

# Portugal – China Geoeconomic Partnership: A Shot in the Dark?

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## ABSTRACT

China has become a hotly debated political topic in Europe and has also attracted significant public attention. However, despite historical relations between Portugal and China and the significant economic investment China has made in Portugal in recent years, no study has been carried out concerning Portuguese public opinion on China. Following up on earlier studies in other European countries, this paper reports and examines the results of a survey held in Portugal, revealing that Portuguese public opinion is generally more suspicious and critical of China than Portuguese government policies suggest.

**Key words:** China; Portugal; United States; Europe; Russia; Public opinion

**JEL codes:** F2; F5; F6.

“A myth has been created that Portugal is some kind of a special friend of China in Europe” (Wise, 2020) – Portugal’s foreign minister Augusto Santos Silva on the idea that his country was developing a problematic reliance on Beijing.

Over the past two decades, China has attracted growing interest across Europe (e.g., Chow et al., 2019; Jacoby, 2014; Kao, 2020; Rühlig et al., 2020; Summers, 2018; Zuokui, 2017). The reasons are multiple and range from its strong economic growth to its widening presence in the international trade of manufactured products, including the extensive investment made in several of the member states of the European Union (EU) in strategic sectors of the economy (Fernandes, 2020a,

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2020b). This dynamic economic development has also led to many political, strategic, and military considerations on how the West should respond to challenges presented by China, while at the same time the worsening human rights situation in China has fuelled criticism and tensions between the EU and China. A growing rivalry between the United States of America (USA) and China, which has been escalating in recent years, has also sharply increased interest in China (Baldwin & Freeman, 2020; Goldstein, 2020).

Covid-19 started spreading from China to the entire world, putting China even more in the spotlight of world public opinion. With the emergence of the new coronavirus that triggered the pandemic, China's international visibility has become even greater. The first detection of the virus in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, with the first cases confirmed in Europe (Italy) at the end of January 2020 (Vicentini & Galanti, 2021), created negative feelings towards China. Moreover, China's impact management of the virus on its population and economy and preventing its spread across borders has always been surrounded by controversy. For many, especially in the West, it lacked transparency. China was heavily criticised for the time it took to convey the seriousness of the situation to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the international community (Silver & Cyranoski, 2020). Only in late February or March 2020 did it become clear that the effects of the new coronavirus would be extraordinarily severe, both for human health and for the economy of most countries in the world. In this context, China, its role in the world, and its relations with different states quickly became the centre of public debate, while at the same time, its image in many parts of the world took a negative turn (Pew Research Center, 2020; The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020).

Studies aiming to assess public opinion towards China have been on the rise in Europe (Kim et al., 2017) and other parts of the world (Gallup, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2020). Some have focused on single countries, such as Chow et al. (2019), through studies on the impact of the perceptions about China on British public opinion in relation to the social and political dynamics that led to Brexit. A further study by Hang et al. (2020) assesses the mass media impact on the North American public opinion of China, focusing their analysis on the New York Times. In Australia, a country where China's geographical proximity and economic and cultural presence also have a huge impact, the perception of public opinion was studied by Rogers et al. (2017), with a focus on Chinese investment in land linked to agricultural and mineral exploration and real estate. Zuokui (2017), from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, deserves mention as a Chinese researcher publishing on the topic.

In the European context, a comprehensive survey on public attitudes towards China was carried out in thirteen European States (Germany, Czechia, Slovakia, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, United Kingdom, Russia, Serbia and Sweden) between September and October 2020 (Turcsányi et al., 2020). This research interest in the public opinion of China is understandable: in democratic countries, the governments naturally need to consider public preferences if they wish to remain in power after the next elections. In addition, politicians also

socialise within the same epistemological context and thus are part of the public. Changes in public sentiment thus can signal a changing mood among politicians and signal future changes in governmental policies.

However, the Portuguese case was not dealt with in these studies, despite being one of the EU member states where the economic and commercial relationship with China and its investment in the Portuguese economy has caught the attention at an international level. For a small and open economy such as Portugal, China's economic and political relationship naturally has great relevance. Moreover, for historical reasons, Portugal has a particular connection to China through Macau, currently a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China – as is the case with Hong Kong, the former British colonial territory (Mendes, 2013).

As such, the first objective of the current study is to assess Portuguese public opinion towards China. The second objective is to compare it to European public opinion based on a recent study by Turcsányi et al. (2020), which collected valuable data from thirteen European countries (although not from Portugal). The third objective is to assess Portuguese public opinion vis-à-vis China more comprehensively; namely, the impact of the historical relationship with China via Macau, the Portuguese government's Golden Visa programme designed to attract foreign direct investment, and the perception of Chinese investment in companies related to critical infrastructure (Moteff, 2010; Moteff et al., 2003) – in particular, the energy sector and China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Portuguese energy companies like *Energias de Portugal* (EDP) and *Redes Energéticas Nacionais* (REN). Finally, the fourth objective is to assess how Chinese economic diplomacy vis-à-vis Portugal (Saner & Yiu, 2006) is perceived compared to China's relationship with other member states of the European Union.

## **I. Historical and political background of the Portugal-China relationship**

Along with the British, the Portuguese are the Europeans with the longest permanent tradition of contact with China. In the Portuguese case, this contact is older, dating back to the great maritime voyages in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that reached the Far East (China and Japan), which led to the establishment of the Portuguese in Macau (China). Comparatively, in the British case, the contact between the two nations is relatively newer – contact with Hong Kong dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century –, and was much more conflictual. Moreover, it took place in the context of the colonial expansion of the great European powers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the Portuguese presence in Macau was relatively superficial and tolerated by the Chinese emperors (in fact, it never questioned China's power and served Chinese commercial and anti-piracy interests), the British presence in Hong Kong was of a different kind. It was deeper, much more impactful, and imposed by the military and technological supremacy of the British in the Opium Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first Opium War of 1839 marked the beginning of what the Chinese call the 'century

of humiliation', which officially ended with the founding of the People's Republic of China by Mao Zedong in 1949 (Scott, 2008).

Furthermore, about thirty-five years ago, the process of negotiations over Macau for the devolution of the territory's sovereignty to China – that materialised in 1999 – was quite fast and free of diplomatic-political friction (Ramos, 2016). The same cannot be said of British negotiations with China regarding Hong Kong under the Margaret Thatcher government of the 1980s. This historical context allowed Portugal and China to construct a historical-political narrative of convenience. In turn, the Portuguese claim to be the "Europeans who know China best", as the Portuguese President, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, claimed on his visit to the country in 2018 (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 77).

