

The race to mobilise voters starts today

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The race to mobilise voters starts today

In February, GLOBSEC conducted its yearly poll in the Central and Eastern European region. The poll asked respondents about their voting intention in the 2024 elections to the European Parliament, as well as their reasons for voting or staying away from the ballot boxes this summer. The results indicate that participation in the Europe-wide elections in the CEE region can be stronger than ever, but there is work to be done to mobilise all potential voters.

Participation in the European Parliament (EP) elections was relatively low in 2019 in the 9 Central and Eastern European countries polled by GLOBSEC (Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), as voter turnout remained below 50% in 7 of them. In Lithuania and Romania, only slightly more than half of the voters went to the ballots.

However, based on GLOBSEC's poll, this might change in 2024, as in 4 out of the 9 countries, more than half of respondents said they would "definitely" cast a vote in the upcoming EP elections. If those who said they would "rather" vote are also counted, every one of the 9 countries might expect over 50% of eligible voters to turn up at the ballot boxes. This indicates that CEE citizens increasingly acknowledge the role the Union and – specifically – the Parliament plays in their lives, and they want to have a say in where the European Union is heading in today's challenging international environment. The events of the past five years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the events in Gaza, and the fact that the Union's actions concerning these issues became highly publicised, have likely driven up voters' intentions to partake in EU-wide elections.

The voting intentions are especially high in Hungary, which is likely the result of the political turbulence caused by the clemency scandal and the fact that Hungarians will also have to cast their vote in municipal elections on the day of the EP ballot. The positive difference between the

proportion of those who would definitely vote in 2024 versus actual voting data from 2019 is also substantial in Czechia. In contrast, there is a substantial negative difference in Lithuania, which saw the highest voter turnout in CEE in 2019, but – at the time of the GLOBSEC polling – Lithuanians seemed to be more hesitant about going to the polls.

Lithuania is one of two countries where more respondents said they would "rather" vote in the EP elections than those who were certain about their presence at the ballot box in 2024. Another such country is Slovakia. In these countries, voter mobilisation by civil society and political actors will prove to be key.

As the proportion of voters who said they would "rather" vote is above 22% in all countries except for Hungary, voter mobilisation cannot be neglected anywhere. This is especially important for pro-democratic actors for two key reasons. First, an EP elected by a large number of voters would have a very high level of legitimacy. Second, strongly anti-EU narratives could have serious mobilisation potential among anti-system voters, skewing the results towards extremist forces if democratic actors cannot call their own voter base to polling stations.

