

To What Extent Is the European Union United? Emerging Tensions between Eastern and Western Europe

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In November 2017, a warning issued by the Planning Division of the German military was leaked to the German media calling to prepare for a situation of “chaos with the possibility of a breakdown of the EU and the establishment of an eastern bloc.” The scenario, entitled “West versus East,” spoke of a possible breakdown of the European integration process, with the Eastern states leaving the EU and establishing a separate Eastern Union. The fact that heads of Eastern states announced they would not allow Muslim refugees to cross their borders and refused to change their position even after a round of legal threats by parties in the EU generated serious concern within the German army’s Planning Division.¹

Indeed, and from a more general perspective, Europe has changed in recent years. In the last decade, the desire to establish a united European collective has been tested by weighty issues challenging the unity of the European Union (among them Iran, Brexit, Middle East turmoil, Trump’s election), and the ability of its leaders to shepherd it to a stable and secure future is being questioned. Another important issue trying the EU is the tension of recent years between East and West European nations. After a series of economic crises besetting the EU,² the mass immigration crisis, the rise of populist right wing movements, and disagreements between East and West on how to respond to the Russian threat, it seems that the cautious optimism of Europe in the post-Communist era, which above all longed to unite East and West, has dissipated.³

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The current rift in the EU is a complex issue expressed not only between Eastern and Western states. Euro-skeptical and anti-establishment stances can now be found throughout the European continent, including nations in the center and west. In Austria, for example, the October 2017 election resulted in a coalition uniting the People's Party (ÖVP) headed by Sebastian Kurz with the Freedom Party (FPÖ) led by Heinz-Christian Strache, a party whose rallying cry is the struggle against "Islam's seizure of Austria."⁴ There are similar trends in Italy, Germany, Holland, France, and the United Kingdom.⁵ The split is exacerbated by separatist issues of factions in certain EU countries (such as Spain),⁶ and the challenge to present a united front against Russia (especially in the context of the EU's involvement in the Balkans, the espionage affair, the suspicion that Russia tampered with the US presidential election, and Russian gas supplies to Europe).⁷

This essay focuses on tensions between the East European nations (the Visegrád Group⁸) and the EU's Western members, and considers how they are manifested and if in fact they undermine EU stability. The essay also examines the implications for Israel.

Background

In 2004, 13 new states from Eastern Europe joined the EU. Of these, 11 were previously Communist. In hindsight, it seems that the idea to rehabilitate the economy of East European states by expanding the EU was partially successful. The EU viewed its expansion to the East as a tool that would eventually result in Western liberal democratic values becoming embedded in the nations that until recently had borne the yoke of the Soviet regime. At the 1993 Copenhagen Summit, EU leaders compiled a list of criteria as acceptance terms: stable democratic institutions of government and the rule of law, human rights, protection and dignity toward minorities, a uniform market economy, and more.⁹

However, this expansion did not result in full equality among the nations. The fact that the new members were former Soviet states where trust in the regime was low delayed their full integration into the EU.¹⁰ Many issues were left unresolved and the asymmetry in relations increased. Since then, particularly over the last decade, EU institutions have faced other challenges undermining their stability. The global economic crisis of 2008 did not leave Europe unscathed and the huge debts accumulated by the economically weaker nations led to the creation of massive aid packages and loans (Greece alone received aid worth €7.5 billion), which

in turn resulted in profound differences of opinion between the nations supporting debt relief and those opposing it.¹¹ Another challenge was the military crisis on the Russian-Ukrainian border. In 2014, Ukraine approved a trade agreement with the EU at the expense of its ties with Russia. In response, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and began supporting the separatist struggle in eastern Ukraine that led to the deaths of more than 8,000 people.¹² In addition to this crisis, in 2015, EU leaders were forced to confront the question of the dispersal of asylum seekers reaching Europe's shores following an immigration crisis of a scope unprecedented since the end of World War II. This crisis further destabilized relations between East and West in the EU.

Domestic Issues

The growing strength of right wing populist political parties in response to the arrival of asylum seekers made waves all over Europe, but especially in Eastern states. In Hungary, the conservative party Fidesz headed by Viktor Orban came into power in 2010 and turned Hungary from a democracy that had reaped praise for being the leading democratic state in Eastern Europe to a democracy in freefall. The fact that Orban ran into virtually no strong opposition on the left domestically and no firm and active intervention from the EU allowed him, in short order, to pass new laws that clashed with both the Hungarian and the EU constitutions. Orban and his followers then embarked on a legislative blitz in which restrictions were imposed on civil society and moneys from the EU channeled to "loyal allies."¹³ In addition to constitutional changes, Orban frequently attacked the media and the courts and placed friends and members of the business community in key positions of power and influence. Over eight years, about one thousand new laws were passed that have rocked the very foundations of Hungarian democracy.¹⁴

