

Public attitudes to migrant workers: a (lasting) impact of Covid-19?

Commentary No. 3 of the [MigResHub](#) at the Migration Policy Centre, RSCAS, European University Institute

The general preference of the native-born population for high-skilled immigrants has been extensively documented by a large body of academic studies. In line with this, many countries base their migration schemes on definitions of “skilled” and “unskilled” occupations and apply point-based immigration systems favouring high-skilled immigrants. However, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of “essential” jobs many of which are in lower-skilled occupations often performed by migrant workers. As the Covid-19 pandemic clearly has the potential to change the value that society attaches to certain jobs and occupations, the question arises: could the coronavirus health crisis affect public attitudes to immigration and essential migrant workers in particular?

Attitudes to immigration and migrant workers

Recent research (e.g. Ademmer and Stöhr 2018) regarding Europeans’ attitudes to immigration unequivocally shows that, as a whole, Europeans are becoming gradually more supportive of immigration. As Figure 1 reveals, long-term attitudes to immigration in Europe are highly stable and we can observe a general increase in favourability towards immigration and immigrants in the majority of Western European countries. Nevertheless, there are some differences between European countries, as countries such as Hungary and Poland have in fact become less favourable to immigration in recent years.

Social science research points to the stability of one’s attitudes, which are generally formed during childhood or youth and tend to persist throughout life (Jeannet and Dražanová 2019). Although there might be some weak and unstable proximate causes of one’s attitudes (such as the ‘migration crisis’ and its intense media coverage or the current health crisis) these events are unlikely to have a long-lasting impact on people’s views on issues such as

immigration (see Dennison and Geddes 2020). Instead, these events might “activate” already latently held individual immigration attitudes: When immigration becomes salient, individuals who have already held negative attitudes to immigration make their electoral choices according to parties’ stances on immigration (Dennison and Geddes 2019). In times when immigration is not salient, voters make their electoral choices according to other, often economic, issues (Krosnick 1990) and individual attitudes on immigration rarely determine their electoral choices.

It is highly likely that the current pandemic will lead to less salience of the immigration issue and politicians and citizens alike will focus their attention on other issues, such as the economy and healthcare. The first available polls point in this direction. Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, the salience of immigration has noticeably dropped. In the latest Eurobarometer survey fielded in July and August 2020 (Figure 2), only 11 % of the European public sees immigration as the most important issue facing their country. Instead, the majority of Europeans considers the economy, health, and unemployment to be the most pressing issues facing their countries.

Given that individual attitudes are highly stable over the life course, one might wonder why we observe any changes in attitudes at all. These changes are likely due to generational replacement. Older and usually more anti-immigration cohorts are being replaced by younger cohorts socialized in more heterogeneous societies and thus more open to immigration (Hewstone 2015). Nevertheless, it is also likely that some individual attitudes are indeed changing – due to personal experiences. This commentary next highlights how the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to change attitudes to immigration and “low-skilled” migrant workers in particular.

