

The Past and Next 20 Years: Why Does CEE Need (More) EU?



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This year's 20th anniversary of the presence of Central and Eastern European countries in the structures of the European Union (EU) is a time to take stock and set new priorities. The upcoming twenty years are expected to be crucial, not only for these countries individually, but also for the overall structure of European collaboration and unity. The journey of CEE countries within the EU has been marked by significant advancements in economic growth, political stabilization, and cultural integration.

However, the road ahead is fraught with challenges and opportunities that necessitate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the intricate dynamics between CEE and the EU. Therefore, it is crucial to delve into the multifaceted nature of their integration, exploring the economic disparities that must be bridged, the crucial role of political stability, the complex web of geopolitical pressures, and the rich potential of cultural fusion. It is a narrative that underscores the necessity of a stronger EU for CEE, not just as a convenience, but as a shared destiny and a mutual path towards progress.

ECONOMIC INTEGRATION: THE KEY TO BRIDGING EAST AND WEST IN THE EU

The economic situation in Europe is an intricate mix of differences, with Central and Eastern European countries experiencing notable inequalities when compared to their Western counterparts. To understand the reason for this variation, it is necessary to look at historical, political, and economic factors.

After the Cold War, CEE countries underwent a tumultuous transition from centrally planned economies to market-driven systems. While this transition was necessary, it was also fraught with challenges. Many companies that thrived under state control

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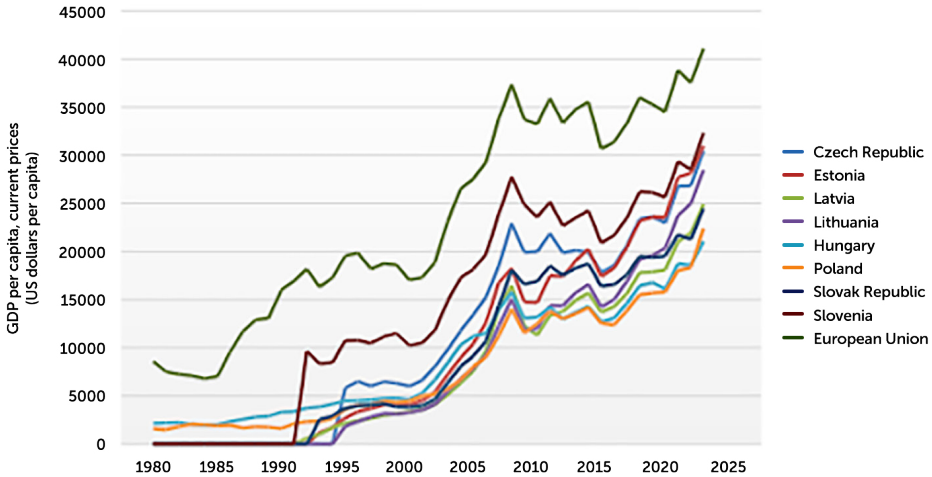
struggled to adapt to the global market, and the outdated infrastructure required significant investments to keep pace with modern economic demands¹.

Meanwhile, Western EU nations continued to advance, further widening the economic gap². This disparity is evident in various aspects of economic life – including the quality of public services, job opportunities, and the overall vibrancy of economic activities. The GDP numbers alone cannot capture

¹Mitra, P.K. and M. Selowsky (2002) Lessons from a Decade of Transition in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union”, [in]: *Finance and Development*, Vol. 39, No. 2. Available [online]: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2002/06/mitra.htm>

²IMF (2006) *The World Economy at the Start of the 21st Century, Remarks by Anne O. Krueger, First Deputy Managing Director, IMF*. Available [online]: <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sp040606>

Figure 1: GDP per capita in CEE [in USD]



Source: IMF³

the full extent of the division, as the everyday lives of citizens are significantly impacted by these economic differences. In essence, the economic landscape of Europe is a tale of two regions, each with its unique set of challenges and opportunities. While Western EU nations have established market economies that continue to thrive, CEE countries face a more challenging path towards economic growth and development.

Even before joining the European Union, the CEE countries were experiencing rapid economic growth as a result of free market reforms. EU accession gave a further boost to growth through access to the single market and development funds. Dynamic growth is confirmed by GDP per capita data [See: Figure 1]. However, there is still more potential for integration⁴.