In 2015, Orban received a significant tailwind with the arrival of Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan asylum seekers to Europe's shores. As an extreme preventive measure, Orban decided to erect a wall along the Hungarian-Serbian border to prevent refugees from entering, resulting in a blow to Hungary-EU relations and making Hungary the hidden front line of the EU's refugee crisis.¹⁵ That year, more than 50,000 asylum seekers who had gone through the Balkan land route entered Hungary. Orban called these asylum seekers "poison" and a "security threat," and announced that "2018 will be a year of tough battles."¹⁶ Ominous signs can be found

in new legislative initiatives he is currently advancing, which will make it possible to impose monetary fines on civic bodies helping the refugees.¹⁷

Prominent in Orban's anti-immigrant campaign was American billionaire George Soros, a Jew of Hungarian extraction, whom Orban accused of financing organizations supporting asylum seekers in Hungary who, according to Orban, are destroying Hungary from within. According to Soros, Hungary "is encouraging an anti-Muslim atmosphere and using anti-Semitic language reminiscent of the 1930s."¹⁸

Trends similar to those in Hungary may also be found in Poland, which joined the EU in 2004 (and NATO in 1999). At first, Poland was thought to have a clear pro-European mindset, and many believed that Poland should join the expanding European collective, certainly for economic reasons. In fact, the central motivation for joining was that after years of Communist rule, Poland strove to join the West, distance itself from Russia, and stride toward a democratic, Western future. However, in the early 2000s, as it was in the midst of the process of acceptance to the EU, the domestic political discourse took a sharp turn to the right. After the stark electoral defeat of the LID (Left and Democrats) Party, the pro-European rhetoric changed. Gradually, various Polish political parties started singing Euro-skeptical and nationalistic tunes, and distrust of the free market coupled with ultra-conservative Catholic positions grew.¹⁹ The Law and Justice Party, which took office in 2005, replaced the left-leaning LID Party and created a coalition with

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two parties of more extreme orientation dominating the Polish government to this day. Over the last two years, as the courts and the media have been weakened, the Polish government has concentrated on implementing a religious nationalistic ideology. The church remains powerful in Poland, in sharp contrast to the widespread secularization of Western Europe. The Polish clergy have a great deal of power, especially in their battle against members of the Communist Party and their efforts to curb the influence of Western liberalism on Polish society. The lack of church-state separation is manifested, for example, in the government's attempt to pass an anti-abortion law.²⁰

Similar processes are also evident in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, which emerged from the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 and joined the EU in 2004. Miloš Zeman, the Czech Republic president, is known for his Euro-

skeptic, pro-Russian views. He supports ties with China and is adamantly opposed to the entrance of Muslim asylum seekers.²¹ Robert Fico, who until March 2018 was the Slovak prime minister, is also known for his anti-Muslim rhetoric and has said that “Islam has no place in Slovakia.”²²

Relations among the States

A key reason for the rising tensions between East and West was the tremendous wave of asylum seekers arriving at the continent from Muslim countries in the summer of 2015. While the leaders of the EU started dealing with immigration policy long before (the EU completed its Common European Asylum System designed to ensure that all member states would protect the rights of asylum seekers in the EU already in 2005), the refugee crisis of recent years hit EU institutions hard, and they were unable to provide a rapid response to the masses of asylum seekers who arrived within a very short period of time.

The main disagreement among member states regarding refugees was the Dublin Regulation, which stipulated that every asylum seeker coming to the EU must submit his/her request for asylum in the first state where s/he sets foot (with most asylum seekers first arriving at gateway countries on the Mediterranean, such as Italy and Greece). The regulation’s fundamental aim was to prevent a situation in which asylum seekers would, from the gateway countries, head to countries with laxer immigration laws (mainly those in the European northwest, such as Germany, France, and the Scandinavian countries).²³ However, the influx of more than one million asylum seekers to the gateway countries in the summer of 2015 exposed the flaw in the Dublin Regulation.²⁴ As they entered, the intake centers came under massive pressure. They could not handle the volume and collapsed. It therefore became clear that in order to better manage the traffic of asylum seekers in the continent, it was necessary to reform the regulation. The amended Dublin agreement set new criteria defining the redistribution of refugees among member states aimed at a more equal balancing of the burden.²⁵ The proposed re-division was led by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who called it “a mandatory system of refugee quotas.”²⁶

However, given the deep disagreements between the Eastern and Western EU member states, this program did not go into effect as planned. Hungary and Poland refused to take in any asylum seekers, while Slovakia and the Czech Republic took in about a dozen refugees each. The rhetoric of the

political leaders in Eastern Europe against the distribution program was mainly based on “security and national concerns,” given the increase in Islamist terrorist incidents in Europe in recent years.²⁷ They further claimed that unsupervised entrance of “illegal immigrants”²⁸ would necessarily change the nations’ cultural and religious nature, a scenario they sought to prevent at all costs.²⁹

