



Why Can't the EU's West and East Work as One?

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Fifteen years after the 2004 accession of eight former communist countries, the EU still behaves as two halves rather than a whole. Many Western Europeans routinely refer to these states, as well as those that joined in 2007 and 2013, as “new,” implying a failure to become fully “European.” Some believe their neighbors to the east may never become fully democratic either, judging by recent developments in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.

For their part, while the Baltic, Western Balkan, and Central European countries remain, on balance, strongly pro-European, many of them feel ill at ease in the EU. The public in these nations feel that their countries have too little influence upon EU policymaking. Meanwhile, their governments are increasingly less inclined to play by the rules, with some, such as Budapest, making a virtue out of rebelling against Brussels.

The perception of an unbridgeable divide and an authoritarian creep is beginning to lead to a reevaluation of EU enlargements since 2004. Many in Western Europe now think that the EU has extended **too far and**

too quickly. As Carnegie’s [Stefan Lehne](#) notes, some are nostalgic for the “Carolingian Europe” dominated by France and Germany and have seized on the perception of an unbridgeable divide to push for a “two-speed Europe.” Even in Germany, an original champion of EU enlargement, 46 percent of respondents in a [recent poll](#) said the 2004 enlargement was a mistake.

But an East-West split would spell trouble for both sides. Populists in the post-2004 accession states would argue that Western Europeans never fully accepted the accession states and that Central Europe’s real place lies between the EU and Russia. In effect, the democrats in Central Europe face two interlinked challenges: the populists’ rise and Western Europe’s response to it, which risks boosting populists further and killing off democracy.

For Western Europeans, it is an illusion to think that a separation would make them immune to instability emanating from its borders. Recognizing that either the “old” members export their norms and rules to the “new” ones, or they import the latter’s problems,



is what inspired enlargement in the first place. It is as true now as it was fifteen years ago. Separation would also endanger the prosperity that enlargement brought to both sides. It completely redefined trade patterns in the center of the continent. If the Visegrád 4 (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) were one country, they would be, by far, Germany's largest trading partner, with an annual **turnover in bilateral trade** nearly twice the size of China.

Majorities on both sides, therefore, have reasons to find ways to safeguard and improve the relationship. But they need to begin by understanding the roots of the discontent—not the immediate causes, such as different attitudes toward migration, but the deeper psychological causes. What are the unspoken assumptions Europeans hold about each other? How much do they really know each other? When do they talk past each other, and why? While the worst of the migration crisis appears to be over (for now), a number of potentially divisive issues lurk ahead, such as how to reduce carbon emissions and whether Europe should depend on the United States for its defense. These issues threaten to rekindle tensions unless EU member states find a way to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Thus far, they appear to have learned little from the past several years.

An examination of the roots of such discontent is not intended to lay blame or reduce serious problems, such as violations of the rule of law, to mere disagreements that can be explained away. When rules are broken, penalties should follow. But even in those cases—perhaps especially in those cases—the right approach and the right language matter. If the European Commission or European Parliament act in ways that suggest bias or disrespect toward a particular government, it makes it easy for the offending government to rally public opinion and regional support behind its case. For example, when the European Parliament voted to launch proceedings against Budapest on the grounds

of rule of law violations, many Central European members of parliament otherwise opposed to Orbán **voted against** the majority. This reflected a broadly held feeling in the region that the West does not understand the East—a view that undermines the EU's credibility and strengthens authoritarians everywhere.

HOW DID EUROPE GET HERE?

The **easy answer** to why East-West relations have become so poor is essentially that the two sides have fundamentally different values and simply see the world differently. While partly true, this fails to explain why the differences are so much more consequential than those between Europe's North and South or the big and small EU member states. Nor does it help understand, for example, why some of the most recent accession countries, such as the ones in the Baltic, have come to feel more at home in the EU than the Central European ones.

To understand the deeper roots of the tensions, Carnegie Europe assembled a group of experts (seven from Central Europe and six from Western Europe). Their research, mainly involving interviews conducted over one year in key European capitals, suggests that the real source of tensions is unfamiliarity with the nature of East-West differences rather than the differences themselves. The East-West divide has proven more divisive than other such gaps mainly because the nature of the differences is poorly understood.

Unfamiliarity Impedes Consensus

The 2004 enlargement was unique not only in size but also in that it brought together countries that had existed in essentially parallel and separate spaces for four decades. This was different to all previous rounds of enlargement. Those had always featured countries from

the same (Western) political bloc. Their citizens had traveled across EU borders long before accession and knew each other's traditions and histories, which was simply not the case for the West and the ex-Soviet bloc.

