



GLOBSEC **Trends** **2019**

**Central & Eastern Europe
30 years after the fall of
the Iron Curtain**

Authors



Daniel Milo
Senior Research Fellow



Katarína Klingová
Senior Research Fellow



Dominika Hajdu
Research Fellow

Strategic Communication Programme

Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2019 on a representative sample of the population in seven EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample ranging from 1000 to 1025 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) in Slovakia and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) in the other six countries. In all countries,

the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. For the purpose of graphical data-visualisation in this report, the results were rounded to full numbers.

The quotes used within the report belong to analysts from recognised think tanks and NGOs, which are listed at the end of this report. We thank them for providing valuable context and interpretation of the data received.

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Foreword



Jakub Wiśniewski

Vice President of GLOBSEC and Director of the GLOBSEC Policy Institute

Dear Reader,

If there is one word to describe the state of the Central European mind in 2019 it would be “confusion”. We live in times when notions of East, West, and the Transatlantic family have lost their precise meaning. It is as if the fuel of the NATO and EU accession processes of Central Europeans has run out. Joining Western structures did not automatically make Central European wallets any thicker. Prosperity for all might be long in the making. The eschatological end of history did not happen. Domestic politics is often toxic and tribal. Also, a hazy concept of lands “in-between” is making its comeback, sometimes as a risk of creating a “geopolitical hole” in the middle of the Old

Continent and other times as a vague promise of a peaceful existence far away from big power politics.

People see grey clouds gathering in the geopolitical skies. They yearn for the times when Russia or China were “partners” rather than “adversaries”. Deep in their hearts, they feel the geopolitical moment of Europe might be over. In an increasingly hostile world, they fear the Old Continent will play second fiddle unless small countries (by global standards, we are all small) get their act together and act as one. There is no consensus as to who and to what extent constitutes a threat, but international developments send shivers down European spines. The US has acquired the less familiar, often unpredictable face of Donald Trump. The very notion of the “West” has become loaded with connotations that are not so positive—economic and political turbulence.

In times of trouble, people of countries that are part of NATO increasingly welcome Alliance membership. But the brightest spot on this horizon seems to be the European Union. It is still a point of reference, an anchor, and the aspiration of millions of Europeans. In no country does the EU loom as a sinister, malevolent geopolitical actor while the same cannot be said of any other entity. Its hypothetical EU army appeals to the imagination of ordinary citizens. We might laugh at the ineffectual Brussels bureaucracy, lengthy boring procedures, or convoluted power structure (biased in favour of big member states) but nobody questions the *raison d'être* of

the European project itself as well as the logic of multilateralism. Quite the contrary, multilateralism itself—warts and all—seems to provide a sentiment of security in a world beset by strife and ideological ambiguities. The EU can also be an antidote to populist, authoritarian tendencies of rulers at home. Just when free media face fierce attacks from anti-democratic regimes and movements, Central Europeans appreciate the benefits of free speech. They know the value of NGOs acting as a watchdog over misbehaving authorities. It is as if some democratic antibodies have been awakened in the organism of the European body politic.

Before reading this year’s GLOBSEC Trends, I was expecting a triumph of Euroscepticism and radicalisation of views. I was almost certain that a fierce nationalism would rear its ugly head. I was expecting the “No to NATO”, “No to the EU” type of rhetoric. It appears confusion, when it is followed by serious self-reflection, can be a good thing after all. A somewhat startling counterintuitive conclusion of this year’s report is that Europeans are stalwart multilateralists. Decades of the integration process and a reality check against the less propitious outside environment have weakened the selfish, nationalist gene in the Central European DNA. At least this is what I want to believe.

Wiśniewski

Countries surveyed



Glossary

CEE: Central and Eastern Europe; this report uses the term in reference to all countries covered by this research - Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

Visegrad Four: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

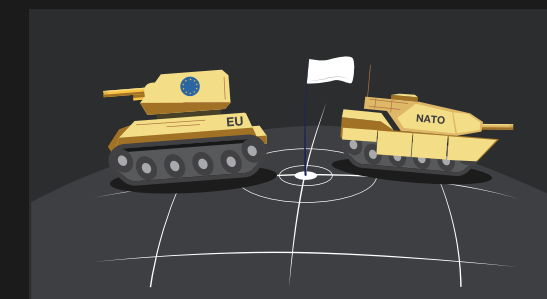
Slavic countries: Countries where Slavs (ethnolinguistic group) constitute a majority; in this report they are Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland and Slovakia.

2019 marks 30th anniversary of the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. While there is no better opportunity to celebrate freedom, peace and democracy, the widespread fatigue with the political “establishment”, endemic corruption, and a desire for change did not avoid the region. The rise of nationalism and populism, which question some fundamental democratic values, is now on the everyday agenda. Harsh political rhetoric targeting the EU, attacks on journalists, attempts to rein in independent media and NGOs, the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of few, all these are important warning signs of the democratic order under

attack. Such trends do not go unnoticed by external forces such as Russia or China. On the contrary, taking advantage of polarised societies to weaken the EU and NATO from within is one of the most powerful techniques to destabilise their adversaries. But is it really so effective? Are the CEE democracies on the decline?

We asked people in Central and Eastern Europe and they do not seem to fully succumb to these efforts.

These are our key findings



While NATO enjoys huge support among 7 in 10 Central and Eastern Europeans, who recognise its importance for their security, at the same time, 4 in 10 support the idea of setting up a European army as an alternative to NATO.



Support for the EU is increasing across the whole region despite rising Eurosceptic political forces in some countries. Yet, people often feel that the EU is ruled by a few big states and their representatives do not have a say on important issues.



Not everyone would like to see their country positioned in the West (only 35% on average). In the Visegrad Four, around half would prefer their country remain somewhere in-between East and West to get the “best of both worlds”.



Despite the attacks of populists, the overwhelming majority of people in the CEE region think that the work of media and NGOs are important for their democratic societies.



The identity of people in the CEE is rather linked to the European Union. A majority identifies with the values of the EU.

Country highlights



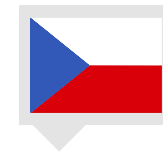
Austria

- 1** Austrians were an outlier in the questions linked to their identity. While **74% identify with the values of the EU (the most in the region)**, their preferences towards putting Austria in the West are mostly connected to the feeling of being “Western”.
- 2** Nevertheless, the small-country complex has not been avoided. **Almost an equal share (73%) of Austrians believe that the EU is ruled by large states such as Germany and France.**
- 3** Austrians cherish their neutral status, which is also reflected in their perception of the superpowers. **Almost one-third of Austrians (29%) perceive the US to be a threat to their country while slightly more think the same of Russia (37%).**
- 4** While Austria belongs culturally to the West, **34% of Austrians think their country belongs geopolitically somewhere between East and West.**



Bulgaria

- 1** Bulgarians seem to have very conflicting perception of the EU: **while 8 in 10 support EU membership, almost an equal share (77%) believes the EU dictates what to do without them having the power to influence it** and even more (79%) believe the EU is ruled by big countries such as Germany and France.
- 2** The strongest sympathies towards Russia, mostly based on cultural proximity and historic ties, were measured in Bulgaria: **71% of Bulgarians identify with Russian values and only 7% perceive Russia as a threat.**
- 3** Bulgarians turned out to be quite indecisive on a number of issues, for example, **almost half could not say whether they would prefer their country to be in the West, the East, or somewhere in-between**, and 33% could not decide whether the activities of NGOs are important for a democratic society.



Czechia

- 1** **Over the past two years, support for the EU has skyrocketed among Czechs to 68%**, challenging the long-held image of it as a Eurosceptic country. Moreover, a great majority (62%) also identify with EU values, which suggests that the support for the EU is also identity-related.
- 2** At the same time, **Czechs are the strongest supporters of positioning their country in-between the East and West (55%)**, perceiving themselves as an imaginary bridge between the two.
- 3** While the overwhelming majority of Czechs feel protected thanks to NATO, **Czechs are the most cautious of rising geopolitical actors in the CEE and the wariest of China**, with 48% perceiving it as a threat to their country.



Hungary

- 1** Despite a massive, public Brussels-bashing campaign and the divisive rhetoric of populist politicians, **56% of Hungarians do not believe in the narrative of an EU dictate.**
- 2** **Support for the EU has actually increased to an all-time high of 83% in the country.** At the same time, though, 57% of Hungarians believe that their values are not in line with those of the EU, a figure which endorses the argument that the membership benefits are mostly perceived in terms of economic gains.
- 3** Notwithstanding the narrative of foreign agents and massive smear campaigns, **the overwhelming majority (84%) believe that independent media and the work of NGOs are important for the functioning of a democratic society.**

Country highlights



Poland

1 Poles stay true to their image as the most pro-American country in the region, **with 42% of Poles identifying with US values, the most in the region.**

2 While the same percentage would prefer Poland to be a part of the West, almost half, **48%, would choose to position their country somewhere in-between**, which is an increase of 17% from last year.

3 Strong and confident rhetoric of political representatives vis-a-vis the EU Commission might be working: **72% of Poles, by far the highest number in the region, believe their political representatives can influence EU decision-making.**

4 **Poles are the most distrustful of mainstream media in the region**, which might be a reflection of their awareness of the strong government control over some key mainstream media channels.



Romania

1 **Romanians are the strongest proponents of the EU in the CEE, with 89% supporting membership**, an almost 10% increase since 2017. EU funds and over 3 million Romanians working in other EU countries, sending back remittances, might be among the key reasons for this.

