

## Turbulent times in European politics – the populist/illiberal factor

István Hegedűs

Welcome speech at the workshop „Reforming the EU - Central European Perspectives” organised by the Hungarian Europe Society on 18 March 2017 at the Central European University, Budapest

It is an understatement to claim that we live in turbulent times. This is a decisive, historic period for the future of Europe and the globe. At the moment, 2017 seems to be the year when the negative political tendencies expressed in Brexit and Trump’s victory in 2016 can be finally stopped and, probably, reversed. We had good news from the Netherlands on 15 March and we have realistic hopes for the French presidential elections and the German parliamentary elections: radical right wing populist parties might be blocked in gaining more influence and power at national and at European levels. Interestingly enough, there is no common formula how to defeat them: in Holland, at least the winning party’s leader, Mark Rutte moved to the right during the campaign in order to bring back voters from Gert Wilders, in France, a new centrist political leader, Emmanuel Macron has grasped the imagination of citizens with pro-European messages, whilst in Germany a relative newcomer in domestic politics, Martin Schulz introduced a more left-wing rhetoric to mobilise traditional social-democrats. The feeling of an unavoidable arrival of a new populist zeitgeist that followed the unprecedented turmoil at the ballots can even evaporate in a big part of Europe, at least. Moreover, the re-consolidation and the renewal of the joint European project can be once again seen as a realistic scenario.

Dear Guests, dear Friends, you are warmly welcome at the workshop of the Hungarian Europe Society at the Central European University in Budapest. In this country, Hungarians do not simply face the potential risks of a populist take-over, but have experienced the practical consequences of the adventurism of a hard populist political regime. As a non-governmental organisation, we belong to the circle of like-minded civil groups which have received support from “abroad” in order to maintain their activities or have successfully applied for a grant to implement projects. This time it is the German Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit that has sponsored this workshop. Thank you for their support. The university, which kindly hosts our event, stands under increasing attacks by the government and its loyal media empire especially because of its founder, the American-Hungarian George Soros. He became the number one personalised enemy of the regime, who, according to the official propaganda, works in a business alliance with the bureaucrats in Brussels, the left and liberal Western elites, who prophesise political correctness, the bankers, and the

smugglers who transport the migrants to the old continent and to the soil of an ethnically homogenous Hungarian nation.

Viktor Orbán follows and re-invents an actually old-fashioned methodology. Today, illiberal/popular parties always declare that they are the only representatives of the so-called real, ordinary and decent people. They offer a political package, which often resonates with the political fears and social anxieties in a significant part of the electorate. In fact, populists do not listen and act following the political and economic priorities of their voters at all. They seduce people through politicizing and polarising identity issues, meanwhile they attempt to delegitimize their democratic and liberal political opponents developing conspiracy theories about them. Based on a majoritarian perception of democracy, populists permanently need to find new “enemies of the nation” in order to stigmatise them and to keep the level of continuous political tension at a high degree.

In the last couple of years, Orbánism has spread over in the Central European region. Together with his friend, the Polish nationalist leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Viktor Orbán declared a cultural counter-revolution inside the European Union last year. The countries of the Visegrad Four seemed to create a close alliance based on their regional identity and national sovereignties expressed in a strong resistance to Angela Merkel’s refugee policy. But the Visegrad Group has not proved to be a united front or the avant-garde of a new movement just as Orbán prophesied that 2017 would become the “Year of the riot” in Europe. And just a week ago, his political interests, personal strategic calculations and own moral flexibility, as well as the pressure from the European People’s Party made the Hungarian Prime Minister suddenly a Realpolitiker: he supported the re-election of Donald Tusk as President of the European Council in spite of the fact that Tusk was Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s arch rival in Poland. The creation of a Populist International had to be postponed.

The challengers of the liberal democratic order have a much stronger voice everywhere in Europe than ever before. In Hungary and in its neighbourhood illiberal and populist political declarations dominate the public spheres. We need to demonstrate that there are fascinating alternative political, constitutional and economic ideas emerging inside the Central European region. Such concepts can seriously contribute to the new broader debate on the future of Europe as it is urged in the recent White Paper elaborated by the European Commission. We will celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome on 25 March 2017. This workshop is a great opportunity to renew our way of thinking about important aspects of the European political and economic integration. I wish ourselves a fruitful discussion.