



Public opinion survey and assessment of perceptions on China in Hungarian Society

András Bartók

A Research Report by the

Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies

July 2022

Budapest

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On issues related to China and Hungary-China relations, the Hungarian public seems divided, with about half of the population having positive perceptions towards China's interactions with Hungary, a slightly smaller cohort having negative views and a small fraction (4-10%) having no strong opinion on the matter.
- This roughly resembles internal political division between supporters of the governing party and supporters of alternative political forces.
- China's perceived assistance and role in Hungary's pandemic management seems to have had a significant positive impact on public perceptions.
- China's strategic partnership with Russia is the only issue in which views favourable to Chinese standpoints does not represent a majority opinion within Hungarian society.
- Party preferences greatly influence Hungarian disposition towards China and China's relationship with Hungary. Roughly two-thirds of the supporters of the governing FIDESZ coalition have overall positive perceptions in China related issues, while a similar ratio of non-FIDESZ supporters have negative perceptions on the same issues.

Introduction

As part of the research project, we sought to gauge the perceptions of the domestic public on issues related to the People's Republic of China. The survey covered diplomatic relations, cooperation on pandemic response, attitudes compared with other major power actors on COVID assistance, and perceptions on the Sino-Russian partnership.

It was considered appropriate to assess how recent public policy issues relating to China (e.g. Fudan University), disease management, and world political events (war against Ukraine and the Russia-China partnership) may have affected society's perception of China. As the circumstances surrounding COVID have fluctuated and long-term pandemic management has become part of everyday discourse, the Hungarian media has begun to engage in in-depth investigative reporting on related issues. These include the procurement of medical equipment from China and the procurement of vaccines, on which several controversies have surfaced, warranting a close examination of possible changes and differences in the public and political elites' disposition towards these issues. While vaccine diplomacy may have initially had a positive impact, debates about efficacy and the international recognition of certain specific vaccine types in vaccine passports were thought to have had a possible impact on the discourse on China.

The widely publicised debates about the possible surveillance of prominent public figures using IT and other means of public discourse have also heightened the threat of IT security and malicious surveillance in everyday public discourse. This trend may have an impact on the general sensitivity to the security of IT services and critical infrastructures, as well as on the general perception of 'security' in the virtual sphere, as threats range from malware to disinformation. Accordingly, we were also interested in the relevant perceptions in the information space.

The social discourse around the planned opening of a campus of Fudan University in Budapest has received considerable media attention, so we have included a question on this in the survey.

Our preliminary assumption was that there would be a likely emergence of a politically polarised division of opinion on each issue, and that there would be a narrower "hard core" of proponents who would take very positive or negative positions on each issue. We assumed that the majority of survey respondents have some sort of mature opinion on various aspects of China's engagement in Hungary, but far fewer are aware of how this relates to other actors (EU, US, etc.). To follow up on this, we used the COVID outbreak assistance questionnaire to ask about perceptions of the EU, US, China and Russia.

Methodology

After consideration, compiled survey questions were given over to the polling firm Medián, to conduct and record the survey on a larger sample of participants, via phone conversation.

Due to a competitive market of pricing services, our project budgetary limitations only allowed us to have 8 questions/topics while keeping a significant n for sample size.

The survey was conducted with n=1014 person sample size. The geographic scope of participants covered all of Hungary, with various types of communities represented (capital, cities, rural communities). Age range was n=125 18-29 yrs., n=149 30-39 yrs., n=149 40-49 yrs., n=149 50-59 yrs., n=441 60+ yrs.

Although we had planned on receiving the survey results sooner, Medián was only able to conduct the survey questionnaire in the weeks after the 2022 general election. APR 03.

The survey questions were the following:

- 1. In your opinion, the degree of Chinese political, i.e. state, diplomatic influence in Hungary is: Very high, Fairly high, Fairly low, Very low, Don't know*
- 2. And you think this Chinese influence in Hungary is: Very positive, Rather positive, Rather unfavourable, Very unfavourable, Don't know*
- 3. How large do you think Chinese presence is in the Hungarian IT industry? Very large, Fairly large, Fairly small, Very small, Don't know*

4. *If the scale of this Chinese presence in the Hungarian IT industry were to increase, do you think this would be: Very positive, Rather favourable, Rather unfavourable, Very unfavourable, Don't know*
5. *There are efforts to increase the Chinese presence in Hungarian academia and higher education. Do you consider this growing Chinese presence in Hungary is: Very positive, Rather favourable, Rather unfavourable, Very unfavourable, Don't know*
6. *As part of the survey, we asked respondents what they thought about the assistance provided by some countries/international actors to Hungary during the COVID pandemic. These were the EU, US, China and Russia. Respondents were asked to consider if each actor has: Not helped at all, Wasn't rather helpful, Neither helpful nor unhelpful, Rather helpful, Very helpful, Do not know*
7. *What do you think China's role has been in the management of the pandemic in Hungary? Very positive, Rather positive, Rather negative, Very negative, Don't know*
8. *In recent years, China and Russia have strengthened their cooperation and strategic partnership. In your opinion, this cooperation in terms of world politics might be considered: Very positive, Rather positive, Rather unfavourable, Very negative, Don't know*

Limitations

Our goal was to focus the survey on public sentiment regarding specific issues related to China. As such, with the limited number of questions, the survey could not necessarily contextualise the broader geopolitical perceptions of responders, although the question related to different international actors' help during the COVID pandemic does present some form of comparative dispositions towards international entities.

The survey format did not necessarily allow for a deeper understanding of individual and broad social perceptions on China. As such, the current findings should be taken only as a basis for showing the context of public opinion on certain issues. The further phases of the research

project, such as “Elite Perceptions” can give a more detailed and nuanced overview on how China’s image in Hungary is formulated.

Main Findings

Overall, the proportion of respondents who were unable or unwilling to answer each question was lower than expected. In general, this was below 10%, the lowest for the question on higher education (4.95%), but 10% higher for the two questions on the IT sector (14.5% and 11%). This was a positive surprise and has shown that issues in public discourse that have connection to China have garnered broad attention as well as fostered pro-con preferences regarding the issues at hand.

In most cases, responders were divided along positive or negative dispositions towards issues regarding China in a way that roughly resembles political polarisation ratios in Hungary. Positive views on Chinese presence and influence regarding key public discourse issues were within the 50-60% range (Q1, Q2, Q4, Q7). Negative views for the same questions were in the 30-40% range. As such, it seems that positive disposition towards China, regarding various social and policy issues represents a notable majority within the Hungarian public.

The questions regarding the help of international actors (Q6) shows the EU as mostly viewed as a helpful entity (43% answered Rather helpful or Very helpful) with China coming in as a close second (40%).

The only question, where positive disposition towards China’s conduct did not represent a majority was Q8, regarding the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, with only 41% regarding it as Very positive or Rather positive.

