



East or West: Where does Central Europe stand?

BY KAFKADESK 26 JUL 2019



PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC – How do Hungarians feel about the EU? Do Slovaks support NATO membership? What's the greatest threat, according to Poles? Are Czechs really as Eurosceptic as we might think?

All these questions, and many more, are answered in the fascinating report published by Bratislava-based think tank Globsec Institute: "Globsec Trends 2019 – Central & Eastern Europe 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain", which takes a look at the opinion of Central and Eastern European populations (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania and Austria) on a wide array of topics.

"If there is one word to describe the state of the Central European mind in 2019, it would be 'confusion'", writes Globsec Policy Institute director Jakub Wiśniewski. To cut through that confusion and help you make sense of what's truly happening beyond the flashy headlines, here are the key takeaways of the Globsec Trends 2019 study for Visegrad Group countries.

Central Europe's balancing act between East and West

Do Poles, Hungarians, Slovaks and Czech identify as part of the East, West or somewhere in between?

According to the report, Hungarians stand out as the most Western-oriented among V4 countries (45%), followed by Poland (42%). In both countries, however, more people would rather see themselves somewhere in between East and West (47% in Hungary and 48% in Poland).

Although it might be argued, from a geographical and cultural standpoint, that they're the most Western in the V4, Czechs appear the most in favour of positioning themselves somewhere between East and West (55%), compared to only 37% who see themselves as part of the West. Due to "a strong narrative of pan-Slavism and Soviet nostalgia", Slovaks are the most Eastern-oriented (10%) population in the CEE region, and the least prone to feel part of the West (only 23%) in Central Europe.

American, European or Russian values? Take your pick.

With which country's values do Central Europeans think their country is more in line with: the EU, Russia or the U.S.? Some pretty interesting differences here as well.

An overwhelming majority of Czechs (62%), Slovaks (62%) and Poles (60%) would rather identify with EU values... compared to only 38% of Hungarians. Hungarians (36%) and Slovaks (35%) are also more likely to identify with

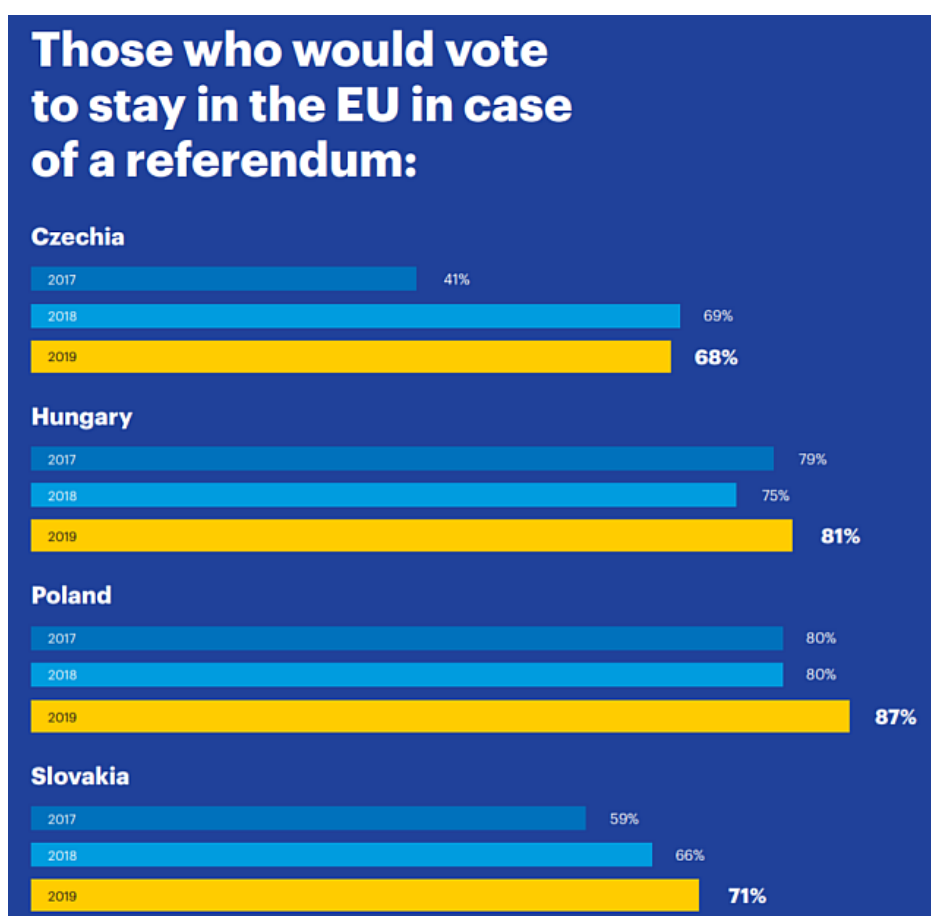
Russia, around three times more than Czechs (14%) and Poles (10%). In all V4 countries, only a minority of the population identifies with U.S. values, with the biggest share unsurprisingly found in Poland (42%, the highest in the wider CEE region) well ahead of Czechs (32%), Slovaks (23%) and Hungarians (17%).

