



**POLITICAL CAPITAL**  
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE



# Voices of Central and Eastern Europe

## Hungarian Country Report



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# Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2020 on a representative sample of the population in ten EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, 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. For the purpose of graphical data visualisation in this report, 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 for the purpose of both data visualisation.



# About this report

The fragility of democracies is an increasing concern amid a period of global instability and insecurity reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, a shared belief in good governance, a reliable and trusted news media and government institutions, and an engaged civil society are now all crucial for democratic societies to get back on their feet and overcome societal and economic challenges of today and the near future.

GLOBSEC's new report, **Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of democracy & governance in 10 EU countries**, provides unique insight into public satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and governance in ten Central and Eastern European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Taking note of the links between citizen support for liberal democracy (rather than autocracy), satisfaction with governance and life, and predispositions towards conspiracy theories and misinformation, the report, in its entirety, reveals fragile spots and pinpoints areas for further discussion.

This country report focuses on Hungary. Once the role model of post-1990 democratization, the country has been, according to the assessment of international organizations<sup>1</sup>, experiencing an erosion of democratic standards, including the rule of law. The cabinet, moreover, has become increasingly supportive of eastern authoritarian regimes in its public rhetoric<sup>2</sup>. The policies of the Hungarian government have only been further buttressed by a government-controlled media group encompassing over 500 outlets.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, the Hungarian government, which enjoys broad public support in the country<sup>4</sup>, has found itself embroiled in frequent clashes with EU leadership.<sup>5</sup> Campaigns led by the government, further amplified by numerous media outlets, have potentially had considerable influence on the views of different segments of the population towards, for example, NGOs, migrants, and the European Union. These three groups have indeed often found themselves on the receiving end of criticism by the Hungarian government and been a target of conspiracy theories<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/nations-transit/2020>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://euobserver.com/political/146485>; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/hungarys-orban-defends-russia-cooperation-at-putin-visit/>; <https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-hungary-wants-to-bolster-ties-with-eastern-countries/>  
<sup>3</sup> <https://english.atlatzo.hu/2018/01/16/infographic-explore-the-media-empire-friendly-to-the-hungarian-government/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/world/europe/hungary-orban-media.html>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/hungary/>  
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-clashes-with-eu-governments-in-rule-of-law-hearing/>  
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/16/hungary-s-orban-lashes-out-at-slow-eu-growth-sinister-menaces-and-george-soros>; <https://euobserver.com/political/148616>; <https://apnews.com/article/ddff4e9c32f74ffcac4fee3907a71fe5>; <https://www.dw.com/en/hungary-europes-champion-of-conspiracy-theories/a-46689822>

# Key findings in Hungary

- **Hungarians overwhelmingly prefer liberal democracy with regular elections and a multiparty system over one premised on a strong leader who does not have to face elections.** A total of 45% of respondents, comprised primarily of supporters of the ruling political parties, are indeed satisfied with how democracy works in the country. **But there are, nevertheless, some nuances recorded within this overall sentiment.** Around one-third of Hungarians, for example, are willing to exchange their freedoms for improvements to enhance their finances, security, and/or the protection of traditional values. And only 31% of respondents say their needs are taken into account by the political system, with 55% saying nothing will change regardless of the party in power.
- **Hungarians tend to especially trust formally independent institutions like the presidency, the police, the armed forces, and the courts and judiciary, according to the survey.** With the exception of its own supporters, the government, meanwhile, is strongly distrusted. All political parties are, in fact, distrusted nearly universally.
- **Respondents are generally satisfied with their lives and social standing but rather dissatisfied with their own financial situation.** Fidesz supporters are the only political subgroup expressing general satisfaction with personal finances and where a plurality (41%) of respondents believe that everyone has a chance to succeed in the country. Significant numbers, 69% and 49%, of Hungarians, respectively, hold the view, meanwhile, that the wealthy and those from the capital are given preferential treatment in society.

