



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

East Versus West

IN FOCUS

**Is There Such a Thing as
a European Society?**

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Summary

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The East–West divide in the EU has recently received much attention. While certain national leaders on both sides have tried to capitalise on it politically, data on the attitudes of the general public in the two subregions convey a more complex picture. This paper analyses European polling data on people’s attitudes regarding several key societal questions. It concludes that the opinions of Western and Eastern European populations are in fact converging on key societal issues, and that EU policies should reflect this growing consensus

Keywords European regions – Values – Nationalism – Religion – Cultural studies



Introduction

Over the past decade, media headlines have covered many disagreements between Eastern and Western Europe over core issues: climate change, the rule of law, asylum regulations and Russia, among others. Controversial declarations and actions by the elected leaders in countries such as Hungary and Poland, as well as diplomatic tactics within the EU, have frequently caught the attention of commentators.¹

Yet, beyond the realm of politicians and policymakers, where do European citizens themselves stand on these alleged geographic divides? Is there such a thing as a united European society or are nationalists right to see insurmountable cultural barriers behind every tension?

Using polling data from the European Social Survey (ESS),² the picture I intend to display is mostly one of cultural convergence. Eastern and Western Europeans are in fact taking steps towards one another. Overall, the data point to a consensual waltz between all regions rather than the irreparable distancing that is often portrayed.

In all subsequent analyses and calculations, the acronym 'EU' refers to the EU27, while 'Europe' refers to the EU27 plus selected associated countries, meaning here the UK, Iceland, Norway, the Western Balkans and Switzerland. With regard to data analytics, the following European subdivisions were applied: 'north' is Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden; 'west' is Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK; 'east' is Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovenia; and 'south' refers to Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain.

¹ See, for instance, the European Council on Foreign Relations's infographics map on political leaders' interactions across the EU: A. Möller and N. Milan, 'Can Slovakia and the Czech Republic Overcome Europe's East-West Divide?', European Council on Foreign Relations (11 February 2019), accessed at https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_can_slovakia_and_the_czech_republic_overcome_europes_east_west_d# on 23 September 2019.

² See our methodology section for more on the data collected and analysed.



Eastern Europe's growth and its adverse effects

That Eastern European member states have economically caught up with Western ones counts as one of the silent and unclaimed successes of the EU. Economic reforms since the fall of the Soviet Union and the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 have, to a large extent, unleashed the East's potential. Looking at Eurostat figures on the evolution of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, with the EU27 average set at 100, the trend is potent: Eastern European member countries rose from an average score of 67 in 2012 to a narrowed gap of 74 in 2018, while Western European member countries slightly receded towards the average, from 124 (2012) to 119 (2018).³ Performance indicators such as productivity levels and tertiary educational attainment display the same converging dynamic over the same time frame.⁴

Behind these initial numbers, though, remain plenty of asymmetries. Country experts argue that these economic changes have had destabilising societal effects in the East: intra-EU labour mobility has induced educated Eastern youths to leave their countries behind, while territorial inequalities and corruption continue to rise back home.⁵ In these consciously planned transfers, remittances are sometimes insufficient to offset the demographic and psychological cost of departures, particularly in rural areas.

Adding pressure to this emigration wound, populist movements have built a counter-narrative that has rallied a strong bloc of voters. Their message in a nutshell: we no longer have anything to learn from the West; instead, the West should now look to our way of life as its nations are disappearing under the guise of multiculturalism and openness to global shocks. Moving away from the region's not uncommon self-deprecation, some Eastern European

³ Luxembourg was excluded from Western Europe's average, as its very high GDP per capita caused a misrepresentation of the West's actual wealth. For GDP per capita data see Eurostat, 'GDP per Capita in PPS' (1 June 2018), accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&pcode=tec00114&language=en> on 20 September 2019. Using this, we calculated the percentage difference between the EU27 averages in 2012 and 2018.

⁴ For more information, see Eurostat, 'Database' (n. d.), accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database> on 20 September 2019. We have surveyed several indicators, including 'Tertiary educational attainment, age group 30–34' and 'Labour productivity per person employed and hours worked (EU27=100)'.

