

EU Accession and Revival of Nationalisms in CEE



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Many Westerners have seen the break-up of the Eastern Bloc as the long-expected moment of reconnection with the countries of Central Europe. Formerly, in the interwar years, these states formed a crucial part of the order within the region. With the conclusion of USSR domination, there was a natural expectation that these countries would use this transition to make a quick transformation into democratic and economically free and open regimes that would reap the benefits in terms of economic and political liberalization.

The two regions where this expectation was the strongest were the Baltic region (which became part of the USSR as a result of the Second World War and thus had a reason to want to become Westernized), and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (which found itself at the border between the East and the West and comparatively could see their deterioration vis-à-vis the capitalist countries located just a few kilometers away).

The countries of the former Eastern Bloc managed to switch lanes from the early moves away from the nationalistic and extremist rhetoric, up until the European Union (EU) accession. At that point they opted for the Eurosceptic, nationalist, and extremist rhetoric since 2005, has strengthened through the years of the economic recession.

Multiple issues affected this transition and the four countries had their specific flavors of nationalism and extremism reflecting the past experiences with an "external enemy" (as was the mutual case of the Slovak and Hungarian nationalists) of the country and the presence of the Roma minority.

Over the past two decades there was at first, a positive honeymoon period between

the EU and the CEE countries, and a sharp break with Western Europe with the growing resentment and the gradual divergence between the two political blocs. This has resulted in the slow-down of the integration process in terms of the adoption of the Euro as a common currency, and later led to political animosity for the proposals of the EU. This can be illustrated by the lack of cooperation of the V4 countries with the EU during the migrant crisis.

While Slovakia has gone the farthest to show that it is a reliable partner for the EU, it still prefers to respect the unity of the V4 countries over the full support for the policies of its main economic partners. With recent Russian military aggression, the information warfare deployed through Russian paid channels, as well as the economic integration needed to make the most to the Industry 4.0 revolution, the restarting of the convergence process may be crucial to save the future of the European project for the CEE region.



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EARLY PROMISE LEADING TO THE EU ACCESSION

The years between 1989 to the early 2000s presented a very positive story for both of these regions. All of the countries within the bloc have put themselves on the clear path towards both membership of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

However, this path was not without hurdles – especially in the case of Slovakia, which has suffered six years of control by the governments of authoritarian Vladimír Mečiar, who was finally ousted in 1998.

The final admission of the four Central European countries into the EU in May 2004 was supposed to be a recognition of the working protection of minority rights and stabilization of the democratic discourse in the newly re-established free societies. The reasons for such optimism came from the fact that a part of the accession criteria was directly related to the protection of minorities under “the 1990 Copenhagen Document, the 1991 Geneva Report, and the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”.¹

Furthermore, accession to the club of Western democracies was supposed to bring stabilization and the decrease in the salience of nationalist/extremist discourse, which were dominant in the 1990s period in some countries². Some authors directly focused on the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, pointing to the near disappearance of the nationalist discourse from the Slovak and Czech debate in the 2002 elections.

¹ Tesser, L. M. (2003) “The Geopolitics of Tolerance: Minority Rights under EU Expansion in East-Central Europe”, [in]: *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 17(3), pp. 483-532.

² Henderson, K. (2004) “The Slovak Republic: Explaining Defects in Democracy”, [in]: *Democratization*, Vol. 11(5), pp. 133-155.

In addition, Slovakia closely observed the Hungarian minority party entering the government coalition for the second time in 2002, coupled with the split and the failure of the leading nationalist party (SNS). Thus,



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IN SLOVAKIA, THE SUPPORT FOR EU ACCESSION REACHED NEARLY 94%, ALBEIT WITH A 52.1% TURNOUT

there were strong reasons for optimism in numerous countries.

A similar situation occurred in Hungary and Poland. In the case of the former, while there were nationalist and extremist parties active at the break of the century within public life, the 2002 election resulted in the exclusion of the Hungarian Life and Justice Party (MIEP) – which was the main party representing the extreme nationalist spectrum in the late 1990s and early 2000s – from the Hungarian parliament³. As regards the latter, the political life stabilized in 2001, when the main problem was the break-up of the Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS) and the formation of the numerous new parties emerging from its legacy⁴.

