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IDEAS SHAPING THE WORLD

GLOBSEC Trends 2022

Romania

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Focus on Romania

Up until a year ago, Romania was considered to be among the most pro-Western countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The 2022 GLOBSEC Trends survey capturing the impact of the war in Ukraine on public perceptions, however, measured a decline in Western backing in Romania (the only country in the region to see such a shift) and a substantial rise in support for the East. At the same time, support for NATO membership and Romania's strategic partnership with the US remains robust.

For most Central and Eastern European states, dissatisfaction with how democracy works in their countries has been assessed as endemic.¹ Perhaps influenced, among others, by the belligerent

actions of Moscow, however, satisfaction with democracy as a governance system climbed across the region since 2020 by an average 11%. Romania was the only surveyed country where satisfaction with democracy declined (from 30% to 23%) – Bucharest now ranks lowest in the region, on par with Bulgaria, on this question.

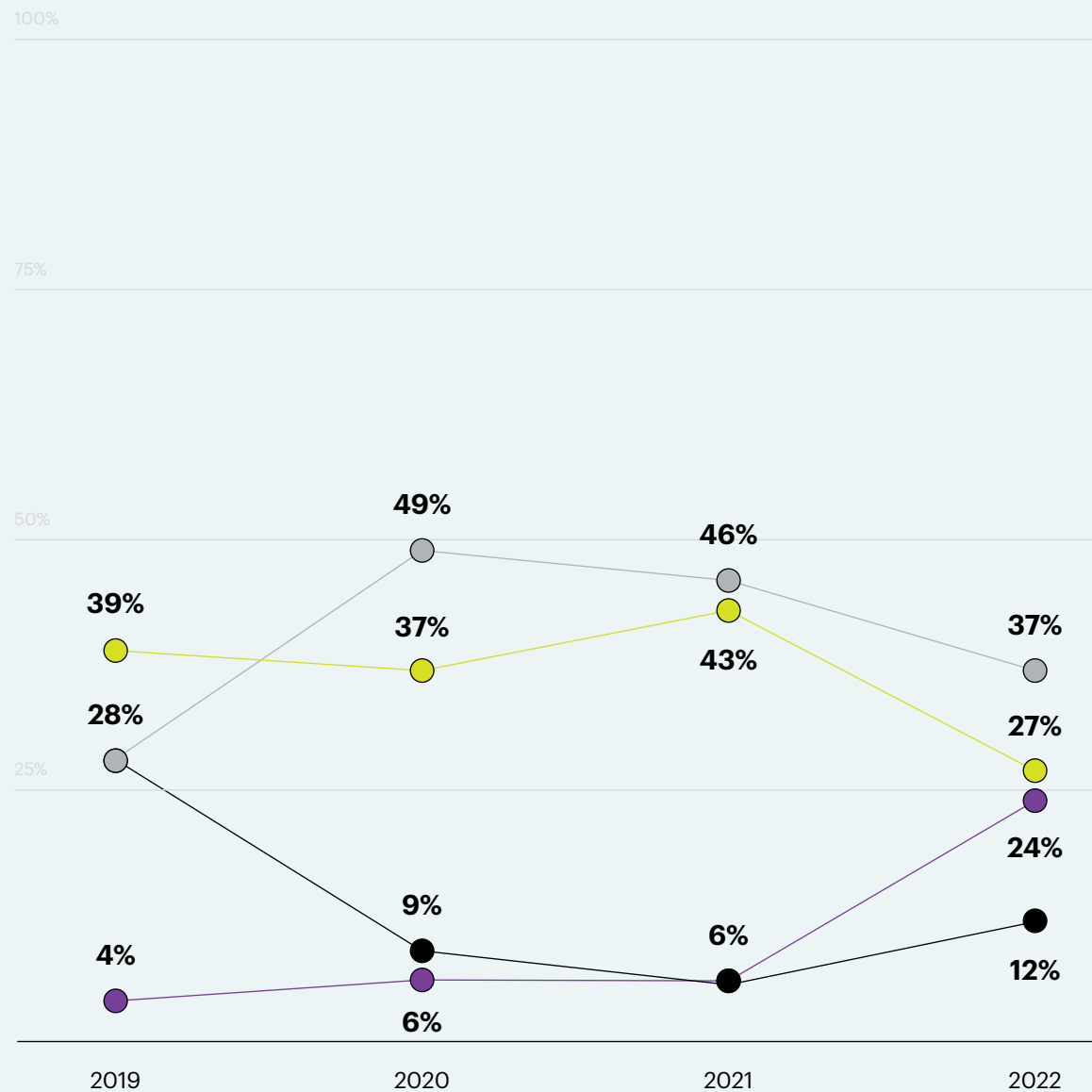
This report, using various data-driven indicators, examines whether these developments can be considered part of a new trend or rather a small piece of a much more complex puzzle. It also provides an in-depth look into socio-demographic data and notable shifts within different sub-groups.



