

The preference for the primitive

Vladimir Putin has previously suggested the West's transition away from traditional values has put it in a state of moral decline. Sergio Scandizzo argues that despite predictions of the collapse of western society, the evidence suggests we are becoming better at handling major crises.

One of the most depressing considerations one can make about the causes of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is that it might have been in part motivated by the belief that western countries had entered a phase of moral decline. This was the sense of Vladimir Putin's Financial Times [interview](#) on "obsolete" western values as well as of his subsequent [speech](#) at the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi.

Putin's viewpoint is that the West is renouncing its traditional moral values for new ones. As such, it is becoming weaker, because old values are better than new ones and countries that are inspired by the former are stronger than the latter. The fact that such arguments unmistakably echo those of Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán, to name just two of the more prominent European nationalists, should give us a hint as to where the actual seeds of decline may lie.

In his last [work](#), the late art historian Ernst Gombrich explored the recurring tendency in the history of western art of valuing earlier and less aesthetically refined works over more mature and technically accomplished ones. Far from being an occasional aberration, he argued that a predilection for the unsophisticated over the polished, for the apparently simple over the complex, for the old over the contemporary is a constant feature in our appreciation for the arts, since Plato's rejection of innovation in art and Cicero's preference for austerity and "plain style".

One simple explanation for this bias is that we tend to use our own experience of life as a model for other things that exhibit change through time. As our life goes through stages (childhood, growth, maturity, old age) of which the last is definitely not the best, so art, politics, morals and all things human are expected to follow the same path and the golden age, the highest level of expression and purity of intent are all in the past.

There is also an element of distaste for complexity, sophistication, and the search for 'the new' which inevitably characterises maturity of any sort. Such a natural reaction to the more difficult – think of most people's reaction to contemporary classical music – clouds our judgement when it comes to comparing the new with the supposedly simple, elegant, and straightforward past. That the past was never anything of the sort, if not in our own rose-tinted recollection, is something that apparently is very hard to keep in mind.

It is hard not to see a political angle to this pattern. If things have gotten worse and risks are high, then the future holds no great promise unless we revert to or keep the old ways. Consequently, the status quo is a minimum objective to achieve, traditional values are better than new ones by definition, and so it goes for social arrangements and institutions.

Maybe age is also a factor. The older I am, the less likely I am to be hopeful about the future as mine is not going to be that long in the first place, and, as I associate the best years of my life, most already gone, with the times, culture, music and literature of those old days, it is difficult for me to find the art and the values of the current and future years similarly exciting and full of promise.

But maybe there is yet another reason for this preference for the primitive. If our times are more troubled, more dangerous, more difficult, then, by inference, we are also more interesting, more hardened by challenges, more worthy. Despite the fact that we (and our generation) might have considerably contributed to this presumed state of degradation, we feel nonetheless motivated by it (in no other way can I make sense of today's nationalist and right-wing resurgence, from France to the UK, from Hungary to Italy), we feel we have a job to do, a duty to save our children from such impending doom.

And yet it appears that the last fifteen years in particular have given us sharp, albeit admittedly anecdotal evidence that western society is, if nothing else, getting better at handling those very crises that are supposed to herald its decline. The financial crisis of 2008-2009 (“[our generation’s 1930 moment](#)”, in the words of Yanis Varoufakis) has so far led to nowhere near the catastrophic consequences of its twentieth century precursor, although in fairness, Varoufakis had to witness the subsequent sovereign crisis from an especially uncomfortable point of view. Indeed, the “sovereign” crisis of 2011-2012 will be remembered more for the way the European Union was able to hold the Eurozone together (and for Mario Draghi’s iconic “whatever it takes” speech) than for the undeniably harsh years of austerity that followed.

The Covid-19 pandemic, even with the terrible loss of life it has caused, will not go down in history as a remake of the 1918 Spanish Flu, but hopefully as the first instance of a vaccine (actually more than one) being successfully delivered and distributed at record speed, and for the ability, although through plenty of economic, political and social pain, to modify the work and personal habits of billions of people “on the fly” without our social order breaking down or health and welfare systems becoming obsolete. Climate change is certainly an existential threat to both our economic model and our way of life, but never before, other than in war, have all industrialised countries agreed to cooperate and coordinate not just on scientific research, but on concrete and far-reaching policy-making in the way they have done with climate change.

As I write, fierce fighting is going on in Ukraine, but even this unprovoked attack from a world power over a nation with which it was joined for centuries is showing us some unexpected signs that rumours of our society’s demise have been strongly exaggerated. Realpolitik, a term most of the time meaning that the rights of the weak can be sacrificed to the interests of the powerful, has not so far triumphed.

Countries that routinely struggle to balance humanitarian efforts with the fear of being overwhelmed by immigrants have opened their doors to refugees with unprecedented fervour. Those same countries, which systematically quibble among and within themselves over money, jobs, welfare, and trade, have followed a remarkably, if not totally, coherent approach to what they perceive as the challenge of an authoritarian regime, not to an individual nation, but to that constellation of communities that, while widely different in so many respects, uphold the values of democracy and human rights above all others.

Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent those of the European Investment Bank, EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [kremlin.ru](#)
