



# Voices of Central and Eastern Europe

## Romania Country Report



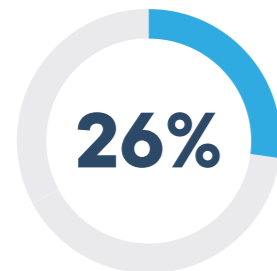
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# Democratic Disillusionment

Romania continues to face an array of historical and contemporary challenges that must be addressed if the country's public diplomacy is to be bolstered. Bucharest is indeed stifled by public disillusionment and deeply ingrained dubious beliefs that still linger from communism, a chaotic and poorly managed transition in the 1990s, and an ongoing lacklustre performance of a political elite that too often fails to deliver on change demanded by the populace.

Surveys conducted by GLOBSEC<sup>1</sup> show that a rather small percentage of Romanians believe their needs are considered by the political elite. This negative sentiment is



of Romanians believe the needs of people like them are taken into account by the political system in Romania.

The Social-Democratic government was defeated in a parliamentary no-confidence vote, with the government helm subsequently assumed by the National Liberal Party (EU: EPP). Given the extensive influence still wielded by the Social Democrats though, the (minority) National Liberal Government was met with regular obstruction in Parliament. For a large part of society, the agenda put forth by the National Liberal government remained murky. Romanians, in other words, had few reasons to believe they got what they voted for. Another focal point should be the rather low satisfaction (30%) with the functioning of democracy in Romania. Although Romania is not the poorest (second to last) regional

performer in this regard, dissatisfaction is palpable and its key causes need to be addressed lest a more persuasive populist and authoritarian movement appear on the scene. It is worth noting that this dissatisfaction towards the functioning of democracy, however, may be associated with the same frustrations directed at political actors more broadly. When provided a recent opportunity, in fact, many Romanians decided to vote for a democratic anti-establishment party (the Save Romania Union party) rather than populist options<sup>5</sup>. It is yet to be seen whether any perceived failure in the success of the anti-establishment party in representing society could pose a threat to the political climate.

proved broadly unpopular including among party supporters and ultimately failed to gain approval. And Liviu Dragnea, party president in 2015, now finds himself in prison.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-read-version.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> According to INSCOP polling, only 9.8% of the population express trust in parliament and 8.9% in political parties. <https://www.inscop.ro/16-mai-2019-directia-tarii-si-a-ue-sursele-de-ingrijorare-ale-romanilor-si-increderea-in-institutii-interne-si-internationale/>

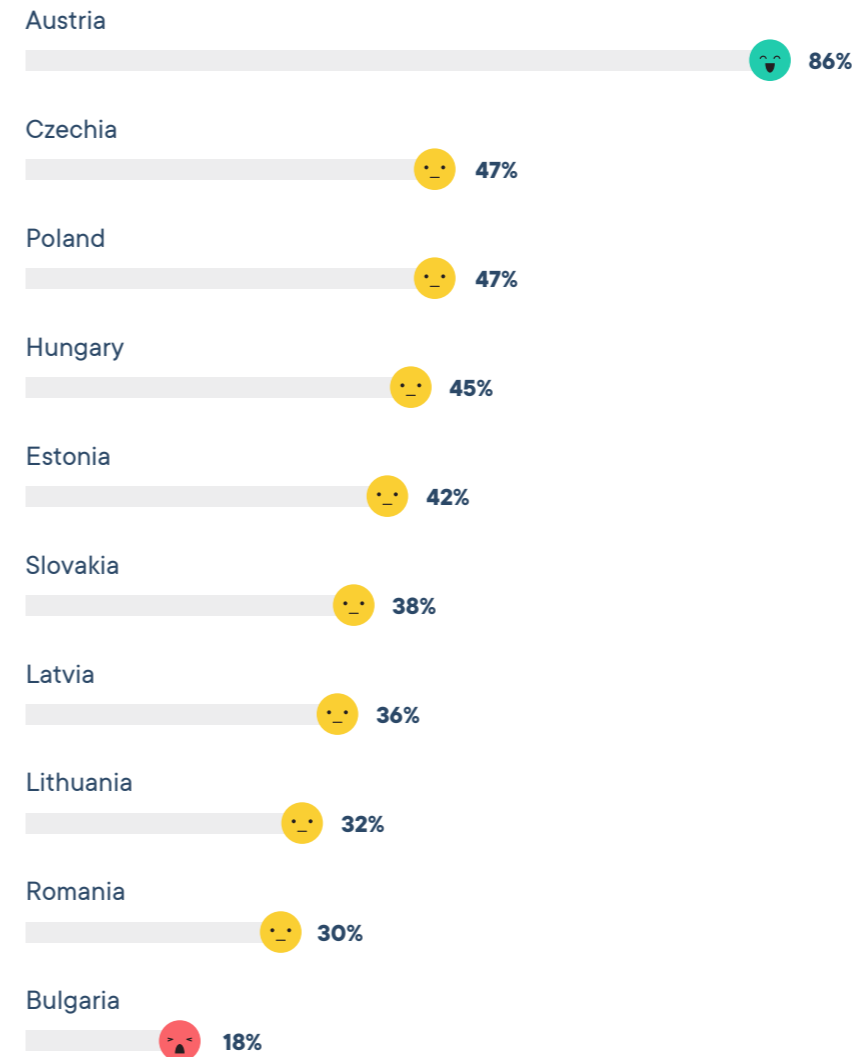
<sup>3</sup> Corruption was listed as the main threat to Romania (35% of the population), almost two times greater than any other cause (second place, at 18.9%, fell to a potential economic crisis).

