GLOBSEC YOUTH TRENDS:
How Young Central Europeans View the World
GLOBSEC Policy Institute carries out research, analytical and communication activities related to the impact of disinformation, information warfare and other subversive efforts aimed at changing the perception and attitudes of the general population in Central European countries.

AUTHORS

- **Daniel Milo**, Senior Research Fellow, GLOBSEC Policy Institute
- **Katarína Klingová**, Research Fellow, GLOBSEC Policy Institute

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

© GLOBSEC Policy Institute 2018

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

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 5 MAIN TRENDS**  

**COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW**  
Where do you think your country belongs to geopolitically?  
Perceptions of EU membership  
Perceptions of NATO membership  
EU membership referendum  
NATO membership referendum  
Importance of NATO membership for national security  
Liberal democracy vs. autocracy  

**COUNTRY-SPECIFIC REPORTS**  
The Czech Republic  
Hungary  
Poland  
Slovakia
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

5 MAIN TRENDS

This executive summary provides some of the most interesting findings and takeaways from the opinion surveys and focus group discussions conducted by GLOBSEC and its partners in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (the Visegrad Four group) in 2017. A more detailed analysis is presented in the comparative section and individual country chapters.

1. **There is no alternative to the EU and NATO for young Central Europeans.**
   In all the surveyed countries, more young people support their country’s EU and NATO membership than oppose it and respondents openly state that there is no alternative to both organisations. They clearly see their future in the framework of both supranational bodies and value the economic opportunities, liberties, and safety they provide. This is a positive signal, suggesting that both institutions managed to keep their appeal despite some fatigue and turmoil in the recent years.

2. **All equal but all different.**
   Although the young generation living in the Visegrad Four countries was born into similar post-communist societies and all the countries joined the EU and NATO almost simultaneously, they show remarkably different attitudes towards main geopolitical issues concerning their countries. Young Poles and Hungarians demonstrate the highest level of support both for the EU and NATO, while young Slovaks support their country’s EU membership, but they view NATO less favourably and their Czech counterparts like NATO more than they like the EU. While these attitudes reflect different national, economic, and historical realities, it is important to be aware of and acknowledge these differences in any future communication efforts.
3. **Undecided, uninformed and uninterested?**

Despite the huge amount of attention and a number of campaigns aimed at young people living in the Visegrad Four region, it seems that big segments of the young generation do not know too much about the EU and NATO and are indifferent to both organisations and broader geopolitical issues. One third of young Czechs, Hungarians and Slovaks does not have any particular opinion about the EU and approximately the same proportion does not have any specific opinion on NATO. This one third of population represents a blind spot which could be swayed both ways. Therefore, there is a need for more active communication about NATO’s and EU’s functioning, decision-making processes and benefits they bring aiming to increase the overall awareness of both institutions.

4. **Young people are not always the most pro-Western segment of the population.**

One would expect that for the people who never experienced communism or hardships of the 1990’s, the EU and NATO would stand out as two institutions protecting and ensuring stability and prosperity of their countries. While young Czechs are the strongest supporters of their country’s EU and NATO membership and represent an example of such optimism, this is not the case for the other countries. In Slovakia, the most favourable opinion about the EU and NATO was observed in the middle-aged group (35-44), while in Hungary and Poland, surprisingly, it is the older generation (55+) that exhibits the most vocal support for EU and NATO membership.