³<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP-DPC@WEO/UVK/EURO/EU>

⁴<https://for.org.pl/en/projects/report-the-next-25-years>

Deeper economic integration is essential for the prosperity of CEE nations and the EU, requiring policy alignment and strong economic institutions. Enhanced cooperation presents opportunities for Western EU businesses in CEE markets, fostering growth and collaboration. By working together towards shared goals, a more resilient EU can be achieved, benefiting all member states. True economic integration goes beyond financial aid, focusing on policy harmonization and a united commitment to progress within the single market.

Poland stands as a great example to the transformative power of EU integration. Through the strategic utilization of EU funds, Poland has seen remarkable improvements in infrastructure and the business environment, catalyzing economic growth and development. These successes underscore the mutual benefits of economic cooperation. However, in Poland, as in other CEE countries, there are populist voices undermining the



AFTER THE COLD WAR, CEE COUNTRIES UNDERWENT A TUMULTUOUS TRANSITION FROM CENTRALLY PLANNED ECONOMIES TO MARKET-DRIVEN SYSTEMS

economic benefits of EU membership. A high-profile example was the report presented by right-wing MEP Patryk Kami, according to which Poland lost out on EU membership PLN 535 billion. Theses from the report were quickly debunked and explained by economists⁵.

The disparities between Central and Eastern Europe and Western EU nations are pronounced, with significant variations in GDP per capita and labor market dynamics underscoring the depth of the economic divide. CEE countries face substantial investment needs in critical areas for sustainable growth – such as renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and education. EU structural funds and policy harmonization stand out as essential tools for facilitating

economic convergence and enhancing the bloc's overall cohesion⁶⁷.

Today, this historical backdrop sets the stage for current economic challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and an escalating energy crisis exacerbate the existing disparities, underscoring the urgency for comprehensive solutions. In response to the pandemic, the European Union demonstrated the power of integration by rapidly deploying a range of mechanisms to combat the health crisis. This included the joint procurement of vaccines, the establishment of the EU Digital COVID Certificate to facilitate safe and free movement, and the unprecedented Next-GenerationEU recovery package, featuring the National Recovery Plan aimed at mitigating the pandemic's economic impact. These actions showcased how EU integration can serve as a critical tool in managing and overcoming crises, reinforcing the necessity of economic convergence within the EU. Achieving this goal remains elusive but increasingly imperative, as collective action has proven essential in navigating the complexities of contemporary global challenges⁸.

The challenges to further integration and development in CEE include administrative capacity to absorb EU funds, regulatory barriers, and a need for increased emphasis on innovation and digitalization. Tackling these issues is crucial for narrowing the economic gap and fostering a more equal and solidary EU.

⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/europe-grapples-with-regional-economic-divides/a-61280976>

⁷ <https://energypost.eu/europe-preventing-a-carbon-wall-between-the-west-and-the-ten-central-and-eastern-eu-nations/>

⁸ <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2021/number/4/article/europe-s-covid-19-crisis-response-a-race-well-run-but-not-yet-won.html>

⁵ OKO.PRESS (2021) *Polska straciła na Unii 535 mld zł? Ekonomiści sprowadzają odlot ziobrystów na ziemię.* Available [online]: <https://oko.press/raport-jaki-ue> [in Polish]



EU STRUCTURAL FUNDS AND POLICY HARMONIZATION STAND OUT AS ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR FACILITATING ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE AND ENHANCING THE BLOC'S OVERALL COHESION

The economic challenges facing CEE nations are manifold, including demographic decline, brain drain, and the necessity for economic diversification^{9,10,11}. These issues, if not addressed, could impede efforts to achieve parity with Western EU nations. However, the reconstruction of Ukraine offers a unique opportunity in this regard. This monumental task could serve as a catalyst for regional development, providing CEE countries with a chance to showcase and leverage their goods, services, and expertise, thus furthering their integration within the EU.

⁹ Golovics, J. (2019) "Addressing the EU's East-West Brain Drain: Why a Tax Solution Would Be in Vain", [in]: *New Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 63–86. Available [online]: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26831887>

¹⁰ <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/central-and-eastern-europe-uncertain-prospects-economic-convergence>

¹¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/07/14/sp071519-tackling-demographic-challenges-in-cese>

The reconstruction of Ukraine represents not just a challenge, but a beacon of opportunity for CEE. By participating in rebuilding efforts, CEE countries can attract investments, stimulate economic growth, and enhance their strategic importance within the EU. This involvement would not only aid Ukraine's recovery, but also spur the development of CEE economies by opening new markets, fostering innovation, and creating jobs. Furthermore, it could strengthen regional cooperation and solidarity, underscoring the EU's commitment to unity and mutual support in times of need¹².

