

Is East-Central Europe Backsliding?

THE STRANGE DEATH OF THE LIBERAL CONSENSUS

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The liberal era that began in Central Europe in 1989 has come to an end. Populism and illiberalism are tearing the region apart. Hungary is in a state of a “cold civil war” between the manipulative postcommunist government (one that admitted to lying “in the morning, in the evening, and at night”) and the populist anticommunist opposition, which keeps its doors open to the extreme right. The Slovak government is a strange coalition of Robert Fico’s soft populists, Ján Slota’s hard nationalists, and Vladimír Mečiar’s Meciarists—an unimpressive brew of nationalism, provincialism, and welfarism. In the Czech Republic there is no major problem with the government—the only problem is that for almost seven months the country’s political parties failed to form a government. In Romania the president and the parliamentary majority are engaged in an open war, with secret-police files from the communist era and corruption files from the postcommunist era the weapons of choice. In Bulgaria extreme nationalism is surging, but the mainstream parties and governmental institutions are accommodating it instead of fighting it.

The capital of Central European illiberalism today, however, is Poland. It is currently ruled by a coalition of three parties: the right-wing populists of the post-Solidarity Law and Justice party; the postcommunist provincial troublemakers of the Self-Defense Party; and the heirs of the pre-World War II chauvinist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic groups that form the League of Polish Families. This coalition has been characterized by its most outspoken critic, editor and former dissident Adam Michnik, as employing a peculiar mix of the conservative rhetoric of George W. Bush and the authoritarian political practice of Vladimir Putin.¹

Throughout the region, publics mistrust politicians and political par-

ties. The political class is viewed as corrupt and self-interested. Dissatisfaction with democracy is growing. According to the global survey Voice of the People 2006, Central Europe, contrary to all expectations, is the region of the world where citizens are most skeptical about the merits of democracy.² The picture is bleak and depressing. The liberal parties founded by former dissidents have been marginalized,³ the liberal language of rights is exhausted, and centrism and liberalism are under attack both as philosophy and as political practice. The new hard reality in Central Europe is political polarization, a rejection of consensual politics, and the rise of populism.

The growing tensions between democracy and liberalism, the rise of “organized intolerance,” increasing demands for direct democracy, and the proliferation of charismatic leaders capable of mobilizing public anger make it almost impossible to avoid drawing parallels between the current political turmoil in Central Europe and the crisis of democracy in Europe between the world wars. The specter of populism is haunting Central Europe, but there is little agreement about the meaning of the term “populism”: Who are the populists? What does populism represent? How dangerous is it? What are the sources of the current populist wave? What should be done about it?

It is above all the latest political developments in Poland that have called up memories of the collapse of democracy in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Poland has become the symbol of the new political *Zeitgeist*. Freedom House’s new report *Nations in Transit 2007* stresses the Polish government’s attacks on the independent judiciary and the independent Central Bank and its violation of the rights of sexual minorities.⁴ Michnik sets forth the indictment as follows:

[I]n the ministries and state institutions, numerous civil servants have been summarily replaced by unqualified but loyal newcomers. The independence of the mass media—especially of public radio and television—was curtailed by changes in personnel instigated by the government and by pressures to control the content of what was published and broadcast. The Kaczyński administration’s efforts to centralize power have limited both the activities of the independent groups that form civil society and the autonomy of local and regional government. The everyday language of politics has become one of confrontation, recrimination, and accusations.⁵

The public atmosphere in Poland perfectly fits what American historian Richard Hofstadter defined as the “paranoid style in politics.” The paranoid style sees evidence everywhere of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine “our way of life.”

According to the current Polish government, ex-communists and their liberal allies had succeeded in creating a public atmosphere in which Catholicism was equated with clericalism; holding to tradition and cultural

identity was equated with ignorance; and the word “patriotism” was deleted from the national vocabulary. The liberal hegemony is blamed for destroying the moral community created in the heroic days of Solidarity and for legitimizing the economic sway of the former communist elites. The Kaczyński brothers frame the political conflict in Poland these days as a clash between their new Fourth Republic and the Third Republic that prevailed during the years of transition (1989–2005). It should not come as a surprise that the issue of lustration has emerged as the symbol of contestation between the Liberals’ Third Republic and the Kaczyńskis’ Fourth Republic. Liberals insist on individual responsibility for the wrongdoings of the communist period. They legitimately fear that the Kaczyńskis’ version of lustration violates the rights of citizens, and the Constitutional Tribunal has affirmed their view. The populists appeal not to the rights of individuals but to the rights of the nation. The government is prepared to sacrifice the rights of individuals in order to restore society’s sense of historical justice.

