



## HOW EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES ARE TO SURVIVE A NEW TRUMP AGE

*Foresight on EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*

# Visegrad Insight's foresight on future policy directions in the EU in the context of democratic security and common EU values



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# IN 5 YEARS



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**T**he next five years will be the make-or-break moment for the European promise to ensure peace, stability and prosperity. Depending on the ability to support Ukraine's sovereignty and the nature of transatlantic relations, the European Union will have to adapt to a quickly changing global environment to protect its democratic foundations.

The EU's solidarity with Ukraine will reverberate with the democratic processes across Europe. Similarly, the shape of American politics will affect European electoral trajectories.

Such critical junctures are particularly pronounced in Central Europe – primarily in the four Visegrad democracies, where the tensions over the rule of law and security have already altered the Union's political dynamics. Threat perceptions and trends amplified in the region are more likely to impact the future of the block overall, and the regional perspective – however rarely coherent – must therefore be considered in planning the future EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029.

Since its onset, the European project has been primarily a peacebuilding effort. In line with this original objective, the EU agenda has developed further to also include prosperity, democracy and foreign policy. But this does not mean that peace and democracy are certainties, as reminded by the ongoing war in Ukraine, tragic events in Israel or the continuing efforts to restore the rule of law on the continent.

Given the ongoing global pressures from climate change to the new geopolitical conflicts, the 2023 Granada declaration of the European Council reiterated the EU's promise of peace and prosperity.

However, too little emphasis has been placed on the internal processes that ensure that democratic foundations are protected along with economic and security resilience.

This report identifies four major scenarios that develop along potential transatlantic unity-disunity and the future of the EU perspective on the war in Ukraine. The fallout of each scenario on the EU's democratic security agenda is significant.

Given the ongoing war and deteriorating situation in the Middle East, defence coordination, economic focus and natural resources supply are understandably prioritised.

The “Resilient EU2030” report by the Spanish presidency dwells on the areas that will keep a peaceful and prosperous Europe together. It mentions “democracy” in the past tense and only once on 81 pages in a section about multilateralism.

Similarly, the Commission President’s 2023 State of the Union address mentions the term only four times while it refers to “security” 15 times – each instance in a context disconnected from the realm of EU values.

However, the future ambitions of the EU are inherently dependent on democratic performance. The global EU directions are prone to uncertainties embedded in electoral processes.

The 2023 elections in Poland and Slovakia brought into light a delicate fabric of values and interests. Voters in both countries decided against underperformance – also in the area of EU funds. In effect, Poland pushed away illiberalism and nationalist narrative that was endangering further EU cooperation with Ukraine. In contrast, Slovakia brought back the same actors who were previously rejected for the rule of law misconduct. The leaders of the new government have been declaring a U-turn on Slovakia’s position towards military aid for the neighbouring Ukraine.

In this light, contributors to this report have been mapping trends and potential triggers of change relevant to the “Democracy Action Plan”, the “EU Citizenship Report 2020,” and the “EU Rule of Law Report”. The report offers a specific perspective that indicates which democratic agenda pillars might require more focus along shifting geopolitical landscapes.

Given the geopolitical rationale, each of the presented four scenarios would likely alter the democratic security agenda in ways that should prompt relevant anticipatory policy planning in the following areas:

1. Align **EU values and interests together in key strategic EU plans** to ensure competitive economies and prosperity for all.
2. Evaluate the EU impact in the domains of the rule of law, accounting rules, and investment screening on **democratic action plan areas with special regard for free and fair elections**.
3. Emphasise the **rule of law’s** effect on member states economic performance to ensure prosperity for all and prevent state capture.
4. Conduct an EU-wide public inquiry into domestic and foreign **surveillance**. Safeguard journalists’ environment to prevent democratic system abuse and protect EU intellectual property against theft.
5. Foster European donors to align on EU-wide values advancement and joint **funding for civil society**, given the outflow of transatlantic donors from CEE member states.
6. Shape the **European Media Freedom Act** for enforcement, considering countries where the restoration of pluralism in public service media will first require political interference (Poland or Hungary).
7. Build policies on the successful cases of **youth and female participation** in the democratic process and **sponsor action against SLAPPs**.
8. Innovate policies for **civic education in the EU and neighbourhood**, including Ukraine’s veterans. Consider future Ukraine’s impact on Russia’s future democratisation.
9. Ensure that **member states develop an interest in the future Ukraine victory** sponsored by European resources and are insulated against Russia’s potential implosion.
10. Ensure **strategic communication on the EU’s mental health** programmes to debunk health-related disinformation and ensure grassroots effectiveness.



The Foresight On European Values and Democratic Security project adopted horizon scanning taxonomy from the 360° autonomy concept proposed by European Parliamentary Research Service in 2022. The Visegrad Insight - Res Publica Foundation – expert panels developed a correlating list of threat perceptions, driving trends and triggers of change that allowed civil society leaders to map out futures synthesised in four scenarios below. Source: Lieve van Woensel, Kjeld van Wieringen and Mario Damen, EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023: From concept to capacity. EPRS, 2021/2022.

# *FUTURE OF EU DEMOCRATIC SECURITY*

**T**he Foresight On European Values and Democratic Security (FEVDS) project is a four-year long programme that maps out global challenges to democratic security and promotes civil society engagement in EU-policymaking. It aims to enhance the quality of public and expert-level debate on the future policy directions in the EU in the context of democratic security and common EU values.

The project started in 2023 and refers to the process of developing the new EU strategic agenda 2024–2029 to be adopted next year. Over the next three years, it is meant to augment CEE civil society public debate and input to the policymaking process in the areas that are relevant to democratic security.

**D**emocratic Security is a term reintroduced in 2015 by the Council of Europe that defines a balance between guarantees of basic rights and freedoms and the considerations of security at both national and individual levels. It underscores democratic principles such as collective governance and decision-making, accountability and the safeguarding of fundamental rights. It highlights participation, joint decision-making, respect for constitutional limits, as well as international obligations of the decision-makers over the implementation of immediate stringent measures in the pursuit of efficiency and elimination of perceived threats.

In the first year of operations, the FEVDS project established a network of over 40 civil society experts (fellows) from across

the CEE region, primarily from the four Visegrad Group countries, to conduct an ongoing weekly horizon scanning on signals that may influence democratic security. Published in the form of weekly outlooks and podcast episodes, it continues to track developments from a wide range of factors that influence Europe's future. The group refers to the EU 360° autonomy clusters to provide a panoramic overview of the factors that continue to shape Europe's condition.

