



# Euroscepticism in Hungary

- **An executive summary of Policy Solutions' study on Hungarian attitudes towards the European Union -**

## 1. Hungarian attitudes towards the European Union

Hungarian public opinion holds that the great expectations regarding EU membership, which predominated at the time of accession, have not been borne out by reality. Nonetheless, in spite of some steady erosion in the level of support for Hungary's Union membership, the public largely believes that on the whole accession was a good thing. Since 2004, support for membership has dropped from 71% to "just" 64% at the time the second Orbán government took office in 2010. This cannot be considered a really negative indicator. Public opinion remains clearly supportive of Union membership; despite the right's occasionally decidedly Eurosceptic rhetoric, a consistently stable 67-69% of Hungarians would vote for retaining membership if a referendum were held to reaffirm our commitment to the EU.

Nevertheless, the continued high endorsement of membership makes the growing potency of Eurosceptic voices all the more remarkable. We may recall that at the EU accession referendum on 12 April 2003, 16.24% of voters declined to support membership, while in 2011-2012 24% of respondents said that they would vote "no". During the current parliamentary term Policy Solutions and Medián have jointly conducted three separate research projects on domestic attitudes towards the Union. These surveys show that EU-sceptic voters are present in significant numbers among the voters of all parliamentary parties. The highest proportion of EU-sceptic voters is in Jobbik's camp, yet critical as the party maybe towards Union membership, a majority of its own voters also remains supportive of staying in the EU. It is also important to add that the overwhelming majority of Fidesz' – which often engages in anti-EU rhetoric as well – voters also has a positive attitude towards EU membership.

The demographic data lead us to conclude that the relatively positive public view of EU membership may persist in the long run. At 74% and 72%, respectively, support for Union membership is highest in the two youngest age groups, those between 18-29 and 30-39. This ratio is especially striking compared to the opinions of the elderly: among those over 60, 62% would vote to reaffirm membership.

Even though Hungary’s EU membership continues to enjoy majority support, this does not mean that Hungarians would be glad to transfer powers to Brussels. There isn’t a single policy area that the majority of respondents would like to see handled exclusively by the EU. Even in the case of immigration and environmental policy, a mere 11% and 10%, respectively, would support a comprehensive transfer of powers to Brussels. The responses to the questions examining the transfer of domestic powers provide a good illustration for the domestic limits of European integration. Regarding economic policy and social and cultural affairs, an overwhelming majority of Hungarians rejects even the notion of harmonising policy-making with Brussels – a majority of respondents would keep these areas exclusively under Hungarian control.

## 2. The reasons underlying Euroscepticism in Hungary

The next chapter of our study focused on the “demand” side of Euroscepticism. We sought to address each of the factors that could be decisive in terms of the emergence and surge of Hungarian Euroscepticism. Specifically, we looked at four factors that could have a negative impact on the assessment of the European Union in Hungary. The first, we argue, is that there is a group of voters in Hungary – just as in all of the EU member states – that considers accession a partial renunciation of our sovereignty. This group provides a constant base for Eurosceptic politics. The second factor concerns popular expectations concerning the benefits of accession, and the subsequent failure of said benefits to materialise. The third is the “remoteness” of the European Union, the lack of direct experience with it. Finally, we also reviewed the economic and institutional crisis that the European Union has undergone over the past years.

**Voters who were sceptics right from the start:** The referendum on Hungary’s accession to the European Union was held on 12 April 2003. The results showed that some 592,000 citizens cast their ballot against membership – 16.24% of all voters. The relatively high ratio of those rejecting accession would be difficult to explain from a supply side angle. Apart from the far-right Party of Hungarian Justice and Life (MIÉP) – which had dropped out of parliament just the year before – no significant political organisation opposed membership before the 2003 referendum. We can therefore safely assume that there was (and continues to be) a group of voters in Hungary – which is incidentally difficult to delineate and is continually shifting in its composition – that regards EU membership as a forfeiture of our national self-determination, a violation of our sovereignty, potentially even a form of colonial subjugation. At the very least members of this group are open and perceptive towards such type of messages.



**The “pragmatic disenchanted” voters:** Both previous surveys and the results of the referendum allow for the conclusion that even though a segment of the electorate opposed membership, the majority of Hungarians anticipated substantial benefits from Hungary’s accession to the EU. Among these expectations there were also purely pragmatic/material considerations, such as the hoped for benefits of EU subsidies and the convergence to Western European standards of wealth. Still, for a majority of Hungarians becoming part of the West is a “millennial” (and still ongoing) dream. Yet accession has failed to satisfy the hopes people vested in it. We lag far behind the countries of Western Europe in terms of living standards, economic prowess and opportunities. This has understandably caused disenchantment among those who had hoped that our EU accession would bring changes in all these areas.

