

NECE WORKSHOP

“Fragility and Resilience of Democracies in Europe. Where now for Citizenship Education and Civil Societies?”

12-13 November 2017, Gdańsk, Poland

“The rise of populism and the challenges ahead”

by Edit Inotai, CEID, Hungary

The 2010 elections marked the beginning of a new era in Hungary. But it looks though the phenomenon we experienced in Central Europe - the rise and the continuous success of populism - has since become a general trend in Europe and even across the Atlantic. In Europe, populist forces have risen to challenge mainstream parties, they entered parliament, were invited into coalition governments or had even been elected as governing parties. This a clear sign of rebellion against the established world order and against the liberal democracies we have lived in the past two decades - or in some more fortunate countries, several decades.

So, what is wrong with liberal democracy?

We live in a rapidly changing world, where our personal future is by no means secure. Professions transform or die out, skills become outdated, technological progress (automatization) makes workplaces in complete sectors obsolete. Insecurity in itself helps populist parties rise, while they offer easy solutions and strong leaders, openly despising the slow and hesitant, disputant, consensus-based democratic models. Who needs debates and arguments where there is a leader who tells you the ultimate truth? Who needs complicated explanations when you can tweet your verdict in 120 characters?

In Central and Eastern Europe, things are a bit more complicated. Illusions about democracy are shattered: many who took democracy as a synonym for economic progress catapulting the region on the level of West European wellbeing, have been disappointed. Even those who thought democracy will help set fair frameworks to a society where anybody can excel, have doubts. Hungary is a textbook case. A country which started off as an economic forerunner before the democratic transition - reaching already 47 percent of EU average GDP - has gradually been overtaken by many, formerly looked down countries of the region. For a nation which has been taught for decades to be special (and yes, often meaning superior to most of its neighbors) this failure is difficult to swallow. The almost instantaneous reaction is to blame your failure on someone else. Especially here, the populist rhetoric of “we against them”, falls on fertile soil, and from this point, an evident step is finding or creating an enemy (migrants, minorities, multinationals or technocrats from Brussels). Some say, life was so much easier in the old Cold War times. The enemy was clear. Now it had to be invented. Or as Viktor Orbán put in a conference in Berlin, at the Centre of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation many years ago: after 1990, we were so sad the we did not have anything to fight against... This is evidently not the case any more.

Paradoxically, the party which is nourishing anti-elite sentiments and promises to be the defender of average Hungarians is a party which has been in politics ever since the transition - and even in government for four years during the “lost decades”. But rational arguments do not work when politics becomes over-emotionalized - another symptom of populists’ success.

There are a number of challenges ahead, and I would like to name just a few of them:

- 1. The challenge for politicians.** Mainstream politicians are often clueless when facing populist argumentation. Many hope they will never make it into power, while they are disorganized, chaotic, they lack the necessary hierarchy or will commit political mistakes. There is widespread hope that they would ruin themselves (especially in Germany), that the population will soon fall out of love with them. But populists should never be underestimated. People nowadays do not vote about values but follow their fears (see above: insecurity). These fears should not be underestimated nor ignored, but the trick is not to let the populist set the agenda. It is a complicated exercise but the political terrain should not be given up. Politicians have to find new ways to get access to society and voters. and be innovative.
- 2. The challenge for educators and the civil society.** The times we are living in are completely different from the post-World War II or the post-Cold War Era. War as an experience has become something distant and unrealistic (except for the Balkans). The dangers of instigation, warmongering (Volksverhetzung) against certain minorities, nationalities and its consequences are underestimated. This is an obvious challenge for educators and for the civil society: if a government is not ready to counterattack or, on the contrary, it even fosters instigation, somebody has to stand up against those campaigns, otherwise you risk radicalization of parts of the society. Intolerance may grow and find its way to the streets. There is a second challenge for this sector: the obvious misinformations, lies, or half-truths have to be immediately pointed out and cleared. Currently, we are in an information war where the truth is about that lose. This is a tiresome exercise because you have to discredit the false information every time it is published and repeat it as many times as necessary. Let’s take a simple example: by now, everybody believes that Fidesz saved Hungary from bankruptcy and if they had not taken over the country in 2010, Hungary would have ended up Greece. This is a half-truth: the government did a lot to stabilize that economy, which was indeed in a bad shape, but the budget deficit - often compared to Greece’s - stood at 6 % of the GDP, whereas in Greece it was 12%. Fidesz has repeated this argument so often that it has become common knowledge by now.
- 3. The challenge and the responsibility of the media.** The media is struggling to survive, serious print newspapers go out of business, viable and sustainable models for financing the internet-based media have not yet been found. Populists smartly use this vacuum, since the trust societies used to have in the media and its control functions have eroded. Yet the media still has a lot of influence when portraying politicians, interviewing them, investigating abuses and malpractices - and by setting the agenda. Investigative reporting is going through difficult times, due to lack of resources and due to lack of time and patience by the readers. Debates, interviews are also fading out and are being replaced by opinion pieces. But let’s face it: in a populist world, you cannot fight one opinion with another, you need

facts, real arguments, and credibility. Advocacy journalism does not help but makes things even worse. The news race can only be won with authentic stories - which will weaken the populists' position on blaming the media with partisanship and with one-sided reporting. We need serious journalists (not so-called click-chasing) and a financial framework for quality media.

- 4. The challenge and the responsibility of the business world.** Populists tend to argue that they are defending the losers of globalization. Thus, one common enemy of the populists are the multinational companies (the other is Brussels). It would be time to think about the responsibility of the business sector and a plan in medium or long term. First, a strategy has to be found to compensate those who belong to the losers of globalization. Secondly, it has to be thought over to what extent the business sector is willing to cooperate with populist, especially if they are in government. The tendency so far is that if populists gain power - see Trump or Orbán - they will attack borderless trade and globalized methods. Multinationals, in turn, are ready to forge extra deals with them. It is time to think about the responsibility. Example: Deutsche Telekom's dirty deals in Hungary, when selling critical online site Origo to a government-loyal investor, or Austrian businessman Heinrich Pecina, closing down critical newspaper Népszabadság. If you enter into this game with populists, you risk becoming an accomplice in dismantling democratic institutions which will drive away the intelligent workforce, who would be creative enough to contribute to the technological innovations necessary in the 21st century. Business may win on the short run, but lose at the end.