



PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF A JUST GREEN TRANSITION IN HUNGARY

SUMMARY

This policy brief investigates how the inevitable steps to combat climate change can be reconciled with principles of social justice and how the framework for a socially just climate transition can be developed.

It examines the results of previous surveys on social opinions and attitudes towards the social impacts of the green transition and uses and presents the results of a public opinion survey that was conducted as part of the Talking Green project in September 2021.

The polling results presented in this policy brief go far beyond the usual questions querying the importance of climate change or personal commitments to act. Instead, this brief focuses on how climate action can be designed and framed to achieve stronger public backing. In particular the reception of climate change, climate policies and messaging about climate issues among lower-income households and the 'working class' is highlighted. In line with this emphasis, the policy brief and the poll foreground the social aspects of the climate transition.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Previous polling data	4
Polling results	6
Conclusions	12
About the author	14
About the Progressive Hungary Foundation and the Institute for Social Democracy	15
On similar topics	16

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Introduction

Social aspects of the climate transition are increasingly at the heart of policy-making in the EU and beyond. Progressive political forces are paying more attention to both the social effects of climate action and public attitudes towards climate policy. In France, the 'Yellow Jacket' movement emerged out of opposition to a fuel carbon tax that was badly designed and poorly introduced. It provides a clear example of how poor planning, a lack of public consultation and little consideration of the social aspects can lead to policy failure and political crisis. Thus, it is essential to leave behind the silo approach, a common characteristic of climate policies, and to design and understand climate decisions together with their social dimension.

The achievement of climate targets and the effective implementation of decisions leading to them are not possible without the support of society. So, while from a left-wing perspective there is a clear need for solidarity and fairness in climate policy legislation, decision-making and action, it is not only considerations of theoretical justice that should drive us to do so. The extremely short window of opportunity (10-15 years) for effective mitigation of climate change does not allow for any experimentation that could lead to misguided, conflictual, or, in some cases, retrogressive action. What is needed is a climate policy that enjoys the support of a convincing majority of society and the social will and consensus needed to implement it effectively. This requires not widening but narrowing social gaps, ensuring that the widest possible range of citizens, including low-income and marginalised groups, are able to participate in the climate transition, and that the burden is not unbearable.

Environmental and climate justice considerations must guide climate policy. The burden of climate change and transition must be shared equitably

among societal actors, and the benefits available to all. Large social transformations, especially those that are less planned and more under duress (eg post-communist regime changes in Central and Eastern Europe) tend to redistribute resources in favour of elite groups that dominate control over resources and decision-making during the transformation and tend to increase social inequalities. There are many indications that, if not properly implemented, climate transitions can also result in such 'perverse redistribution', increasing the advantage of already advantaged social groups. An effective leftist climate policy must be built on completely opposite premises. The climate transition should be seen as an opportunity to strengthen social solidarity and equity, its measures should aim at narrowing the social divide, and its deep restructuring of the economy and society should be both sustainable and just. This will also help us to create the social context to avoid a time-consuming series of leaps forward and backwards, hairpin bends and blind alleys. We are short on time and the task is enormous.

The present collaborative study is part of a research project carried out in co-operation between the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), the Institute for Social Democracy and the Progressive Hungary Foundation and its aim is to examine how the inevitable steps needed to combat climate change can be reconciled with principles of social justice and how the framework for a socially just climate transition can be developed. As a starting point, the policy brief examines the results of some surveys on social opinions and attitudes towards the social impacts of the green transition and presents the results of a public opinion survey conducted by the Publicus Institute, which was conducted between 24 and 30 September 2021.

In parallel, public opinion on climate action and the perception of different climate policy slogans were also tested, in FEPS projects carried out in Ireland and in the UK. Both projects focus on public perception of possible climate policy measures, different framings of climate action and potential slogans to be used effectively in climate campaigns. Results of the three studies backed by FEPS are extremely interesting in the detection and analysis of similarities and differences in how climate change is perceived, and how climate action can be framed and

communicated in different countries. All three studies went far beyond the regular questions querying the importance of climate change or personal commitments to act; rather, they placed the emphasis on better understanding how climate action can be designed and framed to receive stronger public backing, paying special attention to lower-income households, the 'working class' or, in general, social aspects of the climate transition.

Previous polling data

Previous studies have already given an insight into the attitudes of the public regarding climate change and climate action.¹ We analysed seven polls that surveyed public opinion concerning climate change and climate action. Results underpinned the hypothesis that climate change is regarded as an important problem by an overwhelming majority of Hungarian society; however, its relative importance compared to other threats varied in different studies. According to the detected trend, the later the poll was carried out, the higher relative importance was attributed to climate emergency, with a marked increase in the past three years. It is important to note that the Eurobarometer 2021

survey showed that 65 percent of respondents believe that businesses and industry are responsible for tackling climate change (EU average 58 percent), while 60 percent believe that national governments are responsible (EU average 63 percent) – an increase of 13 and 17 percentage points respectively compared to 2019 – and 43 percent attribute responsibility to the EU. However, only less than a quarter of respondents (23 percent, well below the EU average of 41 percent) feel personally responsible for tackling climate change, an increase of five percentage points compared to 2019. Still, 64 percent reported already personally acting to combat climate change.

