

NECE WORKSHOP

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

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“Few remarks on populism from the Citizenship Education perspective”

by Marek Cichocki, Natolin European Center, Poland

1. In the wake of the current crises, firstly, the financial crisis which deepened the divide between debtors and creditors triggering the problem of democratic sovereignty and social identity and secondly, the migration crisis which has challenged the concept of multiculturalism, we are witnessing the profound shift in the way how the notion of authoritarianism is used. In contrast to the classical definition worked out, among others, by Juan Linz in the 1960s, who attributed authoritarianism mostly to the bureaucratic and military regimes or to the syndicalism, nowadays the notion of authoritarianism is often associated with populism and illiberalism.
2. This new usage of the term has often got a highly polemic character and is then understandable only in the context of the cultural wars unleashed in Europe in recent times by the rising crises of liberalism and growing criticism of certain liberal premises as the reaction to the financial and migration crises. For the sake of polemics the descriptive and explanatory power of the term is substantially weakened by confusingly different political cases of contemporary Russia or Turkey on one hand, with their inherent forms of authoritarian ruling (such as limiting and manipulating democratic elections, criminalising and penalisation of political opposition and regulating the right of the free expression in the public sphere) and on the other hand such CE countries like Hungary or Poland, which have decided to pursue politics in the field of multiculturalism or judiciary different than the ones indicated in Brussels or Berlin playbook.
3. The concepts of populism and illiberalism underpinning the new usage of the term of authoritarianism have enabled the critics of the CE countries to denote their different stance to some key issues like multiculturalism, democracy, sovereignty or identity as authoritarian, at the same time often completely ignoring the fact of growing political dissatisfaction of many western societies towards the same issues. The alleged authoritarianism of Central Europeans tends to be a perfect excuse for suppressing any serious discussion at home about the failures of the liberalism of today and their causes. The tireless tracer of populism in Europe Jan Werner-Muller seems to have discovered, at least in his own conviction, the only true meaning of populism by asserting that “Populists claim that they and only they alone, represent the people... The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one, it is always distinctly moral”. This feature of populism, however, may be just a simple reverse of the preceding arrogance of the meritocratic elites, who believe that they and only they

alone, represent the people. This would at least be the conclusion drawn by liberal John Gray arguing that “As it is being used today, populism is a term of abuse applied by establishment thinkers to people whose lives they have not troubled to understand”.

4. But Gray’s remark on populism fits perfectly with the problem of illiberalism as well. Once used by Zakaria to capture the problem of limited attraction of the Western model of liberalism, democracy and free market for the distant parts of the World, especially in South America and Asia, now it is mainly applied in Europe to stigmatise as a heresy any attempts of discussing possible change in the interpretation of some liberal tenets. Reaction to any kind of criticism about the role of judiciary in democracy and the rejection of any possible changes in this field provide the vivid example of this defensive form of liberal orthodoxy. It has been established despite of the fact that the consciousness of the enduring tension between the principle of freedom and equality has always been at the bottom of the liberal warnings (of such liberals like Montesquieu or Constant) against tyranny of the political power and the tyranny of law as well.
5. The problem with the current liberalism lies in its defensive character, in the intellectual weakness mixed with the complacency, lost sense of public freedom (which in itself is a great paradox) and growing obsession with the historical argument. A Polish political thinker, Marcin Król, has foreseen this current situation of liberalism by describing the liberalism of fear dominating over the liberalism of courage in his book from 1996. The main fear determining liberalism of today is the historical argument of the 1930s. According to that, we seem to be witnessing in Europe the repetition of old sins of anti-liberal mass movements which once led to the formation of authoritarian leadership and subsequently to the totalitarian regimes, primarily to fascism and Nazism. In turn, the communism, which has challenged the liberalism, too, still can count on more moderate criticism thanks to its own allegedly more human and noble intention of the historical salvation of the mankind. The historical argument of the 1930s illustrates still dominating vision of the European history which is in a very neo-Marxian or neo-Hegelian vein: the current form of the post-cold-war west is the final stadium of the irreversible process with the EU as the peak, and the Zero Year approach to the European history and culture justifies the necessity of abandoning all forms of tradition and identity tracing back to the times before the WWII. In the result, the current notion of sound liberalism is often modelled on the ideological presumption of necessary reduction or even full rejection of national identities and cultures constituting traditional understanding of the Europeanness.
6. The transformation of the liberalism into the political ideology of corroded post-modernity makes it reactionary and blind, disabling any attempts to understand the post-transformation changes in the CE as the inherent part of the broader evolution or crisis of the post-cold war West. Civilisations which have lost the critical self-consciousness in favour of orthodoxy and fossilization are less capable of survival.