Far-Right Politics and National Identity in Central and Eastern Europe

by **Joakim Ekman** and **Tora Lane**

> **Twenty-seven years ago here in Central Europe, we believed that Europe was our future; today we feel that we are the future of Europe.**
>
> **Viktor Orbán**[1]

Contemporary political analyses of Central and Eastern Europe typically paint a gloomy picture of the region. In stark contrast to similar analyses in the 1990s, which tended to be about democratization, liberalization and Europeanisation, recent years' observers have rather emphasized nationalism, xenophobia, and illiberalism. Following the 2004 and 2007 Eastern enlargements of the European Union – sometimes described as a "return to Europe" – we have witnessed signs of democratic backsliding, Euroscepticism, the rise of radical right populism, and a general authoritarian backlash throughout the post-communist region. This includes a backlash against what one might label European values in a post-communist setting, i.e. the manifold instances of populist attacks on or challenges not only to European integration but also to what the European Union claims to represent: tolerance, liberal democracy, gender equality, respect for human rights and the protection of minority rights.[2]

The recurring crises in the region have further added to the notion of a new East/West divide in Europe: the 2008–2010 financial crisis, the Crimea crisis from 2014 and onwards, the 2015 refugee crises, and the more recent Brexit and Covid-19 crises. The mere titles of some of the more prominent analyses of contemporary politics in Europe and the world reveal the academic (and pessimistic) *Zeitgeist* of our time: *How Democracies Die*, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, and *The Light That Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*.[3]

The *CBEES State of the Region Report* is an annual publication, reporting and reflecting on social and political developments in the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe, each year taking a new and topical perspective. The report is written by researchers and area specialists, from within as well as outside of Södertörn University. The overall purpose of this initiative is to offer a publication that will be of interest to fellow researchers, policy makers, stakeholders, and the general public. The first report, covering events in 2020, focused mainly on constructions or reconstructions of national historical memory in the region and the instrumentalization of the past.

This year, the aim of the *CBEES State of the Region Report* is to present an overview of elements of far-right national identity politics in the recent upsurge of authoritarianism, Euroscepticism, and illiberalism in several countries of the Baltic Sea Region and Central and Eastern Europe. The labels used to characterize such regimes are many and debatable – including illiberal democracies, semi-democracies, hybrid regimes, electoral authoritarian regimes or competitive authoritarian regimes.[4] What the countries they describe seem to have in common is a general turn away from the pro-European liberalism that set the tune for more or less the entire political agenda after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, towards a more isolationist or protectionist – not to say xenophobic – nationalism.

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Nationalism is, in itself, not considered to be a threat to democracy. In the field of democratization studies, it is part of the received wisdom that nationalism (or national unity) has historically been a prerequisite for democracy. Only when people in a given territory can agree upon who the people are (the *demos*), democracy is possible, as argued by Dankwart Rustow in the early 1970s.[5] Later generations of researchers have confirmed the need for a supportive political community in stable democracies.[6] Moreover, nationalism has played an important historical role in the region, as a motivation for the opposition in the struggle against the Communist regimes, from the dissident movements in the 1960s and 1970s, through the protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the outset of the Crimea crises in 2014, Anne Applebaum argued that nationalism could work as such a positive force for the people in Ukraine.[7]

Still, we know from the catastrophic lessons of history that nationalism, as a political ideology, has close ties to authoritarianism, xenophobia, and fascism. And today, nationalism in Eastern Europe that was to serve “the return to Europe” no longer plays into the hands of pro-European liberalism, as argued by Ivan Krastev. Rather, nationalism is generally perceived by the electorate in different countries as the (preferred) opposite to Europeanization and submission to Brussels.[8] What is more, nationalist authoritarian movements pose open threats to democratic values. But the turn away from Europe today only reminds us that the sovereignty regained by the nation states of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism was related to supranational unions, such as the EU.