In the eyes of the postcommunist liberals, the populist right has acquired the features of what Umberto Eco calls “eternal fascism.”⁶ The main characteristics of this “ur-fascism” are the cult of tradition and the rejection of modernization; irrationalism and anti-intellectualism; an appeal to the frustrated middle class; an obsession with conspiracy and anti-Semitism; and, of course, fierce antipluralism and antiliberalism. The erratic and confrontational behavior of the Polish government during the negotiations of the EU’s new “reform treaty” in June 2007 contributed to the popularity of the “Weimar interpretation” of the crisis in Central Europe.

But there is a serious problem with this interpretation. While it may do a good job of illuminating the confusion and despair of the liberal elites, it fails to describe the actual state of affairs. In present-day Central Europe, unlike in Europe in the 1930s, there is no ideological alternative to democracy. The economies of the countries in the region are not stagnating but booming. Standards of living are rising and unemployment is declining. The membership of the Central European countries in the EU and NATO provides a safeguard for democracy and liberal institutions. The streets of Budapest and Warsaw today are flooded not by ruthless paramilitary formations in search of a final solution, but by restless consumers in search of a final sale.

The Central European paradox is that the rise of populism is an outcome not of the failures but of the successes of postcommunist liberalism. David Ost explains the paradox as follows: “[B]y presenting their policies not so much as ‘good’ ones but as ‘necessary’ ones, not as ‘desirable’ but as ‘rational,’ liberals left their supporters no acceptable way to protest or express dissatisfaction.”⁷ The transition period was marked by excessive elite control over political processes and by a fear of mass politics. The accession of the Central European countries to the EU

virtually institutionalized elite hegemony over the democratic process. Parliament lost its function as a place where major political debates take place and was reduced to an institution preoccupied with adopting the EU's *acquis communautaire*. Ordinary citizens experienced transitional democracies as regimes where voters could change governments but could not change policies. As the pop group Maxim + SKIN sings: "We don't have a choice but we still have a voice."

The Fallacy of Anti-Populism

In the current Central European debate, "populism" usually refers either to emotional, simplistic, and manipulative discourse directed at the "gut feelings" of the people or to opportunistic policies aimed at "buying" the support of the people. But is appealing to the passions of the people supposed to be forbidden in democratic politics? And who decides which policies are "populist" and which are "sound"? As Ralf Dahrendorf has noted, "one man's populism is another's democracy, and vice versa."⁸

Respected political scientist Philippe Schmitter (neither Pole nor populist) insists that the rise of populist parties can have a positive impact on the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.⁹ He acknowledges the downside of populist parties: They undermine existing party loyalties and stable choices between competing partisan programs, without replacing them with alternative ones; they recruit ill-informed persons who do not have consistent preferences and who seek "emotional" rather than programmatic satisfactions from politics; and they raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled. But at the same time, Schmitter argues, populist parties deconsolidate sclerotic partisan loyalties and dissolve and open up collusive party systems; they recruit persons who have previously been apathetic and passive citizens and mobilize them to participate in the electoral process. By raising and combining disparate or ignored political issues, populist parties encourage the articulation of suppressed cleavages and demands. They challenge "accepted" external constraints and call into question existing and often exploitative dependencies upon foreign powers.

The recent populist experiences of Slovakia or Bulgaria confirm Schmitter's more balanced and benign view of the impact of populist parties on the democratic system. The coming to power of Fico's government has resulted not in the breakdown of democracy but in increased trust in institutions and in the democratic process as a whole. While only one in five citizens trusted the previous government of Mikuláš Dzurinda, every second Slovak trusts Robert Fico's populist government. Trust in Parliament has also increased. The same could be said about the victory of former king Simeon's movement in Bulgaria. When the ex-king won his electoral landslide in 2001 and formed a govern-

ment, it was feared that his victory represented the end of party politics and a rupture with the politics of democratic reform. All these predictions turned out to be dead wrong. At the end of the day, the ex-king's government contributed to the success of the reform process and to the consolidation of Bulgarian democracy. In other words, populism has distinctive virtues as well as vices, and it is by no means evident that the latter always prevail. Populism is antiliberal but it is not antidemocratic. It gives voice to the losers of the reform process. To paraphrase what James Madison said about factions in *Federalist* 10, any effort to exclude populists from competition would be worse than the damage that they might cause.