- **A total of 46% of respondents judged the media in the country to be free or rather free, with 49% disagreeing, and 44% express trust in the mainstream media.** Supporters of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) are considerably more likely to believe that Hungarian media is free and put more trust in the standard mainstream media. This is likely the effect of the government's efforts to place numerous mainstream organs (e.g. the public broadcaster, Origo<sup>7</sup>, etc...) under its direct or indirect control.
- **A majority of respondents consider migrants to be a threat to their identity and values. This same sentiment is not expressed towards the US, the EU, western societies, or the LGBTI community though.**
- **There is a sizeable contingent of Hungarian citizens who are susceptible to conspiracy theories but there is a substantial variation in predispositions depending on the specific conspiracy concerned.** While 49% think that the Jews have too much power and that recent anti-government protests were orchestrated and financed by George Soros, only 24% believe that the attack on the World Trade Center was planned by the US government. Narratives pushed by the government (e.g. Soros-financed protests<sup>8</sup>, the EU dictating policies to Hungary<sup>9</sup>) are widely accepted by Fidesz supporters, with the same group also among those most likely to believe that Jews have too much power. Those who have attained higher levels of education, especially a university degree, are less prone to believing conspiracy theories. The differences in conspiracy buy-in, in fact, between most and least educated respondents are, in some cases, higher than 20 percentage points. **The data is also indicative of significant divides within Hungarian society.** Political party preferences, for example, are prescient of the degree of trust placed in numerous institutions (e.g. the government and mainstream media), receptivity to conspiracy theories, and/or satisfaction with the operation of democracy in the country. An urban-rural chasm is also discernible on a variety of issues including assessments of democracy, media freedom, and threat perception.

<sup>7</sup> Origo used to be one of the most popular independent news portals in Hungary until it was taken over by pro-government figures. See, for example: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/24/hungary-editors-sacking-blow-press-freedom>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-04-15/hungarian-laws-fueling-protests-target-soros-orban-tells-idok>  
<sup>9</sup> <http://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-we-wont-do-what-brussels-dictates-if-its-not-good-for-hungarians/>

# Democracy and governance

The vast majority of Hungarians (81%) believe that liberal democracy with regular elections and a multiparty system represent a better form of government for the country than one premised on a strong and decisive leader that need not grapple with parliament

or elections. Only 12% of respondents indeed favored an authoritarian model, with 7% uncertain about their preference. An overwhelming majority of respondents representative of all demographic groups, in fact, support a liberal democratic system.

That said, those over the age of 65 (22%), respondents only with elementary school or no formal education (21%), and supporters of Fidesz (29%) are more likely to take a strong leader.

