

GLOBSEC

Trends 2020

CENTRAL EUROPE
EASTERN EUROPE
& WESTERN BALKANS
AT THE TIMES OF PANDEMIC

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Democracy
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Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in September and October 2020 on a representative sample of the population in nine countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample of 1000 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country according to gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement.

For the purposes of graphical data visualisation, the results were rounded to full numbers. To improve the readers' experience, the responses in closed questions with a scale were generalised. For example, a question with options definitely agree/ rather agree/ rather disagree /definitely disagree was merged to agree / disagree.

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Connecting the dots



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INTRODUCTION



Dear reader,

What is democracy? Is it, above all, institutions – representative government, rule of law, freedom of religion and assembly? Or is it just as much a system of values – compassion, respect for people who are different, and a commitment to responsible speech and true facts? In Central and Eastern Europe, these are key questions today. The autocratic rulers of communist times have been replaced by leaders who are called to reflect the will of the governed. But the will of the governed may not be pretty. People may willingly believe conspiracy theories. They may treat with hostility anyone they consider an outsider. They may feel no commitment to the greater good of society, opting instead to grab whatever they can for themselves. Even respectable politicians, struggling to win elections and negotiate knife-edge coalitions, may feel they must accommodate even odious forces for the sake of political survival.

GLOBSEC Trends 2020 throws these issues into sharp relief. It shows strong support in Central and Eastern Europe for democracy as an institutional

concept. But at the same time, many people oppose the liberal social values that typically characterise the Western democratic system. The European Union has long assumed that when democracy exists, liberal values inevitably follow. But it now finds growing numbers of citizens bent on deploying democratically elected institutions as a weapon against immigrants, domestic minorities and the LGBT+ community.

Similar tendencies exist in Western Europe and the United States. But in Central and Eastern Europe, they threaten democracy itself. Using resistance to liberal values as a wedge, authoritarian forces seek to pull down the entire democratic project. Those who would defend democracy must find a way to show respect and understanding to those who feel their lives and countries are changing just too fast, while standing up for the kindness, reason and decency that are hallmarks of true democracy.

Sadly, the report finds many citizens continue to believe in conspiracy theories and other destructive narratives. This is disturbing in the best of times. But in the past year such theories have amounted to biological warfare, killing people by encouraging them to be careless about exposure to COVID-19. If such disinformation frightens people into refusing vaccinations, the death toll from the pandemic could be much worse. GLOBSEC found only 37 percent of CEE citizens are ready to take the vaccine now.

We can take a series of steps to advance democracy in the face of the forces that threaten it. The first is to build a coherent narrative about what being part of the West means.

GLOBSEC finds that “clear pro-Western orientation and messaging,” as in Slovakia, is a powerful tool. Such messaging can point out that ambivalence toward authoritarianism and corruption is morally bankrupt. Government and non-government actors must recognize that conspiracy theories and false facts are highly dangerous even when they occur among populations that generally support Western institutions.

Strategic communication literally saves lives in the time of COVID-19. When a non-trivial part of the population believes COVID-19 is a plot to manipulate populations worldwide, it is obvious how much effort is needed to reinforce not only democracy, but rational thought.

Many CEE citizens believe the United States is an important guarantor of their security – but that it should act mainly in the framework of NATO, where Europeans also have a strong voice. This is understandable but also reflects substantial scepticism about overall US intentions and activities. With new leadership in Washington and the world hopefully emerging from its preoccupation with COVID-19, the United States has an opportunity to re-introduce itself to CEE citizens. Its goal should be to present the United States as a reliable, compassionate and respectful guarantor of the democratic future that most CEE citizens have resolutely chosen.

Thomas Kent

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2020 has been enveloped by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Its profound global impact is likely to be the subject of research for many years to come. Against this backdrop, in this report, we present current perceptions in the Central and Eastern European and Western Balkan regions towards a range of political topics. The report, in particular, provides answers to urgent public health concerns including the willingness of societies to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and proneness to believing COVID-19 related conspiracy theories.

We also scrutinise how the European Union, NATO and major powers including the United States, China and Russia are perceived in the region and whether their standing has improved or suffered setbacks in the wake of the pandemic.

And as disinformation campaigns and information chaos continue to ravage our information

environment, we assessed the prevalence of different polarising narratives and their impact on attitudes towards liberal democracy and international cooperation. While both democracy and international cooperation have suffered setbacks in recent years, public perceptions from the nine surveyed countries suggest they have not been vanquished yet.

THESE ARE OUR KEY FINDINGS

COVID-19 VACCINATION

Trust in public authorities corresponds with people's willingness to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Only 37% of respondents, on average, are inclined to get a COVID-19 vaccine but this figure rises to 53% among those who trust their public authorities.

PRO-RUSSIAN / RUSSIA-ORIGINATING NARRATIVES GOING VIRAL

At 72%, the proportion of those who support NATO membership in the region is robust. Nearly 4 in 10 people living in NATO member countries in the region, nonetheless, believe that NATO is an aggressive tool of the US and/or that NATO is provoking Russia by establishing military bases in the country's vicinity.

EU REPRESENTING A MORE PROMISING FUTURE

A total of 71% of respondents believe that EU membership will lead to better life prospects for future generations and a majority of respondents in seven of nine countries do not think that the EU is destroying their country's traditional values and identity. That said, the notion that an "EU dictate" is at play has gained widespread traction.

DEMOCRATIC PARADOX

The vast majority of people in the region agree that democracy, as a system based on equality, human rights, fundamental freedoms and rule of law, is good for their country (78%). However, a considerable share of respondents perceive democracy to be a threat when it is described as liberal (41%).

CHINA AND RUSSIA NOT SEEN AS THREATS

The perception that China and Russia are threats is currently low, declining over the past year. In numerous surveyed countries, in fact, respondents rather tended to perceive Russia and/or China as key strategic partners for their respective countries.

COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS

Bulgarian support for NATO is getting fragile

Bulgarian support for remaining a member of the EU and NATO has declined by around 10% since 2018, with 65% now backing membership in the EU and 47% in NATO. This decline comes as the EU dictate narrative and the assertion that NATO is a belligerent organisation both resonate strongly in the country.

Bulgarian society continues to maintain a pro-Russian, rather than pro-US, tilt. While 84% see Russia as their traditional Slavic brother nation, only 23% judge Russia to be a belligerent actor seeking to weaken the EU and NATO.

Bulgarians also belong to the more traditional attitude cluster in the region with only 13% indicating support for guaranteeing LGBT+ rights.

Bulgarians are also more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories. Around 33% of Bulgarians, for example, express credence in COVID-19 related conspiracies including the notion that the pandemic is fake to manipulate the population.

Large percentages of respondents in Bulgaria were uncertain or unwilling to respond to survey questions. These figures ranged from 15% on the matter of whether democracy is a good system for the country, 30% on attitudes towards NATO membership to 50% on the issue of threat perceptions.

Strong awareness of Chinese influence in Czechia

The past year witnessed a notable slump in perceptions of both the EU and NATO in Czechia. Support for EU membership nosedived by 14% and NATO by 11%.

The impact of pro-Russian disinformation narratives is at least partially responsible for this shift. A nearly identical share of the population is inclined to believe that NATO is involved in provoking Russia (38%) as the reverse (42%). A 9% drop, from

2019, in perceptions that Russia is a threat and a greater preponderance of respondents believing that Russia has superior military capability is testament to this effect. That said, it is noteworthy that 69% of Czechs value NATO membership and credit the Alliance for providing them with more security.

Czechia is the only country in the region where more people perceive China as a threat (51%) than not (49%).

In terms of strategic partnerships, Germany is the clear preference for the majority of the population (65%).

The impact of disinformation in Czechia is apparent also in buy-in to COVID-19 conspiracy theories, evidenced by the fact that 43% of Czechs believe that the actual number of cases is lower than officially reported.

Czechs seem to be confused in their views on democracy. While 76% believe that democracy is a good system for their country, more than half (54%) also believe that democracy is non-existent because in reality, world is run by secret elites.

Majority of Hungarians disagree with demonisation of the LGBT+ community

The proportion of those who think Hungary belongs to the West dropped from 45% in 2018 and 2019 to 37% in 2020. Increasing numbers are now more inclined to support a middle ground position, with 56% of Hungarians being proponents of the country finding a place between East and West.

At the same time, Hungarian society expresses overwhelming support for NATO membership (83% would vote to remain) and 79% of respondents equate NATO membership with enhanced security.

An overwhelming majority of Hungarians (80%) think that having a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections and parliament would be bad for their country.

This anti-authoritarian attitude is the highest among all surveyed countries.

The majority of Hungarians (55%) disagree with the statement that LGBT+ rights represent a decadent ideology, despite ongoing efforts by the current government to demonise the LGBT+ minority¹. Nearly half of Hungarians, moreover, agree with guaranteeing LGBT+ rights.

Montenegrins' views on NATO are split

Montenegro remains committed to its EU accession, evidenced by the nearly two thirds of Montenegrins (63%) backing EU membership and 64% associating the EU with a better future.

The EU is also the favoured strategic partner for the population, with 54% choosing it over other options.

Montenegrin society is almost equally divided in its support for NATO. Slightly more (50%) would vote to leave NATO than those wishing to remain (45%), pointing to a notable impact of negative messaging on NATO. More than half of the population are inclined to agree that NATO is an aggressive organisation and an even larger majority, 60%, believe that NATO is provoking Russia.

The US is not particularly popular in Montenegro, with 46% perceiving its NATO ally as a threat. Only 22%, meanwhile, identify Russia as a threat. Russian image projection is also evident in perceptions of its military might; more people perceive superiority in the Russian military capability (56%) than in the US (50%).

On coronavirus, 4 in 10 Montenegrins (43%) believe that COVID-19 is a sham, with a similar share believing the conspiracy theory that the US deliberately created the virus (38%). That said, 41% of population are

interested in getting vaccinated, recognising (44%) that the vaccine could save their lives.

North Macedonia wants to belong to the West

Macedonians express the highest level of support for EU and NATO membership in the Western Balkan region. And 31% and 28%, respectively, perceive the EU or the US as their key strategic partner.

However, pro-Russian sentiment can also be found, with narratives favourable to the Kremlin resonating strongly with Macedonians. A total of 48% of the population, the second highest in the region, think that Western countries often unjustly accuse Russia of unlawful or fraudulent behaviour.

Despite an increasing interest from major global powers in the Western Balkan countries, 66% and 62% of Macedonians do not perceive Russia and China, respectively, as threats to their country.

54% of Macedonians, the least in the region, believe that having a democratic political system with regular elections and a multiparty system is good for their country.

China's mask diplomacy not very effective in Poland

An overwhelming 90% majority of Poles would vote to remain in NATO, the strongest level of support for NATO membership measured in the region. Affinity for the organisation is further evidenced by findings indicating that 87% of Poles believe that membership in NATO means they are living in a safer environment.

A strong Euro-Atlantic orientation of Poles is, moreover, reflected in perceptions of threats, allies, and foes. A total of 68% of Poles perceive Russia as a threat while 69% identify the US as the most important strategic partner for their country.

Meanwhile, 66% of Poles, the most in the region, think that Russia deliberately provokes NATO by initiating conflicts in Eastern Europe. These fervent attitudes indeed reflect Poland's historical context in witnessing Russian subversive influence and engagement in the region.

62% of Poles, the highest percentage in the region, lay responsibility on China's shoulders for the global spread of COVID-19.

Romanians want bigger presence of the US in the region

Romanians are ardent proponents of a Euro-Atlantic orientation of their country, reflected in growing support for EU and NATO membership.

On average, 47% of Romanians do not know whether the United States, Russia or China present a threat to their country.

This inability to distinguish between friend and foe, highest in Romania and Bulgaria, could become a potential vulnerability in the future.

A total of 57% of Romanians, the most among surveyed countries, think that the US should play a more important role in the region. This attitude draws on the society's preferred Western orientation and perception that the US is their strategic partner (50%).

Only 29% of Romanians, the least in the region, think that liberal democracy threatens their traditional values and national identity.

Democracy has a contested meaning in Serbia

Serbia is the least pro-EU oriented of all countries surveyed. That said, a slight majority of Serbians (52%) would be interested in joining the EU if the opportunity arose.

A total of 84% of Serbs, by contrast, would prefer not to join NATO, with a sizeable share of the Serbian population holding the view that NATO deliberately provokes Russia by encircling it with military bases. Espousing vehement anti-NATO sentiment, Serbia represents an outlier in the region.

Furthermore, 59% of respondents in Serbia consider Russia and China to be the most important strategic partners for the country, by far the highest amount among surveyed countries.

Democracy, as a system based on human rights, fundamental freedoms and rule of law, is favoured by 85% of Serbians, putting the country at the top of the pack alongside Poland on this attitude. However, 74% of Serbians simultaneously believe in the conspiracy theory that democracy does not exist because the world is ruled by secret elites. A further 57%, meanwhile, see liberal democracy as a threat to their values and identity.

Harmful narratives shape Slovaks' understanding of COVID-19

While Slovak backing for the EU remains relatively robust and steady, NATO is not as popular. Support for NATO membership, nonetheless, has been constantly on the rise, ascending from 43% in 2017 to 61% in 2020. This shift comes despite 56% still believing that NATO deliberately provokes Russia by encircling it with military bases, a common narrative peddled as part of disinformation and conspiracy theory dissemination.

The lower level of support for NATO compared to the rest of the V4 can be linked to some apparent pro-Russian sentiment in the country. While only 20% of Slovaks consider Russia to be a threat to their country, 36% reach the same conclusion about the US.

Slovaks also revealed the strongest level of support for democracy with 90% of respondents agreeing that democracy is a good system for the country.

Narratives demonising liberalism and the West, as a carrier of "decadent" values, however, have infiltrated society. A total of 44% of Slovaks believe that liberalism threatens their values and identity.

Slovaks also show the greatest proneness to believe in conspiracy theories in the V4 region. On average,

31% of Slovaks bought into COVID-related conspiracy theories, ranging from the assertion that the US deliberately created the virus to the notion that the pandemic is fake and a tool to manipulate populations.



COVID-19

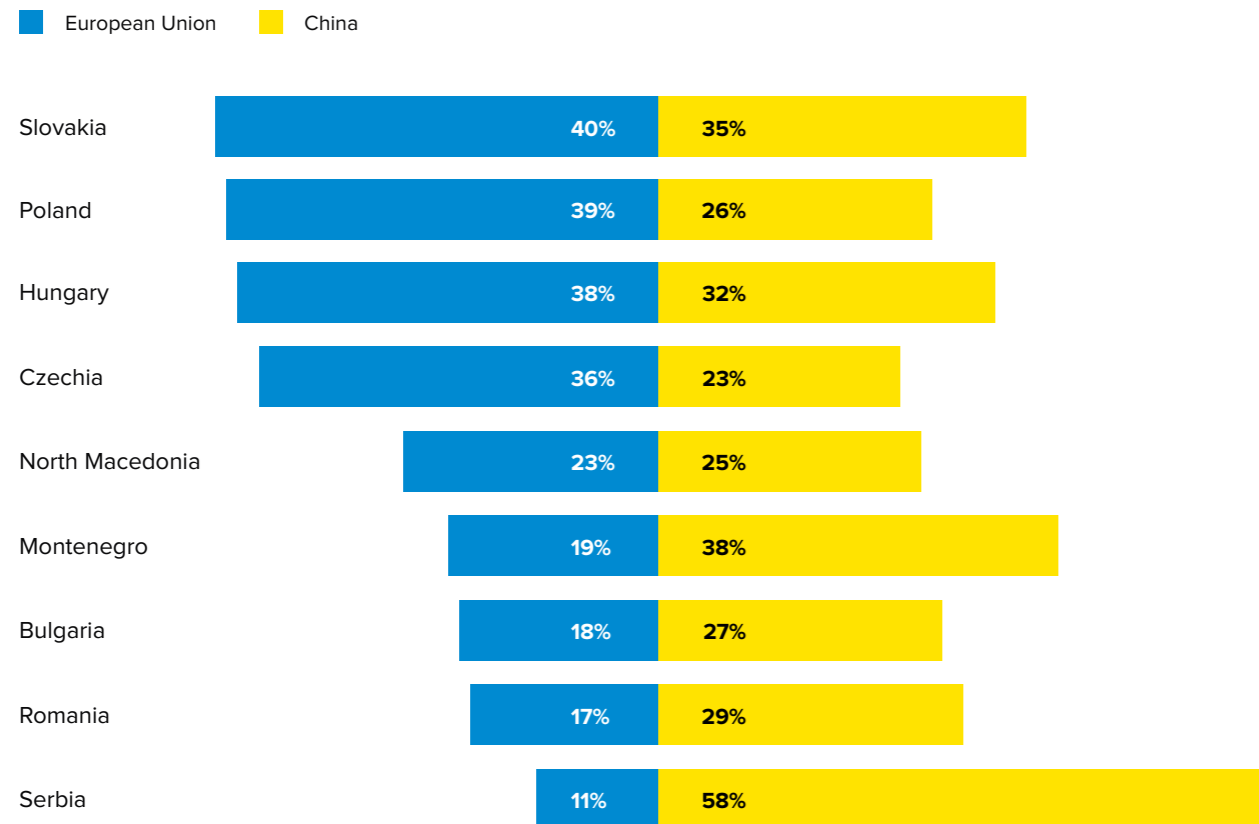
Chapter 1 Reading time 7 min

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward a radical paradigm shift, serving as a backdrop against which everything from public health policy to even foreign policy decisions are now contemplated.

While the CEE region managed the first wave of COVID-19 in the spring relatively well, the more recent second wave of the pandemic paired with a growing impact of pandemic counter-measures, economic lockdowns and an infodemic is testing the stability of the region. COVID-19 is indeed often used as an excuse to inflame simmering internal conflicts and tensions.

Perceived (in)competence

Who handled the COVID-19 crisis the best so far?^{2*}



*The respondents were offered a choice between the EU, China, Russia and the United States.

By the beginning of December 2020, China had reported only around 100,000 cases of COVID-19 and 4,700 fatalities from the disease³, in stark contrast to the staggering 12,400,000 cases and 290,000 deaths recorded across the EU⁴. This comes despite the European population not being even a third of the size of China. Intuitively, it appears that China has handled the pandemic far better than the EU, managing to obscure its responsibility for the spread of the contagion behind its very efficient personal protective equipment diplomacy⁵.

Aside from the fact that there are suspicions voiced by numerous experts about the veracity of the numbers provided by Chinese authorities⁶ and that Harvard researchers suggested that the outbreak may have started much earlier in Wuhan than reported⁷, the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been restricted by the nature of the union as an entity comprised of sovereign states with independent health policies⁸. However, the unprecedented agreement on the 750 billion EU Recovery Fund to foster a turnaround in the pandemic-impacted union as well as to finance green and digital transition⁹ has confirmed the significant advantages of belonging to the EU club.

EU

Within the V4, there is a consensus now that the EU responded to the pandemic better than China. At the outset of the pandemic, the EU was seen as incompetent due to a lack of an effective communication strategy. The bloc has managed to mostly turn around this perception though, aided by agreement on the Recovery Fund, in the face of intense Russia- and China-originated¹⁰ disinformation campaigns¹¹. Given less sanguine sentiment that persists on this question in non-V4 countries, it appears that these campaigns, nonetheless, have been potentially met with some success in shaping public perception of the EU's competence.

China

All surveyed countries have a relatively large proportion of people that judge China to be handling the pandemic well despite the fact that the origins of COVID-19 have been traced back to the country and the Chinese Communist Party has come under criticism for initially covering up the virus, thereby contributing to the global spread of the disease¹².



