Reflections on the Fragility and Resilience of Europe

Speech by Ivan Krastev, Prague, January 30, 2017

"Had I been cryogenically frozen in January 2005", wrote British historian Timothy Garton Ash, one of Europe's most prominent public intellectuals, "I would have gone to my provisional rest as a happy European…Cryogenically reanimated in January 2017, I would immediately have died again from shock. For now there is crisis and disintegration wherever I look."

We all ask ourselves, *are we experiencing a "disintegration moment" in Europe today?* Do Britain's democratic decision to leave the European Union (whose membership, in economic terms, is the equivalent of 20 smaller member states) and the rise of euro-skeptic parties on the continent signal the unraveling of the European project? Is the European Union doomed to fall apart, in the fashion of the Habsburg Empire? Is 2017, marked by critical elections in the Netherlands, France, and Germany, to be as world changing a year as1917?

We are living in a moment in which paralyzing uncertainty has captured society's imagination. It is a moment when political leaders and ordinary citizens alike are torn between hectic activity and fatalistic passivity; a moment when we experience a twist of fate, a leap of creativity, when that which was until now *unthinkable,* the disintegration of the European Union, begins to be perceived as *inevitable*. And it is a moment when the narratives and assumptions that only yesterday guided our actions begin to seem not simply outdated but almost unintelligible.

There is a growing suspicion that what used to keep the Union together will not be enough to do so anymore.

Shared memories of the Second World War have faded away. "The end of history" that Francis Fukuyama promised in 1989 may well have actually arrived, but only in the sense that historical experience no longer matters and few are really interested in history.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has stripped away the geopolitical rationale for European unity. And Putin's Russia, as ugly as it is, cannot fill this existential void. In reality, Europeans today feel less secure than in the final days of the Cold war, the survey indicates that the majority of Brits, Germans and French believe that the world is heading to a major war[1] but the external threats that the EU faces today divide rather than consolidate. The nature of the transatlantic relationship has also dramatically changed. Donald Trump is the first American President who does believe that the preservation of the European Union should be a strategic objective of the US's foreign policy.

The welfare state that was at the heart of the post-war political consensus is also in question. According to Wolfgang Streeck, director of the Max Plank Institute and one of Germany's leading sociologists, since the 1970s, capitalism has successfully escaped the institutions and regulations imposed on it after 1945, and the tax state has been transformed into a debt state. The result has been that democratic voters have lost the power to regulate the market, thus destroying the foundation of the post-war welfare state.

Finally, the European Union has also been hard hit by changing ideological fashions. Over the past decade, European public opinion assumed that globalization would hasten the decline of states as key international actors and nationalism as a seminal political motivator. In other words, Europeans tended to read their own happy post-WWII experience of overcoming ethnic nationalism and political theology as a signal of a universal trend. But what until just yesterday seemed universally applicable in the European experience has begun to look exceptional today. Even a passing glance at the United States, China, India and Russia, not to speak of the vast reaches of the Muslim world, makes clear that both ethnic nationalism and religion remain major ideological driving forces shaping global politics. Postmodern post-nationalism and secularism make Europe different from the rest of the world, not the rest of the world more like Europe.

I was a final-year philosophy student at Sofia University in 1989 when the world turned upside down. As Andrei Makarevich, the Russian songwriter and underground musician tellingly said, "It had never occurred to me that in the Soviet Union anything could ever change. Let alone that it could disappear." Living in communist Bulgaria, I felt the same. The experience of the sudden and non-violent end of something that we were confident was forever (until it was no more) is the defining experience of my generation. We were overwhelmed by the opportunities that were

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[1] YouGov, January 2017

suddenly opened up and by the newly discovered sense of personal freedom. But we were struck also by a newly discovered sense of the fragility of all things political.

