



Bulgarian Public Opinion, 2024:

Increasing Commitment to Allies and Improving Perceptions of Media Freedom amid Continuous East-West Ambivalence

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The briefing paper analyzes Bulgarian public opinion with respect to key domestic and international socio-political attitudinal dimensions on the basis of the results of a GLOBSEC-led polling carried out in Central and Eastern Europe in 2024. In Bulgaria, the survey¹ took place between February 10 and February 27, 2024 on a representative sample of 1000 Bulgarian respondents based on stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The profiles of the respondents were representative of Bulgaria according to gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. The trends identified in 2024 are tallied with the outcomes of the polling in 2023, as outlined in [*Teetering on the Brink of Regional Convergence. Bulgarians' Stances on Russia's War against Ukraine, Strategic Orientation, Democracy, Media and Values vis-à-vis Central and Eastern Europe*](#) (IGA, 2023).

The main patterns in Bulgarians' dispositions for the current year reveal both **persistent continuities with views expressed in 2023** and **some noticeable shifts within an approximate 4% range**:

- **Bulgarian respondents remain firmly committed to EU membership, while pro-Russian attitudes are also entrenched** as ambivalence in assessing responsibility for the Kremlin's war against Ukraine continues unabated. **Apprehension of migration and permissive views in relation to far-right nationalists** represent additional lasting characteristics of the Bulgarian dispositional landscape.
- At the same time, **a growing momentum in favor of pro-Atlanticist positions and more positive evaluations of the media environment and lesser dissatisfaction with the government** stand out in 2024. Support for NATO membership and perception of the US as Sofia's crucial strategic partner have registered incremental gains. Bulgarians also perceive a greater degree of media freedom and are more likely to show a somewhat deeper attachment to democracy.
- Nevertheless, **Bulgarians' Euro-Atlantic commitments are qualified by distinctive attitudinal traits**. The respondents in the country are at once decidedly in favor of EU and NATO membership and, yet, feel disconnected (e.g. the EU is continuously seen as dictatorial), and remain oriented on the instrumental benefits from these organizations rather than shared values. Moreover, Bulgarians' authoritarian-state leanings represent a lingering attitudinal liability (as Russia and China are still not overwhelmingly evaluated as threats).
- A further conspicuous trend reveals that **Bulgarians tend to harbor significant uncertainties, lack of orientation and information** (and potentially concerns with providing socially desirable answers), **which transpire in the high rates of "don't know" responses**.

¹ The graphs in this paper are provided by IGA as based on GLOBSEC survey results.

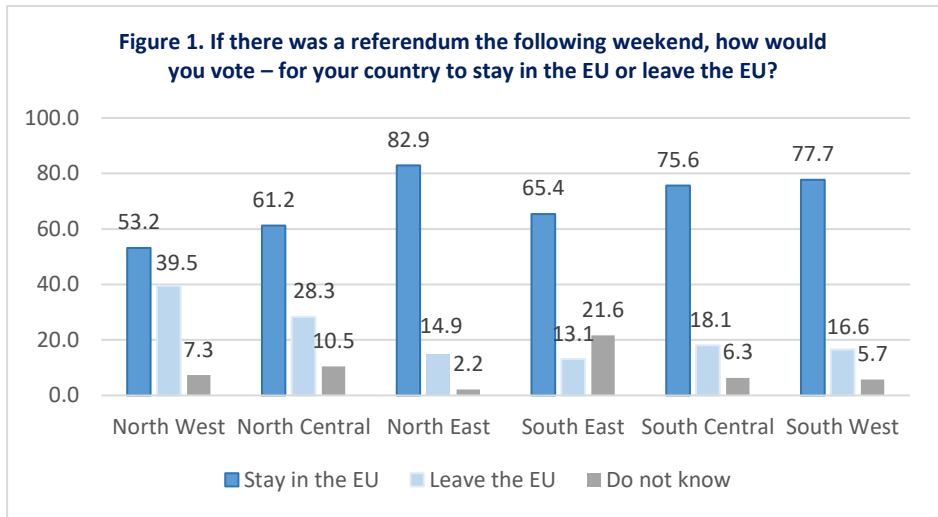
The latter are most prominent in relation to abstract concepts about politics (e.g. the essence and characteristics of liberal democracy, far-right nationalism) as well as events and developments, particularly of global significance (e.g. Beijing's role in international affairs, Ukraine's status, strategic partnerships). Instead, most certainty is displayed with regard to those issues that are of immediate relevance to national politics and discussions (e.g. the EU, the state of the media and the political system). **The youngest age group of 18-24-year-olds register above-average “don't know” responses** (whereby the declining educational quality across the country could be feeding into this trend).

