The Beginning of Democracy in Eastern European Countries from the 1990s to the 2010s and Its Contemporary Crisis: Poland and the Czech Republic as Examples

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Abstract: In 1989, Poland and the Czech Republic almost simultaneously got rid of the socialist regime and gradually embarked on the road to Western democracy. They persisted in the global economic recession in 2008 and achieved economic leaps; however, under the impact of the refugee wave since 2011, conflicts that had been squeezed for decades broke out. For a time, populist forces were rampant in Eastern European countries. Faced with these populist forces, many people lost hope in democracy. This paper aims to present the beginning of the democratization process in Eastern European countries from the 1980s to the 1990s and the reasons for the rampant populist forces in Eastern Europe. The author believes that Eastern European society experienced triple changes in social structure, economic model, and political system at the end of the Cold War. These triple changes exacerbated the inner insecurity of the Eastern European people, and the insecurity planted the seeds of populism. The Soviet Union's long-term control in Eastern Europe led to people's resistance to the Soviet Union and even the Russian nation. Since the second decade of the 21st century, with the arrival of the refugee waves and many other events in the international situation, this resistance against Russia rose to xenophobia, popularized by populist thoughts, used, and expanded by power. Finally, by analyzing the current status of populist parties in Eastern Europe, the author believes that these populist parties are trying to establish a contemporary nation-state with authoritarian solid rule in the 21st century.

Keywords: populism, democracy, Eastern Europe, Poland, Czech Republic

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, Poland faced a severe economic crisis, and a large number of protests and demonstrations broke out. With the overall decline of the Soviet Union, the Solidarity Polish Trade Union, led by Walesa, established a democratic government. Under the same situation, in the Czech Republic after the Prague Spring, democratic elections were finally achieved. Since then, almost all Eastern European countries have established Western democratic regimes. However, after entering the 21st century, populist forces gradually strengthened and gained dominance in a few countries.

When the wheel of history moved towards the end of the 20th century, Eastern Europe ultimately got rid of the Soviet Union's control. It ushered in the dawn of democratic regimes. However, with the Middle East refugee crisis after 2010 and a series of challenges in Europe, this dawn of democracy

has cast a shadow, and this shadow called "populism" may affect Europe's future political direction and the world's political stability. This paper will analyze the origins of democracy in Eastern Europe and speculate on the political aims of these populist parties.

2. Movements in Poland and the Czech Republic in the 1980s and 1990s

2.1. The Birth of Solidarity and Military Control in Poland

This article will introduce the general process of the Polish democratic movement in the 1980s and the central role played by the Polish military government. In the early 1980s, the Polish economy faced a severe crisis, and social conflicts intensified. The working class was dissatisfied with high unemployment and economic recession and launched a series of strikes. In August 1980, the independent trade union "Solidarity," founded by electrician workers, was established, becoming the first independent trade union organization in Polish history. Solidarity quickly grew and became a significant force in protest against Communist rule.

On August 31, 1980, the Solidarity Trade Union and the Communist government signed the famous "Solidarity Agreement", which included essential contents such as the recognition of workers' rights, the establishment of independent trade unions, and the implementation of freedom of speech. The agreement sparked hope and excitement across the country, but the Communist Party soon began to move to limit Solidarity's power.

Poland's communist government declared military rule on December 31, 1981, to suppress Solidarity and its influence. This policy was implemented by the military authorities led by government leader General Jaruzelski, who imposed military control on Poland to maintain social order and national security.

While implementing Poland's military management policy, the government adopted severe control measures, including curfews, censorship, mass arrests, and suppression of demonstrations. As Poland's largest independent trade union, Solidarity has become one of the main targets of government suppression. Solidarity's leadership was arrested, the union headquarters was sealed, and members faced persecution and oppression.

However, Poland's military management policies could not completely stifle Solidarity's influence. On the contrary, it inspired more people to protest and resist. Under pressure from the government, Solidarity transformed into an underground organization and continued its political struggle. Solidarity maintained its organizational network and influence during this time through underground leaflets, contacts, and secret meetings. In 1983, Poland's military management policy was lifted, and Solidarity resurfaced.

2.2. 1989 Polish Round Table Talks

In 1989, Poland entered a critical turning point. The communist government faced domestic and foreign pressure, economic conditions deteriorated, and social discontent grew. The government was forced to open a dialogue and begin negotiations with Solidarity. These negotiations culminated in April's "roundtable talks," where representatives from all walks of life in Poland discussed plans for political reform. The Polish Communist authorities agreed to hold national elections and rewrite the Polish constitution. In the June 1989 election, the Polish people voted for opposition candidates, including Solidarity leader Walesa. These election results marked a significant transition in Poland's history, ending communist rule.

In December 1990, Lech Walesa became Poland's first democratically elected president, beginning a political and economic transition in Poland and thus beginning to integrate with the world.

