Article

Authoritarianism and Misinformation in Eastern Europe

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Learn about the revival of authoritarian politics in Eastern Europe in this public webinar

On November 9, 1989, the most iconic symbol of ideological division in the world – the Berlin Wall – came down amid jubilant celebrations in Germany. The end of the wall came to represent the end of the Cold War as within two years a succession of Eastern European Communist regimes collapsed in domino fashion. Mikhail Gorbachev, then President of the Soviet Union, talked about drawing a “fine line” during this postwar period and proclaimed that the goal was a “new Europe: a Europe without dividing lines.” He was not alone in promoting the idea of finality. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously attributed the fall of the Wall to “the end of history.” It was to be the end of “mankind’s ideological evolution” and the beginning of universal adherence to the tenets of Western liberal democracy.

Thirty-five years later, history is far from being over. While Communist regimes may have ended, authoritarianism is on the march again in Eastern European countries. Poland, a European Union member, is backsliding on the union’s democratic norms. LGBTQ rights are

being stripped away while the Polish government undermines judicial independence, striking at the heart of the rule of law and human rights protections. In Belarus, security forces arbitrarily detained and tortured thousands of people in prisons in an attempt to stifle protests against the reelection of President Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. Many of the protestors have fled the country, ending up in Lithuania and Poland. The region as a whole has seen increased xenophobia and mistreatment of both minorities and refugees.

All of these developments raise the following questions: Why is authoritarianism on the rise, three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union? And what roles do religion and religious actors play in regional politics? How are populist movements contributing to the public sphere in Eastern Europe?

Discussing the Role of Religion in Authoritarianism

To provide some answers, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs and the Pulitzer Center hosted a webinar in December 2021 that featured Simon Ostrovsky, a PBS *NewsHour* weekend special correspondent and reporter on political trends in Belarus and Poland, and Marlene Laruelle, director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University. Two other Berkley Center senior fellows, Jocelyne Cesari and José Casanova, joined as facilitators and respondents. The conversation covered the rise of authoritarianism in Eastern Europe and the particular role of media and misinformation, especially during the Belarusian crackdown on the political opposition. Mainstream conservatism and nationalism, as well as the intensifying roles of religion and religious actors in the region, were also key points of discussion.

Learn about the Pulitzer Center project here.