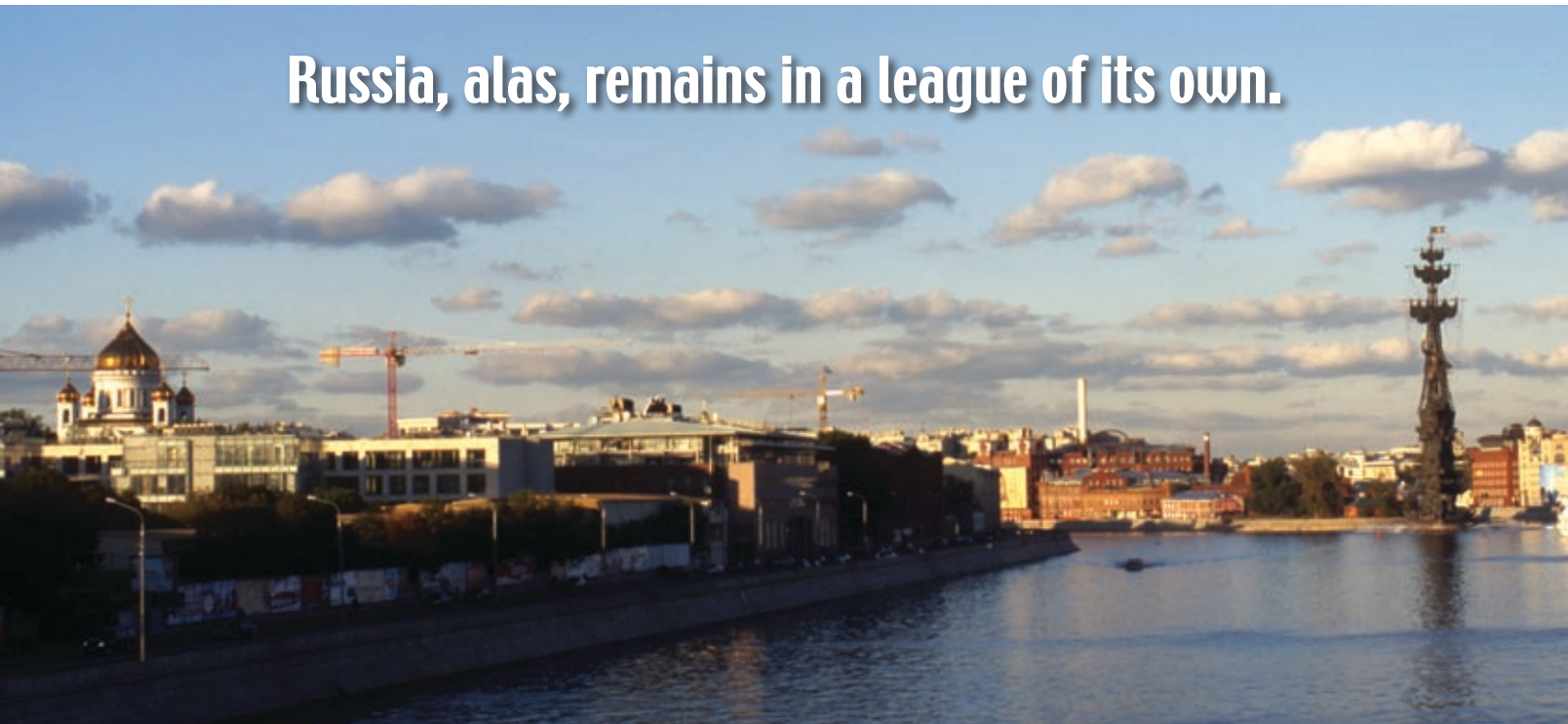




Civil society has returned to Poland.

The Fate of Individual Liberty in Post-Communist Europe



Russia, alas, remains in a league of its own.

By Anne Applebaum

AMONG MANY OTHER THINGS, the year 1945 marked one of the most extraordinary population movements in Polish history. Hundreds of thousands of people were returning home from Soviet exile, from forced labor in Germany, from prisoner of war camps, from territory still under Soviet occupation. The roads, footpaths, trains, and especially railway stations of Poland were crammed full of ragged, displaced people as a result.

