

STAGES OF CHANGE



Attitudes in East and Central Europe 30
Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall

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A woman waves the European flag during a protest against corruption in Bucharest, Romania, on November 26, 2017.

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Executive Summary

The fall of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9, 1989, transformed Europe, bringing down the Iron Curtain and sounding the death knell for Communism in the Soviet Union and the other Communist states of the Eastern Bloc.

Three decades later, European democracies mark the anniversary amid a profound crisis of confidence. The liberal values that effectively vanquished Communism have come under threat from rising populism, and distrust of major institutions has grown.

This short report, based on YouGov research findings and commissioned by the Open Society Foundations, seeks to take the pulse of the countries most affected by the events of 1989. Our study touches, in particular, on how the people of Central and Eastern Europe look back on 1989, as well as how this history remains relevant for democracies and activism, both now and in the future. We pay particular attention to the youngest generation, and on activists today, comparing their views with those of the generation of dissidents operating in 1989.

OUR FINDINGS CAN BE REDUCED TO SEVERAL GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

Firstly, we see an alarming level of distrust among the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe toward government, fed by widespread insecurities regarding the condition of democratic systems, and a prevailing sense of relative deprivation since 1989. It appears that some of the freedoms won in the 1989 revolutions are now under pressure. Trust in the mainstream political system and in the mainstream media is evaporating, and the lure of nationalist-minded parties and authoritarian leaders is growing. These results follow a global trend that can be observed in most Western societies, notably in France, the United Kingdom, and Italy.^{1,2} But this trend is more acute in Central and Eastern Europe, as evidenced in Poland and Hungary, against which the European Union has launched Article 7 proceedings for rule of law violations, and where freedom of speech is shrinking to the point where many express fears of possible government repression.

Yet it seems that parallel to the rise of populism and the coercive political climate, a robust spirit of dissent, and a readiness to challenge those in power, persists. In Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Romania, tens of thousands have joined mass protests against high-level government corruption; Bulgaria has seen a series of protests over the government's appointment of a new prosecutor general; and in Poland, the

last four years of government by the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party have been marked by almost daily demonstrations in Warsaw by both critics and supporters of the government. Even in Hungary, a self-proclaimed bastion of illiberal values, the ruling Fidesz party lost control of Budapest in local elections in October, despite its iron grip on the media and the levers of power. In Berlin, an estimated 270,000 protestors joined Global Climate Strike marches in September. Alongside these events, we observe in our polls that independent of political mobilization, actual civic engagement scores are particularly high in most countries, and represent more than two thirds of their populations. Interestingly, this trend seems to be most pronounced in the East, identified by one commentator as “a new wave of dissidents in the East that can turn back Europe's populist tide.”³

Our results demonstrate that where the establishment has failed citizens, civil society is perceived as a trustworthy counterpart. Indeed, in all of the countries we polled, charities, community organizations, and to some degree NGOs are seen as a force for good—one that should have more scope to criticize the government, and at the same time should remain independent from the state. This is despite strong attacks on major civil society organizations seen in some countries in recent years. A particularly noteworthy finding in this context is that our respondents

almost unanimously endorsed academic institutions as a “force for good,” suggesting that in a post-truth era, citizens may be starting to turn away from the established media in favor of the voices of experts, intellectuals, and scientists.

Our findings also point to the youngest generation, or digital natives (Generation Z), as a very special avant-garde. This generation, which has come of age in a post-recession era, exhibits a remarkable capacity to mobilize effectively, navigate the information landscape, and harness social media. They are confident, feel they can influence change on a large scale, and exhibit a broad embrace of social justice that is significantly more inclusive than their elders' toward ethnic minorities, LGBT groups, refugees, and immigrants. Yet, this is also a generation Central and Eastern Europe stands to lose to a brain drain that is evidently depleting their populations. Finally, we discovered that within this growing youngest generation, women are a voice of reason, and a driver of positive change. Indeed, women are significantly more tolerant and compassionate towards minorities, and are more confident in their capacity to bring about change on a large scale.

1 Pew Research Center, October 15, 2019, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*.

2 https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_2019_European_election

3 Nougayrede, N. (2018), “A New Wave of Dissidents in the East Can Turn Back Europe's Populist Tide,” *The Guardian*, 22.

Introduction

In 2019, the foundations of democracies on both sides of the former Iron Curtain are shaking.

Rising populism, economic inequalities, and a widespread collapse of trust in democratic institutions have raised legitimate concerns. But the Berlin Wall anniversary is also here to remind us that frustration, hardship, and discontent with the status quo can be a driver for essential, often vital, social and political change. These changes are often in the hands of those few who actively participate, resist and fight—with or without fear—for a better future.

On the eve of the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Iron Curtain, we took the pulse of the countries most affected by the events of 1989. We surveyed more than 12,000 people in total in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

We also present a snapshot of the “activist view” as we engaged with face-to-face focus groups made up exclusively of political activists in all of these countries. These focus groups brought together individuals whose

activism stretches back to 1989, as well as younger activists, all from a variety of political backgrounds and allegiances. Our interest in activism today as compared to 1989 is reflected in Open Society’s three decades of commitment to funding civil society groups in all of the target countries except Germany.

In this report, we also look separately at the youngest generation—Generation Z, a new cohort on the rise that already represents almost a fourth of the general population. Recent climate change protests throughout Europe have clearly shown that this generation holds an unprecedented capacity to mobilize around a cause and is ready to initiate change on a large scale. Thus, this report looks at how this generation approaches the legacy of 1989, and the challenges democracies in Central and Eastern Europe face today.

GENERATION BRACKETS ADOPTED IN THE REPORT:

Silent <1927-1946)

Baby Boomers <1946-1965)

Generation X <1965-1981)

Old Millennials <1981-1985)

Young Millennials <1984-1997)

Generation Z <1997-+∞)

“The atmosphere was overwhelming, but there was also a subtle fear of not knowing what was going to happen next.”

-East German activist

THE ACTIVIST VIEW

“It did not have such a big direct impact to us. It was just one stone in the mosaic of switching from communism to democracy.”

-Czech activist

“I learned about the fall of the wall from the news on TV that day. So, the next day we went to see for ourselves and, as a matter of fact, we were expecting this to happen—I had been to the GDR and had seen the empty shelves; the GDR was finished.”

-West German activist

“The fall of the Berlin Wall was a symbolic end of a process that started in our country.”

-Polish activist

“The fall of the Berlin Wall had a good influence on us... we saw that it is possible to remove Communism from our country. We saw that the Russians did not come with their tanks and therefore we had courage to do it ourselves.”

-Romanian activist

In all of our focus groups, half of the members were older, having been activists during the period of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Thus, they were able to speak with some authority on the role of this event in shaping activism. In Germany, this group was split between those who had lived in West and those in East Berlin. For the former, it was an important historical moment but had little impact, while for the latter, it was a moment of enormous significance. In terms of the wider effect of the Berlin Wall, and change over time, the picture is much more mixed.

Firstly, for respondents who lived in Bulgaria at the time of the collapse of Communism, there was an agreement that the fall of the Berlin Wall made very little difference. They felt instead that to see the real end of Communism, they had to wait for the socialist-led cabinet of Zhan Videnov to fall, which took place amid widespread protests in February 1996. Bulgarian respondents did feel, however, that civic organizations were much stronger and

more influential, even if they were still unlikely to make a large difference, due to the lack of great, nationally unifying, causes. There was also the belief that organizations of this kind are in some way manipulated or infiltrated by the state, perhaps in order to sabotage them.

