
What happens to politics when major political cleavages are declared dead, and when the only alternative is bland acquiescence or impotent rage? While Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes’s essay *The Light that Failed* is nominally an analysis of contemporary politics in Eastern Europe and Russia, these broader questions shape its philosophical perspective. This is no coincidence: these concerns have informed Krastev’s writings for the last fifteen years. Krastev currently chairs the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, in addition to serving as a permanent fellow at the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna and a board member of the European Council for Foreign Relations. He has emerged as a prominent political commentator, writing, among other venues, for the *New York Times*. Krastev is also an astute political thinker, who analyzes with rare lucidity modern politics dynamics, particularly as they relate to ideological convergence, liberal democracy, and the recent rise of anti-liberal and antidemocratic forces. Jan Bíba’s essay assesses Krastev and Holmes’s political analysis in *The Light that Failed*. This commentary examines the latter from the standpoint of the political ideas that Krastev has been exploring throughout his career. Specifically, it will argue that Krastev’s primary concern has been with the stunted, often ineffective, yet impactful politics that have characterized western societies since the so-called triumph of liberal democracy in the 1990s—a moment that was notoriously dubbed the “end of history.”[^1]

Krastev’s thought is deeply connected to the “end of history” thesis, both as a theoretical claim and as a practical postulate of western policy. In his famous essay from 1989, Francis Fukuyama argued, a few months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, that history, in the sense of intense ideological battles over the nature of the good society, had come to an end. Communism’s demise left no credible
alternative to liberal democracy and the capitalist free market. In the latter, the struggle for recognition that had long propelled human history achieved its goal. In policy terms, the “end of history” thesis dovetailed perfectly with liberal internationalism and its signature goals: democracy promotion (particularly though not exclusively in Eastern Europe and Russia), European Union and NATO enlargement, and globalization.

That Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis was off the mark has become a truism. Broadly speaking, Krastev’s oeuvre bears witness to this fact. Yet at a deeper level, Krastev’s position is less that Fukuyama was flat-out wrong than that he misinterpreted the moment whose importance he recognized. The cessation of major ideological battles and the hegemony of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism was an undeniable reality, especially for Eastern Europe. For Fukuyama, the end of history was melancholy and rather dreary. It would, he speculated, be “a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.”[2]

Krastev observes that, “in a sense, Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ has come to pass,” since “democracy and capitalism today [lack] powerful ideological rivals.”[3] Yet the problems he sees resulting from this moment differ significantly from those identified by Fukuyama. Krastev’s concern is not that the “end of history” is dull and wistful, but rather that in a political climate characterized by ideological closure, the needs and aspirations that previously drove politics are compelled to manifest themselves in roundabout and often perverse ways. Our epoch is characterized less by the disappearance of political struggle than by the insinuation of more elusive forms of conflict into societies ostensibly structured around consensus. If “there is no alternative” to liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, then oppositional impulses will emerge from within these systems. Krastev’s ‘beat,’ one might say, is democratic dysfunction in societies in which democracy and capitalism were touted as panaceas. In particular, he is interested in the multiplication of what one might call ‘sub-ideological’ challenges to democracy: protest that falls short of a direct ideological opposition, and that may even purport to exemplify democratic practice. Hence the importance of Eastern Europe: it is in countries that were most affected by the “end of history” as a practical postulate—by the democratic and free-market transition—that discontent with the reigning order is most glaring.

