



The Light That Still Shines

The European East as a Factory of Learning for a Common and Democratic Europe

by Vedran Džihic

If there is one dominant paradigm that has shaped modern Europe, it is the East-West Divide. Ever since the Enlightenment, Western Europe has defined itself in opposition to the East – towards Poland, Russia, the Balkans – always imagining and constructing itself as the civilized, modern, enlightened Europe of the West in contrast to the barbarian, premodern, bloody and filled with hatred East. The deep divide between the East and the West during the Cold War, symbolised by the Iron Curtain, emboldened the imaginaries of the East in Western Europe, leaving Eastern Europe and the Balkans almost outside of European self-understanding.

When the age of ideologies, as the time of the Cold war and the deep division between the East and the West was described, came to an end, many experts and observers expected the “defeated” East and its communist ideology to be quickly replaced by the dominant liberal-democratic and capitalist order of the West. The “end of history” was seen as a transformation of the West into the model for the East. It meant the dominance of the liberal democratic model.

Eastern European countries of the former Soviet bloc quickly embarked on a road towards the EU and the

Western European land of milk and honey, while the countries of the Former Yugoslavia sank into the horror of wars of the 1990s, leaving a bloody scar on the new European self-understanding of a united and peaceful continent. The wars in Yugoslavia and the resurgence of nationalism, back then seen as an anomaly in the pinky picture of the rest of Eastern Europe and the era of democratic transition, were not recognised as the harbinger of a new era obsessed with (national and ethnic) identity. Clearly, from the perspective of the Balkans and the places of horrific war crimes, including the genocide in Srebrenica, the phrase



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of “the end of history” appeared as a disillusion or merely a mockery.

In a lecture held in 1995 at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna US-American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, surprised the audience in Austria, which had just joined the EU and was profiting enormously from the opening towards the East, with a message that the convergence of East and West would not be the force shaping the future, but rather the notion of identity. Geertz saw the future contours of a world obsessed with identity, in which “a stream of obscure divisions and strange instabilities” would prevail.

In one of the most provocative and lucid books written in the last few years on Europe by Ivan Krastev together with Stephen Holmes, “The Light that failed”, Krastev and Holmes refer to the notion of the expected convergence between the East and the West. They argue that the previous communist and social East had entered an era of imitation binding itself to the Western notion – or even illusion – that liberal institutions, norms and values would almost naturally prevail and erase all the differences between the East and the West, both in terms of norms, values and ideologies and living standard, salaries, and the way of (neoliberal) life.

Krastav and Holmes wrote their book in the middle of Donald Trump’s first term in office, in an era of crisis for the EU following Brexit and in midst of the rise of competitive and reactionary authoritarianism in Eastern Europe, exemplified by Orban’s Hungary, Vučić’s Serbia, Erdoğan’s Turkey, and Kaczynski’s Poland. The light of liberalism had failed or at least become thinner, as confirmed by the rise of Eastern European and Balkan small or big autocrats and despots, Krastev and Holmes argued. New nationalism bound to the narrative of past glory of proud nations in the East, became the ideological backbone of a new type



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of authoritarian governance deeply engaged in clientelism, corruption and fraud. The bigger the material gains of new authoritarian elites and their coopted business circles, the bigger the need to make “our nation great again”.

The surge of autocratisation was fueled with resentments against the West and Western European norms and values, exemplified in the Brussels-bashing and harsh criticism of the liberal “deep state”. This authoritarian wave coincided with the rise of anti-liberal and anti-EU far rights parties and movements in “old” Western Europe. From Le Pen’s Front National to Austria’s Freedom Party, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party in the Netherlands, Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia, and most recently the AfD in Germany, a new far right, nationalist and authoritarian international has emerged. The European East, most prominently Viktor

Orban with his FIDESZ and the recipe for the authoritarian reconstruction of state and society, became a role model for many, including Donald Trump and his second presidency. If we add Putin’s brutal aggression on Ukraine to this new global power equation, which brought back not only war but also brutal revisionism and imperialism to Europe, we certainly face a new world order full of conflicts, unpredictability, and injustice. And we face a world where we in Europe have to find answers to two urgent questions: Do we want to save the Western liberal-democratic model and how do we intend to do so? And what is our vision of the European continent and the EU, which recently resembles a rather shaken liberal-democratic island amidst an ever-spreading authoritarian sea?

While looking for the answers we should not omit a closer look at Ukraine. Now that Trump has sent shockwaves throughout Europe by aligning more closely with Kremlin’s positions and portraying Ukrainian president Zelensky as a dictator and aggressor, the EU and its remaining democratic allies in the West have – at least – started a new debate about European defense and security capabilities. More importantly, we have begun debating how to confront the authoritarian and revisionist powers – with determination, unity, investments in security and most importantly a new thinking about how to protect our liberal-democratic way of life.

In this new debate, important answers and liberal-democratic inspirations come from the European East. Poland, the Baltic states and nations resisting the Russian revisionist grab for power, like Moldova, teach us how to stand strong while mobilising and advocating for a strong, defence-ready and yet liberal-democratic response to the threat posed by Russia. Poland as one of the most important cases of a successful resistance and fight against a competitive authoritarian regime, as it was during the years of PiS rule, still has a long way to go to make the country resilient against authoritarian challenges. Despite internal struggles and ahead of crucial presidential elections on 18 May, Poland has established itself as a key European player that will significantly shape the future of the EU and Europe.

An important inspiration for Western liberal-democratic societies and nations comes from citizens of countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe that Western Europeans would expect the least – from Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia or Georgia. Protests and contentious movements against authoritarian regimes in these countries, still met with repression like in Serbia and even most brutal violence like in Georgia, teach us how to stand up for what belongs to the core of the promise of liberal-democratic societies – for freedom, liberty, rule of law, fundamental rights and human dignity. It is particularly striking that students and

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young people, who lead the protests in Serbia, a country that in the 1990s throughout the Milošević regime and wars exemplified the worst, have for months following a collapse of a roof of the railway station in Novi Sad in November 2024, stood up to confront an authoritarian regime (led by Serbian president Vučić) with perseverance, creativity, new innovative democratic forms of deliberation in public assemblies, and most importantly with enthusiasm and hope. Serbian students do not wave EU-flags like their young colleagues on the streets of Tbilisi, but they do fight for European values and norms. They literally carry a light of their fight to European capitals, to Strasbourg and Brussels, by biking from Belgrade to Brussels, as they did in April, or running an ultra-marathon to Brussels, as they did mid-May 2025.

How this new positive and inspiring outbreak of protests – from Serbia to Georgia, as well as in Hungary and Slovakia, and also in Turkey following the imprisonment of Istanbul mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu – might lead to political change or even regime change, remains to be seen. There is no place for naivety, yet there is room for hope. What we can certainly argue is that the European East and its citizens – whether in the countries that joined the EU in 2004, in the Balkans, Moldova or Georgia or further southeast in Turkey, have joined the West in a common search for answers to the most pressing challenges of our times. In resisting

Russian aggression and new revisionism and imperialism, in creating counternarratives to nationalism and chauvinism, in offering creative responses to common democratic problems, and lastly in refusing to give in into authoritarianism, the East has become a new factory of learning and inspiration for common and democratic Europe and beyond. Is it in today's new fight against global revisionist, nationalist and authoritarian powers and ideologies that East and West in Europe would finally come together? Paradoxically, and despite some of the toughest times for liberal democracy worldwide and Europe's role as a beacon of freedom and human rights, the European East teaches us that the light still shines.

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