For personal background, survey participants were – amongst other parameters – asked about their political party preferences during the 2022 April general election. If we factor in party sympathy and look at the composition of answers to contentious issues regarding China (Q2, Q5, Q7, Q8) the polarisation of Hungarian public opinion along party lines is vivid. In all of these questions, a stark majority (60-75%) of voters of the governing FIDESZ coalition will have positive perceptions on China related issues, while an almost identical amount of non-FIDESZ voters will have negative views on the subject. Such polarisation was also highlighted by some

other recent surveys, that garnered media attention, such as an almost simultaneously recorded polling that has shown significant correlation between positive opinion on Putin and party preference for Fidesz.¹

As such, we can summarise that general political polarisation of Hungarian public discourse is visible in the public's image of China when it comes to issues frequently discussed. However, this is not necessarily a factor of dispositions towards China, rather the reflection of national political divide echoed in perceptions on foreign affairs.

¹ <https://444.hu/2022/05/10/jobban-kedvelik-a-fideszesek-putyint-mint-a-nyugati-vezeteket>

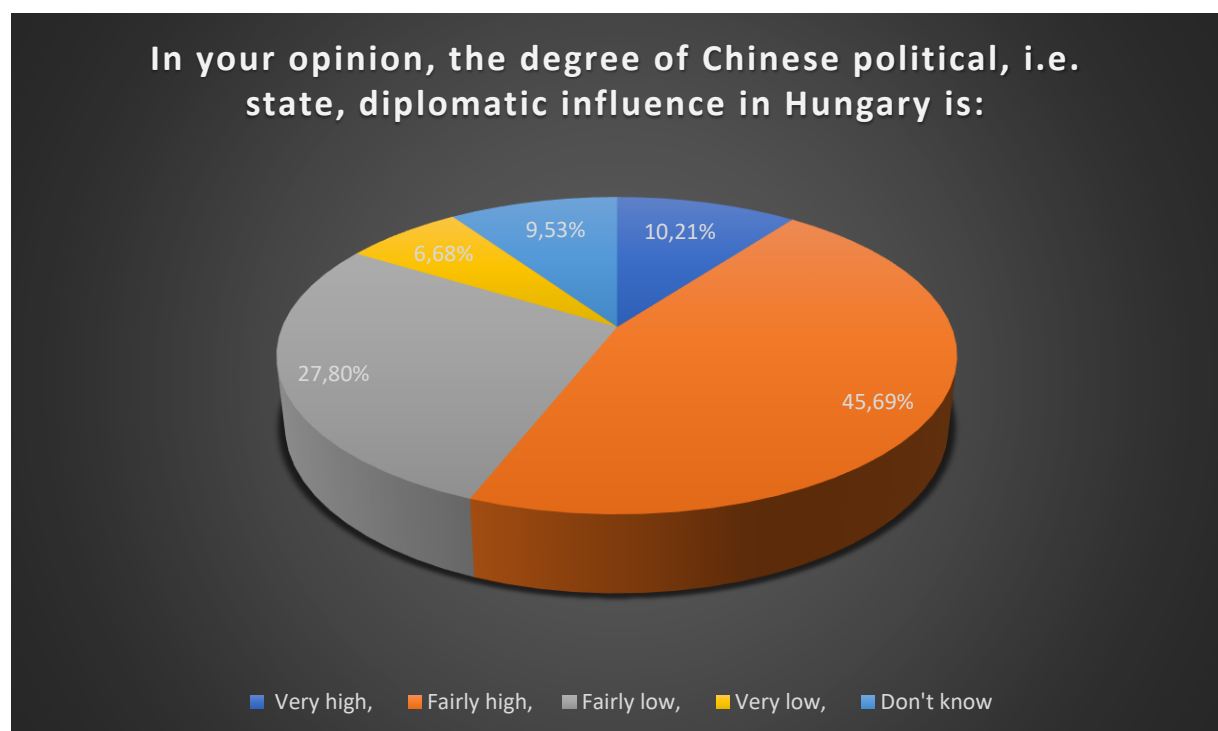
Survey Questions and Results

Q1:

With our first research question, we hoped to map out how strongly the general public perceives Chinese state related influence in Hungary. Notably, a significant majority of survey participants thought that Chinese state related influence is “Very High” or “High”. This in itself does not indicate any subjective value perception regarding Chinese influence, only the perceived degree.

1. **Q1: In your opinion, the degree of Chinese political, i.e. state, diplomatic influence in Hungary is:**

1. *Very high,*
2. *Fairly high,*
3. *Fairly low,*
4. *Very low,*
5. *Don't know*



<i>In your opinion, the degree of Chinese political, i.e. state, diplomatic influence in Hungary is:</i>	
<i>Very high,</i>	10,21%
<i>Fairly high,</i>	45,69%
<i>Fairly low,</i>	27,80%
<i>Very low,</i>	6,68%
<i>Don't know</i>	9,53%

2. Q2:

With our second question, we tried to outline how survey participants perceived Chinese influence in Hungary. As seen below, about half of the answers regarded it as either very positive, or rather positive, with a smaller cohort (40%) perceiving it as negative. In a subsequent part of the report we will see how significantly party sympathy factored in Q2 answers, showing a heavily polarised public on this particular question.

Q2: And you think this Chinese influence in Hungary is:

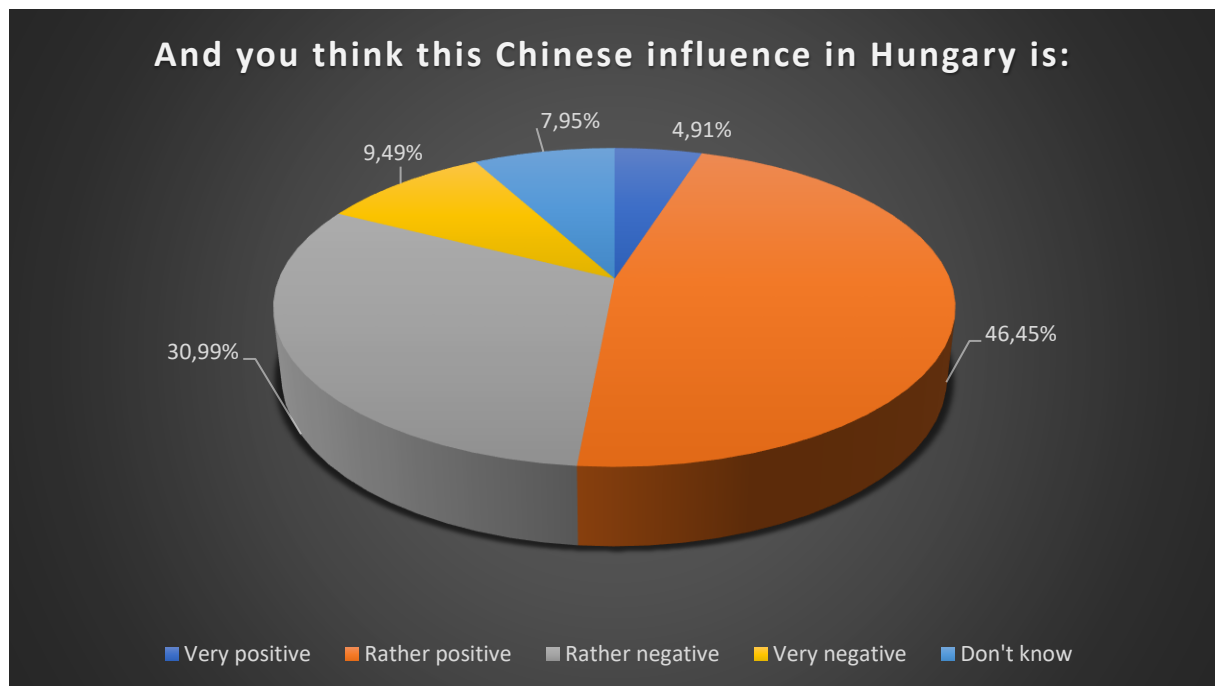
Very positive

Rather positive

Rather negative

Very negative

Don't know



<i>And you think this Chinese influence in Hungary is:</i>	
<i>Very positive</i>	4,91%
<i>Rather positive</i>	46,45%
<i>Rather negative</i>	30,99%
<i>Very negative</i>	9,49%
<i>Don't know</i>	7,95%

3. Q3:

We hoped we could outline public perceptions on Chinese presence in the IT sector of Hungary. Prior assessments posited that although IT is an integral part of daily activities, public awareness of nuanced issues – such as Chinese presence in the sector – would be scarcer than regarding other topics. The ratio of participants not having a clearly formed opinion on the question were highest in the case of Q3 (14%). Almost a three quarters majority thinks it is very or fairly high, showing that in general, the segment of the public being aware of issues regards Chinese presence in the sector as quite significant.

Q3: How large do you think the Chinese presence is in the Hungarian IT industry?

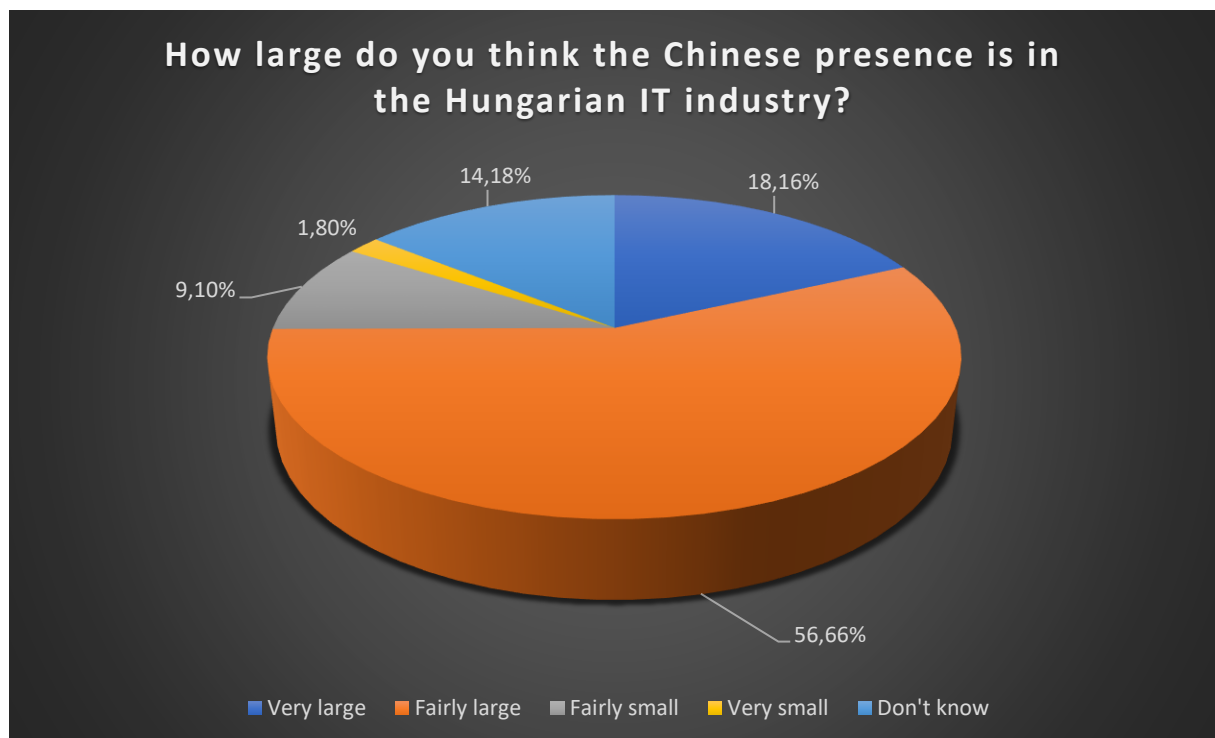
Very large

Fairly large

Fairly small

Very small

Don't know



How large do you think the Chinese presence is in the Hungarian IT industry?	
Very large	18,16%
Fairly large	56,66%
Fairly small	9,10%
Very small	1,80%
Don't know	14,18%

4. Q4:

We tried to understand how survey participants would relate to the possibility of growing Chinese presence in the IT sector. This might be a fairly rough but more or less indicative outline on general user trust in Chinese providers of IT infrastructure. A roughly 50% majority has positive views on it, a little bit less than 40% negative perceptions and about 10% does not have strong opinion on the subject.

Q4: If the scale of this Chinese presence in the Hungarian IT industry were to increase, do you think this would be:

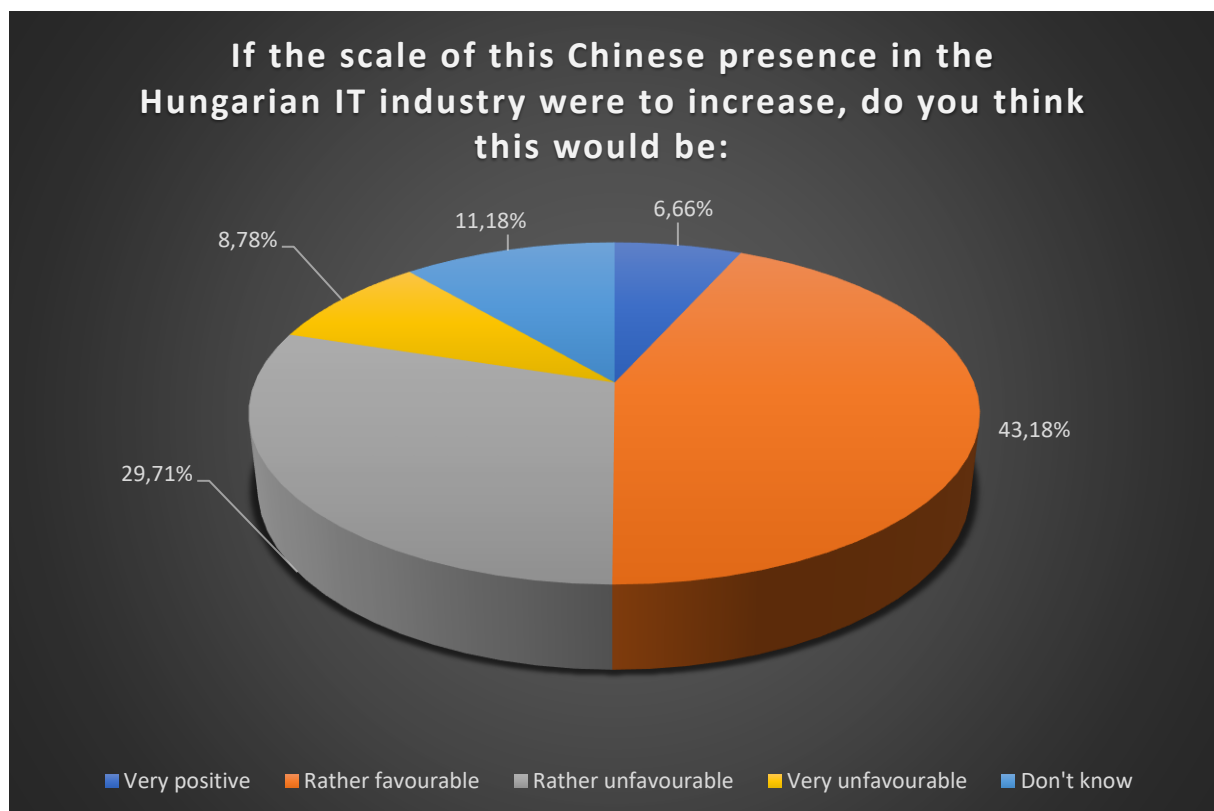
Very positive

Rather favourable

Rather unfavourable

Very unfavourable

Don't know



<i>If the scale of this Chinese presence in the Hungarian IT industry were to increase, do you think this would be:</i>	
<i>Very positive</i>	6,66%
<i>Rather favourable</i>	43,18%
<i>Rather unfavourable</i>	29,71%
<i>Very unfavourable</i>	8,78%
<i>Don't know</i>	11,18%

5. Q5:

In Q5, we have touched upon a subject that has garnered significant national media attention, more so in independent media outlets than state-related affiliations. Plans to have the Chinese Fudan University build and open up a campus site in Budapest have generated strong local opposition in Budapest and in political opposition leaning intellectual and media circles. A low ratio of respondents had no particular standpoint on the issue (4,94%), which was somewhat surprising, given that academia is not usually a topic with vast public engagement. A significant majority indicated a positive disposition towards a possible increase of Chinese presence in the sector, showing an alignment with government related opinion circles. About 42% had negative views on the issue.

Q5: There are efforts to increase the Chinese presence in Hungarian academia and higher education. Do you consider this growing Chinese presence in Hungary:

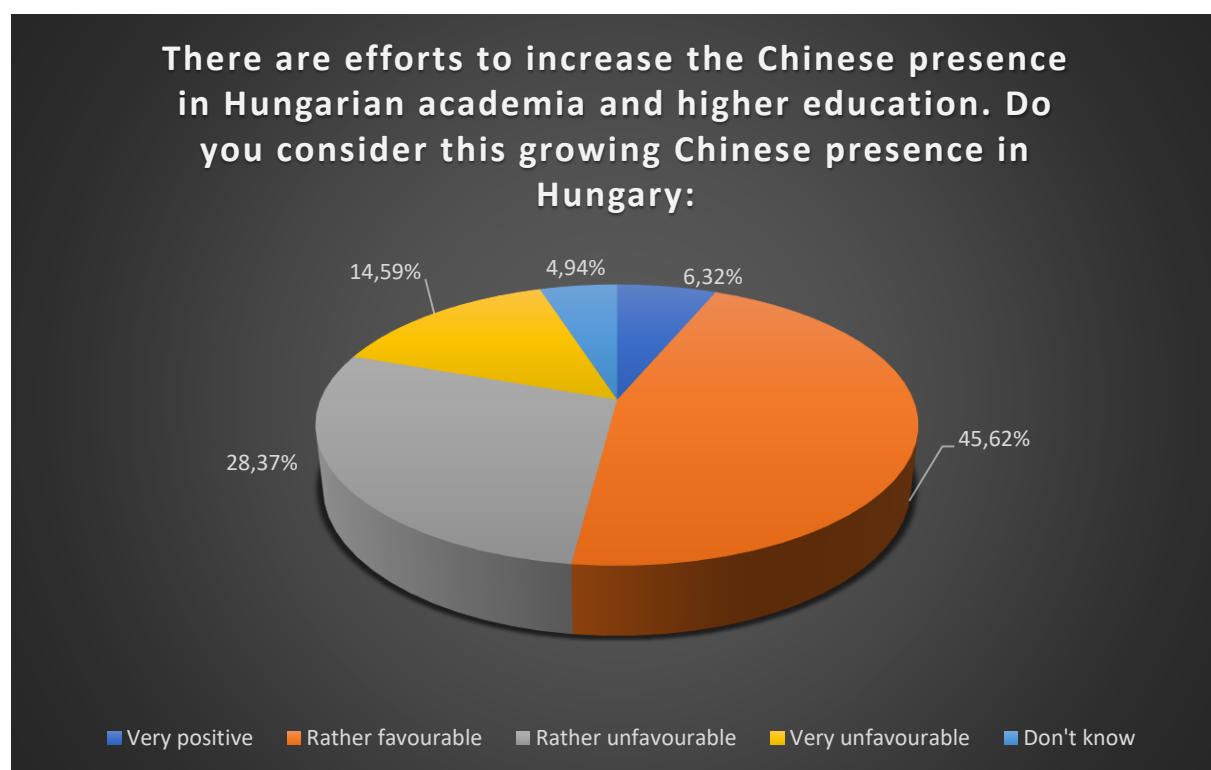
Very positive

Rather favourable

Rather unfavourable

Very unfavourable

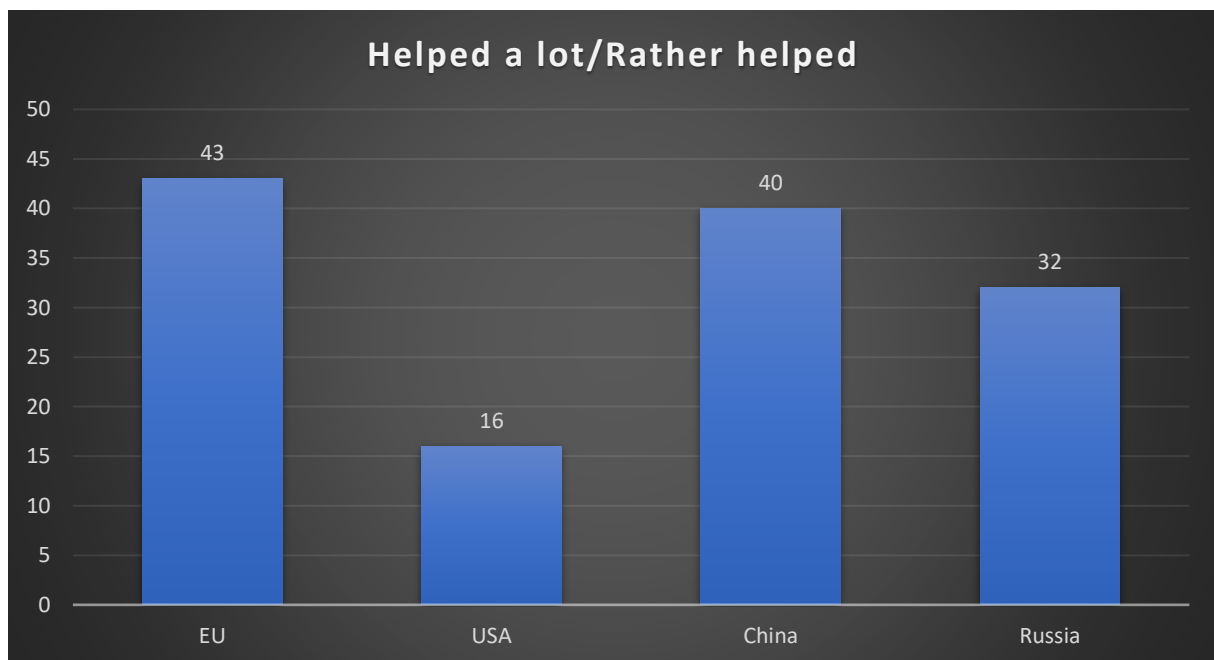
Don't know



<i>There are efforts to increase the Chinese presence in Hungarian academia and higher education. Do you consider this growing Chinese presence in Hungary:</i>	
<i>Very positive</i>	6,32%
<i>Rather favourable</i>	45,62%
<i>Rather unfavourable</i>	28,37%
<i>Very unfavourable</i>	14,59%
<i>Don't know</i>	4,94%

6. Q6 Question Group:

In question group Q6, we asked survey participants to rate the support to Hungary during the COVID pandemic provided by significant international actors, such as the EU, the US, China and Russia. As Hungary was amongst the few countries with a significantly diverse supply of vaccines, this provided a comparative way of gauging public perceptions on outside support. As shown by the results, the EU ranked highest amongst perceptions of support (43%), China a close second (40%), Russia third (32%) and the US last (16%). This indicates that while the EU was regarded as a highly important source of support during COVID, China was viewed as an almost equally important partner.



How much did the European Union help Hungary during the Covid pandemic?	
Didn't help at all	12,55%
Rather didn't help	13,02%
Neither	26,33%
Rather helped	21,03%
Helped a lot	21,66%
Don't know	4,95%
How much did the US help Hungary during the Covid pandemic?	
Didn't help at all	25,16%

Rather didn't help	19,88%
Neither	27,96%
Rather helped	9,39%
Helped a lot	6,55%
Don't know	10,47%
How much did China help Hungary during the Covid pandemic?	
Didn't help at all	11,11%
Rather didn't help	14,21%
Neither	26,95%
Rather helped	24,63%
Helped a lot	15,07%
Don't know	7,56%
How much did Russia help Hungary during the Covid pandemic?	
Didn't help at all	12,88%
Rather didn't help	14,85%
Neither	27,18%
Rather helped	22,95%
Helped a lot	13,26%
Don't know	8,41%

7. Q7:

Following up on the previous question group, we were also curious about how survey participants viewed Chinese assistance specifically. The reasoning behind this was to see how reliable did the general public view Chinese assistance. Amongst vaccines used in Hungary, Chinese manufactured ones have generated some public and professional debate about their efficacy as well as some initial uncertainties about how valid they would prove to be for international travel. If there would be significant negative difference between the China related portion of Q6 and the current question, that would show an awareness of Chinese “help” but a mistrust in the vaccines for example. The results for Q7 however show quite the

opposite, with a higher percentage of answers regarding Chinese assistance as positive rather than results in the previous section showed. Overall, 60% of participants had positive perceptions on China's role in national pandemic management.

Q7: What do you think China's role has been in the management of the pandemic in Hungary?

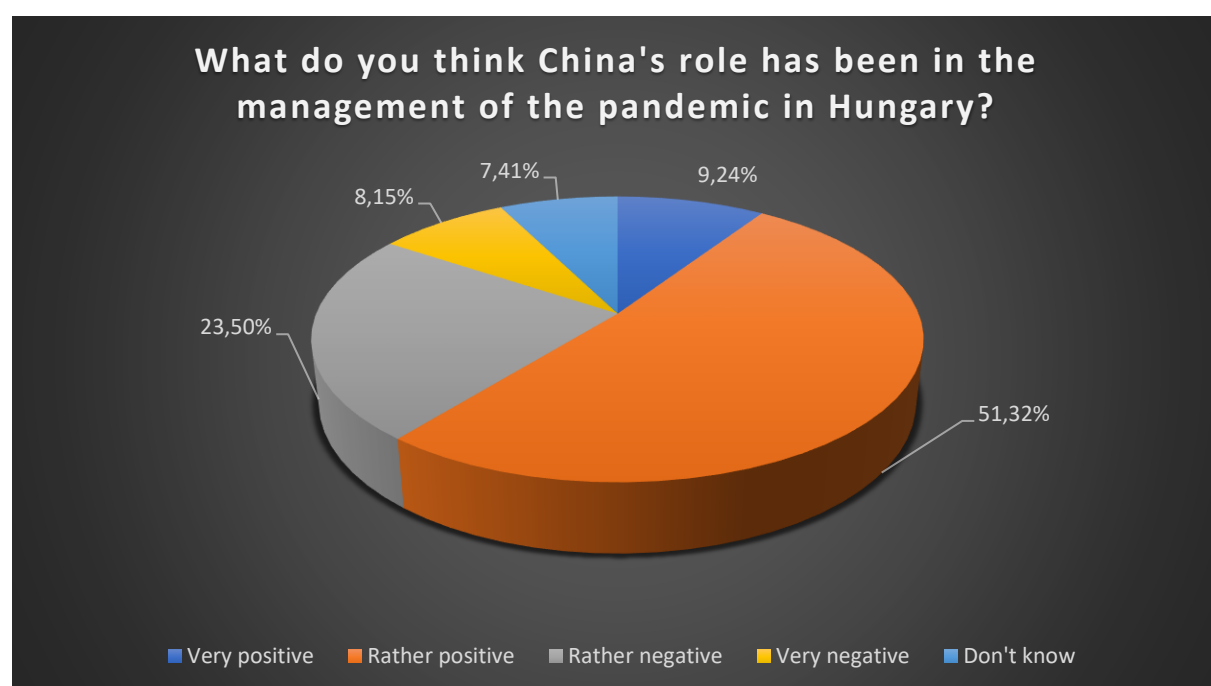
Very positive

Rather positive

Rather negative

Very negative

Don't know



What do you think China's role has been in the management of the pandemic in Hungary?	
Very positive	9,24%
Rather positive	51,32%

<i>Rather negative</i>	23,50%
<i>Very negative</i>	8,15%
<i>Don't know</i>	7,41%

8. Q8:

Lastly, we inserted a previously unplanned topic, the relationship between China and Russia, perceptions on the strategic partnership of the two countries. The Ukraine war has obviously dominated public discussion and while China is only a marginal factor in the issue, it seemed relevant to try and understand public perceptions on the relationship between Beijing and Moscow. It proved interesting as this was the only question in which a majority did not form a positive perception regarding China's role. Only about 40% thought the Russia-China strategic partnership was a positive phenomenon, while around 49% regarded it as negative.

