



POPULISM IN CENTRAL EUROPE

2018

**Anti EU-rhetoric versus own national interests?
National populism and its reception in Central Europe**



AUSTRIA



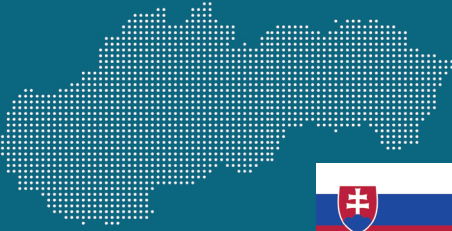
CZECH REPUBLIC



HUNGARY



SLOVAKIA



SLOVENIA



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INTRODUCTION

Paul Schmidt

Secretary General of the Austrian Society for European Politics

Nationalist-populistic discourse is gaining momentum in almost every member state of the European Union, not least in the Central European region.

Pro-European approaches to cope with the manifold challenges the EU and its members are currently facing, seem to be passive and marginalised, trust in the capacity and ability of common European cross-border solutions is low.

Trends to recur to a national political agenda instead of seeking and promoting a common European alternative have the potential to jeopardise the cornerstones of European democracy and diminish the Union's global weight and credibility. Nevertheless, anti-European rhetoric is en vogue, EU

sceptical political parties are on the rise shaping and changing the national political debate in the EU capitals – as self-confident oppositional forces but also as part of the government.

The Austrian Society for European Politics, the Center for European Neighborhood Studies at the Central European University Budapest, the EUROPEUM Prague, the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana and the GLOBSEC Policy Institute Bratislava, therefore jointly launched a project co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union with the goal to examine why political and societal actors resort to “anti-European” rhetoric. We wanted to study if or to what extent and why people believe



in this rhetoric and regard it as justified. Finally, our project also looked at whether and if so, to what extent, “EU bashing” and isolationist policymaking not only fails to deliver on its own promises, but in the medium and long run may even damage national interests.

Our research is based on five representative opinion-surveys that were conducted in all partner countries in a comparable set up and which provide a broad insight into the public opinion in Central Europe on EU membership, its advantages and downsides as well as the assessment of national EU politics, the question of a gap between elites and “ordinary” citizens and other related topics. The results of our surveys were lively discussed at public

events organised in all capitals of the project partners as well as in Brussels.

This report highlights the main results of our surveys, depicts some of the citizens’ views and finally draws conclusions and policy recommendations on how to tackle the challenges ahead and contribute to a constructive European debate based on common values and mutual understanding instead of limited national views that in the end lead to divisiveness and the loss of long-term achievements of the European integration process.

EU MEMBERSHIP IS STILL AN ASSET

Following the British decision to leave the European Union and Donald Trump's election as President of the United States, some voices interpreted this as the beginning of an EU disintegration process and as a starting point for further withdrawals from the Union. However, these claims, mostly expressed by the nationalist-populist side and also picked up by media, did not come true. On the contrary:

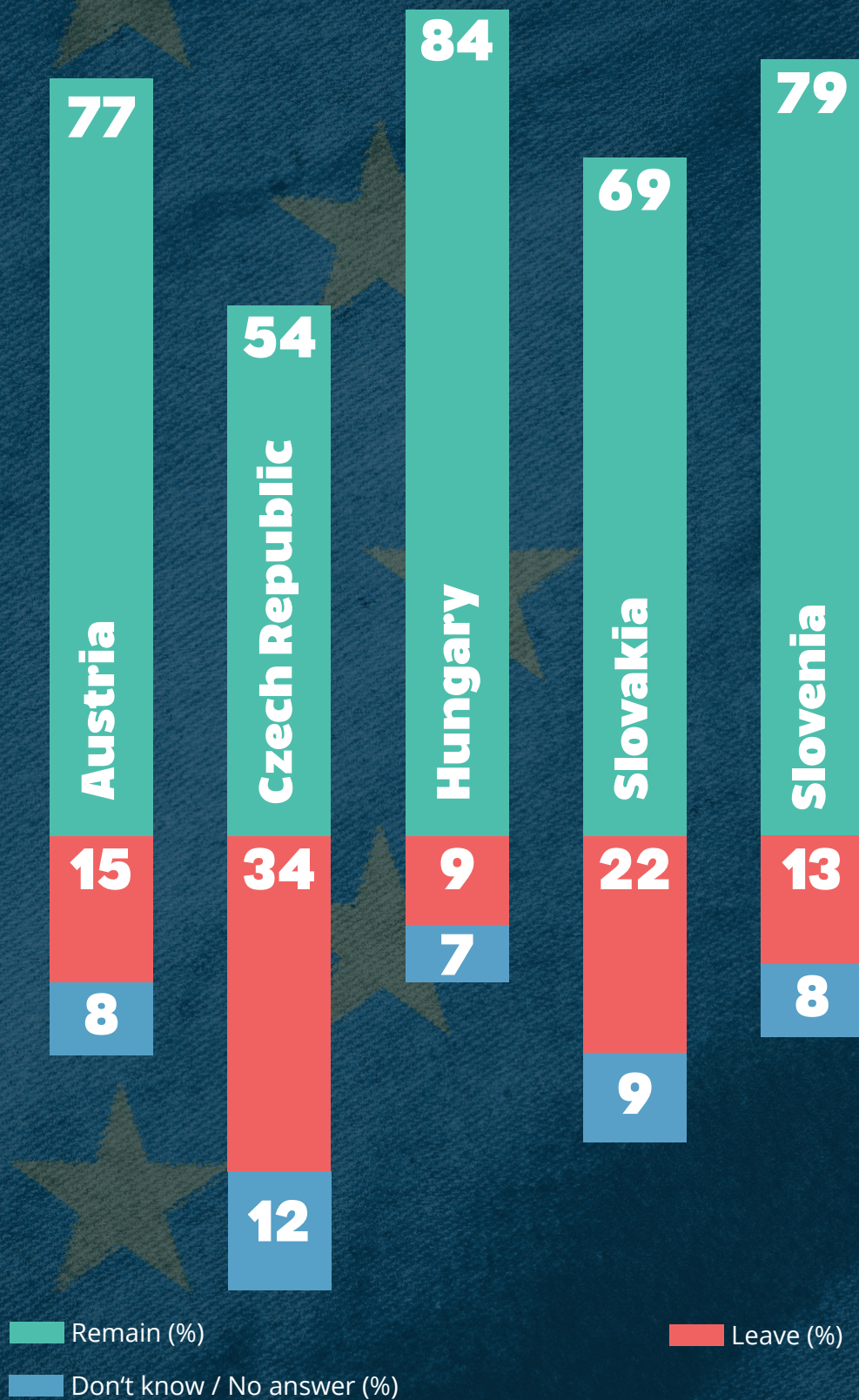
EU membership in most of the five polled countries is largely undisputed. Contrary to some expectations, Hungarians are the strongest supporters of EU membership, followed by Slovenes, Austrians and Slovaks. By contrast, respondents from the Czech Republic are the most sceptical, with one-third of them speaking in favour of their country leaving the EU.

Against the background of an increasingly unstable global environment, and not least the practical difficulties Britain is facing after the decision to leave the Union, the desire to turn its back on the European Union remains at a low level. Notwithstanding the many challenges and diverging views in the EU capitals,

EU membership is regarded as an anchor for stability and economic security, especially for small and medium-sized countries in Central Europe. An equivalent alternative is difficult to offer. Nonetheless, EU-hostile parties continue to receive strong support – a sign that reflects dissatisfaction and mistrust in the ability of the political system and its actors to tackle the challenges ahead.

→ **The Czech result reflects a deep disillusion with politics in general, illustrated by Czech parliamentary elections where 62% of all votes went to anti-establishment and populist parties.**

Should (our country) remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?



HOW DO WE DEPICT THE EU AT HOME?



The way in which the EU is portrayed in the public debate strongly influences people's perception of the Union. A special role and responsibility is played by the media, which is instrumental in communicating the messages set by politics. Do they take on the spin of political messages (message control) or do they critically deal with it, formulate different opinions and ask the citizens to form their own point of views?

In our survey people in the five surveyed countries are divided on the question whether the European Union is dealt with in a correct manner in the national debate. While just under half of Slovaks and Czechs say that the EU is depicted too positively, not even one in ten thinks so in Hungary. A maximum of one-third of respondents in all surveyed countries believe that national politics deals with the European Union in a fair way.

People's perception regarding the way the EU is portrayed in the national public discourse is far from unanimous. There exist different and quite contradictory narratives used by political actors to draw a picture on how they want the Union to

be seen. The fact that only a minority of citizens believes that the EU is depicted fairly, is an indication how emotionalised and polarised the EU debate has become.

➔ **The example of Hungary shows that even repeated, sometimes extremely EU-critical rhetoric does not necessarily mean that it is unreservedly accepted by its citizens.**



Is the European Union depicted in a fair way in the political discussion?

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SLOVAKIA



SLOVENIA



 In a fair way (%)

 Too positive (%)

 Too negative (%)

 Don't know / No answer (%)



IS OUR COUNTRY TREATED FAIRLY BY THE EU INSTITUTIONS?

By joining the European Union, member states have deliberately and voluntarily relinquished some of their national sovereignty to the common European level. This partial renunciation or loss (depending on the point of view) regularly leads to tensions when the feeling arises that national interests are neglected or damaged. A topic that is also popular with nationalists targeting especially the role of "EU institutions".

