

**Marek A.Cichocki**

*Research Director, Natolin European Centre, Poland  
mcichocki@natolin.edu.pl*

### **Entering the time of strong polarisation**

The blow of financial crisis has changed the political and social landscape in Europe significantly. Seven years after the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 the situation of the EU has got even worse. The different forms of crises are now challenging the European community and the future of the whole post-war integration project is at stake. The crisis of growth and employment, geopolitical crisis in eastern European and the tensions with the Middle East, the migration crisis and the consequences of Brexit are simultaneously causing an existential threat to the EU. And now Trump's unexpected victory in the US has undermined the strong belief in the imperturbable character of the liberal world order.

This text aims to show how the new forms of popular and protest movements in the EU member states are determined by the polymorphic crisis in the West. In the analysis the main focus is put on the countries of central Europe in order to examine whether the concept of the illiberal democracy really helps us to better understand the new situation in Europe and the extent to which it is rooted in the old tenets of the Cold War and post-Cold War division into Western and Eastern Europe. This paper will present the main tendencies in the public opinion of the central European countries based on the latest survey from the PEW Research Centre, which shows the huge complexity of opinions on the "polycrisis" in the EU in all European societies. This is followed by a closer examination of the concept of illiberal democracy introduced by Fareed Zakaria in order to consider its descriptive usefulness for the current situation. By reflecting further on the wider situation in the EU this paper will argue that the political and social turmoil in central Europe cannot be correctly conceived as a deviation from the European norm, or as an exception, but in fact belongs to the pan-European problem of the systemic crisis of democratic and liberal Europe.

In general we should reflect on the crisis as the moment of truth and the return of politics (Van Middelaar, 2016: 496). It means that the crisis is the situation in which the key question of political legitimacy arises anew. Therefore, to understand the logic of crisis it is essential to view

the process of increasing polarisation within the EU as directly linked to the relationship between the high politics of the political elites and the expectations and needs of democratic societies. In general after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 the integration process was viewed as the guarantee of the stable post-Cold War order in Europe thanks to the belief that the Western liberal elites were able to convincingly achieve the compromise with their democratic electorates in terms of covering the main needs of prosperity and security. This post-Cold War pact has now been cancelled (Walt, 2016).

As one of the main pillars of the liberal post-Cold War order in the West, this new situation affects the EU directly, exposing it to the extremely dangerous forms of polarisation appearing in many places, in the relation between states, between states, supranational institutions and societies, societies and markets, and governments and electorates. The threat of increasing polarisation has entirely overshadowed any benefits of further integration, leading to general confusion about the future of the EU and its unity. The old divides, which seemed to have been overcome a long time ago thanks to the integration process now occur anew with great intensity: the north-south divide between the debt and surplus countries of the eurozone and the west-east divide between the friends and critics of the migration policy (Kalan, 2015). In the latter case, the old and enduring belief that Europe is deeply divided between west and east with regard to certain values (modernisation, open society, tolerance and liberalism) has been brought back to life, questioning the success of the integration of central European countries after the enlargement in 2004.

### **No exit option for central Europe**

The conflict over the right way to tackle the migration crisis in Europe, which broke out at first between the central European countries and Germany, has proved that relations between Berlin as the key player in the EU and the V4 countries, which are looking for an alternative European policy to respond to the new migration wave and more broadly to the threats caused by the general EU crisis, have changed. However, on the other hand, the split on the migration issue has opened up speculation about central Europe possibly drifting away from the EU in a less Western and less liberal direction. This perception was there even before the migration crisis and has been fuelled by different factors, among them by the friendlier attitude of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia towards Vladimir Putin – especially controversial in light of the sanctions policy implemented by the EU after the annexation of Crimea. The conflict between Hungary and the European Commission and, above all, certain political statements such as Orban's speech in Tuzsádföld in 2014 on the end of the liberal democratic paradigm in Europe and the need for illiberal solutions, gave life to a new wave of speculation about the increasing split between old and new Europe and the possible shift of the latter eastwards. Central Europe has been accused of turning back from the integration project and its main principles. The Brexit campaign and the British referendum in June 2016 proved the situation in Europe to be much more complex than the criticism on central Europe suggests. First of all the argument indicating that central European countries are the most

