

20 Years On: Analysing Popular Opinion on the EU in 2004 Enlargement Countries

Politics & Government in the EU 2025 Essay

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Introduction

In 2004, the EU saw its largest enlargement to date, with ten countries joining the EU. Of these ten, seven were formerly under Soviet influence, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland & Slovakia, two are Mediterranean island countries, Cyprus & Malta, and one, Slovenia, was formerly part of Yugoslavia (European Commission, 2024).

This essay will focus on the evolution of popular support for the EU in selected countries from this enlargement wave, namely Hungary, Slovakia and Malta, who have each experienced the extremes of public opinion swing.

As a start point, nine out of the ten countries held a referendum regarding EU membership, the exception being Cyprus (Del Monte, 2022).

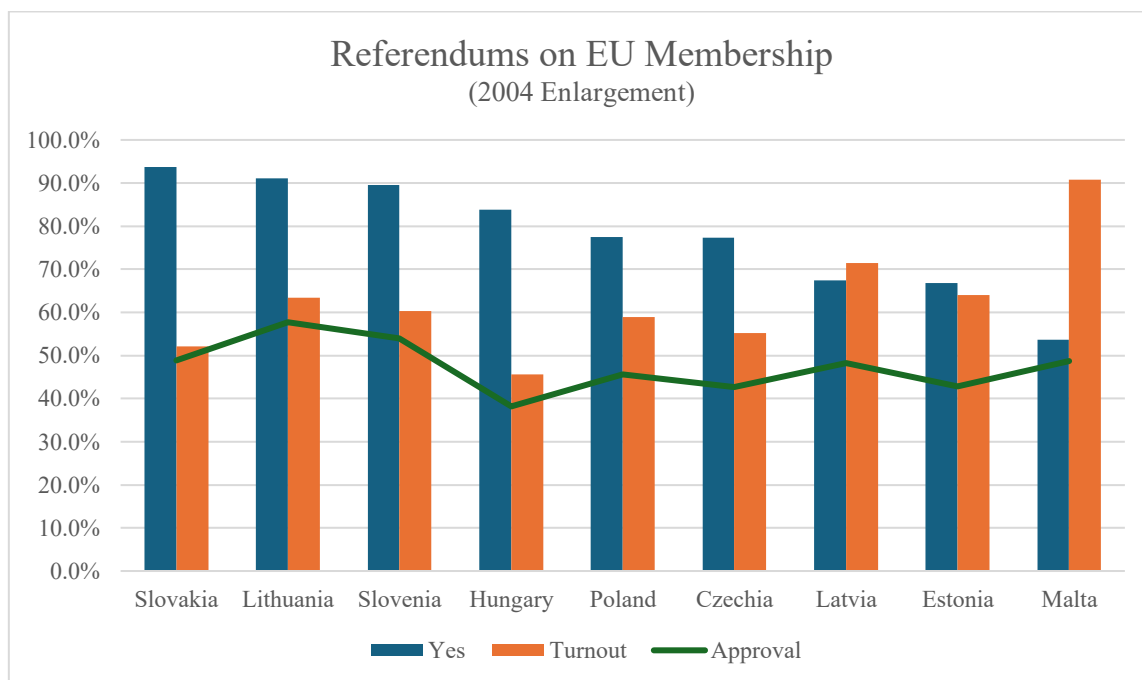


Figure 1: Referendums on EU Membership (2004 Enlargement, sorted by Yes vote share)

(Del Monte, 2022)

Since then, popular opinion about the EU has fluctuated, particularly in the selected countries. To analyse this, I shall use data from Eurostat Standard Eurobarometers since 2004¹, as well as election data in general & European elections² in the selected countries, comparing Eurosceptic parties to others. These aspects will, for the former, offer a standardised poll about EU issues and, for the latter, offer a perspective on the general population's opinion on the EU through the parties they vote for.

In Hungary and Slovakia, both referendums were marked by strong support for EU membership, but with lower turnout (Del Monte, 2022). In Malta, on the other hand, the referendum was won by the pro-EU camp by a sliver (Del Monte, 2022), and was the reason for an early general election to confirm its result (Fenech, 2003).

¹ Biannual survey commissioned by the European Commission through Eurostat.

From Spring 2004 until Spring 2011, the relevant question asked was 'Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the European Union is...?' With the data counting percentage of 'A good thing' responses. This question was asked in every survey during this time frame except in Autumn 2010.

From Autumn 2011 until Autumn 2024, the relevant question asked was 'How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or not to trust it? The European Union' With the data counting percentage of 'Tend to trust' responses.

All data and sources are available in Annex 1 (Data File) and Annex 2 (Eurobarometer Raw Data).

² Data for parties that gained seats in parliamentary and European Parliament elections between 2004 and 2024.

Hungary

On 31 March 1994, Hungary applied to join the European Union, with the Commission's Opinion paper purporting that 'Since 1989 there [had] been a large degree of consensus among Hungarian political forces in support of Hungary's objective of EU membership' (European Commission, 1997a).

Referendum

Egyetért-e azzal, hogy a Magyar Köztársaság az Európai Unió tagjává váljon?

*Figure 2: 2003 Referendum Question in Hungary³
(Government of the Republic of Hungary, 2003)*

On 12 April 2003, Hungary held a binding and constitutionally required referendum on membership of the European Union (Fowler, 2003) (Del Monte, 2022), the third country from the 2004 enlargement to hold such a referendum. Although previously a turnout of 50% was required for a referendum to be valid, in 1997 this law was amended such that validity was dependent not on turnout but on favourable votes compared to registered voters (25%) (Fowler, 2003), henceforth referred to as approval rate.

$$A_r = \frac{Y_v}{P}$$

Approval Rate (A_r) is equal to Yes votes (Y_v) divided by Population registered to vote (P).

