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Hell, or Heaven –

“The crisis in the country is so severe that it’s hard to believe”

The quote in the title above may seem exaggerated and sensationalist, but it rather accurately reflects the reality. (Among other things, the following news inspired the title of our article.) That is, if by ‘reality’ we mean the image of Sweden that has been shaped in recent years by parts of the domestic media and political discourse. In our research, we examine to what extent this narrative holds up when we explore what we know about the state of Swedish society using data and perceptions collected according to scientific criteria and compare this to what we see when juxtaposed with Hungary. This article summarizes the first results of a research project that has just begun.

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of news stories about Sweden in the Hungarian media and strong views in political communication. As a result, there are often contradictory opinions about the functioning of Swedish society in the public discourse. Although the recent easing of the strained political relationship between the two countries (ratification of Sweden's NATO membership) is expected to have reduced the increased media and political interest in Swedish society (however, this is certainly not the end of the story, since then the Swedish Ambassador has been called to the Hungarian Foreign Minister several times). It is assumed that the divergent opinions and evaluations of Swedish society and the strong feelings that arise from the clash of these opinions and evaluations will persist.

The most widely read online media outlets (more than 50 in total) have been analyzed from the past five years to explore the image of Sweden in the Hungarian media. It is not possible to present the analysis in detail and in its entirety in this paper, but a summary of the results shows that most of the articles on Sweden are clustered around a few themes. These are:

- migration and its consequences
- LGBTQ/gender issues
- the state of democracy
- the issue of Sweden joining the NATO
- the Covid situation and how to deal with it
- economic crisis: energy crisis, inflation

Of course, these topics are often not sharply separable from one another, and many of them appear simultaneously in most articles. Generally, it can be observed that the content of the various news sites tends to blur together, with the topics covered during

the same period being identical. As a result, there are frequent cross-references, meaning that the media all revolve around the same topics, though from different perspectives. Regardless of the specific media platforms, the topics remain the same, but their approaches are distinctly different, shaping unique narratives accordingly.

Looking at the overall media representation, it seems as if there are two Sweden. One Sweden is depicted as a country in apocalyptic decline, a practically uninhabitable place where migrants are partly to blame, along with the 'natives' burdened by unlivable, self-destructive ideologies who are incapable of self-defense. By contrast, Hungary appears as a thriving and far more pleasant place in every way. The 'other' portrayal of Sweden in the media is undeniably more complex, but its primary aim is to refute the negative narrative of Sweden, mostly by addressing the issues raised within that discourse. However, independent topic-setting or narrative-building about Sweden cannot be identified from this perspective.

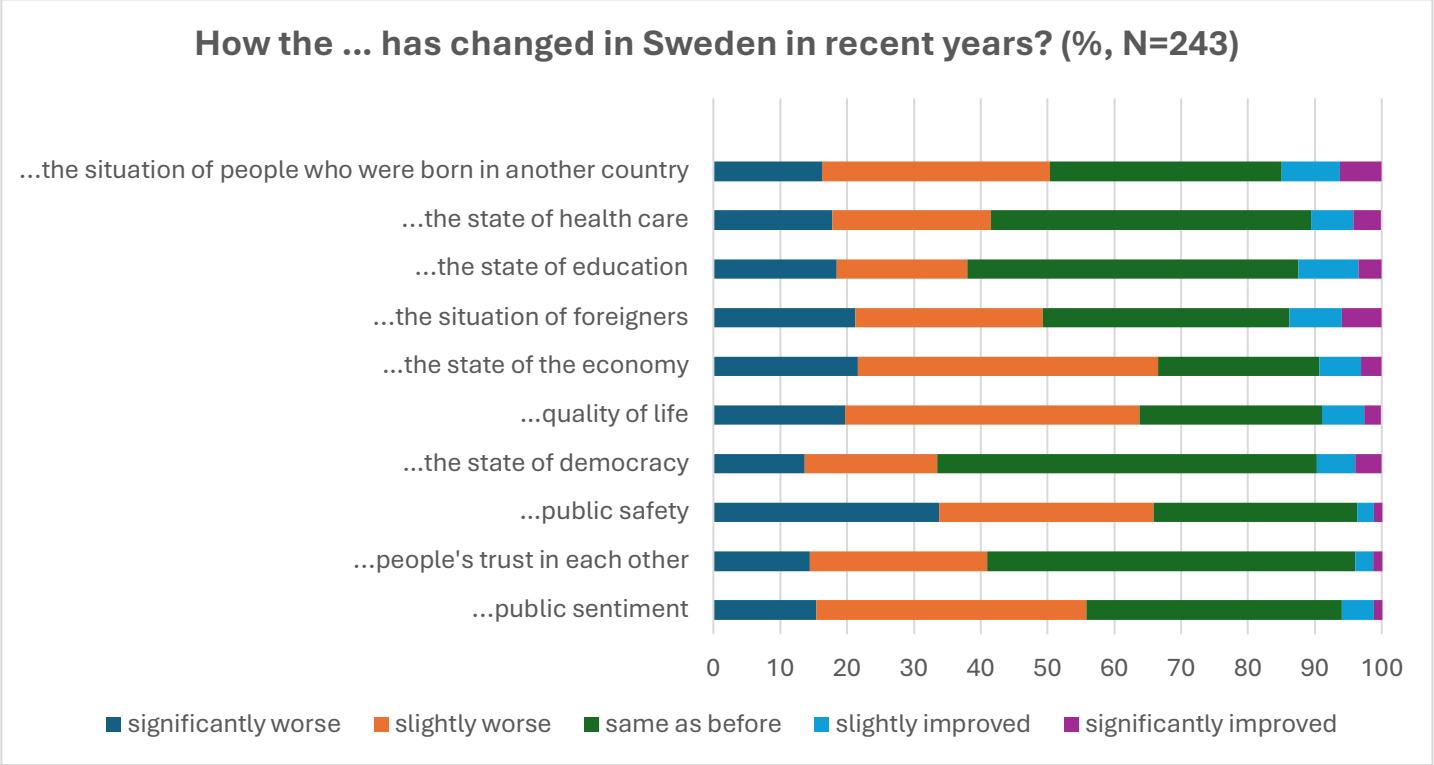
These leads to a valid question: what do Hungarians living in Sweden, who have firsthand experience with life there and how Swedish society functions, think about all of this? We conducted a brief online survey among them, asking for their opinions in relation to the themes that have emerged in the Hungarian media, as presented above.