2 **Although Romanians are staunch supporters of NATO (82%), they are also supportive of the prospect of building an EU army:** 44% tend to agree with it as an alternative, which might be connected with the positive perception of the EU in Romania.

3 **Romanians are the second most prone to think that Russia presents a danger to their country (58%).** Although Russia is an important country in global Orthodoxy and Romanians have an Orthodox majority, geopolitical and past territorial clashes, including a dispute over Moldova, seem to be prevailing in Romanian minds.



Slovakia

1 **Geopolitical and cultural orientation of Slovaks has shifted slightly to the West.** 46% of Slovaks position their country somewhere in-between East and West, a 10% decline over the past year, while the support for a pro-Eastern orientation dropped by 4%.

2 While Slovakia is still one of the weak links in the NATO chain, the trend is clear — **support for NATO membership is steadily increasing among Slovaks, year by year, to the current 56%**, possibly also thanks to Slovakia's involvement in the #WeAreNATO campaign.

3 Deeply rooted anti-Americanism as a legacy of communist propaganda nurtured by modern disinformation campaigns and conspiracies is clearly visible in Slovakia in the perception of threats: **41% of Slovaks think that the US is a threat to their country**, by far the most in the whole region.

Choosing the middle ground

Visegrad in-between

The Visegrad Four expressed the strongest preference towards positioning their country somewhere in-between East and West. The arguments were both pragmatic and emotional. It indicates that the identity-based rhetoric and the allegory of an imaginary bridge between the East and West used by many political representatives is effective only to an extent. For many, the choice lies in pragmatic opportunism to use the best anyone can offer. This is often related to the historical experience of the 20th-century games and betrayals on all fronts. Thus, realising their vulnerability, the preference for the “in-between” position is rather about cautiousness and distrust towards both “East” and “West” across the CEE.

1 in 10 Slovaks and Bulgarians are pro-East

The higher preferences towards the East in Bulgaria and Slovakia are primarily linked to cultural ties and a more positive perception of Russia. In Slovakia, the strong narrative of pan-Slavism and Soviet nostalgia among older generations play a major role while in Bulgaria, it is said that Russia still exerts a strong influence over the country, also via economic means.

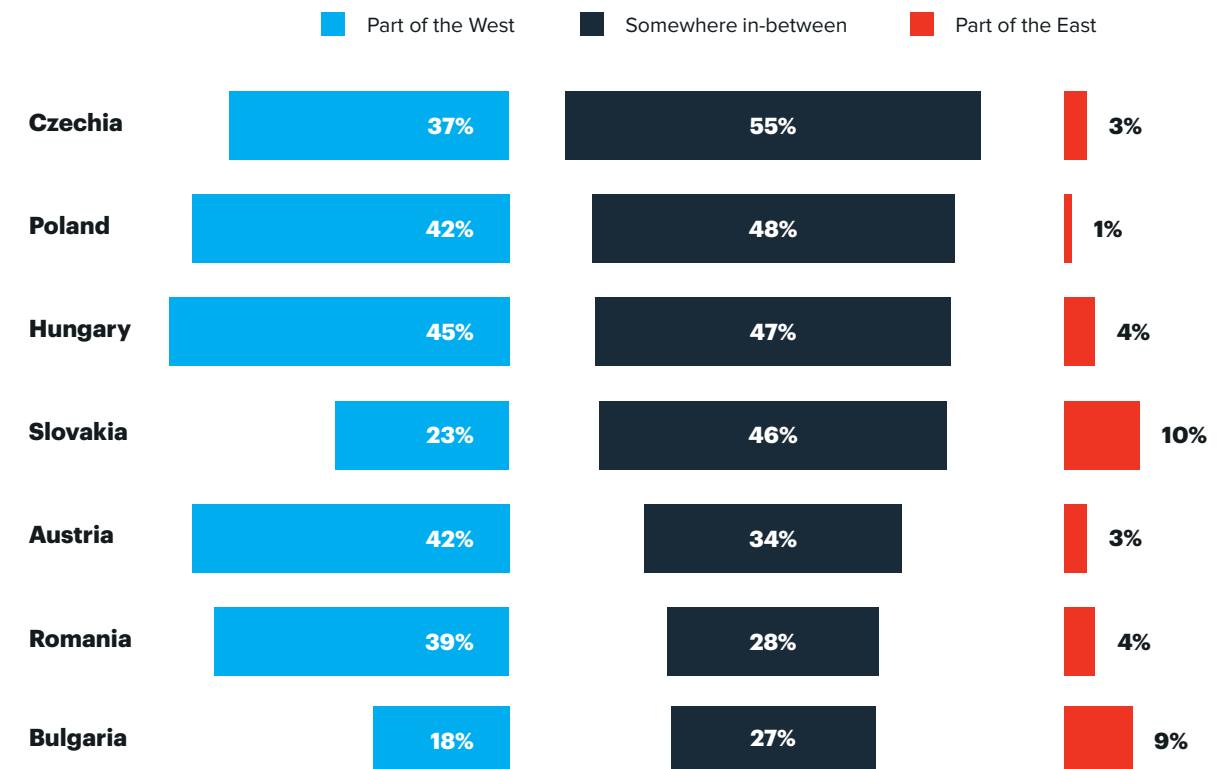
Nearly half of Bulgarians indecisive

Of the surveyed Bulgarians, 46% were reluctant to position the country on the offered spectrum. This can be linked to a degree of ambivalence

Around half of the Visegrad Four would prefer their country to be somewhere in-between the East and West.

to clearly decide between the economic prosperity of the West and the stronger cultural affinity and geographic position of the East.

Would you like your country to be a part of the West, a part of the East, or somewhere in-between?



Why West?

Higher standards of living

The perspective of further growth in terms of standards of living and economic development was prevalent. For these respondents, the West is seen as a benchmark for a “better world” that is still to be attained.

Civilisation

Seeing the West as more civilised was understood in terms of values: better governance, a stronger guarantee of democracy, or less corruption. This attitude was dominant in Romania.

Identity

Only in Austria identity and values preceded economic arguments. There is thus an evident difference between Austrians’ perception of their country already being part of the West and the rest of the countries still perceiving it as an aspiration.

Why in-between?

Bridge

The CEE also likes to see itself as a bridge mediating between the two imaginary competing blocs. The aspirations to stay on good terms with everyone to prevent conflict are mostly linked to historical experience.

Opportunism

Many feel that staying in-between is the way to get the “best of both worlds”.

Neutrality or independence

The desire for independence is driven by populist calls for sovereignty, anti-EU rhetoric, the inferiority complex of smaller countries, or dreams of independent Swiss-model nation-state governance.

Geography

Geographic reasoning was mostly voiced in Austria and Hungary.

Why East?

Russia

Both physical and cultural proximity to Russia was unsurprisingly voiced in Bulgaria and Slovakia.

Economic development

Many Czechs and Hungarians who prefer the East feel their economies are stagnating and would prefer turning to the East instead. This can be interpreted as a search for an alternative linked to disillusionment stemming from the gap between expectations and reality in the aftermath of joining the EU.

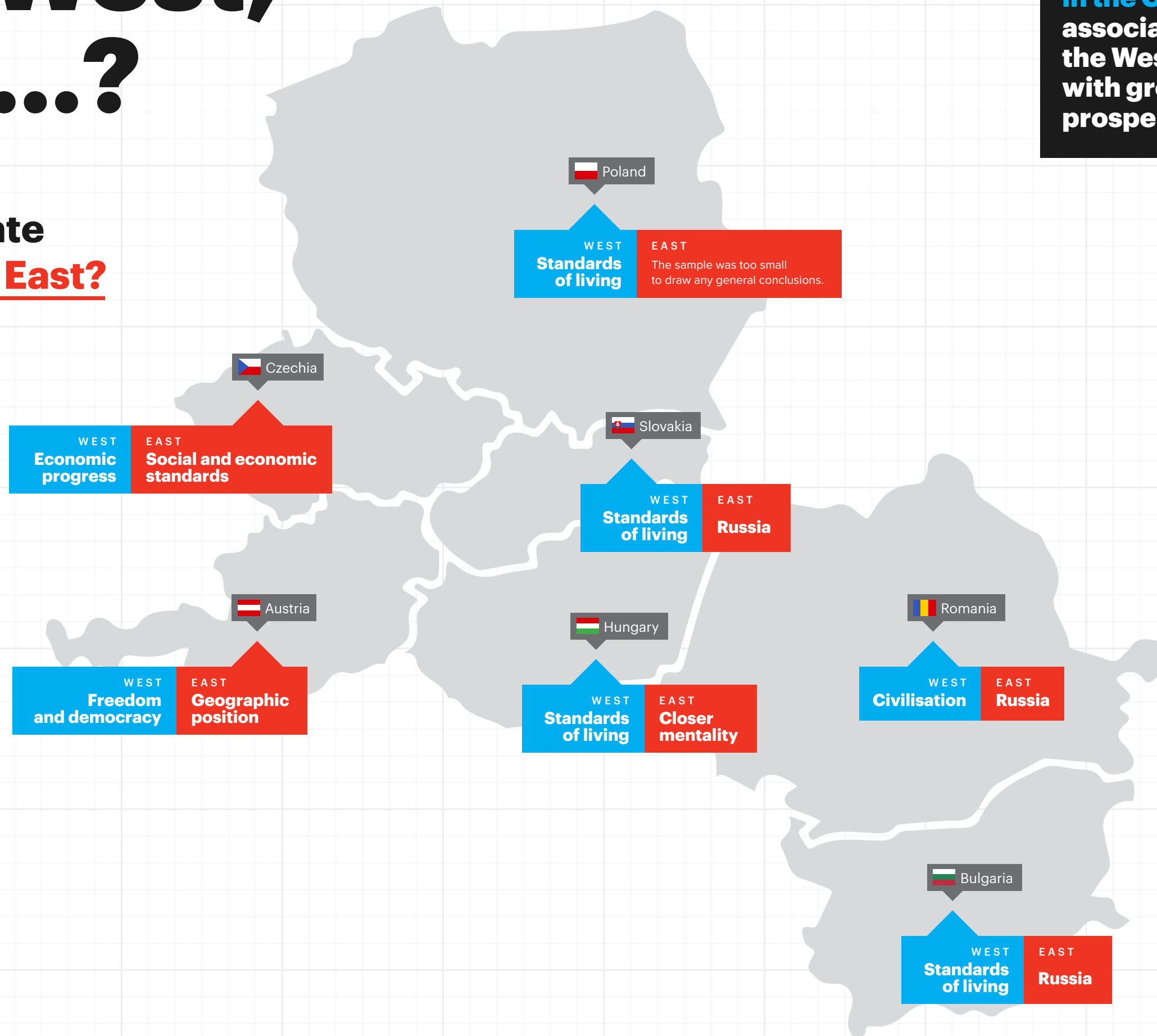
Culture and history

Cultural proximity, especially among the Slavic countries, and nostalgia for the socialist past were among the typical arguments.

