



Briefing paper

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Teetering on the Brink of Regional Convergence

**Bulgarians' Stances on
Russia's War against Ukraine,
Strategic Orientation, Democracy,
Media and Values vis-à-vis Central
and Eastern Europe**

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The Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine has set in train a realignment of attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The GLOBSEC Trends 2023 report, which is informed by comprehensive public opinion surveys, demonstrates that there has been ever growing support for EU and NATO membership and a greater realization of the dangers posed by autocracies to the region's security, all the while vulnerability to manipulative narratives has persisted.¹

Bulgaria however finds itself on the sidelines of these regional configurations as the **Bulgarian respondents' dispositions are generally characterized by some outstanding and continuous trends**, frequently shared with Slovakia. These include a relatively lower adherence and commitment to the EU and NATO compared to CEE counterparts; the least critical assessment of Russia and its war against Ukraine; the weakest perception of threat from Moscow and Beijing; the highest approval ratings of autocratic leaders and the entrenchment of socially conservative, anti-Western views. Some of the lowest levels of trust in media and government are also recorded in Bulgaria. Indeed, Bulgarians' views have distanced the country from Romania in terms of attitudinal dispositions (despite the generic comparisons made between the two countries) and have even outstripped Hungary as regards support for autocratic and illiberal positions (even though Hungary has been posited as a paragon of 'illiberal democracy').

With respect to internal social stratification based on gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement, two notable trends stand out. First, **belongingness to the youngest age group (18- to 24-year-olds) and possession of a tertiary education diploma** do not represent consistent predictors of pro-Western and socially progressive views (as is usually assumed in sociological studies). Second, **the North Central region in Bulgaria**, which is also one of the poorest in the country, is distinguished by some of the most anti-democratic, pro-Russian and illiberal tendencies.

The sociological trends in Bulgaria outlined in this paper draw on GLOBSEC-led public opinion polling, which took place in March 2023 on a representative sample of 1000 Bulgarian respondents based on stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The profiles of the respondents were representative of Bulgaria according to gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. The results for Bulgaria are further tallied against the polling data gathered in 7 other CEE countries, including Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

Bulgarians on the EU, NATO, and Strategic Partnerships: Anchored in the West, Yet Looking to Russia and China

Bulgaria's traditionally EU-favorable orientation has represented a constant attitudinal characteristic, although there has been a dip in the Bulgarian population's positive assessment of the Union in recent years. In 2023, in the hypothetical situation of having to vote in a referendum to stay in or leave the Union, **an overwhelming 71% of the polled Bulgarians would choose to preserve the country's EU membership** as against 23.3% who would prefer to exit it (in 2018, however, 87% of the Bulgarians declared their positive disposition to the Union).² Although this percentage is high, **other CEE countries have registered even higher preferences to stay in the EU** (such as Lithuania – at 84.1% or Romania – 85.5%) and is thus the second lowest in the CEE-8 survey trailing only Slovakia (where approval of EU membership stands at 63.6%). Indeed, 70.7% of the Bulgarian respondents think that the Union dictates to Bulgaria without having the power to influence it, which is on a par with how 78.4% of Romanians and 69.9% of Slovaks feel.

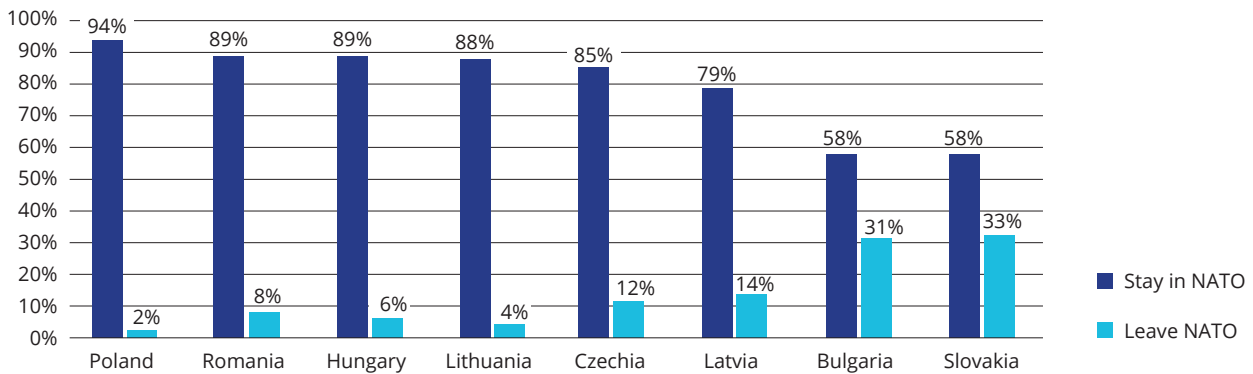
The completion of Sofia's fully-fledged integration in the EU, especially by joining the Eurozone, remains a bone of contention among the Bulgarian public. The propagandist messaging against the euro and organization of a widely promoted campaign for a referendum on the introduction of the European currency, spearheaded by pro-Russian, nationalist party Vazrazhdane, look to have exerted a significant impact. **Over half of the Bulgarian respondents (55.6%) declare that the introduction of the euro will infringe on the country's sovereignty and impoverish the economy** as against 32.9% who disagree with this view. Similar scores are also recorded in Poland (51.1%) and Romania (54.7%), which are likewise yet to introduce the European currency.