Sweden is home to a significant number of Hungarians, not only from Hungary, but also cross-border Hungarians (for example from Transylvania). The first wave of mass emigration from Hungary was the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, after the fall of which Sweden took in a significant number of refugees. But since then, many Hungarians have continued to settle in the Nordic state. There are several estimates of the number of Hungarians living outside the country, with the Hungarian Embassy in Stockholm estimating that the number of Hungarians living there could be as high as 35,000.

Obviously, it would be very difficult to carry out a traditional poll from this elusive population, which would be adequate in all respects. Therefore, we decided to conduct a survey by placing our questionnaire in the online space where Hungarians in Sweden are likely to be present (Facebook groups of Hungarians in Sweden, Instagram pages, YouTube channels dedicated to life there). A total of 243 people completed the questionnaire between 1 February and 4 March 2022. The methodology of the survey does not allow us to generalize the results to all Hungarians living in Sweden, but it can give us a rough idea of the respondents' perception of the problem.

Our results show (figure 1) that a large majority of respondents with personal experience of life in Sweden believe that the situation has indeed deteriorated in the areas we surveyed. This is mostly true for the state of the economy, public safety, public sentiment, quality of life and the situation of people who were born in another country where most

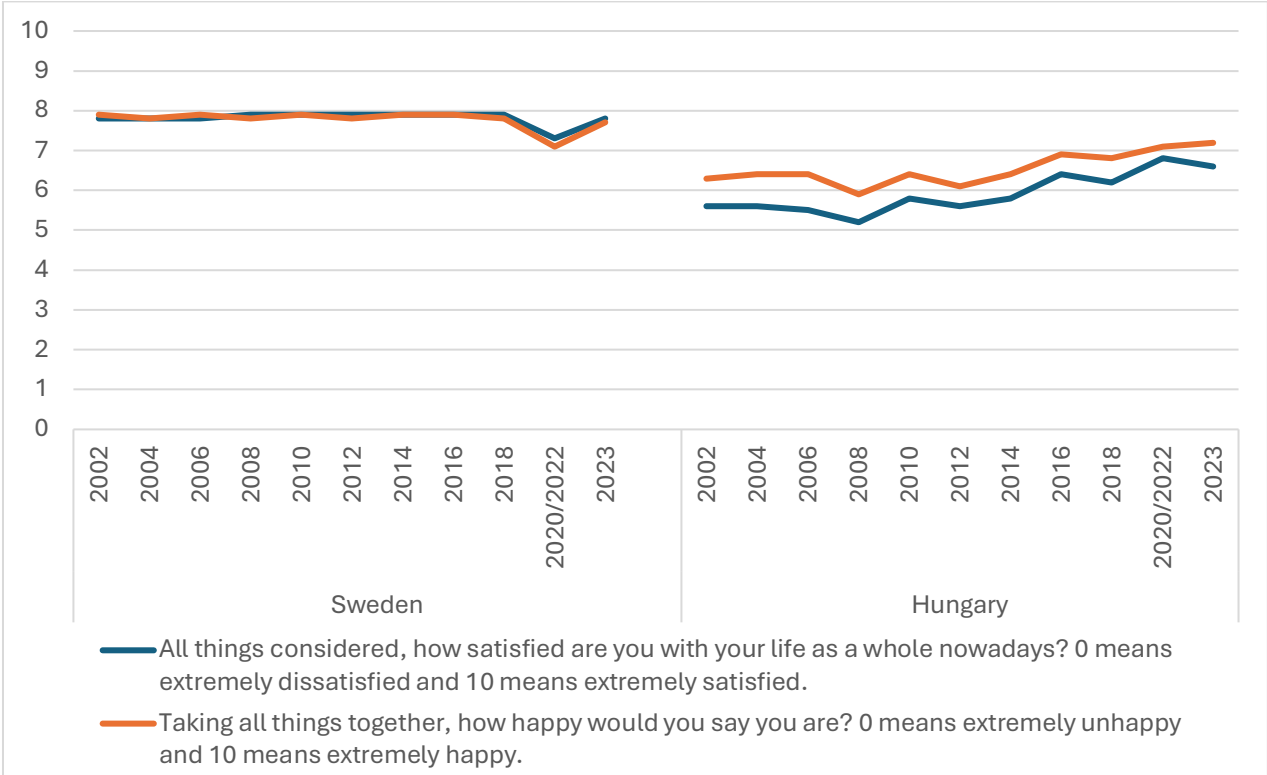
respondents (50.4% - 66.7%) gave a negative answer ('significantly worse' or 'slightly worse'). However, there is also a significant proportion who think that there has been no change, and only a small proportion of respondents think that there has been more of an improvement. However, in terms of people's trust in each other, the state of democracy, the state of health care, the state of education and the situation of foreigners there is a minority of respondents who think that the situation has deteriorated (34.5% - 49,3%). Overall, we can see that the Hungarians in Sweden who completed our questionnaire are divided in their perception of the situation in the country.