We say West, you say...?

What do you associate with the West or the East?

The majority in the CEE associates the West with greater prosperity.



What comes to your mind when we say West?

In perception analysis, first associations are an important indicator for understanding people's preferences and attitudes. The associations of "Westernisers" usually fall under prosperity and development, democracy, large Western European countries, or the EU. The East is mostly associated with Russia, geographic position, and higher social and economic standards. The latter is often linked to post-Soviet nostalgia and remnants of the Eastern countries' image of having more social guarantees.

And the winner is ...

the EU 

The questions of identification with others' values help us understand the deepest and most spontaneous emotions and feelings CEE citizens have towards the EU, US, or Russia. Do they feel close? Do they feel like they have something in common? Simple question and answer can sometimes provide a clearer picture of societal attitudes that can be both current and deep-rooted towards relevant players without space for pragmatism.

Rather EU than the West

When comparing values to the question on geopolitical orientation (see the previous section), the identification with the EU is much stronger, especially in Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, than the orientation towards the West.

Czechs are European

As the majority of Czechs identify with EU values, the rising support for EU membership (see p. 16) in Czechia is seemingly not based on economic

opportunism but backed by stronger identity-related beliefs that are much harder to undermine.

American connections

Also, Czechia and Poland represent the countries with the highest degree of identification with US values. Poland has been historically known as the most pro-American in the region, which is usually connected to Poles' perception of the US as the main security guarantor against a threat from Russia (see p. 28 - 29).

Hungarian identity prevails

Contrary to Czechia, in Hungary, the strong public support of EU membership appears to have strong economic reasons while Viktor Orban's anti-EU values-based rhetoric seems to be paying off. Not many Hungarians identify with EU values. Nevertheless, a similar tendency applies to the values of all, whether the EU, US, or Russia.

Bulgarian paradox

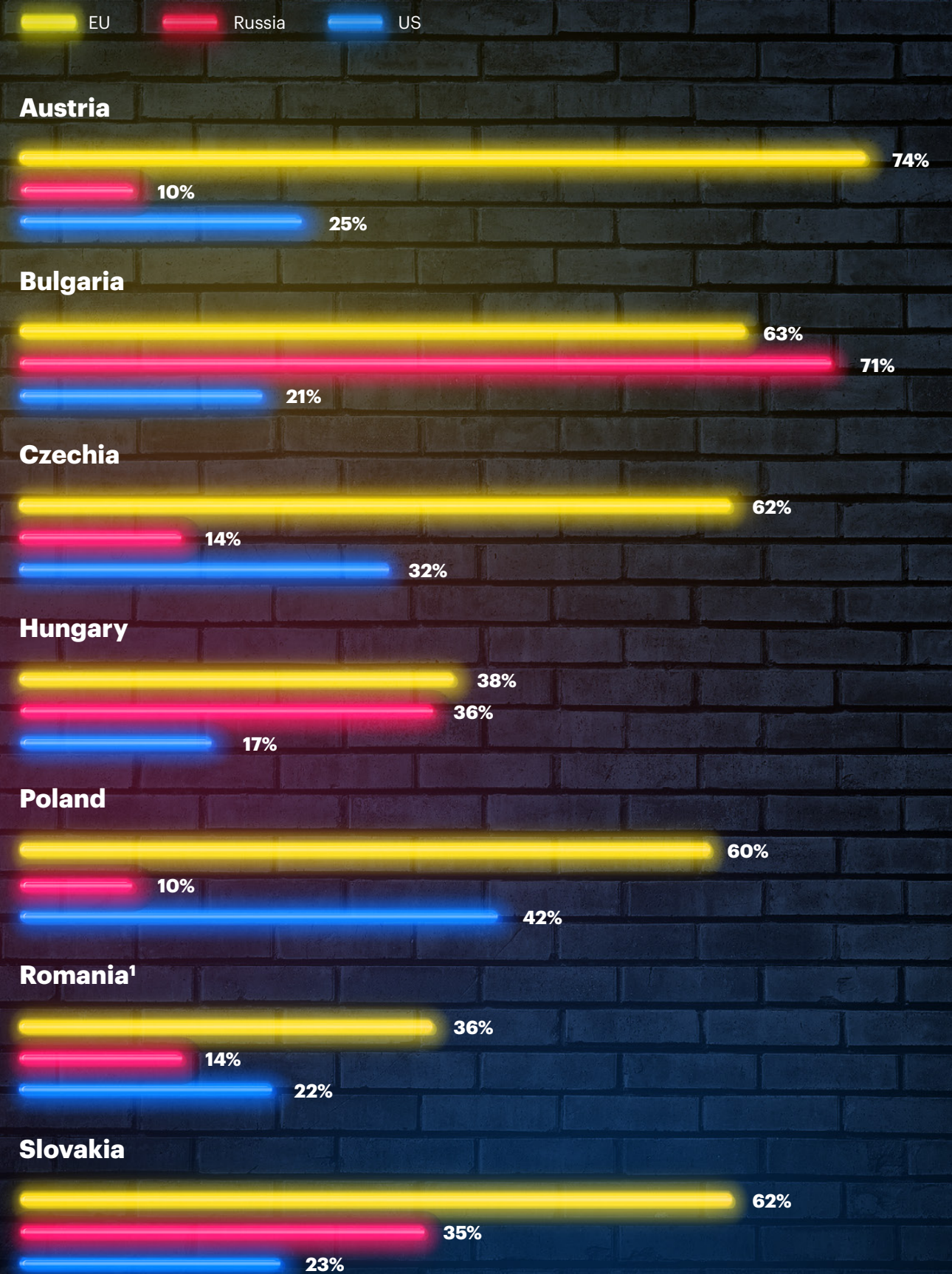
Similar proportion of those seeing a compatibility with both the EU and Russia can be attributed to the Bulgarians' historically and geopolitically ambivalent position between East and West. An emotional-cultural affinity to Russia is mixed with an aspiration for emulating the Western economic and political model of success and prosperity, which results in broadly positive attitudes to both.

(analyst from Bulgaria)

A lower degree of identification with anyone's values may be linked to strong nationalism and, to certain extent, nostalgia for the great Hungarian Empire.

(analyst from Hungary)

Do you think the values of your country are in line with the values of:



¹ Lower percentages are probably linked to a methodological complication in translation. In Romanian language, „culture” and „tradition” is used more often than „values”. „Romanian values” rather indicates important or „valuable” people as a source of inspiration.

#WeAreEU

Pro-European people vs. Eurosceptic political leaders?

Despite bombastic headlines and the public defiance of some political leaders against Brussels, the CEE is unequivocal in its support for EU membership. In these times of turbulent Brexit negotiations and global shifts in economic power, EU membership is undisputed in all seven countries.

Aside from the majority of CEE respondents wanting to stay in the EU, it is possible to observe another important trend. The support for the EU is either stable or rising while the potential leavers are shrinking in numbers. Such a surprising trend is in contrast with the heated political debates related to migration, rule of law, state of democracy, or government-sponsored anti-EU campaigns, which often dominate the headlines.

8 in 10 Central and Eastern Europeans would vote to stay in the EU.

Poles and Hungarians overwhelmingly support the EU

Interestingly, Poland and Hungary, where EU criticism is visibly featured, remain, with more than 80%, the strongest supporters of EU membership among the Visegrad Four. Regardless of the political bickering, disputes, and EU bashing, Poles and Hungarians remain staunch allies of the European family of nations and seem to realise there is no viable alternative to EU membership.

The high level of EU membership support of Poles is a clear sign that the ongoing dispute between the Polish government and the European Commission has not impacted the overwhelming approval of EU membership.

(analyst from Poland)

In spite of the anti-EU populist rhetoric which dominated the political agenda in the past years in the form of strong rhetoric and the public 'Stop Brussels' campaign, it is clear that exiting the EU and losing the economic benefits [of it] is not a favourable option.

(analyst from Hungary)

Those who would vote to stay in the EU in case of a referendum:

Czechia



Hungary



Poland



Slovakia



Bulgaria



Romania



Austria



Despite criticism thrown at the EU in many CEE countries, there is no appetite for EU exit. Only 13% would leave the EU in case of a referendum.

