

THE RETURN OF HISTORY: COUNTERING THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

by **Stuart Austin**



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This article summarises discussion held at the Ratiu Dialogues on Democracy conference, held in Cluj (Romania) on 15-16 June 2023. Contributors to the discussion were: Dr Radu Albu-Comanescu, Prof Christopher Coker, Dr Adrian-Gabriel Corpadean, Prof Sumantra Bose, Prof Christopher Dandeker, Prof Michael Burleigh, Dr Mois Faion, Dr Marcin Fatalski, Dr Alexander Gerganov, Maja Kurilić, Prof Dominic Lieven, John Lloyd, Bálint Magyar, Prof Slobodan Markovich, Dr Oana-Cristina Popa, Wojciech Przybylski, Richard Ralph CMG CVO, Nicolae Ratiu, Emilia Șercan, Louisa Slavkova, and Dr Eric Weaver.

Since the early-1990s, Europe has been facing what Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg term the 'third wave of autocratisation'; post-communist East European countries accounted for 16 out of 75 protracted episodes (as of 2019) and, unprecedented in history, the third wave largely affects existing democracies over autocracies.¹ The panels and audience alike repeatedly pondered the question of whether consolidated democracies are irreversible, and whether 'European values' (i.e. liberal democratic values) are universal. The Hungarian case seems to suggest not: Prime Minister Viktor Orbán notoriously and proudly declared Hungary to be an 'illiberal democracy' in 2014. The outlook for democracy is not entirely negative, however. Hungary remained the only European Union member state downgraded to 'partly free' by Freedom House as of 2023.² This year's Freedom in the World report has found that, while global freedom has declined for a 17th consecutive year, the gap between those countries improving and those declining is also now at its most narrow—a reason for some optimism that autocracies are not themselves consolidating irreversibly.³

What is concerning is that, as part of that long decline, trust in democratic institutions across the central-eastern European region is overall notably low. Without that trust but also unity on liberal values—however different the norms to implement those values are between nations—democracies will slide further into illiberalism, and from that into another form of state altogether but one which is neither free nor democratic. According to Bálint Magyar's interpretive framework of post-communist regimes, on the political spectrum Hungary is almost entirely a patronal autocracy; Poland sits between liberal democracy and conservative autocracy; Romania is classified as a highly patronal democracy, while North Macedonia and Moldova are definitively patronal democracies.⁴

The war in Ukraine is also a war of values and the EU has invested much towards a Ukrainian victory, or at least a Russian defeat. But the return on this investment depends upon a strong degree of unity regarding values within the union. While state capture within Hungary has been successful enough to take Orbán's boast at face value, populist attempts within Poland have not replicated the illiberal achievements of Fidesz, at least not in every branch of government or free institution. Recently, in June 2023, the European Commission sued Poland over its Kremlin-commission law, which allows for anyone vaguely suspected of

'Kremlin influence' to be banned from politics for a decade; the law has provoked outrage for its potential weaponisation against any political opposition figures.⁵ This development is additional to Poland's ongoing constitutional crisis since 2015, as the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party's gradual capture of the judiciary has since elicited rulings against it from the European Court of Justice in 2019 and 2020. However, the panellists focused on threats to media freedom and, unlike the controversy over the judicial system, PiS have been hitherto unsuccessful in their attempts to reshape the structure of the media landscape since 2016.

The reasons behind that lack of success may be cause for optimism. The post-1989 liberal promise of integration with the West unified a Polish society that had lived under decades of Communist Party rule—albeit of a slightly lighter touch since 1956 than Poland's less fortunate Iron Curtain neighbours. However, the nature of that society is broadly conservative in its Liberalism, at least relative to most of its EU counterparts; two notable leading daily national newspapers include centre-left *Gazeta Wyborcza* and liberal-conservative *Rzeczpospolita*—both primarily critical of PiS. The leading Conservative daily, German-Swiss-owned tabloid *Fakt*, is also regularly attacked by PiS, including President Duda during the 2020 election campaign alleging its German political agenda.⁶ As for local and regional media in Poland, the offerings are traditionally strong, independent, and privately owned; regional media is largely financed and influenced by the political opposition, and, unlike Hungary's Fidesz, PiS never enjoyed a permanent constitutional majority.