anti-European and most affected by populism needs to be examined critically in light of results presented by the PEW Research Center in its Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey “Euroskepticism Beyond Brexit” (Stokes, 2016). PEW’s findings do not place central Europe at the front of the anti-European revolt in the EU, which is mostly boosted by the protest electorate and populist movements from the old member states. Greece and France are champions in this regard with, respectively, 71% and 61% viewing the EU unfavourably. Surprisingly, Poland and Hungary are at the top of the list of countries whose public opinion looks most favourably on the EU. Additionally, the people in both countries tend to assess the economic situation in Europe much more optimistically than in case of other member states in the EU (of course with exception of Germany) where the financial crisis has devastated the social consensus around government policy. In many other questions related to the main challenges to the integration project the PEW research underlines the existing consistency and inconsistency of views between the central European countries and the old members of the EU. There is the same level of criticism of the way the problem of refugees and migrants is handled by the EU and similar scepticism about the pushing of integration into a more tightened form to overcome the crisis. In many member states an expectation prevails that in times of crisis we should rely more on our own states and governments than on shared European institutions which now should return some of their competences to the national level. Therefore, the thesis that central Europe is turning away from the EU should be evaluated more critically, at least with regard to the societies and public opinion. The high politics of the central European leaders’ work can sometimes be confusing, but in principle the whole region should not be perceived as the exception to the common rules but rather as the inherent part of the pan-European problem of the continental post-Cold War order undermined by the current polycrisis.

## The concept of illiberal democracy examined

The concept of illiberal democracy also has to be examined more closely since it seems to be the key term for describing the current problem of the democratic evolution of some of the EU countries. How should we understand the concept? The term itself was coined by Fareed Zakaria in his famous article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1997, at the peak of the post-Cold War globalisation process and transformation of Europe (Zakaria, 1997). It was the moment liberalism seemed to be most influential. However, the problem of the relationship between democracy and liberalism is much older than that. It traces back to the French and American Revolutions at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the old feudal order collapsed and the need arose to find the new right and balanced order to make it possible to keep together two principle developments in modern Europe: the evolution of capitalism and the bourgeoisie and the evolution toward more democratised societies. This constituted the very essence of the relationship between liberalism and democracy.

The concept of the liberal democracy reflects – at least since the end of WWII – the widespread belief that democracy should be exercised in the framework of the constitutional order, based on certain liberal values like the rule of law, separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property. On the one

hand free and fair elections (as characterised in Huntington's procedural definition of democracy: democratic method – collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes). But on the other there need to be some constraints or rules over the democratic majority that should have constituting character. This necessity to keep democracy within constitutional limits is mainly legitimised by the gloomy experience in Europe of fascist and Nazi regimes.

Therefore the notion of the liberal democracy and its illiberal counterpart points to the key problem of the post-war order in Europe. The features of the liberal and democratic society and government seemed to be clear and self-evident in Cold War Europe thanks to the contrast with the communist regimes in the eastern part of the continent. This explicitness of the concept was declared to be its strength after the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet bloc, especially in light of the alleged lack of alternatives (Fukuyama, 1989). It served to set up the standard of rules to be necessarily adopted by countries from central Europe which sought to overcome the communist heritage in politics and economy and to join the EU. Therefore, the Commission and the member states have coined their own criteria, addressed to the candidates in 1993, the so-called Copenhagen criteria, where the notion of liberal democracy appears in the indirect but obvious way. Institutions of stable democracy and the rule of law are there quoted in first place among political standards. This reflects the broad understanding of the main components of liberal democracy. But on the other hand the concept of liberal democracy described in the way Zakaria did in his article encounters at least two important difficulties. The first is about the relationship between liberalism and democracy – not at all as clear and obvious as is often taken for granted. De Tocqueville, Madison and Schmitt are just a few of the many political thinkers who have tried to tackle the problem of the inner contradictions of the liberal democracy concept which cannot, therefore, be perceived as if it were the Weberian ideal type. The concept of liberal democracy is just a much more practical solution to reuniting liberalism with democracy in order to keep democratic majoritarianism under control. However, this concept is constantly exposed to the criticism and polemic of those who ask rhetorically: who will control the controller in such a case? Even more important is the fact that the model of liberal democracy is not a value, it is a method. It is rather the concept of how to organise the democratic government to achieve concrete liberal values which are first anchored in the principle of individual freedom protected against any form of tyranny and suppression. This concept has its roots in some general supranational principles shared by all states in the liberal community but, at the same time, results from the particular consensus reached with each political system.

