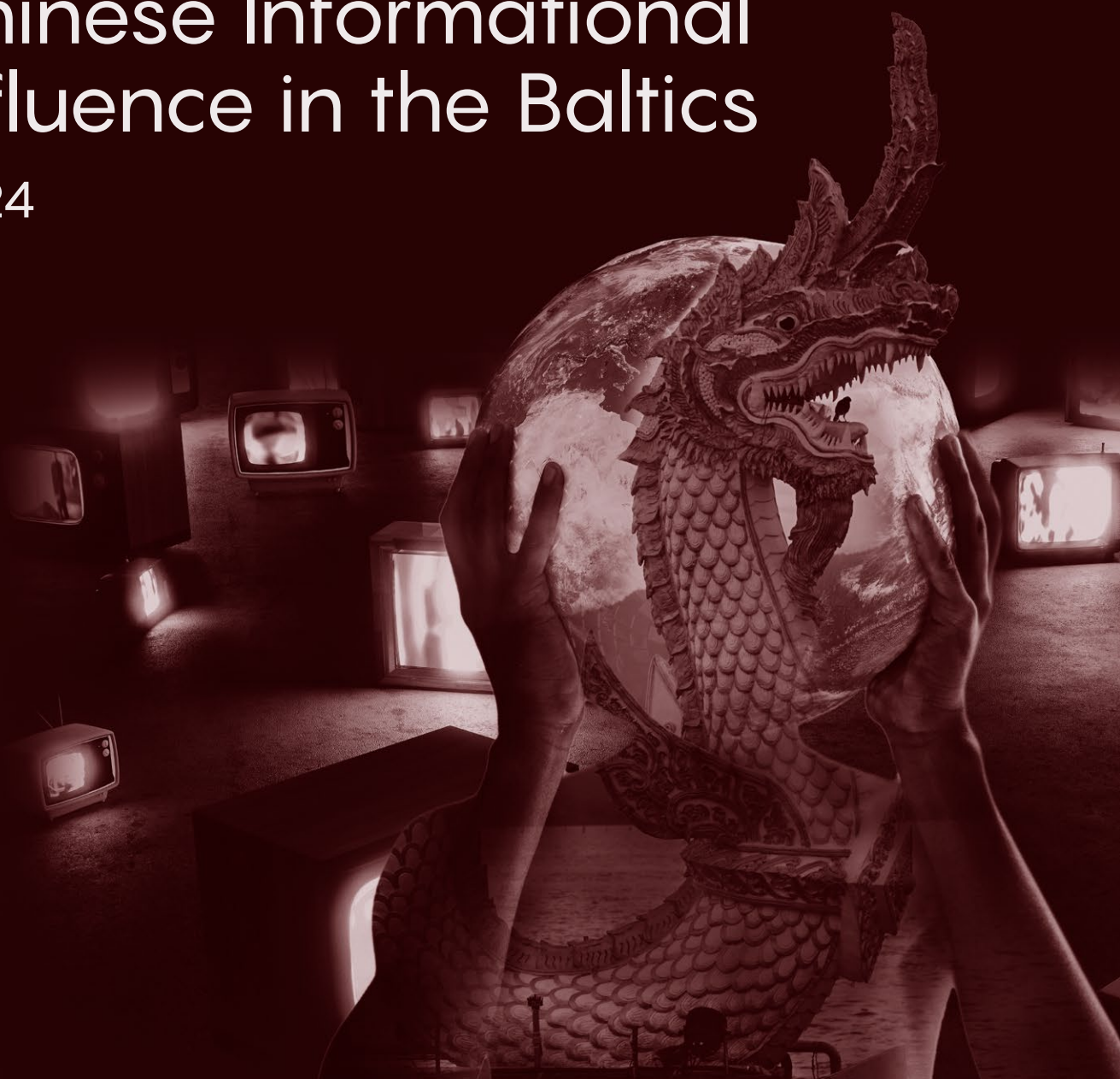


Classic Cleavages in a New Light: Chinese Informational Influence in the Baltics 2024



Authors:

Simona Merkinaitė, Chief Projects Officer at the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (editor-in-chief).

Konstantinas Andrijauskas, Associate Professor at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University, Associate Expert at the Eastern Europe Studies Centre.

Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Head of the China Studies Centre at Rīga Stradins University, Head of Asia program at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

Tomas Jermalavičius, Head of Studies and Research Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS).

Dmitri Teperik, independent senior policy expert, project consultant for the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS).

Data assistant:

Donata Ketlerytė, Project Assistant at the Eastern Europe Studies Centre

Rüüt Kaljula, Junior Research Fellow (2022–23) at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS)

Design and Layout:

Ieva Makarevičė

Language Editor:

UAB Skrivanek

Publisher:

Eastern Europe Studies Centre, 2024.

Citation:

Eastern Europe Studies Centre,

“Classic Cleavages in a New Light: Chinese Informational Influence in the Baltics”,

Vilnius, 2024.

ISBN 978-609-96440-1-1

©EESC, 2024

The report prepared with the support from National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the framework of the project *Measuring and Countering Chinese Disinformation in the Baltic States* (Grant number 2023-0140).

The views and opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors.

Table of contents

4	Executive Summary
6	Introduction: China's Informational War and the World Order
11	Perceptions of China and Pro-Chinese Narratives in Estonia
27	Perceptions of China and Pro-Chinese Narratives in Latvia
42	Perceptions of China and Pro-Chinese Narratives in Lithuania
59	Cross-Country Trends
67	Conclusions and Recommendations
69	Annexes
70	Endnotes

Executive Summary

The report is based on nationwide surveys conducted by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC) (Lithuania) in partnership with the Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA) and the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) (Estonia), aimed at assessing the susceptibility and resilience of the societies of the three Baltic states to the Chinese influence in the information domain.

The surveys in all three Baltic states were conducted in two stages. First, 3022 respondents were polled using a combined research methodology that included a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) and Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) in areas throughout Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The respondents were asked to provide their opinions on the same 30 statements related to China, equally grouped along three different domains: economic, normative, and geopolitical. Next, individual interviews/focus group discussions were conducted to gather the opinions of the titular and minority ethno-linguistic groups, as well as two specialized professional groups: entrepreneurs and journalists in metropolitan and rural areas. The study was conducted between June and August 2023. The report

provides in-depth country profiles as well as a summary of the comparative results, with policy recommendations included at the end.

The survey results demonstrate a high level of sensitivity to the economic narratives in all three societies. The respondents see China as an economic power that is contributing to the development of small countries, like the Baltics. At the same time, the respondents tend to identify China as a political threat to international order. This may indicate both a tendency to separate economic questions from political issues; while at the same time, it could be a sign of pragmatism, with the respondents seeing China as an important, even indispensable, source of wealth generation for the stagnant or low-growth economies of the West. The study showcases the need to focus strategic communication on China's tactics of economic entrapment and coercion and its intent to compromise democratic processes.

Somewhat surprisingly, Lithuanians appear to be particularly susceptible to China's "win-win" discourse that emphasizes the economically beneficial nature of bilateral relations between the countries. This may be a direct impact of insufficient strategic communication by the responsible authorities on the long-term

economic effects, with many believing in the potential for economic loss in the face of a China-Lithuania relationship crisis.

In the normative and political domains, the views are influenced to a large extent by the image of small states as unable to influence global political processes, with the highest agreement across all three Baltic states (at the level of 63-73%) occurring in response to the statement that their country should not interfere in China's affairs. Estonians stand out as the most skeptical toward China's normative and political narratives, while at the same time demonstrating a surprising level of skepticism toward the US leadership in Europe. A mix of economic pragmatism, a small state mindset, distrust in one's government, socio-economic insecurity and socio-political conservatism are the major drivers in adopting a stance that favors China-friendly narratives in all three Baltic states.

The report recommends strengthening the monitoring and analysis of China's information agenda in the Baltic states and studying this agenda in the context of China's employment of other instruments of "sharp power". It urges policy stakeholders to enhance strategic communication exposing China's long-term geopolitical motives, means and ways of influence, and benefits it draws from Russia's disinformation activities. Special attention should be devoted to societal groups most vulnerable to disinformation as well as on the issues where the public lacks clear opinion. The report also calls for strengthening resilience of the Baltic states' societies to economic coercion and, most importantly, their self-confidence in the ability of small democratic states to protect their fundamental values and interests through coalition-building and active foreign policymaking.

Introduction: China's Informational War and the World Order

Institutions and organizations researching and monitoring the informational policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are observing a dramatic increase and expansion in the regime's efforts to shape and influence the global information space. This trend is followed by a careful and expanding effort to understand the tactics used by the People's Republic of China (PRC), which vary from propaganda and misinformation and the suppression of critical voices to the promotion of digital authoritarianism, utilizing aggressive means such as intimidation and diplomatic, pressure as well as gaining control over media and information technologies.¹

There has also been a slight shift in the perception of the informational influence. With the heavy investment in different assets and sectors, this influence was often viewed by Beijing as secondary to the buildup of economic and political power. Propaganda and misinformation aimed at advancing China's image as a rising global technological and economic superpower, as well as promoting a

positive view of the CCP and its authoritarian regime. The influx of Chinese investments – for example, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – is also helping to consolidate the regime. This involves not only using the same information as a means to control actual movements of people, monitoring content sharing, and harvesting private information under the pretense of managing the COVID-19 epidemic, but also buying off the silence of Western countries on the Chinese human rights record. However, in the past few years, and especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this has begun changing. There is an increasing consensus that Beijing is not only using information to maximize its gains, but rather, along with other autocratic regimes, to instrumentalize a deeper penetration into the informational sphere as a way to undermine and revise the existing international rules-based order, while also diminishing the role of the US in the process.

Such an anti-democratic alliance is cemented not by ideals, but by mutually beneficial deals,

which include reaffirming and amplifying each other's narratives and messages in order to sow discontent and polarization in democratic states. For example, the PRC officials repeated the Russian propaganda saying that NATO is an aggressor and is fueling the war.² In turn, the Russian state media cited these PRC statements as proof of an international consensus in favor of Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine. Their goal was to instill doubt about the direction of Western resolve, undermine trust in national governments and its direction, deepen the polarization among different political groups and directly challenge democratic governance, presenting autocracy as more efficient and beneficial form of government.³

This requires not only understanding the direct influence the PRC can exert over other countries' informational space, exposing their tactics, but along with it, assessing the attitudes and views that may be exploited by China. For example, they can exploit the existing relationship of citizens to the government, such as trust in its policies and the capacity to execute them, the perception of their personal and their country's security, and attitudes toward transatlantic relations and European cohesion.

According to a recent study by the International Republican Institute (Summer 2022) that compared the Chinese influence in the three Baltic states, it is obvious that the number of those with a critical view of China has increased: 91% of the respondents in Estonia and 79% in Latvia and Lithuania, respectively, cited China's partnership with and support of Russia as a key reason for this shift. While a minority of people indicated that their attitude toward China had improved, they cited the economic development model of China as the reason for this.⁴ That indicates several things. First, the worsening opinion of China is directly linked to its increased effort to establish itself as a political superpower by aligning itself to other authoritarian powers. On the other hand, the current economic anxiety, as well as a pragmatic understanding of China's economic influence is a key vulnerability.

This is the backdrop to the study, conducted by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (EESC) in partnership with the Latvian

Institute of International Affairs (LIIA) and the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) (Estonia), aimed at assessing the receptiveness and resilience of the three Baltic states to the Chinese influence in the information domain.

The study has two main goals: (1) to assess the receptiveness/resilience of the societies in the three Baltic states to the Chinese narratives; and (2) to assess and evaluate the effect of the Chinese narratives against the backdrop of political values, opinions, and level of trust in the government, in order to identify the gaps in the resilience of these societies and offer recommendations. Prior to the study, an assessment of the key narratives circulating in the three Baltic states was performed. As a result, the questions in the survey were organized around three topics, representing different domains of the PRC's informational influences: (1) the economic area, where China is focusing on positioning itself as an economic superpower and the benefits of economic cooperation; (2) the normative area, where China is attempting to subvert Western values and obscure the human rights violations perpetrated by Beijing's authoritarian regime; and (3) its role in the international affairs/geopolitics, where China is attempting to establish itself as a key player. The data was gathered in two stages: polling and focus groups; and in-depth interviews. In total, 1000 people in Estonia, 1007 people in Latvia and 1015 respondents in Lithuania were polled during the summer of 2023, using a combined research methodology that included a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) and a Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI), selected according to quota sampling mirroring the latest statistical data on the country's demography. The respondents were asked to provide their opinions on the same 30 China-related statements, equally grouped along the three different domains: economic, normative, and geopolitical. The goal of the polling was to measure the receptiveness and/or resilience of the respondents to the Chinese narratives split along the three thematic dimensions, while factoring in socio-economic and socio-political characteristics, including the participant's sex, age, education, occupation, and primary spoken language. In addition, the media consumption patterns, political orientations and the respondents'

levels of personal security and wellbeing were assessed, as well as their trust in the government, hence including 13 questions to create a profile of the respondents.

The focus group discussions were built around the same three dimensions (economic, normative, and geopolitical) and consisted of five main target groups: (1) general population from rural areas; (2) general population from a metropolitan area; (3) ethno-linguistic minority; (4) businesspeople/entrepreneurs; and (5) journalists/influencers. The in-depth individual interviews method was used to question the last two target groups, providing a relatively unrestricted environment for their conversation. The survey was conducted using the same questionnaire, the same focus groups guide and in the same timeframe, during July–September 2023, providing a snapshot of the three Baltic states. The profile of the respondents is outlined in Annex 1.

This report presents the results of the survey, outlined in country profiles and all split among the three dimensions, as well as including a section on the profile of the respondents. Each chapter is also split into a discussion of the polling results and an analysis of the focus groups/in-depth interviews. For the Estonia and Latvia country profiles, the focus groups results are organized around the same three dimensions as the polling results; while the Lithuanian profile separately describes different target groups, thus serving the dual purpose of questioning the comparative lack of relevance that some of these groups exhibited in the survey (ethnicity, occupation, and place of residence), and also better scrutinizing the effect of Lithuania's more radical review of its relationship with China.

China's Informational Influence in the Baltics: A Background

Overall, the Baltic states are primarily a target of Russian propaganda and misinformation. The Russian misinformation strategies and narratives are monitored and studied, while the general population is shown to be demonstrating their resilience to it, with

Russian speaking minorities being the most targeted and vulnerable. However, with the expansion of non-traditional media channels and information consumption, new vulnerabilities are emerging in the Baltic states, as well as in other democracies; for example, a disposition toward conspiratorial thinking. The rising distrust in the traditional media, as well as governments, provides an opening for influence of malign forces, including Chinese propaganda.⁵

The influence of the PRC in **Estonia** has been previously analyzed, mostly in relation to Chinese economic activities, infrastructural projects, known vulnerabilities in the technological domain (including cyber threats) and some Chinese instruments of soft power.⁶ The PRC has also been exploiting people-to-people contacts in the political and academic activities in Estonia, which has been highlighted by some researchers and security analysts.⁷

For decades, one of the most important goals of the PRC in Estonia has been to maintain a positive image of China and to avoid any direct criticism of its domestic and foreign policies. These aspirations of the PRC have been publicly challenged in Estonia, as both national intelligence services – the Estonian Internal Security Service (Kapo) and the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service – have been involved in exposing and describing cases of Chinese espionage and other types of activities in and against Estonia in recent years.⁸ However, as of 2022, in the public perception, China is associated with a security threat by only 24% of Estonians, while just 21% of them share the opinion that the Chinese government threatens their identity and values.⁹ These are much lower numbers compared to the perceptions of Russia's threat, and raise important questions regarding the awareness of China and its policies. It remains to be seen what effect the expected opening of Taipei's representative office in Tallinn – the last Baltic capital to obtain some form of Taiwanese representation – will make on the public debate and its narratives in Estonia, but this is not something that Beijing will take lightly, as it has already made threats of a diplomatic response.¹⁰ In the long term, however, such representation is bound to open new opportunities for countering the pro-China narratives in Estonia.

Just like with Estonia, apart from a short period when Riga had de-facto diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1992-1994,¹¹ the relations between **Latvia** and China have been those of distant, while not disinterested parties. Latvia's strategic focus on a European and transatlantic alignment meant that the nation's limited resources were dedicated primarily to joining the EU and NATO. This focus prevented Latvia from developing specific policies for other global regions, such as East Asia. In this context, China was perceived as an unfamiliar entity, characterized primarily by its unique culture, language, and historical background, but also as an opportunity for economic engagement.¹²

The situation changed in 2012 when Latvia, along with the other two Baltic countries, became a part of the China-proposed Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries (16+1 platform). This development was closely linked to China's expanding role as a significant economic player and its growing global influence. A decade of economic hopes and expressions of political will followed, from both Latvia and China. The first five years of this format proved to be particularly active, with the Latvian excitement reaching its highest point in 2016, as the Latvian capital Riga became the first (and only) Baltic destination to host the Prime Ministers' Summit of the platform¹³. This was also the year when the three Baltic states, including Latvia, signed Memoranda of Understanding to join an even wider and more ambitious China's transcontinental initiative: the BRI.

In the years that followed, however, the underwhelming Riga Summit outcomes, combined with the lack of success stories and concrete deliverables, coupled with growing security concerns and geopolitical risks, led Latvia, along with Estonia, to announce that both countries had decided to cease its participation in the platform in 2022.¹⁴ In summary, a decade later, after an initial period of optimism regarding economic cooperation with China which did not develop into tangible results, and was influenced by a wider rift between China and the West, Latvia has withdrawn from 16+1 and has effectively halted its participation in high-profile BRI events. It is unclear whether the impact from the decade of exchanges has left its mark on the population's

opinion and their assessments of the Chinese narratives. It is hard to ascertain how informed and up-to-date the general Latvian public is on China-related developments, the nation's assessment of China's role, and to what degree China's narratives on economy, geopolitics, and values, resonate with certain parts of the Latvian society.

Since 2019, the southernmost Baltic state of **Lithuania** has gradually become a particularly outstanding case, in terms of its relationship with the PRC. Partly in reaction to the worsening bilateral relations, the new center-right Lithuanian coalition government elected at the close of 2020, embarked on a major review of its foreign policy approach toward Beijing, resulting in a series of pathbreaking decisions the following year. Most importantly, these were the country's withdrawal from 16+1 (the first of the three Baltic states to do so), and the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office under that exact name in the nation's capital, Vilnius. It was the latter decision, in particular, that led to China's retaliatory multi-dimensional pressure campaign against the country that was manifested in unique diplomatic, economic and, notably, informational measures. In late 2021, Lithuania found itself in the extraordinary position of having no ambassadorial relationship with the world's second largest economy, its physical embassy in Beijing being effectively closed, and its manufacturers suffering from all-out Chinese import and export restrictions and, most disturbingly, unrecognized pressure on third country multinationals due to their mere usage of Lithuanian-made components that were to end up in China.

It is no wonder that, in these circumstances, the Sino-Lithuanian bilateral relationship in general – and the government's review of these relations in particular – for several months emerged as the main topic of uncharacteristically public, heated, and widespread policy debates in Lithuania, until the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine naturally shifted the entire country's attention elsewhere. In other words, it is important to keep in mind that the Lithuanian perceptions of China were expected to be affected greatly by both the latter's very recent intimidation campaign against their country,

and also overall citizens' views of their own government, still in power at the time of the data collection and writing this paper as well.

This has been visibly confirmed by previous relevant opinion polls. The results of a survey published in January 2022 revealed a clear lack of popular support (13% "for" versus 60% "against") for the government's review of its relationship with China.¹⁵ However, almost two thirds (64%) of the Lithuanian respondents polled roughly around time of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine had a negative opinion of China, ranked only below Russia (83%) and Belarus (73%).¹⁶ Mirroring relevant subsequent developments, namely the escalating war nearby and the relative lightening of Beijing's pressure, the unfavorable views of the latter among Lithuanians decreased a bit to 57% in late 2022.¹⁷

The second consecutive annual EESC democracy barometer in Lithuania showed a certain level of receptiveness to the Chinese economic narratives, with 56.3% of respondents convinced that the political tensions with China were having a negative impact on the economic situation in Lithuania. However, when asked whether they would consent to a partnership with the authoritarian state if it created an economic benefit, the majority indicated that they would not (59%). The survey also found a higher resilience to the political narratives, in comparison to the economic ones. Still, 45.3% of the respondents agreed that Lithuania is undergoing a deteriorating relationship with China (at the same time, the study marked a significant drop from 2022, when this number stood at 56.3%).¹⁸

Perceptions of China and Pro-Chinese Narratives in Estonia

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Estonia is a small country of just 1.37 million inhabitants, with around half of the population concentrated in the metropolitan area of the capital city, Tallinn, and the adjacent municipalities of Harju County in North Estonia. Its ethnic composition includes a sizeable non-Estonian minority that comprises 31.5% of the population, concentrated mostly in the capital area and in North-East Estonia (Ida-Viru County). According to the latest available demographic data, 22.5% of the population identify themselves as ethnic Russians and a further 9% identify as “other ethnicity” (but these are also mostly Russian speakers, e.g., Russified Belarusians, Ukrainians, or Armenians).¹⁹

The Estonian sample was weighted according to the latest available statistical data, and thus closely reflects the overall demographic of the country (see Annex 1). When asked about their core values and political views, 25% of the respondents described themselves as very or moderately conservative, 23.1% as centrist, and 35.2% as very or moderately liberal, while 16.7% did not place themselves on the political spectrum. Concerning the perceived capacity of Estonia’s government to successfully deal with international affairs and foreign policy matters, 46.3% of the respondents were skeptical of such capacity, while 26% were supportive and 27.7% had no position on this question. In terms of a sense of (in)security, 29.8% of the respondents indicated a high perception of personal economic risks, while 38.2% had an average level, and 28.4% stated they had a low or no perception of such risks.

The patterns of media consumptions of the Estonians respondents were identified by asking the respondents to list the Top 5 most important information channels for them: 61% indicated the Estonian public television channels (ETV, ETV2, ETV+), 38.2% indicated news portals in Estonian, 32.2% indicated social media, 30.2% indicated radio, and 18.7% indicated communication and conversations with friends, relatives, or acquaintances. There were significant differences in the patterns of media consumption between the ethnolinguistic groups in Estonia: for the Russian speakers, social media was more important – 45% of them listed it among their Top 5 sources, compared to 26% of Estonian speakers. Likewise, Estonian public television was by far more important to the Estonian speakers – 75% listed it among their Top 5 sources, compared to 31% of the Russian speakers. Also, contrary to the Estonian speakers, the Russian speakers included communication with friends, relatives, and acquaintances among their five most popular information sources (mentioned by 26% of the respondents), while also heavily relying on Russian language Estonian online news websites in their media consumption (mentioned by 46%). These differences could potentially explain at least some of the persistent ethnolinguistic gaps in assessing the China-friendly narratives.

Moreover, there are several important correlations between some socio-political/economic attitudes and the demographic characteristics of the sample in Estonia. One can be seen between the socio-economic wellbeing and the ethnolinguistic background, as local Russian speakers tend to have a more worrisome perception regarding the personal economic and social risks than ethnic Estonians. According to the survey, the average net income of the local Russian speakers is lower than that of the ethnic Estonians. Additionally, almost one-third of the local Russian speakers struggled to identify themselves with any suggested political orientation, although they were – in comparison with the ethnic Estonians – also more skeptical about the capacity of Estonia's government to successfully conduct foreign relations. Similarly, this skepticism – something that could be called the “small state realism” mindset – was shared by the respondents with more conservative political views and values.

As of 2023, one of the main features of Estonia's public opinion on the PRC is its overall lack of awareness regarding China. According to the results of the project survey, 53% of Estonians have never been to the PRC and do not want to visit that country, while 43% would like to do so. The groups who were statistically more inclined to consider travelling to China were male, younger (especially 15-29), local Russian speakers, residents of Tallinn, respondents with a lower level of education, respondents who have children, and those who are critical-minded about the capacity of Estonia's government to successfully deal with international affairs. Thus, there is a significant pool of Estonia's population who could potentially be targeted by China's soft power in projecting its favorable image and attraction as a benign country, while glossing over its human rights record, international behavior, and economic coercion. The key question is whether a more granular perception of the PRC in Estonian society provides favorable conditions, and in which particular fields of interest.

Economic Domain: Ethnic Divide, Conservative Pragmatism, and Small State Mindset

Economic interests usually form one of the most important bases for inter-state relations, which comes to the fore during times of an economic downturn with the accompanying social tensions. The PRC has long been associated with the image of economic opportunity driven by its rapid growth, mass production of low-cost goods for the world markets, expanding domestic consumption, and now also its increasing technological sophistication and capacity for financial investments. The perception of China as a major source of economic opportunities is pervasive worldwide, despite all the evidence of market discrimination of foreign companies, arbitrary state intervention, huge risks of financial instability, and massive environmental damage in its economic model.

This perception, to a certain extent, also prevails in Estonia. As the poll was conducted during the period of the economic downturn resulting from high inflation, a deep slump in the major export markets of Estonia (Nordic countries and Germany), and curtailed economic relations with Russia, it would be natural to assume that China's economic attraction would become more pronounced in the public perception. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that a greater prominence of the geopolitical confrontation between the PRC and the West, as well as an enhanced coverage of the security threats posed by Beijing over the last few years might have dampened some of the economic enthusiasm toward China.

Overall, 52% of Estonians agree (and just 13% do not agree) with the statement that **having good relations with China is economically and politically beneficial for China and Estonia.**

The differences were significant between the ethno-linguistic groups, as 73% of the local Russian speakers and 43% of the ethnic Estonians supported this statement. At the same time, more than half of the respondents in Estonia (53%) believed that **political tensions and a geopolitical confrontation between the USA and China should not affect our economic relations with China** (17% disagreed, and a third, or 30%, had no clear position). Statistically major differences, however, existed between the ethnic Estonians (15% agreed and 50% disagreed) compared to the Russian speakers (41% agreed and 14% disagreed). Other groups whose members tended to agree with the need to insulate economic relations from the (geo)political turbulence were those with conservative political viewpoints (62%), as well as those who work in the private sector (57%) or are critical toward the government's capacity in foreign affairs (78%).

One particular dimension of this confrontation is the issue of Taiwan, but the Estonian perceptions are mostly ambivalent in this regard: 43% of the respondents had no clear opinion about whether **supporting Taiwan would not bring any economic benefits to Estonia and should therefore be less important than maintaining good economic relations with China**, while 20% agreed and 37% disagreed. The picture becomes more clear-cut in the responses among different ethno-linguistic groups, whereby 74% of the Russian speakers agrees and only 6% disagrees with setting Taiwan aside for the sake of doing business with China, but less than a half (44%) of the ethnic Estonians agreed and a fifth (22%) disagreed.

As far as myths are concerned, one of the most pervasive ones is that **China is a huge and lucrative market, so Estonia should be pragmatic and abstain from making any criticisms of China.** In this regard, the split is again rather even, as 35% of all respondents agreed, 37% disagreed, and 29% stated no clear position. On the other hand, differences between the ethno-linguistic groups were very significant on this China's major economic "selling point" to foreign audiences. There were equally deep cleavages on the notion that China's "great economic promise" should moderate Estonia's foreign policy behavior that run along ideological lines, and between the skeptics and optimists of the government's capacity to successfully conduct the foreign policy (see Figure 1). Russian speakers, conservatives and "small-state realists" (i.e., skeptics of the government's capacity about foreign policymaking) were obviously more willing to stay silent on values and international security matters, for the sake of economic gains.