At times, the scenes in these railway stations were horrific to behold: Starving mothers, sick children, entire families were camped out on filthy cement floors, waiting for the next available train, sometimes for days on end. In the city of Łódź, a group of women, members of the pre-war Women's League—an energetic, liberal-minded, charitable and patriotic organization founded in 1913—decided they had to do something about it. They regrouped and reorganized the league, in order to help the impoverished travelers. In Łódź, and across the country, Women's League members set up “women and children's shelters” at train stations and staffed them with volunteers, doctors, and nurses. They began supplying travelers with hot food, medicine, and blankets.

Their motives, in 1945, were the same as the organization's motives would have been in 1935: charity and patriotism. Janina Suska, a former Women's League member from Łódź who is now in her eighties, told me in a recent interview that she remembers these early efforts as completely apolitical: “no one received money for charitable work.... everyone who had a free minute helped.”

In fact, the re-creation of the Polish Women's League in the desperate postwar years was a classic example of the workings of what we now call “civil society.” A group of women were witnesses to a social emergency. Without being asked or paid, let alone ordered or coerced, they organized themselves in order to help people cope with it. None of them expected the state to be involved in their charitable activity. Certainly none of them feared the conse-

quences. To put it differently: At this stage in immediate Polish postwar history, the women of Łódź still felt a powerful sense of individual liberty and personal responsibility, and still knew how to organize themselves in order to exercise them.

That was 1945; by 1948, the Women's League would be well on its way to becoming something rather different. As the Soviet-backed Polish Communist party slowly took over the organs of power in the country, as it imposed its far more limited vision of personal liberty and civil society on the Poles, organizations like the Women's League gradually lost their independence. Volunteers became employees, working at the behest of state bureaucrats, paid out of the state budget. Their offices were no longer in homes or private buildings, but in state-owned buildings. Their leaders were no longer independent-minded patriots, but Communist party members, or at least party sympathizers. The Women's League was no longer free to choose all of its own activities, but was expected, among other things, to help organize May Day parades, to make posters, leaflets, and other Communist party propaganda, and to use its network to recruit Communist party members too.

Anyone who objected to any of this—anyone who refused, for example, to march in the May Day parades—could be kicked out of the Women's League, or eventually arrested. Not surprisingly, the organization ceased to be independent. And the women who continued to work for it ceased to have the same goals and motivations as they had in 1945. They were no longer free agents, but bureaucrats, working in the service of the state and the Communist party.

IHAVE SIMPLIFIED THIS STORY SOMEWHAT, in order to make a point: Of course there were some women who continued to make use of the Women's League's resources for good purposes, particularly in later years. But I'm describing the organization's general trajectory because it is typical, precisely reflecting the fate of many other once-independent institutions in central and Eastern Europe following the Communist occupation of the

1940s, and in the Soviet Union, following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Nowhere was this massive suppression of civil society accidental: Everywhere, it was deliberately orchestrated from above. In Hungary, some 1,500 organizations were banned by the interior ministry as early as 1946, following attacks on Communist party functionaries and police. Violence was frequent: In East Germany, a wide range of youth groups, including Catholic and Social Democratic groups, were forcibly unified under the banner of the Free German Youth, the Communist youth club, in 1948. Those who objected were often arrested, sometimes killed. Nor was it an accident that civil society flourished in moments of relative freedom: The Czech Boy Scout movement happily reconstituted itself during the 1968 Prague Spring, only to be crushed again after the Soviet invasion.

Much the same pressure was applied to private businesses, of course, as well as to individuals. Book publishers who did not agree to print a certain number of the Communist party leader's memoirs might find themselves deprived of paper. Artists who did not join the official "Artists' Union" might not be able to buy paint. Writers who did not toe the party

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line were not published, and lost their right to vacation in the state-subsidized writers' colony. Some went on refusing to toe the line: a generation of Czech intellectuals made their living stoking furnaces. Others bent to economic and political pressure and conformed.

