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# GLOBSEC Trends 2022

# Latvia

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# Focus on Latvia

Over the past year, Latvians, like others in the region, have expressed increased support for Western institutions and become more wary of Russia.

Latvian satisfaction with democracy, now at 58%, puts the country second highest in the region. Meanwhile, dissatisfaction with the governance system decreased over the past two years, although it remains higher than in other Central and Eastern European countries. Latvians are less aware of Chinese influence efforts than Russian malign tactics. A majority still do not know who Xi Jinping is and/or whether to view him favourably or unfavourably. While understanding of Chinese threats remains low, China is not seen as a potential role

model of governance. This can potentially be attributed to the fact that Russian disinformation have already been analysed by journalists and policy makers for years, whereas Chinese activities have been less visible in the information space.

This report analyses satisfaction with democracy in Latvia and changes in attitudes towards China over the past year, with a focus on the youth (people aged 18-24).



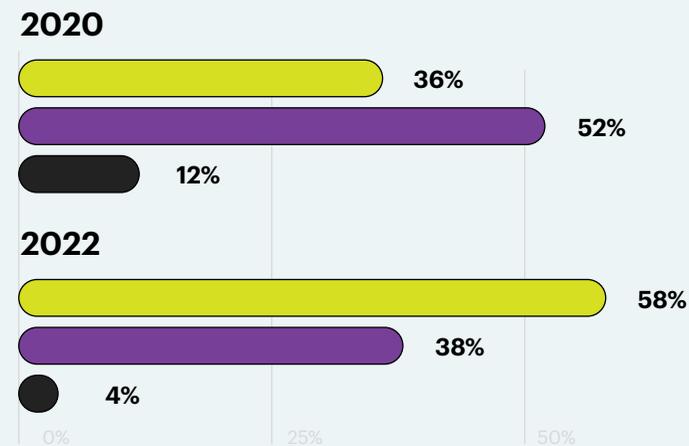
# Democracy

The data from GLOBSEC Trends showed that satisfaction with democracy and the democratic governance system in Latvia has overall increased. The percentage of Latvians who are satisfied with how democracy works in their country has risen from 36% in 2020 to 58% in 2022. Although, since 2020, more people trust the government, the public trust in the president has been in decline. President Levits has not been able to use opportunities given by the representative position and low approval ratings might be also connected to unfulfilled societal expectations for him to transcend from a representative role to political leadership.

The overall rise in satisfaction with the democratic system in Latvia can be also demonstrated on two other questions, where attitudes shifted considerably since 2020. According to research done by Systemic Risk Centre, after the Covid pandemic, the negative impact on trust in political institutions and governments was most marked in democracies - governments that were perceived to be 'weaker' at the time of an outbreak were also more likely to experience a more pronounced fall in public trust.<sup>1</sup>