In our survey Czech respondents are the most sceptical: only 2 in 10 are convinced that their country is treated fairly by the EU institutions. More than half of Austrians and Hungarians in contrast do believe that their country is treated correctly. In Slovakia and Slovenia respondents' views are divided.

The United States of Europe will probably remain an illusion for the foreseeable future. For the time being, the Union remains a complex construct in which national and European decision-making structures co-exist, whose interaction is difficult for individuals to understand and where conflicts of interest can arise. While decisions at local and regional level are still fairly understood and directly

affect individuals, this is hardly the case with decisions taken by "anonymous" EU institutions.

In addition to differing views on fundamental values, mandatory redistribution rates of asylum seekers, CEE countries having joined the Union in 2004 often perceive themselves as second-class members, social and economic differences still remain. The debate about different quality standards also plays an important role. In the case of Austria, EU institutions are often seen as aloof and bureaucratic and always ready to interfere in national affairs.

→ **The Slovenian result might reflect frustration with recent developments the country has been facing e.g. during the financial and migration crisis, the Teran wine dispute or the Croatian-Slovenian arbitration process.**

Is our country treated in a fair way by the EU institutions?

AUSTRIA



CZECH REPUBLIC



HUNGARY



SLOVAKIA



SLOVENIA



Agree (%)

Disagree (%)

Don't know / No answer (%)

IS EU MEMBERSHIP FAVOURABLE FOR MY COUNTRY?



The European project draws its appeal from its promise to foster prosperity, security and stability. Can the EU continue to live up to its expectations in a time of sustained crisis and global upheaval? Populist voices often question this.

Our survey shows that a majority of respondents in all 5 countries associate EU membership, albeit to varying degrees, with benefits. This is especially true for the economic welfare, for the position of the country as a business location and its security.

The positive impact of EU membership on the political weight of the own country, on the other hand, is more disputed.

Hungarians are the ones most positive regarding the benefits of EU membership in all areas, while Czechs are the most sceptical.

The positive economic effects of EU membership are also acknowledged by otherwise explicitly EU-critical voices. Nevertheless, the impact of the financial and economic crisis, as well as an unequal distribution of wealth, impacts public opinion. The latter could be an explanation for the Czech result: Although economic data are good, not all can reap the fruits.

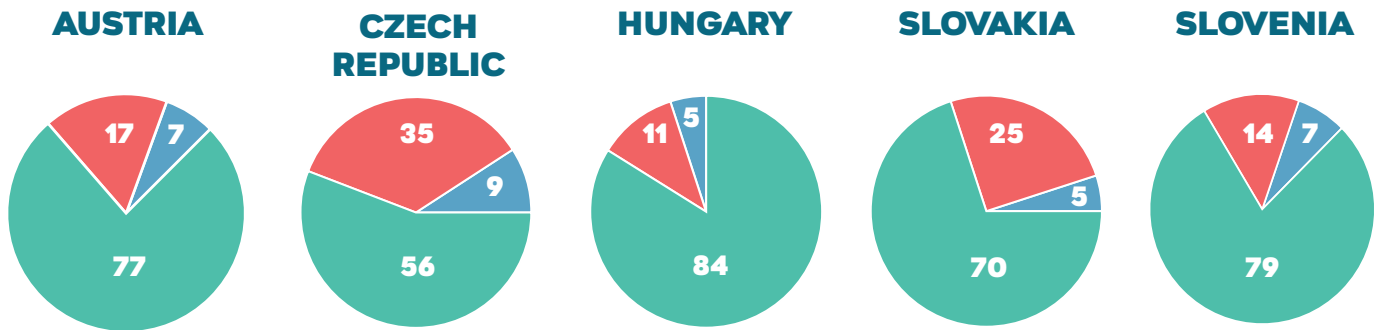
Despite an ongoing security discourse focusing

mainly on the question of migration and questioning the EU's ability to tackle the issue, people do value EU membership when it comes to safeguarding the security of their country against the background of a rather instable global environment.

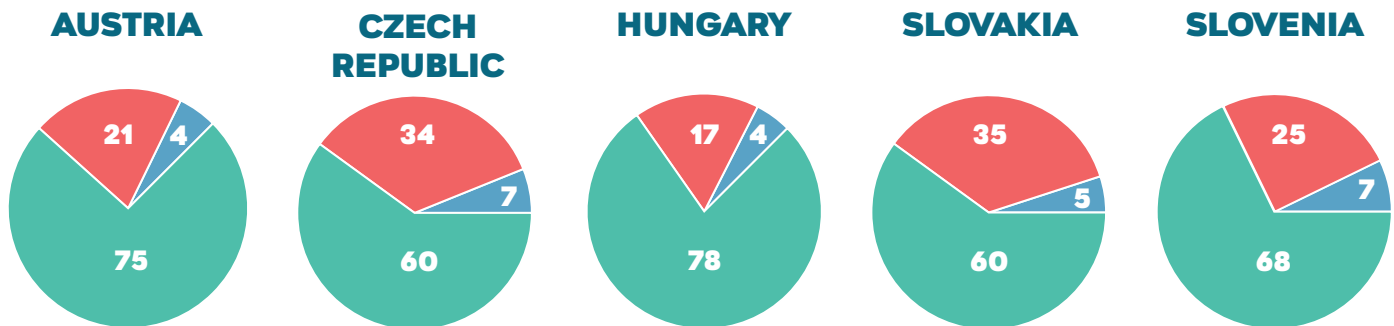
→ When it comes to assessing the impact of EU membership regarding the political weight of the member states, two views collide: While there is a majority in four surveyed countries that membership in a community of more than 500 million people also strengthens the political standing of the own country, sceptics argue that a small country has no say in European decision making. The latter view is expressed especially in the Czech Republic where a majority thinks that EU membership has negative implications for the political weight of the country.

Does EU membership bring more advantages or more disadvantages for our country?

