PART VI

International relations and actors
Introduction

The EU enlargement incorporating the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was completed in 2004–2007 and represented the culmination of more than a decade of negotiations and preparations by the candidate countries and adaptation of policies and decision-making by the Union itself. It was a momentous and difficult undertaking that changed the size and character of the EU, but despite the challenges it brought, it was hailed by many as the true unification of Europe (Avery and Cameron 1997; Dimitrova 2004; Friis 1998; Maniokas 2005; Vachudova 2005; Vassiliou 2007).

The process that we refer to as ‘enlargement’ consists of intergovernmental negotiations between the member states (as the EU’s Council of Ministers) and the candidates. An equally important aspect of enlargement, without which negotiations do not progress, are the candidates’ preparations to fulfil the obligations of membership and adopt the existing policies, legislation, and case law of the Union (the acquis). As the Union’s Eastern or ‘big bang’ enlargement involved the largest number of potential members – ten post-communist states plus Cyprus and Malta – it required not only the transformation of the candidates, but also the adaptation of the Union’s decision making and policies, in particular the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the structural funds, and the budget (Vassiliou and Christoffersen 2007:103–105). Enlargement can be thus seen as a set of processes including, but not limited to, EU reforms, negotiations, domestic transformation of the candidates, and the resolution of outstanding bilateral issues and regional conflicts. The domestic transformations that candidates underwent, adopting EU rules in their own legislation and creating new institutions in order to comply with the EU’s criteria for accession, are often referred to as Europeanisation. Europeanisation, a concept as used and as contested as ‘democratisation’, has been defined in the context of the Eastern enlargement as ‘a process in which states adopt EU rules’ (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a:7).

Almost a decade after enlargement, each of these processes deserves a reassessment with the benefit of hindsight. In this chapter, I will first outline briefly the most important features of the Eastern enlargement as a process of negotiation and adaptation and the policy tools the EU developed to support the CEE countries’ transformation to democracies and market economies.
The second section will look at the CEE states as full EU members and discuss how enlargement has been absorbed by member states and their citizens. The following sections will discuss compliance with the EU’s *acquis* and economic and political aspects of Europeanisation of the CEE states. I will argue that post-enlargement, the record of CEE countries as EU member states presents a certain paradox, namely that they simultaneously performed much better and much worse as EU member states than expected. To develop this argument, I will highlight key findings in compliance research in CEE and the Europeanization of the polities and politics of CEE states. In terms of complying with the *acquis* of the Union in key policy areas such as the internal market, environmental policy, transport, agriculture, and other ‘classic’ community policies, CEE states performed much better than expected (Toshkov, 2008; Sedelmeier 2008). Yet in terms of core democratic principles, norms and values, Europeanisation has been more uneven: not only Bulgaria and Romania, seen as the laggards with respect to rule of law and quality of democracy, but also Hungary and more recently Poland have developed their political systems in unexpected ways, evaluated by many as backsliding from democratic achievements (Ágh 2014; Rupnik and Zielonka 2013). The next section will discuss what instruments and tools the EU has used to cope with post-accession democratic backsliding. The last section will highlight crisis responses of the CEE member states and argue that the economic, geopolitical, and refugee crises affecting the EU have put the unity of the enlarged Union to the test.

**The EU’s unprecedented ‘big bang’ enlargement**

When CEE states applied to join the EU in the early and mid-1990s, the challenge they represented meant that the EU had to formulate clear conditions and guidelines not only for the adoption of the *acquis*, but also for defining the institutional and governance characteristics essential for a member state, such as democratic institutions, rule of law, and market economy. Therefore, meeting in Copenhagen in 1993, the European Council (at the time, the heads of state and government of the twelve EU member states) agreed to offer the CEE states emerging from communist rule a membership perspective and formulated a set of criteria for membership that came to be known as the Copenhagen criteria (European Council in Copenhagen 1993). ¹

Accession negotiations, in contrast to other kinds of international negotiations between the Union and third parties, have been first and foremost about the conditions under which candidates take the *acquis* on board (Avery and Cameron, 1998:31–33). Starting with the Copenhagen criteria, the EU introduced a number of innovations to this traditional method of enlargement (Preston 1997; Maniokas 2004; Dimitrova 2011). These additional conditions are sometimes referred to as the ‘enlargement *acquis*’, while the policy tools, such as the regular progress reports have become an integral part of the Union’s enlargement policy.

