

THE EU INTEGRATION IMPACT ON VISEGRAD COUNTRIES



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Abstract

In our three-part study, we seek to answer the question of what has been successful or unsuccessful in the two-decade EU integration process of the Central European countries and Hungary, and what its main contribution has been. Hungary showed the greatest development dynamics in the Central European region when it joined the EU, but by the end of the initial eight years it was among the last in the standings. Between 2002 and 2010, the very poor performance of the ruling political forces led to the failure to implement the necessary structural reforms that should have helped the adaptation and innovation of the economic system. Between 2010 and 2014, the new political leadership, which received a two-thirds mandate to rule, effectively managed the crisis that had previously developed, and from 2015 the country was on a development path. The orthodox-conservative government definitely built a society based on work instead of benefits, and its preference was strongly focused on the family and its well-being. Public opinion poll data clearly proves that cooperation between the countries of the Central European region is not a zero-sum game, because every cooperating country can benefit, and through cooperation not only the possibility of asserting the interests of the region increases, but also the citizens of each nation become closer to each other, which reduces the possibility of conflicts between nation-states and national minorities and strengthens international peace. Overall, we believe that the existence of the European Union is a great historical achievement, the most important historical task of which is to help nation-states cooperate in preserving international peace. History has also warned us that this is of paramount importance to Central Europe.

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1. Introduction and Methodological Considerations

In our study, we are basically looking for an answer to the extent to which the integration process itself has contributed to the development of pluralistic democracy in the newly joined Central European countries, especially in Hungary. There is no doubt that the decades-long European integration process has had a structure-generating power and played a decisive role in the democratic development of Central European countries, including the strengthening of the political culture of their citizens, especially in its democratic pillars. In our analytical work, we will focus mainly on the Visegrád countries from amongst Central European states, and among them, we will especially focus on Hungary's development, with an awareness that much of the data and indicators can only be interpreted through historical and spatial comparisons. We will present the public effects of integration together with data, facts, voter perceptions and their possible explanations.

Accordingly, this study is divided into three parts: (1) In the first part, we will review the political public life of Western and Central European countries based on public opinion, and we will primarily deal with the neo behaviour and performance of political public figures. (2) In the second part, we will analyse the time series data of public opinion polls to get an idea of the changes in Hungary over the past three decades. (3) In the third part we will describe the causal and network factors and explanations with a (neo) behaviourist approach. Finally, most important lessons will be summarised in this paper.

With perspective, data and methods of sociology, history and political science, we will approach the structure-generating processes and social actors, which decisively influence the behaviour of social and political actors, who evaluate and shape changes. We will try to achieve our goal by collecting time-series data, comparing and analysing information, compiling causal relationships, and searching for explanatory principles and causes. Several options are available to us among the analytical methods, including on the one hand, current theories that describe the processes, and on the other hand the empirical data, statistical indicators and public opinion poll results available to us, which especially relate to perceptions of Hungarian citizens. For the sake of clarity, we will use simple data and basic distributions when conveying perceptions, and where we work with qualified numbers and combined systems, we will try to indicate the components.

As researchers, we have been following the neo behaviourist school for four decades, and we will analyse this study using its spirit, approach and methodology, especially when interpreting public opinion poll data. In behavioural research,

we will consider socio-psychological factors and internal events when analysing perceptions.¹ We will briefly discuss what the neo behavioural approach means in social science. Behaviourism is one of the dominant schools of thought of the 20th century. It focuses on human behaviour rather than on the internal processes of consciousness, because it believes that people's preferences and decisions are not fundamentally determined by genetic or mental processes, but are built on knowledge and experiences acquired through learning and experience. Thus when people make decisions, they are actually responding to external stimuli.

People acquire new forms of behaviour throughout their lives, via their family socialisation, collective memories of society, learning and experience. The behaviourist school is a psychological school that studies human behaviour because it believes that mental and genetic processes are less important than external stimuli and responses to them show the development of preferences, decisions and drivers of choice behaviour. The task here is to explore the relationship between a stimulus and the response to it.² This trend was further developed in the second half of the 20th century by the founders of neobehaviourism.³ Neobehaviourists, on the one hand, now take into account internal events (intermediate variables) in their research on behaviour, and on the other hand, they believe that only an external observer can observe and describe human behaviour with scientific objectivity. To do this, the description and understanding of the nature of processes requires the so-called objective operationalisation, i.e. the use of the world of numbers (measurements and mathematical operations), because only numbers and operations allow for a more objective representation of events, comparisons, and the time-series representation and understanding of changes. Hence the essence of the method is that judgments about reality must be translated into numbers, thus making it possible to perform mathematical operations with them, and then the results must be translated back into the language of social science. Our present study was prepared fundamentally in the spirit and methodology of the neobehaviouralist school, using our own database which has been created over more than three decades of scientific work. It should be noted that all the public opinion surveys used and referenced in our Codebook were conducted using the same methodology, i.e. using a nationally representative sample and direct face-to-face interviews.⁴

We have arranged data and perceptions in chronological order and interpreted them in terms of decades. We analyse changes, the so-called 'delayed responses', even when a longer time period has elapsed between the stimulus and the response.⁵

We must also discuss another important feature of Central European development, history and its memory, which still shapes strong cultural preferences in

1 Barnes and Simon, 1997.

2 Watson, 1913.

3 Miller et al., 1994.

4 Simon, 2023.

5 Hull, 2011.

terms of language and religion. If we want to understand the development taking place in the region, then the various American and Western European development concepts must be supplemented by two approaches: one consists of the historical development (memory) carried by societies for centuries, and the other is made up of their cultural traditions (complex value systems), which have been preserved mostly by religion and language. Central Europe is an intermediate region where countries have always existed between great powers, under pressure and influence. They were pressed, squeezed, and shaped in some direction by the Germans and the French from the West, the Turks from the South, and the Russians from the East (It is enough to refer to the fact that the borders of every state in the region have changed several times. For example, that of the Hungarian state changed eight times in the past 200 years). Similarly, dramatic changes have taken place in the Balkans. The great powers always decided on the changes of state borders without consulting the people living there, which caused many conflicts between the local, and affected peoples. It is no coincidence that even today, these countries, due to their negative historical experiences, are still very much afraid of illegal migration and the associated population exchange, as well as cultural and linguistic conflicts.

In addition, the transition from dictatorship to democracy took place at the same time, and the specificities of post-socialist transitions require that social theories integrate both order-building and conflict theory aspects. Due to the rapidly changing laws and regulations in the region and the lack of legal certainty, the functioning of social systems can often only be understood through informal human relations and practices behind formal institutions and laws, or they can be explained by knowledge of the complex coexistence of rules and actual practice.⁶ This undoubtedly requires sociological, political science, social psychological, anthropological and cultural approaches. The transformations in the former Eastern Europe can also be understood as a struggle for human dignity, i.e. for freedom, democracy and human rights. Therefore, we believe that the systems theory approach must be supplemented with subjective dimensions that make the role of values and norms more visible.⁷

If we accept that the EU process itself is one of the engines of the changes taking place in Central European countries, that is having a structure-generating power, then we have two approaches to describing the impact and consequences of European integration. One is the so-called functionalist integration theories, and the other is the so-called structuralist (neorealist and neoliberal) theoretical approaches. In our opinion, these two approaches do not contain mutually exclusive either / or theories, because both approaches can be valid and explanatory at the same time, since they say a lot about reality in themselves and help in understanding certain eras and periods. The question is always, what do we want to interpret with them?

6 Whitehead, 2015, pp. 15–29; Szmolka, 2022, pp. 71–82; Toots, 2022, pp. 101–118.

7 Bruszt-Simon, 1992; Petrusek, 1993.

What are we looking for the answer to? Based on this, we can decide which system of relationships brings us closer to understanding the actual processes.⁸

The database for our analyses is provided by 17 time-series questionnaire surveys, unique in Central Europe, which were conducted by this author between 1990 and 2022 on civic preferences, integration and political culture (with nationwide surveys of 1,000-1,200 people). We have the answers of nearly 20,000 people at our disposal, which can be arranged in chronological order. In our questionnaire, we repeated the same questions over more than three decades, and the annual data series obtained provide a rare and exceptionally good opportunity for our scientific research work to process the answers in a time-series analysis, and to create a picture of the changes that have occurred in the political culture of Hungarians during the European integration process.⁹ During the communist era, we conducted the first explicitly multi-party polls, political public opinion research from Central Europe in Hungary. From the spring of 1989, led by this writer, we asked representative samples of people using a questionnaire based on direct contact, which party they would vote for if there were a multi-party system competing in an election. Following our initial study, we repeated our research every year or two between 1989 and 2021, using the same questions. The responses from the 17 national surveys obtained were arranged in chronological order by question and edited into a Codebook. All of this data is used in our current study.¹⁰ Based on this, we will try to answer the question of how Hungarians experienced the regime change and democratisation, as well as the process of integration into the system of European countries. We will attempt to describe how much civil society itself has changed over the past three decades.¹¹

2. Interpretations and Types of Integration Process

2.1. Theoretical Approaches

The term integration in a general sense means a process in which one system moves towards fitting into another, more dominant system. It means the process in which one or more separate units – in a looser or tighter form – are connected as parts to some larger or stronger whole. There are several qualitative levels of this connection, or several degrees, from harmonisation, assimilation, and the intertwining of cooperation to fitting, unification, and ultimately complete fusion. The process can occur at an elementary level during certain chemical processes or in

8 Table No. 1.

9 Simon, 2016.

10 Simon, 2022a.

11 Simon, 2016.

biology in the micro- and macro-level units of the living world, but similarly in the world created by humans, in the societies and organisations they create. Accordingly, in the social sciences, the term is used for changes occurring between the most diverse organic organisations, from economic units to political institutions, from smaller organic parts to the higher and more complex levels of cooperation between countries.

What does the concept of integration in the social sciences mean and what is its essence? Let us make it clear that we should view the integration system of the EU and the V4 as the generator of a process, not as the cause of a final and permanent state, and therefore we should analyse it as part of a development, which although can be divided into stages tied to a specific time period, is constantly in a state of change in terms of its content, and also due to the movements of the elements.

In a more general sense, integration means the process of connecting somewhere, during which either the units representing a larger force attract the smaller ones and connect with them, or the units representing a smaller force come together forming a unit constituting a larger force, i.e. integration. In terms of its content, integration is therefore a process during which the elements of the structure integrating into a larger or stronger organisational unit (EU) are bound and either resemble or become more compatible with the integrating organisational structure according to their affinity and their functions. This takes place in such a way that free radicals develop between the actors; they are attracted to each other, bond and thus resemble their system (structure, operation). At the beginning of the integration process in society, purposeful communication, dialogue, the development of common values, agreement, and then the development of common thinking and action conditions begin between the parts.

