

How the Democratic Tide Rolled Back

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Back from the Future: The Rise of Illiberalism and the End of the Post-Cold War Era

Twenty-five years ago the world entered a new era. The Soviet Union had just collapsed, the United States had assumed the leadership of a proclaimed new world order, and liberal democratic capitalism no longer had a viable global challenger. The expectations these changes heralded now appear unfulfilled. Illiberalism is surging around the world, and the post-Cold War era is rapidly giving way to a post-liberal order. Moreover, the very post-Communist states that seemingly were at the epicenter of a liberal transformation have pioneered the counter-norms and tactics that now spread to the West itself.

What went wrong?

Fast Change Isn't Real Change

In retrospect, the post-Communist transitions were remarkable in their scope, speed, and ambition. Idealized democratic standards and benchmarks were projected on the post-Communist states as they built democratic institutions and adopted market-based reforms. Internationally, democratic norms were embedded in regional institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Council of Europe. Indeed, the prospect of entering the European Union and NATO and



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plundered the state through insider privatization and moved their loot overseas. And in 1996, in an effort to re-elect President Boris Yeltsin against a Communist rival, the West openly sided with the Russian president -- a leader who was offering to give away more of the nation's wealth to key oligarchs in exchange for their support. Vladimir Putin, who ascended to the Russian presidency in 1999, benefited from a rebounding economy and from the higher oil prices of the 2000s, but he was also viewed as restoring the integrity of the Russian state from the chaos of the 1990s.

Elsewhere, the landmark expansion of the European Union and NATO as they absorbed Eastern European states in 2004 marked a high tide for liberal norms, but an illiberal backlash began to unfurl almost immediately.

Eurasia experienced a wave of so-called Color Revolutions. This series of election-day street protests in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 swept pro-Kremlin leaders out of power and installed leaders more broadly oriented toward the West. The **Orange Revolution** in Ukraine was a geopolitical earthquake for Moscow. Russia watched as an election that had initially favored a pro-Kremlin candidate was overturned after public protests that were backed by Western governments. Moscow soon adopted a number of countermeasures against perceived Western interference in the affairs of Russia's neighbors. It enacted new restrictions on civil society, cracked down on the media, funded nationalistic domestic youth movements, and actively supported other autocratic post-Soviet regimes against Western criticism and what it called interference. Once regarded as a nuisance, Western democracy promotion and human rights advocacy were recoded as national security threats. And since 2005, political rights in the post-Communist region, as measured by the watchdog **Freedom House**, have been eroding.

Clashes over values and the orientation of the post-Soviet states came to a head as Russia engaged in military conflicts in 2008 with Georgia and in response to the **2014 Ukraine crisis**. That crisis emerged in the fall of 2013. Under pressure from Moscow, President Viktor Yanukovich reversed a plan to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Crowds protested. After an attempted government crackdown and counter-mobilizations across the country, Yanukovich fled to Russia and the regime collapsed. Russia viewed the regime change as the result of coordinated actions by the West and proceeded to annex the Crimean peninsula and support insurgents in Eastern Ukraine. A street-led revolution soon morphed into a war, as Ukraine effectively became yet another divided post-Soviet state. In a post-Crimea annexation **speech** Putin denounced the encroachment of Western actors, rules and norms and reiterated a commitment to construct a new multipolar order.

Meanwhile to the west, the fallout of the great financial economic crisis and policymakers' mishandling of the euro crisis in Greece called into question the economic stability and benefits of EU membership, while the influx of millions of refugees, many of them displaced by the Syria conflict, unleashed anti-immigration calls. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban declared his commitment to an **"illiberal state,"** typifying a wave of new leaders who brashly mixed populist sentiment with governmental interference in media, bureaucracy, and the judiciary. The triumph of Poland's Law and Justice party in 2015, again the product of a backlash campaign against European values, suggested that political support for liberalism was no longer guaranteed by immediate memories of the Communist past.

