

EAST-WEST

REALITY AND RELATIVITY OF A DIVIDE



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Thirty years on from the end of the Cold War and the division of the continent, are we witnessing a renewed East-West divide in Europe? Fifteen years following the enlargement of the European Union to Central and Eastern European countries, are simple political differences emerging or is there a break between the “old” and “new” EU Member States on issues as fundamental as democracy and the rule of law, and the rise in nationalism and sovereignism? The triggering of article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty against Poland and Hungary for breaches of the rule of law which could, in theory, result in these countries losing their voting rights, suggests the latter. It is also often the interpretation favoured in the media or in declarations of political figures on both sides of a newly restored dividing line. In the West of the continent, this is perceived as a threat to the European project and, in France in particular, a justification in hindsight of the reservations with regard to the very idea of enlarging the EU to the East (considered “premature” to be polite). In the East, there are claims of being treated as second-class members of the EU and there is great resentment of a double standards and interference from Brussels compared to the past control from Moscow.

In such a presentation of the situation, what can be referred to as perceptions and discourse and what are the realities of the divergences which will be a major challenge against the backdrop of the European elections and beyond? A succinct analysis of the East-West divides will follow, concluded by some interpretation guidance for an assessment of their scope and limits.

Understanding the nature and the impact of the East-West divide in the EU first of all requires a consideration of the context and a few introductory questions.

Is this a transient conflict related to the migration crisis and the coming to power of populist parties in the countries of the Visegrád Group? After all, only five years ago, the Great Transformation in the East could be deemed a success, topped by EU membership and a Polish prime minister, Donald Tusk, as President of the European Council. A failure of the PiS (Law and Justice) party in the Polish elections of October 2019 would most certainly change the way the region is viewed.

Another consideration is the recent expression of older and deeper points of divergence

concerning the values, priorities and even the purpose of the European project that ought to be clarified. If there is a renewed East-West divide, is it more serious than the North-South divide which emerged within the Eurozone in the last decade, curbed but not yet resolved? It may be suggested that it is the combination of the two divides which qualifies a European crisis and gives the divergence analysed here particular relevance.

Lastly, Brexit shows that fears that centrifugal forces may weaken or deconstruct the EU from within are not exaggerations and that they are not all focused to the East of the EU. In other words, this subject must be considered from a trans-European perspective.

1. Recent divisions and old misunderstandings

1.1 “Illiberal” democracy

2015 was undoubtedly the year in which an East-West divide emerged once again. Initially, it was expressed, symbolically and politically, when faced with the most serious migration crisis since the end of the Second World War. In symbolic terms, Hungary, the country which led the way to bringing down the iron curtain over the summer of 1989, hurriedly put up a barrier along the border with Serbia to stem the arrival of migrants. In political terms, on 5 September 2015, the leaders of the Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) declared that they were firmly opposed – a position that has not been changed

since – to the openness advocated by Angela Merkel and the European Commission’s desire to distribute the migrants according to a quota system. The decision at the end of 2015 of the Slovakian and Hungarian governments to bring action against the European Commission before the European Court of Justice¹ in relation to this issue crystallised the distrust felt towards Brussels. Behind legal arguments on non-compliance with the Schengen and Dublin agreements, there were two political visions and two European responses to the crisis: that of the Commission (supported by most Member States) which viewed the Visegrád Group’s refusal as a serious breach of European solidarity, and that of the Visegrád Four which considered the redistribution of migrants according to the quotas set in Brussels as a challenge to their sovereignty and an attempt to force upon them a multicultural society model.

The Polish election win in 2015 of Jarosław Kaczyński’s PiS party, which stated the ambition of having “Budapest in Warsaw”, meant that breaches of the rule of law and of pluralism in the media made by Viktor Orbán’s government could no longer be considered as an anomaly or an isolated case. The election of Robert Fico’s SMER party in Slovakia in March 2016, following a xenophobic anti-migrant campaign², which led to a government coalition including the nationalist SNS party, confirmed this trend. The coming to power in Prague of a populist entrepreneur, Andrej Babiš, and in Croatia of a coalition dominated by a national-conservative party seems to complete the picture. National populism was certainly not confined to Central Europe, but that is where it has gained power..

1. The action was based on the idea that the Commission had acted illegally in adopting a set of measures which jeopardised the sovereignty and security of Member States by dispensing with the unanimity vote required in the European Council, where Heads of State and government are represented, and opting for a qualified majority vote. The European Court of Justice dismissed the action in June 2017. The action was not followed up as the Commission itself had abandoned the quota policy in the meantime. This was of huge consequence for the EU’s future as it meant that a court ruling could be ignored for political convenience.