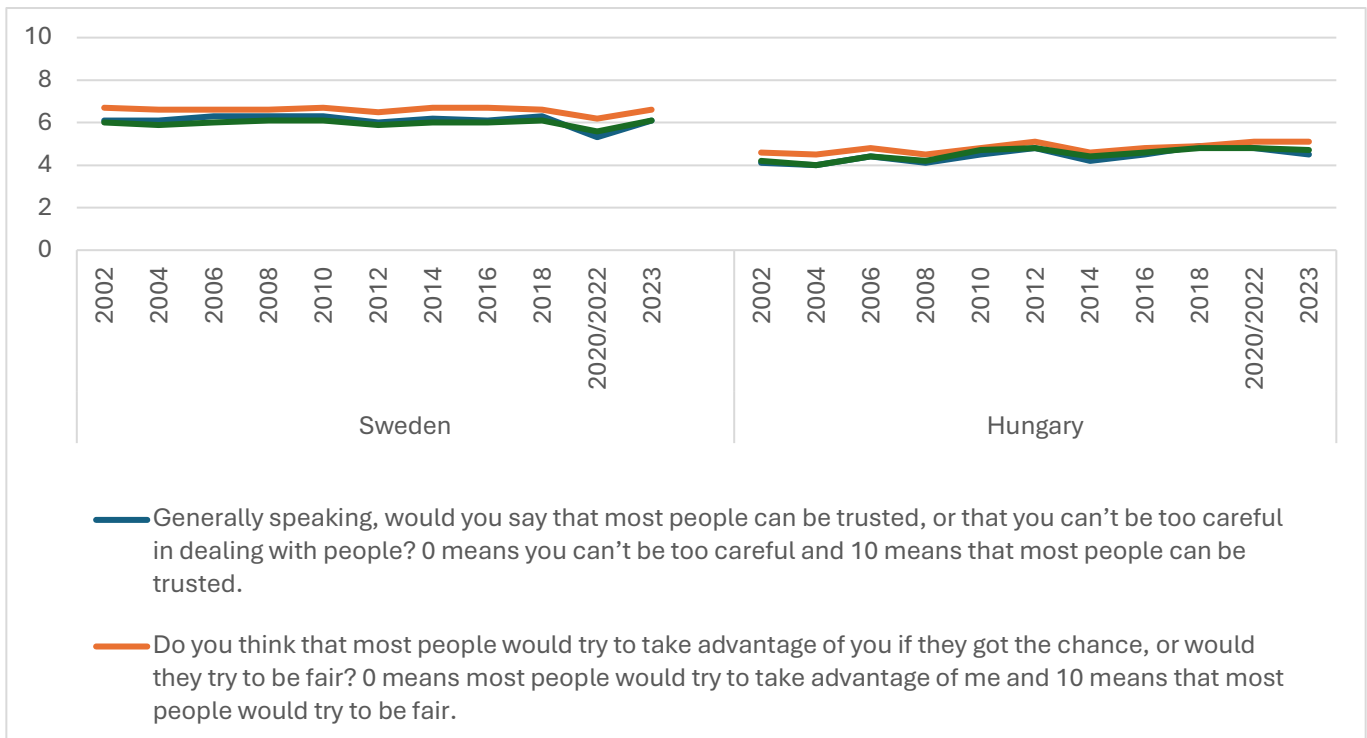
Finally, based on a large-scale, complex international research series that has been conducted every two years for over 20 years (the data from the European Social Survey), we will review the most important characteristics of Swedish society in relation to our topic. In other words, we will explore what Swedes think and how they relate to issues of social cohesion, democracy, and the economic situation. The international nature of the database also allows us to draw a comparative picture of Hungarian society on these same topics, so in the following, we will compare Swedish and Hungarian data.