These concerns were evident in Krastev’s first publications, which examine anticorruption discourse in Eastern Europe. He asks why corruption became so pervasive an anxiety in the 1990s, when in earlier periods it was either tolerated or ignored. The reason, he suggests, lies in the ideological closure brought about by the hegemony of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. Corruption was a way of reinjecting politics into a context marked by conformism. On the one hand, anticorruption discourse and the specious science to which it gave rise became a means by which western countries could promote the Washington Consensus. It allowed them to do so, however, in the name of technocratic expertise rather than an avowed political program. At the same time, anticorruption provided the idiom in which people could denounce the yawning inequalities that arose after Communism’s collapse. Krastev makes the intriguing argument that whereas communist-era corruption established relationships and built solidarity, post-communist corruption was perceived as an exercise in raw power and exploitation. “Talking about corruption,” he hypothesizes,
“is the way [the] post-communist public talks about politics”; at the same time, it is “the end of politics.” Anticorruption discourse thus simultaneously participates in a post-ideological effort to depoliticize the public realm while demonstrating that, even after ideology, politics persists.

In The Anti-American Century, Krastev explored anti-Americanism as another avatar of post-ideological politics, one that partially overlapped with anticorruption discourse. Like the latter, it shows how the attempt to purge politics of ideology paradoxically generated a novel form of political conflict. When liberal internationalism became the only game in town, it could also serve as a catch-all target for discontent. “People are against America,” Krastev observes, “because they are against everything—or because they do not know exactly what they are against.” The Washington Consensus and American foreign policy exemplify the “hollowness of post-ideological and post-utopian politics,” whose “subversive dullness” is “transforming the nature of democratic regimes.”

This dynamic results from the “deficit of politics”: when politics ceases to express itself through ideological opposition, the vehicles of consensus and conformity themselves become bones of contention.

In The Anti-American Century, Krastev observed that many citizens of democracies find themselves in a trap: “They are free to dismiss governments, but they do not feel that they can influence policies.” Elections can throw out leaders, but trade deals contributing to globalization and European integration, for example, continue, regardless of electoral outcomes. This insight, which informed his early work on anticorruption and anti-Americanism in Eastern Europe, provides the segue that allowed Krastev to turn to the analysis of democratic dysfunction in Western Europe and the United States. In Democracy Disrupted: The Global Politics of Protest, Krastev examined a range of protest movements that erupted around the same time: Occupy Wall Street in the U.S. and elsewhere, the Indignados in Spain, and anti-government protests in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Russia. The paradoxical common denominator of these protests, Krastev maintains, is that they invoked the power of the people while conveying fundamental disenchantment with democracy. They show an impressive capacity for mass mobilization, yet without a will to transform this energy into a political force that can win elections and change the government—precisely because they did not believe that governments could change much. They embraced, in short, a “democracy of rejection”—a politics that seeks not to correct democracy, but to work around it, since democracy seems capable of little more than perpetuating elite rule.

In Democracy Disrupted, Krastev first invokes Albert Hirschman’s famous distinction between two alternatives for dealing with bad government: “voice,” which involves speaking out, and “exit,” which involves removing oneself from the government’s authority. While democracy has historically emphasized “voice,” current protest movements embrace the “exit” option: they represent a way of subtracting oneself from the political order, rather than striving to change it. This “antipolitics”—the same term he used to describe anticorruption discourse and anti-Americanism—is, as always for Krastev, both a symptom of democracy’s failure and a poor substitute for democracy. These protests, he observes, “are a rejection of a politics without possibility, but they are also”—because they
abandon hope in “voice”—“a form of acceptance of this new reality.”[11]

In his next book, Krastev examined an even more explicit form of “exit”: the migrants’ crisis that afflicted Europe in 2015. But what interested him was less the reasons the migrants left their countries than the impact they had on “end of history” Europe. The migrant crisis, Krastev maintains, is the kind of revolution we get once the possibility of revolution has been discounted. For the sudden arrival of millions from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East confronted Europeans with the “contradiction that is central to [liberal] philosophy. How can our universal rights be reconciled with the fact that we exercise them as citizens of unequally free and prosperous societies?”[12] The crisis forced a reckoning with the cosmopolitan, anti-nationalist mindset that was central to European construction, as well as to the idea of human rights, which had established itself as “a natural ideology for the end-of-history, post-1989 world.”[13] The insurmountable contradiction of European liberalism and cosmopolitanism triggered by the migrants’ crisis led many to fall back instinctively on the defense of national identity and the security provided by the nation-state. While these ideas are not in themselves especially new, the originality of Krastev’s perspective is his insistence on the tenor that politics assumes once ideological conflict has been declared over. In these circumstances, the “deficit of politics” is filled by “antipolitics”: a politics of empty gestures, aimed at decrying the prevailing liberal order without providing a genuine alternative, yet that is nonetheless driven by profound and politically significant psychological forces.