2. Orbán spoke of an “invasion”, Kaczyński of “risks of epidemics”, Fico of an incompatibility with Islam: “I will never allow a single Muslim immigrant under a quota system”, stated the Slovak Prime Minister before taking up the presidency of the EU Council on 1 July 2016. Cf. Henry Foy, “Anti-migrant rhetoric dominates Slovakia vote, *Financial Times*”, 4 March 2016.

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DEEMED THE MODEL STUDENTS OF THE POST-1989 DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS, THESE COUNTRIES ARE NOW AT THE FOREFRONT OF A REGRESSION IN DEMOCRACY.

Deemed the model students of the post-1989 democratic transitions, these countries are now at the forefront of a regression in democracy. This is not only the opinion of a European commissioner (Franz Timmermans) or of malicious reports adopted at the European Parliament (Sargentini report on Hungary), it has also been indicated in recent years in the “Nations in Transit” democratic assessments by Freedom House³. Hungary is now ranked behind Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, while Poland is undergoing a similar trend.⁴ The

report of the Bertelsmann Foundation ranks Hungary 40th out of 41 European and OECD countries⁵. Similarly, in terms of the corruption assessed by Transparency International, Hungary is on a par with its neighbours in the Balkans. For Reporters without borders, media freedom is under threat and, according to the World Press Freedom Index, Hungary under Orbán ranks 73rd worldwide⁶ and Poland 58th, a situation comparable in Europe to that of Serbia or of Kosovo.

TABLE 1 ■ Assessing democracy

COUNTRIES	OVERALL SCORE ^a	FREEDOM INDEX ^b	SUSTAINABILITY INDEX ^c	CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX ^d	HUMAN DÉVELOPPEMENT INDEX ^e
Estonia	94	1	2	71	0.865
Slovenia	93	1	3,5	61	0.890
Czech Republic	93	1	2,6	57	0.878
Lithuania	91	1	2,7	59	0.848
Slovakia	89	1	2,9	50	0.845
Latvia	87	2	2,6	58	0.830
Croatia	86	1,5	3,2	49	0,827
Poland	85	1,5	2,1	60	0,855
Romania	84	2	3,6	48	0,802
Bulgaria	80	2	3,3	43	0,794
Serbia	73	2,5	4,1	41	0,776
Hungary	72	2,5	3,4	45	0,836
Albania	68	3	3,8	38	0,764
Montenegro	67	3	4	46	0,807
Georgia	64	3	4,1	56	0,769
Ukraine	62	3	3,3	30	0,743
Moldova	61	3	3,9	31	0,699
Macedonia	58	3,5	3,9	35	0,748
Bosnia and Herzegovina	55	4	3,7	38	0,750
Kosovo	52	3,5	3,8	39	n.a.

a. 0 = the least freedom ; 100 = the most freedom (Freedom House, 2018).

b. 1 = best result ; 7 = worst result (idem).

c. 1 = meilleur résultat ; 7 = pire résultat (civil society organisation, 2017)

d. 100 = very low corruption ; 0 = highly corrupt (Transparency International, 2017).

e. 0 = the least developed ; 1 = the most developed (United Nations, 2016).

3. Freedom House is a Washington-based non-governmental organisation financed by the US government which assesses the state of democracy across the globe.

4. Freedom House, “Nations in Transit”, New York, 2018. See Table 1.

5. Ranking by the Bertelsmann Foundation: “Quality of democracy?”

6. Ranking by Reporters without borders: [Hungary](#)

By 2014, Viktor Orbán took ownership of the concept of “illiberal democracy”⁷ used by political scientist and journalist Fareed Zakaria who, in an article published more than twenty years ago, expressed fears with regard to the proliferation of regimes which gain legitimacy through elections but do not respect the rule of law. It allowed him to reject, in an address made in July 2014, claims of authoritarianism to the West of the continent: “We had to state that a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy”.⁸ This is a key element in the European debate on populism: the link between populism and neo-authoritarianism or, stated differently, between a decline in democracy and the invocation of the “sovereign people” which is precisely the foundation of democracy. A PiS MP (the father of the Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki) claimed in Parliament that “the good of the nation is above the law”, using Carl Schmitt’s famous quote. Along the same lines, Kaczyński called for an emancipation from “legal impossibilism”, i.e. from the constitutional and institutional straightjacket that guarantees the separation of powers. This is the justification of all attempts to call into question the rule of law on which the very existence of the European Union is founded, as a community of nations governed by legal standards. It is also the backdrop of the conflict between Poland and Hungary on one side and the European Commission on the other.

