Thirtieth Anniversary Issue

JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

January 2020, Volume 31, Number 1 $15.00

Democracy Embattled

Francis Fukuyama ■ *Ivan Krastev* ■ *Yascha Mounk*

Marc F. Plattner ■ *Larry Diamond*

Alina Mungiu-Pippidi ■ *Michele Dunne* ■ *Carl Gershman*

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way

Lilia Shevtsova ■ *Ladan Boroumand*

Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig

Thomas Carothers ■ *Minxin Pei*

Ghia Nodia ■ *Andrew J. Nathan* ■ *Sumit Ganguly*

Laura Rosenberger on This Is Not Propaganda

THE FEAR OF SHRINKING NUMBERS

Ivan Krastev

Ivan Krastev *is chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia and permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. He is a founding board member of the European Council on Foreign Relations and a contributing opinion writer for the* New York Times. *From May to December of 2019, he was a Mercator Senior Fellow. His most recent book is* The Light That Failed: A Reckoning *(with Stephen Holmes, 2019).*

In 1953, following the violent suppression of anticommunist protests in East Berlin, Bertolt Brecht wrote a poem called "The Solution" in which he asked the communist rulers if it would not be "easier" for them "to dissolve the people and elect another."

Electing a government is what people do in a democracy, but there have been those rare moments when a government has elected the people. Europe is now facing one of those moments. The combination of population decline, economic insecurity, and massive migrant flows—into Europe from the outside and between European countries—could dramatically change the politics of European nation-states and the ways in which governments try to shape those politics. As David Miller has asked, "Should we encourage immigrants to join our societies, or try to keep them out?" Moreover, "If we are going to take some in but refuse others, how should we decide which ones to accept?"[1]

Demography is hardly a new subject for politicians or political theorists. Until recently, however, the relationship between democracy and demography was usually thought of in Malthusian terms. Would there be too many people and not enough resources, leading to war, chaos, and political instability? Pointing to "youth bulges"—societies brimming with masses of young people—was a way to explain both the specter of instability that haunted authoritarian regimes and the difficulties that beset fragile democracies struggling to achieve consolidation.

The demographic shock voiced in parts of Europe today is radically different. It is caused by political fears of demographic decline,

Journal of Democracy Volume 31, Number 1 January 2020

depopulation, and a widening gap in opportunities and social attitudes between metropolitan centers and outlying areas. Not only anxiety about migration but anxiety about population implosion is at the heart of right-wing populism's rise in Europe. Demographic anxiety plays a role in the spread of xenophobia and in campaigns against the rights of women and sexual minorities. Right-wing populists fear that their ethnic groups are dying, and place the blame on decadent liberal culture.

The clash between liberalism and illiberalism in Europe today is a contest between two contrasting ideas of the "people" that various governments want to elect.

In a democracy, numbers matter. When numbers change, power changes hands. The democratic narrative insists that power changes hands because voters change their minds. But in reality, power may also change hands when the population changes. This could be because a new generation with strong collective preferences comes of age, as happened in the Western democracies in the 1960s and 1970s. It could also be because a sizeable group of new voters joins the polity and reshapes it. This is what happened in many countries when universal suffrage was introduced. It is also what Israel experienced in the wake of the Cold War, when numerous Jews arrived from the former Soviet Union to become Israeli citizens. Central and Eastern Europe has seen yet another form of this phenomenon. Millions of people have moved away, mostly to the West, and liberal political forces in Central and Eastern Europe have seen their power drop, as so many of their voters are among those who have left.

The fear of being outnumbered is deeply rooted in politics. This fear is particularly strong in democratic politics, where it means being outvoted. There, what matters most is to be a majority, which is why the imagined electoral preferences of newcomers are always weighed heavily when a government must decide whether or not to give them political rights at a particular historical moment.