During the referendum campaign, all parties in the Hungarian Parliament supported EU membership, with the little opposition only coming from the fringes. Support was expected to be so high that the Visegrad Four agreed that Hungary should hold its referendum first among

³ 'Do you agree that the Republic of Hungary should become a member of the European Union?'

them, to positively influence opinion in the more contentious Czech, Polish and Slovak populations (Fowler, 2003).

Although the party was in favour of EU membership, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz had already highlighted concerns about sovereignty and the EU (the first such mainstream argument), as well as concerns about jobs and small business through EU competition regulations (Fowler, 2003).

The referendum was passed with a vote share of 83.7% on a turnout of 46%, for an approval rate of 38.5%, well over the required 25%, but with a lower turnout than expected (Del Monte, 2022) (Fowler, 2003). Although this represented the 4th highest Yes vote share, it was the lowest approval rate of all nine referendums due to the low turnout.

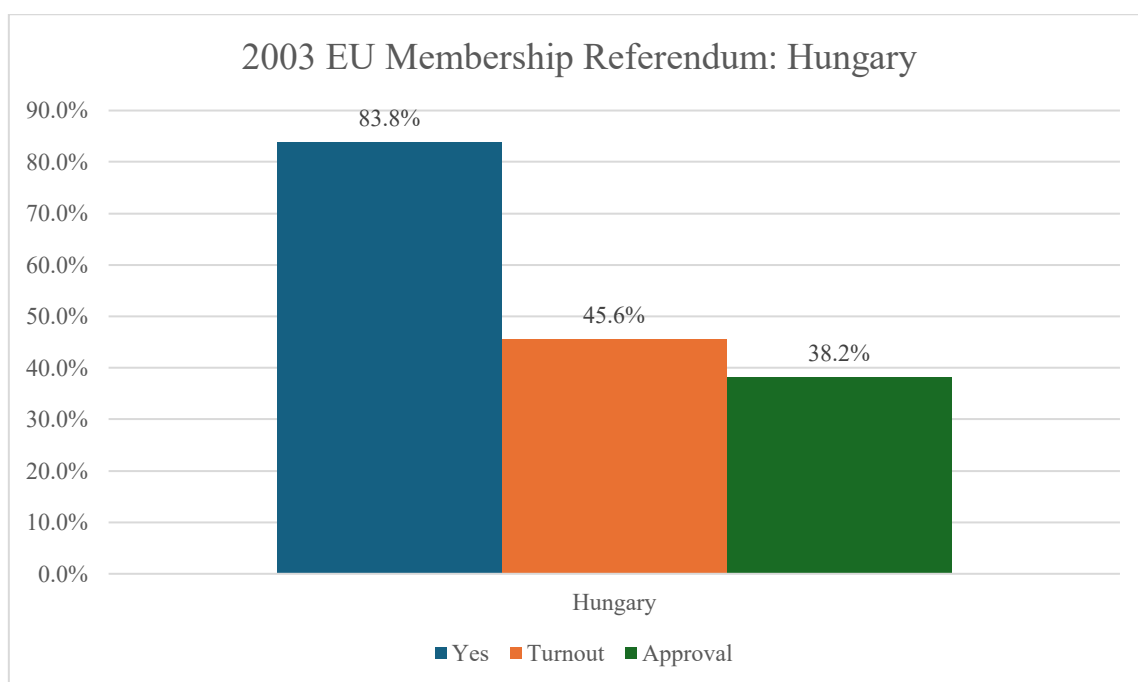


Figure 3: 2003 EU Membership Referendum in Hungary

(Del Monte, 2022)

Political Actors & Context

Having won all but one election of five since the accession of Hungary in 2004, the political landscape has been dominated by Viktor Orbán & the Fidesz⁴ party.

His re-rise to the front of Hungarian politics, having been Prime Minister previously between 1998 and 2002, came in the context of the 2006 ‘Őszöd speech’, a leaked speech made by the then Socialist Party Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, which caused great controversy (Agencies, 2006). This unpopularity, as well as economic troubles later in his premiership led to his resignation in 2009 (Kulich, 2009).

Having gained a supermajority in 2010, the Orbán Government passed a new constitution in 2011, coming into force on 1 January 2012. This constitution was criticised as reducing checks and balances, as well as reducing rights and protections for minorities (Deutsche Welle, 2011).

In the face of exterior criticism, anti-EU rhetoric increased, with Hungary becoming the foremost stalling point for certain European initiatives, and pro-Russia policies continuing despite invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 (Végh, 2016).

Eurobarometer & Elections

Immediately after the accession referendum, popularity of the EU in Hungary began to decline. Even before the financial crisis had taken hold, support for the EU reached a low of 37% in Spring 2007, a rate much lower than contemporary levels. This was not only related to previously mentioned domestic political turmoil, but also due to economic conditions imposed by the EU to reduce deficit, thus lowering wages and not delivering on promised benefits of the EU (Darvas, 2008) (Government of the Republic of Hungary, 2006).

⁴ Originally a portmanteau of ‘Fiatl Demokraták Szövetsége’ or Alliance of Young Democrats.

When the 2008 Financial Crisis hit, Hungary was one of the most affected countries, due in part to these previous economic problems (Darvas, 2008), and the EU support rating declined further, to its lowest ever level at 31% in Autumn 2008. By the time the general election came around in April 2010, EU support rate was at 38%, which was reflected in the election results with 52.73% support for soft Eurosceptic party Fidesz and 16.67% support for hard Eurosceptic party Jobbik.

