

The Revolt of the Masses

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Europe's best kept secret is not that old Europe has second thoughts about the euro. Its best kept secret is that new Europe has second thoughts about the merits of democracy. Of all the world's regions, Central Europe is most skeptical that it's the best form of government out there, according to "Voice of the People 2006," an international poll conducted by Gallup International in May.

Not that Central Europeans dreamily hope for the return of communism or any other form of authoritarianism. But a large majority says that their countries aren't run according to the will of the people. Almost two-thirds of the publics in the eight recent EU entrants from the region plus Bulgaria and Romania judge that elections in their countries have not been free and fair. Surprised at how post-communist societies have soured on politics? Don't be. Recent events in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary show that the publics there have a point.

Poland sent the first warning signal that strange doings were afoot. Last fall, the Law and Justice Party -- led by the identical twins Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski -- swept into the presidency (held by the first) and the government (in which Jaroslaw is prime minister) promising a moral revolution against cynicism and cronyism and the gap between winners and losers that they blamed on post-communist elites.

As it turned out, the Kaczynskis' radicalism was directed more at rewriting the past than at solving the problems of the present. The enemies of choice turned out to be not so much the former communists who lost power last year, or bad governance, but the "liberal" media, the independent Central Bank and the European Union. Since Jaroslaw took over the reins of the government on July 14 -- the symbolism of the French revolution should not be missed -- his coalition has included the populist Self-Defense party on the left and the League of the Polish Families on the right. (Soon after last year's elections, Law and Justice fell out with the liberal Civic Platform, forcing it to cobble together weak majorities ever since.) In power, the government stopped short of reversing the market-friendly policies of its predecessors. But the twins' year in power is marked by an addiction to conspiracy theories and the return of nationalistic rhetoric. Listening to the new Polish leaders one has the feeling that World War Two isn't over.

Last Friday, resisting the pressure for more social spending, the prime minister expelled the Self-Defense party from the government. The prospect that the Peasant Party will join the coalition isn't inspiring. So the Polish public will be stuck either with early elections that offer an unappetizing menu of parties or more unstable government. Is it any wonder that Poles are losing their enthusiasm for democracy?

The Slovak elections, earlier this summer, were next. For the last eight years, Slovakia has been Europe's favorite success story -- as inspiring as Ireland's "Celtic tiger" success, but richer in dramatic twists and surprising happy endings. Slovakia introduced the flat tax, managed to attract more foreign investment (per capita) than any other formerly communist country and get into NATO and the EU, all the while making the world forget about its flirtation with authoritarian populism early on in its life as a free state. Or so we thought, until in June voters returned to power the nationalist parties that had turned Slovakia into a beer-swilling Belarus in the 1990s. Not such a happy ending, after all.

Now in Hungary, thousands are on the streets demonstrating and burning cars. The largest protests since communism fell in 1989 were triggered by a leaked tape of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány addressing top Socialist party officials last May. In his speech, he admitted that the party had consistently deceived the public -- "lied in the morning and lied in the evening" -- about the state of the economy to win re-election the previous month. It is hard to ask Hungarian, or any, voters to make sacrifices and endorse an austerity package, as Mr. Gyurcsány wants them to, when their prime minister is deliberately trying to deceive them about the state of the economy.

So it's not surprising that so many in Central Europe think that democracy doesn't work for them. The factors that contributed to this crisis are complex and numerous but at least some should be mentioned. The pressure of the new globalized world sharply divided societies between winners and losers. After decades of grim stability, people in the region have to get used to permanent insecurity. The last decade was also an age of comparisons. People weren't satisfied with living better than yesterday; they wanted to live like those in most advanced, developed countries.

The EU and the process of joining the club changed the nature of these fledgling democratic systems for the worse. Governments preferred to consult on their policy agenda with Brussels, not voters. The outcome is that the dividing line between left and right has been blurred and the only real divide left is between "the corrupt elite" and "the people." The fact that the winners in the new system turned out to be the old party apparatchiks and secret police collaborators also did not contribute to the legitimacy of the new order in Central Europe.

The tragedy is that voters here are forced to choose between so-called reformers, who are not so secretly becoming anti-democratic, and the populist movements that are openly anti-reformist and anti-liberal. If you are a voter in the new European democracies you can either opt for a "Gyurcsány cocktail" -- mix "noble lies" with neglect for public concerns while fulfilling the EU's dictums -- or for the "populist cocktail" of anti-communism, nationalism, cultural conservatism and excessive social spending.

Brussels faces a bad choice, too. Demonizing populists is easy but dangerous. Populist movements are ugly and anti-liberal. In truth, though, they represent not an attack on democracy but a demand for democracy. Europe's attempt to punish populists, to isolate them and to endorse "reformers" like Mr. Gyurcsány, will only increase the public's mistrust of both the EU and the democratic process.

Ignoring the current moral and political crisis in Central Europe will not work either. Populist parties don't simply oppose the existing elites. They oppose the very consensus that made the EU possible: a rejection of nationalism and economic protectionism, political tolerance and moderation. But old Europe can't be too critical of the newcomers when economic protectionism and populism is thriving in its half of the continent as well.

What Central Europe needs today is not just reformist policies but reformist politics. It is not enough for governments to implement reform policies; they should make an effort to get the people on board. The time when it was enough to say that "we are doing it because of the EU" and expect the people to buy it is over. Without more respect for the demands of the voters, Europe risks falling victim to more populist primitivism, and faces hard days ahead.

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