“Chinese assistance to Serbia at the beginning of the pandemic was intensely promoted in the Serbian news media, with all major outlets devoting space to talk about Chinese aid, presented as a substantial and brotherly move. In addition, Serbia maintains positive historical relations with China from the period of communist Yugoslavia. This is further strengthened by Chinese support for Serbia's position towards Kosovo as it does not recognize its independence. Statements by President Vučić glorifying Chinese investments further improve China's image in the country”.
[International and Security Affairs Centre, Serbia]

Russia

Russia is perceived as managing the pandemic quite well by Montenegrins (29%), Macedonians (28%) and Serbians (19%). While in Serbia this sentiment is attributable to the more broadly held pro-Russian attitudes in the country, with Russia being seen as a historical partner and brotherly nation, the cases of Montenegro and North Macedonia reflect the strong influence that pro-Russian outlets hold in these two countries.



“There is a considerable influence exerted by pro-Russian channels that comes to affect Montenegrin citizens. The majority of this information originates in Serbia, where Russian and Chinese assistance provided during the pandemic received widespread attention from the media, in contrast to direct aid that came from the EU. While the media has, furthermore, extensively covered the pandemic situation in Western countries, information on Russia's struggles in coping with the virus has been hard to come by. The population, therefore, has remained uninformed about the real situation in Russia.”
[Center for Democratic Transition, Montenegro]

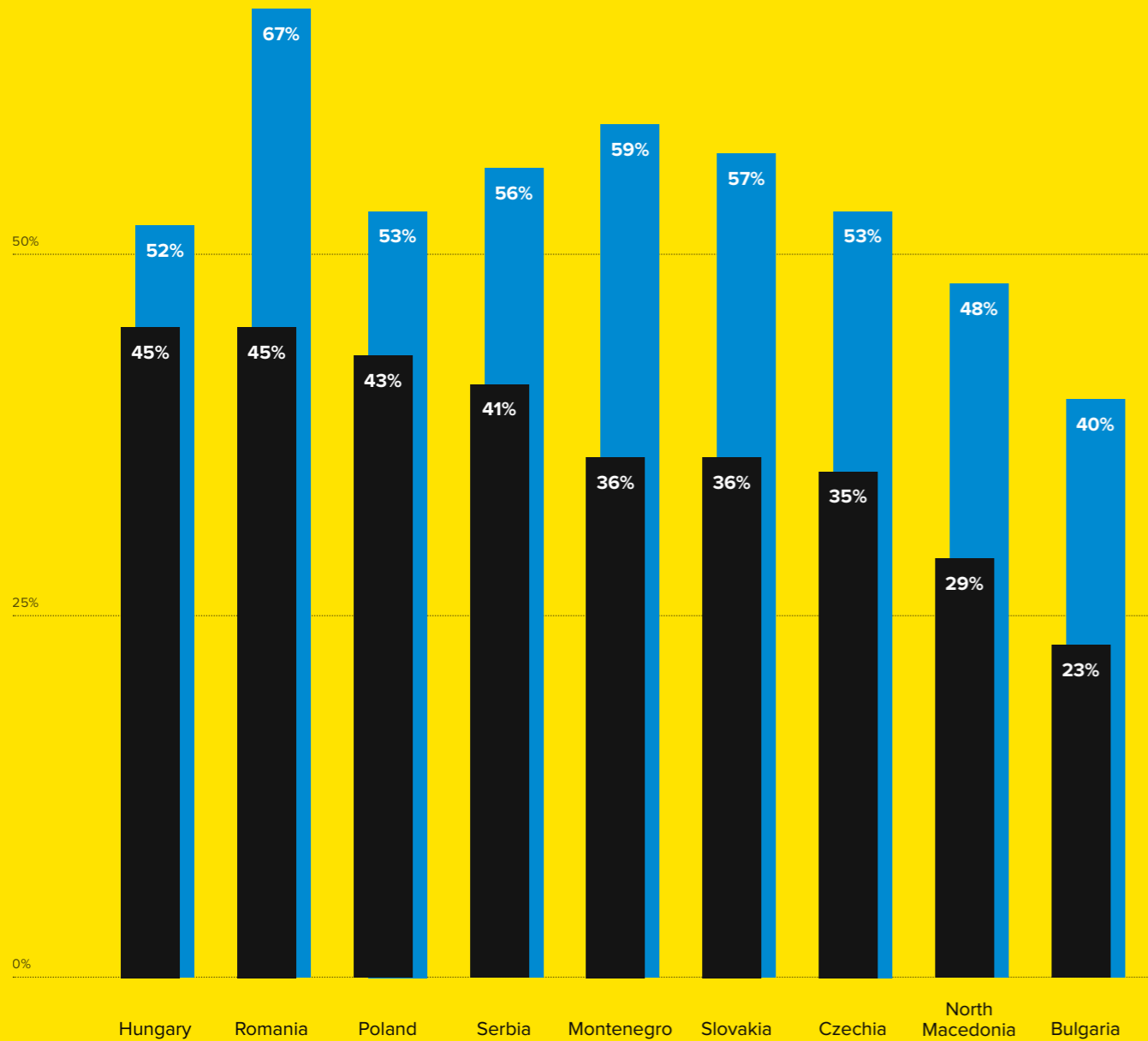
Many remain undecided

In light of the fact that the pandemic is far from over and the situation is still evolving, it is understandable that substantial proportions of respondents in Bulgaria (37%), Czechia (27%), Romania (25%) and Poland (24%) are undecided about their assessments on how different geopolitical entities have responded to the crisis.

Vaccination

People will get vaccinated against COVID-19 if they trust public authorities.

Those who agree with the following statements:
 I would get vaccinated against COVID-19 average
 I would get vaccinated against COVID-19 from those who trust public authorities

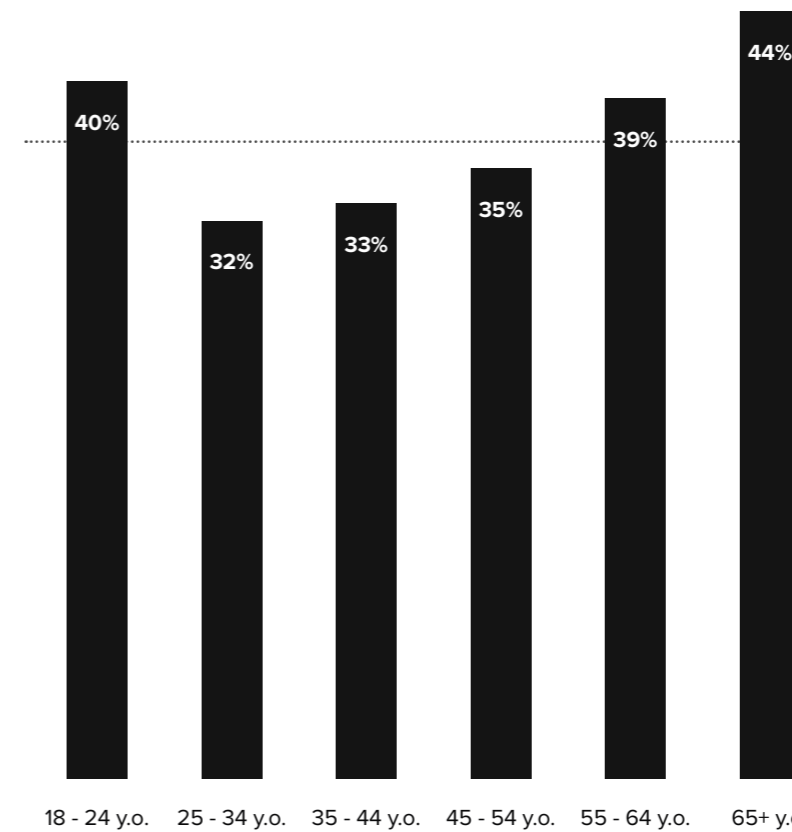


Trust in public authorities and their ability to provide factual information strongly correlates with people's willingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Whereas only 37% of respondents, on average, are interested in the vaccine, the number grows to 53% among those who trust their public authorities. The widest gap between

the two groups is seen in Montenegro, Romania and Slovakia. This finding reinforces the view that if public authorities invest resources in earning the trust of their citizens and engage in strategic communication, they might prove more effective in overcoming the pandemic.

Older people are more willing to get vaccinated against COVID-19

Average willingness to get vaccinated against COVID-19 by age group:



In all countries surveyed, with the exception of Slovakia and Bulgaria, the elderly are generally more willing to get vaccinated against COVID-19. The majority of people over the age of 65 are interested in the vaccine in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Serbia. This finding likely reflects the fact that older people face a much higher risk of serious health complications compared to younger generations.

37% Overall average

In 5 of 9 surveyed countries, the youngest age group polled - those aged 18-24 - expressed higher than average interest in getting vaccinated, in stark contrast to people aged 25-54. In some countries (Czechia, Poland, Slovakia and Montenegro), a higher proportion of youth also eschewed COVID-19 related conspiracy theories. This might mean that young people take the threat posed by the virus more seriously and feel less fearful about getting vaccinated.

Multilateralism is not dead



A total of 82% of all respondents across the region think that international cooperation is important to confront the COVID-19 crisis.

And a further 60% of respondents in surveyed EU member states, with the exception of Czechia, think that EU should act as one bloc on the global stage, even if it comes at the expense of certain national interests. These findings indicate broad support from Central European societies for multilateral cooperation and also substantial backing for aspirations to develop a more coherent EU foreign policy.

COVID-19 infodemic & conspiracy theories

The infodemic - information chaos unleashed on the world and COVID-19's close companion¹³ - has engendered a demonstrable impact on the quality of information populations can attain about the virus including its spread and best practices on mitigation.

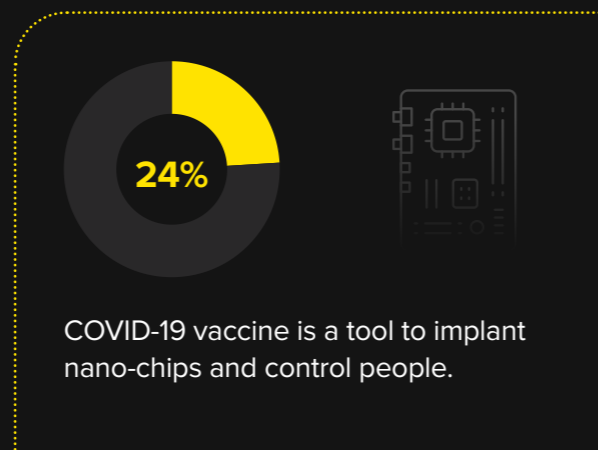
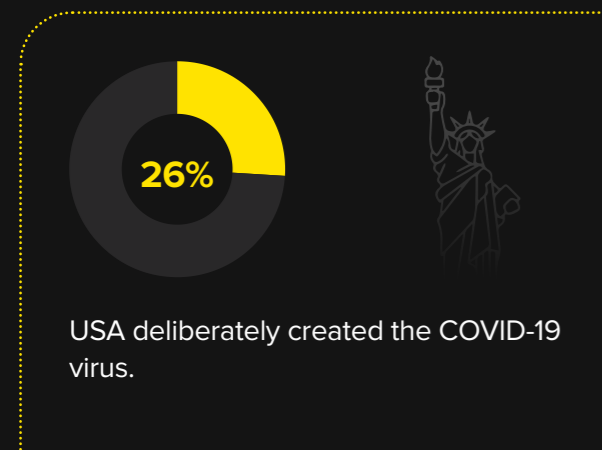
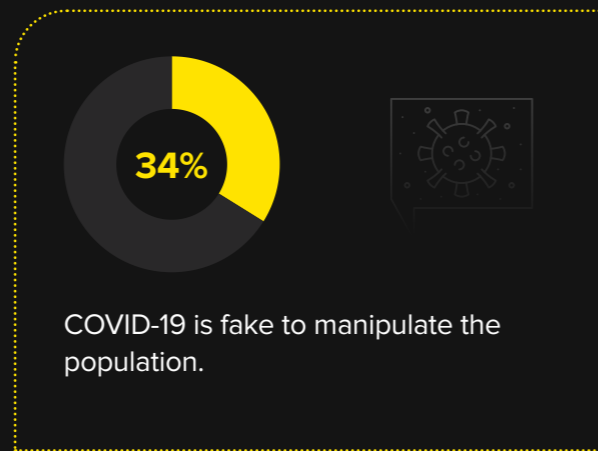
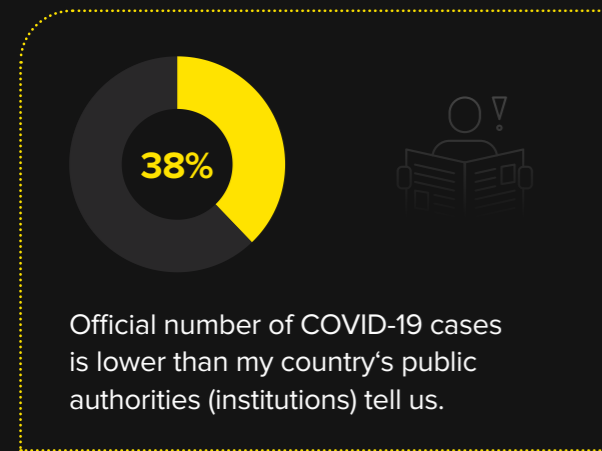
The digital information space has quickly become an arena where all kinds of disinformation, misinformation, health hoaxes and COVID-19 related conspiracy theories have burgeoned, peddled by politically and economically motivated disinformation actors.

Opinion polls now confirm that conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic have found fertile ground in the significant segments of populations that buy in to the notions that COVID-19 is a hoax created to manipulate people, that public authorities have deliberately overestimated the number of positive cases and/or that the COVID-19 vaccine is a tool to 'implant nanochips' to control people.



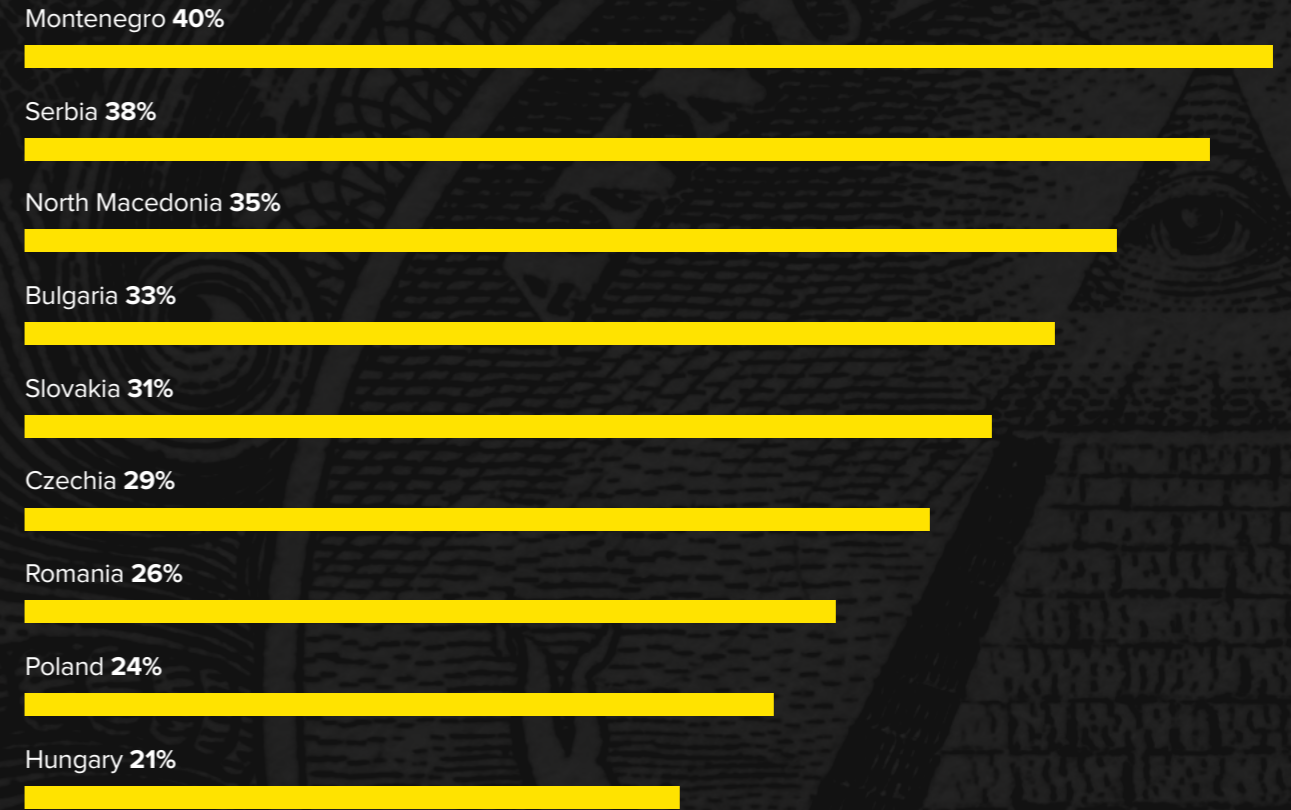
"The Slovak population is consistently assessed to be particularly vulnerable to the impact of conspiracy theories in the CEE region¹⁴. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon including a population receptive to pro-Russian rhetoric, the relatively central position of disinformation outlets on Slovak Facebook¹⁵, the influence of Czech disinformation channels and an obsolete educational system in need of reform".
[GLOBSEC, Slovakia]

Average prevalence of belief in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories in the region



In which countries most respondents believe in conspiracy theories?

The highest proportion of people believing in the conspiratorial narratives about COVID-19 probed in the survey can be found in Montenegro¹⁶. Slovakia, meanwhile, posted the highest figure in the V4.



Facts first

The survey revealed that large sections of different societies are undecided on some of the most widespread COVID-19 conspiratorial narratives. A total of 14% of respondents overall, for example, do not know whether to believe the statement that COVID-19 is a hoax designed to manipulate people throughout the world. It is important, in this vein, that factual information reaches these people before disinformation campaigns do.



