

EU East-West tensions – a marriage of convenience?

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Introduction

Between 2004 and 2007 the European Union (EU) enlarged to the east, incorporating most countries of East and Central Europe. The EU hoped to bring democracy, stability and wealth to its eastern flank. The new member states in turn introduced institutional and political reforms supported by extensive EU investments. However, the convergence looks increasingly weak as tensions and conflicts of interests accumulate.

EU-enlargement as an ideological tool in geopolitics

Increased membership in the EU always has been a foreign policy objective as the Union grew from its founding six members to 28 members today. Further, additional countries wish to join. Montenegro and Albania have been deemed potential candidates, while Serbia, Macedonia and Turkey have been granted candidacy status. Candidacy status does not immediately translate into EU membership. After a country has been awarded candidacy status, formal negotiations start on political, institutional, and economic reforms with no particular deadline. During the accession process the EU supports candidate countries with technical and financial assistance.

Enlargement was always partly driven by geopolitics. The first enlargement was offset in the 1970s with the accession of Ireland, the UK and Denmark to the European Economic Community; thus driving enlargement northwards. The second enlargement took place in the 1980s when Spain, Portugal and Greece joined the Community; thus enlarging to the south. The dis-integration of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s set the stage for the EU's eastward expansion. At that time Sweden, Austria, and Finland joined. The most ambitious enlargement took place during the 2000s with the enlargement to the east. Most new

members were former Communist states in Central and East Europe. Geopolitically, the EU created a buffer to Russia, surrounded the Balkans and accessed their markets. Most Eastern and Central European countries benefited from EU membership, transforming from authoritarian regimes with a command economy to democratic countries with a free market economy. However, enthusiasm over the accession of the newly incorporated members turned into frustration after the 2008/2009 financial crisis. Cracks started to appear over the benefits of membership which rattled the entire EU. The enlargement process was always driven by the prerogative that supranational structures managed by technocrats are more efficient than national governments.¹ Technical assistance to candidate countries during the accession process was driven by the ideology that national governments should transfer sovereignty to these supranational structures managed by technocrats. This principle is also enshrined in the Rome Treaty which promises “an ever closer union”. This led to the democracy deficit problem to which the Union has yet to find a solution. The argument that the Union is managed by unelected technocrats in the Commission prevails. However, the underpinning of an ever closer union has remained mainstream for most of the past decades. The signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 expanded on the idea of a more unified Europe. Provisions of the Maastricht treaty aimed to weaken national structures in favour of supranational structures.² The most visible such move

¹Hopkins, John. *The Future of Sub-National Governments in a Supra-national World – Lessons from the European Union*. Available at: <https://www.victoria.ac.nz/law/research/publications/about-nzacl/publications/special-issues/hors-serie-volume-vii.-2007/Hopkins.pdf>

² 2012. Christiansen, Thomas, Duke Simon, Kirchner Emil: Understanding and Assessing the Maastricht Treaty. *Journal of European Integration*. Volume 34, issue 7.

was the introduction of the euro. Ignoring expert warnings that a diverse economic zone would inevitably result in financial problems, a belief prevailed that European monetary integration would solve the shortcomings of the newly established Eurozone. The EU linked its future to the success of the Eurozone.

Eurozone debt crisis undermines Europe project

When the financial crisis hit, the Eurozone debt crisis followed. Northern Eurozone countries refused to become lenders of last resort for their Southern counterparts. Consequently bailout packages were the outcome of resolving the most pressing issues such as a possible default of Greece. Austerity policy strongly advocated by Germany and its northern counterparts turned a recession in the south into a depression. As a result, the credibility of the European project suffered.

The European debt crisis has revitalised national movements and sentiments across Europe. These sentiments turned into populist movements which threaten the political order in many EU member states. Moreover, the benefits of EU membership became less appealing to many voters. Anti-globalist parties gained ground and demands to protect national interests grew louder. The immigration crisis was only grist to the mills for those demands.

Nationalism in the east causes headaches in Brussels

Electoral wins of populist parties were averted last minute in the Netherlands and France last year. However, their ideological sister parties in the east already have won power in Poland and Hungary. They appealed to an electorate in de-industrialised areas and in the countryside

where the population did not benefit or suffered from globalisation. They also promote traditional values and emphasise national identity. Recently, the European Commission and the EU Council have expressed concern about recent developments in the region. On 7 December the Commission brought Hungary to the European Court of Justice over a recently passed law that restricts foreign donations to NGOs and other organisations.³ Just a few days later the Commission introduced a procedure against Poland that could lead to sanctions and deprive Poland of its voting rights in the Council. The reason for the procedure was Poland's reform of the judiciary which, according to the Commission, weakens the rule of law in Poland. Just two days later, France, Germany and five other EU member states sent a letter to Romania. In it they underlined their concerns over scheduled reforms that could threaten Romania's fight against corruption by increasing the national government's control of the judiciary.⁴

The Commission's interventions were sharply criticized by the governments of Poland, Hungary, and Romania. They accused the Union of interfering in their domestic politics and undermining their sovereignty. According to them the EU should work in close cooperation but also allow EU member states to retain as much sovereignty as possible. The Visegrad Group, comprised of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, is an expression of this desire. Members of this group increased their multilateral cooperation in energy, economic and military issues in order to demonstrate

³ 2017. Infringements -European Commission refers Hungary to the Court of Justice for its NGO Law. European Commission Press Release Database. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5003_en.htm.