2.3. The Process of Democratic Movement in the Czech Republic

On November 17, 1989, the seeds of the Velvet Revolution were sown during a peaceful demonstration known as International Students' Day. The rally was originally to commemorate the suppression of Czech students by Nazi Germany in 1959, but it soon evolved into a protest against the authoritarian rule of the Czechoslovak authorities. Thousands of students and artists marched in Prague to protest against government restrictions on speech, assembly, and other fundamental human rights. The authorities' violent crackdown on the demonstrations triggered public anger in the country. On November 19, the opposition organization "Civic Forum" was established in Prague to promote political reform and end the one-party rule of the Communist Party. The leader of this organization was Václav Havel, later Czech President. In the following weeks, workers, students, and intellectuals across the country went on strike and held rallies supporting the demands of the Civic Forum.

In early December, the authorities began negotiations with citizens' forums to discuss the possibility of a power transfer. This marked a critical turning point in the Velvet Revolution, as it showed the government was beginning to give in to popular pressure. On December 10, 1989, the authoritarian President of Czechoslovakia, Gustav Husak, resigned, and Czechoslovakia started a new stage of political transformation.

On December 29, 1989, Javier, the leader of the Civic Forum, was elected as the new president. His appointment marked the success of the Velvet Revolution. His inaugural address emphasized the importance of free speech, human rights, and the rule of law.

Subsequently, Czech politics gradually evolved into a multi-party democratic system, and the economy also transformed into a market economy model. On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.

3. The Crisis of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Populism

Some countries in Eastern Europe have seen the rise and momentum of populism in recent years. Among them, populist parties in some countries have achieved significant electoral success. These parties usually promise to restore state authority, oppose immigration and globalization, and promote nationalism and protectionism as their main agendas. They attract support by exploiting widespread dissatisfaction with political elites and the existing political system.

Populist leaders in Eastern European countries take hard-line stances to confront domestic and foreign political opponents. They try to shape their country's image and their stalwart and rigid personal image by emphasizing nationalism, protectionism, and anti-immigration stances.

In addition, the spread of social media and the Internet has also played an essential role in populism in Eastern Europe. Populists use these platforms to amplify their voices, spread populist ideas, and interact with supporters.

Why do the Czech Republic and Poland, both democracies and democratic governments, still face the rise of populism despite their rapid economic development in recent years?

As for the rise of populism and radical forces, academic explanations generally fall into two categories: economic and cultural factors. The economic factor explanation believes that the vast gap between rich and poor caused by social income inequality will aggravate the accumulation and outbreak of public dissatisfaction [1-3], and one form of the collection and eruption of dissatisfaction in a democratic government is the emergence of widespread dissatisfaction. Populist parties (the core interests and core concepts of pan-populist parties satisfy the views of the "dissatisfied people" in society on the current social situation and the political demands of this group, and at the same time, pan-populist parties will further incite the dissatisfaction of these people. Sentiment to expand their political parties' membership and gain more political power. However, when these pan-populists truly gain specific political power, they may not fulfill their previous political promises to the "dissatisfied

people.") At the same time, in societies with poor economic conditions, a large number of pan-populist parties may emerge (here refers to European and American institutions).

The author believes that, to a certain extent, a minimal number of pan-populist parties are supplements and corrections to the democratic system because these pan-populist parties do reflect the voices of some dissatisfied groups in society. These voices can allow the authorities to respond to today's Some policy modifications will be made (as for why pan-populist forces have risen around the world in recent years, the author believes that it is related to the rapid development of the Internet, which has to some extent weakened everyone's ability to think deeply).

The theory of cultural factors believes that compared with the vast differences in economic factors, the conflict in cultural concepts between people of different age groups is the fundamental reason for the rise of populism and even the right wing. Inglerhardt proposed in his work that European and American society experienced an ideological reform after World War II and gradually transitioned from modern to postmodern culture. The post-war baby boomers who adhere to the post-modern cultural outlook are far more tolerant and open than their predecessors and advocate social diversity (typical examples are the development of the hippie movement and rock music, which are both culturally open, inclusive, and diverse. Specific manifestations). However, this diversified trend has caused both cognitive and psychological pressures on the older generation. Politicians of the older generation appear as spokespersons for the "people" as a whole, emphasizing that the common sense and values upheld by the people have been seriously eroded by pluralism, which has produced a cultural backlash [4, 5]. In order to resist this pressure, extremely Right-populist parties have emerged as the spokesperson for the older generation to fight against the transformation of cultural values and the trend of globalization. Western European scholars call This process "quiet counterrevolution" [6].

As the hegemon in Eastern Europe for more than half a century, the Soviet Union profoundly influenced Eastern Europe. It can even be said that the Soviet Union accelerated the emergence of pan-populist political parties in Eastern Europe. The author personally believes that the Soviet Union's dispatch of troops to Eastern European countries gave rise to the pan-populist parties in Eastern Europe's aversion to outsiders. The authoritarian rule brought by the Soviet Union and the political atmosphere of red terror caused tremendous psychological pressure on the Eastern European people. There was a solid general backlash against the Soviet Union, culminating in massive demonstrations in Eastern Europe in the late Cold War.

