

## The Illiberal Challenge in Post-Communist Europe Surprises and Puzzles

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### Abstract

Since the collapse of communist regimes in 1989, experts on the region have worried about the depth of popular support for democracy, a market economy, and liberal ideas. Radical movements and revolts against the neo-liberal reforms were widely expected. While states in Central and Eastern Europe have experienced long and costly transitions away from communism and the resulting economic and social dislocations were some of the most severe in the twentieth century, the popular revolt against liberal economic policies never materialized. The current financial and sovereign debt crisis puts renewed strain on economies in the region and forces austerity policies that again raise the specter of political extremism. Yet, despite such economic adversities and costs, political mobilization around illiberal ideas and against democracy and markets has been surprisingly marginal. This essay suggests that illiberal movements are gaining ground only in countries where they are supported by authoritarian states and in periods when illiberal political parties are in power. Thus, economic fortune alone does not seem to drive antiliberal political mobilization.

**Keywords:** Central and Eastern Europe, civil society, democratization, illiberalism, populism, post-communism.

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Two decades of political, economic, and social transformations in Eastern and Central Europe resulted in outcomes that initially were hardly expected. Despite general pessimism about the prospect of liberal democracy in the region, several post-communist countries have developed consolidated

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democratic systems and working market economies. Other countries, however, either have returned to authoritarianism, albeit of a different sort, or have persisted in a semireformed and unconsolidated state, dashing the initial hopes of a democratic future for the entire region. Today, ten formerly communist countries are members of the European Union, while others are still either in a waiting room with increasingly uncertain prospects for full membership or destined to remain the neighbors of the EU for the foreseeable future. Finally, the current financial and sovereign debt crisis in Europe has had varied impacts on countries of the region. Some have experienced severe economic problems (the Baltic Republics, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania), while others have weathered the crisis so far with few difficulties (e.g., Poland, Slovakia). Some recovered quickly (e.g., Estonia, Lithuania), while others are suffering a prolonged crisis (e.g., Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia). Thus, former Eastern Europe has moved from drab communist uniformity to diversity, displaying a surprising range of contrasting political and economic outcomes.

Among the many challenges of transition, the task of rebuilding a civil society able to provide underpinnings for working democracy was considered especially difficult. Yet, despite well-founded doubts about whether civil societies would be able to recover from decades of communist suppression, we have seen significant gains across the region and in many countries vibrant and well-organized civil societies have emerged. Even in countries that experienced authoritarian reversals, civil societies appear to be well-institutionalized, connected to international NGO networks, and grudgingly tolerated by the state. Despite clear efforts in countries like Russia and others, there is no obvious case of civil society capture by the authoritarian state. Finally, there are also very few instances of significant grass-roots extremist movements or civil-society actors mobilized in support of illiberal values and policies.

There have been, however, persistent doubts about the nature and normative orientations of these newly reconstituted civil societies. Early in the transitions, Przeworski predicted inevitable erosion of support for democracy.<sup>1</sup> Ost warned that “the danger of new dictatorship in Eastern Europe comes from the bottom, not from the top.”<sup>2</sup> Others envisioned escalating mass protests, an upsurge in nationalism, ethnic violence, racism, and xenophobia, as well as the emergence of reactionary, populist, and authoritarian movements, fueled by angry publics and representing marginalized sectors of society. While initial fears about popular revolts against neo-liberal economic reforms implemented after 1989 and against growing inequalities faded away after the first decade of transformations, warnings of the populist backlash fueled

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> David Ost et al., “Is Latin American the Future of Eastern Europe?” *Problems of Communism* (May-June 1992): 49.

by illiberal political entrepreneurs feeding on popular discontent, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and xenophobia have been a constant element in the commentaries on the region. In 2007, Krastev claimed that “the liberal era that began in Central Europe in 1989 has come to an end. Populism and illiberalism are tearing the region apart.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Rupnik argued that “the recent populist backlash is a direct challenge to the liberal paradigm that has prevailed in the region for a decade and a half.”<sup>4</sup>

