How to Deal with the Threat of Authoritarianism?

United for Human Rights, Democracy and Rule of Law

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CONTEX

Recent developments and actions in the Western Balkans, especially those by Milorad Dodik, demonstrate the need to counter authoritarian tendencies and backward-oriented policies that threaten the advances achieved in region since the end of the bloody Yugoslav Wars. Worse still, some politicians within the EU, such as Viktor Orbaán, seek to form alliances with authoritarian leaders in the region and prevent a united front by the EU. At the same time, other member states that do not support reactionary forces in the region continue to pose obstacles to the Western Balkan countries' accession and integration process. Additionally, many citizens of the Western Balkans – especially, Kosovar citizens – face obstacles to the freedom of movement within the region and throughout the Schengen Area. Even more alarmingly, we have witnessed democratic backsliding within EU countries, such as Hungary and Poland, as well as aspiring EU members states, such as Turkey. The results of the recent elections in Serbia and Hungary clearly indicate that the era of *electoral authoritarianism* is on the rise in Europe.

The EU now faces several significant foreign policy challenges. Since Putin began Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU has been reconsidering its past relations with Russia. It is imperative that the EU develops a common foreign and security policy that provides guidance on how to deal with such authoritarian regimes.

Thus, when reactionary and authoritarian forces cooperate and unite in their efforts to destroy the very values that the EU stands for, including fundamental rights and respect for diversity, those who want to uphold these principles and values must also cooperate. To this end, different associations and NGOs in the Western Balkans that are engaged in safeguarding democracy and civil rights should unite with organizations and groups within the EU that are fighting a similar battle.

It is in this context and with the aim of developing a common framework to manage the threat of authoritarian tendencies that the workshop on ´How to deal with the threat of authoritarianism?´ was organized.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- It has become evident that authoritarian tendencies are on the rise in Europe, demonstrated by the recent elections in Serbia and Hungary, and the spread of authoritarianism poses formidable challenges to the EU's core values: respect for human rights, democratic systems, and the rule of law. We must stop the practice of double standards between the EU and the Western Balkans so that ordinary citizens feel that their concerns are being addressed. Thus, it is high time to recognize this growing trend as a common threat.
- In this regard, a paradigm shift is necessary to overcome the prevailing narratives of *us versus them*, especially when engaging with the Western Balkans. This relationship should be regarded as a partnership based on mutual respect. As the threat posed by authoritarian and populist leaders is common to all of us, it is imperative to act collectively and avoid divisive narratives.

- When dealing with authoritarian leaders, one cannot delink the foreign policy of addressing democratic backsliding and authoritarianism from the interests of the Europe as a whole. Today's world is characterized by complex interdependence and ever-changing geopolitics across Europe and beyond.
- A common misconception must be avoided: it is not necessary that all European countries become EU members, but our common interests as well as our most cherished values must be safeguarded.
- Stock-taking and self-reflection are important and timely. The normative power of the EU has been declining, owing to both internal crises and external factors, and one must come to terms with this reality. This entails promoting the pillars of the EU's system and values in light of changing dynamics and using innovative strategies that are appropriate for this purpose.
- We must further reflect on our foreign policy and the promotion of human rights, at both a regional and global level.
- Authoritarianism often occurs in a creeping and subtle manner, and it is difficult to address once institutional constraints have been dismantled and power has been consolidated. As such, it may be necessary to develop an early warning system in order to detect and respond in a timely manner to authoritarian drifts.

INTRODUCTION

The motivation of this workshop was to discuss how to deal with the threat of authoritarian tendencies in Europe and how we, the participants of the conference in collaboration with other partners, can develop a values-based strategy in the face of the increasingly authoritarian regimes across Europe. More specifically, it aimed to explore how the EU can craft common policies and strategies to address democratic backsliding and the formidable threat of authoritarianism in Europe, particularly in light of the dynamics observed during the recent elections in Serbia and Hungary.

The discussions focused in particular on the cases of Serbia, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. Notably, Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orban has long been at loggerheads with the European Commission over issues such as immigration, judicial reform, media freedom, and protection of minority rights. The results of the recent elections will only embolden Orban to further undermine the EU's system and values. Meanwhile, Serbia, as a prospective EU member, is at a crossroads between reforming its institutions, political system, and democracy to accede to the EU and joining the authoritarian alliance by aligning its foreign policy towards Russia. Finally, the trajectory of Poland is equally worrisome, not least because it has for years pursued subversive activities to further weaken EU institutions, and the prelude to the upcoming elections has been telling. The previous electoral victory for the ruling conservative party has already worsened Poland's fractious relationship with the EU, and the further consolidation of power will only cement the country's authoritarian system.

