The image of Russia in Central & Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans

Russia: mighty Slavic brother or hungry bear next-door?
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.

Table of contents

04 Introduction
06 Executive summary
08 No appetite for turning to the East in CEE and the Western Balkans
10 Russia – a resurgent strategic partner or a shadow of the past era?
14 Fear of the Russian Bear
16 Russia - the victim of NATO and Western machinations
20 Russian virtual military muscle
22 Legacy of Slavic brotherhood and anti-fascist struggle as door-opener
24 Country summaries
Countries surveyed

Poland
Czechia
Slovakia
Hungary
Romania
Bulgaria
North Macedonia
Montenegro
Serbia
Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans have been, due to their geographic position and history, contested territories that have seen global and regional powers compete for control and influence. Following the fall of communism in 1989 and the successful integration of CEE into the EU and NATO, it seemed almost inevitable that the allure of Russia would diminish as would its footprint.

Yet 40 years of communist rule that witnessed countries come under Soviet domination, combined with the memory of the Red Army liberating the two regions from fascism and a web of economic, cultural and religious ties, continue to draw certain segments of the population to Russia. The mere fact that a significant subset of Central European and Balkan society feel nostalgia for “the good old days” of the communist past, one where Russia played a more predominant role in world affairs, is not necessarily a cause for concern. Nor the fact that some feel an affinity towards Russian culture, Moscow’s geopolitical stances or even Vladimir Putin himself. The manner in which the Kremlin is nurturing and exploiting these attitudes for its political purposes, however, is a paramount problem.

Russia’s turn to a more confrontational foreign policy approach has seen the country use various methods, including active measures, disinformation and information operations, to increase its leverage in an attempt to roll back the pro-Western transition of the region. The end goal of this long-term influence operation is not the renewal of the Warsaw pact - the communist alternative to NATO - or the Soviet Union dominated Council of Mutual Economic Assistance. By cultivating and amplifying pro-Russian attitudes and narratives, the Kremlin rather is seeking to weaken both the EU and NATO from within, slowing and/or paralysing their decision-making processes and shaping their policies. EU unity is indeed crucial if the sanctions regime and overall approach of the EU towards Russia is to be sustained. The planting and cultivation of geo-political, cultural and historic narratives concerning Russia can critically influence how people in the two regions perceive Russia and the EU, NATO and the US. The recent example of the Russian-produced Sputnik V vaccine bypassing the official registration procedures of the European Medicines Agency, with Moscow instead turning to negotiating deliveries with individual EU members, is yet another example of the country exploiting every opportunity to influence its image and gain political leverage.
To counter these influence strategies, it is necessary to first comprehensively understand how Russia is seeking to depict itself in CEE and the Western Balkans and how successful its attempts have been. Equally important is the need to take note of both commonalities and differences across the region and within different segments of societies.

This report, therefore, aims to provide answers to the following questions:

What narratives concerning Russia and its policies are most prevalent? How are they exploited to drive pro-Russian sentiment?

Which countries and population sub-groups are seemingly most vulnerable to pro-Russian narratives and why?

Is there a single disposition that fits all pro-Russian sympathizers across the two regions or are there multiple distinct groups drawn to the country?

What is the interplay between different pro-Kremlin narratives and how do they reinforce one another?
Key Findings

1. There is no single image of Russia in the region. Narratives that emphasize a common heritage and victimhood, however, resonate most strongly, overall, among populaces.

2. Societies in some countries are more inclined to accept pro-Russian narratives, which, in turn, further reinforce these predispositions. The concept of Slavic unity underpins the victimhood narrative that sees Russia recognized, by some, as a mere victim of the West. Those identifying with this notion are also more likely to believe that Russia is a superior military power.

3. The majority of people living in the region (56%) do not feel threatened by Russia. Most respondents think that their country is too small to pose a threat to Russia or that Slavic links and heritage will discourage Moscow from engaging in hostile acts.