Czexit, Polexit, etc.: Really?

How many people would vote to stay in the EU in case of a referendum? Despite all the talk about a possible 'Czexit' or 'Polexit', a strong majority of the population supports EU membership in all CEE countries, including in the Visegrad Group: although known for its deeply-entrenched Euroscepticism, 68% of Czech citizens (compared to only 41% two years ago) would vote to remain in the EU, as well as 71% of the population in Slovakia (compared to 59% in 2017), 81% in Hungary and 87% in Poland, one of the most pro-European nations in the EU.

Support for the EU, although widespread, may have different explanations depending on the country: while in the Czech Republic it seems "backed by stronger identity-related beliefs", Hungary's approach "appears to have strong economic reasons". Moreover, "a lower degree of identification with anyone's values [in Hungary] may be linked to strong nationalism and, to a certain extent, nostalgia for the great Hungarian Empire".

The authors of the report also urge caution in the case of Slovakia: "The pro-European consensus of political elites might be less stable than it seems, and appeals to populism might negatively influence also the popular support for the EU".



Source: Globsec Institute

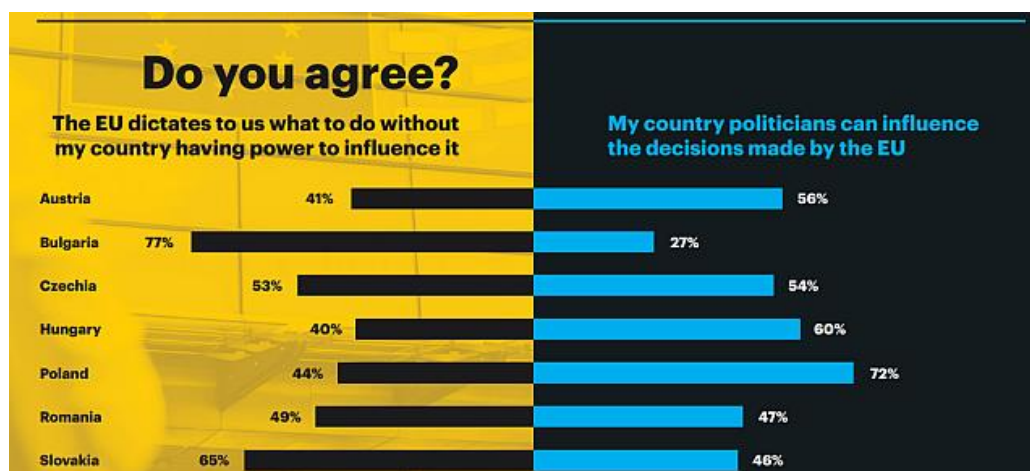
Brussels diktats and influence-wielding

Do Central Europeans feel the EU dictates them what to do or do they believe their country's respective governments and politicians can influence EU decision-making?

Poles are the most optimistic, with 72% of the respondents saying they think they can influence the EU's decision-making, followed by Hungary (60%).

On the contrary, a vast majority of the population in Slovakia (65%, the second highest rate in the wider CEE region after Bulgaria) agrees with the statement that the EU dictates them what to do, a feeling of “being at the receiving end of the EU decision-making” fueled, according to the Globsec researchers, by low identification with Western values, strong appeal toward Russia and a “relatively conservative worldview”.

