

# Policy brief: Trends in attitudes towards immigrants and migration in Europe

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## 1. Context

- The 2015-2016 refugee crisis once again focused Europe's attention on the issue of migration. While Europe has always been characterised by migration flows, debates on the desirability of migration gained prominence in the wake of the influx of refugees, caused by the Syrian conflict (De Coninck, Ogan & d'Hae-nens, 2021; Rea et al., 2019). Even before this crisis, the number of people migrating to Europe was rising steadily, while emigration numbers remained stable (Eurostat, 2021).
- Hence, researchers and policymakers alike have been concerned about the societal consequences of this growing diversity. Populist and radical right parties have criticised migrants for causing higher crime levels, and undermining the national culture (Mudde, 2013; Rydgren, 2013). Within national media, news covering migrant groups tends to be negative, and often connected with topics such as crime or terrorism (Damstra, Jacobs, Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2021; Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017). Additionally, prejudiced frames are observed on online media, where citizens discuss the cost of migration for their countries (Yantseva, 2020).
- **Given these negative narratives on migration, the question could be raised about what do European citizens think about migrants.** Are Europeans, on average, sceptical about migration? At first sight, it looks like Europe is in an impasse, where negative sentiments are being fostered by anti-immigrant parties and populist discourse.

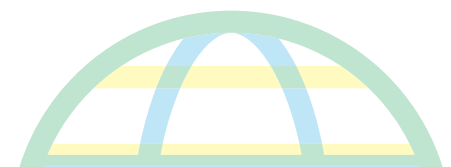
- **The aim of this policy brief is to summarize how attitudes towards immigrants and migration have changed in the last two decades in Europe (2002-2018), and what is driving these changes.** It summarises the main results of two policy reports that have been published in the framework of the Opportunities project.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the policy brief addresses the following objectives:
  - Understand the evolution in changing attitudes towards migration across European countries.
  - Understand the impact of the refugee crisis of 2015-2016 on citizens' perceptions of migration and migrants.
  - Identify how factors at the individual and at the contextual levels influence citizens' perceptions of migration and changes therein.

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<sup>1</sup> Goubin, S., & Ruelens, A. (2022). Changing attitudes towards migration in Europe. Dynamic analyses (2002-2018). HIVA - KU Leuven; Goubin, S., Ruelens, A., & Nicaise, I. (2022). Trends in attitudes towards migration in Europe. A comparative analysis. HIVA – KU Leuven.

## 2. Methods

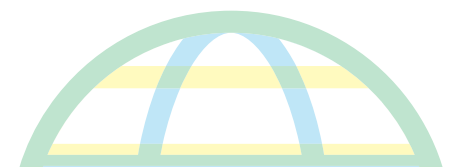
- The empirical analyses relied on the European Social Survey (ESS) (2002-2018). The key advantage of this survey is its coverage across countries and years. The survey is representative for national European populations, and it has been organised every two years since 2002. Over 30 countries and 400,000 Europeans participated in at least one of the ten currently available survey waves. As the ESS contains several questions on migration preferences, as well as two special modules that have more in-depth questions on migration, it is a particularly well-suited source of material to trace changing attitudes towards migration over time.
- Methodologically, the underlying analyses of this policy brief rely on descriptive analysis of patterns and trends, as well as time series cross-sectional analyses based on the European Social Survey (2002-2018).



### 3. Key Findings

- **Migration attitudes have been relatively stable in Europe between 2002 and 2018:** no long-term decline in support for migration is observed.
- There is only mixed evidence for the idea of “a backlash” against immigrants after the 2015-2016 refugee crisis. In **the aftermath of the 2015-2016 refugee crisis**, migration attitudes did not structurally change, or become more negative in most European countries. By 2018, attitudes about migration were at their pre-crisis levels, and, in some cases, even slightly more positive. However, citizens of some Central-Eastern European countries (e.g., Hungary or Slovakia) have become more negative about migration in general and prefer more restrictive policies towards migration.
- **European attitudes on migration are not outspokenly negative.** Only about 25% of European citizens express negative attitudes towards migration and feel that migration threatens their country’s way of life, culture and/or the economy. **Most Europeans can on average be categorised as neutral or lukewarm supporters of migration.**
- **Important cleavages are present between European countries.** Migration attitudes are predominantly negative in Central-Eastern European countries, Austria, and Italy. Citizens of Scandinavian and Western European express more positive attitudes towards migration.

- We find only **mixed evidence for an association between objective country level conditions** (e.g, influx of immigrants, or size of foreign born population...), and **support for migration**. This might be explained by the relative stability of migration attitudes at the country level.
  - More **well-to-do citizens** (in terms of income, education level and job status), more **trusting citizens** (in society and politics), non-religious citizens, and citizens who feel **politically empowered, are more supportive of migration**.
  - The results are suggestive of an **insider-outsider dynamic**. Citizens who feel part of their society, and who are economically and socially empowered, are likely to think positively about migration, whereas other citizens, who are less secure, feel threatened by the (perceived) rising diversity of their country.
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- **As a general conclusion, it can be observed that divergence on the issue of migration will be a likely feature of European countries and citizens in the years to come.**



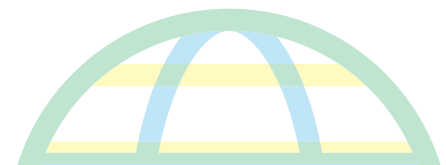
## Want to read more?

- Goubin, S., Ruelens, A., & Nicaise, I. (2022). Trends in attitudes towards migration in Europe. A comparative analysis. HIVA: KU Leuven. <https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/media/attachments/2022/04/20/changing-attitudes-towards-migration.pdf>
- Goubin, S., & Ruelens, A. (2022). Changing attitudes towards migration in Europe. Dynamic analyses (2002-2018). HIVA - KU Leuven. <https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/media/attachments/2022/11/14/d4.2-final.pdf>



## Sources

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