Until the migration crisis, few in the West were aware of the history and particularities of the post-2004 accession states' attitudes to race (or gender, for that matter). Unlike many Western European countries, most ex-communist countries came out of the Cold War unabashedly nationalist, because pride in one's country was a natural response to the internationalist communist creed. Another legacy of Moscow domination has been an instinctively dim view of big powers telling them how to run their lives—a tendency that should have informed the European Commission's and European Parliament's responses to rule of law concerns in Hungary and Poland.

In the years predating the 2004 accession and for years afterward, unfamiliarity with each other mattered little. Western European countries tended to regard the ex-communist countries as different, but also as victims of a foreign totalitarian regime that the latter dismantled through a combination of industriousness, courage, and self-sacrifice. The nature of ex-communist countries' otherness may not have been understood but it seemed almost endearing, and accession was the morally right response to their past suffering. It did not really matter that some viewed the Baltic or Central European countries as unequal in stature. Most older EU member states just saw them as brave and harmless and assumed that, in due time, the East would become like the West.

This assumption has not come to pass, though, and perhaps never will—in the same way that the EU's smaller states will always, to some degree, mistrust the bigger ones and the northerners will continue to suspect the southerners' stewardship of their own

finances. However, these differences have been aired and tested over decades of disagreements. The East-West differences, particularly on migration, quickly came to light during an existential crisis in 2015, with roughly 1 million migrants on the march and far-right anti-EU parties on a seemingly inexorable rise everywhere.

As a result, the West has come to regard the otherness that seemed almost charming at first as a danger to the EU's very existence. And that sentiment continues to poison consensus building in Brussels. When members of the same group (political or other) disagree, they are inclined to be patient, seek common ground, and make compromises. But this typically does not occur between groups, where one often sees the other as different, less consequential, or a liability. For example, during debates on rule of law or migration, there has been little will to suspend judgment, consider local specificities, and see things through the eyes of the other party, which should be the key ingredients in EU policymaking. Again, this is not to defend violators of EU rules. The point is that an eventual reprimand is more effective if the reprimanding side is seen as acting without prejudice, and from a position of understanding.

Unfamiliarity Leads to Stereotyping, Which Deepens the Sense of Difference

Precisely because the West and East are different in ways and for reasons that continue to be misunderstood, politicians and media on both sides have found it too easy to bash and stereotype. In a recent article, Stefan Lehne laid out the numerous myths at the heart of [Europe's current tensions](#). One of these, in the West, is that Central Europe and the Western Balkan countries in particular are susceptible to xenophobic and authoritarian inclinations. Another, in Central Europe, is that the über-liberal, open-bordered West has lost sight of its cultural heritage.



Both views are largely unfounded and ahistorical. Aside from the aforementioned attitudes toward migrants and gender issues, there is little evidence of a “conservative East” and “liberal West.” In reality, attitudes toward religion, divorce, and abortion paint a mixed picture. Latvia and Estonia are among the European nations least defined by religion, while Greece is second only to Poland in opposing abortion (which remains illegal in Malta).

Failure to move past prejudices and generalizations leads to poor decisionmaking. If it is believed, for example, that the East and West have fundamentally different values, the view that “Western” cultural beliefs are necessarily an integral part of the European *acquis*, and that newer member states need to get on board, becomes almost inevitable. The European Parliament has implied this in its [report](#) on Hungary. But this view ignores the differences *within* Western Europe on many of the same values. More importantly—and completely unnecessarily—it pushes thousands of otherwise pro-EU Balts or Central Europeans of more conservative inclination [into the euroskeptic populist camp](#).

This is not to say that generalizations and myths are unique to the relationship between the East and the West. A popular French quip before Spain’s accession to the EU held that “Africa starts at the Pyrenees.” And disagreements between Europe’s North and South during the 2010–2011 euro crisis generated a fair deal of venom, which could easily return if the economic crisis deepens.

But for the past five years, it has been the new-old divide that has produced the most stereotypes, and these now frequently feed social media outrage and influence actual policies. Resentment generated by poor policy decisions, in turn, has tended to drive the most recent accession states further into an angry defensive crouch, which only makes it easier to caricature them as different—thereby creating a debilitating cycle.

