



# Frontex, Europe and direct democracy

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The present study complements a study from 2021 that investigated and compared satisfaction with democracy in Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy and Austria. The 2021 study indicated that satisfaction with the political system and with opportunities for participation, rules and results is high in Switzerland. It is clearly higher, in fact, than in neighbouring countries. The majority of neighbouring countries supports the adoption of aspects of Swiss democracy.

The final report on this study can be accessed using the QR code.

# 1 Management summary



In all EU countries surveyed, an absolute majority of voters has a positive opinion of the European Union. The most positive opinion of the EU is found in Estonia, Portugal, Lithuania, Romania and Ireland. This shows that the positive impression of the EU is present among both long-established and newer members. By comparison, opinion of the EU is most negative in Czechia, the Netherlands, Greece, Slovakia and France. But even in these countries, positive attitudes towards the European Union prevail. This general goodwill towards the political system is an important initial prerequisite for the success of proposals by public authorities.



In almost all countries, except Cyprus, an absolute majority of the voters surveyed feels safe. All security-related elements are considered important by an absolute majority in all countries. Across all EU countries, the most important element of security is the police, followed by cross-border police cooperation. National border protection is rated as slightly more important than European border protection, while self-protection options come in last place. As such, the basic status quo relevant for an assessment of Frontex appears satisfactory from the perspective of EU citizens, and no major problem pressure is evident. Any intention to reform the status quo when it is perceived as satisfactory by a large majority would therefore need to be justified from the outset. It would be necessary to explain why reform is being sought despite widespread satisfaction, and how such reform would not endanger current satisfaction. Experience shows that, without such explanation, reform will not pass in a referendum.



In about one third of the countries surveyed, an absolute majority is aware of Frontex at least by name, while in all other countries, the majority is unfamiliar with the organisation. At the EU level, the majority of voters has a positive opinion of Frontex. The majority is unaware of the criticism voiced against it. This comparatively low awareness of Frontex, the majority's positive attitude towards it and ignorance of the criticism voiced against it underline the low level of problem pressure already noted. Experience shows that if people do not see a problem, they do not actively inform themselves about possible alternative solutions.



Voters in EU countries recognise Frontex's task and contribution and want to provide the necessary resources. From a majority point of view, additional Frontex funds should be used for border protection and not for improving the human rights situation, although the majority agrees that Frontex needs to get a grip on costs and improve human rights protection. An absolute majority of voters in every EU country surveyed would take part in a vote on expanding Frontex, although voter participation at the EU level is slightly below the Swiss average. On the other hand, at the EU level, voting intention in favour of expansion is above that measured for Swit-

zerland during the same period in almost all countries. A look at the argumentative positioning of this voting intention suggests that the Yes share would nevertheless shrink in the context of a tough referendum debate, but that a (narrow) Yes would be a realistic scenario even in the EU environment.



Voting decisions in the EU countries are based on arguments and are thus clearly more than just a gut decision. In Europe, too, voters are thus quite capable of forming opinions on the basis of the arguments at hand and deciding whether to vote yes or no as a result. The measurable influence of the arguments on voting decisions and thus the indicator of how strongly a voting decision is based on actual information is smaller in almost all EU countries than we observe for Switzerland. However, the timing of the survey has coincided with the beginning of the referendum campaign in Switzerland, meaning there is a higher level of media coverage of the Frontex issue in the latter than is currently the case in the EU. Overall, the electorate in the EU, like that in Switzerland, is quite capable of forming and expressing voting decisions on the basis of arguments. Those entitled to vote do so because they have a desire to participate and make a decision.



Finally, in the EU, not only do we observe very similar opinion formation processes on the part of the population regarding substantive decisions as we do in Switzerland, we also see that the majority of EU citizens is indeed willing to participate in such decisions. In terms of democratic wishes, the desire for general referendums – both nationally and at the EU level – is stronger than that for referendums on Frontex. The idea of both general referendums and specific ones on Frontex is considered good by an absolute majority at the EU level.

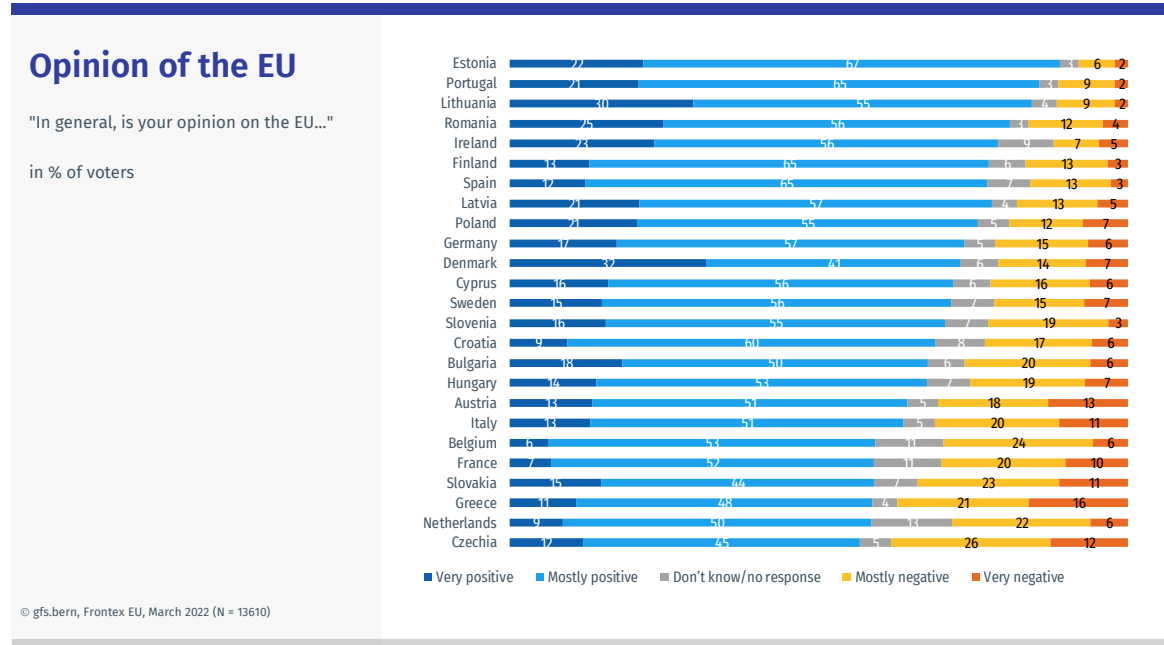
We examine the opinion formation of voters on substantive decisions using our own disposition approach, which understands the path to voting at the ballot box as a highly dynamic, multi-layered decision. Values, everyday experiences and political influence play just as important a role as the prevailing political, economic or social climate, the attitude of political organisations and political communication. Gfs.bern has been observing voting decisions in Switzerland for around 60 years and has developed empirical knowledge that it has incorporated into this disposition approach. In the following report, we assume that opinion formation in the European environment functions in a similar way to that in Switzerland. Further information on the disposition approach can be found in chapter 2.3 of the separate annex to this final report.

## 2 Findings

### 2.1 Starting point

In every EU country, there is an absolute majority that has a more or less markedly positive opinion of the European Union:

Figure 1

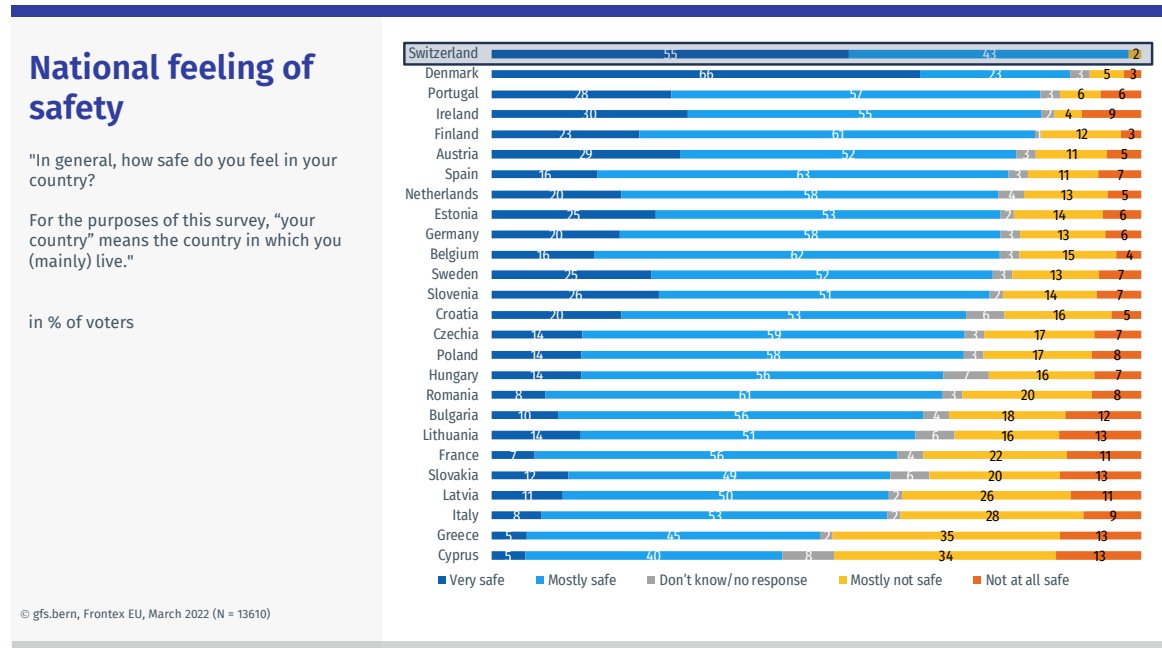


This generally positive attitude towards the EU is a central building block for reform intentions on the part of the EU. Apparently, broad segments among EU citizens have no reservations at this very fundamental level, which represents a starting advantage for subsequent proposals by public authorities. In Switzerland, too, we observe a similar effect: majorities have a positive attitude towards the public sector and assess proposals by public authorities based on a general assumption that these public authorities will act in the citizens' best interest.

Opinion of the EU is most positive in Estonia (89% mostly/very positive), Portugal (86%), Lithuania (85%), Romania (81%) and Ireland (79%). Remarkably, this includes three Eastern European countries that only joined the EU fairly recently. Although opinion of the EU is most negative in the following countries, in each, an absolute majority still has a positive image of the EU: Czechia (38% mostly/very negative), Netherlands (28%), Greece (37%), Slovakia (34%) and France (30%).