Poland's constitutional make-up, relative social unity and strength of independent media therefore combine to provide some level of protection against advanced autocratisation. Additional safeguards can also derive from international political pressure, particularly from the United States as leader of the liberal world order. Poland's biggest independent broadcaster TVN—through its channel TVN24—leads the charge in critical opposition to PiS's illiberal model and is, to the chagrin of the government, owned by the US conglomerate Warner Bros. Discovery (WBD). A media bill passed in 2021's Parliament—under the justification of preventing undemocratic states from owning Polish media—would have forced WBD to sell its majority stake but was eventually vetoed by President Andrzej Duda, as it threatened to rupture trade relations with the US.⁷ As John Lloyd reminded us, whereas journalists in democratic systems hide behind the concept of 'freedom' to justify their mistakes, so populist politicians gaslight their citizens with alleged threats to democracy when justifying legislation which restricts those very freedoms. While Poland remains a free country, with public trust in its media falling from 56% in 2015 to 42% in 2022, damage is clearly being done.⁸

The Reuters Institute for Journalism paints an increasingly bleak picture of trust in this key democratic institution within the central-eastern Europe region; the recent COVID-19 pandemic years seeing the sharper drop. Within Romania, trust in its news media fell nine percentage points in just one year, from 42% in 2021 down to 33% in 2022.⁹ In Bulgaria, the portion crept up from 32% in 2021 to 35% in 2022, but this is a gradual recovery from a 40% high last seen in 2019.¹⁰ Media literacy is also a difficult and complex subject for the region; Louisa Slavkova and Maja Kurilić of the CIVICS Innovation Hub presented data from their report on 'Mapping Civic Education in Europe', which indicates that only Albanian, Austrian, Slovakian, and Slovenian respondents focus on media literacy for more than 20% of their activities.¹¹

Although Poland and Bulgaria benefit from independent media, trust within both countries has been evidently declining, and stark political stances from most news outlets within Bulgaria reflect a strongly divided society. Within a captured state, this pluralism of views can exist but only with deficiencies surrounding the rule of law: the national media model in Bulgaria almost kills the regional, in contrast to Poland, where EU funds intended for local authorities are funnelled elsewhere; media is largely unregulated and used as a partisan tool; critical or investigative journalism hardly exists; and there also exists a strong susceptibility to Russian infiltration via

Russian-owned, pro-Russian nationalist, or communist outlets.¹² The level of disinformation within Bulgaria has been largely ignored within Brussels since the former's accession in 2007, as it was then considered part of the 'family of democracies'—i.e., the 'end of history'; Bulgaria's historical relationship with Russia is rather complicated but the war in Ukraine has come at the time of a crisis of government in Bulgaria, with five general elections in two years failing to produce majorities and levels of trust in representative institutions plummeting.¹³

The proliferation of patronal democracies within the region reveals the seriously deep issue of corruption within post-communist states, serving as another barometer of their democratic health—or autocratic decline. Alexander Gerganov demonstrated using data from the Centre for the Study of Democracy (Sofia) that while the acceptability of corruption is decreasing within the Balkans, the pressure to pay bribes, the average value of said bribes, and therefore the distrust towards policy initiatives that can feasibly address corruption are steadily increasing.¹⁴ The danger is that corruption becomes viewed in a normative way and, therefore, eventually excusable by society at large. Corruption and state capture are a major barrier for candidates sitting in the EU-membership waiting room. Several have been reaping the benefits of the expansion process while cutting corners that violate the Copenhagen Criteria, promising stability while claiming to be reforming democracies—or what was termed by the panels as 'stabilitocracies': Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The Serbian Progressive Party has captured the state, and the feeling among liberals is that elections serve no purpose because the outcome is predetermined. But President Vučić cannot outright claim his state to be an illiberal democracy in the way Orbán so proudly can; Hungary, as an existing member, has been to a degree internally 'protected' from EU sanctions—at least until Chancellor Merkel stepped down in 2022 and, ironically, when the UK Tories 'Brexit' from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group.