The way in which the shrinking ethnocultural majorities of today will try to preserve their power and identity in the face of population decline and increasing migration will go far toward defining the future character of European democracy, and it could affect the survival of democratic regimes. The clash between liberalism and illiberalism in Europe today is a contest between two contrasting ideas of the "people" that various governments want to elect. Liberalism is a vote for an inclusive body politic representing the diverse nature of modern societies. Illiberalism is an exercise in democratic majoritarianism for the purpose of preserving the ethnic character of national democracies. In this sense, the political divide in Europe is not merely a split between East and West, but

runs through every political community. In the East, however, government after government today is practicing democratic majoritarianism and trying to keep power in the hands of a single ethnic group.

Europe's "Demographic Bulimia"

In his 1994 book *Civil Wars: From L.A. to Bosnia,* Hans Magnus Enzensberger defines "demographic bulimia" as the bottled-up panic triggered by the fear "that too many and too few people could simultaneously exist in the same territory"—too few of us and too many of them.[2] Europeans look around the world and see their share of the global population plummeting, while non-Europeans have been migrating to Europe in large numbers. By 2040, runs one prediction, a third of the population of Germany will not have been born there. In 2019, writes Stephen Smith, people of African descent living in Europe numbered about nine-million. By 2050, he continues, there could be "some 150 to 200 million African-Europeans—counting immigrants and their children" if a "sustained African migratory wave" occurs as people move north from a highly (and increasingly) populous Africa to a far less populous Europe.[3]

European life expectancies continue slowly to increase even as fertility rates remain below replacement levels. The upshot is population loss. Italy's 2015 birth rate was the lowest seen since the formation of the state in 1861. In Poland in 2015, two-hundred schools closed for lack of children. The birth rate of Europeans is among the lowest ever recorded in any major region of the world. Some governments are offering inducements to have more children, but young Europeans worried about the threat of climate change or the reality of starvation elsewhere on the planet question these efforts.

The picture is especially bleak in Central and Eastern Europe, where fertility is low and outmigration is high. The UN estimates that since the 1990s, the nations of this region have lost about 6 percent of their collective population, or about eighteen-million people. If these people formed a country, it would be nearly as populous as the Czech Republic and Hungary combined.

Even as voting majorities in many European democracies demand restrictions on the numbers of foreigners who are allowed to enter, Europe needs immigrants. There will be no way to maintain fiscal health and living standards—or maybe even to care physically for aging Europeans—without them.

In the absence of large-scale immigration, European welfare states are doomed. Could European democracy survive their collapse? In 1965, persons over the age of 65 in EU member states were present in numbers equaling 15 percent of those aged 20 to 64. In 2015, that figure had almost doubled to 29 percent. Pronatalist policies, even if partly successful, cannot reverse this trend, nor can the return of some recent

emigrants. Pondering these demographic realities, U.S. social critic Christopher Caldwell has observed,

> Italy has a choice between keeping the population looking the way it did fifty years ago and keeping the landscape and the social structure looking the way they did fifty years ago. . . . immigration, though not ideal, may be the most practical way of keeping Italy looking like Italy.[4]

Demographic anxieties are fueled, in Europe and elsewhere, not only by demographers' projections but also by public impressions of ethnic ratios and dynamics. These can be inaccurate. As Suketu Mehta reports:

> A recent study found that Americans, as an overall average, think the foreign-born make up around 37 percent of the population; in reality, they are only 13.7 percent. . . . The French think that one in three people in their country is Muslim. The actual number is one in 13.[5]

Europeans still numerically predominate in Europe, but they are starting to imagine a future in which they are persecuted minorities and democracy could become their worst enemy. *The Great Replacement,* the 2011 book by French political thinker and right-wing activist Renaud Camus, is a classic expression of this fear.[6] In his political imagination, the "indigenous population" of Europe is already a threatened minority on the cusp of being totally replaced by immigrant-invaders.

