

**Pre-edit version of article accepted for publication in *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1), January 2016.**

## **East Central Europe: The Fading Mirage of the ‘Liberal Consensus’**

### **ABSTRACT**

In 2007 Ivan Krastev argued that EU-enforced ‘liberal consensus’ in East Central Europe was giving way to illiberal, but ultimately benign, populism. Post-accession ‘backsliding’ in Hungary suggests a stronger illiberal challenge. However, we argue, democratic malaise in ECE is better understood as a long-term pattern of ‘illiberal consolidation’ built on an accommodation between technocratic, economistic liberalism and forces of rent-seeking and cultural conservatism. This configuration generates a mirage of liberal-democratic progress and mainstream moderate politics, which obscures engrained elite collusion and limits to cultural change. Bulgarian-style hollowness, rather than Hungarian-style semi-authoritarianism, better exemplifies the potential fate of ECE democracies today.

## East Central Europe: The Fading Mirage of the 'Liberal Consensus'

James Dawson and Seán Hanley

In 2007 Ivan Krastev wrote an influential article in the *Journal of Democracy* entitled 'The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus'. His essay was part of a special issue which wondered aloud, for the first time, whether democracy was backsliding across East Central Europe.<sup>1</sup> The arguments he presented were initially alarming, but ultimately soothing. Yes, the rise of illiberal populism across the region signaled that the post-1989 'consensual politics' aimed at EU accession were coming to an end. No, this was not a dangerous situation threatening a collapse of democracy as unlike the inter-war period, democracy had no serious ideological alternative. "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, 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. Paramilitary formations chanting nationalist and anti-Semitic slogans may have joined the shoppers in Hungarian towns and cities, but Hungary's slide towards 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 socio-economic pain and occasional political turbulence following the Great Recession of 2008-9, the bigger picture in both East Central Europe and more widely reveals that 'Weimar Europe' has not come to pass<sup>3</sup>.

Yet if Krastev was right that democracy in East Central Europe was not about to go out with a bang, he failed to consider the possibility that it might go out with a whimper. In stressing the limited threat posed by extremist outsider parties and elected strongmen, Krastev failed to consider a subtler threat; that illiberalism, represented both by 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 freely concedes – was an elite project driven by small groups at the apex of politics, business, academia and officialdom. However, we argue in this paper that this narrow economic, technocratic variant of liberalism merged with existing illiberal narratives and interests that pro-European elites generally opted to accommodate, rather than oppose. Despite appearances there is an absence of genuinely liberal political platforms – by which we understand a range of mainstream ideologies of both left and right based on shared commitments to norms of political equality, individual liberty, civic tolerance and the rule of law - leaving citizens lacking exposure to the philosophical rationale underpinning liberal democratic institutions. Across the region from Poland to Bulgaria, it is this configuration that sees ardently pro-European administrations of both center-left and center-right steadily undermining liberal democracy.

#### *Region-wide backsliding as the flip-side of conditionality*

The idea that democracy is backsliding in East Central Europe is fast becoming the consensus view among observers of the region. Much of the backsliding literature understandably focuses on Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, who has stripped away formal checks and balances to concentrate power in his own hands<sup>4</sup> and seeks support on the basis of an exclusivist nationalism underlined by his unabashed declaration that he will build an ‘illiberal nation-

state'<sup>5</sup>. Elsewhere in the region, however, mainstream politicians have taken the opportunity of 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<sup>6</sup>. Even in a democratic high-achiever like the Czech Republic, in 2013 the country's first directly elected president, former social democratic Prime Minister Miloš Zeman, wasted no time trying to bend the constitution into a semi-presidential system, appointing a technocratic government over the heads of the country's political parties<sup>7</sup>.

Viewed in the context of a decade of quantified data provided by Freedom House's *Nations in Transit*, such episodes can be seen as part of an established region-wide trend of backsliding on democracy. Measured along a scale in which a score of 1 denotes 'highest level of democratic progress' and 7 the lowest, Hungary and Slovakia have regressed spectacularly since EU accession, each falling from mid-2000s highs of 1.96 to current lows of 2.96 and 2.61 respectively (Freedom House *Nations in Transit* 2014). Poland was listed even higher, at 1.75 on the eve of accession in 2004, yet it too has regressed to 2.18. Romania and Bulgaria, countries recently seen as 'successful laggards'<sup>8</sup>, have regressed from highs of 3.29 and 2.86 to present lows of 3.46 and 3.25. Only the Czech Republic appeared to buck this trend, until it too fell heavily from 2.14 in 2013 to 2.25 in 2014. Hungary aside, these figures do not suggest headlong descent into semi-authoritarianism. However, they do suggest that the idea of a democratic malaise in the region is more than mere hyperbole.

