



SLOVAKIA: A PRO-EUROPEAN ISLAND IN CENTRAL EUROPE?

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ABBREVIATIONS

EU	European Union
KDH	Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement)
LSNS	Ľudová strana, naše Slovensko (People's Party – Our Slovakia)
MS	Member States
OLANO-NOVA	Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
SaS	Sloboda a Solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity)
SMER-SD	Smer – sociálna demokracia (Direction – Social Democracy)
SMK (/MKP)	Strana maďarskej komunity / Magyar Közösség Pártja (Party of the Hungarian Community)
SNS	Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party)

ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

The aim of this report is to provide more details on the perception of both the EU and the rhetoric of state-level officials in Slovakia.

The report is published as part of a larger partnership project called “*Anti EU-rhetoric versus own national interests? Nationalistic populism and its reception in Central Europe*” co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The project is operating in five Central European countries: Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia, having started in September 2017 and continuing to run until February 2019. It consists of the collection in each country of unique data through public opinion polling, followed by a series of open debates to foster a bottom-up approach and gain insights from the wider public. Finally, a comparative analysis will be compiled with recommendations based on the findings and inputs gathered throughout the duration of the project.

Data for Slovakia were collected in November 2017, using a representative sample of the Slovak population with 1060 respondents. The polling was conducted through computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), using stratified multistage random sampling. The profiles of respondents are representative in terms of sex, age, education and place of residence.

Disclaimer: The data were collected and analysed before the beginning of the political turmoil and instability in Slovakia triggered by the murder of a young investigative journalist, Jan Kuciak, and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova, in late February 2018. The killing was controversial from the start, with the police declaring Kuciak’s murder had probably been linked to his professional work. His assassination caused public outrage, leading to large demonstrations across the country, and, subsequently, to the change of government. At the time of publishing the report, which marks almost three months since the beginning of the crisis, the situation still is far from resolved. The demonstrations continue while the societal discontent is evident.

INTRODUCTION

Slovakia and both its representatives and citizens have often taken a pragmatic stance towards the country's democratic and economic development. From a "black hole in the heart of Europe," as Slovakia was called in the 1990's, the country has turned into one of the most pro-European countries in the region and had an opportunity to demonstrate its pro-EU credentials and ambition during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) in the second half of 2016.

The government and its then Prime Minister, Robert Fico, managed to put a more positive spin on EU-related public discourse. As such, Slovakia has been slowly differentiating itself from its Visegrad Four (V4) neighbours, where EU bashing over restrictions of sovereignty and the migration crisis remains quite strong and still gets put on the political front-burner, whenever necessary. The tendency to buck the V4 trend was reconfirmed in a joint statement made in October 2017 by Slovakia's three highest officials, the President, Prime Minister and Speaker of the National Council, stipulating that the country's membership in the EU represents a "basic framework for security, stability and prosperity of our country". This research suggests the shifts in the rhetoric to have possibly had an impact on the public, which followed a similar pattern.

From a regional perspective, Slovakia finds itself in a complicated situation. As its southern and northern neighbours (Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) adopt more critical and populist approaches towards the EU, the country's political leaders have remained vehemently pro-European. Indeed, Slovakia's positive European outlook might even be difficult to sustain given that regional cooperation - whether in the format of the Visegrad Four or similar groupings - is widely regarded as the only mechanism for making its voice heard in Brussels.

The support for EU membership is relatively high among Slovak society; there is a strong sense of awareness about the EU's positive role in terms of cooperation, democracy and fundamental rights. Similarly, the majority of the population recognises quite well the advantages EU membership has brought to their country not only in economic terms, but also in terms of its political weight and security. A considerable proportion of respondents, almost

60%, regard EU membership as beneficial for the country's political weight. This can be regarded as a positive sign, given the strong words of "EU-dictate" or "EU restricting our sovereignty" spoken by many Slovak political representatives.

However, while many ordinary Slovaks and politicians are critical of the EU, most do not want to leave the organisation. Accordingly, criticisms levelled at some EU policies - most notably migration - should not be conflated with Euroscepticism.

In addition to the optimistic perception of the EU, people also evaluate Slovakia's role at the EU level in very positive terms. More than a half of the population say that Slovakia plays a rather or very positive role in the EU in enhancing solidarity, protecting both democracy and fundamental rights, in enhancing the country's security and dealing with asylum and refugee policy.

On the other hand, besides the positive evaluation of both the EU and Slovakia's performance at the European level, Slovak society seems to be drawing a line between EU and national politics. More than 75% of Slovaks agree that the EU is used as a scapegoat to detract from the government's own shortcomings, while the same proportion also recognise the wide gap between the so-called "political elite" and "ordinary citizens".

Moreover, almost one half of respondents also believe the EU to be now depicted too positively in political discourse. Naturally, the question arises whether the results are a consequence of public awareness about the government's shifts in rhetoric towards a more openly pro-European stance, with which they do not agree, or it is caused by the recognition of these shifts combined with a more systemic criticism of the government on the ground. Predominantly pro-European answers to other questions suggest the latter.

KEY FINDINGS

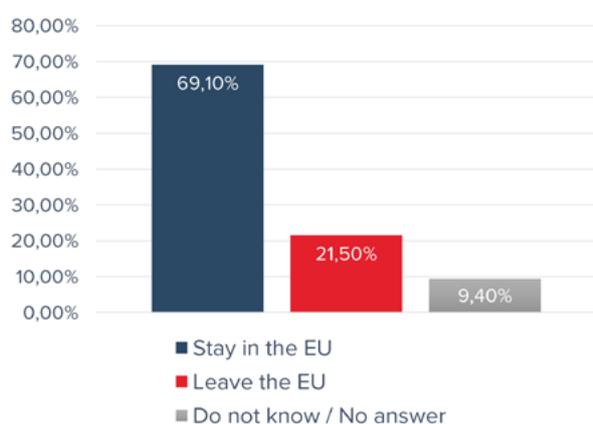
- ▶ Support for continuing EU membership has increased in the past year. **Almost 70% of Slovaks would vote to stay in the EU in a referendum.**
- ▶ The most pro-European demographic groups are young people aged 18-24, students, those with more education, residents of western Trnava Region and voters of SaS, the strongest opposition party. On the other hand, the most Eurosceptic demographic groups are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the elderly older than 66 years, retirees, those with less education and residents of Banská Bystrica Region along with voters of the far-right extremist LSNS party, whose strongest voter base is in this region.
- ▶ While slowly returning back to its pro-Europeanism, **a relative majority (48%) of Slovaks also believe the EU to be depicted too positively in political discourse.** Firstly, this might suggest that the public is well aware of the shifts in the government's rhetoric towards an openly pro-EU stance. Secondly, it might also indicate that the change to positive rhetoric towards the EU from political representatives did not resonate among all citizens who remained Euro-sceptic. Moreover, a relatively low trust of the national government in the country might make the population more prone towards being critical of the political agenda put forward by the political leadership.
- ▶ When it comes to the perception of fair treatment by EU institutions, public opinion is quite evenly distributed. While 49% tend to believe that Slovakia is not treated fairly, 45% believe the opposite. The results are quite in line with Eurobarometer findings in May 2017, showing 52% of respondents believing that the EU does not take Slovak interests into account, compared to 38% that think the EU does consider Slovakia's concerns.
- ▶ **Slovaks value the advantages of EU membership for the country.** Almost 70% of them believe the EU to have helped Slovakia grow and become a magnet for businesses, while around 60% say that it has strengthened Slovakia's economic welfare, security and political weight in the region.
- ▶ People in Slovakia are not able to distinguish clearly between EU policies and Slovak politics at the EU level. The respondents' answers to the two separate sets of questions below were almost identical.
 - ▶ *“Do you think that EU membership currently brings more advantages or more disadvantages for the country as a business location/in its economic welfare/in its political weight/in its security?”*
 - ▶ *“Do you think that politics in Slovakia regarding European matters currently bring more advantages or more disadvantages to the country as a business location/in its economic welfare/in its political weight/in its security?”*
- ▶ The positive perception of the EU was also confirmed when people were asked about the EU's role in specific areas. In fact, the number recognising the EU's positive role in terms of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between Member States, as well as in protecting democracy and fundamental rights, is greater than those which would have voted to stay in the EU in a referendum.
- ▶ More significantly, the government's role at the EU level is perceived even more positively. **The majority of the respondents believe that Slovakia is playing a positive role in the EU in terms of solidarity with other EU Member States, protection of democracy and fundamental rights and the country's security, as well as in asylum and refugee policy.**

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- ▶ While there has been a positive evaluation of national institutions' performance at the EU level, people remain largely critical of the government's own performance at the national level. **77% of the respondents believe the government to be too often using the EU as a scapegoat to deflect attention away from their own shortcomings.**
- ▶ Moreover, **76% also recognise a wide gap between the views of the citizens and political elites**, providing populist political parties with fertile ground to sway voters to their "side".
- ▶ When it comes to key democratic values and principles, the overwhelming majority of Slovak society consider them important. Democracy and human rights, together with an independent judiciary, are considered the most critical issues, with approximately 55% of respondents considering them to be "very important" and around 36% "rather important".
- ▶ **86% of Slovakian society believe in national unity and 85% of Slovaks think that cultural homogeneity is important.** These perceptions are probably linked to the country's widely accepted historical narrative of a millennium of foreign oppression and the creation of the modern nation only in the late 19th century. Slovakia has also repeatedly scored very low in terms of acceptance of other cultures and religions.
- ▶ Two thirds of the population also consider a strong leader to be important, which does not come as a surprise in light of Slovakia's past and political setting, with party popularity deriving predominately from the charisma and persuasive skills of the parties' leaders.

