

# MIND THE OPINION

## STRONGER TOGETHER FOR A STRONGER EU

Public Opinion Across 10 Central and Eastern European  
Countries on Foreign Policy



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## DATE

July 2021

*Centre for Global Europe at the GLOBSEC Policy Institute provides constructive ideas and promotes innovative policy recommendations to ensure that the European Union remains an attractive, successful and viable project that is setting global norms and defining the international system. With an office in Brussels, the Center is a hub for analysis and strategic dialogue on EU policies shaping Europe's global standing.*

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*GEOPE – “Geopolitical Europe: are the EU member-states ready for it?” – is an international project seeking to propose feasible paths for compromises and coalition-building between the EU member-states aimed at fostering a more coherent EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. It is supported by Jean Monnet Activities of the EU's Erasmus+ Programme.*

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# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this publication is to identify potential gaps between public opinion in Central and Eastern Europe and the stances of foreign policy decision-makers at both the national and EU levels. The report, furthermore, endeavours to examine CEE citizen perceptions concerning attempts to bolster the EU voice on the global stage and how CEE countries are seeking to position the EU and themselves in the global great-power competition.

This publication was developed as part of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Project **GEOPE – “Geopolitical Europe: are the EU member-states ready for it?”** – an initiative that seeks to advance feasible paths for compromise and coalition-building between EU Member States aimed at fostering a more coherent EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. It is supported by Jean Monnet Activities of the EU’s Erasmus+ Programme.

The opinion poll was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy within a project **“Understanding and Countering Authoritarian Interference”**. The data has been originally published and presented within the report **GLOBSEC Trends 2021: Central and Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic**.

## METHODOLOGY

The findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2021 on a representative sample of the population in ten countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

The surveys were conducted on a sample of 1000 respondents per country (10,000 respondents altogether) using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country according to gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. For the purposes of graphical data visualisation, the results were rounded to full numbers. To improve the reader experience, the responses to scaled closed questions were generalised. For example, a question with the options definitely agree/ rather agree/ rather disagree /definitely disagree was synthesised to agree / disagree.

**The opinion polling was conducted by the following agencies and coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o. in Slovakia:**

Austria: BB Research Affairs GmbH

Bulgaria: ALPHA RESEARCH Ltd.

Czechia: FOCUS - Centrum pro sociální a marketingovou analýzu, spol. s.r.o.

Estonia: Turu Uuringute

Hungary: IMAS Internati onal Magyar - ország Kft.

Latvia: Latvian Facts

Lithuania: Vilmorus

Poland: IMAS International Sp. z o.o.

Romania: ISRA Center Marketing Research SRL

Slovakia: FOCUS - Centrum pre sociálnu a marketingovú analýzu, s.r.o.

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# KEY OBSERVATIONS

- ▶ Though China received a boost in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region post-March 2020, the European Union has recently gained ground and is judged to have garnered necessary momentum to strengthen its capacity to act;
- ▶ A total of 85% of CEE respondents favour the EU acting as a unified bloc on the world stage;
- ▶ CEE remains consistent in regard to its strategic partnership with the United States across different administrations in Washington;
- ▶ If the US-China rivalry intensifies into an open standoff, most people in the region, nonetheless, back a stance of neutrality, with 67% preferring this option over alignment with either the US or China;
- ▶ China and Russia's use of soft power is influencing CEE's perception of their importance – the recent rapid series of economic and epidemiological shocks are not, however, cultivating a pro-Chinese orientation;
- ▶ There are divergences in societal attitudes of CEE countries towards Russia, China and the United States – this backdrop necessitates that Brussels lead an intensified campaign to persuade states to toe the EU line;
- ▶ As the post-pandemic recovery and geopolitical rivalry both unfold, Germany (53%) stands out as the most selected strategic partner for CEE countries. The United States (35%), Russia (23%), France (16%), the United Kingdom (13%) and China (11%) all rank lower.

# CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE ON THE EU'S PRESENCE ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

- ? To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “The EU should act as one on the world stage”**
- ? With each name, please say whether you have already heard about him/her and whether you perceive them positively or negatively (e.g. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission)**

## PUBLIC OPINION

A total of 85% of Central and Eastern European (CEE) respondents favour the EU acting as a unified bloc on the world stage and ensuring that the EU's potential in foreign policy does not remain untapped. This is preferred especially amongst the older generation with a university degree.

The countries most in favour of strengthening the EU's voice include Austria (93%), Latvia (91%) and Poland (88%). Romania, meanwhile, stands at the tail end, but still with 70% backing this position. Though comprising a small minority in all countries, opposition to the EU as a unitary foreign policy actor is most prevalent in Romania (26%), Hungary (13%), Slovakia (12%) and Czechia (10%).

Nonetheless, the number of CEE respondents supporting this unity is higher than the responses in recent Eurobarometer, which asks the question “Please tell for each statement, whether you are for it or against it: A common foreign policy of the Member States of the EU.” 73% of EU citizens altogether, and 72% of CEE, are in favour of such a common foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, Austria (58%) prefers more independence to manoeuvre in its foreign affairs compared to other CEE countries. Bulgaria (66%), Poland (70%) and Slovakia (71%), while embracing an EU that acts as one, are more suspicious of a common foreign policy than the rest of CEE.

### Interesting highlight

*European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, is viewed rather positively (43% among respondents in all surveyed countries). The EU leader is perceived particularly favourably in Austria (54%) and Lithuania (52%) and among younger women who have obtained a university education.*

*Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, nevertheless, remains unknown to 15% of people in the region. This figure – those either not having heard of or being unable to recognise the Commission President – reaches 42% in Bulgaria and Latvia.<sup>2</sup>*

## POLICY ANALYSIS

For the European Commission that sees itself as geopolitical<sup>3</sup> and aims to promote a “stronger Europe in a fragile world,” it is important that it project a cohesive voice globally that embraces the views of the EU27. Where, consequently, does Central and Eastern Europe stand in this geopolitical tempest?

From the European Commission's 2013 Joint Communication, it is apparent that “the EU has both the increased potential and ambition to make its external action more consistent, more effective and more strategic.”<sup>4</sup> Certain CEE countries, however, might feel this entails more convergence on foreign policy preferences, a development that could contradict their own agendas. Others are concerned, meanwhile, that their voices will be minimised vis-à-vis Brussels.

The EU does not wish to be seen as a junior, less-experienced player in the international area. To avert being labelled as “unimportant” against the all too palpable Cold-War-like dynamism between the US and China, the EU should “learn the rules of the game”, seek to unify 27 increasingly polarised countries in converging policy fields and emphasise the distinct political power of EU institutions and their leaders. No CEE country alone can advance a comprehensive policy on China or deliver impactful restrictive measures against Russia in response to its violations of the rules-based world order the EU stands for.<sup>5</sup>

**? If there is an increased confrontation between the US and China, where should the EU position itself?**

	AT	BG	CZ	EE	HU	LATV	LIT	PL	RO	SK	CEE 10 average
<b>Closer to the US</b>	22%	16%	25%	29%	15%	25%	36%	31%	22%	19%	24%
<b>Closer to China</b>	2%	5%	2%	3%	4%	4%	2%	2%	5%	5%	3%
<b>Stay neutral</b>	74%	68%	68%	59%	74%	66%	54%	60%	72%	70%	67%
<b>Do not know (do not read)</b>	2%	12%	5%	9%	8%	5%	9%	8%	2%	6%	6%

**PUBLIC OPINION**

If the US-China rivalry intensifies into an open standoff, few in the CEE region would clamour for the EU to take Beijing’s side. The share of respondents welcoming the EU positioning itself alongside China measures below 5% in all ten countries. An average 24%, meanwhile, would prefer that the EU align with the US.

Most people in the region, nonetheless, back a stance of neutrality, with 67% preferring this option over alignment with either the US or China.

