

An East-West divide in the EU?

Views expressed by Franziska Brantner and Gergely Gulyás

- Franziska Brantner argues that the EU is not divided into East and West. She advocates securing the rule of law and ensuring that European democracy is in a position to defend itself.
- Gergely Gulyás believes that EU member states must get used to the fact that countries have different perspectives. According to him, Hungary plays a more prominent role in the debate about values than might be expected.
- The contributions on the focus topic “The Value of Europe” are based on the sessions of the 170th Bergedorf Round Table “An Ever More Divided Union? Finding Common Ground after a Decade of Crises”, held in Budapest in March 2019.



Foto: Florian Freundt

Franziska Brantner

It's not East vs West Europe's most profound rift is not geographical

Although the European Union has recently been praised for coming together – over Brexit – tensions and deadlocks are still noticeable in everyday political

life. Be this as it may, tough compromises form part of the EU's DNA. Eastern enlargement has not merely expanded the EU, it has also made it more diverse. However, the current rift running through Europe, which overlays the EU's current tensions and regional differences, is not merely geographical. It is a division between advocates of an illiberal democracy and anti-European nationalists, on the one hand, and European democrats, on the other.

The current rift is responsible for the worsening tone in Europe. Instead of discussing how to proceed with European integration, the entire significance of the European project is being called into question. Moreover, the nationalism that led Europe to ruin several times in the past is being put forward as a valid alternative. Whether it is the restrictions placed on freedom of the press in Austria and Hungary, or Boris Johnson's and Salvini's vilification of the EU, in many EU countries, right-wing populists are influencing EU policy – and they are certainly not doing so in the interest of European democracy.

Some of these individuals further their own political agenda by stylising themselves as representing entire regions, which they clearly do not. In reality, they are merely conjuring up divisions that do not exist. However, progressive forces are once again winning elections in Europe, most recently in Slovakia.

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The countries in Eastern and South-eastern Europe and the Baltic states have specific interests that deserve our greater recognition. There are numerous examples: Germany demonstrates a flagrant lack of solidarity when attempting to push through its pipeline project with Gazprom against the will of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Similarly, when Eastern European skilled workers move to the West, free movement no longer works, because their home country is also in need of them. At the same time, it is unacceptable that the same products that are available in Western Europe are sold in inferior quality via the internal market in Eastern European states. Moreover, the Czech Republic is right to be irritated, when hardly anyone listens to its calls for help in its struggle against Huawei and China. The fact that smaller countries in the East have the impression that the EU only reacts when someone shouts as loud as Orbàn does is dangerous for European cohesion.

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Instead of focusing on the countries with the loudest voice, the EU should focus on whether interests are legitimate and compatible with the principles of the rule of law and democracy. If we intend to prevent a real rift between East and West, it is essential that we strengthen awareness of these issues and recognise each other's specific interests.

Moreover, we have to ensure that no one undermines the rule of law. European democracy needs to be able to defend itself, which is why we need a European Rule of Law Commission that conducts regular

reviews of EU member states' implementation of the rule of law and democracy. This commission would consist of constitutional experts appointed by all national parliaments and develop a common set of criteria to conduct reviews. When a state is not properly adhering to the rule of law, sanctions should be possible. Following these sanctions, the country's power to decide how to allocate EU funds could be delegated to an independent body. Subjecting all EU countries to regular review would help refute the argument that this issue only concerns Eastern European countries. Moreover, it could no longer serve to justify attacks on democracy.

“European democracy needs to be capable to defend itself.”

We need to make the EU better together because we can do more in the world when we act concertedly. In other words, there are two types of EU member states: the small ones, and those that have yet to understand that they are small. The German government does not appear to have realised that this is the case. Too often, Germany forces through its own short-term interests without taking into account the damage that this causes to the European project and, thus, to Germany itself. Ultimately, this situation results from a lack of foresight – and foresight is precisely what we need in Europe today more than ever.



Gergely Gulyás

Listen to Central Europe EU member states must be capable to withstand pluralism

The following sets out a Hungarian view of the main motives behind the positions put forward in the political debates that have been at the centre of public discourse in Europe for many years. Given its political and economic weight, Hungary plays a more prominent role than would be expected in these debates. In my opinion, there is less and less willingness in the public discourse of old EU member states to understand the situation in Central Europe. This is reflected in a tendency to forget that, in addition to the values we share, social differences exist between our societies and these are chiefly manifested in the shaping of public opinion. Moreover, it has become fashionable to interpret these differences as “Anti-Europeanism”, even though support for EU membership is significantly higher in Central European countries and Hungary in particular, than in most old EU member states.

