

Immigration Attitudes Across Europe

A Policy Brief | ESS CRONOS-3 ‘Make it Strong’ Panel

April 2026

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Introduction

This policy brief presents findings from the **European Social Survey CRONOS-3** panel on immigration attitudes across 11 European countries. The data reveals important patterns that policymakers should consider when designing integration policies, communication strategies, and social cohesion programs.

Dataset: ESS CRONOS-3, “*Make it Strong*” theme | **12,147 respondents** | 11 countries: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia | Wave 2 Immigration Module

Finding 1: The Perception Gap – Everyone Overestimates

Key finding: Citizens across all 11 countries dramatically overestimate the percentage of foreign-born residents – by 2 to 3 times the actual Eurostat figures – suggesting a systematic information failure that fuels policy anxiety disconnected from reality.

Perception Gap: Perceived vs. Actual % Foreign-Born

Citizens consistently overestimate immigration levels

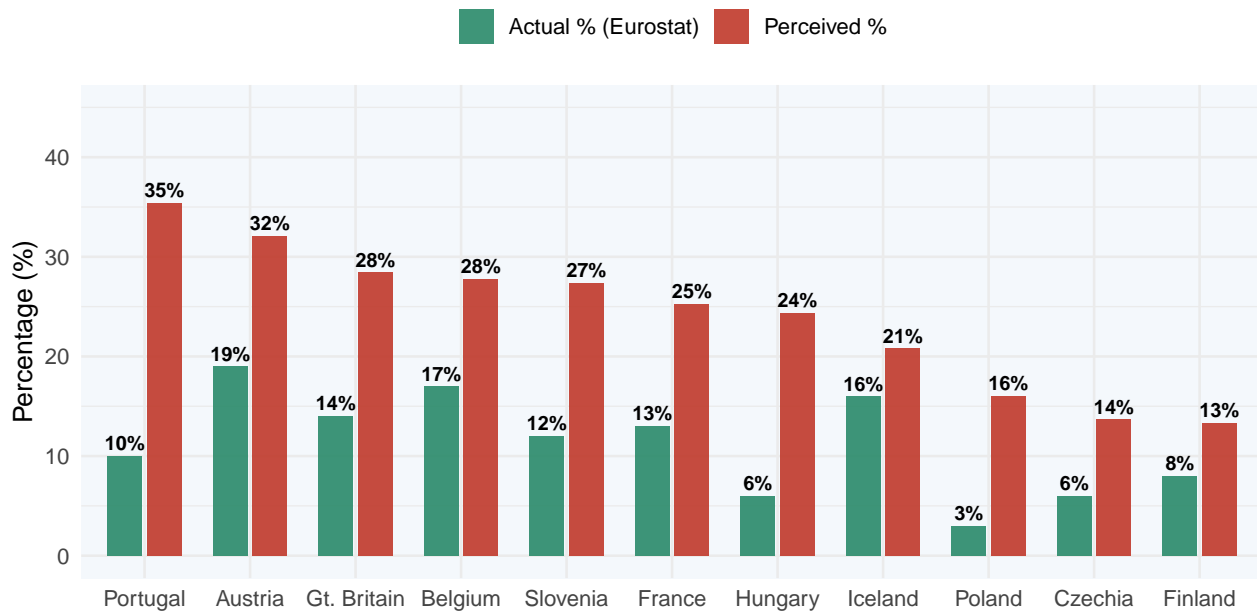


Figure 1: Mean perceived vs. actual percentage of population born outside the country.