**POLICY ANALYSIS**

Although there is a broad consensus that the EU needs to work on its status and influence, geopolitical views (whom to align with or whether to remain neutral) vary within CEE. The preferences of neutrality do not imply that member states disapprove of China, Russia or the US. They rather reflect the societal disposition that the EU uses its market and political power even as member states preserve the option to promote political-economic cooperation individually dependent on their own cultural inclinations and other national contextual factors.

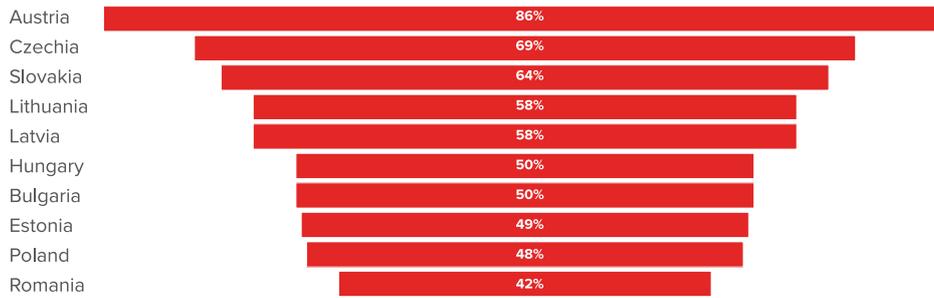
Even the core pro-Atlanticist countries (Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), while generally favouring the US, are inclined to back a stance of EU neutrality. There is alignment, in this regard, between CEE foreign policy preferences and the EU’s aspirations to increase its own distinct capacities.

This backing for EU neutrality, paired with the fact that 57% of respondents are dissatisfied with the lack of solidarity between EU member states, suggests that the EU is in a unique position to pursue further integration in some critical areas.<sup>6</sup> To capitalise on this opportunity, however, Brussels needs to be aware of existing divisions present in CEE societies – the greatest challenge facing Europe indeed relates to internal gulfs as opposed to external influence.

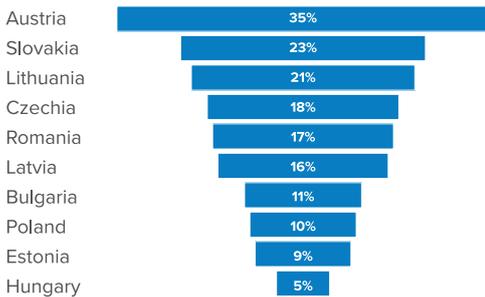
# CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERS

**?** Which of the following are the most important strategic partners of your country today? (respondents could choose two from a randomised order of the following six countries: the US, Russia, China, Germany, France and the UK)

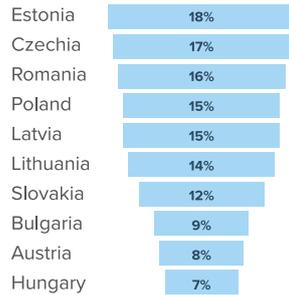
## Germany



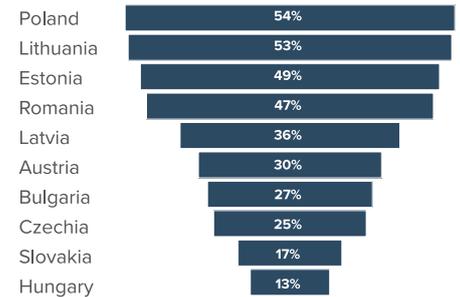
## France



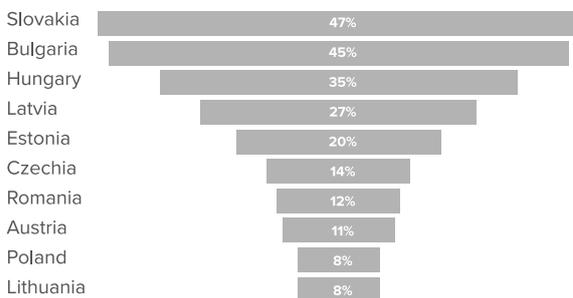
## United Kingdom



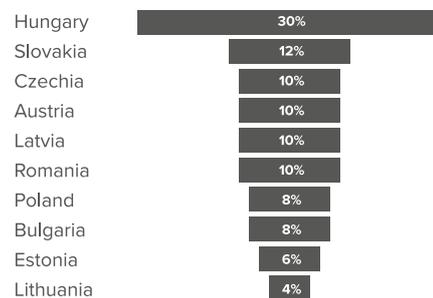
## United States



## Russia



## China



As the post-pandemic recovery and geopolitical rivalry both unfold, Germany (53%) stands out as the most selected strategic partner for CEE countries. The United States (35%), Russia (23%), France (16%), the United Kingdom (13%) and China (11%) all rank lower.

