

The Washington Post

August 3, 2014

“The rise of Putinism”

By Fareed Zakaria

When the Cold War ended, Hungary occupied a special place in the story of the revolutions of 1989. It was one of the first countries in the Soviet orbit to abandon communism and embrace liberal democracy. Today it is again a trendsetter, becoming the first European country to denounce and distance itself *from* liberal democracy. It is adopting a new system and set of values that are best exemplified by Vladimir Putin’s Russia but are finding echoes in other countries as well.

In a major speech last weekend, [Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban explained](#) that his country is determined to build a new political model — illiberal democracy. This caught my eye because, in 1997, [I wrote an essay in Foreign Affairs using that same phrase](#) to describe a dangerous trend. Democratic governments, often popular, were using their mandates to erode individual rights, the separation of powers and the rule of law. But even I never imagined that a national leader — from Europe no less — would use the term as a badge of honor.

“The most popular topic in thinking today is trying to understand how systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies can nevertheless make their nations successful,” [Orban said](#). For him, the world changed fundamentally in 2008 with what he calls “the great Western financial collapse.” Since then, he argues, American power has been in decline and liberal values today embody “corruption, sex and violence.” Western Europe has become a land of “freeloaders on the backs of welfare systems.” The illiberal role models for the future, he explains, are Russia, Turkey, China, Singapore and India.

Leaving aside his odd list (India?), Orban’s actions over the past few years demonstrate that his own role model has been Russia under Putin. Orban has enacted and implemented in Hungary a version of what can best be described as “Putinism.” To understand it, we need to go back to its founder.

When [he came to power in 2000](#), Putin seemed a tough, smart, competent manager, someone who was determined to bring stability to Russia — which was reeling from internal chaos, economic stagnation and a default in [1998](#). He sought to integrate Russia into the world and wanted good relations with the West, asking Washington for Russian membership in the World Trade Organization and even [NATO](#). His administration had technocrats who were Western liberals, well versed in free markets and open trade.

Over time, however, Putin established order in the country while presiding over a booming economy as oil prices quadrupled under his watch. He began creating a repressive system of political, economic and social control to maintain his power. As he faced opposition, particularly in the [parliamentary elections of 2011](#), Putin recognized that he needed more than just brute force to defeat his opponents. He needed an ideology of power and began articulating one in speeches, enacting legislation and using his office to convey adherence to a set of values.

The crucial elements of Putinism are nationalism, religion, social conservatism, state capitalism and government domination of the media. They are all, in some way or another, different from and hostile to, modern Western values of individual rights, tolerance, cosmopolitanism and internationalism. It would be a mistake to believe that Putin's ideology created his popularity — he was popular before — but it sustains his popularity.

Orban has followed in Putin's footsteps, eroding judicial independence, limiting individual rights, speaking in nationalist terms about ethnic Hungarians and muzzling the press. The methods of control are often more sophisticated than traditional censorship. Hungary recently announced a [40 percent tax](#) on ad revenues that seems to particularly target the country's only major independent television network, which could result in its bankruptcy.

If you look around the world, there are others who have embraced core elements of Putinism. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan has veered away from his reformist agenda toward one that is more socially conservative, Islamist and highly nationalistic. He, too, has used clever tricks to cow the media into subservience. Many of Europe's far-right leaders — France's Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders of the Netherlands and even Britain's Nigel Farage — are openly admiring of Putin and what he stands for.

The success of Putinism will depend a great deal on the success of Putin and Russia under him. If he triumphs in Ukraine, turning it into a basket case that eventually comes begging to Moscow, he will look like a winner. If, on the other hand, Ukraine succeeds outside of Russia's orbit and the Russian economy continues to weaken, Putin might find himself presiding over a globally isolated Siberian petro-state.

Fareed Zakaria writes a foreign affairs column for The Post. He is also the host of CNN's Fareed Zakaria GPS and editor at large of Time magazine.

Copyright©2014 The Washington Post