

CSI 24: How do Europeans differ in their attitudes to immigration?

Summary

- Overall, from our sample of 21 European countries, Sweden has the most positive attitudes to immigration and the Czech Republic the most negative
- UK attitudes are slightly less positive than the sample average and are similar to attitudes in France
- Attitudes became a little more positive between 2002/3 and 2014/5* – this is true for the UK and most of the countries we looked at (* latest data collected before the refugee crisis in most cases)
- There is a clear hierarchy of preferred type of migrant: Jewish people are more welcome than Muslims, who in turn are more welcome than Roma (gypsies). Professionals are preferred to unskilled migrants, and unskilled migrants from European countries are preferred to those from outside Europe
- Publics from our set of European countries consider their country's way of life, language skills and work skills to be important criteria for immigration while religious and racial background are relatively unimportant
- Negative attitudes do not correspond to net migration rates: some countries are very positive whilst having high immigration (e.g. Norway) while others have negative attitudes and low immigration (e.g. Hungary)
- Attitudes vary by socio-economic and demographic factors, particularly education (the highly educated have more favourable attitudes) and age (younger people have more favourable attitudes)

Introduction

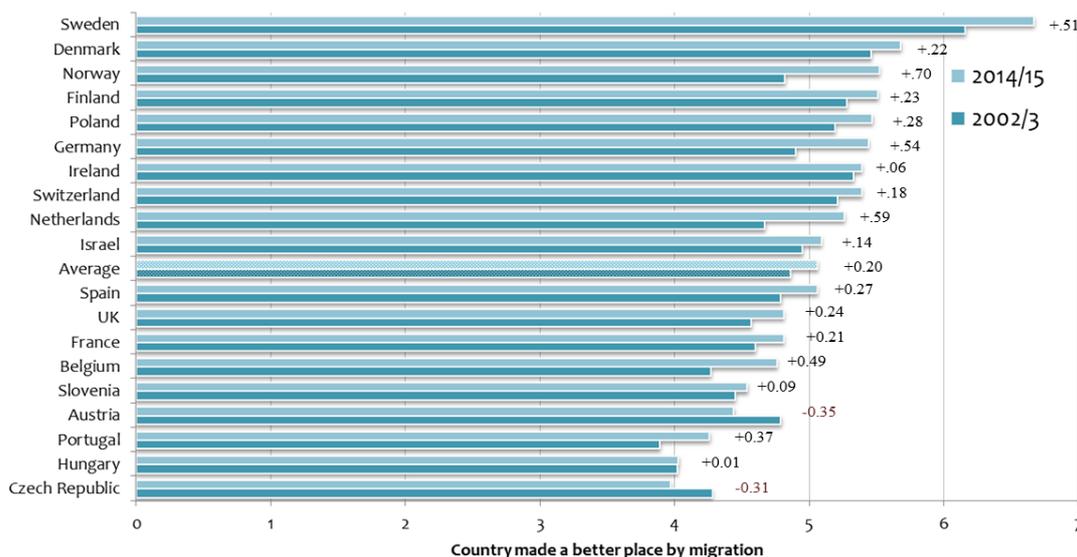
Immigration continues to be one of the most topical and pressing political issues in Europe, with voters in many countries rating it high on the political agenda, and new 'radical right' political parties which oppose immigration emerging in many countries. With continuing high levels of labour migration to many western European countries, as well as continuing pressure to accept refugees and asylum seekers from war zones around the world, this topic is unlikely to lose its significance in the foreseeable future.

In this briefing note we will use the European Social Survey to document the overall levels of support, or lack of support, for immigration and how this has changed over the last decade or so. We also examine the criteria that publics from a set of 21 European countries rate as important or unimportant for immigrants. For example, do people consider religious background to be important? Or are economic factors such as education and work skills deemed to matter more? Along similar lines, we will investigate the extent to which publics differentiate between different types of migrant and we will show differences in attitudes by age, sex, and socioeconomic status.

Which European countries have higher levels of support for immigration?

Figure 1: Country differences in whether one's country is made a better or worse place to live as a result of migration (mean scores). Change in mean scores between 2002/3 and 2014/15 shown with +/-

Limited to countries present at both rounds of the survey



Data and Measures

We use the most recent round (2014/5) of the European Social Survey (ESS)* which contained a detailed module of questions exploring differing aspects of public opinion about immigration. The ESS is the most highly regarded cross-national survey programme in the world, conducting rigorous representative surveys to the highest professional, methodological standards right across Europe, thus providing the most authoritative data on support for or opposition to immigration. Many of the questions fielded in the most recent round repeat questions asked over one decade ago in the first round of the ESS (2002/3), thus enabling one to chart trends over time. Note that most (but not all) the fieldwork predates the most recent large influx of refugees.

