



Eurozine Editorial

Illiberal Europe?

On the new populism

Populist politics are enjoying renewed success in Europe. While Islamophobia, Euroscepticism, and anti-Americanism are grist to the populist mill in "old Europe", it is above all in the new EU member-states that populism is flourishing. The Kaczynski government in Poland, with its religious ultra-conservatism and pursuit of former communists; the FIDESZ opposition party in Hungary, with its predilection for extra-parliamentary politics and coy attitude to the far-Right; the conservative government in the Czech Republic, also keen lustrators, tarnished by outbursts of anti-Roma hate speech; the Fico coalition government in Slovakia, a motley crew of anti-capitalists and rightwing nationalists... Is something wrong with central Europe? Or could it be that something is wrong with democracy?

Even the accusation of populism can be populist, [warns](#) Ralf Dahrendorf. "The border between democracy and populism, election campaigning and demagoguery, discussion and seduction, is not always easy to draw." For Dahrendorf, the root cause for the rise of populism is the diffusion of power — governance replaces government. A fissure has opened up between citizens and power, information gaps that invite conspiracy theories and patent recipes. The parliamentary process is empirically the best antidote to populism; its gradual erosion (Dahrendorf cites the pressure placed by New Labour on the British House of Lords to rush through anti-terror laws) presents one of the greatest challenges to contemporary liberal politics.

[According](#) to Ivan Krastev, what we are witnessing in the new populism is a structural conflict between elites that are becoming increasingly suspicious of democracy and angry publics that are becoming increasingly illiberal. "The major protagonists of European politics are elites who dream of a politically-correct form of limited suffrage, while the people are convinced that they already live under a regime of limited suffrage." Unlike the extremist parties of the 1930s, argues Krastev, the new populist movements worldwide do not aim to abolish democracy. What they do oppose, however, is the representative nature of modern democracies, the protection of the rights of minorities, and the constraints to the sovereignty of the people: all requirements of EU alignment. Jacques Rupnik [comments](#) that populist movements' apprehension towards European integration could make current EU member states yet more resistant to extending further east and could erode the political bonds within the EU. Although the EU has experienced populism before without toppling, just how far can its "absorption capacity" stretch?

[According](#) to G.M. Tamás, the rise of populism in eastern central Europe is a result of the failure of the post-communist Left to respond adequately to the social chaos in transition states. State socialism in eastern Europe, though intolerably authoritarian, offered security and the opportunity for upward

mobility. Today, members of the middle class resist becoming *déclassé* but cannot identify with the communist institutions to which they owe their status. In order to defend social relations before 1989 without losing face, Tamás argues, they portray the neoconservative destruction of the welfare state as the work of communists.

In Poland, liberalism as a political movement has been discredited by the "shock tactics" applied to the Polish economy during the 1990s. Jacek Kochanowicz [describes](#) how the two main rightwing parties' anti-communism, national conservatism, and distrust of "moral relativism" finds ample support among the electorate. While it seems unlikely that Poland will alter its political course rightwards after the elections on 21 October, populism may not be bad for Poland in the long run, [suggests](#) Klaus Bachmann. Populism has the same paradoxical consequences as in other European countries: populists attack democracy, but make it more stable by expanding its ability to integrate; they make use of anti-modern rhetoric, but by polarizing, consolidate their opponents.

In Hungary, polarization between the post-socialist government and the rightwing opposition has permeated society to the point where commentators have referred to a "civil war mentality" in the country. A new controversy around a monument to the '56 revolution shows that political antagonism in Hungary, played out via historical symbols, shows no sign of abating. In a roundtable interview, [Eurozine](#) asks Hungarian journalists, authors, and publishers why historical memory needs to be instrumentalized by party politics; to what extent racism is exploited by mainstream politics; and whether populist, extra-parliamentary mobilization is the threat the Left claims it is. The background to the debate, above all the rioting in Budapest in 2006, is provided by Thomas von Ahn's benchmark essay "[Democracy or the street? Fragile stability in Hungary](#)".

Finally, four articles illustrating the rise of "democratic illiberalism" in Europe. Former Slovenian EU Human Rights Ombudsman Matjaz Hanzek [describes](#) how homophobia and xenophobia, falsely parading as free speech, have entered the Slovenian political mainstream; and Hungarian secretary of state Gábor Szétey [talks](#) in interview about his decision to announce his homosexuality and about intolerance towards sexual difference in Hungary today. Turning to western Europe, Jérôme Sgard [discusses](#) Nicolas Sarkozy's taste for Gramsci — a display of ideological ambivalence common of populist politicians — and Julian Petley [examines](#) the anti-PC campaign in the rightwing British press and how it plays into the hands of the far-Right.

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