However, this multi-secular interaction between the two nations via Macau does not signify either a particular familiarity or an absence of negative stereotypes (Matias, 2007). As for the Chinese, among other historical arguments such as the great sea voyages of Zheng He in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century (Federl, 2018), they also use Macau to highlight China's peaceful attitude towards the nations of the outside world, rooted in its long (imperial) past. Today, the connection that Macau enables with the former Portuguese-speaking colonial territories – e.g., Brazil and Angola – is the primary interest of China. However, there are other areas – usually omitted in the diplomatic discourse (República Portuguesa-Portal Diplomático, 2021) of both countries – that are not as cordial and free of tensions. Portugal only recognised the People's Republic of China in 1975, after the democratic revolution of 1974 that removed the regime of Oliveira Salazar and Marcello Caetano. Portugal's membership of NATO and its traditional political-military alliance with the British – and since World War II with the USA – are also factors that may cause friction in relations with China.

The recent dynamics of the Portugal-China relations have been influenced greatly by the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent Portuguese financial crisis in 2011-2015. Before the crises, Portugal was seen by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) as having a somewhat supportive political attitude towards China, but overall did not belong to the most supportive countries in the EU (Fox & Godement, 2009). That changed following the economic difficulties experienced and Portugal was found to be the most politically supportive of China within the EU (along with Spain, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta) (Godement et al., 2011). Some of the manifestations of Portugal's political approach was the lack of willingness to criticise China on human rights. Portugal also joined the Asian Investment and Infrastructural Bank (AIIB), signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (as one of very few Western European countries to do so), sending high-level delegations to the BRI summits in China, and initially opposed the EU attempt to introduce an investment screening mechanism (Godement & Vasselier, 2007). It is worth noting that Portugal is among the EU countries most dependent on China economically (Esteban & Otero-Iglesias, 2020).

There is a lack of research comparing Portuguese public opinion with other European countries on China, as already emphasised. However, research from

the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) has regularly addressed Chinese trade and investment relations with Portugal. Furthermore, the Portuguese researcher from the University of Aveiro, Carlos Rodrigues, has carried out an annual analysis reflecting the evolution of the relationship between the two countries since the middle of the previous decade. Here we would like to highlight the 2016 and 2017 reports, which address the intensification of Chinese investment in the Portuguese economy during a susceptible period, the Eurozone crisis and its aftermath: “Portugal and OBOR-One Belt One Road: Welcoming, but Lacking a Strategy” and “Chinese Investment in Portugal: Gaining Access to Cutting-Edge Knowledge and Extending Global Influence” (Rodrigues, 2016; Rodrigues, 2017). The two latest analyses for the ETNC reports are also relevant, as they reflect the recent economic and political trends in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, namely, the impact of the Chinese medical assistance to Portugal in early 2020 (sending masks and ventilators), the Portuguese sense of vulnerability due to its dependence on global supply chains and the desire to decrease the dependence on imports from a single country (China), and an increased willingness in Portugal to discuss relations with China in the context of the growing Sino-American rivalry (Rodrigues, 2020, 2021).

## II. Methodology

A cross-sectional and quantitative study, based on a public opinion survey, was developed to replicate the previous study of Turcsányi et al. (2020) in Portugal, compare the results, and assess specific and relevant (even unique) issues for the Portuguese case. The questionnaire was translated from English to Portuguese using the back-translation technique. The questionnaire was developed with SurveyMonkey and then released to the general population through a dedicated Facebook page on the Internet, using a convenience sample and then snowball sampling, with data being collected between March and April 2021. A sample was selected from the 1,689 cases collected composed of 1,416 Portuguese residents over 18 years of age, representing the Portuguese population concerning gender and age. The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the UTAD Ethics Committee on 1 March 2021 (no specific reference was assigned, the date acts as a reference ID). Each participant in the study was informed in advance about the objectives and the guarantee of anonymity and data confidentiality, only accessing the questionnaire itself after expressing their consent to accept the terms of participation.

In addition to socio-demographic questions – gender, age, education (basic; secondary; at university/college; higher education), and job status (inactive/unemployed, retired; active/employed, student, housewife) –, the protocol contained the questionnaire of (Turcsányi et al., 2020), which included questions divided into four topics: feelings towards China and other countries (9 questions); comparing the global powers (7 questions); foreign policy towards China (8 questions); and China & the Covid-19 pandemic (3 questions) (see items in

Tables 2 to 5). In addition, seven statements were added for the respondents to express their agreement using a 7-point Likert scale (1- 'I completely disagree' to 'I completely agree'): (1) The Portuguese government did a good job of granting Golden Visas to attract Chinese investment to the Portuguese economy; (2) Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (REN and EDP) was good for the Portuguese economy; (3) Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (REN and EDP) does not create any security problems for the country; (4) Chinese investment in the media sector does not affect the freedom of the press; (5) China attaches great economic and political importance to Portugal due to Macau; (6) Portuguese companies have the same investment opportunities in China as Chinese companies in Portugal; and (7) Portugal should continue to increase economic relations with China despite criticism from its European and American partners (see items in Table 6).

We will begin with a descriptive analysis using mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, frequencies, and percentages. Subsequently, Pearson correlations were performed between age and continuous and scalar variables, as well as a test for differences (*t*-test Student) in relation to gender. Also, comparisons were made between the distribution of frequencies by gender (chi-square test) concerning dichotomous variables. Significance was established at the level of  $p < 0.05$ . The analysis was carried out with the SPSS statistical analysis program, version 27.

### III. Results

The sample used in this study is representative of the Portuguese population according to gender and age, comprising 1,416 Portuguese residents, stratified in gender and age segments according to the Portuguese population over 18 years old. Table 1 provides the sample characteristics.

**Table 1**  
**Sample characteristics**

		<i>N</i>	% Total	Cumulative %
Total sample		1,416		
Gender	Female	672	47.5	47.5
	Male	744	52.5	100.0
Age		44.8±16.8; 18-87		
Education level	Basic education	181	12.8	12.8
	Secondary education	433	30.6	43.4
	College/University student	181	12.8	56.1
	Higher education	621	43.9	100.0
Occupation	Active	1,080	76.3	76.3
	Inactive	336	23.7	100.0

**Feelings towards China and other countries**

We have found that Portuguese people generally have negative feelings towards China, which have worsened in recent years (Table 2). The Portuguese people's perception regarding the trade and investment relations with China is mostly unfavourable in all aspects.

