



Voices of Central and Eastern Europe



Perceptions of
democracy & governance
in 10 EU countries

Countries surveyed



“Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely.”

(Franklin D. Roosevelt)



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Introduction



Jakub Wiśniewski

Vice-President, GLOBSEC

Liberal democracies are messy, chaotic and often disorganized affairs. What a contrast they represent with dictatorships whose façades, no matter how squalid or rotten, are always painted immaculate white. Electoral cycles bring discontinuity while different views clash. Promises of candidates running for office rarely match their tangible achievements as public officials. Emotions run high, making some citizens disillusioned with the political class. As GLOBSEC's 2020 public opinion polls show, citizens of Central and Eastern Europe are not oblivious to the deficiencies and failures of their political systems. With the notable exception of Austria, the liberal democratic experiment has lasted 30 years – it is a long enough period to raise levels of prosperity and quality of life, but hardly sufficient to address long-standing inequalities or social pathologies. To the utter disappointment of many, progress has not been linear; in some countries, corruption or political favouritism has resurfaced after periods of improvement. Populists have wooed swathes of societies by peddling short-lived hopes of shortcuts to justice or prosperity.

What happens in social and economic life affects the political process very much. Whether people can satisfy their basic housing or medical needs, say, or whether incomes are fairly and evenly distributed has profound consequences on the quality of the political debate. Central and Eastern Europe is still markedly poorer and less resilient in terms of economic shocks than its western neighbours – with the notable exception of Austria. There remains a risk of the middle-income trap for the region's economies. Emigration has sapped the region's growth potential. The agglomeration effect, where well-paid

skilled workers tend to cluster in urban areas, has led to the marginalization of rural and small-town communities, breeding frustration and anger—across the whole region from Poland or Lithuania. The imitation growth model, where Central European countries transformed their economies to match Western precepts, has reached its limits. The West (the United States especially) is less of a role model, with democracy and capitalism in obvious need of an overhaul.

There are still significant mental barriers between East and West in Europe. Western liberal values are contested in more conservative parts of societies. Anti-establishment backlash coupled with vulnerability to populism seems to be stronger in the former Soviet bloc. There are always those who undertake cynical wall-building, manipulate crowds, and exploit anxieties, fears, or stereotypes such as labelling Muslims as terrorists or accusing immigrants of stealing jobs, in order to solidify their grip on power. These are hardly problems unique to Central Europe but are more of a challenge than in the traditional West.

In short, in 2020 the reader will find the liberal democracies of the region still works in progress, sometimes experiencing major setbacks, more often simply grappling with everyday questions any healthy democracy has to address: how to secure the freedom of speech without tolerating misinformation and slander? What are healthy checks to the overweening executive branch of governments? How to make politicians accountable and keep their citizens engaged in the political process? Contrary to what many people expected at the outset of the political transformation over

three decades ago, there is no way to address these questions once and for all, as society is in constant flux. What might be of concern for worry, however, is the situation when the level-playing field of pluralist political systems gives way to the distorted hybrid model where free media or free elections are by name only. In general, citizens of the region seem to be aware of this risk, and this sentiment in itself is the bulwark against authoritarian tendencies. Let us hope that, as the result of eternal navel-gazing and reforming institutions, the liberal democracy will come out ever stronger.

Wiśniewski





Key findings

In countries with higher rankings in democracy quality indexes, respondents are more satisfied with their current governance system.

Support for liberal democracy is not straightforward in the region. Only in 5 of 10 countries, more than 50% of the respondents would choose liberal democracy over an autocratic leader.

Only Austrians, Estonians and Czechs are more satisfied with their governance system than dissatisfied.

There is a strong recognition of income inequality and systemic favouritism for those with contacts to elites and higher incomes – on average, 70% in the region believe that those with contacts to political elites are favoured in society.

The majority of CEE respondents does not believe the narrative that their values are under threat due to the “West” – only 28% on average believe so.

Those who believe in conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives are very likely to prefer a strong leader over liberal democracy and would trade their democratic freedoms for other social and financial benefits.


On average, only 44% in the region trust the media. But at the same time, in Austria, Czechia, Romania and Slovakia, more than 70% believe that media is rather or completely free of influence.

Slovakia and Bulgaria are the most conspiracy theory- and misinformation-prone in the region. On average, around a half of respondents agreed with the narratives articulated.



Democracy & Governance

Chapter I

This chapter provides an overview of the satisfaction and support for democracy and current governance systems among respondents in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Along with other findings, it shows that: 

In countries with higher rankings in democracy quality indexes, respondents are more satisfied with their current governance system than in countries on lower ranks;

However, expressing higher support for liberal democracy over autocratic leaders does not correlate with their satisfaction with the current governance system – countries with most respondents preferring liberal democracy over autocracy are not

necessarily the countries with highest degrees of satisfaction with the current system of governance;

The overwhelming majority of those satisfied with how democracy works in their country, as well as those supporting liberal democracy, are generally satisfied with their life. But also, in some countries, a high percentage of those satisfied with their life are not satisfied with the state of their democracy, which suggests that

life satisfaction might not be strongly influenced by the perceived quality of the democracy;

There is a strong realisation of income inequality and a systemic favouritism of those with contacts to elites and higher income – those with the contacts to elites and higher income are perceived as favoured by the society two to three times more often than those at the receiving end of populist anti-campaigns, i.e. minorities or refugees.



State of democracy in CEE

In the 1990s, many of the surveyed countries did not enjoy smooth democratisation processes right after the fall of the communist regime and struggled on their paths towards stronger institutions and protection of rights and freedoms. A tradition lacking in strong and established institutions can increase vulnerability to anti-democratic tendencies.

Existing indexes prove that a lack of strong democratic processes and institutions is still present in most of the younger democracies. Austria is the only country considered as a “full democracy” by the Economist Intelligence Unit index¹. The Baltic countries with Czechia generally score higher in civil liberties and political culture, while Hungary and Poland have been experiencing declines in democracy ratings in the past years. In 2020, deterioration of democratic principles culminated with Freedom House removing Hungary from a list of democracies, moving it to a group of “hybrid regimes”.²

As the indexes show and our research proves, democratic dynamics are different from country to country. Austria is clearly different from the rest of the studied countries in terms of solid and well-established democratic processes, being constantly ranked among the top democracies in the world. From the younger democracies, Estonia has been winning the charts, especially due to good governance and institutions, which function both effectively and efficiently as much of the administration has been moved to e-government.³ On the other hand, Poland has been criticised for a lack of judicial independence and a respect for rights and freedoms, while Hungary’s decline is mostly linked to higher corruption and a lack of civil liberties and electoral justice.⁴

¹The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2019, <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

²Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

³Estonia ranks the highest from surveyed CEE countries included in the Civil Service Effectiveness Index 2019, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/about/partnerships/international-civil-service-effectiveness-index-2019>

⁴Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/nations-transit/2020>

⁵The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2019, <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

⁶Freedom House, Democracy Scores, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores?sort=desc&order=Democracy%20Score>

Existing indexes prove that a lack of strong democratic processes and institutions is still present in most of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2019⁵

Category	Country	Score
Full democracy	Austria	8.29
Flawed democracies	Estonia	7.90
	Czechia	7.69
	Lithuania	7.50
	Latvia	7.49
	Slovakia	7.17
	Bulgaria	7.03
	Hungary	6.63
	Poland	6.62
	Romania	6.49

Freedom House’s Democracy Scores 2020⁶

Category	Country	Score
Consolidated democracies	Estonia	6.07
	Latvia	5.79
	Lithuania	5.64
	Czechia	5.64
	Slovakia	5.29
Semi-consolidated democracies	Poland	4.93
	Bulgaria	4.54
	Romania	4.43
Hybrid regimes	Hungary	3.96

Support for liberal democracy

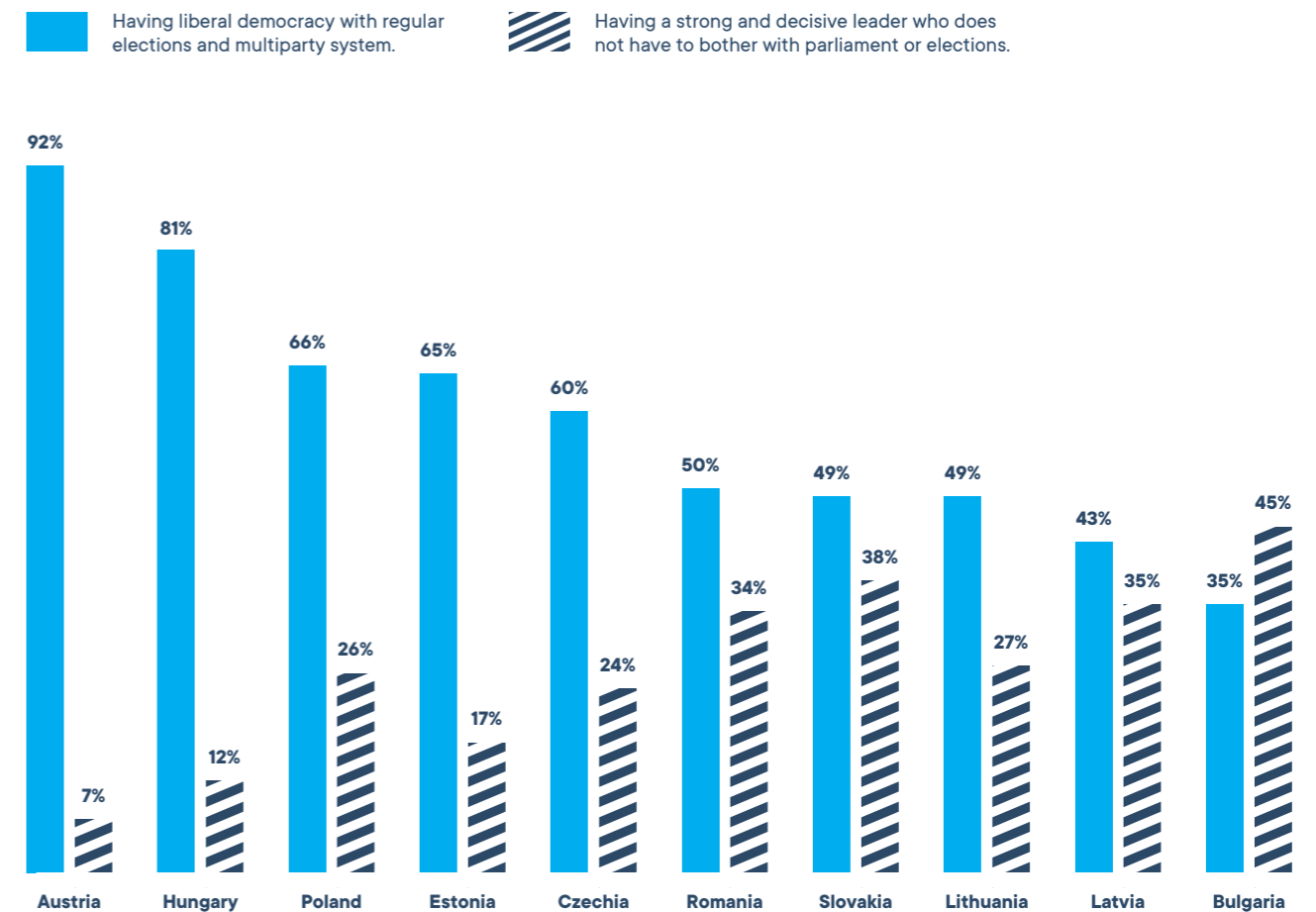
The support for liberal democracy⁷ varies greatly across the region. While in some countries, there is an overarching support for democracy with free elections and multiparty systems, in Bulgaria, more people would prefer a regime with authoritarian tendencies. The results suggest that the quality of democracy in the country has no links with the support for liberal democracy.

For example, this might mean that the citizens will not let the system fall into an autocratic spiral because, deep in their hearts, they have strong support for key democratic values.

In some countries, a high support for liberal democracy persists despite the decline in international ratings. As further elaborated in the next section, in Poland and Hungary,

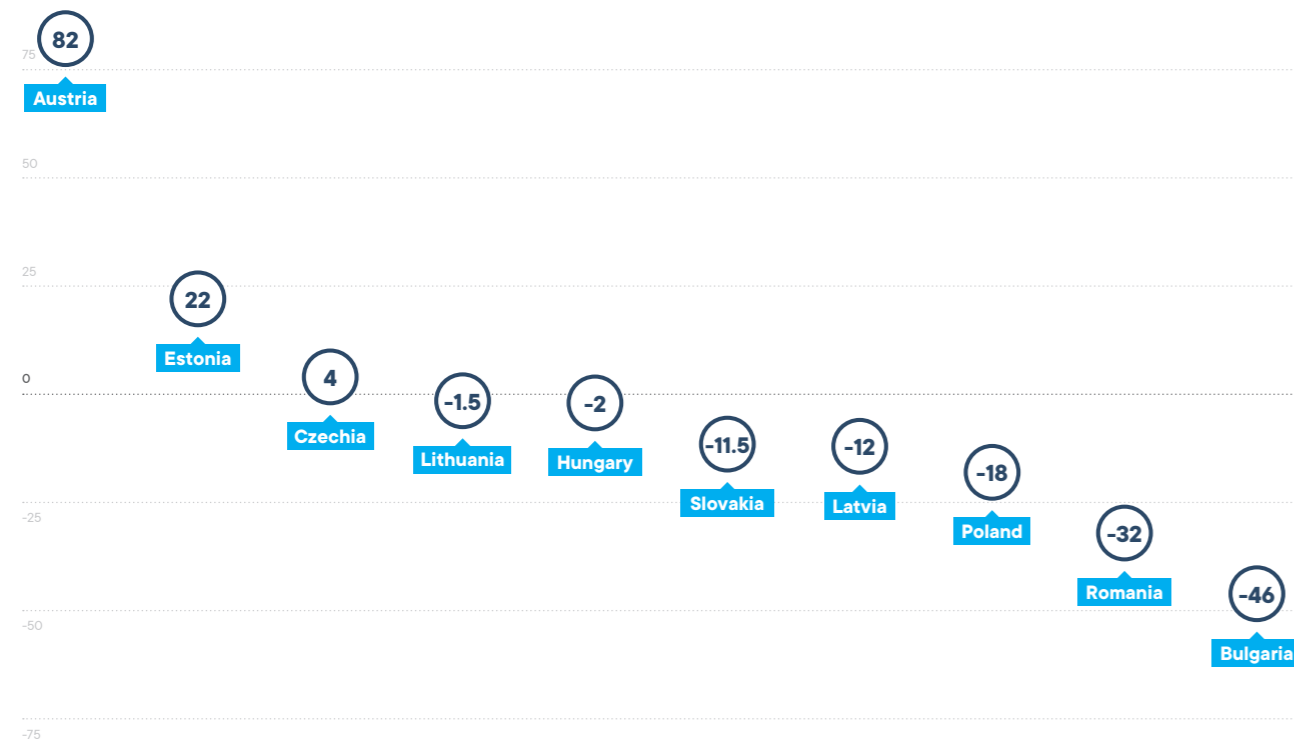
⁷Defined as a “democracy based on the recognition of individual rights and freedoms, in which decisions from direct or representative processes prevail in many policy areas” in Collins Dictionary; <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/liberal-democracy> or “a democratic system of government in which individual rights and freedoms are officially recognized and protected, and the exercise of political power is limited by the rule of law.” in Lexico; https://www.lexico.com/definition/liberal_democracy

Which of the following forms of government is, according to you, better for your country?



