

Between Democracy and Authoritarianism in Central & Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans

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Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in September and October 2020 on a representative sample of the population in nine countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample of 1000 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country according to gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. For the purposes of graphical data visualisation, 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.

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Countries surveyed





Introduction

Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans are distinct regions, each with their own unique complex historical legacies and experiences. In both, decades of democratic aspirations and a yearning to break free from the socialist era, including its cultural, social and political underpinnings, have often gone up against opposing views purporting that democracy is unworkable and ‘foreign’.

The ‘democratic experiment’ has proven rather resilient, persisting over 30 years in conditions that have, notably, been at times inhospitable. The democratic journey that continues to be undertaken by Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia indeed has been an arduous one and far from the fairy tale story some envisioned. The democratic transitions of these countries, instead, have been characterized by ups and downs and contrasts. These have included, for example, stories of national identity development alongside nationalist-

fuelled violence and conflict; emerging creative enterprises and rampant and pervasive corruption; economic opportunities and crippling depression; a vibrant civil society and democratic backsliding; robust support for the rule of law and the seductive turn to populism; a pining for human rights and caustic rhetoric to put marginalised communities back in ‘their place’.

The notion that these conflicting patterns and perspectives will one day mould themselves into a coherent whole, one that sees everyone ‘wake up’ from their autocratic dreams and embrace democracy is as naïve as Fukuyama’s end of history observation.

This historical experience, unique to the CEE and Western Balkan regions, will always constitute a framework through which attitudes towards values and democracy will be formed. The experience of socialism was, for many, by no means entirely negative¹ whether they experienced it themselves or not. Developments in the post-communist era, meanwhile, have arguably been challenging, with these countries finally assuming responsibility for their own paths.

These transitions and the volatility of the globalising world are often put in stark juxtaposition against the idealized ‘stability’ of past regimes. The idea that there is a viable alternative to democracy, consequently, has become alluring to a sizeable subset of the population, one present across all surveyed countries. In a truly democratic system, such preferences need to be acknowledged. This, however, is not to say that they need to, wittingly or unwittingly, be encouraged. This report aims to shed light on where democratic strengths and vulnerabilities lie according to the perspective of people living in CEE and the Western Balkans. These perceptions often find themselves clashing in the postmodern

digital world. The global pandemic has only further accelerated these processes and laid bare the contest between democratic and non-democratic systems of governance. Much like in the Cold War era, CEE and the Western Balkans remain the battlefield where these ideological wars are unravelling.

¹ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82419581.pdf>



Key findings



Democratic governance is embraced by the vast majority of populations living in CEE and Western Balkan regions

78% of people in the CEE & Western Balkan regions see democratic governance understood as a system based on equality, human rights, freedoms and rule of law, as good for their country. Democratic governance is perceived as more than just regular elections and multiparty system by the vast majority of the population in the region.



One third of the populations living in the CEE and Western Balkans sympathise with authoritarian style of governance

Authoritarian sympathizers represent a non-negligible share of societies, with one-third of respondents in the region agreeing that it would be good for their country to have a strong leader who need not bother with parliament or elections. These beliefs have further geopolitical implications - those open to authoritarian governance, for example, express considerably more negative views of the US than the population at large.



Low trust in the main state institutions represents a potential vulnerability

The robust support of societies for democratic governance contrasts with their overall low level of trust in state institutions, averaging 42%, including for head of state (usually president), government, political parties and the judiciary. While this low degree of confidence in important state organs does not necessarily entail that people will be drawn to non-democratic regimes, it certainly underscores a potential vulnerability that could be all too easily exploited by populist forces.



Authoritarian sympathisers have higher propensity to believe in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories

Respondents who prefer rule by strong leader at the expense of democratic governance are considerably more predisposed to believe different variations of COVID-19 related conspiracy theories. Given that the global pandemic shows no signs of abating, such views pose an additional challenge to the management of the health crisis in these countries.



Support for LGBT+ rights is higher among those who do not perceive migration as a threat & generation of young adults

Although support for LGBT+ rights, at only 38%, is relatively low across the two regions, backing increases substantially among those who are not apprehensive about social change. Those who do not perceive migration and liberal democracy as threats indicate notably higher support for the rights of sexual minorities, 48% and 47%, respectively. Young people, similarly, exhibit higher acceptance of sexual minorities, with 50% of those aged 18-24 years old in the region affirming that the rights of the LGBT+ community (e.g. marriage equality) should be guaranteed.

1

How popular is democracy?

Democratic governance has overwhelming support across the region, though its buy-in faces numerous headwinds including dissatisfaction with how democracy works in individuals' own countries, the allure of authoritarianism for some and high levels of distrust expressed towards state administrations and institutions (typical for the regions that are still shaped by their communist past).

Democracy in CEE and Western Balkans is seen as less than perfect

Although **support for democracy averages 77% across the region²**, it is important to distinguish between the ideal of democracy as a governance system and its less than perfect embodiment in CEE and the Western Balkans. According to The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2020³, none of the countries surveyed can be classified as full democracies. Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia and Romania are ranked as flawed democracies while Montenegro and North Macedonia are classified as hybrid regimes.

These nuances are, also, to a certain extent reflected in people's dissatisfaction with how democracy works in their countries. **Over 60% of people living in the two regions**



55% of respondents in the V4 are dissatisfied with how democracy works in their countries.

are dissatisfied with the state of democracy in their respective countries. In Bulgaria and North Macedonia, meanwhile, the proportion of respondents who are dissatisfied with the form of governance practiced in their country outweighs those who prefer democracy.