In the same region, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia tell a similar story of the Berlin Wall as significant, but at the same time a part of a wider process in terms of the transition to democracy. In Romania, the violent 1989 revolution against the Ceausescu regime was felt to be much more significant as an expression of people-led power than the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was, after all, ordered by the East German authorities, albeit under the diktat of mounting protests.

Similarly, in Hungary, historical events that preceded the fall of the wall, such as the opening of the border to Austria that summer, were felt. The theme was similar in Poland, where the rise of the Solidarity movement had already taken place by the time the wall fell. Therefore, it was more likely to be seen as part of a chain of events rather than a single catalyst for change. But respondents also talked about how some sections of society in their country were ill-prepared for the transition to capitalism, resulting in increases in unemployment and inequality as well as a more insidious attitude of selfishness and greed. In Slovakia, the fall of the Berlin Wall seems to have been of profound importance, heralding the fall of the Communist government through people-led power affecting sweeping, transformative change to governmental infrastructure. This has not been seen since, although Slovak respondents seem optimistic it could happen one day in the future. By contrast, in the Czech Republic, the appreciation for the fall of the wall's role in the transition was much more muted than that for the Velvet Revolution.

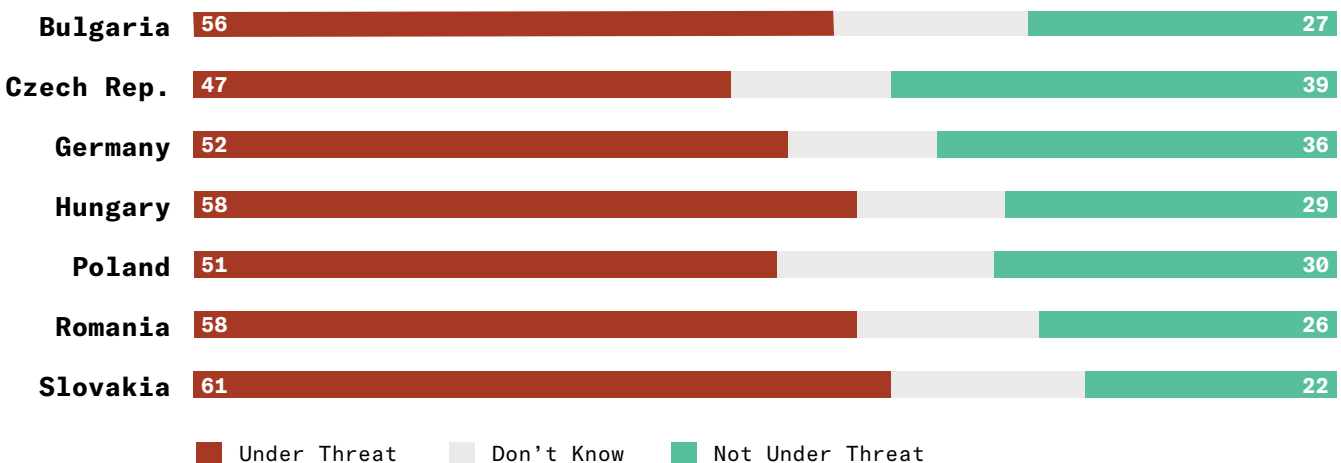
The current perception of democracy: high insecurity and a sense of threat

The results are alarming, as no more than one in four voters over the age of 40 believe the world is a safer place today than it was in 1990.

But security is not the only concern. A majority of respondents reported that they think democracy is under threat in their country, a threat most felt in Slovakia (61%), followed by voters in Hungary (58%), Romania (58%) and Bulgaria (56%). The older, “silent” generation born before 1946 are particularly pessimistic on this question, with 81 percent of respondents in Bulgaria and 63 percent in Poland and Romania holding the view that democracy is under threat. In general, however, the majority of each generation polled (Generation Z 55%, millennials 54%, Generation X 54%, and boomers 56%) shared this view.

The findings show some striking disparities in perceptions regarding whether elections are free and fair in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, in Poland, only around a third (34%) of respondents did not feel that elections were free or fair, despite widespread concerns about the changes to the electoral system introduced by the ruling party, Law and Justice, that have been widely criticized by groups such as Freedom House.⁴ In Hungary, where media coverage during election campaigns is heavily biased against the opposition,⁵ only around half of respondents said that voting is not free and fair (52%). Remarkably, around a fifth of Ger-

DO YOU THINK DEMOCRACY IS UNDER THREAT IN YOUR COUNTRY?



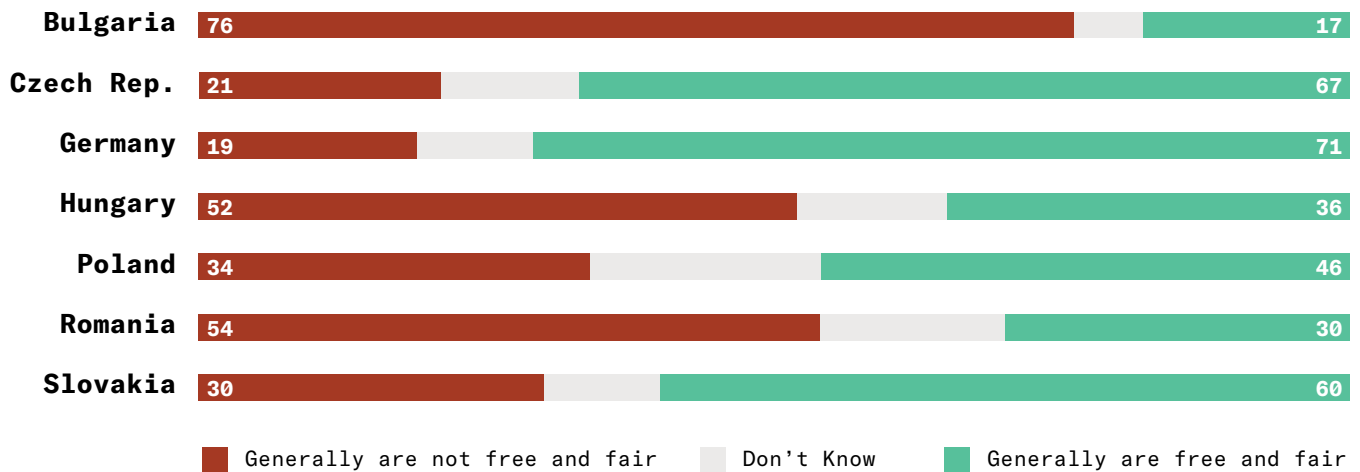
“It is difficult to influence anything. The idea that you can change something is false. We have fake democracy.”

-Polish activist

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/poland>

⁵ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/02/07/why-the-media-helps-make-hungarian-elections-so-predictable>

DO YOU THINK ELECTIONS ARE GENERALLY FREE AND FAIR IN YOUR COUNTRY?



"We vote but I do not trust the results."

