



Österreichische Gesellschaft  
für Europapolitik



# Voices of Central and Eastern Europe

## Country report Austria



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# Introduction

Over the past few years, the European Union has coped with far-reaching political, economic and social changes and a string of successive and sometimes overlapping crises. The financial and economic crisis, refugee and migration flows and the Covid-19 pandemic all underscore both the extent to which our world is interconnected and the vulnerabilities of modern societies. Globalization, digitalization and an all-encompassing information age are indeed providing an unending challenge to all.

These major upheavals have particularly put open and liberal democratic societies to the test. Questions about or relating to identity are becoming more pronounced as many perceive threats to (traditional) values. These concerns have been reinforced by political forces advocating for the reinvigoration of the nation state and alternative models to the liberal democratic system.

Central and Eastern Europe has been particularly affected by these developments. In the case of Austria, objections to ongoing changes in society find voice especially in the Freedom Party (FPÖ), which has seen its support rise, culminating in its participation in government from 2017 until May 2019.

A new report by the **GLOBSEC** think tank ([www.globsec.org](http://www.globsec.org)) based in Bratislava provides comprehensive insight into public satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and governance, trust in political actors and the media and predispositions towards conspiracy theories and misinformation in ten Central and Eastern European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

The surveys were conducted on a sample ranging from 1,000 to 1,047 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) or computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement.

The **GLOBSEC Report "Voices of Central Europe: Perceptions of democracy and governance in 10 EU countries"**<sup>1</sup> contains a detailed comparative analysis of all country results.

As the Austrian partner within the project, the **Austrian Society for European Politics** (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik / ÖGfE) helped to analyse Austrian specific results and has compiled the present country report that focuses on public opinion in the alpine country.<sup>2</sup>

Following the Second World War, Austria developed into a stable liberal democracy dominated over decades by two political parties – the Conservatives and the Social Democrats. In the late 1980s though, this traditional political structure grew more fragile with new contenders arising and shaping the public sphere – especially on the right wing of the political spectrum. These movements have drawn support from those uncomfortable with societal developments and apprehensive about their own place in society. Compared to other surveyed countries, Austrians, in fact, express high esteem for liberal democracy. There are some warning signs, nevertheless, that need to be further scrutinized.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globsec.org/publications/voices-of-central-and-eastern-europe/>

<sup>2</sup> The collection of opinion polls in each country was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o.

# Key findings

- 1 Considerable support for liberal democratic system but sobering view on everyday politics
- 2 Austrians see the domestic media landscape as largely free but trust is still only modest
- 3 Migration and Islam remain controversial issues in the societal and value discourse
- 4 Ambivalent relationship with the European Union
- 5 Misinformation and conspiracy theories resonate within certain groups of society – especially among those who are dissatisfied with how democracy works in Austria



