

THEY LOVE ME, THEY LOVE ME NOT, THEY LOVE ME A LITTLE

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES



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Summary

The following analysis of public opinion in the Visegrad countries since their entry into the European Union brings into relief contrasting developments and situations.

Poles, who were deeply concerned about the prospect of EU membership at the time of their accession, display today a high degree of satisfaction.

Hungarians, whose erstwhile euromania had temporarily diminished, in recent years seem to have developed once again a predilection for the European project.

Czechs, while pragmatically aware of the need for the EU, remain particularly cautious.

Slovaks, who broadly recognise that membership in the EU has brought them tangible benefits, are more guarded than they were eight or ten years ago in their pro-European sentiments.

In these countries, alongside the more or less favourable opinions expressed today, attitudes towards the EU remain characterised by anxieties which, at least in part, have deep historical roots. This is arguably one of the causes of the suspicions of and resistance to common European projects, particularly when it comes to migration policy.

INTRODUCTION

Tensions have recently been increasing between the European Union and the countries of the Visegrad Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia). In the run-up to the parliamentary elections in Hungary, which come on the heels of last autumn's ballot in the Czech Republic, in the wake of the resignation of the Slovak Prime Minister and the inauguration of a new government, and at a time when a sanctions procedure has been triggered against Poland, the Jacques Delors Institute surveys the changes in public opinion in these four countries. We observe mixed trends, but there are also elements of convergence.

This document is based on two types of analysis: quantitative data from the periodic surveys of the Commission and the European Parliament¹; and a review of the results of qualitative studies² carried out from the beginning of the 2000s by the Optem Institute and its partners in the European Qualitative Network, supplemented by current reflections of the directors and political scientists associated with their research.

BOX 1 ■

Developments in this area can be assessed by means of two basic indicators, which were measured each semester in the European Commission's Standard Eurobarometer surveys until the spring of 2011 (except in the autumn of 2010 for the first), then (less regularly) in the Parlemeter of the European Parliament. The first indicator of belonging measures the proportion of citizens who consider the fact that their country belongs to the EU as a good thing (or a bad thing, or as neither good nor bad). The second (membership benefit) indicator evaluates the proportion of respondents who consider whether (or not) their country has benefited from being a EU Member State.

1 ■ POLAND — EURO-FONDNESS RATHER THAN EURO-FERVOUR

1.1 The evolution of judgments on membership since the country's accession to the EU

In Poland, immediately after joining the EU, 50% of citizens saw their country's membership favourably, against 8% who looked on it unfavourably (with 37% holding mixed views). The proportion of favourable opinions rose fairly steadily to reach 71% (as opposed to 6% of respondents who held unfavourable views of EU membership) in the autumn of 2007. It then dropped close to the initial level (to a low of 52%, compared with 6% unfavourable views in the spring of 2012), before increasing again from 2014. The spring of 2017 marked a new peak, with 71% of positive views (against 5%), before the proportion plummeted by several points in the autumn of that year (to 65% positive and 7% negative judgments, with 26% holding mixed views).

55% of respondents in Poland saw the benefits of EU membership in the autumn of 2004, compared with 31% who did not perceived any advantages (19% of those polled did not provide a response). Similarly to the first indicator, their proportion rose considerably until the autumn of 2007 (83% recognising advantages, against only 9%) before plunging, while none-

1. Unless otherwise indicated, the results of the European Commission's Standard Eurobarometer surveys, which in some cases have been supplemented by the answers to questions asked in a Special Eurobarometer survey in the autumn of 2017, and by data from the Parlemeter of the European Parliament.

2. Studies based on psychosociological techniques of open-ended in-depth interviews or group discussions.

theless remaining very positive overall (hovering above 70%, with limited fluctuations between 2008 and 2013). The latest measures stand once again above 80%: in the autumn of 2017, 84% of respondents pointed to the advantages of EU membership, and only 9% failed to do so.

FIGURE 1 ■ Poland: opinion on the membership of the EU

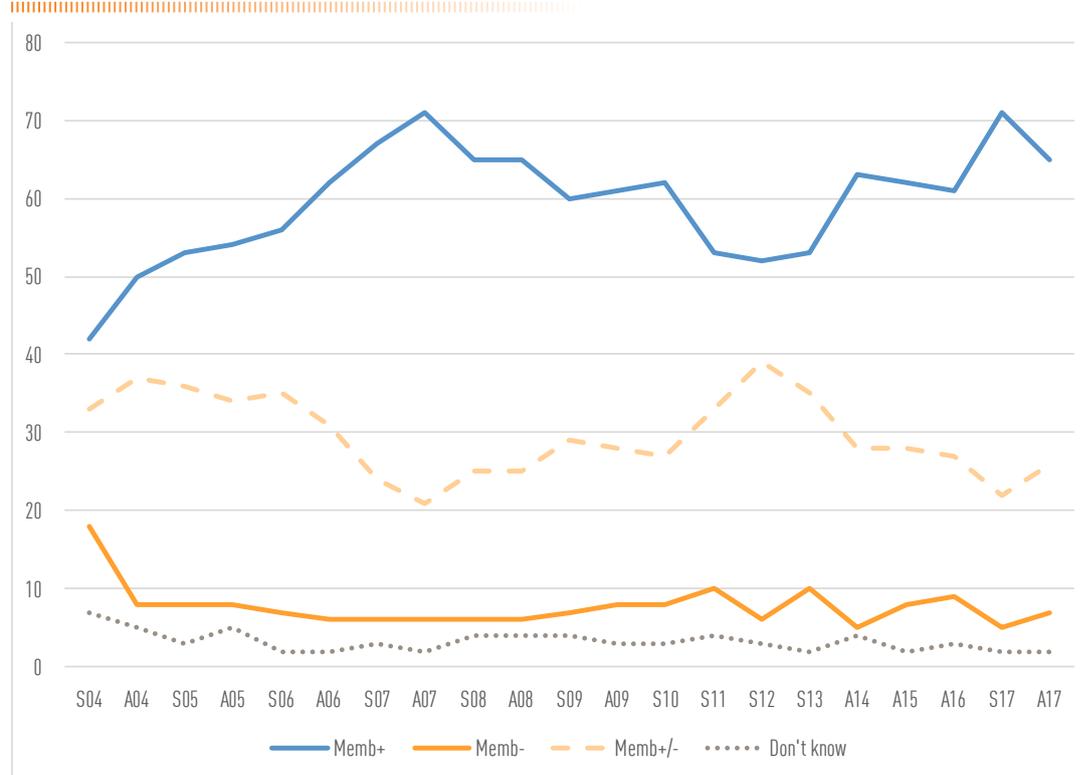
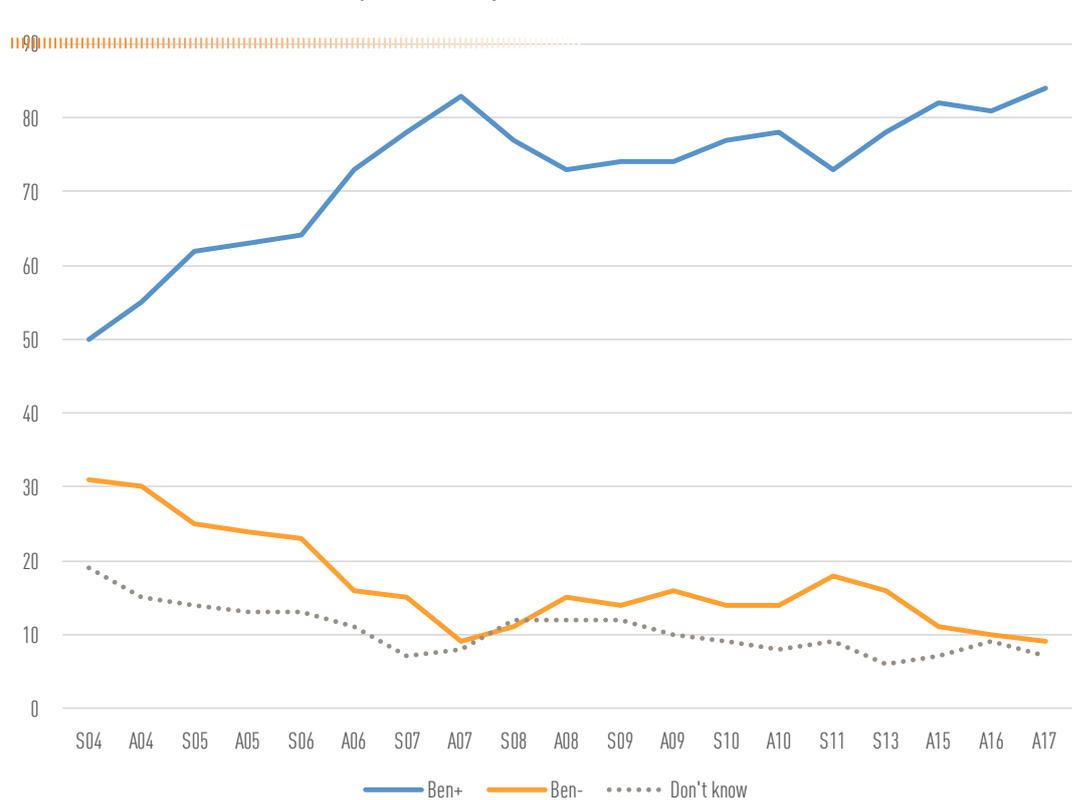