But although the nationalization of industry and the pressure on intellectuals made more headlines in the West, the removal of the right to form even a stamp-collectors' club or an amateur theater group without state involvement probably had a more profound impact on a wider swathe of the population of Communist countries over time. Without private ownership, citizens lost their ambition and work ethic. But without civil society, citizens lost the habit of organizing anything, whether economic activity, entertainment, education, politics, or charity, for

themselves. To use the language of Edmund Burke, they lost the experience of the "small platoons," the small-scale social organizations from which public spirit arises. Or, in the idiom of Tocqueville, they were deprived of "associations" which "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form" and which, Tocqueville believed, helped Americans ward off dictatorship. "If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve," he wrote. By the same token, the enforced destruction of the art of associating in Eastern and Central Europe led quickly to a form of anti-civilization, in which all forms of human behavior were, in theory, controlled by the state and all independent institutions were under suspicion.

THOUGH IT MIGHT SEEM AS IF this all took place a long time ago, I am re-telling this history because it helps to explain some of the moral and practical difficulties inherent in re-establishing individual rights and liberties in Central and Eastern Europe today. In a very short period of time, between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, much that had been illegal in that part of the world became legal again. Once again, it became possible to speak freely, to organize independently, to work for a private business or charity. State surveillance was withdrawn; barriers to travel and investment were lifted. At least on paper, citizens became more free.

Yet the private, social, and charitable institutions through which citizens had once channeled their independent intellectual, political, benevolent, or athletic initiatives no longer existed. In the case of post-Soviet nations, they hadn't existed for several generations; in the case of Central Europe, they had been destroyed 40 years previously. Much has been written about the loss of the work ethic in Communist Europe, but by 1989, the habits, customs, and even etiquette associated with everything from the culture of a responsible newsroom to the organization of annual charity balls had vanished too.

Worse, some part of the population in virtually all of the ex-Soviet bloc countries was, at least to start with, actively opposed to their revival. In 1989, the notion of a newspaper that published articles critical of the government was bizarre, even suspect, to many ex-Soviet citizens. The very thought of a school organized according to a different philosophy from state schools seemed strange. The idea that a charity could be funded entirely by private people

was, to many, unacceptable, even suspicious: What would be the motives of the people who contributed? Political parties engaging in uncontrolled debate were the most terrifying prospect of all: The spectacle of people disagreeing, in public, sometimes even shouting at each other seemed disruptive, divisive, even dangerous.

It is also true that, in the absence of civil society, words like “freedom” sometimes seemed like empty slogans. Prohibitions were gone—but positive ways to invest your energy or develop your intellect were lacking. You might be free to spend your time as you wanted, but the state-run football club you once played with had collapsed for lack of funding, nothing had replaced it, and your community had forgotten how to organize football teams on its own. You might be free to engage in politics, but political parties were weak, corrupt, and poorly organized. You might be free to read what newspaper you pleased, but many contained nothing but pornography and gossip. You might feel outraged about the poverty around you, but you no longer knew how to raise money to help.

With time, of course, many citizens of former Communist states adjusted to the new realities, grew accustomed to the idea of individual liberty, and enthusiastically began to rebuild civil society. Others, however, did not. Across the region, the size of these two groups has varied, depending on a particular country’s history and culture. And, as it turned out, this has mattered a great deal: In the post-Communist world, citizens’ attitudes to civil society have, to a surprising extent, affected the development of ideas about individual liberty, ultimately affecting the political situation of the country itself.

To understand this point better, it is useful to look closely at two examples, on the opposite ends of the spectrum. First, Russia—a country whose citizens’ have largely rejected the Western model of individual liberty as exercised through the institutions of civil society—and then, once again, to Poland, whose citizens largely accept it.