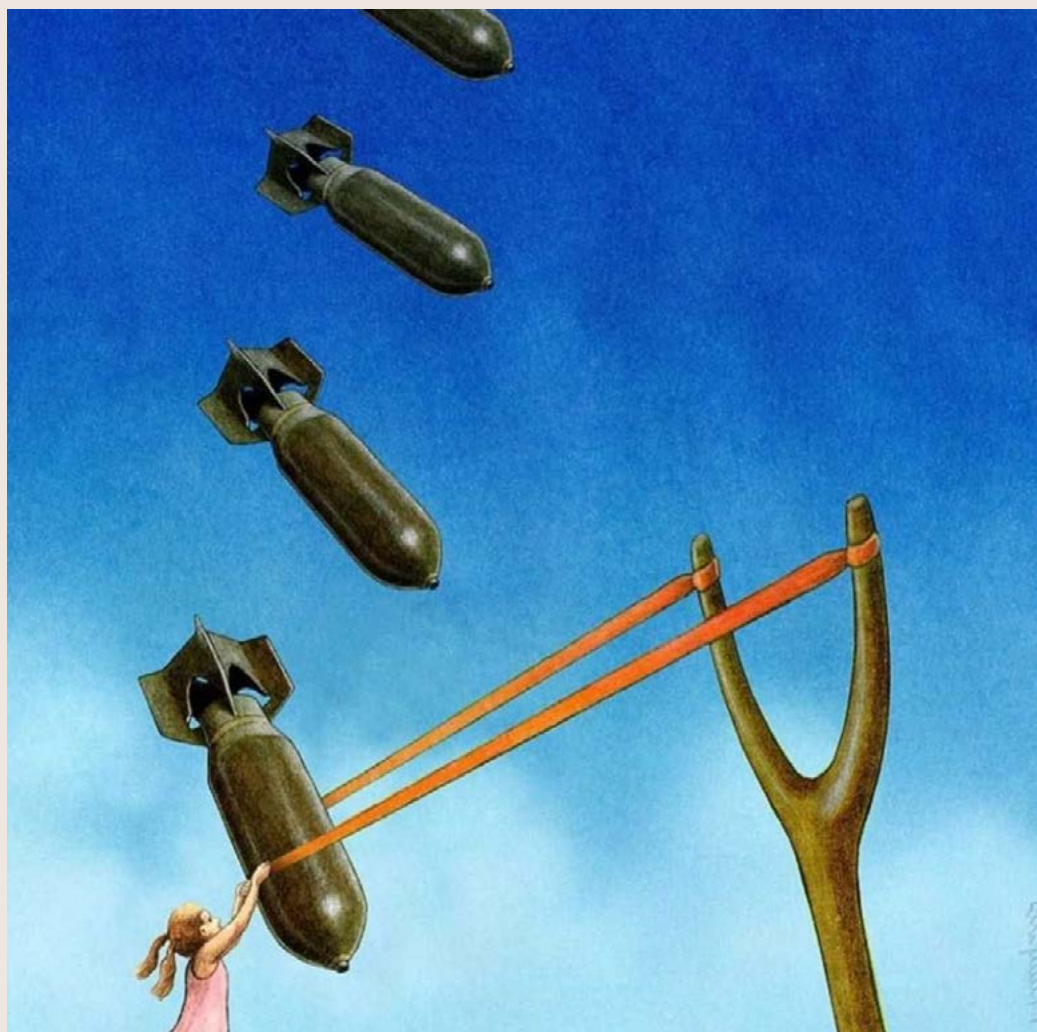
Every quarter, the project releases policy briefs to evaluate the developments with particular focus on the following areas: 1) Party politics, which determine the ability of the EU to act (or not) together to protect its interests and values; 2) Collective Security, that depends on cohesion in the EU and may be undermined by isolationism or nationalism; 3) International relations, which maps relations with external actors and the willingness to advance multilateralism including the EU enlargement agenda; 4) Energy dependencies and solutions which impact energy poverty; 5) Economic innovation that impacts prosperity distribution; 6) Information sovereignty, which depends on societies ability to monitor their government via credible journalism; 7) Rule of law as opposed to illiberal state capture, and 8) Social polarisation or cohesion.

This policy report presents a scenario-based framework of reference developed during the first year of the project by over 50 participants in foresight workshops. It is not meant as predictive but merely as a mind-map against which a democratic security agenda will develop.

SCENARIO

— 1 —

# Stronger Together



**The current political direction of the EU and the US leadership is maintained, giving Ukraine the necessary boost in reclaiming its land. In effect, Kyiv becomes the broker of the transformation of Russia. Global economic relations are increasingly dependent on the democratic values alignment.**



The electoral period of 2024-2025 brings no significant disruptive changes. The incumbent US administration remains in place as Joe Biden wins re-election. While the Senate and the House majorities may change, the defeat of Donald Trump restores grounds for bipartisan compromise on domestic and foreign policy issues. Containing the influence of autocratic regimes globally becomes more likely.

Furthermore, elections in the EU member states as well as in the EU Parliament will see a continued collaboration of the most prominent party families, i.e. the European People's Party, the Party of European Socialists, Renew Europe and the Greens, as well as realignment of the European Conservative and Reformists group under the influence of Meloni from Brothers of Italy Party and due to the weakening of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland.

The second year of the US administration, which usually bolsters foreign policy initiatives, will continue to support an already ambitious global agenda that aligns with the EU over many policy issues, such as building coalitions of countries tied by a shared commitment to democratic values and intensified trade. Given a gradual restoration of the rule of law in Poland, the EU would empower its conditionality policy and put more pressure on Hungary and other countries with substandard rule of law performance. The conditionality mechanism becomes a successful tool allowing member states to self-repair, and the EU develops it further.

Successive support for Ukraine's economy becomes tied up with the rule of law conditionality, progress in addressing systemic corruption and advancing judicial reforms. While supporting a military victory, the US and EU would try to secure a consolidation of the democratic process, including possible elections, despite the ongoing war.