Thus, when we examine the integration itself, we need to know that the process has, in addition to many actors, three main protagonists: the integrator, the integrated, and the forces (relationships) between them. For the present study, the most important of the protagonists is the integration, about which we will describe in more detail, but we must also formulate some statements regarding the other two actors, namely the integrator and the integration force. First, let us briefly look at what integration means at the level of the integrators, then in relation to the lines of force between the actors in the process, and finally at the level of individual citizens. During political integration, individual states give part of their sovereignty to interstate organisations, for example in order to improve economic or interest-enforcement opportunities. In practice, the large integrations of our time can be classified in several ways. One of the main organising principles can be the strength of organisational cohesion between members, that is, the degree of autonomy of the components. Based on this, we distinguish four major types: (1) loose personal union; (2) confederal-type integration; (3) federal-type integration; (4) union integration (the parts are not autonomous outwardly).

We emphasise that these do not represent levels of development, but different qualities. From the point of view of social development, a level of integration that

can harmoniously unite the constituent elements into a whole, ensuring them the balanced development resulting from a state of dynamic equilibrium, is always desirable.

2.2. The Philosophy of Integration

In general, integration processes are essentially the connection between larger and smaller units, the process of their strengthening or weakening being in accordance with the challenges of the times. Hence it is not a one-way process, but involves periods when centralisation, that is, the strengthening the connection of the parts, is needed, and other period when increasing the autonomy of the parts, or weakening connections, is necessary.

The motto of the European Union is: 'Unity in diversity'. This means the recognition of diversity, the fact that despite the differences, traditional European values hold the alliance of countries together, not those who disagree should rather keep quiet. Let us add to this that integration itself is an ongoing process, a change which sometimes appears in closer and sometimes in looser relationships. During the integration process, the connection of smaller units towards larger units begins, followed by their further division, so that in the meantime the specific frameworks, forms, systems, rules and mechanisms of integration operate. In terms of its effect, it is mutual, but usually it is the smaller and weaker units that accepts the normal system of the larger and stronger unit, which of course has effects on both the integrator and the integrated.

Let us approach the social science interpretation, where integration, according to its content, means unification, integration, incorporation, or annexation. This happens on several levels: organisationally, in institutional-legal terms and in the field of symbolic interactions, when one or another form of the system is formed, or the already institutionalised form is modified. The essence of international regional integrations, simplified, is nothing more than the modification of the existing structural pattern of relations between countries, that is, the strengthening of the tissues of the network of relations between them, which has new structural and functional consequences. If one or more new elements are connected to a system, then that process not only causes an effect, but also a kind of interaction, because it usually modifies the system itself and the lines of force between them, not only increasing its size, but also causing changes to a lesser or greater extent in its structure, content and operation. The new system that is created in this way ultimately contains many new elements, functions and qualities, so the interaction works.¹²

Large international integrations can be complex in terms of their target areas, whether economic, political, or cultural, but we will not go into detail about these here, only noting that they are the subject of scientific debates, which have been extensively described in the literature.

12 Sampedro, 2006; Szmolka, 2022, pp. 71–82.

2.3. The Meaning and Values of European Integration

We agree with those who believe that integration is not necessarily created for some normative purpose or self-worth. For example, the COMECON, created by the countries of the Soviet region, was also an integration organisation, but the organisation obliged countries that were militarily occupied by the Soviets and had severely limited sovereignty to join, so we cannot speak of voluntary integration from the very beginning. Thus, during its operation, the interests of the joining countries were not apparent, and in many cases, they were significantly undermined.

The situation is different in the case of European political integration, where the accession of states is voluntary and for the mutual benefit. The European Community, established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, went further and set the goal of political, economic and trade cooperation based on common interests. During the subsequent enlargements of the community, a new criterion was therefore included in the political conditions for countries wishing to join, the essence of which is freedom, democracy and the related civil rights. These are centuries-old traditional European values, the roots of which go back to the Renaissance or even to the Greek democracies. It became a condition for countries wishing to join that their political system should be democratic and that their citizens should be guaranteed freedom and equal rights under the law. In this spirit, the former dictatorships of Southern European countries (Greek, Portuguese, Spanish) had to be democratised in order to join the system. In the 1990s, similar expectations were formulated in Brussels during the accession negotiations with the countries of the post-Soviet region of Central Europe.¹³

3. Main Explanatory Theories of Integration

In the following section, we will describe three possible dimensions for examining large regional integrations (RIs), which provide an opportunity to better understand the functioning of RIs: (1) the structuralist versus functionalist explanation, (2) the legitimisation theory, and (3) the game theory. In the following, we will briefly examine the essence of these.

3.1. Structuralist Theories and the Role of International Power Relations

The content of structuralist and functionalist theories related to regional integrations is shown in Table No. 1. The question is whether the structuralist or functionalist approach is more suitable for describing the current integration processes of the

13 Colomer, 2024, pp. 11–18; Simon, 1997; Whitehead, 2016, pp. 15–29.

EU. Analysts generally emphasise the usefulness of structuralist approaches compared to functionalists.¹⁴ We acknowledge that some theories that can be classified as structuralist (realists, neorealists) explain a lot of the processes taking place, since they derive a generation of changes from international power relations. For example, earlier in this chapter, when dismantling the systems of communist dictatorships, it was also concluded what an important structure-generating role the radical structural changes in international power relations had in US-Soviet geopolitical relations and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s.¹⁵ Accepting that structuralist theories have a strong explanatory power in understanding changes between large systems, we believe that this is not exclusive, because both schools of thought have their place and meaning. In our opinion, the explanation which brings us closer to an answer, and to understanding the processes of reality, always depends on the question being answered.¹⁶

The specifics of the time of pathfinding can also be better explained by structuralist theories, and less by functionalists. The current renaissance of the V4 is again easy to interpret with the help of neorealist views focusing on external factors, and changes in the international system.¹⁷ Global uncertainty, interdependence, energy, border protection and other significant challenges for the countries of Central Europe, which are squeezed between the great powers, have created the network-like and level-based cooperation of the leaders of the Visegrad countries. The need for such cooperation also appears at the citizen level, which is clearly demonstrated by the results of questionnaire surveys, and this will also be dealt with in the final chapter of this study.

14 Stepper, 2022.

15 Colomer, 2024, pp. 11–18; Simon, 2022, pp. 145–161.

16 Table No. 1.

17 Simon, 2023.

	Structuralist theories			Functionalist theories		
	Realistic	Neo-realistic	Neo liberal	Functionalist	Neo-functionalist	Post-functionalist
Subject	RI is a projection of hegemonic power	RI's response to the change in the international system	RI's response to the change in the international system	RI as economic interdependence	RI is a product of the power of interest groups	RI is a product of bargaining and community identity
Guided	ensuring survival	balance of power	interdependence	global governance	the will of multinationals	Politics dominates the academic world.
Purpose	the power maximization	security maximization	conflict prevention	increasing public goods	deepening integration	above policies party interest
Authors	J. Herz, A. Wolfers, Morgenthau	KN Waltz S. Walt, J. J. Mearsheimer	K. Deutsch, R. Keohane J. Nye	David Mitrany	Ernst Haas	Andrew Moravcsik

Table No. 1¹⁸
Two explanatory theories related to regional integration (RI)

3.2. The Argument of the Legitimation Theory

We can also approach the problem from the perspective of the need for legitimacy as understood in the Weberian sense. Regional integrations can be understood as reactions to changes in the international system, where the main goal of the cooperation of nations is to build mutual trust and security, i.e. to prevent war and preserve peace. From this perspective, integration policies, unlike post-functionalist theories, are not dominated by party interests, because the driving forces are not subordinated to them. Their task is to serve the common good, to maintain stability, security and the balance of power.¹⁹ We can add that the political forces that undertake such a political philosophy, unlike neoliberals, do not rely on some elitist background power or opaque lobby groups, they build their need for legitimacy on democratic foundations when they represent the will of the voters in the interest of the common good.

3.3. The Explanatory Power of Game Theory

We can also explain the process of integration with the help of game theory, namely the theory of non-cooperative games by the Nobel Prize-winning polymath

¹⁸ Edited table based on: Stepper, 2022, pp. 10 and 16, and additions and modifications by the author. Simon, 2023, pp. 26–29; Simon, 2025, p. 48.
¹⁹ Simon, 2025.

John C. Harsányi. The author's pioneering work in the field of so-called 'equilibrium analysis', in relation to zero-sum game theories, can be useful to us, since his equilibrium-centric mathematical thinking strengthens the theory of striving for geopolitical equilibrium in social science and geopolitical thinking, which mostly corresponds to the system of the structuralist-neorealist approach.²⁰

Central Europe is an economic and cultural region that has developed over a common history, so cooperation between individual countries is an integral part of its functioning. We know from game theory research that while in zero-sum games one party can win at the expense of the other, in so-called 'non-zero-sum games' all parties win together.²¹

According to the logic of game theory, we believe that the operation of the former CMEA during communist times as an integration can be classified as a zero-sum game for individual countries, while, in contrast, the operation of the V4 and the European Union is a non-zero-sum game. The leaders of the four Central European countries were able to overcome the problems arising from the zero-sum game concept,²² which is an important and achievable result according to both structuralist and especially neorealist theories. The original goals of both the V4 and the EU was to prevent international conflicts, maximize security, and ensure competitive advantage and the opportunity for prosperity for all citizens of the integration.

We consider it very important to state that V4 cooperation is a non-zero-sum game, i.e. the V4 countries do not win against each other, but rather the parties can develop mainly from external sources, primarily by supporting each other, through coordination and cooperation between themselves. Moreover, such successful cooperation can be not only between two parties, but also between several parties. Recognising this and raising general awareness of this is crucial for the region. Especially since the turn of the millennium, we have seen that the governments of individual countries, assuming they are stable and able to think long-term, are increasingly striving towards good relations and lasting cooperation with their neighbours. This has countless manifestations in the fields of economy, politics and culture, for example, in the coordinated representation of agricultural interests within the EU, in joint capital investments of entrepreneurs, in the coordinated sharing of energy resources (transport and change of natural gas, oil, electricity), or in cultural life in the broad sense. This gives the centuries-old value of Central Europeanness, solidarity between peoples strengthens the sense of belonging of citizens in the region.

In the rest of our study, we will argue, with the help of our data and the trends that they show that intra-regional cooperation should be further strengthened with incentives in politics and law.

20 Table No. 1.

21 Simon, 2021; Harsányi, 2021.

22 Harsányi, 2021.

3.4. Federal Unionists vs. Confederate Sovereignists

Historical facts show that the leading politicians of Western Europe had several ideas about the question of a federal or confederal formation, both at the time of its foundation and during the first period of unification. There was a strong group of federalists who wanted to bring the most important areas of power and powers representing the sovereignty of individual countries under the control of a supranational, federal-level organisation, such as J. Monnet and W. Hallstein.²³ Unlike them, the confederalists, led by the Gaullists, only wanted consultations on foreign policy decisions and advocated for the nation-state to retain its sovereignty (on the model of the Fouchet plan).