1. SHOULD SLOVAKIA REMAIN IN THE EUROPEAN UNION?

A substantial majority of Slovaks, almost 70%, agree that the country should remain a member of the EU, while 21.50% believe the country should leave and 9.4% are undecided.



Support for remaining in the EU in this survey is 10% greater than data GLOBSEC collected in the first quarter of 2017¹. The increase in support of EU membership can be caused, among other factors, by the openly pro-European rhetoric long used by the Slovak government, something which strengthened in the course of 2017 and featured particularly in former Prime Minister Robert Fico's speeches. Mr Fico openly and repeatedly declared that staying in the "core" of the EU was very much in Slovakia's interest and it should be fostering together with its partners further cooperation in the EU in different areas.²

The strong commitment to a pro-EU orientation was reconfirmed in October 2017, in a joint statement issued by President Andrej Kiska, National Council Speaker Andrej Danko and former Prime Minister Robert Fico. The declaration stipulates that the country's membership in the EU represents a "basic framework for security, stability and prosperity of our country" as well as an area of values with no alternative and with a positive impact on the economic, social and political development of the country.³

The pro-EU membership stance remains strongest among the younger population, with almost 75% between the ages of 18-35 supporting the EU. On the other hand, the most sceptical age group is "66 and above", where 30% of this group would vote to leave. Notwithstanding, it also has the highest percentage of undecided respondents (13.6%). Declining support for EU membership as the age of respondents rise is not surprising in the face of more than 40 years of Communist Party rule that ended only in 1989. The feeling of nostalgia for the Communist past has been strongest among the oldest members of the population.

GLOBSEC data from focus groups of young people 18-26 that were conducted in spring 2017 confirm the findings of young people being more aware and appreciative of the positive impact the EU has had on their lives, especially in terms of freedom of movement.

Support for continuing membership similarly rises with the level of education obtained. More than three quarters (77%) of the population with a university degree expressed a favourable attitude towards membership compared to 65.3% with just a primary education.

The highest support for leaving the EU was expressed in the Banská Bystrica self-governing region (30.4%), where the far-right extremist LSNS enjoys large support. The party's leader, Marian Kotleba, served a term as the region's governor in 2013-2017. Party members openly promote their highly Eurosceptic views and have been actively advocating and collecting signatures for a national referendum on leaving the EU and NATO.

Relatively high "leave" support was also documented in two self-governing regions in western Slovakia – Bratislava and Trenčín – with 28.3% and 25.6% respectively, although support for staying in the EU is relatively high, especially in Trenčín Region (70.9%). However, this could be also explained by the low levels of undecided respondents in these regions – 4.3% and 3.5% respectively. In comparison, for example, Košice Region in the east of the country

1. Milo, D., Klingova, K., Hajdu, D. (2017) GLOBSEC Trends 2017, GLOBSEC Policy Institute, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec_trends_2017.pdf

2. Jancarikova, T., August 15, 2017, Slovakia's future is with core EU, not eurosceptic eastern nations: PM, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-politics-eu/slovakias-future-is-with-core-eu-not-eurosceptic-eastern-nations-pm-idUSKCN1AV1YY>

3. Vyhlásenie prezidenta, predsedu Národnej rady a predsedu vlády k EÚ a NATO, October 23, 2017, Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, <https://www.prezident.sk/article/vyhlasenie-prezidenta-predsedu-narodnej-rady-a-predsedu-vlady-k-eu-a-nato/>

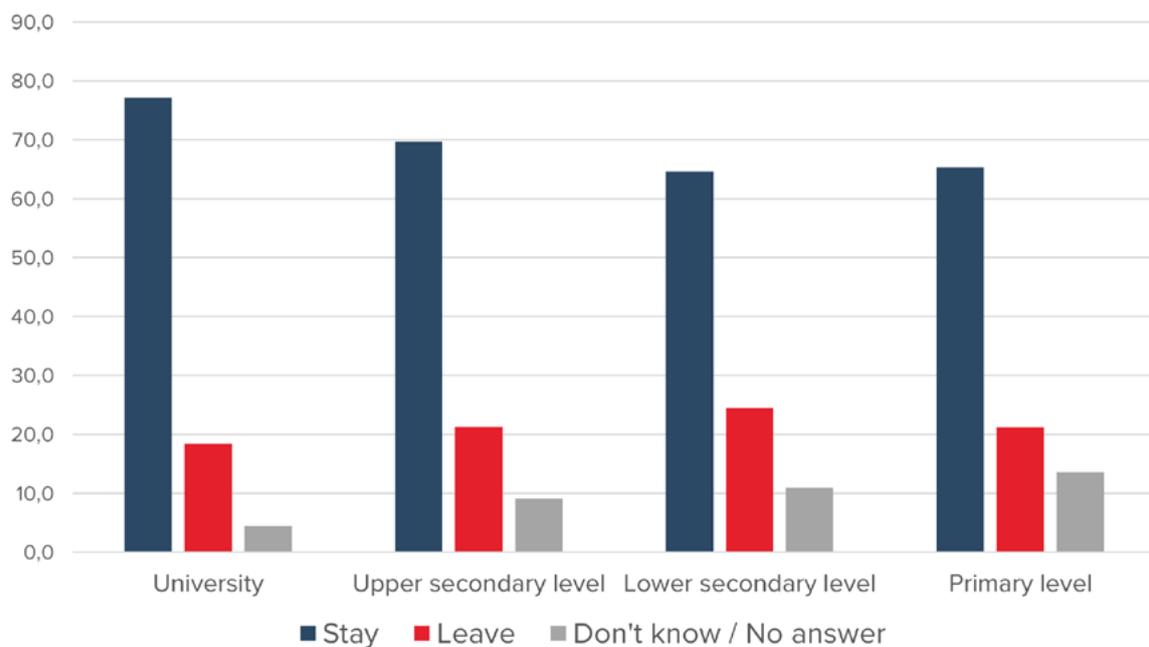
had much lower support for both staying and leaving the EU, with 64.6% for staying and 15.3% for leaving. Yet 20% of the respondents were not sure how to answer. A similar pattern was seen in Banská Bystrica Region, with 15% documented as undecided. These high percentages of the undecided suggest an open window of opportunity to sway voters to either side.

Responses based on party preference confirm the earlier assumption of high levels of Euro-scepticism in Banská Bystrica Region. LSNS voters were the only segment of the population surveyed where the majority did not support Slovakia's continued membership in the EU. The "leave camp" there was almost a majority – 49.6%.

Relatively low scores of 61.4% and 62.9% in support of continuing membership were recorded among voters of the conservative KDH, and SMK/MKP, whose voter base is primarily Slovakia's Hungarian minority. Interestingly enough, both parties are members of the European People's Party (EPP) grouping at the EU level.

Support slightly below 60% was recorded among undecided voters, indicating the group's vulnerability in their inclination towards anti-establishment and Eurosceptic rhetoric. Moreover, the percentage of "Do not know" answers in the undecided group in terms of party preference is also high – 19.8%, which indicates a window of opportunity for a broader range of new parties here, too.

Support for EU membership by level of education



2. HOW IS THE EUROPEAN UNION DEPICTED IN SLOVAKIA'S POLITICAL DISCUSSION?

Most respondents (48.1%) share an opinion that the EU is depicted too positively in political discussion within Slovakia, compared to only 13.7% regarding the EU as depicted too negatively and 31.1% inclining towards a belief that treatment has been fair.

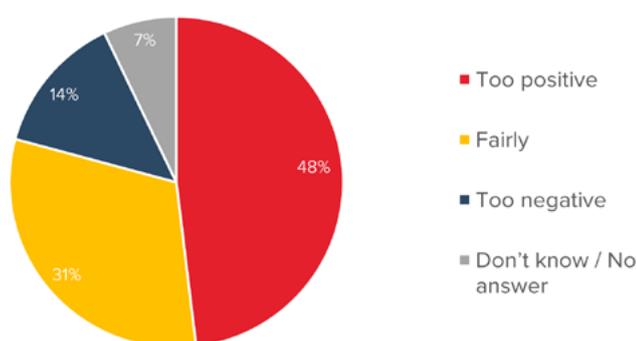
This trend may be related to several factors. First, the population might be well aware of the shifts in EU rhetoric the government has adopted within the past year. In early 2016, with a new government having been cobbled together a few months before Slovakia's first ever Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Government adopted a rather strong and open pro-European narrative. The issues previously utilised to criticise the EU and employ the so-called "us vs. them" narrative, such as the migration crisis, had practically disappeared from political discourse, replaced by reassuring statements about Slovakia's indispensable place at the core of the EU and portrayal of the EU as a space of stability, security and prosperity.