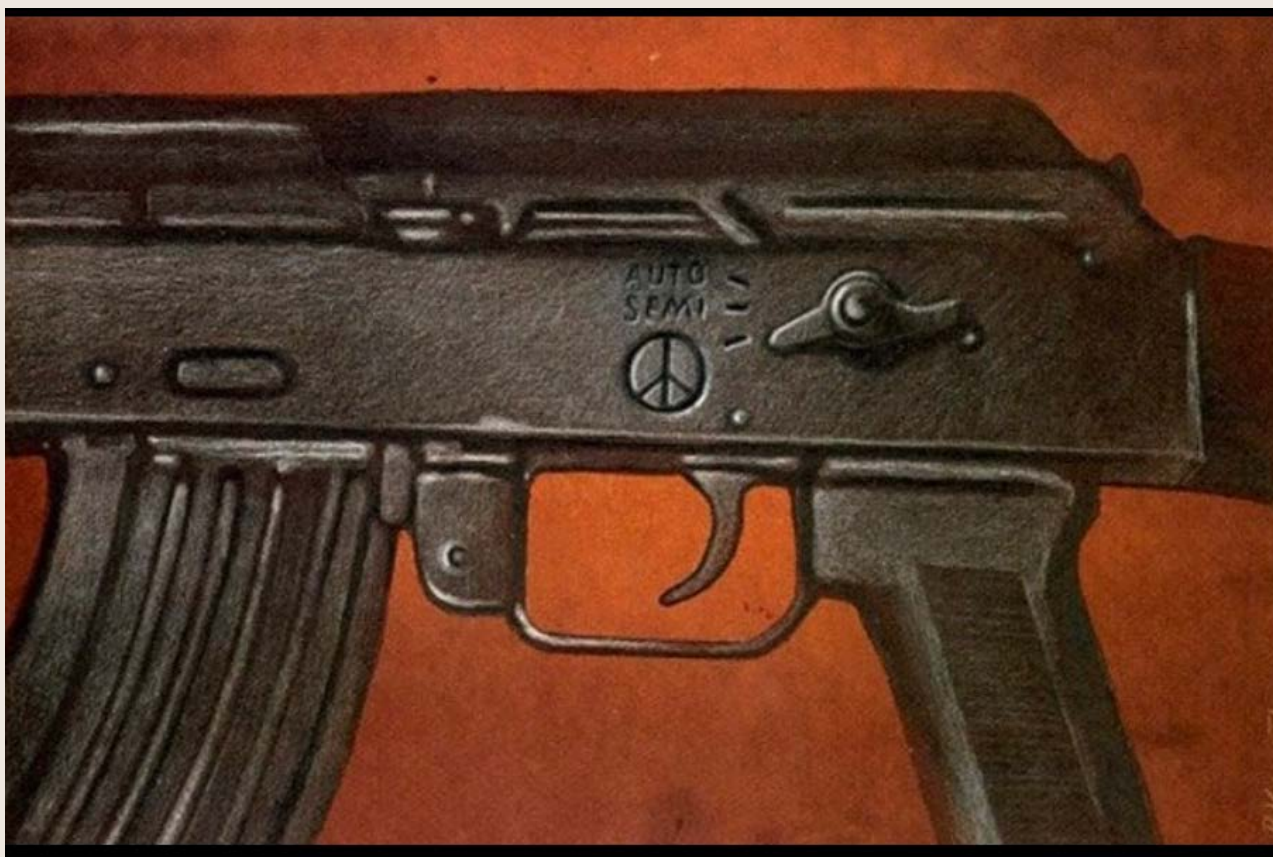
Having the US committed to Ukraine's victory, the EU would be more at ease to consider new tools in the prospective budget plans to increase democratic resilience, including areas of civic education, screening innovation against corruption, and de-risking foreign investments. While arms production is also beefed up, it is complimentary rather than a priority. The transatlantic partners, along with other pro-Western allies, are set to initiate further economic initiatives to cushion against the ambitions of aggressive international actors.

Ukraine gains more ground, retakes Crimea and moves its counter-offensive towards Donbas, promising complete reunification. In this context, new EU enlargement takes place, including countries of the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine. It expands the zone of prosperity and secures resources needed in the energy-poor EU to survive the long-term challenges of global warming and climate change. As it happens, the Russian regime disintegrates, and future instability becomes the main focus of the joint EU and Ukraine effort to reach out to the Russian society and prevent a revanchist attitude built on nationalist resentment. Ukraine becomes an indispensable ally in building the future relations of the EU with Russia.

SCENARIO

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# Outsourced and Outsmarted



**Due to growing isolationism in the US and the war-weariness of European economies, Ukraine must agree to a frozen conflict situation. PM Orbán's influence in EU politics grows as the leading proponent of the "peace" narrative. Individual countries implement democracy resilience plans, but the EU as a block becomes paralysed.**

**D**espite Joe Biden winning a second term in office, US isolationism - at least towards Europe - is rising and is expected to be the central theme by 2028. Thus, American military support for Ukraine dwindles and puts an increasing burden on Europe. While this change is coming about in the US administration, there is a sense of war-weariness that sediments across the EU. A faltering coalition of the formerly leading parties in the EU member states and an inefficient EU Commission makes room for more appeasement narratives towards Russia. Despite Ukraine gradually regaining lost territories and destroying Russian military potential, there is no sense of a breakthrough.

War-weary economies of Europe add another pressure point as the AI-powered economy is increasing productivity and investment primarily outside of the EU. While the EU builds up successful data and privacy protection mechanisms, it has missed the opportunity to be in the lead regarding the technological race — capital and new brain power flow towards the US and Asian markets. Ultimately, the EU regulatory power is slowly eroding along with the withering economic prospects. A sense of economic decline sets the stage for social resentment of the guiding policies of the past decades and a political class.

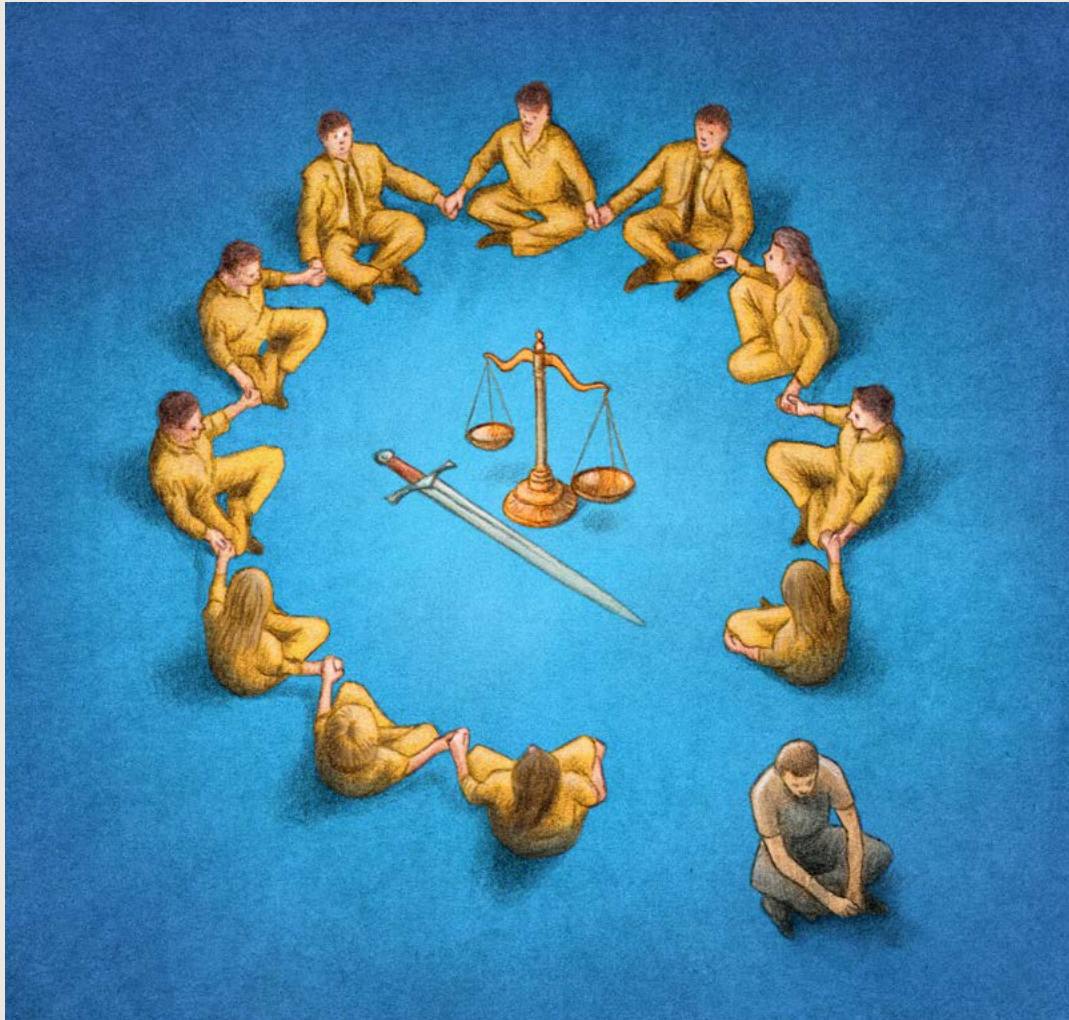
Public dissatisfaction sets grounds for a broad populist sweep across most of the EU countries, starting with the 2027 French presidential elections and expected to cumulate in the 2029 European Parliamentary vote, ending the dominance of the mainstream parties.

