

Does “Populism” in Europe’s New Democracies Really Matter?

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Abstract: The article discusses the populist movements in the New Democracies of Eastern Europe and their relation to the “‘red-brown’ phenomenon”(i.e. the fusion of neo-Nazi and Communist ideas and practices into a new anti-democratic trend). Presenting some of the main features of the regimes of Milosevic and Putin, the author claims that totalitarianism in postmodern times may not necessarily exhibit all the typical characteristics of 20th century movements and still remain totalitarian. The author points out the vulnerability of Europe, emphasizes the importance of the “export of lawlessness” from Russia, and discusses the specific role of Russia among the different anti-Western trends. The possibilities for the appearance of a “red-brown international” are also discussed.

Keywords: Export of lawlessness, populism, “red-brown” phenomenon, totalitarianism

There are authors who claim that a populist revolution has already started in the new democracies of Europe—countries that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, aspired to join or joined NATO or the European Union.¹ If that is the case, the implications are serious.

Studying the situation in the new democracies of Europe is especially tempting for at least three reasons: They exhibit in a more direct form some political, mostly populist tendencies that seem to be bulging all around Europe; they seem politically closer to Western countries and can help us better understand what is going on in Western Europe; and new democracies are still considered the weakest point of the West—most of them remain the main object of interest to both an increasingly powerful and aggressive Russia and the forces of fundamentalist Islam.

The term *populism* is easily confused because of its wide and indiscriminate usage. Apart from its mostly historical use for concepts and activities connected with the Populist Party in the United States, it usually has a negative connotation and is used to define political trends that claim to express the needs and desires of common people, usually by challenging the governing elites and by promising things that cannot be delivered. However, the term is also used by politicians who have missed addressing some important issues to

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castigate their adversaries for managing to address these issues and gaining politically as a result.

In Europe, the term has gradually come to mean something that exhibits characteristics of what used to be called in a very broad sense “fascisoid”—an amalgam of antidemocratic, statist, xenophobic, ethnocentrist trends, which oppose representative institutions, free initiative, competition, and a number of “Western values” like diversity, tolerance, and freedom of expression. Such a definition seems to be pigeonholing populism into a convenient, well-known ideology that can be conceived of as an atavistic—and highly unpleasant—occurrence. The unfolding of strong tendencies in this direction in Eastern Europe,² however, seems to provide new insights for the critical assessment of this phenomenon.

Four Conspicuous Characteristics of Populism in Eastern Europe

The populist movements in Eastern Europe exhibit some common features that can be easily identified.

The first of these characteristics is an emphasis on *restoring “statehood.”* The term *statehood* is hardly translatable, and the dictionary definition fails to explain its implications. In the late-Communist era, the term was widely used to distinguish between the traditional state (e.g., “capitalist” or “feudalist”), which was officially denounced, and the importance of having some form of a state. Gradually the meaning shifted from the expectation of having rules, security, and a level of solidarity to the idea that the state is supposed to “give” work, culture, a future, and individual fulfillment. Emotionally, this seemed to resonate with the sentiment of many citizens during the transitional period of the early 1990s that they had been abandoned, and that nobody was “taking care” of them as the party and the state used to do. Populism took advantage of the fact that for many people, after two generations of Communism, the transition was confusing. Twenty years is a short period historically, many adults felt that their lives had split in two. Furthermore, when they faced any of the abundant problems, these people felt compelled to ask: Am I to blame? Or is someone else? The missing statehood gave a satisfactory explanation for their failures. Once this was established, all statist concepts became more acceptable. The new element here was not the substance of the statist concepts, but the ardency with which restoration of something allegedly lost during the transition was sought. This naturally robbed the transition of much of its moral value, and it revived the tendency to involve the state in as many civic activities as possible.

The second characteristic of Eastern European populism is *anti-Westernism*. Populism opposed the changes in the new democracies of Europe that were aimed at making them into “Western” nations (“joining the Euro-Atlantic structures” was the politically correct way of expressing this). The objective was not to just become democracies; India, for example, is a democracy, but it was never a model. Neither was the goal to become free markets; Colombia is a free market, but it was never a model. Nor was the goal to become rich; Kuwait and Japan are wealthy nations, but neither was a model. The lack of new ideas in the Eastern European revolutions, which amazed Ralf Dahrendorf,³ was only natural. These countries were joining, not building, a family. The populist leaders tended to present integration as the exploitation or destruction of invaluable national riches and Euro-Atlantic solidarity as a form of submission comparable to (and worse than) what accompanied Soviet domination and the Red Army invasion. They combined anti-Communist and anti-Soviet rhetoric (without which it is difficult to explain where the alleged riches had been hidden before

the transition) with a moving understanding for the “New Russia,” which they presented as a unique force that opposes the “imperialist” tendencies of the West.

