EUROPE 25.01.2019 | Ivan Krastev

The metamorphosis of Central Europe

How the imperative of imitating the West has created deep resentment in Central Europe

Read this article in German.

In Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist Gregor Samsa awakens one morning 'from uneasy dreams' to find that he has 'transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.' Needless to say, Samsa's family is shocked and has no idea what to do with the ugly creature he has become.

Europeans know the feeling. In 2018, they were forced to acknowledge that Hungary and Poland have changed from promising models of liberal democracy into illiberal, conspiracy-minded majoritarian regimes. Now, the rest of Europe must decide what to do about the unfamiliar creatures residing in their house.

But first, it is worth considering why these illiberal transformations happened. Why have people who still see themselves as wholly European endorsed a revolt against the European Union, while embracing xenophobia and nativism? And why did liberals across Europe fail to respond in time?

Part of the problem is that liberal elites became complacent and overly confident in the power of EU institutions to contain populist upstarts. But, more than that, they failed to recognise that populism's appeal is more psychological than ideological.

Imitating the West has led to resentment

To understand Central Europe's metamorphosis, bear in mind that the region's political imperative for almost three decades was 'Imitate the West!' That process went by different names – democratisation, liberalisation, convergence, integration, Europeanisation – but it was essentially an effort by post-communist reformers to import liberal-

democratic institutions, adopt Western political and economic frameworks, and publicly embrace Western values. In practice, this meant that post-communist countries were compelled to adopt 20,000 new laws and regulations – none of which were really debated in their parliaments – to meet the requirements for accession to the EU.

In the event, adopting a foreign model of political economy turned out to have unexpected moral and psychological downsides. For the imitator, life becomes dominated by feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, and lost identity. Creating and inhabiting a credible copy of an idealised model requires never-ending criticism of – if not contempt for – one's identity up to that point. When an entire country undergoes this self-renunciation, a debilitating feeling of constantly being judged inevitably becomes endemic. After all, the realisation of an ideal is, by definition, impossible.

Some Western Europeans have always complained about the free movement of people within the EU; but now many Central Europeans do, too, albeit for the opposite reason.

Not surprisingly, then, the post-1989 settlement created a festering sense of resentment. And today, that national *ressentiment* has become the driving force behind the nativist wave sweeping across Central and Eastern Europe. At the heart of the populist counter-revolution is a radical rejection of the imperative to imitate the liberal-democratic West.

Another contributing factor is the mass emigration from Central European countries following their accession to the EU. Depopulation helps to explain why countries that have benefited so much from the political and economic changes of the last two decades nevertheless feel a sense of loss, even trauma. Between 1989 and 2017, for example, Latvia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria haemorrhaged 27%, 23%, and 21% of their populations, respectively. Similarly, 3.4 million Romanians – the vast majority of them younger than 40 – have left their country since 2007. Across the region, the combination of an aging population, low birth rates, and mass emigration has stoked a demographic panic, which has paradoxically been expressed as a fear of African and Middle Eastern refugees (hardly any of whom have actually ended up in Central Europe).

If you stay home, you're a loser

Some Western Europeans have always complained about the free movement of people within the EU; but now many Central Europeans do, too, albeit for the opposite reason. Consider the example of a Bulgarian doctor who leaves his country in search of better professional

opportunities in the Western part of the continent. He is not only depriving his country of his talents and skills, but also robbing it of the investment that it made by providing him with an education and other forms of social capital. The remittances that the doctor sends back to his aging parents will not compensate for this loss.

This brings us back to the psychological dimension of Central Europe's metamorphosis. If you live in a country where the majority of young people cannot wait to leave, you will feel like a loser, regardless of how well you are doing. This unavoidable sense of loss and inferiority explains why Poland has become the poster child of the new populism. The fact that the same country has also registered declining levels of inequality, rising standards of living, and the fastest growth in Europe between 2007 and 2017 hardly matters.

Still, while Central Europeans have lost their appetite for imitation, they also know that the disintegration of the EU would be an epic tragedy for their countries.

As the principal advocates of the imitation imperative, post-communist liberals have come to be regarded as the political representatives of those who have left their countries, never to return. Meanwhile, the Western system that was supposed to serve as a model for Central Europe has descended into a crisis of its own.

It is little wonder, then, that those left behind in Central European societies have rejected imitation and raised the alarm over depopulation – even 'ethnic disappearance.' 'The small nation,' the novelist Milan Kundera once observed, 'is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it.' Central Europeans already saw a world in which their cultures were vanishing. And with the rush of technological change and the threat of mass job displacement, they have come to perceive ethnic and cultural diversity as existential threats.

Still, while Central Europeans have lost their appetite for imitation, they also know that the disintegration of the EU would be an epic tragedy for their countries. A deepening of the East-West divide would not reverse depopulation, but it would threaten Central Europe's economic prospects. As a result, the region finds itself torn between reluctance to play the role of a pretender and fear that its own populist turn could precipitate a collapse of the EU. Either way, Central Europe's 'uneasy dreams' have become a permanent reality.

(c) Project Syndicate



Ivan Krastev

Sofia

Ivan Krastev is Chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies, Sofia, and the 2018-2019 Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy and International Relations at the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. He is the co-author (with Stephen Holmes) of the forthcoming book *The Light that Failed: How the West Won the Cold War and Lost the Peace* (Penguin, 2019).