



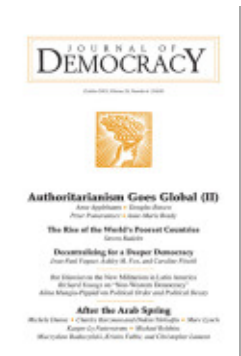
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# What's Wrong with East-Central Europe?

## THE FADING MIRAGE OF THE “LIBERAL CONSENSUS”

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Ivan Krastev's influential essay “The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus” appeared in the *Journal of Democracy* in 2007 as part of a special symposium in which contributors were asked to write about whether they thought democracy was backsliding across East-Central Europe (ECE).<sup>1</sup> Krastev's essay began with an alarming appraisal of postcommunist Europe, but ended with a soothing prediction: Yes, the rise of illiberal populism across the region signaled that the post-1989 “consensual politics” aimed at EU accession was coming to an end; no, this was not a development that would lead to the collapse of democracy, because democracy no longer had any serious ideological alternatives. “Weimar interpretations” were wide of the mark: “The streets of Budapest and Warsaw today are not flooded by paramilitary formations in search of a final solution,” Krastev wrote, “but by restless consumers in search of a final sale.”<sup>2</sup>

Krastev was broadly correct about the limited threat of far-right illiberal populism. Although paramilitaries chanting nationalist and anti-Semitic slogans have now joined the shoppers in Hungarian towns and cities, Hungary's slide toward semi-authoritarianism is arguably an exceptional case reflecting a specific combination of a restive conservative-nationalist right wing, strongly majoritarian institutions, and economic recession. Even after years of socioeconomic pain and occasional political turbulence following the Great Recession of 2008–2009, the situation

today in East-Central Europe and beyond does not mirror that of Weimar Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Yet if Krastev was right that democracy in East-Central Europe will not be going out with a bang, he failed to consider whether it might go out with a whimper. In stressing the limited threat posed by extremist outsider parties and elected strongmen, Krastev overlooked a subtler threat—that illiberalism, represented by both entrenched economic elites and latent forces of national and social conservatism, had never actually gone away during the period of “liberal consensus” and was thus *already established* in the mainstream.

The liberalism of the “liberal consensus”—as Krastev’s essay concedes—was an elite project driven by small groups at the apex of politics, business, academia, and officialdom. We argue, however, that this narrow economic, technocratic variant of liberalism merged with existing illiberal narratives and interests which pro-European elites generally opted to accommodate rather than oppose. Despite appearances, in East-Central Europe there is an absence of genuinely liberal political platforms—by which we mean a range of mainstream ideologies of both the left and right based on shared commitments to the norms of political equality, individual liberty, civic tolerance, and the rule of law. As a result, citizens are left unexposed to the philosophical rationale for liberal-democratic institutions. Across the region from Poland to Bulgaria, it is this configuration that sees ardently pro-European administrations of both the center-left and center-right steadily undermining liberal democracy.

The idea that democracy is backsliding in East-Central Europe is fast becoming the consensus view. Much of the scholarship on backsliding focuses on Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who at the head of his ruling Fidesz party has stripped away formal checks and balances to concentrate power in his own hands and who seeks support on the basis of an exclusivist nationalism, as underlined by his declared intention to build an “illiberal nation-state.”<sup>4</sup> Yet mainstream politicians elsewhere in the region have also used their big electoral majorities to bend democratic and constitutional rules. Barely had the constraints of EU conditionality been lifted when Bulgarian and Romanian administrations moved to vandalize their countries’ institutions and reward financial insiders. Even in the Czech Republic, a star democratizer, the country’s first directly elected president, Miloš Zeman, wasted no time after assuming office in March 2013 before trying to turn the country’s parliamentary democracy into a semipresidential system, appointing a technocratic government over the heads of the country’s political parties.<sup>5</sup>

Viewed in the context of a decade of data provided by Freedom House’s Nations in Transit (NIT), such episodes can be seen as part of an established regionwide trend of backsliding away from democracy.

Measured on a scale in which a score of 1 denotes the “highest level of democratic progress” and 7 the lowest, Hungary and Slovakia have regressed significantly since EU accession, each falling from highs of 1.96 in the mid-2000s to current lows of 2.96 and 2.61, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Poland was listed even higher, at 1.75 on the eve of accession in 2004, and it has now dropped to 2.18. Romania and Bulgaria, countries recently seen as “successful laggards,”<sup>7</sup> have regressed from highs of 3.29 and 2.86, respectively, to present lows of 3.46 and 3.25. Only the Czech Republic appeared to buck this trend, until it too fell from 2.14 in 2013 to 2.25 in 2014. Hungary aside, these figures do not suggest a headlong descent into semi-authoritarianism. They do, however, indicate that the region’s purported democratic malaise is more than mere hyperbole.