In almost all EU countries, an absolute majority of voters feels mostly or even very safe:

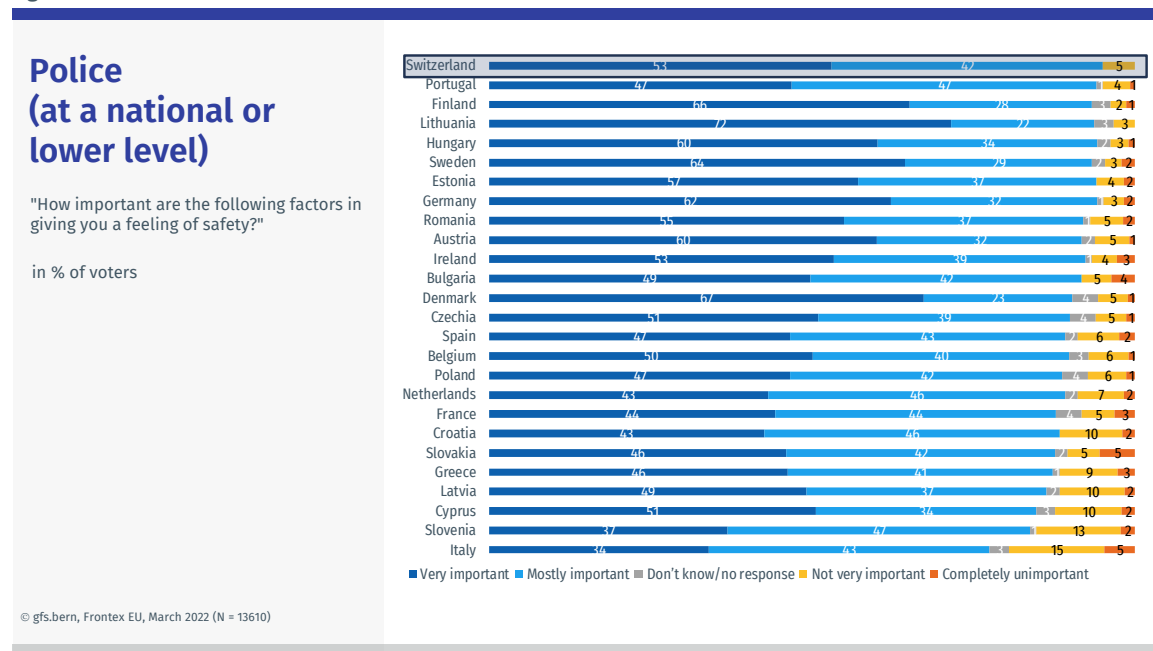
Figure 2



Only in Cyprus does a slight relative majority feel unsafe (47% mostly/not at all safe). In Cyprus, however, the relatively small sample size must be taken into account, meaning that some caution is appropriate when interpreting and evaluating that country's results. Besides Cyprus, the following countries have the highest proportions of citizens who feel insecure: Greece (48%), Italy (37%), Latvia (37%) and Slovakia (33%). Cyprus, Greece and Italy have a special connection with the EU external border and thus to Frontex. The increased feeling of insecurity in Greece and Cyprus can presumably also be attributed, at least in part, to regional conflicts with Turkey. Similarly, in Latvia, the immediate proximity to Russia and Belarus may contribute to the feeling of insecurity. In a thematically and temporally comparable Switzerland, 98 per cent of the voters surveyed felt mostly/very safe, while a 2 per cent minority said they felt mostly not safe.

At the EU level, the most important element of security is the police (89% mostly/very important):

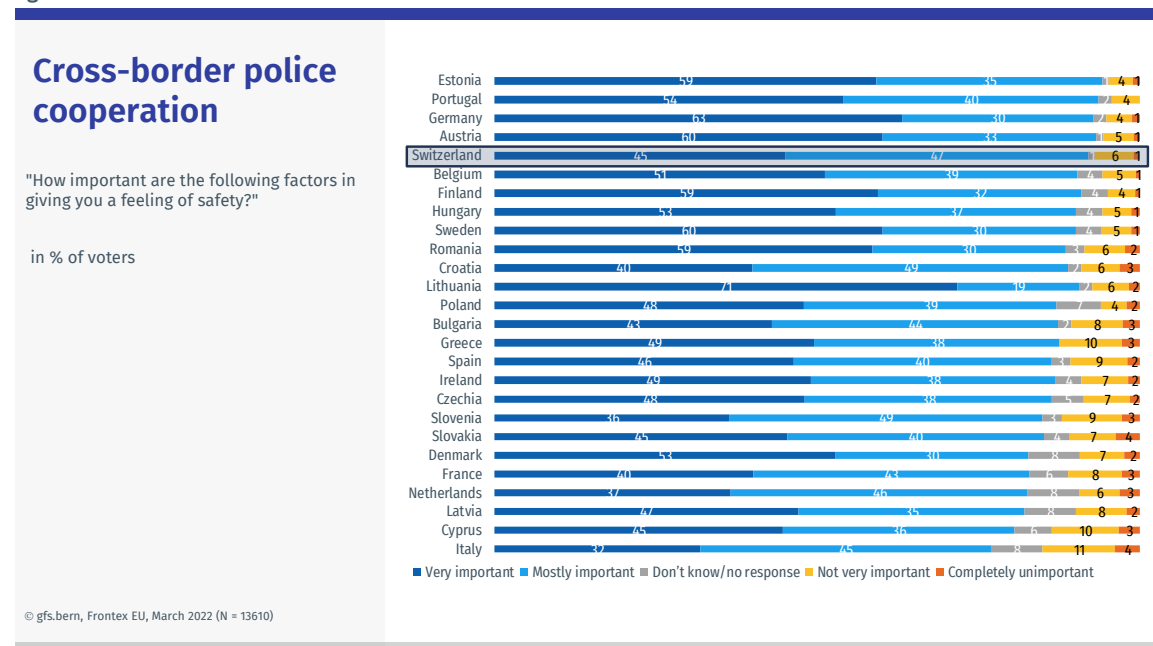
Figure 3



In every EU country, an absolute majority believes that the police are important. In all countries, at least 77 per cent of voters surveyed would rate the police as mostly to very important. Switzerland has the highest percentage of mostly/very important ratings, at 95 per cent.

Cross-border police cooperation is perceived as mostly to very important at the EU level by 87 per cent of the respondents, making it the second most important element of security:

Figure 4

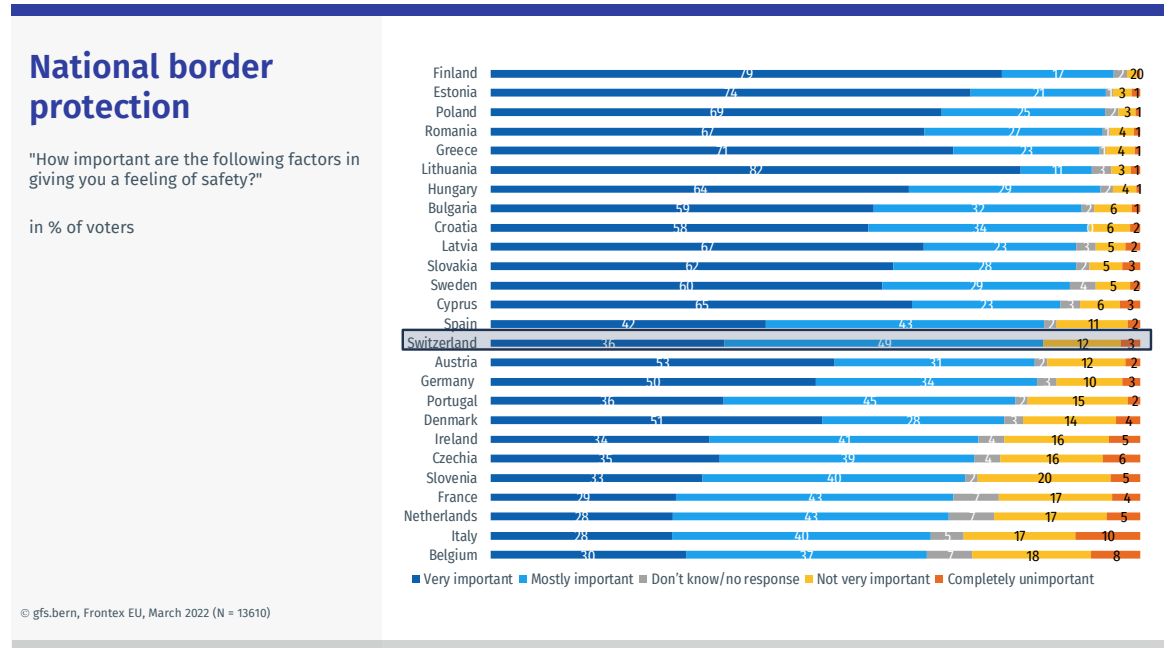




Regarding this element, too, an absolute majority in every country rates international police cooperation as important. In all countries, at least 77 per cent of voters rate cross-border police cooperation as mostly to very important. In this respect, Switzerland is among the top five countries, at 92 per cent.

At the EU level, national border protection ranks third among the most important elements of security (84% mostly/very important):

Figure 5



Here, too, an absolute majority of voters in each of the countries surveyed rates national border protection as mostly to very important. In all countries except Czechia (74%), Slovenia (73%), France (72%), the Netherlands (71%), Italy (68%) and Belgium (67%), at least 75 per cent of the voters rate national border protection as mostly to very important. Switzerland is in the middle of the pack in this respect, at 85 per cent.