Krastev’s latest book, The Light That Failed, written with Stephen Holmes, is an examination of the anti-liberal politics embraced by several Eastern European leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and US President Donald Trump. In addition to being a perceptive analysis of contemporary politics, it is also Krastev’s most developed theoretical statement to date. The crux of his argument is that the anti-liberal forces that have upended political life in recent years—the so-called “populist moment”—are best grasped through the concept of “imitation.” Indeed, “imitation and its discontents,” the title of the introduction, would have been an apt title for the book. Krastev and Holmes contend that anti-liberal politics are a belated backlash to the imperative of imitating liberalism, which became the dominant agenda of global politics at the Cold War’s conclusion. Figures like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Organ and Polish leader Jarosław Kaczyński stoked national resentment against the imitation of Western models imposed on their countries in the 1990s. After the Soviet Union’s implosion, Russia began by simulating democracy (which was relatively easy, Krastev and Holmes argue, as Russians were used to simulating Communism). Later, under Putin, they turned to mirroring the United States—that is, imitating what many Russians regarded as the Americans’ brazen pursuit of national self-interest in order to denounce the hypocritical democratic rhetoric in which it is so often wrapped. Finally, Trump incited Americans to bristle at being imitated. What immigrants and China have in common, in the Trumpian imaginary, is that both show that non-Americans are just as good at being Americans as Americans themselves—the former in their aspiration for an American way of life, the latter in their commercial and technological prowess. Imitation, Krastev and Holmes suggest, arouses as much resentment when one sees oneself imitated by others as when one is forced to imitate others. In both cases, imitation dilutes and devalues identity.

As a concept, imitation fleshes out the “end of history” dynamics that Krastev described more
inchoately in his earlier work. It encapsulates the notion of ideological closure (one imitates when opposition is no longer an option), as well as the universalism claimed by the liberal democratic-free market synthesis (that a model can only be imitated seems to prove that it is universal). Yet imitation also brings to light the tensions lurking within late-twentieth-century universalism—in particular, the way in which it seems destined to raise the question of identity. What is my identity if I am just a second-rate imitation of someone else? If my identity can be easily appropriated by others, then who am I? Imitation, in this way, can be seen as the dark side of recognition, the psychological spring of Fukuyama's argument. Though Fukuyama believed that liberal democracy and free-market capitalism were uniquely able to satisfy the human need for recognition, Krastev suggests that, at minimum, the ability of these systems to do so is impaired when they are imposed on 'losers' by 'winners.' Whatever their capacity for recognition, models imposed in this way risk diminishing the self-respect of those who, in being admitted into the realm of universality, are expected to imitate the victors. Many would prefer to cling to their own imperfect identity than to imitate an allegedly more perfect one. Imitation, in this sense, does not disprove the longing for recognition so much as it shows how the Western ideals that were hegemonic in recent decades proved woefully incapable of satisfying this need. While national populism may have proved this point at the level of political emotions, it has been confirmed at the level of practical political by China's rise to global power: unlike liberal or even socialist hegemons, China, Krastev and Holmes contend, has no ambition to be imitated. Obeyed and respected, yes; emulated, no.

