



Speeches that shape Europe

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Speeches that shape Europe # 3

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"The End of the Long 20th Century"

Ivan Krastev at CEU Vienna, 20 March 2026

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Applebaum mapped the threat. Draghi mapped the response. Krastev does something different and equally necessary — he maps the terrain itself. Before we can defend or build, we need to understand what kind of moment we are actually living through. This lecture is about understanding.

About the Speech

On 20 March 2026, Ivan Krastev delivered the inaugural lecture of [CEU's 35th Anniversary Presidential Lecture Series](#) at the Urania Observatory in Vienna, exploring "The End of the Long 20th Century." The series was conceived as a public intellectual event — CEU opening its doors to the city and inviting citizens to what its president called "a veritable feast of ideas" on the most acute issues of our time.

The venue carries its own significance. The Urania Observatory has stood on the Vienna Ringstrasse since 1910 — a building conceived as a place where science and public life meet, where knowledge is democratised rather than stockpiled. That a lecture on the collapse of the postwar intellectual order was delivered here, in a city that sits at the intersection of Eastern and Western European history, is not incidental. Vienna has always been the place where Europe's fault lines are most visibly felt.

The lecture argues that the twentieth century is ending for a second time — not as a moment of triumph, as in 1989, but as an experience of political rupture. It revisits the illusions of the post-Cold War era, showing how nationalism, authoritarian resilience, and identity conflicts were already embedded in the supposed "end of history."

Who Speaks

[Ivan Krastev](#) is one of the most original political minds in Europe today — and one of the most difficult to categorise, which is precisely what makes him valuable. He is the chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, Bulgaria, and the Albert Hirschman Permanent Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. A Financial Times contributing editor, he is a founding board member of the European Council on Foreign Relations and a board member of the International Crisis Group and GLOBSEC.

His books — among them *After Europe*, *The Light That Failed* (co-authored with Stephen Holmes), and *Is It Tomorrow Yet?* — have consistently identified the fault lines in liberal democracy before they became visible to most observers. He does not come to Vienna as an optimist or a pessimist. He comes as a diagnostician — someone whose primary skill is asking better questions than the ones already being asked.

What Krastev Argues

1. The liberal international order is over — but we need to understand precisely what has ended

Krastev opens with a debate that took place in Toronto in 2017, where Fareed Zakaria argued that the liberal order was not over, while Niall Ferguson argued it was. At the time, 70% of a young liberal

student audience voted that it was not over. Today, he notes, both Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney — who agree on virtually nothing — share one conclusion: it is over. As Krastev puts it with characteristic precision: *"While we agree that it is over, in my view it's very important to understand what is over and what we really mean by this."*

This is not a counsel of despair. It is a demand for intellectual honesty. The liberal order as it existed — with its assumptions about convergence, its faith in trade as a pacifying force, its belief that democratic capitalism was history's destination — that order is gone. The question is what will replace it and whether Europeans have the conceptual vocabulary to navigate what comes next.

Why this matters: The complacency Krastev describes is not a peripheral European problem — it sits at the heart of Western democratic societies. When citizens of France, Italy, or the Netherlands begin to treat their institutions as bureaucratic inconveniences rather than hard-won achievements, the entire European project becomes vulnerable from within. The disinformation campaigns targeting EU-aspiring countries in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe exploit this very complacency — portraying European institutions as hollow precisely when Europeans themselves have begun to take them for granted.

2. The 20th century is ending for a second time — and this rupture is deeper than 1989

This is the intellectual heart of the lecture. Krastev frames his "long 20th century" in contrast to historian Eric Hobsbawm's "short 20th century" — the period from World War I to the fall of the Soviet bloc. For Krastev, the long 20th century is defined not by dates but by political identities — and we are now living through the moment when those identities have ceased to be what they were.

The crucial distinction he draws is between 1989 and today. In 1989, the future arrived — history ended because liberal democratic capitalism appeared to be its destination. Today, something darker has happened: *"The idea of the end of the future was replaced by the idea of the end of time. Our political life is very much shaped by different types of extinction rebellions — climate on the left, demography on the right, technology, AI. We suddenly started to fear the future."*

This shift — from a politics oriented toward the future to a politics paralysed by fear of it — is, Krastev argues, one of the defining features of our moment.

Why this matters: The shift from a politics of the future to a politics of fear is visible across the entire European continent — in the rise of parties that offer certainty over complexity, protection over openness, and the imagined past over an uncertain tomorrow. Understanding this shift is essential for anyone working on democratic resilience, whether in Paris or Tbilisi, in Warsaw or Yerevan. For EU-aspiring societies in particular, this matters acutely: if the argument for European integration is framed purely as a promise of future prosperity, it will not reach citizens who have stopped believing in the future altogether. The case for Europe must be grounded in what it protects today.

3. Four exceptional political identities have collapsed — and the world has not yet replaced them

Krastev identifies four states whose post-World War II identities gave the international order its structure and its meaning: the United States, the Soviet Union, Germany, and Israel. All four, he argues, were perceived as exceptional not merely by their own citizens but by the entire world. And all four — for entirely different reasons — look fundamentally different today than they did even a decade ago.

