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**TABLE OF CONTENT**

Editorial.....	3
Liviu Warter	
Management Education and Duff McDonald's Report on the Harvard Business School.....	7
J.-C. Spender	
Culture, Vuca and the All-Encompassing Unrest. What Will Happen? .....	25
Huib Wursten	
The Erosion of Multiculturalism in the Western World.....	31
Jorge Diener	
Accounting and Statistical Methods for a New Ethic of the History. Case Study for Romania's Recent History .....	37
Băluță Aurelian Virgil	
How to Integrate Nature & Nurture in Coaching? .....	47
Philippe Rosinski	
Sacred Rituals, the Body's Religious Symbolism and Human Trafficking .....	57
Cristina Gavriluță, Nicu Gavriluță	

# THE EROSION OF MULTICULTURALISM IN THE WESTERN WORLD

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## Abstract

This article aims to define the current trends in multiculturalism in Western democracies. Its conceptual framework is defined by the weakening of liberal democracy in traditionally democratic societies and its impact on the acceptance of cultural differences as a reference for social integration. We observe a predominant erosion of multicultural values, primarily in Europe and the United States; and we intent to analyze the causes and draw conclusions in order to propose ways to improve the current situation.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, liberal, democracy, populism, migration, geopolitics.

## The weakening of liberal democracy

After the end of the Second World War and later on, the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites, the broad political alternatives to liberal democracies such as fascism and communism, disappeared. What were the competing paradigms of the twenty-first Century apparently gave the winning trophy to the liberal democracies led by North America and Western Europe. The expansion of the European Union and its inclusion of the former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe created a new reality, one where liberal democracy became a monopoly of political regimes in the Western world. Finally, North America and Europe were united under one umbrella of values, norms and a set of regulations that ensured freedom of movement, human and civil rights and the hopes for human betterment for all. For most of the countries that were previously under Soviet influence, the European Union became the exclusive Club they all wanted to belong to. Integration into the European Union meant access to markets and funding on one side, but also adherence to the newly established European set of values on the other. Only by adhering to the legal regulations associated with those values, were the new countries going to reap the benefits of belonging to the Club.

The end of the last millennium brought enthusiasm and hope to an interconnected world where barriers were coming down, ideologies were less important and technology would improve the lives across the globe. However, with the beginning of the new millennium, the global threat of terrorism marked a shift in the global political agenda, one that would mark only the beginning of long term processes that will lead into the current situation.

The “End of History” as foreseen by Fukuyama (1992) in his end of the century book “The end of History and the last Man” came to an end abruptly when the issues of security, new type of warfare and mass migration reshaped completely the political discourse and provoked a steady deterioration of liberal democracies and the global dialogue of civilizations. With the flow of unrequested immigration into developed countries, the traditional liberal values that had been in consensus in the Western Northern Hemisphere,

fell down in less visible ways than the Berlin Wall did as a symbol of the previous major political transformation.

In contrast to the fall of the Berlin Wall that represented a clear mark of the quick transition from the vanishing Communist regimes into new forms of democracy; the transition to illiberal democracies is a much less visible process. Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, has taken a lead by openly defending illiberal democracies both in his rhetorics and his actions, with Poland following through. In the context of a world dominated by fully authoritarian regimes like China and pseudo-democracies like Russia and Turkey, the growth of anti-liberal movements in long established democracies like the United States, the United Kingdom and most of the European Union members; all signal that liberal democracies are at a minimum being questioned, challenged and in some cases broken down in pieces.

### **Liberal Democracy and Pluralism**

One of the pillars of liberal democracies is its inherent pluralism. The ideal of liberal democracy basically gives power to different groups, parties and minorities through a system of check and balances that stops the majority from imposing its power over minorities. The way it ensures that is through a clear independence of the judicial system, defending the rights of free speech and expression and ensuring that an independent and strong-minded media exists. That's one of the reasons that the current political fight against liberal democracy focuses mainly on attacks on law enforcement institutions and discrediting the media. President's Trump's questioning of the FBI and his ongoing twittering and public attacks on the mainstream media are the best example of that strategy. When the leading world democracy turned its actions and words against its liberal essence, it gives legitimacy to other democracies to do the same one after the other.

The actions of the current US administration have a major impact in the erosion of pluralism in the western world. The handling of the immigration issue is heading the way in this respect. When the narrative presented by the government associates all Mexican immigrants with criminals, it creates an environment of intolerance for the difference, of rejection of diversity, the very same values that liberal democracies stand for.

In Europe, while populist parties to the left and right increase their share of the electorate in most countries, the traditional parties of the liberal consensus keep losing ground. The consensus that kept liberal democracies was one of rotation where conservative parties rotated with more progressive political forces in the government but never questioned the system itself.