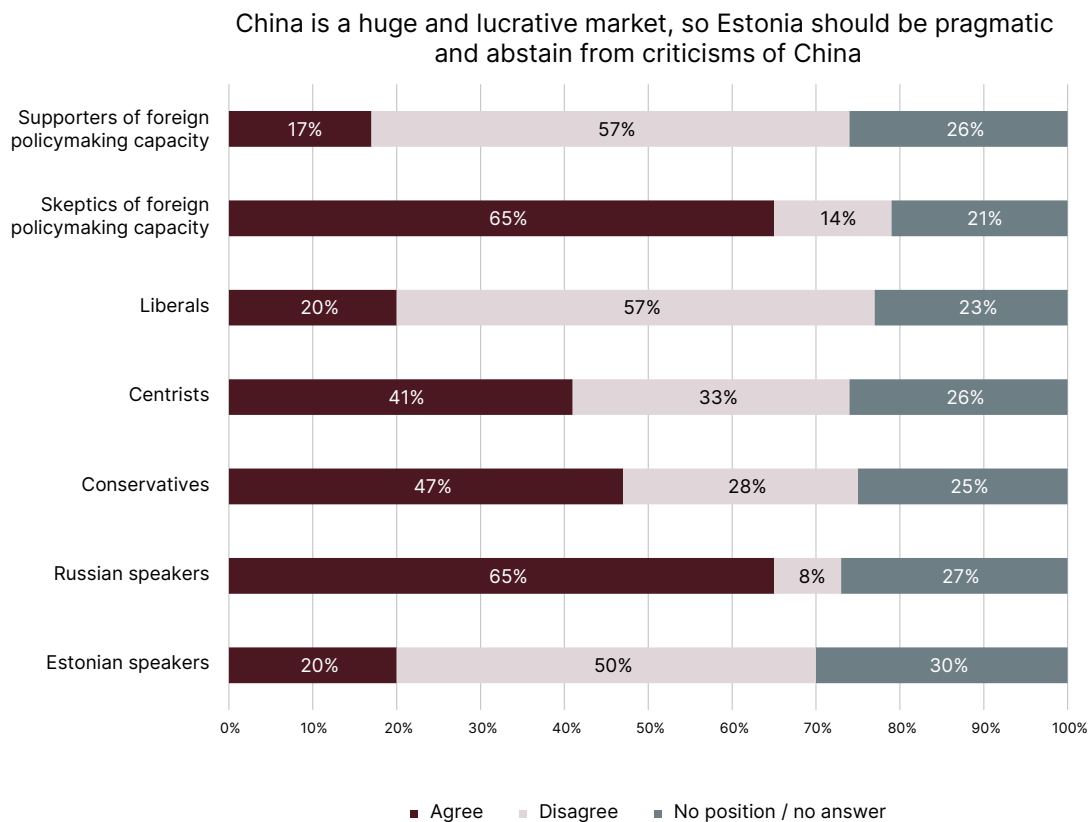


Figure 1: Estonian perception of the economic benefits versus political criticism of China

It is often believed that **our industries and consumers are highly-dependent on supply chains from China**; therefore, it is sometimes argued that **Estonia should not support any EU economic sanctions imposed on China**. Overall, the views of Estonians on this matter are almost evenly split: 31% agreed with it and 34% disagreed, while 35% had no clear position. Statistically, there were major differences between the ethno-linguistic groups, as only 19% of ethnic Estonians agreed with this notion, compared to 55% of Russian speakers. Herein, the respondents with a professional background in the private sector also tended to agree with the above statements, reflecting their sharper sense and awareness of the degree to which China dominates global supply chains.

With technology forming a major pillar of the digitized society, economy and governance of Estonia, IT supply chains and products have come into a particular focus in the national public debate during recent years. Balancing the economic costs and security risks proved particularly important in areas such as the introduction of 5G connectivity. Thus, almost half of the respondents in Estonia (46%) disagreed with the proposition that **China's information technology is affordable; therefore, there should be no limits on its use in Estonia even if there are some security risks** (almost a third, or 27%, agreed, while the same proportion had no opinion). Differences were most significant between the ethno-linguistic groups and along the political lines, as holders of conservative political views were more likely to support this stance than liberals. Being a skeptic or optimist about the government's capacity in relation to foreign policy also results in a very significant cleavage on this matter (see Figure 2).

China's information technology is affordable, therefore there should be no limits on its use in Estonia even if there are some security risks

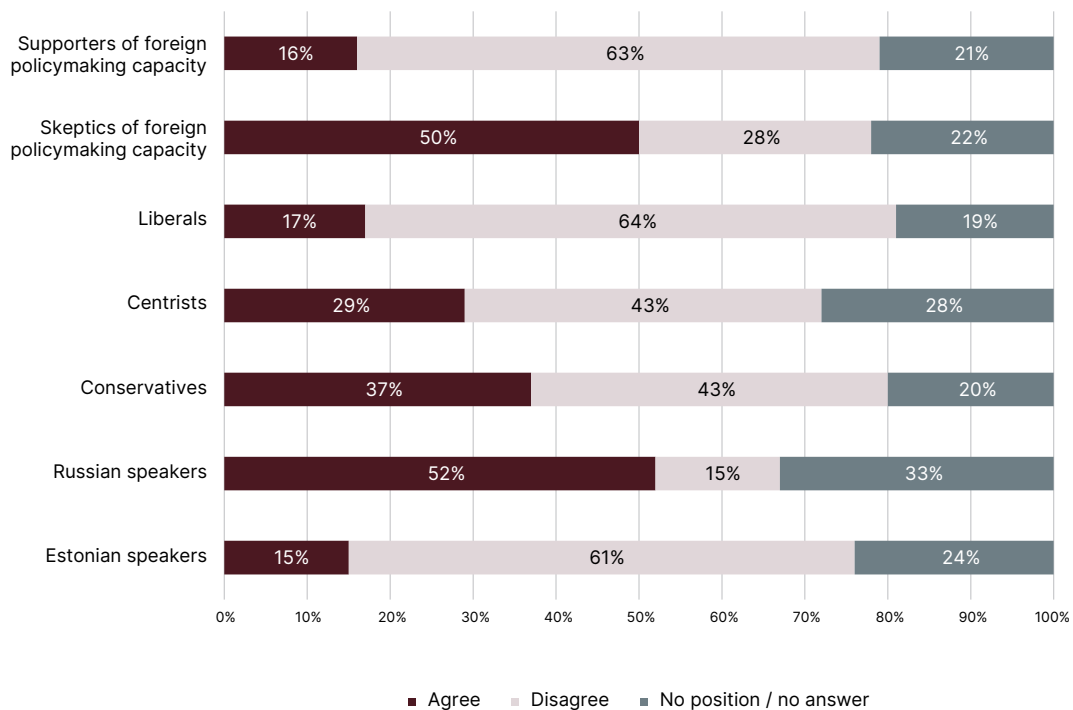


Figure 2: Estonian perception of China's information technology benefits

As China's investments have grown globally, the availability of financial capital from the PRC has become another important dimension in the debate about the benefits of maintaining pragmatic relations with Beijing. However just 23% of the respondents in Estonia agreed that the Estonian **economy would struggle to grow without investments from China**, while 38% disagreed, and 39% had no clear position. Yet again, the ethno-linguistic background produced statistically major differences: only 15% of the ethnic Estonians agreed with this statement and 50% disagreed; while 41% of the Russian speakers agreed and just 14% disagreed that the economy will struggle without the influx of Chinese investments.

With tourism having experienced a particularly deep slump during the COVID-19 pandemic and again after the start of a major war in Europe, the economic benefits of attracting increasingly affluent tourists from China might be regarded as significant to the Estonian tourism sector. Overall, half of the respondents (50%) agreed that **Estonia should seek to attract more Chinese tourists**, while just 19% disagreed, and a third (31%) had no

clear position. Statistically major differences occurred between the age groups, with 64% of those in the bracket of 50-64 years of age agreeing, but only 38% of those in the group of 15-29 years supporting this course of action. The ethno-linguistic background was also significant, as less than half of the ethnic Estonians agree (42%), in contrast to two thirds of the Russian speakers (67%).

As foreign students have been a major source of income for Estonian higher education institutions, attracting more fee-paying students from China is another important consideration. The survey revealed that 40% of the respondents in Estonia agreed that **Chinese students should have all possibilities available to study in the country's higher education institutions** (23% disagreed and 37% had no clear position). However, major statistical differences emerged between the generations, where 49% of those in the 30-39-years age group agreed (14% disagreed), but only a third (32%) of those in the 65+ age group agreed, and another third (31%) disagreed. At the same time, more than half (52%) of the Russian speakers, but only

34% of the ethnic Estonians agreed and 30% of them disagreed. By contrast, just 9% of the Russian speakers disagreed with the need to have more Chinese students.

It is notable that, in addition to the ethno-linguistic background, the conservative political leanings of the respondents and also being a skeptic of the government's capacity to successfully navigate international affairs, were important markers in a person's agreement with the China-friendly narratives in the economic domain. These three backgrounds somewhat overlap, with the Russian speakers exhibiting more conservative views and a greater skepticism toward the power of a small state in international relations. However, as the survey was conducted shortly after a coalition of the liberal parties formed a new government in Estonia, the gradually increasing conservative backlash spanning the ethno-linguistic divide might have influenced this result, as everything the liberal government has been doing in terms of foreign policy is mostly seen as wrong by the conservative constituency – Estonian and Russian speaking alike.

At the same time, almost a third of the Estonians (27%) surveyed exhibit a small state mindset, by expressing skepticism toward their government's capacity to successfully influence the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that the split between these doubters and the (assertive) enthusiasts (46% of the respondents) regarding the economic narratives is a persistent characteristic of these results. The former were consistently more in agreement with the narrative that are implying acceptance of the economic power of China, the need for pragmatism, and the restraint from criticisms or coercive responses (e.g., sanctions) to Beijing's actions, and of pursuing the economic opportunities in Estonia's relations with the PRC.

Quite naturally, the heightened perception of socio-economic threat was among the most important indicators of holding favorable views toward China in the economic domain. The responses to every question in this domain showed a statistically significant difference, between those with a lower and higher level of the perceived socio-economic threat. For the segment of the society that felt rather or strongly threatened (i.e., a third of the respondents, or 30%), economic opportunities clearly ranked above any other

considerations, and this was reflected in the results of the survey. Again, as is noted earlier in this chapter, there was an overlap of this segment with the Russian speaking cohort, thus further highlighting the receptiveness of the Russian speaking minority to China-friendly economic narratives.

Interestingly, in some cases generational differences are also emerging as important determinants of Estonian views on the economic narratives. Specifically, the younger generation (15-29 years) is least likely to accept the need for trade-offs between the economic gains on the one hand, and values or security on the other; while the older generation is more oriented toward economic gains. This is particularly manifest in such narratives as China being a huge and lucrative market dictating the need to abstain from criticism (47% of 15-29 years old respondents disagreed, in contrast with 41% of those in the age group of 50-64 who agrees); and in relation to the unrestricted use of Chinese information technology (55% in the youngest cohort disagreed). The only puzzling exception is the question of the Chinese students in Estonia, where the older generations are more skeptical about providing them with opportunities, which may indicate their more insular attitudes that are predisposed against immigration in general.

Normative Domain: Firm on Values, But Not Everyone

Economic pragmatism or realism in the public discourse usually goes hand in hand with a debate about values – especially in cases where the economic benefits are derived from relations with countries with a poor human rights record and aggressive behavior toward other nations. It is therefore crucial to ascertain the extent to which the narratives that help to dismiss such concerns or that project an image that is contrary to the reality are spread in various parts of society. Given the overall quite favorable, or at least ambivalent attitudes toward the socio-economic aspects of relations with the PRC, one might expect the values-related perceptions in Estonia to be fairly muted or similarly vague.

However, this does not appear to be the case, as 43% of the respondents did not agree that, **in dealing with China, economic interests are more important than values and principles**, while only 24% agreed with this and a third (33%) were unsure. Nonetheless, statistically significant differences emerged between the age groups, whereby half of those (51%) who were 15-29 years old rejected the priority of the economic interest (15% accepted), while twice as many (30%) of those who were 50-64 years old gave priority to the economic interest over values (although 42% of them prioritized values and principles). Ethno-linguistic background also seems of significance in responding to this statement, as 52% of ethnic Estonians disagreed with the primacy of the economic interests over values and principles (19% agree), while the proportion of the Russian speakers agreeing with it was 36% and the number disagreeing amounted to 22%. Unsurprisingly, respondents employed in the private sector were more likely to prioritize economic interests than values.

Furthermore, the polling showed that the Estonian respondents are rather skeptical about China's projected notion that its growing economic dominance benefits everyone – only 20% of the respondents agreed and nearly half (46%) disagreed with the statement that **China**

is a benevolent country, sharing its economic gains with others, including with Estonia.

Some differences again emerged between the age groups, where only 12% of those in the 15-29 years bracket agreed and 42% disagreed, while a quarter of those in the 50-64 bracket agreed – yet even more of them (49%) disagreed with the narrative describing China's economic benevolence. However, the major cleavage lies among ethno-linguistic lines: only 9% of ethnic Estonians agreed with this narrative, while 59% disagreed. At the same time, 44% of Russian speakers agreed and only 18% disagreed.

As China has long cultivated the image of its peaceful rise, the narrative that **China is a peaceful country, threatening nobody, including Estonia**, was of particular interest in this survey. However, generally only 23% of the respondents in Estonia agreed with this statement and half (49%) disagreed, clearly showing the impact of the PRC's abrasive behavior over the last few years. In addition to the ethno-linguistic divide and ideological gap (see Figure 3), generational differences are also clear, since 30% of those who were 50-64 years old agreed with the "peaceful rise" narrative (46% disagreed), while just 11% of those 15-29 years old agreed and more than half (58%) disagreed with this benevolent image.

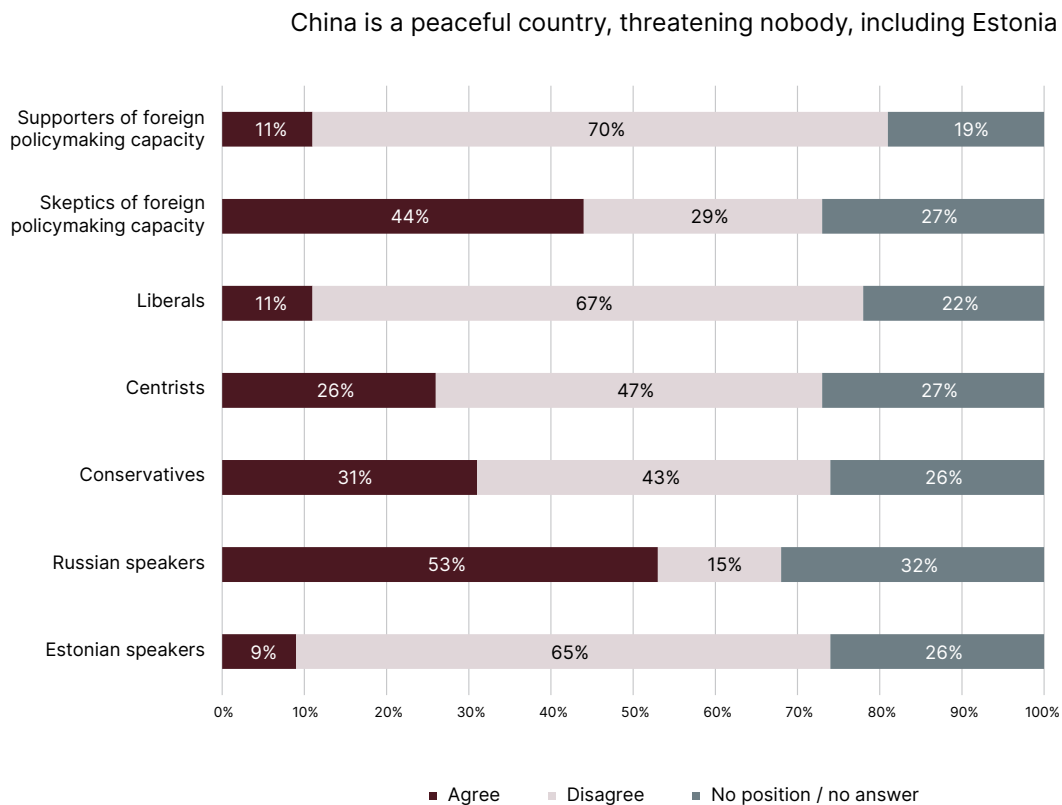


Figure 3: Estonian perception of the threat from China

The notion that **China is genuinely respectful of, and concerned about small states such as Estonia**, was received with significant ambivalence, as 40% of the respondents did not have any opinion or were neutral about it, although a similar share (38%) disagreed with it (22% agreed). There were statistically major differences between the generations, given that 13% of those in the 15-29 years bracket and 30% of those in the 50-64 years bracket agreed with this narrative (in both groups, 41% disagreed). Even more significant, once again, is the ethno-linguistic background, as almost half of Russian speakers (45%) agreed while, by contrast, half of Estonians (50%) disagreed with the image of China treating small states with respect.

Overall, however, the fact that Estonia is a small country – a reality that underpins the mindsets and attitudes of various segments of the society in many ways – also shapes the perceptions about how the country should act in relation to the PRC. 42% of the respondents agreed with the notion that **Estonia is too small and irrelevant to criticize China** (35% disagreed and 23% had no clear position). However, half of the youngest age cohort (15-29 years old) disagreed (49%), while more than half of the oldest cohort (65+) agreed (53%), showing a remarkable generational gap in terms of seeing the relevance of the country's absolute and relative size when it comes to raising values-related issues in the international arena. More significantly, almost two-thirds of Russian speakers (61%), but just a third of the Estonians (33%) agreed with this notion, which may well reflect the impact of Russia's propaganda directed against Estonia and the self-confidence of its society.

While the country's size was an issue for a slight majority when criticizing China's policies and behavior, Estonia's own policies and behavior was not seen as a cause for abstaining from pointing out the PRC's human rights record. 43% of the respondents disagreed with the proposition that **Estonia is not in a moral position to criticize China for its human rights record** (29% agreed and 28% had no clear position). Younger people (15-29) were particularly disapproving of this statement (55% disagreed), but even the older respondents (65+) were split on this narrative, with 35% agreeing and 32% disagreeing. On the other

hand, the share of Russian speakers agreeing with the statement was more than double the share of Estonians (43% vs 21%), reflecting the deep-seated (and misguided) skepticism of the former about the Russophone minority's opportunities in Estonia,²⁰ and the understanding among the latter that Estonia's record is nothing to be critical of (55% of this group disagreed with the statement in our survey).

As evidence of a clear-cut failure of whataboutism in the disinformation narratives, almost half of the respondents (49%) disagreed with the statement that, **in general, the human rights situation in China is no worse than in the West** (only 18% agreed and 33% had no clear view). The disagreement was particularly strong among the younger respondents (15-29), where 64% rejected this notion (compared to 44% in the 40-49 years cohort, for example), as well as among the ethnic Estonians, 62% of whom disagreed. Even the Russian speakers were more divided than usual on this issue, with 36% agreeing and 23% disagreeing with the statement.

However, Estonian foreign policy changes in relation to the PRC – such as exiting the 16+1 format – have not been very visible in the public eye, regardless of the drivers of those changes and the character of the strategic communication surrounding them. Two-thirds of the respondents (66%) had a neutral view or no opinion whatsoever on whether **Estonia's recent review of its relationship with China is irresponsible and erroneous** or, in a similar vein, **prejudicial against the Chinese**. Still, about a third (31%) of the Russian speakers thought this was the case (compared to 15% and 17% of the Estonians, regarding the respective statements), while a quarter of the Estonians disagreed (compared to just 4% and 8% of the Russian speakers).

On the other hand, in one of the strongest expressions of unanimity in Estonian society, 73% of the respondents agreed and only 6% disagreed that **Estonia should not interfere in China's domestic affairs**. The older respondents (50-64 years) and Russian speakers were even more insistent on this issue, with 82% and 85% agreeing with the statement, while just 3% and 1% disagreed with it in the respective segments of the sample. Those with more conservative political views, as well as skeptics of the government's capacity to conduct an effective

foreign policy and those with a sharper sense of socio-economic threat, were more supportive of this notion. It appears that, despite feeling right about criticizing the PRC's international behavior and human rights record, the respondents in Estonia would rather not see their government meddle in what they regard as Chinese internal affairs, just as they would not want to see the PRC meddle in Estonian affairs.

Ethno-linguistic background and, occasionally, age appeared to correlate most strongly with the responses on the question relating to values. However, as in the case of economic issues, the same segments of the society – the respondents with conservative political leanings, a heightened sense of economic insecurity and those skeptical view toward the government's capacity for the foreign policy – tended to be more accepting of China-friendly narratives. Furthermore, in terms of values, the Estonian respondents with a lower level of education and, in some cases, those employed in the public sector also exhibited greater receptiveness to those narratives, which could be explained by the greater economic insecurity of these demographic groups.

One of the key findings, however, is that the Estonian general public does not view China favorably on the issue of values such as human rights, and does not consider the PRC as “force for good” in the world. Therefore, some of the narratives supporting this notion are clearly failing, suggesting both a strong orientation toward upholding universal values and a clear-eyed view of what the PRC's regime stands for. Still, this is tempered by the cautiousness inherent to small countries, in order to prevent any external meddling and not to overreach in projecting normative power.

Geopolitical Domain: Fragmented Picture, Ambiguous Views

China's efforts to present itself as a benign rising power have been built around some general storylines concerning its relations with other countries and its role in global affairs, as well as by more specific, events-driven

narratives. In Estonia, the reactions of the respondents to these narratives were much more diverse and often more ambiguous than the responses to economic or value-related issues.

There are China-friendly “stories” that the respondents in Estonia tended to agree with more than disagree. For instance, 46% of them agreed that **China provides opportunities for the development of many nations, including Estonia** (17% disagreed and 37% had no clear position). The Russian speakers were particularly in favor of this notion (62% agreed) and the ethnic Estonians were more skeptical (38% agreed). In a similar vein, more than half of the respondents (51%) agreed that **China is pushing against global US hegemony** (11% disagreed and 38% had no clear position), with Russian speakers and older respondents (50-64 years) being particularly supportive of this view (63% and 59% agreed, respectively).

Most unexpectedly, for a nation that has a very strong transatlantic foreign policy orientation, almost two-thirds, or 61%, of the respondents in Estonia believe that **Europe should not follow the US lead** in its policy toward China (12% disagreed and 27% had no clear position). This belief was particularly strong among the Russian speakers, skeptics of the government's capacity for foreign policymaking, conservatives and, oddly, the self-identified centrists (see Figure 4). This notion was also very strong among the respondents who were 30-39 years of age (69% agreed), employed in the non-commercial (public) sector (73%), and with a higher perception of a socio-economic threat.

This may well be a short-term reaction to a very assertive pushback by the US against China's growing influence that has created many challenges in the EU, but it could also signal that Estonian society is gradually adopting a more EU-centric set of attitudes in assessing trends in international affairs and the prescribing responses to them. However, these hypotheses would need to be tested with more research specifically focused on the relevant issues.

Europe should not follow the US lead

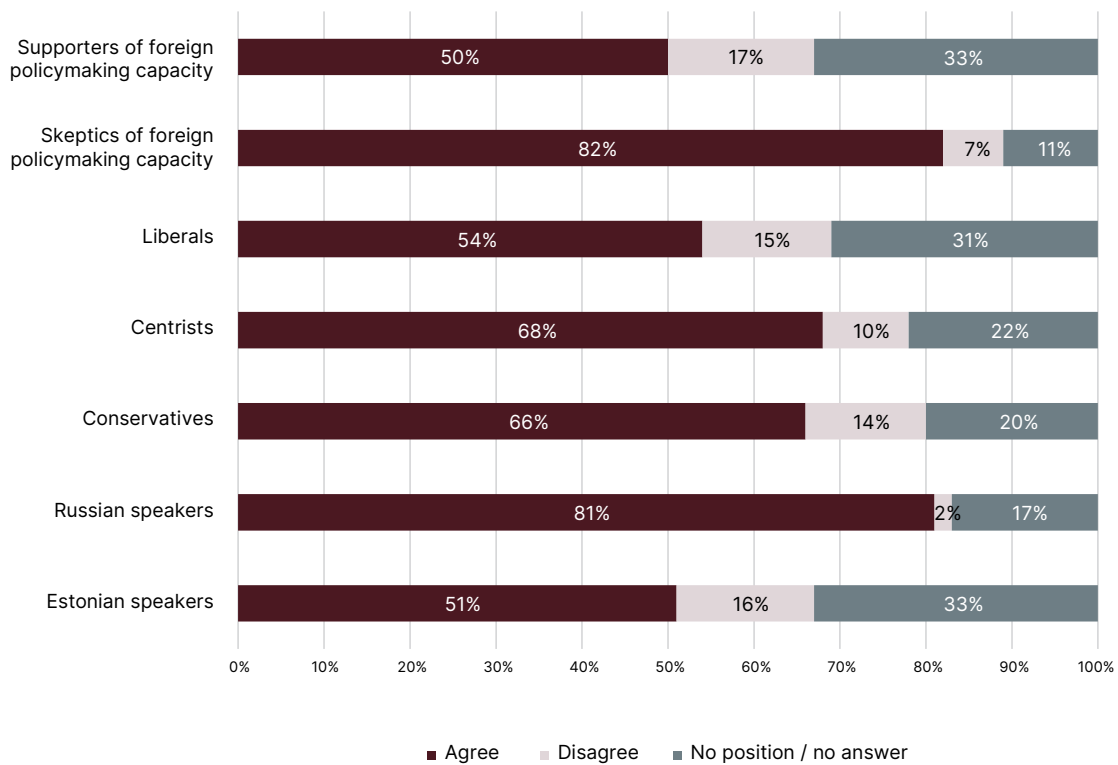


Figure 4: Estonian perception of US leadership

The Estonian public also has less West-centric views about international relations than is commonly assumed. Half of the respondents (50%) agreed with the view (pushed into the discourse by, among others, China's propaganda) that **the diplomatic resolution of the war in Ukraine cannot be reached if led only by the West** (18% disagreed, while 32% had no clear opinion). In particular, the Russian speakers and older respondents were in agreement with this notion (65% and 57%, respectively), but even the ethnic Estonians and younger people leaned quite strongly toward agreeing with it (45% and 40%, respectively).

That does not mean, however, that China's aggressive posturing and influence-building has gone unnoticed and is regarded positively by the Estonian public – 40% of the respondents disagreed with the notion that **China contributes to a safer world**, even though an almost equal share

(38%) had no clear view on this matter. The disagreement was strongest among the ethnic Estonians (52% disagreed) and those in the 50-64 age group (45% disagreed), while the Russian speakers tended to agree more (47% agreed with this statement about China's stabilizing role).

The legitimacy of the PRC's claim to Taiwan is quite strongly rejected among the Estonian public. Half of the respondents (50%) disagreed with Beijing's assertion that **Taiwan is a part of China** (15% agreed, but another 35% held neutral views or were unable to choose). This claim was least supported among the younger respondents (just 5% agreed and 71% disagreed among those 15-29 years old), followed by liberals, enthusiasts of the government's capacity for foreign policymaking, and ethnic Estonians, but only a third of the Russian speaking respondents agreed with it (see Figure 5).

Taiwan is a part of China

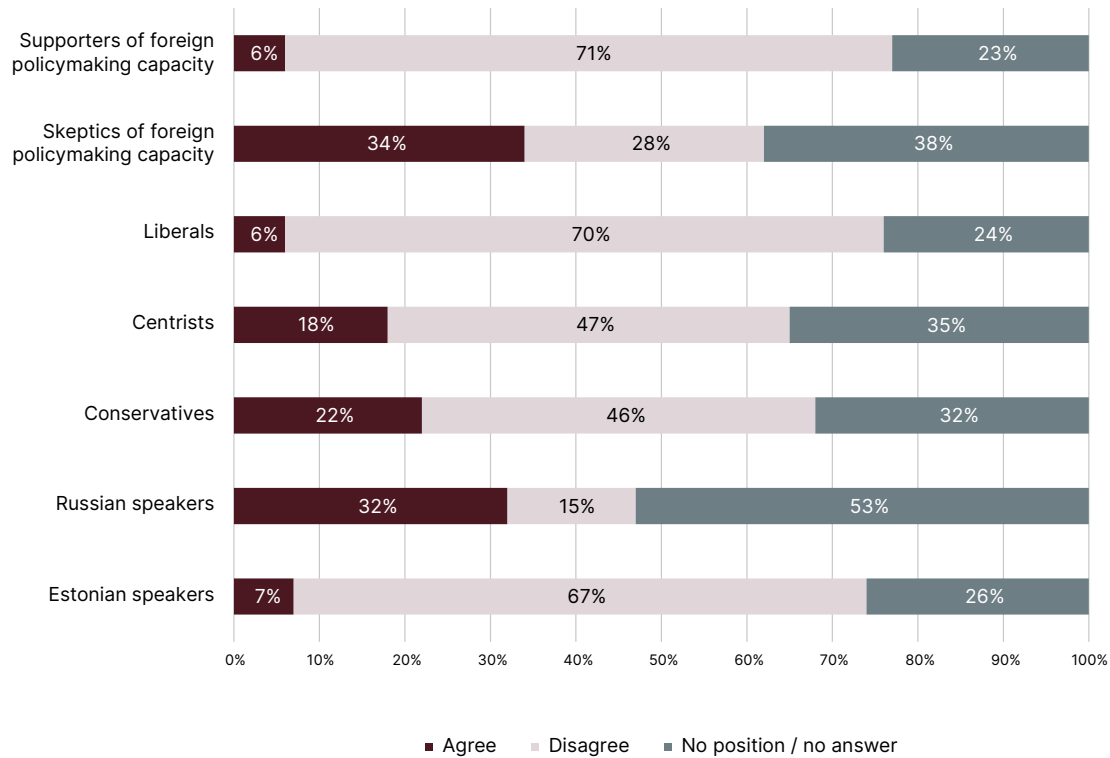


Figure 5: Estonian perception of Taiwan

On the other hand, the Estonian views on some grand notions about China’s strategy (and US counter-strategy), as well as about some more specific issues are more ambiguous and fragmented. This indicates there is a fertile ground for influence operations by China to sway the public in the direction of supporting its narratives, which should be paid more attention in strategic communications.