Pro-European Czechs

The increased support for the EU in Czechia might be a combination of economic factors, absence of any major crisis affecting Czechia, and a return to pre-crises levels of support.

70% of 'remainers' should not be mistaken for uncritical supporters of the EU. The support for staying in the EU is quite shallow and volatile, depending on current events.

(analyst from Czechia)

Slovakia closing the gap

Slovakia, despite political stability and witnessing some of the most successful economic growth in the region, was until recently not the strongest EU supporter. The gap between Slovakia and other Visegrad Four countries seems to be closing though, and Slovakia is on par with Czechia.

Slovakia has greatly benefited from EU membership and people seem to realise it. Aside from direct economic benefits, the EU is seen as a source of stability in the current turbulent times. Yet, the pro-European consensus of political elites might be less stable than it seems, and appeals to populism might negatively influence also the popular support for the EU.

(analyst from Slovakia)

Support for the EU soared in Czechia by 27% in the last two years.

Balkan duo

Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU three years later than the Visegrad Four (2007) and are not part of the Schengen Area. Although differing in many aspects, they exhibit similar patterns in terms of overwhelming support for EU membership.

Loyalty towards the EU membership stems from several factors. First of all, Romanians compare their perception of national politicians with the perceived qualities of the politicians in Western Europe and in the EU. Secondly, the EU has directly and positively influenced the lives of millions of Romanians - approximately three million Romanians work within the EU and send money to their families at home. Lastly, the EU is seen by many as an antidote to the corruption of Romanian politicians.

(analyst from Romania)

Austria on a shaky path?

Austria stands out from the other CEE countries in many aspects - history, economy or neutrality. Yet, despite all the differences, Austria seems to exhibit some of the same tendencies observed in the region. While the overall attitude to the EU is very positive, an openly Eurosceptic political party has become a member of the ruling coalition.

Against the background of the rather chaotic Brexit management in the UK and increased global instability, Austrians feel safer as part of a common European family—despite all deficiencies the European integration process is connected with. Also, traditional EU sceptical voices, such as the Austrian Freedom Party, have thus toned down the voices (in public) questioning EU membership in general, shifting the emphasis to a change in the overall design of the European Union.

(analyst from Austria)

Who runs the EU?

Feeling of second-class Europeans

While there is overwhelming support for EU membership, the perception of the EU is not without criticism. One of the most widespread Eurosceptic narratives—the “Brussels dictate”—is held on average by 53% of the population in the CEE. All but Austria joined the EU not so long ago (in 2004 and 2007) and often feel like second-class Europeans. The notion might be strengthened, for example, by the uneven representation in top EU positions held and dominated by older member states or by the widely debated issue of different quality standards of products, contributing to the “East-West” divide. A combination of these factors can lead to a feeling that the CEE cannot influence developments at the EU level.

Bulgarians and Slovaks under “Brussels dictate”?

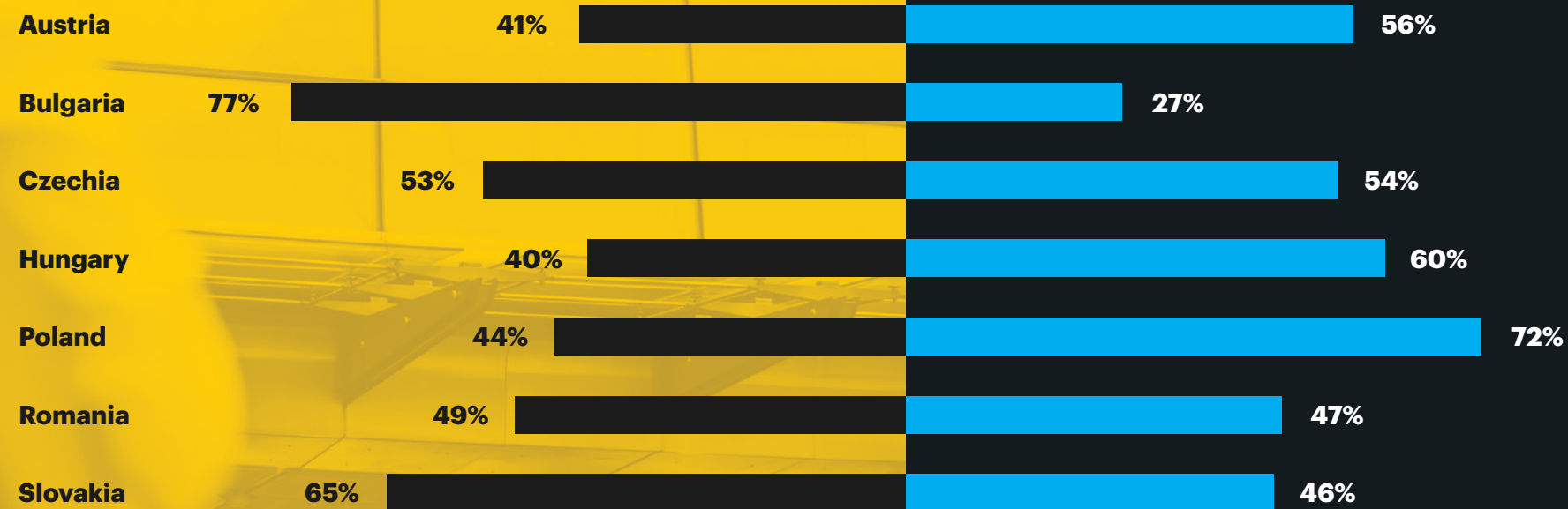
Bulgaria and Slovakia show the highest predisposition to the view that the EU dictates to them what to do without their country having the power to influence it. Both countries share a low self-identification with the West and both have a soft spot

for Russia, making them an easy target for disinformation campaigns using this very narrative. The small population of both countries, coupled with their relatively conservative worldview, only adds to the perception of being at the receiving end of the EU decision-making processes.

The perception of the influence of national politicians at the EU level is very uneven. While on the average 52% of the respondents believe that their elected national representatives can make a difference at the EU level, there are significant differences among the surveyed countries.

Do you agree?

The EU dictates to us what to do without my country having power to influence it



53% believe in Brussels dictate, 52% think their politicians can influence the EU.

Interestingly, Poland and Hungary are the two countries where the notion that their political leaders can influence the decisions taken at the EU level is the strongest. This is in contrast with the tensions between both countries’ political representation and the European Commission, or perhaps precisely the outcome of the public disputes between them.

The notion that the EU is being ruled and dominated by big countries such as Germany and France is widespread in the CEE region and extends also to Austria. On average, 69% of respondents in the region agree with such a statement. While this perception of the dominance of big countries is prevalent, Austria and Bulgaria are the two countries where such views are most pronounced (73% and 79%, respectively).

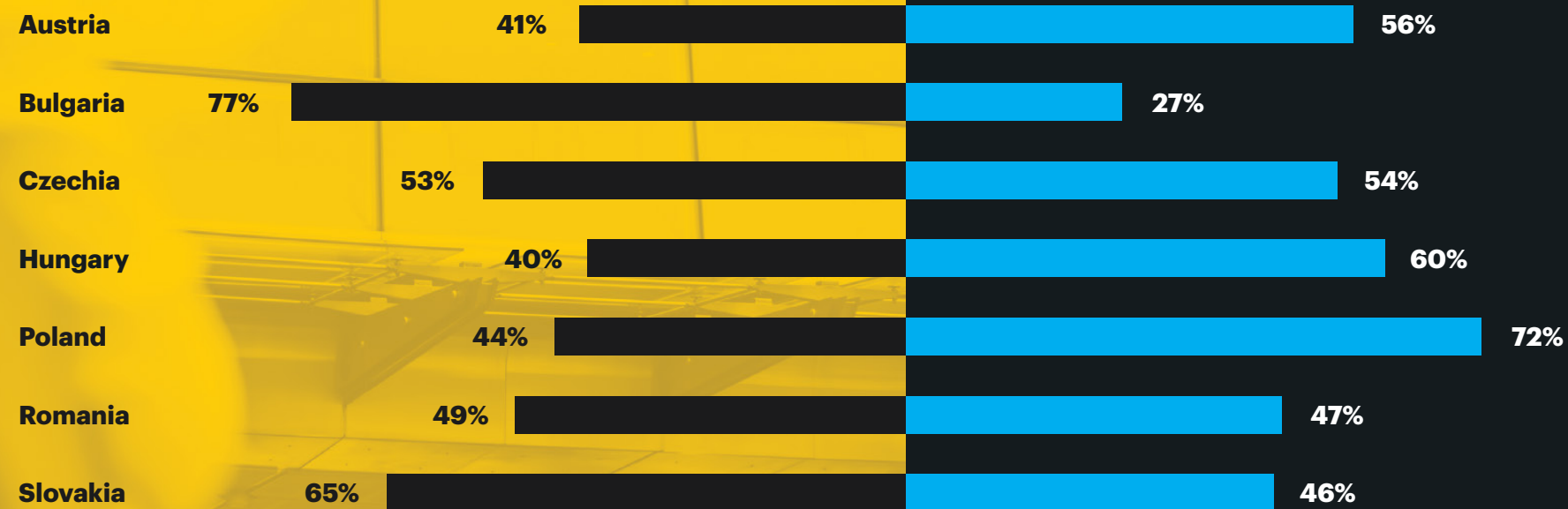
Despite general support for the European Union, Austrians have always been quite critical towards the decision-making process and crisis management at the European level. The EU is often regarded as far, remote, and difficult to understand. Another point of criticism often mentioned in Austria is the deficit of democratic participation and the doubt that a small country like Austria has a say.

