



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

HOW THE KREMLIN BENEFITS FROM THE EAST-WEST DIVISION IN EUROPE

GIORGI JGHARKAVA

150

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

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ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN

The East-West divide in Europe has been becoming more and more present in the last few years. There have been quite a few variables which served as direct triggers for the division. First, it was the global economic crisis. Despite the fact that the crisis was shaped in terms of North-South (such as the Spain-Greek duo versus the Franco-German tandem) narratives, the main culprit of the discourse was the West itself. The financial motives were swiftly translated into national sentiments. The trend of the local discourses in terms of “defending the national sovereignty” became mainstream. The feeling which the economic crisis left in certain countries was that particular states within the EU benefited more at the expense of others and hence the less powerful countries needed to step up their game with national agendas rather than to follow the EU’s directives. This narrative was present in the post-Communist part of the EU as well. The financial collapse was subsequently fueled by the migrant crisis. The migrant crisis helped the nationalist narratives by a bigger margin than the financial collapse. The willingness and endeavor from Brussels and certain member states to accept and distribute the immigrants were perceived as a clear attack on national sovereignties within quite a few countries in the EU. The most apparent and active among those who resisted were Hungary and Poland - the flashpoints of the East-West division in Europe now. The main idea of the narrative which became trendy was somewhat old - certain countries were trying to benefit from the process by forcing others to follow their agenda once again. This was the vital trigger to push the nationalist agendas. The first result of this was Brexit. Brexit created the precedent of success for nationalist narratives which had already been formed in the eastern part of the EU. This eventually led to the messages in the East according to which the idea of a common EU identity did not work, meaning that it was time to redefine Europe. The idea of redefining Europe firstly and most importantly meant the revision of liberalism and to a certain extent democracy. Firstly, with the help of the Polish and the Hungarian cases, this article will try to explore if the mainstream narratives in the East regarding the European identity crisis have historical roots. Secondly, it will attempt to portray a bigger picture of how this process can be artificially influenced by Russia for its own benefit.

Paradoxically, if we borrow it from George Friedman, nationalism is very much a liberal idea.¹ Liberalism advocates liberty, equality before the law and governance by consent. The last in this list holds chief importance in our context. The idea is that if individuals have a chance of consensual governance, then so do societies; that is, nations. Hence, subjugated nations have every right of self-determination. In the late 1980s, this was the understanding of liberalism which was embraced by most of the Warsaw Pact countries which thought that their contemporary regimes were imposed by a foreign power. Liberalism was the symbol of the West. However, the image of the West had another element by which the East was allured - capitalism. According to Krastev and Holmes, liberalism and capitalism were the accomplished ideas that were working in the West, whereas Communism was not.² The revolutions of 1989 led the Eastern European countries on the path where the plan was just to copy the West and good days would come. History would be over.

The 1989 revolutions without revolutionary ideas had two problems. The first comes with constant imitation. As Holmes and Krastev note, the process of political imitation has the “implicit assumption that the mimic is somehow morally and humanly inferior to the model. It also entails the assumption that Central and Eastern Europe’s copycat nations accept the West’s right to evaluate their success or failure as living up to Western standards.”³ If we follow the logic of the two authors, it is highly likely that the logical counter-reaction against the role of the imitator eventually will be right-wing politics with populist and nationalistic political agendas. This is the case which we are witnessing in Poland and Hungary right now.

The second problem of 1989’s revolutions was what Timothy Snyder calls the politics of inevitability. In simple words, Snyder defines the politics of inevitability as an assumption according to which history has its destination and right after the necessary tools are known to reach this point, history ceases to exist. “In the European version [of politics of inevitability], history brought the nation, which learned from war that peace was good, and hence chose integration and prosperity.”⁴ Eastern Europe followed the path of inevitability which promised a happy ending. However, unfortunately, history does not have its destination point. History is more ever-changing than inevitable. So is Europe and its concept of Europeanness. In the late 1980s, the West’s eastern comeback meant embracing freedom with nationalist movements. However, the West was already changing at that time. The nationalistic element of liberalism was long forgotten. Today,

the Western political agenda is more about globalization, integration, migrants, secularism, minority rights⁵ - and the East finds itself confused.

The confusion was swiftly taken advantage of by some shrewd politicians of the East. The fine examples of those are Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński. Kaczyński and Orbán admitted that European politics were not inevitable but were changing and it was their understanding that European politics were changing in the wrong way. According to them, the European political agenda was not European anymore. It was losing its identity. Hence, the East could not imitate the West anymore. The only option left was to preserve the Europeanness which was being abandoned in the West. Orbán and Kaczyński effectively used the migrant crisis and fueled it with accusations that some in the West were imposing the LGBT ideology over their respective countries. In this context, the two leaders have been actively positioning themselves as champions of Christianity. "Together, they clamor for the defense of their societies' 'Europeanness,' allegedly threatened by Western multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and 'political correctness.'"⁶ The idea of Eastern European populist politics is that the real Europe is in the East while the West betrayed the values of the continent. This discourse is strengthened by historical elements as well. The narrative of portraying Eastern Europe as a historical bastion for European culture is very prevalent with references to their struggle against Mongols and Muslims. This meta-narrative made Eastern Europe a Mecca of right-wing movements with populists from Italy, Austria, France and Germany often adoring the Eastern European leaders publicly.

