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Frontispiece:

The Ugandan army patrolling the refugee settlement in Rwamwanja, January
2020, photo: Sándor Jászberényi.

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How EU citizens see the issue of migration – results of an EU-wide representative research

Szabolcs Janik

Abstract

This study presents the results of a specific EU-wide survey conducted by Hungary's oldest conservative think tank, Századvég. The so-called Project Europe included a separate set of questions dedicated to the issue of migration in which respondents were surveyed in all the 27 EU member states in 2020. This representative research gave a valuable insight into how Europeans see contemporary immigration processes amid the COVID pandemic. The results revealed that European societies agree on the broader issue of migration in several important areas. For example, the majority of EU citizens clearly see the current migration towards Europe as economic immigration, and expect the European Union to take more effective action, including more successful border protection. The distribution of asylum seekers is already revealing the division between “Westerners” and “Easterners”, pointing out one of the key reasons why quotas should not be a way out of the migration crisis for the EU and its member states. However, there is a clear demand from the majority of respondents to try to solve demographic problems through an increase in birth rate and through the support of families instead of immigration. These positions are particularly popular in the post-socialist and V4 countries, but, apart from Luxembourg, they also form a majority opinion in Western member states.

Keywords: immigration, EU, survey, Századvég, public opinion, Project Europe

Introduction

The issue of migration (more precisely: immigration) is still strongly present in European public discourse. This highlights the fact that although the number of illegal arrivals in the European Union (EU) has been significantly reduced¹ since

¹ While in 2015 a total of more than 1.822 million illegal border crossings (IBCs) were registered at the EU's external borders, in 2019 this number was only about 142,000. The number of asylum applications submitted also fell sharply after 2015 but stabilised at a higher level (the two statistics correlate but may differ significantly for practical reasons). See: FRONTEX 2020.

2015–2016, the problem is far from being resolved.² On the other hand, it is also important to emphasise that the perception of illegal migration is not primarily shaped by the process itself, but by the “final result”, i.e., the everyday experiences of immigration, and the ideas and perceptions formed about them. Thus, for example, Europeans’ impression of the success of integration or how they view the state of public security is a much more determining factor. Migration has become an important social and political issue over the last five years, and one which is capable of generating serious debates – both within and across member states. In addition to the objective/subjective social reality, politicians in Brussels and the member states, as well as the media, have played a key role in this. The level of interest in the topic and the strength of related concerns are shown by the fact that the issue of immigration remained in the TOP 3 of the EUROBAROMETER 2020 summer survey, even during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.³

This paper briefly presents the results of an EU-wide survey conducted by *Hungary’s oldest conservative think tank, Századvég in 2020, and also provides some possible underlying reasons for the attitudes of EU citizens.*

About the research

In the first half of 2016, Századvég conducted a public opinion poll covering all 28 EU member states, with the aim of analysing the opinions of EU citizens regarding the issues that most affect the future of the Union. In a unique way, Project28 conducted the widest possible survey of 1,000 randomly selected adults in each country, thus a total of 28,000 individuals. Gaining an understanding of society’s sense of prosperity and mapping the population’s attitudes towards the performance of the European Union, the migration crisis and the growing threat of terrorism were among the most important subjects of the analysis. Századvég conducted the research again in 2017, 2018 and 2019. These surveys also continued to reflect on the topics that most determined the European political and social discourse.⁴

In 2020, the survey, now called Project Europe, continued with the aim of mapping the population’s attitude towards the most important public issues affecting our continent.⁵

² And this still holds true: after dropping to 124,000 in 2020, the number of IBCs is on the rise again in 2021, having reached 133,900 by the end of September. See: FRONTEX 2021a. and FRONTEX 2021b.

³ EUROBAROMETER 2020.

⁴ For the results of the surveys see: PROJECT 28 2020.

⁵ PROJECT EUROPE 2020.

In addition to society's sense of prosperity, the performance of the European Union and the attitudes towards the migration crisis, in line with the latest challenges affecting Europe, the dominant theme of the 2020 poll is the coronavirus pandemic, climate change and anti-Semitism. In addition to the EU member states, the research covered the United Kingdom, Norway and Switzerland, interviewing a total of 30,000 randomly selected adults using the CATI method.