Satisfaction with the system of governance

Index of Satisfaction with the System of Governance (based on 11 questions)



Satisfaction with governance systems varies across the region. Based on 11 questions, we comprised a unique index showing an overall satisfaction with the system of governance in each country. It was assembled based on factor analysis - a country with a score of 100 would mean a respondents' full satisfaction with the system she/he lives in; a -100 score would indicate complete dissatisfaction.⁸

The results support the dynamics mentioned in the previous section - Austrians are also the most satisfied with

the way the system works in their country and are an outlier in comparison to others. On the other side of the spectrum are Bulgarians, and, to lesser extent, Romanians. All in all, only in Austria, Estonia and Czechia, there is a tendency to be more satisfied with the governance system than dissatisfied. When compared to the international indexes of the quality of democracy, we can observe similarities - countries with the most satisfied respondents are also scoring higher in democracy quality indexes.

On the contrary, when comparing the index results with the support for liberal democracy over autocratic leaders, there seems to be no correlation. Poles, for example, seem to be rather dissatisfied with the governance system but maintain strong support for liberal democracy.

⁸ For more information about the index, please see Methodology on p. 52



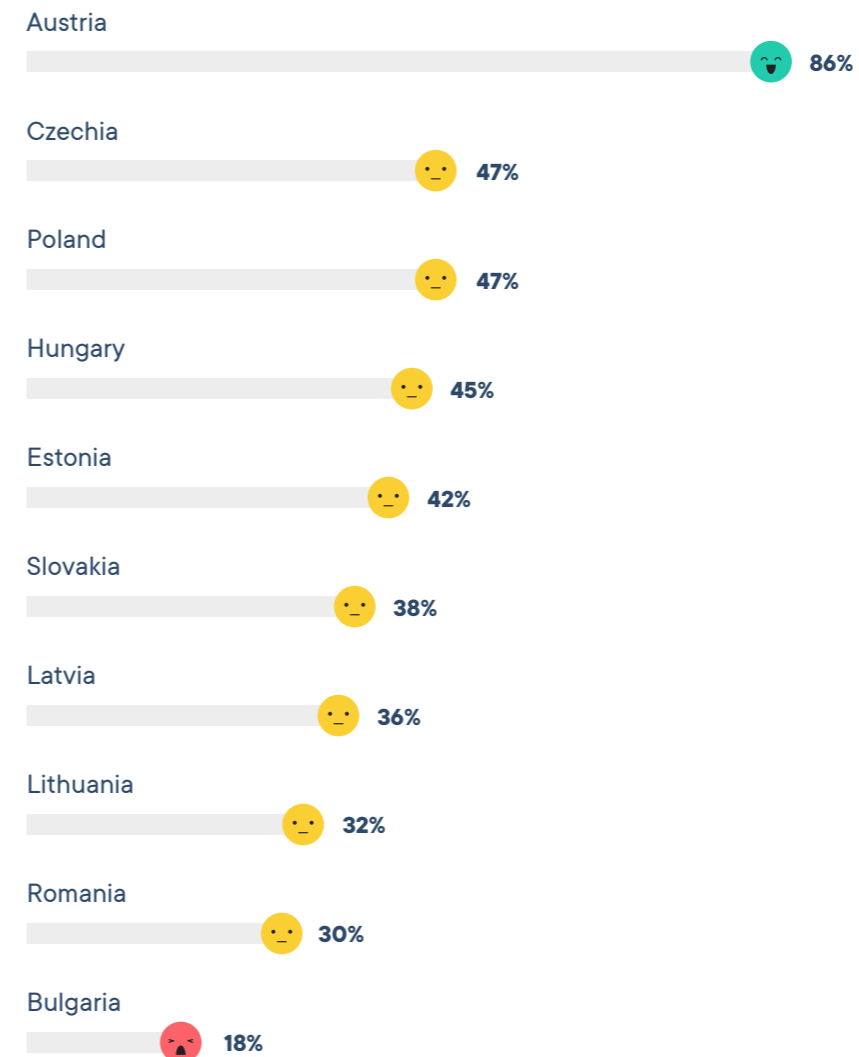
What variables contributed to the Index?

Satisfaction with how democracy works

Examination of specific questions shows that the respondents in all 10 countries realise the deficiencies of the system they live in. Without the two extremes - Bulgaria and Austria, the average level of satisfaction with how the democracy works is just 40%.

Countries with the most satisfied respondents are scoring higher in democracy quality indexes.

Respondents satisfied with how democracy works in their country



Questions included into the Satisfaction with the System of Governance Index:

- In (my country), everyone has a chance to succeed in life
- The needs of people like me are well taken into account by the political system in (my country)
- In general, most people in my country can be trusted
- Trust in the government
- Trust in president
- Trust in courts and judiciary
- Trust in standard mainstream media
- Trust in political parties
- Trust in police
- Trust in armed forces
- Satisfaction with how democracy works in (my country)

72% of Central and Eastern European respondents do not trust political parties, 53% distrust governments.

Trust

Political parties: Another variable contributing to the satisfaction with one's own system is trust in democratic institutions. Generally, the trust in political parties, government, as well as courts and judiciary, is low. On average, 72% in CEE distrust political parties, which is in line with the trend of growing decline in voting for traditional parties.⁹ The trust in political parties is relatively low in Austria too – 50%.

Key institutions: The abovementioned is in stark contrast to key state institutions in Austria enjoying the trust among more than 80% of respondents. The quality of

the institutions can be also reflected in its 12th rank in the Corruption Perception Index 2019 (CPI), the highest ranking from the region.¹⁰ Stronger degree of trust towards the institutions was also observed in Estonia (69% trust courts and judiciary), which ranks 18th in the CPI¹¹, and Czechia where the government enjoys trust among 50% of the population. On the other side of the spectrum is Romania, where only 23% of Romanians trust their government and 42% trust their president. Romania as well as Hungary rank 70th, the second to worst among CEE countries, in the CPI 2019.

Nevertheless, a significant factor contributing to the degree of trust could

have also been the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, which increased peoples' trust in governments in many countries around the world.¹²

An outlier in the trust in courts and judiciary is Slovakia with only 22%. The low perception of judicial independence continues to be Slovakia's serious challenge, and the country's performance in this area remains at the bottom of EU member states.¹³

Security forces: Trust in CEE countries' security forces is high. On average, 71% and 73% of respondents trust in police and the armed forces, respectively.

Feeling of inclusion in the system

Another important variable is a feeling of being taken into consideration by the political system. If responding positively to the statement, "The needs of people like me are well taken into account by the political system in (my country)", they may feel that the challenges and issues they face are discussed and being resolved by representatives on a political level – whether this is local, regional or state level of government – and tend to treat the system as working and justified. Except for Austria where 73% of respondents agree with having their needs taken into account, this perception is relatively strong in Czechia and Poland as well. 43% of Czechs and 42% of Poles feel that their needs are being taken care of on the political level. Otherwise, the same attitudes are only held by around a fourth of the CEE respondents, ranging from 16% in Latvia to 35% in Slovakia.

⁹ Wilson Center, Are Political Parties in Trouble?, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/are-political-parties-trouble-or-democratic-audit-what-explains-mainstream-party-decline-across-europe?>, 2019 <https://www.democraticaudit.com/2019/03/12/what-explains-mainstream-party-decline-across-europe/>

¹⁰ Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index 2019, Austria: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/aut>

¹¹ Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index 2019, Estonia: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/est>

¹² Edelman, 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Spring update, <https://www.edelman.com/news/trust-2020-spring-update-press-release>

¹³ European Commission, 2020 European Semester. Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1584543810241&uri=CELEX%3A52020SC0524>

Who is favoured by the system?

A different way of looking at the satisfaction with the system is the feeling of powerlessness. If the citizens do not feel that the system in which they live provides them a possibility to shape and influence it, the democracy has a difficulty to thrive. On average, 49% of CEE respondents agreed with the statement that who holds the power in the government does not matter as nothing will change. The strongest level of powerlessness was observed among Bulgarians – 59%, the lowest among Poles

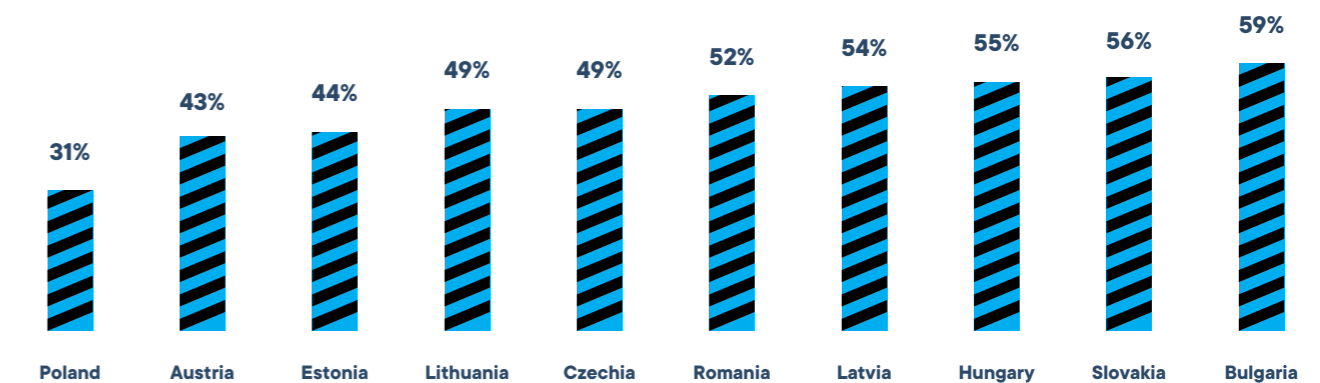
– 31%. This question is one of the few where Austrians did not stand out as an outlier compared to the rest of the region.

Who, according to respondents, holds the power then? The increasing income inequality gap and the cumulation of wealth among the rich is recognised across the region.¹⁴ On average, 67% of respondents across the region think oligarchs and financial groups have strong control over governments in their countries.

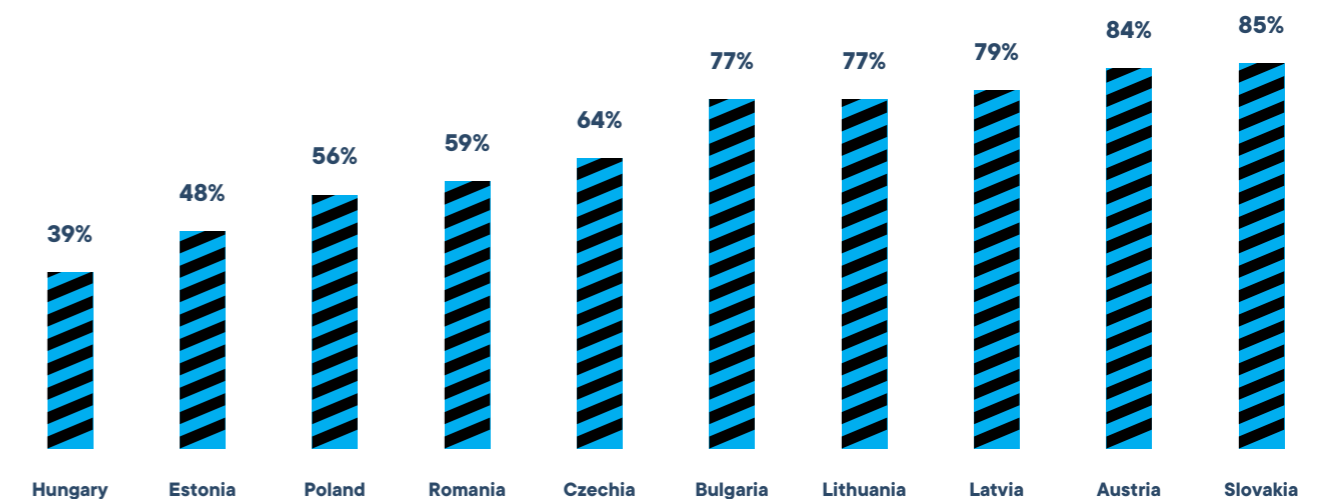
The findings are closely linked to another factor – feeling that some groups of the society are favoured over others as can be seen on the graph on page no. 16.

¹⁴ World Bank Group, Understanding Changes in Inequality in the EU, 2017, <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/319381520461242480/EU-IG-Report-Understanding-changes-in-inequality.pdf>

Those who agree that who holds the power in the government does not matter, since nothing will change.