Eastern Europe’s unwillingness to help the countries that had already accepted many asylum seekers, such as Germany (which has taken in 1.1 million refugees), turned the European Parliament into a battleground.³⁰ Consequently, in 2016, an agreement was reached with Turkey, whereby Turkey would take asylum seekers expelled from EU states in exchange for €6 billion and a fast-tracking of Turkey’s application to the EU.³¹ In tandem, in 2017, after two years of stubborn resistance between the Visegrád Group and the northwest European nations, the European Court of Justice rejected the claim made by Slovakia and Hungary, supported by Poland, regarding the legality of the immigration agreements. The ECJ asserted that the EU has the right to obligate member states to accept the number of asylum seekers allotted according to the relative terms of distribution.

Responses to the court decision were quick in coming. Hungary launched a frontal assault, calling the verdict “irresponsible” and “appalling,” and saying this was a rape of the values and principles of the EU. As such, the court decision endangers the security and future of all of Europe.³² The Slovak prime minister also objected to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s open door policy.³³ By contrast, Germany declared that it expects the Eastern states to fall in line with EU policy. German Foreign Minister

Sigmar Gabriel said: “We can expect all European partners to...implement the agreements without delay.”³⁴ French President Emmanuel Macron also expressed his disgust with the Eastern states’ position and stressed the importance of strengthening solidarity within the EU and preventing rifts.³⁵

At the end of the process, Hungary was asked to accept 1,294 asylum seekers, and Slovakia 862.³⁶ But the harsh disagreement is still far from having a long term, stable resolution. The asylum issue has only

magnified tensions and the sense of uncertainty over the EU’s stability in general. This uncertainty was sensed long before the arrival of masses of asylum seekers, who merely exacerbated the already existing divide. While

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there has been a steep decline in the number of asylum seekers in the EU over the last two years and this has somewhat reduced tensions, they have not completely disappeared. The essential difference in the ideological line and sociopolitical approach between East and West will continue to challenge decision making processes in EU institutions and will make it difficult to articulate a systematic, uniform policy on essential questions affecting the EU's future.

Implications for Israel

The Visegrád Group is currently considered particularly friendly toward Israel, mostly because it does not condition relations with Israel on Israel's relations with the Palestinians, a line more typical of the EU's West European nations. The warmer relations were in evidence already during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's official visit to Budapest in July 2017 when he met with all four Visegrád Group leaders.³⁷ The visit bore historical significance: it was the first time an Israeli prime minister visited Hungary after the fall of the Berlin Wall.³⁸ The purpose of the visit was twofold – economic and political-strategic – and the topics discussed showed Israel as taking a positive line towards the EU's Eastern states while uttering pointed criticism against its Western nations. The four Visegrád states were eager to generate more security and technological cooperative ventures with Israel in the context of the European immigration crisis and bolster efforts in securing their borders, the war on terrorism, energy, military industries, cyberspace, and innovation.³⁹

Relations between the Visegrád Group and Israel have implications for Israel's relations with the EU. During his visit to Hungary, Netanyahu sharply criticized the EU's foreign policy toward Israel, especially on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Netanyahu stated: "The European Union is the only association of countries in the world that conditions the relations with Israel, which gives it technology, on political conditions. The only ones! Nobody does it."⁴⁰ Netanyahu sharply criticized the central/Western nations that instead of supporting Israel attack it and make their relations with it conditional on a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hence, the Israeli government views the Visegrád Group as an answer to the West's critical stance on Israel. However, the warmer relations between Israel and the Visegrád Group are also problematic, especially with regard to Israel's relations with the Jewish communities of Europe. During Netanyahu's visit, the public atmosphere in Hungary was extremely hostile and heavily

tinged with anti-Semitism. At the time of the visit, Orban embarked on his no-holds-barred campaign against George Soros. Members of the Jewish community, feeling vulnerable and threatened, were hoping to get some protection from the Israeli government; that did not happen.⁴¹ The incident resulted in a severe crisis of trust between the Jewish community and Israel.