The issue of migration formed a separate block in the research. The most important results are analysed below. Due to the Project28 research conducted by Századvég in previous years, data are available on several issues in a chronological sequence, so where possible and relevant, the changes and trends in the perception of migration are also covered.

Perception of Immigration

The research shows that illegal migration is still a major concern for Europeans: there were extremely high rates of response to the question of how serious they think illegal immigration into their own country was. The combined rate of “very serious” or “only somewhat serious” responses has not decreased significantly since 2016, and was still at 75% in 2020. (*Chart 1*).

Although there are significant differences in the perception of the influx of illegal immigrants between groups of different countries, it can be seen that even in the Visegrad (V4) countries, almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) selected either “very serious” or “only somewhat serious” (*Chart 2*).⁶

The concerns observed in the V4, which are somewhat more moderate than the European average, can be explained by the fact that migratory pressures on the Mediterranean front countries are higher than in the Central European region (partly due to the geographical location of the latter countries and partly due to the effectiveness of their migration policy – see Hungary), that is, the citizens of the V4 states assess the migration situation of their countries quite realistically. This is reinforced by the fact that the founding countries and those who joined the European integration during the 20th century can be considered traditional target countries, so the problem of illegal immigration was known there even before 2015. Not surprisingly, the highest response at the country level was in Greece, with 63% there finding the arrival of illegal immigrants very worrying and 25% rather worrying. It is noteworthy that even in Luxembourg, which is the least concerned, this cumulative rate is 62%.

⁶ During the research, the response rates of the Visegrad four (i.e. the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) were tallied separately within the post-socialist countries.