While not denying the obvious presence of illiberal political orientations as well as xenophobia, rabid nationalism, and extremist movements in many countries of the region,<sup>5</sup> it is striking how little success populist politicians have had so far in stirring grass-roots movements of rage and manipulating such sentiments. If one considers the social cost and disruptiveness of the post-communist dual (political and economic) transformations, it is surprising that the extremism of both right and left has been relatively marginal and that populist and illiberal parties (with few exceptions) have not been more successful. The response of the populations to dramatic economic and social dislocations and declining living standards both during the initial economic transformations and during the current financial and economic crisis has been surprisingly subdued. There have been no widespread IMF riots in the region, despite rising unemployment, inequality, and often crippling austerity measures introduced by various states. As Greskovits once noted, post-communist societies have been surprisingly patient.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, all significant cases of mass popular mobilization across the region were not movements of rage against the neo-liberal reforms or democracy and capitalism. Instead, these were movements against transgressions from the path of reforms, best epitomized by the so-called colored revolutions. Civil-society groups sought to challenge ruling elites and their efforts to subvert democratic institutions and the rule of law. They rejected corrupt economic practices and called for more freedom, both political and economic, and for more transparency. Finally, while recent public opinion polls suggest a decline in support of liberal values among the new member states of the EU, support for liberal values has been growing in authoritarian and semiauthoritarian countries of the former Soviet bloc.<sup>7</sup> In short, the often-predicted mass protest

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<sup>3</sup> Ivan Krastev, “The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007): 56.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rupnik, “From Democratic Fatigue to Populist Backlash,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007): 19.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Petr Kopecky and Cas Mudde, *Uncivil Society: Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003), and Sabrina Ramet, *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Béla Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience* (Budapest: Central European University, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, “Crisis in Transition: The People’s Perspective,” Transition Report, 2011.

movement against post-communist reforms and against neo-liberal economic policies has never materialized. Populism and extremist views come more often from the fringes of the political elite than from civil society and grass-roots movements. Moreover, populist elite actors have had little success in mobilizing angry masses and building organized bases of support for illiberal causes within new civil societies.

In this essay, I am going to discuss, briefly, three issues. First, I will comment on the diversity of transformation outcomes. Second, I will discuss the reconstitution of civil societies in the region. Finally, I will evaluate the strength of liberal ideas and support for democracy in the context of costly post-communist economic and social transformations and in response to the current financial crisis. I argue that given the cost of the neo-liberal reforms and reoccurring economic downturns—as well as efforts by new autocrats to control and use civil society for their own ends—it is surprising how little support there is for illiberal ideas and various alternatives to democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy.

### **Post-communist Societies: A Surprising Diversity of Outcomes**

Initially, post-communism was considered, with some good reasons, to be the most unfriendly environment in which to build liberal political and economic orders. Liberal outcomes were hardly expected, and scholars predicted the return to rule of “demagogues, priests and colonels,”<sup>8</sup> or the emergence of “low-performing, institutionally mixed market economies and incomplete, elitist, and exclusionary democracies.”<sup>9</sup> Moving away from communism, all these countries faced four formidable challenges: establishing a working democratic regime, transforming the state-controlled economy into a free-market economy, establishing an efficient state based on the rule of law, and reconstituting a vibrant civil society that would provide underpinning for both working democracy and a market economy.

Yet, despite similar challenges, common declared goals, a democracy-friendly and supportive international environment, and generally similar policy designs, former communist countries have moved along increasingly divergent trajectories during the last two decades. The common communist legacy seems to not matter much for the outcomes of transformations. While East Central Europe has seen successful democratization and relatively fast convergence with the old EU-15 countries, especially in the quality of democracy and welfare policies, and Southeast Europe has made considerable progress in

