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# Democracy and Its Discontents

JOHN SHATTUCK

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What's happening to democracy in Eastern Europe? A new authoritarianism, "illiberal governance," has taken over in Hungary and Poland. It's been boosted by the Paris and Brussels attacks and the fear of terrorism. Hungary and Poland are not isolated cases. A trend away from democratic pluralism is also sweeping through Western Europe. Where will it lead?

In trying to answer this question, I'll follow the advice of Václav Havel, to "keep the company of those who seek the truth, but run from those who claim to have found it." I promise to make no such claim, but I will seek the truth about "illiberal governance"—the new threat to democracy that is prominent in the headlines these days. My tentative answer is that this modern form of "soft authoritarianism" may not prove sustainable.

Competing forces were unleashed by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Forces of integration broke down barriers, promoted democratic development, created economic interdependence and facilitated the digital revolution. Forces of disintegration tore apart failed states, stimulated ethnic and religious violence, and spurred nationalist leaders to challenge transnational entities like the European Union. There are conflicting scenarios about how these forces will play out. An optimistic view envisions slow and steady progress toward the universal realization of democracy. A negative, almost dystopian, perspective sees the increasing clash of cultures and

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civilizations—a steady regress toward ongoing conflict among cultures, religions, and societies. These two visions have been caricatured as alternative realities of the post-Cold War world, but they provide a useful starting point for understanding what’s happening today to democracy in Europe and the United States.

## I

Discontent with democracy is widespread. In 2014, a European Commission poll revealed that 68 percent of Europeans distrusted their national governments, and 82 percent distrusted the political parties that had produced these governments.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, a Gallup poll in the same year found that 65 percent of Americans were dissatisfied with their system of government and how it works—a striking increase from only 23 percent in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

One reason for this discontent may be a growing sense that the world is spinning out of control, and that democracy is only making matters worse. A deeper reason may be that people today are confused about the meaning of democracy—demanding both greater participation in their

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own governance and greater efficiency in the way government operates. The very idea of democracy may be at war with itself; people look to democratic governments to solve their problems but are unwilling to recognize their own responsibility for keeping democracy healthy.

Digging deeper, the roots of discontent can be found in four democratic revolutions of the last fifty years. As my colleague Ivan Krastev has written, these four upheavals have simultaneously strengthened and weakened democracy in Europe and the United States.

The Cultural Revolution of the 1960s gave birth to a modern world of individual rights and freedoms. At the same time, the rights revolution reduced the sense of collective purpose essential to democratic governance. It transformed democratic society, but a counterrevolution pushed back, turning the struggle for human rights and civil liberties into an endlessly divisive political battleground.

The Market Revolution of the 1980s released the power of the market economy to produce economic growth. It also cut way back on the role of government in regulating the economy, destroying the Keynesian consensus about the social benefits of a mixed economy and a welfare state. It paved the way for the rise of new economic elites, globalization and inequality, while breeding political resentment among the overwhelming majority left behind.

The Political Revolution of 1989 marked the end of Communism and the Cold War, the opening of borders, and the beginning of a transition to democracy and market freedom in Eastern Europe. But it also marked the collapse of longstanding social support systems in the East, and in the West an end to the informal social contract between economic elites and the people.

The most recent democratic upheaval, the Internet Revolution, opened the floodgates of information, creating unlimited opportunities for peer-to-peer communication and horizontal grassroots pressure for change. At the same time, it spawned vast echo chambers and ghettos of communication, reducing discourse across political divides and increasing the polarization of democratic societies.

## II

Democratic discontent is especially acute in Eastern Europe, where the roots of democratic governance are shallow. Eastern Europeans were ruled for centuries by successive empires of Ottoman, Russian, Hapsburg, fascist, and communist authoritarian regimes. A long-suppressed hunger for national identity and honor among the peoples of the region constantly fueled their anger against outside oppressors—the Hapsburgs, who executed the first elected Hungarian prime minister in 1849; the Russians, who dominated Poland throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and the Turks, who defeated the Serbs in the Battle of Kosovo Polje at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The collective memory of this ancient defeat in Serbia was so powerful that Slobodan Milosevic was able to invoke it 600 years later, when he launched his notorious ethnic cleansing campaign against the Kosovar Muslims.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, communism destroyed civil society in Eastern Europe by limiting civic engagement to activities relating to or mandated by the state. It also destroyed the sense of personal responsibility to the community that is essential for the growth of democracy. In Prague in the 1990s “volunteering” still meant collaborating with the regime. In

Budapest today common spaces in apartment buildings are still rarely cared for by the residents. Communism's alternative to civil society was state employment and social security, but of course these were dismantled after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

After 1989, hopes in Eastern Europe that democracy would bring immediate economic benefits went unfulfilled. Standards of living failed to keep pace with popular expectations, especially after the financial crisis hit the region in 2009. In this neuralgic environment, Eastern Europeans found themselves attracted to political leaders who claimed they could defend the people against outsiders, like the foreign banks that had called in their mortgages when the financial markets collapsed.