**Voters who “perceive Europe as remote”:** After accession, the European Union did not become a direct, palpable experience for Hungarians. Furthermore, an important factor is that European decision-making is unfathomable for the majority of Hungarian voters. The overly complex decision-making procedures and the intricate division of responsibilities between the European Parliament and the Commission are all factors that distance the European Union’s activities from Hungarian citizens, and make it more difficult for them to understand the EU. Another important factor underlining the “remoteness” of the European Union is that the confidence vested in the EU often rises or drops in parallel with the “popularity” of the Hungarian Parliament or the reigning government. Based on the aforementioned tendency, it is no exaggeration to say that there may well be a group of voters who sees the European Union as too remote to feel any affection towards it.

**Those susceptible to the crisis:** If there is a rational side to Euroscepticism in Hungary, it is certainly given intellectual nourishment by doubts regarding the future of the European Union as an institution. Ever since the international financial crisis – and especially the onset of the Greek crisis –, the European Union’s institutions have been subject to unrelenting criticism. While the right employs both types of criticism (i.e. institutional and economic), economic policy-related critiques tend to predominate on the left. A result of all this could be that even segments of the population thus far untouched by Euroscepticism could come to view the EU processes more critically.

### **3. The media’s impact on the attitudes of the Hungarian public towards the Union**

The major competitive disadvantage that the European ideal, European politicians and European institutions suffer from as compared to national visions of the future, national institutions and national politicians is the lack of a European public sphere. In practice this



means that the Union's messages are always conveyed to citizens through national mediators. In other words how the public will perceive the workings of the Union depends on the pro-EU or anti-EU attitudes of domestic politicians and media. 22 years after regime transition, two parallel tendencies are apparent in the Hungarian media: tabloidisation and increasing partisanship (a reduction in the share of party independent political media). These two processes exert significant impact on news concerning the European Union, which are continuously "moulded" into a national context by various public figures.

When examining attitudes towards the European Union, it is also important to ascertain where citizens obtain their information about it, which media influence their opinions and how. According to a 2011 survey by Eurobarometer, 97% of Hungarians watch television at least once a week, 78% listen to the radio at least once a week, 69% read newspapers and 53% use the internet in the same period. In terms of media consumption, the primacy of television is therefore unequivocal.

Two of the three major television channels – RTL Klub and TV2 – tend to be EU-friendly, while the third, the public channel M1, has tended to convey more Eurosceptic values. Nevertheless, almost two-thirds of Hungarians believe that domestic television presents EU-related issues objectively, while a quarter of the population thinks reporting skews towards the Union, and 7% believe that TV channels are ill-disposed towards the EU. On the internet, pro-European portals constitute a majority, and Eurosceptic opinions tend to only prevail on pages whose readership is middling. Opinions in the social media tend to be divided, with both views enjoying a strong presence. In the programme of radio stations with a significant number of listeners, as well as in the print media, the fundamental attitude varies by party loyalty: right-wing media present a mix of both, EU-friendly and EU-sceptic materials, while the left and liberal media are decidedly pro-European.

One issue that ties into the role of the media is the problem of awareness. While in autumn 2004 only 24% of respondents thought themselves well-informed about EU affairs, currently 30% said "yes" to this question. The lack of knowledge and the sense of lacking knowledge obviously generates distrust that – as we saw in the previous chapters – does not necessarily lead to a rejection of Hungary's membership, but it does make respondents relate more critically to the integration process and is associated with a non-recognition of the benefits of said process.

#### **4. The Hungarian parties' European programme**

The crisis of the EU countries has brought forth a specific need in Hungary's right-wing parties, which has primarily manifested itself in public discourse after 2010. This need is to



identify the institutions of the European Union as the source of Hungary's problems. To render the parties' attitudes towards the Union comparable, we grade the party platforms and post-election rhetoric on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 marks a total rejection and a desire to leave the EU, and 5 denotes full support. To track the changes in opinions, we compared the party's election manifestoes for the 2010 parliamentary elections with their current rhetoric.

Based on its election manifesto, **Fidesz** supports the European Union. Even in its official documents, however, the party is careful in the wording it employs, which corresponds to a value of 4 in our scaling system. In spite of its fundamentally pro-European stance in the manifesto, Fidesz has since moved in a considerably less coherent, contradictory and anti-European direction. During the rotating presidency, Fidesz still stood at a 3 on our 5-point scale (the contradictory relation), but in the past year the government party – and especially the prime minister – have hewed closer to the Eurosceptic camp (a 2 out of 5).

Fidesz' European policy may be fraught with contradiction, but **MSZP** is a marked contrast: it has pursued a steadfastly pro-European policy over the past two years, which is also reflective of its election manifesto. Party Chairman Attila Mesterházy has on countless occasions since 2010 professed his support for the ideal of Europe. Even the fact that Viktor Orbán – as the representative of the Hungarian government – assumed the rotating presidency of the EU in the first half of 2011 did not change MSZP's pro-European rhetoric. Based on its manifesto and rhetoric alike, MSZP belongs among the unequivocal supporters of the EU (5).