Unfamiliarity Breeds Misperceptions and Missed Opportunities

Most of the post-2004 member states have yet to crack the code on how EU policymaking works. Somewhat self-defeatingly, most have not even tried, sticking unnecessarily to the mind-set of an EU candidate country. Those that actually have tried their hand at driving decisions, rather than just abiding by them, have neglected the building blocks of success: developing alliances and relationships and using the media and think tanks to seed ideas and drum up public support. The newer accession states’ ambassadors have come to understand these techniques, but many ministers and prime ministers from the region have not; furthermore, except perhaps for those from Estonia and Hungary, they often lose battles in Brussels mainly because their cases are made too poorly. Then they tend to conclude that different rules apply to newer and older EU members, and they portray Brussels as unfair and biased to newcomers, which is only partly true.

Fifteen years and nearly four electoral cycles after joining the EU, most Central European, Balkan, or Baltic heads of state have also failed to build personal relations with their Western European counterparts. With some exceptions, such as Estonia’s former president Toomas Ilves (Sweden-born and U.S.-educated), few socialize with partners across the former Cold War divide. Think of the familiar pictures of [EU leaders](#) huddling over beers after EU summits—not a single Central European among them. This matters because without a personal rapport with the German chancellor or the French president, a country’s leader is far less likely to secure a desired portfolio in the European Commission or to bend budgets and legislation his or her way.

Given Central Europeans’ repeated failures to move their agendas forward, many in the region believe that the EU does not treat newer member states with equal seriousness. And this is not just the view of people

far removed from Brussels policymaking. It is also a surprisingly common refrain among senior EU officials from the most recent accession states. They are not entirely wrong—but, per the points above, the failures are often of their own making.

The perception that double standards are at play carries political consequences. The more people feel that their governments have too little say in the EU—that the 2004 and later accession members are in effect second-class citizens—the stronger the antipathy in Central Europe against Brussels becomes. No one likes to be a rule-follower forever. Having tried and failed to make a significant mark on EU policy, the Visegrád countries, in particular, have responded by resorting to mainly presenting policies together, further damaging their ability to be taken seriously. As one Western European member of Carnegie Europe’s group of experts said, “they need to break out of their ghetto” if they want to have more influence on EU policies.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The above lessons certainly do not provide the full picture. One could add, for example, the effect of the Eurozone crisis, which, in the eyes of many Central Europeans, destroyed the EU elites’ reputation for competence. However, even if the financial and migration crises had not occurred, another event sooner or later would have exposed the nature of differences at the heart of the East-West relationship. Unless these differences are better understood and managed, the EU will remain crisis-prone.

The good news is that little about the nature of East and West differences suggests they should be more consequential than other EU divides (between large and small countries and between the North and South). The specificities are simply a lot less well understood—due to an historical unfamiliarity with each other—and

therefore more feared. Differences that in other contexts would be, and used to be, seen as innocuous loom more significant than they really are, allowing those who never supported enlargement to argue that it should be reversed. One obvious exception to this is the trend of authoritarianism, which is indeed a challenge to the EU’s existence. But it hardly defines Central Europe as a whole, **nor is it confined** to the post-2004 accession states.

Three lines of action might help take the sting out of East-West disagreements:

Chip Away at Unfamiliarity

For the EU to work well, the East and West will need to make more of an effort to get to know each other. The goal is not to overcome their differences; the EU is a patchwork of regions with greatly varying political cultures and traditions, and the EU project still works reasonably well. The idea is to reduce unfamiliarity—to turn the new members of the EU, in the eyes of the West, from an unknown and perhaps less important part of the continent to one whose differences are seen as charming features of the European landscape. Features like the long silences of the Finns or the siestas of the Spanish are unusual perhaps but are considered profoundly European and celebrated as enriching the cultural diversity of the EU.

Steps taken before Central European countries’ accession to the EU, such as providing scholarships for students from candidate countries, have helped acquaint the two sides with each other but only up to a point. They produced a mostly one-way (westward) flow of people and knowledge. Because the West remains much wealthier than the East and has better schools, far fewer Westerners have traveled eastward. Moreover, many Easterners have stayed in the West, meaning that opportunities to help their countries of origin better understand Western mind-sets are being lost.



In a free but economically uneven Europe, the flow of people and ideas will always be lopsided, but for Europe to work as one, there need to be more long-term, ingrained learning opportunities. This will be a generational challenge, but steps such as making sure that textbooks introduce the ex-communist countries to Robert Schuman or Konrad Adenauer, two of the EU's founding fathers, and the Western Europeans to József Antall or Lech Wałęsa, two heroes of the democratic revolutions in Central Europe, could start making a difference within a few years. EU treaties leave education largely in the hands of member states, so European countries need to lead the effort to improve the teaching of each other's history.