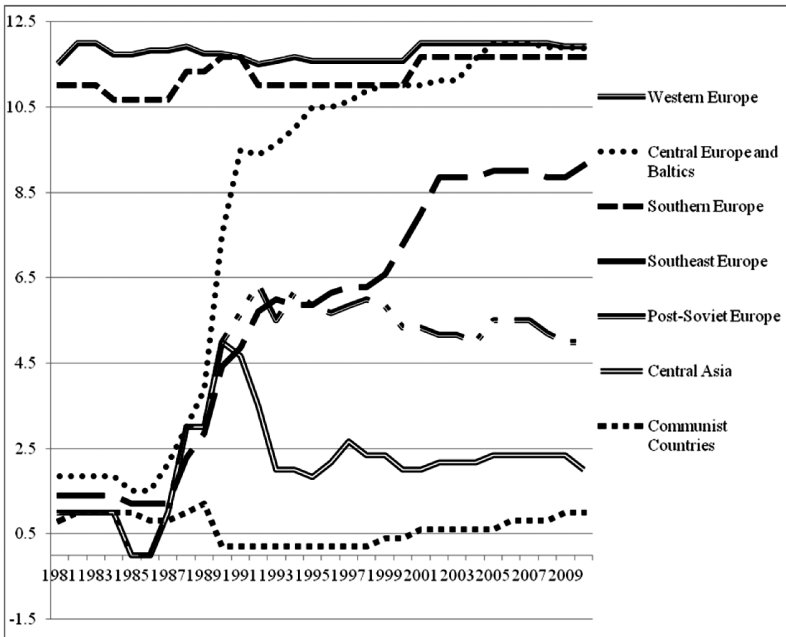
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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University of California Press, 1992), 220.

<sup>9</sup> Bela Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience: East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 184.

building democracy and market economies, other subregions have endured political stagnation, corrupt state capitalism, and authoritarian reversals. Moreover, the distance on almost every empirical indicator among traditional subregions of the former Soviet bloc remains surprisingly and stubbornly stable.<sup>10</sup> Graph 1 below, depicting the Freedom House ratings of civil rights and political liberties for four subregions of the former communist world, shows the significantly divergent trajectories of political development. Trajectories of economic developments, state reforms, and welfare policies show similar patterns. These diverging patterns of post-communist transformations have been extensively debated by social scientists. Various authors invoke different explanatory factors, including historical legacies and initial social and economic conditions, types of democratic breakthroughs, choice of democratic institutions, dominant features of domestic political competition, proximity to the West, and the influence of powerful international actors in support of democratic consolidation, as exemplified by the EU accession process.<sup>11</sup>

Graph 1. Freedom House: Political Rights and Civil Liberties, 1981-2010



<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rupnik, "The Postcommunist Divide," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 1 (1999): 57-62, and Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, and Milada Vachudova, "Democracy in Postcommunist World: An Unending Quest," *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 1-24.

<sup>11</sup> Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephen Hanson, *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Milada Vachudova, *Europe*

Thus, post-communist states today are remarkably different, face different challenges, and their commitment to liberal political and economic institutions is uneven. New EU member states and candidate countries seem to be firmly anchored in the European liberal tradition and attendant political practices, while other countries are moving in an illiberal direction. Russian-style “Putinism” has become not only an established political practice but also has increasingly become a coherent political program (managed democracy plus state capitalism) to be emulated by other leaders with authoritarian ambitions. The sovereign debt crisis in the European Union is likely not only to end any further enlargement of the EU but also to make the Western liberal model increasingly unattractive to countries balancing between authoritarianism and democracy. Authoritarian rulers are likely to embrace illiberal policies as a sensible alternative to what they perceive as the Western malaise. In short, illiberal political and economic practices may sound like credible and legitimate alternatives for struggling countries of the former Soviet bloc, and the resurgence of antiliberal regimes following Russia’s lead may be inevitable not only in countries outside the EU but also for some new EU members. Recent political developments in Hungary may provide a good example of such shift of political commitments.

Disenchantment with the Western political and economic models may result in illiberalism from above, with antiliberal regimes consistently supporting antiliberal forces and organizations within civil society. In fact, the strongest antiliberal, right-wing movements and organizations exist today in countries with antiliberal parties in power—be it in democratic Hungary or in authoritarian Russia. Similarly, the post-2005 Kaczynski government in Poland supported the resurgence of populism and right-wing illiberal movements and organizations within Polish civil society. An increasingly polarized civil society seems to be emerging in Russia, with the government supporting illiberal and nationalistic organizations as a counterbalance to liberal movements and organizations challenging the state’s authoritarian reversal. In short, the successful illiberal challenge in post-communist Europe has been seen, so far, in countries where illiberal political parties and autocrats have been in power, especially in a nondemocratic or semidemocratic context. But the capture of civil society by the consolidated authoritarian state has not yet occurred, and authoritarian rulers are still challenged by proliberal movements and organizations. Transnational links, as well as the surprising diversity and resilience of post-communist civil society, are instrumental in preventing its capture by states intent on reconfiguring their political orientation and policies away from liberal tenets.