Q8: In recent years, China and Russia have strengthened their cooperation and strategic partnership. In your opinion, this cooperation in terms of world politics might be considered:

Very positive

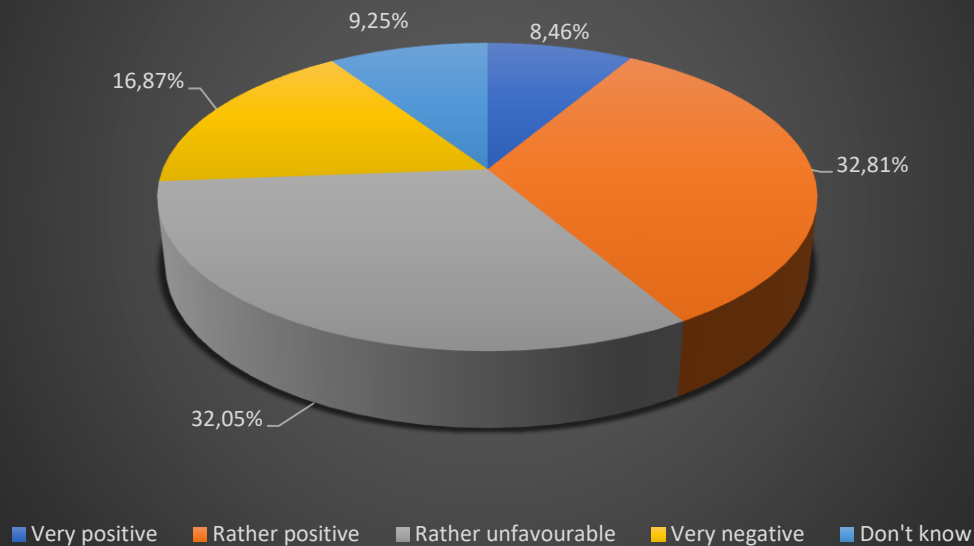
Rather positive

Rather unfavourable

Very negative

Don't know

In recent years, China and Russia have strengthened their cooperation and strategic partnership. In your opinion, this cooperation in terms of world politics might be considered:



<i>In recent years, China and Russia have strengthened their cooperation and strategic partnership. In your opinion, this cooperation in terms of world politics might be considered:</i>	
<i>Very positive</i>	8,46%
<i>Rather positive</i>	32,81%
<i>Rather unfavourable</i>	32,05%
<i>Very negative</i>	16,87%
<i>Don't know</i>	9,25%

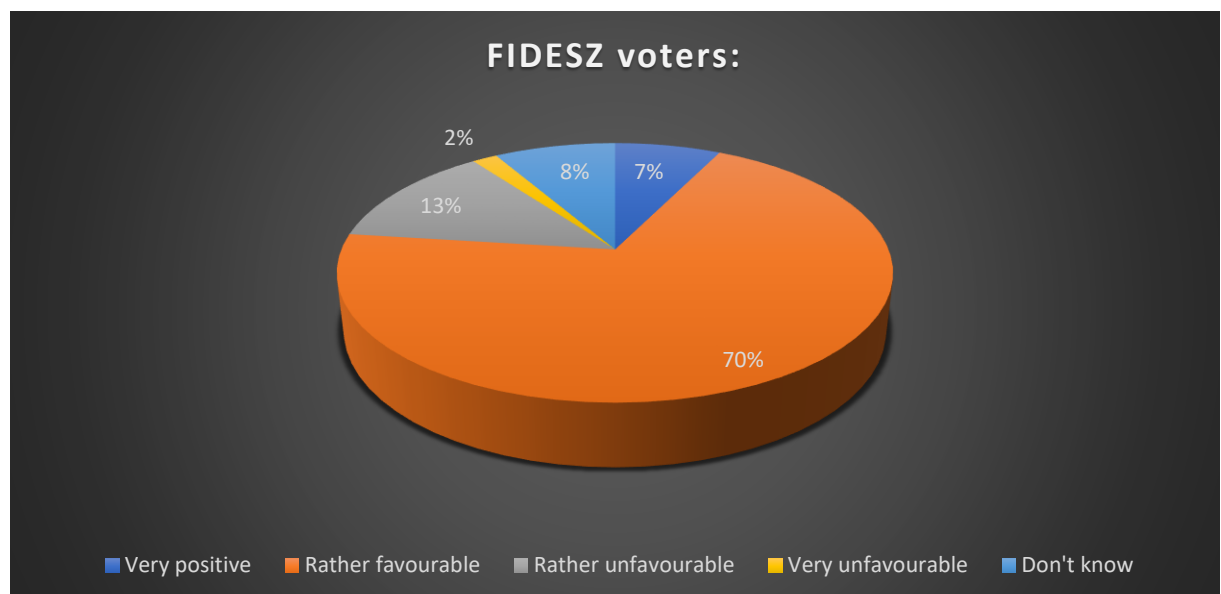
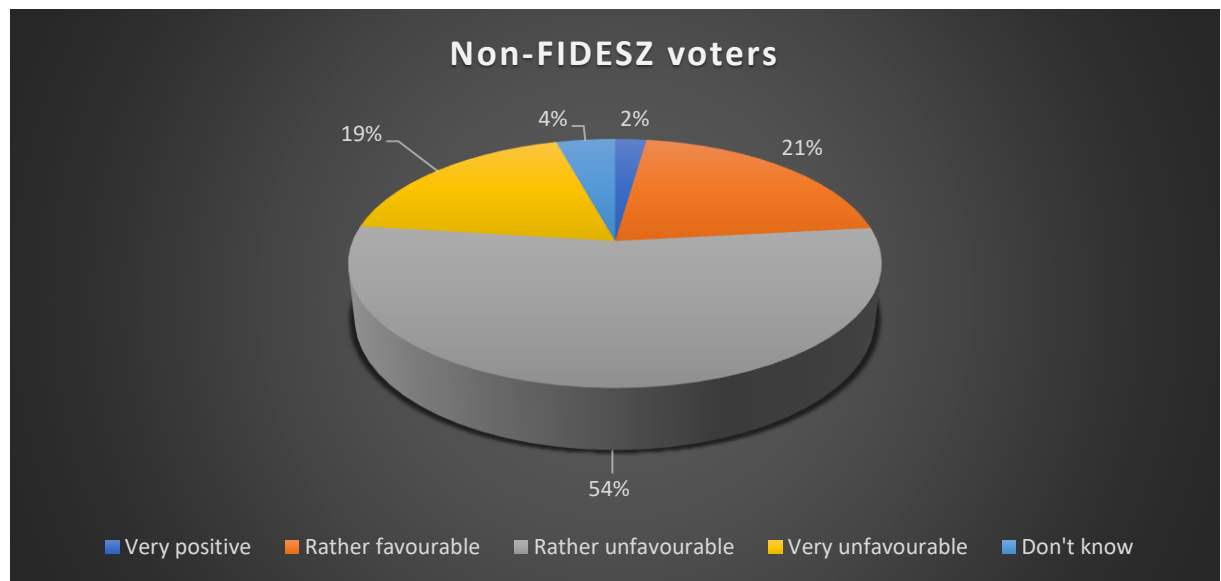
Survey answer result factoring in political party sympathies of the Hungarian General Election, 2022. 04. 03.

