

# JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

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# The Pushback Against Populism

## RECLAIMING THE POLITICS OF EMOTION

*Jarosław Kuisz and Karolina Wigura*

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All liberal democracies are alike; every illiberal democracy is illiberal in its own way. Our riff on the opening line of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is meant to underscore a truth that should perhaps be obvious: Populist politicians are not as similar to one another as their liberal opponents sometimes seem to imagine. Viewed up close, these politicians differ in their governing styles, their political strength, and, last but not least, in their agendas.

It would be too easy, after all, to leap to the conclusion that every populism is the same—a conclusion that lends itself to simple prescriptions. Since populism in its worst forms has been a road to authoritarian rule, equating all populists implies that countries such as Poland or Hungary, in which such politicians have taken power, are lost to democracy. Some commentators extend this line of reasoning to make an even broader claim: that Europe’s postcommunist countries have nothing left to offer to the future of liberal democracy. Central and Eastern Europe, so the argument goes, turns out to be a region where liberalism took hold only temporarily, proved unable to flourish in the postcommunist ecosystem, and finally perished.<sup>1</sup>

This is a fundamental misreading of the drama in this region today. It is true that some postcommunist countries, including our own Poland, have departed from liberal democracy. They have not, however, reached the finish line labeled “authoritarianism.” Comparisons of illiberal populism to such twentieth-century precedents as fascism and communism are seriously flawed. Postcommunist countries where populists are in power have become a “no man’s land,” like the forbidden zone along the Berlin Wall that lay between the denizens of West and East.

These countries are once again “the lands between,” the site of a real political struggle. Populists there feel empowered to remove or subvert

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***Although it is wrong to argue that illiberal populists have attained an unbreakable grip on postcommunist democracies, they have undoubtedly been successful at one thing: creating a dominant narrative about the past three decades.***

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legal constraints at will. Such leaders have taken over state institutions and transformed public media outlets into instruments of propaganda; nationalism is on the rise. At the same time, free elections still decide the future of Central and East European states. Liberal democrats have long since awakened from their long slumber of complacency and are finding much to rally around, particularly when they focus on the local level of politics. Across the region, thousands of citizens have stood up in defense of the liberal order.

Contrary to the assumptions of some analysts, the outcome of these struggles remains very much uncertain. Precisely because Central and Eastern Europe has become a kind of laboratory of illiberal populism, its experience offers valuable lessons for others.

We can formulate effective responses to populists’ rise only if we first understand the reasons for their popularity. It is not enough to be in the right: We have to understand why Viktor Orbán has managed to win three parliamentary elections in a row in Hungary, why Jaroslaw Kaczyński’s Law and Justice (PiS) party has consistently enjoyed support from roughly 40 percent of Poles, why the antiestablishment tandem of President Miloš Zeman and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš is faring so well politically in the Czech Republic, and why Alternative for Germany (AfD) is enjoying its best-ever electoral showings in the regions that were once part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Yet we also need to understand the factors that have enabled triumphs by the political opponents of ruling populists—as when the previously little-known activist Zuzana Čaputová won the 2019 presidential race with a commanding 58 percent of the vote in Slovakia, long dominated by the populist party Smer-SD (Direction–Social Democracy), or when the young mayoral candidate Rafał Trzaskowski crushed a rival from PiS in the first round in Warsaw’s 2018 municipal election.

The case of Central and Eastern Europe suggests that illiberal populism’s effectiveness rests partly on its approach to the past. In postcommunist Europe, liberals lost the battle for the legacy of 1989. To mount an effective challenge to populism, liberals must offer a more convincing narrative about the democratic breakthroughs that took place thirty years ago and the decades of change that followed. Similarly, the popu-

lists have thus far done better than their opponents at promoting their visions of the future. This does not have to remain the case.

The year marking the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain has now come and gone. For many people, the festivities celebrating the beginning of Central and Eastern Europe's democratic transformation were difficult to digest. Although it is wrong to argue that illiberal populists have attained an unbreakable grip on postcommunist democracies, they have undoubtedly been successful at one thing: creating a dominant narrative about the past three decades.