## Which of the following forms of the government is better for Hungary?

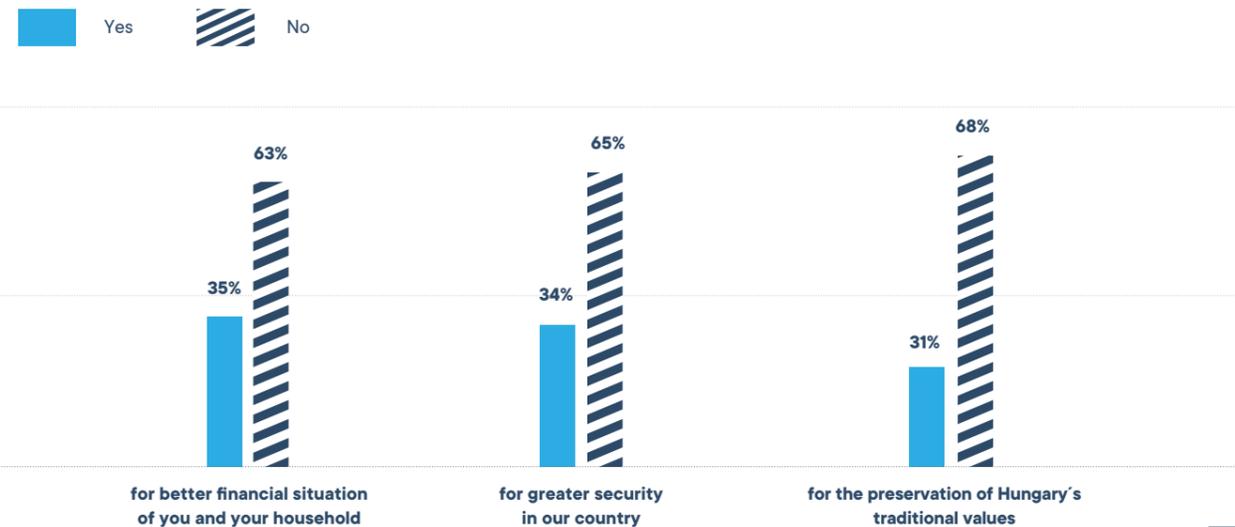


When asked to decide between the two categories, liberal democracy and the autocratic model, Hungarians overwhelmingly prefer the first option, possibly due to their prior experiences living under a political system lacking multiparty elections. This finding, however, does not necessarily imply that Hungarians are unwavering supporters of liberal democracy. The survey rather shows that about one-third of Hungarians are, in fact, willing to trade away some of their rights and freedoms for

certain tangible benefits. A total of 35% of respondents indeed expressed a willingness to exchange fundamental freedoms for a better financial situation within their household, 34% for greater security, and 31% to preserve traditional values. Though these inclinations are heightened among those favoring a strong leader, a sizeable contingent of respondents expressing a preference for liberal democracy would also make these trades (27% on average). The willingness to exchange freedoms

for economic benefits remains relatively consistent among all age groups. An age gulf was observed, however, when it came to the willingness of people to trade away rights to enhance security and protect traditional values, with older respondents more receptive to this deal. Conversely, interest in exchanging freedoms in all three cases generally declined as level of educational attainment increased.

## Would with trade some of your rights and freedoms, for example freedom to travel, to associate or free speech for:



The strong politicization of the Hungarian public sphere is certainly also a factor in shaping attitudes on this matter. The issues of security and the protection of traditional values are regularly featured in governmental communications. In this vein, it is not

surprising that Fidesz supporters indicate significantly greater willingness, compared to those backing other political parties, to sacrifice fundamental freedoms. While 65% of Fidesz voters are willing to accept restrictions on freedom in exchange for greater security

and the protection of traditional values, only around 7%–24% of supporters of the four largest opposition parties share this sentiment.

## Satisfaction towards the Hungarian political system

Additional survey questions reinforced these nuances within Hungarian society regarding the country's political system and its future. Only 31% of respondents said that the needs of people like them are taken into account by the political system in Hungary and 55% said that nothing will change regardless of the party in power. Those satisfied with how democracy works in the country (52%) and supporters of Fidesz (64%) are notably more likely to say that their needs are taken into account.

The Hungarian government is regularly criticized for benefitting a small economic circle with close connections to its members.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, 47% of Hungarian respondents said that oligarchs and financial groups do not exert overbearing control on government, with 39% concluding the reverse and 14% not sure. Fidesz, KDNP and Jobbik voters are the most likely to believe that oligarchs have considerable sway over the administration while Democratic Coalition (DK) and Momentum supporters least likely. The findings among ruling party supporters could be interpreted as voters articulating their impressions that people like George Soros are seeking to control the government while the cabinet is defending itself and the nation. This explanation indeed meshes with the narrative put forward by Fidesz in

which the party is argued to be oppressed but valiantly leading a struggle for freedom against international forces. In contrast, those disagreeing that oligarchs exert undue influence could have been swayed by the argument that it is not oligarchs that influence the administration but rather the cabinet who controls government-friendly oligarchs that are instead dependent on the government for their financial resources. The Hungarian population indeed saw evidence of this line of reasoning when the formerly prominent oligarch, Lajos Simicska, and Prime Minister Orbán had a falling out. Simicska, who had won numerous public procurement tenders in the past, would subsequently not receive any new project opportunities and his primary company, Kőzép, was even banned from receiving public procurements by the Hungarian Public Procurement Board.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding inequality, most respondents (88%) agree that the wealthy enjoy a privileged position in the country. A total of 64% affirmed that those living in the capital are favored in society, underscoring a capital-rural divide. Only a minority, meanwhile, believe that migrants (25%) and minorities (38%) are privileged over others.

Around 64% of Hungarians say that the country has always been oppressed and

never been able to chart its own path. This belief is shared by all segments of society, though most vehemently among respondents that favor a strong leader, express pessimism that politics can bring change, and supporters of Fidesz.

