



GLOBSEC

IDEAS SHAPING THE WORLD

GLOBSEC Trends 2022

Slovakia

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Focus on Slovakia

Throughout the many years of GLOBSEC Trends polling, Slovakia has particularly stood out as a country of paradoxes. Its population, on the one hand, has espoused robust pro-Western sentiment, with around 60-70% expressing support for remaining in the EU and NATO. Yet Slovak

society also continued to display strongly pro-Russian attitudes too - around 50% viewed Russia as a strategic partner and perceived Putin favourably until 2021. These perceptions coincided with strong buy-in to conspiracy theories and manipulative narratives.



Against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the past year has witnessed a considerable shift in attitudes in the country. Increasing segments of the population now recognise that membership in Western structures guarantees the society's safety and relative prosperity and considers Russia to be a threat. The popularity of Putin declined by 100% between 2021 and 2022. At the same time though, certain long-nurtured fears and trends have remained embedded in the country. Slovakia ranks worst in the region as it pertains to fearing other groups - people are apprehensive that migrants or Western societies, for example, may threaten their identity and values. The belief in manipulative narratives has

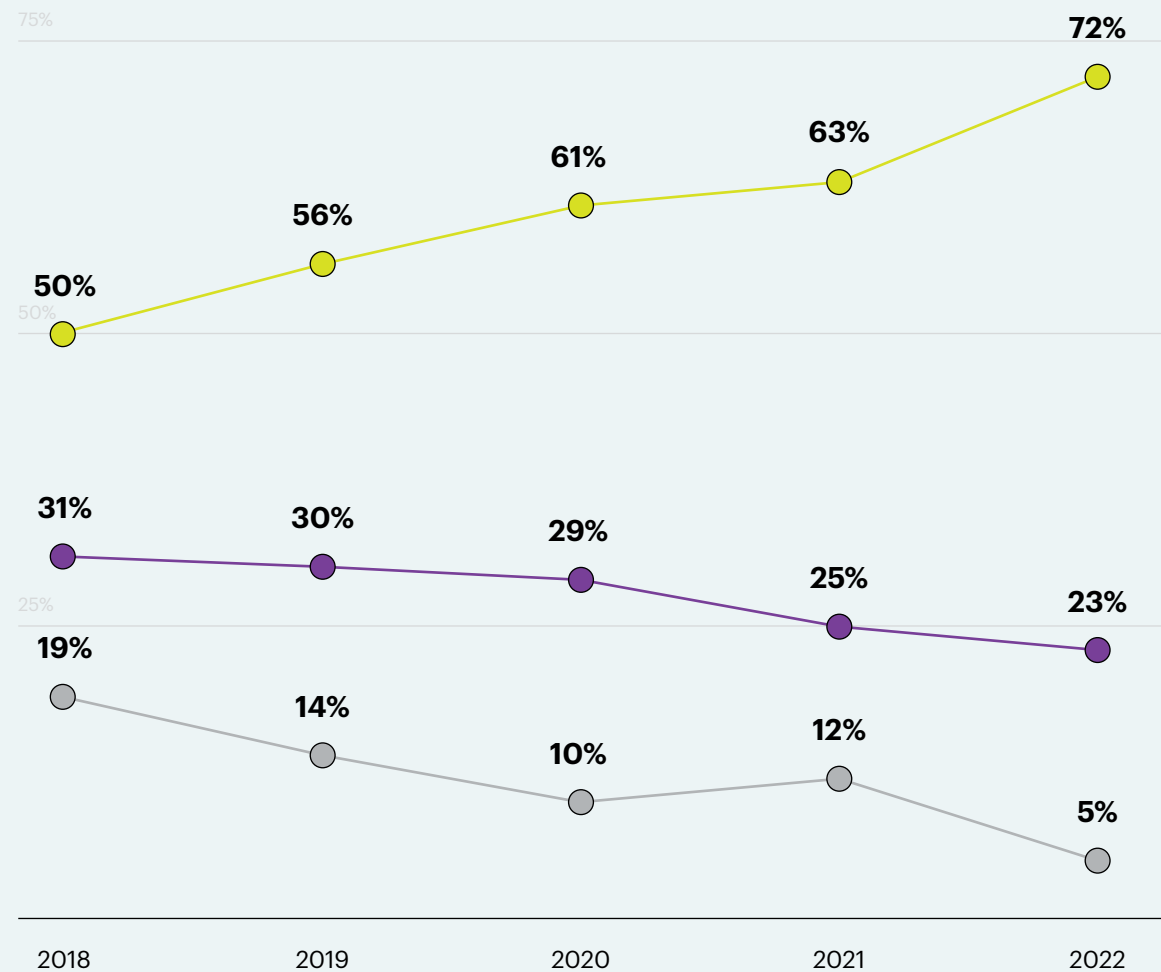
remained intact too and still resonates with approximately half the population.

