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## THE POPULISM ISSUE



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# MISINTERPRETING 1989

## POPULISM AND LIBERAL OVERREACH

Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff

WHEN the Berlin Wall fell three decades ago, many in the West dreamt of a Europe whole, free, and at peace. This was back when the countries of Europe and North America agreed on the text of the Paris Charter for a New Europe (1990) and its fairy-tale language heralding the dawn of a “new era of democracy, peace, and unity” for Europe, and implicitly, for the entire world. It turned out somewhat differently.

Three decades later, Europeans are neither unified nor do they all live in “democracy, peace, and unity.” In the rest of the world things do not look any more promising. Instead, the types of government that get by without too much liberal democracy have been making a comeback. A new nationalism is tightening its grip on Western countries. Its target is no less than the extant idea of international cooperation built on norms, rules, and values. To echo the

2016 words of German historian Andreas Roedder, today we are confronted with “the ruins of our expectations.”

### HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

What went wrong? What has led to the recession of democracy, the resurgence of authoritarianism, and ultimately to the weakening of the liberal international order? Why was the liberal revolution, with its unprecedented expansion of democracy, replaced by a populist counter-revolution?

A growing cohort of “populism experts” has placed the sources of the crisis in the domestic domain of Western democracies. They offer two related explanations, an economic and a cultural one.

According to the economic thesis, an ever-increasing global division of labor has, over decades, prevented middle class incomes in many Western

*Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff is a Vice President of the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. and leads its Berlin Office. From 2013 to 2017, he served as a head of policy planning and speech writing for then German President Joachim Gauck. An earlier, German-language version of this essay appeared in the author's recent book *Die Welt braucht den Westen: Neustart für eine liberale Ordnung* (2019).*



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*History in the making: the fall of the Berlin Wall*

states from rising. Income stagnation is deemed by analysts like former chief economist at the World Bank Branko Milanović to be the cause of the feeling of being left behind, which, in turn, has caused anti-elite and anti-internationalist sentiments.

The other interpretation sees a cultural backlash against a one-world movement at work, as exemplified in British commentator David Goodhart's book *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (2016). As this last narrative argues, globalization has made borders porous or even eliminated them, which has in

turn enabled uncontrolled migration, thereby undermining the status of the nation-state and its middle class. This development has ultimately resulted in a counter-revolution against liberal democracy and everything that can be associated with certain forms of global cooperation—primarily free trade and relatively open borders.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. However, their mix varies from country to country. For France, the United Kingdom, and particularly the United States, the economic thesis can help to explain at least part of what happened. Whole segments of these

countries' industrial production have been exported to China. In several regions, this has led to the loss of well-paid jobs and to long-term unemployment.

Especially in the United States, income distribution is significantly more unequal today than several decades ago. Adjusted for inflation, incomes of full-time employees have not increased since 1980. In 1999, the median family income in the United States was at \$59,039. Seventeen years later, a typical family had just \$374 more at its disposal (again, adjusted for inflation). The tremendous wealth gains that the innovation boom of the digital age has generated found its way almost exclusively to the bank accounts of the top 10 percent. Their share of the United States' gross national product has risen from 34 to 47 percent since 1980.

It should not come as a surprise that people revolt when they consider themselves the victims of globalization and have to watch a new economic oligarchy develop in their country.

The situation looks quite different in Northern and Central Europe. In Sweden, the economy has been growing steadily since 2010. Growth rates of up to 6 percent are quite un-

sual for mature industrial societies. Consequently, the unemployment rate is decreasing seemingly without end.

Germany has been enjoying its second economic miracle. Entire regions of the country report nearly full employment. The gains have not been all in precarious employments, either. In eastern Germany unemployment rates have been falling continuously, even if they

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are still higher than in western Germany. And income inequality is not rising at levels comparable to the United States. Compared with other Western countries, income inequality is below average in Germany and has not increased signifi-

cantly since 2005. Though recent data shows newly rising levels, this could be a transitory phenomenon related to recent mass immigration of destitute Middle Easterners. In May 2019, the German Economic Research Institute reported that "net incomes have been increasing significantly for large portions of society."

