

Twenty Years of Postcommunism

DEEPENING DISSATISFACTION

Ivan Krastev

*Ivan Krastev is chairman and program director of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, Bulgaria. His most recent book, coedited with Alan McPherson, is *The Anti-American Century* (2007).*

It was “the best of years.” Reflecting on the historical significance of Central Europe’s revolutions, Robert Cooper wrote that “the year 1989 divides the past from the future almost as clearly as the Berlin Wall divided the East from the West.”¹ The revolutions of ’89 turned the will of the people as expressed in free and fair elections into the only source of legitimate government that modern societies were ready to accept. Centuries-old arguments critical of the desirability or feasibility of democratic regimes virtually disappeared. Democracy may not have run out of enemies, but it ran out of critics.

The revolutionary crowds on the streets of Prague and East Berlin—peaceful, triumphant, and insisting on their right to live in a “normal society”—provided the ultimate validation for the superiority of liberal democracy as a form of government. The contradictions that had been afflicting Europe’s democratic experience over the last two centuries seemed finally to have reached a resolution. Inspired by the spread of democratic regimes following the demise of communism, political theorists became more interested in the process of democratization than in the transformations taking place within existing democracies. In the years immediately following 1989, little attention was paid to the impact of that year’s epochal events on the way that democracy was beginning to be perceived by its own citizens. No longer was democracy only the least undesirable form of government—the best of a bad bunch, if you will. Instead, it was coming to seem like the best form of government, period. People were starting to look to democratic regimes not merely to save them from something worse, but to deliver freedom, prosperity, and honest and effective governance all in one big package.

Today, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is a grow-

ing ambiguity about the historical significance of 1989 and about the state of democracy in Europe (particularly Central Europe). Trust in democratic institutions (including elections) is steadily declining. The political class is viewed as corrupt and self-interested. Disenchantment with democracy appears to be growing. According to one 2008 survey, only 21 percent of Lithuanians, 24 percent of Bulgarians, 24 percent of Romanians, 30 percent of Hungarians, and 38 percent of Poles believe that they have benefited from the fall of the Berlin Wall.²

The revisionists' hour has arrived. In his new book *Uncivil Society*, the U.S. historian and political scientist Stephen Kotkin powerfully argues that, the Polish case aside, the communist collapse across Central and Eastern Europe is best understood as the implosion of an ineffective and demoralized communist establishment (the "uncivil society" of his title) than by a revolt of civil society.³ The people on the streets of Prague and Sofia were not so much revolutionary citizens as dissatisfied consumers. The idea of civil society has long been a magical construct, one that has somehow succeeded in simultaneously satisfying modernization theorists' belief in the historical mission of the middle class, the New Left's fascination with spontaneous activism, neoliberals' affection for antistatism, and Western donors' fondness for English-speaking NGOs. But today that construct is losing its appeal.

1989 and All That

The new wave of revisionism does not limit itself to reappraisals of what really happened in 1989 and who did it. Instead, the revisionists seek in the first place to alter our understanding of who were the overall winners (and who were the net losers) from the change. There are many today who believe that it was not the people but the elites who broke free and collected the jackpot of 1989. The end of communism, this account goes, set in motion a process that has liberated ex-communist elites from fear (of purges), from guilt (for being rich), from ideology, from the chains of community, from national loyalties, and even from the necessity to govern. Was George Orwell right, one wants to ask, when he wrote that "all revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure"?⁴

My argument here, however, is not that the revolutions of 1989 were a failure. What I maintain, rather, is that the ideology of "normality" which inspired people in the streets of Berlin, Prague, and Sofia in 1989 did succeed in reconciling liberalism and democracy—but at a cost. For the drive to "normalize" democracy (that is, to free it from its historical contradictions) contributed to its current crisis by weakening the democratic immune system. Perhaps the most lasting legacy of 1989 will turn out to be not democracy's spread but a revolution in our *expectations* about democracy.

It is now difficult to imagine how radical was the rupture between the way Europeans thought about democracy before the fall of the Berlin Wall and how they thought about it afterward. The revolutions of 1989 as a collective European experience have remade Europe's political culture.

Modern European history has been strongly shaped by a deeply rooted ambivalence toward democracy as a political regime. The revolutionary upheavals of the long nineteenth century (a century whose quietude is overrated in many conventional accounts) and the collapse of democracies during the interwar period made many Europeans skeptical regarding the merits of mass political participation. The short, unhappy life of Germany's Weimar Republic and its tragic death—"part murder, part wasting sickness, part suicide," in Peter Gay's famous phrase⁵—left a lasting imprint on European attitudes toward democracy. The association between Weimar democracy and the fascist violence that grew within it and ultimately rose to power on Weimar's carcass remained strong in the minds of many.

