

The assessment of the European Union in an international and time series comparison

AN ANALYSIS OF REPUBLIKON INSTITUTE



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SUMMARY

- In our analysis, we examined the opinions on the EU of the respondents of the Visegrád countries, including our country, The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, the traditionally pro-EU Romania, and the Netherlands, which voted down the EU constitution in 2005 and at the same time founded the EU.
- During our analysis, we were not interested in the support of the membership, but in the subjective identification with the Union, in the individual's general assessment of the situation.
- The subjective, citizens' perception of the EU in Hungary shows a similar trend as in other examined countries.
- In the assessment of the EU since 2010, no sharply different trends can be discovered in Hungary, which would point to the limitations of the Hungarian governmental narrative regarding the EU.
- The proportion of those who identify with EU at the citizen level is high in Hungary, regardless of the political side, exceeding 80 percent.
- As in other countries, Hungary developed a less favorable image of the Union by 2014, which changed by 2021, surpassing the 2010 status.
- In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, the number of people satisfied with the events taking place in the EU decreased by 2018, which increased in most all countries by 2021.
- By 2021, citizen identification in Hungary will see a decline in 2014 increased continuously thereafter, similar to the other countries except the Czech Republic.

INTRODUCTION

One of the few consensuses of Hungarian politics after the regime change was Hungary's western orientation and the European integration of our country. As an opposition politician, Viktor Orbán himself was the chairman of the European Integration Affairs Committee of the Parliament between 1994 and 1998. After the 2010 election, with the change of government, the government's behavior towards the European Union also took a fundamental turn. The Union did not appear as a technocratic regulator, as a field for the pursuit of consensus, but as a political actor with independent political interests against which the government must represent Hungarian interests. Since the European Union is a political entity that is perceptible to Hungarian citizens, but at the same time difficult to grasp due to its complexity (Commission, Council, Parliament, Court), it is suitable for being referred to as a scapegoat in domestic political debates and as an external meddler in domestic politics. This is how the Fidesz government acted during the refugee crisis, and in the case of the child protection referendum, it named the EU as the source of external coercion regarding sex education. In the interpretation of the Fidesz government, the European Union thus appears as a globalist force attacking national sovereignty. It is no coincidence that Viktor Orbán formulated the institutional reform of the Union before the 2022 parliamentary elections. Among other things, he suggested that the European Parliament should not be directly elected by EU citizens. The Hungarian Prime Minister would also omit the passage from the EU treaties about striving for „the closest possible union”, even though the latter, according to the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which established the European Economic Community, the predecessor of the EU, the European people and does not apply to relations between countries.

The political opinions and attitudes of the citizens are greatly influenced by the politicians themselves. In the following time-series analysis, we investigated whether the Fidesz government had a meaningful effect on the opinions of Hungarian respondents about the European Union.¹ In order to interpret the data, we compare the domestic results with several countries. In the analysis, we examined the opinions on the EU of the respondents of the Visegrád countries, including our country, the Czech Republic, Poland

¹ The analysis was carried out with the help of Eurobarometer's February-March 2021, March 2018, March 2014, and May 2010 data collection (Eurobarometer 94.3, Eurobarometer 89.1, Eurobarometer 81.2, Eurobarometer 73.4). The databases were selected so that the date of data collection was as close as possible to the time of the Hungarian parliamentary elections, when interest in politics increases.