Finding 2: The Country Divide – Not All of Europe Thinks Alike

Key finding: A clear East-West divide emerges: Central and Eastern European countries (Hungary, Poland, Czechia) consistently score highest on the composite anti-immigration index, while Nordic and Western European countries show considerably more openness – demanding differentiated policy strategies rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

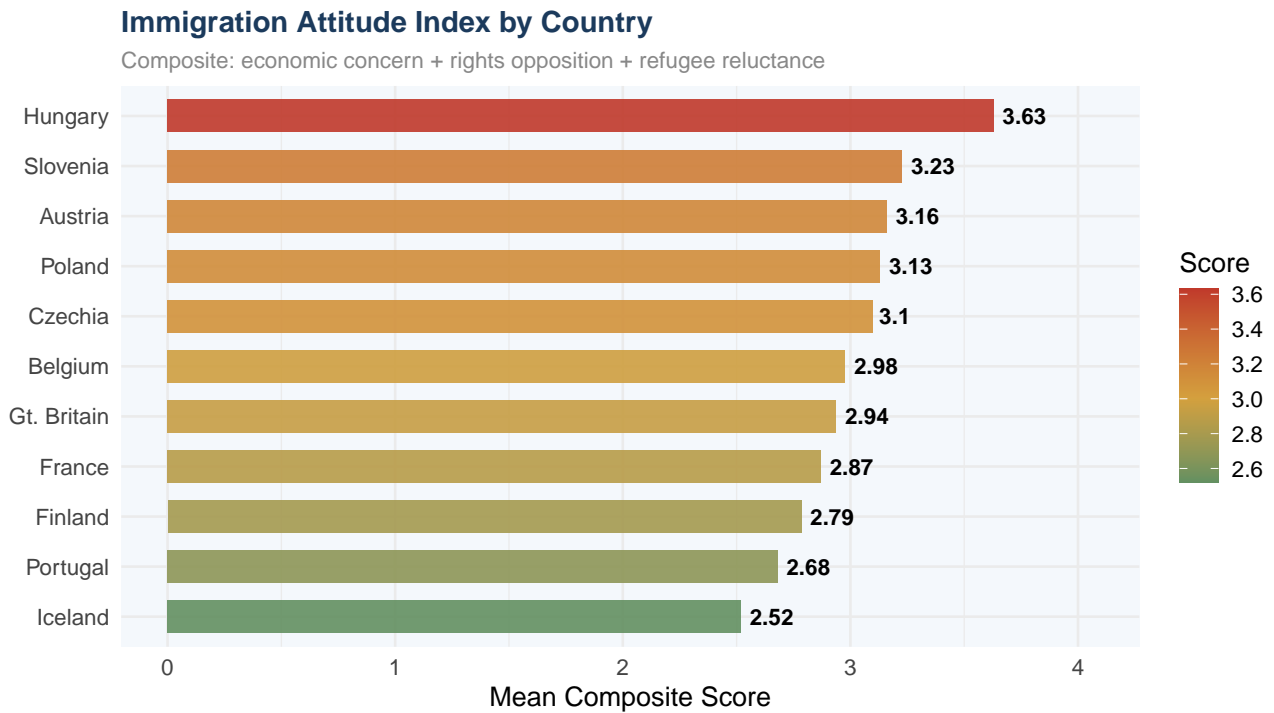


Figure 2: Composite anti-immigration index by country (higher = more anti-immigration sentiment).

Finding 3: The Contact Effect – Exposure Builds Understanding

Key finding: Countries where citizens report higher-quality interactions with immigrants demonstrate significantly more positive attitudes toward equal rights, confirming the contact hypothesis and identifying community-level integration programs as the single most evidence-based policy lever available to governments.