Support for the populist conservative voices within these countries was manifested with the even quicker accession process to NATO as the organization was

to guarantee the CEE countries sovereignty, and distinctively made them a part of the Western geopolitical bloc finally detached from the previous threat of Russian military and geopolitical influence. While this issue was not confirmed through the referenda (unlike the case of the EU accession), and one can reasonably doubt whether these would pass in a popular plebiscite, these measures did not face serious political opposition that would campaign to stop this process. In hindsight, with the current scope of Russian influence in the region in terms of both the political friendships and the cultural influence in mind, NATO accession was a relatively smooth process with a broad spectrum of political parties supporting the convergence to the West.

A similar story took place with respect to the fulfillment of the accession criteria in the form of *Acquis Communautaire*. With the exception of some areas, where the liberalization of the CEE countries was somewhat painful due to the impacts of the economic transformation, this era was very much defined by a lack of the political hurdles present for the pro-European governments that have successfully prepared their respective countries for EU accession.

The success of this convergence could be seen also in the referenda for the accession to the European Union. In Slovakia, the support for EU accession reached nearly 94%, albeit with a 52.1% turnout. Hungarian turnout was even lower, with a 45.6% turnout and 83.8% in support for EU membership. The Polish rate of support was only slightly lower – 77.6% support with a 58.9% turnout. The Czech referendum had a similar result – a 77.3% support with a 55.21% turnout.

These results show that, overall, there was a reasonable expectation that this particular region would not pose a serious threat for the further integration of the countries in

³ Nikolenyi, C. (2004) "Strategic Coordination in the 2002 Hungarian Election", [in]: *Europe-Asia Studies*, November, Vol. 56(7), pp. 1041-1058.

⁴ Palovský, T. (2006) "Polsko", [in]: Havlík, V. and Kaniok, P. (eds.) *Euroskepticismus a Země Střední a Východní Evropy*, Brno: Masaryk University. [in Slovak]

the economic and political bloc supporting the Western values of democracy, political liberalism, and the cultural proximity towards modern Western societies.

A NOTABLE SPLIT SINCE THE ACCESSION

It was, therefore, all the more surprising when CEE started to slide into the sway of populism, with each of the countries following the backward direction in one way or another within the two years of EU accession.

Needless to say, the term *populism* refers to the strategy of the politicians to appeal to the conservative and often reactionary sentiments of the population with respect to ethnic hatred, Christian values in opposition to Western liberalism, and the protection of traditions in the face of the perceived threat from the cosmopolitan societies.

POLAND

In Poland, the populist tendencies started anew in 2005 – a year that signalled the change of direction of the entire region.

For the first time in the 21st century, the 2005 parliamentary election campaign and its results in Poland paved the way for the return of the nationalistic, xenophobic, and strongly Eurosceptic rhetoric, resulting in the victory of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, which formed a coalition government with an openly nationalistic, religiously conservative, and anti-EU League of Polish Families (LPR, associated with xenophobic and anti-Semitic claims) and an agrarian protest-party Self-Defence (Samoobrona).

The leading Law and Justice party started adopting a nationalist discourse associated with a vision of a strong and independent Poland as one of the main parts of its programme⁵. The forming of the coalition

with the League of Polish Families further strengthened an already nationalist and Eurosceptic tone of the Kaczynski brothers, who used these statements in the process of



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⁵ Ibid.

the signing of the Lisbon treaty⁶. Although the Law and Justice party was pushed out of power between 2007 and 2015 – an era that saw two governments of Donald Tusk, a leader of the Civic Platform party, a pro-European centre-right bloc – which seemed a very positive sign, this did not mean that the Eurosceptic nationalist bloc would get any weaker. Quite the contrary, the Eurosceptics got back to the forefront.

In 2015, the Law and Justice party regained power again and has used its influence to undertake a series of perceived illiberal reforms that strengthen the control of the system under the party rule for a considerable time to come. The main area of criticism has been the changes introduced in the judicial branch of the government. The reforms – including, for instance, the lowering of the retirement age for the current judges – have given control over replacement of judges to Law and Justice, allowing the party to reshape up to two thirds of the Supreme Court. Similar control has been exercised in the area of the public media channels, which has contributed to effectively turning these channels into a propaganda machine⁷.

The recent period was again characterized by a sharp increase in anti-EU rhetoric, which was revived in the aftermath of the Brexit vote in 2016. However, what differentiates it from the previous era is the fact that these steps no longer mean electoral troubles for the party conducting itself in this way, while in power.



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According to the 2019 polls, when the next parliamentary election is soon to take place (late October or early November), the Law and Justice party might hold around a 15-percentage-point lead, thus giving the party over 40% of stable support. In light of these predictions, it is unlikely that the Law and Justice party would be punished for their illiberal tendencies. This phenomenon marks an even sharper shift away from the situation that started back in the year 2005. The voters seem to accept the policies adopted by the parties with the Eurosceptic and nationalistic rhetoric⁸.