"The explanation for a consistent percentage of the population mistakenly believing that the number of COVID-19 related infections is lower than reported lies in the low level of trust endowed by the Romanian population in the government¹⁷. This overlaps with a lack of institutional knowledge in communicating measures to contain the pandemic, along with the flood of disinformation and misinformation on Romanian social media. This exacerbates the disconnect between political elites and a large part of the population". [GlobalFocus Center, Romania]

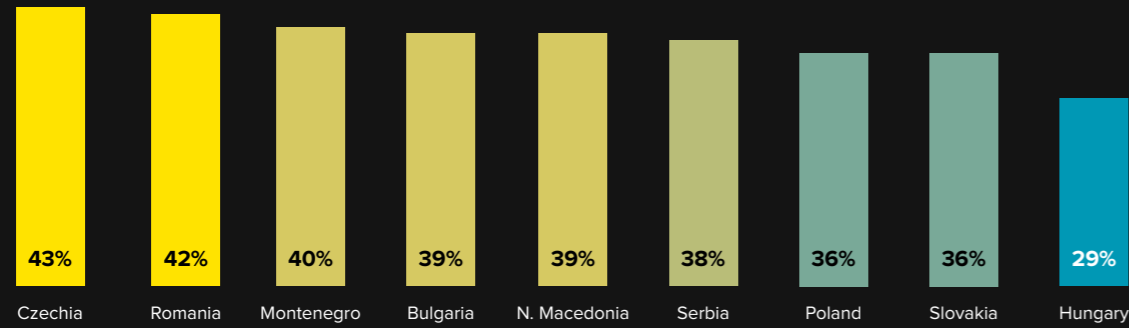


"Czechia was among the countries that managed the first wave of the pandemic quite well, leading to a sense of security. The government was, nonetheless, fairly reluctant to apply more stringent measures to avert the spread of the virus and failed to adequately communicate the need for certain rules¹⁸. Some of the more far-fetched conspiracy theories are, however, not prevalent in the country and even the organisers of anti-lockdown protests claimed that they do not question the existence of the virus but rather its severity." [Prague Security Studies Institute, Czechia]

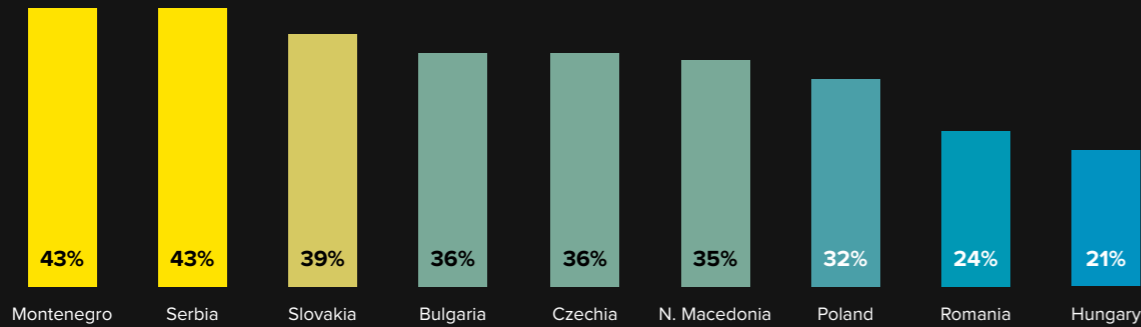
Degree of belief in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories



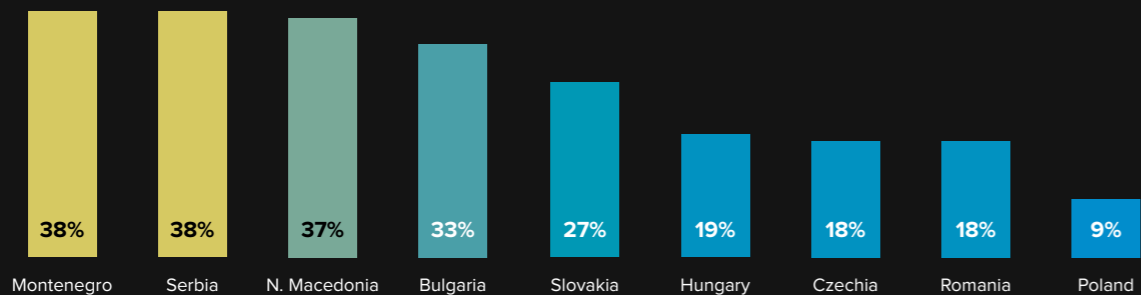
Official number of COVID-19 cases is lower than public authorities (institutions) in your country tell us.



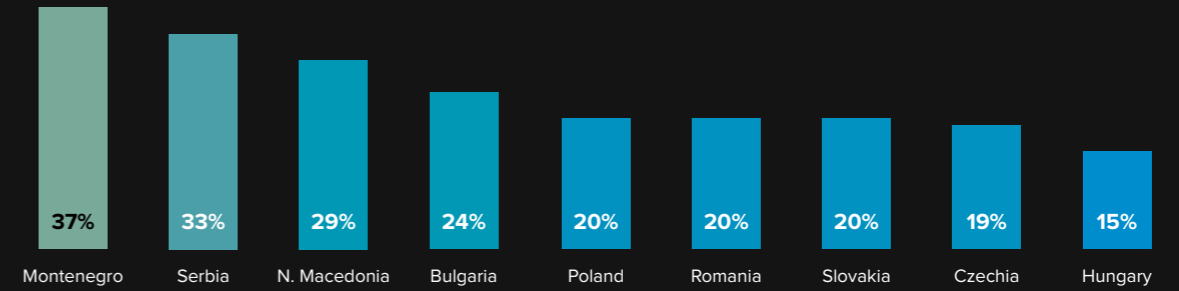
COVID-19 is fake to manipulate the population.



USA deliberately created the COVID-19 virus.



COVID-19 vaccine is a tool to implant nano-chips and control people.



COVID-19 conspiracy theories are most popular among the countries in the Western Balkan region.

Trends to watch out for

! Disinformation and conspiracy theories will significantly hinder recovery from the pandemic

COVID-19 related conspiracy theories and their dissemination among vulnerable populations will pose a growing obstacle to combating the pandemic, as frustrated populations are likely to be less willing to comply with state-enforced measures and recovery plans. This will be particularly true for countries where such measures are not well thought out and communicated and in CEE states where parts of society are already susceptible to disinformation.

! Willingness to get vaccinated will be a mark on states' ability to build trust and communicate with citizens

As approved vaccines become widely available, countries will need to invest considerable effort into strategic communication to both manage the epidemiological situation and persuade people to get vaccinated.

! European Health Union

The ham-handed response by the EU at the outset of the pandemic provided an invaluable teachable moment. The EU will now seek a stronger mandate in the area of public health¹⁹ to be able to respond to the fallout of similar global phenomena in the future in a more efficient manner.

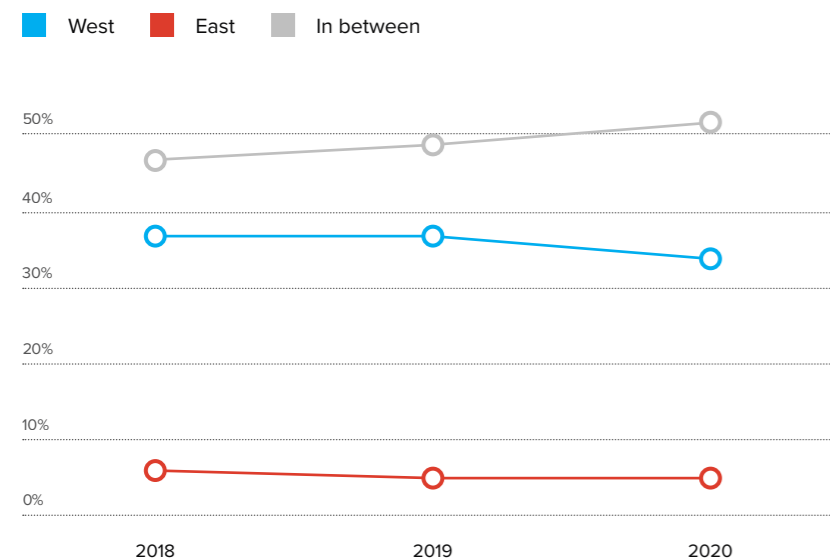
EAST OR WEST?

Chapter 2 Reading time 4 min

Classifications based on binary divisions like dark versus light, good versus bad or East versus West are overly simplistic, condensing complex phenomena into categories that are too determinate. The East-West ideological divide, for example, is not merely a historical remnant of Cold War political polarization. In a world home to non-democratic power players including a resurgent Russia and a China on the rise, this is not to say that the division is irrelevant. But public opinion surveys conducted by GLOBSEC²⁰ each year confirm that this dichotomy is no longer accepted in the region. Central Europeans increasingly perceive themselves as occupying different positions “in-between”, an identity distinct from “Western intellectual narcissism”²¹ or Eastern non-democratic traditions.

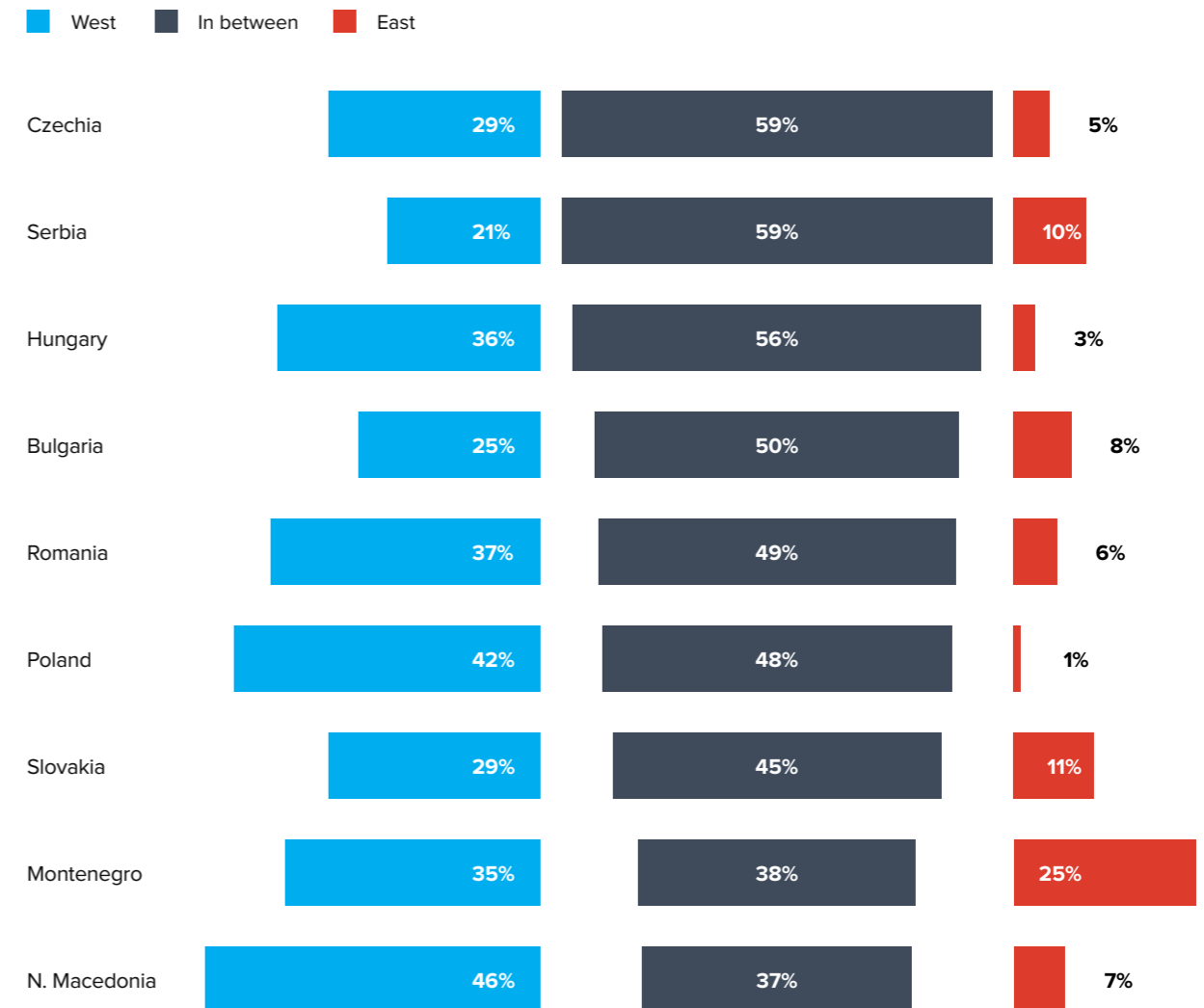
V4 prefers to remain in between

Average responses from the V4 countries since 2018



Over the past two years, a middle ground stance has cemented itself as the preferred geopolitical and civilizational posture for the majority of respondents (52%) in the V4, affirming perceptions of the emergence of a category distinct from either a Western or Eastern orientation. Several factors are at play here, including the notion, promoted by some politicians, that Central Europe represents a ‘bridge’ between East and West. Another purports that pragmatic populations, acting from a deep-seeded mistrust of both East and West learned from historical experiences, want to choose the best of both worlds while not fully aligning with either of them.

Would you prefer your country to be in the West, East or somewhere in-between?



Slovakia looks towards the West

Slovakia is the only exception to this trend, with the middle ground position dropping in support in favour of a pro-Western orientation, which saw an increase from 21% in 2018 to 29% in 2020. This shift can perhaps be attributed, in part, to the clearly pro-Western orientation pursued by the new centre-right Slovak government, which assumed office in March 2020 and has stressed the EU and NATO membership as key to Slovakia’s foreign policy interests. This approach represents a departure from the previous government whose foreign policy was more challenging

to pin down, often described as an ambiguous mixing of pro-European and pro-Russian sentiment lacking a coherent communication strategy²². Current Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, meanwhile, has rejected the notion that Slovakia is “some bridge or a country that would belong nowhere” and stated that priorities during his term will be international cooperation with a focus on the EU introducing endeavours to combat conspiracy theories that demonise the union²³.

Slovakia is the only country where support for the ‘in-between’ position dropped from 56% (2018) to 45% (2020).

Narratives about the West influence civilisational affinities

Perceptions of the West are likely instrumental in influencing where citizens stand on their preferred relationship: does the population, for example, associate the West with aspirational ideals like a properly functioning democracy or with the promotion of 'decadence' shrouded behind civil liberties?

A total of 39% of respondents who think that Western countries have better functioning democracies want their country to belong to the West. This compares to only 22% of people who buy into the assertion that Western countries are 'morally corrupted', a claim actively promoted by unscrupulous political actors and disinformation outlets.

North Macedonia is the most pro-Western oriented country in the region

Among those surveyed, North Macedonia ranks as the most pro-Western oriented country, with 46% of respondents expressing a preference for the West. This number is significantly higher than the share expressing similar sentiments in Montenegro (35%), a country that, like North Macedonia, is an aspiring candidate for the next round of EU enlargement.



“Demographic factors in Montenegro and North Macedonia are the main reason behind different attitudes towards the West in these two countries. A considerable proportion of North Macedonia’s population is comprised of ethnic Albanians (25%)²⁴ with a pro-Western orientation while the Serbian population in Montenegro (29%)²⁵ has adopted a more pro-Russian bent. In North Macedonia, public opinion polls indicate the significant pro-Western orientation of the population²⁶ and integration into Western structures like NATO and the EU have been presented as a goal by several North Macedonian governments.” [ATA – Macedonia, North Macedonia]

A total of 39% of respondents who think that Western countries have better functioning democracies want their country to belong to the West.

Who is perceived as a strategic partner?

To compare threat perceptions towards different countries, respondents were provided a list of countries and asked to choose the two that they view as the most important strategic partners for their country. The list consisted of: China, the EU (for Western Balkans), France, Germany and Russia.

Respondents' perceptions of strategic partners reflected a combination of

personal sympathies, economic ties and/or foreign policy priorities. The latter seemed to prevail in the case of Germany, which was chosen by a considerable number of respondents from all countries with the exceptions of Montenegro and Serbia, and the EU, a popular selection for Montenegrins and Macedonians. Russia, on the other hand, was chosen as a strategic partner by many Slovaks and Hungarians, for

whom trade with Russia corresponds to only 2-5% of all imports and exports²⁷. The effective marketing carried out by China and Russia is evident in Serbia, where the EU is not seen as a strategic partner in spite of the substantial support that the bloc provides to the country²⁸.

Countries selected by more than 30% of respondents

GERMANY

Slovakia 71%, Czechia 65%, Hungary 59%, Bulgaria 53%, Poland 50%, Romania 46%, North Macedonia 42%

RUSSIA

Serbia 59%, Slovakia 42%, Bulgaria 41%, Montenegro 38%, Hungary 33%

EU (ONLY FOR WESTERN BALKANS)
Montenegro 54%, North Macedonia 31%

UNITED STATES

Poland 69%, Romania 50%

CHINA

Serbia 59%, Hungary 32%

Trends to watch out for

In-between position as an identity of its own will remain prevalent in V4

The middle ground position popular in V4 countries will continue to slightly increase over the next couple of years unless there are notable changes in governments and communication of what the "West" represents.



EUROPEAN UNION

Chapter 3 Reading time 8 min

The European Union still represents an important and unprecedented cooperation of 27 sovereign countries. While economic integration and common policies comprise the backbone of the EU's power and importance as a global player, its values and principles are increasingly stirring divisions among member states. The selective implementation of democratic principles, the use of 'othering' in contradiction to human rights standards and differences in perceptions therein are undermining the EU's principles and its unity.

Support for EU membership in all nine countries

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, an ensuing global economic crisis and strenuous Brexit negotiations, the value of EU membership (or potential membership) remains undisputed in all nine countries, notwithstanding nuances between different countries on this point.

In four CEE countries – Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, a pattern of either robust or rising support for the EU was recorded. In some countries, this fervent public backing for EU membership contrasts with heated populist rhetoric, while in others, rising support could reflect increasing strategic communication efforts about the EU voiced by national governments tailored to domestic populations.

CEE outliers

A 15% and 13% percentage point decrease in support for the EU in Czechia and Bulgaria, respectively, was observed over the past year. These GLOBSEC findings conform with the results of the Eurobarometer survey on membership support²⁹, reinstating the status of Czechia as the most Eurosceptic country.

According to the Czech research institute STEM, support for the EU in Czechia is volatile and fluctuating from crisis to crisis³⁰. The institute, consequently, explains that apprehension about the economic situation in the country and the pandemic are key factors behind the recent decrease in trust towards the EU.³¹

In Bulgaria, meanwhile, the decline in support measured could be linked to perceptions that the EU has not provided adequate attention to local calls for anti-corruption reforms, demands that have manifested in the

form of widespread public protests amid apparent violations of the rule of law by the Bulgarian government³².



"The indifference of Czechs leads to volatile support of EU membership which tends to fall in times of crisis, especially when a given crisis could also have economic implications." [Prague Security Studies Institute, Czechia]



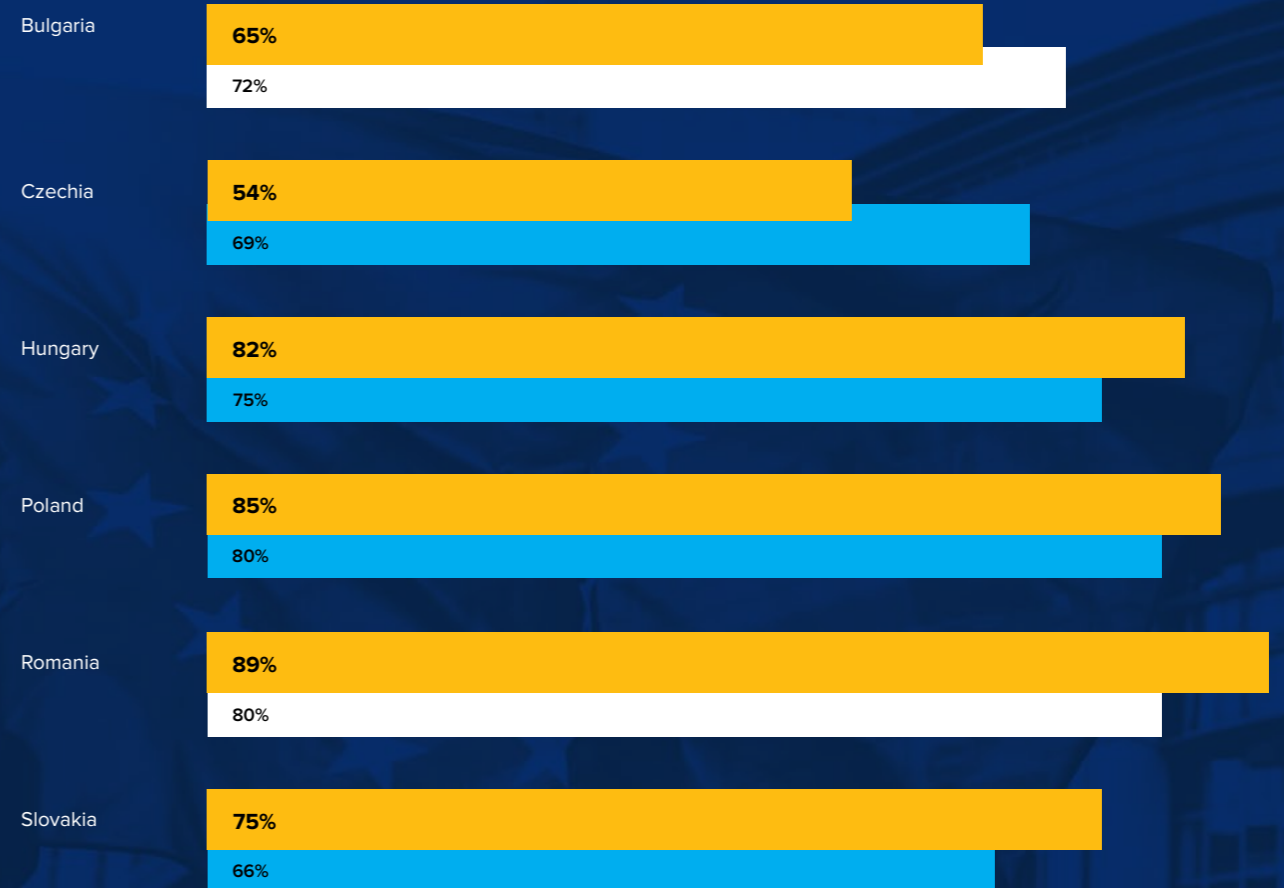
"Since the start of anti-government protests in July 2020, Bulgarians have increasingly seen the EU as colluding with local elites and not as a guarantor of prosperity and democracy for the majority." [Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria]



Staying or leaving?

