

# The Decline of Europe and the Intellectual Fatigue: Where Will the New Iron Curtain Fall?

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*The half-empty highway was even more perceptible after West Germany, where the latest American cars block your way. A few kilometres from Heidelberg, near the American headquarters, three kilometres of car junkyards stretch on both sides of the highway. Conversely, in East Germany one feels lost and driving along a highway leading nowhere. Only the walls on the sides of the highway remind that there are people around. Instead of billboards with ads, as usual on the Western European roads, here are giant cartoons: Adenauer with an octopus' body is choking the proletariat with his tentacles. All the militant metaphors of the communist literature are put in bright colour and strong brushstroke, but the representative and the executor of all the horrors of the capitalist world is Chancellor Adenauer all by himself.*

This is a brief excerpt from *The Travel Around Eastern Europe* by the Colombian genius Gabriel Garcia Marquez. We will return to Marquez and his honest and rather naive insights in the context of present-day realities. We are concerned with the question that sounds both threatening and realistic: is a new iron curtain possible? Where will it fall? Or maybe it has already fallen and it's just us in our stream of information who have failed to view the reality abstractly and appreciate its complexity, and thus to perceive that our everyday life has already been marked with new great identifiers?

## What did the iron curtain separate?

As we speak about the iron curtain that separated the worlds of East and West, we often succumb to the temptation to only perceive it as a physical object. Actually, in the shape of the Berlin Wall, it really was a physical object that one could not only see or touch, but also (as history has shown us) tear down.

After the Berlin Wall fell, the smart folks dragged home even separate bricks as they felt that those may later acquire not just historic value, but also material one. But the iron curtain was more than the physical distinction that limited people's ability to move. It was more than the expression of how the two conflicting sides perceive security.

The end of WWII and the capitulation of the Nazi Germany revealed the issue of distributing interests as quiet, bet of existential importance to some nations.

The fact that the world needs to be divided and new distinctions drawn was obvious as early as the Yalta Conference. Stalin's plan was clear: grab as many territories as possible and turn them not only into protectorates of the Soviet Union, but also into parts of the new soviet world.

The Pole, the Hungarian, the Czech, the Lithuanian, the German, they all had to become not residents of the Soviet zone of influence, but Soviet people. Thus, the new division contained not only geographical and geopolitical interests, but also very clearly expressed ideological ones.

Usually this ideological distinction is defined as the opposition between communism and capitalism, but what I see in it is more than models of self organization of societies and their economic activities. Turning this conflict into a simple opposition between fans of Karl Marx and, say, Adam Smith would make it much too banal.

As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski has observed more than once in his work, the Soviet government realized soon enough that simply persuading others of the success of its system is too risky, so it's best to persuade that any alternative is the greatest threat. The greatest peril to the newly created Soviet person is the influence of the capitalist West.

Thus, the iron curtain separated not civilizations, nations, not different economic models or cultural spaces, not even different political ideas. The iron curtain separated the Soviet world without any alternative and the spaces of individual freedom and choice. In other words, the modern

Soviet person from the Human represented in the Christian cultural, Renaissance and Enlightenment tradition.

„In the surrounded territory, the communists are isolated; in the surrounded territory, it's pointless to look for allies in the enemy camp. The sense of being surrounded has two catastrophic tactical effects. It requires that the surrounded see the whole world outside their territory as enemy to be kept away and guarded against by strengthening own positions, by cutting oneself off from values and opportunities outside. And within the territory, by strengthening the military hierarchy based on blind obedience and intolerance towards criticisms,“ Kolakowski wrote.

It has to be emphasized that the Iron Curtain is often considered to be an act of self-isolation of the Soviets and their occupied territories. As in, a defensive position against the expansion of the West. I believe the iron curtain was none other than the beginning of a new attack. The first step of aggression in the Cold War, the digging of the trenches, the kidnapping of the numerous nations that could not express their own will.

It was an attempt to split the world, to delineate own sphere of influence and use it as a base to start a new expansion that would lead to the global triumph of communism, the proof of superiority of the Soviet person.

### **How was the fall of the iron curtain understood?**

Unsurprisingly, among the Western intellectuals, the fall of the iron curtain was understood not only as capitulation of communism, but also as victory of liberal democracy. The concept of competing ideologies propagated by the Soviets allowed to reduce everything to the success and the era of new dominion of one of the previously competing sides.

The most prominent example of such optimism was the neohegelian political philosopher Francis Fukuyama who became famous by carelessly blurting out that the Western democracy has triumphed, and the history ended. We may acquit Fukuyama if we believe that history as the struggle of the great political ideologies truly has reached its final point in the fall of the Berlin Wall and, eventually, the Soviet Union.