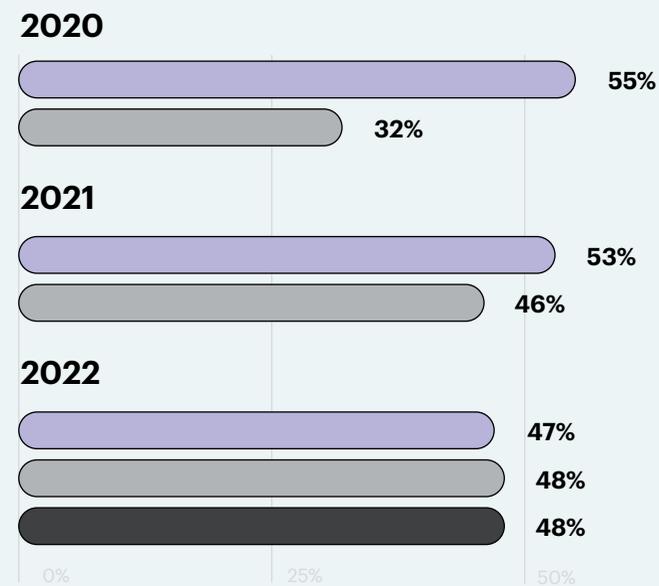
## Satisfaction with Democracy

■ Satisfied
 ■ Dissatisfied
 ■ Do not know



## Distrust in institutions

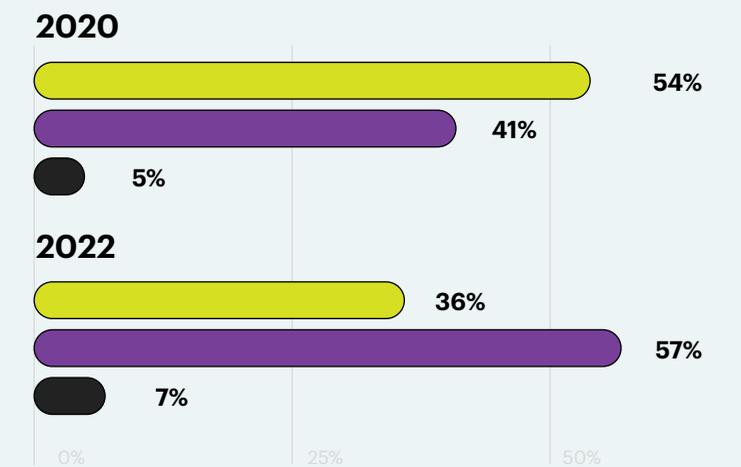
■ Government
 ■ President
 ■ Parliament



Although in the 2022 polling, 56% did not think the needs of people were considered by the political system in Latvia, such notion decreased by 20 percentage points since 2020. A similar shift is apparent in responses to the statement: "Who holds the power in the government does not matter, nothing will change". The results suggest that feelings of disillusionment and dissatisfaction have recently declined in Latvia. Negative attitudes about the political system in 2020 might have been a reaction to COVID-19 and ensuing restrictions including limitations on the right to protest government decisions. Anti-vaccine attitudes were also present in Latvia, and a sentiment that people were "forced" to vaccinate themselves to keep their jobs might have consequently played a role. The 2022 polling took place in March, shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With the event fresh in mind, people may have been reminded about the value of living in a democratic state and NATO protection.

## Who holds the power in the government does not matter, nothing will change

■ Agree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Do not know



# China

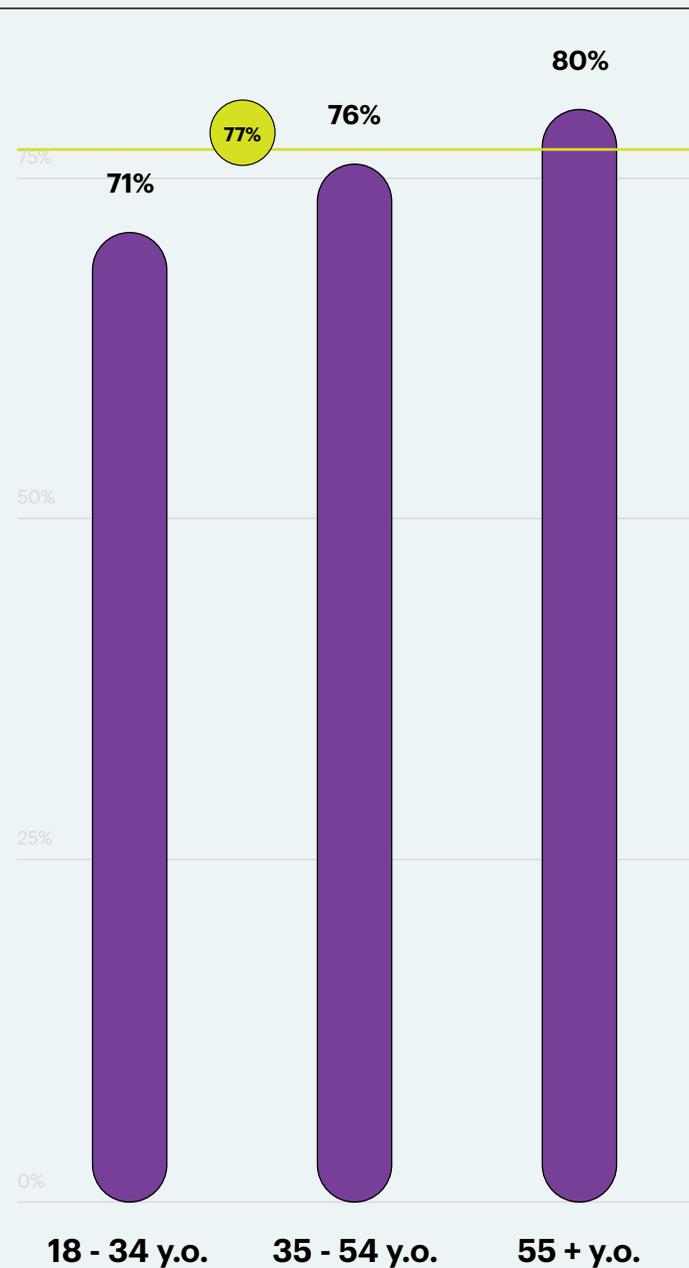
Overall, despite strong awareness of Russia being a security threat to the country, awareness of China's influence is quite low in Latvia. Among Baltic countries, Latvians are the least likely to view China as a threat to their country's security, values, and identity. 77% of respondents in Latvia do not consider China to be a threat, in fact, Latvia and Bulgaria are the only two countries where more than three-quarters of the population share such an attitude. The perception of the Chinese government as a threat to the country's values and identity stands at 12%, while 79% disagree. Threat perception declines as the age of respondents rises since people aged 65 and above are particularly disinclined towards identifying China as a threat.

