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The rise of illiberal democracy cannot be ignored

After declaring that Hungary 'will not be a colony' and won't 'live according to the commands of foreign powers', Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced that he is instead building an 'illiberal democracy' based on states like China, Russia, Turkey and Singapore. He has curtailed the independence of the judiciary, purged the civil service of those who are not his ardent supporters, introduced new election rules to give himself the advantage and launched a wholesale assault on the freedom of the press. When some of his new laws – such as those criminalising homelessness and ruling-out the possibility of gay marriage – were criticised as unconstitutional, he simply changed the constitution. In his reaction to the refugee crisis, he assumed a position of rabid nationalism, prosecuting asylum-seekers entering Hungary, building razor-wire fences on the borders and flouting the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees.

The European Union seems absolutely helpless in dealing with these infringements of democracy. When you cannot correct the situation, it seems the best way out is to pretend the problem does not exist. Last December, the EU's justice commissioner Věra Jourová made it clear this was the case by saying in the European Parliament that Hungary's illiberal ways are not actually a problem.

The Polish general election in October was won by the extreme populist Law and Justice Party (PiS), which is both on the far right and left because while being positioned on the extreme right of the political spectrum, its economic policies are state-orientated and its behaviour towards opponents is highly authoritarian – strongly reminiscent of the pre-1989 ruling communist party. The PiS has quickly followed in Orbán's footsteps, paralysing the Polish constitutional court and enfeebling the media. Its assault on democracy has been strongly criticised by the Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe, which has decreed that an ongoing constitutional crisis in Poland poses a danger to the rule of law, democracy and human rights. But, as in the case of Hungary, Brussels is more or less powerless.

There have been no such anti-democratic constitutional changes in the other two countries of 'New Europe', the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but even these countries have found themselves in the grip of irrational eurosceptic, anti-Muslim and anti-refugee xenophobia over the past year. Slovakia's (allegedly) social democratic prime minister Robert Fico peddled so much fear and loathing against refugees, of which there are none in Slovakia, that he emerged seriously weakened from the general election on 6th March. Slovak voters did not vote for him, and because of his scare campaign instead put their confidence in extreme right-wing parties. An openly neo-

Nazi party has entered the Slovak parliament with 14 seats as a result. In the Czech Republic, too, President Miloš Zeman systematically makes strongly fear-mongering statements using factually incorrect information, and the public love him for it. The leader of the Czech "Anti-Islamic Bloc" was even invited to sing the national anthem with the president at a public event last November. The finance minister and first deputy prime minister Andrej Babiš, a powerful oligarch, supports Zeman in this and has also expressed his admiration for Donald Trump's 'solution to the immigration problem'.

It is quite remarkable that there is such unity defying liberal, humanitarian and pan-European solutions to the refugee crisis in central and eastern Europe. This includes some of former East Germany, because in Saxony-Anhalt, the anti-Islamist and anti-refugee party Alternative für Deutschland gained more than 24% of the popular vote in the regional elections on 13th March, and Saxony is the birthplace of the anti-Islamic movement Pegida. Large numbers of Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians and East Germans now express open defiance towards European values. But what are the sources of this widespread illiberalism?

It is of course well known that since the mass murder of Jews during the Second World War and the wholesale deportation of Germans after 1945, central and eastern European societies have been extremely homogeneous, predominantly white, and have not experienced the multiculturalism that has been common in western Europe for decades. Fear of the unknown is somewhat understandable, especially when unscrupulous media create the impression that Middle Eastern refugees are no different from Daesh terrorists. Social networks such as Facebook are in large part to blame for this as vehicles for the dissemination of alarmist 'news' and racist hoaxes. Facebook rarely removes racist hate speech, especially when it is published in eastern European languages, and this has greatly contributed to the normalisation of what was unacceptable only a few years ago. Trapped in an echo-chamber of self-generated fear and hate, most central and eastern Europeans feel that they are genuinely threatened by the unknown 'other', and so they grasp for illiberal solutions.

Social and economic frustration is another important factor in illiberalism's success. Economic development across central and eastern Europe is very uneven, and there are areas that remain very poor. Most of the inhabitants of such regions are in opposition to the political and media elites in their capitals. They disdain the mainstream media, hate Brussels and fully believe all the hoaxes disseminated on Facebook, helping Islamophobic material to quickly go viral. It is this kind

of frustration that brought the PiS to power in Poland, that is the source of Czech President Zeman's high popularity, that has brought neo-Nazis into the Slovak parliament and that sustains Viktor Orbán's power. After 25 years of low pay, the rule of multinational companies and lecturing from the West, many central and eastern Europeans are fed up. They have assumed the role of a defiant pupil of the West. They no longer want to listen, Czech political scientist Ondřej Slačálek has said, and so they have reverted to nationalism and illiberal values.

There are rough times ahead for the European Union. Nationalist populism is on the rise in both the east and the west, and it is advisable to resist nationalist pressures and defend civic principles at all cost. Maybe it is at this point fitting to think of the predicament of former Yugoslavia. The moment Yugoslavia abandoned the civic principle after 1989, the whipping up of nationalism on all sides for political advantage led to the brutal war of the 1990s. Is this the same story we will someday be telling about the EU?

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