To paraphrase a well-known slogan from the sixties: What if democracy became the norm and nobody felt represented? This, in a sense, is the conundrum that lies at the heart of Krastev's thought. His interest in the paradox of contemporary democracy—that democracy's apparent triumph (until recently) is accompanied by a sense that democracy has become dysfunctional—echoes the concerns of several current thinkers, particularly in Europe. The French philosopher Marcel Gauchet has reflected on the way in which dispossession and loss of autonomy have intensified with the expansion of democratic norms.[14] The Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe has argued that the consensus politics advanced by neoliberal parties results in an occlusion of authentic politics, which populism seems uniquely poised to revive.[15] While his views resemble these positions, Krastev's thought, even if it focuses on such familiar issues as electoral politics and international relations, is rooted in political psychology: what emotions and passions are elicited when certain political options are declared off limits? How does the fact that democracy has decreed some political choices to be unacceptable make democracy itself less appealing? These are the questions that Krastev asks us to reckon with.

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Essay by Jan Bíba, Charles University

As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes note, the title of their book, The Light That Failed, refers to two other books: Rudyard Kipling's novel of the same title[16] and the Cold War pamphlet The God That Failed.[17] While the former is a novel with two distinct endings that in addition to describing the
tragedy of personal ambitions celebrates the white man's burden in colonizing the remote corners of the British Empire, the latter is a collection of six essays in which both Western and Eastern intellectuals describe their break up with Communism. These two references symbolically outline the field in which Krastev and Holmes place their argument. The god that failed for them, however, is not Communism but liberalism, and both authors participated in its spread in post-Communist Europe. Krastev founded the Center for Liberal Strategies in his native Bulgaria, and Holmes taught at the Central European University in Budapest, which was perceived as one of the main intellectual centres of liberal thought in Central Europe. Both thus took part in a process which, as they note thirty years later, is perceived by many in the post-Communist region as assimilation or colonization.

The main argument of their book is that the events of the year 1989 and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union seemed to confirm Francis Fukuyama's notorious thesis about the end of history in liberal democracy. However, thirty years later, it seems that something went wrong as many liberal democratic countries face similar phenomena that some understand as symptoms of the crisis of democracy, democracy's disfigurations, the rise of illiberal democracy, or as democracy's backsliding, to name just a few. Krastev and Holmes add the perspective of political psychology to the ongoing discussion. They claim that one of the sources of contemporary democracy's discontent can be found in the anti-liberal resentment that has recently swayed post-Communist countries. To identify the source of this resentment Krastev and Holmes focus on the trauma that the politics of imitation have brought to inhabitants of post-Communist Europe. They claim that post-Communist countries had to adapt to a strategy of imitation of liberal democracy that was presented to their inhabitants as alternativlos. To make matters worse, this politics of imitation has placed the post-Communist countries in an inferior position of permanent learners. In other words, from the Central and Eastern European perspective, the imitation of the West turned to involuntary assimilation or colonization. The authors claim, however, that in the last decade or so, we have witnessed a reversal in the direction of imitation. The Post-Communist empire struck back either in the form of Russian President Vladimir Putin's sardonic pointing out the hypocrisy behind western politics or in the form of Donald Trump's (and others') imitation of Hungarian Prime minister Viktor Orban's illiberal democracy.

Building on the thesis of imitation and reverse imitation as sources of the contemporary predicament of democratic countries and Eastern-European democracies above all, Krastev and Holmes find the source of the recent liberal-democratic malaise in the development of the last thirty years, the problematic transformation from Communism, and not in post-Communist backwardness, in the Cold war heritage, or in some forms of cultural essentialism. It is an important point that deserves attention. While I agree with this part of Krastev and Holmes's diagnosis, I wonder whether the disproportionate emphasis on the role of imitation precludes the taking into account other phenomena. I will return to this shortly. Another noteworthy specific feature of Krastev and Holmes's book is its genre. The book is a political essay rather than an academic text. The form of the essay allows the authors to formulate their theses in a simple and very readable way, but on the other hand, the result is a certain freedom in dealing with concepts that, on closer inspection, create questions about some of Krastev and Holmes's starting points and conclusions.