The widespread belief that China constitutes no danger to the country should be alarming to public institutions and opinion shapers and underlines the need for more public discussion and awareness-raising efforts concerning Beijing's influence in Europe. In the public discourse in Latvia, there have not been regular and deeply analysed media reports about China's influence in politics, technology, and economics. The Confucius Institute in Latvia, meanwhile, acts as an ardent "soft propaganda" tool for China.

The lack of awareness is also visible in Latvian perceptions of Xi Jinping. Although more people claimed they had heard of the Chinese president in 2022 than in 2021, there was an upward shift in positive perceptions by 8 percentage points and an upward shift in negative perceptions by 12 percentage points, the negative attitudes toward the Chinese president were among the lowest in the region. On the contrary in 2022, Latvia, together with Bulgaria, showed the highest degree of favourable attitudes towards the president.

## Do you think China presents a security threat to Latvia?

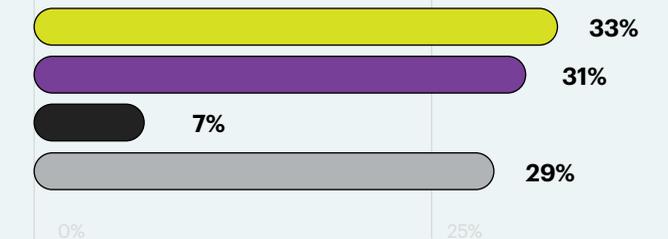
■ No
 ■ Average



The negative perception of Xi Jinping decreases with age and rises with the level of education attained. Younger and university-educated people tend to hold more negative views of the Chinese president than older and less educated respondents. The striking differences between the negative perceptions can be attributed to the high percentage of people unsure how to respond to the question and those who had never heard of the president. Latvia's media outlets primarily concentrate on local news and European politics, which can explain people's lack of knowledge concerning Xi and China.