Compounding this challenge, the accession process is a two-way agreement and Brussels has proved disappointing from the point-of-view of those within the Balkans who sincerely desire membership. North Macedonia has been awaiting accession talks for nearly two decades: being at the mercy of its neighbours Bulgaria and Greece over bilateral disputes of geography, language, and historical ethnic identity; exacerbating the issue is that individual member states such as France, the Netherlands and Denmark have internationalised these bilateral issues by vetoing accession talks at various stages for political reasons. Not unexpectedly, member states rally behind their fellow members. However, EU enlargement has returned to the forefront of the geopolitical conversation thanks to the security threat posed by the war in Ukraine, and the Union must contend with this fundamental reality within the Western Balkans.

That reality has been obvious since the 1990s, where anyone could see that the collapse of the Iron Curtain did not lead to the 'end of History' through inevitable liberalisation and democratisation across Europe. The breakdown of Yugoslavia led to years of genocidal conflict and ethnic cleansing on the continent. A few decades previously, throughout the 1950s-60s, the supranational dream was already dying out, to be replaced once again by the nation state—a return to the 19th-century trend for group identity formed along national lines. According to its last census, in 2013, Bosnia and Herzegovina's population was composed primarily of Bosniak Muslims (50%), Serbs (30.78%), and Croats (15.43%).¹⁵ The 1995 Dayton Accords—securing peace after the 1992-95 Bosnian War—provide for collective national rights within the country, and its future likely lies in a federalised national state, but deep divisions along sectarian lines remain: Bosniaks desire a unitary, multicultural state; Bosnian Serbs want their own state within an existing entity—Republika Srpska; and Bosnian Croats aim for their own self-ruling entity similar to that of the Serbs. Compounding risk to stability in the region is the recent sectarian violence within Kosovo between ethnic Serbs and Albanians. History is always ready to return.

The world is witnessing a resurgence of Great Power competition; what has been striking is the speed at which the post-Cold War unipolar illusion has itself collapsed. European values are being increasingly challenged from within, as described above. If values are proven to be non-universal for Europeans, or indeed a complete illusion, this may spell the death knell for the European Union, at least as a player in this emerging geopolitical chessboard. Europe must beware of 'Putin-lovers' coming to power across the continent. Italy saw a populist right-wing government win the 2022 general election—although many have labelled it 'far right' due to its historical links with Mussolini's Fascist regime. By contrast, while Spain's recent general election was anticipated to bring far-right populist party VOX serious gains in coalition with the conservative People's Party, in fact the latter gained only a narrow win, with VOX *losing* a third of its seats and the right failing to achieve a majority—a win for the political centre, perhaps.¹⁶

In more alarming scenarios, there is no clear existing mechanism for what happens if one EU member state goes to war with another member or candidate state: if, for example, Hungary decides to militarise the Transcarpathian issue with Ukraine when the latter's armed forces are on the backfoot against Russia's military. Or one can consider the haunting proposition that NATO ally Turkey may eventually join a despotic axis alongside Russia, China and India; authoritarianism such as Erdogan's increasingly stresses republicanism over democracy and state over society.

There is no doubt that Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, commit war crimes and continue a brutal campaign despite major military setbacks has negatively impacted the populist appeal of the Kremlin's archetypal strongman. But there is the sense that war-weariness will set in and European populations will tire of supporting the Ukrainian cause. The CIVICS Innovation Hub found that 'History and Remembrance' is one of the least taught subjects by civic educators, focused on by less than 25% of those mapped; less than five percent of total civic education was focused on the subject within Croatia, France, Italy, Malta, and North Macedonia.¹⁷ The great challenge for historians and diplomats is that they can do surprisingly little to counter Russia's narrative surrounding their war on Ukraine. Putin is essentially continuing the Russification campaigns of the 19th Century, resurrecting Tsar Alexander III's ultra-nationalism. The concept of Russians and Ukrainians being 'one people' made more sense to the politicians and public of the 1850s than it possibly could to those in the 20th and 21st Centuries. Indeed, European diplomats during the Romanov years were aristocrats whose relatives and heritage came from all over the continent thanks to the nature of the global and land empires they represented—loved by their governments for helping create their national myths. The diplomats of modern times are representatives of nation-states and supranational bodies, ready to bust the national myths of other countries in the process—raising the ire of populist or nationalist governments wherever they are to be found.