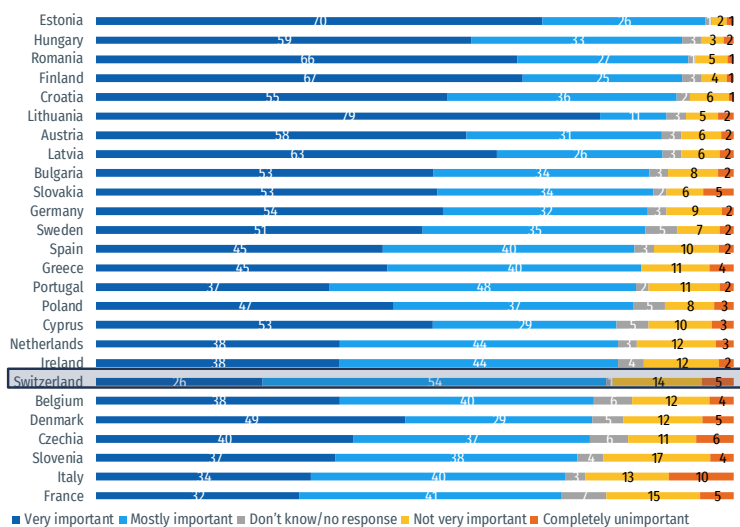
At the EU level, 83 per cent of voters are of the opinion that European border protection is mostly to very important:

Figure 6

### Border control at the European level

"How important are the following factors in giving you a feeling of safety?"

in % of voters



© gfs.bern, Frontex EU, March 2022 (N = 13610)

In every country, an absolute majority believes in the importance of European border protection. In all countries except Italy (74%) and France (73%), at least 75 per cent of voters rate national border protection as mostly to very important. Switzerland is in the bottom third in this respect, at 80 per cent.

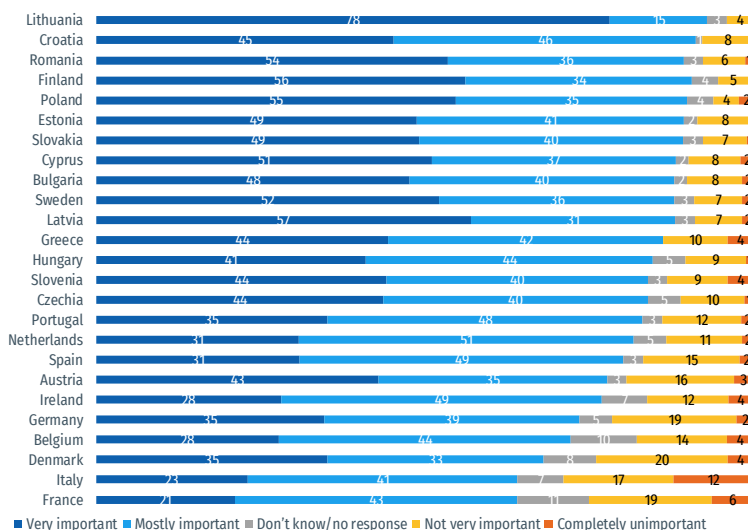
Across all EU countries, 80 per cent of respondents are of the opinion that self-protection options are mostly to very important for their own security. This is the least important of all the elements of security asked about:

Figure 7

### Importance of self-protection

"How important are the following factors in giving you a feeling of safety?"

in % of voters



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Finally, there is also an absolute majority of voters in every EU country who rate this element of security as mostly to very important. In all countries except Germany (74%), Belgium (72%), Denmark (68%), Italy (64%) and France (64%), at least 75 per cent of voters rate national border protection as mostly to very important. This element of security was not asked about in the Swiss survey.

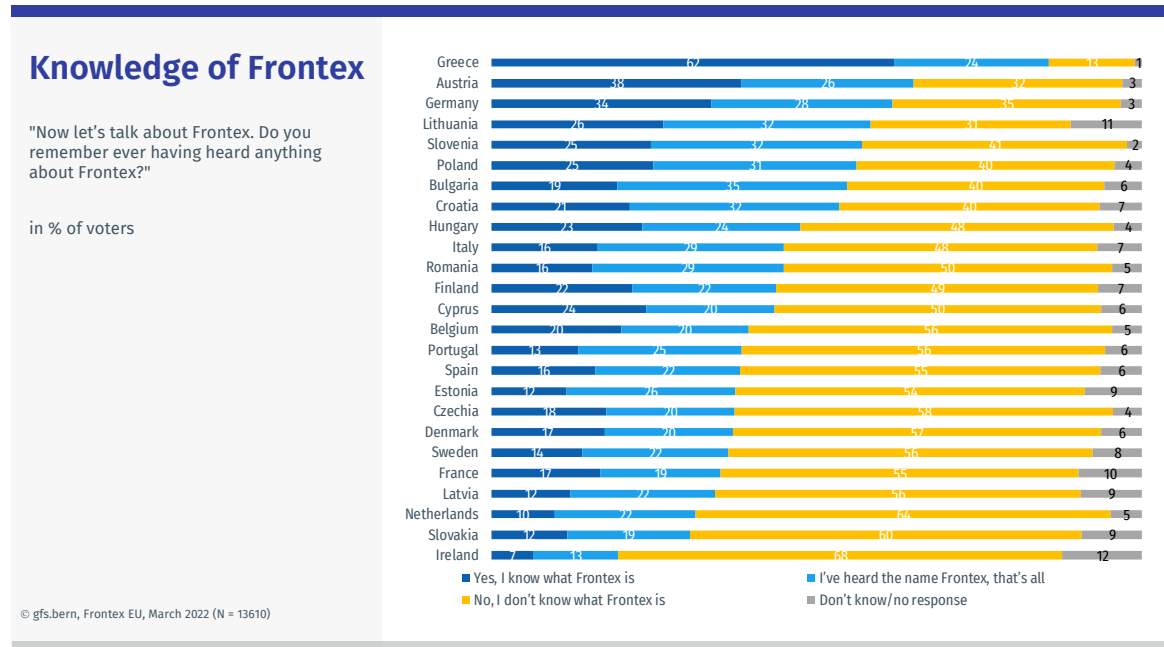
Comparison between the EU and Switzerland shows that the elements of security had the same ranking, but the Swiss share was between 1 and 6 percentage points higher in each case. The only exception in this regard is European border protection, which is the only element of security that was rated as less important in Switzerland than at the EU level.

Overall, this second look at the prevailing mood complements the general goodwill towards the EU. Most EU citizens not only have a positive attitude towards the EU, a clear majority also emphasises the great importance of transnational police work and border protection. General systemic trust in the EU also has an explicit operational component, therefore: the EU fulfils a function in policing and border protection that is considered important for individuals' own sense of security. Political adjustments to European police and border protection are thus subject to critical observation from the very beginning.

## 2.2 Frontex

In eight out of 25 countries, an absolute majority of voters knows Frontex at least by name:

Figure 8



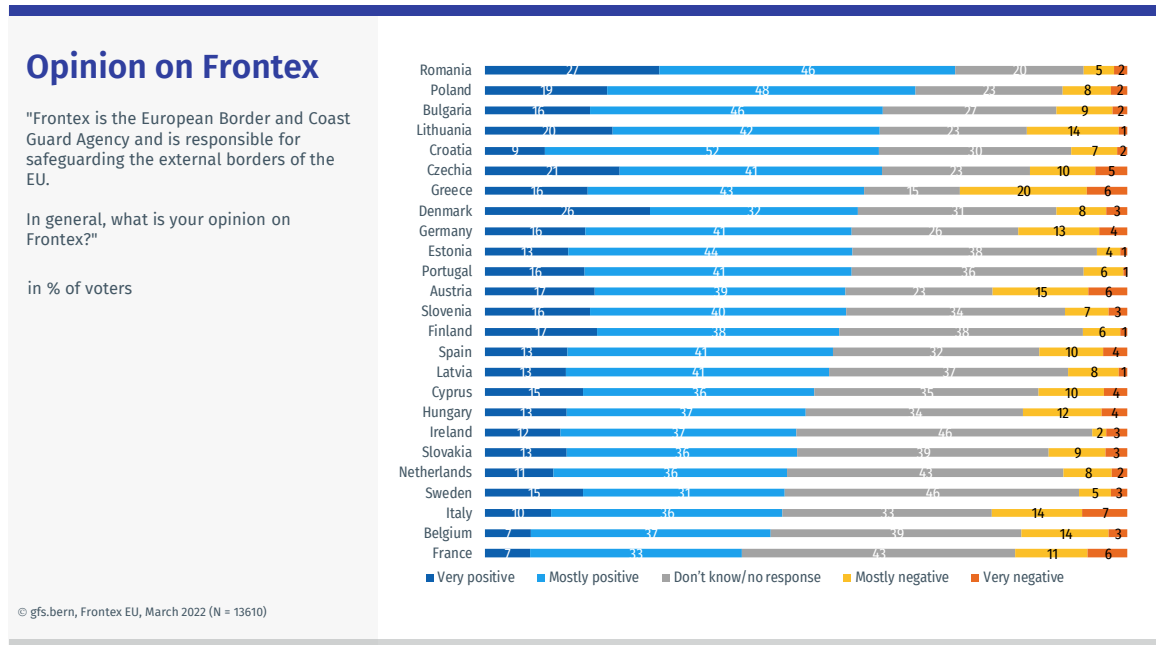
Frontex is best known in Greece, where 86 per cent of respondents say they know Frontex at least by name. This can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that Greece is directly affected by migration flows and thus also by Frontex. Frontex is also comparatively best known in Austria (64%), Germany (62%), Lithuania (58%) and Slovenia (57%).

At the EU level, voters are split into two almost equally large camps: 46 per cent know Frontex at least by name, while 48 per cent do not know what Frontex is. This is an indication of low problem pressure, as interest in and perception of Frontex tend to be low as well.

Experience shows that a lack of knowledge about political issues is an important indicator that no major problem is suspected in this area.

