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Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution  
The Long Road to Democratic Decline  
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In 1991, when the West was busy celebrating its victory in the Cold War and the apparent spread of liberal democracy to all corners of the world, the political scientist Samuel Huntington issued a warning against excessive optimism. In an [article for the \*Journal of Democracy\*](#) [2] titled “Democracy’s Third Wave,” Huntington pointed out that the two previous waves of democratization, from the 1820s to the 1920s and from 1945 to the 1960s, had been followed by “reverse waves,” in which “democratic systems were replaced . . . by historically new forms of authoritarian rule.” A third reverse wave was possible, he suggested, if new authoritarian great powers could demonstrate the continued viability of [nondemocratic rule](#) [3] or “if people around the world come to see the United States,” long a beacon of democracy, “as a fading power beset by political stagnation, economic inefficiency, and social chaos.”

Huntington died in 2008, but had he lived, even he would probably have been surprised to see that liberal democracy is now under threat not only in countries that went through democratic transitions in recent decades, such as Brazil and Turkey, but also in the West’s most established democracies. Authoritarianism, meanwhile, has reemerged in Russia and been strengthened in China, and foreign adventurism and domestic political polarization have dramatically damaged the United States’ global influence and prestige.

Perhaps the most alarming development has been the [change of heart in eastern Europe](#) [4]. Two of the region’s poster children for postcommunist democratization, Hungary and Poland, have seen conservative populists win sweeping electoral victories while demonizing the political opposition, scapegoating minorities, and undermining liberal checks and balances. Other countries in the region, including the Czech Republic and Romania, seem poised to follow. In a speech in 2014, one of the new populists, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, outlined his position on liberalism: “A democracy is not necessarily liberal. Just because something is not liberal, it still can be a democracy.” To maintain global competitiveness, he went on to say, “we have to abandon liberal methods and principles of organizing a society.” Although Orbán governs a small country, the movement he represents is of global importance. In the West, where the will of the people remains the main source of political legitimacy, his style of illiberal democracy is likely to be the major alternative to liberalism in the coming decades.

Why has democracy declared war on liberalism most openly in eastern Europe? The answer lies in the peculiar nature of the revolutions of 1989, when the states of eastern Europe freed themselves from the Soviet empire. Unlike previous revolutions, the ones in 1989 were concerned not with utopia but with the idea of normality—that is, the revolutionaries expressed a desire to lead the type of normal life already available to people in western Europe. Once the Berlin Wall fell, the most educated and liberal eastern Europeans became the first to leave their countries, provoking major demographic and identity crises in the region. And as the domestic constituencies for liberal democracy immigrated to the West, international actors such as the EU and the United States became the face of liberalism in eastern Europe, just as their own influence was waning. This set the stage for the nationalist revolt against liberalism seizing the region today.

## PEOPLE POWER

Many have found the rise of eastern European populism difficult to explain. After Poland's populist Law and Justice party (known by its Polish abbreviation, PiS) won a parliamentary majority in 2015, Adam Michnik, one of the country's liberal icons, lamented, "Sometimes a beautiful woman loses her mind and goes to bed with a bastard." Populist victories, however, are not a mystifying one-off but a conscious and repeated choice: the right-wing populist party Fidesz has won two consecutive parliamentary elections in Hungary, and in opinion polls, PiS maintains a towering <sup>[5]</sup>lead over its rivals <sup>[5]</sup>. Eastern Europe seems intent on marrying the bastard.

Some populist successes can be attributed to economic troubles: Orban was elected in 2010, after Hungary's economy had shrunk by 6.6 percent in 2009. But similar troubles cannot explain why the Czech Republic, which enjoys one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe, voted for a slew of populist parties in last year's parliamentary elections, or why intolerance is on rise in economically successful Slovakia. Poland is the most puzzling case. The country had the fastest-growing economy in Europe between 2007 and 2017, and it has seen social mobility improve in recent years. Research by the Polish sociologist Maciej Gdula has shown that Poles' political attitudes do not depend on whether they individually benefited from the postcommunist transition. The ruling party's base includes many who are satisfied with their lives and have shared in their country's prosperity.

The details of eastern Europe's populist turn vary from country to country, as do the character and policies of individual populist governments. In Hungary, Fidesz has used its constitutional majority to rewrite the rules of the game <sup>[6]</sup>: Orban's tinkering with the country's electoral system has turned his "plurality to a supermajority," in the words of the sociologist Kim Lane Scheppele. Corruption, moreover, is pervasive. In a March 2017 article <sup>[7]</sup> for *The Atlantic*, the writer David Frum quoted an anonymous observer who said of Fidesz's system: "The benefit of controlling a modern state is less the power to persecute the innocent, more the power to protect the guilty."