Living through a great disruption teaches you several, often diverse, lessons. The most important is that what defines the direction of history is sometimes a chain of minor events, amid a background of big ideas. As the historian Mary Elise Sarotte argues in her book *Collapse*, the actual opening of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9, 1989 "was not the result of a decision by political leaders in East Berlin…or of an agreement with the government of West Germany,…[it] was not the result of a plan by the four powers that still held ultimate legal authority in divided Berlin…The opening represented a dramatic instance of surprise, a moment when structures both literal and figurative crumbled unexpectedly. A series of accidents, some of them mistakes so minor that they might otherwise have been trivialities." The end of communism is thus less effectively explained by Francis Fukuyama's narrative of "the end of history", but rather by Harold Macmillan's "events, my dear boy, events."

It is the experience of the Soviet collapse that, in myriad aspects, defines the way we East Europeans perceive what is taking place today. Witnessing the political turmoil in Europe, we have a sinking feeling that we have been through this before - the only difference being that then it was their world that collapsed and now it is ours.

Is it a sense of déjà vu that defines Central Europeans' reaction to the crisis? We are not Euro-skeptics but some of us are Euro-pessimists. We fear that the disintegration of the Union will likely transform a sympathetic environment of tolerance and openness to one characterized by a bullying narrow-mindedness. It may cause the breakdown of liberal democracies on Europe's periphery and usher in the collapse of several existing member states. But at the same time, we are paralyzed by the fear that when the disintegration train leaves the station, it will be almost impossible to stop it.

In order to make sense of the critical period that we are in, we need to be able to make sense of three paradoxes. First, why Central European voters, who, opinion polls tell us, form one of Europe's most pro-European electorates, are ready put Euro-skeptics in power and why do they vote for parties that openly loathe independent institutions such as courts, central banks, and the media? I will call it the "Central European Paradox". Second, why has the political mobilization of the younger generations in Western Europe, who according to opinion polls, are much more liberal and friendly to the Union, not led to the emergence of pan-European, pro-EU populist movement? In other words, why have all attempts to build Europe from below failed? I will call it "West European Paradox". Third, why are Europeans so resentful of the Brussels elites, who represent the most meritocratic elites in Europe? I will call it "Brussels Paradox".

The Central European Paradox

Why, despite the profound public mistrust of politicians, are people ready to elect parties that are eager to dismantle any constraints on government's power? This question can help us to unpack the Central European paradox.

The decision of the governments in Hungary and Poland to take control over their constitutional courts, in order to curb the independence of their central banks, and to declare war on independent media and civil society organizations, should be alarming for people who are mistrustful to their politicians. But contrary to these expectations, the vast majority of Hungarians and a sizable number of Poles were not much worried by their government's decision to concentrate power in the hands of the executive. The question remains, why are citizens uninterested in the separation of powers? Could it be possible that in the eyes of the public, the separation of powers is not the way to keep officeholders accountable, but rather just one of the tricks of the elites?

The real appeal of liberal democracy is that those defeated in elections need not fear losing too much: Electoral defeat means having to regroup and plan for the next contest, not having to flee into exile or go underground while all one's possessions are seized. The little-remarked downside of this is that for winners, liberal democracy gives no chance for a full and final victory. In pre-democratic times, meaning the vast bulk of human history, disputes were not settled by peaceful debates and orderly handovers of power. Instead, force ruled: The victorious invaders or the winning parties in a civil war had their vanquished foes at their mercy, free to do with them as they pleased. Under liberal democracy, the "conqueror" gets no such satisfaction. The paradox of liberal democracy is that citizens are freer but they feel powerless. Demand for real victory is a key element in the appeal of populist parties. "Our country is in serious trouble" was a line Donald Trump used to repeat at his electoral rallies. "We don't have victories any more. We used to have victories, but we don't have them. When was the last time anyone saw us beating, let's say, China in a trade deal?"

The appeal of populist parties is that they promise non-ambiguous victory. They appeal to those who view the separation of powers, much beloved by liberals, not as a way to keep those in power accountable but as an alibi for the elites to evade their electoral promises. Thus, what characterizes populists in power is their constant attempts to dismantle the system of checks and balances and to bring independent institutions such as the courts, central banks, media outlets and civil society organizations under their control.