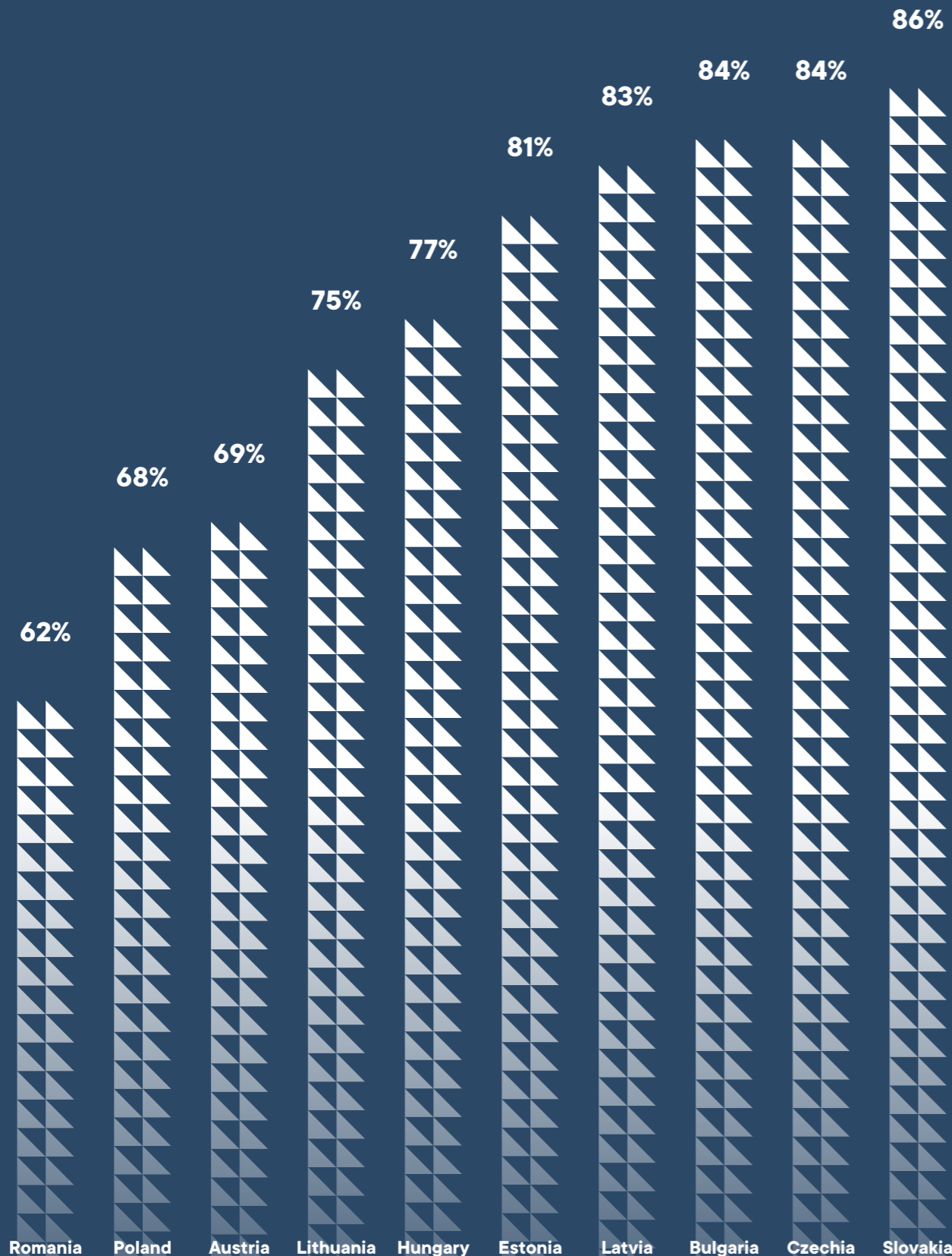


Those who agree that oligarchs and financial groups have strong control over the government in their country.



Particular group(s) in our society are favoured over others

Agree



Which group(s) are favoured in your society, according to your opinion?

Average from CEE of those who believe that the following groups are favoured in their society:

People with contacts to political elites



People who earn more



People from the capital



People living in a particular region or regions in my country



Minorities



Migrants



On average, 77% think that particular groups of a society are favoured over others. Our data suggest that the dissatisfaction with inequality is, in fact, much more important for societies than the system's alleged "free-riders", i.e. migrants (or refugees) and minorities, who are often the target of attacks and demonisation for the sole purpose of scoring political points and coverage of more serious systemic problems.

The preference of people living in particular regions was dominant especially in Estonia and Lithuania, where 61% and 47% think so accordingly. These perceptions correlate with the belief that people living in the capital are favoured and have more privileges in the society, which can be explained by the economic power of the capitals in both countries.¹⁵

¹⁵ OECD, Regions and Cities and a Glance 2018 – LITHUANIA <https://www.oecd.org/regional/LITHUANIA-Regions-and-Cities-2018.pdf> and – ESTONIA <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/ESTONIA-Regions-and-Cities-2018.pdf>

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”

Country insights

The following quotes represent data interpretation from the partner organisations in the project.

Austria

“As an outlier, Austria is perceived by its citizens as socially and economically strong with high living standards. This high esteem for democracy is common to nearly all population groups and its reliable public administration system, system of reconciliation of interests and strong social partnership is reflected in the positive ranking in the Satisfaction with the System of Governance Index as well as other international indexes.

In recent years, however, the FPÖ [Freedom Party of Austria] has regularly called for more direct democracy, since it would “better represent the interests of the people” than elected parliamentarians that are blamed as representatives of the elites. In addition, an “illiberal system” as practiced in Hungary has already been cited as a role model by FPÖ representatives. However, turning away from the multi-party system and free elections is not an option for Austrians – even if discontent with daily politics often is high.” (Austrian Society for European Politics)

Bulgaria

“In Bulgaria, the lack of inherent and consolidated democratic attitudes rather leads to a perception that shortfalls in Bulgarian democratic system can be fixed through authoritarian measures. Such reflexes can be partially explained culturally – given the legacy of authoritarian rule, but mostly empirically – the Bulgarians have not been able to experience the benefits that a democratic system should ensure, including the rule-of-law and an equitable allocation of public goods. According to Eurostat, Bulgaria has the highest income inequality in the EU¹⁶.” (Centre for the Study of Democracy)

Czechia

“Strong and enrooted belief in democratic principles and high socio-economic benefits and stability are reflected in a positive ranking in the Satisfaction with the System of Governance Index. However, past corruption scandals of leading political representatives and long-term problems of leading political parties to form a strong coalition government reflect distrust of Czechs towards the political parties and leads to preference for new-looking alternatives in newly established popular movements.” (The Prague Security Studies Institute)

Estonia

“Since 1991, Estonia has achieved remarkable progress. While it is still perceived as a nation in democratic transition, it leads the ranking of young democracies across the international indexes. Many Estonians perceive the country as dynamic, with small differences between societal groups, which suggest a pursuit of equality in many areas. Such attitudes combined with a national character of being modest, high appreciation of hard-work, wide-spread secularity and strong self-belief, support the idea that everyone has a chance to succeed in life. Also, its unprecedented e-governance system made Estonia a digitally innovative state, in which citizens can easily communicate with public institutions and take part in decision-making processes online.” (International Centre for Defence and Security)

Latvia

“Latvia belongs to the more dissatisfied group of countries in the Satisfaction with the System of Governance Index. Decreasing voter turnout reflects the strong perception among the public that the needs of the people are not taken into consideration by the political system. 76% of Latvian respondents believe so, which is the highest percentage among CEE countries. Such perceptions provide a fruitful ground for populist rhetoric, a new wave of which has hit Latvia in 2018 parliamentary elections too.” (Centre for East European Policy Studies)

Hungary

“Many warning signs have been raised concerning the state capture of democratic institutions in Hungary. Yet, the support of the ruling political parties among Hungarians remains strong and its voters generally trust the system, which still has regular elections and multiparty representation (albeit not on an equal footing). If there was such choice, supporters of current ruling parties might prefer the Prime Minister’s vision of “illiberal” or “Christian” democracy. But if given the choice between democracy and dictatorship, most Hungarians will prefer democracy.” (Political Capital Institute)

Lithuania

“Over the past decade, the concept of “the two Lithuanians” – elites versus common citizens – has emerged. The concept is nurtured by a narrative focusing either on the “elite” being in a privileged position and gaining wealth at the expense of the “common citizens” or on the “common citizens” being decisive in voting for “populist” or “inept” governments and receiving meagre, short term benefits to be pacified. This weaves its way through a variety of issues, ranging from distrust to dissatisfaction with democracy, with entire groups feeling like they have lost from the democratic transition, being concerned by growing inequality and social issues.” (Eastern Europe Studies Centre)

Poland

“Strong liberal democracy support is a legacy of the communist era, but also of the recent years where the country has been led, albeit from the back seat, by a strong leader – Jarosław Kaczyński. Satisfaction with the state of democracy in Poland shows the high level of polarisation which has marred the country for over a decade. The recent deterioration in the rule-of-law – especially with regards to the independence of the judiciary – resonates among Poles who start to raise questions about the state of democracy. Many, however, realise that the power to change the course of the country is in their hands. 66% of Polish respondents, the most across all countries, think that it matters who holds the power in the government.” (Political Accountability Foundation)

Romania

“Romania scores the second to last in GLOBSEC’s Satisfaction with the System of Governance Index. While only 33% are satisfied with the way how democracy works in their country, Romanians are not giving up on democracy. Since two most established political parties failed to create an effective government, many Romanians started to vote for a democratic anti-establishment party rather than for any anti-democratic populist forces. Still, if the democratic anti-establishment party fails to represent them, this could pose a significant threat to the political climate.” (GlobalFocus Centre)

Slovakia

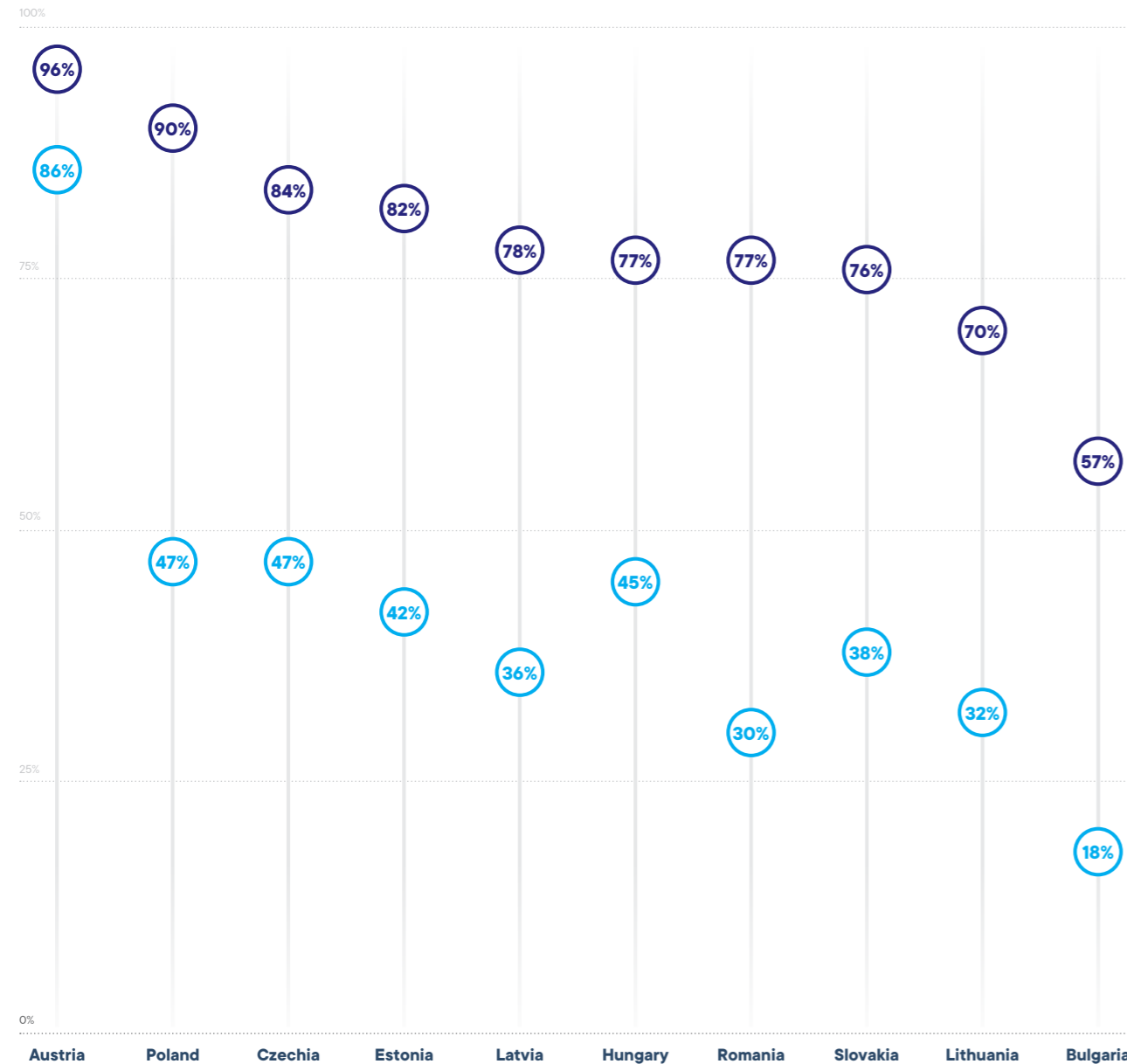
“The killings of investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak, and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, and their investigation have uncovered multiple cases of corruption and hidden ties between politicians, mafia, oligarchs, members of the police and other civil servants, including prosecutors and judges. This state capture by oligarchs and financial groups is reflected by low trust of Slovaks in these democratic institutions. While the cleansing of the system was launched, only good governance and time will restore the trust of Slovaks in these institutions.” (GLOBSEC)

Life satisfaction and insecurities

The happier people, the greater support for liberal democracy?

If they take all circumstances into account, they are satisfied

● with their life ● with how democracy works in their country



On average, 91% of those who are satisfied with how democracy works in their country are satisfied with their life.



