



# Europe's Disintegration Moment

*by Ivan Krastev*

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It is often Europe is facing a crisis of integration. Some years ago it was conventional wisdom that the European integration project was the best "convergence machine" that mankind had invented. The assumption was that if a poor and undeveloped (but democratic and integration minded) European country was put "in the machine," with the passing of time that country would become richer and more democratic, thereby closing the prosperity gap with its wealthier neighbors. However, this "world of yesterday" has abruptly disappeared in front of our eyes, and what was initially viewed as a "convergence machine" is now being seen as a "divergence machine." The European Union as we know it has vanished.

The EU is in crisis, and it is paralyzed because of the dramatic transformation of the character of the liberal democratic regimes in Europe, usually described as "the rise of populism." This transformation has taken the form of growing mistrust of democratic institutions, rebellion against the political establishment, endorsement of the "wisdom of the crowds" and rejection of the wisdom of the experts, support for radical political actors and the reduction of politics nothing more than a clash between the "people" and "the corrupt elites." The challenge we are facing is rooted in the fact that our societies are more open and democratic than ever before, but it is precisely this openness that leads to the ineffectiveness and lack of trust in democratic institutions.

Today's rebels do not oppose the status quo of yesterday; rather, they seek to preserve it. We are witnessing a kind of 1968 in reverse, and this time around, what most people fear is change. The European reaction to the "Arab Spring" has demonstrated that demographic imagination has replaced democratic imagination as the driving force of European politics. Threatened majorities—those who have everything and fear everything—have emerged as the major force in European politics. They exercise the most influence over society, and at the same time they are obsessed with a perception of powerlessness.

The new populist actors in Europe are successful because they represent the fears of European societies. This new populism differs dramatically in its language, political objectives and ideological sources from the traditional populist movements in the 19th and 20th century. Why in the last century the notion of populism was closely related to the notion of people as kin, "heartland", "the nation of nationalists," now the ideology of populism derives not so much from the notion of people as you know it from the history textbook, but from the idea of the people or the majority as we see it in the opinion polls. The new populism represents the frustration of the empowered.

The central political paradox of our times is that the factors that contributed to the success of European democracy are the ones that threaten it today. The crisis of trust in democratic institutions in Europe is the outcome not of the failure of the democratization of our societies, but rather of the success of democratization. The competing strategies to "save the Union" share a common assumption, namely that European democracies will resemble their previous selves. In reality we cannot get the EU right if we fail to re-think the unintended consequences of the five revolutions that shattered our world since 1968: the cultural revolution of the 1960s that put the individual at the center of politics; the Market revolution of the 1980s that delegitimized the state as an economic actor; the Central European revolutions of 1989 that reconciled the cultural revolution of the 1960s (resisted by the Right) and Regan's market revolution of the 1980s (rejected by the Left) and that made us believe that liberal democracy is the end of history and the natural state of humanity; the revolution in communications brought by the spread of the Internet (Web2.0); and finally, the revolution in the neurosciences that made political consultants believe that manipulation of the emotions and not rational discussion is at the heart of democratic politics. While in their early stages, all five of these revolutions were critically important for deepening the democratic experience, it was paradoxically, these same five revolutions that are not at the center of the crisis of liberal democracy.

Now the EU risks disintegration if something dramatic does not happen. What we should fear is a vicious circle—namely that in responding to populist pressure some governments will decide to please the public by introducing policies that openly contradict the objectives of European integration/re-introduction of national borders (for example), and that the advance of such policies will make the EU less effective and less credible. The more the Union loses credibility, the more the opposition to it will increase. Europe has witnessed this dynamic more than once in the twentieth century, and the question now is how to arrest this newly born disintegration inertia.

In short, we have reached what Gerschenkron called a “nodal point,” a point where in a relatively short period of time we will witness, experience and perhaps even participate in aesthetic, ideological, strategic and finally institutional redefinition of the meaning of democracy and Europe. Something more essential has worn out than the replaceable part of the machine. The biggest danger for the EU derives from the behavior of its political and intellectual elites, and whether they decide to busy themselves “fixing” the project when in fact, the solution is to re-invent it.



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