This anti-Western attitude is naturally anti-European, but it is anti-American above all. The United States can be accused of all mortal sins in branching from a good European tradition, but as soon as the U.S. is castigated, the attack is then directed at Europe. In other words, by frowning at the “imposition” of Western standards and rules, populists challenge the very essence of the choice made by the new democracies.

Populism’s third characteristic is *nationalism*. The populist statement, “We are much better than the Westerners” (a notion to mitigate bruised self-esteem), is easily transformed into hatred, and identity is transformed into rejection of the standards and values of liberal democracy, anti-Americanism, and anti-Europeanism. With the disenchantment with the present and fears for the future, patriotism turns overtly ethnocentric. Gypsies are easy to hate everywhere, even in Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Turks (in Bulgaria) or Hungarians (in Romania and Slovakia) are easy targets based on historical and religious grounds. Anti-Semitism is resurfacing—even in countries where it used to be generally unknown, such as Bulgaria.⁴ These sentiments are not much different than those expressed by Jean-Marie Le Pen in France or Jörg Heider in Austria, although in Eastern Europe the claims of ethnic superiority appear to more openly overcompensate for an intense inferiority complex and bear more pronounced nostalgia (i.e., “we have been great” or “we have been victims of worldwide conspiracies sometime in the past few hundred or few thousand years”). This creates no impulse for any patriotic undertaking; it only breeds hatred for others and gives rise to histrionic appeals for more attention to national security. (It is appropriate to remember John Lukacs’s distinction between patriotism as maintaining the value and well-being of the community and nationalism—an aggressive expansionist trend).⁵

The fourth characteristic is *antisystemism* or *anti-institutionalism*. Populists frequently talk about corruption and inefficiency of democratic institutions (and receive widespread support from the media, which also concentrates on those topics). Their general message is not anti-corruption, however, but anti-institutionalist. They claim that politicians are by definition parasites interested in only their egoistic ends, parties are nothing but instruments for keeping corrupt elites in power, and institutions are mere façades of hidden machinations of the same hated elites. This kind of language is perfectly suited to minds accustomed to Marxist definitions of the state as an instrument for oppression of one class by another, or of the law as a statute of the will of the dominant class. Conspiratorial thinking is well known around the world and fashionable even in Hollywood. For a Marxist mindset, however, it is a standard mode of functioning, which can be taught and transmitted more easily than any concept.

The fashionable criticism of representative institutions, combined with the calls for more direct democracy, serves this populist line of thought well. Present-day Eastern European populists have a profoundly Leninist approach to politics, in spite of their ethnocentrism and right-wing or even anti-Communist rhetoric. They fight the rich (whether they call them capitalists, plutocrats, corrupt elites, or “comprador bourgeoisie”) and claim to defend “the people” with class fervor (even as they declare that they don’t believe in class struggle). To different extents they reject parliamentarianism, distrust division of power, and offer salvationist solutions to social problems, defined as a “clean new movement” (i.e., different from the “corrupt old parties”) or the “trustable leader of the people” (i.e., a

savior, distinct from politicians).⁶ However, the “clean movement” and “trustable leader” solutions serve as a solid ground for neglect of the rule of law.

The Totalitarian Dimension

The characteristics of populism strongly resemble the practice of the well-known totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.⁷ However, the populists lack an organized and coherent doctrine, which was typical of Communism and Nazism (although never of what we call fascism).⁸ However, no matter what lip service the populist leaders give to direct democratic procedures, their salvationist description of the tasks of the state, their expressed desire to control the economy and the media, their insistence on state procedures against the people who divert from what they consider national ideals, and the accusing language they use for all “servants of the West” (or even more often for American imperialism and Zionism) makes it clear that Eastern European populism carries a conspicuous totalitarian tendency, to put it very mildly. It is more appealing to treat this as a residue of Eastern European totalitarian history and biography, but such an easy explanation can be misleading. Once it has been proven that totalitarian practices are part of modernity,⁹ it seems more reasonable to see if these tendencies are not viable and thus addressed to the future than to send them into the dustbin of history and to deal with them as mere residues. It would be unwise to assume that totalitarianism has come to an end and will not reappear under a different form, even after the collapse of the great totalitarian doctrines of the twentieth century.

Certainly we could avoid the academic discussion by leaving the name “totalitarianism” to history and inventing—in the new postmodern epoch—some new “post-something” title for the present-day threat. Such an approach might be tempting, except it would deprive the general audience of a vividly imaginable point of reference. I think (together with Juan J. Linz, who describes the enthusiasm with which totalitarianism in the 20th century has been accepted)¹⁰ that the psychological components (both emotional and cognitive) of totalitarianism are strong and should not be neglected.

