

Evolution of How CEE Perceives the European Union



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The enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 was of high importance not only because it was the largest round of accessions so far¹, but also due to the fact that most joining countries were Central and Eastern European (CEE) ones – speaking in geographical terms – and formerly belonged to the Eastern Bloc. That background has left a lasting mark, both politically and culturally, on the social fabric of these countries. During the past 20 years, the perception of the EU in these countries has shifted many times², creating an ever-changing curve of approval and disapproval that is heavily influenced by governments and the messages they are conveying about the EU.

It is, therefore, crucial to better understand how the image of the EU has changed in Central and Eastern European countries over the last two decades, what it was like before the accessions in the early years of membership, and more recently. While the geographical scope for addressing these questions is quite wide, it might be helpful to draw somewhat general conclusions and paint a comprehensive picture of the EU's perception throughout the years.

In an analytical sense, the focal point is determining the factors that have been influencing the image of the EU in these countries via a deeper study of Poland and Hungary. These two countries have been a prime example of how political leadership can influence the way the EU is viewed by a society, as well as how to distort the

¹https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/6-27-members_en

² Guerra, S. (2013) *Central and Eastern European Attitudes in the Face of Union*, London: Palgrave Macmillan., <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2016/major-changes-in-european-public-opinion-2016/report/en-report-exploratory-study-201611.pdf>

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SYSTEM TRANSFORMATIONS USUALLY ENTAIL A POLITICAL PURGE AND ENSURING THAT JUSTICE – OR AT LEAST WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS JUSTICE – IS SERVED

perception. The final goal is to reach conclusions that can be applied to the countries of the Central and Eastern European area and assessing the challenges of the past, and their contemporary impacts.

DOMESTIC TRANSITIONS IN THE ACCEDING COUNTRIES BEFORE 2004: THE AFTERMATH OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME

When assessing and analyzing the 2004 EU enlargement, it is crucial to keep in mind that the majority of the ten acceding countries had belonged to the Eastern Bloc until the then relatively recent collapse of the USSR. In order to understand the period leading up to negotiations and the accession of CEE countries, one must take into account the processes that characterized the domestic political and cultural sphere at the time. It can be concluded that former communist countries were in a period of transitioning from an authoritarian regime to a democratic and pluralist political

system³, accompanied by extensive and deep economic transformation.

System transformations usually entail a political purge and ensuring that justice – or at least what is perceived as justice – is served⁴. As a new government takes the lead, people get the desire to remove those who collaborated with the previous regime from the political elite. However, in the case of the former communist countries that later joined the EU, this process was quite difficult because of the high involvement rate of citizens in different branches of the communist regime⁵. This piece of historical heritage created a changing and evolving society in the 1990s, characterized by the re-emergence of the civil society that had been suppressed during the socialist period.

The historic background provided by the communist regime had severe and long-lasting impacts on both the political culture and the society of these countries. On the one hand, after a time period when the international community split in half along the strong West versus East division, citizens formerly belonging to the Eastern Bloc had the desire to become more like Western societies. They wanted to internalize values perceived as Western and modern – a desire that was embodied in the European Union. Therefore, there was a strong sense of ‘Euroenthusiasm’ among the citizens of these states⁶. They wanted political, economic, and social developments and the EU was perceived as the potential source of all of

³ Welsh, H. A. (1996) “Dealing with the Communist Past: Central and East European Experiences After 1990” [in]: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3, May. Available [online]: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152734>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Guerra, S. (2013) *Central and Eastern European Attitudes in the Face of Union*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.



POSSIBILITY OF ACCESSING THE FREE MARKET AND FURTHERING THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS OF THEIR OWN COUNTRIES WERE TWO INCENTIVES FOR PEOPLE TO SUPPORT THE IDEA OF BECOMING EU MEMBERS

them. Moreover, the possibility of accessing the free market and furthering the democratization process of their own countries were two incentives for people to support the idea of becoming EU members.