5. **Central European inbetweeners.**

While the overall support for the pillars of the West (EU and NATO) in the young V4 generation is stable, this is not the case when it comes to the position of their country on the East-West axis. With the exception of young Czech professionals and Hungarian youngsters, in all the other groups more people supported the idea that their country should stay in the middle between the West and the East than any other option. Such outcome could illustrate the identity of Central Europe, which is situated in the middle between two geopolitical blocks, but it also indicates lack of self-identification with the values associated with the West.
When it comes to geopolitical orientation of their country, **53.8% of young Hungarians** aged 18-24 support the pro-Western stance making it the most pro-Western oriented youth in the Visegrad group. The highest percentage of young people who do not side with either the West or the East and prefer the ‘in-between’ position live in Poland. **48.2% of young Polish** professionals aged 18-24 years think that Poland geopolitically belongs somewhere in the middle between the East and the West. Nearly identical results come from Hungarian respondents aged 25-34 with 48.1% while 7.7% of young Hungarians aged 18-24, the highest percentage of all youth age groups and the Visegrad countries, think that their country belongs to the East. **Slovakia** has the highest number of undecided young people as **30.5%** of Slovaks aged 18-24 are not sure where their country belongs geopolitically.
The highest number of young people from the Visegrad countries with a positive perception of European Union membership live in Poland. **74.7% of Poles aged 18-24 and 74% of Poles aged 25-34 perceive membership in the EU favourably.** In comparison, the Czech Republic is the only country from the Central European region, without the majority of young respondents viewing membership of their country in the European Union positively. Furthermore, **24.4% of the young Czech professionals aged 25-34, the largest proportion among the V4 youth, perceive their country’s membership in the EU negatively.** Slovakia has the highest number of undecided youngsters as **40% of young Slovaks aged 18-24 are not certain** whether the membership of their country in the EU is a positive or a negative thing.
82.3% of Poles aged 25-34, the largest proportion of all youth age groups in the V4 countries, perceive that membership of their country in NATO favourably. On the other hand, young Slovaks aged 18-24 perceive their country’s NATO membership least favourably with only 35.4% believing it is a positive thing. Conversely, 17% of Slovak young professionals aged 25-34, view membership of Slovakia in NATO negatively. In comparison, only 1.2% of young Poles aged 18-24 believe that NATO membership is a negative thing for their country. Interestingly, 47.7% of Slovaks aged 18-24 are not sure whether they perceive membership of their country in NATO positively or a negatively.
If a referendum on EU membership was held this Sunday, **82.6% of young Hungarians** aged 25-34, the largest proportion of all young people in the V4 countries, would vote to **stay** in the European Union. On the other hand, the **Czech Republic** is the only V4 country in which **less than the majority of its young population, 43.4%** and **44.8%** respectively for both age groups would vote to stay in the European Union. The largest share across all the V4 countries’ young populations, **24.8% of Czechs** aged 18-24 would **vote to leave** the European Union if such referendum was held. Also, the largest number of young people who are not sure whether they would like to stay or leave the EU lives in the Czech Republic. **31.8% of Czechs** aged 18-24 are **not certain** how they would vote in a potential referendum on membership in the European Union.
If a referendum on NATO membership was held this Sunday, **92.8% of young Poles** aged 18-24 would vote to **stay** in NATO. In comparison, only **38.9%** of their Slovak peers would vote similarly. Most of the young that would vote to leave NATO are from **Slovakia**, **18.4%** of young professional aged 25-34. **Slovakia** is also a country with the highest number of young people, **42.8%** of those aged 18-24, **are not certain** how they would vote on NATO membership of their country if such referendum was held. Czech peers follow closely with **40.4%**.
Majority of young people in all Visegrad countries agree that NATO membership is important for the security of their country. While 95.2% of young Poles aged 18-24 agree with this statement, only 53.4% of their Slovak peers think similarly. However, 31.5% of Slovaks aged 25-34, the largest proportion of all V4 youth segments, disagree that the membership in NATO is important for Slovak national security. Eventually, Slovakia is also the country with the highest number of undecided young people. 17.5% of Slovaks aged 18-24 are not sure whether their country’s NATO membership is important for its security.
When asked about the political system which would be the most beneficial to the future of their country, Hungary is the country with the largest differences between the two age groups. While 75.1% of Hungarians aged 25-34, the most of all V4 youth groups, prefer liberal democracy, only 59.8% of young Hungarians aged 18-24, the smallest percentage across all V4 youth groups, think similarly. Hungary also has the highest number of young people (29.9%) aged 18-24, who prefer the rule of a strong authoritarian leader for their country. In addition, the Czech Republic is the V4 country with the largest share of undecided young people as 18.3% of Czechs aged 18-24 are not sure whether they prefer liberal democracy or authoritarian regime.
THE EAST-WEST GEOPOLITICAL ORIENTATION

We often hear that the Czech Republic is the country with the strongest anti-EU sentiment in the Visegrad Four. Miloš Zeman, the Czech President as well as former Prime Minister Václav Klaus are well known for their anti-EU public statements. However, what are the preferences of the country’s youth? Where does the young generation want their country to stand?

When it comes to geopolitical orientation of the Czech Republic (either being part of the West or the East), 34.3% of young Czechs aged 18-24 favour a pro-Western orientation of their country in comparison to 1% that believes that the Czech Republic geopolitically aligns with the East. The pro-Western attitudes of the young generation of Czechs resembles the average pro-Western orientation of the Czech Republic at 33.5%. However, young Czechs aged 18-24 or 25-34 are not the most pro-Western age group as 43.6% of 45-54-year-olds holding this view.

Thus, in the Czech Republic majority of the population (40.7%) prefers the ‘neutral’ position between the West and the East. Same attitude is held by Czechs in the 18-24 age group. 36% of young Czechs aged 18-24 years prefer the ‘in-between’ geopolitical position compared to 34.3% who believe that the Czech Republic should be aligned with the West. Interestingly, in the age group of 25-34 year-olds, 39% of young Czechs have a pro-Western orientation and only 31.2%, the least among all age groups, believes that the Czech Republic belongs geopolitically somewhere in between the West and the East. The findings that 28.7% of young Czechs aged 18-24 and 24.9% of the young aged 25-34, the largest share of all age groups, are not sure about the geopolitical orientation of their country could be cause for concern.

THE EUROPEAN UNION

However, when it comes to young Czechs’ attitude towards the European Union, 43.8% and 41.3% in the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34 respectively perceive membership of their country in the European Union favourably. While 43.8% of the young people aged 18-24 view the Czech EU membership favourably, 20.6% perceive it negatively 31.7% take a neutral stance and 35.6% are not sure.