The image that emerges from **Jobbik's** manifesto is that of a typical Eurosceptic party, but this stance is not without its internal contradictions. Though Jobbik rejects integration, it endorses the acceptance of European funds. Just as Fidesz has moved towards a more anti-European stance, however, Jobbik, too, has shifted towards a more forceful rejection of the EU. But while in Fidesz' case this shift meant a transition from pro-European to Eurosceptic, for Jobbik the change is from a Eurosceptic party to a staunchly anti-European one, which means a drop from 2 to 1 in our scale.

**LMP's current** rhetoric reflects the same nuanced critical attitude towards Europe that was already apparent in its manifesto. The party treats Hungary's membership as axiomatic, but at the same time believes that the European Union's institutional framework is in need of reforms. LMP is also opposed to some of the EU's policies, particularly in the area of economic integration. On the basis of both its manifesto and rhetoric, we classify LMP as a 4.

## 5. Proposals for halting the rise in anti-EU attitudes

The study reveals that anti-EU sentiments in Hungary have grown continuously over the past eight years in part on account of a rise in supply – i.e. anti-EU political rhetoric – and in part because of growing social dissatisfaction stemming from recession and the perception that the money boon that was anticipated from the EU failed to materialise. The level of “core Euroscepticism” – that is a principle-based rejection of integration – continues to remain low. The most effective instrument to halt the further growth of anti-EU sentiments is at the same time also the least realistic to implement: a return of economic growth would be the single most effective remedy against a continued anti-European attitude. That is why the most important responsibility of pro-European political players is to ensure that citizens become more informed about Europe and that they entertain a more realistic image of her. To this end, we have delineated the following five general directions for European Union institutions and the Hungarian political parties:

**Debating Eurosceptics:** Quarantining the EU-sceptic political forces by attaching a negative “anti-EU” label to politicians or parties is not a solution. The public needs a set of arguments that help it understand or explain to the neighbours why EU membership is worthwhile for Hungary. Such a set of arguments can only be conveyed to the public, however, if politicians are willing to debate with those opposed to the Union, and if they also make sure that the public is involved in these debates.

**A campaign about the successes and benefits of membership:** Numerous criticisms may be formulated concerning the period since our accession, but it is an indisputable fact Hungary has been a net beneficiary of membership. There have been several attempts to communicate these achievements (the campaigns for the New Hungary Development Plan and the New Széchenyi Plan), but these generally sought to portray the successes as the respective governments’ achievements rather than that of the EU. A so-called Administrative Partnership may provide a solution, as it could finance *joint* communication programmes of the European Commission and the Hungarian governments. With the use of the allocated resources to communicate results, the segment of “pragmatic disenchanted” citizens – who have not perceived any tangible benefits of membership thus far – may be swayed. As a result of a co-operation between the European Commission and the current and successive Hungarian governments, the credibility of communication efforts and the sense of mutual interdependence with Europe would increase.

**Using the European Citizens’ Initiative:** Since 2012, there has been a new opportunity to either launch a European Citizens’ Initiative or to join one. The use of the initiative would



make it more obvious for citizens that they have possibilities to influence European affairs and to steer the course of European politics. We recommend that Hungarian parties join in the signature collections for initiatives that match their values and ideology, which would not only draw their voters' attention to Union issues but would also mobilise them along specific policy issues.

**Buying media presence and training journalists:** Due to the lack of forums for European public discourse, the European institutions and the national governments have few opportunities to place Union-related messages in the media. As a result, ever since regime transition the European Union has employed the instrument of “buying” media presence and training for journalists to balance its lacking media exposure. It is important to note that this was done with the utmost respect for and safeguarding of broadcasters' editorial independence. In the past few years, however, such activities have practically ceased, which is why we recommend to relaunch them. In practice, this would mean the allocation of finances to Union-related news and radio shows, as well as the writing and publication of print and online articles. It is crucial that such publications be realised in widely disseminated media outlets so that they reach the largest audience possible.

**European studies in schools:** The most potent enemy of anti-Europeanism is knowledge. Hence the better organised the efforts to inform the public, the fewer citizens will be receptive to anti-integration beliefs. That is why we recommend that the ideal of European integration, as well as European civic studies be taught as a mandatory subject already at the elementary level. In addition to formal education, informal education, too, plays an important role in shaping pro-European attitudes: the Erasmus programme alone offers 3,000 students annually the opportunity to study in other countries' educational institutions. Hence by increasing national allocations for the Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Comenius programmes, it will be possible to multiply the number of Hungarian students who visit other Union member states, learn about the culture of the given countries and meet European youth their age. Simultaneously, the extension of exchange opportunities to students from underprivileged backgrounds who currently have no access to such opportunities is also important.