1. Eurobarometer, Climate Change, July 2021 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2273>; Greens/EFA EU Polling Report Greens/EFA Group research (not yet published); Policy Solutions and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 'A zöld baloldali politika lehetőségei magyarországon', https://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzes/315/policy_solutions_fes_zold_baloldali_politika_magyarorszagon.pdf; Scale Research, Bankindex, 'Sajtóközlemény', 14 April 2021 https://scale.hu/wp-content/uploads/Scale-Research_Sajtokozlemenye_Bankindex_Felujitas_2021_04_14.pdf; Association of Climate

Friendly Settlements/Association of Hungarian Nature Conservationists, 'A magyar lakosság klímaváltozási attitűdvizsgálata', https://mtvsz.hu/dynamic/energia_klima/klimavaltozas_attitud_tanulmany_vegso_pdf.pdf; Eszter Bogáromi, Olivér Hortay and Péter Pillók: 'The role of climate change in the Hungarian population's fear of the future' http://replika.hu/replika/114-03_Replika; National Council for Sustainable Development, 'Környezettel és környezetvédelemmel kapcsolatos lakossági attitűdök változása Magyarországon', https://www.tarki.hu/sites/default/files/2020-10/500_521_Schneider_web.pdf

According to these polls, while social justice is regarded as an important value and desirable area of governmental action, in citizens' minds it is not strongly linked to climate action.

Possible policy measures to tackle climate change are mostly limited to traditional areas of renewable energy – building renovation, saving resources, recycling, etc – without linking them to social issues. However, it was also shown by these studies that the willingness to pay more for climate-friendly products is much higher in higher-income groups and in big cities than in smaller settlements and lower-income groups. The contradiction and the social tension these answers imply has not been resolved, keeping this area wide open for innovative solutions closely linking climate action with social justice. It is even more the case given that the surveys also show that Hungary is among the countries in the EU where people are the most worried about poverty and social inequalities in their country.

There is an important lesson to learn in the studies, showing regional differences in the relative importance of climate change: the more developed a region is, the more likely people are to put climate change at the top of their priority list. There are three additional important conclusions. The first is about the correlation between views on climate issues and political affiliation. In general for green issues (climate change, nature protection, etc) there is no significant difference between camps of the different parties. But when it comes to the climate performance of the government or to concrete environmental or climate policy issues (eg the construction of nuclear power plants), there are huge gaps between the governmental and the opposition camp. Pro-government citizens tend to be satisfied with their government's actions to tackle climate change and the practical measures, while people sympathising with the opposition are very much more dissatisfied

and critical. The second important conclusion is the specific sensibility of young people to climate issues: young people are the most environmentally friendly, alongside those in the capital. Eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds are 10 percentage points more dissatisfied with current green policies (52 percent) than those aged 60 and over. They are 10 percent more in favour of a carbon tax (56 percent), nine percentage points more in favour of stopping the Paks-2 nuclear project and five percent more in favour of helping the switch to renewable energy (96 percent). Also, 18- to 29-year-olds would pay the most for environmentally friendly products (40 percent). Third, that lower-income groups, people with a lower level of education and/or living in disadvantaged areas of the country rank climate issues significantly lower than the rest of the country, meaning that those social groups who are the most worried about poverty and social inequalities are the least likely to support policy measures to tackle climate change.

Altogether, these studies conclude that the Hungarian public, although slightly less than the European average, regards climate change as an important challenge to tackle. They expect action from their government, business and the European Union. Social justice and poverty, on the other hand, are a great concern for them, slightly above the European average. Still, the link between climate policies and social fairness is not recognised. Popular slogans and buzzwords in the area of green action are still more traditional ones – such as 'protecting our natural heritage', 'preventing air pollution', 'fighting against extreme weather conditions' – than complex, societal goals, perhaps with the only exemption being health issues, which are seen as related to climate change. Socially vulnerable groups on the other hand are much less likely to back climate action.