Voting intentions in 2024 and voting in 2019

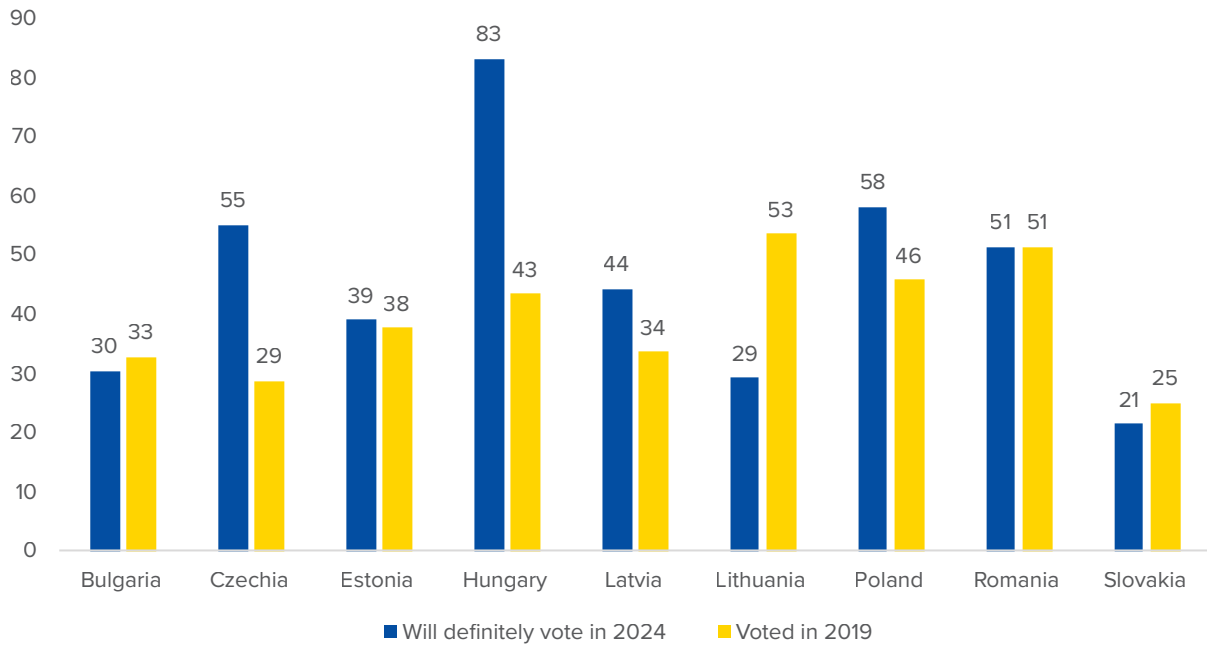
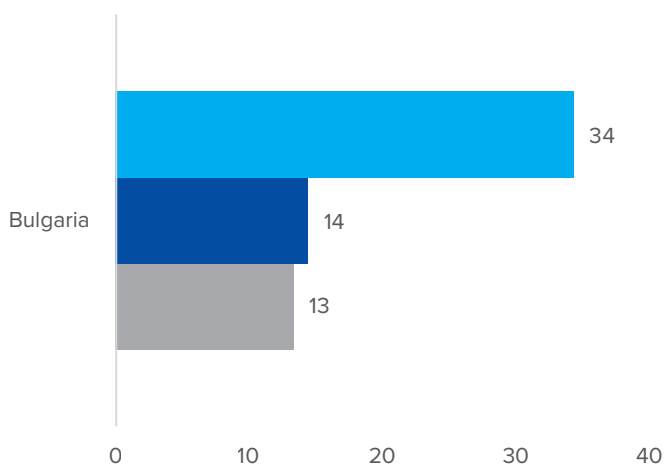


Figure 1 Proportion of GLOBSEC Trends 2024 respondents who would ‘definitely’ vote in the upcoming EP elections vs rounded turnout data from 2019. Source for 2019 data: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/turnout/>

Respondents who said they would ‘definitely’ or ‘rather’ vote were asked about why they wanted to cast a ballot. In 6 out of the 9 countries, the most frequently mentioned reason was that it was their duty to vote. In Czechia and Slovakia, the main reason was that they cared about who would represent their country in the EP, and this proved to

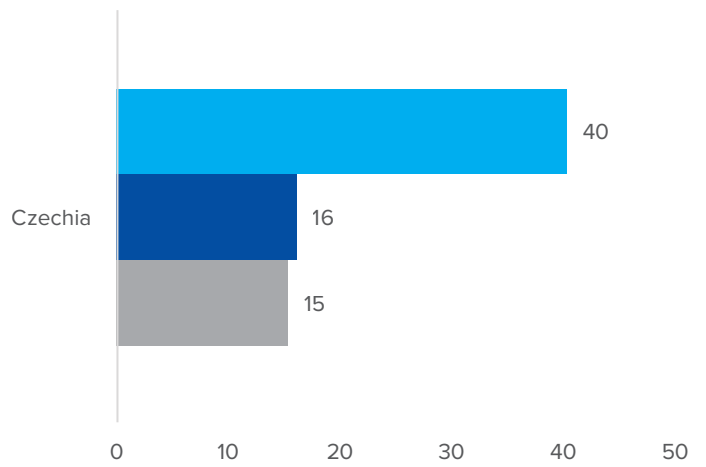
be the second-most popular option for the majority of countries except for Bulgarians, who cited a better future as their main reason for voting, followed by the duty-based argument in second place.