The survey questions we use for our analysis are as follow:

Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?

To what extent do you think [country] should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most [country]'s people to come and live here? How about people of a different race or ethnic group from most [country] people?

And how about people from the poorer countries in Europe? How about people from the poorer countries outside Europe?

To what extent you think [country] should allow ...Jewish people/ Muslim people/ Gypsies?

To what extent you think [country] should allow professionals/ unskilled labourers from [poor European country/ poor country outside Europe providing largest number of migrants] to come to live in [country]?

Please tell me how important you think each of these things should be in deciding whether someone born, brought up and living outside [country] should be able to come and live here: Be white, work skills, Christian background, qualifications, speak language, be committed to way of life.

The parts in [square brackets] are adapted for each country in the study. For example, in the case of the UK, Poland was chosen as the poor European country providing the largest number of migrants to the UK, and India was chosen as the poor non-European country providing largest number of migrants.

The countries included are: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. Our analyses are weighted to ensure the figures best represent the population of Europe (or populations of specific countries where we show differences by country).

* The European Social Survey is conducted by a European Research Infrastructure Consortium with its headquarters at City University London. All of its data and protocols can be freely downloaded at www.europeansocialsurvey.org

Throughout this briefing, we use data from the European Social Survey¹. The respondents in this study were asked a range of questions (also see inset box *Data and Measures*) including: *Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?* (scale running from 0 (worse) to 10 (better)).

Overall, European publics have become slightly more positive about the effect of migration on their societies. In 2002/3 the average was on balance slightly negative (with a mean score less than 5 – the midpoint of the scale). In 2014/5 the average was very slightly positive (with a mean score just over 5). There was considerable stability in countries' relative positions over time: in both years a similar set of countries were the most positive – Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Poland – and in both years a similar set were the most negative – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Portugal. The UK was a little less positive than the European average in both years, with a mean score just below 5 in 2014/15. The UK has very similar attitudes on average to those in France and Belgium, and is a little less positive than Spain. Most countries saw modest shifts between 2002/3 and 2014/5, more or less in line with the overall shift. Notable exceptions were Austria and the Czech Republic, both of which became more pessimistic. Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden all became much more positive in their attitudes (a change of half a point or more).

Do European publics distinguish between different sorts of migrants?

In Figure 2, we examine differences (and similarities) in the willingness to accept labour migrants, asylum seekers, Roma, or different religious groups such as Muslims or Jews. There is a clear hierarchy of preferred type of migrant. Jewish people are much more welcome than Muslims, who in turn are more welcome than Roma. Responses on Roma were somewhat more polarized than on other groups. Responses concerning Muslims are very similar to those concerning people coming from poorer countries outside Europe. To be sure, in many countries, Muslim migrants will in fact be coming from poorer non-European countries (Turkey, Pakistan and Somalia for example).

The survey also asked some questions about attitudes to immigration on the part of professionals and towards unskilled labourers coming from European or non-European countries. We find quite a substantial difference in attitudes towards professionals and to unskilled labourers. This occupational distinction is considerably more powerful than the distinction between European and non-European countries of origin. In the case of professional migrants it looks as though country of origin makes very little difference, whereas in the case of unskilled labourers those from a non-European origin are clearly less welcome than those from a European origin. The figures for unskilled labourers from a poor non-European country are very close to the figures for Roma (Gypsies). This suggests the possible interpretation that hostility towards Roma may be in part because of people's assumption that they are unskilled labourers.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards different sorts of migrant (sample average)