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*Undivided: Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Frank Schimmelfennig, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

## Post-communism and the Surprising Revival of Civil Society

During the last two decades, scholars and experts on the region have argued that civil society is weak in post-communist countries. Early studies of “social capital” conducted in the 1990s found lower levels of social trust, community engagement, and confidence in social and political institutions across Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> More recent analyses have shown low levels of voluntary associational membership and weak unconventional political participation.<sup>13</sup> The picture of even the most successful post-communist countries that arises from the literature is one of “democracies without citizens,” in which elites have succeeded in protecting basic civic rights and implementing democratic procedures, the rule of law, and multiparty competition, but failed to counter the paucity of voluntarism at the grass-roots level and weak participation in the institutions of representative governance. Since democracies need strong civil societies, many authors have pointed to the declining legitimacy of democratic institutions, disenchantment with liberal values, and the growing popularity of populist and radical-right parties across the region.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, this conventional wisdom regarding the weakness of post-communist civil society seems to generate a number of paradoxes and is built on questionable empirical foundations.<sup>15</sup> Studies of civil society in post-communist Europe have tended to rely on simple surveys of voluntary activity asking respondents to report the different kinds of associations in which they participate, rather than on studies of organizational development and composition of civil societies and behavior of civil-society actors. This has led to a little-noticed inconsistency in the data on organizational membership in post-communist states. On the one hand, comparative survey data from the European Social Survey or the European Values Survey have shown a consistently low level of reported group membership, with little or no change over time. On the other hand, official registries from within individual countries show a phenomenal

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Rose, “What Does Social Capital Add to Individual Welfare? An Empirical Analysis in Russia,” SCI Working Paper, no. 15 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1999), and Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Christian Haerpfer, “Getting Real: Social Capital in Post-Communist Societies,” Conference on the Erosion of Confidence in Advanced Democracies, Brussels, November 7-9, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Postcommunist Europe* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Michael Bernhard and Ekrem Karakoc, “Civil Society and Legacies of Dictatorship,” *World Politics* 59 (2007): 539-567.

<sup>14</sup> Ramet, *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*; Michael Minkenberg, “The Radical Right in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations,” *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 335-362; Kopecky and Mudde, *Uncivil Society*; and Rupnik, “From Democratic Fatigue to Populist Backlash.”

<sup>15</sup> See Grzegorz Ekiert and Roberto Foa, “The Weakness of Civil Society Reassessed,” Center for European Studies Open Forum Working Papers, no. 11 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, September 2012).

growth of listed groups and organizations.<sup>16</sup>

In Poland, for example, the number of registered NGOs grew by 400 percent from 1989 to 1994. While the growth leveled after that point, it has remained strong in subsequent years, with an average addition of some four thousand new NGOs and five hundred foundations every year, across all types of organizations, in all regions of the country. This development of civil-society organizations has not been restricted to major urban centers or specific groups or classes within society. And this picture is not unique to Poland. By pursuing a multidimensional strategy for analyzing the constitution of civil society and the behavior of civil-society organizations, Ekiert and Foa have been able to present a picture of post-communist civil society that is more complex and more robust than has been commonly assumed. Thus, we should abandon any simplistic generalizations regarding the “weakness” of post-communist civil society or its “demobilization” following democratic transition. At the same time, we still know little about actual behavior and normative orientations of civil-society actors in various post-communist countries. While public opinion surveys suggest that commitment to democracy and trust in civil-society organizations has improved across the region (see figure 1 below), research on civil-society actors may generate a different picture.