Geopolitics: A puzzle

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

West East Somewhere in Between Don't know



From among the 9 countries analysed in the GLOBSEC Trends 2022 survey, Romania stands out as the only country seeing more people averse to a Western geopolitical orientation (a 16-percentage point drop) and more inclined towards the East instead (an 18-percentage point rise) compared to 2021. These changes held equally across all demographic groups.

At the same time though, university-educated people are considerably more oriented towards the West (38%) than any other demographic group. Significant differences are also apparent based on the place of residence (urban or rural). Urban dwellers are more likely to prefer a Western or “in between” orientation, whereas rural residents tend to favour an Eastern posture and “in between”.

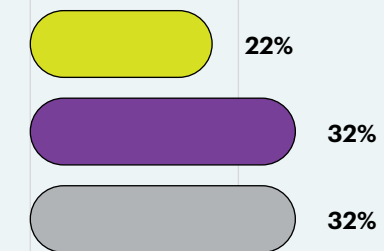
It is notable that Romania shares its longest border with Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, against this backdrop, has prompted apprehension in Romania about the consequences of the war. Romania, in fact, has become a frontline state not only to a geopolitical crisis but also a humanitarian one². The strain placed on Romania’s healthcare and education systems, especially following the pandemic, has been stark. And Western aid and assistance has not always been properly communicated to the public. There is a continuing political, economic and demographic conflict between the capital Bucharest, which is home to 25% of the country’s GDP, and the rest of Romania³.

This gulf deepens resentment between a perceived overbearing and more modern capital and people living in other parts of the country. The attitudes are also prompting greater dissatisfaction and nationalist sentiment. Foreign companies, meanwhile, do not boost investment in the development of local communities either. Instead of importing best practices from the West, they replicate the local business culture and do not fully implement long-term strategies of Corporate Social Responsibility, often lacking coordination with the real needs⁴. These practices further generate criticism of Western business practices, especially in rural areas.

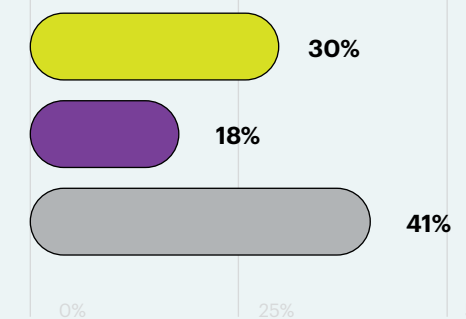
Geopolitical preferences based on a type of settlement in 2022

