

Democracy in Central Europe

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Prepared by the GfK Group

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Introduction

The GfK Group conducted a survey in three Central Eastern European countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) in May 2011 in order to learn about the opinions of the adult population about democracy. The fieldwork was conducted in all three countries on a national representative sample of 1,000-1,000 people aged 18 and over as part of an omnibus research. For the interpretation and comparability of the results, the current data are compared to the results of the surveys conducted in the same countries using the same methods and questionnaire in the 1990s, and in Austria in 2009-2010 in every possible case (source of historic data: Plasser, Fritz – Ullrich, Peter – Waldrauch, Harald: *Politischer Kulturwandel in Ost-Mitteleuropa*. Opladen. 1997. Leske+Budrich, illetve Plasser, Fritz – Ullrich, Peter – Waldrauch, Harald: *Democratic Consolidation in East-Central Europe*. Basingstoke. 1998. Macmillan).

Support of Democracy

The support for the democratic form of government is basically at the same level in all three surveyed countries (see Table 1). The results are worthy of attention for two reasons. On the one hand, the support for democracy is considerably lower everywhere than in Austria, which has a significantly longer democratic history; at the same time both the nostalgia for dictatorship and the indifference to the form of government are stronger in the young democracies. On the other hand, it is extremely surprising that although the two decades passed since the democratic transformation (and the beginning of opinion polls about democracy) have brought about an almost total generation change, a generation whose political socialisation took place during the dictatorship has practically died out, and a generation who grew up in the new democratic system has grown up, the overall attitude to democracy has remained practically unchanged compared to the beginning of the '90s. This stability, however, is not only true of the overall picture, but across the generations as well: the preference for dictatorship in Hungary and Poland is no less weaker in the younger generations than in the older ones (e.g. in Poland, 15% of the 18-to 29-year-olds were on the opinion that in some cases dictatorship is better than democracy compared to the 18% of the over 60s, while in Hungary it is just the younger age group in which this antidemocratic opinion is represented slightly more). However, in Slovakia, the results are what could be expected: the under 50s are strongly committed to democracy, at the same time the older ones are either indifferent or pro dictatorship.

	HU	PL	SK	A (09)
<i>Democracy is preferable to dictatorship under any circumstances</i>				
2011	70	66	62	90
1995	67	65	66	
1991	69	60	67	
<i>In some cases, dictatorship may be preferable to democracy</i>				
2011	11	17	20	4
1995	11	15	12	
1991	9	14	10	
<i>For people like me, it makes no difference, whether we live in a democracy or a dictatorship</i>				
2011	14	11	14	5
1995	17	17	22	
1991	18	23	22	

Table 1: Support for opinions about democracy (%)

The increase in the group of citizens committed to democracy between the middle of the 1990s and 2011 would be difficult to hypothesise considering that satisfaction with the democratic system as a legitimising factor of the system is rather low in the whole Central European region, and has not grown in the last fifteen years at all. According to the data of Table 2, people dissatisfied with the

functioning of democracy have a steady majority in the Central European countries in the long run, and no improving trends can be seen in the opinions at all. When comparing the results surveyed between 1991 and 2011, it can be established that none of the countries have had a change of more than a few percentage points, which means the population practically have the same opinion about the consolidated, mature political system 20 years after the political transformation as about the unsettled democracy of the transitional period. The dissatisfaction with democracy in Central Europe is even more emphasised by the fact that only a quarter of the population are dissatisfied in the neighbouring Austria.

	HU	PL	SK	A (09)
<i>Very satisfied or rather satisfied</i>				
2011	25	45	35	73
1995	20	50	27	
1991	30	27	28	
<i>Not at all satisfied, or rather not satisfied</i>				
2011	70	49	60	26
1995	77	38	67	
1991	60	50	66	

Table 2: Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (%)

Dissatisfaction with the system causes a serious deficit in the support for and legitimation of the system. In the light of the above, it is not a surprise that the weight of the social strata that can clearly be considered anti-democracy has increased (or at least has not decreased) in all three countries. On the basis of answers given to two questions, the typology of Plasser, Ulram and Waldrauch divides the population into five groups (see Chart 1). According to the typology, for example, people who believe democracy is preferable to dictatorship under any circumstances and prefer a multi-party system can be considered committed democrats; those who cannot see a difference between democracy and dictatorship and prefer a multi-party system can be placed in the alienated type etc.