The data shows that overall life-satisfaction is a factor linked to both the satisfaction with how democracy functions and the support for liberal democracy. An overarching majority of those who are satisfied with how their democracy functions, as well as those who support liberal democracy, are satisfied with their life in every surveyed country. But, as the graph shows, while life-satisfaction correlates with democracy-satisfaction, it is generally twice as high as democracy satisfaction everywhere but in Austria. In other words, large numbers of people are dissatisfied with how democracy works but still satisfied with life. The difference thus suggests there are other determining factors contributing to life-satisfaction, possibly economic growth and social standards. Among others, it might represent a challenge for democratic leaders in countering the so-called „China model“ or „Beijing Consensus“ of having an undemocratic regime at the expense of economic growth.¹⁷

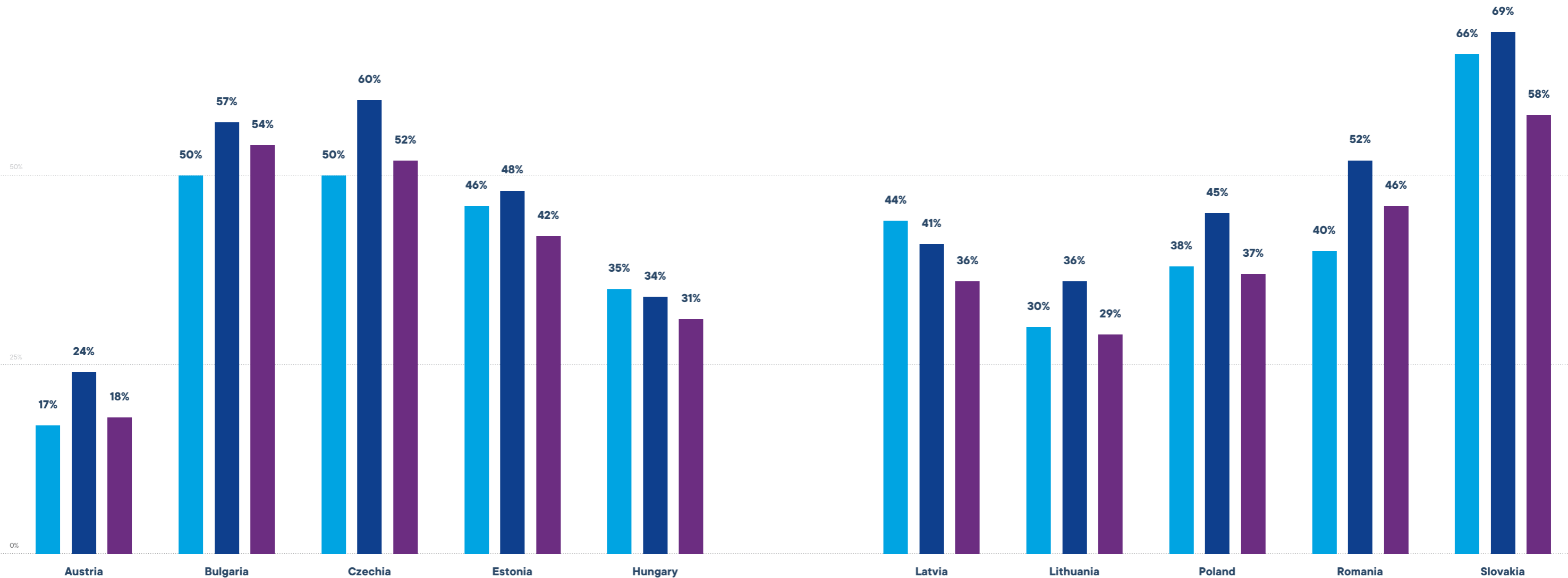
¹⁷ Weitseng Chen, ed., *The Beijing Consensus? How China Has Changed Western Ideas of Law and Economic Development*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, <https://academic.oup.com/icon/article-abstract/17/1/375/5485947?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

On average, 83% of those who support liberal democracy are also satisfied with their life.

Who would trade their freedoms for other benefits?

Those who would trade some of their rights and freedoms (for example freedom to travel, to associate or free speech) for:

■ better financial situation ■ greater security in their country ■ the preservation of their country's traditional values



The willingness to trade basic democratic rights and freedoms for other financial, security or cultural benefits in some CEE countries suggests vulnerability towards anti-democratic voices, both domestic and foreign. Actors with political ambitions who argue that their "order" and "strong hand" are a path towards greater prosperity and safety are further nourishing these attitudes while demonising international cooperation, spreading fear of the unknown and persuading their audiences that their inconvenient situation is linked to their life in democracy.

On the other hand, the willingness to trade freedoms can also be explained by rising insecurity over the stability of both people's financial situation and a changing world order. Globalisation, increasing income gaps, restructuring of geopolitical power dynamics, a 24/7 news cycle, as well as the use of social media full of unreliable information, may all contribute to rising insecurities and thus influence the ladder of priorities of every individual. In other words, the greater the feeling of financial instability and insecurity, the greater may be one's willingness to give up basic rights

and freedoms, especially in countries where people had been taught to live in restrictive environments for decades. This trend should be watched with a particular caution, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic's causing insecurity and instability.¹⁸

Moreover, the willingness to give up key freedoms can also suggest that the overall understanding of what these democratic guarantees mean is uneven. The socio-demographic data suggests that the tendency to trade freedoms tends to be

stronger among older generations in most countries. Those who spent most of their lives under the un-free regimes might, on one hand, not have had an opportunity to fully embrace and enjoy the advantages of the democratic freedoms; on the other hand, they are often struggling to make ends meet. The pensions in most of CEE are lower than in Western European countries.¹⁹

The highest degree of insecurity has been overall identified in Slovakia, Bulgaria, as well as Czechia, the lowest in Austria. Among Slovaks and Bulgarians,

a so-called small country complex could also be observed. 68% of Slovaks and 60% of Bulgarians agreed that their country has always been oppressed and was never able to control its path.

¹⁸ Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19: First findings – April 2020, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/living-working-and-covid-19-first-findings-april-2020>

¹⁹ Eurostat, Pensions benefits, 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Pensions_benefits_2016_\(%25_relative_to_GDP\)_AE2019.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Pensions_benefits_2016_(%25_relative_to_GDP)_AE2019.png)

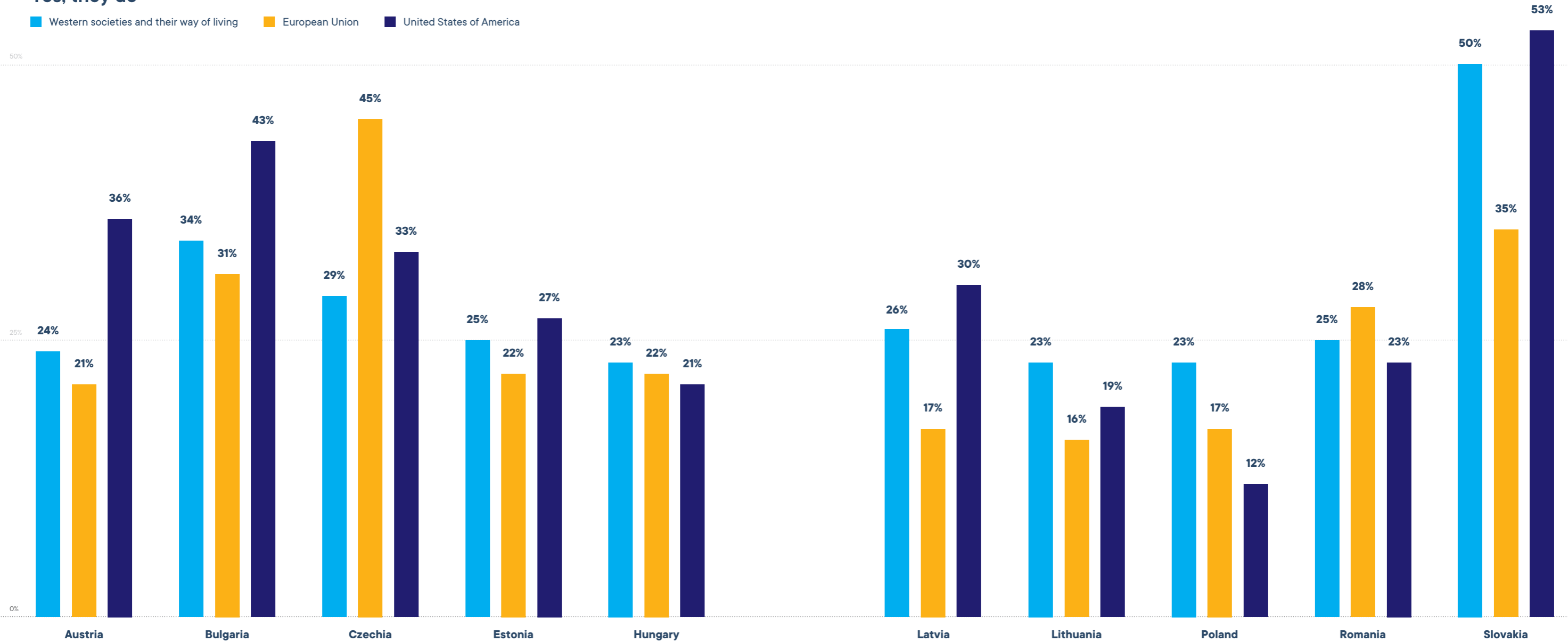
In 4 countries, the absolute majority would trade their rights and freedoms for greater security.

Insecurities: distant “West”

Do you personally think any of the following groups or countries threaten your identity and values or not?

Yes, they do

Western societies and their way of living European Union United States of America



Blaming international organisations and institutions for all the wrong happening today and in the past has become the new trend also across the democratic world, primarily among the nationalistic populists.²⁰ The demonisation of the so-called “West”, however, becomes yet a bit easier in CEE, due to the region’s central position, as well as the fact that the majority of society does not feel it is a part of the West.²¹

The West and liberal values are often portrayed as antagonistic to the “true”

nature of a society.²² This link can also be demonstrated by the correlation between those who feel threatened by Western societies and those who would trade their freedoms for the preservation of traditional values.

The results, however, suggest that these narratives are not influencing public attitudes so strongly, except for Slovakia and Bulgaria, where the anti-West and anti-US narratives play a significant part of political discourse. In addition, the

broadly recognised Czech Euroscepticism is demonstrated by the 45% of respondents feeling threatened by the European Union.

²⁰ Marcel Fratzscher, Populism, Protectionism and Paralysis, *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy*, 2020, <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2020/number/1/article/populism-protectionism-and-paralysis.html#footnote-001>

²¹ GLOBSEC Policy Institute, *GLOBSEC Trends 2019*, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2019/>

²² An illustration of the anti-liberalism campaign can be found in GLOBSEC’s research on Slovak Parliamentary Election 2020: <https://www.globsec.org/publications/slovak-parliamentary-election-2020/>

Slovaks are usually a regional outlier in the perception of the US. In our last year’s research, GLOBSEC Trends 2019, 41% of Slovak respondents perceived the US as a threat to the country.

”

Country insights



Slovakia

Slovaks have been known for having stronger anti-US sentiments than their neighbours.²² These are, on one hand, linked to stronger pro-Russian sentiments based on a historical and cultural context. On the other hand, they have also been nourished by nationalistic populist rhetoric and malign information campaigns. In our last year's research, *GLOBSEC Trends 2019*, 41% of Slovak respondents perceived the US as a threat to the country, while 26% perceived Russia the same way.²³

²² GLOBSEC Policy Institute, *GLOBSEC Youth Trends 2020*, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Youth-Trends-2020.pdf>; GLOBSEC Policy Institute, *GLOBSEC Trends 2019*, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2019/>; GLOBSEC Policy Institute, *GLOBSEC Trends 2018*, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2018-central-europe-one-region-different-perspectives>

²³ GLOBSEC Policy Institute, *GLOBSEC Trends 2019*, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>



Czechia

Czechia has been traditionally the most Eurosceptic country in the region. While our research has been showing a gradual increase in support since 2017 for their EU membership, the “EU dictate” narrative is generally strong in the country and Czechs generally do not favour the idea of giving more member state competences to the EU.²⁵

²⁵ Ibid.



Bulgaria

Bulgaria's rather negative perception of the US is similarly linked to stronger pro-Russian sentiments; the minds of many in CEE are still strongly influenced by the bi-polar US vs. the Soviet Union division of the world. In *GLOBSEC Trends 2019*, 68% of Bulgarians claimed that their country's values are not in line with the US, despite being a NATO member. These trends might indicate the remnants of Soviet propaganda and the ideological conditioning of the communist period that instilled negative views of the US, but common religion and history – Russia helping to free Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire – plays a role here as well.