Those who would vote to stay in the EU in a referendum*

2020 2018 2017



Those who would join the EU in a referendum



*data for 2017 and 2018 were published in GLOBSEC Trends 2017 and GLOBSEC Trends 2018 respectively, Bulgaria and Romania were not included in 2018 polling.



The Western Balkan trio

Nudged by a range of political developments, interest in EU membership remains strong among the three surveyed Western Balkan countries. Firstly, for many, the accession to the EU is perceived as a vehicle for resolving internal ethnic disputes, thereby bringing the promise of stability and providing an opportunity to improve internal democratic processes. Secondly, Euro-Atlantic integration may still be viewed as a means for achieving economic growth and public wellbeing in exchange for fulfilling membership criteria. This perception of the EU as a means to solve internal problems could, nonetheless, be detrimental to the EU over the long haul. While the EU's "carrots" might indeed, for example, foster domestic reforms or support peace talks, the willingness to implement reforms and settle ethnic conflicts needs to come from within.

Only 18% of Serbians see the EU as a strategic partner.

This argument is underscored by an EU that has seen its appeal slowly wither away as accession processes have dragged on and countries have encountered an array of conditionalities. Witness the decline of the EU role in, for example, Serbia³³, where perceptions of strategic partners in the region have shifted. When asked which two countries are the most important strategic partners for their own country, respondents were loath to name the EU. While 54% of Montenegrins ranked their partnership with the EU as top priority, 59% of Serbians, by contrast, identified their most important strategic partners as Russia and China and 21% as Germany, and only 18% labelled the EU as such.

EU = Better life for future generations

A total of 71% of respondents, on average, think that EU membership will result in a better life for future generations. There are regional differences though. Czechia is an outlier, with only 53%, the lowest among Central Europe countries, holding this view. The greatest levels of optimism on this question, meanwhile, are found in Poland (82%), Romania and Slovakia (80%). In the Western Balkan countries, where the question was framed in the context of potential membership, Macedonians (78%) were particularly sanguine, followed by Serbians and Montenegrins at 64%.

71% of respondents, on average, think that EU membership will result in a better life for future generations.

The EU and our values and identity

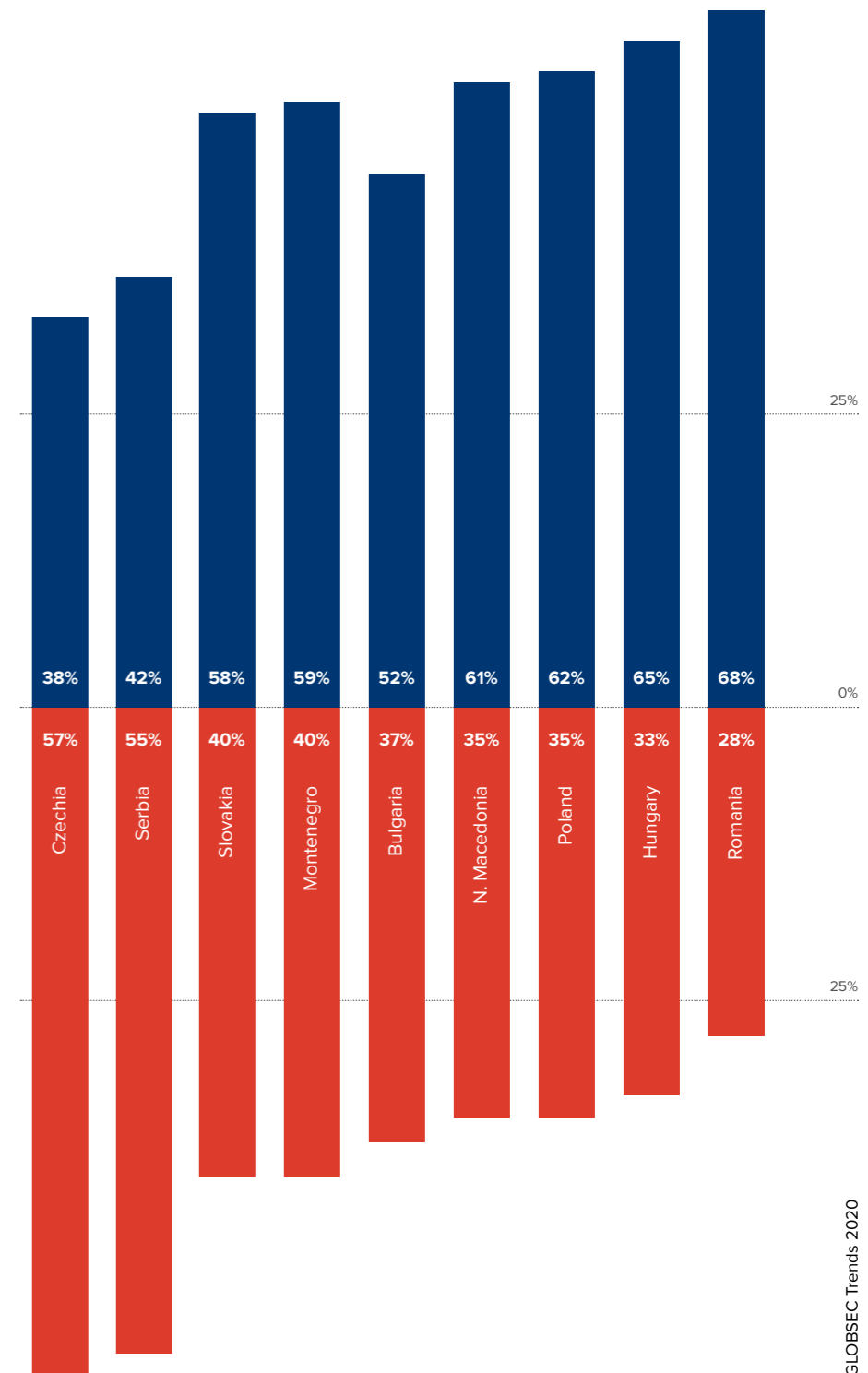
Contradictions abound in societal perceptions of the EU. In all countries, respondents expressed interest in being part of the EU and majorities were also confident that the EU could improve their lives and those of future generations. Yet these benefits appear to be perceived primarily in material terms.

While in 7 of 9 countries the majority of respondents do not feel that the EU is destroying their country's traditional values and identity, this narrative of an EU as a bulwark against traditions has found itself a sympathetic audience with 30-50% of respondents in the region, Romania being the notable exception. This finding is indicative of the fact that, despite a general consensus that the EU is beneficial, the region is particularly sensitive to questions concerning the preservation of values and identity. In this vein, political actors that have propagated "protecting our traditional values" political rhetoric appear to have been met with success. This is the case, for example, in Czechia. Though not necessarily perceived as especially strident about traditions compared to others in the region, against the backdrop of an unpopular EU in the country, the EU as a destroyer of traditions talking point has taken hold.

Despite Czechs not being generally considered as a traditional society, stronger Euroscepticism makes them prone to believe the narratives demonising the EU.

Do you think that the EU is destroying your country's traditional values and identity?

■ No ■ Yes



EU Paradox

Differentiation in perceptions towards the EU are also apparent when comparing views of EU competencies. A majority of CEE respondents, for example, want the EU to present a united front on the world stage, even if that clashes with their own interests. Support for the EU in acting as a coherent foreign policy bloc meshes with findings indicating that an average 38% of EU-based respondents perceive the EU to be growing in importance over the past five years.

There is, however, a contradiction concerning the application of certain measures to its own member states. The storyline of a so-called “EU dictate” indeed has seeped into the political discourse and public sphere in numerous countries over the past few years. Numerous respondents, in particular, believe that the EU dictates policies to their countries without the possibility for a domestic say on this agenda.

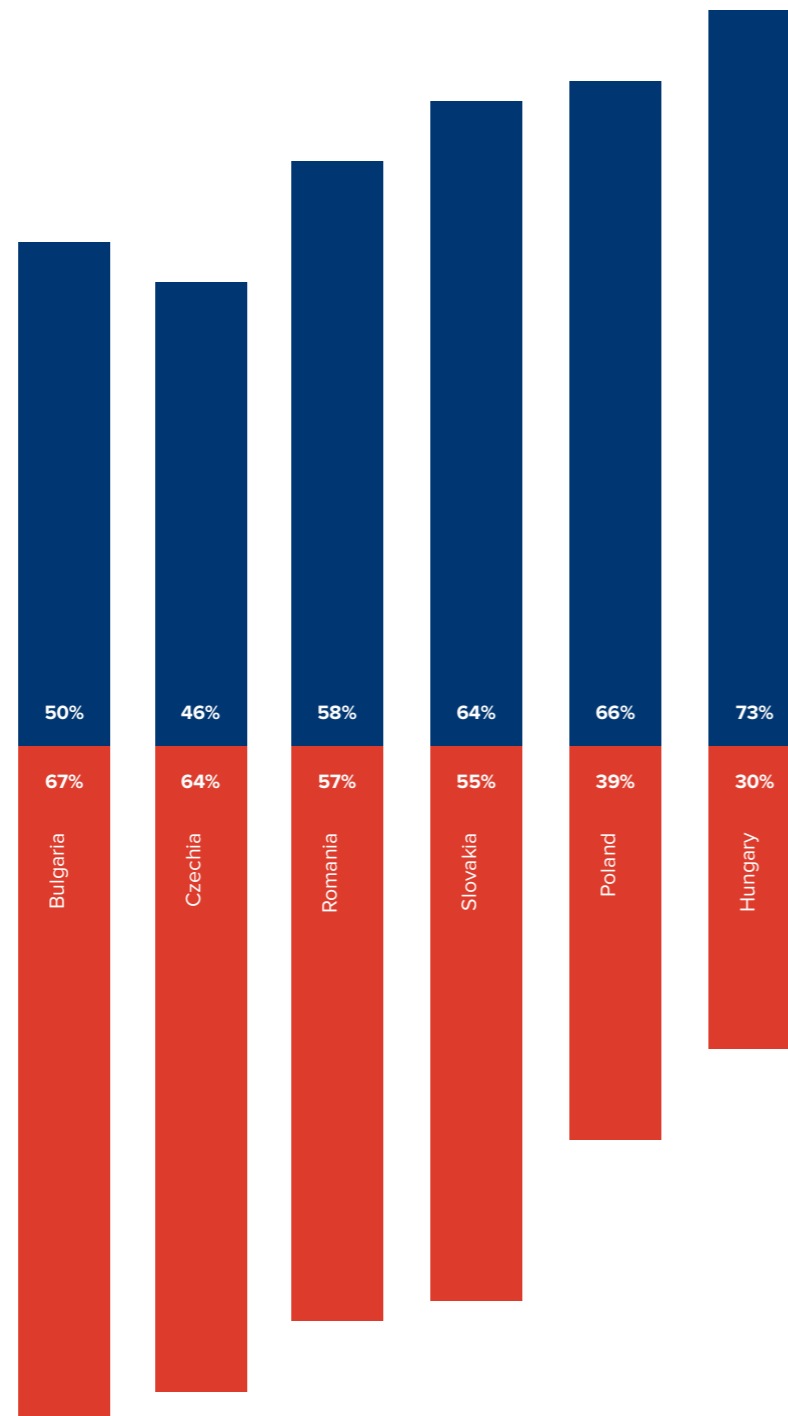
In contrast to the notion of the EU becoming a unified actor in international politics, the EU dictate trope is primarily judged to be an issue of domestic politics, often in connection to value-based sensitive issues like migration and LGBT+ rights. GLOBSEC data, for example, show that the EU is partially perceived as a threat to traditional values and national identity (especially in Czechia, Slovakia and Bulgaria)³⁴.

Narratives disseminated by various actors seeking to nurture confusion, undermine democracy and weaken Euro-Atlantic partnerships³⁵ are contributing to this dichotomic understanding of the EU.

EU should act as one block vs. EU dictate

Those who agree with the following statements:

- The EU should act as one block on the world scene, even if it sometimes clashes with my country's interests.
- The EU dictates us what to do without my country having a chance to influence it.



A majority of CEE respondents want the EU to act as a united bloc on the world stage, even if that clashes with their own interests. At the same time, however, many believe that the EU dictates policies to their countries.

Trends to watch out for

⚠ **The EU's pull factor will continue to operate as populations are drawn in by the prospect of financial benefits and economic growth.**

For decades EU membership has been viewed as an objective whose attainment motivated critical reforms and democratic transitions in numerous countries across different regions. Despite

worries of an “EU dictate”, the EU still holds a positive image among its prospective members. Unless it invests more resources into communication and relationship-building, however, it risks losing momentum, evidenced by developments in Turkey and to a certain extent also in Serbia. The unstable political situation in several CEE countries and the use of anti-NATO rhetoric as a wedge issue in political debates might only further destabilise support for the organisation in the region.

⚠ **Rise of polarisation continues to harm the EU.**

Polarising issues connected to values and identity have become pertinent in affecting EU policy and decision-making processes, with those capitalising on these issues increasingly finding themselves in positions of power. Unless the EU redefines its values and principles or changes its modus operandi, these developments will continue to impair EU interests and hamper its unity.



NATO

Chapter 4 Reading time 8 min

The NATO accession of post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe was hailed at the time as a success story of transformation and a testament to the new post-Cold War security architecture based on the liberal democratic order. The addition of new members from the Balkans was indeed perceived as a logical next step as stabilisation in the region paired with the pro-western ambitions of countries.

Yet, it seems that NATO armour has lost some of its shine both in the CEE and in the Western Balkans. The same NATO accession that once seemed to be an almost inevitable process with no real alternative is now being increasingly questioned in certain corners. NATO is still perceived as the primary security guarantee across the region but gaps and internal conflicts threaten to further undermine its image at a time of increasing superpower competition.

NATO losing its appeal in CEE?

Central Europeans cherish the security umbrella provided by NATO, yet the positive trend line of increasing support for NATO membership has come to a screeching halt in most countries. While NATO is still overwhelmingly popular in the region with 72% backing membership, Czechia and Bulgaria are moving in the opposite direction. Especially significant are developments in Czechia, once one of the most vehement proponents of NATO in the region, alongside Poland and Romania. Not only has support for NATO dropped in Czechia, sentiment for leaving NATO has seen a corresponding rise of 9%. According to the Czech polling agency STEM³⁶, plunging support for NATO in Czechia is linked to perceptions that Czechia now faces fewer global security threats. The nosedive, moreover, corresponds with previous fluctuations in NATO support, which has hovered historically at around 70%.

In Bulgaria, a more concerning shift has occurred, with support for NATO in 2020 falling below 50% for the first time since Bulgaria joined the organisation in 2004.

There has been a particular increase seen in the number of Bulgarians who are ambivalent on NATO membership. The share of those expressing no opinion indeed swelled nine percentage points, rising from 21% to 30%.

According to the Bulgarian Center for the Study of Democracy, this development is driven to a large extent by increasing dissemination and acceptance of pro-Russian disinformation and anti-NATO narratives in Bulgaria, which have entered into usage even by the mainstream media and in the public political domain.

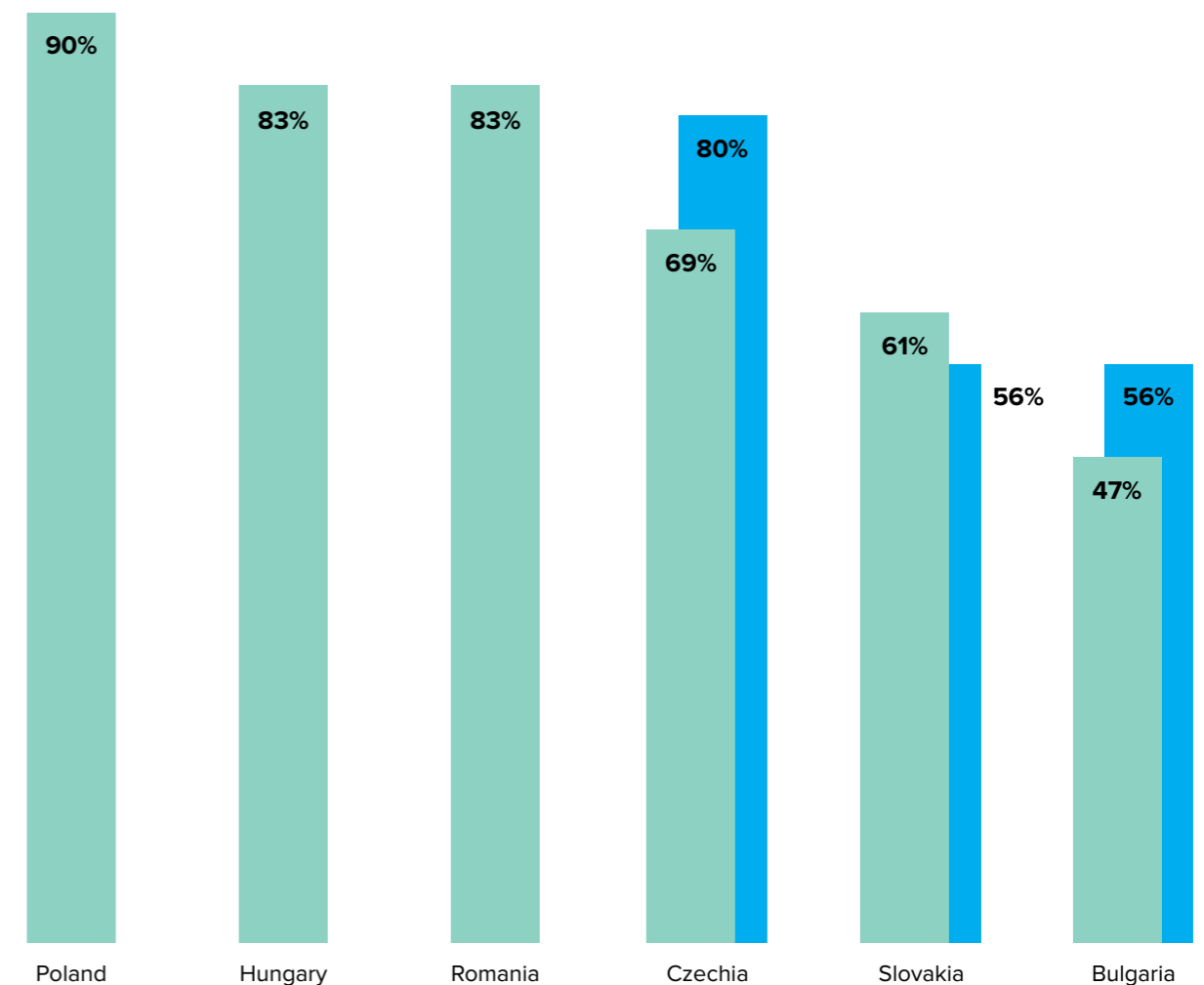
Meanwhile, growing support for NATO observed in Slovakia, which used to be one of the least enthusiastic backers of the organisation in the region, may be tied to the clear and consistent messaging of the new Slovak administration on its foreign policy approach including on NATO and its importance for Slovakia. This pattern corresponds to a similar increase in Slovakia's pro-Western orientation described in the East vs. West chapter.

Steady growth of support for NATO membership in Slovakia continued over the last 4 years, the support has risen by 18%.

