



# GLOBSEC TRENDS 2018

CENTRAL EUROPE:  
ONE REGION,  
DIFFERENT  
PERSPECTIVES



## Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out from February to March 2018 on a representative sample of the population in four EU and NATO member states: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample ranging from 1000 to 1012 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) in Slovakia and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) in the three other countries.

In all countries, the profiles of respondents are representative of the country by sex, 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.

## Glossary

CE	Central Europe
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
V4	Visegrad Four



# Contents

- 4** — **Foreword**
- 6** — **Key findings**
- 8** — **Country highlights**
- 12** — **East, West or in-between?**
- 16** — **EU relationship: It's complicated**
- 20** — **NATO: Better in than out**
- 24** — **Leaders**
- 26** — **The Russian confusion**
- 30** — **Who believes in conspiracies?**
- 34** — **Social media: Hatred goes viral**
- 36** — **Post-communist nostalgia**
- 38** — **Connecting the dots**



## **Jakub Wiśniewski**

Vice President of GLOBSEC and  
Director of the GLOBSEC Policy  
Institute

### **History never repeats itself but sometimes it rhymes, or so the saying goes.**

In 1918, the First World War ended and Central European countries were no longer part of the post-feudal monarchies that dominated Europe's political landscape for the whole of the 19th century. A short-lived experiment with parliamentary democracy and market economy began before Central Europe was swallowed by totalitarian systems from the East and West.

Events in 1938 marked a low point for those who believed that their countries could be spared war, humiliation and bloodshed. The night that followed was long and dark. It had the ugly face of Hitler and Stalin. Brief moments of hope like the Prague Spring of 1968 ended with tears and disappointment, before 1988 saw the Cold War begin to crumble. (Numerologists might feel vindicated that the number 8 always brings winds of change.)

How will we remember 2018? Will we look back and find the causes of the trouble that plagues Central Europe every couple of generations? Or – more optimistically – will it mark the end of the social, political and economic turbulence triggered by the crisis of 2008?

Alas, GLOBSEC Policy Institute experts have no crystal ball to look into and foretell the future. Fortunately, the next best solution is at our disposal – research coupled with mountains of data about Central Europe and its people that enables us to see the socio-economic, political and geopolitical trends shaping the region. GLOBSEC Trends 2018 report analyses public opinion polls conducted in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. It casts some light on the mindset of Central Europeans, who after almost 30 years of post-Cold War reality are still searching for their place in Europe and the world.

What have we learned about us? First and foremost, we see that Central Europe is not immune from the wider Western crisis of liberal democracy and turbulence of world capitalism. To a certain extent this crisis is even more profound in the region, which throughout much of the 20th century did not experience anything beyond autocratic illiberal central command regimes. It does not help that some degree of confusion can be detected, especially among younger generations, who have difficulty ascertaining where their countries belong on the geopolitical map of Europe. Second, despite successful integration with Western structures such as the EU, NATO, OECD and



# Foreword

others, Central European mentalities are still distinguishable, with common characteristics among the four countries and markedly different from that of the western Europe. The naïve beliefs in the inevitability of systemic transition towards democracy and market economy from the 1919s must be verified, if not shelved. Third, and most strikingly, regional mindsets seem to be in flux, with opinions about such fundamental questions as EU membership fluctuating from one year to another. This probably reflects the high intensity of national-level debates about such issues as fairness of elections, corruption among ruling politicians as well as echoes of distant political storms such as the Brexit vote or the migration crisis.

Whatever the future evolution of Central European mindset, 2018 is a year of crucial importance. It looks almost certain that political developments in the four countries will not be as linear and harmonious as was generally expected. It is also possible that different national realities will set the countries on different trajectories, for instance membership of the Eurozone or reluctance to join the club will determine their status in a new EU order.

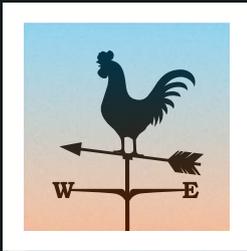
Throughout history Central Europe has always been torn between tragic

fate marked by suffering of its people and amazing spurs of growth and rejuvenation. Yet, there is nothing predetermined about the future – it is up to Central Europeans to choose how their futures will rhyme with the past, and GLOBSEC Trends is here to help figure out where the wind is blowing.

*Wisniewski*

# Key findings

## 01



The geopolitical and cultural position between East and West remains a dominant self-identification preference of Central Europeans and significantly increased among Czechs and Slovaks in 2018. Young Poles are surprisingly the least pro-Western youth in the region.

## 02



The gap between perceptions of the EU has narrowed. While support for the EU rose among Czechs and Slovaks - originally more Eurosceptic countries - positive perceptions decreased in Poland and Hungary.

## 03



Czech and Slovak youth are increasingly pro-NATO. Poles and Hungarians are revising their stance.

## 04



Approval of world leaders' policies never exceeds 50% among Central Europeans. Moreover, the region knows less about Jean Claude-Juncker compared to Macron, Merkel, Putin or Trump.

## 05



Most Central Europeans do not believe that Russia meddled in US and European elections.

## 06



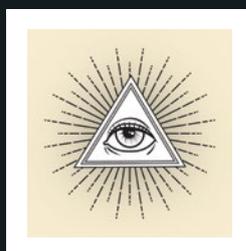
The overwhelming majority of Central Europeans perceive the fall of communism positively. Slovakia and Hungary, however, share less positive views when it comes to evaluating whether their countries were better before or after 1989.

## 07



While public approval of Putin's policies is higher than that of Poroshenko in most CE countries, Central Europeans overwhelmingly reject the presence of Russian military forces in Eastern Ukraine.

## 08



Two interesting outliers regarding conspiracies. While Slovaks are more conspiracy-prone, Czechs are the most impervious to such theories.

# Country highlights



## Hungary (HU)

### Geopolitical orientation

#### Hungary moved closer to the West

in terms of geopolitical preferences. Support for the West increased slightly by 6% in 2018 while the in-between and pro-East orientation dropped.

Hungary still maintains its position as the second most pro-European state in the region. 75% of Hungarians would vote to stay in the EU in a referendum.

While the preference of Hungarians to stay in NATO remains unchanged, positive perceptions of the Alliance fell by 15% among respondents aged 55-64 years while 10% more 35-44 year olds perceive NATO membership as a good thing. 38% of Hungarians do not know whether membership is a good or bad thing.

52% of Hungarians do not agree with the disinformation narrative that NATO and the United States support terrorists in Syria. However, 29% of the youngest and oldest generations do not know whether this conspiracy statement is true or false.

### Leaders

#### Young Hungarians are the least aware of both local and world leaders.

16% of 18-24 year olds do not know Vladimir Putin and 49% have never heard of Emmanuel Macron.

### Russia

47% of young Hungarian professionals do not believe that Russia tried to influence the outcome of the US presidential elections, while only 26% do so.

4% of middle aged Hungarians (45-54 years old) are the strongest proponents of the theory that Russia tried to influence the outcome of several European elections.

### Conspiracies and disinformation

#### Hungarians are the second most prone nation to believing in conspiracy theories.

27% of young Hungarians do not know whether Al-Qaeda or the US government organised the 9/11 terrorist attacks and only 43% of Hungarians disagree with the anti-Semitic conspiracy statement that Jews have too much power and secretly control the world.

60% of Hungarians encountered disinformation on social media. 92% of young social media users who encounter inappropriate content do not report it.

### 1989

#### Although 62% perceive the fall of communism in 1989 positively, this percentage is the lowest in the region.

This is, among other factors, caused by a high proportion (19%) of undecided respondents, primarily among the youth and least educated. 53% of young Hungarians aged 18-24 years did not know whether the lives of people like them were better before or after 1989.



# Poland (PL)

## Geopolitical orientation

**Only 27% of young Poles prefer the pro-Western geopolitical orientation of their country, by far the lowest support in the region,**

while their grandparents remain strong supporters of the West.

While Poland remains the most pro-European state in Central Europe, support among young Poles is declining. When compared to youth in other countries, the percentage of those that consider EU membership a good thing is lowest in Poland.

**Polish support for NATO membership is still the strongest in the region, but has decreased by 13% over the past year.**

21% of the oldest and 17% of the youngest Poles perceive NATO membership less positively.

## Leaders

Out of all Central European countries, Angela Merkel and Donald Trump enjoy the highest levels of support for their policies in Poland, with approval rates of 50% and 46% respectively. Trump's policies are mostly supported by men, people older than 65 years and the least educated.

## Russia

**Poland is the only country where more people believe that Russia influenced the US presidential elections than not (42% vs. 38%).**

Middle-aged Poles are the strongest proponents of the view that Russia influenced the elections (51%).

61% of Poles think that the conflict in Ukraine persists due to continued Russian military presence in Eastern Ukraine. 72% of young professionals aged 25-34 years support this view.

Poland is the only country in the region that views Poroshenko (20%) more favourably than Putin (13%).

## Conspiracies and disinformation

Only 46% of Poles oppose the anti-Semitic conspiracy that Jews have too much power. However, 72% of Poles disagree with conspiracy theories concerning 9/11.

83% of young Poles encountered disinformation on social media. 53% of young Polish social media users who encountered inappropriate content online reported it.

## 1989

Poles perceive the fall of communism the most positively in the region.

**74% of Poles believe that the fall of communism was a good thing,**

compared to only 13% who perceived it negatively. The strongest proponents of the regime change are young people and the most educated.

# Country highlights



## Czech Republic (CZ)

### Geopolitical orientation

Czechs are moving to the in between zone and slightly towards the West, with 5% more supporting a pro-Western orientation compared to 2017, and 14% more preferring the Czech Republic to position itself between East and West.

### Czechs are turning more pro-European.

Support for EU membership has risen by 28% over the past year and 69% would vote to stay in a referendum.

Men have a more positive view of the EU than women. While 60% of Czech men believe the EU is a good thing for their country, only 42% of women share the same opinion.

### Czech support for NATO membership increased by 26% over the past year.

In the event of a referendum, 91% of young Czechs would choose to stay in NATO, a 40% increase over a year.

65% of Czechs think that NATO membership is a good thing, an 11% increase over the past year. In particular, more Czechs aged 18-24 years think that NATO membership is a good thing, a 27% increase on last year.

