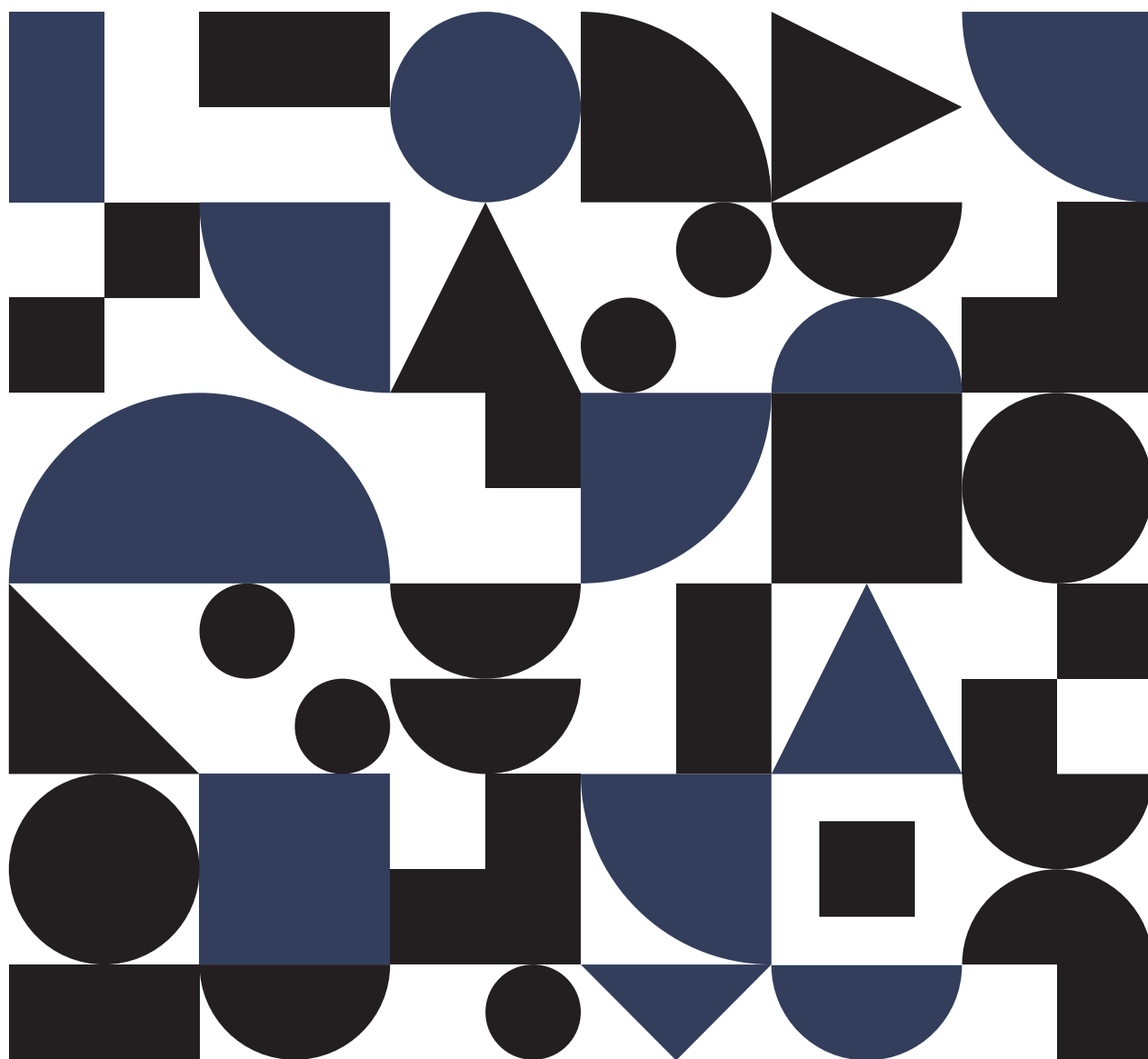


Democracy, Demography and the East-West Divide in Europe

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Democracy, Demography and the East-West Divide in Europe