First, we will look at the ‘subjective well-being’ of people in Sweden and Hungary, that is, essentially how they feel about their lives. In the European Social Survey (ESS), this is examined through two questions: *"How satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?"* and *"Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?"*. Based on the average values calculated for each country (as shown in Figure 2), it can be said that subjective well-being is higher and more stable in Sweden than it is in Hungary. However,

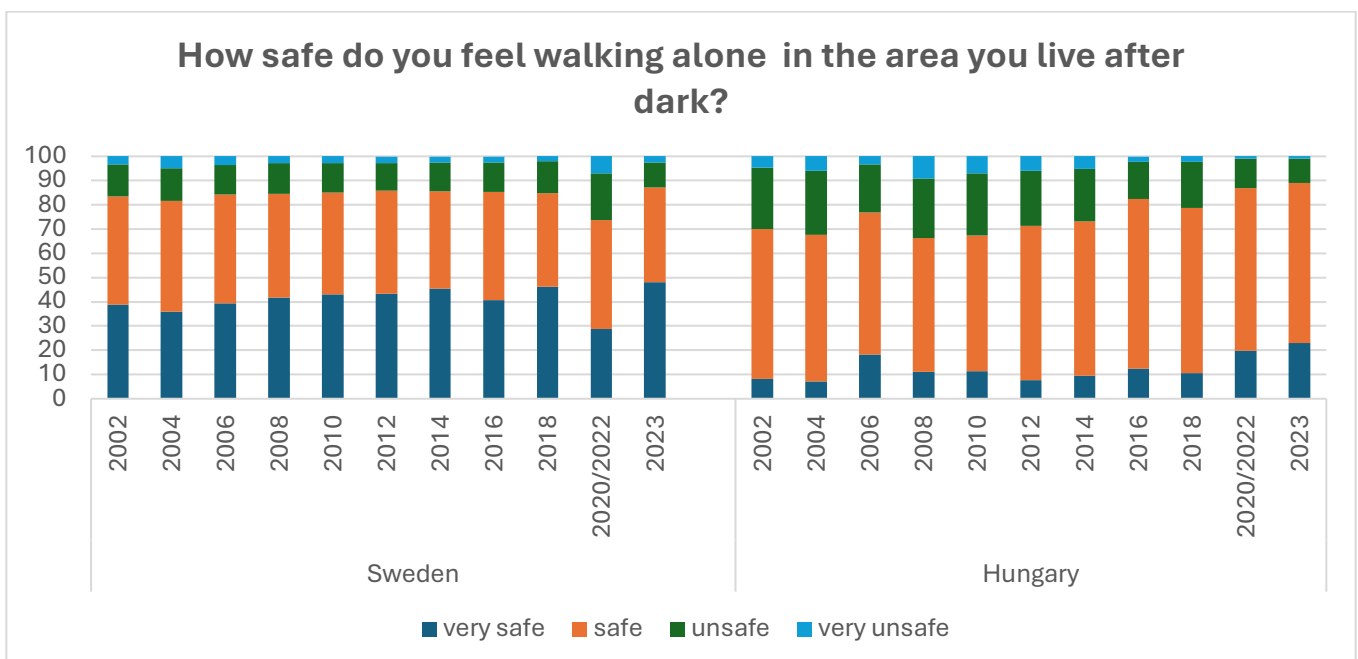
it should also be noted that Hungarian data has shown continuous improvement over the past ten years (according to the latest data, seems to be appears to be in decline.). In contrast, in Sweden, the survey from 2020/2022 indicated a decrease in the previously nearly constant level of subjective well-being, but it remains higher (‘satisfaction’) or the same (‘happiness’) compared to the Hungarian results, but in Sweden the most recent survey (2023) is back to old levels. It is important to mention here that due to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020/2022), the ESS was unable to conduct face-to-face data collection in some countries, including Sweden, in the usual manner, and therefore they caution that conclusions from these data should be drawn more carefully.



