

Shape-Shifting Illiberalism in East-Central Europe

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There's a lot we're getting wrong if we see the "illiberal" politics of countries like Hungary and Poland as extensions of a mid-twentieth-century nationalist agenda. In fact, this illiberalism is a politics that has adopted the tactics of late communism and continued many of the policies pursued by the transitional governments of the 1990s and the early 2000s. It is qualitatively different from the nationalism of the 1930s and World War II, or that of the 1990s Yugoslav wars. Many of our assumptions about what makes these governments tick, and how to effectively confront them, are therefore due for revision.

The Yugoslav wars suggested that inter-ethnic conflict and territorial revisionism were going to plague the region's politics for a long time. But the leadership of many countries in Eastern Europe made a point of avoiding the Yugoslav nightmare, with the encouragement of stabilization treaties brokered by the European Union. So far, at least, illiberal nationalist leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, both of whom were politically active throughout the 1990s and 2000s, have stayed the course.

A particular irony of recent developments is the extent to which these states are marked not so much by tensions around endogenous minorities, hostile neighbors, or oppressed ethnic kin in the "near abroad," as they are by tensions *within* the national polity. Hungarians are a house divided, now arguably more than ever before, which is quite an achievement in a polity that has long nursed deep divisions (consider the seventeenth-century revolt that split loyalties between two factions, *kuruc* and *labanc*: labels with lingering political significance even today). More strikingly, Poles are bitterly divided, too, a remarkable reversal from the mass character of the Solidarity movement that led the opposition to the communist re-

gime throughout the 1980s and remained active in the democratic transition.

Although nationalists in both Poland and Hungary have a history of hostility especially toward Ukrainians and Romanians respectively, both states are playing well with their neighbors to the east. While suspicion of Hungarian and Austrian revisionist aspirations once drove a wedge between countries in the region, now even the Czech Republic, which is headed by a social democratic government, is part of a Visegrad regional grouping that shares anti-immigrant, security-oriented sentiment. Orbán recently characterized the so-called V4 (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia) as the energized "new Europe," in contrast to the stagnating Western one. Even a few Austrian politicians have shown a desire to join the club.

Domestically, Kaczyński's PiS (Law and Justice) party and Orbán's Fidesz (Young Democrats) have taken societies that seemed largely united against communism in the 1990s and created internal divisions (or sharpened existing ones) by directing their political blame game inward. When Orbán went after migrants and refugees in a billboard campaign, the messages addressing the newcomers as "you" were in Hungarian: "If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture." Given that very few people outside Hungary can understand Hungarian, it is clear that the real target was domestic opposition to Fidesz policies. In general, both Fidesz and PiS tie domestic enemies not to scheming minorities but to malicious Western imperial or international designs, and either implicitly or explicitly cast them as traitors to the national interest.

Orbán's trajectory is telling in this respect. In its early years Fidesz included strong liberal elements, and in 1992 the party joined the Liberal International. Two years later, Orbán distanced himself from the modifier "liberal." And then in 2014, he declared the goal of making Hungary an "illiberal state." Both Fidesz and PiS now leave harassment

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of dissenters to trolls on comment streams and social media, and offer incentives to employers, clubs, businesses, and even courts to play favorites. Among their first sweeping legislative actions was the gutting of the independent judiciary.

In a recent poem titled “Some advice for the new government,” the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski addressed the just-elected PiS administration in Warsaw:

All professors of constitutional law should be interned for life.

Poets can be left alone. No one reads them anyway.

Zagajewski’s poem also refers to “isolation camps, but gentle ones that won’t upset the United Nations.” This reveals how these new governments have harnessed one of the malicious forces described by Alexis de Tocqueville, writing on the young American republic in the 1830s. The danger with societies run by the force of state-sanctioned public opinion, wrote the Frenchman, is that “The master no longer says: You will think like me or die; he says: You are free not to think as I do . . . but from this day on you are a stranger among us. You will keep your privileges as a citizen, but they will become useless to you.”