The quest for economic integration and the bridging of the East-West divide within the European Union is a complex but feasible endeavor. It demands a comprehensive approach that encompasses policy harmonization, strategic investments, and a steadfast commitment to collective prosperity. By seizing the opportunities presented by EU integration and the reconstruction of Ukraine, CEE countries can overcome the legacies of the past and current challenges, paving the way towards a more balanced, resilient, and prosperous European Union. The journey is undoubtedly challenging, but the rewards—a more cohesive, competitive, and inclusive EU – far outweigh the efforts required to traverse this path.

POLITICAL STABILITY THROUGH EU INTEGRATION

The European Union plays a crucial role in promoting democratic values and political stability in CEE. This region, characterized by relatively young parliamentary traditions (compared to the institutions with long traditions in Western European countries), has undergone significant transformations from the economic and political tumults of

¹² <https://media.bgk.pl/229470-bgk-report-rebuilding-and-bringing-ukraine-to-the-eu-to-become-a-historic-opportunity-for-central-europe>

the late 20th century. These nations evolved from authoritarian regimes to pluralistic democracies, where democracy is understood as more than just casting a vote. True democracy in CEE emerged through the establishment of institutions, laws ensuring personal freedom, media freedom, and civil society—developments that have been further strengthened by these countries' accession to the EU¹³.

The European Union represents not merely an economic union; it embodies a community of common values. This is evidenced by the Copenhagen criteria, established by the European Council in 1993, which required joining countries to meet both economic and political standards. These criteria mandated the establishment and preservation of the rule of law, human rights, and minority rights, indirectly influencing the development of legal frameworks that allow the EU to intervene in the protection of democracy and the rule of law in member states¹⁴. This gradual process led to the creation of intervention mechanisms (such as Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union), enabling the EU to protect its foundational values¹⁵.

The EU linked financial support to the adherence to the rule of law principles, a move confirmed by the Court of Justice of the European Union on February 16, 2022¹⁶. This decision paved the way for the European Commission to take stronger actions in protecting Europe's democratic

¹³ <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/voices-central-and-eastern-europe-perceptions-democracy-governance-10-eu>

¹⁴ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria_en

¹⁵ Closa, C. and D. Kochenov (2016) *Reinforcing Rule of Law Oversight in the European Union*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/16/eu-top-court-approves-linking-eu-funds-rule-law>



THE QUEST FOR ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND THE BRIDGING OF THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION IS A COMPLEX BUT FEASIBLE ENDEAVOR

values. EU interventions, especially in CEE countries, were motivated by the need to maintain political, economic, and social stability within member states. Through mechanisms like the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) funding program, the EU supports the role of civil society in promoting the rule of law, demonstrating its commitment to protecting democracy – especially in regions where democratic processes and legal institutions are more vulnerable to challenges such as political pressures or corruption¹⁷.

In the context of Poland, the return of Donald Tusk to national politics and his assumption of the prime ministerial role initiated a new phase in the country's efforts to rebuild democracy and the rule of law institutions. Tusk's government undertook a series

¹⁷ https://poland.representation.ec.europa.eu/publications/czym-jest-program-cerv_pl

of reforms aimed at strengthening judicial independence, protecting media freedoms, and civil rights, and intensified cooperation with the European Union in enhancing democratic mechanisms and the rule of law. Poland can serve as an example for future EU interventions aimed at protecting political stability, where cooperation and constructive dialogue between countries and EU institutions lead to the renewal and strengthening of democratic norms¹⁸.

The future of democracy protection by the EU appears to focus on strengthening enforcement and monitoring mechanisms to ensure member states' adherence to the rule of law principles. Following the Court of Justice of the EU's decision, allowing for financial sanctions on non-compliant states, the EU is now positioned to act decisively against those undermining democratic values and the rule of law. The European Commission is expected to quickly initiate procedures to suspend, reduce, or prevent new financial agreements with member states violating these principles. The actions and procedures presented above underscores the EU's commitment to defending its democratic values and the rule of law, which are crucial for the future of democracy in the European Union.