This brief report scrutinises key trends shaping Slovak society this year. It examines the socio-demographic groups driving the growth in support for the West, especially NATO, and identifies where the above-mentioned fears still resonate most.

Security issues: Undecided and women as key drivers

Support for NATO membership in 5 years

Stay Leave Don't know



Almost every issue of GLOBSEC Trends has measured a sustained increase in support for NATO in Slovakia. This past year saw that trend continue, with support for membership soaring from 50% in 2018 to 72% in 2022 and interest in leaving the Alliance declining. The swing has been primarily driven by people who had previously declared themselves undecided on the matter. A detailed dive into the data reveals another key driver of the rise in support – women.

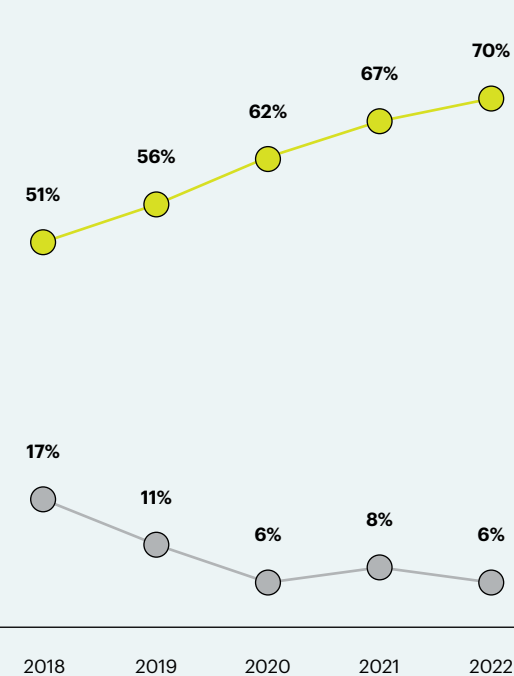
As the graph illustrates, compared to men, women were more likely until 2022 to express ambivalent views towards NATO membership. Whereas men had already gradually come to express more firm beliefs on the issue over the past several years, the war in Ukraine prompted nearly all women to develop a stance too.

74%
of women in
Slovakia now
support NATO
membership.

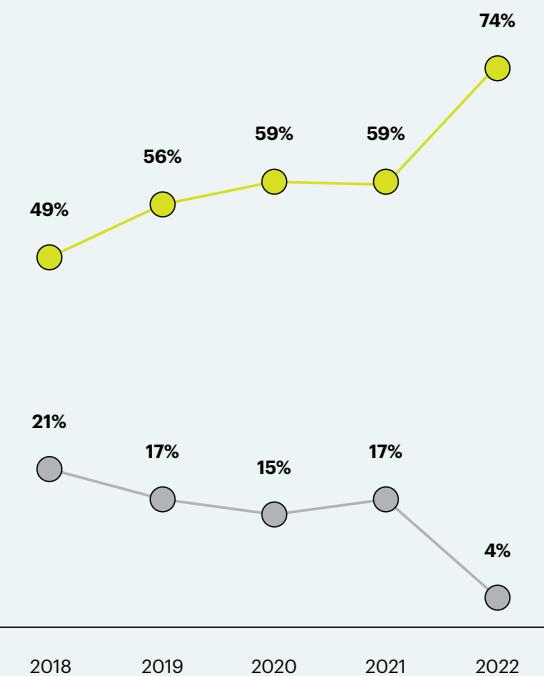
Men vs. women support for NATO membership

