Bulgaria has established itself as a country home to the most fervent pro-Russian sentiment in Central and Eastern Europe. Bulgarians indeed espoused the greatest support for an Eastern geopolitical orientation in 2021 (at around 12%). The 2022 survey indicates that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has not changed these views. On the contrary, people are now more likely to support leaving NATO and the EU. The perception that Russia is a security threat to Bulgaria, that said, has surged to 33% (it was previously near zero). But 57% still reject the idea that Russia poses a threat (unchanged from the year prior). Russia, moreover, is still seen as a strategic partner by nearly 30% of Bulgarians. Only 21%, by contrast, identify the US as a strategic partner.

For most Central and Eastern Europeans, dissatisfaction with how democracy works in their countries is considered an endemic problem. Perhaps influenced by the actions of nearby autocracies, the 2022 polling revealed that satisfaction with democracy as a governance system soared across the region, on average, by 11%. Satisfaction with democracy, now 24%, in Bulgaria increased by six points in the country. This figure, nevertheless, puts it on par with Romania at the lowest level in the region.

This report scrutinises various indicators to assess whether these developments can be considered a pattern or rather a piece of a more complex puzzle. Compared to the GLOBSEC Trends comparative report, it provides a more in-depth look at socio-demographic data and notable shifts therein.
Support for EU membership remains the same as last year at 70% backing. But growing support for leaving the bloc places the country as the most Eurosceptic country among surveyed countries. Less educated respondents drive the increase in those wishing to leave the EU by 10-percentage point.

Broad differences across age groups, meanwhile, are apparent with respect to views on the transatlantic orientation of the country. Young people have longed indicated the greatest support for EU membership.

Bulgaria exhibits the least Euro-Atlantic orientation in the region. It is the only surveyed country where support for leaving the Alliance increased over the past year.
Bulgaria also appears to be a regional outlier on NATO, with opposition to Alliance membership increasing by 13 percentage points over the past year to the highest level since GLOBSEC started polling it in 2017. The shift leaves the population evenly divided between backers of NATO membership and those either opposed to it or ambivalent. Rising opposition is especially found among the younger (18-34) and older (55 and above) age cohorts.

Bulgarian opposition to NATO membership can be attributed to two primary causes. The first factor concerns the traditionally significant Russophile sub-section of society that tends to stress the historical and cultural affinities between Bulgaria and Russia. The war in Ukraine has proven to be an especially divisive event among Bulgarians that has tested the loyalty of these groups to NATO and partly to the EU. The second issue pertains to the fact that the Ukrainian crisis has come at a time of considerable political turbulence in Bulgaria: three successive parliamentary elections were held in 2021 only to produce an unstable government (the coalition ultimately saw its own demise in June 2022 less than six months after it assumed office).

The country instead has been routinely governed by interim governments falling under the control of the directly elected president. President Rumen Radev has gained unusual influence in affecting public policy and framing the debate. His views have been broadly tilted towards promoting a “neutral” branding of the country. According to this view, Bulgaria should not send arms to Ukraine and should rather preserve its links to Russia to the best extent possible including, for example, in the energy sector. Although more than 75% of Bulgarians generally cast their ballots for political parties espousing pro-EU and NATO views, the inability of these parties to form stable parliamentary majorities has discredited them in the eyes of some and fuelled anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiment and political positions as demonstrated by the stances of President Radev.

Support for leaving NATO based on age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>18 - 34 y.o.</th>
<th>35 - 54 y.o.</th>
<th>55 + y.o.</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perception of Russia as a threat

A majority 57% declined to label Russia as a security threat – the figure remains unchanged from 2020. But there has, simultaneously, been a 30 percentage point rise across all socio-demographic categories in people willing to identify Russia as a threat (this shift, undoubtedly, has come from people that previously found themselves in the “Do not know” category).