The period of rising prosperity that followed the end of the Second World War in Western Europe, though not without its hardships, has become known in French as *les trente glorieuses* (the great thirty years). The fundamental premise of the populist narrative in postcommunist countries is that the thirty years since 1989 were instead decades of failure—what one might call *les trente honteuses* (thirty years of shame). According to this version, the fall of communism and ensuing political transformation were nothing but a fraud perpetrated by elites: Liberal democracy was a cover for oligarchic dominance, European integration a new form of occupation in which Brussels took the place of Moscow.

Increasingly negative popular assessments of 1989 and its aftermath have affected both political rhetoric and voting patterns in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, the story of transition as failure proved so effective that even opponents of populism began to be convinced. For example, the celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall culminated not in the monumental concert conducted by Daniel Barenboim at the Brandenburg Gate, but in a rush of reflections on what had failed in the German unification process. Numerous commentators recalled the bitter epithet “Kohl-onization,” coined in the 1990s in reference to then-chancellor Helmut Kohl. Their remarks emphasized not unity, but rather the East-West disparities that have persisted to this day in terms of wages, unemployment levels, and so forth.

Arguments of this kind come from voices both to the right and to the left of the post-1989 liberal mainstream, but sometimes from within as well, in a peculiar form of self-criticism. These narratives typically condemn all decisions made after 1989 as soulless, neoliberal, and perhaps simply stupid. During the thirtieth-anniversary celebrations last June in Gdańsk, we were struck by the deeply depressed mood among a significant portion of the dissidents who had come out of the Solidarity movement. Both in private and in public, veterans of 1989 lamented the freedom they saw as having been irreversibly lost with the ascendance of PiS. Some time earlier, one of the intellectual fathers of the transition remarked of his cohort, “We were stupid.” This has since become the common lament of a whole class of Polish liberals who enjoyed influence during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

Even more worrying is how the postcommunist countries are today

seen from the outside. France's Minister for European and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian, speaking in Prague on the thirtieth anniversary of the former Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution, described a "shift from euphoria to doubt" since 1989.<sup>3</sup> Pessimistic assessments of the region often equate the stubborn assault on rule-of-law norms by Kaczyński in Poland, which is indeed going through a serious constitutional crisis, with Zeman's rather creative approach to constitutional law in the Czech Republic, a country where democratic institutions and procedures are still respected. Commentators lump together evidence from these disparate cases to demonstrate that democratic transitions in general have failed. And from here it is but a few steps to the claim that postcommunist countries only pretended to be EU member states worthy of the name, and to calls for narrowing the ranks of members to include only the initial Western core of the European integration project.

The truth is that only illiberal populists thrive on the defeatist view that follows from a total critique of the last thirty years. Wherever such politicians gain power by playing on this attitude, they proceed to use it as a smokescreen for dismantling or coopting independent institutions, the judicial system, and public media outlets. If liberals want to escape this trap, something must fundamentally change in the way they think and talk about the period between 1989 and 2019.

### The Feeling of Loss

We are not suggesting that liberals completely avoid criticizing the past. Such criticism is a necessary first step toward undertaking reforms. But criticism should not be the only aspect to our discussions of 1989. Finding the right approach is by no means easy, for 1989 presents a real conundrum to those who would celebrate it. Viewed from a certain angle, the promise of that revolutionary year was in fact fulfilled. In material terms, Central and East Europeans are living in a better world than ever before. In the history of the region, there has been no precedent for the past thirty years of virtually uninterrupted economic growth, infrastructure development, soaring living standards, and increasing social mobility.