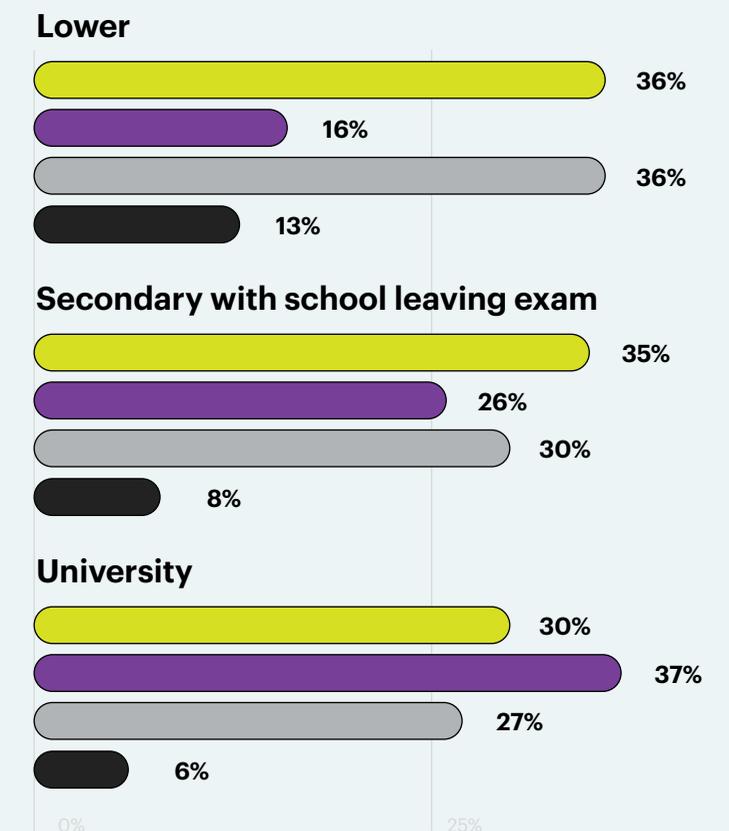
## Perception of Xi Jinping in 2022

■ Positively
 ■ Negatively
 ■ Never heard of him
 ■ Do not know



## Perception of Xi Jinping in 2022 based on education

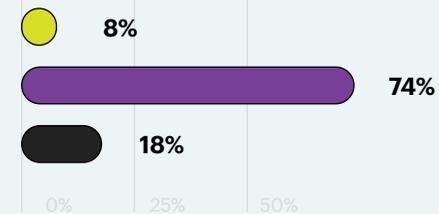
■ Positively
 ■ Negatively
 ■ Never heard of him
 ■ Do not know



Although they may not be familiar with the current Chinese president, more Latvians appear to recognize certain negative features of the regime. This might be explained by the higher rise of reporting about Huawei and China's influence in politics overall in the international media.

