Illiberal Democracy and Hybrid Regimes in East-Central Europe

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After the fall of the Communist regimes in 1989, the new political order in East-Central Europe (ECE) was inspired by the liberal project. This pertained primarily to the political realm, with the transition followed by democratic consolidation, ushering in a political system founded on free elections, constitutionalism, and the separation of powers. Furthermore, it also concerned the economic system being converted to a market economy, integrated into that of the European Union and, more generally, open to international trade. Finally, it brought about, to varying degrees, an evolution toward the development of civil society and more open societies characterized by a culture of tolerance and pluralism. This triple transformation created the conditions for integration into the European Union for these countries, which was then considered a point of no return. The European perspective and the process of accession based on conditionality functioned as an external anchor for the transition and the consolidation of these new democracies. Their integration into the Union was perceived as an irreversible democratic commitment, if not "the end of history" as described in Francis Fukuyama's essay.[1]

The Regression

Nowadays, Central and Eastern Europe has recaptured the attention of Western Europe, but for the opposite reasons of those of the early 1990s. It is no longer the "third wave" of democratization as described by Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington,[2] but quite to the contrary, an authoritarian reversal named "illiberal democracy" by Huntington's protégé, Fareed Zakaria,[3] that is the central issue. Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall (which has now been down longer than the period during which it divided the city, symbolizing the divisions of a country and a continent), new walls and barbed-wire fences are being erected on the Eastern borders of the continent. Democratic change has been associated with dissidents, the fight for human rights, and the growth of civil society. Nowadays, we witness the rise of nationalism and the introduction of measures seeking to stifle the role of NGOs that could contest certain government policies. The motto of the post-1989 era was the "return to Europe" while major reforms necessary to join the European Union were adopted; now, the Union itself has become contested and even compared to the Soviet tutelage of the past.

The instigators of this backsliding from the post-1989 wave of democratizations are not the nostalgic Communists associated with the former regimes, but often some of those who had contributed to the democratic changes in their countries: in the late 1980s, Viktor Orbán, now the Hungarian prime minister, was the founder of a liberal dissident student movement that became known as Fidesz; Jarosław Kaczyński, now the uncontested leader of the Law and Justice party (PiS) in power in Poland, emerged from the Solidarność (Solidarity) movement that helped bring an end to that country's Communist regime and was an advisor to its leader and former president Lech Wałęsa. In October 2016, at Krynica in the Polish Tatra Mountains, Kaczyński and Orbán together called for a "counter-revolution" in Europe. The democratic revolutions of 1989 combined mobilization and negotiations. The "counter-revolution" does not take place

[1] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
[3] Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003). Fukuyama, like Zakaria, had also done his graduate studies under Huntington in Harvard University's Department of Government.

on the barricades but by way of elections. Orbán's Fidesz has won four consecutive parliamentary elections with half of the vote and a two-thirds majority of the seats in parliament. The PiS party in Poland won the majority of seats in the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament) in 2015, and again in October 2019. The revolutions of 1989 were accompanied by a brutal economic recession as a "shock therapy," which accompanied the transition to a market economy. The "counter-revolution" is taking place in the context of economic growth and an improvement (albeit unevenly distributed) in living standards.[4] Things have gone from the "return to Europe" of 1989, including the explicit goal of becoming member states of the European Union and catching up with the western part of the continent, to today's forces of nationalist populism riding the wave of distrust or even defiance toward Brussels while developing a sovereigntist rhetoric of a "Europe of nations."

How are we to explain this regression? What are the main features of the authoritarian drift? How are we to define the political regimes in the East of the continent?

Democracy Receding

The countries of the Visegrád Group (consisting of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) had been treated within the study of "transitology" (comparative studies of transitions to democracy) for almost two decades as being successful in consolidating their democracy as confirmed, year after year, by the evaluation of the institutes and think tanks specialized in democracy monitoring. The institutes in question have, however, identified an erosion since 2010, in some cases yielding to a striking backsliding. Long considered a "model student" of the transition, according to the reports on "Nations in Transit" published by the Washington-based think tank Freedom House, in the 2021 edition of the report Hungary ranked 15th out of the 29 post-Communist nations spanning Eastern Europe and Eurasia in terms of freedom, ahead of Bosnia & Herzegovina but just behind Albania and North Macedonia. Poland has been faring better, coming in at 7th place just ahead of Bulgaria and Romania, though still well behind Slovakia's 6th-place standing in terms of the countries' respective overall democracy scores.[5] The introduction to the 2020 "Nations in Transit" report puts it as follows:

> Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary has similarly dropped any pretense of respecting democratic institutions. After centralizing power, tilting the electoral playing field, taking over much of the media, and harassing critical civil society organizations since 2010, Orbán moved during 2019 to consolidate control over new areas of public life, including education and the arts. The 2020 adoption of an emergency law that allows the government to rule by decree indefinitely has further exposed the undemocratic character of Orbán's regime. Hungary's decline has been the most precipitous ever tracked in *Nations in Transit*; it was one of the three democratic frontrunners as of 2005, but in 2020 it became the first country to descend by two regime categories and leave the group of democracies entirely.[6]

Moreover, as far as corruption is concerned, according to Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index, Hungary is ranked 73rd in the world, at roughly the same level as or worse than some of its Balkan neighbors.[7] According to Reporters Without Borders, freedom of the press is under threat: its

[4] Thirty years ago, Poland was among the poorest countries in Europe, whereas today, its GDP per capita is equal to that of Portugal and is higher than that of Greece.
[5] Elisha Aaron, David Meijer, Shannon O'Toole, and Tyler Roylance, "Nations in Transit 2021: The Antidemocratic Turn," Washington, DC, Freedom House, p. 26, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf.
[6] Zselyke Csaky, Introduction, in Noah Buyon, Shanon O'Toole, Tyler Roylance, and Mike Smeltzer, "Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Façade," Washington, DC, Freedom House, p. 1, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf.
[7] Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2021, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021.

World Press Freedom Index ranks Hungary under Orbán 89th in the world and Poland 62nd, a situation in Europe that is comparable to that of Serbia or Kosovo.[8]

Evaluating Democracy

Beyond evaluations that resort to quantitative indicators (too precise to be accurate!), it is the trend that counts as well as the variations they suggest among countries and regions that used to be part of the Communist world. One can identify three post-1989 trajectories that refer to the notions of "hybrid regime," "electoral authoritarianism," or "democratorship," each of them according to rather different dynamics.

The accession of the countries of Central Europe (the Visegrád Group: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) into the European Union in May 2004 was considered a "success story," the completion of the democratization process, though by the 2010s some of the Central European states had witnessed an illiberal backsliding. In the Balkans, meanwhile, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the creation of new nation-states was accompanied by the rise of nationalist and populist movements favoring the emergence of authoritarian regimes—the idea of "the unity" of the nation as being under threat clearly not being conducive to the development of political pluralism. Certain countries (North Macedonia, Albania, and post-Milošević Serbia) have experienced a slow and uncertain evolution toward pluralism, in spite of the fact that its institutionalization and that of the and the rule of law remain rather rudimentary (hence the hybrid characterization of these regimes and the possibility of setbacks).

The countries of Europe's post-Soviet East along with the Caucasus and the Central Asian republics constitute a trio of geographic areas containing two distinct variants. One the one hand, there are the hard authoritarian regimes: Belarus under Aleksandr Lukashenko; Kazakhstan under the rule of Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has been described as "a combination of a Soviet leader and a mafia boss";[9] Azerbaijan and its dynastic regime based on the Aliev clan; or Tajikistan under Emomali Rahmon, in power for more than a quarter of a century and characterized by a personality cult that could compete with that of North Korea. On the other hand, there are the semi-authoritarian post-Soviet regimes that have gone through processes of democratization brought about by "color revolutions," such as in Georgia in 2003, Moldova in 2009, Armenia in 2018, and most importantly in Ukraine, in 2004 and again 2014. Asked about the difference between the Orange Revolution in Kiev in 2004 and that of 1989 in Prague, former Czech