Another way this historical heritage impacted political culture was the rise in the importance of the ‘bottom-up approach’⁷. Citizens wanted to have a bigger say in the future of their country and they had grown tired of politics being a tool and sphere of only the elites. The bottom-up approach basically meant that the ideas of ordinary

⁷ Steenbergen, M. R., Edwards, E. E., and C.E. De Vries (2007) “Who’s Cueing Whom?: Mass-Elite Linkages and the Future of European Integration”, [in]: *European Union Politics*, Vol. 8(1), March.

people about politics, the policies that should be implemented – and just in general the future of the country – were taken into account as they circled up to the decision-makers. Simultaneously, the political elite realized the importance of listening to the voices from society, thus public opinion gained importance and even became a legitimizing tool for political decisions. Public opinion became a two-way tool, as it both influenced domestic politics and is influenced by it⁸.

PERCEPTION OF THE EU BEFORE THE ACCESSIONS: EXPECTATIONS

Historian Yuval Noah Harari says that, oftentimes, there is a big gap between expectations and reality, adding that this was particularly true in Central-Eastern Europe during the collapse of communist regimes in the area. He argues that it is impossible to meet the expectations that arise in times of change over the course of a short period, which eventually leads to a loss of enthusiasm and support⁹. This idea summarizes the period between 1989 and 2004 perfectly: the citizens of former communist countries yearned for a change of regime, they wanted to belong to the Western world and embrace its values. However, once the regime change happens, the focus shifts to economic matters¹⁰, because that affects everyone, and the expectations are now tailored to the overall better living conditions that had taken over after the breakdown of the communist system.

⁸ Guerra, S. (2013) *Central and Eastern European Attitudes in the Face of Union*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹ Pataky, I. (2019) "Az EU nélkül román–magyar háború jöhet? – Yuval Noah Harari szerint az európaiak ma természetes állapotként fogják fel a békét", [in]: *Krónika Online*. Available [online]: <https://kronikaonline.ro/kulfold/az-eu-nelkul-romannmagyar-haboru-johet-n-yuval-noah-harari-tortenesz-szerint-az-eu-ropaiak-ma-termeszetes-allapotkent-fogjak-fel#> [in Hungarian]

¹⁰ Ibid.



PUBLIC OPINION BECAME A TWO-WAY TOOL, AS IT BOTH INFLUENCED DOMESTIC POLITICS AND IS INFLUENCED BY IT

What is the consequence of this process? People have higher expectations, even though their living conditions have already improved, but it takes time to achieve economic prosperity and development. Therefore, people might end up feeling like the shift towards European values did not bring them the desired changes and that is how enthusiasm and support towards integration declines over time¹¹. Right after the breakdown of the communist regime in CEE countries, the general public had little information on what being a member of the EU actually entailed¹². This lack of understanding allowed them to fill the gaps with their own desires as to what they wanted membership to mean: economic prosperity and a different set of values, among others.

However, as negotiations began and the accession approached, people were suddenly bombarded with a lot of information¹³, ranging from the process of accession to

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Guerra, S. (2013) *Central and Eastern European Attitudes in the Face of Union*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ Ibid.



PEOPLE MIGHT END UP FEELING LIKE THE SHIFT TOWARDS EUROPEAN VALUES DID NOT BRING THEM THE DESIRED CHANGES AND THAT IS HOW ENTHUSIASM AND SUPPORT TOWARDS INTEGRATION DECLINES OVER TIME. RIGHT AFTER THE BREAKDOWN OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME IN CEE COUNTRIES, THE GENERAL PUBLIC HAD LITTLE INFORMATION ON WHAT BEING A MEMBER OF THE EU ACTUALLY ENTAILED

the structure of the EU, all of which was difficult to process and understand all at once. At this point, another piece of communist heritage appeared in the public opinion: the deeply rooted mistrust towards institutions and the government – the *us* versus *them* dichotomy¹⁴. This tendency affected the way the supranational organization of the EU was viewed. The numbers of the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer survey illustrate this phenomenon: in 1991, around two thirds of the people in Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary had ‘heard of the EC’, but the same number of people felt that they had little information about it¹⁵.

Between 1994 and 1995 there was a slight decrease in support for the European project in some countries (Slovakia and Lithuania), but the general trend was that the initial enthusiasm calmed down and a more balanced attitude took over – so-called ‘Euroneutral’. This term showcases the fact that the decrease in support did not lead to a significant rise in opposition, but more so that there was a group of undecided people who were neutral (rather than skeptical) towards the accession¹⁶.