<https://www.inscop.ro/20-mai-2019-opiniile-romanilor-privind-probleme-de-securitate-nationala-si-politica-externa/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/a59499e0-8080-11e9-b592-5fe435b57a3b>

<sup>5</sup> The situation began to change following the recent parliamentary elections on Dec. 5<sup>th</sup> – Dec 6<sup>th</sup>. As an outcome of this democratic exercise, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, a far-right and nationalist party that engaged in populist discourse during its campaign, garnered 9% support and entered parliament.

## Respondents satisfied with how democracy works in their country



Circling back to the topic of representation, the inability of the two main established political parties – the Social-Democrats and the National Liberals – to provide effective government can also be recognized as a failure in ensuring that the will of the population is represented.

Dissatisfaction with 'establishment' democratic actors, furthermore, explains the rise of newer parties. In the 2016 elections, the newly formed pro-democratic and anti-establishment Save Romania Union (now EU: Renew) secured seats in parliament. The party managed to attract 9 percent of the vote, possibly even neutralising a

potential populist surge. Together with the symbiotic PLUS party (EU: Renew and ruled by Dacian Cioloş), the party soared to 22 percent support in the 2019 EU Parliament elections.<sup>6</sup> Both parties, nevertheless, declined to engage society and civil society on governing issues, arguing that their first priority<sup>7</sup> was to defeat the then-Social-Democrat government. Following the 2019 Romanian presidential election, the Save Romania Union (USR), and to a lesser extent the alliance, gave in to bitter infighting. At the climax of this dispute, up to 10 percent of USR members were suspended by the party board, making them ineligible to vote or run for party offices.

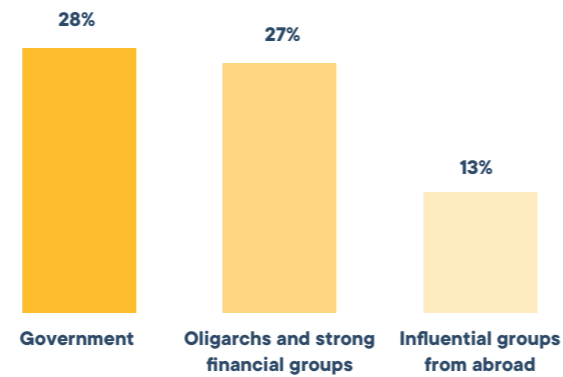
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/romania/2019-2024/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://ziare.com/dan-barna/USR/dan-barna-explica-de-ce-nu-vrea-USR-sa-isi-asume-guvernarea-daca-dancila-pica-la-motiunea-de-cenzura-video-1564231>

# Concern over the media

The Romanian news media is another area of concern, with its ramshackle condition posing a vulnerability that could be all too easily exploited by malign actors. The view that oligarchs and prominent financial groups from abroad exert influence over what and how content is reported is prevalent.