For instance, 43% of the respondents had no clear view (30% agreed and 27% disagreed) on whether **China makes efforts to create multilateral order in the world**. However, 42% of the 50–64 age cohort agreed (42%), while 34% had no view or were neutral about the statement. Likewise, 57% of Russian speakers agreed with this statement (11% disagreed), which may indicate that this narrative, which echoes a persistent Kremlin propaganda point about the dawn of a multipolar order, might be imported from the Russian information space rather than being spread as a result of the PRC’s efforts.

In addition, half of the respondents (51%) had no clear position on whether **the US is launching a new Cold War against China**

(26% agrees and 23% disagreed). This was especially true among those in the 15–29 age group (58% had no view or were neutral), which may reflect their general lack of knowledge about the Cold War. By comparison, less than half of those in the 50–64 age group had no view (43%), while 31% of them agreed and 26% disagreed. The ethno-linguistic background was also statistically significant in thinking that a new Cold War is breaking out between the US and China – 43% of Russian speakers agreed and 12% disagreed, compared to just 18% of ethnic Estonians who agreed while 28% disagreed.

Public opinion is also very equally split between those in disagreement and those with no clear views on whether **China is helping to reach peace in Ukraine** – 42% disagreed with this notion, and the same share has no clear view on the matter. However, only 18% of the respondents agree with the statement, showing the limits of Chinese propaganda with regards to presenting it as a peacemaker rather than an ally of Russia. The ambivalence was strongest among the youngest age cohort aged 15–

29, where 47% expressed neutral views or were unable to answer – presumably due to a low awareness of what the PRC has or

has not been doing in this regard – while the disagreement was strongest among ethnic Estonians (see Figure 6).

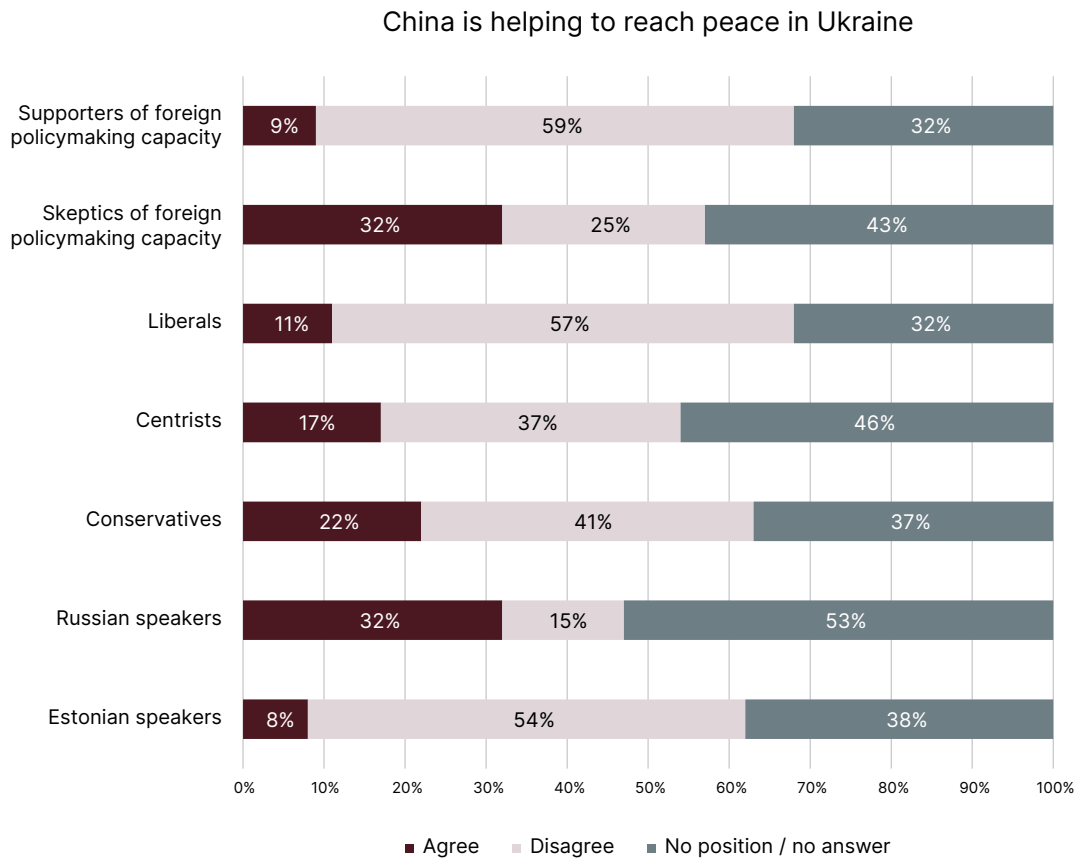


Figure 6: Estonian perception of China's role in Russia's war against Ukraine

The highest degree of ambivalence among the respondents in Estonia is related to the issues encountered by their Baltic neighbor, Lithuania, which indicates a limited awareness of, and attention to, the geopolitical challenges faced by their allied nation. 59% of all the respondents in Estonia could not answer, or had a neutral view on the statement that **the China-Lithuania dispute is Lithuania's fault** (10% agreed with it while 31% disagreed). The ethno-linguistic gap was apparent again in this case, as 42% of ethnic Estonians disagreed with it (compared to 7% of Russian speakers).

Despite the strong fragmentation and ambivalence in views on China's narratives of international relations and politics,

similar demographic groups as those in the previous two questions exhibited a greater receptiveness to these narratives, the respondents with conservative political leanings, skeptics of the government's capacity for its foreign policy, and those with a higher perception of the socio-economic risks. In this particular domain, however, employees in the public/non-commercial sector also appeared to be amenable to half of the tested pro-China narratives – something that surfaced, to smaller extent, in the normative domain and could be explained by a lower sense of economic security in this segment, which correlates strongly with the receptiveness of the pro-Chinese narratives.

Insights from the Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews

In total 31 respondents/participants were recruited and interviewed, either in a focus group or by using the in-depth interview method. The profile of the respondents can be found in Annex 1.

The qualitative survey data reveals that various societal groups in Estonia share the opinion on a potential dichotomy between economic and political interests. Many of the interviewed respondents also highlighted the apparent primacy of national interests when discussing political interference in relation to the economy and trade. *“In the European context, values and economic interests are intertwined. In the case of America, we can talk about values and economic interests, but then there is also a third aspect – national interests”* (quote from a representative of an international logistics business from Western Estonia, 42 years old). The commercial sector’s representatives and participants with a lower income leaned toward supporting a stove-piped approach to managing economic and political interests, by insulating the former from the political agenda.

In general, however, the respondents recognize there are potential clashes and frictions between the economic and political affairs, especially where values such as human rights are concerned. When it comes to China specifically, it was obvious to the interviewers that various aspects of the PRC often fell outside the scope of knowledge and attention of some of the interviewees. Several of the respondents from various groups mentioned the lack of PRC-related topics in the Estonian media, thus explaining their relative ignorance on particular issues.

Upholding Values: Necessary, But Only Together

There was a general consensus among the interviewees regarding the understanding of what constitutes universal human rights, yet many of them realize that the degree to which these rights are implemented in practice may vary geographically, as well as culturally and politically, with China standing out as a special case due to its various characteristics.

“China has shown that strength is more important to them than standing up for human rights. The second thing is: economic or political power is more important than people’s lives” (female rural school principal, 32 years old). The topic of human rights resonated the most among the younger respondents, while resonating least among the representatives of private businesses.

Nevertheless, all the interviewed Estonians think that there might be serious violations of human rights in the PRC, but the awareness of the general situation or particular cases is rather low. The media affiliated-respondents demonstrated the most informed knowledge about this topic. Consequently, there was no common position among the interviewees on whether Estonia should raise any concerns regarding the situation regarding human rights in China. The media representatives advocated a more vocal and proactive approach to Estonia’s foreign policy, while other groups would prefer a rather more careful and cautious position, and expressed that, if at all, the concerns should be raised unitedly within the common EU policy toward the PRC. *“Estonia should take and express a clearer position on human rights, although it is still a double-edged issue because, at the same time, it is necessary to maintain relations with China,”* said an Estonian journalist (male, 50 years old). On the other hand, there was the comment that, *“We should protect human rights where it is possible, foremost at home, here in Estonia. The situation in China is above our heads, so this should be addressed on the global level, and maybe the EU can influence it”* (a municipal worker from Tallinn, female, 49 years old).

The representatives of private businesses and the Russian speaking community, as well as the residents of rural areas, expressed an opinion that Estonia should first improve its situation with regard to human rights domestically before reproaching the PRC, thus echoing the views of some specific groups in the quantitative survey. In general, the overall sense was that this is something that the EU is better equipped to address than Estonia on its own.

Keeping the Economy Running: Security on the Back Seat

While the majority of the interview respondents recognized the impact of the PRC on global

economy and trade, some of them (e.g., private businesses) could not associate it directly with a malicious influence – even if there was some degree of acknowledgement that China’s motives might be broader than just an economic motive. As an entrepreneur from Tallinn (male, 40 years old) put it: *“China is such a big country, it is still a very important country in general that everyone has to take it into account. But it’s quite difficult to deal with China. It’s still regarded with some suspicion.”* Moreover, most of the respondents did not appear to see any major threat to the country from Sino-Estonian economic and trade ties.

However, the Estonians with a greater awareness of Chinese activities (journalists, government officials, and respondents with a higher education degree) mentioned the risk of an increasing dependency on Chinese products and technologies. Nonetheless, this is a plain business reality, where the supply chains and business operations are being heavily saturated by more price-competitive Chinese offerings, blunting the willingness among Estonian enterprises to consider less risky alternatives. As a representative of a small enterprise from Tallinn (female, 55 years old) noted, *“Europe still cannot compete with the prices set by China, and China’s economic influence on Estonia and Europe is overwhelming.”*

The latter topic is one of those where Estonians have very divergent positions, ranging between the two extremes of allowing the use of accessible and affordable Chinese technologies without any major limitations at one end of the scale, and introducing a complete ban or severe restrictions on Chinese technologies which might be associated with some safety and security risks at the other end. Different societal groups formulated various arguments to support their positions, but in general, the risk awareness and calculation of the possible negative implications were more present among those Estonians who have some specific (professional) interests in analyzing the activities of the PRC. The majority of the respondents would prefer some clear guidelines provided by the state authorities (or, even better, by the EU) on the safety and security risks associated with particular technologies (digital, manufacturing equipment, etc.) produced in/by the PRC, instead of being tasked with passing their own judgment.

Navigating Geopolitics: The Big Game Above our Heads

As far as the geopolitical ambitions and initiatives of the PRC are concerned, almost all of the interviewed respondents think that “the real game is happening above our heads,” so Estonia has very little (if any) chance to influence it. Many of the Estonian respondents think that geopolitical relations with the PRC should be discussed not at national, but rather at the EU level, which aligns with the quantitative research finding that Estonians are quite skeptical of a small state’s capacity to influence international affairs.

The PRC is perceived by the respondents as a canny player, with long-term goals and many hidden agendas that are difficult to comprehend by a Western mind. As a student from Tallinn (female, 21 years old) articulated: *“China has realized that most of the world is dependent on it. It then plays a nice, long-long game to increase this dependence.”* Likewise, according to a social media influencer (female, 32 years old): *“It is certainly in China’s interest to create a new world order. But I think they are patient enough to achieve their dominant status.”* Some respondents watched with respect the development of the PRC, and its aspirations to be among the global leaders in science, technology and economy. Estonia should, in their opinion, maintain a balance with pragmatic relations with the PRC as much as possible for an EU/NATO member.

However, the majority of the Estonian respondents think that Estonia is not naïve, as it understands that the PRC has only selfish interests. This is highlighted by the disapproval of the narratives peddling China’s respect for, and benevolence toward, small states in the public opinion poll results – it is known that China uses a range of techniques and approaches to advance those interests. As an entrepreneur from Tallinn (male, 28 years old) commented on China’s foreign policy methods, they are *“negotiations and pressure to compromise, but also an infiltration through the economy and education.”* This realist and clear-eyed assessment also applies when discussing China’s role in Russia’s war against Ukraine: the interviewees thought that China supported Russia not on sincerely ideological grounds, but rather only because of its own pursuit of geopolitical and economic gains and to gain a greater influence internationally.

As a marker question regarding the issue of Taiwan, most of the interviewed Estonian respondents had no clear opinion on this matter as their awareness was very limited, especially among younger people (in contrast to the findings of the survey where they had a very strong and clear stand), as well as among local Russian speakers and residents of rural areas. On the other hand, the government officials and media representatives – i.e., groups that are well-attuned to world affairs – tend to understand and even support the Taiwanese aspirations for independence from the PRC. It is against the backdrop of such a positive sentiment among some particular societal groups that the Estonian foreign policy is slowly moving toward engaging Taiwan, with its recent promises to open Taipei's economic or cultural office in Estonia²¹ – something that will likely trigger a wave of pro-China narratives in the public space, as well as a diplomatic and economic response from China, but will equally help to give a stronger voice in the Estonian debates to those who are directly and gravely threatened by the PRC's regime.

Conclusions

The acceptance of various Chinese and/or pro-Chinese information narratives varies in Estonia, depending on the theme as well as the demographics. The general lack of interest in, or awareness of China contributes to a visible share of unclear, superficial, or sometimes contradictory positions. This demonstrates that the diffusion of China-friendly narratives in the country is still in its infancy and is just beginning to coalesce into something more tangible.

On economic issues, there is generally either some degree of pragmatism, or indifference and ignorance, expressed by the majority of the respondents in Estonia. Nevertheless, some demographic groups are more critically minded with regard to economic relations with the PRC. Those groups include younger respondents, ethnic Estonians, respondents with a university degree, and those who work in the governmental sector, as well as those with a more liberal political perspective and with a low concern for the socio-economic threat. On the other hand, the representatives

of private businesses and socio-economically insecure respondents are inclined to see more benefits and fewer risks in having trade relations with the PRC.

The values-related information narratives of the PRC are mostly rejected by a large proportion of the respondents in Estonia, but there are significant deviations from this mainstream view, which are represented by the pro-China attitudes of local Russian speakers, older people, those with a lower education attainment, those who work in the non-commercial (public) sector, those with a more critical attitude toward the Estonian government's capacity, and the respondents with a more acute sense of socio-economic threat. However, there is quite strong unanimity across various groups on the position that Estonia should not interfere in China's domestic affairs.

There is a huge variation in the opinions regarding the narratives on politics and international relations. On some topics, the majority of the respondents in Estonia simply have no clear position. Nonetheless, there are generational, ethnolinguistic, educational, and socio-economic gaps evident in the answers, with the exception of the universally shared opinion that Europe should not follow the US lead in relation to its China policy. Still, by and large, there is no clear position among the respondents in Estonia regarding China-related geopolitical issues. In general, the respondents in Estonia would prefer to see some EU-coordinated approach to (geo)political affairs vis-à-vis the PRC. This low level of awareness and relative lack of interest could potentially lead to the risk of misperceiving the PRC's actions and aspirations in the field of international relations.

The demographic groups in Estonia that are informationally vulnerable, and are therefore more susceptible to accepting the Chinese or pro-Chinese narratives, can be described as having the following characteristics: older generation, local Russian speakers, people with a lower education attainment level, employees of the non-commercial (public) sector, representatives of private businesses, people with a more conservative political viewpoint, people who have a critical attitude toward the government's capacity for managing foreign affairs, and people with a higher degree of the perceived socio-economic threat. Some of these

groups certainly overlap, but it is clear that the mixture of economic pragmatism, a small state mindset, socio-political conservatism, and socio-economic insecurity are the major drivers in adopting a stance that favors China-friendly narratives.

Given the variety of media consumption, it would be difficult to synchronously address PRC-related topics across the different channels and platforms available in Estonia. Nevertheless, there is an evident need to increase the general awareness among certain societal groups regarding a Chinese malign influence and activities and their short-, mid-, and long-term security implications for Estonia and the EU. Otherwise, as Europe pursues de-risking strategies, these groups might become the unwitting agents of Beijing's narratives propagated to undermine the public support and political cohesion that ought to underpin these strategies.

At the same time, the most important cleavages in the perceptions of China – which run along ethnolinguistic (Russian speakers vs Estonian speakers) and ideological (conservatives vs liberals and, most of the time, centrists) lines – contain the primary targets of the Russian malign influence campaigns. This serves to underline that the PRC regime can often piggyback on Russian propaganda when engendering a particular worldview, thus saving their resources while maintaining a certain distance from those who are getting their hands dirty through distorting the public views in Estonia. Without dealing more effectively with the disinformation and misinformation concocted by the Kremlin, it will be difficult to avoid the local diffusion of narratives that benefit Beijing as well.

Perceptions of China and Pro-Chinese Narratives in Latvia

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Latvia is a small country with 1.88 million inhabitants (2023).²² Among them, 1.18 million identify as ethnic Latvians, 0.44 million as ethnic Russians, and 0.26 million as other nationalities,²³ which mostly pertains to Russian speakers, including Russified Belarusians, Ukrainians, or Armenians. Almost half of the population resides in the capital city, Riga, and in the capital-adjacent municipalities.²⁴

The average disposable income per equivalent consumer has grown dramatically during the last 20 years, from EUR 2,713 in 2004 to EUR 13,148 in 2022.²⁵ However, the geographic income disparity remains a challenge, with the share of persons under the minimum income level in the capital recorded at 5% and in the eastern region of Latgale at 14.2%.²⁶ Consequently, 35.2%

of the current survey respondents indicated a high perception of personal economic risk, while 30.6% had an average level, and 28.2% stated they had a low or no perception of such a risk, with the responses being quite evenly distributed across age, gender, education, work sector, living place, and nationality groups. As for the personal sense of social threat, 20.3% of the respondents perceived this as high, 29.0% as average, and 43.0% as low or absent, with men feeling slightly less threatened than women. 70.8% of the respondents answered that they felt safe at home, while 7.9% stated that they did not feel safe at home. Residents of rural areas, as well as ethnic Latvians reported feeling safe “to a very great extent” more than dwellers of other domicile types and other nationalities, who preferred the response that they felt “moderately safe.” A degree of worry about the economic future, as well as one’s social safety, is a current characteristic of the Latvian society.

Given the cultural and geographical distance, as well as the lack of historical exchanges, the level of experience with China in the Latvian society is low. When asked whether people have ever traveled to China, a significant percentage of the respondents said no, yet expressed an interest in visiting. The desire to travel to China was found to be higher among individuals aged 18-55 (above 60%) and was around 50% among those aged 56-75. This preference exhibited a consistent distribution across the different languages spoken by the respondents, including Latvian, Russian, English, and other languages.

The responses from the group under the age of 34 highlighted the fact that social media networks have emerged as their primary source of news. Significantly, younger individuals also showed a preference for news portals in English (15% of the respondents), rather than in Latvian or the other languages spoken in Latvia. Potentially, if this trend continues, it will limit the policy instruments available on the national level to curb the spread of misinformation. On the one hand, the populations are becoming less prone to take locally-generated unauthentic or misleading content at face value. On the other hand, the consumers of international media content will become more often subjected to the narratives distributed by global FIMI actors, including China, in the future. Over half of the middle-aged and older respondents (35-54 and 55-65+) generally preferred National Public TV Channels, with over a third relying on the news portals operating in Latvian, as well as radio. This is a positive dynamic, since the public broadcaster-operated national TV and radio in Latvia is an independent media source that generally carries out a high standard of fact-checking.

In terms of the level of trust that the respondents have in their government's ability to successfully handle international and foreign relations, the overall agreement was recorded at 36.1%, whereas the overall disagreement was 30.6%. This data indicates an almost even mixture of trust, skepticism, and uncertainty. Private business representatives showed lower levels of trust compared to central and local government employees, and Latvians showed more trust in the government's foreign relations ability than the respondents of other nationalities.

From the perspective of the political viewpoints of the respondents based on self-identification, a significant portion of the answers – over 45% – falls under a conservative viewpoint, and 16.6% under a centrist viewpoint, whereas 19.3% fell under a liberal viewpoint. The percentage of “moderate conservatives” (30.6%) among Latvian speakers was higher than among other linguistic groups, whereas almost 30% of Russian speakers found their political identification hard to tell. Men tended to be more conservative than women. 30% of the respondents under 25 identified as “centrist”, which was the highest number of centrists among all age groups. Perhaps, this self-identification is a counter-reaction to the political polarization taking place globally. Much attention to political polarization is being drawn in social media, which this group consumes as their primary information source.

Only 8% of the respondents had personally traveled to China. Roughly two-thirds of the respondents who had not been to China, especially businesspeople and public sphere employees, would like to visit the country, whereas one third did not wish to see China with their own eyes.

Economic Domain: The Importance of Life Standards yet Indecision over China's Role

Issues related to the economy and personal income clearly strike a chord with respondents in Latvia, arguably due to a level of economic anxiety among the population. Most of the respondents acknowledged the economic and political benefits of maintaining positive relations with China. The data indicated that 62.1% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that **good relations with China are beneficial for both China and Latvia**. Curiously, a personal interest in China did not correlate with the belief in China's positive economic impact: 52.8% of the people who agree that **having good relations with China is economically and politically beneficial for China and Latvia** had no interest in traveling to

China. The respondents who choose Latvian news portals operating in Russian as their primary information source tended to agree with the statement about China's beneficial economic and political impact more than the consumers of other sources, standing at 78.3%. There seems to be no ideological divide relating to good relations between China and Latvia, as both self-identified conservatives (66.5%) and liberals (67.5%) agreed with the statement.

The belief in the economic benefits China could bring Latvia does not equally spill over into a pro-China sentiment in the framework of EU-China relations, as the respondents were almost equally divided in groups that agreed, disagreed, or had no response with regard to the statement that **our industries and consumers are highly-dependent on supply chains from China; therefore, Latvia should not support any EU economic sanctions on China**. Linguistic and national factors appear to have contributed to this

tie in the results – Latvian respondents were less likely to agree with the statement compared to the respondents from other nationalities. The respondents who trust the government to know how to successfully deal with international and foreign relations tended to believe (42%) that Latvia should support the EU economic sanctions on China. Consequently, those who do not trust the government's foreign policy capacity were of the opposite opinion (49.7%), believing that Latvia should not support any EU economic sanctions on China.

Over a third of the self-described centrists (37.7%) agreed that **industries and consumers are highly-dependent on supply chains from China; therefore, Latvia should not support any EU economic sanctions on China**, while 38.1% of liberals disagreed. Conservatives were divided on the issue, with one third concurring, and another third dissenting.

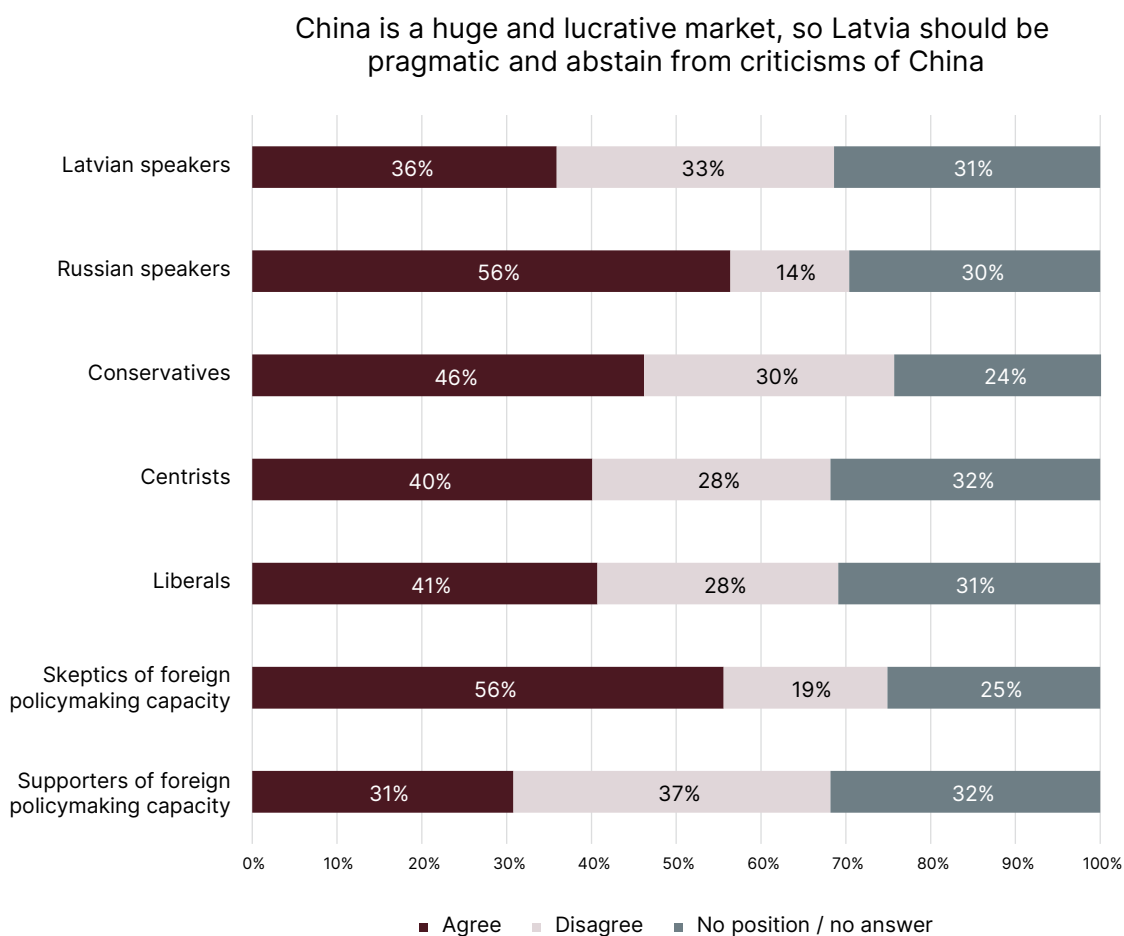


Figure 7: Latvian perception of the economic benefits versus political criticism of China

An even more polarized picture emerges regarding the statement that **China is a huge and lucrative market, so Latvia should be pragmatic and abstain from criticisms of China** (see Figure 7). The data shows that 42.4% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. On the other hand, over a quarter of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. The study revealed that half of the respondents from the “Other main city” living areas, as well as almost half

of those in the “Capital city” area shared this sentiment. Among Latvian respondents, the composite agreement was recorded at 34.3%, whereas for the respondents of other nationalities the composite agreement was 55.4%. The difference in the level of agreement with the statement between Latvian and other respondents is quite significant. Again, the majority of the respondents who lack trust in the government’s foreign policy abilities call for pragmatism.

