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No, Eastern Europe Isn't Doomed to Right-Wing Rule

Six left-wing parties from central-eastern Europe have formed a new alliance. They're united by opposition to right-wing populists and Russian imperialism — but they're also challenging the center-left parties who led the region's neoliberal turn.



Supporters of Lewica during a campaign convention ahead of Polish parliamentary elections on October 5, 2019 in Katowice, Poland. (Omar Marques / Getty Images)

Before a media gaggle inside Poland's parliament, this January 12 representatives of six organizations announced the creation of a new Central-Eastern European Green Left Alliance (CEEGLA). For its organizers — Poland's Razem, Hungary's Szikra Movement, Romania's Demos, Ukraine's Sotsialnyi Rukh, the Czech Republic's Budoucnost, and Lithuania's Kartu — [the event](#) represented the expression of a modern left in the region.

Already following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many Eastern European left-wingers [began to vocalize](#) a separate identity from their comrades in Western Europe — complaining that

these latter failed to recognize what was really at stake in the war. The creation of CEELGA seemed designed to concretize this reality.

“We realized that we live in different worlds and that the left-wing world — Western, South, and Northern — they have different views [on the war],” Claudiu Crăciun, spokesperson for Romania’s Demos, told me. “And we feel that we have a world here. It’s a European periphery that had independence and sovereignty as major stakes during the nineteenth and the twentieth century, and we know a bit something about . . . Russian influence in every form.”

CEEGLA is hoping to be that world’s standard-bearer. But while its outlines have become more precise, the idea of an Eastern European democratic socialism is still a work in progress. The alliance’s membership reflects the reality that this is a nascent project. Even its most prominent member organization — Poland’s Razem — has only seven seats in its national parliament.

Collapse

CEEGLA has its roots in two periods of recent history: the decline of Eastern European left-wing parties in the 2000s and the Eurozone crisis of the 2010s.

Indeed, it’s important to avoid caricatural readings of right-wing domination in the postcommunist countries. In the early years of the new millennium, social democratic and socialist parties controlled or were part of the government in the Czech Republic (1998–2006), Hungary (2002–2010), Lithuania (2001–2008), Poland (2001–2005), Romania (2000–2004), and Ukraine (2002–2005). But by the mid-2000s, those parties saw their popularity decline [due to scandals](#) and [their role](#) in the austerity-driven transition to capitalism.

“Much of a transition to capitalism and to neoliberal economic regimes was enabled by nominally left-wing governments through the ’90s and early 2000s,” Áron Rossman-Kiss, head of external relations for Hungary’s Szikra Movement, says.

The collapse created a vacuum on the Left just as the Eurozone crisis began. The ensuing protest movements would birth or elevate groups like Spain’s Podemos, Greece’s Syriza, La France Insoumise, and the UK Labour Party movement led by Jeremy Corbyn. At the same time, an Eastern European “new left” began to coalesce — and often modeled itself after Western and Southern European parties.

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“If you look back at when Razem was founded, they were sort of portraying themselves as a kind of Western-style democratic socialist alternative to what [remained] of the

postcommunist left in Poland. So, they were very much trying to emulate something Western,” Tom Junes, an assistant professor at the Polish Academy of Sciences, says.

At first, few such organizations gained traction in Eastern Europe. Of CEEGLA’s current membership, only Poland’s Razem and Romania’s Demos were active as political parties in the 2010s, although others like Ukraine’s Sotsialnyi Rukh did exist as social movements.

“Seven, eight years ago, it was just us and Razem,” says Demos’s Crăciun. “But in the meantime, other parties and movements sprang up.”

The new left differed from the legacy parties of the last century. Unlike the often conservative communist parties, they were socially progressive, and unlike the social democrats, they opposed austerity. Many of their members came from the urban middle class and Europe’s growing “precarariat” rather than the traditional base of industrial workers.

In several countries — Poland and Hungary especially — these movements also organized alongside other forces who resisted right-wing populists. They found themselves aligned with mainstream parties in broad popular fronts. Razem (as part of the Lewica alliance) and Szikra have both run for election in either official or informal coalitions against incumbent national-populist rulers.

Still, the CEEGLA parties are more than the left-wing of democratic, pro-European movements. While their opposition to antidemocratic behavior has led to alliances with centrist and neoliberal parties, CEEGLA’s members argue for replacing, not returning, to the “pre-populist” status quo. This difference has sometimes placed the new left at odds with its erstwhile allies. For instance, in last October’s Polish elections, Razem ran in an — albeit very loose — informal coalition of the broad center-left to center-right opposition. But when Donald Tusk led these same parties in forming a new government, Razem chose to remain outside it.

Internationalism

Even in the post-2008 crisis period, some tensions existed between new left movements in Eastern Europe and those elsewhere on the continent.

“Many of us shared a similar experience: for years, we had been going to international — left-wing — forums and had the feeling that there was little or no place for Eastern European leftist voices there, that we were reduced to something of a negligible backwater,” Rossman-Kiss says.

That tension was particularly heightened around defense issues — and Russia. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and sponsored insurgencies in Ukraine’s east.

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While left-wingers across Eastern Europe were alarmed, [some left-wing politicians elsewhere on the continent](#) expressed their support for the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics.”

Still, cooperation between the Eastern and Western parties continued. Russia’s invasion in February 2022 was the final prompt to change the relationship.

“There was a recognition that things couldn’t go on as they had until now, that we must start actively building these partnerships within the region, since they would not be built for us,” Rossman-Kiss explains.

Some Eastern European parties disengaged with left-wing projects that they saw as Western-dominated. In March 2022, Razem [announced](#) that it was leaving the Progressive International and DiEM25 — groups associated with former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis.