Since Hannah Arendt, scholars have placed a special emphasis on the state machine for terror and mass repression typical of both Communism and Nazism.¹¹ There is no doubt that terror and repression may be natural outcomes of a totalitarian attitude toward power, as are concentration camps (in their known form or in different possible forms). However, the essence of totalitarianism as a form of government lies in the relation between the state and the individual. The fascination with the role of the state is something more than just creating an oppressive regime. Totalitarianism is militantly anti-individualistic—not in the classical Greco-Roman tradition of demanding that one sacrifice himself or herself for the community, but insisting on dependence and indebtedness (through ideas like “the party has given you the opportunity for education” or “the state gives young couples apartments”); it results in neglecting rules and individual rights and reducing individual initiative.

However, the most spectacular feature of totalitarianism is what Arendt illustrates with the image of the onion: the tendency to establish layered communication of significant information, leading to a skewed picture of reality in both cognitive and emotional terms.¹² Here, we should not expect to see clear examples from Nazi or Communist propaganda or censorship in the twenty-first century. Having only radio at hand is different from having both radio and television and dramatically different from having the Internet. At this point,

one can only imagine exactly what form the presentation of a skewed picture of reality will take in the coming years. One thing is clear: the Internet's pluralism of opinions does not guarantee that information manipulations will be overcome.

Overall, then, it would be rather confusing to freeze the definition of totalitarianism to the most conspicuous features of the regimes of the previous century.

Rightist or Leftist Populism?

The popular misunderstanding that places particular significance on whether a particular totalitarianism is "rightist" or "leftist" adds to the general confusion in the estimation of the threat that populism poses. The populist slogans, often ideologically flexible, may emphasize concepts like "stop giving privilege to the Gypsies," "take back the stolen money from the credit millionaires," "fighting to restore the independence and glory of the nation," or "fighting to break out of the grip of American imperialism," but most often, they use all of these.

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Populist parties formed throughout Eastern Europe in the 1990s, based on groups originating from both the political right and the left. Although they used nationalist claims in their agenda, they had every reason to work with one another across borders early in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which was, for them, an era of cooperation that culminated in the 2007 formation of a group in the European Parliament that consisted of populist parties, such as Romania Mare and the Bulgarian Ataka, as well as Le Pen's Front National.

Ataka, led by Volen Siderov, won more than 7 percent of the vote in the 2005 parliamentary elections and in the 2007 European Parliament elections, and had a candidate reaching—albeit at a large margin (about 50 percent)—the second round of the 2006 presidential election. It is one of the newest populist parties in Eastern Europe. Its creation was preceded by an anti-Roma, anti-Semitic, anti-Western, and anti-corruption privatization television campaign of its future leader (the sponsors of which remained unrevealed).

Romania Mare, led until recently by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, is among the older populist parties. It was part of a leftist coalition for a time (1993-95), and then played passionately irredentist card, which gained it the largest number of votes in the 2000 presidential elections and 13 percent in the 2003 parliamentary election.¹³ By every standard, at least on the issue of Greater Romania and the historical glory of Bulgaria, the two parties from the neighboring countries should have clashed, but they never did. They can serve as a good example of populist parties that—because of the background of their leaders—sit on different sides of the aisle (the right and the left, respectively) but still exhibit striking similarities in everything except the idea of the borders of the two countries. The careers of their leaders are also illustrative. The leftist Vadim Tudor, who was writing odes to Elena Ceausescu, and the "democrat" Volen Siderov (former editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Democracy*) suddenly changed their loyalties and became ethnocentrist, anti-Semitic (with a tendency to tone down this particular feature when the entering the European Parliament, after it became obvious that this position was a

totally unacceptable attitude there),¹⁴ and above all anti-Western, anti-European Union, and anti-NATO.

In Slovakia, the current government, which came to power after 2006, is based on a leftist coalition, the Social Democrats,¹⁵ including two nationalist parties with strong ethnocentrist (anti-Gypsy, anti-Hungarian) tendencies. Prime Minister Robert Fico has publicly declared his admiration for Muammar al-Gaddafi. His admiration for Vladimir Putin can be guessed. His behavior fits the previously described characteristics. However, his government is not expected to do more mischief than it already has, and he is comfortably defined as “soft,” a “moderate,” or a “social populist.”¹⁶

One may ask why we need to pay any particular attention to these occurrences. Some may say that both Communism and Nazism are extremely unpleasant phenomena that already have been thoroughly studied, and there is a large amount of preparedness, in terms of public opinion, to cope with them. Their remnants evidently find absurd combinations to simply survive, but this is a sign of their doom. However, their capacity to cause problems should not be neglected, especially given the danger of raging nationalism, which has recently engendered so much violence and devastation in what was formerly Yugoslavia.