These festering resentments were the building blocks of a new nationalism. Two basic elements went into its construction.

First was the politics of national identity. The longing for national identity had been largely ignored by the proponents of post-Cold War

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European integration, but it was taken up with a vengeance by nationalist leaders who developed new narratives to appeal to a resentful and confused populace.

In Hungary, which had been on the losing side of both world wars as an ally of Germany, the new nationalist narrative depicted Hungarians as victims, stripped of two-thirds of their lands and separated from their compatriots by the Treaty of Trianon after the First World War, then occupied by Germany and allegedly *forced* to participate in the Holocaust at the end of the

Second World War. A particularly dangerous charge in this twisted national narrative was that "Brussels is the new Moscow."<sup>3</sup> After decades of being dictated to by a distant Soviet regime, Hungarians were susceptible to this claim. Casting the European Union as a hostile foreign power served the interests of nationalist politicians like Viktor Orban whose popularity was bolstered whenever EU authorities questioned the quality of Hungarian democracy.

A second building block of nationalism is the politics of fear. Today, leaders are linking the threat of terrorism in their countries to the refugees fleeing the violence in the Middle East. In Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland,

the governing parties have called Muslim refugees “a threat to Christian civilization.” Not to be outdone, the Hungarian government has warned that refugees in Europe are all potential terrorists, and is now preparing to enact an anti-terror law to give the government emergency powers to declare “a state of terror threat” and suspend the constitution for 60 days, subject to continuous extension.

### III

Once an Eastern European nationalist state was fully constructed, its form of government was given a new name—illiberal democracy. The term was coined in July 2014 by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary for the Hungarian government. He asserted that Hungary and its Eastern European neighbors had rejected the liberal values of individual rights and were returning to the traditional collective values of their nation-states. To emphasize his point, he asserted that “the Hungarian nation is not a pile of individuals” like people in the West after the rights revolution of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Orbán claimed that liberal democracy was a failure, pointing to political division and economic inequality in the United States, and dysfunction in the EU on issues of financial policy and migration. In his view, countries that are “capable of making us competitive” in the global economy “are not Western, not liberal democracies, maybe not even democracies,” citing as models the governments of Russia, China, Turkey, and Singapore.<sup>5</sup>

What are the elements of an “illiberal democracy?” The entry point is an election, to establish its claim—however tenuous—to be a democracy. Beyond that, the critical feature is majoritarian rule, implemented by a parliamentary supermajority that guarantees total control by the ruling party. In Hungary, this supermajority has opened the door to constitutional changes abolishing checks and balances and other key distinguishing features of a pluralist democracy.

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the system is whether it is sustainable, especially when it is inside a larger transnational system like the European Union. In his 2014 speech, Viktor Orban challenged the EU, claiming, “I don’t think our EU membership precludes building an illiberal new state based on a national foundation.”<sup>6</sup>

The Hungarian government has rejected the values and structures of a liberal democratic order. These values and institutional structures are intended to maximize accountability and liberty within a framework of democratic governance—checks and balances; freedoms of expression and assembly; due process of law; independence of the judiciary and the media; the protection of minorities; a pluralist civil society; and the rule of law.

The European Union was built on these values. They are at the heart of the political culture that has promoted the integration of Europe, but the new illiberal regimes of Eastern Europe are alien to this culture, and their neo-authoritarian leaders are rejecting it. Forces of disintegration unleashed by the refugee crisis and the Euro-crisis, combined with Viktor Orban’s challenge to European values, are threatening the very concept of European integration.

Last fall, this new model of illiberal democracy galvanized nationalists across Europe when Hungary constructed razor wire fences on its borders and stationed its army and police to keep out refugees. The result was a huge boost to the governing party’s flagging popularity at home, and the Hungarian Prime Minister’s emergence on the European stage as a challenger to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose response to the refugee crisis was based on the liberal values of the EU. The refugee

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crisis provided a golden opportunity for Viktor Orban to burnish his illiberal credentials without having to make the kinds of sober compromises that a liberal leader like Merkel has had to do to support both European values and European security. To paraphrase the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, illiberal leaders use chaos to create the opportunity for imposing order.