So, populist and radical parties are not just parties; they are constitutional movements. They promise voters what liberal democracy cannot: a sense of victory where majorities, not just political majorities, but ethnic and religious ones, too, can do what they please. Only total victory gives political majorities their sense of identity.

The rise of populist parties in Europe is symptomatic of the explosion of threatened majorities as a force in European politics. They blame the loss of control over their lives, real or imagined, on a conspiracy between cosmopolitan-minded elites and tribal-minded immigrants. They blame liberal ideas and institutions for weakening the national will and eroding national unity. They tend to see compromise as corruption and zealousness as conviction.

What makes anxious majorities most indignant is that while they believe that they are entitled to govern (they are the many after all), they never can have the final say. And so they are ready to blame the separation of powers and other inconvenient principles of liberal democracy for their frustration – and readily endorse parties like the Law and Justice party in Poland or FIDESZ in Hungary that run counter to those principles.

The explosion of conspiracy theories and the rise of conspiracy-minded politicians is another critical feature of the current moment.

Holding the belief that the tragedy of the Smolensk plane crash, where President Lech Kaczynski died alongside 95 members of the Polish elite, was assassination appears to be the strongest predictor of whether a person will support Jaroslaw Kaczynski, chair of the Law and Justice party.

Poles are not unique in believing, en masse, in the existence of a government cover-up, despite a dearth of evidence. According to opinion polls, between half and three quarters of people in various Middle Eastern countries doubt that Arab hijackers were responsible for the 9/11 attacks; four out of 10 Russians think that Americans faked the moon landings and half of Americans think that their government is probably hiding the truth about the 9/11 attacks. Conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists have existed in abundance everywhere, for as long as there have been suspicious deaths and powerful people. Scholars tend to agree that these sorts of theories are at their most popular during periods of major social change and that they represent a desire for order in a complex and confusing world.

But what is happening in Poland today has revealed something more: how, in some cases, a shared belief in a particular conspiracy theory can play a role previously reserved for religion, ethnicity, or a well-articulated ideology. It can now be a marker of political identity.

The "assassination hypothesis" helped consolidate a certain "we" in Poland: We who do not trust the government's lies, we who know how the world really works, we who blame liberal elites for betraying the promise of the 1989 revolution. The Smolensk conspiracy was critical for returning Kaczynski to power, because it both mined a vein of deep distrust that Polish people have in any official version of events and fit with their self-image as victims of history. But the rise of conspiracy theories signals another major vulnerability of EU designed democratic politics – its failure to build political identities.

The West European Paradox

Should you decide to click on the European Republic's website, european-republic.eu, you will read that, "The EU is flawed. People want Europe, but not the EU." The European Republic was founded by the charismatic German political scientist Ulrike Guerot and is one of dozens of attempts to create a political platform that is at the same time anti-status quo and pro-EU. The hope of European republicans is to mobilize the political energy of pro-European youth in order to create a pan-European movement. However, it is unclear, given the current climate, what kind of political impact would result from this desired mobilization of younger and cosmopolitan-minded Europeans.

The question of why the democratization of the public life and the emergence of a much more cosmopolitan younger generation have failed to translate into support for the Union is at the heart of the West European paradox. It is enough to look at the Brexit vote to see that age and education were among the major factors defining how people voted. Younger and better educated Brit voted to remain. They voted for the EU and were disillusioned when the

majority of Brits voted to leave the Union. In the period following the 2008 financial crisis, there was a surge of young people politicized and empowered by access to new media. Political protests against the austerity policies favored by Brussels were an everyday experience in most of the European capitals. So, we have a younger generation that speaks foreign languages, values the freedom to live and work anywhere in the EU and which is ready to fight for fairness and justice. This is also a networked generation, empowered by social media. Knowing the ideological make-up and the political potential of this generation, it is quite natural to anticipate the emergence of a pan-European movement, trying to confront Europe of the elites with Europe of the citizens. Why, then, did such a power movement never come into being?