Polling results

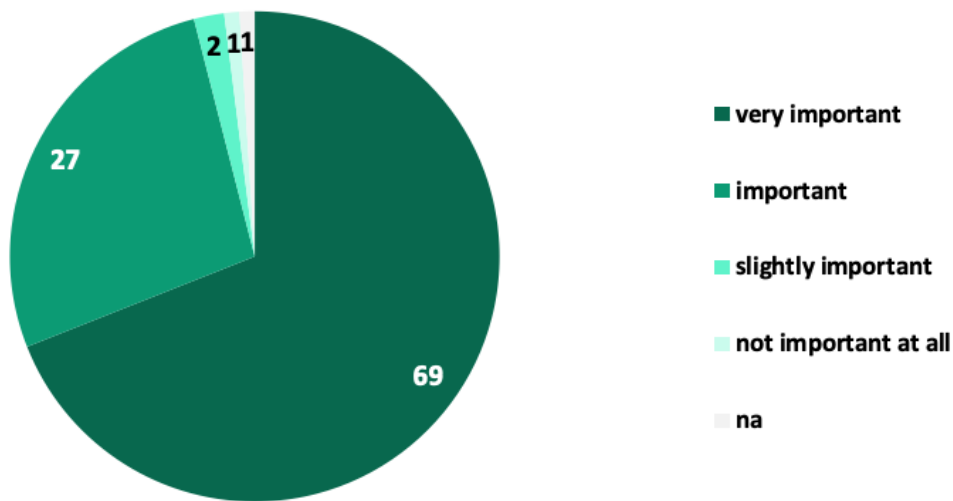
In the framework of the FEPS project, we also conducted our own data collection. The Publicus Institute's public opinion survey commissioned by the research project was based on telephone and online polling between 24 and 30 September 2021. The sample included 1,022 respondents and the resulting database is representative of the adult population in Hungary by gender, age and education. The sampling error for the total sample was +/- 3.1 percentage points. According to our survey, in line with other polling data presented earlier, but even more so, **climate change** is overwhelmingly (96 percent) identified as a **serious problem**, with 69 percent of respondents saying it is a very important problem. Even 54 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat agree that climate change is the most serious problem we face, which shows a stronger perception of the problem in society than other previously reported survey results (Figure 1). On the other hand, respondents are slightly less likely to take climate change into account in the case of their personal choices. Surprisingly, there are no big differences along the lines of education, age or economic activity in our data, although, contrary to other polls, elderly people, pensioners and those with lower education levels see it as slightly more important and are slightly more committed to action.

Our next set of questions tried to map out the **expectations** of the public concerning the economic impacts of climate action. Survey respondents tend to see the economic impacts of combating climate change as positive in the short term (72 percent) and in the long term (83 percent) (Figure 2, upper panel). There is a marked difference between the government side and the opposition, with opposition voters much more positive about the **economic impacts of**

climate action in both the short term (68 vs 80 percent) and the long term (79 vs 90 percent). Overall, expectations of positive impacts are significantly stronger than fears of negative impacts (67-74 percent say positive impacts are more likely, compared to only 31-61 percent who say negative impacts are more likely). Among the concerns about negative impacts, fears of higher costs of living are the strongest (61 percent of respondents say they are more likely), followed by fears of higher taxes (40 percent), lower social support (34 percent) and job losses (31 percent). Negative effects are considered more likely by pro-government voters than opposition voters by a substantial margin (4-8 percent more likely), except for expectations of a reduction in social support (Figure 2, lower panel). It is also important to note that the concerns of those with lower education levels are significantly higher in all cases, while their expectations of positive impacts are weaker. In all cases, fears are lowest among people living in condominiums (mostly urban, more middle-class social groups) and equally high among people living in garden houses (mostly rural) and in prefabricated housing. In line with this, previous research by Policy Solutions and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has also shown that people living in Budapest and urban areas are more willing to pay a higher price for climate action, such as for fossil fuels.

In the next section of our research, we wanted to find out which **messages and slogans** are positively received by society. We included both positive and negative messages in the questionnaire. The results showed that the support for positive messages is extremely high. The message 'Protecting Hungary's natural heritage is a priority' resonates well, with overwhelming support (93 percent), and

How important for you are the environment and tackling climate change?
(as a % of all respondents)



How much do you agree that climate change is the most important problem of politics today globally? (as % of all respondents)