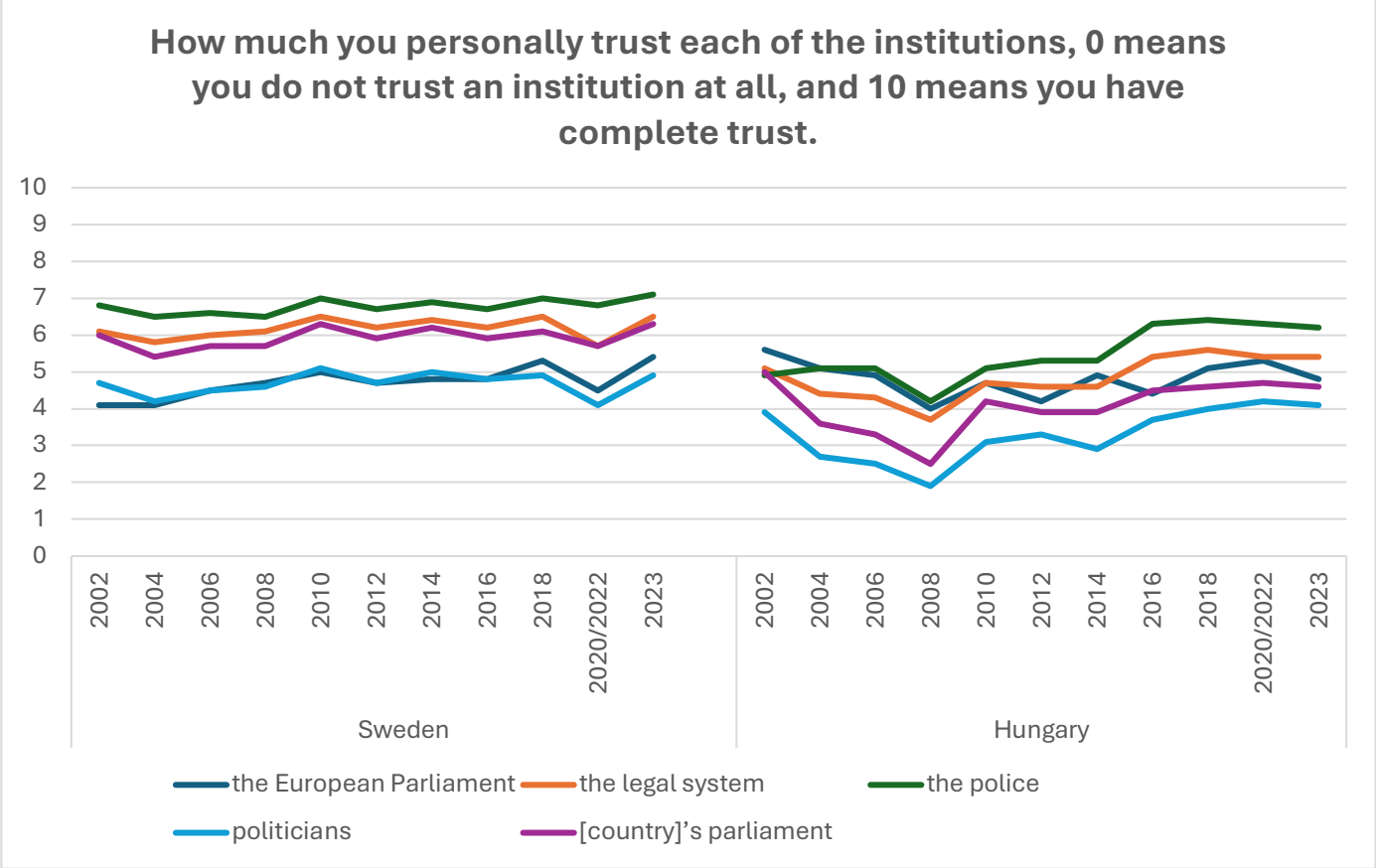
Secondly, we examine what the data on interpersonal trust (so-called generalized trust) show for the two countries and whether it is true that social cohesion in Sweden has weakened in recent years. The ESS measures this phenomenon with three survey questions, which are shown in Figure 3. The data indicate that the average level of interpersonal trust is consistently higher in Sweden than in Hungary. However, in Sweden, we can also observe a decline during the period in 2020/2022, though even with this decrease, Sweden maintains its advantage and shows rising again in 2023. In Hungary, trust levels fluctuate more significantly, but recent data suggests an overall improvement.



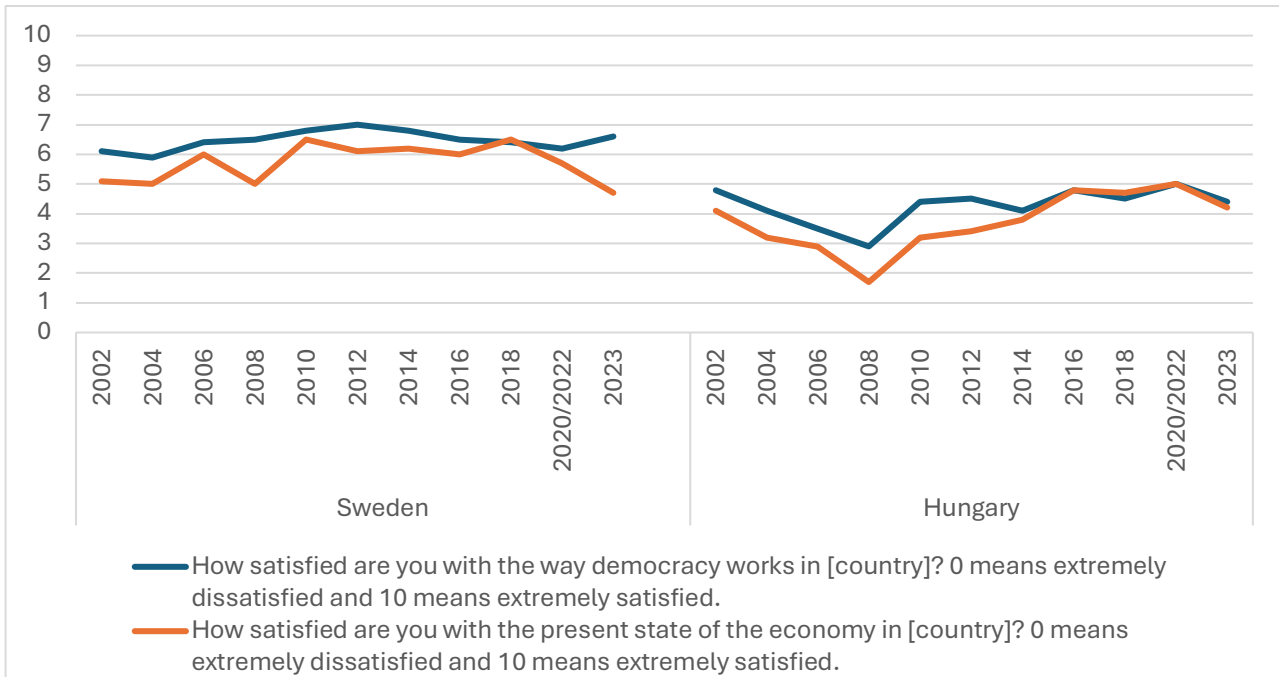
A much more concrete question, though still related to social cohesion, is how safe people feel in their neighborhoods. According to the data shown in Figure 4, a significantly larger proportion of Swedes believe that their neighborhood is "very safe", even after dark, compared to Hungarians, who chose this category much less frequently. However, most Hungarians also generally consider their neighborhood to be safe ("safe"). Additionally, except for the survey conducted during the COVID period, the proportion of people who feel that their neighborhood is unsafe ("unsafe" or "very unsafe") has consistently been lower in Sweden than in Hungary.