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RESULTS

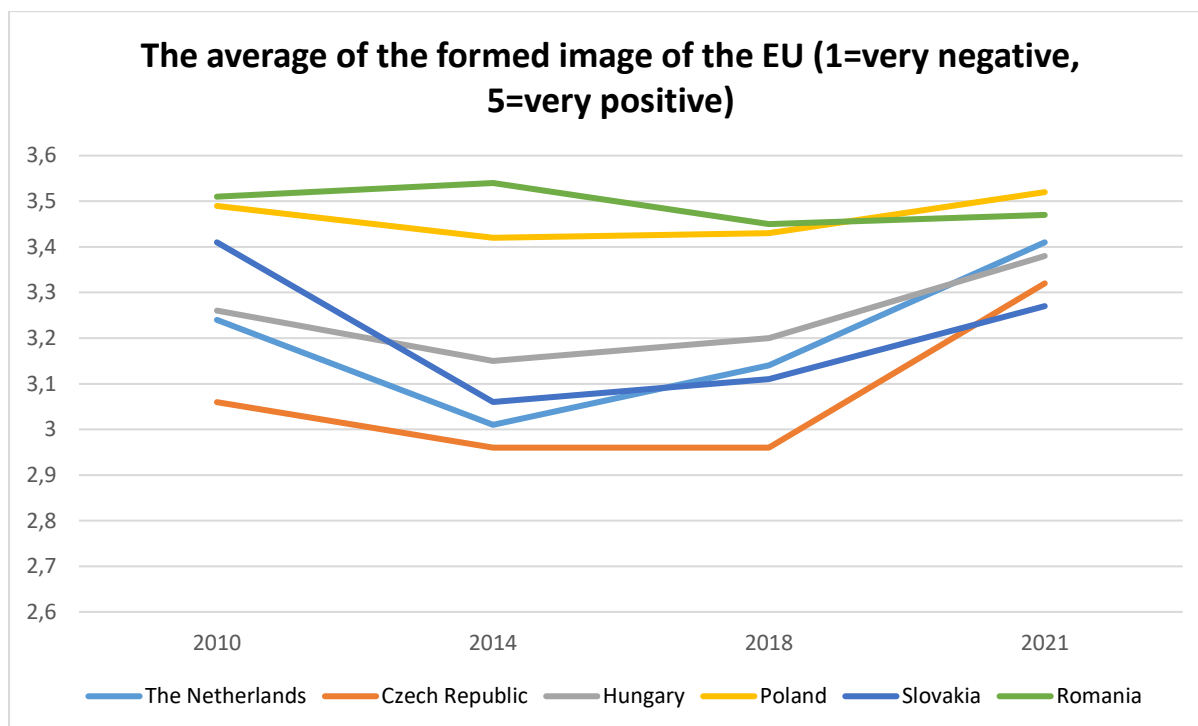


Figure 1. Average image of the EU (1=very negative, 5=very positive)

Figure 1 shows that the respondents have a negative or positive image of the European Union. This data examines personal preceptions, and it therefore able to more accurately capture opinions about integration than simply asking about membership support. At the beginning of the 2010s, Czech respondents, who were more Eurosceptic than before, developed a less positive view of the European Union. On a scale of one to five, they gave an average grade of 3.1. However, by the end of the decade, their image of the EU is more positive and they are ahead of Slovakia in this regard. The Romanian and Polish respondents have the most positive image of the EU, they are half a point ahead of the more Eurosceptic peoples at the beginning of the 2010s. In the case of Romania, an important factor may be that they joined the Union in 2007, three years later than the Visegrád countries. Together with the Netherlands, Hungary is located in the middle field. As in other countries, by 2014 a less favorable image of the Union had developed in our country, which became more favorable by 2021, surpassing the 2021 status.