West East Somewhere in between

Rural



Urban



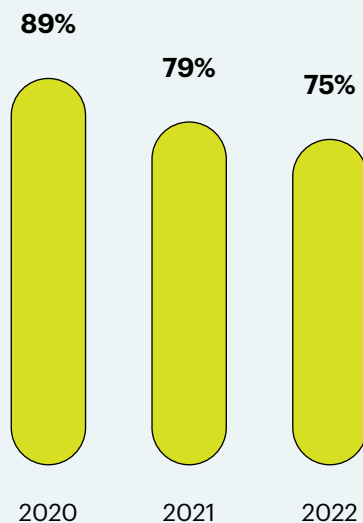
Strong NATO support

Support for EU membership, which stood at a resounding 89% in 2019 and 2020, declined to 75% in 2022. Less educated and rural residents are primarily responsible for this shift - their support for EU membership tumbled by an average 11 percentage points over the past year. Record energy prices have been one factor, particularly in a country otherwise plentiful in energy resources. The planned closure of coal mines in the two largest coal basins related to the price of CO2 emission allowances within the EU ETS trading scheme, criticized by PSD and AUR have nourished nationalist feelings and to some extent dissatisfaction towards EU⁵. Debate over Schengen accession, moreover, has fuelled Eurosceptic sentiment⁶.

Despite these developments, other indicators of our survey point to a more nuanced situation. Support for NATO membership, for example, has remained resolute. And the public identification of the US as a strategic partner and key ally remains robust. Romanians, to this end, continue to unequivocally value their key security guarantors.

Education is an important factor generally shaping support for the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country. Those with university education express 85% support for EU membership and more than 90% backing for NATO. Age plays a crucial role too - younger adults (those aged 18-34) indicate above average support for EU membership (82%) and staying in NATO (86%).

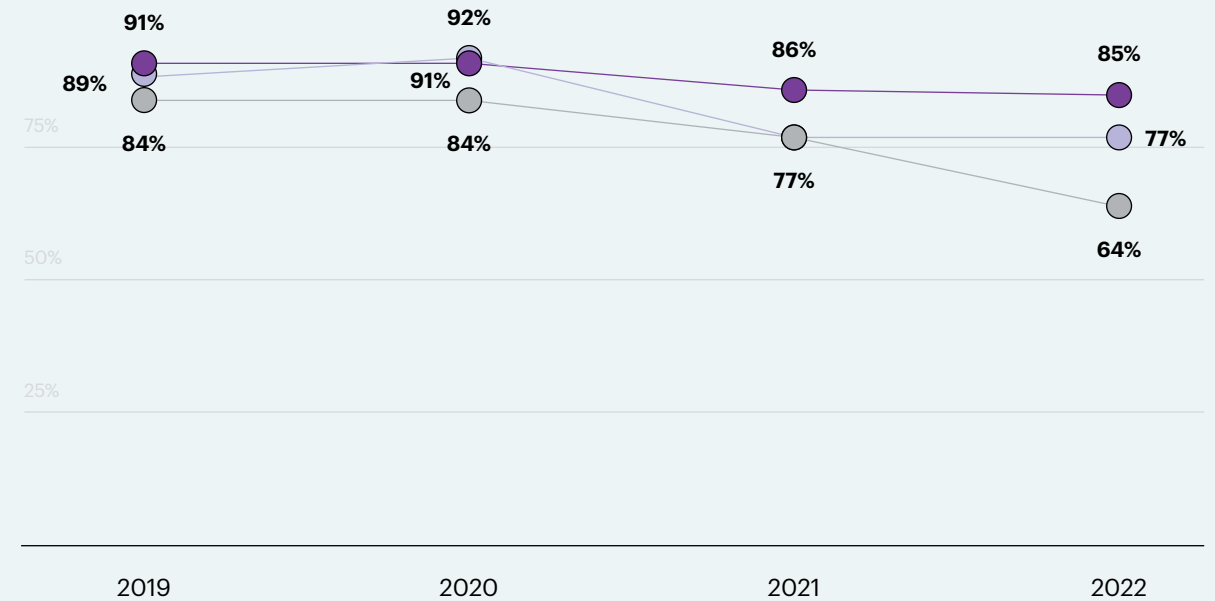
Support to stay in the EU:



Education and age are important factors shaping support for the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country.