Yet this did not come as a nasty surprise. Backsliding was a widely forecast side-effect of the elite-focused, incentive-driven democratization and reform in ECE implemented under the oversight of 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 focused on the likely impact of the disappearance of these incentives post-accession<sup>9</sup>. In line with much later analysis of backsliding, such warnings rested on the assumptions that ECE elites had not internalized liberal-democratic values and would violate or stretch constitutional norms when able to do so. Now that the expected trend of backsliding has emphatically emerged, scholarship has moved on to consider cross-national variation in the forms and extent of backsliding and how elites could be coerced or 'shamed' into preserving liberal institutions.<sup>10</sup> It nevertheless continues to place considerable faith in (international and domestic) institutions and incentives to stop them doing so.

### *The Illusion of Democratic Consolidation*

Despite the coherence – and to some extent realism - of these accounts, their understanding of democratic consolidation and progress as a function of elite calculation rather than identification 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>11</sup> ECE democracies' low levels of civic engagement and weakly embedded institutions have long been noted, usually framed as tough, but surmountable, obstacles thrown up by the legacies of communism<sup>12</sup>. Only a small number of scholars have flagged the more acute challenge that such institutional hollowness poses to institutionally-focused models of democratization. For example, Bohle & Greskovits note that, unlike Western Europe with its well-established, if declining, core of mass civic and political engagement, ECE democracies were born with a 'hollow core'<sup>13</sup> and suggest that such hollowness is key to understanding region's democratic malaise.

Considering this hollowness, it would thus have taken a great deal of principled and philosophically-consistent political leadership and civic activism to make meaningful identification with core liberal democratic norms even possible. Despite the presence of many self-proclaimed 'liberals' in mainstream politics, no political-cultural project was ever attempted on a scale sufficient to embed liberal norms and practices in contexts where they had previously been absent. Far from backsliding on limited earlier progress, East Central Europe's democratic consolidation is thus better viewed as somewhat illusory in the first place.

Furthermore, the story of ECE democracy is not simply one of hollow institutions subject to the occasional predations of newly disinhibited illiberal elites while a minority of genuine liberals looks on. The political center ground across East Central Europe, has long been characterized by the subtle *cohabitation* of liberal and illiberal norms, with the latter gradually overpowering the former. It is this consistent weakness of liberalism, we believe, that lies at the root of the region's democratic malaise, with the well-documented problems of fading conditionalities, corruption and economic crisis serving as opportunity structures for both elites seeking to consolidate their power and angry citizens seeking to vent their frustrations. Much analysis has identified Hungary as the paradigmatic case of (semi-)authoritarian backsliding in ECE expressing, in metastasized form, the 'same cancer... present elsewhere on the continent, even if it hasn't come to the attention of diagnosticians'<sup>14</sup>. However, if our analysis is correct, it is another ECE state that is more paradigmatic of the malaise afflicting the region's hollow, incomplete democracies: Bulgaria. Although disadvantaged by lower levels of economic development and less favorable historical legacies and always seen as deeply flawed, Bulgarian democracy was widely seen as one of the success stories of EU democratic conditionality and was not infrequently labeled 'consolidated'<sup>15</sup>. It also

exemplified in stark form political dynamics characteristic of successful democratizing states elsewhere in ECE. While in much of ECE the picture of top-down, elite-dominated democratization was blurred by weak or ambiguous liberal traditions and legacies of opposition to communist rule, Bulgarian pre-accession democratization was an unabashedly elite-driven process<sup>16</sup>.