4. Russia is seen as a strategic partner by 30% of people across the region. Given that all surveyed countries, apart from Serbia, are NATO members, this substantial figure is quite surprising and a testament to the still-significant Russian footprint present.

5. The narrative asserting that NATO is deliberately provoking Russia by encircling it with military bases is shared by 45% of the region’s population. The opposing view stating that Russia is responsible for provoking NATO by initiating conflicts in Eastern Europe, meanwhile, is affirmed by 40% of people.
Favourable attitudes towards Russia and high levels of acceptance of pro-Russian narratives that blame the West and/or NATO do not translate into geopolitical support for Moscow.

Rather than falling into the Russian bear’s embrace, even the most ardent supporters of pan-Slavic unity and admirers of Russian weaponry rather choose the West or a middle ground position. Russian influence operations, as of yet, only rarely result in tangible changes in public support for the EU and NATO - two primary Western geopolitical and cultural anchors important to the region.

Even in countries that are notably reserved towards Russia, Moscow’s projection of its military superiority appears to be resonating.

On average, 50% believe that Russia has the most powerful military in the world, whereas only 47% think the same of the US military.

Pro-Russian narratives serve as an important tool in shaping public opinion across the region and they are widely accepted as discussed in this report.

Pro-Russian narratives serve as an important tool in shaping public opinion across the region and they are widely accepted as discussed in this report.

Russia is still not seen as a real alternative to the West but rather as a victim of Western machinations.

Post-communist nostalgia, Slavic brotherhood and/or dissatisfaction with the state of society underline the rejection of the Western liberal democratic order and the preponderance of pro-Russian attitudes.

There is no universal profile of a pro-Kremlin backer across the region.

Different groups in different countries indicate varying level of acceptance of pro-Russian narratives.
Countries of this region can be categorized into three groups according to their views on Russia.
Undergirded by complex historical, cultural and ethnic ties, these countries express favourable views and share a high level of affinity towards Russia. The victimhood narrative that places the blame squarely on the shoulders of West and NATO, moreover, receives a sympathetic audience and buy-in in these countries. The notion that they share a common Slavic heritage with Russia is also pervasive and popular among an overwhelming majority of people, reinforcing other narratives. Despite this sentiment, when asked, even the bear hugger group declines to select Russia, as opposed to the West, as their preferred choice for the geopolitical and cultural orientation of their countries.

These two countries, separated by geography, share scepticism of Russia. This sentiment is based, to a certain extent, on historic experiences and the national narratives interpreting them (e.g. the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact or the occupation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina). Neither perceives Russia as an important strategic partner and the prevailing view in each sees Moscow labelled as a threat. Some pro-Russian narratives including, for example, the claim that NATO and West are aggressive and unfair, however, are shared by sizeable proportion of the populations of the two countries. While people in both countries firmly believe that the US has the upper hand when it comes to the military, a sizeable minority subscribe to the belief that Russian military superiority is unsurpassed.
No appetite for turning to the East in CEE and the Western Balkans

Most countries of CEE are positioned at the eastern edge of the EU and NATO. Cultural and social feelings of belonging to the West or East, therefore, can play a crucial role in framing the place of this region and its affinity to the two opposing geopolitical poles. As underlined in GLOBSEC Trends 2020⁴, instead of choosing one or the other, most Central Europeans choose the in-between position. On average, 49% would prefer to join neither the West nor East, not surprising considering the region’s history, geography and self-identification.

Following the fall of communism, the West came to embody the promise of better living standards, security, stability and economic opportunity, these ideals serving as a magnet for EU and NATO integration. The West, consequently, is the region’s second highest preference for its geopolitical orientation, selected by one third of respondents (33%).