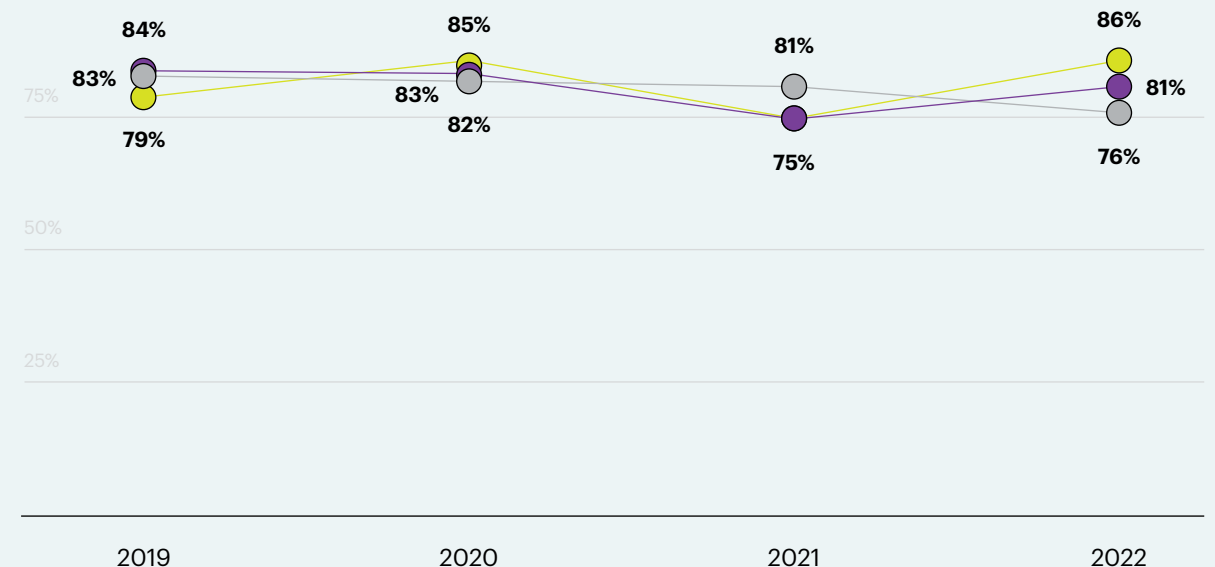
Support for EU membership based on the level of education

Lower Secondary with school leaving exam University



Support for NATO membership based on age

18 - 34 y.o. 35 - 54 y.o. 55 + y.o.

