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The EU's ongoing East-West divide

How the West's economic exploitation and moral arrogance fuel right-wing populism in East-Central Europe

Read this article in German.

'We must now fight for the idea of Europe or see it perish beneath the waves of populism.' This was the prevalent message before the European elections in May 2019. The quote itself comes from a manifesto published by 30 well-known and respected intellectuals at the end of January. The signatories such as Milan Kundera, Adam Michnik, Ágnes Heller and Salman Rushdie called for a 'fight for Europe' and 'against the [...] populists'. They wanted to send a clear signal before the European Parliamentary elections and recalled Europe's dark times. They referred to the omnipresent dichotomy of 'Europe vs. the populists'. But repeating abstract European values and using the sledge-hammer argument of the *Holocaust* comes across as aloof and alien in the face of many people's everyday worries and struggles. The last few years have shown that this often just creates a bigger divide.

If we are genuinely interested in understanding the demand side of populism's growth, Petra Köpping's book *Integriert doch erst mal uns! [Integrate us first!]*, released in Germany to widespread acclaim, delivers some interesting insights. It helps us understand why the writers' attitudes and the liberals' slogans – 'pro-Europeans vs. Eurosceptics', 'progressives vs. populists' – do more harm than good. Instead, if we are truly interested in the demand side of populism's growth, we can grasp its underlying causes.

Petra Köpping seeks to explain the rise of the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in the east of Germany. She claims that the greater popularity of the AfD in east compared to west Germany can be attributed largely to the injustices of the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall. These, she says, are still taboo.

The forgotten East-West wealth transfers

The so-called 'Treuhand' policy, which entailed an enormous transfer of wealth from east to west through the privatisation of most state enterprises and real estate to west Germans; the introduction of a militant neoliberal capitalism that would have been politically unthinkable in west Germany at that time; the alteration of entire living and working environments from one day to the next, the devaluation of people's life histories and identities through the system's failure; the frequent treatment of the 'Ossis' (easterners) as if they were immature or backward – all of this has left its mark. All the more so since it radically dampened the optimistic spirit of change, the hopes and the dynamism of the peaceful revolution of 1989.

Anyone who denies this or doesn't take it seriously simply pours oil on the fire. And the right knows how to capitalise on that. It offers a 'fake cultural revaluation', a sense of moral superiority over the West and over everything regarded as a 'Western import', including the EU. It's not only the AfD that knows how to turn this into political capital: in Hungary, a government coalition has been in power for nine years now, drawing most of its social support from this source; in the Czech Republic, Euroscepticism is at its strongest; in Slovakia, a liberal woman president, elected with a slim majority, faces a rapidly growing far right.

Why? Because what happened *within* Germany applies to East-Central Europe in relation to the European Union. There was a desire to become 'part of Europe' again, but it was only possible to join following the rules set by the West. Democracy came as part of a package that also included precarisation. The prescription of the way forward was presented with a degree of arrogance – as if Eastern Europeans had been backward up until now.

East-Central European elites' self-colonisation

This attitude was also adopted by the liberal, affluent and educated elite of Eastern Europe, who detached themselves from the perceptions and lived experience of broad sections of their own population.

A single model of 'Western Europe', which just needs to be reproduced in

Petra Köpping's purpose is not simply to condemn the West; she doesn't shy away from addressing the responsibility borne by the East German elites. In East-Central Europe, the

different geopolitical contexts, doesn't exist.

West was always the reference point. The goal was to catch up. The economic price of transformation and integration into free markets were downplayed as a necessary evil of civilisation. Alexander Kiossev describes this process as self-colonisation. He doesn't express a lack of respect for countries that were *actually* colonised, but with this metaphor he rather describes what happened in the eastern periphery of Europe that was never colonised but has still historically suffered from feelings of inferiority.

Another Bulgarian political scientist, Ivan Krastev – whom Köpping often quotes in the book – identifies precisely this as the central cause of the right's popularity in the region. In an article co-written with Stephen Holmes, he describes the 'political psychology' of current developments: we're done with copying, we don't want to be judged by the West anymore; we're going our own proud way that provokes by deliberately diverging from Western expectations.

Köpping's book doesn't present a complete rejection of the post-reunification period as a success story. Rather, it seeks to paint a more realistic picture. And it just happens to be part of that picture to acknowledge that the West profited from the way in which reunification took place.

