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GLOBSEC Trends 2022

Hungary

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Focus on Hungary

Hungary has established itself as a country undergoing democratic backsliding and one often labelled illiberal, hybrid¹ or a partially free² democracy. In September, the European Parliament declared that Hungary had become an “electoral autocracy” and can no longer be considered a full democracy.³

Despite these developments, support for EU and NATO membership has remained stable and uncontested among Hungarians.⁴ It appears that the rampant disinformation and criticism targeted towards the EU from Viktor Orbán⁵ and his administration have had no discernible impact on the views of Hungarians towards these two organisations. Viktor

Orbán’s commitment to improving relations with authoritarian regimes, nonetheless, renders its own top-down vulnerabilities.⁶ The public now expresses more favourable views towards Russia and China than the United States, France and the United Kingdom even as Germany is perceived as the most important strategic partner. This report, in this light, examines the key trends shaping Hungarian society in 2022 and vulnerabilities. It explores the socio-demographic groups steering the country’s increasing leanings towards authoritarian regimes and provides insight into rising satisfaction with democracy.



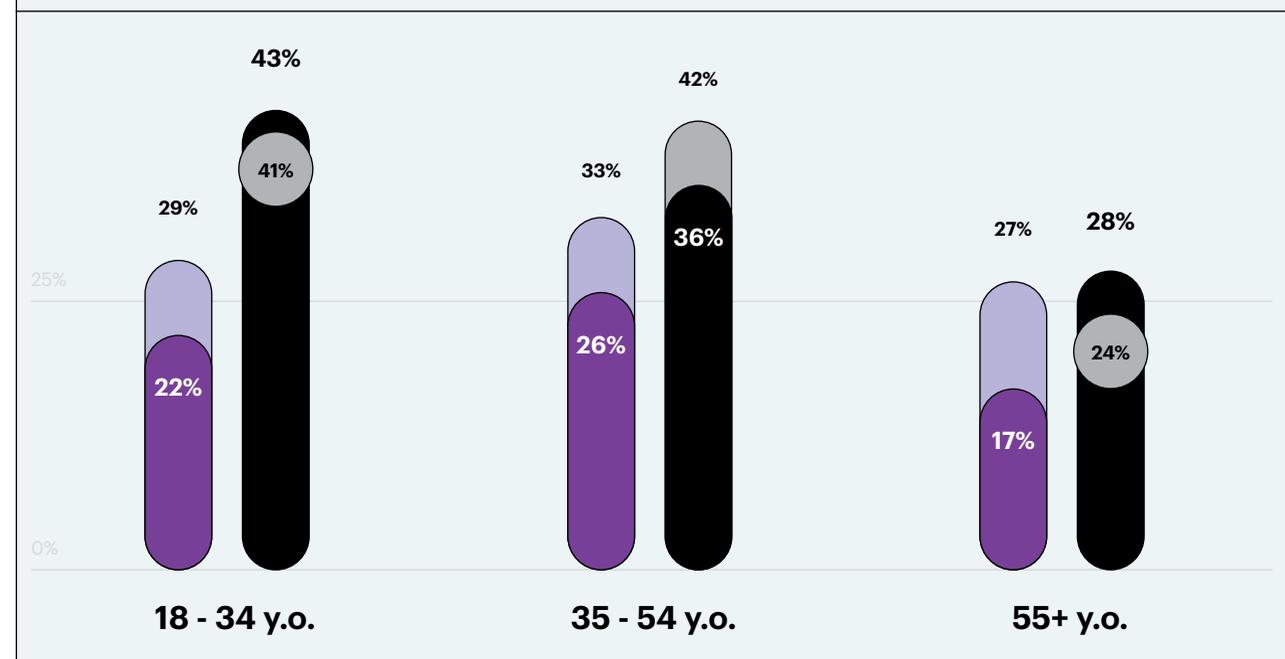
Strategic partnership

Though Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affirmed the importance of Hungary's strategic partnership with Germany according to public opinion, it has not engendered the same effects on perceptions towards Russia and the United States apparent in other Central European countries.⁷ Even following the outbreak of war, 35% of Hungarians perceive Russia

as the most important strategic partner for their country compared to 13% that identify the US the same way. And 21% perceive China to be a strategic partner, establishing Hungary as a regional outlier. However, it must also be noted that Germany tops the list of strategic partners by a 23-percentage point margin over Russia.