The general attitude towards Frontex confirms this exactly: at the EU level, 55 per cent of respondents have a positive opinion of Frontex, while a 14 per cent minority has a negative one:

Figure 9

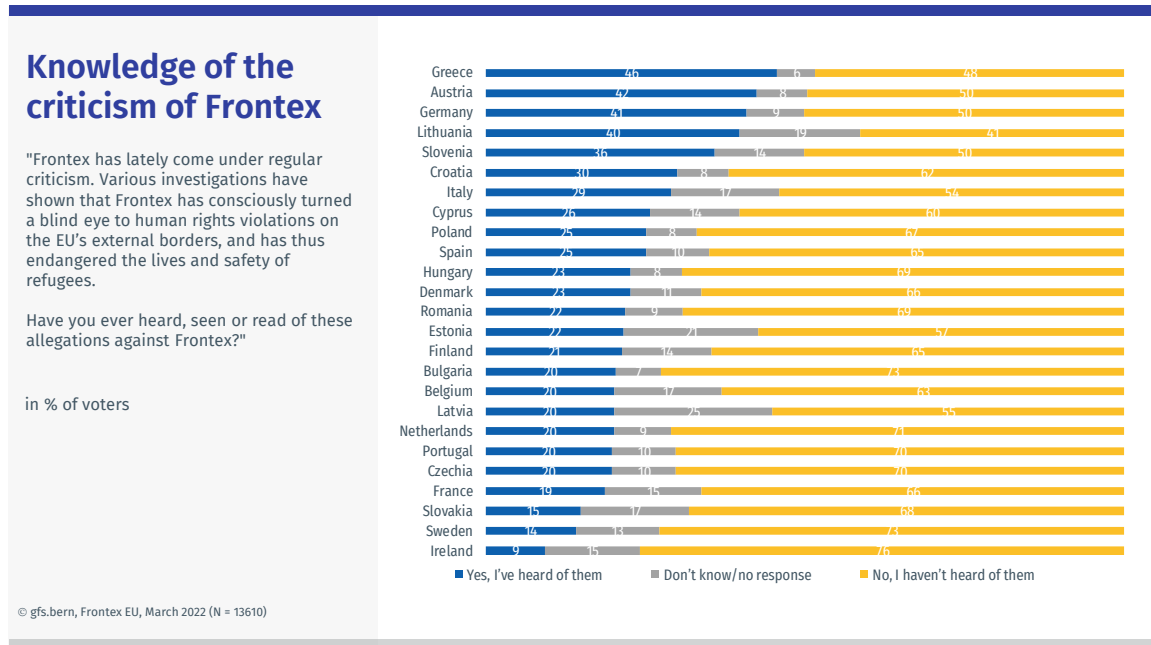


This indicates that a majority has a positive view of Frontex, while the opposing group is evidently more disinterested and less critical. The most positive assessment of Frontex is found in Romania (73% mostly/very positive), Poland (67%), Bulgaria (62%), Lithuania (62%) and Croatia (61%). Dissatisfaction is not truly broad in any country, but it is comparatively highest in Greece (26% mostly/very negative), Austria (21%), Italy (21%), Germany (17%), France (17%) and Belgium (17%).

The comparatively weakly pronounced negative opinion of Frontex reinforces the weak perception of the problem noted above. The premises of European border protection are rated as important; Frontex receives little attention and visibly enjoys majority support. Accordingly, a proposal that calls for potential reforms in this area would have a difficult time.

Consequently, it becomes apparent that in no EU country is there a relative or absolute majority of voters aware of the criticism of Frontex:

Figure 10



At the EU level, 26 per cent of all respondents have heard of the criticism, while almost two thirds have not. This minority perception of criticism reinforces the point that both the stated problem pressure and the underlying perception of the issue are low. Comparatively, the criticism is best known in Greece (46% yes, have heard of it), Austria (42%), Germany (41%), Lithuania (40%) and Slovenia (36%). The criticism is least known in Ireland (9%), Sweden (14%), Slovakia (15%) and France (19%).

Agreement in general is also found at the level of specific arguments. The four most shared statements around Frontex underline the positive view of the organisation. Thus, the following four statements are shared by a majority at the EU level:

- It is pretty hypocritical to commission Frontex to protect our borders and then to criticise Frontex when they carry out their work (60% mostly/fully agree).
- Thanks to Frontex, the police and border forces of the individual EU countries are able to carry out their work much more efficiently and effectively (57% mostly/fully agree).
- Without Frontex's work, the EU would be overwhelmed with huge waves of migration (57%).
- Rather than repelling asylum seekers, it would be better to ensure they have safe access to a proper asylum procedure in the individual EU countries (53%).

There is only one majority-shared counterargument, and that is the demand for secure access to a proper asylum procedure.

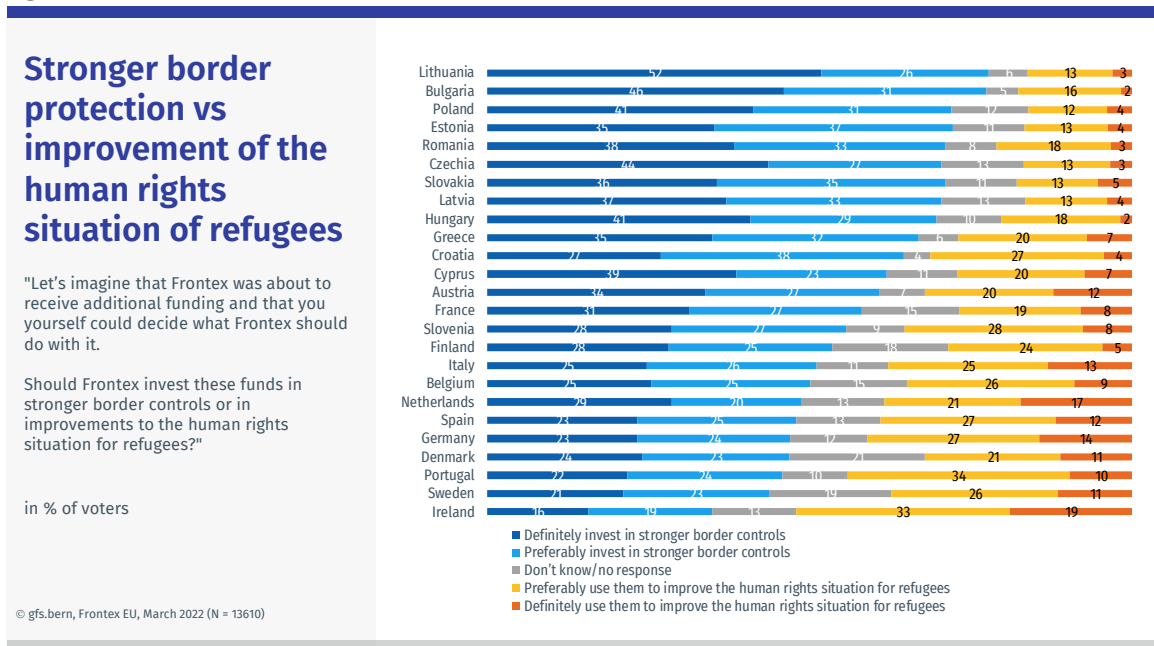
Minority agreement was observed regarding the remaining counterarguments:

- Through the work of Frontex, the EU is partly responsible for the deaths of asylum seekers in the Mediterranean (32%).
- Frontex’s actions are a stain on Europe’s long-standing humanitarian tradition (27%).

Not only are the two statements – strongly based on moral arguments – about joint responsibility for dead asylum seekers and disgracing a long-standing tradition supported by a clear minority, we also find a significant proportion of people in all countries who are unable to make such an assessment. Apparently, such questions are not asked at all in connection with Frontex, which is a further indication that the criticism of the organisation expressed in these regards simply went unnoticed to a large extent (out of disinterest).

As a result, it is also not surprising that an absolute majority in two thirds of the countries surveyed believes that additional Frontex funds should be spent on border protection:

Figure 11



In almost all other countries, a relative majority is in favour of strengthening border protection. The use of funds for improving the human rights situation of refugees is only demanded in Ireland, where an absolute majority is in favour of this.

Overall, such an assessment reinforces the basic stance that Frontex is important and is not visibly associated with human rights violations, and that if any funds are to be spent, they should go towards improving border protection.

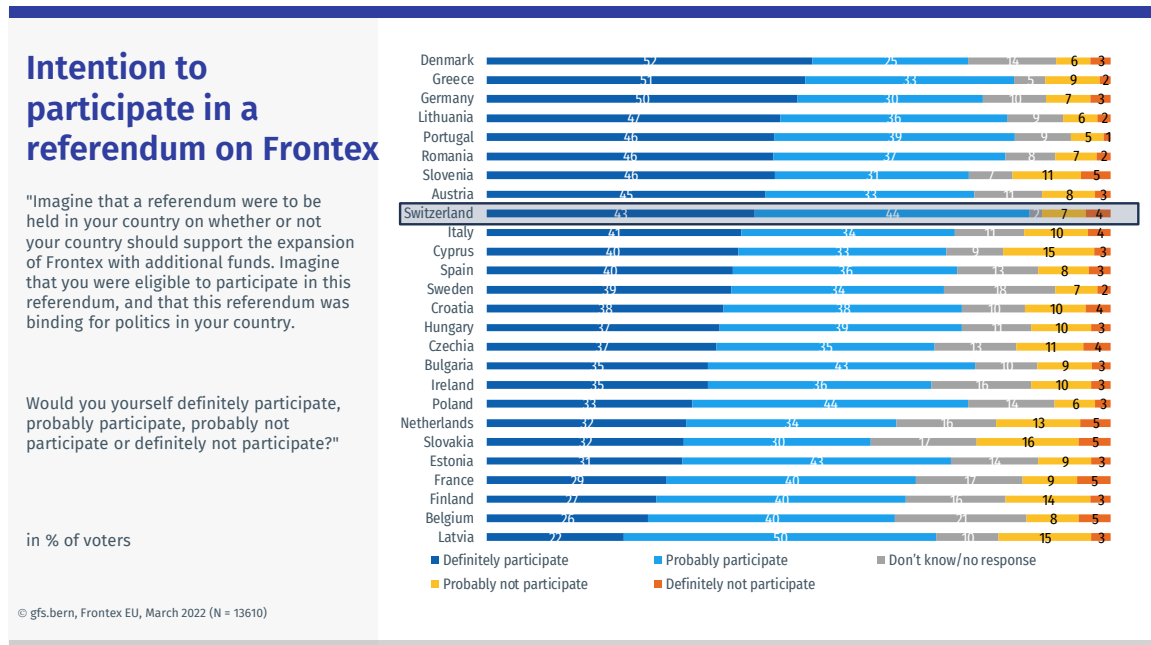
The subsequent power of a political proposal to mobilise support is based on this basic stance. In Switzerland, it has been shown that the power of a political proposal to mobilise support is high when an issue either addresses a serious problem and thus creates high problem pressure from the point of view of the voters or has a strong impact

on their own everyday lives. Indirectly, the expressed intention to participate is therefore an indicator of how strongly a political issue addresses one of the two elements.

Looking at the intention to participate, we focus on those voters who indicate that they would definitely take part in the referendum, because experience shows that the others will not participate.