Secondly, the results suggest that the positive rhetoric about the EU has failed to make citizens uncritical towards the Union. As the next question shows, the majority of the population feel that Slovakia is treated rather unfairly by EU institutions. Moreover, the relatively low trust towards the national government in the country⁴ is probably related to the public's overall tendency to be sceptical of the political agenda put forward by the political leadership.

The only segment of the population surveyed in which the percentage believing Slovakia to be treated fairly by the EU had reached the same level as the perception of too positive treatment happened to be voters of SME RODINA – Boris Kollár (We Are Family). Definite conclusions are hard to draw from the finding, as the party's leader, Kollár, is a businessman generally known for having built his political career on the foundation of a strong and popular social media presence, featuring videos and posts critical towards both the national government and the EU (and who saw his political profile boosted especially during the migration crisis). In following his activities, Mr Kollár's supporters might conclude that the political discussion is well-balanced. A similar trend of a small difference between the perception of a fair depiction and a too positive depiction is shared among voters of SaS, the strongest opposition party, with 38.1% of its voters believing the EU to be depicted fairly versus 39.8% for the EU depicted too positively. The party presents itself as liberal, while its leader, Richard Sulík, a Member of the European Parliament in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) grouping, is also not uncritical towards EU policies, especially asylum and refugee policy. His critical stance, however, seems not to be affecting the position of his party's voters towards the EU. Considering the responses to all of the questions asked, SaS voters have turned out to be the most pro-EU oriented segment among the population analysed.

Perhaps surprisingly, 2.8% voters of the far-right LSNS consider the EU to be depicted too negatively, which is 9.1% higher than Slovak average.

Depiction of the EU in political discussion within Slovakia



4. 26% tend to trust the national government according to the Standard Eurobarometer 87 (May 2017), European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2142>

3. DO YOU THINK SLOVAKIA IS TREATED FAIRLY OVERALL BY EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS?

Nearly half of the population (49.3%) tends to believe that Slovakia is not treated fairly by EU institutions, compared to 44.4% that incline towards the “fair treatment” answer. The results are well in line with Eurobarometer findings from May 2017, which show 52% of the population believing that Slovak interests are not taken into account by the EU in comparison to 38% saying that they are. The same poll also confirmed a slightly larger share of Slovaks tending to distrust EU institutions,⁵ which might further indicate scepticism towards Slovakia receiving fair treatment.

However, while taking into account the less than 5% difference between inclinations towards fair and unfair treatment and that the highest percentages were recorded for “rather agree” (38.9%) and “rather disagree” (35.4%), the survey might indicate a potential shifting due to recent developments and the government agenda.

The perception of the treatment might have been strengthened by several issues that appeared on the Slovak political scene during 2017. One of the problems that strongly resonated throughout the country in 2017 was the issue of double standards in food products imported within the EU to Western and Eastern Europe. The documented difference in product quality was widely debated for several months both on the political level and in the media, leading to evident discontent across the population

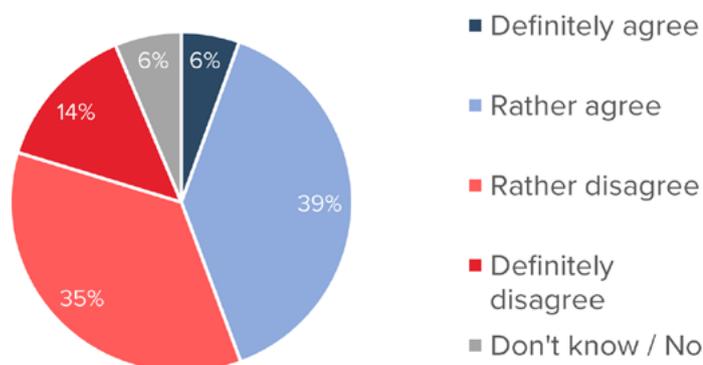
and later to a meeting between former Prime Minister Robert Fico and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in late July 2017.

Moreover, the findings show significantly higher percentages of respondents persuaded of unfair treatment by the EU (14%) than those strongly persuaded about receiving fair treatment (5.5%). The only three segments of the population where “fair treatment” significantly exceeded “unfair treatment” are “house persons” with 7.4% and 3.0%, respectively and voters of the strongest opposition party SaS (8.7% and 4.8%).

These two segments of the population are the few where perception of fair treatment dominated over unfair treatment.

Aside from the general suspicions expressed in the high percentages for unfair treatment, such as from voters of Eurosceptic parties, a surprisingly high percentage of people working in the public sector are also inclined towards this view. Only 36.1% of civil servants believe Slovakia to be treated fairly by EU institutions, compared to 58.6% that think the opposite.

Do you think that Slovakia is treated fairly by EU institutions?



5. The Standard Eurobarometer 87 showed 42% trust and 45% distrust towards the European Parliament, and 39% trust and 44% distrust towards the European Commission (Standard Eurobarometer 87 (May 2017), European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/com-frontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2142>)

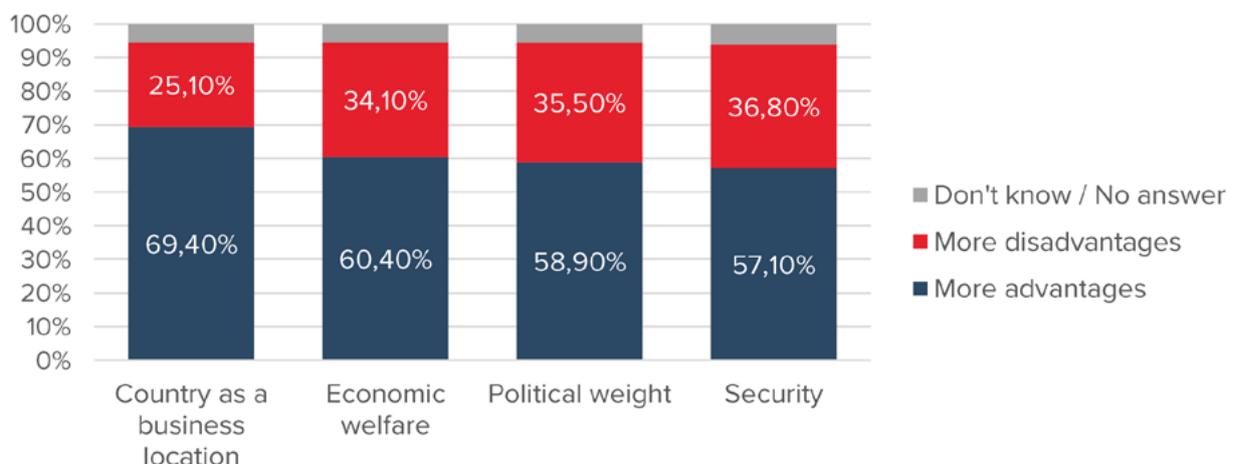
4. DOES EU MEMBERSHIP BRING MORE ADVANTAGES OR DISADVANTAGES FOR THE COUNTRY?

The majority of respondents believe that Slovakia's membership in the EU is bringing the country more advantages than disadvantages as a location for businesses (69.4%), in its economic welfare (60.4%), in its political weight (58.9%) and in its security (57.1%).