So, it is fair to say that what we face in Central and Eastern Europe is not a crisis of democracy but a profound transformation of democratic regimes as a result of the end of the transition. It is antagonism toward the politics of the transition period—what we may call “really existing liberalism”—rather than toward liberal ideology that is driving the current revolt against liberalism in the region.

In historical perspective, the transition marked the victory of the democratic revolution. Postcommunist societies succeeded in peacefully transforming the communist system, building democratic and market institutions, producing economic growth, and, finally, in becoming part of the European Union. At the same time, the transition led to rapid social stratification that painfully hurt many while it privileged a few. Many lives were destroyed and many hopes betrayed during the time of transition. As David Ost notes, “by the late 1990s, the typical Polish suicide victim was not a teenager in an existential crisis but a married man in his early forties living in one of the myriad small towns and villages” where the bankruptcies of farms and state firms “combined with the collapse of the old welfare state to produce a particularly searing kind of despair.”¹⁰ The fact that the major winners of the transition were the educated and well-connected members of the old *nomenklatura* did not enhance the moral acceptance of the transition. The original sin of the postcommunist democracies is that they came into being not as an outcome of the triumph of egalitarianism but as a victory of an anti-egalitarian consensus uniting the communist elite and the anticommunist counterelite. Ex-communists were anti-egalitarian because of their interests. Liberals were anti-egalitarian because of their ideology.

The impact of EU accession on the consolidation of postcommunist democracies was more ambiguous than some of its advocates are ready to admit. The European Union played a key role in securing policy consensus and improving the quality of institutional performance, as well as in strengthening local democracy and empowering liberal institutions such as the courts and independent central banks. At the same time, however, the European Union and the external constraints that it imposed on the accession countries contributed to the perception of the transition

regimes as “democracies without choices,” and thus fueled the current backlash against consensual politics.

Thinking 1968

There is another analogy that illuminates the recent events in Central Europe better than that of the interwar European democracies. It is West Germany in 1968 rather than Weimar Germany in 1933 that offers the key to understanding the current crisis. Today, as in 1968, the crisis came after two decades of successful economic recovery and a period of amnesia about the past. The turmoil was unexpected and frightening. The crisis of democracy in 1968 was rooted not in the failure of democratic institutions but in the success of the postwar West German project of modernization and democratization. Then, as today, there was a talk about the hollowness of democratic institutions and the need for a moral revolution. In Germany then, as in Poland now, there were appeals for a “new republic” and a rejection of the politics of soulless pragmatism. Then, as now, there was a major transformation in the cultural and geopolitical context. The word “populism” was in the air, and people demanded more direct democracy.

Here, however, the similarities end. What is different about the current “populist revolution” is that it is shaped by conservative sensibilities. The new self-proclaimed “revolutionaries” in Central Europe fear not the authoritarianism of the state but the excesses of postmodern culture and the collapse of traditional values. They are nostalgic and not utopian, defensive and not visionary. In 1968, the spirit of the times was individualistic, emancipatory, and libertarian. That is not the case today.

Now, unlike then, the challenge to the system is coming not from the left but from the right, and the new dream is not global solidarity but national exceptionalism. The populists of 1968 were “educationalists”: They wanted to empower the people as they believed the people should be. The populists of today want power for the people as it is. The revolutionaries of 1968 had a passion for “the other,” for those who are not like us. The populists of today have a passion for their own community, for those who are just like us. In a sense the populist revolution that we are witnessing in Central Europe today is a revolt against the values, sensibilities, symbols, and elites of 1968. In the modern age, nothing is more revolutionary than what only yesterday seemed the height of reaction.

Thinking in terms of 1968 tempts us to view the current crisis of liberalism in Central Europe not as a “particular” crisis of postcommunist democracies, but as one aspect of the transformation of democracy in the European Union as a whole. The heart of the current crisis is *not* a clash of principles that pits democratic majoritarianism as embodied by the populists against liberal constitutionalism as defended by the liberals. The heart of the conflict is rather the clash between the liberal rationalism embodied by EU institutions and the populist revolt against

the unaccountability of the elites. Liberal elites fear that modern societies are becoming ungovernable. Populists fear that modern elites have become totally unaccountable. Both fears are legitimate.