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE I have been closely involved with a new, post-Communist, charitable institution in Russia. The Moscow School of Political Studies was founded in the early 1990s by Lena Nemirovskaya, a Muscovite close to the old dissident movement, and Yuri Senokossov, her philosopher husband. Though this was an era of enormous optimism in Russia, Nemirovskaya’s



plans were modest. She wanted, in her words, simply to “civilize” Russia a little bit, by introducing her country’s young leaders to the intellectual debates taking place in the West. Towards that end, she began organizing seminars for young Russian elected officials, mostly from the provinces, to discuss the meaning of federalism, the role of a free press, the means of ensuring an independent judiciary, and other abstract issues. She invited Western speakers, with a special emphasis on practitioners rather than theoreticians: working journalists, sitting congressmen, active members of parliament, current and former European officials as well as a few political scientists and historians.

By the year 2000 or so, the school was considered a huge success. It drew funding and attracted senior politicians from across Europe and the U.S., as well as Russia itself. Because the school was non-partisan and non-ideological, its first Russian participants described their experience at its seminars with enormous enthusiasm, using words like “revelation.” For some, it was the first time they’d ever heard issues properly debated, with two sides of an argument given equal time. For others, it was the first time they had ever discussed a philosophical question to which there was no right answer. For most it was the first time they’d met foreign politicians and journalists, and for everyone it was the first opportunity they’d had to ask them questions.

The school began to get a reputation for producing thoughtful and independent-minded “graduates”—but it also attracted the attention of the Russian authorities, and as the second post-Soviet decade wore on, the school began to run into trouble. Nemirovskaya began to receive regular visits from the FSB, the political police that replaced the KGB, and the school began to be audited by the



tax and regulatory authorities. Her success in raising Western funds was considered extremely suspicious, her friendly contacts with foreign diplomats even more so. Once, her home was raided by mysterious “burglars” who stole nothing but an award she’d been given by the British government.

Clearly, what had been considered a success in 2000 was, by 2008, considered by some to be a threat, even a center of espionage. Yet the school itself had not changed: It had stayed true to its original purpose—the promotion of open debate. But its values were slowly being rejected by the society around it. The school was dedicated to the promotion of individual liberty and open debate, but it was operating in a society where the very word “liberty” had begun to take on negative connotations.

AND NOT ONLY LIBERTY: “Free markets,” “democracy,” “free speech”—all of the things that Russians had seemed to want in the early 1990s were, by 2002 or 2003, being rapidly rejected by the public at large. In part, this was because Russia’s leaders and their foreign friends—most notably the American president, Bill Clinton—had

erred in telling the Russian nation repeatedly that these ideals had already been obtained. Looking around at the first fruits of what the American president was calling “freedom”—“privatized” companies that had been effectively stolen from the state, newspapers filled with libel, rampant crime and corruption, an oligarchy that had mysteriously taken control of the country’s richest assets—many Russians decided that if this was democracy, they preferred authoritarianism.

But the deeper problem lay in the nature of the people surrounding Vladimir Putin, the man who became president of Russia in 2000. Almost all of them came not just from the former Communist party, but, like Putin himself, from the former KGB. Given their education and their training, it was not surprising that the new ruling clan distrusted organizations like the Moscow School. Deep down, neither Putin nor his comrades truly believed that Russian citizens, left to their own devices, would or could make good political or economic choices. Instead, they believed that unless controlled and manipulated by the Kremlin, they would fall under the influence of foreign powers, and act under foreign orders. They did not, in other words, truly believe in the existence of individual liberty at all, let alone civil society.

With this kind of mindset, the Russian authorities perceived the Moscow School—along with human rights’ organizations, environmental groups, and of course new political parties—not as an element of nascent civil society, but as evidence of a secret network, probably involving Western spies. That view was echoed in the Russian press, which took up the theme of “foreign NGOs as Western fifth columns.” With apparent public support, the authorities began to discourage, even to threaten people like Nemirovskaya—and to encourage the development of a different sort of “civil society” altogether.

In 2005, Putin himself declared that “thousands of associations and civil unions exist and work constructively in [Russia]. However, not all of them are concerned with the real interests of the people. For some of these organizations the main objective has become to receive funds from influential foreign and domestic foundations, for others the aim is to serve dubious groups and commercial interests.”