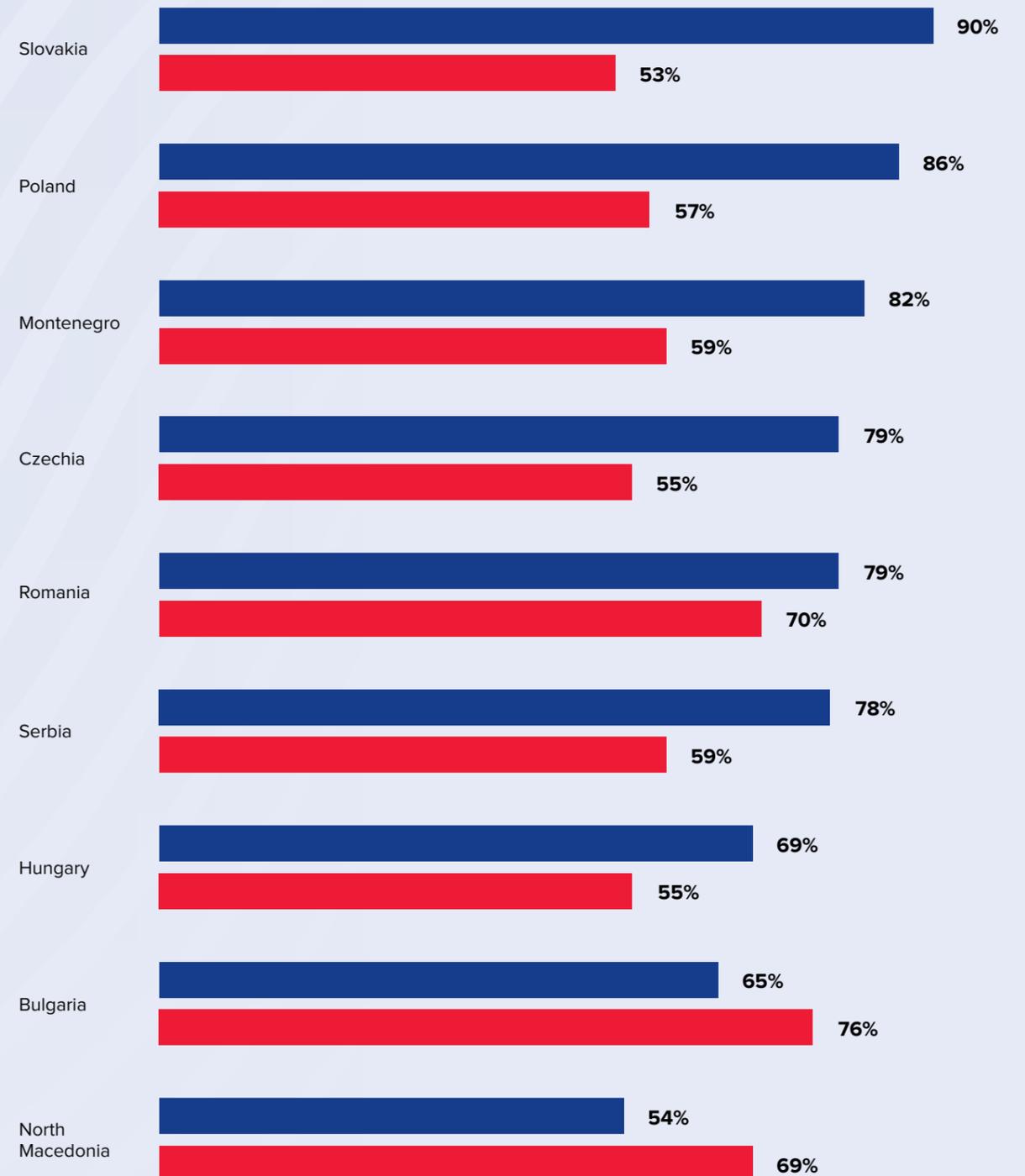
² Calculated as average of both more narrow and more robust definitions of democracy tested in this study.

³ <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>



Having a democratic political system with regular elections and multiparty system

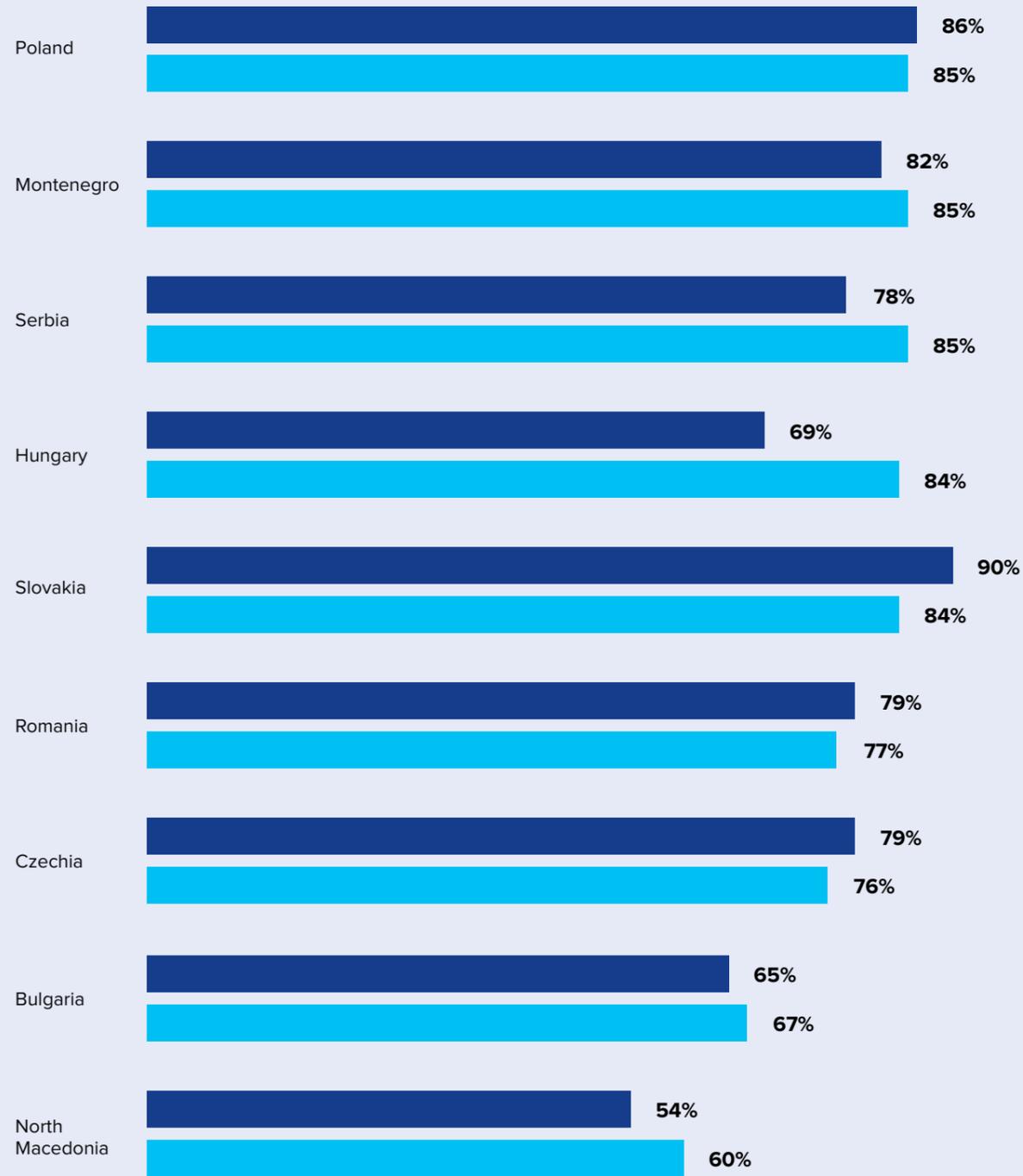
■ Having a democratic political system with regular elections and multiparty system.
 ■ Those who are dissatisfied with how democracy works in their country





Support for narrow and more robust definitions of democracy

- Having a democratic political system with regular elections and multiparty system.
- Democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms, rule of law is good for our country.