In Bulgaria we see liberalism – or rather the economistic and technocratic variant of it that emerged post-1989 - merge with existing illiberal narratives (ethnic nationalism, social conservatism) which pro-European elites generally opted to accommodate rather than to oppose. Thus Bulgaria's pro-western reform-oriented Union of Democratic Forces-led government of 1997-2001, usually credited with putting the country firmly on the path to democratic consolidation<sup>17</sup>, never actually advocated liberal norms beyond the bare minimum required by a European Union keen to recognize a prospective new member<sup>18</sup>. UDF PM Ivan Kostov may have overseen Bulgaria's ratification of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, but he was keen to stress the party's 'national credentials' on the campaign trail<sup>19</sup>. Predictably, the party never seriously threatened to repeal the illiberal constitutional prohibition on parties 'formed on an ethnic basis'.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, though the UDF's liberal economic policies (and especially its implementation of a currency board) aligned with the prescriptions of Western governments and financial institutions, the enthusiasm of the latter was tempered by the party's penchant for 'privatizing in their own favor'<sup>21</sup>. The UDF, though undoubtedly a massive improvement on the brazenly corrupt Bulgarian Socialist Party administration that preceded them in office, is thus better understood as an ECE government neither excessively progressive nor regressive: hardly the transformative force to realize a fully liberal democracy in a political-cultural sense.

What the UDF did achieve was to 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 certainly have been hugely more difficult if it had articulated these goals as part of a strongly progressive liberal platform. Bulgaria accordingly made rapid progress in implementing liberal *institutions* as reflected in Freedom House *Nations in Transit's* grading of the country as a 'consolidated democracy' by 2006<sup>22</sup> and, more consequentially, by its admission to the European Union in 2007.

The post-accession period in Bulgaria witnessed no autocratic Fidesz-style power grab, nor even any major electoral breakthrough for 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 more piecemeal, pragmatic manner. The ruling tripartite coalition led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party quickly fell afoul of the EU on corruption and connived with parliamentary allies to tamper with the electoral rules in 2009<sup>23</sup>. Though the gambit failed and allowed the new pro-European center-right GERB party to win the 2009 election and install celebrity Mayor of Sofia Boiko Borissov as PM, the change of government did nothing to arrest the steady decline in the country's *NIT* Democracy Score<sup>24</sup>. One relatively obscure incident speaks volumes about GERB's flexible approach to both EU regulations and democratic norms: In 2011, GERB Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov tried to maintain the practice of funding the country's police force from private donations (amounting to several million euros per month) even after censure from the European Commission<sup>25</sup>. GERB's ascendance ultimately only meant that a different set of elites oversaw the erosion of institutional checks and balances.



However, the fact that such flagrant post-accession abuses elicited limited intellectual and public dissent reveals that institutional vandalism is a symptom rather than the cause of this malaise. The underlying problem is that illiberal elites can only weakly be held to account by citizens who have never been exposed to any unambiguously liberal identity project. This was demonstrated by the aftermath of the generally hopeful waves of mass protest that targeted first GERB and then BSP-led governments throughout 2013.

The second wave protests - centered on Sofia and backed by most of the intelligentsia – clearly embraced some liberal norms, lampooning the oligarchic linkages of the BSP-led government with a creative protest repertoire. However the movement's ideological underpinnings echoed the UDF-era formula of advocating 'Europe' and 'democracy' while neglecting and often seeking to delegitimize the interests of disadvantaged sections of society<sup>26</sup>. The familiar absence of any call for a more inclusive political community also meant that the long-standing tolerance for ethnic particularism among the country's right-leaning liberals was left unchallenged, leaving behind a barely altered political landscape. The Reformist bloc, which includes the UDF's successor parties and draws support from the same highly-educated urban demographic driving the protests, has thus used its position in the post-October 2014 GERB-led government to target Roma for discrimination<sup>27</sup>. Bulgaria's 'liberal consensus' continues to unravel not because of far-right or conservative intrusion but because it was illusory in the first place.

Seen in this light, the experience of Bulgaria as a 'successful laggard' underlines how the very premise that liberal democracy was ever as institutionalized as the EU's accession judgements suggested is very much open to question. Moreover, we would argue, it is open to question not only for 'laggards', but even for apparently successful and high-performing Central

European Visegrad states. If the 'liberal consensus' underpinning democratization was illusory, as our argument holds, then democracy in the region may instead be moving towards a kind of equilibrium in which liberal-democratic institutions are gradually eroded as the illiberalism of the political mainstream discreetly consolidates. Viewed in this perspective, Bulgaria might not actually be a 'laggard' at all. It could actually be a trailblazer representing a 'purer', more 'consolidated' form that the region is moving towards.