One cannot understand the political experience of twentieth-century Europe without grasping the fear of the revolutionary masses that underlay so much of that experience. "We tend to see revolution as in theory a movement to bring liberation," wrote Raymond Aron in the 1970s. "But the revolutions of the twentieth century seem rather to promote servitude, or at least authoritarianism."⁶ On the Continent, liberalism and democracy did not go together. Liberals often found themselves waging a two-front struggle as they fought against both the proponents of authoritarian stability and the advocates of radical (populist) democracy. The very different meanings of the word "populism" in the U.S. and European political traditions (mostly neutral in the former, overwhelmingly negative in the latter) reveal two contrasting patterns of relations between democracy and liberalism. French liberalism in particular—born as it was as part of a response to the excesses of the French Revolution—saw itself not as a part of but rather as an alternative to mass democracy. For someone like François Guizot, an essential part of being a liberal was refusing to be a democrat.

Even as "democracy" was Western Europe's battle cry in its confrontation with Soviet communism, mistrust of democracy was part of the Cold War European consensus. Democracies were regarded as weak and unstable. They were ineffective at combating destructive enemies. They were too idealistic and too slow to act when it came to making tough decisions about the use of violence. Democratic decision making was short-sighted, divisive, and prone to demagoguery and manipulation. Meritocracy, not democracy, was the ideal of Europe's educated classes. Meritocracy and liberal rationalism—not democracy—lay at the very foundations of the project of European integration.

It was in 1983—just six years before the Wall was torn down—that

Jean-François Revel articulated the fears of the Cold War generation when he wrote that “democracy may, after all, turn out to have been a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes.”⁷ What made him so pessimistic was his conviction that democracy re-

On the Continent, liberalism and democracy did not go together. Liberals often found themselves waging a two-front struggle against the proponents of authoritarian stability and the advocates of radical (populist) democracy.

ceives too little credit for its achievements, and at the same time must pay an infinitely higher price for its failures and mistakes than its adversaries do for theirs. In short, on the very eve of the “velvet revolutions,” democratic regimes continued to be perceived as weak and inadvertently self-destructive if not outright suicidal.

It took the revolutions of 1989 to dramatically erase the Weimar experience as a defining moment in European attitudes toward democracy. The night of November 9 that year, when joyous crowds of Germans decisively breached the Berlin Wall, served at last to suppress memories

of the November evening exactly 51 years earlier when the Nazis’ anti-Semitic *Kristallnacht* atrocities put the world on notice that the “wall” between civilization and barbarism was falling in the heart of Europe. In the mind of many a European, the revolutions of 1989 succeeded at last in reconciling the experience of revolution with the ideal of liberal democracy. Seeing the nonviolent nature of the change and the firmness of the fledgling democracies’ resolve to adopt new constitutions through orderly means, liberals found themselves at long last won over to democracy’s cause. The revolutions of 1989 made manifest to West Europeans the attractiveness of their own much-deprecated political model.

The revolutions of 1989 and the experience of postcommunist transition also helped to put an end to a long-running intra-European debate over the relationship between political democracy and market capitalism. Today, historians find themselves tempted to tell the story of Central and Eastern Europe’s postcommunist transitions as a tale of the irresistible attraction between democracy and capitalism. But twenty years ago, the goals of market-building and democracy building were often seen as contradictory. Most of the East European dissidents (being men of letters) shared the anticapitalist sentiments so common on the European left. And while political theorists in the late 1980s agreed that free markets and freely competitive politics tended to strengthen each other in the long run, the fear was that political and economic reforms, when pursued simultaneously, would work at cross-purposes. How can you give people the power to make free choices and at the same time expect them freely to mandate the pain of slashed budgets, reduced subsidies,

and fired workers? German sociologist Claus Offe spoke for many when he wrote in the early days of transition that “the market economy is set in motion only in predemocratic conditions.”⁸

Normality and Its Discontents

Happily enough, sometimes what does not work in theory works in practice. Central and Eastern Europe did manage to make a simultaneous transition to both markets and democracy. It took a magical mix of ideas, emotions, circumstances, external pressure, and leadership to make that success possible. In their efforts to transform their societies, the region’s reformers found the communist legacy to be a natural if unwilling ally. People were patient in the face of reform’s cost because they were *impatient* to break away from communism. The early 1990s were surreal years that saw trade unionists calling for job cuts and ex-communists professing their eagerness to advance economic privatization.