The most often cited examples of a nationalist or illiberal turn in the region refer to Putin in Russia, Órban in Hungary and the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland, but the same tendencies are detectable in several other countries in the region, as this report demonstrates. In fact, in a majority of the countries in the region, authoritarian right and far-right movements or elements have become increasingly influential in politics and society in recent years. The explanations for such authoritarian tendencies differ, and how we are to understand this phenomenon in relation to traditional parliamentary party politics remains an open question. Some have argued that the rise of illiberalism (i.e. the electoral success of right-wing populist parties) is related to unfulfilled and perhaps unrealistic expectations of the transformation era, after which many voters felt that the idea of “catching up with the West” never materialized.[9] At the same, other observers have pointed out that disillusionment with liberal democracy is not exclusively confined to post-communist countries, and that the recent electoral success of radical right-wing parties can be found all over Europe.[10] Important as the notion of Eastern European disillusionment seem to be for the emergence of popular support for right-wing parties, it is clearly not the full story.

Backlash symptoms may be found all over Europe, and beyond. In the well-functioning democracies in Northern Europe, radical right parties have had unprecedented electoral success in recent elections. The anti-immigration Sweden Democrats entered parliament in 2010, and despite having its roots in neo-Nazism and promoting outright opposition to multiculturalism, the party has remained a significant actor in Swedish politics.

In the 2018 general election, they won some 18% of the vote. In a similar fashion, in Finland, the far-right Finns Party proved that both opposition to immigration and the rejection of climate change policies appealed to many voters in the 2019 elections. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party has a history of successful cooperation with the government parties on most issues, in return for acceptance of their anti-immigration political stance.

In Western Europe, we have seen parties of similar kinds for a number of years in e.g. the Netherlands (Party for Freedom), Belgium (Vlaams Belang), France (National Front, more recently National Rally), Italy (the League) and Austria (the Freedom Party). These parties seem to have been able to capitalize on the 2015 refugee crisis in particular. The Brexit Party in the UK is part of the same family of parties. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered parliament in 2017, with almost 13% of the vote. The party is typically described as basing its agenda on anti-immigration (especially hostility towards Muslims) but also on "resistance" to the (West) German establishment, and appeal in particular to voters in the former GDR parts of Germany. At the same time, as demonstrated by Weissenkircher's contribution in this report, Germany's far right is currently much more multifaceted, involving political parties, social movements (like PEGIDA) and think-tanks. Moreover, opposition to the liberal establishment is not just about "East" versus "West"; rather, the far right uses multiple identities in order to mobilize locally, regionally and even on the supra-national level.

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Far right parties have thus become significant political players throughout Western Europe; but common wisdom is that similar parties are stronger in post-communist Europe.

In Central Europe, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Órban stand out as something of a role model for other extreme right politicians in the EU, and with his party FIDEZ (and government coalition partner Christian Democratic People's Party) he has used its two-thirds majority in the parliament to make constitutional changes, virtually getting rid of checks and balances, turning Hungary into what Órban himself labels an "illiberal state". The aim has been to take full control over all state institutions, and after that, to make conditions increasingly difficult for critical journalists, NGOs, oppositions groups and – as highlighted in Andrea Pető's contribution in this report – universities. The assault on academic freedom also includes attacks on individual researchers. In his contribution on Ukrainian nationalists, Rudling points to the same practice.

In 2019–2020, the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) returned to power in Poland, with almost 44% of the vote. Voters, especially in the rural parts of the country, have been attracted to the party's emphasis on Catholic values, social welfare, and Polish nationalism (see also Michlic's contribution). In both Hungary and Poland, democratic freedoms have been steadily declining over the past decade. In the yearly rankings provided by *Nations in Transit* (NiT), a report by Freedom House focusing on democracy in Eastern Europe, Hungary recently dropped out of the group of "democracies" altogether, to become a "hybrid regime". Poland is still labelled a "semi-consolidated democracy" in NiT, but the democracy ratings have been in decline over the past few years. The government has advocated distinctly discriminatory treatment of LGBT+ people and introduced controversial changes in the abortion law. Also, press freedom has been under attack in recent years.