Austria

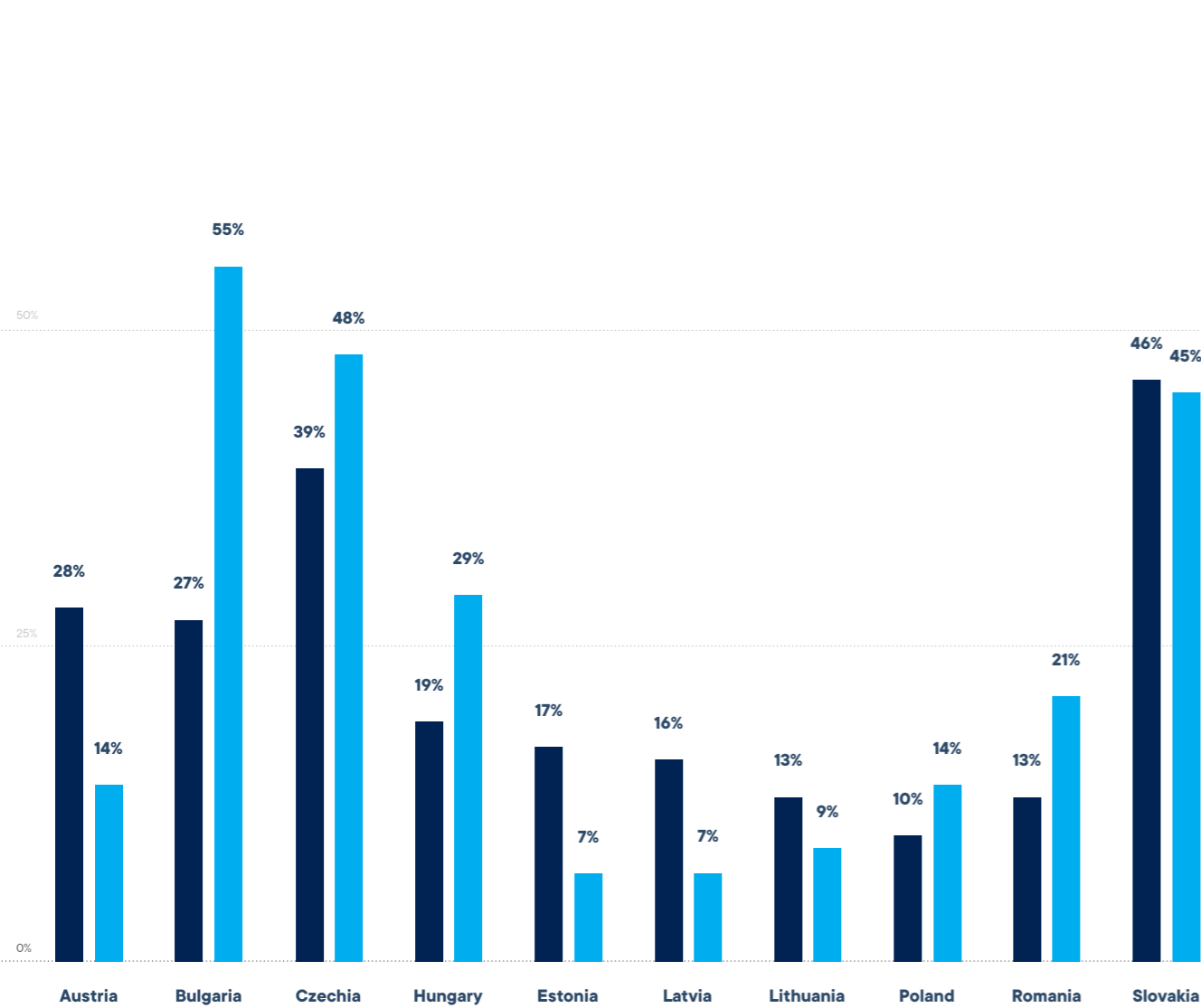
In Austria, “the perception of the US being a threat is partly rooted in history. In the post-war period Austria always regarded itself as part of the West, but also as a neutral country in equidistance to the US and the Soviet Union. In the left-wing political spectrum, scepticism or “anti-Americanism” has always been present – especially with regard to the US's global ambitions. American everyday culture was and is popular in Austria. Nevertheless, the omnipresence of fast food, commercial US cinema, TV series, streaming services, etc., is viewed by some as less of an enrichment than as a threat to local traditions, especially among older people. The multitude of Americanisms/Anglicisms in the German language is also viewed with scepticism. In general, the image of the United States has suffered significantly since Donald Trump took office.” (Austrian Society for European Politics)

“The feeling of insecurity from other groups in society translates into lower tolerance and thus greater difficulties in creating a just and equitable democracy respecting and upholding the rights and freedoms of all.”

Insecurities: minorities

Those who believe the following groups of society are favoured over others:

■ Migrants ■ Minorities



The feeling of insecurity from other groups in society translates into lower tolerance and thus greater difficulties in creating a just and equitable democracy respecting and upholding the rights and freedoms of all. Overall, the attitudes towards minorities are influenced by local historical and political contexts and demographics, as the passages below demonstrate. However, the role of contemporary political rhetoric should also be recognised.

Czechia, for example, is generally considered an open and liberal society, as is confirmed by high tolerance towards LGBT+ people. Yet, the feeling of insecurity

towards migrants is extremely high, despite the fact the country has not been hit by any massive migration waves in the past years. The refugee crisis was used as a tool to spread insecurity in several political campaigns in the late 2010s.²⁶

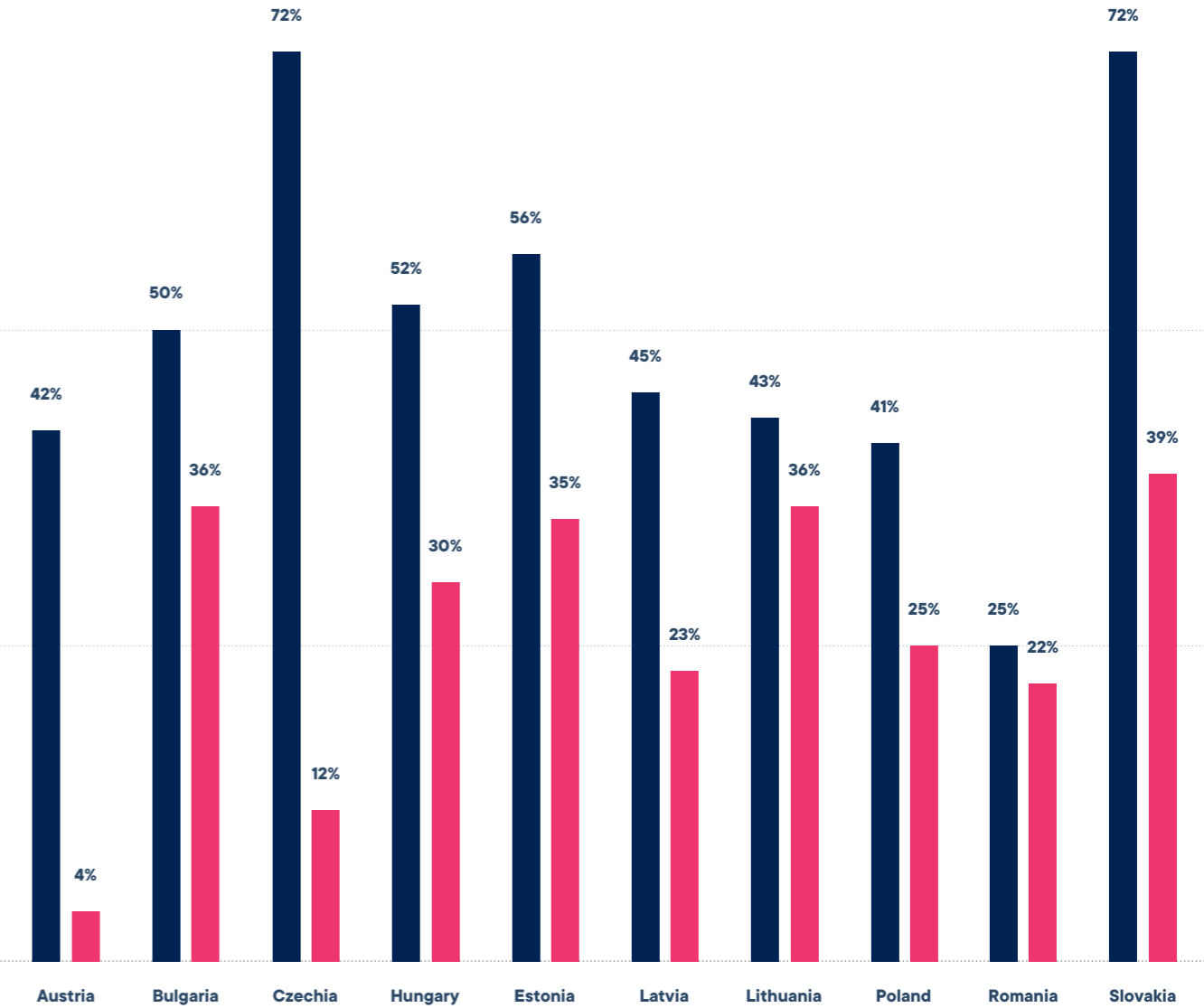
Sharp anti-immigrant campaigns waged by key political actors to spread fear and strengthen their own image as the “saviours” or “protectors” of the people could be found in many countries across the region.²⁷ On one hand, the fear of migrants present in the states with no real experience with large migration waves should be also understood as a fear of

the unknown in the more traditional and homogeneous societies such as Slovakia or Bulgaria. On the other hand, the campaigns have been nourishing these feelings and thus contribute to a more closed and less tolerant society.

Ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia are mostly represented by Roma, often faced with social exclusion from the society and stigmatisation due to the decades of ignorance to solve the integration challenge by the Communist regimes and a subsequent lack of strategic approach from the governments since the 1990s.²⁸

Those who believe the following groups threaten their identity and values:

■ Migrants ■ LGBT+



As a result, this minority is constantly accused of exploiting the social benefits system and a lack of willingness to participate in the workforce.

More to the north, the largest national minority within Poland are Ukrainians traveling for work, while in Lithuania, Poles and Russians both constitute approximately 6% of the population.²⁹ In Latvia and Estonia, the largest national minority remains the Russian-speaking population. Austria is the country with the most complex ethnic demographics, largely affected by the migration wave from the former-Yugoslavia as well as Turkey,³⁰ while

it is also the only surveyed country directly affected by the wave of immigration in the recent refugee crisis.³¹ It is, therefore, paradoxical to find other CEE countries with no negative experience from the waves of migration to be more insecure than Austria.

²⁶ Reuters, Migration drops near zero in Czech Republic but sways election campaign, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-czech-election-president-migration/migration-drops-near-zero-in-czech-republic-but-sways-election-campaign-idUSKBN1FC25N>; GLOBSEC Policy Institute, The Czech Republic: Migration trends and political dynamics, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/czech-republic-migration-trends-political-dynamics/>

²⁷ GLOBSEC Policy Institute, Migration politics and policies in Central Europe, 2017, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/migration_politics_and_policies_in_central_europe_web.pdf

²⁸ Pál Tamás, Central European Roma Policy: National Minority Elites, National States and the EU, p.163 – 175, *The Roma – A Minority in Europe*, <https://books.openedition.org/ceup/1420?lang=en>

²⁹ Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, National Minorities, 2019, <https://irkm.lrv.lt/en/activities/national-minorities>

³⁰ Migration Policy Institute, Austria: A Country of Immigration?, 2003, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/austria-country-immigration>

³¹ World Bank, Refugee population by country or territory of asylum, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG>

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Country Insights

The following quotes represent data interpretation from the partner organisations in the project.

Austria

42% think migrants are a threat to their values and identity.

However, only **28%** agree that the migrants are favoured over others.

“Since December 2017, Austrian government policy has been characterised by a migration-sceptical stance, regardless of the Greens’ participation in the government since January 2020. Asylum seekers are less referred to as “refugees” in the political discourse, but primarily as “economic migrants”, with visible impact on public opinion. Austrians’ attitude toward refugees and migrants is also influenced by tabloid media, the FPÖ and right-wing social media platforms that regularly spread reports of an alleged preference for asylum seekers. For example, when it comes to social benefits, housing or claims that asylum seekers would receive free mobile phones.” (Austrian Society for European Politics)

Estonia

60% believe most people in their country can be trusted.

74% do not believe that minorities are favoured over others.

“The high level of trust among Estonians might be linked to the size of the population. Estonians often joke that in such small country (half of population lives in Tallinn, the capital) everyone knows everyone, so there is not much space for mistakes. The high degree of trust can be also demonstrated by many volunteer movements and organisations, particularly popular and trusted in Estonia.” (International Centre for Defence and Security)

Hungary

68% would not trade their rights and freedoms for the preservation of their traditional values.

52% think migrants are a threat to their values and identity.

“The Hungarian government’s main message regarding migration is built on the claim that migrants are not allowed to enter Hungary. The majority thus has no reason to believe they are favoured by the system. Nevertheless, more than a half believes that migrants threaten them, which is a result of almost-constant anti-immigration government campaign spread in the media and public engagements since early 2015. Migration is only discussed in the context of a threat to national security, economic prosperity, cultural values, public health and safety of individuals in general.” (Political Capital Institute)

Romania

77% are satisfied with their life

25% think that migrants are a threat to their values and identity.

“Compared to other countries in the region, quite a low percentage of Romanians feel threatened by others. With a large number of Romanians working abroad (4 million according to a recent estimate), at least one study³² shows that their families remaining in Romania tend to be more tolerant towards outsiders. Hungarian or Roma minorities are the largest and the most likely to face discrimination and hostility in Romania but migrants are not an issue of public debate, possibly since Romania is out of the way of migration routes and the political representatives generally have other contentious issues to debate.” (GlobalFocus Centre)

Poland

79% think that the EU does not pose a threat to their identity and values.

Only **25%** think that LGBT+ community poses a threat to their values and identity.

“The high degree of tolerance for LGBT+ is somewhat surprising, as Poland is generally regarded as a more conservative society. The first explanation can be linked to a realisation that the government and church strongly influence and control the media. While distrusting the government, Poles also distrust the narratives they push forward [see more in Chapter no.2]. Another explanation can be linked to Poles’ tendency to focus on personal development and on the wellbeing of their nuclear families and small businesses. Even though they feel as a part of a bigger nation, they are very much attached to their freedoms and refuse others limiting them even for the sake of preservation of conservative values. This attitude could be most easily described as ‘let me and others be.’” (Political Accountability Foundation)

³² Sandu, Lumile sociale ale migrației romanesti în strainatate, Polirom, 2010

The growing trends of distancing from liberal democracy and rising narratives building upon nationalism, tradition or religion have not avoided the CEE region. However, the data suggest two crucial tendencies suggesting the course for the years to come.

Practical implications

First, there are countries with lower or declining qualities of democracy where the satisfaction with life and system is high. This indicates that **more illiberal models with strong leadership guaranteeing some economic growth or social benefits will not vanish**. On the contrary, as long as the citizens will be enjoying financial benefits while maintaining the basic rights of participative democracy, the EU and NATO should be getting ready for another long-term cleavage among its members, and as the data show, it should not be defined by geography. The Liberal vs. not-so-liberal conflict might, however, intensify the challenges of closer cooperation in the institutions founded on common values, including the rule-of-law, equality and solidarity. In efforts to maintain the EU or NATO as united blocs, we risk having even more pragmatism and compromises omitting the question of values.

Second, **democracy as a system is generally supported and thus will probably stay with us**. A high support for liberal democracy, even in countries with declining democratic standards, is a sign that democracy is a cherished system after decades of occupation and totalitarian regimes. The high dissatisfaction with the system and a willingness to exchange some freedoms for other benefits, however, poses a serious threat and challenge for the upcoming years. Citizens are aware and sensitive to income inequality and oligarchic influences over various aspects of the state. While there might be tendencies to believe the narratives of a threat coming from various "alien" groups, those with contact to political elites are seen as favoured by 70% of the region. In the search for alternatives to state capture, many might vote for anti-establishment political actors in a hopeless call for change of the system. Democratic leaders should try to overcome these tendencies by opening the discussions on reforms and strive for greater inclusion into it of those who feel the most distant and dissatisfied.