In Switzerland, at the same time of the European surveys, we observe a 44 per cent intention to participate in the Swiss referendum. This is marginally below the average rate of participation we observe for Swiss referendums and shows, for Switzerland, that the proposals for the vote on 15 May are not making much of a splash, in terms of either problem pressure or their everyday relevance at the time of the survey. A second survey conducted in Switzerland about a month later shows that this problem pressure had not increased noticeably even 20 days before the vote.

Figure 12



If we now take the same look at the current mobilisation in European countries, it can be divided into three subgroups: voter participation higher than in Switzerland, voter participation comparable to Switzerland and voter participation lower than in Switzerland. In the first group, we find Denmark, Greece, Germany and Lithuania, where the intention to participate is at least 47 per cent (definitely participate). Voter participation is considered to be similar to that in Switzerland where the participation is between 42 and 46 per cent. This is the case in Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Austria. In the remaining 17 countries, the intention to participate is lower than we observed in Switzerland in March 2022.

There are therefore eight EU countries that, at the time of the survey, would be as involved as or more involved than Switzerland in a vote on Frontex. Considering that in Europe, too, there is no high level of problem pressure associated with Frontex, nor a high level of everyday relevance, this observation is quite remarkable. However, it is also evident from the highest participation rate (52% definitely participate) that the

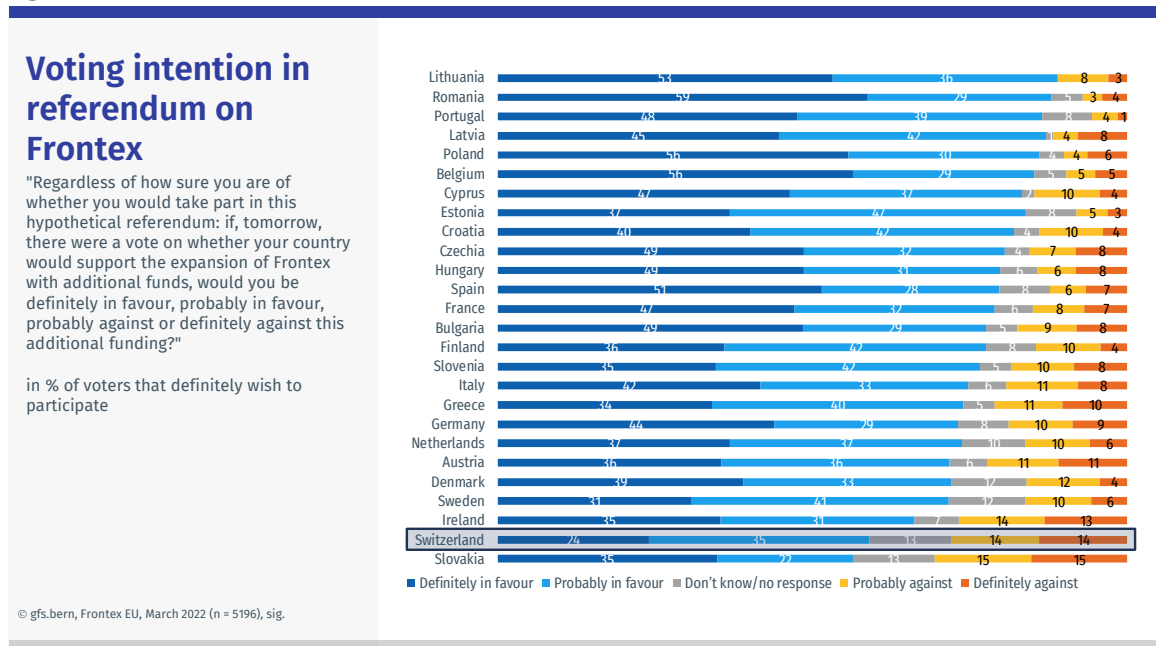


sometimes high participation rates in elections are not achieved in the case of referendums<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, from the outset, mobilising power for referendums functions on a scale familiar from Switzerland, even if the degree of mobilisation may vary greatly, depending on the situation and problem pressure.

We subsequently use this as a basis on which to examine the voting intentions expressed at the time of the survey. Experience has shown that these intentions are dynamic, especially in situations where a referendum campaign is ongoing, and change noticeably in the last ten weeks before a substantive decision is made at the ballot box. Provided that issues do not have a high level of problem pressure or everyday relevance for the population, in Switzerland, growing approval of the government’s position is often observed: voters have a tendency to sway towards the latter when an issue is not of great concern to them. Accordingly, it is not surprising, given the lack of problem pressure found, that at the same point in time as the European surveys, 63 per cent of all those willing to vote on the Frontex proposal were in favour, and a clear minority of 29 per cent was opposed. The share of approval was also confirmed at the time of a survey conducted around 20 days before voting day, with approval even increasing slightly, to 69 per cent, before the final spurt of the referendum campaign.

In comparison, 77 per cent of respondents from European countries are more or less in favour of a hypothetical proposal to expand Frontex.

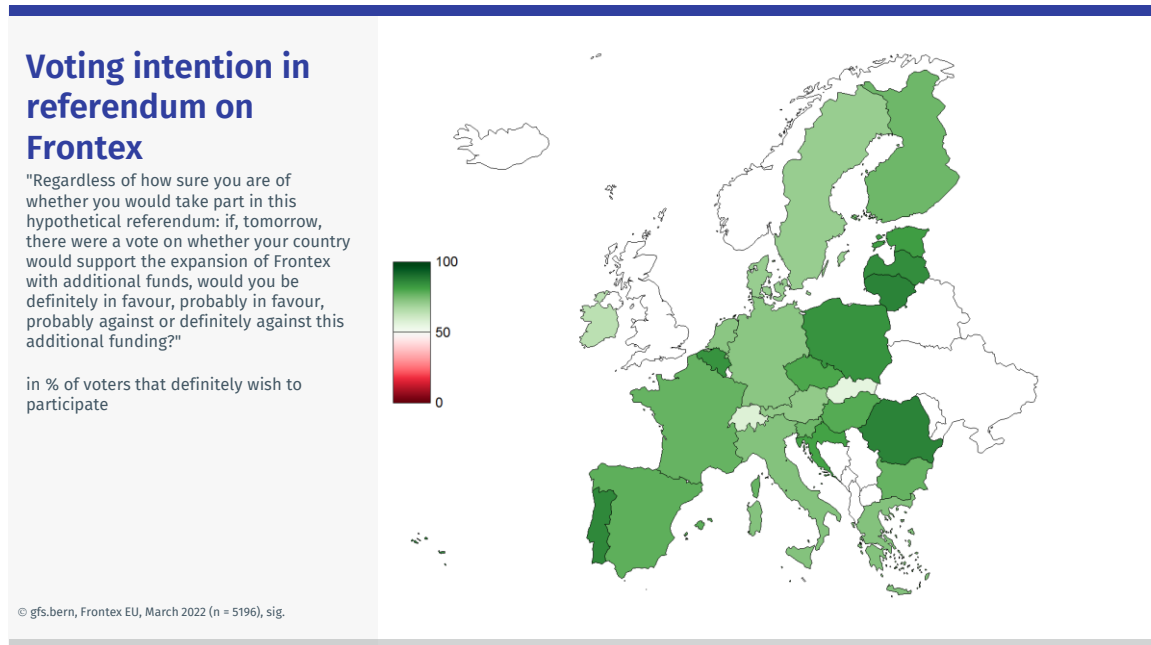
Figure 13



44 per cent are decidedly in favour (‘definitely in favour’), and another 33 per cent are in favour with some reservations (‘mostly in favour’).

<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the average voter participation in the European elections across all countries was 50.99 per cent.

Figure 14



This means that almost all countries have a higher level of approval than Switzerland for an expansion of Frontex. The highest shares of supporters are found in Lithuania, Romania, Portugal, Latvia and Poland, while the shares of supporters are lowest, albeit still fairly high, in Slovakia, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark and Austria. Overall, there is no minority agreement in any of the countries surveyed.

It is uncertain to what extent such significant approval figures will further increase during a campaign situation, equivalent to the situation in Switzerland. In Switzerland, we rarely find approval ratings higher than 80 per cent for proposals from public authorities. The constitutional basis for a war tax during the First World War in 1915 received the highest approval, being accepted by 94 per cent of all voters. The most recent strikingly high approval was in 2014, when a law on basic healthcare was passed with 88 per cent in favour. Of 296 proposals by public authorities since the founding of modern Switzerland in the 19th century, only 29 have achieved an approval rating of more than 80%, which suggests that the very high approval ratings measured in the European context are due not least to the strongly hypothetical nature and the resulting lack of critical public discussion among the population of such a substantive decision, and therefore that the approval rating in comparison with Switzerland is rather exaggerated. Nevertheless, the same rules of thumb from Switzerland can also be applied to the European context: we observe no problem pressure, little everyday relevance, a presumably rather average intention to participate and, on this basis, strong support for the position of the public authorities. In this setting, there is a great deal of evidence to indicate approval for such a political proposal, even in the European environment, if it were to be put to the ballot box.