The Toolkit of the Illiberal

Liberal democracy used to compete with Communism as a global ideology. But there is now no single universal alternative to liberal democracy. Skeptics and autocrats now use a mix of different counter-norms and justifications for their democratic transgressions: they raise alarms over state sovereignty and national security to justify targeting social groups as extremists and champion a return to "traditional values," mixing nationalism with a more public role of officially sanctioned religious institutions, while **decrying Western moral decay**. Still others invoke the idea of "civilization diversity" -- often invoked by Chinese policymakers -- which emphasizes noninterference in the affairs of other states on the basis of cultural relativism and the rejection of universal values and standards.



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First, governments have increasingly cracked down on the political activities of non-governmental organizations and civil society. Methods of doing so range from adopting cumbersome registration laws to, in the **Russian case**, declaring NGOs that receive external funds to be “foreign agents” and banning others as “undesired organizations.” Across the rest of the post-Communist sphere, similar restrictive legislation on NGO activities has been adopted and **proposed**.

A second strategy has been to pioneer new forms of state-run media and propaganda. In Russia, Vladimir Putin quickly brought under control TV channels and **developed new forms** of social media monitoring and regulation. New-style propaganda is an explosive mix of news, disinformation, and conspiracy theorizing, **designed to entertain** and to reinforce political apathy. Externally, the Kremlin built a global media empire, with outlets like RT and Sputnik, designed to both promote Russian perspectives on global issues and unrelentingly spotlight the social problems of the West along with its hypocrisy and double standards.

A third strategy was to mimic the form of democratic institutions and actors, but not their actual substance or values -- creating so-called “zombie institutions.” The post-Communist states created government-organized non-governmental organizations (known as GONGOs), anti-corruption agencies, and human rights committees, but these bodies seemed to target the activities of political opponents. Internationally, this has involved post-Communist countries **inviting friendly election monitors** to praise obviously flawed elections and to drown out the more critical evaluations by credible monitors such as the OSCE.

A fourth strategy has been to create new legal mechanisms and networks to go after political opponents residing abroad in exile. Internal security services have cooperated in creating common watchlists and have **abused international crime-fighting tools** like Interpol’s red notice list to detain individuals for political reasons. New extraterritorial laws and norms have also been institutionalized in new regional security treaties and institutions -- for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s **Anti-Terror Treaty**, which allows member states to extradite what they call political extremists, in contravention of national political asylum laws, and to conduct criminal investigations on each other’s territory.

Fifth, autocrats have invested in their own branding and self-promotion across the West, courting think tanks and high-profile advisors in an effort to improve their international image and whitewash their authoritarianism. For example, the government of **Kazakhstan hired** former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to enhance its international image, while the Azerbaijani government was accused of practicing **caviar diplomacy** by offering lavish trips and country visits to European lawmakers and U.S. members of Congress.

Further, illiberal regimes started to openly court and support one another’s efforts to defeat mainstream parties. The Kremlin itself began to support both leftist and right-wing parties in Europe whose foreign policy goals included exiting the Euro-Atlantic order and/or supporting Russia. Following the election of Donald Trump, a **report** by the National Intelligence Council into Russian interference in the U.S. election argued that Russia had supported the Republican candidate in order to “undermine public faith in the US democratic process” and “undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order.”

Finally, the rejection of liberal norms in the international realm has been accompanied by the adoption of “multipolar populism,” where rulers publicly reject certain norms and rules, such as commitments to longstanding allies or to institutions. They present themselves instead as decisive pragmatists who will partner with a range of external players - - Western and non-Western -- to promote their national interests. Orban himself has talked of the importance of China and Russia to Hungary, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has signaled an intention to break from the pursuit of EU membership by **publicly calling for Turkey** to join the Chinese and Russian-led SCO.



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For some in the West, the liberal agenda has been folded into the broader framework of anti-globalism, signaling the intent to disengage from multilateral commitments abroad and pursue economic and political nationalism at home. But for the United States, weakening the liberal consensus on the importance of democratic norms in the interest of pragmatic dealmaking also risks eroding the **extensive global network** of alliances, institutions, and cooperative agreements that have buttressed U.S. global power since World War II. Twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, and of the **apparent triumph** of American values and power, U.S. policymakers now confront the very basic question of which values to uphold and for what purpose, both at home and abroad.



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