The rise of populist parties as a rule invites psychological or even psychoanalytical interpretations. Commentators consciously or unconsciously are tempted to analyze populism in terms of “the return of the repressed,” “traumas,” “frustrations,” and “status anxieties.” But the psychological fashion in interpretations of populism is misleading. What we are witnessing today is not pathology but a profound transformation in the nature of Europe’s liberal democracies. It is the very structure of contemporary democracy that is at issue, rather than a particular malfunction of an otherwise workable model.

The processes of European integration and globalization have profoundly changed the essence of the political in Europe. The Cold War-era liberal democracies of Western Europe, organized around the antagonism between left and right, between labor and capital, can no longer serve as a model for Central and Eastern Europe. In the new environment of a common European market and global economic competition, decision making on economic policy has practically been excluded from the realm of electoral politics. Despite all the populist rhetoric in Central and Eastern Europe, there is very little in the way of populist policies, especially when it comes to the economy. Even though populist leaders blame neoliberal policies for the suffering of the people, they do not seem eager to change those policies. The economic approach of the populist governments in Poland or Slovakia (for the moment, at least) does not differ substantially from the policies of their liberal predecessors.

The decline of the welfare state has resulted in the disappearance of the liberal democracies as we knew them. Sociologist David Ost has argued that the emerging class conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe became articulated as conflicts not about interests but about identity, thus fostering an illiberal political culture and the triumph of populist parties.¹¹ In order to prevent anticapitalist mobilization, liberals successfully excluded anticapitalist discourse, but in doing so they opened up space for political mobilization around symbolic and identity issues, thus creating the conditions for their own destruction. The priority given to building capitalism over building democracy is at the heart of the current rise of democratic illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe. The more rational economic policies have become, the more irrational electoral politics has grown. The *de facto* exclusion of economic policy from the democratic process, combined with the revolution in media and entertainment, eroded the rationalist foundations of liberal policies.

The death of the grand ideological narratives and the hegemony of “third way” centrism have profoundly transformed contemporary democratic politics. Elections no longer offer a grand choice between competing worldviews; instead they more and more take the form of referenda on the elites—the

“ritual killing” of the governments in power. Scandals have played a central role in this transformation of the political. As Pierre Rosanvallon has put it:

The function of opposition is framed more and more often in terms of indictment (on the model of the great English political trials of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), eclipsing a vision of politics as the rivalry among different programs. The figure of the citizen as a voter is today more and more overtaken by the image of the citizen as juror.¹²

The populists’ obsession with corruption is the most powerful expression of this new understanding of the meaning of politics. The new populist majorities perceive elections not as an opportunity to choose between policy options but as a revolt against privileged minorities—in the case of Central Europe, corrupted elites and morally corrupting “others” such as ethnic or sexual minorities.

Populism is no longer merely a feature of certain parties or other political actors. It is the new condition of the political in Europe. The result is a brand of politics where the main structural conflict is not between left and right or between reformers and conservatives. The real clash is between elites that are becoming ever more suspicious of democracy and angry publics that are becoming ever more hostile to liberalism.

NOTES

1. Adam Michnik, “The Polish Witch-Hunt,” *New York Review of Books*, 28 June 2007.

2. Leger Marketing, *Voice of the People 2006: What the World Thinks on Today’s Global Issues* (Montreal: Transcontinental, 2006).

3. The Freedom Union in Poland, the Alliance of Free Democrats in Hungary, and the Union of Democratic Forces in Bulgaria.

4. Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2007: Governance Crisis in Central Europe amid Intensifying Repression in Russia and CIS* (New York: Freedom House, 2007).

5. Adam Michnik, “The Polish Witch-Hunt.”

6. Umberto Eco, *Five Moral Pieces* (New York: Harcourt, 2001).

7. David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 95.

8. Ralf Dahrendorf, “Acht Anmerkungen zum Populismus,” *Transit–Europäische Revue* 25 (2003): 156.

9. Philippe C. Schmitter, “A Balance Sheet of the Vices and Virtues of Populisms,” paper prepared for “The Challenge of the New Populism” conference, 10–11 May 2006, Sofia, Bulgaria.

10. David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*, 17.

11. David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*.

12. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 244.