Rights and freedoms are considered important

In surveyed countries, support for democracy remains roughly the same when respondents are posed with broad (a system based on equality, human rights, fundamental freedoms and rule of law) and narrow (a system with regular elections and a multiparty system) definitions. In the Western Balkans and Hungary, however, the more robust version of democracy garners greater backing than the narrower definition. For 78% of people in the two regions, overall, human rights and fundamental freedoms are recognized as essential pillars of the democratic system and are seen as beneficial.

Perceptions of what human rights encompass, nevertheless, often does not extend to the rights of sexual minorities (see Chapter 3) and once democracy is described as 'liberal', it is perceived as threatening by 41% of respondents⁴.



'Hungarians are strongly committed to the main principles associated with democracy (e.g. human rights, freedom, rule of law). But this understanding takes democracy at a surface level. A detailed engagement with the different elements of the governance form is rather lacking. People in Hungary recognize these concepts as very important but specific violations of rights, rule of law or freedom of speech often go unnoticed.'

[Csaba Molnár, Political Capital]

⁴ https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf



78% of population in the region think human rights and freedoms are understood as essential pillars of democratic system.

Trust in state institutions and support for democracy not the same thing

Robust support for core democratic institutions, in some democracies, echoes trust endowed in state institutions including the presidency and/or government. This is not generally the case, however, across CEE and the Western Balkans. Societies in these two regions may indicate strongly pro-democratic leanings yet simultaneously express distrust⁵, for

example, towards the conduct of their elected representatives or the judiciary.

Although governance in CEE and the Western Balkans leaves much to be desired according to the surveyed populaces, people are not necessarily inclined to lay fault at democracy generally and turn to authoritarian alternatives.

⁵ The trust ranking is calculated as average based on levels of trust towards the government, the president, political parties and judiciary in each state.

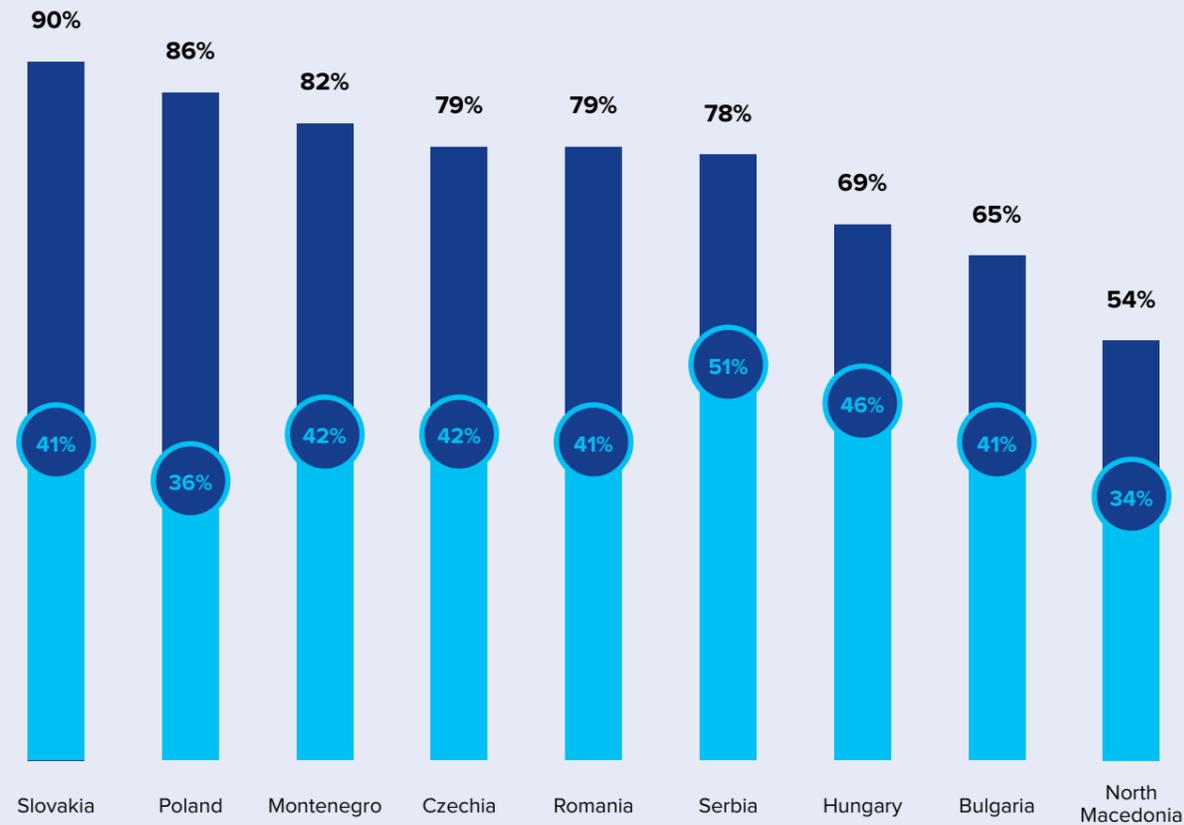


On average, only 42% of respondents in CEE and Western Balkans trust their government, president, courts and judiciary.



Average trust in government, president, courts & judiciary and political parties vs support for democracy

Trust ranking ■ Having a democratic political system with regular elections and multiparty system is good / very good.



University education corresponds to higher support for democracy

Educational attainment is a pertinent factor that corresponds with support for parliamentary democracy in each country. University educated respondents, on average, are **seven percentage points more likely** than the general population to back democracy.

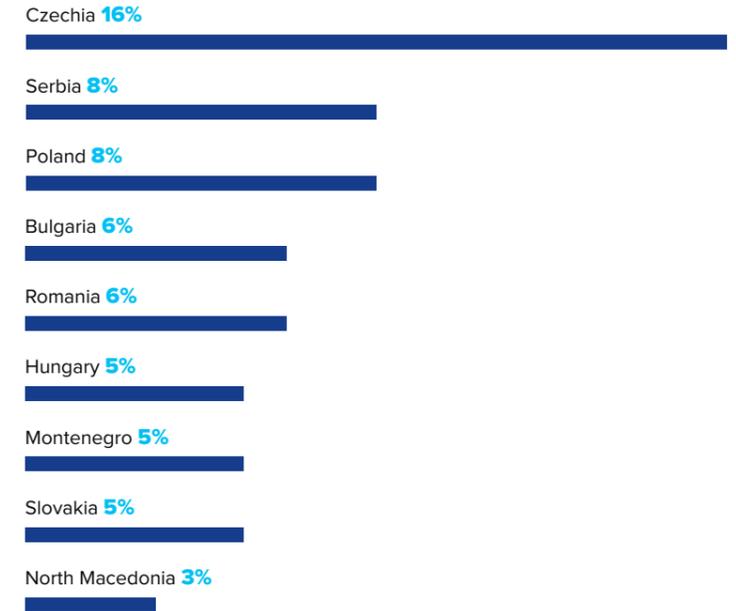


'In Czechia, the highly educated are more supportive of the democratic system because they perceive that it has enabled them to thrive for the last 30 years.'