There are opinions that centralisation efforts have become so strong that Brussels no longer operates based on the rule of law in the 2020s, while their leaders expect this from Central European member states, especially the Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, or the candidate Balkan countries. When the Council created the so-called ‘Rule of law’ procedure, it introduced an incomprehensible and undefined rubber category, which has been used at will as a formal-legal justification for its dubious internal political interests and alleged rule of law objections. The complete lack of interpretability of the ‘Rule of law’ procedure also sets back the integration efforts of the Balkan states or Turkey, among other things, and is fully part of the great struggle about the present and future of Europe that has been ongoing for more than a decade between unionists who want to centralise and sovereignists who want to decentralise. With Trump coming to power, sovereignists feel empowered and have announced with greater force that they will regain the previously lost elements of their national sovereignty, which they believe the Brussels bureaucracy has ‘stealthily’ taken from European nation-states by circumventing the EU Treaty (e.g., using tools for centralisation, rule of law procedures, conditionality, etc.).

The situation is different in the case of the V4 than in the EU, because multi-lateral cooperation remained sustainable in Central European regional integration without continuous expansion and deepening.²⁴ They are much more helpful in interpreting the organisational and cooperation system between the V4 countries, and the lack of deeper institutionalisation. The leaders of the four countries were able to overcome the problems arising from the zero-sum game concept, which is an important achievement and a path to common success according to structuralism and neorealist theories.²⁵

23 Gillingham, 2003; Fricz, 2025.

24 Stepper, 2023.

25 Simon and Harsányi 2021.

4. The Effects of Integration in Individual Areas

EU integration has also influenced the fate of the V4 members in many areas. Most studies primarily analyse the development direction and decision-making mechanisms of Central European countries in one of the following four areas: (1) Economic integration and development: EU membership has provided the Visegrád countries with the opportunity to benefit from EU funds and subsidies, which have facilitated economic development and the region's convergence; the adoption of common regulators can contribute to modernisation and increased competitiveness. (2) Regional cooperation and advocacy of common interests: EU membership has given the Visegrád countries the opportunity to act together in EU decision-making, to formulate jointly and more effectively represent their common interests: joint positions, implementation of projects and initiatives. (3) Democracy and political stability: The conditions for EU membership include strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring the rule of law. This contributed to increasing political stability and deepening democratic processes. (4) Democratic political culture, civic behaviour patterns: The so-called European values, democratic behaviour patterns must be spread, the willingness to dialogue and the tendency to understand and agree, linguistic and cultural diversity must be strengthened, so that the democratic pillars of political culture are strengthened in the spirit of 'Unity of diversity'.

Although we consider each area important and worthy of deeper analysis, in order to understand the essence and consequences of the EU's integration process, we will highlight three areas out of the five above, where the positive results of the changes have been clearly visible: (1) Issues of economic and social integration and development; (2) The area of democracy and political stability; (3) Democratic political culture and issues of civic behaviour.

Based on all this, in the rest of our study, we examine, in addition to the issues of economic competition, the topics of political stability, democratisation, and citizen behaviour patterns and democratic political culture at the Central European level, and we look for signs of change. Basically, we are analysing democratisation and changes in citizen behaviour patterns at the level of preferences with the help of public opinion poll data. In essence, the two topics also represent two dimensions of political culture.

4.1. Economic and Social Impacts of Integration on V4 Countries (2004–2024)

From what approaches and dimensions can the impact of EU integration on Central European countries be examined? The impact and consequences of the two-decade long process of integration can be examined using at least three different approaches. On the one hand, the international dimensions, namely the new world political power lines and global development paths, can provide an interpretation and analysis framework. Following the change in the power lines of the great powers and the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the countries of the post-communist region

sought to build new regional systems of relations (V4, Alps-Adriatic, Baltic States), which can also be understood as the antecedents of EU integration.²⁶

On the other hand, we can approach the problem of EU integration from the perspective of the domestic political changes taking place within individual Central European countries, for example, from the perspective of party-political struggles, as the majority of parties sought to strengthen European alliances. This also brings with it a kind of forced adaptation, dialogue, rapprochement and agreement.

A new approach is offered by the level of voters, since a significant section of the people tried to break out from the previous decades of isolation and, representing the idea of Europeaness, strove for cooperation between nations. We can therefore see that several approaches are possible for measuring the integration impact mechanisms under examination, both at the level of organisations and of citizens. In fact, it is always the personal preference and point of view of the analyst that decides which of them he/she considers important and which he/she chooses as the subject of his/her analysis (There have been countless analyses of the legal and institutional contexts of the integration process, its system. We acknowledge the outstanding importance of that dimension, but it is not the subject of our present study, we only deal with it in way of reference.) In our study, we place emphasis on another important pillar of integration, the political and cultural dimension, especially the change in citizen behaviour.

Among the effects of the European Union integration process, which has been going on for several decades, on the V4, let us first look at the development of economic competition. Statistical data clearly show the changes. Let us make it clear that membership has brought mutual benefits, both for the joining Central European countries and for the Western European countries, since exports and imports, as well as the free flow of labour and capital, have become easier in both directions. The former made sacrifices by releasing part of their qualified labour force to work in Western Europe and allowing Western products to enter their markets duty-free, while the former member states benefited greatly from the fact that the new member states enabled them to invest their capital and use the much cheaper Central European labour and energy. Thanks to EU membership, exports and imports have become easier for the V4, as well as the free flow of labour and capital, contributions to infrastructure developments, and the benefits of the EU internal market have undoubtedly brought development to the region, especially in the period before the Covid pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war, and then significant development followed again in the 2020s.²⁷

26 Simon, 2022, pp. 145–161.

27 Wiatr, 2022, pp. 29–36; Szmolka, 2022, pp. 71–82.

4.2. European Values and Integration

Does Europe have common core values that are above all else? There is no consensus among analysts on this issue, the background of which we will discuss later. Let us conclude that in our opinion there are clearly values that unite nations in Europe, since the historical past has produced values that today form the foundation of Europeanness. In our opinion, countries are connected by three important core values, as a legacy of Hellenic civilisation and Christianity: the institutions and legal system of modern democracy can clearly ensure the enforcement and operation of freedom, humanism, and tolerance of otherness.

In our interpretation, democracy is essentially ‘institutionalized freedom’.²⁸ With this formulation, we give perhaps the most concise definition of democracy in the political science. If we accept that democracy in the 21st century essentially means the institutionalisation of freedom, then we must examine its emergence in terms of not only institutionalisations and legal guarantees in an economic and legal sense, but also in a cultural sense.²⁹ However, institutions and rules only function effectively if they are given actual content, if people themselves accept them, internalise them (internalise, and socialise them) and live according to them.

Therefore, if we analyse European values, we definitely should examine how strong the pillars of political culture that strengthen democracy are in people’s preferences, thinking, knowledge, opinions and actions.³⁰ Our study will answer this question by analysing trends, also using statistical data. We will consider the important changes have occurred in individual countries during the integration process, in terms of market competition, prosperity, democracy and political culture. If we arrange the survey data available to us in chronological order, we will also get an idea of how citizens experienced the changes accompanying the EU integration process, which perceptions they developed about reality, and how these have changed over time.

Since the establishment of the European Community, relations between Western European nations have been governed for several decades by the idea of established common rules between Western European nations, mainly on aspects related to economic integration and the definition of a common foreign policy. (This is proven by historical facts of which we will not go into detail here). In the 1980s, the leaders of the European Community formulated new expectations for candidates applying for membership. It became generally accepted from the 1990s (the Maastricht Treaty of 1992) and was confirmed in writing by the 1993 ‘Copenhagen criteria’, that the main objectives of integration were cooperation and convergence, with three main areas identified in economic, political and social terms. These are still among the conditions and guidelines required for accession today and were mandatory expectations

28 Simon, 2023.

29 Simon, 2024.

30 Barnes and Simon, 1997.

of the community for the post-communist countries that were wished to join at that point in time. The following three criteria still form the main pillars of the EU's value system: (1) Common European economy (European Community, MONTAN Union, Euratom, EMU, Customs Union, free movement of capital and labour, etc.); (2) Common Foreign and Security Policy (Common Political Cooperation: CFSP); (3) Common Justice and Home Affairs work (Justice and Home Affairs: JHA, through the coordination of legislation, justice, asylum, immigration).

The three common principles are closely linked, as it is clear that the results of successful integration must not only be economic (which are essentially the consequences of market economy conditions), but also political and legal-justice, the combined conditions of which are, on the one hand, an effectively functioning democracy, and on the other hand, human dignity (social welfare, civil rights, labour rights, etc.). The disappearance of national borders, free movement, and the organisation of a single labour and economic market have made it increasingly important to link the process of political and economic convergence with the strengthening of fundamental social and labour rights. The process of social convergence is a part of and is aimed at the common European value system, the condition of which is not only the pursuit of common economic and political interests, but also the sharing of the benefits of the growth and prosperity process among the broader layers of society. With the accession of the Central European countries and the subsequent further enlargement of the European Union, it became possible for a cultural feeling, the so-called the realisation of a 'common European citizenship' or at least the possibility of it. An important indicator of its existence is the emergence and continuous strengthening of European identity, which we will demonstrate with our public opinion poll data. With the help of statistical data and the results of questionnaire surveys, we will seek answers to the question of what the identity of Central Europeans is, to what extent Hungarians feel themselves to be Central Europeans and Europeans and how they relate to other nations of the region, and to what extent and in what direction their opinions have changed during integration. We will deal with these in the rest of our study.

5. Development of V4 in Economic and Social Spheres (2004–2022)

5.1. Economic and Social Performance of V4 Countries (2004–2024)

In the following, we will first look at how the competitive position of individual countries and the social situation of their citizens in Central Europe have developed in light of the data. The data in Table 2 show remarkable changes in several areas.

Order	Employment development		Earnings development		GDP/capita development		Consumption development		Pensions development	
	2004	2022	2004	2022	2004	2022	2004	2022	2004	2022
1.	Cz.	Cz.	Sl.	Pl.	Cz.	Cz.	Cz.	Cz.	Cz.	Cz.
2.	Sl.	Hu.	Cz.	Cz.	Hu.	Pl.	Hu.	Pl.	Hu.	Pl.
3.	Hu.	Sl.	Pl.	Hu.	Sl.	Ro.	Sl.	Ro.	Pl.	Sl.
4.	Pl.	Pl.	Hu.	Ro.	Pl.	Hu.	Pl.	Sl.	Sl.	Ro.
5.	Ro.	Ro.	Ro.	Sl.	Ro.	Sl.	Ro.	Hu.	Ro.	Hu.