Defining migration as invasion, right-wing populists dream of restoring a society in which men are citizen-soldiers ready to die for the fatherland while women are citizen-mothers ready to bear as many children as the motherland needs. A study published by Germany's Bertelsmann Foundation in late 2018 revealed that those nostalgic for the past are more likely to vote for far-right parties.[7]

As the Israeli scholar Liav Orgad points out in his important book *The Cultural Defense of Nations,* "never in human history has so much attention been paid to human movement."[8] In 2019, there were 272 million migrants in the world, 51 million more than in 2010. At present, 3.5 percent of the world's population consists of migrants. In 2010, it was 2.8 percent. The expectation is that these figures will rise.

As George Steiner once wrote, "whereas trees have roots, men have legs," and people use their legs to move to what they see as better places where they will be able to live better lives. According to the World Bank, migrants who move from lower- to higher-income countries typically earn three to six times more than they did at home. If you are from an underdeveloped country and you seek a secure economic future for your children, the best thing you can do is to make sure they are born in Canada, the United States, or the European Union. The political impact of this massive movement of people is not easy to predict, but it has already captured the political imagination of societies.

It is also important to keep in mind that migration anxiety and the re-

turn of nationalism are taking both liberal and conservative forms. In the liberal version, the fear is that the inflow of people from nondemocratic countries could erode the democratic civic culture of host societies. Will the new immigrants respect Europe's commitments to gender equality and same-sex marriage? What will be the view of the Holocaust held by migrants from the Middle East who think of Jews less as victims than as aggressors? Will European secularism be preserved in the face of the religious beliefs of many new Europeans? Is migration across borders contributing to higher social inequality in Western societies?

In the conservative version of the new nationalism, the fear is that immigrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds will destroy the national identity and Christian character of host societies. Conservatives might cite the development economist Paul Collier, who observes that "in the absence of policies to the contrary, immigrants tend to cluster," and wonders whether tightly clustered migrant communities will begin to think of "bringing their institutions with them" from the old country to the new.[9]

In the twentieth century, revolutions, world wars, and waves of ethnic cleansing changed the ethnic map of Europe. All these traumas and upheavals left behind a Europe whose states and societies had become *more* rather than less ethnically homogenous. In the twentieth century, ethnic homogeneity was viewed as a way to reduce tensions, increase security, and strengthen democratic trends. Minorities were viewed with mistrust.

This outcome of ethnic homogenization is particularly visible in Central and Eastern Europe. In 1939, almost a third of Poland's people were something other than ethnic Poles (there were substantial German, Jewish, Ukrainian, and other minorities). Today, ethnic Poles account for more than 95 percent of Polish citizens. In this corner of Europe, many people see ethnic homogeneity as essential to social cohesion. Yet the twenty-first century is bringing more diversity. If the twentieth century in Europe was the century of unmixing, the twenty-first century is one of remixing. Behind the migration challenge that Central and East European countries see themselves facing is an intellectual one: In order to deal successfully with migration, these societies will have to unlearn what many of them still see as the twentieth century's major lesson—that ethnic and cultural diversity is a security threat.

The Cultural Rights of Majorities

In a democracy, the most existential collective right is the right to exclude. While democratic regimes rightly praise themselves for their capacity to include diverse social, ethnic, and religious groups in public life and in political decision making, democracy is preconditioned on the right of the democratic political community to decide who can and who cannot be a member. How you define the right to exclude is what distinguishes liberal from illiberal democracies.

In most of Western Europe, the response to the changing ethnic and cultural composition of societies has been to open the political community to migrants while adopting immigration and naturalization policies designed to protect the cultural identity of the national community. Most West European governments are impressed by the immigration policies of countries such as Australia and Canada. These countries seek young and highly educated legal immigrants without regard to cultural, ethnic, or racial origin, and try to integrate them in ways that are consistent with the host country's fundamental civic values and cultural makeup. As Orgad argues,

> Liberal democracies . . . should stop beating about the bush and directly tackle the question of majority rights. Under which circumstances (if any), and based on what justifications, can majorities legitimately defend their cultural essentials by using immigration law?[10]

In the second half of the twentieth century, the assumption was that the rights are for the minorities, whereas ethnic and cultural majorities, with numbers on their side, can defend their interests and identities at the ballot box. The major impact of the current fear of shrinking numbers is that this assumption is no longer taken for granted. The opening of West European democracies to migrants, particularly from outside Europe, is now being accompanied by growing voter pressure to create legal guarantees for the preservation of the cultural makeup of society.