Consistent with long-running, established trends, Bulgarians are even less categorical in their support for NATO – a disposition conditioned by the historically distorted and ingrained perception of Moscow as the country's protector and 'benevolent ally'. In a hypothetical referendum on the country's membership in the Alliance, **57.8% would vote for Sofia to stay in NATO**, while 31.2% would vote against continued membership. This result ranks Bulgaria as **the country least eager to maintain its NATO status along with Slovakia** and in contrast to Poland, where almost the whole population – 93.7%, would vote in favor of staying in the Alliance, or Romania, where 88.9% share the same preference. **The Bulgarian respondents are furthermore the least supportive of their country's continued NATO membership among all of the polled Alliance members.**³

The pattern, whereby Russia's war against Ukraine did not lead to a significant surge in support for NATO and realization of the security benefits it endows to Sofia is reflected in the fact that **only about half of the respondents (53.4%) agree with the statement that the country's membership in the Alliance makes it less likely that a foreign nation will mount an**

attack. This again represents the lowest result among all CEE-8 (slightly exceeded by 53.5% of Slovaks who think the same way). Correspondingly, **the Bulgarians are the least likely to show solidarity** and agree that the country should defend NATO neighbors, in particular, in case of an attack. An underwhelming 44% share this view, which is by far the smallest proportion among other CEE countries as, for example, 91.4% of Czechs and even 64.5% of Slovaks express readiness to come to the aid of an attacked ally.

Figure 1. Support for NATO membership



Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023.

The continuing difficulty of the Bulgarian population in abiding by and decisively supporting the country’s strategic commitments is further manifested in the priority ordering of relations with the main global actors on the part of the respondents. The anti-American discourse vociferously promoted by pro-Russian political and societal groupings has exerted a significant influence on public perceptions leading to the striking result, whereby **a bigger proportion of the polled (25.6%) consider Russia to be Bulgaria’s most important strategic partner than the US** (the latter position is supported by 19.9%). More of the respondents (8.2%) also order China ahead of the United Kingdom (6.2%) in Bulgaria’s ranking of strategic partnerships. Overall, Germany garners the highest approval (40.3%) as Sofia’s most important strategic partner.

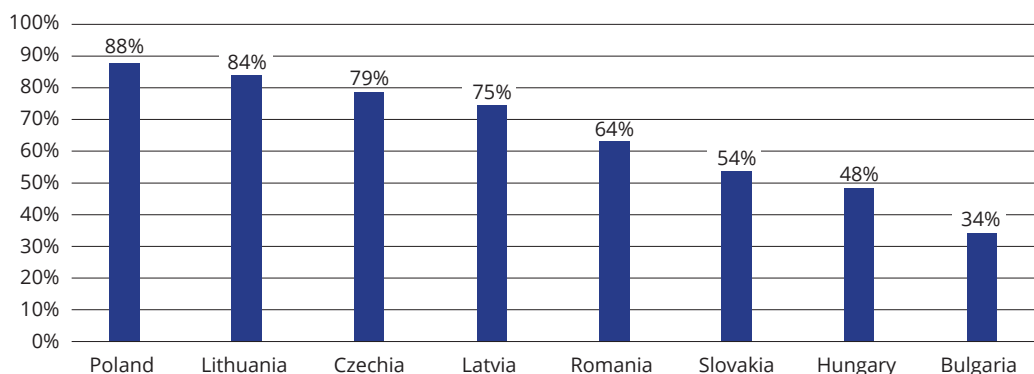
The reasoning behind the Bulgarian public’s strategic partnership inclinations is informed by distinct cultural-historical, political and economic perceptions. Those who prefer a strategic alignment with Moscow are not necessarily motivated by assessments of Russia’s power-political status in international relations as only 13.7% think that Russia represents a super power. Instead, **the most commonly cited reason for engaging with the Kremlin is rooted in perceptions of cultural/values-based proximity and a common history**, with each of those two views being respectively endorsed by 23% and 40.1% of the polled. Indeed, as IGA’s report *History Undone* has demonstrated, Russia’s weaponization of history and distorted presentation of bilateral Bulgarian-Russian ties as supposedly based on mutually beneficial ‘brotherhood’ represent the major ideational avenue through which Moscow exercises sway over the Bulgarian public’s mind and related vulnerability to all other types of Russian disinformation.⁴

In turn, **the US is seen as a much more reliable and trustworthy ally than all other global actors.** This view is shared by 40.4% of the respondents, while only 6.4% evaluate Moscow as reliable. Most respondents (14%) additionally perceive Washington as a defender of democracy and freedom, whereas none of the polled attribute these qualities to Russia or China.

The Bulgarians' assessments for cooperating with China are grounded in the expectation of economic opportunities (31.5%) and technological advancement (32.1%) as the greatest number of respondents associate these characteristics with Beijing as compared to the other global actors.

Furthermore, the average Bulgarian perceptions of threat inform the status of Bulgaria as an outlier in regional comparisons. **The lowest perception of threat from Russia in CEE is registered among the polled Bulgarians,** only 34.2% of whom think that the Kremlin is dangerous for the country. Similarly, only 15% of the Bulgarians sense danger from Beijing, which **ranks the Bulgarian respondents as feeling the least threatened by China among all of the Central and East European publics.** Unlike many CEE states, where the limited realization of Chinese investment pledges and Beijing's ever more aggressive stances (towards Taiwan and in support for Russia's war against Ukraine) have led to a significant reassessment of any positive potential in relations with the East Asian country, in Bulgaria cooperation with China is still seen as an opportunity rather than a danger. Politicians and businesspeople have not shown a significant degree of awareness of the challenges emanating from Beijing. For example, Chinese aggression towards Taipei does not figure in domestic political debates and Bulgarian political parties have not taken a stance on tensions in the Taiwan Strait.⁵ Interactions in the sphere of higher education facilitated by limited security screening and vigilance have additionally opened up an avenue for academic actors to advance their cooperation with China.⁶ At the same time, pro-Kremlin proxies have pushed China-favorable narratives into the media space, which extol the Chinese economic model and supposed opportunities for cooperation.