Perceptions of strategic partners reflect a combination of foreign policy priorities and economic ties, but also personal sympathies. Public attitudes appear little changed despite the pandemic and its ensuing ‘vaccine and mask’ diplomacy. The GLOBSEC Trends 2020 survey, conducted between September-October 2020, reveals that Germany (57%), the US (33%) and Russia (24%) were identified as the top three strategic partners in the region<sup>7</sup>.

**? Which of the following are the most important strategic partners of your country today?<sup>8</sup>**

%	SK 20	SK 21	CZ 20	CZ 21	PL 20	PL 21	HU 20	HU 21	RO 20	RO 21	BG 20	BG 21
US	17	17	29	25	69	54	16	13	50	50	18	27
China	14	12	23	10	7	8	32	30	10	10	13	8
Germany	71	64	65	70	50	48	59	50	46	42	52	50
France	22	23	17	18	16	10	8	5	15	17	16	11
UK	N/A	12	N/A	17	N/A	15	N/A	7	N/A	16	N/A	9
Russia	42	47	21	14	6	8	33	35	6	13	41	45

Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2020<sup>9</sup> vs. GLOBSEC Trends 2021<sup>10</sup>

# FRANCO-GERMAN MOTOR OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

**? Which of the following countries are the most important strategic partners of your country today?**

	AT	BG	CZ	EE	HU	LATV	LIT	PL	RO	SK
Germany	86%	50%	69%	49%	50%	58%	58%	48%	42%	64%
France	35%	11%	18%	9%	5%	16%	21%	10%	17%	23%
UK	8%	9%	17%	18%	7%	15%	14%	15%	16%	12%

## PUBLIC OPINION

An overwhelming 57% of respondents in CEE countries continue to see Germany as their key strategic partner within Europe. Germany ranks particularly favourably among Austrians (86%), Czechs (69%), Slovaks (64%), Lithuanians and Latvians (both 58%) and Hungarians and Bulgarians (both 50%). Relatively high figures, though slightly lower than the above, were measured in Estonia (49%), Poland (48%) and Romania (42%). Berlin’s standing, notably, increased in some places since 2020 including, for example, in Slovakia (up 7%) and Czechia (up 4%). Germany, meanwhile, saw a year-to-year decline in its backing in Hungary (down 9%).

France, for its part, is selected most frequently by Austrians (35%), Slovaks (23%) and Lithuanians (21%) and least by Hungarians (5%), Estonians (9%) and Poles (10%). Paris is, notably, favoured over London in Austria (27% more choose France), Slovakia (10% more), Lithuania (7%) and Bulgaria (2%). Compared to the strong preferences for Germany recorded in CEE countries, France is not as widely recognised as a critical partner, with merely 16% of respondents in the region identifying it as a strategic partner.

The United Kingdom is viewed as more strategically important than France in Estonia (9% more choose London) and Poland (5% more) but Latvians and Romanians rank France and the United Kingdom similarly. A total of 13% of respondents in the CEE region, on average, judge their partnership with London to be a key priority.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

CEE policymakers have routinely stressed a preference for a “Europe of homelands”, rooted in national identity rather than political union (a vision shared by Germany)<sup>11</sup>. The region’s favouring of Germany over France in the ‘Franco-German motor’ of the European project is not a novelty. Germany has been seen for some time now as a country that better represents the agendas of CEE countries in Brussels<sup>12</sup>. The region is economically dependent on German supply chains and investment. CEE decision-makers, furthermore, have, more often than not, aligned politically with German initiatives. France’s charm, consequently, fails to trump CEE’s linkage with Germany.