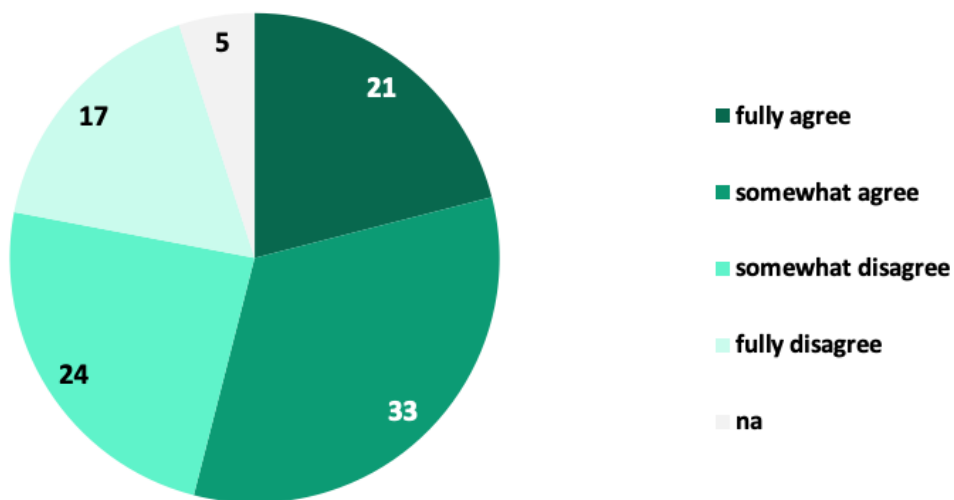
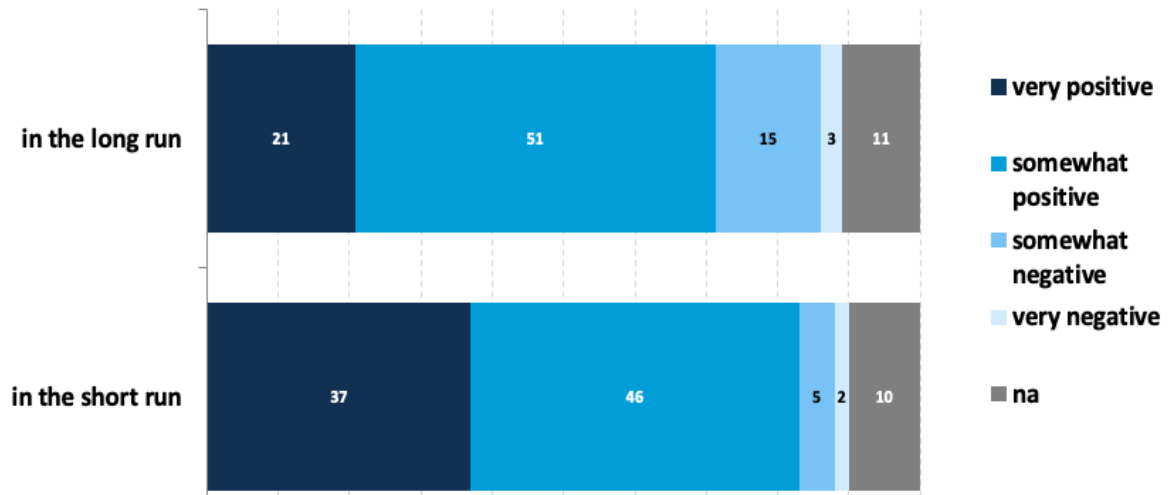


Figure 1. How important do respondents consider action on climate change to be?

there is no significant difference between the opposition and the government camps (Figure 3, lower panel). There is also strong agreement (88 percent) on the importance of local communities’ knowledge and involvement in decision-making and climate action, which is

an expectation and demand. Green job creation is also a message with strong agreement (64 percent yes, 25 percent no), in line with the survey results presented earlier. Consistent with our earlier findings on fears about the cost of living and the reduction of social support,

According to you, would it have a positive or negative impact on the Hungarian economy if Hungary took more seriously the problem of climate change and introduced due policy measures? (as % of all respondents)



According to you, how probable are the following impacts? (as % of all respondents)

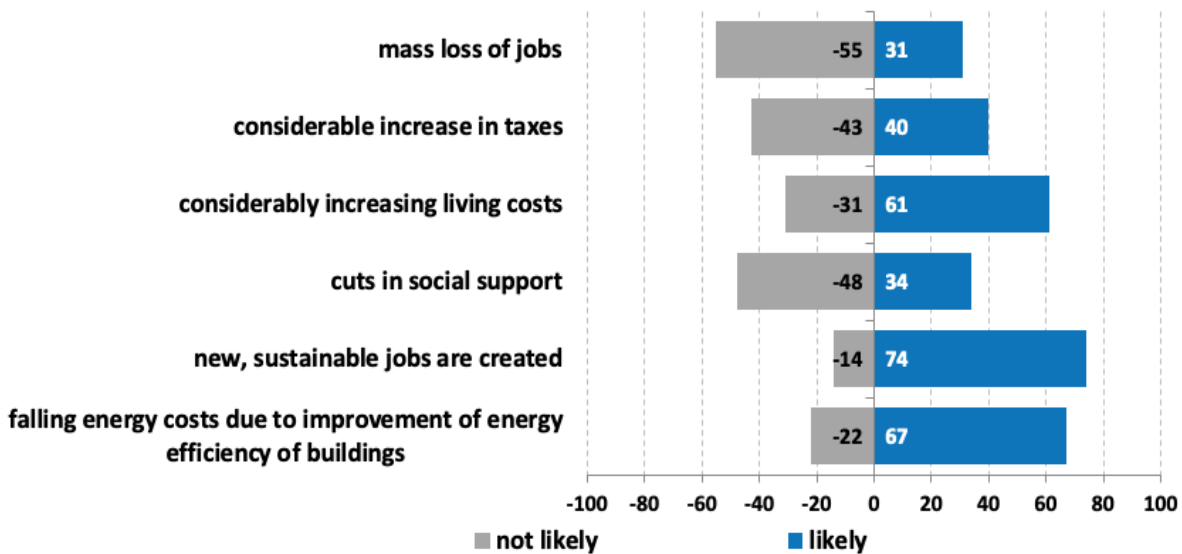


Figure 2. What are the expectations regarding the impact of climate action?

the overwhelming majority (73 percent vs 13 percent) believes that the costs of the climate transition should be offset by significant social transfers.