Importantly, the 2025 federal elections in Germany and the presidential elections in Poland have already brought in political leaders who wish to review relations with Ukraine and insist on holding democratic elections to see a change of power in Kyiv.

Faced with such realities, Ukraine agrees to de facto freeze the conflict. Russian forces were on the defensive, but in the new situation, they are granted invaluable time to shore up defences for an indefinite period. They use it well to entrench strongholds and focus on military production now altered to meet the needs of the freshly tested battlefield. As Moscow fails to capture Ukraine, it knows that within a decade, it will be ready for yet another war, as it was nearly every ten years. It prepares to re-launch influence operations in several EU countries ahead of elections,

The new opening in the EU power game enables Mr Orbán to provide technical assistance to like-minded parties across the EU to manage gradual state capture. While “illiberals” gain experience in the national constituencies, the Hungarian aspirations aim high for the takeover of the EU Commission by 2029. The bureaucratic power of the key institution, which has grown over the years and is equipped with additional budgets, is the cherry on top in the long march of Fidesz and their allies, who do not wish to dismantle the EU but seize its full potential. The promises of economic security and technological processes obscure a dismantling of the framework protecting the EU values and individual rights and freedoms.

# Holding Ground



**A Republican administration limits American support to Ukraine and makes EU coordination more difficult. However, the EU finds ways to keep close ties with the US by prioritising energy purchases and boosting defence spending.**



While the EU elections hold a coalition of parties committed to Ukrainian victory, the shift in the US away from the EU begins with any one or a combined effect of the following developments:

- ▶ the return of Donald Trump to power in the 2024 elections,
- ▶ both the US Senate and the House increasingly under the influence of Trump supporters,
- ▶ a victory of a Trump-like Republican candidate in the 2028 presidential elections.

The US continues some military support to Ukraine, but the political strategy is more erratic and transactional – not aligned on shared values. As before, it seeks to separate its support to CEE countries from the western part of the EU. The US primarily boosts its defence sector in preparation for a conflict in the Pacific and decides that the EU should bear most of the Ukraine-related burden. Washington's strategy assumes that it is worth giving Ukraine just enough to keep Moscow hopeful and willing to continue the invasion. At the same time, it keeps Russia's position unstable and weakens China's resolve to annex Taiwan by force.

The EU member states are deciding to boost their defence production and supply massively to support Ukraine's resistance and counter-offensive and build up their capacity. Over the next decade, the EU priorities are bound to concentrate primarily on coordinating the defence sectors in the block and improving the logistics. The drive to increase European capacity to deliver and capacity to act under the theme of "sovereign Europe" keeps the Union together. Given the rise of social instability on its borders and digital autocracies, the EU

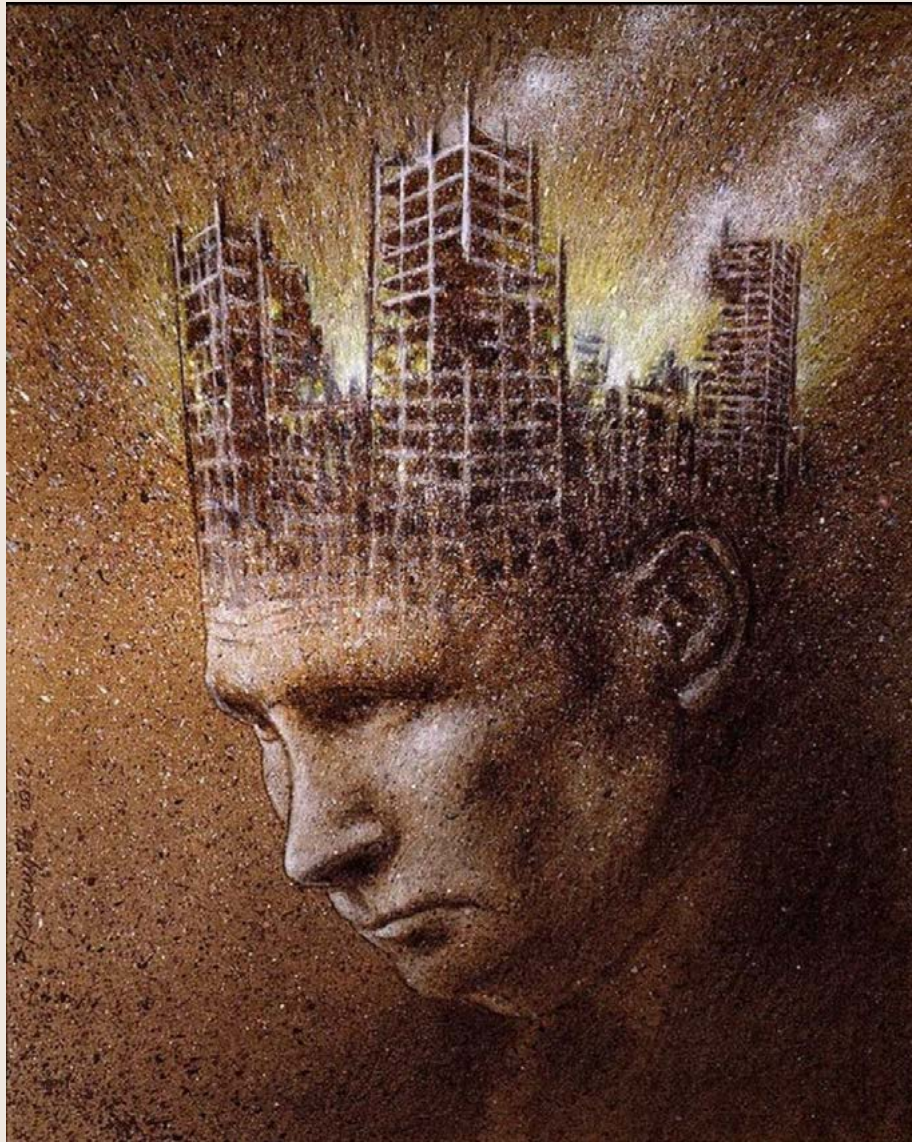
primarily focuses on insulating its core member states and willing candidate countries regarding democracy-support plans. Hence, the block's initiatives focus on bringing the rest of the house in order and insulating it from external shocks.

Meanwhile, the residual tensions over Taiwan leave little room for constructive international alliance buildup, and the EU pays the price of new US sanctions on China that hamper European production lines before they diversify related risks. Energy-poor Europe is dependent on the goodwill of the US in supplying gas.