Backsliding was a widely forecasted side-effect of the elite-focused, incentive-driven reform processes in East-Central Europe overseen by the EU. Just as prevailing explanations of the success of democratization had focused on the incentives for elites to meet EU conditionalities, warnings of possible backsliding hinged on the likely impact of the disappearance of these incentives after accession.<sup>8</sup> Such warnings rested on the assumption that ECE elites had not internalized liberal-democratic values and would violate or stretch constitutional norms if they could. Now that the predicted backsliding has actually begun, studies are examining cross-national variation in the forms and extent of backsliding and alternative ways of motivating elites to preserve liberal institutions.

Despite the coherence—and to some extent realism—of these studies, their understanding of democratic consolidation and progress as a function of elite calculation rather than identification with liberal values has always been in conflict with the equally taken-for-granted notion that “democracy needs democrats” and the only slightly more contested idea that “democracy needs democratic citizens.”<sup>9</sup> The low levels of civic engagement and the weakly embedded institutions in East-Central European democracies, although long acknowledged, have usually been framed as tough but surmountable legacies of communism.<sup>10</sup> Only a small number of scholars have flagged the more acute challenge that such institutional hollowness poses to democratization. For example, Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits note that ECE democracies, in contrast to those of Western Europe, were born with a “hollow core” and suggest that the lack of mass civic and political engagement is key to understanding the region’s democratic malaise.<sup>11</sup>

Overcoming this hollowness and instilling meaningful identification with core liberal-democratic norms in ECE societies would have required a great deal of principled and philosophically consistent political leadership as well as civic activism. Yet despite the presence of many self-proclaimed liberals in mainstream politics, no such political-cultural project was ever attempted on a scale sufficient to embed liberal norms and practices in contexts where they had previously been

missing. Far from backsliding on limited earlier progress, East-Central Europe's democratic consolidation is better viewed as having always been somewhat illusory.

Furthermore, the story of democracy in East-Central Europe is not simply one of hollow institutions subject to the occasional predations of newly uninhibited illiberal elites allowed by the inaction of genuine but passive liberals. Across the region, the political center ground has long been characterized by the subtle *cohabitation* of liberal and illiberal norms, with the latter gradually overpowering the former. In our view, this consistent weakness of liberalism is at the root of East-Central Europe's democratic malaise, with the well-documented problems of fading conditionalities, corruption, and economic crisis providing opportunities for elites to consolidate their power and for angry citizens to vent their frustrations.

### The Paradigmatic Case of Bulgaria

Hungary is commonly considered the paradigmatic case of democratic backsliding in East-Central Europe, exhibiting the “same cancer”—already metastasized—that is “present elsewhere on the continent, even if it hasn't come to the attention of diagnosticians.”<sup>12</sup> Yet in our view, another country is more emblematic of the malaise afflicting the region's young democracies: Bulgaria. Despite Bulgaria's lower levels of economic development and less favorable historical legacies, the country's democracy was considered one of the success stories of the EU's democratic conditionality. Bulgaria also exhibited the political dynamics that were characteristic of, but concealed in, other successful ECE democratizers. Whereas tenuous liberal traditions and legacies of opposition to communist rule obscured the top-down, elite-dominated nature of democratization in many ECE states, in Bulgaria pre-accession democratization was an explicitly elite-driven process.<sup>13</sup>

In Bulgaria, we see liberalism—or rather the post-1989 economic and technocratic variant of it—merging with existing illiberal narratives (ethnic nationalism and social conservatism), which pro-European elites generally opted to accommodate rather than oppose. Thus Bulgaria's pro-Western, reform-oriented government of 1997 to 2001, led by the anti-communist center-right Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) and generally credited with putting the country firmly on the path to democratic consolidation, never actually advocated liberal norms beyond the bare minimum required by a European Union eager to recognize a prospective new member.<sup>14</sup> SDS prime minister Ivan Kostov may have overseen Bulgaria's ratification of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, but he was also keen to stress his party's “national credentials” on the campaign trail. Predictably, the SDS never attempted to repeal the illiberal constitutional prohibition on parties “formed on an ethnic basis.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, though the SDS's liberal economic policies (especially its implementation of a currency board) aligned with the prescriptions of Western governments and financial institutions, the party had a penchant for "privatizing in [its] own favor."<sup>16</sup> The SDS, though undoubtedly an improvement on the brazenly corrupt administration of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) that preceded it, is thus better understood as neither excessively progressive nor excessively regressive—hardly the transformative force needed to realize a fully liberal democracy in a political-cultural sense.