The youngest generation exceeds the national average for favourable view of the Czech EU membership (34.8%) by 9 percent, while the oldest age group (aged 65 and over) do so by 15.7%. In case of favourable and unfavourable public perception of the EU membership, it is possible to observe indirect proportion with the rising age of the particular groups. The older Czechs are, the less favourably they view their country’s EU membership.

The lukewarm position of Czechs towards the membership in the European Union is confirmed by the attitudes of respondents when it comes to the potential referendum on EU membership. However, the willingness to stay in the European Union was higher by almost 20% in both young age groups, 43.4% and 44.8% respectively, in comparison to those young respondents who would vote to leave the EU polled at 24.8% and 24.4%. Young professionals aged 25-34 were actually the age group with the most vocal support of staying in the European Union, in comparison to the oldest generation with only 34.5%. At the same time, approximately one third (31.8%) of 18 to 24-year-olds and 30.8% of 25 to 34-year-olds, would not know how to vote in the potential referendum on staying or leaving the EU.

Different perceptions of the European Union among various generations of Czech population were confirmed by young Czechs during the focus groups interviews. The young view the freedom of movement of people and capital as the most relevant and positive aspects of the EU. Young Czechs want to fully utilize all the opportunities the EU offers them, they want to study, work, or live in other EU countries without any barriers, but this open-door principle of free movement without border controls might be perceived unfavourably by the older generations. The young are aware of that fact that owing to their age and education, they are the generation that can benefit the most from their country’s EU membership.
Young Czechs welcome the influx of EU structural funds into their country or the rising number of jobs—“the European Union ensures the economic prosperity of our country,” declared one of the interviewed Czech students. The EU is perceived as a guarantor of peace and stability. It diminishes the disparities between Western and Eastern European countries and improves the negotiation position of the Czech Republic at the international level. “People say that the Czech Republic’s voice is not heard in the EU. But historically, when in the last 200 years have we (Czechs) had a stronger voice than now?” Furthermore, young Czechs also perceive the EU as the guarantee of democratic principles and political culture in their country.

According to the young, the negative characteristics that the EU needs to get rid of in order to be more effective include complicated administration, complicated decision-making procedures that very few people actually understand and the lack of transparency. “The EU has a lot of civil servants, institutions, that are ‘ivory-towered and distant from ordinary people, and this is why it appears to be complicated and bureaucratic.” Young Czechs think that the EU “needs better PR”, it needs to better communicate its accomplishments and policies to ordinary people. Local/national politicians quite often embrace achievements of the EU as their own, while the problems are blamed on the EU. According to young Czechs, the European Union lacks clear direction and it seems to give preference to economic policies over cultural and social values.

NATO
Most young Czechs view membership of the Czech Republic in NATO favourably. In fact, 61.4% of young Czechs aged 25-34, the largest proportion across all age groups, believe that NATO membership benefits their country. It seems that this age group of young professionals realizes the value and the benefit of their country’s membership in NATO the most. While 61.4% of those aged 25-34, the highest share among all age groups, believe that NATO membership is favourable for their country, at the same time only 9.9%, the smallest percentage of all age groups, view Czech membership in NATO unfavourably. 54.3% of the youngest age group (18 to 24-year-olds) seems to copy the average attitude of the public showing positive view of the membership (53.1%). At the same time, we observe that almost one in three young people (31%) aged 18-24 and 28.7% of those aged 25-34 are not sure about their position on the membership of their country in NATO.

The support of the Czech Republic’s NATO membership NATO is visible in the responses of young Czechs who would vote to stay in NATO if such referendum was held. Majority of the young would vote to remain a NATO member. Specifically, 62.3% people in the age of 25-34 =, the largest proportion across all age groups would vote for their country to remain a NATO member in case of a referendum. This is a difference of 20.3% compared to 42% of respondents aged 65 or older and of 11.1% in comparison to the youngest age group of those aged 18-24 years (51.2%) who would vote similarly. Interestingly, it is possible to observe direct proportion between the age of the respondent and the rising preference to leave NATO - the older the age group, the more inclined the respondents are to support their country leaving NATO. While only 8.4% and 8.8% of the young would vote to leave NATO in a referendum, in the age group of those aged 65 years and older the support for the leave vote reaches as much as 26.3% of all respondents.

Majority of young Czechs agree that NATO membership is important for the security of their country. While 81.7% of young Czechs aged 25-34 agree with this statement, the most of all age groups, 77.6% of Czechs aged 18-24 think similarly.

Interesting difference between the two young age groups can be observed when it comes to their answers supporting the third option – “don’t know”. While “only” 28.9% of young professionals aged 25-34 were not sure about how they would vote, in the youngest age group (18-24) as much as 40.4% of Czechs were not certain about their stance.