From this point onwards, Fidesz has led 4 consecutive governments with a majority (along with KDNP, widely considered a satellite party (Batory, 2010)), with various levels of Euroscepticism. Support for Eurosceptic parties at elections remained rather consistently between 65% and 70% between 2010 and 2018, dipped slightly to 60% between 2019 and 2023 and finally reached 51.4% in 2024. During this same time period, Eurobarometer poll data indicated a general increase of support from 38% in 2010 to 50% in 2024, with a peak of 59% in Autumn 2020 (coinciding with the EU's response to COVID-19) and notable dips of 15% in Autumn 2015 (coinciding with the Migration Crisis) and of 6% in Autumn 2022 (coinciding with the invasion of Ukraine).

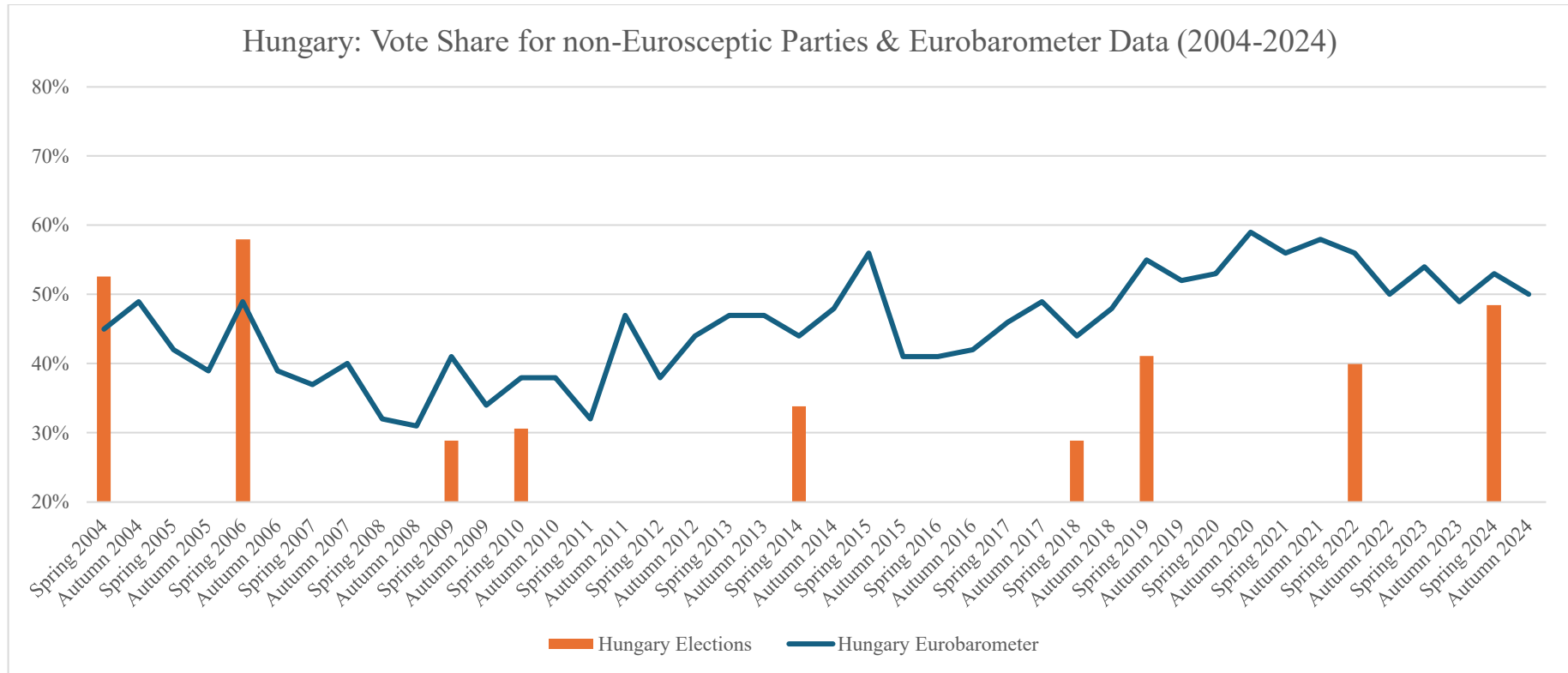


Figure 4: Hungary Election & Eurobarometer Data⁵

(International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2025)

(European Commission, 2025)

⁵ Election data for Eurosceptic parties that gain seats in either Parliamentary Elections (for 2006, 2010, 2018 & 2022) or European Parliament Elections (for 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 & 2024). Percentage for Eurosceptic parties is subtracted from 1 to produce non-Eurosceptic party vote share. Eurobarometer data is as described in Footnote 1.

Slovakia

On 27 June 1995, Slovakia applied to join the European Union (European Commission, 1997b). Slovakia, contrary to Hungary, had less smooth an accession process, due in part to weaker democratic standards, as well as a Prime Minister (Vladimír Mečiar) described by many as autocratic in nature (“Mečiar, the Martyr,” 2000). Although Mečiar came first in the 1998 elections, he was unable to form a government, leading to the Slovak Democratic Party, led by Mikuláš Dzurinda, to form a coalition and pave the way for Slovakia’s accession in 2004.

Referendum

Súhlasíte s tým, aby sa Slovenská republika stala členským štátom Európskej unie?