In understanding the failure of this "connected generation" to make a difference and to build an effective political movement in support of a better EU, it is worth reflecting on the findings of Zeynep Tuffeci, one of the most insightful analysts of the politics of social media. To explain her theory, she opened her talk in the MIT media lab with a picture of the Hillary Step on Mount Everest. The picture of Everest, taken on a day when four people died on the mountain, shows the profound crowding on the mountain that made Everest so dangerous, as climbers had to wait for others to finish.

Because of greater access to technology and to sherpas, more people who are not great climbers come to Everest. Full-service trips (at a $65,000 price point) can get you to base camp and much of the way up the mountain, but they cannot prepare people to climb the peak. There has been an uptick in deaths since the 1980s, after basecamps became more developed and more people started coming to the mountain.

People have proposed putting a ladder at Hillary's Step to reduce this risk of crowding. But the issue is not the ladders – it is the fact that it is very, very hard to climb at altitude. The mountineering community has suggested something else: to require people to climb seven other high peaks before they attempt Everest.

Zeynep Tuffeci used this analogy for internet-enabled activism. In speaking about the Internet and collective action, political commentators tend to focus on the increased opportunities for coordination and community building. But in Tuffeci's view, the gift of the Internet is also a curse for building effective political movements. Social movements, like inexperienced mountineers, are getting to base camp without developing altitude awareness – in other words, some of the Internet's benefits have significant handicaps as side effects. As a result, we see more movements but they may not have an impact or stay in power because they come to the public's attention much earlier in their lives.

Movements get stuck at "no", she argues, because they've never needed to develop a capacity for representation, and can only coalesce around saying no, not building an affirmative agenda.

My own work on the protests movements strongly supports her conclusions. Fascinated by spontaneity and dreaming of politics of horizontal networks, the new social movements represented by Indignadoes, Occupy and other anti-austerity movements in Europe succeeded for a while by demonstrating citizens' power to resist those in power but they failed to have any long-standing political impact. The anti-institutional culture of the protesters and their distaste for any ideologies doomed them to irrelevance. You can tweet a revolution but you cannot tweet a government. What these protest movements will be remembered for is videos, not manifestos; happenings not speeches; conspiracy theories, not political tracts. They are a form of participation without representation.

The protesting citizen wants change, but resents any form of political representation. His theory of social change is Silicon Valley-made. He values disruption and laugh at blueprints. The protesting citizen longs for political community, but refuses to be led by others. He takes the risk of clashing with the police, but is afraid to take the risk of trusting any party or politician. So, unsurprisingly, while these movements have a transnational identity and protesters in different countries are constantly communicating with each other, Europe and the European Union were almost entirely absent from the passions and discussions of the protesters. The idea of democracy without representation makes any serious discussion about the future of the European Union practically impossible. United Europe cannot exist without representation. So, it is the anti-institutional ethos of the pro-EU young activists that made impossible the emergence of Europe from below.

The Brussels Paradox

"I am persona non grata in my own country, with many blaming me for the crisis we are in and for their personal difficulties", former Greek finance minister George Papaconstantinou wrote in his bitter memoirs. "I was the one who, when the music stopped, turned on the lights and told everyone the party is over… As a result, I have lived for years under a peculiar sort of 'house arrest'. Walking the streets became a dangerous sport". Papaconstantinou is not one

of the corrupt Greek politicians who robbed the country for decades. He is not a super-rich fellow who converted his political power into money. He is not a member of one of the Greek political families who has run the country for the last century. He is one of Europe's model meritocrats. He comes from an ordinary family. He succeeded to get great education. And he was invited to join the government of George Papandreu not so much because of his ideological commitment but because of his competence and his integrity. And yet he ended up as one of the most hated men in Greece.

Why George Papaconstantinou and the "exams-passing classe" he belongs to so resented, at a time when the complexity of the world suggests that people need them most, is the question at the heart of the current European crisis. Why do people who work hard so that their kids can graduate from the world's best universities refuse to trust people who have already graduated from these universities? How is it possible that anybody can agree with Michael Gove, the pro-Brexit politician, who said people "have had enough of experts"?