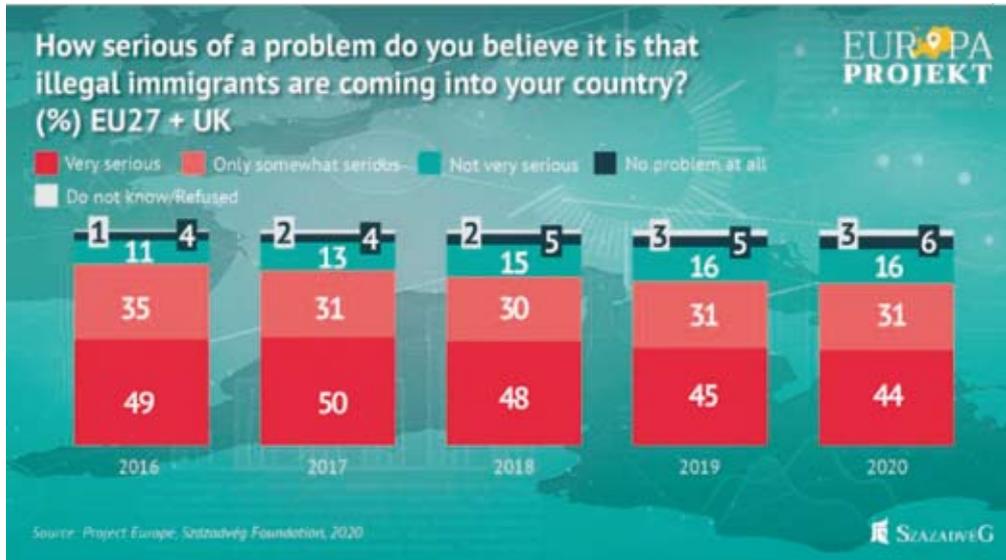


Chart 1

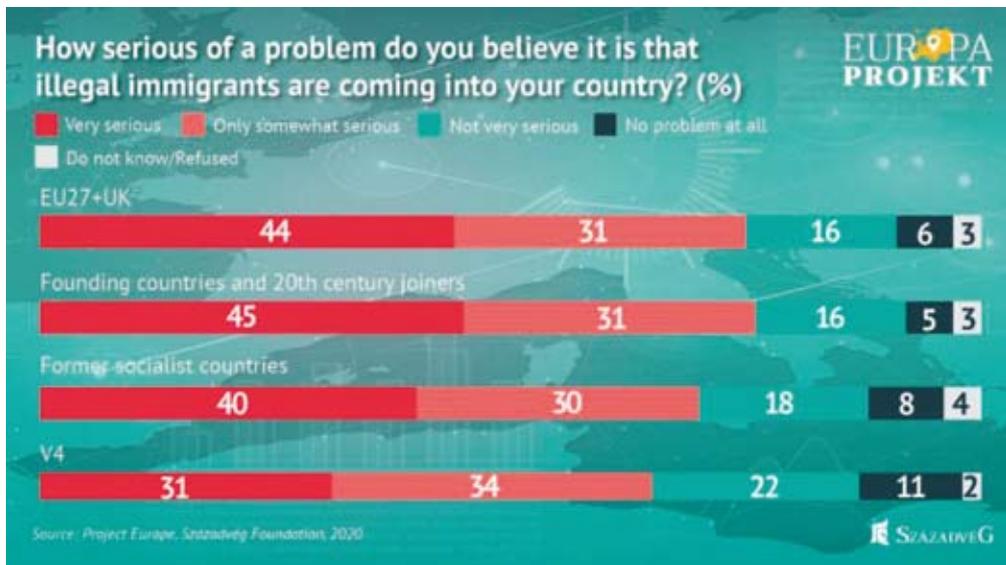


Chart 2

The survey also asked why Europeans think immigrants come to the continent. While in 2016 (the second peak of the migration crisis) a narrow majority (51%) believed that the majority of illegal migrants fled their homeland to the EU to save their lives, in 2020 only 37% thought so (*Chart 3*). At the same time, and in line with the results of research published since then⁷, the proportion of those who say that most people come for economic purposes or for social benefits has increased steadily (those who think so have become a majority since 2017). The data draw attention to the unsustainability of the exclusive narrative of the “refugee crisis”, also demonstrating Europeans’ sense of reality, since, based on the recognition rates in the member states, the majority of newcomers are indeed considered to be economic migrants.⁸



Chart 3

There is a significant difference between the response rate of the V4 and other member states: while in the group of the 27 EU member states and the United Kingdom the rates are 57% to 37% in favour of economic immigration, in the V4 countries the rates are 68% to 26%. It is noteworthy that the highest response rates were in Latvia (79%) and Lithuania (77%), but the third Baltic state, Estonia, is also in the highest bracket (fifth place with 70%) (*Chart 4*). Those who say that the migrants are essentially refugees from persecution are in a majority only in six countries, Romania, Sweden, Cyprus, Portugal, Malta and Luxembourg. Among these, Malta seems particularly interesting, since illegal immigration increased significantly there in 2020.

⁷ For example see: ZAPTIA 2016.

⁸ For the latest data see: EASO 2021.