The European Union plays an irreplaceable role in supporting democratic institutions and political stability in CEE. Through integration with the EU and adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, member states are encouraged to maintain democratic norms and practices. The EU's influence is key to the consolidation of democracy in CEE, offering a framework for political assessment and integration that supports the development of robust democratic institutions.



THE EUROPEAN UNION PLAYS A CRUCIAL ROLE IN PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN CEE

As the EU continues to develop mechanisms for democracy protection, its commitment to promoting stability and democratic values among its member states, particularly in the CEE region, remains unwavering. This ongoing support is essential for the next 20 years and beyond as CEE countries navigate the complexities of modern democracy in the broader European context. The example of Poland and the actions of the Tusk government indicate the possibility of effective democracy rebuilding and strengthening through cooperation with the EU, serving as a model for other nations seeking to ensure lasting stability and prosperity in Europe.

However, Hungary's case under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán can be seen as both an exception in its aggressive push against EU democratic norms and a symptom of the European Union's imperfect mechanisms to enforce these standards. This duality underscores the complex challenges the EU faces in upholding its foundational values among member states, demonstrating the need for more robust and effective tools to address such deviations. The exceptionality of Hungary

¹⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-justice-minister-bodnar-to-introduce-plan-restore-rule-of-law-brussels-eu/>

could be linked to Orbán's unique blend of nationalism and populism, effectively leveraging EU criticisms to bolster domestic support while exploiting the EU's procedural and political limitations to resist substantial reform¹⁹.

GEOPOLITICAL LABYRINTH

In the face of rising geopolitical challenges, Central and Eastern European countries stand at the frontline of shifting international relations. Within this context, integration with the European Union and close cooperation with NATO become key pillars ensuring security, stability, and development of the region. Membership in these structures not only enhances the security of CEE countries amid an uncertain geopolitical environment, but also opens the door to economic and political benefits stemming from the single European market and a common foreign and defense policy²⁰.

The current discussions on a common EU defense and foreign policy include a new plan to coordinate increased military spending among EU members, aimed not just at bolstering Europe's defenses but also at boosting its defense industries. This plan encourages European governments to work together on joint procurement, offering financial incentives for collaboration to reduce dependence on non-EU military capabilities and support European defense industries. Challenges include aligning member states' interests and overcoming reliance on external suppliers, highlighting the intricate balance between achieving strategic autonomy and ensuring a unified

approach to defense and foreign policy²¹. Moreover, in the case of increased military spending, the European Union is loosening its policy on the Excessive Deficit Procedure. At the end of last year, Poland was given the go-ahead to exempt military spending under the EDP procedure²².

Russia has a profound influence on the CEE region. Initially, it subjugated the countries of the region by installing communist regimes and consolidating them within the Warsaw Pact. Then, at the turn of the 21st century, seizing the moment of Russia's weakness and the fall of communism, CEE countries joined NATO, marking a milestone towards EU integration structures. Currently, Russia's aggressive foreign policy, including military interventions among others Georgia and the full-scale invasion in Ukraine from 2022) and hybrid actions²³, poses a direct challenge to the security and sovereignty of the region's states. Moreover, energy dependence on Russia further complicates the situation, making energy security one of the main challenges for countries in the region. However, these challenges consolidate both the CEE countries and the entire community.

Faced with these challenges, the EU undertakes a series of actions aimed at supporting CEE countries, whose energy mixes often do not guarantee energy security. Financing mechanisms – such as the Just Transition Fund²⁴, the Recovery and Resilience Facil-

¹⁹ Batory, A. (2016) "Populists in Government? Hungary's "System of National Cooperation", [in]: *Democratization*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 283-303.

²⁰ Schimmelfennig, F. (2003) "EU Enlargement", [in]: *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric*, Chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 52-62.

²¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-defense-brussels-budget-military-us-josep-borrell/>

²² Inwestycje (11/12/2023) *Mamy zgodę rady UE na wyłączenie wydatków na armie przy procedurze EDP* [online]: <https://inwestycje.pl/gospodarka/mamy-zgode-rady-ue-na-wylaczenie-wydatkow-na-armie-przy-procedurze-edp/> [in Polish]

²³ <https://www.pism.pl/publications/preparing-for-russian-hybrid-activities-against-natoand-eu-countries>

