

# Summary

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**Peter Jankowitsch-Lecture**



## **Liberal democracy under attack? Populism, nationalism, illiberalism: The regression of democracy in East-Central Europe and the Balkans**

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**Welcome address & introduction:**

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## Summary

Liberal democracy is no longer triumphing in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. In many countries we can observe illiberal and even authoritarian “temptations”, with illiberal political parties gaining power and control over societies. A peculiarity of the region are for sure the countries’ divergent conceptions of nationhood. For countries in East-Central Europe and the Balkans nationhood is rooted in ethnic and cultural homogeneity. As market globalization and unchecked migration have spurred fear among voters of a nationhood under threat, illiberal democratic leaders have gained power by pledging to defend it. While the return of illiberalism has revived talk of an East-West split in Europe, the crisis of liberalism and rise of populist nationalism are assuredly pan-European phenomena. Are we facing the beginning of a historic decline in democracy and the new rise of authoritarianism? What exactly explains the rise of populism, nationalism and illiberalism in East-Central Europe and the Balkans? And finally, can the EU, the last elitist project in the age of populism, overcome its internal divisions and contain the illiberal drift?

## Zusammenfassung

Die liberale Demokratie triumphiert nicht mehr in Ost- und Südosteuropa. In vielen Ländern beobachten wir illiberale und sogar autoritäre Trends in Politik und Gesellschaft und erleben den Aufstieg von politischen Parteien, die immer autoritärer die Macht ausüben und Gesellschaften kontrollieren. Eine Besonderheit der Region sind sicher die recht unterschiedlichen Vorstellungen der Nation. Für Länder in Ostmitteleuropa und auf dem Balkan ist die Nation in ethnischer und kultureller Homogenität verwurzelt. Die Globalisierung und die unkontrollierte Migration haben die Angst nach dem Verlust der nationalen Identität verstärkt. Die illiberalen politischen Leader konnten sich zu Verteidigern der Nation hochstilisieren und damit ihre Machtbasis ausbauen. Während die Rückkehr des Illiberalismus die Rede von einer Ost-West-Spaltung in Europa wiederbelebt hat, sind die Krise des Liberalismus und der Aufstieg des populistischen Nationalismus sicherlich europaweite Phänomene. Stehen wir am Beginn eines historischen Rückgangs der Demokratie und des neuen Aufstiegs des Autoritarismus? Was genau erklärt den Aufstieg von Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus in Ostmitteleuropa und dem Balkan? Und letztlich, kann die EU, das letzte elitäre Projekt im Zeitalter des Populismus, ihre internen Spaltungen überwinden und den illiberalen Drift eindämmen?

For a long time, it looked as if in Central and Eastern Europe – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the like – the establishment both of liberal democracy and EU integration were possible. For more than two decades, during the so-called “post-1989 era”, the region faced a process of adjustment with Western Europe in economic, sociological and political terms.

## Democratic Regression in Eastern Europe

In recent years the region of East-Central Europe has shown a picture of democratic regression. The main features of this process of de-democratizations are:

- Decline of the rule of law
- Attacks on independent media
- Politicisation of public administration

In this context populism started to gain ground. Populism is not genuinely an Eastern European problem, moreover it is a transatlantic one. But the specificity of Eastern European populism is that many populist parties have come into power and are now contributing to the regression of democracy in their countries.



Victor Orbán can be seen as a blueprint for Eastern European populism, as the region’s process of de-democratization has started in Hungary with Orbán and his Fidesz party. In the aftermath of the Hungarian prime minister’s victory in the National Assembly in 2010, he began to undermine democratic institutions, such as the separation of powers and the independence of judiciary. Similar developments took place in Poland with Jaroslaw Kaczynski and his PiS party taking over in 2015.

The historian Oskár Jaszi connects these events to a similar process in Hungary in the 1920ies: from nascent democracy to authoritarianism. He clarifies that such a backlash is likely to happen, when a crisis and its constraints lead to the reassertion of old structures. Is Eastern or East-Central Europe now facing such a crisis-caused regression dynamic?

Generally, three levels of democracy can be mentioned:

- Substantive Democracy
- Procedural Democracy
- Output Democracy



Liberal democracy is especially endangered in countries, where all three levels are affected and the democratic framework itself is threatened. Populist leaders abolish democratic institutions by using the narrative of legal constraints that harm the will of the people. In the eyes of populists, *legal impossibilism* (a phrase of Kaczynski) is the enemy of the people.

## Reasons for the Rise of Authoritarianism

There is a plurality of explanations for the rise of authoritarianism, which are not mutually exclusive:

- Tale of two countries

This explanation tells a story of a societal split between the winners (urban, highly educated, young) and the losers (rural, less educated, elder) of the post-1989 era. By supporting Orbán and Kaczynski, people are rejecting the transition's period dominant mantra of political and economic liberalism. Orbán explicitly argues that a liberal political order is not necessarily a precondition for economic success.

- Clash between 'course of freedom' and 'course of nation'

This kind of identity politics has its deep historical roots in Eastern European countries. The region does not share the Western European narrative of freedom. A significant percentage of Eastern Europeans see themselves as recently having reclaimed their *own* freedom from the Soviet bloc. Now populist leaders want to protect their countries from immigration and open societies as existential threats.

- Exhaustion of the liberal cycle

The 'cycle of liberalism' ended successfully in 1989. Now a new one is appearing.

Orbán and Kaczynski have also used the current migration crisis to enforce their politics. The Hungarian prime minister has started to build a fence on the spurious grounds of the 'protection of nation and national identity'. In favour of power-political interests, both Orbán and Kaczynski have chosen identity politics over the liberal legacy based on human rights. What is more, they managed to transfer their discourse framing to the European level. Just when Germany has gone 'universalist',

Eastern European leaders tried to reverse the former 'German model' of *Kulturnation*. They define Europe as a distinct culture and civilization. In this discursive context, the freedom of movement and the threat of a 'Muslim invasion' have been abused by certain politicians. For more than a century, Eastern European states have been countries of emigration, not immigration – but there is still great fear of the latter. Using the EU as an enemy is strongly related to these circumstances. As mentioned before, the EU is seen as a "tool" of market globalization and uncontrolled migration, which are the main sources of the politics of fear and resentment.

## Contestation

With respect to the current development towards illiberalism we should not neglect the factors that are able to reveal this process:

In the first place, the ability of nationalists to self-destruction has to be mentioned. Secondly, the role of the EU and its sanctions policies are crucial. The EU can counter illiberal moves concerning media independence or the rule of law. Furthermore, smart geopolitical strategies can work as a constraint on the centrifugal tendencies in the EU and can help to stop the movement toward illiberalism. Moreover, civil society can be a segment of contestation. The containment from bottom-up should not be underestimated.