Unlike the western lure of a better life and economic opportunities, those electing for a pro-Eastern leaning are influenced by a broader range of factors. Bulgaria and Slovakia exhibit the greatest propensity for this viewpoint, 9% and 11% in Central Europe, respectively. In these two countries, this stance is driven by positive attitudes towards Russia including their cultural and/or religious proximity and even common Slavic heritage. In other countries, like Czechia and Hungary, this affinity is rather buttressed by negative attitudes towards the West and its perceived ills. Whatever the reasons, Russia is not seen as a real alternative to the West. Even in countries where large segments of the population are sympathetic to some pro-Russian narratives, the desire to choose the East (Russia) over the West (represented by the EU and NATO) is rather small. This might, at first, be seen as a problem for Russia but it actually is congruent with Moscow’s overall strategy. Rather than attempting to present itself as a viable alternative to the EU or NATO, as elaborated on in this report, Russia is seeking to smear and damage the image of these organizations⁶.

East means Russia

According to our research findings, in CEE, the East is largely associated with Russia⁵. And when given a clear-cut choice, only 9%, on average, choose to express an explicit preference for a pro-Eastern cultural and geopolitical orientation (which often translates into pro-Russian).
There has recently been much discussion in our society about the geopolitical and civilisational positioning of your country. Would you like your country to be a part of the West, a part of the East, or somewhere in between?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>West</th>
<th>East</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Macedonia</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The political and economic transition of the post-communist bloc and its accession to the EU and NATO was hailed by many as a shining example of successful societal transformation leading to greater prosperity and stability. While a large majority of the region’s population supports the political and economic changes that have been introduced since the fall of communism, the perception of these changes on a personal level is much more mixed. As evidenced in the 2018 GLOBSEC Trends report or in a 2019 Pew Research report, sizeable shares of people express dissatisfaction with the effects of post-1989 developments on their own lives. One quarter (28%) of the populations of the Visegrad Four countries (CZ, HU, PL, SK), for example, believe that their lives were better before the fall of communism, with Slovakia and Hungary particularly driving these figures.

The post-communist transformation indeed has not proceeded without setbacks and there have been winners and losers in the process. The effects of post-communist nostalgia and/or disillusionment with the current state of affairs is discernible in perceptions, held by some, that Russia is a strategic partner.

There are, however, significant differences both between different countries and age groups within each country. In Bulgaria, Czechia and Slovakia, identification of Russia as a strategic partner increases with age. That said, the youngest generation in other countries, including Serbia, Hungary, North Macedonia and Montenegro, is, surprisingly, more inclined to see Russia as an ally. An explanation might lie in the possibility that young Serbs, Hungarians and Montenegrins, born long after the end of communism, are more prone to falling victim to contemporary anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives than their parents or grandparents.
Russia is the most important strategic partner*

* Which of the following countries or groups of countries are the most important strategic partners of your country today? 5 countries to choose from, maximum two picks: The US, China, Russia, France, Germany and the EU (for non EU member states)
Russia is our most important strategic partner - age groups

**Slovakia**

- 18 - 24 y.o.: 29%
- 25 - 34 y.o.: 41%
- 35 - 44 y.o.: 39%
- 45 - 54 y.o.: 43%
- 55 - 64 y.o.: 44%
- 65+ y.o.: 47%

**Bulgaria**

- 18 - 24 y.o.: 29%
- 25 - 34 y.o.: 35%
- 35 - 44 y.o.: 41%
- 45 - 54 y.o.: 40%
- 55 - 64 y.o.: 38%
- 65+ y.o.: 53%
The image of Russia in CEE and the Western Balkans

Serbia

76%
58%
60%
52%
58%
59%

18 - 24 y.o. 25 - 34 y.o. 35 - 44 y.o. 45 - 54 y.o. 55 - 64 y.o. 65+ y.o.

Hungary

44%
39%
41%
34%
31%
21%

18 - 24 y.o. 25 - 34 y.o. 35 - 44 y.o. 45 - 54 y.o. 55 - 64 y.o. 65+ y.o.
Fear of the Russian Bear

Media coverage of Russia’s actions and policies, especially in the Western press, is mostly critical. The direct Russian military involvement in combat in eastern Ukraine, the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian airstrikes in support of the brutal Assad regime in Syria, aggressive hacking campaigns carried out by the military intelligence GRU units and the targeted assassination of the Kremlin’s defectors and detractors have indeed made headlines across the world in recent years. Yet how do these stories influence perceptions of Russia as a threat in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans?