After a candidate has officially applied for membership, the European Commission provides a detailed opinion of its political and economic situation. With CEE candidates, this required a detailed process of ‘screening’ their legislation prior to negotiations to establish their compatibility with the EU’s policies (Avery and Cameron 1998; Christoffersen 2007). The EU *acquis* is divided into chapters for the purpose of the negotiations and these chapters are opened and provisionally closed in the Intergovernmental Conferences between the candidates, the Council of the Union, and the European Commission.

Having opened the door to enlargement at the Copenhagen European Council, the Union had to come to grips with the institutional and policy changes needed to make enlargement work. In 1997, the European Commission prepared an important set of proposals presented in the Agenda 2000, detailing the necessary policy reforms in key areas as well as opinions on the membership applications of each of the ten CEE candidates (European Commission 1997).
Following the Commission’s opinions and after negotiations at the Luxembourg European Council, the EU decided to open enlargement negotiations with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. A second group of candidates was to be screened and open negotiations when deemed sufficiently prepared (Christoffersen 2007: 31–32; Friis 1998). Deciding which candidates could start negotiations was difficult, as the Union had recently emerged from an Intergovernmental Conference negotiating the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997. Furthermore, various member states were sceptical about the ability of all the candidates to fulfil the obligations of membership, since they were neither fully-fledged democracies nor market economies when they applied. The European Commission, together with member states committed to enlargement, managed to promote an ‘objective’ approach to enlargement, emphasising candidates’ preparation instead of political considerations (Friis 1998). Thus, candidates would move together in the negotiations, but each would progress according to its own speed of preparation, an approach the EU dubbed ‘the regatta principle’. In the end, the EU offered all candidates an inclusive process whereby the Council adopted Accession partnerships detailing the reforms needed in each country and the Commission started monitoring progress with regular reports. The five remaining candidates – Bulgaria, Malta, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia – started negotiating in 2000 after a decision by the Helsinki European Council. The Union proceeded with its own internal negotiations and institutional reforms, reaching a (partial and imperfect) solution for the inclusion of the future members in its institutions embodied in the Nice Treaty in 2000. Ultimately, ten countries joined in 2004, while Bulgaria and Romania were deemed not to have developed market economies. They were able to join later, in 2007. Since the ten CEE states applied and went through key stages of the process approximately at the same time, the 2004–2007 enlargement is seen as a single enlargement round, sometimes called the ‘big bang’ enlargement.

The Accession Partnerships and the regular yearly reports of the European Commission became institutionalized enlargement policy tools, used not only for measuring progress, but also providing a roadmap of the reforms needed in fundamental areas of governance such as electoral process, public administration, the judiciary, nuclear safety, and many others. The continuous demands for candidates to reform institutions and policies in order to move closer to accession became known as conditionality, a policy tool that emerged as the linchpin of the EU’s approach to the 2004–2007 and subsequent enlargements (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a, Dimitrova 2002, 2011). When it emerged that Bulgaria and Romania had serious deficiencies in the area of rule of law and problems with organised crime and corruption, the EU instituted another monitoring tool just before their accession, the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). Furthermore, realising the weaknesses in fundamental areas of democratic governance in the whole region and taking the lessons from the 2004–2007 enlargement on board, the EU has shifted the emphasis of its enlargement strategy in the Western Balkans towards fundamental reforms and rule of law. This emphasis on the fundamentals has been reflected in a new sequencing of negotiation chapters, a more elaborate system of benchmarks, and use of financial assistance as an instrument facilitating reforms.

Having adopted wide-ranging reforms in governance and policies in response to the EU’s conditionality, the CEE candidates essentially underwent a process of Europeanisation before joining the EU. Europeanisation of the CEE states should be evaluated both in the narrow sense, defined by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005b: 7), as the adoption of EU rules and compliance with the acquis of the Union and in the broader sense, as institution-building and support for democratic principles and rule of law (Dimitrova 2002, 2010).