FIGURE 2 ■ Poland: benefit for the country of membership of the EU



1.2 Factors contributing to Polish attitudes

The analysis of the evolution of the two indicators outlined above shows that a positive awareness of EU membership in Poland quickly gained ground in the post-accession years. This attitude has been somewhat overshadowed by the economic crisis but has fully recovered since, and is broadly accompanied by a recognition that membership brings benefits to the country.

Judging by those criteria alone, **Poles are today among the most Euro-friendly of EU citizens** (8 points above the average for the first indicator, 20 points for the second), while at the time of accession they were beset by considerable uncertainties and anxieties. The qualitative studies carried out at the time showed them to be particularly pessimistic about the situation in their own country and the lag of development vis-à-vis the old Member States. Poles were also concerned about the image of their country (supposed by some to be very negative) among Western Europeans, fearing to appear – and remain for a long time - the “poor relatives” frowned upon by the “richer” members of their family. Some even went so far as to suspect a hidden agenda underlying the EU’s acceptance of Poland’s membership bid.

At the same time, there was a noticeable vivacity of national feeling which could finally be expressed after so many partitions, occupations and forms of domination Poland suffered at the hands of its neighbours. This went hand in hand with fears of seeing its identity diluted and its sovereignty curtailed by membership of an organisation with federalist leanings perceived (or feared) to be excessive.

These concerns, of course, coexisted with strong expectations, primarily pertaining to economic development – the country hoped gradually to catch up with the standard of living enjoyed by Western Europeans –, but also to solidarity, the affirmation of fundamental rights and freedoms (whose full scope was to be applied, as regards freedom of movement and establishment), and security.

Over the years, the positive contributions of the EU have become more obvious:

- at the economic level, EU funds have helped modernise the country; investment in infrastructure yielded visible results; as did the agricultural subsidies received under the umbrella of the CAP.
- freedom of movement and access to the labour markets of Western European countries as well as the general opening of the country associated with EU membership have been seen viewed favourably.

The decline of positive evaluations following the economic crisis has been linked to dwindling confidence in the European institutions, which appeared to be hardly able to offer solutions, and to the fear that the financial aid the country received could be in jeopardy because of the difficulties in the euro area. Added to this list could be the slowdown of the investment flow from some Western European companies. Meanwhile, the fact that Poland was less affected by the crisis than other Member States may help to explain that the membership benefit indicator remained quite high during this period.

Since then, other events seem to have played a role in the resurgence of a more favourable disposition to the EU: the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the destabilising intervention of Russia in Ukraine have revealed the security benefits former Eastern Bloc countries derived from EU membership.

However, resistance and mistrust remained towards an EU occasionally perceived as overly cumbersome and bureaucratic, inclined to set binding standards and to bring about a “cultural standardisation” which is detrimental to national sovereignty. Still, these negative perceptions weighed less heavily on the minds of Poles than in the past.

1.3 The situation at the end of 2017

In addition to the indicators mentioned above, the responses to questions that were asked as part of the recent sample surveys in the autumn of 2017 confirm the strongly favourable views Poles hold of the EU. 66% of those polled said they are attached to EU membership (compared to 32% who said that they are not). 50% say they have a positive image of the EU, compared to 13% who have a negative image (and 36% who subscribe to neither view). 66% are optimistic about the future of the EU, only 25% are pessimistic. Only 34% of respondents think that the country would be better off outside the EU (with 54% maintaining that it would be worse off).

62% consider the economic situation of Poland to be good, with 31% holding a negative view on this issue. Similarly, 62% of those polled maintain that the EU is in a good place economically, compared to 19% who judge the bloc's situation negatively. Over the next twelve months, they are more likely to anticipate an improvement than a deterioration (the most frequent responses being characterised, as is generally the case in EU countries, by a cautious attitude: according to them, the situation will remain "unchanged").

On all those points the respondents hold more positive views than the average EU citizen.

In line with the conviction of many Poles that being part of the EU has been beneficial to their country, the data bears out the special importance Poles attach, especially compared to the European average, to an improvement of living standards and new job opportunities (*Parlemeter*, autumn 2017). When asked about the most positive results of EU membership, Polish survey participants, more so than other Europeans, chose freedom of movement and establishment and the CAP among a series of twelve proposed answers.

Less cheerful are their answers to a question about confidence in the EU: 43% say they trust the EU, while 42% said that they do not. Only a minority of 34% consider that things are moving in the right direction, against 40% who are of the opinion that they are going in the wrong direction (and 8% holding neither of these views). These poor ratings are yet slightly above the European average. As in a majority of Member States, trust in the national government is (here clearly) lower than that in the EU. Only 29% of Polish respondents trust their own government, against 64% who distrust it.

A relative majority of 49% (against 40%) states that the country's interests are well taken into account by the EU – a proportion very close to the European average, and above all a result which tempers the fear of counting for little that dominated Polish attitudes at the time of accession and in the years that followed.

Poles are more ambivalent in their responses to proposals for strengthening European integration. A majority (52% vs. 37%) wants more decisions to be taken at EU level, but this is still slightly below EU average (55% vs. 36%). Questioned specifically about the desirability of taking more decisions on a European level in eight proposed areas, they are less likely than the average EU citizen to respond favourably in seven of them, the sole exception being healthcare and social security (*Special Eurobarometer*, autumn 2017). Another question asked whether or not they approve of the further development of various EU policies. Poles are more open than average European citizens to future enlargements, but much less than their peers to common monetary (the euro) and migration policies (they hardly differ from the average in other subjects).

