

Welcome address: European Elections in 2019: The Organisation of Europe?

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Dear Guests,

As you know, a week is a long time in politics (Harold Wilson, 1964). When we initiated this conference, the title of my welcoming presentation was much more adequate than it is today. The Organisation of Europe seems to be much less a clear and present danger than couple of weeks ago.

Thank you for coming to our event. We will discuss the political implications of the European elections through one and half day, with Hungarian and foreign – European – speakers: experts, scholars, politicians and NGO representatives.

These elections will be much more European than any contests for the European Parliament ever before, even if we do not have trans-European party lists, we cannot vote for the President of the European Union directly (there is no such position at all) and we do not have a government majority and an opposition facing each other at the plenary sessions in Brussels and Strasbourg. Still, we can observe an accelerating process to be called the Europeanisation of politics, the penetration of all-European issues into the national public debates of the member states - and an emerging European public sphere. Ironically, the politicisation of the European Union – both in the case of politics and policies - has happened significantly as the consequence of the criticism and permanent attacks by anti-European populist and illiberal political forces all over in Europe. Today, the biggest challenge for the European project is whether hard Eurosceptics and radical right wing parties would receive altogether a one-third of the mandates in the European Parliament following the elections at the end of May 2019.

Now we are back to our point on the Organisation of Europe... In 2015-16, the dominant pro-governmental Hungarian media (an entire empire by today) portrayed the Hungarian prime minister as the new strongman of Europe. Seemingly beyond frustrating infringement procedures and resolutions approved by the European Parliament, like the Tavares report, which had condemned the Orbán-government and the Orbán-regime, the leader of Fidesz enjoyed the peak of his political career at European level as a well-known trouble-maker and influencer inside the centre-right European political family. By then, he was isolated as a bilateral partner by most of the leaders of the member states and suffered under negative coverage in the liberal media worldwide. Still, Orbán was able to increase the speed of his peacock dance (as he called it), to improve his slippery tactics vis á vis the European institutions – two steps forward, one

step back (having in mind Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's reverse remarks on the social democrats). At the same time, he constructed himself as the main representative of alternative ideological concepts regarding "Muslim" migration, "invasion", compared to Angela Merkel's human political behaviour and openness during the refugee crisis. Following the referendum on Brexit with a tragic result and Donald Trump's victory at the US presidential election in 2016 Orbán prophesised that in 2017 we would enter into the year of rebellion in Europe.

As we know, the political climate has changed again and did not follow Orbán's wishful thinking. Nevertheless, the Hungarian prime minister moved forward with his strategy to have two strings to his bow: using the protecting shield of his party's membership inside the European People's Party against external pressure as well as against the consequences of ongoing investigations by the European institutions, and, parallel, enjoying his new celebrity role as a politician and visionary in the eyes of supporters of radical right wing parties everywhere in Europe. One foot here, with the other there. This political gamble, however, proved to be too risky for Orbán.

Just a couple of month ago, common knowledge, including experts' views, stated that Fidesz would never leave the EPP, and the EPP would never expel Orbán's party. The reason: it is a win-win situation for both of them. According to the pragmatic *Realpolitik* argumentation, a mathematical approach, the EPP needs the votes of the Fidesz MEP-s in the European Parliament. Also, the EPP is a big party family that can cope with radicals on its wings, moreover, Orbán still listens to internal critical remarks and is able to change his mind and political decisions. "It's probably better to have him inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in" – as Lyndon B. Johnson formulated about John Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI. In other words: he is an *enfant terrible*, as EPP President Joseph Daul said, but he still likes Orbán. He is the kid of our dog. Quite a many politicians in the political group of the EPP held the position that Orbán might be wrong on the rule of law, but his views on migration were noteworthy. Moreover, the EPP needs a strong partner (a ruling party) from Hungary (and from Central Europe) in order to avoid an East-West divide – and cultural-historic differences should be tolerated.

Nevertheless, an idealist counter-opinion also emerged and spread over inside the EPP' rank and files. According to this moral approach, what does not belong together, should fall apart. As new and new conflicts came to surface each and every year, and the process of the ongoing radicalisation of the Orbán-regime could not be stopped, namely the assumed mitigating impact of the EPP on Fidesz did not work, the political arguments against the membership of Fidesz gained gradually ground. As Orbán's steps and measures created international media scandals repeatedly, and the Hungarian politician became more arrogant

after winning his third national election in a row, and he neglected and crossed the imaginary red lines drawn by the leadership of his Euro-party, Orbán started to cause more damage to the EPP - not only aesthetically, but even according to cost and benefit analyses. Trust has gradually evaporated before and during the plenary debate on the Sargentini report about the state of democracy and the rule of law in Hungary: finally, the majority of the EPP political group voted in favour of triggering Article 7 against Hungary in September 2018. Orbán's flirtation with radical right wingers, like Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian *Lega*, made EPP leaders definitely even more nervous. When a new propaganda – “information” - campaign was launched by the Hungarian government portraying Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, and one of the top politicians of the EPP - together with George Soros - as supporters of uncontrolled mass migration to Europe, this manoeuvre was the last straw that broke the camel's back. Loyalty is certainly a crucial value inside any organisation: Fidesz could not avoid its suspension by the political assembly of the European People's Party on 20 March 2019.

The Fidesz-EPP bromance definitely comes to an end. It's a common phrase, especially in politics: Never say never...

Today, just three weeks after the decision of the EPP, the Orbanisation of a well-established, democratic European party family is not on the agenda any more. I assume that sooner or later, Fidesz will leave the EPP, or the EPP will get rid of Orbán: the escalation of the conflict has even accelerated since the suspension of Fidesz and the pro-Fidesz media - in an orchestrated way - urges Orbán to find a new partisan alliance. Certainly, the Orbanisation of the European Union, if this term means the break-through of populist, anti-liberal and anti-European political forces at the European and national elections, is still one of the potential scenarios. We will see how Fidesz positions itself after the elections in a changing European environment as a relevant political group. But a full U-turn towards authoritarianism, nationalism and populism in the near future in Europe is much less likely to occur than we feared some years, some months or some days ago. The European Union can finally regain its strength after its long-lasting, turbulent crisis period and might renew its political agenda with the support of the majority of European citizens.

I wish you all a successful and fruitful conference.

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