-Romanian activist

mans did not think elections are free or fair despite evidently high rankings notably on the Electoral Integrity Scale.⁶ Attitudes were most negative in Bulgaria, where over three-quarters of the respondents did not think elections were free and fair. Negative perceptions of the freedom and fairness of the election process for Bulgaria and Romania are consistent with ratings of the transparency of the election process for these countries. In general, these results overall support other findings that Central and Eastern Europeans generally endorse democratic values but display concern about the future functioning of their political systems.⁷

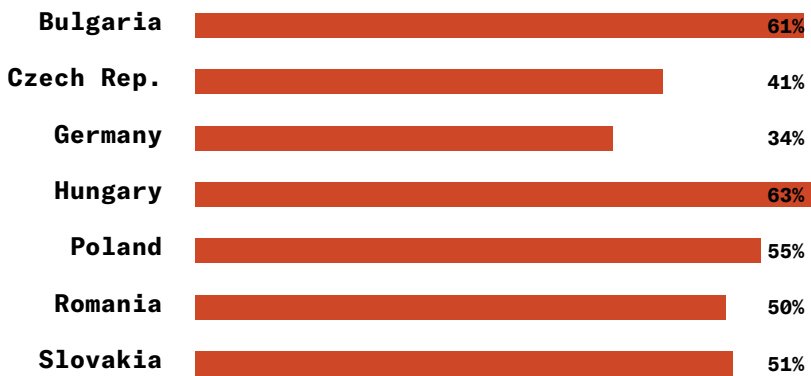
RULE OF LAW

In every country, more than 60 percent of respondents polled (and half of respondents in Germany) considered the rule of law to be under threat. The figures were highest in Bulgaria (74%), followed by Slovakia (70%), Romania (68%) and Poland (64%). The slightly lower number for Hungary (59%) is despite the government being the target of legal action by the European Commission over breaches of the rule of law guarantees of the EU founding treaty (also the case in Poland). Interestingly, the younger generation overall expressed great concern about democratic values in their country, also including the generally optimistic youngest Generation Z, with nearly half (49%) still saying that the rule of law is under threat.

⁶ <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com>

⁷ Pew Research Center, October 15, 2019, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*.

IF YOU WERE TO CRITICIZE YOUR COUNTRY'S GOVERNMENT IN PUBLIC, DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD SUFFER NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES IN YOUR LIFE?



“A friend of mine said to me, that she completely agrees with what I was saying on the internet but she is not brave enough to send a ‘like.’”

-Hungarian activist

FEAR OF REPRESSION

In Hungary, almost two thirds of respondents reported that they feared negative consequences if they criticized the government in public, which is the highest of any country polled. The responses may reflect the influence of the ruling Fidesz party's extensive patronage networks that extend across the government, the private sector, academia, and the cultural sphere.⁸

Nearly half of the people surveyed in Romania (50%), Bulgaria (47%), and Poland (48%) think that their freedom to protest is under threat despite the vigorous public protests taking place in all three countries over the past year. In general, younger people are the most apprehensive about their freedom. A majority of Generation Z respondents reported a sense that their freedom of speech is at threat in their country (52%).

“I intended to sign an endorsement of a candidate I was supporting, but I was afraid to provide my personal data since I did not know what they might do with it. I was afraid to sign.”

-Romanian activist

Comparison of respondents' current economic situation with 1989

The shift to a free market economy after 1989 is generally believed to have been positive, with more than half of the respondents in two out of the seven countries rating the free market as a change for the good for their country.

But support is less than overwhelming. Our survey found that around half those surveyed in Poland (52%) hold this view, where support is the highest, while only a small minority (12%) reported that a free market economy has been bad for the country overall. These numbers compare to the findings of the recent Pew survey,⁹ which found that 85 percent of respondents in Poland approved of the change from Communism to the market economy, while only 8 percent disapproved—the stronger numbers possibly reflecting the direct comparison with Communism in Pew's questioning. In Bulgaria, more than a third of respondents (39%) felt that the shift to the free market economy was bad for the country. In the Pew survey, Bulgarians were similarly unhappy, with 34 percent saying they disapproved of the shift to the market economy.

Overall, the pattern of support versus scepticism in the former Communist countries maps the economic improvements seen in the relevant countries with support for the free market higher in countries that are doing the best economically (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) and lower in Romania and Bulgaria. Slovakia is something of an outlier. The

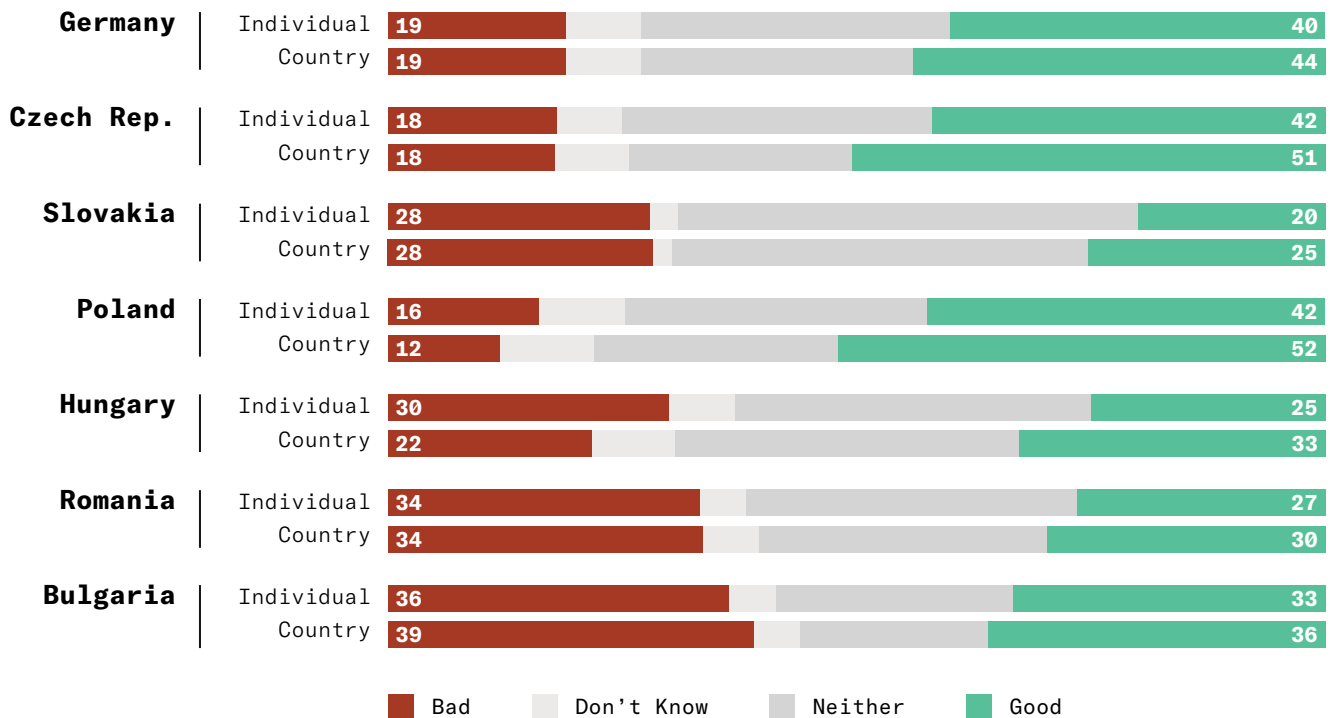
country has the second highest GDP per head of the group¹⁰ (\$33,917 in 2018 according to World Bank data) after the Czech Republic (\$39,743) and ahead of Poland (\$31,342), Hungary (\$30,673), Romania (\$28,206), and Bulgaria (\$21,960). But Slovak respondents showed deep scepticism about the benefits of the market economy, with only a quarter of respondents describing it as good for the country. This may reflect the popular anxieties over high-level corruption involving big business that fuelled an outpouring of antigovernment protests in 2018 following the assassination of a young anticorruption journalist, Jan Kuciak and his girlfriend Martina Kusnirova.

There are some striking shifts in how individuals in the former Communist states view the impact of the market economy on themselves personally, versus the impact on the country as a whole. Poland and the Czech Republic, the strongest economic performers, reveal the most upbeat views on the question with 42 percent and 40 percent of respondents respectively stating that the free market has been good for them. But this is below the percentages who thought it was good for the country. Once again, Slovaks are the

⁹ Pew Research Center, October 15, 2019, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*.