- **Youth attitudes generally fall in line with predominant stances in the rest of society** and are not distinguished by a significantly more pro-democratic, socially tolerant and pro-Western bent.
- **The most significant cleavage that emerges** as regards demographic data related to place of residence and type of settlement **is that between the different regions of Bulgaria rather than between urban and rural dwellers**. The North East region distinguishes itself with more democratic, progressive and pro-Western views, while the attitudinal differences between those who live in cities and villages are less stark.

Bulgarians on the EU, NATO, and Strategic Partnerships: More Attuned to Allies, But Still Apart

Bulgarians' traditionally EU-favorable views have persisted into 2024 as exactly the same proportion of 71% of respondents, as in 2023, would choose to continue Bulgaria's membership in the Union in the hypothetical situation of a referendum on staying in or leaving the organization. At the same time, there has been a slight decrease of 3.5% in the number of those who are inclined to prefer Sofia's severing of ties with the EU (down to 19.8% in 2024 from 23.3% in 2023).

These overall sentiments are shared among all age groups, who register similar results in their preferences for the maintenance of Bulgaria's status as a EU member state: 72% of 18-34 year-olds; 73.9% of 35-54 year-olds and 70.1% of 55+ year-olds. In line with the already identified pattern of the more democratic and progressive dispositions prevalent in the North Eastern region of the country, it is notable that respondents from that region exceed the 71% average support across the country for remaining in the EU by 11 percentage points (at 82.9%), surging ahead of all other five regions. The North East's traditions of pro-democracy protests and historical connectedness to Romania and Central Europe can play a role in maintaining a more democratic and open outlook. Moreover, the fact that the North East houses Bulgaria's naval forces and a coordination center contributing to NATO has likely sensitized the region to threats from Russia in the Black Sea.



Support for Bulgaria’s membership in NATO has grown by 4.4%, rising from 57.8% in 2023 to 62.2% in 2024. The proportion of those respondents who would like to see the country’s membership discontinued has simultaneously declined by 4.6% in the past year (26.6% in 2024 as against 31.2% in 2023). In a similar vein to attitudes towards the EU, age groups do not markedly differ in their preferences for Bulgaria to stay in or leave the Alliance. Rural and urban residents also share roughly identical views. Yet, respondents in the North East region once again surpass their counterparts in all other regions in the above-average support for NATO membership reaching 74.8%, which is in contrast to the lowest result of only 38% gauged in North Central Bulgaria.

Overall, the prominence of NATO initiatives over the past year in Bulgaria (such as the multinational battlegroup) and a clearly enunciated government position in support of the Alliance may have contributed to a greater public adherence to and understanding of the importance of Sofia’s allied commitments.

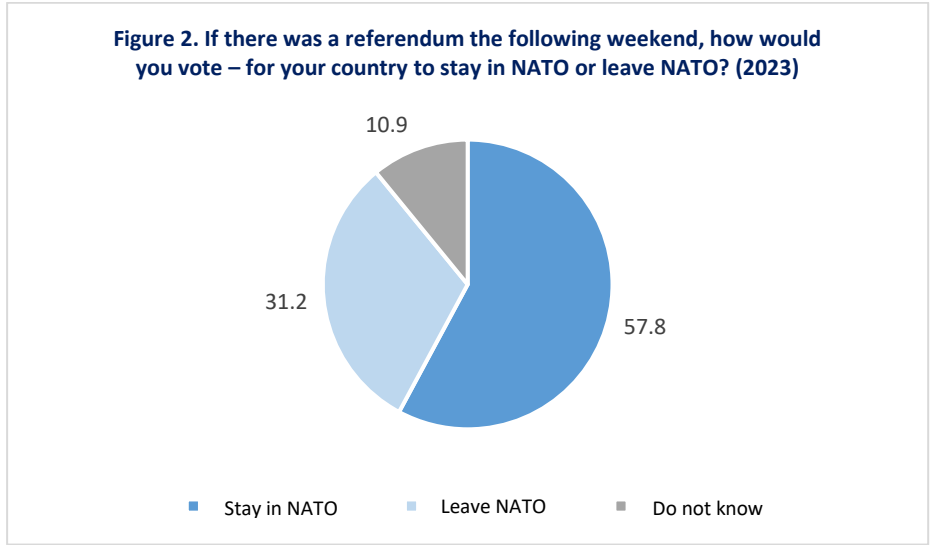
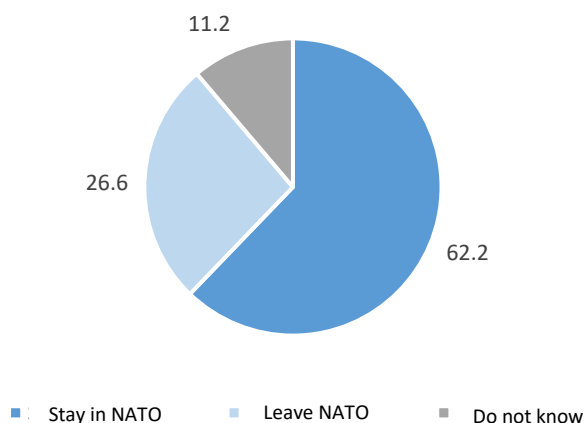