Justification for voting in Bulgaria (N=579)



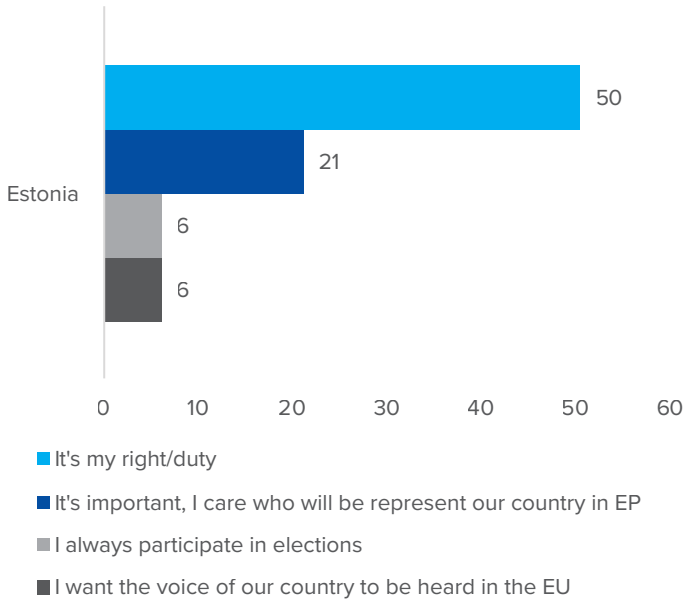
- For a better future
- It's my right/duty
- I want a change/ Changing the direction of the EU

Justification for voting in Czechia (N=772)

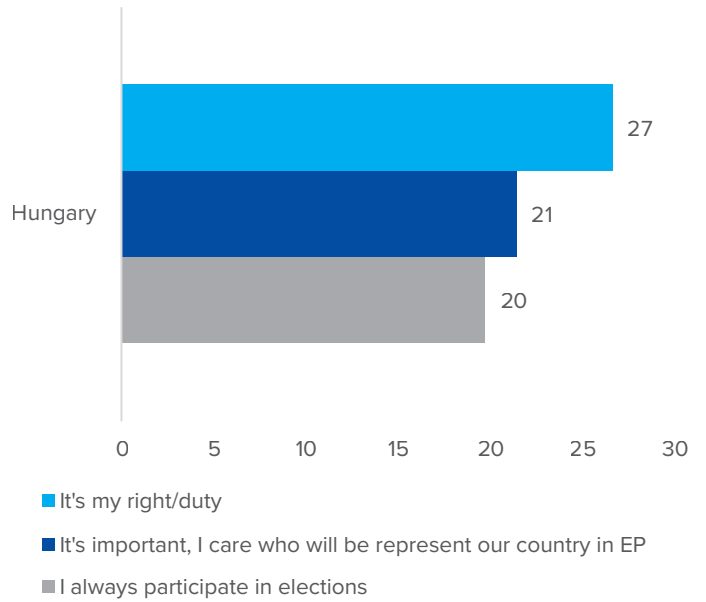


- It's important, I care who will be represent our country in EP
- I always participate in elections
- It's my right/duty

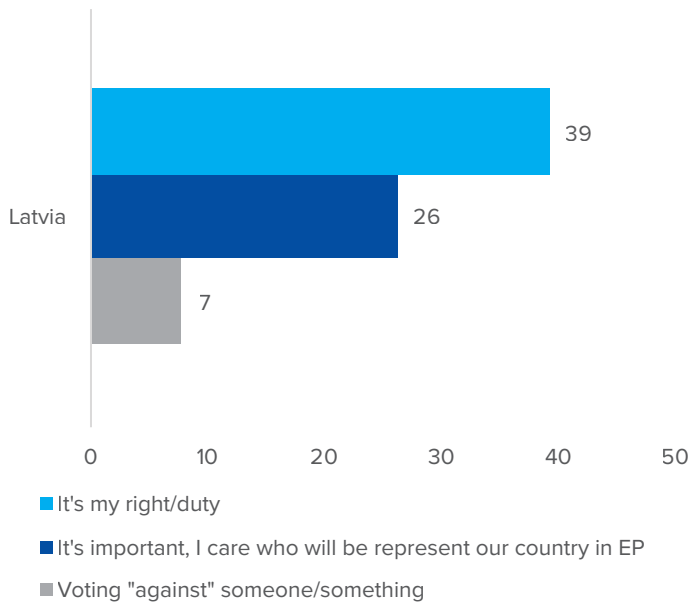
Justification for voting in Estonia (N=617)