### Chinese regime could be an inspiration for Latvia

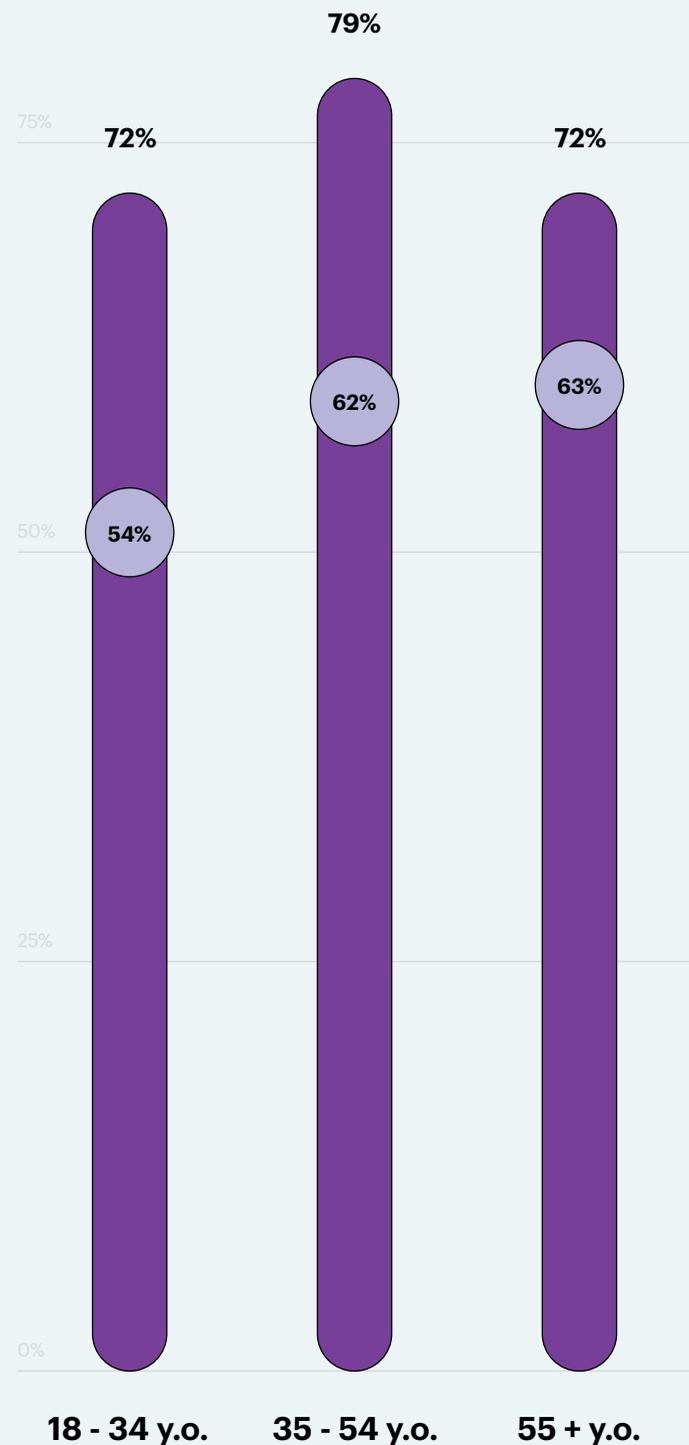
Yes No Do not know



The Chinese regime is not seen as a potential role-model for Latvia by three-quarters of the respondents in 2022, which compared to 2021 increased by 14 percentage points. A such shift was primarily driven by younger people, with many previously undecided youth making up their minds on the issue. The varying attitudes on these different questions could merely be a matter of different degrees of knowledge about China dependent on the topic. Whereas fewer people may know facts about Beijing's leadership and methods of malign influence, people hold a general understanding of the nature of totalitarian regimes and the consequences for individual rights and freedoms due to Latvia's history. Such memories might have been revived after another oppressive regime next door invaded Ukraine, a democratic and free country.

### Chinese regime could be a source of inspiration for Latvia

Disagree 2021 Disagree 2022



# Young generation

Young people aged 18-24 in Latvia share strong support for NATO and the EU. They also indicate broad awareness of Russia as a security threat.

At the same time, however, they distrust the institutions inside their country and are less satisfied with democracy than the older generation. Across most

respondents, a considerable shift towards the West has been measured, while younger respondents, when asked to position Latvia geopolitically between the East and the West, preferred to stay in between. It might point to the fact that the dichotomy of East and West remains strange to them.

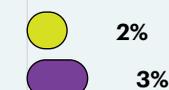
### Would you like your country to be part of the West, part of the East, or somewhere in between?

Average 18 - 24 y.o.

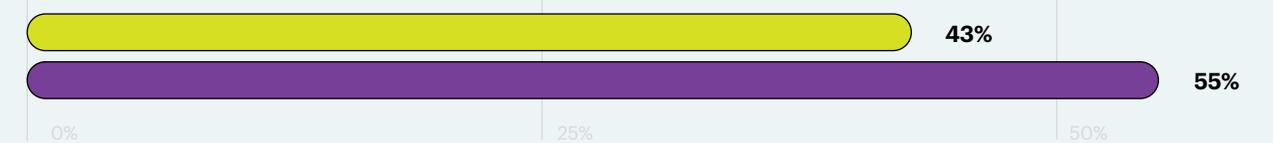
#### West



#### East

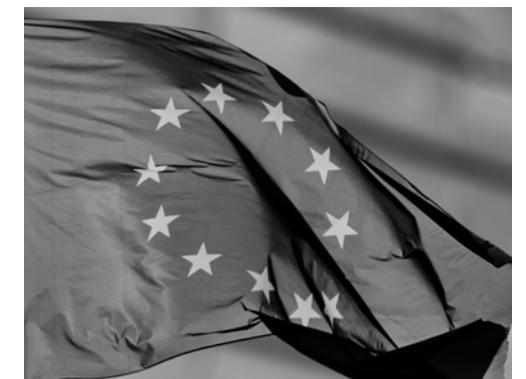
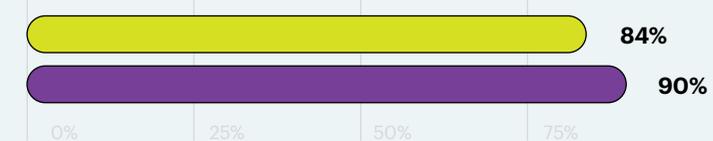


#### In between



### Willingness to stay in the EU

Average 18-24 y.o.



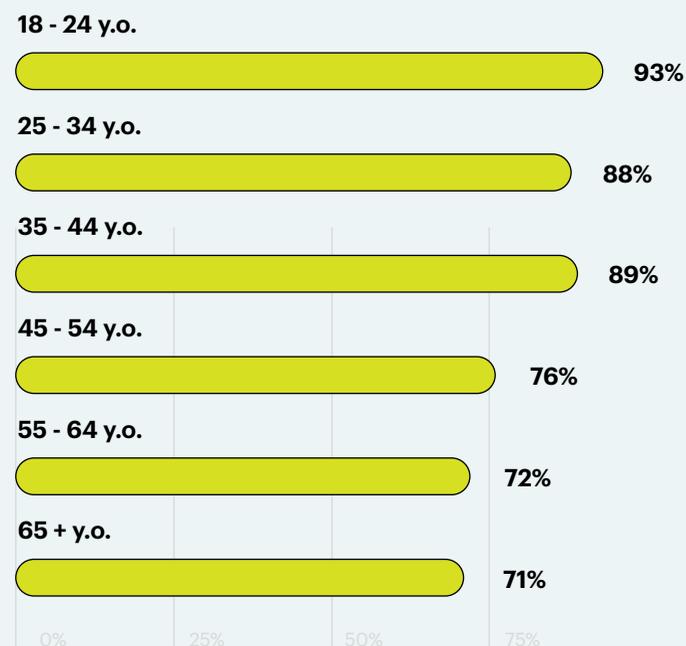
90% of young people are supporting the EU and 93% are supporting NATO membership. The commitment to both organisations, among different age groups, stands highest with young people.