The most important problems facing their country on the one hand, and the EU on the other, differ significantly in their eyes. Compared to the EU average, concerning their own country Polish respondents tend to emphasise issues that have a direct impact on their personal lives (rising prices/the cost of living, healthcare and social security, pensions as well as public debt levels). Other problems including immigration and terrorism seem less pressing to them. Yet as far as the problems facing the EU are concerned, immigration and terrorism appear as crucial issues (and economic issues less so).

Only 24% have a positive feeling about immigration (from countries outside the EU), as opposed to 68% who view the issue negatively. Those who think that immigrants “contribute a lot” to their country are clearly in the minority: 38% versus 53%. These results are significantly worse than the European average. Yet they reflect two different phenomena: a tendency to view the arrival of Ukrainians or other citizens from formerly communist countries sympathetically, combined with a very strong opposition to immigration from the Middle East or North Africa.

Poles recognise that their country “should help refugees”, but it is clear that they do not intend to have their policy in the matter dictated by others: they tend to support the idea of refugees finding accommodation in camps located near their country of origin, but they do not want to receive them on their national territory. The European scheme for the relocation of asylum seekers between different Member States faces strong opposition in Poland. Many respondents argue that asylum seekers in any case do not want to settle in Poland but in the more prosperous Western European countries. Accordingly, it is up to these countries to take responsibility. This perhaps helps explain Poles’ apparent relative openness to a European policy on migration: when asked directly about it, a slight majority of 47% (against 43%) say they are in favour of such a common policy.

2. HUNGARY - A NEWFOUND EUROPHILIA?

2.1 The evolution of judgments on membership since the country’s accession to the EU

In Hungary, the initial judgments on membership were comparable to those observed in Poland: 49% thought it was a good thing, 10% considered it a bad thing and 36% of respondents subscribed to neither view. But, unlike Poles, Hungarians became more gloomy over the following years: from 2005 to 2007, positive opinions hovered around 40% (except in the spring of 2006, when they reached 49%), then plunged to between 34% and 30% until 2012 (except in the spring of 2010, when favourable judgments of membership stood at 38%). A sharp upswing followed: starting at 39% in the spring of 2013, positive appraisals of membership increased from 44% to 48% between the autumn of 2014 and spring of 2017, and finally peaked at 56 percent last autumn (against 8% with negative and 34% with mixed views of EU membership).

The membership benefit indicator has evolved in the same direction. From 48% (versus 33%) of positive opinions in the autumn of 2004, it fell to 40% (or slightly above) in most surveys carried out between the autumn of 2005 and that of 2007, and then under 40% until the summer of 2009. Then began a modest upturn lasting until 2013, with scores fluctuating between 40% and less than 50%, which became more pronounced over time: the 60% bar was exceeded in the autumn of 2015, the 70% threshold crossed at the end of 2017 (72% of respondents being of the opinion that EU membership brought clear benefits, and 19% seeing no advantages).

FIGURE 3 ■ Hungary: opinion on the membership of the EU

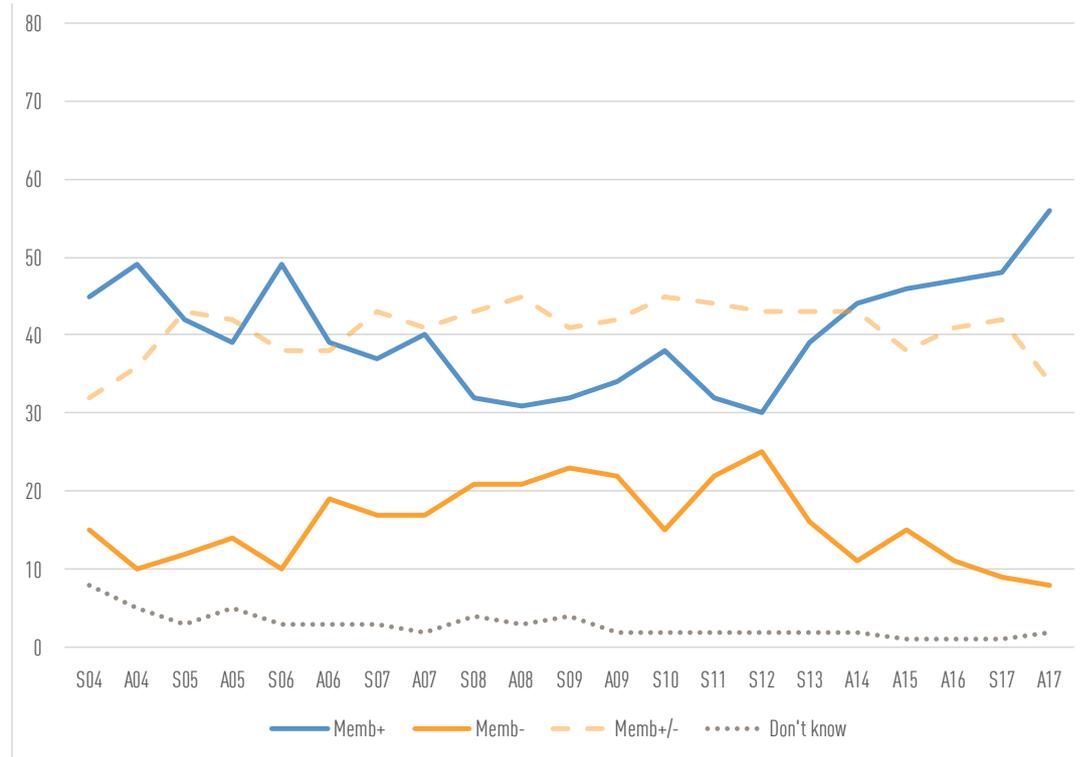
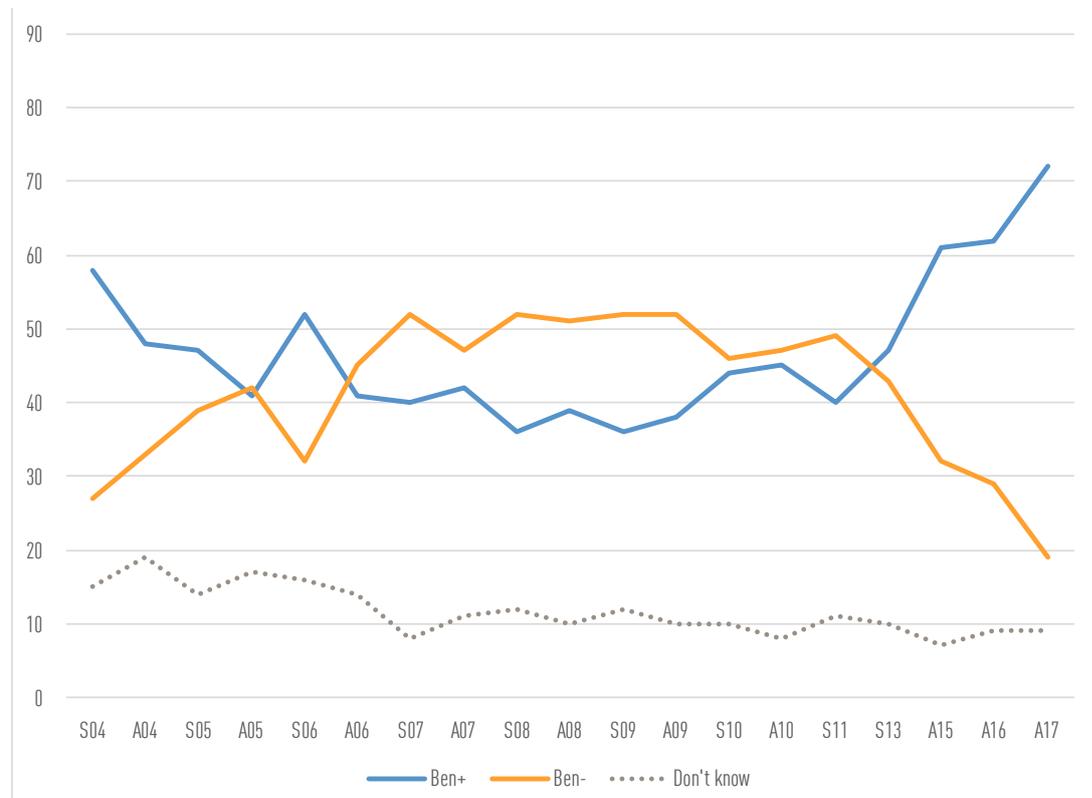