Poland's government has also sought to dismantle checks and balances, especially through its changes to the constitutional court. In contrast to the Hungarian government, however, it is basically clean when it comes to corruption. Its policies are centered less on controlling the economy or creating a loyal middle class and more on the moral reeducation of the nation. The Polish government has tried to rewrite history, most notably

through a recent law making it illegal to blame Poland for the Holocaust. In the Czech Republic, meanwhile, Prime Minister Andrej Babis led his party to victory last year by promising to run the state like a company.

Yet beneath these differences lie telling commonalities. Across eastern Europe, a new illiberal consensus is emerging, marked by xenophobic nationalism and supported, somewhat unexpectedly, by young people who came of age after the demise of communism. If the liberals who dominated in the 1990s were preoccupied with the rights of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, this new consensus is about the rights of the majority.

Wherever they take power, conservative populists use the government to deepen cultural and political polarization and champion what the American historian Richard Hofstadter termed “the paranoid style” in politics. This style traffics heavily in conspiracy theories, such as the belief, shared by many PiS voters, that the 2010 plane crash that killed President Lech Kaczynski—the brother of the PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski—was the product of an assassination rather than an accident. This paranoia also surfaces in Fidesz’s assertions that Brussels, aided by the Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros, secretly plans to flood Hungary with migrants.

Eastern Europe’s populists also deploy a similar political vocabulary, casting themselves as the authentic voice of the nation against its internal and external enemies. As the political scientist Jan-Werner Müller has argued, “Populists claim that they and they alone represent the people,” a claim that is not empirical but “always distinctly moral.” Fidesz and PiS do not pretend to stand for all Hungarians or all Poles, but they do insist that they stand for all true Hungarians and all true Poles. They transform democracy from an instrument of inclusion into one of exclusion, delegitimizing nonmajoritarian institutions by casting them as obstacles to the will of the people.

Another common feature of eastern European populism is a Janus-faced attitude toward the EU. According to the latest Eurobarometer polls, eastern Europeans are among the most pro-EU publics on the continent, yet they vote for some of the most Euroskeptical governments. These governments, in turn, use Brussels as a rhetorical punching bag while benefiting from its financial largess. The Hungarian economy grew by 4.6 percent between 2006 and 2015, yet a study by KPMG and the Hungarian economic research firm GKI estimated that without EU funds, it would have shrunk by 1.8 percent. And Poland is the continent’s biggest recipient of money from the European Structural and Investment Funds, which promote economic development in the EU’s less developed countries.

Support for illiberal populism has been growing across the continent for years now, but understanding its outsize appeal in eastern Europe requires rethinking the history of the region in the decades since the end of communism. It is the legacy of the 1989 revolutions, combined with the more recent shocks delivered by the decline of U.S. power and the crisis of the EU, that set in motion the populist explosion of today.

## LIBERTY, FRATERNITY, NORMALITY

Although eastern European populism was already on the rise by the beginning of the current decade, the refugee crisis <sup>[8]</sup>of 2015–16 <sup>[8]</sup> made it the dominant political force in the region. Opinion polls indicate that the vast majority of eastern Europeans are wary of

migrants and refugees. A September 2017 study by Ipsos revealed that only five percent of Hungarians and 15 percent of Poles believe that immigration has had a positive impact on their country and that 67 percent of Hungarians and 51 percent of Poles think their countries' borders should be closed to refugees entirely.

During the refugee crisis, images of migrants streaming into Europe sparked a demographic panic across eastern Europe, where people began to imagine that their national cultures were under the threat of vanishing. The region today is made up of small, aging, ethnically homogeneous societies—for example, only 1.6 percent of those living in Poland were born outside the country, and only 0.1 percent are Muslim. In fact, cultural and ethnic diversity, rather than wealth, is the primary difference between eastern and western Europe today. Compare Austria and Hungary, neighboring countries of similar size that were once unified under the Habsburg empire. Foreign citizens make up a little under two percent of the Hungarian population; in Austria, they make up 15 percent. Only six percent of Hungarians are foreign-born, and these are overwhelmingly ethnic Hungarian immigrants from Romania. In Austria, the equivalent figure is 16 percent. In the eastern European political imagination, cultural and ethnic diversity are seen as an existential threat, and opposition to this threat forms the core of the new illiberalism.