While the ratios of positive-negative perceptions on most of the issues of the survey roughly show a resembling division of the Hungarian public along the lines of party preferences, as part of the research we also looked at how answers to specific questions correlated with the preferred choice of individuals during the 2022 general election. We grouped survey subjects into voters/sympathisers of the governing FIDESZ-KDNP coalition and non-FIDESZ voters (Unified Opposition, Our Homeland Movement, Hungarian Two Tailed Dog Party).

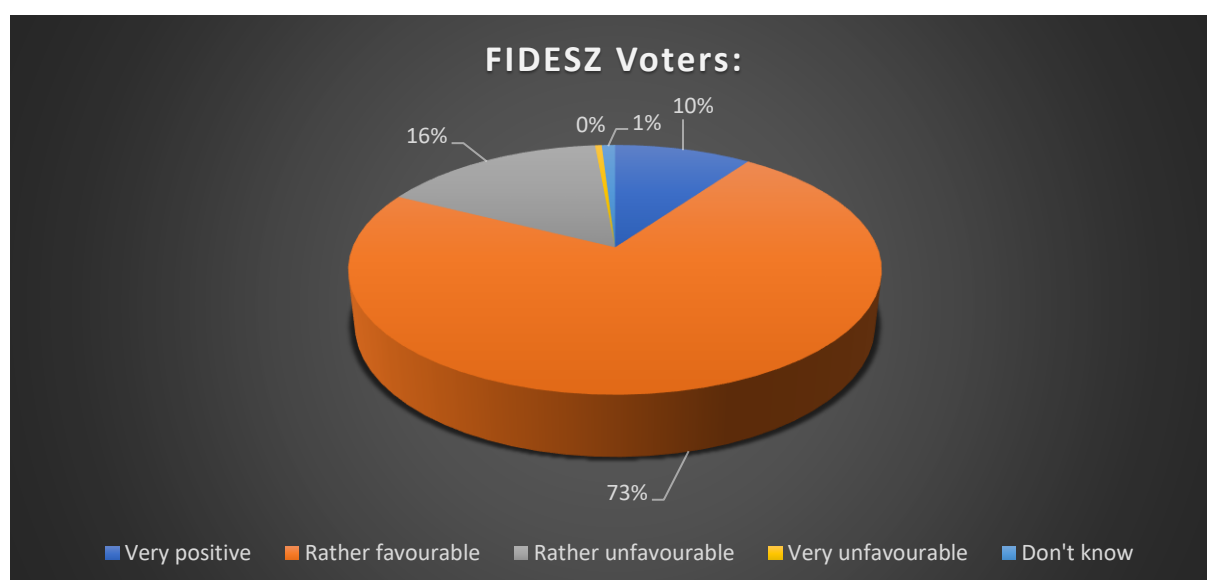
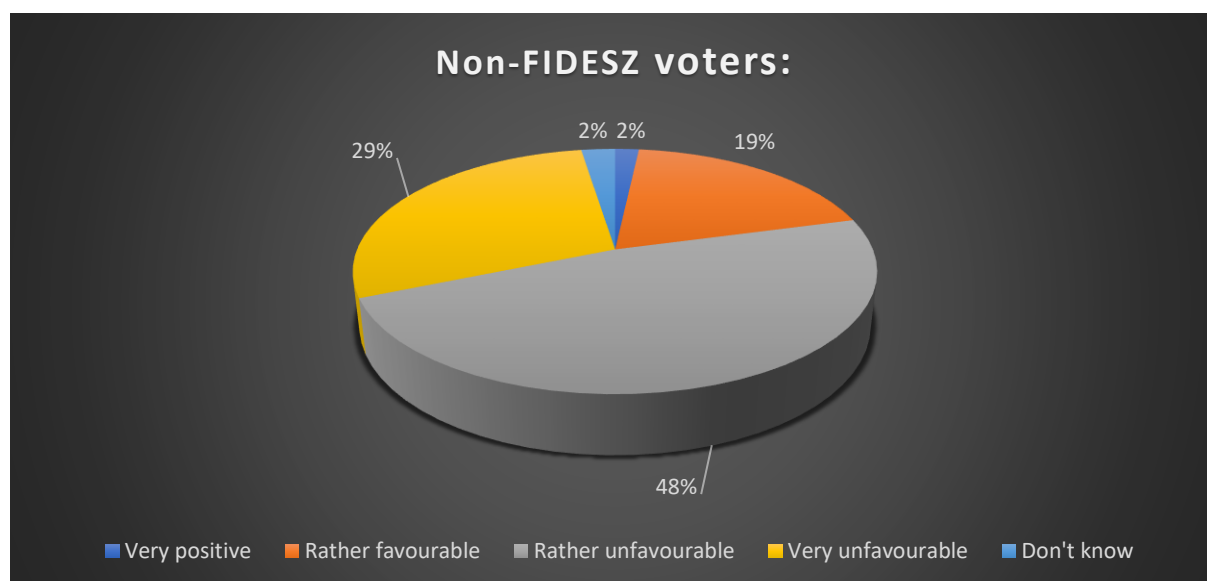
Certain questions were regarding issues without positive/negative reflection by the survey participant, so we did not include those in this political party related segment of the research. Also, the comparative question group regarding the help by international actors during the COVID pandemic used a different answer format so we also excluded that from the subsequent analysis.

Q2, Q5, Q7, Q8 all would posit to show some form of subjective positive or negative perception regarding issues related to Chinese influence in Hungary. When we look at the division of answers amongst the two groupings, people sympathetic towards the governing FIDESZ coalition versus people sympathising with opposition political forces, we see a stark difference in preferences. Non-FIDESZ voters seem highly unfavourable towards China on all issues, with 60-80% having dispositions unfavourable to Chinese positions. On the other hand, FIDESZ voters seem to have the exact polar opposite opinion, with 60-85% having opinions that view Chinese positions and China-Hungary relationship issues in a positive light.