The SDS did, however, usher in a period of broad elite-level consensus in favor of building liberal institutions with a view to Euro-Atlantic integration, a feat that would have been far more difficult had the SDS articulated these goals as part of a strongly progressive liberal platform. Accordingly, Bulgaria made rapid progress in establishing liberal *institutions*, earning it NIT's designation of "consolidated democracy" by 2006 and gaining it admission to the EU in 2007.

The postaccession period in Bulgaria witnessed no autocratic Fidesz-style power grab, nor even any major electoral breakthrough of far-right populists. The country is barely mentioned in much of the backsliding literature. Yet the democratic norms enshrined in the country's institutions were nonetheless undermined in a piecemeal, pragmatic manner. The BSP-led coalition that came to power in 2005 quickly fell afoul of the EU on corruption and connived with parliamentary allies to tamper with electoral rules in 2009. Although the gambit failed and allowed the new pro-Europe center-right party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) to win the 2009 election and install celebrity Sofia mayor Boyko Borisov as prime minister, the turnover did nothing to arrest the steady decline of the country's NIT rating, which had already slipped to "semi-consolidated democracy" by 2009, just two years after EU entry.

One obscure incident illustrates well GERB's flexible approach to both EU regulations and democratic norms: In 2011, the European Commission (EC) reproached Bulgaria's Interior Ministry for accepting private donations, a practice that "casts doubts over the independence of police investigation."<sup>17</sup> Yet GERB interior minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov denied any exchange of favors (despite the Ministry's having received in-kind donations amounting to several million euros per month) and resisted banning the corrupt practice until Borisov, under pressure from the EU, agreed to do so. Tsvetanov, however, said that private donations would be phased out gradually rather than stopped all at once. In the end, the rise of GERB simply meant that a different set of elites was now overseeing the erosion of institutional checks and balances.

That such flagrant postaccession abuses elicited only limited intellectual and public dissent shows that institutional vandalism is a symptom rather than the cause of the country's democratic malaise. The underlying problem is that citizens who have never been exposed to any unam-

biguously liberal political-cultural project can only weakly hold illiberal elites to account. This was demonstrated by the aftermath of the 2013 waves of mass protest, which first targeted GERB, bringing down the Borisov government, and then the successor government formed by a BSP-led coalition (although GERB won a plurality in the 2013 elections, it failed to form a government).

The second wave of demonstrations, which began in June 2013 and was sparked by BSP prime minister Plamen Oresharski's naming of a young oligarch to head the State Agency for National Security, was backed by most of the intelligentsia and clearly embraced some liberal norms, criticizing the government's ties to oligarchic power with a creative protest repertoire. But the movement's ideological stance echoed the SDS-era formula of advocating "Europe" and "democracy" while neglecting and often seeking to delegitimize the interests of disadvantaged sections of society.<sup>18</sup>

The familiar absence of any call for a more inclusive political community also meant that the longstanding tolerance for ethnic particularism among the country's right-leaning liberals was left unchallenged. Ultimately, the protests barely changed the political landscape. The Reformist Bloc, a five-party coalition created in 2013 that includes the SDS and draws support from the same highly educated urban demographic driving the protests, has thus used its position as part of the GERB-led government that came to power after elections in October 2014 to target Roma for discrimination.<sup>19</sup> Bulgaria's "liberal consensus" continues to unravel not because of far-right or conservative intrusion, but because the so-called liberal consensus was illusory in the first place.

The experience of Bulgaria calls into question the notion that liberal democracy was ever really institutionalized in postcommunist Europe—and not just in the so-called successful laggards, but even in the seemingly successful and high-performing Visegrád states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). If the "liberal consensus" underpinning democratization never really existed, as we believe, then democracy in the region may be moving toward an equilibrium in which liberal-democratic institutions are gradually eroded as the illiberalism of the political mainstream discreetly consolidates, perhaps making Bulgaria an illiberal trailblazer rather than a democratic laggard.