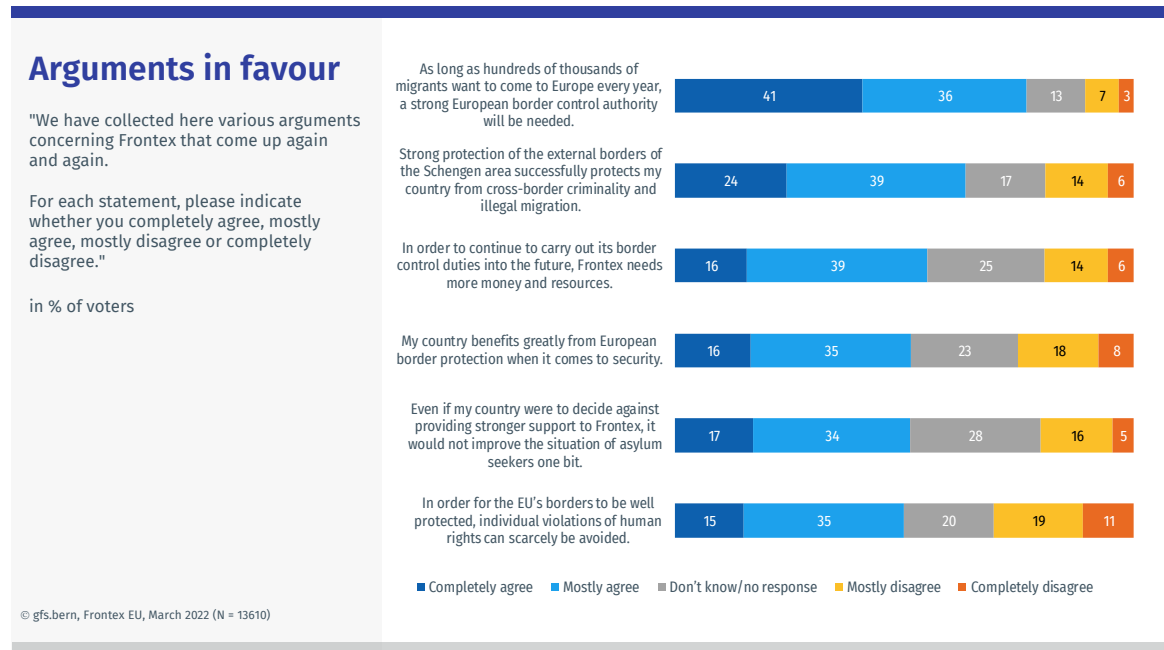
Both in Switzerland and in the European environment, political opinions on referendums continue to be formed until the moment the individual votes at the ballot box. All events and campaign elements can still have an influence during this time. For example, in Switzerland, shortly before the actual decision at the ballot box, there has

been even more discussion about whether a No to the Frontex proposal would lead to Switzerland losing its benefits under the Schengen Agreement. If the perception prevails that this is not the case, this may well reinforce a critical view.

### 2.3 Arguments

In order to understand how firm a currently expressed voting intention is, it is important to look at its substantiation based on the current argumentative discourse. Consequently, positive sentiment towards Frontex and its financial expansion can be found here as well. For every argument in favour of Frontex, there is an absolute majority across all EU countries that assesses this argument as mostly or completely applicable:

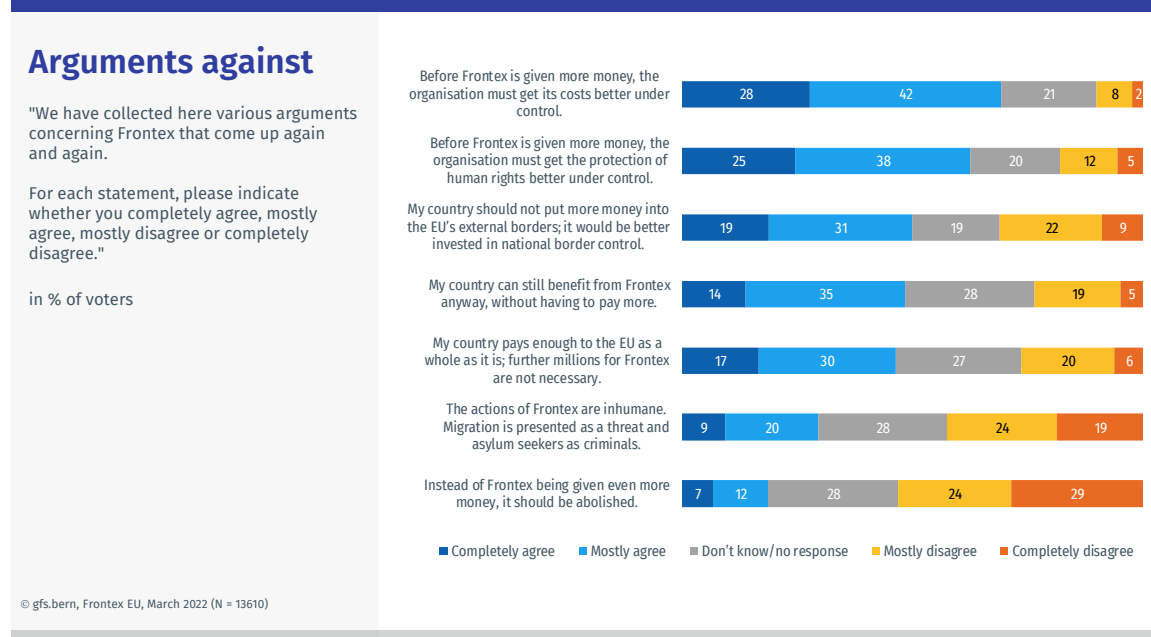
Figure 15



More than three quarters of the voters surveyed support the statement that a strong EU border protection agency is necessary as long as hundreds of thousands of migrants intend to enter Europe every year. In second place is the argument that Frontex protects against cross-border crime and illegal migration (63% mostly/fully agree). The argument that Frontex needs more money and resources was supported by 55 per cent of respondents. In each country, 51 per cent believe that their own country benefits greatly from EU border protection in terms of security and that the situation of asylum seekers will not improve if the respondent's own country does not participate more in Frontex. A relative majority is of the opinion that individual human rights violations can hardly be avoided when it comes to border protection (50%). These arguments and their approval ratings show that Frontex, its task and contribution, and its need for additional (financial) resources are indeed recognised. With regard to the human rights situation, it can be seen that half of the respondents think that human rights violations can hardly be avoided when securing the external border. This is in contrast to the third or so of respondents who mostly disagree with this argument or disagree with it completely.

The situation is different, however, on the opposite side of the argument. An absolute majority of respondents agrees with only two counterarguments:

Figure 16



The criticism shared by the majority relates primarily to cost control and that human rights protection must be improved. The expansion of Frontex does not simply enjoy unconditional support, therefore, and Frontex cannot freely decide on the amount and use of additional funds. Moreover, it is also emphasised that national border protection should not be neglected just because Frontex secures the external borders. This also shows that the abolition of Frontex and the criticism of border protection in terms of preventing migration do not enjoy (relative) majority support among the electorate.

What is remarkable here is that the current majority criticism of Frontex therefore has more to do with a discussion on costs, while ethical concerns are evidently less widely shared. This is also confirmed by a further multivariate analysis of the effect of the individual arguments on current voting intentions<sup>2</sup>: the most effective argument in favour across all EU countries is the statement that Frontex needs more money and resources for the future performance of its tasks (21 countries), while on the critical side, the view among respondents that their own country already pays enough and that further millions are therefore not necessary is the strongest driver for rejection (16 countries). In contrast, the ethical component is evidently less relevant for opinion formation currently: the statement that Frontex's actions are a disgrace to Europe's long-standing humanitarian tradition has a secondary impact on opinion in only four countries (Italy, Ireland, Germany and Belgium), although, even there, this aspect is secondary to the discussion on costs.

In addition to indications of the substantiation of hypothetical voting intentions, this statistical procedure can be used to extract a second finding: how strongly the arguments substantiate the current voting intention is shown by the R<sup>2</sup> value. The closer this value is to zero, the less a voting intention is substantiated. Experience has shown that the

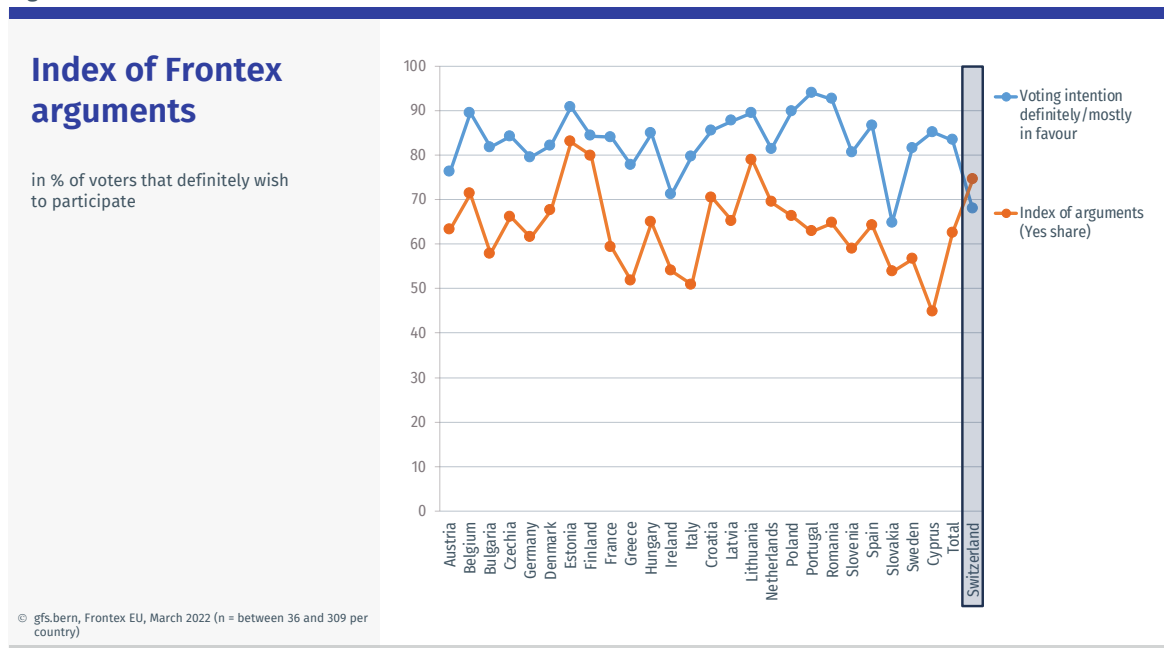
<sup>2</sup> Regression procedure with voting intention as dependent variable and arguments/statements as independent variables.

correlation between the assessment of arguments and voting intention is strong evidence of the extent to which the population assesses political proposals based on substantive content and not just on an affective gut feeling. This value thus also functions as a sign of the degree of maturity of a population to form opinions and make political decisions on the basis of political information.

The R<sup>2</sup> value in Switzerland at a comparable point in time was 0.6, which is a usual average for a political proposal in an early phase of opinion formation and increases even further in the course of a referendum campaign. This value is higher than the Swiss value in Italy and Austria, but lower in all other countries. This downward difference is undoubtedly partly due to the fact that in Switzerland, we have a public debate conditioned by the referendum, which is not the case in the other European countries where there is no such referendum. In Switzerland, too, we observe that the effect of arguments continues to visibly grow during the actual referendum campaign, and it is not uncommon for around 80 per cent of all voting intentions to be directly based on an evaluation of the arguments shortly before the vote. If we hypothetically assume that this head start that Switzerland enjoys already amounts to the same 20 per cent, any values above 0.4 would also seem to indicate a level of opinion formation that is similarly well-founded to that in Switzerland. With the exception of Slovakia, Croatia, Portugal, Cyprus, Lithuania and Romania, this applies to all EU countries. Apparently, the population in the EU is, indeed, just as able as the Swiss population to condense political positions into a political decision.