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3

An old man dies somewhere in a remote village in Bulgaria. He is 92 years old, the last person living in the village and so it takes some time for people to discover he has died. Most probably, no one would have noticed his death if not for the fact that because of it, the population of the country fatally drops under 7 million people (2 million less than in 1989). Suddenly the death of the unknown old man triggers waves of moral panic and becomes the focus of national politics. Demography is destiny if you know that because of low fertility rate, low life expectancy and massive outmigration, Bulgaria has become the world champion in population decline in the absence of war or natural disasters. People start asking themselves: are we going to vanish? Are there going to be any Bulgarians left in the next hundred years? Is it democracy or the EU which are to blame?

The president of the country – a pedestrian nationalist who is facing re-election – is determined that something should be done. He of course can easily increase the population if he decides to open the country for thousands of migrants willing to come, but this is the one thing he cannot do because in the days of the 2015 refugee crisis he was elected on the promise that not a single immigrant would enter the country. Bulgaria will be opened only for Bulgarians. But where to find them when those who emigrated are unwilling to come back? So, in the same way that Columbus went to look for new land for the Spanish crown, the president sends out an anthropological expedition in order to find some left out Bulgarians somewhere in the world and bring them home. In a short time the anthropologists proudly report that in a remote region of Central Asia, in the territory of the former Soviet Union, they have found a population that resembles the proto-Bulgarians who left this part of the world some 70 generations ago. The president is thrilled. First, if these people will get Bulgarian passports, it means the country will be back to 7.5 million people, but secondly, he made a deal with the local authoritarian leader that all these half million new citizens will vote for him in the coming presidential elections.

So goes the plot of the recently published satirical novel *Mission Turan* by a prominent Bulgarian author, Alek Popov. At the end of the book, things don't turn out in the way the President expected. The "new Bulgarians" – after taking their EU passports – fly to France and Germany and do not bother to vote in the presidential elections, thus causing the defeat of the President. The President's attempt to put together an electoral body that will elect him has

failed.

Popov's novel captures three problems that are central for making sense of the rise of right-wing populism in Europe today.

First, the novel reveals the importance of demography in the current transformation of Western democracies. Aside from Israel, there is no rich country in the world whose population would not – absent migration – be on track to shrink. It is this demographic anxiety of small and shrinking nations that are at the roots of populists' electoral success in Eastern Europe. In the last three decades, Central and Eastern European countries as a whole have lost a population which is equal to the population of Hungary and the Czech Republic combined.

Secondly, it reveals the troublesome relation between the fear of population loss and openness to migration. In the absence of large-scale immigration, European welfare states are doomed. But governments who advocate open borders are in trouble in most of the EU member states, and particularly in Eastern Europe. So, Europe desperately needs migrants in order to preserve its social model but voters are not ready to open the borders. In 1965, persons over the age of 65 in EU member states were present in numbers equalling 15 percent of those aged 20 to 64. In 2015, that figure had almost doubled to 29 percent. By 2050, at least half of Europeans will be older than 50. Pro-natalist policies, even if partly successful, cannot reverse this trend, nor can the return of some recent emigrants. The aging of the population is narrowing society's time horizon and dramatically changes the nature of the electoral body. Should we be surprised that Europe is infected with the virus of nostalgia if we know that in Germany today, people younger than 30 make up only 14.4 percent of the electorate, people over 50 make up to 57.8 percent, and the political choices of the old and young – as 2021 elections demonstrate – substantially differ.

Thirdly, the novel helps us realize that in a democracy people elect their governments, but governments are also trying to elect their people by designing citizenship laws, by designing the electoral laws, and by employing practices like gerrymandering and voter suppression. And while governments' temptation to elect "the people" is a constant feature of democratic politics, it is in moments of dramatic demographic, social, and cultural change that the way governments try to elect their people becomes of critical importance. It is in moments like this that the politics of migration and citizenship becomes the central issue in electoral politics and the best migrant is the one who will vote for the governing party.