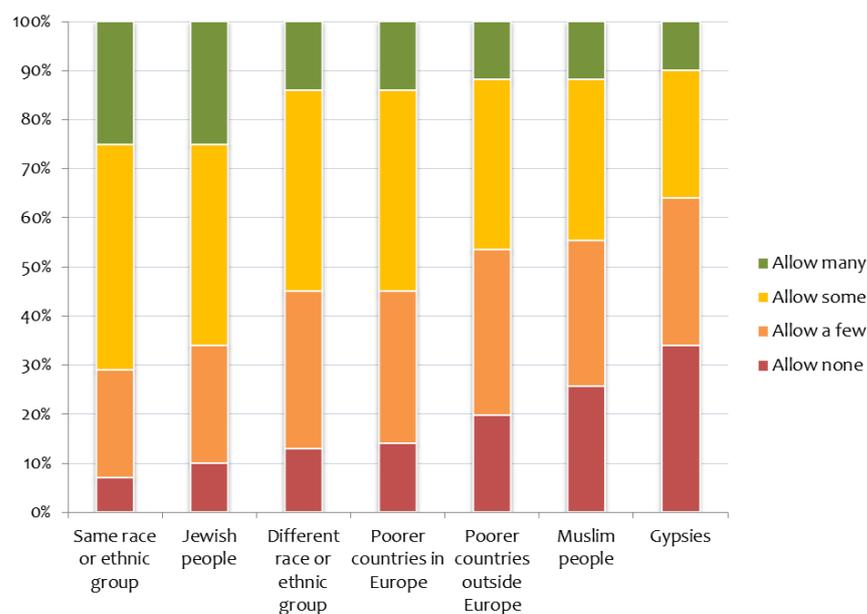
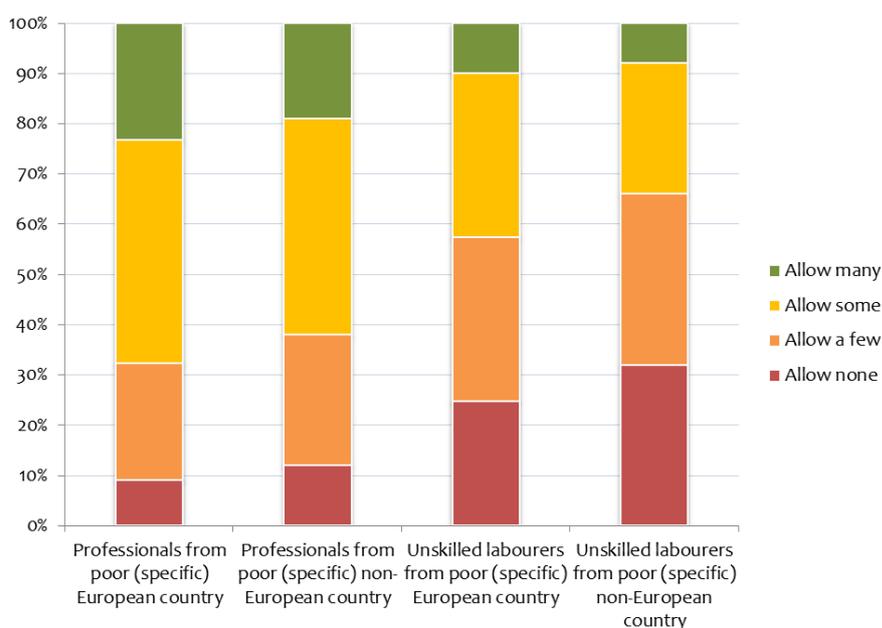


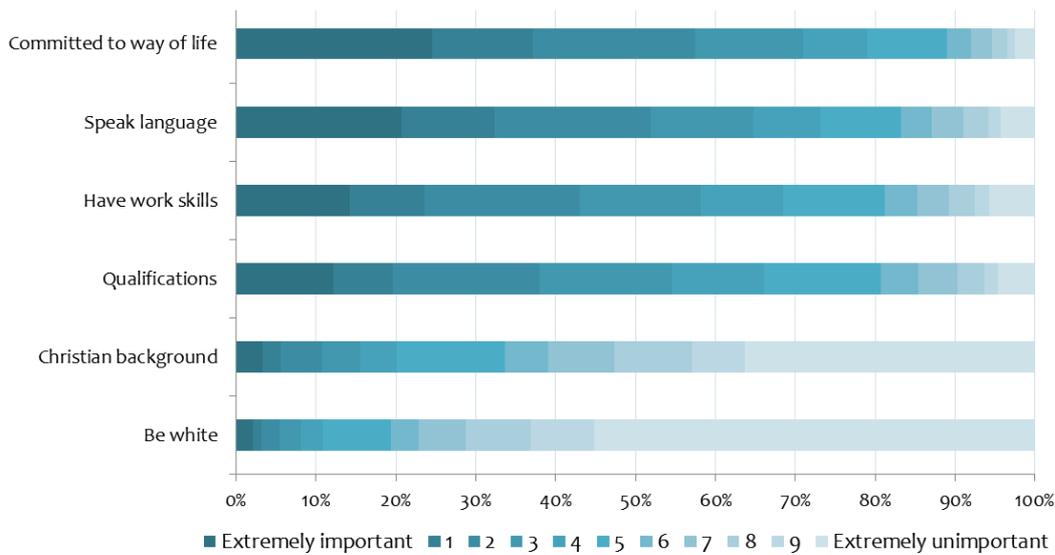
Figure 3: Attitudes towards professionals and unskilled labourers coming from poor European and non-European countries (sample average)



What do the public feel should be the main criteria for accepting or excluding migrants?