While it’s true enough that not all associations are “concerned with the real interests of the people,” who is to determine that? The Russian state solution was straightforward: instead of independent groups,

initiated by private citizens and funded privately, the Russian administration created a state-financed, and state-organized, “civil society,” allegedly intended to serve the same purpose.

AS IT HAPPENS, I’ve run into this phenomenon too. In 2004, I was asked by an acquaintance to speak at a seminar on civic education for high school teachers, being held at something called the Institute for Democracy. I went, and gave a short speech on Western journalism of a kind I’d given many times at the Moscow School. Immediately, the audience attacked me. The first questioner asked me “why America supports Chechen terrorism.” Another asked me how I, a representative of the *Washington Post*—“widely known to be a U.S. government-controlled newspaper”—dared to speak about the free press at all.

The audience went on, parroting the most extreme version of the neo-Communist propaganda that was then beginning to appear in the Russian press. Afterwards, I asked the organizer to explain the origins of the Institute for Democracy. It was, she explained, actually an older organization, formerly known, in Soviet times, as the Institute for World Peace. Though it had a new title, it was run by the same director, and still operated according to the same principles. It “taught” students to follow whatever government line was currently in fashion.

The perks proffered by the Institute for Democracy—a free trip to Moscow, free meals, probably a stipend—probably encouraged many of the participants, provincial high school teachers, to attend the seminar. But I suspect that they had made an ideological decision as well. They came from that part of society which misunderstood “liberty” as “libertinism,” which believed economic reform to be the equivalent of economic chaos, and which preferred the more orderly world of state organization and constrained individual liberty to the messy, unpredictable, liberated world of private education and civil society.

Not all of Russia shared these views: Lena Nemirovskaya is still there, and she has many colleagues. But the opponents of individual liberty are currently in power, and they are not. For those in power, the Moscow School of Political Studies was indeed a threat, even a foreign conspiracy. They welcome the Putin administration, with its increased controls on media, its dislike of democratic opposi-

tion and its threats against independent-minded organizations, as a positive force for “stability.”

THOUGH PUTINISM IS THE post-Communist ideology that most explicitly rejects individual liberty and civil society, it is not completely unique. Suspicion and distrust of the new liberties could be found everywhere after 1989, and are around still. In 2005, President Vaclav Klaus of the Czech Republic voiced suspicion of Western-style NGOs because they promote agendas, of “artificial multiculturalism, of radical human right-ism, of aggressive environmentalism.” Perhaps so—but who is to determine which ones promote genuine human rights, or reasonable environmentalism?

In Poland too the suspicion of liberty has been voiced. In the months following the launch of the

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new stock exchange in 1991, the market fluctuations were so unexpected that one exasperated investor wrote a letter to a leading newspaper, complaining: “This market goes up and down, up and down, can’t the government regulate it so that it goes up all the time?”

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, Poles most emphatically did not share Russia’s mistrust of independent organizations on principle. In large part, this was because Poles had maintained a very few independent organizations through the years of Communism, and had even, in the decade before the regime actually crumbled, developed some new ones. True, the Communist regime destroyed or absorbed all kinds of groups: the Women’s League, the Boy Scouts, the Order of Malta, the craftsmen’s guilds. But it was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to destroy the Catholic Church. As a result, the church played a

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role in Communist Poland that was unique in the Communist world.

This role was partly intellectual—obviously, church teachings presented a clear alternative to Marxist ideology—but partly organizational as well. When I lived in Poland in the late 1980s, I was told that if I wanted to know what was going on, I'd have to go every week to a particular Warsaw church and pick up a copy of the city's weekly underground newspaper. Equally, if I wanted to see an exhibition of paintings that were not the work of the regime's artists, or a play that was not approved by the regime's censors, I could go to an exhibition or a performance in a church basement. The priests didn't write the newspapers, paint the paintings, or act in the plays—none of which was necessarily religious at all—but they made their space and resources available for the people who did. Officially, there was no such thing as “independent,” privately organized youth groups in Communist Poland. In practice, they existed—there was even an underground, non-Communist scouting movement—often within the physical, if not the spiritual, confines of the church.