Arguably the most important aspect of Europeanisation as institution-building was the anchoring of democratic changes and moderation of political behaviour of political parties and
leaders in response to the EU’s leverage and conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a; Vachudova 2005). Alongside democratic consolidation and market reforms, the adaptation of key policy areas to the *acquis* became a form of policy modernisation in many areas and sectors, reflecting the ideas, bargains, and technical solutions the EU had adopted.

Given this extensive adaptation in response to EU conditionality and the requirements of the accession process in all areas, including both domestic and foreign policy, it is fair to say that the enlargement negotiations defined the relations between the EU and the post-communist states in CEE in the 1990s and early 2000 and that they currently define the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. But what has happened with the new member states after enlargement?

**Adapting to enlargement: compliance and decision-making**

The CEE countries that took part in EU’s big bang enlargement cannot be called new member states any more: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia have been members for more than a decade, Bulgaria and Romania for eight years and even Croatia, which joined on the 1st of July 2013, can look back at more than two years of membership. The CEE member states participate fully in decision-making and implementation of EU policies, and five of them – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia – have also joined the Eurozone.

Despite the success of enlargement, worrying trends and developments have emerged suggesting the Cold War divide of Europe has not been overcome. Perceptions of the timing, process, and effects of the Eastern enlargement vary considerably between member states. Among politicians and citizens of the EU-15, arguments that the post-communist states of Eastern Europe joined the EU too fast, before they were ready, are common (Verheugen 2013; Dimitrova et al. 2015). Politicians and commentators from the CEE member states, on the other hand, perceived their countries’ road to the Union as too long (Telčiška and Bartak 2007: 144; Maniokas 2005). The divide between the east and west of the EU is still reified in research, as exemplified by the fact that most analyses of public opinion in the EU examine either the EU-15 (that is, pre-2004 EU members) or the ‘new member states’, but hardly ever both (Toshkov et al. 2014). Taken together with the divergent responses to the multiple crises the Union has recently encountered, it can be argued that we witness today the unfinished unification of Europe.

The moment when CEE states achieved the status of ‘normal’ EU members was therefore marked by a historical irony. Just as CEE states gained the confidence and experience to behave as equal partners to the older member states, the EU has been beset by multiple crises, subjecting it to powerful centrifugal forces and overshadowing the historical achievements of Eastern enlargement.

This contradiction between past achievement and current strains make it important to assess the performance of CEE states as member states and their compliance with EU rules, as well as democratic record.

Much of the research before and after CEE accession focused on whether candidates from CEE could function properly as EU members, in terms of transposition of existing *acquis* and compliance with EU rules. Their transposition and implementation record has been investigated in great depth, both quantitatively, across candidates and sectors (Toshkov 2008; Sedelmeier 2008) and qualitatively, through comparative case studies of compliance within certain sectors (Toshkov et al. 2010; Falkner and Treib 2008). Even before they entered, CEE member states had already reached levels of transposition of the EU *acquis* which were equal to and in many cases better than the transposition records of existing member states (Toshkov 2008; Sedelmeier 2008). As
they became EU members, the 2004–2007 entrants established a more mixed record, dividing
between implementation leaders (Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, even, for a while, Bulgaria) and
(relative) implementation laggards (the Czech Republic and Poland).

In general, fears that CEE member states would lag behind dramatically in compliance have
not materialised. The EU did not suffer from bad implementation, or at least no more than it
did before the CEE countries joined. The relative success of the CEE states in transposition of
the EU *acquis* should be attributed to a great extent to the substantial upgrades in administrative
capacity during the pre-accession period (Dimitrova 2002; Dimitrova and Toshkov 2009; Meyer-
Sahling 2004; Zubek 2005; Zubek and Staronova 2010). Next to adopting and adapting to the
EE *acquis*, CEE member states have also adjusted to decision-making procedures in the EU and
have become increasingly confident as they have organised and conducted successful presidencies
of the Council of Ministers (Vandecasteele et al. 2015).