Too many of them and too few of us

The fear of de-population is not a new problem. In France, for example, the military consequences of demographic change were discussed constantly from the Franco-Prussian war until WWII. Low fertility was interpreted as a sign of moral and political decline. In the middle ages it was the impotence of the king that signalled trouble to the community; in modern times it is the low fertility of the nation. A French postcard from the period shows a scene of five Germans bayoneting two Frenchmen: another featured large German babies

looking down on their smaller French counterparts¹. National decline – as well as class decline – is often illustrated in literature as the impossibility to have kids or through the generations of the family. The fear of population decline of the nation goes hand in hand with the fear that within the nation it is the wrong classes and ethnic groups that show higher fertility. Political demographer Teitelbaum insists that eugenics should be seen as the “movement of middle-class professionals and men of property who found a biological language to express their fears of revolution or proletarianization”².

What is new in the current debate coloured by “poetic defeatism and elegant racism” is the role of demographic projections in stirring public sentiments. Demographic anxieties are fuelled, in Europe and elsewhere, not only by demographers’ projections but also by public impressions of ethnic ratios and dynamics. These can be inaccurate. As Suketu Mehta reports:

A recent study found that Americans, as an overall average, think the foreign-born make up around 37 percent of the population; in reality, they are only 13.7 percent... The French think that one in three people in their country is Muslim. The actual number is one in 13³.

Europeans still numerically predominate in Europe, but they are starting to imagine a future in which they are persecuted minorities and democracy could become their worst enemy. The research of Jennifer Richeson, a social psychologist at Yale University, and Maureen Craig, a social psychologist at New York University, demonstrated the political power of demographic imagination. They have figured out that in democratic societies, group size is a marker of dominance and that a group which is getting smaller could feel threatened and disempowered. Their findings, first published in 2014⁴, showed that white Americans who were randomly assigned to read about the Census report claiming that by 2044 whites will not be a majority group in the United States were more likely to report negative feelings toward racial minorities than those who were not. They were also more likely to support restrictive immigration policies and to say that whites would likely lose status and face discrimination in the future⁵.

It is not by accident that parties of the Far-Right have become the prophets of the demographic apocalypse of Western societies. Post-Covid European politics is no longer structured by the traditional opposition of the Left and Right; it is structured by the clash of two apocalyptic imaginations.

One is the *ecological imagination* that is triggered by the prospect of the coming ecological disaster. It galvanizes the feeling that if we do nothing to change

1 — Teitelbaum, the fear of population decline, p.22.

2 — Idem, p.57.

3 — Suketu Mehta, “Immigration Panic: How the West Fell for Manufactured Rage,” The Guardian, 27 August 2019.

4 — Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson, More Diverse Yet Less Tolerant? How the Increasingly Diverse Racial Landscape Affects White Americans’ Racial Attitudes, in Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 1 –12 © 2014 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc, SAGE, 2014.

5 — Sabrina Tavernise, “Why the Announcement of a Looming White Minority Makes Demographers Nervous”, NYT, November 22, 2018.

the way that we are living and producing – if not tomorrow then the day after tomorrow – there will be no more human life on Earth. As a recent landmark report argues, “up to 3bn out of the projected world population of about 9bn could be exposed to temperatures on a par with the hottest parts of the Sahara by 2070”⁶.

The other imagination is the *demographic imagination*. It is driven by the fear that “my people” will disappear and our way of life will be destroyed. German poet and political thinker Hans Magnus Enzensberger has captured best the nature of Europe’s demographic imagination when he diagnosed that Europe suffers from “demographic bulimia” – the bottled-up panic triggered by the fear “that too many and too few people could simultaneously exist in the same territory” – too few of us and too many of them⁷. Europeans look around the world and see their share of the global population plummeting, while non-Europeans have been migrating to Europe in large numbers. One prediction is that by 2040, a third of the population of Germany will not have been born there. In 2019, writes Stephen Smith, people of African descent living in Europe numbered about nine-million. By 2050, he continues, there could be “some 150 to 200 million African-Europeans – counting immigrants and their children” if a “sustained African migratory wave” occurs as people move north from a highly (and increasingly) populous Africa to a far less populous Europe⁸.