Yet as the twentieth-century philosopher Raymond Aron would remind us, great progress always comes at a great cost.<sup>4</sup> In the postcommunist case, much has been said about the economic upheaval of the early 1990s, which led to job loss on a massive scale as well as to innumerable bankruptcies of firms and entire industries. But the most staggering loss came on a different front. What we mean is the collective loss of familiar habits, the breakup of established relationships, and the destabilization of traditional sources of identity. In German, there is a word for the bizarre social dislocation that accompanied Central and Eastern Europe's democratic transformation: *schleudern*, which also means spinning in a washing machine. Though postcommunist societ-

ies in the transition era were moving toward a better future, they were turned upside down many times along the way. The consequence has been a deep collective feeling of loss. Moreover, the particularities of the postcommunist case notwithstanding, global changes taking place in this period produced strikingly similar experiences in other corners of the world. The year 1989 meant not only, as we often think, the end of the communist era. It also meant accelerating technological advances, the advent of new and transformative forms of communication, soaring standards of living, and rising social mobility. These changes occurred from Athens to Washington and from Istanbul to Amsterdam, and everywhere they had complex consequences.

Liberals, focused on the positive effects of change, were long blind to the sense of loss that it produced. Even worse, they erred seriously by ridiculing this emotion, which is felt across the social spectrum—not only by the so-called losers of the transition, but also by its “winners.” In many Central and East European countries, liberals are paying bitterly at the ballot box for this mistake. Populists, in contrast, have secured political success by engaging effectively with the widespread emotion of loss. Without their ability to connect emotionally to voters, populists’ particular strategies—whether economic tools such as the direct money transfers implemented in Poland, or rhetorical devices such as the framing of refugees as a threat—would not be so politically potent.

Populism appeals to those experiencing loss because it is reactive: Populists position themselves as the defenders of social mores or forms of community under threat from the pressures of a changing world. In Poland, the government constantly reminds voters that it protects the “traditional family”; in the United States, Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election with the slogan “Make America Great Again”; and in the Netherlands, Thierry Baudet of the right-populist Forum for Democracy warns against the erosion of traditional Dutch values. Though these politicians are clearly invoking artificial, idealized versions of the past, they appeal to real emotions and longings. Populist politics translates the vague emotion of loss into more concrete feelings, among them an aversion to strangers, the desire to protect one’s home and family, and so forth.

We do not mean to suggest that illiberal populism should be seen as a useful corrective to the post–Cold War model of liberal democracy. In fact, populist policies and rhetoric have devastating consequences. Yet the populists may have been correct in sensing that a feeling of loss is today the dominant collective emotion. Current research in neuroscience shows why their strategy may have proven so effective. In situations of change, our brains tend to concentrate first and foremost on the costs and dangers. There are obvious evolutionary reasons for this: Seeing and thus avoiding dangers protected humans as a species for thousands of years.<sup>5</sup> Our biology thus poses a political challenge: How do we re-

spond to the emotion of loss that accompanies rapid change without losing faith in liberal democracy? How do we process this emotion without falling into populist thinking that embraces the recent authoritarian past and reflectively rejects inevitable processes of social change?

## The Role of Emotions

Liberals usually discuss emotions in negative terms, and not without reason. Their aversion stems from the many horrific acts that have historically been fueled by collective emotions, whether the racial hatred spread by Germany's National Socialists or the religious and ethnic resentments fanned by politicians during the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. Thus former Polish president Donald Tusk, in one of his last speeches as president of the European Council, argued last year that "emotions and passions, inherent in our nature, are stronger than our attachment to the laws and rules we ourselves have established, and will always be pushing us towards violation and domination."<sup>6</sup> Liberal intellectuals therefore urge a cooling of emotions, if not their complete rejection. For example, theorist Jürgen Habermas advanced the concept of *Verfassungspatriotismus* (constitutional patriotism) as an ideal emotion for Europeans. Based on his description, this "feeling" would be something so intellectual as to practically belong to the sphere of reason. Other scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum, have called for the liberal education of emotions. Socratic pedagogy, as Nussbaum terms it, is supposed to make citizens more imaginative and critical and thus to reduce intolerance, hate, and contempt. Again, this is a strategy that aims at employing reason to eliminate emotions.