Stay Don't know

Male



Female



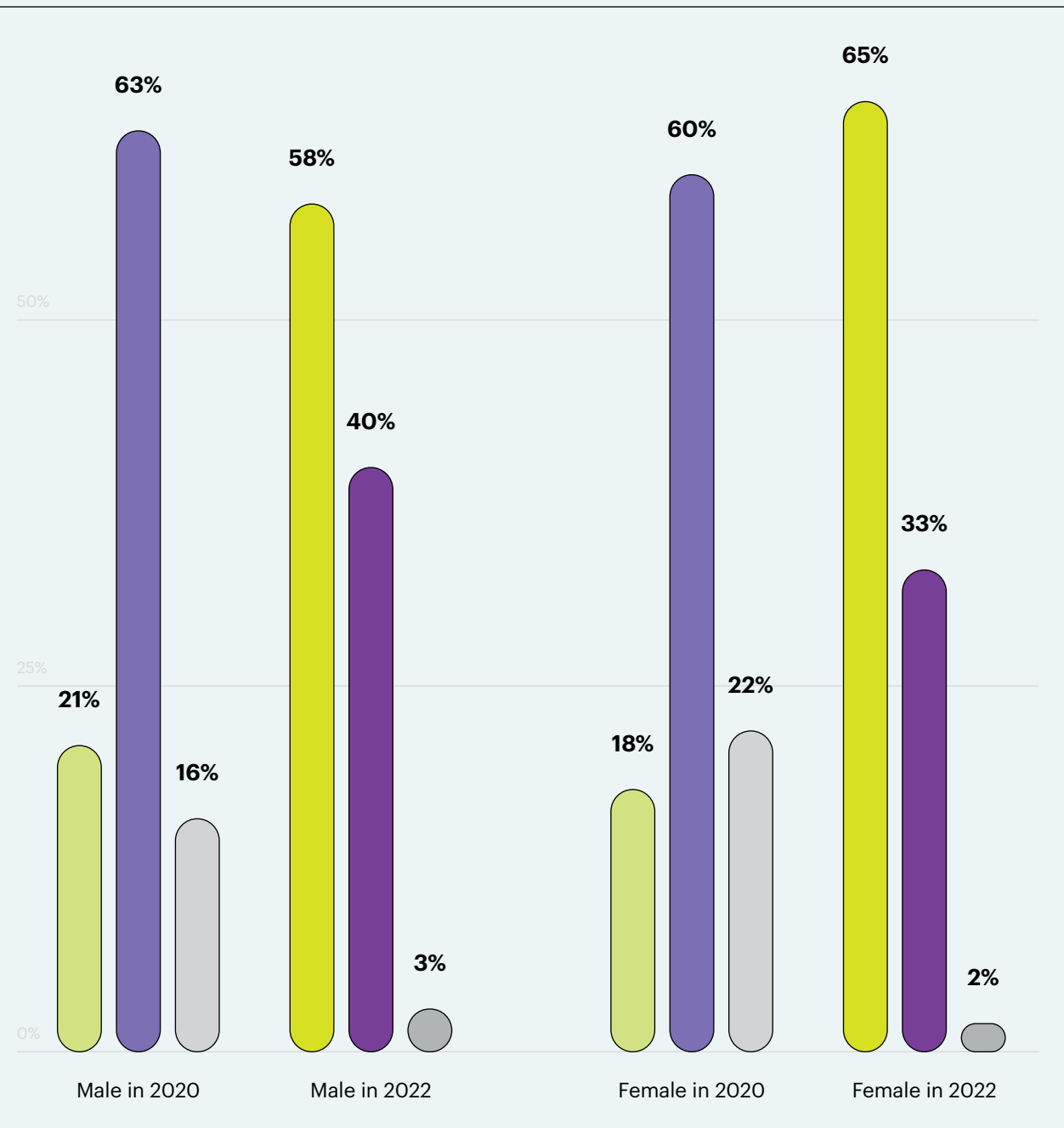
Whereas in the questions concerning satisfaction with democracy and proneness to believing conspiracy theories, the differences in responses according to gender were minor, questions directly related to safety and security matters, such as perceptions that Russia

poses a security threat to Slovakia, witnessed stronger shifts in attitudes among women than men.

In 2020, 22% of women did not know whether to perceive Russia as a security threat or not. In 2022, only 2% were unsure.

Does Russia pose a security threat to Slovakia?

Yes No Don't know



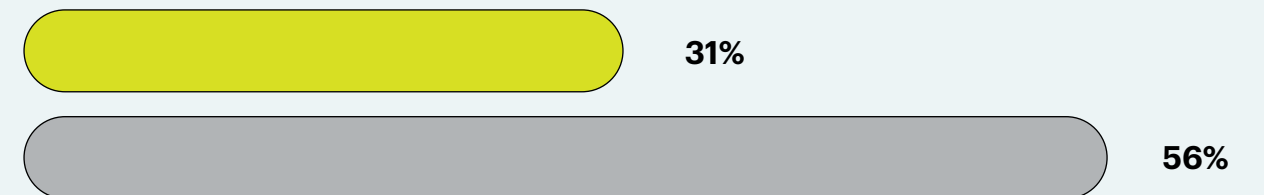
Would you like your country to be part of the West, East, or somewhere in between?