“Among the most propagated pro-Russian narratives have been the descriptions of NATO and the EU as devious actors with a global agenda intended to undermine the sovereignty of nation-states and to manipulate governments in destroying their relations with Russia. NATO is also largely portrayed as an extension of US power in Europe, which has contributed to widespread mistrust among Bulgarians in the alliance’s objectives of boosting regional security.” [Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria]

Those who would vote to stay in NATO in a referendum*

2020 2019



*relevant shifts in attitudes since 2019 were only found in Czechia, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Complete results from past years can be found in GLOBSEC Trends 2019.

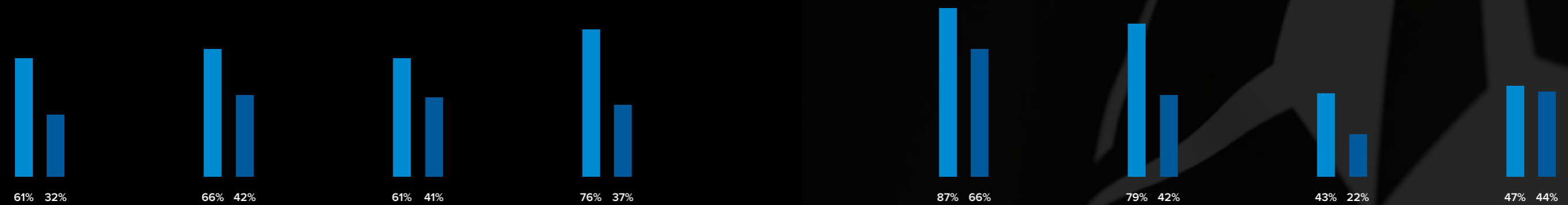


NATO chain: hawks, steady supporters and the weak links

The penetration of pro-Russian narratives into the CEE region is quite significant. Almost 4 out of 10 people living in NATO member countries in the region believe that NATO is an aggressive tool of the US or that NATO is provoking Russia by establishing military bases near the country.

Those who agree with the following statements:

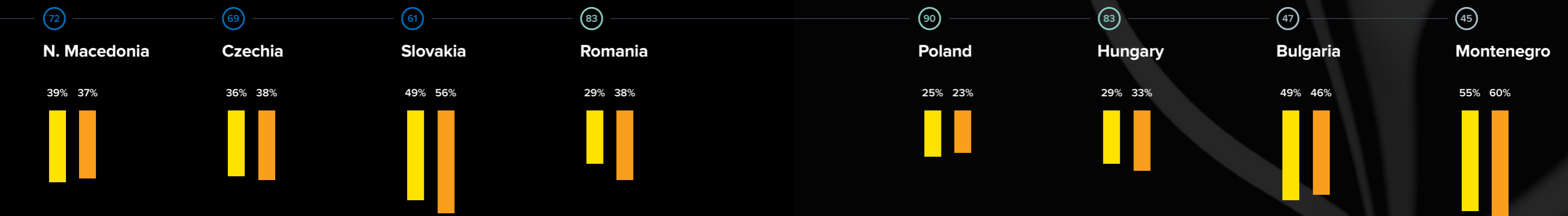
- My country's membership in NATO means we are living in a safer environment.
- Russia deliberately provokes NATO by initiating conflicts in Eastern Europe.



On the other hand, 7 out of 10 Central Europeans agree that NATO membership has provided them a safer living environment. There are, nonetheless, significant differences in the region, with Poland, Romania and Hungary being the least likely to express negative perceptions of

NATO and, on the other side of the spectrum, Bulgaria and Slovakia being the most receptive to anti-NATO creeds. This confirms previous findings from GLOBSEC Trends 2017³⁷, which identified Slovakia and Bulgaria as the weakest links in the NATO Chain and also corresponds with the fact that

these two countries are home to the highest levels of support for pan-Slavic narratives.



Those who agree with the following statements:

- NATO is an aggressive organisation and a tool for the US to control other countries.
- NATO deliberately provokes Russia by encircling it with military bases.

*Those who would vote to stay in NATO in a referendum



NATO in the Western Balkans


Despite the recent NATO accessions of Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020, on average, non-EU Balkan countries are 22% more likely to believe that NATO is an aggressive organisation compared to their Central European counterparts. In a similar vein, non-EU Balkan countries are 17% more likely to believe that NATO is provoking Russia with its placement of bases.


It comes as no surprise that the Serbian population is particularly antagonistic towards NATO, with the trauma of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign and its victims continuing to shape opinions even 21 years later. Russian disinformation regarding NATO, which has been widely circulated in the mainstream media and spilled over into political discourse in the country, effectively builds upon and instrumentalises existing attitudes. According to an International Republican Institute opinion poll, 83% of Serbians perceive the role of NATO in the world negatively³⁸.

Even in the new NATO members, Montenegro and North Macedonia, populations are quite divided on their views on NATO. Montenegrins, due to the country's historic and cultural links with Serbia, are more likely to hold

negative perceptions of NATO, with more than half the population agreeing with the perspective that NATO is a US tool that is used to provoke Russia. While Montenegrin society has always been close to equally divided in its views on NATO, it appears that anti-NATO narratives are currently enjoying the upper hand.

North Macedonia remains the only country in the Balkan region where a majority of the population rejects pro-Russian and anti-NATO narratives. The country's active and long-standing cooperation with the US, the EU and NATO have all contributed to a considerably more positive perception of NATO in North Macedonia.

 "During the war in Kosovo, Serbia and the Serbian population living in several Balkan countries (Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina) perceived NATO and US as an aggressor. On the other side, North Macedonia would never solve any of its major issues without the mediation and the strong support of the 'West'. The US, NATO and European Allies have always acted swiftly to mediate all major issues." [ATA-Macedonia, North Macedonia]

 "Anti-NATO propaganda was promulgated through several different framings including the argument that joining NATO was specifically directed against Russia, Serbia, Orthodoxy, tradition and Serbian and Slavic culture. The strong connections with Russia and Serbia are also a major factor in this case. Another pertinent issue is the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war when military targets in Montenegro, then a part of Yugoslavia, were bombed." [Center for Democratic Transition, Montenegro]

On average, non-EU Balkan countries are 22% more likely to believe that NATO is an aggressive organisation compared to their Central European counterparts



Image of NATO: Protector or Aggressor?



*Serbia is not a NATO member

Trends to watch out for

! NATO support will continue to wane in CEE.

Support for NATO in Bulgaria might deteriorate further, as anti-NATO narratives, driven by external and internal actors, take their toll. The unstable political situation in several CEE countries and the use of anti-NATO rhetoric as a wedge issue in political debates might only further destabilise support for the organisation in the region.

! The Western Balkans will experience further shifts in NATO perceptions with Montenegro and North Macedonia moving in opposite directions.

The Western Balkans will continue to be a region where global and regional powers clash and this dynamic will likely lead to further destabilisation.

! The renewed US pledge to the transatlantic security partnership will act as a bulwark against a resurgent Russia and China.

The new US administration and its policies towards the CEE and Balkan region will significantly influence perceptions of the US, itself closely tied to attitudes towards NATO.

UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA

Chapter 5 Reading time 12 min

Russia and the US have historically been the two primary centres of gravity, pulling countries of the CEE and Western Balkan region into their civilisational and cultural orbits through the use of security, economic and political tools. The post-Cold war period, when Russia retreated from both regions and the West, led by the US, was seen as the only viable option, is over. Russia's investments into its propaganda apparatus appear to be paying off. Particularly at a time when perception is often more important than reality, Russia's image increasingly looms large over the region.

Attitudes of CEE and Western Balkan countries towards Russia and the US are mixed and again reflect cultural and historical links, geopolitics, current developments and domestic politics. The region is seen by many as a playground for superpowers and the attitudes of different populations seem to correspond with such narratives.

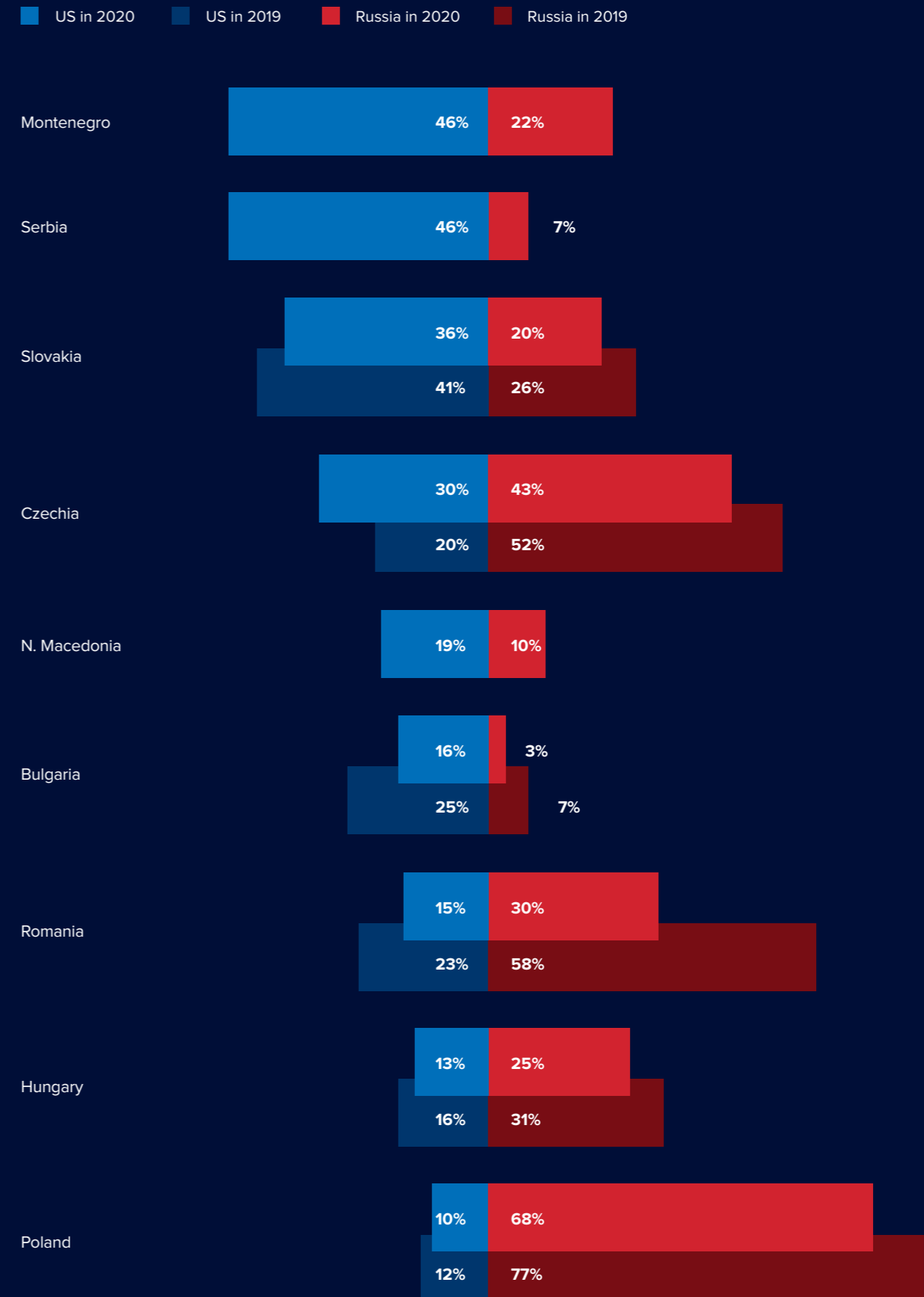
Perception of threat

Perceptions vary from country to country. Poland and Serbia, for example, seem to be remaining true to their image – the former as the most ardently pro-US country in the

region, the latter the most stridently pro-Russian. Heightened perceptions, among some NATO members, that the US poses a threat, declining fears concerning Russia and a state

of haziness that prevails in some countries, furthermore, merit special attention.

Those who believe Russia or US present a danger (significant threat) to their country:



Why is the US seen as a threat?

Those who perceive the US as a threat, meanwhile, generally refer to the image of the US as an aggressor on the world stage. In Serbia and Montenegro, responses tended to emphasise “bad historical experience” including specifically the NATO bombing of 1999. Around two thirds of responses from Slovaks and Czechs alluded to US expansionist and/or belligerent behaviour in the world.



Why is the US not seen as a threat in most countries?

1 US is our ally / partner in NATO

Where: Slovakia, Poland, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Romania

In the countries above, 32% of responses, on average, that identified the US as not a threat expressed the perception that the US is an ally, a member in NATO and/or a country that protects them and their partners.

2 Our country is not interesting or threatening to the US

Where: all countries

This point on inferiority is a common feature to threat perception in the region. Respondents believe that their countries are too minuscule and insignificant on the geopolitical playing field for any larger power to be interested in engaging in interference. This conclusion is, nevertheless, rather paradoxical given that all countries in the region gained their independence from foreign influence only a few decades ago.

3 Fair or good relations and/or business ties

Where: Hungary, Poland and North Macedonia

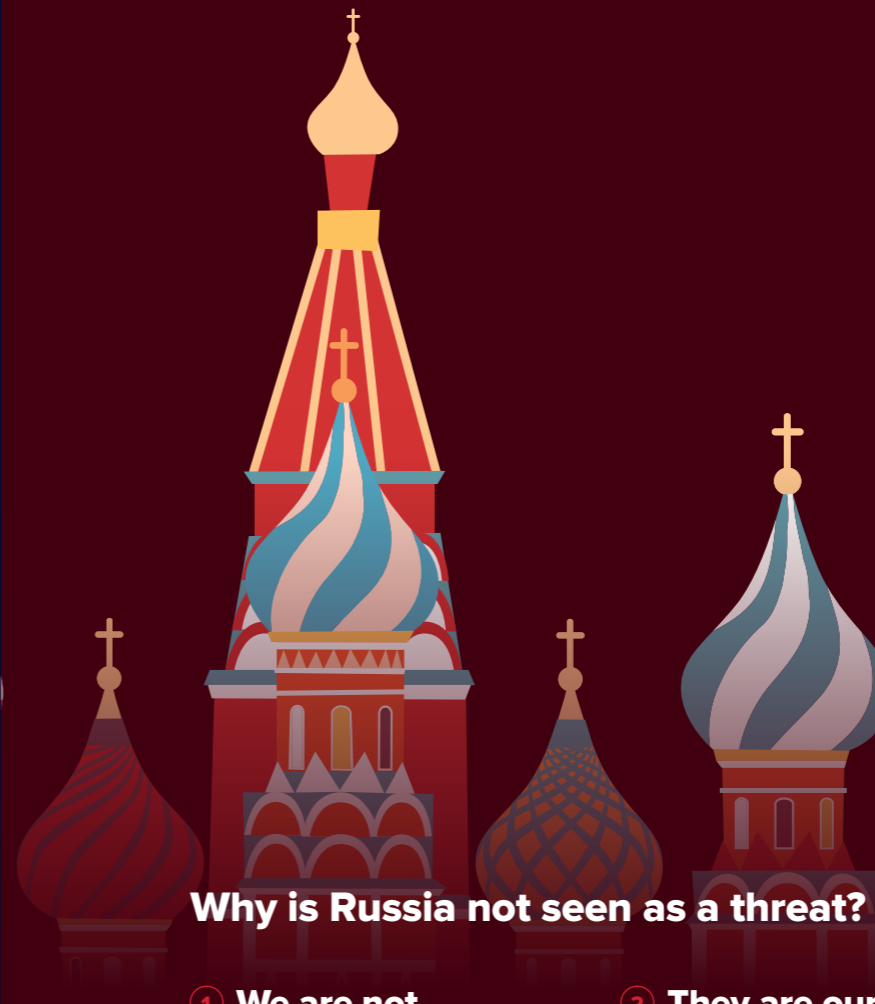
Undecided

In Romania and Bulgaria, around 50% of respondents declined to respond or did not know how to respond to questions about threat perceptions.

In North Macedonia and Slovakia, the same figure was around 20%.

Why is Russia seen as a threat?

In Poland and Czechia, around 30% of all responses identified negative historical experiences. This awareness is reflective of ongoing communication campaigns and/or general knowledge of 20th century history and current events in both countries. Romanians, on the other hand, note their membership in NATO and alliance with the US (22% of responses) and perceptions that Russia is an aggressor (21% of responses).



Why is Russia not seen as a threat?

1 We are not interesting or threatening to Russia

Where: Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary and North Macedonia

Around a third of responses reiterated the argument that Russia does not pose a threat to their country because Moscow is unlikely to be interested in them. This is a concerning finding in light of all the evidence to the contrary on Russian intervention in CEE and the Western Balkans.

2 They are our brother/sister nation

Where: Slovakia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro

As elaborated further later in this chapter, a sense that “Slavic brotherhood” matters is strongly present in the countries.

3 We have fair relations/we are partners

Where: Hungary and Bulgaria (partner), Serbia and Montenegro (ally and friend)

While the former two voiced apparent fair relations and partnerships as a reason for not labelling Russia as a threat, Serbians and Montenegrins take it a step further in identifying Russia as a friend and an ally who respects and supports them.



“As far as threats are concerned, Macedonians are more focused on internal threats (such as inter-ethnic issues and challenges) and external issues emanating from adjacent countries (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and Albania). These include identity issues that are often times contested by neighbouring countries (name of the country, history, the language, autonomy and recognition of the church, etc...)” [ATA-Macedonia, North Macedonia]

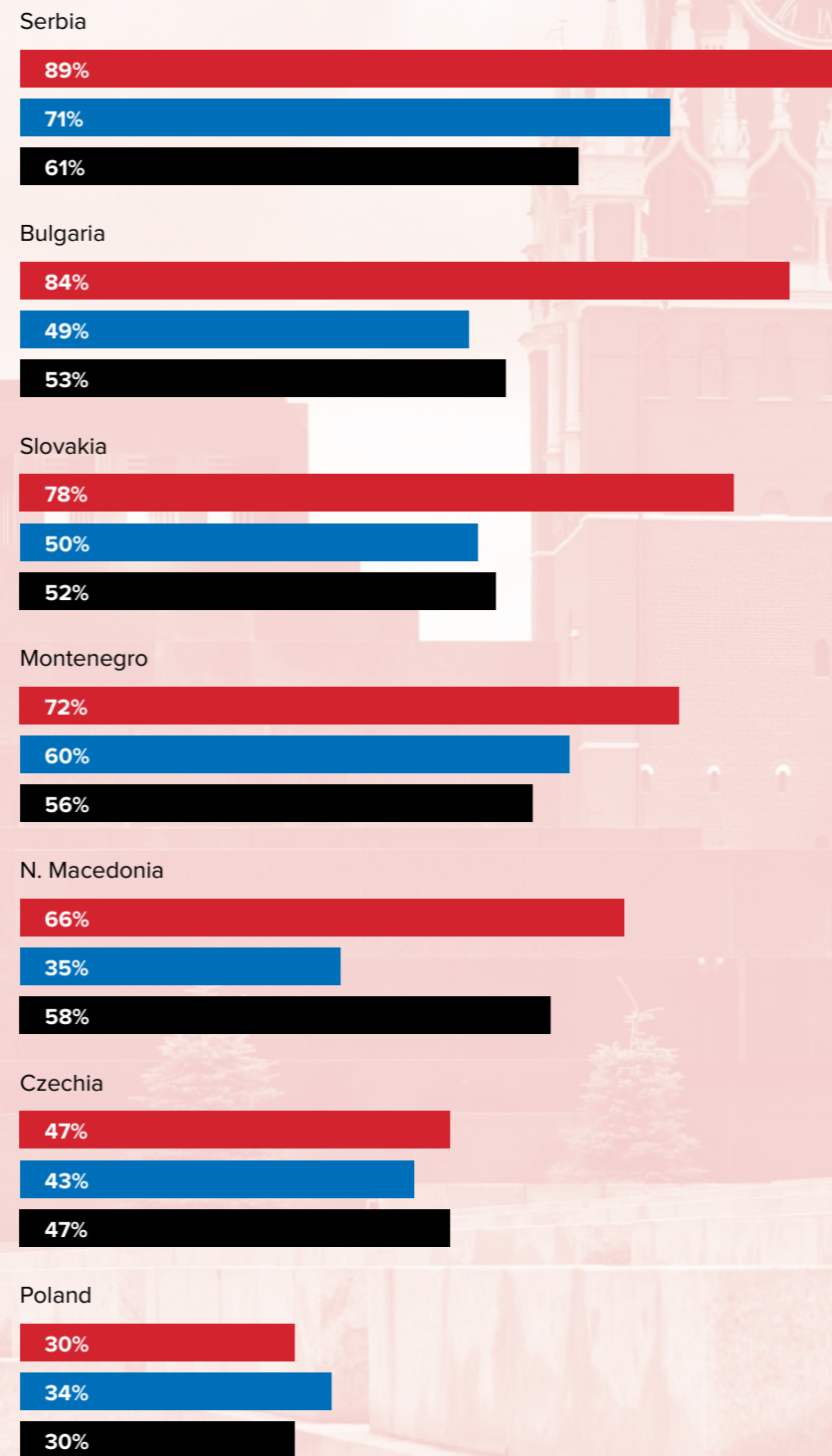
Mighty Russian Slavic brother

Russia, deploying the legacy of communism and its modern apparatus of information influence, has managed to project its preferred image into the minds of people living in the region: Russia is a Slavic brother and a military superpower unjustly blamed by the West for all wrongdoings. The combination of these three elements creates a powerful story of an underdog unjustly accused of misconduct, providing a convenient escape for the "true" culprits (US and NATO) to evade responsibility. The extent to which this narrative is successful in seeping into the mainstream differs across the region, though the existence of a Slavic link plays an important role.