Following on from illiberal democracy, we are also witnessing in Central and Eastern Europe a criticism of societal liberalism together with an alleged “hegemony of the liberal left” on such issues within the EU. The former Polish minister for foreign affairs Waszczykowski mocked those convinced that a sense of history must necessarily tend towards “a new

mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy and who battle all signs of religion.” He opposed this position to “Polish values”, shared by most of the population such as “tradition, historical awareness, love of country, faith in God and normal family life between a woman and a man”.⁹

Ryszard Legutko, a historian of ideas and PiS MEP¹⁰, is equally critical of the European Union which is allegedly transcending its field of jurisdiction defined by the treaties to act increasingly openly in the areas of culture, religion and morals. For him, the new “totalitarian temptation” is not that of communism, but of liberalism, as both ideologies share the same objective: to dissolve the family, the nation and the Church. In Western Europe, European values are presumed to be liberal and are, according to him, identified with a proliferation of rights which amount to “social engineering”. The political message of this is that if even the conservatives of Cameron and Merkel’s CDU can adopt gay marriage, then we are the last “real conservatives” in Europe.

While in Western Europe, there is currently a trend of viewing Central Europe through the prism of authoritarian regression, a rise in nationalism and Eurosceptic powers in office, among a significant portion of the elites in Central Europe there is growing resentment towards a Union dominated by the Franco-German tandem, which promotes a society open to all, permissive, individualist, lacking bearings. In this, we are not that far from the Putin-style discourse on a decadent and weak Europe.

Kaczyński and Orbán’s solution to this is to defend a “Europe of nations” and a Christian Europe. “On the eve of a pan-European

7. Read also Thierry Chopin, “[Illiberal democracy or majoritarian authoritarianism? Contribution to the analysis of populisms in Europe](#)”, Jacques Delors Institute, 2019.

8. V. Orbán, [Address](#) at the Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp, 26 July 2014, Băile Tuşnad.

9. Interview of minister W. Waszczykowski by Hans-Yörg Vehlewald published in *Bild*, 3 January 2016.

10. R. Legutko is the author of *The Totalitarian Temptation* (2016).

parliamentary election, Europe finds itself in the position that we must stand up again for our Hungarian identity, for our Christian identity”¹¹.

1.2 The misunderstandings of enlargement

How can this triple divide on democracy, migration and societal issues – three aspects of European liberalism – be charted after 25 years of unprecedented economic, political and institutional convergence? One place to start would be the misunderstandings concerning the process and meaning given to enlargement of the EU to the East. There are also deeper historical and cultural differences that we must try to understand if we are to prevent these recent divisions from becoming actual fault lines. Lastly, there are different expectations of the European project and of the role that each party wishes to play in it.

An enlargement or unification of Europe? This is more than a semantic nuance. The term used by the EU is enlargement, which suggests that an institutional and normative system is transferred to new members; the 100,000 pages of the “*acquis communautaire*” to be incorporated into the legislation of new members in the pre-accession phase transformed their parliaments into photocopiers of European legislation.

Reunification was the term preferred by acceding countries, starting with figures linked to the founding moments of new democracies such as Bronisław Geremek (Polish minister of foreign affairs) or the Czech President Václav Havel¹². Both insisted on a mutual contribution, that of Central Europe being specifically the support of the values pertaining to human rights, democracy and a certain idea of Europe resulting from resistance within a totalitarian empire; for

them Europe was not merely a “common market”. Rather than a return to Europe (they had never left Europe), their “return in Europe” was meant as a return home rather than an inclusion. Yet in the meantime, Europe had changed and no longer corresponded fully to the image they had of it. The gap was twofold: between the discourse on the return and the more prosaic reality of an accession process broadly dominated by experts and technocrats on both sides, between the expectations and illusions with regard to the future: the new members who had regained a voice emphasized equality between members and economic catch-up. The illusion of the founding countries was to believe that an enlarged Europe would be the same but on a greater scale. The EU had to contribute significantly to transforming Central and Eastern Europe, but with the “revolution of numbers” (Alain Lamassoure) and the shift to the East of its centre of gravity, the EU itself was actually transformed. After the Europe of the post-war founding fathers which resulted in the Treaty of Rome, then the Europe in which the single market and the single currency consolidated peace through interdependence, in 2004 a 3rd Europe was created, enlarged to the East, “not quite the same, nor quite another”, to borrow from Paul Verlaine.