A possible explanation to the decreasing rate of support after the negotiations began is that the public started to realize the costs of integration because of the infrastructural changes that had to be done and the standardizing policies¹⁷. It is, therefore, important to understand that becoming part of the EU comes with its costs and states must submit some of their decision-making powers and other privileges to the EU in

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Central and Eastern Eurobarometer (1991) *CEEB 1*, pp. 43–48.

¹⁶ Guerra, S. (2013) *Central and Eastern European Attitudes in the Face of Union*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁷ Ibid.

order to achieve goals together as a union. For the public opinion to support the decision of their state to give something up, they need to feel that the benefits they – as citizens – receive by being members of the EU outweigh the costs. The assessment of costs and benefits is a fine balance, which is constantly changing depending on government rhetoric, EU policies, and the general political and economic sphere.

In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the 2004 enlargement, it is crucial to take a look at the other side of the public opinion: the incumbent member states. The opinion of current members of an organization at the time of accession is a great indicator of the socio-economic circumstances surrounding the process, as it highlights the interests of the parties. An important element of the 2004 enlargement was the narrative that it is more than the accession of ten countries, it is a symbolic reunion of Western and Eastern Europe after the Cold War¹⁸, finally uniting in the same organization, accepting common values and guidelines. It is a compelling insight that crises and conflicts have the power to change how countries that are geographically close (or in some other way related) view each other, as they enhance the feeling of belonging to one another, creating a sense of us¹⁹.

The support for the 2004 enlargement – on the part of the states that were already members of the EU – was fueled by the hopes of reuniting Europe and a perceived common pan-European identity²⁰. West-

¹⁸ <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/from-eu-enlargement-fatigue-to-enlargement-enthusiasm/?lang=en>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Maier, J. and B. Rittberger (2008) "Shifting Europe's Boundaries: Mass Media, Public Opinion and the Enlargement of the EU", [in]: *European Union Politics*, Vol. 9(2). Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116508089087>



BECOMING PART OF THE EU COMES WITH ITS COSTS AND STATES MUST SUBMIT SOME OF THEIR DECISION-MAKING POWERS AND OTHER PRIVILEGES TO THE EU IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE GOALS TOGETHER AS A UNION

ern-European powers viewed Europe as a community of democracies, characterized by pan-European values²¹, thus, they aimed at ensuring that Eastern countries were also integrated into this system. Common historical heritage and the rationality of integration based on geographical proximity also played a part²² in the mild support of voters regarding the Eastern enlargement²³.

²¹ <https://eu.boell.org/en/2014/06/10/europe-after-eastern-enlargement-european-union-2004-2014>

²² Eurobarometer 61, Spring 2004.

²³ Schimmelfennig, F. and U. Sedelmeier (2002) "Theorizing EU Enlargement: Research Focus, Hypotheses, and the State of Research", [in]: *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol.9(4). Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116502009004>

**PERCEPTION OF THE EU
IN THE EARLY YEARS
AFTER THE 2004 ENLARGEMENT –
THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS
OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EU
AND IN THE ACCESSING COUNTRIES**

Most public opinion polls²⁴ that were conducted after the 2004 enlargement (including annual surveys that had been conducted for years at that point) examined EU member states as a whole, instead of focusing on the Central-Eastern region specifically, which makes it slightly more challenging to study the perception of the recently joined countries. However, the combination of keeping in mind the common historical heritage of CEE countries and taking a look at surveys only examining one country allows us to draw somewhat general conclusions, which can be applied to most of the accessing states.

When examining the overall public opinion about the EU, usually positive trends can be observed in the years of enlargement rounds and elections, and 2004 was no exception²⁵. This positive change followed a slight decline in public attitudes towards the EU in 2003, which can be explained by the anxiety of incumbent member states as their organization was about to expand from 15 to 25 members²⁶. These opinions characterized the general public perception of EU citizens at the time.

org/10.1080/13501760210152411

²⁴ See, for example: Eurobarometer surveys. Available [online]: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/24/people-broadly-view-the-eu-favorably-both-in-member-states-and-elsewhere/> Note: This survey lists the results of specific countries, but does not focus exclusively on the CEE region.

²⁵ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2016/major-changes-in-european-public-opinion-2016/report/en-report-exploratory-study-201611.pdf>

²⁶ Ibid.