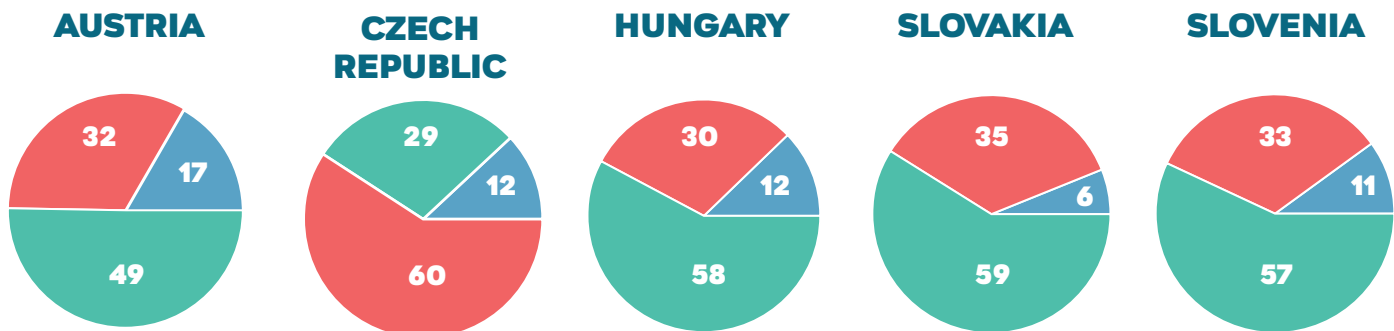
BUSINESS LOCATION



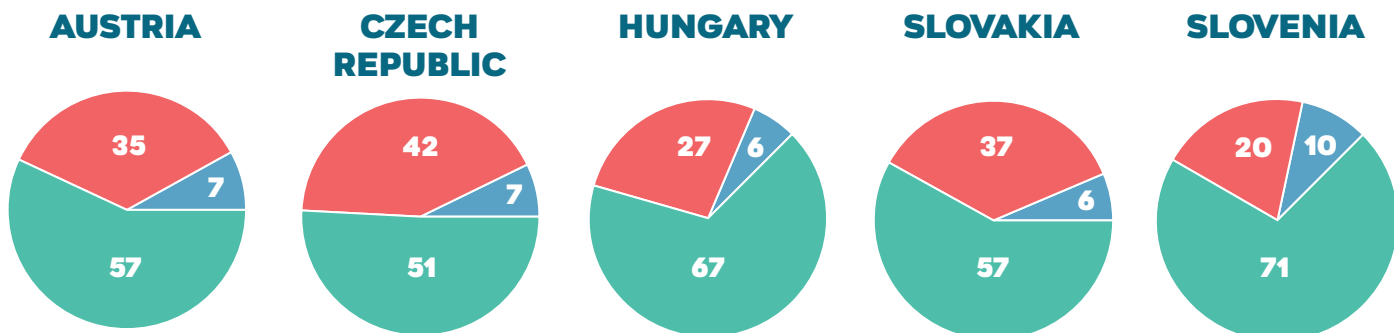
ECONOMIC WELFARE



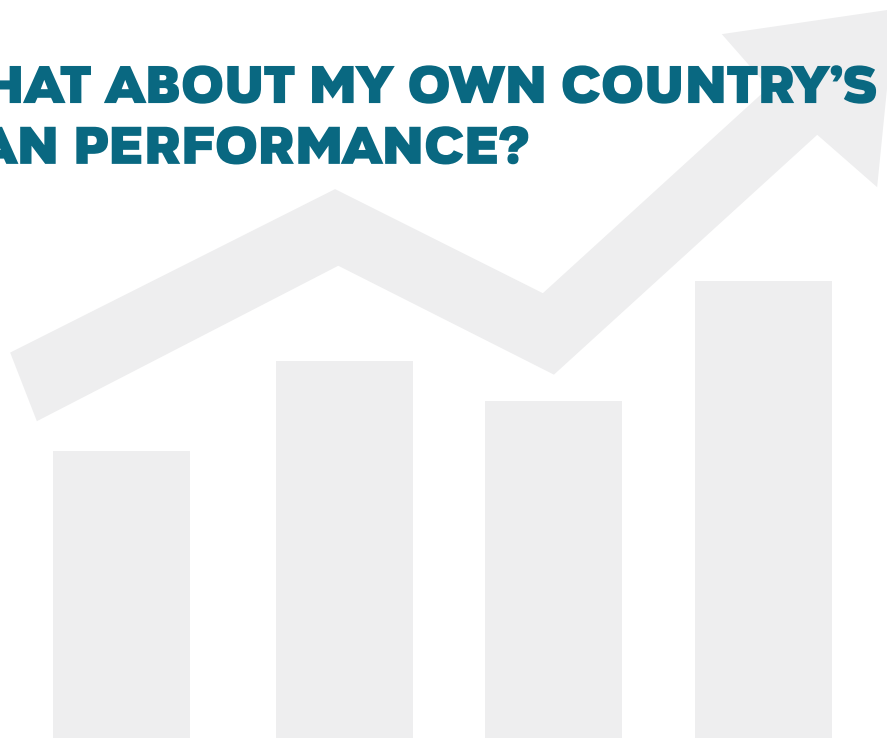
POLITICAL WEIGHT



SECURITY



...AND WHAT ABOUT MY OWN COUNTRY'S EUROPEAN PERFORMANCE?



People in all five countries think that the politics of their country regarding European matters brings more advantages for the **economic welfare** and is favourable for the country's standing as a **business location** (each strongest in Hungary, weakest in the Czech Republic and Slovenia).

Regarding the impact of national EU politics on the **political weight** of their own country, Czechs are by far the most critical, followed by Slovenians whose opinions are divided. A majority of Austrians, Hungarians and Slovaks though do believe that national politics contributes to strengthening of the country's political weight.

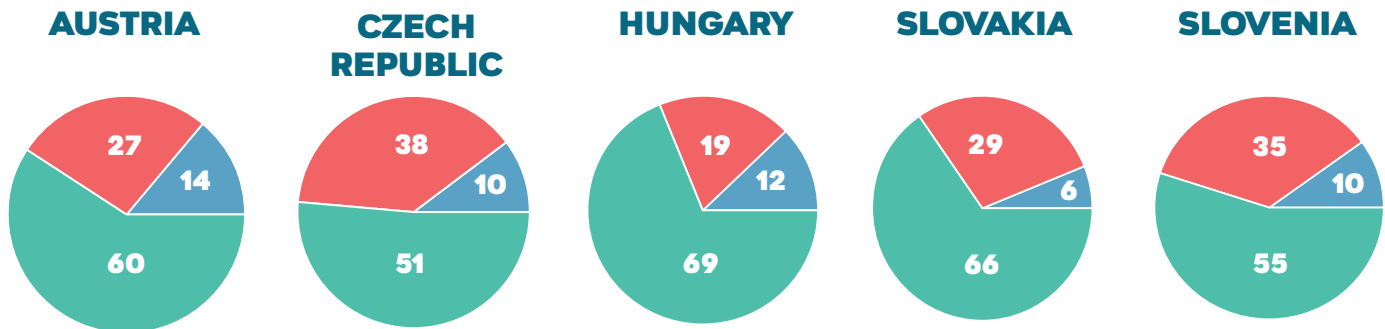
There is also quite a consensus in all five countries that national politics regarding EU matters is favourable to ensure the country's **security**. This view is expressed especially in Hungary, while Austrians and Czechs are more cautious in their assessment.

→ **The results show that people (with only some minor exceptions regarding the Czech Republic and Slovenia) are convinced that both national EU politics as well as EU membership are decisive to strengthen their own country's standing. While citizens believe that national priorities at the EU level need to be more pronounced, EU membership is still valued for enhancing voice in the globalised world.**

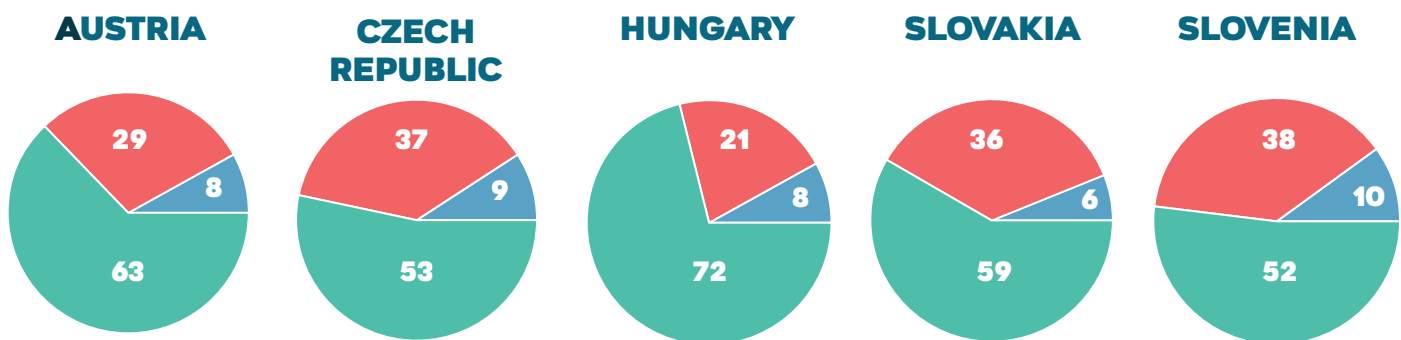


Do the politics of our country regarding European matters bring more advantages or more disadvantages for our country?

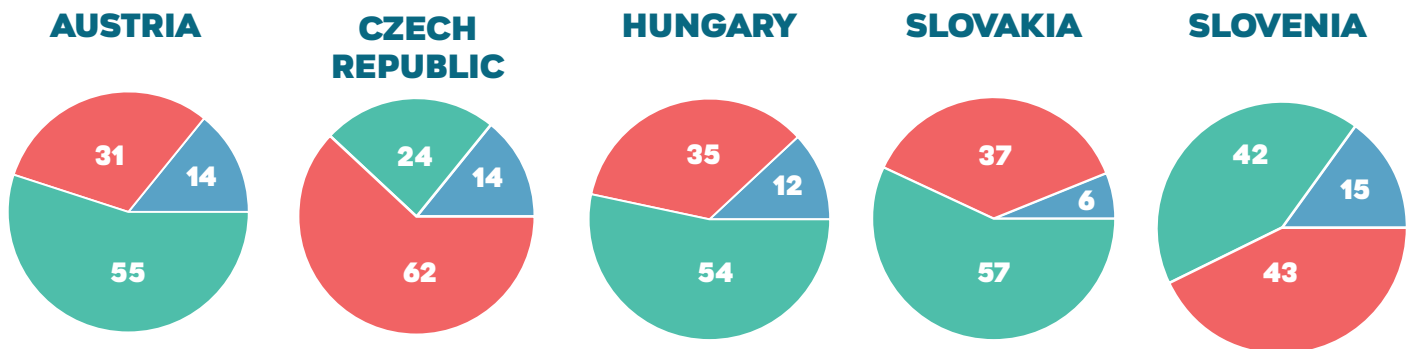
BUSINESS LOCATION



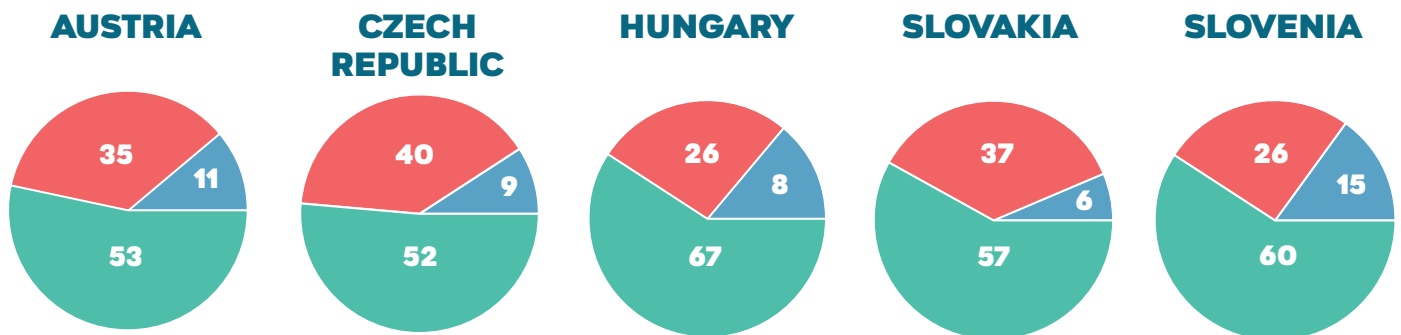
ECONOMIC WELFARE



POLITICAL WEIGHT



SECURITY



■ Advantages (%)
 ■ Disadvantages (%)
 ■ Don't know / No answer (%)

MIGRATION - AND ASYLUM POLITICS CAST A SHADOW ON THE EU'S IMAGE



EU-sceptics often claim that the European Union has lost the ability to create a sense of unity between its member states. Critics argue that the EU initially had its merits as a common market but then became more political form with highly bureaucratic and opaque structures. Especially with regard to the financial crisis and the management of the challenge of migration, the Union is blamed to deepen differences between the member states and its people. In this context also the question is raised to what extent the EU can still be seen as a bulwark for the protection of democracy and human rights.

