



An East-West divide in the European Union? Analysis of selected policy areas

Anežka Fuchsová, Pavlína Janebová



Summary and recommendations

- The term “East-West divide” is often used as a rhetorical tool rather than as a description of reality.
- In three selected policies (climate, MFF, migration) when discussing different coalitions of member states, we cannot clearly identify an East-West divide
- The analysis of negotiations on climate, migration, and financial policies does not provide proof of two distinct blocs of Western and Eastern European countries. On the contrary, the coalitions in most cases consist of members from all corners of the EU.
- When discussing EU affairs, the positions of Visegrad Four countries should not be mixed up with positions of all Central and Eastern European members of the EU.
- While conceptually useful, over-simplistic assessments/descriptions of political reality can potentially shape this political reality in an unfavorable direction.



Introduction

The distinction between East and West has recurred through history, the notions often being associated with distinctive characteristics and values – Catholicism versus Protestantism, the democratic West versus communist authoritarianism in the East, rich versus poor, a high versus a low share of immigrants in the societies. Even thirty years after the disappearance of one of the most tangible barriers dividing the Western and the Eastern part of Europe – the Berlin Wall – the mutual sense of a certain “otherness” between the “Western” and the “Eastern” Member States seems to prevail in the political reality of the European Union. Immediately after the fall of the communist authoritarian regimes, the distinctions between East and West – politically, rather than geographically conceived terms – were openly acknowledged, seemingly clear and soon to be overcome. The most emphasized dimension of these differences was the embeddedness of the politics and society in the principles of liberal democracy and of the economy in the principles of capitalism in the West – and the lack thereof in the East. The post-communist states expected – and were expected – to fairly quickly catch-up to the Western standards under the leadership of their new political representations. A few years after this process had supposedly been fulfilled by successful accession to NATO and the EU, the notion of an innate difference between the “old” (i.e. “Western”) and “new” (i.e. “Eastern”) EU member states has reoccurred with few clues about ways of overcoming it (and, some might say, limited willingness to do so).

The purpose of this paper is to look into the notion of the East-West divide, assess its different interpretations and inspect whether it finds support in reality. Specifically, we will focus on the Member States’ positions in the discussion about the EU climate policies, the EU asylum and migration policies, and the ongoing negotiations about the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the years 2021-2027. These themes are among the most prominent on the EU agenda lately. Potential objections can be raised against not including e.g. rule of law – an area where the East-West clash seems to be apparent. However, as elaborated upon further on, such a clash is only present in the rhetoric of certain political leaders.

1. What is the East-West divide?

Mentioning the East-West divide (and other divides for that matter) often comes with a negative connotation. Divisions are to be eliminated – and if that is not possible, there is a problem. Therein lies an important distinction from mere differences that are to be acknowledged but are not necessarily problematic. Divisions come when differences are so deep and interests so far apart that they cause tension and pose an obstacle to effective collaboration between two sides. Focusing on the European Union, the question is thus: are the differences between what we call “East” and “West” irreconcilable?

The authors of this text do not think so. First of all - the so-called “East” and “West” in the EU are not sufficiently defined. More than fifteen years after the so-called “Eastern” enlargement, the thirteen states who became members in 2004, 2007 and 2013 are still often labelled as the “new ones”. Yet, when speaking about the East of the EU, usually the post-communist states are meant, i.e. the Visegrad Group, Baltics, Balkan states, Bulgaria and Romania. What these states have in common is their authoritarian – communist – past. Notwithstanding the extent to which this characteristic might be irrelevant more than thirty years after the change of regime in these countries (as opposed to other more recent and often omitted developments in their history), the significance of this common aspect of their history for the current politics of these states is often overestimated. Even acknowledging the communist past as a relevant factor, it is apparent that this grouping of states rarely



holds a consistent position on specific political issues. When they do, then the given position often is not limited to them – a recent example is the “friends of cohesion” group which, apart from the post-socialist member states also includes Greece, Portugal and Spain¹.