The type of settlement (urban/rural) residents are from is particularly significant in influencing views on this matter - nearly 70% from rural areas do not consider Russia to be a threat, an increase compared to 2020.

Russia is not perceived as a security threat possibly on account of shared values deeply entrenched in society. In Bulgaria, 52% reject the idea that Russia threatens their identity or values. The number is highest among respondents from rural settlements (58%) and lowest among university graduates (49%). With 43% migrants, in fact, are perceived by Bulgarians as a greater threat to their values and identity than the Kremlin even following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Does the Russian government threaten your identity and values or not?

- Yes, they do threaten our identity/values: 35%
- No, they do not threaten our identity/values: 52%
- Do not know: 13%
Dissatisfaction with how democracy works and distrust of media contributes to prevalent buy-in to conspiracies

Over the last two years, dissatisfaction with how democracy works in Bulgaria has remained steady at slightly over 70%. This steep dissatisfaction places the country second worst (after Romania and its 76% dissatisfaction) among the surveyed countries on this metric. Young Bulgarians were least dissatisfied (though still, the same alarming 66% expressed dissatisfaction as in 2020). Unlike two years ago, there appeared to be nearly no distinction between men and women on this point.

Agreement that democracy is the best governance system for Bulgaria, meanwhile, decreased by 6 percentage points compared to 2021. A shrinking majority, 76% of respondents, agreed that democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms, and the rule of law is good for their country compared to 82% in 2021. From a socio-demographic point of view, the most notable decline, 12 percentage points, occurred among people from rural areas. There were 9 percentage point drops, meanwhile, among women and young people on this metric.

In 2022, 77% of respondents disagreed with the statement that “the needs of people like you are well taken into account by the political system in Bulgaria”, a 14-percentage point increase compared to 2020. The demographic data indicates a substantial shift among women (24 percentage point rise in those disagreeing with the statement) – men, for their part, remain unchanged from their views in 2020. Older people (55 years old and above) and less educated respondents were also more likely to disagree with the statement than two years ago (by an additional 20 and 21 percentage points respectively). In brief, women, older and less educated respondents are now feeling less included in the political system than two years ago.

General attitudes towards democracy are also indicated by responses to the statement “it does not matter, who holds the power in the government, nothing will change”. This pessimistic sentiment has, in fact, actually declined in Bulgaria over the past two years. While 59% expressed a feeling of powerlessness towards the system in 2020, only 50% felt the same way in 2022. The most marked shift occurred among people from rural communities (a 13 percentage point decline from 70% in 2020 to 57% in 2022).

Nevertheless, 50% of the population feels powerless towards the system, a sentiment that correlates with higher tendencies to believe conspiracy theories and disinformation. In 2022, Bulgaria was one of two countries (the other being Slovakia) in the region espousing strong buy-in, at 54%, to three conspiracy theories and manipulative narratives:

- 61% of respondents believe that “world affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order” (an increase of 9 percentage points compared to 2020);
- 40% think that “liberal democracy threatens our traditional values and national identity” (similar numbers as 2020);
- and 62% agree that “democracy does not exist because in reality hidden elites rule the world” (also roughly the same as 2020).
The extent to which the public trusts the media significantly impacts their perceptions of information and their vulnerability towards information operations. Thus, one of the reasons why the overall number of people that believe conspiracy theories in Bulgaria is also the fact that distrust towards mainstream media rapidly increased, by 18 percentage points to 64% within one year. This distrust, in turn, can be attributed to the general fatigue that has developed from four parliamentary elections and associated campaigning. Even though the Bulgarian media sector remains pluralistic, many media outlets are dependent on financial contributions from the state through advertising, which, according to Freedom House, leads to pressure to run government-friendly material. This conclusion is supported by findings from Reporters without Borders arguing that the Council for Electronic Media appears to be politicised and negatively affecting perceptions of the editorial independence of public media. Perceptions concerning the independence of private media are underscored by their owners’ interests in regulated sectors. University educated respondents and older people were particularly large sources for this growing distrust.