The public's views tend to be much more nuanced than is often realized. In Figure 4 we can see that commitment to the destination country's way of life, the ability to speak the country's language, and work skills are mentioned as important criteria for accepting migrants, while racial and religious background are considered rather unimportant.

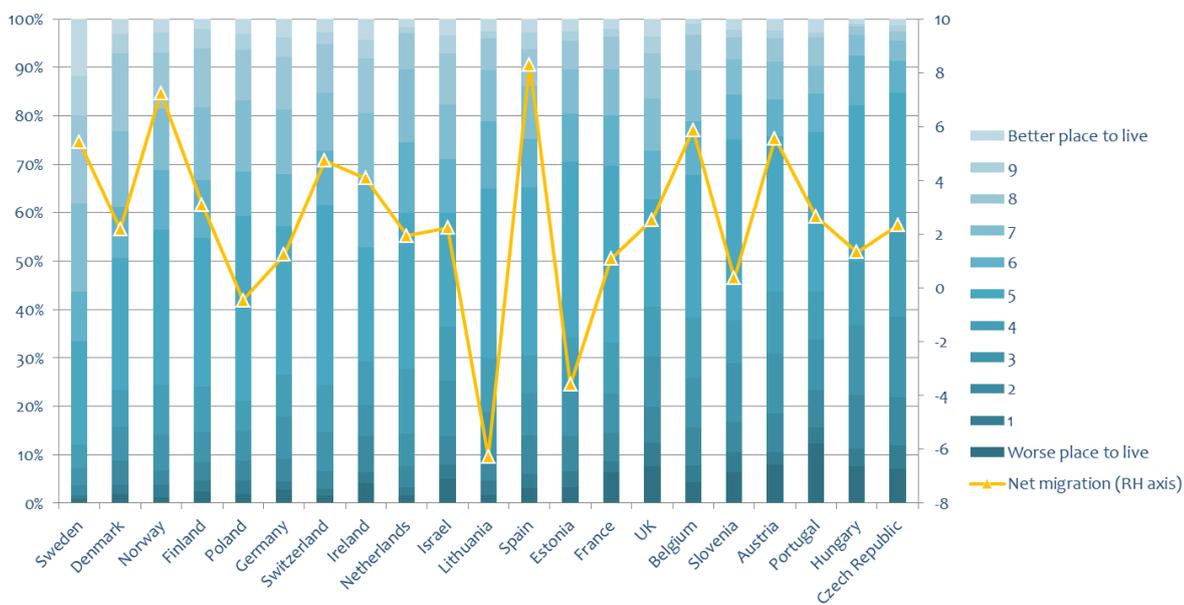
Figure 4: ‘Way of life’, language, and skills are considered more important than religious and racial background as immigration criteria



Are negative attitudes driven by high levels of immigration?

As Figure 5 shows, negative attitudes towards immigration do not straightforwardly relate to the numbers of migrants arriving in a country. For example Sweden and Norway have relatively high net migration rates yet are favourable to immigration. On the other hand, Slovenia and Hungary have net migration rates close to zero, yet have quite negative attitudes. By this measure (which is migrants per 1000 population) we can see that immigration to the UK is not as high as is sometimes assumed, and is similar to Denmark, Portugal, and the Czech Republic. The drivers of anti-immigration sentiment are more complex than is usually supposed.

Figure 5: Net migration rates do not correspond to attitudes to immigration (countries are ordered from positive (Sweden) to negative (Czech Republic)) Migrants per 1000 population source: CIA world factbook



Within-country differences

Previous research has shown that attitudes to immigration are strongly linked with age, educational level and economic situation, and this holds true with the ESS data in our analysis. Figure 6 compares the percentages of people from more advantaged or mainstream social positions with those in less advantaged or more marginal

situations in their attitudes to migration from poorer countries outside Europe. (The pattern is very similar for the attitudes towards other groups.)