[Jonáš Syrovátka, PSSI]

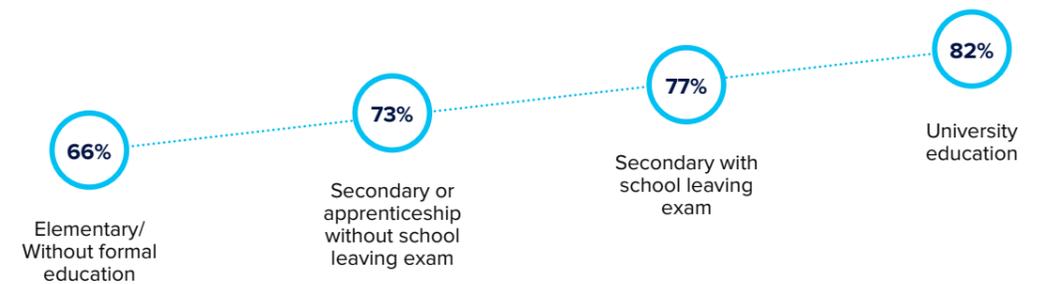


Difference in preference for parliamentary democracy among university-educated and population as a whole



Support for democratic political system with regular elections and multiparty system

Difference in support for democracy between those with primary school and university education is quite significant, at 16 percentage points.



2

How popular are authoritarian practices?

While overall support for democracy remains high in CEE and the Western Balkans, survey findings suggest that sizeable shares of the public are amenable to authoritarian principles, amounting on average to one-third of populations.

The preference for a strong leader who need not bother with elections is an important indicator of democratic vulnerabilities. This is particularly true if these beliefs are paired with considerable dissatisfaction towards the state of democracy in a particular country. Rather than seeking improvement in their democratic systems, a substantial proportion of democratic sceptics are resolved to changing the governance form altogether.

A notable contingent of respondents was also identified who, even while not necessarily subscribing to autocratic rule, is willing to sacrifice some 'non-essential' freedoms for other benefits including security, economic prosperity and/or the preservation of 'traditional values'⁶. These findings underpin the notion that openness to authoritarianism in post-communist countries can manifest in different forms, some of which are compatible with narrower definitions of democracy tailored to the bare basics of regular elections and multiparty systems.



"Poland is currently undergoing a process of profound self-re-examination of its democratic governance model. The government and the intellectual circles around it claim that post-1989 systemic arrangements need to be updated or streamlined (to 'root out remnants of communism') while the opposition and most Western commentators assert that the government is engaged in an assault against the rule of law, free media and an independent judiciary. Regardless of where Polish citizens align on this debate, an overwhelming majority is cognizant of the fact that Polish democracy is far from secured. Authoritarianism can indeed only be averted through deliberate actions. Democracy on auto-pilot is not on the cards, no matter what people think is right for their country."

[Jakub Wisniewski, GLOBSEC]

The willingness of citizens to trade personal freedoms for financial benefits and/or security is, undoubtedly, a nod to the fact that the democratic transitions of the 1990s benefitted society unequally. The idealized image of democracy as constituting the powerful combination of freedom and economic prosperity, perhaps best epitomized in societal perceptions of Switzerland, failed to materialise. Regime change, in fact, often prompted economic insecurity in an era characterised by 'wild' privatizations of state enterprises (e.g. in Slovakia⁷). Those who feel they have been excluded from shared prosperity and passed by can be prone to nostalgia for a system which guaranteed them basic social security.

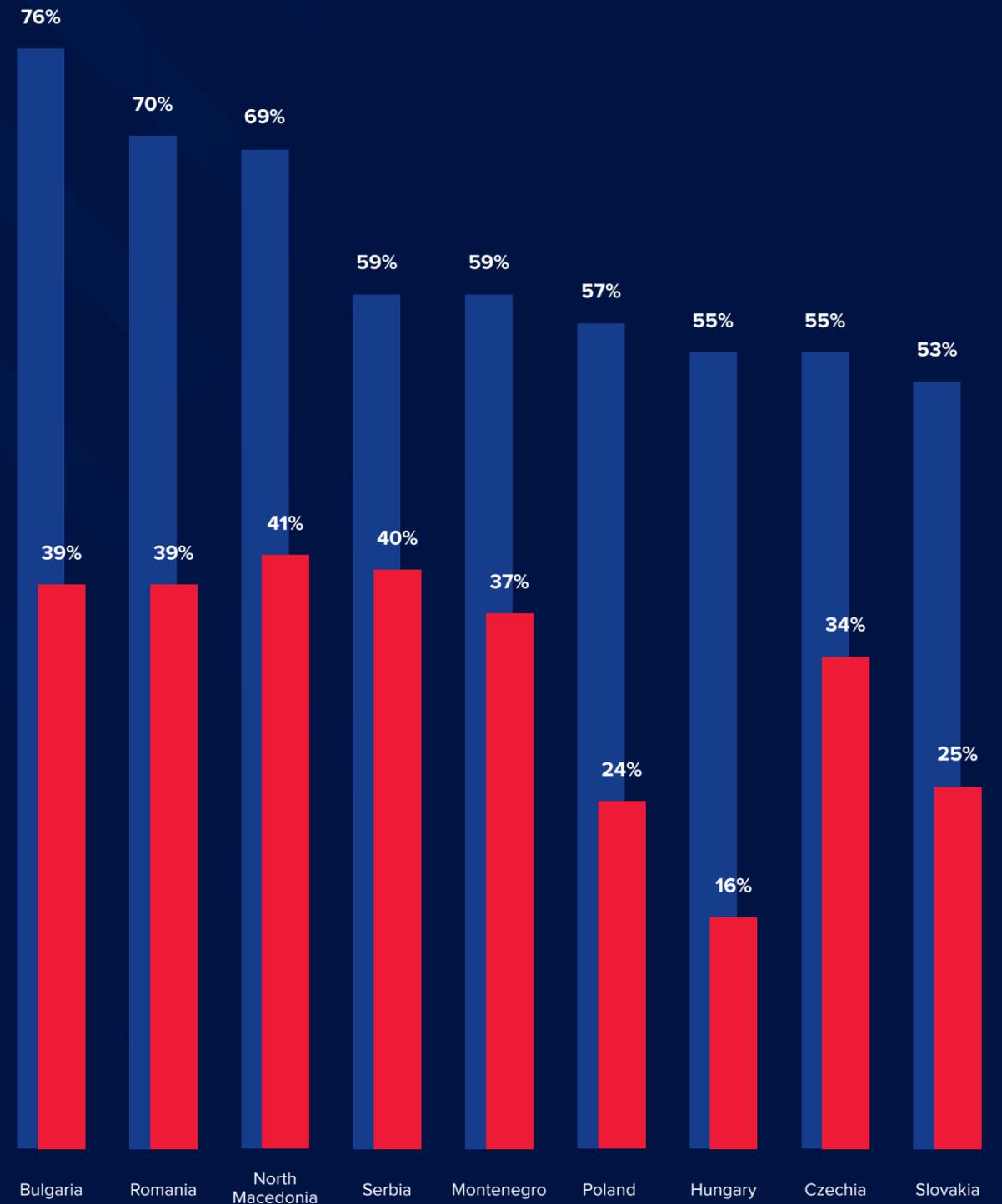
⁶ <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-read-version.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23533/slovakia-tries-to-mask-its-oligarchic-democracy-with-strong-eu-ties>