FIGURE 4 ■ Hungary: benefit for the country of membership of the EU



2.2 Factors contributing to Hungarian attitudes

In Hungary the ratings for the two indicators (concerning positive or negative judgments on belonging to the EU and the benefits or disadvantages of membership), which started from levels comparable to those in Poland, had plummeted prior to the economic crisis. This decline became even more pronounced over the course of the following years before an upswing took hold which, by late 2017, saw them rise significantly above their initial level. Concerning positive judgments on belonging to the EU, Hungarian scores are slightly above the European average. Concerning the benefits of membership, progress has been particularly strong over the last few years, placing respondents 8 points above the European average.

At the time of accession, Hungarians had mixed feelings. Hopeful expectations (of economic development, the support their fragile economy would be given, and, more generally, issues such as solidarity, openness and mobility as well as greater democracy ...) coexisted with serious concerns (about the EU as little more than a vast market where the law of the strongest prevailed, the country's capacity to adapt to the new situation, negative effects on the standard of living with a population faced with both increasing prices and stagnant wages, the uncertain fate awaiting sources of national pride such as a highly educated citizenry and quality products, particularly in the food sector, or the difficulties inherent in a heterogeneous EU—the EU was often seen as an institution plagued by chronic disagreements where the implementation of common rules frequently encountered problems).

As a sense of Europeanness came to the fore that was anchored in Hungarian history, doubts about the benevolence of the EU system persisted.

The years following the accession witnessed an exacerbation of these misgivings, coupled with the reemergence of old frustrations. For example, there were concerns that Western European countries might take advantage of EU enlargement so as to turn Hungary into a mere outlet for their companies, taking over local firms or forcing them to close down and dumping their low-quality mass products. In the eyes of some, Hungary had been sold cheaply to the EU.

Historical memories give succor to these perceptions. Many had not forgotten the treatment Western powers had reserved for the country in the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, dismantling an Empire of which Hungarians saw themselves as co-managers, amputating entire regions given to Slovaks, Romanians or Yugoslavs. These collective memories feed suspicions towards an interventionist EU, which leaves Hungary little room for manoeuvre and scarcely able to make its own decisions. The resentment at the fate to which the West abandoned them in 1956 may also play its part.

At the same time, there was growing bitterness linked to the impression of being “in the back of the queue” of the new Member States, even though Hungary prided itself earlier of having being closest to the West among Eastern Bloc countries. To these frustrations should be added, from 2008, the effects of the economic crisis and, from 2010 to 2014 especially, the controversies arising from EU concerns about the “democratic standards” of which the Orban government was said to fall short, as well as the angry responses the criticisms elicited.

The significant improvement in attitudes towards the EU since then is due to a number of factors: considerable economic progress – with a growing recognition of the contribution EU funds—; the gradual convergence of living standards with those in Western European Member States, which were of course materially important but also mattered on a symbolic level; the progress towards modernity Western EU members embody, including an openness to free movement and free trade, etc.

Hesitations naturally remain in a country that historically has always considered itself a bulwark in the defense of the (Christian, some expressly add) West against the successive as-

saults of Mongols, Ottomans, and to a certain extent, Russians. These contributions to the history of the West, some argue, are not sufficiently recognised. Now it is the migratory flows the country purports to hold back, a task that – according to some Hungarians - many of its Western neighbours fail to appreciate.

2.3 The situation at the end of 2017

Today, Hungarians express a strong commitment to the EU: 64% affirm their attachment to it against 35% who care little or are opposed. 43% of Hungarians respondents have a positive image of the EU, against 15% who see it negatively (and 41% who have neither a positive nor a negative image). 58% of those polled in Hungary are optimistic about the future of EU, versus 38% who look at it with pessimism. 33% may think that the country would be better off outside the EU, but 58% are of the opposite opinion. On these questions, Hungarians score are either close to the European average or above it.

When it comes to economic issues, Hungarians are, like the average European citizen, divided on the situation of their own country, which seems good for 50%, and bad for 49%. As for the economic fortunes of the EU, Hungarians see them in a much more favourable light: 62% consider them good, against 29% holding the opposite view. This proportion is significantly above the European average, and reflects an awareness of the remaining gap between Hungary and the Western Member States. When asked whether they expected the situation to improve or deteriorate over the next twelve months, Hungarians display slightly more optimism than pessimism about Hungary and the EU as a whole (the dominant response being, as elsewhere, uncertainty or a wait-and-see attitude, with the situation remaining “unchanged”). Here too they appear (slightly) more positive than the average EU citizen.

When asked in what respects membership of the EU has been beneficial to them, we see them citing more than the average EU citizen the contribution to economic growth, the improvement in living standards, and the new employment opportunities (*Parlemeter*, autumn 2017). In response to another question about the positive results of EU membership, they mention more often than others free movement, exchange programmes such as Erasmus, the economic power of the EU and the CAP.

Hungarians are more likely to say they are confident in the EU (49%) than to display distrust (43%). This, too, is higher than the average EU score of 41% versus 48%. As for the current direction in which the EU is headed, 34% of Hungarian respondents judge it positively against 47% who see it negatively (with 8% being unsure). This vision looks a little less bleak than the EU average.

Confidence in the national government is slightly below confidence in the EU, standing at 48% (against 47% who do not trust their national government), but this reflects a more positive view compared to the figures in other countries.

By contrast, when asked whether the interests of Hungary are well taken into account by the EU, the responses are more negative: they are a minority (43%) to take this view, as opposed to 53% of Hungarian respondents who think that their country's interests receive insufficient consideration. The proportion is below the European average (with 49% considering that their country's interests are well taken into account, and 43% holding the opposite view).

Hungarians are also comparatively less likely to want more decisions to be taken at the European level: 49% expressed this wish, against 41%. The EU average here stands at 55% against 36% (but even in Hungary, this means that there is still a relative majority for greater EU responsibilities). More specifically, asked to give their opinion about eight areas where more common decisions could be taken, Hungarians opt comparatively more often for two fields: investment stimulus and job creation, but also healthcare and social security (*Special*

Eurobarometer, autumn 2017). In response to another question about how to further develop European policies in different areas, they cite comparatively less often the objective of a common migration policy and, slightly less frequently, the European monetary policy with the euro (focusing instead comparatively more on EU enlargement, and the prospect of a European digital market, arguably held to be synonymous with modernity).