However, France-CEE links are still valued by the public more than those with the UK (post-Brexit). While Central and Eastern Europeans feel more strongly about their partnership with Germany, this does not necessarily mean that France is not viewed as an important partner too.

Germany’s image has, perhaps, also benefited from the UK’s departure from the bloc. CEE was initially patently concerned that they would face at least three challenges in a post-Brexit EU: absence of an ally opposed to further EU integration; higher likelihood of a multispeed EU (whereby smaller groups of member states would intensify cooperation in certain areas and leave CEE on the periphery); and difficulties in counterbalancing France on the concept of European strategic autonomy.

Upcoming elections will be pivotal to these outcomes: federal German elections taking place in September this year could slightly shake perceptions. CEE countries are likely to re-assess their own strategic partnerships with Berlin if the next German Chancellor refrains from adopting Angela Merkel’s pro-CEE orientation, historical and cultural understanding and sympathies towards the region. If Germany chooses a Green government, some tensions could potentially arise with certain CEE leaders.

## GREAT AND MIDDLE RANGE POWER RIVALRY

**? Which of the following countries are the most important strategic partners of your country today?**

	AT	BG	CZ	EE	HU	LATV	LIT	PL	RO	SK
US	30%	27%	25%	49%	13%	36%	53%	54%	47%	17%
China	10%	8%	10%	8%	30%	10%	4%	8%	10%	12%
Russia	11%	45%	14%	21%	35%	27%	8%	8%	13%	47%

## THE UNITED STATES

### PUBLIC OPINION

Public attitudes across Central and Eastern Europe reveal that 35%, on average, deem the US to be the most important partner of their respective countries. This view is held most prevalently in Poland (54%), Lithuania (53%), Estonia (49%) and Romania (47%) and especially by young people.

CEE countries perceive President Joe Biden more positively than former president Donald Trump. A total of 53% look favourably on the new leader of the free world and 41% wanted Biden to win the 2020 presidential election.<sup>13</sup>

Austria (76%), Czechia (63%), Slovakia (56%) and Hungary (42%), notably, see the US President in a better light than the United States more broadly.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

Our data indicates that the change in administration, though welcomed in Brussels, has not resulted in a change in how CEE strategically perceives the US or the region's strategic objectives and partners. CEE public perceptions of the strategic partnership with the US remain consistent regardless of the occupant of the White House or the involvement of third countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

This comes despite the fact that CEE relations with former President Donald Trump proved beneficial for the region's strategic ambitions, with the previous administration in Washington providing Central and Eastern Europe a window of opportunity to amplify its own defence interests in terms of defence investments and refocused military presence in CEE (foremost in Poland)<sup>14</sup>. US leadership alone, in other words, resonates little among CEE citizens.

## CHINA

### PUBLIC OPINION

Our survey indicates that only Hungary stands out from its peer group, with its public more inclined to classify China as strategic partner (30%). Other countries in the region rank China considerably lower: only 12% of Slovaks and 10% of Austrians, Czechs, Latvians and Romanians identify China as a strategic partner. Merely 4% of Lithuanians and 6% of Estonians come to the same conclusion.

Overall, 15% of V4 citizens see China as strategically important, exceeding the CEE average of 11%. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the relatively high V4 average is constituted largely by Hungary where 30% judge China to be a strategic partner. Merely 4% of Lithuanians and 6% of Estonians come to the same conclusion.

Both Czechs and Bulgarians (13% and 4% decrease respectively) have soured on the view that China constitutes a strategic partner.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

It is unsurprising that compared to other Western countries, where the China-US rivalry is more pertinent, it is Russia rather than China which is seen as strategically important in CEE. As China becomes more involved in shaping the international order, the notion of strategic rivalry is, however, increasingly relevant. While China's policies on human rights and democracy might contradict European values, China is becoming a central feature of CEE and EU foreign policy.

