

Round Table: Desperately Seeking... A Future for Solidarity in Europe
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Some introductory remarks by István Hegedűs

Solidarity is a key term in international politics. Living in turbulent times, we desperately need solidarity with like-minded people (individuals and groups) inside our local communities, in our domestic and global political spheres - at national and European levels -, in our real life and on our social media platforms. (This is one reason why we are living inside our own hubs.) When liberal democratic values - our culture – have been challenged and attacked by anti-liberal, populist, Eurosceptic political forces, we feel stronger and safer in case we know we are not alone.

This is especially the feeling of those who live in countries where liberal democracy has already been under deconstruction. Enforced political, economic and cultural changes by a coercive political power are certainly not just a problem for the Poles and Hungarians who experience the consequences on their own skin. Not only because mainstream democrats have to try to co-operate with semi-authoritarian governments as partners and co-decision-makers in the European Union, but also because the virus is spreading all over in the democratic world. Retrospectively, it is evident that the old political elites and the European institutions have made a mistake when not blocking troublemakers like Viktor Orbán who now has an ambition to “save” Europe in alliance with similar political adventurers.

We have reached a polarised era when political-ideological confrontation between the protagonists of open societies, the pro-European, human rights oriented public actors, parties, civil organisations on the one side and the new reactionaries on the other has become unavoidable. Today, identity politics dominate our public debates: it will be crucial to prove that the populist claim about their special relationship to the masses is false. It is fake news.

Viktor Orbán just decided to be present and fight back at the plenary session where Members of the European Parliament will discuss the proposal to trigger Article 7 of the EU Treaty against Hungary, better to say, the Hungarian government on 11 September in Strasbourg. The Hungarian Prime Minister hopes to mobilise sympathy for his anti-refugee rhetoric and hard measures Europe-wide pretending to be just a radical, outspoken guy who works for a secure Europe even when criticising the old guard. Hopefully, there will be enough room for his political opponents to unmask his latest manoeuvres in Hungary which include further steps to control the media landscape, to attack the freedom of education and academia, to domesticate the judiciary system, to

shrink the space of independent civil society and to start a new cultural war on history, memories and identity. Recently, Orbán and his new “hero”, Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini proclaimed at a joint press conference who is their number one common enemy: French President Emmanuel Macron immediately picked up glove (<https://euobserver.com/news/142686>).

At the moment, a new strong united block of different extreme right wingers as well as hardliners from the “centre-right” European People’s Party – notoriously Fidesz – seems to be unrealistic according to Ivan Krastev (www.nytimes.com/2018/08/19/opinion/steve-bannon-europe-movement-far-right.htm). Still, future negative development in the European political sphere might bring unexpected peculiar surprises to the supporters of the pro-European vision if they, politicians and civil activists, if we, become sclerotic under the attacks of the populists. Moreover, what is to be observed in Poland and Hungary, “it can happen here”, writes Paul Krugman in The New York Times, arguing that “the Republican Party is ready, even eager, to become an American version of Law and Justice or Fidesz” (www.nytimes.com/2018/08/27/opinion/trump-republican-party-authoritarianism.html). The problems we face are unique and global, the solutions should be both unique and global.

The claim to re-invent national sovereignty inside the European Union is actually an easy excuse for semi-authoritarian leaders to get rid of shared values, common policies, rules and behaviour. So, unmasking the populist agenda is the first step. To convince people about a renewed, dynamic non-populist alternative is the harder task. Facing European elections in 2019, there is not much time left. Yet, most European citizens – especially Central Europeans – still support the European project. Their existing European identity can be mobilised by talented politicians who are able to take back control on the political agenda, who have skills to frame public discourse and who can communicate in a rational way whilst smartly accommodating to our changing political and media environment. Actually, the European election campaign is a perfect opportunity for pro-European parties and NGO-s to redefine Europe and call for action on the whole continent.

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