“In the public discourse of old EU member states there is a tendency to forget that, in addition to the values we share, social differences exist in our societies.”

Whether during the Ottoman conquest in the Middle Ages or the communist occupation in the 20th century, it has only ever been possible to separate Hungary from Europe through violence and repression. Joining the EU meant far more to the Hungarian population than merely being able to travel to Germany without passport controls or finding work in the UK. For us, joining the European Union symbolised the

end of socialism – Hungary was finally becoming a member of a community that our history and culture had predestined us to join. Surveys repeatedly demonstrate that a vast majority of the Hungarian electorate will never vote for a party that is hostile to the EU. As such, once we accept that the Hungarian population and the Hungarian political leadership are committed to Europe, it becomes clear that the motives behind current debates must lie elsewhere.

“The Visegrád countries merit tolerance not intolerance, understanding not exclusion and dialogue rather than isolation.”

Thirty years ago, a wall in Berlin divided freedom from oppression, democracy from dictatorship, and Germany from Germany. Today our peoples live as members of the European Union in ‘unity and justice and freedom’. If a prophet had predicted this situation, he would certainly have ruled out the possibility of this extraordinary blessing not resulting in harmony, gratitude or understanding. When regime change finally occurred, we believed that we were different. We were very surprised to see just how many things we had in common. When we joined the EU, we assumed that we were the same as everyone else. Now we realise how different we are. Importantly, the differences between our values have led to unfounded accusations. It has become customary in German public life to belittle the democratically elected heads of the Visegrád states as autocrats. In some cases, people who have never lived through a dictatorship are now demeaning those who heroically fought for freedom and the rule of law precisely during such times. The Visegrád countries merit tolerance not intolerance, understanding not exclusion and dialogue rather than isolation. We aim to provide our citizens with freedom of expression, instead of political correctness. Someone who criticises the European Commission or any another European institution is not necessarily an enemy of the European Union. Criticism may often be justified, particularly when, in just five years, the EU has not only lost its second most influential member, but also has been unable to enforce its commitment to protecting borders and tackling the migration crisis as part of its implementation of the rule of law. Anyone who dismisses this turn of events or who claims that it does not constitute a loss for everyone, is not helping the European cause. In-

stead, they make it far more difficult to change Europe's current path, and they do so at a time when change is essential to maintaining the attractiveness of the European Union.

Hungarians associate freedom with identity. Foreign powers suppressed our country for so long that patriotism and freedom have become inseparable to us. The majority of Hungarians, therefore, associate mass immigration with the loss of their identity – something that has already occurred in the West. The long-term success of European cooperation, thus, depends on our ability to identify the issues that we need to agree on and the commitments that we all need to fulfill. Examples include protecting our external borders, which is essential to upholding the Schengen area, and upholding the shared values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Moreover, in line with the tolerance that the old member states often call for, yet currently display less and less, we not only need to recognise that we disagree on many issues, but also that a common position is not always necessary. Legal migration is a good example.

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One in every 15 people on the Earth is a citizen of the European Union. Institutional European cooperation is crucial if we are to compete effectively in the global economy, successfully assert our interests and maintain security. The people who are expressing dissenting opinions during legitimate debates over values or who strongly criticise certain decisions made by the European community's institutions are not putting Europe at risk. European cooperation is under threat because some people are unwilling to accept diverging opinions.

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The Bergedorf Round Table

The contributions are based on the sessions of the 170th Bergedorf Round Table “An Ever More Divided Union? Finding Common Ground after a Decade of Crises”, held in Budapest in March 2019. Since 1961 eminent international politicians and experts have met at the Bergedorf Round Table to discuss fundamental questions pertaining to German and European foreign and security policy in small and intimate groups. The Round Table provides foreign policy decision-makers with a forum for a frank exchange of views in which they are not subject to the constraints and pressures of everyday life. Here they are able to develop new ideas and policy alternatives in an intimate and informal atmosphere.

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