The chapters included in this report demonstrate the *diversity* of the post-communist regimes. In some countries, an extreme nationalistic agenda is not promoted by populist or radical right-wing parties, but rather, by the political incumbents themselves, like in Tajikistan (see the contribution by Lemon and Antonov). In Belarus, the discussion about identity formation among far-right movements relates to competing narratives of World War II (see Kotljarchuk's contribution); and in Russia, Shenfield provides an informed discussion about various forms of Russian nationalism.

The contributions in this report also demonstrate the need to take context-specific factors seriously. In some countries, you have a situation where one single party stands out as the main right-wing party, like in Slovakia, where the People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS) represents the key radical right actor (see the contribution by Paulovicová), or in the Czech Republic, where the SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy Party) presently fills the same function (see the contribution by Kazharki). In Estonia, the far right and anti-immigrant Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) entered parliament in 2015, and has since consolidated its position as the main anti-immigration (and anti-liberal) party in the country. In other countries, the situation is very different, for example in Serbia or Croatia, where several radical right-wing parties exist at the same time (see the contributions by Pavlović and Todosijević, and Petsinis, respectively). In Catholic-dominated Lithuania, there are also a number of right-wing actors promoting family values, as part of a nationalistic agenda (see the contribution by Ulinskaitė and Garškaitė), whereas in Orthodox Romania, the far-right is mainly a phenomenon on the political fringe, as demonstrated in Gherghina's contribution.

What all these illiberal or right-wing parties have in common is an aggressive approach to politics, rather than a specific common agenda. In the research literature, the far right in Europe is typically depicted as a diverse phenomenon, being at the same time anti-establishment, anti-EU, anti-Muslim, anti-multiculturalism, and anti-globalization. While all of these voices arguably advocate intolerant views of some variety, they differ in terms of targeted "others". Some are outright neo-fascist, focusing almost exclusively on immigration or ethnic minorities, while other support e.g. LGBT rights, as a way of pointing out Muslims as the true enemies of freedom.[11] Many promote what they claim to be traditional European values, while at the same time being critical of the European Union. Some of the actors highlighted in this report constitute a direct threat to democracy, like the radical right-wingers in Ukraine (see the contribution by Likhachev).

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There are some common traits, however: all of the parties commonly understood as radical right-wing parties typically claim to represent ordinary people, in stark contrast to the corrupt elites. The political establishment is considered to be dishonest and self-interested. There is a common notion of the need to protect the silent majority from the perils of globalization and non-Western immigration. After the refugee crisis in 2015, the latter has gained importance. To liberal politicians, this remains a serious challenge. Being unable to totally dismiss the right-wing populists as illegitimate, liberal politicians have to varying degrees failed to stop the far right agendas from making an impact on the public debates. While this need not necessarily mean the death of liberal democracy, it nevertheless entails political polarization and the rejection of consensual politics and as such, a distinct threat to societal integration and European cooperation.[12] On top of this comes the shrinking influence of the EU, not least after Brexit. EU tutelage worked in Central and Eastern Europe until membership was achieved, it would seem; and once an EU member, countries could relax about further reforms and observance of democratic or "European values".[13]

Given the general development towards popular support for the far right documented in this report, one may ask if post-communist voters after having "returned to Europe" more recently have turned away from "Europe"? But that is obviously not the case. Public support for the EU remains widespread. A more appropriate question would be if post-communist voters accept the notion of an *alternative vision* of Europe?