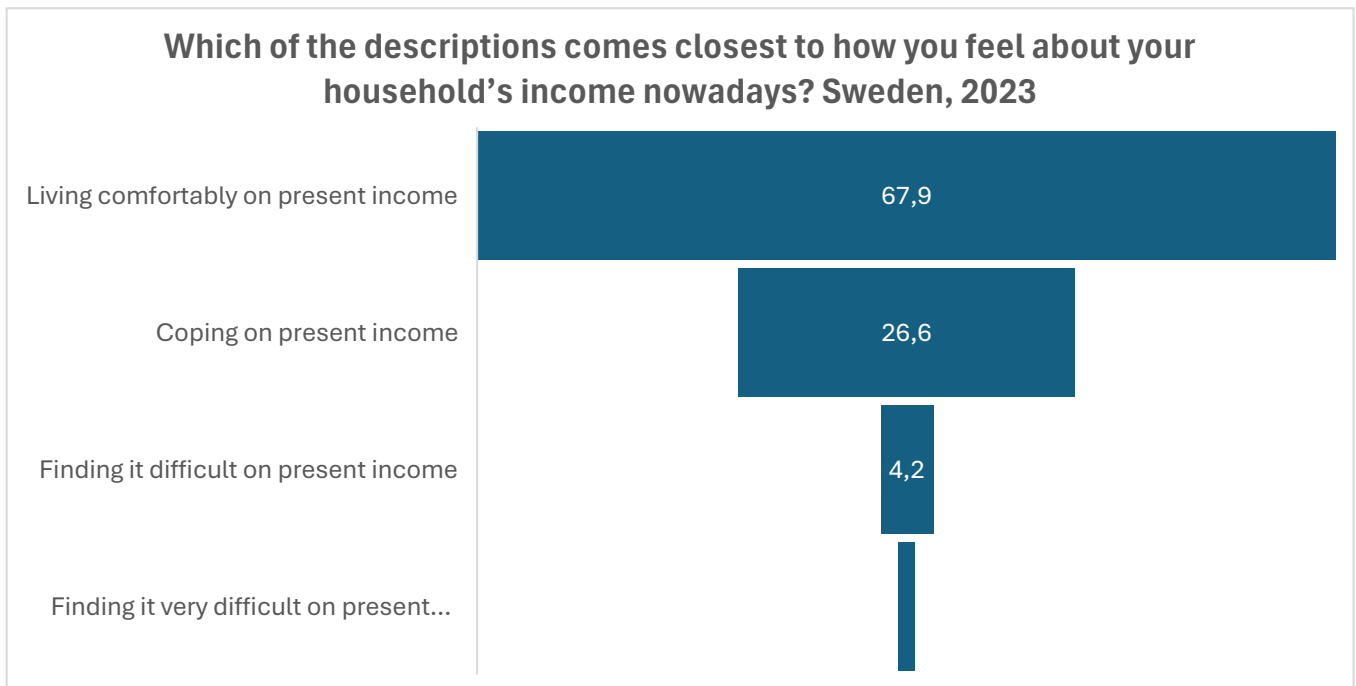
The institutional trust also reflects the state of a society. Here, we see a similar pattern to interpersonal trust: Swedish data shows higher values and is more stable over time compared to Hungary (Figure 5). However, it is evident that trust in institutions has improved in Hungary since the 2000s. In Sweden, we can see a decline, like the trends in the previous indicators, during the pandemic, but the situation has now recovered, with Sweden showing higher trust in all the institutions examined.