Despite the good transposition record of CEE member states, there have been widespread
expectations that transposition would not lead to proper implementation. EU rules have remained
‘dead letters’ in some policy areas (Falkner and Treib 2008), which has raised questions as to the
real Europeanisation of policies in CEE. As research in specific policy areas in CEE has pro-
gressed and the number of implementation studies has slowly grown, a more nuanced picture has
emerged. In some sectors and some member states, lack of resources and weak rule of law lead
to a situation where the EU rules indeed remain dead letters (Falkner and Treib, 2008 Buzogány
2009). There are, however, areas where implementation has worked well and EU rules have led
to the Europeanisation of policies (Dimitrova and Steunenberg 2013, Zhelyazkova et al. 2017).
There is a considerable sectoral-level difference in implementation, one that can be attributed not
only to country-level factors, but also to a number of structural and actor-related factors such as
the configuration and preferences of relevant veto players (Dimitrova 2010), state capacity and
resources (Buzogány 2009; Falkner and Treib 2008, Dimitrova and Toshkov 2009, Martinsen and
Vasev 2015), the configuration of non-state actors, and their capacity and organisation (Börzel
and Buzogány 2010).

EU decision-making – measured as the Union’s legislative output – has not slowed down as a
result of enlargement (Toshkov 2015). Despite complaints that the initial statement of positions
(‘*tour de table*’) at the Council of Ministers has become unworkably long with twenty-eight
member states, this has not translated, on average, to less legislative output from the enlarged EU.
This is partly, however, the result of preparation and adjustment in all decision-making for an
enlarged Union. Member states and the European Commission embarked on several rounds of
institutional and treaty changes (finalised with the Amsterdam, Nice, and Lisbon Treaties), to a
great extent driven by the anticipation of larger number of member states (Steunenberg 2002).

Negotiating institutional changes to prepare for enlargement has been anything but easy. EU
member states and institutions used enlargement as an opportunity for renegotiating core bar-
gains (Steunenberg 2002). The agreement to limit the number of commissioners once member
states reached twenty-five is an example of an enlargement driven adjustment enshrined in the
Nice Treaty, but one that remained contentious and was ultimately rejected. Post-Lisbon, informal
rules have slowly evolved to supplement the new formal rules governing decision-making
in the enlarged Union. As shown by Reh et al. (2013), for example, there have been many more
early agreements in co-decision (reached through the so-called trilogues) after enlargement, a
development they attribute to the need to alleviate functional pressures on decision-making.
There has also been a trend of increasing differentiation between member states (Leuffen et al.
2013), although arguably it is an effect of the division between Eurozone members and the rest
of the EU, rather than enlargement.
Core-periphery dynamics: has enlargement led to economic convergence?

When contemplating the success of the Eastern enlargement and the challenges of post-enlargement integration, it is easy to overlook the other enlargement objective of unifying and integrating Europe economically and ending the division between core and periphery (Epstein and Jacoby 2014). As Buzogány and Korkut (2013) have rightly noted, convergence in policies such as structural funds should lead to development and economic convergence. Europeanised policies are not an end in themselves, but rather are the means for the desired increase in prosperity and economic growth in CEE.

A growing body of research investigating trajectories of economic development in CEE after communism has attributed some credit to the EU for economic stabilization, growth and increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) in CEE. While it is clear that the EU’s market-liberal orientation and its nature of a regulatory rather than redistributive union have prevented large-scale transfers to CEE states to stimulate development, the EU did support the candidate states’ economies in the hardest years of transition. EU support alleviated some of the negative externalities arising from the economic restructuring, which the Union required during pre-accession (Bruszt and Langbein 2017). The EU pre-accession support and structural funds did make a difference for both growth (Epstein and Jacoby 2014) and FDI (Medve-Bálint 2014; Langbein 2015). Attracting FDI, however, was initially a question of low production costs for CEE states, sometimes leading to a ‘bidding war’ for foreign investment and tensions between candidates and existing member states (Drahokoupil 2009; Medve-Bálint 2014).