Ecological imagination is a cosmopolitan one; it works with the assumption that humanity could be saved only if we act together. Demographic imagination is a nativist one; it acts under the assumption that others want to replace us and we should stop them.

Climate activists doubt the morality of having kids in a world driven to self-destruction. Nationalists see any family with less than three kids as traitors. But both imaginations are marked but a sense of extreme urgency. Both climate activists and national populists share the sense that they are living in the last days of the world.

How important is the East/West divide in Europe

Let us accept that European politics today is a contest between those who want to “save Life” and those who want to save “our way of life”. In this context, how important is the East/West divide in Europe? How will it affect the future of the EU, and how should we think about it?

It is our argument that while both ecological imagination and demographic imagination are present in all European societies, it is the ecological imagination that primarily shapes the politics of Western Europe where Green parties and Green sensibilities are on the rise, and demographic imagination is the one that shapes the politics in Eastern Europe.

6 — Steven Bernard, Dan Clark and Sam Joiner, “Climate change could bring near-unliveable conditions for 3bn people, say scientists”, Financial Times, November 1, 2021.

7 — Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil Wars: From L.A. to Bosnia*, trans. Piers Spence and Martin Chalmers (New York: New Press, 1994), 117.

8 — Stephen Smith, *The Scramble for Europe: Young Africa on Its Way to the Old Continent* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 7. See also Noah Millman, “The African Century,” Politico Magazine, 5 May 2015.

But the East/West divide is not the most important value divide in Europe because if you want to know people's values and political preferences, you do not need to know in which country a person lives, but whether a person lives in a big urban center or a rural area (Warsaw is closer in value terms to Berlin than to the Polish countryside). The East/West divide is critically important because it is not simply a divide between citizens, but also between governments and states. The current conflicts between Brussels on one side and Poland and Hungary on the other are the classical illustration of this point. The East/West divide is existentially important for the EU because it is the conflict most likely to bring about the disintegration of the Union.

The East/West divide is also central because of the fact that it reinforces existing cultural stereotypes and reflects the very real and different historical trajectories of the state-building processes in the two parts of the continent.

In his classic work "Inventing Eastern Europe", Larry Wolff clearly demonstrates that the Iron Curtain was drawn much earlier than Churchill's speech in Fulton in 1946. The East/West division was constitutive for Europe's identity in any historical moment since the Enlightenment. Starting with the 18th century, crossing the border between Prussia and Poland was crossing from civilized Europe to barbarian Europe. In the days of the Cold War, dissidents fought hard to replace the notion of "Eastern Europe" with the notion of "Central Europe" in hopes that this would allow the West to see Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs as lost brothers rather than as the natural allies of Eastern tyranny. In the West's philosophic geography, Eastern Europe was Europe and non-Europe at the same time.

It is not only intellectual legacies but also diverging historical experiences that cement the centrality of the West/East divide in EU politics.

Europe's most dangerous myth, argues American historian Timothy Snyder, is the myth that the European Union was founded by small- and medium-size nation states. In reality, Snyder wrote:

"The European Union is the creation of failed or failing European empires. At the beginning is Germany. The Germans were defeated in 1945 after the most decisive and most catastrophic war of colonialism of all time. We remember it as the Second World War. Italy in 1945 also lost a colonial war in Africa and in the Balkans. Not long after, in 1949, the Netherlands lost a colonial war in the East Indies. Belgium lost the Congo in 1960. France, having been defeated both in Indochina and Algeria, makes a decisive turn to Europe in the early 1960s. These are the powers that initiated the European project. None of them were nation states at the time. None of them had ever been nation states."