Which of the following global actors do you consider to be the most important strategic partners for your country? Pick max. 2 from available options: the United States, China, Germany, France, Russia and the United Kingdom.

● China as a strategic partner 2021 ● China as a strategic partner 2022
● Russia as a strategic partner 2021 ● Russia as a strategic partner 2022



Almost one fifth of older respondents "do not know"

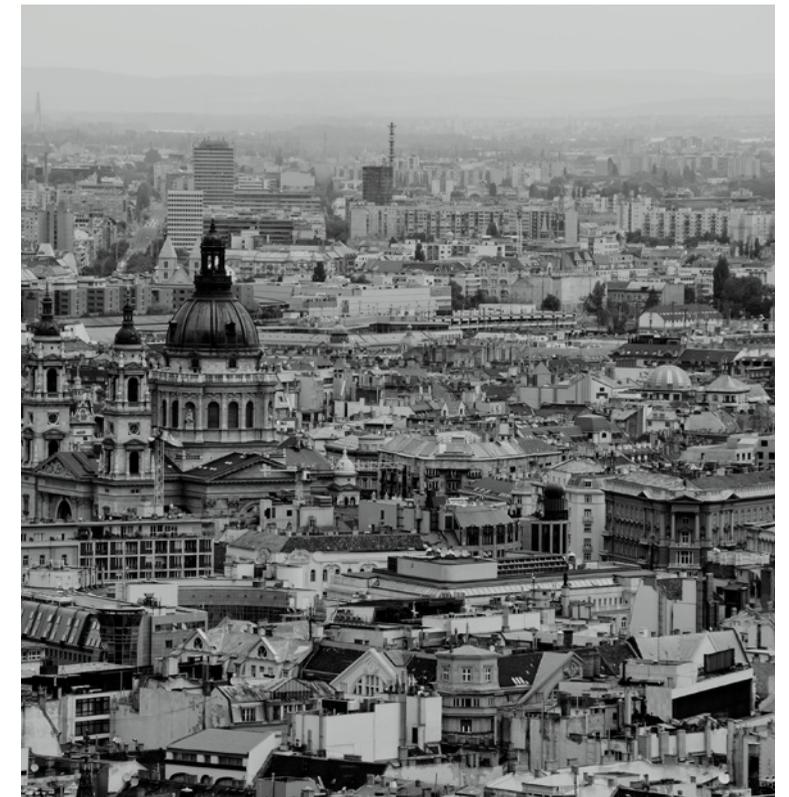
Nearly a fifth, 18%, of older respondents still "do not know" who is the most important strategic partner for their country. This indecisiveness and/or ignorance renders this sub-group vulnerable to information operations, both domestic and foreign. Yet 43% of young Hungarians hold favourable views of Russia compared to 28% of elderly people.

Rural-urban divide

Over the past year, people living in urban areas have adopted more cautious views concerning Chinese and Russian malign influence. Urban dwellers are now less likely to perceive both China and Russia as strategic partners than in 2021. The same pattern was not apparent in rural areas - the government's grip over the media and Orbán's own propaganda machinery promoting cooperation with authoritarian regimes is likely a major factor. It is considerably more difficult to penetrate these narratives, especially in rural areas.⁸ Party-political preferences might also play a key role, with the policy views of political parties in Hungary often adopted by their supporters as well. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the Fidesz ruling party's policies enjoy greater backing in rural settings where it is more popular.

Russia perceived as a partner no matter the level of education

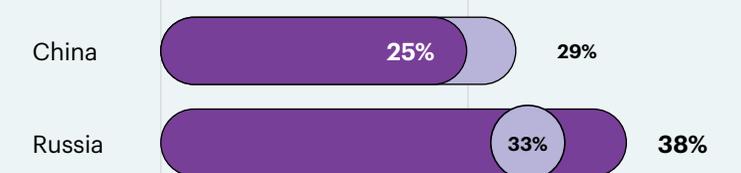
The gap between university-educated (36%) and less educated Hungarians (33%) stands at only 3 percentage points regarding perceptions of Russia as the most important strategic partner for the country.⁹



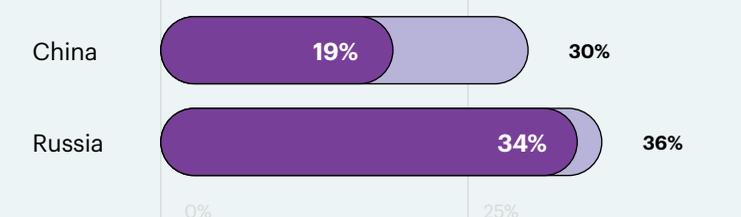
Perceptions of strategic partners according to rural-urban divide