## **Mainstream Illiberalism in the Visegrád Countries**

Despite important variations in their patterns of democratic development, all three of the ostensibly robust Visegrád democracies—the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and even Poland—bear key hallmarks of the pattern of illiberal consolidation exemplified by Bulgaria. This pattern is rooted in the interaction of a compromised form of liberalism with residual illiberal structures inherent in postcommunist societies. These

same conditions are evident to varying degrees across East-Central Europe, leaving even relatively high-performing states such as the Czech Republic and Poland vulnerable to a creeping illiberal consolidation of politics facilitated rather than blocked by the “ersatz liberalism” of the political mainstream.

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***Despite the Czech Republic’s hallowed liberal-nationalist traditions, the lack of a strong and progressive civil society limits liberal influence on issues of inclusive citizenship and national identity.***

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As Krastev’s account makes plain, liberalism in East-Central Europe has rested not only on a narrow social base but on a narrow intellectual base as well. The only clear ideas binding together the region’s liberal elites in the late 1990s and early 2000s were their Euro-Atlantic foreign-policy orientations and their conformity with the liberal economic recipes of the World Bank, IMF, and *acquis communautaire*

(EU law). This threadbare faux liberalism sidelined the emancipatory concerns of marginalized constituencies, thereby allowing elite “reformers” to avoid confrontation with existing bases of illiberal power in society—namely, economic elites with origins in *nomenklatura* structures and forces of national and social conservatism found among the intelligentsia, churches, and nationalist subcultures. This lack of commitment to liberal-democratic norms from the outwardly prodemocratic political mainstream—including small avowedly liberal parties—explains the growth of illiberal power in ECE politics and society, of which institutional “backsliding” is a mere symptom.

It is important to stress, however, that these remain competitive democratic systems whose landscapes of institutions and parties are modeled on those of Western Europe. At the same time, these systems are increasingly undermined by popular distrust; corrupt and collusive relationships linking business, media, and political elites; and periodic eruptions of civic anger and anti-elite populism. These systems are also characterized by a revealing lack of public discussion and civic activism around touchstone social issues, such as the treatment of Roma populations or LGBT rights, and a lack of substantive, informed debate on the political power of economic elites. Such gaps set de facto limits on the scope of liberal democracy.

***The Czech Republic.*** The Czech Republic, a consistent high achiever in terms of democratic progress, has few structural obstacles impeding its path to becoming a fully liberal democracy. Czech nationalism has always self-consciously embraced ideas of political and economic liberalism, and there is no obvious clash between Czech national identity and liberal democracy. Furthermore, the country has an activist



subculture dating back to the early 1990s—with roots in the dissident movement of the 1970s and 1980s—that advocates a broader, more emancipatory version of liberalism.<sup>20</sup> Unlike many new EU members, the Czech Republic also had a stable lineup of plausible “standard” parties (Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Communists, and promarket conservatives) that competed, at least until 2010, over socioeconomic issues. Since then, this left-right axis has been weakened by the emergence of business-backed protest parties, notionally animated by good-governance and anticorruption agendas rather than illiberal populism.

But the strength of the country’s parties and the fixation of its politics on economic growth and well-functioning institutions reveal the limitations and underlying weakness of its democracy. President Václav Havel often pointed out in the 1990s that the early consolidation of political parties came at the expense of civic activism, the impact of which was further reduced by a turn toward establishing project-driven NGOs that often served as EU subcontractors.

The unhealthy merger of the political and economic spheres—and the penetration of business interests into the voluntary sector—has been a consistent feature of Czech democracy. This has recently been brought into sharp relief by the political rise of billionaire Andrej Babiš, who owns a massive business and media empire while also playing an extensive role in government as deputy prime minister and finance minister. Babiš has astutely managed to coopt anticorruption and good-governance NGOs into the service of his nominally reformist Action of Dissatisfied Citizens movement while simultaneously drawing many former members of the secret police into his political entourage.<sup>21</sup> But the Czech postcommunist liberal project has always been rooted in such compromises—between dissident liberals and the economic liberalism of technocratic elites, and between emerging mainstream politicians and the old-regime economic elites who would later become the backbone of the new business class.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the country’s hallowed liberal-nationalist traditions, the lack of a strong and progressive civil society limits liberal influence on issues of inclusive citizenship and national identity. For example, the post–World War II mass expulsion of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia remains a taboo topic in mainstream politics, so much so that it was considered a gross political error when presidential candidate and former foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg said during the 2013 election campaign, “What we committed in 1945 would today be considered a grave violation of human rights, and the Czechoslovak government, along with President Beneš, would have found themselves in The Hague.” This statement drew rejoinders accusing Schwarzenberg of “talking like a Sudeten German” and insulting the Czech nation.<sup>23</sup>