[8] Reporters Without Borders, "World Press Freedom Index 2022," Hungary, https://rsf.org/en/country/hungary. The 2020 report (https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus) stated that in Poland, which was ranked 62nd (down three places from 2019), the government's control over the judiciary had adversely affected press freedom. Some courts use Article 212 of the penal code, which allows sentences for journalists of to up to a year in prison for defamation charges. In 2019, Poland had been ranked 59th, having repeatedly fallen from higher positions since 2015 (see Reporters Without Borders, "Poland: Journalist Investigated for Coverage of Gdansk Mayor's Assassination," February 27, 2020 [updated March 2, 2020], https://rsf.org/en/news/poland-journalist-investigated-coverage-gdansk-mayors-assassination). Up till now, judges have only imposed fines, but the damage has been done and an underlying climate of self-censorship has now come to the surface. In parts of southern Europe, a crusade by the authorities against the media is very active. In Bulgaria (111th place), which remains in the region's lowest position, an attempt by the public radio management to suspend (see Reporters Without Borders, "Grave Threat to Public Media Independence in Bulgaria," September 20, 2019, https://rsf.org/en/grave-threat-public-media-independence-bulgaria) the experienced journalist Silvia Velikova, a government critic, has highlighted the lack of independence of Bulgaria's public broadcasting media and the hold some political leaders have on editorial policy. EU candidate countries Montenegro (105th place) and Albania (84th place) both fell two places after a year that saw journalists detained on the pretext of the fight against disinformation, and instances of legal harassment exemplified by the Kafkaesque trial of investigative reporter Jovo Martinovic (see Reporters Without Borders, "RSF Decries Montenegrin Journalist's 18-Month Jail Sentence," January 15, 2019, https://rsf.org/en/rsf-decries-montenegrin-journalists-18-month-jail-sentence). During the same period, many abuses directed against reporters in the Balkans went unpunished. Serbia came in at 93rd place, down another three places in the 2020 Index.

[9] Bakhytjan Toregojina, who opposes the regime, quoted in Benoît Vitkine, "The System of Nazarbaïev, Golden Hand and Astana Steel Handle," *Le Monde*, December 6, 2014.

President Václav Havel responded: "The 'velvet revolutions' of 1989 were revolutions against communism. The 'color revolutions' are revolutions against post-communism, a combination of an authoritarian regime and mafia style capitalism."[10]

The term "democratorship" (a contraction between "democracy" and "dictatorship") emphasizes the duality of a regime that seeks to combine elements of both systems. The term, similar to that of *democradura* originally coined by students of Latin America (a contraction of the Spanish words *democracia* [democracy] and *dura*, which is both the suffix for the word *dictadura* [dictatorship] as well as a standalone adjective meaning "hard") is, however, most often used to suggest that the reference to democracy mainly serves the purpose of camouflaging a confiscation of power.[11] The idea that democracy could become a façade that conceals the manipulation of the media system ("repressive tolerance," to use Herbert Marcuse's phrase)[12] dates back to the 1960s. However, the idea of a lure, a manipulation that seeks to achieve a pacification of the "silent majority" in Western democracies, has, of course, little to do with Vladimir Putin's Russia or the authoritarian regimes that prevail in much of the post-Soviet part of the world. The problems of the countries of Central Europe, are now partly like those of other members of the European Union and concern the old distinction between "formal democracy" and "substantive democracy,"[13] and partly the result the above-mentioned illiberal drift.

In a similar vein, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way put forward the concept of "competitive authoritarianism,"[14] which seems pertinent in describing the development of certain political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. These regimes ensure a degree of political competition by virtue of an electoral process that is, however, distorted or perverted given that the incumbent party is able to use all the levers at its disposal (the executive branch, the legislature, the security apparatus, and the media) to curtail the opposition's access to the public sphere and thus consolidate its hold on power.

Orbán's Hungary and Kaczyński's Poland represent two prime examples of democratic backsliding, even though there are other countries in the region that have been following a similar trend. "To make Budapest in Warsaw," was the declared ambition of PiS in Poland in the 2015 election campaign, and indeed the Hungarian model was applied rather thoroughly. What are its main traits?

Illiberal Democracy

Orbán came to power in the spring of 2010 by winning half of the votes cast in the election, enabling him to form a constitutional majority with two-thirds of the seats in parliament, which permitted him to unleash a "legislative storm" (Orbán's term) with astounding speed, leading to a series of measures undermining the separation of powers as well as the independence of the constitutional court and the judiciary. The same approach was applied by PiS in Poland, which, since it came to power in 2015, has adopted legislation concerning the appointment of judges as well the control of the media. In October 2018, the former