If Snyder is right – and in my view he is right – it is only with the Eastern Enlargement that classical nation states massively joined Europe's integration project. But for the Eastern European societies, in order to integrate successfully in the post-national European Union, they have to unlearn what many of them still see as the twentieth century's major lesson: that ethnic and cultural diversity is a security threat.

In the twentieth century, revolutions, world wars, and waves of ethnic cleansing changed the ethnic map of Europe. All these traumas and upheavals

left behind an Eastern Europe whose states and societies had become more – rather than less – ethnically homogenous. In the twentieth century, ethnic homogeneity was viewed as a way to reduce tensions, increase security, and strengthen democratic trends. Minorities were viewed with mistrust. Not only nationalists but also communists (self-proclaimed internationalists) believed in the central importance of ethnic homogeneity. In the aftermath of World War II, Polish Communist leader Wladislaw Gomulka instructed party officials, “We must expel all the Germans because countries are built on national lines and not on multinational ones”.

Legs and roots

As the Israeli scholar Liav Orgad points out in his important book *The Cultural Defense of Nations*, “never in human history has so much attention been paid to human movement.” In 2019, there were 272 million migrants in the world, 51 million more than in 2010. At present, 3.5 percent of the world’s population consists of migrants. In 2010, it was 2.8 percent. The expectation is that these figures will rise. As George Steiner once wrote, “whereas trees have roots, men have legs,” and people use their legs to move to what they see as better places where they will be able to live better lives. As Ayelet Shachar argues in her book *The Birthright Lottery*, membership in a state (with its particular level of wealth, degree of stability, and human rights record) has a significant impact on our identity, security, well-being, and the range of opportunities realistically available. By this reading, the most valuable assets Germans have are their German passports; unsurprisingly then, Germans fear the devaluation of their passports no less than they fear inflation. All assets lose value when they become too prevalent and too widely shared. When seen in this context, full membership in an affluent society becomes a complex form of property inheritance: a valuable entitlement that is transmitted – by law – to a restricted group of recipients under conditions that perpetuate the transfer of this precious entitlement to their heirs. This inheritance carries with it an immensely valuable bundle of rights, benefits, and opportunities. Ninety-seven percent of the global population – more than six billion persons – are assigned lifelong membership by the lottery of their birth and either choose or are forced to keep it that way.

It is this birthright lottery that challenges the major promise of liberal politics and defines the central role of migration in global affairs. In today’s connected world, migration is the new revolution – not the twentieth century revolution of the masses, but a twenty-first century exit-driven revolution enacted by individuals and families. It is inspired not by ideologically painted pictures of a radiant, imaginary future, but by Google Maps photos of life on the other side of the border. How to guarantee the right of individuals to cross borders in pursuit of freedom and happiness while not violating nation states’ right to protect its borders is an insurmountable problem of modern liberalism.

According to the World Bank, migrants who move from lower- to higher-income countries typically earn three to six times more than they did at home. If you are from an underdeveloped country and you seek a secure economic future for your children, the best thing you can do is to make sure they are born in Canada, the United States, or the European Union. The political impact of this massive movement of people is not easy to predict, particularly in the context of the looming ecological crisis, but it has already captured the political imagination of societies. Ecological imagination scares people with the growing threat that they will be forced to leave their lands, while demographic

imagination scares people with the prospect that others will come and populate their native lands that have been emptied by the low fertility rates of European societies.

The shocking hostility towards the refugees displayed by Eastern European governments and societies during 2015 refugee crisis could not be explained if we are not ready to recognize that it was triggered not simply by the fear of foreigners coming, but also by the trauma of the tens of millions of Eastern Europeans who have left the region in the last 30 years. Eastern Europeans do not know how to talk about open borders within the EU because the freedom of movement is both the best and worst thing that has happened to them. It is the best because people can travel, study, and work abroad, and the worst because the village doctor or their closest neighbour can decide to depart for the West. In Eastern Europe, populist governments' nationalistic rhetoric is not simply meant to stop foreigners coming to their countries. It is meant to try to stop their own citizens from wanting to leave their native lands. By claiming that Western Europe was invaded by migrants from the Middle East and that the West is not the West any more, the Eastern European populist leaders hoped to persuade their own youth to stop dreaming of going to the West.