With few exceptions, the majority of people living in this region (56%) do not feel threatened by Russia. This might come as a surprise in light of the geographic proximity of several countries in the region to Russia and their complicated histories that have included past military occupation and conflict.

According to a Pew Research survey, twice as many Americans (50%) feel threatened by Russia than countries situated in its vicinity (25%). While differences in Russian threat perceptions are vast across the region, the three-group classification laid out earlier is not necessarily applicable on this question. Czechia (57%) and Bulgaria (55%), the former a bear feeder and the latter a bear hugger, are similarly inclined, for example, to reject the notion that Russia poses a threat.

The reasons why such a small share of populaces feels threatened by Russia vary in each country. In the more Russophilic countries (Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia, Montenegro), a perceived brotherly/sisterly Slavic family link, shared with Russia, plays an important role. In other countries (Czechia, Poland, North Macedonia, Romania), respondents cite the fact that their country poses no threat to Russia, giving Moscow no reason to threaten them. In Hungary, meanwhile, respondents judged the fair mutual relations between Budapest and Moscow to be the most important factor.

The wide variety of motivations, including emotional and cultural bonds and pragmatic appeals, point to the success of the information operations conducted by or on behalf of Russia and their reliance on customised country-specific narratives that reflect different local contexts. In many of these countries, Russia is described in official intelligence or security reports as a challenge and its actions as threatening to their stability and security. These official security assessments, nonetheless, do not seem to have much bearing on societal perceptions of Russia.
Do you think that Russia presents a danger to your country?

- Yes
- No

**Regional average**
- Yes: 25%
- No: 56%

**Countries**
- Poland: Yes 68%, No 21%
- Czechia: Yes 43%, No 24%
- Romania: Yes 30%, No 25%
- Hungary: Yes 22%, No 25%
- Montenegro: Yes 20%, No 61%
- Slovakia: Yes 10%, No 66%
- North Macedonia: Yes 7%, No 91%
- Serbia: Yes 3%, No 55%
- Bulgaria: Yes 3%, No 55%
Since 2014, NATO has become one of the most prominent targets of Russian disinformation campaigns. The Russian government and aligned outlets have sought to consistently disseminate anti-NATO narratives. The converse narrative purporting that Russia is provoking NATO by initiating conflicts in Eastern Europe, meanwhile, is believed to be true by only 40% of respondents. The detrimental impact of Kremlin rhetoric is further visible in the gradual decrease of support for NATO in Bulgaria, which has declined by 9% since 2019 and currently stands at 47%.

The accession of Central European, Eastern European and some Balkan countries into NATO extended the security guarantees enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty to this region, shielding it from direct military threats and anchoring it to the West. The Russian Federation, for its part, has been concerned with this NATO expansion into an area it considered to be its backyard and has perceived these developments as posing a threat to its security and national interests.

The categorization of countries into three main groups is pertinent, with the exception of Romania, in understanding attitudes towards the “Russia vs. NATO” pairing. Education, meanwhile, is a relevant factor influencing public opinion on the matter within countries. Those having secondary education without school-leaving certificate are most prone, in the majority of countries, to believe that NATO is provoking Russia. Bulgaria, where people with university education are more likely to affirm this narrative, represents an interesting exception.
Russia vs. NATO

- NATO deliberately provokes Russia by encircling it with military bases.
- Russia deliberately provokes NATO by initiating conflicts in Eastern Europe.