Table No. 2³¹

Development of Central European countries from EU accession to the present day – Changes in the space of competition (2004–2022)

It is immediately apparent that the clear winners of the EU integration process in economic and social terms are two countries: the Czech Republic and Poland, because both countries have not only improved their previous economic situation, but have clearly started to catch up with the western EU countries. We could also say that the scissors have closed most in their case. However, the disadvantage of the Hungarians and the Slovaks has not decreased (e.g. compared to the Austrians), and it is some consolation that it has not increased either.

The Czech Republic – as it was throughout the 20th century and at the beginning of the 2000s, when accession began – was clearly the most developed country in the region. The Czech Republic has essentially maintained its competitive advantage, leading the way in GDP, employment, consumption and pension developments even after two decades. It was only in the subject of earnings developments that it was initially in second place and has remained so until now.³²

Poles have performed better in all areas than they did two decades earlier. We could say that they were the big winners of integration (and regime change). Of the V4 countries, Polish workers were absorbed by the Western European labour market in the largest proportion, so the millions of euros they sent home also strengthened the country's economy. In terms of consumption, pensions, and GDP, they have risen from third to second place, while in terms of earnings, they also surpassed the Czechs and became the first (from the previous third place).

Slovakia's continuous loss of position is the most visible in the competition of the countries of the region, and this trend is independent of governments. 20 years ago, the country was in third place in terms of GDP per capita, but today it has fallen to last place, and in terms of earnings it has moved from first to last place. The country's situation is particularly complicated by its vulnerability in the energy market, especially since the Russia Ukraine war cut the country off from cheap Russian oil

31 Based on multiple data sources: GKI, 2023; vosz.hu, 2025.

32 Lukáš and Mansfeldová, 2007.

and natural gas by virtue of the EU sanctions policy in the 20s. In terms of the performance of the social sphere, it has only managed to improve its position in terms of pensions (it moved from fourth to third), but this is more a consequence of the poorer performance of the Hungarians (who fell from second to fifth place), rather than due to the significant pension increases in Slovakia based on higher GDP.

The rapid increase in Romania's GDP may seem surprisingly positive at first glance. However, deeper analysis has revealed that this is not so much the result of increased productivity and can only be attributed in a lesser part to changes in internal production structures, and rather in a greater part to new foreign capital investments and remittances from Romanian guest workers working in the EU. On the one hand, in the past three decades, Romania has provided the largest group of people, along with Poles, who have gone to work in the West, and on the other hand, guest workers living there have now become embedded in the local economy, thus gaining significant market positions and receiving higher wages (e.g. compared to citizens of other Balkan or Central European countries). The millions of euros sent home not only increase domestic consumption in Romania, but also represent a significant investment volume, perhaps only comparable to the relatively high similar Polish incomes. Moreover, due to the size of the outflow of wages, Romania's public budget deficit and thus its indebtedness have increased dangerously, which the governments of the time should urgently address in the near future, for example with drastic austerity measures. In turn, demagogic forces, and radical, chauvinist parties can forge electoral capital for themselves from this, which could be dangerous for the already fragile Romanian democracy.³³ (We have noted that in our data analysis we include Serbia and partly Romania in the Central European region because historically Serbia has always been part of the Christian nations of Central Europe, as has Transylvania, which currently makes up the majority of Romania. Both countries are still strongly connected to Central Europe, culturally, politically and economically.)

5.2. The Performance of Hungary

5.2.1. Economic and Social Performance (2004–2024)

We will also look at the economic and social performance of Hungary in more detail. The table shows that at the turn of the millennium, the country was in second place in three out of four areas (GDP, consumption, pensions) in terms of its competitiveness. However, by 2022, it had fallen in all three areas, not just slightly but significantly. In GDP, they fell from second to fourth place, and in consumption and pensions, from second to last (ie: fifth) place. It may be some consolation for Hungarians that they have improved their position in the world of work and in the development of earnings by one place (they moved from third to second and from fourth

33 Pop and Pop, 2021, pp. 11–46.

to third place). However, the decline occurred in the years following accession, and so drastically that it took a long time to get out of that situation. Analyses show that Hungary's loss of ground began after the turn of the millennium, following the change of government in 2002, namely with the coming to power of the socialists, and the downward trend that began ended in a deep decline by the end of the first decade, which was only managed and stopped by the change of government in 2010, when the FIDESZ-KDNP (Orbán government) came to power. The country's development gained momentum from the middle of the decade and only became noticeable to the people in the 2020s. For example, in 2023, average wages in Hungary increased by 13%, which was the highest rate in Europe.³⁴

On May 1st 2004, ten new member states joined the EU, and the majority of these countries have now clearly come closer to the EU average in terms of their economic development and welfare indicators, such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Malta, Lithuania and Slovenia. When Hungary joined the EU, as a relatively developed country in the region, it also entered the EU with the hope that it would continue to grow, catch up with Austria in terms of economic development, and get closer to other Western European countries in terms of living standards. With these expectations, Hungarians supported the economic regime change and the privatisation of state property.³⁵

Looking at the balance sheet of the last two decades, however, we must say that Hungary's catch-up was the slowest, that much less developed countries quickly accelerated and overtook them in several indicators. There are times when it is appropriate to measure a country's progress against its past performance, but now it is worth comparing the results with those of its competitors, and in this area, the Hungarian economy, its economic policy, and ultimately political leadership have not performed well in the past twenty years. In comparison, time-series statistical data show that while the value of GDP per capita, calculated at purchasing power parity, increased 2.2 times between 2004 and 2023, Hungary's relative position in Central Europe has nevertheless deteriorated.³⁶ In 2004, Hungary was in 19th place among the 27 EU countries, but by 2023 they had fallen back to 22nd place.

It is somewhat encouraging that since 2010, one of the main drivers of GDP/capita growth has been the change in economic structure, the essence of which is, on the one hand, the increase in so-called 'added values' and, on the other hand, the significant improvement in labour market activity. The latter is well illustrated by the change in the age distribution of the employed. While at the beginning of our EU accession, only 57% of Hungarians aged 15–64 were employed, in 2022 it was almost 75%, which places the country among the leaders in the EU and has helped Hungarians to embark on a more serious development path in the short and medium term. For example, the proportion of employed Hungarians aged 15–64 at the time

34 Becsey, 2022, pp. 539–550.

35 Bruszt and Simon, 1990.

36 GKI, 2023.

of the country's EU accession was only 57%, but by 2022 it had reached 74%. In this respect, Hungarians have surpassed the Slovaks in the region and are already among the leaders in the EU. (Between 2010 and 2012, one million new jobs were created, along with a very strong family support system.) At the end of 2024, the centre-right government announced a very ambitious series of measures for 2025-26, with an extremely strong social and welfare content, which could also be called a kind of 'welfare system change' that Hungarian society has long been waiting for. The Hungarian pension system also has several additional elements that ultimately put the age group in a better position compared to the average pension value (including a 13th month pension, the lowering the retirement age for women to 40 years of employment, tax-free employment opportunities, etc.).

At the same time, it should also be observed that in the case of Hungary, the relevant statistical data mask the actual situation, because it does not include additional elements, and benefits, which can be add up to a very significant proportion in the case of the country's citizens. According to some opinions, income not directly derived from earnings, which is the support due to the traditionally strong social network, increases the income and financial resources of individual families by about 30–50%. However, raw statistical data does not show this. If the government functions well and produces significant economic performance, then employees' incomes are supplemented with various benefits, and these are based on the world of work on the one hand, and on the family on the other. These include contributions, benefits (reductions in utility costs), social benefits for career starters and pensioners, as well as significant support applications for various groups of society (purchase of housing and cars, heating modernisation, etc.). On top of all this, a family-friendly, child-friendly tax system has also been built, having its own benefits, thanks to which, for example, Hungarian earnings calculated on purchasing power parity increased by 76% between 2004 and 2022, and in this respect, Hungarians not only entered a development path, but by the mid-20s they again overtook Slovakia. From February 2025, the government announced a family tax cut and salary increase unprecedented in Europe (including the fact that mothers who give birth to at least two children will receive a tax exemption for the rest of their lives).³⁷

5.2.2. Political Changes: Orbán's Path Towards Ordo-Conservatism (2004–2025)

The economic policy changes that have taken place in the past two decades in Hungary have also been accompanied by a strong realignment of power relations. Let us look at the essence of this in chronological order. Four prime ministers have changed hands in twenty years, the first three of which were linked to the Socialist movement (2004–2010), while the fourth was linked to the Christian Democrat governments led by Viktor Orbán. At the time of accession in 2004 and for the six years that followed, an MSZP-SZDSZ coalition governed. In the first years, EU

37 Bitá, 2025.

subsidies were not fully open to the accession countries, while the socialist governments pursued a loose budget policy. The forced investments brought with them a high budget deficit and, compared to the level of development and neighbouring countries, high public debt, inflation and household indebtedness. The collapse of the US mortgage and credit market in 2008 further accelerated the economic crisis and Hungary, like Greece, was on the verge of insolvency and required a significant IMF loan. The country, which had lost its previous competitive advantage, was only helped by the change of government in 2010.

The high level of dissatisfaction among the people is demonstrated by the fact that in the 2010 elections the opposition Fidesz-KDNP received two-thirds of the parliamentary seats from the voters, which was an unprecedented development in Europe. The Orbán government (Fidesz-KDNP) implemented a so-called ‘unorthodox’, non-liberal and anti-market economic policy with its crisis management during the period 2010–13. With strong state intervention and market regulations, the Orbán government earned the opposition of Western countries, while by 2013 it managed to stop the economic crisis and put the Hungarian economy on a growth path. The Orbán government’s great popularity is demonstrated by the fact that between 2010 and 2022, in the parliamentary elections held every four years (2010, 2014, 2018, 2022), the centre-right party alliance won more than two-thirds of the seats in all four occasions. This is an unprecedented achievement in the history of multi-party parliamentary elections in Europe. It is so unprecedented that some political leaders of the European Union cannot even interpret this within the framework of democracy, and question the purity of the elections, and do not attribute it to the manifestation of the will of the people. They constantly refer to either electoral fraud or to the misleading of voters, which is why they still do not understand the background of the real processes.³⁸

The international distrust of the Orbán government in the EU was increased by the fact that the right-centre Hungarian government received such a large electoral mandate that it was able to govern independently without a coalition partner. In practice, this also meant that it was not forced to compromise, i.e. without internal party political checks and balances, it was able to govern boldly in accordance with the interests and values of the voters, which in turn provoked countless conflicts in the European Parliament, which was basically led by the leftists, neoliberals and greens. Not only the political leadership of the EU, but also the majority of governments in Western countries did not support the so-called ‘separate’, often non-liberal policy of the Orbán government (see migration policy, family policy, gender policy, and later the Russia Ukraine war, opening to the East). In fact, because of this, conflicts intensified within its own party family, the PP, which brings together conservative right-centre forces, to the point that FIDESZ finally left the alliance in the spring of 2021.³⁹

38 Simon, 2023b.

39 Zsíros, 2023.

Relative economic prosperity (4–6% GDP growth) lasted until the Covid pandemic and the outbreak of the Russian Ukraine war. The EU embargo imposed on Russian gas and oil imports drastically increased the price of imported raw materials, which burdened both production and household consumption. The government took over the latter from the population as part of its so-called ‘utility reduction program’. EU politicians led by left-leaning liberals and greens, amended EU legislation, citing government corruption and the lack of rule of law guarantees, and citing the new rules, stopped a significant part of EU subsidies to Hungary, which potentially cost the country’s economy several thousand billion euros. This forced the Orbán government to move closer to the American conservatives led by Trump. The ‘Eastern opening’ proved successful, and by the 20s the country was not only able to stay on its feet economically, but also made huge investments, the results of which became clearly visible from the middle of the decade in the demand for labour, the growth of production, and the rapid rise in living standards.