We also wanted to find out who is regarded by the public as the most important actor in the

fight against climate change and **who should pay the costs of climate action**. The results were largely as expected, but there were some surprising elements. Overall, unsurprisingly, there was a strong rejection of passing the costs on to consumers, with only 5 percent of the total sample agreeing. Those in favour of

How much do you agree with the following statements? (as % of all respondents)

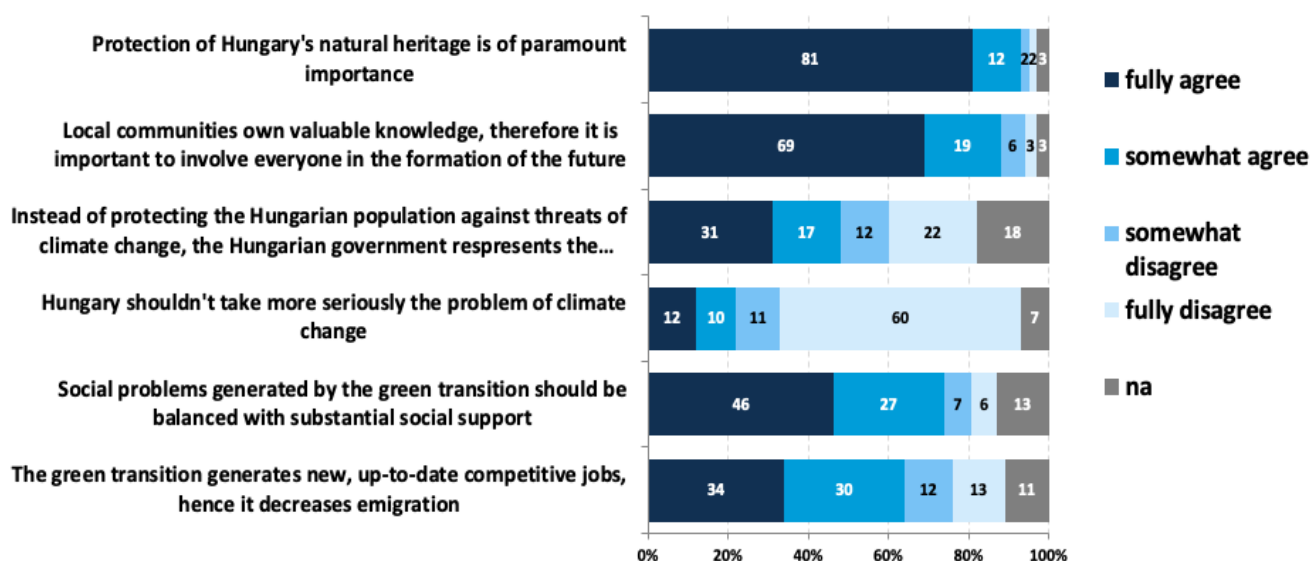


Figure 3. Public accordance with different potential slogans and messages concerning climate change.

the state or large companies taking primary responsibility were roughly evenly split (43 percent vs 45 percent). An analysis by political orientation shows that government messages on the burden of costs on big business fell on fertile ground mainly in the pro-government camp, with 65 percent of respondents agreeing, while only 21 percent said the state should bear the costs primarily. On the opposition side, this pattern is almost mirrored, with only 31 percent saying that it is desirable for large companies to bear the primary costs, and 57 percent saying that this is primarily the responsibility of the state (Figure 4).