Young Czechs perceive NATO very favourably as an organisation guaranteeing and assuring security, whose presence is implicit and to certain degree taken for granted. However, they have very limited knowledge about NATO and show even less interest in it since NATO supposedly “does not have direct impact on their lives” as the EU does on daily basis. “In comparison to the EU, we know fewer things about NATO, actually it does not whip up any emotions.”
The importance of NATO to young Czechs is obvious and crucial, but it only automatically arises with the hypothetical situation of being attacked or with the possibility of NATO’s disintegration. “After the annexation of Crimea, the first time in my life I said: ‘Thank God that we are in NATO’”. However, while young students and participants of focus groups do not underestimate the value of NATO, they very negatively perceive its association with the United States and think that NATO primarily serves US interests.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY VS. AUTOCRACY
Young Czechs appreciate democracy and value the principles and freedoms that come with it. 62.7% of young Czechs aged 18-24 and 66.2% of those aged 25-34 prefer democracy over authoritarian rule. These figures are above the average public sentiment (61.2%). Furthermore, looking at young professionals, they are more pro-democratic (by more than 10%) compared to the oldest generation with only 55.8%. The youngest age group is also the group with lowest preference for an authoritarian leader with only 19% in comparison to 36% in the oldest generation of Czechs (the most among all age groups). However, as much as 18.3% of young people aged 18-24 in the Czech Republic are not sure whether democracy or a political system with a strong authoritarian leader is better.

HUNGARY

THE EAST-WEST GEOPOLITICAL ORIENTATION
Majority of young Hungarians, in particularly 53.8% of respondents aged 18-24 want their country to align geopolitically with the West. This youngest generation is the only age group which holds a pro-Western stance, which is in a stark difference to the attitudes of the oldest age group (65+). There is a 23.4% difference between this youngest and oldest age groups when it comes to the support of Hungary’s pro-Western orientation. The youngest generation is also the least (with only 35%) supportive in terms of positioning Hungary geopolitically somewhere in the middle between the East and the West. Already the young professionals in the age category of 25-34 are more sceptical towards the West with only 45.4% respondents in this age group clearly preferring a pro-Western geopolitical orientation of Hungary. Furthermore, the older age groups of respondents prefer the neutral and “in between” position of their country. Majority of Hungarians aged 35 and older believe that Hungary should geopolitically align in between the East and the West.

Such dichotomy of Hungarians’ opinions was captured even in the replies of students during the focus groups. Although most young Hungarians said that they would rather belong to the West, current tendencies keep reminding them that Hungary is actually closer to the East. One student even pointed out that “Belonging (somewhere) is a constant tension for Hungary. If I look at the West that is the West, if I look at the East that is the East. Yet, it would be a luxury to say that we are in the middle. We are definitely closer to the East now, even though I would prefer the West”. Another respondent argued that Hungary tends to “always belong [geopolitically] to those who offer more.”

THE EUROPEAN UNION
60.7% of young Hungarians aged 18-24 view Hungary’s membership in the European Union favourably. Young professionals follow close behind with 59.7%. Attitudes of these young Hungarians resemble the dominant perception of the public viewing the EU favourably (60.7%). However, younger generations do not value Hungary’s EU membership as much as the oldest generation does with 63.7%. On the other hand, only 8.5% of Hungarians aged 18-24, the smallest proportion across all age groups, perceive Hungarian membership in the EU unfavourably. In case of young professionals aged 24-34, the percentage is a little larger at 11.3%. As it is possible to observe in the other V4 countries, almost one third of young people in Hungary (30.8% and 29% respectively) are not sure whether the membership of their country in the European Union is to be appreciated or not.

The strong support of Hungary’s membership in the European Union among the young Hungarians is visible in the responses to the question about the possible referendum. 78.6% of young Hungarians aged 18-24 and 82.6% of Hungarians aged 25-34, the largest proportion across all age groups, would vote to stay in the European Union. Furthermore, only 12.8% and 10.9% of young Hungarians, again the smallest proportion across all age
groups, would vote to leave the EU. Strong support of the young generation for the European Union is also obvious from the limited number of indecisive respondents. While 8.6% of the young people between the ages of 18 and 24 don’t know whether they would support the stay or leave camp, only 6.5% of young professionals aged 25-34 are undecided. In general, a clear majority of respondents in all age groups would vote to stay in the European Union in such potential referendum.

These findings from public opinion polls were supported by qualitative data collected in focus groups. It is possible to declare that young Hungarians have positive yet critical approach to Hungary’s EU membership. The positive attitude of young Hungarians stems from the advantages of the EU membership, which young Hungarians consider primarily to include free movement of people and capital and the freedom to do what you want and wherever you want it. The youth is also very well aware of the financial benefits brought by the EU membership. In particular, the European Structural and Cohesion Funds were perceived as one of the greatest advantages of the Hungarian EU membership. One student even pointed out that “ninety percent of the investments in Hungary have been funded by European money”. Young Hungarians also associate the European Union with peace and perceive it as the guardian of values in the sense that EU institutions “give you a certain level of security. Local politicians cannot do whatever they want. They know that there is someone above them as well. The European Union has a control mechanism” over national governments. Interestingly, some young Hungarians wish the EU would intervene in Hungary more often and impose stricter measures on their country - “We joined the EU willingly and accepted its rules which should be respected by each member state”.

Partially, the critical view of young Hungarians stems from their lack of understanding of the EU institutions, their processes as well as the division of competences between the EU and member states. Young Hungarians perceive the EU to be slow in taking decisions, they believe that EU processes are not transparent enough and need to be better communicated. During the focus groups we observed that these essential deficiencies are then further utilized by the populist rhetoric of national politicians and suits various disinformation about the EU that are spread on the national level.