Entering the EU at a late date, the new members wanted a new order, but underestimated the tensions that this could give rise to. They took the EU for granted, an anchor for their budding democracies, while retaining a diffuse resentment for a project that had been built without them. Conversely, in the founding countries (France in particular) there was an ownership reflex: a project that they had invented and conducted successfully could be a victim of its success and fall out of their hands. In part, this reluctance with regard to enlargement explains the negative votes in the Netherlands and France in the referenda

11. V. Orbán, State of the Nation address, Budapest, 10 February 2019. The European election is the “final struggle”, “the stronghold of the new internationalism is in Brussels, and its means is immigration”.

12. Cf. B. Geremek, “De l’élargissement à la réunification. Qu’allons-nous apporter à l’Europe ?” in J. Rupnik (dir.), *Les Européens face à l’élargissement*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2004 (in French).

2005 which put an end to the European Constitution and with it a deepening of the EU. There was a feeling between a nostalgia for a Carolingian Europe and the feeling of being on a train while new carriages are being added, heading for an unknown destination and in which it is impossible to get off without setting off the alarm.

2. Migrations, nations, Europe

Faced with the recent migration crisis, two visions of the nation, of sovereignty and of Europe have been confronted. On one side, those in Western Europe who would emphasize solidarity with migrants and between European nations to tackle the challenge they raised. Angela Merkel said at the time that they should be welcomed in the name of European values, i.e. for human rights. This universalist discourse was opposed by the prevailing discourse in Central and Eastern Europe which focused on protecting the nation, its culture, its way of life and a different vision of Europe.

Unlike in France, where the State built the nation over one thousand years completing, with the 1789 revolution and the Republic, the emergence of a citizen conception of it, in the East nations are old but States are relatively recent. Their construction of the nation-building was based on the German model of *Kulturnation*. An ethno-linguistic concept of the nation (language, culture, religion) prevails in Central and Eastern Europe. For historical reasons, these countries also considered themselves to be Europe's bulwark against the Ottoman and Russian empires. This difference in terms of the definitions of the nation and its identity is therefore far-reaching and will remain the most difficult aspect to overcome. The irony of history means that just when Germany abandoned this concept and shifted to a civic concept of the nation and a universalist interpretation of European values, those who inherited the "German" conception of the nation in Central Europe transposed it on a European level: justifying the closure of their borders to migrants to protect the nation and "European civilisation".

In a second contrast, most of the nation-states in Central Europe created in 1918 became "homogenous" post-1945. Following the Holocaust, Stalin helped the exclusion of Germans at the end of the war. Changes to borders and then the iron curtain during the Cold War did the rest: nobody could leave, but nobody could enter either. The migrations to Western Europe since the 1960s did not affect Central and Eastern Europe. The migrants to Central Europe since the 1990s, mainly from the former Yugoslavia and Ukraine (around 1 million in Poland, 200,000 in the Czech Republic) did not provoke debate on their integration, which was not deemed to be problematic.

The issue of migration relates to the broader issue of the complex relationship between demography and democracy. Faced with the demographic stagnation in Europe, immigration is often considered by experts in the OECD or in Western economic circles as a necessity which meets the needs of the labour market. To the East of the continent, it is more correct to speak of demographic decline or even collapse, rather than stagnation.

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CONCERNS FOR THE NATION INHERITED THROUGH HISTORY ARE COUPLED WITH A “DEMOGRAPHIC PANIC”, THE FEAR OF THE DISSOLUTION AND EVEN THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE NATION.

While the population in Western Europe rose by 11% between 1990 and 2015, that of Eastern European countries fell by 7%. Bulgaria and Romania lost between a fifth and a quarter of their population, and one million Polish nationals work in the United Kingdom. The projections for the next thirty years show this gap widening. Concerns for the nation inherited through history are coupled with a "demographic panic", the fear of the dissolution and even the disappearance of the nation. The strong reluctance confirmed in opinion polls with regard to welcoming migrants should be analysed against this backdrop. The media and political elites have successfully propagated and leveraged this pervasive anxiety by presenting the European

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THE CHRISTIAN VALUES EXPRESSED ARE A MARKER OF IDENTITY RATHER THAN A QUEST FOR SPIRITUALITY OR AN INDICATION OF RELIGIOUS FERVOUR

Commission's desire to allocate migrants via a quota system as the imposition of a multicultural society model which, moreover, was a failure in the West. After all, at the CDU congress of December 2010, Angela Merkel deemed multiculturalism as having "utterly failed". This in no way minimises the expression of xenophobic discourse in the public arena and in political debate¹³, but offers a greater understanding of its echo in society.