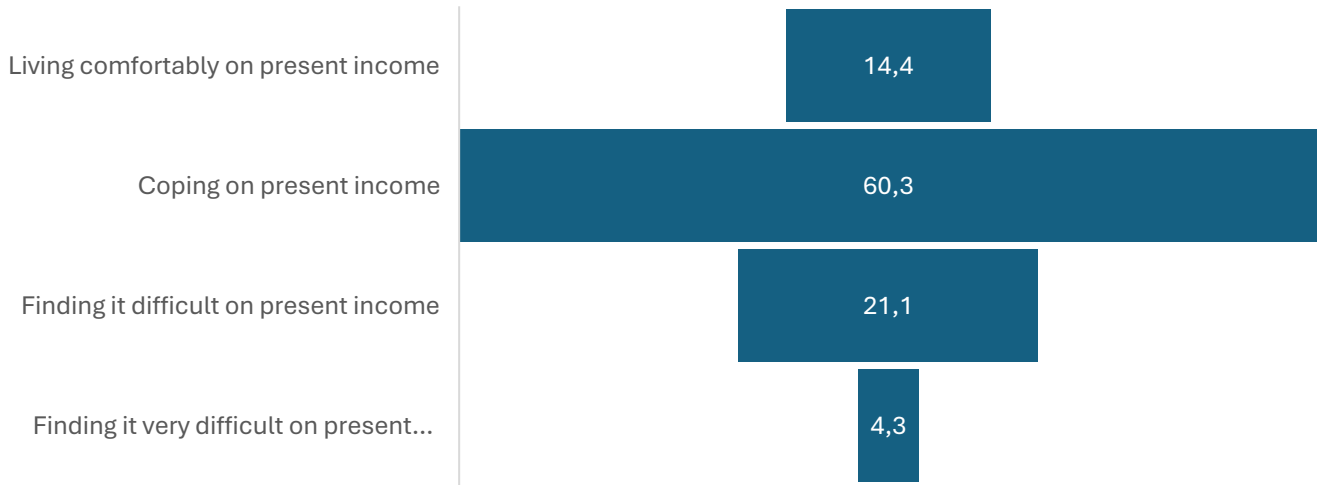
Closely related to the previous points is the topic of satisfaction with major social systems. Here, we focus on two questions: one concerning satisfaction with the functioning of democracy and the other regarding opinions on the state of the economy (Figure 6). In both cases, we can observe that people in Sweden are significantly more satisfied with these aspects than those in Hungary.



The topic of how people experience their individual financial situation also falls under the broader question of the state of the economy (Figure 7). For clarity, we present only the results of the most recent survey from 2023. These results show a significantly different pattern between the two societies: in Sweden, a majority of respondents (67,9%) reported that they live comfortably on their income, whereas in Hungary, this is true slightly over one in ten respondents (14,4%). Additionally, in Hungary, a quarter of respondents (25,4%) reported financial difficulties ("we live with difficulty..." or "we live with great difficulty..."), while in Sweden, this proportion is much lower (5,5%).

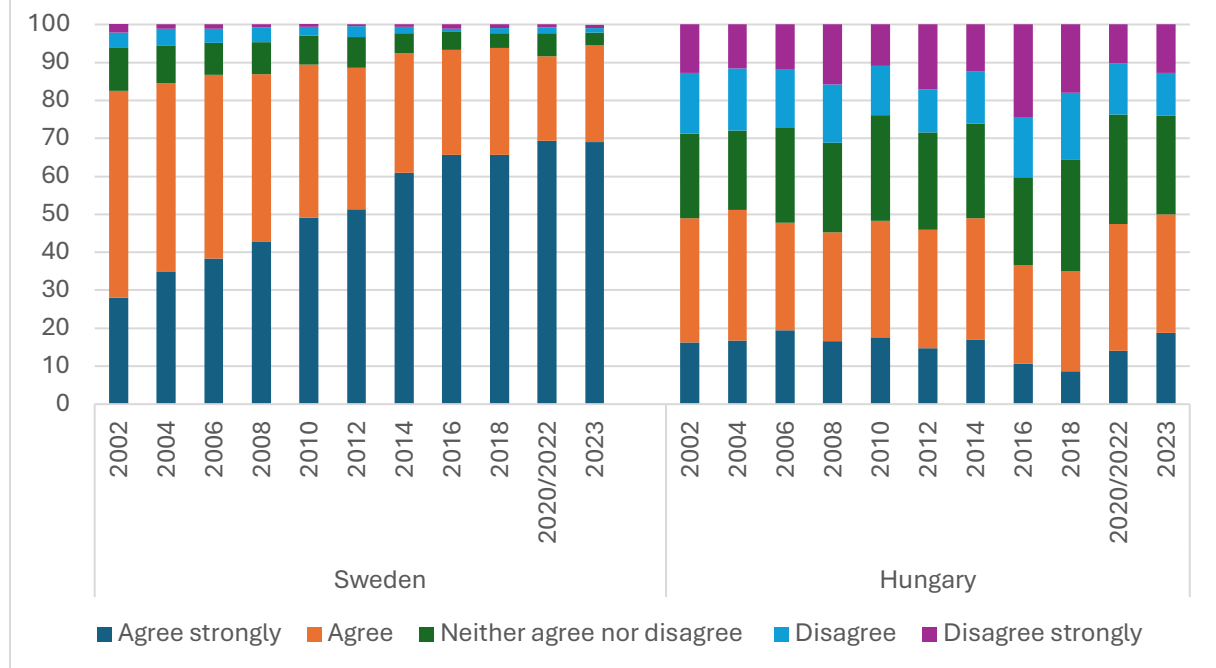


Which of the descriptions comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays? Hungary, 2023