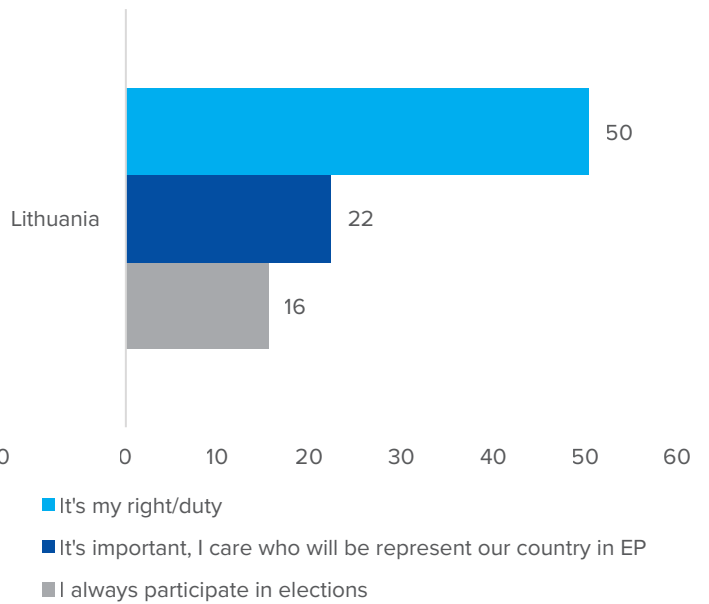
Justification for voting in Hungary (N=878)



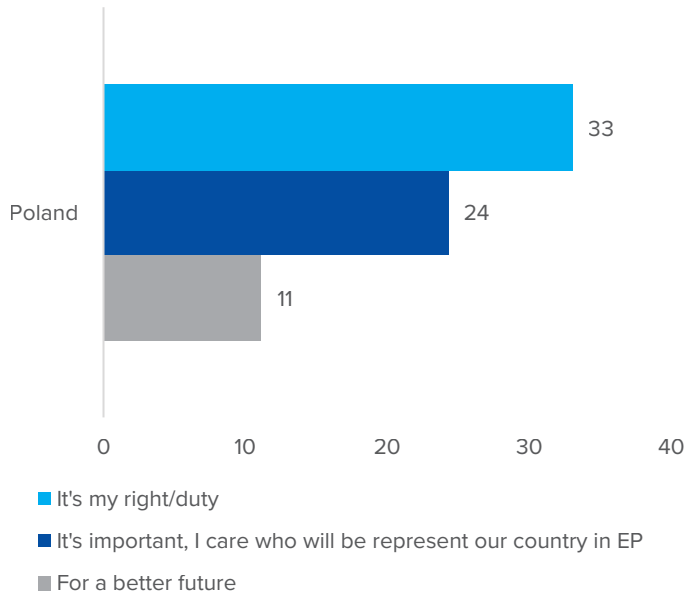
Justification for voting in Latvia (N=669)



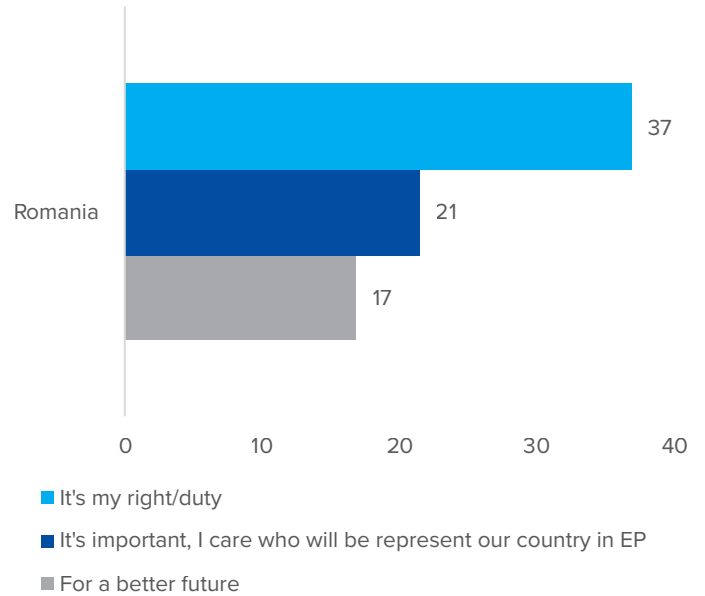
Justification for voting in Lithuania (N=613)