It would be difficult to imagine the world in which similar totalitarian concepts would re-emerge and claim lives of tens of millions. National socialism, and later also communism will not reappear in their total form of absolute systems. But does it mean that we may applaud the triumph

of liberal democracy? Will the democratic project necessarily be fulfilled in the countries that have experienced the period of occupation, cultural repressions and ethnic cleansing?

The signs that the optimism of the Western intellectuals regarding the promulgation of democracy was much too high appeared immediately after the fall of the iron curtain. Virtually all the post-Soviet states experienced a period of wild capitalism, a sudden shift in economic and social structure.

Less obvious but even more influential were the cultural and psychological transitions, the attempts to rewrite the historic narratives, to come to terms with historic hurts, to learn to live with the social groups that had no right of participation before then.

Suddenly, the triumph of liberal democracy and the wave of personal and social freedoms and responsibilities became a complicated process. Some states have managed this process without painful effects, and in some the project of democracy is still being carried out in the background of revolutions and geopolitical threats.

Some of the states separated from the West by the iron curtain have joined the EU and NATO, and some are still lurking indifferently in the shadow of the curtain or waiting their turn while trying to maintain their independence and withstand regular provocations and attempts to involve them back in the old spheres of influence.

Thus, the fall of the iron curtain, naively perceived to be a solution, became a catalyst to new processes. The promise of the triumph of democracy slowly turned to anxiety and quiet warnings that we need to protect democracy and individual freedom in our daily struggle with those who try to offer the possibilities of easier or more spectacular change.

### **What world do we live in?**

Having stated that the optimistic scenario of the promulgation of liberal democracy has failed, we may take a look at the present. The fall of the iron curtain expanded the limits of the Western world. Some states, like Lithuania, returned to the Western cultural space.

Globalization, IT, the spread of the internet have in general expanded the limits of the Western culture and have permitted it to prevail, at least superficially. Even China, which has preserved its communist form, or the

Arab countries, which view the Western influences with extra wariness, are taking over the Western habits and lifestyles.

Paradoxically, more and more intellectuals in such an atmosphere of the domination of Western culture and globalism are talking about the geopolitical weakness of the West or, simply, the crisis of the West.

The reasons for this weakness are highly complex. First of all, the states of the Western world are becoming less and less dominant economically. The long-debated Chinese economic boom has become a long-term growth process that allows taking the USA on in a trade war or calling the shots not just in Africa or South America, but also in Europe.

From the military perspective, the West may still rely on the power of NATO, however, it is ever more eroded not just by authoritarian states that increase their military might at the expense of their residents, but inner spats as well. Crisis and need for change came up in the NATO leaders' conversations already before Donald Trump was elected. Barack Obama spoke about the need to increase military spending and reconsider defence plans in his last address in Warsaw.

The Western states themselves have erupted in voices of protest due to economic crises and growing unease because of social change. From the Greeks crushed under the unbearable weight of their debt left without much sympathy from the EU to the Brits who have opted for Brexit.

From the Hungarians voluntarily turning away from liberal democracy to the Poles who are trying to fight their way into the diarchy of Germany and France. The Western states lack unity both within themselves and in their various organizations.

These inner challenges are further stirred and increased by the provocations and the various expressions of threat from Russia or China.

At the same time, the Western world is forced to seek agreement for the solution of the various global problems. The Westerners carry the heaviest burden in the process of slowing down the climate change, they get to respond to the humanitarian crises, negotiate military conflicts in regions that lay quite a distance from their own spheres of influence.

Thus, the liberal democratic states are weighed down more and more by the inner problems, external threats and the burden of global responsibility. They also feed the doubt whether such global outlook and representation of the liberal values really are of any use to the Westerners?

Isolationist moods may be detected in the American choice of the President and in the British step out of the EU. The search for a new way are ever more often debated in Central Europe, especially in Hungary with its unusual interpretations of democracy.

All these circumstances only confirm that the issue of the triumph of liberal democracy has long been pushed away. A different question may be raised: does liberal democracy have a future?

In his brief collection of lessons in democracy Timothy Snyder wrote: „We might want to believe that our democratic heritage protects us from such threats. Such instinct is false. In fact, the precedent set for us by the founding fathers requires us to study history in order to understand the deep root of tyranny and consider appropriate responses to it.“

### **Why are we talking about the sunset of Europe?**

The idea of the European sunset was not picked by accident. Besides hinting at Oswald Spengler's idea of the development of civilizations, it is also an idea that allows to perceive continuity.