⁵ On this matter, see A. László, 'Fifteen Years of Convergence', *Millennium*, February 2019, accessed at <http://www.millenniumintezet.hu/2019/02/06/fifteen-years-of-convergence-east-west-imbalance-and-what-the-eu-should-do-about-it/> on 15 September 2019.



leaders are now trying to convince their youngest constituents that they can and should contribute to the new ‘illiberal’ model that is being built at home.⁶

Has this message convinced Eastern Europeans? Has it spread further still? Since the turn of the century, populist movements have grown visibly in Eastern Europe, before expanding in the south and west.⁷ The characteristics and dynamics vary from one country to the next, but the assumption in Western Europe that radical anti-EU politics can be easily contained in the ‘backward’ border areas from which it originated⁸ is obviously condescending and, more importantly, misleading.

The map below (Figure 1) focuses on the difference between attachment to one’s nation and attachment to Europe. It demonstrates that significant differences in scores in favour of nation-states are not necessarily found where some have predicted they would be. Citizens expressing a clear preference for their nation compared to Europe⁹ form a noticeable U-shape that bypasses Germany, Belgium, Czechia and Hungary—thus uniting west and east in a symmetrical arc. Put differently, in those countries highlighted as part of this U-shape, nationalist feelings are more prevalent than feelings of attachment to Europe.¹⁰

⁶ See this very interesting analysis by I. Krastev and S. Holmes, ‘Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitations and Its Discontents’, *Journal of Democracy* (2018), 117–28.

⁷ For smart visualisations on this topic, see J. Henley, ‘How Populism Emerged as an Electoral Force in Europe’, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2018, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/how-populism-emerged-as-electoral-force-in-europe> on 15 September 2019; and A. Tartar, ‘How the Populist Right is Redrawing the Map of Europe’, *Bloomberg*, 11 December 2017, accessed at <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/> on 15 September 2019.

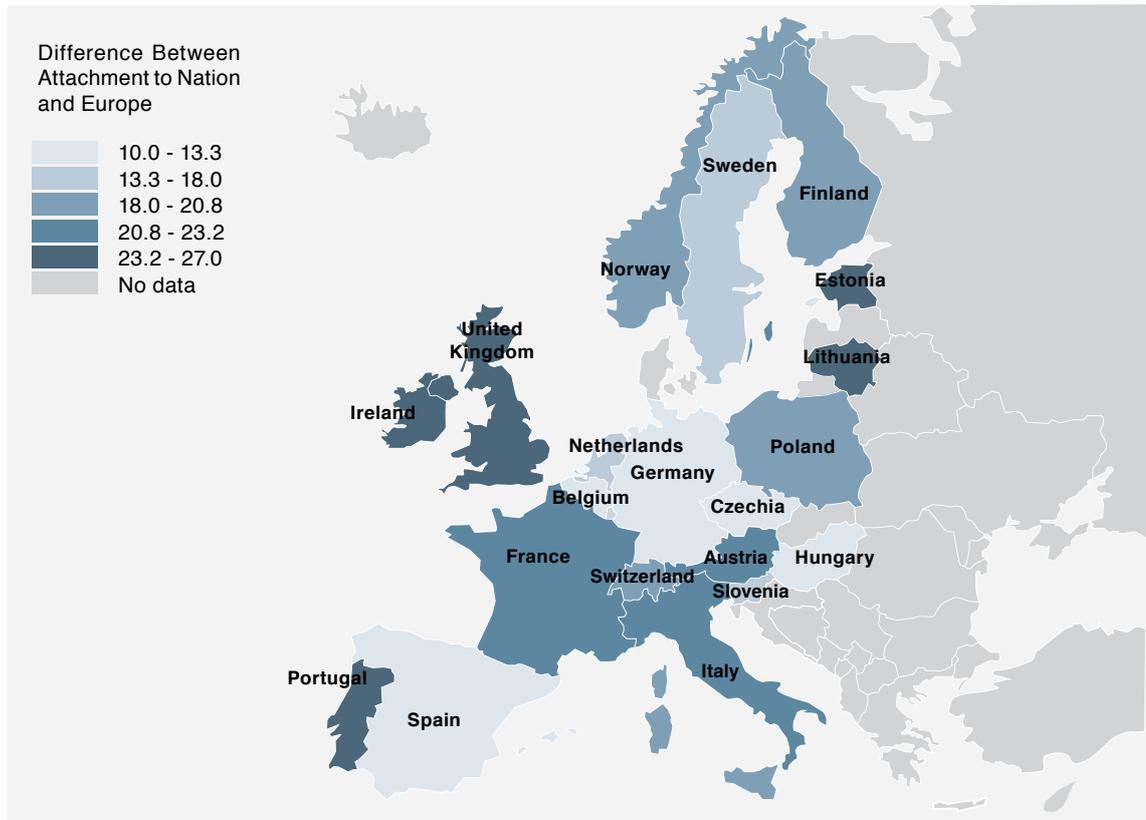
⁸ On the disdain of Western European elites for the East, see E. Kováts and K. Smejkalova, ‘The EU’s Ongoing East–West Divide’, *International Politics and Society* (2019), accessed at <https://www.ips-journal.eu/regions/europe/article/show/the-eu-ongoing-east-west-divide-3575/> on 15 September 2019.