Levels of dissatisfaction with democratic governance & authoritarian preferences

■ Those who are dissatisfied with how democracy works in their country
 ■ Having a strong leader who does not need to bother with any parliament and elections is good for my country.



Authoritarian sympathies and geopolitics

Authoritarian dispositions not only shape public attitudes and preferences towards different forms of governance but they can potentially influence foreign policy through their impact on perceptions of allies and threats. In general, negative perceptions of the US and the West are linked to higher authoritarian inclinations. The same leanings, meanwhile, are linked to positive attitudes towards China and Russia.

The US

These patterns are found even in countries where the US is generally identified as an important ally, exhibit Poland and Romania. Perceptions that the US is an existential threat, for example, rise substantially among those segments of society that gravitate towards valuing a strong leader who need not bother with parliament and elections. Overall, the perception of the US as a threat lands at 26% across the region and at 42% among respondents sympathetic towards authoritarianism.

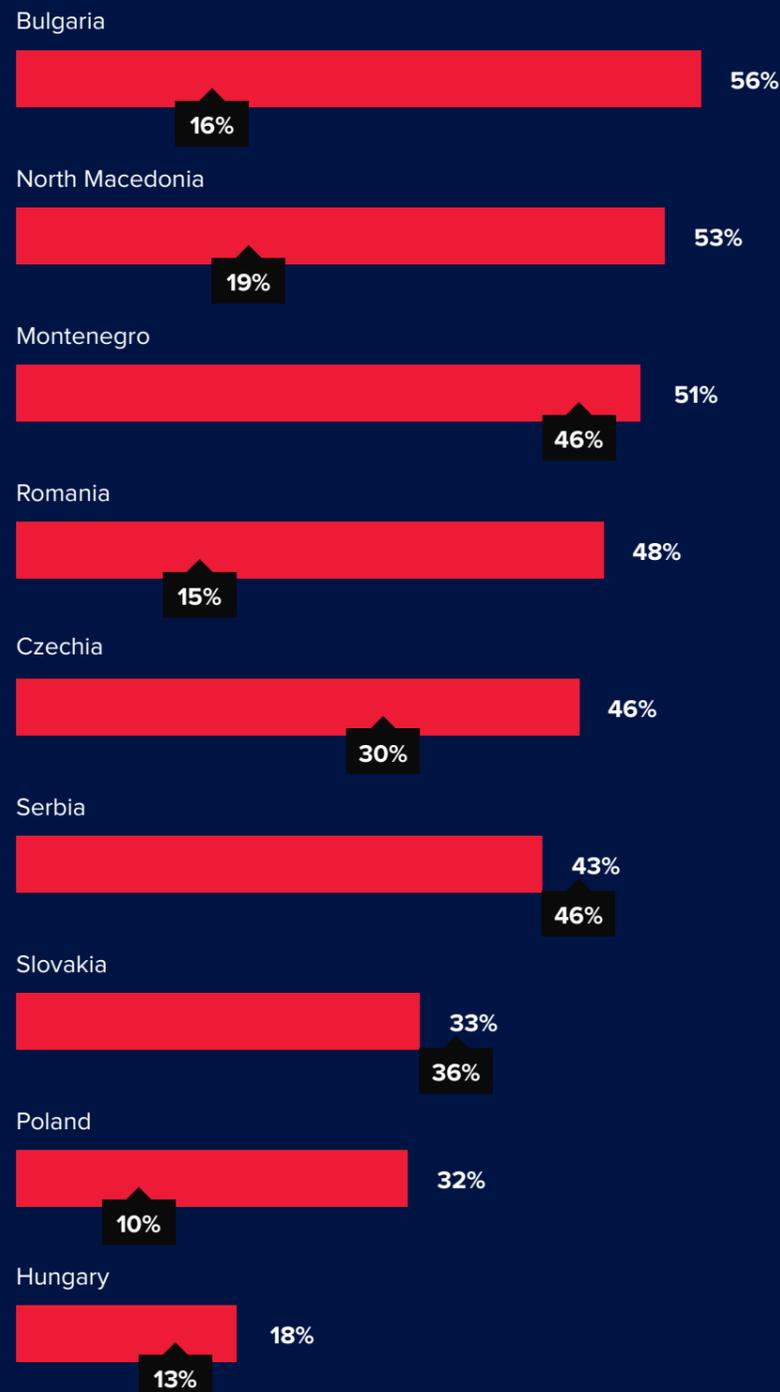


Overall, the perception of the US as a threat lands at 26% across the region and at 42% among respondents sympathetic towards authoritarianism.



United States of America present a danger to your country

■ Authoritarian sympathisers ■ General population



West

Authoritarian tendencies are also present in greater numbers among those who accept the narrative asserting that the civil liberties agenda is being driven by 'Western decadence'⁸.