The second difficulty is related to the use of the term illiberal democracy to refer to the post-transformation countries in central Europe. Actually, the applicability of the term is usually much broader according to the belief in the universal meaning of the liberal model. Transformed societies and countries from Asia and Latin America are described in line with the same concept of liberal democracy as central Europe. This approach confuses different cases and ignores historical contexts

and traditions unjustifiably. The problem of liberal democracy in central Europe cannot be analysed if we neglect the fact of the longstanding historical tradition of social pluralism, anti-absolutism, political participation and individual freedoms in the region. Central Europe is not Asia or Latin America. It is an inherent part of the political and cultural development of Europe.

## **Transformation and modernisation on trial**

To understand the current development in central Europe and its relationship to the polycrisis in the EU, the problem of the transformation process after the breakdown of 1989 and 1990 has to be analysed closely. In his report on the future of the EU single market Mario Monti, the former EU commissioner and prime minister of Italy, rightly suggests that despite shared common values the European integration member states have their own perspectives resulting from their cultural traditions which make them diverge on the further social and economic integrity of Europe (Monti, 2010). Among the main groupings of countries with diverging priorities he identifies the group of new member states, notably those in central Europe, as a model that is separate to three others: continental social-economy countries, Anglo-Saxon countries and Nordic countries. He sees the new member states as the strong advocates of the market and competition, giving priority to growth over heavy social protection. According to him, central European countries, not being large economies, are compelled to compete with larger and economically more powerful old member states thanks to the protection of the single market rules.

Monti's intuition that the countries of central Europe should be treated as separate from the social and economic model of others in the EU is absolutely correct as this model is specifically formed by the process of economic and political transformation since the turn in 1989. The collapse of state socialism and the planned economy in the region opened up the path for the post-communist transition, aiming at establishing the liberal form of democracy and free market economy in the central European countries. Therefore, the reforms were first of all focused on providing free market competition, restoring private ownership, rolling back the state's competences as collective owner, securing free elections and establishing liberal constitutionalism and rule of law over democratic majoritarianism.

In general this transformation process can be defined as: "the transformation from centrally planned economies governed by one party communist regimes into democratic market-type system" (Hare & Davis, 1997: 1). In practice the policies of transformation, projected mostly from outside the region which was the object of them, aimed not only to help the central European countries with the know-how and investments to complete the path they had to take from failed communism to the promised free market and democracy but to model them completely anew accordingly to the neoliberal beliefs dominating then in the West. Therefore, one can rightly perceive the transformation of the central European countries in the 1990s as the last successful move and at the same time the epilogue of the neoliberal revolution in Europe. As Stuart Shields states "From the 1970s onwards, a major shift

occurred in the Western countries from national strategies for economic growth towards the neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation and stabilization” (Shields, 2012: 20).

The transformation of the economy, social order and political practices of the central European countries directly according to the neoliberal model meant, in practice, often the shock therapy of enforcing acontextual systemic change through the functioning, stable and legal new order in economy and public life. The effectiveness of such a mode of transformation, which enabled the constant economic growth (at least in the Polish case) and modernisation of post-communist countries and opened up the chance to realise the ambitious project of EU enlargement to the east, was often possible only at the expense of other values like justice or democratic legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, on a different scale and with a different intensity but generally in the whole region disappointment and contestation over the transformation process has increasingly appeared in the politics and public opinion of the first decade of the 21st century. More and more complaints about the unjust and unfair redistribution of growth, rising productivity and competition with low labour costs and wages below the standard of living fuelled political movements contesting the political parties of the mainstream and pro-transformation camp. As in the case of Law and Justice in Poland or of Fidesz in Hungary and Smer in Slovakia, political forces with a critical stance on the outcomes of the transformation have now gained democratic majority and taken the helm. The criticism towards the neoliberal, acontextual transformation led to several attempts in Poland to correct the process through elements of more evolutionary changes or through institutionalisation to gain more legitimacy (Shields, 2012: 26–31). But the main point of the critical assessment of the transformation was, after all, the ability of the transformed countries to further develop and compete with stronger economies in the common single European market. Especially after the accession to the EU the weakness of the transformation turned out to be visible in the case of newcomers which were capable of generating growth but without prosperity and higher social benefits and, first of all, without being able to change the structural constraints of their economy and society. This all led to the conclusion that the transformation is not the vehicle for sustainable modernisation and that in reality European integration brings the transformed countries in central Europe into the grave problem of the middle-development trap temporarily neutralised with EU funds.