What we see now is a social and political transformation that doesn't mean a change of government but a change of the basic political system where societies exist. What was the melting pot in an America that welcomed with open arms immigrants from the world over; and the multicultural rebuilt Europe that gave space to the different cultural and ethnical expressions under one European project, became history, not because history ended but because it started a new, darker chapter.

### **Mass Migration and Populism**

The last decade witnessed a significant increase in the number of mass migration and global displacement of asylum seekers and refugees. According to the latest OECD report, "G20 countries population increased by 10 million between 2010 and 2015 due to net migration, which is at its highest level since the early 1950s"(OECD, 2017).

The dramatic growth in the number of immigrants coming into the developed economies of the Western world, posed a challenge to the liberal consensus. The Syrian war caused one of the largest displacements of refugees in modern history and provoked an unprecedented crisis among country members of the European Union. When German

President Angela Merkel took the lead in opening the borders to all refugees, she took a clear decision of standing behind the essence of the European project and the values it represents. At the same time, her decision opened a Pandora box of political reshaping of the continent.

The issue of mass migration from Muslim countries amplified two latent social issues in many European countries. The first, the frustration of many among the working and middle class with the lack of economic progress in their individual lives. The second, the fear that culturally, Muslim immigration, would destroy the traditional national cultures of each country. When the governments of Poland and Hungary resisted the request to accept refugees, they were both acting to protect their own sovereignty and at the same time manipulating the fear of their constituencies to strengthen their grip on power.

Those attempts of resistance to the refugee policy of the European Union set the stage for the growth of populist parties in other countries in Europe. Raising the flag of anti-immigration policies, populist parties increased their electoral weight in Italy, Germany, Austria among others. Without any doubt, it also had a big influence in the outcome of the Brexit referendum.

The combination of anti-immigrant and anti-Europe agendas served as a useful tool for populist parties to increase their agendas against the liberal model of democracy. Blaming the liberal media, the left and the presumed increased power of the minorities against the “silent” majority, they woke up the darkest nationalistic sub-consciousness that divided Europe in the first half of the previous century.

Encouraged by the European trends described below, the Trumps’s 2016 campaign built on the fears of middle class Americans focusing and combining the fears of personal and job insecurity. The US’s administration attempted policy of closing the borders for citizens of Muslim countries based on the claimed threat of islamic terrorism, reopened the wounds that followed the September 11th tragic terrorist attacks. The anti-Mexican and anti-immigration agenda of the current US government works on both the security fears and the labor concerns of the average American. It builds on stereotypes, generalizations and prejudices. In their worldview, the presence of Mexican gangs transforms every Mexican immigrant into a potential criminal, regardless of the fact that they represent a marginal percentage among the hard working and law abiding group of Mexicans in the US. At the same time, the idea that rejecting immigrants south of the Rio Bravo would bring back jobs to the working class Americans who lost their jobs as factories closed down in the last decades, is a misreading or a manipulation of socio-economic processes at the root of the unemployment issues in the US.

One way or another, in both sides of the Atlantic, the rebirth of populist and nationalistic movements is both a response to and a manipulation of the mass migration issues. This new trend represents a broad regression on the previous gains of multicultural diversity, one that might have an impact in generations to come.

### **From the margins to mainstream politics: the rise of extremism**

One of the main elements that contributed to political stability in Europe was the evolution of the European Union as an institution that promoted shared values of respect to minority rights. They did that by adopting laws that clearly prohibited discrimination, laws that are to be implemented by each one of the 28 EU country members and followed by those working on getting access to the Union.

However, legislation hasn’t stopped the growth of discrimination as shown in the latest study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2017). The rate of discrimination of minorities has increased in several EU countries, at the same time that intolerant rhetorics have moved from the margins to the frontline of the political map.

The Europe that boycotted the election of the extreme-right political leader Jorg Haider in Austria in 2000 does not exist anymore. That Europe was protecting itself from going back in history by making sure that extreme political parties would stay in the margins. Today, powerful European governments can implement pseudo-discriminatory policies and actions without putting at risk their belonging to the EU. While in theory, EU institutions have the power to sanction those countries, the new political balance in the continent does not allow that in practice. The rise of extreme parties in Italy, Germany, Austria and even in some of the most liberal and progressive EU countries such as Holland, Sweden and Denmark; has also caused those parties at the political center to move their political agendas rightwards in order to keep their electorate base, giving some degree of legitimacy to this raising intolerant environment.