For the six countries<sup>15</sup> where comparable data is available, the evaluation of both the US and China as strategic partners suffered between September/October 2020 and March 2021. Budapest remains an outlier in its "friendliness" towards China though fewer respondents even in Hungary, which has administered China's Sinovac vaccine, identify China as a strategic partner. Even as societies endeavour to prioritise economic ties, close cooperation with Beijing is not valued as highly in the region. Among V4 countries, based on our data, the Czechs and Poles are especially wary of China's involvement and are sobering up to the realisation that Chinese activity in CEE yields underwhelming outcomes.

When the German Presidency of the EU Council included the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in the Committee of Permanent Representatives' agenda in December 2020, Poland openly objected to this decision.<sup>16</sup> If EU policymakers were to account for regional public opinion, Brussels would permit CEE countries to incorporate these viewpoints into the EU's overarching policies towards China.

## RUSSIA

### PUBLIC OPINION

Slovakia (47%), Bulgaria (45%) and Hungary (35%) view Russia as their most important strategic partner, with this perspective held predominantly by older respondents that never completed the school leaving exam. Contrarily, only 8% of Poles conceive of friendly relations with Russia as integral.

The number of people labelling Russia as a strategic partner has been more stable than for the United States and China, witnessing declines only among Czechs (6% drop). By contrast, 6% of Slovaks and Romanians and 5% of Bulgarians now rate Moscow higher in the rankings of their countries' strategic partners.

### POLICY ANALYSIS

The varied attitudes towards Russia stem from old sentiments and dominant political narratives rather than economic or social prospects.<sup>17</sup> Aside from the delivery of Sputnik V vaccines, which has improved Russia's image, Slovakia and Bulgaria have consistently articulated a commitment to further cementing their relationship with Moscow. This comes despite the fact that the two countries have continuously supported the EU's position on the illegal annexation of Crimea and the EU sanctions policy.

This backdrop sets up a formidable set of challenges for CEE policymakers in seeking to position both the region and the EU as a whole in this confounding new global climate. The survey findings underscore the fact that Central and Eastern Europe is neither ignorant nor indifferent to geopolitics. The challenges faced by CEE largely map onto those faced by the broader EU but in a microcosm<sup>18</sup>. Or, looked at another way, many of the risks facing the entire EU are even more pronounced in the CEE context. Despite differing perceptions of Russia and China, CEE countries are both allies of the United States and members of the European Union, two geopolitical poles that still constitute the region's major points of reference.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2355>
- 2 [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021\\_final.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021_final.pdf)
- 3 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/646148/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)646148\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/646148/EPRS_BRI(2020)646148_EN.pdf)
- 4 [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/csdp/structures-instruments-agencies/eu-military-staff/save\\_the\\_date/docs/joint\\_communication\\_on\\_comprehensive\\_approach.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/csdp/structures-instruments-agencies/eu-military-staff/save_the_date/docs/joint_communication_on_comprehensive_approach.pdf)
- 5 <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/The-EU-Strategic-Autonomy-CEE-Perspectives-Report.pdf>
- 6 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2020/parlemeter-2020/en-report.pdf>
- 7 Note that instead of 10 countries, Globsec trends 2020 looked at a smaller group of 6 CEE states (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Romania) <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2020/>
- 8 Many decreases in preferences for some Western powers in 2021 were caused by the fact that in 2021, the United Kingdom was added to the list of countries to choose from. The list thus increased from 5 to 6 countries."
- 9 [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020\\_read-version.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf)
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- 11 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/contending-european-views-on-new-post-brex-it-balance-pub-81354>
- 12 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-germany-drop-plans-russia-summit-after-eu-outcry-2021-06-25/>
- 13 <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/US-in-CEE-and-Western-Balkans.pdf>
- 14 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-poland-idUSKBN23V2PP>
- 15 Visegrad countries, plus Romania and Bulgaria.
- 16 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/opinion/china-investment-agreement-and-the-golden-calf-of-eu-unity/>
- 17 <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Image-of-Russia-Mighty-Slavic-Brother-or-Hungry-Bear-Nextdoor.pdf>
- 18 <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/The-EU-Strategic-Autonomy-CEE-Perspectives-Report.pdf>



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