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Keynote speech: Crisis of Liberalism and the Russian Threat: Perspectives from Latvia, the Place Where History Never Ended

After the end of the Cold War, many Latvians never quite believed that history had ended. They continued to perceive Russia as a threat and, although grudgingly, sought membership in the European Union and NATO. In return, they were asked to re-evaluate their history, extend rights to minorities, and be tolerant towards difference. The Euro-American liberals, in turn, believed that history had indeed ended. They welcomed Latvians and other Eastern Europeans to the “free world” and confidently advised them on how to become liberal.

This confidence is no longer. Political liberalism is said to be in crisis. Moreover, Russia has emerged as the new old threat to the international liberal order. As a result, Latvians—along with Lithuanians and Estonians—have been propelled from the rearguard of European liberalism to the vanguard of its defense. In this talk, I draw on ethnographic work on postsocialist democratization in Latvia to argue that the externalization of liberalism’s crisis in the form of the Russian threat reveals crucial internal tensions of post-Cold War political liberalism as an actually existing ideological formation.