⁶ Mulvey, S. (2007) "Poles in War of Words Over Voting", [in]: *BBC News*, June 21. Available [online]: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6227834.stm>

⁷ Zerofsky, E. (2018) "Is Poland Retreating from Democracy?", [in]: *The New Yorker*, July 23. Available [online]: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/30/is-poland-retreating-from-democracy>

⁸ PTWP (2019) *Sondaże poparcia partii politycznych (wybory)*. Available [online]: <https://www.wnp.pl/parlamentary/sondaze/> [in Polish]



THE FOUR YEARS OF THE SMER'S SINGLE-PARTY GOVERNMENT WERE A COMBINATION OF POPULIST SOCIAL-POLICY AND NATIONALIST MEASURES

SLOVAKIA

Poland provided a blueprint for Slovakia's story. Having beaten the nationalist populist government of Vladimír Mečiar in 1998, the center-right governments of 1998 and 2002 placed Slovakia on the path of much needed reforms. They have, however, lost the 2006 election badly to the coalition of the social democratic SMER party, which joined forces with the populist nationalist parties of Mečiar (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) and Ján Slota's reunited Slovak National Party⁹.

This unholy, at least by the European Standards, coalition for a Social Democratic party meant that SMER faced the threat of suspension of the membership of the Party of European Socialists (PES). Despite these

pressures, the coalition with the nationalist and populist forces held full four years and the nationalist and strongly populist rhetoric started to define the discourse of its social-democratic leader, Robert Fico, himself. Some of the notorious examples of this rhetoric included the enactment of the Language Act or the steps taken to deny the Hungarian president's entry to Slovakia during his unofficial visit in August 2009¹⁰.

Moreover, in addition to these established parties, there was a gradual growth of the extremist group Slovenská Pospolitosť (Slovak Togetherness) and its main figure Marián Kotleba. Along their rising activity against the "Roma criminality", which gained them considerable publicity, in the 2013 election for the regional governor Mr. Kotleba managed to gain over 10% (or 13,000 votes) in his home region of Banská Bystrica¹¹. Subsequently, in 2014 he actually won the seat of the regional governor, and after the court had disbanded his original party, he simply founded a new party to contest the national election.

A similar situation followed in Poland. In 2010, the government parties were defeated rather badly. The party of Vladimír Mečiar was kicked out of the parliament, while the Slovak National Party avoided the same fate (by 0.07 percentage points, or just 2,020 votes). The victory was celebrated by the center-right bloc, which suffered from internal tensions in the coalition of four diverse parties.

¹⁰ Viličková, Z. (2009) "Prime Minister Fico Says State Language Act Is Diplomatic Success for Slovakia", [in]: *The Slovak Spectator*, December 18. Available [online]: http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/37460/10/prime_minister_fico_says_state_language_act_is_diplomatic_success_for_slovakia.html

¹¹ Viličková, Z. (2009) "VÚC Election Results Mirror Party Sympathies at National Level", [in]: *The Slovak Spectator*, November 16. Available [online] http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/37147/10/vuc_election_results_mirror_party_sympathies_at_national_level.html

⁹ Bakke, E. and Siter, N. (2005) "Patterns of Stability: Party Competition and Strategy in Central Europe since 1989", [in]: *Party Politics*, Vol. 11(2), pp. 243-263.



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The last straw was the vote about the European bailout fund. This was a point which disappointed so many of the voters who have had high hopes of this government and led to a landslide victory of the SMER-Social Democracy. As a result, in the 2012 election it became the first party in history to form a single-party government in Slovakia after 1989.

The four years of the SMER's single-party government were a combination of populist social-policy and nationalist measures. After this term, the main party was weakened considerably, gathering less than 30% of the total vote.

What was shocking in this election was the fact that it saw the fascist People's Party (Our Slovakia) receive nearly 8% of the votes, resulting in their entering the parliament. Since then, their position has not weakened, meaning that the fascist party defending the puppet regime of the first Slovak Republic has become an accepted party of Slovak politics.

Given that the populist and very strong anti-media rhetoric is keeping the SMER party at the level of around 20% of voter support, with roughly 8% for both the Slovak National Party and the fascist party Our Slovakia and a similar percentage for the populist conservative party We Are Family, this means that, nationally, the conservative nationalist forces have a hold on over 40% of the vote. While this tendency has been countered by the growing support for the progressive center-left coalition of the two new parties – Progressive Slovakia and the Together (Spolu) party – the pool of the voters for these and similar parties remains low.