[10] Václav Havel, interview with Jacques Rupnik: "Il est impératif de poser des questions dérangeantes à M. Poutine," *Le Monde*, February 24, 2005).
[11] The first to attempt an Anglicization of the Spanish term was the Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg, in his provocatively-titled article, "Sweden, Democratura?" *Dagens Nyheter*, December 14, 1965.
[12] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
[13] Mary Kaldor and Ivan Vejvoda, "Democratization in Central and East European Countries," *International Affairs* 73, no. 1 (1997): 59–82. The authors' assessment of the state of democracy distinguishes the adoption of elections and democratic institutions from a broader notion of democracy that entails participation, the development of a vibrant civil society, and a pluralist public space. On the definitions and distinctions between democracies as modes of governance, see Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (summer 1991): 75–88, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/225590.
[14] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

president of the Constitutional Court of Poland, Andrzej Rzepliński, stated that his successor's appointment by PiS in 2016 was meant to turn the Court into the tool of a government engaged in the "destruction of the rule of law."[15] After establishing control over the Constitutional Court, new laws adopted in 2017 and 2019 on the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court raised even more broadly the question of the subordination of the judiciary to the political branches of government. This reopening of the issue of the separation of powers is made in the name of a certain rejection of what Kaczyński has called a "legal impossibility," as well as in the name of a majoritarian concept of democracy specific to the populist discourse: "In a democracy, the sovereign is the people, their representative parliament and, in the Polish case, the elected president," said Kaczyński. "If we are to have a democratic state of law, no state authority, including the constitutional tribunal, can disregard legislation."[16]

Such words and, more generally, such an approach, correspond with those of Orbán in Hungary. They resonate with the position of the former president of the Hungarian Constitutional Court, András Sólyom, who stated in March 2011 that "the rule of law no longer exists in Hungary."[17] This statement was made following the adoption of a constitutional amendment authorizing a parliamentary majority of two-thirds to annul or modify a decision issued by the Constitutional Court. In Poland, however (and this is an important difference between it and Hungary), PiS does not have at its disposal a majority that would permit it to modify the constitution; it suffices that it can circumvent or bend the constitutional law. According to Jarosław Kurski, editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Gazeta*, "the parliament has become an instrument to enable [the] adoption of laws that are unconstitutional, without deliberation and without consultation."[18]

In Hungary as in Poland, these repeated examples of the calling into question of the very foundation of the rule of law were accompanied by attacks on the independence of the media. In Poland, the preferred target was the public broadcasting service, from which more than 200 journalists have been fired. The same happened earlier in Hungary, where a council responsible for monitoring the "objectivity" of the media had been appointed by the government. It is now easier to compare the Hungarian public broadcasting service to that of China than to the BBC.[19] Finally, the third element is the end of the political neutrality of public administration: loyalty to a political party trumps competence. The result of such a takeover by the political party in power was described by legal scholar Kim Lane Scheppele as a "Frankenstate," combining the worst practices from different existing systems of governance.[20]

All of these attacks on the separation of powers and against the freedom of the press are made in the name of a certain idea of democracy. That is exactly what Orbán did in his 2014 speech on "illiberal democracy": "We must affirm that democracy is not necessarily liberal. The fact that something isn't liberal does not mean that it is not democratic."[21]

From such a vantage point, democracy is based on the sovereignty of the people, incarnated in a government created by a party majority that should not be impeded by anything—neither constitutional nor institutional constraints. This calls into question the role of institutions presumed to be politically neutral (such as the constitutional court, the central bank, the audit court, etc.) more generally, in the sense of what Kaczyński has called "legal impossibilism." Elected officials cannot be constrained by unelected bodies. Somewhere between the "will of the nation," in the words of Schmitt, and the "general will," in the words

[15] Andrzej Rzepliński, interview by Jacques Rupnik, October 18, 2018, Academy of Science, Warsaw, Poland.
[16] Christian Davis, "Poland Is 'on Road to Autocracy,' Says Constitutional Court President," *Guardian,* December 18, 2016.
[17] MTI (Magyar Távirati Iroda), "Ex-President Urges Successor to Veto Constitutional Changes," *MTI,* March 11, 2013.
[18] Jaroslaw Kurski, (editor-in-chief, *Gazeta*, comments made during a seminar on "Les démocraties illibérales en Europe" (Illiberal democracies in Europe), September 13, 2018. National Assembly of France.
[19] In 2010, a delegation from ORTT, the regulating body of audio-visual services in Hungary, visited China, where both parties expressed a willingness to cooperate in this area. According to the Hungarian news agency MTI, the Hungarian delegation requested from its Chinese counterpart documents that concern TV broadcasting and details on programming policies. "Tirts Tamás, Pekingben a magyar-kínai médiakapcsolatokról," HirExtra.hu, April 18, 2010.
[20] Kim Lane Scheppele, Princeton professor, lecture given at the Council on European Studies, Paris, July 7, 2015.
[21] Full Text of Viktor Orbán's Speech at Băile Tuşnad (known as Tusnádfürdő in Hungarian), Romania on July 29, 2014, available at BudapestBeacon.com.