Figure 6: Willingness to allow many or some migrants from poorer countries outside Europe by socio-demographic status

The strongest association is between the highly educated (graduates) and the less educated (those with lower secondary education or below), where the gap is 21 percentage points. Next comes age, where it is the younger people who are more favourable to immigration than are older people. Age is followed by income, where the gap between the top quintile and the bottom quintile is 15 points. Despite their marginal position, non-citizens have more favourable attitudes than citizens; similarly migrants are more positive than non-migrants though the gap is somewhat smaller. Differences between men and women, by unemployment status, and between Christians and people with no religion are relatively small in comparison.

It is probable that different mechanisms are involved with these different socio-demographic characteristics. It is likely (although impossible to be certain) that generational differences lie behind the large age effects – in other words, generations who grew up before the years of mass migration are more negative than those who grew up more recently and for whom diversity has always been part of their experience. In contrast the educational and income differences may reflect the extent to which the less-educated and those on lower incomes feel greater levels of ‘symbolic’ and ‘economic’ threat respectively

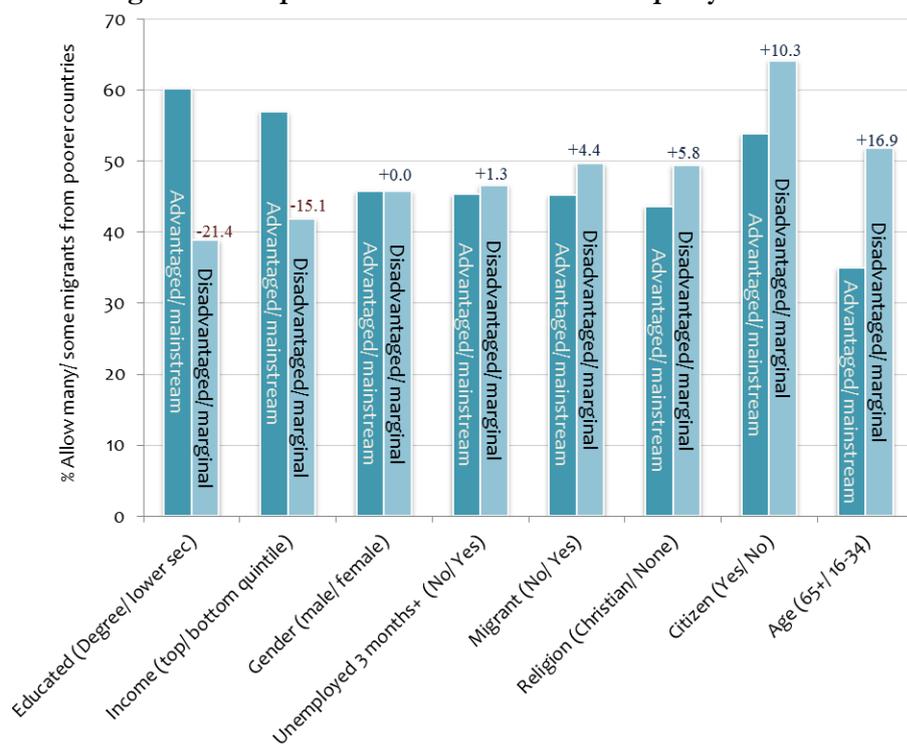
Conclusions

Overall, it is evident that attitudes to immigration and to immigrants are rather more nuanced than might be expected. From our sample of 21 European countries, respondents make clear distinctions based upon cultural and economic factors. From questions about specific groups of migrants, attitudes to Roma (gypsies) are the least positive, followed by attitudes towards Muslims. However, a clear preference is evident for professional above unskilled immigrants, and to a lesser degree for those from within Europe rather than for those from outside. The UK has a level of positive feeling towards immigrants that is a little below our sample average, but is very similar to some of our nearest European neighbours such as France and Belgium. Average attitudes at the country level are not driven by net migration: it is possible for a country to have high immigration rates and positive attitudes or high immigration rates and negative attitudes. At the individual level, it is those with low education, low incomes, and older people who tend to have more negative attitudes.

Authors: Anthony Heath and Lindsay Richards

Acknowledgements: With thanks to Rory Fitzgerald

Publication date: June 2016



¹ ESS Round 7: European Social Survey Round 7 Data (2014). Data file edition 2.0. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC