

3 Versions of Europe Are Collapsing at the Same Time

Post-1945, post-1968, and post-1989 Europe are all different — and none of them make sense anymore.

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel stepping out of a 212 A submarine of the German Marine in Rostock Warnemuende, northeastern Germany. (JENS BUETTNER/AFP/Getty Images)

Is Europe failing? There is plenty of evidence to suggest so, from the constant bickering over NATO contributions, to the proliferation of half-baked deals to regulate migration, to the growing signs of authoritarianism in Eastern Europe.

Yes, Europe has repeatedly failed over the past 70 years, and those failures have been the building blocks of Europe's success. But things are different today. Today's noise isn't simply another invitation for Europe to fail upward again. It's the sound of Europe threatening to fall apart entirely.

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Three different versions of Europe constitute the one that we know today: the postwar Europe after 1945, the post-1968 Europe of human rights, and then the united Europe that emerged after the end of the Cold War. All three Europes are now cast into doubt.

Take postwar Europe, which is the original foundation of the European project. This is the Europe that remembers the horrors and destruction of World War II, the Europe that once lived in constant fear of, and determination to prevent, the next war — a nuclear one — which would be the last war. The blind spots of postwar Europe first came into view in the 1990s, when Yugoslavia descending into chaos, despite the prevalent belief that a major war was no longer possible on the continent.

Postwar Europe is failing today because, for the younger generations, World War II is ancient history. Francis Fukuyama was right: We are at the end of history, when the past doesn't matter anymore to the present. At best, Europe's younger generations have passively absorbed the lessons of history while failing to think historically. In the internet age, the state has also lost much of its monopoly on civic education; one of the paradoxes of the revolution in communication technologies is that, while the young generation communicates much more intensively than any previous generation, they talk predominantly to their peers. Constant chatting is of no help when it comes to transferring the experience of previous generations.

Two other factors undermine the cementing power of the memories of WWII in Europe today. First, the generation of survivors is already gone, and second, for most of the refugees and migrants who come to European societies from outside the continent, World War II is not *their* war. When referring to "war," Syrian refugees mean the destruction of Aleppo and not the destruction of Warsaw or Dresden.

Postwar Europe is also failing because the majority of Europeans continue to take peace for granted while the world is turning into a dangerous place and the United States can no longer be assumed to be interested in protecting Europe. Brussels' insistence that what matters is soft power while military might is obsolete is starting to ring false even to those making the claim. In that way, Europe's postwar thinking has become its vulnerability, rather than an advantage. Postwar Europe today does no longer mean Europe as a peaceful power, it means a Europe that is unable to defend itself. (Grasping this new reality is going to be particularly painful for Germany.)

But there's another Europe that is failing: Europe as a post-1968 project — the Europe of human rights and particularly the Europe of minority rights. The powerful impact of 1968 on the European mind is defined by the widely drawn conclusion, amid that year's unrest and revolutions, that the state is something that defends citizens but also threatens them. The incredible achievement of the 68ers was that they made Europeans perceive the state with the eyes of the most vulnerable and persecuted groups in their societies. This revolutionary turn in the way Europeans felt about the world and their role in it was largely the result of the process of decolonization but also of the global expansion of the democratic imagination. If post-1968 Europe would be defined by one word, it is inclusion.

But this post-1968 Europe is also in question today. The dramatic demographic and social changes that transformed European societies in recent decades threatened majorities — those who have everything and who therefore fear everything, who make up the major force in European politics. Threatened majorities now express a genuine fear that they are becoming the losers of globalization and particularly the losers of the intensified movement of people that accompanied it. The defining characteristic of the politics of threatened majorities is that when they vote, they do it imagining a future where they will be a minority group in their own countries, where their culture and lifestyles will henceforth be endangered. It would be a major political mistake if liberals simply ignore or ridicule these fears. In democratic politics, perceptions are the only reality that matters.

Many of the political movements that are gaining popularity today are very much about the rights of the majorities and particularly their cultural rights. Majorities insist that they have the right to decide who belongs to the political community and to protect their own majoritarian culture. In this regard, the 2015 immigration crisis was a turning point in the way European publics viewed globalization. It marked both the end of post-1968 Europe and the failure of a certain idea of post-1989 Europe, as we are witnessing a once unifying consensus falling apart. It is symptomatic that while surveys indicate that members of the younger generation across Europe are much more tolerant when it comes to the rights of sexual minorities, there is no significant difference between generations when it comes to the perception of non-European migrants as a threat.

