

It is difficult to get accustomed to the daily Eurosceptic antics in post-socialist Europe. The offences range from symbolic (such as the refusal by the [Czech President Václav Klaus](#) to raise the EU flag over the Prague castle even after accession to the bloc), to propagandistic (e.g. Premier Viktor Orbán’s remark, during the ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising against Moscow, that the EU is a modern-day empire akin to the Soviet Union), to uncooperative (such as when the whole [Visegrád-4 group-the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia](#)-rejected the mandatory migrant quotas imposed by the EU), to openly confrontational (e.g. the retaliation threats by [Polish Premier Beata Szydło](#) after the former PM Donald Tusk won a second term as European council president in March 2017).

The degree of attention that Euroscepticism has obtained from the international press induces readers to think that the political parties in the region, alone or in conjunction with their Western counterparts, do pose a credible threat to the unity and workings of the EU. The rhetoric is certainly there. However, only a systematic appraisal of Central and Eastern European (CEE) Euroscepticism may reveal if words are matched with deeds.

## So you think you can tell a populist from an Eurosceptic?

The first problem facing any analyst of Eurosceptic parties and attitudes is the terminological ambiguity, especially vis-à-vis phenomena such as populism, extremism and protest inclinations. Here we shall use the categorization proposed by [Paul Taggart and Aleks Sczerbiak](#), who distinguish between soft- and hard-Eurosceptic parties, respectively opposing particular EU policies or EU membership as a whole (“Eurosceptics” and “Eurorejects”, in the words of [Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde](#)).

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The second problem, which is specific to post-socialist Europe, is that Euroscepticism in the

east systematically differs from that of the west. According to [Attila Ágh](#), the point of departure is that ten years of EU membership have failed to deliver the sort of catching-up in living standards (and, possibly, in individual freedom) for which the masses strived.

In economic terms, the divide between the core and periphery has grown both in Europe and within the new Member States. Acting as dependent market economies (see [Andreas Nölke and Arjan Vlieegenthart](#)), central and eastern European (CEE) countries have integrated their low- or middle-skilled labour into western production chains. This in turn has split each country into modernized regions (core) and undeveloped islands of poverty (periphery). The electoral map in post-socialist countries reflect this split: hard-populist parties got hold among the absolute losers (the unemployed, the uneducated), the soft-populist and Eurosceptic among the relative losers (the declassed middle strata). The Great Recession only exacerbated the resentment.

In political terms, as posited by [Tanja Börzel and Frank Schimmelfennig](#), the leverage that the EU has on a Member State's democratic credentials inexorably wanes, which lends a hand to eastern Euroscepticism. Democratic rules are enshrined in the Copenhagen criteria for accession and not in the *acquis communautaire*, which benefits from compliance monitoring and judicial review. After accession, neither the novel rule-of-law mechanism (invoked against Poland in January 2016 following the country's constitutional crisis) nor ensuing sanctions, which under Art. 7 of the Treaty of European Union require Member State unanimity, seem to be effective. Nor does the European Parliament exert much authority. For instance, the European People's Party (EPP) group refrains from cracking down on Orbán's Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) because it benefits from its share of votes.

Such lack of guardianship has *de facto* legitimized party and corporate state capture in the region and the rise of a post-socialist brand of Euroscepticism. This has its specific aims, which only at times overlap with the issues at heart to the French Front National or Italian Lega Nord (e.g. migration, islamophobia, monetary sovereignty). Soft-Eurosceptic parties like Hungary's Fidesz or Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), are supportive of the EU in areas such as the single market— alongside receiving EU subsidies for agriculture and failing industries, a key source of clientelism and patronage—so long as Brussels has little control over national policy-making (or, in [Orbán's worldview](#), so long as it stops interfering through the support of domestic left-liberal forces).

In sum, despite all the rhetoric, the Eastern brand of Euroscepticism is rather soft (save for extremist parties, such as Jobbik) and concerned more with maintaining unabated power at

home than challenging EU membership or core rules. Such stance is corroborated both by the relatively supportive public opinion and by the institutional limits of Eurosceptic parties in the region, especially regarding coalition-building at the European level.

## **A benign attitude of the public**

The [Standard Eurobarometer 85](#) of May 2016 reveals a mixed picture. In line with the deterioration of domestic politics, both the respondents from Visegrád-4 and from other new Member States were more dissatisfied with their national governments and parliaments than with the EU's institutions. Furthermore, people in post-socialist Europe distrust the European institutions less than is the case in old Member States. This, however, cannot be said about the central Europeans: apart from their general view of the EU, which is only marginally better than the EU15 average, they show lower trust levels towards European institutions. Among the V-4, the Czech Republic is the least optimistic and, somewhat surprisingly, Hungary the most.

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With regard to the EU's image and opinions about its future, the migrant crisis has taken its toll, as they both declined since 2015. Here, again, the new Member States have, on average, a less negative opinion than the EU15. Yet, the Czech Republic and Hungary are among the six EU countries where a majority of respondents are pessimistic about the Union's future, as Table 1 shows.