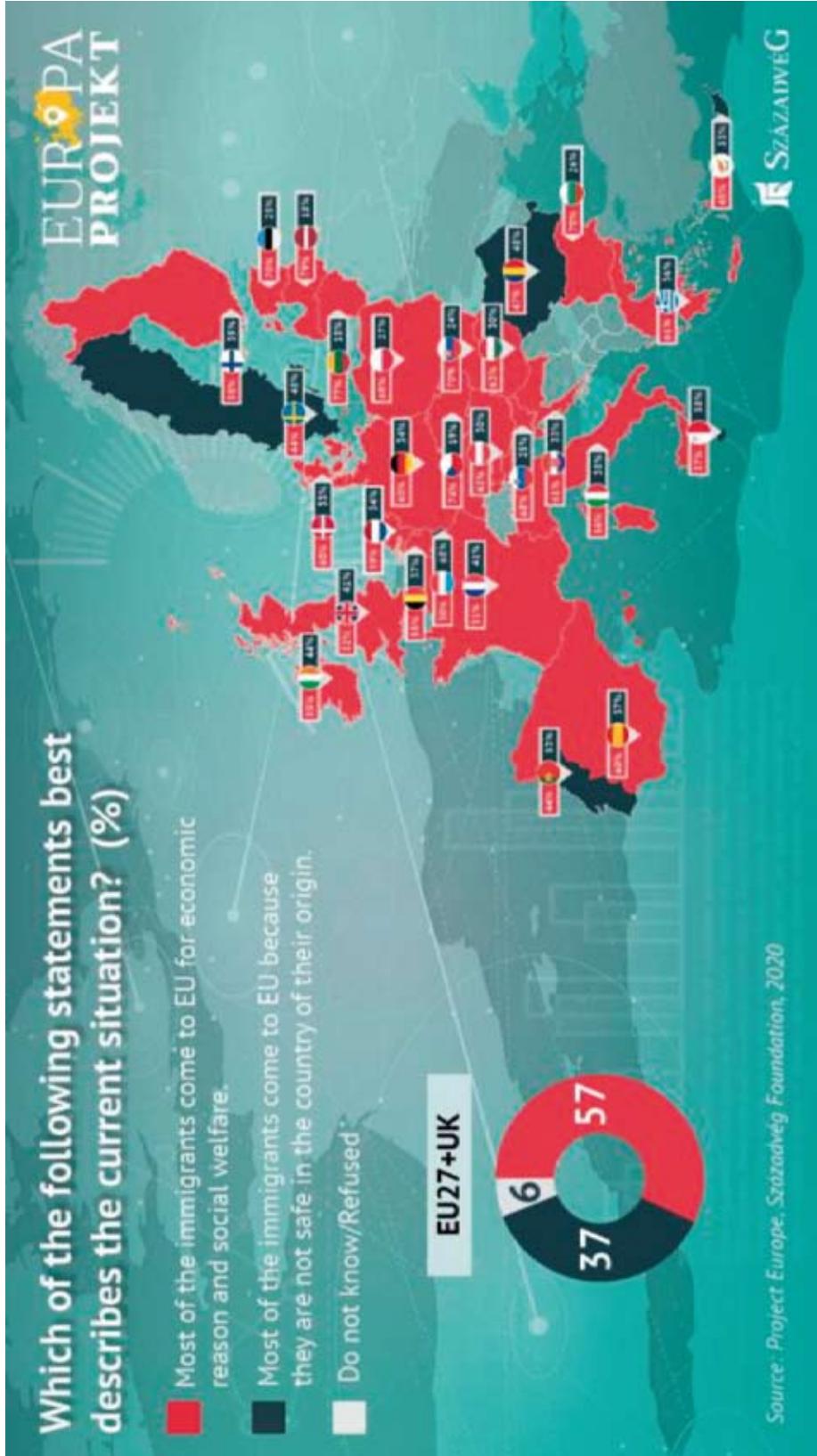


Chart 4

Crisis Management

Project Europe was also interested in how Europeans assess the EU's crisis management performance and measures regarding migration. The answers to the related question suggest that, while immigration is essentially a member state competence, Europeans expect Brussels to take effective action, and clearly assign it a role in resolving the crisis. The results obtained suggest that, similar to the experience of recent years, the majority of Europeans are dissatisfied with the way in which Brussels is handling the migration crisis. More than two-thirds (67%) of EU and UK respondents consider the EU's action on this issue to be weak, while only 26% are satisfied with Brussels' migration policy (*Chart 5*).