⁹ This can be inferred from Figure 1 when there is a gap of more than 18 points between their attachment to nation score and their attachment to Europe score.

¹⁰ Methodological note: using polling data from EU and non-EU countries, the first step was to calculate two attachment scores—one for nations, the second for Europe—converting 0-10 polling responses to a 0-100 total score. Once these two 0-100 scores were obtained, we proceeded with the following subtraction: ‘attachment to nation’ minus ‘attachment to Europe’. For instance, Hungary’s attachment to nation score stands at a high 83.65 but its attachment to Europe score is also significant: 70.93 (83.65 – 70.93 = 12.72). France’s attachment to nation score is 80.71 compared to a score of only 58.59 for attachment to Europe (80.71 – 58.59 = 22.12).



Figure 1 Measuring the difference between attachment to nation and attachment to Europe



Source: Map created by the author. Data from ESS Round 8: European Social Survey Round 8 Data (2016). Data file edition 2.1. NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS8-2016.

Is there cultural convergence in Europe?

Whether Eastern European politicians have had a direct impact on the West's national discussions and decision-making processes is hard to tell from the data. It would be difficult to establish the semiological or programmatic linkages between political parties, even though the 'East to West' populist wave has already been pointed out. However, thanks to the ESS polls, what we can understand is the evolution of the liberal versus conservative attitudes of the EU public itself.

Using this data to view changes in cultural reactions between 2002 and 2016 is enlightening, as numerous events occurred in that period—the



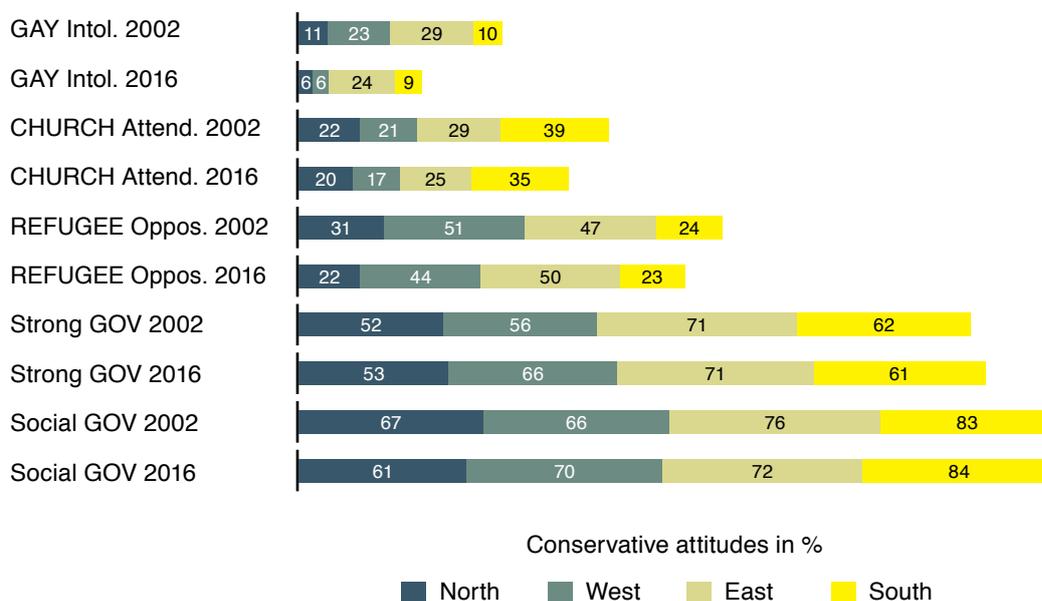
rejection of the EU Constitution; the 2008 financial crisis; terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels and Berlin; and the summer 2015 migration wave all come to mind as defining events. The 5 questions in Figure 2 were selected in view of the challenges faced during these 14 years, and with the identity politics that populism aims to engage in, in mind. For each question, our aim is to focus on conservative attitudes by analysing the following responses:

- percentage of negative answers when asked if ‘Gays and lesbians should be free to live life as they wish’ (GAY Intol.),
- percentage of answers stating ‘at least once a month or more’ when asked ‘How often do you attend religious services apart from special occasions’ (CHURCH Attend.),
- percentage of negative answers when asked if ‘Government should be generous when judging applications for refugee status’ (REFUGEE Oppos.),
- percentage of positive answers when asked if ‘It is important that government is strong and ensures safety’ (Strong GOV), and
- percentage of positive answers when asked if ‘Government should reduce differences in income levels’ (Social GOV).

NB: We could not find similarly dated data for other allegedly divisive topics such as climate change, the rule of law, support for NATO or attitudes towards Russia. Additionally, as already indicated in footnote 1, we have subdivided Europe into four subregions—north, west, east and south—instead of the schematic East–West classification in which all but Eastern countries are often randomly lumped together.



Figure 2 Cultural convergence across Europe: regional averages



Source: Data from ESS Round 1: European Social Survey Round 1 Data (2002). Data file edition 6.6. NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS1-2002; and ESS Round 8: European Social Survey Round 8 Data (2016). Data file edition 2.1. NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS8-2016.

Looking at the changes from 2002 to 2016 in Figure 2, we notice three general dynamics among our four geographic subregions:

- parallel regional decreases in (a) intolerance towards gays and lesbians and (b) regular church attendance;
- converging regional trends as Western Europe catches up with the East's more conservative¹¹ attitudes in demanding increased government focus on safety and social protection; and
- a clearly diverging trend in the regions' stances on refugees. (Opposition to granting refugee status declined in all European regions except in the East, where it grew from 47% in 2002 to 50% in 2016).

¹¹ The association of social protection with a conservative position could be questioned. What seems to justify it is that this development is very much a move away from liberalism, including economic liberalism, in favour of a right-wing platform of protectionism and stronger social protection. In other words, it is a move towards the anti-liberal right and not so much towards the socialist left.



Comparing subregions for each topic, one observes that Eastern Europe's sole peculiarity seems to be a greater aversion to gays and lesbians: 24% of respondents were opposed to the idea that gays and lesbians should be allowed to live the life they wish in 2016, while the same view is only shared by 6% in the north-west and 9% in the south. Elsewhere, Eastern European responses are again amongst the most conservative of the four, but they fall closer to the EU average. Two additional patterns deserve to be highlighted:

- Southern Europe tops Eastern Europe for church attendance rates and the wish for higher social protection; and
- Eastern and Western Europe share a similar opposition to granting refugee status (50% and 44% respectively), which contrasts with much lower refusals in the North and in the South (22%–23%).

Finally, a careful look at country-by-country variations reveals profound differences within each subregion. In the following remarks, we will limit our focus to the East and West subregions, in accordance with the central object of our inquiry:

- Some Eastern Europeans may be accepting of gays and lesbians but closed to the idea of welcoming refugees (Czechia and Estonia), while others are more hostile to gays and lesbians but more accepting of refugees (Lithuania). The polarisation is significant: Poles are relatively accepting of both gays and refugees (opposition to both groups is just 20%) while Hungarian respondents are highly opposed to both (64% to refugees, 40% to gays).
- In Western Europe, consensus is more easily found on most debates and attitudes, as country-by-country differences are narrower, with Austrians being the most conservative on almost all topics. The only discussion that splits the West into two groups is the one on refugees: France, Switzerland and the UK appear more generous with regards to applications (25%–35% refusal rate only), while Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands are more hostile to welcoming new asylum seekers (50% to 68% refusal rate).
- In Eastern Europe, the wish for a bigger government is the only real consensus point across the board (positive responses to 'Social GOV' and 'Strong GOV' fall close to a 70%–75% average). Big government



hopes also apply in Western Europe, though these relate to increased social justice ('Social GOV') more than safety-minded concerns ('Strong GOV').