However, further statistical modelling shows that the argumentative aspect of approval does not go as far as the currently expressed voting intention. For this comparison, we have formed an index for or against the proposal on the basis of the arguments and compared this index with the currently expressed voting intentions:

Figure 17



We find that there is potential for a decrease in approval in all countries: in their arguments, sympathisers are visibly less strongly in favour of the proposal than they are currently expressing in their voting intentions. Experience has shown that such a discrepancy is a sign that the currently expressed voting intention is still founded on an appreciable element of gut feeling and spontaneous opinion. This decreases during an actual referendum campaign as substantive discussion of the proposal increases and thus erodes the voting intention. Significantly, the two lines in Switzerland are usually much closer together at the beginning of a referendum, which provides an indication that voters in Switzerland deal with political issues in a noticeably more substantive manner from the outset. It can be assumed that this is related to a generally heightened awareness of political issues when the electorate knows that it will be voting on them.

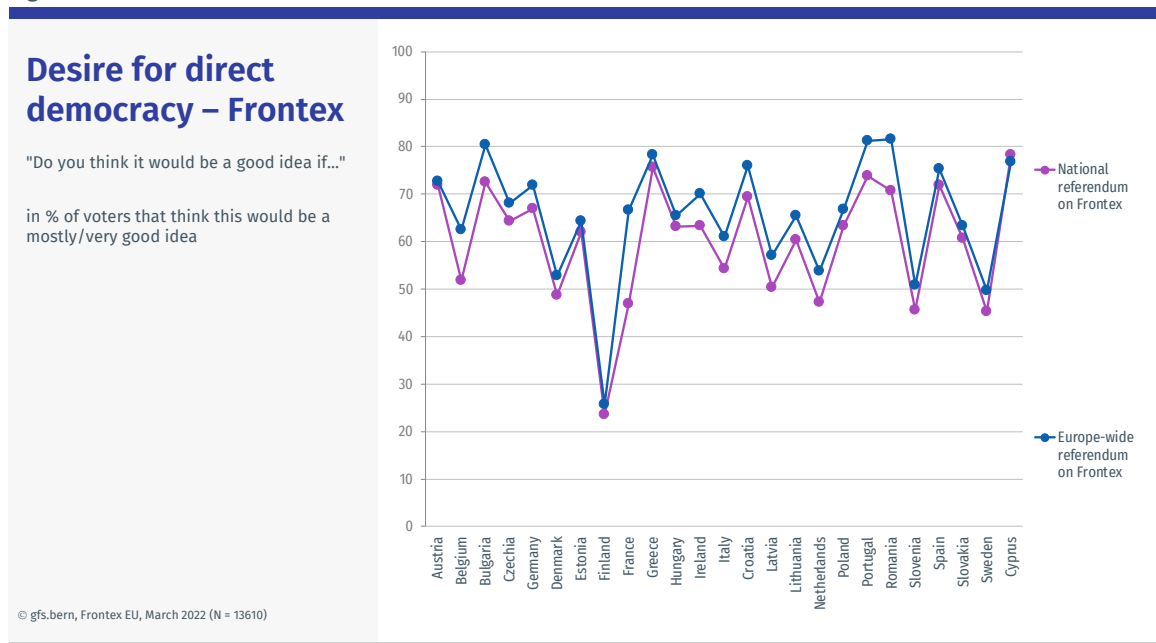
A comparison with the same index from the SRG pre-analysis is particularly exciting: the difference between the argument index and expressed voting intention is greater in the EU than in Switzerland, where the two lines are almost congruent.

In terms of a possible development of voting intention in the EU area, this means that if the views of the side that is opposed to Frontex were to be communicated in an ideal manner, approval in Greece and Italy could drop to the 50 per cent mark and, in Cyprus, even fall below this threshold.

## 2.4 Desire for democracy

In almost three quarters of the countries surveyed, there is an absolute majority that tends to find a **NATIONAL FRONTEx REFERENDUM** a good idea:

Figure 18

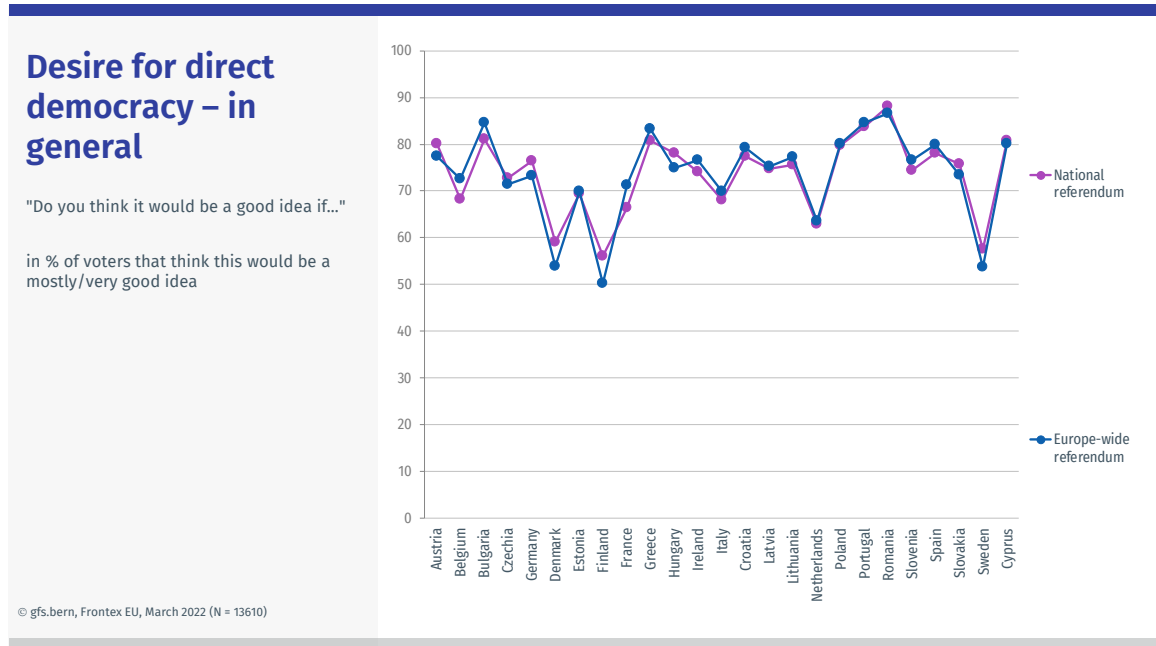


Relative majorities for this idea can be found in Denmark, France, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Sweden. In Finland, there is even a relative majority of 45 per cent of the voters surveyed that considers this a mostly or even very bad idea. Across all EU countries, 60 per cent of respondents think it is a good idea.

The idea of a **EUROPE-WIDE FRONTEX REFERENDUM** is supported by an absolute majority in almost all countries. In Sweden, this plan is perceived as a good idea by a relative majority. In Finland, again, a relative majority of voters thinks it is a bad idea (43% mostly/very bad). At the EU level, 66 per cent of respondents think it is a good idea.

When it comes to the desire for **GENERAL REFERENDUMS IN ONE’S OWN COUNTRY**, an absolute majority in all EU countries considers this a good idea:

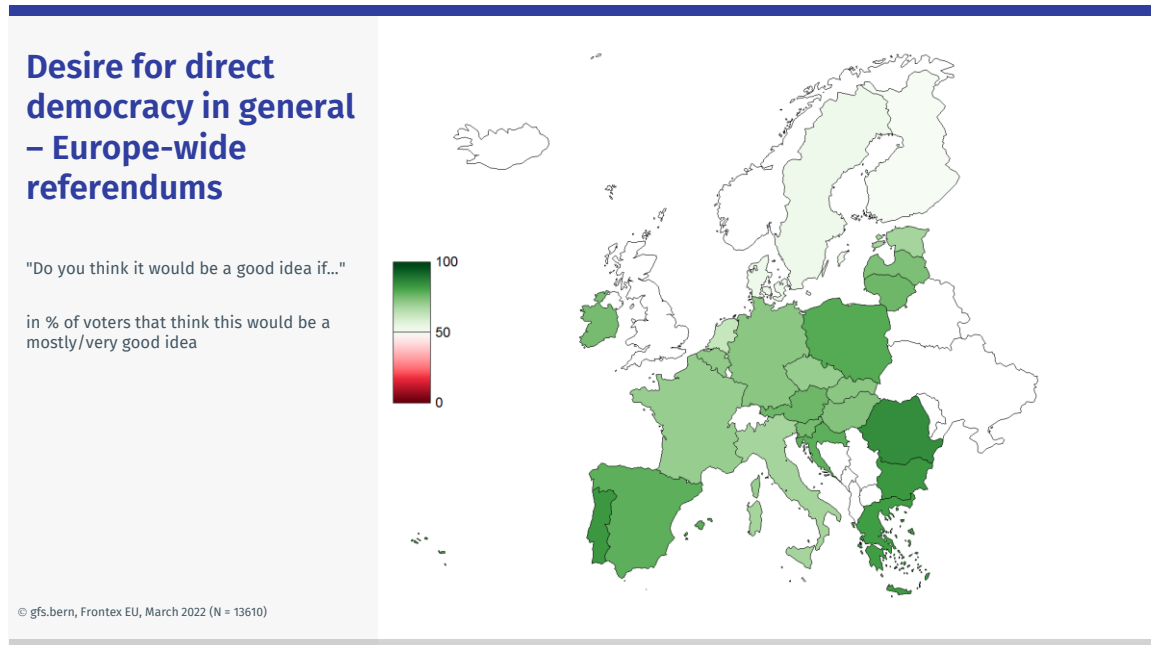
Figure 19



Agreement ranges from 88 per cent (Romania) to 56 per cent (Finland). It is striking that the idea of national referendums rates comparatively lowest in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) (less than 60% mostly/very good idea). At the EU level, 73 per cent of respondents consider it a good idea.