In our survey a fairly large majority of respondents in all five countries consider that the European Union (still) plays a positive role when it comes to promoting **mutual understanding and cooperation** between the member states, the protection of **democracy and human rights** (both strongest in Slovakia) and the **security** of the country (strongest in Hungary). Again, the Czech Republic is the country where sceptical views are most frequently pronounced.

However, respondents are clearly negative assessing the EU's **asylum and refugee policies**. More than 8 in 10 Czechs express their

dissatisfaction, in all other surveyed countries sceptical views prevail, too.

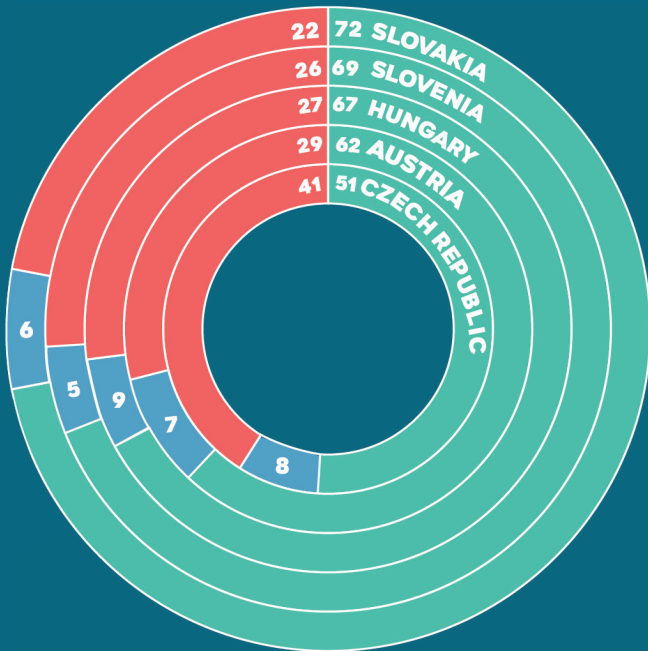
The result shows that two cornerstones of European integration are largely appreciated, from which the Union derives its *raison d'être*: the unifying element of peaceful cooperation between the member states and the EU's global leadership in protecting democracy and human rights. One can assume that the EU is considered as a back-up that can be used in the last resort – especially with regard to growing authoritarian tendencies in its neighborhood.

The lack of a consistent approaches to asylum and migration at EU level is clearly reflected in people's assessment. Neither in Austria (which has taken a more open approach to the issue at the time of the survey) nor in the other countries where the reception of refugees was met with opposition from the beginning of the migration challenge, do people value how the EU tackles this issue. This shortcoming benefits nationalist-populist parties and increases EU scepticism.

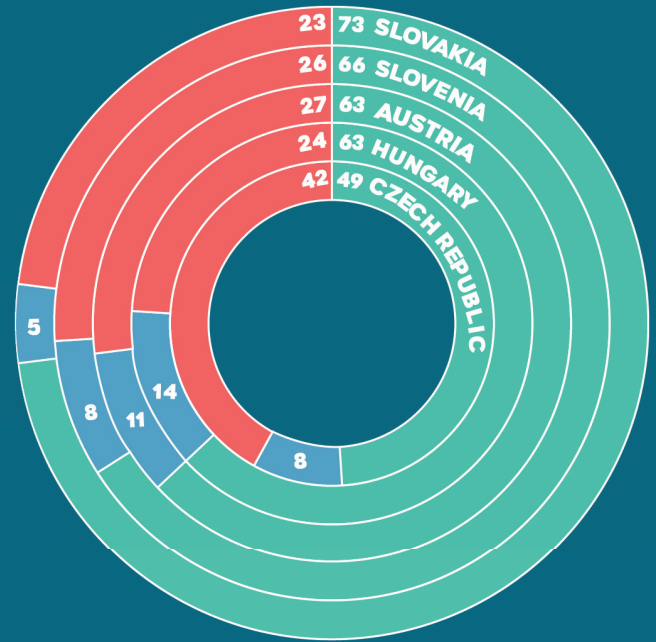
→ **It is high time for the EU to move away from this single issue and lead the EU debate towards a broader and more constructive direction.**

Do you think that the European Union is playing a positive role or a negative role concerning ...

MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EU MEMBER STATES



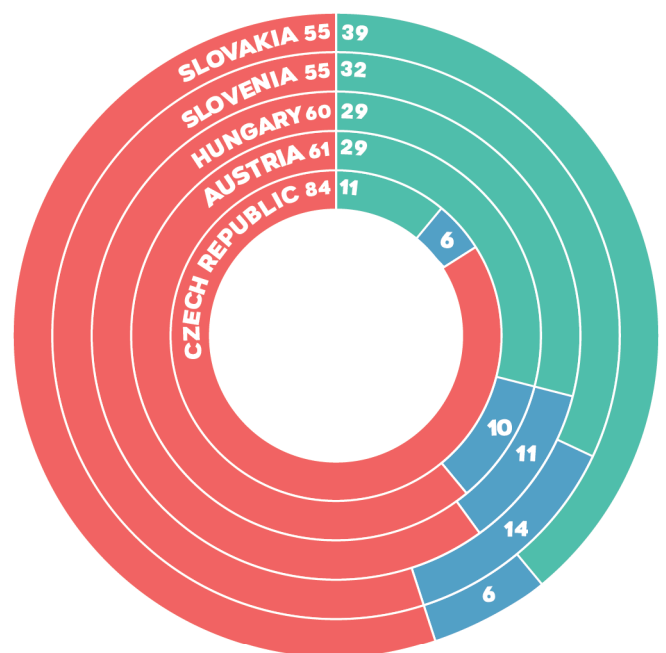
THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS



SECURITY OF OUR COUNTRY

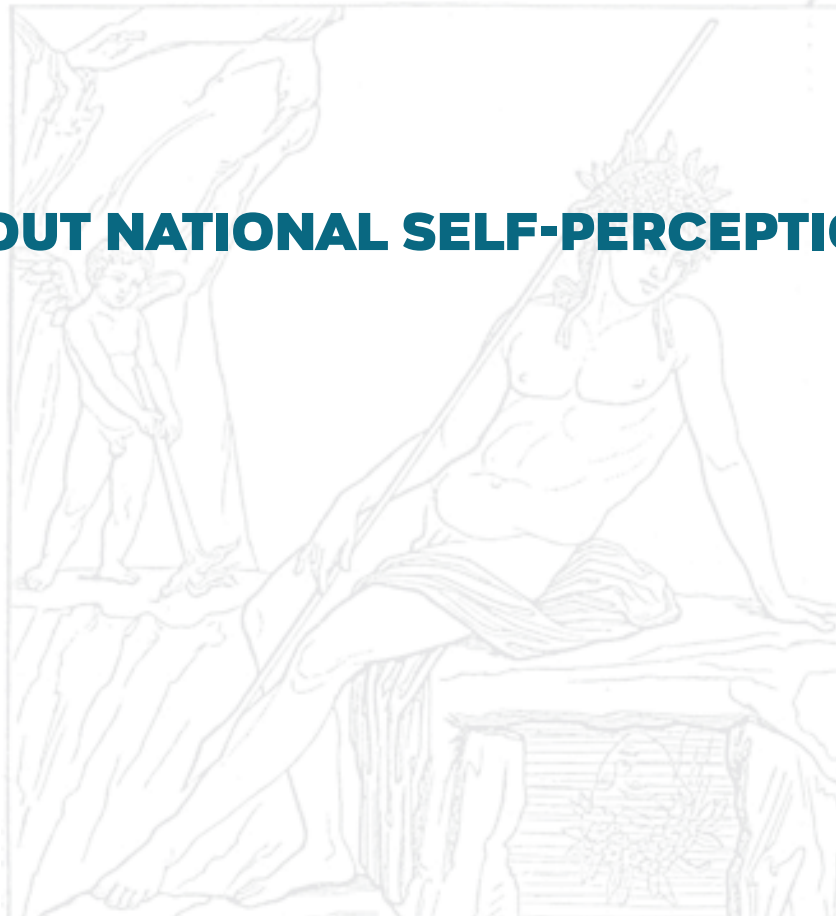


ASYLUM AND REFUGEE POLICY



■ Positive (%)
■ Negative (%)
■ Don't know / No answer (%)

WHAT ABOUT NATIONAL SELF-PERCEPTION?



The way we see ourselves and are perceived by others often differ from each other. This is also reflected in our survey when people rate their own country in terms of solidarity with other EU countries.