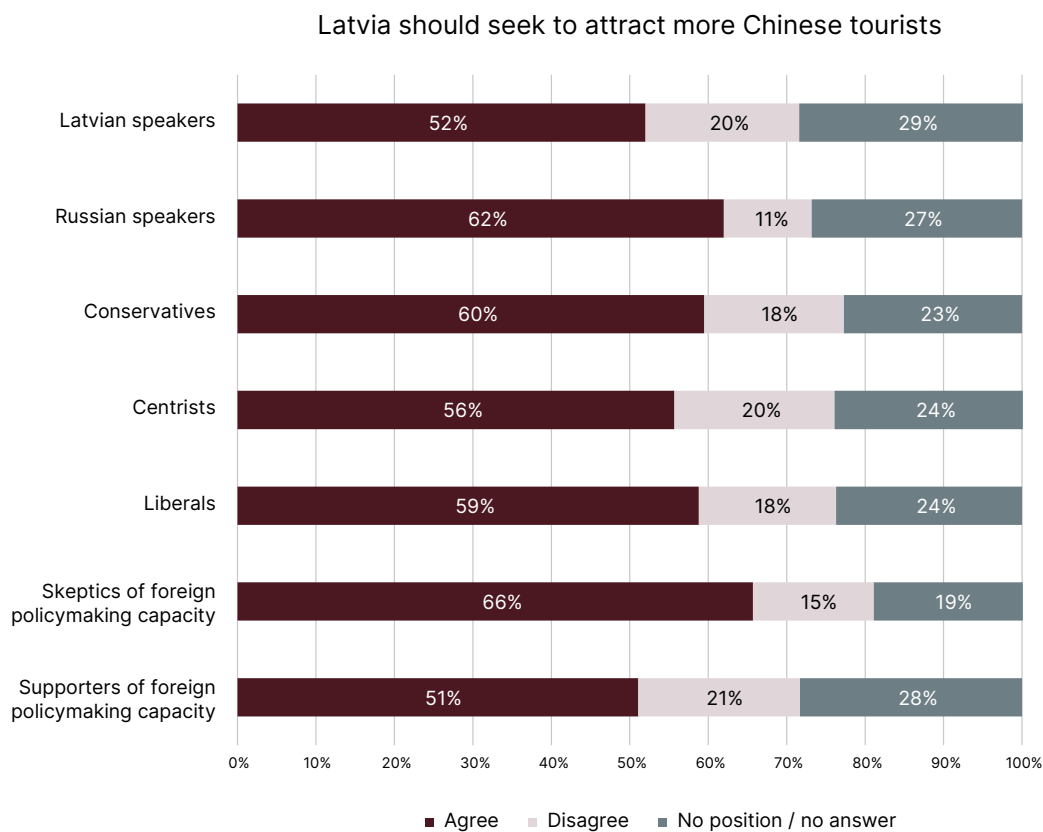


Figure 8: Latvian perception about Chinese tourists

Over half of those surveyed expressed generally favorable views on the statement that **Latvia should seek to attract more Chinese tourists**, regardless of the respondents’ level of trust in the government’s capacity to handle foreign relations and their personal political ideology (see Figure 8). The results are similar in the responses to the statement that **Chinese students should have all possibilities to study in our country’s higher education institutions**, with the data indicating an overall positive/neutral attitude, and with over half of the respondents agreeing with this statement. Interestingly, the respondents

from private businesses showed the highest percentage of agreement (43.2%). Most probably, this population identifies tourism as well as education exports as low-risk economic endeavors, and perhaps is better informed on Latvia’s growing appeal as a tourism and education destination, making the attraction of Chinese tourists and students a positive and achievable economic goal in their eyes.

The survey also investigated the public sentiment concerning the use of China’s information technology in Latvia, even in the presence of potential security risks. The data revealed a cautious stance among government

employees and media industry professionals. In the “Central government” sector, almost half of the respondents expressed disagreement with the notion that **China’s information technology should be unrestricted in Latvia, despite its affordability**. The “Media” sector closely followed, with 46.2% of the respondents disagreeing. When examining responses by nationality, a stark contrast emerged yet again. Among the Latvian respondents, a degree of skepticism prevailed; whereas the respondents from other nationalities demonstrated a significantly higher level of agreement: 11.9% strongly agreed, and a substantial 30.7% agreed with the notion of the unrestricted use of China’s information technology in Latvia. People who trust the Latvian government to know how to successfully deal with international and foreign relations rallied in favor of the restrictions on Chinese tech, with those experiencing distrust calling against limiting its use. The inverse correlation between trust in the government’s foreign policy and an openness to China suggests that the society is well-informed of the transatlantic and pro-Western position of the Latvian establishment, and is also aware that it leads to restrictions on Latvia’s political and economic relations with China. This is pushing the parts of the population with a dislike toward the collective West to argue in favor of a more openness to China. The results based on nationality suggest that the anti-establishment sentiment is more prevalent among the Russian speaking population, pointing to a cleavage in the Latvian society.

The survey also probed public opinions regarding Latvia’s economic growth and its reliance on investments from China. When analyzing the data by education level, a general trend emerged. The respondents with higher education levels were more likely to agree with the statement that **the economy would struggle to grow without investments from China**. Conversely, the respondents with lower education levels were more inclined to disagree. Nevertheless, it’s essential to note that the opinions on this topic were diverse across all education levels. Like in other economy-related cases, the already-familiar inverse correlation with the trust in the government’s foreign policy emerged yet again, with an extra nuance: the prevailing opinion within the group that does not have an opinion

on the government’s foreign policy was aligned with the group that does not trust it, stating that Latvia will struggle without Chinese investments. The respondents that personally feel economically and socially safe did not see the necessity for Chinese investments, whereas those who feel greatly threatened economically believe in the necessity of Chinese investments for Latvia.

Examining the survey responses by sector, a divided perspective on China’s investment emerges within the business community. Approximately a third agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while another third disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that **Economy would struggle to grow without investments from China**. Among the public servants employed by the central government, 29.7% agreed or strongly agreed, whereas 36.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The respondents employed by the municipal governments exhibited a nearly even split, possibly reflecting the narrative of China as a revitalizing force at the local level, which is in alignment with the narratives of the 16+1 framework. Among the respondents working in the public sphere, including in education and medical care, 24.2% agreed or strongly agreed, while 32.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

A further analysis based on the language spoken at home again revealed disparities. The respondents whose first language was Latvian were less likely to agree with the statement, with 24.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing, and 38.8% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. In contrast, those whose first language was Russian or English displayed a higher agreement rate, with 42.4% and 40.0%, respectively, agreeing or strongly agreeing. The respondents with other first languages also exhibited a higher disagreement rate, with 40.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Latvia’s respondents do not hold particularly strong opinions when it comes to the support for Taiwan and its impact on Latvia’s economic relations with China. The statement that **supporting Taiwan does not bring any economic benefits to Latvia and should be less important than good economic relations with China** showed that 27.8% of the respondents agreed, while 25.9% disagreed, leaving a significant portion of respondents who expressed neutrality or uncertainty on

the topic. The respondents who trust the government's foreign policy approach believe in maintaining links with Taiwan, whereas those who are critical of the government's foreign policy stance prefer maintaining good relations with China and deem Taiwan to be less important. The responses of the conservative-leaning and liberal-leaning respondents did not significantly differ.

A noteworthy finding, which feeds back into the Latvian economic optimism vis-a-vis China, relates to the geopolitical confrontation between the US and China. Slightly over a half of the respondents believed that the **political tensions and geopolitical confrontation between the US and China should not affect our economic relations with China**, regardless of whether they position themselves on the conservative or liberal side of the political spectrum. Only 10.1% disagreed with the statement. This suggests that the Latvian population in general, unlike the government and opinion leaders, is not particularly impacted by the transatlantic solidarity mindset on this issue. In particular, the respondents that do not agree with the Latvian government's approach to international issues were in favor of keeping the Latvian economy separated from the US-China dispute.

The data suggests that the perspectives vary based on nationality, but this difference is slighter than on other issues: the respondents from non-Latvian backgrounds were more likely to agree (44.1%) that political tensions should not affect economic relations, compared to the Latvian respondents (36.3%).

The survey also explored the attitudes toward Latvia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its reliance on China's mass production of medical supplies and equipment. The combined percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement that **my country would have been unable to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic without China's mass production of medical supplies and equipment** was 23.9%, strongly surpassed by the composite level of disagreement (41.2%), with the inhabitants of rural areas showing

statistically-significant higher disagreement levels. The respondents who generally are aligned with the government's international positioning tended to believe that Latvia would have been able to cope with the pandemic without relying on Chinese medical supplies.

Normative Domain: Limited Effect and the Vulnerabilities of Minorities

As China has become an active communicator in the global values domain by pushing back on the universality of the Western values, including human rights, and by calling for each country's right to decide what values best match its development path, the spread of Chinese "sovereign" value narratives presents a real risk, as this worldview can be seductive to the parts of populations that are susceptible to anti-establishment leanings.

Nonetheless, the survey shows that the spread of Chinese value narratives has been minimal in Latvia so far. When the respondents were required to provide interpretations of China's actions, role, or position, in relation to values, a considerable number of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, or picked the "Hard to tell" category, suggesting there is a lack of knowledge or lack of a clear stance on the issue. Similarly, in response to the questions related to the economic domain, statistically significant differences between Latvians/Latvian speakers and other nationalities/linguistic groups were detected, although the comparative difference in the percentages varied.

Several examples below confirm this trend. In all the cases listed here, the respondents who trust their government to know how to successfully deal with international and foreign relations tended to be more critical of China, yet those distrustful of the Latvian foreign policy approach did not.

China is a peaceful country, threatening nobody, including Latvia

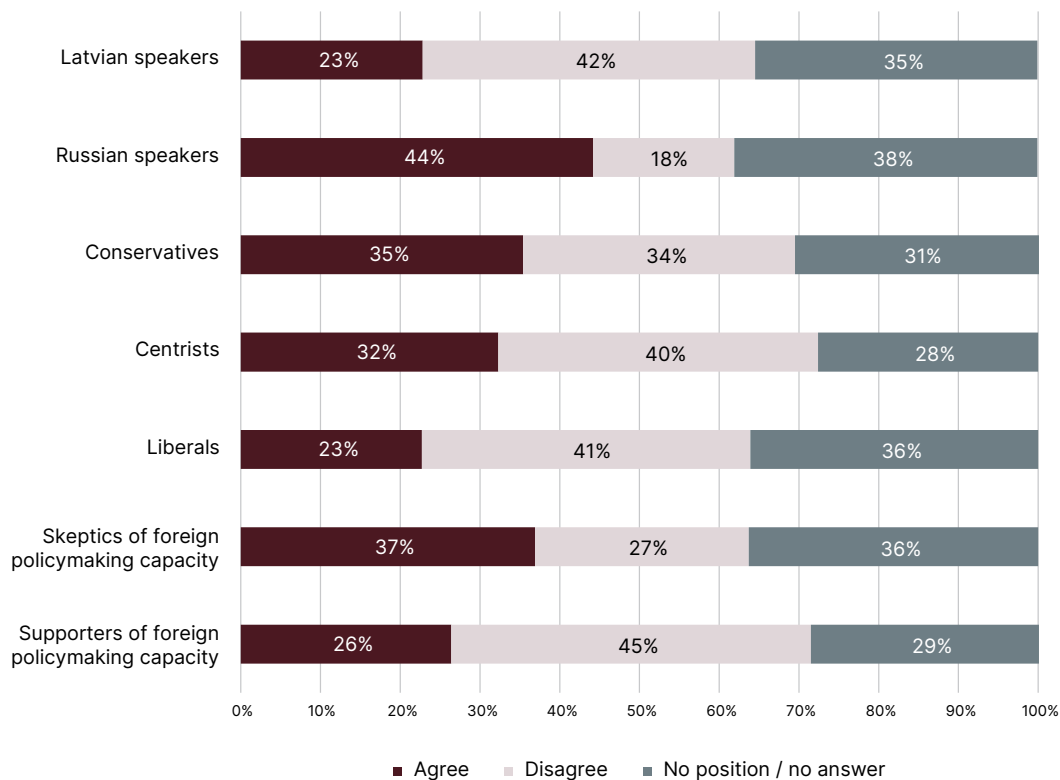


Figure 9: Latvian perception of the threat of China

33.5% of the respondents agreed that China is a benevolent country, sharing its economic gains with others, including Latvia, whereas 26.3% express disagreement. Consistently with the previous section, the respondents from other nationalities were more likely to view China as an economically benevolent entity, compared to the Latvian respondents. Around 30% of the respondents believe that **China is a peaceful country, threatening nobody, including Latvia** (see Figure 9). However, a substantial 33.6% expressed skepticism of this statement. As above, the share of various undecided responses was also quite significant. Conservatives were evenly split in their agreement and disagreement; whereas centrists and liberals tended to deny China's peaceful intention.

A combined total of 28.4% of the respondents believe that **China is genuinely respectful of and concerned about small states, such as Latvia**. However, a similar 27.5% disagreed with this notion. The respondents from other nationalities were more inclined to view China positively in this regard. An almost even shares

of conservatives agreed and disagreed with the statement, whereas more liberals don't believe China to be respectful.

Approximately 33.7% of the respondents agreed that **Latvia is not in a moral position to criticize China for its human rights record**, while 37.0% of the respondents disagreed with this statement. Latvian nationals showed a more even distribution of opinions, while respondents from the "Other" nationalities were more likely to agree with the statement (composite agreement: 46.7%). Approximately 20.6% of the respondents agreed that **Latvia's recent review of its relationship with China is irresponsible and erroneous**, while 20.5% disagreed, with Russian speakers appearing to have a more critical stance regarding Latvia's actions (composite agreements: Latvian speakers: 15.9%; Russian speakers: 30.2%). 19.1% of the respondents agreed that **Latvia's recent review of its relationship with China is prejudicial against the Chinese**, while 23.1% disagreed with this statement. Russian speakers were more inclined to agree with the statement than Latvian speakers. A notable majority of the

respondents agreed with the statement that **Latvia is too small and irrelevant to criticize China** (composite agreement 46.7%). The level of agreement was evenly spread across the political spectrum, without significant differences between the self-ascribed liberals, centrists, and conservatives. Interestingly, 17.8% of central government employees chose the "strongly agree" option, possibly reflecting their concerns related to the Chinese backlash on Lithuania.

When it comes to the reaction to the statement that **in general, the human rights situation in China is no worse than in the West**, 23.5%

of the respondents agreed, 39.3% disagreed, the remainder of the responses were neutral/ undecided, indicating that, even though almost 40% of the population believe that China's human rights situation is worse than that in Western countries, an almost even fraction of the population has no strong opinions or knowledge regarding the matter. The majority of those that lean toward a liberal view believe China's human rights situation to be worse than in the West. Furthermore, higher education holders appeared to be more critical of China's human rights record, highlighting a potential correlation between education level and human rights concerns.

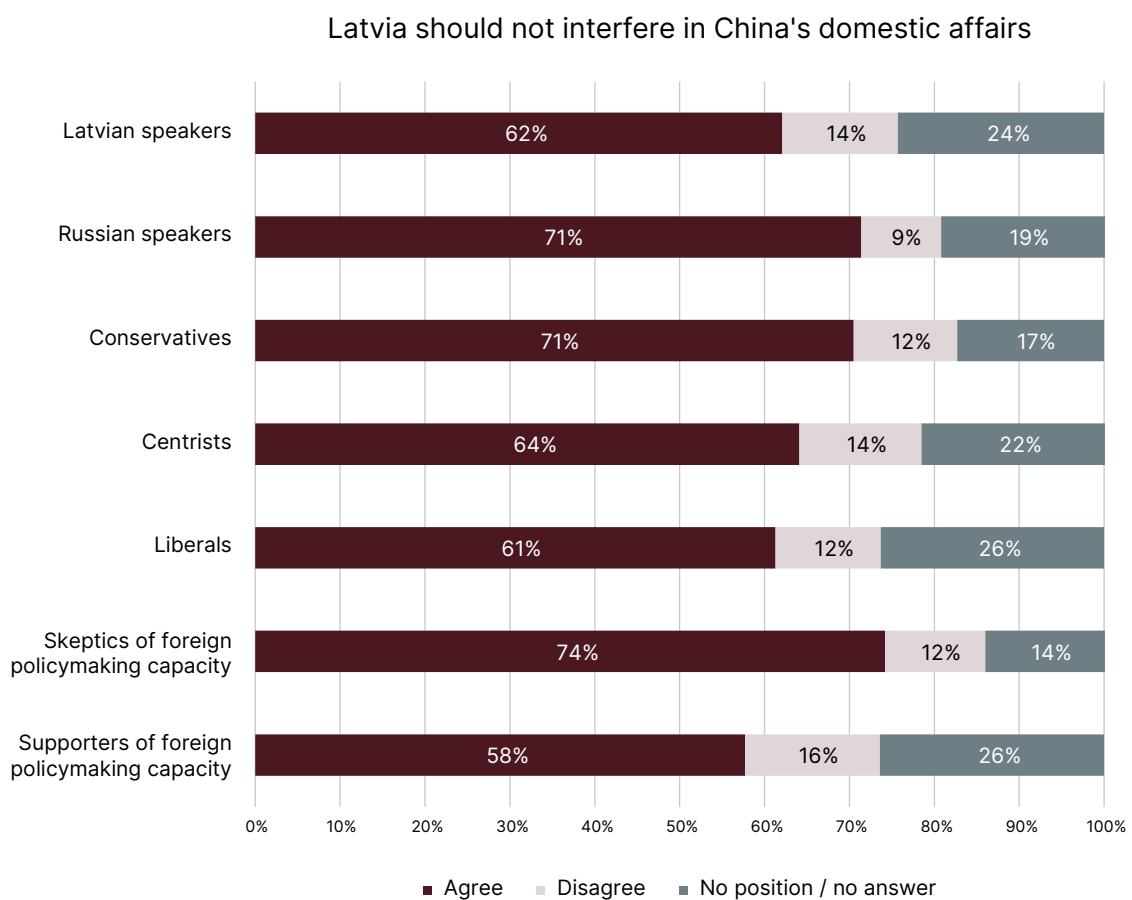


Figure 10: Latvian perception of the non-interference policy

Almost 65% of the respondents agreed that **Latvia should not interfere in China's domestic affairs** (see Figure 10). Only 12.2% disagreed with this statement. Variations were observed by age and nationality, with the older respondents and those from other nationalities showing a greater agreement with non-interference. However, the discrepancies

in the responses of the Latvians and others were lower than in the case of other topics. Perhaps the Latvian speakers are generally in support of staying out of China's affairs on the same level as other linguistic groups, including the Russian speakers, as long as the statement is not worded as being critical or undermining the Latvian state. This could also

be attributed to the view that small countries possess limited power to affect the policy of a big country, as well as to the fact that people in the post-Soviet space generally stand for non-interference in the affairs of other states.

Also, somewhat counterintuitively given the data concerning other economy-related topics, a substantial 40.5% expressed disagreement that **in dealing with China, economic interests are more important than values and principles**, suggesting that a significant segment of the Latvian public values principles and values over economic interests in international relations. More than half of the respondents who trust their government to know how to successfully deal with international and foreign relations also underscored the role of values over the role of the economy – without significant differences across the political spectrum. Central government employees were notably more critical of prioritizing economic interests, possibly indicating their sensitivity to the geopolitical context. Perhaps it can be concluded that the population is not against economic engagement and a degree of pragmatism overall, but draws the line when presented with a zero-sum trade-off of values versus interests.

Geopolitical Domain: Population Susceptible to China's Development Narrative yet Mixed on China and Ukraine

By endorsing alternative development models through the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative, and presenting itself as a champion of the developing world, China has carved out a significant political niche in the international arena. The Latvian survey data confirms that this narrative has taken root in fertile ground among Latvian inhabitants as well.

A majority of the respondents, comprising 50.4%, expressed agreement with the statement that **China provides opportunities**

for the development of many nations, including Latvia. Curiously, unlike in other cases, this response was not conditioned upon the respondent's assessment of the Latvian approach to international relations.

The response to this statement somewhat contradicted the population's understanding of values, as discussed in the previous section. The majority expressed concern with China's human rights record, hence viewing the state as a negative force in China, abusing the rights of its citizens. However, when it comes to China's influence on the international stage, it is seen as a rather positive force. This contradiction could be exploited by malign actors, who might deduce that shaping their narrative by focusing on the provision of global goods will help their soft power and alleviate the negative effects caused by their freedom restrictions at home.

Regarding the statement whether **China contributes to a safer world** the data shows a diverse range of opinions. Approximately 21.6% of the respondents agreed with this statement, while 35.9% disagreed. In this case, as in most others, the respondents who trust their government on foreign policy tended to question China's contribution to global safety.

Around 35% of the respondents agreed that **China makes efforts to create multilateral order in the world**, while 45% disagreed. The majority of the respondents were not convinced that China is building an alternative order. Interestingly, statements regarding China's role in Russia's war against Ukraine failed to produce a strong opinion among a significant majority of the survey respondents, but had an opposite effect among the participants in the focus groups (see below). Survey opinions were mixed concerning the statement that **the diplomatic resolution of the war in Ukraine can NOT be reached if led only by the West**. 34.6% of the respondents agreed, while 25.0% disagreed with the statement, and the rest found it hard to determine their stance. Consistently, the respondents who trust their government to know how to successfully deal with international and foreign relations expressed their belief that the West can reach a diplomatic resolution to Russia's war in Ukraine alone.

China is helping to reach peace in Ukraine

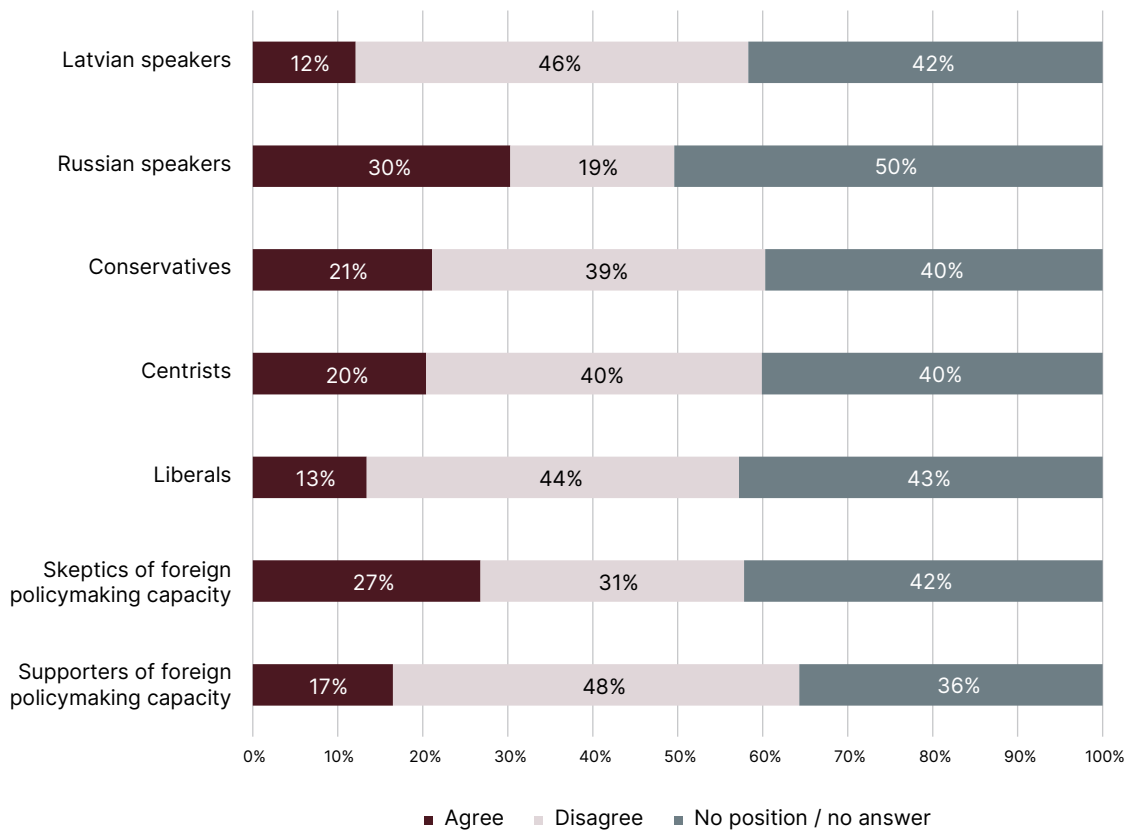


Figure 11: Latvian perception of China's role in Russia's war in Ukraine

There is a notable contrast in the opinions between the Latvian speakers and Russian speakers, with the latter group being more inclined to agree and less inclined to disagree with this statement compared to Latvian speakers. Regarding the statement whether **China is helping to reach peace in Ukraine**, 18.1% of the respondents agreed, while 37.0% disagreed. Over 20% of the self-perceived conservatives and centrists agreed with the statement (see Figure 11). Nonetheless, disagreement with the statement prevailed and was consistent across the political spectrum, standing at around 40% for all groups. All the nationality and linguistic groups exhibited a notable percentage of respondents who find it "hard to tell", although admittedly this response was higher among other nationalities (26.5%) and among Russian speakers (28%) than among Latvians/Latvian speakers. This suggests that the issue might not be well understood, or that there is uncertainty about China's role in reaching peace in Ukraine.

The role of the US also proved to be a topic without a clear dominating opinion. Opinions were divided on whether **Europe should not follow the US lead**. Approximately 34.5% of the respondents agreed, while 25.0% disagreed with the statement, suggesting a variety of perspectives on Europe's alignment with the United States. The impact of trust in the Latvian government's foreign policy that was observed in other responses appeared here as well, with those distrustful of the national policy also arguing against following the US lead in Europe. Conservatives and centrists shared sympathy for a Europe independent from the US, more often than liberals.

Regarding the statement that **the US is launching a new Cold War against China**, 21.9% of the respondents agreed, while 28.9% disagreed, with a significant portion of the public not having a pronounced opinion on the matter. Those leaning toward a liberal view expressed a stronger level of disagreement than the respondents self-identifying with conservative or centrist political ideologies.

Approximately 37% of the respondents agreed that **China is pushing against global US hegemony**, while 16% disagreed, indicating a substantial belief in China's global ambitions and influence. The divide between those who trust the government's international policy and those who do not was not as clear-cut as in other cases, as over 35% of both groups believe China to be pushing against global US hegemony. Perhaps the explanation for this result lies within the formulation of the statement – the respondents were not asked to assess whether US global hegemony is a negative phenomenon.

Opinions were also mixed on whether **the China-Lithuania dispute is Lithuania's fault**.

The respondents from different nationality groups expressed varying opinions, with the "Other" nationalities showing a higher proportion of agreement (28.9%) than the Latvians (12.9%). A significant percentage of both groups found it challenging to form a clear stance on the issue. The responses again correlated with the level of trust in the government's international policies, with the respondents backing Latvia's foreign policy disagreeing that the dispute is Lithuania's fault. The spectrum of responses overall attests to a low knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the Lithuania-China dispute, which is an example of insufficient horizontal exchanges across the Baltic information environment.

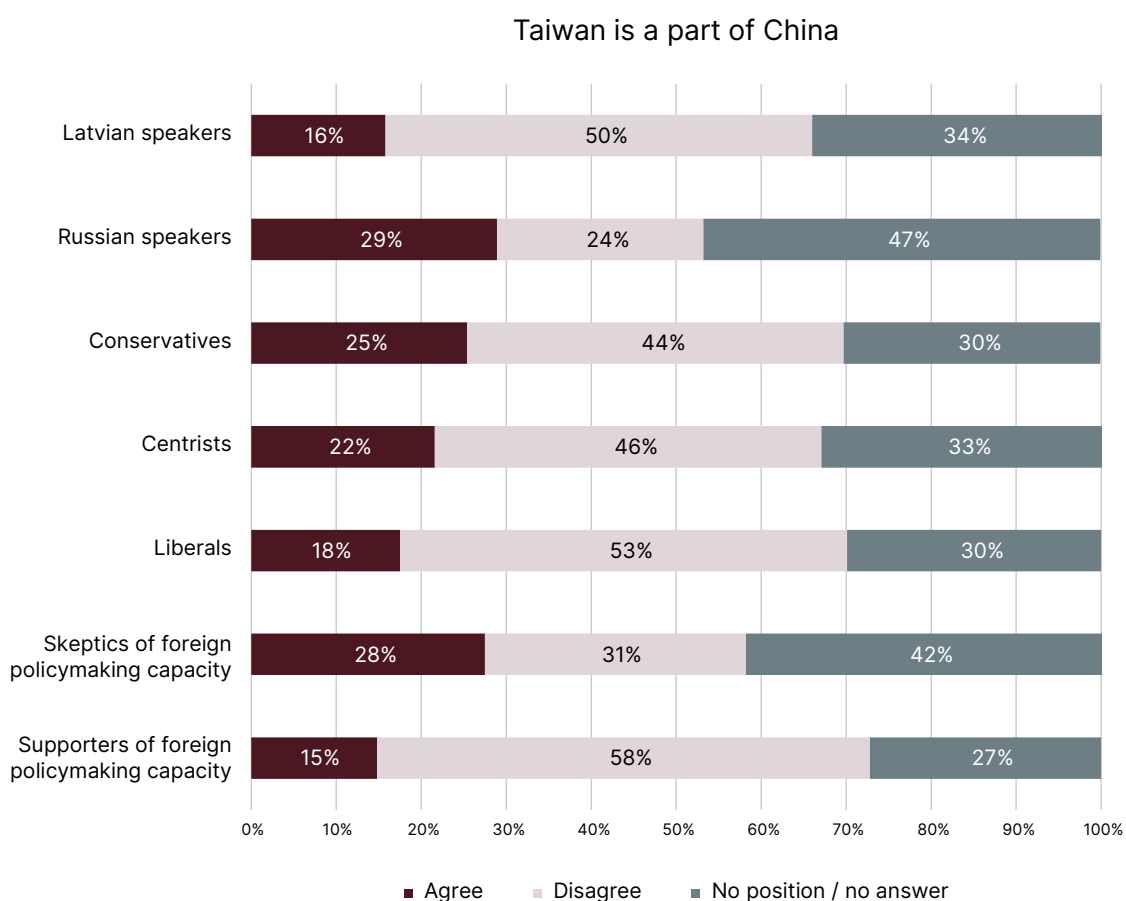


Figure 12: Latvian perception of Taiwan

Almost half of the respondents disagreed that **Taiwan is a part of China**. Unlike in the statement gauging the public support for Taiwan, almost a third of the respondents who do not trust the Latvian government's international policy decisions did not see

Taiwan as belonging to China (see Figure 12). This opinion was almost evenly split across the political spectrum. There could be several explanations as to why the Latvian public views Taiwan as being independent from China.