### *The Illiberal Parameters of Mainstream Politics in Central Europe*

This pattern, expressed most strikingly in the 'Bulgarian scenario', is rooted in the interaction of a compromised form of liberalism with residual illiberal structures inherent to post-communist societies. However, these same conditions are evident to varying degrees across ECE, leaving even relatively high performing states such as Czech Republic and even Poland vulnerable to a creeping illiberal consolidation of politics facilitated rather than blocked by the 'ersatz liberalism' of the political mainstream.

As Krastev's account makes plain, ECE liberalism not only rested on a narrow social base, but was also drawn narrowly in intellectual terms. The only clear philosophical threads that linked the projects of liberal elites from Warsaw to Sofia in the late 1990s and early 2000s were Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientations and conformity with the liberal economic recipes of the World Bank, the IMF and the *acquis communautaire*. This threadbare, ersatz liberalism side-lined emancipatory concerns relating to traditionally marginalized constituencies, thereby allowing 'reforming' elites to avoid confrontation with existing bases of illiberal power in society. Such bastions of illiberalism have been twofold: 1) economic elites with origins in, but not confined to, *nomenklatura* structures and 2) well established, but not

necessarily dominant or assertive, forces of national and social conservatism found in sections of the intelligentsia, churches and nationalist subcultures.

By this interpretation, it is exactly this lack of commitment to liberal democratic norms from the outwardly pro-democratic political mainstream, including small, avowedly liberal parties, that explains the growth of illiberal power in ECE politics and society - of which institutional 'backsliding' is a mere symptom.

At the same time, it is important to stress that these remain competitive democratic systems with a landscape of institutions and parties modelled along West European lines, albeit increasingly undermined by popular distrust, corrupt collusive relationships between business, media and political elites and periodic eruptions of civic anger and anti-elite populism. Just as significantly, however, they are characterized by a revealing lack of public discussion and civic activism around touchstone social issues, such as the condition of the Roma or LGBT rights, or substantive, informed debate on the political power of economic elites. These silences and gaps set *de facto* limits on the scope of liberal democracy.

There are, even leaving aside the case of Hungary, important variations in the patterns democratic development unfolding across the Visegrad group. However, our purpose here is not to highlight these variations but rather to argue that all three of the seemingly democratically robust (but divergent) Visegrad democracies - the Czech Republic, Slovakia and even Poland – bear key hallmarks of the pattern of illiberal consolidation exemplified by Bulgaria.

*Czech Republic*

The Czech Republic, a consistently high achiever for democratic progress, provides a good example of a society in which there are few structural obstacles to the realization of a fully liberal democracy. Czech nationalism has always self-consciously embraced ideas of political and economic liberalism<sup>28</sup> and there is no obvious clash between national identity and liberal democracy. Furthermore, there was an activist sub-culture dating from the early 1990s – with roots in the dissident movement of 1970s and 80s - that did advocate broader, more emancipatory imaginings of liberalism<sup>29</sup>. Unlike many new EU members, the country also had a stable line-up of plausible ‘standard’ parties (Social Democrats, Christian Democrat, pro-market conservatives, Communists) competing, at least until 2010, over socio-economic issues. Since then, this left-right axis has been weakened by the emergence of business-backed protest parties, notionally animated by good governance and anti-corruption agendas, rather than illiberal populism.

However, the strength of the country’s parties and the fixation of its politics on economic growth and (later) well-functioning institutions also reveal the limitations and underlying weakness of its democracy. As President Havel often warned in the 1990s, the early consolidation of political parties took place at the price of damming and demobilizing civic activism, whose limited impact on Czech society was reinforced by a turn to project-driven NGO building (often in a sub-contracting role for the EU) rather than any alternative Czech identity project. The unhealthy merger of political and economic spheres – and the penetration of business interests into NGOs and the third sector - has been a consistent feature of Czech democracy. This has recently been thrown into sharp relief by the political rise of billionaire Andrej Babiš who combines a substantial business and media empire with an extensive role in government as deputy prime minister and finance minister. Babiš has shown an astute ability to co-opt anti-corruption and good governance NGOs into the service