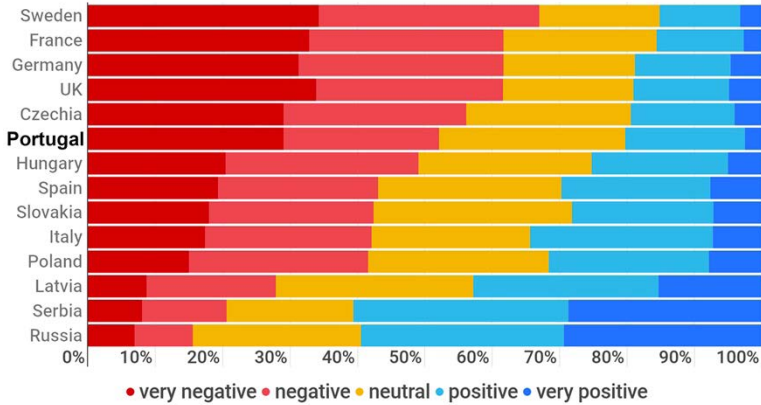
**Table 2**  
**Feelings towards China and other countries**

Item	Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How do you feel about the following countries/entities?			
EU	0 – Very negative ...	69.8	23.43
China	100 – Very positive	37.7	23.80
USA		51.6	24.44
Russia		34.5	22.94
Has your general view of China improved or worsened during the last three years?		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	Likert 1 – Worsened ... 7 – Improved	3.1	1.42
How do you feel about the following issues?		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Trade with China	0 – Very negative ...	44.0	24.88
Chinese investment	100 – Very positive	37.8	25.20
China's New Silk Road Initiative		45.4	26.75
China's military power		25.5	26.47
China's impact on the global environment		22.9	25.93
China's influence on democracy in other countries		25.0	24.06

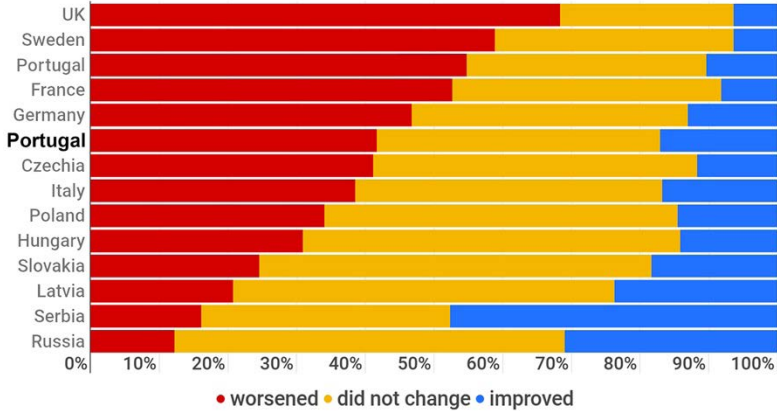
*M* – Mean; *SD* – Standard deviation

Considering the results reported in Turcsányi's study (2020), one can compare the Portuguese feelings towards China and other countries, as depicted in Figures 1 to 8 (the figures were adapted from the abovementioned report to include the Portuguese case). More than half of the Portuguese sample has a very negative or negative outlook towards China (Figure 1). This opinion has mostly worsened in the last three years (Figure 2). Concerning both topics, Portugal is one of the six European countries with the least favourable opinion towards China, positioning itself at the higher end of the middle group, with a slightly less negative perception of China than the Czechs.

**Figure 1**  
**Feeling towards China amongst Europeans<sup>1</sup>**



**Figure 2**  
**Change of feeling towards China amongst Europeans in the past three years (% of respondents)<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> Feelings towards China (and other countries have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as “very negative” (0-20), “negative” (21-45), “neutral” (46-54), “positive” (55-79), and “very positive” (80-100). Here only “positive” and “very positive” (merged) are visualised.

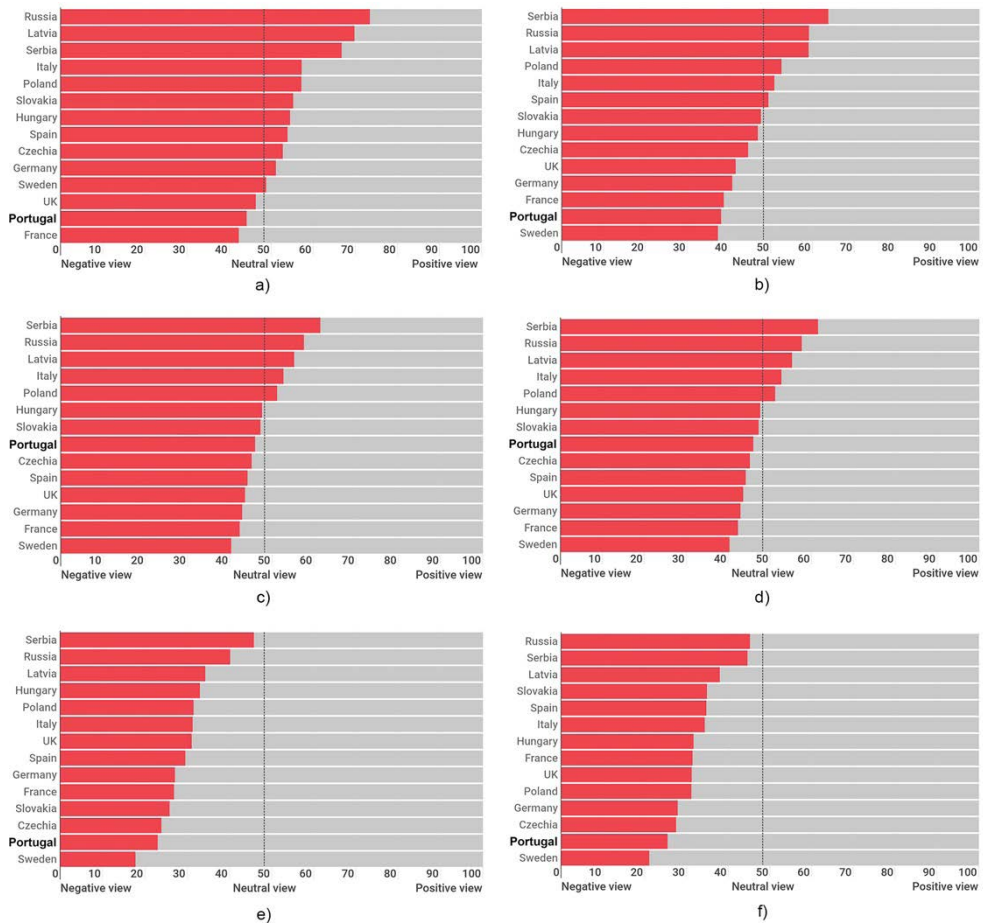
<sup>2</sup> Respondents were offered 7 options: much worse; worse; slightly worse; neither worse nor better; slightly better; better; much better. “Worsened” includes the options much worse; worse; slightly worse. “Did not change” includes the option neither worse nor better. “Improved” includes options slightly better; better; much better.