Insights from the Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews

The survey was complemented by three focus group interviews, as well as in-depth discussions with opinion leaders and business representatives. Of the three focus group sessions, two were conducted in Latvian, while one was held in Russian, in recognition of the importance of capturing the viewpoints and perspectives of the substantial Russian speaking population within Latvia. In total, 26 participants were included in either the focus groups or by using the in-depth interviewing method. The profiles of the respondents can be found in the Annex 1.

Economic Aspects: Limited Local Geopolitical Reckoning Regarding China's Technological Prowess

The focus group results for both Latvian and Russian speakers, as well as the in-depth interviews with business leaders, demonstrated that the respondents place social rights higher than political rights, with the Russian speaking group expressing no opinions favoring political rights at all. Politics is seen as a process that is intentionally designed to deceive the population and to distract it from the real issues; therefore, political rights are not perceived as helpful, unlike economic rights. As one participant said: *"We are so wrapped up in this political agenda... I just feel tired, I want to say, listen, do whatever you want, just leave us alone. Let us work in peace and, most importantly, receive decent pay for our labor."* The dissemination of such a perception within a society can present challenges, as it aligns with China's stance against the universal applicability of individual human rights. This stance essentially places a higher priority on the right to development over that of political freedom. A population, where a similar understanding to the Chinese one prevails, would thus be willing to sacrifice political human rights for the promise of prosperity, which poses a direct threat to democracy.

China's economic might and the benefits it could bring to Latvia was one of the central points of agreement across the respondents in all three focus groups. The focus groups

revealed that the respondents favor China because, and not despite of, its authoritarian system, saying: *"China is a trustworthy trade partner for Latvia, because of its strict laws."*

The respondents also expressed a deep-rooted respect for China's technological prowess and manufacturing capacity, coupled with affordability. One respondent used the liberal argument to argue in favor of welcoming Chinese technology in Latvia, describing it as: *"Human rights – if you want the right to freedom, nothing in particular should be prohibited."* The participants strongly believe that they are benefitting from their access to Chinese goods, be it low-cost supplies available via the Ali-Express app, or high-tech solutions such as Huawei and Xiaomi phones.

A Latvian speaking focus group participant framed Chinese tourism as a lifeline after the restrictions on Russian entries: *"Since we have now banned half of Russia... In Jūrmala [a sea-side resort in Latvia], those who rented out, and who lived practically on their summer income, will have a sharp winter this year."* This view echoes that from 2012-2013, when the Latvian government communicated to the public that attracting Chinese companies was an alternative that would save the national logistics industry after the decrease in Russian transit. Hence, some pro-China narratives pertinent in the Latvian society do not necessarily originate from China, but are homegrown and are therefore more entrenched.

The focus groups revealed some level of awareness about the geopolitical context of the Taiwan issue. When asked about what position Latvia should take, the in-depth interviews with the business community revealed a spectrum of opinions, ranging from *"China and Taiwan have to deal with everything themselves"* to being invested in a joint Western, specifically, NATO approach: *"Latvia must not become another example of Orbánism. We may like it, or we may not like it, but we are a member of a global defence organization."* When asked about visiting Taiwan, the participants of the focus groups did not express significant interest, commenting that they would *"rather visit mainland China because it has a more interesting history."* These findings are consistent with the polling data, and ultimately show that the culture and history narrative propagated by the PRC state-affiliated actors lies on fertile ground in Latvia.

Values: Economic Importance vs. Human Rights

The focus groups respondents tended to prioritize social and economic rights over political human rights, in line with China's human rights narrative. One respondent showed an awareness of the tradeoff that this brings, but was almost ready to accept it: *"Yes, it will be like the USSR... there was social security, as everything was average for everyone – salary, income... by then, as for civil liberties, you couldn't go anywhere."* This tendency was similar among both Latvian and Russian speaking respondents.

The focus group participants generally showed a high level of awareness of human rights violations in China, including labor camps. Admittedly, the participants' information was outdated at times – e.g., several respondents mentioned the now-discarded one child policy as an example of the infringement of human rights in China. Perhaps this speaks to the accumulated background knowledge – after all, the reproductive rights issue in China was on the Western value agenda, and hence the news cycle for decades; therefore, even without specifically following China-related topics, the respondents would have been familiar with it. But when it specifically came to Latvia's moral obligation to point out human rights violations in China, the respondents exercised restraint. *"If they don't tell the truth about Latvia, what is the chance to hear the truth about China?"* asked one of them.

The in-depth interviews with business leaders additionally revealed that the respondents have heard of the recent Lithuanian dispute with China, but it has sparked different reactions. Some posited that Lithuania cannot influence China's economy and would only end up hurting itself economically, bringing up this example as a word of caution for Latvia; while another speaker argued that the Lithuanian valued stance vis-a-vis China *"gives resonance to what is being talked about, and it can influence other countries."* The focus groups revealed that the public has "heard something" about the Lithuania-China problem, but is not equipped to take part in a debate on the matter.

Overall, there was agreement across the focus groups and in-depth interviews on Latvian the economic asymmetry vis-a-vis China, and therefore its limited capacity to criticize China

on the issue of values. As one of the experts put it: *"Well, yes, they violate human rights; but, at the same time, it is clear that they are extremely important in today's global economy. As soon as something goes a little differently in the economy in China, we feel it. Right here, in small and distant Latvia. Through the prices for energy resources, and for everything else."*

Geopolitics: China as Russia's Supporter

The president of the PRC, Xi Jinping, and his distinct leadership style is well known among the opinion leaders and the business community in Latvia. The interviewees recognized a certain authoritarian turn during the decade of Xi's rule, which has been characterized by a consolidation of power and an increase in international influence.

However, the recognizability of the leader himself and his governance style does not carry over to a knowledge of Xi Jinping's signature initiatives. As the aim of the conversations with the focus groups and the in-depth interviews was to probe into the knowledge of China's initiatives among the population, it became clear that the Belt and Road Initiative, despite China's efforts, is not yet a recognizable brand in Latvia. Only some of the business leaders agreed to having heard about the term, immediately enquiring if it was the same as the Silk Road.

In contrast to the survey results, which failed to produce a clear opinion on China's role regarding Russia's invasion in Ukraine, during the focus group interviews, the overwhelming majority of the participants were of the opinion that China supports Russia behind the scenes, and therefore is not neutral: *"I don't think they say anything, but in reality they are [cheering] for Russia,"* a participant in the Latvian speaking focus group communicated. Within the Russian speaking focus group, the perception of China's support of Russia was also a matter of consensus: *"[China] is not just dominant, it's very cautious... China doesn't say it supports Russia... It's very cunning and smart and wise in its policy."* Interestingly, the Russian speaking respondents expressed disbelief in China's solidarity with Russia, stating that China supports Russia only inasmuch as it benefits Beijing's interests: *"If China wanted to help Russia, this war would be over by now."* When asked if China's position on Russia's attack

on Ukraine has changed the participants' perception of China, curiously, the leading opinion was "no": *"We had always thought that China was playing its own game for its own gain, and this is the same."* The conversations with business leaders mostly revealed similar opinions that nonetheless underscored China's opportunism: *"[China is] guided by its own interests, but is on the side of Russia."* Still, the perception of China as a neutral party was also present. The country was described by one respondent as a *"mediator of peace between two countries that cannot find a common approach"* and *"not involved in the conflict."*

Conclusions

In all the question groups, the opinions were mostly divided between those who agreed or strongly agreed, those who disagreed or strongly disagreed, and those who neither agreed nor disagreed – in almost equal parts. Women tended to pick the "hard to tell" categories more often than men. Furthermore, the Russian speakers tended to pick the "hard to tell" categories more often than the Latvian language speakers.

When the issue had to do with interpretations of China's actions, role, or position, a considerable number of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, or picked the "hard to tell" category, suggesting there is a lack of knowledge or lack of a clear stance on the issue. When it comes to geopolitical questions, the language spoken at home and nationality is the leading factor, highlighting a difference in opinion between Latvians and Russians.

Latvia should not interfere in China's domestic affairs and China provides opportunities for the development of many nations, including Latvia were the least divisive statements among all the nationalities and linguistic groups. Yet **Latvia is not in a moral position to criticize China for its human rights record** stood out as being among the most divisive statements. Perhaps the Latvian speakers, just like the other linguistic groups including the Russian speakers, are generally in support of staying out of China's affairs, but the opinion becomes more polarized if the statements include a

critique or an undermining of Latvia. Thus, if the first narrative has the potential to work on all groups, the second wording can only work on those who feel a disconnection from the Latvian state.

The issue concerning whether Latvia should take a tougher stance on China given its position on Russia's invasion in Ukraine is both linguistically and nationally divisive. There was no overwhelming agreement on the Latvian part, however, the respondents who trust their government to know how to successfully deal with international and foreign relations believe that the West can reach a diplomatic resolution of Russia's war in Ukraine alone.

Almost half of the respondents disagreed that **Taiwan is a part of China**. There could be several explanations for this response. The questions surrounding Taiwan are currently being discussed across all types of media. In addition, Taiwan is similar to Latvia as a small, democratic entity threatened by a big authoritarian neighbor, which evokes public sympathy. Nonetheless, the perception that Taiwan is not a part of China, coupled with the low interest in traveling to Taiwan expressed by both the Latvian speaking, as well as the Russian speaking focus groups, is a somewhat puzzling finding. There is a significant space for narrative contestation on both sides.

Some of the pro-China narratives pertinent in the Latvian society do not originate from China, but are homegrown and are therefore more entrenched, e.g., the hope that China can make up for the loss of Russian business in the fields of logistics and tourism. Such narratives resonate across the population the strongest, especially when they are matched with a similar framing on the Chinese side. The statement **China provides opportunities for the development of many nations, including Latvia** had the highest levels of composite agreement in Latvia, at 50.4%.

The majority of the respondents in Latvia expressed concern with China's human rights record, hence viewing the state as a negative force in China, responsible for abusing the rights of its citizens. Still, when it came to China's influence on the international stage, the respondents were not as critical. This contradiction could be exploited by malign actors, who might deduce that shaping their narrative focusing on the provision of global

goods would help their soft power and alleviate the negative effects caused by their freedom restrictions at home.

The groups most vulnerable to the Chinese narratives – people who attest to anti-establishment leanings – also tend to view China more favorably, believe Latvia should pursue economic and political engagement with China, and are not convinced by the need to apply universal values, including human rights, to China. Consistently across the different responses, there is one characteristic that such respondents have in common: they do not trust their government to know how to successfully deal with international and foreign relations. Interestingly, this part of the population is somewhat evenly spread across the socio-economic, as well as the political spectrum, with only the ethnic aspect presenting as statistically significant. However, the results based on nationality suggest that the anti-establishment sentiment is more prevalent among the Russian speaking population, pointing to a cleavage in the Latvian society.

The inverse correlation between trust in the government's foreign policy and an openness to China suggests that the society is well-informed of the transatlantic and pro-Western position of the Latvian establishment, and is also aware that it leads to restrictions on Latvia's political and economic relations with China. This is likely pushing the parts of the population with a dislike toward the collective West to argue in favor of a more open approach to China. As a result, the anti-establishment groups in Latvia are vulnerable to the Chinese narratives.

The category of respondents who identify as centrists on the political spectrum merits more research. Their opinions were inconsistent from response to response, yet there were cases when the China's political, economic, and value narratives resonated with the self-identified centrists. As this group is prevalent among the younger population, and its members largely rely on social media for their daily news, it is a vulnerable section of the Latvian society. Thus, policy solutions should specifically be introduced to counter the Chinese narratives among the younger population, both on the national as well as the European level.

The low knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the Lithuania-China dispute among the respondents is an example of insufficient horizontal exchanges across the Baltic information environment. These exchanges should be strengthened, in order to increase regional solidarity and to ensure that the populations are warned of China's actions vis-a-vis countries similar to Latvia in relation to policies, size, and history.

The Belt and Road Initiative is not a recognizable brand in Latvia, despite Latvia having joined the Initiative in 2016, and China devoting significant resources to its popularization. Only some of the business leaders admitted to having heard about it, but immediately enquired if it is the same as the Silk Road. This testifies to the fact that China's capacity for influencing public perceptions in Latvia is still limited.

Perceptions of China and Pro-Chinese Narratives in Lithuania

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Besides the general traits described in the introductory chapter, important insights on the background of the surveyed Lithuanians were also provided through accounts of their overall practical experiences and attitudes. Some 5% of the respondents had visited China, and of those who had not, 54% wanted to, while 41% were not willing to do so. As far as media consumption was concerned, similar numbers of respondents got their news from Lithuanian private TV channels (20.3%), Lithuanian news portals (18.9%), Lithuanian public TV (18.7%), and social networks (14%), with radio (8.9%), personal communication (4.5%), Western TV channels (3.6%), national and local newspapers (at 1.9% and 1.6%, respectively), or Russian media channels (1.5%) trailing behind.

Speaking of attitudes, more than a quarter (25.1%) of the Lithuanian respondents were unable to place themselves on the presented ideological spectrum, while similar proportions self-identified as moderately conservative (19.9%), centrist (19.8%), or moderately liberal (15.1%), with very liberal (6.6%), very conservative (3.7%), and others (9.8%) trailing behind. The surveyed Lithuanians were also very divided on whether to place trust in their government's foreign policy capacity, with 35.1% and 32.8% being "against" and "for" such confidence, respectively, and 32.1% having no clear opinion on the matter. Finally, while an absolute majority of the Lithuanian respondents felt at least "safe enough" at home (85.5%), the sample was also characterized by a remarkably high level of socio-economic threat perceptions, with only 11% and 16% of those surveyed feeling no economic and social personal risks, respectively. Therefore, it is no wonder that the Chinese narratives appear to have found a particularly fertile ground in this domain.

Economic Domain: Recognition of China's Impact

Remarkably, even with the news of the Chinese multi-dimensional pressure campaign against Lithuania being relatively recent, 59.4% of the surveyed Lithuanians agreed that **having good relations with China is economically and politically beneficial for both countries**, while only 13.4% disagreed, and 27.2% had no clear opinion on the matter. The groups statistically more inclined to agree were the female, oldest, and conservative respondents, Lithuanian speakers, town and rural inhabitants, and especially the Russian media consumers, those distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity, and those feeling socio-economically threatened. On the other hand, the only respondents more likely to disagree were those that reported trusting in the government's foreign policy capacity. Overall, this statement resulted in the second-highest support level of all those included in the survey, which suggests that there remains a lot of potential for societal acceptance of China's widespread "win-win" rhetoric.

In the context of the recently-applied Chinese pressure, a strong plurality of the Lithuanian respondents also perceived their country as being economically dependent on China, with numerous implications to Lithuania's foreign policy preferences. In reacting to all four related statements, the respondent groups especially prone to agree were those that feel socio-economically threatened and those distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity, while more likely to disagree were those trusting in it.

To begin with, 40.3% of the Lithuanian respondents agreed with the statement that **Lithuanian industries and consumers are highly-dependent on supply chains from China, and that Lithuania therefore should not support any EU economic sanctions on China**, while 24.1% disagreed, and 35.6% were neutral or undecided on the issue. Besides

those feeling socio-economically threatened and distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity, the two extra groups more inclined to agree were the female respondents and town dwellers, whereas among those likely to disagree, in addition to the trusting ones, were the capital dwellers. These results are concerning, considering that Beijing's unofficial sanctions on Lithuanian manufacturers through import and export restrictions in the China-centered global supply chains have been a major component of the recent Chinese pressure campaign.

Referring to another conventional foreign reference point for Lithuanians, the statement that **political tensions and geopolitical confrontation between the US and China should not affect Lithuania's economic relations with the latter** was met with a slightly larger level of agreement from the respondents at 42.3%, while only 19.5% disagreed, and 38.2% had no clear opinion on the matter. The additional group more inclined to agree was composed of the Russian media consumers, whereas more likely to disagree also were the respondents with a higher educational attainment.

An even higher number of those surveyed (44.4%) agreed that **Lithuania's economy will struggle without investments from China**, while 18.5% disagreed, and 37% had no clear opinion on the statement. The additional group more inclined to agree was composed of town dwellers. These results are particularly telling, considering the low level of China's existing investments in Lithuania.

In the most straightforward manner, linking the perceived Lithuanian dependence on China's economy with their foreign policy outlook, 47.6% of the respondents agreed that **China is a huge and lucrative market, so Lithuania should be pragmatic and abstain from criticisms of it**, while 21% disagreed with the statement, and 31.5% were neutral or undecided (see Figure 13). In addition to those feeling socio-economically threatened and distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity, the two groups more likely to agree were the female respondents and Russian media consumers.

China is a huge and lucrative market, so Lithuania should be pragmatic and abstain from criticisms of China

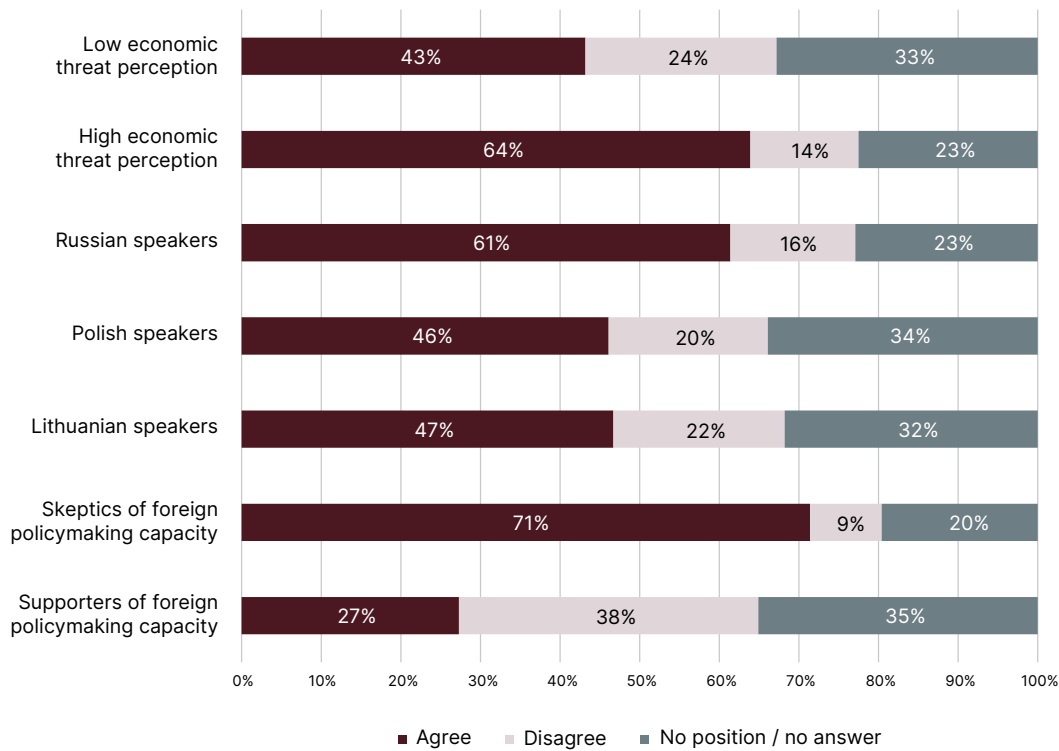


Figure 13: Lithuanian perception of the economic benefits versus political criticism of China

The Lithuanian respondents also expressed a positive outlook on two examples of the people-to-people aspects of a bilateral socio-economic relationship, with those distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity being especially prone to agree on both occasions. Indeed, 49% of the surveyed agreed that **Chinese students should have all possibilities to study in Lithuania's higher education institutions**, while 38.5% had no clear opinion, and only 12.4% disagreed with the statement. The additional groups more inclined to agree were the female respondents and Lithuanian speakers, whereas those more likely to disagree were the male ones.

Moreover, 48.6% of the respondents agreed that **Lithuania should seek to attract more Chinese tourists**, while only 15.3% disagreed, and 36% had no clear opinion on the matter. The additional groups more likely to agree were the middle-aged respondents and especially those feeling socio-economically threatened, whereas the only group more inclined to disagree was composed of those trusting in the government's foreign policy capacity. These results demonstrate that

Lithuanians continue to perceive China as a potential contributor to their country's cherished, but lately-struggling tourism sector, despite the nasty incident involving a visitor from there that occurred soon before the full eruption of the bilateral relationship crisis.²⁷

Finally, three different and important questions in this category produced more neutral and undecided than positive or negative responses among those surveyed, with (dis)trust in the government's foreign policy capacity again being relevant in explaining the (dis)agreement on all of these occasions. To begin with an increasingly hot topic throughout much of the world, 39.6% of the respondents had no clear opinion on the statement that **China's information technology is affordable, and therefore should be of no limits to use in Lithuania even if there are some security risks**, while 34.4% agreed, and 26.1% disagreed with the issue. Besides the distrusting ones, the two extra respondent groups more inclined to agree were those feeling socially threatened and the Russian media consumers.

Considering the relatively recent global health crisis, and China's publicity efforts associated with its so-called "mask diplomacy," it is remarkable that 42% of the surveyed Lithuanians were neutral or undecided on whether **their country would have been unable to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic without China's mass production of medical supplies and equipment**, while 31.3% agreed, and 26.7% disagreed with the statement. In addition to the (dis)trusting ones, those more likely to agree were the female respondents, whereas to disagree – the male ones.

Last, but perhaps most importantly given the fact that this topic has been at the heart of the bilateral relationship crisis, the statement that **supporting Taiwan does not bring any**

economic benefits to Lithuania and should therefore be less important than maintaining good economic relations with China resulted in 40.1% of the respondents having no clear opinion on the matter, while 37.2% of them agreed, and 22.7% disagreed with the issue (see Figure 14). The additional groups more inclined to agree were older Lithuanians, those feeling somewhat unsafe at home, and especially those feeling socio-economically threatened, whereas the extra groups more likely to disagree were urban dwellers and particularly those feeling entirely safe at home. The data therefore clearly suggests that Lithuania remains an open battlefield for the Sino-Taiwanese competition for influence, at least as far as the economic domain is concerned.

Supporting Taiwan does not bring any economic benefits to Lithuania and should be less important than good economic relations with China

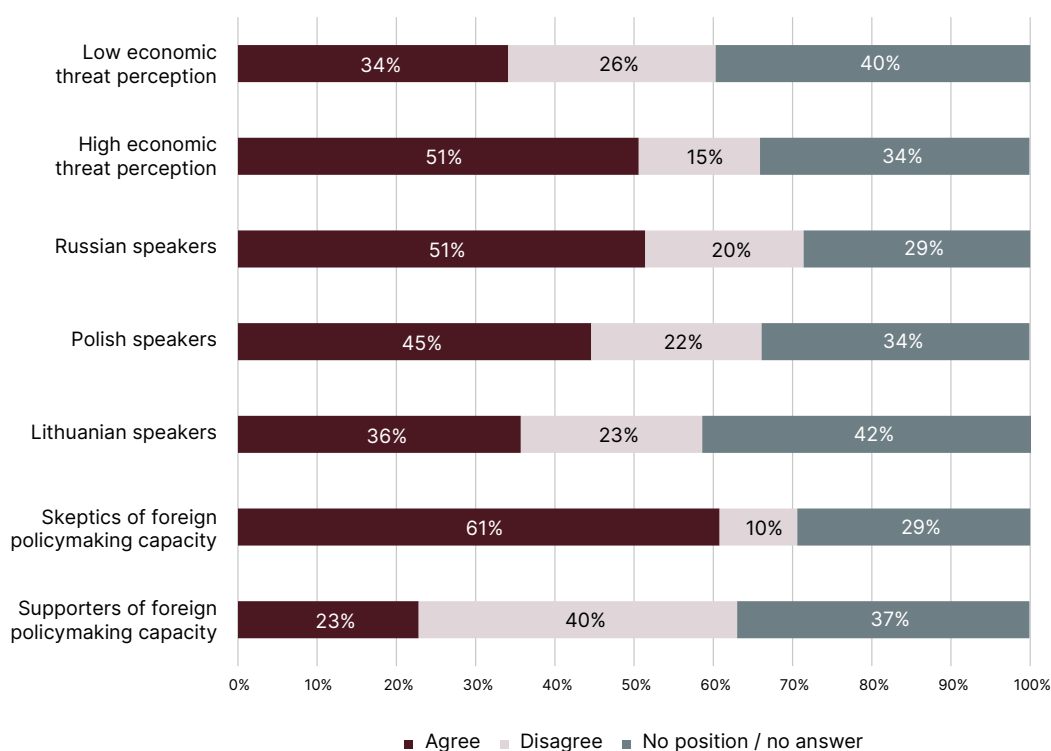


Figure 14: Lithuanian perception of the economic benefits of relations with China vs. Taiwan

Normative Domain: The Key Battleground

It is logical to begin this section by addressing the statement that neatly connects it with the just-discussed economic domain.

Overall, 44.3% of the surveyed Lithuanians had no clear opinion on whether **in dealing with China, economic interests are more important than values and principles**, while 31.2% disagreed, and 24.4% agreed with the assertion. The respondent groups more inclined to agree were town dwellers

and especially those distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity, as well as those feeling socio-economically threatened. On the contrary, the groups more likely to particularly disagree were those feeling socially non-threatened, entirely safe at home, and trusting in the government's foreign policy capacity.

Just as interesting were the answers to four questions that focused on China's overall approach toward the outside world, including Lithuania, with the results showing that those trusting in the government's foreign policy capacity were prone to disagree on all of these occasions. Remarkably, considering Beijing's recent multi-dimensional pressure campaign against their country, 43.7% of the surveyed Lithuanians were neutral or undecided on whether **China is a benevolent country, sharing its economic gains with others, including Lithuania**, while 30.5% disagreed, and 25.7% agreed with the statement. The only group more inclined to agree was composed of the female respondents.

In a similar, and just as surprising pattern, 45.3% of the surveyed Lithuanians had no clear opinion on whether **China is genuinely respectful of and concerned about small states, such as Lithuania**, with 41% disagreeing and only 13.7% agreeing with the statement. The additional respondents more likely to disagree were those having the highest educational attainment, as well as those feeling entirely safe at home and socially non-threatened.

The surveyed Lithuanians were even more skeptical of the decades-old Chinese pacifist self-promotion, with 39.1% of them expressing disagreement with the statement that **China is a peaceful country, threatening nobody, including Lithuania**, 34.9% demonstrating neutrality or indecision, and only 25.9% agreeing with the assertion (see Figure 15). The only respondents more inclined to agree were those distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity, while the extra group more likely to disagree was composed of those with a higher level of education.