THE ASSESSMENT OF COSTS AND BENEFITS IS A FINE BALANCE, WHICH IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING DEPENDING ON GOVERNMENT RHETORIC, EU POLICIES, AND THE GENERAL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SPHERE

If one takes a look at the newcomer countries and their national public opinion polls, a slightly ambivalent combination of anxiety and high expectations can be observed. Polish polls published in 2004 revealed that the public had the highest hopes for the economic dimension of the accession²⁷. And understandably so, as that is arguably the aspect directly affecting the lives of citizens the most. The public was hopeful about the acceleration of their national economic development by their newly acquired EU membership.

²⁷ CBOS Public Opinion Research Center (2004) *Improvement of Social Moods after the EU Accession and Resignation of the Government*. Available [online]: https://cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2004/05_2004.pdf

Out of the three main dimensions of their EU accession – economic, political, and cultural – the support was the highest for the first one among Polish people, with 71% of them being in favor of economic integration (for comparison, the support for political integration was 52% at the time, and only 24% for cultural integration)²⁸. This proves an important point about EU membership (one that is true in general, not just in the case of the 2004 enlargement): accessing countries might not be equally eager about all areas of the integration, but – as mentioned before – if the foreseeable benefits outweigh the costs, they are willing to overlook certain aspects of joining the EU that are perceived as less beneficial.

In the case of Poland, according to the 2004 public opinion polls, this area was cultural integration. Citizens wanted to maintain their own national culture²⁹ instead of merging it with the pan-European values, but decision-makers realized that cherry picking the areas of integration they wanted to take part in was not an option, and the projected benefits were higher than this cost.

An important point needs to be made when discussing the topic of cultural integration in relation to the CEE region, namely that historical heritage has an impact on how nations view this issue. Poland is a great example of a broader phenomenon³⁰ that can be applied to many of the 2004 accessing countries. Countries that have a history of being occupied and governed by foreign powers often develop a national

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Stanley, B. and M. Czeński (2019) "Populism in Poland", [in]: Stockemer, D. (eds) *Populism Around the World*. Available [online]: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-96758-5.pdf>



THE SUPPORT FOR THE 2004 ENLARGEMENT – ON THE PART OF THE STATES THAT WERE ALREADY MEMBERS OF THE EU – WAS FUELED BY THE HOPES OF REUNITING EUROPE AND A PERCEIVED COMMON PAN-EUROPEAN IDENTITY

identity based on the resentment of alien powers³¹. The long-term effect of this tendency – also relevant in the EU integration process – is the desire to protect their national culture and values perceived as their own from external influences. During the integration period, the desire to be part of an organization that embodies progressive and democratic values was stronger than the fear of European culture overriding their national one.

³¹ Roszkowski, W. (2006) "The Lands Between: The Making of East-Central Europe", [in]: T. Rakowska-Harmstone and P. Dutkiewicz (eds.) "Trends and Prospects", Vol. 1. *New Europe: The Impact of the First Decade*.

However, this attitude of protecting national integrity and identity in the face of (real or often only perceived) threats is a strong feature of many CEE countries, stemming from their historical background. The need to protect national values, identity and sovereignty has been characterizing the rhetoric of certain CEE countries towards the EU in the past few years, mostly due to the rise of populist parties in Europe. The anti-establishment nature of populist parties³² results in a strong sense of distrust towards the EU and its institutions, hence the term 'Euro-scepticism'³³. While, in a strict sense, populism and the emergence of the so-called Eurosceptic attitude does not belong to the discussion on the early years after the enlargement, it is an important consequence of the tendencies observed in 2004.

A key economic circumstance that one must not forget is that the 2008 financial crisis took place shortly after the enlargement. A 2016 exploratory study published by the European Parliament (based on Eurobarometer numbers) suggests that economic crises do not cause immediate negative trends in public opinion. In the case of a supranational organization – such as the EU – states might even view being members as a good thing in times of crises that are hard to manage on the national level³⁴.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned study by the European Parliament revealed –

³² Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³³ Taggart, P. (1998) "A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems", [in]: *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 33(3). Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00387>

³⁴ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2016/major-changes-in-european-public-opinion-2016/report/en-report-exploratory-study-201611.pdf>



WHEN EXAMINING THE OVERALL PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT THE EU, USUALLY POSITIVE TRENDS CAN BE OBSERVED IN THE YEARS OF ENLARGEMENT ROUNDS AND ELECTIONS, AND 2004 WAS NO EXCEPTION

drawing on polls from 2009 and 2010³⁵ – that survey numbers support the theory that a decrease in public opinion is due to follow crises, but in a delayed manner, not right away. These survey results suggested that between fall of 2009 and spring of 2010, a rise in negative opinions on the image of the EU took place. Another supposed consequence of the financial crisis was a decreasing level of trust the public had towards EU institutions³⁶. This loss of trust began in late 2004 and continued until early 2016, but the results suggest that the global economic crisis was the main trigger of this process.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.