	European Parl.		Commis- sion		EU		National govt		National parl.		EU image		Future of EU	
	T	D	T	D	T	D	T	D	T	D	P	N	P	N
<b>V-4</b>	41	46	39	43	37	52	28	65	24	70	34	25	52	43
<b>EU28</b>	40	46	37	45	33	55	27	68	28	65	34	27	50	44
<b>EU15</b>	45	44	41	43	36	53	33	61	36	56	35	28	53	43
<b>EU11</b>	45	39	42	38	43	43	26	67	19	74	37	19	57	37

*Table 1: Views on European and national institutions (%)*

*Notes: T: trust; D: distrust; P: positive; N: negative. Data for EU28 are weighted by population, for EU15 and EU11 averages are unweighted..*

A more positive picture emerges from a survey run ahead of the Brexit vote by the Pew Research Center, which encompassed Poland and Hungary among the V-4. The survey shows that the EU's strongest backers are effectively the Poles (72%) and the Hungarians (61%). Interestingly, both displayed almost no variation regarding the opinion on the EU across the Left-Right ideological divide. Moreover, whereas the two countries' overwhelmingly negative opinion of how the EU approached the migrant crisis was in line with the rest, Poland was most upbeat regarding the Union's handling of the economy (the net approval rate was 14%), while Hungary was only relatively dissatisfied (net disapproval of 10%). In comparison, the Greek net disapproval rate was 86%. All in all, these results point to a population deeply dissatisfied with national politics rather than with EU membership, which is exactly the context in which populist, extremist and (for self-preservation motives) Eurosceptic parties fester in the region.

## The non-impact on EU decision-making

There is a big gap between the perceived capacity of post-socialist Eurosceptics to influence European decision-making, the theoretical expectations and the empirical reality. To expound the divergence, the impact of CEE countries, particularly in the Council, and the ability of Eurosceptic parties to forge alliances in the Parliament are separately addressed.

Starting with the Eastern enlargement, according to the [2009 Flash Eurobarometer survey](#), 65% of the EU27 citizens think that the inclusion of CEE countries into the Union's

institutional apparatus has made it more difficult to manage. The share of respondents was 69% in the old Member States and highest in Austria, France and Portugal. CEE countries, with the exception of Slovenia, were more upbeat.

Such fears are corroborated by theory. Spatial models of voting posit that legislative decision-making depends on the interaction between the preferences of the actors involved and the voting rules. If the Eastern enlargement has increased the heterogeneity of policy preferences—a prime example is the tension, mentioned by [Heather Grabbe](#), between the objectives of the “regulatory state” in the old members versus the “developmental state” of the new ones—this does not necessarily mean that the Union’s decision-making capacity has been negatively affected. The now classic veto players theory developed by [George Tsebelis](#) tells us that under super-majoritarian voting rules gridlock is expected. Under looser institutional rules, instead, frequent policy changes may be the norm as coalitions can be constructed ad hoc to defeat the status quo.

Confronted with such ambiguity, [Dimitër Toshkov](#) systematically reviewed the Union’s legislative activity before and after the fifth enlargement. He found no major negative effect, which would in any event hard to disentangle from the institutional changes that came into force since 2004, e.g. through the Lisbon Treaty.

On average, the EU now adopts fewer regulations, which are compensated by more Commission directives. The ordinary legislative procedure (the former co-decision) is now swifter, possibly due to the increased role of trialogues. If there was a breakdown in decision-making, these would be very odd indicators. Yet, the author finds that enlargement has reshaped one of the conflict dimensions in the Council of Ministers of the EU. There are several caveats. First, the new dimension of contestation may be conflated with more durable ones: net contributors (EU15 minus the Mediterranean countries) versus net recipients (CEE plus Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) or core versus periphery (Southern and Eastern countries). Second, very few policy areas are affected: environmental policy and, marginally, migration. Third, even when CEE countries ganged together in opposition to other Member States, they have seldom been able to form powerful blocking minorities, thereby finding themselves on the losing side.

If the New Member States are too small and heterogeneous to form formidable alliances, what about its Eurosceptic parties in the Parliament? Here, the record is even more dismal. In June 2014, the three main Eurosceptic groups had huge problems in organizing EP factions. The Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFFD), dominated by the United Kingdom

Independence Party (UKIP), could not find a common platform with a second group of radical Eurosceptic parties with a centrist effort, dominated by Front National. This established in 2015 the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF). Likewise, the more extremist group comprised of Jobbik or Golden Dawn is unaffiliated, belonging to the non-inscrits.

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Such factionalism has thwarted most organizational efforts of an Eurosceptic post-socialist alliance. First, the governments in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia are either only partly veering towards soft Euroscepticism (the Czech Social Democratic Party) or have just built alliances with Eurosceptic parties (Smer - Social Democracy with the Slovak National party). Second, even when Euroscepticism is openly advocated, cooperation has given way to Realpolitik. The [recent re-election of Donald Tusk](#) is a case in point. Law and Justice, which sits in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, proposed a different candidate (also because of the personal enmity between Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński). Fidesz, potentially its closest ally, confirmed Tusk, as it did not wish to upset its allies in the EPP group.

In sum, post-socialist Euroscepticism is too soft, fragmented and concerned with domestic politics to pose a real threat to the EU. Beyond constituting a veritable obsession for the Western press, however, it also represents a diffuse sense of malaise. This should at least caution European policymakers: exacerbating the core-periphery cleavage through projects such a multi-speed Europe may just have the consequence of hardening and uniting Eastern Eurosceptics.

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