

## POPULISM AND NATIONALISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

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Exactly what *is* Eastern Europe? Geographically, it has changed significantly since 1989.

**BASIC PRINCIPLE:** The current situation in Eastern Europe is rooted firmly in the demise of the Soviet bloc and the tumultuous events of 1989.

**HUNGARY:** Viktor Orban

**POLAND:** Andrzej Duda, president

Jaroslaw Kaczyński, leader, Law and Justice Party

**LATVIA:** Artuss Kaimins, leader, KPV LV (Who Owns the State? Party)

**GERMANY:** Alternativ für Deutschland

### HUNGARY

Viktor Orban was a young, grass-roots democratic activist in 1989. In the intervening 29 years, he has become Hungary's prime minister as a far-right enemy of civil society.

What happened? In the early 1990s, voters expected that membership in the EU and the transition to liberal democracy would bring living standards comparable to those of Western Europe. But the privatization of state assets appeared to benefit foreign investors and corrupt politicians, not ordinary citizens. The global financial crisis of 2008 soured many Hungarians on the motives and abilities of the political and economic elites. Politicians often responded, in Hungary and elsewhere, by shifting to the right.

Orban became prime minister for the first time in 1998, profiting from voter resentment over a weak economy. He led Hungary into NATO and brought it to the brink of membership in the EU. For these achievements he was rewarded with defeat in 2002. The loss of power turned him into a radical rightist. He blamed the media for his defeat and stated that democracy had one fatal flaw: once you gained power, you might lose it.

Elected by a landslide in 2010, Orban has steadily weakened Hungary's democratic institutions. He is an admirer of Putin and Erdogan, and in 2015 he began

convincing other Central and East European countries to block the EU's efforts to resettle thousands of migrants from Syria and Libya. He inspired Poland's lurch to the right, toured Holland with nationalist Geert Wilders, and allied with a right-wing Austrian party that ended up joining a coalition government there. Orban sees all this as the march of history, an inevitable progression toward authoritarian rule.

## POLAND

President Andrzej Duda purged Poland's supreme court, forcing one-third of its justices to retire. The EU has moved to invoke Article 7 of the EU Treaty for a breach of obligations as a member of the Union. The government's action has led to resistance from the nation's judges, who have essentially boycotted their own courts. There are 10,000 qualified judges in the country, but only 200 are willing to be considered for dozens of court openings. The Chief Judge refuses to retire, and the man appointed by Duda to replace her refuses to take her job. Judges who condemn the retirements are hauled before disciplinary chambers, denounced in the right-wing media, and physically threatened.

Duda defines the EU as an "imaginary community." His Law and Justice Party, led by the autocratic nativist Jaroslaw Kaczyński, has been in power since 2015 and has made reshaping the courts the center of its nationalist agenda. The Justice Minister has been given the power to dismiss judges, including those who rule on the validity of elections.

## GERMANY

19,700,000 Germans have foreign-born parents. The AfD, "Alternative for Germany," is a fellow-traveling Nazi organization. It was amplified by the Syrian catastrophe that hit Europe like a sledgehammer in 2015, and the wave of refugees has intensified long-simmering discontent with the nature of assimilation. Americans attempting to understand this need to recognize that the melting-pot mentality so ingrained in the USA is not congenial to Europeans.

## LATVIA

Latvia has been governed since 1991 by parties inclined toward Europe and suspicious of Russia. But on 7 October 2018 election returns showed a strong lurch toward pro-Russian, anti-establishment parties like Harmony Center, which is close to

Vladimir Putin. Harmony Center took 19% of the vote; KPV LV (Who Owns the State?), led by an erratic, volatile former actor, Artuss Kaimins, took 14%; and the New Conservative Party polled 13%.

Why? The country's largest bank collapsed and has been described by the US Treasury as a money-laundering enterprise.

25% of Latvians speak Russian and get their news from Russian state media, with a strong dose of stories of Latvians persecuting Russians. Radical pro-Russian groups regularly call for withdrawal from NATO and the EU.

## SWEDEN

Sweden is not part of Eastern Europe, but events there are instructive. For decades Sweden, once an ethnically and culturally homogeneous country with an expansive social welfare system, insisted that it could absorb large numbers of non-European migrants without considering how those emigrants should be integrated into Swedish society.

Results:

- Migrants are clustered in low-income neighborhoods
- They face poor job prospects and employment discrimination
- They tend to reject many of the values of Swedish society

The Sweden Democrats are a racist, anti-immigrant, anti-establishment party. They want to leave the EU and terminate the right to asylum.

Sweden since 2015 has accepted 163,000 refugees. That's proportionally equal to the USA accepting 5,200,000. No one seems to have considered that it would be difficult to house them adequately and with dignity. Entering the job market requires fluency in Swedish and technical skills, neither of which are possessed in great numbers by migrants.

## QUESTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Q-1. Hungary is moving to ban gender studies. Where does the gender issue fit into East Europe's rightward shift?

Gender and LGBTQ studies may or may not have a future in East Europe, but they certainly don't have much of a present. Right-wing parties and factions consider such people far too left-leaning and generally try to ignore them.

Q-2. No one anticipated the duration of the Syrian conflict and the magnitude of the refugee issue it would generate. How does Russia's backing of the Assad regime affect these considerations?

Russia has been Syria's ally since 1957, and a departure from that alliance would have been astounding. Assad guarantees Russia a voice in eastern Mediterranean affairs. His endurance is attributable to two factors: Russian support, and desperation on the part of the Alawite minority, which fears literal extermination if he loses.

Q-3. Do low European fertility rates have anything to do with the acceptance of refugees by these countries?

Not much. Far more compelling is the EU Treaty of 1992, which mandates acceptance and transmigration of refugees within the EU.

Q-4. Which countries in Eastern Europe actually have stable, more liberal democracies?

The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia come down on the more liberal-democratic side of things, at least at present.

My thanks to Jen Medwid for recording the questions, and my thanks to all participants for their attendance!