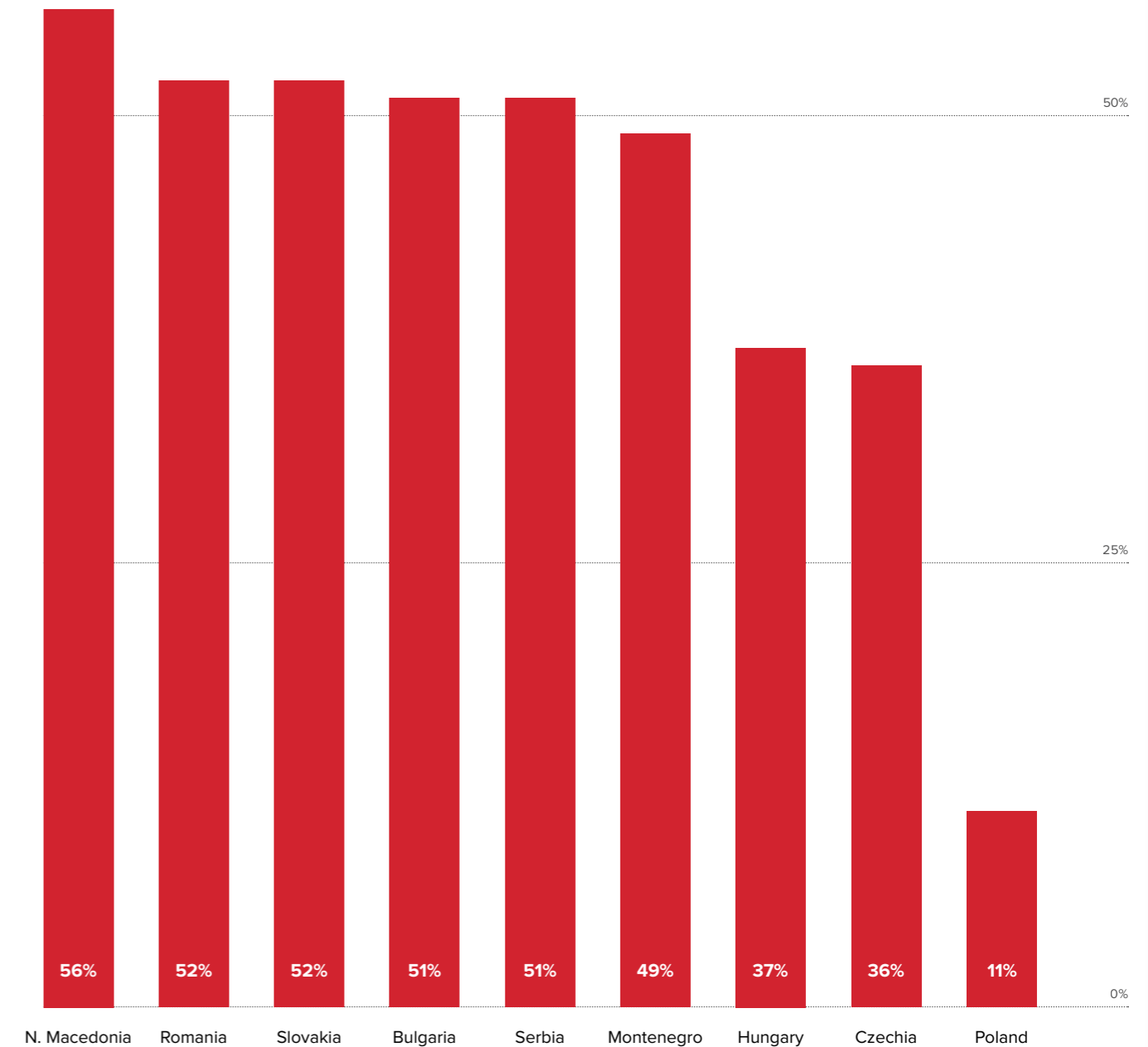
Despite no common Slavic heritage, both Hungary (43%) and Romania (37%) share some of the narratives depicting Russia as an innocent victim of the West.

Those who agree with Pro-Russian narratives

- Russia is my country's traditional Slavic sister/brother nation.
- Western countries often unjustly accuse Russia of unlawful or fraudulent behaviour.
- Russia's military power is far greater than that of any other country in the world.



Those who disagree that Russia is behaving aggressively against its neighbours and tries to weaken the EU and NATO.



Perception of Russia seems to be changing in Romania.

The perception that Russia acts in aggressive manner towards its neighbours is not prevalent among the countries surveyed. While significant differences among individual CEE countries exist, as a whole, the population of the region is almost evenly split in their views on Russia bullying its neighbours. Nearly half the population (47%) of the region

believes that Russia is unjustly accused of unlawful behaviour by the West compared to 44%, on average, that identify Russia as aggressive.

Superior Russian guns: image projection trumps reality

Another important element of Russia's image abroad is its projection that it is a military superpower on par or even superior to the US. It is, in fact, striking that more people in this region believe that Russia has the upper hand when it comes to military equipment (50%) in comparison to the US (47%). This finding underlines the effectiveness of Russian disinformation efforts including attempts to cultivate views that contradict reality on the ground. With respect to this illustration, for example, the US, in fact, outperforms Russia both in terms of military spending and military capabilities³⁹.

“The fact that more Czechs believe that Russia has the most powerful military in the world than the similar statement about the US military could be linked to the significant amount of coverage the Russian military garners in the Czech news media. This coverage is not limited only to propagandistic outlets like Sputnik but also the mainstream.”
[Prague Security Studies Institute, Czechia]

More people in this region believe that Russia has superior military equipment (50%) in comparison to the US (47%).

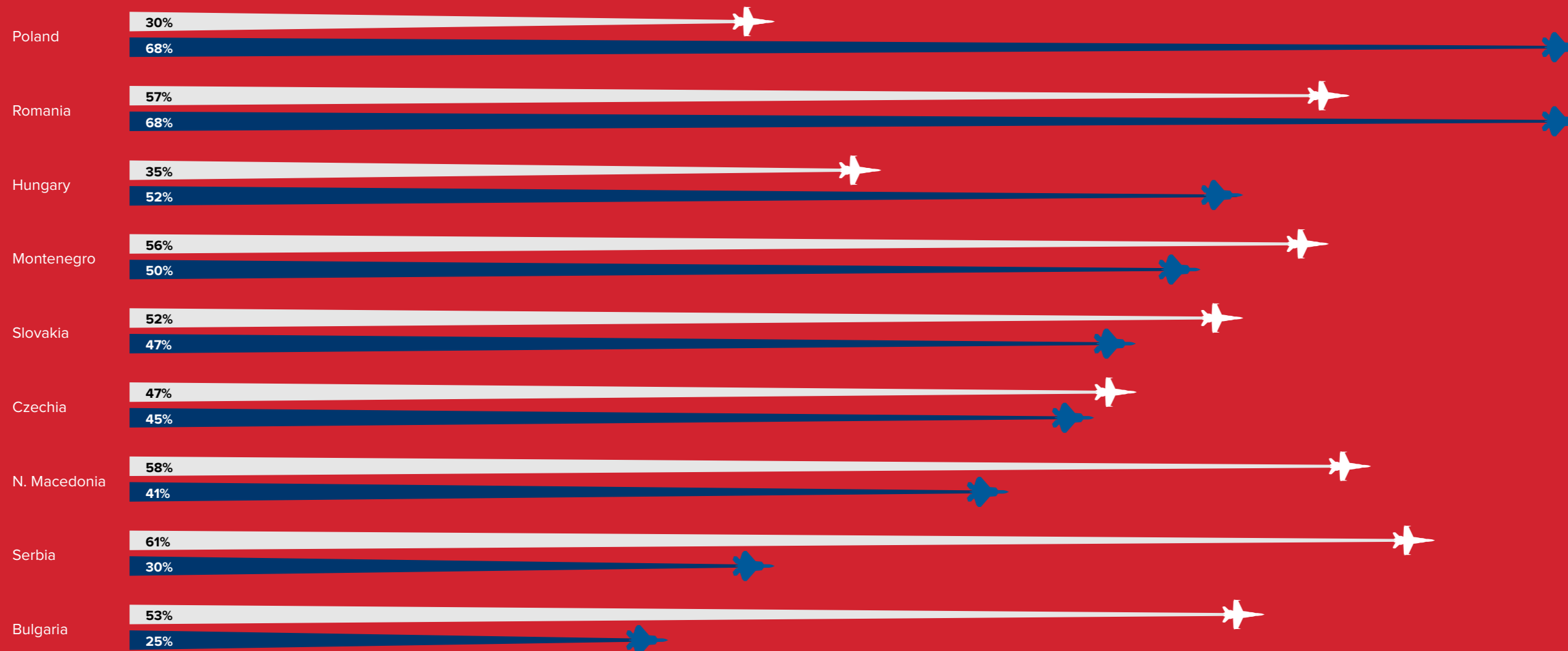
The notion of a Slavic brotherhood/sisterhood uniting all Slavic nations with Mother Russia exerts a powerful impact in the region, with 67% of respondents in Slavic countries⁴⁰ subscribing to such views and only 28% rejecting this ideological construct. Serbia and Slovakia particularly stand out from the pack, with more than three quarters of the populations in these two countries supporting the idea, rendering both places considerably more susceptible to other Russian narratives and to interference more generally. The importance of the Slavic brotherhood

motif in forming overall perceptions of Russia is evident also when it comes to the perception of Russia as a threat. The idea of a Slavic brotherhood and/or the importance placed on historical links with Russia was indeed the second most common reason cited by respondents in not listing Russia as a threat. Yet Hungary remains an exception to this rule. Despite not sharing a common Slavic heritage, Hungarians, like their Slavic neighbours, are equally loath to label Russia as a threat.

“Poland and Russia have had a troubled past and the relations on a bilateral level are strained also due to the 2010 Smolensk plane crash. But on a people-to-people level, Poles see Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians as their brothers with whom they share a complicated history and, to some extent, a more conservative outlook on the world.” [Political Accountability Foundation, Poland]

Those who agree that:

■ Russia's military power is far greater than that of any other country in the world. ■ The US military is more powerful and technologically advanced than Russian.



“Russia is clearly not perceived as a threat. The Hungarian government's rhetoric generally depicts relations with Russia in a positive light and as a partnership. The Prime Minister himself, moreover, has often emphasised that Russia is not a security threat to Hungary⁴¹.” [Political Capital Institute, Hungary]

Russia is our Slavic brother



US appeal persists

The US is seen as an important ally rather than a threat, though scepticism remains regarding its intentions and involvement. The US is perceived predominantly as an ally and partner by more than half of the population in all CEE and Western Balkan NATO members. That said, there are profound differences between individual countries in the intensity of these views. Poland continues to lead the chart as the most pro-US country in the region, attributed to its at times tumultuous history and unfavourable geographic position that places it on borders with Kaliningrad, the heavily militarised Russian enclave, and Belarus. Even in countries highly sympathetic to pro-Russian narratives and in those that cherish their Slavic roots, like Bulgaria and Slovakia, there is a prevailing consensus that the US is an ally.

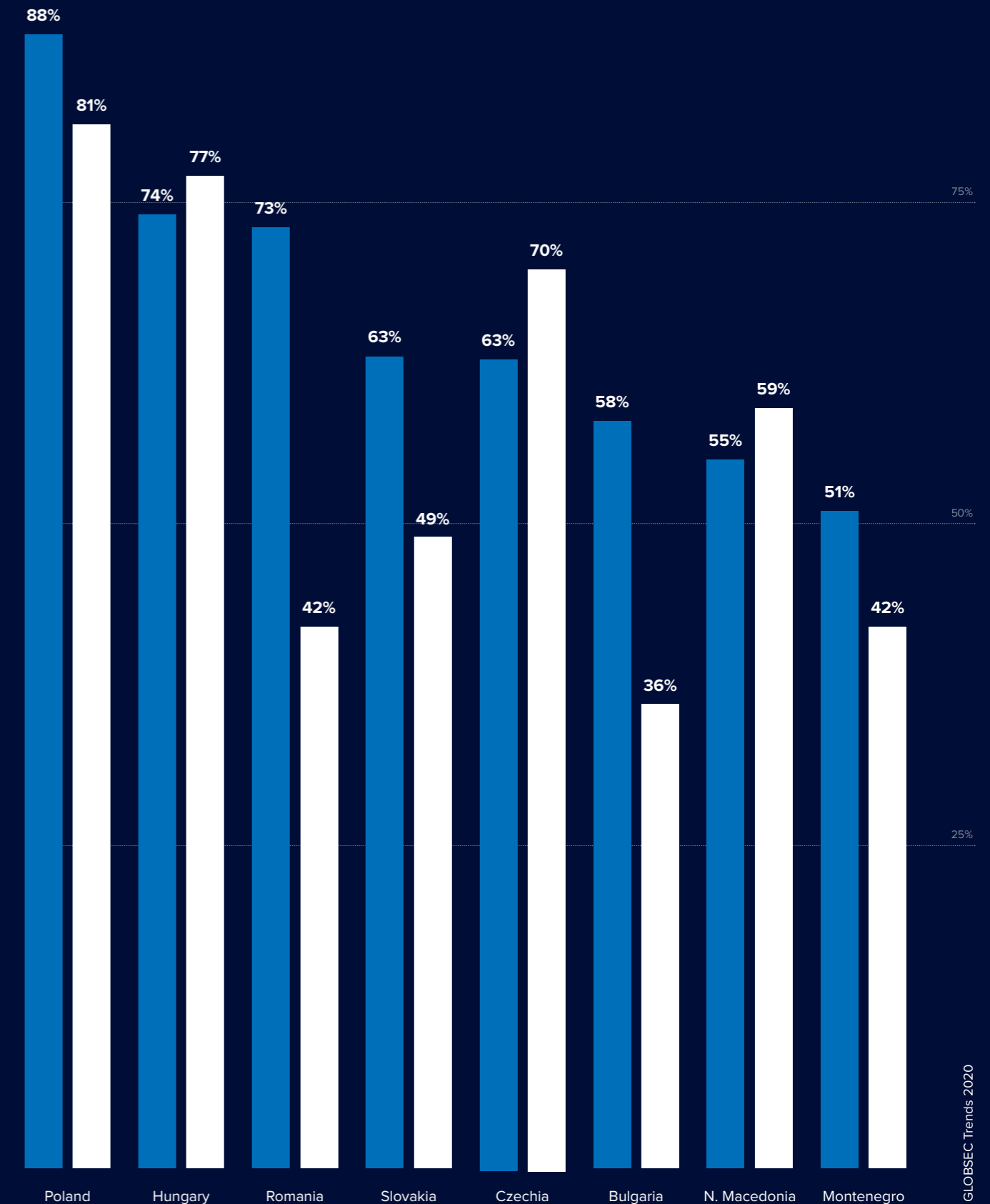
The sentiment that the US is an ally and conversely not a threat could have important ramifications in the struggle to counter pro-Russian information operations in the region, which are often based on demonising the US and its policies. The more people perceive the US to be an ally, the less receptive they appear to be to polarising messages coming from the Kremlin and its proxies in the region.

Even in countries highly sympathetic to pro-Russian narratives, there is a prevailing consensus over the US being an ally.

The more people perceive the US to be an ally, the less receptive they appear to be to polarising messages coming from the Kremlin and its proxies in the region.

The US – ally or a threat?

■ Those who agree that the US is our ally and traditional partner within NATO. ■ Those who agree that the US is NOT a threat*



*Those who answered negatively to question whether the US presents a danger (significant threat) to their country

No appetite for increased US role in the region

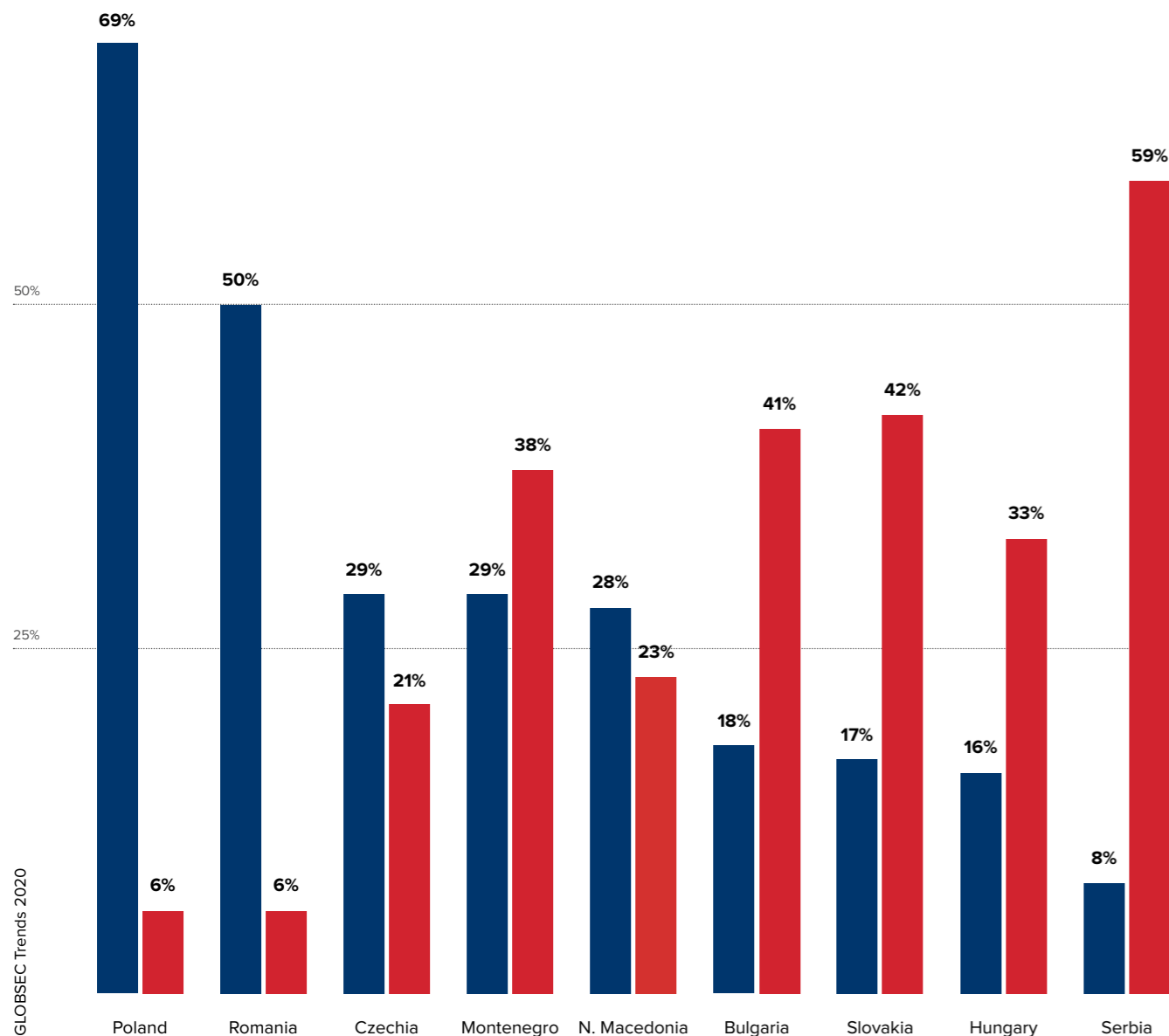
Even among the most ardent supporters of the US, there is little appetite for seeing the US augment its role in the region. The Western Balkan countries, interestingly, are more likely to support such an increased role though. Romania is also an exception in this regard with a majority of respondents welcoming a potential increase in US involvement, perhaps a direct consequence of the expanded Russian military presence in the Black

Sea region and the annexation of Crimea. This general lack of support, however, seems to confirm the notion that NATO is the preferred framework for cooperation with the US in the majority of countries. It remains to be seen, however, whether these attitudes are the result of negative perceptions towards the current US administration or are linked to a deeper yearning for greater European autonomy.

