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THE STATE OF EUROPE'S DEMOCRACY 25 YEARS AFTER THE WALL

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BRUSSELS - The fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago this week swept away the most glaring gaps in political and economic opportunity between Western and East Central Europe.

As distinctions between old and new Europe blur, the declining health of democracy in the continents postcommunist frontier states threatens both democratic values and the security of the region.

In Hungary, the idea of failed transition- that Hungary's shift to democracy after 1989 was unsuccessful and incomplete - has served as the pretext for wide-ranging reforms that consolidate authority in the hands of Viktor Orbans Fidesz party.

Orban's unsettling accomplishments since 2010 include the creation of a media oversight commission whose government appointees have far-reaching powers to regulate electronic and print media; a new constitution adopted in a rushed, nontransparent process; and new electoral legislation that ensured the survival of Orbans two-thirds parliamentary supermajority.

By now, the Fidesz-led coalition dominates most major decision-making bodies and the government has full control over all but a few independent institutions.

Earlier this year, Orban laid out a vision of Hungary as an illiberal nation state, citing Russia, China, and Turkey as models. With the exception of a few minor legal concessions, Orbans response to four years of escalating domestic and international criticism has been a corresponding increase in revolutionary rhetoric, accompanied by new restrictions.

In Slovakia, Prime Minister Robert Fico has also harnessed the reactionary zeitgeist of post-crisis Europe, pushing back against EU-mandated austerity measures and speaking out against anti-Russia sanctions after the annexation of Crimea.

Meanwhile, the opposition is being boxed out of political decision-making and politicised appointments continue in the judiciary. Sme, the countrys leading opposition-oriented daily, was recently purchased by a company involved in the biggest corruption scandal in independent Slovakiyas history.

Oligarchisation of media ownership

Media ownership and the influence of tycoons with murky connections has been a problem in the Czech Republic, as well. In June 2013, billionaire and Finance Minister Andrej Babis purchased the MAFRA publishing house, which puts out two of the countrys most influential dailies, raising concerns of self-censorship and oligarchisation. Babis has also acquired the countrys most popular radio station.

In Romania and Bulgaria, the many positive changes since EU accession are increasingly offset by institutionalised corruption and politicised judicial bodies, both linked to the influence of oligarchs.

Romanias anticorruption office has pursued arrests and convictions in high-profile corruption cases, but other developments - such as an attempt to decriminalise graft in parliament in 2013 - raise questions about the political class long-term commitment to clean living.

In Bulgaria, institutional problems have been exacerbated by the fragility of recent governments - four cabinets in the last two years - as well as organised crime and Russias growing interest in the countrys potential as an export route for Russian energy.

Poland may end 2014 on a high note, as the most outspoken and committed champion of Ukrainian democracy and the home of the European Councils first Central European president. But there are serious problems here, too, including media that are increasingly polarised and unprofessional and endemic government corruption, often made public via leaked tapes rather than by formal investigations.

The forces of civil society

Democratisation efforts in post-communist Europe have thus reached an unstable plateau, further threatened by Europes protracted economic crisis. As in much of Western Europe, prolonged public dissatisfaction has bred support for populist demagogues, who exploit wedge issues like immigration, the rights of religious or sexual minorities, and abortion.

Faced with Russias re-emergence as an unambiguous enemy of liberal reform and European integration, Europes democracies - both old and new - must work harder than ever to reinforce the liberal democratic practices and institutions that bind them.

In particular, democracies must come together to support civil society in the former communist sphere.

The success of protests in Hungary in the face of the Orban governments recent efforts to impose an internet tax is a vivid reminder that movements of engaged citizens stand as a bulwark against the authoritarianism, especially in societies where opposition political parties are weak.

The forces of civil society are the contemporary versions of the workers who formed Polands Solidarity trade union and the artists and writers who were the backbone of Czechoslovakias Velvet Revolution.

While the challenges facing todays democracy advocates are less daunting than those that confronted Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, the threats to pluralism, honest government, and civil rights remain very real.

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