While converging, each subregion seems set on choosing its own 'conservative' battles: Southern Europe is obviously more religious and keener on welfare protection; Western Europe is now more focused on security matters—with those in the north increasingly agreeing; while Eastern Europe has become the region most opposed to migration, replacing the West in that regard.

Overall, European attitudes have shifted in favour of the individual and are placing more demands on the taxpayer. Europeans are increasingly accepting of atheism and different sexual orientations, and agree that there should be more government involvement in their affairs. However, defining what Europe means as an emotional and demographic project raises disagreements, as the variations in attachment to Europe and in attitudes towards granting refugee status show.

Conclusion and recommendations

The idea of reducing Eastern Europe to 'the continent's darkest corner'¹² is erroneous, as figures show. If we put politicians' speeches and decisions aside, we can see that the values of Eastern Europeans are converging with those of other European subregions. They have embraced free markets and intra-EU mobility and have taken steps towards accepting lesbian and gay people, while de-christianisation has progressed in the East as steadily as in other European quarters.¹³

This cultural symbiosis is happening in a supportive environment as other European regions are facing similar challenges and displaying similar features—disparities between rural areas and urban centres, vulnerability

¹² Joseph Conrad introduced his novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) with this quote. Its intent was to imagine what London may have felt like during the Roman Empire, when it was not a beacon of progress.

¹³ See Pew Research Center, 'Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Matters of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues' (29 October 2018), accessed at <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/> on 21 September 2019.



to market-based competition, and a willingness to preserve some Christian values amidst rampant de-christianisation.

After two decades of adaptation and significant though unbalanced economic progress, the EU's East is now moving from being a subsidies-dependent subregion to being one that confidently exports policy alternatives. Now representing 21% of the European Council votes, it is only logical that these countries' voices should be heard. Yet in the West, talks of 'division' and 'separation' abound when the East raises a concern; and it is my belief that these reflexes often reflect wrong-headed electoral mathematics from certain liberal or nationalist circles that fail to grasp how much the two sides have in common.

Moving beyond this politicised hype, here are some simple suggestions to try and improve the East–West relationship based on the cultural convergence described:

- Encourage EU policy leaders to connect with their Eastern European counterparts more frequently. The European Council on Foreign Relations has proved that leaders from north-west Europe tend to exclude those from the East and the South in their interactions, a damaging trend in the long run.¹⁴
- In the same vein, academic and civil society exchanges can be promoted through the new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–7.
- Anticipated budget cuts for cohesion programmes should be made more political and more transparent. At the time of writing, September 2019, Eastern Europe is expected to receive less funding, while more has been allocated to the South in order to cope with GDP per capita evolutions. These choices need to be explained.
- Enlargement to the Western Balkans should not suffer due to electoral mathematics. The efficiency of EU decision-making can no longer be used as an excuse: arguments supported by numbers have shown that integrating parts of Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007 did not slow Brussels down.¹⁵ Provocations by Eastern leaders or obsolete cultural stereotypes should not stop the EU from pursuing its obvious

¹⁴ Möller and Milan, 'Can Slovakia and the Czech Republic Overcome Europe's East–West Divide?'

¹⁵ See D. Toshkov, 'There Is No Evidence of a Structural East–West Divide in the EU', LSE Europe blog, 30 March 2017, accessed at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/03/30/no-evidence-east-west-divide-in-eu/> on 22 September 2019.



interests: reaping the fruits of the costly pacification efforts begun in the 1990s by extending its Eastern consolidation efforts in this region which feels European, thereby clarifying Europe's borders in a manner that appeals to geography and security concerns.

Liberals and conservatives alike should take pride in this new Europe-wide debate on the cultural identity of the continent and its constituent regions. It is time to embrace all players while sticking to the basics of the rule of law and enabling the EU to look whole, from Dublin to Sofia.



About the author

Michael Benhamou is the founder of ARON Praxis, a consultancy specialising in data-driven analytics on European matters. He was previously a visiting fellow at the Martens Centre, focusing on the Middle East and European defence, which was a continuation of the work he had done for the French armed forces and NATO as a political adviser in field operations. Michael has master's degrees from Sciences Po, Paris and Sorbonne University.

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