(analyst from Austria)

Bulgarians know the country’s best interests lie with the EU, with which the country shares common values, though they at the same time harbour latent Eurosceptic feelings, in that they think their country cannot influence EU decision and is being ruled by the bigger EU members.

(analyst from Bulgaria)

My country politicians can influence the decisions made by the EU



69%
of citizens in CEE countries believe the EU is ruled by Germany and France.

Celebrating NATO

2019, the year of anniversaries

70 years of NATO establishment

20 years of membership for Czechia, Hungary and Poland

15 years of membership for Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia

The anniversaries constitute a unique opportunity to revive discussions on the Alliance's strategic importance for the region and should become a prompt for strategic communication efforts to improve the understanding of the organisation's role and purpose.

It seems the societies in the CEE would welcome such efforts, as support for NATO has been rising across the region. The increase in support may be linked to general feelings of insecurity caused by the emergence of new threats—shifts in global powers, rise of terrorist attacks in Europe, migration crisis, increase in acts of aggression and manipulation

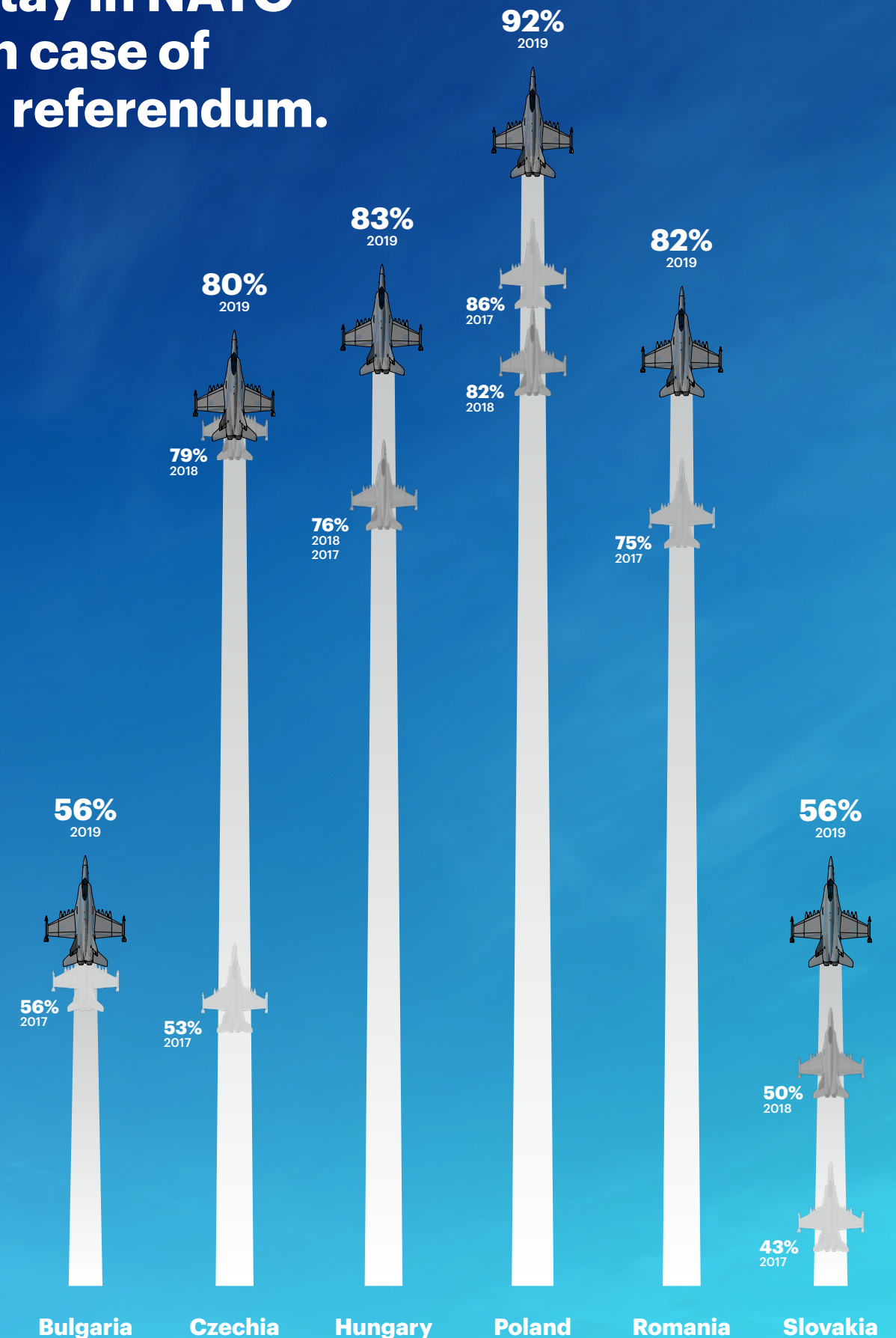
from Russia—perceived as the largest security threat in the region, or wars, and instability in North Africa.

In general, the support for NATO is often linked to the guarantee of collective defence safeguarded by Article 5 (see *GLOBSEC Trends 2017*²) while the experience from the 20th century has made the opportunity to “sit at the table” and be treated as equal is valuable across the CEE.

In Romania and Slovakia, the strategic communication efforts were bolstered by NATO's #WeAreNATO communication campaign launched in 2017, followed by Czechia and Bulgaria in 2019.

On average, 75% of people in the CEE would stay in NATO.

Those who would vote to stay in NATO in case of a referendum.



Guardians of the CEE

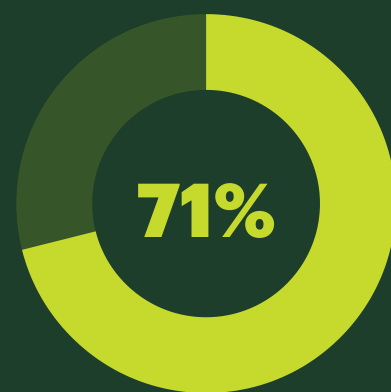
With the rising engagement of China and Russia on the international scene and threats of potential US withdrawal from NATO voiced by the US president during his campaign rallies, some EU politicians, including the French president, Emmanuel Macron, have called for increased dedication to building military capacities in the EU to have a “Europe that is increasingly able to defend itself by itself—and without solely depending on the US.”³

EU army as an alternative?

The opinion in the CEE seems to be in line with the views of most political and military representatives—although not convinced of the idea, 4 in 10 seem inclined towards the thought of an EU army as an alternative to the Alliance. One of the reasons may be the CEE’s ability to realistically assess the lack of funding, military capabilities, and

defence planning in the EU. Second, as the initially strong language and threats over cutting US NATO funding by the current US president have not materialised, rather, on the contrary, the region does not consider it necessary to look for alternatives.

Even though each NATO member perceives threats to their country differently, there is an overarching understanding of the role of NATO as a protector. Even in countries with generally lower support for NATO, the role of the Alliance as a guarantor of peace and security is mostly incontestable. Drawing on a lack of military capacities and inability to defend themselves, CEE countries realise the significance of their allies for their safety.

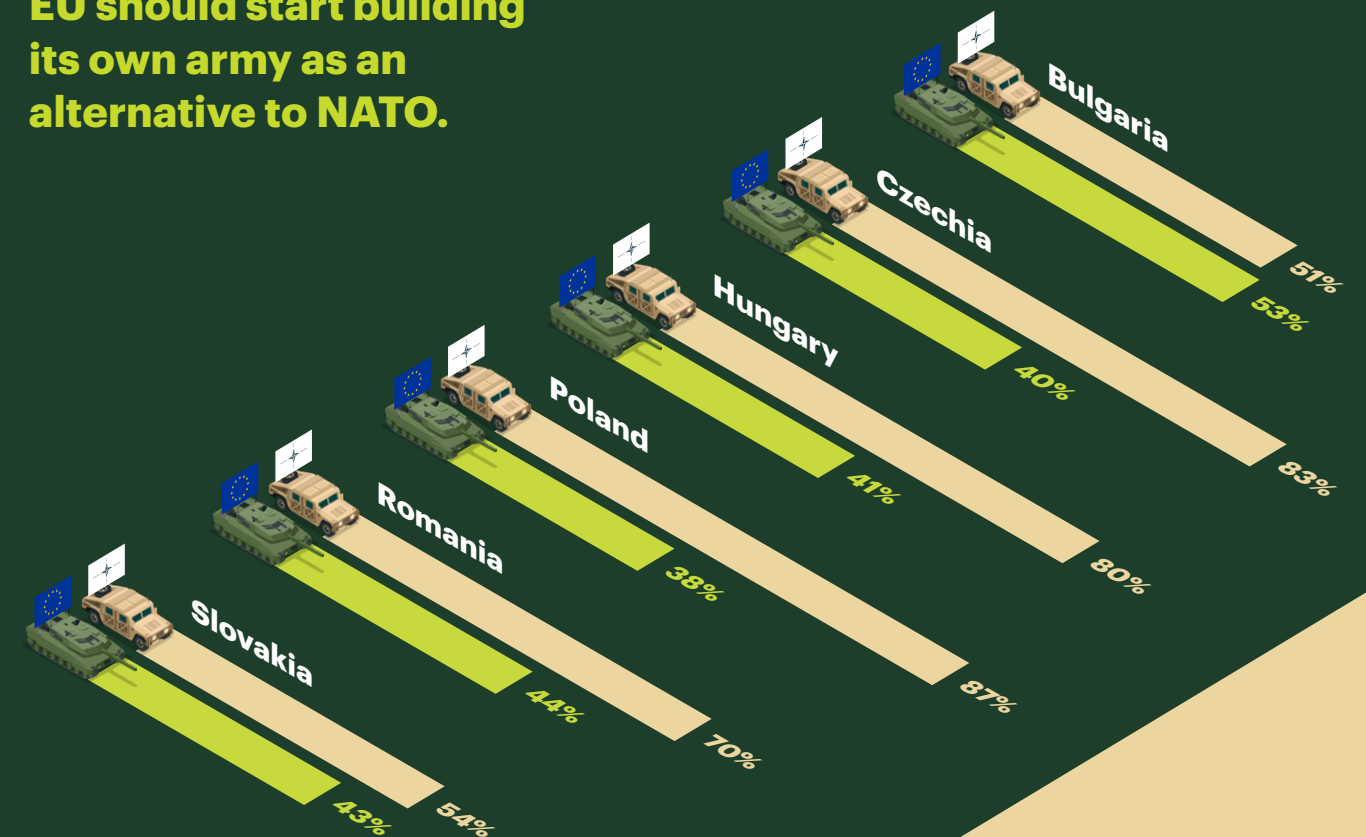


On average, 71% in CEE feel protected by NATO and their Allies.