²⁴ <https://crido.pl/en/threads/just-transition-fund-jtf/>



AS THE EU CONTINUES TO DEVELOP MECHANISMS FOR DEMOCRACY PROTECTION, ITS COMMITMENT TO PROMOTING STABILITY AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES AMONG ITS MEMBER STATES, PARTICULARLY IN THE CEE REGION, REMAINS UNWAVERING

ity²⁵, and some elements of the National Recovery Plan²⁶ – aim to support these countries in their green transition and the building of economic resilience²⁷. The re-

²⁵ <https://www.oxera.com/insights/agenda/articles/promoting-the-green-transition-the-eus-recovery-and-resilience-facility/>

²⁶ <https://cor.europa.eu/cs/news/Pages/National-recovery-plans-Green-Deal-.aspx>

²⁷ <https://ceenergynews.com/eu-affairs/8-cee-countries-secured-4-11-blm-euros-in-eu-funds-for-clean-energy-transition-this-year/>

gion's countries will be the main beneficiaries of the green transformation.

For example, Poland will receive nearly EUR 27 billion from European funds for energy transformation in 2021-2027, about EUR 17 billion more than the next largest beneficiary²⁸. Additionally, strategies such as the European Green Deal and initiatives for energy security like the REPowerEU Plan, such as the diversification of energy sources and the development of renewable energy sources, are key to reducing dependency on external supplies and increasing the energy stability of the region.

However, not only Russia impacts the security and stability of CEE. The EU's new migration pact, aimed at reforming the asylum and migration system, has become another flashpoint in the debate on European solidarity and the division of responsibility. While the pact aims to address long-standing challenges associated with migration management, the proposal for a mandatory relocation mechanism of migrants has sparked opposition among some CEE²⁹ countries, highlighting the difficulties in finding a common stance on such complex issues³⁰.

²⁸ Rzeczpospolita (2023) *Fundusze UE zrekompensują Polsce koszty odejścia od węgla*. Available [online]: <https://energia.rp.pl/wegiel/art38055171-fundusze-ue-zrekompensuja-polsce-koszty-odejscia-od-wegla> [in Polish]

²⁹ Poland and Hungary were against during the vote. Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Austria abstained. See: Polsat News (2023) *Unijny pakt migracyjny. Zapadała decyzja, dwa państwa się wyłamały*. Available [online]: <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2023-10-04/unijny-pakt-migracyjny-zapadla-decyzja-dwa-panstwa-sie-wylamaly/> [in Polish]

³⁰ Forsal (2023) *Co oznacza nowy pakt migracyjny? UE przyjęła ostry kurs*. Available [online]: <https://forsal.pl/swiat/unia-europejska/artykuly/9386526-co-oznacza-nowy-pakt-migracyjny-ue-przyjela-ostry-kurs.html> [in Polish]

CEE countries find themselves at a crossroads, striving to balance their unique regional challenges with the expectations and standards of the EU. Their future in the European Union depends on the ability to collectively manage threats, such as energy security, Russian aggression, and migration challenges, while pursuing deeper integration and cooperation within the EU and with NATO. This path, though rugged, offers the greatest chance for maintaining geopolitical stability in the region and securing a safe and prosperous future for Central and Eastern European countries within a united Europe.

BUILDING A EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The European Union embodies more than just economic cooperation or a political union; it represents a profound commitment to cultural integration that surpasses national borders, creating a foundation for the understanding and acceptance of diversity. This European identity, shaped by centuries of diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, assumes a new dimension amidst the contemporary challenges faced by the EU. The journey of cultural integration within the European project presents a multitude of challenges but, more significantly, opens up unparalleled opportunities for the peoples of Europe to thrive together.

Balancing the promotion of a common European identity while preserving the distinct cultural identities of individual member states poses a unique challenge. The EU's foundation is built on diversity, and cultural integration is not aimed at homogenization but rather at fostering understanding and respect among varied cultures. Programs like Erasmus+ exemplify this approach by enabling young individuals to study, work, and immerse themselves in different EU countries, thereby broadening their horizons, acquiring new skills,



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and forming international relationships. Such initiatives not only enhance personal growth, but also significantly contribute to the economic dynamism within the EU by promoting labor mobility and encouraging a more interconnected European society³¹.