As Epstein and Jacoby argued, growth in CEE is not in itself sufficient to change the status of CEE states as European periphery (Epstein and Jacoby 2014). A noticeable increase of complex manufacturing as a share of CEE economies can be seen as the true measure for development and sustainable growth in the region (Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Langbein 2015). In addition, EU structural fund spending has, to a certain extent, softened the impact of the 2008 economic crisis for CEE states (Jacoby 2014) and limited CEE states’ vulnerability in the international system (Epstein 2014). However, as Epstein (2014) warns, to achieve sustainable growth under crisis conditions of more limited FDI, the CEE states would need to develop more innovation in their economies.

The generally positive assessment of policy Europeanisation and economic growth following CEE accession to the EU changes when we turn to more recent developments in politics and polities in CEE. Research on Europeanisation East, as Héritier has rightfully noted, has developed contemporaneously with transition research, but the two should be seen as analytically separate (Héritier 2005:204; see also Dimitrova 2004:4–5). The processes of post-communist democratisation and Europeanisation have coincided in time and brought effects of mutual reinforcement for those states that took part in the Eastern enlargement. Nowadays, however, we need to reassess the EU’s effects on the polity and politics of CEE states in the light of the illiberal turn in several Central European states.

Polity and politics: backsliding in CEE and the EU

While Bulgaria and Romania have been criticised for weaknesses in their democratic institutions ever since their entry in the EU and continue to suffer serious deficiencies with respect to democracy and the rule of law (Ganev 2013; Dimitrov et al. 2016, 2015; Spendzharova and Vachudova 2012), the backsliding in democratic quality in Hungary and Poland has taken many by surprise.
The constitutional, legislative, and personnel changes made in Hungary by the Fidesz government led by Prime Minister Orbán have affected negatively key democratic and state institutions such as the electoral system, the judiciary and administration, and the media (Ágh 2013; Meyer-Sahling and Jaeger 2012; Rupnik 2012). Elements of Orbán’s approach of taking control of state institutions, and limiting judicial independence and media freedom appear to be emulated by the government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, confirming fears of an ‘authoritarian turn’ in the region (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013:3). The PiS government, in power since 2015, explicitly referred to Orbán’s ‘illiberal democracy’ as a model to emulate (The Economist 2015).

While it is not the task of this chapter to delve into analyses of the causes and mechanisms underlying the illiberal turn in some CEE states, the question what, if anything, the EU can do about it, should be addressed. There are three possible avenues of inquiry: first, to compare the EU’s role as an actor engaging with democratisation in CEE before and after accession. Second and connected to the first, the tools that the Union has at its disposal in dealing with backsliding member states should be evaluated. Third, scholars have started asking questions whether the economic model the EU has promoted affects the political economy and thereby the political systems in CEE states (Greskovits 2015; Innes 2014). These three directions will be explored in turn.

Comparing EU leverage before and after accession, scholars note a diminishing power of conditionality: what the EU can do for candidates in terms of encouraging democratic reforms and discouraging backsliding, it cannot do for its full members (Sedelmeier 2008; Epstein and Sedelmeier 2008; Dimitrova 2010). Before accession, the EU was considered by many to have a kind of transformative power, based on the tools discussed earlier, underpinned by incentives and socialisation mechanisms (Dimitrova 2002; Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a; Vachudova 2005). There is near universal agreement among scholars that the EU conditionality and pre-accession support were beneficial for democratic institutions (Dimitrova 2004, Grabbe 2006; Ekiert 2008; Jacoby 2006; Levitz and Pop-Eleches 2010; Vachudova 2005). It must be noted, however, that there are some important disagreements with the story of the EU’s transformative power; for example, Mungiu-Pippidi (2014) has argued that the EU was able to promote democracy only to a limited extent and has failed to promote good governance. Yet while most scholars claimed the EU’s pre-accession tools played a positive role for consolidation of democracy, post-accession the Union’s role was found to be weaker (Levitz and Pop-Eleches 2010). The Union has limited instruments and even more limited will to deal with what Ganev dubbed ‘post-accession hooliganism’ of CEE members (2013).