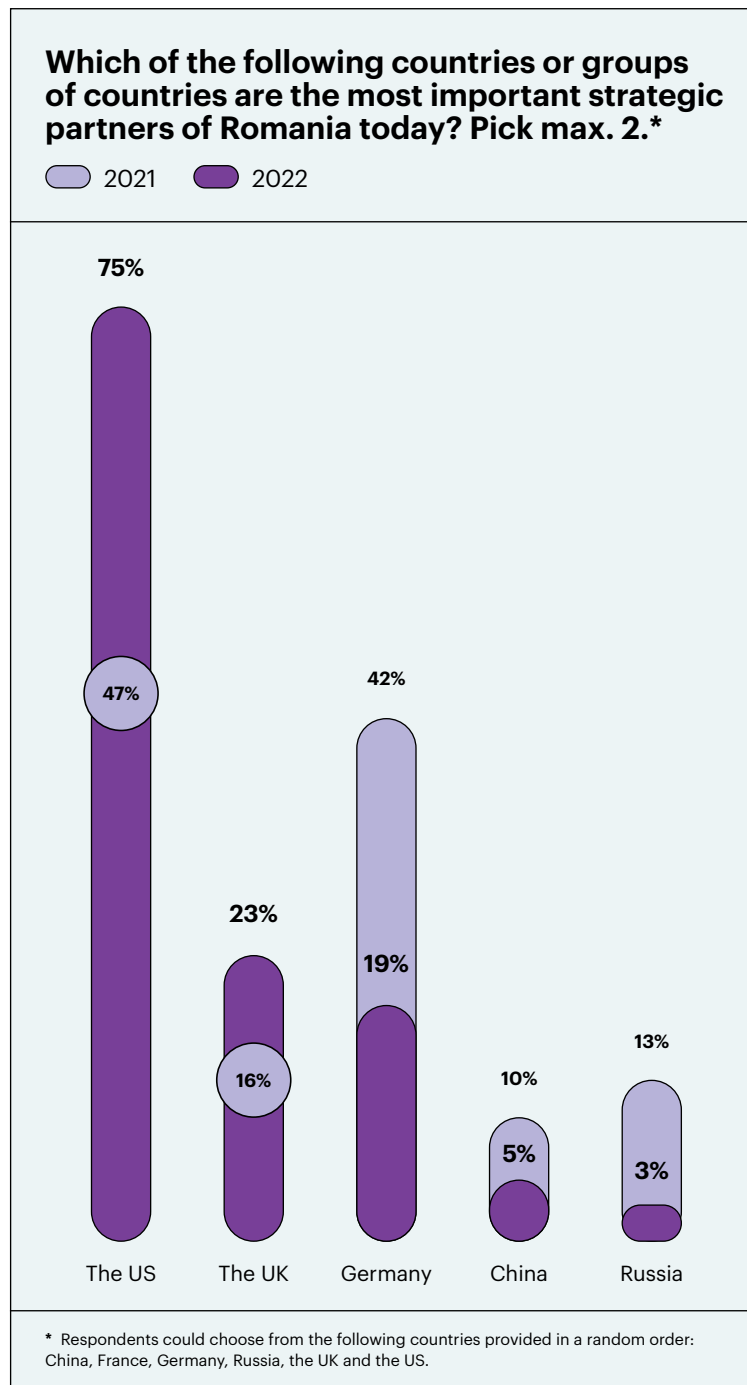


Pro-US sentiment rising

The US, like in previous years, continues to be perceived as the most important strategic partner for Romania. The 28-percentage point rise on this metric now puts the US well ahead of other countries. On the other hand, the perception that Germany is a strategic partner has plummeted. Strong support for NATO, combined with a heightened perception of the US as a strategic partner, can possibly be attributed to the armed conflict in Ukraine and the dependence on the US as a strong security guarantor. The more reserved action in the initial phases of the war from Germany and some others may also be a factor.

Differences in the perception that the US is a partner primarily varies by age and education. The younger and more highly educated the respondent, the more likely the individual is to identify the US as a strategic partner.

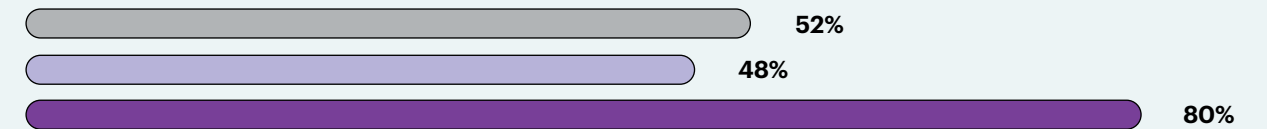
The robust support of Romanians for NATO membership, their pro-US leanings and their rejection of China and Russia as strategic partners suggests that even though there is an increased inclination towards the East and away from the West compared to last year, it does not mean that Romania has shifted geopolitically towards the East.



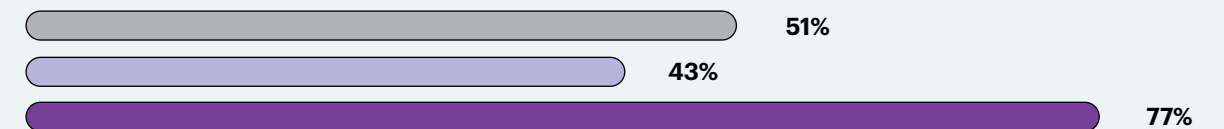
Perception of the US as a strategic partner between different age groups

2020 2021 2022

18 - 34 y.o.



