GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Ghosts from the Riverbed: Europe's New Divides

Article by Vesna Goldsworthy
October 6, 2026

As the fever dream of this summer's scorching heat slowly subsides, nightmares from Europe's past are lingering in waking life in the form of warships, bombs, and catapult stones. Still, a shared understanding of history remains elusive despite physical evidence of all that befell the continent. And while some of the walls that separated us have crumbled, new divides are forming in front of our very eyes.

London's unforgiving, sun-bleached summer of 2026 has a dystopian, hallucinatory quality. As I write this, the city has not seen proper rain in 45 days. We swelter, unused to high temperatures. Air-conditioning in private homes is rare. People are suffering from sleep deprivation. Underground trains and buses are like ovens. A hosepipe ban has turned English lawns into dusty deserts of parched yellow and trees are shedding leaves to survive. We watch in horror as wildfires devour vast areas of France and seemingly everywhere else further south. Reports suggest that almost half a million hectares of European land have been consumed by flames so far this year.

Email exchanges with friends across the European continent frequently start and end with the weather. A distinguished university professor in Timișoara, in Romania, reports living as if under house arrest, with temperatures rising into the 40s. "In the end we will probably have a repeat of the 1980s," she writes, "when, albeit for different reasons, there were constant power and running water cuts". Our conversations about climate are increasingly coloured by a fatalism which seems, in many ways, more difficult to argue against than climate denial.

Skeletons of the past

Meanwhile, the falling waters of the Danube, Europe's great East-West thoroughfare, are peeling back layers of European history in a way which makes the physical vulnerability of our present difficult to separate from the traumas of our past. In Hungary, the riverbed has surrendered centuries-old catapult stones and a live wartime bomb, causing a temporary bridge closure in Budapest. Further downstream, the wreck of a cargo ship materialised in Croatia, and the ancient remains of a woolly mammoth surfaced in Bulgaria. Most striking of all, a fleet of World War II German warships emerged from the river's former depths in Prahovo, Serbia. Skeletons of the European past have never seemed so close to the surface.

Elsewhere, history is yielding its secrets through deliberate excavations. Joint archaeological teams from Poland and Ukraine are searching for the mass graves of up to 100,000 Poles murdered by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the Volyn Oblast during the last two years of the Second World War. This vast project is, in some ways, a belated example of the type examined by Katherine Verdery in her seminal book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (1999).

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The people of Eastern Europe, Verdery argued, suffered “cosmic disorientation” after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In order to re-anchor their sense of history, they turned to exhuming, moving, and reburying historical figures and national heroes, as well as counting victims of mass executions in an effort to reframe versions of the past they had lived with since the end of the Second World War. The materiality of dead bodies seemed to promise an “objective truth” in contrast to narratives coloured by communist ideology.

Ukraine may be spurred to cooperate with Poland by its desire to join the European Union, but “objective truth” requires more than a body count. Having witnessed perhaps the largest and certainly the most technologically advanced effort in human history, conducted on the territories of at least four of its successor states, and still ongoing, former Yugoslavia illustrates the limitations of such endeavours. Causes and effects of past events continue to be disputed to the extent that makes the idea of a shared, agreed version of history seem like a naïve dream. In some ways, the passage of time and the exigencies of economic survival, involving trade, shared infrastructure projects, or cross-border employment, have achieved more progress – however painfully slow – towards reconciliation than the activities of expensive and sometimes self-serving international bodies set up to forge it.

I am drawn to contested versions of history by the invitation to consider the current state of the East-West divide in Europe, and its transformations in the last 15 years. The evidence of this summer’s parched landscapes leads me to wonder if the North-South division is not already more critical. The seemingly unstoppable mass migration patterns are certainly speaking in its favour. Britain’s departure from the European Union in 2020 was largely driven by fears of uncontrolled immigration, yet when it comes to global movement, post-Brexit Britain and the rest of Europe continue to share the same problems. Desperate people walking and sailing into Europe from Sub-Saharan Africa or Taliban-ruled Afghanistan do not worry if their biometric passports are EES or ETA compliant.

Europe “as it used to be”

In an episode from the 2010 UK election campaign, broadcast live on British television, 65-year-old lifelong Labour supporter Gillian Duffy challenged the then prime minister Gordon Brown by highlighting immigration issues. “But all these Eastern Europeans that are coming in, where are they flocking from?” she asked. Brown offered a predictably anodyne public response. Some moments later, being driven away and forgetting that his microphone was still on, he commented to his aide that the conversation was a disaster and that Duffy was “just a sort of bigoted woman”.

The comment derailed Brown’s campaign by its suggestion of political arrogance, yet the so-called “Bigotgate”, highly damaging at the time, seems almost quaint today. Even the language used to depict the threat of immigration belongs to a simpler world. Instead of “flocking”, with its suggestion of birds that can potentially fly away as easily as they arrived, we now hear threats of biblical deluge, conquest and population replacement. The most prejudiced Brexiteers sometimes hint at nostalgia for the Polish plumbers of yesteryear and even a degree of envy for those plumbers’ as yet unspoiled homeland.

It might seem paradoxical that Poland, historically one of Europe’s most significant exporters of labour, is

also one of the most vocal opponents of southern migration. It is not without its support in western social media, where countries such as Poland, Hungary, or the Baltic republics are often mentioned not as “New Eastern Europe” but as Europe “as it used to be”, evoking postcard images tinged with the sepia tones of false memory. Such nostalgia is often a conservative fantasy, a coping mechanism for the West’s own identity crisis and its diminishing social cohesion.

