EUROPE 30.03.2020 | Eszter Kováts & Katerina Smejkalova

East-Central Europe's revolt against imitation

Krastev and Holmes shed light on the rise of illiberalism in Europe's East, but ignore the damage caused by neoliberalism

Read our interview with Ivan Krastev.

Read this article in German.

'This is a learning process – you will get to that point', said Katalin Novák, Hungarian State Secretary for Family Policy, in her speech at the annual meeting of the conservative-fundamentalist World Congress of Families in Budapest in May 2017. She was reporting on the reactions to the Hungarian government's position on same-sex marriage that it had declared at the United Nations in Geneva, when she heard this condescending sentence. Novák summed up the attitude of the UN body towards Hungary: 'They just shame us the whole time. But we shouldn't be constantly lectured.'

Novák's account could not better illustrate the central argument of Ivan Krastev's and Stephen Holmes' book *The Light That Failed*. The two authors argue that it is precisely the socio-psychological consequences of taking on the role of perpetual imitator – i.e. East-Central Europe vis-à-vis the West after 1989 – that boosts populists in those countries and mobilises their electorates.

Krastev and Holmes do not deny that the anti-liberal rulers are thoroughly pragmatic strategists who want to strengthen their power while offering a certain interpretation of the world as a smokescreen. However, the authors rightly argue that it is of little use to portray them as corrupt villains who somehow 'bewitch' their populations, blinding them.

Rather, we need to develop viable explanatory models to understand their popularity among large sections of their citizens. And Krastev and Holmes see this 'in the humiliations associated with the uphill struggle to

become, at best, an inferior copy of a superior model. Discontent with the "transition to democracy" was also inflamed by visiting foreign "evaluators" with an anaemic grasp of local realities.'

The two authors work this out with numerous insightful observations and plausible arguments. Here, the dynamics derived from psychology take the centre-stage, by which the imitation of an unattainable role model inevitably turns into a defiant aversion, accompanied by striving for one's own dignity through a clearly marked differentiation.

What kind of liberalism?

This is all the more severe since, in the eyes of many East-Central Europeans, the West is no longer what they had longed to achieve through imitation: economic stability and prosperity, a model for a clear, traditional European identity, or even – narrowly interpreted – Christian values. Instead, 'secularism, multiculturalism and gay marriage' now suddenly appear as 'normality', as the 'Europe' to catch up with.

The emigration from East-Central Europe to the West comes on top of that: it was massive and led to a demographic panic, subsequently expressed in the vehement rejection of immigrants from other cultures. At the same time, according to Krastev's and Holmes' thesis, demographic destabilisation results in a policy intended to make the West unattractive in the eyes of young people – so that they don't migrate. These and other statements make their book an interesting contribution and worth debating to understand the current situation in East-Central Europe.

At the same time, there are reasons why the book's explanatory model with regard to the region should be expanded. Probably its weakest point is that the authors hardly explain what exactly they mean by 'liberalism'; and this is crucial to examine the departure from that very idea suggested in the book's title.

Krastev and Holmes also remain silent on the way in which East-Central European populists have introduced generous social programmes that also materially add to the

Without them explicitly stating so, it seems that Krastev and Holmes take the term to mean alternately cultural liberalism and the concept of state protection of civil liberties and human rights. Unfortunately, they completely ignore the fact that both came hand-in-hand with another form of liberalism to the region: economic and political neoliberalism. The correlation between precariousness, lack of opportunities, the social exclusion and material

restoration of dignity.

need which this engenders and the subsequent dedication to conservative-nationalist political projects, has been adequately proven elsewhere. But Krastev and Holmes merely claim that the countries of East-Central Europe are doing well economically and that inevitably other dynamics must be at work.

This is far from the truth and may be because of the fact that neither of the authors is in a position to critically analyse the deceptive macro-indicators that suggest this. In reality, high growth or low unemployment rate do not say anything about living conditions in the countries, whether the material resources are distributed equally or unequally and what opportunities people actually have to lead a decent life.

Really existing liberalism

It is more meaningful, for example, to point out that one out of every ten people in the Czech Republic, and one in five in Slovakia, is heavily indebted. When a group of experts calculated a living wage for the Czech Republic in 2019 – the amount that would allow someone to pay all of their normal expenses – the result showed that over half of gainfully employed people do not earn the necessary monthly gross amount of around €1240. There are many other examples that give testimony to the actual quality of life in the region. In short: life beyond the nicely superficial macro-indicators is extremely precarious and uncertain.