But while, as we argued, that the East/West divide was not invented by populist leaders like Mr.Kaczynski or Mr.Orban, it was these types of political leaders that made their strategy to essentialize the differences between the East and the West and to weaponize them. The paradox is that, now, some of the political leaders in Central and Eastern Europe are fighting for what they have been fighting against before. In the 1980s, anti-communist nationalists in Eastern Europe were fighting against the idea of Eastern Europe being fundamentally different than the West. Now they are the major advocates of these ideas.

Populist leaders were quick to grasp the fact that, two decades after the end of communism, Eastern European societies have gotten tired of imitating the West. When Central Europe's populists rail against a perceived Imitation Imperative as the most insufferable feature of liberalism's hegemony after 1989, they rightly assume that imitation means moral superiority of the imitated over their imitators; that it implies a political model that claims to have eliminated all viable alternatives' and a presumption that representatives of the imitated (and therefore implicitly superior) countries have an ongoing right to monitor, supervise, and evaluate the progress of imitating countries.

Unlike the borrowing of technologies, the imitation of moral ideals makes you resemble the one you admire but simultaneously makes you look less like yourself at a time when your own uniqueness and keeping faith with your group are at the heart of your struggle for dignity and recognition.

But what populist leaders have failed to grasp is that for Eastern European societies, the EU and the West are still the only valuable reference.

In *White*, the second part of Krzysztof Kieslowski's famous *Three Colors* film trilogy produced in the early 1990s, Karol, a Polish hairdresser living in Paris, is left divorced, desperate, and humiliated by his younger French wife, Dominique, on the grounds that he cannot perform sexually. His impotence becomes the symbol of the East trapped in the overexpectations of the West in post-1989 Europe. Miserable, penniless, but still obsessed with his former wife, Karol returns to Warsaw hidden in a compatriot's suitcase and spends the remainder of the film seeking to avenge his humiliation by making his ex-wife feel

helpless and lonely in the way he felt in Paris. His plan succeeds; he gets her imprisoned in Poland, only to realize that he is still in love with her and his life does not make sense without her. The East has taken revenge for the arrogance and insensitivity of the West only to realize that the West remains its only point of reference.

The politics of demographic determinism and America's last elections

Demographic anxiety challenges democracies in more than one way, but the biggest challenger is the rise of demographic determinism.

As Fox News dutifully reported on November 14, tens of thousands of President Donald Trump's supporters – angry and determined to save their country – gathered in Washington DC claiming voter fraud and urged Donald Trump not to concede to President-elect Joe Biden.

«This election was stolen from us,» Courtney Holland, a conservative activist from Nevada, told the crowd. “If they steal the 2020 election” – announced the loudspeaker – “there won't be a 2024 election!”

Mass protests against rigged elections are nothing exceptional in the history of democracy. So, what was puzzling with the pro-Trump post-elections rallies was not the claim that the elections were rigged, but the claim that they could never be fair again. Trump's supporters were not angry about counting, but about those counted. In their eyes, America's elections were being rigged not by ballot tampering but by open borders and low hurdles to the naturalization of illegal aliens; policies introduced by Democrats who are thereby seeking to lock in their future preeminence (similarly to Bulgarian President importing voters from Turan) by reshaping the electorate to their advantage. They accused their opponent of stealing their country through the means of elections. They accused Democrats of trying to dissolve the American people and elect a new one.

“I think this will be the last election that the Republicans have a chance of winning”, Donald Trump warned in an election rally in 2016, “because you're going to have people flowing across the border, you're going to have illegal immigrants coming in and they're going to be legalized and they're going to be able to vote and once all that happens you can forget it”⁹.

More forcefully than any other politician, Donald Trump has given voice to the fear of voters in the demographically dominant group of being politically marginalized by demographic and generational change. Trump's refusal to concede and his supporters' claim that this could be the last election captures the moment when demographic fears turned a sizable part of Republican voters against democracy.