What does the policy of opening to the East mean? The Orbán government, which came to power in 2010, sought several opportunities to escape the IMF debt trap, of which the most important were the acquisition of cheap energy sources, the taking out of cheap loans and the receiving markets offering high purchasing power for Hungarian products. And the opportunity for this was not offered by Western Europe, but primarily by Eastern, Asian countries. The previously strong German economic orientation was thus increasingly supplemented and partly replaced by Orbán’s so-called ‘Eastern opening’ policy. In terms of energy (oil, natural gas), in addition to the previous Russian partnership, cooperation with the Gulf Arabs was strengthened, and energy, economic and financial relations were established with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and other Caucasian countries rich in natural gas and oil. Moreover, Arab countries offered cheaper loans than Western European countries, while the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Indians, in addition to purchasing Hungarian products, made significant capital investments in the country in the spirit of mutual benefits. China stands out in particular with its investments (car manufacturing, electrical industry, battery manufacturing). Half of all Chinese investments made in the EU between 2022 and 2025 came to Hungary. Thus, Asia has become very valuable for Hungarians, complementing the previous unilateral Western European (especially German) economic commitment. We can therefore say that the Orbán government’s ‘Eastern opening’ policy was primarily driven by well-understood economic interests and has brought significant benefits to Hungarians in the long term. Thus, not only has the country’s economic power increased significantly (GDP, reduced unemployment, low inflation rate), but the government’s political room for manoeuvre has also increased significantly. However, the changes have caused unrest and fear in Western capitalist circles, as the country’s sovereignty and the government’s freedom of decision-making have increased significantly, which has had political consequences in the world of big politics as well, e.g. in the assessment of illegal migration or in the treatment of ‘woke’ ideologies, in the relationship to the Russian-Ukrainian war.

All these factors contributed to FIDESZ winning the 2022 elections, taking two-thirds of the parliamentary seats. If we look for the reason for the electoral success of the Orbán government, then on the one hand we must mention the high degree of flexibility and the pragmatic response to challenges, free from ideological bias, and on the other hand the strong social policy, the basis of which is the world of work and the aim of supporting families. Orbánism filled the conservative policy (non-neoliberal) with a very strong social content, family benefits, free benefits for pensioners, and easy-to-obtain career start-up programs for young people.⁴⁰

In this way, it started a double process, because while it pulled the rug out from under the feet of left-wing voters, it also attracted materially driven voters. FIDESZ-KDNP, which emphasized values and performance instead of political ideologies, represented a broad coalition in its voter base, encompassing forces ranging from the political centre to the centre-right.

In my opinion, we can consider this a continuation of Adenauer's Christian-social course of the 20th century and call it 'ordo-conservatism', a deeper professional, sociological, and political description of which is still awaited.⁴¹

6. What Does 'Unity in Diversity' Mean?

The motto of the Union is 'Unity in diversity', which refers to both diversity and unity, but in a democratically functioning integration this does not mean that those who disagree should keep quiet, but that conflicts of interest within the alliance are resolved through debates and agreements, and that a unified position is always reached externally.⁴² Before we deal with the topics of debate, we would like to state that despite partial differences of interest and conceptual disputes, the cohesive forces within the Union, which hold the Union together by relying on legally regulated interest advocacy and value representation, are much stronger than conflicts.

If we want to provide a fact-based answer to the main question of our study, to what extent the two-decade integration of the newly acceded countries has been successful or unsuccessful, we need to look specifically at the areas in which intra-EU conflicts and fault lines between the 27 member states are strong. In the following, we will highlight and examine in more detail some areas that we consider important, in which there are significant differences in the assessment and ongoing conflicts between the majority and minority of member states. The seven areas we will examine are as follows: (1) Different concepts of the EU development strategy; (2) The EU's controversial enlargement policy; (3) Different perceptions of illegal migration; (4)

40 Simon, 2024.

41 See more Simon, 2023, pp. 324–332.

42 Simon, 1996.

Collective identities: homeland, Central Europe and Europe; (5) Common European values; (6) Who loves whom? Central European interdependence; (7) Interpretation of homeland, nation, identity

6.1. Different Concepts of the EU Development Strategy

According to many researchers the governance structures of the European Union have long been determined by the relationship with American global imperial interests. Let us remember that the last time Europe tried to resist American efforts was in 2003, when the USA invaded Iraq. French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder very strongly condemned the American imperial intervention as a step seriously threatening the balance of power in the world. However, it was somewhat surprising that the governments of the eight Central European countries that, at the time, were awaiting admission supported the American aggression in a joint memorandum.⁴³ Since the turn of the millennium, it has been clear that the governance structures of the European Union have already been determined by the relationship with American global imperial interests. The EU increasingly acts as a servile structure subordinated to the global interests of the USA.

In the 21st century, two different visions of integration have emerged about the present and future of Europe. Federalists (unionists) represent one trend in political science, the other by sovereigntists. The first trend aims to create an imperial-type state entity, the United States of Europe, while the other aims for cooperation based on a loose alliance of nation-states. The two competing forces have now become one of the main fault lines in EU politics, and the basic positions also determine the public policy decisions of individual countries and their politicians on many other issues, e.g. illegal migration, tax policy, the scope of legal regulations, national interests, collective nationality rights or social policy.⁴⁴

For several decades, the relationship between Western European states was governed by concepts that were mainly based on prevalent rules related to common foreign policy and partial economic cooperation, and did not include, for example, the protection of the collective rights of national or religious minorities. However, after the accession of ex-Eastern European states, the role of nation-states and national minorities became more valued, so new challenges emerged, to which the founding 'core countries' should have adapted their concepts, but in our opinion this did not happen. In the event of conflicts, the founding countries, as core countries, treat the new member states that contradict them in the same way as the imperial centre treats its periphery: instead of dialogue and compromise, they either ignore the interests of the minority, or, as the colonialists did, they incite their internal opposition with their colonies and punish them.⁴⁵ Thus, the Western powers easily turn

43 Bogár, 2005.

44 Pokol and Simon, 2021; Minority SafePack 2020/2846; Willányi-Kovács, 2024, pp. 39–56.

45 Carteny, 2016, pp. 92–99.

the internal opposition into an opponent that delegitimises the ruling power, and the punishments they inflict undermine the country's economy and the social security of its citizens. (See the example of the Polish PIS governments, the Hungarian Orbán government, or the Slovak Fico government.).

It is also obvious that since the turn of the millennium, the EU's international competitiveness has weakened significantly, which has further intensified the struggle between the two major trends. The Union's left-liberal globalist political leaders (socialists, liberals, greens, leftists) want to respond by centralising power, by creating a kind of superstate (the United States of Europe), and want to limit the sovereignty of member states using a step by step process. They are opposed by the sovereigntists (patriots, national conservatives, nationalists, Eurosceptics), who seek common connecting forces based on the interests of nation states, refer to the principles of freedom and democracy, and insist on national-level interest representation in the most important areas of political decision-making, be it the judiciary, the tax system, migration policy, family policy, sanctions policy, or even economic policy as a whole.

In the ongoing struggle between the forces of centralisation and decentralisation, the two forces were almost in balance until Brexit. The British, together with the V4, were able to prevent any centralisation efforts, as together they were able to form a 'blocking minority'.⁴⁶ However, with the British withdrawal, the blocking power of the minority ceased, the supporters of decentralisation weakened, and the previous more or less balanced state was broken. Many believe that politics overtook law in the EU leadership, and from then on, centralisation efforts advanced at an unprecedented pace between 2016 and 2025, until Trump's second election (see rule of law procedures, conditionality, unprecedented financial penalties). Many believe that top leaders in EU positions 'circumvented the law, circumvented the charter'.⁴⁷

Accordingly, the two schools also envision internal reforms within the EU in different directions. Federalists want to use the debates on internal reforms to increase the degree of centralisation, that is, to take powers away from the member states. A typical example is the German proposal to transform the previous 'unanimity decision' into 'majority decision' (QMV decision-making), which would essentially mean suppressing the opinions of countries with smaller populations. The sovereigntists who oppose them want to regain their autonomy in those areas that they believe centralists have stealthily taken from them in recent years, circumventing the EU Treaty. In other words, they want to regain powers from Brussels for the member states and even want to eliminate the sanctioning tools that the Brussels bureaucracy uses in the interests of centralisation (rule of law procedure, conditionality).

Let us add that both schools of thought have historical traditions. Many believe that centralists hark back to the traditions of the Roman Empire, which, based on a strong army and a sophisticated legal system, was able to create a powerful governing

46 Bogár, 2025; Lukáš and Mansfeldová, 2007, pp. 20–39.

47 Orbán, 2024.

force with a centralised infrastructure through the work of peoples, who were subject to Rome and deprived of their independence. Sovereignists, on the other hand, fear the emergence of another Soviet Empire, where once free states were continuously stripped of their powers, their autonomy, and ultimately their freedom.

Of course, the internal reforms on the agenda are also being used by the parties arguing with each other within the Union for their own purposes. The big question is how to modernise the Union while maintaining the two main values, freedom and prosperity. In our opinion, the solution can be found in maintaining some kind of balance between the two trends and a series of continuous compromises between them. The first half of the past twenty years was essentially about this balance, because the French and Germans always wanted to centralise, while the British and the V4 countered this, because they wanted to strengthen their nation-state sovereignty. However, with Brexit, the previous balance was upset, and the forces blocking centralization, the V4, were in the minority.

It is a hotly debated and therefore still an open question as to what power the blocking minority will have in the future. Will it grow stronger, thus restoring the previous balance of power, or will the forces of centralisation finally break through, allowing the Union to move towards empire-building?

6.2. The EU's Controversial Enlargement Policy

It is also true in politics that there is no unfilled space in power struggles, because if one withdraws from somewhere, another will take its place. This is also the case with the Balkans, the space between Hungary and Greece, where there is a geopolitical hole because the EU has not been able to integrate its countries within the framework of a comprehensive enlargement concept for a long time.