Almost half of our respondents perceive trade with China negatively (Figure 3-a), while about 38 percent has a negative perception of Chinese investment (Figure 3-b). In comparison, 45 percent has a positive and neutral perspective of China’s New Silk Road Initiative (Figure 3-c), 25 percent of Chinese military power (Figure 3-d), 23 percent of China’s impact on the global environment (Figure 3-e), and 25 percent of China’s effect on democracy in other countries (Figure 3-f).

**Figure 3**  
**Perception of Europeans towards China (mean values)<sup>3</sup>**

a) Trade with China; b) Chinese investment; c) New Silk Road Initiative; d) Chinese military power; e) China’s impact on the global environment; f) China’s effect on democracy in other countries.



<sup>3</sup> Perception of China-related issues of Figures 3 to 8 have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale; each chart shows the mean value for each country.

### Comparing the global powers

In descending order, the Portuguese people have the most trust in the EU, followed by the USA and Russia, with the level of trust in China being the lowest in comparison, and they consider China to be the least desirable country to establish cooperation in building the 5G network (Table 3). The Portuguese people consider China to be the country with the most economic power and the EU with the least; they consider the US the country with the most military power and the EU with the least. In addition, the Portuguese think that China is the country that least respects human rights, followed by Russia, the USA, and the EU.

**Table 3**  
**Comparing the global powers**

Item	Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How much do you trust the following countries/entities?			
China	Likert 1 –	5.4	1.24
EU	Strongly distrust ...	3.2	1.39
USA	7 – Strongly trust	4.3	1.46
Russia		3.0	1.52
Should your country cooperate with the following countries in building the 5G network?			
China	Likert 1 –	4.2	1.77
South Korea	Completely disagree ... 7	4.2	1.74
USA	– Completely agree	4.9	1.50
EU		5.8	1.30
Japan		5.1	1.52
How economically powerful do you consider the following entities?			
China	Likert 1 –	5.1	1.18
EU	Very weak ... 7 – Very strong	5.3	1.24
USA		6.0	1.13
Russia		6.2	1.14
How powerful do you consider the following entities in terms of military strength?			
China	Likert 1 –	4.5	1.36
EU	Very weak ... 7 – Very strong	6.0	1.09
USA		6.2	1.10
Russia		6.0	1.18

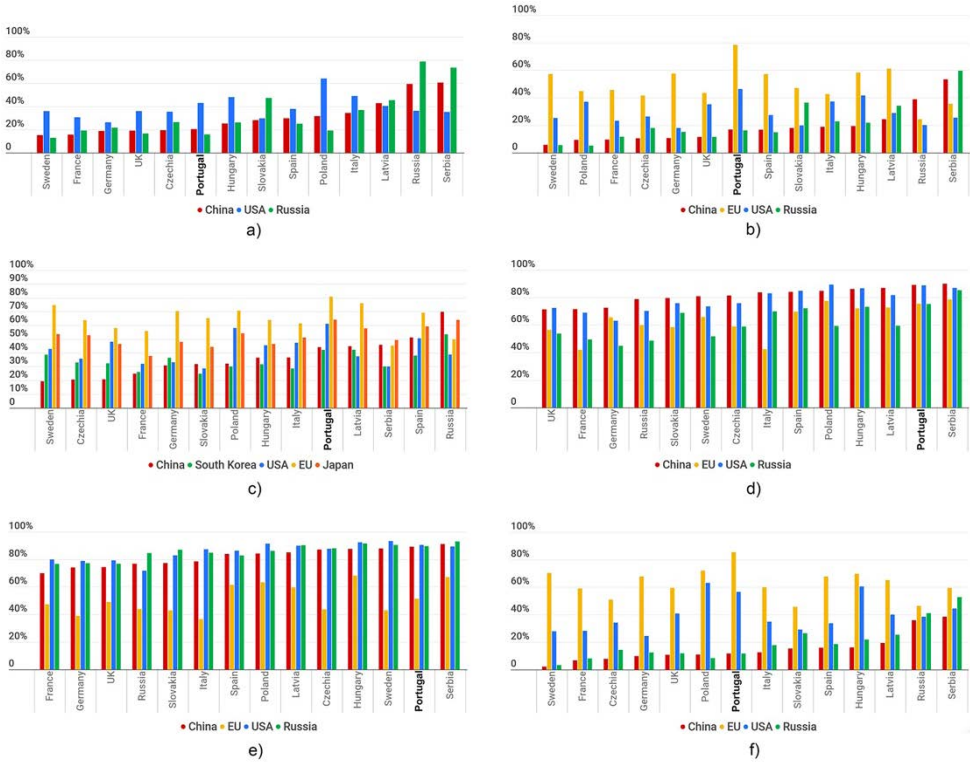
Item	Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How positively or negatively do you assess the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?			
China	Likert	5.7	1.20
EU	1 – Very negatively	3.4	1.46
USA	... 7 – Very positively	4.5	1.46
Russia		2.7	1.48

*M* – Mean; *SD* – Standard deviation

Figure 4-a to 4-f depicts the Portuguese people's perception of the previous topics in comparison with other European countries. In general terms, the Portuguese people have a positive inclination towards the EU. For example, 78 percent of Portuguese people trust the EU (Figure 4-b), 81 percent believe Portugal should cooperate with the EU in building the 5G network (Figure 4-c), and 86 percent positively assess the human rights situation in the EU (4-f) – values that score way above other European countries. In contrast, regarding all topics, the Portuguese people have a negative view of China, although this does not significantly stand out from other European countries.

**Figure 4**  
**Comparing the global powers**

a) Positive feeling towards major powers amongst Europeans (% of respondents)<sup>4</sup>; b) How much do you trust the following countries/entities? (% of respondents)<sup>5</sup>; c) Should your country cooperate with the following countries in building the 5G network? (% of respondents agreeing); d) How economically powerful do you consider the following entities? (% of respondents consider it to be strong)<sup>6</sup>; e) How powerful do you consider the following entities in terms of military power? (% of respondents consider it to be strong)<sup>14</sup>; f) How positively or negatively do you assess the human rights situation in the following countries/entities? (% of respondents assessing it positively)<sup>7</sup>.