For example, young Hungarians are critical of the European Union because the EU structural funds are not properly targeted, are not used where they are most needed, and foster corruption. Some of the youth also think that the EU “took much more money out of the Hungarians pockets” that it gave them and that Central and Eastern European countries “consumer market” is exploited by Western companies which also take advantage of the “cheap labour force” provided by the domestic population. One young Hungarian university student even noted that “Merkel acts like the chancellor of the EU. She decided alone that we will opt for Willkommenskultur (open-door policy towards migrants). I do not remember the Germans asking anyone else about this”. Better communication of EU policies and responsibilities could potentially mitigate such perceptions often based on misinformation. While the position of young Hungarians towards the EU might be characterized as a love-hate relationship, young people in Hungary realize the EU’s potential and want to be active members of the European Union.

NATO

Young Hungarians value Hungary’s in NATO membership very similarly as they do the country’s EU membership. 61.5% of respondents aged 18-24, the largest proportion across all age groups, view Hungary’s membership in NATO favourably. Young professionals follow with 59.1%. Interestingly, NATO membership was least favourably perceived by Hungarians aged 35-43, where only 51.9% of respondents believe that Hungary’s membership in this international organization benefits the country. That is a 9.6%-difference compared to the youngest generation. While there are very few young Hungarians that perceive Hungarian membership in NATO negatively (6.8% and 9.1% respectively), over 31.7% of the young people aged 18-24 and 31.8% in the category of those aged 25-34 do not have a clear position on this question. The leader in this respect is the age group of 35 to 44, where 37.9% of respondents do not know whether Hungary’s active membership in NATO is beneficial for the country or not.

Hungarian population’s strong support of NATO is visible from the answers of respondents when asked about the potential referendum on the membership in the Alliance. 73.5% of the young people aged 18-24 and 77.3% of those aged 25-34 would vote to stay in NATO. However, the age category of 55 to 64 is most supportive of Hungary’s membership in NATO with 79.3%. While a small percentage of young Hungarians, the smallest
proportion across all age groups with 9.4% and 9.2%, would leave NATO, once again, a larger share of young Hungarians do not know whether they would support staying or leaving NATO. 17.1% of young Hungarians between the ages of 18 and 24 years lack the knowledge about NATO and do not have a clear position on this question.

However, at the same time as much as 81.9% of young Hungarians aged 18-24 and 81.6% of those aged between 25 and 34 years are convinced that Hungary’s membership in NATO is important for the security of their country. With 84.6%, the age group that considers Hungary’s NATO membership to be most important for the security of their country are the respondents aged 55-64. On the other hand, Hungarians aged 35-44 consider NATO to be least important for the safety of their country (76.2%) and 17.4% of respondents from this age group actually believe that NATO does not guarantee security for Hungary.

When it comes to NATO, qualitative data from focus groups show that young Hungarians think that NATO is a less complicated organization that is “worth the investment”. Some actually view NATO positively because of its “neutral” perspective in comparison to the European Union. Young Hungarians perceive NATO as an organization that “provides safety, particularly to small countries” and is a “useful” deterrence against foreign occupation.

At the same, however, it is possible to observe lack of knowledge about NATO among young Hungarians. The disadvantages of NATO described by the young were based on general misconceptions that the US is in charge of NATO and, since the United States are no longer interested in Europe, the era of NATO is coming to an end. The dichotomy of NATO’s perception was also obvious in the perception of the collective defence. While some young Hungarians valued NATO membership as a deterrence against a foreign attack, others questioned NATO’s fulfilment of such obligations in case a country like Hungary was attacked. Lack of understanding of how NATO work was also obvious as most of interviewed young Hungarians were not able to explain in a simple way what NATO was.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY VS. AUTOCRACY

On average, 71.3% of Hungarians trust in and choose democratic regime over the rule of a strong authoritarian leader. Interestingly, only 59.8% of young Hungarians aged between 18 and 24 years, the smallest proportion of all analysed age groups, believe that liberal democratic political system would be most beneficial for Hungary’s future. Not only is this quite below the average perception of the Hungarian population as a whole, but it is also 15.3% below the 75.1% support for liberal democracy expressed by the young professionals aged 25-34.

With 77.4%, Hungarians at the age category of 34 to 45 show the most vocal support for democracy. On the other hand, 29.9% of the young people aged 18-24 are convinced that the best political system for Hungary would be the one under a strong authoritarian leader that would introduce more order in the country even if it led to concentration of power and restrictions of fundamental rights. Young Hungarians aged 18-24 show most trust in an authoritarian leader in comparison to other age groups.