When the occurrence of the five possible types are examined on the basis of the 20-year trends, the first thing to establish is that the number of committed democrats has not increased, practically about 60% of the population of all three surveyed countries can be placed in there, just like in 1991. Fluctuations with no clear trend can be seen in the other groups of the typology as well, the only exception is that of anti-democrats, whose proportion – as a result of lesser or grater fluctuations – is about a fifth of the population now (the highest in Slovakia and lowest in Hungary).

	<i>Democracy is preferable to dictatorship under any circumstances</i>	<i>For people like me, it makes no difference, whether we live in a democracy or a dictatorship</i>	<i>In some cases, dictatorship may be preferable to democracy</i>
<i>Preference for one party-system</i>	<i>critical democrats</i>	<i>latent authoritarians</i>	<i>anti-democrats</i>
<i>Preference for multiparty-system</i>	<i>committed democrats</i>	<i>alienated</i>	

Chart 1: Typology of orientation related to democracy

As it could be seen when democratic commitment was discussed, it is not that the voters socialised during the dictatorship form the anti-democratic group and young people “born into” democracy are committed democrats with no exception (or at least their overwhelming majority). In accordance with what was said above, the proportion of committed democrats in the 18-to 29-year-old age groups is only 65% just like in the whole sample, and this group has roughly the

same proportion of anti-democrats as the other age groups. The Polish results developed similarly to the Hungarian ones, and the age effect again can only be seen in Slovakia, which means that the younger generations are more democratic and less authoritarian oriented.

These facts pose the issue of spontaneous and guided political socialisation in Hungary and Poland. If effective democratic political socialisation existed in these countries, it could not happen that the younger generations show the same varied picture as regards their democratic orientation as the older cohorts. Slovakia offers a counterexample, where there is a gap between the democratic values of the youngest and older age groups: while 66% of the 18-to 29-year-olds are committed democrats and hardly 13% of them are anti-democrats, only 40% of the over 60s are committed democrats, but 35% of them are anti-democrats.

	HU	PL	SK
<i>Committed Democrats</i>			
2011	66	59	56
1995	57	54	61
1991	63	53	61
<i>Critical Democrats</i>			
2011	9	12	8
1995	14	14	5
1991	10	10	7
<i>Alienated</i>			
2011	8	6	8
1995	10	10	21
1991	11	15	17
<i>Latent Authoritarians</i>			
2011	5	5	6
1995	7	10	1
1991	6	15	6
<i>Anti-Democrats</i>			
2011	12	18	22
1995	11	15	12
1991	10	15	9

Table 3: Proportion of types by democratic orientation (%)

The above conclusions are confirmed if the attitudes to democracy are examined using another typology as well (Rose, Richard – Haerpfer, Christian: *Adapting to Transformation in Eastern Europe*. Glasgow. 1993). This theory also forms the types on the basis of answers given to two questions; the questions are the following: “Some people think this country would be better governed if parliament were closed down and all parties were abolished. How likely do you think this is to happen in the next few years?” and “If Parliament was closed down and parties abolished, would you: definitely approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove or definitely disapprove?” Within the 2x2 typology, people who would not welcome and do not find the abolition of parliament and parties likely were placed in the confident democrats group. Anxious democrats are those who do not support the abolition of parliament and parties, but find it conceivable. The hopeful authoritarians group is made up by those who would welcome the abolition of parliament and parties and find it likely, and finally the dejected authoritarians type are those who agree with the abolition of parliament and parties, but do not find it likely.

	HU	PL	SK
<i>Confident Democrats</i>			
2011	69	50	52
1995	65	33	59

1992	64	33	61
<i>Anxious Democrats</i>			
2011	3	12	4
1995	9	34	19
1992	11	24	19
<i>Hopeful Authoritarians</i>			
2011	14	22	23
1995	16	27	15
1992	13	35	13
<i>Dejected Authoritarians</i>			
2011	15	17	21
1995	7	5	7
1992	12	8	6

Table 4: Proportion of types by democratic orientation (%)

The only common trend seen in all three countries is a fall in the proportion of anxious democrats. The “coming of age” of the new political system following the political transformation – it seems – can provide enough evidence that the quick elimination of the democratic system of institutions is not only difficult to imagine, but not a real threat either. It is especially noteworthy that it is just Hungary that has the lowest proportion of anxious democrats (3%), although during the one year before the survey the messages of the parliamentary opposition focused on the fact that the government majority were preparing to eliminate democracy.