HUNGARY

Moving to the developments in Hungary, the situation also began with the general election, but not quite in the same way as in the two previous cases. The 2006 election itself ended with a victory for the previous coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz). The only other parties to enter parliament were the coalition of two right-wing parties under the leadership of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union and the Christian Democratic People's Party on the one hand, and the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) on the other. However, the previous state of things only lasted for a very short time.

The breaking point happened shortly after the election, as Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány was caught on tape saying that the government lied to win the election, while bringing the country to the brink of bankruptcy¹². This event resulted in massive riots across the country, which lasted several weeks.

¹² Boyes, R. (2006) "Prime Minister Refuses to Stand Down after Lies and Street Battles", [in]: *Times Online*, September 20. Available [online]: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article644751.ece>



UNLIKE IN THE CASE OF POLAND AND SLOVAKIA, HUNGARY HAS NOT SEEN A MOMENT OF MODERATION SINCE THE CRISIS IN ITS POLITICS ERUPTED IN 2006

The leader of the main opposition party (Fidesz), Viktor Orbán, radicalized his already fierce rhetoric. He went towards making claims concerning the term 'Felvidék' or 'Upper Hungary', which is a historic term for Slovakia, and thus called for territorial autonomy for the Hungarians in the neighboring countries (mainly Slovakia, Serbia, and Romania)¹³. With the Fidesz party being the likely winner of the 2010 election, as it eventually happened it was preparing the ground for even more radical elements within Hungarian public life.

The main concern was the success of an extreme right party called Jobbik – Movement for a Better Hungary, which rallied its support around two main issues – of the Roma minority and the revival of the

strong nationalist sentiment¹⁴. This process strengthened domestic levels of the criminality against the minority and the creation of the Hungarian Guard. The outcome was the result of the 2009 European Parliament election and a clear victory of Fidesz (with more than 50% of all the votes cast) and 14.77% of the votes for the extreme right-wing Jobbik party¹⁵.

Unlike in the case of Poland and Slovakia, Hungary has not seen a moment of moderation since the crisis in its politics erupted in 2006. The coalition of Fidesz and the KDNP scored 52.73% of all the votes in the 2010 election and decided to use the constitutional majority to introduce changes in the Constitution to make life easier for itself, or as some media outlets put it, to cement itself in power¹⁶.

Similarly to Poland, Hungary went through a series of changes in media legislation, granting a single public entity the control over all of the private media. These two goals gradually undermined the system of checks and balances within the Hungarian political system that were supposed to protect the civil liberties in the country¹⁷.

¹⁴ Jobbik (2010) *Jobbik – The Movement for a Better Hungary*. Available [online]: <http://www.jobbik.com/>

¹⁵ Waterflier, B., Samuel, H., and Squires, N. (2009) "European Elections 2009: Far-Right and Fringe Parties Make Gains Across Europe amid Low Turnout", [in]: *The Telegraph*, June 8. Available [online]: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/eu/5471893/European-elections-2009-far-right-and-fringe-parties-make-gains-across-Europe-amid-low-turnout.html>

¹⁶ Verseck, K. (2012) "Orbán Cements His Power With New Voting Law", [in]: *Spiegel Online*, October 30. Available [online]: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/hungarian-parliament-amends-election-law-a-864349.html>

¹⁷ Kingsley, P. (2018) "Orban and His Allies Cement Control of Hungary's News Media", [in]: *The New York Times*, November 29. Available [online]: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/world/europe/hungary-orban-media.html>

¹³ Mesežnikov, G. (2009) "Who Really Won the 2009 European Elections in Slovakia?", [in]: *Institute for Public Affairs*, June 23. Available [online]: http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/publicistika/subor/Mesez_Elect_09_HBF_Eng.pdf



HUNGARY HAS TRAVELED PERHAPS THE LONGEST ROAD FROM THE LIBERAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE 1990S AND EARLY 2000S AND THAT, SO FAR, THERE IS NO SIGN OF ANY LIBERAL OPPOSITION THAT COULD REVERSE THIS TREND

Lastly, Viktor Orbán has started using a public scarecrow in terms of the Hungarian expatriate, George Soros – a billionaire financier, hedge fund manager, political activist, and philanthropist of Jewish descent who funded pro-liberal think tanks in Hungary and other Central European countries.

