CZECH ANALYST: EASTERN EUROPEANS HAVE LOST FAITH IN THE EU

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When countries in Central and Eastern Europe joined the EU, their expectations were high. Above all, they thought that they would quickly reach a Western standard living, Irah Kučerová told EURACTIV Czech Republic.

Irah Kučerová is an expert on international economic relations and European integration. She has served as a lecturer at Charles University in Prague since 1997 and is the author of more than 50 publications.

There is a vivid debate about the gaps between Western and Eastern Europe, especially in connection with the labour mobility, posted workers and migration. It is also important to note that Western officials are much more pro-European than the Eastern ones. How did this happen?

The gap between the Western and Eastern Europe is rooted in history. It has political and economical levels and there are also divergent mentalities and attitudes to the integration process in Europe which is nowadays represented by the European Union.

From a political perspective we still cant forget more than 40 years of life behind the Iron Curtain. Life in totalitarian regimes marked our people whereas Western Europe developed its democratic spirit.

The other thing is that borders of Central and Eastern European countries were closed during the regime. Locals lived in a bubble and they werent meeting people with different religions or colours. Nowadays its reflected in the approach of Visegrad group towards immigration.

How much do Eastern Europeans differ from Westerners?

Eastern Europeans dont believe in any institutions including the EU. We dont have any experience with establishing democratic institutions and thats why it is often said in the Czech Republic that Brussels again came up with something. Czechs, Poles and Hungarians are just convinced that the EU is ruled by elites with no connection to their countries. But people from Western Europe know that if a decision is made and is not good for national interest of their country, it was perhaps badly negotiated by politicians, who were elected by them as their representatives in Brussels.

Is it possible to overcome this mistrust of Eastern Europeans?

It needs some time. There has to be a generational renewal in politics, research and media. The new generation has to take the lead.

The problem is that the EU is often demonized by Eastern people. Of course negative stories are more read than others but this alarmism is common not only for journalists but also for experts and politicians. Thats worse because if a well-known person says something, lay people think it must be true because that politician or expert has to understand EU matters very well.

Western Europeans are sometimes influenced by negative propaganda too, but their political elites are more responsible. It is true that populism is getting stronger there but parties with a democratic program still cope with that. It is evident from the results of the elections in France, Netherlands and also Finland or Austria.

And what about the economic gap between Eastern and Western European states? Could we expect such a slow progress for the East?

We have to bear in mind that history plays a big role also at the economic level of East-West division. During the interwar period, Central and Eastern Europe werent really developed except Czechoslovakia. Even Austria had much weaker economy, but its willingness to catch up with Germany and Switzerland lead to success. Now the Czech Republic looks up to Austria.

In the 1990s Western countries showed a lot of solidarity with the Eastern countries ruled by totalitarian regimes. But now it seems that their solidarity ran out. It is time for us to become self-sufficient.

We admire the economies of Austria and Germany but on the other hand we can see some protectionist measures such as a minimum wage for foreign workers or debates on posted workers. How is it possible that those problems occurred when all of us take a part in a free market?

Divisions between East and West are connected to unfair competition that takes place between their companies. For example, the Czech Republic relies on the low cost strategy since 90s because back then we were not competitive and only a few of our products were quality enough to have a success on international markets. So we made it easier for our companies by the adoption of the so-called transformation monetary pillow.

With lower prices and lower wages we have become more competitive and it lasted quite a long time. Then there was the intervention of the Czech National Bank in 2013 which was nothing else than just another export support.

Thanks to those monetary pillows, our companies did not have a strong need to invest in innovation and overall modernization. So we alone contributed to the gap between Czech and German wages. But it is only one part of the complex problem.

Speaking about wages, do you think that the East can catch up with the West?

We live in market economy and harmonisation of wages can occur only with economic development, not by political decision.

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