NATO is the preferred framework for cooperation with the US.

Strategic partners: the US, Russia or neither?

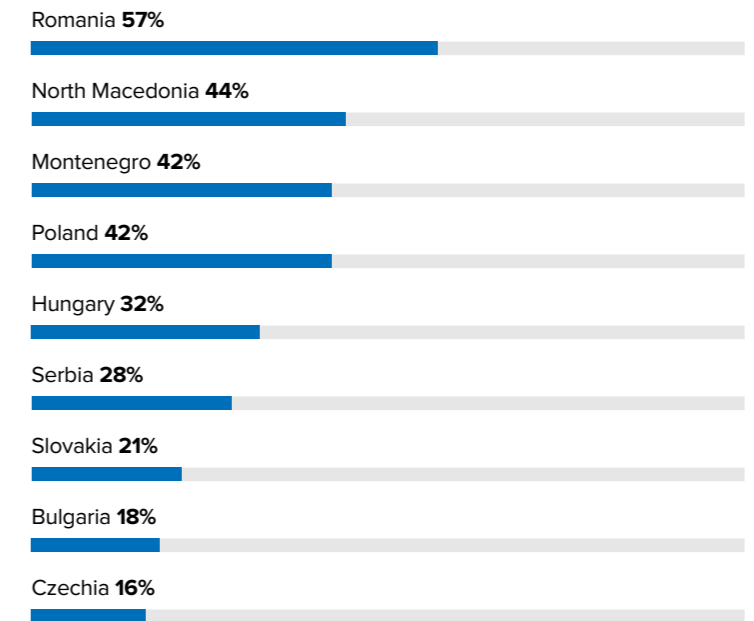
■ The United States ■ Russia



When it comes to perceptions that the US and Russia are strategic partners, a rift between surveyed countries is quite evident. Poland and Romania are the only two countries where the US draws significant support, while Serbia, Slovakia and Bulgaria are the strongest supporters of Russia.

With the exception of Poland and Romania, people living in the region do not choose the US as their most important strategic partner and rather place other European countries in this role. The verdict is still out on whether this dwindling prioritization of the US in the region could, among other possibilities, be a consequence of the US pivot to Asia or an indication that the longing for greater European strategic autonomy championed by some has found a sympathetic audience. The void created by the US pulling out of the region, however, risks being swiftly filled by China and Russia, apparent already in the Western Balkans.

The US should play a more important role in our region



“The Bulgarian public has been firmly divided along a West-Russia dichotomy which has seen the close cultural, religious and historic connections to Russia presented as antithetic to Western society. This is in line with Russian propaganda narratives that point out that in a world dominated by morally decadent values instilled by Western powers, Russia is the one who protects (Bulgaria’s) traditional Christian and moral values.” [Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria]

Trends to watch out for

! Russia will continue to project its military might and portray itself as a Slavic brother.

The country will, furthermore, continue to make full use of its progress in military modernisation and is likely to further intensify its propaganda that purports an alleged superiority of Russian arms over its western counterparts.

! US will re-enter the world stage.

The increasing realisation that any void created by the US on the world stage will be quickly filled by other superpowers is likely to lead to increased involvement of the US in multi-lateral platforms.

CHINA

Chapter 6

★ Reading time 6 min

With no strong cultural ties or lingering feelings associated to any 20th century power-play, China's position in the region differs from Russia and the US. China is presented, in some countries, as a strategic partner that can be turned to if in need of financing for infrastructure projects. The scale of its influence, meanwhile, is often discussed by both its supporters and detractors at the highest political level, though its power goes unnoticed in some corners. These (in)actions are mirrored in current perceptions of China, though the question of how the political narratives of the present will shape the image of China in the future remains open.

A non-threatening power?

China has been continuously stepping up its game to exert greater influence in Europe. While its approach in the Western Balkans is different to the one the country is pursuing in CEE⁴², China is, in general, not perceived as a threat in the region, despite the majority of Central and Eastern Europeans viewing China as an international actor with increasing power and significance in the world (similar to other parts of Europe⁴³). Czechia, in fact, is the only country where more respondents identify China as a threat than not.

On average, 66% in the region believe that China's power and significance in the world has risen.

Chinese influence operations focus mostly on the use of relatively soft methods of economic pressure, media influence and narrative formation⁴⁴ - the use of aggressive means as understood in the sense of traditional forms of conflict are generally avoided. These methods, consequently, may be perceived as non-threatening by the majority in the region.

This, however, points to the need for more discussion on threats that fall outside the scope of conventional hard tactics like military strikes and warfare. According to a range of experts, China has, in fact, been pursuing a so-called "debt-trap diplomacy"⁴⁵ strategy in the Western Balkans region by financing loans for large infrastructure projects, in turn resulting in unsustainable debt accumulation. China owns 25% of the public debt, for example, in Montenegro⁴⁶. As intelligence services have reported⁴⁷, potential infiltration into the area of public infrastructure through Chinese providers can, moreover, result in severe security breaches and espionage practices. Another type of influence, meanwhile,

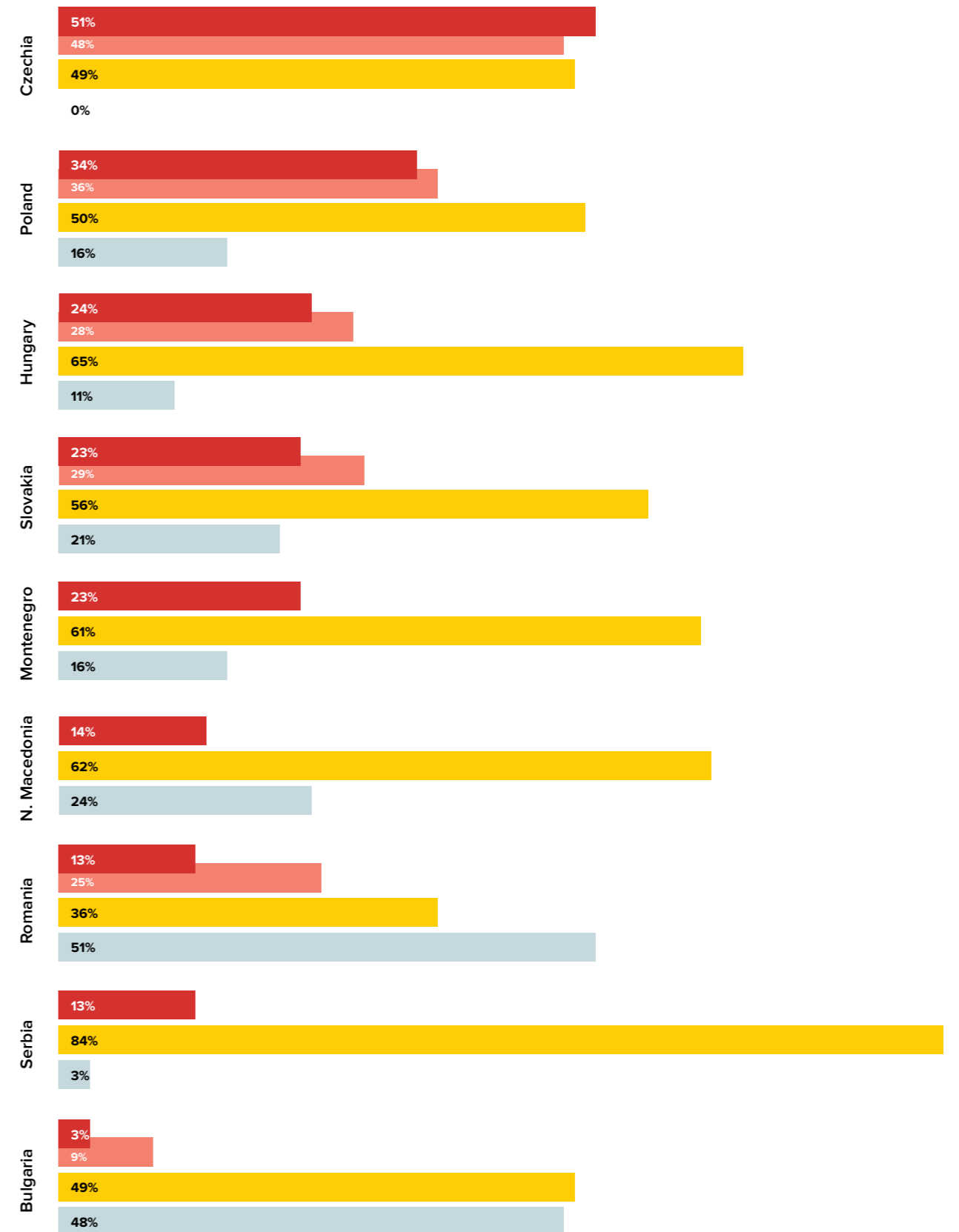


"China came to the fore in Montenegro by providing necessary funds that were lacking for infrastructure projects, which have often been overshadowed by concerns about corruption and transparency. China is, consequently, rather seen as a more neutral and primarily economic player, whose presence has become more visible through its investments."
[Center for Democratic Transition, Montenegro]

can be characterised as Chinese cultural and relationship diplomacy, which is pursued by strengthening people-to-people relations among both national and local governments. This may take the form, for example, of partnerships in the academic sector or attempts to influence the media landscape⁴⁸. The approach ultimately can provide a gateway to engage in indirect influence and one that can later balloon in size and dimension.

Do you think China presents a danger (significant threat) to your country?

■ Yes ■ Yes in 2019 ■ No ■ Do not know



China is perceived as strategic partner by 59% of Serbians and 32% of Hungarians.

Majorities in different societies in the region, with the exception of Czechia, do not identify China as a threat to their countries.

Why is China seen as a threat?

Those who perceive China as a threat (Czechs and Poles) most commonly cite the country's strong economic influence in their reasoning. Czechs also mention, though to a lesser extent, Chinese expansionist tendencies and China's status as an authoritarian or undemocratic regime as threatening to their security.

Why is China not seen as a threat?

1 We are not interested or threatening to China

Where: All countries but especially Slovakia and North Macedonia

Slovaks and Macedonians particularly perceive their countries as too small to garner concern from China. As can also be seen in the case of Russia explored in the previous chapter, this fact is indicative of clear gaps in strategic communication on the part of public institutions on the role of China in the region.

2 Geographical distance

Where: Poland, Romania

Another argument, emblematic of a general lack of awareness in some countries, holds that China is not a threat owing to geographical distance.

3 They are our friends and supported us during the COVID-19 crisis

Where: Serbia, North Macedonia

4 China is only pursuing economic interests, they are our trading partner

Where: Hungary

This line of reasoning is most prevalent among Hungarians who, according to our previous research⁴⁹, indeed have a tendency of seeing geopolitics rather in economic terms.

How is China perceived in the region?



"China has been treated as a very important economic partner ever since the 2008 economic crisis in Hungary. The Hungarian government has indeed consistently described China as a country that provides vast economic opportunities that can only bring benefits to Hungary.

As far as threat perception is concerned, China is seen as too far away to be of concern for Hungarians. The finer security challenges posed by the country (e.g. surveillance, 5G), meanwhile, are rarely discussed in Hungary, only visible in the public discourse when brought up by a narrow range of political actors like Momentum and independent MPs." *[Political Capital Institute, Hungary]*



"Serbia has historically maintained constructive relations with China including during the periods of communism and Yugoslavia. Serbians generally perceive China as a friend given that Beijing has lent its support to Serbia's position on Kosovo and withheld recognition of Kosovan independence. The regular release of official statements from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić that advertise Chinese investments but fail to mention that the financing, in fact, comes in the form of loans are, furthermore, helping to boost China's image in the country. Chinese aid provided at the beginning of the pandemic received heightened attention that stressed its importance. In this vein, pro-Chinese narratives received unprecedented media coverage in comparison to all other countries." *[International and Security Affairs Centre, Serbia]*



"GLOBSEC Trends had previously already shown that China is perceived more negatively in Czechia than in other CEE countries⁵⁰. Relations between the two countries are perceived in Czechia as not only a matter of foreign policy but also domestic politics. In 2014, a new government together with President Miloš Zeman sought to change the country's (until then quite negative) stance towards China as part of a broader shift in foreign policy away from a focus on human rights⁵¹. These moves were subsequently countered by centre-right opposition parties that employed the topic of relations with China to challenge the government, primarily through symbolic gestures like expressions of support for Taiwan⁵². In this regard, negative sentiment towards China became rather mainstreamed into Czech political debates." *[Prague Security Studies Institute, Czechia]*

Trends to watch out for

! Chinese influence may continue to go unnoticed unless it becomes a topic of a mainstream public debate.

Only in Czechia, where the matter of Chinese influence has been featured in debates at the highest political level, are perceptions of a threat posed by China strong. Chinese methods of soft power influence will continue to garner little attention unless the issue is brought to the fore publicly and policies are implemented at both national and EU levels.

! The declining perception that Russia and China pose a threat, combined with growing irresolution regarding questions of partners and foes, will stay here without robust public diplomacy and engagement on the part of the EU and US.

These developments could, on the one hand, be conspiring on

account of increasing muddle in world affairs, fuelled, for example, by a range of actors that use the internet to question the validity of information. On the other hand, non-democratic regimes that are playing a greater role in contributing to economic growth and gaining power in the world may have started to gain appeal once again. There is, nonetheless, currently a significant void present that could be filled by a range of actors seeking to sway public opinion in different directions.

DEMOCRACY & POLARISATION

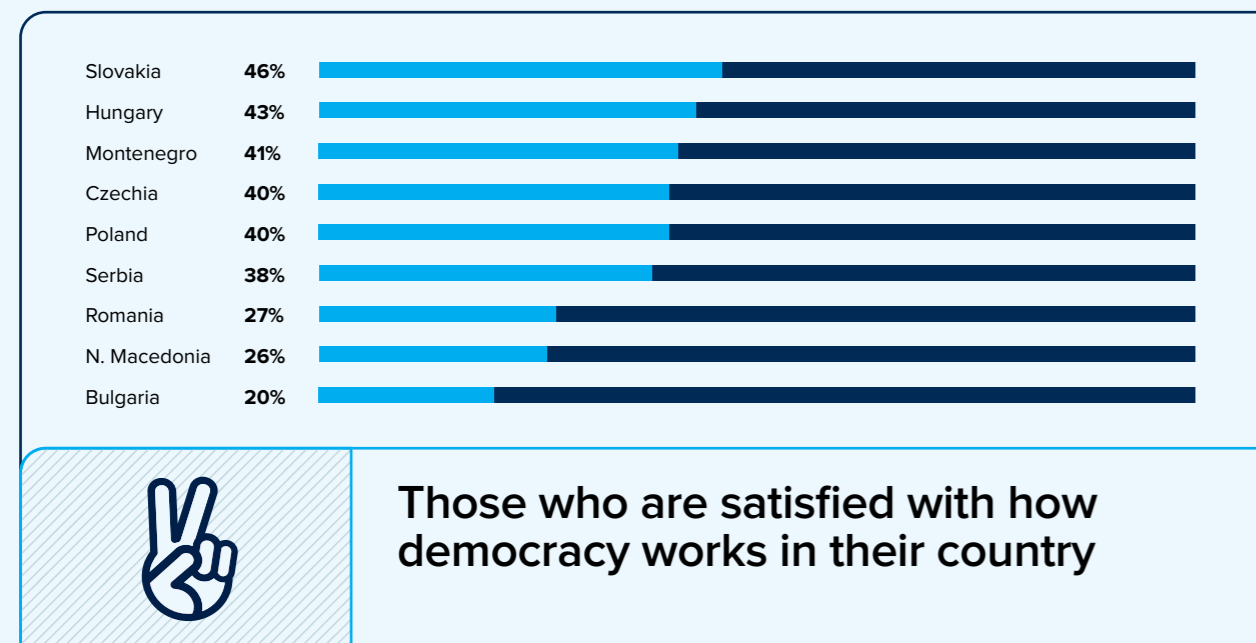
Chapter 7  Reading time 9 min

The path towards democratisation has varied for each of the surveyed countries, especially when comparing Central Europe to the Western Balkans. In the past decade though, while the quality of democracy has continued to rise in some countries, the democratisation process has started to sputter in others⁵³. As a result, the democratic standards upheld by some countries of Central Europe are now on par with those in the Western Balkans. The survey data also reveal that perceptions of democracy are not necessarily different in the two regions. With a rising number of actors at work constantly undermining democratic values and principles, the region is finding itself in the peculiar situation where it has achieved freedoms it had struggled for on the one hand and yet faces headwinds pushing back against securing these same freedoms for others.