of his notionally reformist ANO movement, while simultaneously drawing large numbers of former secret policeman into his political entourage.<sup>30</sup> However, the Czech post-communist liberal project has always been rooted in compromise: firstly of dissident liberals with the economic liberalism of technocratic elites<sup>31</sup> and secondly of emerging mainstream parties and politicians with the economic elites rooted in the old regime, who became the backbone of the domestic business class.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the country's hallowed liberal nationalist traditions, the absence of a strong progressive civil society means it is not difficult to find the limits of Czech liberalism on issues of inclusive citizenship and national identity. The post-war re-foundation of the Czechoslovak state on the basis of the mass 'transfer' of ethnic Germans remains taboo as a topic of real debate within mainstream politics.<sup>33</sup> Although Czech public opinion has become more liberal towards some minorities (for example, lesbians and gay men), Roma are the subject of engrained public hostility and – with the exception of hostile outbursts by local populists and individuals (usually from mainstream parties) – are largely invisible in political debate. Although the populist radical right seems likely to remain marginal electorally, a string of grassroots protests in 2011 highlighted that 'anti-Gypsyism' is far from a latent phenomenon.

### *Slovakia*

The Slovakian case reveals progressive liberalism to be even more elusive. Unlike the Czech Republic, Slovakia is widely viewed as having turned to liberal-democratic politics after an initial period of illiberal post-transition backsliding. From 1992, a strong illiberal nationalist ruling party (HZDS under Vladimír Mečiar) and smaller radical right parties were able to scapegoat the Hungarian minority and focus on anxieties around the vulnerability of Slovakia as a newly independent state. When HDZS were displaced in 1998 by a pro-European coalition

of 'standard' parties extending from Christian Democrats to post-communist social democrats, the country started its rapid climb towards EU membership. The political system appeared to 'normalize' around left-right competition as Smer, having emerged under the leadership of Robert Fico, reinvented itself as form of social democracy. As in the Czech Republic, such 'standard' party-political divisions have recently started to be eroded by the politics of anti-corruption and good governance. This could be seen most visibly in the 'Gorilla' protests of early 2012 over leaked wire-tap transcripts implicating major parties in systematic corruption of privatization in 2005-6, as well as in the rise of liberal protest parties such as Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) (2010) and Ordinary People (OL'aNO).

However, the focus of the liberal anti-Mečiarism of 1990s was on catching up with 'Europe' and implementing the *acquis* (legislation, institution-building) while the liberals who took office when center-right parties gained office after 1998 focused on neo-liberal welfare and labor market reforms<sup>34</sup>. The capture of liberal post- Mečiar privatization projects by informal economic structures has already been noted.

Unsurprisingly, however, there is very little evidence that any of the country's political parties - or the bulk of its citizens - had seriously rejected illiberal norms. Smer was able to absorb the nationalist camp electorally and to some extent also ideologically by fusing elements of ethnic nationalism with a populist understanding of social democracy<sup>35</sup>. Consistent with this orientation, the party entered into a coalition with the far-right (2006-10), earning a temporary suspension from the Party of European Socialists. Smer did seek to justify this coalition on both pragmatic (coalition stability) and political grounds, claiming 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 affinity.

Post-1998 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. In 2014 the opposition Christian Democrats (KDH) joined Smer in enacting a Constitutional ban on gay marriage<sup>36</sup> and in 2015 supported the referendum initiative of the conservative Alliance for the Family seeking to ban same-sex marriage and adoption and the abolition of compulsory sex education. Small parties such as SaS and OLaNO were top-down creations, which either subordinated liberal social demands to pro-market economics and fiscal conservatism (SaS) or anti-political showmanship (OLaNO). Even the protests of the Gorilla period which seemed to signal a reawakening of civic activism were inconclusive, leaving no lasting political effect and yielding only a semi-coherent anti-politics message directed against all parties and, to some extent, against the very notion of representative democracy.