Moreover, the conditions for civil society development and activities have been favorable in most of the countries in the region. In East Central Europe, the quality of public space, legal protections, and resources available to civil-society actors are similar today to those in established Western democracies. Countries of Southeastern Europe have made considerable progress in improving the quality of public space as well. While other subregions either did not make any progress (Central Asia) or registered significant decline after initial improvement (the remaining part of the former Soviet Union, except the Baltic republics) during the last decade or so, there still is more freedom to organize and pursue diverse interests than under the old regimes. In fact, even in countries with authoritarian regimes in place such as Russia, significant segments of civil society have been growing undisturbed.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, civil societies in post-communist countries can be described as surprisingly strong and diverse. Civil-society organizations, from trade unions

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<sup>16</sup> Renata Nagy and Istvan Sebesteny, “Methodological Practice and Practical Methodology: Fifteen Years in Non-profit Statistics,” *Hungarian Statistical Review*, Special Number (2008): 12; Zdenka Mansfeldova et al., “Civil Society in Transition: Civic Engagement and Nonprofit Organizations in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989,” in *Future of Civil Society: Making Central European Nonprofit-Organizations Work*, ed. Annette Zimmer and Eckhard Priller (Wisbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004), 99-121; and Eva Kuti, “Policy Initiatives towards the Third Sector under the Conditions of Ambiguity—The Case of Hungary,” in *Policy Initiatives Towards the Third Sector in an International Perspective*, ed. Ben Gidron and Michal Bar (Heidelberg: Springer, 2010), 127-158.

<sup>17</sup> Debra Javelin and Sarah Lindemann-Komarowa, “A Balanced Assessment of Russian Civil Society,” *Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 171-188.



to professional organizations to business associations, were also supportive of the general direction of political and economic transformations in the initial years of transition. As Ekiert and Kubik documented, during the most difficult initial years of economic and political transformation, civil-society organizations rarely questioned democratic or market reforms, even if they were involved in intense contentious activities.<sup>18</sup> They termed this normative orientation of civil-society actors “contentious reformism.” Moreover, in the second decade of transformations, civil societies in many laggard countries mobilized to bring about the renewal of liberal commitments and policies. Angry masses proved not to be a threat to liberalism in the region. This does not mean, however, that civil-society organizations cannot be enlisted in the task of building an illiberal political system or mobilized for nationalistic causes. Yet, until now, post-communist civil-society organizations have tended to support liberal causes and major cases of popular mobilization (such as the so-called colored revolutions or recent mass protests in Russia against electoral fraud and in Hungary against constitution changes and restriction of media freedoms) and were almost exclusively in support of liberal principles. This is clearly a surprising development, given initial expectations. Across post-communist Europe, relatively strong civil societies tend to support liberal freedoms and values and strive to make the ruling elites accountable.

### **Post-communist Contention: The Surprising Strength of Liberal Ideas**

Since the fall of communist regimes, experts on the region constantly have worried about the depth of support for democracy and the viability of liberal ideas. After all, this part of Europe had a dark past and was home to right- and left-wing extremism, virulent nationalism, and shocking atrocities. The violent collapse of the former Yugoslavia served as a reminder that hideous pasts can easily be revived. Similarly, the treatment of minorities, from the Chechens to the Roma, has not inspired much confidence.

Likewise, analysts frequently predicted imminent popular revolts in response to the staggering cost of economic transformations, growing unemployment, disappointment with falling living standards, and the dismantling of the old, familiar systems of protections and privileges. It was widely expected that dashed expectations and the absence of significant improvements in living conditions would spawn political extremism and turn populations against democracy and market reforms. And, indeed, the economic data show the staggering depth of the transitory recession in the early years of the transformations, the inability of many countries to improve

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<sup>18</sup> Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, “Contentious Politics in New Democracies,” *World Politics* 50, no. 4 (1998): 547-581, and Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1999).

their economic conditions and living standards, and the vulnerability of even the most successful reformers to international economic crises. The current financial crisis has hit many countries of the region hard. For example, Latvia's GDP fell by 25 percent in 2009 and unemployment went up from 7 to 23 percent in the span of two years. Austerity policies followed with deep cuts to employment in the civil service, salaries, pensions, and benefits.