The Hungarian Prime Minister has directed a considerable amount of hatred towards George Soros based on his political views, billionaire status, and his Jewish origins. This push has been strengthened by a law aimed directly at the Central European University (CEU), which was founded by Soros. The institution has been seen as the last major remaining intellectual institution challenging

the regime of Viktor Orbán. As a result of this legislative proposal the CEU had to relocate a considerable majority of its operations and educational activities to Vienna, Austria¹⁸.

These developments show that Hungary has traveled perhaps the longest road from the liberal transformation of the 1990s and early 2000s and that, so far, there is no sign of any liberal opposition that could reverse this trend. Fidesz continues to dominate the polls after winning both the 2014 and 2018 election. His popularity does not face any challengers despite numerous illiberal and anti-opposition policies have been introduced by the Orbán governments.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The case of the Czech Republic is different from all of the above-discussed cases. While the country remained seemingly stable throughout the early and late 2000s, there were already some examples of increased nationalist and populist rhetoric over those years.

Some people have identified the main problem as being connected to the persona of President Vaclav Klaus, due to his strong Eurosceptic and later more openly pro-Russian statements – illustrated, for example, by his reluctance to sign the Lisbon Treaty, which gained significant attention all over Europe. Klaus has been critical of the EU membership from the moment that the Czech Republic joined in 2004. His early criticism had been more constitutionalist and focused on the loss of sovereignty. Later, since his standoff against the final signing of the Lisbon treaty, he has moved as a more anti-Western populist, critical of the migration

¹⁸ Walker, S. (2018) "Dark Day for Freedom": Soros-Affiliated University Quits Hungary", [in]: *The Guardian*, December 3. Available [online]: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/dark-day-freedom-george-soros-affiliated-central-european-university-quits-hungary>

crisis and becoming more defensive of the Russian regime under Vladimir Putin¹⁹.

However, some other important developments started as early as 2005. On the one hand, several popular and very charismatic leaders emerged within the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), including David Rath who became the Czech Health Minister, and subsequently, a regional governor of Central Bohemia Region. His rise to fame and prominence coincided with the increased nationalist rhetoric by a left-wing politician arguing against immigrants from African countries “on the somewhat populist (not to say racist) grounds that non-European migrants will bring crime, disease and social disorder”²⁰.

On the other hand, the second very closely related issue within Czech politics – just as in the case of Slovakia and Hungary – has been the salience of the social tensions with the Roma minority. While this topic grew in terms of the social importance in the late 2000s, Czech political parties rallying against this particular group were kept outside of parliament²¹. In this particular decade, only the gradual growth of minor political formations within Czech political discourse was observed. It was perhaps best illustrated by the increased activity of the Workers Party as the main representative of the extreme right in the country since 2007.

¹⁹ Odkladal, M. (2015) “Václav Klaus: Západ donutil Putina obsadit Krym, Európa je vinná za migračnú krízu”, [in]: *Aktuality.sk*, November 30. Available [online]: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/309131/rozhovor-s-vaclavom-klausom-zapad-donutil-putina-anektovat-krym-europa-nesie-vinu-za-migracnu-krizu/> [in Slovak]

²⁰ “Czech Republic: Green Card law opens left-right split on immigration”, [in]: *Dr Sean’s Diary*, September 1. Available [online]: <http://drseansdiary.blogspot.com/2008/09/czech-republic-green-card-law-opens.html>

²¹ Mudde, C. (2005) “Racist Extremism in Central Europe”, [in]: *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 19(2), pp. 161-184.



THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC HAS BEEN RESHAPED BY THE EMERGENCE OF A PLETHORA OF NEW PARTIES ON ALL SIDES OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

The development of support for the anti-system elements have accelerated greatly within the last five to eight years due to a number of political crises surrounding the traditional parties (eg. the Civic Democratic Party or the Social Democrats) in terms of corruption, as well as the lack of charismatic persons to drive the popular support back to these traditional parties. The result could not have surprised anyone. The political landscape in the Czech Republic has been reshaped by the emergence of a plethora of new parties on all sides of the political spectrum.

There has been a diversification of the parties on the liberal side, mainly in the form of the Pirate party, which has become the key representative of progressive liberalism. The party has brought new topics and a new type of discourse into Czech politics, which

needs to be taken positively as it spreads the issues covered into new aspects of liberal policies.