Figure 3. If there was a referendum the following weekend, how would you vote – for your country to stay in NATO or leave NATO? (2024)



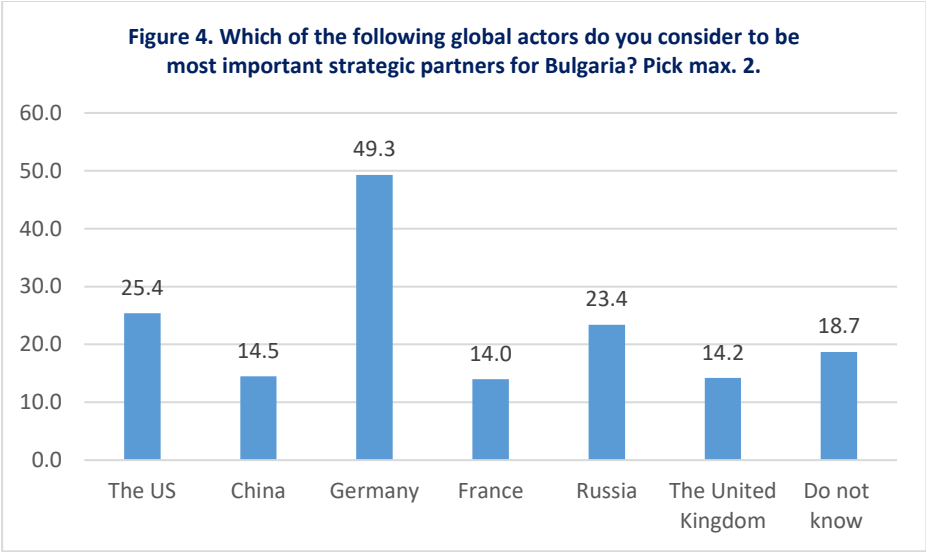
As regards attitudes to strategic partnerships with global actors, **the view that the US represents the most important partner for Bulgaria is garnering a larger approval.** 25.8% of the polled Bulgarians share this strategic stance in 2024, which amounts to a 5.5% increase on responses in 2023. The opinion that, conversely, Russia represents Bulgaria’s most important strategic partner has declined in popularity by 2.2%, standing at 23.4% in 2024. The upward trend in the preference for the US as a crucial ally has led to a reversal in the rank ordering of the Bulgarians’ strategic affinities on an annual basis so that more respondents in 2024 perceive Washington rather than Moscow as a strategic partner.

Nevertheless, **a much more broad-based Atlanticist position has yet to take root and become more widely established** as Bulgarians remain more familiar with European positions, while ideological and propagandistically distorted sympathies for Russia still need to be dispelled. Almost half of the polled (49.3%) consider Germany to be Bulgaria’s most important strategic partner, which marks a 9% increase since 2023. 67% of the Bulgarian respondents additionally think that “the EU should start building its own army to limit dependence on the United States”. The most enthusiastic supporters of closer strategic ties with the US are to be found in the 45-54 age group, 31.4% of whom deem that Washington is Bulgaria’s crucial strategic ally. By comparison, 18-24-year-olds score almost 10% less on the same attitudinal measure. Differences in perceptions of the US are even wider on a cross-regional basis as almost 39% in the North East and 40% in the South West assess that strategic relations with the US are paramount for Bulgaria in contrast to only roughly 12% in North Central and South Eastern Bulgaria, 13% in the North West and 14% in the South Central region.

Moreover, the negative tendency whereby Bulgarians cannot decisively assess Russia as a strategic threat (in line with geopolitical circumstances) has yet to be substantially reversed, given that **well over half of the polled (56.5%) still think – as in 2023, that Moscow does not pose a danger to**

Bulgaria. Almost 52% of the youngest respondents between 18 and 34 years of age think that way as do 52.5% of university graduates.

For its part, China – the other key actor on the global authoritarian nexus, continues to be viewed in non-threatening terms not least due to the absence of a sustained public debate about the negative repercussions of Chinese investments in Europe as well as military-political activities aimed at subverting the rules-based international order. Hence, **almost 70% of the respondents think that Beijing is not a danger to Bulgaria** and China is ranked on a par with France and the United Kingdom in the Bulgarians’ scale of strategic preferences. The same proportion of 14% of the polled attribute to Beijing, Paris and London, respectively, the role of a crucial strategic partner for Bulgaria.