The participants of the workshop came from a diverse background with a wide range of specializations, and the thematic issues for discussion included, but were not limited to: democracy in Hungary; the Western Balkans and the prospect for EU integration; the elections

in Serbia and repercussions for the Western Balkans and Europe as a whole; democratization through active public participation; a bottom-up approach to influence the policy-making process at the national and regional level; and general strategies to deal with the threat of authoritarianism. The following sections will share reflections on the elections in Serbia and Hungary, mechanisms to deal with authoritarian regimes, and the path forward.

ANALYSING ELECTIONS

The Case of Serbia

Serbia's opposition parties, many of which boycotted the previous elections, remained overly fractured in this year's elections, paving the way for the ruling party to win most of the votes. At the same time, laws regulating the conduct of elections were changed just two months prior (laws on the election of members of parliament, on the election of the President of the Republic, on the prevention of corruption, on the financing of political activities, and on local elections were either amended or changed entirely). President Aleksandar Vucic and his party dominated the media landscape during the electoral campaign. Unsurprisingly, this year's elections did not bring any substantial changes. Vucic and his party won the presidential election by a landslide (58.5%) but fell short of a majority (42.9%) in the parliamentary elections.

The elections did reveal a rising far-right movement in Serbia that is mostly dominated by nationalist and pro-Russian parties. However, a centrist green party also won a parliamentary seat in Serbia for the first time. The most interesting outcome of the elections will be the formation of a ruling coalition. Vucic may form a government by forming a coalition with minority parties that excludes the Socialist Party of Serbia, which won 11.5% of the vote. With the formation of a coalition government, Serbia may impose sanctions on Russia. In any case, Vucic has long presented himself as a stabilising factor in Serbia and will continue to do so.

In short, the authoritarian shift in Serbia is likely to continue, and Serbia is undoubtedly moving further away from a path toward democratization.

Discussion

The degree of active public participation in Serbia provides some hope that changes are coming. However, the total control of the media by a single political party is worrisome, and opposition parties did not receive equal media coverage in the campaign, as evidenced by their results in the elections. The electoral process indicated unfair competition. According to both domestic and international election observers, there were some irregularities encountered as well as some physical attacks on activists.

Moreover, while the amended laws required parties to provide interim financial reports, the main opposition party failed to do so. Vucic will most likely continue his usual narrative to sway public opinion. It is difficult to provide a complete assessment of public opinion at this point. Undoubtedly, young people in Serbia appear to be less motivated, regardless of innovations in communication strategies, such as the use of TikTok. According to a poll conducted before the elections, over 50% of young people in Serbia believe that their country

is heading in the right direction under Vucic's leadership. However, as the poll was conducted before the war in Ukraine, the results might now be different.

The war in Ukraine had a significant impact on the electoral campaign and, to some extent, the results of the elections. With the elections completed, the grace period provided to Vucic by the West in sidestepping the sanctions regime against Russia is over, but it is likely that he will continue to pursue a balancing act in his foreign policy.

The Case of Hungary

Over the last decade, the EU has brought a plethora of infringement procedures against the government of Hungary, which underscores their embattled relationship. Hungary has a mixed electoral system, ostensibly designed to ensure proportional representation. Due to such institutional imbalances, the expectations for change among EU observers and the Hungarian opposition turned out to be overly optimistic. Orbaán and his party won the elections with an overwhelming majority, while Hungary's opposition parties won only a minority of seats. The results of the elections have strongly reinforced Hungary's urban-rural political divide, with Budapest in opposition to Orbaán and most of the rest of the country supporting him. This year's elections were historic in many ways: the *United for Hungary* coalition of opposition parties (including the Hungarian Socialist Party, the Democratic Coalition, the formerly extremist right-wing Jobbik, the liberal Hungary's Green Party, the green Dialogue for Hungary, and the centrist Momentum Movement) united the parties for the first time to avoid a fragmentation of the vote. However, they only captured 35.0% of the vote and were thus unable to unseat Orbaán.

In 2018, Hungary's opposition parties managed to win more than 2 million votes, but this year they won only 1.8 million, likely due to their poor campaign strategy and their lack of visibility. One of the most surprising aspects of the elections was the emergence of a new far-right party, the Our Homeland Movement. Many observers participated in the elections, but recommendations from the previous elections – notably those by the OSCE Election Observer Mission Report of 2018 – were entirely ignored. There were numerous irregularities reported during the elections, including compromised mail-in ballots, voter intimidation, and systemic bribery, but the elections were deemed relatively free, though not fair. Needless to say, the playing field was uneven, as evidenced by the domination of the media landscape by the ruling party, an electoral system that systematically favors strong political parties – such as the ruling party – and a discriminatory system of participation, as groups such as students and those with citizenship issues could not vote by mail.