In democracy, those who lose today concede defeat because of two main reasons. First, because losing an election in a democracy means they do not lose too much; they do not fear being arrested or robbed of their property. Secondly, they have good reasons to believe that they can win the next elections. The belief that those who lose today have a fair shot at becoming the winners of tomorrow is a precondition for the durability of democracy. In a democracy, rather than taking to the streets or barricading themselves inside their offices, losers channel their disappointment into preparing for the next round. Losers bet on what Clausewitz called “the instinct for retaliation and revenge”

9 – Harper Neidig, “Trump says 2016 is the GOP's last chance to win,” The Hill (September 9, 2016).

among troops that have suffered setbacks. “It is a universal instinct “writes Clausewitz, “shared by the supreme commander and the youngest drummer boy; the morale of the troops is never higher than when it comes to repaying that kind of debt...There is thus a natural propensity to exploit this psychological factor in order to recapture what has been lost”¹⁰.

But what if the supporters of a defeated party believe that they are doomed and they can never win again? And what if their pessimism is fuelled by the anxiety that their numbers are shrinking while the numbers of their opponents are rising due to migration and the coming change of a new generation that you feel is as alien as the migrants? In a war the heroism of the troops can turn out to be more important than the number of the soldiers, but not in a democracy. In a democracy numbers decide. And here comes the question: will parties, haunted by the fear of demographic decline, still be ready to trust democracy and its rules?

Demography is not destiny but “demographic change shapes political power like water shapes rock”. Democracy is a numbers game. When numbers change, power changes hands. The democratic narrative insists that power changes hands because voters change their minds. But in reality, power may also change hands when the population changes. This could be because a new generation with strong collective preferences comes of age, as happened in the Western democracies in the 1960s and 1970s. It could also be because a sizable group of new voters joins the polity and reshapes it. This is what happened in many countries when universal suffrage was introduced. It is also what Israel experienced in the wake of the Cold War, when numerous Jews arrived from the former Soviet Union to become Israeli citizens. Central and Eastern Europe has seen yet another form of this phenomenon. Millions of people have moved away, mostly to the West, and liberal political forces in Central and Eastern Europe have seen their power drop, as so many of their voters are among those who have left.

The fear of migration in this context is not the fear of cultural diversity or the fear that migrants will take your job, it is the fear of the loss of power. Being a majority is the real identity of Trump’s white voters; it is a real identity of Eastern European populists.

Four times throughout its history, the United States has witnessed the rise of powerful nativist movements whose major goal was the restriction of emigration in the country. The reasons for the rise of these movements in all four cases have been “very high volume of arrivals and sharp changes in immigrants’ origins”. Historians long ago have figured out that former immigrants were ready to keep the door open only if the newcomers were of their own kind. But there was one major wave of migration that did not bring nativist backlash and this was the non-voluntary arrival of African-Americans. African-Americans were “welcomed” in the United States not because of their cultural similarities with the predominant part of American society back then there was not a backlash because African-Americans deprived of all political rights were not perceived as a threat to the political power of the majority.

Demographic determinism is a fallacy but it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was just yesterday that Republicans were ready to embrace America’s changing demography as a promise for a new Republican majority. In his book *Future Right: Forging A New Republican Majority*, Republican strategist Donald T. Critchlow argued that “the

10 — Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 244.

assumption that demographics favors Democrats as the party of the future is wrong". In his view, the Democratic base – an uneasy coalition of women, minorities and young voters, – is vulnerable to Republican takeover. The configuration of race in America opens the opportunity for the Republican party to win Hispanic- and Asian-Americans. Asian-Americans – who are at the top of the academic achievement heap – are natural enemies to the affirmative action programs. The fact that most Hispanics consider themselves whites and most live in non-segregated, racially, and income-mixed neighborhoods make them open to Republican arguments. But the moment nativism becomes a Republican ideology, they really risk losing the support of minority groups.