### Leaders

With a 49% approval rate, Emmanuel Macron enjoys the highest level of support among Czechs. 50% also view the policies of their current leader, Andrej Babiš, in a positive light.

### Russia

Out of all the countries surveyed, **young Czechs are the strongest believers in Russian meddling in the US presidential elections,** with 59% supporting this view.

54% of Czechs with a university education believe in Russian meddling in European elections, which makes them the only group in CE where the absolute majority holds such a view.

### Conspiracies and disinformation

### The majority of Czechs disagree with conspiracy statements.

The Czech Republic was the only CE country where a majority (67%) disagreed with the anti-Semitic conspiracy that Jews have too much power and secretly control many governments and institutions around the world. 96% of young Czechs disagree with this statement.

96% of young Czechs aged 18-24 years came across disinformation on social media.

### 1989

An overwhelming majority of Czechs (80%) evaluate the fall of communism positively, while 64% also consider their lives to be better than before 1989.



# Slovakia (SK)

## Geopolitical orientation

More than 50% of Slovaks would prefer to position their country between East and West, a 14% increase on last year.

Slovakia remains an outlier in its support for Russia, with 13% of Slovaks preferring a pro-Eastern orientation in 2018.

## Two thirds of Slovaks would vote to stay in the EU

in the event of a referendum, a 7% increase compared to Spring 2017. Slovakia's youth hold the most positive views of the EU, with 68% of 18-24 year olds perceiving it as a good thing for their country compared to 41% of 65 years old and above.

## Support for NATO membership among Slovaks reached 50%,

a 7% increase over the past year. Support among young Slovaks for staying in NATO increased by 21% with an extra 16% perceiving NATO membership as a good thing.

## A relative majority of Slovaks (40%) think that NATO and the US-led coalition support terrorists in Syria.

29% of Slovaks aged 35-44 years and 27% of the youngest generation remain undecided on the issue.

## Leaders

While more Slovaks disapprove (47%) of Putin's policies than approve (41%), they are the most supportive of Putin in CE. The same does not apply to Slovakia's youth, of which only 27% agree with Putin's policies. The most positively evaluated leader is Andrej Babiš (42% approval rate) which may be related to his Slovak origins.

## Russia

50% of Slovaks disapprove of Russia's military presence in Ukraine, while 33% do not believe that the conflict continues due to the presence of Russian forces on the ground.

Only 27% believe that Russia tried to influence the outcome of several elections in Europe, making Slovakia the least aware of such efforts.

## Conspiracies and disinformation

## Most Slovaks believe in conspiracy theories.

53% think that secret groups control world affairs and aim to establish a totalitarian world order. 52% believe Jews have too much power and secretly control the world. Moreover, 25% of young Slovaks do not know whether Al-Qaeda or the US government organised the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

68% of Slovaks aged 18-24 years encountered disinformation on social media. However, only 9% of all Slovak social media users who encounter inappropriate content report it.

## 1989

Although 67% of Slovaks perceive the fall of communism positively, more people (41%) say that their lives (or the lives of people like them) were better before 1989. The older generation's feeling of nostalgia is prevalent. While 60% of people aged above 55 years believe their life was better before 1989, only 19% of 18-24 year olds believe the same.

# East, West or in-between?

The self-perception of Central Europeans in terms of their geopolitical and cultural identity was dominated in 2018 by a strong preference for the middle position between East and West and a stark difference between the attitudes of the region's young and old generations.

It is quite surprising that after 14 years in the EU and 19 years of NATO membership\*, half of Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians would prefer their home countries to be geopolitically somewhere in the middle between East and West. Poland is an outlier in this regard since it is the only country where a pro-Western orientation is dominant.

## Increased support for the in-betweeners among Czechs and Slovaks

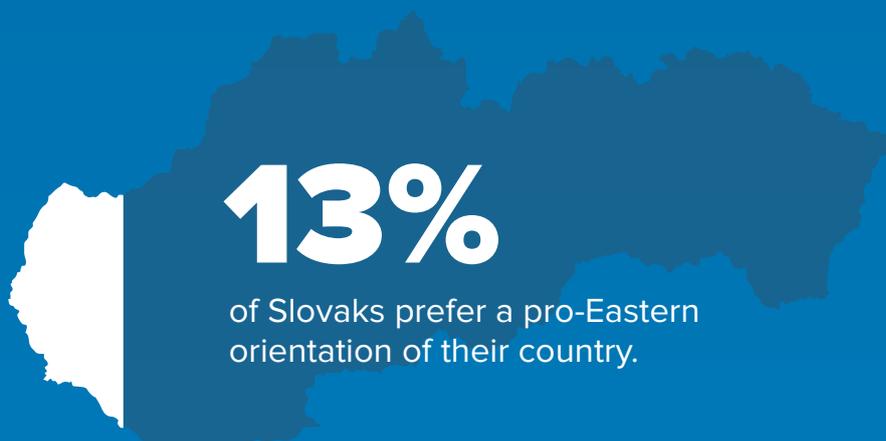
Support for the middle position has grown by **14% over the past year in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia and decreased slightly in Poland and Hungary**. Slovaks, followed closely by Czechs, take the first and second places on the list of “in-betweeners” with Hungary dropping to third. Such a significant boost for the in-between position could be explained by a shift from “do not know” to a more articulated support for the middle ground among Czechs and Slovaks. However, the driving forces behind the emboldened “neither East nor West” position in both countries are quite different. In the Czech Republic it seems that the campaign

in the run up to Presidential elections held in January 2018, which featured an openly anti-EU rhetoric, had a significant impact. In Slovakia, the sudden increase of “in-betweeners” is not linked to any domestic political event, but rather with the diminishing perception of the West as a force for good and the disproportionately high penetration of conspiracy theories and disinformation highlighted later in the report.

## Slovakia drifting Eastwards?

Slovakia has historically been the country with the weakest support for

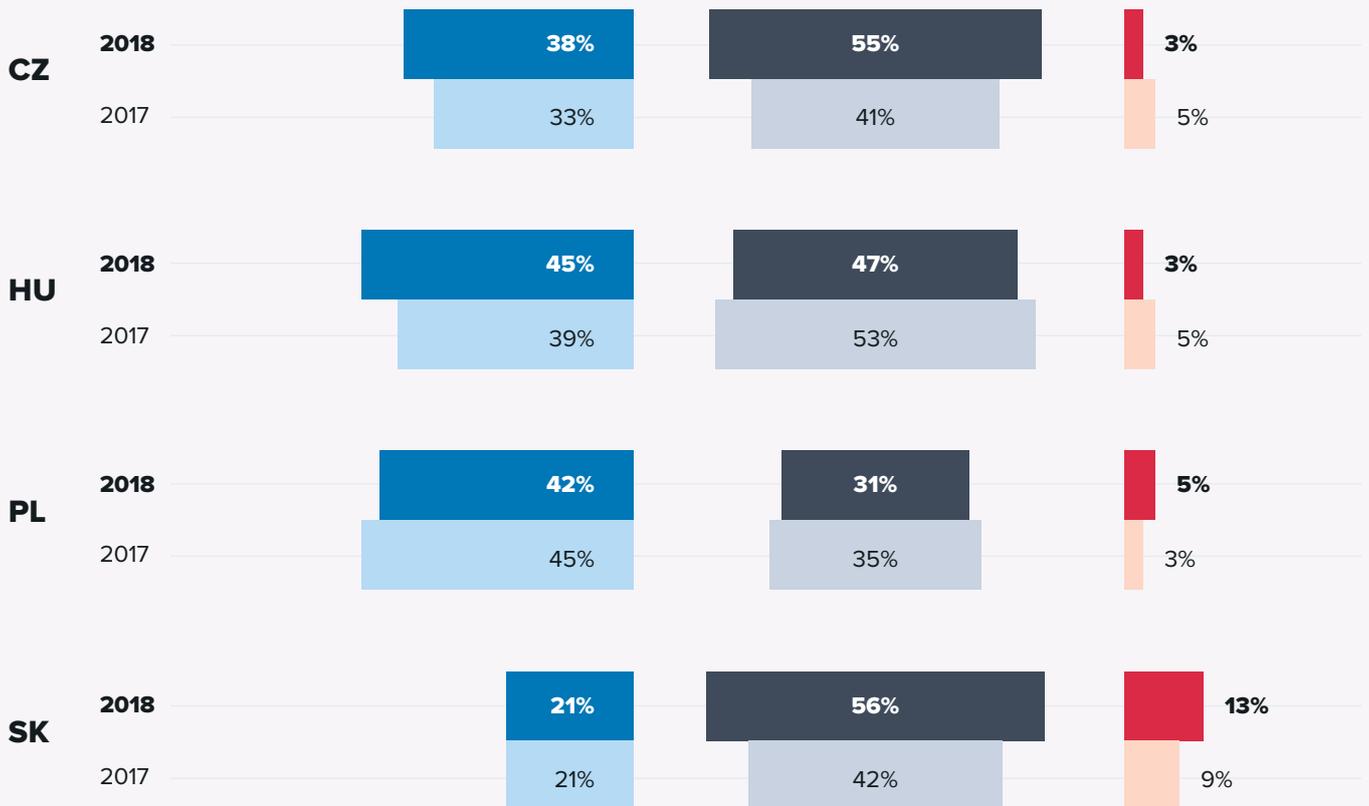
the West (including NATO and the US) among the Visegrad Group and was also the last country to join NATO. With only 21% support, the country remains the least supportive of the pro-Western orientation. The growing divide between Slovakia and the rest of the Visegrad Group in terms of support for the pro-Eastern orientation (mostly associated with Russia) was also confirmed this year. Slovakia is the only country where such orientation has reached more than 10% of the population and recorded the highest growth in such sentiments (an increase by 4% to 13% in 2018). Yet, the West is still more popular than the East among Slovaks by 8%.



# Where we belong

All respondents

■ Part of the West   
 ■ Somewhere in between   
 ■ Part of the East



## More than half

of Czechs and Slovaks would prefer to position their countries between East and West, a 14% increase on last year.