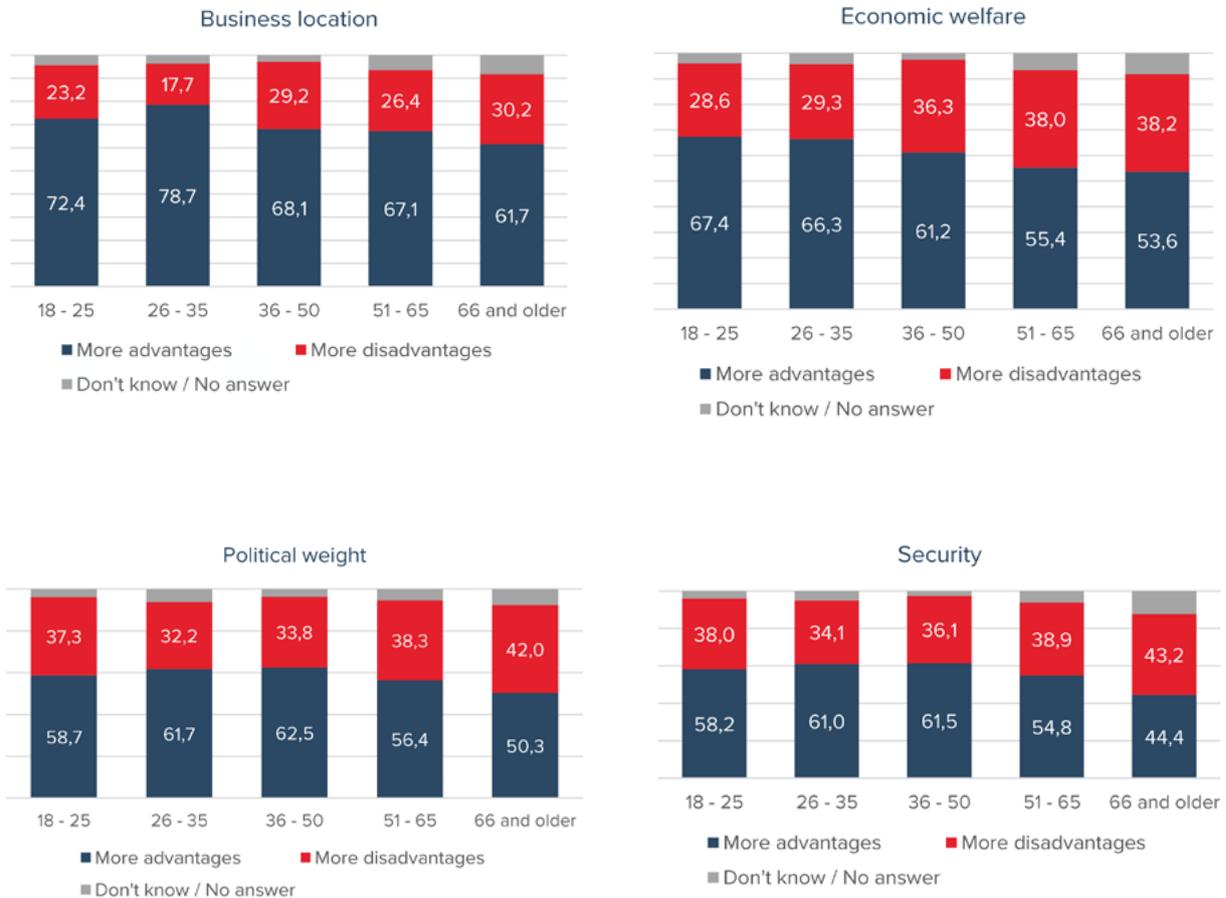
The segment of Slovak society perceiving the EU's positive effects most strongly in the four areas mentioned are voters that supported SaS, with percentages ranging from 74.7% for political weight to 87.9% for business location. On the other hand, the highest levels of scepticism were recorded among voters of the far-right LSNS and of the Hungarian minority party SMK/MKP. Except for economic welfare, which voters in both parties consider as having improved with EU membership, these segments believe that joining the EU has brought Slovakia more disadvantages in terms of business location, political weight and security.

Generally, people aged over 66 and retirees were less sceptical, but still were more inclined towards seeing EU membership as disadvantageous in the four areas surveyed. On the other hand, the 26-35 demographic shared the least negative view about the impact of Slovakia's EU membership on the country, with 78.7% believing EU membership to have had a positive impact on Slovakia as a business location and 66.3% in its economic welfare.

Do you think that EU membership currently brings more advantages or disadvantages for:



Comparison by age groups



Scepticism in this matter also tends to increase with the level of education achieved in the case of the impact on Slovakia's security. However, in the three other areas, the persons with just primary school education showed slightly less scepticism (by 1-3%) than respondents with only lower secondary school education.

When analysed in concrete areas, 49.8% of Slovaks believed EU membership to be rather advantageous for Slovakia as a business location, while 19.6% saw it as definitely advantageous, compared to 25.1% inclining towards "rather" or "definitely" disadvantageous. With the exception of voters who had supported the far right LSNS party or the Hungarian minority SMK/MKP parties, all segments of the Slovak population tend to think the EU has been positive in this sphere.

The same tendencies can be observed in relation to the economic welfare of Slovakia, although the overall percentage inclining towards advantages is lower (60.4%) than for disadvantages (34.1%).

The figures further decline when it comes to the political weight of Slovakia (58.9% for the country having advantages against 35.5% for disadvantages) and the security of the country (57.1% for having advantages against 36.8% for disadvantages). The migration crisis could have still had an impact on the latter set of figures, which, even if it had not influenced the country in practical terms (Slovakia was never a transit country on the Balkan Route and only 16 refugees had been officially relocated in Slovakia by December 2017)⁶, it still dominated the political discussion during the culmination of the crisis with mostly negative rhetoric vis-à-vis EU institutions.

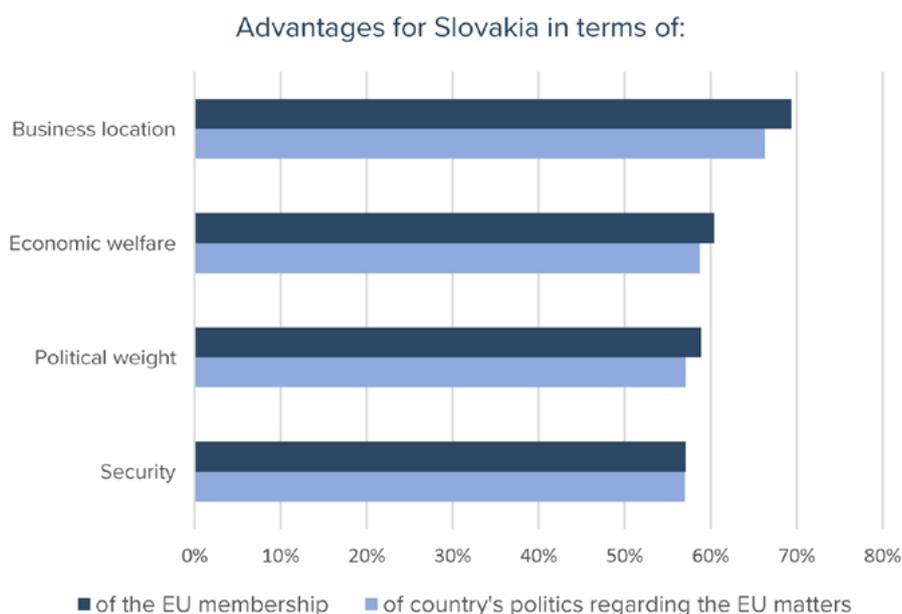
6. European Commission (2018), Member States' Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf

5. DOES POLITICS IN SLOVAKIA REGARDING EU MATTERS BRING MORE ADVANTAGES OR DISADVANTAGES FOR THE COUNTRY?

The findings are generally similar and in line with the answers given to the previous question, with the differences generally floating around 2% in each category, which generally falls within the range of statistical error.

The results indicate that people generally do not distinguish between what EU membership has brought to the country and the country's policies regarding EU matters in the same areas. In other words, the respondents had a perception of politics executed at the national level as having taken a certain direction since EU membership and to be now consistent with EU policies. Therefore, Slovakia's politics might be seen as more contributing to these advantages or disadvantages, bringing the country to a certain stage in the years since it joined the EU. Also, with the government actively and openly promoting its own agenda as being consistent with EU policies and future goals, especially in the economic sphere (as part of the Eurozone, advocating for completion of the banking union) as well as in security (joining PESCO), there are not many reasons for the population to distinguish between the influence of the politics of the country regarding the EU matters and the EU membership as such. Experts also generally agree that people in Slovakia are not very much aware of their government activities and agenda in foreign policy.

The largest difference between responses to the survey's fourth and fifth questions in regard to business location, economic welfare and political weight came within the segment of the population currently out of work. Naturally, the more critical stance seen towards the country's politics, particularly in matters related to economics and finance, can be related to the respondents' possibly more difficult personal financial situation caused by being out of work.



6. IS THE EU PLAYING A POSITIVE OR A NEGATIVE ROLE IN SELECTED AREAS?

The perception of the EU's role and policies in the four areas mirrors attitudes reflected in the previous questions. The overwhelmingly positive perception of the EU's role and policies concerning cooperation among Member States, the safeguarding of democracy and in security is absent when the question turns to asylum and refugee policies. This outcome only confirms the opinion of a supposed failure in the narrative of EU asylum/refugee policies, and the rejection of them as an example of the Brussels bureaucratic bubble not respecting realities on the ground, having become widespread among the Slovakian public. Slovakia's opposition to the mandatory relocation of asylum seekers on Slovakian soil through a quota system was shared by a great majority of the population and, as such, was adopted by most mainstream political parties. Such a perception of EU policies concerning asylum seekers and refugees is deep-rooted and would be difficult to change.

Looking at the overall positive and negative perception of the EU in the four areas, roughly three out of four people in Slovakia (72%) see the EU role positively in regard to cooperation among Member States and in safeguarding democracy. This comes as no surprise, since the increased cooperation and mutual understanding are the cornerstones of the European project. In these two areas, roughly one in five people in Slovakia see the EU's role negatively (23% in each category).