Figure 2. Perception of Russia as a threat



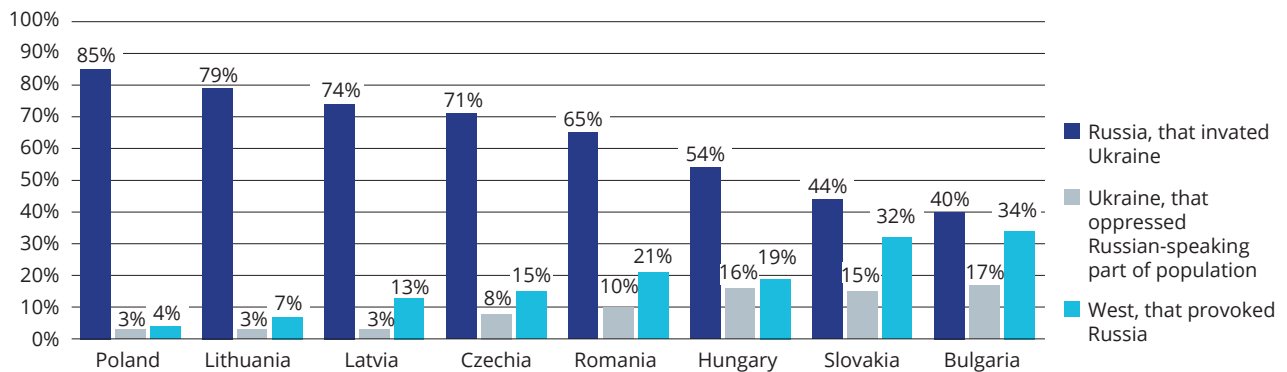
Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023.

Who Started the War in Ukraine: The Bulgarians Remain Undecided

Since the start of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, there has been a consistent trend, whereby Bulgarian society is divided in its assessment as to who is responsible for the war. Pro-Russian actors (including politicians and journalists) have reinforced such indecision: in particular, the question whether Sofia should dispatch weapons to Ukraine reignited the perennial debate over ‘balancing’ and ‘neutrality’. ‘Neutrality’, however, is understood less as a means to assure security through military non-involvement in third-party conflicts, than as a way of diluting Bulgaria’s pro-Western orientation on the basis of a concealed or explicit pro-Russian bias aimed to prevent resolute action in support of Kyiv.⁷

The polling data confirms the pattern of divided and uncertain assessments of the war since 43.7% of the Bulgarian respondents agree that Russia invaded Ukraine, while a total of 46.7% attribute blame either to Kyiv (14.6%) or to the West, which supposedly provoked Moscow (32.1%). **Only Slovakia records a lower score than Bulgaria in ascertaining that Russia invaded Ukraine**, whereas the rest of the CEE-8 more clearly appreciate the Kremlin’s culpability (even 54% of Hungarians think that way).

Figure 3. Responsibility for the war in Ukraine

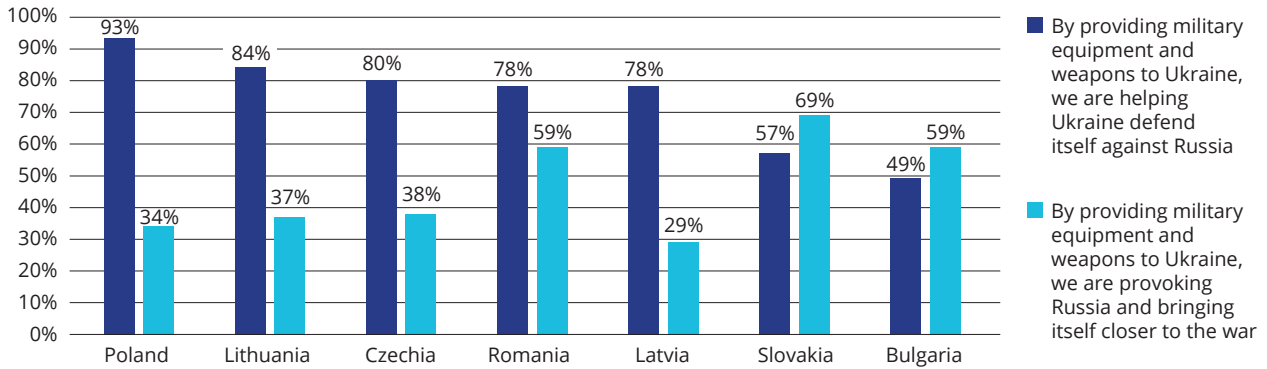


Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023.

On other dimensions related to the war, the Bulgarians – along with the Slovaks, express similar views that are less decisively supportive of Ukraine and measures to support it. For instance, **the polled Bulgarians demonstrate the least agreement (amounting to 48.9%) among all CEE-8 with the statement that by providing military equipment and weapons to Ukraine, Bulgaria is helping the latter defend itself against Russia**. The Bulgarian population also continues to consider that Ukrainian refugees receive support at the expense of Bulgarian citizens from weaker and socially vulnerable groups in society that supposedly need it more – a view expressed by 71% of the polled, which is the highest percentage point in the polled CEE countries. The Bulgarians