# Satisfaction with democracy

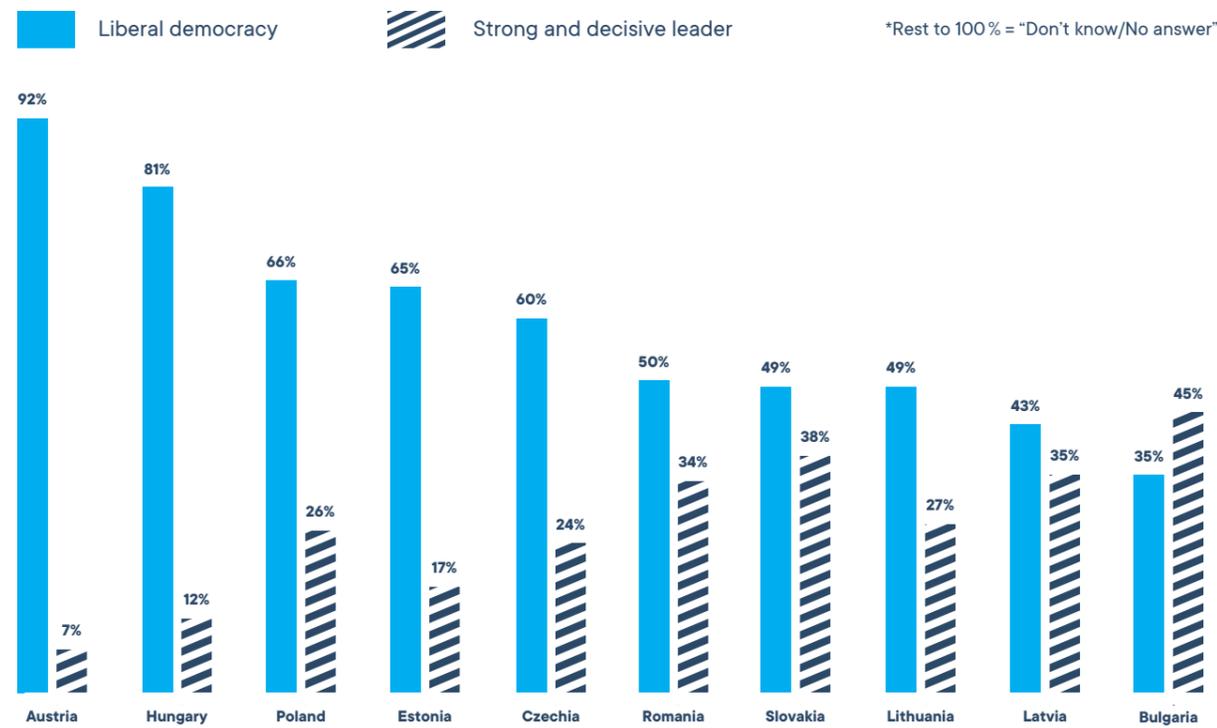
A clear majority of Austrians (92%) are in favor of **“having a liberal democracy with regular elections and a multi-party system”**. On the other hand, 7% would rather be governed by a **“strong and decisive leader”**.

**leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections**. Support for liberal democracy can be found in practically all segments of the population. Respondents with a lower level of formal education and

those in rural regions are the only groups who are somewhat more inclined to support a system centered around a **“strong leader”** (and even then only around 10% do so).

Among the ten countries surveyed, Austrians are the strongest supporters of the liberal democratic system.