We also examined in detail the opinion of some specific **target groups**. From an electoral campaign perspective, two target groups deserve special attention, whose targeting and mobilisation could be key to the electoral success of the opposition in 2022. The primary reservoir of this is the millions of politically **undecided** and hundreds of thousands of

politically passive **young people**. Politically undecided citizens have a perception of climate change, similar to the overall average, as an important issue and a corresponding commitment to take action in their own lives. In terms of fears, the undecided group showed very similar scores to the governing-party voters (and both groups expressed significantly higher levels of concern than the opposition voters as a whole). In terms of potential positive impacts, they are even less optimistic than Fidesz (the governing party) voters, with by far the lowest expectations for, for example, the creation of sustainable green jobs. In the case of positive messages (preservation of Hungary's natural heritage, knowledge and participation of local communities), support is slightly higher than the average for the sample as a whole, positioning the undecided camp slightly closer to the opposition than to the government side on this issue. Those who are undecided, in terms of their perception of the Hungarian government, are in an intermediate zone. Regarding young

people there is a general view that the issue of climate change is significantly more important, more determinant of their political choices, and they are more committed to action. In contrast, in the research we carried out, there was a statistically significant correlation between age and responses in a very small proportion of the questions asked. The younger age group (18-29 years old) did not express a significantly different opinion from the sample average in the majority of questions. In those questions where significant differences by age were identified, the younger age group did not show a trend towards more progressive or committed action on climate change. When asked how much action on climate change (rather than other

ancillary considerations) specifically influences their decisions, the 18-29 age group scored lower than all others, with an overall mean of 3.7 on a five-point scale. Young people are also the least likely of all age groups to expect positive impacts from more intensive action on climate change. Our results do not support the *a priori* assumption that young people have a specific interest in climate change, as their attitudes are largely in line with the average for other age groups.

In our research we have also attempted to define a socially equitable and inclusive climate action framework and programme in a way that is simple to communicate and understand. We

Who should pay the costs of the green transition, according to you? (as % of all respondents)

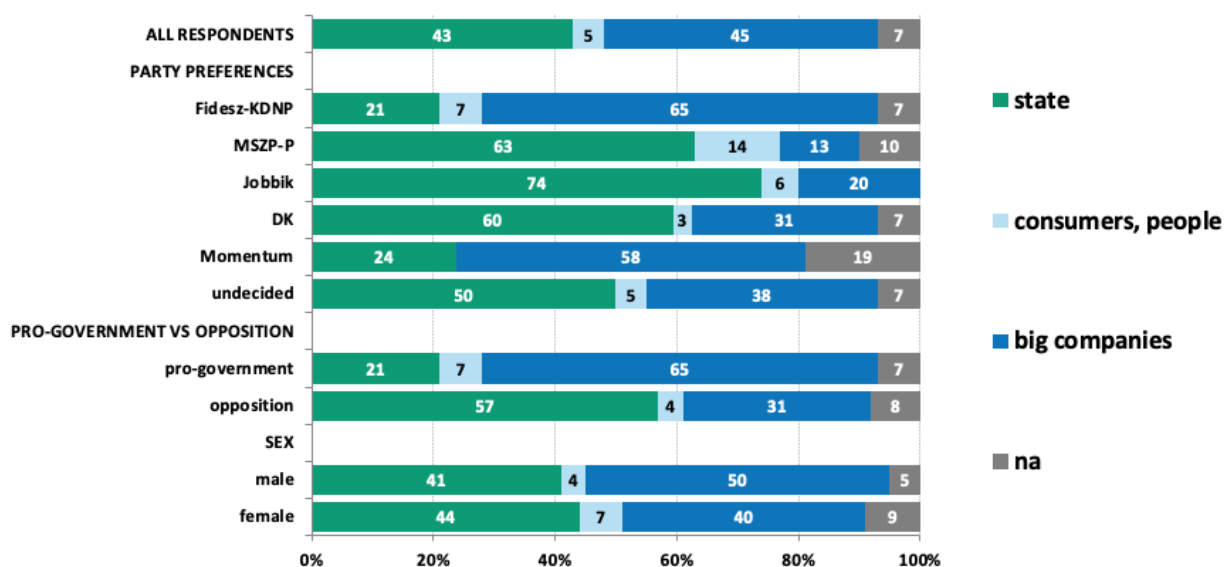


Figure 4. Opinions on who should pay the costs of green transition.