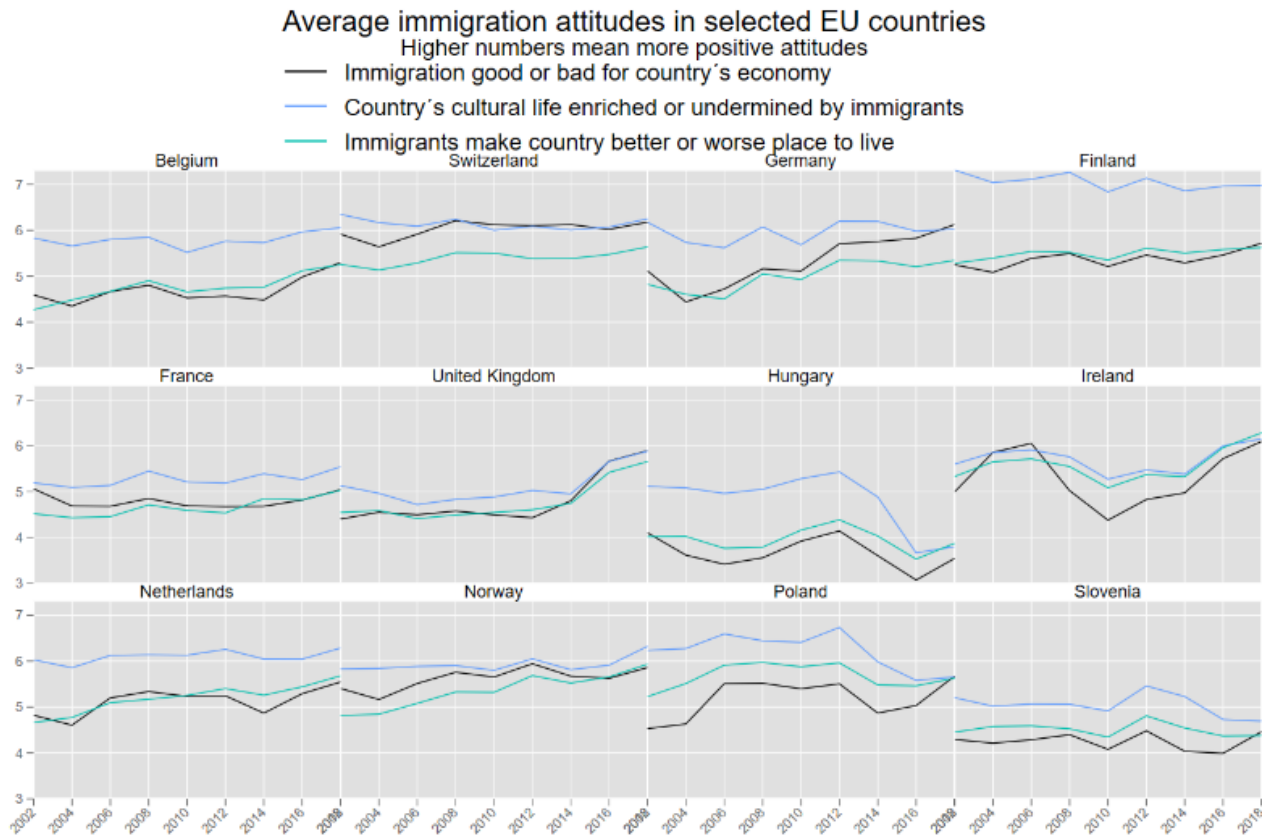


Figure 1: Long-term attitudes to immigration in Europe for countries included in all European Social Survey (ESS) waves. Source: European Social Survey 2002-2018.

QA3a What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS)
(% - EU)

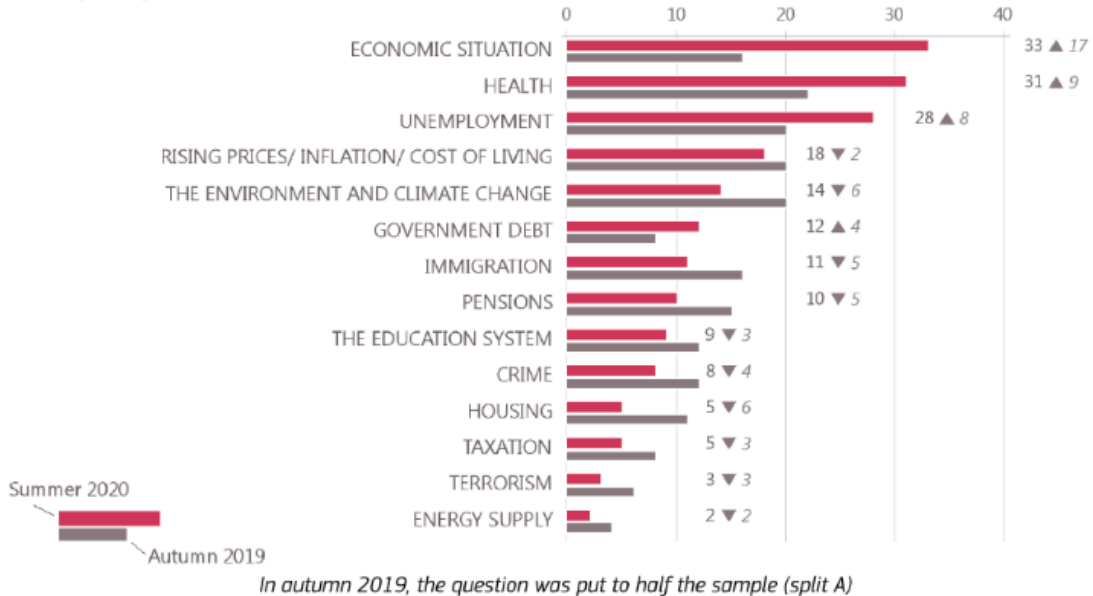


Figure 2. Trends in main concerns at national level. Figure source: Standard Eurobarometer 93 – Summer 2020. Public opinion in the European Union, First results.

A Covid-19 effect?

Research has shown (e.g. Naumann, Stoetzer and Pietrantuono 2018) that the European public, irrespective of their own skill levels, has a strong preference for high-skilled rather than low-skilled migrants. However, since there is no single definition of a low-skilled worker, we know little about how exactly survey respondents understand and define high- and low-skilled migrants. The apparent opposition to ‘low-skilled’ migrants might be therefore more nuanced than how many government authorities understand it. People may value different types of migrant workers and occupations beyond the distinction of low- and high-skill. The Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to highlight these nuances and it could shift the focus in the public debate from a general distinction between low- and high-skilled migrant workers to more specific occupations and roles. Moreover, the health crisis could change preferences about which occupations should be treated favourably in the immigration system.

As many narratives surrounding immigration are structured around the concept of “fairness”, the contribution of migrant workers to the health crisis could advance positive attitudes towards immigration. The fairness or “deservingness” narrative revolves around people’s views on perceived immigrants’ contribution to the host society (Helbling and Kriesi 2012). These contributions are defined not just through working and paying taxes, but also by filling in labour market shortages and not putting a strain on the welfare system. Covid-19 may lead to a higher appreciation of some essential sectors where migrants are disproportionately represented, such as those listed as “key or essential” during the coronavirus outbreak. The public’s view of the contribution by these “low-skilled” jobs may have changed, with more appreciation for specific occupations.

In conclusion, suggesting that the Covid-19 pandemic will bring a dramatic and wide-reaching change either in attitudes towards immigration or policy is likely an overestimation. However, the pandemic might bring a greater appreciation of the wider social benefits of migrant workers, at least of those doing “essential” work. This has the potential to change the public debate and government policies with regards to “low-skilled” migrants in the future.

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