West In-between

Male



Female

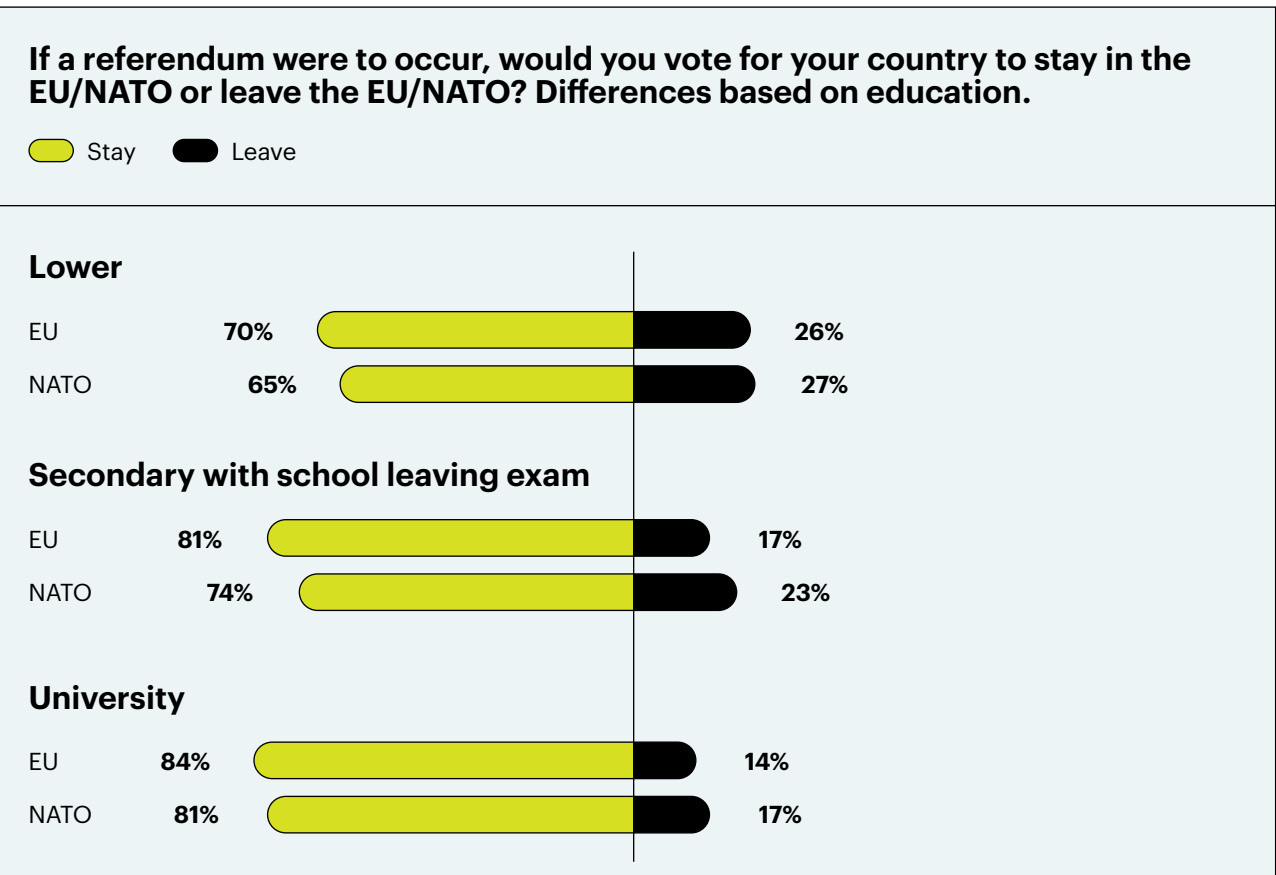