Figure 5: 2003 Referendum Question in Slovakia⁶

(Government of the Slovak Republic, 2003)

On 16 and 17 May 2003, Slovakia held a binding and constitutionally required referendum on membership of the European Union (Henderson, 2003) (Del Monte, 2022), the fifth country from the 2004 enlargement to hold such a referendum (and as previously mentioned, after the Hungarian referendum). A 50% turnout was required for the referendum to be valid, and this was achieved in the last hour of voting (Henderson, 2003). This was the first and to-date only Slovak referendum to attain this condition, with the other eight (four before and four since) having failed (Szekeres, 2021).

⁶ ‘Do you agree with the Slovak Republic becoming a member state of the European Union?’

All main parties in Slovakia supported a Yes vote, which was reflected in the vote share of 93.7%, the highest of all the 2003 EU accession referendums (though only third in terms of approval rate due to low turnout) (Henderson, 2003).

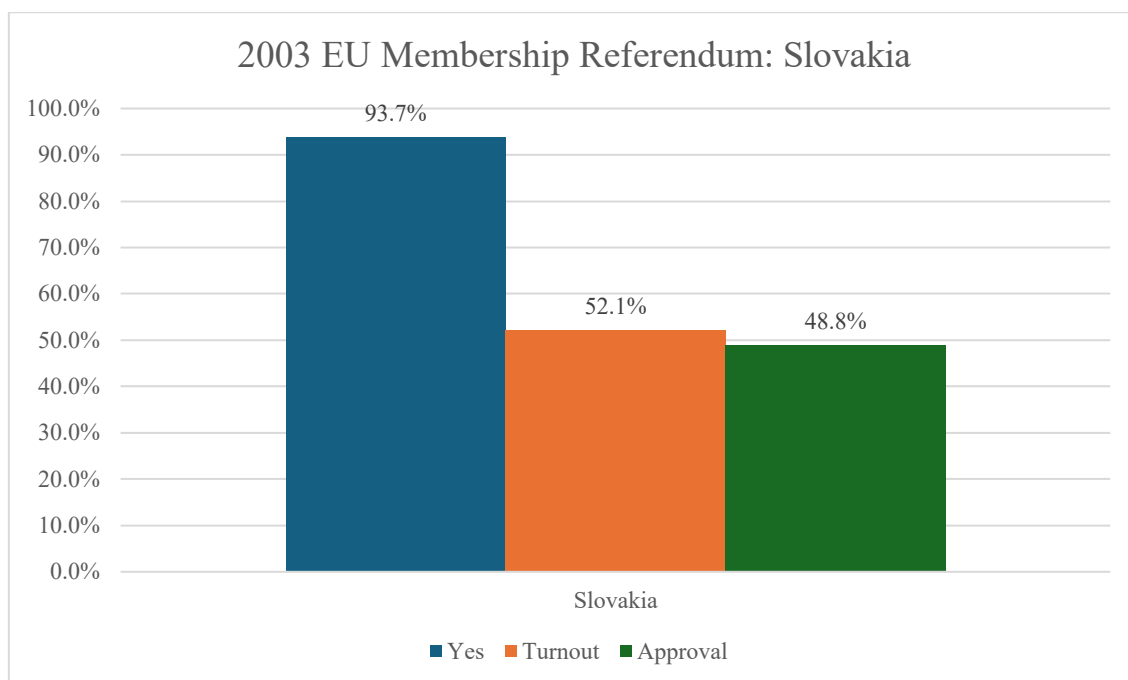


Figure 6: 2003 EU Membership Referendum in Slovakia

(Del Monte, 2022)

Political Actors & Context

Although the Slovak political scene has been nowhere near as stagnant as that in Hungary, one man, Robert Fico⁷ has been the eminent political figure, leading four of the nine governments since accession to the EU (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2025). As leader of Smer-SD⁸, the party he founded and has been leader of since 1999, his rhetoric on the European Union has been reactionary to popular sentiment in Slovakia *REF*, and was for a long time a member of the Socialist & Democrats group in the European Parliament, though with a long history of playing both sides of the political spectrum. Three of his governments have been in coalition

⁷ Pronounced Fitso ['fitso]

⁸ Smer: literally Direction, SD: short for 'sociálna demokracia', Slovak for Social Democracy.

with the far-right SNS⁹, which led to Smer's suspension from the Party of European Socialists between 2006 and 2008 ("Smer Suspended from PES," 2006) and removal in 2023 (Socialists & Democrats, 2023).

In between Fico's governments were the centre-right Government of Iveta Radičová (between 2010 and 2012), the Smer Government of Peter Pellegrini (between 2018 and 2020, Fico having resigned as a result of Ján Kuciak's assassination), the pro-European, populist, anti-corruption Governments of Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger (between 2020 and 2023) and one caretaker government.

In 'Euroscepticism and the 'Missing Left': The Slovak Case Study' Karen Henderson (2017) wrote that the first mainstream case of Euroscepticism in Slovakia was in the aftermath of the 2015 Migration Crisis, with Fico at the forefront of rejection of refugee quotas and engaging in blatant Islamophobia. This was in anticipation of the election in March 2016, and 'We are protecting Slovakia' was a campaign slogan used by Smer.

In the run up to the 2023 election, Fico again campaigned on a soft-Eurosceptic platform, notably promising to end military aid for Ukraine, and subsequently became Prime Minister again (Geist, 2023).

Eurobarometer & Elections

Charting Eurosceptic party election data in Slovakia is more of a challenge than in Hungary, as not only is the number of parties greater, but also their stance more fluid. In the data collated, the far-right SNS and ĽSNS¹⁰ (and their spiritual successor Hnutie Republika¹¹) were always

⁹ Slovenská národná strana: Slovak for Slovak National Party.