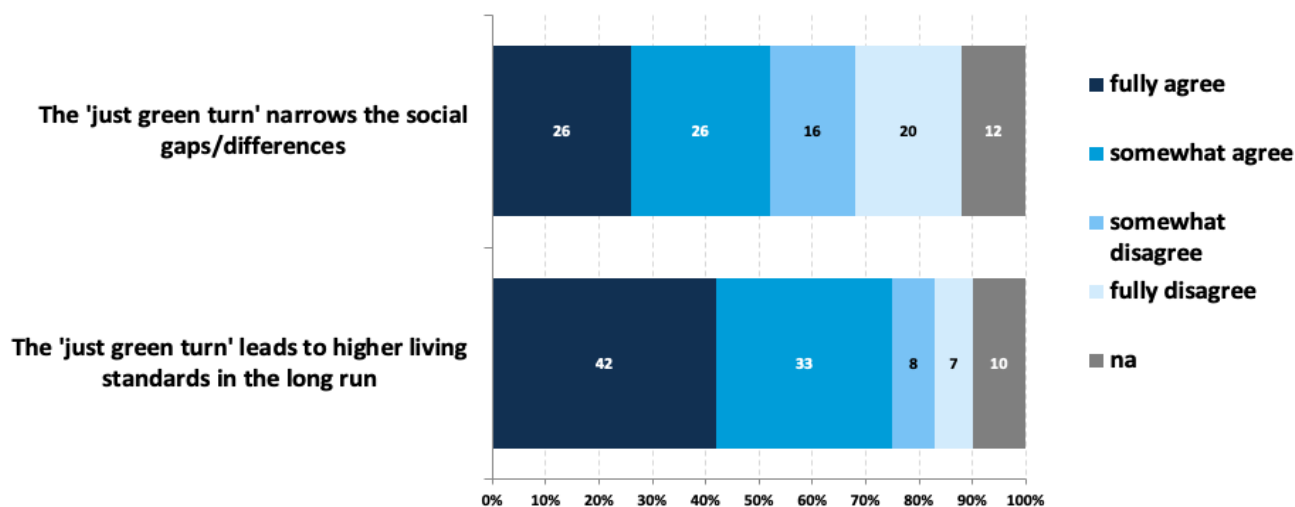
chose the term ‘just green turn’ and sought to explore the impressions, feelings and attitudes associated with it. Our results showed that the term ‘just green turn’ was found to be workable and to have strong support in our testing. The

term ‘just green turn’ is well received across the sample, resonates well, and is associated with fundamentally positive sentiments: an absolute majority (52 percent) believes it reduces social inequalities and an overwhelming majority (75

percent) believes it increases living standards, which may make it suitable for use in effectively addressing fears about climate transition, particularly the rising cost of living (Figure 5, upper panel). This positive attitude is broadly consistent across the main demographic variables,

with no significant differences by age, education, place of residence or other characteristics. The comprehensibility of the term is considered to be high, with the highest proportion in the 18-29 age group.

How much do you agree with the following statements concerning the 'just green turn'?
(as % of all respondents)



According to you, how characteristic are the following to the expression of a 'just green turn'? (as % of all respondents)

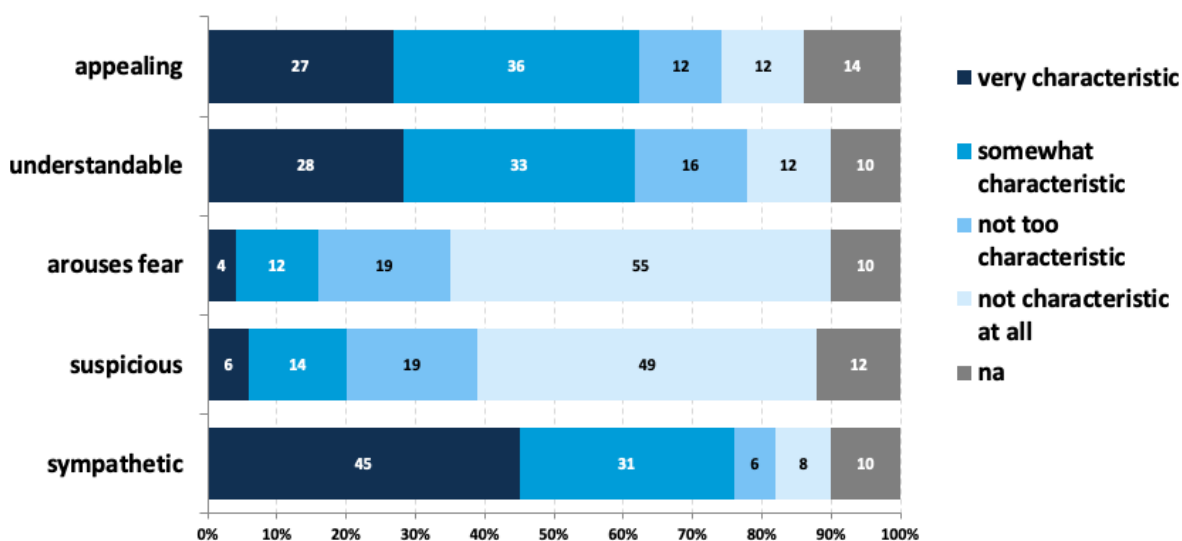


Figure 5. Views on the term 'just green turn'.

Conclusions

Our research mapped public opinion concerning climate change, climate action and possible slogans and messages to effectively reach out to and mobilise people. Based on the results of the opinion poll, we drafted a set of possible 'flagship programmes'. These programmes reflect the expectations and concerns of society unveiled by the survey, and to draw up a potential policy package to make the climate transition socially as fair as possible. In this research report we concentrate on the opinion-poll section of the study as it is comparable with other ongoing surveys carried out in Ireland and in the UK in the framework of an FEPS project. Still, it is important to note that the complete study, with special attention given to the policy proposals, went through an extensive stakeholder consultation process: it was discussed with and commented on by several important environmental, climate, energy, social and housing NGOs in November and December 2021, and was sent to and discussed with political parties of the united opposition in Hungary in December 2021 and January 2022. Many of the remarks and proposals made by the partner NGOs were included or reflected in the final version of the study, strongly improving its quality. It is also worth noting that a number of policy measures worked out in the study 'A Just Green Transition' were accepted by the opposition parties and have become part of their joint electoral programme.