This trap has to be overcome by putting the economies of transformed countries more on their own footing – a challenge which is especially important if we consider the shrinking volume of the structural funds in the future. Apart from the postulate of social redistribution of the economic growth which has fuelled parties contesting the method of transition and the structural problems of the middle-development trap, the additional, third factor of the financial crisis has undermined the belief in the efficiency of the neoliberal model in central Europe. The economic crisis in the eurozone has profoundly changed the perception of the West as the only feasible blueprint for development for the European peripheries. Regardless of the different social and economic conditions and consequences this changed perspective

1. More about this problem in:  
*Rethinking the Rule of Law after Communism*, ed. CZARNOTA Adam, KRYGIER Martin and SADURSKI Wojciech, Budapest & New York: Central European University Press, 2005.

strongly affected the countries in southern and central Europe as well. Therefore, the current development – especially in V4 countries (apart from the special case of the migration crisis) – has to be perceived in the first place as the reaction to the transformation failures and not as the fundamental contestation of European integration as is the case of many populist movements in member states that have been part of the EU for a longer period.

## Supranational activism doesn't help

In the context of the polycrisis the EU has been undergoing since at least the breakdown of stability of the eurozone in 2010 central Europe is no exception but forms part of the pan-European problem of shrinking integration capacity in Europe. The main challenge the EU is facing now is to find the new conditions under which the integration project could regain its vigour and come out from the deepest stagnation in its history. The key dilemma for any attempts undertaken in this direction was rightly described once by the French sociologist Alain Touraine who has argued in his sociology of crisis that each critical situation evaluates the capability of the system to maintain itself as a whole, in unity (Touraine, 2010).

This brings us to another key problem of balancing between unity and difference which seems to be essential when searching for the potential solution to the current polycrisis in the EU. Rebalancing the EU to find the common point of support in order to keep member states together and to overcome the increasing polarisation between them has to be taken now as the *raison d'être* of integration after the Brexit referendum. To make it possible, new forms and mechanisms of mediation are urgently required that go beyond the existing beaten paths of how the common EU institutions have functioned until now. Luuk van Middelaar, the excellent expert on European integration, identifies the crisis as a moment of truth which requires increased politicisation, the return of politics (Van Middelaar, 2016). He observes this turn in favour of politics in the case of reactions to the euro crisis and the geopolitical situation in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea. However, such politicisation of the EU in times of crises can produce adverse effects in light of the necessary balance between the unity and differences mentioned above. Firstly, Middelaar admits that politicisation leads to the pre-eminence of non-rule-based decisions in times of crises departing from the community method and common market principles. Secondly, the logic of politicisation usually brings increasing centralisation. As in Habermas' argument for transnational European democracy or in the expectation to overcome the euro crisis thanks to the common transnational fiscal policy with one European parliamentary sovereign, political centralization leads to replacement of diversity by one coherent agent.

This effect of political centralisation (which once gave rise to the formation of modern statehood in the Europe of the 18th century) can now lead to disastrous consequences for European integration (Huntington, 1996: 93–98). Never before has the thesis of Nicolaïdis that the EU is a system of different *demos* (different democratic communities) creating a specific system of European "demoicracy" come to seem as