POLAND

THE EAST-WEST GEOPOLITICAL ORIENTATION

While Poland is perceived as the most pro-Western country in the Visegrad region, with the overall support for country’s pro-Western orientation at 45.2%, quite surprisingly, the youth is not so enthusiastic. Among those aged 18-25, the pro-Western orientation is only at 33.7 % and those aged 25-37 express a little stronger support of alignment with the West at 37%. Both age groups are the most lukewarm supporters of Poland’s pro-Western orientation, and in comparison, with the older segments of the population (55+) which score more than 50%, it is evident that the young generation shows signs of disillusionment or lack of enthusiasm with the pro-Western orientation. Significant proportion of Poland’s youth and young professionals choose rather to stay somewhere in the middle between the West and the East: 48% of young people and 42 % of young professionals, which is significantly above the nationwide average of 35%.
Findings of the focus group discussion indicate that young Poles often see the European Union as the epitome of the West, which the generations of their parents and grandparents strived for to no effect. The West is associated with better standards of living, progress, modernity, respecting of human rights, liberal democracy, and civil society, it is viewed as a community of wealthy and developed countries. The East is associated with collectivism, no respect for the individual and his/her rights, Russian domination, authoritarianism, superiority of force and power, the legacy of the Soviet Union, backwardness, poverty, or a collective mentality.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the open pro-Eastern geopolitical orientation among the youth aged 18-25 is very low at 3.6%, only slightly higher than the national average of 2.7%. However, it reaches almost 7% in the age category of 25 to 34. Young professionals are indeed the most enthusiastic Poles when it comes to country’s orientation to the East, which, again comes as a quite surprising outcome, although the overall level of pro-East support is still marginal in comparison to other Visegrad Four countries.

THE EUROPEAN UNION

In terms of support for the EU, Polish youth is not very different form the rest of the population, although, quite surprisingly, there are other age groups in the Polish population which show stronger support for the European project. EU membership is viewed favourably by 74.7% of 18 to 24-year-olds and an almost identical positive evaluation (74%) was monitored among those aged 25-34. Unlike the other Visegrad Four countries, the most pro-European age group was actually among the pensioners at 83.7%.

While the overall negative perception of the EU among youth is relatively low (17% among the youth aged 18-24 and 19% among the 25 to 34 year-olds), it is still much higher than the nation’s average of 11.5%. Especially young professionals demonstrate surprisingly high levels of euro-scepticism. Also in this category, the least euro-sceptic Poles (unlike in other Visegrad Four countries) are the oldest segments of the population aged 65 and older.

The same trend can be observed also in terms of support for the EU in a hypothetical stay/leave referendum. While the overall support for the remain camp is at 80.7% on the national level, youth shows a slightly lower support with 79.5% and young professionals show the relatively weakest support of the remain camp also in this category with 74.5%. Youth and young professionals would also be the strongest supporters of the leave vote with 18% support for leaving the EU among those aged 18-24 old and 22% support among those aged 25-34. Although the above figures show stronger support for EU membership compared to other surveyed countries it is still noteworthy that it is the oldest segment of the population that is the most vocal supporter of the EU.

Focus group discussions indicated that among young Poles, the European Union evokes mostly positive associations such as openness, solidarity, community, reliability, security, elegance, free movement across borders, joy, integration, economic development of Poland and the improvement of the quality of life. The EU only very rarely evoked negative associations such as the one of an extensive welfare state and excessive red tape. Another relatively strong association was the linkage of the EU with Germany and German culture (strongly connected to reliability and quality as well), which the participants explained by the strong influence or even domination of Germany in the European Union.

The most frequently used argument that the participants raised in order to explain their pro-EU attitude was that there were no serious alternatives to the EU in terms of securing a dynamic and secure development of Poland. Young Poles appreciate the magnitude of positive changes which Poland has undergone since its accession to the EU 13 years ago. The perception that Poland can build itself a bright future only within the EU was very vivid. When it comes to benefits associated with Poland’s EU membership, these included the undeniable development of Poland driven by the EU structural funds and free movement within the EU. This is, in turn, related to the opportunities such as studying abroad, organizing youth exchanges at schools, or opening labour markets in other Member States. The EU was also seen as a guarantee or a ‘guardian’ of upholding the standards of liberal democracy, rule of law, and thus also of human rights in Poland.

As far as the most frequently mentioned disadvantages and problems related to the membership of Poland in the EU are concerned, they include absurd EU legal regulations which had to be implemented on the national
level, problems with taking crucial decisions on the EU level, excessive red tape, decline of many industries in Poland, quotas imposed on agricultural production, which negatively affected Polish farmers, unreasonable allocation of EU funds and labour migration as a result of which young Poles prefer going abroad rather than pursuing their aspirations in Poland.

**NATO**

Poland is the strongest supporter of NATO among the Visegrad countries with 80% of the population supporting the country’s NATO membership; this trend is also visible in the young population. Support for NATO among the Polish youth is at 79.5% and is almost identical to the national average. NATO is viewed even more favourably among the young professionals, who show even higher than average level of support at 82.3%. Yet even in this category, it is the oldest segment of the population (65+) which shows the strongest support for NATO – 85.5%. Negative perception of NATO is very limited in Poland as such - only 3.5% and this perception is almost non-existent among the youth - only 1.2% hold negative views towards NATO. The group of NATO critics is higher than average among young professionals – 6.8%, but this is also a result of a relatively low proportion of the undecided (only 10% compared to 17% on average).