<sup>4</sup> Feelings towards China (and other countries have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as “very negative” (0-20), “negative” (21-45), “neutral” (46-54), “positive” (55-79), and “very positive” (80-100). Here only “positive” and “very positive” (merged) are visualised.

<sup>5</sup> The respondents were asked “How much do you trust or distrust the following countries/entities?” and offered seven options: strongly distrust, distrust, slightly distrust, neither trust nor distrust, slightly trust, trust, strongly trust. Here the options slightly trust, trust, and strongly trust (merged) are visualised.

<sup>6</sup> The respondents were offered 7 options: very weak, weak, slightly weak, neither weak nor strong, slightly strong, strong, and very strong. Here, the options “slightly strong”, “strong”, and “very strong” are visualised (merged).

<sup>7</sup> The respondents were offered 7 options: very negatively, negatively, slightly negatively, neither positively nor negatively, slightly positively, positively, and very positively. Here, the options “slightly positively”, “positively”, and “very positively” are visualised (merged).

**Foreign policy towards China**

Regarding Portugal's political affairs with China, the Portuguese people have a more positive perception of the cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics, and counterterrorism and a more negative perception in relation to promoting trade and investment (Table 4; Figure 5-a/f). More than 40 percent of the sample believe Portugal should follow the EU's policy towards China (Figure 6), which is above the means obtained in Poland, Germany, Italy, France, and Spain.

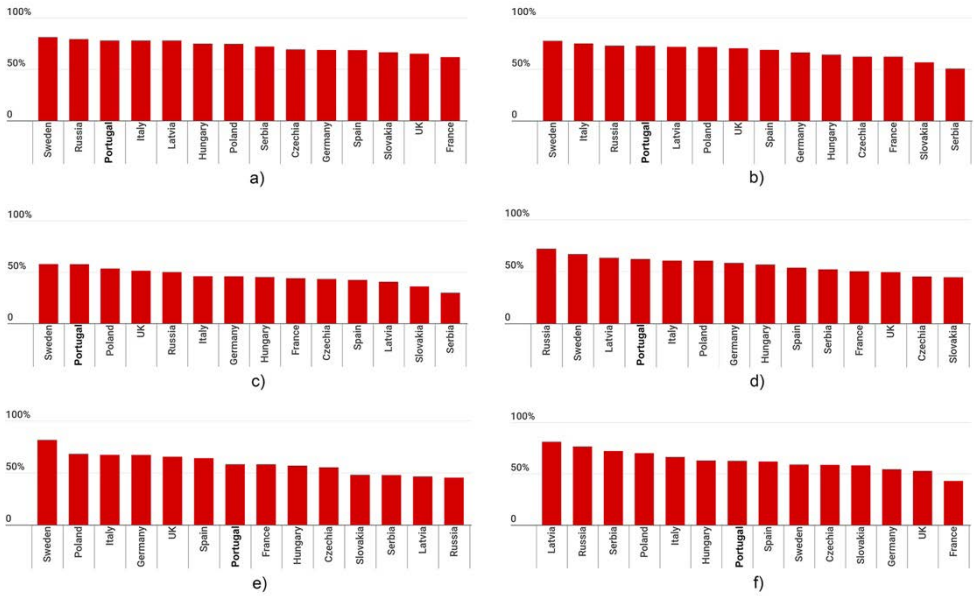
**Table 4**  
**Foreign policy towards China**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In your opinion, Portuguese foreign policy priorities in its relations with China should be:			
Cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics, and counterterrorism	Likert 1 – Completely disagree ...	5.7	1.41
Addressing cyber security	7 – Completely agree	5.5	1.34
Preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion		5.0	1.45
Addressing intellectual property rights		5.1	1.35
Advancing human rights and democratic reforms in China		5.2	1.51
Promotion of trade and investment		4.8	1.42
Should Portugal have an independent China-policy or contribute to a common EU policy?		<i>n</i>	%
Take a lead on EU policy formation		156	11.0
Follow the EU's policy		574	40.5
Independent policy		267	18.9
No opinion/Don't know		413	29.2

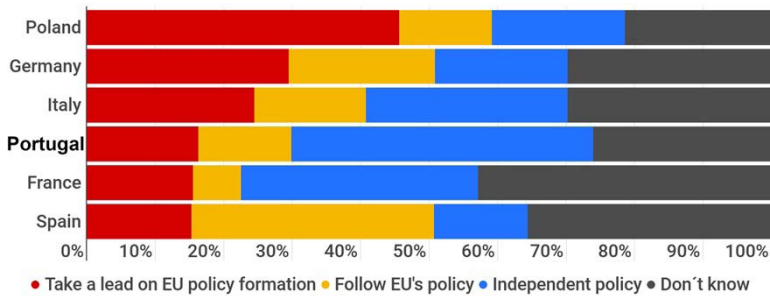
*M* – Mean; *SD* – Standard deviation

**Figure 5**  
**Foreign policy towards China (% of respondents who agree).**

a) Should cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics, and counterterrorism be your country's foreign policy priority concerning China?; b) Should addressing cybersecurity be your country's foreign policy priority concerning China?; c) Should preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion be your country's foreign policy priority concerning China?; d) Should addressing intellectual property rights be your country's foreign policy priority concerning China?; e) Should advancing human rights and democratic reforms in China be your country's foreign policy priority concerning China?; f) Should the promotion of trade and investment be your country's foreign policy priority concerning China?