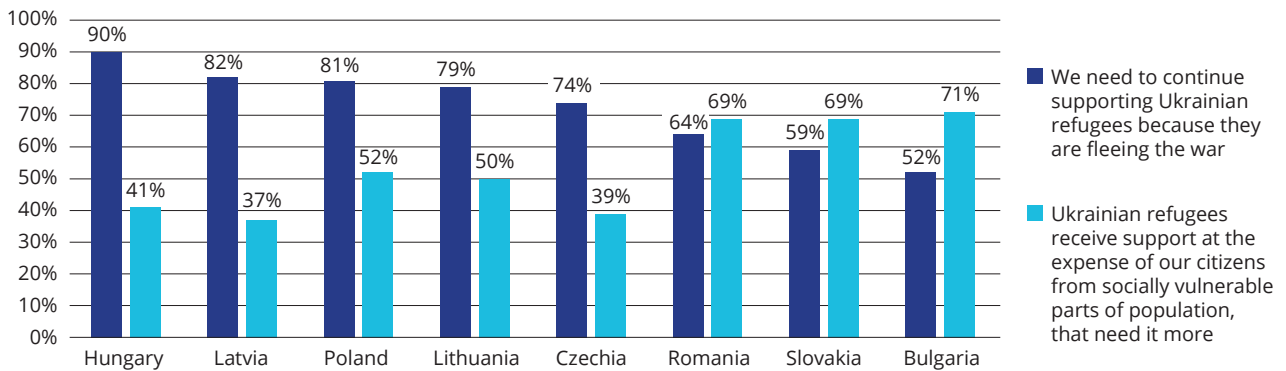
are additionally the least likely among their Central and East European counterparts to consent to further support for Ukrainian refugees as only 52.2% think that way against the score gauged in Hungary, for example, which reaches 89.7%.

Figure 4. Support of the provision of military equipment to Ukraine



Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023

Figure 5. Support for Ukrainian refugees



Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023.

The West, Democracy and Bulgaria's Values: Uncertain Compatibility

Bulgaria's traditionally divided loyalties and identities between West and East – between Western Europe as an example of progress and Russia as a culturally and emotionally close 'savior' (informed by historically distorted representations of ostensibly mutually beneficial Russian-Bulgarian ties), have persisted over the long term. These trends are manifested and corroborated by opinion polling data in 2023. On the one hand, more Bulgarians (59.7%) think that the West does not threaten the country's values than that it does (30.4%). Yet, almost a similar proportion of 53.2% deem that Russia does not represent a values-based challenge either, while a staggering 71.9% perceive China as non-threatening.

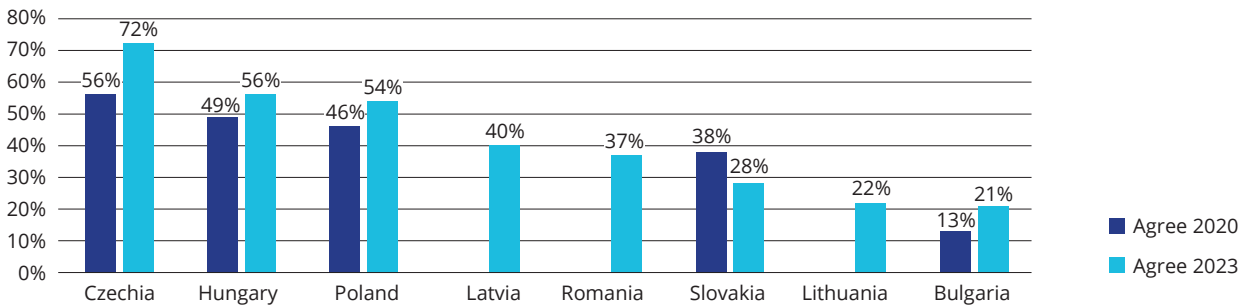
Comparatively, other than Slovakia, CEE countries are much less likely than Bulgaria to declare that Western societies and their way of living represent a threat. For instance, only 17.2% of Czech respondents perceive such a threat. Conversely, **the Bulgarians are among those Central and East Europeans who feel the least threatened in values-based terms by Russia and China:** 53.2% of the Bulgarian respondents and 57.6% of their Hungarian counterparts evaluate Moscow as non-threatening, which are the highest scores in the region. Similarly, 71.9% of the Bulgarians and 72.2% of the Romanians do not perceive a values-based threat from China, which are the outstandingly greatest proportions recorded across CEE.

The level of approval of world politicians further reveals Bulgarians' democratic or autocratic inclinations. Somewhat counterintuitively, despite the lack of intense ties and exchange between Bulgaria and France, **French President Emmanuel Macron garners the highest approval rate among Bulgarian respondents**, reaching 57.4%. US President Joe Biden receives the least number of positive evaluations, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky obtains the second lowest approval rate in Bulgaria within CEE (after Slovakia). On the contrary, the most prominent authoritarian leaders, including **Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban attract the highest approval among the polled Bulgarian population than in all other CEE-8 countries** participating in the survey, respectively garnering 32.1%, 35.6% and 48.3%. This score confirms a longstanding trend, whereby Bulgarians tend to exhibit the highest level of confidence in Putin in comparative terms (even though, in absolute terms, there has been a decline in positive assessments of the Russian President). For example, in 2020, a Pew Research Center survey demonstrated that the polled Bulgarian population maintained the highest level of approval of Vladimir Putin, whereas a median of 60% of the polled in 34 countries across the world stated they have no confidence in the Kremlin leader to do the right thing in international affairs.⁸

These results can be related to **Bulgarians' insufficiently wide agreement – standing at 49.7%, that liberal democracy is good for the country** reinforced by the rampant Kremlin-sponsored propaganda in favor of 'traditional' values and against 'elitist liberal globalism'. In contrast, 61%

of the polled Hungarians and 79.1% of the polled Czechs express favorable views of liberal democracy. Democracy in general, however, receives a more positive assessment in Bulgaria and the region as a whole. The Bulgarians' more circumscribed comfort with a key element of liberalism – the promotion of minority rights, is observable through the fact that **the Bulgarian respondents exhibit the lowest level of consent within CEE to the importance of upholding LGBTI rights**. Only 20.5% support those rights, while by comparison 71.7% of the polled Czechs and 55.9% of the polled Hungarians do so. At the same time, 49% as against 29.9% believe that far-right nationalists represent a threat to Bulgarian values and national identity. This shows that at least about half of Bulgaria's population is alert to extremist ideologies, which recognition can potentially circumscribe the influence and further electoral gains of pro-Russian, far-right party Vazrazhdane.