Although most of the discrimination is targeted to Muslims, Africans and Roma, the Jewish issue continues to be of great significance due to Europe's historical role in the Holocaust. In that context, the way that not just parties, but those parties in the government, play today on the fringes of antisemitism is another sign of this new official discriminatory policy. As Poland legislated an official revisionism of Poland's role in the Holocaust; Hungary's ruling party, Fidesz, ran an openly antisemitic campaign demonizing Jewish financial mogul George Soros. When people in Budapest central station walk over Soros' face, we understand that there is a new reality. When boats of desperate refugees float on the Mediterranean coast waiting for their final fate as traditionally refugee-welcoming countries like Italy show now their backs; we know for sure that the European project is in decay.

The current US administration and in particular, US President Donald Trump, are the ultimate example of how the marginal ideas of discrimination become mainstream. Although still limited to legislating anti-immigration policies, President Trump set the new narrative touching again the nerves of "we against them". Attacking immigrants as both criminals and job hunters that threaten American's well being, he created a framework for renewed discrimination. Social networks and media fueled this process in ways that sometimes seem unstoppable.

### **Russia and the new paradigm**

Much has been said and analyzed, particularly in the last two years regarding the geopolitical role of Russia under Putin's leadership. Putin's Russia is one of renewed hopes of rebuilding the Russian empire, the one that preceded the Soviet Union. Many analyst look at the imperialistic actions of Russia as one that is empty of any ideology, like today's Russia apparently is too. While it's true that today's Russia lacks the communist ideology that dominated the Soviet era, that doesn't mean that it hasn't unleashed a new paradigm, one that is slowly taking over in many other Western countries.

The Putin that ran away from the KGB Berlin offices as the crowds were bringing the Berlin Wall down in 1989, decided in those early times of his political career that in order for Russia to stay strong and powerful, it couldn't let those waves of freedom reach its borders. During the first years of his tenure as both President and Prime Minister, he saw the struggle on the same light of the Cold War, being a territorial competition for areas of influence when he aimed to preserve the areas of influence that were part of the Soviet Union. As he transformed Russia into a semi-authoritarian democracy, he made it into a model of that kind of illiberal democracy where pseudo-democratic institutions are a facade for the lack of basic rights. The new Russia goes back to the traditional values of pre-Soviet Russia including its associations with the Church, conservative morals and nationalistic values. As Russia built a new political paradigm of semi-authoritarian democracy under nationalistic idealization of its history; Putin understood that his war wasn't going to be won by protecting his territories but

by attacking and weakening from inside the stability of the Western alliances that in his view threaten the existence of a powerful Russia.

Russia's new interventionism is based on a combination of proxy interference tools in national politics mainly in support of extreme right parties and sometimes those to the extreme left. Its aim is to destabilize the political stability of liberal democracies by breaking the balance of power of traditional political parties and strengthening the power of governments who move into the same kind of semi-authoritarian systems that Russia promotes. By doing that, Russia has given legitimacy not only to these new kind of political regimes but also to the far-right parties that focus on keeping their nations homogeneous both ethnically and religiously and at the same time, eroding the advance of multicultural practices that prevailed during the last decades in the Western World.

### **The role of civil society**

Amidst this process of erosion of multiculturalism as sanctioned by governments, the civil society keep making gains in addressing issues that better represent minorities. That is a process that historically has been more predominant in periods when governments were weak in defending minority rights. The awakening of civil society is a traditional reaction to the prevalence of governments that disregard the needs of specific groups in society.

In the US, the "MeToo" movement represents a new trend of groups in the society that have traditionally been silent and/or silenced and react organically to an issue that is of particular concern not just to one group but the existence of a healthy society, in this case the issue of sexual abuse. The latest resistance movement of American high school students to the gun lobby behind the Trump's administration is another example of how the civil society has still the power to keep the check and balances in existing democracies.

In the case of Europe, where civic organizations are strong and have traditionally been supported by EU institutions, their power has been challenged by national government policies modeled on the Russian control over NGOs that limit the activity of those organizations. For refugees and asylum seekers, the challenge is bigger as their lack of resident status and the fear of deportation means that they can hardly get organized to express their needs and rely on the support of other civic partners who can fight for and with them to make their needs being heard.

### **Conclusion**

As we currently see a regression in multiculturalism in the Western World, we understand that there are political processes both in national and regional levels that have a significant impact in this moving backwards for cultural diversity, its respect and its evolution. Those processes, while not irreversible, signal a shift in major paradigms in international politics and a challenge to liberal democracy as the predominant political model. The weakening of that model causes serious challenges to the rights and needs of diverse groups and cultures, challenges that will have to be addressed by new political movements and the civil society finding creative ways to improve the social and political climate. As we witness a new chapter in the evolution of humankind, we don't have certain answers to when the erosion of multiculturalism will stop or as how it will reverse course; but we know that the causes are various and by deconstructing its complexity, we can address each issue by itself and the phenomena as a whole. So that multiculturalism will find its way back, in a new shape, in a new light, in a renewed era of progress.

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