When labor shortage is the most significant problem of the labor market, it is hard to argue that victimization from globalization and economic marginalization are at the heart of the anti-liberal revolt. As British historian Timothy Garton Ash has put it at with regard

to Germany: "It's not the economy, stupid!" He points out that economic factors simply cannot account for the rise of the populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), given that four out of five AfD voters said they were doing well or even very well economically.

**DIGNITY AND RESPECT**

This leaves the cultural thesis and the sentiment of cultural alienation and uprooting. It is remarkable how little attention has been paid to this phenomenon for years. According to Garton Ash, the ruling liberal majorities—in Germany as in other Western countries—have not only been ignoring dissenting opinions on migration and identity politics, they have also delegitimized such views. Whoever voiced what did not fall into the mainstream of liberal thinking was easily maligned as "sexist, racist, or fascist," he points out.

*What has led to the recession of democracy, the resurgence of authoritarianism, and ultimately to the weakening of the liberal international order?*

He attributes this behavior to an "illiberal liberalism" that only tolerates liberal views, thereby turning liberalism on its head. In its most extreme version, illiberal liberalism can be observed in British and American Universities. This topic was picked up with great success during eastern Germany's regional election season of 2019 by the AfD. Their election

posters read: "Complete 1989." Which was well understood shorthand for: "Complete the revolution of 1989 by finally replacing political correctness with free speech."

Garton Ash, therefore, does not focus on inequality of incomes but on inequality of attention or, as he calls it, the "asymmetry of respect." To illustrate this point, he tells a little-known story from German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to the eastern German town of Heidenau where she faced an AfD-led rally against her. She ignored the protest, prompting one participating townswoman to allegedly say: "this woman does not even look at us with her ass."

The British historian underscores the language of the protester and calls it "very Lutheran." But he does so in order to make another, broader point. As he says, voters are attracted to this type of crude language. They do not vote for Donald Trump in spite of but *because* of his "crass and vulgar and aggressive language." It is what many voters consider to be his honesty. This is one way how blue-collar workers can relate to a billionaire from a real estate dynasty. He speaks their language, disregards political correctness, and thereby awards them respect.

It is precisely this respect—the acknowledgment and consideration of their views—on which populist rebels want to capitalize. The semi-authoritarian nationalists from Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) have developed a battle cry from this observation: they promise the “redistribution of dignity.”

They want to grant attention to all those who see themselves as victims: of globalization, the ruling liberal elites, or the previous government.

What sounds like an emancipatory agenda for an ignored middle class is in fact something entirely different: it is PiS’s justification for a massive critique of the elites that, according to its playbook, shall result in a change of elites. As PiS has demonstrated when handling personnel issues in the judiciary, state-owned media, and cultural and educational institutions, the gloves come off when it comes to putting a new ideologically-aligned elite in place. Emancipation thus turns into a power grab without adequate checks.

**LIBERAL OVERREACH**

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variants of a critique of globalization. Whether people consider themselves to be economically disadvantaged or culturally marginalized, they assume that the source of their oppression originates outside their country’s borders, either from migrants or from a global cosmopolitan elite to whom the national

elite is falsely loyal. It is therefore paramount for them to regain control over their own fate by controlling these forces.

Therefore, the battle between those who prefer the economic explanation over the cultural explanation is—while intellectually engaging—a bit of a distraction,

for there is something else that has not been sufficiently considered in the discussion. It could be called the liberal internationalists’ original sin: the self-serving and lazy interpretation of the events of 1989 and their consequences for the international order.

Only in retrospect has it become evident that Western countries in the wake of the end of the Cold War settled into a naive optimism about the future of the world. It was commonly believed that the triumph of capitalism over communism would translate into the global triumph of the Western model of organizing society.