Some of this fear of diversity may be rooted in historical traumas, such as the disintegration of the multicultural Habsburg empire after World War I and the Soviet occupation of eastern Europe after World War II. But the political shock of the refugee crisis cannot be explained by the region's history alone. Rather, eastern Europeans realized during the course of the refugee crisis that they were facing a new global revolution. This was not a revolution of the masses but one of migrants; it was inspired not by ideological visions of the future but by images of real life on the other side of a border. If globalization has made the world a village, it has also subjected it to the tyranny of global comparisons. These days, people in the poorer parts of the world rarely compare their lives with those of their neighbors; they compare them instead with those of the most prosperous inhabitants of the planet, whose wealth is on full display thanks to the global diffusion of communications technologies. The French liberal philosopher Raymond Aron was right when he observed, five decades ago, that “with humanity on the way to unification, inequality between peoples takes on the significance that inequality between classes once had.” If you are a poor person in Africa who seeks an economically secure life for your children, the best you can do for them is to make sure they are born in a rich country, such as Denmark, Germany, or Sweden—or, failing that, the Czech Republic or Poland. Change increasingly means changing your country, not your government. And eastern Europeans have felt threatened by this revolution.

The great irony is that although eastern Europe today is reacting with panic to mass migration, the revolutions of 1989 were the first in which the desire to exit one's country, rather than to gain a greater voice within it, was the primary agent of change. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many in the former communist bloc expressed their wish for change by immigrating to the West rather than staying home to participate in democratic politics. In 1989, eastern Europeans were not dreaming of a perfect world; they were dreaming of a normal life in a normal country. If there was a utopia shared by both the left and the right during the region's postcommunist transition, it was the utopia of normality. Experiments were forbidden. In 1990, Czech Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus (who later became prime minister and then president) said of finding a middle ground between capitalism and

socialism, “The third way is the fastest way to the Third World.” Eastern Europeans dreamed that European unification would proceed along the same lines as German reunification, and in the early 1990s, many Czechs, Hungarians, and Poles envied the East Germans, who were issued German passports overnight and could spend the deutsche mark immediately.

Revolutions as a rule cause major demographic disruptions. When the French Revolution broke out, many of its opponents ran away. When the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, millions of Russians fled. But in those cases, it was the defeated, the enemies of the revolution, who saw their futures as being outside their own country. After the 1989 revolutions, by contrast, it was those most eager to live in the West, those most impatient to see their countries change, who were the first to leave. For many liberal-minded eastern Europeans, a mistrust of nationalist loyalties and the prospect of joining the modern world made emigration a logical and legitimate choice.

As a result, the revolutions of 1989 had the perverse effect of accelerating population decline in the newly liberated countries of eastern Europe. From 1989 to 2017, Latvia lost 27 percent of its population, Lithuania 23 percent, and Bulgaria almost 21 percent. Hungary lost nearly three percent of its population in just the last ten years. And in 2016, around one million Poles were living in the United Kingdom alone. This emigration of the young and talented was occurring in countries that already had aging populations and low birthrates. Together, these trends set the stage for a demographic panic.

It is thus both emigration and the fear of immigration that best explain the rise of populism <sup>[9]</sup> in eastern Europe. The success of nationalist populism, which feeds off a sense that a country’s identity is under threat, is the outcome of the mass exodus of young people from the region combined with the prospect of large-scale immigration, which together set demographic alarm bells ringing. Moving to the West was equivalent to rising in social status, and as a result, the eastern Europeans who stayed in their own countries started feeling like losers who had been left behind. In countries where most young people dream of leaving, success back home is devalued.

In recent years, a rising desire for self-assertion has also caused eastern Europeans to chafe at taking orders from Brussels. Although during the 1990s, the region’s politicians, eager to join NATO and the EU, had been willing to follow the liberal playbook, today, they wish to assert their full rights as members of the European club. Eastern Europe’s integration into the EU mirrors at a national level the experience of integration familiar from the stories of immigrants around the world. First-generation immigrants wish to gain acceptance by internalizing the values of their host country; second-generation immigrants, born in the new country, fear being treated as second-class citizens and often rediscover an interest in the traditions and values of their parents’ culture. Something similar happened to eastern European societies after joining the EU. Many people in those countries used to view Brussels’ interference in their domestic politics as benevolent. Over time, they have started to see it as an intolerable affront to their nations’ sovereignty.

## THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS

The final ingredient in eastern Europe’s illiberal turn is the deep current of geopolitical insecurity that has always afflicted the region. In 1946, the Hungarian intellectual Istvan Bibó published a pamphlet called *The Misery of the Small States of Eastern Europe*. In it,

he argued that democracy in the region would always be held hostage to the lingering effects of historical traumas, most of them related to eastern European states' history of domination by outside powers. Poland, for instance, ceased to exist as an independent state following its partition by Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the late eighteenth century; Hungary, meanwhile, saw a nationalist revolution crushed in 1849, before losing more than two-thirds of its territory and one-half of its population in the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.