**Figure 6**  
**Should your country have an independent China-policy or contribute to a common EU policy?**



**China & the Covid-19 pandemic**

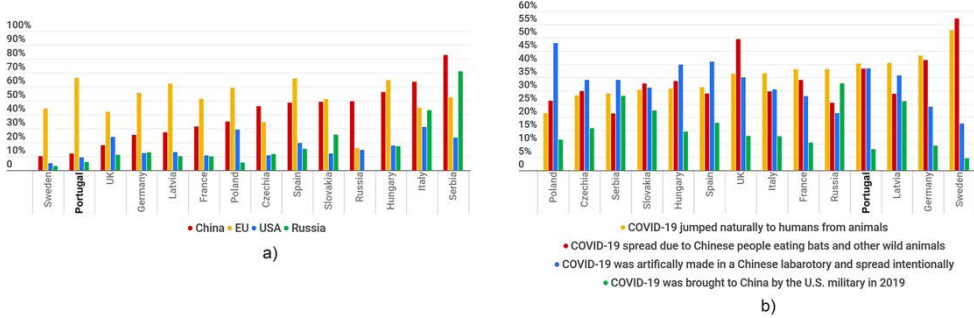
The Portuguese people believe that the EU provided people with substantial help during the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by China, but they considered that Russia and the US helped very little; they also consider that China has gained economically from the Covid-19 pandemic, but did not improve its international reputation (Table 5). The Portuguese people consider that the EU provided significant help during the Covid-19 pandemic, more than most European countries and in line with Spain, Hungary, and Latvia (Figure 7-a). They also consider that China, the USA, and Russia did not help at all, in contrast with most countries that expressed more favourable perceptions towards other powers; namely China (for instance, more than 50 percent of the Russian, Hungarian, Italian, and Serbian people think China helped significantly), and Russia (in this case, only Serbia recorded more than half the sample that considered Russia helped significantly).

**Table 5**  
**China & the Covid-19 pandemic**

Item	Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How much did the following countries/entities help your country during the Covid-19 pandemic?			
EU		68.5	24.90
Russia	0 – Didn't help at all ... 100 – Helped a lot	17.9	23.06
USA		23.2	25.86
China		25.2	26.63
How did China's global position change in light of the Covid-19 pandemic?			
China's international reputation improved as result of the Covid-19 pandemic.	Likert 1 – Completely disagree ...	2.5	1.51
China has gained economically due to the Covid-19 pandemic.	7 – Completely agree	5.0	1.68
Do you agree with the following statements about the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic?			
Covid-19 was passed naturally from animals to humans.	Likert 1 – Completely disagree ...	4.0	1.75
Covid-19 spread due to Chinese people eating bats and other wild animals.	7 – Completely agree	3.8	1.83
Covid-19 was artificially made in a Chinese laboratory and spread intentionally.		3.9	1.92
Covid-19 was brought to China by the U.S. military in 2019.		2.5	1.55

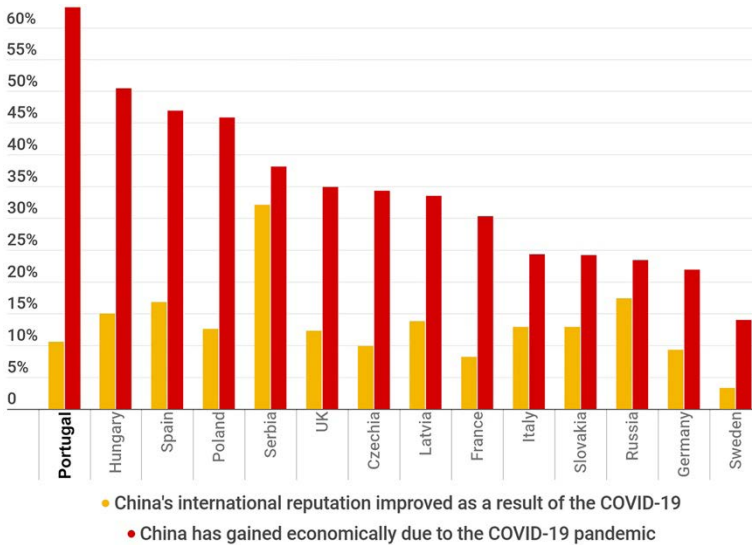
**Figure 7**  
**China & the Covid-19 pandemic.**

a) How much did the following countries/entities help your country during the Covid-19 pandemic? (% of respondents who think the country/entity helped); b) Do you agree with the following statements about the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic? (% of respondents who agree with the statements)<sup>8</sup>.



The Portuguese people mostly believe (63 percent) that China has experienced economical gains as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 8).

**Figure 8**  
**How did China’s global position change in light of the Covid-19 pandemic (% of respondents who agree with the statements)**



<sup>8</sup> Perceived Covid-19 help provided by the abovementioned entities has been measured on a 0 (didn't help) to 10 (helped significantly) scale. The responses were grouped as “didn't help at all” (0-2), “didn't help” (3-4), “neutral” (5), “helped” (6-7), and “helped significantly” (8-10). Here, only the options “helped” and “helped a lot” are visualised (merged).



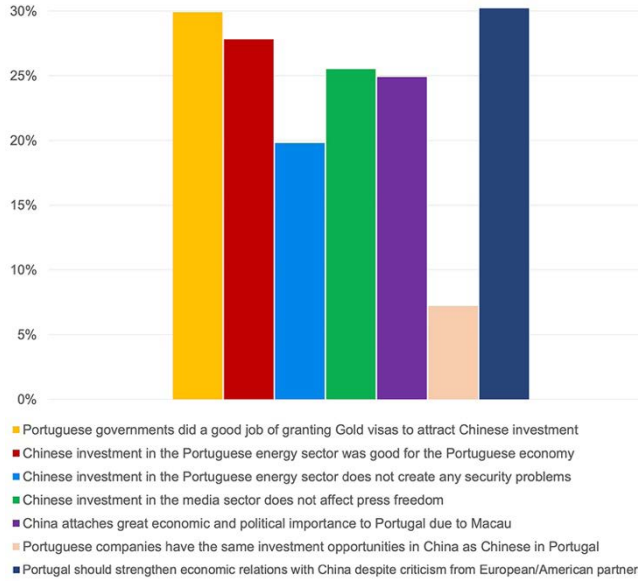
***Specific issues in the Portuguese case***

Despite the agreement levels being below 50 percent (Table 6), two issues seem to be more consensual among the Portuguese sample. On the one hand, although most respondents have an unfavourable opinion of China, 425 respondents (30.1 percent) favourably view the work of the Portuguese government in attracting Chinese investment to the Portuguese economy through the implementation of the Golden Visa system (Figure 9), while 421 (29.9 percent) neither agree nor disagree, and 563 (39.9 percent) disagree. Similarly, 429 (30.5 percent) respondents agree (above the mean) that Portugal should continue boosting economic relations with China, despite the criticism from its European and American partners, whereas 500 (35.5 percent) neither agree nor disagree, and 480 (34 percent) disagree.