The cultural exchange facilitated by programs such as Erasmus+ is instrumental in forging a European identity that transcends traditional boundaries. With over 4 million participants, including more

³¹ European Union (2018) *Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study*. Available [online]: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/94d-97f5c-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>



THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL INTEGRATION WITHIN THE EU ALIGN CLOSELY WITH LIBERAL AND FREE-MARKET IDEALS, LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A DYNAMIC AND COMPETITIVE ECONOMY

than 200,000 only from Poland in 2017³², the impact of these exchanges on fostering a European consciousness among the youth is undeniable. These experiences make other countries and cultures feel less foreign and thus make the decision to move across borders for professional reasons more accessible, enhancing the EU's internal mobility and labor flexibility.

The broader implications of cultural integration within the EU align closely with liberal and free-market ideals, laying the

foundation for a dynamic and competitive economy. A shared European identity facilitates the free movement of individuals, not just for cultural or educational purposes, but also for employment, embodying the essence of the EU's single market. This mobility is crucial for stimulating economic growth, fostering innovation, and enhancing the competitiveness of the European economy on a global scale³³.

Furthermore, the liberalization of markets, coupled with cultural integration, catalyzes increased economic cooperation and the realization of a truly unified market where goods, services, and people circulate freely. Such an environment is conducive to entrepreneurship, innovation, and the creation of jobs, driving forward economic growth and sustainability³⁴.

The engagement in cultural exchange programs has also been shown to foster an entrepreneurial mindset among Europeans, inspiring young entrepreneurs to establish startups with a pan-European vision. These startups often lead the charge in innovation, leveraging the EU's vast market and harmonized regulatory landscape to create economic value and job opportunities^{35,36}.

³² Bankier (2017) *Od 1998 roku 200 tys. studentów z Polski skorzystało z wymiany w ramach programu Erasmus*. Available [online]: <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Od-1998-roku-200-tys-studentow-z-Polski-skorzystalo-z-wymiany-w-ramach-programu-Erasmus-4038829.html> [in Polish]

³³ <https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/culture-and-development-action-and-impact-project/info/iii-impact-cultural-sector-eu-en>

³⁴ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/next-steps-eu-economic-integration>

³⁵ Jones, G., Chirino Chace, B. and J. Wright (2020) "Cultural Diversity Drives Innovation: Empowering Teams for Success", [in]: *International Journal of Innovation Science*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 323-343. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJIS-04-2020-0042>

³⁶ Kostic, P.C. (2021) "Culture, Innovation, and Economic Development", [in]: *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 10(22). Available [online]: <https://innovation-entrepreneurship.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s13731-021-00163-7>

The construction of a European identity, underpinned by liberal and free-market principles, represents a multifaceted strategy that not only enriches the cultural fabric of the continent, but also strengthens its economic foundations. Initiatives like Erasmus+ showcase how cultural integration can enhance European identity while respecting and celebrating national and regional diversities. In the face of globalization, where identities are increasingly fluid, Europe stands as a testament to the idea that a shared future can be built on the pillars of cultural diversity, mutual respect, and economic liberalization. This approach ensures a more inclusive, competitive, and resilient European Union, poised to navigate the complexities of the 21st century and beyond.

CONCLUSIONS

The examination of the next two decades for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) within the European Union (EU) framework reveals an imperative need for deeper integration. The journey thus far has showcased tangible benefits in economic growth, political stability, and cultural integration for CEE countries. However, the path forward is laden with challenges that demand an even more significant commitment to integration. Economic disparities, although narrowed, still present a critical frontier where further EU integration can catalyze mutual prosperity. The political landscape, too, underscores the EU's crucial role in fostering democratic stability and adherence to the rule of law – a cornerstone for the region's continued evolution.

On the geopolitical front, CEE's strategic significance is magnified amidst contemporary challenges, where EU solidarity and support become indispensable for regional and broader European stability. Culturally, the EU's endeavor to weave a shared European identity while celebrating diversity

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THE FUTURE OF BOTH CEE AND THE EU IS INTRINSICALLY LINKED TO THEIR ABILITY TO DEEPEN THEIR INTEGRATION

has enriched the continent's social fabric, showcasing the profound benefits of cultural exchange and unity.

As we look towards the next twenty years, it is clear that the future of both CEE and the EU is intrinsically linked to their ability to deepen their integration. It not only promises enhanced economic opportunities, political stability, and cultural cohesion, but also fortifies the vision of a unified, resilient, and prosperous Europe. The mutual benefits derived from this journey underscore the importance of continued efforts towards fostering closer ties, affirming the essential nature of EU integration for the flourishing future of CEE and the broader European project.



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