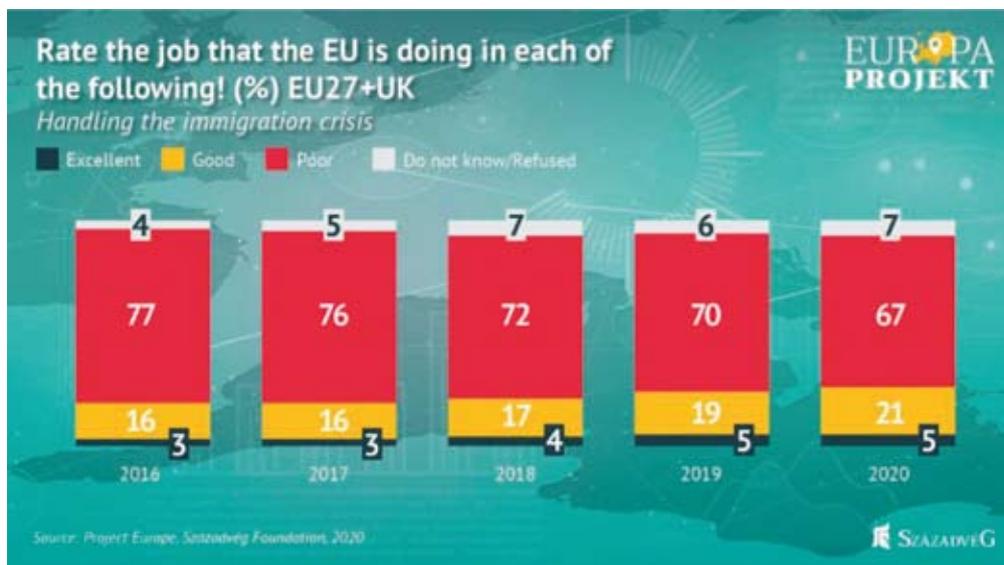


Chart 5

There are noticeable differences between certain groups of countries. In Western, Northern and Southern Europe, which are most affected by immigration, 70% of respondents gave Brussels a "poor" rating, compared with the former socialist member states and the V4 countries, where this rate is 58% in both cases (*Chart 6*). In addition to being affected to different degrees by migration, the latter result can also be explained by optimistic, idealistic attitudes stemming from a high level of commitment to EU membership.

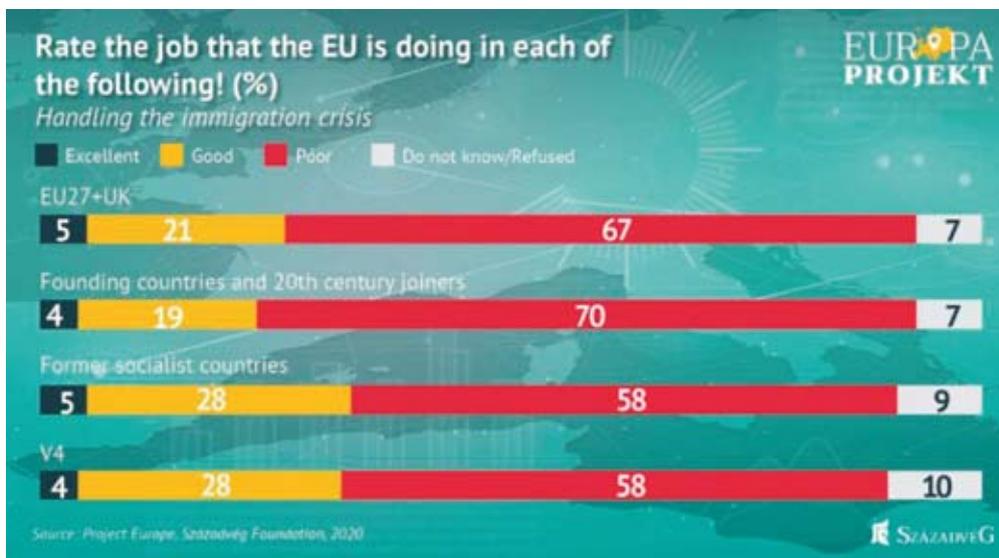


Chart 6

Interestingly, the majority are dissatisfied with the EU's crisis management in all member states, and the worst certificate has been issued by respondents in two front countries, Greece and Italy: 82% of Greeks and 81% of Italians rated the EU's performance as poor. The least dissatisfied were the Irish, Romanians and Luxembourgers (the cumulative rate of "excellent" and "good" was 44%, 39% and 45%, respectively). The research also asked about two important crisis management tools: border protection and distribution quotas.

Border Protection

The results obtained suggest that Europeans expect Brussels to take stronger action on border protection, without which it is impossible to effectively address the migration crisis. Accordingly, more than three-quarters of the respondents (78%) agree with the statement that "the EU should protect the European borders more efficiently". There is a noticeable difference in the response rates between the founders and those who joined in the 20th century and the post-socialist countries (*Chart 7*). In the latter group, there is a higher proportion of those who expect more effective border protection, which reinforces the overall picture that border protection is strongly expected of Brussels, even if the protection of external (Schengen) borders is basically a member state competence. With this in mind,

