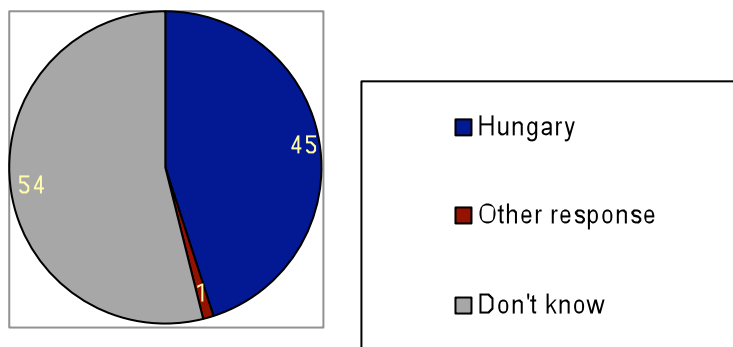


Popular attitudes towards the EU

Hungary is scheduled to take over the rotating presidency of the European Union starting in January 2011. Along with the public opinion research company Median, Policy Solutions took the opportunity to explore both, the public's view of the future Hungarian presidency and EU membership in general. While Hungarians may be slightly more sceptical towards the Union than a couple of years ago, overall they remain supportive of membership and optimistic about its possibilities.

The most obvious question to ask was how many people were even aware of Hungary's impending presidency. The result was a good reflection of our general assumptions, namely that people do not follow EU related news and are often unaware even of events that significantly impact Hungary. For the most part, the press respects this lack of interest and contributes to it, too, both by failing to report about the goings-on in Brussels. Nevertheless, even with such an expectation in mind it was somewhat surprising to find that a majority of Hungarians was not even aware of this rare and important opportunity (and massive substantive and logistical challenge).

Graph I. Do you know which country will assume the rotating presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2011? (open question, answers in percentages)



While it is unlikely that by the end of our six months at the helm of the Union most of those unaware now will continue to be ignorant of Hungary's temporary elevation, that does not imply that the information gathered during this time will significantly bolster education about and awareness of the European Union.

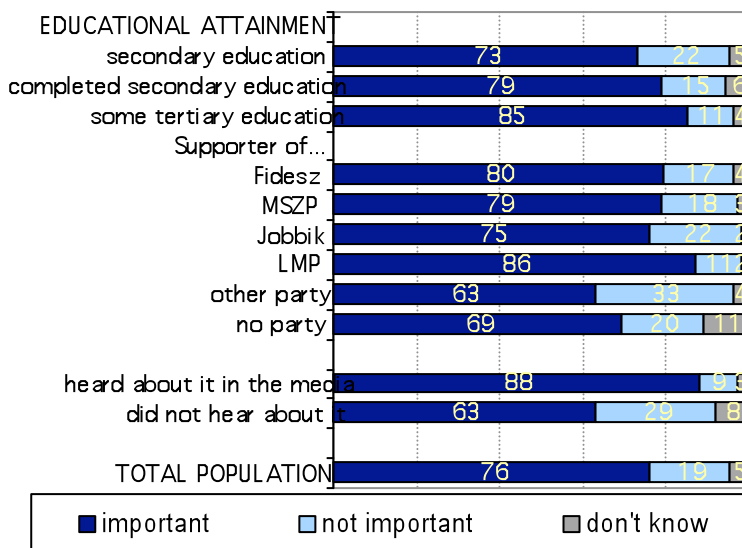
Hungarian's lack of knowledge about the rotating presidency compares unfavourably with the inhabitants of neighbouring new member states: 85% of Slovenians in 2007 and nearly 70% of Czechs in 2008 knew that their country would assume the presidency. Interestingly, however, while in the other two countries the percentage of those informed and those who

believed that this is an important opportunity for their country were roughly on par at the aforementioned high levels, in Hungary enthusiasm is high despite the low levels of awareness. This at least suggests that there is no major enthusiasm gap as compared to our fellow new members.

As would be expected, there is a strong correlation between educational attainment and knowledge of the impending EU presidency. While 69% of those with tertiary education degrees provided a correct answer, only 34% of those without completed secondary education knew about the presidency. Broken down by age group, the analysis reveals that lacking awareness is most widespread at the two extremes of the age distribution: only 41% of respondents between 18-29 years of age and 40% sixty and older knew the right answer.

