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How is the European Integration debate changing in post-communist states?

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Abstract

To many citizens in post-communist states EU membership represented a historical-civilisation choice: an end to the Cold War division of Europe and symbolic re-uniting of Eastern Europe with a 'West' that they had always considered themselves to be part of culturally and spiritually. In fact, in spite of its multiple crises, there continued to be high levels of support for EU membership and 'Hard' rejectionist Eurosceptic discourses were confined to the margins of politics. However, the increasing sense of East European cultural distinctiveness, highlighted by the post-communist states' responses to the European migration crisis, meant that pro-EU discourses were less romantic and more instrumental, driven increasingly by a cost-benefit analysis based on an evaluation of the tangible material benefits that the Union was felt to deliver.

Arguments for EU accession

Membership of the EU and NATO were the key foreign policy objectives for the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism in 1989. There was an overwhelming elite and public consensus in favour of EU membership exemplified by these countries' decisive 'Yes' votes in their 2003 accession referendums. The closest margins of victory, two-to-one, were in Estonia and Latvia but these were still above the average 'Yes' vote in all previous EU accession referendums. In Poland and the Czech Republic the margin was three-to-one, in Hungary nearly six-to-one, and around nine-to-one in Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Virtually all of the cues that citizens received from the main political and social elites during these referendums were to vote in favour of accession. No major political party or civil society actor called for a 'No' vote with outright opposition to EU membership confined to fringe radical groupings and marginal individuals (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2009).

So what arguments were used in these referendum campaigns? And how was the European integration debate framed in post-communist states during this period? One set of arguments in favour of EU accession related to macro-economic considerations. For many East Europeans, the EU was associated with economic modernisation and prosperity. An important driver of such modernisation for these countries would, it was argued, be the EU's fiscal transfers in the form of regional aid and agricultural subsidies, together with the impetus that access to the Union's single market would provide for trade and inward investment into the region. However, such socio-economic factors were very much the secondary (and certainly not the main) ones in determining the contours of the EU integration debate in these countries, as East Europeans were quite pessimistic (arguably realistic) about the impact of such fiscal transfers, initially at least. During the EU accession negotiations (Mayhew 2002, Avery 2004) the clear message was that existing member-states were trying to achieve Eastward Enlargement 'on the cheap', exemplified by the restrictions on the levels of EU regional aid and agricultural subsidies that these countries would receive. This led some East European Eurosceptics to characterise their potential accession as a 'second class membership' package. One area where there were clearer expectations that the EU would

deliver was access to Western labour markets and the ability of East European citizens to work abroad. Here, at least, the EU delivered in spite of the fact, that existing members were allowed transition periods of up to seven years before opening up access to their labour markets. More accurately, it was the UK - which, together with Ireland and Sweden, allowed free movement of labour from post-communist states into their countries more or less straight away - delivered on the EU's behalf.

In some countries, geopolitical security considerations were a key factor in mobilising support for EU accession. For sure, the EU, unlike NATO (which these countries were also trying to, and eventually did, join), was not a military security actor and had nothing akin to the North Atlantic alliance's famous 'Article 5' which promised that fellow members, notably the USA, would come to the assistance of any state whose security was threatened. Nonetheless, EU membership was felt to entail an informal and implicit security guarantee and that, by bringing a post-communist state into the orbit of one of the major Western international organisations, other Euro-Atlantic states would feel morally obliged to come to their assistance if they were threatened militarily. This was, for example, an important factor in generating support for European integration, and major focus of the EU accession referendum debates, in the Baltic states which, as former Soviet republics with substantial Russian minorities, feared Moscow's revanchism (Mikkil and Pridham 2004). Given Western concerns that expanding NATO into the former Soviet republics (what Moscow termed its 'near abroad') would antagonise Russia, until the early 2000s it was unclear if these states would ever actually be admitted into the alliance.

Another key feature of European integration debates in post-communist states was a feeling, even among those who were not necessarily particularly enthusiastic about EU accession, of a lack of any attractive and realistic foreign policy alternatives. Closer economic and political links with the USA - through, for example, membership of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was sometimes touted as a possibility by Eurosceptics - was felt by some to be an attractive alternative but was not seen as particularly realistic. An independent foreign policy or the idea of an alternative post-communist economic-political bloc were seen as neither viable (given historical mistrust of neighbours, exemplified by the inability of the post-communist states to co-ordinate their strategies and tactics during the accession negotiations) nor attractive (the feeling that it was better to be 'second class member of a rich club' than a 'first class member of a pauper's club'). This may have helped to explain, in part at least, the enduring attractiveness of EU membership for post-communist states in the Western Balkans that were previously part of the former Yugoslav federation. A renewed alliance with Russia was clearly a viable alternative but, given that they had recently escaped from Soviet tutelage, was, for obvious reasons, not felt to be particularly attractive in most of these states. This was not just the case in countries such as Poland and Romania that had a historical antipathy towards their Eastern neighbour re-inforced by the experience of forty years of being part of the Soviet communist bloc, but even in those states with strong historical-cultural ties to Moscow such as Bulgaria. In the latter, Russophilia often tended to manifest itself in opposition to NATO membership rather than Euroscepticism. A similar process appeared to work itself out in the approach to European integration - pro-EU, anti-NATO - adopted by certain historically pro-Moscow states in the Western Balkans such as Serbia.

