

Opening remarks

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I would like to start our workshop with a description of the current Hungarian political context and, then, to move towards the European political space. As you know, we do not intend to focus exclusively on Hungary when discussing the dilemma what the European Union can do in case a member state systematically breaches European values and regulation. Still, here, in Budapest, we cannot pretend - amongst like-minded guests and friends - as if we simply talked about a mere theoretical problem.

1. About the Hungarian context

The political regime we face today in Hungary might be called a *failed* illiberal democracy. When the concept of this workshop (and the following one in Brussels) was elaborated after the infamous speech of the victorious Hungarian Prime Minister about an illiberal state in the summer of 2014, Viktor Orbán ruled the country in his full pomp. But we know that ‘a week is a long time in politics’, as the quote attributed to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson says – so, half a year in politics seems to be a century. First of all, in the last months Fidesz lost three by-elections and - as a consequence - its two-third supermajority in the national parliament. This shift in the public mood also means that Orbán cannot change the constitution any more so easily (or at all) in order to render strong competences to the president of the republic in case he wants to grasp this position whilst cementing his personal power for another 7-9 years starting from 2017. Second, the sicknesses of the regime now show evident and painful symptoms: fresh state-led corruption scandals - unmasked by a courageous critical new generation of journalists -, irrational and unpopular domestic political decisions like the obsession to introduce an internet tax, which was blocked by huge spontaneous demonstrations, another defeat against the commercial TV channel RTL Klub, which started to present critical news coverage as a reaction to discriminative state regulations, the increasing isolation of the government in the international arena - a sort of *cordon sanitaire* has emerged around Orbán - especially because of his so-called “Eastern opening” and close friendship with Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile loud and open power struggles inside the inner circles of the Fidesz elite as well as a brutal economic and primitive rhetorical war between the former No 1 oligarch of the regime, Lajos Simicska and the Prime Minister himself dominate public life.

Is this the endgame of the Fidesz-story and the collapse of Orbán's rule in its current form? It is too early to call a total defeat. The over-centralised power structure is under huge pressure, but the ruling party still has a safe majority and Fidesz seems to be the most popular political force nationwide even after losing more than one million voters. Moreover, one of the alternatives, Jobbik, in spite of its softer language and less radical political attitudes - at least on the top level of its leadership -, still jeopardises, to use an understatement, the renovation of liberal democracy. And what would happen if left-liberal democratic political forces win a future parliamentary election: would they have a chance to eliminate the legacy and the illiberal character of the system which has been strongly institutionalised by the Fidesz government during its four year long revolutionary "Sturm und Drang" activism? What if a government has to be formed including Fidesz as the major political force in a coalition?

2. About the international and European context

We need to have a debate on the definition, on the "How to call you?" problem. Illiberalism, populism, soft and hard Euroscepticism, majoritarianism, nationalism: which terminology should be used in order to better understand new collective political beliefs, group/partisan identities, inside and outside the European Union which challenge the core values of traditional western democracies? Some observers claim that former fringe parties still do not have significant influence on European politics: look at the composition of the European Parliament. Still, in some of the member states, parliamentary elections resulted in political earthquakes. Populist parties are usually non-liberal, but not necessarily anti-democratic: they can even adjust to the system or lose popular support when getting to power. Still, the clear and present danger in many big and small member states, combined with the experience provided by the practice of the current Hungarian government, might and should push leading European political elites towards the strengthening of safeguards against anti-liberal tendencies at European level.

I would argue that the Europeanisation of the Hungarian case following the first illiberal measures by the new Orbán government in 2010, especially the introduction of restrictive media laws, have saved the country from an even worse political outcome. The series of conflicts between the Hungarian government and the European institutions meant moral support to the opponents of the aggressive and fearful political regime at home, but at the same time gave a new reason to Orbán to mobilise pro-governmental sentiments against

“foreign”, socialist and liberal forces - proclaiming that these political groups simply express the interests and bitterness of big multinational companies. Actually, it was the European People’s Party which followed a partisan political line and refused to condemn its member organisation, Fidesz, when most of the MEP-s belonging to the EPP voted against the resolutions approved by the majority of the European Parliament between 2011 and 2013. Still, these resolutions, including the Tavares Report on the state of democracy in Hungary, as well as the individual infringement procedures initiated by the European Commission were not able to make many rapid and devastating changes to be withdrawn in Hungary: the neutralisation of the Constitutional Court through constitutional amendments and patronage, the nationalistic rhetoric of the preamble of the new Basic Law, the partisan media regulatory media authority, the devaluation of the ombudsman system, or, to mention an everyday human rights issue, the criminalisation of the homeless people are still with us. We do not have a simple answer to a rather exciting question: whether it was the consequence of non-sufficient legal competences at European level, or it was the lack of political will as well as a cold pragmatism inside the higher circles of the main European political actors that ended up in half-way solutions when the EU had to face the negative Hungarian development? So, should we search for a Third Way between parliamentary resolutions plus individual infringement procedures on the one hand, and the so-called nuclear option of Article 7 established by the Lisbon Treaty, on the other? Or, should we have no fear, including the citizens of the respective member state, of the use of Article 7?

There is an open event today in Brussels organised by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). The title of the forum is “Problems of Representative Democracy in Europe - conversation with Frans Timmermans”. According to the invitation, the first Vice-President of the European Commission is supposed to react to, I quote: “Whether it is the rise of populist parties like the True Finns who came second of the elections [...], the anti-democratic mentality, a democratic malaise or the rejection of liberal democracy by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the number of threats is growing.” Parallel to the consultation in the European capitol, here we discuss exactly the same dilemmas. I wish us a fruitful brain-storming.

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