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Altogether, it can be concluded that the years following the CEE enlargement brought several events challenging the EU both on the national and the supranational level. These challenges ranged from the 2005 debates about the Treaty, aiming to establish a Constitution for the European Union, to the 2008 financial crisis. The former disrupted the inner unity, as it did not get ratified by all member states³⁷, and in the case of the latter, the EU had to act as a global actor, while formulating policies for its members, which posed a difficult duality. However, it can be concluded that the EU managed to keep the public's perception predominately optimistic,

³⁷ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/draft-treaty-establishing-a-constitution-for-europe>

with the positive and neutral opinions on membership remaining higher than the negative ones³⁸.

PERCEPTION OF THE EU IN RECENT YEARS: THE IMPACT OF CRISES

Since the 2004 enlargement, the EU has been through a number of crises: Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and various international conflicts, just to mention a few. Some argue that for the EU, crisis is the driver of development³⁹. Beyond academic curiosity, examining this claim also has practical relevance. Approaching the European Parliament elections, it is important to take a look at the role of the EU in the lives of its citizens. How has the perception of the European project changed recently? Has it changed at all? 2024 is rounding up to be a year when over 4 billion people will have the chance to vote in over 40 countries and in the EU⁴⁰. While this is a unique landmark in the history of political societies, it entails an equally great responsibility. Thus, taking a look at the past of the EU might be valuable, before forming plans its future.

The data on the general approval of EU citizens regarding the European Union suggests that the perception of the EU took a hit in early 2010 and positive opinions remained under 42% until 2016⁴¹. However, it is important to note that the number of people having a neutral view of the organi-

³⁸ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2016/major-changes-in-european-public-opinion-2016/report/en-report-exploratory-study-201611.pdf>

³⁹ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/10/18/eu-and-creative-and-destructive-impact-of-crises-pub-88145>

⁴⁰ <https://theconversation.com/more-than-4-billion-people-are-eligible-to-vote-in-an-election-in-2024-is-this-democracys-biggest-test-220837>

⁴¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2016/major-changes-in-european-public-opinion-2016/report/en-report-exploratory-study-201611.pdf>

zation has often been higher than 42%⁴², leading one to believe that the perception of the EU has not deteriorated radically, but rather, a more moderate public opinion took over.

Looking at more recent data, a survey conducted in early 2023⁴³ seems to prove the 'crisis as a trigger for development' approach. It found that in nine surveyed member states (Hungary, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Poland, Italy, and Greece) the median of positive opinions was 69% versus 31% of negative ones. Two CEE countries were part of the survey, with Poland reaching an outstandingly high percentage of positive opinions (87%) and only 10% of negative ones. Meanwhile, in Hungary, 59% of the polled people had favorable opinions, whereas 39% had unfavorable ones. In the nine examined member states, the overall lowest ratings were reached between 2013 and 2018 and in the majority of them, the highest ratings were reached in 2022.

2016 was a turning point for the world of politics in many different regards: Donald Trump was elected as the U.S. president, populist politicians gained popularity in several Western countries⁴⁴, and – not unrelated to this – the referendum about their EU membership took place in the UK⁴⁵. There was a wide range of reactions to the UK parting ways with the EU. Nationalists in Slovakia even went as far as to claim that

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/24/people-broadly-view-the-eu-favorably-both-in-member-states-and-elsewhere/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/trump-brexite-and-rise-populism-economic-have-nots-and-cultural-backlash>

⁴⁵ The global rise of populist politicians enhanced emerging Eurosceptic attitudes, and this played a role in the idea of an "exit referendum". Populist politicians raised issues that later played a key role in the Brexit campaign, such as migration.