The ruling party's narrative dominated the public discourse. In addition, campaign financing was particularly challenging for opposition parties, as the ruling party had access to both government and party resources and representation on social media does not count for election financing.

Discussion

Authoritarian leaders – including Orbaán and Vucic as well as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoggan – did not emerge out of the blue: they are the result of a long process of democratic backsliding. Electoral victory for these leaders simply signifies more authoritarianism, rising nationalism, the formation of alliances among authoritarian regimes, and the further radicalization of politics. The implication of these shifts is that democratic backsliding will continue, polarization will grow, clashes with institutions will intensify, attacks against civil society will continue, and illiberal foreign policies will remain. As in many other cases, this year's elections in Hungary brought no signs of moderation.

MECHANISMS OF DEALING WITH AUTHORITARIANISM IN EUROPE

Presentation

A values-based foreign policy is a core component of the EU system, and the rule of law, as the most significant guarantee of the EU system, must be defended. First and foremost, we must focus on the interests of the citizens of Hungary and Poland. The separation of powers is a central tenet of the rule of law. In this regard, there is something fundamentally lacking in Poland. As has been observed over the last few years, Poland has become an increasingly subversive EU member by compromising key EU values, such as the protection of minority rights, democracy, the rule of law, and liberalism. At the same time, Serbia has become an outlier in the EU sanctions regime against Russia, and it continues to facilitate the Kremlin's war effort.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, coordinated lies, false narratives, and massive disinformation campaigns are ongoing in some countries. There is compelling evidence that international crimes are being committed in Ukraine, for which accountability must be ensured.

There is a direct correlation between Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the state of democracy today. Authoritarian leaders are not fond of institutions and the rule of law because they want to make their systems less competitive. In Poland and Hungary, there is a noticeable tension between Catholic moral convictions and constitutional democracy. It is safe to say that Hungary and Poland are sick family members of the EU. There is a sense of contempt (anti-EU narratives) towards core values, and these leaders portray such values as hypocritical and devoid of substance while advancing narratives of nationalism and militarization. The stakes could not be higher: we cannot afford to see another endemic Syria in the middle of Europe.

At the same time, we must face reality: the transformative power of the EU is waning, and the liberal world order is declining. Authoritarianism has been growing as electoral systems are manipulated. Democracy is not a final state, but rather a long and demanding process. Countries have disguised national interests as liberal values, and values-based relationships are being replaced by transactional partnerships.

What is to be done? A transactional approach seems realistic for the time being. Self-criticism is essential in order to avoid similar mistakes in the future. We, as the EU, put Ukraine in a precarious situation by making false promises. From the outset, the idea that Ukraine should choose between the EU and Russia was misguided.

Discussion

In Turkey, meanwhile, the major challenges include unrealistic expectations for the elections by Western partners, the weakness of opposition parties, growing nationalism, and a governing system highly dependent on the ruling party (all state institutions are controlled by the ruling party). Even Turkey's monetary policy is now directed by Erdogan himself. Despite the war in Ukraine, public opinion has not shifted in Turkish politics.

In Hungary, Orbaán's consecutive victories over the last four elections can be partly attributed to structural advantages, including significant gerrymandering, control over media outlets, and instrumentalization of institutions. At the same time, in Poland, one of the judicial chambers recently appointed by the government will be responsible for certifying the results of the upcoming elections. The state of the media is relatively better in Poland in comparison to Hungary, but there is a high degree of hatred towards Germany among Polish society, which is further fueled by the ruling party. Comparing the nature and extent of anti-EU sentiment in the Baltic region, Poland comes out on top, as has been observed over the past two decades.

It is undeniable that authoritarianism is growing irrespective of the EU's position and that authoritarian regimes will not work with the EU to defend democracy and the rule of law. This is to say that bad actors know exactly what they are doing (they are successful at shaping public opinion by fostering their own reputations and portraying themselves as strong leaders). For example, the political system in Hungary over the last 12 years under Orbaán has moved from a consolidated democracy to a modern-day authoritarian system in which institutions and democratic values have been systematically undermined.

In short, the EU is facing a crisis as its values are attacked, both at home and abroad.

To respond, it is necessary to first clarify the precise meaning of the rule of law, as the term can be abstract and multifaceted. Next, in terms of foreign policy, the EU must develop a well-balanced approach for how to deal with authoritarian leaders. Finally, on the domestic level, the fact that some challenges are within the EU system (evidenced by internal contradictions and foreign policy discrepancies) means that the EU framework itself must be revisited.