## Liberal democracy or strong, decisive leader?

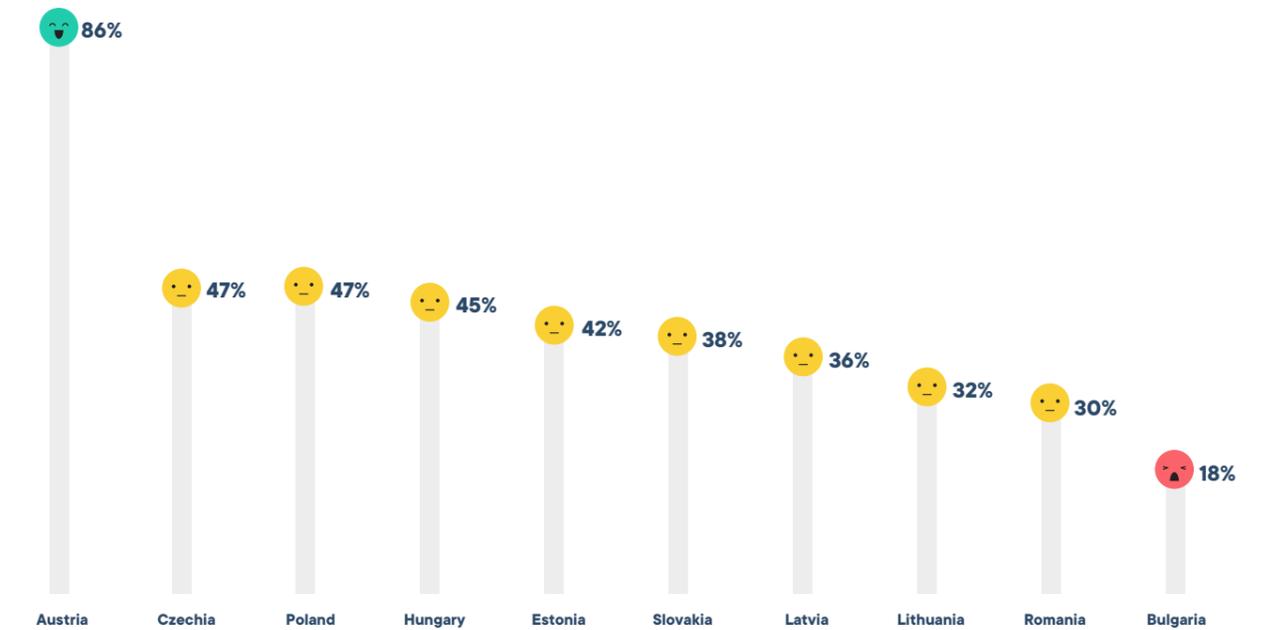


**Satisfaction with the way democracy in Austria works** is strong: 86% say that they are “very” (35%) or “rather” (51%) satisfied. Only 13% are “very” or “rather” dissatisfied.

Satisfaction with democracy in the other surveyed countries is significantly lower and ranges from between 47% in Czechia and Poland and 18% in Bulgaria.

## Satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country

\* “very/rather satisfied”  
\*\* Rest to 100% = “Very/rather dissatisfied” or Don’t know/No answer”



## What are the reasons for Austrians’ strong support for democracy?

Austrians’ considerable satisfaction with democracy is shared among nearly all demographic groups. It is based on the historical experiences of the 20th century and perceptions of Austria as a stable, secure, socially and economically strong country with a generally high living standard, a reliable public administration and a system that supports the reconciliation of interests and a robust social partnership.

Democracy has been on the move in Austria since the late 1980s; the predominance of the conservative ÖVP and Social Democrats (SPÖ), who at that time were able to gain up to 90% of the vote, led to a rigid political structure. The status quo has been dismantled by the rise of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) and new political groups like the Greens and the liberal NEOS.

Besides Malta, Austria is the only country in the EU where 16-year-olds are entitled to vote. In recent years, however, the FPÖ has regularly called for more direct democracy, arguing that it would “better represent the interests

of the people” than elected parliamentarians as mere representatives of the elite.<sup>3</sup> The “illiberal system” like favoured by the Hungarian government has been cited as a role model by FPÖ representatives. However, turning away from the multi-party system and free elections is not an option for Austrians - even if discontent with daily politics often runs high.

A total of 43% of those surveyed agree with the statement **“Who holds the power in the government does not matter, nothing will change”** (“strongly agree”: 15% | “rather agree”: 28%).

A further 95% of Austrians are convinced that “people with contacts to political elites” are given preferential treatment in society and 80% think that this is also true for “people who earn more”.

The number of those who trust political parties (50%), meanwhile, is slightly higher than those who express distrust (43%).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632577>

Respondents in Bulgaria (59%) and Slovakia (56%) are most likely to agree with the statement **“Who holds the power in the government does not matter, nothing will change”**.

84% believe that **“Oligarchs and strong financial groups have a strong control over the government in Austria”** (“strongly agree”: 49% | “rather agree”: 35%). Only in Slovakia do slightly more people believe that oligarchs and financial groups exert a strong influence on the government (85%). This opinion is weakest in Hungary (39%).

# Independence of the media

Eight in ten respondents think that “**standard mainstream media**” in Austria is “completely free” (18%) or “rather free” (62%). A total of 17%, meanwhile, are sceptical and doubt that domestic media is **free**.

Traditionally, freedom of the press in Austria ranks high compared with international peers. In recent years, however, a steady decline has been observed, as the annual ranking of Reporters Without Borders shows.<sup>4</sup> Since 2018, Austria has dropped seven spots and is now in 18<sup>th</sup> place.