¹⁰ World Bank, International Comparison Program database. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations>

DO YOU THINK THE FREE MARKET ECONOMY HAS BEEN GOOD OR BAD?



“Corruption is killing us.”

-Bulgarian activist

most skeptical, with only 20 percent agreeing that they have personally benefited from the market economy despite the country’s comparatively strong economic performance. This sense of relative deprivation appears in many aspects, with the Berlin Wall generation (those now over 40) in particular expressing bitterness about how the free market economy has failed to address their hopes and aspirations. There is also a clear high level of ambivalence here as between a third and a half of voters responded “don’t know.”

Everywhere apart from Hungary, respondents under the age of 40 were more likely to believe that the market economy had benefited the country as a whole, compared to respondents over the age of 40. Apart from in Romania, under-40s were also more likely to believe that the market economy has benefited people like them than those over 40 years of age.

In general, it seems that there are interesting variations when it comes to the extent to which respondents approached their feeling of economic hardship. Not surprisingly, people’s feeling of deprivation is relative to the reference group against which they compared their own situation. Consistent disparities in respondents’ assessment of the extent to which the free market economy benefited the country overall versus people like them perhaps reflect how that country’s internal economic inequalities may have also determined how they evaluated the economic achievements of their country in the last 30 years.

“The people agree that generally we belong to the better part of the globe but compared with the countries of Europe we are poor.”

-Bulgarian activist

For countries like Bulgaria and Romania, however, it seems that a sense of

deprivation also emerged in comparison to other EU member-states, not only in the comparison to their own economic condition before 1989. The Western European reference group may also play an important role in Slovakia.

German respondents' assessment of their economic situation is interesting in this context. Remarkably, less than half of Germans (44%) think that the free market economy has been overall good for their country. This may be an expression of resentment

towards costly economic measures that have benefited other member states to the relative disadvantage of their own country. Indeed, issues such as membership in the Eurozone, as well as Germany's role in providing state assistance to other members of the European Union, remain divisive in Germany. It should be noted, however, that this response was not broken down according to whether or not the respondents were living in the Communist East before the wall fell.

“We participated in the events of 1989, hoping that things would be better for us. But now things don't look good. The country is beset by failure and poverty.”

-Bulgarian activist

THE ACTIVIST VIEW

In our focus groups, an issue that emerged concerned the growing inequality between the rich and the poor. There seemed to be a link between the issue of corruption and inequality as it was perceived that those in power were able to “feather their own nests” at the expense of working people. There was also a sense among the groups that the problem is not dissipating over time, but is actually getting worse. In Romania, and to some extent in Bulgaria, the issue was with poverty in a more general sense, with issues like the very poor standard of life and public service provisions, which have led to high levels of emigration. It should be noted that this view reflects the fact that Romania and Bulgaria have indeed the highest poverty rates and lowest per capita income from all member-states; inequalities that constitute an evident challenge to these countries, in spite of poverty alleviation efforts both at the national and European level.¹

In their responses, activists reflected on various issues and estimated how much progress they felt had been made on them in the past, along with how much optimism they had that things would change for the better in the future. Often, they indicated that not enough had been done, and that there was still much more to do. There was, of course, variation across the issues and by country. For example, respondents felt that there had been a lot of good work done on equality of women, workers, and for LGBT people. But they stated that there was still much to be done on many public service issues, such as housing and education. With the issue of climate change, there was universal agreement that not enough has been done, allied with a worry that it may now be too late. This corresponds with other studies conducted across Europe and the growing feeling that more action should be taken to protect our environment even at the expense of economic growth.²

¹ Dobrescu, P., & Durach, F. (2019). “Unable to Stop Inequality from Rising: Evidence from Romania.” *In Development in Turbulent Times* (pp. 89-101). Springer, Cham.

² https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_2019_european_election

A crisis of trust?

Our quantitative findings reflect that a majority of respondents have a high-level of scepticism about government trustworthiness, combined with a frequent distrust of “mainstream media.”

The highest level of distrust in government information was reported in Slovakia (72%), Romania (70%), Bulgaria (69%) and Hungary (63%). Even in Germany, almost half of the respondents said they did not trust the mainstream media (48%), and just over half said they did not trust government statements (51%).

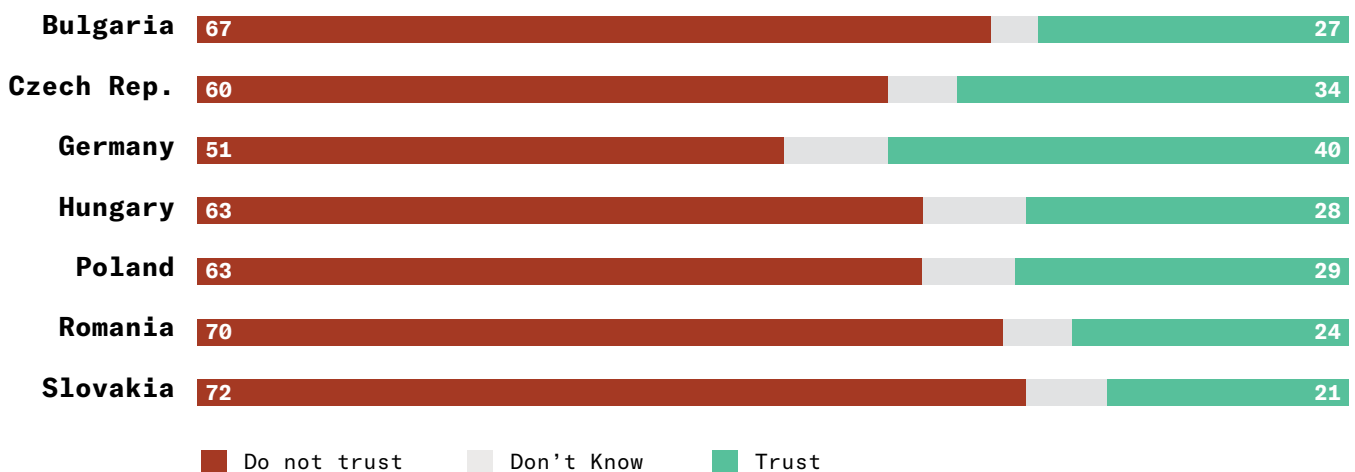
Overall, distrust in the mainstream media outweighs distrust in government media in many countries. Young people are more skeptical than older people about whether the media will still be able to criticize the government in 10 years. Slovakia is the only country where young people are more hopeful about the future of the free media than older people. In most countries, older people (over 40s), who remember the fall of the Berlin Wall, are more likely to say that media

coverage has got better in the last 30 years.

SCEPTICISM AND DISTRUST: THE CRITICAL CITIZEN?

Our findings are mostly consistent with other more fine-grained results demonstrating a plurality of trust towards government and mainstream media,¹¹ and which raise legitimate questions on the factual trustworthiness of major institutions and agenda-setting entities. In this context, the work of Pippa Norris,¹² comparing levels of trust relative to trustworthiness of major institutions, is very timely. These comparisons reflect that in general, the trust level found also in our polls corresponds to actual good governance levels, with lowest scores for Bulgaria and Romania and highest for Germany and Poland.

TO WHAT EXTENT, IF AT ALL, DO YOU TRUST THE NEWS YOU RECEIVE FROM YOUR COUNTRY'S GOVERNMENT?