¹⁰ Eudová strana naše Slovensko: Slovak for People's Party Our Slovakia, an even more far-right party than SNS, considered neo-Nazi.

¹¹ Republic Movement.

counted as Eurosceptic, with Mečiar's HZDS¹² also featuring in elections until 2009. Smer and Hlas-SD¹³ are counted as from the 2023 Slovak election, due to their increased Euroscepticism.

In Slovakia, the Eurobarometer data corresponds much less to Election data for Eurosceptic parties, due in part to the late arrival of Euroscepticism to mainstream political parties. This is also due to less focus being on European politics than other countries, with the lowest turnout of all the Member States in every European Parliament election except in 2024 (including the lowest ever national turnout for a European Parliament election of 13.05% in 2014) (European Parliament, n.d.).

Despite little reflection of EU approval at election time, notable events are highlighted in the data, with notable dips in Autumn 2015 (in the midst of the Migration Crisis) and in Autumn 2022 (after the invasion of Ukraine). In earlier years, between 2004 and 2011, support remained high, above 50%, which would further explain the lack of Eurosceptic parties in Parliament as a result of the electoral threshold of 5% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

¹² Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko: Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, considered Eurosceptic (Skyvová, 2008).

¹³ Hlas: literally Voice, SD: short for 'sociálna demokracia', Slovak for Social Democracy. A split from Smer, Hlas are part of the same coalition, and vote with Smer.

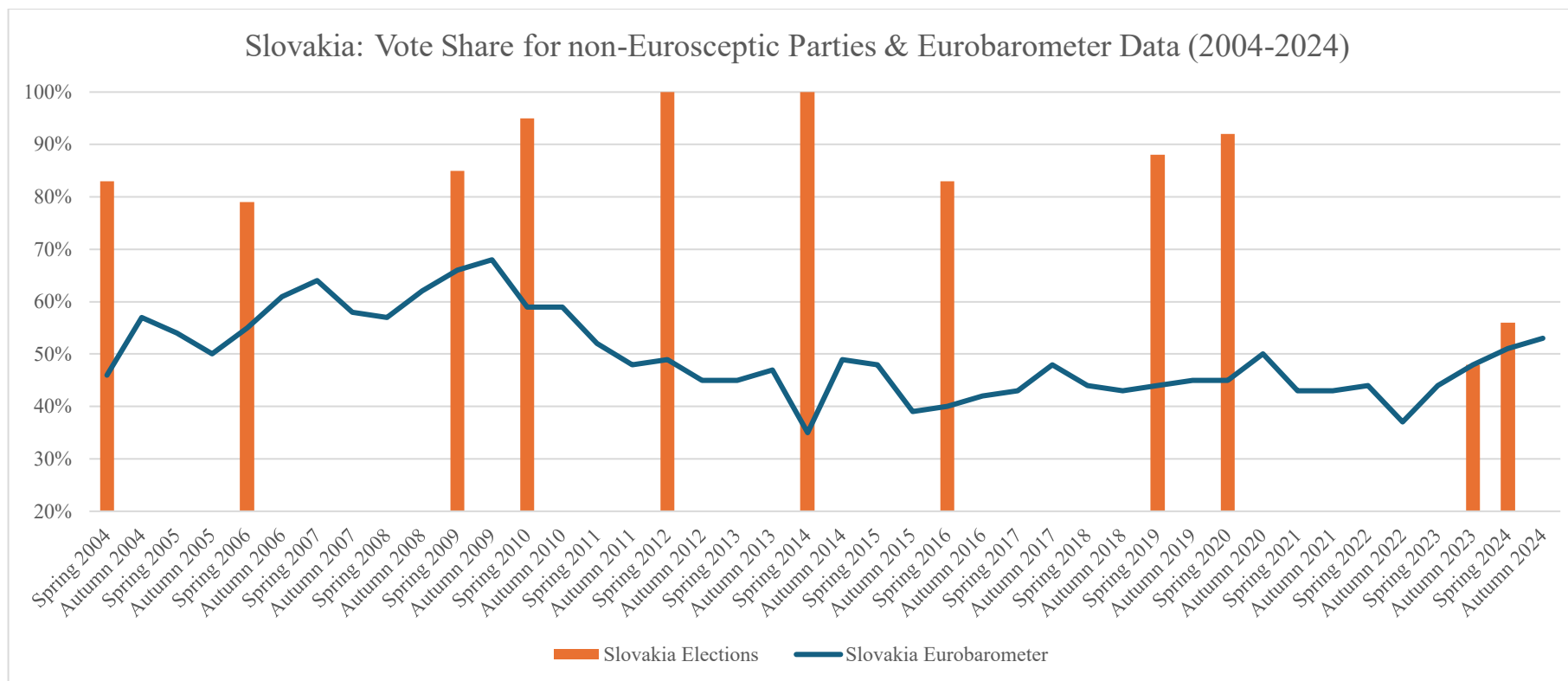


Figure 7: Slovakia Election & Eurobarometer Data¹⁴

(International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2025)

(European Commission, 2025)

¹⁴ Election data for Eurosceptic parties that gain seats in either Parliamentary Elections (for 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020 & 2023) or European Parliament Elections (for 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 & 2024). Percentage for Eurosceptic parties is subtracted from 1 to produce non-Eurosceptic party vote share. Eurobarometer data is as described in Footnote 1.

Malta

On 16 July 1990, Malta applied to join the European Economic Community¹⁵ (European Commission, 1993). Unlike in Slovakia & Hungary (or any other 2004 accession country for that matter), consensus on EU membership was very much split (Pace, 2011).