When asked which actors exert the greatest **influence on the domestic media**, 57% of respondents name “**oligarchs and strong financial groups**” and 47% “**the government**”. Among those who consider the domestic media landscape to be “rather free” or “not free”, these percentages are significantly higher: 72% see influence on the part of oligarchs and financial groups and 60% from the government. Other potential

actors such as the church, NGOs, the United States, Russia and “influential groups from abroad” are mentioned much less often.

In general, there is moderate trust in the media. While 45% of respondents say that they trust “standard mainstream media” (“completely”: 6%| “rather”: 39%), a majority of 51% expresses distrust (“rather”: 42% | “completely”: 9%).

## In Austria, the role of high-circulation tabloid media is somewhat special

Austria’s print media market is among those with the highest media concentration in Europe. The Austrian daily “Kronen Zeitung” has a reach of 27% according to a 2019 analysis of Austrian media<sup>5</sup> followed by the free newspaper “HEUTE” with 12% and another tabloid, “ÖSTERREICH”, partly published in a free version, at nearly 10%.

What they all have in common is that they are co-owned by domestic media tycoons, a phenomenon subject to broad public debate and media research. This media concentration is exacerbated by the influence of major companies (e.g. Raiffeisen in the case of daily “KURIER”) and large publisher groups (e.g. Styria Verlag) that own several dailies and weekly and monthly magazines.

There is a remarkable interplay in the relationship between politics and tabloid media: Tabloid media in particular are regularly fed government ads, with the expectation of more benevolent reporting. There is conversely the fear of falling victim to a targeted negative media campaign should these ads disappear. Critical media, on the other hand, are much less likely to receive this kind of government support.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rdg.at/press-freedom-index/>  
<sup>5</sup> <https://media-analyse.at/table/3349>

## Assessment of the media landscape



“There is a remarkable interplay in the relationship between politics and tabloid media: Tabloid media in particular are regularly fed government ads, with the expectation of more benevolent reporting”.

# Values and identity

Alongside an increasingly globalizing world, questions of identity and values have become more prevalent in Austria, with certain groups like migrants depicted as potential threats to traditions and the "Austrian way of life".

## Perceptions of migrants

Four in ten respondents (42%) are convinced that **migrants** threaten Austrian identity and values while 53% do not recognize any such threat.

Another 41% believe that migrants "are favoured in our society" (53% say "not favoured").

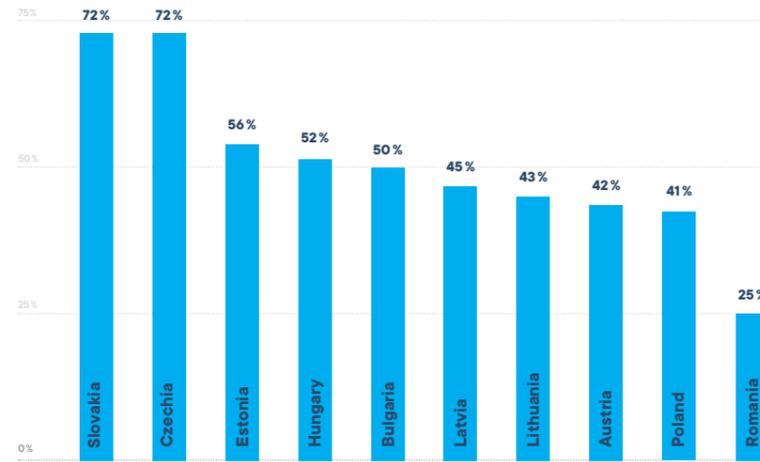
In the 10 countries surveyed, Austria ranks eighth, with only Romanian and Polish respondents more vigorously rejecting the "migrants as threats" framing. In six survey countries, meanwhile, buy-in to this anti-migrant sentiment was significantly higher. In light of the fact that Austria has been significantly more impacted by migration and refugee flows than other countries polled, this is a particularly pertinent finding.<sup>6</sup>