They are right that if the EU does not integrate this region, others will invade. It is a fact that the Chinese have already appeared, and also partly in the background the Russians. For example, in Serbia, customs duties on more than 10 thousand items of goods are being abolished within the framework of the free trade agreement with China. Even short-term thinking requires that the Western Balkans become full members of the European Union as soon as possible.⁴⁸ That is why it would be worthwhile to support the Balkan candidate countries in accordance with the V4 initiative with growth loans and non-repayable grants for the period between 2025 and 2027, which would help develop their energy industries, infrastructure and transport network.⁴⁹

Opinions on the Balkan enlargement vary considerably. While Central Europeans support it, Scandinavian countries, the French and Germans are strongly against it. The political arguments of the opponents include that the EU has already grown too big, and that 27 countries can hardly be managed as a unit, while 37 member

48 Manova, 1995, pp. 83–104.

49 Várhelyi, 2023, pp. 29–30.

states would already be a system. This is somewhat contradicted by the fact that with the British, the organisation was much larger in terms of both population and the expected number of representatives in the European Parliament than it would be with the new Balkan members. However, many of the old member states oppose the enlargement, saying that things are not going so well in the union because post-communist countries were admitted earlier.⁵⁰ Central European countries claim that when they had joined, the enlargement was successful, and that in the past five years (between 2020 and 2025) they, the Baltics and Central Europeans have produced their best economic and social performance, while the Western countries have shown almost no growth.

To summarise, the enlargement towards the Balkans should be seen as a potential source of energy, an excellent opportunity. We can say that there is no consensus on the future enlargement of the EU, and in fact there is a very large gap between the individual groups or parties of countries (Let's not talk about the inclusion of Ukraine, whose inclusion on the agenda would lead to even more serious conflicts).

6.3. Different Perceptions of Illegal Migration

One of the controversial issues is the perception of the problem of migration, especially illegal migration. In this regard, Europe has essentially become divided into two parts: one part is the attitude of the Western countries, the other is that of the Eastern, newly acceded countries. The roots of the differences lead us to the problem of the workforce, which is closely linked to population growth and family policy issues (We will avoid ideological explanations here again).

One position is that external resources should be brought into the labour market. Politicians in Western European countries, who believe that the low population growth rate and lack of children have caused a dramatic labour shortage, represent this. Guest workers from newly joined countries have proven to be insufficient to compensate for this, so migrants from the third world (mainly African and Arab countries) should be accepted, who could potentially be new workers. The concept is most strongly represented by left-wing and liberal politicians in Germany, France, and Sweden. The other position, on the other hand, wants to build on internal resources. This is the view of the majority of citizens of the newly integrating countries from the post-Soviet region, who believe that the labour shortage should not be solved with migrants settled from outside, but that the country should be strengthened from within, with population growth, by encouraging citizens to start families and have children with a much stronger family policy support system than previously. Hungarians adhere most consistently to this concept, but the majority of Poles and Slovaks also hold a similar view.⁵¹ Let us add, however, that this latter view is held only by a weak and subordinate minority in the EU dominated by left-liberal

⁵⁰ Devetak, 2023, pp. 31–50.

⁵¹ dorzeczy.pl, 2025.

politicians, since Western European countries have many more votes due to their size and are also dominant in terms of positions.⁵²

	2015	2017	2021	Change (2015-2021)
1. Europe has been betrayed by letting in migrants, and if we Hungarians don't stand up for it, the migrants will take it from us.	63	69	77	+ 14
2. A border fence is needed to prevent migration.	79	80	88	+ 9
3. The V4 must unite to counter pressure from the West!	75	79	81	+ 6
4. The EU is not handling the problem of migration well.	87	90	90	+ 3
5. Nation states in Europe must be strengthened against global forces!	82	83	84	+ 2
6. Migration is a significant problem	96	93	90	-6

Table No. 3⁵³

Opinion of Hungarians on the problem of migration (2015, 2017, 2021)
(% of respondents agree)

We need to clarify one more issue regarding migration, as political journalism often does not distinguish between immigrants with official documents and migrants arriving illegally, and the two are usually confused. Most countries accept both, while the countries on the eastern side of the EU's Schengen borders protect themselves from illegal immigrants with fences and gates. The latter are considered economic (subsistence) immigrants, and their right to immigration is not recognised, since illegal border violations between two peaceful countries are not considered human rights, and international law also considers this a violation. That is why illegal border violators are deported from Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania or Poland. The expulsions primarily caused significant conflicts between the Hungarian government and the EU authorities, which resulted in a heavy fine being imposed on the country, and Hungary appealed to an international court. The Orbán government's policy against illegal migration reflects the will of the voters, as public opinion polls show that the fight against illegal border crossings has a very significant social base in Hungary (regardless of party affiliation): more than three-quarters (77–90%) of Hungarians support the fight against illegal migration.⁵⁴

Let us also add that in the thinking of Hungarians, refugee migration and illegal economic migration are separated, as 77% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'Refugees and economic immigrants should not be treated the same!'.⁵⁵

⁵² Table No. 3.

⁵³ Simon, 2022, pp. 188–191.

⁵⁴ Table No. 3.

⁵⁵ Simon, 2022, p. 190.

The Orbán government acted accordingly when it accepted more than a hundred thousand Ukrainian refugees after the outbreak of the Russia Ukraine war (accommodation, aid, education, job opportunities). But in connection with migration, it should be mentioned that in the past five years, many people have been granted asylum and then Hungarian citizenship for political reasons, including, for example, more than three thousand Venezuelans who were forced to flee dictatorship.

To summarise we can conclude that, unlike Western European practice, in Hungary there is legal migration, which is officially permitted, and illegal migration, which violates the border, violates the law and is not permitted. It causes conflict within the EU that general European practice does not think this way, but mixes the two and permits them, and expects the same from Hungarians.

6.4. Collective Identities: Homeland, Central Europe and Europe

Political culture is a collective quality that is carried at the group level in every country, essentially a historically formed cultural category, a set of knowledge, orientations, experiences, values, emotions and attitudes that determine the preferences of social groups and nations, their group-level relationship to public affairs, and their practical actions.⁵⁶ Political culture only changes in the long term, some of its elements are inherited through socialisation processes, which are also supplemented by individual experiences. Changes in attitudes, knowledge and opinions are measured by survey-type public opinion polls, by arranging data in chronological order.

Next, we will look at some characteristics of the political culture of Hungary in terms of identity and relations with other nations (We note that the culture of the political elite of each country plays a prominent role in the world of political changes, but this is not the subject of our current study). The issue of national identity is one of the most important fault lines within the EU. Several of the EU founders concluded that war is caused by conflict of interest between nations, that aggression is produced by national interests, and that, consequently, nation-states must be transcended, weakened by the withdrawal of powers, and a supranational construct, a United States of Europe, must be created. This controversial concept was most definitely formulated after the Second World War by Jean Monnet, then R. Schuman and W. Churchill, who believed that there would only be peace on the continent if we could achieve development that goes ‘beyond nations’. Monnet is also referred to by today’s federalists when they want to implement a supranational state.⁵⁷

Opposing them are the sovereigntists, who emphasise one of the most important values of the Union, the protection of freedom, highlight the importance of the collective lifeworld, cultural and linguistic diversity, and fear superpowers

⁵⁶ Simon, 2010; Verba and Flores, 2010.

⁵⁷ European Commission, 2022.

and transnational corporations.⁵⁸ The sovereigntists in the minority formulated their position by referring to the will of the people. It is also important to see how strong people's identity and attachment to the nation, the Central European region, and the Union are. The data from public opinion polls provide the answer to this. Analyses conducted at the level of basic distributions also clearly show people's opinions, attitudes and values, and even, when arranged in chronological order, they make it possible to interpret the changes that have occurred during the integration process.⁵⁹

Patriotism is based on an attachment to the nation. One of the first comparative data sets dates from the mid-1990s, when Austrian researchers used a questionnaire to examine the strength of patriotism in three Central European countries. They formulated statements and asked citizens whether they agreed with them or not. To measure patriotism, the following three questions were asked, and they could choose from the statements.⁶⁰

Statements: (1) I love my country; (2) I am proud to be a (Hungarian) citizen; (3) Even if I don't agree with the government's decisions, I fully support my country.

Question: 'Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'

Statement:	Hungary	Poland	Czech Republic
1. I love my country	78	50	50
2. I stand on the side of my country	66	44	44
3. I am proud of it	62	42	41

Table No. 4⁶¹

*The proportion of patriotism in Czech, Polish and Hungarian contexts
(in 1996, in % of yes answers)*

Statement:	2010	2015	2017	2021	Change 2010-2021
Proud of him (very much + rather yes)	81	81	87	86	+5
Not proud (rather + not at all)	19	19	13	14	-5
Average = (1–4)	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.3	+0.2
N = in people	946	1044	1036	1031	

Table No. 5⁶²

How proud are you to be Hungarian? (2010–2021)

58 For more on this, see the concept of complex interdependence introduced by Keohane and Nye, 2019; Juhász 2019, p. 33.

59 Table No. 1.

60 Table No. 4.

61 Magyar Nemzet, 1996.

62 Simon, 2022, p. 46.

Table No. 5 presents the results of the Central European comparative research, according to which the answers to all three questions show that Hungary has the highest proportion of patriotism (78%), national pride (66%) and standing up for the homeland (62%). We could also say that the spirit of patriotism is strongest among Hungarians in Central Europe. Anyone who knows the history of Hungary and the turbulent fate of the Hungarians in the 20th century will understand why national consciousness is the strongest in the entire region, and the feeling of national ‘togetherness’ and national solidarity is the highest.

It can be added that this measurement does not refer to radical nationalism or chauvinism, but to a strong attachment to the nation, since attachment to the homeland is a natural identity. We call this patriotic patriotism. We must consider this if we want to better understand Central Europe and the role of Hungarians in integration processes.

If we want to create a picture of the present, we need more recent data, and if we are also curious about the changes and want to see their direction, we need to use time series data. This writer has regularly examined the identity of Hungarians, how they relate to their own nation, the Central European region and Europe, using a nationally representative questionnaire survey between 1989 and 2021, using the same questions. Let’s see how the patriotism of Hungarians has developed in a regional dimension and what changes it has undergone.⁶³

Question: ‘How proud are you that ...?’

How proud he is that	Not at all	On a small scale	To a large extent	Fully	Average
Hungarian	2	12	36	50	3.4
Central European	3	12	50	35	3.1
European	1	13	49	37	3.2
Resident of his town (village)	2	2	75	21	3.1

Table No. 6a⁶⁴
Strength of national and regional identity in 2021 (in %)

Tables 6a and 6b are very instructive, as they show, among other things, that only 2-3% of Hungarians are not proud of being Hungarian, Central European, and European. On the other hand, 77% of respondents are proud of being Hungarian and 78% of them are proud of being European. This is a very important indicator, indicating that Hungarians are both patriotic and European at the same time. It must be remembered that in the two world wars of the 20th century Hungary lost 70% of its territory, and nearly half of its Hungarian-speaking population were repatriated under the rule of other countries. Hungarians fought for centuries for their

⁶³ Table No. 6a and Table No. 6b.