Not only did these historical traumas make eastern European societies fear and resent external powers; they also, Bibo argued, secured these countries in the belief that "the advance of freedom threatens the national cause." They have learned to be suspicious of any cosmopolitan ideology that crosses their borders, whether it be the universalism of the Catholic Church, the liberalism of the late Habsburg empire, or Marxist internationalism. The Czech writer and dissident Milan Kundera captured this sense of insecurity well when he defined a small nation as "one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment." A citizen of a large country takes his nation's survival for granted. "His anthems speak only of grandeur and eternity. The Polish anthem however, starts with the verse: 'Poland has not yet perished.'"

If one effect of eastern Europe's post-1989 emigration was to kick-start the demographic panic that would later take full form during the refugee crisis, another, equally important effect was to deprive countries in the region of the citizens who were most likely to become domestic defenders of liberal democracy. As a result, liberal democracy in eastern Europe came to rely more and more on the support of external actors such as the EU and the United States, which over time came to be seen as the real constraints on the power of majorities in the region. Bucharest's desire to join the EU, for instance, was primarily responsible for its decision to resolve a long-running dispute with Hungary about the rights of ethnic Hungarians in Romania. And the EU's eligibility rules, known as the Copenhagen criteria, make legal protections for minorities a precondition for membership in the union.

The central role of the EU and the United States in consolidating eastern Europe's liberal democracies meant that those democracies remained safe only so long as the dominance of Brussels and Washington in Europe was unquestioned. Yet over the last decade, the geopolitical <sup>[10]</sup>situation has changed <sup>[10]</sup>. The United States had already been hobbled by expensive foreign wars and the financial crisis before the election of Donald Trump as its president raised serious questions about Washington's commitment to its allies. In Europe, meanwhile, the consecutive shocks of the debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and Brexit have called the future of the EU itself into question. This came just as Russia, under the authoritarian government of President Vladimir Putin, was beginning to reassert itself as a regional power, seizing Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and backing a secessionist insurgency in the country's east.

Huntington predicted in 1991 that a strong, nondemocratic Russia would pose problems for the liberal democracies of eastern Europe, and the rise of Putin's Russia has in fact undermined them. For eastern European leaders such as Orban, already fed up with liberalism, Putin's combination of authoritarian rule and anti-Western ideology has served as a model to emulate. For many Poles, the return of the Russian threat was one more argument to vote for an illiberal government that could protect the nation. In other eastern

European countries, such as the Baltic states, Russia has simply acted as a spoiler by attempting to spread disinformation. Across the region, the return of geopolitical insecurity has contributed to the fading attractiveness of liberal democracy.

## AN ILLIBERAL EUROPE?

Eastern European populism is a recent phenomenon, but it has deep roots in the region's politics and is unlikely to go away anytime soon. "The worrying thing about Orbán's 'illiberal democracy,'" according to the Hungarian-born Austrian journalist Paul Lendvai, is that "its end cannot be foreseen." Indeed, illiberal democracy has become the new form of authoritarianism that Huntington warned about more than two decades ago. What makes it particularly dangerous is that it is an authoritarianism born within the framework of democracy itself.

The new populists are not fascists. They do not believe in the transformative power of violence, and they are not nearly as repressive as the fascists were. But they are indifferent to liberal checks and balances and do not see the need for constitutional constraints on the power of the majority—constraints that form a central part of EU law. The main challenge posed by eastern European populism is therefore not to the existence of democracy at the level of the nation but to the cohesion of the EU. As more countries in the region turn toward illiberalism, they will continue to come into conflict with Brussels and probe the limits of the EU's power, as Poland has already done with its judicial reforms. Eventually, the risk is that the EU could disintegrate, and Europe could become a continent divided and unfree.

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[2] <https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf>

[3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-04-19/watching-american-democracy-china>

[4] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2017-12-22/europes-authoritarian-equilibrium>

[5] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-europe/2017-11-03/why-polands-law-and-justice-party-remains-so-popular>

[6] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2017-04-12/hungary-turning-russia>

[7] [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/how-to-build-an-autocracy/513872/?utm\\_source=atltw](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/how-to-build-an-autocracy/513872/?utm_source=atltw)

[8] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2017-02-13/destination-europe>

[9] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-10-17/populism-march>

[10] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/anthologies/2017-02-23/what-was-liberal-order>