Finally, immigration and terrorism are singled out more often than in other EU states as the main problems facing Europe (and economic concerns less so). Immigration is also mentioned here as one of the problems the country itself has to confront (as is, though to a different extent, healthcare and social security. Terrorism, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned).

On the issue of immigration, the responses of Hungarians are clear. **Only 19% of respondents feel positive about immigration from outside the EU, with 77% having negative feelings.** 19% think that immigrants “make a big contribution” to their country, but 78% reject this idea. The idea that the country should help refugees is anything but widely shared (29% subscribe to this view, and 66% oppose it). 50% say they approve of the idea of a common migration policy, with 45% disagreeing with it. The responses may contain some ambiguities, since the very prospect of a policy imposed by the EU is probably one of the causes (if not *the* main cause) of the resentment expressed.

3. CZECH REPUBLIC – A EURO-CAUTIOUS CITIZENRY

3.1 The evolution of judgments on membership since the country’s accession to the EU

In the Czech Republic, judgements on the country’s accession were initially rather reserved. In the autumn of 2004, 45% of respondents considered membership of the EU a good thing (against 10% who saw it as bad thing, and 42% who held neither of those views). This proportion continued to hover between 45% and a little more than 50% until the autumn of 2008, before dropping sharply to a low of 24% (against 21%, with a record level of indecision of 54%) in the spring of 2012. Since then the share of positive judgments has risen slightly, standing at between 31% and 34% (except in the autumn of 2014, when positive judgments increased to 40%), before a further decline to 29% (against 21% who viewed membership unfavourably and 40% who were undecided) at the end of 2017.

The membership benefit indicator improved significantly since the autumn of 2004, when respondents were sharply divided on the issue (with 42% considering that the country derived benefits from EU membership, versus 41%), climbing to 66% (versus 27%) two years later and remaining above 60% until the autumn of 2009. It then dropped to around 55%, only to reach or slightly exceed 60% during the surveys carried out at the end of 2015 and 2016. In the autumn of 2017, 56% of Czech respondents recognized the benefits of EU membership, but 36% did not.

FIGURE 5 ■ Czech Republic: opinion on the membership of the EU

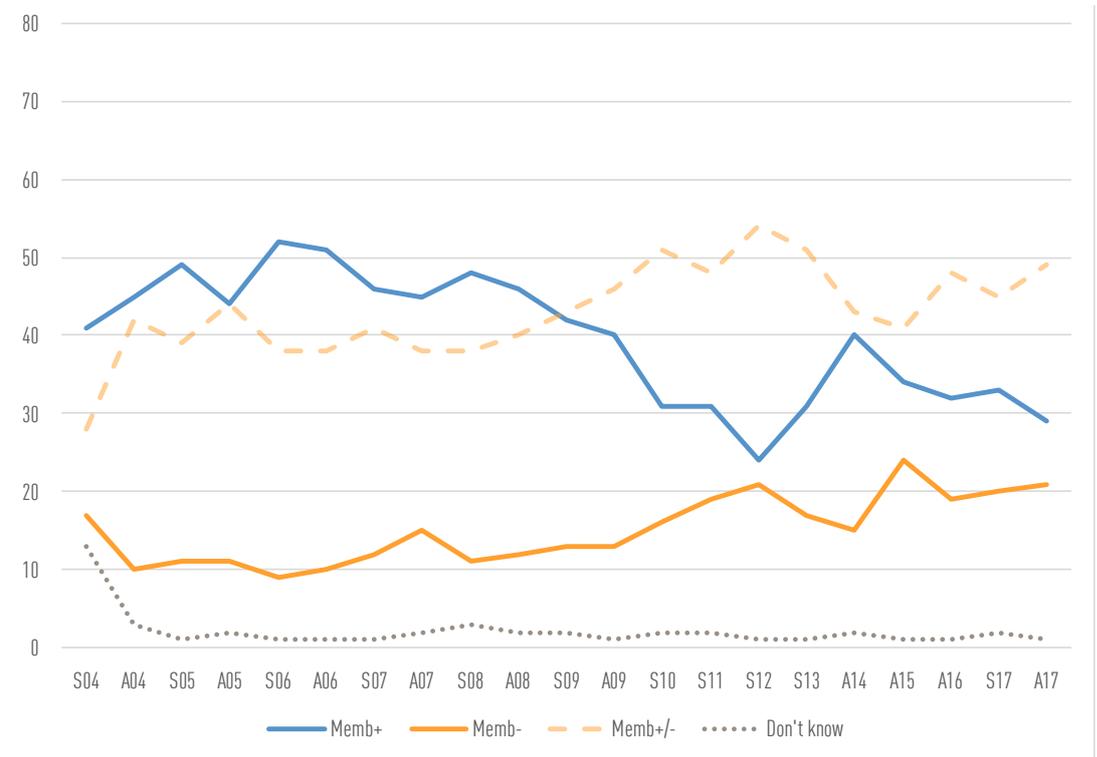
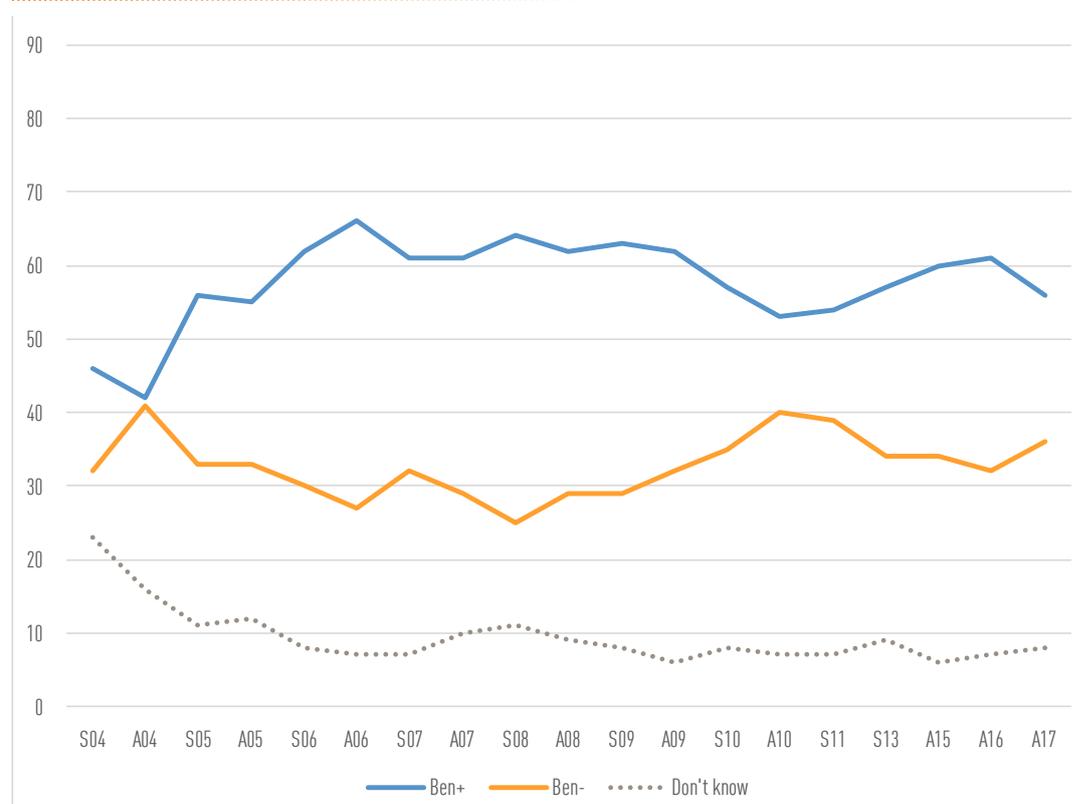