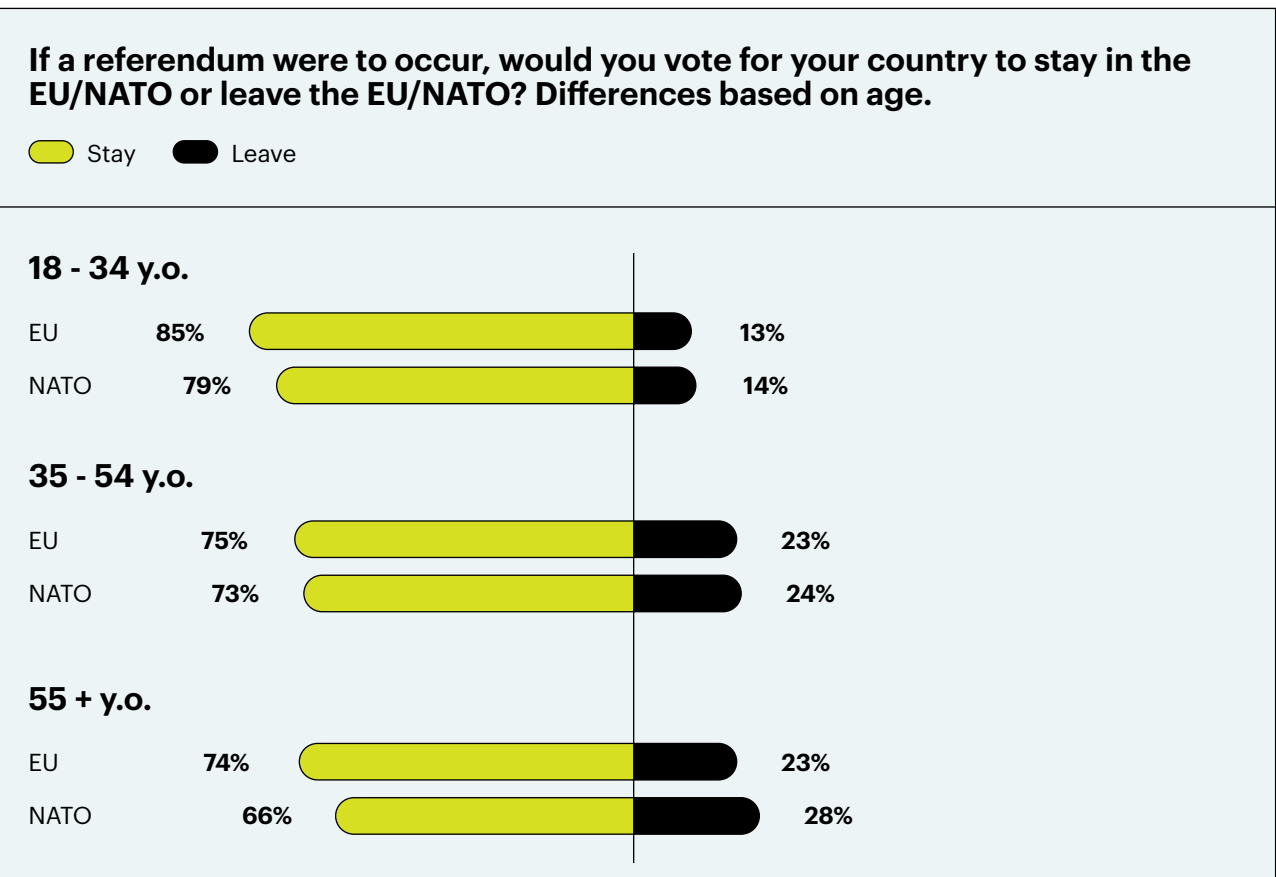
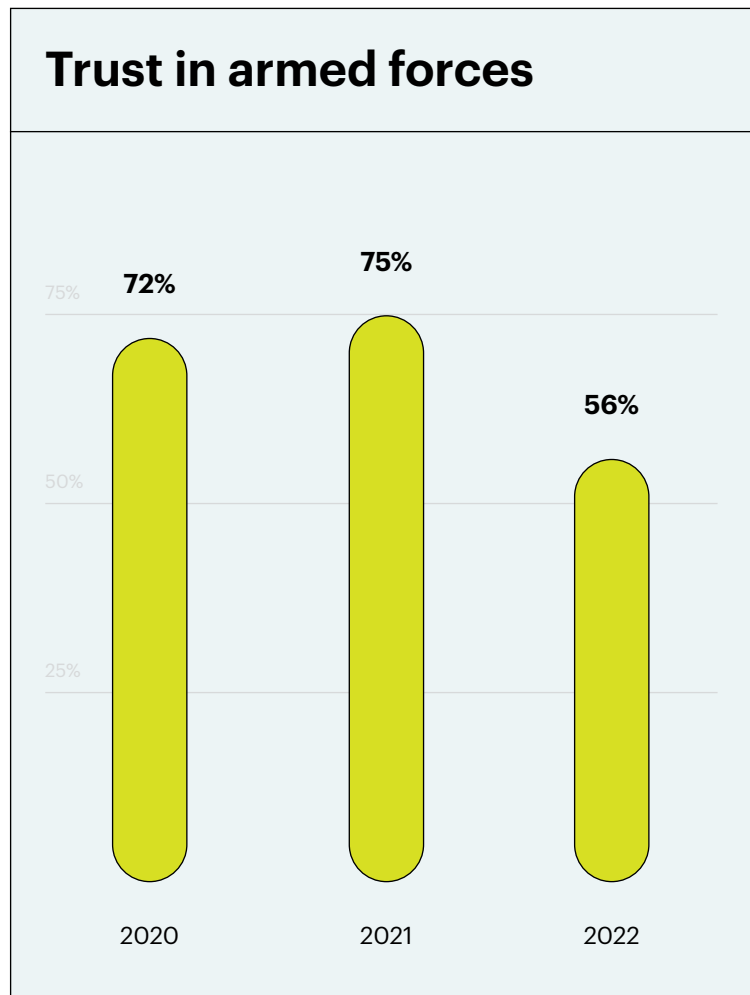