Governing elites in Western countries proved themselves to be willing students of American political scientist Francis Fukuyama. They adopted, repeated, and trivialized his thesis about the “end of history” and his expectation of a lasting democratic peace. Unintended by Fukuyama, his theory became the blueprint of Western triumphalism. As *The American Interest* editor Damir Marušić has written, it was not just optimism that won out, but a belief in democratic determinism. Hope for a better future turned into certainty about the course of history. In his recent *The Road to Unfreedom* (2018), Yale University historian Timothy Snyder identifies the “politics of inevitability” as a major consequence of this view, leading to a course of action that tolerated no alternatives and left individuals with a profound sense of a lack of agency.

Since the goal of all politics was predetermined, according to the teleology of the times, it seemed as if the package of liberal democracy, economic freedom, uninhibited trade, and international cooperation no longer had to be fought for, justified, or exemplified.

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Some even seemed to believe that it was okay to take liberties with principles, values, and rules, and that they could allow themselves double standards and even pure recklessness. The only fitting word for this behavior is hubris.

Gradually, liberal overreach emerged: a belief in a glorious democratic future and a sense of entitlement promulgated throughout the West. At the same time, the will and the means to implement the necessary policies remained limited. The liberal world no longer knew adversaries (apart from terrorists), only partners who were on course to become like-minded friends. This new world allowed its inhabitants to indulge in self-deception when tolerating free riders and rule breakers because a rule violation could only be understood as deferred acceptance of a rule. One would need to exert patience or agree to a compromise. Eventually, everybody would come on board.

It was easy to turn a blind eye to the fact that there were players within the international system who only pretended to play along. There was China, for which economic opening was

supposed to mean that it would eventually adopt participatory governance, perhaps even some version of democracy. Western elites repeated this narrative until it was impossible to overlook that the country's leadership considers international rules merely a product of Western self-assurance that can be taken advantage of, bent, and even broken whenever it serves the cause of the rise of the People's Republic of China.

Secondly, there was Russia, which seemed to be on course to become a "normal," perhaps even democratic state in Europe. According to this theory, Moscow would adopt reforms to modernize the country and move it closer to the rest of Europe. Whenever Russia strayed from liberal orthodoxy, Western mainstream thinking was more than willing to call for more patience with it. Only after a couple of military interventions did even the West's staunchest true believers have to own up to the fact that Russia's leadership did not intend to place the country on a path toward becoming a peaceful, liberal democratic land of plenty.

Then there were the Central-Eastern European countries. They were espe-

cially important because they were considered to have permanently moored in the harbor of liberal democracy (which is why most of them became members the EU and NATO). But as Milanović underscored recently, 1989 was not just a triumph of

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Western values in the countries of Central-Eastern Europe; it was primarily a "revolution of national emancipation"—an emancipation from Soviet imperialism.

For centuries, Central-Eastern Europeans fought for their own nation-states. In three stages over the course of the twentieth century (1918, 1945, and 1989), almost homogeneous national states finally emerged. After 1989, the citizens of these countries were ready to accept the market economy and democracy, but not ethnic heterogeneity. That seemed to contradict the spirit of national self-liberation, no matter how strongly Western Europeans insisted that ethnic heterogeneity was the natural consequence of freedom of movement and ultimately, an open society.

Over the past years, considerable efforts have been made to re-evaluate

how large or small the group of "Western liberals" in Central and Eastern Europe really was. Back then, it appeared larger and more influential than it really was because in reality it was an alliance of liberals and nationalists. As Milanović writes, even die-hard nationalists talked "the language of democracy because it gave them greater credibility internationally as they appeared to be fighting for an ideal rather than for narrow ethnic interests." This group included Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński—today's rulers of Hungary and Poland. Their metamorphosis from freedom fighters to anti-liberal nationalists is illustrative, for it did not entail as much of a change as is often assumed. For them, as for others, liberal democracy was not the political system of their dreams but a useful tool.