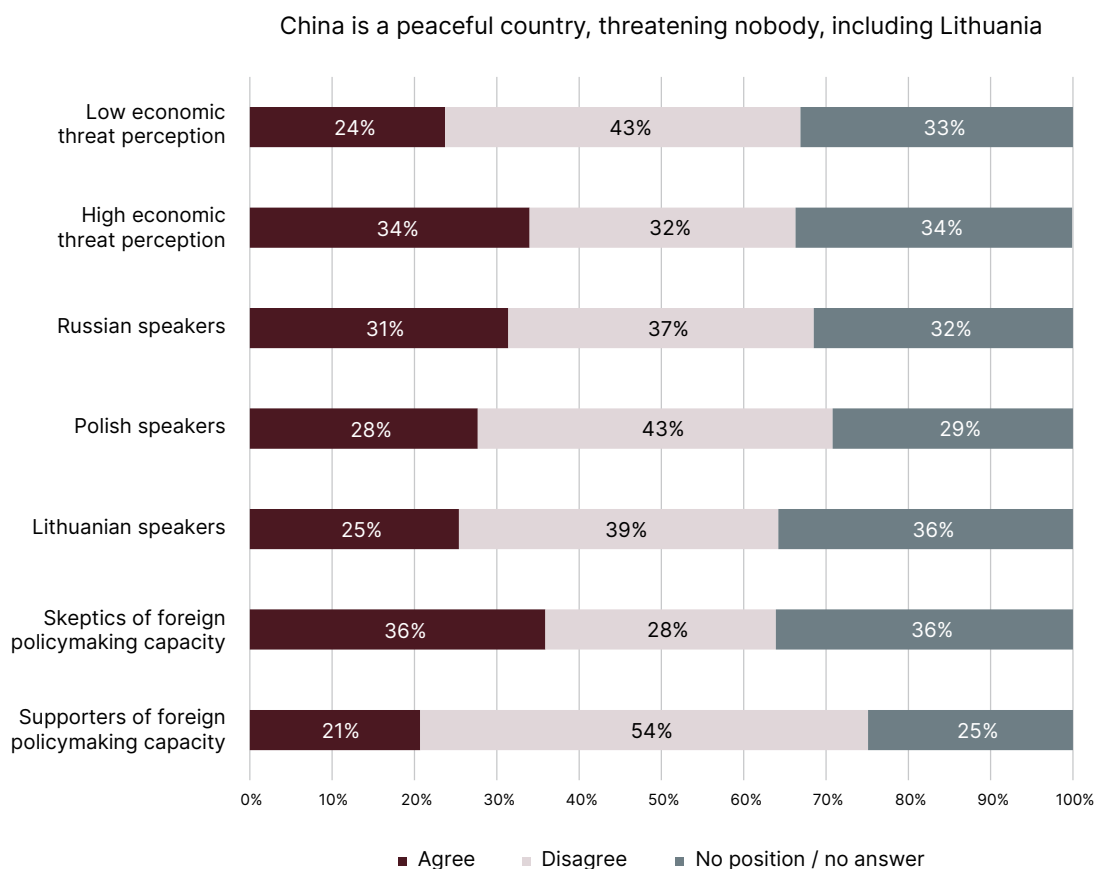


Figure 15: Lithuanian perception of the threat of China

A similar level of skepticism was expressed by the Lithuanian respondents regarding the Chinese defence against one of the most lasting and prominent charges directed at them, with 41% disagreeing that **overall, the human rights situation in China is no worse than in the West**, while 37.7% had no clear opinion, and only 21.2% agreed with the statement. The groups more likely to agree were those with a lower educational attainment and those distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity, whereas the additional group more inclined to disagree was composed of the Vilnius residents. These results clearly show the limits of China's relativist and "whataboutist" rhetoric on the key issue of the human rights situation in that country.

On the other hand, the Lithuanian respondents appeared more willing to follow China's narratives in discussing their own country's actions toward the Asian giant, with those feeling socio-economically threatened and those distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity more prone to do so on all five such occasions, and those trusting in the government's actions being more likely to disagree on the latter four of those statements. To begin with, 63.3% of the respondents agreed that **Lithuania should not interfere in China's domestic affairs**, producing the largest overall level of support within the entire survey. Almost as remarkably, 28.7% of them had no clear opinion on the matter, while only 8.1% expressed their disagreement. Besides the mentioned groups, those more inclined to agree were the female respondents, Lithuanian speakers, and especially the Russian media consumers. Therefore, the Lithuanian society seems to be particularly susceptible to the Chinese narratives about non-interference.

At least in part, such convictions appear to be associated with a deeply-ingrained societal recognition of their country's lack of power and agency in global affairs. Indeed, 52.7% of the respondents agreed that **Lithuania is too small and irrelevant to criticize China**, while 29.8% were neutral or undecided, and only 17.5% disagreed with the statement. The additional groups more likely to agree were the female, middle-aged respondents, and especially the Russian media consumers, whereas the extra group more inclined to disagree was composed of those feeling entirely safe at home. These results demonstrate the third-highest level of support among all the statements included in the survey, and the last one with an absolute majority agreement.

Hinting at the country's own potential problems in this regard, 41.9% of the respondents had no clear opinion on the statement that **Lithuania is not in a moral position to criticize China for its human rights record**, while 33.5% agreed, and 24.6% disagreed with the issue. The additional groups more likely to agree were other language speakers, those feeling somewhat unsafe at home, and especially the Russian media consumers. This data reveals that the societal support for Lithuania's self-ascribed shaming role of China's human rights record is actually rather limited.

On the other hand, 42.2% of the respondents were neutral or undecided on whether **Lithuania's recent review of its relationship with China is irresponsible and erroneous**, with those agreeing admittedly being only marginally behind at 40%, and those disagreeing numbering merely 17.8% (see Figure 16). The additional group more inclined to agree was composed of the female respondents.

Lithuania's recent review of its relationship with China is irresponsible and erroneous

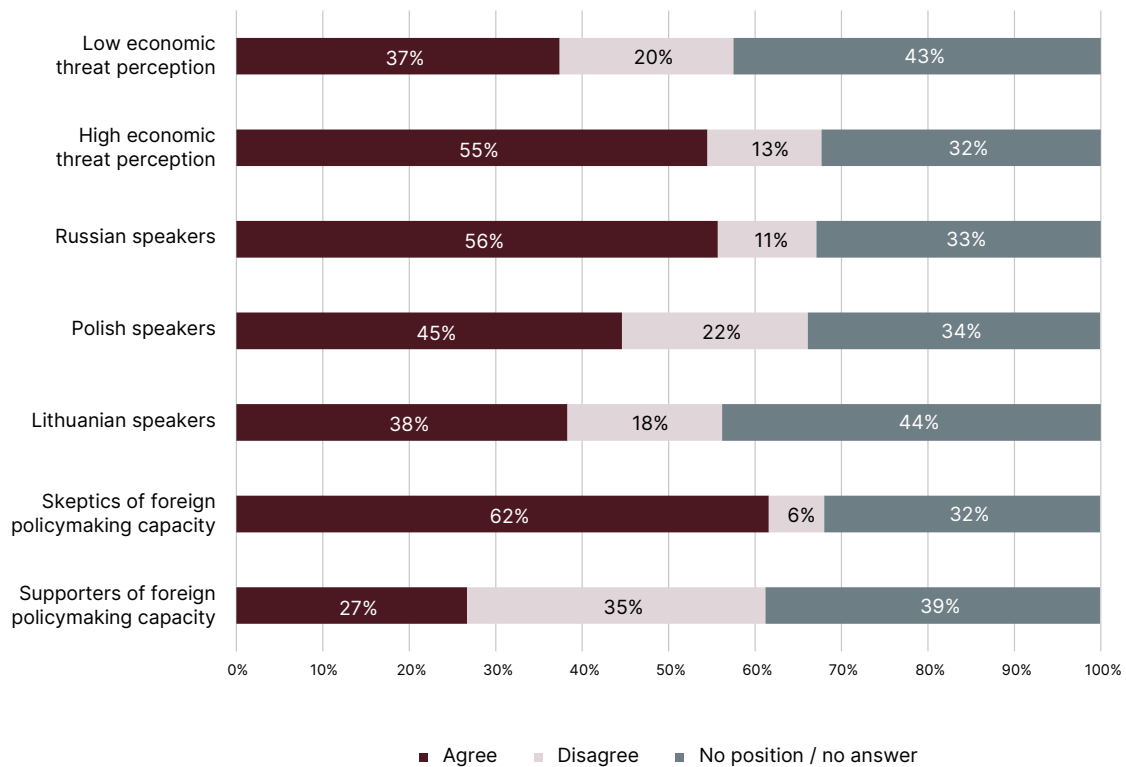


Figure 16: Lithuanian perception of Lithuania's review of its China policy

Slightly more toward the skeptical end of the spectrum were the opinions on a similar statement that **Lithuania's recent review of its relations with China stems from an anti-China prejudice**, with 46.4% of the surveyed Lithuanians having no clear opinion on the matter, while 32.6% of them agreed, and 21% disagreed with it. Therefore, with so many respondents neutral or undecided, the popular judgment on Lithuania's review of its relationship with China does not seem as straightforward as is shown elsewhere in the survey.

Geopolitical Domain: Lack of Awareness about China

It is logical that (dis)trust in the government's foreign policy capacity was a particularly significant factor in this domain, having been respectively relevant in all of the ten cases of disagreement and nine of the cases of agreement, with the sole exception of the

last statement on Taiwan. In connection to the first section's main topic, similar numbers of Lithuanian respondents agreed with or had no clear opinion (at 42.9% and 41.2%, respectively) on the assertion that **China provides opportunities for the development of many nations, including Lithuania**, while only 16% disagreed with this statement. Besides the (dis)trustful ones, the respondents statistically more inclined to agree were those feeling socio-economically threatened, whereas more likely to disagree were those feeling entirely safe at home. Therefore, it can be concluded that the association of China with development opportunities remains quite strong among Lithuanians.

In contrast to the previous statement, the surveyed Lithuanians were much more skeptical about China's self-ascribed role as a promoter of peace across the globe. While 41.7% of the respondents were neutral or undecided on whether **China contributes to a safer world**, 36% disagreed, and only 22.3% agreed with this statement. The additional group more inclined to agree was composed of those feeling socially threatened.

It is curious that the Lithuanian respondents were even more ambiguous regarding China's potential role in ending the Russo-Ukrainian War, a topic that was implicitly much more concerning and prominent to them. On a broader level, 45.8% of those surveyed had no clear opinion on the statement that **the diplomatic resolution of the war in Ukraine cannot be reached if led only by the West**, while 37.7% agreed, and only 16.5% disagreed with the assertion. The additional group more likely to agree was composed of the high school representatives, whereas the extra group more inclined to disagree consisted of the male respondents. Although China was not explicitly mentioned in this admittedly polysemantic statement, Lithuanians expressed clear doubts about

the West's ability or willingness to end the war diplomatically, thus potentially imagining Beijing's role in its resolution.

When asked more explicitly about whether **China is helping to reach peace in Ukraine**, a very similar number of the Lithuanian respondents were indeed neutral or undecided, at 45.9%, although contrary to the previous statement, 32% of them disagreed, and 22.1% agreed with this assertion (see Figure 17). The additional group more likely to agree was composed of the Russian media consumers, while the two extra groups more inclined to disagree consisted of the male respondents and especially those who reported feeling entirely safe at home. All of this suggests China's failure to be seen as a peacemaker in the Russo-Ukrainian War among Lithuanians.

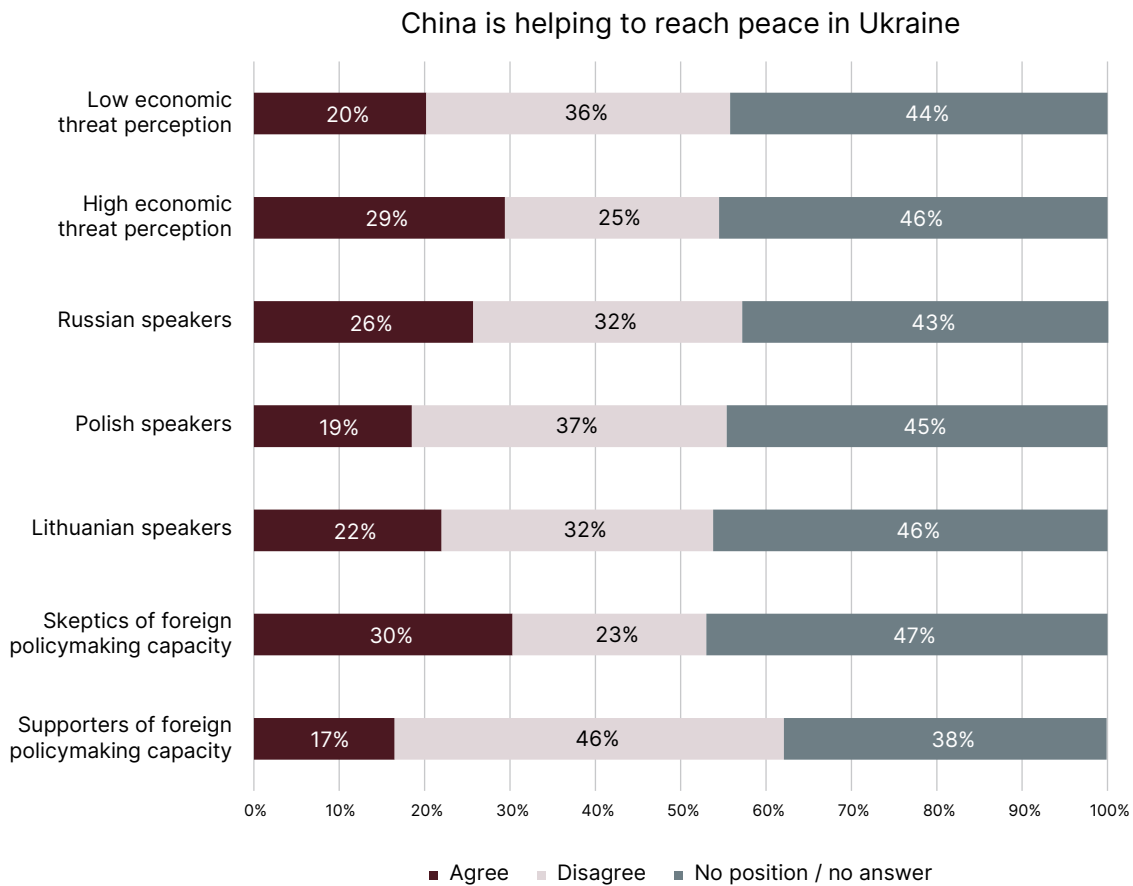


Figure 17: Lithuanian perception of China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war

At least a plurality of the Lithuanian respondents also had no clear opinion on the questions that dealt with relations among the great powers on the global/systemic level of international politics. Thus, 45.9% of them

were neutral or undecided on whether **China is making efforts to create a multipolar order in the world**, with those agreeing and disagreeing being divided almost equally, at 27.4% and 26.7%, respectively. The additional

groups more likely to agree were composed of the high school representatives and especially the Russian media consumers. Although this statement does not allow us to say anything definite about the respondents' perception on the issue of global multipolarity itself (something that China has long been arguing for), the pattern of the Lithuanian answers was very consistent with their reactions to other assertions, thus hinting at a certain level of susceptibility to the Chinese narratives in this case as well.

A similar proportion of the Lithuanian respondents (45.7%) had no clear opinion on the statement that **Europe should not follow the US lead**, with those agreeing and disagreeing again being divided almost equally, at 26.8% and 27.5%, respectively. The additional group more inclined to agree was composed of those feeling socio-economically threatened. Hence, despite a great deal of ambiguity on this topic, only about a quarter of the Lithuanian respondents internalize to some degree China's rhetoric about Europe as a separate pole in global affairs, which is a narrative fundamentally aimed at disrupting the transatlantic consensus.

The surveyed Lithuanians were similarly neutral or undecided (at 46.8%) on the issue of **whether China is pushing against global US hegemony**, with those in agreement forming almost the same share (at 44.4%), and those disagreeing numbering only 8.8%. The additional group more likely to agree was composed of the oldest respondents. Thus, despite the manifest ambiguity by many surveyed Lithuanians, there seems to be some notable support for China's narrative about "American hegemonism," and potentially its own supposedly righteous opposition to this trend.

Even a larger proportion of the Lithuanian respondents (at 51.2%) were neutral or undecided on whether **the US is launching a new Cold War against China**, while 27.8% agreed, and 21% disagreed with it. Therefore, an absolute majority of Lithuanians do not seem to embrace China's rhetoric about America's so-called "Cold War mentality," and the agreement with the actual statement does not automatically imply pro-Chinese views, since one can theoretically be very pro-American/Western and support something of the kind precisely for that reason.

Returning to the very contentious bilateral agenda, 42% of the respondents agreed that **the China-Lithuania dispute is Lithuania's fault**, while 36.7% had no clear opinion, and only 21.4% disagreed with this assertion. The additional groups more likely to agree were the Russian media consumers, those gathering news from unspecified other sources, and those feeling socio-economically threatened, whereas the extra group more inclined to disagree was composed of the male respondents.

Finally, 44.6% of the surveyed Lithuanians were neutral or undecided on whether **Taiwan is a part of China** (see Figure 18), while 34% of them disagreed, and 21.5% agreed with this statement. Curiously, the only group more likely to agree was that composed of the Russian media consumers. The data thus confirms that there is a notable lack of support for Beijing's so-called "One China" principle among Lithuanians.

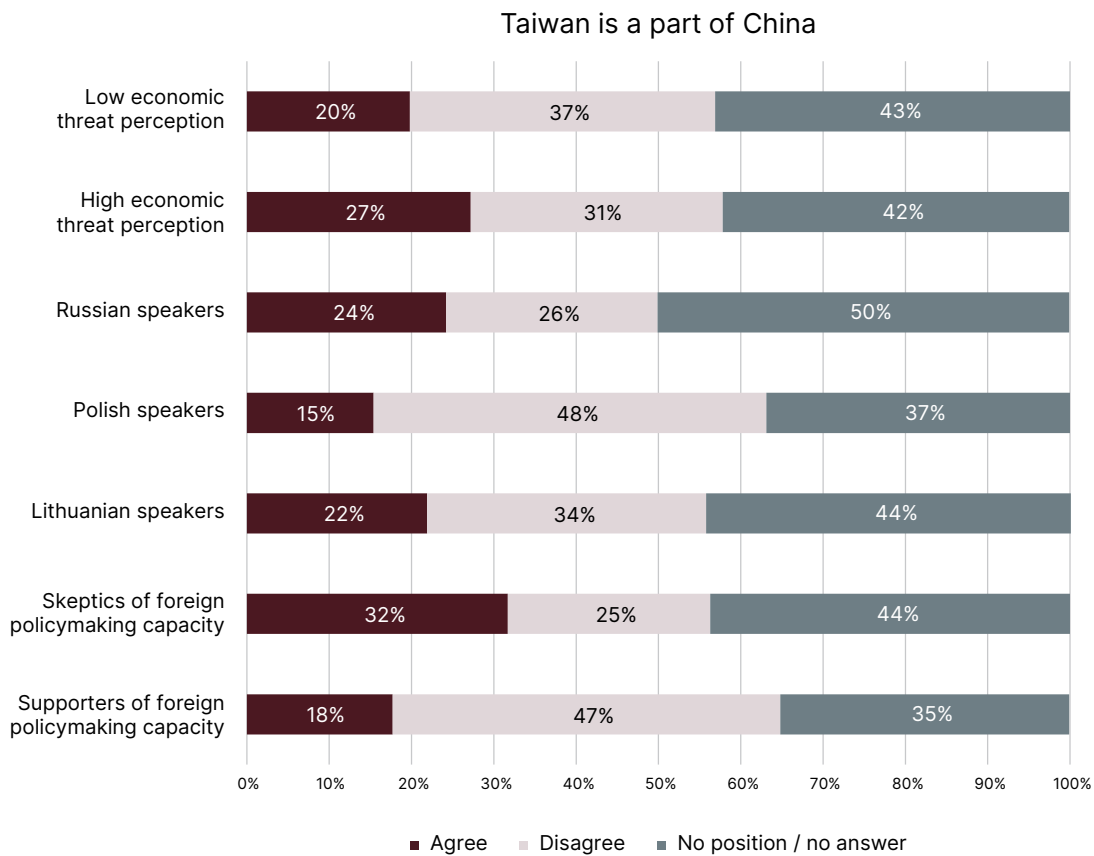


Figure 18: Lithuanian perception of Taiwan's status

Survey Overview

Several important generalizations and inferences can be made from the above. To begin with a review of the overall responses, it becomes clear that Lithuanians are rather ambiguous, undecided, and uninformed about matters related to China. Indeed, out of the 30 questions asked in the survey, at least a plurality of the respondents expressed no clear opinion on 17 occasions, with these results progressively rising from the economic (3 cases) to normative (6 cases) and the geopolitical domain (8 cases). Notably, the only two exceptions in the latter case both referred to Lithuania, revealing agreement with the statements that **China provides opportunities for the development of many nations, including Lithuania** and that **their bilateral dispute is Lithuania's fault**. An *absolute* majority of the respondents were neutral or undecided in the survey only once, in reaction to the statement that **the US is**

launching a new Cold War against China. All of this confirms that Lithuanians are struggling to have a clear opinion on China, aside from the recognition of its economic strength and the hot topic of bilateral relations. Beijing's role in global politics appears to be an especially murky area for the survey participants.

Lithuanians have a relatively stronger view on socio-economic, and somewhat less so on normative topics. Indeed, out of the 10 questions in the former case, a relative majority of the respondents agreed with seven. The normative domain, on the other hand, produced the largest variation of the three, with at least a plurality of the survey participants agreeing and disagreeing twice each. It was here that the Lithuanian respondents registered the entire sample's only two occasions of composite disagreement, with a relative majority being skeptical of the statements that **China is a peaceful country, threatening nobody, including Lithuania** and that **the human rights situation in China is no worse than in the**

West. On the contrary, a resolute majority of the respondents agreed with the other two statements, namely that **Lithuania should not interfere in China's domestic affairs** and that **Lithuania is too small and irrelevant to criticize China**. The only other statement that resulted in support from an absolute majority was the incipient one, asking whether **having good relations with China is beneficial for both countries**.

A closer look at the surveyed Lithuanians themselves reveals some additional curious traits. To begin with the apparent significance of belonging to different respondent groups, several things in particular stand out.

First, contrary to the expectations derived from previous research²⁸ and parallel case studies in fellow Baltic states, the surveyed Lithuanian speakers did not appear markedly less susceptible to the Chinese narratives than the representatives of the country's other ethno-linguistic communities. While the Russian media consumers were indeed among the most concerning groups in this regard, on no occasion were the Russian speakers themselves statistically more likely to agree with the pro-Chinese statements.

Second, by far the most important dividing line among the respondents concerned the evaluation of the government's foreign policy capacity, which was statistically relevant in all 30 cases. This is more comprehensible if we consider the stark societal divisions on the overall judgment of the current government and the review of Lithuania's relationship with China as one of its signature foreign policies. A distant next, in terms of the statistically significant variation, was the category of the socio-economic threat perception.

Third, some of the categories were found to be barely important at all. Most curiously, a respondent's ideological affiliation was statistically relevant only once, suggesting challenges regarding both self-attribution and identification of the current governing coalition within the ideological spectrum. Moreover, one's professional activity produced no statistically significant results at all. Finally, a lack of interest in China was generally associated with more neutrality or indecisiveness rather than a stronger position, which is something to be logically expected.

Insights from the Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews

In total, 29 people from Lithuania participated in either the focus group discussions or in-depth interviews. Their background profiles can be found in Annex 1. Considering them as a reference part of the population, it is logical to start the analysis with the ethnic Lithuanian focus group.

Ethnic Lithuanians

As was expected, considering Beijing's recent economic pressure against their country, the ethnic Lithuanian interlocutors were universally convinced of **China's large role in the global economy and trade**, and overwhelmingly saw it as a negative trend that is threatening the West. Similarly, China was perceived as unpredictable and unreliable in pursuing **bilateral economic and trade ties**. In a rather contradictory fashion, economic relations with China were not seen as bad in themselves, but the participants mostly prioritized **values and principles over economic interests** while conducting them, although this seemed to be stated in a declarative as opposed to in an earnest way. In general, the group appeared to be concerned about Lithuania's potential dependence on China, and often used Russia as a negative illustrative example. The West, on the other hand, was often interpreted as having contributed to the "Chinese peril" itself.

The ethnic Lithuanian discussants overwhelmingly agreed that **human rights are generally important and universal**, but diverged on whether civic and political, or social and economic rights should precede over the other. Moreover, all the participants were aware of the **dire human rights situation in China**, citing many of the relevant topics widespread in recent global headlines, notably including the Chinese pressure on Taiwan. Although the discussants appeared to be firm supporters of "Western values" in this regard, the West's actual approach toward China on this topic was often perceived to be disappointing. However, the participants disagreed whether **Lithuania should publicly express concerns about human rights in China**, with most emphasizing the importance of the right tone in addition to the message while doing so, as well as being concerned about the cost

of such shaming, and some going as far as stating that “an ant cannot bite an elephant” (a male discussant).

The ethnic Lithuanian interlocutors were also unanimously skeptical regarding **Chinese technologies as serving for overall progress and development**. Although there was an overwhelming association between these technologies and flawed practices, especially the infringement of others' intellectual property, some agreed that China could become a real innovator, like Japan previously. None of the participants perceived **Chinese technologies as generally safe and secure**, with most being especially concerned about surveillance capabilities, as a feature of China-made equipment being used by both state institutions and individuals. It is no wonder then that they also were skeptical about the embrace of **Chinese technologies in Lithuania** itself. While an absolute rejection of them was seen as paranoid, particularly considering the allegedly similar data collection practices by companies in other countries, the participants supported restrictions on the use of Chinese tech in the state sector.

Finally, the ethnic Lithuanian discussants overwhelmingly agreed that **China already plays a large role in global geopolitics**, and interpreted this trend as a negative one with a fair amount of awe and concern, because of its allegedly domineering and selfish behavior. More specifically, **China's geopolitical ambitions and initiatives** were seen as destabilizing and threatening to Western liberal democracies in general and to the US global leadership in particular. China's power was often somewhat mythologized in these accounts, with some individuals linking it to the Chinese ancient civilization or the enigmatic governing Communist Party. This belief in an ever-cunning and self-seeking China was strongly reflected in the participants' views of the **Chinese reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine**, as they overwhelmingly agreed that this military conflict serves Beijing's interests well – due to providing it with an extra strategic respite from Washington's security focus, valuable lessons for militarily and economically dealing with its opponents, and a stronger influence over Moscow. The discussants also linked the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War with the dynamics of the **relationship between**

China and Taiwan, with the former remaining committed to take over the latter. While they agreed that Taiwan is an independent country, their opinions on the role of Lithuania in defending this position were more nuanced, with some arguing for acting as part of a broader like-minded coalition, and others for taking an even stronger individual stance on the matter.

Ethnic Community Representatives

The native Russian and Polish-language speaking discussants were also unanimously convinced of **China's large role in global economy and trade**, but differed on whether that is beneficial to the world, in comparison to the ethnic Lithuanians. While China was generally perceived as unreliable in pursuing **bilateral economic and trade ties**, the opinions of the participants in this group were also less categorical and more often self-described as pragmatic. In this context, the majority of the discussants thought that Lithuania should avoid entering into conflict with China over Taiwan and even circumvent the EU sanctions on the country, with those supporting the latter policy actually doing it for pragmatic as opposed to normative reasons, since that would stimulate a search for alternative markets to an increasingly expensive Chinese one. Hence, most of these participants prioritized **economic interests over values and principles** in dealing with China, and were comparatively more skeptical of the existence of universal values in the first place. A recurring thread was a certain level of disappointment in Europe for losing its competitive edge to China, and even becoming dependent on this country.

The discussants overwhelmingly agreed that **human rights are generally important and universal**, but clearly preferred social and economic rights over civic and political ones. The majority had heard something about **human rights problems in China**, but were not particularly engaged with this topic, except for a female participant who had actually taken a business trip there and returned with a decidedly negative impression on the matter. Largely reflective of the above, a majority of the discussants thought that **Lithuania should not be public about the human rights**

issues in China, with some interpreting this as not only dangerous from the perspective of Lithuanian interests, but also as an interference into others' affairs.

Ethnic minority representatives were also unanimously skeptical regarding **Chinese technologies as serving for overall progress and development**, associating most of the alleged breakthroughs in this area with theft. None of the participants perceived **Chinese technologies as generally safe and secure**; however, not all of them saw it as a particularly dangerous issue, considering the alleged universally established practices, since: "In the contemporary IT world, privacy is a fiction" (a female discussant). Similarly to the ethnic Lithuanians, while describing an absolute rejection of **Chinese technologies in Lithuania** as paranoid, the members of this focus group mostly agreed that the use of China's tech should be avoided by state institutions.