Furthermore, – as we illustrate below – we do not believe that within the EU there are two distinct blocs of states defined by the same characteristics. Certainly, there have been more or less stable coalitions of states that are like-minded on certain issues. These, however, are far from representing two blocs – what we observe more often are multiple groups of states².

When we speak about the East-West divide in the EU, we can legitimately point to a certain disappointment of some of the post-communist states who accessed the Union in 2004 in not having yet quite managed to catch up to the Western member states in terms of the economy. The relatively lower economic level in these states certainly accounts for some of their positions in some EU policies (further elaborated upon below). What is perhaps even more important though, – and distinguishes the fashionable notion of the East-West divide from other “divides” in the EU, like e.g the North-South one – is the insistence of some political figures on an inherent difference in values. What we call the East-West divide is often exploited by the attempts of political actors to structure political discussion in the European Union in a specific way – and others’ willingness to go along with these attempts rather than to problematize them³, thus often not only failing to find common ground on issues like migration, but effectively moving the two sides even further apart. In the past few years, the voice of the East has become identified mostly with the Visegrad Group, or rather the opinions and policies proclaimed by the government of Hungary, for which the V₄ has become the main foreign policy platform, notwithstanding that the actual policies of the Visegrad states towards the European Union are far from always aligned⁴. Nevertheless, once even seemingly verisimilar divisions between Eastern and Western states become used as an argument by relevant actors (i.e. mainly political representatives) in the discourse, they become materialized as a factor to be acknowledged. Rather than reflecting an existing division between the “East” and “West” in the EU, by boldly claiming that “Central Europe is a region which also has a special culture” and „is different from Western Europe“⁵, the Hungarian Prime Minister is creating such a division. It is this notion of a “special culture” that the government of Hungary uses to legitimize the questionable steps away from democracy taken since 2010. Some Western European political leaders tend to accept this line of reasoning, thus assuming that the ongoing decline of democracy is a consequence of something inherently “Central European” that they cannot – and do not want to – understand. That however is not the case – decreasing standards of democracy in some EU countries are not the result of special values held by Central Europeans, but by the governments of certain Central European states⁶. In the following sections we take a look at three EU policy areas

¹ Friends of Cohesion: Joint Declaration on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027, <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/friends-of-cohesion-joint-declaration-on-the-multiannual-financial-framework-2021-2027-177497/>.

² “EU Coalition Explorer – European Council on Foreign Relations,” <https://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer>.

³ Cf. Tomáš Valášek, “Why Can’t the EU’s West and East Work as One?” Carnegie Europe, November 8, 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/08/why-can-t-eu-s-west-and-east-work-as-one-pub-80300>.

⁴ Pavlína Janebová, Zsuzsanna Végh. Trends of Visegrad Foreign Policy 2019. Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), 2019. <https://trendy.amo.cz/trendy2019/paper>.

⁵ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, July 28, 2018, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/>.

⁶ Despite the decline in democracy standards reported by Freedom House (Freedom in the World 2019. Democracy in Retreat, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/democracy-retreat>), looking at Pew Research reports on Global Democracy, both Hungarian and Polish respondents attributed a comparable level of importance to several attributes of democracy as did the



and argue that, although far from consensual, they do not support the existence of a divide between the East and the West of the EU.

2. Climate policies

The European Union's climate agenda is among the most ambitious, if not the single most ambitious in the world. According to the Green Deal for Europe, the cornerstone of the current European Commission's policies, the Union should be climate neutral by 2050. Given its prominence, comprehensiveness, long-term character and projected costs for both economies and societies, the agenda has become the subject of difficult discussions among the EU political leaders, as well as in the media and between experts, some of whom have warned about another potential case of a division between East and West⁷.