National myths are important, however, to the emotional core of a nation-state, factoring into their geopolitical behaviours. The bigger surprise is that this post-Soviet conflict did not break out back in the late 1980s or early 1990s, as the USSR split into its constituent parts—largely bloodshed-free—in a form of civilisational collapse. While not a unique phenomenon to Russia, we are witnessing the ongoing failure of the Russian Empire, from its Tsarist and Soviet forms, as a security issue; militarily and culturally attempting to subjugate Ukraine and Ukrainians, denying their own identity and sovereignty. Empires historically fall through defeat in war and conflict, but within the 20th Century conflict also brought about the convergence of states into supranational bodies and intergovernmental organisations: an 'international community'. The EU's founding (as the European Coal and Steel Community) did not create the peace after the Second World War: that was secured in the immediacy by the Allied military victory and occupation of the defeated states. Similarly, the United Nations began as a wartime military alliance, not the peacetime organisation it developed into once

the Third Reich had been utterly defeated into unconditional surrender, with it and much of Europe in ruins. What the EU has no doubt succeeded at is maintaining stability on the continent since its last negotiated peace settlement.

The great challenge for the international community of today is not only to secure a negotiated settlement but to maintain the peace between Russia and Ukraine. The British press have historically labelled every international opponent as 'Hitler'—including Gaddafi and Saddam among others—making diplomacy especially harder to engage in when any terms of peace favourable to Russia become framed as 'appeasement'. There is no realistic outcome of this conflict which sees Russia occupied and pacified, due to the obvious factor that, unlike the Nazi war machine, Putin's Russia owns a deployable nuclear arsenal. Besides, the Russian state has never been successfully conquered by conventional land forces. However, we can draw lessons from the Versailles settlement of 1919, the terms of which were harsh enough in the eyes of the German elite that they likely would have challenged the settlement even without Hitler and the Nazi Party, in time. The current conflict will likely stop and start in the years and decades to come if issues remain unresolved around territorial disputes, war crimes, ecological disasters, reparations for infrastructural destruction, and psychological trauma inflicted upon Ukrainians; but also if Russia is permanently treated as a pariah state.

COUNTERING THE DECLINE

The list of challenges is a long one. Given that the EU finds itself between a rock and a hard place with the Western Balkans, and that accession by individual nations has proved increasingly disappointing to all sides, the panellists questioned whether Brussels's hitherto strategy of membership entry by chapters has been a mistake these last decades. In 2018, the European Commission did publish an enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans, but since then member states have repeatedly failed to kickstart accession negotiations with both North Macedonia and Albania; this stalemate sends the message to countries in the region that their achievements towards accession are fruitless, and will erode the EU's soft power.¹⁸ Brussels should therefore consider a regional strategy to further integration of the Western Balkans: not by rushing each country through with political expediency but by progressing the rule of law, democratic institutions, and healthy economies in parallel as one group through the Copenhagen Criteria.

The soft power of the EU is as critical now as ever; the 2013-14 Maidan Uprising in Ukraine was sparked by Yanukovich's refusal to sign the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement. However, it is also difficult to quantify how European values were being met by the region in the accession process. Therefore, to evolve into a geostrategic foreign policy actor, the EU will be required to back up its values with elements of hard power; militarisation combined with the strategic expansion discussed above—a controversial direction at the best of times, but with a military conflict of ideological motivation, war crimes, and disinformation on its doorstep, this pathway must be planned for. Europe should address the issues of democratic institutional weaknesses within its own borders: address governance deficits (especially corruption), establish public-private hybrid regulation bodies to tackle illicit flows of EU funds, and clearly define the line between free speech and criminal disinformation.¹⁹