Even though Bulgarians rank among the most conspiracy theory-prone countries in the region, the trends appear to be favourable as it concerns views about the three groups most commonly perceived as threats to identity and values. A 6-percentage point drop to 28% was measured in 2022 among Bulgarians concerning their threat perception of Western societies and the Western way of life. Although no specific socio-demographic groups are driving this decline, the older the respondent the more likely they were to agree that Western societies pose a threat to their identity and values. There are also notable differences depending on the type of settlement (urban/rural) the respondent comes from. Rural residents were considerably more likely than urban dwellers to identify Western societies as a threat.

**Distrust of media based on age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 - 34 y.o.</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 - 54 y.o.</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 + y.o.</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Distrust of media based on the level of education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Perception of Western societies as a threat based on a type of settlement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement Type</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The European Union, for its part, benefits from an 11-percentage point decline (compared to 2020) to 20%, among Bulgarians identifying it as a threat to their identity and values. Young people and those with secondary education contributed the largest declines among different age groups and those with different levels of educational attainment.

As it relates to negative views towards migrants, middle-aged and older people were responsible for the improving trendline. The opinions of young people remained the same. Education plays a role here too - university educated respondents are now less likely to identify migrants as a threat to their identity and values (a 17 percentage point decline).
### Recommendations

1. **Promote the importance of the strategic component of the EU for Bulgaria’s security and prosperity.**
   
   Bulgaria is one of the most Eurosceptic countries in the region. The group most fervently supportive of the EU - younger people - is moreover on the decline. The post-COVID recovery plan funds provided by the EU must be deployed to promote the benefits of Union membership.

2. **Tout the role of NATO as a security guarantor of the country.**
   
   Bulgarians underestimate the importance of Alliance membership and the threat that Russia is posing to the Western world. Efforts should be made to better communicate the role of NATO as a security backstop for the country and a clearer picture of the threat that Russia is posing.

3. **Tie EU and NATO together in narratives.**
   
   Many in Bulgaria wrongly believe that the EU and NATO can be severed from one another without significant costs. The narrative that the EU is an essential component of security should be enhanced.

4. **Support for quality and independent media and trust building efforts need to be prioritised.**
   
   Distrust of the mainstream media leads to a less resilient society that is more prone to disinformation as demonstrated by the most recent data. Extending support for quality and independent media, with transparent ownership, will leave less space for conspiracy theories.

5. **Ambivalent positions held by politicians should be exposed and criticised.**
   
   The contradictions in public opinion are shaped by ambiguous and ambivalent statements of high-profile politicians that nominally support the EU and NATO even as they promote ideas of Bulgarian neutrality between Russia and EU/NATO. This equivocation ultimately fuels anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiment and drives up the popularity of radical populist players that openly advocate for a Bulgarian exit from Euro-Atlantic structures.

6. **Address social policy concerns.**
   
   Soaring inflation and the rise in energy costs should be prioritised and addressed in all communication campaigns as issues that citizens genuinely care about. Both communication and action are important even in the absence of information and even if the precise consequences cannot yet be predicted. The information vacuum will otherwise be exploited by disinformation actors to further sow doubt and undermine trust in democracy as a system of government that heeds the concerns and needs of people.

7. **Invest more in intensive strategic communication of public servants.**
   
   According to the survey data, decreasing support for democracy across all demographic categories coincides with a growing feeling of powerlessness and abandonment by political elites. Investment into the strategic communication capacities of public institutions can improve this situation, starting with the strengthening of awareness of public servants in this area through manuals and/or trainings.
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 1,000 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 Bulgaria was conducted by ALPHA RESEARCH Ltd. and coordinated by the FOCUS, s.r.o. agency and the comparative results published in May 2022 as GLOBSEC Trends 2022. The results have been compared to polls conducted using consistent methodology since 2017.

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