In 2022, I published *Iron Curtain*, a novel set in the mid-1980s, the dog days of communism. Its story linked an unnamed Soviet satellite state with Britain in the grips of its yuppie revolution under its Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher. I had lived through the era but the experience of recreating it on the page seemed at times as challenging as researching the French Revolution. In 1986, I arrived in London from socialist Yugoslavia, a country enjoying freedoms unimaginable further east and officially not behind the Iron Curtain. As a student I had criss-crossed Europe by train. Britain was less easily accessible. Airplane tickets were expensive and a single telephone call from London to my parents in Belgrade cost more than my current monthly mobile phone bill. We were so paralysed by the need to be succinct that our conversation often consisted of the same basic phrases, reassuring each other that everything was all right. Our steadiest link consisted of weekly letters: one means of communicating which has since become both more expensive and more unreliable.

What resurfaced with those memories, more than almost anything else, is a sense of the sheer physical distance between East and West, a void that is no longer there. My British students hop on an airplane to spend a weekend in Riga or Budapest with less forethought than, at their age, I gave to spending 48 hours in my grandparents’ village a hundred kilometres south of Belgrade. Could the distinction between East and West still be relevant, on either side of wherever that divide might lie now, when a whole generation of what would have been East Europeans has grown up benefiting from freedom of movement, buttressed by budget flights and a shared digital space?

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Recycled concepts

Indeed, it sometimes seems that the East now has an advantage even beyond the conservative longing for an impossible return to safe, homogenous, and traditional societies. In *The Historical Novel* (1937), György Lukács described how an awareness of Europe was formed by the mass marches of the Napoleonic Wars, taking millions of people for the first time across their country’s border. Something similar happened at the beginning of this century, now in a benign context, when the borders of Western Europe opened to labourers from the East.

As reverse brain drain started to occur more recently, the West to East knowledge transfer brought with it an economic and digital boom in cities as far apart as Tallinn, Warsaw, and Cluj. It would appear that any notion of a simple binary opposition pitching a rich, democratic West against an impoverished East – unfree until 1989, then for many years lagging behind – has been replaced by a more complex, fluid set of ideas and values.

The concepts of East and West are still recycled, even if the West is no longer so sure of its progressive ideas; and the East is more ready to resist what it sees as western cultural impositions; and even if we

are no longer so certain where exactly we are talking about when we talk about East and West. Again, it is in former Yugoslavia, once perceived as “the West in the East”, that the West continues to assert its superiority most confidently, even running Bosnia like an EU colony through its own appointed viceroy. The notion of “the Western Balkans”, now a common reference for those regional states still not in the EU, is part consolation prize, part insult. It is an oxymoronic designation devised by outsiders, and it makes no geographic sense other than to define a hole in Europe’s Balkan bagel.

Viewed from the West, this area is still routinely described in tones that are more redolent of Bismarck than of contemporary European debate. This is illustrated by a quote from a recent report published by the Robert Schuman Foundation: “In the Balkans, borders, regimes, dynasties, alliances and even the names of states are constantly changing … It is clear that today, Balkans or not, the region wants to be European. Yet will all these countries, having barely regained their sovereignty, easily accept Community rules which by definition imply limits to national sovereignty? Will the Community model suit them? After centuries of dependence, will they be able to tolerate a new form of federalism? And finally, can the European Union overcome *the Balkan curse*?”

There is profound irony in the fact that the report’s authors, the French centre-right politicians Jean Bizet and Fabrice Hugot, worry about the Balkan ability to accept limits to national sovereignty just at the moment when Western European nations are putting forward greater demands for sovereign border controls. To borrow their gothic turn of phrase, the *curse* may be European and not Balkan.

However, and whenever, the war in Ukraine ends, that new demarcation – between what Putin calls the ‘collective West’ and the shrunken, Russia-dominated East – seems likely to remain.

A new West?

Of course, it is impossible to discuss shifts in mutual perceptions between East and West while ignoring the fact that there is war in the East. I have argued elsewhere that the Iron Curtain was removed in 1989 only to divide Europe again in February 2022, this time several hundred miles further east from the Szczecin-Trieste line made famous by Churchill’s speech. However, and whenever, the war in Ukraine ends, that new demarcation – between what Putin calls the “collective West” and the shrunken, Russia-dominated East – seems likely to remain.

As we look at the parched earth of the South and the newly dug trenches of the East, yet another difference of perspective emerges from the geopolitical vice. It is the contrast between those countries in the European Union with direct memories of the Soviet Union and all too concrete fears of Russia, and those countries further West, with populations much more concerned with Israel and Palestine than they are with Ukraine. Their peoples are more influenced by the post-colonial priorities of the Global South than by fears of Moscow. To them, Gaza seems closer than Kyiv. It is easier, in light of such a divergent sense of existential threat, to pinpoint the “New East” than it is to locate the “New West”.

This article first appeared in New Eastern Europe*. It is republished here with permission.*



Vesna Goldsworthy is a novelist, memoirist and poet with many years' experience in teaching creative writing and English literature at the University of Exeter. Her most recent critically acclaimed novel, *Iron Curtain* (2022), was one of the *New Yorker Best Books* of 2023

Published October 6, 2026
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/ghosts-from-the-riverbed-europes-new-divides/

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