Do you agree?

Our country is protected thanks to NATO and our Allies.

EU should start building its own army as an alternative to NATO.

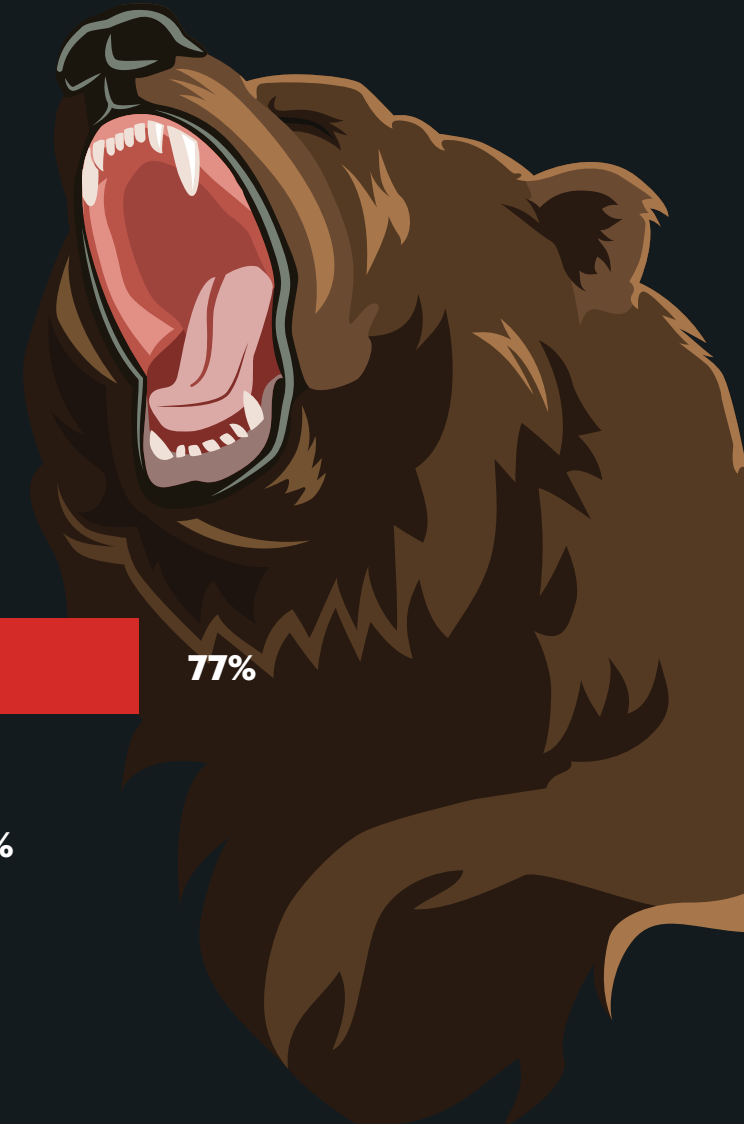
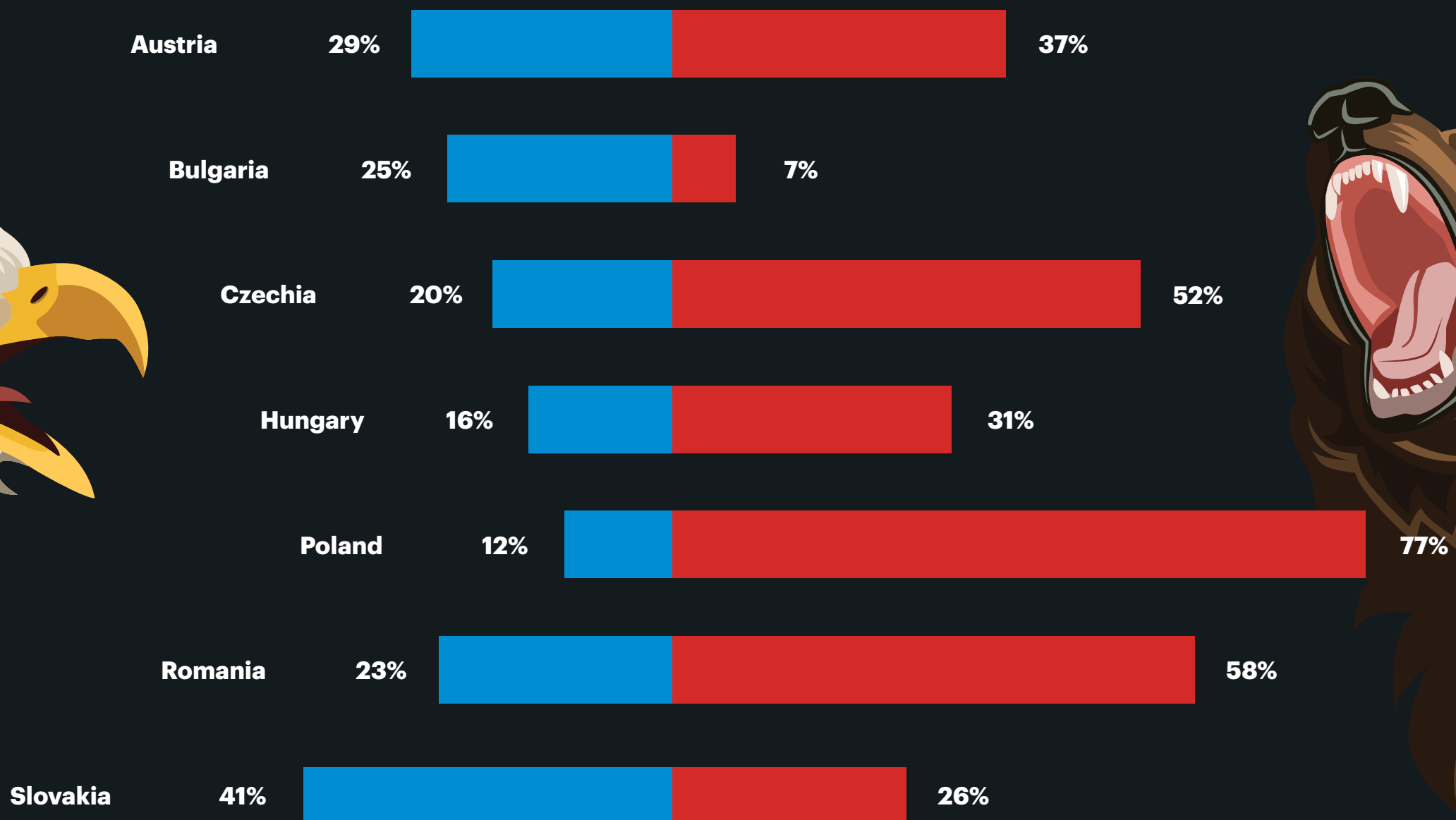


Majority of Austrians, Czechs and Poles do not want the EU to start building its own army.

The Eagle or The Bear?

Do you think **the US** presents a danger (significant threat) to your country?

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



Russia as a threat: Hawks, pragmatists, bridge-builders and peacemakers

The perception of threats to the security of CEE countries is very diverse. Diverse historical and cultural perspectives have clearly shaped the image of Russia in the region and the countries could be divided into four very different groups: hawks, pragmatists, bridge-builders, and peacemakers.

Polish and Romanian hawks

Poland and Romania both share negative and painful historical memories of their relations with Russia and are highly suspicious of its actions. As a consequence, 7 in 10 Poles and 6 in 10 Romanians perceive Russia as a direct and present danger.

Czech pragmatists

Czechia, culturally and economically affiliated with the West, is less wary and could be described as representative of the pragmatist group—only slightly more people consider Russia to be a threat than those who do not. The society seems to be split between those who eye Russia with suspicion and remember Soviet tanks crushing the Prague Spring in 1968, or the recent Russian military adventures, and those who do not view the country as an adversary.

Austrian, Hungarian, and Slovak bridge-builders

Almost two-thirds of respondents do not see Russia as a potential threat in the “bridge-building” countries. Austria’s long-held neutral position between the two geopolitical blocs during the post-WWII period led not

only to economic prosperity but also to increased Russian influence. Aside from energy and economic cooperation, Russia has cemented its influence also in the political domain since one of the ruling coalition partners has official ties to Putin’s United Russia party.