## Who do you believe has the strongest influence over the media in Romania?



The Romanian term for a media oligarch, a [media] mogul, was widely propagated by former president Traian Băsescu (EU: EPP) who sought to lay blame at these figures for everything wrong in the country<sup>8</sup>. While President Băsescu's accusations were certainly hyperbole, television news networks and powerful business interests appear often to go hand in hand. Romania has five dedicated TV news channels (and three additional networks that appeal to an important part of their audience through news programming)<sup>9</sup>, apparently more than the market can reasonably sustain. Some of the channels are notoriously delinquent taxpayers and routinely report dubious annual losses<sup>10 11 12</sup>. Some news channels are

extremely partisan in orientation and yet prove, oftentimes, incredibly willing to switch the direction of this partisanship<sup>13</sup>. These dynamics have contributed to suspicions that the news networks are serving the interests of powerful businessmen.

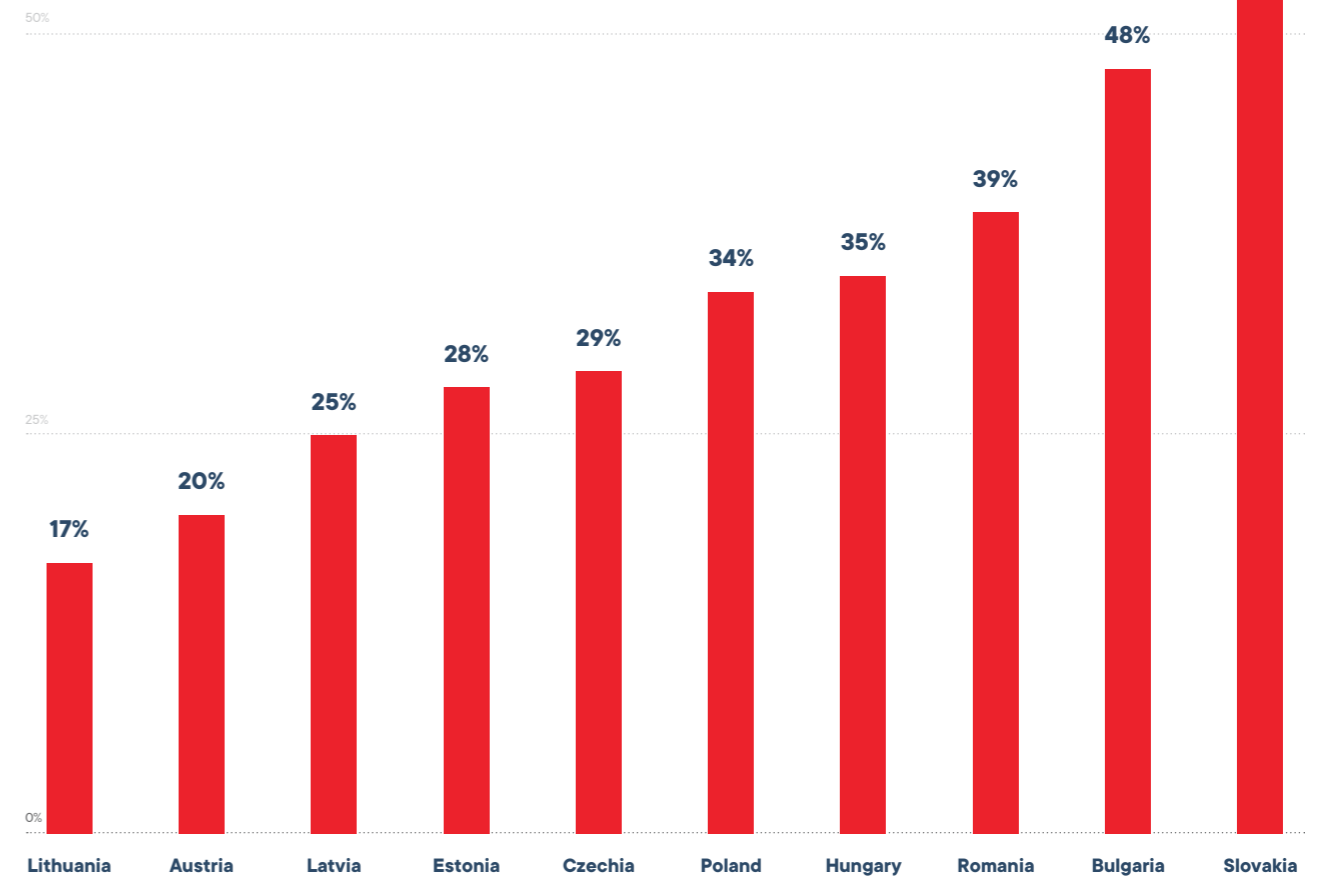
Heeding the conclusions of other research<sup>14</sup> on the state of the media in Romania, the finding that a small percentage (13%) consider that "influential groups from abroad" are shaping the media environment in Romania should be seen in light of additional survey observations including the unsubstantiated minority-held belief that "Romania is not deciding its own fate and that it is a modern colony of the West"<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.zf.ro/politica/basescu-se-razboieste-cu-mogulii-de-presa-3044182>  
<sup>9</sup> [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf)  
<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Marketing-PR/176099/mediafax-group-si-a-cerut-insolventa-trustul-de-presa-este-inglodat-in-datorii.html#gref>  
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.b1.ro/stiri/economic/dan-voiculescu-blocare-vanzare-grivco-280983.html>  
<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ro/o-nou%C4%83-%C8%9Bap%C4%83-tv-possibil%C4%83-cu-gu%C8%99%C4%83-realitatea-plus-pe-o-firm%C4%83-cu-plerderi-%C8%99-datorii-mari/a-51035885>  
<sup>13</sup> [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67815/romania\\_results\\_mpm\\_2020\\_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67815/romania_results_mpm_2020_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)  
<sup>14</sup> <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/romania-2019/>  
<sup>15</sup> <https://pressone.ro/romania-colonia-europei-o-poveste-cu-propaganda-care-nu-se-mai-termina>