More than 7 in 10 Slovenians and Slovaks say that their country shows intra-EU solidarity, in the Czech Republic and Hungary about 6 in 10 share this view. Austrians are those who are most convinced of their country's EU solidarity (nearly 9 in 10).

In other areas too, respondents from all five countries are convinced that their country plays a predominantly positive role. This holds true for the protection of democracy and human rights, where Austrians, Czechs and Slovaks give their own country even better marks than the EU.

Equally positive is the perception of the role of one's own country when it comes to security, especially among Austrians, Hungarians and Slovaks.

An exception is once again found in people's assessment of the asylum and migration policy: only Slovak respondents say (by a small majority) that they are satisfied with the way their own country tackles this issue while Austrians are divided on this point. Czechs, Hungarians and Slovenians, on the

other hand, are more critical - a result that can be interpreted in two ways: either they consider their country being too strict or too lax.

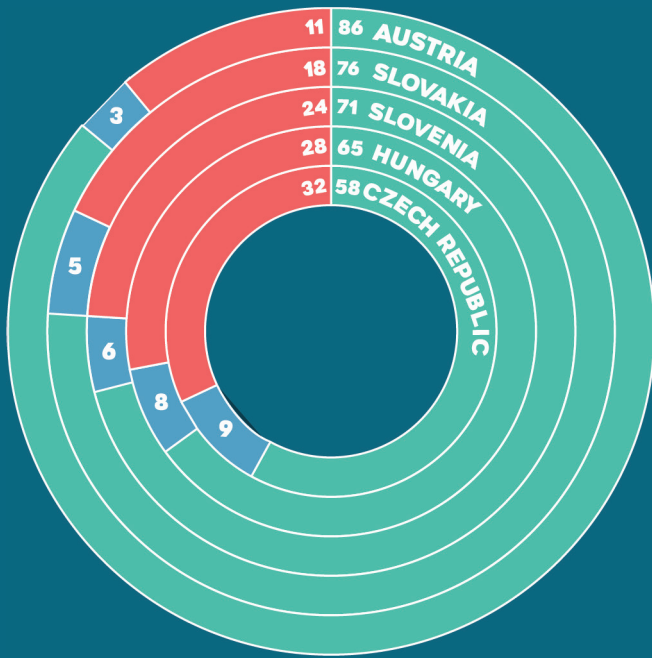
→ Especially for some Western member states it might come as a surprise that those countries that are often accused of lacking of solidarity, by no means see it this way.



Do you think our country is playing a positive or a negative role concerning...

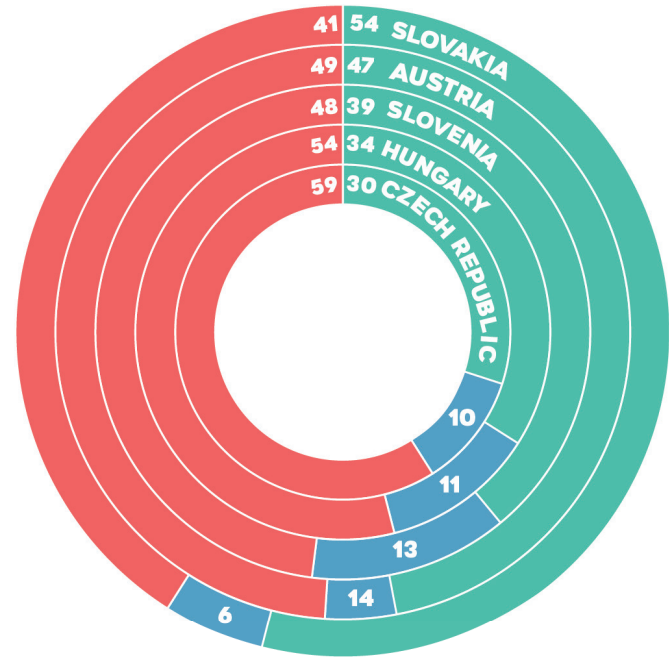
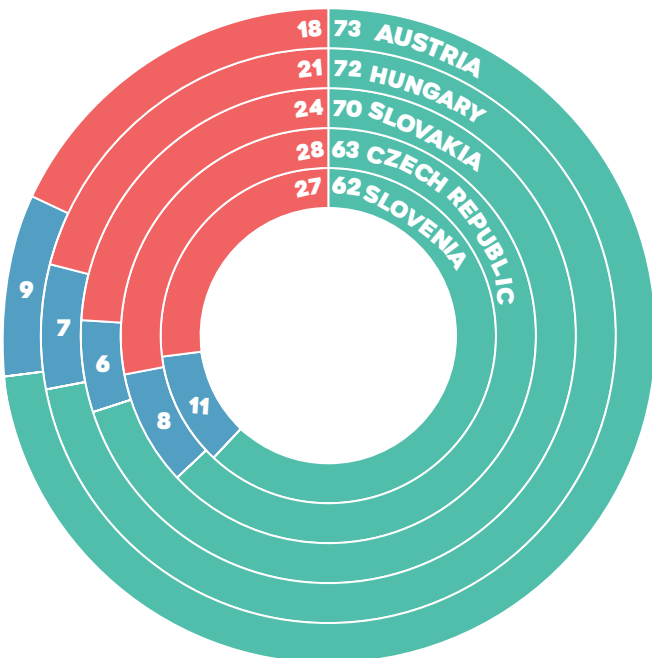
SOLIDARITY WITH OTHER EU MEMBER STATES

THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS



SECURITY OF OUR COUNTRY

ASYLUM AND REFUGEE POLICY

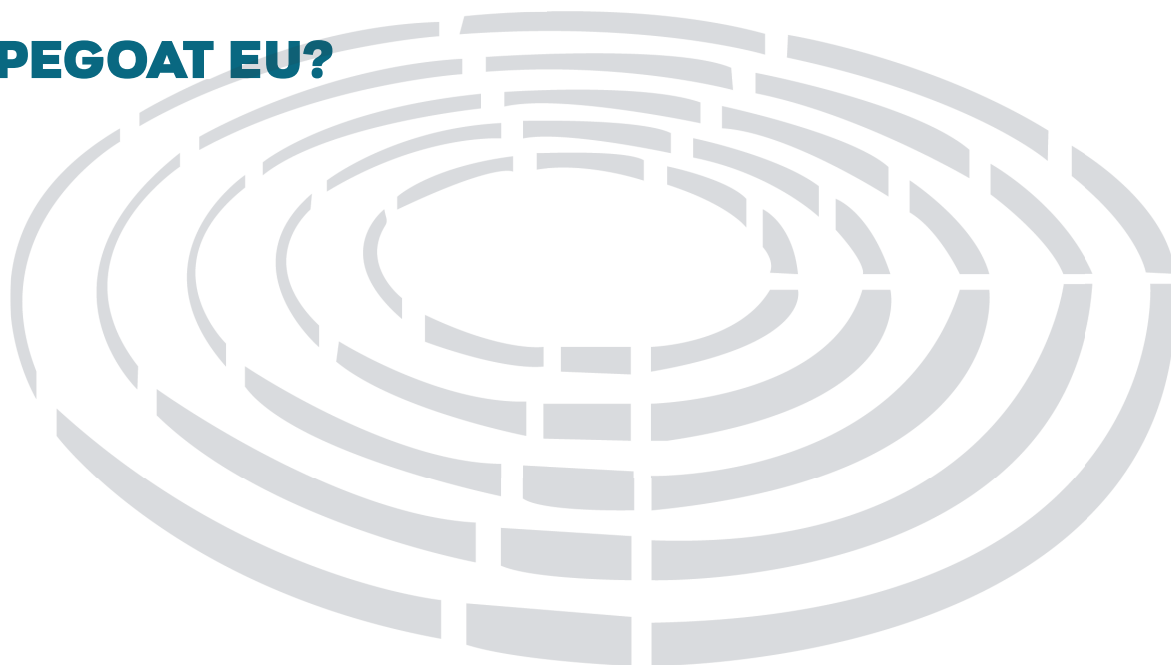


Positive (%)

Negative (%)

Don't know / No answer (%)

SCAPEGOAT EU?



To blame Brussels for unpopular decisions is a quite common characteristic of the political discourse in many EU countries. Politicians often tend to keep quiet about their own participation in European decision-making as chances are good that there is overall little knowledge on the sharing of competences between the European and national level.

In all five countries, an overwhelming majority believes that the European Union is often used as a scapegoat by national politicians to detract from own shortcomings.

This applies in particular to people in Slovenia, where nine out of ten respondents agree but also to a similar extent to Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians. This view is least pronounced in Austria, where about one third do not believe that national politics could insinuate such a thing.

→ **Politicians might be mistaken to force the Brussels blame-game. People are quite well aware that there might be a red herring hiding behind it.**



Do you agree or disagree?

The European Union is often used as a scapegoat by our politicians to detract from own shortcomings.