Serbia
- 71%: NATO provokes Russia
- 31%: Russia provokes NATO

Montenegro
- 60%: NATO provokes Russia
- 44%: Russia provokes NATO

Slovakia
- 56%: NATO provokes Russia
- 41%: Russia provokes NATO

Bulgaria
- 46%: NATO provokes Russia
- 22%: Russia provokes NATO

Romania
- 38%: NATO provokes Russia
- 37%: Russia provokes NATO

Czechia
- 38%: NATO provokes Russia
- 42%: Russia provokes NATO

North Macedonia
- 37%: NATO provokes Russia
- 32%: Russia provokes NATO

Hungary
- 33%: NATO provokes Russia
- 42%: Russia provokes NATO

Poland
- 23%: NATO provokes Russia
- 67%: Russia provokes NATO

Regional average:
- NATO provokes Russia: 45%
- Russia provokes NATO: 40%
More than half of respondents in the region view relations with Russia positively. 55% consider Russia to be our Slavic brother or believe that relations with the country should be nurtured. 47% believe that Russia is subjected to unfounded criticism by the West.
Russia a victim of the West or the aggressor?

Similar to narratives that portray NATO as the real aggressor, this same victimhood storyline is elevated through assertions that Russia has been unjustly accused of all wrongdoings by the West. The comparison, therefore, of two opposing narratives – one blaming Russia and the other the West – can provide interesting insight into the relative success of Russian image projection endeavours.

The survey data, in fact, indicates that a majority across the region fault the West for unfounded criticism rather than Russia’s actions. This perspective is more likely to be held in five of nine surveyed countries. The “West is to blame” view garners, overall, 2% more buy-in than the “Russia is a regional aggressor” narrative.

The “Russia as a victim of the West” and “Slavic brotherhood/special relations with Russia” narratives, meanwhile, correspond closely in the eyes of respondents. Indeed, when it comes to victimhood, those who subscribe to the Slavic brotherhood/special relations storyline are more inclined to see Russia as a victim, with each reinforcing one another. The positioning of Russia as a brotherly/sisterly nation in Slavic countries of CEE and the Western Balkans and the perceived need for a special relationship in non-Slavic countries, as elaborated further below, plays an important role.

The concept of Slavic unity underpins the victimhood narrative that portrays Russia as a mere victim of the West.
Russian virtual military muscle

Russian global image projection is underpinned by its show of force including the dramatic use of military equipment, military drills and accompanying rhetoric for psychological effect. Russia, in this regard, has mastered psychological tactics and information operations, making them integral components in its military affairs since World War II. Russia, notably, has employed these capacities extensively in the presentation of new equipment and military operations in Ukraine and, most recently, Syria.

This emphasis has included, for example, the development and presentation of new military equipment (e.g. tanks, fighter jets, cruise missiles, ATBMs and submarines). A standard feature encompasses slick video footage of new equipment, sometimes comprising its combat use in action (e.g. test sites in Syria), that enables Moscow to boast its abilities. These images have been disseminated through the sprawling network of pro-Russian information sources in the region, instilling an image of vast military power.

The aim of projecting conceptions of Russia as a military superpower on par with the US, achieved by parading its new equipment and proving its combat readiness, is two-fold. Firstly, Moscow is seeking to foster admiration and support from those sympathetic to Russia and spark apprehension among those wary of the country. Moscow, secondly, is attempting to camouflage the fact it is lagging on other issue areas, among others, economic development, quality of life and the state of medical facilities.

According to responses to the two opposing narratives – one asserting that Russia has the strongest military in the world and the other that the US military is more powerful than Russia’s – the majority in six of nine countries are inclined to accept Russia’s line. Nevertheless, overall perceptions, it should be noted, are nearly equal.

There is, significantly, no single age profile that characterizes people who subscribe to the Russian military superiority framing. In some countries, it is youth - the supposed digital natives – that are enormously influenced by the Kremlin narrative (Serbia, Hungary, Czechia, Romania and Poland). In Bulgaria and Montenegro, conversely, the oldest generation proves most susceptible to the claim. Slovakia and Romania, meanwhile, present the case where both the younger and the oldest generations were found to be prone to perceiving Russia as a military superpower. North Macedonia is also a distinct case, with the middle-aged demographic most likely to believe that Russia holds a military might advantage.