The new Polish government is now emulating the Hungarian model. It made the refugee issue a central feature of its election campaign last fall,

promising that religious and ethnic nationalism would protect Poles from an invasion of Muslims into Poland’s homogeneous Catholic society. The

government took a page out of the Hungarian playbook by attacking the Polish Constitutional Court and the independence of the Polish judiciary.

A pitched battle is now shaping up in Europe between liberal and illiberal democracy. At stake are the values that safeguard Europe against a repeat of its catastrophic experience with 20th century fascism and communism. These values are challenged not only by the proponents of illiberal democracy, but also from within liberal democracies in Europe and the United States. Disturbing signs are everywhere about the health of Western democracies—their steady decline in voter participation, their broad distrust of political leaders, their alienation from distant decision-makers, their susceptibility to the influence of money in politics, their inability to make decisions on urgent issues like the Eurocrisis, refugees and immigration, and their increasing polarization and gridlock. Out of this discontent, new nationalists and demagogues on both sides of the Atlantic like Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump are gaining popularity.

#### IV

This is why the winter of our discontent will not be ending soon. But if we step back and ask some questions, I think some surprising answers may indicate the state of democracy may not be as bleak in the long run as it may seem today.

*Can the EU survive the challenge posed to it from within by illiberal governance?*

The EU is clearly vulnerable. Without major structural reforms, EU institutions make easy targets for nationalist movements. The Brussels bureaucracy is remote, and voters have no real connection to it. Only the member states participate directly in EU governance, and so far their leaders have shown little inclination to discipline a member state like Hungary or Poland that defies EU rules and principles—probably because they may want to do so themselves one day, as many British leaders are doing now by promoting “Brexit,” or British exit from the EU.

Paradoxically, Eastern European illiberal states may not be as big a threat to the EU as they appear because the benefits they receive are far greater than their costs of staying in. Two basic factors tie Hungary and its Eastern European neighbors to the EU—money and politics.

The money is plentiful, and flows freely in the form of structural funds with few strings attached. Over the next five years, Hungary is guar-

anteed to receive EUR 22 billion from the EU. Many of the country's major capital projects, public investment opportunities, and employment strategies are connected to this beneficent and benign funding source.

The second factor is politics. The EU provides an attractive political target for Eastern European politicians who benefit from biting the hand that feeds them with their rallying cry that "Brussels is the new Moscow." And despite their assault on the EU's liberal values, Eastern European countries benefit substantially from the Schengen rules on freedom of movement within the EU that guarantee employment mobility for their citizens. Without the EU, Hungary and its neighbors would be cast adrift in a chaotic environment. They have no natural resources, and would become economic vassals of the two big illiberal states to the East—Russia and Turkey—whose economic and security situation is far more uncertain even than that of the EU. This is why Viktor Orban is trying to prevent the EU from detaching Eastern Europe from the Schengen zone, and also why he is seeking to maintain social benefits for Hungarian workers in the UK. These may be losing battles for him, especially if he continues to resist the EU quota rules on accepting refugees, but they show how much he and his neighbors need the EU.

*Are the new illiberal democracies in Eastern Europe sustainable?*

If an illiberal government can be changed by democratic means, then the system may be sustainable. But if the centralization of power is

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so successful that the government can fend off any democratic challenge, then, paradoxically, an illiberal system may not be sustainable in the long run. There are four key weaknesses in the system.

First, the legacy of state control over the economy and its eventual collapse under communism show that it may be difficult for centralized illiberal regimes to deliver economically to their citizens without liberalizing their political institutions. This is particularly true for countries like Hungary and Poland that have been incorporated

into a much larger interconnected market economy like the EU.

Russia and China, the two main countries cited by Viktor Orban as models of illiberal governance, are both faltering economically because of the way they are governed politically.

Second, illiberal governance tends to lead to systemic corruption, which is a drag on economic growth and a source of instability, as the situation in Russia shows. Eastern European countries have unfavorable ratings compared to other EU member states on Transparency International's European Corruption Index.

Third, illiberal governance is vulnerable to the digital revolution, which allows increased peer-to-peer flows of information and creates horizontal pressures for change. Traditional media may have fallen under the control of illiberal regimes, but digital media have not. In Hungary, over 100,000 people took to the streets in 2014 when the government threatened to tax the use of the internet, and the government had to back down.