The Czech Republic has a pretty balanced view on the issue, with 53% believing in EU diktats and 54% who think Czech politicians can wield influence at the EU table.



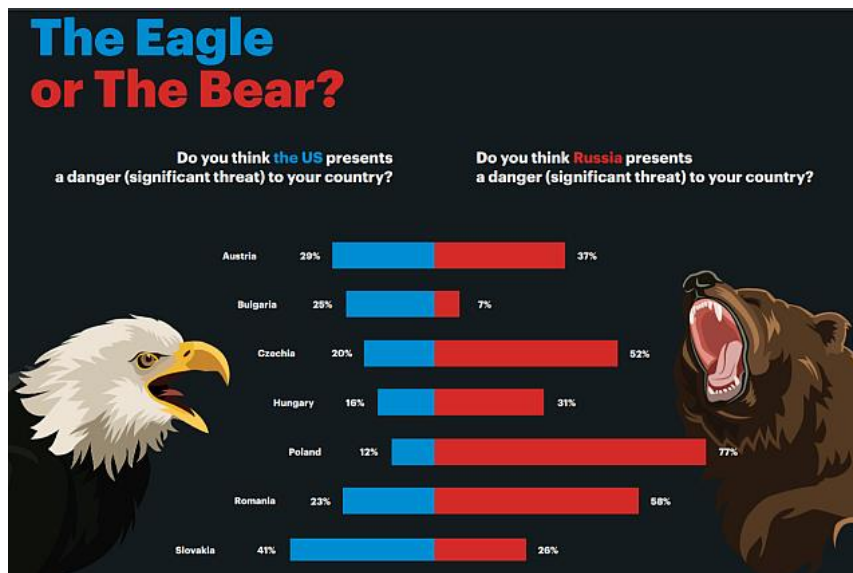
Source: Globsec Institute

NATO, EU army and global threats

Let's move on to the security and defense issues. Except for Slovakia, a vast majority of V4 countries' population believes NATO is critical for their security and would therefore vote to stay in the Alliance if a referendum was held: 92% in Poland, 83% in Hungary and 80% in Czechia (compared to 53% in 2017). Slovaks remain the most skeptic towards the Western Alliance, with only 56% supporting NATO membership (which still represents a significant increase compared to 43% two years ago). Quite naturally, a minority of the CEE population supports the establishment of an EU army as an alternative to NATO: 38% in Poland, 41% in Hungary, 40% in Czech Republic and 43% in Slovakia,

Between the U.S. and Russia, who presents the most significant threat to their national security? For Poland, the answer is clear: Russia (77% of the population) presents a significant threat to the country (only 12% believe the U.S. does). Although more balanced, Czech citizens also single out the Russian bear (52%) far more than the American eagle (20%) as a foreign danger. Elsewhere, it's not so crystal-clear: in Hungary, only 31% believe Russia poses a threat to their country's security, and 16% believe the U.S. does. Along with Bulgaria, Slovakia is the only Central and Eastern European country where more people see the U.S. as a threat (41%) rather than Russia (26%).

Despite recent controversies surrounding the rise of Chinese espionage and potential cyber-threats presented by Huawei, China isn't clearly identified as a danger in Central Europe, except in the Czech Republic (48%). In Poland (36%), Slovakia (29%) and Hungary (28%), only a minority of the population sees Beijing as a potential danger to their country's national security.



Source: Globsec Institute

Media, NGO's and the defence of democracy

In all V4 countries, a majority of respondents agrees with the statement that “media are an important part of democracy because they watch over the functioning of the institutions”.

But that doesn't mean they trust them: for 81% of the population in Poland, 78% in Hungary, 75% in the Czech Republic and 69% in Slovakia, people also back the claim that “mainstream media in our country are often lying and manipulating facts”. Interestingly, the Czech Republic is the only CEE country where more people agree with the second statement than with the first one.

Even in countries where they face regular attacks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are considered as a key element to a functioning democracy: a large majority of Poles (85%), Hungarians (84%), Czechs (66%) and Slovaks (59%) see the work of NGO's as important in a democracy's check-and-balance system.

The opinion polls gathered in the Globsec Trends 2019 report were conducted by the FOCUS agency in Slovakia, IMAS in Poland and Hungary and STEM/MARK in the Czech Republic.