Between 2021 and 2022, Latvia, like most CEE countries, saw a spike in support for NATO membership, rising from 72% to 79%. Meanwhile, average support for the EU remained constant. These developments are directly attributable to Russia's war against Ukraine as the Kremlin's belligerence has changed security perceptions in Latvia and the importance of NATO as its safety guarantee. Young people are the biggest supporters of NATO with the most significant shift from 2021 (77%), to 2022 (93%) when compared to the other age groups.



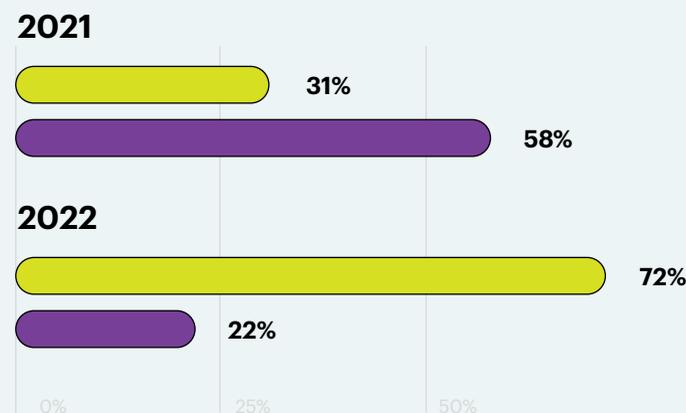
The change in perceptions due to the security situation, especially among young people, is also underlined by the increase in perceiving Russia as a threat, which rose by 41 percentage points among younger respondents. It can also be applied to the negative perceptions of Vladimir Putin, increasing from 56% in 2021 to 87% in 2022. The shift is steeper compared to the average population, where the negative perceptions rose from 58% in 2021 to 72% in 2022.

## Support for staying in NATO



## Do you consider Russia to be a threat?

Youth  
 Yes No



## Distrust in institutions among youth

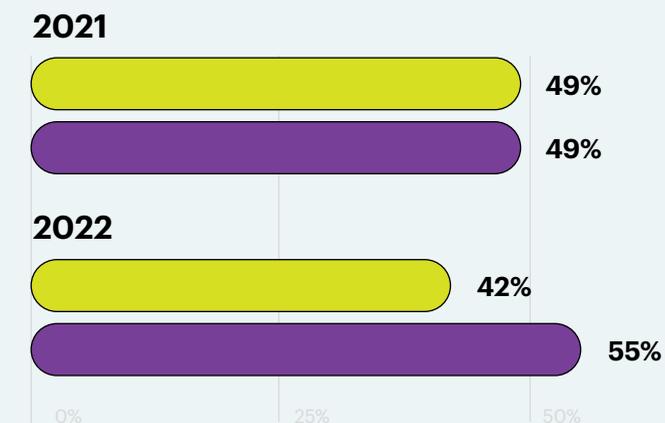
Despite stronger pro-Western attitudes, young people trust institutions less than older respondents. A majority distrusts the government (55%), parliament (57%), and president (51%). Young people also disagree with the statement that the needs of people like them are well considered (54%), while dissatisfaction with democracy rose by 11 percentage points. At the same time though, satisfaction with how democracy works in Latvia remains constant compared to 2020. The rise in dissatisfaction rather came from respondents that indicated they were undecided or unsure in 2020. According to an OECD report, youths' trust in government and satisfaction with democratic processes decreased since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. The capacity of policymakers to deliver a fair, inclusive and resilient recovery for young people can be a way how to solve the decline in trust.<sup>2</sup>

**Despite the high satisfaction in democracy and high support in the EU and NATO, young people do not trust the institutions in Latvia.**