It is the post-communist states who have been the more reluctant about the EU setting ambitious goals, given the structure of their energy production and the traditionally large extent to which their economies rely on energy-intensive industries⁸. Three of the Visegrad countries (namely Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) were the loudest, demanding financial guarantees to make up for the disadvantage they would allegedly had and, in the case of the Czech Republic and Hungary, arguing for nuclear energy to be included in the EU taxonomy for sustainable finance⁹. However, only Poland did not sign up to the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 as agreed upon by other member states in December 2019¹⁰. With the European Climate Law – the legally binding framework of the Green Deal – to be approved, there certainly are further tough discussions ahead.

A letter addressed to Frans Timmermans, the First Vice-President of the European Commission, responsible for the Green Deal agenda and European Commissioner for climate action in April 2020, calling for the EU to increase the 2030 EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction target as soon as possible, was originally signed by Denmark, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Latvia – a grouping that does not mirror an East-West divide. Latvia was also among the original ten signatories of a letter stressing the European Green Deal's crucial role in the process of recovery following the COVID-19 crisis. Apart from Latvia, the ten member states were Austria, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden, Latvia thus being the only representative of the "Eastern" bloc. Later, France, Germany and Greece joined to be followed by Ireland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Malta which means that among those who did not join were Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania,

respondents from other EU countries, i.a. a fair judiciary, regular competitive elections, freedom of speech and media, as well as the system of representative democracy per se. At the same time, support for autocratic elements is not considerably more widespread than in other EU countries. Pew Research Center, October 2017, "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy", Pew Research Center, February 2020, "Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong", https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/02/PG_2020.02.27_global-democracy_REPORT.pdf.

⁷ Kalina Oroschakoff, "Europe's East-West divide is back, this time over climate policy," Politico, May 8, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/climate-protest-europe-policy/>; Marin Lessenski, "Taking on climate change: The new East-West divide?" European Council on Foreign Relations, October 4, 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_taking_on_climate_change_the_new_east_west_divide.

⁸ James Brunsten, "Eastern EU governments demand price for climate neutrality," Financial Times, December 12, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/42761ec6-1c69-11ea-9186-7348c2f183af>; Felix Heilmann, Rebekka Popp, Ada Ámon. The Political Economy of Energy in Central and Eastern Europe. Supporting the Net Zero Transition, Berlin: E3G, 2020. http://e3g.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/docs/E3G_2020_Comparative_Analysis_CEE.pdf.

⁹ Frédéric Simon, "EU seals deal on green finance in breakthrough for climate goals," Euractiv, December 17, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/eu-seals-deal-on-green-finance-in-breakthrough-for-climate-goals/>.

¹⁰ European Council conclusions, 12-13 December 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2019/12/12-13/>.



Poland and Romania.¹¹ However, as for the official EU record, the Green Deal commitments have been repeatedly reaffirmed by the Member States' political leaders, notwithstanding some doubtful rhetoric.¹²

Following the European Commission's proposal to up the target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the current 40% to 50 or 55 % below 1990 levels, representatives of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia (all "Eastern" member states) pointed out that the costs of such an increase, especially in the time of the hard-hitting second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, might be too high. On the other hand, the Nordic EU member states (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) argue for increasing the target to "at least 55%"¹³. Conclusions of the European Council October meeting, signed by the heads of all 27 member states, declare that the EU needs to "increase its ambition for the coming decade and update its climate and energy policy framework" with all member states participating while "taking into account national circumstances and considerations of fairness and solidarity."¹⁴

What we observe in the case of the EU climate agenda negotiations is not a fundamental conflict between East and West about whether environmental measures are needed. Instead, it is a case of classic bargaining based on the more or less legitimate fears on the side of the countries that, due to the structure of their economies, might bear higher costs. The fact that most of them belong to Central and Eastern Europe is a result of their shared heritage of carbon intensive economies but does not point to deep ideological rifts. Given the size and importance of the agenda and its many implications for EU citizens, it is not unexpected that negotiations among the member states (and the institutions) are complicated and tense at times. Despite that, the leaders manage to find common ground.

