

# The East/West Divide in the EU: A Useful Paradigm?

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### *Introduction*

Dr. Tsveta Petrova, faculty at the European Institute at Columbia University, discusses the much debated East/West divide in the European Union (EU) with Elizabeth Zolotukhina, Head of the North America Program at the Centre for Geopolitics and Security in Realism Studies (CGSRS). The interview is particularly timely in light of the EU's recent invocation of Article 7 against Poland. Broadly, the Union has alleged that Warsaw has not adopted shared EU norms such as independence of the judiciary and the rule of law. Also touched upon is the Union's refrain that its Eastern members are not committed to equitable burden sharing in the resolution of the migrant crisis.

Dr. Petrova earned a bachelor's degree and a doctorate in political science from Cornell University. She has held post-doctoral fellowships at the Davis Center at Harvard University, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. Dr. Petrova is the author of "From Solidarity to Geopolitics" (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

*EZ: Does the East/West divide in the European Union (EU) exist? Why, or why not? What about a north/south delineation within the EU? Which of these, if any, is more salient when explaining current events, and why?*

TP: I find the idea of a North/South divide in the EU simplistic. Similarly, recently there has been extensive commentary in the media about an East/West divide. I think that this narrative is also both inaccurate and damaging to the EU. In part because it implies a good deal of unity among the Eastern European (EE) EU members that is not there. For instance, when discussing migration-crisis responses of EU members states, the Eastern European EU members are referenced as the ones that choose not to carry their weight - i.e. not to contribute sufficiently to the Union's efforts to resolve the crisis. However, there have been non-compliant Western member states (that also chose to close their borders) as well as compliant Eastern EU members states that have done their best to support the Union's efforts. If we look at Slovenia's response to the migration crisis, for example, we see a tiny country, which has been financially and administratively challenged by migrants using the Balkan route. Nevertheless, Ljubljana has made valiant effort to process migrants without encouraging vigilante justice and a discourse of xenophobia and hatred.

The East/West divide further overemphasizes non-compliance by East European EU member states in a way that reinforces the view of a uniform East as a second-class EU citizen. Before the East's accession to the EU, Brussels had set out a difficult reform agenda for the East. Now that these countries are in the EU, Brussels has continued to ask them to make sacrifices, in some cases to bail out Western EU members that had chosen not to reform as the East did (such as Greece). Many Eastern leaders see this as hypocrisy that's hard for them to justify domestically.

Moreover, while many in the West European EU members feel that their counterparts in the East aren't embracing the "Union's values", many in the East European EU members want to have a say in how these values are defined. The East wants to be heard - but at some critical times it isn't, as the migrant crisis has illustrated. This has fueled a wave of nationalists (and populist nationalists) set on reclaiming sovereignty from Brussels.

*EZ: Recently, Lyubov Shishelina has [argued](#) that the only way to settle the conflicts between the EU and EE would be to re-visit and revise the so called “four common spaces” between Russia and the EU. In your opinion, how likely is such a revision to occur? To be successful in addressing disputes between the EU and EE?*

TP: I find Russia’s current strategy vis a vie the EU is one of subversion. Moscow is not interested in working toward common goals. Rather, Moscow’s goal is to weaken the EU and its pull in what the EU calls its “neighborhood countries” in the east and the south. Russia’s support of fringe movements in Europe, and Russia’s actions to destabilize Syria are prime examples.

The East European responses to this Russian strategy and Russia’s economic and political presence in their own countries are diverse. Some (Poland, Estonia) are very hawkish, others (Hungary and Slovakia) seek to befriend and take advantage, and many fall in between. The EU’s Russia policy, however, treats the Eastern European members’ preferences and experience in dealing with Russia as secondary to those of Brussels, Paris, and Berlin.

*EZ: The EU has threatened to invoke article 7 against Poland and Hungary. In Warsaw’s case, the measure has been attributed to an alleged “clampdown on the independence of the judiciary” and “[serious violations](#)” in the rule of law in the country. By contrast, Budapest has aroused the EU’s ire due to its refusal to accept the EU-mandated quota of migrants, as well as a tamp-down on independent institutions. Are these two cases similar, or different, and how? How do you see each case proceeding?*

TP: The EU’s invocation of Article 7 against Poland has been made into a show trial. This strategy might backfire. Poland is unlikely to have its voting rights suspended. This is due to the EU’s unanimity rule, which requires the consent of all EU member states for one member to be sanctioned under Article 7. In Poland’s case, at least Hungary is opposed to such a move. Yet, Poland’s going through Article 7 is likely to be a very contentious process, and might thus play into the ruling regime’s nationalist and anti-EU narrative.

Moreover, the EU should have invoked Article 7 against Hungary in the early 2010s. The EU missed that opportunity to send a clear signal to illiberal elites in the east and west. So by making Poland a show case now, the EU not only risks backlash in Poland, but also in other Eastern EU members.

*EZ: Can Poland and Hungary be incentivized to adopt EU norms related to the issues currently under dispute (rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and the refugee crisis)? If yes, how? If not, why not?*

The cases of Poland and Hungary are slightly different. Budapest takes small steps to see how much they can push against EU norms. If met with resistance, Budapest backs off and only sometimes does it look for other ways to achieve the same goal. And in Hungary, rollback on many of the issues has already happened. Poland has been more aggressive, fast-acting, and ideological. Thus, Brussels has less room to push Poland on issues such as the judiciary, media, elections, and civil society. So the EU's likelihood of arresting or pushing back on the illiberal rollback in Poland and Hungary is small.