But really existing liberalism did not really care about that. Civil rights and human rights were introduced on its behalf but social rights were systematically left out. This is because low social standards in low-wage countries benefit Western capital. Capitalism with such a harsh neoliberal angeda, hardly imaginable in many Western countries, has caused existing communities and families to break up; and besides that, liberalism has demanded that the losers – i.e. women – must now also battle patriarchy and, thus, their husbands. The systems of support that existed before 1989, along with the legacy of dictatorship, were declared a historical error. It's no surprise that in its place, the concept of nationhood arose as a replacement.

Krastev and Holmes also remain silent on the way in which East-Central European populists have introduced generous social programmes that also materially add to the restoration of dignity. For example, the PiS government in Poland has introduced the largest redistribution scheme since 1989, the so-called 'Family 500+' programme, which guarantees a benefit payment of around €150 per month per child to families with

more than one child (since July 2019, it even applies to the first child). Consequently, in the first years after its implementation in 2016, poverty and child poverty were measurably reduced.

Frequently, these programmes are derided by the West – and also by local liberal elites – as 'bribes to stupid voters'. This lax interpretation fails to recognise that populism feeds on complex causes, some of which are socio-psychological in nature, but others also rooted in tangible material needs, precariousness and real economic asymmetries in Europe. Someone who does not understand this can get upset without tangible effects about further restrictions on freedom in these countries and the lack of resistance by the population.

The demand for right-wing populist discourses and alternatives certainly has reasons specific to the context of East-Central Europe.

But those who understand the problem will instead campaign for a European social pillar EU worthy of its name. In the ongoing debates about the European minimum wage, they will demand this to constitute a real living wage that does not merely amount to average wages paid, perpetuating the precariousness and asymmetries in Europe.

The image of liberalism resonates as the bogeyman because it is seen by large sections of the population as hypocrisy on the part of elites who impose a cumbersome and thankless cultural and civilisational imitation of the West, while economic inequalities have not been addressed and often even been delegitimised.

At the same time it is clear that, for example, the Polish 500+ programme, in a practical sense, restores dignity by recognising long overdue care work, but does not address the real causes of poverty and the care crisis. The Orbán government's freedom-fighting discourses are also incapable of alleviating the various dependencies of the Hungarian economy on foreign investments. For this very reason, its inflammatory critique of liberalism only amounts to setting up a new bogeyman to maintain, even now in its tenth year of rule, the pose of being attacked and oppressed and, this way, to legitimise its authoritarian interventions in all areas.

Progressive politics' way forward

The demand for right-wing populist discourses and alternatives certainly has reasons specific to the context of East-Central Europe. Krastev and Holmes convincingly reveal several of them. But it would be too easy to dismiss them as Eastern European deviations – especially in the area of

values usually categorised as liberal. Human rights (and liberal agendas defined as human rights) are attacked by the right from Brazil to Italy, by referring to 'human rights fundamentalism', 'gender ideology', 'political correctness' or 'Gayropa'. Contrary to what Krastev and Holmes claim, the rejection of sex education is not an issue specific to Eastern Europe: it is a contentious battleground for instance in Germany and France as well.

Nevertheless, Holmes and Krastev correctly point out that liberal values have also changed and it is worthwhile to take a critical look at them. However, a purely socio-psychological analysis is not enough to develop an understanding of why such large portions of the population are not willing to support these newly articulated values.

The demands of progressive politics – whether it be more women on the supervisory boards of listed companies or the use of gender-neutral language in university documents – arouse mistrust in economically and socially disadvantaged and underrepresented sections of the population, both in Western countries and in an East-West comparison. These values are presented as universalism, but in fact ultimately serve the elites and Western European and North American discourses that have little to do with the realities of life in broader parts of the populations.

The progressive forces should deal with this part of the 'imitation imperative' in a self-reflective way before a change of course becomes completely impossible when right-wing agitation increases and the wrong lines of conflict deepen.



Eszter Kováts
Budapest / Vienna

Eszter Kováts is Marie Skodłowska-Curie postdoctoral research fellow in the Institute of Political Science at the University of Vienna and a research affiliate of the Central European University. She was responsible for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's East-Central European Gender Programme from 2012 to the end of 2019.



Katerina Smejkalova
Prague

Katerina Smejkalova is a researcher at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Prague.

-