The first concerns the way in which Krastev and Holmes understand the failed god of liberalism. They claim that, after an initial fascination, they distanced themselves from Fukuyama's thesis of the end
of history in liberal democracy. As mentioned above, liberalism is for them a god that failed. In their interpretation, however, they present liberalism as a more-or-less uniform ideology, ignoring the fact that liberalism, like all ideologies, is far from uniform, and that there are many different forms of liberalism.\footnote{This results in a lack of discussion of the kind of liberalism that was introduced to Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s and a view of the anti-liberal movements—whether in Europe or the USA—as similar responses to the global success of more or less the same liberalism. The difference between liberalism in the neoliberal form, which was introduced into the post-Communist countries in the 1990s, and the socio-cultural liberalism of the American left is huge, and not only because the latter is essentially etatist and progressivist. In this regard, it is symptomatic that the word neoliberalism does not appear in the book at all.}

The success of liberalism in its neoliberal form in Central Europe from the 1990s to the economic crisis of 2008 was caused not only by the fact that neoliberalism became a hegemonic force in the West but also because neoliberalism promised to fulfill the aspirations of various opposition forces that took over after 1989.\footnote{These were based either on human rights dissent or conservative positions and their common enemy was the authoritarian bureaucratic state of state socialism. The question of freedom was thus associated primarily with resistance to statism as such. In many post-Communist countries, opposition to statism resulted in the illusion of a liberal-conservative consensus, which has been expressed in agreement on neoliberal reforms.\footnote{With the gradual emptying of anti-Communist discourse and the economic crisis of 2008, the liberal-conservative consensus began to disintegrate and to polarize both of its former components, necessarily leading many of those who had previously been seen as liberal converts to supporting anti-liberal conservatism and illiberal democracy.\footnote{If we take into account this liberal-conservative consensus, it is clear that national and authoritarian conservatism and populism, which are now on the rise in many post-Communist countries, are not merely a reaction to imitation turned into assimilation, but have been part and parcel of the “liberal” politics of post-Communist countries since 1989.\footnote{Apart from the fact that the book’s undifferentiated notion of liberalism results in the neglect of the specifics of post-Communist liberal-conservative consensus, it might also underestimate of the role of liberalism as the main force shaping post-Communist countries since the 1990s and the effects of the semi-peripheral position of post-Communist countries in relation to the West.\footnote{In their explanation of the transformation of Central Europe (and Russia and the U.S. as well), Krastev and Holmes emphasize the role of depopulation and fear of demographic collapse instead of the effects of neoliberal reforms. They argue that the explanation for the rise of nationalism and xenophobia in post-Communist countries, which shocked the West during the refugee crisis, can be found in the fear of depopulation of these countries and massive emigration of educated and young people to Western Europe on the part of the segment of the population for which the possibility of leaving did not exist. Krastev and Holmes refer to the psychological mechanism of “displacement,” (38) in which a completely unacceptable threat is replaced with another, more acceptable, albeit also serious threat. Likewise, the inhabitants of post-Communist countries have displaced the fear of population collapse for fear of refugees and of the threat to national and cultural identity that the refugees' arrival would mean.}}}}}
While there is no denying that depopulation and the fear of demographic collapse are a serious problem for many post-Communist countries, it seems unlikely that they were the main cause of the rise of anti-liberal nationalism. An example that seems to falsify this explanation is the Czech Republic, the country I live in. The Czech Republic did not experience depopulation in the same way as, for example, the Baltic or Balkan countries did. It did not accept refugees, nor is it their destination. The danger of refugees is therefore completely imaginary, yet for the past few years it has become the main topic of Czech politics. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the main populist and right-wing populist parties in the Czech Republic have leaders who, by their origin, do not match the ideals of Czech nationalism. (Andrej Babiš, prime minister and leader of technopopulist ANO[26] movement is Slovak; Tomio Okamura, the leader of the right-wing populist Freedom and Direct Democracy is an entrepreneur of Japanese origin.) The very fact of the non-Czech origin of the representatives of Czech nationalism and populism is telling, in the sense that it suggests that the sources of this malaise can be found rather in the socioeconomic position of their constituents than in fear of violating a homogeneous national identity.[27] This again accentuates the role of neoliberalism. Although there is no denying the possibility that demographic anxiety may be behind the rise of illiberal nationalism in some post-Communist countries, the case of the Czech Republic demonstrates that this rise may have causes other than fears of depopulation and that Krastev and Holmes's thesis cannot be generalized.