The Index of Satisfaction with the System of Governance measures how citizens assess the deficiencies of the political system they live in based on 11 questions. These include questions on: whether everyone can succeed in life; how the system takes their needs into account; trust in the government, the presidency, the courts and judiciary, the police, the mainstream media, and political parties; and the overall satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the respective country. Hungary's score of -2 puts it in the middle of the pack among the 10 countries examined in this study. Hungary's score is only slightly lower than that of Lithuania. But it is far higher than Slovakia's score of -11.5, ranked just after Hungary.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/04/05/the-eu-is-tolerating-and-enabling-authoritarian-kleptocracy-in-hungary>  
<sup>11</sup> [https://bbj.hu/business/report-kozgep-banned-from-public-procurement-tenders\\_101146](https://bbj.hu/business/report-kozgep-banned-from-public-procurement-tenders_101146); PM Viktor Orbán said, for instance, that George Soros was the "largest oligarch" in the world in January 2020. See: <https://tenyek.hu/politika/318165-orban-soros-a-legnagyobb-oligarc.html>

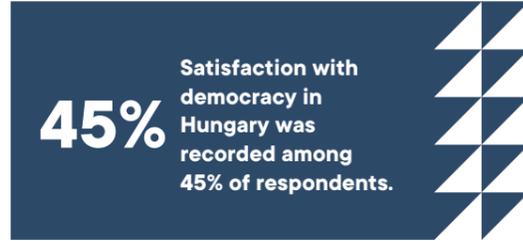
## Index of Satisfaction with the System of Governance



## Assessment of the functioning of democracy

Satisfaction with democracy in Hungary was recorded among 45% of respondents. Unsurprisingly, Fidesz supporters express positive sentiment in this regard (88%) while the vast majority of those who support the four largest opposition parties (77–87%) are dissatisfied. And while only 40% of people who favor liberal democracy are satisfied with

the state of democracy in Hungary, 75% of those favoring a strong leader in charge are content. There is also a notable urban-rural divide observed here: those living in urban areas tend to be more dissatisfied (66%) compared to those living in rural regions (42%).



## Trust

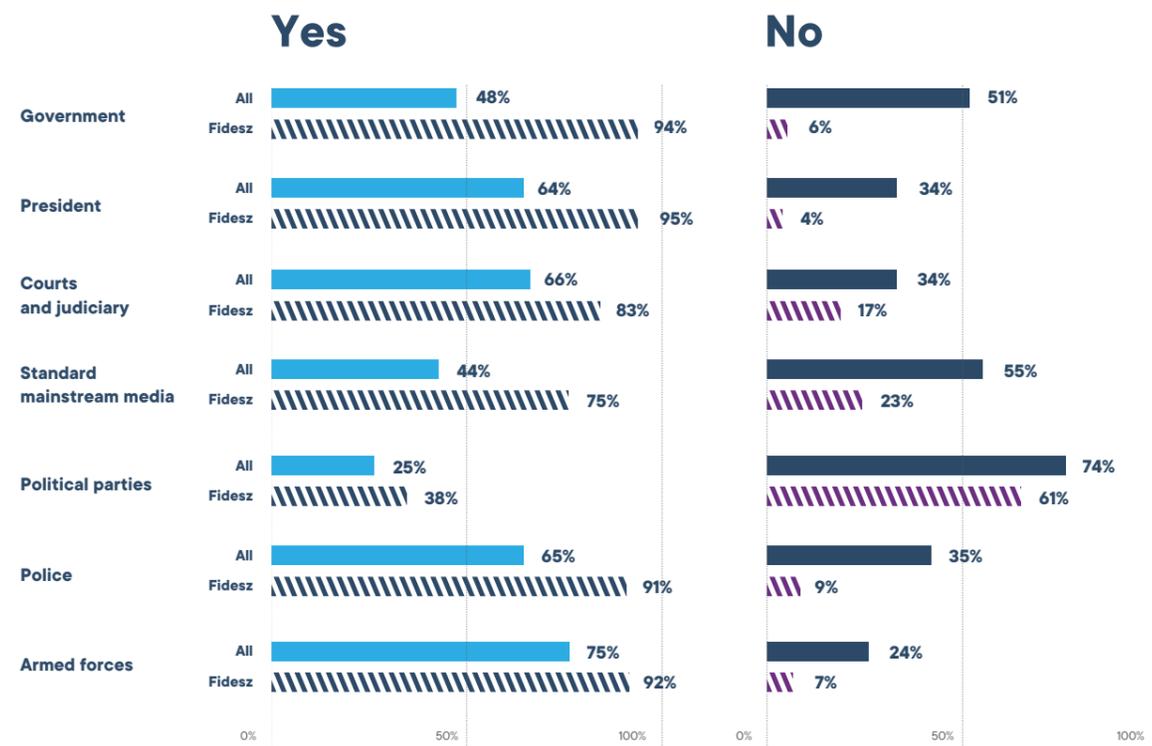
Taking a closer look on what institutions are trusted or distrusted by Hungarians, data reveals strong splits in society, mirroring the current political climate in the country. Hungarians tend to trust the office of the presidency (64%), the courts and judiciary (67%), the police (65%), and the armed forces (75%) and they almost universally distrust