Which European values? In the face of the migration crisis, all sides assert European values, but with very different content: humanitarian universalism, openness, multicultural society in the West and cultural identity, closure, protection of the Christian-European civilisation in the East.

When discussing this contrast and its implications, first of all the blatant political instrumentalization used by Orbán, Kaczyński, Fico and Zeman must be separated: fear and a withdrawal in the nation are leveraged for electoral purposes. Here, the Christian values expressed are a marker of identity rather than a quest for spirituality or an indication of religious fervour.

Yet the question cannot be reduced to its uses and abuses. It was already dividing Europeans during the Convention in charge of the European Constitution project. We simply have to read the contributions of the delegates of the new Member States with regard to the Constitution's preamble to note that none of these countries considered European values without a reference to Europe's Christian heritage. On this subject, the great historian

and humanist intellectual Bronisław Geremek said that Europe is a community of law which is based on a "common denominator" in which various cultural traditions can be found. For him, this common denominator was human dignity, unthinkable without the Jewish-Christian heritage in Europe, which constituted the "first European unification"¹⁴: "In European discourse [...] the historical tradition separates the religious factor from the humanist factor, which is considered to be secular. I am with those who believe that it is important to combine both factors in European traditions".

Václav Havel, another figure of the reinvented democracy to the East of the continent in favour of pluralism and human rights, and opponent of the Eurosceptic nationalism of the conservative Prime Minister (then President) Václav Klaus, was the first to call for a European Constitution as early as the 1990s ("a short text, understandable by all") which would define its institutions, their competences, and would have a "fine preamble" devoted to the meaning of the Union and its project. For Havel, the project relates to a "European identity or soul", a distinct "cultural, spiritual and civilizational space"¹⁵.

In other words, it would be wrong or simplistic to rigidly oppose the Western advocates of a Europe based on "constitutional patriotism" (J. Habermas), on legal standards and the universalism of human rights, and Eastern advocates of an identity-based nationalism draped in the defence of "Christian Europe". The East-West debate on European values and identity precedes and exceeds that on national-populism.

¹³. For Orbán, if he had not put up the barrier, Hungary as a whole would have become a massive Marseille (sic). The Czech President Miloš Zeman, in his re-election campaign, even equated his rival, Jiří Drahoš of the Czech Academy of Sciences, with the threat, with posters stating: "stop immigration and Drahoš".

¹⁴. "The European idea has been based on the community's awareness of Christian values since the 14th century", cf. B. Geremek, "L'humanisme européen, creuset du laïc et du religieux", cf. Rue Saint-Guillaume issue 144 (September 2006) p. 31 (in French). He continued: "I say with Voltaire that Europe is Christian. It became a community in medieval times around Latin and Greek, in the Graeco-Roman heritage and with Latin in Church practices."

¹⁵. V. Havel, address to the French Senate in Paris on 3 March 1999. Separate from other "civilisation areas" with which Europe must enter into open dialogue and be respectful. This was the purpose of the annual meetings of the Forum 2000 which V. Havel organised in Prague.

Legacies of Empires. To understand the differences in the relationship to the nation and to Europe against the backdrop of the migration crisis, the weight of history must be taken into account. In Western Europe, the integration project stemmed from the drive to overcome nationalism and to revive the Nation-State. In Central and Eastern Europe, the nation and its culture were in a defensive stance within former empires (Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian) as in the Soviet bloc. Literature on European integration in the West spoke of a post-national project, while in the East the new members only regained their independence after 1989 and any surrenders of sovereignty were not straightforward. György Schöpflin, a political scientist and MEP for the Hungarian Fidesz party, attributes these differences to the fact that “the West has unilaterally declared itself post-national”

The consequence of these varying conceptions of the nation and attitudes to immigration are the contrasting heritages of empires. In Western Europe, a more inclusive conception of citizenship and the variants of multiculturalism developed with the arrival over the last fifty years of migrants from the former colonies, Sub-Saharan Africa and Maghreb for France, India and Pakistan for the UK, Indonesia for the Netherlands, Angola and Mozambique for Portugal. The nations of Eastern Europe did not have colonies and consider themselves recently emancipated from the last colonial empire: the Soviet bloc. “Can the West ever come to terms with those parts of Europe that were subordinated to imperial rule and, hence, have no post-colonial guilt?”¹⁶

3. Convergence through the economy or neocolonialism?

Historians will consider the last quarter century as the swiftest East-West economic convergence process in the history of Europe.¹⁷ Poland’s per capita GDP, one of the lowest in Europe thirty years ago, is now greater than that of Greece or Portugal, and the region around Prague is the 7th most prosperous in Europe.