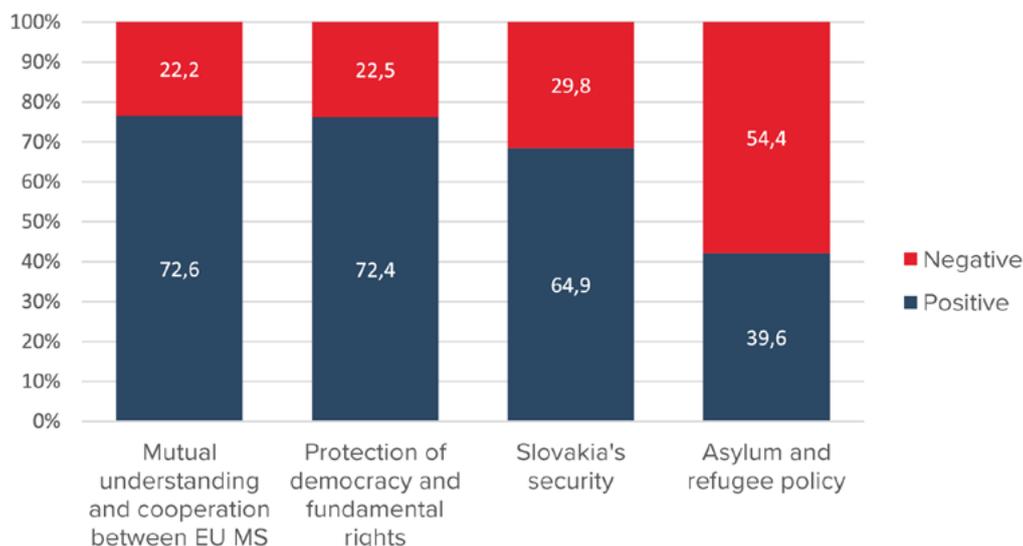
Positive perception of the EU is almost as high in security. Even though EU defence cooperation is only starting to develop, the Schengen zone, Europol and other EU initiatives concerning Member State security is perceived positively by 65% percent of Slovakia's population, while 30% see the role of the EU negatively.

The overwhelmingly negative perception of the EU's role in the area of asylum and migration policies is even more evident when looking at the total numbers: roughly 40% have a positive perception of the EU, while 54% express a negative one.

Breaking down the population groups responding to the first three sub-questions paints a rather interesting picture, contradicting some traditionally held views. The relatively higher percentage of elderly people (66+) rejecting EU policies in the first three areas (6-9% more than the average population) comes as no surprise, nor does the relatively higher support for the EU among the younger generation (the 18-35 demographic support EU policies 5-8% more).

In terms of regional differences, Banská Bystrica confirmed its position as the most Eurosceptic region in Slovakia. In addition to the region having been and still is a stronghold of the fiercely anti-EU, far right extremist LSNS party, the region is also experiencing a sub-standard level of economic development. Surprisingly, Bratislava Region scored lower than average in all

The EU's role in selected areas



three areas, despite being the sixth richest region in the entire EU with 186% of average EU GDP.⁷

Perhaps the most surprising finding is the lower than average support for EU policies in Slovakia's larger cities (over 100,000 population) alongside higher than average support in mid-sized cities.

In terms of party preference, the highest level of approval of EU policies seen in the three areas was among supporters of the centre-right SaS party (despite the euro-sceptic rhetoric of leader Richard Sulík), OLANO-NOVA and, surprisingly, also among voters of the nationalist SNS party, which in all three questions outperformed even SMER-SD, the social democratic party.

The outcome of the asylum and refugee sub-question differs from the other three questions; therefore, it deserves special focus. The overall negative perception of the EU's role and policies in this area (54.4% negative against 39.6% positive) seems to be reflected across all socio-demographic categories, with only with minor fluctuations. Some of the above-mentioned trends seem to be also evident in this last question, while they seem not to apply in the others. Similarly to the previous three areas, elderly people reject EU policies related to asylum-seekers and refugees even more than the rest of the population, with positive perception 6% lower (34% among 66+ compared to the 40% average).

Unlike the previous questions, young people's perceptions do not differ significantly from the

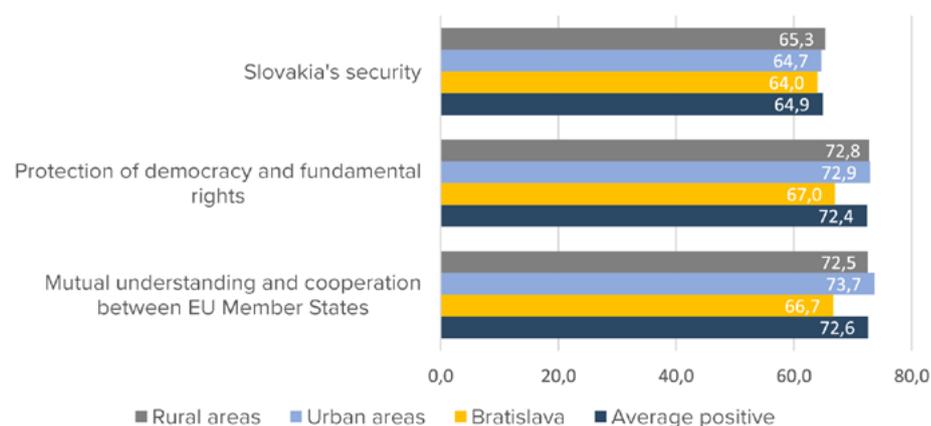
overall negative perception of the EU in this area. When it comes to employment status, homemakers were the only category to have had a more positive than negative perception of the EU role in this area (51% positive and 40% negative).

Surprisingly, the region most rejecting the EU's asylum and refugee policies was northernmost Žilina Region (29.8% positive against 65.3% negative). The result looks surprising because Žilina region showed higher than average support for the EU's role in the three previous questions. There is no easy explanation for such a negative perception of EU asylum policies other than Žilina being a relatively homogenous Slovak region with a low percentage of any national minorities and low exposure to foreign nationals and cultures. This region had also been in the past a bastion of fierce Slovak nationalism.

Another interesting outcome of the survey is higher than average support for EU policies in this area by SNS voters. These voters seem to confirm their surprisingly strong pro-EU attitudes likewise displayed in the previous three sub-questions. The level of support for EU asylum policies among SNS voters was the highest of all the other political parties (47.8% positive against 50.7% negative).

Voters of other mainstream parties scored around 45% positive perception and 48%-55% negative perception. Unsurprisingly, the strongest rejection of the EU's role in this area was present among far-right LSNS voters (14.4% positive as opposed to 82.7% negative).

Positive perception of the EU's role by city population



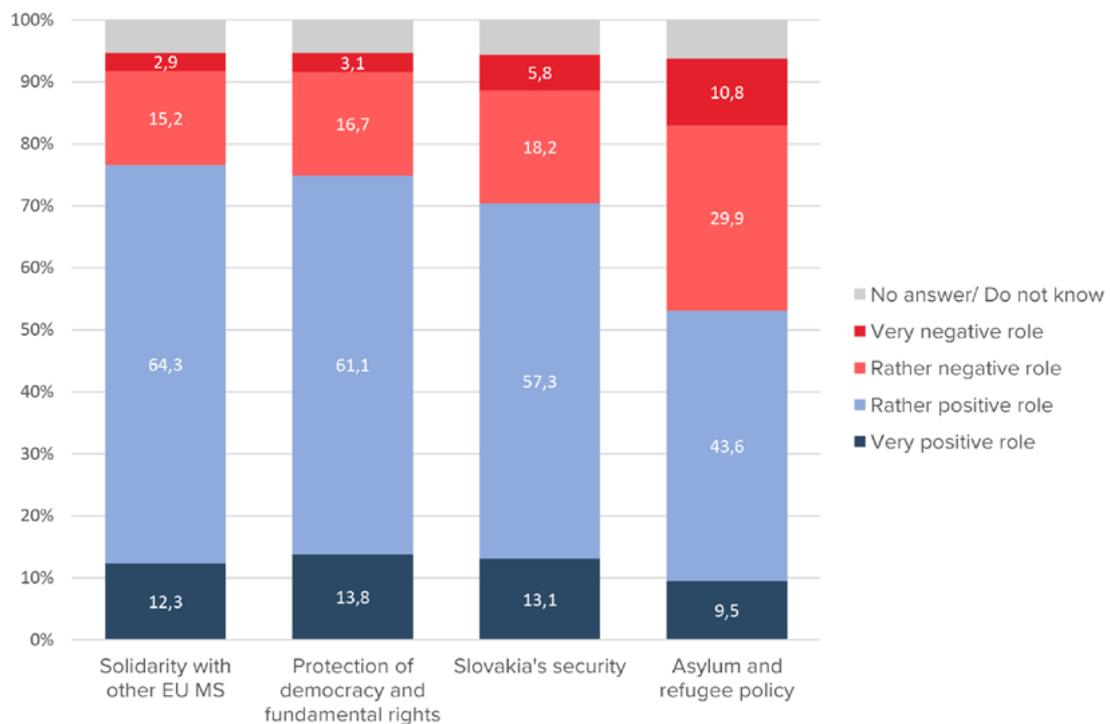
7. Liptakova, J., March 2, 2016, Bratislava is the sixth richest region of EU, but..., The Slovak Spectator, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20106220/bratislava-is-the-sixth-richest-region-of-eu-but.html>

7. IS SLOVAKIA PLAYING A POSITIVE OR A NEGATIVE ROLE IN THE EU IN SELECTED AREAS?

The main outcome of this question is an overwhelmingly positive self-perception of the role Slovakia plays in the EU within all four areas. The interpretation of these findings is a bit difficult due to the low level of awareness of most foreign policy issues and the actual position of Slovakia in regard to them among the general population. The different understanding of what is considered to be a positive or negative role also further complicates the analysis of the findings.

