

# There is no evidence of a structural East-West divide in the EU

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*One of the most feared consequences of the EU's eastern enlargement in the 2000s was that it would significantly diminish the decision-making capacity of the Union. As [Dimiter Toshkov](#) writes, several highly-publicised cases in which member states from Central and Eastern Europe have seemingly acted together to oppose proposals coming from Brussels have reinforced this pessimistic view. However, drawing on a recent study, he argues that there is no systematic evidence that the accession of the new member states has slowed down decision making nor compromised the capacity of the EU to adopt common policies.*



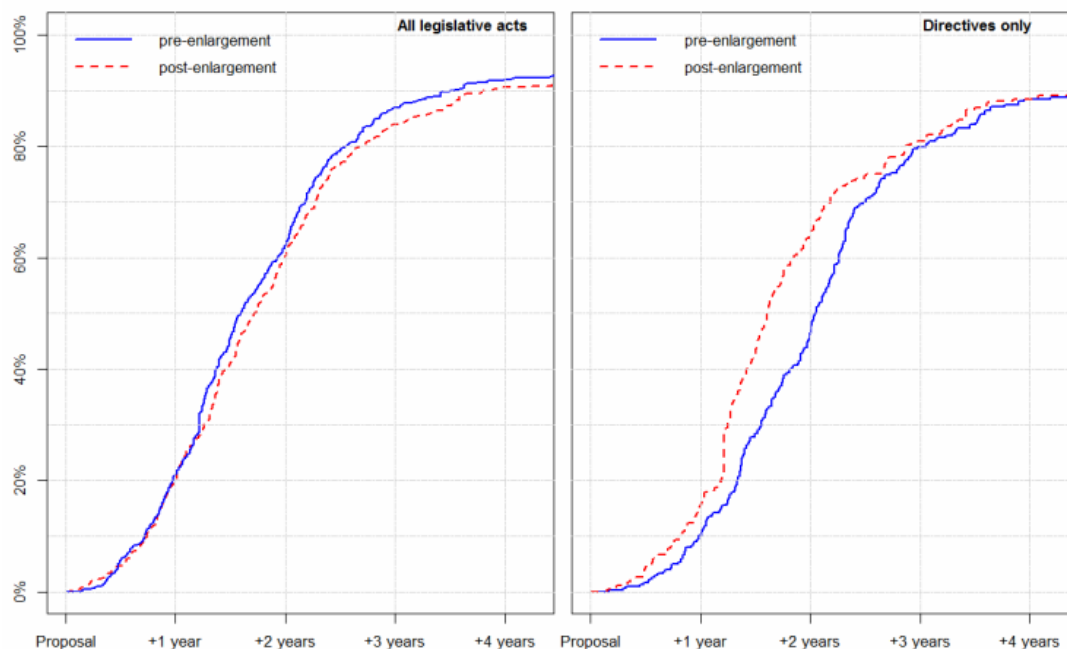
In the wake of the eastern enlargement, more than 12 years ago now, European political leaders and the general public alike shared a grave concern about the effects enlargement would have on the EU institutions and their capacity to adopt and implement new decisions. And there were good reasons to be anxious: the countries about to join were numerous, relatively poor, and quite unpredictable. How would negotiations between more than 25 member states work, if at all? Wouldn't the new member states gang up together to block new market-making policies and increase agricultural subsidies?

As enlargement unfolded, early accounts, including much academic writing, seemed to find support for these negative expectations, and the narrative of the crippling effects of enlargement on the EU persisted. So much so that in 2009, 65 per cent of EU citizens [believed](#) that the integration of Central and Eastern European countries had made the EU more difficult to manage, elevating this as the most widely shared perceived negative consequence of enlargement.

Yet, as pervasive as they are, these negative perceptions are mostly wrong. There is no systematic evidence that enlargement has slowed down the speed of decision making (see Figure 1), that it has significantly decreased legislative productivity (see Figure 2), nor that the major line of conflict in the EU has become one between 'old' versus 'new' member states (see Figure 3).

**Figure 1: Proportion of legislative acts adopted over time in the EU (1994-2012; co-decision/ordinary legislative procedure)**