## **Young Central Europeans prefer the West more than their parents**

Overall, the West remains hugely popular in the CE region with support for the pro-Western orientation growing in the Czech Republic by 5% and 6% in Hungary, while dropping slightly in Poland. Looking at the geopolitical preference of young Central Europeans, we see a significantly different picture. Support for the West among 18-24 year olds is much higher among Hungarians (24%), Czechs (19%) and Slovaks (13%) in comparison to the average for their country. Young Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians also show less enthusiasm for their country's in-between position, which is also significantly lower than the average. Finally, only 2% of young Slovaks support the pro-Eastern orientation, 11% less than the total preference for the country.

## **Sceptic young Poles**

While Poland is rightly perceived as the most pro-Western country in the region, young Poles contradict this picture. Poland is the only country where the oldest generation (65+) is the strongest supporter of the pro-Western orientation (51%), while preference for the West is weakest among 18-24 year olds (27%). This makes young Poles the weakest supporters of the West in the whole Visegrad region. Surprisingly, young Poles are also the strongest proponents of the pro-Eastern orientation in the region (9%).

# **Support for the West is higher by approximately 20% among young Czechs and Hungarians, but lower by 15% among young Poles in comparison to their parents.**

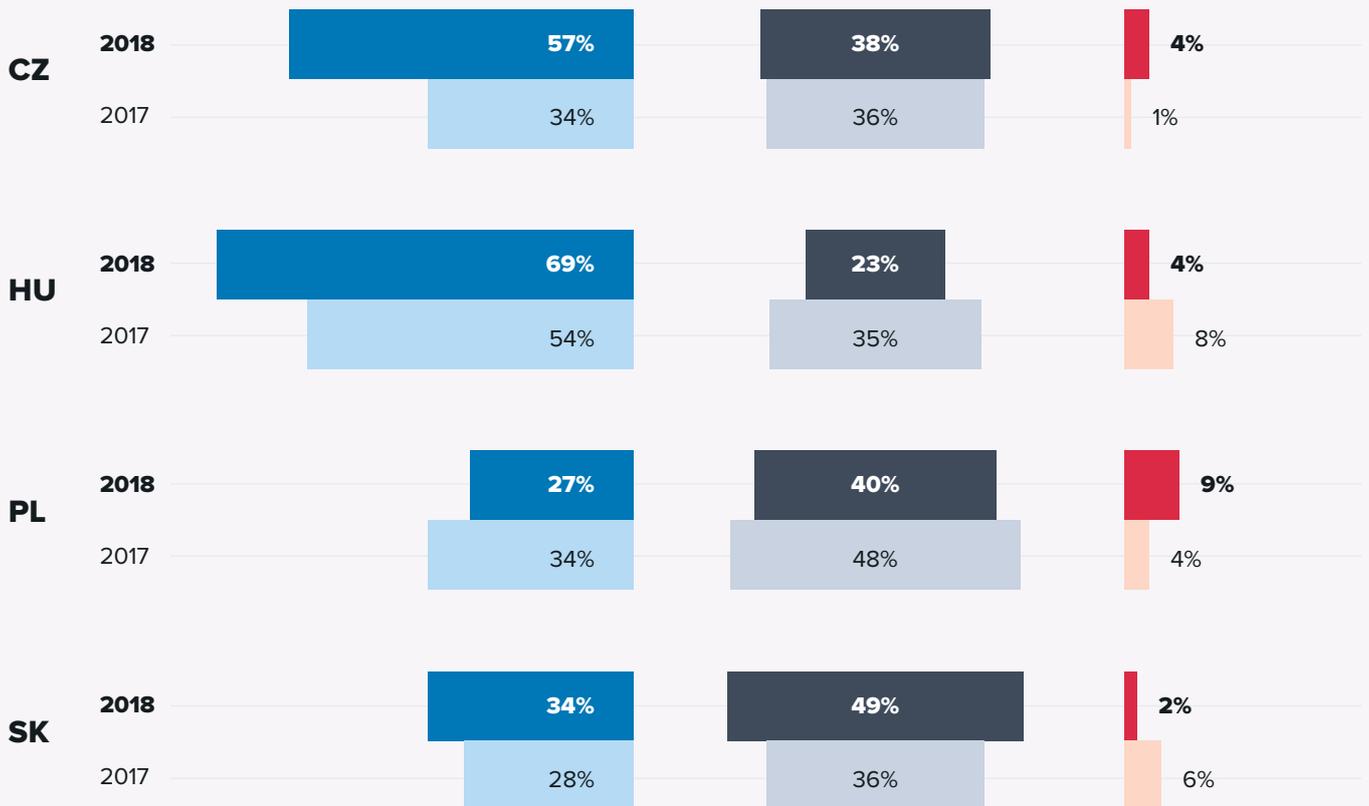
---

\*Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined NATO in 1999, with Slovakia joining in 2004. All four countries joined the EU in May 2004.

# Where we belong

Young people aged 18-24

■ Part of the West ■ Somewhere in between ■ Part of the East



**51%**

Poland is the only country where the oldest generation (65+) is the strongest supporter of the pro-Western orientation (51%),

**27%**

while preference for the West is weakest among 18-24 year olds (27%).

# EU relationship: It's complicated

Central Europeans' support for the EU is clear and unquestionable. The absolute majorities in each country consider the EU a good thing and would vote to stay in the EU, which represents a change towards the positive compared to last year. At the same time, the differences between the four countries are diminishing, especially due to the significant increase in support in the Czech Republic and drop in Poland.

## No alternative to EU membership

EU membership has overwhelming support across the region. More than two thirds of Central Europeans would vote to stay in the EU in the event of a referendum. This represents a 7% increase compared to last year, despite elections held in two countries where the EU's image suffered from the "blame game" played by political representatives, as well as several high-profile disputes between state- and EU-level representatives in the region.

## Getting closer

While Poles can still be considered the most pro-European of the V4, the Czechs' reputation as the region's biggest Eurosceptics is diminishing. Support for the EU has drastically risen among all segments of the Czech

population (41% to 69% support EU membership and 35% to 51% consider the EU as a good thing), which resulted in a level comparable to Slovakia on an imaginary ladder of pro-Europeanism. The steep increase might be connected to the two major elections held in late 2017 and early 2018, during which the EU played a major role in the political discourse. In addition, the "naming and shaming" strategies of political representatives who were not afraid to go as far as proposing a referendum on EU membership might have mobilised previously silent or indifferent groups to define their position more clearly.

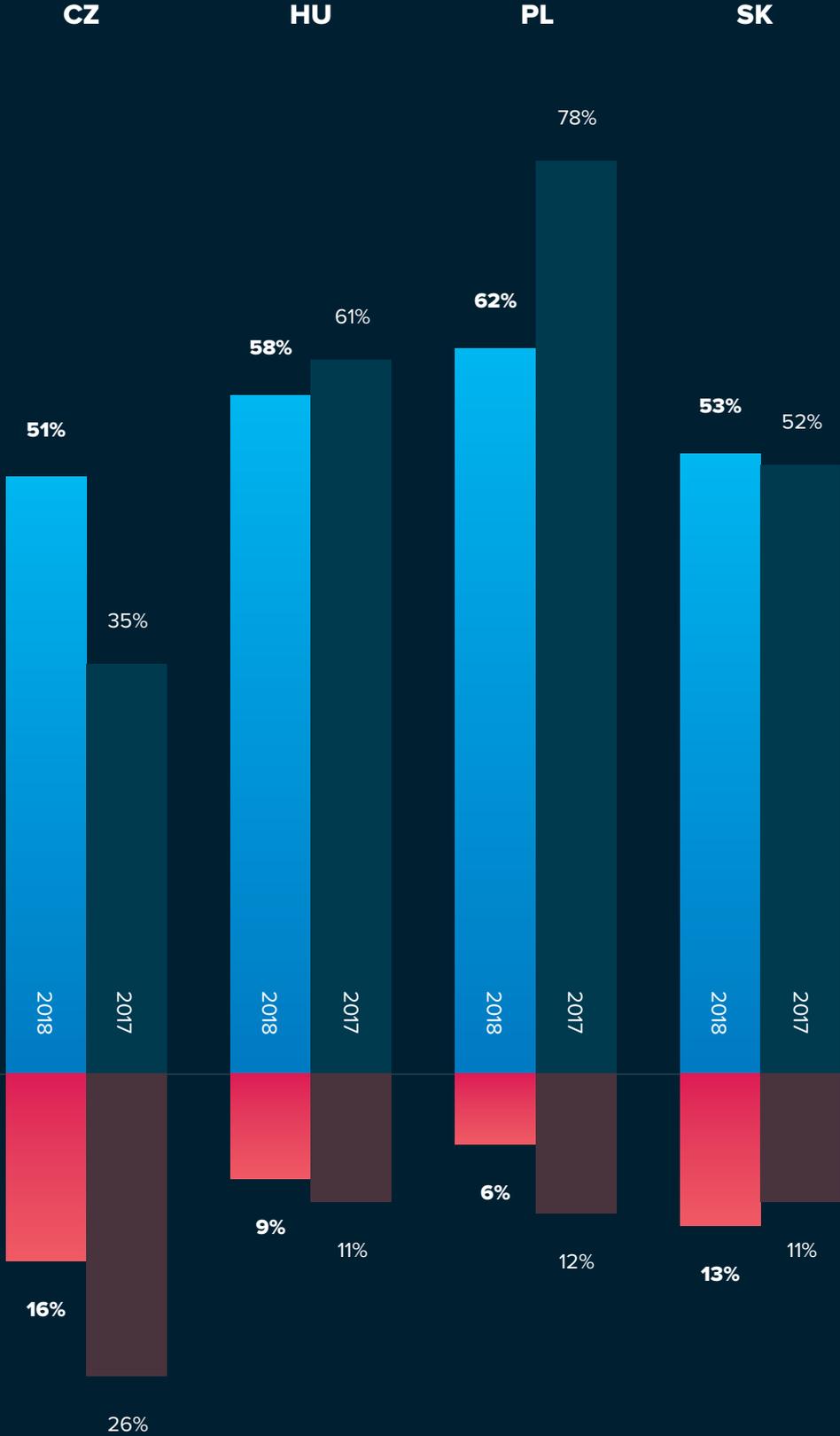
On the other hand, the perception of the EU as a good thing has deteriorated significantly in Poland (by 16%) and declined slightly in Hungary, meaning that differences of opinions between the region's most pro-European and Eurosceptic countries are narrowing. The similarities in

percentages, however, do not translate into similarities in the reasoning behind support for the EU. While in some countries pro-Europeanism is more about geopolitical definition against the East or Russia, in others it is more about a common space of guaranteed freedoms or a symbol of stability vis-à-vis unstable internal developments.