Slovakia is known for being among the most pro-Russian country in the Visegrad Four and there are many factors at play, from the notion of mythical and romantic pan-Slavic unity to anti-American sentiments. However, this perception of Russia in Hungary is surprising given the legacy of the 1956 bloody suppression by the Soviet army of the anti-communist uprising in Budapest. One potential explanation for the rather favourable image of Russia in Hungary is the booming economic cooperation between Hungary and Russia, ranging from the renovation of the Budapest underground to the Russia-financed construction of the Paks II nuclear plant, to energy cooperation and relatively frequent bilateral meetings between the political leaders of Russia and Hungary.

Bulgarian peacemakers

Bulgaria stands out as an example of a country with a very rich and deep connection to Russia, spanning from the Orthodox religion to the

85% of Poles do not consider the US to be a threat.

nation-building era, fight against the Ottoman Empire, up to current energy cooperation. It comes as no surprise that only 7% of Bulgarians see Russia as a threat while fully 86% do not subscribe to such a view.

1 in 4 see the US as a threat

Although all the countries in the region except Austria are members of NATO and their armed forces exercise regularly with their US allies, on average 23% of CEE respondents see the US as a potential threat. Bulgaria and Slovakia confirm their position as outliers also in this category, since only in these two countries do more people perceive the US as a greater threat than Russia. Such manifestations of anti-American and pro-Russian sentiments are easily exploitable by the Kremlin and their proxies to drive wedges in society. On several occasions, the perceived “US threat” was leveraged as a powerful framing of current events related to international relations and security issues affecting the region.

41%
of Slovaks think that the United States presents a danger to their country.

Despite many years of NATO membership, 23% of CEE respondents consider the US as a threat to their country. Slovakia and Bulgaria are outliers, since more people in both countries consider the US to be a threat compared to Russia.

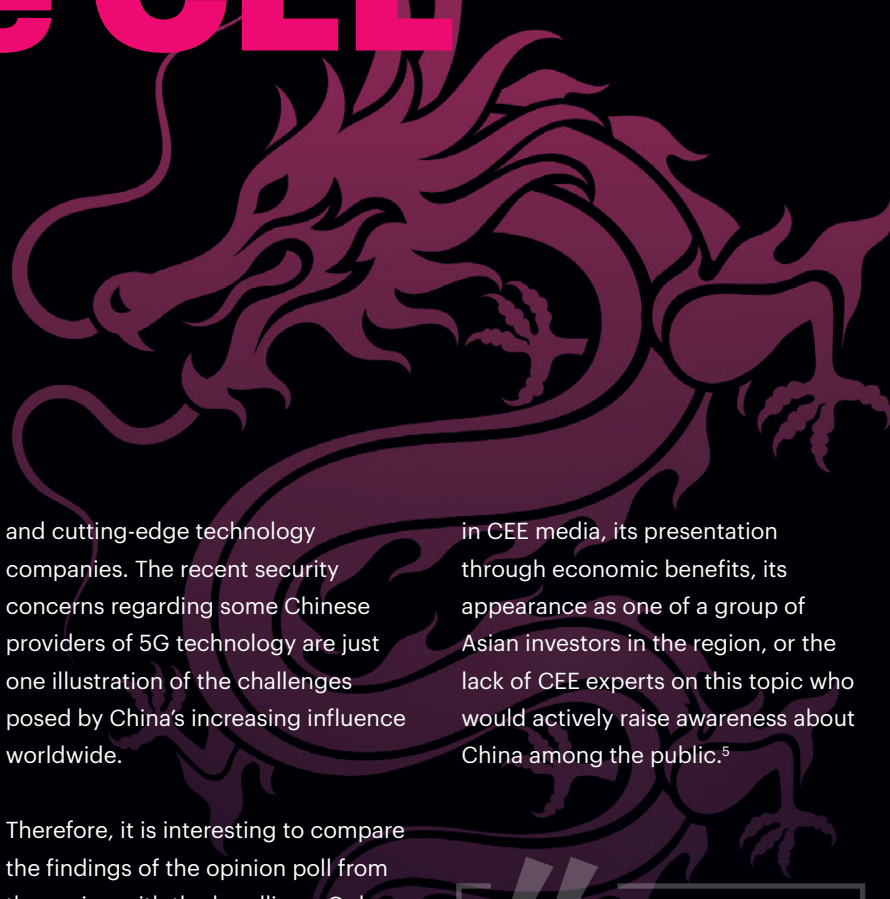
An emotional-cultural affinity to Russia is mixed with an aspiration for emulating the Western economic and political model of success and prosperity. These trends might indicate remnants of past Soviet propaganda and the ideological conditioning of the communist period that instilled negative views of the US. But they should also be considered as a serious warning about the ways Bulgarian political elites have been unable to inspire support for the country’s strategic security choices.

(analyst from Bulgaria)

The latent anti-Americanism present in Slovakia manifested also in the perception of the US as a threat is an outcome of 40 years communist propaganda, combined with deeply rooted pro-Russian sentiments. In the turbulent 1990s, Slovakia was very close to being excluded from the NATO expansion and some of the current narratives employed by the Kremlin proxies resemble those used 20 years ago.

(analyst from Slovakia)

Dragon in the CEE



China is currently the second-largest national economy in terms of nominal GDP after the US, according to World Bank data, with USD 13.4 trillion.⁴ In order to expand its presence in the 11 Eastern EU member states and 5 Balkan countries, in 2012, China established the “16+1” framework. The CEE region is seen by China as an important entry point to the EU, using the region’s skilled and relatively cheap labour and strategic geographic position in its signature One Belt One Road initiative.

Many in CEE and Balkan countries welcomed Chinese investments, which helped them in times of economic stagnation to modernise their economies. Chinese foreign direct investment had historically focused on other parts of the EU and the CEE region was not until recently within the centre of its attention.

However, China’s increasing economic and political power, manifesting also in Europe, has triggered alarms in some Western European countries, which point to the potential danger of Chinese acquisitions of strategic infrastructure

and cutting-edge technology companies. The recent security concerns regarding some Chinese providers of 5G technology are just one illustration of the challenges posed by China’s increasing influence worldwide.

Therefore, it is interesting to compare the findings of the opinion poll from the region with the headlines. Only 30% of Central Europeans consider China to be a threat to their country and twice as many—63%—do not perceive it as such. Potential factors behind the low perception of China as a threat could be its limited exposure

in CEE media, its presentation through economic benefits, its appearance as one of a group of Asian investors in the region, or the lack of CEE experts on this topic who would actively raise awareness about China among the public.⁵

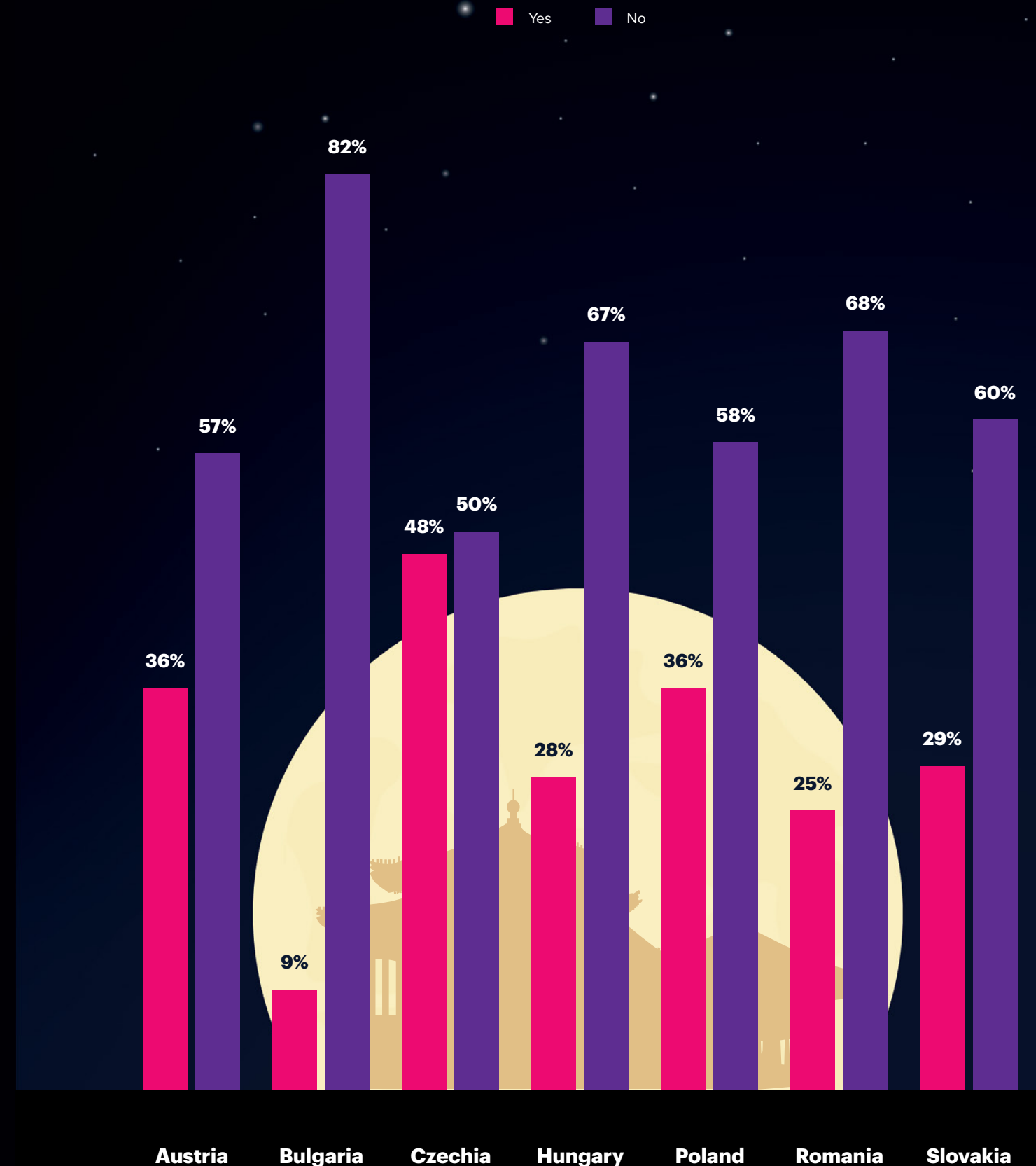
“Bulgaria’s less-intensive interaction with China and the expectations of Chinese economic investments probably condition the context in which only 9% of the Bulgarian population consider China as a threat to Bulgaria.”