clearly true as it does now in the times of the polycrisis (Nicolaidis, 2013: 353).<sup>2</sup> This system suffers from the increasing polarisation caused in different member states by the economic and social consequences of the crisis. Uncertainty about the future, lack of security, the shrinking cohesion of societies, the gloomy perspective for economic growth and sustainable development in Europe makes the citizenry in the member states address their needs and fears with their national governments. The vicious circle where the citizens organised in protest movements to hold their national political elites accountable and the governments have to yield under the pressure of protesters starts to determine now the political situation in the EU and the main direction of its further development. As the latest examples of the British referendum on the withdrawal from the EU and the Dutch one on the association agreement with Ukraine indicate, we are now increasingly witnessing a bottom-up revolt on the national level against the supranational policy of the EU. We have to understand the reasons why the political elites of the EU have lost the confidence, trust and in consequence the lead in Europe. The response has to be as complex as today's situation in Europe. The further centralisation of the EU has to be replaced by the flexible and selective integration of only certain strong common foundations such as the single market, the Schengen zone with common external borders, and common EU institutions. The huge challenge remains the future of the euro, which is still a big question mark despite the many new arrangements applied to the eurozone in order to make it more stable and functional. The much more modest attitude to integration seems to be more appropriate for the times of polycrisis and overwhelming distrust of the transnational elites and institutions. It can help the integration project to survive the difficult times of inner European polarisation. All this will, however, be baseless without regaining the balance in the EU which is urgently required in many aspects. First of all, the balance between the national citizenry, political representation and governments has to be re-established in the states around the new post-liberal consensus, especially with regard to the relations between society and the market in its national and transnational dimension. Secondly, the balance between the European member states, including their societies, should be rediscovered in the EU and may be achieved with the reformed and strengthened single market and Schengen zone. And finally the new balance has to be found among the EU institutions and member states. The European Commission still holds the main power over initiating the legislation process, playing the role of the political agent instead of fulfilling its prior mediation role among the interests of member states as a safeguard of the single market. And the national parliaments still have no say about whether the EU legislation will be approved or rejected, whereas the European Parliament is unable to take its representation role seriously vis-à-vis the national citizenry. This is only one example of the many institutional paradoxes that make the EU currently entirely lacking in credibility.

2. Nicolaidis defines European democracy as "a Union of peoples, understood both as states and as citizens, who govern together but not as one. It represents a third way against two alternatives which both equate democracy with a single demos, whether national or European".

These circumstances of deepening systemic crises in the EU and increasing uncertainty in the future push the decision-makers on the European and national levels to intensify actions and make new spectacular decisions in order to prove their decisiveness and ability to react. However, this kind of activism in crisis management can be counterproductive if the risk of new solutions carried out by decision-

makers turns into uncertainty and pressure in the eyes of people affected by those decisions they cannot control. We have to be smart towards the crisis and see differences between popular movements in different member states. Their roots and reasons very often differ significantly and should not be cleared by one general theoretical or political concept. Social and economic changes required in the central European countries by new governments and popular political forces, even if counter to the same of liberal recipes, are deeply rooted in the critical approach to the modernisation concept of the transformation the societies in this part of Europe underwent in last two decades. Hence, similarities between popular movements in central Europe and the old member states play just the selective role, like in the case of immigration policy. Those movements are not the same phenomena. And, differently from France or Germany, those movements in central Europe do not aim to undermine the EU as such.

## References

CZARNOTA Adam, KRYGIER Martin and SADURSKI Wojciech (eds.). *Rethinking the Rule of Law after Communism*, Budapest & New York: Central European University Press, 2005.

FUKUYAMA, F. "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, summer 1989.

HARE, P. and DAVIS, J. R. *The Transition to the Market Economy: Critical Perspectives on the World Economy*, London Routledge, 1997.

HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1996.

KALAN, Dariusz. "Migration Crisis Unites Visegrad Group", *Bulletin PISM*, No. 82 (814), 16 September 2015, (online). [Date accessed 20.11.2016.] [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=20392](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=20392).

MONTI, Mario. "A new strategy for the single market, Report to the President of the European Commission", May 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, (online). [Date accessed 20.11.2016.] [http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/strategy/docs/monti\\_report\\_final\\_10\\_05\\_2010\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/strategy/docs/monti_report_final_10_05_2010_en.pdf).

NICOLAIDIS, Kalypso. "European Democracy and its Crisis", *JCMS*, vol. 51, Issue 2, March 2013.

SHIELDS, Stuart. *The International Political Economy of Transition*, Routledge/RIPE Studies in Global Political Economy 2012.

STOKES, Bruce. "Euroskepticism Beyond Brexit. Significant opposition in key European countries to an ever closer EU", Pew Research Center, June 2016.

TOURAINÉ, Alain. *Après la crise*, Paris: Seuil 2010.

VAN MIDDELAAR, Luuk. "The Return of Politics – The European Union after the crisis in the Eurozone and Ukraine", *JCMS* 2016, vol. 54, no. 3.

WALT, Stephen M. "The Collapse of the Liberal World Order", *Foreign Policy*, 26 June 2016, (online). [Date accessed 20.11.2016.] <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/26/the-collapse-of-the-liberal-world-order-european-union-brexit-donald-trump/>.

ZAKARIA, Fareed, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 1997.