Although Czech public opinion has become more liberal toward

homosexuals, Roma continue to be targets of engrained public hostility and are largely ignored in political debates, save for periodic angry outbursts from populists and sometimes even mainstream politicians. Although the populist radical right seems likely to stay on the electoral margins, a string of grassroots protests in 2011 showed that anti-Roma sentiment is more than a latent phenomenon.

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***There is little evidence that any of Slovakia's political parties—or the bulk of its citizens—ever seriously rejected illiberal norms.***

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***Slovakia.*** Progressive liberalism has been even more elusive in Slovakia. Unlike the Czech Republic, Slovakia is

widely viewed as having turned to liberal-democratic politics after an initial period of illiberal posttransition backsliding. From 1992, an illiberal nationalist ruling party—Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)—and smaller radical-right parties were able to scapegoat the country's Hungarian minority and exploit anxieties about Slovakia's vulnerability as a newly independent state.

When HZDS was displaced in 1998 by a pro-European coalition of "standard" parties, including both Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, the country started its rapid climb toward EU membership. Whereas the liberal anti-Mečiarism of the 1990s had focused on catching up with Europe and implementing the *acquis* (passing legislation and building institutions), the center-right liberals who took office after 1998 focused on neoliberal welfare and labor-market reforms.<sup>24</sup> The political system appeared to "normalize" around left-right competition with the emergence of Robert Fico's Direction–Social Democracy party (known as Smer) as a mainstream, pro-Europe, center-left party.

Yet, just as in the Czech Republic, these conventional left-right political dynamics are starting to be overtaken by the politics of anticorruption and good governance. One product of this shift is the rise of liberal protest parties such as Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), formed in 2009, and its offspring Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OPaNO), formed in 2011. Another is the wave of protests in early 2012 over the so-called Gorilla scandal, in which leaked notes of wiretap recordings from 2005 and 2006 implicated high-officials in mass corruption involving privatization contracts.

Unsurprisingly, there is little evidence that any of the country's political parties—or the bulk of its citizens—ever seriously rejected illiberal norms. Smer was able to absorb the nationalist camp electorally, and to some extent ideologically, by fusing elements of ethnic nationalism with a populist slant on social democracy.<sup>25</sup> Consistent with this orientation, the party formed a coalition with the far right from 2006 to 2010, earning it a temporary suspension from the Party of European Socialists. Smer

justified this alliance on both pragmatic and political grounds, claiming that it promoted stability and that it was a means of taming the far right. Yet the government's subsequent passage of restrictive legislation (such as the 2009 Language Law) hinted at a closer ideological affinity.

Other developments also highlighted how the "pro-Europe" politics of anti-Mečiarism had obscured the illiberal nature of key parts of the pro-European center right. For example, in 2014 Smer joined the opposition Christian Democrats (KDH) in passing a constitutional ban on gay marriage (a move justified by Smer as a quid pro quo for opposition support of judicial reforms). Smer also supported the conservative Alliance for the Family's 2015 referendum initiative that sought to define marriage as only between a man and a woman, to ban adoption by same-sex couples, and to abolish compulsory sex education. Although both SaS and OĽaNO were liberal parties, both were top-down formations that subordinated liberal social demands to promarket economics and fiscal conservatism, in the case of the former, and to antipolitical showmanship, in the case of the latter. Finally, even the Gorilla protests, which seemed to signal a reawakening of civic activism, left no lasting political effect, yielding only a semi-coherent antipolitics message that was directed against all parties and, to some extent, against the very notion of representative democracy.