The Red-Brown Experience in Serbia and Russia

The wars in Yugoslavia were largely stimulated by ethnic animosities hidden under the surface for years. However, as with any conflict, the development of this one would not have been possible without deliberate leadership in this direction. Serbian leaders made conspicuously visible a tendency that has been making its way around the world during the past two decades: the possibility of marriage between the sworn enemies Communism and Neo-Nazism. Slobodan Milosevic talked and behaved like an extreme nationalist, and the genocidal activities of the Yugoslavian army (performed with his consent) reek of Nazism. His whole regime was based on the structure of the League of Yugoslav Communists and his economic and institutional policies were based on its practice for more than four decades. The term *red-brown* is well-suited to his regime.¹⁷

However, the first appearance of the term was not connected with Serbia or Yugoslavia but with Russia.¹⁸ It was coined in the early 1990s in anticipation of a union between the Communists of Gennady Zyuganov and the extreme Nationalists of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The expectation was that these two would join forces against the “pro-Western” Yeltsin administration. However, it never worked exactly like that. Yeltsin turned out to have been only a prelude.¹⁹ The Putin administration managed to render both parties insignificant even while gaining their support.

To discuss the characteristics of Putin’s regime in Russia in real terms does not seem quite politically correct, even after the conflict in Georgia during the summer of 2008. The tendency to think in terms of *Russia First* (i.e., the Strobe Talbot concept of the mid-1990s to make the possible reaction—and interest—of Russia a priority in making strategic decisions about the post-Communist space)²⁰ has still not been completely overcome.²¹ However, the following characteristics of Putin’s regime are indisputable:

- **Ethnocentrism:** Its origins are difficult to trace, but it is still predominant in the everyday discourse on other countries and other ethnic groups in Russia, among which the Chechens are the unhappiest example.

- State control of the economy (destruction of the “oppositional” businesses): Apart from its dangerous effects on freedom in Russia, this policy has ominous implications for other countries. For example, the destruction of Mikhail Khodurkovsky’s Yukos led a number of Eastern European countries, where industries had been privatized by being sold to private foreign companies, to wake up one day with their only oil refineries or other important energy assets owned by the Kremlin.²²
- State control of information and no proper investigation for killings of journalists: Not only has all independent media been destroyed, but Russia has become one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. (According to a 2007 report of Reporters Without Borders, more than twenty journalists have been killed since Putin came to power.²³ The neglected investigation of Anna Politkovskaya’s murder is only one, albeit the most shocking, example).
- Absence of opposition parties: Once in power, Putin’s United Russia has allowed no alternative parties to gain influence and dwells in a Duma with no opposition and only a few subservient other parties, which are ready to agree with Putin on every substantial issue. This situation is gradually moving Russia closer to the “multipartism” of Eastern Europe during Communist times, in which nominally independent parties were subservient to Moscow.²⁴
- Lawlessness: This key issue—tolerating and exporting organized crime and the complete lack of criteria that distinguish between legal and illegal activities (except in cases of political expediency)—show a neglect of the very concept of the rule of law. Crime has not become more powerful than the law; the state has become opposed to the law and more powerful than it so that it may fight crime efficiently.
- Overt support for anti-Western regimes throughout the world: This includes support for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chavez.

Back to the Totalitarian Dimension

The previously mentioned characteristics are typical of totalitarianism.²⁵ This is important not only for theoretical clarity. Populism still tends to be viewed as a way to gain power, whereas totalitarianism is seen as a way to exercise and maintain power, and a very modern—although inhumane—way of doing it. All that is lacking is an organized doctrine, such as Nazism or Communism.²⁶ However, this is hardly a surprise. What Francis Fukuyama wrote about the end of history—in which liberal democracy and market economics are the dominant ideologies—can be accepted in purely intellectual terms.²⁷ Democracy is no longer disputed—not only because there is no coherent doctrine to oppose it but also because nobody cares to bring forward such a doctrine. The concept of postmodernity may be disputable in many ways, but it betrays a mindset—not only of intellectuals, but also of the general public—that does not need (or deliberately pushes aside) structurally coherent ideologies. “Eclectic” (as much as “bipartisan”) becomes the preferred approach. There is no need to criticize postmodern populists for not being able to build a conceptual structure—they simply do not want to do so. But it does not make their totalitarianism less totalitarian. Concentration camps are not constructed. Nor is there a secret police of the former variety—although there was never any extensive dismantling of the KGB’s structures by final KGB chairman Vadim Bakatin during the early 1990s. The state-salvationist approach (Orwell’s Big Brother) and the tendency to pervert realities (Arendt’s onion image) become predominant. The language in which populism is communicated

(not exactly New Speak, but something similar) is entering public discourse.²⁸ Populist language is crucially important. No form of totalitarianism ever left the people's voice out of the picture. Vladimir Lenin and Adolph Hitler equally disregarded the feelings of human beings, but both did their best to display the support of "the people." Communists skillfully used the language of democracy, although they perverted and skewed it. Eastern European populists borrow many approaches from Nazism (i.e., ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and scapegoating minorities), but their language is full of Communist clichés.