In this, the illiberals are imitating what they view as the tyranny of liberal political correctness. To Orbán, the election of Donald Trump “gives the rest of the Western world the chance to free itself from the captivity of ideologies, of political correctness, and of modes of thought and expression which are remote from reality: the chance to come back down to earth and see the world as it really is.” The illiberals falsely claim to be nonideological, while casting themselves as high priests of reality.

BLOOD AND SOIL

Territorial revisionism, or the desire to “rectify” the “unjust” boundaries of bygone peace treaties, was long the signature preoccupation of Hungary in particular. Today the spirit of revisionism still exists, but it is politically tame. Driving through Hungary, you’ll see many cars sporting stickers with maps reflecting the pre-1920 borders of “Greater Hungary,” and the symbolism of revisionism (the brain-shaped Kingdom of Hungary) is everywhere. Orbán even delivered his famous “illiberal state” speech in the formerly Hungarian

territory of Transylvania, which is now part of Romania.

Yet the government is on relatively good terms with its neighbors, does not agitate forcefully on behalf of their Hungarian minorities, and insists that all Hungarians are already united in a single state, now that the EU has eliminated most of the boundaries with neighboring countries within the bloc. When Fidesz offered Hungarian citizenship to all ethnic Hungarians living abroad, the party acquired a large electoral support base of people who have little or no direct experience of the way the country is being governed. Finally, nothing says “this border is fixed” quite like a big, long fence. The erection of a super-secure, many-layered border fence along the southern border with Serbia to keep migrants and refugees out seems to be a final, resolute gesture indicating that Hungary has relinquished its revisionist ambitions.

There is also the matter of anti-Semitism, a time-honored feature of nationalism in East-Central Europe and Russia. Yet this, too, seems to be receding. Anti-Semitism hasn’t disappeared—in Hungary, the billionaire investor George Soros is still often associated with international liberal scheming and crypto-Jewish

conspiracies to undermine Hungarian nationalism by funding civil society and democratization initiatives in the region—but it is not the real political force it once was. The ruling “illiberals” have largely let it go, in part because their focus is now on the specter of Muslim migrants and refugees. Many of the tropes of nationalist anti-Semitism have been neatly transferred to Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa.

After World War I, when there was an influx of Jewish refugees and migrants to Hungary and Poland, the new arrivals were seen as carriers of an alien and hostile culture, race, and religion: “Eastern” and “non-European,” closed in on themselves, infected by religious fanaticism or terrorism (read Bolshevism), who would assimilate the hosts rather than vice versa. Throughout much of East-Central Europe now, there is already a well-tooled xenophobic rhetoric ready for transfer to newcomers. An anti-immigrant rally in Poland featured the burning in effigy of a Jew in a caftan, and the right in Hungary has blamed Soros for the refugee crisis.

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SOCIALIST PLAYBOOK

That the region's nationalism can be so different from what we expect is both good and bad news. It's good news because it means that a conflict like the one in Yugoslavia in the 1990s appears unlikely. Nationalism does not necessarily mean violent hostility toward neighbors, anti-Russian sentiment, dreams of territorial aggrandizement, or anti-Semitic agitation. It's bad news because—like communism before it—it has shape-shifted without making any concessions to pluralism. Russia and Turkey are more or less one-party states with undisputed semi-authoritarian leaders at the top. Hungary and Poland have not tipped so far, but the opposition in both countries is severely crippled and there is no doubt in either about who's in charge. In many respects, their narratives of Western imperialism and their power-holding strategies seem to have been ripped directly from the late-socialist playbook.

The irony of this is that one of the sources of domestic division on which Orbán and Kaczyński have played most effectively is the legacy of communism. Both set the elimination of the last vestiges of communist influence from the polity as their primary political objective early on. As a fresh-faced 26-year-old in 1989, Orbán delivered a famous speech whose theme was “Russians, go home!” He told the crowd, “If we believe in our own strength, then we are capable of bringing an end to the communist dictatorship.” After winning a supermajority in 2010, Orbán's Fidesz changed the constitution to effectively excise the communist period from national history.