Such predictions have been supported by public opinion data showing that support for new political and economic regimes and trust in public authorities have fallen from the heights registered shortly after the collapse of communism. Also, nostalgia for the old system has been rising, especially in less successful countries. Another indication of the disenchantment with the outcomes of transformation has been the growing strength of popular support for nationalistic and populist parties and movements. As Rupnik noted in 2007, "the recent populist backlash is a direct challenge to the liberal paradigm that had prevailed in the region for a decade and a half."<sup>19</sup> In the view of many commentators, the global financial crisis and the EU sovereign debt crisis have further undermined the attraction and credibility of the Western model and, by extension, support for liberal democracy and welfare capitalism. Is it true that liberal ideas are in retreat in the post-communist world? Are the countries of the region turning their backs on the West and searching for alternative political and economic models? Is illiberal civil society on the march in the region?

There is no doubt that the normative preferences of civil-society actors matter greatly in determining the political outcomes of their activities. Berman provides a notable example of strong civil society that turned against liberal values and democracy and facilitated the rise of the totalitarian Nazi state in Germany during the intrawar period.<sup>20</sup> In the Weimar Republic, dense and vibrant civil society ultimately supported extremist political options and fueled opposition to the democratic regime. In addition, values and preferences may determine whether civil society develops along normative or clientelistic lines. That is, whether civil-society organizations exist to defend citizen rights, work for public good, and advance the rule of law and the democratic process, or simply to serve as a means of extracting material rents for their leaders and members of the state and local administration.

One of the traditional indicators of the liberal commitment of civil-society actors is the degree to which citizens express a normative commitment to democracy.<sup>21</sup> Public opinion surveys often ask whether democracy is a "good" or "bad" way to run the country, and these trends, based on the World Value Survey data, are shown for the four clusters of post-communist societies below

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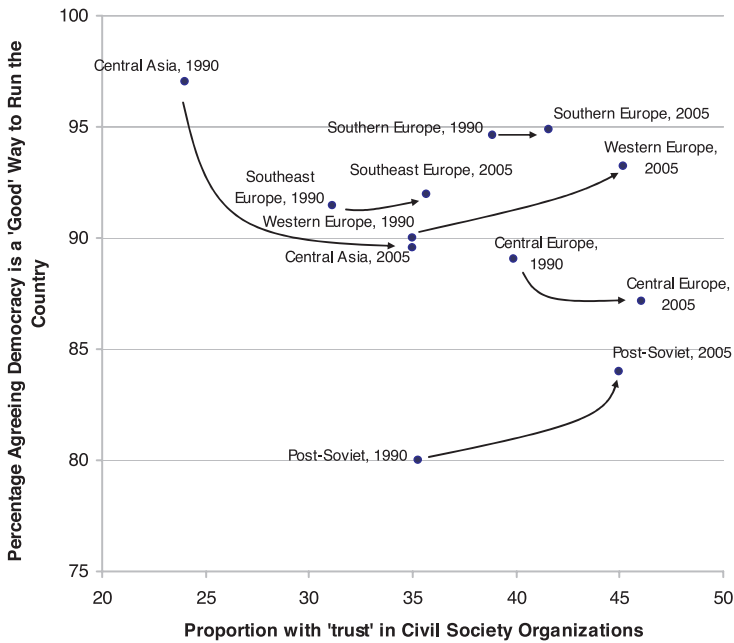
<sup>19</sup> Rupnik, "From Democratic Fatigue to Populist Backlash," 19.

<sup>20</sup> Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (April 1997): 401-429.

<sup>21</sup> See Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963).

(figure 1). The normative commitment to democracy is the weakest among the post-Soviet states, yet it stands almost as high in Southeastern Europe as in Southern and Western Europe. Central Europe, meanwhile, fits somewhere between the two. In terms of change over time, between 1990 and 2005, effective support for democracy has consolidated. However, more recent surveys<sup>22</sup> show that while support for democracy declined slightly in democratic countries in the region (EU members), it increased in other countries. Thus, there is no massive defection from democracy and market capitalism as a result of the current economic crisis and subsequent austerity policies. There

Figure 1. Normative Commitment to Democracy



Source: Attitudinal items are from the World Values Surveys, waves 2-5 (1990-2005).

Country coding: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia (Central Europe and Baltics); Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia (Southeast Europe); Azerbaijan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan (Central Asia); Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine (Post-Soviet Europe); Greece, Portugal, Spain (Southern Europe); Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom (Western Europe).

