

## Is Democracy Stalemated?

*di Maciej Kisilowski*

*Advocates of liberal democracy tend to veer between triumphalism and fatalism nowadays. But neither perspective really captures the politics of countries like Poland, Serbia, Hungary, Italy, and the United States.*

VIENNA – Recent news from Eastern Europe has given us hope for liberal democracy. In Hungary, the largest-ever Budapest gay pride parade defied bans imposed by the country’s authoritarian leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In neighboring Serbia, mass student protests continue against Orbán’s ally, President Aleksandar Vučić.

[Mariana Mazzucato](#) & [Rainer Kattel](#) think progressives have neglected the importance of delivering results that voters will feel in their own lives.

But caution is warranted. Even within Eastern Europe, we can point to equally significant signs of democratic decay. Consider Poland, where the far-right Karol Nawrocki’s victory in the June presidential election dashed hopes for a decisive democratic renewal.

How should we interpret these contradictions? Commentators provide little clarity, oscillating between triumphalism and fatalism. Hence, the historian [Timothy Snyder saw](#) in Serbia’s protests “new hope for democratization,” the philosopher [Slavoj Žižek framed](#) them as an effort “to create the conditions for a new politics,” and Nicu Ștefănuță, a European Parliament vice-president, [described](#) the Budapest pride parade as being “about what kind of Europe we choose to build and protect.”

Yet when it came to Poland, the sociologist Krzysztof Katkowski, [writing](#) in *Jacobin*, offered the typical reaction: Nawrocki’s victory is evidence of a “deeper crisis within the post-1989 liberal order ... increasingly undermined by radical alternatives.”

All these comments frame individual events as signs of broader trends, reflecting our collective longing for a grand narrative that explains the current political moment. Liberals, of course, yearn for any indication that the populist “wave” is receding, because they cling to a progressive hope that the arc of history bends toward justice.

But when facts no longer support this optimistic story, liberals are quick to despair about their democracies teetering on the brink of collapse. The usual reasons are that elites have proven inept, while large swaths of the electorate have been manipulated or shown themselves to be outright “[deplorable](#).”

Yet neither triumphalism nor fatalism captures the real dynamic. A more measured analysis shows that history’s arc is not bending at all; it is stuck. We are locked in ideological trench warfare between two large, robust political camps. In country after country, the support base for liberal democratic politics mirrors what scholars have called the “[reservoir](#)” of support for the authoritarian right.

In places like Poland, this politics of attrition has persisted for decades. Had Rafał Trzaskowski, the liberal mayor of Warsaw, prevailed in the presidential election, he would have become the country’s most progressive head of state since 1989. Instead, Poles will have the most conservative presidency in their post-communist history.

This is not just “polarization,” a term that implies symmetrical extremism. The real problem lies in the fact that the right’s platform – while genuinely popular – is often alarmingly irrational: more fossil-fuel extraction in the face of climate disaster; anti-vaccination rhetoric during pandemics; anti-immigrant hysteria amid demographic decline; economic withdrawal (for example, Brexit) in response to rising global competition. It is hard for liberals not to oppose these ideas vigorously, even if doing so deepens the ideological divide.

If we are looking for a common thread in all the optimistic story lines, it is that they occur in countries where authoritarian leaders have demonstrably failed to deliver for their people. This is the outcome that one should expect for a political movement whose foundational views lack logical coherence.<sup>1</sup>

Hungary is a case in point. The country is plagued by [stagflation](#), because private investors have lost trust in a system that allows for virtually no independent institutions.

Despite championing pro-natalist policies, birth rates have [plummeted](#) to levels lower than those in many of the Western European countries that Orbán despises.

Serbia, too, feels increasingly out of step with its neighbors, Croatia and Slovenia – both members of the European Union and the eurozone. Its authoritarian government has failed to deliver on its promises, and the country is now plagued by high [unemployment](#) (especially among the young), widespread [corruption](#), and heavy-handed state control.

Until recently, populist fatigue had been met mainly by political leaders promising a return to the old liberal consensus. But such strategies, rooted in the binary narrative of liberal triumph or decline, have fallen short everywhere – from Poland and the United Kingdom to the United States under Joe Biden.

In this context, Hungary has become particularly interesting because it has a new opposition leader with a different message. Two years ago, Péter Magyar was a regime insider, freshly divorced from Orbán's justice minister. But following a series of scandals involving his former spouse, he decided to launch what has become a wildly popular opposition movement.

Though Magyar broke with Orbán's authoritarian "[mafia state](#)," he did not abandon many of the conservative values that Orbán represents. He was notably absent from the Budapest pride parade and only commented, sarcastically, that Orbán is "[the king of Pride in Europe](#)" for having issued the ban that provoked such massive turnout. This was a strategic choice. While turnout was impressive, the [200,000](#) participants represent less than 4% of Hungary's active electorate, and a recent [poll](#) showed that 47% of Hungarians, including 53% of undecided voters, opposed the march.

If Magyar wins next year's general election, his policies would probably have more in common with those of Italy's popular prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, than of struggling liberal leaders like UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer or Polish Prime Minister [Donald Tusk](#). Thus, we may be witnessing the emergence of a "far right-lite." Its exponents may try to minimize the most harmful geopolitical, economic, and environmental effects of populist policies while still credibly responding to the deeply entrenched nativist and anti-intellectual sentiments of today's conservative voters.

If there is a way out of this democratic stalemate, it likely won't be through a decisive victory for either the liberal or the authoritarian side. Instead, the result might be an uneasy truce – an attempt to “freeze” the ideological trench war by balancing the demands of both camps.