⁴ 2017. Embassies to Romania take new stand on justice laws: Avoid any action that could weaken the independence of justice. *The Romania Journal*. Available at: <https://www.romaniajournal.ro/embassies-to-romania-take-new-stand-on-justice-laws-avoid-any-action-that-could-weaken-the-independence-of-justice/>

more autonomy to their peers in Brussels. Further, the group is a key forum in which to express their views more visible towards Western Europe. Their most visible statement to date was the group's objection towards a redistribution scheme of migrants which the EU proposed in order to ease migratory pressure in Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden.

Criticism on the EU came not only from Poland and Hungary, but also from the Czech President Milo Zeman who suggested a referendum on EU membership.⁵ The Slovak prime minister called Brussels bureaucrats "detached from reality."⁶ All this serves a common goal – to criticise Brussels' interference in their domestic affairs. Moreover, it mobilises their domestic electorates. Poland's Law and Justice ruling party and Hungary's governing Fidesz party are deeply sceptical of the spirit of the Rome Treaty, especially its underlining policy of strengthening supranational structures. The rejection of an asylum distribution system is based on the belief that such a move would erode national sovereignty and national identity. Poland and Hungary regard the scheme as a threat to their national security.

Weak political structures in Romania undermine EU integration

In Romania, weak political institutions - not nationalism - is the main concern for Brussels. Romania and Bulgaria are the most corrupt countries in the EU. In a November 2017 report Brussels urged Romania to continue implementation of transparent reforms.⁷ The report criticised

that many recommendations which would make the country more transparent remained unfulfilled. Corruption usually hinders economic growth, undermines political institutions, and generates popular dissatisfaction. Moreover, Romania cut taxes and increased public spending, moves which could increase the budget deficit further. Brussels faces a dilemma here. Unpopular austerity measures coupled with widespread dissatisfaction with established parties could pave the way for the rise of similar populist and national parties such as Law and Justice or Fidesz who are already in power in Poland and Hungary.

Common security interests prevent escalation of conflict

Despite all these conflicts of interest the core argument for EU membership for Eastern and Central European countries has not vanished. Governments see the EU as a significant source of revenue; all of them are net recipients of EU funds with Poland being the biggest beneficiaries. Poland received 86 billion euros, Hungary 25 billion euros and Romania 30 billion euros in the 2014-2020 EU budget.⁸ Moreover, eastern member states view EU membership as a security shield against Russia. Although NATO might play a more critical military role, the EU offers economic and institutional protection. Poland and Romania are the strongest advocates for maintaining sanctions against Russia, and strongly support the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative in order to wield political and economic influence in Ukraine and Moldova.

Next multiyear budget threatens to increase conflict of interest

Despite these mutual interests, further potential conflict is on the horizon over the

⁵ 2016. Reuters. *Czech government rejects president's call for referendum on EU, NATO*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-czech-president/czech-government-rejects-presidents-call-for-referendum-on-eu-nato-idUSKCN0ZH4C8>

⁶ 2017. Jancarikova, Tatjana. *Slovakia's future is with core EU, not eurosceptic eastern nations: PM*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-politics-eu/slovakias-future-is-with-core-eu-not-eurosceptic-eastern-nations-pm-idUSKCN1AV1YY>

⁷ 2017. European Commission Press Release Database.

Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-17-4613_en.htm

⁸ 2018. European Structural and Investment Funds: Country factsheet – Romania, Hungary and Poland. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/factsheets/2016/european-structural-and-investment-funds-country-factsheet-romania

next budget as eastern members aim to protect their share of EU funds. Negotiations over the next budget started this year. Discussions are more heated as the next budget will be the first one without the UK – a net contributor. Eastern members will lobby for wealthier member states to fill the gap the UK is due to leave by increasing their contributions. On the

other hand, they will fight for their share to be maintained. The Union's proposal to link funds to the member states' respect of EU values and norms will increase the conflict potential. Even though such a move has yet to occur, it has the potential to increase tensions with eastern members.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the current east-west tensions are anchored in the union's manifested ideology that supranational structures managed by bureaucrats are more efficient than national governments. The founding accession documents for candidate countries, the Rome Treaty and the Maastricht Treaty, expressed this principle. However, the ideology suffered credibility during the financial and Eurozone debt crises. Anti-globalist and anti-establishment parties with an emphasis on national identity and promoting national interests gained support throughout Europe but won decisive elections in Poland and Hungary while a win was averted in France and the Netherlands. Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party and Hungary's Fidesz Party regard Brussels' interference in national politics as illegitimate. The migration crisis and the

subsequent proposal to redistribute asylum seekers across EU territory have reinforced these sentiments. Not only national sentiments cause divisions also weak political institutions add to the tensions as the example of Romania demonstrated. Common security interests vis-à-vis Russia and EU structural funds prevent those tensions to escalate. However discussions over the next multiyear budget threaten to heat up east-west tensions further.

All in all the benefits of EU membership still outweigh the conflict of interest which Central and Eastern European members have with Western Europe. However, this is no guarantee. If Brussels decided to cut structural funds to Eastern Europe these countries may find new sponsors and greater European integration will more threatened than today.

Key findings and recommendations

- Nationalism will likely continue to play a vital role in politics of Poland and Hungary in the mid-term future; thus conflicts of interest will continue as both countries will put national interests over EU interests
- Discussions over the next multiyear budget will be more heated as the UK will not contribute for the first time and Eastern and Central European countries will demand wealthier Western member states to pay the bill
- This collides with the idea that members in violation with core EU principles should receive fewer funds
- Therefore, the EU should distance itself from this idea as the timing is not the best for introducing these measures as they threaten to deepen the rift between east and west
- Instead of punishing these countries the EU should emphasise dialogue with these countries and play out its prime position as a source of wealth for economic development and security.
- The EU should not insist on supranational structures; instead an emphasis should be put on respecting national sovereignty in order to calm down national tendencies and to deprive nationalist leaders of their core argument in their anti-EU rhetoric.

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