“People would rather get involved in local community associations and activities, than in more political ones.”

-East German activist

¹¹ https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_2.pdf

¹² <https://trustgov.net/trustgov-blog>

Nevertheless, in our study, even though the distribution is similar, the level of distrust observed in the Eastern countries polled is exceptionally high as compared to other surveys and may be qualified as a general and actually alarming collapse of trust towards

mainstream information sources, including the government, that goes beyond mere scepticism or balanced criticism. This tendency may also reflect the corrosive impact of Russian disinformation campaigns and interference in European democracies.¹³

Civil Society

FORCES FOR THE GOOD

Our survey assessed levels of support for a range of non-governmental groups and organizations that together compose what is commonly described as civil society.

Our survey assessed levels of support for a range of non-governmental groups and organizations that together compose what is commonly described as civil society. We asked whether these groups should be allowed to criticize the government, and whether they should or should not be more regulated. Support for these organizations is being severely challenged in some of the polled countries, where non-state actors have come under sustained attack, most notably in Hungary and Poland. In spite of a political climate that is undermining civil society organizations, public support remains strong, especially when it comes to the protection of these institutions' independence from the state. A majority of people took the stand that these organizations should not be more regulated, and that they should be free to criticize the government.

“Non-profit organizations often stand in for the role of the state in helping the socially disadvantaged.”

-Slovak activist

Indeed, 72 percent of Bulgarians and 70 percent of Poles think that NGOs and charities should be allowed to criticize the government, followed by 66 percent of Romanians, 64 percent of Germans and Slovaks and still a majority of Hungarians (55%) and half of Czechs. What is more, the majority of Poles, Bulgarians, and Hungarians think that civil societies should NOT be more regulated and should NOT be more controlled by government.

We have also looked more broadly at people's approach to other non-state institutions and discovered that support for academic institutions was extremely high across all of the polled countries. A majority of respondents declared that academic institutions should be allowed to criticize the government with 82 percent of Bulgarians, 74 percent of Germans, 73 percent of Slovaks, 72 percent of Czechs, 71 percent of Hungarians, 71 percent of Poles, and 70 percent of Romanians expressing this view. The results for Hungary are noteworthy, especially in the current political context, where Fidesz is trying to limit the freedoms of

¹³ https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russian_cyber_sins_and_storms

academic institutions. Again, this polling demonstrated clearly that Hungarians disagree with these moves.

In general, respondents have endorsed charities as the major force for good in their country (66%). The most enthusiastic was the youngest generation, with 86 percent of Generation Z in Slovakia thinking charities are a force for good. This figure for Generation Z is 80 percent in Bulgaria, 79 percent in Poland, 70 percent in the Czech Republic, 65 percent in Romania, 61 percent in Germany, and 60 percent in Hungary.

“It is sad that we are the only country in Europe where people pay health care contributions, and additionally have to take part in fund raising drives for medical equipment.”

-Polish activist

Results are especially noteworthy for Poland in the context of the dramatic events that have shaken the country this year, with the public assassination of the mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz, stabbed on stage during a yearly charity event in Poland. The assassination of Adamowicz was preceded by a widespread hate campaign that included harsh attacks by the government, aimed at Adamowicz and fundraising for a charity.

NGOs and non-state actors are increasingly exposed to political assault¹⁴ and smear campaigns, yet only 13 percent of respondents in all countries believe NGOs are a negative force. Furthermore, trust in NGOs has risen over the past year according to the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer.

“Nonprofit organizations solve these issues, like delivering support for people with disabilities, and providing hospice care, much better than government.”

-Czech activist

In contrast, political parties have been rated as a negative force by nearly half of respondents in all countries (44%).

In general, our findings show a high level of support for civil society groups. But support also comes with greater expectations. When we additionally asked our respondents whether they felt civil society groups were interested in issues that ordinary people care about, results showed that apart from Hungary, where 50 percent responded positively, less than half of respondents in Bulgaria (48%), Romania (41%), Germany (40%), Poland (40%), Czech Republic (36%), and Slovakia (35%) believed civil society organizations were focused on issues they cared about.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY

Majorities of respondents in Bulgaria (73%), Romania (62%) and Hungary (53%), and significant minorities in Slovakia (48%), Poland (40%), Germany (32%) and the Czech Republic (30%) believe it is difficult for people to live the life they want to, regardless of background, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

Our findings might suggest that there is a very high concern for social justice across all of the countries surveyed, with more than two-thirds of the respondents in favor of greater government support and protection for the elderly, children, the unemployed, and people with disabilities. However,

this contrasted sharply, although perhaps not surprisingly, with the widespread general conviction, shared by nearly two-thirds of the population across all countries, that immigrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, and LGBT groups are receiving sufficient government support.

Indeed, over three-quarters of people in virtually every country thought the government should do more to protect old people and people with disabilities. Bulgaria was more likely than other countries to say that government should be doing more to protect older people, with 93 percent agreeing with this statement.

“Anti-migrant propaganda is forced on us everywhere. We have to see it and hear it all the time, it is like brainwashing. Eventually, regular people believe it.”

-Hungarian activist

In contrast, only around a quarter or fewer respondents think the government should be doing more to protect immigrants. The highest support for immigrants was reported in Poland but even there just 27 percent of people think they should be protected. Less than 10 percent of people (9%) in the Czech Republic thought the government should be doing more to protect immigrants. Similarly, there is not significant support for the government doing more to protect refugees. Again, government help had the most support in Poland (26%) though that is still only a quarter of the population. In Hungary, less than a quarter thought the government should be doing more to support refugees (22%) and just 13 percent in the Czech Republic. People in Poland (35%) and Hungary (31%) were most likely to think the government should be doing more to protect ethnic minorities.

LGBT groups were not an exception. Support for the government doing more to protect LGBT people is highest in Poland (38%) and Germany (31%) and lowest in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Only 13 percent of people think that the government should be doing more to protect LGBT people in the Czech Republic, which was the lowest of any country polled. Among the former Eastern Bloc nations, Czechs are the most tolerant regarding same-sex marriage and homosexuality, and the government there is considering a law legalizing same-sex marriage. The low results for this group thus suggest that the Czechs are expressing a strong demand for better government protection of traditionally marginalized groups such as the unemployed, the elderly, and the disabled, as compared to the progress achieved on LGBT rights.

Altogether, these findings reveal an interesting dichotomy regarding which groups should be more protected, and which ones shouldn't. The results seem to reveal an approach to social justice that is clearly demanding higher protection of one's own group, as opposed to readiness to engage more for "others" for whom the polled respondents clearly think the government has done enough.

“Civil society is a dirty phrase because the government has made it so.”

-Hungarian activist

THE ACTIVIST VIEW

Generally, participants understood the term “open society” and that it meant a tolerant, accepting culture where different values and backgrounds are welcomed. They did not feel, however, that this was a current description of the countries where they live. Slovakian respondents in particular felt that it was a much more closed and conservative society, and Poles felt it was becoming less open and tolerant. In Romania, the term “open society”

was understood to be much more about freedom to travel and freedom of expression. The latter was also touched on in the Czech group, where there were concerns about having to be politically correct. Again, Bulgaria was slightly different in that they seemed to wholeheartedly appreciate this ideal, and yet they felt prevented from espousing these values due to the present government.