Political Actors & Context¹⁶

Malta has a two-party parliamentary democracy with among the highest levels of political engagement in the EU and the World (Zammit, 2018).

The two parties relevant during the time period covered by this essay are the Partit Laburista (PL)¹⁷ and the Partit Nazzjonalista (PN)¹⁸.

The PN were in Government during the accession procedure, between 1998 and 2013. Their policies were centred towards joining the EU. The PL, on the other hand, under the leadership of Alfred Sant, maintained that Malta would benefit from staying out of the EU and sought a ‘special relationship’ with the bloc. This form of Euroscepticism is slightly different from that of today, and aligns more closely with that of the British Labour Party in the early 1970s. When Sant was elected briefly between 1996 and 1998, Malta’s application to the EU, previously started by the PN, was even suspended, though his party lost the weak one-seat majority they held soon after and the application was re-started in 1998 (Pace, 2011).

Immediately after accession to the EU, the PL changed its narrative on the EU greatly, winning 3 of 5 seats in the 2004 European Parliament elections, and every single European Parliament election since, as a member of the Party of European Socialists (Pace, 2011).

¹⁵ As well as the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Atomic Energy Community.

¹⁶ As in the Maltese case the political actors were more so relevant before and during the referendum, I shall outline them before the section on the referendum.

¹⁷ Maltese for Labour Party.

¹⁸ Maltese for Nationalist Party.

Although other parties exist, notably (for this essay) Imperium Europa¹⁹ and (more generally) the AD-PD²⁰, the former has never won a seat in either a national election nor a European Parliament election, and the latter held the only two seats (to-date) to have not been won by either of the two main parties since Malta's independence in 1964²¹.

Referendum

Taqbel li Malta ssir membru ta' l-Unjoni Ewropea fit-tkabbir li se jsir fl-1 ta' Mejju, 2004?

Do you agree that Malta should become a member of the European Union in the enlargement that is to take place on the 1st May, 2004?

Figure 8: 2003 Referendum Question in Malta

(Government of the Republic of Malta, 2003)

On 8 March 2003, Malta held a non-binding and non-constitutionally required referendum on membership of the European Union (Cini, 2003) (Del Monte, 2022), the first country of the nine to do so, due to its polarisation in Maltese politics.

As previously mentioned, the PL campaigned for a No vote and the PN campaigned for a Yes vote.

The result was the closest of any of the referendums held on EU accession, with a Yes vote share of 53.7% on a turnout of 90.9%, also the highest of any of the referendums. As a result, the PL leader Alfred Sant argued that with an approval rate of only 48.7%, the PN did not have a mandate to take Malta into the EU. Although this was unheard of, with no precedent in Maltese politics (unlike many other countries there is no minimum turnout or approval rate),

¹⁹ An ultranationalist, EU sceptic party, led since its foundation by Norman Lowell, who has unsuccessfully ran for every European Parliament election in Malta.

²⁰ AD, short for 'Alternattiva Demokratika', Maltese for Democratic Alternative, PD, short for 'Partit Demokratiku', Maltese for Democratic Party, two separate parties which merged in 2020.

²¹ Between 2017-2022, while in an electoral alliance with the Nationalist Party.

the PN reacted by calling a general election, as a kind of vote of confidence in the EU (Fenech, 2003).

On 12 April 2004, the PN won the Maltese General Election by a margin of 52% to 47%, with a turnout of 96.95%, the highest ever figure in Malta's history as an independent country (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2025).

As a result, Malta joined the EU on 1 May 2004 (European Commission, 2024).

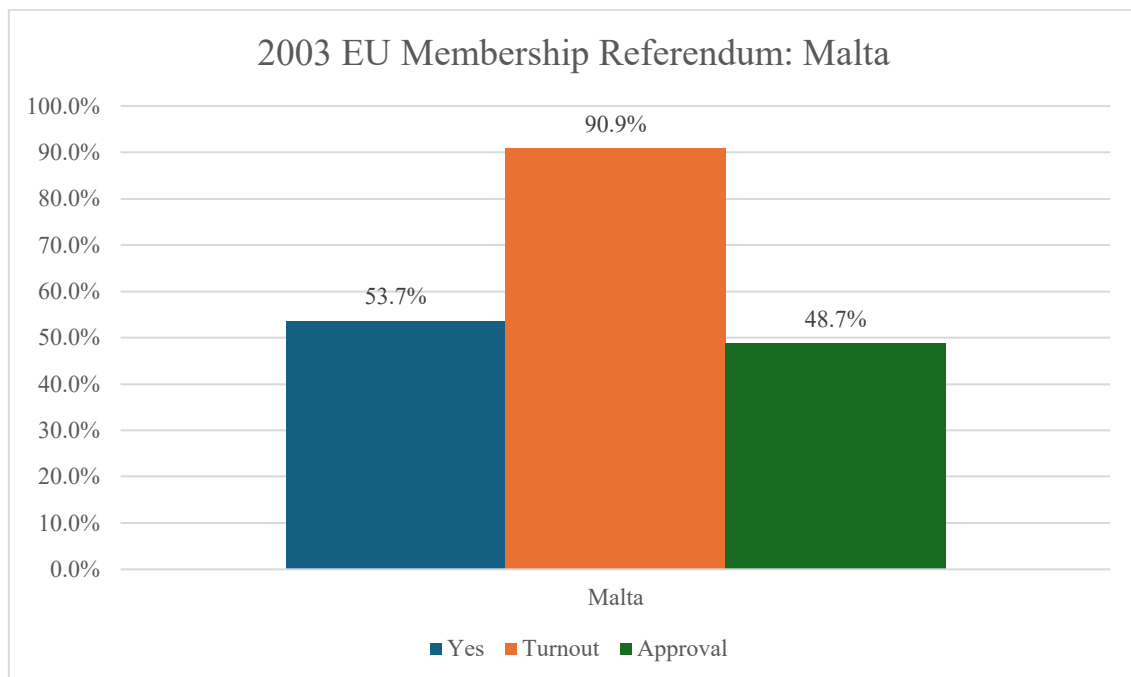


Figure 9: 2003 EU Membership Referendum in Malta

(Del Monte, 2022)