FIGURE 6 ■ Czech Republic: benefit for the country of membership of the EU



3.2 Factors contributing to Czech attitudes

At the time of accession, the Czechs were less inclined than the citizens of the other three countries to take a positive view of EU membership (yet without therefore rejecting it) and rather divided on the issue of whether the country derived any benefits from it. For a few years, this glum vision brightened somewhat but, during the crisis (and especially from 2010), positive opinions fell to a particularly low level. Despite a slight rebound, even today the Czechs remain hesitant about the EU, **displaying a particularly high rate of indecision, even though a majority is of the view that their country has benefited from EU membership.**

At the beginning of the period surveyed, the Czechs were more divided between positive and negative assessments of their country's situation than their Polish or Hungarian neighbours. They were also less emotional in their analysis, and considered the advantages and disadvantages of the country's entry into the EU with a certain detachment. They saw it as a commitment to a project that is primarily economic but, insofar as it entails common rules and the need for greater cooperation, also goes beyond it. Still, they also pointed to the mismatch between the vision of the EU and an institutional reality marred by disagreements between Member States, an overeager bureaucracy intent on regulating the most minute details, and they suspected unfair competition from established Member States.

As in other countries (but perhaps in a more pronounced fashion), Czech citizens were divided between those (generally younger, more educated, from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds) who had confidence in the country's ability to regain its place as "the most Eastern of Western Member States" (rather than the other way around) – the country had a long-established industrial tradition with which it could reconnect after a half century of communist rule perceived as a hiatus – and those who worried about the new times and manifested a certain nostalgia about a past that might have been dreary but where everyone knew what path to follow, leaving less room for uncertainty and worry.

In the years that followed this polarisation persisted. An awareness and appreciation of the EU's contributions in economic and other matters (such as the freedom of movement and the safeguarding of democratic rights) coexisted with a frequent feeling, particularly widespread among the less well off, of stagnation or even deterioration (since the economy recovered only slowly, while price increases and the social situation worsened). More recently, the improvement in the country's situation, in which EU funds played a role, has become more visible. The economy rests on healthy foundations, the employment level is high and wages have gone up.

Yet skepticism remains about an EU in which the small (and/or new) Member States seem to count for little and where bigger neighbours are rarely sanctioned in case of non-respect of the rules. There is also a sense of the EU being dragged down by its weakest members (in the South in particular). The eurozone crisis naturally did little to improve such perceptions. In addition, there are profound disagreements about how to deal with immigration and the influx of refugees.

The Czechs can perhaps be described as skeptics who contemplate system failures with a feeling of slight superiority rather than inferiority (unlike citizens of other new Member States). This skepticism seems to be a general trait of the national mentality.

3.3 The situation at the end of 2017

These reservations are confirmed by the results of recent quantitative surveys. If 62% of Czech respondents say they are attached to Europe, compared with 36% who do not share such a commitment, this proportion falls to only 38% when the question relates specifically to the European Union (with 60% saying they are not attached to the EU). **The image they have is**

equally divided between the negative and the positive, 30% subscribing to either view (and 39% saying that they are not sure). If Czechs are mostly optimistic about the future of the EU (53% against 45%), their opinions are nonetheless less favourable than the European average. On the other hand, they do not differ much from other Europeans when asked whether, in their opinion, the country would be better off outside the EU: 35% agree with this statement, but 55% disagree with the idea. **This confirms that Euroscepticism in the country does not go so far as to reject EU membership as such, which Czechs deem necessary.**

When it comes to economic issues, a particularly high proportion of Czech citizens considers the situation of the country (68% against 30%) more favourably than that of the EU (61% against 28%). A slight majority of people believe that the economic situation of the Czech Republic will improve rather than deteriorate over the next twelve months, whereas they tend to think the opposite when asked about the near-term economic prospects of the EU (but as elsewhere, many think that the situation will remain unchanged).

Presented with a number of reasons why EU membership may have been beneficial, Czechs cite improved living standards and new job opportunities more often than their European peers (*Parlemeter*, autumn 2017). In their responses to another question on the most positive results of EU membership, they point to the bloc's economic power, the opportunities afforded by freedom of movement and exchange programmes as well as peaceful relations between the Member States.

35% of Czech respondents say that they trust the EU, whereas 56% replied that they do not. On this matter, the score is less positive than the already disappointing European average (41% against 48%). Asked whether things in the EU are currently moving in the right direction, Czech responses are slightly gloomier (with 30% saying that things are moving in the right direction, 52% holding the opposite view and 10% remaining undecided). At the same time, **their degree of confidence in the national government is lower still**: only 22% trust it, whereas 71% said they do not have confidence in their own government.

The number of those who consider that the interests of their country are well taken into account by the EU is particularly low (31% against 64%). The average EU score is more balanced (44% against 50%). These results are in line with the qualitative results mentioned above.

Czechs are **particularly reluctant to see more decisions made at EU level**. Only 35% of respondents subscribe to this view, with 58% rejecting it. This is well below the EU average (55% vs. 36%). On the more specific issue of the policy areas in which they would like to see more joint decisions made (*Special Eurobarometer*, autumn 2017), there are no large differences with the average.

Asked about the desirability of developing European policies in various fields, Czechs show little enthusiasm for any of the proposed areas, but they are particularly reticent about monetary policy (the euro) and a common migration policy. If Czechs mention immigration and terrorism (but also the economic situation, unemployment, housing, the environment and climate change as well as energy problems; on the other hand, the rising cost of living, pensions and the level of public debt are singled out more often as important preoccupations) less often than the average EU citizen as major problems facing their country, the opposite holds for the problems the EU must confront, economic challenges being mentioned less frequently than in other EU countries.

Czechs are intransigent about immigration (from non-EU countries). Only 15% of respondents feel positively about it, compared to 81% who view it negatively. A mere 14% believe that immigrants "contribute a lot" to their country, 83% holding the opposite view. Only 27% think that the country should help refugees, whereas 67% oppose this idea.

The idea of relocating refugees to different EU countries is both rejected and considered absurd. Refugees, they argue, aspire to settle not in the Czech Republic but in the more developed Member States of the West. Even if they were assigned to a place of residence, they would

only think of leaving, moving instead to more prosperous countries – at least the most qualified of them, leaving behind the least educated and those least able to work and to integrate. Only a minority of Czechs (41% vs. 55%) supports the idea of a common migration policy.

4. SLOVAKIA – THE GUARDED EUROPEANS

4.1 The evolution of judgments on membership since the country's accession to the EU

In Slovakia, assessments of EU membership were initially the most favourable of the four countries surveyed: 57% of respondents viewed it positively, compared to 4% who saw it negatively (and 37% who were undecided). In the first few years after the accession, this indicator improved further overall (some leaps and fluctuations notwithstanding), peaking in the autumn of 2009, when 68% of Slovaks had a positive view of EU membership, compared with 5% who saw it negatively (and 26% who did not subscribe to either opinion). Then a sharp drop occurred, with the rating falling to a low of 44% (against 11%) in the spring of 2012, before a slight rebound occurred to a level close to 50% that was maintained since 2013 (50% judged EU membership positively, 8% viewed it negatively and 39% were undecided, the last survey in the autumn of 2017 showed).