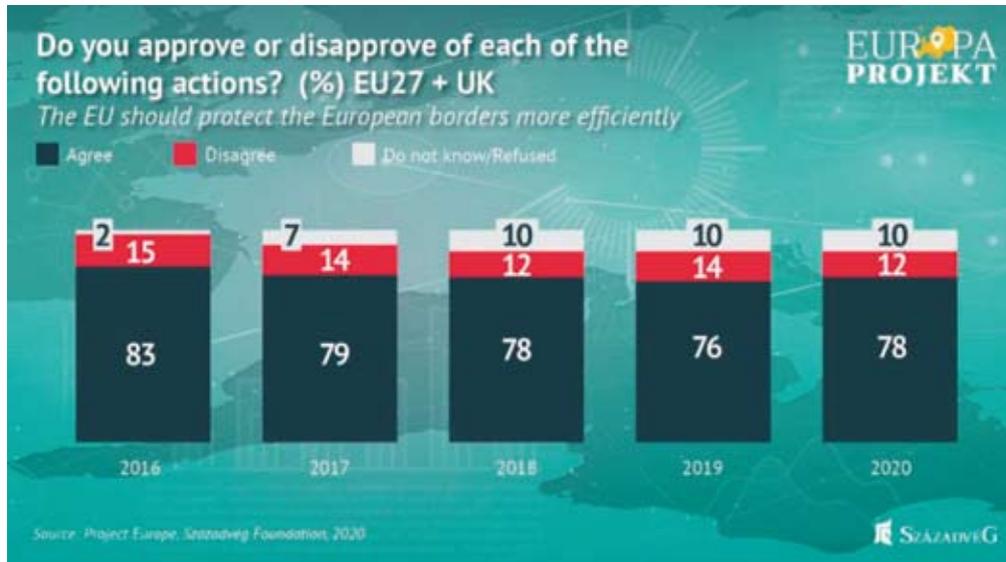


Chart 7

the minimum that European citizens expect from leaders in Brussels is to support the member states in these efforts.

It is important to note that the proportion of those expecting more efficient border protection is highest in two member states with external borders: Malta (90%) and Hungary (88%).

Relocation Quotas

There is no trace of an “EU-wide” consensus on the EU’s relocation quota proposal. There has been a change in the perception of the plan in recent years: while the proportion of supporters was 53% in 2020 (the same as in 2016, although it fell to as low as 45% in the intervening years), and the proportion of opponents fell from a “peak” of 41% to 29%, the proportion of those who could not or did not want to respond (18%) was remarkably high (*Chart 8*). The data suggest that this is still an extremely divisive proposal.

Looking at the response rates between certain groups of countries, the division is well illustrated. In the “old” member states, support for the quota plan is 59%, while in the former socialist countries and the V4 countries, only 30 and 28% of respondents, respectively, support Brussels’ plans for a mandatory distribution of

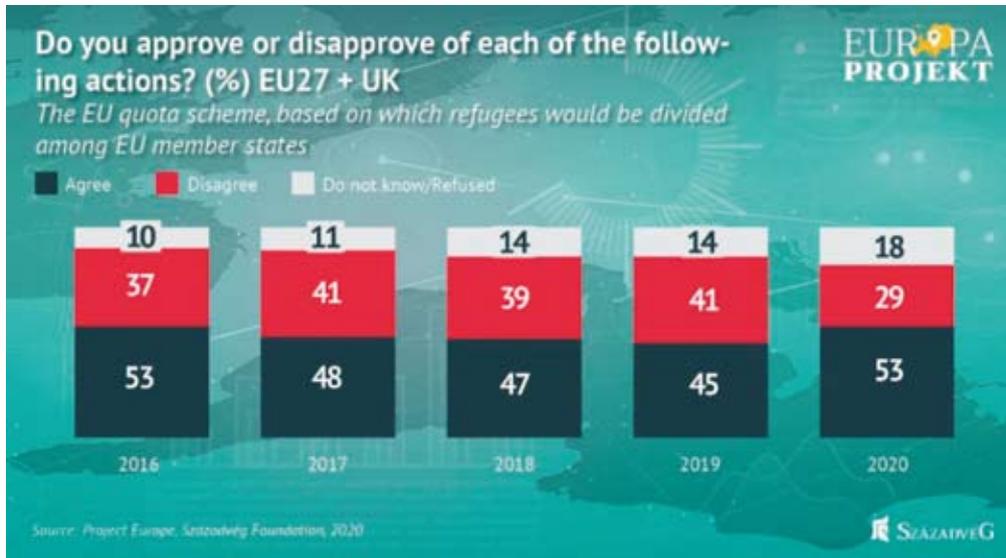


Chart 8

asylum seekers. Interestingly, in the Visegrad countries, opposition to the quota plan is exactly twice as high (56%) as support for it, on the basis of which it can be stated that Brussels' efforts to implement the mandatory distribution of asylum seekers do not meet the expectations of the citizens of the Visegrad countries (Chart 9).

