

HAVE WE PUNCHED OUR WEIGHT IN THE EU?

THE NEW MEMBER STATES' 10 YEARS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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With the approaching ten-year anniversary of Central and Eastern Europe's accession to the EU, it is time to take stock of what these 'new Member States' have achieved inside their club.

Slovakia, Estonia and Lithuania have converged fastest. After four decades of Soviet domination, Central and Eastern Europe longed to catch up with the West. The economic trajectory of Slovakia, Estonia and Lithuania has been remarkable: in 1995, Slovakia was half, Estonia and Lithuania only one-third, as rich as the EU. By 2012, Slovakia had become three-quarters, Estonia and Lithuania 70%, as rich as the EU. Each followed the policy prescriptions of the 'Washington consensus': profound structural reforms, painful austerity and deleveraging during the economic crisis, a prudent fiscal policy. As a result, Slovakia and Estonia have introduced the Euro – Lithuania will do so in 2015. Each has returned to growth much faster than the rest of the EU.

Poland has been the most influential in foreign policy. Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania have each held the rotating EU Council Presidency for six months, but only Poland chalked up a notable success in foreign policy. It held a high-profile summit with the EU's 'Eastern partners' in 2011 and went on to mediate, with Germany and France, in the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. Its foreign policy clout derives from its size, pro-European electorate, enviable economic record during the economic crisis and active foreign policy towards Eastern Europe.

Outlook after 2014 EP elections. While Euroskepticism and populism are on the rise across the region, some CEE politicians will rise to the top of international politics in 2014. The so-called 'fringe parties' (the far-left, Euroskeptics and the far-right) make up only one-fifth of the current EP. In May 2014, they will likely pick up 30% of the EP's seats. In CEE, the fringe parties will obtain roughly one-quarter of the seats, with substantial variation among states: more than half the votes will go to populists and Euroskeptics in the Czech Republic and Latvia; nearly 40% in Poland; a quarter in Bulgaria; a sixth in Hungary. At the same time, several top politicians from the region could bag a top international post.

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