Backlash in East-Central Europe? What Happened to the Promise of 1989?

On February 27, 2015, John Feffer, the director of Foreign Policy in Focus at the Institute for Policy Studies, gave a talk that was part of the European Union Center’s Jean Monnet lecture series and co-sponsored by REEEC entitled “Backlash in East-Central Europe: What Happened to the Promise of 1989?” As the title of his lecture suggests, he attempted to explain the disillusionment with the post-socialist system that is taking place in several countries of East-Central Europe, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and the successor states to the former Yugoslavia. Many of these countries are now members of the European Union and NATO. In terms of economic growth and democratization, the post-1989 transformations have been remarkable. Yet many in the region – politicians and everyday citizens alike – perceive the promises of 1989 as unrealized, and there is widespread dissatisfaction with the current system. In the face of broadly emerging Euroscepticism, some leaders – most prominently Viktor Orban, Prime Minister of Hungary – have blatantly acted to undo aspects of the post-1989 transition to economic and political liberalism.

Mr. Feffer attempted to put these developments in context. He had traveled to the region in 1990, and interviewed over 250 local leaders and activists on the changes that were happening, specifically concerning the Roma, women and the workplace, and Yugoslavia. In order to gauge public perceptions of change, he traveled back to the region in 2012-13 as an Open Society Fellow to re-interview those with whom he had originally spoken, as well as many new people from civil and political society.

Mr. Feffer began his lecture with two stories illustrating contradictory experiences during the transition from communism. One was of Bogdan from Poland, who experienced a typical progression of shock, adjustment, and prosperity – or the “Golden Age” of the post-transition period. Mr. Feffer countered Bogdan’s story with that of Miroslav from Bulgaria, who had been a minority rights activist but left the country after facing extreme political isolation and disillusionment with the transition. Together, their stories create a picture of two co-existing worlds in today’s East-Central Europe – one of prosperity and a successful transition to economic/political liberalism, the other of widespread disillusionment and dissatisfaction complemented by strong anti-liberal trends.

Several factors indicate this latter world, which Feffer referred to as the “non-Golden Age.” One factor consists of public opinion polls, in which people say that their experience is worse today than it was under communism. There are also problems associated with mass emigration from these countries, often of the young and educated (i.e., those most capable of enacting further change). Coinciding with these trends is the rise of intolerant nationalistic parties, who take advantage of disillusionment in the region. Mr. Feffer lastly described the new push towards “illiberal democracy,” in which some countries have seen polar transitions from liberal ideas and parties towards models based on Russia or China.

If the above serve as indicators for what has happened, the following attributes of the transition...
help contextualize the situation that exists now. Mr. Feffer described disappointment (i.e., failed expectations), economic hardship (i.e., shock and unemployment), justice deferred (i.e., neglect of rule of law and immunity to those who benefited from insider privatization), and political backlash (i.e., a leftist critique of economics mixed with far right politics). Mr. Feffer argued that the left has been largely discredited in the region today because of its communist connections and conduct after 1989, while those from the far right have become the main actors on a stage of bad economics and politics. One such example is the rise of anti-Islamism in the region. Those who are not necessarily racist still often support overtly racist parties because of other unrelated hardships.

Even though most of the countries in the region are now full members of the EU, Euroscepticism is on the rise. Superficial images of progress (e.g., infrastructure development and EU membership itself) belie local disenchantment with the European Union and the perception that the expected benefits of EU membership have not manifested. Another important point Mr. Feffer made is that many of these countries are relatively conservative, and therefore, their stance on issues such as women’s and gay rights lead Western Europe to regard them as fostering “social illiberalism.”

Mr. Feffer did not try to argue that the liberal project has completely failed in East-Central Europe because the people there now have a degree of agency which they previously lacked. Rather, he suggested that there were flaws in the liberal project to begin with – even with Poland, considered the EU’s success story. In Poland, Mr. Feffer learned from his interviews that even those who favored the Balcerowicz Plan of rapid liberalization still admitted that the plan should have paid more attention to those left behind. Those who were left behind the most in the region were the Roma. Mr. Feffer described their situation as simply being a process of “uninterrupted shock,” consisting of widespread discrimination and extremely high unemployment.

However, Mr. Feffer concluded by arguing that these trends – disillusionment, economic problems, and a return to conservatism – are ultimately not peculiar to East-Central Europe. Instead, he saw them occurring throughout Europe, especially concerning debt issues and austerity. Furthermore, Euroscepticism and disaffection with politics are also happening in Western Europe, not just in the former socialist states. He described those sentiments in terms of a “pendulum swing.” Whereas there was wide support for liberalism in the 1990s, the pendulum now swings the opposite way and will likely shift again in the future. This was his larger argument, but the trends have been particularly acute in the places where a significant many perceive the promises of 1989 and the post-socialist transition to be currently unrealized.

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