SLOVENIA



89

8

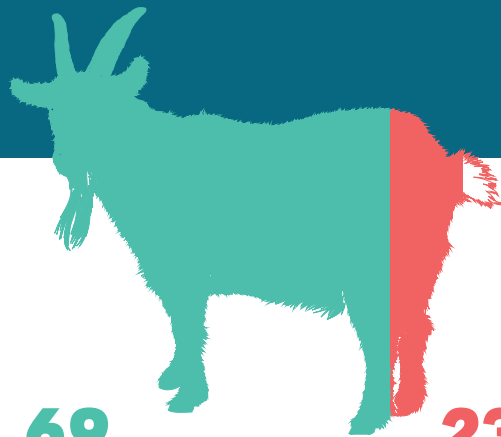
CZECH REPUBLIC



82

12

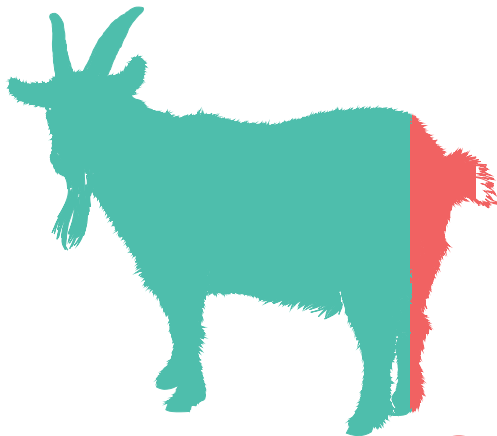
HUNGARY



69

23

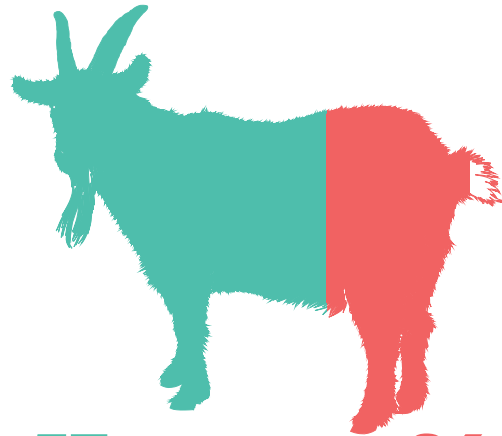
SLOVAKIA



77

18

AUSTRIA



57

36

Agree (%)

Disagree (%)

Don't know / No answer (%)

GAP BETWEEN ELITES AND CITIZENS

MIND THE GAP

Claims that there is a gap between the views of ordinary citizens and the political elites is a recurring paradigm in populist discourse. This gap is particularly perceived regarding migration and refugees but also concerning the advantages of EU integration in general. The so-called elites are blamed to be insensible to the fears and concerns of “the people”, to take decisions and force developments that are against the will and consent of the ordinary citizen. Elites would therefore implement a policy in opposition to the interests of the true people and thus against overall national interests.

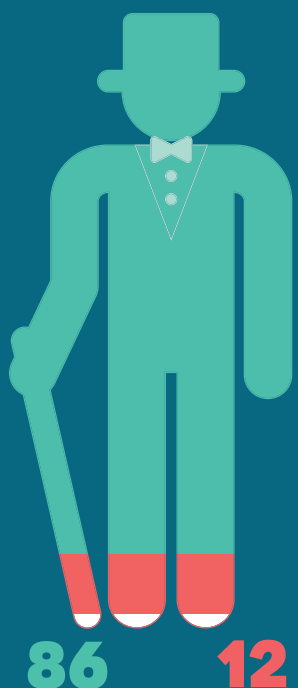
In all five countries, the view that there is such a gap between elites and population is overwhelming - most in Slovenia, still the weakest in Austria.

→ Due to global societal changes, long-term crisis scenarios, but also political scandals and corruption, trust in politics and institutions is severely damaged.

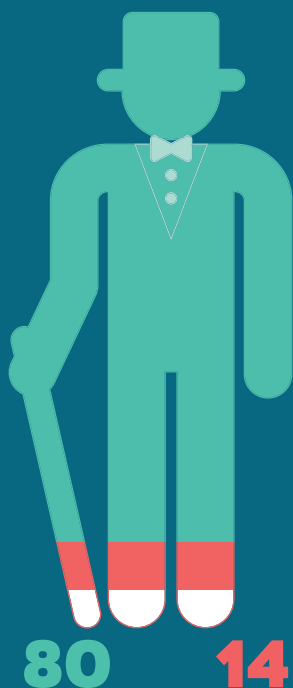
Fears to lose one's identity, depopulation in rural regions, the feeling of being left behind and no longer being needed in the labour market are exploited and reinforced by populists for their own ends, to discredit the system of representative democracy and draft a fundamental opposition between the interests of an (international) elite and an imaginary “true” popular will. This strategy proves increasingly successful.

Are claims that there is a gap between citizens and the political elites justified or exaggerated?

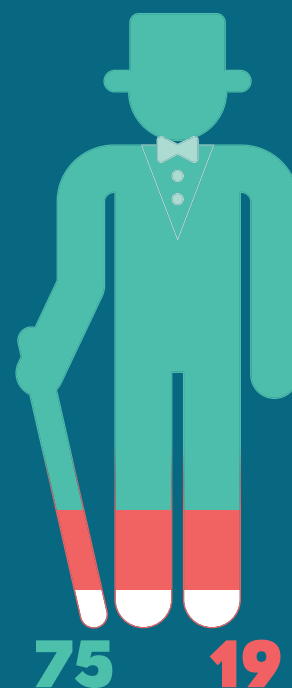
SLOVENIA



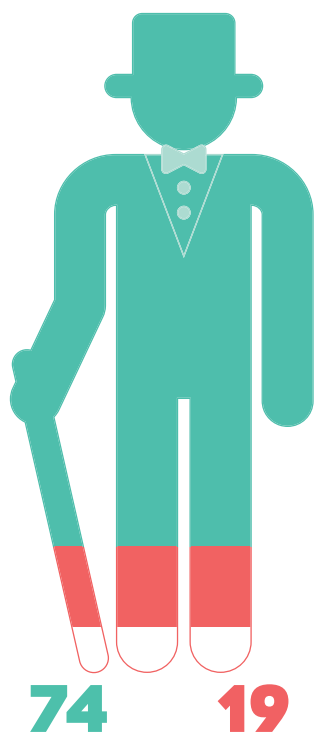
CZECH REPUBLIC



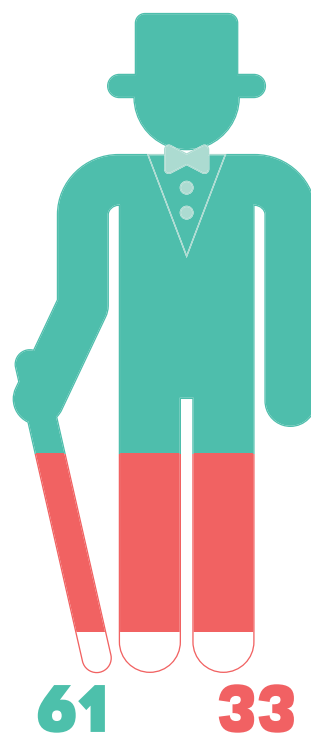
SLOVAKIA



HUNGARY



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Justified (%)

Exaggerated (%)

Don't know / No answer (%)

WHAT DO PEOPLE VALUE?



Populist politics and rhetoric discredit the system of parliamentary democracy and seek to replace it with plebiscitary models. Even an independent judiciary is increasingly under pressure while human rights are partly reinterpreted. Oppositional parties, civil society and critical media have to defend themselves against allegations to act against the interests of the people, represent the elites, and being promoted and funded by internationalist players. The question is: how firmly are democratic achievements anchored in society?

Over 9 in 10 respondents in all five countries unanimously value democracy and human rights as well as an independent justice system.

Nearly equally high is support for the oppositional control of the government and independent media and civil society.

At the same time, people argue for a strong leader in politics (strongest in Hungary and Slovenia – weakest in Austria), want a culturally homogenous society (strongest in Slovakia, weakest in the Czech Republic), and plead for national unity (strongest in Slovenia, weakest in Austria).

Increasing global insecurity, the challenges of digitalisation and new security threats enhance the desire for stability and security, clear directions and

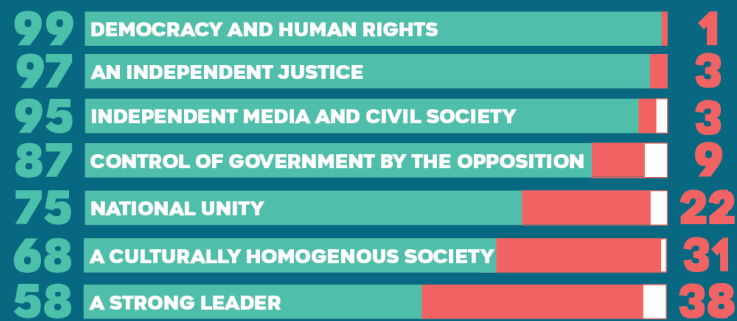
decisions. At the same time, the lessons learned from history stress the importance of democratic achievements. The fact that a majority opts for a strong leadership should be used to intensify the European debate and to develop a clear perspective regarding the future path of European integration.

→ Citizens need to be able to identify themselves with the European Union or will opt for a disintegrational and nationalist concept of Europe.

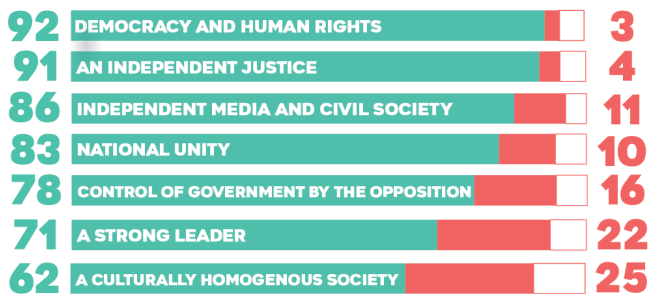


How important are the following issues for you personally?