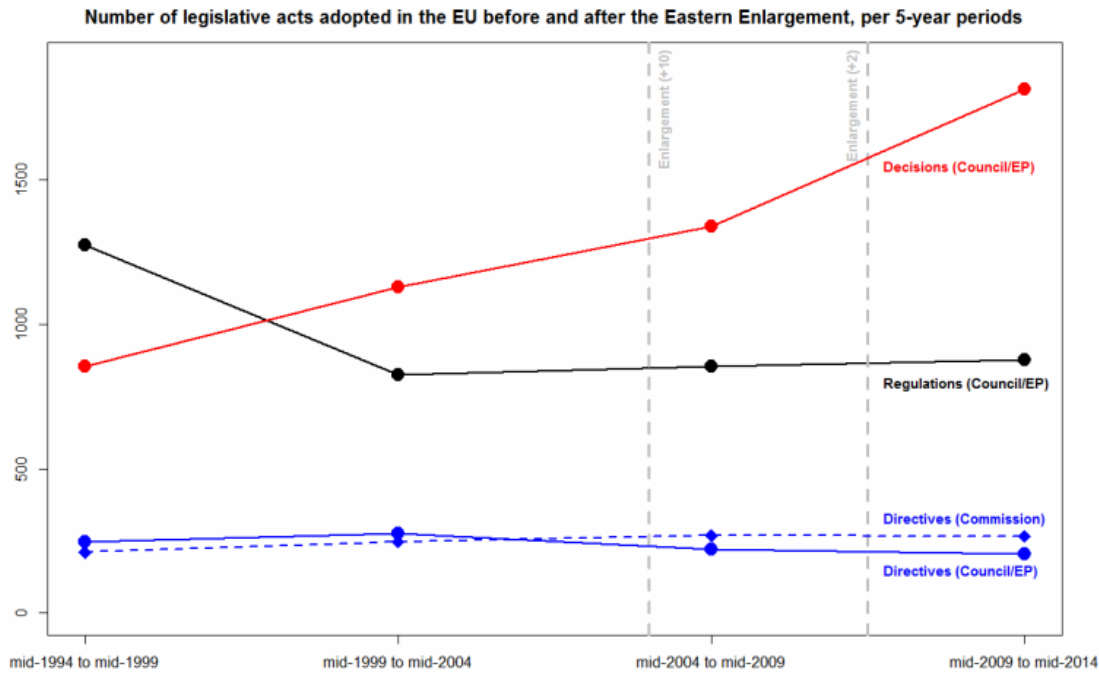
Proportion of legislative acts adopted over time in the EU, 1994-2012. Co-decision/ordinary legislative procedure



**Note:** The figure shows the proportion of legislative proposals adopted in the EU as a function of time. It tracks all legislative proposals made under the co-decision/ordinary legislative procedure between 1994 and 2012. The left panel plots all types of legislative acts, while the right panel focuses on directives only. The solid blue lines show the survival curves for proposals made before the 2004 enlargement, while the dashed red lines show the curves for proposals made after enlargement. The figure shows that when all types of legislative acts are considered, there is no difference in the speed of adoption before and after enlargement, while for directives adoption is actually faster after enlargement, likely due to the increased use of first-reading ‘trilogue’ agreements.

When we look at the actual data on the duration of EU decision making before and after 2004, it is clear that there is no enlargement-related trend and certainly no evidence for gridlock (Figure 1). Looking at the number of legal acts adopted (Figure 2), there is a decline when it comes to certain types of legislation (e.g. regulations or directives adopted by the Council or by the Council and European Parliament under the ordinary legislative procedure), but there is actually an increase for other types of legislation (e.g. decisions and directives adopted by the European Commission). Furthermore, the decline in the number of adopted regulations and directives precedes enlargement and has a lot to do with other developments, such as the [Better Regulation programme](#).

