

The Dying of the Light

BY IVAN KRASDEV AND STEPHEN HOLMES

*Why did the West, after winning the Cold War, lose its political balance? In their latest book *The Light that Failed*, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue that the supposed end of history turned out to be only the beginning of an Age of Imitation. Reckoning with the history of the last thirty years, they show that the most powerful force behind the wave of populist xenophobia that began in Eastern Europe stems from resentment at the post-1989 imperative to become Westernized. The following text is an excerpt from the book.*

In the immediate aftermath of 1989, the global spread of democracy was envisioned as a version of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, where the Prince of Freedom only needed to slay the Dragon of Tyranny and kiss the princess in order to awaken a previously dormant liberal majority. But the kiss proved bitter, and the revived majority turned out to be more resentful and less liberal than had been expected or hoped.

When the Cold War ended, racing to join the West, as that destination has been idealized from behind the Iron Curtain, was the shared mission of Central and East Europeans. Indeed, becoming indistinguishably Western was arguably the principal aim of the revolutions of 1989. The enthusiastic copying of Western models, accompanied as it was by the evacuation of Soviet troops from the region, was initially experienced as liberation. But after two troubled decades, the downsides of a politics of imitation had become too obvious to deny. As resentment seethed, illiberal politicians rose in popularity and, in Hungary and Poland, acceded to power.

In the first years after 1989, liberalism was generally associated with the ideals of individual opportunity, freedom to move and to travel, unpunished dissent, access to justice, and government responsiveness to public demands. By 2010 the Central and East European versions of liberalism had been indelibly tainted by two decades of rising social inequality, pervasive corruption, and the morally arbitrary redistribution of public property into the hands of a few. The economic crisis of 2008 had bred a deep distrust of business elites and the casino capitalism that, writ large, almost destroyed the world financial order. Liberalism's reputation in the region never recovered from 2008. It greatly weakened the case, pressed by a handful of Western-trained economists, for continuing to imitate American-style capitalism. Confidence that the political economy of the West was a model for the future of mankind had been linked to the belief that Western elites knew what they were doing. Suddenly it was obvious that they didn't. This is why 2008 had such a shattering ideological, not merely economic, effect both regionally and worldwide.

An additional reason why Central and East populists have got away with exaggerating the dark sides of European liberalism is that the passage of time has erased from the collective memory the even darker



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sides of European illiberalism. In addition, Central and East Europeans got their chance to imitate the West just as the West was losing its

alism espoused by ruling groups in Budapest and Warsaw is incontestably convenient for incumbents who want nothing to do with the demo-

are undoubtedly complex. But they partly lie in the humiliations associated with the uphill struggle to become, at best, an inferior copy of a

allel example. As its name suggests, it was launched in response to Angela Merkel's offhand claim that her monetary policy was 'alternativlos' ('without alternative'). By describing the government's proposal as the only available option, she provoked an intense and implacable search for alternatives. A similar backlash, provoked by the assumed normality of post-nationalism, gave birth, in formerly communist countries, to an anti-liberal, anti-globalist, anti-migrant and anti-EU revolt, exploited and manipulated by populist demagogues who knew how to demonize 'inner enemies' to mobilize public support. <

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global dominance and prescient observers began to doubt not only the universal applicability but also the ideal superiority of the West's political model. This was not a favourable context for continuing to pursue reform-by-imitation. Being an imitator is often a psychological drama. But it becomes a shipwreck if you realize mid-stream that the model you have started to imitate is about to capsize and sink. Fear of catching the wrong train is commonly said to haunt the collective psyche of Central Europe. Thus, political and economic instability in the West has both energized and justified the revolt against liberalism in the East.

By identifying animus against the politics of imitation as one of the taproots of Central and Eastern European illiberalism, we do not mean to deny that the leaders of illiberal parties in the region are power hungry and benefiting politically from their efforts to discredit liberal principles and institutions. The illiber-

cratic alternation of parties in power. Their anti-liberalism is opportunistic in the sense that it helps them evade legitimate charges of corruption and abuse of power levelled by EU officials and domestic critics. *Fidesz* (the Hungarian Civic Alliance) and *PiS* (the Polish Law and Justice Party) regularly malign the checks and balances prescribed by Western constitutionalism as a foreign plot to stifle the authentic voices of the Hungarian and Polish peoples. The urgent need to defend the nation against 'foreign-hearted' inner enemies is how they justify their dismantling of an independent press and an independent judiciary as well as their scurrilous attacks on dissidents and critics.

But focusing on the corrupt practices and strategies for evading responsibility adopted by the illiberal governments in the region will not help us understand the sources of popular support for national populist parties. The origins of populism

superior model. Discontent with the 'transition to democracy' was also inflamed by visiting foreign 'evaluators' with an anaemic grasp of local realities. These experiences have combined to produce a nativist reaction in the region, a reassertion of 'authentic' national traditions allegedly suffocated by second-hand and ill-fitting Western forms. The post-national liberalism associated especially with EU enlargement has allowed aspiring populists to claim exclusive ownership of national traditions and national identity.

This was the mainspring of the anti-liberal revolt in the region. But a subsidiary factor was also involved, namely, the unargued assumption that, after 1989, there were no alternatives to liberal political and economic models. This presumption spawned a contrarian desire to prove that there were, indeed, such alternatives. Germany's populist anti-euro party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), provides a par-

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