**Poland.** On the surface, Poland appears to be the exception to East-Central Europe's democratic malaise. It has experienced sustained economic growth, bucked the economic turmoil of the Great Recession, and produced a strong liberal governing party, Civic Platform (PO). Poland also offers one of the few examples of an ECE protest party defined by radical social liberalism, the upstart Palikot's Movement, which entered parliament in 2011.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Poland's status as a champion of liberalism—or bulwark against illiberalism—may owe more to its party-electoral configuration than to any deep cultural embrace of liberal norms. Like many promarket liberal parties in the region, PO pursues a narrowly defined technocratic program that is economically liberal but socially conservative. Moreover, as a prominent observer of the Polish political scene has noted, the country's "national and local elites are bound to Civic Platform primarily by the access that it provides to state patronage and the main factions are personality-based rather than ideological."<sup>27</sup>

In addition, the prominent conservative-nationalist opposition party Law and Justice (PiS) has long hoped to refashion Polish democracy by creating a "Fourth Republic" based on conservative Catholic values and an explicit rejection of the compromises made in the transition settlement between the regime and opposition in 1989. PiS's attempts to realize this project—most directly through minority governments in 2005 and 2006—foundered due both to the party's inability to expand

its electoral base and to the more proportional, power-dispersing nature of Poland's political institutions. But the dynamics, if not the final outcome, of Polish political competition in the early-to-mid 2000s, were similar to those of Hungary. These same dynamics led Krastev in 2007 to designate Poland as the "capital of Central European illiberalism."<sup>28</sup>

In our view, Poland is a case of illiberal conservative nationalism held at bay, and its prospects are gloomier than the current political situation might imply. Poland remains a divided society in which liberal rights for constituencies such as sexual minorities and women are either opposed or only reluctantly tolerated by many.<sup>29</sup> Strong bases of conservative nationalism can be seen not only in the strength of PiS but also in the tendency of the more liberal parties to accommodate positions of the Catholic Church (the declining Palikot's Movement, now called Your Movement, is an exception in this regard). Although the Catholic-conservative right has backpedaled on its earlier Fidesz-style project of cultural and constitutional transformation (the "Fourth Republic"), the key building blocks of illiberal consolidation are firmly in place.

### Toward a Bulgarian Scenario?

All these societies fit the Bulgarian paradigm in several key ways: the persistence of taboos on nationally sensitive issues; the lack of debate on the incestuous relationships between political and economic elites; and the predominance of narrow, economistic outlooks among liberal parties. The relative stability of these states since EU accession has been supplied not by liberal institutions—or the aftereffects of an EU-enforced "liberal consensus"—but by the relative absence of liberal challenges to illiberal power structures and norms. Bulgaria's present situation, in which superficially liberal institutional forms mask the illiberal parameters constraining political and cultural change, could well be the future situation for all of Central Europe.

Such a prognosis might be unduly pessimistic. Liberal traditions, legacies of dissidence, and civic activism are certainly stronger in, say, the Czech Republic and Poland than they have ever been in Bulgaria. Citizens and officeholders in Prague and Warsaw may more readily recognize that the norms implied by labels such as "Europe" and "democracy" are incompatible with the overt scapegoating of ethnic minorities or the blatant funding of police forces through private contributions. It is possible that some or all of these East-Central European societies may yet become functionally *liberal* democracies.

But they are not on course to do so as long as liberal accommodation of illiberal norms endures. In failing to confront the flawed designs of economic elites or to provide alternative political-cultural projects to counter national and social conservatism, ECE liberals have consistently opted to pretend that they live in liberal societies rather than

to set out to actually make them so. We therefore need to reassess the contribution of those “liberals” who are better at winning elections than at being liberal.

This implies that the task at hand is not necessarily the rescue and reform of deconsolidating democratic experiments. Rather, the recent experience of East-Central Europe suggests that the limits of what sound institutional planning can achieve in the absence of strong liberal civil societies have already been reached. Liberal institutions can lock in norms upheld by a liberal civil society by giving them legal force. But this only can temporarily substitute for a liberalism that is absent. That is the actual predicament of East-Central Europe. In this region, the erosion and circumvention of institutions—which indexes like NIT capture—are not evidence of “democratic backsliding” but rather symptoms of the interaction between democracies that were born hollow and a “liberal consensus” that never was.

What does the “Bulgarian scenario” forebode? First, it leaves ECE democracies vulnerable to the breakdown of norms of democratic representation as the Potemkin-like character of mainstream parties and politicians becomes apparent. This leads only to the further empowerment of elites, despite formal structures of accountability and open competition. The populist “elites-versus-the-people” structuring of politics that Krastev viewed in 2007 as the boisterous (but ultimately benign) future of European democracy exercises a corrosive effect in the ersatz liberal democracies of East-Central Europe. Moreover, the capture of pro-European politics by faux liberalism inhibits the formation of liberal forces that could and should act as agents of the long-term cultural and identity transformation necessary for any real progress toward a fully liberal democracy.

