

Opinions: The EU Eastern Enlargement from Today's Perspective

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CURRENT CRISES REVEAL *PROBLEMZONEN* IN THE EU AFTER ENLARGEMENT

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If there were neither the dramatic humanitarian disaster that comes with the current refugee crisis nor the embarrassing loss of political culture characterizing the debate leading to the Brexit decision by the British people, we might be grateful for the sobering effect of both crises. Both crises unambiguously revealed *Problemzonen* of the integration project in general and of the EU's 2004/7 enlargement in particular. Three areas are particularly apparent: the unfinished building of sovereign nation-states in Central and Eastern Europe, the revealed lack of a shared consensus about the normative underpinnings of the integration project between the eastern and the western member states and, finally, the horizontal unease in the relationships between the member states.

There are some reasons to argue that after more than a decade the no longer so new member states in Central and Eastern Europe may be suffering from what can be described as a collective hang-over. After at least partially enthusiastically rallying around the European flag, they have had their own experiences with what the once promised EU land implies. Becoming a member of the club of stable and relatively prosperous Western European states had a price tag that went well beyond the costs of adapting to the standards of the common market. While bearing the costs and collaterals of the modernization of the domestic industries is one thing, acknowledging the costs of the transfer of sovereignty is another. In this respect the pooling of sovereignty that has reached a historically unprecedented level

in the EU is frequently perceived in the CEE countries as déjà-vu. For some, the difference between the forced octroy of the former Soviet Union and the voluntary membership in the EU is blurred as both are perceived to generate the same effect of being governed by foreign powers. Accordingly, there is a perception within large parts of the societies that the period of sovereign rule and national self-determination between independence from Soviet dominance and membership in the EU had been too short. In particular, there has not been enough time for the consolidation of a national self-esteem that would be robust enough to accommodate the desire to live according to traditional patterns and the supranational governance regime of the European polity.

This takes me to my second point. Buying into European integration is more than just learning to be part of multilevel policy-making; it is more than making the domestic economy competitive for the single European market; and, finally, it is more than managing to adapt in administrative terms to the new complexity of regulations. Indeed, the European project is much more than just a large market for 500 Million people that requires the harmonization of norms of products and production. Rather, the cooperation amongst the states and societies has gone far beyond an instrumental understanding of being a *Zweckverband*, i.e. a partnership of convenience. According to the terminology of the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, the EU is no longer only a *Gesellschaft* based on the principles of individualism and instrumentalism. Rather, many of its policies build on the assumption of the EU as being a *Wertegemeinschaft*, i.e. a community of values. However, the self-proclaimed attribute of being built on a

solid stock of shared values and respect for a humanitarian principles has been shattered over the past years. Notwithstanding Chancellor Merkel's motivation to unilaterally open up the borders to Germany for very, very many refugees, neither barbed wire fences around many countries in Central and Eastern Europe nor the refusal of many CEE countries to accept non-Christian refugees in their country resonates with the EU's claim of being built on shared humanitarian foundations.

Finally, it would not do justice to the countries and societies in Central and Eastern Europe if we look for the reasons for the precarious situation of the EU only in their backyard. Rather, the humiliating character of the campaign and the outcome of the Brexit vote made it very obvious that there is something flawed in the horizontal relationship between the member states in general and between the old western and new eastern member states in particular. While the fear of the "Polish plumber" and criminal gangs from Eastern Europe figured prominently right before the 2004/7 enlargement to the East, the reference to the allegedly negative implications of the free movement of people (from the East!) became the killer argument of the Brexit campaign. It was not only a perception of an overcrowding of domestic labour markets and the unease in the some parts of the British society with people from the states of Central and Eastern Europe which could be labelled xenophobic in the classical sense. Rather, in addition to both fears for their jobs and a nationalistic stance, the toxic "Brexit" cocktail entailed further ingredients such unease with orthodox religiosity specifically and a quite unspecific insecurity due to diffuse, culturally-related features including language, group coherence and other rather prejudice-based assumptions attributed to the people from the former Soviet



Brexit „Vote Leave“ in Islington, London, June 13, 2016. Author: David Holt, wikimedia commons.

bloc. In particular in areas where the share of citizens from Central and Eastern Europe was relatively low, the lack of real contacts between people from West and East led to a higher receptiveness for negative assumptions.

One might argue that this unease with people from the East, which the British society to no small degree shares with other Western European societies, is an expression of two asynchronous processes: One is the fast and very advanced process of economic integration including free movement; and the other is the much slower process of societal adaptation to growing together in Europe. As the history of integration since the 1950s has shown, overcoming unease between societies requires exchanges, transactions and, in particular, time and the willingness to engage with each other at both the individual and collective level. None of these dimensions has been present on either side since 2004 and 2007 respectively.

To conclude, Jean Claude Juncker's 2015 statement that the European Union is not in a good shape as there is not enough Europe in the Union and there is not enough Union in the Union is even more to the point after the Brexit decision by the majority of the

British people. At the heart of this assessment is not only a whole series of crises that have unsettled people across Europe regarding the advantages of cooperation between states and societies in Europe, but also the unfinished business of the last enlargement. Because cooperation and unionification are more than a technical-administrative affair, they require an intensified engagement of citizens, economic and political decision-makers at all levels and across the societies of Eastern and Western Europe.

RUSSIA'S VIEW ON THE BREXIT

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Officially, the Kremlin maintains that it does not hold an opinion about the Brexit. However, it is clear that Russia's position towards the EU will be strengthened in the future. With Britain, the EU loses one of the staunchest defenders of the sanctions against Russia. Moreover, the Brexit is seen in Russia as a signal of a dwindling EU. Moscow has always sought bilateral talks with EU member states, rather than with EU headquarters in Brussels.

Yet the Kremlin also understands the global economic risks that are tied to the Brexit. Currently, Russia is undergoing its most severe economic crisis since 2008 and is anxiously observing the international markets. For Russia, less uncertainty would be more desirable.

POLAND'S VIEW ON THE BREXIT

The eurosceptic conservative government in Warsaw has quite an ambivalent stance towards Brexit. On the one hand, it shares the nationalist values of the Ukip party. On the other hand, it is quite worried about the situation of the considerable number of Polish migrants in Great Britain. Even the Kaczyński party knows how important EU membership is for Poland and will not question Poland's position within the EU.

HUNGARY'S VIEW ON THE BREXIT

The Brexit is not solely a reason for Orbán to rejoice either. Without the United Kingdom, the influence of Germany on EU policies will be strengthened. For Orbán, it is also clear that the current degree of European integration will not be weakened after the Brexit. Orbán, just like Kaczyński, sees the EU as a transnational means towards a national end: It shall ensure economic prosperity but the sovereignty of the member states shall be safeguarded as much as possible.