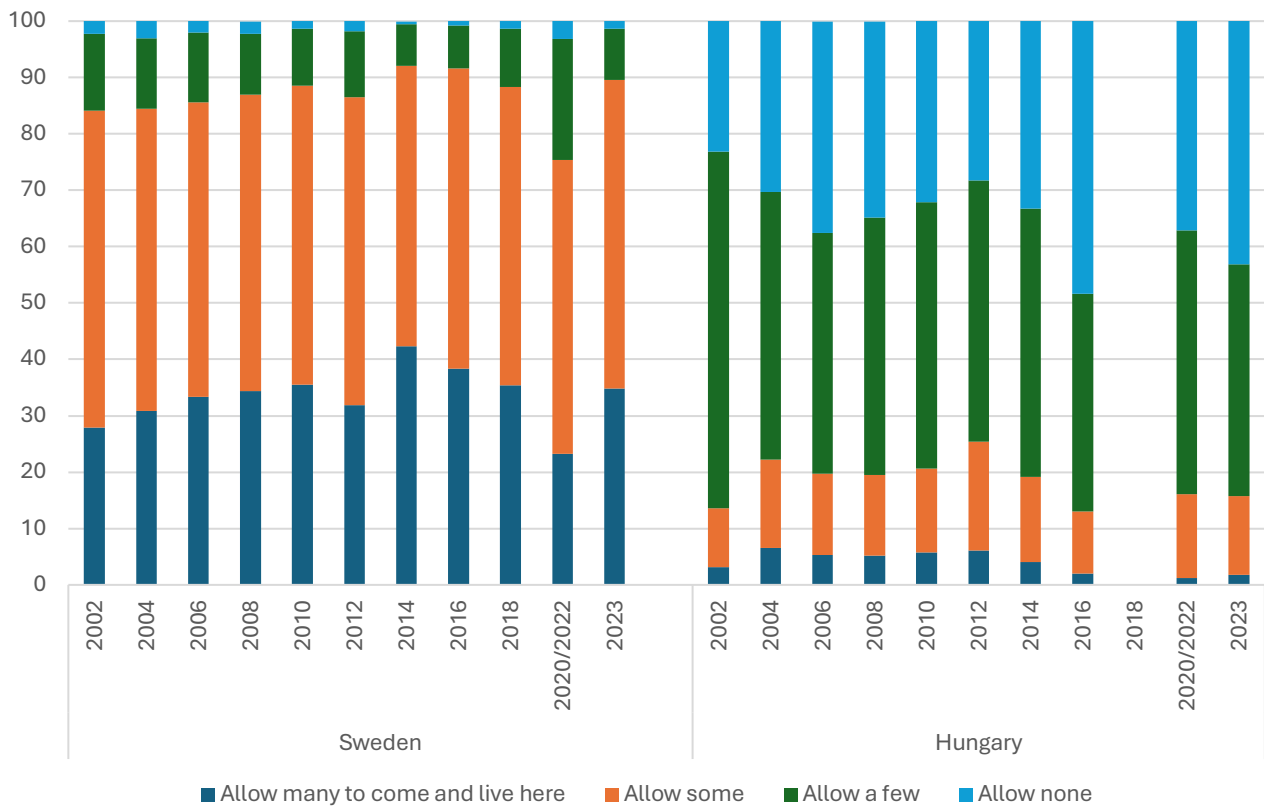


Perhaps even more striking differences between Sweden and Hungary emerge when we examine two specific attitudes that frequently appear as topics in Hungarian media coverage about Sweden. One of these attitudes concerns non-heterosexual people, and the other relates to migration (Figures 8 and 9). Based on the data Sweden is a much more tolerant society in both respects compared to Hungary.

Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish.



Now some questions about people from other countries coming to live in [country]. How about people of a different race or ethnic group from most [country] people?



Overall, the dimensions examined show that the data from ESS surveys do not support the assumption that living conditions in Sweden have changed radically, Swedish respondents do not perceive their country as a significantly worse place than in recent decades. However, the survey from 2020/2022 indicated a slightly worsening situation on several issues, but the situation has improved by 2023 and shows similar results to the previous situation. But it is difficult to decide whether this is a distortion due to measurement problems caused by the Covid epidemic or a real change. In any case, the Swedish data still give the impression of a better functioning society overall compared to the Hungarian data.

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