

# THE CONVERSATION

## Brexit: the view from Eastern Europe

August 11, 2016 1.53pm BST

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The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

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I can't believe what I'm seeing. Anders Adermark, CC BY-NC-ND

Anyone who has been exposed to only the British media before and after the Brexit referendum would be amazed to find out how different the narrative has been outside the UK. The public discourse on Brexit in the UK has been significantly coloured by the anti-EU stance taken by most tabloid newspapers. Their coverage has normalised some quite extreme and irrational views within the UK.

While some European media organisations also peddle fear and hate (particularly about the refugee crisis) they seem to have been reacting much more rationally to Brexit than their British counterparts.

Eyebrows have been raised about the decision to leave the EU. Why would Britain want to cut itself from Europe and diminish its international status? Having suffered on the fringes of Western democracy under communism, the liberal elites of Eastern and Central Europe were extraordinarily pleased when their countries were able to join the European Union in 2004. They were integrated into what seemed to be a civilised, democratic and stable West.

And just as the new EU members were able to join “the West”, it started to fall to bits. First came the financial crisis and now Brexit.

In the UK, many people mocked David Cameron for warning that Brexit might lead to war on the European continent. But many Europeans, on the basis of their traumatic experiences from the past, take this warning very seriously indeed.

## Against Brexit

In the Czech Republic, an opinion poll carried out at the end of June 2016 showed 60% of Czechs were opposed to the UK leaving the EU. Although Czechs are often critical of the EU, particularly its social policies, only people on the extremes of the political spectrum supported Brexit.

Czechs fear that Brexit will lead to unemployment in Central Europe and to a drop in their exports to Western Europe. And another opinion poll, carried out in July, indicated that most Czechs believe Brexit will strengthen Germany’s position in the EU, which would be disadvantageous for the Czechs, who, for historical reasons, fear domination by the Germans.

As many as 43% were also afraid that Brexit marks the beginning of the end of the EU. They also fear Brexit will strengthen Russia’s influence in Europe because it will weaken the European Union. Many Czechs openly worry about a possible re-imposition of a Russian regime in Central Europe. They expect Brexit to lead to a pan-European economic crisis.



The Visegrad Group: not wildly enthusiastic about this plan, tbh. EPA/Pawel Supernak

Daniel Prokop, a leading Czech sociologist, sees Brexit as a mutiny against globalisation. It is a demand for a return to the past and to local solutions. Very similar policies are advocated by the new parliamentary party of Slovak fascists, lead by Marian Kotleba, says Prokop.

However, a nostalgic view of the past is not quite such an effective narrative in the Czech Republic. For them, there is no nostalgia about life before the EU. Before 1989, they had 40 years of communism, which is very difficult to be enthusiastic about. The inter-war democratic Czechoslovak Republic lasted only 20 years before it was destroyed by Hitler. And before 1918, the Czechs were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which they regarded as an alien state.

Prokop also argues that Brexit frustration is the result of unsolved social problems. He predicts that if the EU does not concentrate on solving these quickly and effectively, destabilisation will follow.

Very similar results were thrown up by opinion polls in Hungary, where 60% of people felt Brexit would be bad for their own country. Asked if Hungary should also leave the EU, 64%

were opposed.

The Hungarian government is, however, seeking to capitalise on Brexit with an official programme aimed at wooing companies with bases in the UK to relocate to its own territory. Hungary is being presented as a “beacon of stability in a Europe of disorder”.

Likewise, shortly after the Brexit vote, Romanian president Klaus Iohannis promised Romania will remain “an oasis of stability” in the EU and that the impact of Brexit on the Romanian economy will be minimal.

However, Doru Pop of Cluj University, warned the British referendum has strengthened extreme nationalist and eurosceptic tendencies in the country, with politicians suggesting that multinational companies are exploiting Romania. The recent social democratic Prime Minister Victor Ponta was critical of Western influences in Romania. Pop sees in this a throwback to the anti-Western propaganda of the 1950s. These tendencies have been further encouraged by Brexit.

## The legitimising effect of the EU

Things are a little different in Poland, where the national government is under fire over Brexit. Some feel that Poles have been leaving to work in the UK because of the lack of opportunities on offer at home. Now the opportunity is to be cut off.

Polish sociologist Wojciech Lukowski said in a recent interview in the journal Polityka that the UK needs immigrants for the menial jobs the English can't be bothered to do. That's why it opened its borders to Eastern Europeans in the first place, he suggested. However, he added:

*The English were then stunned when they found out how hard-working and how assertive the Poles are. They did not expect them to climb the social ladder in the UK so quickly.*

About 10% of Poles living in the UK are now planning to leave for other EU countries, while others are applying for British passports. All this raises the question of why more is not being done to encourage them to come home.

But while Brexit has been interpreted as an encouragement for extreme right wing parties everywhere in Europe, loyalty to the EU remains strong among most Central and Eastern Europeans. Many feel their countries could not make it on their own. They genuinely fear a possible renewal of hostilities between their nations if they were to leave the bloc. What's more, membership of a “Western” organisation gives them legitimacy. It makes them part of the West – an important statement in a region keen to assert itself against the Russian sphere of influence.

There are varying levels of understanding for the UK Brexit vote, but most people think that the UK has voted for Brexit out of irrational frustration – and that they will pay a heavy price for the decision.



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