

Why Eastern European Conservatism Is Different

Eastern Europe is by far the most conservative region of the Western world. The Russian Federation has arguably the least liberal system of government in all of Europe, and the nations of the Visegrád Group—Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary—form a right-wing bloc within the European Union that resists the progressive agenda coming from Brussels.

From an American perspective, though, Eastern Europe is only “right wing” in terms of cultural values and national identity. When it comes to economic policy and the scope of government, Eastern European conservatives are far less devoted to free markets and limited governance than their Anglosphere counterparts. The truism that “right and left mean different things in Europe” generally holds, but is not a sufficient explanation. So why does the right wing in former Warsaw Pact nations fight to protect generous social programs along with Christianity, sovereignty, and national pride?

The basic distinction between American and Eastern European right-wingers lies in their different attitudes toward freedom. American conservatives prioritize the individual and oppose most government efforts to manage people’s property and livelihood—a natural fit for a nation relatively isolated from the world’s conflicts. But Russia, Poland, Hungary, and others have all at one point faced existential threats to their existence. Because of this, the right wing in these countries prioritizes collective self-determination, meaning freedom from foreign interference and other forces that threaten their nation’s ability to thrive on its own terms. When in power, Eastern European conservatives see themselves as representing the national interest and readily use government to advance this interest.

This distinction emerged in two waves. In the 1960s, social conservatives in America began allying with small-government advocates and free-market establishment Republicans, both of whom favored cutting regulations, lowering taxes, and ending the welfare state. Paleoconservatives joined the conservative coalition in the 1990s, and a fledgling nationalist movement emerged after 2016. But even they generally support limited government and free enterprise. By contrast, conservative parties in Eastern Europe only came into existence after the Soviet Union fell. They built their platforms on opposition to communism and appeals to Christian faith, tradition, and pre-communist history. Now they partner with non-ideological centrist populists and nation-first identitarians to form ruling coalitions. In small nations like Poland and Hungary with fewer competing electoral demographics to appease, most parties are comfortable with the idea that the government should take care of people.

However, these trends did not start with twentieth-century electoral politics. America is a young nation, but independent-minded Protestants, who left the Old World to escape persecution or seize new opportunities, primarily wrote the first hundred years of US history. By contrast, Orthodoxy and Catholicism in Eastern Europe are each more than a thousand years old. For the most part, Christian culture has endured in all four nations, through periods of expansion, conflict, and occupation. It continues to inform people's views on how they want to be governed to this day.

In Russia, Christianity is certainly a cultural force, but not to the extent that one might expect of the largest and most powerful Orthodox nation in the world. Just over [70 percent](#) of the population identify as Orthodox when surveyed, but a [2012 study](#) revealed that only about 40 percent are devout in their faith, while 25 percent believe in God but do not practice a specific religion. In Russia, this usually means celebrating major Orthodox holidays and attending church a few times a

year. Many Russians embrace Christian-derived traditional values, but less so Christianity itself; 70 years of communist rule did much to separate Russians from their ancestral faith. The Soviet period also normalized several completely left-wing tendencies in an otherwise conservative society: for example, Russia has one of the [highest abortion rates](#) in the world because the Soviet system treated the procedure as the go-to form of birth control.

Some holdovers of socialism are more benign, and even consistent with European right-wing principles of governance. Russia has universal government healthcare, though about one-third of employers offer [private healthcare plans](#) and the demand for [private individual coverage](#) is growing. Soviet-derived public education continues to produce satisfactory results: Russia has the [twelfth-best](#) education system in the world. Many Russians have benefited from pro-natal incentives, which include monthly child support payments and a large one-time handout to women who have a second child. When the government introduced these in 2007, Russia's birthrate shot up to its [highest point](#) since the collapse of the USSR, though total population has not grown.

Attributing these policies to "right-wingers" or any other faction is difficult in a de facto one-party state, where the government may listen to pressure groups but cracks down on overly disruptive activists on the left and right alike. The ruling United Russia party is vaguely conservative, as is the average Russian, who is resistant to change but not proactive in asserting traditional values. Most Russians also generally support government-funded social programs as long as they appear to benefit them.

In Eastern Europe proper, the picture is different. Conservative and right-wing parties compete in the electoral system and form effective ruling coalitions. Poland, the Visegrád Group's largest and most populous member nation, has seen the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party steadily gain

support since it took power in 2015. The party [aligns itself](#) with the church, [resolutely opposes](#) the EU's third-world migrant quotas, and [pushes back](#) against US-led pressure campaigns to promote homosexuality. In a 90-percent Catholic nation, these policies have earned Law and Justice decisive pluralities in both the lower Sejm and upper Senate houses of parliament, and near outright majorities in regional assemblies and Poland's European Parliament delegation.

As in Russia, most Poles treat government services as a given. The Polish healthcare system is functional enough for most people: average life expectancy in Poland is [77 years](#), just below the United States' [78 years](#). The education system is ranked as the [fifth-best](#) in Europe. Poland has its own [generous pro-natal policy](#) to combat demographic decline and loss of human capital due to emigration, though just as in Russia, birthrates remain level. This does not deter proponents, who cite the relief to existing families and the increased consumer spending the child payments have brought. Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński's case for the policy succinctly describes Polish conservatives' view of government intervention and individual liberty: at a PiS party convention in 2017, he told supporters that "a person whose pockets are empty isn't free."

In Hungary, where the modern-day Visegrád Group was formed, the right is arguably even more socially conservative and economically nationalist than in Poland. This has benefited the ruling Fidesz party, which maintains super-majorities in the national and county assemblies, as well as in Hungary's European Parliament delegation. Along with robust public education programs and a healthcare system that makes Hungary a [top destination](#) for medical tourism in Europe, the government offers [large tax breaks](#) to families—and [loans to married couples](#) that are forgiven if they have three or more children. Family Minister Katalin Novák, herself a mother of three, announced in June 2020 that [birth rates had](#)

[increased](#) by around 5 percent since the previous year, though the policy's long-term effects remain to be seen.

The Eastern European right has generally succeeded in holding off the progressive cultural trends that dominate politics on the rest of the continent, as well as in the United States—at least for now. Economic collectivism in Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere should be understood not as a sign of authoritarianism, but instead as a defense of freedom as Eastern Europeans define it—specifically, the freedom for nations to be self-sufficient and independent. To many people in Russia and the Visegrád nations, the more free-market and liberal parts of the Western world are not currently a compelling example, and they do not want to go down the same path. They believe that American-style globalized capitalism will come with ideological strings attached, and they're not entirely wrong. In the absence of good options, they turn to pro-government patriotic conservatives for solutions.

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