3. Multiannual Financial Framework

The negotiations of a Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) belong among the most complicated that EU members have to go through. The talks over the 2021-2027 MFF were no exception in this regard. Furthermore, they were influenced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. In the future, the EU will have to make do without a contribution from the UK which was among the four highest in the 2014-2021 MFF.¹⁵ The whole situation was a chance for the European Union to demonstrate its unity and the opportunity was seized. The member states' leaders announced the agreement on 21st July. The final deal consists of a total amount of €1.074 trillion for the new MFF which will be accompanied by the €750 billion EU recovery fund.¹⁶

¹¹ Alister Doyle, "Four more EU nations back a green post-coronavirus recovery," Climate Home News, April 20, 2020, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/04/20/four-eu-nations-back-green-post-coronavirus-recovery/>.

¹² Ondřej Houska, "Babiš je s kritikou zelené Evropy sám. Ztratil i původní spojení z visegrádské čtyřky," Hospodářské noviny, April 27, 2020, https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66755370-babis-je-s-kritikou-zelene-evropy-sam-ztratil-i-puvodni-spojence-z-visegradske-ctyrky?fbclid=IwARowKhaDNVEton4libFJ8GDht4eb3yfAI1FBAZ_rzd29KTmjid-IYvc-WtM.

¹³ Frédéric Simon, "Environment agenda: EU climate talks enter decisive phase," Euractiv, August 19, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/news/environment-agenda-eu-climate-talks-enter-decisive-phase/>.

¹⁴ General Secretariat of the Council Delegations. "European Council meeting (15 and 16 October 2020) – Conclusions. October 19, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46341/1516-10-20-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

¹⁵ "Financial Reports – European Commission", https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/financial-reports_en; Alister Doyle, "Four more EU nations back a green post-coronavirus recovery," Climate Home News, April 20, 2020, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/04/20/four-eu-nations-back-green-post-coronavirus-recovery/>.

¹⁶ "As it happened: EU summit on budget, coronavirus recovery fund," Politico, July 16, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-european-council-summit-live-blog-mff-budget-coronavirus-recovery/>.



One of the visible divisions concerned the size of the new EU budget; therefore, how much each member state will have to contribute. Most states expressed their stances with some of them holding a much stricter line than others. It is worth mentioning that the current MFF without the UK contribution is equivalent to 1.16% GNI¹⁷, which means that heading under this level would necessarily mean cuts in some chapters, which clearly is undesirable for some, but not all member states. Some clearly stated that their aim is to target an overall smaller budget and that they prefer reducing contributions to the EU budget. On the other hand, other states suggested compensating the loss of the UK's contribution with increased payments to the common budget.

In mid-2019, most countries held a more or less clear position in this regard. The bigger groups sharing similar stances on the matter were as follows: Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden wanted the smallest budget. They stated that the overall contribution to the budget should not exceed 1% of GNI.¹⁸ This frugal group was followed by states willing to accept a budget under 1.11% of GNI.¹⁹ Those were Belgium, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Finland and Ireland. Then, there were member states that preferred the budget to be exactly 1.11% of GNI, the amount suggested in the European Commission's proposal. Among those states were Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.

The following states were more isolated in their positions. Portugal preferred the budget to be somewhere in between 1.11 and 1.30% of GNI. Estonia and Hungary wanted the new budget to be 1.16% so it would equal the current one without the UK's contribution. They were all topped by Greece and Poland who demanded the highest level of the planned EU budget – 1.30% of GNI.²⁰ There were also the member states that did not disclose a preferred budget size at that time, which included Bulgaria, France, Luxembourg and Latvia.²¹

The positions of the member states on the budget size suggest that the dividing line between the West (old members) and East (new members) cannot be clearly established. Greece and Poland were the countries requesting the highest budget, with Greece representing the old members and Poland representing the new ones. On the other side of the spending demands, the smallest contribution was proposed by five old members. However, the group suggesting the second smallest contribution included the Czech Republic and Cyprus which are both new members. It is also interesting to look at the structure of the biggest group (1.11% GNI). There were old members (Italy, Spain) as well as new ones (Croatia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia). Thus, it is difficult to find a clear divide between the East and West in the EU where the budget size is concerned.