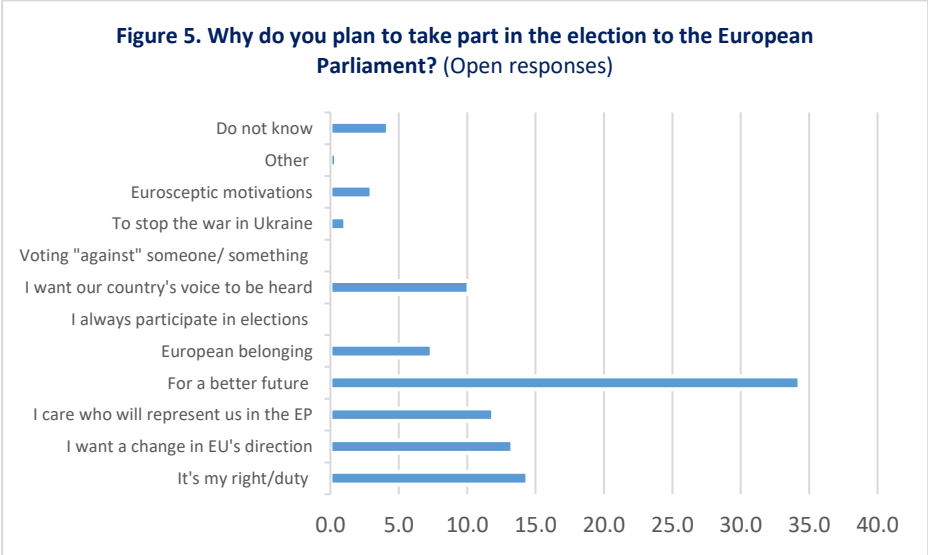
In general, Bulgarians’ unflinching commitment to remaining a part of the EU and NATO combined with an inability and unwillingness to comprehensively consider Russia and China as a threat is testimony to the fundamental (and paradoxical) ambivalence in traditional Bulgarian attitudes. It is reflected in a preference to “balance” relations with the West and the East, which amounts to a geopolitical and values-based contradiction, given the radically different standpoints of these two poles in international politics.

European Parliament Elections Beckoning: Bulgarians as Less Than Convinced Europeanists

In the wake of the European Parliament elections in June, more than half of the Bulgarian respondents (57.8%) declare an intention to vote. **The youngest age group of 18-34-year-olds demonstrates a lesser willingness to participate in the elections** as 47.8% of them (or 10% less than the average for the whole population) plan to go to the polls.

In line with Bulgarians’ typically instrumental rather than values-conditioned attachment to the EU, most of those who do intend to take part in the elections are motivated by prospects for a better future (34.3%) as opposed to wider considerations of European identification and EU-wide, normative concerns. 13.3% view voting in the EP elections as a way to effect change in the direction of the EU and only 7.4% are spurred by motivations related to European belonging.

The expectation of benefits (i.e. work, travel opportunities) thus prevails as an overwhelming majority of the Bulgarians still perceive the Union as distant and not fully inclusive (of Bulgaria). This is reflected in the strongly persistent perception that “the EU dictates to us what to do without Bulgaria having the power to influence it”, which is shared by 73.1% of the polled Bulgarians (up 2.4% since 2023). Youth also go along with this view as 71% of them perceive the EU as dictatorial (which result has remained unchanged over the past year).



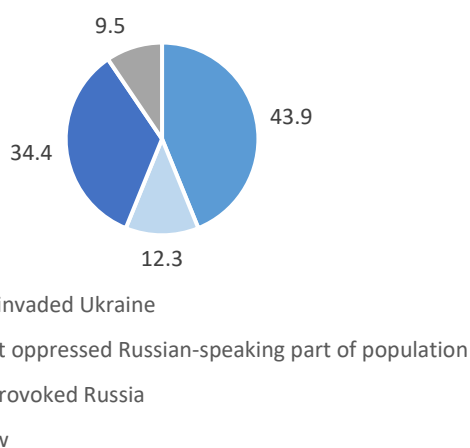
Who Started the War in Ukraine: The Bulgarians Remain Undecided

The Bulgarians’ divided assessments of Russia’s war against Ukraine have persisted virtually unchanged from 2023 into 2024. Slightly more of the polled (46.7%) consider that the West’s “provocation” of Russia and Ukraine’s supposed oppression of its Russia-speaking population are to blame for the outbreak of the war as opposed to 43.9%, who rightly point out the fact that Russia invaded Ukraine. Despite evidence to the contrary and in line with oft-repeated pro-Russian propagandist narratives, Bulgarians persevere in the opinion that by providing military equipment and weapons to Ukraine, Bulgaria is provoking Russia and bringing itself closer to the war – a view shared by 61.1% of the respondents.