Finally, the ethnic minority discussants also overwhelmingly agreed that **China already plays a large role in global geopolitics**, and viewed this trend as a mostly negative one because of the country's allegedly domineering and predatory behavior. On a more specific level, however, **China's geopolitical ambitions and initiatives** were seen as somewhat less threatening to the West, if not necessarily to the US leadership than was found in the case of Lithuanian speakers, with mutual economic interdependence serving as the main supportive argument for China's continuing restraint. The discussants also unanimously agreed that, as far as the **Chinese reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine** was concerned, it is serving Beijing's pragmatic interests well. Similarly to the Lithuanian speakers, some of the participants were quick to link this war with the **relations between China and Taiwan**, although in a way that clearly benefits the former: "The more resources from America go to Ukraine, the less America will be able to defend Taiwan" (a male discussant).

Business Representatives

Having a particularly strong impression of the recent Chinese economic pressure on their country, the Lithuanian business representatives were unanimous about **China's large role in global economy and trade**, with some, however, doubting whether its growth rate will be sustainable in the long term, and

most of them rationalizing its economic power as a positive force due to the competitive incentive for other rising manufacturing centres around the world. At the same time, several of the interviewees demonized China, viewing it as an invincible and unavoidable power, impossible to be affected, and therefore leaving only the two options of either submitting to or trying to evade it. While avoiding to plainly call it unreliable, the Lithuanian entrepreneurs overwhelmingly agreed that businesses in China are heavily affected by the party-state's government and clearly preferred the "risky" terminology instead. In the case of **bilateral economic and trade ties**, the interviewees strongly doubted whether "small" and "economically unremarkable" Lithuania should, or even could, affect the behavior of China or any other big country alone. For that to potentially happen, a coalition must be established with more powerful economies, and both internal (government and business) and external (at least on the Baltic states level) coordination must occur. Notably, the interviewees seemed to be rather uncomfortable in recognizing China's own usage of economic measures to achieve its political aims, preferring to justify and console themselves with the position that risk-management is the essence of business activity, and to direct their dissatisfaction at the allegedly uncooperative and detached Lithuanian government instead, with some going as far as treating its policy on Taiwan as a sign of personal disregard and disrespect. Consistently with this, the interviewed entrepreneurs were unanimous in **prioritizing economic interests over values and principles** and immediately connected this question with the Sino-Lithuanian dispute, pointing out the need to always retain a possibility for dialogue, citing the allegedly different – pragmatic – approach of other Western countries as a yardstick to be followed, and highlighting the lack of Lithuania's long-term foreign policy strategy as a potential guide.

Although the Lithuanian business representatives overwhelmingly agreed that **human rights are generally important**, they seemed to slightly prefer social and economic rights over civic and political ones, and appeared to be less convinced about their universal character. While the interviewees were aware of **human rights problems in China**, many rationalized this fact by adhering

to arguments such as the country's allegedly different "authoritarian" culture, lower level of societal development, or an expression of the people's conscious agreement with certain limits in exchange for the government's support for economic growth. Those interlocutors who had business interests in China seemed to be more defensive in this regard, denying any personal observation of human rights abuses while on trips there. Several of the interviewees also expressed doubts about the Western depiction of the topic, interpreting this as a tendentious manifestation of the West's competition with Beijing. As a natural reflection of the above, the participants were overwhelmingly opposed to **Lithuania's publicity of the human rights situation in China**, which was interpreted as idealistic and naïve, particularly considering the more pragmatic and self-interested stance taken by other Western governments. A strong perception of insecurity about their business prospects therefore often resulted in a rather emotional berating of their own country, and de facto a defence of the Chinese government's right to pursue such policies: "We are a provincial and small country, yet we are educating a society thousands of years old" (a male interviewee). Some of the interlocutors also proposed focusing on more nuanced and long-term soft power, instead of allegedly counter-productive public naming and shaming.

More similarly to the other groups, the interviewed Lithuanian entrepreneurs overwhelmingly disapproved of **Chinese technologies as serving for overall progress and development**, with most seeing such superficial technological advances as a result of unfair practices, especially theft, and positively contributing to the world only through technological replication and dissemination rather than real innovation. Nevertheless, there was a certain level of recognition that China may still achieve a lot in this regard, mainly due to heavy capital and especially intellectual investments, including from abroad. While being mostly skeptical of the **general safety and security of Chinese technologies**, the discussants pointed out that China, although less susceptible to legal and moral constraints than the West, is not unique in terms of collecting data, and that relevant decisions on the matter must be based on expert as opposed to political

opinions. However, they overwhelmingly agreed with placing limits on the use of **Chinese technologies in Lithuania's state institutions and strategic sectors**. In the case of private businesses, they expressed the belief that consultations should be preferred to prohibitions.

Finally, the Lithuanian business representatives also overwhelmingly agreed that **China already plays a large role in global geopolitics**, threatening Western democracies. More specifically, according to them, **Chinese geopolitical ambitions and initiatives** are aimed at achieving global domination, both directly (vs. the US) and indirectly (in the Global South). **China's reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine** was also interpreted as serving the party-state's interests well. The interviewed entrepreneurs were also skeptical of any major economic breakthrough associated with Taiwan, with some pointing out that, on the topic of **Cross-Strait relations**, the Taiwanese themselves would always choose China over Lithuania.

Media Representatives

Similarly to the other groups, the Lithuanian media representatives were overwhelmingly convinced of **China's large role in global economy and trade**, viewing it as a politically disadvantageous trend, especially from the perspective of Western lifestyles and values. While earlier, there was at least some economic benefit resulting from cheaper Chinese products, the current situation was interpreted as a zero-sum game where the strengthening of autocracies automatically results in a weakening of democracies. Most of these interlocutors therefore perceived China as unreliable in pursuing **bilateral economic and trade ties**, and expressed alarmist views on the scenario of deeper economic relations in general and Chinese investments in particular. According to the majority of these interviewees, the EU's sanctions should be followed unconditionally, and Lithuania's individual naming and shaming tactics could also be effective. In addition, this group was particularly cautious of China's potential for influence through education and science cooperation. Naturally, these interlocutors overwhelmingly prioritized **values and principles over economic interests**, supporting a liberal agenda and a strategic

diversification from autocracies, while being conscious of the latter's economic pressure measures against democracies.

In a rather consistent way, the Lithuanian media representatives unequivocally agreed that **human rights are generally important and universal**, while arguing for a fundamental equality between civic and political and socio-economic rights. All of the interviewees were aware of the **dire human rights situation in China**, with mass surveillance clearly being the most discussed issue and the Uyghur plight mentioned by everyone. Being naturally worried about freedom of speech there as well, the media representatives expressed concerns about the diffusion of such dangerous practices abroad and disagreed that they should be treated as China's internal matters. It was therefore natural that they largely argued for **Lithuania's publicity of human rights issues in China**, with many expecting an even stronger position, although preferably communicated within broader international coalitions and to the domestic audience as well. In both of these cases, Lithuania's own allegedly similar historical experience should serve as a strengthening argument.

The interviewees saw **Chinese technologies as contributing to the world's overall progress and development**, but emphasized their insecure, invasive, and control-seeking character. Under the conditions of the alleged new tech-focused Cold War, none of the interlocutors regarded **Chinese technologies as generally safe or secure**, and this group was particularly concerned about surveillance and disinformation threats. As a result, they were emphatically skeptical about the **use of Chinese technology in Lithuania** itself, especially by government institutions. On the other hand, the Lithuanian state, instead of introducing prohibitions, should organize tech and media literacy campaigns focused on both businesses and society at large, so that the people themselves will be discouraged from using problematic apps such as TikTok.

Finally, the Lithuanian media representatives overwhelmingly agreed that **China already plays a large role in global geopolitics** and aims at domination in the world, with its soft power serving as an extra means to pursue this goal. More specifically, **China's geopolitical ambitions and initiatives** were

seen as fundamentally threatening Western democracies and American primacy, with there being a notable disagreement on the actual outcome of this struggle. The interlocutors also agreed that **China's reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine** is self-interested and reflects its numerous aims. Contrary to the isolated examples mentioned in other groups, nobody expressed any admiration for such a position. The interviewees were also quick to connect the former issue with that of the **relationship between China and Taiwan**, pointing out at the lessons that Beijing is learning from the Russo-Ukrainian military experience in order to prepare better for its ultimate invasion of the island. In general, the media representatives were comparatively more empathetic toward Taiwan, partly because of the alleged similarities with Lithuania and, in the words of a female journalist co-working as a university lecturer, argued for "the need for small state solidarity in order to survive."

Focus Group Overview

The discussions and interviews conducted with selected focus groups largely confirmed and further contextualized the survey results. Rather expectedly, considering the format, the participants were generally more willing to express stronger opinions on China-related matters than their surveyed co-nationals, who often preferred to remain neutral or undecided. There were apparent differences in the overall assessment of this country and its narratives among the four specifically approached groups. Thus, those most susceptible to Chinese messaging appeared to be the interviewed Lithuanian entrepreneurs, while most resistant to that were the media representatives. Judging from their answers, these patterns had a lot to do with having a more pragmatic outlook on politics, as entertained by the businesspeople in general and their strong disapproval of recent Lithuanian policies toward China in particular; and on the other hand, a comparatively higher awareness about international politics as befits the journalists. Therefore, although the survey did not indicate professional activity as statistically significant with regard to Lithuanians' perceptual differences on China, these interviews revealed a more nuanced picture.

In between these two extremes were the ethnic Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian focus groups, who generally leaned toward the China-skeptic and China-accommodating ends, respectively. The native Lithuanian speaking group appeared to be somewhat more alarmist than was suggested by the survey data, while the Russian and Polish speaking group was more susceptible to the Chinese messaging than seemed to be the case among their polled colleagues. As was expected from the survey data, however, capital-dwelling ethnic Lithuanians were more likely to be China-skeptic than their rural counterparts.

Speaking of the actual narratives, the interlocutors from all four groups largely confirmed the survey results by overwhelmingly agreeing that **China is a powerful economic and geopolitical actor aiming for global dominance, at least a competitor if not necessarily a threat to the West and the US in particular, a human rights abuser, and a self-serving power not interested in genuine peace, especially in Ukraine.** Somewhat contradicting and adding to the poll insights, the majority also agreed that **Chinese technology originates in unfair practices and is generally unsafe,** with intellectual property theft, data collection, and surveillance commonly cited as the most pressing concerns, and that **Beijing remains committed to taking over Taiwan,** whereas the Russo-Ukrainian War is serving as an additional factor in such preparations. In all of these cases, however, the most China-accommodating participants were inclined to rationalize, appreciate, or even justify that country's positions.

Several secondary narratives were recurrent among the four groups, and therefore merit some attention. To begin with, China's power was often mystified as essentially more complex and effective than that of other actors, particularly the West, while the country itself was seen as fundamentally cunning, self-seeking, and acting according to a different set of rules. Moreover, a certain share of disappointment in the West for allegedly allowing this to happen, and a continuing unprincipled hypocrisy between "word and deed" while dealing with Beijing, was indicated among the discussants with markedly different views of this party-state. In the case of Lithuania's own relationship with China, a certain list of proposed principles could be distinguished: coalition-building with preferably

more powerful actors abroad, greater coordination among domestic stakeholders, and consultations and education instead of prohibitions.

On the other hand, the starkest differences between the four groups were found in regard to the overall debate about values versus interests, and in the assessment of their current government's foreign policy toward China. In general, the more accommodating groups and individual participants were inclined to strongly prefer economic interests over values and principles, to prioritize socio-economic over civic and political human rights, and to be somewhat more skeptical of the latter's universal character. As was entirely expected, the same subjects were also more likely to disagree with Lithuania's recent review of its relationship with China.

Conclusions

It appears that Lithuanians are rather ambiguous, undecided, and uninformed about matters related to China, and therefore present themselves as a particularly meaningful audience to work with, in order to shift their opinions toward either of the two directions. Overall, Lithuanians manifest themselves as comparatively most conscious of Beijing's economic impact, least assured in evaluating its geopolitical role in the world, aside from their own country, and most divided on their normative reaction to the Chinese power. It is arguably the latest domain that should be treated as a potentially decisive one.

Even despite the recent Chinese pressure campaign against their country, where economic measures played a huge role, Lithuanians appear to be particularly susceptible to China's **"win-win" discourse** that emphasizes the mutually beneficial nature of bilateral relations, and to its related narrative about offering itself as a **development opportunity** for all who are willing. Since they are clearly under the recent impression of Beijing's actions and conscious of Lithuania's broader historical experience, they also turn out to be especially amenable to the Chinese discourse about **non-interference** as a key principle guiding international relations.

The key common trait linking all of these positions together is a recognition of **China's**

great power credentials, the acceptance of Lithuania's "smallness" as something that should limit its international agency to that befitting an objective level, and the conviction of their country's **economic dependence** on the Asian party-state. It is no wonder then that a majority of the surveyed respondents agreed that Lithuania is too small and irrelevant to criticize China, and a plurality of them laid the blame for the bilateral dispute on their own country's doorstep. The Lithuanian answers appear to be particularly motivated by a sense of **economic pragmatism toward China**, widely shared by the society in general and by its business representatives in particular. A worryingly large share of the respondents preferred this position to solidarity on China with the West, which is often seen as disappointing in its own dealings with Beijing, thus showing a certain susceptibility to the latter's rhetoric about **Western double standards**.

On the other hand, Lithuanians appear to be especially resistant to China's self-promotion as a fundamentally **peaceful country** with a **sufficient level of human rights protection**. While in the former case, Beijing's pacifist rhetoric and conduct were widely perceived by the approached interlocutors as insincere and cunning, particularly regarding its designs toward Taiwan and the Russo-Ukrainian War, their take on the latter normative issue was somewhat more nuanced. Indeed, many of the focus group participants **preferred socio-economic over civic and political human rights** and expressed doubts about the **universal character of human rights**, thus matching the long-standing Chinese position on this matter.

While a relative majority of the surveyed respondents were neutral or undecided in many cases, their responses marked a certain inclination to support the unrestricted use of Chinese information technology, doubt in Taiwan's ability to substitute China as an economic partner, recognize the latter's vital help in dealing with the pandemic, question the morality and correctness of the recent Lithuanian policies toward Beijing, and essentially view the West as unwilling to lose its primacy in an increasingly multipolar and China-friendly world. In other words, Lithuanians seem to be rather susceptible to the Chinese narratives of being an

indispensable **tech powerhouse** and an **ally in the fight against the pandemic**, while treating Lithuania's review of the respective **bilateral relationship as irresponsible, self-damaging and prejudicial**, and interpreting global affairs as fundamentally characterized by the interrelated **rise of China** and **decline of the West**. The focus group and interview participants largely confirmed these insights, but were comparatively more skeptical of Chinese technological innovations and expressed a fair degree of disappointment with such a state of global affairs.

On the other hand, the Lithuanian respondents were comparatively more skeptical of China's alleged benevolence, respect and concern about small states, the overall primacy of economic interests over values and principles, the Chinese contribution to a safer world in general and to peace in Ukraine in particular, Europe as a separate pole from the US, and Taiwan as a part of China. The acceptance of Beijing's narratives about being a different type of a truly **benevolent, respectful, and constructive great power**, the **fundamental worth of economic pragmatism** (when not specifically referring to relations with China), the hoped-for **transatlantic divide**, the **American "Cold War mentality"** and the **"One China principle"** therefore appears to be limited among Lithuanians, with the interviewed business representatives admittedly being more forthcoming toward a preference of the economy over values.

Ultimately, both stages of the data analysis revealed that by far the most susceptible to China's official narratives are those Lithuanians who distrust their current government's foreign policy capacity and feel socio-economically threatened, while comparatively higher risks are also associated with the following societal groups – female, older, less educated, town and rural dwellers, those feeling unsafe at home, Russian media consumers, ethnic minorities, and business people, especially those having interactions with China. On the contrary, more resistant to the Chinese messaging are those Lithuanians who, above all, trust in their current government's foreign policy capacity and feel socio-economically secure, and those who preferably are better educated, feel safe at home, live in the capital, and are generally interested in global affairs.

Cross-Country Trends

In this chapter, a cross-country comparison is presented along the same three domains – economic, normative, and geopolitical.

If there is a China-favorable narrative on which all three Baltic states are in strong agreement, it is the narrative about non-interference. This evidently appears as a projection of their own common wish not to be meddled with by external powers in their relations with the PRC. Meanwhile, the Latvian and Lithuanian respondents are also aligned in their agreement that relations with China are beneficial (see Figure 19). However, the side-by-side comparison shows

that each country has its own idiosyncrasies when it comes to accepting or rejecting the pro-China narratives determined by their national contexts, which suggests that a “one size fits all” approach in countering China’s disinformation and misinformation in the Baltic states would not be appropriate.

In an effort to evaluate the resilience to the pro-Chinese narratives, we also took a look at statements with the highest disagreement among the 3 countries (Figure 20). What stands out in this case is the lower total values in comparison to the values in Figure 19.

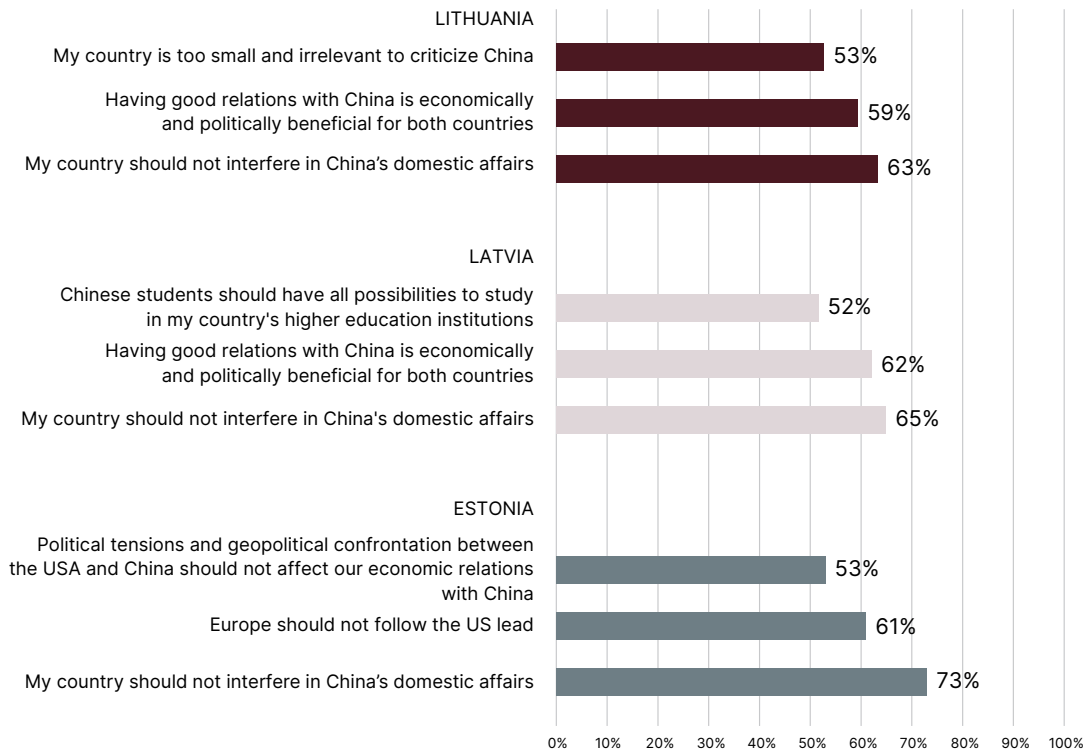


Figure 19: The Top 3 narratives in each country in terms of agreement

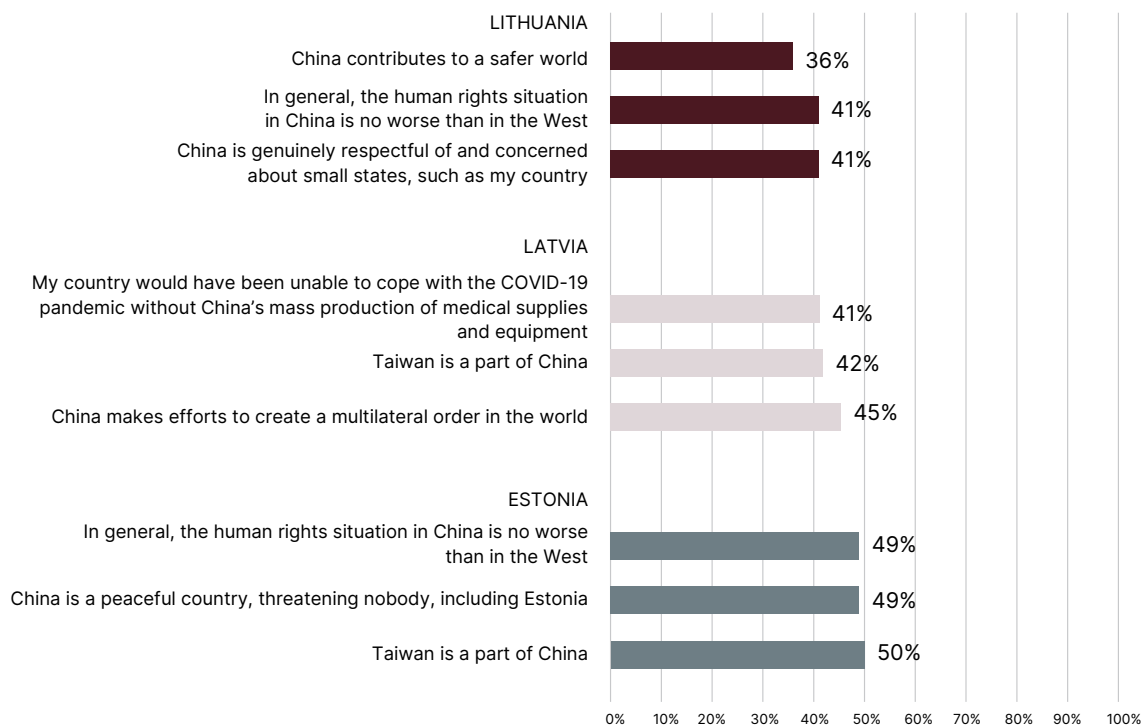


Figure 20: The Top 3 narratives in each country in terms of disagreement

Economic domain

In socio-economic terms, the Baltic states are more similar than they often would like to acknowledge. Their GDP per capita, foreign direct investments, population welfare (expressed by such indicators as average income, savings, consumption per capita, equality of income distribution, poverty, etc.), and their general human and economic development levels are quite similar.²⁹ Also similar is their foreign trade and investment profile, with the EU member states – especially the Nordic countries, Germany, and Poland – being their main partners, and their direct economic exposure to China being quite modest.³⁰ All three countries have burgeoning ICT sectors and vibrant technological innovation ecosystems, which are attracting the attention of foreign venture capital investments. They have similar scores in indices such as ease of doing business, tax competitiveness, and digitalization.³¹

There are some differences, of course. For instance, industry comprises a somewhat larger share of the GDP and exports in Lithuania, compared to that in Latvia and Estonia.³² In the latter two states, the metropolitan capital area generates a larger share of the overall national economic activity and wealth, compared to Lithuania, making regional (under)development a more important challenge in these two countries.³³ The corruption perception index shows that this is a more acute problem in Lithuania and Latvia, compared to in Estonia, as is the demographic decline in those two countries (even though Estonia's demography is not experiencing a positive trend either).³⁴ Last, but not least, relative poverty has an ethno-linguistic character in Latvia and Estonia more than in Lithuania, where ethnic minorities seem to struggle more in terms of the socio-economic indicators.³⁵

None of this suggests that any of the three countries should be exposed and receptive to the Chinese economic narratives, to a much higher or lower degree. Indeed, if there is one major similarity between them in this regard, it is the share of their societies that is neutral or has no view on such narratives in the economic dimension. Across all the survey's questions in this dimension, this share ranged from just under 30% to more than 40% of the respondents, depending on the question. A particularly

high proportion of such neutral or opinionless respondents – 40% in Lithuania, 43% in Estonia, and 46% in Latvia – concerned the narrative that **supporting Taiwan does not bring any economic benefits and should therefore be less important than maintaining good economic relations with China.** It is thus clear that a very substantial portion of people in the Baltic societies are yet to become aware of, or to be swayed by, the pro-Chinese economic narratives and counter-narratives. This certainly represents a major opportunity, both for China and for those seeking to counter Beijing's malign influence.

Nonetheless, there are some interesting differences in public opinion between the three nations. Estonians are the least inclined to accept the narrative that **having good relations with China is economically and politically beneficial:** 52% of them agreed with this statement, in contrast to over 59% of Lithuanians and 62% of Latvians. They are also less swayed than their Baltic neighbors by the suggestion that **China is a huge and lucrative market, so they should be pragmatic and abstain from making any criticisms of China:** just 35% of the Estonians agreed with this, compared to 42% of Latvians and almost 48% of Lithuanians. Likewise, they are also the most skeptical among the three countries in accepting that **their industry and consumers are highly-dependent on supply chains from China and therefore their country should not support any EU economic sanctions on China:** just 31% of the Estonian respondents agreed with this statement, with Latvians very close behind (almost 34% agreed) and Lithuanians being most in agreement with this view (40%).

Estonians are also least worried about the lack of Chinese investments and the impact of that on their country's economic growth: just 23% agreed and 38% disagreed that **the national economy will struggle to grow without investments from China.** By contrast, more than 44% of Lithuanians agreed with this view. Lastly, Estonians also appear to be the most cautious of the three nations about Chinese information technology: almost half (46%) of them disagreed (and just 27% agreed) that it is affordable, and therefore should be used without limitations and despite security concerns. In contrast, only a quarter of Lithuanians (26%) disagreed with this view, with Latvians again finding themselves in the middle (35% disagreed).

It thus appears that the famous economic pragmatism of Estonia is not necessarily reflected in the public opinion about pro-Chinese economic narratives, as in six out of ten of such narratives they had the lowest share of agreeing respondents, when comparing between the three Baltic states. Only one pro-China narrative resonated with them more than in the other two Baltic states: 53% of the Estonian respondents agreed that **political tensions and geopolitical confrontation between the US and China should not affect their country's economic relations with China** – presumably a point where economic pragmatism and the desire to maintain a firewall between economic matters and (geo)politics re-asserted itself. Latvians were not that far behind (50% agreed), while Lithuanians appeared to be the least economy-oriented in this choice (42% agreed). In all three cases, it seems, there is a large proportion of the population who would like to insulate the economy from politics, with Estonians leading the pack.

Among the three countries, Latvia sits most consistently in the middle between the Estonian and Lithuanian extremities, not only geographically but also in terms of accepting or rejecting the pro-Chinese economic narratives. Only once were the Latvians in greater disagreement with a particular narrative than the other two: just 24% of Latvians agreed, and fully 41% disagreed that it would have been **impossible to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic without China's mass production of medical supplies and equipment** (compared to 38% of those disagreeing in Estonia, and almost 27% in Lithuania). At the same time, Latvians were the most in agreement, compared to their Baltic neighbors, concerning the narrative that their country should seek to gain more tourists from China (55% agreed, compared to 50% of Estonians and 49% of Lithuanians), and that **Chinese students should have all possibilities to study in their country** (52% agreed, compared to 40% Estonians and 39% of Lithuanians). The Latvian respondents also scored the highest in the share of those agreeing – both between the different tested socio-economic narratives and between the three Baltic states – with a particular narrative: that **having good relations with China is mutually economically and politically beneficial** (62%).

However, it is Lithuania's society that emerges as leaning the most toward accepting China-friendly narratives in the economic domain. From the ten narratives explored in the survey, the share of Lithuanians agreeing with those narratives was highest among the Baltic states in six cases (compared to Latvians in three, and Estonians in one). 40% of Lithuanians agreed that Lithuania, **due to the high dependence of its industry on Chinese supply chains, should not support the EU economic sanctions on China** (34% of Latvians and 31% of Estonians agreed), and almost 48% agreed that Lithuania **should abstain from criticizing China, because it is a huge and lucrative market** (42% of Latvians and 35% of Estonians agreed).