New transatlantic tensions appear, with the EU trying to maintain the line, hoping they can be overcome, while Russia gives up hope of victory in Ukraine. The new situation rekindles strategic autonomy ambitions that result in regulations meant to contain illiberal drive in the EU.

In this spirit, Poland gradually returns its core institutions to functioning according to the EU norms and becomes the hardcore rival of Hungary for access to US policymaking. Making nice with Europe requires Warsaw to be more assertive towards Republican-led initiatives, even though pro-American sentiments remain and security dependency is critically high. At the same time, Budapest seeks to leverage its long-term support for the American far-right. Czech ex-PM Andrej Babiš, who returns to power in 2025, seeks to follow Viktor Orbán's steps as well, while in Slovakia, the political situation remains unstable and triggers the EU to initiate special assistance on disinformation in a country whose ammo production lines are of critical importance to Ukraine and EU defence ambitions overall.

# Hardline Alignment



**The far-right agenda triumphs both in the EU and the US, leading to a new format of transatlantic relations. Ukraine accepts “peace” terms negotiated in a Yalta 2.0 format. Europe sees increasing social unrest due to restrictions on civil liberties and discontent by the Ukrainian population across the continent.**

**T**he far-right rises globally and aligns primarily on the issue of migration and related pressures on the socio-economic fabric. Electoral victories of hardliners on both sides of the Atlantic bring about an alignment that keeps Europe and the US close, but with the agenda shifting now towards “big power politics” narratives that discredit values-driven international order and seek “realism” in arranging relations between the nations.

Such logic dictates to seek accords with Russia as a nuclear power and essential source of resources at the cost of further support of the Ukrainian counter-offensive. The US, under President Trump, steps in to negotiate the terms of peace and pushes Ukraine and the EU to accept that under the American security umbrella, Russia will keep away from further onslaught on civilian infrastructure but will remain in control of the captured territories, including Crimea. Ukraine is left with no choice but to accept the terms because of American military support dependency, and the EU is not willing to extend further support to Kyiv, especially since the far-right agenda has gained so much influence in national parliaments and in Brussels.

Trumpist Republicans see that Russia balances out the EU's ambitions for global positioning. Taking comfort in having a balance of conflicting powers on the Old Continent, they expect to devote full attention to the Pacific and focus on preventing the rise of China. Their calculation assumes Russia may turn away from China and again engage with Europe. Eventually, it is considered indispensable for the next security

architecture, which the nuclear powers with the leading role of the US must guarantee. Having a favourable constellation of Russian-friendly parties across the continent, such a plan takes shape, sidelining voices that were previously against it. Public discontent in several countries sometimes produces protests, but even Baltic states must accept the arrangement for the price of NATO's protective arm. Transactional and bilateral formats of policymaking become the dominant format of managing the diverse block, and to the surprise of many, it produces results. The societies embrace the new reality in time, given that energy supplies and prices stabilise, giving prospects for economic growth.

In the countries of Central Europe, civil society and political dissent voices are silenced and pushed outside. While the western part of Europe keeps the liberal traditions under newly rediscovered *realpolitik*, in the countries of the Visegrad Group, the zone of free expression and balance of powers is curbed to contain social unrest. The far-right forces prioritise economic growth and privacy of family circle but dominate all elements of public space at the expense of transparency and corruption. In Poland, the relationship with the US is only strengthened as Warsaw feels a hostage to the arrangement (like Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia). Political and business elites in Slovakia and Hungary feel at ease to do more business with Russia, expanding their potential influence among, respectively, pro-Russian left and pro-Russian right in Europe. Czechia stands out and quiet, trying to wait off the storm. At the same time, Ukrainian veterans come to the EU and, in particular, to Central Europe in big numbers and become radical elements, motivated by political vengeance and not willing to accept the status quo.

# DEMOCRATIC SECURITY

## KEY TRENDS IN NUMBERS

### DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP

**Attitudes toward liberal democracy** – 73% of the Czech respondents believe that having liberal democracy with regular elections and multiparty system is better for their country, while 27% declared that having a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with parliament is more beneficial. In Hungary, these numbers are 74% and 26% respectively; in Slovakia, 67% and 33%, and in Poland 66% and 34%. In Germany, the preference for liberal democracy is significantly higher than in any of the CEE states, with 81% of the respondents declaring it.

**Evaluation of democratic governance** – When asked how democratically their countries are being governed today on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (completely democratic), Central Europeans ranked the democratic governance in their states in the following way: Polish and Slovak respondents gave their states a score of 4.9, Hungarians – 4.3, and Czechs – 5.5.

**Participation in politics** – According to the data gathered by the Economist Intelligence Unit as part of the Democracy Index, the rate of political participation fell in Hungary and Slovakia, remained at the same level in Czechia, and recorded a slight increase in Poland between 2006 and 2022. The political participation index score is evaluated as a score between 1 and 10, where 10 is the highest level of political participation. In Hungary, it fell from 5.00 in 2006 to 4.44 in 2022, in Slovakia from 6.11 in 2006 to 5.56 in 2022. In Czechia political participation remained at the same level of 7.22, and in Poland it increased from 6.11 in 2006 to 6.67 in 2022.

**Women in political representation** – In 2023, the share of women in the national houses of parliament in Poland reached 28.3%,

23.0% in Czechia, 22.7% in Slovakia and 12.6% in Hungary. These indicators for all the CEE countries are below the EU average at 30.8% and the OECD countries average at 33.8%. Hungary has the lowest percentage of women in parliament in the EU.

### RULE OF LAW AND ILLIBERALISM

**Perceived judicial independence** – In Poland, only 23% of the respondents rate the national justice system as very or fairly good, compared to 33% in Slovakia and 35% in Hungary. Out of the CEE states, the perceived independence of courts and judges among the general public is the highest in Czechia – 65% of the respondents rate the justice system as very or fairly good.

**Corruption perception** – According to the Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which ranks 180 countries around the world by their perceived levels of public sector corruption and assigns each state a score between 0 (highly corrupt) and 100 (very clean), corruption perception level has increased in Poland since 2015 and in Hungary since 2012. In 2022, Poland scored 55 and ranked 45th, and Hungary scored 42 and ranked 77th. Slovakia and Czechia both saw a positive trend, as perceived corruption has decreased between 2015 and 2022. In 2022, Slovakia scored 56 on the scale and ranked 49th, and Czechia 56 and ranked 41th.