The process to integrate Central and Eastern European countries into the EU can be seen as their third “modernisation” following the unconvincing attempts of former empires and then the Soviet model imposed in the post-war years. This economic integration with Western Europe, upon their exit from the command economy as part of the former Comecon, has resulted in a significant interlinking with the economies of Western Europe and the percentage of exports in the GDP of the Visegrád Group countries has grown spectacularly (to 80%), three quarters of which are conducted with the EU. Germany’s trade with the “V4” exceeds its trade with France¹⁸ and the term economic Mitteleuropa adequately describes the situation.

Paradoxically, a nationalist and Eurosceptic discourse has developed against this backdrop. Countries such as Hungary and Poland, which are highly dependent on foreign investors, have developed rhetoric on “economic patriotism” and measures that are hostile to foreign finance and trade capital. Since the 2008 financial crisis and within the framework of the power struggle with Brussels on the rule of law, a discourse of victimhood and resistance to the domination of foreign capital has emerged. When the

¹⁶ György Schöpflin, “What if?”, *Hungarian Review* (Budapest), November 2018, p. 15.

¹⁷ Over the last decade, growth in the new EU Member States was double that of the Eurozone on average.

Poland was the only EU Member State not to undergo a recession after 2008. The Czech Republic has the lowest unemployment rate in Europe (2.5%). Both countries enjoyed a budgetary position with a surplus in 2018.

¹⁸ “We thank our friend Viktor Orbán for his visit. Hungary and the Visegrád countries are close trading partners of Germany. The trade balance with these countries is much higher than we have with France”, said Alexander Dobrindt, leader of the CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag, in January 2018. *Le Monde*, 12 October 2018.

IMF's office in Budapest was closed, Orbán claimed: "It is the end of the colonial era!". "Are we going to accept the status of a colony as a fact?" questioned Jarosław Kaczyński in a 2016 letter to PiS members. In Western Europe, studies and theories on "post-colonialism" are monopolised by heavily left-leaning academics. In Central Europe, in Poland or Hungary, they are clearly on the conservative right and are aimed at the liberal and pro-European cosmopolitan elites which have dominated the political arena since the post-1989 years. "What we need", said Morawiecki in October 2016, "is to build an elite in the country (native) around us." After more than twenty years of modernisation through the economic integration with Western Europe, the "colonised" periphery of the EU is now being incited to practice economic patriotism.

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of Central and Eastern Europe. Yet straight away there was a contrast between NATO, associated with the USA and their power to advocate Western values and "promote democracy", and the European Union which remained predominantly a "single market" and the route to prosperity. In simple terms, the Central European elites shared a British vision of Europe: the Nation-State was and remains the preferred framework for democracy; security is the remit of NATO and therefore the USA, and Europe is a space for economic development and necessary legal standards where economic interests are negotiated.

Recently, this "Euro-Atlanticist" positioning was affected by Donald Trump's election and by Brexit. Trump's arrival was welcomed by Orbán, Kaczyński and the Czech President, who found an ideological ally against European liberalism.¹⁹ Western

4. Pro-Europeans and/or Atlanticists?

Just as the EU accession treaty was signed by the Central-West European countries in April 2003, together with the rhetoric of European unification, Europe was divided on the US war in Iraq. The "new Europe" was opposed to Franco-German "old Europe" to use the words of Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defence. For the first time since 1945, the USA was making European division a virtue in the transatlantic relationship. The division was deep-seated and left a mark, but it was wrong to seek out a divide among Eastern political elites in terms of "pro-Europeans" against "Atlanticists". Most of those who supported Bush were also pro-European. Support for the war in Iraq was above all a policy to ensure a security guarantee for the countries

Europe points the finger at us as if we were backward post-communists, yet we were the avant-garde of the coming populist and sovereignist wave. The response of Germany and France to "America First" and Washington's unilateralism is to put forward the idea of a "strategic autonomy" (Macron) and a "European sovereignty". The divisive voices of the Visegrád Group allowed Washington to play on the divisions in Europe on certain aspects of foreign policy such as the Middle East (Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jerusalem as the capital of Israel) to the extent that a "V4" summit was planned to be held in Jerusalem²⁰. Poland combined defiance towards the EU with support for Trump's policies in the most explicit way.

