

Divided by a common purpose: Why do activists in Central and Eastern Europe rarely collaborate with those in the West?

*Major protests have occurred in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe in the last few years. Yet as **Julia Rone** explains, there has been a remarkable lack of coordination between activists in the region and their counterparts in Western Europe.*

In 2020, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of Bulgarian and Polish citizens took to the streets to protest. In Bulgaria, demonstrations began in early July against state capture and [the role of oligarchs in Bulgarian politics](#). The protests lasted almost four months and revealed a vibrant civil society is firmly established within the country.

Meanwhile, in mid-October, [thousands of Polish citizens](#) took part in demonstrations against the incumbent Law and Justice government over a court ruling that would have imposed a [near total ban on abortions](#). The protests, which had a presence in all major Polish cities, were the largest Poland has witnessed since 1989 and ultimately forced the government to [delay the ban](#). In December, Polish activists [declared](#) they were “entering a second stage of the revolution and everyone is invited”.

These two examples, along with several more that could be cited, confirm a trend that has been apparent over the last decade. Citizens in Central and Eastern Europe, once known for their [patience](#) in relation to their political leaders, now appear far more willing to mobilise in the thousands for a sustained period of time.

Yet, 2020 revealed something else as well: three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, activists in the EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe still have remarkably few connections with activists in Western Europe. This matches the findings of my [recent book](#) on protest diffusion in the EU, which illustrate that in spite of – or in some cases *because of* – their shared EU membership, protesters and trade unions in Eastern and Western Europe rarely collaborate.

Divided activists

There are several factors which explain this phenomenon. First, as [research based on individual data from the European Social Survey](#) has shown, protesters in Western Europe are primarily left-wing, while in the East it is mainly right-wing citizens who go to the streets. The reasons for this are often historical since in countries such as Spain and Greece, protesters traditionally opposed right-wing dictatorships, while in countries such as Poland, dissidents opposed communist governments. Today, most progressive protesters in countries such as Poland, Romania, or Bulgaria come from the liberal right rather than the left. This key difference at the individual level goes a long way toward explaining the lack of collaboration between activists.

There are, however, also important structural factors that make cooperation difficult. The EU’s governance regime is distinct from a federal state, such as the United States, where solidarity and fiscal transfers occur between different states. On the contrary, [it has been argued](#) that the EU’s economic governance system has more in common with the approach of multinational corporations in the sense that it stimulates competition between member states to attract investment and increase their exports.

Furthermore, within the context of freedom of movement in the EU, there have been important conflicts of interest between trade unions in the East and in the West. This was seen clearly in the disagreements surrounding reform of the [Posting of Workers Directive](#). For decades, EU member states had been allowed to ‘post’ workers to another state without abiding by local labour laws. Yet in the 2010s, Central and Eastern European truck drivers who worked for much smaller wages and often slept in their trucks instead of in hotels were accused by Western trade unions of social dumping. In turn, trade unions from Central and Eastern European countries accused the West of protectionism. Moving beyond such nation-based conflicts has proven to be exceptionally difficult.

Finally, beyond individual and structural factors, the lack of existing traditions and networks of cooperation is no less important for explaining the persistent gap between civil societies in Eastern and Western Europe. Activists on both sides have generally shown little interest in reaching out and forming coalitions. While Spanish, Greek and Italian protesters, for example, have a long tradition of organising shared events, [there is no comparable bottom-up tradition of East-West solidarity](#). What does exist may be described as indifference at best, animosity at worst. For instance, there was little diffusion of anti-austerity narratives from the Southern European Indignados movement to the East, despite countries such as [Romania](#) and the [Baltic states](#) implementing some of the toughest austerity packages in the EU.

This phenomenon has also been reflected at the academic level, with political science and social movement studies tending to exclusively focus on either Eastern Europe or Western Europe in isolation. At best, such studies contain comparisons between the East and West, but it is rare to find an assessment of the connections between them. This is all the more important since far right actors have proven to be much better at establishing [transnational connections](#) when it comes to [political parties](#), [protest movements](#), and even [digital media](#).

Building bridges

In the context of rising illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe, low levels of solidarity with counterparts in the West has hampered the cause of progressive left-wing actors. What is perhaps even more significant, however, is there has also been a lack of 'East-East' solidarity between activists.

Despite multiple similarities between protests such as those in Bulgaria in 2013 and 2020 and those that took place in Romania between 2017 and 2019, no common movement on the left (or for that matter on the liberal right) has emerged which can unite activists and articulate a common narrative in the way the Indignados movement did in Southern Europe. The fact that progressive actors in Eastern Europe find it difficult to build bridges across borders means they often end up fighting their fights alone.

Still, not everything is so bleak. The outpouring of [international solidarity](#) with Polish women in late 2020 has shown that Eastern European protesters are not alone in their stance against illiberalism. While in many case protests outside Poland were led by Polish women living abroad, they also incorporated local feminist organisations and other actors.

Similarly, during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, German activists raised awareness about the [scandalous conditions](#) which some Eastern European agricultural and factory workers were encountering after flying to the West to take up employment. The emigration of workers from Central and Eastern European countries raises issues such as social dumping and [disinvestment in skills training](#) which should unite, rather than divide, trade unions operating in different EU countries.

Long-lasting connections and cooperation are not easy to build. Nor do they come without caveats and dangers. Yet, instead of politely avoiding each other, European progressive activists and unions in the East and West may well benefit from engaging in a conversation to see what might be possible. This will undoubtedly produce some heated debates and drama, but it may also bring some coordinated action and at least a better understanding of the increasingly connected problems that activists face in the East and West.

For more information, see the author's accompanying book, [Contesting Austerity and Free Trade in the EU: Protest Diffusion in Complex Media and Political Arenas \(Routledge, 2021\)](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Can Ayaz \(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#)