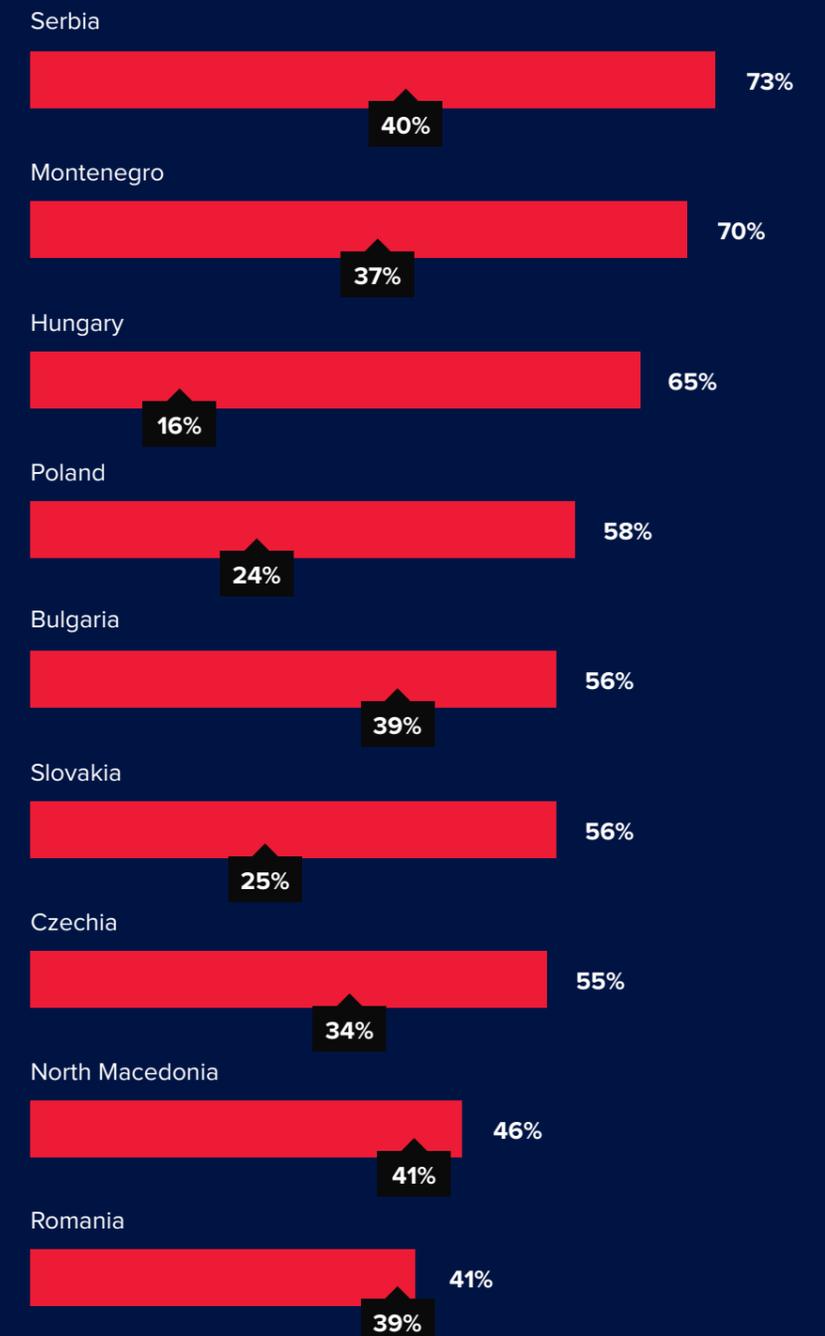
The overall proportion of those preferring rule by a strong leader over democratic governance encompasses 33% of all respondents and 58% among those who agree with the narrative of a 'decadent West'.

⁸ The full statement posed in the questionnaire included the following: 'Western countries promote a morally corrupt and decadent lifestyle which hides behind "civil liberties".'



Having a strong leader who does not need to bother with any parliament and elections is good for my country

■ Among those who think West promotes decadent lifestyle ■ Average



Russia

Russia's image, on the other hand, garners greater favourability among people with authoritarian tendencies in CEE and the Western Balkans. Those disinclined to perceive Russia as a threat, for example, are more prone to authoritarian inclinations. The only exceptions are Poland and Romania, where a willingness to lend a sympathetic ear to authoritarian practices are not necessarily linked to pro-Russian sentiment.



Overall, 33% of the respondents in the CEE and Western Balkans think that authoritarianism would be a good way of governing their country. This proportion rises to 59% among those who do not perceive Russia as a threat.

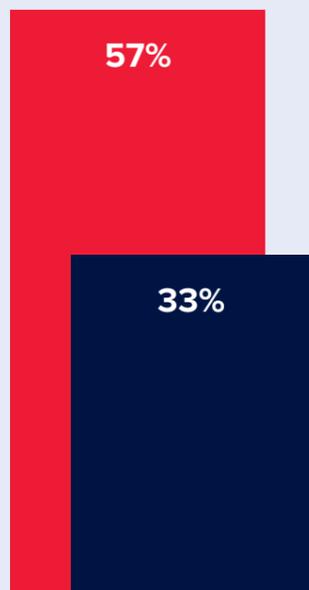
China

Some CEE and Western Balkan countries see China primarily as an important strategic partner that brings beneficial economic ties. There, however, is an association between the espousal of authoritarian sympathies and those perceiving that China is not a threat.



Having a strong leader who does not need to bother with any parliament and elections is good way of governing my country.

■ Regional average
■ Among those who do not perceive China as a danger



Authoritarian sympathies and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories

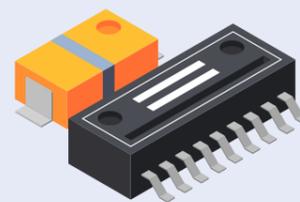
Respondents who think that having a strong democratically unaccountable leader is good for their country are considerably more likely to believe in various COVID-19-related conspiracy theories than others.

This pattern is particularly discernible in Czechia, Bulgaria and Romania. In these countries, there is a more than 20 percentage point gap in acceptance of COVID-19-related conspiracy theories between those with authoritarian inclinations and the population at large.



On average, 28% of the population in CEE and Western Balkans believes in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, while among the authoritarian supporters, the proportion rises to 44%.*

* Counted as average of those who agreed with statements: 1) COVID-19 is fake to manipulate the population; 2) USA deliberately created the COVID-19 virus; 3) COVID-19 vaccine is a tool to implant nano-chips and control people.