## How are migrants being portrayed in the political discourse?

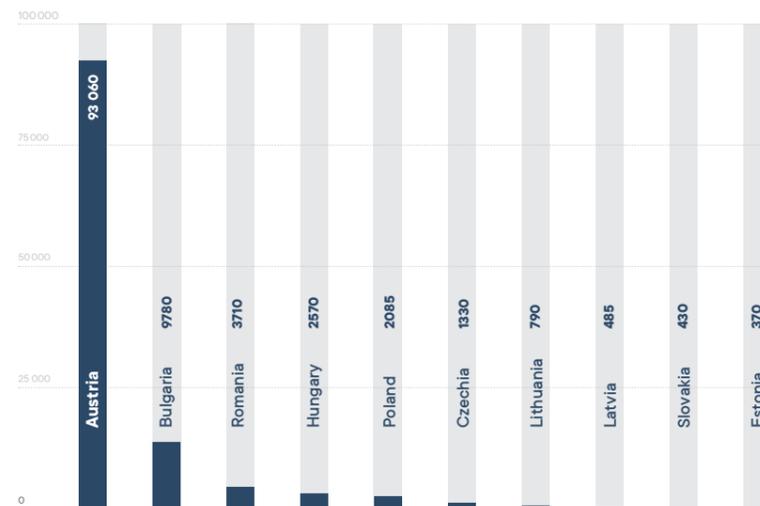
Four in ten respondents believe that migrants "are favoured in our society". This perception is not a novel phenomenon because migration was already met with consternation in the 1990s, especially among socio-economically disadvantaged groups, as people fled from a Yugoslavia that was then collapsing. These fears were particularly fuelled by the Freedom Party under Jörg Haider. Current attitudes, however, largely reflect attitudes towards the 2015 refugee and migration flows that saw Austria become one of the largest host countries (as a percentage of its population) across the EU.

Initially, public opinion had been rather inclined towards accepting refugees, particularly those fleeing the Syrian civil war. The political landscape, however, changed as concerns regarding a perceived uncontrolled influx of migrants became more paramount. Doubts also

## "Migrants are a threat to our country's identity and values"



## First instance decisions on asylum applications - Total positive decisions 2015 - 2019



began to seep in with respect to the capacity of Austrian society to integrate a large number of people, primarily arriving from Muslim countries.

Since December 2017, Austrian government policy has been characterized by a sceptical stance towards migration, notwithstanding the participation of the Greens in government beginning from January 2020. The fact that asylum seekers are generally referred to as economic migrants, rather than refugees, in the political discourse has left a notable impact on public opinion. Austrians' attitudes toward refugees and migrants have also been influenced by tabloids and FPÖ and right-wing social media platforms that regularly incite fury by disseminating reports that asylum seekers are receiving more than their fair share of the public purse in the form of social and housing benefits and free mobile phones.

## Perceptions of the United States and the West

The **United States of America** is perceived as a threat by 36% of Austrian respondents with 59% not identifying the US as a threat.

Only 24% of Austrian respondents, meanwhile, say that "**Western societies and their way of living**" are a threat to their country's identity while 73% do not share this view.

While Hungarians (21%) and Poles (12%) are less likely to consider the US as a threat to their identity and values, Slovaks (53%) and Bulgarians (43%) are the most likely to do. Slovakia (50%) and Bulgaria (34%) are also the two countries with the greatest concern regarding Western influence on their values and identity. In other countries surveyed, these worries are much less pronounced.

## Do the United States and Western societies threaten the values and identity of Austria?

This perception is partly rooted in history. In the post-war period, Austria always regarded itself as part of the West but also as a neutral country in equidistance to the US and the Soviet Union. Among those on the left-wing of the political spectrum, scepticism towards the US, including "anti-Americanism", has always been present, especially with regard to the country's global ambitions.