The new cohort

DIGITAL NATIVES

Digital natives (Generation Z) emerge as a particularly interesting avant-garde. They counter the dominant “doom and gloom” by displaying a strong activism and a sense of capacity to influence change on a large scale, combined with a broad approach to social justice that is significantly more inclusive of ethnic minorities, LGBT groups, refugees, and immigrants than their elders’. They are twice as likely as baby boomers to think that the government should do more to protect immigrants. While they are more critical of the establishment and seem the most concerned about the future of democracy, they also happen to value the achievements of 1989 more than their elders, with young people in Romania leading the way. Recent polls conducted by the

Pew Research Center confirm their strong belief that the shift to a market economy was good for their country, and that changes that have taken place over the last 30 years have been good for ordinary people.¹⁵ Consistent with our findings, it has also been observed that this generation has more positive attitudes towards Muslims and homosexuality than their older counterparts.¹⁶

The generally optimistic and trustful nature of this generation,¹⁷ widely described in recent, extended surveys conducted worldwide, seems to have been challenged by the current political climate in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, in our polls, Generation Z shows the greatest concern about the condition of their democracies, notably concerning threat to

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, October 15, 2019, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*.

¹⁶ <https://www.austausch.org/news-details/the-generation-of-transition-in-eastern-europe-a-generation-of-uncertainty-a-generation-of-distrust-1787/>

¹⁷ https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2018-08/ipsos_-_beyond_binary_-_the_lives_and_choices_of_gen_z.pdf

the rule of law. In Poland, more than 7 out of 10 Gen Z respondents believe that the rule of law is under threat in their country followed by more than two-thirds in Bulgaria and Romania, and more than half of Gen Z in the Czech Republic. Less than half Gen Z respondents were concerned in Germany and Slovakia, where governance is generally highly rated. This was also the case in Hungary, where rule of law violations should raise most concern.

“How we feel about living here depends on aspect you focus on. When you wake up in the morning and go to work that you have—it is good to live here, but if you think about the political and economic situation, I’m worried about it.”

-Polish activist

GENERATION Z AND THE MEDIA

Generation Z spend nearly nine hours a day on media and communication, and a third of this time is spent communicating. Interestingly, this time does not hinder other activities, as the digital natives are not less engaged in other activities than their older counterparts; they have simply developed the ability to do things simultaneously. There is a widespread concern over the way social media, gaming, and the digital sourcing of information may impact the youngest generation’s ability to participate in public and civic life. Yet recent studies seem to suggest that the impeding impact of virtual reality on actual participation in the real world has mostly touched on the first digital generation—young Millennials—than on the following, youngest generation. Indeed, Generation Z rarely rely on a single source of information, and seek to gather information from a great variety of sources instead. This generation has more capacity than the older generations to diversify

and triangulate information, which has been linked with their potentially greater resilience to disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories.¹⁸ Moreover, this generation is densely networked, and as the recent Global Climate Strikes demonstrate, they can display a remarkable capacity to mobilize around a cause quickly and effectively.

Altogether, the ease with which this generation navigates the information landscape, and harnesses social media, paired with a relatively unbiased and open culture and concern for the condition of democracy and the planet in general, make them a hopeful driver of change. It seems that they are confident they actually can bring about change. In our survey, we find that, apart from Romania and Poland, in most countries Generation Z has a stronger belief that they have more opportunities to influence change on a large scale than other generations did, with Czech youth leading the way. Czech youth are also outstandingly optimistic regarding their political power. Indeed, more than 7 out of 10 Generation Z youth believe they have more say in politics than previous generations.

YOUNG WOMEN LEAD THE WAY

When we looked closer at Generation Z, we observed a general trend, where women appeared most open to diversity, and most optimistic about their power to bring about change on a large scale.

Women from Generation Z display a more inclusive sense of social justice than their male counterparts. This is especially pronounced in their support for greater protection of LGBT groups and ethnic minorities by the government. As much as 51 percent of

Generation Z women think that LGBT groups should be more protected, against only 31 percent of men. Along the same lines, 40 percent of women and 33 percent of men from this generation think ethnic minorities should be more protected. Similarly, 38 percent of young women from this generation think refugees should be more protected, while only 24 percent of men share this view. The same trend is observed towards immigrants: 37 percent of Generation Z women compared to 27 percent of men.

Young women from Generation Z are also more optimistic than men when they are comparing their current situation with the situation of people in their country 30 years ago. Two-thirds of women (66%), feel they have in general more opportunities now than people in 1990, with just half of Generation Z men sharing this view. More

than half of Generation Z women think they have more opportunities than 30 years ago to have their say in politics (53%), as compared to a minority of young men (46%). Women are also more optimistic about their opportunities to influence change on a large scale (47%) than men (39%).

The observed gender trend also reflects a core focus of Generation Z in defining and manifesting their individual identity. In a sense, this Generation mirrors an identity dilemma also relevant for Central and Eastern Europe in general. On the one side, a nativist reactionary trend, against a dilution of national identity, and resenting the past 30 years as a race towards being a copycat of the West; on the other, a force embracing multiculturalism, pluralism, and openness to others, where civil and individual liberties are seen as progress.

“The quality of public participation in social and political matters will only worsen in the coming years.”

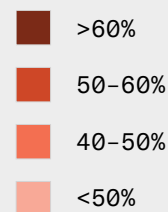
-Hungarian activist

THE ACTIVIST VIEW

An important issue raised by focus groups is political polarization, which was mentioned in Germany in particular. Participants felt that this issue is becoming more and more of a problem, fuelled not only by sensationalist reporting in the media, but also due to people increasingly relying on the

bubbles of their like-minded social media networks. In Poland, they discussed an autocratic and right-wing government that they feel is fuelling populism through propaganda, making polite and reasoned political discourse impossible.

HOW WORRIED, IF AT ALL, ARE YOU ABOUT THE IMPACT OF PEOPLE LEAVING YOUR COUNTRY TO LIVE ABROAD?



Greater fear of emigration than immigration?

“I cannot emigrate, but I hope my child will do it.”

-Bulgarian activist

Sadly, this new cohort of energetic, tolerant, and educated young women may not necessarily become the driver for change in their own country. Central and Eastern European countries may lose this generation to emigration. In every country polled, apart from Germany, around half or more of the public are worried about an evidently depleting brain drain. Around two thirds of the population of Romania (67%), Bulgaria (65%), and Hungary (62%) are concerned about people leaving their countries to live abroad. This is especially the case for the oldest generation, with 87 percent in Bulgaria, 78 percent in Poland, 64 percent in Hungary, and 61 percent in the Czech Republic falling into this group. Millennials in Slovakia are particularly worried about the effects of emigration, with more than two-thirds of respondents (70%) expressing this view.

According to a major poll conducted this year before the European Parliament elections by the European Council on Foreign Relations, voters in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania were revealed to be more concerned about people leaving their country than coming in. This was despite efforts by nationalist parties to frame the European Parliament elections as a referendum on migration.

Democracy, civic engagement, and activism

In all the countries polled. More than two-thirds of the population in general have reported participation in at least one form of civic activity within the last 12 months.¹⁹

Slovakia is leading the way with more than 7 out of 10 citizens engaged in civic activities. Germany is the lowest, where about half of the population was engaged. It should be noted, however, that “doing democracy” in Germany involves a larger scope of possible participation, notably through active and inclusive political engagement. Noteworthy in this context is the particularly active group of young, green voters, with 87 percent of them actively engaged civically. Generally, in every country younger citizens were significantly more likely to engage than the more elderly, and were more likely to be women.

“A national outrage can make people come together to protest, as they did in Slovakia after the killing of the two young people.”