Besides the discussion on the overall budget size, there were other issues around which the member states formed coalitions. In particular, the structure of the budget and the budgetary correction mechanisms.

Among these coalitions two groups were the most visible - the Frugal Four and the Friends of Cohesion. The members of the Frugal Four mostly overlap with the countries demanding a lower budget. They favored a budget focusing less on supporting agriculture and cohesion policy, and wanted more investment in research and innovation and in tackling migration instead. Furthermore, these countries demanded that they keep budgetary compensation in the form of rebates.

¹⁷ "Time to decide on the Union's financial framework. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council," European Commission, October 9, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-euco-mff-oct2019_en.pdf, 1.

¹⁸ Jo Harper, "Poland fights its corner in EU budget spat", Deutsche Welle, February 24, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-fights-its-corner-in-eu-budget-spat/a-52490735>.

¹⁹ Lili Bayer, "The EU's budget tribes explained", Politico, November 4, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-eus-budget-tribes-explained/>

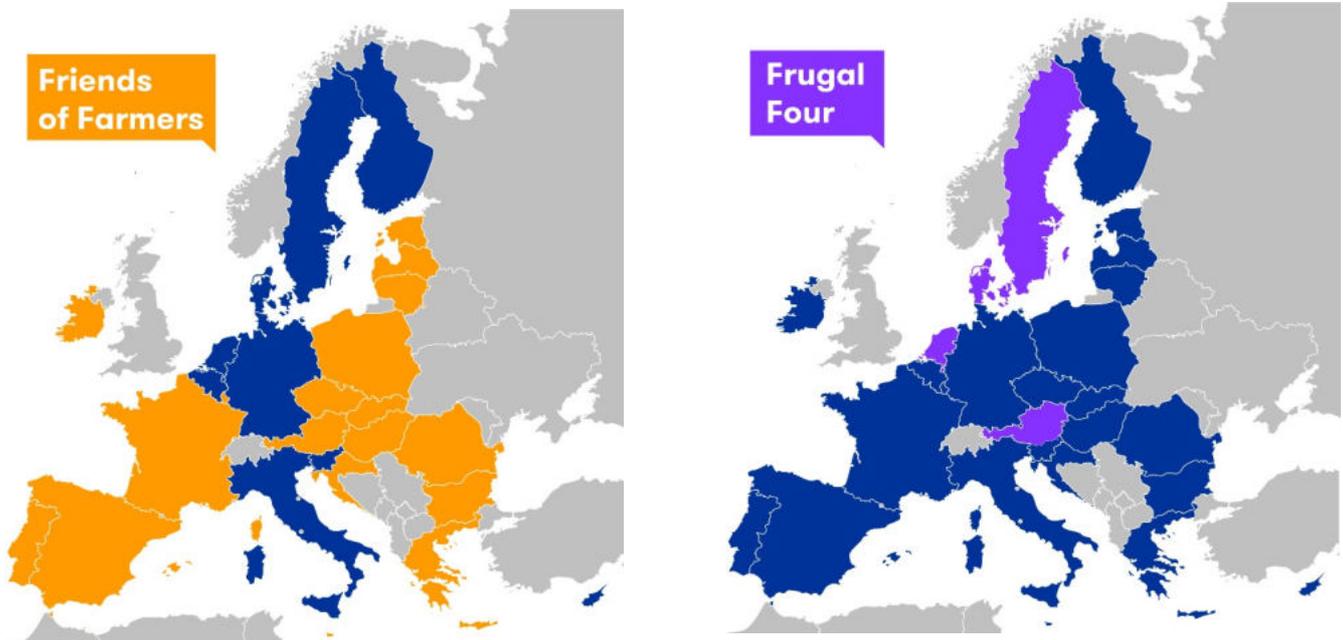
²⁰ Jo Harper, "Poland fights its corner in EU budget spat."