Media

Chapter II



This chapter provides an overview of the trust in media and perceptions of CEE respondents towards media independence. Among other findings, it shows that:

On average, the majority of CEE respondents do not trust the standard mainstream media;

However, the standard media is also rather perceived as free;

Strong influence by governments and oligarchs was commonly recognised

as an element undermining media independence;

In some countries, mainstream media are perceived to be under full control of the government and, thus, are perceived as channels of state and political influence.

Trust and freedom

Media and investigative journalism are an important part of democratic society. Performing the role of watchdogs of democracy, they scrutinise public institutions and report on matters of public interest. This became especially crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, when media as a platform for the open exchange of information served as the main communication channel between

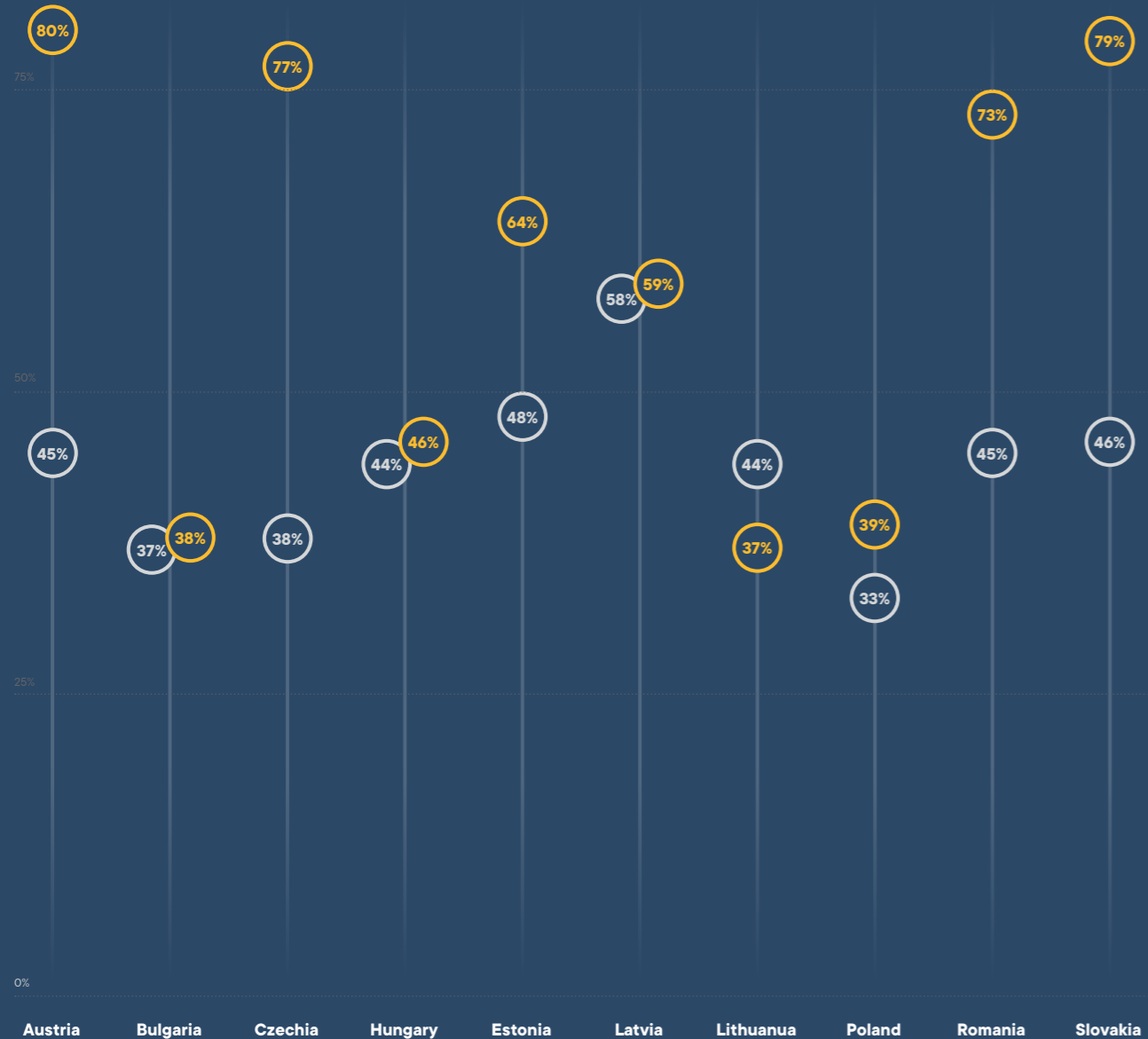
governments and populations under the lockdown.³³

However, a distrust in media, nurtured by populist and polarising rhetoric, is a continuous trend around the world. According to the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, media still belong to the least trusted institutions in the world, with 49% in average trust from surveyed countries.³⁴

Similar trends apply for the CEE region, where the majority of respondents do not trust standard media. Only in Latvia is media perceived as a trustworthy institution by the absolute majority, while in 7 out of 10 countries, most respondents do not trust the standard mainstream media. The findings reflect also the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2020* detecting the trust in news overall.³⁵

Trust in media and perceptions of being free-of-influence

● Those who trust standard mainstream media ● Those who think that media are rather or completely free



In 7 out of 10 countries, most respondents do not trust the standard mainstream media.

Paradoxically, despite the distrust, in 6 out of 10 countries, a large majority of respondents claim that their standard media is rather or completely free. In the cases of Austria, Czechia, Romania and Slovakia, more than 70% of respondents believe in relative or complete media freedom in their country. The perceptions of media freedom reflect the ranking of countries in the *2020 World Press Freedom Index* of the Reporters without Borders to a relatively good extent. The respondents in CEE thus seem to have a relatively healthy assessment of media freedom.

2020 World Press Freedom Index³⁶

Country	Ranking number 2020
Estonia	14
Austria	18
Latvia	22
Lithuania	28
Slovakia	33
Czechia	40
Romania	48
Poland	62
Hungary	89
Bulgaria	111

³³ Reuters Institute, *Digital News Report 2020*, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/overview-key-findings-2020/>

³⁴ Edelman, *2020 Edelman Trust Barometer*, https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2020-01/2020%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Executive%20Summary_Single%20Spread%20without%20Crops.pdf

³⁵ Reuters Institute, *Digital News Report 2020*, <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/overview-key-findings-2020/>

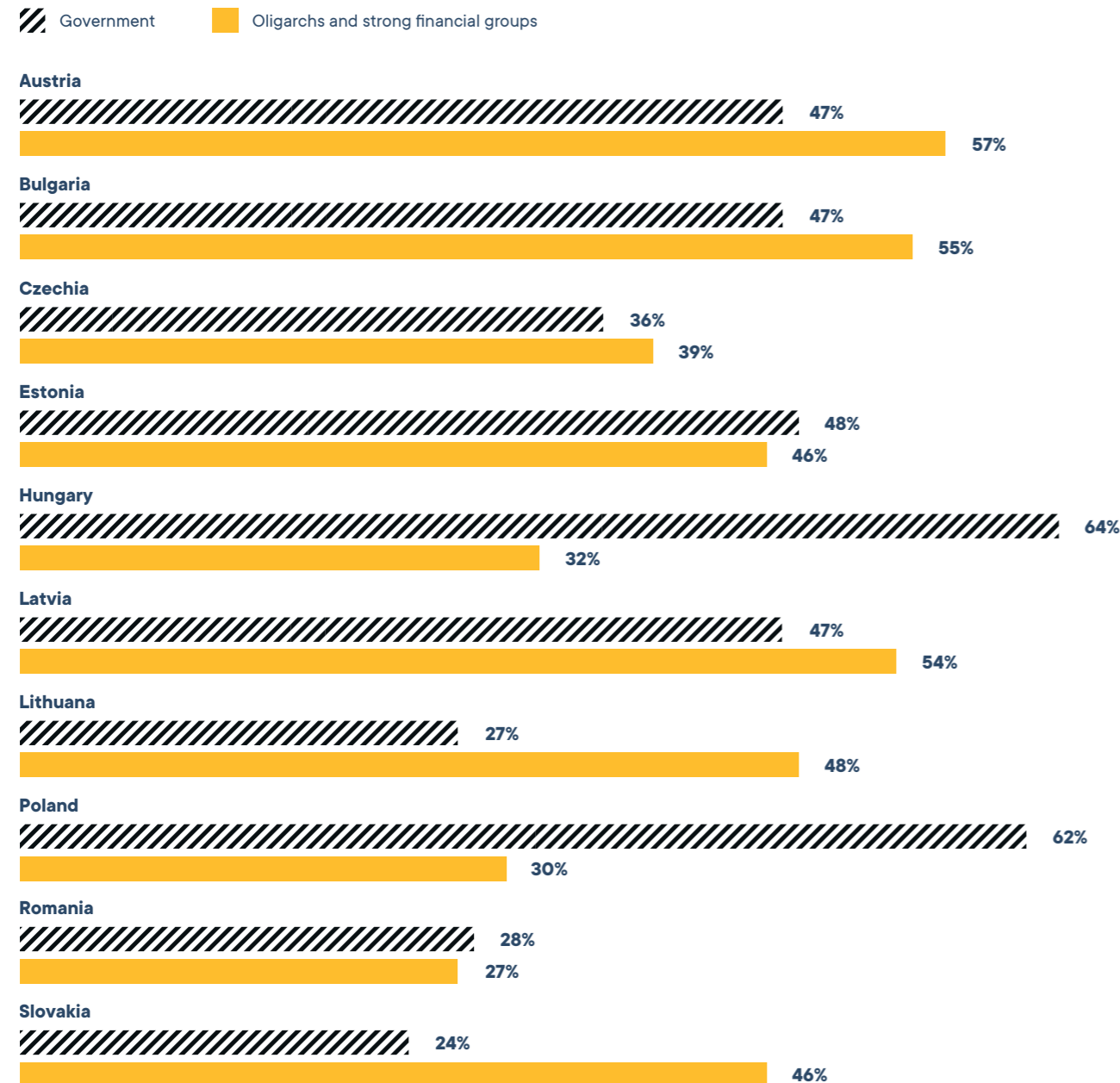
³⁶ Reporters Without Borders, *2020 World Press Freedom Index*, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

Who influences the media?

Only 32% respondents world-wide think that media serve the interests of everyone equally and fairly.³⁷ Such attitudes of perceived media bias are also visible in CEE. In 7 out of 10 countries, the most frequently mentioned actors influencing the work of

media and its independence were both the government and oligarchs. Such interfering tendencies have been also voiced by Reporters without Borders, reflecting the deteriorating conditions of independent journalism in the region.³⁸

Who do you believe influences the media in your country?



On average 43% of CEE respondents believe both government as well as oligarchic influence impact media independence. The governmental influence is strongly perceived in Hungary and Poland, which indicates that the deteriorating democratic standards in these countries voiced by experts assessing the quality of democracy,³⁹ are once again recognised among the citizens. While the governmental influence can be exerted in the form of the overhaul of public funding and its redistribution among selected media and political appointments to the leadership of the public broadcaster and regulatory bodies, it can be perceived sensitively in the region with the majority of countries having decades of experience with state propaganda and complete media ownership.

Strong influence of the church in Poland

Our data shows that 42% of Poles think the Catholic Church has a strong influence over the media in their country. Poland is an outlier among CEE countries in this respect. The church's media influence is represented primarily, but not exclusively, by a private media company owned by one of Poland's priests, Father Rydzyk, that includes a TV station and Radio Maryja. Observers also increasingly perceive the Catholic Church as supportive of the current government and no longer politically neutral.⁴⁰

³⁷ Edelman, 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer. https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2020-01/2020%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Executive%20Summary_Single%20Spread%20without%20Crops.pdf

³⁸ Reporters Without Borders, 2020 RSF Index: Europe's journalists face growing dangers, 2020. <https://rsf.org/en/2020-rsf-index-europes-journalists-face-growing-dangers>

³⁹ Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/nations-transit/2020> or the Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2019. <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

⁴⁰ Rob Schmitz, NPR, As an Election Nears in Poland, Church and State are a Popular Combination, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/12/768537341/as-an-election-nears-in-poland-church-and-state-are-a-popular-combination>

On average, 43% of CEE respondents believe that oligarchic influence impacts media independence.



64% of Hungarians believe that government influences the media in their country.

Practical implications



A high recognition of the influences over the media among the respondents in the region suggests that the increasing distrust towards the media might be linked to citizens' (sometimes legitimate) concerns about government or oligarchic influence over the information broadcasted. It might be a reason why some look for supposedly "alternative sources" run by self-declared independent "journalists" or individuals with no journalistic experience or standards. Often inclined toward providing a distorted picture of reality and alternative explanations of world events, a regular consumption of such sources poses a danger to an informed society and can represent a path towards strong anti-systemic to radicalised views.⁴¹

Legitimate concerns over media influence should receive more attention and be tackled on both national and international levels. Anti-monopoly laws, stricter regulations and transparency requirements enforced by the EU could support media independence. Stricter rules on who can be called a journalist and independent medium need to be set and actively implemented. Such content should be appropriately marked by social media platforms as relevant and verified and prioritized by algorithms to increase its reach, such measures are also advocated by the European Commission.⁴² Furthermore, good investigative journalism takes time and requires financial and personal costs. Thus, more independent funding should be provided to media pursuing quality journalism and cross-national platforms.



⁴¹ The New York Times, The Rabbit Hole Podcast, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/podcasts/rabbit-hole-internet-youtube-virus.html>

⁴² Financial Times, Brussels to launch far-reaching overhaul of online content rules, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/42d66452-5066-4ab8-8650-8b6c9f41c899>



This chapter provides an overview of the factors behind the current thinking about conspiracies and misinformation, together with the most popular narratives in each country. It shows that those who believe in conspiracy theories:

Are very likely to trade their rights and freedoms for other benefits;

Are likely to believe that the media is not free;

Are very likely to support autocratic leaders over liberal democracies;

Are likely to be dissatisfied with the system they live in;

Are likely to be dissatisfied with their own life.