However, perhaps most importantly the issue that 'cut through' emotionally to many citizens in post-communist states, was the idea that EU membership represented an end to the Cold

War division of Europe and symbolic re-uniting of the Eastern and Western halves of the continent; of the post-communist states with a ‘West’ that many of its citizens had always considered themselves to be part of culturally and spiritually. This was encapsulated in the 1990 election slogan of the Czech Civic Forum anti-communist opposition movement, ‘Return(ing) to Europe’. The casting of the EU accession process as a natural historical-civilisational choice, made it extremely difficult for East European Eurosceptics to develop really convincing alternative historical narratives. Integration into the EU appeared to represent the culmination of the post-communist transformation process - going with the grain, and being an inescapable part, of the logic of history, This somewhat abstract and rather romantic European integration discourse, more than any other single factor, probably explained why these countries voted so overwhelmingly to join the EU in their 2003 EU accession referendums.

The European integration debate in the post-EU crises era

So how did the debate on European integration in post-communist states develop since then? The EU itself experienced a series of crises (at the time of writing, some still ongoing): the Eurozone crisis, the European migration crisis, the continued increase in support for Eurosceptic parties in national and European Parliament (EP) elections, and the UK’s June 2016 referendum vote to leave the Union, so-called ‘Brexit’. What was the impact of these crises on the debate surrounding the European integration in post-communist Central and East European states? Did it lead to any increase in public or elite Euroscepticism? In fact, in spite of these multiple crises, there continued to be high levels of support for EU membership in post-communist states. Both public and political elite opinion remained overwhelmingly in favour of these countries being part of the Union. In 2012, for example, Croatia voted by a two-to-one margin in an accession referendum to join the EU (albeit on a 44% turnout) with the only opposition once-again coming from marginal political actors (Čović 2012). In other words, in many ways very little appeared to change since the early-to-mid 2000s when these countries voted to join the EU so overwhelmingly and with such, almost unanimous, elite support. Indeed, there was, if anything, an increase in public support for EU membership in some of these countries and virtually no calls for other ‘exits’ to follow ‘Brexit’. ‘Hard’ rejectionist Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008) continued to be confined to the margins of politics, generally on the radical nationalist right (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2018).

However, these crises, particularly the European migration crises, did help to bring about a sharpening of so-called ‘Soft’ Euroscepticism: political actors who did not oppose their country’s EU membership *per se* but did question *the kind of EU* that they wanted their countries to be members of and called for the Union to change or reform, or (although this is stretching the definition, probably to breaking point), in some cases, questioned *the kind of EU members that they want their countries to be* (generally more assertive in promoting their national interests) (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008). The most notable and well-known examples of this were the right-wing conservative governing parties Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland. Both of these parties became increasingly explicit in their (apparent) Euroscepticism, critical of key elements of the European project, and, of course, came increasingly into conflict with the EU political establishment; although this was as much, if not more, a result of their domestic policies in areas such as the media and judicial reform as it was their anti-federalist approach to European integration. However, the period of EU crises also saw the emergence or strengthening of other notable of anti-establishment Eurosceptic forces in countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia,

Hungary and Slovakia. Indeed, the phenomenon even appeared to encompass centre-left social democratic (arguably sometimes only nominally), and in some cases governing, parties in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia. This phenomenon involved several quite disparate issues and narratives and it was difficult to pin down all of its various manifestations. Indeed, 'Soft' Euroscepticism is, itself, a problematic concept that is tricky to define and measure. However, in so far as there was something like a unifying theme here it involved questioning the notion of EU membership as representing a natural, obvious and axiomatic historical-civilisational choice for post-communist states.

An important catalyst for this sharpening of East European Soft Euroscepticism, that perhaps highlighted this issue most dramatically, was the response of these countries to the EU's plan for the compulsory relocation of, mainly Muslim, Middle Eastern and North African migrants located in Greece and Italy. This scheme was agreed at a September 2015 EU summit in response to that summer's migration crisis but was opposed by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania. Although initially approved by Poland, Warsaw's position was reversed after Law and Justice took office at the end of that year. The EU quota scheme was overwhelmingly opposed by the publics in these countries, as many Central Europeans were keen to avoid the kind of cultural and security problems that they felt West European countries had experienced through admitting large numbers of Muslim migrants. The latter were seen as difficult to assimilate and embedding violent extremists within their communities/ Moreover, many of the political elites and citizens saw the EU's migrant relocation scheme as forcing these countries to adopt multi-culturalism (Pawlak 2015). This, the scheme's critics argued, reinforced the region's sense of cultural distinctiveness (Krastev and Holmes 2018) and raised significant doubts as to whether the elites and publics in these countries actually wanted to make the same 'civilizational choices' as those being made by their West European counterparts (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018).