²¹ Lili Bayer, "The EU's budget tribes explained."



As a counterweight to the Frugal Four, there was the Friends of Cohesion consisting of 17 EU member states. Fifteen of them²² signed, in January 2020, a joint declaration defining their demands, which include the same amount of money being dedicated to cohesion (at the level of the 2014-2020 MFF) and the abolition of all rebates.²³

Besides these two, there have been other groups that emerged in joint support of a certain topic. There are the Friends of farmers,²⁴ who insisted on keeping agricultural spending on the current level, which is 35%. Besides them there is also the New Hanseatic League²⁵ that supported a motion to shrink the budget and was against any new additional eurozone instruments in or outside the EU budget as had been proposed by Germany and France.²⁶ And the last to be mentioned is a group labelled by some as democracy promoters²⁷, which insist on having a link between funds and respect for the rule of law.



²² Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

²³ Concerning the rebates, 18 member states called for their abolition in November 2019. "List of Working papers (WK) distributed to the ad hoc Working Party on MFF in the second semester of 2019," General Secretariat of the Council, January 8, 2020, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5081-2020-INIT/en/pdf>.

²⁴ Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Spain, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Malta.

²⁵ Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Finland, and Baltics.

²⁶ Peter Becker, A New Budget for the EU. Negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2019, 23.

https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2019RP11_bkr.pdf.

²⁷ Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden.



It is possible to indicate clearly the differences in member states' opinions on how the new MFF should look concerning certain issues (budget size, amount of money spent on agriculture or cohesion, or whether rebates should be abolished); however, we cannot say that they indicate an East-West divide. There are old members (Greece, Portugal, Spain) among the Friends of Cohesion and there is France among the Friends of farmers. In some cases, it even seems that the priorities of some countries clash as they demand cuts, whilst proposing increased spending for certain chapters at the same time. For example, Baltic countries which support cuts in the budget are against cuts in funds for cohesion or agricultural policies. Or German calls for a reduced budget to 1% GNI are not consistent with their calls for an increase in allocations given to building relations with Africa.²⁸

It is difficult to indicate any clear divide because the countries tend to follow their own national priorities which are not defined by East-West positioning but rather, by the structure of their economies (which, as has been pointed out above, in the case of East vs. West are of course affected by historical differences) and by current political needs. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about two distinct blocs fighting for opposing priorities as the groups vary and overlap.

4. Migration

EU policies designed to tackle external immigration and at least partially distribute the burden fairly appeared to be insufficient when dealing with a wave of people of such size as in 2015. Member states adopted various approaches to handling the incoming people. The members largely preferred national solutions or approaches, and struggled to find a common way forward. Each country was in a different position. On the one hand, EU border states were flooded with migrants, which made them deal with the situation urgently and push the others to look for a common EU solution; on the other hand, some inland countries with a significantly smaller share of incoming immigrants and which did not experience a similar pressure were rather reluctant in the search for a common approach to deal with the issue efficiently.

Their positions were reflected in their approaches to the solution-finding process. The border states such as Italy or Greece called for some kind of a solidarity system and asked their fellow member states to ease the burden. Germany reacted and opened their borders for migrants, but others were hesitant to adopt a similar approach. Other countries built razor wire fences to prevent migrants from crossing their border unchecked (Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Austria,..) and some temporarily closed their borders, which Schengen Border Code allows in exceptional circumstances (Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Hungary, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France).²⁹ The different approaches displayed not only the different views of member states, but also led to an inability to reach a unanimous consensus on how to deal with the difficult situation.