of Rousseau, there are essential ingredients of what is being deemed to justify the attacks on the separation of powers and their concentration or confiscation by the executive branch—more specifically, by the PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary—and, of course, by their respective leaders. It is in this sense that these representative cases are linked with the more general problematics of the populist challenge to liberal democracy.

An important element in understanding the electoral successes of the nationalist-populist parties is the resonance of some their preferred issues among the societies of Central and Eastern Europe. Despite a broader context of democratic disenchantment, for the majority of citizens in the region, democracy remains the best political regime. However, already a survey published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall showed that only a third of the citizenry believed that they had a greater influence on the government than before 1989, whereas half of the respondents "did not see any change."[22] In a survey published 10 years later, democracy still had no rival, but only a minority of the citizens polled in five Central and Eastern European states (24% of Hungarians, 33% of Slovaks and Romanians, 43% of Poles, and 50% of Czechs) were satisfied with the functioning of democracy.[23] A "government of experts" is favored by 92% of Czechs and Slovaks, as well as by 86% of Hungarians, as opposed to slightly more than a half in the West of the continent. Moreover, a worrying fascination with the idea of a "strongman" as head of state has been emerging: 46% in the East (with even a majority of those polled in Romania, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic) as opposed to 27% in the Western Europe, embrace the idea. If we take into consideration the very low trust in the institutions of parliamentary democracy and in the political elites, and even in the judiciary (with reference to "corrupt" and "inefficient" judges), one can see the emerging appeal in some of these societies of centralizing political power at the expense of the checks and balances associated with the rule of law.

Apart from democratic disillusionment, the second major source of the illiberal or authoritarian drift is nationalism. The alter ego of people's sovereignty is national sovereignty, the conviction that a strong devolution of political power should protect an individual member state from the European Union's intrusions, as well as from the migration wave. The latter enabled Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Robert Fico in Slovakia, and Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic to elevate themselves to the status of defenders of the nation against these new threats (partly from the surge in Middle Eastern migrants, but also from the European Commission with its policy of quotas for the distribution of migrants among EU member states).

In his classic work on nationalism in the region, "The Miseries of East European Small States" (1946),[24] the Hungarian political thinker István Bibó argued that democracy was under threat when the cause of freedom came into conflict with the cause of the nation. Democracy in Central Europe should, however, be able to avoid having to choose between individual and collective liberties. The situation created by the migrant crisis in 2015, one without precedent in postwar Europe, was framed by the political elites in Central Europe precisely in that way: the nation (its identity, its culture) is under threat from the freedom of movement (of migrants) in a Europe without borders. In this sense the migration crisis was a catalyst for the nationalist-populist turn in Central Europe.

In the context of democratic backsliding throughout the region, the political leaders as well as the media in the Visegrád Group countries have been reproducing variations on a theme that engenders anxiety about an invasion of Muslim migrants making use of the historical Ottoman route through Turkey and the Balkans

[22] New Europe Barometer, as quoted in Richard Rose, *Understanding Post-Communist Transformation: A Bottom up Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009), 101.

[23] For an analysis of Central and Eastern Europe as part of an international survey, see Jacques Rupnik, "Hongrois, Polonais, Slovaques et Tchèques considèrent la démocratie comme le meilleur système," in *Democraties sous tension: une enquête planétaire*, ed. Dominique Reynié (Paris: Fondation pour l'Innovation Politique, 2019), p. 112–113. See also the previous survey in Dominique Reynié, ed., *Où va la démocratie?* (Paris: Plon, 2017), 127–141.