Contact Hypothesis: Better Contact, More Positive Attitudes

Higher contact quality correlates with stronger support for immigrant rights

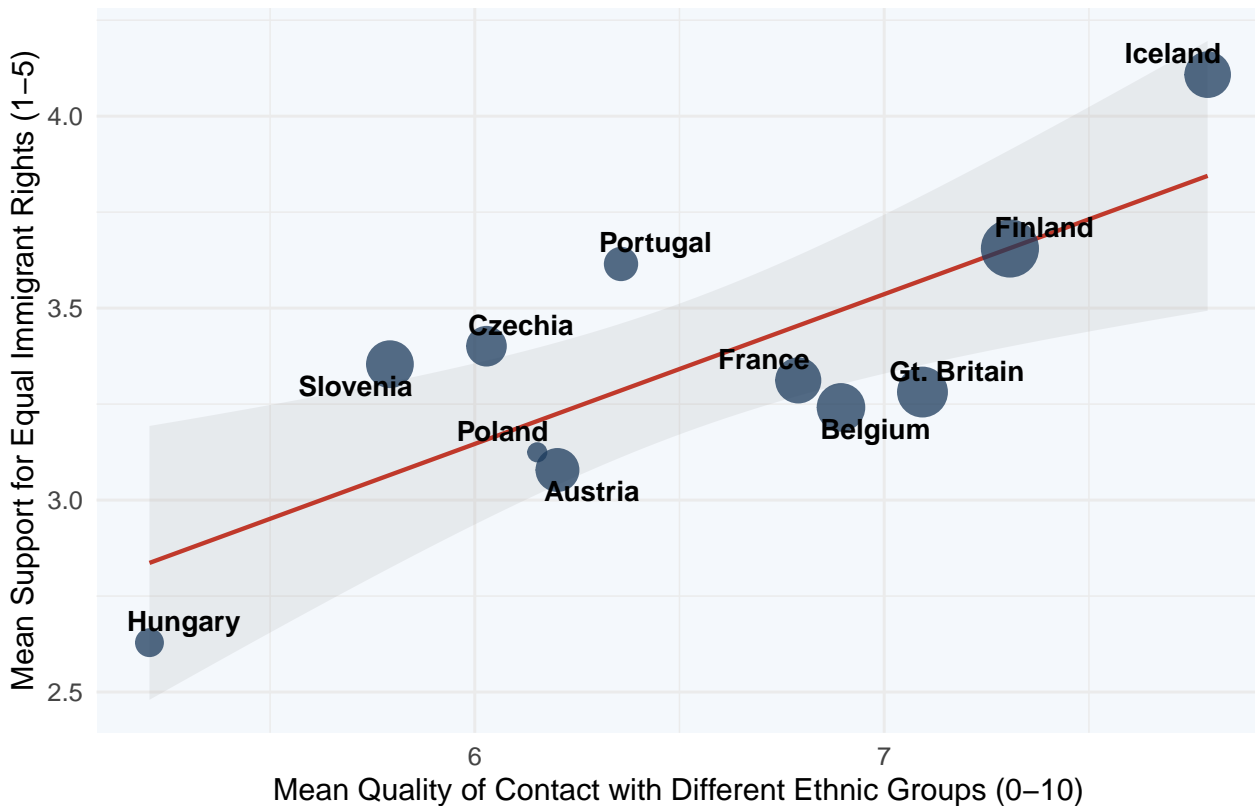


Figure 3: Mean contact quality with immigrants vs. mean support for equal immigrant rights, by country.

Practical Policy Suggestions

The three findings above converge on a clear set of evidence-based actions.

1. The numbers lie, but not in the data. Citizens overestimate the share of foreign-born residents by two to three times the actual Euro Stat figure. This isn't a values problem — it's an information failure. Therefore, national statistics offices should run targeted public campaigns correcting these misperceptions before policy debates begin.
2. We can see from the results that where you live shapes what you believe. Scores in counties like Hungary, Poland, and Czechia are significantly higher on anti-immigration sentiment than Finland, Iceland, or Portugal. From here, we have the message that a single EU integration framework will not work. Differentiated, country-level communication strategies are essential.
3. Contact matters. Countries with higher reported quality of contact with immigrants show measurably stronger support for equal rights. This finding confirms a domain of social science research: community-based integration programs are your highest-return policy investment.

Reference:

European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2025) CRONOS3 Wave 1 edition 1.1 “Make it Strong”. Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. <https://doi.org/10.21338/cron3w1e01.1>

European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2025) CRONOS3 Wave 2 edition 1.1 “Make it Strong”. Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. <https://doi.org/10.21338/cron3w2e01.1>