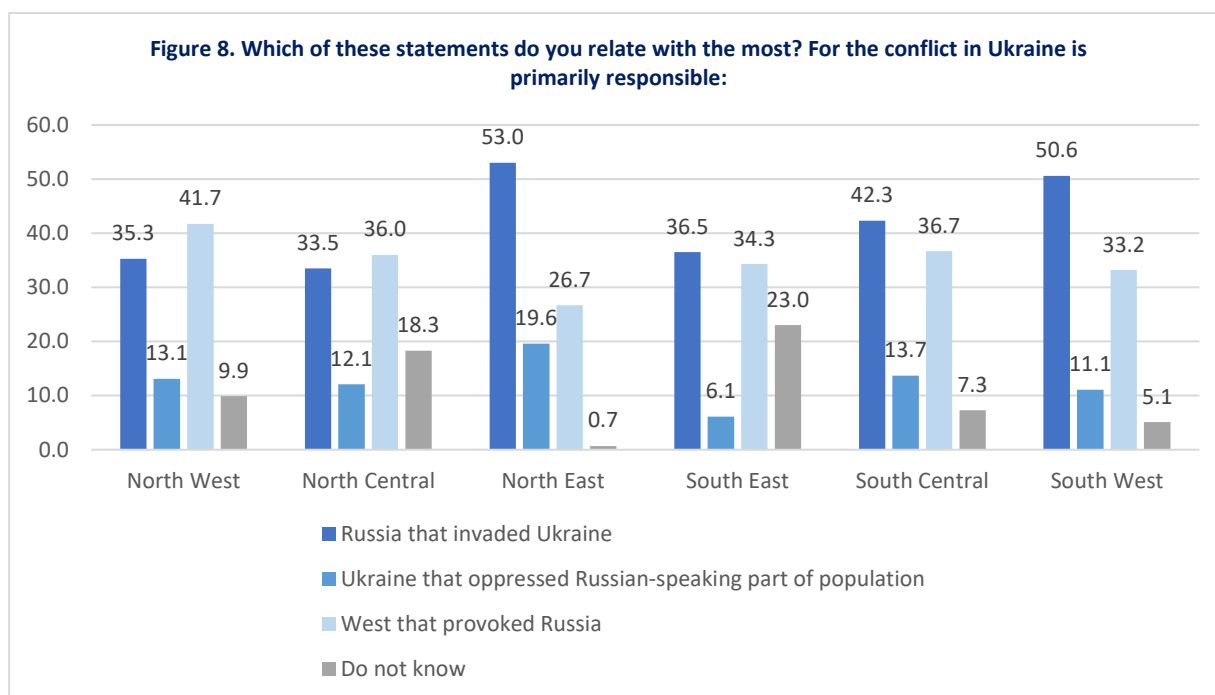
Figure 6. Which of these statements do you relate with the most? For the conflict in Ukraine is primarily responsible (2023):



Figure 7. Which of these statements do you relate with the most? For the conflict in Ukraine is primarily responsible (2024):



Youth appraisals of the war have also lingered at similar levels since roughly 40% of 18-34-year-olds in 2024 – as well as in 2023, indicate Kyiv or the West as the culprits. Those among the youngest, who declare that they do not know, encompass 16.9%, which is twice greater than in the older age groups of 35-54 and 55+ year-olds. In regional terms, the North East and South West stand out again among other regions as over half of their polled residents, 53% and 50.6%, respectively, consider that Russia is to blame for the war. These results are well above the average ranges in other regions of Bulgaria, where the proportion of those who view Moscow as the aggressor hovers between 33 and 42%. At the same time, **there is little distinction between rural and urban dwellers’ attitudes as a whole**. Exactly the same percentage of 43.9% in both types of settlements pinpoint the Kremlin as the aggressor. 34% in urban and rural areas alike blame the West and urban residents surpass their rural counterparts by 2.7% in blaming Ukraine (12.9% as against 10.2%).



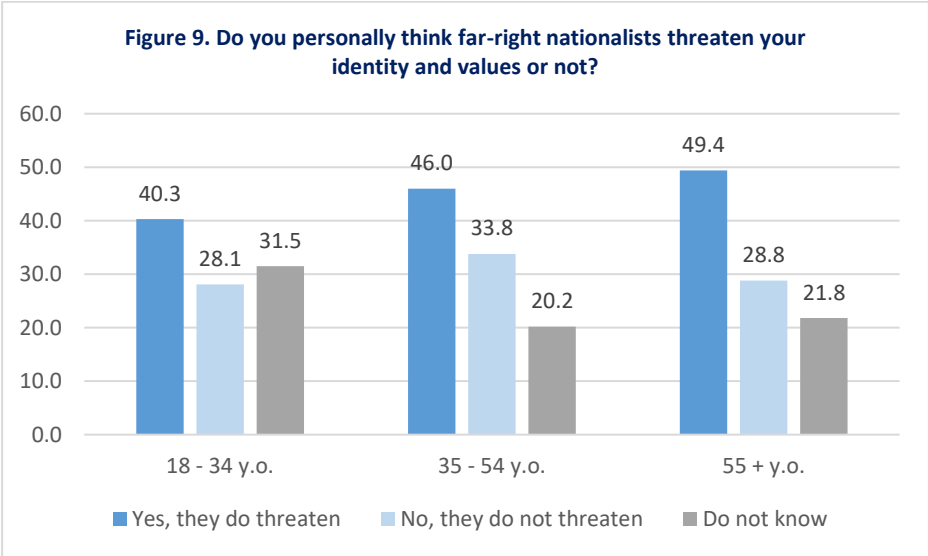
Bulgarians also remain ambivalent in their evaluations and preferences for Ukraine’s future status. 30.8% think that the country should become a member of the EU and NATO and just as many – 30.2%, deem that it should become a neutral country, which orientations are again identically distributed among urban and rural respondents. The significant lack of clarity and orientation on this matter can be inferred from the high percentage of those who do not know how to respond, reaching 19.1%.