In case of hypothetical referendum on NATO membership, an overwhelming majority of Poles (86.4%) would vote to remain and young people show even stronger support for NATO membership. Almost 93% of young people would vote to remain and only 2.5% would vote to leave NATO. Young professionals exhibit similar level of NATO membership support - 86%, while the camp rejecting the NATO membership is relatively largest (7.3%) compared to 4.4% on average.

Importance of NATO for the security of Poland is clearly understood also by young people since 95.2% of them strongly agree or fairly agree with NATO’s importance, while only 4.7% do not consider NATO to be important in this regard. The only notable difference in comparison to the general population is the lower level of support in the ‘strongly agree’ category (difference of 15%) and stronger support for the ‘fairly agree’ (19%). Overall, Poles are the most vocal supporters of NATO in the Visegrad region and young people are not an exception to this rule.

The above overwhelmingly positive perception of NATO was observed also among the participants in the focus group discussions. The vast majority of the focus group participants view NATO membership as the second pillar of Poland’s firm position as one of the Western states. A large majority of focus groups participants regarded Poland’s membership in NATO as undisputable due to Poland’s raison d’état. For some, Poland has a key, existential interest in being a NATO member due to its history and the vulnerable position between two major powers - Russia and Germany.

The benefits of NATO membership include especially the improvement of Poland’s security and the sense of security of Poland’s population. It was stressed that Poland was located on the Alliance’s Eastern flank and in direct neighbourhood of a potential aggressor. The second most frequently quoted advantage concerned the process of exchanging knowledge, skills, and technology with the armies of other NATO member states in which the Polish army has been taking part for almost 20 years.

As to numerous deficiencies and disadvantages connected to Poland’s NATO membership, respondents mentioned mainly their doubts and concerns whether, in case Poland or another NATO ally were attacked, NATO would provide them with adequate support. Moreover, the respondents pointed out that due to its membership, Poland needs to be involved in various international conflicts. This could turn out to be against its own interests. It was also noted occasionally that Poland may be unable to pursue its independent foreign policy as it is currently determined by Poland’s membership in NATO. Also, some participants noted that Poland needed to incur increased expenditures on the modernization of its army – although some respondents actually perceived this as an advantage.

**LIBERAL DEMOCRACY VS. AUTOCRACY**

Young people in Poland voiced above-average support for liberal democracy. While the national average is at 64.8%, among the youth aged 18-24, it reached as much as 71%. Young professionals are closer to the national
average with some 64% preferring liberal democracy over an authoritarian regime. Approximately 1 in 4 young Poles (26.5%) would prefer a strong leader, even if it meant limiting of fundamental rights and freedoms. This corresponds to the national average of 26.7%.

SLOVAKIA

THE EAST-WEST GEOPOLITICAL ORIENTATION

Young Slovaks are more inclined to be affiliated with the West compared to the rest of the population. While the average level of support for the pro-Western alignment of Slovakia is at 21%, it reaches 27.5% among young Slovaks (aged 18-24) and 26.7% among young Slovak professionals (aged 25-34). This trend is also confirmed with regards to the country’s pro-Eastern geopolitical orientation – only 6% of the young people and 7.3% of young professionals would prefer this orientation, which is lower than the national average of 9%.

However, youth in Slovakia also confirm another observation: most people living in Slovakia would prefer a neutral position between the West and the East. Of all the options available, the largest proportion of youth inclined towards the “in between” option – 35.9%, which is slightly less than the national average of 41.5% preferring this alternative.

Interestingly, almost one third of young respondents (30.5%) are undecided as to where Slovakia should belong, which may point to lack of information on foreign policy issues but also represents a vulnerability that can be exploited.

This quantitative data was also confirmed in the focus group discussion, where most participants were lukewarm supporters of the country’s pro-Western geopolitical orientation. Majority of respondents would prefer a more distant relationship with the USA (and as such also with NATO), provided that the EU would be able to have its own army. Those who preferred closer cooperation with the East (Russia) stressed the importance of EU membership. The narrative presenting Slovakia as the bridge between the West and the East as well as the narrative of a small nation which should stay out of any conflict with major powers seems to be deeply rooted also in the young generation as illustrated by the quantitative data.

In comparison to their Visegrad peers, the main reason for the relatively lower pro-Western orientation of young Slovaks is the relatively higher negative perception of the USA and its role in world affairs, combined with a more positive sentiment towards Russia. Both these phenomena have deeper historical and cultural roots.

THE EUROPEAN UNION

The EU has been historically perceived very positively by the Slovak public and such perception extends also to include young people and young professionals. 49.2% of young Slovaks (aged 18-24) perceive the EU favourably, which is slightly less than the national average of 52.3%. Young professionals are slightly more supportive of the EU with 54.6% approval rate. Outright negative perception of the EU is isolated to 10.8% of young Slovaks and 12.1% of young Slovak professionals. Both figures are slightly higher than the national average of 10.7%, however, the difference is not very significant. Quite surprisingly, roughly one in three young respondents assessed the EU as being neither good or bad/do not know (40% among those aged 18-24 and 33.3% among those aged 25-34) which contradicts the usual perception of young people as being strongly and decisively pro-European.