**Table 6**  
**The Portuguese case**

Item	Scale	M	SD
How much do you agree with the following statements?			
Portuguese governments did a good job of granting Golden Visas to attract Chinese investment to the Portuguese economy	Likert 1 – Completely disagree	3.6	1.55
Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (e.g., REN and EDP) was good for the Portuguese economy	... 7 – Completely agree	3.6	1.54
Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (e.g., REN and EDP) does not create any security problems for the country		3.5	1.46
Chinese investment in the media sector does not affect the freedom of the press		3.7	1.54
China attaches great economic and political importance to Portugal due to Macau		3.6	1.42
Portuguese companies have the same investment opportunities in China as Chinese companies in Portugal		2.6	1.40
Portugal should continue to increase economic relations with China despite criticism from its European and American partners		3.8	1.48

**Figure 9**  
**Portuguese specific case: respondents who agree with the statements<sup>9</sup> (%).**



However, on the other hand, only 102 respondents (7.2 percent) agree (below the mean) that Portuguese companies have the same investment opportunities in China as Chinese companies in Portugal, 352 (25 percent) neither agree nor disagree, and 955 (67.8 percent) disagree.

As for the specific case of Macau, 352 respondents (25 percent) agree that the historical linkage between Portugal and China is relevant for the relations between the two countries – and is one of the reasons why China attaches economic and political importance to Portugal, a small European state; still, 559 respondents (39.7 percent) neither agree nor disagree, and 498 (35.3 percent) disagree.

There are also two distinct aspects of China's relationship with Portugal to be considered: the investment in the energy sector and the media. Portuguese public opinion perceives, and to some extent is satisfied, that its impact on the Portuguese economy is favourable, but also partly harbours feelings of distrust and fear. Only 394 respondents (27.9 percent) agree that Chinese investment in the major Portuguese energy companies REN and EDP was good for the Portuguese economy, while 441 (31.3 percent) neither agree nor disagree, and 574 (40.8 percent) disagree; 280 (19.9 percent) believe that this investment is exempt from

<sup>9</sup> The respondents were offered 7 options: completely disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, agree, and completely agree. Here, the options "slightly agree", "agree", and "completely agree" are visualised (merged).

security problems for the country, whereas 531 (37.7 percent) neither agree nor disagree, and 598 (42.4 percent) disagree. At the same time, 352 respondents (25.7 percent) think that Chinese investment in the media sector does not affect the freedom of the press; however, 500 respondents (35.5 percent) neither agree nor disagree, and 547 (38.9 percent) disagree. Nevertheless, the perception of this aspect is a little more positive than the one on the adverse effects of Chinese investment in the energy sector.

### ***Associations and differences between age, gender, and items***

Age is significantly correlated with several variables, either positively or negatively; however, the value of most of these correlations is below Pearson's correlation  $r = 0.100$ , and is very weak and unimportant. As such, only correlations above this value will be highlighted. Of the significant correlations presented in Table 7, the negative correlation between age and the variable "Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (REN and EDP) was good for the Portuguese economy" is noteworthy. Also, younger participants tend to consider that Chinese investment in Portugal is good for the Portuguese economy.

**Table 7**  
**Correlations between variables and age**

	Age
How do you feel about the following countries/entities? ...China	-.100**
To what extent do you consider the following countries/entities to be economically strong or weak? ...Russia	-.104**
To what extent do you consider the following countries/entities to be economically strong or weak? ...United States	-.103**
To what extent do you consider the following countries/entities to be strong or weak in terms of military power? ...Russia	-.105**
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: For the construction of the new generation of 5G mobile infrastructure, Portugal should cooperate with ...China	-.122**
China's international reputation improved as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.	.100**
China has gained economically due to the Covid-19 pandemic.	.101**
Portuguese governments did a good job of granting Golden Visas to attract Chinese investment to the Portuguese economy.	-.115**
Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (REN and EDP) was good for the Portuguese economy.	-.222**
Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (REN and EDP) does not create any security problems for the country.	-.121**

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

In Table 8, we detail the items in relation to which there are statistically significant differences between men and women. Those items whose significance

is at the level of  $p < 0.001$  stand out. Of these, it is worth noting the differences whose absolute values of  $t$  are higher. Thus, there are statistically significant differences between men and women regarding some items in which women score higher than men: “To what extent do you consider the following countries/entities important? ...Russia”, “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: For the construction of the new generation of 5G mobile infrastructure, Portugal should cooperate with China”, “To what extent do you consider the following countries to be economically strong or weak? ...Russia”. Still considering the items where differences between men and women are significant, men score higher in the variable “How do you feel about China’s military power”.

Differences in gender distributions concerning dichotomous variables using chi-square were also analysed. Differences were found concerning: “Should Portugal follow its own strategy towards China or contribute to an EU strategy? “[ $X^2(3) = 30.670$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\Phi = 0.135$ ] (more women selected the ‘no opinion’ option than men; more men than women chose the ‘other response’ options).

**Table 8**  
**Differences between means concerning gender**

		<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>d</b>	<b>M</b>
What should be the priorities of Portuguese foreign policy towards China? ...Promotion of trade and investment	...China	Male	4.98	1.408	3.061	0.002	0.149
		Female	4.77	1.373			
How do you feel about the following countries/entities?	...China	Male	37.30	23.943	-2.354	0.019	-0.115
		Female	40.05	23.910			
	...USA	Male	53.26	24.881	2.662	0.008	0.130
		Female	50.05	24.498			
To what extent do you consider the following countries to be economically strong or weak?	...Russia	Male	5.19	1.281	-4.341	< 0.001	0.213
		Female	5.44	1.153			
To what extent do you consider the following countries to be strong or weak in terms of military power?	...USA	Male	6.34	1.074	2.641	0.008	0.129
		Female	6.20	1.062			
	...EU	Male	6.06	1.161	-2.635	0.008	-0.129
		Female	6.21	1.117			
	...Russia	Male	4.67	1.492	-2.344	0.019	-0.114
		Female	4.84	1.455			
How attractive is the culture of the following countries/entities?	...USA	Male	5.03	1.472	-3.009	0.003	-0.149
		Female	5.25	1.453			
	...China	Male	4.78	1.605	-2.788	0.005	-0.136
		Female	4.99	1.580			
	...Russia	Male	3.27	1.458	-3.5	< 0.001	-0.171
		Female	3.52	1.457			
How do you consider the human rights situation in the following countries/entities?	...USA	Male	4.55	1.422	2.742	0.006	0.134
		Female	4.36	1.498			