National Identity: Fears of “Outsiders” and Equivocation on the Far-Right Threat

Bulgarians continue to espouse relatively intolerant views as regards minority communities. A significant majority of 65.3% disagree that the rights of LGBTI (such as the right to marriage) should be guaranteed, which nonetheless represents a 3.6% decline in the scope of disagreement with the same question in 2023. Migrant-skeptical positions also remain entrenched. Migration, particularly from outside Europe, stands out as a factor that is overwhelmingly perceived by Bulgarians (69.8%) as a significant threat to national identity and values. Ukrainian migrants are however viewed much more positively as over half of the respondents (51.3%) consider that they do not represent a danger in values-based terms.

Apprehension of the economic impact of migration (without distinction as to where migrants come from) is especially prominent. A strongly held opinion emerges, shared by 71.8% of the polled, which disputes the statement that “Bulgaria needs migrants from other countries to cover the lack of workforce in various economic areas”.

At the same time, Bulgarians’ stance on the extent to which far-right nationalists threaten national identity and values remains equivocal. 46.1% believe that far-right groups pose such a danger (or 3% less than in 2023), while 30.5% do not and a high rate of 23.4% do not know how to respond. **The youngest respondents in the 18-34-year-old age groups are distinguished by relatively weaker perceptions of threat from the far-right** since their older counterparts are more attuned to the danger. Uncertainty in young people’s assessments can also be identified, as those who do not know whether the far-right is a danger or not amount to 31.5%, which is 10% more than in the 35-54 and 55+ age range.

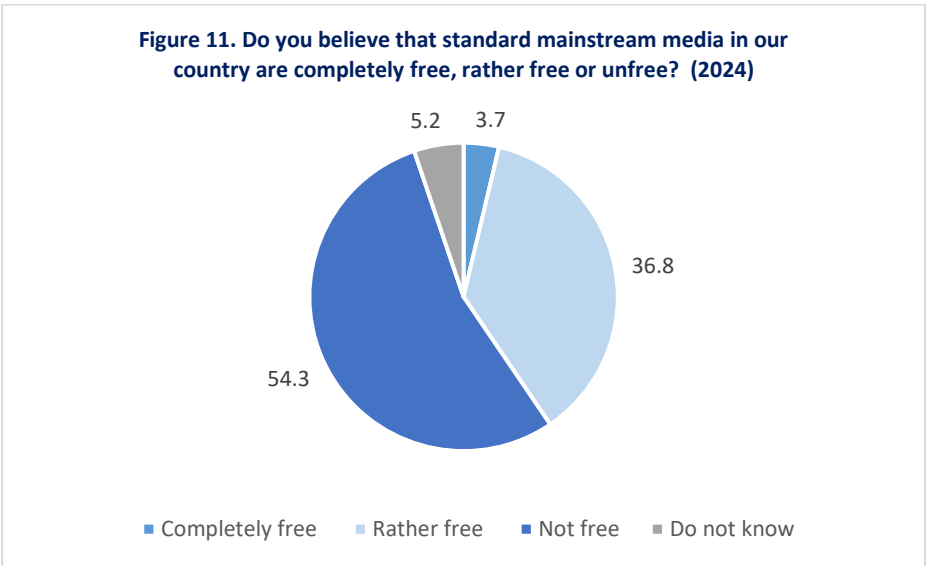
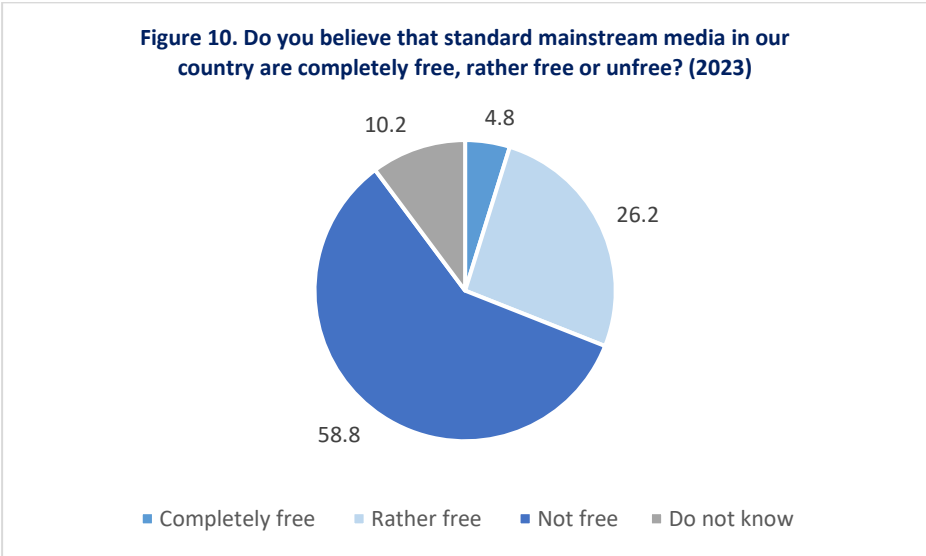