In the first three areas - solidarity, protection of democracy and security - the findings are consistent with the answers to the previous, sixth question, differing only by small margins. Interestingly enough, self-perception of Slovakia's positive role in the EU in the second and third area is even more positive than the perception of the EU's role. The results in the last question concerning asylum and refugee policies mirror the perception of the Slovak public on this issue. Those who oppose EU policies in this area perceive Slovakia's role in the EU positively and vice versa.

Slovakia's role within the EU in selected areas



Solidarity

The outcome of the first question – more than three out of four (76.6%) perceive Slovakia's role in regard to solidarity with other EU MS positively - is somewhat hard to explain and contrasts with the overall negative perception of EU policies on asylum seekers and refugees. Slovakia was one of only two countries (the other was Hungary) to have legally challenged the European Council's decision on mandatory reallocation of asylum seekers and, in December 2015, filed suit to annul the decision at the European Court of Justice.

In September 2017, the ECJ dismissed the action and both Slovakia and Hungary had to accept the decision⁸. This was perhaps the most notable example of the Slovak Government's rejection of EU solidarity.

One way of interpreting such a positive self-perception, despite the abovementioned rejection of solidarity with other EU MS regarding the refugee crisis, might be a lack of understanding of the very concept of solidarity among the respondents. Another potential explanation is that people in Slovakia feel the country has contributed its fair share in providing police enforcement and funding to other EU Member States such as Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia that were facing the brunt of the asylum and refugee crisis.

A closer look at the sociodemographic breakdown among respondents shows patterns similar to those in the previous question. The elderly, retirees and unskilled workers perceive Slovakia's role in the EU more negatively, although only by 4-6%. Interestingly, respondents in Bratislava and in the Bratislava Region, and Banská Bystrica and Nitra regions had almost the same level of negative perception of Slovakia's role (roughly 25%). This result could be interpreted in two ways: either the population of Slovakia's capital and the entire Bratislava region view government policy regarding solidarity, specifically when it comes to refugees (or lack thereof), more negatively than the rest of the country, or the rest of the country has a more positive perception. The second interpretation (rejection of the principle of solidarity as such when it comes to migration – i.e. demands for even a stricter position by Slovakia in the EU) could be confirmed also by a high level of negative assessment among euro-sceptic socio-demographic groups (elderly people, Banská Bystrica Region, LSNS voters etc.) of Slovakia's role.

Democracy and fundamental rights

As illustrated below, safeguarding democracy and human rights seems to be one of the most important issues for the Slovak population (at least according to this survey). However, the interpretation of the role Slovakia plays in the EU in this area is rather difficult to explain. The main outcome is that 75% of Slovaks view Slovakia's role positively, while 20% view it negatively. However, a closer look at the population groups showing a higher than average positive and negative perception of Slovakia's role in the EU points to two very different reasons for such perceptions.

For the more traditional (and religious) groups within the population, Slovakia's positive role in the EU might mean that they agree either with lukewarm acceptance or outright rejection of certain sensitive issues related to human rights (for example LGBTI rights - same sex marriages and adoptions) by the Slovak authorities at the EU level. In their perception, Slovakia might be acting as a bulwark against further weakening of traditional, Christianity-based socio-cultural values and traditions in the EU.

A second explanation for this outcome is that another (relatively smaller) group from the population disagrees with Slovakia's current position and role in the EU regarding democracy and fundamental rights for the exact opposite reasons. They are demanding broader acceptance of liberal democratic values and principles and a weakening of the role of other traditional authorities (such as churches) in society.

Security

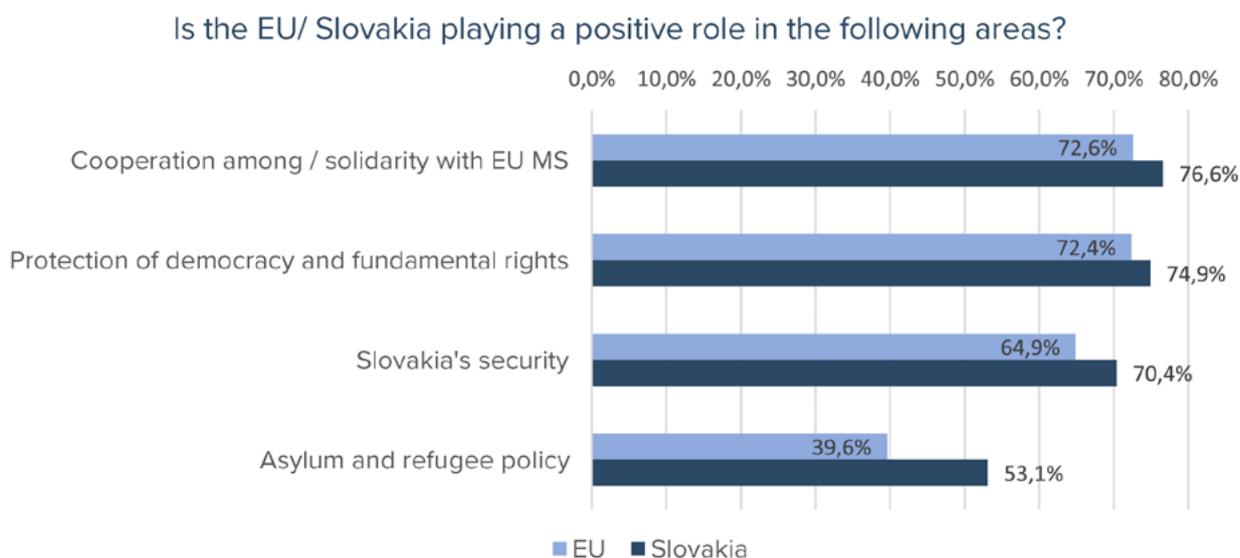
The outcome of the third sub-question on the role of Slovakia in the EU regarding security paints an overall picture that is almost the same as in the previous two sub-questions: 70.4% perceive the security issue positively, while 24% perceive it negatively. In interpreting the results, similar problems are faced as in the previous question. It is highly difficult to assess how many of the respondents actually know Slovakia's position and role in the EU regarding security-related issues (defence cooperation, exchange of data among law enforcement agencies, stronger mandate of EU bodies and institutions in the area of security). Therefore, the results reflect rather the overall perception of the EU and its policies than the actual role of Slovakia in the EU.

8. Judgement of the European Court of Justice in Joined Cases C-643/15 and C-647/15, European Court of Justice, <http://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=194081&pageIndex=0&doclang=en&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=1117627>

Asylum and refugee policies

The result from responses to the final sub-question concerning Slovakia's role in the EU in regard to asylum and refugee policies mirrors the overall perception and framing of this issue in Slovakia. The main take-away from this question is that roughly half of the population sees Slovakia's role regarding EU asylum policy positively (53.1%), while 40.7% see it negatively. In terms of Slovakia's eight regions, 62.5% of those surveyed in Bratislava Region and 63.4% in Trnava Region supported strongest Slovakia's role and position.

There are two potential explanations for interpreting the negative stance. For one group in the population, the tough position taken by Slovakian authorities towards migration flows and refugees is not strong enough (69.3% of strongly anti-immigrant LSNS voters see it negatively, but also 45% of supporters of the ruling coalition member Hungarian minority MOST-HID party). For other segments of the population, which exhibit higher than average support for the EU in other areas, it might be too strict, endangering Slovakia's position in the EU as such.



8. IS THE EU USED AS A SCAPEGOAT BY SLOVAK POLITICIANS?

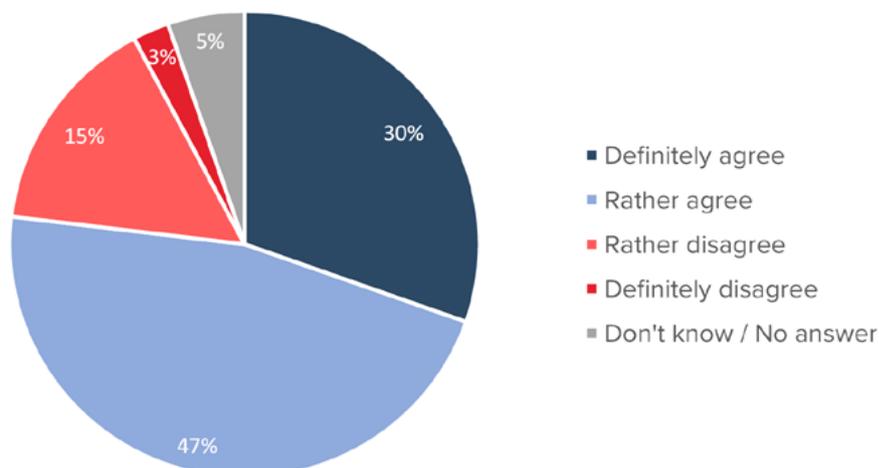
The widely shared negative perception of Slovak politicians is clearly illustrated in the responses to this question. 77% agree that the EU is often used by national politicians to detract from their own shortcomings, while only 18% disagree with such a statement. This assessment confirms the overall positive perception of the EU among the Slovak population. At the same time, this outcome should be interpreted more as a critical assessment of the overall performance by national politicians than an acknowledgement of the distorted picture they often present to the public.