● 2021 ● 2022

Rural



Urban



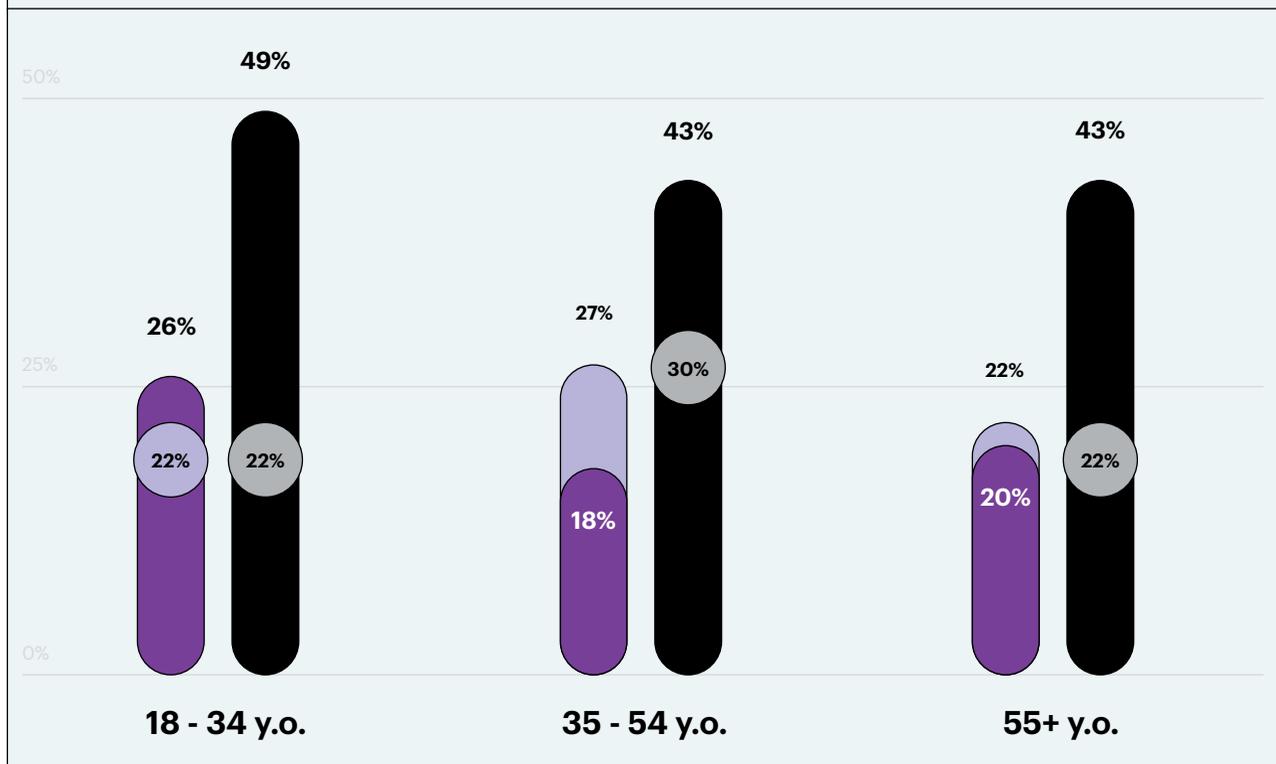
Perceptions of threats

Hungary, alongside Bulgaria, represents one of two countries where a majority do not perceive Russia as a security threat even following the invasion of Ukraine. The conflict, however, has seen many Hungarians firm up their beliefs regarding their perceived adversaries. On this point, 45% now identify Russia as a security threat, a 20-percentage point rise from 2021. But turning to China, a similar

percentage of Hungarians (21%) recognise Beijing as a threat compared to the year prior. Older respondents and those living in rural areas, meanwhile, are less likely than their younger and urban peers to identify Russia and/or China as threats. A majority 52% and 76% of respondents aged 35-54 do not perceive Russia and China, respectively, as security threats.

Do you think the following countries present a security threat to your country?

China as a threat 2021 (light purple), China as a threat 2022 (dark purple), Russia as a threat 2021 (light grey), Russia as a threat 2022 (dark grey)



Women more aware of security threats

Gender divisions are present too - women generally are more likely than men to recognise Russia and China as threats.