We would like to propose a different approach. After all, the subject of emotions is not new in political philosophy. Classical political thinkers from Plato to Montesquieu to Adam Smith all the way to Tocqueville have seen emotions as a necessary element of politics, working together with reason and not in contradiction to it. Philosophers constructed typologies of emotions to show how each one influences collective life. Montesquieu, for example, indicated which emotions can be a basis for despotism, and which for a good republic. Today's theorists could stand to learn from at least one piece of knowledge reflected in this kind of political philosophy: an awareness that the liberal order needs a passionate defense, and not a cold one.

Clearly, not every emotion is suited to serve as an ally of reason; this, too, philosophers have discussed for centuries. Depending on context, feelings of the same basic type can work for or against the civic good. Wise politics is then neither about departing from emotions in general, nor about dividing them into negative and positive. The craft of statesmanship is as much about choosing the emotions to which one appeals wisely, and engaging with them thoughtfully, as it is about creating and enforcing good laws.

What does this mean in practice? Populists have the ability to commune with the emotion of loss, and to translate this vague feeling into clearer ones. True, the emotions they fashion as a result are dangerous: Neither fear and hatred toward strangers and refugees, nor reactionary promises to protect the so-called traditional family or traditional values, are worthy of liberals' praise. Yet understanding the feeling of loss that underlies populism's effectiveness will enable liberals to better chart their own course. They should engage with that emotion and translate it into feelings that will have a positive, rather than a harmful, impact on the community.

Liberals can begin by appealing to people's empathy. Let us reflect on what human beings do when they experience loss in their personal lives. In their beautiful book on bereavement, Colin Murray Parkes and Holly G. Prigerson argue that our lives are all about constant change. We mature and age, we experience successes and failures. All these changes involve both gain and loss. We bid goodbye to old surroundings and gain new ones. The people in our lives come and go, we gain and lose jobs, possessions, and homes, we learn new skills and forget others. But particularly big changes require a special approach. In our private lives, one such change is the departure of our loved ones. Parkes and Prigerson argue that we often treat mourners as people who are ill, telling them to lay down and rest, and that this empathetic reaction eventually helps them to recover.<sup>7</sup>

We would argue that the collective emotion of loss caused by rapid and deep societal change in postcommunist countries is very similar to profound personal grief. Thus, just as empathy is a critical aid for working through personal loss, so too can it help to change the rules of the game in a polarized political community. This is especially so when empathy is directed not only toward those groups with whose causes liberals are traditionally associated, such as ethnic or sexual minorities, but also toward those who are particularly difficult for liberals to understand, such as voters who support populist parties. In postcommunist countries, there is already some evidence that this approach can yield political victories. In Slovakia, Čaputová has highlighted the importance of empathy in her political project. Invoking this emotion allows her to appeal to both sides of her divided country, because it resonates not only with her fellow progressives but also with conservative and religious voters. During her victory speech, she explained how she presented her liberal social stances: "When I talked about these things, for me, this attitude is based on a value that I believe to be very conservative and Christian—empathy and respect for other people. And, for me, this value leads to tolerance and respect."<sup>8</sup> In Poland, Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, the liberal Civic Platform's contender in the upcoming May 2020 presidential election, and Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, a candidate from the agrarian Polish People's Party, are trying out a similar approach. For example, Kosiniak-Kamysz refers often to Jacek Kuroń,

a late Polish dissident who served as minister of labor and social policy in the early postcommunist years and who was legendarily committed to helping those for whom Poland's free-market reforms came at the greatest cost. This helps Kosiniak-Kamysz to communicate with those PiS supporters who are still reeling from the "spinning" of the transition years. If these efforts succeed, they will point to an important lesson about the role of emotions in liberal-democratic politics.

### The Two Faces of 1989

Readers might well ask how this new politics of emotion relates to thinking about economics, geopolitics, ideology, and other issues. In fact, we call not only for a more nuanced engagement with the collective emotions that have arisen as a consequence of social change, but also for a more nuanced story of the past thirty years, one that describes them neither as a complete success nor as a pure failure. As Charles Dickens wrote of the revolutionary year 1789 in *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1989 was "the best of times" and "the worst of times," both a "spring of hope" and a "winter of despair."<sup>9</sup> Liberals' story about the recent past must embrace the many dualities and contradictions that mark the legacy of 1989.