-Slovak activist

What differentiated civically active participants from those who did not engage was a stronger concern for democratic values. In all the countries polled, a consistent majority of active participants declared that democracy was under threat in their country, yet this view was consistently in the minority among those who did not report any civic activity in the past 12 months. Similarly, across all the countries, civically active participants were considerably more worried that the rule of law was under threat than the

civically inactive groups. Except from Slovakia, civically engaged citizens were also more worried about freedom of speech being under threat in their country.

“A lot of young people joined the 2012 protests against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement because they wanted open access to the internet. It was important for them, so they took to the streets.”

-Polish activist

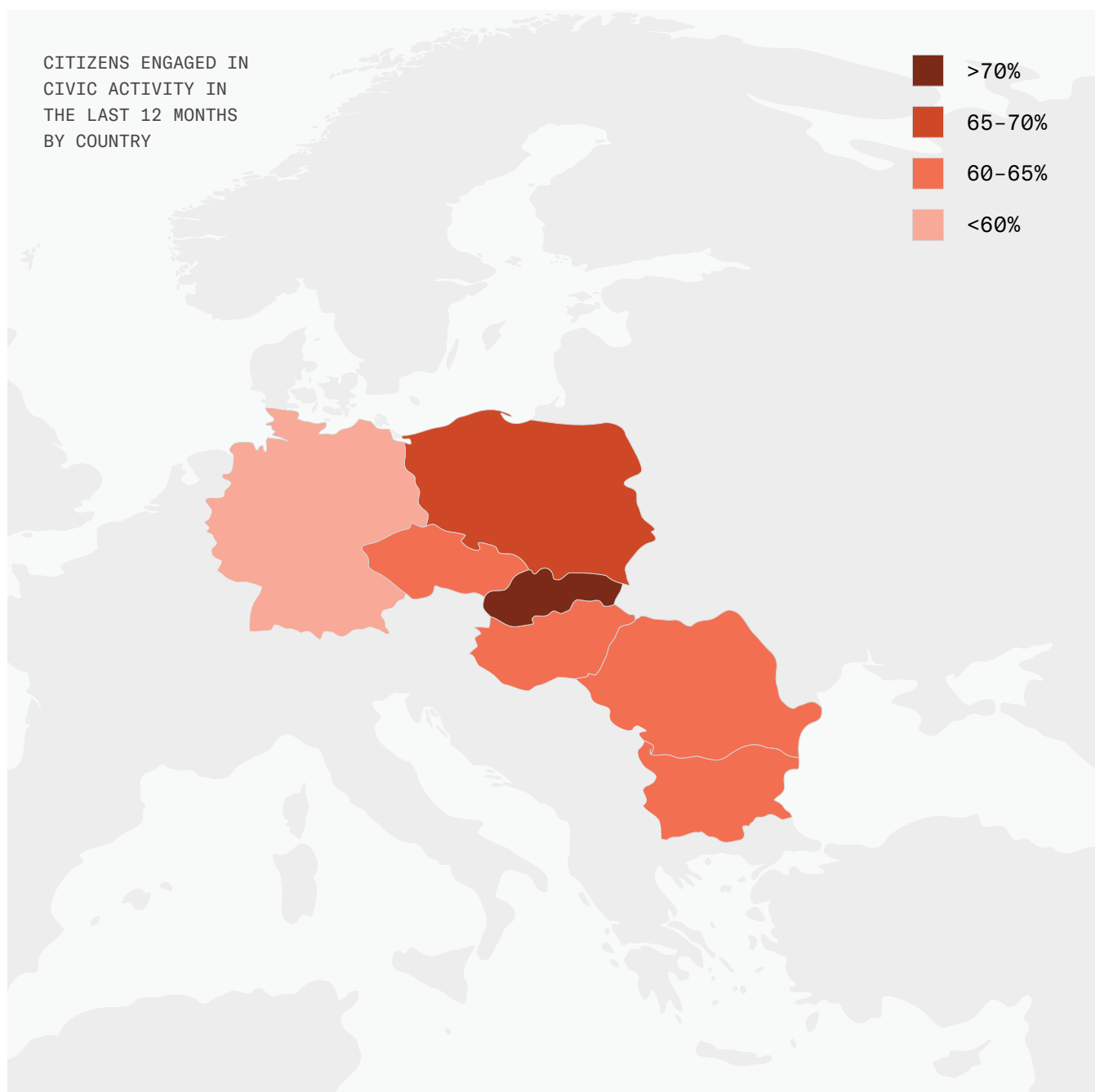
A profile of the civically engaged citizen emerges from the findings: a watchdog of democratic values, acting more in the spirit of dissent than in tandem with the establishment, evidently more represented by women than men, and coming from the East. Our quantitative results clearly challenge the narrative of the rise of right-wing nationalist groups across the region. While they are clearly a concern, they represent a minority, and are outnumbered within the most active part of the population. This corresponds to results from recent polls conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations, where respondents were far more worried about economic performance and corruption than about immigration. Climate change also emerged as a major concern; a majority of the polled member states supported the introduction of measures to protect the environment,

¹⁹ Activities included: taking part in a protest, march or rally, writing a blog or article about a particular cause or issue, signing a petition, donating to charity, contacting an elected official for a specific issue or cause, boycotting a company's product or service due to your belief or their practices and becoming a member of a charitable or political organization

even at the cost of impacting economic growth.

This readiness to dissent has driven a sustained wave of protests in defense of democratic values in the former Eastern Bloc over recent months. In the Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia, tens of thousands of people have joined mass protests against high-level government corruption—while Bulgaria has seen a series of protests over the government’s

appointment of a new prosecutor general. In Poland, the last four years of government by the conservative PiS party have been marked by almost daily demonstrations in Warsaw, by both critics and supporters of the government. And in Berlin itself, an estimated 270,000 protestors joined the Global Climate Strike marches in September.



“Our government will listen and even respond to popular protests, but only if they are sufficiently large scale.”

-Bulgarian activist

THE ACTIVIST VIEW

Across the focus groups of activists, there was a general mood of pessimism about both the opportunity for and potential impact of people-led change, although this did vary by country, with those in Poland and Bulgaria seemingly most optimistic.

In other countries, however, there was a much more fatalistic attitude, with a predominant belief that the people are powerless and that national governments hold all the cards despite some recent political advances by government critics.

For example, in Slovakia, the group felt that the government does not listen to the people and that unions are weak, despite the public protests that forced the resignation of the country’s prime minister, Robert Fico. Similarly, in Romania, participants did not feel empowered to make changes, due to an opaque and corrupt political system, this again despite mass protests against corruption and the jailing of the PSD political boss Liviu Dragnea in May of this year.

In Hungary, there was a feeling of scepticism that the general public can bring about large-scale change. A lack of persistence and cohesion were cited as reasons for mobilization of this kind being seen as ineffective. Interestingly, respondents also cited a lack of leadership with a lack of charismatic personalities to involve and mobilize the masses. These views perhaps reflect recent failures in challenging the government by Budapest liberals, who protested against the government’s closure of Central European University in 2018, and by the union movement, which failed to persuade the government to repeal new labor laws dubbed by critics as the “slave laws” and were perceived to benefit foreign investors and significantly erode workers’ rights.

This was also mentioned in Germany, with Greta Thunberg cited as a good example. In the Czech group, there was simply a pessimism that the people can really bring about change directly, as well as a focus on electing “better politicians” in order for change to come about. In Bulgaria, there was a markedly different tone, with a belief that people-led power can effect change, and that this has often taken place locally. To do so on a larger scale, however, respondents felt that greater public buy-in will be needed, which could perhaps be achieved through widening the reach of the call to action. Broadly speaking, those in the Polish group were also optimistic, but with the caveat that, often, campaigners do not fully understand the issues that they are fighting for, which can lead to their protests being unsuccessful.