PROTECTING NATIONAL INTEGRITY AND IDENTITY IN THE FACE OF (REAL OR OFTEN ONLY PERCEIVED) THREATS IS A STRONG FEATURE OF MANY CEE COUNTRIES, STEMMING FROM THEIR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

their country should follow the British example and host a referendum of their own⁴⁶. The idea that parting ways with the EU is possible amplified dissatisfied voices in the country and 'soft' Eurosceptic opinions in the CEE region were enhanced⁴⁷. Soft Euroscepticism entails a negative view of certain aspects of the integration, without the element of opposing the European project as a whole⁴⁸. Examples of this attitude are

⁴⁶ Braun, D., Hutter, S., and A. Kersch (2016) *What Type of Europe? The Salience of Polity and Policy Issues in European Parliament Elections*, [in]: European Union Politics, Vol. 17(4)., Hobolt, S. B. and C. E. de Vries (2016) "Public Support for European Integration", [in]: *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 19(1).

⁴⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/panorama/2023/09/09-06-2023-the-development-trap-a-cause-of-euroscepticism_en

⁴⁸ Ibid.



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Hungarian governing party Fidesz and former Polish governing party Law and Justice. After Britain formally left the EU in early 2020, notoriously Eurosceptic Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán referred to this decision as “evidence of the greatness of the British”⁴⁹.

Meanwhile, Polish reactions were somewhat ambiguous: the PiS (Law and Justice) government expressed their regret, as they lost an important ally, but right-wing nationalists took the chance to praise the decision⁵⁰. Krzysztof Bosak from the far-right Confederation party congratulated Britain and used the slogan “Let’s make Europe

great again!”⁵¹. This is a classic rhetorical phrase often used by right-wing populists to evoke a sense of nostalgia towards – real or perceived – past greatness. This phenomenon could be clearly observed in Donald Trump’s campaign slogan “Make America great again”. (Interestingly, this particular phrase was first used by Ronald Reagan in his 1980 presidential campaign⁵²). Later, Viktor Orbán paraphrased it when referring to the upcoming Hungarian EU Presidency in his State of the Nation Address with the phrase “Make Europe Great Again!”⁵³. The 2018 CODES (Comprehending and Understanding Euroscepticism) research found that an “emotional dimension” was present in Latvia in connection with Euroscepticism and their perception of the EU⁵⁴. This is probably not unrelated to Brexit, as it was an event that heightened both positive and negative opinions through its polarizing effect.

Brexit opened a newfound cleavage among member states, characterized by the diverging opinions about leaving the European project⁵⁵. There is an intriguing duality in the consequences of Brexit. On the one hand, it had an acute polarizing effect. However, on the other hand, it brought the remaining member states closer, as they realized the high costs and the challenges of leaving the organization⁵⁶ (“a post-

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² <https://www.ussc.edu.au/reagan-making-america-great-the-first-time>

⁵³ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2024/>

⁵⁴ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/01/04/what-euro-scepticism-looks-like-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

⁵⁵ Glencross, A. (2019) “The Impact of the Article 50 Talks on the EU: Risk Aversion and the Prospects for Further EU Disintegration”, [in]: *European View*, Vol. 18(2).

⁵⁶ Chopin, T. and C. Lequesne (2022) “Disintegration Reversed: Brexit and the Cohesiveness of the EU27”, [in]: *The Nested Games of Brexit*, London: Routledge.

⁴⁹ Reuters (2020) *Brexit proves ‘Britain’s greatness’ but Hungary will not follow, PM Orban says*, Available [online]: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN-26G2AO/>

⁵⁰ <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/01/31/we-want-the-eu-to-change-so-others-dont-follow-britain-polish-politicians-react-to-brexit/>

referendum cohesion of the EU27⁵⁷). The enhanced level of cohesion seems to support the theory that crises often have a way of resulting in development.