However, the good trend has been more than just overshadowed by the negative political developments, mainly through the growth of two new parties, ANO 2011 and the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party. The former, ANO 2011, has been dominated by a billionaire businessperson from Slovakia, Andrej Babiš. He has created a catchall populist party claiming to want to clean up Czech politics, even though his businesses have been associated with the allegedly corrupt business practices and possible misuse of the European funds.

Entering into politics has radicalized Mr. Babiš in terms of his rhetoric, which started resembling the leaders of Poland and Hungary. His participation in the government under the leadership of the Social Democrats between 2013 and 2017 has made Babiš immensely popular, but only thanks to his ruthlessness and populism. This led to the fact that after the 2017 election, there was a general reluctance to enter the government with the then winner, Mr. Babiš himself. Eventually, he was forced to form a coalition with the Social Democrats. However, since they have only had a minority in the government, they rely chiefly on the support of the Communist Party.

The Communist Party of the Bohemia and Moravia has been the only unreformed communist party in the Eastern bloc countries that have continued in the public sphere, and their defense of the life under the previous regime has translated into the nostalgia among the older part of the population and eventually into the electoral successes in the late 1990s and the 2000s, when the party attracted between 11% and 18%. This has been linked with strong party membership, which stood at 100,000 until 2003 and



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which has not dropped below 50,000 until 2013. Since then, the support and membership declined rapidly to 34,000, below 7% in 2019 EP election. Their electoral support has waned to the ANO party and their traditional base of voters that remember Communism is fading away, thus they are likely to continue this decline and fade away from the Czech politics.

Lastly, with the success of the Freedom and Direct Democracy party in the parliamentary 2017 election, there has been a breakthrough of an anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic, anti-European element into the Czech parliament. The party was founded by half-Japanese, half-Czech entrepreneur Tomio Okamura after the split from his previous political project – Dawn of Direct Democracy.

Mr. Okamura has managed to popularize the anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic sentiments within the Czech electorate and capitalized on this strategy. Currently, the party is ostracized in the Czech parliament and no other political grouping is willing to cooperate with them. However, it now has a platform on which it can increase its appeal among the Czech voters, which have previously not responded to this form of populism.

Freedom and Direct Democracy continues to do well in the election polls, gaining up to 10% of voter support. This shows that



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together with the continued 25-30% gains of the ANO, 35-40% of the Czech electorate is susceptible to the populism of the nationalist and extremist kind. Such an unfortunate development has brought the Czech Republic into the fold of the other V4 countries.

CONCLUSIONS

In summation, the post-Socialist developments within Central and Eastern Europe have demonstrated some very promising signs in the early parts of the development, namely the 1990s. With the exception of Slovakia, there has not been any significant return to authoritarian tendencies and all CEE countries later made quick progress to join both NATO and the European Union.

The main economic and geopolitical goals of the transformation have been achieved sixteen years after the fall of the Eastern Bloc. Generally speaking, positive changes may have been observed in terms of the democratic transformation, a decrease of the nationalist and social tensions, and the emergence of respect for individual liberties, the rule of law, and the principles championed by the European Union. However, in hindsight, this entire success may have been just a result of implementing the carrot and stick approach in the EU accession process.

Once this success was achieved, the EU lost all of its bargaining power vis-à-vis the politicians from Central and Eastern Europe. In the immediate aftermath of such a situation, the politicians in all four countries (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) have started using strategies to increase their general appeal among the population. This has been done through the stirring up of Eurosceptic rhetoric and the abandonment of certain standards of the rule of law, on which the EU was insisting in the accession process.

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IT IS UP TO LIBERAL THINK TANKS TO TRY TO INSTITUTE CHANGES IN THE POPULAR DEMAND

Given that this period has been associated with the impacts of the economic recession from the 2007 financial crisis, the politicians of the V4 region could see EU sentiments weakening in Central and Eastern Europe, and that their populism may be seen as politically more justified among the population. In the years following the crisis, there has been a general return to the era of responsibility following the worst moments of the crisis in Greece, Portugal, and Ireland. These experiences have pushed the population to vote for more moderate parties – mainly in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

However, once the unpopular part of the *tough job*, namely transformation, was complete, the aforementioned countries slid back into a second wave of populism which has lasted up until now. This recent period has been characterized by more direct opposition to the EU which has manifested as protests against deeper integration and certain social measures, including the migrant quotas.

Unlike in the previous case of the governments immediately after 2004, the support for the populist governments and nationalist sentiments persists, even following them getting into power. It is up to liberal think

tanks to try to institute changes in the popular demand and help move the discussion back onto a moderate course.



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