In the beginning of the 20th century Europe was the dominant continent that gave direction not only to the geopolitical processes, but to cultural ones as well, and now it is losing its power. If several decades ago the American writers could joke about the stagnation in the European culture, now Europe is growing old physically as well.

The demographic data are harsh on many of the European states. Europe is losing its steam in the world economy, politics, in is also losing its leadership in the Western world. In the context of the demographic booms in Africa or Asia and their economic potential, the Europeans seem to be riding in a car that is gradually running out of gas. The car is doomed to stop eventually. Or find new sources for the impetus to move.

In his adventurous scheme of the development of civilization, Spengler describes the winter stage as stagnation in the city civilization and loss of faith. The dictate of scientific explanations prevails, as well as utilitarian goals and the cult of success. Art and creative instinct are replaced by mechanical flight from one fleeting object of fashion to another.

In politics, the power of the rich emerges, the social disparity grows, and the possibility to change the reality by political decisions is killed off by the bureaucratic machine that has expanded to become a self-supporting

system. In fact, it is easy to observe the imagery of a dying civilization as described by Spengler in the present day. Anywhere from the capitalist principle of growing wealth and the prevalence of material expression of value to the complicated political decisions that get stuck and moving again in the bureaucratic machine of the EU in Brussels.

Europe is facing great inner challenges and is slow to reconsider its identity. It finds it difficult to adapt to change, but does it deserve to be termed a sunset? Does Europe have no answers in terms of political, cultural, social life? Are we to expect an eclipse?

Or is the metaphor of sunset to us, like to the observer of David Hume, a clue to simply expect a new sunrise?

### **Is our age drenched in exhaustion?**

If the signs of sunset are perceivable in the civilizational context, then an individual life is presently mostly drenched in exhaustion. We can observe the signs of exhaustion not only in the cases of psychological problems, insomnia and overworking. The exhaustion is both physical and mental.

From online advice on how to fall and stay asleep throughout the night to academic debates that attempt to go in circle around the same problems.

The rushing stream of information transferred by the latest technologies, the ever-diminishing ability to focus, organize time and work. The ever-expanding background of noise and imagery. The social demands and the privacy more and more often lost voluntarily, the expansion of the public sphere.

The ever-greater difficulty in defining the relationship between the virtual and the real. The search for true experience, feeling, conversation. Ant the attempt to simulate them or simply to deny their need upon failure to find them.

As a person tries to stay on top of this reality, he or she is necessarily exhausted, which leads to indifference, resignation. An intellectual in such a society has three more perceivable options. The attempt to cut off, the attempt to participate and the attempt to maintain the balance and find a moderate point of view and judgement.

In the West, more and more often we find the second case of the intellectual who is exhausted and tries to keep up with the stream of information and opinion. He or she tries to stay relevant, attempts to participate

in the social media discussions, appear on all the possible platforms of the public space, he or she becomes a part of the opinion market and attempts to satisfy every possible need of the society and prevent from stopping the imaginary progress of the Enlightenment.

The exhaustion of the intellectuals becomes part of the general exhaustion. The societies do not want or expect philosophical questions. Not to mention philosophical answers. The cynical mind prevails, as described by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, it does not have nor seek moral distinctions and judgments. Even great quantities of the criticisms of the political, cultural, social vices produced lose more and more of their power.

“If dissatisfaction is what inspires criticisms in culture, our time is the most beneficial to them. However, the critical impulse has never been more likely to succumb to dubious triggers. The tension between what is desirably “criticized” and what should be “criticized” is so great that our thinking becomes rather too morose than precise. No thinking can keep up with the problems. That is the root of the powerlessness of criticism. The indifference towards all the problems is related to the premonition of what would be if they were reached. Since everything is problematic, somehow everything has become unimportant,” Sloterdijk’s diagnosis runs.

Having summarized the present-day situation and the world that has emerged after the fall of the iron curtain, I should provide you with an answer to the most intriguing question: is such a curtain possible now?

But first, two jokes related to the answer.

First. Two East German guards are boringly walking by the Berlin Wall. Suddenly, the first stops in front of the second and asks: “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” The second replies: “Yes!” “Than you’re under arrest!”, his colleague replies.

Second. Midnight, a person with a mysterious suitcase comes up to the Berlin Wall with a bicycle. The guard stops him and asks to see the suitcase immediately. The person opens it, and it’s full of sand. The guards digs about, but finds nothing. “All right, move along,” he says to the man.