The demographic determinism expressed by Trump's supporters and his East European admirers undermines democracy with its assumption that we know – or at least we can predict – how people will vote just by knowing their ethnic and racial identity. In their eyes, in a time of identity politics elections have started to resemble censuses. But if elections resemble censuses, the highest duty of the true patriot is to prevent body politics from ethnic polluting. Nationalist governments can tolerate foreign workers but they are not inclined to give them citizenship and to try to integrate them into the political society.

In his famous 1949 lecture "On the Development of Citizenship", English sociologist T.H. Marshall distinguished between civil, political, and social dimensions of citizenship. In his version of history, it took three centuries for the West to win its war for rights. The 18th century was marked by the struggle for civil rights, freedom of speech and religion, and equality in front of the law. The 19th century was critical to citizens' struggle to obtain political rights. It was in this century that the right to vote was granted to a much larger part of the population. Voting, once a privilege, became a right. Finally, the rise of the welfare state in the 20th century extended the concept of citizenship to the social and economic sphere by recognizing the minimal conditions of health, education, and basic standard of living. In Marshall's view, the modern liberal state is a combination of these rights and the social rights are the most contested ones.

What is distinctive for the present moment is that 21st century illiberals unbound Marshall's trio of rights. They are ready to open their markets to foreigners (like post-WWII Australia, Eastern Europe today is facing a "populate or perish" situation) and to give them social rights, but they are unwilling to give them political rights. The right to vote remains a privilege based on origin. It is a domain reserved for the ethno-cultural majority and the traditional national minorities, if they exist.

The fear of shrinking numbers

The famous American-Indian scholar, Arjun Appadurai, wrote a book called *The Fear of Small Numbers*, which was published in the context of the War on Terror and he asks an extremely interesting question: How did it happen that very small minorities can fuel such hatred and genocidal impulses in a society when we are talking about groups that are 3-4 percent of the population? His argument is that the problem with minorities is that they threaten the idea of the wholeness of the majority group. And secondly that they remind the majority that they can be minorities, too. This fear of the threatened majority is one of the most important factors in European politics.

Eastern Europe represents the fear of shrinking numbers. It represents the clash between two very different meanings of "majority" inherent in democratic politics. It is the promise of the permanent ethnic and cultural majority born in the context of the struggle for self-determination and associated with the emergence of the post-imperial states in Europe in the 19th and 20th century, and the notion of majority as it is defined in democratic politics.

Similar to monarchy, described by Kantorowicz's famous book *The King's Two Bodies*, democracy has also two bodies. It gives birth to a majority that dies on every election day while at the same time it speaks of the majority as synonymous with the nation, the one that is immortal and that remains unchanged while governments change all the time. It is this immortal body that the nativist leaders of today claim to speak on behalf of. The clash between liberalism and illiberalism today is the clash between the notion of a majority born with the emergence of the nation state, that has never changing ethnic and cultural characteristics, which has a smell and shape, and the notion of a majority adopted in electoral politics where majority is *Barbapapa*, the beloved creature of the French children's' movie that constantly changes its form. European democracies are lost in the constant interplay between these two notions of majority that demographic anxiety is putting in conflict with each other.

In 1995, the great American anthropologist Clifford Geertz accepted the invitation of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna to deliver a lecture on the meaning of the post-Cold War world. Contrary to the prevailing consensus at the time, Geertz tended to see the newly-born international order not as one marked by convergence and adoption of Western models but as a one obsessed with identity, in which "a stream of obscure divisions and strange instabilities" has come to the surface.

Geertz believed that in order to understand this world, it is important to understand "how people see things, respond to them, imagine them, judge them, deal with them" and to adopt "ways of thinking that are responsive to particularities, to individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities".

It is fair to acknowledge that we live in this new world. And in Geertz's view, how we answer the two questions "What is a Country if it is not a nation" and "What is a Culture if it is not a consensus", are going to determine the future of Europe. It is these two questions that are tearing Europe apart today.