## Distrust in government: change over a year

Youth

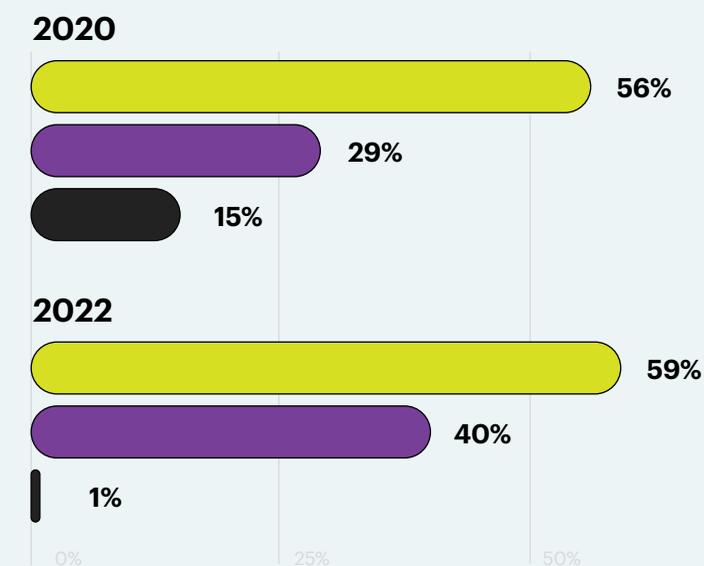
Trust Distrust



## To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with how democracy works in your country?

Youth

Satisfied Dissatisfied Do not know



# Recommendations

## ① Boost awareness about Chinese foreign malign influence.

Latvians are among the least aware in the region of potential Chinese threats. Political officials and opinion shapers in the country, consequently, should put the public spotlight on Beijing – these discussions should focus on the risks and vulnerability that come with cooperation with the country and the ways these partnerships could enable malign influence to seep in. These types of open conversations and the more active involvement of both political and civil society sectors proved to be effective in Lithuania or the Czech Republic, two countries whose societies indicate broad awareness of this threat.

## ② Talk about China with youth.

Youth (18–24 y.o.) expresses the least amount of awareness concerning Beijing's influence activities. To alter the dynamic, there is a need to introduce more extensive education and awareness-raising campaigns about autocratic governments and their effects on democracy in schools. The curricula should also incorporate engagement with the role of China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## ③ Understand and support youth.

Youth trust in government and satisfaction with democratic processes have declined since the beginning of the pandemic. Developing the capacity of policymakers to deliver a fair, inclusive, and resilient recovery for young people could be a way to stem the decline in trust.

## ④ Foster pro-Western support among older respondents through.

For example, coordinating generational exchanges and/or peer-to-peer communication, engaging opinion-shapers considered to be trusted voices by these groups, and organising in-person events to discuss the foreign policy priorities of Latvia and the importance of the EU and/or NATO to their lives.

## ⑤ Continue investing in government strategic communications.

By monitoring the information environment, making data informed policy decisions, and organising campaigns that inform citizens in a timely and clear manner, it is possible to foster trust and rapport with different target audiences. The pandemic has illustrated that trust can be especially fragile during crises if policymakers are unprepared to communicate the necessary actions and restrictions they must enforce.

## ⑥ Promote democracy to youth.

Based on youth dissatisfaction with democracy and their distrust towards government, democracy should be more actively promoted and discussed in workshops.

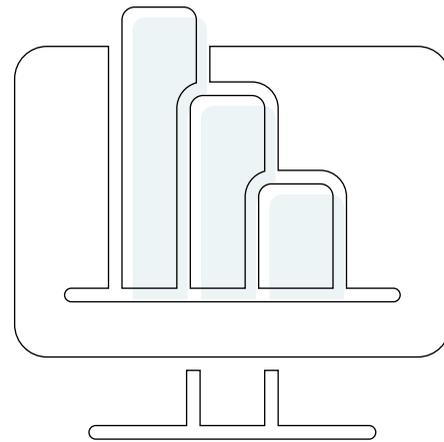
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## Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on a public opinion poll 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 the settlement. For the purposes of graphical data visualisation, the results were rounded to full numbers. To improve the reader 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 was conducted by Latvian Facts 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 using consistent methodology since 2017.

## References

- 1 <http://www.systemicrisk.ac.uk/publications/discussion-papers/political-scar-epidemics>
- 2 <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/delivering-for-youth-how-governments-can-put-young-people-at-the-centre-of-the-recovery-92c9d060/#boxsection-d1e32>



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