The same happens the next night. Again, a man with a bicycle comes up, carrying a mysterious suitcase. Again, the guard opens the suitcase and finds sand inside. He digs about, finds nothing and lets the man go.

The man with the bicycle and the suitcase appears every night for three years.



Finally, the Berlin Wall falls, Germany is reunited, and people's lives change. The former guard becomes a bartender and is pouring beer in a Berlin pub. One night, the mysterious man comes into the pub. The bartender, former guard, immediately notices him, calls up and says: "You can have as much of my beer as you want for free, just tell me, why the hell did you drag all that sand in the suitcase across the border?" The man looks at him, sips his beer and says: "Why sand? I was smuggling stolen bicycles."

### **Where does the great struggle for human minds take place?**

As I have already mentioned as I was talking about the idea of history ending, the great ideological struggle is hard to imagine in the shape it took in the 20th century. It is even harder to imagine a physical wall that would separate the amount of people that the Berlin Wall separated three decades ago.

Physical distinctions and barriers are becoming a rather rare phenomenon in the global world. Even the grandiose wall with Mexico that the US President is promising will never ensure complete separation or absolute security.

Now the trenches of the great struggle are hard to find and distinguish. But we can trace the shape of the new wall if we go back to the true distinction of the iron curtain, which has not lost its relevance.

Liberal democracy or open society no longer need to compete with totalitarian regimes, but its enemies are no less numerous. Their ranks have been joined by those who sympathize to the fallen systems, wax nostalgic about the past that never was, and those who advocate for new great systems or new order.

As he crossed the old iron curtain, Gabriel Garcia Marquez was mostly astounded to see that it was, according to him, neither iron nor curtain.

"Just a bar with red and white stripes like your typical barbershop sign. Having spent three months on the other side of the world, I realized that it's completely foolish to imagine that the iron curtain is in fact iron," wrote the famous South American writer in his memoir.

His observation only confirms that even the famous iron curtain was first and foremost an invented psychological border marker rather than a physical barrier. An imposing line beyond which lie the forbidden and vicious pleasures of Western life.

The new present-day wall should cut off the attitudes toward individual freedom, human rights and the openness of society. One side would hold the attitude steeped in liberal values, respect for an individual and social contract, and the other would suggest destroying all that and moving into the playing field of charming power games, bathing in the streams of liquid evil.

I believe this distinction is the easiest to observe not in economics and not even in politics, but in the information space. If we looked for a new possibility of self-isolation, its new expressions, first of all we could point to the public space.

In the states like Russia or China, the economic, social and even political life may simulate the MO's of liberal democracies, but the public space is haunted by the spirit of control, censorship and punishment.

The explosion of the internet and the expansion of the public space might empower expression, create the Western-type social media platforms, participate in the public sphere, but in authoritarian states, this participation is always observed by a Big Brother. The constant fear of expressing one's thoughts, the fear regarding one's social position, the collection of social credit in the case of China and the individual freedoms provided by the state in the form of alms.

Information, collection of personal data and public reputation are the tools of government that the new powers opposing liberal democracy employ to rule. Their goal is to limit individual expression and to convince that the only guarantee of everyday comfort is obedience to those who are in power.

If you are looking for the new iron curtain, watch the information space. It is constantly pushed and shoved, and sometimes own bastions are placed even on the Western side of the world. The new prisoners of this system are those who willingly reside in the bubble of the manipulative information space and become determined to deny the reality and facts for a more convenient and lesser life.

### **What is the new struggle?**

The principle of the struggle remains. The individuals, communities and nations who believe in the liberal values, democracy, open society face those who are dissatisfied with the possible alternative. The distinction is

less clearly defined than was possible by pointing fingers to East or West Berlin.

The geopolitical shifts, the challenges facing the Western international organizations indicate that this struggle between liberal democracy and its enemies no longer has clear borders and boundaries. One or the other side may be joined not only by individuals, but by entire communities and even states.

While some attempt to destroy the world order based on agreements, legal principles and diplomacy, other intuitively feel that they must keep their faith in the system that provides the freedom and possibility for everyone to participate, and to maintain the independence of states.

While some declare that a sunset is necessarily followed by an eclipse and advocate the return of the old forms of rule or simply fall into power play in its shadow, others believe in the possibility of a sunrise, a new agreement or simply in being human.

The iron curtain is much more mobile and more difficult to perceive, like liquid evil, it seeps into new territories, new lands, new hearts, but the struggle for the essence of being human, for human rights and liberties, for open society and the right to self-determination of the states remains the same.