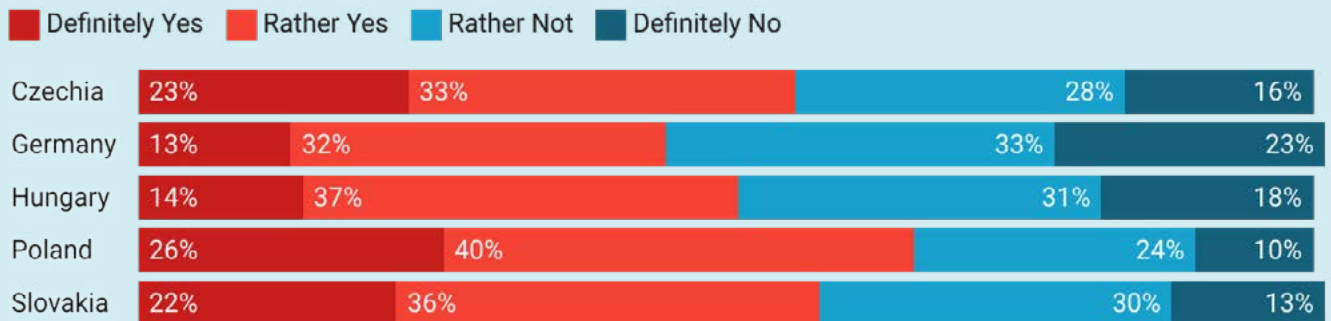
### MEDIA FREEDOM AND DISINFORMATION

**Struggle for press freedom and independent media** – In 2023, the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without Borders ranked the situation of press freedom as “satisfactory” in Czechia and Slovakia and “problematic” in Poland and Hungary.

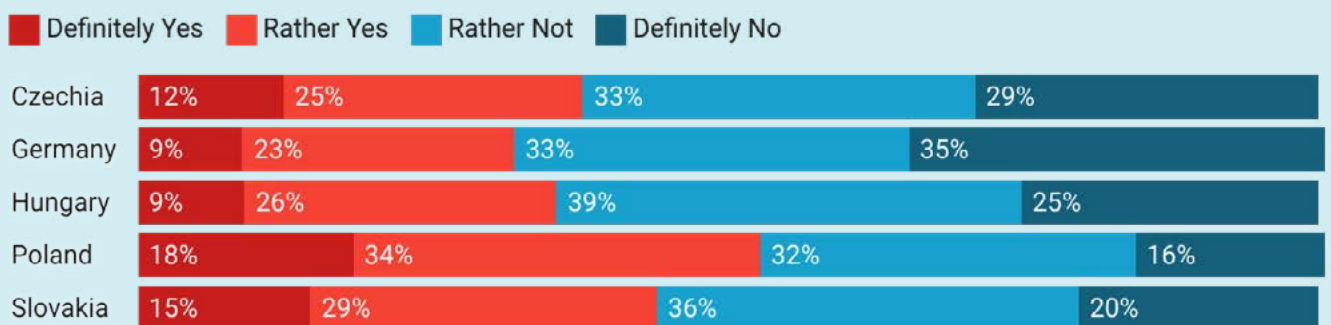


## Would you be willing to trade some of your rights and freedoms for...

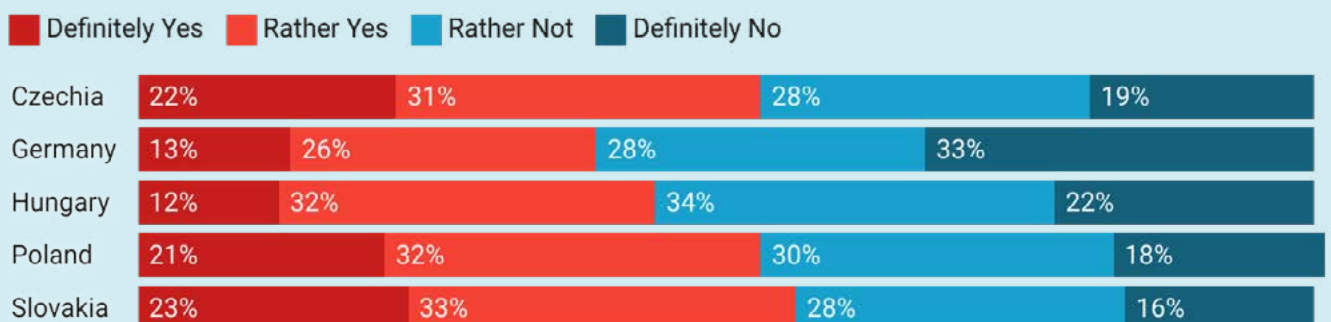
### Greater security in your country?



### To be in a better financial situation?



### The preservation of your country's values?



Democratic Trends in Central Europe 2023, Principal Investigator: Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences, SAS. Partners: Institute of Psychology – Czech Academy of Sciences, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Bárczi Gusztáv Gyógypedagógiai Kar, Res Publica Foundation, Jacobs University Bremen gGmbH. Also for page 17.

Czechia was ranked 14th out of 180 countries evaluated by the index, Slovakia 17th, Poland 57th and Hungary 72th.

**Exposure to disinformation** – As the EU Barometer Media & News Survey from 2022 shows, CEE citizens' exposure to disinformation and fake news is particularly pronounced. 28% of the EU citizens declared being very often or often exposed to disinformation and fake news in the previous 7 days. 29% of Czechs, 33% of Poles, 36% of Slovaks and 46% of Hungarians report facing disinformation often or very often.

Additionally, citizens of CEE states feel less confident about their ability to recognise disinformation. 64% of the EU citizens on average declare that they feel very confident or somewhat confident that they can recognise disinformation when they encounter it, 56% of Czech respondents agree with the same statement, compared to 53% of the Polish respondents, 70% of Slovak respondents and 63% of Hungarian respondents declaring their confidence when encountering disinformation.

## GLOBAL THREAT PERCEPTION

**Stance on Russia** – According to the GLOBSEC Trends 2022 surveys, there has been a significant spike in perception of Russia as a security threat among the CEE states between 2020 and 2022. In Poland, around 90% consider Russia as a threat to their country's security (68% in 2020), compared with 84% of Czechs identifying Russia as a security threat to their country (43% in 2020), 62% of Slovaks (20% in 2020) and only 45% of Hungarians (25% in 2020).

**Stance on China** – Fewer Central Europeans identify China as a security threat to their countries, however the negative perception of China has increased between 2020 and 2022. In Czechia, 51% identify China as a security threat, 43% in Poland, 29% in Slovakia and only 21% in Hungary.

**Perception of the US and Germany as strategic partners** – In Poland, 73% perceive the US as a strategic partner for their country, compared to 41% of Czechs, 29% of Slovaks and 13% of Hungarians. There is more enthusiasm among the CEE citizens when it comes to the perception of Germany as a strategic partner for their states. 74% of Czechs perceive Germany to be Czechia's strategic partner, compared to 64% of Slovaks, 58% of Hungarians and 48% of Poles.

## MIGRATION, GENDER EQUALITY, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

**Migration perceived as a threat** – 73% of Czech respondents declared that migrants threaten their identity and values. 68% of Slovak respondents, 59% of Hungarian respondents and 51% of Polish respondents agreed with the same statement.