### *Poland*

Poland is seemingly the exception: a country that experienced sustained economic growth, bucked the Great Recession and produced, in Civic Platform, a strong liberal governing party and, in the upstart Palikot Movement which entered parliament in 2011, one of the few examples of an ECE protest party defined by radical social liberalism<sup>37</sup>. However, Poland's status as a champion of liberalism – or a bulwark against illiberalism – may be more an expression of a party-electoral configuration than any deep-rooted cultural swing towards liberal norms. Firstly, like many pro-market liberal parties across the region Civic Platform pursues a narrowly defined technocratic, economically liberal, but socially conservative program. Moreover, in the words of one prominent observer of the Polish scene its '[n]ational 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>38</sup>

Secondly, notwithstanding its recent criticism of Viktor Orbán's pro-Russian foreign policy, the long-term project of the conservative-national Law and Justice (PiS) party was one re-founding Polish democracy by creating a 'Fourth Republic' based on Catholic conservative values and an explicit rejection of the compromises of the transition settlement agreed between regime and opposition in 1989. PiS's attempts to realize this project – most directly through minority governments in 2005-6 – floundered due to the party's inability to expand its electoral base and the more proportional, power-dispersing nature of Poland's political institutions. However, the dynamics, if not the final outcome, of Polish political competition in the early-mid 2000s, thus appear to run in parallel to those of Hungary, a point underlined by the early backsliding literature's recognition of Poland as the 'capital of Central European illiberalism'.<sup>39</sup>

According to our interpretation, Poland thus appears as a case of *illiberal conservative nationalism held at bay* with an outlook more pessimistic 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>40</sup> There remain strong bases of conservative nationalism rooted in the continued importance of PiS and support for the positions of the Catholic Church that - with the exception of the declining Palikot Movement (now renamed Your Movement (TR)) - are still accommodated rather than opposed by the more liberal end of the political spectrum. Although the Catholic-conservative right has rowed back on its earlier Fidesz-style project of cultural and constitutional transformation ('Fourth Republic'), the key building blocks of illiberal consolidation are firmly in place.



*Towards a Bulgarian Scenario for ECE?*

All of these societies fit the Bulgarian paradigm in several key regards: the policing of taboos on nationally-sensitive issues; incestuous and under-debated relationships between political and economic elites; and the predominance of narrow, economistic forms of liberalism. Most significantly, however, the relative stability of these states since EU accession has been supplied not by the liberal institutions – or the after-effects of an EU enforced ‘liberal consensus’ - but by the relative absence of liberal challenges to illiberal power structures and norms. Bulgaria’s present, in which superficially liberal institutional forms mask the illiberal parameters constraining political and cultural change, may thus be the future equilibrium point for 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 office-holders in Prague and Warsaw may recognize more readily that norms implied by labels such as ‘Europe’ and ‘democracy’ are incompatible with practices like 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 Central and (even) Southeast European societies may yet become functionally *liberal* democracies.

However, we contend, they are not on course to do so while liberal accommodation of illiberal norms endures. In failing to confront the flawed designs of economic elites or to provide alternative identity projects to counter national and social conservatisms, ECE liberals have consistently opted to pretend they live in liberal societies, rather than setting out to make them so. We therefore need to reassess the contribution of those ‘liberals’ who are better at winning elections than being liberal.

This implies that the task at hand is not necessarily the rescue and reform of failing, de-consolidating 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 has been reached. Liberal institutions can lock in norms supported by a liberal civil society by giving them legal force, but they can only temporarily substitute for a liberalism that is absent. That is the actual predicament of East Central Europe. The erosion and circumvention of institutions recorded by databases is not 'democratic backsliding' but rather a symptom of the interaction between democracies that were born hollow and a 'liberal consensus' that never was.

#### *Dangers of the Status quo*

What are the dangers of this "Bulgarian scenario"? Firstly, while avoiding Hungarian-style backsliding, it leaves hollow ECE democracies vulnerable to the breakdown of norms of democratic representation as the Potemkinesque character of mainstream parties and politicians (and anti-politicians and anti-parties) becomes apparent. This leads to a growing empowerment of elites despite formal structures of accountability and open competition. The populist 'Elite versus People' structuring of politics that Krastev saw in 2007 as the boisterous (but ultimately benign) future of European democracy exercises a corrosive effect in the born-hollow, ersatz-liberal democracies of ECE. Secondly, the capture of pro-European politics by ersatz liberalism inhibits the formation of the liberal (counter-) publics which could and should act as agents of the long-term cultural and identity change necessary for any progression towards a fully liberal democracy.