Conspiracies & Misinformation

Chapter III





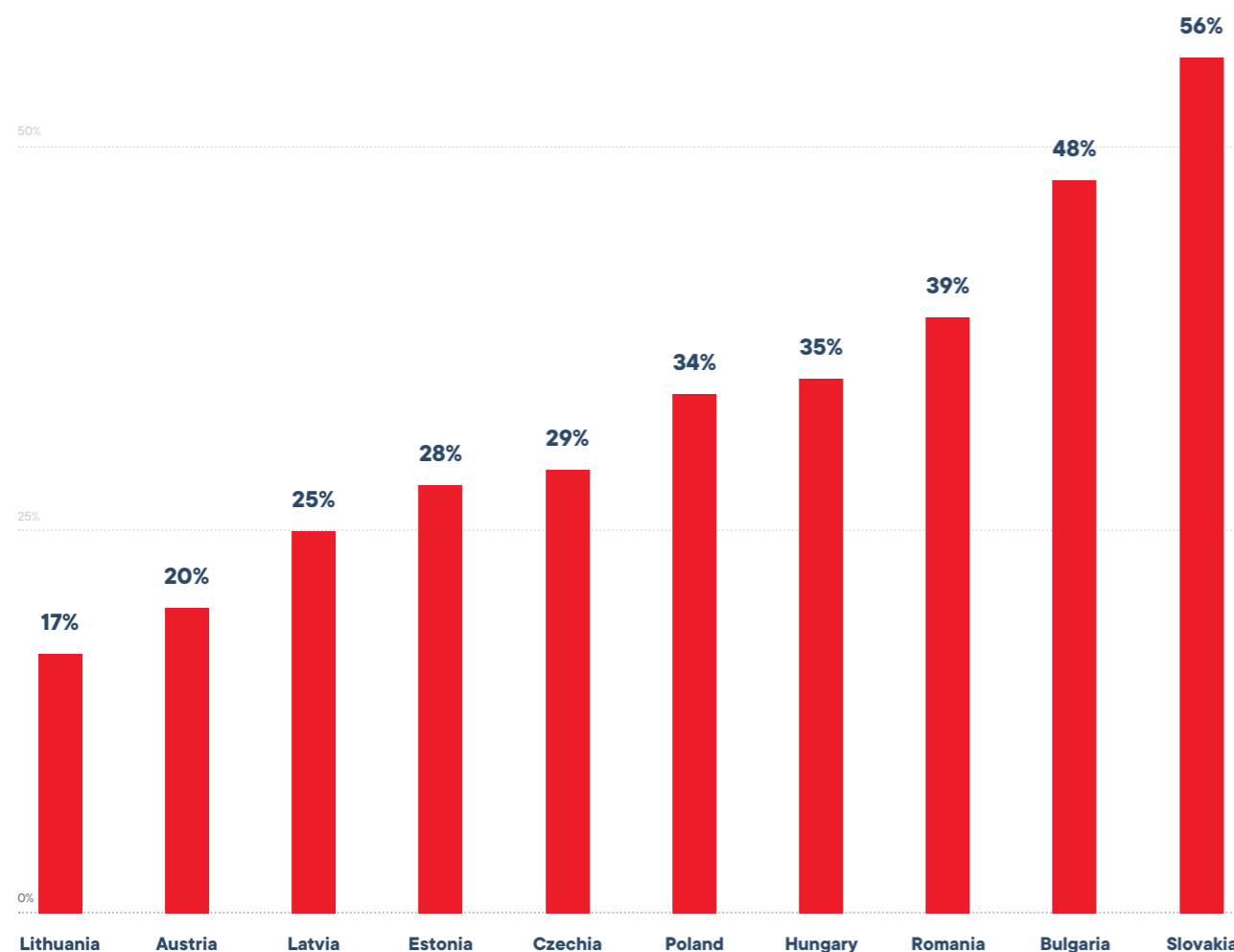
Who believes in conspiracies?

A logistic regression analysis identified five key factors contributing to people's being prone to believe in conspiracy theories and misinformation: willingness to trade freedoms for other benefits (p. 22-23); support for an autocratic leader; distrust in the media; dissatisfaction with the system; and dissatisfaction with life. The two factors contribute significantly to one's susceptibility to conspiracy theories. This means that those people: 1) willing to trade their rights and freedoms for more security,

values-based or financial benefits; and 2) preferring an autocratic leader to liberal democracy are significantly more prone to believe in conspiracies. The latter three factors' link to susceptibility is less strong but still significant, which means that those who are dissatisfied with how the system works in their own country, dissatisfied with their own life and believing that media in their country are not free, are also more prone to believe in conspiracy theories.

The data, however, show that one's tendency to believe in certain narratives is also linked to historical and political context, with some conspiracies being particularly popular also among less conspiracy-prone countries or groups of society.

Degree of belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives⁴³



Foreign interference & control

Those who agree that world affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order.

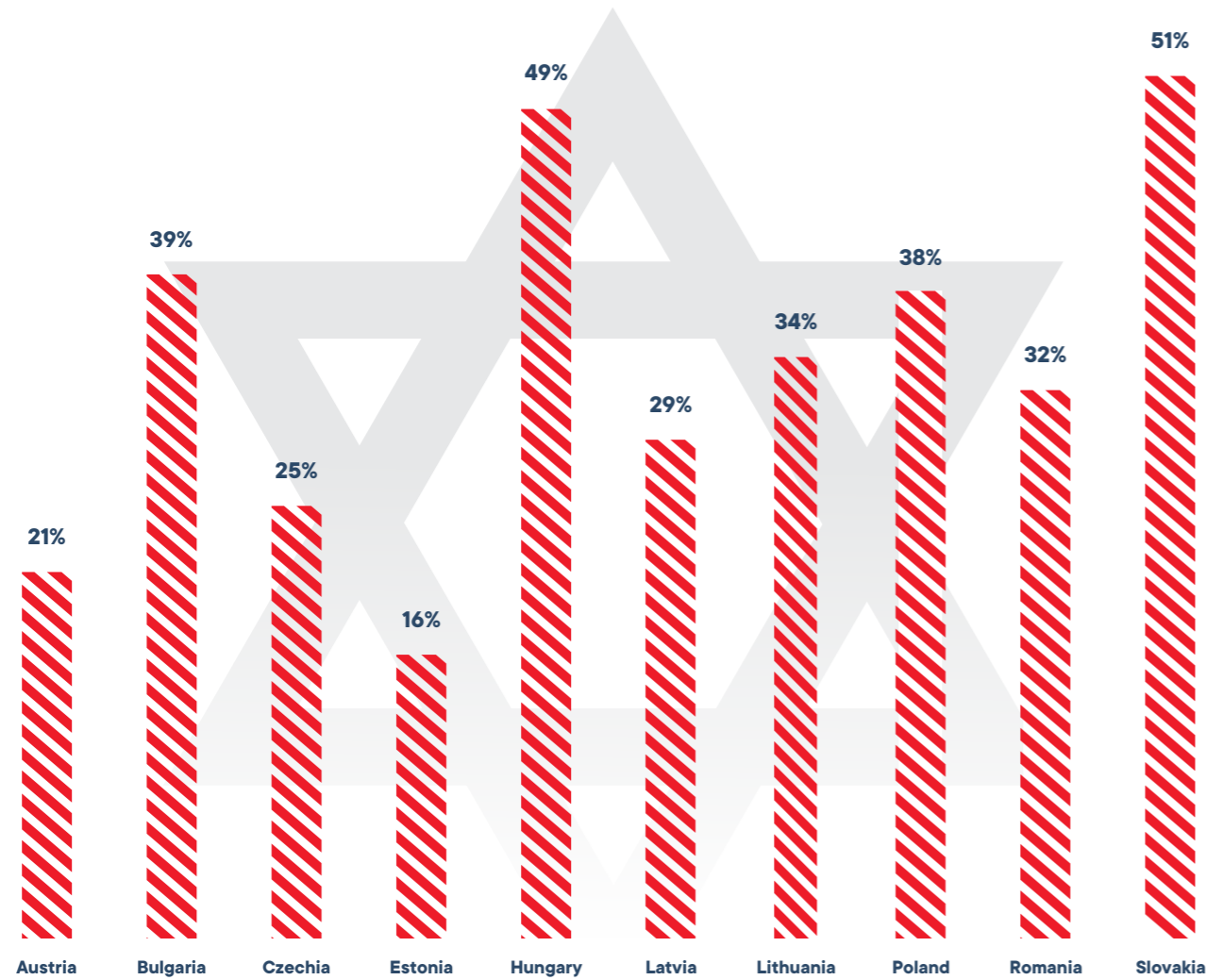


The majority of Slovaks believe in 5 out of 6 conspiracy and misinformation narratives polled.

On average, 41% of CEE think that world affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order. Stories about secret societies are entangled in the world's history. The secretive and mysterious character of these groups can be attractive for human imagination to run wild about potential plans and plots, on the other hand, they are also distant and vague enough to be blamed for anything.

⁴³ The percentage scores represent an average of an agreement of 3-4 conspiracy statements. The respondents were asked around 5-6 conspiracy statements, of which three were identical for all the countries covered and the rest country-specific and selected by the analysts from given countries. The statements with the lowest and highest % were excluded from the average to remove narratives that might be strongly influenced by recent political context or by the analysts' miscalculation of the dominant narratives. Specific questions used for the average are included in the Methodology on the page 54.

Those who agree that Jews have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world.



A sad legacy of the past centuries' demonisation and blaming of Jews still persists in many societies.⁴⁴ The anti-Semitic conspiracy theory about Jews having too much power and secretly controlling governments and institutions around the world resonates with around a half of population in Slovakia and Hungary, and with around a third in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Lithuania. On the other hand, 74% of Austrians and 59% of Estonians say a clear no to such conspiracy thinking.

However, in 6 out of 10 CEE countries, a quarter to a third of the population, did not have a clear opinion on whether to believe this conspiracy theory – 35% of Lithuanians, 30% of Czechs and Bulgarians and 25% of Estonians. The findings indicate that latent anti-Semitism and unresolved historical grievances are still present in the region, while, in many countries, significant parts of the "unsure" population could be swayed either way. More pro-active narrative-building should be done by democratic actors to counter possible

exploitation of these narratives by malign domestic and foreign political actors.

In some countries, anti-Semitism has been revived, with one of the most popular targets of smear campaigns by populist and authoritarian actors are conspiracy theories about the Hungarian-born, American billionaire and philanthropist, George Soros.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, The Alarming Rise of Anti-Semitism in Europe, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/04/alarmed-rise-anti-semitism-europe>

54% of Slovaks believe that protests against the government in Slovakia, which resulted in changes in the government and other crucial institutions in the country, were controlled and paid from abroad.

49% in Hungary and 56% in Czechia believe the anti-government protests in the past years were orchestrated and financially supported by George Soros.

In some countries, anti-Semitism has been revived, with one of the most popular targets of smear campaigns by populist and authoritarian actors are conspiracy theories about the Hungarian-born, American billionaire and philanthropist, George Soros.

A specific example of a popular use of the "Soros narrative" are anti-government protests of the past years in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. Even in Czechia, where the "big" anti-Semitic conspiracy is not popular, more than a half of

respondents from our research believe that George Soros was behind the protests. On average, 53% of Czechs, Hungarians and Slovaks believe that anti-government protests in the past years were orchestrated and financially supported by George Soros.

Protests in 1989-1990

The legacy of 1989-1990 protests, marking the turning point both in the end of the bi-polar world and in a path towards CEE democratisation, strongly resonate in the region. For many, these years are a symbol of change, freedom and hope. However, hopes and aspirations for greater prosperity did not materialise for all parts of society. While the states economically grow and some regions and groups thrive, others are found on the other side of the wealth distribution gap, often disappointed with and cynical towards democratisation.⁴⁵ One of the results of such disillusionment may be the inclination to undermine the protests and their consequent establishment of democratic systems in CEE countries.

The questions asked in specific countries cannot be used for a comparative analysis, as they were drafted by local researchers reflecting the country-specific contexts. Nonetheless, the results hint that the 1989 conspiracy theories tend to be popular in Central and Eastern Europe, as opposed to the Baltics. But again, large parts did not respond, or did not know how to respond to these questions, which may signify uncertainty as well as a lack of public discussion around the issue.

⁴⁵ Brzezinski, Salach and Wroński, Wealth inequality in Central and Eastern Europe: evidence from joined household survey and rich lists' data, Working Paper no 9/2019 (294), University of Warsaw, 2019, https://www.wne.uw.edu.pl/files/3015/6034/4619/WNE_WP294.pdf

45% in Romania

believe that the protests in 1989 that led to the fall of Communist rule were orchestrated and paid by Western powers.

10% of Lithuanians and 21% of Latvians

agree that the movement towards independence in 1990 was orchestrated by the US for the sole purpose to cement its dominance in the region

also, 39% of Lithuanians and 27% of Latvians do not know whether to agree or disagree with such statement.

32% of Czechs

agree that the Velvet Revolution in 1989 was not a result of mass protests but was planned in advance by the secret services.

48% of Poles

agree that "Solidarity" made a deal with the communists during the roundtable negotiations of 1989, and Poland is still ruled by the people who were in power during the socialist regime.

Misinformation narratives

EU & NATO

International organisations are often used as a scapegoat to divert attention from political actors' own wrongdoings. In addition, representatives of the organisations can be portrayed as distant powers, with "officials in Brussels" or a "Brussels dictate" being commonly used labels in the discourse.⁴⁶

The polling data shows that, on average, 52% of the respondents in CEE agree that Brussels dictates to their country what to do without the country having power to influence it. The constant repetition of such narratives might further contribute to a greater tendency to believe in other plots or misinformation demonising the EU.⁴⁷ The perceptions about NATO are, on the other hand, often linked to US influence.⁴⁸ While these attitudes are to a certain extent justified, the simplification of conspiracies and anti-EU/NATO narratives contribute to the scepticism towards the membership and endanger the very bases of the alliances that are vital to the CEE's security and prosperity.

The data show much higher degrees of belief in anti-NATO narratives in Bulgaria and Slovakia than in the Baltic states. This correlates with our research conducted since 2017 that shows the weakest pro-NATO sentiments are in Slovakia and Bulgaria. For comparison, only 56% of respondents in both countries would have voted to stay in a referendum in 2019, compared to 92% of Poles.⁴⁹ Combined with the strongest anti-US sentiments, pro-Russian attitudes and the proneness to conspiracy thinking, the belief in the anti-NATO narratives is thus not surprising.