Central Europeans, for their part, should invest in French and English-language websites about their politics and history. Similarly, perhaps a joint East-West TV channel, such as a German-Polish one modeled after Franco-German ARTE, might help. The EU, after all, overcame much greater gaps in familiarity—even open hostility—after World War II. But those successes did not just organically happen over time; they required a conscious effort. Nothing similar has taken place since the reunification of Europe's East and West, and the EU is now paying the price.

Fight Mythmaking

Informed discussions on what ails East-West relations remain rare, but the mood appears to be turning, with *the Economist* and other media now giving more space to, and thoughtful treatment of, the issue. More such intelligent coverage is badly needed. When politicians and opinion-forming media perpetuate the view that the East and West are fundamentally incompatible, they lend support and credibility to the argument that the EU should divide into two classes of membership.

Some politicians will continue to hold this line for electoral gains, but there are ways to reach those who support it unwittingly.

One way to improve media coverage of the East-West discourse is through generating more nonbiased research and data that pierces through the many stereotypes and generalizations surrounding the relationship. In the age of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, opinion-forming media outlets are constantly hungry for content and would be interested in the data if it were to come from trustworthy sources, have a basis in solid research, and be timed to coincide with newsworthy events.

In the Czech Republic, a coalition of individuals, businesses, and organizations concerned about rising euroskepticism have come together to fund research into how the Czechs regard the EU and why. The data are available to everyone who wants to their sharpen arguments regarding continued membership in the EU. Similar efforts also have sprung up in other Central European countries, even if they are mostly for local audiences and in local languages.

What is needed now is a cross-boundary look at how the East and West regard each other, what underlying beliefs inform those views, and which communication strategies could most effectively bridge the divide. That sort of research will require money and collaboration among polling agencies, think tanks, and communication experts.

Lastly, help from the top will be needed: more intelligent media coverage and research will count for little unless Europe's leaders in both regions join the effort. The president-elect of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has shown the desire to be a bridge builder, most notably by dividing the rule of

law portfolio of work between Central and Western European commissioners. Her State of the Union speeches will present further opportunities to push back against the myth of East-West “incompatibility.”

Forge Collaboration at the Top

If Central European leaders want to exercise more influence in Brussels—and change the perception at home that the EU does not listen to them or care—they need to start floating joint policy proposals with their Western European counterparts on issues where they see potential commonalities and shared interests. These include incentives to shift to cleaner electric cars and ways to deepen Europe’s single market.

The idea is not only to improve the EU’s image in Central Europe but also to change the most recent accession states’ reputation for having little constructive to say on anything beyond “usual” Central European priorities such as enlargement or Russia. While the Baltic governments are already closely cooperating with the Nordic governments in an informal [Hanseatic League](#), the Central European countries influence EU policy only intermittently and at the working level in Brussels. Far too little collaboration on EU policy happens at the top levels of government, so Central Europe’s reputation further west is primarily informed by opposition to quotas for asylum seekers or tighter emission controls.

Admittedly, the advice for newer member states to refrain from only banding together seems to differ from the current typical approach, as most [EU coalitions](#) are regional. The Benelux countries (Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) team up with one another when they need to get things done in the EU; so do the Southern Europeans. When Central Europeans’ interests align, such as on the sale of inferior foods in their region, it makes sense for them to stick together.

But on most other issues, they would be better off reaching out westward, in order to improve their image in the West and to make it more difficult for euroskeptics to argue that the EU does not take its newer members seriously. The Central European countries, along with others who joined in 2004 or after, face a unique policy challenge. They came to the EU later than other members and need to work harder to prove themselves. The fastest way for their preferences to gain legitimacy is to be endorsed by the older member states.

WHERE TO START

All the above recommendations may seem trivial or irrelevant to Europe’s major challenges. They do not propose ways to resolve rule of law issues or East-West disagreements on migration.

But that was never the intention. The point is that each potential solution needs to start with a reflection on the deeper, underlying problems of poor understanding; the propensity to buy into stereotypes, generalizations, and misperceptions; and the lack of a common political agenda to support East-West relations. Without a greater understanding of why the East and West sometimes see things differently, the differences will continue to plague EU policymaking.

Unless the East and West learn about, and largely accept, the nature of their differences, they risk the gap widening again, when a new crisis appeals to the different instincts in them. The smart approach would be to take stock now of what has gone wrong in the relationship and to start developing solutions while the memories of the post-2015 fallout over migration are still fresh, but the passions have cooled somewhat.

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NOTES

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