35 - 54 y.o.



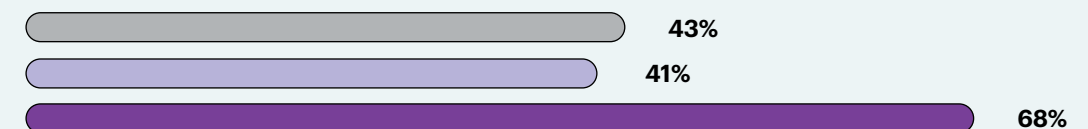
55 + y.o.



Perception of the US as a strategic partner between different levels of education

2020 2021 2022

Lower



Secondary with school leaving exam



University



Democracy

Dissatisfaction with democracy increased by 10 percentage points since 2020 to 76% in 2022. It is equally distributed across gender and age in the country. The decline in satisfaction may be linked to a political crisis and protests that occurred in autumn 2021⁷.

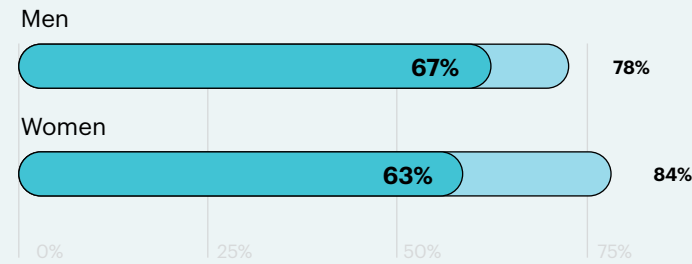
Less educated adults saw their dissatisfaction with democracy surge by 20 percentage points to 84%. The highly educated, meanwhile, have expressed no change in their dissatisfaction levels since 2020 (the figure still stands at 63%).

Support for democracy as the best governance system in the country similarly decreased by 16 percentage points compared to 2021. Only 65% of respondents in Romania, the lowest in the region, agreed that democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms, and the rule of law is good for their country. From a socio-demographic point of view, the most notable decline occurred among female and middle-aged respondents. The pandemic may have been a factor here – women gained additional responsibilities and were subjected to increased domestic violence during the lockdown and limited medical and legal support⁸. A lack of female leadership and representation in the country and a disregard for merit, furthermore, contributes to disillusionment and a sense of disconnect from power and governance.

Another question that sheds light on overall attitudes towards democracy concerns agreement with the statement “It does not matter, who holds the power in the government, nothing will change”. While 52% of respondents agreed in 2020, 66% felt the same way in 2022, the highest in the entire region. Notable shifts occurred among older adults (aged 55 and above) and less educated people. Both these groups saw 23 percentage point increases in those affirming the

Support for democracy based on gender*

2021 2022



* Those who agreed that “Democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms, rule of law is good for our country.”

statement (reaching, respectively, 75% and 77%). The perception that people lack the opportunity to participate in open and transparent government processes has influenced attitudes towards democracy.

The higher prevalence of these cynical views also corresponds with greater tendencies to believe conspiracy theories and disinformation. In 2022, Romania was among the top three countries in the region that suffered from buy-in, at 44%, to three conspiracy theories and manipulative narratives (only Slovakia and Bulgaria, each at 54%, ranked worse).

• An alarming 49% of respondents believe that “Democracy does not exist because, in reality, hidden elites rule the world” (an increase of 15 percentage points compared to 2020).

• A total 37% believe that “Liberal democracy threatens our traditional values and national identity (an increase of 8 percentage points compared to 2020).

• And 47% believe that “World affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order” (approximately the same level as in 2020).