It is fashionable these days to discuss the crisis of the EU either in terms of the Union's democratic deficit or in terms of the Union's cosmopolitan make up. But at the end of the day, what is at the heart of the current European crisis is the crisis of the meritocratic vision of society. And this is demonstrated nowhere better than in the growing mistrust in meritocratic elites. How is it possible to have elites that are legitimate both at home and abroad is the critical question that European project faces today.

It should seem obvious that meritocracy, a system in which the most talented and capable/"IQ+effort=merit"/, the best educated, those who score highest on tests, are put in leading positions, is better than plutocracy, gerontocracy, aristocracy and, perhaps, even the rule of the majority, democracy. But what we witness is a motion for a non-confidence vote exactly against this vision of society.

Europe's meritocratic elites are not hated simply because of populists' bigoted stupidity or the confusion of ordinary people. Michael Young, the British sociologist who, in the middle of the last century, coined the term "meritocracy," would not be surprised by this turn of events. He was the first to explain that even though "meritocracy" might sound good to most people, a meritocratic society would be a disaster. It would create a society of selfish and arrogant winners, and angry and desperate losers. It will not simply be unequal society but society in which inequality is justified on the basis of the difference of achievements. The triumph of meritocracy, Young understood, would lead to a loss of political community.

What makes meritocrats so unbearable in the eyes of the losers of the last decades of political and economic openness is not so much their success but their insistence that they have succeeded because they worked harder than others, because they happened to be more qualified than others and because they passed the tests that others failed.

The paradox of the current political crisis in Europe is rooted in the fact that the Brussels elites are blamed for the same reasons that they praised themselves for: their cosmopolitanism, their resistance to public pressure and their mobility.

In Europe, the meritocratic elite is a mercenary elite, not unlike the way the best soccer players are traded around to the most successful clubs across the Continent. Successful Dutch bankers move to London; competent German bureaucrats move to Brussels. European institutions and banks, just like soccer clubs, spend colossal amounts of money acquiring the best "players." Usually, this system means victories on the pitch or in the central bank's boardroom.

But what happens when these teams start to lose or the economy slows down? Their fans abandon them. That's because there's no relationship connecting the "players" and their fans beyond celebrating victories. They are not from the same neighborhood. They do not have mutual friends or shared memories. Many of the players are not even from the same countries as their teams. You can admire the hired "stars," but you do not have a reason to be sorry for them.

In the eyes of the meritocratic elites, their success outside of their country is proof of their talents, but in the eyes of many people, this very mobility is a reason not to trust them. They see them as liquid elites.

People trust their leaders not only because of their competence but also because of their courage and commitment, and because they believe that their leaders will remain with their own in times of crisis, rather than being helicoptered to the emergency exit. Paradoxically, it is the convertible competencies of the present elites, the fact that they are

equally fit to run a bank in Bulgaria or in Bangladesh or to teach in Athens or Tokyo, that make people so suspicious of them. People fear that, in times of trouble, the meritocrats will opt to leave instead of sharing the cost of staying. In this, sense meritocratic elites are very different in comparison with land owning aristocratic elites, who were devoted to their estates and who could not take these estates, should they have wanted to run away, but also in comparison with the communist elites who practically had everything better than the ordinary person on the street. They had better goods, better health service and better education but in the framework of the Cold War, there was one area where the ordinary person did have an advantage to the nomenklatura. It was easier for the ordinary person to emigrate. Communist elites, as Stephen Kotkin demonstrates, were "no exit" elites, while meritocratic elites from the time of globalization and European integration are "no loyalty elites".

Unsurprisingly then, it is loyalty, namely the unconditional loyalty to ethnic, religious or social groups, that is at the heart of the appeal of Europe's new populism. Populists promise people not to judge them based solely on their merits. They promise solidarity but not necessarily justice. While meritocratic elites envision society as a school populated by A grade students who fight for fellowships and drop outs who fight in the streets. Populists endorse a vision of society as a family where people help each other, not simply because the other one deserve help but because he is one of us.