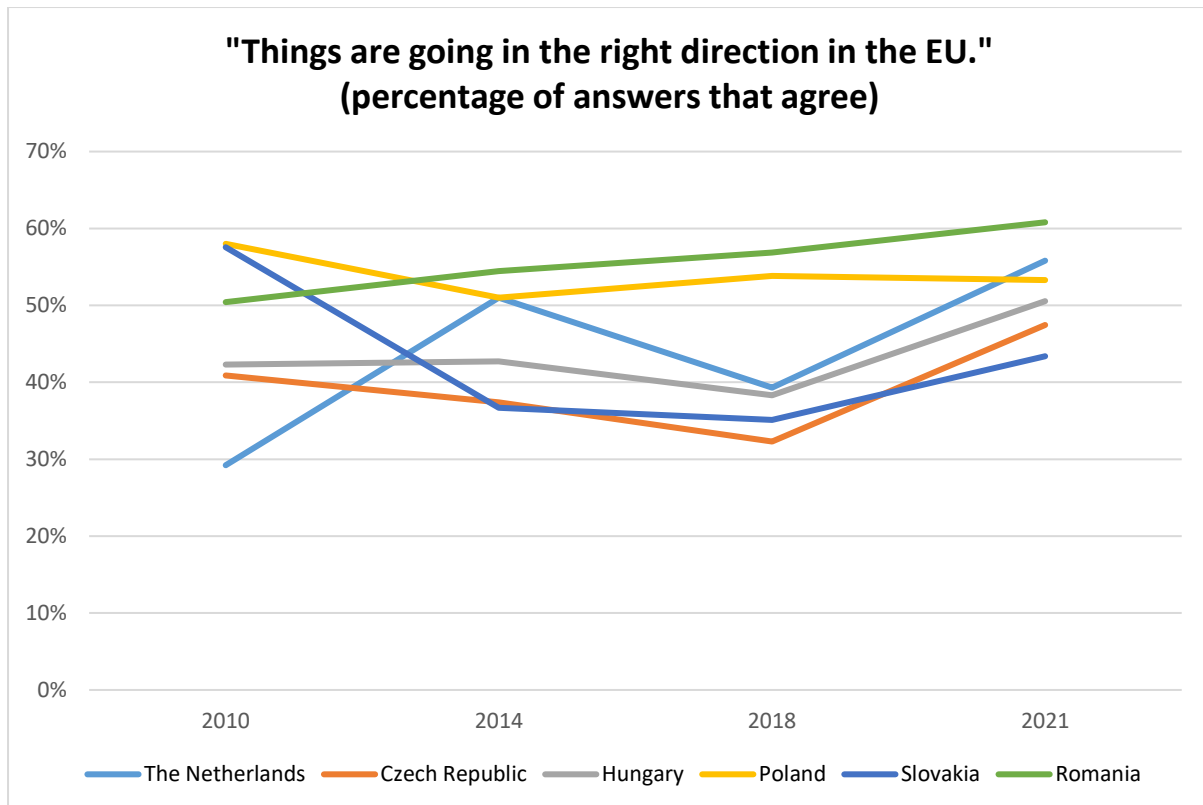


Figure 2. "Things are going in the right direction in the EU." (percentage of answers that agree)

A recurring question in the Eurobarometer analyzes concerns the general citizens' perception of the situation in the EU. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents in the examined countries who agree with the statement that „things are going in the right direction in the EU. The biggest difference between 2010 and 2021 result can be measured in the Netherlands, In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, the number of people satisfied with the events taking places in the EU decreased by 2018, which increased in almost all countries by 2021. The difference in opinion between 2014 and 2018 may be due to the European refugee crisis of 2015, which showed solidarity between the member states and the limits of the effectiveness of EU decision making. Similar to the data in Figure 1, in Hungary, compared to 2010, satisfaction with the EU is increased compared to 2021.