# Belief in conspiracy theories among Romanians

## Degree of belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives<sup>16</sup>



<sup>16</sup> The percentage scores represent an average of an agreement of 3-4 conspiracy statements. The respondents were asked around 5-6 conspiracy statements, of which three were identical for all the countries covered and the rest country-specific and selected by the analysts from given countries. The statements

with the lowest and highest % were excluded from the average to remove narratives that might be strongly influenced by recent political context or by the analysts' miscalculation of the dominant narratives.



Indeed, it is concerning that significant proportion of the Romanian public, an average 39%, demonstrate a proclivity to believe and support various conspiracy theories. This is especially true regarding conspiratorial views that purport external actors and/or organisations exert control over domestic happenings in Romania.

Conspiracy theories have traditionally fuelled fringe media outlets and their alternative narratives that reject well-established facts and instead feed scepticism. These fabricated accounts make it only more difficult for mainstream ideas to be embraced by the groups in question.

These predispositions can be explained, among other things, by the fact that Romanians were socialized into believing conspiracy theories during communism. Some of this conditioning has not yet been eradicated and returns when people feel a sense of powerlessness. International realpolitik and the incompetence of local politicians count among several factors that can trigger traditional scepticism. There is even a certain amount of nostalgia for the Ceausescu regime among segments of the Romanian population.

Conspiracy theories often run part and parcel with Russian propaganda. Romanians are a Latin people and have harboured historical suspicions towards Russia, leaving them disinclined to pan-Orthodox and pan-Slavic, Kremlin-orchestrated appeals. Therefore, as a forthcoming GlobalFocus Center study suggests, Russian propaganda aims to seed distrust in international bodies and in Romania's foreign partners rather than necessarily generate sympathy for the Putin regime. Even when Russian propaganda is consumed, Romanians remain likely to see Russia as a perpetrator.