Then visiting the White House, the Polish President announced his "Poland First" policy

¹⁹. On the day after Trump's election to the White House, Orbán declared "The era of liberal non-democracy is over. What a day! What a day! What a day!" *Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 2016. The Czech President sent a letter of congratulations, stating: "In my country, I'm known as the Czech Trump".

²⁰. The fact that the Visegrád Group was to hold its first summit outside of Europe in Jerusalem in mid-February is described by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* as an "attempt by Netanyahu to erode the EU consensus on issues concerning the Palestinians and Iran". The summit was postponed and changed to bilateral meetings following the spike in the dispute between the Polish government and that of Benjamin Netanyahu with regard to Polish complicity in the Holocaust.

and offered to invest \$2 billion for a permanent US military base in Poland to be named “Fort Trump”.²¹

Faced with the fear of a US withdrawal and doubts with regard to NATO’s future, conflicting responses can be observed. Yet with such a confusion as to their strategy, how can Europeans develop a common threat perception (priority given to threats from the South such as Islamist terrorism) or from the East (Russia and its hybrid war in Ukraine) and a common strategic culture?

in their footsteps with a Polexit or a Czexit. There are several factors at play here. First of all, the economic reasoning, the close interlinking with Western European countries and the significant financial advantages brought by EU membership (between 3 and 4% of GDP) makes them think twice before slamming the door shut. The difficult Brexit negotiations and the political spectacle of a major European player are not an incentive to follow suit. The UK wishes to find itself a role in the world again, but this is not an option for small nations which do half of their trade with Germany.

5 . The limits of European divisions

As Europe was being divided by the Cold War, Polish historian Oskar Halecki published a book on “the limits and divisions of European history”²². We will conclude this paper by analysing the limits of the division of Europe. According to Halecki’s expression, East-Central European countries, located between Germany and the Soviet Union, were considered in the post-war period as the West of the East. For the last thirty years, and especially since their accession to the EU, they have become the East of the West.

Above all: the countries of Central and Eastern Europe do not form a bloc. Even within the Visegrád Group, which adopted common positions on some of the issues presented above, there is a real diversity as regards their domestic political situation and their place within the EU. On posted workers, the long-standing bone of contention between old and new EU Member States, President Macron found some common ground in July 2017 with the two social-democrat government leaders who were then in power in Prague and Bratislava. This opening helped then to redefine the European consensus on this issue. The Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš shows solidarity with the V4 on migrants but will not undertake anything that may compromise the interests of his country and his company Agrofert within the EU.²³

We have presented some of the East-West divides which have emerged within the EU. The aim now is to put their scope into perspective and to identify the limits.

As regards relations with Russia, all countries in Central and Eastern Europe approved the EU’s sanctions following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, but there is a gulf between the very hard positions of the Poles and the good relations that Viktor Orbán is cultivating with Vladimir Putin. The Czechs and Slovaks are in the middle ground between these two positions. Through their recent history and geographical proximity with Russia, there

Brexit is a prime example of this. It was first of all hailed by the governments of the Visegrád Group as a reaction to the excessive drive for regulation from Brussels in the name of an “ever closer Union” and the sign that it was high time to restore the competences of Member States. With the projected departure of the British, the “V4” countries found themselves deprived of a precious ally and yet none showed any attempt to follow

²¹. This is an extension of US engagement with the missile defence shield deployed in Poland and Romania in the spring of 2016. Along the same lines, Poland, like most Central European countries, procure their military equipment from the USA.

²². Oskar Halecki, *Limits and Divisions of European History*, London, 1950.

²³. Agrofert, the Czech agri-food flagship company, has a large proportion of its business in Germany and benefits directly and indirectly from European funding for its development. An investigation has been opened in the Czech Republic on the proper use of these funds.

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is a real geopolitical constraint which sets certain limits on the temptation to deepen the disputes with Brussels.

Lastly, and above all, going beyond the East-West divide which is very real for some issues, it would be wrong to content oneself with this observation without considering that most of the themes discussed in this paper actually outreach this division and are trans-European problems. This is true for the democratic crisis and the rise in nationalist populism across Europe (with the exception of the Iberian Peninsula), which oppose the liberal elites and have Brussels in their line of fire.

