

# Baltic Public Opinion on China in 2022 – Neutral but Tilting towards Negative

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[https://doi.org/10.25143/China-in-the-Baltic-States\\_2022\\_ISBN\\_9789934618154\\_89-93](https://doi.org/10.25143/China-in-the-Baltic-States_2022_ISBN_9789934618154_89-93)

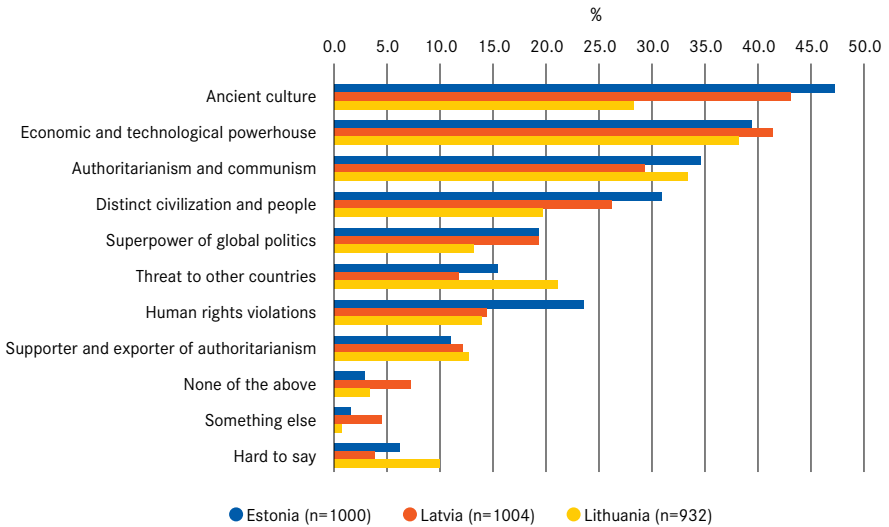
Public opinion on China has previously been studied in the Baltic states. However, the body of such studies remains scarce and inconsistent. Although limited in scope, this is a tri-nationally representative sociological study, where public opinion on China is explored simultaneously in all three countries and within a single methodological framework. Although this is only a one-off survey and consists of only two questions, the results are telling.

The sociological study was conducted as part of an omnibus survey in summer 2022: from 17 to 28 June in Lithuania (conducted by Baltic Surveys), from 8 to 19 July in Latvia (conducted by SKDS), and from 4 to 16 August in Estonia (conducted by Turu-uuringute). Face-to-face interviews were conducted in both Latvia and Lithuania. In Estonia, half of the respondents were reached face-to-face, and another half in computer-assisted web interviews. Altogether, 2936 respondents were surveyed, among them 1004 in Latvia, 932 in Lithuania, and 1000 in Estonia.

The first question explored the associations of the respondents with China (Figure 1; the question “What is your association with the People’s Republic of China?”). The predefined options were the following: an ancient culture, a distinct civilization and people, an economic and technological powerhouse, a superpower of global politics, authoritarianism and communism, a supporter and exporter of authoritarianism, human rights violations, threat to other countries, something else, and none of the above. Each respondent was invited to choose up to three options from those just mentioned.

With the provided answer options, the authors of this paper strived to deliver a balanced set of positive, neutral and negative associations based on the presumably most widespread assumptions of China in the Baltics.

The choice of options is further justified by the fact that only a small proportion of the answers were “something else” and “none of the above” – slightly above one-tenth in Latvia, and less than half the number in the other two states.



**Figure 1.** Answers to the question “What is your association with the People’s Republic of China?”

The top three associations in all three countries, albeit in slightly different order, were an ancient culture, an economic and technological powerhouse, and authoritarianism and communism. The top four answers were identical in Latvia and Estonia. Ancient culture came first in Latvia and Estonia, but third in Lithuania. The economic and technological powerhouse came first in Lithuania and second in both Latvia and Estonia. Authoritarianism and communism came second in Lithuania and third again in both Latvia and Estonia. Distinct civilization and people was fourth most popular in both Latvia and Estonia, and fifth in Lithuania.