To many people, Communism now seems a worn-out and old-fashioned set of ideas, represented in the world by only a few exotic regimes (e.g., Cuba and North Korea) that

"There seems to be still some general difficulty distinguishing between Russians and ex-Communists."

serve as nothing more than good illustrations of its futility. They usually disregard a couple of facts that make it also harmful. For example, unlike Nazism, Communism was never fully rejected. A large number of politicians, academics and ordinary people still have Marxist views of history. Furthermore, unlike the language of Nazism (which is often used, half defiantly and

half compulsively, like dirty language), the language of Communism can be used to reach people who, even though they might have been disenchanted with Communism, had been taught to think in its terms and to understand them as "scientific." The number of people who tend to think this way in the former Communist countries is often underestimated. Finally, the language of Communism is sometimes difficult to distinguish from leftist language. At some moments, it can be used as a bridge to an existent entity of legitimate leftist parties. This does not help the populists in general. However, when it comes to assessing Russia's role, the picture is slightly different.²⁹

The Role of Russia

There seems to be still some general difficulty distinguishing between Russians and ex-Communists. Ex-Communism is still deemed leftist. One can hardly miss noticing that in left-leaning circles (e.g., the European Parliament), the verbal expressions used to characterize present-day Russia are often, if not always, milder than the ones used for a democratic country (e.g., the United States). The massive acceptance of ex-Communist parties (many of whom still keep the habit of looking in the direction of Moscow) in the Socialist International seems to help this tendency.³⁰ At the same time, Putin's party has managed to place itself in the group of conservatives (together with the British Conservatives) in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. It may be a public secret that this "conservatism" is fake. Still, there they are, helping to make the institution's authority shakier.

It is amazing how the present Russian leadership manages the left-right issue. Russia is not Communist anymore, and this makes the country appealing to the nationalist populists in France and Austria. At the same time, it is still carrying something of Communism, appealing to the Left around the world. This is all so illogical that it can be deemed only postmodern, but it makes Russia the perfect candidate for red-brown leadership.

Leadership here does not mean the same that it did twenty-five years ago. With all its resources, Russia can hardly ever be the other power. But these resources cannot be

neglected, no matter how unwisely used. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, made us forget that the main threat to the Western world of liberal democracy is directed not against the U.S. but against Europe. It is true that attacks on democracy are inevitably attacks on the U.S.; it may also turn out that the concerns about a new anti-American century are legitimate.³¹ Still, it is Europe that Russia is trying to pressure. The Nord Stream and the South Stream (supported most ardently by German Social-Democrat Gerhard Schröder, Hungarian Socialist Ferenc Gyurcsány, and Bulgarian ex-Communist Georgy Parvanov) are aimed not only as a way of making Europe more dependent on Russia but also at giving Russia a freer hand to punish one Eastern European state or another. The hand-twisting of the Baltic States, the recent gas fights with Ukraine (which also affected other surrounding Eastern European countries), and the invasion of Georgia all show that the Russian regime is considered within its rights to use all means of pressure and force against its opponents.

It is simply unrealistic to claim that a country should give up such instruments if it has the resources to use them. God forbid that the U.S. have no means to use force or pressure against regimes that pose a danger to it, to its friends, or to freedom and democracy. The question is, then, for what purpose and against whom can this pressure be used. Unfortunately, the answer has already been well-illustrated by Russia's policies since 2000. The targets are often the countries of Eastern Europe, some of which are already EU and NATO members. The purpose is more opaque. It may be described as the understandable desire of a former empire to maintain its control over some of its former satellites, or as an equally understandable wish of a former superpower to at least partly restore its positions. But all this is twice as dangerous when one considers the character of the Russian regime, its opposition to the democratic values and freedom of the West, and its disdain for the rule of law (which has never been tried in Russia). The most visible threat that Russia poses today is not through its missiles, nor even its role as a supplier of gas; it is through exporting lawlessness and political malpractice.

The red-brown pressure on Western European countries can have a considerable destabilizing effect and can only help to provide support for those who overtly attack the West. The capacity to produce such influence is difficult to estimate, because there is no clear way to assess the instruments with which it can be enacted or the extent to which the regime is capable of controlling these instruments. There are three networks that can hardly be clearly distinguished from one another: past international links, links between the former KGB and the Russian mafia, and world terrorism.

Totalitarianism is by necessity aggressive and belligerent. By not fighting it loses its main feature: control. You cannot broker hate without providing an object that has to be attacked sooner or later. (No surprise, then, that the Bulgarian populists called their party *Ataka*, meaning "attack"). However, no country or group of countries can be expected to attack the Western world outright, and there is no need for it. Volunteers—even suicidal ones—are plentiful.

There is a logic which dictates that if you cannot prevent something (e.g., a level of support for terrorists in certain countries), you can at least diminish its efficiency (e.g., by undermining recruitment efforts) by creating an environment in which it is necessary for all to pretend that the event (e.g., the support) does not exist. This strategy currently works in essentially the same way that blood-stained dictators from around the world come to the fall session of the general assembly of the United Nations to preach their devotion to democracy. This is an

achievement—as François de La Rochefoucauld mentions in his maxims, “Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue.” The question is whether the tribute is enough.