**Around 30%  
of the V4  
population  
perceive the EU  
as neither good  
nor bad for their  
country.**

# What is Central Europeans' opinion on their country's EU membership?

■ EU is a good thing    
 ■ EU is bad thing



# Youths in Hungary and Poland are the least aware of Juncker, with 46% and 40% of 18-24 year olds respectively claiming not to know who he is.

## Juncker's balanced score

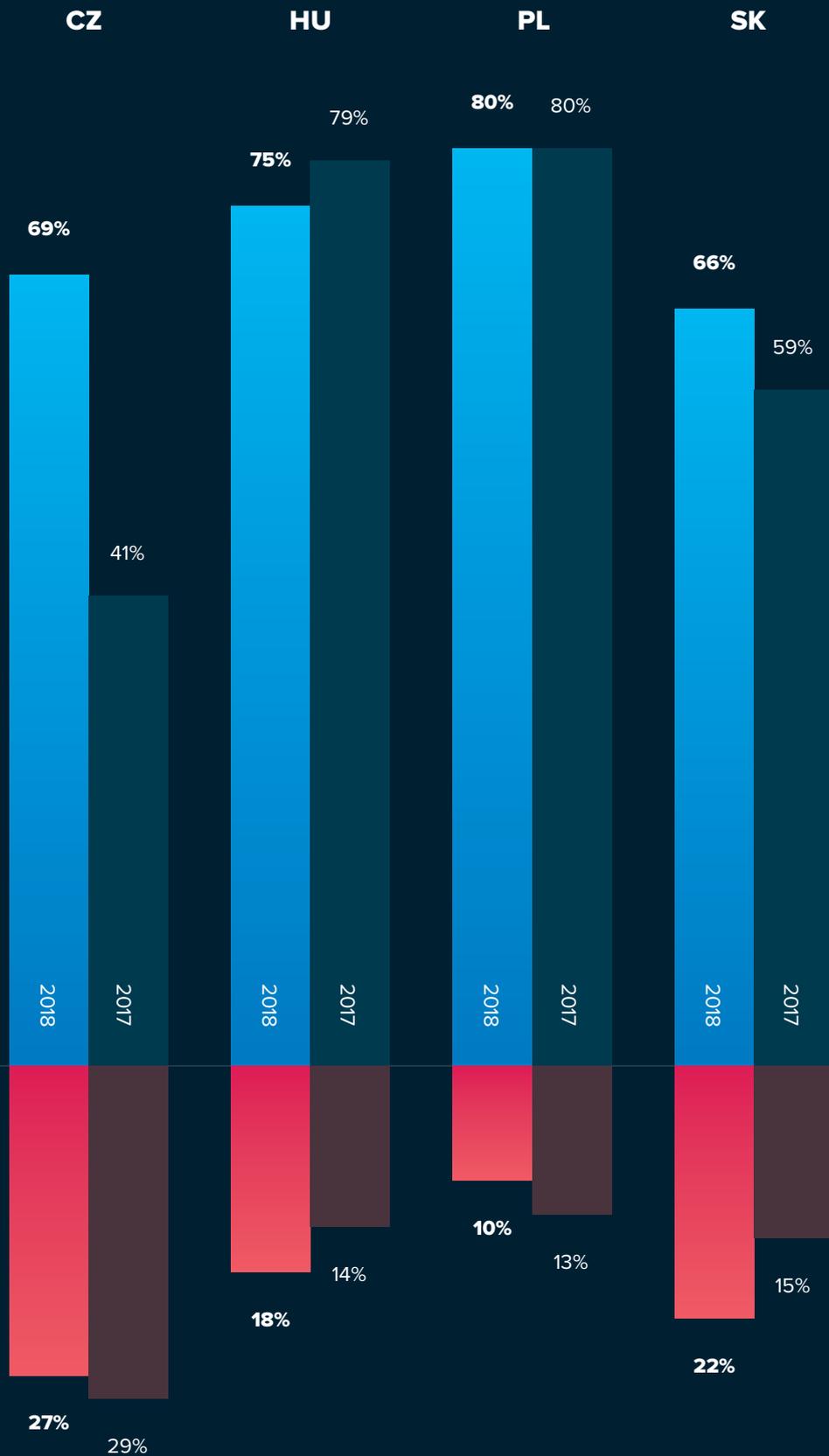
After three and a half years in office as President of the European Commission, perceptions of Jean-Claude Juncker's policies are quite balanced among V4 countries. Around 30% of Czechs, Poles and Slovaks both agree and disagree with the policies of the EU's highest official. Disapproval rates are highest in Hungary, which does not come as a surprise given the rhetoric that is regularly applied against EU institutions but, on the other hand, goes against generally high levels of trust expressed towards the European Commission.

## Polish youth in question

Support for the EU correlates with age only in Slovakia, whereas the productive working age groups (35-64 years) in the Czech Republic and Hungary seem to be the most Eurosceptic. Nevertheless, in all three countries, 18-24 year olds are the most pro-European age group. The same does not apply to Poland, where people aged 65 years and over are the most supportive of the EU.

# How would Central Europeans vote in a referendum?

Stay in the EU    Leave the EU



# NATO: Better in than out

Support for NATO remains strong among Central Europeans. The majority of respondents in all four countries would vote to stay in the Alliance in a referendum. However, various disinformation narratives about NATO are common in this region and have a significant impact on the perceptions of Central Europeans.

## Positive perception of NATO on decline among the usual suspects

Positive public perceptions of NATO among Central Europeans have on average decreased by 8%. Polish support for NATO membership has decreased by 13% over the past year and 31% of Poles do not know whether membership is a good thing or bad thing, a 15% increase on last year. 38% of Hungarians do not know whether NATO membership is a good thing or

bad thing, up 11% on the last survey. However, in the Czech Republic it is possible to observe an 11% increase in the perception of NATO being a good thing. Young Czechs aged 18-24 years are the main drivers of this change (up 27%) followed by a 17% increase among Czechs aged 55-64 years. While perceptions of NATO in Slovakia remain relatively unchanged, divisions have emerged among the age groups. While more Slovaks aged 18-24 years perceive NATO as a good thing (up 16%), 16% of the oldest group view the Alliance as a bad thing and 24% as neither good nor bad.

**More Slovaks aged 18-24 years perceive NATO as a good thing. A 16% increase on last year.**

## Slovaks think NATO supports terrorists in Syria

A relative majority of Slovak respondents (40%) think that NATO and the US-led coalition support terrorists in Syria. Slovakia is the only country in the region in which the majority of respondents do not challenge this Russian disinformation

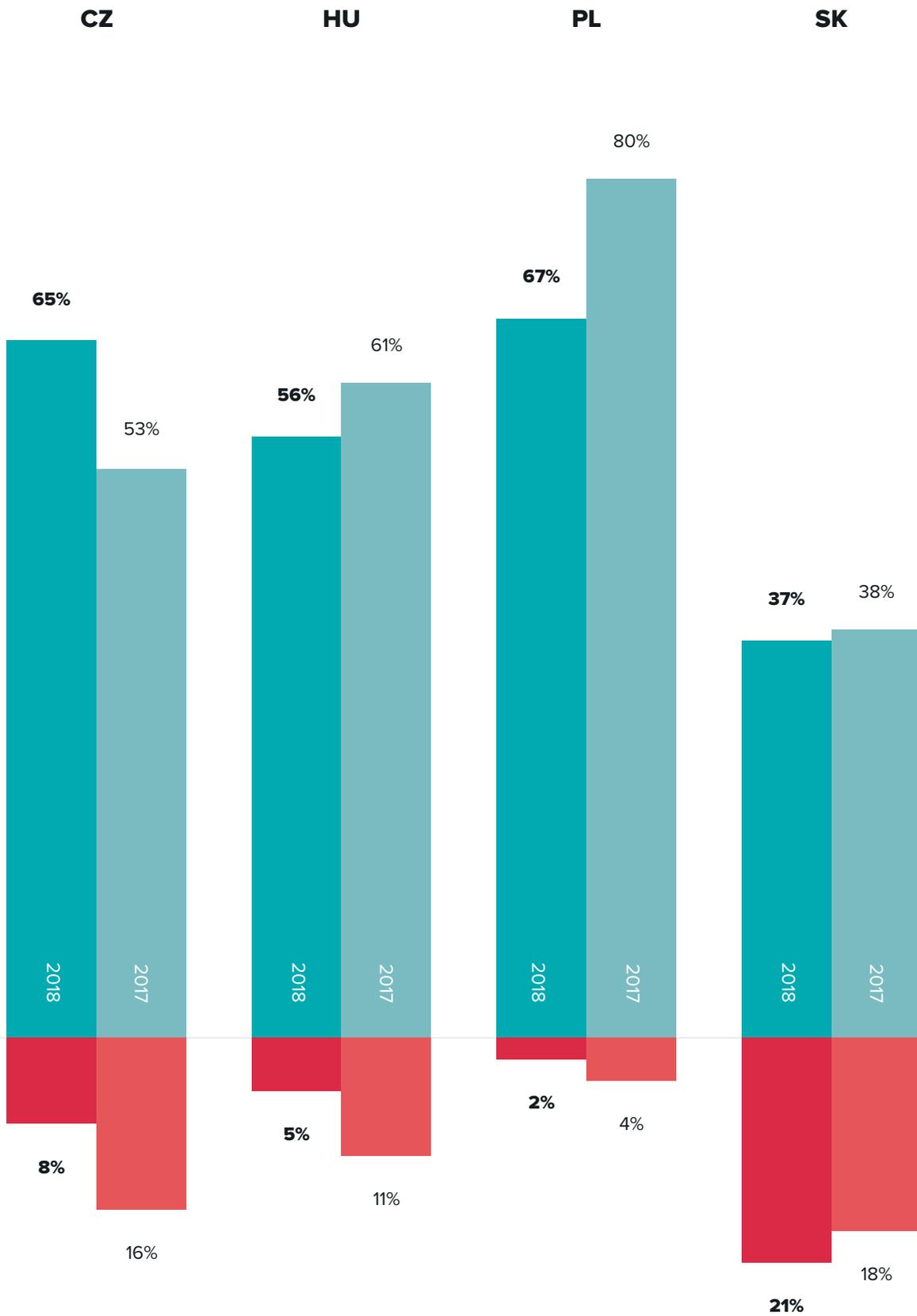
narrative. By comparison, 65% of Poles and 62% of Czechs disagree with this false statement, while only 35% of Slovaks think along similar lines. Interestingly, with the notable exception of the Czech Republic (13%), in all other Central European countries more than 20% of respondents do not know whether NATO supports terrorists - 20% in Poland, 25% in Slovakia and 26% in Hungary.