political parties (74%). Hungarian society, however, is markedly divided on the degree of trust it confers to the government (trusted by 48%) and the mainstream media (trusted by 44%). Fidesz supporters overwhelmingly trust the government and mainstream media (94% and 75%, respectively) while backers of the main opposition parties distrust these

two institutions. Trust in the two institutions is also higher among rural voters though lowest in the capital where the ruling parties are weaker.

## I would like to ask you, to what extent do you personally trust or distrust the following institutions in Hungary?

All respondents vs. Fidesz voters



The findings concerning trust levels in the mainstream media should be seen in light of the broader political backdrop. The government, in this regard, controls or has direct or indirect influence over a large number of media outlets<sup>12</sup>, including the public broadcaster and several organs that can be considered mainstream based on their popularity (e.g. Origo) and/or history (e.g. Magyar Hírlap, Magyar Nemzet). Therefore, when asked to assess mainstream media, the question of what mainstream encompasses might not be clear-cut to all; i.e. some respondents might consider pro-government outlets that do not adhere to journalistic standards to be mainstream while others might deem independent media that follow professional guidelines to be in this category.

The remarkable trust endowed to various formally independent institutions like the police, the courts, and armed forces, meanwhile, generally traverses party divides. Opposition supporters themselves are somewhat divided on these institutions though, with 60% of Momentum's electorate trusting the courts but only 39% of Jobbik supporters feeling the same way.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/world/europe/hungary-orban-media.html?auth=login-email&login=email>

## Satisfaction with life and the future

Hungarians, in general, are satisfied with their own lives (77%) and social standing (74%). They are considerably less content (47%), however, with their financial situation. There is a gulf between respondents, nonetheless, depending on level of educational attainment, with higher levels of formal education corresponding to increased satisfaction on personal finances. And Fidesz supporters are more satisfied with their finances (59%) than backers of all other political parties. Opposition supporters and undecided voters are indeed generally dissatisfied with the state of their finances.

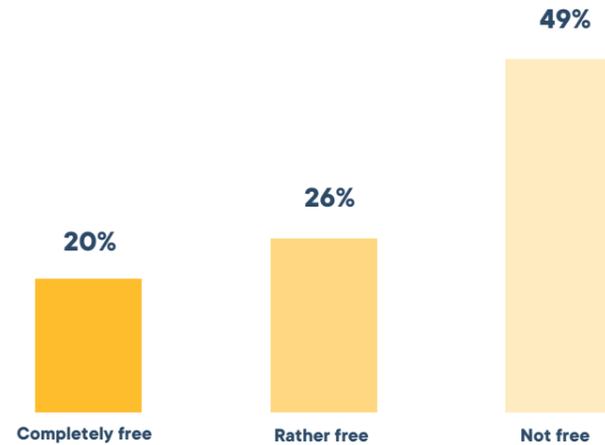
As far as the future is concerned, Hungarians are somewhat optimistic. The majority of respondents (57%) said everyone has a chance to succeed in the country. When broken down by political preferences though, a majority behind optimistic sentiment is, in fact, only recorded among Fidesz supporters.

Societal trust, meanwhile, appears to be lacking in Hungary. Only 46% of those surveyed felt that most people in the country could be generally trusted while 53% disagreed with this attitude (rather or strongly). There is once again variation based on partisanship; supporters of Jobbik, for example, demonstrate below average levels of social trust (68% tend to distrust people) and on the opposite end of the spectrum 63% of Momentum supporters tend to trust their fellow citizens.