The “Bulgarian scenario” is not inevitable, however—neither for other Central European states nor even (in the longer term) for Bulgaria itself. But avoiding it may require a reorientation of research and policy agendas in the region. If there is one vital lesson to be learned, it is that strong, progressive, liberal identities are unlikely to emerge without the active promotion of liberal ideals in politics and civil society. Without strongly embedded liberal identities, it is difficult to imagine on what grounds citizens might call colluding elites to account when politicians tamper with electoral codes or scapegoat minorities. In much of East-Central Europe, liberal institutions paradoxically give legal force to norms that almost no one identifies with. It sometimes seems that liberal rights are upheld only when they are not seen to be challenging some nationalist or conservative norm.

Liberal politicians and civil society activists thus need to advocate liberal principles consistently, in particular in areas where they clash with existing illiberal norms. Frequently this may mean actively confronting social constituencies such as *nomenklatura*-derived economic

elites (often media owners and party backers), traditional nationalist lobbies, and powerful factions in churches or in the military. In the short term, there could, paradoxically, be negative effects—for example, harassment of liberal groups might go up, and Freedom House democracy scores might go down. But the path from an illiberal political culture to liberal pluralism is a long one. It is sure to have obstacles along the way, and it is unlikely to be negotiated without conflict.

## NOTES

1. Mirroring Krastev's article, we use the term "East-Central Europe" to describe the Visegrád states of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, plus Romania and Bulgaria. Ivan Krastev, "Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 56–63.

2. Krastev, "Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus," 58.

3. Cas Mudde, "The Myth of Weimar Europe," *Open Democracy*, 20 August 2013, [www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/myth-of-weimar-europe](http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/myth-of-weimar-europe).

4. "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp," 26 July 2014, [www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp](http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp).

5. Venelin Ganev, "Post-Accession Hooliganism: Democratic Governance in Romania and Bulgaria After 2007," *East European Politics and Societies* 27 (February 2013): 26–44; Seán Hanley, "Miloš Zeman's Attempt to Impose a Caretaker Government in the Czech Republic Is a Fundamental Challenge to Czech Parliamentary Democracy," EU-ROPP blog, 4 July 2013, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/07/04/milos-zemans-attempt-to-impose-a-caretaker-government-in-the-czech-republic-is-a-fundamental-challenge-to-czech-parliamentary-democracy>.

6. Sylvana Habdank-Kotackowska, *Nations in Transit 2014: Eurasia's Rupture with Democracy*, Freedom House, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2014%20booklet\\_WEBSITE.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2014%20booklet_WEBSITE.pdf).

7. Dimitar Bechev and Gergana Noutcheva, "The Successful Laggards: Bulgaria and Romania's Accession to the EU," *East European Politics and Societies* 22 (February 2008): 114–44.

8. On the "success" of EU conditionality, see Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization Through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, "When Europeanisation Meets Diffusion: Exploring New Territory," *West European Politics* 35 (January 2012): 192–207. For early predictions of backsliding, see Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, eds., *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

9. Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, and Milada Anna Vachudova, "Democracy in the Post-Communist World: An Unending Quest?" *East European Politics and Societies* 21 (February 2007): 7–30, 20. Some definitions of "democratic consolidation" include an attitudinal or cultural dimension, yet these generally require rejection of nondemocratic alternatives rather than a strong mass embrace of liberal-democratic or civic values. See, for example, Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Postcommunist Europe* (Bal-

timore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5. For a wider discussion, see Andreas Schedler, "What Is Democratic Consolidation?" *Journal of Democracy* 9 (April 1998): 91–107.

10. Marc Morjé Howard, "The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 157–69.

11. Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits, *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 239.

12. John Feffer, "Hungary: The Cancer in the Middle of Europe?" *World Post*, 6 July 2013, [www.huffingtonpost.com/john-feffer/hungary-the-cancer-in-the\\_b\\_3402128.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-feffer/hungary-the-cancer-in-the_b_3402128.html); see also Lise Esther Herman, "Re-Evaluating the Post-Communist Success Story: Party Elite Loyalty, Citizen Mobilization, and the Erosion of Hungarian Democracy," *European Political Science Review* (February 2015 electronic preprint): 1–34.

13. Most accounts agree that those Bulgarian dissident groups that did emerge from the communist period failed to inspire meaningful civic participation. Even the mobilization of 1996–97 that forced the BSP from office is most commonly described as a reaction to economic mismanagement strengthening the promarket elites rather than the expression of a mass democratic political culture. Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to Post-Communist Bulgaria: Political Economic and Social Transformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), ch. 3.