The distinction here is clear: as long as 77 or 120 representatives to the general assembly are opposing the West (specifically the U.S.) only on grounds that it has not been sufficiently generous or benevolent or democratic (no matter how absurd that may sound at times), the tribute is sufficient. But what if cooperation among Hamas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, North Korea, and the Bulgarian or Slovak Mafia—and also the Taliban, Skinheads, Iran, and Chavez—grows closer? And what if Russia joins them?

Such a thing could not happen openly, but there are two things that can make the Russian regime and the Eastern European populists a beneath-the-surface complementary factor and increase the intensity of other threats: a common network and a few common formulae that may sound acceptable to all participants in such a diverse group.

Is There the Possibility of a “Red-Brown International”?

Like everything in Soviet Russia, the former Communist Party’s network was financed by the state and was fused with the state. Twenty years later, any parts of it that continue to exist can be much better operated by Russian state structures than by Zyuganov’s party.

The Russian mafia now has no formal connection with the Russian state, but its organizing capacity is almost state-like. Organized crime groups all over Eastern Europe have performed their share of extortion, bullying, bribery, and murder, sometimes under the guidance of the Russian mafia. However, both the initial impetus and the initial financing for all these organizations were provided by the respective Communist Parties and states, especially by their most powerful structures: the KGB and its daughter agencies.³²

Fortunately for the world, like most Communist undertakings, the KGB was fairly inefficient. This might be mostly because, on one hand, practically anything in the Communist state could be used for its goals and, on the other hand, it was not meant to suffer as an institution from the consequences of any failure.³³ Still, the KGB and its daughter agencies were capable of maintaining a network that included both ideological and operational contacts with terrorist, organized crime (mainly drug and arms trafficking), and other fighting groups, even those with ideologies opposite to their own (e.g., the Grey Wolves in Turkey)³⁴ but still ready to cooperate against a common enemy, which was usually defined as global imperialism. (Here, again, the term was used in strictly Leninist sense, meaning the most advanced democratic countries of the West.) The idea that this network just vanished—and the idea that the KGB just vanished—is hardly realistic. The extent to which this network is capable of causing large-scale trouble depends on the attitudes of the players toward wide cooperation and the different populist terrorist, criminal, and red-brown forces.

The issue of the common language is both easier and more complicated than the issue of “technical cooperation.” It is easier because even if there is no common constructive idea, some political language can be organized around shared hate for the common adversary. It is enough to listen to the enthusiasm with which accusations of all sorts are cast against the U.S. The main linguistic components of the language of hate have been known for decades, if not centuries: cynical self-interest, unjust enjoyment of position, and the exploitation and disregard of others’ needs and rights. To make this sound political, a certain scientific flavor needs to be added. With scientific racism out of use, Marxist jargon remains the

only possibility. As previously mentioned, it is well-spread and mastered (whether liked or disliked) by virtue of deliberate education by people in the former Communist world who are around or above the age of forty.³⁵

What makes the language issue more complicated is the need to use it as the basis of mutual understanding for a wide range of people from the left, whose vigilance can thus be diminished. Too much of it does not help, however, nor does its inevitable mixing with nationalist and anti-Communist utterances. Here arises again the special charm of Russia—only Russia can convincingly be both left and right, unfit to be Nazi ever or Communist anymore and still both ex-Communist and neonationalist (to avoid the embarrassment of both the words *Nazi* and *National-Socialist*).

In other words, when talking about a red-brown international, I do not mean an organization, but rather a *modus co-operandi* directed at destabilizing the West by destabilizing a major part of it—Europe. Its common motivation is not a charter but a shared hatred. Its rules are not bylaws, but the logic of opposing the values of the West and accusing it of every sin (e.g., undemocratic behavior, abuse of human rights, heartless exploitation, and support for oppression). Its aim is not overcoming the West's military or economic power, but—in a global world—eroding its cooperation capacities, its efficiency, and its ability to be self-reliant.

The Role of Chavez

Populism needs fresh blood: the Soviet Union's Komsomol, Putin's Nashi, Hitler's Jugend, Chavez's Red Shirts, or some skinheads of any kind. It also needs expansion. Militant Islam is expanding, as are skinheads. But what brings in a special fervor is a new prospering country joining the club, capable of influencing others by extending a friendly hand for cooperation and aid. Chavez's Venezuela fills this role, and its capacity to influence nearby countries has proved notorious.