#### *Promoting liberal democracy means confronting illiberal norms*

The “Bulgarian scenario” is not inevitable, either for Central European states, or indeed – 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 even if liberal institutions are implemented and mainstream identities and policies proclaimed, strong, progressive liberal identities are unlikely to emerge without the active promotion of liberal ideals in politics and civil society. Without such identities it is difficult to understand on what grounds citizens might hold collusive elites to account when politicians tamper with electoral codes or scapegoat minorities. In much of ECE, liberal institutions paradoxically give legal force to norms that almost no one identifies with. In some cases, liberal rights are only upheld until that point at which some nationalist or conservative norm is challenged, and then lapse.

Liberal politicians and civil society activists thus need to advocate liberal principles consistently, in particular in areas where they clash with existing illiberal norms. Often, this may mean actively confronting social constituencies such as *nomenklatura*-derived economic elites (often media owners, party backers), nationalist historical lobbies and powerful factions in institutions such as churches and armies. In the short term, rates of harassment would go up and Freedom House democracy scores, paradoxically, might go down. Yet the long path from a tacitly illiberal political culture to liberal pluralism is a long one. It is unlikely to be negotiated without conflict.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Mirroring Krastev’s article, we use the term ‘East Central Europe’ to describe the Visegrad states of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary plus Romania and Bulgaria. Ivan Krastev, “The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus”, *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 56-63.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Krastev, “The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus”, p.58.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cas Mudde, "The Myth of Weimar Europe", *Open Democracy*, 20 August 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/myth-of-weimar-europe>.

<sup>4</sup> See Miklós Bánkúti, Gábor Halmai and Kim Lane Scheppelle, 2012, "Disabling the Constitution", *Journal of Democracy* 23 (July 2012): 138-146; Jacques Rupnik, "How Things Went Wrong", *Journal of Democracy* 23 (July 2012): 132-37; Jan-Werner Müller, "Eastern Europe Goes South", *Foreign Affairs* 93 (March/April 2014): 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp", 26 July 2014, <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>.

<sup>6</sup> Venelin Ganey, "Post-Accession Hooliganism: Democratic Governance in Romania and Bulgaria after 2007", *East European Politics and Societies* 27 (February 2013): 26-44.

<sup>7</sup> Sean Hanley, 2013, "Miloš Zeman's Attempt to Impose a Caretaker Government in the Czech Republic Is a Fundamental Challenge to Czech Parliamentary Democracy." LSE *EUROPP*, July 4 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/>.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitar Bechev and Gergana Noutcheva, "The Successful Laggards: Bulgaria and Romania's Accession to the EU", *East European Politics and Societies*, 22 (February 2008): 114-144.

<sup>9</sup> 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 & Ulrich Sedelmeier (Eds.), *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Sedelmeier, "Anchoring democracy from above? The European Union and democratic backsliding in Hungary and Romania after accession", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52 (January 2014): 105-121.

<sup>11</sup> Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik and Milada A. Vachudova, "Democracy in the Post-Communist World: an Unending Quest?", *East European Politics and Societies* 21 (February 2007): 7-30, p.20. Some definitions of 'democratic consolidation' include an attitudinal or cultural dimension. However, these generally require rejection of non-democratic 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 Post-Communist Europe* (Washington: JHU Press, 1996), p.5. For a wider discussion see Andreas Schedler, "What Is Democratic Consolidation?", *Journal of Democracy* 9 (April 1998): 91-107.

<sup>12</sup> Marc M. Howard, "The weakness of postcommunist civil society", *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 157-169.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits, *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery*, (Ithaca N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), p.239.

<sup>14</sup> John Feffer, "Hungary: The Cancer in the Middle of Europe?" *The World Post*, 6 July 2013, [http://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 E. 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 pre-print): 1-34. doi: 10.1017/S1755773914000472.

<sup>15</sup> See Milada A. Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Indeed, Krastev labeled Bulgaria 'consolidated' (Ivan Krastev, "The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus", p.60). More recent scholarship details the flaws of Post-Accession Bulgarian democracy, though without contradicting the established narrative that EU Accession

---

reflected a meaningful triumph of liberal forces in the country. See Aneta Spendzharova and Milada A. Vachudova, "Catching Up? Consolidating Liberal Democracy in Romania and Bulgaria after EU Accession", *West European Politics* 35 (January 2012): 39–58.