Consequently, Western European and American mainstream interpretations of the post-1989 events in the Western Balkans were equally tilted towards a desired outcome. The Western Balkans was seen as a part of the Central and Eastern European story, but with one important caveat. Having been housed in the artificial building that was socialist Yugoslavia, they seemed to be delayed in their

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progression towards liberal democracy. They first had to work through their nation-building processes—bloody as they were—before boarding the train of history. They were delayed, but they were not aberrant: they were not following a different trajectory. Therefore, the countries of the Western Balkans could be incentivized to join the liberal club. The NATO and EU accession

processes were supposed to do the trick.

Little did this mainstream interpretation consider that in the Western Balkans the 1989 coalition of liberal democrats and nation-

alists could (and did) easily turn into a lasting battle between the two groups. And that any alliance between the two would be tenuous at best because freedom was first of all the freedom to identify with one's own ethnicity. This is why today's democratic recidivism, with all its backsliding and state capture, is especially severe in the young nation-states of the Western Balkans.

### REFUGEE ERUPTION

In 2015, when the refugee crisis swept across Europe, the latent conflict between liberal democrats and nationalists in Central and Eastern Europe erupted; and it erupted yet again in the Western Balkans.

Confronted with a massive Western critique of the seemingly cold-hearted refugee policy in several countries across the region, citizens argued that their elected representatives were faithfully representing the views of the majority and protecting the values of their country from messianic Western Europeans who preached a form of idealistic universalism that Easterners and Southeasterners were not committed to, did not believe in, and had never signed up to.

The question of how Europe will deal with this schism remains unanswered. Will Western Europeans treat their Eastern brethren as “fallen” democrats? Will these countries adopt a posture of victimhood for the long term, thus deepening the divisions within Europe? And will the accession crisis that is festering in Western Europe as a consequence of a series of domestic crises in those states, combined with a disillusionment with Eastern Europe, crest with the shocking, yet still temporary rejection of North Macedonia and Albania as EU candidate countries?

Only one thing is clear: in 1989, the number of supporters of a liberal worldview was smaller than assumed. In hindsight, the explanations for the events of 1989 were far too monocausal. The thinking about the possible consequences was too linear.

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crop of its leaders. Once they are voted out of office, their successors will toe a similar line because of the unchanged preferences of the electorate. In other words: from the end of history to endless populism. Consequently, books with titles like *On Tyranny* (2017), *The Road to Unfreedom* (2018), and *How Democracies Die* (2018) are flying off the shelves.

The problem with this type of linear thinking is that it extrapolates the future from present

#### NEW FATALISM

Today, we are confronted with a similar danger: democratic determinism seems to give way to populist determinism—as if it was all but decided that neo-nationalism will dominate political life in many Western countries for years if not decades.

In this narrative, the reasons for the rise of right-wing populism will not disappear with the current

trends and tends of overlook countervailing tendencies. The analysis of the new fatalists often ignores that neo-nationalism itself gives birth to an opposition that will eventually lead to populism’s downfall. Crises of nationalism, a loss of voter confidence, ultimately failure—all of that is absent in in the fatalists’ calculations. Thus, they underestimate the resilience and the self-correcting powers of liberal democracy.

Cultural pessimism is a powerful force that one ought to resist. That was Columbia University historian Fritz Stern’s warning 40 years ago. He urged

Americans and Europeans not to engage in endless jeremiads about the impending decline of their nations, their continents, or the West as a whole. Cultural pessimism, he argued, could easily turn into cultural despair and thus become a destructive political force.

Humankind has always lived through periods of transformation. In fact, periods of stability and self-assuredness such as the past three decades have been rare. What British historian Ian Kershaw observed in his grand history of postwar Europe remains true: “Uncertainty will remain a characteristic of modern life.” ●