BUT IF THE CHURCH WAS THE oldest and most enduring example of an independent, non-state institution in Poland, the Solidarity trade union was no less important. Born in the late 1970s out of a populist workers' revolt against poor living conditions—in large part, they were infuriated by the propaganda of the “workers' state,” which never conformed to reality—Solidarity grew from a small organization in a single shipyard into a national movement very quickly. Along with the Flying University—history and literature courses organized in private homes, outside the confines of Communist-dominated state universities—Solidarity became, for many of its ten million members, the first real experience in “self-organization” since the war. Even though it was destroyed, and its leaders jailed in 1981, the memory of that organization remained in the culture, and a small part of the underground remained active.

Finally, the fact that Poles had some freedom to travel, and therefore had some experience with trade in the 1970s and 1980s, also turned out to matter a great deal. The much-despised Polish “tourists” who streamed into Berlin in the late 1980s to sell butter, eggs, and cheap manufactured products in open-air markets collected not only capital—later invested in small shops and businesses—but the experience of



engaging in productive, self-organized economic activity, unsanctioned by the state. It may not be quite the same thing as founding a software company, but there is still a world of difference between the mindset of a person who buys and sells Taiwanese computer parts at street bazaars for a living and one who works as a Communist functionary.

Because there were probably as many of the former as of the latter by 1989 meant that the majority of Poles were not in principle opposed either to private shops or to private chess clubs, and indeed welcomed both when they began to appear. The post-1989 expansion of individual liberty was unthreatening, precisely because most people understood, from the beginning, that free choices would be exercised through the sorts of institutions that Poles already understood.

In some spheres, in fact, civil society rapidly flowered. The Polish version of the charter school movement took off in the 1990s, for example, and there are now hundreds of charter schools and independent schools in a country that had none fifteen years ago. Some were formed by the “Solidarity” wing of the teachers' union, which began founding

its own schools just as soon as it became legally possible. Others formed under the aegis of the church, or of church organizations such as Opus Dei; thus did old traditions of civic engagement spawn newer ones.

OTHER KINDS OF INSTITUTIONS took longer to get started, as people struggled to understand the new system. The fate of the Polish Women's League is, again, instructive. By 1989 the organization was utterly moribund at the national level, and in the early 1990s it more or less collapsed altogether. No one any longer had any need for an "official" women's group whose main function had been to echo state propaganda. But a few local chapters—of which Łódź is the most notable—felt that some of the functions they served were still necessary. In Łódź, for example, the League offered free legal clinics to women having marital or other problems that they were unable to solve alone. At first, the League petitioned the government for money to support such projects, but with only minimal success.

But over time, the League learned how to find new sources of income and support. Since Łódź is a city of textile mills, many of which have women employees, they succeeded in convincing employers that their services were necessary. Donations began to come in, and the organization stayed alive. Having lost their independence, they have now regained it. No longer a national organization, and no longer a state-run organization, the Women's League in Łódź now had a genuine purpose, and the women who ran it once again did so out of conviction, as they had in 1945.

Of course there are still hazards ahead, both for the development of such institutions and for the personal independence which both inspire their creation, and which they in turn promote. Again, I can cite my own experience, and my children's experience, at a Polish independent school in Warsaw, founded in 2005. Originally, the school's aims were very ambitious. Its headmaster wanted to offer, in addition to the standard subjects available in state schools, extra courses, designed according to students' interests and teachers' abilities—classical subjects such as Latin, extra languages, arts—woven into the day. In addition, the school wanted to involve the children in the community around them through field trips and projects.

The model works, but only up to a point. As it turns out, there are both legal and practical con-

straints, many left over from the Communist era, which the school must constantly fight. Teachers cannot teach precisely what they wish to teach, for example, as they are obliged by law to cover certain topics. The law even dictates how many hours a week should be spent on Polish language, math, etc., what the content of some of the courses should be, and the length of the breaks between classes.