In response to the pressing circumstances, the European Commission proposed a scheme to resettle 160 000 migrants from Italy and Greece, which was approved after a few months of discussion by representatives of member states in the Council of the EU in September 2015. Nevertheless, it was not a unanimous vote. Four countries voted against (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia), and one abstained (Finland).³⁰ They were outvoted by the rest and the plan was to be implemented. It is noteworthy that outvoting other members in an issue as sensitive

²⁸ Benedikt Erforth, Niels Keijzer, "EU budget negotiations: the 'frugal five' and development policy," European Think Tanks Group, January 21, 2020, <https://ettg.eu/2020/01/21/eu-budget-negotiations-the-frugal-five-and-development-policy/>.

²⁹ Kira Schacht, "Border checks in EU countries challenge Schengen Agreement," Deutsche Welle, November 12, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/border-checks-in-eu-countries-challenge-schengen-agreement/a-51033603>.

³⁰ "Migrant crisis: EU ministers approve disputed quota plan," BBC, September 22, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34329825>.



as this notion was, is not a common practice due to anticipated difficulties in implementing such measures for which even states that opposed are responsible.

The implementation did not go smoothly. Firstly, two countries (Slovakia and Hungary) challenged the decision at the European court of Justice claiming that the EU had exceeded its powers by adopting such a decision by qualified majority. However, the ECJ did not support their view and ruled the decision was adopted in accordance with EU law.³¹ Hungary, together with the Czech Republic and Poland refused to implement (or continue in the implementation), which again was a concern of the ECJ, which in April 2020 ruled that they had violated EU law. Nevertheless, the decision was never fully fulfilled and as of December 2018 Germany, a big proponent of the measure, dropped its demand for all EU countries to receive migrants based on quotas.³²

As a result of the events in 2015, migration has been propelled to the forefront of topics among EU member states. However, despite the time which has passed since the crisis, the member states still have not come up with a system for setting the EU's migration, asylum, and refugee policies.³³ It is hard for the Union to agree on anything above the lowest common denominator which is the need for improved border control. Some countries prefer the centralization of the EU asylum system and enhanced solidarity among member states; others prefer their own national way with the focus being on curbing immigration. All in all, this puts the measure, at least temporarily, off the table.

As for recent developments in this regard, in the autumn of 2019 a coalition of the willing appeared. It is a French-German solidarity mechanism plan for voluntary allocation of individuals. It gathered support across the EU, for example from Finland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Lithuania, Croatia, and Ireland.³⁴ Once again, attracting new and old member states.

The latest measure, The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, as presented by the European Commission in September 2020 proved to be a sensitive issue. Visegrad Four countries, Slovenia, and Austria articulated various levels of disagreement. Despite this, after the first round of negotiations EU officials claimed that there was no country that would reject the plan.³⁵

The issue of how to deal with the migration crisis was often framed as an example of the East-West divide.³⁶ There was different rhetoric which could be assigned to one or other "side"; however, when it came down to the most controversial measure adopted in 2015, most countries, therefore, including the "new" members, voted for the measure. In some cases, the voice of the East is confused with the voice of Visegrad Four. The V₄ countries were indeed vocal

³¹ "Refugee crisis: European Court of Justice rejects quota challenge," Deutsche Welle, September 6, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/refugee-crisis-european-court-of-justice-rejects-quota-challenge/a-40375192>.

³² Alex Barker, Michael Peel, Mehreen Khan, "Germany drops long-held EU migrant quota demand," Financial Times, December 9, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/18b9b194-fb98-11e8-aebf-99e208d3e521>.

³³ Andrew Geddes, Martin Ruhs, *Reforming Asylum and Migration Policies in Europe: Attitudes, Realism and Values*. Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2019, 7. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/61596/RSCAS%20PP%202019_13.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

³⁴ Georgi Gotev, "EU coalition of the willing agrees new migrant 'solidarity mechanism'," Euractiv, July 23, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/eu-coalition-of-the-willing-agrees-new-migrant-solidarity-mechanism/>.