Type of settlement matters for threat perceptions on Russia

A total of 44% of less educated Hungarians perceive Russia as a threat and 43% of university-educated people feel the same. Meanwhile, 47% of urban-based Hungarians perceive Russia to be a threat compared to 40% living in rural areas. With respect to perceptions towards China, no differences are apparent among the same demographic groups.

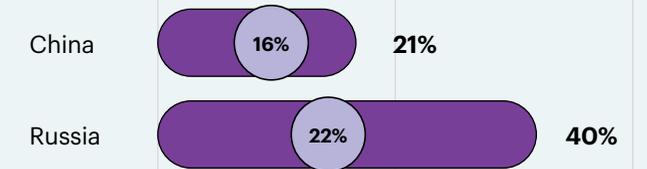
Party-political divide

Party-political preferences substantially influence how Hungarians evaluate the geopolitical priorities of the country. Apart from EU and NATO membership (where there is little gulf between the Fidesz and opposition camps), this is evident in nearly all cases¹⁰. While nearly 22% of opposition voters see Russia as a strategic partner, 40% of Fidesz voters feel this way. Threat perceptions are also shaped by this political divide: 70% of opposition voters believe Russia to be a national security threat compared to only 31% of Fidesz supporters. The party affiliations of voters also considerably affect the lenses through which they view China: 41% from the opposition camp perceive the country as a threat against a mere 9% of Fidesz backers. The opposed geopolitical narratives of the two political blocs, therefore, are reflected in respective supporters too. This pattern makes societal agreement on the general direction of Hungarian foreign policy essentially unfeasible.

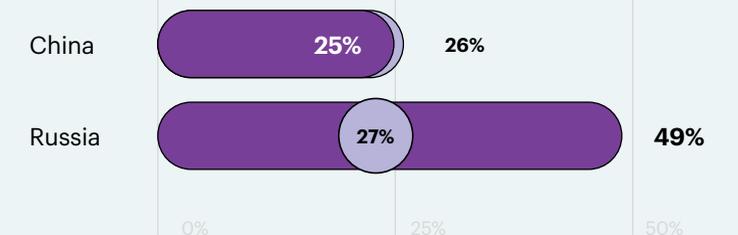
Threat perceptions based on gender

2021 (light purple), 2022 (dark purple)

Men



Women



Only 31% of Fidesz supporters perceive Russia as a threat compared to 70% of opposition voters.

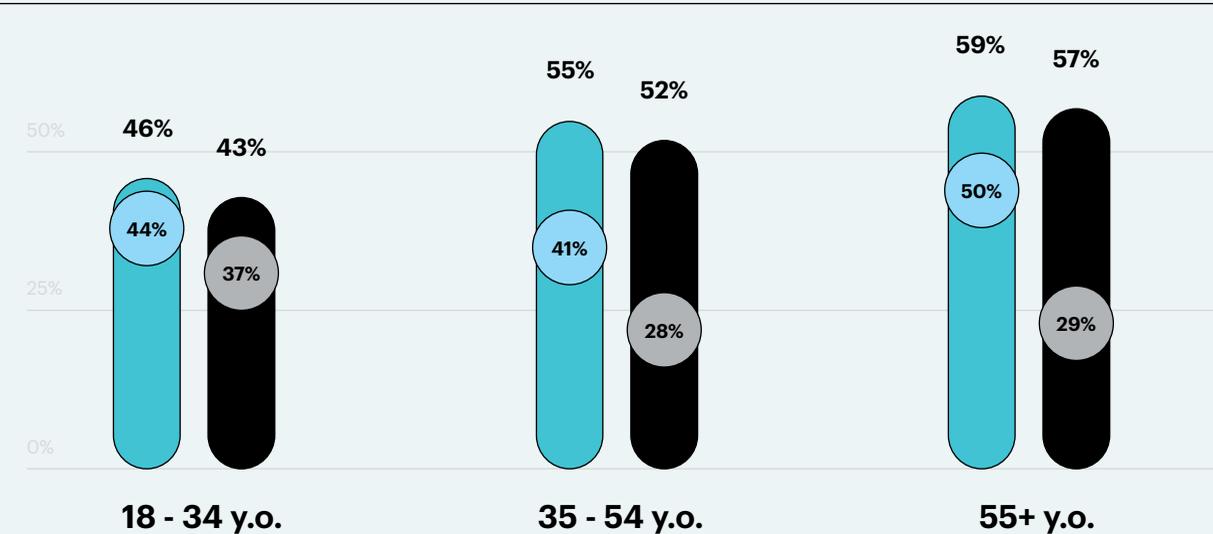
Addressed needs and satisfaction with how democracy works in the country