Figure 6. Support for LGBTI rights



Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023.

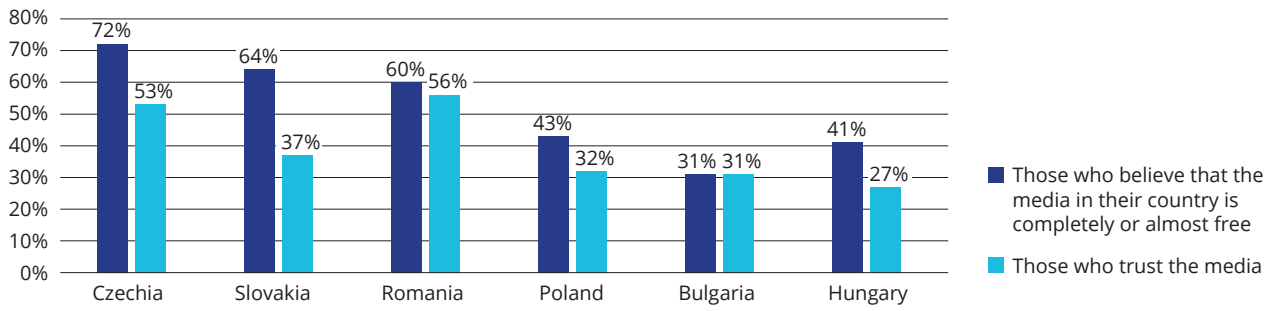
Media and Government: Distrust Seems Irreparable

Bulgaria's longstanding distrust of the media and government has persisted in public opinion trends in 2023. Disenchantment with the political authorities is reflected in the staggering 70% proportion of the polled population, who distrust the government, and 80% who have no confidence in the Parliament. 58.8% of the respondents express the view that the media in the country are not free, which **ranks the country in the first place in CEE measured by media distrust**. 63.7% do not express confidence in 'mainstream media', in particular.

Nevertheless, a contradictory trend is noted, whereby despite the high levels of distrust in mainstream media, the latter still represent the primary source of information for the Bulgarian population. A majority of the Bulgarian respondents (57%) predominantly inform themselves from the largest TV channels, including, bTV, NOVA and BNT (Bulgarian National Television). There are no major distinctions in this pattern based on socio-demographic data. For instance, age is not a significant predictor of deviation from the trend of informing oneself from the main TV channels as overwhelming majorities of 80-90% in all age groups, educational levels and types of settlement regularly or sometimes watch these channels.

Bulgarians' beliefs as to who exerts an impact on the media environment in the country can furthermore diverge from the actual circumstances of established control. **Many more Bulgarians (45.4%) think that influential groups or individuals from the West exert an impact on the media landscape than does Russia (only 12% share this view) and none consider that Beijing is influential.** In contrast to this public perception (itself framed by Kremlin propaganda), research has shown that Russian media influence in Bulgaria has proliferated, reinforcing pro-Russian sentiments and sowing further division within Bulgarian society. The informational ecosystem in Bulgaria, which enables the circulation of Kremlin-sponsored messages, is populated by a wide array of actors, who cross-post each other's sources and messages of disinformation. They include both politically-affiliated actors (such as nationalist party Vazrazhdane and the Bulgarian Socialist Party) and grassroots groups, who make up a large pool of local, pro-Kremlin proxies and are part of Russia's strategy of cultivating opaque local networks of patronage. The latter are aided and directed by the hostile media designs of the Russian Embassy in Sofia, which has adopted a strategy of aggressive interference in the domestic informational environment.⁹

Figure 7. Freedom of and trust in the media



Source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023.

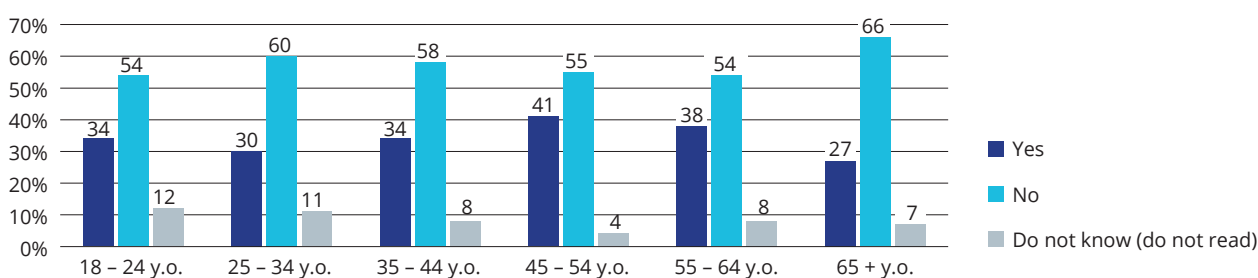
Social Stratification: Expect the Unexpected

The breakdown of survey results by key sociological attributes, including age, gender, level of education, place of residence and size of settlement has revealed a number of sociologically unanticipated patterns, defying established expectations.

- First, although there is an overall tendency in sociological studies to attribute to the youngest, sociologically-relevant age group (18-24-year-olds) consisting of representatives of Gen Z socially liberal views, in Bulgaria, this trend is not sustained empirically (as indeed, it is not consistently sustained in other countries, too).¹⁰ Instead, **the youngest Bulgarian adults are not distinguished by significantly more progressive and democratic political stances, further displaying socially conservative views.** This could be explained by a degree of confusion that exists among the youth about politics and social tendencies; declining educational standards; and media disorientation – despite the fact that the younger generations are more digitally savvy, this does not necessarily condition the capacity to sift quality information from disinformation.

