

## Mastering the Past by Ellen Hinsey — the return of history

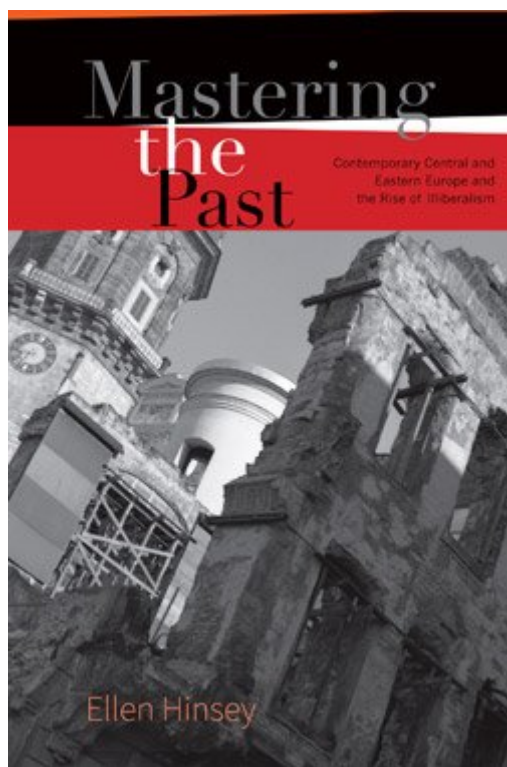
How the high hopes of early-1990s central Europe gave way to creeping authoritarianism

March 3, 2017 by: John Lloyd

The central European states were the vanguards of communism's collapse in the late 1980s, prompting in the west a sense of inevitability about democracy's benign coming. This was reinforced by the diverse figures who stepped forward to help these societies transit to democracy with decency and, above all, without violence.

In Poland, the shipyard electrician Lech Walesa gave the lie to the claim that communism had the support of workers and, in the Solidarity movement, gathered together a new ruling class. In what was then Czechoslovakia the playwright Václav Havel voiced the possibility of "living in truth" in a country shorn of one-party rule. Both became their countries' (non-executive) presidents. Less celebrated, in Hungary former Communist minister Imre Pozsgay led talks that ushered in the institutional skeleton of a democratic state.

Politicians fleshed out these bones, and the relative smoothness of the fall of authoritarian socialism beguiled the west into an assumption: the European Union, in helping these states "return to Europe" (as Havel put it), was heading for a 21st century it could name as its own. This hasn't happened. As Ellen Hinsey notes in *Mastering the Past*, among the many woes that plague the EU is that, on its expanded eastern borders, arise the "spectres of populism, nationalism, extreme-right militantism and authoritarianism — released from their historical deep freeze".



In examining the "rise of illiberalism", Hinsey, an American essayist, poet and translator based in Paris, has assembled reportage and interviews conducted at different times across central Europe. Her book mixes vivid personal description — as from Havel's funeral in Prague in December 2011, and the demonstrations against election fraud in Moscow that began that same month — with her own and others' analysis on this brief flourish of central European civic grace.

Hinsey cites the view of political scientist Lilia Shevtsova that Russia's threat is not only to its former Soviet neighbours, but of a shift towards a "new global authoritarianism", which over the last decade has been drawing countries such as Russia, Belarus, China and Hungary into political and economic alliance". Russian president Vladimir Putin, inevitably, is the de facto leader of this new Despots International.

In Hungary, the philosopher Agnes Heller tells Hinsey that the first post-communist rulers "had no idea whom they governed" while, for their part, "the population... had no idea what freedom was; they had no idea that they were responsible for it". Thus a determined authoritarian, such as the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, could make the state his own and proclaim it as "an illiberal democracy" where, as Heller puts it, he and his Fidesz party are "against anyone who... limits the authority of the nation-state".

Havel had raised the theme of responsibility in *Summer Meditations*, written soon after the Czech Velvet Revolution of 1989. He observed that the previous order “has now been shattered, but a new order . . . based on freely accepted responsibility to and for the whole society, has not yet been built — nor could it have been, for such an order takes years to develop and cultivate”.

Yet Havel — a global symbol of democratic and civic politics — was powerless to do much cultivating. Such an order has not developed: instead, autocracy is strengthening, with much public backing. Back in 2005, 40 per cent of Poles said they preferred “strong leadership” to democracy; they now have something of the former in the rule of the Law and Justice party, which threatens the existence of the latter through a Trump-like attack on the mainstream news media, a tight control of the public broadcaster, reform of the constitutional court to bring it more closely under the influence of the government and a limitation on gay rights.

Hinsey writes with style but with too little attention paid to the popular bases for authoritarian-populist rule. In her description of Havel’s funeral, with a young soldier testifying to his greatness, she leaves out that many Czechs, maybe at times most, saw him as out of touch with the conditions of their lives. Her view of states in which civil society is becoming less rather than more vibrant is accurate; but to see that only as a matter of repression from above rather than demand from below is to downplay the larger part of the tragedy.

In its past, for instance, Poland was both tolerant and multicultural and, after communism’s disappearance, there seemed to be general agreement about centrist, liberal government and attachment to the EU. But there was another Poland, of rural and small-town citizens on low incomes and resentful of the new class of cosmopolitan professionals and their attachment to causes such as gay rights and racial equality. The sociologist Rafal Pankowski tells Hinsey that a “mono-cultural Poland”, composed of ethnically Polish Catholics, “is, in a way, an anomaly, set against the breadth of Polish history” — and, less determinedly pessimistic than some of Hinsey’s interlocutors, he looks forward to a “return to normality”. But as *Mastering the Past* shows, the struggle for what is “normal” in central Europe is in full flood, and those for whom authoritarian nationalism is the natural default position are presently on top.

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