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Introduction

What a perfect year to publish a book about the collective-memory roots of the current crisis of liberal democracy in many Eastern European countries! Hindsight is, after all, 2020. The very same history and the very same memory that the distinguished contributors to the first part of this volume invoke to sombrely declare Eastern Europe’s stubborn “otherness” were for decades used to reach precisely the opposite conclusions. Does anybody still remember “the end of history,” the calls to stop treating Eastern Europeans as “client states”¹ through pre-accession conditionality, or the rankings, which declared Poland and Hungary “consolidated democracies” where “democracy is the only game in town”²?

Some of the authors here can, to be sure, legitimately claim that they have always been critical of the European liberal mainstream. But being a persistent critic is a safe position for a thinker: if things go well, you say “wait some more”; if things deteriorate, you triumphantly exclaim: “I told you so!”

The truth is that the populist revolt of the 2010s is yet another dramatic historical turn which the policy-academic consensus failed to anticipate. The comparisons with the similar predictive debacle in the years leading up to 1989 are obvious. In both cases, once the world changed, scholars and policymakers got busy to catch up. The chapters to follow represent an interesting palette of those catch-up efforts: from emphasizing institutional continuity (Artur Nowak-Far) through modest scenario framing (Anton Pelinka and Claus Offe) and targeted policy interventions (Joanna Kurczewska), to calls for an aggressive systemic makeover (a “shock therapy” for the era of populism, György Lengyel, Marcin Król, and Peter Verovšek).

All of the contributors face the fundamental problem embedded in the very idea of exploring the role of history, collective memory, and interests in the current crisis of European democracy: all three of those proposed explanatory variables differ widely across nations, and even more fundamentally between the East and West of Europe. And yet the *outcome* is, in many aspects, remarkably uniform. And when it differs, it does so in ways that our implicit model finds hard to account for.

¹ Heather Grabbe, European Union Conditionality and the. Acquis Communautaire, *International Political Science Review* vol. 23 no. 3 (2002), at 266.

² Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, Toward Consolidated Democracies, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 7 no. 2 (1996).

If the rise of Eastern European populism was, as Claus Offe suggests, the result of the unique experience of the post-communist transition, then why do Orbán and Kaczyński sound so similar to their counterparts from “the old Europe”: Salvini, Hofer, Le Pen, and Farage? If it is all about the collective memory and the “renaissance of sovereignty,” as Pelinka suggests, then why are the Baltic states – the most acutely deprived of their self-determination under the Soviet rule – now arguably the least affected by the anti-EU populism? If liberal democracy is inherently contradictory, as Król argues, then why are some countries so much more successful than others in overcoming those contradictions?

The interest story also evinces serious problems. Take Hungary and Poland. Both countries are governed by remarkably similar governments, ones which solemnly proclaim the primacy of “national interests.” And yet those interests cannot be further apart! Materially, we Poles experienced the most economically successful period in our history after 1989, with the average per capita real GDP growing by nearly 300% in just one generation. Hungarians, by contrast, went through a period of tepid growth, starting as one of the richest nations in Central Europe and being overtaken (again, in per capita terms) not only by Poland, but also by Slovakia. Geopolitically, Poland has every reason to fear Russia and oppose irredentism, while Hungary may naturally be tempted to play with both Moscow and the West and, in the process, flirt with territorial revisionism. In no rational choice model would the two countries be close allies, and yet they are.

Logically, these problems can be solved in one of two ways. On the one hand, we may need to challenge some “conventional wisdoms” about (Eastern and Western) European history, memory, and interests and develop a much more nuanced, granular understanding of each of these concepts. On the other, we may simply need to look beyond the three concepts in our search for explaining Europe’s current turmoil. Either way, the chapters to follow offer a perceptive step in the right direction.