American popular culture, however, has always found a receptive audience in Austria. Its omnipresence is, nevertheless, viewed by some, including particularly the elderly, as a threat to local traditions rather than an enriching contribution. The same is true with respect to the many Americanisms and Anglicisms that have found their way into the German language. In general, the image of the United States has, moreover, suffered significantly since Donald Trump took office as US president.

The debate about whether Austria's identity is threatened by the Western way of life has been again reignited in recent years, spearheaded particularly by the Freedom Party that has turned to denouncing overly liberal and decadent patterns in society and culture. As an alternative model, the FPÖ has suggested looking to the Visegrád Group countries and to Russia, leading to the signing of a friendship treaty with United Russia, the political party of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

On LGBT+ rights, only 4% of Austrians believe that "**people with different sexual orientations**" threaten domestic identity and values.

In all other surveyed countries, the respective numbers are significantly higher: In Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Estonia, a total of 39%, 36%, and 35% of respondents, respectively, see those with a different sexual orientation as a threat to domestic values and identity. Czechs come closest to the Austrian view on the issue, meanwhile, with only 12% of respondents identifying different sexual orientations as a threat.

## Perceptions of the European Union

Though 21% of Austrians perceive the **European Union** as a threat to their values and identity, three in four (74%) respondents do not agree with this notion, putting Austria in the middle of the 10 surveyed countries.

Austrians have had an ambivalent relationship with the European Union. Since Austria joined the EU in 1995, a consistent majority has been in favour of remaining a member. Moves to deepen integration, however, are eyed with concern, apprehension fuelled by politicians and tabloid mass media that turn to the EU as a scapegoat for domestic problems. The EU is often portrayed as a complicated bureaucratic construct that provides a space for large member states to dominate business. And decisions at the European level are argued to often not reflect national interests. The European Union is, furthermore, seen as a motor and not a protection against the negative repercussions of globalization, underlined by migration challenges that have further stoked fears in recent years.

<sup>6</sup> [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_asydcfst&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asydcfst&lang=en)

## "The European Union is a threat to our country's identity and values"



# Conspiracy theories and misinformation

A lack of trust, insufficient transparency and considerable levels of life dissatisfaction provide a conducive breeding ground for the spread of conspiracy theories and can also increase the susceptibility of a given population to disinformation. When accompanied with turmoil, it is all too easy to identify and galvanize the public against perceived threats.

A total of 43% of the survey sample indeed “strongly” (12%) or “rather” (31%) believe that the **“EU and Brussels dictate to Austria what to do without Austria having a chance to influence”** its own policy direction. Just over half of respondents “rather” (28%) or “strongly” (26%) disagree.

Four in ten Austrians, meanwhile, believe that **“Austrian society is undergoing a slow and secret Islamization”** (17% “strongly agree” | 24% “rather agree”) while about six in ten hold opposing views (28% “rather disagree” | 26% “strongly disagree”).

The survey findings indicate that these two conspiratorial claims held the greatest preponderance of buy-in among those tested. This can be explained by the fact that these sentiments are already prevalent and widely rehearsed in the political discourse.

## Why do people believe that Austrian society is undergoing a slow and secret Islamization?

The FPÖ, in particular, regularly campaigns on this issue, stoking fears of an Islamization of Austrian society (and Europe more broadly).<sup>7</sup> Under this narrative, society is encouraged to be irate in the face of supposed developments that will see both the native Austrian population and adherents of Christianity become minorities in the future. Although polls currently record FPÖ

support at only around 15%, many more identify Islamization as a threat. While public data indicates that, from 2001 to 2016, the number of Muslims in Austria doubled from 4% to 8%, this “threat scenario” framing is indubitably overstated.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2015, refugee and migration flows have seen the arrival of predominantly Muslim migrants to Austria, some from regions home to particularly conservative religious views (e.g. Afghanistan) and social attitudes that deviate from Austrian practices (especially with regard to gender roles and the position of religion in society).