Crucially, however, in spite of the intense political polarisation in Hungary there is no major variation in the enthusiasm of the supporters of different parties – the enthusiasm gap emerges only between politically committed/interested citizens and those without party preferences or interest in politics. The overwhelming majority of respondents (76%) believes that holding the presidency is important for Hungary, with – as expected – Jobbik’s voters assuming the most critical stance among those with party preferences (75%). LMP voters – in part also a reflection of the party’s educated and urban base – tend to be most gung-ho, with 86% finding the fact important.

Graph 2. Do you think it is important that starting 1 January 2011 Hungary will assume the rotating presidency of the European Union (demographic groups, percentages)



Clearly, hopes for the presidency and being informed it about are also strongly correlated, with 88% of those who had previously known about the presidency finding it important, while a still impressive, but nevertheless significantly lower proportion (63%) of those who learned about it from the pollster also thought that it is highly relevant. As to the impact the presidency would exert on Hungary’s European standing, public opinion is more divided

along party lines. A bare majority (51%) of respondents think it will improve Hungary's reputation in the EU, but this optimism is largely fuelled by the hopes of Fidesz voters, 63% of whom harbour such hopes, as opposed to 33% of MSZP, 36% of LMP and 43% of Jobbik sympathisers. Even among the more pessimistic opposition supporters, however, those who believe in an outright negative effect of the presidency are a small minority, with many believing that it just won't have much impact either way.

The EU's popularity is diminished, but still high

The presidency also offers an opportunity and an occasion for exploring general popular attitudes towards the European Union six years after the accession. It emerges that Hungarians have on the whole become more sceptical of the Union, but Hungary is still far from being a euro-sceptic country. In light of the inflated expectations at the time of accession, often fuelled by politicians particularly in the then ruling social-liberal coalition, a bit of disappointment is anything but unexpected.

Though it is down from a peak of 71%, a large majority of respondents (64%) still believes that our membership is a good thing and well over two-thirds of Hungarians (69%) would reaffirm it if they had to vote on the question. While LMP voters (80%) are again the most buoyant, despite their party's negative attitude towards European integration even the majority of Jobbik supporters (58%) would opt to keep us in the EU. At the same time, the slightly diminished enthusiasm went hand-in-hand with a commensurate creeping growth in euro-scepticism: while at the accession referendum in 2003 only 16% voted nay, today 24 would say no, with Fidesz, MSZP and LMP supporters voicing roughly similar opinions (25%, 18% and 18% respectively) and Jobbik supporters rejecting accession to a much higher degree (38%). For EU supporters, a cause for optimism is that enthusiasm for the EU appears inversely correlated with age, that is young people tend to be much more supportive than the middle-aged, and the elderly emerging as the least supportive age group.

The general preference for the EU does not mean that Hungarians would be willing to cede national sovereignty to a pan-European project; at this point in fact there is not a single policy area that they would like Brussels to control exclusively. In several core policy areas such as taxation, fiscal policy, education and social policy Hungarians want their national government to retain sole policy-making authority. Some of the responses by citizens evince a keen understanding of the areas in which European co-operation might most help to attain better policy outcomes: citizens favour joint policy-making competency in areas such immigration, crime policy, foreign and security policy, environment and energy policy.

The reluctance to give the EU greater control over certain policy areas probably also stems from the perception that Hungary and Hungarian interests wield little influence over EU decision-making. 64% of respondents – and a majority of all parties' supporters – think that

the EU forces its view on Hungary and only 34% believe that Hungary has a significant impact on EU decisions. Of course it would be difficult to disaggregate these numbers to capture whether the respondents who think Hungary has too little influence believe so a) because realistically a medium-sized country of 10 million will have little influence over an organisation with 26 others members and 490 million non-Hungarian constituents, that is because even an influence that is commensurate with our relative weight is very small indeed; or b) because the West (or other malicious forces) discriminate against a Hungary that is just learning to assert its national interest. Either way, the majority's preference to retain exclusive control over several policy areas and to give at most shared control over others to the EU also reflects a well-grounded fear that in a vast organisation Hungarian interests might not prevail.