**Figure 2: Number of legislative acts adopted in the EU before and after the eastern enlargement (per 5 year periods)**

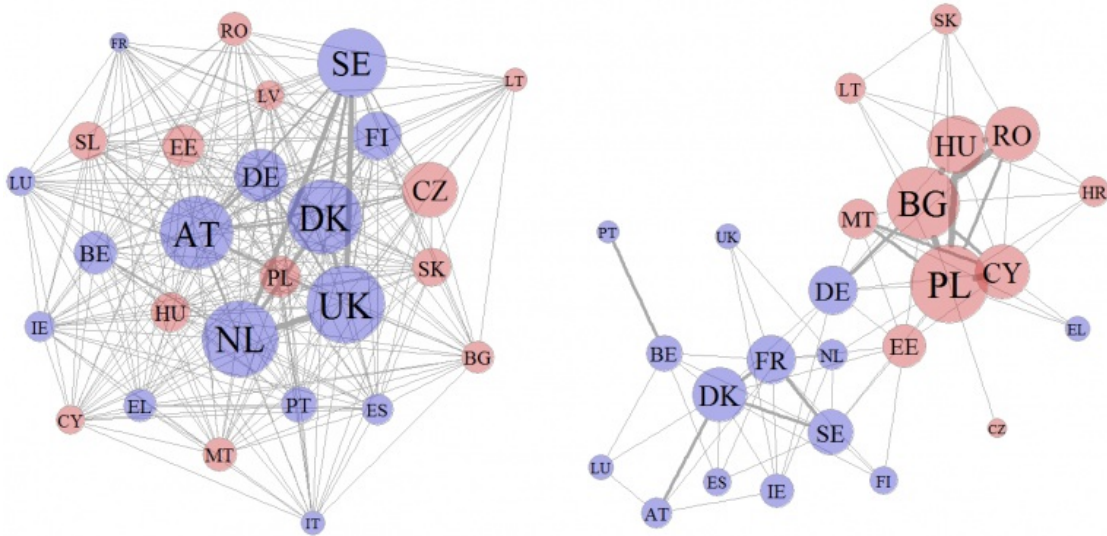


**Note:** The figure shows the total number of legislative acts adopted during each of four 5-year time periods and per type of legal act. Two of these periods are before the eastern enlargement and two afterwards (the enlargement moments in 2004 and 2007 are indicated with the vertical dashed grey lines).

There is some evidence that a conflict between ‘old’ and ‘new’ member states has emerged as a faultline in the Council of Ministers of the EU. But this faultline concerns only a limited number of decisions and policy areas, and it is not perfectly related to enlargement: some ‘old’ member states from Southern Europe end up aligned with the ‘new’ ones from Central and Eastern Europe, while some post-communist member states are closer to the Western European ones.

To illustrate the lack of a systematic East-West divide in the Council of Ministers, Figure 3 provides a network representation of the structure of conflict in the Council of Ministers, in which each time two member states have voted together to oppose a proposal is considered a tie (connection). In effect, the more often member states vote together, the closer they will be in the network graph, and if member states systematically vote together, clusters will appear. But looking at the left part of the figure, there is no evidence for clusters when all proposals are considered. To illustrate what a clustered graph would look like, the right panel of the figure focuses only on proposals in the field of the environment, where there is a rather clear separation between the ‘new’ member states and the rest. But this East-West divide is visible only for a couple of relatively small policy areas and not in the general case.

**Figure 3: Network representations of common dissent in the Council of Ministers (2007-16)**



**Note: The figure shows network representations of common dissent (negative votes and abstentions) in the Council of Ministers (2007–2016). The left panel is based on all proposals, while the right panel focuses on proposals in the field of environment only. The dots and labels of the member states are drawn proportionally to the number of times they have expressed dissent. The width of the connecting arcs is proportional to the number of times the connected member states have expressed dissent together.**

The misleading impression that the Central and Eastern European member states recurrently act together to oppose the progress of European integration is sustained by media framing of several highly-publicised cases, such as the proposal for compulsory refugee resettlement quotas made in 2015. But once we look deeper, the picture of an East-West divide disappears even in this case.

The proposal was indeed supported by Germany, France, Italy and other West European states, and it was openly opposed by Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and other East European ones. However, not all East European states expressed opposition (e.g. Bulgaria was much more open to the idea of burden-sharing), and some Western member states did (e.g. Austria). But most significantly, when in September 2015 the proposal was voted on in the Council of Ministers, Poland, Bulgaria, and other Central and Eastern European member states actually voted in favour.

Altogether, the East European states do not have enough voting power to stop EU policies and legislation, even if we assume that they share similar interests, which they rarely do. The thirteen states that have joined the EU since 2004 command less than 21% of the votes in the Council of Ministers, which falls well short of the required 35% for a blocking minority. (Brexit would change little in this regard.) Unless we want to put the blame for Brexit on the Eastern enlargement (and we should not, despite the indirect effects of free movement on the British position), the accession of the Central and Eastern European countries to the EU has not derailed European integration and it has not blocked the EU's decision-making machinery.

Why is this important now, almost 15 years after the eastern enlargement? First, it is important because large parts of the general public, as well as many journalists, commentators, and politicians, continue to believe that enlargement has crippled the decision-making capacity of the EU and that the Eastern European member states act systematically as a tight group in opposition to the rest. This narrative is seductive but unsupported by the evidence.

Second, the anticipation of negative institutional effects is often used to argue against further EU enlargement and to promote overly ambitious institutional reforms, like the ill-fated Constitutional Treaty. But in fact, against all odds,

since 2004 the EU has managed to accommodate and integrate without much turbulence 13 new member states within its decision-making structures. This success is most remarkable and provides an important lesson for the future; a lesson that should not be overshadowed by the forthcoming exit of the United Kingdom from the EU.

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*Note: This text is based on the author's recent paper in the [Journal of European Public Policy](#) (an earlier extended version of the article is freely available [here](#)). Research for the article has been supported by the European Union's FP7 programme under the project 'Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons and prospects for enlargement and beyond' [MAXCAP]. This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

**Dimiter Toshkov** – *Leiden University*

[Dimiter Toshkov](#) is Associate Professor at the Institute of Public Administration, Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University, The Netherlands. He is on Twitter [@DToshkov](#)



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