Such a conclusion is evident also in the breakdown of the respondents, with higher than average agreement to the statement among young people (79.3%), the middle-aged (35-50 years old – 80.2%), house persons (80.3%), self-employed (83%), residents of Bratislava Region (80%), of Trnava Region (84%), of Nitra Region (81.3%) and of Žilina Region (83.4%). In terms of political preferences, the voters most critical of EU scapegoating surprisingly came from supporters of the far-right, anti-EU LSNS

party, with 91% agreeing with the statement, most likely an outcome of the overall negative perception of the ruling political parties. Other opposition party voters are also highly critical: 82.1% of OLANO voters, 84.7% of Hungarian minority opposition party SMK supporters and 81.5% of supporters of the strongest centre-right SaS party. Surprisingly also 81% of MOST-HID voters agree with the EU scapegoating despite the party being a member of the ruling coalition.

Opponents of such critical assessment of EU scapegoating by national politicians are present mostly among the elderly (66+ years old - 20% disagree with the statement), residents of Banská Bystrica Region (22.5% disagree) and Prešov Region (24.1% disagree). In terms of political preferences, unsurprisingly enough, voters supporting the strongest member of the ruling coalition – SMER-SD (38.6%) and the third coalition partner SNS (28.3%) disagree the most.

The European Union is often used as a scapegoat by Slovakia's politicians to detract from their own shortcomings



9. IS THERE A WIDE GAP BETWEEN THE VIEWS OF THE CITIZENS AND THE POLITICAL ELITES?

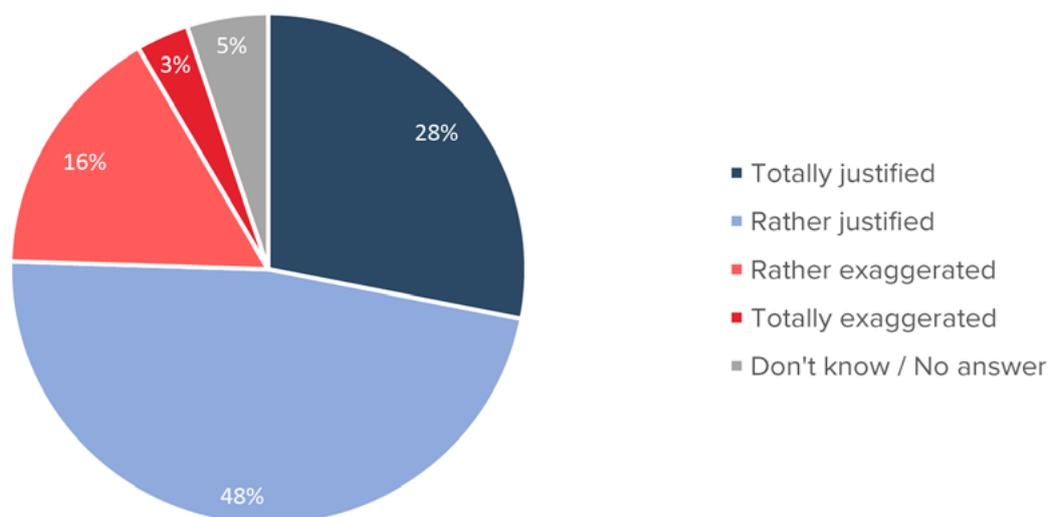
It is evident from the responses to this question that the perceived gap between the views of the political elite and citizens is a serious issue in the eyes of three quarters of Slovakia's population: 75.5% agreed that a wide gap existed, while only 19.4% thought the statement to be exaggerated.

Feelings of disconnect between the views of the political elites and citizens voting for them is evenly distributed among various age and professional groups, with some notable exceptions. Groups inclined to agree more with such an assessment include the middle-aged (35-50 years old - 80%), people with upper secondary level education (79%), skilled manual labour and blue collar workers (79.7%), residents of the Nitra (80.8%) and Žilina (83.2%) regions as well as residents of larger cities (78.9%). Citizens who voted for the far-right LSNS party were the most critical, with 87.8% agreeing with the assessment, alongside 81.8% of those who had voted for the opposition OLANO-NOVA party.

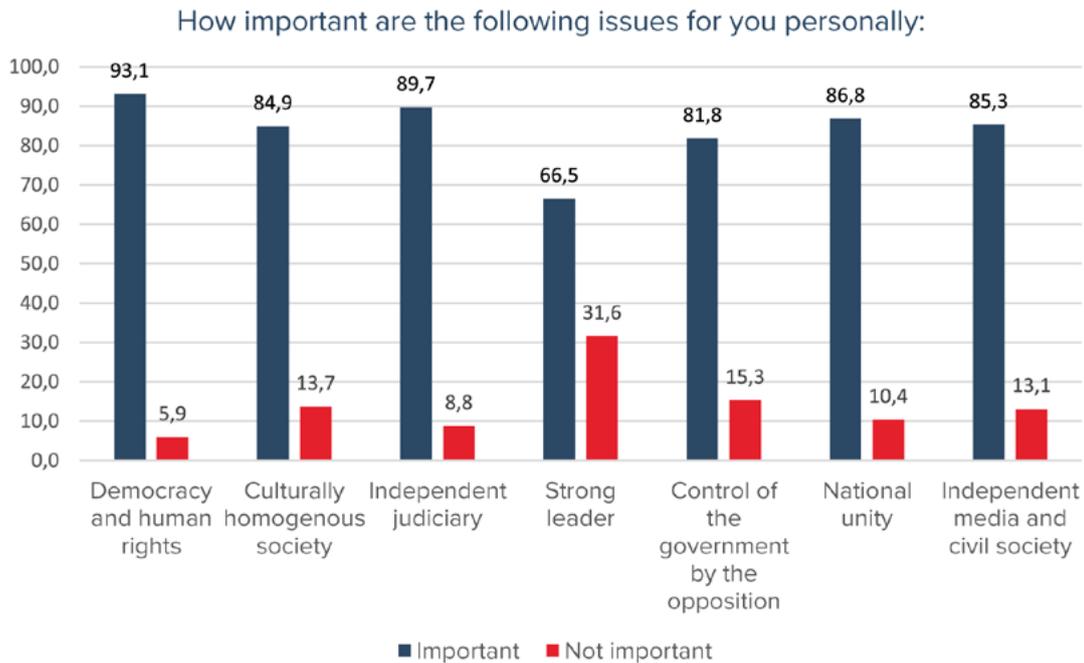
The populist, anti-political-elite position is surprisingly less present also among Banská Bystrica Region residents, 23.7% were more critical of such a populist assessment. In terms of political preferences, two notable exceptions to the trend were voters of the mainly ethnic-based parties, with 36% of supporters of the nationalist SNS rejecting such an assessment and 31.2% of Hungarian minority party MOST-HID likewise disagreeing.

The results suggest the populist view of "us against the political elite" to be most likely a social stratification issue pitting blue-collar workers against white-collar professionals and business owners, since it appears to be present across age, education, employment groups and even regions.

Some say that there is a wide gap between the views of the citizens and the political elites. Do you think that this description is justified or exaggerated?



10. HOW SLOVAKS PERCEIVE KEY DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND ISSUES?



The outcome of this set of questions paints a rather interesting and surprisingly positive picture of the values considered to be important for citizens of Slovakia. Democracy and an independent judiciary seem to be the two most important values, while a culturally homogeneous society and a strong leader are considered to be the two least important ones.

Looking at the same set of data from a broader perspective, combining both very and rather important against the response of not important confirms this assessment. From most to least important, the ranking of these issues is as follows: 1) democracy, 2) independent judiciary, 3) national unity, 4) independent media and civil society, 5) culturally homogeneous society, 6) control of the government by the opposition, 7) strong leader. This outcome reflects specificities of Slovak history, composition of its rather diverse population, as well as recent political developments.

Democracy

The surprisingly high importance of democracy (93.1%) could be explained by two factors. First, democracy is still relatively young in Slovakia (it has been 28 years since the fall of Communism) and the country experienced a period of almost six years of

authoritarian rule under Vladimír Mečiar, who was replaced in 1998 after a parliamentary election. Democracy is most cherished by middle aged people (35-50), university graduates, self-employed, and by residents of the Trnava and Žilina regions, as well as Košice Region in the east and in larger cities. Democracy was also viewed significantly higher than of average importance among 98.9% of supporters of the liberal SaS party.

