

# **BRAVE NEW WORLD: THE ILLIBERAL TURN IN 2014–2016, ITS CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS**

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## 1. Opening

The present paper discusses the radical changes witnessed in the political landscape of the world today. After 25 years of post-Cold World hopes for triumph of liberal democracy, the years between 2014 and 2016 shattered the Western World. The annexation of Crimea by Putin's Russia came first in March 2014, then in June 2016, the Brexit of Boris Johnson followed and finally in November 2016, came the stunning victory of Donald Trump at the US presidential elections. These developments can be called the *illiberal turn* in politics and ideology.

In fact, this was not the first time that a conservative wave started rolling from the East. The Ayatollah's Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978–9 was a harbinger of Margaret Thatcher's installation as Prime Minister of UK in 1979 and of Ronald Reagan's coming to power as the president of the USA in 1981.

## 2. The Cold War and its Lasting Implications

The main thesis of this essay is that the illiberal turn in 2014–16 disproved the simplistic view that the end of the Cold War would change the world forever by solving all global political problems caused by the “empire of Evil”, the Soviet Union, and that the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of that history (Fukuyama 1992). On the contrary, I see the historical asset of the Cold War as *constitutive* of the political map of the Western World today. Apparently, “the legacies of previous political regimes—both positive and negative—weigh heavily on the development of new ones” (Berman 2019: 302).<sup>1</sup>

Take for example Putin's Russia. Her aggressive politics against “the West” is just a further development of the tradition of confrontation from the Cold War. The main objective of Putin's political agenda is to restore the power and influence of Russia in the world as in

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Hawes (2017) demonstrates how elements of the old divide between the Roman Empire and the German tribes from more than 2000 years were preserved over the centuries till today.

the 1950s and 1960s. The government-led media ceaselessly try to influence the masses in this country to the effect that “the West” is an evil “partner” the aim of which is to destroy Russia and subjugate her people.

One reason for this development is that the desired objective, which was adopted 30 years ago, of creating a political system of *liberal democracy* in the post-communist world, was a rather difficult undertaking. Securing its basics—individual liberties, rule of law, and minority rights—is not an easy task to achieve. It requires a strong state, well-formed national identity and a developed political culture. In fact, this is a challenge not only for the East European countries in the post-Cold War era, but also for some South European states like Italy and Greece.

### 3. The Aftermath of Cold War in Eastern Europe

This predicament is confirmed through the developments in Eastern Europe in the last 15 years where many started to believe that democratic liberalism was “the light that failed” (Krastev and Holmes 2019). The intellectuals of these countries lament today that after the fall of the Berlin Wall they were urged to *imitate* and *copy* the values, the institutions and social and political practices of the liberal democracies of the West. These were recommended as a kind of orthodoxy and dogma. The copy, however, is in principle inferior in quality to the original. This allegedly explains why some politicians in Eastern Europe turned back to authoritarian illiberalism, populist xenophobia and reactionary nativism. They fight multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and individualism, and hold that *in their countries* there are national traditions that work better than the *dogma* of liberal democracy.

My answer to these arguments is, first, that liberal democracy does not consist of dogmas and orthodoxy. It is an *approach* that changes in the context of time and place. Liberal democracy recurrently renews itself.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, this position is mistaken for philosophical reasons. In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein has shown that people learn social practices, for example, speaking language, in an ultimate form, so that at the end of the day the copy is not inferior to the original. The persons that learn a language from a teacher master it in a way that is not inferior to the way that the teacher has it. In fact, political actions follow the same logic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See § 6 below for details.

<sup>3</sup> I have demonstrated how this principle works in respect of social and political practices in Milkov (1997).

#### 4. USA and the Aftermath of the Cold War

The developments in the USA in the last 30 years also follow the direction outlined by the Cold War. In his novel *Rabbit at Rest*, John Updike posed the question (in the words of his fictional character Harry Angstrom): “Without the Cold War, what’s the point of being an American?” (1990: 367). Apparently, for the political class in that country, there was no other point. In consequence, when the Cold War ended, the political elite in the USA replaced it with another kind of radical antagonism—the enmity between the two leading parties of this country. This led to *political tribalism*. Today, the animosity between the Democratic Party and the GOP seems to be a matter of necessity, the subject of disagreement being of lesser importance.<sup>4</sup> One of its most mischievous appearances was republican Newt Gingrich’s “guerilla warfare” against the democratic House of Representatives in the 1990s, which culminated in the impeachment trial of Bill Clinton in 1998, also engineered by Gingrich.

In fact, this radical polarization of the Western society started with Ronald Reagan’s and Margaret Thatcher’s conservative revolution in the mid-1970s. In terms of political philosophy, they put accent on the negative and not on the positive liberties, understood as a self-mastery of the autonomous personality (Berlin 1958). As a result, Reagan and Thatcher set up the era of turbo, or casino capitalism. This politics led to significant erosion of the middle class and to the creation of the class of hyper-rich. Ironically, Donald Trump, the defender of reducing taxation of the rich, but also master of publicity, used this reality to support his populist agenda.

Importantly, the triumph of “Reaganomics” in the 1980s coincided with the downfall of the Soviet Bloc socialism. An illusion perpetuated that the remedy for the economic and political failures of the East European countries is to follow Milton Friedman’s dogma of unlimited free market. The results were often dissatisfactory which partly explains the disappointment of the East Europeans with liberal democracy. This is supported by the fact that first signs of the illiberal turn in Eastern Europe appeared exactly after the financial crisis of 2007/8.