One of the explanations for a steeper shift among women could be a stronger sense of fear regarding safety. Despite the higher female support for NATO membership, women express less confidence in NATO as a guarantor of safety than men. Only 58% of women believe that membership in NATO reduces the likelihood that a foreign country will attack Slovakia compared to 66% of men. In a similar question probed in 2019, the difference was smaller – 53% of women agreed that Slovakia was protected owing to NATO and Allies compared to 55% of men. This argument of women backing NATO out of a sense of fear - is also corroborated by the finding that women are not necessarily more pro-Western than men. In positioning Slovakia between the West, East or in-between, more women leaned towards the in-between position. The difference between the preferences for the East was minor.

The war caused greater shifts in attitudes among women.

Foreign or domestic troops?

Though NATO support is on the rise, confidence in the Slovak armed forces was marked by a dramatic decline in 2022. A possible explanation lies in the fact that society may hold greater confidence in the ability of NATO troops to defend the country than their own military when weighing Slovakia's limited equipment and staff shortages. Another factor might be related to the increase of communication supportive of West and critical of Russia by the Slovak armed forces following the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These actions may have contributed to a loss of trust among those harbouring strident pro-Russian views. The age distribution of the data indeed lends credence to these presumptions. In 2020, 66% of respondents aged 18-34 and 79% aged 55+ trusted the armed forces. But in 2022, 57% of those aged 18-34 and only 56% of those aged 55+ trusted them. This swing marks a 23-percentage point decline among older respondents and a decline by just 9 percentage points among the younger. The older generation in Slovakia, meanwhile, is generally more pro-Russian and less pro-Western.



The decline in trust in the armed forces between 2020 and 2022 was largest among the older generation. The trust dropped from 79% to 56% among people aged more than 55 years.

The younger and more educated, the more pro-Western and pro-democratic

A discrepancy in views towards geopolitics and democracy was especially apparent between different age and education demographics of respondents. The younger and more educated the respondents, the more likely they were to hold pro-Western and pro-democratic attitudes. This pattern has been observed in all polls for Slovakia conducted by GLOBSEC since 2017. No such pattern, by contrast, has been found between inhabitants from urban and rural settlements.

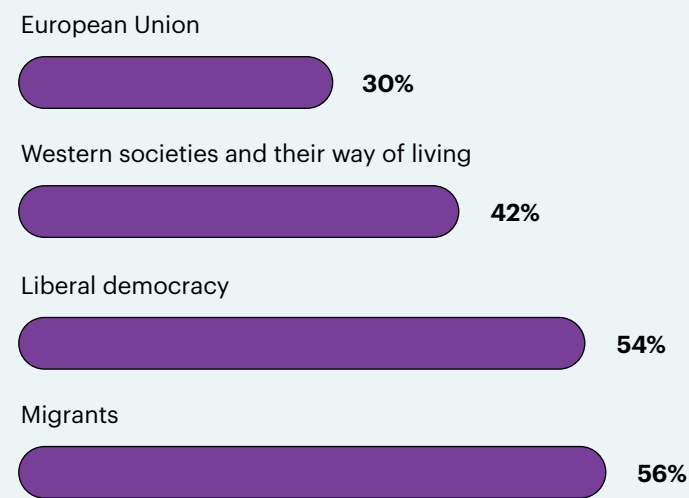
Threat perception

Paranoia of having own values or identity under threat resonates strongly among respondents in Slovakia. This stance is partly attributable to the lack of strong narratives rallying citizens behind widely acknowledged and accepted values and/or the accomplishments of Slovaks in shaping the history of their country and region. On the contrary, one of the most prevalent narratives circulating in society, including the education system, purports that Slovaks have been constantly oppressed by external forces, nations and countries, be it the Austro-Hungarian Empire or 20th century powers. This narrative has been regularly adapted during every crisis and also used to demonise certain groups of people or country(ies). It has also been propagated by various political figures and groups across the information space.¹

61% agree with the statement "Our country has always been oppressed, we have never been able to control our own path."

This feeling of oppression and powerlessness also contributes to the greater predisposition of Slovaks towards believing conspiracy theories that are typically premised on the idea that a particular external force, country, group of people or "secret" organisation is pulling the strings. Conspiracy theories enhance the feeling that one is unable to influence events in the world.