In his contribution on the far right in Hungary, Balogh draws attention to the meaning of Europe in the right-wing discourse. It is certainly not about the EU; rather it has to do with a self-image as a Christian bulwark. Hungary (and Europe) need to be protected from Muslim migrants or asylum seekers, and FIDEZ is there to do the job. Likewise, in his contribution, Bassin demonstrates that illiberal or far-right politicians like Viktor Órban and Jarosław Kaczyński (leader of PiS in Poland) are not out to dismantle or secede from the EU; rather, what they want is to remodel the union, making it into a populist version of itself. After Brexit, a window of opportunity has opened. In the right-wing European populist discourse, such a cultural "counter-revolution" is possible. Thus, as Bassin argues, there are no simple lines to be drawn between the nation states and Europe in today's far right milieu. The far right may be EU-sceptic, but it is not anti-European. Several nationalist parties are in fact pan-European, and ready to form alliances on the supra-national level (see for example Weissenkircher's contribution in this report). Bassin underlines the significance of ideas of European identity contingent to national projects of identity within the far right, with an emphasis on, among other things, traditional Christian values.

The kind of illiberal politics promoted by Órban and Kaczyński are thus not primarily about fighting multiculturalism or Brussels; rather, it is nothing less than dealing with a perceived civilizational threat to European Christianity. As suggested by Krastev and Holmes,[14] this entails a cynical twist on "returning to Europe". Three decades after the fall of communism, returning to Europe doesn't mean the East catching up with the West; it is rather about the Western liberals that – supposedly – need to return to Europe. That is, to the *real* Europe. In the words of Órban: "Twenty-seven years ago here in Central Europe, we believed that Europe was our future; today we feel that we are the future of Europe."

As evidenced by the political contestation of Europe, far-right populists have become increasingly preoccupied with identitarian issues, relating to both national and European identity. The coalition of far-right parties in the European Parliament has assumed the name *Identity and Democracy*. The interest in identity seems to have been appropriated from leftwing political movements. Identity politics may be tentatively understood as a political approach wherein people of a particular ethnicity, gender, or social class (or some other basis of identification) develop political agendas based on such identities (cf. the contributions on Serbia, by Pavlović and Todosijević in this report). In the far-right take on identity politics, the "other" that needs recognition and protection are those silently opposing the hegemonic or dominant norms in society: The common people, those who feel alienated from Western liberalism, which defines European values and Brussels-style tolerance.

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Not only does identity politics seem to fit well into the projects of national identity formation in post-communist Europe; it also serves to underpin the ideological quest for hegemony over the political field that the French chief far-right ideologue Alain de Benoist saw as the task of the New Right think tank *La Nouvelle Droite*. According to de Benoist, a crucial strategy for the new right was to challenge the political distinction between the left and the right. And indistinction seems to work well in the hands of contemporary right-wing movements. Another appropriation from leftwing politics has to do with social welfare. Both Putin and the Polish PiS party have derived a lot of their popularity from promises of increased welfare for all. But how then do these very different political projects and ideas work together, if they do at all? As mentioned, it is very difficult to name the political tendencies that we are attempting to define here using any single label (such as authoritarianism, illiberalism, populism, or nationalism). The question can also be raised as to whether there is any coherent ideological program at all in the new right movements of today, or whether it is just an amalgam of indistinct nationalist strategies. (In the present report, in his essay on the far right's online engagement with national identity issues, Zavatti addresses the question about ideological consistency.)

What are we then to make of this situation? How close are we to the *Twilight of Democracy* as Applebaum termed this historical moment, opening up the possibility of the end of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe? How can we understand this development in the dynamics of the region in itself, and in relation to global political tendencies? Back in 2007, in a special edition of *Journal of Democracy* on the democratic backsliding of Central and Eastern Europe, Ivan Krastev noted bluntly: "The liberal era that began in Central Europe in 1989 has come to an end. Populism and illiberalism are tearing the region apart".[15] Contrary to hopes and actual progress in the early 2000s, what we have seen in many places in Central and Eastern Europe since the EU expansions in 2004 and 2007 indicates that the health of democracy in the region is far from assured.[16] Some scholars have pointed to the communist legacy in order to explain the resilience of non-liberal orientations among citizens in the region; others have identified performance-related explanations (like corruption) for the emergence of low trust societies, where and far right populist parties may thrive.[17] In order to understand the challenges that lie ahead, we need a better understanding of how far right ideas and attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe come to be manifested. That is the point of the present report. ●

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