⁶⁴ Simon, 2022, p. 46.

‘Hungarianness’, their sovereignty, which was connected to their Europeaness and Christianity. This was the case for centuries, against the Tatars, the Turks, and then against the Austrians, as well as in 1849 against the Russians, and 1956 against the Soviet Union, and in 1989, when they cut the barbed wire along the border so that East Germans could freely go to the West. In the Middle Ages and the modern era, there was a strong belief, a consciousness, that Hungarians had always defended Christian Europe from outside forces. Hungarians still say today that they are defending Europe when they stop illegal migration with a fence built at their border, 77% of them agreeing with the statement that ‘Europe has been betrayed by letting in migrants, and if we Hungarians do not stand up for it, the migrants will take it from us’.

In Central Europe, strong Christian traditions have served as a force for identity formation, not only in the distant past, but also during the communist dictatorships of the 20th century. For historical reasons, the region had strong islands of freedom down to the family level, which preserved the national culture against external foreign powers. This is also why they show very serious resistance to ideologies and ideas that are foreign to them, and imposed on them from Western Europe. For example, most Hungarians are resentful of gender ideologies or Muslim migrants with different value systems imposed on them, as well as accusations and false claims of structural racism. As an outside observer, the astute Norwegian social scientist J. H. Matlary rightly warned the bureaucrats in Brussels that the countries of Central Europe had a dramatic recent common experience of external Soviet invasion and communist oppression, the memory of which is still vivid today, and for this reason they do not look kindly on being educated by outsiders. ‘They feel the indoctrination of forty years of communism behind this, when people were told what the only permissible opinion was’.⁶⁵

It is surprising that the proportion of those who identify with Central Europe is relatively high, with 71% of Hungarian citizens identifying as largely and entirely Central European. This can also be traced back to Hungary’s history, on the one hand to the centuries-old friendly relations with the Poles, and on the other hand to the half-century of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which ensured the peaceful coexistence of the peoples of Central Europe.

65 Matlary, 2022, pp. 233–234.

	Not at all + to a small extent	To a great extent + not at all	Average
How proud he is to be Hungarian	14	86	3.34
How proud to be European	14	86	3.21
How proud he is to be Central European	15	85	3.17

Table No. 6b⁶⁶
How proud are you that... (2021)

The connection and pride with the place of residence can also be said to be high, as only 4% of Hungarians claim to be ‘a little’ or ‘not at all’ proud of their city (or village), while 75% are ‘very’ proud, and 21% are completely proud of their place of residence. This latter proportion is half of those who are proud of to be Hungarian (Table No. 6b).

Identities are embedded in culture and reproduced by it. It is indeed true that ‘every culture is necessarily the expression of a specific string of identities’.⁶⁷ Identity is part of the feeling of belonging to somewhere, and its strength also expresses the sense of security of society. The data (in Tables 6a, 6b, and 6c) shows that on the one hand, the Hungarian society has a relatively high level of national identity and pride, and on the other hand, this has strengthened in the past 10 years.

Proud (%)	2010	2014	2017	2021	Change 2010-2021
1. Very proud	42	42	51	50	+8
2. Rather proud	39	35	36	36	-3
3. I'd rather not proud	15	20	11	12	-1
4. Not at all not proud	4	4	2	2	-2
Average	3.2	3.1	3.3	3.4	-
N = (person)	946	1350	1036	1031	-

Table No. 6c
How proud are you that...? (2021)
How proud are you of being Hungarian?
Change in the strength of Hungarian identity (2010–2021 in %)

⁶⁶ Simon, 2023, p. 79

⁶⁷ Schöpflin, 2004, p. 258.

	2010	2018	2021	Change
Very + rather proud	81	84	84	+ 3
Average	3.1	3.3	3.3	+ 0.2
N = people	946	1036	999	

Table No. 6d

How proud are you to be Hungarian?

(4-point scale) the table includes the combined responses of very proud and rather proud, as well as rather proud and not proud responses in % (2010–2021)

The table clearly shows that a very high proportion of Hungarians are proud to be Hungarian, and in fact, their proportion has even increased somewhat over the past decade. This can also be called healthy patriotism, as it is not directed against other nations, while having strong historical and cultural roots that increase creativity.

To summarise, we can say that Hungarians have a very strong patriotic national consciousness even at Central European level. At the same time, they consider themselves both Central Europeans and Europeans, and therefore believe that by fighting illegal migration, they are not only protecting their homeland, but also the whole of Europe.

6.5. Common European Values: Freedom, Equality, Prosperity

Some claim that the West is deeply divided, that we have no common values, because the opposition between the two major political camps in Europe, the liberal forces linked to global forces and the non-liberal forces with national roots, is so great. In other words, in cultures dominated by forces that call themselves ‘liberal left’ and ‘liberal progressive’ (e.g. liberals, socialists, social democrats, greens), values such as homeland, homeland, national identity are not important, and thus in their thinking, human rights do not include collective rights such as the right to practice religion, the collective rights of national minorities to use their language and culture. Opposite them is the other side, liberal political and cultural forces that consider locality and the nation as the basic values of their entire existence and base their operations on this.

Moreover, it seems that the existence of common values is being questioned not only at a European level, but also between the old continent and the USA.⁶⁸ Let us look at Christoph Heusgen at the Munich Security Conference, when he practically cries that ‘our values are not common’ (‘This conference started as a transatlantic dialogue, but after Vice President Vance’s speech we must fear that our common

⁶⁸ rte.ie, 2025.

values are not so common anymore', quotes Heusen's closing speech at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) by the Irish public service radio).⁶⁹

Let us add that these ideas stem from the logic of thinking that values worthy of general acceptance cannot be other than the values held solely by the person expressing their opinion in this way. We believe that the 'unilinear' thinking that strives for exclusivity does not want or simply cannot take into account that the world is a much more complex set of cultural value chains. If someone considers their own creed to be exclusive in Europe, it breeds arrogance and leads to dangerous conflicts in a democracy that is called to protect freedom at all costs. It is obvious that in democratic systems, disputes between parties can only be resolved through dialogue between the parties, and this also applies to conflicts between fundamental values affecting the life world, be it migration, abortion or even the norms associated with the Woke ideology and the possible reinterpretation of history.⁷⁰

In our opinion, the three common, so-called 'European core values' that hold the Union together are freedom, equality and prosperity. Let us take a brief look at them, in the light of opinion poll data. We are curious to see how Hungarians judge these values, and what changes have occurred in this area in the political culture of Hungarians during their membership.

The examination of these began in Hungary in the 1980s as part of the value research and political culture research of the time. In the Communist system, in addition to the strong paternalistic political culture, we saw that on the one hand, those who were satisfied with their lives attributed their success and happiness to their own personality, while dissatisfied people saw the cause of their failures not in themselves, but rather in the world around them, in external circumstances, in social constraints.⁷¹ According to our questionnaire survey on political culture conducted in the spring of 1989,⁷² Hungarians still felt that among the Soviet systems, they had the most say in 'public affairs' (freedom), while in ours there was a 'goulash communism' (welfare), and in theirs there was the greatest 'equality between people', which is why they lived in the 'cheeriest barracks' of the Eastern bloc.⁷³

69 Takács, 2025.

70 Simon, 2024.

71 Hankiss, 1985; Pataki and Molnár, 1987, pp. 29–46; Bruszt and Simon, 1989; Bruszt and Simon, 1990.

72 Bruszt and Simon, 1989.

73 Bruszt and Simon, 1989; Bruszt and Simon, 1990.

	The possibility of having a say in public affairs		Equality before the law		Where do people live better?	
	1989	1999	1989	1999	1989	1999
1. Austria	1.7	1.7	1.9	1.5	1.2	1.4
2. Hungary	2.1	3.5	2.3	3.4	2.3	3.7
Czech-Slovakia	3.7	–	3.2	–	3.5	–
3. Czech Republic	–	3.7	–	3.7	3.2	–
4. Poland	–	4.1	–	4.0	3.7	4.1
5. Slovakia	–	5.1	–	5.1	–	4.2
6. Bulgaria	–	6.2	–	6.1	–	–
7. Romania	5.9	6.9	5.7	7.2	5.9	7.3
8. SU-Russia	3.9	7.2	3.7	7.4	4.3	7.8

*Table No. 7⁷⁴ Hungarians' opinion before EU accession about...
(before EU membership 1989, 1999) (scale 1-best to 9-worst)*

1. *Where do people have greater opportunities to have a say in public life?*
2. *Where is legal equality greater?*
3. *Where do people live better?*

Let us add that in Hungary, the 'communist-spirited' egalitarianism of the state socialist system meant that better abilities and greater knowledge were suppressed in the name of levelling, in order to equalise the differences between people. This type of equality concept made its impact felt for a long time, especially in the so-called 'collective envy' attitude expressed by left-wing voters. For example, our 2021 survey also showed that the desire for freedom was very important among the middle and upper classes. The more educated the social group, the higher the desire for well-being, especially among those who considered themselves workers, while the idea of equality suffered greatly from the 1950s for the villagers, the peasantry.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Simon, 2022, pp. 195–196.

⁷⁵ Table No. 7 and No. 8.

1.	Freedom	Equality	
	61%	34%	5%
2.	Freedom	Wealth	Name.
	40%	54%	6%

Table No. 8a⁷⁶

Question 'If you had to choose, which one would you choose?' (2021, in %)

1. freedom or equality?

2. freedom or prosperity?

	peasantry	labour	lower middle class	middle class	upper middle class	Average
He chose freedom	46	36	46	47	51	43%
He chose prosperity	54	64	54	53	49	57%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
He chose freedom	40	64	70	64	72	65%
He chose equality	60	36	30	36	28	35%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table No. 8b⁷⁷

Freedom choice by subjective class position (in 2021%)

(Remarkably high rates are marked in bold)

6.6. Who Loves Whom? Central European Interdependence

The motto of the Union is 'Unity in diversity', which refers to both diversity and unity, but in a democratically functioning integration this does not mean that those who disagree should keep quiet, but that conflicts of interest within the alliance are resolved through debates and agreements, and that a unified position is always reached externally.⁷⁸ Before we deal with the topics of debate, we would like to state that despite partial differences of interest and conceptual disputes, the cohesive forces within the Union, which hold the Union together by relying on legally regulated interest advocacy and value representation, are much stronger than conflicts.

If we want to provide a fact-based answer to the main question of our study, to what extent the two-decade integration of the newly acceded countries has been

⁷⁶ Simon, 2022, p. 158.