**40%**

**of Slovaks think that NATO and the US-led coalition support terrorists in Syria**

# What is Central Europeans' opinion on their country's NATO membership?

■ NATO is a good thing     ■ NATO is a bad thing



# Czech support for staying in NATO increased by 26% over the past year.

## All would stay

A majority (or relative majority) of citizens in all Central European countries would vote to stay in NATO in the event of a referendum. Interestingly, Czech support for staying in NATO increased by 26% over the past year. A 19% increase in support for staying in NATO can be observed across all age groups in the Czech Republic, with 91% of 18-24 year olds expressing support for the Alliance, a 40% increase on last year. This group's support for NATO membership also outstrips similar age groups in Central Europe.

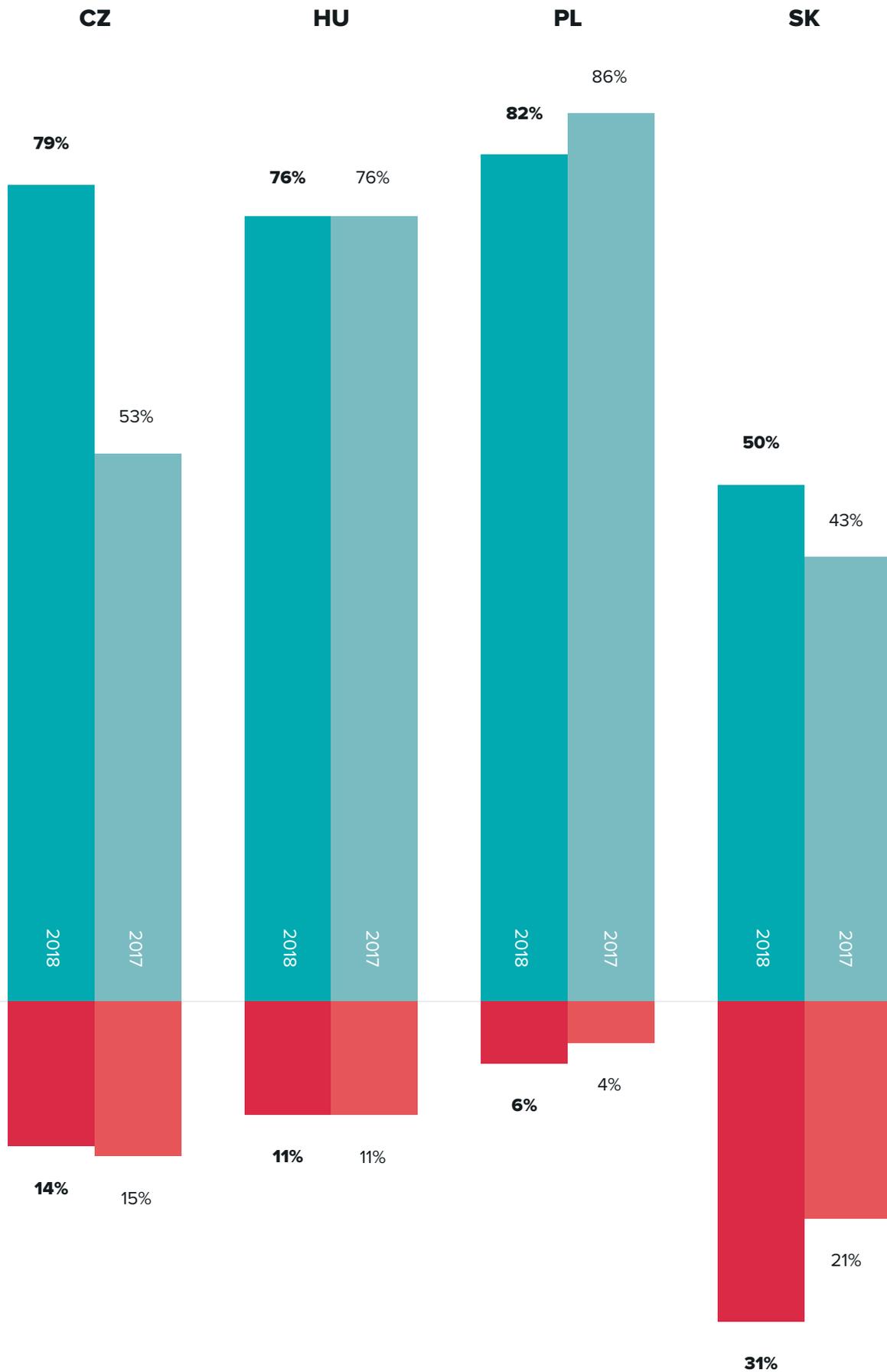
50% of Slovaks now support staying in NATO, a 7% increase on last year. There nevertheless remains a 32% difference in support for NATO between Poland and Slovakia, the countries with the highest and lowest support for the Alliance. Interestingly, young Slovaks support for staying in NATO increased by 21%, while there was a 12% decrease among young Poles (from 93% to 81%).

## Czechs and Slovaks define their stance

In two countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, citizens defined their stance towards NATO membership and changed their perceptions from having an indifferent attitude towards the Alliance. In case of the Czech Republic, 25% have defined their perception of NATO. Similarly, 17% of Slovaks have clarified their attitude towards NATO in the event of a referendum. While 7% more would vote to stay in NATO, 10% more Slovaks would vote to leave. The leave campaign is supported by disinformation narratives and conspiracies about NATO spread in Slovakia.

# How would Central Europeans vote in a referendum?

Stay in NATO Leave NATO



# Leaders

Approval of world leaders' policies varies greatly among the V4 and generally copies the countries' geopolitical preferences. Also, Central Europeans' awareness about the world leaders' actions on the political scene is much higher than the knowledge about the leaders of other Central European countries.

Central Europeans are more aware about the policies of the world's top leaders than their domestic leaders. Although approval rates differ significantly from country to country, support for both world and domestic

leaders' policies never exceeds 50%. This is due to generally high levels of distrust towards political representatives in the region, as well as a strong perception of an imaginary gap between political elites

and "ordinary citizens". Moreover, awareness of foreign leaders' policies can be negatively affected by a lack of interest in international politics and foreign policy in general.

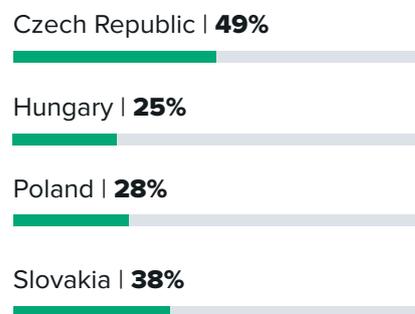
## World leaders under the spotlight

### Emmanuel Macron



Approval of the French President's policies is significantly higher in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In fact, Macron's approval ratings in the latter are on the same level as the Czech Prime Minister Babiš, which makes them the two most supported politicians in the country. By contrast, Macron is the least known of the "big four" (Macron, Merkel, Putin, Trump), with the lowest level of awareness in Hungary (28% do not know who he is and 20% do not have an opinion on his policies).

### To what extent do Central Europeans agree with the leaders' policies?

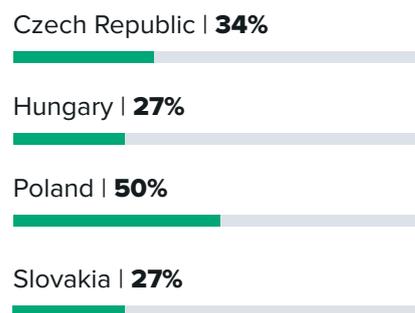


### Angela Merkel



Angela Merkel's policies are most supported in Poland, which is primarily caused by the country's closer ties to Germany during the last decades. On the other hand, despite strong German economic ties with Slovakia and the Czech Republic, around 60% of Czechs and Slovaks disapprove of the German Chancellor's policies. Such views might still be affected by Merkel's open-door approach during the migration crisis, which strongly and negatively resonated among the public in both countries.

### To what extent do Central Europeans agree with the leaders' policies?



# Did not hear about / did not know them:



**Andrej Babiš**

(in office since December 2017)

**65%** Poles

**41%** Hungarians

**6%** Slovaks



**Robert Fico**

(in office between April 2012 - March 2018)

**66%** Poles

**22%** Hungarians

**6%** Czechs



**Viktor Orbán**

(in office since 2010)

**38%** Czechs

**30%** Poles

**9%** Slovaks



**Mateusz Morawiecki**

(in office since December 2017)

**64%** Hungarians

**57%** Czechs

**34%** Slovaks

## Vladimir Putin



A relative majority in all CE countries disapproves of Putin's policies. Nevertheless, major differences can be noted. 75% of Poles confirmed their generally anti-Russian sentiment by expressing their disagreement with Putin's policies, making him the least popular of the four world leaders analysed. On the other hand, more Hungarians and Slovaks agree with how Putin performs in his role than they do with the policies of Macron, Merkel or Trump.

### To what extent do Central Europeans agree with the leaders' policies?

Czech Republic | **32%**

Hungary | **33%**

Poland | **13%**

Slovakia | **41%**

## Donald Trump



Poland's relatively high support for Trump's policy is partly attributable to the country's strong pro-American sentiments. On the other hand, the reasons behind Slovaks' strong disapproval of Trump's policies (73%) are not as straightforward. It may, to a certain extent, be linked to anti-American sentiments which are quite present in the country, however, when compared to past data evaluating previous presidents, the perception was not always as negative.

### To what extent do Central Europeans agree with the leaders' policies?

Czech Republic | **27%**

Hungary | **30%**

Poland | **46%**

Slovakia | **16%**

# The Russian confusion

While the overall perception of Russia in CE is not very positive, the situation is far less clear when it comes to specific issues and narratives. Central Europeans are not convinced of the existence of Russian attempts to influence the outcome of elections. While most Central Europeans supported Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, Putin's policies are more accepted in CE than Poroshenko's.