Younger respondents' views as to who is responsible for the war in Ukraine do not deviate radically from average assessments within the other age groups. 38.4% of the polled 18-24-year-olds apportion blame to the West or Ukraine and 40.4% of 25-34-year-olds do so too (46.7% of the whole of the polled Bulgarian population share this position). Conflicting trends also characterize youth's attitude to Russia. On the one hand, Russia and China are least likely to be seen as Bulgaria's main strategic partners among the youngest age group, garnering respectively 12.3% and 1.9% approval. By comparison, the oldest generation (65+) are most likely to designate those two authoritarian states as partners for Bulgaria, whereby Moscow receives 37.1% and China – 11.1%. The youngest age groups (18-24 and 25-34-year-olds) are additionally the least likely to think that the West is a threat to national identity and values, while the oldest generations (55-64 and 65+) are conversely most likely to consider the West as a threat. However, on the other hand, the youngest age groups are not the most alert to the Russian security challenge. Instead, 45-54 and 55-64-year-olds exhibit the highest levels of perception of threat from the Kremlin amounting to 40% and 38%, respectively. Russia is additionally seen as more threatening in values-based terms by 25-34-year-olds (46%) and 45-54-year-olds (46%) than 18-24-year-olds (35%).

Figure 8. Perception of threat from Russia among Bulgarian respondents based on age groups

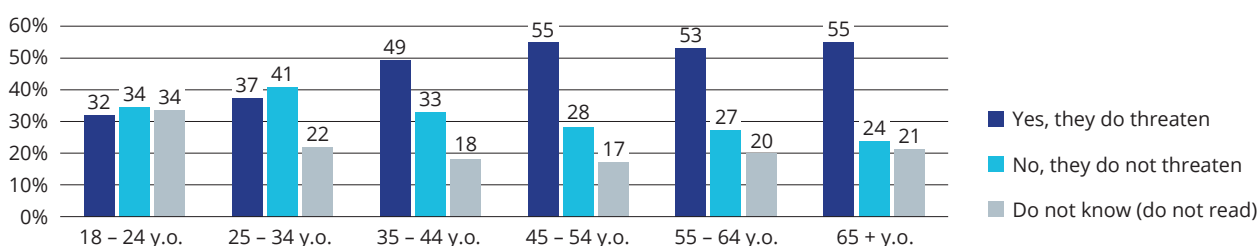


Source: IGA based on GLOBSEC survey results.

A further surprising trend shows that **an overwhelming proportion of 70% of the 18-24 age group and 72% of the 25-34 age group think that the EU ‘dictates to us what to do without Bulgaria having the influence to change that’**. This unexpected skepticism contradicts the assumption that younger generations should be more attuned to the EU and the possibilities it offers, given that they have spent most or all of their adult lives in the circumstances of the country’s fully-fledged Union membership and related opportunities for travel, work and study in EU countries. It may be surmised that since many of the representatives of the 18-24-year-olds in particular have not witnessed the accession process as a key national goal in the 1990s and 2000s; the fact that the political authorities have not consistently and vigorously explained the benefits of EU membership, all the while nationalist discourse has gained momentum have all contributed to a shortage of awareness among the youth.

Similar factors may also explain the young generations’ lukewarm support for democracy. **Over half of the respondents from the 18-24 age group are most likely to agree – compared to all other age groups, that having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is good for Bulgaria**, exceeding by one percentage point support for this statement among the 65+ age group. The 18-24-year-olds additionally score the same result together with 65+ year-olds in approving of democracy, amounting to 70%, which is however higher in the rest of the age groups. 18-24 and 25-34-year-olds are moreover the least likely to agree that far-right nationalists represent a threat to national identity and values – only 32% and 37% respectively, whereas all other age groups perceive a greater threat from the nationalist sector. The youngest adults are furthermore not outstandingly more critical of Putin compared to their older counterparts. The absence of well-developed civic education in high school and the importance of transitioning to democracy after 1989 (even if imperfectly carried out) have thus contributed to a diminished understanding of the value of democracy among the youth.

Figure 9. Perception of far-right nationalists as a threat among Bulgarian respondents based on age groups



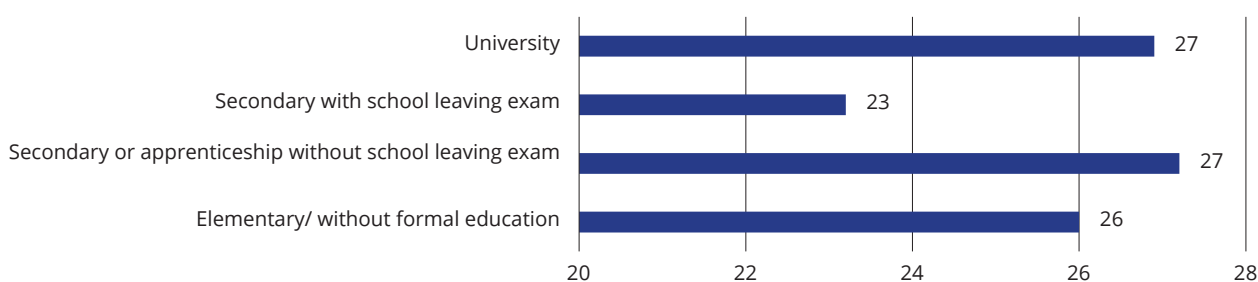
Source: IGA based on GLOBSEC survey results.

Last but not least, the youngest generation has registered some of the most conservative social views. **The 18-24 age group harbors particularly traditional positions regarding LGBTI rights** as over half of the polled in this group (55%) think that LGBTI is an immoral and decadent ideology. This result is exceeded by 4 percentage points only by the 65+ age group.

- A further, less predictable trend shows that **possession of a higher education diploma does not necessarily ensure more nuanced and informed views leading to the occupation of pro-Western and progressive stances.**¹¹ Indeed, those with tertiary education are more politically savvy and more likely to support democratic arrangements. Yet, when there is 1) limited public discussion of a given topic (such as China), 2) or widespread propaganda (about the West, liberal values) and unless a concerted effort is made in acquiring quality information, deeply nationally ingrained beliefs are reinforced and education as a variable assumes less weight.