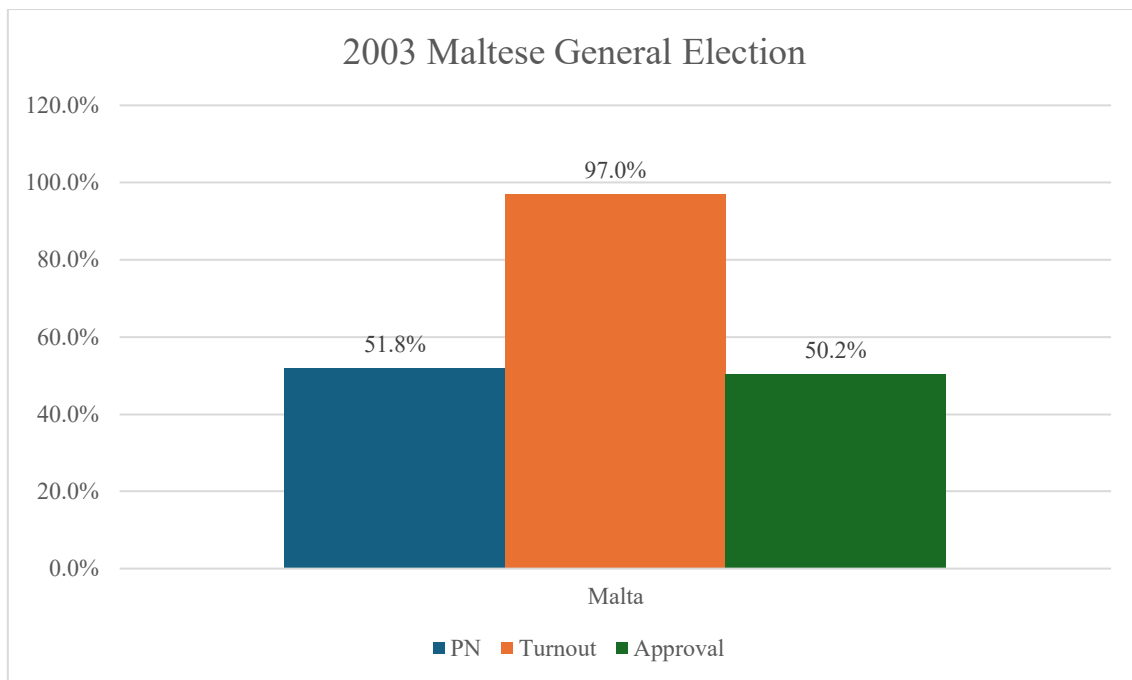


Figure 10: 2003 Maltese General Election

(International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2025)

Eurobarometer

Maltese satisfaction with the EU has steadily remained over 50% since 2013 as benefits such as increased tourism and free movement took hold. The only exceptions to this are in Autumn 2015 (coinciding with the Migration Crisis) and Spring 2020 (coinciding with the initial EU response to COVID-19, though in the next survey reaching far above previous polls at 64%). In Spring 2022, support for the EU reached a record high of 71%, in the midst of the Invasion of Ukraine. No political parties that maintain a Eurosceptic stance have ever taken seats in any Maltese election since accession.