THE IMPACT OF GOVERNMENTS ON THE EU'S PERCEPTION AMONG ITS CITIZENS: EXAMINED VIA THE EXAMPLE OF HUNGARY AND POLAND

In the previous section, the focal point of analysis was a crisis of political nature. Very often, when talking about crises, only the traditional types (like economic, demographic) are considered. This approach leads to disregarding one of the most significant challenges of the last two decades: the rise of populism in Europe. What is interesting is that it can be viewed both as a crisis itself and a result of previous ones⁵⁸. Inglehart and Norris⁵⁹ claim that based on the economic inequality theory – suggesting that “economic insecurity and social deprivation” may result in support for “anti-establishment, nativist, and xenophobic” populist parties – financial hardships could have contributed to the emergence of a new crisis. Regardless of what we believe the source of it to be, one thing is certain: populist rhetoric has been characterizing political discourse towards the EU. Therefore, examining populist tendencies and rhetoric in member states can provide valuable information when assessing the

⁵⁷ Ganderson, J. (2023) “Exiting after Brexit: Public Perceptions of Future European Union Member State Departures”, [in]: *West European Politics*. Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2164135>

⁵⁸ Csehi, R. and E. Zgut (2021) “We Won't Let Brussels Dictate Us: Eurosceptic Populism in Hungary and Poland”, [in]: *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 22(1). Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1717064>

⁵⁹ Inglehart, R. F. and P. Norris (2016) “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash”, [in]: *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series*, August, p. 3. Available [online]: <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/trump-brexit-and-rise-populism-economic-have-nots-and-cultural-backlash>



POPULISM IS OFTEN COUPLED WITH XENOPHOBIA AND NATIONALISM, ESPECIALLY ON THE RIGHT-WING END OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM. HOWEVER, THESE TENDENCIES ARE FURTHER AMPLIFIED BY THE HISTORICAL HERITAGE OF THE CEE REGION

relationship between CEE governments and the European Union.

“Eastern Europeans are among the most pro-EU publics on the continent, yet they vote for some of the most Eurosceptical governments. These governments, in turn, use Brussels as a rhetorical punching bag while benefiting from its financial largess”⁶⁰. This quote encompasses the duality of the CEE region and their

⁶⁰ Krastev, I. (2018) “Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution”, [in]: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97(3) (May/June), pp. 49–56.



IN 2023, THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER FOUND THAT VOTERS OF THE HUNGARIAN RULING PARTY, FIDESZ, ARE LESS LIKELY TO HAVE A POSITIVE PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION THAN THOSE WHO VOTE FOR ANOTHER PARTY

somewhat ambivalent relationship with the EU perfectly. Right-wing populism has been prominent in Hungary and Poland, along with Eurosceptic attitudes (which took different forms in the two countries⁶¹) and the above-mentioned tendency can be observed in both countries.

⁶¹ Both countries' Eurosceptic rhetoric centered around the protection of national sovereignty in the face of attempts of supranational domination, but Poland focused on the rule of law crisis, while Hungary focused on the migration crisis of 2015-2018. The extent of Eurosceptic rhetoric in the national political sphere also differed. See: Csehi, R. and E. Zgut (2021) "We Won't Let Brussels Dictate Us": Eurosceptic Populism in Hungary and Poland", [in]: *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 22(1).

The core idea of populism – regardless of whether it is its right- or left-wing in form – is the opposition between 'the corrupt elite' and 'the pure people'⁶². This is easily translated into Eurosceptic rhetoric: the EU is the corrupt elite, misusing their power and attempting to downsize national sovereignty⁶³. The contrast between 'Us' and 'Them' allows populist leaders to create an image of protecting their nation from a perceived danger: immigrants, the war in Ukraine, or simply Brussels and the EU in general (see slogans and speeches of Hungarian PM Orbán).

Populism is often coupled with xenophobia and nationalism, especially on the right-wing end of the political spectrum. However, these tendencies are further amplified by the historical heritage of the CEE region. For these countries, which have a past of being occupied by various regimes, resentment of foreign people – immigrants and foreign dominance – a supranational organization, such as the EU – is about reclaiming their past and overcoming their historical humiliation⁶⁴. The need to protect their national values and sovereignty from perceived threats is deeply embedded into these societies, making it easier for populist politicians to gain support when voicing similar concerns and aims.

The following excerpt from an Orbán speech (2011) is a great example of this attitude: "*we did not let Vienna dictate us in 1848, we did not let Moscow dictate us in 1956, and we won't let Brussels or others*

⁶² Mudde, C. (2004) "The Populist Zeitgeist", [in]: *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, pp. 541-563

⁶³ Csehi, R. and E. Zgut (2021) "We Won't Let Brussels Dictate Us": Eurosceptic Populism in Hungary and Poland", [in]: *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 22(1). Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1717064>

⁶⁴ Ibid.