The Soviet case is the most straightforward: the identity collapsed because the state disappeared. But the disappearance was itself revelatory. *"In December 1990, the Pentagon asked a panel of*

leading American experts on the Soviet Union to predict how the situation would develop. The major conclusion was that superpowers make mistakes but they never commit suicide." The experts were wrong — and their certainty in being wrong taught the world a false lesson: that because we had failed to predict the Soviet collapse, we now understood how history worked.

Germany's case is equally instructive. Every crisis in the world today, Krastev observes, somehow becomes a crisis of Germany's postwar identity. The pacifist Germany — the Europe that made war unthinkable — is now, paradoxically, about to have a defence budget larger than those of France and the United Kingdom combined.

Why this matters: The collapse of the four exceptional political identities Krastev describes has destabilised the entire international order — not only its periphery. Germany's pacifist identity gave European integration its moral foundation. America's values-based exceptionalism gave it its external guarantor. As both dissolve, every European society — east and west — is forced to ask what the European project now stands on, and who defends it. This question is existential for societies already living under direct Russian pressure, but it is increasingly urgent for all Europeans who have assumed that someone else would always answer it.

4. America is redefining itself — from values-based hegemon to power-based actor

This is where Krastev's analysis is at its most striking and most consequential. The current American administration, he argues, represents something more radical than a change of priorities. It represents a fundamental redefinition of what kind of political actor the United States is. *"America is exceptional, not because of its values. America is exceptional because of its power. And this power is not connected to any type of moral justification."*

He calls this the "Agamemnon doctrine" — a world where there are different kings, but one king is more powerful than the others, and that power requires no moral legitimisation beyond itself. This is not simply a shift in foreign policy. It is a shift in the foundational logic of American exceptionalism — and it has profound consequences for every international institution the United States helped build.

Why this matters: The redefinition of American power from a values-based to a purely power-based logic has consequences that extend far beyond Washington's immediate foreign policy choices. It removes the moral architecture that gave multilateral institutions — the UN, NATO, the WTO — their legitimacy in the eyes of smaller and medium-sized states. For European democracies, this creates both a challenge and an opportunity: the challenge of filling a values vacuum that America once occupied, and the opportunity to demonstrate that rules-based international order is worth defending on its own merits — not because Washington endorses it, but because it is the only framework under which smaller states, whether in Western Europe or on Europe's democratic frontier, can genuinely thrive.

5. In moments of rupture, we cannot only defend — we must reinvent

Krastev closes not with a solution but with a reorientation. The temptation in moments of crisis is to defend what exists — to protect institutions, norms, and frameworks from further erosion. But Krastev argues this is insufficient. *"We are much more forced to change the questions we are asking ourselves."* Defending the answers of the 20th century will not serve a world in which those answers no longer apply.

He finds a kind of institutional hope in this reorientation — pointing to universities as spaces uniquely equipped for exactly this kind of intellectual reinvention. But the argument extends beyond academia. Political movements, civil society organisations, and European institutions face the same

challenge: not simply to preserve what was built, but to understand what needs to be rebuilt, and on what foundations.

Why this matters: Krastev's call to reinvent rather than merely defend is the most practically useful argument in this lecture for anyone engaged in democratic advocacy or counter-disinformation work. Purely defensive communication — countering lies, correcting false narratives, defending institutions under attack — will always be reactive and always arrive too late. The deeper challenge, for European civil society broadly and for organisations working across EU-aspiring societies specifically, is to articulate a renewed vision: not just what Europe is protecting, but what it is building, and why that construction project is worth the long and difficult journey of joining.

What This Tells Us

Ivan Krastev's CEU lecture is the most intellectually demanding piece in this series — and deliberately so. Where Applebaum identified the enemy, and Draghi proposed the blueprint, Krastev forces us to confront a harder question: do we even have the right conceptual framework for the moment we are living through?

His answer is uncomfortable but honest: probably not yet. The political identities, institutional assumptions, and intellectual frameworks that structured the postwar world are dissolving. The future has shifted from a promise to a threat. The powers that guaranteed the liberal order are redefining themselves in ways that make that guarantee void.

And yet Krastev is not a pessimist. His call to reinvent rather than merely defend carries a genuine conviction that the rupture we are living through is also an opening — that moments of collapse are, historically, moments of creation.

This message resonates far beyond any single region. Across Europe — east and west, inside the Union and on its democratic frontier — societies have lived through ruptures, absorbed shocks, and rebuilt. They know that collapse and creation are not opposites. And perhaps the most honest thing Krastev offers is not an answer but a challenge: in the aftermath of the long 20th century, what kind of Europe do we want to build — and are we willing to do the work?

Watch the full lecture: [CEU YouTube Channel](#)



David Dondua

Ambassador David Dondua is a diplomat and expert in international security, conflict resolution, and European integration. During his diplomatic career in the Georgian foreign service (1993–2022), he held key positions, including Ambassador to Austria, Greece, Serbia, OSCE and NATO. Beyond diplomacy, he has served as an associate professor and lecturer at several universities. He currently represents the European Public Law Organisation (EPLO) at the International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA) in Vienna. He serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the EU Awareness Centre.