⁷⁷ Simon, 2022, pp. 23–25.

⁷⁸ Simon, 1996.

successful or unsuccessful, we need to look specifically at the areas in which intra-EU conflicts and fault lines between the 27 member states are strong. In the following, we highlight and examine in more detail some areas that we consider important, in which there are significant differences in the assessment and ongoing conflicts between the majority and minority of member states.

The European Parliament is divided into party families, which are federal systems, and thus affiliation to them also offers opportunities for consultation between parties, helps individual national parties to dialogue with other parties, and moderates extremism in times of conflict. In this way, it also counteracts potential tensions between individual governments (and countries).

Now, examine how Hungarians relate to other Central European nations, who they consider their friends and their enemies; and how the image of Hungarians as friends and enemies has changed during the integration process. One important positive consequence and concomitant of the integration process is that the feeling of fear of other nations has decreased, which has several manifestations. This appears, for example in connection with migration, when, in contrast to the concept of Western countries that enforce (illegal) migration, 81% of Hungarians trust the V4 more and emphasise the importance of regional cooperation. This is increasingly the case.⁷⁹

	2015	2017	2021	Change (2015–2021)
The V4 must unite to counter pressure from the West	75	79	81	+ 6 !!!

Table No. 9⁸⁰

*Opinion of Hungarians on the management of the migration problem
(2015, 2017, 2021)
(% of respondents agree)*

Another instructive dimension also shows the growing trust towards Central European countries, i.e. the distrust is decreasing. According to the data, the friendship index between people has clearly increased at an international level, which means that the Hungarians have increased their trust and sense of friendliness towards all countries, i.e. the feeling of hostility based on distrust has decreased. This is largely due to the efforts made to strengthen the relations of the V4 (e.g. intergovernmental economic relations, political relations between parties or the work of the International Visegrad Fund for civil society organisations), and on the other hand, media news and tourism have also contributed to a better understanding of the other party, to building relationships, dialogue and practical cooperation. In our opinion, this can

⁷⁹ Table No. 9.

⁸⁰ Simon, 2022, pp. 188–191.

also be assessed as the acceptance of common European values, which undoubtedly exhibits one of the successes of integration.⁸¹

	1999	2010	2021	Change (1999–2021)
	They are friendly with us.			
Poland	3.9	3.7	4.0	+ 0.1
Czech Republic	3.0	3.1	3.5	+ 0.5
Slovakia	2.3	1.7	3.3	+ 1.1
Serbs	1.7	2.4	3.2	+ 1.6
Romania	2.2	2.1	2.8	+ 0.6
Ukrainians	2.6	2.8	2.8	+ 0.2
	They are hostile to us.			

Table No. 10⁸²

*Growth of trust between friends over two decades (1999–2021)
How friendly (5) or hostile (1) are the following countries towards us?
(Five-point scale).*

We consider it an important consequence of the integration process that over the past two decades Hungarians consider the citizens of all Central European countries have become somewhat friendlier to us. Hungarians have experienced the greatest change in their relations with Serbs and Slovaks, where they feel that the trust they have in them has increased significantly. The reservations towards Ukrainians are clearly a consequence of the restrictions on the freedoms of the hundreds of thousands of Hungarians living there. All measurements show the traditional friendship of Poles towards Hungarians. Behind this lies the centuries-old Polish-Hungarian friendship of arms, tempered in common historical struggles, which appears to be lasting. The ‘friendship index’ of the Czechs is constantly increasing. Among the V4 countries, the biggest change occurred among Slovaks, where the feeling of friendliness increased by 1.1 points over 22 years, but in the case of the Hungarians’ southern neighbours, the Serbs, this indicator shows an even greater increase: 1.6 index points.

Therefore, in the integration era, according to the perceptions of Hungarians, trust between nations has grown in the region, and common European values have strengthened, which is an important pillar of democratic political culture guaranteeing freedom. In Central Europe, fear is no longer the determining factor, but rather cooperation. After great efforts and investing a lot of energy, the peoples of the region have now reached the point where in Central Europe they are no longer

81 Table No. 10.

82 Simon, 2022, pp. 197–201.

ominated by a fear of each other, or a sense of danger, but by the spirit of cooperation, the culture of cooperation of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin. Since the 2020s, the majority of peoples speaking different languages in the region, Serbs, Slovaks, Romanians, Hungarians, no longer feel threatened by their neighbours, and do not see the future in the isolation of others, as in the 20th century, but in dialogue, in the search for common values and in the acceptance of common goals. All this has required politicians to realise that Central European nations could do better by cooperating and through projects that connect nations rather than by fighting against each other.

To summarise this opinion, the growth of trust between peoples and the cooperation based on this is one of the successes of the European integration process, and if it remains lasting, it will also be a great historical achievement.

6.7. The Hungarian Patriotism, Homeland, Nation, Identity

We were curious about how strong the attachment of Hungarians to their homeland is. We asked the conditional question whether they would still choose Hungary as their homeland if they had the chance. We have collected data on the answers to this question for 25 years, which provides us with a rare opportunity to form a picture of the change in attachment to the homeland over time in Hungary.⁸³

Question: If you could choose, would you choose Hungary as your country or not? (1989–2021).

	1989	1993	1999	2015	2017	2021	Change (1989–1921)
Not at all	1	2	4	5	4	4	+ 3
Probably not.	5	6	9	17	11	11	+ 6
Probably yes	20	20	32	34	38	38	+ 18
Absolutely yes	74	72	55	44	47	47	-27
N =	981	1142	1046	1051	1036	1021	

Table No. 11⁸⁴

Attachment to homeland (changes in time series 1989–2021 in %)

The data in Table 11 shows the development of attachment to one's homeland over a period spanning a quarter century. The figures present a remarkable trend, according to which the proportion of those who would not or probably would not choose Hungary as their homeland has increased nearly fourfold from the beginning of the regime change to the present day, from 6% to 23%. This is certainly a significant

⁸³ Table No. 11.

⁸⁴ Simon, 2022, pp. 197–201.

increase, the reason for which we cannot clearly state, but we can only speculate that the hope of a better financial life would tempt them to another homeland. Whether this is the case can be measured with another question.⁸⁵

	1989	1999	2015	2021	Change 1989–2021
took it further would have	68	66	62	56	-12
it would have taken the same amount	28	32	35	49	+ 21
would have taken it for less	4	2	3	5	+ 1
N= people	879	845	895	887	

Table No. 12⁸⁶

‘What do you think, if you lived in a Western country, you would ...?’

Table 12 shows that the proportion of those who say that they would have been paid more in the West has not increased but rather has decreased somewhat (by 9%). This means that we could neither confirm nor refute our assumption. We can only give one explanation for this, namely that a significant number of those who stated in 1989 or 1999 that they would have been paid more had already emigrated and taken up work abroad, so their answer is no longer among the ‘would have been paid more’ answers.

Of course, we do not rule out the possibility that we have arrived at the end of a historical era through post-globalisation, where identities and institutions protected by citizenship are continuously crumbling, common symbolic values are being diluted and disintegrated, while perhaps elsewhere ‘new-type identities’ are being built in a different dimension. Signs of the latter are still only sporadically visible, and this does not provide a basis for sufficient certainty. In Europe, and thus in Hungary as well, the historical frameworks of state sovereignty seem to have been fragmenting by the beginning of the 21st century (migration, taxes, customs, international laws, technological changes), and new forces are emerging to control and influence the power of the time. Therefore, it is not unimportant whether there is a renaissance of civil society, a strengthening of its sense of national identity, its power to preserve the nation, and its ideology.⁸⁷

To summarise what has been explained above, according to our concept, a well-functioning, nationally conscious society is characterised by inclusive-defensive

⁸⁵ Table No. 12.

⁸⁶ Simon, 2022, p. 43.

⁸⁷ Simon, 2013a.

adaptivity, in other words, a coherent and healthy national consciousness. This is what a nation that aspires to success must achieve.

7. In Conclusion

In this study, we have analysed the pillars of the democratic political culture of civil society in their historical changes and comparisons, relying on statistical and public opinion poll data. We paid special attention to the most controversial topics that represent the cleavage and fault line within the EU: such as for example: centralisation, the non-democratic decision-making process, the blocking of the membership of smaller countries, illegal migration, a lack of respect for national sovereignty, patriotism, national identity, and the collective rights of minorities.

We sought to answer the question of how successful or unsuccessful the two-decade integration process could be. We believe that it would be unprofessional to give a simple short answer to the question, namely, whether it was successful or unsuccessful. Perhaps we could say that the process of integration is often successful and often unsuccessful, but the people living here definitely have a great need for a common Europe.

During European integration, the development of Hungarian society and the economy in the past twenty years was not a linear process, but took place in an irregular manner, with shock waves, where strengthening was mixed with weakening, growth with decline and interferences further complicated the development. Undoubtedly, significant geostrategic changes, as well as the unpredictable development of the favourable and unfavourable international environment, played a major role in this. Development in Europe can also be achieved in the constant political struggle for powers, interests and values, where tailwinds are often stronger than headwinds. If it is true that the European Union already defined its own governance structures as a function of American global imperial interests twenty years ago (wok culture, etc.), then a fundamentally new era will begin for the EU from 2025, that is, from the time the Trump administration comes to power. The big question for the EU in the future will be whether it will be able to create a fundamentally new strategy, which will give Europe its own independent room for manoeuvring in the global space, in which it can already unanimously undertake to represent its historical and cultural self-identity and its own interests. Understanding this is a matter of political struggle within the Union and a condition for the future success of integration.

While we see how vulnerable some of the pillars of the EU, which comprises 27 member states, are, overall, we can say that Hungary is interested in the existence and maintenance of a democratically functioning European Union for historical and strategic reasons. We agree with those who believe that the goal of EU integration cannot be to transcend the idea of nationhood or to eliminate the sovereignty of

the member states. The concept of EU leadership must make it clear that the idea of Europeanness will not be able to erase or transcend the feeling of belonging to the nation, because it has deep cultural, linguistic and historical roots that are passed on through socialisation. Instead, it would be more appropriate to accept the co-existence of the two in a common system, where both the idea of nationhood and Europeanness carry complementary values. If we see this, then the common feeling of Europeanness, freedom, equality and prosperity can be fulfilled primarily in experiencing a common European culture and way of life. This is also in the interest of the Central European states.

The common House of Europe must be built together, and then a new centralised empire will not be built, but a free homeland of free people of free nations. For Hungary, the existence of the EU is very important, and even constitutes a fundamental national interest in the 21st century, namely to have a well-functioning EU that integrates the European peoples based on their common interests. This was clearly expressed by the statement of László Kövér, the President of the Hungarian Parliament, when he said: if the structure were to start to crumble and result in the collapse of the EU, we would be the first to stand under the main beam to hold it up, with our shoulders for as long as possible.

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