Meanwhile, since 2010, Kaczyński has fast-tracked his political career by theorizing that the Russians were behind a plane crash that year in Smolensk in which his twin brother, then-President Lech Kaczyński, and scores of others were killed. He has sought to connect it in the minds of Poles to a World War II-era conspiracy to conceal the mass killing of Polish army officers by the Soviets. Kaczyński blames the liberals—in particular former President Donald Tusk—for covering up “the truth” behind the crash. Lately he seems to have forgotten the other key villain in the conspiracy theory: Vladimir Putin.

Neither Orbán nor Kaczyński has made Putin the target of his ire. Both choose instead to criticize and cast aspersions on the EU and the domestic opposition. In 2014, Orbán declared that Hungary would join China, India, Turkey, and Russia

in the “race to invent a state that is most capable of making a nation successful,” and in the fall of 2016 he said “freedom-loving people” needed to guard against “Sovietization” driven by the EU. Meanwhile, his government has negotiated a secretive atomic energy deal with Moscow that effectively turns the keys of much of Hungary's energy sector over to a Russian company close to Putin's government. But more than Orbán, Kaczyński is the man to watch here. If even Poland starts to openly tack closer to Russia, then circumstances truly have changed.

CYNICS IN THE VANGUARD

Today's illiberals are harsh critics of neoliberalism and have undertaken concrete measures to ameliorate the effects of market exposure for some citizens. Orbán's Fidesz helped Hungarians escape underwater mortgages following the 2008 financial crisis, and the government gives extra money and tax breaks to families. The director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Warsaw, Sławomir Sierakowski, recently noted that PiS implemented neoliberal policies during its earlier period in power (2005–7), but this time around it has distributed benefits for multi-child families, free medication for seniors over 75, and reduced the retirement age.

Rhetorically, Orbán and Kaczyński have cast themselves as the vanguard of the fight against neoliberalism. Orbán declared that the truly significant shift of recent history was not the “regime change” marked by the collapse of state socialism in 1989, but the financial crisis of 2008. Fidesz politician György Schöpflin said in an interview that Orbán's vision of the “illiberal state” must be viewed primarily in economic terms. In other words, Orbán's “illiberalism” was a foil for “neoliberalism,” rather than for “liberal democracy.”

The trouble with Schöpflin's assessment is that this illiberalism stretches well beyond the economic realm. It is an ideology that claims to be democratic, while deploying an unmistakably anti-democratic and anti-pluralist governing strategy. Cynically, both Orbán and Kaczyński are willing to use the market when it serves to eliminate or sap the power of their critics, especially the daily press. Wielding the “compete-to-survive” rhetoric of business, the governing parties in both Hungary and Poland have gone after leading opposition newspapers (*Népszabadság* in Hungary and *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Poland), not by censorship

or detention of journalists, but by squeezing off their access to advertising revenue and subscriptions. They have done so by pressuring companies and state-funded offices and institutions to deliver ads and subscriptions to government-friendly media, making it very difficult for independent outlets to compete economically. Last year witnessed the total disappearance, from one day to the next, of *Népszabadság*. Neoliberalism may be losing ground, but clientelism is alive and well.

So far it has proved remarkably difficult, but not altogether impossible, for opposition parties in the new illiberal anti-democracies to organize public resistance. Polish demonstrators recently

foiled a government attempt to push through an abortion ban, and neither the last referendum held by Orbán—intended to validate his rejection of an EU plan to resettle refugees in accordance with a quota system—nor the subsequent vote in parliament went the way he wanted, despite his insistence that the referendum was an overwhelming success. If strong pushback by civil society—such as the massive protests against government corruption and cronyism in nearby Romania, or for that matter the ongoing political uproar in the United States since Trump’s election—spreads, it will test illiberals’ claims to speak for the people. ■