[24] István Bibó, "The Miseries of East European Small States," in *The Art of Peacemaking: Political Essays by István Bibó*, World Thought in Translation, trans. Péter Pázstor, ed. Iván Zoltán Dénes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

to reach the heart of Europe. This poses a security threat, and a risk of epidemics, according to Kaczyński. The exploitation of the migrant crisis has been proven to pay off during elections. Orbán, who was losing his advantage in the polls in the spring of 2015, witnessed a spectacular resurgence of his popularity by the beginning of the summer, with the referendum on immigration being held on October 2, 2016.[25] In Slovakia, Robert Fico, an "Orbán of the Left," also wanted to transform the anti-migration disposition of the voters into an electoral victory, without the anticipation that he would have to face competition on a political terrain overcrowded with those on the nationalist right.[26] Two elements are essential to understanding the specificity of the Central European approach to the migration crisis.

The first element consists of the ethno-cultural concept of the nation, borrowed from the 19th-century German model of a nation as being construed around a shared language, culture, and often religious affiliation as well. This model of a *Kulturnation* has recently been transposed on a European level: the fence built on the border with Serbia supposedly turned Hungary into a bulwark of European civilization.

The second element is linked to the fact that, since World War II, the nations of Central-Eastern Europe have become ethnically and linguistically more homogeneous, not having experienced, in the era of the Cold War, the migrations coming from the Mediterranean. They do not have the "postcolonial complex" of the Westerners and consider the model of a multicultural society a complete failure. Nationalism and opposition to multiculturalism cement their ideological sense of themselves.

The Concept and the Context

The democratic backsliding among the newer member states of in Central Europe raises concerns that, thirty years later, there has been a return to a division between East and West: between liberal democracy in Western Europe, and dictatorships and authoritarian regimes to the East of the continent (Vladimir Putin's Russia, Aleksandr Lukashenko's Belarus, or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey), with the rise of "illiberal democracy" causing Central Europe to lean toward the Eastern pattern. The question of democracy's consolidation thus also has high geopolitical stakes.

However, such a reading of the situation is an oversimplification. The surge of nationalist-populist movements and of an authoritarian temptation is a pan-European and indeed an international phenomenon. After Brexit in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016, two pillars of liberal democracy have been faltering, and the neo-authoritarians of Central Europe have seen these two occurrences as legitimizing their own projects at home. These have converged in their campaigns for the European elections in May 2019, in order to defeat the pro-EU "liberal progressives."

In other words, the rise of authoritarian populist movements is not merely a post-Communist but rather a pan-European phenomenon. One significant difference is the fact that in the East of the continent they have actually been in power. The question then arises: are the illiberal regimes in the East an anomaly, a trend that is a passing fever, or are they the harbingers of a coming new normal of a post-liberal or post-democratic European order?[27]

This leads us to a twofold realization. On the one hand, in the 1990s, the concept of "democratorship" could be applied to the post-Communist transitions toward a different form of authoritarianism: the Serbia of Slobodan Milošević, Croatia under Franjo Tuđman, Slovakia under Vladimír Mečiar, and Ukraine under Leonid Kuchma. All these countries have, at a differing pace and in different degrees, evolved toward

[25] Certainly, the rejection of immigration was approved by an overwhelming majority of registered voters, although the quorum of 50% participation was not attained and the outcome of the referendum thus not binding.
[26] Henry Foy, "Anti-Migrant Rhetoric Dominates Slovakia Vote," *Financial Times*, March 4, 2016.
[27] For further developments on this issue, see Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).

becoming more democratic. By its very nature, hybridity is not fixed and can evolve either towards a positive outcome, as in Slovakia, or into a pattern of backsliding, as in Serbia under Vučić.

Conversely, the backsliding toward authoritarianism observed in some Central European member states confronts the EU with the need to address the rise of illiberal democracy in its midst, with the awareness that challenges to the rule of law and the free press (the core of liberal democracy in the EU) represent a threat to the very foundations of the European Union. An unprecedented situation has developed, posing important questions for the future: did the societies of these countries, in the course of their first two decades since independence, build up sufficient "antibodies" to resist and rein in the forces of authoritarian regression? Such may be the case in Poland but, as is often the case in history, it seems difficult to draw broader generalizations from the Polish case. It seems also that the geopolitical challenge posed by Russia's war in Ukraine has made the European Commission more cautious or even reluctant to implement rule-of-law conditionality on Poland. Finally, the essential question remains: does belonging to the European Union constitute for the countries of Central Europe a sufficient constraint, framework, or dam that can stem the illiberal tide?

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