A common thread across all of the groups seems to concern how alternatives to the status quo are presented and “sold” to the public. The example of Brexit was raised in the Czech Republic and Hungary as an example of when people vote against something (EU membership) without being clear exactly what they are specifically voting for. By better presenting alternatives to current systems, it is possible that more people will come on board. The role of the internet was also mentioned, with the Hungarian group reporting that it can be used to spread the message effectively, but that it can also benefit one’s political opponents, as those that use it most effectively have the upper hand. The issue of technology did come up in the Bulgarian group as well, at a later point, with a discussion on how social media can dampen civil activity because of the more “passive character of expression.”

“PEOPLE-LED POWER” AND HOW IT HAS CHANGED OVER TIME

Across all the focus groups of activists, there was a palpable perception that civic activism has lessened over time in all of these countries in recent years. Many countries cited political apathy, with older people in the groups seeing that, over time, young people are less interested in politics than they used to be. This is considered to be compounded in certain countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania, by emigration.

Possibly a more prevalent view, however, was that the decline in activism is not caused by apathy but by a sense that activism will be ineffective. Again, there were multiple reasons for this. In Slovakia, for example, there is a perceived lack of cohesion, which limits people’s ability to mobilize, as well as a political system set up in order to disrupt mobilization. Perhaps the most pessimism was found in Romania, where participants seemed deflated about the process of politics and generally felt that the best way to effect change was not for people to mobilize, but rather for politicians to be threatened with punishment for not upholding the law.

In some countries, like the Czech Republic, there was a sense that the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall had resulted in the growth of bureaucracy and the decrease in democracy in those areas, which is, in some ways, a regression to how things used to be. Rather than encouraging activism, this situation seemed to hamper it. As an example, some reported that referendums had been held on both local and national levels, but that the results had not been implemented by politicians, leading to more widespread distrust of the system.

In Bulgaria, there were a number of issues at play, but one issue the group dealt with was the extent to which civic activism is measurable as it is not just about protests in the streets, but also the use of digital communication and organizing. Related to this, activism and the causes fought for are more diffuse and less focused, and, again, touching on an earlier point, these do not always present clear alternatives like a neat, binary choice.

In Slovakia, there was also the sense that, since the fall of Communism, activism has diminished, and with it, optimism has fallen. There was also a feeling that activism is on the rise, but with smaller, more

local issues where people think a difference can be made with more ease. This was also the case in Poland, where they feel much more able to influence decisions that are made locally—for example, with fundraising and public meetings. However, “barriers” exist when trying to roll this out at a national level, related to distrust in politicians and the system, as well as concerns about democratic accountability. In Germany, there seemed to be an appetite for it, a belief that it was possible, but with an annoyance at a lack of meaningful progress.

INCREASING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVISM

There was an agreement across the groups that more civic activism would be welcome in their countries, but that this will be easier for some than others. A sense of apathy and individualism was mentioned in Poland and Hungary, where young people are felt to be too self-centered—they need a reminder of the struggle that activists of the past faced while fighting for a righteous cause. In Slovakia, there was definitely a feeling of the opportunity to mobilize young people by educating them about the role of activism and giving them a strong moral grounding. This was also the case with Romania, where there was a feeling for a need to drive a “pure civic urge.” In Bulgaria, it was suggested those most suited to activism are former emigrants who are now coming back to the country, as they have some experience of how to do things differently. Again, Germany was the “odd one out” in that, due to high living standards they felt there was little to protest about.

This research shows that there is a surprisingly fatalistic and defeatist attitude about the appetite for, and impacts of, widespread civic activism, particularly bearing in mind the fact that the research audience was made up of activists themselves.

But what seemed to unite all of the groups was that the older participants wanted the younger ones to understand they had been through a time of profound political upheaval and understand it in the light of the role civic activism and the vital difference this had made. They argued that young activists need to have a much more empathetic connection to older activists, who fought for enormous goals after the fall of the Berlin Wall, including the future political direction of their countries and their places in the world.

By contrast, participants report that much of their current activism is smaller in scale, more local and more outreach-focused, without such grand ambitions. This is significant, and it may be both a cause and effect of their feeling that it is impossible to persuade their often corrupt and self-interested ruling elites to effect change on the people's behalf. Perhaps climate change—an issue that concerns the entire planet—will mobilize activists to surmount these obstacles.

It is true to say that activism today has not reached the great heights that it did in 1989, but at the same time, there is a sense that this activism has shifted to a more local level. It is less about mass mobilization and more a battle for “hearts and minds,” often fought digitally and over the longer term. With the right triggers—a unifying cause, convincing leadership and the belief that it's possible to make a difference—it is more than possible that people in the former Eastern Bloc can once again feel empowered about how activism can change their countries for the better.

At the same time, they are not giving up altogether on other freedoms that were gained after 1989. For example, engagement in protest and petition is still high, and the belief that people today can influence large-scale change still holds.

The polled countries are not unique. Even in advanced economies, the effects of the 2008 downturn and political responses are now manifesting. The mainstream is paying a price— and needs to recalibrate its offer to voters. There is considerable hope and optimism borne from these results: people are engaging with their freedoms, they are worried about their future, and they want positive change.

Conclusion

The findings of this survey suggest that the countries polled are now in a dark and dangerous state, beset by fears for the future of democracy, freedom, and security.

This reinforces the widespread perceptions reflected in contemporary media coverage of the region, as well as some of the negative findings of the Pew Research Center's expansive recent survey, *European Public Opinion Three Decades after the Fall of Communism*.²⁰ Evidently all this together constitutes fertile ground for the rise of populism and an illiberal climate.

On the other hand, our results clearly show that despite great concern, a large majority of people engage in "doing democracy" by participating in civic activities.

Fear, frustration, hardship and discontent with the status quo can dangerously precipitate us towards the hard grasp of populism. But the Berlin Wall anniversary reminds us that discontent can also drive positive social, political, and economic change.

In a sense, perhaps we need today's fears, to drive us forward to harness the energy of the youngest generation, and to define the most pressing challenges for civic engagement and mobilization to emerge.

²⁰ Pew Research Center, October 15, 2019, *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*.

Methodology

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Fieldwork was undertaken between 21st August - 13th September 2019. A total of 12537 adults were surveyed. The weighted Nationally Representative samples were comprised of N=1000 in Slovakia, N=2000 in Czech Republic, N=2000 in Hungary, N=2000 in Poland, N=1500 in Bulgaria, N=2000 in Romania, and N=2000 in Germany,

This survey has been conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc and partner panel providers.. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to it. YouGov Plc normally achieves a response rate of between 35 percent and 50 percent to surveys, although this does vary depending upon the subject matter, complexity, and length of the questionnaire. The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry-accepted data.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Face-to-face focus groups were carried out by YouGov in seven EU countries. The groups took place in the capital cities of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. Those recruited to the focus groups were all political activists, defined by such measures as:

- people who have participated in at least one public expression, protest or demonstration
- members of religious / social / professional communities and organizations
- people who have attended at least one-party political meeting
- people who have signed a petition or written to a political representative

Each group was split, with a mixture of those whose activism stretches back to 1989 and those who were younger activists, all from a mixture of political backgrounds and allegiances. The objectives of the research were to explore the role of civic activism in today's society and whether or not people-led power plays the same role as it did in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. While the qualitative surveys were conducted on representative samples throughout the population, participants in the focus groups were coming from either the capital cities or the broader metropolitan areas, it is worth stating that these metropolitan views may not be reflective of their nations in the broader perspective.

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