Nostalgia for communism appears to find a receptive audience among two groups of people. One is comprised of those who were adults in 1989 and endured severe hardship including poverty during successive crises in the 1990s. Even though some of these people may have since recovered financially, they may feel that their golden age has been lost, squandered by a democratic transition that has not benefited them. Another group, meanwhile, consists of people who were born

following the 1989 regime change or in the years immediately preceding it. They have little experience of what real communism meant and can be vulnerable to the propaganda of the first group.

Ceausescu himself was a kind of maverick on the international stage, having both rejected Soviet calls to invade Czechoslovakia and economic pressure from the IMF to reform its economy. Nationalistic, protectionist, and a transactionalist on the international stage who, nevertheless, sought respect and recognition, Ceausescu shared some traits with modern populists like Donald Trump (minus the showmanship).

He declared (and, to an extent, probably believed) that his domestic- and foreign policy gave Romania a strong independent voice among nations. The dictator also encouraged a cult of personality around himself, with propaganda often comparing him favourably to the great princes of the romanticised Romanian medieval past. While much of this propaganda became the target of ridicule, some of it stuck.

Implicit in this worldview was a crude form of realism in international relations. Romania, the argument went, had to take care of itself because no one else would, not the Russians nor the Americans. Any rules-based world order is, in other words, a decoy since in the final analysis the powerful will blatantly take care of their own interests. It would be, in fact, the patriotic duty of all leaders, big and small, to pursue the interest of their country at the expense of others.

Joining the EU, nonetheless, brought in a period of unabashed enthusiasm towards international (or, at least, European) relations. But when unprepared Romanian politicians met their match in the cold bureaucracy of Brussels and a pragmatic Council, suspicions crept back in. Many Romanians indeed feel wrongly excluded from Schengen and a victim of discrimination of, among other policies, the EU's agricultural policy and branding rules.

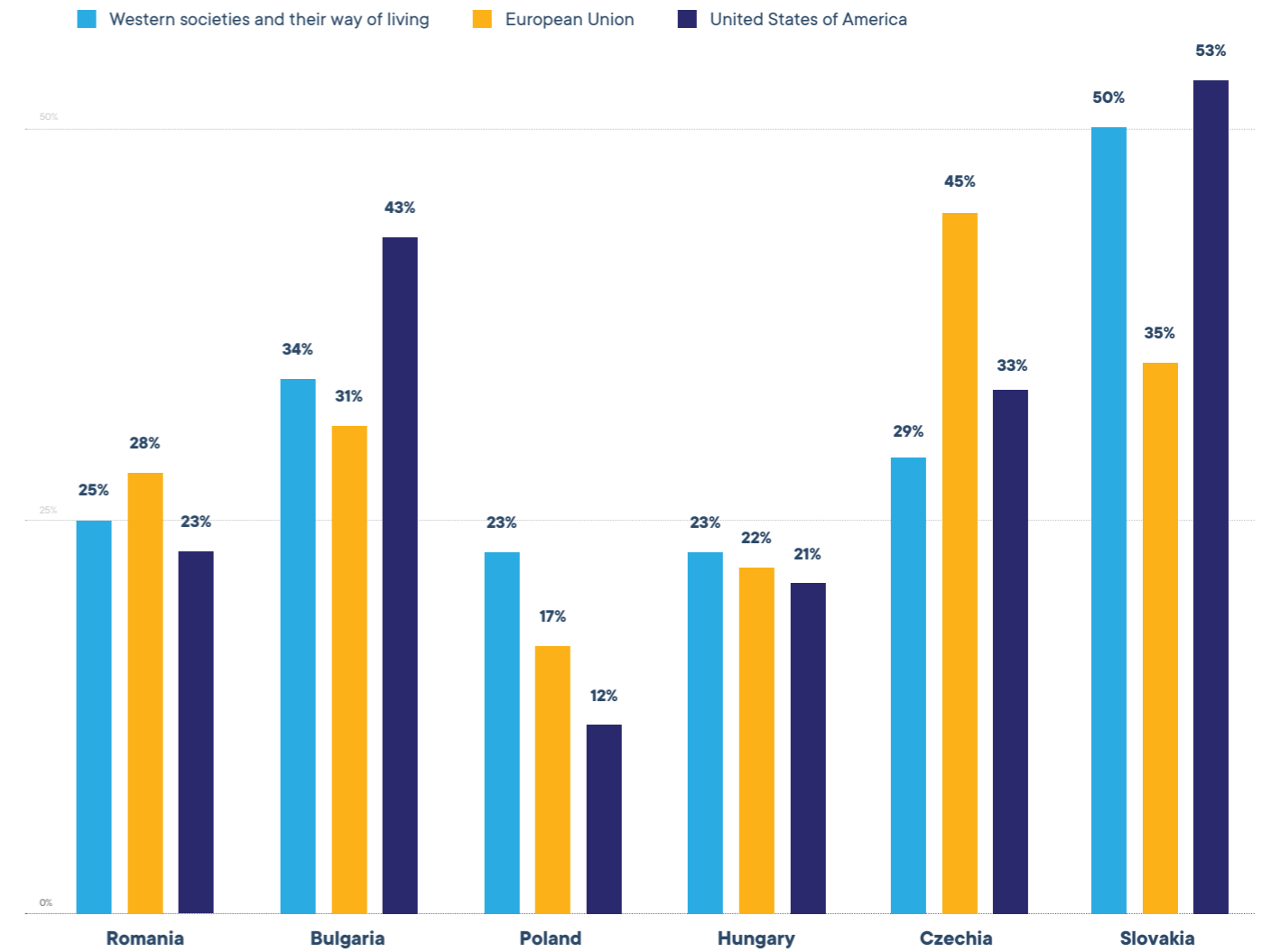
Despite a detrimental communist legacy that persists in the form of behavioural patterns and recurring narratives, increased interactions between Romanians and the West, following the country's accession to the EU, is benefitting society.