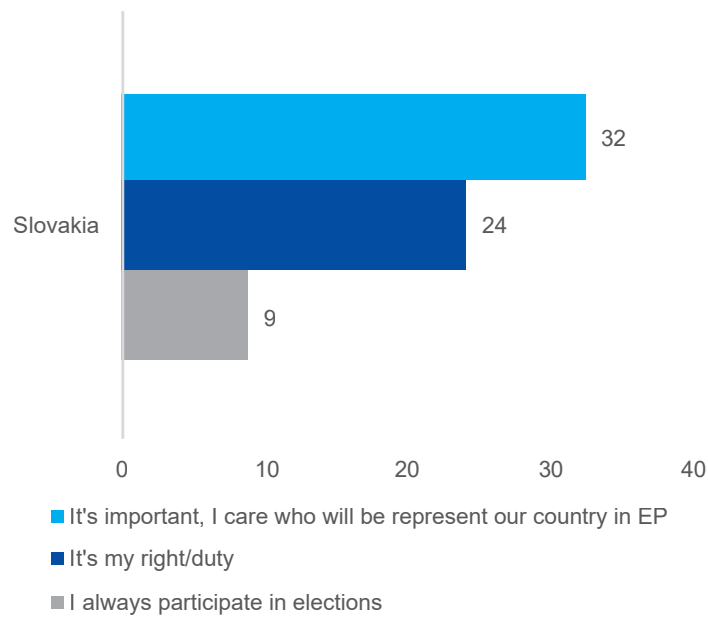
Justification for voting in Poland (N=836)



Justification for voting in Romania (N=741)



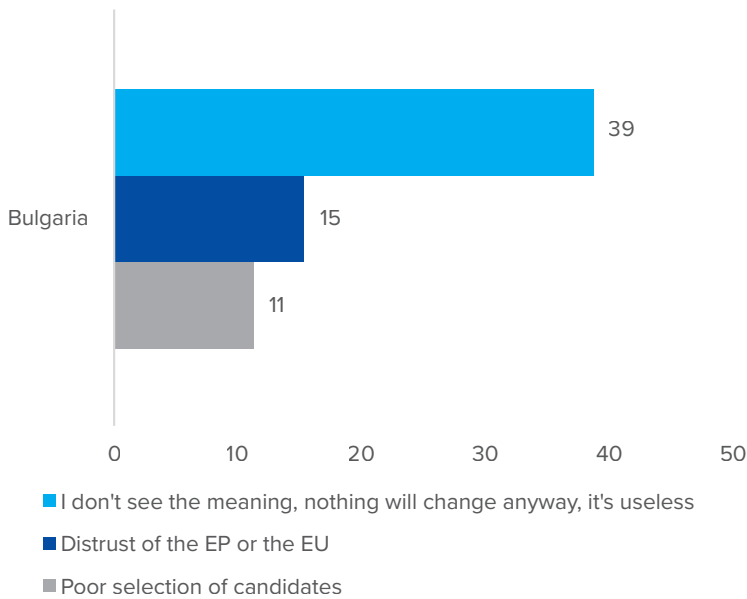
Justification for voting in Slovakia (N=522)



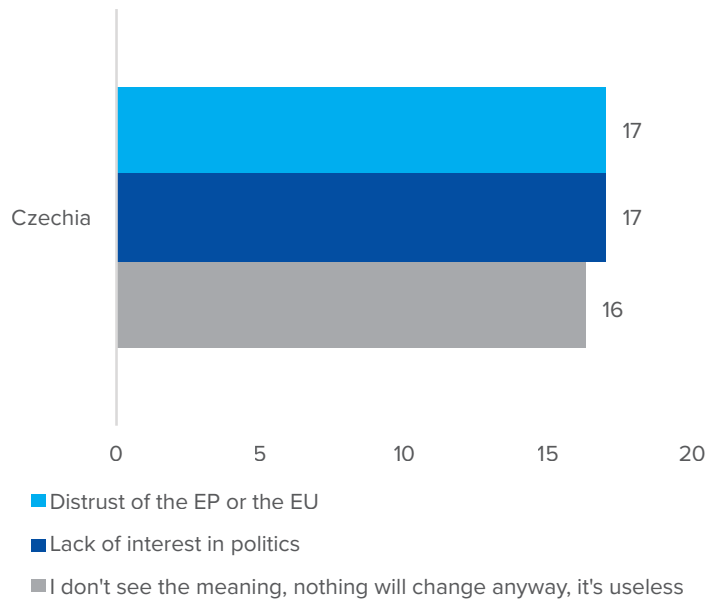
Those who would ‘definitely’ or ‘rather’ not vote were also asked about their reasoning. In 5 countries, the largest group was those who said they were not interested in politics. In 3 others, most respondents argued nothing would change with their vote. Those with a lack of interest in politics are unlikely to be mobilised. However, in Bulgaria, Latvia, and Lithuania, where at least a third of respondents said nothing would change, populist actors could potentially get them to the ballot boxes with false promises, so democratic actors must focus on explaining how change can be achieved in the European Parliament. Those distrusting the EU or EP, who are mainly present in Czechia (17%), Bulgaria (15%) and Poland (10%), could also be targeted by populist forces.