The proportions of the rest of the types developed differently in the different countries; however, a common feature is that 30-40% of the population can be considered clearly authoritarian in 2011. If this result is compared to the 60-70% proportion of committed democrats, then the two independent measuring methods both suggest that about 2/3 of the population can be considered democrats and a third authoritarian. Since these proportions have been virtually unchanged in the last 20 years, we cannot conclude that the relatively high proportion of anti-democrats would make democracy fragile in the Central Eastern European countries, and we cannot conclude either that the functioning of the system itself will automatically create its own legitimacy and thus reduce the authoritarian proportion within the society.

Since the population do not consider the elimination of the democratic political system likely, the nostalgia felt for the earlier system can be considered a criticism of the present system, and not an increase in the support for a real anti-democratic alternative.

	HU	PL	SK
<i>Mostly or only bad sides</i>			
2011	8	24	20
1995	4	15	12
1991	8	17	15
<i>Both good and bad sides</i>			
2011	42	52	43
1995	76	79	81
1991	85	76	78
<i>Mostly or only good sides</i>			
2011	36	13	31
1995	18	4	7
1991	5	4	6

Table 5: Opinions of the communist system (%)

Considering all these, it can still be considered a huge change that while in 1991 practically only a handful of blinded Stalinists thought that the old regime had more better features than bad ones (4-6% of the population), the proportion of those who only remember the “bright side” has jumped to a third both in Hungary and Slovakia in 20 years, and the nostalgic ones have only remained a minority in Poland (although showing a significant increase), which country suffered a lot due to the agony of the old regime.

The functional legitimacy of the democratic system cannot only be examined in connection with the satisfaction with the system, but the alienation from the political system is also a proper indicator. On the basis of answers given to the three questions surveying alienation, the more or less uniform picture of the three Central European countries is somewhat differentiated: the population of Slovakia has alienated from the political system even more than Hungary and Poland, although the two latter countries are also significantly behind the benchmark Austria.

	HU	PL	SK	A
<i>People like me have no influence on what the government does</i>				
2011	82	78	87	69
1995	87	85	86	68
1991	80	88	79	-
<i>Sometimes politics is so complicated that people like me can hardly understand what is going on</i>				
2011	70	72	75	61
1995	77	83	77	58
1991	72	82	85	
<i>Politicians don't really care what people like me think</i>				
2011	86	84	90	-
1995	83	89	84	67
1991	67	77	77	

Table 6: Proportion of those agreeing with the system alienation statements (%)

In addition, it deserves attention that diverging trends can be seen in the region related to this issue: while all the indexes show alienation is clearly decreasing in Poland, the results have practically been the same in Hungary for 20 years, while the opinions of the population about the system are clearly worsening in Slovakia.

Alienation is approached from another angle by the index surveying the population's interest in politics. The study of these data suggests that the population's alienation from the system has been continuously increasing in Slovakia, and by 2011 this alienation has reached a stage where hardly one in ten voters feels it is important to follow what is happening in politics. The case of Hungary can be interesting where despite the strong feeling of keeping the distance, the long-term trend of interest in politics is clearly increasing.

	HU	PL	SK
<i>Very much or much interested</i>			
2011	23	12	9
1995	19	12	10
1991	14	12	23
<i>Somewhat interested</i>			
2011	34	36	42
1995	30	42	42
1991	40	35	52
<i>Hardly or not at all interested</i>			
2011	43	52	49

1995	52	45	48
1991	43	51	23

Table 7: Interest in politics (%)

As opposed to functional legitimacy, the value-based legitimacy of democracy is unquestionable in the Central European countries. When it comes to democratic values like freedom of speech, right of assembly or freedom of participation in elections, practically the same proportion of the residents of the surveyed countries stand up to these values as in Austria.

	HU	PL	SK	A
Everybody should have the right to express his or her opinion, even if the majority holds a different opinion	96	89	90	98
Every citizen has the right to take to the streets for his or her convictions, if necessary	89	87	85	82
In principle every democratic party should have the chance to come into power	81	69	68	86

Table 8: Support for democratic values (%)

Although there are only slight differences, it cannot be considered accidental that it is just Poland and Slovakia where the support for the freedom of speech (apart from the practically 100% surveyed in Hungary and Austria, these two countries only had 90%), and the acceptance of free competition for power (another 10-15% deficit compared to the two other countries) is not unanimous. It is most probably the experience with demagogic political forces that have strengthened in Slovakia and Poland that encourage some of the residents of these two countries not to accept these democratic values without reservation. This could be indicated by the fact that it is just the cultural elite that have more reservations (e.g. only 17% of people with elementary education accept limitations as regards any party having the chance to come into power, while the similar proportion is 27% among college and university graduates; similarly, 7% of people with an elementary level of education find it acceptable to limit the freedom of speech, but 11% of college and university graduates in Slovakia).