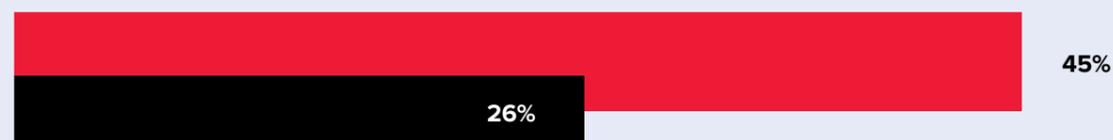
COVID-19 is fake to manipulate the population

■ Authoritarian sympathisers ■ General population



USA deliberately created the COVID-19 virus

■ Authoritarian sympathisers ■ General population



COVID-19 vaccine is a tool to implant nano-chips and control people

■ Authoritarian sympathisers ■ General population



3

Rights versus threats

Anti-democratic attitudes tend to be closely linked with threat perceptions across the region. This includes, for example, opposition to LGBT+ rights on the grounds that it represents ‘traditional values coming under attack’ from West and/or EU seeking to impose their unwanted dictate. These narratives are often promulgated by nationalist politicians⁹, interest groups and institutions that espouse far-right views and a plethora of disinformation outlets¹⁰. Within these circles, the human rights agenda is often depicted as a false dichotomy, a zero-sum game that sees those gaining long-denied rights doing so at the expense of everyone else.

Support for LGBT+ Rights

The relevance of fear-based narratives can be measured, as one possible indicator, by examining societal (in) tolerance towards sexual minorities.

Altogether, 54% of respondents in the region oppose the granting of rights to sexual minorities, seemingly contradicting the overwhelming 78% support expressed for democratic governance when defined broadly as a system based on equality, human rights and fundamental freedoms. This discrepancy could be tied to the post-communist pasts of the regions. Evidence indeed shows that newer EU member states suffer from greater levels of prejudice against Roma, women and LGBT+ citizens¹¹.



44% of respondents in V4 countries think that the rights of the LGTB+ community (such as right to marriage) should not be guaranteed.

⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-27/orban-vows-to-fight-liberal-democracy-in-challenge-to-eu-values>

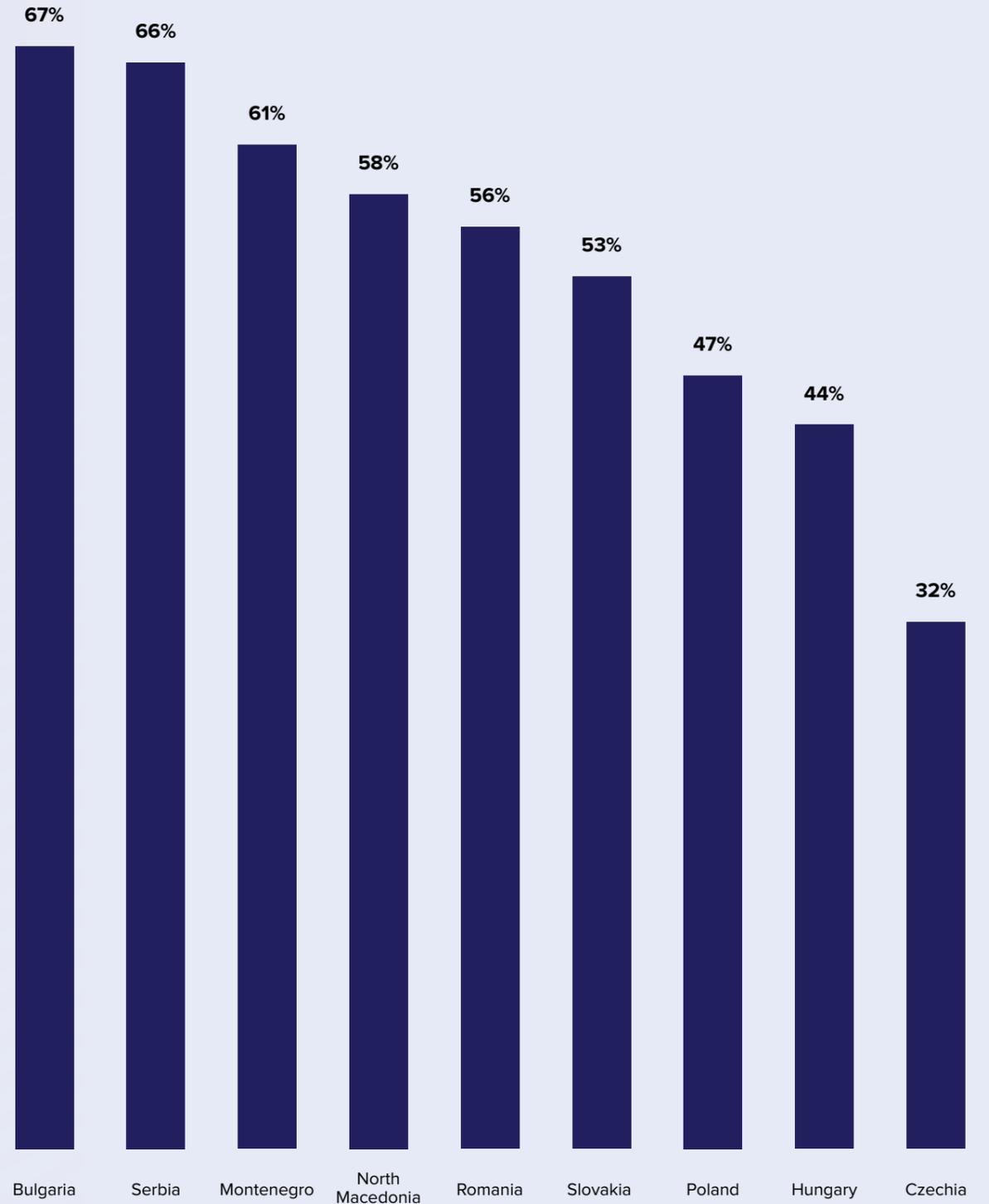
¹⁰ <https://www.europeanpressprize.com/article/propaganda-war-europe-far-right-media/>

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/east-west_integration.pdf



The rights of LGBT+ community (such as a right to marriage) should be guaranteed

■ Disagree



The Link between threat perception and support for LGBT+ rights

Though there is relatively low support for LGBT+ rights across the region, backing increases substantially among those not professing threat perceptions towards numerous issues including LGBT+ people, liberal democracy and migration. This finding suggests that the unwillingness of populaces to acknowledge the rights of sexual minorities can be interpreted as

generalized anxiety that could stem from anything that is perceived as uprooting the status quo. A lack of generalized apprehension towards social change contributes to significantly higher support for LGBT+ rights among those who do not perceive migration (48%) or liberal democracy (47%) as a threat.

This pattern holds true in majority of the surveyed countries with the exception of Romania, North Macedonia and Bulgaria where there appears to be no relationship between threat perception on these topics and LGBT+ rights.



In the V4, the support of LGBT+ rights rises from 48% on average to 62% among those who do not perceive migration and liberal democracy as threats.