The level of education is not a predictor of assessments of Russia's war against Ukraine. **An equal proportion (43%) of those with higher as well as secondary education blame either Ukraine or the West for supposedly inciting the war.** There is also no outstandingly wide range in the way that Putin is viewed depending on educational attainment. A contradictory trend emerges, however, with respect to Russia as a whole. On the one hand, respondents with tertiary education are much more likely than others to see Russia as a threat in security and cultural terms, respectively amounting to 42% and 49%. At the same time, an equal number (29%) of those with elementary or no education and those with tertiary education perceive the West as a threat. Moreover, the level of education does not make a difference in preferences for Russia as a strategic partner, as 27% of those with tertiary education, 26% of those with elementary or no education, 27% of respondents with secondary education without a school leaving exam and 23% of respondents possessing a secondary diploma with a school-leaving exam are equally likely to designate Moscow as a strategic partner.

Figure 10. Preference for Russia as a strategic partner among Bulgarian respondents based on level of education



Source: IGA based on GLOBSEC survey results.

In political terms, **having tertiary education can condition better awareness of and support for democracy.** Respondents with the highest educational attainment are much less likely than others to approve of a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections as a good option for Bulgaria: 33% think so as compared to 45% of the polled respondents with secondary education and 53% of the polled individuals with elementary or no education. Additionally, many more polled Bulgarians with tertiary education (63%) see far-right nationalists as a threat to national identity and values than all others.

However, in relation to social issues, higher education does not guarantee liberal views as **respondents possessing a tertiary educational diploma are more likely to hold traditional stances regarding LGBTI and characterize it as an immoral ideology than those with secondary education (52% against 49%).**

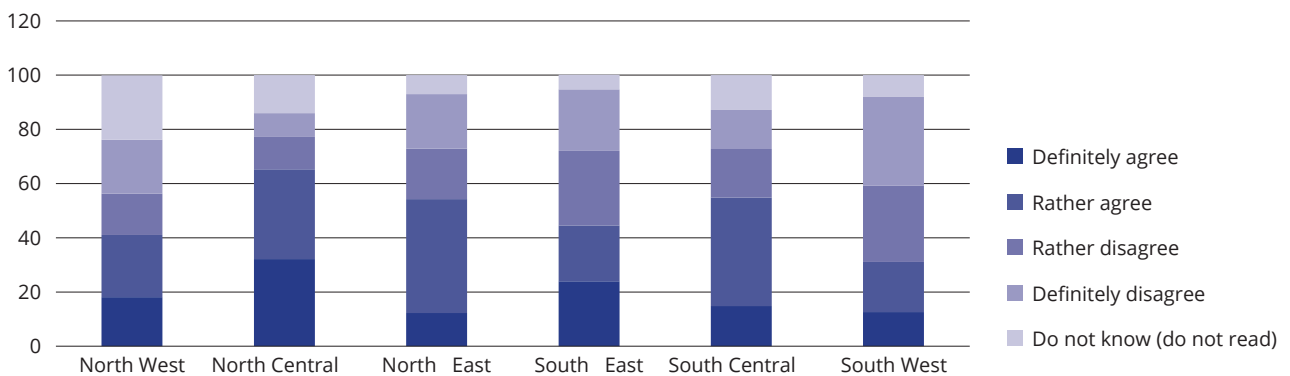
- Last but not least, sociological differentiation by place of residence defined on a regional basis and encompassing the 6 main regions of Bulgaria (North West, North Central, North East, South East, South Central and South West) can frame public opinion trends that are distinct from the average. In particular, a consistent and hitherto underexplored pattern has emerged, whereby **residents of the North Central region maintain the most conservative, anti-Western and anti-democratic views, while those who reside in the South West and North East are distinctly more progressive in their perspectives.** This differentiation can be explained by the fact the South West incorporates Sofia as the largest, richest and typically most forward-looking city. In turn, the North Central region has recently overtaken the North West in terms of ranking as the poorest Bulgarian region by GDP along with the South Central region.¹² Yet, additional ethnographic research needs to complement factors related to economic development and level of income to explain outlying attitudes.

Residents of the North East are most in favor of staying in the EU – 80% express this position. **The North East and South West are also most positively disposed towards Bulgaria’s continued membership in NATO** (in case of a hypothetical referendum), where support for this stance exceeds 60%, while being lowest in the North Central and North Western region dipping to around 40%.

As regards Russia’s war against Ukraine, **only 28.6% of residents in North Central Bulgaria – the lowest proportion of all regions, evaluate that Moscow is responsible for the war**, which assessment is, in contrast, shared by 53% of the respondents in the North West. Fewer residents of the North Central region than in any other place of residence consider that Russia represents a threat to Bulgaria – only 27%, whereas 48.7% in the South West think so. Residents of the North East and South West additionally outstrip by 10% respondents from the other regions in assessing China as a threat.

Moreover, **the notion that Western societies and their way of life represent a threat to national identity and values gains the greatest traction in North Central Bulgaria** amounting to 37.5%. More respondents in this region compared to all others also think that liberal democracy is a threat (32.8%). The statement that a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is good for Bulgaria receives the greatest approval in the North Central region, garnering 65%, whereas the lowest approval of this claim amounting to 31% is recorded in the South West. Socially conservative views further abound. A staggering figure of 58% of residents in North Central Bulgaria register a categorical disapproval of LGBTI as a decadent and immoral ideology.

Figure 11. Perception that a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is good for Bulgaria among Bulgarian respondents depending on place of residence (region)



Source: IGA based on GLOBSEC survey results.

Conclusion: Can Attitudes Change?