Summarising in one sentence what has been said about the support for the democratic system, we can say that democracy is accepted in Central Europe, however, opinions vary: when we speak about democratic values and principles, the system does not have considerable opposition, however, when thinking of the actual existing democracy, many would welcome some more efficient alternative.

Opinions about the Democratic System

As it has been pointed out above, the acceptance of the democratic system is not unanimous in the Central European countries. The following section examines which elements of the system contribute to the lack of legitimacy.

	HU	PL	SK	A
Government				
2011	23	19	23	35
1995	19	23	24	30
1991	26	26	23	33
Parliament				
2011	22	21	21	35
1995	21	25	24	31
1991	29	18	34	31
Political parties				

2011	12	11	14	20
1995	10	8	15	14
1991	16	7	20	19
<i>Courts of law</i>				
2011	38	40	28	61
1995	43	38	32	60
1991	44	30	39	50
<i>Police</i>				
2011	42	47	34	-
1995	44	38	28	62
1991	43	30	35	51
<i>Army</i>				
2011	38	58	53	-
1995	40	54	44	44
1991	47	53	31	41

Table 9: Trust in the different institutions (cumulated % of values 5 to 7 on a 7-point scale)

Trust in the institutions of the system is generally moderate in all three countries. It should be emphasised that a kind of lack of trust in the institutions is typical of the new democracies, which is conspicuous when the results surveyed in the three Central European countries are compared to the Austrian figures. This comparison shows – whether it is about political institutions such as parliament or the government, or organisations far from politics such as courts of law or the police – that the confidence indexes in Austria are regularly 10-20% higher than in the other three countries. It is easy to discover the effect of the general Central European atomisation and lack of integration in this uniform distrust in all institutions, so if the democratic political institution system also suffers from a lack of trust, that is partly the consequence of this general trend, we cannot say that the acceptance of and opinions about the political institutions is a lot worse in new democracies than in the West, since the results are just as much worse as in the case of other institutions.

Despite this restriction it is clear that the trust in political institutions has reached the lowest level everywhere, and practically there is no difference in the opinions about these institutions between Hungary, Poland or Slovakia (for example, the proportion of those who have trust in the parliament is 21-22% in all three countries, those in parties 11-14%). Non-political institutions or those far from politics clearly received better ratings everywhere, however, there are very significant differences at places by country (e.g. opinions about the army are worsening in Hungary, and the confidence index is only at 38%, while they are improving in Poland and are at 58%).

Finally, it is conspicuous that when the long-term trends are considered, practically all the institutions are losing confidence in Hungary, while the trends show a general increase in confidence in Poland. This may suggest that while social depression and anomy are deepening in Hungary, social welfare is enjoying an upward trend in Poland.

On the basis of the study of feelings generated by politics, another sharp line can be seen on the two sides of the former Iron Curtain: while we can hardly find people in the three Central European countries in whom politics generates positive feelings (e.g. interest, enthusiasm), a third of the population of Austria have a positive attitude. The trends of feelings are even more conspicuous: while opinions about politics have been continuously worsening in the three Central European countries since the enthusiasm felt at the beginning of the '90s (e.g. the proportion of those who feel distrust when they think of politics has increased from 17% to 28% in Hungary in 20 years, and even more, from 3% to 25% that of people who connect disgust to politics in Slovakia), opinions about politics have hardly worsened in Austria.

	HU	PL	SK	A
<i>Distrust</i>				
2011	28	26	26	25
1995	26	19	33	26
1991	17	20	36	25
<i>Disgust</i>				
2011	11	9	25	6
1995	8	8	5	4
1991	4	12	3	4
<i>Anger</i>				
2011	20	15	17	21
1995	12	10	12	20
1991	16	11	13	14
<i>Indifference</i>				
2011	19	14	14	9
1995	21	28	19	13
1991	25	26	12	17
<i>Boredom</i>				
2011	7	20	6	3
1995	8	12	6	3
1991	8	7	4	4
<i>Positive feelings (sympathy, interest, enthusiasm)</i>				
2011	13	14	9	33
1995	24	23	26	30
1991	31	22	31	37

Table 10: Feelings generated by politics (%)

The analysis of both the trust in institutions and the feelings generated by politics suggests that the political system is a formation the population of the Central European countries look upon with suspicion and keep a distance from, something average people are strongly alienated from. This means that opinions about democracy have a twofold character. While the democratic principles and values (free elections, freedom of speech and opinion, multi-party system etc.) are desirable and supported goals for the overwhelming majority of the society practically nobody opposes, the actual functioning of the system is not only unappreciated but also widely rejected.