Support for LGBT+ rights

- Support for LGBT+ rights among those who do not perceive migration as a threat
- Support for LGBT+ rights among those who do not perceive liberal democracy as a threat



Youth more tolerant

In each of the surveyed countries, the youngest adult cohort, aged between 18 and 24 years old, indicated notably more acceptance of LGBT+ rights than the populations at large. This pattern dovetails with global trends¹².

If LGBT+ rights (e.g. marriage equality) in CEE and Western Balkans was only up to young people, it would amass 50% support.



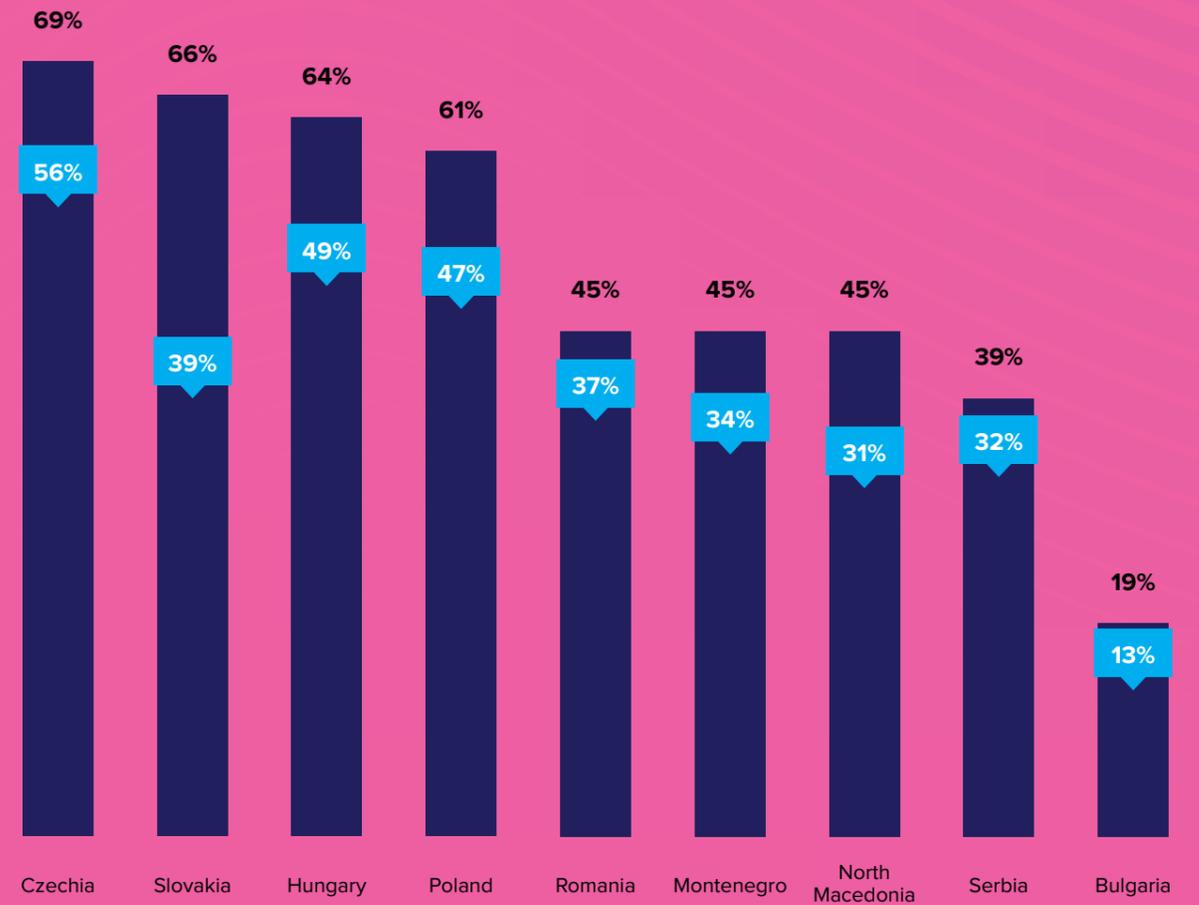
In the two regions, Czech & Slovak youth are most supportive of LGBT+ rights.

¹² <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/>



Support for LGBT+ rights

- Average support for LGBT+ rights
- Among those aged 18 - 24 years





Recommendations for democratic actors



1

Turning the narrative around

Anti-democratic sentiment has been undergirded by depictions of the human rights agenda as a threat and/or zero-sum game. As part of this conception, most people are portrayed as ‘losers’, with minorities and marginalized groups supposedly ‘winning’ at their expense. This apprehension, in turn, is exploited to fuel anti-democratic attitudes and demonization of the West, those instigators of “decadent” change, as part of a broader geopolitical strategy. The solution is to actively challenge these narratives through framings that explain how the human rights agenda is a priority that, in fact, benefits everyone. Given that 78% of people in the region view human rights and personal freedoms as essential democratic pillars, policymakers and civil society actors can use strategic communication to continually explain that rights of minorities are part of this agenda.

2

Work with the fact that not everybody is a democrat

One-third of all respondents in the region would prefer an authoritarian alternative to democratic governance in the form of a strong leader who need not bother with elections. This segment of the population is largely homogeneous in each of the surveyed countries. It often exhibits strongly pro-Russian sentiment, identifies the US as a threat, opposes LGBT+ rights and indicates a proclivity towards believing various conspiratorial narratives. While it is important to expend greater effort to counter disinformation and increase strategic communication capabilities at all levels of society, it cannot be expected that one-third of populations will miraculously change their worldviews. Democracy is a system which, by definition, thrives on pluralism, including a variety of opinions, and even anti-democratic attitudes need to be acknowledged. The moment, nonetheless, calls for ensuring that these tendencies do not become a danger to individuals and society. By fostering active engagement and participation of pro-democratic voices, this threat can be averted. This focus should particularly include youth, a group supportive of a more inclusive understanding of democracy and human rights across the region.

3

Engage with pro-democratic segments of society

A disconcerting number of people in the region (over 60%) are dissatisfied with how democratic regimes work in their countries and have legitimate grievances which need to be addressed. While dissatisfaction with current elected governments does not immediately translate into support for authoritarian ideas, it poses a problematic vulnerability that can be all too easily exploited by conniving anti-democratic actors. While it would be naïve to expect political leaders whose commitment to principles of liberal democracy is already questionable to truly address the concerns of their constituents, ‘friends of democracy’ in each of these countries need to stay engaged with the pro-democratically minded sections of their populations. Continued outreach at the grassroots level can ensure that pluralism, civil liberties and political participation remain present at least as guiding ideals.





Credits

Collection of opinion polls in each country was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o.

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Terminology used to identify regions in the report:

- CEE / Central and Eastern Europe – Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia
- Western Balkans – North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia

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