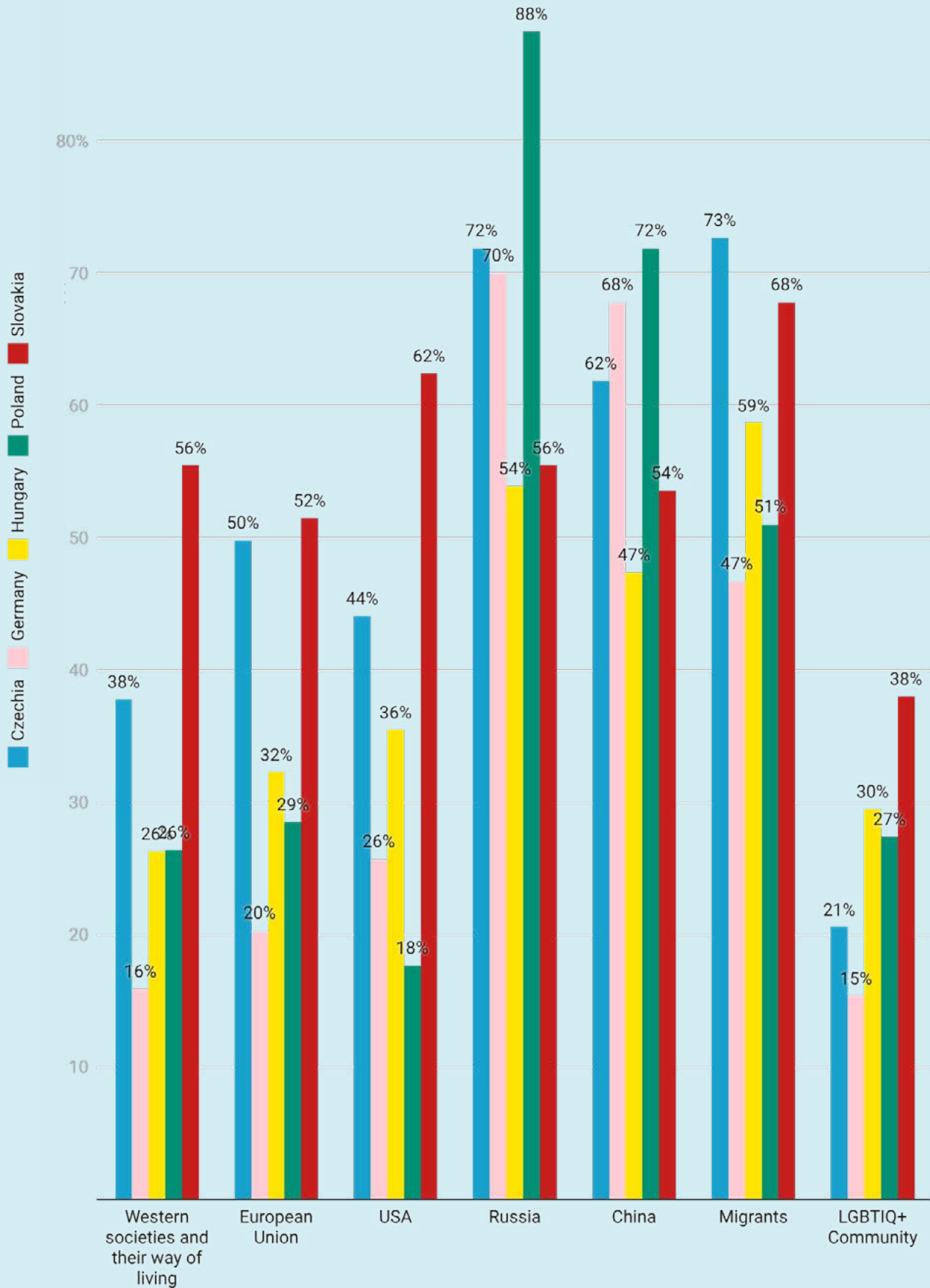
**Attitudes toward climate change** – Across the CEE, the attitudes toward climate change vary when compared to the EU average. According to the 2023 Eurobarometer Survey, 77% of Europeans think climate change is a very serious problem at this moment. 87% of Hungarian respondents, 69% of Polish respondents, 64% of Slovak respondents and 48% of Czech respondents agree with the same statement. The same survey reveals that in 2023 63% of Europeans declared taking action to fight climate change. 72% of Slovaks admit to taking action to fight climate change, 61% of Hungarians, 47% of Czechs, and only 39% of Polish respondents admit to that.

**Gender Equality** – While the EU's Institute for Gender Equality research indicates that the conditions leading to greater equality between men and women have improved in the last three years, the Gender Equality Index (expressed as score from 1 to 100, where a score of 100 would mean that a country had reached full equality between men and women) in the CEE states has persisted at a lower rate than the EU average. In 2023, the Gender Equality Index reached 70.2 for the EU, 61.9 in Poland, 59.2 in Slovakia, 57.9 in Czechia and 57.3 in Hungary.

**Gender pay gap** – As of November 2022, the gender pay gap in the EU is at 13% (defined as the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of working men and women). In 2022, the gender pay gap in Poland is at 4.5%, the lowest among the CEE states and way below the EU average. However, the gender pay gap in Slovakia, Czechia and Hungary has remained significantly above the EU average, at 15.6%, 16.4% and 17.2%, respectively.

**Attitudes towards LGBTIQ+** – The Rainbow Index by ILGA Europe reflects how the laws and policies of each country impact the lives of LGBTIQ+ people on a scale of 0 (gross violations of human rights, discrimination) to 100% (respect of human rights, full equality). In 2022, Poland scored 13% on that scale, Czechia 26%, Hungary 30% and Slovakia 34%.

## Whom do you perceive as threatening?



# EUROPE'S PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

The *European Democracy Action Plan* is designed to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU. The main points of the plan are:

- **Promoting Free and Fair Elections:** The plan aims to protect electoral processes, keep elections free and fair, preserve open democratic debate and update digital safeguards. Key actions in this area include proposing legislation to ensure greater transparency in the area of sponsored political content (“political advertising”), accompanied by support measures and guidance for political parties and Member States.
- **Strengthening Media Freedom:** The European Commission started taking action to improve the protection of journalists and human rights defenders from abusive court proceedings. Strategic lawsuits against public participation, commonly known as “SLAPPs”, are a particular form of harassment used primarily against journalists and human rights defenders to prevent or penalise speaking up on issues of public interest.
- **Countering Disinformation:** The plan includes measures to counter the spread of manipulative information and threats against journalists. It proposes actions to increase the protection of journalists and fight disinformation and interference while fully protecting freedom of speech.
- **Empowering Citizens:** The plan emphasises empowering citizens and civil society to counter the threats. It aims at protecting and promoting meaningful participation of citizens, empowering them to make their choices in the public space freely, without manipulation.
- **Building More Resilient Democracies:** The plan is designed to build more resilient democracies across the EU by promoting free and fair elections,

strengthening media freedom and countering disinformation.

The *EU Citizenship Report* is a report published by the European Commission every three years, in accordance with Article 25 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The report provides an overview of the progress made on EU citizenship since the last report and outlines new priorities for the years ahead in the area of EU citizenship rights. The most recent report, titled “EU Citizenship Report 2020: Empowering citizens and protecting their rights”, was published on 15 December 2020. In 2023, a year ahead of the next European elections, the Commission is reviewing the implementation of the action plan.

The report aims to improve the protection of journalists and human rights defenders from abusive court proceedings. The report also highlights the importance of education in enabling active and informed citizenship, as well as the need for stronger citizenship education covering all political levels, national, European and global.