Recently, a military dimension was added to this. Russia and Venezuela's joint military exercises may not pose too much of a threat to the American continent, but, beyond a doubt, they have a symbolic meaning, especially after the Russian invasion of Georgia. This is a good reason to be concerned with Chavez's winning (or stealing?) the referendum, allowing him to run for another term.³⁶

The Contemporary Perspective: Gas and the Financial Crisis

All of these concerns seem less important at a moment when the price of gas and oil has dramatically decreased, which inevitably affects the ability of either Russia or Venezuela to exert influence. For the time being, however, Russia has managed to score a new point. The conflict with Ukraine on gas prices that blocked the flow of this valuable commodity to Europe does not positively affect Russia's reputation. Putin evidently does not expect or worry about admiration; the invasion of Georgia confirmed this. However, the effect of these events can be measured by the reluctance of the European Union and NATO to enlarge further. The invasion has inevitably increased reluctance.

Wasn't this exactly what Russia desired? Is Ukraine capable of stoically enduring being placed on this isthmus of a middle state between the West and Russia, especially with the raging economic crisis? And if so, for how long? If it gives in to Russia, will this make the life of nearby new democracies easier or even more difficult? Would that have the same effect on the EU?

The Vulnerability of Western Democracy after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Chances of a New Totalitarianism

Neither the red-brown populists of Europe nor their Russian counterparts are going to invade Eastern Europe. They can only make its life—and decision-making—more difficult. The West is a world of particular values. It cannot impose them on people; instead, it needs to make people voluntarily share them. What the Communists called ideological struggle and used for justifying secret policing and concentration camps existed in an exactly opposite form—it was the West that was under the ideological pressure of both Nazism and Communism and eventually managed to intellectually maintain the superiority of its values. However, this competition never ends.

The new populist wave as it can be best traced in Russia and the new democracies is the most important expression of the red-brown phenomenon. Combining Nazi and Communist ideas, it provides a platform for attacking the values of the West. It also serves the role of shifting popular attention off of the political agenda of the new democracies inside the countries by introducing a language best spoken by them and by the ex-Communist parties (which are often subservient to Russia, although less overtly anti-Western). This gives the ex-Communist parties new legitimacy and facilitates their integration into the European and international socialist structures. Of course, they go there with their inherited values.³⁷ Sooner or later this may also affect the agenda of the European Union. Even now, it makes flights to Guantanamo Bay a much more important—or at least more lasting—topic than raids into Georgia.

Repeating accusations against the West from within serves a role. It is the scale that matters. If new populists, ex-Communists, and a few socialists come and voice the same accusations, their chances to create confusion are considerably increased.

We can hardly imagine the West invaded. But can we imagine it eroding? A West that disintegrates or feels as if it is disintegrating or at least looks like it is disintegrating—can this be the aim of the postmodern totalitarianism? And can Eastern European populism give us a clue as to how this end might be pursued in the future?

NOTES

1. Ivan Krastev, "NATO in the Age of Populism," Riga papers, NATO Summit—Riga, Latvia, November 28, 2006.

2. I use the term *Eastern Europe* instead of the more popular *Eastern and Central Europe*, because no matter what the differences among the countries that joined or aim to join North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union are, the similarities associated with the shared Communist history and legacies are unfortunately more telling. Furthermore, the reintroduction of the term *Mittel-Europa* confuses the discussion by charging it with clash-of-civilization connotations.

3. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolutions in Europe: In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Warsaw* (New York: Time Books, 1990).

4. Bulgaria was the only country in Europe that managed to save about 50,000 Jews from deportation to Hitler's death camps by popular and institutional effort, and it ended the war with a larger Jewish population than it had had at the beginning.

5. John Lukacs, *Democracy and Populism: Fear & Hatred* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 36.

6. Sorin Antohi and Vladimir Tismeneanu, eds., *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000).

7. Contrary to the generally accepted notion, Communism was not alien to strong nationalist and ethnocentrist tendencies, even though the Communist regimes manifested an obligatory flavor

of Russocentrism because of their slavish subservience to Moscow. It is enough to mention the ridiculous claims that all major scientific discoveries had first been made by congenial Russian peasants. Communist xenophobia was not as easy to detect when it was disguised as class phobia. However, from Stalin's ethnic displacements during and after World War II via the anti-Semitic trials around Eastern Europe in the 1950s, to the persecutions of the Bulgarian Turks in the 1980s, the Communist regimes were ready to forget internationalism (which was designed to work on a purely anti-class and thus anti-Western level) and resort to violent imposition on the ethnically and culturally different.