The vehement support for democratic political systems should be deemed a positive sign for the region. Overlaps between people identifying both systems as potentially good for their

country can be explained by the fact that the question offered a spectrum of choices including fairly good, very good or bad in evaluating the two types of systems. In North Macedonia,

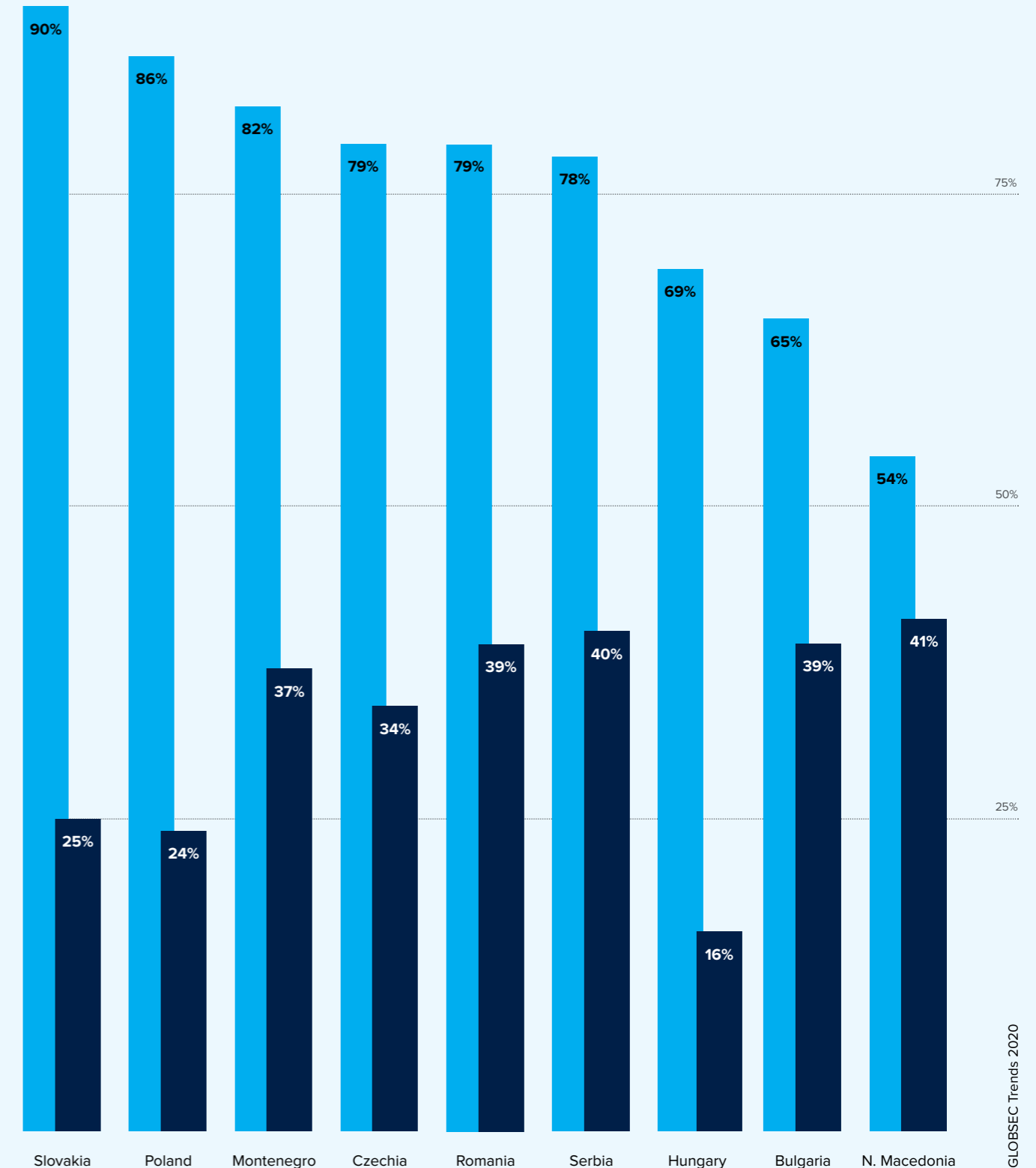
Bulgaria and Romania, lower levels of satisfaction with how democracy works in their country (below) also play a factor in their higher levels of tolerance for a strong leader.



Which form of government is good for your country?

Those who affirmed that the following form of government is “fairly” or “very” good for their country:

■ Democratic political system with regular elections and a multiparty system ■ Strong leader who does not need to bother with parliament and elections



“Liberal” as a label

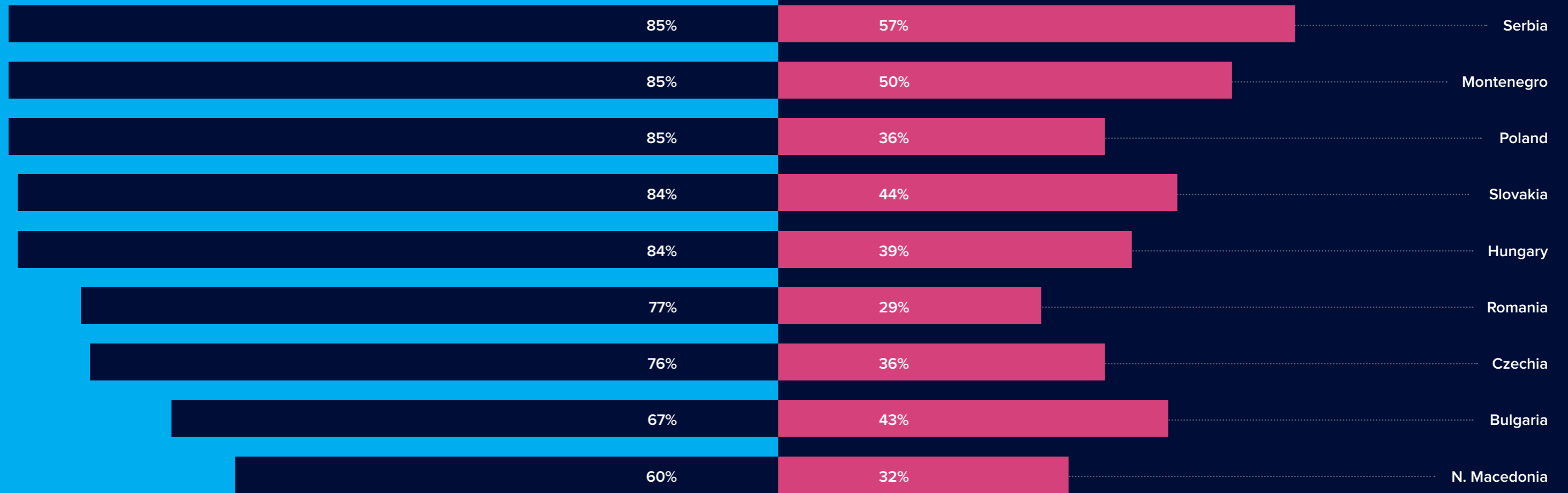
The concept of “othering” has been applied in the CEE political discourse for years⁵⁴. While in the mid-2010s, the purported threat came from migration, today, it is liberalism and the policies tied to it⁵⁵. Liberalism has been labelled as “perverted”, “threatening”, “fascist” and “alien to our identity or traditional values”. The information space has been, furthermore, flooded with divisive and detrimental assertions that undermine the very basis of democratic systems and values including fundamental rights and freedoms⁵⁶.

The comparison on this page demonstrates the extent of impact of the “anti-liberal” wave in the region that has made respondents almost allergic to the term liberalism, even if “liberal democracy” defines the very basis of the system they live in. An overwhelming majority in each country agrees with the statement that

“Democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms and rule of law” is good for their country, constituting the very definition of liberal democracy⁵⁷. At the same time, however, a sizeable proportion of respondents believe this very same liberal democracy threatens their values and identity.

Those who agree with the following statement

Democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms and rule of law is good for our country.



This dichotomy can be understood, on the one hand, as indicative of the success of actors that have sought to polarise society and demonise liberalism as a concept. On the other, it should be noted that the first statement is rather declaratory in nature and it has been illustrated in prior research⁵⁸ that people tend to approve of respect for

human rights and equality generally as universally accepted constructs. When it comes to specific cases, however, that potentially impact individuals, particularly when concepts like “identity” and “values” are involved, responses vary greatly.

Those who agree with the following statement

Liberal democracy threatens our traditional values and national identity.

Western model is good but also a threat to us

A similar contradiction can be noted with respect to two descriptive statements about Western Europe. On average, 45% of respondents in the region agreed with the statement that “Western countries promote a morally corrupt and decadent lifestyle which hides behind “civil liberties”. At the same time, 62% also agree that “Democracies in Western countries such as Germany and France are better off when it comes to adhering to key democratic principles and securing rights and freedoms and equality before the law for their citizens” than democracy in their own country.

45%
Western model is a threat

Western countries promote a morally corrupt and decadent lifestyle which hides behind “civil liberties”.

62%
Western model is good

Democracies in Western countries such as Germany and France are better off when it comes to adhering to key democracy principles and securing rights and freedoms and equality before the law for their citizens than democracy in our country is.

Cognitive dissonance or insecurity?

These findings indicate that ownership of democratic principles is rather declarative and selective, leading to cognitive dissonance and an asymmetric approach to the application of democratic principles and human rights, a phenomenon also identified in other chapters above.

Another feasible explanation might be linked to the genuine feeling of

insecurity and uncertainty that has emerged out of the unstable economic and unpredictable security situation. In a world constantly on the move, a shift rapidly augmented by an internet age that contributes to information chaos and overflow, there are few guarantees people can take to the bank. Against this backdrop, for some, “traditions” or “national identity” become a couple of the only dependable comforts people

can turn to. This process has been capitalised on by political leaders in the region over the past few years, with some advancing the ideal of restoring Central European traditional identities based on Christian values⁵⁹.

Liberalism as a threat in Central Europe

Bulgaria

“Liberalism in Bulgaria is often perceived as an attack on Bulgarian traditional national identity, which is based on strictly patriarchal norms espousing gender stereotypes and rejecting unconventional family planning or sexual preferences. Anti-liberal rhetoric is strongly promoted by nationalistic political parties (some receiving direct or indirect support from Russia) that have become an integral part of Bulgarian politics over the last decade⁵⁹.

Authoritarian states including Russia and China have taken advantage of this deep-seated prejudice towards liberal values to disseminate propaganda material aimed at discrediting Western powers and promoting their governance model as a viable alternative⁶⁰. [Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria]

Serbia

“Liberalism has been coupled with the US, which is negatively perceived as belligerent on account of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. Frequently deployed rhetoric purports that liberalism is destroying traditional values and liberal capitalism is a Western tool for enslaving small countries.

Serbia is still a strong and patriarchal society that cherishes traditional family values. There is, nevertheless, no particular well-established discourse on this, apart from some obscure media outlets. That said, the Serbian prime minister is openly gay, which has garnered little attention in the media apart from memes and comments on social networks.” [International and Security Affairs Centre, Serbia]

Romania

“The resurgence of populism at the international and regional level has encouraged some politicians to mimic this behavior. The term “liberal” was widely used in a derogatory way for scoring political points or slandering political opponents. The 2017 broadly popular protests against the attacks on the judiciary by the then Social-Democratic government were depicted by the same Social-Democratic establishment as being orchestrated by ‘liberal, global elites’ (Soros).” [GlobalFocus Center, Romania]

Czechia

“The stronger derogation of the liberal viewpoint started to be present mainly after 2013 when the newly elected president used wealthy liberals from cities (the so-called ‘Prague café’) as a constructed enemy⁶¹. This rhetoric has since been picked up by other political actors (former President Václav Klaus, for example, claimed that contemporary liberalism is, in fact, the enemy of democracy which again puts the identity argument into the mix).”⁶² [Prague Security Studies Institute, Czechia]

Hungary

“The Hungarian government and the far-right Mi Hazánk are the primary actors that deride liberalism. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, has recently deployed the term ‘loopy liberals’ (libernyák) to lampoon alleged leftists on multiple occasions. Liberals are regularly accused of advancing policies, like openness to migration and pro-LGBT+ views, which supposedly threaten the Hungarian nation.” [Political Capital Institute, Hungary]

Connected polarising narratives

Around a third to half of populations in the region is impacted by polarising narratives, which target a range of possible "others". The polls show that those who are receptive towards narratives about the LGBT+ community,

the West and/or liberal democracy as threats to identity or values make up a rather homogenous group. In each country, with the exceptions of North Macedonia and Romania, around two-thirds of respondents that

identify liberal democracy as a threat to traditional values and identity also agree with anti-LGBT+ and anti-Western narratives. In North Macedonia and Romania, the overlap falls to around 45%.

LGBT+

A split in society appears to exist on questions concerning the LGBT+ community, which is often targeted as a representative group of "liberal ideology". While in Czechia, Hungary and Poland, the number of respondents

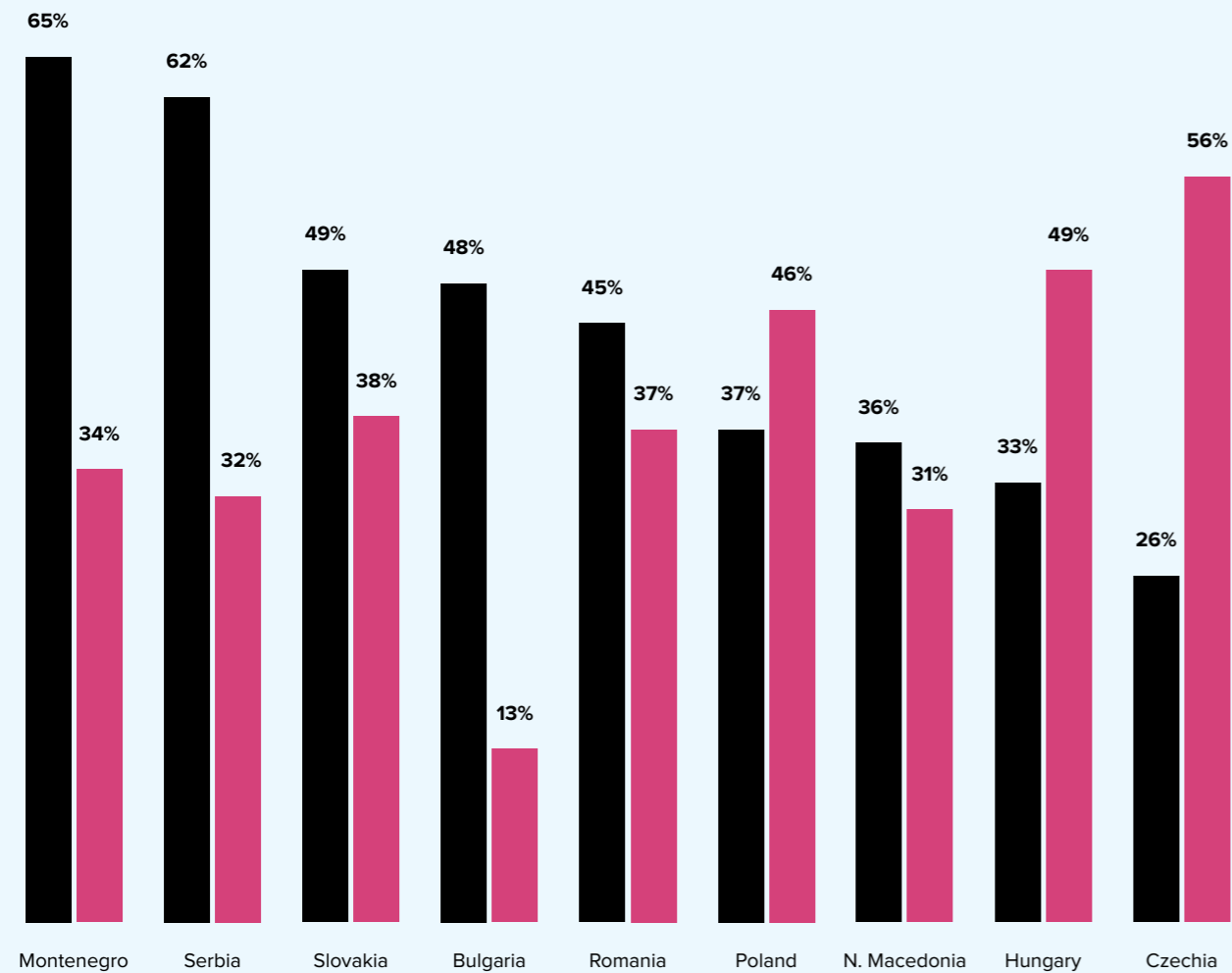
respecting rights for the LGBT+ community outnumber those receptive to the homophobic narrative, the opposite is true in other countries. This fact underscores the conservative orientation of societies in the region,

facilitating the penetration and popularity of storylines that put forward the "threat to traditional values" framing in the respective countries.

Those who agree with the following statements:

■ LGBT+ (equal opportunities and rights for gays, transsexuals and other minorities) is an immoral and decadent ideology.

■ The rights of LGBT+ community (such as a right to marriage) should be guaranteed.



Cultural wars coming?

As argued in a chapter focused on democracy in Megatrends 2020, "the pandemic has magnified economic, social and political division in our societies"⁶⁰ and served as a catalyst for some issues to rise above the surface. Even while societies continue to face the COVID-19 pandemic and a festering economic crisis, some countries have seen abortion, minority rights issues and/or LGBT+ rights pushed into the centre of political discussions. The "protection" of society from LGBT+ ideology, for example, became one of the cornerstones of Polish President Andrzej Duda's re-election campaign⁶¹. And a recent decision of the Polish constitutional tribunal effectively banning nearly all access to abortions⁶² has resulted in massive protests across the country. A similar attempt to impose stricter limits on abortion, meanwhile, was pursued by Slovak ultra-conservative MPs from the Christian Union, failing by just one vote⁶³. This selectiveness and asymmetric approach in the implementation of liberal principles could lead to cultural shifts and further societal tensions.

The pandemic has magnified economic, social and political division in our societies.

Trends to watch out for

⚠ **The rise of the demonisation and othering of liberalism and the selective application of human rights and fundamental freedoms will continue unabated in many countries.**

Unless influential actors revive discussions on what liberal democracy represents and means for societies, the anti-liberal narrative will continue to preoccupy minds.

⚠ **Cultural and ideological wars brewing within societies.**

A consequence of the demonisation of numerous groups in society by populist leaders could be that cultural wars, like the one seen in Poland this year over abortion restrictions, may ignite broader societal clashes.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

01

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES UNDERMINE TRUST IN DEMOCRACY

Having already left its mark on nearly all aspects of society, COVID-19 will continue to shape CEE and the Western Balkan region for the foreseeable future. As governments grapple with the health, economic and social ramifications of the pandemic, preposterous conspiracy theories and disinformation running rampant on social media are being wielded as political weapons by domestic and foreign actors. Their aim - to weaken trust in institutions, government and democracy itself. If left unchecked, the impact of these narratives could result in further drift towards "managed democracy" or even outright rejection of the democracy itself.

02

VIRTUAL ARMIES DOMINATE OVER REAL ONES

Regardless of the realities on the ground, with the growing virtualisation of our lives, image projection is becoming an increasingly important component of foreign affairs and geopolitics. Perceptions of power and strength indeed often trump reality, with the regular manipulation of public perceptions leading to decisions based on mere illusion. If NATO wants to maintain its edge as the world's leading military alliance, it must step up its strategic communication game.

04

CHINA'S CREEPING INFLUENCE UNDER THE RADAR

China's rising global influence and ambitions have largely been cast aside in the region. Most countries either welcome Chinese investments, without questioning their geopolitical significance, or turn a blind eye to their potential long-term consequences. With 5G rolling out in Central Europe, questions concerning how the region should engage with the emerging global superpower remain unanswered.

03

WEST NEEDS A CHAMPION AND A NEW NARRATIVE IN CEE AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

While CEE was successfully integrated into the EU and NATO, the notion that the West provides the sole model worth emulating is losing its lustre. If the West wants to hold onto its soft power advantage, it needs to identify an alluring new champion and engage with the increasing great power competition in both CEE and the Western Balkan region.

05

EU: A COMMUNITY OF VALUES OR A FREE MARKET ZONE?

The EU accession process served as the impetus for a considerable overhaul of institutions, policies and political culture in the entire Central European region. Yet 15 years later, the values that have been the glue holding the EU together are under attack, with calls for abolishing the value element growing more audacious. Powerful actors in the region are depicting the EU as oppressive and politicians are using the spectre of a "Brussels dictate" as a scapegoat to cover their own misdeeds. If the EU is perceived not as a community of shared values, but merely a free market area, the EU risks ceding the beneficial transformative power of enlargement.

NOTES

CREDITS

Collection of opinion polls in each country was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o.

The inputs for country-specific context and analysis were completed by our project partners:

Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria
www.csd.bg

Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), Czechia
www.pssi.cz

Political Capital Institute, Hungary
www.politicalcapital.hu

GlobalFocus Centre, Romania
www.global-focus.eu

ATA-Macedonia, North Macedonia
<https://www.atamacedonia.org.mk/en>

Center for Democratic Transition, Montenegro
<https://en.cdtmn.org/>

International and Security Affairs Centre, Serbia
<https://www.isac-fund.org/en/>

Political Accountability Foundation, Poland
www.odpowiedzialnopolityka.pl

Terminology used to identify regions in the report:

V4 / Visegrad Four – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia
CEE / Central and Eastern Europe – V4, Bulgaria, Romania
Western Balkans – North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia

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