Fourth, as the internet tax controversy shows, illiberal regimes have few institutional safety valves for citizen discontent. When popular pressures build, the regime must either back down or resort to coercion. The Euromaidan protests in Ukraine demonstrated that the use of violence by an illiberal regime can lead to greater public discontent and pressure for more radical change.

A far greater challenge to the EU than illiberal governance in Eastern Europe is coming from one of the world's oldest democracies in the West—the United Kingdom. Now that the EU has given Prime Minister David Cameron what he has been asking for, it would be devastating for both sides of the Channel if the Brexit referendum were to pass.

### *Is liberal democracy in recession, or a state of permanent decline?*

This question can be answered in different ways. If one looks at the increasing popular demands for participation in governance and engagement in decision-making—as demonstrated by democracy movements around the world from Euromaidan to Taksim Gezi Park, to Tahrir Square, to Hong Kong, to Black Lives Matter in the United States—the ideas of democracy have greater appeal today than ever, even as the supply of healthy democratic governance may be diminishing.

On the other hand, if one looks at the popular appeal of the politics of national identity and security, and the demand for stability and efficiency in governance, as the opinion polls in Europe and the United States

seem to show, then liberal democracy with its aging pluralist institutions and short-term election perspectives may be in decline.

In the end, it will depend on democracy's capacity to reform itself—  
 ..... to use the tools of the digital revolution  
 ..... to stimulate participation while leveling  
*In the end, it will depend* the playing field and curtailing the  
*on democracy's capacity to* economic power of the top 1 percent to  
*reform itself.* ..... exercise disproportionate influence over  
 ..... decision making. It will also depend on  
 ..... liberal democracy giving more recog-  
 ..... nition to national identity and security, and creating new channels for  
 ..... national participation in supranational structures like the EU.

***What about the United States—will they elect a nationalist, populist, unilateralist, illiberal president?***

There are certainly threats to liberal values in the United States from the far right—on immigration, racial issues, and women's rights, to name a few. But there's also plenty of energy, especially on the left, for economic and political reforms to strengthen liberal democracy. On foreign policy, no one should mistake populist discontent for support for foreign intervention. Military deployment is deeply unpopular in the wake of the disastrous 2003 intervention in Iraq. If anything, I'm concerned that the United States is being swept up in a wave of neo-isolationism that may keep it from engaging as a leader in the world, and particularly from working with Europe and Russia to address the crises in Ukraine and Syria, and manage the global refugee crisis.

My prediction is that the United States will not elect a nationalist, populist, unilateralist, illiberal president, but that gridlock and polarization will continue to plague American politics unless one party wins both the presidency and the Congress, especially now that the Supreme Court is up for grabs. This is a sorry commentary on the state of democracy in America. Democratic politics are about compromise and negotiation between opposing viewpoints, not about zero-sum scorched-earth attacks on anyone who does not follow the orthodoxy of one political group. The Tea Party movement was the harbinger of contemporary anti-compromise, anti-democracy politics in America, and Donald Trump is its apotheosis. Trump may not succeed in capturing the presidency, but what he represents is a more dangerous American version of the nationalist illiberal democracy movements in Europe.

## V

The rise of illiberal governance in Eastern Europe is rooted in a long legacy of authoritarianism. Democratic solutions must come from within and will take time to develop. These regimes do not pose an existential threat to the European Union—in fact, the benefits the EU provides them may make them stronger EU supporters than liberal democracies in the West like the UK. Illiberal democracies stimulate and feed on popular fears and anxieties, but without an institutional safety valve for popular discontent, they may not be sustainable in the long run.

The popular demand for democratic participation is growing, but it needs new language and new structures beyond those of traditional liberal democracy.

Democracy always sparks discontent, but discontent can also spark change. While democracy offers a path for change, illiberal governance is a dead end: its proponents are determined to control all the levers of power, and block all the avenues for change. In the end, democracy, as Winston Churchill famously pointed out, is the worst form of government, apart from all the others.

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To return to Václav Havel, his words sum up very well the challenge of democracy and its discontents: “I’m not an optimist because I don’t believe all ends well. I’m not a pessimist because I don’t believe all ends badly. Instead, I’m a realist who carries hope, and hope is the belief that democracy has meaning, and is worth the struggle.” *f*

## ENDNOTES

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