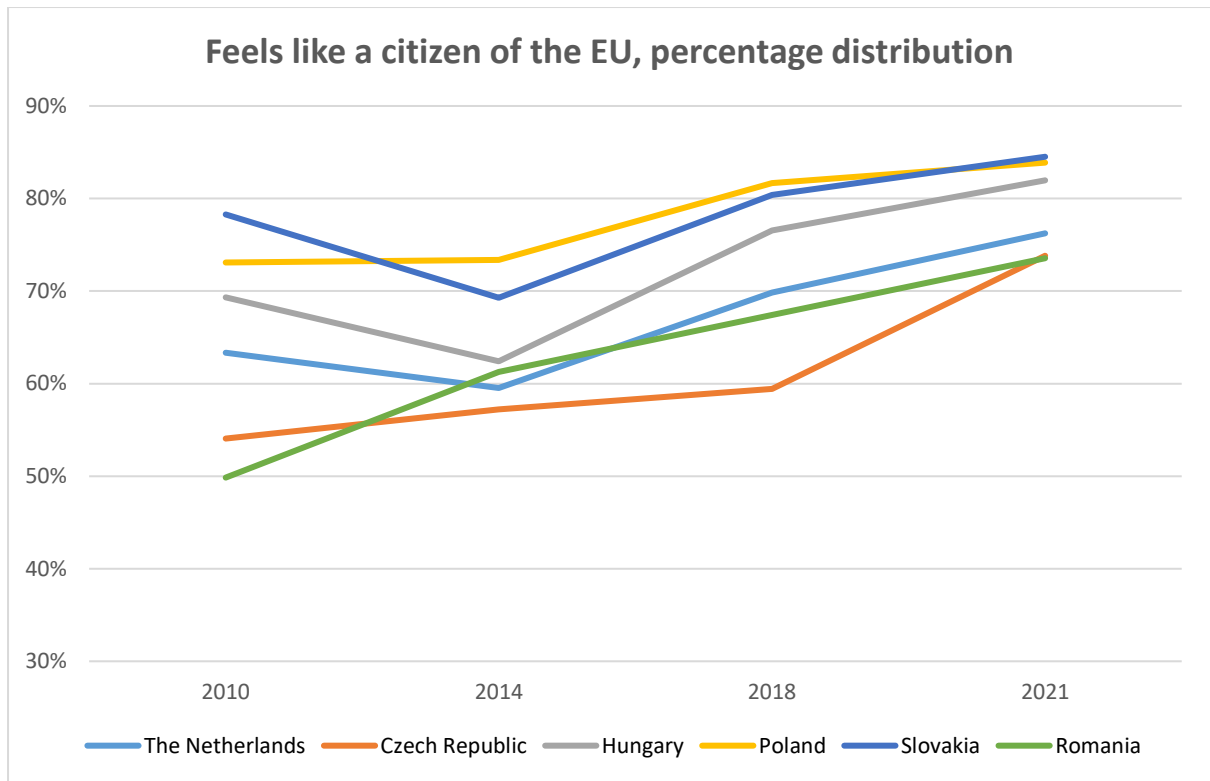


Figure 3. Feel like a citizen of the EU, percentage distribution

Direct contact with citizens is essential for the European Union. This is supported not only by individual mobility programs (Erasmus, Europe for Citizens), but also by the direct election of the European Parliament. Figure 3 shows the proportion of those who consider themselves EU citizens within each country. Of course, identification with the EU as a citizen does not exclude multiple identities, identification with the member of state. Interestingly, it was the lowest in pro-EU Romania in other respects, even though the proportion of those who consider themselves EU citizens is still 50 percent. Citizen identification in Hungary has steadily increased by 2021 after the decline in 2014, similarly to the other countries except the Czech Republic.

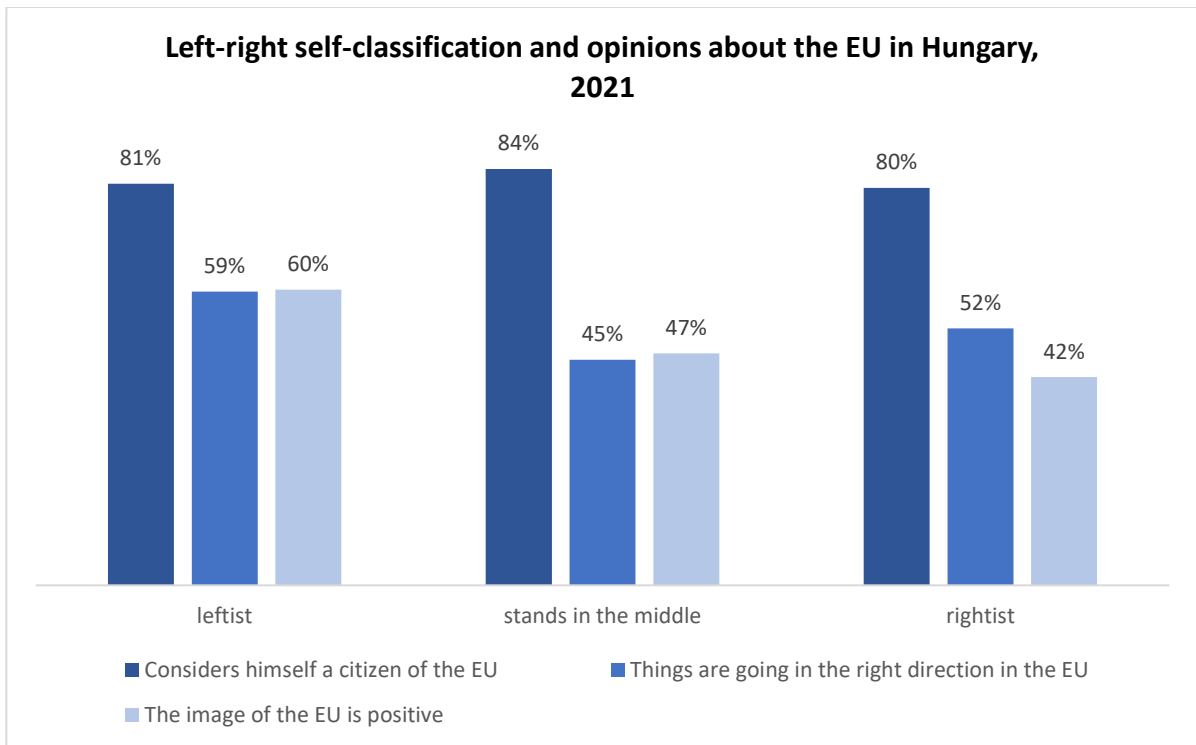


Figure 4. Left-right self-classification and opinions about the EU in Hungary, 2021

We also examined the domestic data separately in the breakdown of left-right self-classification (Figure 4). According to the 2021 data collection, there is no significant difference between left-wing, right-wing and middle-of-the-road respondents in how many consider themselves EU citizens. However, there is a bigger difference in terms of whether „things are moving in the right direction in the EU”. 59 percent of those on the left agree with this, while only 45 percent of those in the middle agree, which is lower than 52 percent of those on the right. The latter can be explained by a more general anti-political attitude. 60 percent of left-wingers have positive view of the EU as a whole, but among those in the middle and on the right, those who form a positive view of the EU are in the minority.

The data therefore show that, overall, the subjective, citizens’ perception of the EU in Hungary shows similar trend as in other examined countries. In Hungary’s perception of the Union since 2010, no sharply different trends can be discovered, which points to the limitations of the Hungarian government’s narrative regarding the EU.