Coinciding with this pressure has been a decline in the capacity of EU member states to integrate migrants. In David Miller's sharp observation, "People are both less sure of what it means to be French or Swedish, and less sure about how far it is morally acceptable to acknowledge and act upon such identities."[11]

European liberal democracies embrace the protection of majority rights as the way to manage diversity at a time when a growing number of migrants are coming from outside Europe and Western societies no longer trust the virtues of multiculturalism.

In a Central and Eastern Europe populated by small nations with traumatic histories, demographic anxiety—not surprisingly—has taken the form of a fear of ethnic disappearance. It is not the first time that East Europeans have feared the nightmare scenario that their languages and cultures will become extinct. Czechs, for instance, were known to fear in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that they would all end up speaking German. The reasons why the Czech language did not disappear are numerous, among them the massive movement of Czech-speaking peasants to cities starting in the second half of the nineteenth century and the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia after the First World War.

Today, nobody thinks that the existence of a Czech or a Hungarian state is threatened—no Habsburg Empire or German Reich or Soviet Bloc is going to swallow them up—but some Czech and Hungarian vot-

ers do insist that their respective national cultures are again in danger of extinction. Populist leaders in the region not only capitalize on these fears but constantly fuel them. The refugee crisis of 2015 was the best example of how the fear of migrants can lead to public hysteria.

The illiberal project in Europe, associated with the current governments of Hungary and Poland, is about preserving the ethnic state in rapidly diversifying societies. The European illiberalism of the twenty-first century is not the second coming of nineteenth- or twentieth-century European nationalism. It is not about gathering all Bulgarians, Hungarians, or Poles into their own respective territorial political entities. Earlier nationalism was territorially expansionist, but it was mostly civic in nature and also assimilationist: Hungarian nationalism, for instance, wanted to turn non-Hungarians living in Hungary into good Hungarian citizens. You could compensate for the lack of Hungarian blood in your veins by proving ready to sacrifice your life for Hungary. The new ethnic politics has to do more. It must not only make non-Hungarians Hungarian, but also persuade young Hungarians not to leave the mother country and convince those who have left in the last few decades to come back.

In order to achieve this objective, illiberal governments demonize the West as a decadent land with no future, and they promise to their own citizens a happy land with no foreigners. But economic reality will not allow Central and East European illiberals to keep all foreigners outside the city walls. So governments in places such as Poland and Hungary promise that migrants (so long as they do not come from Muslim countries) can live—and, more importantly, work—inside the walls of the city, but will not be allowed to set foot in city hall. Foreigners will receive economic and social rights but not political rights. Citizenship is seen as a privilege that comes with ethnic belonging.

The irony is that Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, squeezed between his economy's increased demand for foreign labor and his government's promise of "Hungary for Hungarians," is doing exactly what he has criticized Germany for doing in the 1970s. In imitation of a policy that Germany regrets today, Orbán has decided to open his country's labor market to foreigners while keeping membership in the body politic closed to them. He has reintroduced, in effect, the German expedient of the *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker). Orbán's hope is that most of these workers, unlike the Turks that Germany brought in to keep the post-1945 *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) going, will not stay in Hungary but will prefer eventually to move on to Germany. Thus Hungary will get foreign workers but no stable ethnic minority comparable to the roughly 2.8 million people of ethnic-Turkish background who now live in Germany.

The preservation of the ethnic state is at the center of the illiberal project. In Orbán's version of illiberal democracy, the communist idea of the one-party state is replaced by the idea of the one-party nation. In the rhetoric of Orbán's government, only by voting for his Fidesz party can Hungarians

express their belonging to the Hungarian nation—the opposition parties are painted as a pack of traitors who threaten the very existence of a sovereign Hungary. Minorities too can best prove their loyalty by voting for Fidesz.