Hungary is one of five Central European countries where a majority are satisfied with how democracy works in their country. And it is one of two countries, alongside Czechia, in Central Europe where a majority think that “the needs of people like myself are well taken into account by the political system in my

country”. Satisfaction with how democracy works in the country and the feeling that people’s needs are prioritised by government have increased, respectively, by 9 and 21 percentage points over the past few years. This movement has been steered by people older than 35 years.

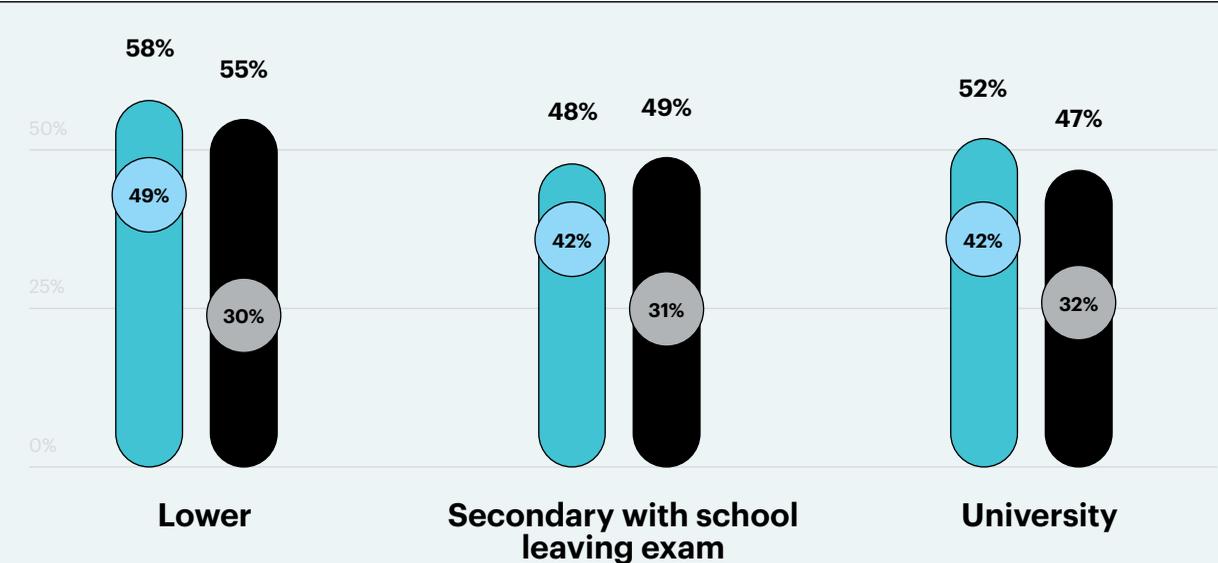
If you take all circumstances into account, to what extent are you overall satisfied with how democracy works in your country? To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The needs of people like you are well taken into account by the political system in your country.

● Satisfaction with democracy in 2020 ● Satisfaction with democracy in 2022
● Needs taken care of in 2020 ● Needs taken care of in 2022



Satisfaction with how democracy works in Hungary and the perception that people’s own needs are being taken care of based on the education level of respondents.

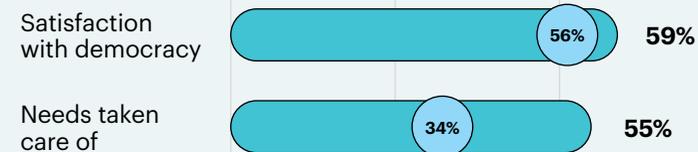
● Satisfaction with democracy in 2020 ● Satisfaction with democracy in 2022
● Needs taken care of in 2020 ● Needs taken care of in 2022



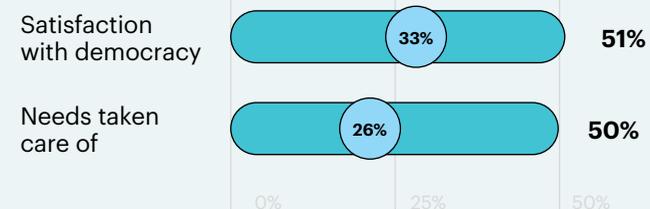
Satisfaction with democracy and needs according to rural-urban divide

● 2020 ● 2022

Rural



Urban



Decreasing urban-rural divide

Rural and poorer areas represent electoral strongholds of Viktor Orbán¹¹, with people living in urban locales more likely to support opposition political candidates.¹² But the urban-rural split on satisfaction with democracy and perceptions that their needs are addressed has increasingly dissipated in recent years. Most Hungarians indeed broadly approve of Orbán’s performance as prime minister.¹³

Recommendations

① Better seize on the Russian atrocities in Ukraine.