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SLOVAKIA



SLOVENIA

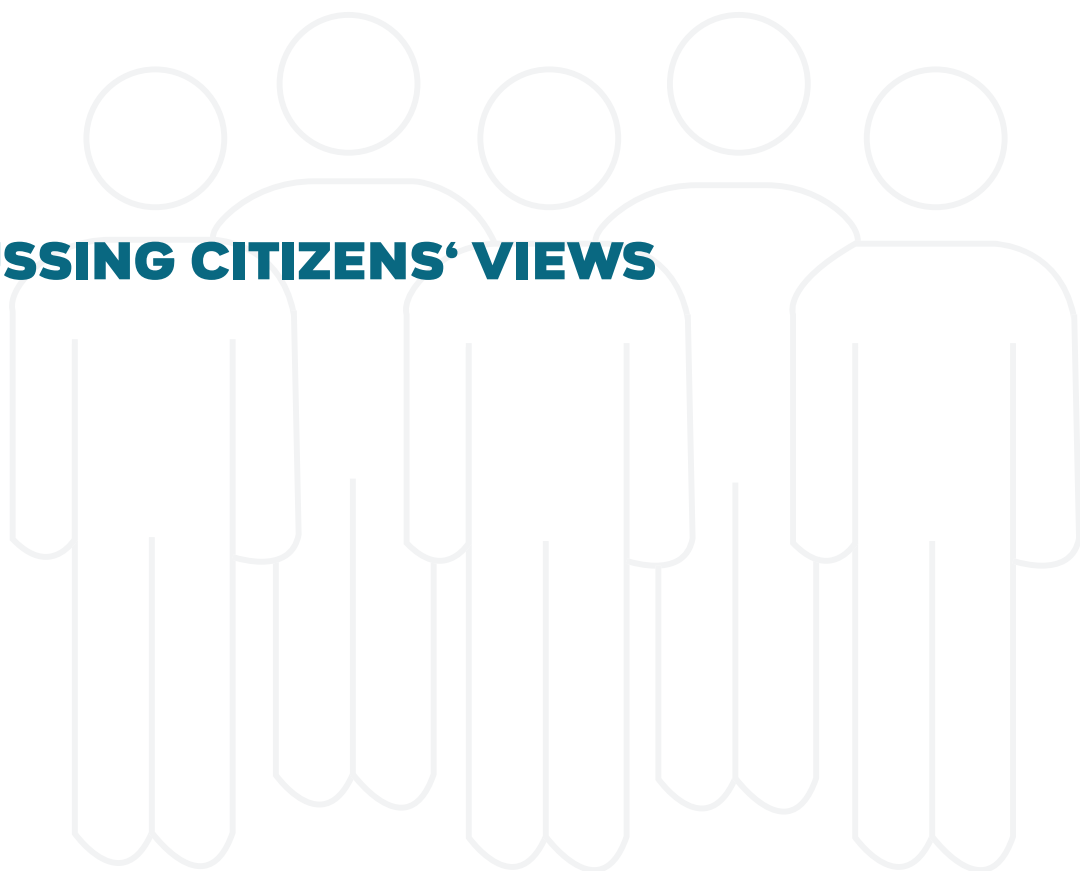


■ Important

■ Not Important

Don't know / No answer

DISCUSSING CITIZENS' VIEWS



Citizens' dialogues in all five countries and Brussels:

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

02 October 2017

Haus der Europäischen Union



LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA

14 March 2018

Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Ljubljana



BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

19 March 2018

Central European University



PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

04 April 2018
Evropský dům



BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA

17 May 2018
Malá Scéna STU

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

16 October 2018
Haus der Europäischen Union



BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

24 October 2018
Vienna House

CITIZENS' VIEWS

"As long as politicians sell everything that is good as a national success and everything that is bad as a failure of Brussels, we will not be able to solve the issues that Europeans are facing. And I think it is especially up to us, the youth, to take over the responsibility, go to the polls and vote at the European elections."



"Populism can be very dangerous, and in the worst case lead to conflicts and wars. However, populism must not be left to demagogues and politicians that only engage in hate speech. It also needs to be used by positive forces to show people how things can be better."

"My opinion is that there is not just one sort of populism, there are at least two sorts of it. I would define it as negative and positive populism. Nationalistic populism is negative, if the means of the rhetoric used are separative and deliver fear. However, politicians that address people with solidarity, kindness, hope and unity should be defined as positive populists."



"Often we think that social media in civil society are all those free and positive forces and sources, but as we have heard today, this is not necessarily always the case. Those platforms can become channels for hate mongering and wrong nationalism. To tackle this, I personally consider self-reflection as particularly crucial to become aware of our own prejudices."

“It is amazing to see that trends in Central Europe are not limited by borders. I was particularly surprised to see how people support and value democracy and yet do not have negative opinions about a strong leader. This I believe needs to be amended by education.”



“One of the main factors fostering populism is definitely that since the financial crisis many people feel left behind, particularly in the middle class. But what I believe is particularly important when talking about this issue is that most of the European citizens still haven’t incorporated the European values. Therefore efforts to promote European values and explain which benefits they bring should be intensified.”

“A particular focus should be placed on the role of social media, as this not only affects how people think about the European Union and democracy, but also how they vote in the end.”



“I am an Indonesian citizen and I have been living in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary for several years both as a student and an expert. Even though I am neither an illegal immigrant nor an asylum seeker, populism affects me personally. For instance when I am walking on the street, people sometimes attack me or behave negatively towards me – simply because populist statements create these kind of sentiments.”

CONCLUSIONS



WHY DO POLITICAL AND SOCIETAL ACTORS RESORT TO AN "ANTI-EUROPEAN" RHETORIC?

1. Anti-EU attitudes are a syndrome of anti-globalisation sentiments brought by swift societal change (income disparities, migration). For many, the EU is a European model of globalisation, a softer version but with essentially the same problems.
2. Anti-Europeanism is a natural supplement to a recent rise of nationalistic populism.
3. Especially in the CEE region the narrative of small countries being constantly abused and oppressed by the "stronger powers" is rooted in history. Framing the EU as a "big power" that is "again" constraining the sovereignty of the nation, is for many a useful tool to gain or strengthen popularity.
4. Finding a scapegoat who is to blame for all the societies' ills is an effective technique. Due to a relatively low level of knowledge about the EU and its institutions it is easy to play on a populist note and portray the EU as "the other" in the "us vs. them" narrative.
5. The more distant people feel from decision-makers, the more inclined they are to believe that the growing disconnect of the elites translates into decisions and policies not responding to their needs. Thus, the EU, which is perceived as a separate body "somewhere" far away in Brussels, becomes a perfect target for their frustration.
6. Among more "traditional" parts of the society, the fear of the unknown is strongly present. The portrayal of the EU as an enemy which, by its progressiveness, threatens the traditions and cultural heritage of the country by promoting the rights of minorities and accepting asylum-seekers, helps to stir xenophobic tendencies and puts populists in the position of the "defenders" of so called "traditional values".
7. Especially in times of crisis, relative instability and dynamic political developments in the region, criticism, blame and negative emotions are a much easier to sell than long-term systematic solutions.
8. To brand itself as "anti-establishment" is popular due to the very low trust in national politicians.

IF / TO WHAT EXTENT AND WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THIS RHETORIC AND REGARD IT AS JUSTIFIED?

1. Our survey shows: Anti-EU rhetoric does not necessarily increase people's willingness to leave the EU.
2. People remain quite pragmatic and critical towards anti-EU rhetoric and do see that national politicians use the EU as a scapegoat.
3. Anti-EU rhetoric does not necessarily lead to the feeling that the own country is treated incorrectly by the EU institutions. In our survey only Czechs share that feeling.
4. Anti-EU sentiments are taking advantage of the mistakes and crises that emerge on EU level – especially in connection with the migration challenge.
5. Many people were personally affected by EU crises and globalisation effects. This leads to the impression that political elites are not taking responsibility. The void is being filled by populists.
6. The EU has been accused of struggling with a democratic deficit and an over-bureaucratic structure. Justified EU-criticism is blending with simplified EU-bashing which makes it difficult for citizens to differentiate.
7. Anti-EU rhetoric is being positioned as a requirement for national or regional pride. Especially citizens of small countries – often due to historic experience – are anxious when it comes to a (perceived) loss of sovereignty.
8. In recent years, migration and the EU's handling of the migration crisis were omnipresent in the national political and societal discourse and shaping the EU's image. This has led to the effect that many equate migration with the EU and gladly buy into anti-EU rhetoric.
9. Populists benefit from the fear of the unknown meaning that particularly people without first-hand experience with migration are prone to concerns regarding loss of identity or terrorism.
10. Media imbalances particularly in the tabloid press are key in maintaining the anti-migration campaign. Public perception can be distorted through biased reports about integration problems in Western Europe.

IF AND TO WHAT EXTENT DOES “EU BASHING” AND ISOLATIONIST POLICYMAKING NOT ONLY FAIL TO DELIVER ON ITS OWN PROMISES BUT IN THE MEDIUM AND LONG RUN MAY EVEN DAMAGE NATIONAL INTERESTS?