The school also answers to the same heavy, educational bureaucracy that has been in place for decades. When a particular teacher recently took the decision, for example, to move a child from one grade to another, the change had to be verified with a local "pedagogical council," which required a psychiatrist's report, writing samples, and an extended meeting. The legal presumption was that individuals don't know best, that teachers can't make their own judgments about students, and that a bureaucratic institution representing the state must oversee all such decisions.

As it happens, the teacher in this case was willing to go through the procedure and argue his case. But surely there are others who, faced with the time and trouble needed to get an official approval, would have given up. Ultimately, this kind of interference weakens the school and the teachers who are trying to create something new. The suspicion of independent organizations that is so prominent in Russia may be less widespread in Poland, but it persists among those bureaucrats whose jobs and worldview continue to depend upon it.

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TO SOME EXTENT, the ongoing threats to freedom that still exist in Central and Eastern Europe are no different from those in the West. Any nation, however old and hallowed its democratic tradition, is capable of producing unscrupulous politicians who manipulate the secret services, steal money, and falsify elections. These things

happen sometimes in the United States, in France, or in Britain, so it is hardly surprising that they should happen in Poland, Hungary, or Ukraine.

In fact, the real test of a nation's stability and dedication to freedom is not whether citizens' rights and democratic procedures are sometimes violated, but whether anyone reacts when this happens, and

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whether anyone bears the political consequences. The deep dividing line in the post-Communist world is not, as some would have it, between Orthodox and Catholic or between Slavic and Magyar, but between countries whose citizens actually react to news of political misbehavior and those whose citizens do not. Evidence that a politician has been involved in a financial scandal can harm the electoral performance of his party in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Estonia. Evidence that the Russian president's secret services poisoned a political opponent using radioactive material did not harm the reputation of the Russian president at all. The maintenance of civil society thus requires the free circulation of information, as well as the institutions that allow the public to put pressure on the government. Any trends that weaken the flow of information—whether increased controls on Internet use or extended state control over the media—or that damage democratic institutions will ultimately prove detrimental to the cause of liberty as well.

In the case of those Central European countries that have joined the European Union, there is another, special category of threat. EU membership has, it is true, brought benefits, some unexpected. For the first time in recent memory, Central Europeans are able to travel easily, cross borders freely, study and trade in Western Europe. Providentially, the first two EU countries to open their labor markets to Central Europeans were Britain and Ireland, thereby giving hundreds of thousands of people exposure to the two most open economies in Europe.

Nevertheless, the EU adds another layer of even more unaccountable bureaucracy to that which

exists already in post-Communist Europe, and therefore another layer of rules and regulations designed to make life difficult both for independent institutions and for individuals. More worrying, though, are the threats that the EU's legislative momentum and cultural imperialism could pose in the future. What the philosopher Roger Scruton calls the EU's universalist, "secular 'human rights' agenda" is often diametrically opposed to the local and homegrown ideologies of civil society, particularly those inspired by a religious or patriotic philosophy. Rigorous enforcement of "non-discrimination" against homosexuals could, for example, come into conflict with the rules of Catholic organizations or the Boy Scouts, as it has done already in Britain, for example, destroying Catholic adoption agencies. As Scruton writes, "The ideology of non-discrimination is inherently hostile to the spontaneous forms of membership: and it is sweeping the old forms of membership away, putting nothing in the place of them save a new kind of dependence on the universal state."

Myself, I'm inclined to believe that resurgent civil society is, at the moment, strong enough to withstand this ideology: Among other things, the experience of being in the EU has itself given new members a certain geopolitical self-confidence, allowing them to maintain some distance from the European intellectual mainstream. They don't feel the need to slavishly follow all Western trends, since their status as a "Western" country is now secure.

And if the threat is still there—well, it's the same threat faced by others. Economically, Central Europe remains weaker than its Western neighbors. But socially, culturally, even politically? I'm not so sure. In the 21st century, liberty will still be threatened in Europe. But for the first time in many years, the East may be better equipped to defend it. ❧

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