One key divide concerns interpretations of economic change. Many critics in recent years have cast the free-market reforms that were introduced at the start of the 1990s as policies adopted more or less carelessly in a fit of neoliberal enthusiasm. In fact, however, the transformation was hardly characterized by naïve euphoria. When the Polish Communist government sat down with the anticommunist opposition for groundbreaking talks about the country's future in February 1989, the government's official newsreel remarked that given the state's dire economic condition, a surgeon's operating table might be more suited than a round table to the task at hand.<sup>10</sup>

The reforms that were eventually enacted—called the Balcerowicz Plan after the finance minister in Poland's first postcommunist government—have been the subject of bitter controversy ever since. But few remember that candidates were hardly lining up for the finance post. Leszek Balcerowicz was the third person Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki (1989–91) asked to take the job; others had been daunted by the prospect of assuming responsibility for the economic reforms the country then required. Nor was this crisis of confidence exclusive to Poland. Václav Havel remembered that he spent his first day in office as president of Czechoslovakia in a mindset close to depression, completely unsure how to begin.<sup>11</sup>

Economic reforms across the postcommunist countries were carried out according to a common scheme: belt-tightening in the short run, with benefits expected to materialize in the long term. This framework

produced gradual frustration. In the early 1990s, after many lean years, the desire to consume was enormous. In the GDR, people spoke of *Konsumrausch*, intoxication with consumption. Poles threw themselves into the craze of opening their own businesses, selling clothes and everyday items arranged on metal cots hastily set up on sidewalks everywhere. Whether motivated by consumerism or by desperation, people from the former Soviet bloc were striving feverishly to catch up with the West.

Even as the prospect of a better life appeared on the horizon, a sense of the humiliation of poverty grew as well. The scale of this shame became evident only gradually, just as people only gradually came to know the real Western Europe (as opposed to the idealized version they had held in their minds before the democratic breakthrough). That is, while in absolute terms the standard of living was obviously low before 1989, it was only after the fall of communism that average citizens in the East and those in the West could personally compare their respective circumstances. From 1989 onward, perceptions of the East-West gap grew stronger and more painful with every decade. While in the early transition years people had come to take for granted that GDP per capita was several times lower in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, or Poland than in West Germany or France, today it seems incomprehensible that such indicators remain unequal.

In addition, the reference point for residents of Central and Eastern Europe has shifted. Early in the postcommunist era, these Europeans compared their situation to the circumstances that prevailed in their own countries a few years earlier, to the poverty of the 1980s. Everything seemed better when contrasted with those miserable years. Today, a younger cohort of Central and East Europeans are comparing themselves to counterparts in Germany, France, and Great Britain. This has led to a phenomenon that was described by Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century, although Tocqueville did not give this sentiment its current name: “relative deprivation.” The upshot of this concept is that whether people are content or unhappy depends not on their objective situation, but on their own expectations and on whom they compare themselves to.

This hypothesis provides a helpful framework for thinking about postcommunist countries, because relative deprivation is one type of emotion of loss that is widespread in these societies. It is the loss of that which one never had but thinks one ought to have had. As the contemporary novelist Georgi Gospodinov argues, in Bulgaria people feel sorrow at what they experience as the “loss” of things that never actually happened.<sup>12</sup> Another example might be Germany after the unification. Residents of the Western lands viewed their conationals from the East with a mixture of indulgence and superiority, an attitude that became increasingly difficult to tolerate with the passing decades. In 2015, a third of residents of the former GDR saw their Western compatriots as arrogant.<sup>13</sup>

A second duality lies on the level of geopolitics. From today’s per-

spective, it is tempting to view 1989 as an immediate leap to freedom. At the time, however, postcommunist countries were Janus-faced, looking both eastward with hope and westward with fear. In the last year of the Cold War and the first years of freedom, the face directed to the East was distorted by nervous impatience, because the countries beyond the Elbe were not completely independent in their decisions. Hardly anyone remembers today that Russian troops only left Czechoslovakia in 1991, Poland in 1993, and the former GDR in 1994. Decisions taken at that time were thus shaped by both the military threat and the psychological blockages stemming from Russia's continued presence.