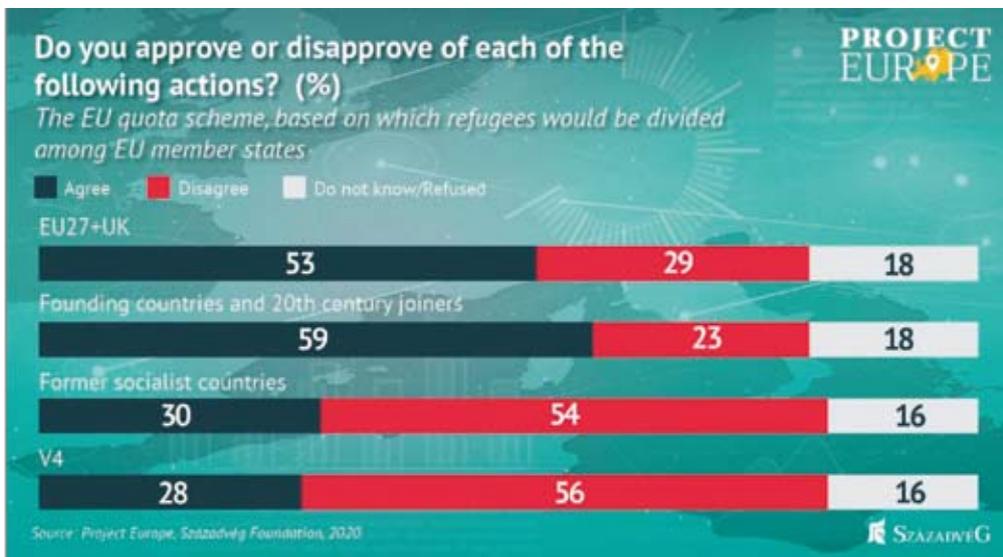


Chart 9

The fault line is also striking in the national data. Malta (78%), Germany (76%), Italy (69%), Greece (68%), Austria (66%) and Spain (60%) have the highest support for the distribution of asylum seekers. In contrast, the proposal is largely rejected in the Czech Republic (73%), Hungary (73%), Slovakia (71%), Bulgaria (62%), Estonia (60%) and Latvia (60%).

It is clear that both the front countries and key target countries for immigration have also lined up behind the proposal, as the quota is primarily a relief from their point of view. The member states that reject mass (illegal) migration and admission can be found on the other side. It is striking that while the protection of external borders is eminently suitable as the basis for a “common EU” migration policy, the quota system is still extremely divisive. This also highlights the main problems with the European Commission’s migration proposal package presented in September 2020.⁹ It does not give sufficient weight to the importance of external border protection (as a key factor in curbing illegal migration), yet the quota, which is not de jure mandatory but could easily become de facto mandatory in a migration crisis – i.e., mandatory optional – is presented as a solidarity element. The latter element is incompatible with the position of citizens in the Visegrad countries, especially in Hungary, which has been outlined in recent years.

Strategic Vision

Project Europe also examined the link between population decline and migration. According to the majority of respondents, population decline should be solved by increasing rates of childbirth and not by immigration (*Chart 10*). In the “old” member states, the proportion of those who hold this view is 53%, while in the former socialist and Visegrad countries it is noticeably higher (74% and 72%, respectively). The difference may be explained by the traditionally more permissive attitude of Western Europe, reflecting the fact that in some “old” member states, the phenomenon of multiculturalism has been part of the social landscape for many decades. In addition, the escalating social (especially integration-related) tensions following the migration crisis, added to those that had accumulated in the past, may have strengthened the aversion of the “newer” member states towards mass immigration (from which, in contrast to Western, Northern and Southern Europe, the “Easterners” have been completely left out since the middle of the 20th century). The proportion of those who support the promotion of childbearing instead of migration is highest in Hungary (89%), followed by Bulgaria (88%) and Latvia (84%). On the other end of the spectrum, a relative majority of Irish and British respondents (40% and 38%, respectively) see immigration as a solution for halting population decline.