## No Russian hand in the elections?

Russian information operations in the run up to the 2016 US presidential elections, not to mention similar efforts across Europe in 2017 and 2018, received a lot of media attention on both sides of the Atlantic. However, Central Europeans are not convinced that Russia interfered in proceedings. Despite new evidence of Russian attempts to steer the outcome of the US elections and meddling in others coming to light every month, respondents in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia tend to believe there was no such attempt by the Kremlin to influence democratic processes. It is only in Poland where a relative majority of people believe that Russia influenced the outcome of the US presidential elections.

While the hacking of Emmanuel Macron's election campaign, the subsequent bot activity on social media supporting his opponent, and Russia's alleged interference with

German Bundestag emails in 2017 received a lot of media coverage, it failed to persuade Central Europeans that Moscow was the real culprit. In all four countries, more people disagreed with the notion that Russia tried to influence the outcome of elections in France, Germany and the Czech Republic. Slovaks are the least convinced of a Russian hand in European elections, while Czechs most vehemently reject this opinion, despite many signs pointing to covert or overt

**In all four countries, more people disagree with the notion that Russia tried to influence the outcome of elections in Europe.**

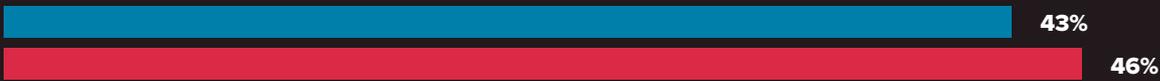
Young Czechs are the strongest believers in Russian meddling in the US presidential elections.

**59% support this view.**

# Did Russia influence the outcome of the US presidential elections?

Agree Disagree

**CZ**



**HU**



**PL**



**SK**



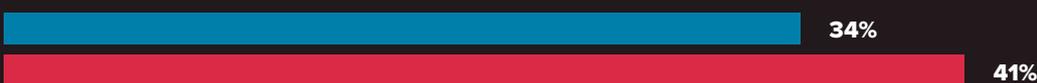
# Did Russia try to influence the outcome of elections in several EU countries in 2017 and 2018 (France, Germany, Czech Republic)?

Agree Disagree

**CZ**



**HU**



**PL**



**SK**

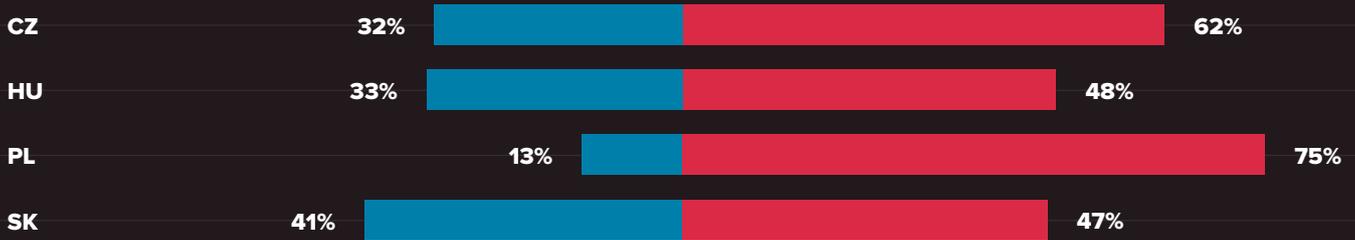


# Putin vs. Poroshenko

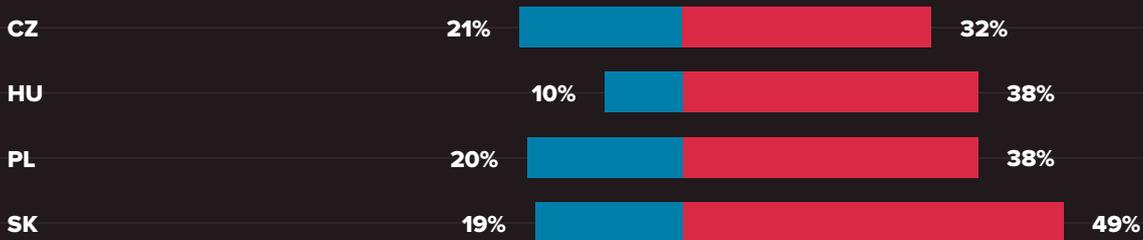
■ Agree with policies
 ■ Disagree with policies



Vladimir Putin



Petro Poroshenko\*



## The conflict in Ukraine persists because of presence of Russian forces in Ukraine.

■ Agree
 ■ Disagree



## **Putin more acceptable to Central Europeans than Poroshenko**

Public perceptions of the leaders of Russia and Ukraine is quite different in CE countries and their comparison yields some interesting insights. With the notable exception of Poland, Putin's policies are accepted by more than one third of Central Europeans. Poland is the only country where a positive perception of Poroshenko prevails, by the small margin of 7%. Slovaks are the most sympathetic towards Putin and his policies, confirming a long-standing trend of being the most pro-Russian country in the region. While one in five Czechs, Slovaks and Poles are sympathetic towards Poroshenko and his policies, Hungarians are more critical of the Ukrainian leader, a viewpoint that is particularly influenced by Budapest's confrontation with Kiev over a new education law that affects national minorities in Ukraine.

## **Presence of Russian forces in Ukraine rejected in Central Europe**

While public approval of Putin's policies in CE is higher than that of Poroshenko, Central Europeans overwhelmingly reject the presence of Russian military forces in Eastern Ukraine. More than half of respondents in all four countries believe the conflict in Ukraine is sustained by the continued Russian military presence in this region. Poles and Czechs are the strongest supporters of this viewpoint, with Hungary and Slovakia trailing behind by 10%. Young professionals (24-35 years old) are the strongest supporters of this viewpoint in all four countries.

---

\*The total numbers of Poroshenko are lower, since less people know him in comparison to Putin.

# **50% of Slovaks reject Russian military presence in Ukraine, while one third does not believe that the conflict in Ukraine continues due to presence of Russian forces on the ground.**

# Who believes in conspiracies?

Conspiracy theories are widespread among Central Europeans. At least a quarter of citizens in V4 countries believe in various conspiracies. At the same time, the differences between the four countries are significant and it is possible to observe two outliers. While Slovaks are the most conspiracy-prone, Czechs are the most impervious to such theories.

## Anti-Semitic conspiracies still quite prevalent

Up to 6 million Jews were systematically annihilated during the Second World War (WWII). The majority of the Jewish population of Central European countries, ranging from 70% in Hungary to 89% in the Czech Republic were killed over the course of the conflict.<sup>1</sup> WWII anti-Semitic propaganda claiming that Jews controlled the world and were to be blamed for phenomena such as capitalism and communism was spread throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup> It seems that such theories still hold sway among many Central Europeans. 52% of Slovaks agree with the anti-Semitic conspiracy statement that Jews have too much power and secretly control many governments and institutions around the world. 39% of Poles and 38% of Hungarians think along similar lines. The Czech Republic was the only Central European country in which the majority of respondents (67%) disagreed with anti-Semitic conspiracies.



# 53%

**of Slovaks think secret groups seek to establish a totalitarian world order.**

## Slovaks believe in conspiracy theories

The majority of Slovaks completely agree with the two most widespread conspiracy theories. Slovakia is the only country in Central Europe where most respondents believe that world events are not decided by publicly elected representatives, but secret groups that seek to establish a totalitarian world order. The majority of Slovaks also agree with anti-Semitic conspiracy statements. In addition, only

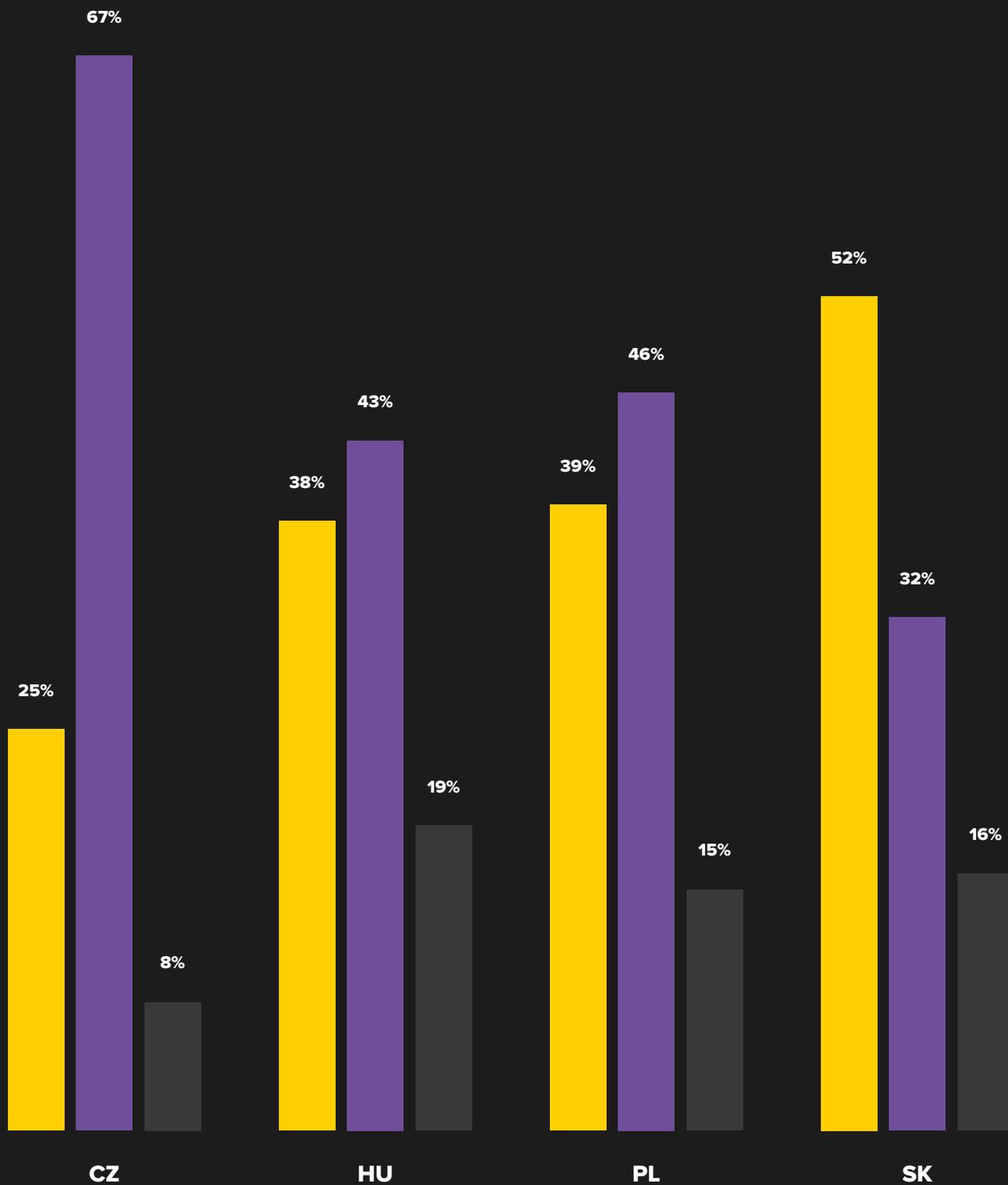
41% of Slovak respondents completely refute that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were planned and conducted by the American government rather than Al-Qaeda. However, over 65% of Czechs, Hungarians and Poles disagree that the US government was responsible for the organisation of the 9/11 attacks.