After the end of the Cold War, Eastern Europe's resistance and opposition to the Soviet Union was almost passed on to Russia. Russia is indeed a volatile factor in Eastern European geopolitics. Any move by Russia will practically affect the sensitive nerves of Eastern European countries. One manifestation of this resistance is resistance to Russians, and a more extreme manifestation is resistance and opposition to any outside group. Most of this more extreme behavior began to appear after the refugee wave, but the refugee wave may have accelerated the radicalization of pan-populist parties in Eastern Europe. This result is undoubtedly catastrophic.

At the same time, the complex history and staggered ethnic distribution in Eastern Europe are also a reason for the rise of pan-populist forces. Due to the staggered distribution of ethnic groups in Eastern Europe, the distribution of ethnic residential areas/aggregations is also complicated (in fact, Budapest is a good example). On the one hand, the situation of mixed ethnic groups is conducive to promoting the diversified development and cultural exchanges of cultures in different regions (unfortunately, pan-populist parties are opposed to cultural diversity and equal two-way interactions between different cultures); on the other hand, it will also make Inter-ethnic conflicts increased. From the perspective of a few cities or a very small geographical unit such as a particular city, the size and population of ethnic settlements in the region can be almost directly proportional to the cultural influence of the ethnic group (ideally, each ethnic area exists independently of each other), peaceful and equal cultural exchanges among all ethnic groups) In a few countries in Eastern Europe, there are

annexations and exclusions of ethnic minorities by the majority ethnic groups. This exclusion and annexation are also gradually causing pan-populist parties to move to the extreme right.

Of course, in most Eastern European countries, pan-populist parties are not the mainstream political force in Eastern European society.

Scholar Minkberg pointed out that Central and Eastern European countries have experienced three almost simultaneous transformation processes: politically from totalitarian-authoritarianism to liberal democracy, economically from state socialism to free market, and from social structure to industrial society [7]. These three major transformations were completed almost within 20 years. Such a rapid speed has greatly aggravated the insecurity mentality of the Eastern European people. The high-pressure situation during the Communist rule has caused a lack of mutual trust among the people. The wave of marketization after the transition has further hindered the establishment of civil society and is conducive to the rise of populism [8]. While adhering to an authoritarian-nationalist stance, far-right populist parties in Western Europe also adhere to a neoliberal stance on economic policies [9]. Far-right populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe often combine authoritarian-nationalist positions with planned-economy positions, tend to use simple methods to deal with complex economic issues, and are hostile to the concept of free market economics [10].

After the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis broke out in 2008, the global financial situation fell into turmoil. Although the impact suffered by the Czech Republic and Poland was relatively limited, there was no serious imbalance in the economic structure, and there was no serious recession. The far-right populist parties in the two countries saw a gradual increase in support in the elections [11].

At the same time, the flow of refugees from the Middle East after 2011 has still aroused xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment in Central and Eastern European countries. Against the background of economic and financial turmoil and the influx of refugees, radical right parties have also shown an upward trend (for example, in Greece, which serves as a springboard for refugees, the influence of its radical right party "Golden Dawn" has increased significantly.).

The particularity of the specific historical development process of Central and Eastern European countries, the author believes that economic factors have not played a role in promoting pan-populist political parties in modern times as much as the historical and cultural role of Eastern Europe. Because the 2008 financial crisis had a smaller impact on Eastern Europe, the 2008 financial crisis provided a relatively safe external environment for the economic development of Eastern Europe. Moreover, the political demands of most Eastern European pan-populist parties can clearly be seen from the political demands of these parties. Economic demands are secondary.

From the situation in recent years, we can conclude that pan-populist parties in Eastern Europe emphasize the restoration of the territory that their nation has historically owned [12] and attempt to intensify the suppression of ethnic minorities in the country. Typical among them are the JOBBIK party in Hungary and the Czechoslovak Republican Party SPR-RSC in the Czech Republic. From this, we can conclude that pan-populist parties in Eastern Europe are highly exclusive and aggressive [13].

4.   Conclusion

The purpose of pan-populist parties in Western Europe is to ensure the cultural survival of the country's main ethnic groups in the face of large-scale immigration and to maintain the independent enjoyment of the country's welfare system by the country's main ethnic groups. However, both the pan-populist parties in Western Europe and Eastern Europe are unanimously opposed to European integration and the continued acceptance of more refugees. In major Western European countries, pan-populist parties have become relatively stable opposition parties and rely on their influence to carry out pan-European far-right interactions.

To sum up, combined with the characteristics of the historical development of Central and Eastern Europe and real-life examples, socio-cultural factors have more powerful explanatory power than economic factors for the rise and development of radical right and far-right populist forces in Central and Eastern Europe.

In some countries in Central and Eastern Europe, pan-populist and even far-right parties have achieved long-term and stable governance, and some are trying to break through the constraints of the EU to develop new political forms. Based on the above political demands expressed by the pan-populist parties in Eastern Europe, the author suspects that the pan-populist parties are trying to establish highly centralized nation-states in modern society. Modern nationalism is a political trend closely related to modernization and globalization. This nationalism related to current development has led to significant adjustments in the pattern of interests in modern Europe, which has not only accelerated economic and social development but also produced historical changes. Sharp divisions and extended the same tendencies throughout the European-influenced world.

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