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Introduction

What a different mood we had a couple of months ago when we applied to the *Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für Freiheit* for a support in order to organise an event on – what we call - illiberal seduction! Since 12 April 2026 the political climate has drastically changed in Hungary and the impacts of our national parliamentary elections have been widely discussed in the European and international political and public spheres. The defeat and collapse of an illiberal, populist, anti-European political regime has given hope to liberals and democrats worldwide. The new government started to work with a remarkable dynamism to deconstruct the old regime, to reconstruct the institutions of liberal democracy and to renew political culture in the country.

It won't be easy. History shows that illiberal, authoritarian ideas and practices do not disappear fast and they have been present and represented by political entrepreneurs and ideologists all over the world in our modern epochs. The enemies of free society and civic liberties repeatedly created their “isms”, movements, political organisations in the last two-hundred years. We all remember that the twentieth century brought extreme left-wing and right-wing totalitarian regimes to life with terrible consequences.

Liberalism – both political and economic – has a long history of philosophical thoughts, ideals and ideology, partisan politics and social practice. Liberal views seemed to win over inhuman radicalism and fundamentalism at the turning point in 1989 in

Europe. Nevertheless, this miraculous year was not the “end of history”. Since then, anti-liberal, illiberal, populist worldviews and their current messianic or opportunistic representatives have gained ground with fresh and dangerous political agendas even within the European Union. Public support to hybrid or openly authoritarian political regimes has grown globally.

Just like in previous historic times, the conflict between the protagonists of liberal democracy and their nay-sayers cannot only be seen as a partisan competition in the national and supranational political arenas. This clash is based on a fundamental differentiation of current ideological concepts and values elaborated in today’s spiritual and intellectual spheres. Even nowadays when most citizens have easy access to social media to express their thoughts, it is think-tanks, foundations, research institutions, and the academia that supply the public discourse with facts, knowledge and arguments – as well as with “alternative facts”, fake news and disinformation. The moral responsibility of intellectuals and experts, who – together with top politicians – exert dominance on what and how people think and talk, is as crucial as ever before.

History shows us that it is members of the intellectuals’ strata who became authors of non-liberal, extremist social and political ideologies. Julien Benda’s famous book *La Trahison des Clercs* criticised the apologists of nationalism and racism. Both totalitarian systems, Nazism and Bolshevism/Stalinism were supported and maintained by high-ranking, educated public figures of their own eras. Especially the vision of communism and the communist parties themselves have attracted intellectuals worldwide to join their chorus. In his

book, *L'opium des intellectuals*, Raymond Aron unmasked the myths of the Left, the revolution, and the proletariat.

Of course, we should not forget about the heroes of resistance as well as the open or secret dissent against exclusionary ideologies. Especially after the 1956 anti-Stalinist revolution in Hungary and the Prague Spring in 1968, enthusiasm evaporated and a great number of former believers left their naiveté behind: *Le passé d'une illusion* by François Furet illustrated this process with the break-up of famous German, French, Italian and East-Central-European public intellectuals with communist dogmas. Still, others remained followers of the Marxist-Leninist “church” – either because of loyalty or opportunism – until the collapse of the rotting regimes of the Soviet bloc. Before this endgame, the Western part of the world experienced extreme leftism of a new generation even flirting with terrorism in Germany and elsewhere.

Today we have public intellectuals, experts, analysts and popular influencers who produce populist, illiberal ideological concepts whilst attacking the fundamentals of liberal democracy, arguing in favour of semi-authoritarian systems like *Putinversteh* in Germany or prophesying the end of the European Union à la “*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*” by Oswald Spengler. Illiberal populist politicians, parties and movements openly spread their hatred and hate speech against the liberal world order undermining the achievements of the post-1945 and the post-1989 periods.

The main question we would like to focus on in this volume is the following: Why and how intellectuals (experts, scholars, opinion-leaders, influencers – depending on which era we are talking about) have supported or even produced non-democratic

ideas, extremist “isms” and/or have been seduced by such totalitarian political thoughts – often occupying high-ranking, leading positions in oppressive regimes. And more concretely: how and why intellectuals and experts have served Orbán’s dreams about a political transformation towards illiberal regimes domestically and globally? Again, many public figures have refused to support illiberal populism in Hungary. Just like in previous historic periods, there have always been protesters, resistance fighters, dissidents and advocates of human, liberal world-views who have unmasked the real nature of illiberalism and populism. We might add that the reserves of European liberalism are still powerful in current German and French ideological confrontations about the future of our societies.

In a complex and complicated real world, however, many typical individual cases might be grasped and characterised with the German notion *Bildungsroman*, expressing the ideological shift and development from, for example, dogmatic Marxism to liberalism, or the other way round, from pluralistic ideals to majoritarian, even far right political concepts. These life stories of strong personalities as well as their fellow-travellers have been deeply rooted in their historic circumstances, in the past and present struggles of intellectuals to form and change the world, or to the contrary, to accommodate to realities in an opportunistic way, or because of fear during the worst eras of political oppressions.

Semi-authoritarian regimes, like the System of National Cooperation under Viktor Orbán’s sixteen-year-long rule in Hungary forced public actors to choose between behavioural strategies. Media-workers, for example, could become loyal propagandists of the regime. Others just wanted to survive the

long-lasting bad times hoping to wait out the partisan capture of the field. Still, many journalists worked in the free segment of the media world with all the financial and personal risks it meant for them and still insisted on the professional standards of their vocation.

Today, we can celebrate the victory of the courage of many liberals and democrats over illiberal populism in Hungary. Actually, it seems to be quite a unique story how an extra-parliamentary movement and its leader were able to defeat *Goliath* with the help of the votes of the citizens on a sort of judgement day. Still, we have to be careful to define strictly the international lessons to be learnt from our special case and not to suggest a general liberal playbook simply to be copied. That issue might be the topic of debates and conferences in the near future. Moreover, it would be too early to say that the comeback of *Orbánism* is impossible. But at least we can share our global optimism when reminding ourselves to the carnival mood on the streets of Budapest on the election night just a month ago.