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'Democratic capitalism became synonymous with modernity'

Ivan Krastev on the end of the Age of Imitation in Europe's East and the roots of a new post-populist liberalism

Read our critique of Ivan Krastev's and Stephen Holmes' new book.

Read this interview in German or Russian.

You call the 30 years since the fall of the Berlin wall "the age of imitation" when the nation states of Central and Eastern Europe were to mimic the liberal democracies of the West, instead of finding their own way. How could a genuine Eastern European development model have looked like?

> At the end of the Cold war, democratic capitalism became synonymous with modernity, so there is nothing strange or wrong that East European societies decided to imitate Western institutions and lifestyles. What I see as a problem is that we are so surprised that the politics of imitation has produced a backlash at the moment when, first, the liberal model got in crisis in the West itself and, secondly, when East European societies got the feeling that they are treated like a student who will never be allowed to graduate.

How much did the path that Central and Eastern Europe took have to do with Western political influence and how much did it come from these societies themselves? Were they kind of tricked into it? Or were they so eager to become Western-style states and societies?

> It would be unfair to blame the West for the failure of the Eastern European democracies. What the West could be blamed for is the lack of curiosity towards the very complex transformation in Europe's East. Even the most sympathetic Western observers seem unaware that the crisis of democracy in places like Romania or Bulgaria is to a large extent the result of popular disappointment with Western democracies and the systems these countries had previously admired

and sought to emulate.

When the Albanian Prime Minister, in the midst of the Brexit debate, remarked on television that the House of Commons reminded him of the Bosnian Parliament, he was conveying a sense, shared throughout the region, that the simultaneous unravelling of democratic norms and institutions in the East and the West are two expressions of a single underlying crisis.

Have the formerly over-confident liberals learned their lesson?

At the moment, most of the liberals are either angry or scared. They felt betrayed by history or to be more precise by the idea of "the end of history". In order to learn your lesson you should be ready to recognise that not everything that your critics said is just wrong.

Is the failure of liberalism in Eastern Europe ultimate – especially considering the fact that the exodus of young and well-educated people damages chances of liberal parties?

Demographic anxieties played a critical role in the rise of illiberal political regimes in the region. In the ageing and demographically shrinking societies of the East, many young people are convinced that if they want to live in a democratic country the best they can do is to change the country than to struggle to change the government.

But at the same time, it would be a mistake to talk about the ultimate failure of liberalism in the region. What we witness is the resurgence of a new post-populist liberalism as an outcome of societies' experience living in the populist paradigm. And this liberalism is different than the imitational liberalism of the 1990s. For example: the President of Slovakia and the newly elected mayor of Budapest do not speak English – speaking foreign languages were some of the symbols of the new East European liberalism.

Why is the spectre of mass immigration such a powerful narrative for populist leaders in Eastern Europe – all the while mass emigration poses probably the bigger threat to their societies?

As George Steiner once wrote, "trees have roots while people have legs," and people use their legs to move to what they see as better places, where they will be able to live better lives. Eastern Europeans are well aware of this because we are the migrants. In a paradoxical way, Eastern Europeans' hostility towards migration is a result of the trauma after many of your compatriots have decided to leave the country, and fear of ethnic diversity that is in the DNA of the East European states born out of the disintegration of Europe's multi-

cultural continental empires – Habsburg, Ottoman, Soviet.

In the 20th century, revolutions, world wars and waves of ethnic cleansing changed the ethnic map of Europe. All these traumas and upheavals left behind a Europe whose states and societies are more rather than less ethnically homogenous. In the 20th century, ethnic homogeneity was viewed as a way to reduce tensions, increase security and strengthen democratic trends. Minorities were viewed with mistrust.

This outcome of ethnic homogenisation is particularly visible in Central and Eastern Europe. In 1939, almost a third of Poland's people were something other than ethnic Poles – there were substantial German, Jewish, Ukrainian, and other minorities. Today, ethnic Poles account for more than 95 per cent of Polish citizens. In this corner of Europe, many people see ethnic homogeneity as essential to social cohesion.

Yet the 21st century is bringing more diversity. If the 20th century in Europe was the century of unmixing, the 21st century is one of remixing. Behind the migration challenge that Central and East European countries see themselves facing is an intellectual one: In order to deal successfully with migration, these societies will have to unlearn what many of them still see as the twentieth century's major lesson — that ethnic and cultural diversity is a security threat.

Liberalism's reputation in the region never recovered from the 2008 crisis – could a comprehensive reform of capitalism take the wind out of the populists' sails or has the ship sailed?

When history ended and the Age of Imitation began, in 1989, the East fell in love with the West. Simultaneously, and partly as a result, the West fell in love with itself. Flattered by the desire of the East to remake itself on the model of the West, Western policy-makers lost any critical perspective on the shortcomings of their own societies.

It is now clear that the change of the economic model is a pre-condition for restoring publics' trust in liberal democracy. In the second half of the 20th century, democracy was capable to tame capitalism, in the 21st century it has failed to do it. But the change of the economic model does not mean the return of the economic policies of the classical social-democratic period. Nostalgia is not powerful enough to turn the clock back.

Are you still optimistic when it comes to the European project? Or have we spoiled it?

What optimists and pessimists share are a deterministic view of

history. To be optimist or pessimist means that you expect that we could know how the future will look like. For me future is the invasion of the unknown so I am neither optimist or pessimist. I am worried but hopeful. I am worried because I think that the disintegration of the EU is a realistic option, but I am also hopeful because I do not want to live in Europe after the EU.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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