# Control over the media

A total of 20% of Hungarians believe the media in the country is completely free, 26% say it is rather free, and 49% not free. The latter finding represents the third highest figure among the 10 countries surveyed, falling only below Bulgaria (53%) and Poland (57%). A majority of the youngest (18-24) and oldest (65+) respondents said media was completely or rather free. The more educated a respondent, meanwhile, the less likely they are to consider Hungarian media rather or completely free. An urban-rural chasm is apparent on this point: while 55% of rural voters see Hungarian media as free to some extent, only 37% of urban voters reach the same conclusion. And though 76% of those satisfied with democracy in the country are content with the Hungarian media situation, only 22% of people dissatisfied with democracy feel the same way. In terms of political partisanship, supporters of the ruling party overwhelmingly say that the Hungarian media is free, standing in stark contrast to the attitudes of opposition party backers.

## Do you believe that standard mainstream media in our country are completely free, rather free or unfree?



## Who do you believe has the strongest influence over the media in your country?



The vast majority of Hungarians (85%) say the government exercises the greatest degree of influence over media in the country. Only 43% selected financial groups and less than 20% other presented options like influential

groups from abroad, the US, Russia, NGOs, or the Church. Although opposition party supporters were more likely to think that the government had strong influence over the press, 63% of Fidesz voters agreed too. The

latter constituency, as other results reveal, does not necessarily, however, consider this to be a problem.

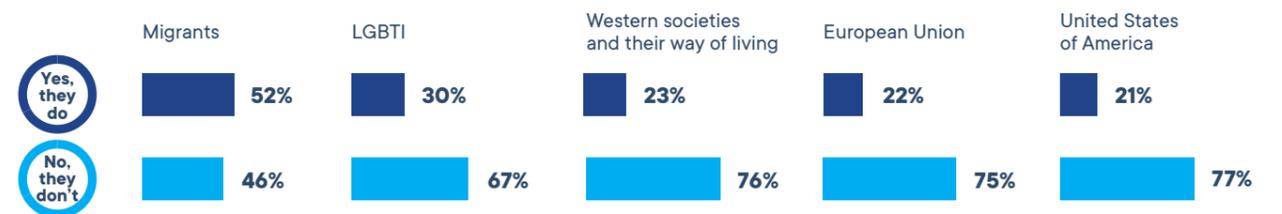


# Perception of threats

The majority of those surveyed in Hungary (52%) consider migrants to be a threat to their identity and values. Other options posed to respondents (Western society and its way of life, the EU, the US and LGBTI community) were only deemed to be a threat by 20-30% minorities. Threat perception, in general, increases with age, with the 65+ group feeling most threatened by this array of groups. This age gulf is most striking in the case of migrants and the LGBTI community. While 42% and 20% of respondents from the 18-24 age group, for example, identified migrants and the LGBTI community, respectively, as threats, 61% and 43%, respectively, of people aged 65+ did the same. Level of formal education also plays a role with threat perception generally declining as educational attainment increases. An urban-rural divide was observed in responses to these questions too. And on political affiliation, voters of Fidesz and Jobbik indicated the most socially conservative views, being the most likely to perceive migrants and members of the

LGBTI community as a threat. A total of 41% of Fidesz supporters identify the EU as a threat to their identity and values. This is a significantly higher level of opposition to the EU compared to that measured among supporters of the center-left opposition parties – 91% of DK and 90% of Momentum voters do not perceive the EU as a threat.

## Who threatens your identity and values?





# Conspiracy theories and misinformation



A considerable segment of the Hungarian population is susceptible to believing conspiracy theories, ranging from the 49% agreeing that Jews have too much power and that anti-government protests in the past few years were orchestrated and

financed by George Soros to 24% believing that the attack on the World Trade Center was planned by the US government.

## Those most prone to accepting conspiracy theories in general include:

- the youngest (18–24) and oldest (55–64 and 65+) age groups;
- respondents with less formal education;
- people living in rural areas.