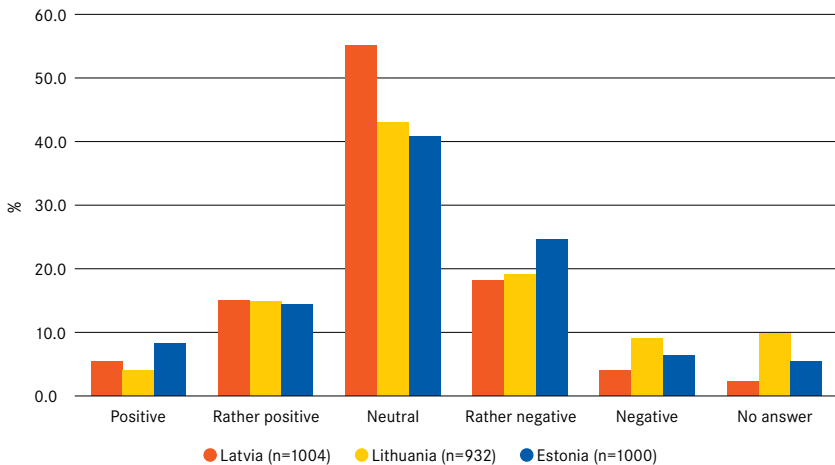
Negative associations were more common in Lithuania. China as a threat was perceived most often there, as the fourth most common answer was “threat to other countries”. This option came as the last option, except for the “other” options, in Latvia and second to the end in Estonia. Human

rights violations ranked at the lower end in all three states, fifth from above in Estonia and sixth in Latvia and Lithuania. The least popular answer of all was China as a supporter and exporter of authoritarianism. It was the least common in Lithuania and Estonia and second to last in Latvia.

The second question explored the perception of China in the range of positive, rather positive, neutral, rather negative, and negative (Figure 2; the question “What is your opinion of the People’s Republic of China?”).

The answers to this question provide a rather coherent picture across all three states. In each of the three Baltic states, more than 40% of the respondents had a neutral view of China. The highest rate of neutral perception was in Latvia, 55.1% of the answers.

The most balanced negative and positive views towards China were in Latvia. There, 20.4% of the respondents expressed a positive view, but 22.1% gave a negative assessment (here and henceforth these are the cumulative values of positive and rather positive, and negative and rather negative). The disbalance of the positive and negative views was more pronounced in Lithuania and Estonia. 18.9% of Lithuanian respondents expressed a positive view, but 28.3% provided a negative assessment of China. 22.7% of Estonian respondents had a positive view of China, but 31.1% had a negative view.



**Figure 2.** Answers to the question “What is your opinion of the People’s Republic of China?”

Upon a closer look, as is usually the case, there are differences among opinions depending on the background of the respondents. As this is a one-off study, care must be taken in generalising the results. More restraint is needed when looking at the variations of the results depending on the background of respondents. The smaller the number of respondents in a category, the less representative the data are.

A category that clearly stands out among others is the ethnolinguistic background of respondents in Latvia and Estonia (the ethnic composition of Lithuania's society is more uniform and, consequently, the relatively small number of non-Lithuanians in the sociological study makes generalisations too stretched). This is no surprise as opinions between Latvian and Estonian speakers, on the one hand, and Russian speakers from both countries, on the other, tend to differ significantly on domestic and foreign policy issues. As a result of divergent historical memories and narratives in Russia's information space, the most contentious issues are related to Russia and interpretations of history. And the subject of China is another example of these divergences. This is no surprise given the strategic partnership between China and Russia and the more positive image of China in the Russian media, a popular source of Baltic Russian speakers.

In this sociological survey, Latvian and Estonian speakers expressed more negative views toward China, compared to Russian speakers. In the second question, only 13% of Latvian speakers expressed positive views toward China, but 25.1% expressed negative views. Unlike that, 32.6% of Latvian Russian-speaking respondents had a positive view and 17.4% expressed a negative view. The difference was even more pronounced in Estonia. There, only 8.7% of Estonian speaking respondents had a positive view of China, while 38.9% expressed a negative view. 53.6% of the Russian speaking Estonia's respondents had a positive view and only 10.8% expressed a negative view of China.

Staying on the same point, Latvian and Estonian speakers more often associated China with communism and authoritarianism, export of authoritarianism, human rights abuses, threats to other countries, compared to Russian speaking respondents. The difference was again more pronounced in Estonia.

The perceptions sketched by the sociological survey generally align with the state of affairs in Baltic-China relations. China is not among the

major external powers in the region, and thus is not a major concern to ordinary citizens. China's accomplishments and failures are generally known. Awareness of the failures is on the rise. They were further illuminated by the recent spat between Lithuania and China over Taiwan, as well as China's continued support of the authoritarian neighbours of the Baltic states - Russia and Belarus.