Welfare and Democratic Values

This strong criticism of the actual functioning of the system is primarily due to the economic slump and the general and extensive fall in the standard of living occurring together with the democratic transformation. Since the stabilisation of the democratic system and the economic transformation that has put many at a disadvantage were taking place simultaneously after 1989, most people blame democracy for their own failure. As a result, no improvement in the support for democracy can be expected in these countries as long as the livelihood of masses of people is insecure.

The above statement can be supported by the following facts. Partly, the differences are shocking between the democracy concepts of the strata with worsening and improving financial conditions. In Slovakia, for example, hardly a quarter of those expecting worsening conditions in their situation were satisfied with the functioning of the democracy, while 60% of those who expect an improvement, and the same trend was seen in the other two surveyed countries as well.

The financial situation of your household in the next 10 years will ...	HU	PL	SK
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<i>improve</i>	40	63	60
<i>not change</i>	36	52	42
<i>worsen</i>	19	28	23

Table 11: Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy by respondents economic expectation (%)

Although the proportion of those satisfied with the functioning of the democratic system is not really high even within the strata in good financial condition (the index does not reach the two-thirds level in any of the countries), if we consider that only 28% of the Hungarian, 30% of the Polish and 23% of the Slovakian adult population expect an improvement in their financial situation, that is, about a quarter of the residents of the region have an optimistic view of the future, then according to our forecast, no significant improvement in the acceptance of the system can be expected in the near future.

By the system we do not necessarily have to mean the less supported political system, but the whole democratic regime. When respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement “security and welfare are more important than freedom,” those preferring welfare to freedom formed the majority in all three countries (the biggest difference was surveyed in Slovakia with a 33:16 result, but at 36:24, the standing was incontestable in Hungary as well).

	HU	PL	SK
<i>Fully agree or rather agree</i>	36	38	33
<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	37	33	41
<i>Rather disagree or completely disagree</i>	24	28	16

Table 12: Breakdown of answers given to “Security and welfare are more important than freedom” (%)

It is certainly worth considering that the above results are proportions surveyed on the whole sample, and optimism versus pessimism about personal financial conditions also fundamentally influence people’s views in this respect. For example, the preferences for welfare versus freedom were 30:33 among the optimists in Hungary (as a reminder: about a quarter of the population), 33:25 among those who expect stagnation in their standard of living, and welfare proved to be more important in the ratio of 45:21 to those who expect worsening financial conditions. The Polish and Slovakian trends agree with the Hungarian figures, the population of the latter would especially gladly trade freedom for welfare: welfare proved to be more important in the ratio of 38:21 even within the optimistic stratum, while the 55:11 proportion surveyed among pessimists makes all further analysis unnecessary.

This devaluation of one of the most valuable achievements of the democratic system, freedom, cannot only be seen in connection with the welfare versus freedom dilemma, but strong authoritarianism and statism seem to be important characteristic features of the population of Central European countries.

When it came to media regulation, Poland was the only country where people who thought that control was acceptable in order to ensure public order and public morals did not have a convincing majority, which enjoys clear support in the other two countries. The result is especially worthy of attention in Hungary since it was the criticism of the law limiting the freedom of the media that the parliamentary opposition made a cornerstone of their policy hoping that their intervention in favour of democracy will be met with the uniform support of the population, however, this topic is of serious value for only not more than a third of the population.

	HU	PL	SK
<i>Fully or rather agree</i>	61	45	55
<i>Rather or completely disagree</i>	36	45	38

Table 13: Breakdown of answers given to “The state should have the right to control the media to make sure that public order and morale are secured” (%)

Convincing evidence of the need for a strong government is provided by opinions about the economic intervention role of the government. The individual efforts versus state taking responsibility split the society half-and-half (Slovakia had a slight majority of the individual, Hungary the statist view), so does the state versus private ownership of companies (it is also Hungary where the most government-centred view is found, while it had a certain disadvantage in Poland). The explanation may certainly emerge again that the older age groups that were socialised before the changes in 1990 and for a long time lived in a system that did not allow individualistic solutions at all are more pro state, while younger generations who already grew up in the new system are rather individualistic, however, this logical train of thought is mostly weakly felt, and in some cases it is not felt at all.