The instruments the EU has at its disposal to affect democratic backsliding in member states, can be divided into those explicitly targeting specific states – the CVM for Bulgaria and Romania – and the tools available for all member states, such as Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). The CVM’s record is mixed and opinions of its effectiveness and usefulness are divided (Dimitrov et al. 2014, 2016; Dimitrova 2015; Toneva-Metodieva 2014; Spendzharova and Vachudova 2012). The European Commission itself did not appear to find the CVM an effective mechanism, as evidenced by the fact that it changed enlargement strategies for Croatia and the Western Balkan candidates respectively in 2011, 2013, and 2015 to put fundamental democratic governance reforms and their implementation at the centre of accession negotiations.

With respect to EU sanctions beyond the CVM, existing studies show mixed results as well. Sedelmeier’s (2014) comparative study of the EU’s post-accession efforts to contain democratic backsliding in Romania and Hungary sought to establish whether and under what conditions the EU had an influence. Sedelmeier qualified the EU’s efforts to address breaches in liberal democracy in Hungary as highly selective and partially effective. He found that transnational partisan politics had a negative impact on the EU’s ability to mobilise and impose sanctions, with party
groups in the EP supporting or denying sanctions instrumentally depending on the party affiliation of those violating democratic principles (Sedelmeier 2014:133). Both Sedelmeier (2014) and Spendzharova and Vachudova (2012) highlighted the importance of issue linkages (e.g. with Schengen membership) for successful leverage from the EU on non-
aquis matters such as media or judicial independence. Using issue linkages, Bulgarian environmentalists have used EU rules in some policy areas to challenge lack of transparency in other, related policy areas (Dimitrova and Buzogány 2014).

The effectiveness of article 7 of the TEU, created to address fundamental breaches of democratic principles in member states, has also been questioned (Sedelmeier, 2014; van Hüllen and Börzel, 2013). Article 7 is known as ‘the nuclear option’, referring to the demanding voting threshold required to make it work and its far-reaching consequences of suspending voting rights, both making it near impossible to apply. To create a more nuanced approach, the EU adopted a mechanism in 2014 to address systematic violations of rule of law and democratic principles, which relies on a European Commission opinion and reflection and ultimately may lead to the activation of Article 7 TEU (European Commission 2014).

The experience with Hungary seems to have had an impact on EU institutions with regard to other potential cases of backsliding. When the new Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland started ‘remaking the state in a hurry’ in the last days of 2015 (The Economist 2015), the European Commission and European Parliament took a series of highly visible steps suggesting the possibility of sanctioning Poland under the new mechanism for breaches of democratic principles and rule of law. The Polish government and parliament were addressed in two letters by Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Commissioner Günther Oettinger hinted the letters could be the first steps in triggering the mechanism addressing violations of the rule of law and democratic principles (Rettman 2015; Reuters 2016). The European Parliament (EP) invited Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło for a hearing in early 2016 (Zalan 2016). The proactive approach from the Commission and the EP towards the law amendments affecting the constitutional court and media in Poland can be explained with the lessons from earlier confrontations with Hungary’s Fidesz government, in which the EU was considered rather weak and ineffective.

It is too early to evaluate whether the EU’s more proactive approach will have an effect in Poland, but it is clear that the governments in Poland and Hungary, backed by large parliamentary majorities, do not shy away from a confrontation with ‘Brussels’. The lingering social effects of decades of reforms combined with the expectation of prosperity thwarted by the economic crisis allow anti-EU rhetoric to flourish and resonate with the public, as shown by some citizens’ discourses regarding enlargement (Dimitrova et al. 2015).

The effects of EU supported economic policies are seen by some authors as a major cause for democratic backsliding (Greskovits 2015; Ágh 2013). Greskovits has argued that the development of neoliberal economies in Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, or Bulgaria has led to hollowing of democracy in these states (Greskovits 2015). However, Greskovits has also found that more welfare-oriented policies and an active civil society in Hungary have not led to democratic resilience. Instead, the rollback of democracy in Hungary occurred in the context of mobilized and vibrant civil society (Greskovits 2015).