We usually think that 1989 meant solving the difficulties of communism, but to a greater degree it meant revealing them, in almost all aspects of everyday life. Dealing with these myriad problems took so much energy that when PiS won the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2015 with the slogan "Poland in ruins," this reflected less conditions on the ground than the way in which Poles' collective identity had become worn out and scattered. Similar problems exist in the other postcommunist countries. If liberals today would like to formulate a narrative to challenge the populist vision of *les trente honteuses*, they must not fall back on the story of the wondrous transformation. A naïve, overly rosy depiction of the past only provokes extreme reactions in the opposite direction. It is time to tell the history of the past thirty years anew, in a way that will do justice to the complexity and the contradictions of this era.

## The Future

Where great social and political changes occur, there are always great promises that drive them. In Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, this promise took the form of a postcommunist myth of the West. Cobbled together in countries such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland between the late 1980s and early 1990s, this myth was a peculiar intellectual phenomenon, indeed. To an outside observer, nothing made sense. During his travels around the former Eastern bloc, the liberal U.S. writer Paul Berman found that no matter which Central or East European capital he happened to visit, he encountered a great passion for everything associated with the United States and Western Europe. The objects of adoration came in all shapes and sizes, ranging from the lightest products of popular culture to the most profound philosophical ideas about democracy.<sup>14</sup>

In their lucid essay in these pages on the post-1989 transformation of postcommunist countries, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes posit that the constructors of the new democracies took it as their maxim to imitate everything Western.<sup>15</sup> We would add that the object of this imitation was not the West as it really existed, but an imaginary West.

The seventeenth-century thinker Baruch Spinoza was the first to observe that our emotions are the result of imitating the emotions of oth-

ers. Yet his view was that we do not feel what others actually feel, but rather what we think others feel. If I think that someone loves me, I will love him back, and if I think someone hates me, I will hate him back. Of course, this means that we make many mistakes along the way, which in turn cause conflicts and can lead to radicalization and fundamentalism. In just the same way, starting from 1989, Poles, Czechs or Bulgarians imitated not the West as it really was, but rather the society they thought it was—an impression that came from filtering their scarce actual experience of the West through a lens shaped by decades in the communist system. This led to the emergence of a strange cluster of ideas, opinions, and stereotypes concerning the West that made sense only from the point of view of a resident of Warsaw or Bratislava.

Regardless of its inconsistency, for decades the myth of the West was a powerful fuel for various projects of modernization—whether economic reforms, institutional and legal changes aimed at meeting the requirements of the European Union, or military reforms carried out in accordance with NATO guidelines. And let us emphasize that we also imitated the imagined emotions of Frenchmen, Germans, or Americans, exactly as Spinoza described. “What would they think of us in the West? We should be ashamed!”—such exclamations were not at all uncommon. The myth of the West was not only an image of a world where life would be better in material terms, but also a promise of a morally better tomorrow.

With time, however, the myth of the West lost its power. This was caused by many factors, including simple changes such as the increasing numbers of former Eastern Bloc citizens who were able to experience the real West firsthand. In addition, events such as the 2008 financial crisis and the revelation of secret CIA prisons in Poland shattered the rose-tinted spectacles through which many in Central and Eastern Europe had previously viewed the West.

The burning out of this powerful fuel for modernization left a void to be filled. Unfortunately, liberals failed to offer a new vision of the future that could accomplish this. Instead, the empty ideological space was occupied largely by populists who packed it with a reactive dislike of the West, supplemented by a xenophobia-tinged promise of well-being for the national community. In times filled with uncertainties—about the economy, about social identities, about institutions, about the global climate—this promise offers voters a sense of sanctuary and security. Therefore, simply highlighting the short-sightedness and economic pitfalls of populism will do little to change the minds of people who find a respite in its promises. Liberals must instead have ready a rich alternative narrative about the future. Their new promise to voters must take into account the uncertainties mentioned above, as well as the cultural needs that populists have profited from addressing. For example, it seems that patriotism is a cultural element that is in demand in today’s societies. One needs to consider, then, the possibilities for combining patriotism with liberalism, without

slipping into nationalism. Moreover, in the age of social media, liberals must catch up with their populist competitors in learning to convey their narrative in a manner that is not only engaging and authentic, but also sufficiently entertaining to hold the audience's attention.