Those who believe the following threatens their values and identity

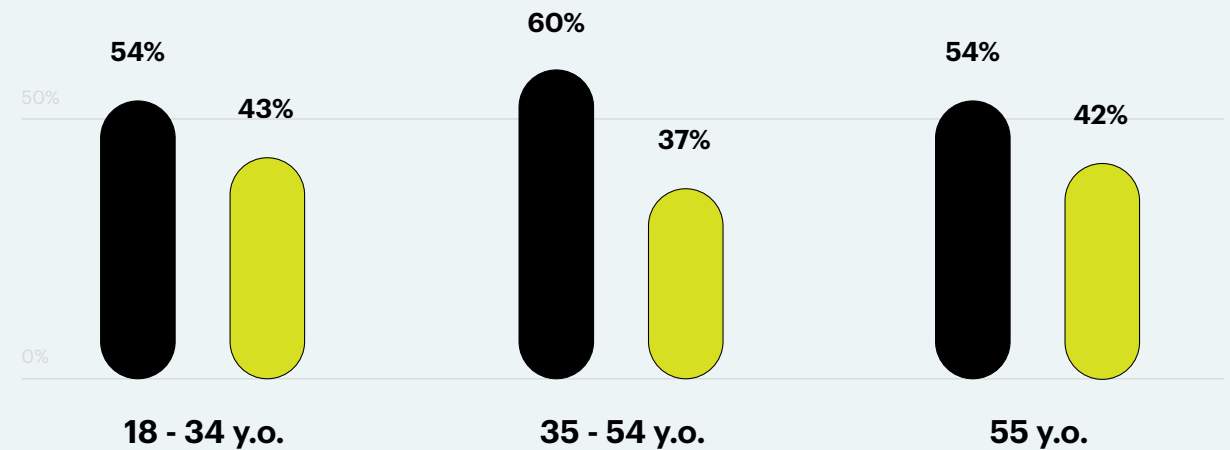


When it comes to geopolitical and democracy-related questions, the correlation with age and education is apparent – younger and more educated are less likely to identify liberal democracy, western societies or the European Union as threats to their identity. Age appears not to be a determinative factor on views regarding migration though. As the chart reveals, perceptions towards migrants as a potential threat are almost equal across the three main age groups.

A more alarming age-related finding concerns perceptions towards far-right nationalists as a threat. Younger people were, in fact, less inclined to perceive this group as a threat than older generations. This finding points to a potentially considerable challenge for the political future of the country.

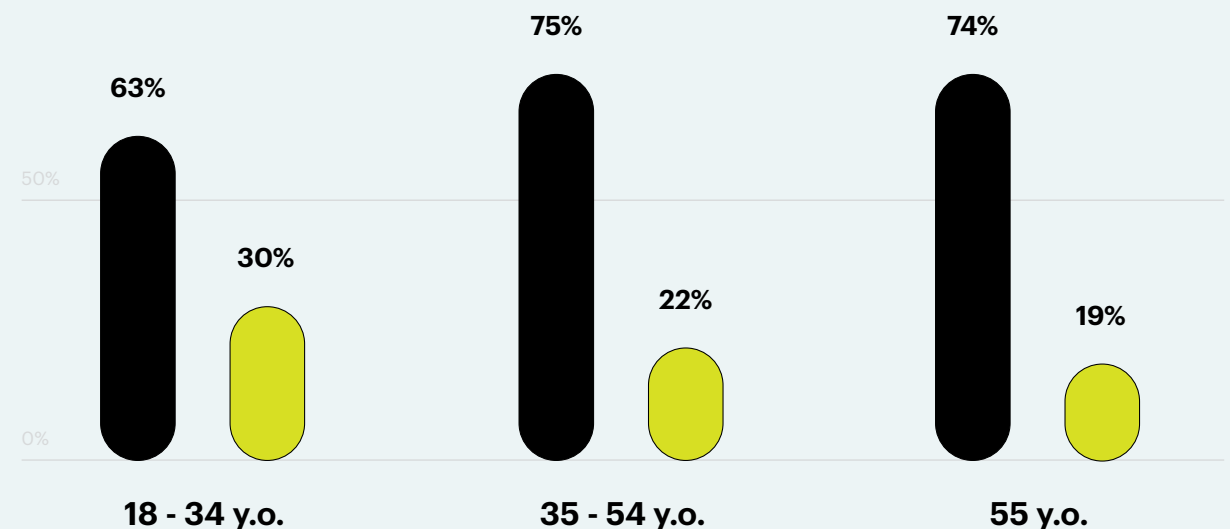
Some people claim that there are certain groups of people and countries that threaten our own identity and values. Do you personally think any of the following groups or countries threaten your identity and values or not? "Migrants"

● Yes, they do threaten our identity/values ● No, they do not threaten our identity/values



Some people claim that there are certain groups of people and countries that threaten our own identity and values. Do you personally think any of the following groups or countries threaten your identity and values or not? "Far right extremists"

● Yes, they do threaten our identity/values ● No, they do not threaten our identity/values



Recommendations

① Utilise increased support for NATO.

While backing for NATO and the West has increased, the recent dramatic spike in support is primarily in direct reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This momentum should be further nurtured through sustained communication campaigns spotlighting and explaining the advantages NATO membership provides to ensuring the safety of Slovakia.

② Target women via their own channels.

While women have indicated a distinct and remarkable shift in favour of NATO, many still hold onto doubts about NATO's ability to protect Slovakia. Additional explanatory campaigns, consequently, should be targeted to women via channels and news sources most consumed by them (e.g. lifestyle magazines for women, afternoon television shows, discussion forums visited by mothers, etc...).

③ Raise awareness on far-right extremism among young people.