(analyst from Bulgaria)

“Poles do not see China as a significant threat to Polish security. This may be surprising given the tense relations between China and the US, the key ally from Warsaw’s security perspective. Despite the so-far unfulfilled Polish hopes regarding trade, the key element of bilateral relations, as well as the negative experience so far in terms of Chinese infrastructure investments, it seems that the majority of Poles still consider China more as an opportunity than as a threat.”

(analyst from Poland)

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



Watchdogs of democracy: Media

Distrust or Appreciation?

A distrust in media, nurtured by populist and polarising rhetoric of many political actors, is a continuous trend in the CEE and beyond. While, according to the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in media has slightly increased over the past year, media still belong to the least trusted institutions in the world, with 47% average global trust.⁶ The same trend applies in the CEE region where, on average, 68% of respondents tend to agree that mainstream media often lie and manipulate facts.

These high percentages can also reflect the situation on the ground. Many countries in the region suffer from media overtake by oligarchs, a lack of independence, and strong government influence. The distrust in media is thus often connected to citizens' legitimate concerns over media freedom in their own country.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of the CEE realise that media play a crucial role in healthy democratic societies, as they watch over the functioning of institutions and report on important domestic and foreign issues.

68% in the CEE agree that mainstream media often lie and manipulate facts. On the other hand, 78% in the CEE agree that media are important for democracy.

Do you agree?

Mainstream (main/big) media in our country are often lying and manipulating facts.

Media are an important part of democracy because they watch over the functioning of the institutions.



More protection for investigative journalists

79%

of people in the CEE think that investigative journalists should be better protected by the state.

On 21st February 2018, a Slovak investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak, and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, were murdered in their home due to Kuciak's investigative work. The killings caused shock and public outrage, leading to the largest public protests since the 1989 demonstrations leading up to the Velvet Revolution.

Watchdogs of democracy: NGOs

In some countries, NGOs and their activities, such as the revelations of corruption scandals or criticism of public policies' cost-effectiveness, have become a thorn in the eye of many populists. Smear and disinformation campaigns about the NGOs' mission, activities, and funding have been present in many CEE countries for several years. NGOs

and their employees are labelled as foreign agents, funded from abroad, as undermining traditional values, interfering in domestic democratic processes, or even attempting to stage a coup d'état. However, despite these misleading narratives and legal measures that have attempted to curb NGO activities, the public recognises and values their work. Apart from Bulgarians, the majority in the CEE think that the work of NGOs is important to the functioning of democracies.

On average, 68% of people in the CEE think that NGOs, same as media, are important since they contribute to checks and balances and stand as watchdogs of the democratic society. The findings indicate that the majority of the CEE do not agree with policies implemented in this region curbing or controlling the work of civil society. Moreover, most in the CEE also believe that the work of

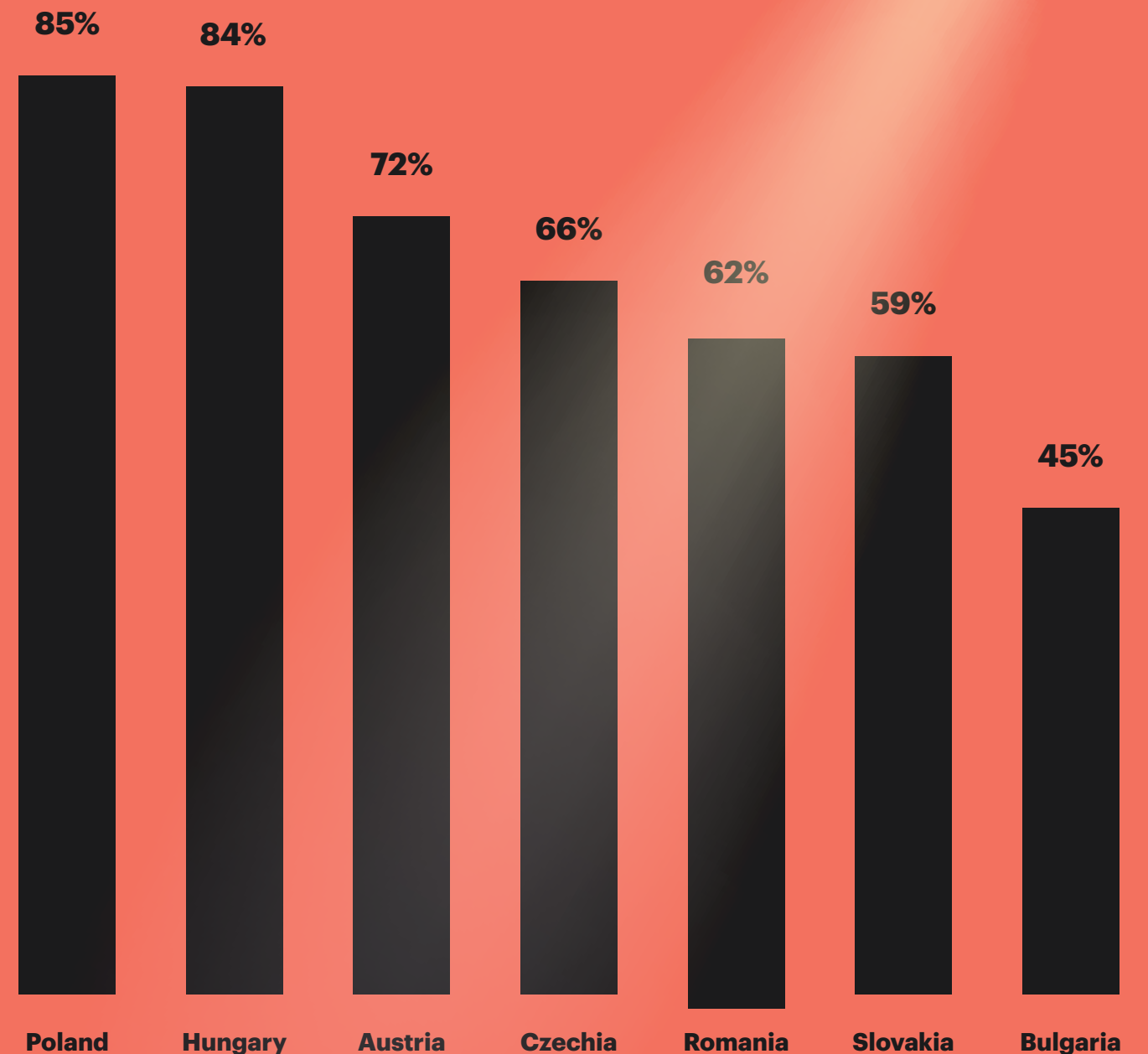
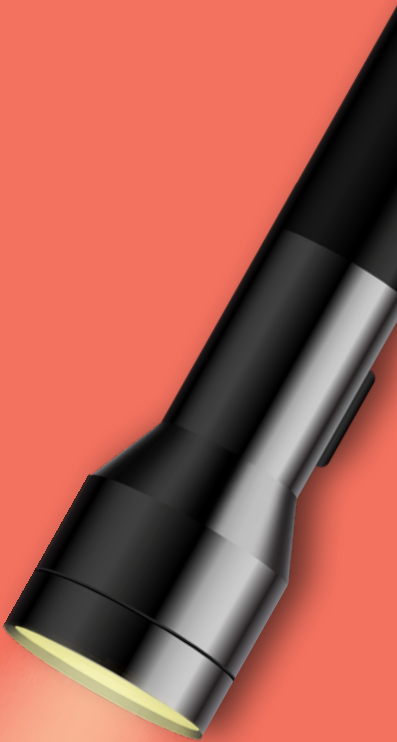
NGOs is under unfair attack by state representatives and some media. Such attitudes are the most prevalent among 70% of Poles and 59% of Hungarians, who think that NGOs are being unfairly attacked.

Over one-third of Bulgarians say they have no opinion

An interesting outlier among the analysed countries is Bulgaria. Only 45% of respondents agreed that the work of NGOs was important for their society, the least of all CEE countries; 33% could not tell whether the activities of NGOs are beneficial and important for the democratic society or not; and, 36% did not have an opinion on whether civil society organisations are under an unfair attack of state representatives and media.

Only 15% of Poles and 16% of Hungarians doubt the importance of NGOs' work for their society.

Yes, the work of NGOs is important for the functioning of a democratic society.



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Prague Security Studies Institute, Czechia (www.pssi.cz)
The Euro-Atlantic Association, Poland (www.sea.org.pl)
GlobalFocus Centre, Romania (www.global-focus.eu)

Opinion polls conducted by

SPECTRA in Austria
ALPHA RESEARCH in Bulgaria
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Creative concept & design



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► Polus Tower II
Vajnorská 100/B
831 04 Bratislava
Slovak Republic



► +421 2 321 378 00
► info@globsec.org
► www.globsec.org