Unfortunately, when the Soviet Bloc and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989–91, the USA politicians understood it as a win in the Cold War. They did not, therefore, consider changing the political course but continued the politics they had pursued for decades (Bacevich 2020). America was intoxicated with its success. The implication was pursuing the

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<sup>4</sup> This development closely reminds one of the political wars in the Byzantine Empire in the fifth and sixth century A.D. between the Blue and the Green party.

policy of unbounded capitalism paralleled by unbounded individualism. The result was tearing apart the social fabric.

In foreign policy, the implication of this development was that the one and only remaining superpower, the USA, started to dictate the terms of peace, taking over the global leadership. In the context of this ideology, G. W. Bush and Dick Cheney tried to forcefully extend liberal democracy to the Islamic world. The result was the Second Gulf War (2003–2011) that displaced Saddam Hussein as president of Iraq. Practically the same policy was pursued in the early 2010s, when an effort was made to liberalize the Arab countries. It started at the Tahir Square in Cairo, went through Algeria and ended with the civil war in Libya and Syria that still goes on.

The unsuccessful attempt of the USA to export liberal democracy to the Middle East decisively contributed to Putin’s confrontation with the West. It began in 2007 as Putin tried to debilitate the only superpower, USA, by seeking to establish a multipolar world. Putin’s leading idea was not an argument stemming from the moral or political philosophy, but to fight against the political and military hegemony of the USA.

#### 5. The Role of the Mass Media Revolution

An important factor in the illiberal turn of events in 2014–16 was the revolution of the mass media which has been going on for nearly a decade now. It made the multiplication of fake news ubiquitous and facilitated the propagation of conspiracy theories and anecdotes of dubious quality and provenance. The champions of illiberalism tirelessly spread the belief that in the realm of politics “anything goes”. There is no right and wrong and, above all, no truth.

In order to better understand this development, it may be recalled that the printing of books in 1455 (the year the “Gutenberg Bible” was first published) brought about a revolution in the mass media of similar dimension. It led to the Reformation of the Catholic Christianity started by Martin Luther in 1517. Arguably, the online revolution of the mass media in the 2010s changed the world both ideologically and politically in a similar way. Fake news, alternative facts, and the crisis of the truth are the results.

#### 6. Philosophical Defense of Liberal Democracy

The main objective of the present paper is, however, not to reveal only the causes of the illiberal turn in the Western World after 2014. Rather, it is the theoretical defense of liberal

democracy. The latter is to be confused neither with turbo capitalism nor with multiculturalism. The principles of liberal democracy are well grounded in philosophical analyses made over the centuries by John Locke, David Hume, Rousseau, Kant and Hannah Arendt, among others. Of course, their works are not canonical. We also know from Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) that the Age of Enlightenment had its dark side too. Be that as it may, the past masters of political philosophy can greatly help to create a clearer concept of liberal democracy today. It is a political understanding based on values that are proven over the ages. As I see it, liberal democracy is not a theory but a *method*, an approach. It is prone to changing its ways when confronted with new situations. Because of this, its mastery and implementation is not an easy task. It needs recurrent corrections and modifications.

One of the implications of the developments, described in § 4 above, is that today the USA cannot be considered anymore the “strongest democracy”. An alternative savior and protector of liberal democracy today is Germany. An important factor in this development is the *reductio ad absurdum* of nationalism—the propeller of the Great War and its second installment, the Second World War—in this country. Being fundamentally anti-nationalistic, Germany today is oriented to the future and not to its past—it is a radically progressivist country. Its Constitution is based on reason, while the Constitution of the USA is based on the authority of the Founding Fathers. Moreover, its politics is led by consensus, not by animus; its politics is not polemic. In the USA, in contrast, politics is often understood in terms of war and enmity (French 2020). Party coalitions are typical in Germany, something difficult in UK and practically unthinkable in the USA.

As a matter of fact, politics of social balancing and compensation was typical for Germany of the fin de siècle era. Well-known are Bismarck’s social laws and Gustav Schmoller’s political economy of social market. The political class of the time strived to achieve culture in society as measured by progress on the moral front. Unfortunately, German’s concept of liberal democracy has also its problems. For example, it is inclined to present itself, in the tradition of Kant’s moral philosophy, as an a priori, unchangeable principle and not as a method.

The last point refers me to some attempts, mainly made in countries with illiberal regimes, to justify the political practices in their states. Some authors maintain that in countries like Russia, China and Turkey, the so called “civilizational identity” is preferable over liberal universalism. Weiwei Zhang (2012) and Christopher Coker (2019), for example, praise the identity politics and the support of “civilizational norms” and “civilization state”.

The latter supports the idea of strong nation and defends national isolation. Against these views, one is reminded of Kant's discrimination between culture and civilization (AA8: 26). Culture is connected with moral progress (we already mentioned it in the lines above), civilization with formal politeness, manners and other niceties. Obviously, it is problematic to speak either of "culture" or of "civilization" in Kant's sense when we speak about Putin's Russia or Xi Jinping's China. Their countries support neither culture nor civilization.

It is not difficult to discern the philosophical foundations of the idea of "civilization state". Firstly, it is influenced by Hegel's concept of state as an ontological entity, as a moral whole which is the ultimate objective of the world history. Secondly, it follows Heidegger's concept of social identity as central to political theory. In support of this claim, I would refer to two Russian authors who defend Putin's illiberal politics. Alexander Dugin (2014), for one, seeks to substantiate Russia's anti-European, "Eurasian" future with Heidegger's help. Vladislav Surkov, in contrast, defends Putin's "long state" in a purely theoretical (not in geographical) terms. To be more explicit, he pleads for a hidden, "robust, *absolutely undemocratic* set organization of the real force of the structures of power" (Italics added).

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