The majority in six of nine countries are inclined to accept Russia’s line on military superiority.
Military superiority: Russia vs. the US

- Russia’s military power is far greater than that of any other country in the world.
- The US military is more powerful and technologically advanced than Russia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Russia (%)</th>
<th>US (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Macedonia</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Legacy of Slavic brotherhood and anti-fascist struggle as a door-opener

In addition to contemporary issues, perceptions of Russia in CEE and the Western Balkans are influenced by historical and cultural narratives. In Slavic countries, which represent all surveyed countries apart from Hungary and Romania, the notion of joint historical, cultural and even “spiritual” bonds is often exploited to elevate Russia’s image in the region.

Notwithstanding the many historical and even current conflicts between Slavic nations that have witnessed a Russian role (e.g. the breakup of Poland, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea), this communal sentiment garners a tremendous following throughout the region, creating further openings for additional pro-Russian narratives to seep in.

In our research, people who subscribe to the Slavic brotherhood/sisterhood concept are both more inclined to take a positive view towards nearly every other attribute concerning Russia and adopt more anti-Western attitudes.

That said, no universal characteristics are discernible among people professing a special bond between their country and Russia, ethnic (Slavic countries) or otherwise (Hungary and Romania). The segmentation by age, similarly, points to no distinct pattern. Though Slavic unity holds greater sway among older people in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czechia and Montenegro, youth are more drawn to the possibility of special relations with Russia in Hungary, Romania and Poland.

Those who agree that Russia is our Slavic brother

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Macedonia</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

67% Average
Russia as the main actor responsible for the defeat of Fascism in WWII. continues to play the leading role in fight against fascism today

**The (ab)use of anti-fascist legacy by Russia**

Memories of the region’s anti-fascist struggle and the toll absorbed by the Soviet Red Army in its campaign to liberate Europe during the Second World War remain intact throughout the region. The remembrance of Red Army soldiers who sacrificed their lives during this struggle indeed were an integral component of communist ideology, contributing to the formation of close bonds between the liberators and the liberated. The communist era that ensued (and claimed many lives) put an emphasis on the victory over fascism as a central element of its raison d’être.

While the remembrance of fallen soldiers and victims is, undoubtedly, laudable, its contemporary exploitation for nefarious political motivations is not. This flagrant abuse was exemplified, for example, in Russia’s preposterous situating of the Ukrainian conflict as a contest between “fascist” forces on the Ukrainian side and brave anti-fascist volunteers on the other. This attempt to frame the conflict in Ukraine through the prism of the anti-fascist struggle was further emboldened by the activities of groups like the Night Wolves operating also in CEE and Western Balkan countries.

Against this backdrop, the “Russia as leader against fascism” storyline was found to be prevalent in five of nine countries surveyed. In another two countries, equal shares embraced and rejected the narrative, whereas it was vehemently spurned in only one. Most people in the region, furthermore, are inclined to believe that Russia is playing a leading role in combating fascism today. The fact that Russia, in fact, has been cultivating (complex) ties with many far-right political groups and parties throughout Europe appears lost on these segments of society.
Country summaries

Bear huggers

**Serbia**
Most pro-Russian country in the survey
Russia seen as a strategic partner by more than 50% of respondents
Majority of population believes in all surveyed pro-Russian narratives
Slavic brotherhood narrative nearly universally accepted in the country

**Bulgaria**
Russia perceived as an important strategic partner by four in ten Bulgarians
Explicit pro-Eastern geopolitical orientation not present
Russian victimhood narrative prevalent, accepted by nearly half the population
Oldest and university educated most sympathetic to pro-Russian narratives

**Montenegro**
Most pro-Russian country among NATO members surveyed
Russian narratives targeting NATO have proven effective and are widely accepted
Most inclined to believe Russian victimhood narrative among Slavic brotherhood adherents
Middle-aged people most reserved in their attitudes towards Russia