It must be highlighted that in 4 out of the 9 countries, more than 10% of respondents mentioned objective obstacles, like travelling, being away from home or their health as their reason for not voting. These should all be issues that can be tackled in 2024, and actors mobilising for the elections need to provide clear options for these citizens to be allowed to exercise their democratic rights if they wish to. Finally, it needs to be highlighted that 31% of Romanian respondents did not want to or could not answer why they would not vote in the 2024 EP elections.

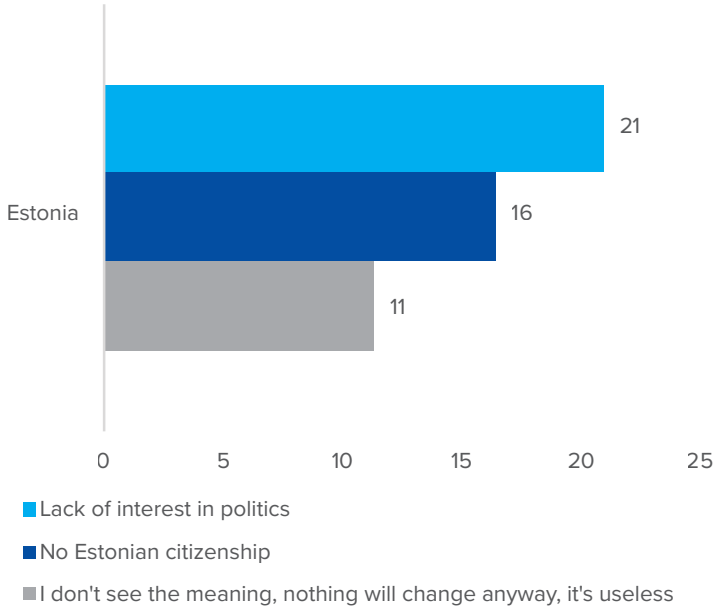
Justification for not voting in Bulgaria (N=346)



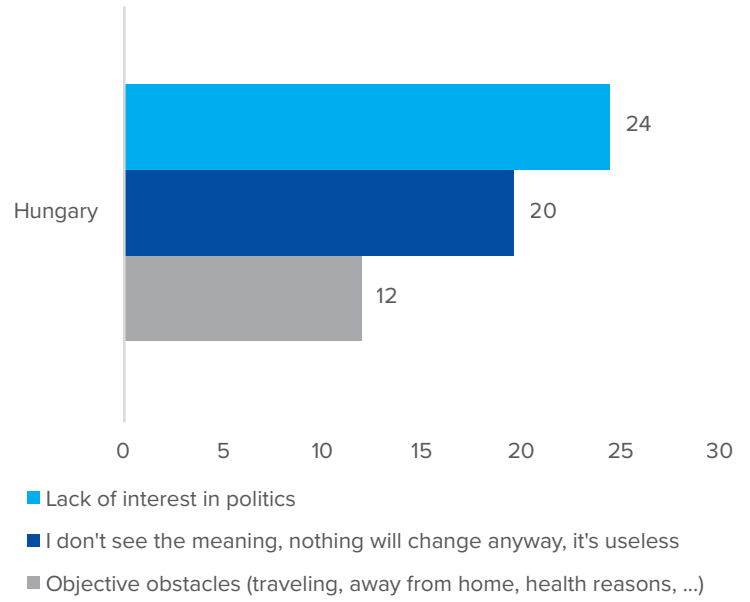
Justification for not voting in Czechia (N=215)