Compared to 1989 conspiracy theories, the undecided approach towards the narratives on the EU or NATO was not significant among the Balts but in Bulgaria, where 25% of respondents could not decide whether to agree or not.

55% of Bulgarians

think that the EU has always schemed to destroy Bulgaria's nuclear energy industry and strip the country of the role of a regional energy hub.

65% of Slovaks

believe that NATO bases in Slovakia would mean the US occupation.

33% of Czechs

think that "Brussels" dictates their country what to do without them having power to influence it.

⁴⁶ GLOBSEC Policy Institute, European Elections in the V4: From disinformation campaigns to narrative amplification, 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/European-Elections-in-the-V4.pdf>

⁴⁷ GLOBSEC Policy Institute, GLOBSEC Trends 2017, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>

13% of Lithuanians and 26% Latvians

and 26% Latvians believe that the Baltic states are under NATO occupation.

30% of Estonians

believe that the only purpose of NATO's presence in Estonia is to provoke and irritate Russia.

50% of Bulgarians

believe NATO is an American scheme to keep Europe subordinate.

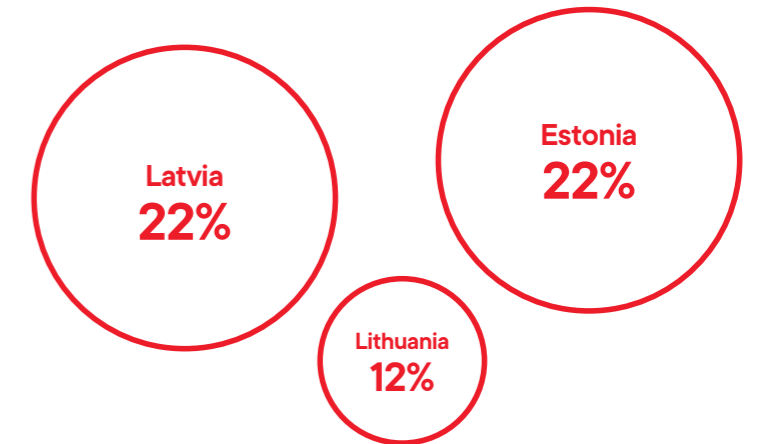
⁴⁸ GLOBSEC Policy Institute, GLOBSEC Trends 2016, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/GLOBSEC-Trends-2016.pdf>

⁴⁹ GLOBSEC Policy Institute, GLOBSEC Trends 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>

Russia-related narratives

When it comes to pro-Russian misinformation narratives questioning historical events, they do not seem to enjoy popularity in the Baltic countries. A key factor is the negative image of Russia pertaining particularly to the Baltics and Poland due to their bad historical experience with the Soviet Union in the 20th century. While similar narratives are present also in other CEE countries, they were not polled all across the analysed CEE region.

There was no Soviet occupation of my country; it joined the USSR willingly and legally.



26% of Latvians

believe that a network of Western historians conspires against Russia to falsify and distort the country's history in order to undermine the Russian/USSR role in the destruction of Nazism.

22% of Poles

believe that the Smolensk plane crash was staged and that the former PM Donald Tusk made a deal with Russia to kill the then-President Kaczyński and other elites.

The case of Austria

The only narrative resonating in Austria among all narratives tested in the country is strongly linked to the migration waves the country has been experiencing in recent decades.

42% agree that the Austrian society is undergoing a slow and secret Islamisation.

"Worries of Islamisation are also particularly prevalent in rural regions, where the proportion of people of Muslim faith and the number of asylum seekers is rather low. Supporters of the Islamisation conspiracy theory are afraid that Muslims are preferred by politicians to lure them as future voters. Not least because of the terrorist attacks with an Islamist background, the terms „Islamic“ and „Islamist“ are often confused in public discussion despite the fact that a majority of Muslims in Austria see themselves as moderate.

In the past years, the general political discussion increasingly concentrated on the subject of Islam in general and the "fight against political Islam" in particular.

Debates on failed long-term integration efforts inflamed the issue and politicians tried to demonstrate strength by pursuing a "symbolic policy". In Autumn 2019, the Austrian Parliament passed a ban on headscarves for girls in elementary school, an extension of this ban to teachers or to the public sector has been considered. In recent months, the ÖVP urged the introduction of protective custody – a move that was generally considered to be referred to representatives of a radical political Islam. All this led to an overrepresentation of the topic of 'Islam' in the public debate as one of the most urgent domestic 'problems' and had visible consequences on Austrian public opinion." (Austrian Society for European Politics)

Practical implications



Susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking is based on looking for alternatives and culprits to explain specific events.⁵⁰ The “villain” is usually made up by a group of people, which is intangible enough for the believers to blame them. This is thus usually an ethnic group, representatives of a country or nation that is distant ideologically or geographically, or a group on the other end of the ideological, social or financial spectrum of the society.

The data shows that dissatisfaction and the feeling of insecurity greatly contribute to the population’s proneness to conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives. It is rather natural that groups who do not feel an integral part of society and do not feel treated fairly in life would look for alternatives. While for some, it is an alternative system of governance, for others, it is an alternative culprit “secretly” responsible for wrongdoings, and, in the worst-case scenario, both. While pushes for changes in the system of governance can eventually lead to a stronger public debate about reforms, the justification of one’s dissatisfaction through imaginary plots and culprits dangerously leads to greater passivity. If a person believes that the events shaping the world and people’s lives are governed differently than “the majority believes”, their willingness to participate in the system decreases significantly.⁵¹ Their satisfaction and empowerment, on the other hand, comes from the belief that they are a part of the “special” group aware of the truth. This tendency is dangerous for any democracy, which requires the society to play an active role to work. Disillusioned and passive society is hampering participatory democracy and its key building blocks.

A misleading narrative or a conspiracy theory has fertile ground to become widely popular if there is no viable alternative in the discourse or if there is a degree of uncertainty surrounding it, i.e., if those on the receiving end lack key information. Thus, in addition to historical context, the popularity of specific narratives in specific countries is often linked to the nurturing of the topic by political leaders or to a lack of governments’ strategic communication. If the former applies, democracy needs its key components – free media and strong civil society to hold politicians accountable and provide factual information to the public.

In order to prevent any attempts to suppress these components, greater international support, both financial and declarative, is required. Active and long-term strategic communication can address and pre-bunk the prevalent conspiracy or misinformation narratives in society, but more coordination and proactive measures on both the state and non-state levels are needed to fill the void. That first requires robust research into societal attitudes and the identification of key vulnerabilities. Once strategic political messaging is established, further research should be conducted on potential underrepresentation of key issues in the education system to establish a solid knowledge base more resilient to conspiracy theories and misinformation.



⁵⁰ Douglas et al., Understanding Conspiracy Theories, *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 40(1), 2019, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/pops.12568>, p.4

⁵¹ Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo, The psychological impact of viewing the film “JFK”: emotions, beliefs, and political behavioral intentions. *Polit. Psychol.* 16, 237–257, 1995, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3791831>

Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2020 on a representative sample of the population in ten EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample ranging from 1,000 to 1,047 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) or computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).

In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. For the purpose of graphical data visualisation in this report, 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 for the purpose of data visualisation.

The collected data were subject to **factor analysis**, from which three factors were identified - "satisfaction with the system of governance", "personal satisfaction" and "willingness to trade freedom" comprised of the following variables (polled questions):

Polled questions and variables used in factor analysis	Factor 1 „Satisfaction with the system of governance“	Factor 2 - „Personal satisfaction“	Factor 3 - „Willingness to trade freedom“
In (country), everyone has a chance to succeed in life	0.414		
The needs of people like you are well taken into account by the political system in (country)	0.541		
In general, most people in my country can be trusted	0.438		
Trust - Government	0.733		
Trust - President	0.575		
Trust - Courts and judiciary in your country	0.581		
Trust - Standard mainstream media	0.524		
Trust - Political parties	0.641		
Trust - Police	0.654		
Trust - Armed forces	0.545		
Satisfaction - With your life?		0.720	
Satisfaction - With your financial situation?		0.707	
Satisfaction - With your social standing?		0.708	
Satisfaction - With how democracy works in your country?	0.602		
Trade freedom for... : - ... better financial situation of you and your household?			0.723
Trade freedom for... : - ... greater security in your country?			0.792
Trade freedom for... : - ... the preservation of (your country's) traditional values?			0.780

Since factor loadings can be interpreted as standardised regression coefficients, it is possible to interpret that, for example, the variable trust in government has a correlation of 0.733 with Factor 1. This would be considered a strong association for a factor analysis.

Factor-score indices comprised of individual variables (please see table above) were weighted based on the portion they "contribute" to the indicator.

Average value of the factor scores-based indices per country

	Factor 1 „Satisfaction with the system of governance“	Factor 2 - „Personal satisfaction“	Factor 3 - „Willingness to trade freedom“
Austria	0,82	0,75	0,70
Bulgaria	-0,46	-0,37	-0,20
Czechia	0,04	0,01	-0,23
Estonia	0,22	-0,20	-0,11
Hungary	-0,02	-0,24	0,26
Latvia	-0,12	-0,13	-0,03
Lithuania	-0,02	-0,34	0,07
Poland	-0,18	0,27	0,09
Romania	-0,32	-0,01	-0,07
Slovakia	-0,12	-0,09	-0,53

The individual value of the index per each country represents how close countries are to the "ideal type" of respondent, i.e. a value of 1 in Factor 1 means the respondent is "definitely" satisfied with their governance system. The value of -1 represents the opposite (i.e. the respondent is "definitely" not satisfied with their governance). The countries' factor scores of the „satisfaction with the system of governance“ index used on page no. 12 of the publication were multiplied by 100 for easier graphic visualisation.

Logistic regression analysis was applied to see what variables could explain conspiracy beliefs of the respondents. In case of the question concerning independence of media, both "rather agree" and "strongly agree" answers to the question "Do you believe that standard mainstream media in our country are completely free, rather free or unfree?" were included.

Logistic regression coefficients for determinants of conspiracy beliefs

Variables	World Trade Center conspiracy	Jewish conspiracy	Secret groups conspiracy
Factor 1 „Satisfaction with the system of governance“	-0.305*** (0.0419)	-0.0739* (0.0388)	-0.394*** (0.0393)
Factor 2 „Personal satisfaction“	-0.207*** (0.0403)	-0.197*** (0.0382)	-0.241*** (0.0383)
Factor 3 „Willingness to trade freedom“	-0.407*** (0.0407)	-0.565*** (0.0383)	-0.546*** (0.0382)
Preference of strong authoritarian leader	0.508*** (0.0731)	0.455*** (0.0695)	0.588*** (0.0700)
Belief that standard media not free	0.321*** (0.0787)	0.108 (0.0734)	0.170** (0.0729)
Country dummies	(yes)	(yes)	(yes)
Constant	-0.320 (0.280)	-0.886*** (0.262)	-0.0996 (0.258)
Observations	5,522	5,772	6,007

Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Chart Degree of belief in conspiracy and misinformation narratives on page 44:

The percentage scores represent an average of an agreement with conspiracy statements polled in a particular country. The respondents were asked around 5-7 conspiracy and misinformation statements, of which three were identical for all the countries covered and the rest country-specific and selected by the analysts from given countries. The statements with the lowest and highest percentage were excluded from the average to remove the narratives that might be strongly influenced by recent political context or by the analysts' miscalculation of the dominant narratives.

Three conspiracy statements polled in all 10 countries were:

1. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001 was planned and conducted by the American government, not Al-Qaeda.
2. Jews have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world.
3. World affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order.

Country specific questions were the following:

Austria:

- Austrian society is undergoing a slow and secret Islamisation.
- Jörg Haider (a former leader of the FPÖ) was murdered in 2008.

Bulgaria:

- The EU has always schemed to destroy Bulgaria's nuclear energy industry and strip the country of the role of a regional energy hub.
- The non-governmental organizations in (your country) are the secret voice of foreign powers and interests.
- NATO is an American scheme to keep Europe subordinate.

Czechia:

- The Velvet Revolution in 1989 was not the result of mass protests but was planned in advance by secret services.
- The anti-government protests in the past years were orchestrated and financially supported by George Soros.
- There is no climate change; data are intentionally falsified by the governments.

Estonia:

- NATO is unwilling and/or incapable to defend Estonia militarily because Russia is much stronger than NATO in any way.
- The only purpose of NATO's presence in Estonia is to provoke and irritate Russia.
- There was no Soviet occupation of Lithuania; it has joined the USSR free-willingly and legally.

Hungary:

- The non-governmental organizations in (your country) are the secret voice of foreign powers and interests.
- The anti-government protests in the past years were orchestrated and financially supported by George Soros.

Latvia:

- Latvian movements towards independence in 1990 were orchestrated by the USA for the sole purpose to cement its dominance in the region.
- Latvia and the other Baltic states are under NATO occupation.
- There was no Soviet occupation of Latvia; it has joined the USSR free-willingly and legally.
- A network of Western historians conspires against Russia to falsify and distort the country's history in order to undermine the Russian/USSR role in the destruction of Nazism.

Lithuania:

- Lithuanian movements towards independence in 1990 were orchestrated by the USA for the sole purpose to cement its dominance in the region.
- Lithuania and the other Baltic states are under NATO occupation.
- There was no Soviet occupation of Lithuania; it has joined the USSR free-willingly and legally.

Poland:

- The "Solidarity" made a deal with the communists during the roundtable negotiations of 1989, and Poland is still ruled by the people who were in power in the socialist regime.
- The Smolensk plane crash was staged. The former Prime Minister Donald Tusk made a deal with Russia to kill the then-President Kaczyński and elites.

Romania:

- The protests in 1989 that led to the fall of the communist rule were orchestrated and paid by Western powers.
- The non-governmental organizations in (your country) are the secret voice of foreign powers and interests.

Slovakia:

- NATO bases in Slovakia would mean US occupation.
- The non-governmental organizations in (your country) are the secret voice of foreign powers and interests.
- The protests against the government in Slovakia, which resulted in changes in the government and other crucial institutions in the country, were controlled and paid from abroad.

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Credits

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