

Re-evaluating the East-West Divide in the European Union

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Abstract

This introduction argues that the East-West divide in Europe continues to be politically salient since the fall of the Berlin Wall and two decades since the accession of most East Central European (ECE) countries to the European Union. We re-evaluate the nature of the East-West divide in the EU, consider its sources, and examine the interplay between political variation and cross-border economic inequalities. The fundamental question posed here is whether such divisions are persistent, intractable, or transitional. We note that earlier scholarship on the East-West divide emphasized economic divergence as a primary explanatory factor. As relevant as the economy still is, our contribution is to argue that the divide also needs to be assessed against the broader political backdrop of democratic backsliding and new geopolitical developments. Although we find that the East-West divide is still highly salient, the articles here specify how fluid categories are and how variation has emerged – both between and within countries in the ECE region. Finally, the very perception of an East-West divide is politically consequential. If unaddressed, East-West divisions and tensions will impede future reforms of the EU's internal governance processes and limit its power on the global stage.

Keywords (5 keywords)

European Union, East-West divide, enlargement, economic development, democratic backsliding

1. Introduction

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced in Prague in 2022 that the “centre of Europe is moving eastwards”¹. Not long after, French President Emmanuel Macron pledged his support for moving away from divisions between “Western and Eastern Europe” or “old Europe and new Europe”² in Bratislava in the summer of 2023. Varying cleavages coexist in the European Union, but these statements specifically acknowledge one of the most salient—the East-West divide.

¹Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the Charles University in Prague on Monday, 29 August 2022.

² “Macron extends olive branch to Eastern Europeans”, Politico, December 5, 2023.

This Special Issue re-evaluates why the EU project and enlargement have not managed to transcend that divide, and what we can expect in the future. Through this collection of articles, we aim to develop a more nuanced account of what drives the East-West divide, how that divide affects governance within the EU, and how it affects the EU's external agenda and its power projection beyond its borders.

From the beginning of enlargement debates, East-West divisions have been manifest. Eastern countries have had systematically poor representation in EU decision-making bodies, heightened strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, and labour rights problems for Eastern workers in Western economies, despite persistent large outward migration from the East of both skilled and blue-collar workers – all fuelling continued political and economic peripheralization. Western member states, for their part, have raised concerns about the Eastern neglect of the Rule of Law (RoL) and democratic backsliding, management of migration and border control, and a faltering commitment to tackling climate change.

Against this background, we start from the observation that while some of the economic, social, and political divisions have been covered in the existing literature, there is still a poor understanding of why there is a persistent East-West divide in the EU. We seek to remedy the incomplete assessment of ongoing tensions within the EU, more than three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, by exploring the sources of those tensions, even as the (re)integration process of the East Central Europe (ECE) has attempted to transcend the divide.

To remedy the gap in the literature regarding the scope of the East-West divide and to acknowledge the growing relevance of it both theoretically and empirically, we extend the conceptual foundation laid out by Epstein and Jacoby from 2014, on *Eastern Enlargement Ten Years On: Transcending the East–West Divide?*. Their research evaluated the degree of economic and political convergence in the EU and found that economic integration of the East had been far more transformative than its political alignment—but without explicitly specifying the dynamic interaction between the two.

Some of these tensions, divisions, or areas of solidarity within the EU have been debated extensively in the context of North-South relations following the Eurozone crisis (Magone et al. 2016; Rhodes et al. 2019). Similarly, other publications have covered core-periphery relations across the EU (Bruszt & Vukov 2017; Makszin et al. 2020; Bruszt & Langbein 2020). Such analyses have built on the differentiated impact of the economic crisis, but also on the failures of economic integration and the challenges of the overlapping concentric economic circles in the Single Market and the European neighborhood. By focusing on elements such as integration into global value chains of production, patterns of foreign direct investment, and national growth models, this literature has tended to portray Europe's southern and eastern peripheries as parallel.

Other parts of the literature examine ECE specifically and focus on common economic vulnerabilities (Nolke & Vliegenthart 2009), national specificities in development

trajectories (Bohle & Greskovits 2012, Ban & Bohle 2020), or issues of economic integration (Ban & Volintiru 2021). Similarly, Bârgăoanu et al. (2019) and Makszin et al. (2020) argue that East-West political divergence is merely an effect of the persistent developmental chasm. The articles here engage with the latter ECE-centered literature, focusing specifically on the East-West divide and not general peripheralization within the EU. The collection also examines the interplay between politics, culture, and economics, moving beyond the purely economic approach that tends to cast material conditions as causal for everything else.

This Special Issue was guided in its inquiry by the following four research questions:

RQ1: What are the sources and dynamics of contemporary East-West divisions and tensions in Europe?

East-West divisions and tensions in Europe stem from cultural, political, and economic conditions, as well as their interplay. Ananda and Dawson (in this volume) look at the individual values from the European Values Survey to see the extent to which they can explain the East-West divide in terms of democratic vulnerability. They indeed find that a larger proportion of cultural liberals within national cohorts is positively correlated with increasing democracy levels across Europe. Bruszt and Vukov (also in this volume) show how the regulatory and monetary integration of economies at different levels of development is a salient source of East-West division, as it has reinforced an FDI-dependent growth model in the East.

RQ2: To what extent has the EU diminished or intensified the East-West divide two decades after Eastern Enlargement?

Political and economic developments in countries and across Europe have had both a moderating and inflammatory effect on the evolution of the East-West divide in the EU. On the one hand, we find a regress in the East in terms of the Rule of Law since joining the EU as the power of conditionalities decreased. Sedelmeier (in this volume) points to overall regional averages showing this trend but cautions at the same time that within-group variation means that sub-set categories should be accounted for as they effectively lead to different intra-EU divides on the quality of democracy. Similarly, Bruszt and Vukov (in this volume) point to the politicisation of persistent inequalities among member states that in turn amplifies the rhetoric assailing the East-West divide and the EU's failure to address it. In contrast, Medve-Balint and Elteto (in this volume) show how EU-led state aid has leveraged the influx of Western FDI in the East, contributing to the economic growth in the East.

RQ3: How do conflicts between East and West affect EU governance and integration, including the EU's role in global affairs?

The collection contributes novel analysis of democratic backsliding in the EU, especially in newer member states (see Ananda and Dawson and also Sedelmeier in this volume). In addition, the volume investigates the extent to which democratic erosion affects the EU's

ability to promote democracy in its neighbourhood (see Burlyuk et al in this volume). While the economic appeal of joining the EU overpowers the reputational downside of democratic erosion in member states, these findings do not diminish concern about the smooth functioning of the EU and its efficacy in the world. With respect to budgetary decisions, migration, aid to Ukraine, achieving transatlantic cooperation, or securing an energy transition that is both carbon-conscious and security enhancing vis-à-vis Russia, the EU has often been stalled in recent years. The contributions here explain why through the lens of an enduring East-West divide in which the political and economic interact in corrosive ways.

RQ4: What practical approaches would result in a higher degree of cohesion and solidarity within the EU, considering internal divisions between East and West Europe?

The findings in this volume provide insight into the ways in which the East-West divide could be ameliorated in the service of stronger cohesion and solidarity within the EU. We find that while the division is perpetuated by interconnected economic and political factors (see Bruszt and Vukov and also Medve-Balint and Elteto in this volume), it is also fuelled by cultural factors (Ananda and Dawson) and even rhetorical ones (Bruszt and Vukov). As such, the principal countermeasure would be to acknowledge the challenge this represents for the future of the EU and to offer solutions. Recent developments in the way in which financial resources are distributed (see Bruszt and Vukov and also Medve Balint and Elteto) and the ways in which the rule of law is reinforced (Sedelmeier) are improvements in the EU's procedures. But to address other problems related to democratic backsliding and disruptive contestation of the dependent growth model requires enhanced intergovernmental processes and new kinds of decentralized transfers to member states that are seeking to catch up economically. These measures would also help the EU to project its democratic values in its neighbourhood (Burlyuk et al). All of these aspects are important, not just for the current status of the EU project, but also for the enlargement process and the EU's power on the global stage.

While we acknowledge that the EU has been instrumental in bringing peace and prosperity to Europe, this collection nevertheless argues that the severity, duration, and intractability of the East-West divide poses a real threat to European integration in the medium- and long run. This argument unfolds as follows. First, despite robust economic growth and some degree of socio-political integration, the distinctive structural and historical trajectories of East and West are still more impactful than the common deployment of EU laws, processes, and resources might suggest. Second, in recent years, scholars have found a significant but paradoxical link between increasing economic prosperity and popular rejection of democratic rule and liberal values in the East (Epstein 2019; Kelemen 2020; Orenstein & Bugarcic 2020). While many Western member states have profited from the extension of the Single Market, they have done so while ignoring or even enabling democratic erosion in the East and contributing to the unequal distribution of resources within member states (Medve-Balint 2014; Camba and Epstein 2023). Third, institutions in Brussels have regularly tried to remedy democratic backsliding, but with limited political

support and weak technocratic instruments (Surubaru et al. 2020; Priebus 2022). If not addressed more forcefully, the current East-West divide will hamper the EU's ability to deal with other pressing crises, including migration, climate change, competitiveness, or future enlargement commitments.

2. What we know about the East-West divide and other internal crises and divisions within the European Union

The 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe had indisputable political, socio-economic, and cultural impacts across the continent. Nevertheless, many analysts argued that deep and longstanding divisions still ran across the continent and many of their legacies only re-emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Bunce 2000; Laczó and Lisjak 2020).

The democratic transition brought about socio-economic, institutional, and political uncertainty rather than what some in the West imagined as an end of history and the entrenchment of an 'idyllic tranquillity' (Judt 2010). Rebuilding states in the East through new or adopted Western models—socio-economic, bureaucratic, and political—proved to be a very challenging task (Tilly 1993). Deploying the EU as an anchor helped to a certain extent, accelerating integration and creating momentum behind a new political transition (Vachudova 2005; Epstein 2008). Still, the institutional entrenchment of anti-liberal ideas in parts of ECE (Coman and Volintiru 2023) indicated that the 'age of imitation' might have come to a close, along with attempts to emulate Western models of liberal democracy (Holmes and Krastev 2018; Krastev and Holmes 2019). At the same time, anti-liberal ideas eroded West European politics, even if they have been less decisive in redefining democratic processes there compared to in some Eastern member states. Anti-liberal tendencies in the West notwithstanding, it is the East that confronted head-on the painful distributional consequences of the transition to a liberal market economy (Gros and Steinherr 2004), which also offered vast opportunities for capture and waste (Innes 2013). And yet that very same transition also managed to ultimately steer economies in ECE towards a relatively successful, and in some ways transformational, FDI-led growth model built on regional supply chains (Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Epstein and Jacoby 2014; Ban and Adascalitei 2022).

Driven by the prospect of mitigating socio-economic differences via dedicated European financial assistance (see Medve-Balint and Elteto in this volume), most of the newer member states in Eastern Europe experienced a relatively tranquil first few years of European integration, with the demanding process of accession negotiations behind them. They also took advantage of membership to improve their performance on many different institutional and policy metrics (see Sedelmeier in this volume; Papadimitriou et al 2017; Surubaru 2021). In contrast, the financial crisis of 2008 hit Western and Southern Europe much harder, reinforcing core-periphery asymmetries and an uneven distribution of benefits in the EU (see Bruszt and Vukov in this volume; Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Epstein and Jacoby 2014; Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017; Börzel and Langbein 2019; Makszin et al 2020).

Specific issues around the evolution of ECE have been tackled extensively from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. These range from post-communist studies (see Bernhard 2020 for a more recent overview), political economy (Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Rhodes et al. 2019), comparative politics, e.g. party systems and elections (Kitschelt 1992; Marks et al. 2006; Grzymala-Busse 2007), politicisation and party patronage (Meyer-Sahling 2004; Kopecký et al. 2012)], legal and rule of law reviews (Mendelski 2015; Closa and Kochenov 2016; Cianetti et al. 2018; Kelemen 2020) or various new historical insights on, for instance, the legacies of communism for contemporary societies (Janos 2001; Ekiert and Hanson 2003; Ekiert and Ziblatt 2013; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017). Kopecký and Fagan (2017) provide a comprehensive overview of many of the above areas. While divisions, crises, and tensions in Europe have been extensively analysed by European Studies scholars in the last two decades (see Appendix 1 online), these were not necessarily tested against divergent pathways between Eastern and Western member states in the EU. This Special Issue builds on this literature but, equally, addresses its gap, by specifically focusing on the salience of the East-West divide (Epstein and Jacoby 2004), its overlapping political and economic drivers, and the way this divide festers dangerously for the EU's internal and external positioning in the future.

We have examined seventeen different collections over the last decade that focus on various aspects of the East-West divide³. These special issues have covered the crises, divisions, or tensions experienced by the EU since 2008 (referring to the Research Questions outlined above), but do not always frame the arguments in terms of core-periphery dynamics.

All the examined special issues (except for Epstein and Jacoby 2014) focus only tangentially on the tensions between Eastern and Western member states. Therefore, the primary contribution of this Special Issue is to re-evaluate the East-West divide. We do so by examining it from various angles and perspectives, and by arguing that such a gap cannot remain undertheorized, methodologically unexamined, or empirically underexplored without negative consequences for the state of our knowledge and for the functioning of the EU.

The literature shows relevant aspects of an East-West divide in the specific context of migration patterns, the financial crisis, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, EU enlargement, "culture wars", and the internal reform of the EU. We consider these aspects to be both

³ There is a total of 17 Special Issues that fit our relevant criteria, published between 2013 and 2023, in the five key journals for the area of European Studies: *European Journal of Political Research (EJPR)*, *European Union Politics (EUP)*, *the Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS)*, *the Journal of European Integration (JEI)*, and *the Journal of European Public Policy (JEPP)*. The keywords used for the selection and analysis of these SIs were the following: *East-West divide*; *North-South divide*; *North Europe*; *West Europe*; *South Europe*; *South East Europe*; *Eastern Europe*; *Central and Eastern Europe*; *Visegrad*; *cleavage*; *conflicts*; *crisis*; *crises*; *divide*; *divisions*; *tensions*; *Rule of Law*; *core periphery*; and *European Union*. A brief overview of these academic collections of articles, including their link and relevance to this special section, is provided in Appendix 1.

contributing to and resulting from an East-West divide, yet their analysis is rarely framed as such.

The immigration, asylum, and refugee crises (Falkner 2016; Niemann and Zaun 2017), triggered by the war in Syria and other problems in the wider EU neighbourhood and beyond, polarised public opinion and politicians' attitudes towards the topic across the continent (Kentmen-Cin and Erisen 2017). Visegrad 4 (V4) countries played an important and often contentious role during this episode, with Poland and Hungary opposing the mandatory quotas developed by the European Commission for the redistribution of refugees (Kentmen-Cin and Erisen 2017). Yet, the argument for defending a national Christian identity has often been linked to domestic electoral mobilization strategies (Bustikova 2019), rather than concrete policy divides in the EU.

The financial and Eurozone crises of the 2010s defined a North-South divide across the continent, with the opposing fiscal austerity of the disciplined North poised against the fiscally vulnerable South (Wasserfallen et al 2018). Interestingly, East European countries were not directly involved in this dispute, despite having served as the initial test case for conditionality packages in the pre-accession period – a process that informed the EU's approach towards Southern member states during the financial crisis (Jacoby and Hopkins 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic was also a challenging moment for EU unity. It led to an increase in domestic contestation over national and European pandemic responses, institutions, or lock-down policies (Quaglia and Verdun 2023; Kriesi and Oana 2023). Equally, it saw the advent of some autocratic measures and policies to combat the pandemic in the East (Bohle et al 2023). Schmidt (2020), however, argued that zero-sum conflicts were mostly avoided by member states during the pandemic through bargaining and reaching a consensus on economic and health recovery policies. In important ways, such measures renewed the political commitment to the European project (Wolff and Ladi 2020). Innovative policies and institutions to address the pandemic in turn bolstered the broader integration process (Rhodes 2021). New flexible financing frameworks were advanced in response to the pandemic, such as the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (Ollerich and Simons 2023), which now serves as a reference for Ukraine's assistance package. These new financial instruments might replace traditional cohesion funding, through targeted industrial policy, though it is yet unclear whether such an approach will exacerbate or diminish internal developmental divides within the EU (McNamara 2023).

The war in Ukraine reignited deliberation on the EU's and NATO's enlargement (Orenstein 2023). The European Commission's recommendation in fall of 2023 for opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova will require pre-accession support from ECE, including especially from those countries that have strong political and economic ties with the candidate countries (e.g. Poland with Ukraine or Romania with Moldova). The special issue by Börzel et al. (2017) highlights the interlinkages between the internal and the external integration capacity of the EU, claiming that the integration of East European members has not disrupted the EU's political and legal system (Börzel et al. 2017, Toshkov

2017a). This will be tested in the coming years against a new Eastern enlargement process and centrifugal tendencies within the EU.

There is still a strong gap in terms of satisfaction and support for democracy between North-West, Southern, and Central and Eastern Europe, which was also amplified by the effects of the financial and Eurozone crises (Kriesi 2018). This equally applies to very entrenched diverging perceptions between Western and Eastern European citizens on 'good governance' (Schimmelfennig 2016) or 'quality of government' (Bubbico et al. 2017). Political cleavages between East and West might also be structured by contrasting cultural views and values (Akaliyski 2017). For instance, views on LGBTQ rights vary widely across Eastern and Western Europe (see Ananda and Dawson, this volume) and to a certain extent even within ECE (Guasti and Bustikova 2023). Such cultural dimensions and differences still require more exploration.

Finally, other special issue authors have assessed the implications of crises and divisions concerning the EU polity. On the one hand, many of these authors stressed that divisions have accelerated instances of differentiated integration, with some core member states seeking to enhance their cooperation in a more limited way. On the other hand, the enactment of different forms of differentiated integration may also widen cleavages and lead to more formal divisions, in the long run, between member states (Schimmelfennig et al. 2023, p. 10). What is interesting though, and contrary to expectations, is that public support for differentiated integration does not seem to be structured along the North-South or East-West divide but more along the left-right ideological positions of individuals (De Blok and De Vries 2023, p.159). Hence there is a great variety of views on differentiated integration within and across the different blocks and sub-regions of the EU (Schuessler et al. 2023, p. 180). Capturing such variation is key, especially as the EU will potentially embark on an internal reform process (McNamara and Kelemen 2022).

Overall, as the above contributions present important contextual factors on the divisions, crises, and tensions faced by the EU, we feel that there is still room for improving their conceptual, methodological, and empirical examination in a way that accounts for a persistent and festering East-West divide. The following section outlines our definitional and theoretical framework on the East-West divide that provides the basis for this Special Issue.

3. Insights from the articles in this Special Issue for conceptualising the East-West divide

A decade ago, Epstein and Jacoby asked a simple yet difficult question: did 'EU membership for post-communist countries upend the continent's traditionally persistent divisions' and what they referred to as the 'long standing east-west divide in Europe'? (2014, p. 1). The authors then concluded that answer was, at the time, 'not yet' the case (2014, p. 12). This special issue revisits the same question, considering an extra decade of empirical evidence and on-the-ground developments across Europe, as well as in light of the multitude of

crises that have afflicted the region. Our updated conceptualisation of the East-West divide and the findings of our contributors are highlighted here.

We define the East-West divide as the multitude of political, legal, institutional, socio-cultural, economic, and developmental differences, either perceived or empirically manifested, between East and West European countries and stakeholders. These differences can be cross-cutting or intersectional. As distinctive subsets emerge both in economic growth models (Bohle and Greskovits 2012) and in terms of political posturing on different policy issues (e.g. Hungary and Poland on the Rule of Law), it is important to make two conceptual clarifications.

(1) The East-West divide is a continuum with some Western member states at one end and some Eastern member states at the other, with multiple sub-groups in-between (see Sedelmeier, this volume); and

(2) there are specific layers or dimensions (e.g. economic and political, persistent and circumstantial, pre-determined or instrumental) on which the East-West divide should be evaluated empirically.

For example, a primary distinction can be made between an economic or developmental dimension (see Medve-Balint and Elteto ; Bruszt and Vukov, both in this volume) and a cultural, political or legal one (see Ananda and Dawson as well as Sedelmeier, this volume). There are also other ways to differentiate the East-West divide.

In terms of the governance level, divisions can play out domestically (within and between member states) (e.g. Medve-Balint and Elteto 2024, this volume), or at the EU level (e.g. Börzel et al 2017; Jones et al 2021). In terms of timeline, divides can be persistent (e.g. the developmental gap in Bruszt and Vukov 2024, this volume) or circumstantial (e.g. democratic backsliding in Sedelmeier 2023, this volume or COVID-19 responses in Bohle et al 2022). In terms of intent, divides can be pre-determined (e.g. cultural liberalism in Ananda and Dawson 2023, this volume) or instrumental (e.g. politicisation of inequalities in Bruszt and Vukov 2024, this volume).

Whatever conceptual distinctions we refer to, we do not pretend to have clear-cut empirical categories to coincide with a single label. There is often cross-fertilisation between different areas. For instance, domestic and European governance layers blur via EU processes of accession and post-accession Europeanisation and integration (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Dimitrova 2010). There is also an overlap between short-term developments or circumstantial divides (e.g. the migration crisis, COVID-19), and opportunistic actions of instrumentalising divisive elements (e.g. the consolidation of executive domestic or European powers in times of crisis). In contrast, the war in Ukraine has equally highlighted the potential for coalition building between EU member states and how circumstances can sometimes also unite the continent. Still, despite blurred lines in the conceptual analysis of the East-West divide, referring to broad categories helps us better understand the processes at play and the driving tendencies behind them.

There are five empirical papers in this special issue. The first two deal with the political dimension, showcased both in policy choices and attitudes, as well as in institutional process and Rule of Law. Sedelmeier (this volume) provides a solid empirical base for the debate on the East-West divide in terms of Rule of Law, demarcating an intra-EU divide. He finds that with regard to the quality of liberal democracy, an East-West divide is undeniable, as member states from each region cluster around different sides of a continuum. However, he cautions against a narrative of a regional democratic divide as there is fluidity in distributional patterns, depending on which indicators are used. Ananda and Dawson (this volume) also focus on democratic cleavages across Western and Eastern Europe, analysing an original metric of Proportion of Cultural Liberals (PCL) as a critical mass of activists and anti-majoritarian attitudes. Their statistical analysis shows a positive and significant relationship between the proportion of cultural liberals in a given national population and democracy across Europe. In other words, they point to the fact that a divide in the quality of liberal democracy is explained by the differing proportions of activist groups that push back against democratic backsliding at the domestic level.

The subsequent two papers cover the extent to which the East-West divide is a function of developmental gaps and untangle the economic factors at play. Both papers showcase counterintuitive elements of the oft-cited developmental gap linked to domestic factors in the East, such as lower industrial and infrastructure endowments, as well as shorter experience with the free market economy. Bruszt and Vukov (this volume) show the relevance of the East-West divide by explaining the distinction between Eastern and Southern peripheries within the European core-periphery conceptualization. Their paper shows how the debt-based dependency of Southern members strengthens the pressures to turn them into market-conforming democracies. By contrast, the FDI-based dependency of Eastern member states gave them more negotiating power given the higher sunk costs of foreign firms. As such, the economic dimensions of the East-West divide should be seen as closely coupled with a robust culturalist framework that drives Eastern member states toward divisive politicisation of inequalities within the EU.

Along similar lines, Medve-Balint and Elteto (in this volume) point to the fact that ECE governments have more economic agency than what the dependent market model would indicate. Their paper shows the specific process through which the very financial tool designed by the EU to lower developmental gaps and cross-regional inequalities works at cross purposes to the EU's objectives. Regional investment aid is used aptly by some countries in ECE to attract more foreign capital despite the nationalist rhetoric of ruling elites. Domestic political elites in ECE are thus sometimes strengthening their legitimacy at home by simultaneously benefiting from EU funding (alongside West European companies) and countering the EU through nationalist stances.

Finally, this special section closes with an assessment of the implications of an East-West divide on the EU's legitimacy in its neighbourhood. Burlyuk, Dandashly, and Noutcheva (this volume) unpack the implications of deteriorating democratic standards in the EU's Eastern member states for the EU's external power as a democratic promoter. While they

do not find a negative impact on the EU's legitimacy in its neighbourhood, this is not necessarily linked to the low pervasiveness of backsliding within its borders, as much as it is linked to the primary appeal of the EU in neighbouring countries, which is economic.

The articles in this special section provide both an overview of the contemporary origins and in-depth analyses of these East-West tensions across multiple intertwined dimensions: cultural, political, legal, institutional, economic, developmental, and in terms of external and foreign policy. The authors here engage with their respective literatures and assess East-West tensions from various empirical vantage points using eclectic methodological approaches. All of the articles point to ongoing East-West tensions that potentially threaten the EU's functioning and reform, not least in future enlargements.

4. Conclusions and further avenues for researching the East-West divide across Europe

All papers in this Special Issue reveal an East-West divide in the EU more than three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall and two decades since the EU accession of the majority of ECE member states. Our contribution is to re-evaluate the existence of an East-West Divide in the EU, to consider causal explanations, and to re-consider the interplay between cultural divides and cross-border inequalities identified in the existing scholarship. The fundamental question posed here is whether such divisions are persistent, intractable, or transitional. We find that the interplay between political and economic factors, consistently drive East-West divisions within the EU. Equally, and as a result, Brussels' ability to project its developmental model both internally and externally is severely limited by continued divisions.

The earlier scholarship on an East-West divide within the EU emphasized economic divergence, not least because the impact of the so-called 'Great Recession' was then so prevalent. There also remained within the analysis a 'transitions' inflection that earlier projects of democratization and Europeanisation were somehow unfinished or imperfect. The contributions here, written against a different backdrop (such as democratic backsliding and resurgent authoritarianism) adopt an even less teleological perspective.

The articles that make up this collection show how fluid categories are (Sedelmeier), and how sub-groups emerge – either within countries (e.g. anti-majoritarian cultural liberals in backsliding democracies in ECE – see Ananda and Dawson) or within the region (e.g. Visegrad countries using regional aid to counter inequalities as a booster of FDI-led growth – see Medve-Balint and Elteto).

Looking at major crises from 2018 to 2023 (such as COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine), there is also a pendulum dynamic, as member states group together, showing a united front on select short-term issues that ultimately give way to divisive politicization soon after. As recent scholarly contributions have shown, the EU needs to seize windows of opportunity and push forward structural reforms (see for example Jones et al 2021). But as we argue, the very perception of an East-West divide is politically consequential and can have implications in the medium to long run for the EU, as it becomes much harder to push

forward reforms that would improve the EU's internal processes. The East-West Divide remains first and foremost a question of legitimacy for the EU as a critical test of integration. Resolving the East-West divide is a test of enlargement and the whole European integration process. If the EU cannot transcend this divide, then what is the EU really for?

As all the papers demonstrate, the East-West divide matters because of legitimacy, which is foundational to the EU's power. The EU's inward legitimacy affects its ability to protect the quality of democracy within its member states (Sedelmeier 2023). It also affects the financial tools of convergence (Medve-Balint and Elteto 2024) and the EU's ability to root out opportunistic posturing in favour of durable market integration (Bruszt and Vukov 2024). The EU's outward legitimacy in turn affects its ability to promote democracy in its neighbourhood (Burlyuk, Dandashly and Noutcheva 2023) and to provide a credible enlargement reform path. This is because the EU's enlargement process is based on its integration capacity at both the internal and external levels (Börzel et al 2017). The East-West divide can alter the EU's legitimacy in terms of its internal integration capacity, which is especially consequential as of 2023 when additional commitments were made towards Ukraine and Moldova, as well as to Georgia and the Western Balkan countries.

The collection also shows that mitigation of the East-West divide requires interventions to reduce economic developmental gaps and to increase governmental and political accountability (especially across the East), as well as to constrain the domestic politicization of inequalities (in both the East and the West). Waves of populist electoral victories demonstrate the importance of a range of measures to understand the dynamics at play. Brussels must move beyond quick and technocratic fixes or backdoor bilateral negotiations with recalcitrant countries and address the deeper structural challenges, including those documented in this collection, that continue to animate East-West tensions in the EU.

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⁴ Please consult the full academic programme of the Online Symposium here:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cRrCgDxXku9na-Jv_N3KbqjjKK4UdGhh7bP1-7q7AtM/edit#

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