Only if liberals can offer voters a new, attractive vision of the future can they hope to win. There are many possible elements on which liberals might draw to put together such a vision; here, we will mention two of them.

The first of these is the promise of a secure and affluent nation. Unfortunately, for many liberals the mere word nation provokes suspicion. To be sure, just as with the liberal aversion to evoking collective emotions in politics, there are good reasons for that suspicion. But as Ghia Nodia argues in his recent essay on postnationalism in these pages, "we must stop trying to free democracy from the will of the people."<sup>16</sup> If contemporary Poles, Hungarians, or Bulgarians feel a need for greater emphasis on the national aspect of politics, liberals should not reject this impulse. Instead, they should look in the history of these nations for examples of robust liberalism and tolerance, and use them to build a liberal model that is both attentive to national history and tradition and open to membership in a common European community. Poland's history, for instance, includes a beautiful tradition of multiculturalism and democracy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as attempts in the eighteenth at Enlightenment reforms—which, though they failed, can still serve as a source of inspiration.

Second, ecology should be a central theme of any strategy for liberal renewal. There is growing public support for action to mitigate climate change, as well as for other environmental initiatives such as protecting biodiversity and promoting sustainable farming. Such policies could help to define a stronger and more compelling liberal program. Yet we must be cautious. If defined wisely—in a way that aligns with the goals of economic modernization and social inclusion—an ecological agenda can be a source of hope for a better future, compelling even for some who now support populist movements. A radicalized version of this agenda, by contrast, could spark yet another cultural war, which liberals will lose—at a very high cost to our natural environment and our collective well-being.

Can we draw any conclusions? The future, argued some great theorists of revolutionary change in politics, is unknown to us. Tocqueville wrote about the "dark depths of the future," Hannah Arendt about its unpredictability and the way that many people feel powerless in its face.<sup>17</sup> Yet if we are to have any control over what is to come, it will stem from having a vision of what that future might be, and from effectively communicating this vision to others. Indeed, to think this is impossible would be contrary to liberalism, which is based on a belief in the political potential of every individual and in an open-ended future. This thought, hopefully, can make us a little less defensive and a little more free as we approach the work of building for future generations.

## NOTES

1. For a more detailed argument of this kind, see Eric Gujer, “Der Osten war eine Landschaft der Lüge—davon profitiert die AfD bis heute,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 8 November 2019, [www.nzz.ch/meinung/ddr-mauerfall-afd-profitiert-bis-heute-ld.1520435](http://www.nzz.ch/meinung/ddr-mauerfall-afd-profitiert-bis-heute-ld.1520435).

2. This discussion was summarized in Jacques Rupnik, “After 1989: The Perennial Return of Central Europe, Reflections on the Sources of the Illiberal Drift in Central Europe,” in Michael Ignatieff and Stefan Roch, eds., *Rethinking Open Society: New Adversaries and New Opportunities* (New York: CEU Press, 2018), 257–70.

3. “Speech by Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, at the conference ‘Beyond 1989: Hopes & Disillusions after Revolutions’ Prague (6 December 2019),” [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/our-ministers/jean-yves-le-drian/speeches/article/speech-by-mr-jean-yves-le-drian-minister-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-at-the](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/our-ministers/jean-yves-le-drian/speeches/article/speech-by-mr-jean-yves-le-drian-minister-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-at-the).

4. Raymond Aron, *Le Spectateur engagé* (Paris: Julliard, 1981).

5. Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than You Think* (New York: Flatiron Books 2018).

6. “Speech by President Donald Tusk at the Athens Democracy Forum 2019,” [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/09/speech-by-president-donald-tusk-at-the-athens-democracy-forum-2019](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/09/speech-by-president-donald-tusk-at-the-athens-democracy-forum-2019).

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