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## Distrust unbound: What next after joining the EU

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### ABSTRACT

The 2004–07 EU enlargement towards the post-communist region showed that the long waiting for EU membership could impact on levels of public support for the EU. This article examines citizens' trust towards national and international institutions after joining the EU in Poland, in comparative perspective. In the post-Communist region, levels of trust towards national institutions are generally lower compared to the European and international ones. Politicians and political parties are the most distrusted actors, undermining the social and political fabric in the region. An overview of political participation and levels of trust with focus on national data sets and the European Social Survey shows that levels of trust are quite low and a share of the population is concerned with sovereignty vis-à-vis EU integration. This analysis addresses how the relationship between citizens and institutions have changed and how this may affect not just the EU's policies towards candidate countries and third countries, but how it can also affect citizen participation during the process of democratization and after joining the EU.

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Citizens' participation and involvement in politics is central to the study of political systems and liberal democracy, and they still show signs of apathy in most of the post-Communist region, characterized by low levels of participation to political life of ordinary citizens (Howard, 2003). While contemporary studies on voter turnout signals actual 'erosion' in the last thirty-five years, it is across the post-Communist regions that figures are often low – with sizeable differences between old and new democracies up to almost 20 per cent (Delwit, 2013: 51). In the first few years of the democratization process this was expected. Common to all post-Communist countries, these all had little of experience of democracy, a weak public sphere and a subject political culture (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The Communist ideology was pervasive and performed the function of a guide for all political, economic and strategic decisions. It was accompanied by the absence of economic, social and political pluralism, with the Communist party having had the right to control the public sphere, destroying independent intermediary institutions, while producing atomized societies. The pervasiveness of the Communist system has had an impact on different sectors of everyday life that touched upon the transition towards democracy. Notably, with an ingrained and persistent mistrust of political institutions and cynicism towards them, such as parliaments, public authorities and political parties; a concomitant faith in private and family networks to achieve individual goals – and an enduring 'us' vs. 'them' mentality.

Low levels of trust have persisted across the years. Candidate Countries' Eurobarometer studies have long shown Central and Eastern European countries at the bottom of surveys on trust towards political parties and governmental institutions (Guerra, 2013). This analysis aims to explore how citizens perceive the EU institutions, and how perceptions and trust towards the EU changed after joining the EU, while looking at perception of corruption and distrust and how these could affect attitudes. The intention is to explore trust and possibly to address further questions, which emerge from the intersections highlighting the ways in which trust and political participation also affect citizens' attitudes towards domestic institutions. This article seeks to bring together research of different aspects of trust on European politics and governance, while looking at different scholarly debates. In the current financial and post-financial and economic climate and one of the latest publications

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by the European Commission on Corruption across the EU (EB397, published in February 2014), this analysis further explores development on political participation across post-Communist societies through the lenses of the Polish case.

As [Attila Ágh \(2014\)](#) underlines, the new EU Member States have experienced the demanding costs of the democratization process, a post-accession crisis, which this analysis addresses, examining decreasing levels of trust for the EU institutions, and the 'global competition crisis'. Ágh poignantly observes, 'the social discontent loomed large' during the democratisation process and path towards EU membership, and 'this mass disillusionment in the social construction of democracy has come back later in the second decade ... (Hence), the satisfaction with representative democracy has been very low from the very beginning' (2014: 10). Still low levels of enthusiasm, if seen through participation at European Parliament (EP) elections, have always been widespread across the entire region. EP elections are considered second order elections, where turnout is generally lower compared to national elections ([Reif and Schmitt, 1980](#); [van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996](#)), and have seen decreasing participation trends across Western and Central and Eastern Europe. In 2014, the 'Spitzenkandidat' did not boost or halt decreasing participation and official data pointed to a meagre increase (43.03 per cent) till the end of June, a few weeks after the elections, when the 43 per cent of 2009 further dropped to 42.54 per cent. Not only did low turnout persist, it confirmed a wide turnout gap between the old Member States, plus Malta and Cyprus, and the eight – nine in 2014 – former Communist new Member States, 55.63 per cent vs. 31.19 per cent, in 2004; 54.01 per cent vs. 22.93 per cent, in 2009; and 52.73 per cent vs. 28.75 per cent, in 2014, signalling unchanged different patterns of participation across the EU. Low turnout seems to have become a general pattern in Central and Eastern Europe where Slovakia shows the lowest (13.05 per cent in 2014) since the first EP elections in 2004 (17 per cent) ([Hanley, 2014](#); [Guerra, 2015](#)).