The refugee crisis was Europe's 9/11. In the way 9/11 pushed Americans to change the lens through which they see the world America has made, the migration crisis forced Europeans to question some of the critical assumptions of their previous attitudes toward globalization.

The migration crisis also led to questioning of the reality of a unified post-1989 Europe, not simply because Europe's west and east took very different positions when it comes to what they owe other people in the context of the refugee crisis, but because it revealed the existence of two very different Europes when it comes to ethnic and cultural diversity, and questions of migration.

One irony of history is that, while in the beginning of 20th century Central and Eastern Europe was the most diverse part of the continent, now it is extremely ethnically homogeneous. Meanwhile, while today's Western Europe is preoccupied by questions about how to integrate the growing number of foreigners living in their countries, many of them coming from culturally very different societies, Central Europeans are preoccupied with the challenge of reversing the trend of young Central Europeans leaving for life in the West. While the West struggles to deal with diversity, the East struggles to deal with depopulation. To imagine the scale of the problem, it helps to consider some [figures](#). In the period from 1989 to 2017, Latvia hemorrhaged 27 percent of its population, Lithuania 23 percent, and Bulgaria 21 percent. The combination of an aging population, low birth rates, and an unending flow of out-migration is the ultimate source of demographic panic in Central and Eastern Europe, even though it is expressed politically through hysteria against the refugees, who are nowhere to be seen in the region. In reality, more Eastern Europeans left their countries for Western Europe as a result of the 2008 financial crisis than all the refugees that arrived as the result of the war in Syria.

Ultimately, however, what's at the heart of Central European illiberalism's rise isn't differences over migration but a rejection of what I call the Imitation Imperative.

For two decades after 1989, the political philosophy of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe could be summarized in a single imperative: Imitate the West! The process was called by different names — democratization, liberalization, enlargement, convergence, integration, Europeanization — but the goal pursued by post-communist reformers was simple: They wished their countries to become like the West. This involved importing liberal-democratic institutions, applying Western political and economic recipes, and publicly endorsing Western values. Imitation was widely understood to be the shortest pathway to freedom and prosperity.

Europe was no longer divided between communists and democrats. It was divided between imitators and imitated. But pursuing economic and political reform by imitating a foreign model has more moral and psychological downsides than many originally expected. The imitator's life inescapably mixes feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, lost identity, and involuntary insincerity. Imitators are never happy people. They never own their successes — they only own their failures.

The first Europe, postwar Europe, is failing because memory of the war is fading and because it has contributed to a Europe incapable of defending itself. The second Europe, post-1968 Europe, is failing because it was the Europe of minorities; it's still trying to find a way to address majorities' demand that their cultural rights should be protected, too, without turning democracy into instruments of exclusion. Post-1989 Europe is failing because Eastern Europeans no longer want to imitate the West and be judged by the West but rather want to build a counter-model.

Do Europe's failures mean that Europe is irrevocably falling apart? Fatalism would be a mistake. It does mean that Europe should invest in its military capabilities and stop taking America's security guarantees for granted. It also means that, in the same way European liberal democracies in 1970s and 1980s succeed at deradicalizing the far-left and integrating some of its legitimate demands in the mainstream, it should do the same with the far-right. People who today are scared by some of the radical ideas coming from the far-right should remember that many centrists of the 1970s regarded Germany's anti-establishment leftists such as Joschka Fischer — later to become Germany's foreign minister — as a threat to the

capitalist, democratic West. And when it comes to West-East relations in Europe, the challenge is to find a way to strongly criticize the authoritarian turn in the East without insisting that imitating the West is the only meaning of democracy or naively imagining that a commitment to democracy can be bought with cohesion funds from Brussels.

Seventy years ago, Europe managed miraculously to turn the destruction of World War II into the foundation of its peace project. It succeeded at turning the anti-establishment anger of 1968 into political progress. It succeeded in less than two decades at uniting a Europe divided by 50 years of Cold War. If Europe has managed to turn so many failures into success, one can certainly hope that it will achieve the same miracle again today.

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