It is the struggle over the nature and the obligation of the elites that is at the heart of the populist challenge. Unlike a century ago, today's insurgent leaders are not interested in nationalizing industries. Instead, they promise to nationalize the elites. They do not promise to save the people but to stay with them. They promise to re-establish the national and ideological constraints that were removed by globalization. They praise them for not speaking foreign languages and having nowhere to go. In short, what populists promise their voters is not competence but intimacy. And many in Europe today find this promise appealing.

Conclusion or on Resilience

"Man tends to regard the order he lives in as natural", wrote Czeslaw Milosz in a now distant 1951. "The houses he passes on his way to work seem more like rocks rising out of the earth than like products of human hands. He does think the work he does in his office or factory as essential to the harmonious functioning of the world...He cannot believe that one day a rider may appear on a street he knows well, where cats sleep and children play, and start catching passers-by with his lasso... In a word, he bahaves a little like Charlie Chaplin in *The Golden Rush*, bustling about in a shack poised precariously on the edge of a cliff".

For Europeans, the European Union was such a natural world. It is not any more. Brexit and Trump's electoral victory forced us to re-conceive the world we live in. Many fear that the critical elections in Netherland, France, Germany and most likely in Italy and Greece will escalate the process of European disintegration. A series of major terrorist attacks in some of Europe's capitals or armed conflict and a new wave of refugees on Europe's periphery can easily bring the Union to the edge of collapse. But here comes my note of optimism, the unexpected turn of the déjà vu mind. What being a witness and participant in major historical reversal teaches you is that determinism does not work and that pessimism is an inflated currency.

Paradoxically, 2017 comes with a promise that was very absent in 2016. The shock of Brexit and Trump's electoral victory were very much related not only to what happened but also to the fact that we did not expect it to happen. It was our failure to predict what happened that made us desperate. In 2017, we are facing a very different dynamic. Now, we expect only bad things to happen. And my guess is that we will fail in our predictions once again. We fear but we also expect that Wilders will be the big winner of the Dutch elections and nobody will be able to make a government without him, that Marie Le Pen will end up as the new President of France and that Merkel's moment in German politics will be over. All of this really may happen but most likely it will not. Populist parties will probably do well but they will not do great. And as the opinion polls testify, the impact of Brexit on European public opinion is that the number of people who want their countries to leave the Union has declined in all major EU member states, in comparison with the summer of 2016. So, in a way the failure of our optimistic expectations shattered the Union in 2016, the likely failure of our fatalistic expectation would strengthen it in 2017. The capacity to survive is a major source of legitimacy in any political project.

It is also a common point in today's discussion to be skeptical about the future of Europe, because of the lack of visionary leaders committed to the European project. But do we really know what kind of leaders can save the Union?

In his wonderful book *The Anatomy of a Moment*, Spanish writer Javier Cercas tells the story of the failed anti-democratic coup in Spain in 1981. It was the most decisive moment in recent Spanish history. People were still fearful

of the power of the old regime and already disappointed with their early experiences with democracy. Unemployment was at 20 percent and the inflation rate was reaching 16 percent. Talk of a coup was in the air. Everybody expected something to happen. Finally, 200 officers of the Civil Guard led by Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero entered the Parliament and threatened to shoot Members of the Parliament. Everyone flung themselves under the benches, except three people who decisively remained in their seats while bullets went past them. With their profound courage, they doomed the coup to fail. The three heroes of democracy were the most unlikely bedfellows: Prime Minister Adolfo Suarez, a politician who made his career during Franco's dictatorship, Santiago Carrillo, the leader of the Spanish Communist Party who for years had been arguing against the artificiality of capitalist democracy, and General Gutierrez Mellado, an officer who fought in the Civil War against democracy. If only a year before, somebody predicted that when the coup started, citizens would stay at home and these three would save democracy by standing up against putschist forces, they would have not believed. But this is how it happened. So, be prepared for the EU to survive and be prepared that the most unlikely people can surface as Europe's heroes.