The main conclusions of the opinion poll considerably contributed to better understanding the structure of public views on climate change and climate action, and to designing policy proposals that better fit the expectations and concerns of society. **First**, it was important to notice that the public, perhaps slightly less than in Western Europe, is still deeply concerned by climate issues in Hungary and puts climate

emergency high on its priority list. It also takes into consideration climate aspects in its private decisions. **Second**, the Hungarian public has surprisingly positive hopes regarding climate action and climate transition, expecting much more strongly potential positive economic and social impacts (green jobs, falling energy bills, closing the social gap, etc) than negative consequences (loss of jobs, increasing taxes, cuts in social subsidies, etc). **Third**, while society receives much better the positive messages and slogans (protecting our natural heritage, creating green jobs, etc) it is still rather critical of the climate policies and action of the actual government, expecting the government to turn more attention to climate issues. **Fourth**, while lower-income groups and marginalised social groups are not necessarily less sensitive to the issue of climate change, their positive hopes are significantly weaker and their fears and concerns are much stronger than the average. This creates a huge task to convince them that the climate transition can be socially just and may contribute to the narrowing of social gaps, while working out and implementing just climate transition measures to effectively lower the burden of the green transformation on these groups and making them winners of it. **Fifth**, identified specific target groups, like young people or politically undecided citizens, are not particularly interested in and committed to climate action; overall their views are very close to the average, but certainly they are not less sensitive to these issues, and in some areas tailor-made and well targeted messages can have a mobilising effect. **Sixth** and finally, we tested the potential slogan and term a 'just green turn' to frame climate action and climate policy in a socially fair and inclusive way, and it proved to be an effective, understandable, appealing and supportable way of speaking about climate action in practically all social groups, including

both opposition and pro-governmental camps. Altogether, our study suggests that climate might be a useful topic for progressive forces in campaigning in Hungary, if climate action takes heavily into consideration the social aspects and emphasises that the climate transition is not putting further burdens on disadvantaged groups but might become a tool to strengthen solidarity and justice in the society.

A just green transition is not only justifiable from an ideological, leftist starting point (however, it may serve as a strong foundation to develop fair climate policy measures), but it can be made an attractive campaign message targeting lower-income households and disadvantaged groups, to mobilise them and to strengthen the public support for climate action.

About the author



BENEDEK JÁVOR

Benedek Jávor is a Hungarian biologist, green activist and politician. He graduated in Biology from Eötvös Loránd University in 1997 and in 2006 was awarded his PhD from the same university. Between 1998 and 2014 he taught at the Department of Environmental Law at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Budapest). He is a founding member of the environmental NGO Protect the Future! and from 2000 to 2009 was their spokesperson and leader. He was Member of the Hungarian Parliament (2010-14) for the Greens, chair of the Sustainable Development Committee (2010-13) and chair of the greens' political group (2012). Elected to the European Parliament in 2014, he was vice-chair of the Committee for the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (2014-19) and green coordinator in the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (2018-19). Currently he is the head of the Representation of Budapest to the EU. Author of over 60 publications, his interests cover climate, energy and environmental policy, green politics, public participation and environmental philosophy. Benedek Jávor was winner of the Environment Award at *The Parliament Magazine's* annual MEP Awards in 2019.

About FEPS

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Its mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.

FEPS works in close partnership with its 68 members and other partners -including renowned universities, scholars, policymakers and activists-, forging connections among stakeholders from the world of politics, academia and civil society at local, regional, national, European and global levels.

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About the Progressive Hungary Foundation

The Progressive Hungary Foundation (*Megújuló Magyarorszáért Alapítvány* – MMAA) was established by the Dialogue for Hungary Party (*Párbeszéd Magyarorszáért* – PM) in July 2014 and began its operative functioning in December 2014. The foundation envisions a country where each and every citizen has the opportunity to live up to their highest potential and a country which is characterised by freedom and equity. MMAA works on fostering dialogues, co-operation, trust and support for grassroots movements.

About the Institute for Social Democracy

The Institute for Social Democracy was founded by two parliamentary parties, the Hungarian Socialist Party (left) and the Dialogue for Hungary (left-green). Its main mission is to help the progressive political forces to break out from everyday political fights, and highlights the consequences of the different policy choices. It develops and presents a realistic alternative to all Hungarian citizens who want a just, free and democratic Hungarian republic.

ON SIMILAR TOPICS