**Slovakia**
Considerable presence of pro-Russian attitudes - among most ardent of NATO and EU members
Russia seen as a strategic partner, NATO as an aggressor
Majority believes in Russian victimhood narrative
Slavic brotherhood plays a predominant role
Young and educated more resilient to pro-Russian narratives

Majority of Slovaks (50%) are inclined to see Russia as a victim of the West. Among those who subscribe to the concept of Slavic brotherhood, this figure increases to 58%.
### Bear feeders

**Czechia**
- Population wary of Russia, evidenced by second highest threat perception of Russia in the region
- One in five respondents view Russia as a strategic partner
- More people believe Russia is responsible for provoking NATO and acting in a hostile manner than the reverse
- More people identify the Russian military, rather than the US, as superior.
- Slavic brotherhood affinity second lowest in the region

**Hungary**
- Russia perceived as a strategic partner and a victim of NATO provocations by one-third of the population
- Three-fourths of people agree that the country should further develop its relationship with Russia
- Russian victimhood narrative is accepted by four in ten, rising to five in ten among those who support closer ties with Russia
- Explicit support for Eastern orientation is negligible
- Younger generation holds more favourable disposition towards Russia and oldest generation most distant

**North Macedonia**
- Population holds low threat perception of Russia
- People express second highest belief, following only Serbia, in the idea that Russia has the military upper hand
- Slavic brotherhood attachments to Russia are shared by two-thirds of the population
- One-third are inclined to believe that NATO is responsible for provoking Russia
- More people conclude that the West is unjustly accusing Russia of wrongdoing than the other way around.

### Bear sceptics

**Romania**
- More people see Russia as a threat than not
- Russia and NATO are equally blamed for provocations
- Slightly more people believe that Russia is acting aggressively towards its neighbours than the “West is unjustly making accusations about Russia” narrative
- While more people recognize the US military as superior, six in ten Romanians believe that Russia has the most advanced military
- Majority of Romanians believe in nurturing their relationship with Russia

**Poland**
- Russia is seen as a threat by seven in ten Poles
- Strategic partnership with Russia and any pro-eastern orientation sentiments are negligible
- Two-thirds consider Russia’s actions as provocations against NATO and eight in ten think Russia generally treats its neighbours aggressively – the highest percentage in the region
- One-third of Poles believe Russia has the strongest army and identify with Slavic brotherhood links with Russia
The image of Russia in CEE and the Western Balkans

The Warsaw Pact was a collective defense treaty similar to NATO, uniting the Soviet Union and seven other Eastern Bloc socialist republics of Central and Eastern Europe. Signed in May 1955 in Warsaw, it was established as a military counterweight to NATO.

1 The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance was a socialist economic organization set up by the Soviet Union in 1949 following the rejection of the Marshall economic plan by socialist bloc countries. Led by the Soviet Union, its original members included Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania; Cuba, Mongolia, and Vietnam joined later.

2 The Warsaw Pact was a collective defense treaty similar to NATO, uniting the Soviet Union and seven other Eastern Bloc socialist republics of Central and Eastern Europe. Signed in May 1955 in Warsaw, it was established as a military counterweight to NATO.

3 The Warsaw Pact was a collective defense treaty similar to NATO, uniting the Soviet Union and seven other Eastern Bloc socialist republics of Central and Eastern Europe. Signed in May 1955 in Warsaw, it was established as a military counterweight to NATO.


5 GLOBSEC Trends 2020

6 GLOBSEC Trends 2020


8 See for example: International media image of Russia: trends and patterns of perception, Ekaterina A. Repina et al, DOI: 10.18355/ XL.2018.11.02.45;


13 GLOBSEC Trends 2020


16 Valentino, Benjamin A. (2005), Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century, Cornell University Press,


19 These many links include financial, media and political support, cooperation agreements signed between our Russia Party and a host of Western European far-right parties, illicit financing etc... See Anton Shekhovtsov’s ‘Tango Noir, https://www.tango-noir.com/