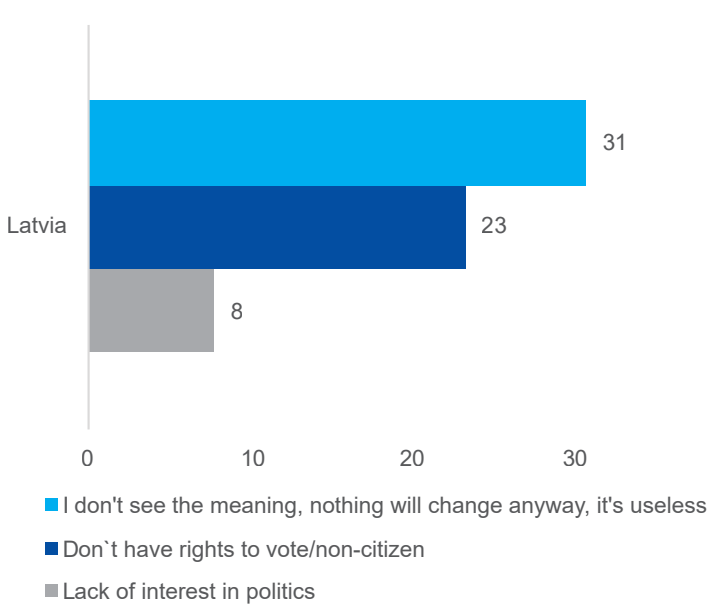
Justification for not voting in Estonia (N=265)



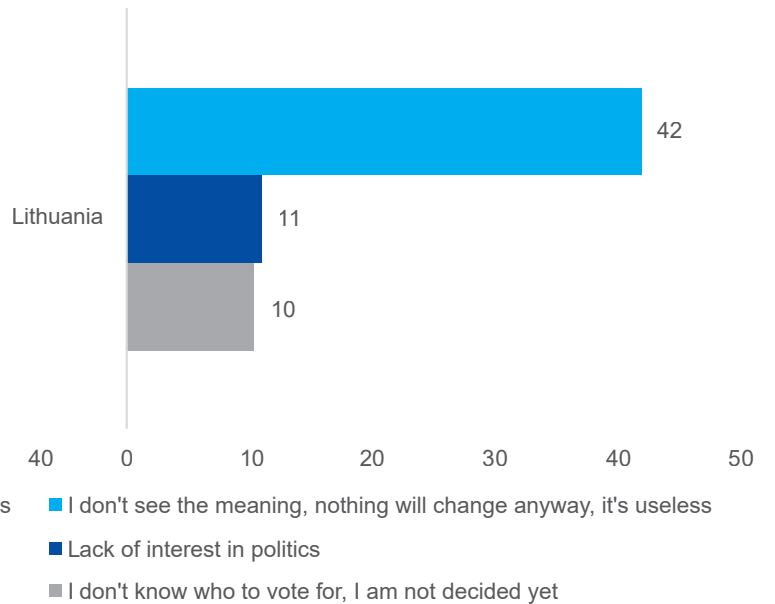
Justification for not voting in Hungary (N=122)



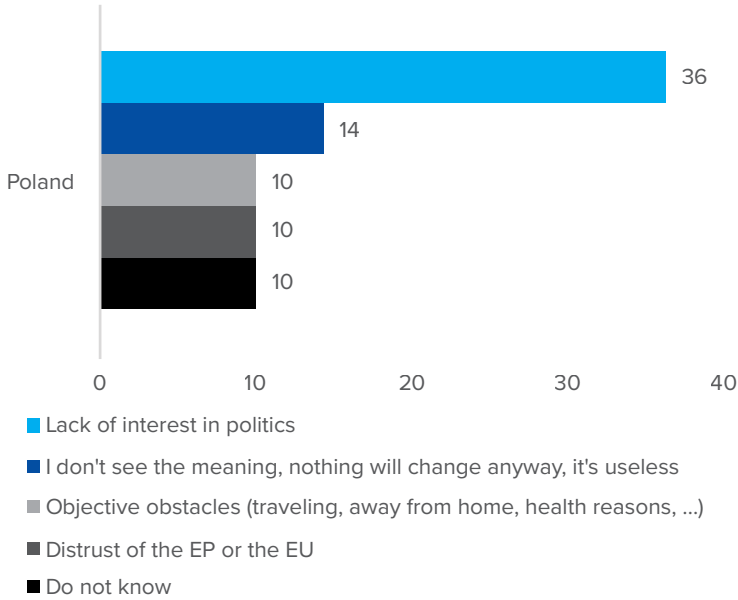
Justification for not voting in Latvia (N=258)