When it comes to a hypothetical referendum on EU membership, outcome among the young people corresponds to the national average: 59% would prefer to stay while 11.5% would prefer to leave. The leave camp is weaker by 4% in comparison to the national average of 15%.

While young Slovaks mostly perceive the EU favourably and there seems to be no real alternative to EU membership in the eyes of most respondents, they criticised some of its aspects. The so called “dictate of Brussels” was often mentioned alongside with calls for a reform of the EU. In this regard, many participants highlighted the lack of awareness on the fundamental aspects of the EU functioning and the lack of emotional appeal and attachment to the EU. This, in turn, was perceived as one of the reasons for the declining support of the EU. The EU was perceived as a bubble of its own kind, which is rather distant from ordinary people.
The EU was mostly associated with benefits related to economic progress and freedom of movement, travel, possibility to study and work abroad without visa or passports.

Aside from the “dictate of Brussels”, other negative associations included the dominance of bigger nations in the EU and limitations on Slovakia’s sovereignty. In this regard, the mandatory migration quota system was often mentioned as an intrusion into Slovakia’s national sovereignty.

NATO
Among the most recent Alliance members, Slovakia is rightly perceived as one the countries with lowest popular support for NATO membership. Young Slovaks confirm this trend and the support for NATO is almost the same as in the general population: 35.4% Slovaks support NATO, while 16.9% oppose it. Roughly one in two young respondents (47.7%) assessed NATO membership as neither positive or negative for their country or did not have an opinion at all, which might signal lack of knowledge and awareness. Young professionals (25-34) closely mirror these attitudes, with the largest group being the undecided (46.1%). In this age group, such lack of opinion on NATO is quite surprising, since it is expected that people of this age should be able to form their own opinion even on issues they do not deal with on a day-to-day basis.

In case of a hypothetical referendum on NATO membership, the support for NATO among young people is quite different comparing the two young age categories. While the proportion of young people (aged 18-24) supporting NATO membership is slightly lower than the national average (38.9% vs. 42.8%), young professionals are more pro-NATO oriented: 46.6% would support NATO membership. Proportion of young people wanting to leave NATO in case of such referendum is almost identical in both age groups: 18.3 and 18.4% respectively and is slightly lower than the national average at 21%.

Despite the lower of popular support for NATO in comparison to other Visegrad countries, majority of Slovaks value the security guarantees provided by NATO. Young Slovaks are no exception and their views closely correspond to the data on national level. More than 53% of young people in Slovakia agree that NATO membership is important for the security of Slovakia, while only 29% disagree. The level of support for such statement is even higher among young professionals - 57% agree and 31.5% disagree. Such perception is very close to the national average: 56% agree and 32.6% disagree with NATO being important for Slovakia’s security.

Data from focus group discussions confirm the Slovak youth’s lukewarm support of NATO. Most participants acknowledged that owing to its small size, Slovakia has no option but to be a part of a bigger group of nations and supported NATO membership as such. However, when it comes to the reasons mentioned in support of NATO membership, these were mostly pragmatic and security-oriented and not related to shared values or political affiliation. Such transactional attitudes were present also with regards to the relationship with the USA, perceived by many as the hegemon of NATO. Many participants would welcome Slovakia distancing itself from the USA in case the EU would be able to step in and provide security guarantees in the form of a common military force. The idea of a common European Army was quite popular among the respondents.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY VS. AUTOCRACY
Two thirds of young Slovaks would prefer liberal democracy over authoritarian regime, which corresponds also to the average level of support on the national level. Moderately stronger support (70%) was demonstrated among 18 to 24-year-olds a while a less pronounced support (66%) was monitored among those aged 24 to 34.

Pro-democratic tendencies among young Slovaks are also underlined by above-average percentage of those who strongly support liberal democracy (35.4% vs. 29.5% on average).

Young Slovaks are also least supportive of authoritarian regime, since only 20.8% would support such a change in the age group of 18 to 24, while a slightly higher level of support (24.7%) has been observed among young professionals.
METHODOLOGY
The results and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys conducted in 2017 on a representative sample of the population in the form of face-to-face interviews using stratified multistage random sampling in the four Visegrad countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. In all countries, the profiles of respondents are representative of the national population in terms of sex, age, education, place of residence and the size of settlement.

OPINION POLLS CONDUCTED BY:
- STEM - Institute of Empirical Research in the Czech Republic
- TNS Hoffmann in Hungary
- Kantar TNS S.A. in Poland
- FOCUS, s.r.o. in Slovakia

The qualitative aspect of this report is based on the findings of focus group discussions organised in 2017 with randomised samples of university students in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Four focus group discussions were organised in each of the researched countries. Each focus group discussion with students lasted 1.5 – 2 hours.

FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSIONS CONDUCTED BY:
- Eva Králová in the Czech Republic
- Kornél János László in Hungary
- Paweł Krasowski in Poland
- Andrej Findor in Slovakia