A majority of Hungarians do not perceive Russia as a security threat to their country. Democratic actors in Hungary, consequently, should put a spotlight on Russian war crimes and atrocities in Ukraine to reveal the true nature of Russia and the Kremlin to Hungarian citizens. It is important to show the true cost of Hungary's cooperation with Russia. In parallel, it is key to point out that Hungary gains nothing from its overly close ties to the Kremlin given that Hungary's gas purchases from Russia are based on market prices.

③ Build awareness of Chinese influence operations.

While all eyes are on the war in Ukraine, threat perceptions concerning China have gradually declined in Hungary. Public discussions need to be promoted with an emphasis on specific examples of harmful Chinese foreign influence in other countries. Personal stories that reflect violations of human rights in China also need to be actively disseminated among Hungarians. The plight of Tibetans, for example, could be compared to those of Communist-era Hungary.

② Utilise the increased presence of Allies in the region.

The aid allocated to Ukraine by Hungary's allies could be depicted in a positive light. Hungary's place in the EU and NATO could be better framed as a strong security guarantee in the light of the US, German and British assistance that has enabled Ukraine to recapture parts of their country. Moreover, the personal stories of Hungarians – especially from the military such as Baltic air policing personnel – on what it means to be a NATO ally could be used to enhance the awareness of Hungarians about national security issues.

④ Adherence to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Article 11 of EU Charter on Fundamental Rights devoted to freedom of expression and information specifically states that “the freedom and pluralism of media shall be respected.”¹⁴ Media freedom and pluralism have been deteriorating in Hungary for years.¹⁵ Respect of the Charter should be a sine qua non for the country's access to EU funds.

⑤ Bring to light corruption scandals.

Due to government control over the media, many impoverished Hungarians may not be aware about the extent to which corruption is permeating into large joint projects shared with authoritarian states. Bringing such information to light and communicating it regularly through different personal settings in smaller communities may be a strategy to crack the information bubble many Hungarians, especially those living in rural areas, are living in.

⑥ Develop presence in smaller settlements.

Democratic actors in Hungary must focus on establishing a larger presence in smaller towns, a task that has not been sufficiently prioritised in recent years. An enhanced organisational presence in the countryside could enable these groups to better explain geopolitical subtleties to rural communities.

Author

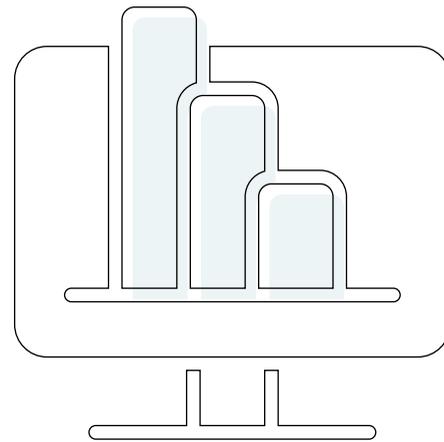
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Methodology

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 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 poll in Hungary was conducted by Publicus Kutató és Tanácsadó Intézet Kft 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.

References

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- 3 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>
- 4 <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>
- 5 <https://hungarytoday.hu/opposition-orban-smear-campaign-eu-recovery-funds/>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-eu-idUSKBN1QU1FL>
- 6 https://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/src/files/Foreign_Malign_Influence_in_Hungary_brief.pdf
- 7 <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>
- 8 https://www.vulnerabilityindex.org/src/files/Globsec_VI_Hungary-Report_online.pdf
- 9 Note: differences of 3 percentage points fall into the range of possible statistical error for public opinion polls.
- 10 By 'opposition', we mean all political parties that contested the 2022 general election in Hungary under the umbrella of the United Opposition, so this excludes the backers of the far-right Mi Hazánk and the joke party MKKP, among others.
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