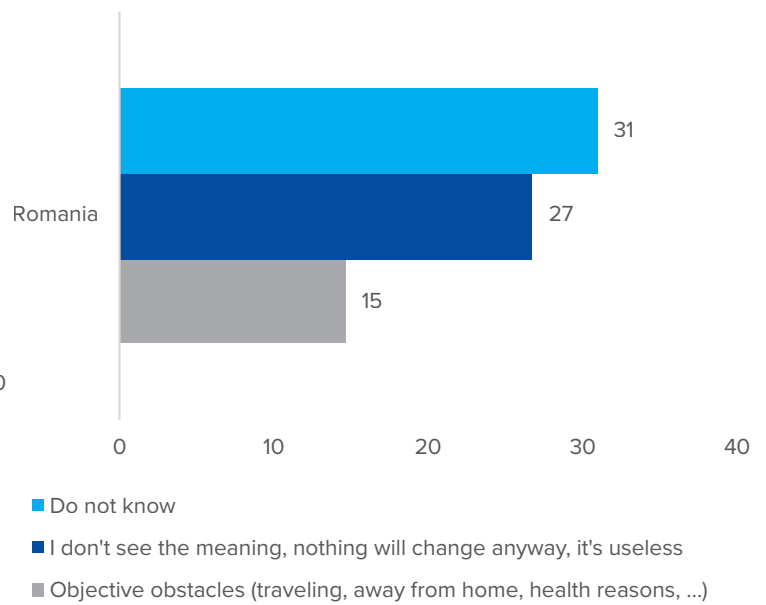
Justification for not voting in Lithuania (N=202)



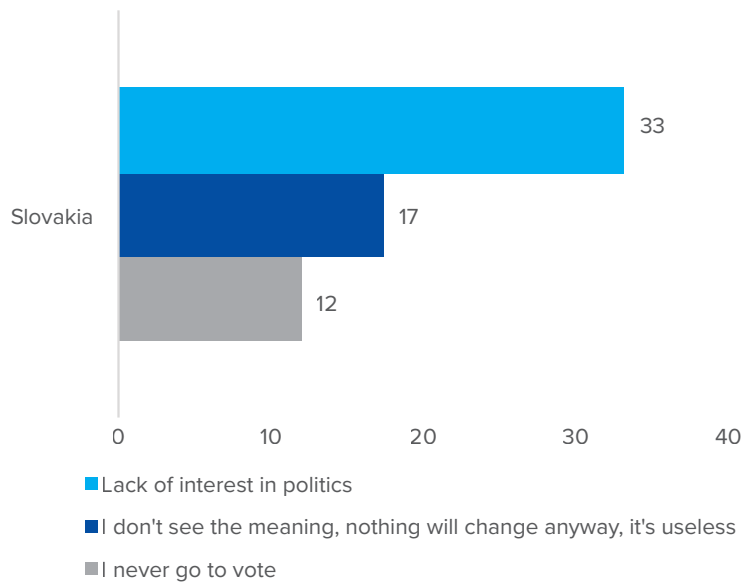
Justification for not voting in Poland (N=126)



Justification for not voting in Romania (N=146)



Justification for not voting in Slovakia (N=364)



In summary, the 2024 EP elections could become the most popular ever in the CEE region due to high voter turnout, which will help provide additional credibility to the new Parliament. However, it will also be a race for the mobilisation of voters, especially for pro-democracy actors, who need their voters at the

ballots to stop the far right from making significant gains since the latter might be better able to bring their supporters to polling stations via populist anti-EU claims.