1. EU-bashing is largely connected to greater nationalism and protectionism. If such tendencies continue to grow, the four freedoms constituting the basis of the common market are endangered. Barriers in the common market will, in the long-term, damage the economy, growth and well-being of the societies in each country to the benefit of none.
2. If every country promotes its own national agenda disregarding common solutions at the European level, there is a danger that countries underbid each other which in the end leads to a race to the bottom detrimental for all sides.
3. Isolationism and thus refusal to continue further integration or cooperation within the Union will reduce the political weight not only of the European Union, but of each individual country.
4. Nationalist-populistic movements are gaining momentum across the EU and are building networks at the European level. The contradiction mainly lies in the assumption that an alliance of nationalists/nativists can be lasting and be of international nature.
5. Nationalism in the long run leaves a strong mark in people's mind. Trust in international cooperation and institutions diminishes. Not least cross-border understanding could be affected by this.



RECOMMENDATIONS



1. MIND THE GAP!

Populists deliberately promote the idea that they are the only ones capable of representing the will of the people - a strategy that undermines confidence in democracy and politics. Indeed, our survey shows that a gap between the “ordinary people” and the “elites” is widely perceived. Greater engagement on personal and local level is necessary and urgent to prevent that this perception solidifies.

2. MESSAGE CONTROL REVERSED

As long as the EU does not control the narrative on the issue of migration and displays proactivity, it is likely that populists will sharpen the public discourse. Populists are actively looking for conflicts with the EU. Punishing them could worsen the situation as it improves their argument.

A pro-European counter-narrative is needed that takes citizens’ concerns seriously. Instead of playing on people’s fears the focus should be on controlling migration and improving integration - without concealing the challenges that come with it.

3. EU ALMIGHTY? DON’T FORGET THE MEMBER STATES

To fight the notion of an almighty EU that restricts national sovereignty, the decisive role of the member states in the EU decision making process should be highlighted – not least when new regulations are implemented, or when necessary actions are not taken due to member states’ vested interests. On the other hand, we should be cautious with the EU blame-game. The EU cannot solve every problem modern societies and individuals are facing - it lacks the financial resources and the necessary competences. Most of the current challenges are related to profound societal, social and structural change, which can only be tackled through a complementary collaboration of supranational, European, national, regional and local levels. Let’s communicate more realistically!

Greater engagement on personal and local level is necessary and urgent to prevent that this perception solidifies.



4. MUCH MORE THAN MIGRATION

The challenge of migration is often used by populists as a single issue dominating the political discourse and detracting from own weaknesses, policy failures and the inability to deliver on promises made. There is a danger that the security argument will curtail social and societal achievements, gradually reducing democratic values. Our opinion polls show that democracy and human rights are highly valued in all surveyed countries. The stakes are high when democratic achievements are gradually pushed back.

5. A THRIVING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

An independent press is a prerequisite for safeguarding an open and liberal society and depict the multitude of different views. Our research shows that citizens hold this in high esteem. The EU should therefore pay more attention to media freedom across the Union and proceed against countries undermining freedom of the press.

In times of social media, especially schools are called upon to teach media literacy in order to differentiate between fake and real news. The European level should support such activities.

6. REVIVE THE EUROPEAN SPIRIT

At a time when national solutions are often praised as the only possible answer, increased cross-border exchange is of particular importance - on personal, cultural as well as on the level of schools, associations, civil society, science and research. Cross-border projects offer an additional and visible added value for European cooperation and mutual understanding.

7. EUROPE - WHAT ELSE?

National populist strategies leave their mark in public opinion. The withdrawal into national sensitivities is hindering effective responses to global challenges. Yet, common European solutions have much more potential to succeed in global competition. The European institutions should e.g. increasingly showcase their efforts in protecting EU citizens against multinational corporations.



8. LISTEN CAREFULLY

When it comes to intra-EU solidarity, dividing lines not only exist between East and West, but also between North and South. National-populist solutions are no remedy to dissolve them but add to deepen mistrust between the member states risking a domino effect that proves to be detrimental for all sides. Views diverge significantly when the question of solidarity is raised. Trying to empathise more strongly with different opinions would be helpful to overcome increasing cleavages and misunderstandings. Policy solutions on the European level should be clear, but worded carefully, taking into account societal fears and tentative populist misinterpretations.

9. EU BASHING FIRES BACK

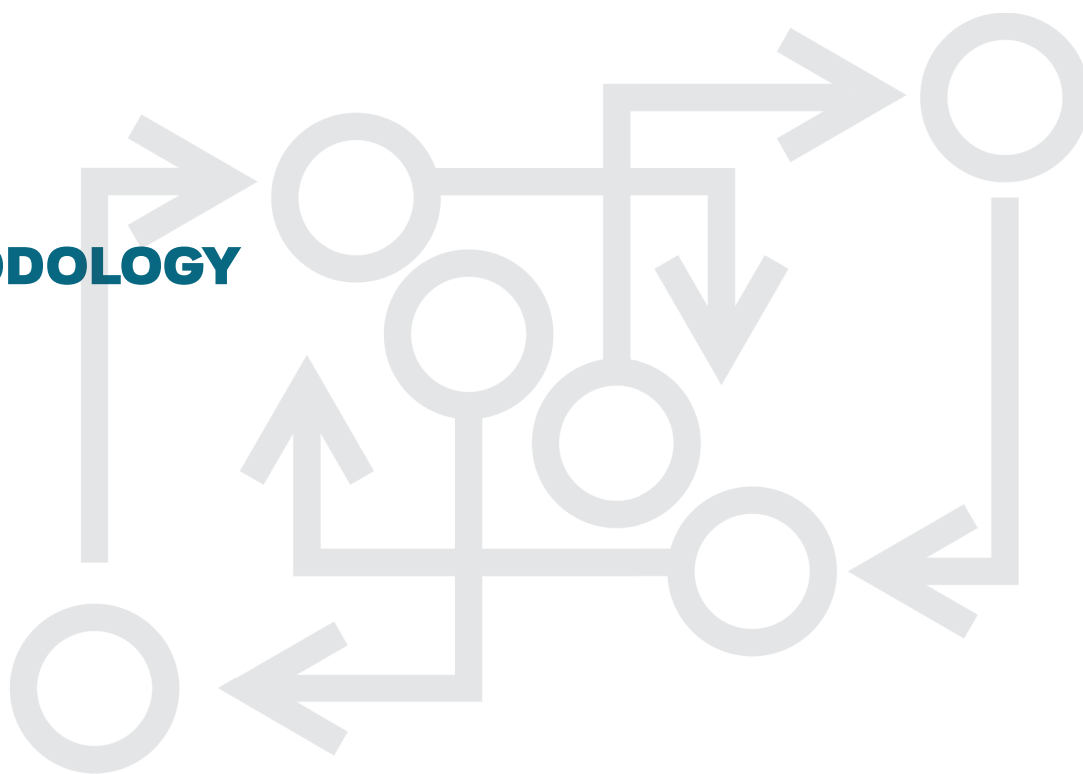
Populists often depict the EU, its representatives and institutions as aloof, far and elitist. With this, they further undermine trust in politics in general and ignore that rather few people believe in the overall denigration of the EU as a scapegoat for policy failures. In fact, Eurobarometer data shows that in many cases trust in national governments and parliaments is lower than trust in EU institutions. More efforts should be made to highlight the advantages of EU membership as well as EU funding for the national, regional and local level and to point out what would be at risk if we start a process of renationalisation.

10. OUR EUROPE

People are not per se Eurosceptic, but are disappointed regarding the handling of major questions – notably the challenge of migration and asylum. The EU should see this as an opportunity to address these topics with its citizens. Instead of the ongoing security discourse it would pay off to underline the opportunities resulting of EU membership, promote democratic, social and liberal values and a common European identity complementing the national one.



METHODOLOGY



The outcome and findings of this report are based on public opinion surveys carried out in November/December 2017.

The surveys were conducted by telephone (AT/CZ/HU/SK) respectively online (SLO) on a representative sample of the population from the age of 18 weighted according to gender, age and education.

Austria: Sozialwissenschaftliche Studiengesellschaft (SWS) on behalf of ÖGfE, Tel SWS 268, 16.11.-5.12.2017, N=512. Maximum margin of fluctuation: approx. $\pm 4,3$ percent.

Czech Republic: Nielsen Admosphere on behalf of EUROPEUM Praha, 23.-29.11.2017, N=519. Maximum margin of fluctuation: approx. $\pm 4,3$ percent.

Hungary: Závecz Research on behalf of Center for European Neighborhood Studies, Central European University Budapest, 18.-22.12.2017, N=500. Maximum margin of fluctuation: approx. $\pm 4,3$ percent.

Slovakia: FOCUS s.r.o on behalf of Globsec Policy Institute Bratislava, 7.-13.11.2017, N=1060. Maximum margin of fluctuation: approx. $\pm 3,0$ percent.

Slovenia: CJMMK on behalf of University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, 22.11.-14.12.2017, N=591 (Online). Maximum margin of fluctuation: approx. $\pm 4,0$ percent.

For the purpose of graphical data visualisation in this report, the results were rounded to full numbers.

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