		<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>d</b>	<b>M</b>
How do you assess foreign policy in the following countries/entities?	...Russia	Male	3.58	1.389	-3.257	0.001	-0.159
		Female	3.80	1.364			
	...China	Male	3.48	1.544	-2.369	0.018	-0.116
		Female	3.65	1.516			
To what extent do you consider the following countries/entities important for the development of the Portuguese economy?	...Russia	Male	4.09	1.463	-5.902	< 0.001	-0.288
		Female	4.49	1.326			
	...China	Male	5.01	1.472	-3.899	< 0.001	-0.190
		Female	5.28	1.332			
How much do you distrust or trust the following countries/entities?	...Russia	Male	3.13	1.385	-3.002	0.003	-0.147
		Female	3.33	1.370			
	...China	Male	2.92	1.533	-2.379	0.017	-0.116
		Female	3.09	1.489			
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: For the construction of the new generation of 5G mobile infrastructure, Portugal should cooperate with:	...China	Male	3.94	1.802	-5.867	< 0.001	-0.286
		Female	4.44	1.680			
	...South Korea	Male	4.39	1.745	3.939	< 0.001	0.193
		Female	4.06	1.705			
	...Japan	Male	5.19	1.527	2.425	0.015	0.118
		Female	5.01	1.469			
To what extent did the following countries/entities help Portugal during the Covid-19 pandemic?	...EU	Male	67.77	25.499	-2.304	0.021	-0.113
		Female	70.52	23.416			
Covid-19 was brought to China by the U.S. military in 2019.		Male	2.40	1.519	-2.88	0.004	-0.141
		Female	2.62	1.576			
Covid-19 was artificially made in a Chinese laboratory and spread intentionally.		Male	3.77	1.929	-2.136	0.033	-0.104
		Female	3.98	1.934			
China has gained economically due to the Covid-19 pandemic.		Male	5.03	1.686	2.927	0.003	0.143
		Female	4.79	1.737			
Should Portugal follow its own strategy towards China or contribute to an EU strategy?		Male	2.69	1.054	-4.119	< 0.001	-0.201
		Female	2.91	1.081			
Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (REN and EDP) was good for the Portuguese economy.		Male	3.52	1.604	-4.071	< 0.001	-0.199
		Female	3.83	1.442			
Chinese investment in the Portuguese energy sector (REN and EDP) does not create any security problems for the country.		Male	3.41	1.536	-2.695	0.007	-0.133
		Female	3.60	1.321			
Chinese investment in the media sector does not affect the freedom of the press.		Male	3.59	1.629	-2.579	0.01	-0.127
		Female	3.78	1.403			
China attaches great economic and political importance to Portugal due to Macau.		Male	3.57	1.490	-3.489	< 0.001	-0.172
		Female	3.81	1.288			

*M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = t-test; *p* = p-value; *d* = Cohen's size effect

#### **IV. Discussion and concluding remarks**

The results obtained in our study are, on the one hand, in line with expectations concerning several aspects. For example, there is a more favourable view of the European Union and (to a lesser degree) the USA than China and a deterioration regarding China's image. However, on the other hand, the results are also surprising in suggesting that Portuguese public opinion has one of the most negative perceptions of China compared to other European countries, although there is no political-diplomatic conflict with China in Portugal, as with some other European countries, which could explain negative and worsening feelings towards China in many countries across Europe (Jerdén et al., 2021). Thus, the perception of Portuguese public opinion contrasts with the attitude of successive Portuguese governments in recent decades, which has been one of the friendliest towards China among Western countries.

In addition to the comparison with other European countries, which was the first objective of this research, the second objective was to assess, in a more complex way, the Portuguese public opinion vis-à-vis China through the posing of the specific questions concerning the Portuguese situation. The first finding to highlight here is the public perception that economic-business relations with China are fundamentally asymmetric and largely unfavourable for Portuguese companies that do not have the same investment opportunities in China as Chinese companies in Portugal. Furthermore, about a quarter of the respondents perceived Macau's specific case, which has historically linked Portugal to China since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as being at the origin of the increased importance of Portugal to China. However, there does not seem to be differentiated Chinese economic diplomacy (Saner & Yiu, 2006) towards Portugal, compared to the other EU member states.

As for the Portuguese government's work to attract Chinese investment through the Golden Visa policy, the favourable view of public opinion on this measure is a minority. However, it should be noted that the policy's particular impact was at the time of the Portuguese public financial crisis from 2011 to 2015, when there was a huge need for public financing and a more favourable international attitude to China, including in the European Union. Even so, in early 2021, the fact that around 30 percent of the respondents believe that Portugal should continue to increase trade and investment relations with China – despite tensions with the EU and the USA – is quite relevant.

This study also intended to assess the perception of FDI of Chinese state companies in Portuguese energy companies (e.g., EDP and REN) and critical infrastructures (Moteff et al., 2003). The public perceives these as predominantly negative; however, it is important to mention mixed and even contradictory feelings. A part of the Portuguese public (27.9 percent) perceives the investment with satisfaction due to the favourable impact it had on public finances – both were companies where the Portuguese state had important shareholder positions, which were sold at a time of crisis. Yet, among the majority, mistrust or fear prevails, probably because of the notion of the importance of such companies

for the normal functioning of the economy and, even more, concerning delicate security issues. A similar division of Portuguese public opinion takes place vis-à-vis the sensitive issue of the freedom of the press, where only a minority (about a quarter of the respondents) think that Chinese investment in the media sector does not raise any freedom of the press issues.

As this study has shown, younger people tend to think that Chinese investment in Portugal is good for the Portuguese economy, contrasting with the pessimism and reservations of the older generations regarding Chinese investment. This discrepancy can be interpreted as a result of the absence of negative experiences and previous memories about China, which the older Portuguese population has, due to the Cold War and the ideological conflict between liberal democracy and communism. Concerning gender, the relevant differences in some answers perhaps can be explained by the propensity to follow China and its relations with Portugal in different ways (for example, the variation in perception about China's military power may be linked to a greater interest in the subject by males.) Furthermore, this also leads us to recognise some of the limitations of this study. One should note that the European and Portuguese studies were carried out at very close, but not precisely coincident, temporal moments: the first in September and October 2020 and the second in March and April 2021. In addition, future research should include replicating the study on a sample that considers differences in Portuguese regions and a more in-depth examination of the differences in demographic respondents' characteristics to identify trends and analyse the stability of the Portuguese public opinion towards China.

Finally, when Portugal-China relations are gauged by public opinion – in contrast to the government's approach – the findings of this research lead us to conclude that Portugal is not a “special friend of China” in the European Union. On the contrary, and somewhat surprisingly, it even emerges in this context as one of the European countries where China has a more negative image.

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