The Dying of the Light

BY IVAN KRASIEV 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 Krastiev 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 of the book.

In the immediate aftermath of 1989, the global spread of democ- cracy 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 resent- ful and less liberal than had been ex- pected or hoped.

When the Cold War ended, rac- ing to join the West, so that destina- tion has been idealized from behind the Iron Curtain, was the shared mis- sion of Central and East Europeans. Indeed, becoming indistinguishable from Westerners was arguably the principal aim of the revolutions of 1989. The enthusiastic copying of West- ern models, accompanied as it was by the evocation of Soviet troops from the region, was initially expe- rienced as liberation. But after two troubled decades, the downsides of a politics of imitation had become too obvious to deny. As resentment set in, illiberal politics took over in popularity and, in Hungary and Pol- land, acceded to power.

In the last years after 1989, liber- alism was generally associated with the ideals of individual opportunity, freedom to move and to travel, un- punished dissent, access to justice, and government responsiveness to public demands. By 2010 the Cen- tral and East European versions of liberalism had been indelibly tainted in two decades of rising social in- equality, 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, until then, largely, almost completely, destroyed the world financial order. Liberals’ reputa- tion in the region never recovered from 2008. It greatly weakened the case, pressed by a handful of West- ern-trained economists, for continu- ing to initiate American-style capital- ists. Confidence in 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 the elites didn’t. This is why 2008 had such a shattering ideological, not merely economic, effect both regionally and worldwide.

An additional reason why Cen- tral and East populists have gotten away with exaggerating the dark sides of European liberalism is that the passage of time has erased from the collective memory the even darker global dominance and present ob- servers began to doubt not only the universal applicability but also the ideal superiority of the West’s political model. This was not a favorable context for continuing to pursue re- form by imitation. Being an imitator is often a psychological drama. But it be- comes 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 used to haunt the collective psyche of Central Europe. Thus, political and economic instability in the West has both energized and justified the revolt against liberal- ism in the East.

By identifying animus against the politics of imitation as one of the triggers of Central and Eastern Euro- pean liberalism, we do not mean to deny that the leaders of illiberal parties in the region are power hun- gry and benefiting politically from their efforts to discredit liberal prin- ciples and institutions. The illib- eral criticism of the parties is by- eral model. Discontent with the transition to democracy was also inflamed by visiting foreign evalu- ations with an anemic grasp of lo- cal realities. These experiences have combined to produce a nativist re- sponse in the region, a reassertion of ‘authentic’ national traditions that is en- abled by second-hand and ill- fitting Western forms. The post- national liberalism associated es-pecially with EU enlargement has allowed aspiring populists to claim exclusive ownership of national tra- ditions and national identity. This was the mainspring of the anti-liberal revolt in the region. But a subsidiary factor was also involved, namely the unmet assumption that, after 1989, there were no al- ternatives to liberal political and economic models. This premiss sparked a contraction desire to prove that there were, indeed, such alternatives. Germany’s pop- ulist anti-euro party, Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), provides a par-