<sup>17</sup> While the situation might have changed over the years, the study findings are still relevant today for a segment of the Romanian population: <https://m.hotnews.ro/stire/8149536>  
<sup>18</sup> <https://sl.ziare.com/romania/790b9562c4ee0bbf3e>  
<sup>19</sup> See Society sub-chapter in Romania section here: <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Propaganda-Made-to-Measure-How-Our-Vulnerabilities-Facilitate-Russian-Influence.pdf>  
<sup>20</sup> <https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/preview/XD/XD589/XD589923.Romanian-communist-leader-Nicolae-Ceausescu-in-the-context-of-Romanian-history-1960s.jpg>  
<sup>21</sup> See Society sub-chapter in the Romania section: <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Propaganda-Made-to-Measure-How-Our-Vulnerabilities-Facilitate-Russian-Influence.pdf>

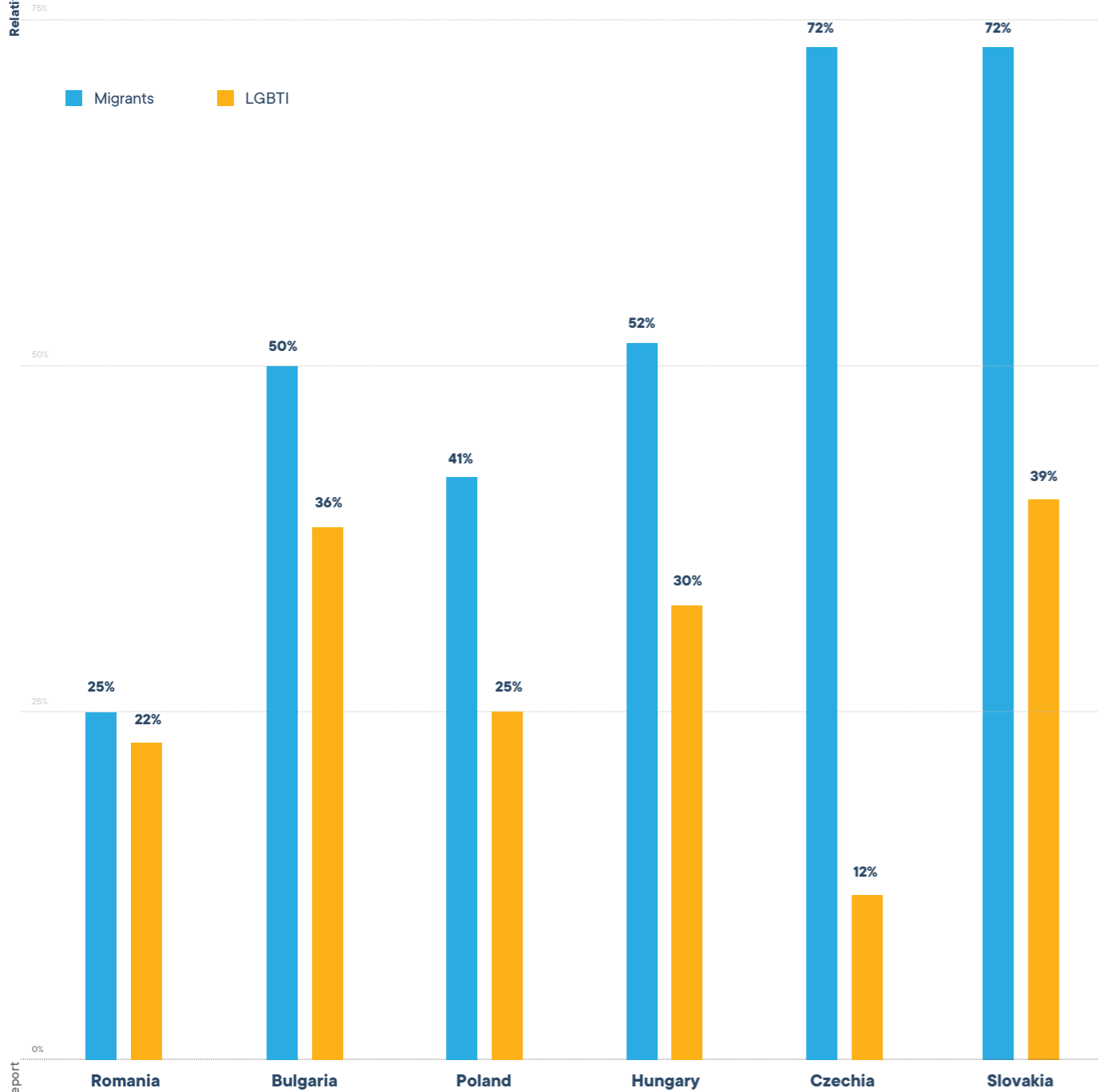


# Relative feeling of safety

Those who believe the following groups or countries threaten their identity and values.



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One positive implication surrounds the fact that a surprisingly low percentage of Romanians feel threatened by 'others', especially in comparison with neighbouring countries. Putting aside the fact that these statistics do not really account for views towards the Roma and Hungarian minorities (the groups most likely to face discrimination in Romania), the relative absence of widespread perceptions of any significant threats posed by other groups (such as migrants or foreigners) come from the first-hand migration experience of many Romanians themselves.

The West, including the European Union and the United States, is still considered a model for prosperity and a higher standard of living. A significant segment of the Romanian population is employed abroad (4 million of a total population of 19 million according to a recent government estimate). While this diaspora may become more prone to intolerance and anti-Western positions due to their particular circumstances, at least one study<sup>22</sup> shows that the families who stay behind in Romania tend to be more tolerant on average. One plausible explanation is that they may come to think of their family

members as "strangers in a strange land" and become more tolerant to foreigners.

The idealization of the West, prevalent in the early post-89 transition period, is long gone. But there is an apparent consensus that the Western way of life is still preferable to the alternatives including a Russian path that is anathema to many Romanians.

<sup>22</sup> Sandu, D., Lumile sociale ale migrației românești în străinătate. Polirom, 2010



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GlobalFocus Center

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