<sup>22</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, "Crisis in Transition: The People's Perspective."

is, however, a detectable impact of the Euro-zone crisis on the support for liberal democracy among new member states. This suggests that economic fortune alone may not drive political preferences, and that the rise of antiliberal sentiments may depend on the credibility of liberal projects of which European integration is the most important one.

Post-communist civil societies also fare well with regard to the extent to which they are normative rather than clientelistic in function. As one indicator that may detect the extent to which civic movements serve to advance the interests of citizens rather than their own private interests, we can take the degree of trust that survey respondents express to have in the civil-society organizations of their country. In East Central Europe and post-Soviet Europe, the public's evaluation of voluntary associations and NGOs is comparable to that found in Southern and Western Europe; only in the Balkans and Central Asia does this confidence lag behind, possibly reflecting a greater degree of clientelism and cooptation. Also charted is the trend over time of trust in civil-society organizations since 1990 (see figure 1). These trends clearly suggest a consolidation of public trust in the civic sector, for public trust in nongovernment organizations has grown across all post-communist societies since 1990.

Yet, the picture emerging from public opinion polls is not consistent. Some evidence against the consolidation of liberal preferences can be found in the left-right polarization of respondents. Since the seminal work of Bell,<sup>23</sup> it has been argued that ideological differences narrow as countries develop economically, and empirical evidence suggests this has indeed occurred across Western democracies.<sup>24</sup> However, in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, the concern has often been expressed that far from converging on the median, ideological divisions have widened with the growing popularity of populist and radical-right parties, in particular. Table 1 shows the left-right placement of respondents in a sample of West and East European countries in 1990 at the start of transition, and more recently in 2005, using the World Values Survey item for left-right placement on a ten-point scale. Respondents at the extremes ("1" and "10") are classified as extreme left and right, respectively, while those in between are classified as centrist. It can be seen that, while levels of ideological polarization in Western Europe have remained low and stable, radicalization has increased in this sample of Eastern European countries. Yet, the overall level remains relatively low, both as an overall proportion of the population and by broader international comparison. While 6.6 percent of Eastern Europeans in this country sample position themselves on the radical

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).

<sup>24</sup> Russell Dalton, "Social Modernization and the End of Ideology Debate: Patterns of Ideological Polarization," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (2006): 1-22.

right (“10” on a ten-point left-to-right scale) in 2005, the equivalent figures are 13 percent in India, 19 percent in Indonesia, and 25 percent in Colombia. As recent election results and polls suggest, the Euro crisis resulted in the increase of support for illiberal political options in some countries of the region (e.g., Hungary) but not in others (e.g., Poland). Thus, extremism in Eastern European politics may appear worrying from the Western European perspective, but is relatively mild in comparison with other emerging democracies.

Moreover, this rise of extremist attitudes has not manifested itself in mass radical movements or organized civil-society activities. As Greskovits noted, “domestically, it is not the marginalized masses who appear to be the immediate

Table 1. Ideological Polarization among Survey Respondents  
(1990-1992 and 2005-2007)

	Year	Extreme Left	Center	Extreme Right
France	1990	5.1	93.2	1.8
	2005	9.1	88.1	2.8
Italy	1990	8.5	88.8	2.8
	2005	4.9	91.9	3.2
Netherlands	1990	2.5	95.0	2.5
	2005	2.7	95.2	2.1
Sweden	1990	1.2	94.8	4.1
	2005	2.7	94.1	3.2
Great Britain	1990	3.1	93.5	3.4
	2005	3.8	93.8	2.5
West Germany	1990	0.9	97.5	1.7
	2005	3.1	95.6	1.3
<i>Western Europe Average</i>	1990	3.5	93.8	2.7
	2005	4.4	93.1	2.5
Poland	1990	3.6	88.6	7.9
	2005	4.5	85.7	9.9
Romania	1990	1.7	95.6	2.8
	2005	6.0	85.4	8.6
Slovenia	1990	2.5	94.9	2.6
	2005	6.8	86.8	6.4
East Germany	1990	2.2	96.2	1.6
	2005	6.5	92.2	1.4
<i>Eastern Europe Average</i>	1990	2.5	93.8	3.7
	2005	5.9	87.5	6.6

Source: World Values Surveys, waves 2 (1990-1992) and 5 (2005-2007).

problem—most of them have simply withdrawn from politics and do not even vote—but rather various elite and middle-class groups that for different reasons have chosen to rally behind radical economic and political agendas.”<sup>25</sup> As long as the radical agenda is not supported by a state that actively seeks to mobilize popular support for the departure from liberal policies, extremist attitudes may well remain marginalized.