In order to understand how attitudes and perceptions may change, this analysis first examines why this debate is important, with a focus on corruption and perceptions; second, it studies the role of perceptions at the domestic level and to what extent these may create a vicious circle of low participation and how this together with disillusionment can represent 'very important destabilizing political factor(s)' ([Ágh, 2014](#): 10). Finally, the article expands on the possible impact and the troubles for democracy at the domestic level and it closes on the challenges more than twelve years after the 2004 enlargement and what is the lesson for the Western Balkans, as representing the next EU enlargement.

## 1. Perception of corruption and trust in the region

Corruption is defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.

Corruption can be classified as grand, petty and political, depending on the amounts of money lost and the sector where it occurs. ... Political corruption is a manipulation of policies, institutions and rules of procedure in the allocation of resources and financing by political decision makers, who abuse their position to sustain their power, status and wealth. ([Transparency International, 2014](#)).

In Europe, corruption became one of the most salient issues after the collapse of Communism, at the same time the issue was also gaining increasing international attention as part of the good governance agenda being pursued across the Global South ([Brown and Cloke, 2006](#)).

[Ivan Krastev \(2002\)](#) found that at the end of the 1990s more than 70 per cent of Bulgarians, Poles, and Russians thought there was more corruption than there had been at the time of Communism, although levels of corruptions are and were different in the area (CPI data). It is worth to note that the process of democratization also tied into the economic liberalization process both in the post-Communist region and across the Global South, with different patterns of success identified regarding the fight against corruption ([Ades and Di Tella, 1997](#)). In other cases, democratization seems to have been associated with worsening corruption levels or at least perceptions of its prevalence and the embedding of new forms of elite privilege and patronage. As [Milada Anna Vachudova \(2009: 43\)](#) pointed out, 'Corruption also undermines liberal democracy as political elites violate the legal limits of their power, [and] citizens lose trust in state institutions ...'.

This is worrying for those concerned about the sustainability of democratic transitions, which means that the more well-known arguments concerning the negative economic and social impacts of corruption have been supplemented by concerns over the impacts of corruption on political trust, legitimacy, the quality of service provided by democratic institutions ([Norris, 2011](#)) and, more broadly, support for democratic forms of politics. Within the literature this is often singled out as being a particular issue for so-called young democracies, where democratic structures, processes and above all political cultures are only weakly consolidated. [Pippa Norris \(2011: 93–101\)](#) found that levels of approval of democratic attitudes<sup>1</sup> in younger liberal democracies was slightly lower compared to older liberal democracies, 97 per cent in Sweden and Norway, 96 per cent in Germany and Italy, but 87 per cent in Bulgaria, 88 per cent in Slovenia, and 84 per cent in Poland; much lower in countries outside the status of EU candidate countries, 83 per cent in Moldova, 66 per cent in Russia. Norris underlines that direct questions on the political system can be also misleading, where strong approval of the democratic system may combine with 'illiberal convictions' towards some specific principles, such as freedom of speech, political equality and tolerance to minority rights ([Norris, 2011: 93–94](#)). That is critical in developing democracies, as approval of democratic regimes strengthens the consolidation of democracy ([Almond and Verba, 1963](#)).

<sup>1</sup> Based on the answers to the question, 'I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing the country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Having a democratic political system', with the percentages indicating those responding 'very' and 'fairly' good (World Values Survey, 2005–2007 cited in [Norris, 2011: 93](#)).

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