Figure 20



When it comes to **EUROPE-WIDE REFERENDUMS**, 73 per cent of voters across the EU also think they are a good idea. These EU referendums are very popular in the same countries (share of mostly/very good idea 80% or higher) that view national referendums positively: Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Cyprus. Similarly, approval is lowest in Denmark, Finland and Sweden compared to the other countries (between 50% and 54% mostly/very good idea).

Comparing general and Frontex-specific desires for democracy, it is evident that the desire for a referendum on Frontex is less intense than the desire to vote in referendums in general. This demonstrates one last time that Frontex is not really seen as a problem and that voters are comfortable with maintaining the solution that has existed up to now.

Finally, if we compare this desired outcome with the previously ascertained decision-making maturity using the example of a Frontex referendum, we can gain an initial impression of the degree of maturity of voters in the EU countries surveyed when deciding on a political issue. To do so, we create an index from the degree to which the currently expressed voting intention is justified by substantive arguments and the deviation between the argumentatively calculated approval and the expressed approval. With this index, a person who justifies 100 per cent of their own voting intention with arguments and achieves exactly the same level of approval as was actually expressed would have an index value of 100. The opposite of this person would have an index value of -100. To calibrate these findings, we use the index values from Switzerland. The latter account for 53 index points in an early phase of political opinion formation, increasing to 69 index points in the midst of the main campaign phase. Thus, even in Switzerland, where a high degree of maturity is to be expected in political decision-making processes among voters, the maximum value of 100 index points is not reached.



Table 1

Country	Index Decision-making maturity Index value between 100 (maximum degree of maturity) and -100	Desire for general EU referendums (in % mostly/very good idea)
Switzerland	March survey: 53.0 May survey: 69.0	-
Austria	51.0	77%
Finland	48.6	50%
Estonia	44.2	70%
Italy	34.2	70%
Germany	34.1	73%
Denmark	32.5	54%
Czechia	31.9	71%
Ireland	31.8	77%
Netherlands	31	64%
Sweden	30.1	54%
Hungary	30.1	75%
Slovakia	30.0	73%
Bulgaria	29.1	85%
Slovenia	27.3	77%
Poland	26.5	80%
Greece	25.4	83%
Belgium	23.9	73%
Lithuania	23.4	77%
Croatia	23.0	79%
Spain	22.6	80%
France	22.4	71%
Latvia	21.5	75%

<b>Romania</b>	6.2	87%
<b>Portugal</b>	4.8	85%
<b>Cyprus</b>	-5.3	80%

In direct comparison with Switzerland, the degree of maturity is lower in all European countries observed. In 12 countries, it is more than 30, in a further 10 countries more than 20, while in Romania, Portugal and Cyprus, it is in single digits.

The fact that Switzerland ranks first is not surprising, given the country's more than one-hundred-year tradition of opinion formation processes in the context of referendums, and makes Switzerland an ideal benchmark for the ability of the electorate to form a robust political opinion.

In fact, the most comparable benchmark is the Austrian electorate: it translates arguments into voting intentions to a similar extent as Switzerland and is only marginally less congruent in doing so.

Part of the difference can undoubtedly be explained by the fact that no referendum on Frontex is pending for the EU population, so the media have been reporting on it less. Overall, however, it seems reasonable to assume that political attention and thus the handling of political information is structurally weaker in a society if that society is not regularly involved in referendums. The will, at least, to be more involved in such decisions is found in all the countries studied, even in Cyprus, which comes last in terms of maturity. And a look at the increase in the degree of maturity in Switzerland during a campaign reveals that a population learns during votes and can thus develop a routine through regular ones, as can be observed in Switzerland.

### 3 Summary

We summarise the findings of this comparative EU study in the form of the following theses:



In all EU countries surveyed, an absolute majority of voters has a positive opinion of the European Union. Opinion of the EU is most positive in Estonia, Portugal, Lithuania, Romania and Ireland. This shows that the positive impression of the EU is present among both long-established and newer members. By comparison, opinion of the EU is most negative in Czechia, the Netherlands, Greece, Slovakia and France. But even in these countries, positive attitudes towards the European Union prevail. In the case of proposals by public authorities, goodwill towards the political system is an important condition for success at the ballot box.



With one exception (Cyprus), the majority of voters from all EU countries feels generally safe. National and European protection services, especially those relating to European border protection, contribute to this feeling. Thus, European border protection fulfils its generally formulated basic task, which means that the population perceives no problem pressure at this level; those who wish to implement reforms, therefore, need to explain why. From the point of view of EU voters, the status quo regarding Frontex is satisfactory and there is no major problem pressure. Therefore, an intention to implement reforms needs to be justified from the outset, since it must be explained why the reform is desired despite broad-based satisfaction and how such reform would not endanger current satisfaction. Experience has shown that, without such explanation, the reform project will be rejected at the ballot box.



As a consequence of low problem pressure, attention to Frontex is not very pronounced. With the exception of Greece, only a minority is aware of Frontex in terms of content, and only minorities are aware of the current criticism. Satisfaction with Frontex is therefore essentially general and not intensively reflected upon. In terms of content, this sympathy is based on the idea that Frontex enhances national police and border protection work and prevents Europe from being confronted with unmanageable refugee flows. These elements are visibly weighted more heavily than the idea that Frontex makes Europe responsible for deaths in the Mediterranean and is a disgrace to the European humanitarian tradition. This comparatively low awareness, the majority positive attitude towards Frontex, and the lack of knowledge of the criticisms voiced reinforce the impression of low problem pressure, both at the EU and the

national level. If no problem pressure is apparent to voters, experience shows that they will not actively inform themselves about alternative solutions.



Approval of the arguments asked about in the survey indicates that the majority of voters in the EU countries recognises Frontex's task and contribution and want to provide the necessary resources. The majority of criticism relates mainly to (lack of) cost control and only marginally to ethical concerns. From a majority point of view, additional Frontex funds should be used for border protection and not for improving the human rights situation. However, this in no way means that Frontex should get a free pass and decide for itself on the amount and use of additional resources. Counterarguments expressed by the majority were that Frontex must get a grip on costs and improve the protection of human rights. Furthermore, secure access to a proper asylum procedure should be made possible. In the event of a vote on Frontex expansion, an absolute majority of voters would participate in every EU country surveyed. Voter participation at the EU level is slightly below the Swiss average. On the other hand, at the EU level, in almost all countries, voting intention in favour of expansion is above that measured for Switzerland during the same period. Currently, EU voters are more commonly in favour of Frontex expansion than would be expected based on their argumentative position. Therefore, erosion of the intention to vote is to be expected, although even with a decrease, there would still be enough Yes votes for the referendum to pass. This discrepancy also indicates that opinion formation is less consolidated than we might normally observe in Switzerland at this point in time.



Voting decisions and thus also opinion formation among EU voters is based more on argumentative considerations than on a pure gut decision. Compared with Switzerland, however, the measurable influence of arguments on voting decisions and thus their substantiation is smaller in almost all EU countries. The more than one-hundred-year tradition of political opinion formation in Switzerland thus has an appreciable effect on how arguments and messages are used to form a resilient political opinion and intention to vote. Nevertheless, the population in the EU is by no means starting from scratch: voters in the EU are quite capable of forming their voting decisions on the basis of arguments and expressing them in the form of relatively stringent voting intentions. Moreover, in the EU, it is also evident that a desire to decide, which would include participating in a referendum, does exist.



All the EU countries surveyed are in favour of national and European referendums on political decisions. Whether a specific referendum on Frontex is a wise idea has slightly less support than the prospect of referendums in general. In Finland, there is even clearly insufficient support.

## 4 Annex

Luzius Meisser, Meisser Economics, in cooperation with Stiftung für direkte Demokratie (Swiss Foundation for Direct Democracy), commissioned the research institute gfs.bern to conduct a comparative EU study on the current Frontex referendum in Switzerland.

The results of the comparative EU study on Frontex are based on a representative survey of 13,610 voters in 25 EU countries. The survey was conducted between 7 March and 17 March 2022 via an online survey.

Information on the methodological details of the survey can be found in the table below:

Table 2: Methodological details

<b>Client</b>	Meisser Economics
<b>Population</b>	Voters in 25 EU countries
<b>Data collection</b>	Online survey with panel provider Bilendi
<b>Sample size</b>	Total respondents N = 13,610 in 25 countries n per country = between 218 and 1,015
<b>Type of sampling</b>	Self-selection of participants
<b>Weighting</b>	Age*gender and party choice for European Parliament
<b>Sampling errors</b>	±0.83% with 50/50 and 95% probability
<b>Survey period</b>	from 7 March 2022 to 17 March 2022
<b>Publication</b>	15 May 2022

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In sampling, two factors play a decisive role in determining the quality of the statements later obtained: the probability of error on the one hand and the sampling error (error size) of a statistical statement on the other. With regard to the first point, survey research usually relies on a safety margin of 95 per cent. This means that we accept a 5 per cent probability of error that the true value of a variable in the total population does not lie within the range of the reported value of the sample ± its sampling error. On the other hand, statistical statements are subject to this sampling error, which depends on the size of the sample and the basic distribution of the variable in the population, whereby the larger the sample, the smaller the error.

The statistical error in the sample size for the groups surveyed is:

Table 3: Sampling errors

Selected statistical sampling errors by sample size and basic distribution		
Sample size	Basic distribution error rate	
	50% at 50%	20% at 80%
N = 1,000	±3.2 percentage points	±2.5 percentage points
N = 600	±4.1 percentage points	±3.3 percentage points
N = 100	±10.0 percentage points	±8.1 percentage points
N = 50	±14.0 percentage points	±11.5 percentage points

Example: With around 1,000 respondents and a reported value of 50%, the effective value is between 50% ±3.2 percentage points, with a baseline value of 20% between 20% ±2.5 percentage points. In survey research, a 95% confidence level is usually defined, i.e. we accept a 5% probability of error that the proven statistical correlation does not exist in the population.

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Especially in subgroup analysis, the group sampled quickly demonstrates fewer than 50 respondents, which makes adequate interpretation nearly impossible with a sampling error of ±14 percentage points. Therefore, we do not carry out subgroup analysis with fewer than 50 cases.

The other element of high-quality analysis is guaranteeing representativeness. Representativeness means nothing other than that every person in the population must have the exact same chance of being able to participate in the survey. If any groups are systematically excluded during sampling, the survey is not representative.

To correct for socio-demographic bias, we have weighted based on age, gender and party choice in the European Parliament elections.

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