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Between elite and people: Europe's black hole

▶ Ivan Krastev

4 - 8 - 2006

The elites dream of limiting the people's voting rights. The people dream of revenge on the elites' misrule and corruption. Ivan Krastev sees in central Europe's strange new politics a crisis of democracy itself.

"New Europe" is no longer a miniature version of the United States. It has become instead "little France". In the first instance, this does not mean that east-central Europeans have suddenly shifted their romantic affections or reoriented their foreign policies. It is rather that new **Europe** – the bright formation designated (and championed) by Donald Rumsfeld on the eve of the Iraq war to connote the ex-communist states that were combining market economics with robust foreign-policy attitudes – more and more *looks* like **France**: messy, unhappy, unpredictable, anti-liberal, its politics dominated by left-wing populists and far-right nationalists.

True, there are also differences. In France, pensioners are beneficiaries of the status quo, and so never protest; in central Europe, pensioners are the losers and so protest all the time. Moreover, in Paris almost everyone is frightened by the invasion of the fabled **Polish plumber**, while in Sofia or Warsaw the public is indifferent or at least less hostile to the invasion of the French banker.

Slovakia's success and failure

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The formation of the grand populist coalition in **Poland** after the elections of September-October 2005 was an early-warning signal that something strange and unexpected is taking place in central European politics. It has sounded even more loudly with the appointment on 14 July of Jaroslaw Kaczynski – twin brother of the president, Lech Kaczynski – in place of Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz as prime minister, joining Roman Giertych (minister of education) and other populists in the cabinet.

The Slovak election on 17 June 2006 and the formation of a new government in Bratislava are an indication that what happened in Poland was not an accident of Polish eccentricity, but a definite trend. The cabinet formed there (and on 4 August ratified by **parliament**) as result of post-election manoeuvring – an unbelievable and unbearable **coalition** of Robert Fico's moderate populists, Jan Slota's extreme nationalists and former president Vladimir Meciar's Meciarists – is an illuminating example of the new "French" revolution that is underway in central Europe.

For the last eight years, Slovakia has been the European Union's favourite success story. It was as inspiring as the story of Ireland's "Celtic tiger" success, but arguable even richer in dramatic twists and surprising happy endings.

First, Europe's power of attraction mobilised Slovak society and liberated the country from Meciar's authoritarian rule.

Second, **Mikulas Dzurinda's** social-democratic government – the one voted out in June – was the best government Brussels could dream of. It introduced the flat tax; it managed to attract more foreign direct investment per capita than any of its post-communist neighbours. The government was pro-European, pro-market and pro-constitution. Slovak diplomacy, under the banner of the European Union, even managed to negotiate the birth of independent Montenegro. All this is not a bad record for a country that found its way to independence only in **1993**.

Ivan Krastev is chair of the **Centre for Liberal Strategies** in Sofia, Bulgaria. He served as the **executive director** of the International Commission on the Balkans, chaired by Giuliano Amato

Also by Ivan Krastev in openDemocracy:

"We are all Brits today: Timothy Garton Ash's *Free World*" (September 2004)

"Ukraine and Europe: a fatal attraction" (December 2004)

"The European Union and the Balkans: enlargement or empire?" (June 2005)

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"The new Europe: respectable populism, clockwork liberalism" (March 2006)

"The end of the 'freedom century'" (April 2006)

"The energy route to Russian democracy" (June 2006)

Then, after all these miracles, Slovak voters returned to power the two parties – nationalists and Meciarists – that in the mid-1990s had turned Slovakia into a beer-drinking version of Belarus. Not such a happy ending after all.

It is not difficult to find reasons – high **unemployment** and rising social inequality among them – for why pro-European liberal reformists lost the election. It is more difficult to explain why populists and semi-fascists were the only available alternative. Is something wrong with Slovakia and central Europe – Or could it be that something is wrong with democracy?

On the same day **Robert Fico** formed his government, the Slovak constitutional court announced that a Slovak citizen had asked the court to annul the general election. The claimant declared that the republic has failed to create a "normal" system of elections and has therefore violated citizens' constitutional right to be governed wisely. In the eyes of the claimant an electoral system that can lead to a motley coalition such as the new Slovak government could not be "normal".

The lone Slovak appellant has a point. The right to be governed wisely can contradict the right to vote. This is what always made liberals nervous about democracy. Indeed, superstitious minds familiar with the work of the influential 19th-century liberal **Francois Guizot** (1787-1874) might suspect that he had been reincarnated in the figure of the Slovakian citizen who demanded answers from the constitutional court.

It was Guizot and his colleagues, "the doctrinaires", who used all their eloquence to argue that democracy and good governance can coexist only under a regime of limited suffrage. In their view the real sovereign is not the people, but reason. So, voting should be discussed in terms of capacities rather than rights. In the 19th century, capacity was translated as property or education; only those with the right education or enough property could be trusted with the power to vote.

The elites vs the people

The modern successors of Francois Guizot will find it more complicated to define capacity. Almost everybody is at least partially educated and at the same time many people are reluctant to disclose all their property. In these circumstances, the only way to guarantee that reason will be sovereign is to introduce an electoral system where only those who speak English (or at least French) as well as their native language have the right to vote. Under such a system Robert Fico would never have become Slovakia's prime minister, and citizens' right to be governed wisely would not have been violated.

Who could seriously protest such restrictions? English and French are, after all, the official languages of the European Union. (Moreover, do you know anybody who does not speak English and who is rational at the same time?)

The paradox of current European politics is best captured in the observation of **Stephen Holmes**, law professor at New York University, who notes that the critical question is: "How is it possible to have elites that are legitimate globally and locally at the same time?" European politics is failing to find the answer. No wonder that, especially after what happened in Poland and Slovakia, it takes courage and imagination today to be a Euro-optimist.

It is perverse but true – in this age of democracy, elites in Europe are secretly dreaming of a system that will deprive irresponsible voters from the power to violate the right of wisdom. At the same time most citizens are convinced that they have the right to vote but not the right to influence decision-making.

In this sense, central Europe today is not just "little France", but – even more sobering – "little France in 1847", before the great wave of national-popular revolution in **1848**. In 2006, the major protagonists of European politics are elites dreaming of a politically-correct form of limited suffrage, and people convinced that they *already* live under a regime of limited suffrage.

The new **populist majorities** perceive elections not as an opportunity to choose between policy options but as a revolt against privileged minorities – in the case of central Europe, elites and a key collective "other", the **Roma**. In the rhetoric of populist parties, elites and Roma are twins. Neither is like us; both steal and rob from the honest majority; neither pays the taxes that it should pay; and both are supported by foreigners – and Brussels in particular.


In this **pattern** of political life, where any initiative is conceptualised and labelled either as corruption or as populism, the only way for governments to gain legitimacy is by declaring a war – in this case, a war on Brussels.

The outcome is politics where populists are becoming openly anti-liberal, and elites are becomingly secretly anti-democratic. What central Europe is lacking is genuine reformism: the kind that is responsive to the demands of the people without falling victim to populist primitivism. This gaping black hole in the national politics of the member-states, more than anything else, threatens the European project today.

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Eurozine


Read on!




Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848–1851* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) (US) (UK)


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