Placing Bulgaria in a comparative context with its CEE counterparts exposes outstanding trends, which categorize the Bulgarians as least favorably disposed to the West, its institutions, strategic outlooks and values and most accepting of Russia's and China's postures and discourses. The Bulgarians' attitudinal differentiation from its Euro-Atlantic allies takes on an added significance in the circumstances of the Kremlin's aggressive war against Ukraine that poses a civilizational challenge to the liberal, rules-bound international order, as Sofia's adherence to shared values and positions within the EU and NATO may be doubted.

The transformation of typically deeply entrenched dispositions is however a time and effort-consuming endeavor that requires political and civic leadership to unpack traditional assumptions as well as innovate new guideposts. To this end, tackling foreign authoritarian-state propaganda and improving media standards can forge a leeway for quality discussions. Historical and memory policies additionally have a critical bearing on the formation and maintenance of societal perceptions with there being an urgent need to lay the institutional and educational frameworks for assessing, researching, teaching and raising awareness of Bulgaria's communist past and the larger, generally adverse role played by Russia in critical episodes of Bulgarian history.¹³ In this way only can propagandistically promoted, Russia-friendly distortions of Bulgarian attitudes – informed by falsified historical narratives, be demystified and a rebalancing of affinities be forged in the direction of the democratic West and away from persistent leanings towards the autocratic East.

Accordingly, the following recommendations stand out:

- **An objective approach to historical memories and consciousness needs to be promoted in a consistent manner** and be part of strategic communications that provide positive narratives about Bulgaria's past and its future direction.
 - ✓ Informational campaigns should be created that underscore the advantages of Bulgaria's EU and NATO membership and the strategic, economic and civilizational importance of the country's firm rooting within the Euro-Atlantic community.
- **Foreign disinformation that extols the virtues of authoritarianism and cooperating with the 'East'** must be widely recognized and accepted among the political elite as a threat to national security and well-being in society.
- **National public broadcasting should be promoted and supported as a key pillar of quality journalism** (as against the proliferation of foreign disinformation on social/online/print media) on the basis of financial and editorial independence.

- **Audience-specific identification and development of informational, media literacy and capacity-building campaigns** targeting in particular 1) the ‘undecideds’ (groups within society, which do not harbor strong ideological views and are therefore more receptive to quality information) and 2) the youth (given that the upcoming generations’ attitudinal orientation will shape Bulgaria’s future policy direction).
 - ✓ Media literacy campaigns should be conducted in different parts of Bulgaria and be geared to regional specificities and vulnerabilities.

- **Fostering historical literacy within society** by developing effective historical communication and debunking Moscow’s distortions of Bulgarian history, which try to ground present-day bilateral relations on a seemingly eternal, unbreakable and mutually beneficial ‘Slavic bond’.
 - ✓ Expert information about history should be presented to the public in a creative and engaging way through dedicated podcasts and social media pages, for example, developed and coordinated by history researchers.
 - ✓ Historically-sensitive policy-making should be promoted by involving historians in a more consistent manner into policy decisions.

Endnotes

- ¹ Hajdu, D., et al., 2023, *GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand*, GLOBSEC, p. 4.
- ² European Commission (Directorate-General for Communication), 2018, *Special Eurobarometer No 479: Future of Europe*, p. 13.
- ³ NATO (Public Diplomacy Division), 2023, *NATO Audience Research: pre-Summit polling results 2023*, p. 6.
- ⁴ Filipova, R., 2023, *HISTORY UNDONE. Russia's Historical Disinformation, Bulgaria's Memory Politics and Lessons for Dealing with the Past from Central and Eastern Europe*, Institute for Global Analytics.
- ⁵ Filipova, R., 2023, 'Bulgaria: Viewing Taiwan through the Chinese prism' in Šimalčík, M., et al., *Beyond the Dumpling Alliance: Tracking Taiwan's relations with Central and Eastern Europe*, CEIAS, pp. 30-35.
- ⁶ Filipova, R., 2022, *Bulgaria: A steady embrace of Chinese academia*, China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker.
- ⁷ Filipova, R., 2022, *Bulgaria's balancing act*, Eurozine.
- ⁸ Huang, C., and Cha, J., 2020, *Russia and Putin Receive Low Ratings Globally*, Pew Research Center.
Wike, R., et al., 2019, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*, Pew Research Center, p. 64.
- ⁹ Filipova, R., and Shopov, V., 2022, *Authoritarians on a Media Offensive in the Midst of War: The Informational Influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States in Southeast Europe*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., p. 30.
- ¹⁰ Evidence has emerged that Gen Z representatives may hold conservative views (e.g. on the role of women in society) and prefer strong leadership over democracy: McLennan, D., and Ross Manzo, W., 2022, *Why Generation Z might not be as 'woke' as most think*, The Hill.
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- ¹¹ On challenging the assumption of a link between university graduation and holding more liberal views: Simon, E., 2022, 'Demystifying the link between higher education and liberal values: A within-siblings analysis of British individuals' attitudes from 1994–2020', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 73(5), pp. 967-984.
- ¹² Kamenova, A., 2023, 'Остава ли българският Северозапад най-бедният регион в страната и в ЕС?', *Българско национално радио*, 6 април 2023 г. ('Does the Bulgarian Northwest remain the poorest region in the country and in the EU?', *Bulgarian National Radio*, 6 April 2023).
24 Chasa, 2023, 'Най-бедната област в България вече е Хасково', 31 януари 2023 г. ('Haskovo is already the poorest region in Bulgaria', 31 January 2023).
- ¹³ For more on reforming Bulgaria's memory politics and history education, see Filipova, R., 2023, 'The Way Forward for Bulgaria's Past Amid Social Division', in *HISTORY UNDONE. Russia's Historical Disinformation, Bulgaria's Memory Politics and Lessons for Dealing with the Past from Central and Eastern Europe*, Institute for Global Analytics.



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