Other than the events in Hungary, early 2018 saw tensions between Israel and Poland over the new Polish Holocaust law proposed by the ruling Law and Justice Party. According to the law, anyone who alleges participation or responsibility for Nazi crimes, crimes against humanity, or war crimes to a Pole or to Poland can be fined or even jailed for up to three years. This initiative aroused much anger in Israel, and diplomatic efforts were made to pressure Poland into annulling it or at least amending it. In early March 2018, a Polish government delegation consisting of diplomats and historians visited Jerusalem in order to try to explain the law to Israel's Foreign Ministry personnel.⁴²

Conclusion

Over the next few years, EU institutions will face a decisive test of stability, in particular, the nature of the relations between its Western and Eastern member states. The many challenges, domestic and external, threatening the integrity of the EU require its leaders to rethink the EU's goals and the values on which it should be based. The recent influx of immigrants to Europe has proved that the desire to create a common European identity for the some 800 million people on the continent, with different national identities and narratives, is under reconsideration. Right wing populist movements that for years survived under the radar are again taking center stage and undermining the basis of the EU and the project of integration. EU leaders' inattention to these processes is liable to result in deep fissures

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between two main worldviews: the one – liberal, democratic, and global, promoting individual liberties, equality, separation of church and state, and striving to erase borders between states and deepen cultural and economic ties between them; and the other being largely its opposite, championing a return to nationalism, strengthening borders, and conservative, religious values. Reconciling these competing visions is the biggest challenge EU leaders have to face.

Tensions within the EU have significant impact on the quality of Israel-EU relations. Israel's recent warmer relations with the Visegrád Group mean a tacit acceptance of a Euro-skeptic, populist, right wing line, which often reeks of anti-Semitism, a development that could be met with a chilly reception by West European nations and Jewish communities in the diaspora. In this context, one should remember that the EU is a major source for Israeli imports (approximately 41 percent) and the second largest export destination (after the United States) for Israeli goods (26 percent). Israel would be wise to maintain an open, even channel with EU institutions. Maintaining balanced relations with EU member states and with the Jewish communities of Europe is an Israeli strategic interest of the highest order.

Notes

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- 8 In February 1991, a political alliance was established by four Central and Eastern European states: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The alliance's objective was to promote cooperative ventures and common interests in the context of European integration on economic,

- military, and energy issues. These four states share cultural and intellectual values and common religious traditions they wish to preserve through the alliance. See www.visegradgroup.eu/about.
- 9 Similarly, all had to commit to assume obligations of EU member nations. See Ana E. Juncos and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, "Enlargement," in *European Union Politics*, 4th ed., eds. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), pp. 226-39.
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 James Kanter, "Eurozone Agrees to Debt Relief and Bailout Aid for Greece," *New York Times*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/business/international/greece-debt-relief-imf-eurozone-bailout.html>.
 - 12 *Haaretz*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/europe/1.2727056>.
 - 13 Orban took over two thirds of parliament. Patrick Kingsley, "As West Fears the Rise of Autocrats, Hungary Shows What's Possible," February 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/world/europe/hungary-orban-democracy-far-right.html>.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 Patrick Kingsley, "Migrants on Hungary's Border Fence: 'This Wall, We Will Not Accept It,'" *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/migrants-hungary-border-fence-wall-serbia>.
 - 16 Ibid.
 - 17 Kingsley, "As West Fears the Rise of Autocrats, Hungary Shows What's Possible."
 - 18 Israel Fisher, "Soros against Hungarian Government: 'Dishonest and anti-Semitic,'" *The Marker*, November 20, 2017, <https://www.themarker.com/wallstreet/1.4610722>.
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 - 20 Under public pressure, the attempt failed and the law was not passed.
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 - 25 *Financial Times*, "The EU: Heavy Fines on State Refusing to Accept Immigrants," *Globes*, May 3, 2016, <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001121593>.

- 26 According to Juncker's proposal, Greece and Italy were to move about 160,000 asylum seekers to EU member nations up September 2017. The 28 states would then divide the asylum seekers in a balanced, equal way according to a division key based on the states' GNP, population, unemployment rate, and past number of asylum seekers already there. Source: "The EU and the Migration Crisis," European Commission, July 2017, <http://publications.europa.eu/webpub/com/factsheets/migration-crisis/en/>; Naomi O'Leary, "The EU to Present Refugee Distribution Program," *NRG*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/694/019.html>; "Refugee Crisis: Junker Unveils EU Quota Plan – As it Happened," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2H8KE6V>.
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- 35 Rebecca Flood, "Hungary Celebrates Victory over EU Migrant Quotas after Juncker Speech," *Sunday Express*, September 15, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2ESfbna>.
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- 37 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu's Visit to Hungary Turns into Test of the Government's Relations with Europe's Right-Wing Nationalist Governments," *Haaretz*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.4261717>.

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- 41 Netanyahu and the members of his office completely ignored the harsh anti-Semitic statements in Orbán's campaign and even joined in the attacks on Soros. Barak Ravid, "On Netanyahu's Orders: Israel's Foreign Minister Retracts Criticism of anti-Semitism in Hungary and Slams George Soros," *Haaretz*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-retracts-criticism-of-hungary-s-anti-soros-campaign-1.5492668>.
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