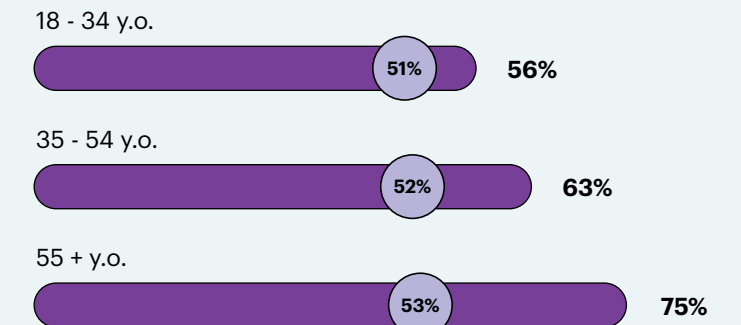
In both 2020 and 2022, around the same number of respondents in Romania, 67%, disagreed with the statement that “the needs of people like me are broadly taken into account by the political system in Romania”. In scrutinizing different demographic categories and relevant shifts therein, the older generation (those aged 55 and above) and those with less education disagreed with the statement by an additional 11 percentage points in 2022.

Institutional trust, finally, is another indicator of citizen satisfaction with the system they live in. Distrust in national government, to this point, increased. While distrust of government stood at 68% in 2021, it climbed to 75% in 2022. The greatest shifts occurred among rural residents, less educated people, and the middle-aged category (those aged 35-54), with their distrust of government averaging 82%.

These abysmal trust levels have been borne out of multiple crises. The fact that the current government coalition in Romania was not on the ballot box last time is not helpful either. A lack of communication from the government and the president has particularly increased distrust in the national government. Though the president once ardently criticized the PSD party, he endorsed the formation of a left-wing coalition without adequately addressing the need to do so to end the political crisis and support the economic recovery following multiple international and regional crises⁹.

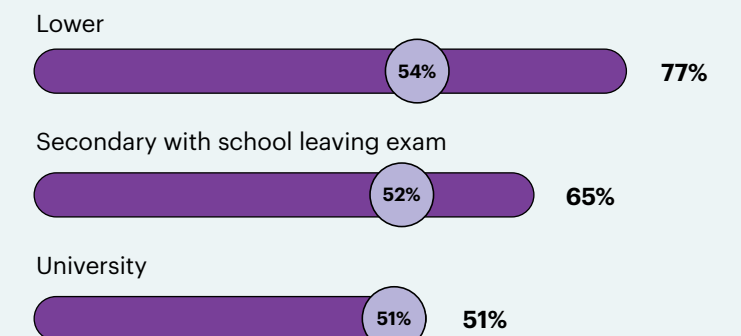
Those who believe “Who holds the power in the government does not matter, nothing will change.” based on age differences

2020 2022



Those who believe “Who holds the power in the government does not matter, nothing will change.” based on the level of education

2020 2022



Recommendations

① Utilise positive perceptions of security guarantors to communicate support for the West in other areas.

In contrast to the decline in its pro-Western geopolitical orientation and EU support, Romania's sharply higher perceptions of the US as a strategic partner and its consistently strong support for NATO should be seized and further kindled through sustained communication campaigns that position the country as part of the West.

② Promote the strategic components of the EU as essential to Romanian security and prosperity.

The survey data indicates that Romanian society firmly understands the strategic importance of NATO and the US in providing security. By similarly spotlighting the strategic importance of the EU for the country's security and prosperity, especially vis-à-vis the economic and energy crisis, the previously resounding support for EU membership can be revived.

③ Address social policy concerns.

Soaring inflation and energy prices, as pressing citizen concerns, should be prioritized and addressed in all communication efforts. Communication and action is important even in the absence of comprehensive information and an ability to predict precise consequences. The information vacuum, otherwise, will be exploited by disinformation actors to further sow doubt and undermine trust in democracy as a governance system that heeds societal concerns.

④ Invest in more intensive strategic communication of public servants.