⁹ EC 2020a.



Chart 10

In this context, the study also asked the opinion of respondents on the following statement: “Your country should rely on its internal resources and support families instead of immigration.” A vast majority of respondents (69%) essentially agreed with the statement. However, the difference in emphasis between the two groups of countries was also echoed here: 65% of respondents in the “old” member states agreed with the statement, compared to 81% in the post-socialist countries and 78% in the V4 countries. Thus, it can be stated that respondents in the former socialist bloc, including Hungary, consider the protection and support of families a fundamental expectation of their governments. The encouragement of immigration is not considered key to overcoming demographic and related economic difficulties (*Chart 11*).

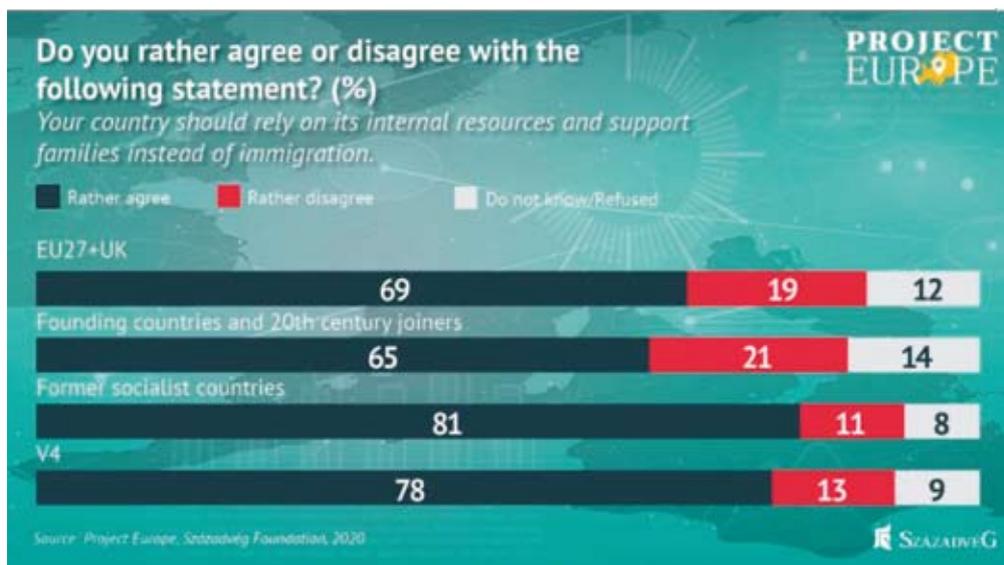


Chart 11

Response rates at the member state level naturally reflect and support the above observation. Support for internal resources is particularly high in Hungary (91%), Latvia (90%), Bulgaria (90%), Slovakia (89%), Romania (88%) and the Czech Republic (87%). Of the 28 countries surveyed, only in Luxembourg does the proportion of those agreeing with the statement not exceed 50%. However, it can also be said of this country that a relative majority of respondents (47%) consider family support, instead of immigration, to be the key to solving the emerging challenges.

It is striking that in Western Europe, the rate of the “do not know/refused” responses is consistently 10%. Overall, it can be stated that EU citizens expect their own government not to encourage immigration but to support and help the indigenous society. In light of this, it is particularly troubling that a proposal of the Commission released in November 2020¹⁰ earmarks for the member states significant support for the integration of immigrants (e.g., housing), which is clearly not in line with the above response rates.

Conclusion

Based on the survey results presented above, it can be stated that European societies agree on the broader issue of migration in several important areas. For example, the majority of EU citizens clearly see the current migration towards Europe as economic immigration, and expect the European Union to take more effective action, including more successful border protection. The distribution of asylum seekers is already revealing the division between “Westerners” and “Easterners”, pointing out one of the key reasons why quotas should not be a way out of the migration crisis for the EU and its member states. However, there is a clear demand from the majority of respondents to try to solve demographic problems through an increase in the birth rate and the support of families instead of immigration. These positions are particularly popular in the post-socialist and V4 countries, but, apart from Luxembourg, they also form a majority opinion in Western member states.

¹⁰ EC 2020b.

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