

THE BIG QUESTION: WHAT IS THE ROOT CAUSE OF RISING ILLIBERALISM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE?



Central and Eastern Europe, as scrutinized in a cluster of articles in the July 2018 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, has undergone a period of political turbulence in countries like Poland and Hungary. In these and other places, a polarized political landscape and fragmented media sector have helped provide fertile ground for the spread of non-democratic ideas. Foreign authoritarian powers, such as Russia and China, have also seized on this moment to spread disinformation and advance their own interests. Yet, as the recent protests in Poland and Slovakia demonstrate, democratic civil society remains willing to push back against illiberalism in the region.

The International Forum for Democratic Studies asked five leading experts for their views on the root cause of rising illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe. (Their answers have been edited for length and clarity, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Endowment for Democracy.)

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To understand the origins of today's Central and East European illiberal revolution, we should look neither to ideology nor to economics, but to imitation. The region's illiberal turn cannot be grasped apart from the political expectation of "normality" created by the 1989 revolution and the politics of imitation that it legitimized. After the Berlin Wall fell, Europe was no longer divided between communists and democrats. It was instead divided between imitators and the imitated. East-West relations morphed from a Cold War standoff between two hostile systems into a moral hierarchy within a single liberal, Eastern system. While the mimics looked up to their models, the models looked down on their mimics. It is not entirely mysterious, therefore, why the "imitation of the West" voluntarily chosen by East Europeans three decades ago eventually resulted in a political backlash. What makes imitation so irksome is not only the implicit assumption that the mimic is somehow 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 at living up to *Western* standards. In this sense, imitation comes to feel like a loss of sovereignty.

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The failure of mainstream political parties is one clear and proximate cause of current illiberalism. Voters remain committed to democracy—but the behavior of politicians often ranges from cynical to corrupt. Mainstream, centrist parties failed their electorates in two ways: first, they had earlier minimized public debate over critical issues such as market reforms or EU accession. These were presented to the public as unalloyed goods, with enormous elite consensus behind them. The result was that populist and extremist parties were the main (and often only) critics. The second, more immediate, failure was the lack of integrity and the never-ending legal and ethical controversies: the MSzP [*lying*](#) over the state of Hungarian public finances in 2006, the [*PO taping scandals*](#) (and sweetheart deals of previous administrations) in Poland, or the "tunneling" (fraudulent asset transfer) and privatization disasters in the Czech Republic in the 1990s are just a few examples. The result? An electorate eager for responsive and accountable governing political parties, one that turned to less orthodox parties who criticized the mainstream elites as corrupt, claimed to represent the common good, and promised to pursue real change. And implement change they did. With considerable parliamentary majorities, Fidesz in

Hungary and PiS in Poland, among others, pursued a relentless set of policies designed to bring state institutions back under “popular” control—resulting in the current erosion of the rule of law, an end to judicial autonomy, attacks on the media and on civil society, and the division of society into party loyalists and their treasonous opposition.

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On the one hand, democratic backsliding and rising illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe is part of a broader trend. The nationalistic turn in Hungary has undoubtedly drawn legitimization from the Western world’s larger shift toward identity politics. The general backlash against political correctness led Hungarian leaders to realize that there is nothing inevitable about the growing influence of progressive-liberal values. These global changes have re-amplified the authoritarian characteristics of Central and East European political culture, especially the prevalence of “hierarchy values” over the values of egalitarianism, intellectual and affective autonomy, and mastery (ambition, daring, and the like). Additionally, low social trust and disillusionment with democracy and capitalism have made it difficult to build a civil society robust enough to defend pluralism. Weak democratic institutions are also less resistant to transformative political will. This anti-liberal climate has even engulfed one of the region’s strongest economic performers, the Czech Republic, where Miloš Zeman won re-election to the presidency in January 2018 by whipping up fear of refugees in a country that hosts no refugees. In Poland, trends similar to those in Hungary are apparent as well. At the same time, the region is not monolithic. In Slovakia, even strongman Robert Fico had to step down as premier when March 2018 protests over the murder of an investigative journalist became more than he could handle. In Romania, demonstrators have triggered a number of changes of government in recent years, and the Baltic states have bounced back from a devastating financial crisis without abandoning liberal democracy.

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[Europe: Can Poland's Backsliding Be Stopped?](#) appears in the July 2018 issue of the Journal of Democracy. Follow him on Twitter [@wprzybylski](#).

For many years, Central Europe was driven, often through painful reforms, by the dream of becoming part of the West. Specifically, Poles have looked up to the US, UK, and Germany as models to both mirror and shape their democracy. Now, after 30 years, there is a growing weariness in Central and Eastern with the old slogans of “catching up” with the West. In some countries, such as Hungary, people do not feel that they are catching up at all. Several previously unsuccessful leaders saw an opportunity in this shift in perception and have proposed “new” reforms that would revive the dream of escaping the gloom they saw all around them—a gloom that they believe exists despite the region’s macroeconomic progress.

In this milieu, Russia has seen an opportunity to actively amplify a narrative of revisionism and rebellion against the world order in the region and further afield. This interference, combined with the rampant corruption existing in Central Europe, aims to promote oligarchy as the best alternative to both liberal democracy and direct, military control. For some countries, it is easier to implement this authoritarian shift due to their centralized systems of governance. Illiberalism’s only obstacle is the decentralization of power, in which there are more spheres of political, social, and economic autonomy than just one central public authority. This is why countries that allow for a more centralized power structure, like that which was prevalent during the Communist period, have a stronger drive towards illiberalism.

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The main determinant of today’s illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe is a fundamental change in the pattern of status mobility and elite formation that took place in the early 1990s. This root cause gave a regional twist to an assortment of derivative causes, including inequality, demographic shifts, weak liberal values and an upsurge in nationalism. In 1989, people gave up on socio-economic equality, but they did not give up on fairness. Hopes for a society fairer than communism were shattered by the redistribution of wealth and power during a brief twilight period after 1989. Efforts to introduce fair play could not catch up with unbridled grabbing. The new, anti-meritocratic pattern of status mobility was experienced as profound unfairness. This gave birth to powerful political and cultural sentiments that evolved in parallel over the following decade: a deepening mistrust of post-1989 elites coupled with a textbook case of scapegoating, projecting outwards on perceived safe targets such as minorities, foreigners, and refugees. The upswing of illiberalism began in 2010, one generation after the fall of communism, when it was too soon to forget but too late to undo the new social pyramids.