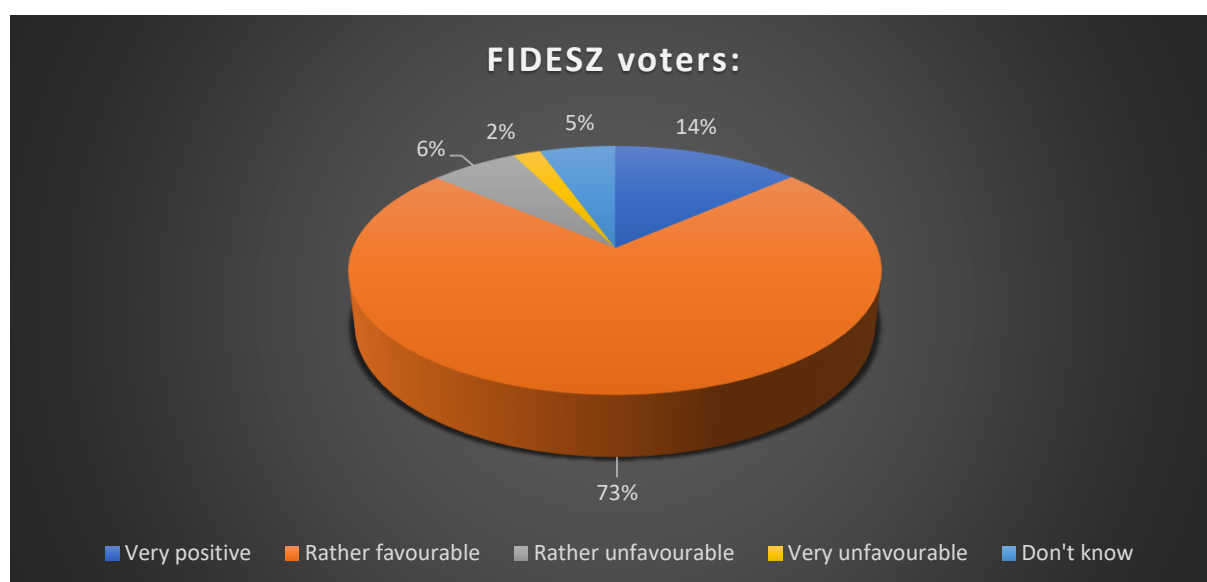
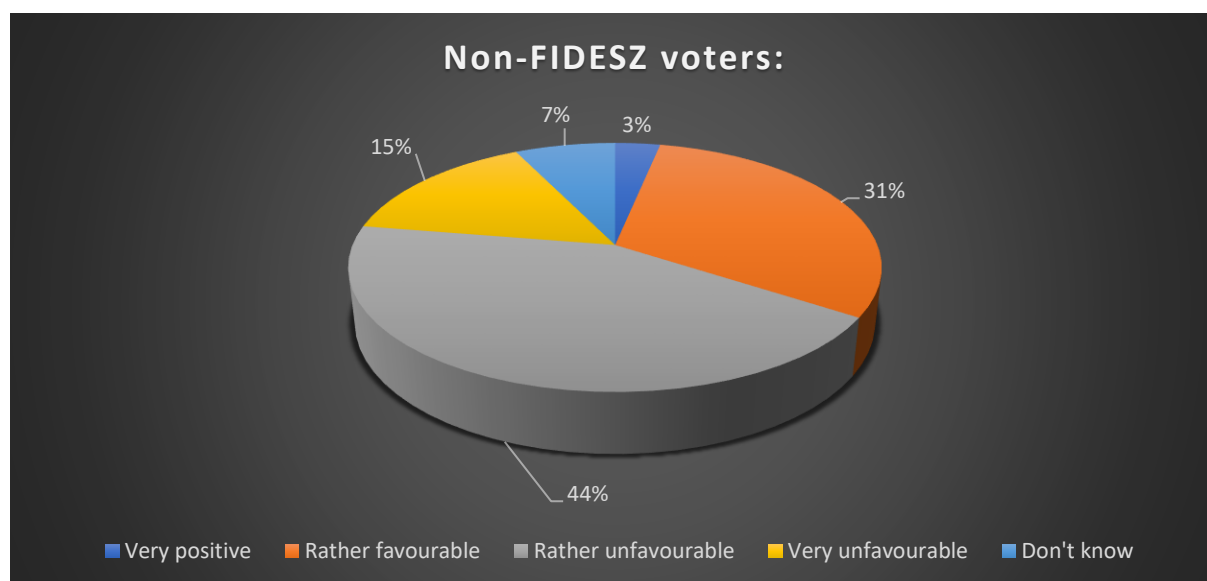
Q2: In your opinion, from Hungary's point of view, the increase in Chinese political, i.e. state and diplomatic influence is:



Q5: There are efforts to increase the Chinese presence in Hungarian academia and higher education. Do you consider this growing Chinese presence in Hungary:

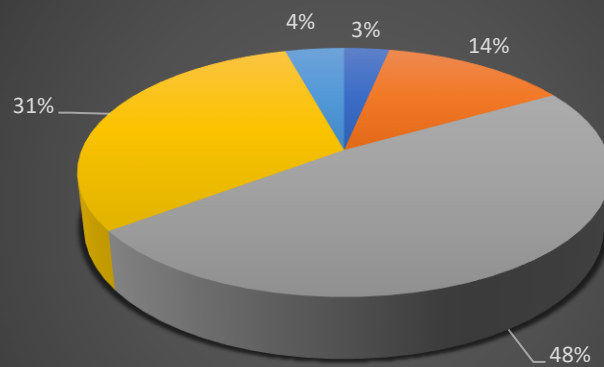


Q7: What do you think China's role has been in the management of the pandemic in Hungary?



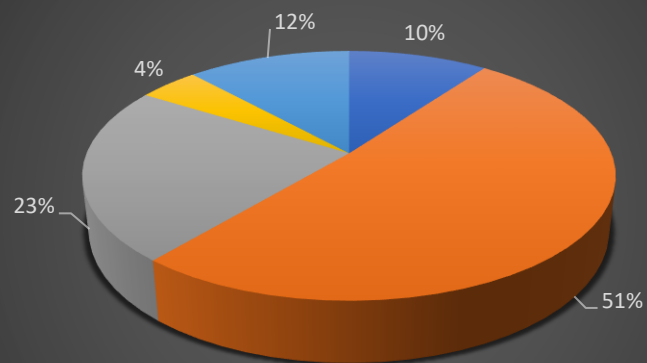
Q8: In recent years, China and Russia have strengthened their cooperation and strategic partnership. In your opinion, this cooperation in terms of world politics might be considered:

Non-FIDESZ voters::



■ Very positive ■ Rather favourable ■ Rather unfavourable ■ Very unfavourable ■ Don't know

FIDESZ voters:



■ Very positive ■ Rather favourable ■ Rather unfavourable ■ Very unfavourable ■ Don't know