The rules of the EU’s single market and Economic and Monetary Union have limited the space for different domestic economic policies and taken over some competences from the national level. In some CEE states this may exacerbate existing problems and contribute to the rise of populist and illiberal political forces. To establish whether this is indeed the case, future research would need to investigate the potential link between inequality, EU policies, and illiberal politics.
Responses to the crises: no longer trying to be the best pupils in the class

Just like the older member states in the North and South of Europe, CEE member states have been affected in varying degrees by the series of major crises: the Eurozone and sovereign debt crisis; the Greek debt crisis; the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of the Crimea in 2013–2014; the migration and refugee crisis in 2014–2016; and the terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015–2016. The fact that member states are affected in different ways and degrees has meant that common solutions have been hard to develop (Lefkofridi and Schmitter 2014).

Slovakia’s stance towards the Greek bailout and crisis was an example of the divergent domestic and European pressures affecting domestic politics. Slovaks have argued that a state as poor as Slovakia should not be required to fund the bailout of much richer Greece. Slovakia’s centre-right government, led by Prime Minister Iveta Radičová, lost a parliamentary vote of confidence linked to the Slovak contribution to the Greek bailout (Haughton 2014). Not only for Slovakia, but also for Latvia, the Greek bailout stood in contrast to the costs of the transformations they had gone through. In opposition to the Greek left that presented the Greek crisis as a confrontation between the rich North and the poor South, Slovaks and Latvians argued that it was not about austerity, but rather about much needed reforms Greece needed to undertake, just as CEE states had done.

During the most severe of the multiple crises that beset the EU, the refugee crisis, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia challenged measures proposed by Germany. A rare coordinated response from the Visegrád Group opposed the EU plan for quotas for refugee distribution (Vlada.cz 2015). For the first time since enlargement, member states preferences seemed to cluster along the East–West divide (although Poland, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states voted in favour of the quota plan). In addition, in December 2015, Slovakia announced it would challenge the EU’s decision on migrant quotas in front of the European Court of Justice. Such actions hint at a possible negative future scenario: the formation of an illiberal alliance between the current governments of the Visegrád Group of states, further increasing the gap between East and West in Europe (The Economist 2015). Ultimately, the Eurozone crisis or the refugee crisis did not have much to do with the effects of enlargement. Nevertheless, decreasing solidarity and a lack of common response to these crises exacerbates and exaggerates the differences between member states.

CEE states are far from being the only ones to exhibit short-sighted or nationalist behaviour in response to Europe’s multiple crises. As Rupnik and Zielonka noted, the EU as a whole has not set a great example: ‘If old European democracies find it extremely difficult to cope with the damaging implications of the current crisis, can new democracies be expected to do any better?’ (2013:4). There has been hardly any leader in the EU – bar German Chancellor Angela Merkel – that has shown the way for a different, less self-interested approach to dealing with each other in the Union. Neither then UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s push of negotiating a deal for the UK in February 2016 to the detriment of non-discrimination principles, nor the mix of scepticism, pragmatism and efficiency of the Danish or the Dutch, can serve as an example for CEE leaders of how to approach the EU as more than a zero-sum game.

In conclusion

The previous sections have shown that the integration of CEE states into the EU was quite successful and exceeded the rather pessimistic expectations at the start of the enlargement process, at least with respect to the classical areas of European integration and the absorption of the *acquis*.
Participation in the Union’s decision-making institutions – the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, and the European Parliament – has also been less problematic than expected. Not only have CEE states become more adept and vocal at defending their positions in the EU, but they have also become more focused on their national interests. They can be seen as ‘normal’ members, less inclined to take a back seat and avoid confrontation with older member states. This normalisation is not a problem in itself, but it has put additional stress on a Union battered by crises and centrifugal forces. Public opinion studies show a perceived gap between East and West of Europe, making it painfully clear that European unification is still far from complete. Nationalist rhetoric and chaotic responses to the multiple crises affecting Europe have been driving member states further apart.

For the moment at least, the gap between East and West is one of rhetoric and perception rather than implementation and decision-making. The EU’s big bang enlargement has been a challenging, but successful project, making the EU a bigger economic and geopolitical player and ameliorating some of the effects of global economic downturn. We can only hope that the enlarged EU will find a way to complete its unification and uphold the values and principles that made the Eastern enlargement a success.

Note

1 According to these, membership requires that

‘a candidate has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. Membership presupposes the candidate’s ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.’

References


Enlargement and Europeanisation