<sup>1</sup> Holocaust Encyclopedia, Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008193>

<sup>2</sup> OSCE, Anti-Semitism, Hate Crime Reporting, <http://hatecrime.osce.org/what-hate-crime/anti-semitism>

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

Agree Disagree Don't know



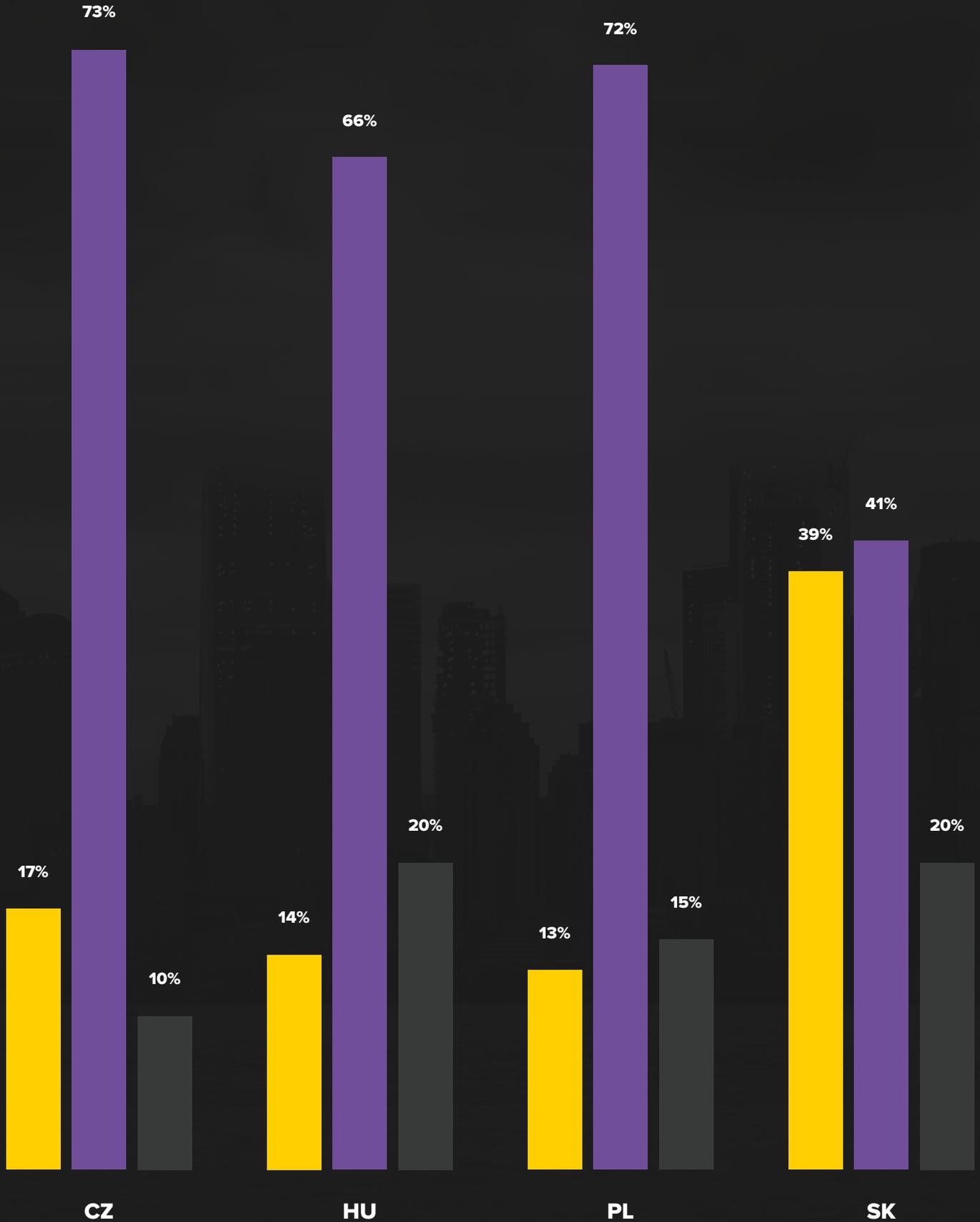
# **27% of young Hungarians and 25% of young Slovaks do not know whether Al-Qaeda or the US government organised the 9/11 terrorist attacks.**

## **More men believe in conspiracy theories than women**

Data shows that men in all four countries are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories than women. On average, men are 6% more likely than women to think that secret groups are pulling the strings of world events and aiming to establish a totalitarian world order. On average, there is an 11% gap between the sexes regarding anti-Semitic conspiracy statements. Men are also 6% more likely to believe 9/11 conspiracy theories than women. It is important to note that the Central European disinformation scene is predominantly driven by male actors.

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

Agree Disagree Don't know



# Social media: Hatred goes viral 🤪🔥

Central Europeans have different experiences with disinformation spread on social media. However, a relative majority of social media users in all four countries have encountered inappropriate content on their social networks. Nevertheless, active reporting of such content to relevant authorities remains rare.

## Different encounters with disinformation on social media

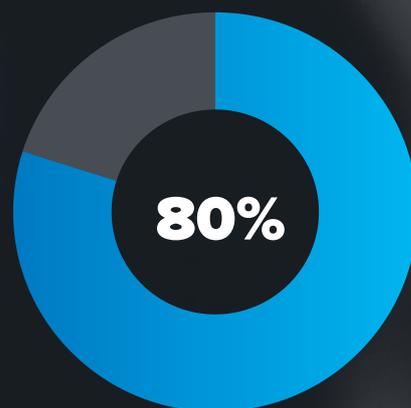
In 2 out of 4 countries, most respondents encountered disinformation on social media. 60% of Hungarians and 52% of Czechs claim to have come across intentionally misleading or false information on their social media accounts. In addition, between 28% to 36% of Central Europeans do not have a social media account. Unsurprisingly, older generations are not so active on social media. Encounters with disinformation on social media thus differ significantly between age groups and education levels of respondents, with the youngest and university educated being the most aware of disinformation and having stumbled upon it on their social media accounts the most. Interestingly, there is a 44% difference between Czechs with an elementary

education and university degree that have encountered disinformation on social media.

## Central Europeans do not report inappropriate content on social media

In 3 out of 4 Central European countries, over 70% of active social media users have encountered inappropriate content on their social networks, which, according to their opinion, does not belong there.

Once again, Slovakia is an exception with only 48%. However, the majority of social media users in all four countries that experienced inappropriate content such as hate speech, incitement towards violence or racial, ethnic, religious hatred etc., which according to them does not belong on social media, did not report it.



**On average 80% of Central European social media users do not report inappropriate content.**

## Hate speech dominates

If Central Europeans report inappropriate content on social media, it is predominantly hate speech followed by incitement to violence, discrimination and cyberbullying. Outright reporting of disinformation was mentioned in only two countries, the Czech Republic and Hungary, and by only a few respondents.

# Have you encountered disinformation on social media?

General population vs. 18-24 year olds

■ Encountered disinformation ■ Did not encounter disinformation

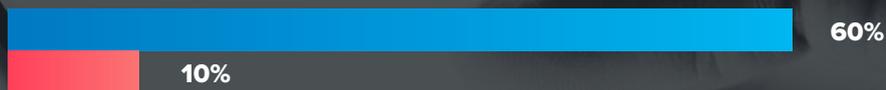
**CZ**



**Young Czechs**



**HU**



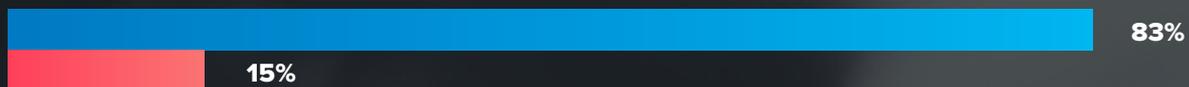
**Young Hungarians**



**PL**



**Young Poles**



**SK**



**Young Slovaks**



# Post-communist nostalgia

While Central Europeans clearly perceive the fall of communism positively, the perspective is not as straightforward when evaluating the quality of life before and after 1989, especially in Slovakia and Hungary. Feelings of post-communist nostalgia strongly resonate among the oldest segments of the region's population.

The year 1989 marked a turning point for all four countries. After four decades of communism, the V4 slowly began building and transforming their systems into Western-model liberal democracies and market economies. Yet while 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of this key historical event, many in the region express doubts over the quick pace of transformation which caught societies unprepared. As a result, and especially in the aftermath of the last economic crisis, nostalgia for an era of perceived stability and social security has increased, particularly among older and more vulnerable parts of societies. However, as the data shows, there are slight paradoxes in how the region perceives the events surrounding this landmark year. While the overwhelming majority evaluates the fall of communism positively, opinions regarding quality of life before and after 1989 are not so straightforward.