This notion of East European cultural distinctiveness had been raised by East European Eurosceptics on occasions in the past - for example, by religious and cultural conservative critics of Western secular liberalism - but, for various reasons, it had not previously developed any traction. The EU political establishment's response to the European migration crisis, however, appeared to lend some credibility to this narrative. Indeed, by raising the idea that 'European-ness' and national identity were no longer obviously complementary, and possibly even conflicting, notions, at one point the migration crisis even appeared to have the potential to prompt a significant re-framing of the way that the EU was debated in these states. Moreover, although these concerns were driven primarily by responses to the European migration crisis, the so-called 'rule of law' nexus of issues around concerns expressed by the EU political establishment that some post-communist states, notably Hungary and Poland, were increasingly characterised by 'democratic backsliding', also became a factor here. Notwithstanding their arguments about the difficulties of conceptualising and objectively measuring such phenomena as the 'rule of law' and 'illiberalism', this also raised concerns among East European Eurosceptics about how far the EU should become involved in what many argued were essentially domestic political debates (Karatnycky 2015).

From romanticism to instrumentalism

The corollary of the undermining of the idea that the EU integration process represented a natural historical-civilisational choice for post-communist states - as noted above, one of the

original key pillars of support for the Union in these states - was that membership came to be perceived in an increasingly contingent and instrumental way. In other words, support for EU membership in post-communist states was driven increasingly by a cost-benefit analysis based on an evaluation of the tangible material benefits that the Union was going to deliver. Once again, there were various dimensions to this. Such a cost-benefit analysis could, for example, have been viewed in terms of: financial and economic costs and benefits, particularly budget contributions and fiscal transfers; geopolitical and security factors; and access to Western markets.

Many commentators expected the 2014-20 EU budget to be the last from which the post-communist states would benefit so substantially and the next (2021-27) round to be much less favourable to these countries as the Union shifted its priorities away from regional aid towards areas such as research and development where the longer-standing West European members were likely to benefit more. This problem would be exacerbated following Brexit as the removing one of the EU's largest net contributors would almost certainly decrease the overall size of the Union's budget and thereby reduce the scale of these fiscal transfers in the future (Barker 2018). Moreover, as concern about un-controlled mass EU migration from post-communist countries was an important driver of support for Brexit in the UK other member states were also likely to come under increased pressure to restrict East Europeans' access to Western labour markets. This was, exemplified by French President Emanuel Macron's concerns about 'social dumping' by East European workers and his subsequent proposal, accepted by the EU, to limit the rights of so-called 'posted' workers (Khan 2018). As a counter point, supporters of EU membership sometimes pointed to the importance of access to the single market for post-communist states' trade and for attracting inward investment. However, this argument, compared to more visible fiscal transfers, may simply have been too distant and abstract for many East European citizens to grasp. Overall, the fact that attitudes towards the EU in post-communist states became increasingly less abstract and romantic and more instrumental and contingent - at a time when this cost-benefit analysis was shifting to the EU's disadvantage as the benefits of membership appeared to become more limited - was a problem for EU-enthusiasts, and opportunity for Eurosceptics, in these countries

Nonetheless, public and elite opinion remained overwhelmingly in favour of these countries remaining EU members. There did not appear to be any immediate future prospect of an upsurge in 'Hard' rejectionist Euroscepticism or calls for further '-exits' in post-communist states as long most citizens and political elites in these countries felt that this cost-benefit calculus was working in the EU's favour. Even if Brexit could, at some future point, have been portrayed as a 'success' by Eurosceptics, EU supporters would no doubt finesse this argument by arguing that Britain was an exceptional case from which broader conclusions about the viability of life beyond the EU bloc could not be drawn, especially for the post-communist states. In doing so, they could point to the fact that the UK was a large military power with a strong economy and, therefore, much better placed to survive outside the EU's structures. The 'lack of viable alternatives' argument thus remained a very powerful one in the case of what were mainly small and still relatively poor countries, and was likely to continue to be one. For all its faults, the EU was still seen very much as the 'best game in town' exemplified by the fact that no mainstream post-communist politicians questioned their country's membership and many other post-communist states still wanted to join the Union. Notably, Western Balkan states such as Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Kosovo - but also some former Soviet republics like Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine -

continued to strive for EU membership. Moreover, geopolitical factors obviously remained critically important in some countries. This happened, for example, in the Baltic states where the need to be integrated into Western international structures such as the EU continued to be linked to military security considerations, and a fear of possible Moscow revanchism appeared to trump alternative considerations.

However, it was likely that tensions between the post-communist states and the EU political establishment on a number of issues would continue to persist, underpinned by an increasing sense of underlying cultural distinctiveness. The shift from a more romantic, abstract notion of the historical-civilisational choice towards an EU discourse that was more contingent and instrumental meant that supporters of the Union in post-communist states did not have such large reserves of diffuse public and elite support to draw upon in times of crises. It would be particularly interesting to see what would happen if that cost-benefit calculus were to change to the EU's disadvantage in a way that would make Eurosceptic narratives, if not necessarily a full-blown Eurosceptic backlash, more plausible; if, for example, some of these states started to become net EU budget contributors.

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