

GLOBSEC EU Taskforce

Building a Vision for Europe through the Lenses of a Constructive Central European Perspective

The future of the European Union (EU) matters to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). With Brexit in five months, Europe will change in shape and priorities. The new European leadership will need all the support from its Member States, politicians, private sector, citizens and experts to ensure that the EU, with further improvements, remains the best arrangement for all. In this regard, GLOBSEC's Vision for Europe Taskforce has committed to delivering sensible proposals while providing a platform for voices from CEE that not only identify challenges but also propose serious solutions.

During GLOBSEC's Tatra Summit 2018, members of the Taskforce and select participants discussed the challenges and opportunities for the future of Europe, keeping in mind that a variety of division lines exists between and within the Member States. While some of these divisions can be resolved, their reinforcement can also have dangerous consequences. The main question that emerged was – is there an East-West divide?

There is no clear agreement on an answer. On the one hand, the East-West divide known by previous generations is no more. The Berlin Wall has fallen, and the EU of today comprises countries from West to East. Freely using the term can only emphasize stereotypes, demonise the CEE region and wrongly over-simplify the present situation. Indeed, division lines can be found, but they might be better identified as ideological differences transcending national political boundaries. If these divergences are not addressed properly on the national and European levels – and critical voices are not heard – the European project will suffer further delegitimization from unhealthy populism. These cross-cutting division lines raise doubts that even small groupings of Member States like the Visegrad Four can find a common position on vital European matters. And, as the post-financial crisis trend reveals in the long-term, it is increasingly likely that the EU will have a more prominent North-South rather than the East-West divide.

On the other hand, however, there are some signs that Europe's Eastern and Western flanks are in opposition to one another. For some, the divide is not closing but growing. It can be partly traced back to the consequences of EU enlargement. The experiences of older Member States were different from those of the newer ones, and the perceptions resulting from the process also diverged. In addition, the length of democratic traditions varies between West and East, and the newer democracies can be more susceptible to illiberalism since their institutions are still in the process of converging. However, the CEE members can also learn and steam forward in strengthening their democracies.

While divergences can be seen in liberal-illiberal terms, from the Western perspective there is a sense that this divide is synonymous to the East-West divide, with some governments in CEE, like Hungary, Poland and Romania, legitimising illiberalism through contentious national policies (even if Italy's new government and even Austria's coalition government blur the set perception). Furthermore, East vs. West camps have been formed around certain unresolved European challenges, including the single market (and protections), migration (especially in terms of solidarity vs. national choice) or rule-of-law.

Dividing lines within CEE do not only exist on political ideologies but also within societies. Failures to hear out citizens' demands, and thus leaving an open space for loud, anti-establishment populist voices, result in the alienation of significant parts of the population and today's ascendant Euroscepticism. And, even when [surveys](#) show generally positive attitudes towards the EU, when the time comes for citizens to show commitment in reality, they are too often passive in engaging.

Key recommendations

Based on the discussions during GLOBSEC Tatra Summit 2018, the following recommendations were advanced:

Find common ground. We are experiencing difficult and even stalled negotiations when it comes to migration, following the rule of law, as well as deepening and joining the eurozone, but there are areas where benefits can be seen by all Member States when integration deepens. One promising alternative is the Single Market. Ensuring a

robust internal market with opportunities for all countries to prosper - as the original idea behind economic integration suggests - can be an important opportunity for the EU to be a true global power and more importantly to provide countries with higher living standards and economic growth.

Similarly, further consolidating EU foreign policy has its own benefits. While currently only the lowest common denominator is sought in common decision-making, such an approach prevents the EU from acting as a real power in the international arena. More integration in this area would be especially helpful to CEE countries, since their small size (except for Poland) often prevents their demands from being heard globally.

Start building bridges on a smaller scale. While it is hard to foresee a unified vision for Europe even within the CEE or Central Europe, countries can start intensifying their cooperation with other countries from the West and the North. Closer cooperation could lead to debunking stereotypes from both sides, increasing understanding of various countries' positions, and eventually narrowing if not resolving differences.

Get our act together. CEE countries should not allow the deterioration of democratic values. As the region has shorter democratic traditions and is still developing institutionally and economically, it needs to take democratic duties as an important part of their EU membership. Today, CEE countries are more prosperous than before, and they should not shy from increased EU commitments in areas such as humanitarian aid and far-sighted assistance to sub-Saharan Africa. CEE's own democratic backsliding at times and lack of productive engagement plays in the hands of those who have stayed skeptical of the major EU enlargement, including a more cautious Dutch government, as well as politicians in France, Belgium and elsewhere.

CEE needs to **step up and be much more active** within the decision-making processes in the EU. Being shy to bring constructive and ambitious proposals to the table is not a favorable strategy. With this in mind, simply stalling the resolution of disagreements and advancement of solutions will have a negative effect not only in the CEE region but the whole of Europe.

Involve citizens and encourage them to be active Europeans. The channels of communication between decision-makers and citizens are changing. Unless politicians in CEE adapt accordingly, gaps will continue to be filled by populists with dangerous agendas in mind. CEE governments have to start the conversation with their citizens about how the EU is an asset and the best arrangement available.

Despite the challenges Europe is currently facing, GLOBSEC's Vision for Europe Taskforce has already begun to provide realistic proposals for how division lines can be bridged for the EU to be clearly the best arrangement for its citizens.