There was anger against capitalism, but there was neither a party nor even a viable political vocabulary to give force or voice to the inchoate anticapitalist feelings of those who saw themselves as net losers from the transition. Any criticism of the market was equated with nostalgia for communism. Anticommunist and ex-communist elites both backed the changes—the former on principle, the latter out of self-interest. The popular longing to “return to Europe” helped postcommunist societies to reconcile the redistributive instincts of democracy with the market’s penchant for producing inequality. Disciplined in the straitjacket of European integration, Central and Eastern Europe embraced political and economic opening at one and the same time. By reconciling democracy with both liberalism and capitalism, 1989 deprived democracy of its two most potent critics.

In short, the ideology of normality that was the driving force of the revolutions of 1989 deserves the credit both for the successes of the transition and for the hollowness of post-transition politics. The desire to be normal encouraged Central and East European political leaders to look for pragmatic solutions, and to imitate Western institutions and practices. The ideology of normality was particularly useful in advancing the decade-long process of EU accession, during which many a postcommunist polity busied itself with passing laws over which it had scarcely paused to deliberate. This same ideology of normality, however, is at least partly responsible for the intellectual paralysis that grips Central and East European politics today, as well as for the larger failures of the new democracies to reinvent themselves. The politics of “normalization” replaced deliberation with imitation, inspired respect for banality, and allowed policy makers to pull off the rhetorical sleight of hand involved in using “democracy” and “good governance” as synonyms. Central Europe made a virtue of being uninventive. In

the postcommunist era, the very word “experiment” took on negative connotations.

By declaring democracy the normal state of society and restricting democratization to an imitation of the institutions and practices of developed democracies, Central Europe’s ideology of normality failed to give rein to the creative tensions that do so much to supply democracy with its flexibility and endurance. The tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism, for example, are not transitional “growing pains,” but lie at the very heart of democratic politics. These tensions cannot be wished away or simply resolved; instead, societies must learn to live with them and turn them to good use. Democracy is a federation whose constituent republics constantly squabble over and renegotiate their shared borders. Democracy is a self-correcting regime that is sustained by its own contradictions. It is instructive that even while the current ideologues of normality tend to interpret the rise of populism in Central Europe as a leap into the abyss of political pathology, the expressed level of citizens’ trust in democratic institutions in countries with populist governments (Bulgaria and Slovakia, for instance) has dramatically increased.⁹

In seeking to explain how and why societies seem constantly to oscillate between periods of intense preoccupation with public affairs and times when private concerns hold the upper hand, Albert O. Hirschman demonstrated that acts of participation in public affairs, which are undertaken because they are expected to yield satisfaction, also yield dissatisfaction.¹⁰ Democracy’s advantage over authoritarianism lies not in some inherent democratic ability to offer citizens instant gratification of their needs and desires, but rather in democracy’s superior institutional and intellectual readiness to cope with the dissatisfaction produced by its citizens’ choices. Whereas before 1989 democracies tended to take people’s dissatisfaction for granted, the normality-obsessed democracies of post-1989 Europe tend to view such dissatisfaction as baffling and unintelligible.

In fact, it is democratic societies’ capacity to overcome their own failings and learn from experience that gives these societies their deepest and most durable appeal. By defining democracy as the natural state of society while limiting the sanctioned policy choices available to the public, the post-1989 consensus paradoxically undercut this very basic advantage of democratic regimes. Democracies are not and cannot be “satisfaction machines.” They do not produce good governance the way a baker turns out doughnuts. (Good governance is a welcome but far from inevitable product of democratic governance.) What democracies do offer dissatisfied citizens is the satisfaction of having the right to do something about their dissatisfaction. In this sense, doubts about democracy itself are critically necessary for democracy’s capacity to survive, for without dissatisfaction there is no learning from experience. Thus

the most problematic aspect of 1989's historical legacy may turn out to be its unrestrained enthusiasm for democracy.

NOTES

1. Robert Cooper, "The Meaning of 1989," *Prospect*, December 1999.
2. Eurobarometer 70, field work, October–November 2008, "Data," p. 58, December 2008. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_en.htm.
3. Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: Random House, 2009).
4. Quoted in Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity, 1980–82* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), 275.
5. Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), xiii.
6. Raymond Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 163.
7. Jean-François Revel, *How Democracies Perish* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 3.
8. Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition: The East European and East German Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 67.
9. Grigorij Mesežnikov, Ofga Gyárfásová, and Daniel Smilov, eds., *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bratislava: Institute for Public Policy, 2008).
10. Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).