The unemployed, skilled workers and unskilled workers were the population groups that did not put so much stock in democracy as an important value, alongside residents of Prešov Region. In terms of party preference, democracy held relatively lower importance among voters of SME-RODINA and SMER-SD.

Independent judiciary

Since an independent judiciary is one of the fundamental features of a liberal democracy, it is not surprising to see that its critical importance is reflected in the survey. Almost 90% of those polled consider it important, while only 9% believe that it is not important. Another explanation why an independent judiciary is considered to be so important, and somewhat less optimistically to explain, is the negative perception

of the judiciary system in Slovakia and questions about its independence, confirmed also in the flash Eurobarometer survey (No. 447) conducted in January 2017⁹. In the survey, the independence of the judiciary in Slovakia was ranked the worst in the entire EU, with only 23% of the general public in Slovakia assessing it positively, while 59% assessed it negatively¹⁰.

When looking at the socio-demographic groups that value the independence of the judiciary the most, a picture emerges that is similar to the results seen in the previous question.

National unity

Slovakia is a relatively small country with a population of 5.4 million and also a very young country, which only became independent on 1st January 1993. Having been dominated over much of its history by foreign rulers, there is a widely accepted narrative of a millennium of foreign oppression and the creation of a modern Slovak nationality only in the late 19th century, so national unity is a quite important value for many Slovaks. At the same time, Slovakia is a relatively diverse, multi-ethnic country with ethnic Slovaks representing roughly 80% of the population, with sizeable Hungarian, Roma, Czech, Ukrainian/Ruthenian, and other smaller national minorities living in the country, too¹¹.

In light of this, the responses (87% saying it is important as opposed to 10% answering “not important”) confirm the major significance of national unity, yet it should be interpreted also from the perspective of a multi-ethnic country. Since it is not possible to break down the data according to the nationality of the respondents, it is not possible to assess the nationalities living in Slovakia that value national unity the most. The strongest supporters of the idea of national unity are the middle-aged (91%), homemakers (96%), the self-employed (96%), residents of the Trnava (95.6%) and Žilina (94.8%) regions, larger cities (90%) and voters supporting the two ethnic Hungarian political parties: MOST-HID (90.4%) and SMK (100%) as well as the nationalist SNS (89.5%) and, surprisingly, also voters of the liberal SaS party (95%).

On the contrary, national unity is relatively less

important for young people (84%), students (81.5%), the unemployed (69.7%), residents of the Bratislava (82%) and Banská Bystrica (79%) regions and among voters supporting the Christian democratic KDH party (82.8%).

Independent media and civil society

Independent media and a healthy civil society act as the watchdogs of democracy and, therefore, it can be seen as crucial for their significance to have been also ranked quite high in Slovakia. Among Slovakian respondents, 85.3% find an independent media and civil society to be important, while 13% say it is not.

Surprisingly, young people, university educated respondents and residents of Bratislava Region, the wealthiest in Slovakia, were among the groups that valued independent media and civil society relatively less. The figures for these groups that found it not important are 18.8% of young people, 16.4% of university graduates and 19% of Bratislava region residents.

Culturally homogeneous society

Slovakia has repeatedly scored very low in terms of acceptance of other cultures and religions. Its people also exhibit one of the highest levels of social distance towards people of different origin, religion and sexual orientation. A 2015 Eurobarometer survey (437)¹² focusing on discrimination is a good illustration of this trend, as Slovakia scored lowest out of the entire EU in acceptance of co-workers of African or Asian origin and second lowest in acceptance of co-workers of Roma origin. Despite or maybe even due to a low level of religious diversity, Slovakia scored the lowest in acceptance of Jews and Buddhists, and second lowest in acceptance of Muslims¹³ in the EU.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a large majority of respondents in this survey (85%) value the importance of cultural (and by extension also religious) homogeneity, while only a small part of population does not consider it to be of importance (13.7%). On average, it is very important for 34% and rather important for 51% of Slovak respondents.

9. Flash Eurobarometer 447 (2017), Perceived independence of the national justice systems in the EU among the general public, European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/FLASH/surveyKy/2148>

10. Flash Eurobarometer 447 (2017), Slovakia factsheet, European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/77664>

11. Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, Obyvateľstvo SR podľa národnosti – sčítanie 2011, 2001, 1991, <https://goo.gl/cV7rDH>

12. Special Eurobarometer 437 (2015), Discrimination in the EU in 2015, European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/68004>

13. Ibid.

The strongest proponents of cultural homogeneity are not limited to manual labourers or unskilled workers (44.4%). Higher than average support for a homogenous society was also found among young people and university graduates (39% in both groups responded that it was very important) and among homemakers (46.2%). Another surprising outcome is that the strongest support for a homogenous society is not evident among the far-right or ethnic Slovak nationalist voters, but rather within the liberal centre-right SaS party (90%) and the two ethnic Hungarian parties – MOST-HID (92.8%) and SMK (96.3%).

Control of the government by the opposition

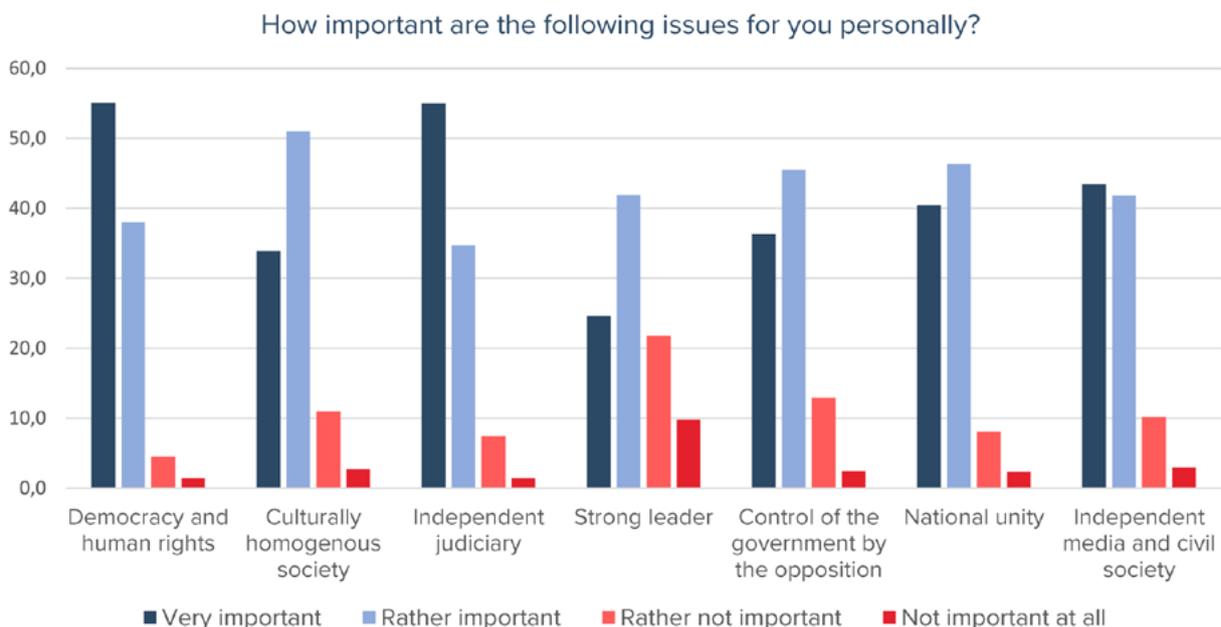
Perhaps due to the population's disillusionment with the struggle between the government coalition and the opposition, the role of the opposition as a control mechanism ranked second from bottom among the issues assessed in this question. It is deemed important for almost 82% and unimportant for 15% of respondents. Higher than average support for this issue was present among middle-aged respondents (86%), the university educated (84.7%), house persons (94.5%), residents of Trnava Region (92.3%), Žilina Region (84.7%) and large cities (91.3%). Unsurprisingly, opposition party voters valued the importance of opposition as a check to limit government power more than voters of the ruling coalition, with the notable exception of coalition member MOST-HID.

Strong leader

Notwithstanding Slovakia's negative experience with a strong authoritarian leader in the early 1990s, it is rather surprising to see almost two thirds (66.5%) of respondents still considering it important, while only 31% perceive it as unimportant. Strong leaders providing direction could easily become authoritarian and, as Slovakia was forced to learn, it takes a lot of effort to remove them democratically.

68% of respondents over 50 and 68.7% over 66, dominate among proponents of strong leadership alongside the lower educated (70.4%) and retirees (71%), but both skilled (70%) and unskilled workers (68%) also feel strong leadership is important.

Trnava, Trenčín and Prešov stand out among Slovakia's regions in terms of support for a strong leader. Unsurprisingly, the highest support for a strong leader was found among voters who had supported the "Führer-based" far right LSNS party (82.1%) and also the nationalist SNS (79.6%) and SMER-SD (73.7%) parties.





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