Untying the fear of demographic collapse and the rise of illiberal nationalism not only points to the possible parochialism of Krastev and Holmes's approach but also points to another potentially problematic level of the book's argument. As I outlined above, Krastev and Holmes argue that post-Communist countries once imitated Western liberal democracy and that Western democracies now imitate the illiberal democracy of post-Communist Europe. In their view, recent history has turned into a kind of pendulum, which, by swaying from one side to the other, spreads either liberal or, in the opposite movement, illiberal democracy in the form of contagious imitation. As I have tried to show by reference to the hegemonic position of the liberal-conservative consensus in post-Communist Europe, national conservatism and illiberal democracy do not have to be understood as a reaction to liberal assimilationism but were part and parcel of the post-Communist countries’ road from state socialism. Similarly, it is unconvincing to claim that the contagion of national populism and illiberal democracy has spread from the East to the West, as if nationalism and populism had been previously been unknown in the West. The examples of Jörg Haider, the long-time leader of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Jean-Marie Le Pen (President of the National Front from 1972 to 2011) and his advance to the second round of the 2002 presidential election in France, Silvio Berlusconi’s (leader of Forza Italia and four-times Italian prime minister) electoral successes and Northern League in Italy—to name just a few examples—prove that this does not have to be the case.

The book does not discuss any of this. The idea of history as a pendulum conceals the fact that the turning points of the pendulum represent separate and irreducible opposites. Translated into the language of geopolitics, the post-Communist East and West represent two opposite poles of pendulum motion, not unlike during the Cold War. The question arises as to whether the remnants of a kind of mental Iron Curtain does not appear in the book. Also, the question of neoliberalism and globalization is germane. Events like the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, or the Yellow Vest movement in France are difficult to understand as a consequence of illiberal democracy in post-Communist Europe.
Instead, the abovementioned events and the success of populists in post-Communist Europe indicate a deep popular distrust of political elites, transnational norms, the EU, international and non-governmental organizations, etc., and it seems difficult to believe that this distrust and resentment have spread from post-Communist countries to the West. Quite the opposite: it seems that many factors, like the end of the ideological dispute in connection with the fall of state socialism, globalization, the decline of the welfare-state, neoliberal economic reforms, to name just a few, which both Eastern and Western countries experienced together, contributed to their emergence.

The *Light that Failed* is a particularly interesting and above all thought-provoking book that deserves readers’ attention. They will find many interesting insights that will make the book a point of reference for future discussions about the perils of democracy both in the East and the West.

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**Notes**


[20] The literature on topics of a variety of liberalisms and ideologies is immensely vast. For an approach that combines both, see, for example, Michael Freeden, Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).


[23] Viktor Orban, a former Soros foundation stipend holder at Oxford University, is among the most well-known examples of liberal turned into a proponent of illiberal democracy and authoritarianism. Former Czech president and prime minister Václav Klaus turned from staunch Thatcherite in the early 1990s to a supporter of right-wing populist parties after 2000. Many examples of polish politicians and intellectuals following the same trajectory can be found in Anne Applebaum’s book Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism (New York: Doubleday, 2020).


[26] ANO is abbreviation for Asociace nespokojených občanů (Association of Discontented Citizens). The word ano also means “yes” in the Czech language.