³⁵ Jacopo Barigazzi, "Germany's Horst Seehofer: Yes, we can get a political deal on migration," Politico, October 8, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-interior-minister-we-can-succeed-in-reaching-a-first-deal-on-migration-asylum-migrants/>.

³⁶ "Migration: EU summit fails to bridge east-west divide," Deutsche Welle, December 15, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/migration-eu-summit-fails-to-bridge-east-west-divide/a-41807105>; Natalie Nougayrède, "Healing Europe's east-west divide is central to a lasting refugee solution," The Guardian, September 3, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/03/europe-east-west-divide-refugee-eu-leaders>.



against the measure; however, they should not be mistakenly understood as the voice of all new members.

Migration, even though a highly sensitive issue, did not divide the EU into two separate blocs although the views might have been more polarized than in other situations. Member states did struggle to come up with a system that would enable them to tackle migration on a large scale. At the moment of crisis, most states took an individualistic approach. This cut through the entire Union regardless of the geographic location.

Since 2018-2019, as the situation has become much calmer, a new approach to the solution has appeared. Besides the protection of borders on which all agree, several member states voiced themselves in favour of contributing voluntarily to the solution by being a part of the so-called coalition of the willing, where there are both old and new member states. Thus, despite differences among the member states about how to approach a new asylum and migration system, based on the coalitions formed around specific issues, not even in the case of migration can we talk about an East-West divide. Although it is sometimes painted this way, it is mainly because of the vocal opposition from V₄ countries which is sometimes understood as a voice of all CEE/new members.



Conclusion

To measure or quantify a divide within the 27 member states is not an easy thing. The Debate on the East-West divide often measures cultural, national, or sociological differences. In this paper, the aim was to look at the decision-making processes among the EU member states and to try to assess whether the coalitions formed when dealing with important EU issues give us a hint on whether it is possible to talk about an East-West divide.

By analysing the different coalitions that appeared in recent years in discussions about climate policy, the new multiannual financial framework and migration, we came to the conclusion that in this regard it is not possible to clearly state the existence of a dividing line between member states in the East and in the West.

The coalitions are formed on the basis of national interests, political circumstances, or the current economic situation. These may or may not be common to countries in one region, but as shown above, there is not one group of countries sharing all the same goals. Even the Visegrad Group, often mentioned in a rather negative light, finds agreement on a certain number of topics, but definitely not all of them.

What we are dealing with in the European Union is not a divide in a grave sense of the word, and certainly not one between East and West. The real issue that the EU unfortunately seems ill-equipped to deal with are attempts by certain politicians to use the notion as a tool for advocating for their unwillingness to respect norms and values their countries signed up for when acceding the Union. The three above mentioned examples of key EU policy areas show that while conceptually tempting, the notion of an East-West divide is also simplistic and does not find support in reality. Giving in to divisive rhetoric about such a divide can however make it very real.



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+420 224 813 460



www.amo.cz



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Anežka Fuchsová

Anežka Fuchsová is a Project Manager in AMO since October 2019. She holds master's degrees in history from Charles University and European Politics and Society (EPS) from EPS consortium (Charles University in Prague Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Leiden University, and Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona). During her studies, she spent a semester at University of Essex and George Washington University in Washington, D.C.



anezka.fuchsova@amo.cz

Pavλίna Janebová

Pavλίna Janebová is the AMO Deputy Research Director. Her research focuses on Czech foreign and European policy and on politics of Central European countries. She is a graduate of European Studies which she read at the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, where she currently pursues a PhD degree in the same field. During her Master's degree program, she completed internships at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, at the Czech Center in Budapest, and at the International Institute of Political Science of Masaryk University.



pavlina.janebova@amo.cz

Peer review: Vít Dostál

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of Veronika Hložková in conducting the research.