Overall, the high degree of uncertainty among Bulgarian respondents as to whether far-right nationalists represent a threat to identity and values can be accounted for by the fact that such far-right groups have gradually become part of the mainstream political, societal and media discourse. The pro-Russian, nationalist party Vazrazhdane (Revival) gained 14% of the vote share in the 2023 parliamentary elections, thus becoming a force in parliamentary politics. Although some political parties and government figures have condemned far-right groups as a threat, there has not been an all-out and clear-cut stance against them among most major political parties in Bulgaria.

In a similar vein, counter-disinformation civil societal initiatives have exposed the false and propagandist content of far-right discourses. Yet, online, print and TV outlets with a national-level audience have demonstrated a degree of permissiveness as regards Kremlin-friendly, nationalist rhetoric by featuring far-right politicians in their coverage and interviews, thus enabling the migration of extremist views from social onto “mainstream” media. Hence, the combination of political and media “normalization” of far-right positions and simultaneous societal and, on occasion, political pushback has made it difficult for citizens to orientate themselves in the political environment and take a decisive stance.

Media, Democracy, and Government: A Boost in Credibility

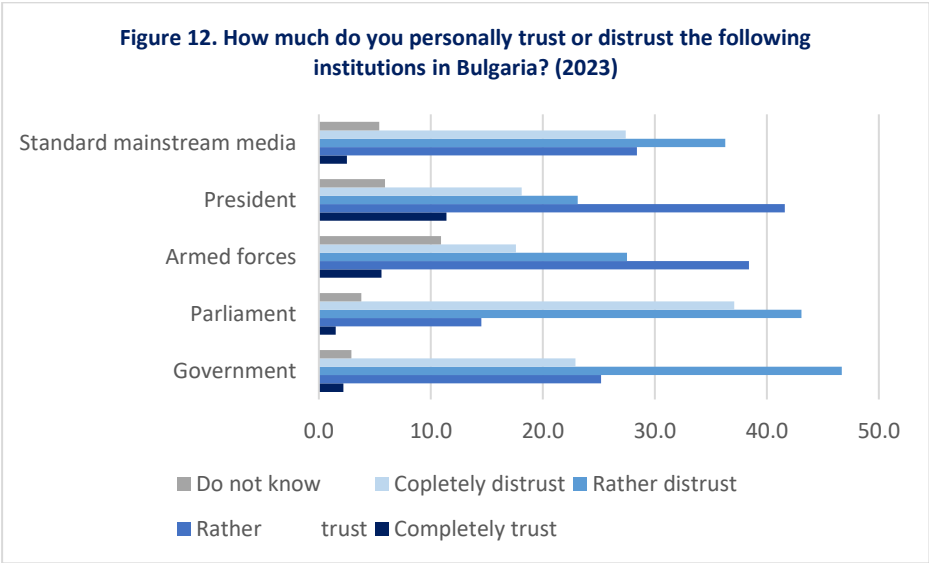
Bulgarians still occupy an entrenched position that the media in the country are not free, with 54.4% expressing this view. However, **an improvement in the appraisal of media freedom in Bulgaria can be noted since 2023** as there is a 4% decrease in the proportion of those who consider media to be unfree over the course of the past year. Moreover, 10% more of the polled in 2024 than in 2023 think that the media are either completely or rather free. This positive trend can be attributed to the growing prominence of counter-disinformation civil societal activities as well as the more pluralist and complex government configuration of the Denkov cabinet that was more attuned to the importance of freedom of expression. This socio-political environment thus opened avenues for a greater representation and inclusivity of different perspectives in the media.