With young people less inclined to believe that far right nationalists pose a threat to their values and identity, it is important to raise greater awareness about the threat of extremism to democracy. The enhanced use of communication campaigns on social media channels, such as TikTok or Instagram, on the history of Nazism in Slovakia during WWII would be a prudent course. More engaging informational and educational materials for schools are also needed. High school and university history classes, moreover, need to be revised. According to data from this report, around a third of students remain uneducated on far-right nationalism.

④ Support intergenerational engagement.

Older generations tend to be less pro-Western than young people. Projects directed at promoting exchanges between these two groups to bridge generational gaps, therefore, could provide one promising path towards increasing awareness regarding the advantages of the EU and NATO among older segments of society. Intergenerational dialogue should be supported through events and discussions that bring together speakers and audiences from varying age groups.

⑤ Change the narrative about "oppressed Slovaks".

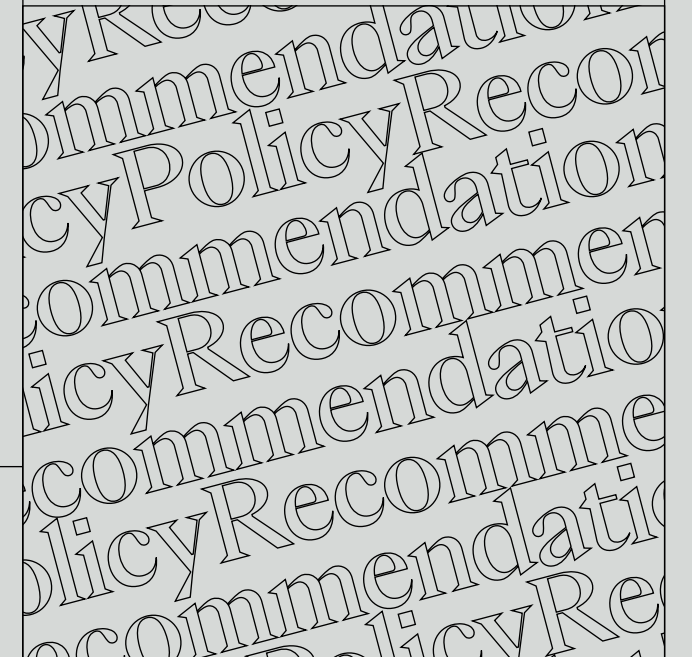
Slovakia and its people were once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one of the largest and longest lasting European empires. In the 16th century, Bratislava served as the capital of the empire - 11 kings and queens were coronated there over 300 years including Maria Theresa. After WWI, Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia, which stood out as one of the leading modern democracies in Europe, among others, with the implementation of universal suffrage in 1918 and with leading intellectuals, such as Tomas Garrigue Masaryk and Milan Rastislav Stefanik shaping developments across Europe. The extent to which Slovakia and its people played an important role in shaping the contemporary history of the country and Europe more broadly should be embedded in education, promoted by pro-democratic political forces and regularly used in public discussions as a key narrative about Slovakia to limit the influence of the "we are an oppressed people" narrative on society.

⑥ Tour the regions.

People with lower educational attainment are generally more prone to being manipulated and believing problematic narratives that undermine transatlantic unity. More attention should consequently be provided to these segments of society, for example, through in-person engagement and visits from key policy-makers, decision-makers and opinion-shapers. These leading figures should tour different regions and meet and discuss issues with citizens face to face. By providing this opportunity for people to voice their opinions and feel that they are being heard, public engagement central to building trust in public institutions can be fostered.

⑦ Develop networks across regions.

Engagement with less educated citizens could also be supported by networks of NGOs and CSOs across Slovakia. While there are whole-of-society practices functioning at the national level, including namely organisations located and operating in Bratislava, the cross-sectoral exchange of best practices and information across regions is still lacking.



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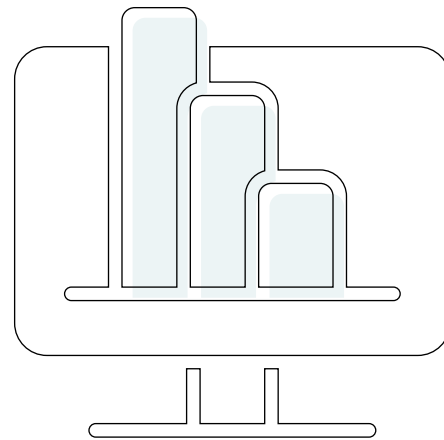
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Methodology

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 polling in Slovakia was conducted by FOCUS s.r.o. agency and the comparative result 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.

References

1 As regularly demonstrated in our research: <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Slovak-parliamentary-election-2020.pdf>; https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/information_war_monitor_april_2016_part_2.pdf; <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Presidential-Election-Monitoring-report.pdf>



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