The crisis of representative democracy, the collapse of traditional parties and the rise in Europhobic populism are trans-European phenomena with multiple interactions and collusions which far exceed the analysis in terms of an East-West divide. The double divide of people's politics/elites or openness/closure is now affecting most European countries to varying degrees.

Admittedly, Orbán and Kaczyński were the first leaders of their countries to call for a "counter-revolution" in Europe, and they have since found partners which share their aim. One of these is Salvini, member of the

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THE EAST-WEST DIVISIONS WITHIN THE EU ARE UNDOUBTEDLY A SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLE TO PURSUING THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS, BUT THE REAL THREAT IS PRECISELY THIS NEW TRANS-EUROPEAN DIMENSION.

Lega Nord and Italian Deputy Prime Minister who, at the end of August 2018, threw down with Orbán the challenge to Emmanuel Macron (national-sovereignists against progressist-Europhiles). Along the same lines, Salvini travelled to Warsaw to announce a common platform with Kaczyński's PiS ahead of the European elections. Warsaw-

Budapest-Vienna-Rome... the aim of Orbán and Kaczyński is not to leave the EU, but to transform it from the inside, the way they want it, as part of a trans-European political re-composition.

The East-West divisions within the EU are undoubtedly a significant obstacle to pursuing the European integration process, but the real threat is precisely this new trans-European dimension. The nerve centre for the EU's future is not Orbán with his provocations, but Italy, a laboratory for the political crisis of European democracies and the Achilles heel of the Eurozone. The real threat for the European project is the implementation of Orbán's words: "in 1989, here in Central Europe, we thought that Europe was our future, but now we feel that we're Europe's future".

The response to this ill-fated prophecy will depend on two safeguards or counterbalances. First of all, the resilience of European institutions and more generally the interpenetration of economies and societies within the EU and above all the political drive to defend the values and principles on which the Union was founded. This political drive will be put to the test in two ways. Firstly, within the EPP (European People's Party) and more generally the German and Austrian right wing which have been, up to now, the great protectors of Viktor Orbán in his "illiberal" and Eurosceptic shift. Orbán has gone as far as using the portraits of the President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, and of George Soros as the scapegoats in his campaign against Brussels for the European elections. The EPP voted for the first time to adopt a report which is critical of the Orbán regime at the European Parliament, but refrained from expelling (merely suspended) Hungarian Fidesz party from the EPP.²⁴ Will this be simply an inconsequential rebukes, for fear of seeing Fidesz join the PiS and Salvini's Lega in a new national-sovereignist hub?

Lastly, there is public opinion, full of mistrust of liberal elites and voting for Eurosceptic

²⁴. Kaczyński's PiS left the EPP and joined the group which included British conservatives at the European Parliament.

parties, but absolutely not in favour of a departure from the EU. As demonstrated by a major European opinion poll conducted in 2018 by Fondapol²⁵ on all the main issues concerning democracy and Europe, two elements must be noted: the trend for these opinions is greater than before, but it is the same to the East and the West of Europe.

Also, an attachment to EU membership is strongest in countries in which democracy is under the greatest threat (Poland and Hungary). It is as if, faced with the “illiberal” drift, Europeans hit and divided by the crisis of faith in democracy view the Union as the last safeguard against their own demons.

25. *L'opinion européenne en 2018*, Dominique Reynié (dir.), Fondapol, 2019.

BOX 1 ■

One important element to gain an understanding of the electoral successes of national-populist parties is that their preferred themes resonate in societies to the East of the continent, against a backdrop of disillusionment with democracy. While it is true that in most countries in the region democracy remains the “best political regime”, according to a survey conducted in 2018, only a minority is satisfied with how democracy functions (20% of Hungarians and one third of Romanians)²⁶. This is likely why other forms which overstep representative democracy are viewed favourably. 80% of citizens polled in the new EU Member States are in favour of a “government of experts” (92% of Czechs and Slovaks, 86% of Hungarians) against more than half in the West of the continent. Yet above all, there is a more worrying attraction to the idea of a “strong man” at the helm of the country (46% in the East of the EU against 27% in the West, with a majority in Romania, Bulgaria and even in the Czech Republic).

26. For a trans-European survey which presents data on Central and Eastern Europe, cf. Dominique Reynié (dir.), *Où va la démocratie ?*, Paris, Plon, 2017, p. 127-141 (in French).

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