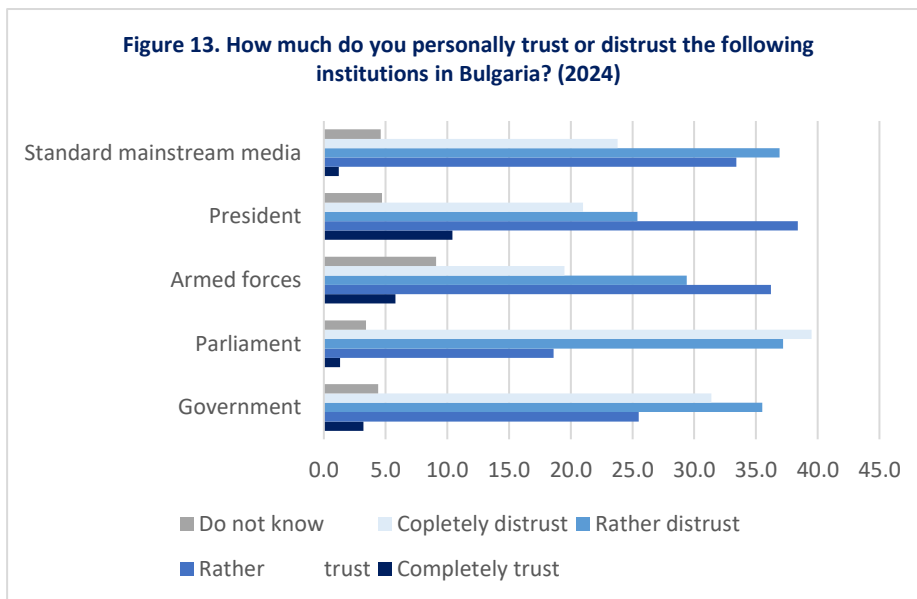


Attachment to democracy has also grown on an annual basis by over 4%. 78.2% of respondents in 2024 as against 73.9% of the polled in 2023 now subscribe to the statement that “Democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms, rule of law, is good for our country”. More Bulgarians further agree than disagree (54.1% vs. 29.2%) that the work of non-profit organizations is important for the functioning of a democratic society.

Bulgarian respondents nevertheless remain dissatisfied with how democracy actually performs in the country – a view expressed by 71.9% of them. Moreover, the evaluation as to whether *liberal democracy* is a danger to Bulgaria’s identity and values poses a difficulty to 21.8% of the polled, who do not know how to respond. 18-24-year-olds display an even greater degree of uncertainty as 32.6% declare an inability to answer. A staggering 43.7% in the same age group also do not know whether NGOs are foreign agents, significantly exceeding the average of 29.8% who cannot respond across all of the polled citizens.

Assessments of the performance of different state institutions reveal that **distrust of the government has declined over the past year by almost 3%**, which can be accounted for by the relatively greater governance stability experienced in the country between June 2023 and April 2024. This was propped up at the time by a prevalent public sentiment against holding another round of inconclusive elections typically followed by a succession of caretaker cabinets. If 69.6% of the polled Bulgarians in 2023 expressed little confidence in the work of the Bulgarian government in 2023, this rate has decreased in 2024 to 66.9%. The lack of trust in the work of Parliament has also been alleviated, decreasing by over 3%, while the President is distrusted by 5% more respondents in 2024 than in 2023.





Conclusion: Fostering Sustainable Patterns Out of Fragile Gains

Gauging Bulgarians’ opinions in 2024 and juxtaposing them to the previous year reaffirms the persistent continuities tending towards affinities for Russia, susceptibility to anti-Western propagandist narratives, perception of Bulgaria as an object rather than subject in European affairs as well as relatively intolerant and nationalist attitudes. Nevertheless, the positive shifts observed in relation to NATO, media freedom and trust in government, albeit modest in their scope, demonstrate that deeply ingrained dispositions can be altered and are therefore not a given. The high rates of uncertainty in Bulgarian respondents’ orientation to a variety of domestic and international phenomena, evident in the ubiquity of “don’t know” responses, points to the fact that a significant section of society can be considered as “undecided” and hence potentially open to persuasion.

To that end, the visibility of the counter-disinformation efforts of civil society needs to be continuously raised and complemented by the sustained development of strategic communications on the government level. The lingering and worrying patterns in youth views, including political withdrawal and ambivalence on the East-West attitudinal axis, can be addressed through a concerted political strategy for engaging young people in the governance process (both as an electorate with distinct priorities and as candidates for office). The identification of regional divides in how Bulgarians think means that a segmented civil societal and political outreach approach should be constructed, which is sensitive to intra-country differences. Ultimately, doubling down on media, historical and political literacy that takes into account socio-demographic specificities can be conducive to better-informed understandings that are less amenable to an anti-democratic and authoritarian sway.