HISTORICAL HERITAGE CANNOT BE IGNORED AS IT INFLUENCES MANY DIFFERENT AREAS OF A SOCIETY

*dictate us now*⁶⁵. Another peculiarity of CEE countries is that joining the EU, they had high hopes for a better life to come with better conditions than what the communist regime provided. If these high expectations are not met, people will start looking for someone to blame and, essentially, they have two choices: their domestic government and the supranational organization they are part of. Whether the blame falls on the EU or not is heavily influenced by government rhetoric⁶⁶.

But how can we be certain that Euroscepticism is connected to certain rhetorical patterns and not just party affiliation? In 2023, the Pew Research Center found that voters of the Hungarian ruling party, Fidesz, are less likely to have a positive perception of the European Union than those who vote for another party⁶⁷. However, voters of Jobbik (another Hungarian right-wing party) are more likely to have a positive opinion of the EU. This

difference in the attitude of Fidesz and Jobbik voters proves that the main source of Eurosceptic attitudes is not necessarily to be found in voters' location on the left-right axis. It is rather the consistent Eurosceptic rhetoric of politicians – in the Hungarian case, PM Orbán, who creates a measurable decrease in positive opinions. In a 2016 speech, Orbán followed classic populist patterns when saying that the leaders of the EU “*are trying to reshape Europe against the will of the people of Europe*”⁶⁸. This is a traditional populist claim that the corrupt elite is not in accordance with the general will of the people and this was the core message in the majority of his EU-related speeches.

Poland is an interesting case because its citizens are in favor of the European Union. The 2023 Spring Eurobarometer survey found that 77% of Polish citizens were optimistic about the future of the EU and 58% had an overall positive image of it⁶⁹. Still, the former government of Law and Justice (PiS) and mainly Jarosław Kaczyński (not the PM, but the effective leader of the ruling party) employed heavily Eurosceptic rhetoric regarding many topics. The most significant examples were in connection with their own domestic democratic deficit and immigrants between 2015 and 2018.

In connection with the latter, Kaczyński's rhetoric was very similar to that of PM Orbán's, with both arguing that the migration crisis is to be blamed on the corrupt and unfit leaders of the EU⁷⁰. Their message to the citizens was that the EU is working

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/01/04/what-euro-scepticism-looks-like-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/24/people-broadly-view-the-eu-favorably-both-in-member-states-and-elsewhere/>

⁶⁸ Csehi, R. and E. Zgut (2021) “We Won't Let Brussels Dictate Us’: Eurosceptic Populism in Hungary and Poland”, [in:] *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 22(1). Available [online]: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1717064>

⁶⁹ Eurobarometer 99, Spring 2023.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

against them, completely disregarding national interests. The public opinion polls suggest that the Polish attempt at dismantling the image of the EU and creating a scapegoat out of its leaders was less successful than the Hungarian one. However, it is beyond dispute that these types of rhetoric create long-term damage in the perception of the EU.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the countries of the 2004 enlargement through the years, a couple of conclusions can be drawn. First, historical heritage cannot be ignored as it influences many different areas of a society. CEE countries have a heavy burden to carry with their post-communist heritage, as it is one that left many sensitive areas – ranging from economic insecurity to fear of foreign influence. These sensitive issues, stemming from the socialist past have been exploited and amplified by populist politicians, but that is not to say that the damage they had done to the EU's reputation is irreparable.

Another pattern that can be seen is that the European Union is great at becoming stronger and more united in the aftermath of crises, thus it is a possibility that the current challenge posed by populist will trigger further development in the long run. After all, in historical perspective and in the grand scheme of things, the EU is a relatively young organization, and it seemingly learns from all its mistakes and hardships. Dealing with Eurosceptic member states helps create a precedent, which might be useful if a similar situation arises in the future.

Another implication of the CEE accession experience is that high expectations can be hard to meet in the framework of a supranational organization. It is a difficult and delicate task to coordinate the interests of several different member states,

thus it can take some time to achieve goals – especially ones directly affecting the lives of citizens.

Citizens' perception of the EU is ever-changing, affected by many different factors. While some cannot be changed, the CEE heritage can be used in a good way, acknowledging it but not letting it entirely determine the future of the region's EU membership.



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