Finally, it should be emphasized that, over the last decade, the most significant popular mobilizations were in defense of human rights, liberal values, and democratic principles. They not only were more numerous, but also they were much larger and significant than any mobilizations in support of illiberal causes and policies. From the phenomenon of the colored revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, or Serbia to recent demonstrations in Russia and Hungary, there is solid evidence of liberal commitments in post-communist societies.<sup>26</sup> Although the recent European Bank for Reconstruction and Development survey documents the decline of support for democracy and a market economy in the most successful countries of East Central Europe, it also registers an increase in support for liberal policies in countries of the former Soviet Union and in the Balkans. In short, the growth and consolidation of new civil societies in the region has not generated significant populist and extremist movements. These new civil societies tend to support liberal causes and mobilize when the states and autocratic leaders violate democratic principles. They indeed pose a liberal challenge to government that follows authoritarian temptations.

## Conclusions

The three vignettes presented in this essay offer two different and somehow inconsistent messages. First, despite initial expectations, the collapse of communist regimes resulted in the emergence of a number of consolidated liberal democracies securely anchored in European political and economic structures and in a significant expansion of civil society across the region. Moreover, despite severe economic difficulties and the costs of economic reforms, both at the beginning of transition and during the current financial crisis, support for democracy and commitment to economic reforms and market economy remains relatively high both among the elites and populations. Even in countries that failed to consolidate democracy, there is growing

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<sup>25</sup> Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Taras Kuzio, “Civil Society, Youth and Societal Mobilization in Democratic Revolutions,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 2006): 365-386; Henry Hale, “Democracy or Autocracy on the March? The Colored Revolutions as Normal Dynamics of Patronal Presidentialism,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 2006): 305-329; and Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, “International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 283-304.

popular support for liberal principles manifested in significant civil-society mobilizations to challenge authoritarian practices. In addition, there is no marked increase across the region in radical political movements either on the right or on the left, while civil societies are becoming stronger and better organized even in places where they face unfriendly governments. In short, this is an optimistic message pointing to the viability of liberal ideas and a commitment to democratic practices among East European populations and organized civil-society actors.

Yet, strong civil society can be a blessing or a curse depending on specific circumstances. While democracy has been consolidated in many post-communist countries, competitive authoritarianism has been consolidated in others.<sup>27</sup> The new authoritarian states in the region are eager to colonize public spaces with organizations that support their policies and can be mobilized against proliberal forces and movements. Moreover, the sovereign debt crisis in Europe is having pernicious effects on peripheral European economies. Not only is the economic crisis exported from the center to the periphery but also the viability and attraction of the European liberal model is being increasingly questioned.

It is almost certain that countries in the region will face years of slow economic growth, high unemployment, and repeated austerity measures to reduce their deficits and public debt. Economic problems of the EU may also affect the size of its budget and its structural funds. Greskovits may be right in pointing to the exhaustion of some stabilizing mechanisms that, during the first two decades of transformations, eased the cost of reforms (such as high welfare spending, expanding black and gray markets, and labor migrations in search of employment in more developed European economies).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, countries outside of the Euro-zone may be relegated to the position of second-class citizens within the EU and those outside of the EU may be permanently excluded from it. Further enlargements may not be forthcoming, weakening the position of the EU as a hegemonic political and economic model. Such combination of economic and political factors is likely to affect the preferences of both political elites and popular actors who may, after all, turn their backs on Western ideas and search for alternatives to liberal democracy and welfare capitalism. As a result, post-communist countries may face significant illiberal challenges from below in coming years, especially in countries where illiberal elites and parties dominate politics and in places where authoritarian states expand their basis of support by colonizing the civil-society domain.

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Béla Greskovits, "Economic Woes and Political Disaffection," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007): 40-45.