In the following months, Razem met with other groups that had likewise been disappointed by the European left’s response to the war.

“We had a meeting in Warsaw [where] . . . we discovered that we have some very common problems because of the capitalist order in Central/Eastern Europe, with few differences, it’s the same,” Demos’s Crăciun says. “And it was interesting to see how our struggles crystalized differently in our countries. . . . We recognize ourselves in the struggles of the others. It was like looking in a mirror and saying, ‘Oh yeah, we’ve been through that.’”

Those meetings laid the groundwork for CEEGLA. It was a reaction to the marginalization experienced by the Eastern European left within left-wing spaces, as much as a rejection of the local neoliberal status quo.

“I think it’s very important to remember that there’s no leftist politics without internationalism — both because a truly emancipatory struggle cannot be successful if it’s confined within national borders, but also on a very practical level. It’s so crucial to learn from each other’s experiences and to exchange methods regarding what has worked — and what hasn’t,” Rossman-Kiss says. “Very often, rather than looking at what happens in the countries neighboring us, we look towards Germany, the UK or the US. This has only reinforced a sense of isolation regarding our national struggles.”

But now that CEEGLA exists, it is difficult to pinpoint what it aims to do or represent, beyond regional cooperation.

“In light of the events in the last two years, I see this alliance as some kind of attempt to create a sort of regional identity for a democratic socialist left alternative,” Junes says. “[It is]

very much an attempt towards identity, but not an identity that yet exists. I think they're still sort of searching for what it is meant to be.”

Ideology

CEEGLA does have [seventeen agreed-upon principles](#), but they are light on actionable details. The result is a rough outline of the organization's goals and beliefs.

Foremost, the alliance attempts to synthesize the last three decades of Eastern European history — the collapse of communism, the transition to capitalism, European Union and NATO expansion, and Russia's renewed aggression — into a coherent progressive program.

“We want to see the Central-Eastern Europe region stronger; a region that can influence Western politics and can talk from our perspectives and not to be this [buffer] zone between Russia and the US,” says Victoriia Pihul, a board member of Ukraine's Sotsialnyi Rukh.

However, members say that's only part of their identity.

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“It's not just about [Ukraine]. It's advocating about leftist progressive ecological policies in Eastern Europe, reflecting that [shared] context,” Klára Školníková, cochair of the Czech Budoucnost party, says. “And I think Western Europe . . . we want the same things, right? We want climate justice, we want workers' rights, we want social justice, but it's just that we have a completely different context and completely different debates, and we cannot apply the same [strategies] to our countries as well; it's just not going to work. So it's a lot about exchanging things that work.”

The alliance's *raison d'être*, in other words, is the creation of a shared political home.

“We find support in sometimes very complicated political environments in our own countries,” Crăciun says. “So that we feel less alone.”

Zofia Malisz, a member of Razem's national council steering committee, also argues that the alliance's future will be in addressing the concrete domestic issues members face, not just lofty questions of sovereignty.

“CEEGLA is an organization whose goals, alongside solidarity with Ukraine, are much broader,” Malisz says. “And I think the Ukrainians and the Hungarians and everybody else are the most excited about discussing among ourselves and finding solutions and sharing policies about the way we organize [on] very practical things like reviving the trade union and labor movement in the region.”

CEEGLA's emphasis on regional cooperation is genuinely innovative. For decades, such ties either didn't exist or were deprioritized.

"So much of this neoliberal process that has been ongoing in our region for the past few years has thrived on putting our country's our people against each other — you have this real race to the bottom," Rossman-Kiss says. "And it also thrives because of a lack of information. And because we don't share our networks, we don't share our experiences, we don't share successful tactics."

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As the only non-EU member of the alliance, Sotsialnyi Rukh is especially hopeful that the organization will teach left-wingers in Ukraine how to navigate their country's potential transition into the bloc.

"I think, for Ukraine, it's important that the countries that already experienced this transition into the European Union [teach us] the problems that they faced, and we can provide this experience to Ukrainian society into Ukrainian politics," Pihul says.

Other issues members highlighted included housing justice, minority rights, and questions of democratic inclusion.

"In several countries [whose left-wing parties are] involved in CEEGLA — like Romania, Ukraine, and Lithuania — there are very many outdated regulatory hurdles that greatly restrict participation and democratic processes for the Left or in general," Malisz says. "And this requires major democratic reform."

These priorities do little, however, to define what CEEGLA actually is. Will it be a loose discussion forum or an electoral vehicle for smaller Eastern European parties? What does it mean to be green and left in Eastern Europe?

CEEGLA's general principles and broad scope highlight the tightrope the new alliance is trying to manage as it establishes itself. Given the alliance's relative diversity, there are differing opinions about what exactly CEEGLA should be.

"Each of our movements is obviously working in very different circumstances. But just as our work with Szikra is not reduced to participating in elections, CEEGLA's work isn't either," Rossman-Kiss says. "This project is not an electoral vehicle as such, but should go beyond it."

Not in Isolation

There is agreement on what CEEGLA is not. It is not a pan-European party or meant to be a faction within the European Parliament. Nor is it a split with Western parties or larger pan-European formations.

“This endeavor’s goal is not some kind of a breach or isolation. On the contrary, we want to strengthen the quality of the dialogue between us and some of our Western colleagues that might struggle with understanding the problems in our region,” Malisz says. “The formation of CEEGLA . . . will intensify bilateral cooperation with specific parties, while also putting [us] on the map of regional and pan-European left or left and green organizations.”

CEEGLA’s formation is an argument that Eastern Europe will become important for the entire continent — and that the Left needs to be ready. The alliance is a decisive statement that the democratic Eastern European left aims to meet that opportunity on its own terms.