Worries of Islamization are particularly prevalent in rural regions despite lower proportions of Muslim residents and asylum seekers more generally. Adherents to the Islamization conspiracy theory express concern that Muslims are given preferential treatment by politicians in an attempt to lure them as future voters. Associations between terrorist attacks and Islamic fundamentalist backgrounds have fundamentally shaped public discussions and contributed to further muddle.

Over the past few years, debate has increasingly concentrated on the subject of Islam in general and the “fight against political Islam” more concretely. Exchanges on the challenges of long-term integration have only further fanned the flames with politicians seeking to demonstrate strength by pursuing a “symbolic policy”. In autumn 2019, the Austrian parliament approved a ban on headscarves for girls in elementary school and an extension of this ban to also include teachers and the public sector has been broached. In recent months, the ÖVP has, moreover, proposed the introduction of protective custody, a move widely believed to be politically targeted towards elevating the issue of radical political Islam. This emphasis has led to an overrepresentation of the topic of “Islam” in the public sphere

and its portrayal as one of the most pressing domestic “problems”, which in turn has had notable consequences on Austrian public opinion.

Other theories find far less of a receptive audience:

Although 22% of respondents agree with the statement that **“World affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order”** (7% “strongly agree” | 15% “rather agree”), nearly seven in ten respondents find this unfathomable (26% “rather disagree” | 43% “strongly disagree”).

Judged credible by 60% of Slovak respondents, highest in the ten countries surveyed, Austrians, conversely, expressed the least amount of buy-in to this claim.

Similarly, 21% believe that **“Jews have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world”** (7% “strongly agree” | 15% “rather agree”) while three in four respondents disagree (25% “rather disagree” | 49% “strongly disagree”).

This conspiracy theory is also not prevalent in Austria when compared to the other nine countries. Only in Estonia are there fewer adherents (16%). This belief, nonetheless, finds a more receptive audience in Slovakia (60%) and Hungary (49%).

<sup>7</sup> <https://de.reuters.com/article/us-austria-immigration-idUSKCNISBOC2>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.diepresse.com/5263601/zahl-der-muslime-in-osterreich-seit-2001-verdoppelt>

**The acceptance of conspiracy theories and misinformation rises with age and decreases with level of formal education. The rural population is also more likely to find them credible than urbanites.**

**Conspiracy theories and misinformation are more common among those who:**

- want a decisive and strong leader,
- doubt that it makes a difference who holds power in government,
- are not satisfied with the way democracy works in Austria.

# Conclusions

Austria takes a special position among the ten surveyed countries in Central and Eastern Europe owing to its distinct political and social history in the decades following World War II. Commitment to liberal democracy is, consequently, comparatively strong. That said, there are concerns within the population on the degree to which external influences shape politics and on the perceived preferential treatment of certain groups in society.

A series of crises and upheavals have contributed to the rise of populist movements and fostered social polarization, a pattern that continues to this day. Five years following the start of the refugee and migration crisis, this issue is still highly charged in Austria.

Austrians' relationship with the European Union remains ambivalent: Despite 25 years of Austrian membership, the number of those who believe that the country has no say in the Union is considerable.

Conspiracy theories and misinformation fall on fertile ground in Austria, albeit to a lesser extent than in other surveyed countries. Certain demographic groups, though, are more susceptible than others.

Political leaders must react proactively to developments and seek common dialogue. A robust civil society must be an indispensable partner in this process.



# Authors

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More information about the research can be found in the comparative English version **Voices of Central and Eastern Europe**.

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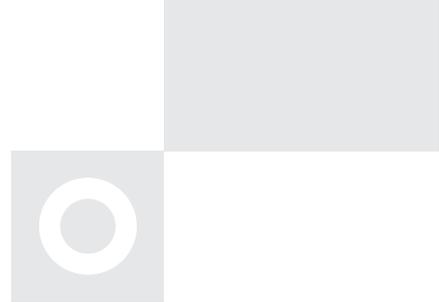


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