Party affiliation appears to have a strong effect on conspiratorial beliefs. Supporters of the center-left opposition parties are the least likely to agree with the various conspiracies. Among voters of right-wing opposition parties and the governing Fidesz though, the share of adherents is above-average. And in five of the six conspiracy theories we probed, supporters of the ruling

party were, in fact, considerably more likely to accept the statements than respondents of other political persuasions. This was not only true for conspiracies supported by governmental narratives (EU dictates, Soros financing, NGOs) but also those concerning Jews and secret groups supposedly dictating world affairs.

## Agreement with conspiracy theories and misinformative narratives.



Jews have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world.

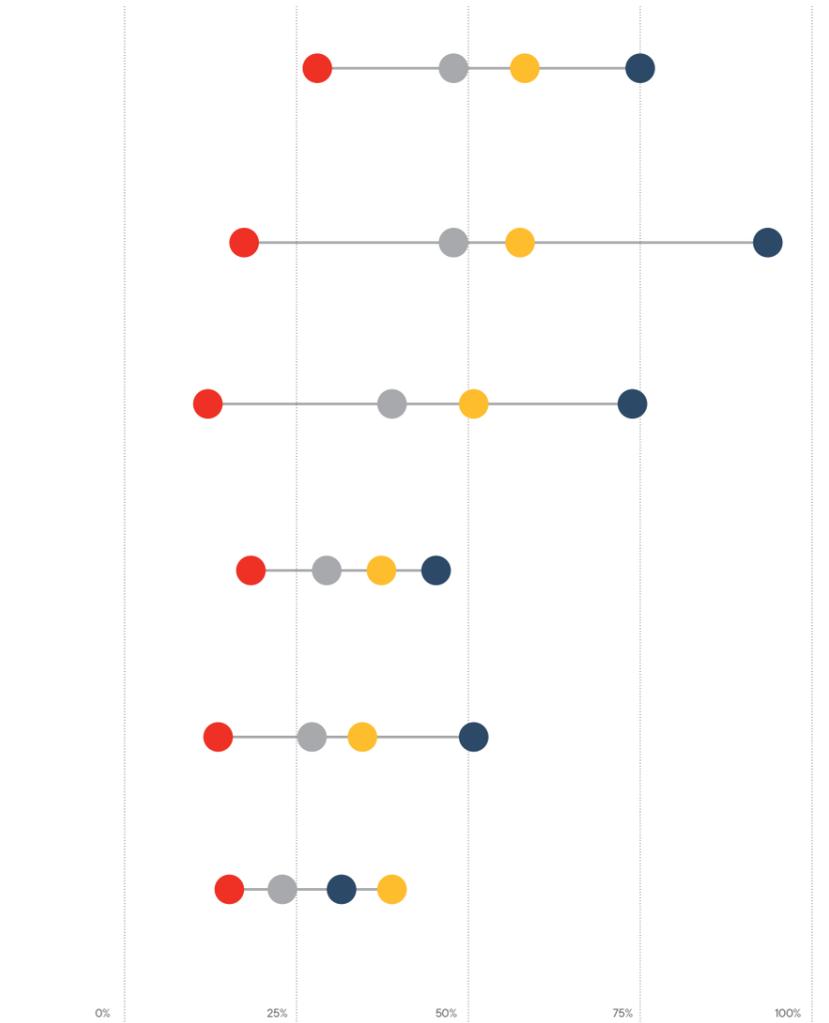
The anti-government protests in the past years were orchestrated and financially supported by George Soros.

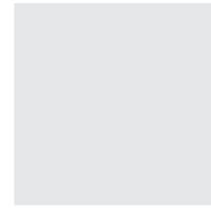
EU and Brussels dictates to Hungary what to do without Hungary having a chance to influence it.

World affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order.

The non-governmental organizations in Hungary are secret voice of foreign powers and interests.

The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 was planned and conducted by the American government, not Al-Qaeda.





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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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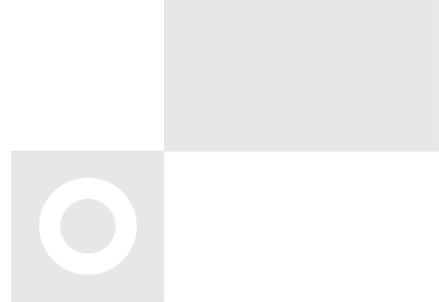
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