Our taxes for your assimilation

Both in East-Central Europe and east Germany, the question of who profited from the transition is very similar. Among the political class in Western Europe, there's a prevailing feeling that the East has been nursed for long enough and now just shows a 'lack of gratitude'. But the profits derived by Western economies from this region of low wages and low taxes often exceed the structural aid paid out by taxpayers several times over, as Thomas Piketty clearly and convincingly demonstrated with regard to the Visegrád Four. This imbalance has certainly been noticed in East-Central Europe.

Of course, there are investments of foreign capital in East-Central Europe, but most of the profits are being taken out again. Property prices are rising to western levels. In many places, prices for goods and services have almost reached Western European levels because domestic products can barely compete with the major giants. In other words, the free movement of goods, services and capital seems to be working very well

indeed in the European Single Market.

But at the same time, the theory that free movement of labour would act as a compensation on wages and prices has largely failed. It was a chimera from the outset because people are not as mobile as goods. And where it did occur, it was perceived as dumping, leading only to the rise of nationalism and anti-Eastern European sentiments (as in Great Britain).

No progress if progressives profit from inequality

The usual macro-economic indicators such as economic growth or low relative poverty rates, which seem to look good for many countries in the region, say little about people's quality of life. The minimum wage in the Czech Republic and Hungary, even when adjusted for purchasing power, is only half the German one. The argument that 'wages are lower, but so too are prices' does not apply. Although the lives of large parts of the population in East-Central Europe have improved since 1989, they remain precarious and so, understandably, many are disappointed.

A single model of 'Western Europe', which just needs to be reproduced in different geopolitical contexts, doesn't exist. Belief in progress turned out to be an illusion: there can be no progress if the so-called 'progressives' profit from this very inequality. We were, are and remain on the periphery, and cannot really catch up with the West materially, and are not treated as equals by the West. East-Central Europeans remain 'second-class citizens', as Köpping also observes with regard to east Germany. And disappointed hopes and inequality constitute the ideal breeding ground for the rise of populism, nationalism and of authoritarian thinking.

The dichotomy between 'pro-Europeans' and 'Eurosceptics' is false and counterproductive.

Another good illustration of the existing inequalities is the crisis in care work. The countries of Eastern Europe are often seen as lagging behind because female employment is significantly lower than in the West. But higher employment rates among Western women don't have much to do with their level of emancipation, greater male participation in care provision or a more extensive social infrastructure. Rather, they exist because of inequality between women in the West and East. Those who have the means to outsource care work for children, the disabled and the

elderly are able to take up gainful employment. Meanwhile, women from the eastern periphery of Europe are moving to the West *en masse* to do the care work – from Romania to Italy, from Hungary and Slovakia to Austria, Germany and Great Britain.

From morality to power struggles

Köpping's book succeeds at describing, in impressive detail, how people experienced this period of great transformations – and what it means for our time. But psychology has its limits when it comes to looking at structures and power imbalances. Empathy cannot substitute structural analysis, and reappraisal and reconciliation alone cannot resolve persistent power imbalances.

One thing is clear: the right has no solution. It's more concerned with national pride than with fighting inequalities within Europe. On the contrary: Viktor Orbán, who always claims to be defending Hungarian sovereignty against one enemy or another, exercises 'shared sovereignty' with Audi, BMW and Mercedes.

So in the struggle against the populists, we need a discussion about power – instead of morality and abstract values: the power of the market over politics, the West over the East, the centres over the peripheries. This conflict also takes place within the states of East-Central Europe, and it's tearing them apart: they have their own wealthier, liberal centres that caught up to the West and feel they're equals. Here, too, we find condescending talk about the peripheral regions that have been left behind and where 'European values', civilised attitudes and cosmopolitan openness to the world have not yet been internalised.

The dichotomy between 'pro-Europeans' and 'Eurosceptics' is false and counterproductive. Rather, the fault line runs between the winners and losers of the eurozone and the Single Market, between prosperous centres and peripheral regions that have been materially and symbolically left behind. This leads to nationalism and disintegration, countered by a purely moral – and hence self-defeating – response: with passionate speeches, there's a vain attempt to present the EU as a moral and value-based project that must be rescued, even though its rejection is fuelled by the failure of its economic dimension and power structures to reflect those very values and morals.

This has to end soon; otherwise the EU will fall apart. First of all, we need to have the courage to talk about these inequalities. In order to be

able to stand up against nationalism and Euroscepticism, social democrats in East and West must, instead of moralising, find a language that brings these power dynamics back into play. Then we can work together to find concrete, courageous political solutions.



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