In the early years, opinions on the benefits the country derived from EU membership were also the most favourable of the four states of the Visegrad Group: 62% of Slovak respondents emphasised the advantages, vs. 25% in 2004. This proportion rose steadily to 80% in 2009 (against 10% of unfavourable opinions in the spring of that year), remaining at a comparable level in 2010. It then dropped a little but continued to stand above 70%. In the autumn of 2017, 74% of those polled in Slovakia (after a peak of 79% a year earlier) expressed a positive opinion about the benefits of EU membership, compared with 16% who did not.

FIGURE 7 ■ Slovakia: opinion on the membership of the EU

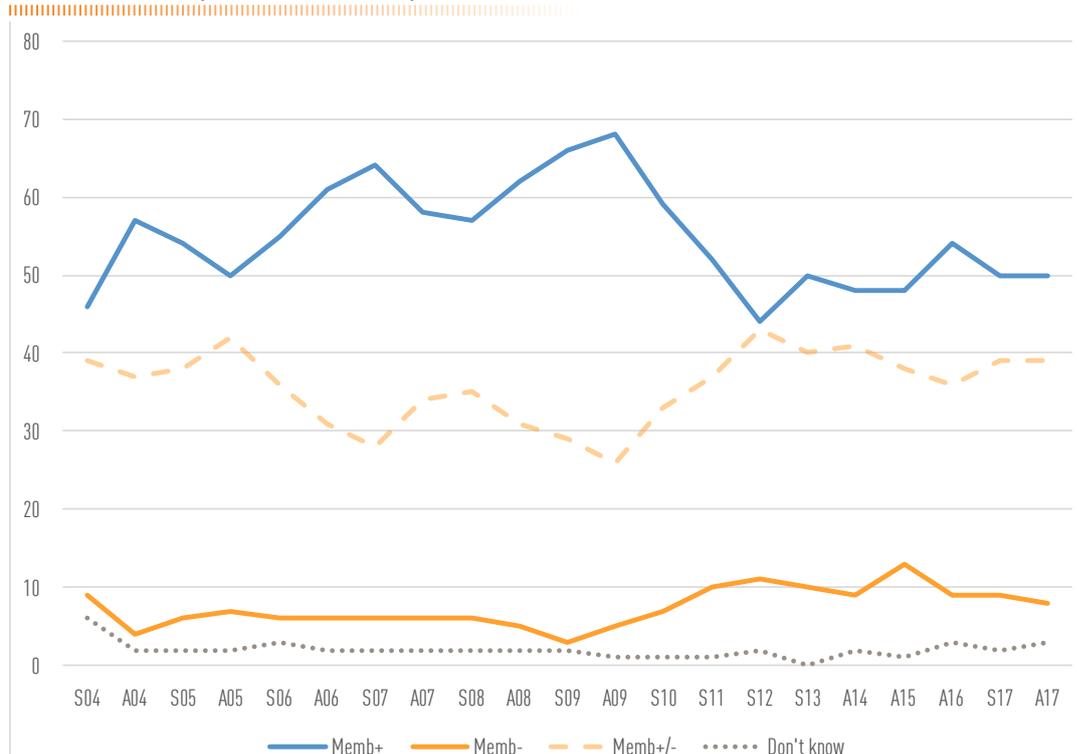
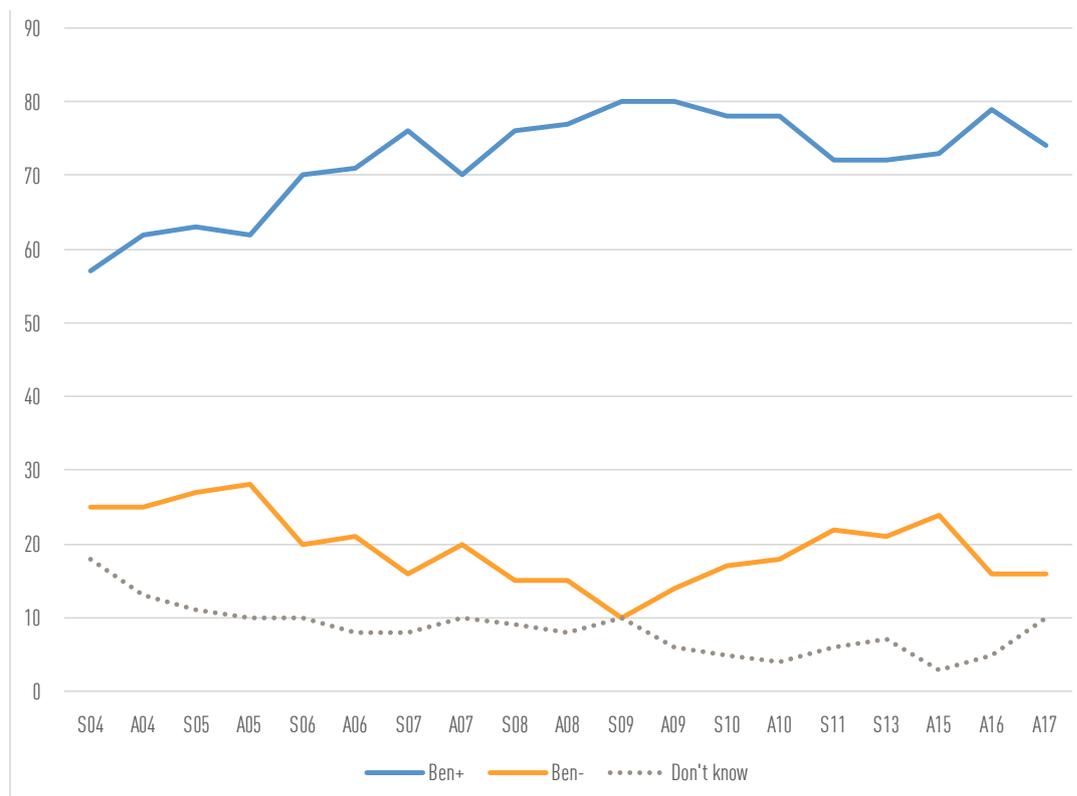


FIGURE 8 ■ Slovakia: benefit for the country of membership of the EU



4.2 Factors contributing to Slovak attitudes

To sum up, Slovaks' views of EU membership were markedly positive at the time of their country's accession and improved further until 2009. The proportion of favourable appraisal then fell sharply and rebounded only slightly after the financial crisis. However, the awareness of the benefits the country derived from this membership, which was subject to fewer fluctuations, contains to stand at a high level at the end of 2017.

The qualitative investigations carried out at the time of Slovakia's accession and in the following years showed that hopeful expectations coexisted with anxieties, the former being more present in the medium and higher socio-professional categories, the latter more vividly expressed among less well-off groups. In a context where many Slovaks considered the country's situation to be dire, their hopeful expectations were based on the promise of economic development, better employment prospects, greater solidarity and higher levels of social protection, more political cooperation with other European countries, the enjoyment of freedom of movement and a reunion with a West to which Slovaks thought they had already belonged during the times of the Habsburg Empire. Slovaks' concerns included the evolution of the social system as a whole, the limitations imposed on freedom of movement in the early years of the country's membership, the relatively slow pace of economic catch-up that transpired after a few years (Poland making comparatively faster headway) and, given the country's modest size, its weak influence on a powerful federal "centre".