<sup>16</sup> 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 1996-7 that forced the BSP from office is most commonly described as a reaction to economic mismanagement strengthening the pro-market elites rather than the expression a mass democratic political culture. Emil Giatzidis, *An Introduction to post-Communist Bulgaria: Political Economic and Social Transformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), Chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> Venelin Ganev, "Bulgaria's Symphony of Hope", *Journal of Democracy* 8 (October 1997): 125-139; see also Milada A. Vachudova *Europe Undivided*.

<sup>18</sup> James Dawson, *Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria: How Ideas Shape Publics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp 81-93.

<sup>19</sup> Jon Elster, Claus Offe & Ulrich K. Preuss (eds.), *Institutional Design in Post-Communist Societies: Rebuilding the Ship at Sea*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 255; see also Benedict E. De Dominicis, "The Bulgarian Ethnic Model: post-1989 Bulgarian ethnic conflict resolution", *Nationalities Papers* 39 (May 2011): 441-460, p. 450.

<sup>20</sup> The Turkish-minority-dominated Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) has enjoyed electoral success, but resists prohibition only by denying any mandate to represent minority interests, instead resorting to patronage politics.

<sup>21</sup> Zsolt Barany, "Bulgaria's Royal Elections", *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (April 2002): 141-155, p. 148.

<sup>22</sup> Freedom House *Nations in Transit* codes countries scoring below 3.0 as 'consolidated democracies', a designation Bulgaria earned between 2006 and 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Venelin Ganev, "Post-Accession Hooliganism".

<sup>24</sup> The country regressed in *Nations in Transit* rankings to the status of 'semi-consolidated democracy' within two years of EU entry in 2009, and has fallen year on year since, standing at 3.18 as of 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Tsvetanov initially tried to ignore the official complaint of European Commission spokesperson Mark Gray, stating that the donations were simply offered by grateful citizens for 'a job well done'. Tsvetanov was forced to concede the point only when the Commission reiterated the illegality of the arrangement. "EC Spokesperson Slams Donations to Bulgaria's Interior Ministry", Sofia News Agency, 11 August 2011, <http://www.novinite.com/articles/131048/EC+Spokesperson+Slams+Donations+to+Bulgaria%27s+Interior>.

<sup>26</sup> 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, <http://www.cls-sofia.org/blog/?m=201307>.

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

---

<sup>28</sup> Ladislav Holy. *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Social Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Stefan Auer, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Europe* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Michal Kopeček, "The rise and fall of Czech post-dissident liberalism after 1989", *East European Politics & Societies* 25 (May 2011): 244-271.

<sup>30</sup> James de Candole, "Why is the next Czech PM is surrounding himself with police and spooks?" *Business New Europe*, 14 January 2014 <http://www.bne.eu/content/story/comment-why-next-czech-pm-surrounding-himself-police-and-spooks>.

<sup>31</sup> Gil Eyal, *The Origins of Postcommunist Elites: From Prague Spring to the Breakup of Czechoslovakia* (Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Gil Eyal, Iván Széleányi, and Eleanor R. Townsley. *Making Capitalism without Capitalists : Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> In the bruising presidential election campaign in January 2013, the acknowledgment by one candidate, the aristocratic former foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg that '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*' was considered a gross political error and drew rejoinders accusing Schwarzenberg of 'talking like a Sudeten German' and insulting the Czech nation. See Jan Richter, "Beneš decrees re-surface in Czech presidential race", *Radio Praha*, 21 January 2013, <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curraffrs/benes-decrees-re-surface-in-czech-presidential-race>.

<sup>34</sup> Sharon Fisher, John Gould and Tim Haughton, "Slovakia's Neoliberal Turn", *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (September 2007): 977–98.

<sup>35</sup> 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), pp. 39-66; Petra Burzová, "Towards a new past: Some reflections on nationalism in post-socialist Slovakia", *Nationalities Papers*, 40 (November 2012): 879-894.

<sup>36</sup> Smer justified support for the amendment as an acceptable quid-pro-quo for opposition support for judicial reforms.

<sup>37</sup> 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 pre-print) 1354068814560911.

<sup>38</sup> Aleks Szczcerbiak, "Is the ruling party back in the game?" *The 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/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ivan Krastev, "The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus", p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> Aleks Szczcerbiak, "A Model for Democratic Transition and European Integration? Why Poland Matters.", *SEI Working Paper no 138*, January 2015, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=aleksszczcerbiaklecture.pdf&site=266>.