The idea is that only voting for Fidesz can guarantee the survival of Hungarian identity. Under Hungarian electoral law, electoral engineering reinforces ethnic politics. Those whom the government designates as true Hungarians—people of Hungarian ethnic background living in neighboring countries, for instance—are allowed to vote by mail in Hungarian elections. Hungarians who have left the country on their own and currently live in Western Europe, however, can vote only by the more difficult path of visiting Hungarian embassies. Orbán is well aware that these expatriate Hungarians in the West are unlikely to be among his supporters. This is how he is electing the people who then elect him.

New Questions

The Brechtian moment in European politics, when governments get a chance to elect their respective peoples, offers the best lens through which to view the diverging paths of the democratic regimes in the two halves of Europe.

In the West, the cultural question is key: How can liberal democracies integrate newcomers without triggering majoritarian political backlash? In the East, by contrast, the central question is generational, and it is turning young people into a dangerous minority.

At present, young people are a small cohort in Central and Eastern Europe. Low rates of birth and high rates of emigration see to that. Young people lack the numbers to weigh heavily in electoral politics, so they often vote with their feet. At the same time, those who stay home have the most to lose if future-oriented economic policies are not adopted.

The generational disequilibrium caused by graying demographics and government policies against immigration creates a risk that older generations, which are overrepresented in the political system, will block investments in the future (that is, investments that will not directly and immediately benefit them), and in so doing will trigger a new exodus of young people. Governments therefore must persuade older citizens to sacrifice for the future of the country, even if they suspect that their children or grandchildren will not live in that country.

Illiberal democracies dominated by older voters may also be unable to raise the retirement age. This would require a majority to vote against its own immediate interests. Yet if something is not done to keep welfare states solvent, it is hard to see how politicians can keep their promises that Central and East Europeans can continue living only among their own. Shutting immigrants out of political participation could in a few decades produce a situation in which most working people lack the right to vote, while most voting people are beyond working age.

The absence of the large population bloc needed to bring change at the ballot box could explain why younger citizens in the region do not tend to vote much but do turn out for street protests. It may also explain why leaving and not voting is their preferred reaction to an adverse political environment. Young people's focus on environmental issues could also be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to shift society's attention toward long-term problems and to signal that young people speak also on behalf of future generations.

And what can governments do to respond to the generational imbalance? Should they reduce the voting age? Should they let everyone under thirty cast two ballots? Should parents be allowed to cast a vote on behalf of each of their minor children? In a time of demographic anxiety, liberalism and illiberalism represent two different ideas of the "people" that governments want to elect. The illiberal project may look attractive to some, but it is doomed to be self-defeating, and for a simple reason: It will make any countries that pursue it unattractive to their own younger generations.

NOTES

1. David Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 1.

2. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil Wars: From L.A. to Bosnia,* trans. Piers Spence and Martin Chalmers (New York: New Press, 1994), 117.

3. Stephen Smith, *The Scramble for Europe: Young Africa on Its Way to the Old Continent* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 7. See also Noah Millman, "The African Century," *Politico Magazine,* 5 May 2015, *www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/05/africa-will-dominate-the-next-century-117611*.

4. Christopher Caldwell, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 44.

5. Suketu Mehta, "Immigration Panic: How the West Fell for Manufactured Rage," *Guardian,* 27 August 2019, *www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/27/immigration-panic-how-the-west-fell-for-manufactured-rage*.

6. Renaud Camus, *Le grand remplacement* (Paris: Reinharc, 2011).

7. Catherine E. de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann, *The Power of the Past: How Nostalgia Shapes European Public Opinion* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018), *www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/eupinions_Nostalgia.pdf*.

8. Liav Orgad, *The Cultural Defense of Nations: A Liberal Theory of Majority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

9. Paul Collier, *Exodus: How Migration Is Changing Our World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 100, 102.

10. Orgad, *The Cultural Defense of Nations,* 9.

11. David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 165.