## Iron curtain down

The differences are mostly related to Central Europeans' subjective perception and experience. The fall of communism as such is perceived positively across the region due to

peoples' general ability to identify the advantages that regime change brought in terms of rights, freedoms and opportunities. The strongest supporters of the fall of the Iron Curtain are young Czechs, Poles and Slovaks aged 18-24 years, a positive sign for the future of liberal democracy. Young Hungarians do not evaluate the fall of communism negatively, however, a relative majority of 42% did not have any opinion on whether this was a positive or negative development, which is probably due to a lack of knowledge of the period.

## Better before or after 1989?

When asked to compare the quality of their own lives (or people like them) before and after 1989, feelings of nostalgia are particularly prevalent in Slovakia and strong in Hungary. The results were influenced by two factors. In both countries, older segments of society significantly affected the figures. Over 60% of people above 55 years old in Slovakia and approximately 43% of the same age group in Hungary consider their life

before 1989 better than their current status, which is not surprising given their heavy dependence on social and medical services and relative decrease in living standards. In Hungary, the results were again influenced by a considerable lack of awareness about the issue among the younger generation.

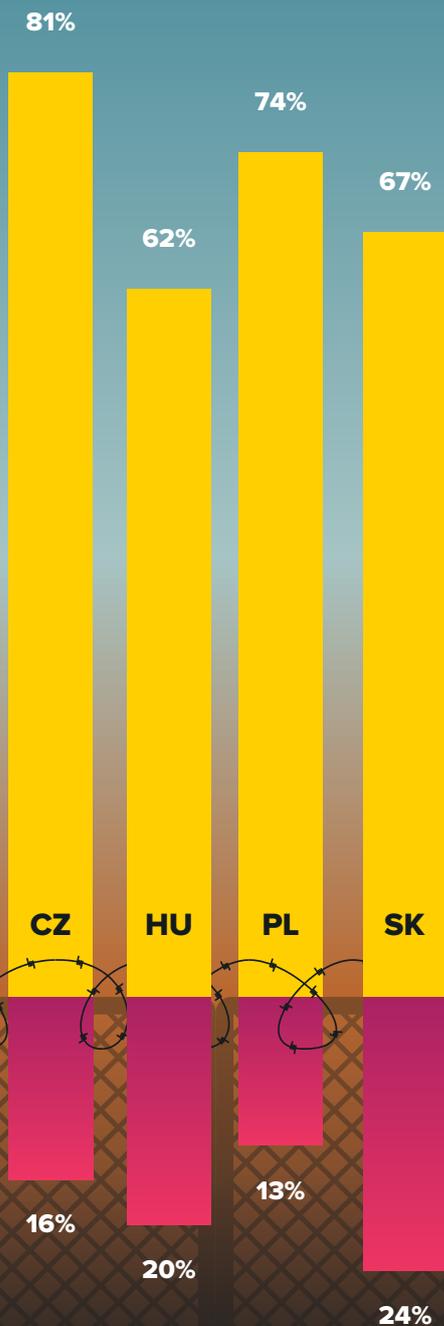
**53%**



**of Hungarians between 18-24 years old did not know how to answer whether the lives of people like them were better before or after 1989.**

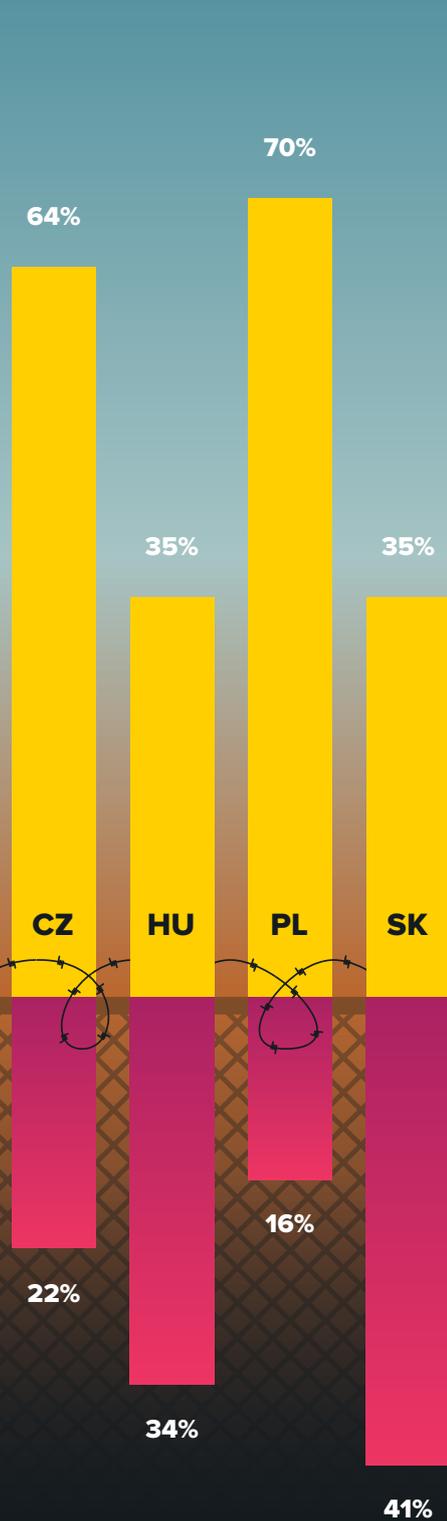
## How do Central Europeans perceive the fall of communism in 1989?

Positively Negatively



## When did Central Europeans have a better life - before 1989 or now?

After 1989 Before 1989



# Connecting the dots

## 01

### **Strained trans-Atlantic relations take their toll on Central Europe**

Central Europe has been a playground of the world powers since medieval times and the modern history of this region is rife with invasions, wars and foreign interference. Therefore, the current turmoil in trans-Atlantic relations, which played a crucial role in the post-communist transformation, is taking its toll on the region. Concerns over the US' uncertain involvement in Central Europe and its more inward-looking perspective has prompted some countries to look to the EU (and PESCO) as a source of stability. Conversely, the prospect of Brussels' greater involvement in regional affairs has prompted others to try and revive old geopolitical concepts and the formation of a regional block stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The decreased presence of the US is also seen as an opportunity for an ascendant China to create a more significant foothold in Europe with its 16+1 initiative, exporting not only economic influence but also its political model.

## 02

### **Post-2020 EU future for the Visegrad Four at stake**

While popular support for EU membership is still overwhelming across Central Europe, its political leaders have adopted a more confrontational approach on particular issues, with their defiant stance to the migration quota system perhaps being the best illustration. However, the region's defiance over Brussels' alleged intrusion into national sovereignty might soon backfire given that negotiations on the new fiscal framework of the post-2020 EU budget are now under way. Central Europe has been a net beneficiary of structural funds since its accession to the EU, but this might change as a result of changing political realities and a growing rift between "old" and "new" member states. The economic benefits tied to membership play a significant role in stimulating popular support for the EU. Once this gravy train stops, support might significantly decrease, opening doors for domestic and foreign political forces trying to increase their influence by questioning the benefits of EU membership.

## 03

### **Populist surge, rampant corruption and the search for a new political model**

All V4 countries are experiencing a significant change to their political landscapes, which have been based on liberal-democratic norms since the fall of communism. A populist wave stemming from growing dissatisfaction with perceived deficiencies in economic policies, rampant corruption in the highest echelons of power and a growing feeling of social and economic injustice has swept aside the old political class. This wave is also undermining an independent media, vibrant civil society and civility in public discussions. While such soul searching is natural for every state undergoing transformation, it creates further internal divisions in Central European societies and exacerbates tensions with other EU member states.

# 04

## **Post-communist nostalgia drives autocratic tendencies**

Next year will mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of communism in Central Europe. Yet for a significant portion of its population the post-communist transformation has not been a success story and they express nostalgia for the communist past. On average, slightly less than one third of Central Europeans think that life was better before 1989. While this might actually be the case for some of them, such nostalgia and a feeling of economic injustice is often used as a tool to stimulate support for anti-democratic political forces. Such political actors reject the whole post-communist transformation - and liberal democracy as a whole - by sometimes pointing to autocratic regimes as a source of inspiration.

# 05

## **Is social media a breeding ground for conspiracy theories?**

Social media is becoming the most important source of information for Central Europeans, having an impact comparable to that of television. However, social media also facilitates the broad dissemination of false information, and disinformation. It comes as no surprise that many Central Europeans have fallen under the spell of conspiracy theories and fully support even the most outlandish ones. That said, most people living in this region do not believe in well documented attempts by foreign actors to influence the outcome of democratic processes in the US and Europe and regard them as just another conspiracy theory. The age of alternative facts and alternative realities has now reached Central Europe.

# 06

## **The geopolitical chessboard: NATO, Russia and Ukraine**

While NATO is still perceived as an anchor of stability and a bulwark against hostile powers, Central Europeans are wary of being dragged into a conflict with Russia. This is borne out in perceptions of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which theoretically enjoys widespread support but not when it comes to deploying troops to counter Russian aggression. Central Europe's perception of Ukraine, its close neighbour, is complicated. Russian military actions in Ukraine are rejected by most Central Europeans, however, Poroshenko is one of the region's least popular leaders. This points to a rather negative image of Ukraine and a lack of solidarity with a pro-European state that is at war with an aggressor on Central Europe's doorstep.

# Credits

## Authors



**Daniel Milo**  
Senior Research Fellow,  
GLOBSEC Policy Institute



**Katarína Klingová**  
Research Fellow,  
GLOBSEC Policy Institute



**Dominika Hajdu**  
Junior Research Fellow,  
GLOBSEC Policy Institute

## Opinion polls conducted by

FOCUS, s. r. o. in Slovakia

Ipsos Zrt. in Hungary

Kantar TNS S. A. in Poland

STEM/MARK, a. s., z. ú. - Ústav empirických výzkumů in the Czech Republic

## Creative concept & design



This publication and research was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy.

© GLOBSEC Published in May 2018

GLOBSEC Policy Institute, Bratislava, Slovakia

*The GLOBSEC Policy Institute and the National Endowment for Democracy assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use. Sole responsibility lies with the authors of this publication.*

GLOBSEC's organisational visual identity developed by Creative Department







▶ Polus Tower II  
Vajnorská 100/B  
831 04 Bratislava  
Slovak Republic

▶ +421 2 5441 0609  
▶ [info@globsec.org](mailto:info@globsec.org)  
▶ [www.globsec.org](http://www.globsec.org)