When considering the future of the Russian leadership and state, already the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation; the two are suspected of the war crimes of unlawful

deportation of Ukrainian children and of unlawful transfer of populations from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation.²⁰ The warrant has so far prevented Putin from attending in-person the forthcoming August BRICS summit in South Africa, as the latter is a signatory to the ICC and therefore obliged to arrest Putin on arrival. As Russia refused to ratify the Rome Statute—so have the United States and China—the Kremlin cannot be investigated by the ICC for the Crime of Aggression. However, other models have been proposed, including an International Criminal Tribunal established by treaty between states to try the planners and wagers of the war on Ukraine, as well as the perpetrators of war crimes.²¹ This would be akin to the Nuremberg Military Tribunal of 1945-46; a trial against individuals and organisations would show that the Russian state, not its civilian population as a whole, are responsible for the war and for atrocities.

There are strengths and weaknesses to such arrangements: the Nuremberg Trials were only possible because of Allied victory over and capture of the defendants, an arrangement uncontroversial to the many nations which eventually signed on to the tribunal. Today's landscape is divided on attitudes towards Russia; both from the Global South and within the West. However, we continue to return to historical precedent in order to counter the Kremlin's narrative, as well as to guide policy on how to settle the conflict peacefully and how to maintain that peace once the war is over. But we must consider nuance when making historical comparisons. Putin is not Alexander III, neither is he Hitler. The war in Ukraine is not the Second World War. Where we can make reasonable comparisons in behaviour and motivation, one ray of hope is that, while the Third Reich committed destruction and atrocity on an entirely larger scale than the Russian armed forces are doing today, Germany as a state, and as a nation, survived intact—albeit split for decades into two opposing polities stabilised under the Cold War framework, but eventually united. Today's Germany is a beacon for the liberal world, especially following the impact of America First on international soft power in recent years. Therefore, despite the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, its war crimes, and increasingly irrational narrative, it is still plausible for the Russian nation to come out of this conflict intact and with a degree of legitimacy within the international community.

What if the perpetrators of this war cannot be brought to justice nor even defeated? When the Cold War framework collapsed throughout 1989-91 and reunited the two Germanys, President George Bush was anxious to prevent the US' archenemy from disintegrating violently into lawless territories. The attempted coup in June by Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner Group within southern Russia has highlighted the very real danger of a nuclear-armed state controlled by prisoners-turned-hardened war criminals. US intelligence believes that Prigozhin's death - exactly two months on - in the Tver Oblast plane crash was caused by an on-board explosion; the most clear-cut demonstration of Putin reasserting his authority over the nation, the state, and Russian military proxies, if true.²² The picture is less clear as to whether Putin remains in power long-term, or Russia suffers military defeat. But if the US-led liberal order wants to eventually bring Russia peacefully into the family of democracies—as the Axis powers eventually were, albeit following military defeat—it needs to approach the Russian people not as a Second World nation; an attitude held toward much of post-communist Europe since 1989, even as they integrated into Western democratic structures and liberal ideals. With a shift in attitudes, alongside the policies and strategies discussed above, the world's democracies counter the third wave of autocratisation—and perhaps prevent an even greater destructive and destabilising return to history for the foreseeable future. ■

ENDNOTES


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The Ratiu Forum is CSEEP's joint initiative with the Ratiu Family Charitable Foundation (London) and the Ratiu Centre for Democracy (Transylvania). The Ratiu Forum supports researchers who focus on Central Eastern Europe, as well as the Balkan region. The Forum facilitates conferences, workshops, and other events as part of the Teaching of History Programme, Journalism Mentorship Programme, and annual Dialogues on Democracy.

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*Left: Statue of Ion Ratiu, co-founder of
The Ratiu Family Charitable Foundation
(The Ratiu Guesthouse, Turda).*

*Right: Profs Dominic Lieven and Michael Burleigh discuss
the 'Return of History and the War in Ukraine'.*