The report provides a threefold rationale for the need for stronger citizenship education. Firstly, education is a fundamental enabler of active and informed citizenship and, thus, of democratic participation. Secondly, a series of events and socio-political changes reinvigorated the call for stronger citizenship education. Thirdly, deep structural changes also support the need to reinforce this area of education and to recognise the ever-evolving nature of citizenship education.

The report recommends that the Commission and Member States develop common and participatory educational research, in particular EU-wide comparable testing in the area of citizenship education, including EU citizenship, with a well-defined mandate and objectives within the remit of EU competencies. The report also calls for a Special Eurobarometer survey on citizens’ awareness of their rights and obligations as EU citizens.

The *2023 Rule of Law Report*, published by the European Commission on 5 July 2023, presents a synthesis of both the rule of law situation in the EU and an assessment of the situation in each Member State. The report examines developments across all Member States, both positive and negative, in four key areas for the rule of law: the justice system, the anti-corruption framework, media pluralism and freedom, and other institutional issues related to checks and balances.



According to a press release by the European Commission, the report shows progress on 65% of recommendations made in previous reports. However, it also highlights that there is still work to be done in some areas. For example, the report notes that there are still challenges in ensuring judicial independence and tackling corruption.

For the four Central European countries, the key takeaways from the report are the following:

### Czechia

*Judicial Independence:* The report noted that legislative reforms have been adopted aimed at addressing the justice-related recommendations of the 2022 Rule of Law Report. However, concerns remain about the transparency of case allocations in lower courts.

*National Judicial Council:* The strengthened role for the National Judicial Council will allow it to counter-balance the powers of the President of the National Office for the Judiciary, also as regards the career of judges.

*Corruption:* Although some high-level cases reached the indictment and conviction stage, the lack of a robust track record of investigations of corruption allegations concerning high-level officials and their immediate circle remains a serious concern.

*Asset Declarations:* Some progress was made relating to asset declarations due to legislative amendments reducing public official's declaration obligations and the lack of systematic monitoring.

### Hungary

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*Asset Declarations:* Some progress was made relating to asset declarations due to legislative amendments reducing public official's declaration obligations and the lack of systematic monitoring.

### Poland

*Judicial Independence:* Serious concerns persist related to the independence of the Polish judiciary. The government has ignored calls to address the lack of independence and effectiveness of the Constitutional Tribunal. The changes made to the Supreme Court's Disciplinary Chamber were largely cosmetic and did not contain an obligation to reinstate unlawfully suspended judges. They also did not provide guarantees against influence by the executive for the functioning of an independent and impartial disciplinary system for judges.

*National Council of the Judiciary:* The country's National Council of the Judiciary is inconsistent with the constitution due to political interference.

*Freedom of Media:* Independent media outlets and journalists faced threats and obstacles in their reporting.

*Women's Rights:* Women's sexual and reproductive rights and activists continued to be under attack.

*Migration and Asylum:* While Poland admitted millions of people fleeing the war in Ukraine, unlawful pushbacks of migrants and asylum seekers from other parts of the world continued at the border with Belarus.

### Slovakia

*Judicial Reforms:* Reforms of the Slovak justice system continued. The reform of the judicial map has entered into force and a new separate system of administrative courts has become operational.

*Judicial Council:* No steps have been taken to ensure that the members of the Judicial Council are subject to sufficient guarantees of independence as regards their dismissal.

*Corruption:* Efforts to fight high-level corruption continued, with several former high-ranking officials charged with bribery offences. The use of the Prosecutor General's discretion to annul investigations in several high-level corruption cases continues to raise concern.

*Lobbying and Conflicts of Interest:* No steps have yet been taken to regulate lobbying and some initial steps have been taken to strengthen the legislation on conflicts of interests and asset declarations.

*Whistleblower Protection:* Slovakia's dedicated Whistleblower Protection Office is investing in public awareness campaigns to address the persistent low levels of reporting.

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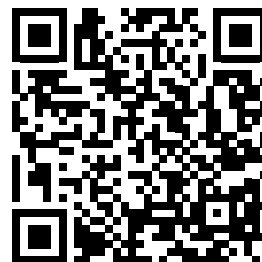
Source for infographics on pages 17 and 19 as well as some information on pages 14-16 - Brezina, I., Boehnke, K., Deutsch, F., Jakab, Z., Klicperová-Baker, M., Przybylski, W., Cavoiová, V., & Šrol, J. (2023). Democratic Trends in Central Europe (A Report on the Project Political Culture, Democratic Values and Misinformation: Detecting Democratic Footholds & Weaknesses). Centre for Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Visegrad Insight is main Central European analysis and media platform. It generates future policy directions for Europe and transatlantic partners. Established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation.

In this project, we aim to promote democratic values and strengthen democratic security in Central European states through our framework. We'll engage in activities such as scenario-building, yearly foresight reports, conferences and media appearances to improve discourse on EU values and foster collaboration within civil society. Leveraging our position, we'll develop a CEE-wide public foresight debate on future scenarios for democracy, freedoms, elections and social cohesion, bringing together thought leaders, academia and policy-makers. Our primary goal is to address the decline in public debate caused by a lack of information sovereignty, limited trust in democratic institutions and political polarisation, offering solutions and reinforcing support for democratic values.

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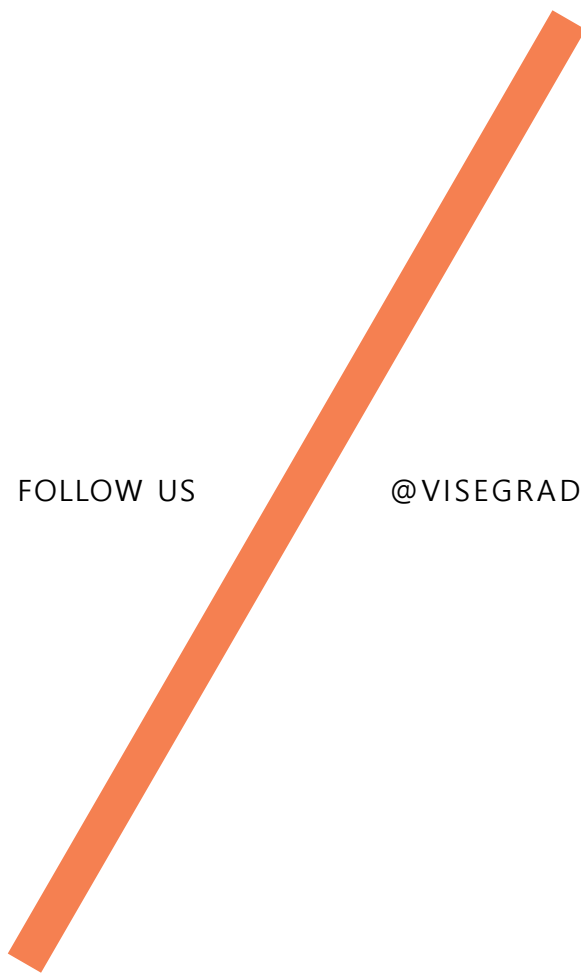


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