14. James Dawson, *Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria: How Ideas Shape Publics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 81–93.

15. The Turkish-minority-dominated Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) has enjoyed electoral success, but avoids prohibition only by denying any mandate to represent minority interests, instead resorting to patronage politics.

16. Zoltan Barany, "Bulgaria's Royal Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 141–55, 148.

17. "EC Spokesperson Slams Donations to Bulgaria's Interior Ministry," Sofia News Agency, 11 August 2011, [www.novinite.com/articles/131048/EC+Spokesperson+Slams+Donations+to+Bulgaria%27s+Interior](http://www.novinite.com/articles/131048/EC+Spokesperson+Slams+Donations+to+Bulgaria%27s+Interior).

18. For example, the economist and prominent liberal Georgy Ganev argued that the task of lifting Bulgaria "out of the swamp" rested on the shoulders of the "bourgeois" who had to defeat an alleged alliance of the oligarchs and the poor. "When They Laid Foundations . . . in the Swamp," 20 July 2013, Centre for Liberal Strategies, [www.cls-sofia.org/blog/?m=201307](http://www.cls-sofia.org/blog/?m=201307).

19. Health Minister Petar Moskov, representing the Reformist Bloc, announced in December that he would no longer send ambulance staff into neighborhoods where they risked attack by Roma, whom he referred to with the word *populatsiya* (a term generally used to refer to livestock rather than people). Far from alienating Reformist Bloc voters, the minister's comments and defiant response to criticism won him support. "Incidents with Sofia Emergency Teams 'Not Related to Roma,'" Sofia News Agency, 9 December 2014, [www.novinite.com/articles/165303/Incidents+with+Sofia+Emergency+Teams+%27Not+Related+to+Roma%27](http://www.novinite.com/articles/165303/Incidents+with+Sofia+Emergency+Teams+%27Not+Related+to+Roma%27).

20. Michal Kopeček, "The Rise and Fall of Czech Post-Dissident Liberalism After 1989," *East European Politics and Societies* 25 (May 2011): 244–71.

21. James de Candole, "Comment: Why Is the Next Czech PM Surrounding Himself with Police and Spooks?" *BNE Intellinews*, 14 January 2014, [www.bne.eu/content/story/comment-why-next-czech-pm-surrounding-himself-police-and-spooks](http://www.bne.eu/content/story/comment-why-next-czech-pm-surrounding-himself-police-and-spooks).

22. Gil Eyal, *The Origins of Postcommunist Elites: From Prague Spring to the Break-up of Czechoslovakia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi, and Eleanor R. Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1998).

23. See Jan Richter, “Beneš Decrees Re-Surface in Czech Presidential Race,” Radio Praha, 21 January 2013, [www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffrs/benes-decrees-re-surface-in-czech-presidential-race](http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffrs/benes-decrees-re-surface-in-czech-presidential-race).

24. Sharon Fisher, John Gould, and Tim Haughton, “Slovakia’s Neoliberal Turn,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (September 2007): 977–98.

25. Grigorij Mesežnikov, “National Populism in Slovakia—Defining the Character of the State and Interpreting Select Historic Events,” in Kálmán Petőcz, ed., *National Populism and Slovak-Hungarian Relations in Slovakia, 2006–2009* (Šamorín—Somorja: Forum Minority Research Institute, 2009), 39–66; Petra Burzová, “Towards a New Past: Some Reflections on Nationalism in Post-Socialist Slovakia,” *Nationalities Papers* 40 (November 2012): 879–94.

26. Ben Stanley and Mikolaj Czesnik, “Poland’s Palikot Movement: Voice of the Disenchanted, Missing Ideological Link or More of the Same?” *Party Politics* (December 2014 electronic preprint).

27. Aleks Szczerbiak, “Polish Politics in 2014 (Part 1): Is the Ruling Party Back in the Game?” Polish Politics Blog, 2 January 2015, <https://polishpoliticsblog.wordpress.com/2015/01/02/polish-politics-in-2014-part-1-is-the-ruling-party-back-in-the-game/>.

28. Ivan Krastev, “Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus,” 56.

29. Aleks Szczerbiak, “A Model for Democratic Transition and European Integration? Why Poland Matters,” *SEI Working Paper No. 138*, January 2015.