The advent of overwhelming populist narratives in Eastern European politics led to results which are worth noting. The first outcome can be seen in economics where social programs are much widely used. Here, the narrative was that the economic agenda led by Brussels did not benefit the East as much as it could. Hence, it was time for capitals to take care of themselves. This led to the politics of redistribution where Poland fared best. Kaczyński's ruling Law and Justice party increased the minimum wage, introduced subsidies worth USD 150 per child, exempted people under the age of 26 from income tax, etc. One of Orbán's major achievements in this regard was the introduction of loan benefits up to USD 36,000 for Hungarian parents. Redistribution worked, it did not impede the economy from growth and most importantly it made people delighted. However, the dark side of the Eastern populist politics is the setback in democracy. The ruling parties in the region have been having problems with independent

mass media, courts, the rule of law, educational institutions and even museums lately. This is the point where the partly natural/historical causes of Eastern European populist politics lose their legitimacy in the eyes of the proponents of rules-based democratic societies. On the other hand, this is where the role of Russia also appears in our story. Where democracy fails, Russia appears – in our cases by fueling the historical roots of populism by assisting those who promote it.

* * *

As many analysts claim nowadays, the current foreign policy goals of Russia are more about exposing the flaws of others rather than boasting about Russia's own attractiveness. The Kremlin indirectly admits that it might be politically ugly, so its only aim now is to make others look like it. In doing so, Russia sees populism movements as a chance as those types of regimes are usually undemocratic. The Kremlin does not necessarily need to offer anything to those people who feel frustrated by the West. However, it can be a foothold for the populists who were chosen by those frustrated. Here is how. Russia has been actively giving a hand to right-wing parties through financial and political support all around Europe. Whether or not those parties are directly engaging with the Kremlin is another matter. However, the populist upsurge in Europe is a point of interest for Moscow and it can be easily traced. For instance, the leak of secret recordings of former Polish Foreign Affairs Minister Sikorski (the case is sometimes labeled as the Polish Watergate) is believed to be carried out by Russian special forces.⁷ This instance hugely undermined the former Polish ruling party and helped Kaczyński's team to gain full control over the parliament. Moscow has been active in Hungary too. It is believed that Jobbik (far-right party in Hungary) member Bela Kovacs used to be spying for Russians while he was representing Hungary in the European Parliament.⁸ There are quite a few questions with regard to Orbán's ties with Moscow as well where most of the issues concern shady financial deals.⁹ One should not forget that the last governmental collapse in Austria happened exactly after the right wing populist party's leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, was rightfully accused of corruption, linking him to a Russian oligarch.¹⁰ Russia has been linked to Western European populist parties too. To give an example, Matteo Salvini has been accused of seeking financial support for his League party in Russia.¹¹ On the other hand, Le Pen's party in France has been given a

loan from a Russian bank.¹² In addition, Russian interference in the Brexit referendum in favor of the “leave” agenda has been an active topic for a long time.¹³

The idea behind Russia’s hype for populist movements in Europe can be multifaceted. The Kremlin has already adapted to the idea that it has nothing much to offer - not even for its own citizens, let alone foreign countries. Hence, in order to stay in power and not be seen as outdated, Moscow needs to demonstrate that it is not the only one which is not doing great. It needs to demonstrate that the European idea of liberal-democracies does not work either. This will let the Kremlin stay relevant. While European ideals have their own rightful flaws which have already been labeled above as the “politics of inevitability,” Russia tries to offer the “politics of eternity” - another term introduced by Timothy Snyder.

“Eternity arises from inevitability like a ghost from a corpse. The capitalist version of the politics of inevitability – the market as a substitute for policy – generates economic inequality that undermines belief in progress. As social mobility halts, inevitability gives way to eternity and democracy gives way to oligarchy. An oligarch spinning a tale of an innocent past, perhaps with the help of fascist ideas, offers fake protection to people with real pain.”¹⁴

* * *

By promoting the populist agenda Russia pursues the divide et impera policy. Russia fears the more united and integrated Europe and so it has to push for nationalist agendas. The Kremlin also has another idea on its mind. The populist movements usually undermine democracy which is the case of the Eastern European instances listed above. If European democracy fails, then Russia will not need to offer any excuses for its own absence of it. If Moscow manages to corrupt European political leaders, then corruption will become the new normal and not a Russian problem. Russia advocates that the truth does not exist because it has many faces. With this narrative, it is hard to argue why post-Communist Russian politics is worse than the Western model. The Kremlin does this through spreading fake news where the truth becomes fluid. Moscow is good at fighting the imaginary enemies and twice as good at promoting the same elsewhere. By doing so, the Kremlin contributes its fair share to the European ideological division.

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