The general outlook was rather optimistic. That the country fulfilled the necessary conditions for the adoption of the single currency was a source of satisfaction that no doubt contributed to the sharp rise in pro-EU sentiment until around 2009, before a certain disenchantment coin-

cided with the onset of the financial crisis. During the euro crisis, Slovaks thought they “had to pay” for a Member State whose conduct they considered “irresponsible” and which is wealthier than their own country. This did not entail a rejection of the euro, but undermined the credibility of the EU. It seems that the recurrent criticisms of the flaws and shortcomings of the EU levelled by populist parties at Brussels and the effects of Russian propaganda seeking to exploit feelings of Slavic proximity and to instill doubt about the merits of the Western orientation of Slovakia also played a role.

4.3 The situation at the end of 2017

At the end of 2017, 60% of Slovaks say they are attached to the EU (with 36% saying that they are not). This share is significantly above the EU average (55% versus 43%). The image they have of the EU – positive for 38%, negative for 17% (and neither for 37%) – does not reflect any great enthusiasm, but is close to the EU average. 59% of those polled in Slovakia say they are confident about the future of the EU, a proportion slightly above the EU average, whereas 36% are pessimistic about the bloc’s future. The idea that the country would be better off outside the EU, held by 24% of respondents, is clearly rejected by a majority of Slovaks (60%), which is more promising than the average EU score of 31% who say that their country would be better off outside the EU, compared with 60% who disagree with this view. Despite existing concerns, **EU membership continues to be seen as an obvious necessity by Slovaks.**

When it comes to economic matters, a certain gloom has clearly gained ground, with 40% of Slovak respondents considering the situation of their country to be good, against 56% who view it negatively. (In this respect, the average European score is better, standing at 48% and 49% respectively). Slovaks, though, are more positive about the economic situation of the EU: 55% view it positively and 35% see it negatively (across the EU, the average score is 48% and 39% respectively).

However, over the next twelve months, they judge an improvement of the economic situation to be a little more likely than a deterioration. This holds for both their own country and the economic performance of the EU as a whole. In this regard, they are slightly more optimistic than the average European citizen (as elsewhere, there is a noticeably high proportion of responses which do not expect to see any change in the economic situation).

The reasons cited for believing that the country has benefited from EU membership are, more frequently than is the case for the average European citizen, the employment opportunities and, to a certain extent, the improvements in living standards as well as the contribution to the country’s democratic system and its growing influence in the world. (*Parlemeter*, autumn 2017).

Confidence in the EU is higher in Slovakia than it is on average in the EU: 48% trust the EU and 43% do not (compared with an EU-wide average of 41% vs. 48%). The current direction in which the EU is headed is judged positively by 33% of those polled in Slovakia, compared with 49% who gave a negative response (6% of respondents did not subscribe to either view). This is a minority share comparable to that that observed elsewhere in the EU. Confidence in the national government is much lower (22%), with 66% of Slovak respondents not trusting their own government. However, **those who think that the interests of the country are well taken into account by the EU are in the minority (40% against 51%)**. This result is slightly below the EU average.

This can be related to the fact that **only a minority of Slovaks would like to see more decisions taken at EU level** (39% as opposed to 47% who reject this idea). The percentage is well below the EU average (where the respective figures are 55% and 36%). This is confirmed by an equally lower proportion of citizens wanting such common decision-making in each of

the eight areas presented to them in another survey (*Special Eurobarometer*, autumn 2017). In response to another question about the desirability of various EU policies, Slovaks approve more than the average European citizen does the common monetary policy (including the euro) and, to a lesser extent, the prospect of future enlargements. By contrast, the idea of a common migration policy is met with less approval.

Immigration is one of the challenges for the EU that Slovaks mention more frequently than respondents in the rest of the EU do, alongside terrorism, insecurity as well as rising prices or the cost of living. As for the problems facing Slovakia itself, price rises/the growing cost of living as well as healthcare and social security rank highly on the list. This cannot be said of immigration or terrorism.

In Slovakia, **the arrival of (non-EU) immigrants gives rise to almost the same negative reactions as in the neighbouring country**: 18% of respondents feel positively about immigration as opposed to 77% who express negative sentiments. 21% of those surveyed responded that migrants “contribute a lot” to their country, with 73% disagreeing with this idea. A majority (56%) opposes the idea that one should help refugees, a view only shared by 34%.

However, Slovaks are more open than Czechs (53% vs. 35%) to the idea of a common migration policy (perhaps such proposals were less unanimously denounced by politicians here). Still, there is marked opposition to what might be seen as policies imposed on Slovakia by the EU. Prejudices against populations they know little about also flourish.

CONCLUSION

From relatively different starting points, **public opinion in the four Visegrad countries has evolved in contrasting ways** from the moment of accession to the current conjuncture.

Poles, who were initially very apprehensive, are today **the most satisfied with their EU membership** and the benefits they have derived from it.

Hungarians, after a stretch of gloomy years, **have developed greater European fervor of late**.

Deeply skeptical, Czechs do not question the EU as such, but **consider it from a pragmatic and detached point of view**, weighing the advantages and disadvantages that membership entails. Czechs do not deny that there are benefits but their attachment to EU institutions is weak, which contrasts with their commitment to Europe as such.

Initially the most open-minded, **Slovaks**, whose attitude toward the EU became steadily more positive until around 2009—the year in which their country joined the single currency –, are **now more divided on the results of their EU membership**, even though there is a general awareness of the benefits.

There can be little doubt that **the EU’s contributions are widely known and recognised in these countries**, whether it is economic progress and improvements in the standard of living or the opportunities offered by freedom of movement and establishment. There is, however, a part of the population that does not see the benefits and perceives the world they live in today as harsher, less supportive and more uncertain than the past. **To varying degrees, dissatisfaction, frustration, even resentment persist**. Some of these issues are rooted in the difficult history of these countries.

There is an awareness of the gap that still separates the Visegrad countries from the old Member States. It will take a long time for them to catch up. Meanwhile, **the feeling (especial-**

ly prevalent among smaller countries) of not being fully recognised as “first class members of the club”, of being little able to make their voices heard, of having rules or measures whose merits they dispute imposed from above is widespread. In short, there is a sense in which EU membership does not always allow these countries to go about their business as they see fit.

The question of immigration is a major stumbling block³. In all four countries, it is considered a key challenge for the EU, but (except in Hungary) not for the country itself. Consequently, citizens in the Visegrad countries do not see why they should help manage migratory flows.

Populism obviously thrives on the challenge of migration, though it is far from its only cause. Other frustrations like the ones mentioned above play a role, too, and perhaps the limited historical experience of democracy prior to the collapse of the Soviet empire cannot be discounted as a factor either.

Even if the image of national governments is generally very poor, the injunctions or the demands by the EU or Western Member States for a better sharing of the burden of the migratory problem or, on a different level, the repeated warnings and condemnations of measures which are seen as deviating from democratic rules and values, can have **the perverse effect of generating greater solidarity among citizens with their political leaders** (for whom, after all, they voted) in the face of such “interference”. Finding a solution to this conundrum is clearly a key issue for the EU in the years to come.

3. The Jacques Delors Institute has published a policy paper largely devoted to this question: Daniel Debomy and Alain Tripier, “[European public opinion and the EU after the peak of migration crisis](#)”, Policy paper, no 201, July 2017.

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