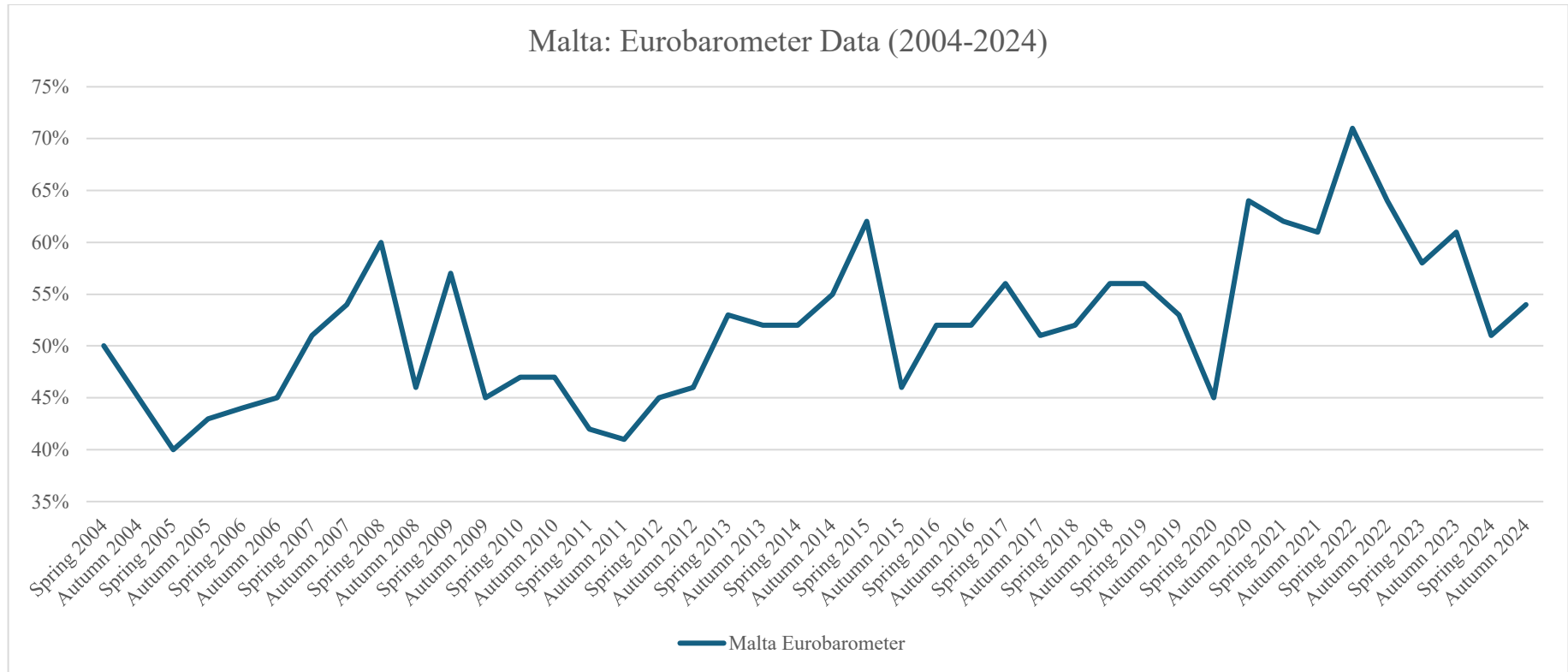


Figure 11: Malta Eurobarometer Data²²

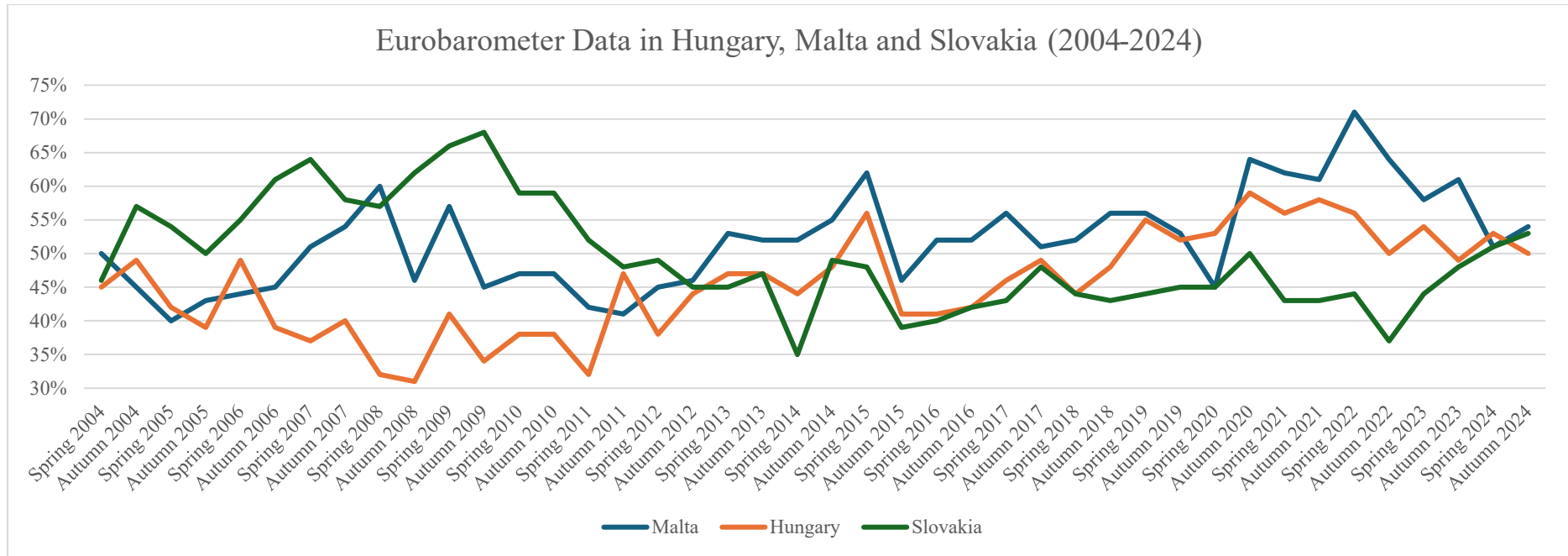
(European Commission, 2025)

²² Eurobarometer data is as described in Footnote 1.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these three cases highlight the extremes in evolution of popular support for the EU, and the different paths followed as a result. Highlighting the EU's crises, in one notable case, the 2015 Migration Crisis, the EU fell in popularity in all three countries, however reactions to COVID and the Invasion of Ukraine varied. The Eurobarometer data highlighted that depending on the electoral context, dissatisfaction with the EU can be reflected (as is the case in Slovakia and Hungary) in parliamentary make-up, or can also be irrelevant in the political scene (as is the case in Malta).

Finally, the Eurobarometer data, if taken at face value, highlights the fact that support for the EU does not vary that greatly between populations, compared to their representatives at state and parliament level.



*Figure 12: Eurobarometer Data²³
(European Commission, 2025)*

²³ Eurobarometer data is as described in Footnote 1.

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Annex 1: Excel File with Eurobarometer, Election and Referendum Data

Annex 2a: Zipped Folder: Eurobarometer Raw Data (Standard Eurobarometer 61-74)

Annex 2b: Zipped Folder: Eurobarometer Raw Data (Standard Eurobarometer 75-102)

Annex 3: Zipped Folder: Sources

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