Lithuanians also agreed more than the Estonians and Latvians (44% vs. 30% and 23%, respectively) that their **economy would struggle without Chinese investments**. They also were the most inclined to embrace low-cost Chinese information technology despite the security risks (34% were in favor, compared to 30% in Latvia and 27% in Estonia), and were the most skeptical toward the economic benefits of prioritizing the support of Taiwan over economic relations with China (37% agreed that Taiwan should not be prioritized). On the other hand, the Lithuanian respondents were the least receptive in the Baltic states to the narratives concerning Chinese tourists and students, and were least in agreement that the (geo)political tensions between China and the US should not interfere with their economic relations. The latter is an indication that, in the minds of a significant majority of the Lithuanian respondents (over 42%), the importance of the United States to Lithuanian security outweighs the importance of trade with China.

The way that Lithuania stands out among the Baltic states in accepting the China-friendly economic narratives could be explained by one significant factor. The political decision to allow the opening of the Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius, and the resulting harsh economic and diplomatic coercion by China, has brought economic issues to the fore to an extent that has not happened in Latvia and Estonia – not even during the peak of the debates about 5G and the banning of Chinese technology in those countries.

The business community in Lithuania, as the focus group results show, is particularly scathing and vocal in its criticisms, and frequently takes to the media to highlight the risks and downsides to the Lithuanian economy. Partly as a result of this, the public has become much more aware of the extent of Lithuanian industry's direct and indirect dependence on Chinese supply chains and market access, and its vulnerability to economic coercion, which could have shaped their views. This also reflects Lithuania's greater reliance on manufacturing and the export of goods (compared to Latvia and Estonia) that makes the country more sensitive to the disruption of those supply chains and markets. The fact that the issues most remote from trade and industrial considerations – tourism and students from China – were least endorsed by the Lithuanian survey respondents seems to confirm that the matter concerning the Taiwanese representative office has had a major impact on the public perception of China-related socio-economic narratives in Lithuania.

Normative Domain

It has become a convention that the governments of the three Baltic states share their appreciation of normative domain as fundamental in structuring international relations, and are therefore deeply-concerned about human rights across the world, not excluding China. Ever since the establishment of respective bilateral relations with the communist party-state, manifest differences in the professed values have often served as a constraining factor in pursuing deeper political and economic ties. Perhaps the most consistent manifestation of this, at least before the pandemic, was rather regular tours through the three countries by the Dalai Lama, always resulting in Chinese diplomatic reprimands and sometimes even economic pressure toward them. Throughout the last decade, all three Baltic states have served as members of the UN Human Rights Council, and their record there and the UN system in general suggests a high level of disagreement with, and concern about China, as is most clearly expressed by their voting on Xinjiang-focused resolutions. Lithuania's more recent "values-based foreign

policy" can therefore be considered as an (admittedly peculiar) apex of a broader trend that has long been in the making.

In general, the surveyed representatives of all three Baltic states perceive China in a similar normative way. While overall, they expressed much more skepticism of Chinese values than of the country's economic credentials, there were two notable exceptions to that, namely: the majority agreement across all three states with the statement that **their country should not interfere in China's domestic affairs**, and strong support for the position that **their country is too small and irrelevant to criticize China**. On no other question in this domain did any of the Baltic societies express such a high level of agreement. On the other extreme, a relative majority of the respondents in all three countries disagreed with the statement that **in general, the human rights situation in China is no worse than in the West**.

Therefore, the Baltic states appear to be most susceptible to the Chinese narrative about non-interference as the guiding principle in international relations, and are heavily prone to embracing their "smallness" as a constraining factor in pursuing their own normative agenda toward Beijing. At the same time, they are most resistant to the Chinese relativist and "whataboutist" rhetoric on human rights, with the additional focus group interviews revealing a rather respectable level of awareness and concern about the human rights problems in China itself.

As far as the differences between the three countries are concerned, with some notable caveats, Estonia is the most skeptical, while Latvia and Lithuania are more susceptible to China's normative narratives, although in a somewhat different way. Indeed, the Latvian respondents were generally most willing to accept the Chinese normative positions, while the Lithuanians were most inclined to have no opinion on these matters, also making them a promising potential target for Beijing.

To specify the results further, while roughly the same proportion of respondents (24%) in all three countries agreed with the fundamental statement that **in dealing with China, economic interests are more important than values and principles**, a plurality of Estonians and Latvians disagreed, while a similar share of Lithuanians had no clear opinion on the matter.

A substantially larger portion of Estonians disagreed with China's self-presentation as a benevolent and peaceful country in its dealings with others, while the Latvians and Lithuanians were more divided on both these statements. In all three cases, a relative majority of the respondents were neutral or undecided on whether China is genuinely respectful of and concerned about small states, such as their country, with Lithuanians this time being the most skeptical.

In general, the data suggests an additional dividing line between Estonia and Latvia on the one hand, and Lithuania, a recent victim of Beijing's all-out pressure campaign, on the other. Indeed, while the Lithuanians clearly fell in the middle between the more and less skeptical Estonians and Latvians, respectively, in the case of those statements that focused on China's global role and actions, they were distinctly most supportive of those Chinese narratives that specifically addressed their country's bilateral relations with Beijing. As many as 40% of the Lithuanians therefore agreed that their government's recent review of this relationship was irresponsible and erroneous, while roughly a third endorsed the views that Lithuania is not in a moral position to criticize China for its human rights record, and that the policy in question stemmed from anti-China prejudices. Admittedly, however, in all these three instances, the proportion of Lithuanians with no clear opinion was actually larger, and the Latvian respondents were just as willing to question the moral credentials of their country's criticism of the human rights situation in China.

By far the largest divergence between the Baltic societies in this domain derives from the fact that Lithuania's review of its relationship with China is much deeper, more consequential, and therefore better-known publicly, while a strong absolute majority of the surveyed Latvians and especially the Estonians apparently struggled to determine anything akin to such a drastic policy shift on China in their own countries. Obviously being under the impression of Beijing's recent intimidation, a majority of the surveyed Lithuanians (53%) thus decided to essentially support Beijing's rhetoric, by agreeing that their country is too small and irrelevant to criticize China, and this position was strongly reflected in the interviews, especially those conducted with entrepreneurs who were by far the most critical

group regarding the policy review in question. Another notable outlier was the Estonians' markedly higher support for the principle of non-interference (73%), much valued by Beijing, in comparison to the Latvians and Lithuanians, although almost two thirds of them also embraced it.

Largely mirroring the trends witnessed in the other two domains, all three societies appear to be similarly susceptible to the Chinese normative narratives as far as particular respondent groups are concerned, with those being more critical of their government's foreign policy capacity being most prone to embrace such messaging. The Estonian comparatively stronger resistance to China's rhetoric also tends to be associated with titular ethnicity, a younger age, higher education, less conservative values and a lower perception of socio-economic insecurity, with the latter factor often being applicable to the Lithuanian respondents as well. In general, the ethnolinguistic background was manifestly more important in Estonia and Latvia, with the minorities generally being more welcoming of China's messaging than the titular groups, which was somewhat expected considering the demographic and related policy differences between the three societies.

Geopolitical Domain

The political course of the three Baltic neighbors, since regaining independence over 30 years ago, has been consistently about steering the nations toward a transatlantic Western future. After a short-lived policy of neutrality, aimed primarily at the facilitation of a withdrawal of the remaining Russian troops after the collapse of the Soviet Union, all three nations expressed the will and desire to join Western security structures in 1994.³⁶ Although routinely engaged in healthy competition and not being above some amusing bickering³⁷ at times, the Baltic states are nonetheless one of the prime examples of regional foreign and security policy coordination and unity on a global scale.

The shared experience of the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – in navigating their relationship with China is a testament to the coordinated approach to their foreign policy. Initially drawn in by the allure of China's

extended cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries in 2012, these nations joined the 16+1 platform, eager to explore the economic possibilities while maintaining their steadfast commitment to a transatlantic alliance. However, the anticipated substantial opportunities failed to materialize, and growing concerns from the EU over China's divisive ambitions in Europe, coupled with deteriorating China-US relations, prompted a reevaluation of this move. Lithuania led the way in distancing itself from China, soon followed by its Baltic neighbors. By 2022, all three had withdrawn from the platform, reflecting a heightened awareness of the security risks posed by China's increasing influence. The decade-long engagement with China did not yield significant business exchanges, nor did it embed China's narratives into the official political discourse of the Baltic states. However, it did bring about a keen public awareness of China's ascent as a global force.

Drawing from the results of the poll, the reactions to China's narratives in the domain of geopolitics are characterized by high levels of ambiguity and indecisiveness among the respondents on China's role, indicating a complexity in the public understanding or mixed feelings about these issues. Noncommittal reactions to the survey statements consistently hovered at around 40% on questions of global governance, including whether **China is making efforts to create a multipolar order**, and is **China pushing against global US hegemony**. When asked if **the US is launching a new Cold War against China**, a statement distinct to the Chinese foreign policy narrative, an absolute majority of the Estonian (51%), Lithuanian (51.2%), and Latvian respondents (49.2%) did not have an opinion on the matter. This lack of awareness could indicate two things: first, the narrative has not spread widely; and consequently, second, the respondents unfamiliar with the narrative find it hard to decide on a clear position, as they have not thought about it previously.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, even a topic of fundamental regional importance – that of Russia's war on Ukraine – is not enough to jolt the inhabitants of the Baltic region into taking a stand. 40.5% of the Latvians, 45.8% of the Lithuanians, and a slightly lower proportion of

the surveyed Estonians (32%), had no clear view on **whether the diplomatic resolution of the war needs mediation from a force outside the Western alliance**. Similarly, with regard to the statement **China is helping to reach peace in Ukraine**, 42% of the Estonian, 44.5% of the Latvian, and 45.9% of the Lithuanian respondents failed to produce an opinion.

Apart from the general undecidedness, there are also other similarities across the region when it comes to politics and international affairs. It appears that the security-oriented pro-China narratives receive a significant pushback from the Baltic public. E.g., 35.9% of the Latvian, 40% of the Estonian, and 36% of the Lithuanian respondents disagreed with the statement that **China contributes to a safer world**. In Latvia and Estonia, the disagreement among Latvian and Estonian speakers was even higher.

However, when it comes to softer agendas, such as development, a significant portion of the populations across all three countries appear to be sympathetic toward the Chinese narratives. For example, 50.4% the respondents in Latvia, 46% in Estonia, and 42.9% in Lithuania believe that **China provides development opportunities for many nations, including their own**.

Importantly, the Baltic respondents who are distrustful of the government's foreign policy capacity tended to agree with the Chinese worldview in international affairs more than those who are happy with the foreign policy decision-making in their nations. There is a direct correlation between trust in the government on matters of foreign affairs and support for China's narratives, which in turn means that the anti-establishment communities in all three Baltic states, regardless of age, gender, place of residence, and socio-economic circumstances, are vulnerable to China's arguments. This conclusion suggests the need for a coordinated policy response among the three Baltic nations.

Nonetheless, there are also some noteworthy differences in public opinion between the three nations. Estonia and Latvia display more pronounced ethno-linguistic divisions in their attitudes (there are more favorable views vis-a-vis China among Russian speakers), while the Lithuanian data does not highlight this

aspect as strongly, which admittedly, may be due to a more uniform ethno-linguistic make-up of the Lithuanian society.

Of the three countries, Estonians also stand out as the most skeptical regarding the US leadership. 61% of the respondents in Estonia believed that **Europe should not follow the US lead** in its policy toward China, a view shared by only approximately 34.5% of the respondents in Latvia and 26.8% in Lithuania. Therefore, the view is evidently not mirrored in Estonia's neighboring states.

Also, although there was a sizable portion of responses agreeing that China is pushing against the global US hegemony in Latvia (37.1%) and Lithuania (44.4%), the Estonian level of agreement was significantly higher and constituted an absolute majority of 51%. This can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, the respondents may have not perceived

"hegemony" as a negative phenomenon, but rather as simply dominance or leadership, and viewed China's pushback as a statement of fact. But on the other hand, this could be viewed as an effect of China's narratives. The Baltic deeply-rooted pro-Americanism has become a trademark of the region.³⁸ If the population has a negative perception of US hegemony and agrees that China is pushing back to stop it, this would mean that the pro-Americanism of the Baltic states is either in decline, or is more political elite-based than was previously thought.

Overall, as expected, the survey data comparison is a testament to the Baltic's geopolitical proximity, while highlighting its national specifics, including ethnic make-up, and at times its shared challenges, including a low interest in foreign policy matters.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research demonstrates a strong link between the confidence of Baltic societies in their government's ability to implement a foreign policy and their receptiveness to the Chinese narratives. Socio-economic uncertainty and anxiety increase the receptiveness to these economic narratives, with Russian speaking communities generally being more receptive toward the political and normative narratives of China.

The disconnect between the view of China as a big, lucrative market versus its image as a trusted political ally (mixed with skepticism regarding its international role in the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as its own record on human rights) indicates that many Baltic citizens tend to separate economic issues from the political ones. Economic favoritism, however, should not be read solely as a pro-Chinese stance. Some form of cooperation, especially from small, open market dependent countries such as the Baltics, may be seen as a statement of fact – both pragmatic and unavoidable. At the same time, more people in all three countries were inclined to provide their opinion on economic, but not on normative or geopolitical issues, indicating

that there is a large proportion of politically-undecided people. This is the largest group that could be affected by the information manipulation and disinformation efforts.

Talking about vulnerabilities, the Baltic states are particularly susceptible to the more sophisticated tactics of Beijing – not necessarily promoting the Chinese narratives, but sowing distrust in the target country's government and its ability to implement a foreign policy, or amplifying the declining relative economic power of Europe and the West. These vulnerabilities are connected to the general separation in democratic countries between the economic versus political domains, and also more specifically to the Baltics as small states attached to the idea of non-interference, as well as to the proliferation of skepticism toward the US and the West in some segments of these societies. With vulnerabilities running along ethno-linguistic lines (people consuming information in the national versus the Russian language), as well as the perception of a socio-economic threat, Russian propaganda is one of the driving forces inducing the pro-Chinese stances.

Recommendations for the policy stakeholders at different levels:

- Dedicate more effort to demonstrating the links between the economic influence and subversion of the key international norms and rules, in order to build the resilience of the societies.
- Strengthen the strategic communication concerning long-term approaches toward China, especially regarding policy changes, tracking and informing the public about the outcomes.
- Intensify strategic communication on the narratives where large sections of the society are still undecided or opinionless, while also strengthening the counter-narratives where China-friendly perceptions have taken a strong hold, especially among people who are socio-economically disadvantaged and/or regularly consuming Russia-linked information.
- In strategic communications, highlight the overlaps between the Kremlin's propaganda narratives and narratives that benefit China as well as Beijing's practical efforts to support Russia and its war against Ukraine.
- Tailor China-related strategic communication to the long-term trends in preferred information channels among different segments of the societies in the Baltic states (e.g. various social media platforms).
- Focus on strengthening public confidence in the ability of, and the need for the Baltic governments to exercise international leadership, wield normative power and achieve a positive change in international affairs through building coalitions with other EU member states and across the wider West (US, Canada, Japan, etc.).
- Amplify narratives emphasizing the importance of strong transatlantic relationships, and showcase a coordinated European approach to (geo)political affairs vis-à-vis China.
- Enhance the visibility of cultural and economic cooperation with Taiwan by highlighting similar challenges that face small states encountering authoritarian powers, and provide opportunities for Taiwan's representatives in the Baltic states to engage with local stakeholders in countering China's disinformation activities.
- Develop a holistic approach to evaluating China's informational influence in conjunction with other ways of exercising its "sharp power", including economic and diplomatic measures.
- Incentivize different stakeholders in the Baltic states to increase efforts to monitor and analyze China's informational agenda and engage in wider cooperation with partners in the Nordic and Central and Eastern European countries in this effort.

Annexes

Annex 1: Profile of the polling and focus groups / in-depth individual interviewees

	Focus groups	Polling
Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cluster 1: seven metropolitan residents (Tallinn and Tartu). Cluster 2: six rural residents (Põlva and Jõgeva counties). Cluster 3: six local Russian speakers, residents of Ida-Virumaa in North-East Estonia. Cluster 4: six journalists and influencers, including representatives of public channels (ERR) and various private media outlets (newspapers/online news portals, radio, TV). The sample included a freelancer and a social media influencer. Cluster 5: six representatives of the business community and entrepreneurs – representing one large company, two medium-size companies, and three small enterprises in various fields of activity, including exporters and importers, as well as users of Chinese technology and engineering equipment. 	<p>1000 people, of them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 53.6% were female and 46.4% male. 68.1% speak Estonian at home, and 31.9% self-identified as being of other ethnolinguistic backgrounds. 32.9% are residents of the capital metropolitan area (Tallinn), 35.8% of other towns and urban areas, and 31.8% of rural areas. 71.2% have other than a university (or equivalent) degree, and 28.8% have higher education. 43.5% work in private businesses or are self-employed, 17.6% work in the public sector, 2.9% in the non-governmental / non-commercial sector, and 36% are not participating in the labor market (unemployed, retired, students, etc.).
Latvia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cluster 1: seven representatives from the capital, five of them Latvians and two Russians, by ethnicity. Cluster 2: nine residents of other areas outside the capital city (other cities and rural), six of them Latvians and three Russians by ethnicity. Cluster 3: five journalists and opinion leaders, including journalists from online news portals, a public broadcaster, as well as a political scientist -- an academic at a leading state education institution. Cluster 4: five business community representatives: three large companies and two small enterprises in various fields of activity, including exporters and importers internationally, including exports to China. 	<p>1007 people, of them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 52.5% were female and 47.5% male. 61.5% speak Latvian at home, and 8.5% self-identified as being of other ethnolinguistic backgrounds. 34.5% are residents of the capital city (Riga), 29.7% of rural areas, 20.5% of other major cities, and 15.4% of small towns. 54.7% have a level of education other than a university or equivalent degree, and 45.3% have higher education. 51.4% work in private businesses, 26.8% in the public sector, 1.3% in media, 4.8% in the non-governmental / non-commercial sector, and 15.0% are unemployed or are not participating in the labor market (retired, students, etc.).
Lithuania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cluster 1: seven ethnic Lithuanian participants from the capital. Cluster 2: six ethnic Lithuanian participants from rural areas. Cluster 3: six ethnolinguistic minority representatives from the capital area, including two Polish and four Russian native speakers. Cluster 4: five journalists, including one employed for a news portal that operates in the national language, a host for a national public TV channel, a journalist for a news portal that operates in the national language, and two journalists from regional newspapers. Cluster 5: five business community representatives, including a small business owner, one CEO of a large-size business, one owner of a franchise in Lithuania of a medium-size business, and a representative of an association of various Vilnius industries and businesses. 	<p>1015 people, of them:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 53% were female and 47% male. 85% speak Lithuanian at home, while 15% self-identified as being of other ethnolinguistic backgrounds (Russian, Polish, and other). 38% have a higher education degree, 30% finished vocational/professional school, and 28% finished high school. 21% are residents of the capital Vilnius, 22% live in one of the country's other four big cities (Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai, or Panevėžys), 26% in other cities and small towns, and 31% in rural areas. 59% work in private business, 34% in the public sector, while the rest work for local municipalities (4%), civil society (2%), and the media (1%).

Endnotes

1. Engagement Center, "How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment", 2023, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/HOW-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-SEEKS-TO-RESHAPE-THE-GLOBAL-INFORMATION-ENVIRONMENT_508.pdf; Freedom House, "Beijing's Global Megaphone. A Special Report", 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.
2. The Global Engagement Centre report illustrates how certain messages about the war appear in the Russian media, then are quoted by Chinese outlets, and then reinforced as Chinese positions in Russia again; see Global Engagement Center, "How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment", 2023, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/HOW-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-SEEKS-TO-RESHAPE-THE-GLOBAL-INFORMATION-ENVIRONMENT_508.pdf.
3. Simon Denyer, "Move Over, America: China Now Presents Itself as the Model 'Blazing a New Trail' for the World," Washington Post, October 19, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/19/move-over-america-china-now-presents-itself-as-the-model-blazing-a-new-trail-for-the-world/>.
4. International Republican Institute, "Survey of Public Perceptions of China in 13 European Countries.", 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-perceptions-of-china-in-13-european-countries-august-2022/>.
5. For example, data shows that in Lithuania, 21.3% "agree" and 27.8% "mostly agree" with the statement that the pharmaceutical companies deliberately conceal the treatment for COVID-19 or cancer. This percentage can be linked to the use of alternative media, such as social media channels (alternative to the traditional means of information, such as print, radio and TV). Among them, the percentage of people who agree with the statement that NATO is responsible for the war in Ukraine rises to 1.4%, from 6.2% among people who consume "traditional" sources of information. See: Viktor Denisenko, "Medijų vartotojų požiūriai: Lietuvos auditorijos poliarizacija." Rytų Europos studijų centras, October 25, 2023, <https://www.eesc.lt/publikacija/mediju-vartotoju-pozuiri-ai-lietuvos-auditorijos-poliarizacija/>.
6. Frank Jüris, "China's Influence Activities in Estonia.", International Centre for Defence and Security, September 25, 2020, <https://icds.ee/en/chinas-influence-activities-in-estonia>, Frank Jüris, Dmitri Teperik, "Chinese Influence in Estonia", Center for European Policy Analysis, 2022, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-estonia/>.
7. Frank Jüris, "Making friends, making inroads. The CCP's influence activities in Estonia", Sinopsis, 2023, <https://sinopsis.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ccpestonia0.pdf>.
8. Estonian Internal Security Service (KAPO), "Aastaraamat 2022-23.", 2023, https://kapo.ee/sites/default/files/content_page_attachments/Aastaraamat%202022-23.pdf, Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, "Valisluureamet Annual Report 2023.", 2023, <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2023-et.pdf>.
9. GLOBSEC, "GLOBSEC Trends 2022.", 2022, www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf.
10. Postimees News, BNS, "Chinese Ambassador Threatens to Leave Estonia if Taipei Representative Office Is Opened." Postimees, November 7, 2023, <https://news.postimees.ee/7892855/chinese-ambassador-threatens-to-leave-estonia-if-taipei-representative-office-is-opened>.
11. Czeslaw Tybilewicz, "The Baltic States in Taiwan's Post-Cold War 'Flexible Diplomacy,'" Europe-Asia Studies, 54(5), 791-810, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130220147056>, p. 793.
12. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, "Ārlietu ministra ikgadējais ziņojums par paveikto un iecerēto darbību valsts ārpolitikā un Eiropas Savienības jautājumos 2014-2015", <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/media/1984/download?attachment>.

13. China-CEEC, "Leaders of China and Central and Eastern European Countries Hold Video Meeting.", 2021, http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474162.htm.
14. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Latvia Ceases Its Participation in the Cooperation Framework between Central and Eastern European Countries and China.", 2022, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/latvia-ceases-its-participation-cooperation-framework-central-and-eastern-european-countries-and-china#:~:text=Published%3A%2011.08.,Eastern%20European%20Countries%20and%20China>.
15. LRT.lt, BNS, "Most Lithuanians Critical of Vilnius' China Policy – Survey," LRT English, January 12, 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1586875/most-lithuanians-critical-of-vilnius-china-policy-survey>.
16. ELTA, "Apklauso: Lietuvos gyventojai išrinko draugiškas ir nedraugiškas šalis," Made in Vilnius, March 27, 2022, <https://madeinvilnius.lt/naujienos/lietuvos-naujienos/apklauso-lietuvos-gyventojai-isrinko-draugiskasir-nedraugiskas-salis/>.
17. Gytis Pankūnas, LRT.lt, "Survey shows Lithuanians have abysmal opinion of Russia, favor Poland and Germany," LRT English, January 2, 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1856830/survey-shows-lithuanians-have-abysmal-opinion-of-russia-favour-poland-and-germany>.
18. Mažvydas Jastramskis, "Demokratijos Tvarumo Barometras 2023.", Rytų Europos Studijų Centras, 2023. https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/v02_Jastramskis_Demokratijos-tvarumo-barometras_2023_LT_A4.pdf.
19. Statistics Estonia, "Avasta Statistikat: Rahvastik.", <https://www.stat.ee/et/avasta-statistikat/valdkonnad/rahvastik>
20. See, for instance, Eve Mägi, Ivan Polynin, Katrina Koppel et al., Eesti Ühiskonna Lõimumise Monitooring 2020 [Estonian Society's Integration Monitor 2020] (Tallinn: SA Poliitikauuringute Keskus Praxis, Balti Uuringute Instituut, Tallinna Ülikool, Tartu Ülikool, Turu-uuringute AS, 2020), pp. 64-65, <https://www.kul.ee/media/3240/download>.
21. ERR News, "Estonia Permits Taiwan to Open Representative Office in Tallinn." ERR News, November 3, 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1609153714/estonia-permits-taiwan-to-open-representative-office-in-tallinn>.
22. Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, "Iedzīvotāju skaits un tā izmaiņas.", <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaits/247-iedzivotaju-skaits-un-ta-izmainas>.
23. Statistics Latvia, "Statistiskie dati par iedzīvotāju reģistrāciju.", https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/OSP_PUB/START__POP__IR__IRE/IRE091/table/tableViewLayout1/.
24. Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, "Iedzīvotāju skaits un tā izmaiņas.", <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/iedzivotaju-skaits/247-iedzivotaju-skaits-un-ta-izmainas>.
25. Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, "Average Disposable Income per One Household Member.", <https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/population/disposable-income/tables/nni010-average-disposable-income-one>.
26. Statistics Latvia, "Statistical data on Natural Increase in Population.", https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__POP__NN__NNM/NNM020/table/tableViewLayout1/.
27. Euronews, AP, "Chinese tourist vandalizes cross at Lithuania's top tourist site," Euronews, December 30, 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/12/30/chinese-tourist-vandalises-cross-at-lithuania-s-top-tourist-site>.
28. The early 2022 poll cited ethnic Russians as more inclined to view China positively, along with male respondents, rural inhabitants, youth, and people holding managerial positions. See: ELTA, "Apklauso: Lietuvos gyventojai išrinko draugiškas ir nedraugiškas šalis," Made in Vilnius, March 27, 2022, <https://madeinvilnius.lt/naujienos/lietuvos-naujienos/apklauso-lietuvos-gyventojai-isrinko-draugiskasir-nedraugiskas-salis/>.
29. OECD, Basic statistics of Estonia, 2021, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/d3aedad3-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/d3aedad3-en>, OECD, Basic Statistics of Latvia, 2020, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b69ca35f-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/b69ca35f-en>, OECD, Basic statistics of Lithuania, 2021, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/177cfafe-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/177cfafe-en>.

30. World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), "Latvia trade balance, exports and imports by country and region 2021", <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/LVA/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>, World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), "Lithuania trade balance, exports and imports by country and region 2021", <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/LTU/Year/2021/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>, World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), "Estonia trade balance, exports and imports by country and region 2021", <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/EST/Year/2021/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, "Diagnostic of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania", 2022, <https://www.ebrd.com/publications/country-diagnostics/estonia-latvia-lithuania>.
31. Doing Business, "Rankings", <https://archive.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings>, Tax Foundation, "2023 International Tax Competitiveness Index", 2023, <https://taxfoundation.org/research/all/global/2023-international-tax-competitiveness-index/>, Digital Single Market - European Commission, "DESI - Digital Economy and Society Index.", <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi>.
32. European Union, "Country Profiles: Lithuania.", https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/lithuania_en, European Union, "Country Profiles: Latvia.", https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/latvia_en, European Union, "Country Profiles: Estonia.", https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/estonia_en
33. OECD iLibrary, "Regions and Cities at a Glance 2022: Executive summary", 2022, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/14108660-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/14108660-en>.
34. Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2022." <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>, European Commission, "Demographic Trends in EU Regions.", 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/eprs-briefing-633160-demographic-trends-eu-regions-final.pdf>.
35. European Centre for Minority Issues, "National Minorities and Regional Development: A Comparison of the Baltic States.", 2019, https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/pdf/WP_117_National_Minorities_and_Regional_Development._A_Comparison_of_the_Baltic_States.pdf.
36. Vaidotas Urbelis, "Defence Policies of the Baltic States: from the Concept of Neutrality towards NATO membership", NATO-EAPC Individual Fellowship Report 2001-2003, 2003, <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/01-03/vaidotas.pdf>.
37. LETA, "Shareholders' Conflict Might Delay Rail Baltica, Says CEO." Latvian Public Broadcasting (LSM.lv), February 13, 2018, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/shareholders-conflict-might-delay-rail-baltica-says-ceo.a267732/>.
38. "The Baltics Fear European Strategic Autonomy." The Economist, October 4, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/10/04/the-baltics-fear-european-strategic-autonomy>.