	HU	PL	SK
Individuals should be responsible for their own welfare	40	46	52
The state should be responsible for everyone's economic security	52	46	45
State ownership is the best way to run an enterprise	50	35	46
An enterprise is best run by private entrepreneurs	35	53	46

Table 14: Support for individualist and collectivist views (%)

For example, the members of the 18-to 29-year-old age group preferred the second option in the ratio of 41:59 in Hungary, while the support for the collectivist view was weaker among the over 60s. Although the above described pattern was not true in the case of state ownership versus private entrepreneurs (the youngest preferred private enterprises in the ratio of 52:48, the oldest state ownership in the ratio of 64:36), however, it is worth mentioning that opinions were split half-and-half even among the 18-to 29-year-olds, which means not even this age group rejects state ownership in the economy on the one hand, and state ownership is clearly the preferred option in the next age group, among the 30-to 44-year-olds on the other hand (in the ratio of 58:42). Although the trend that older people have more collectivist views than young people is true of the other two countries, however, 39% of the Polish 18-to 29-year-olds also believe that the state should be responsible for everyone's economic security, or 38% of the Slovakian young people of the same age consider the state ownership of companies better, which means the support for the state's role is also very strong in these strata.

The seriousness and strengthening nature of the need for state intervention can be confirmed by two other indicators. On the one hand, when it comes to the equal treatment and equal taxation of domestic and foreign companies, the proportion of those who feel foreign investors receive disproportionately more favourable treatment than the domestic ones is outstandingly high in all three countries, which means they think domestic enterprises suffer negative discrimination in their own country. Since the question was about the perception of the problem (if people see a difference in the treatment of the companies), and not about their opinion about the solution (what measures they would support to solve the problem), it is not a fact just a hypothesis when we say that the respondents of all three countries would expect strong state measures in order to cease this perceived inequality.

	HU	PL	SK
Rather equal and fair	14	24	24
Rather unequal and unfair	71	61	65

Table 15: Opinions about the regulation and taxation of domestic and foreign enterprises (%)

The increasing longing for a strong-hand leader is another indicator of the need for an efficient state and not of the increasing acceptance of dictatorship, since the data shown in Table 1 above

clearly confirm that the proportion of those preferring dictatorship to democracy has not increased in any of the countries in the last 20 years. If we remember what was said above about the erosion of trust in institutions and the feelings created by politics turning more negative, then at the back of it is again the low efficiency of the political system: the parliament, the parties, the government are the institutions of empty talk, fruitless disputes that postpone action and cannot be expected to take the necessary measures. It is not a surprise in the light of this that efficient state intervention is a value the residents of the region long for so much that they feel that even strong one-person leadership is an acceptable price for it.

	HU	PL	SK
2011	24	42	35
1995	20	32	17
1993	18	39	19

Table 16: Opinions about the statement “We do not really need a parliament. Rather we need a strong leader who can make decisions quickly and implement them” (%)

Summary

Democracy as a value and a principle governing social coexistence has not lost importance in the Central European countries since the democratic transformation: the biggest part of the population, about two thirds of it, can be considered committed democrats. However, the experience with the “existing democracy” in the last 20 years has been disillusioning for very many: for everyday people, democracy means political squabble, neglecting their needs, a state of low efficiency, the weakening of social cohesion and the deterioration of their standard of living. As a result, high tension can be felt in the countries of the region when democratic principles and the democratic practice are assessed: while the first one is supported without reservation, the latter creates strong aversion, even rejection in many.

Since such tensions do not generally exist in the society permanently, we can see two possible scenarios as regards the prospects of democracy in the region. On the one hand, if dissatisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system remains in the long run, it will sooner or later question democratic principles as well: what is parliament for if it does not do anything, what are elections for if we can only elect worse and even worse candidates, what is freedom of speech for if opinions do not reach the response threshold of decision makers etc. If this scenario is realised, first people’s indifference to democracy will increase (“For people like me, it makes no difference, whether we live in a democracy or a dictatorship”), then the value of democracy may even become negative.

On the other hand, the proper handling of system dysfunctions making the perception of the functioning of the democratic system negative may strengthen the population’s commitment to democracy (which still has ample room since compared to the two-thirds of the region, 90% prefer democracy in Austria). Meeting the population’s expectations of an efficient state can be a primary tool since it could be seen above that the most biting criticism of the system was about the weak, non-intervening state.