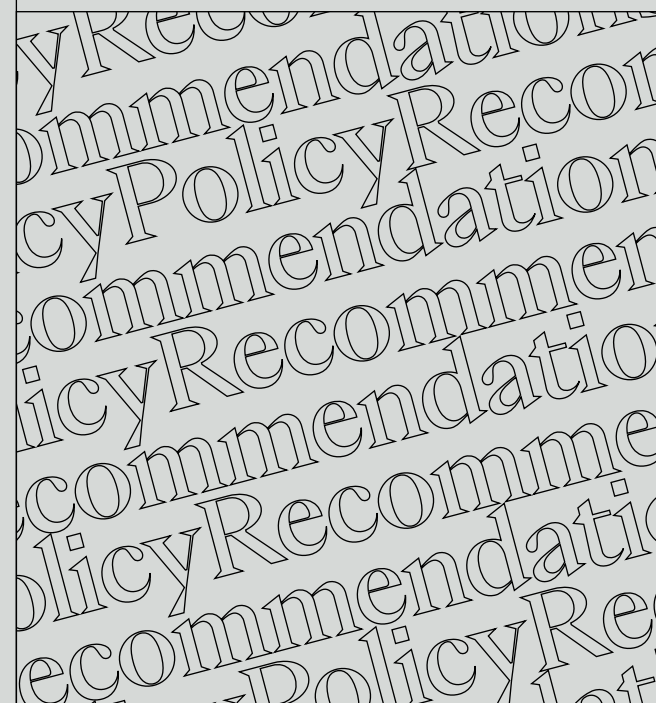
The findings suggest decreasing support for democracy across all demographic categories corresponds with a growing sense of powerlessness and abandonment by political elites. Investment into strategic communication by public institutions should start, as one potential method, with the strengthening of awareness of public servants in this area through manuals and/or trainings.

⑤ Support intergenerational engagement.

As older Romanians tend to be less pro-Western than the young, projects that focus on exchanges between the two can bridge generational gaps and raise awareness about the advantages of the EU and NATO among the older segments of society. This intergenerational dialogue should be supported through events and discussions that bring together speakers and audiences from varying age groups.

⑥ Tour the regions.

The less educated segments of society are generally more prone to falling victim to manipulation and believing narratives that undermine transatlantic unity. More attention should consequently be given to these groups through, for example, in-person engagement and regional visits by key policymakers, decision-makers and opinion-shapers. These events can provide opportunities for officials to discuss issues with citizens face to face. By feeling heard and voicing their opinions, public engagement can be fostered and the first step taken towards building trust in public institutions.



Authors

Jana Kazaz, SJD
Research Fellow

Centre for Democracy & Resilience
GLOBSEC

Leonela Leca,
Associate Fellow,

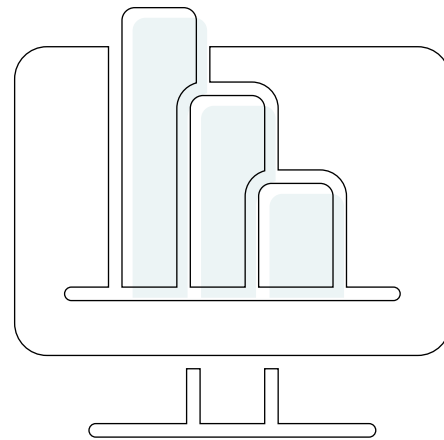
GLOBSEC and Senior Analyst, Global Studies
Center, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu



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Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2022 on a representative sample of the population in nine countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample of 1000 respondents per country (9,000 respondents altogether) using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). 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 readers' experience, the responses in closed questions with a scale were generalised. For example, a question with options definitely agree/ rather agree/ rather disagree /definitely disagree was merged to agree / disagree. The opinion in Romania was conducted by ISRA Center Marketing Research SRL and coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o. agency and the comparative results were published in May 2022 as **GLOBSEC Trends 2022**. The results have been compared to polls conducted with the use of consistent methodology since 2020.

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myHive
Vajnorská 100/B, 831 04
Bratislava Slovak Republic
+421 2 321 378 00
info@globsec.org

www.globsec.org

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