8. Umberto Eco, "UR-Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995.
9. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).
10. Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Reiner, 2000), 16.
11. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).
12. Values and perception of normalcy are also skewed and stimulate emotional satisfaction by being under attack or having wounds inflicted. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 99-100.
13. Romania Mare was reduced to 3.15 percent during the 2008 elections, and, for the time being, has no representation in either the national or the European Parliament. However, it would be rather premature to claim that the Romanian populist movement has been defeated. The plummeting popularity of its leader, Vadim Tudor, may simply result in the rise of another leader or populist party.
14. These actions show a tendency typical of junior populists in countries striving for European accession; they often try to prove their right to be European, even as they claim to be anti-European. This only betrays the deep sense of inferiority behind their exploits.
15. Jacques Rupnik, "The Populist Backlash in East-Central Europe in Democracy and Populism in Central Europe," in *Democracy and Populism in Central Europe*, ed. Martin Butora (Bratislava: IVO, 2007), 162.
16. Karl Olaf Lang, "Populism in 'Old' and 'New' Europe: Trends and Implications," in *Democracy and Populism in Central Europe*, 127-30.
17. Tatyana Vaksberg, *Milosevic and the Tribunal* (Sofia, Bulgaria: CIELA, 2008)
18. Philip Dimitrov, *Jumping into the Atlantic* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003).
19. Yeltsin's attempt to revive the old Russian imperial approaches in 1993-95 with the doctrines of the Orthodox Arch, the Pan-Slavic Community, and the Byzantino-Slavic Cultural Space should not be forgotten. The first attempt recurred in Russian political discourse almost until the 1996 elections, when Western, and especially American, help was eventually estimated as still crucial.
20. Ronald Azmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 20-29.
21. For a nice effort to present reality while avoiding harsh terms, see Thomas Magstadt, *Contemporary European Politics: A Comparative Perspective* (Belmont, CA: Thomson / Wadsworth, 2007).
22. Mazeikiu Nafta, the sole oil refining company in the Baltic states, is one such example.
23. Letter from Reporters Without Borders to President Barack Obama, published on July 3, 2009. <http://www.rsf.org/Reporters-Without-Borders-Letter.html>. It reads, "Russia is currently ranked 141st out of 173 countries in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. According to our research, at least 20 journalists have been killed in connection with their work since Vladimir Putin became president in March 2000. The latest victim was local newspaper editor Vyacheslav Yaroshenko, who died on 29 June of injuries received in April."
24. A great deal has been written on the importance of the party in a totalitarian regime. This is beyond doubt for the Nazi Party and Soviet Communist regimes, but the party did not have the same significance in fascist Italy. Putin's party should not be deemed insufficient. The efficiency of the youth organization Nashi has never been questioned.
25. Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 22, 124-25.
26. Ibid. Friedrich and Brzezinski's definition of *Communism* and *Nazism* include two more elements: state terror and near-complete monopoly of the effective use of all weapons of armed combat. However, I tend to believe that times have changed and, just as the impact of Internet has altered the character of media control, state-sponsored lawlessness tolerates some weaponry in the

hands of criminal groups, which serves as terror substitute; there is no SA (Hitler's Sturmabteilung), just organized crime that can be crushed more legitimately if needed.

27. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

28. I have not seen a recent study on the linguistic aspects of Putinism. However, I have experienced, at democracy-promoting conferences, a complete, overwhelming divergence between the language of Eastern European and some Russian participants.

29. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 116-20.

30. Some of the ex-Communist parties in Eastern Europe have both historical and strong personal links with Russia. One telling example is Bulgaria, where the leadership of what is now the Socialist Party includes a number of children and grandchildren of former Communist leaders who have lived and studied in Russia and have strong Russian family connections.

31. Ivan Krastev, "Introduction," *The Anti-American Century*, ed. Ivan Krastev and Alan McPherson (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 1-7.

32. Khristo Khristov, *The Secret Life of Picadilli* (Sofia, Bulgaria: CIELA, 2008), 57-63.

33. Momchil Metodiev, *The Role of State Security in the Communist State* (Sophia, Bulgaria: CIELA, 2008), 141.

34. It is still disputed whether the Bulgarian KGB had direct involvement in the assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II. What is not disputed is that Mehmet Ali Agca, the shooter and a member of the Gery Wolves, was visiting Bulgaria and that terrorists like him were welcomed by the Bulgarian KGB.

35. The frequent use of Communist clichés by prominent democratic leaders in the new democracies could be the subject of a separate study.

36. Alen MacPherson, "Anti-Americanism in Latin America and the Caribbean," in Krastev and McPherson, *The Anti-American Century*, 49-76. Curiously enough, as late as 2007 some still claimed that there were no political prisoners in Venezuela. Examples of political prisoners include Nixon Moreno, who still hides in the Papal Nunciatura in Caracas, after being accused of rape despite being miles away at the time, and Eligio Cedeño, a financier accused and imprisoned for supporting the opposition. Still, the Chavez regime generally is treated as if it was not clearly totalitarian.

37. A good example of this trend is a book by the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, (ex-Communist) Sergey Stanishev, entitled *Why Are We Socialists* (2008). In a bold combination, he put the names of international terrorists and political mass killers (e.g., Che Guevara and Georgi Dimitrov) together with nineteenth-century Bulgarian national liberation figures (e.g., Hristo Botev and Tonka Obretenova) and leaders of the contemporary European socialist movement (e.g., Tony Blair and José Manuel Baroso), and no acting European politician (to my best knowledge) expressed the slightest indignation.