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"Safeguarding liberal democracy: what role for the EU?"

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We have recently a widespread surge in global civic unrest. We see them in Poland and Hungary, but also in Chile and Hong Kong. And in many other places across the world.

One can suspect that today's unrests are a reaction to populism.

Since the annus mirabilis of 1989, a consensus has emerged in Europe that liberal democracy is a default choice. We witnessed universalization of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. Fukuyama announced the end of history. In Poland, Fukuyama became very popular.

Not many expected one day a backlash to globalized liberal democracy. We took liberal democracy for granted. But we could also see that not everybody equaled democracy with its liberal version.

We saw growing economic and cultural clashes between different segments of societies, those dominated by sentiment of being left behind and those winners of change. Democratic leaders were seen as not delivering on they promises. So a populist backlash came in different forms, in my part of Europe in the form of nationalism, authoritarianism, it was also anti-elitist. It was different in Latin America with Chavez and Maduro.

I remember our first and second elections. There was a general acceptance for the election as the entrance point for democracy. But we could see that not everybody was willing to accept that liberal democracy is more than just electoral democracy.

There is a package that includes rule of law, freedom of speech and association, freedom of media, multiparty system, protection of minorities, strong and independent civil society, institutions, and checks and balances. In the era of populism soon to come many of those features of liberal democracy started to be openly questioned. It is also worth mentioning that lack of democracy culture was damaging as well.

Soon liberal democracy started to be presented as ideal of elites, elitist democracy and democracy of liberal policies.

Populism started its march across world and Europe. Skilful populist politicians focused on inflating threats. Populism used the growing unhappiness and growing appetite for economic and cultural clashes.

Those feeling economically left behind entered this trap. It was facilitated by the fact that democratically elected governments and mainstream parties failed to deliver on promises and were not providing what people normally expect from their government: personal security, shared economic growth and basic public services. That is the list of Fukuyama. It can be adjusted to specific situations in individual societies and countries.

Liberal democracy started to be questioned as not capable to solve real challenges to society. Populists did not come from nowhere. They used very effectively legitimate grievances of people to question democratic governments' legitimacy.

They acted as vacuum cleaner, sucking in all legitimate grievances and discontents of people unhappy with the direction the world took in the last thirty years: growing inequalities, income stagnation for middle class, reduced social mobility, weakened welfare state, crises and austerity policies, etc.

What helped to undermine liberal democracy was a successful populist discourse conflating liberal democracy with liberal policies. Liberal got this connotation with elitist.

Liberal institutions like independent judiciary are seen as representatives of elitist interests. Non-governmental organizations as enemies of electoral democracy. Freedom of speech and association as a luxury compared to increased social expenditure. Immigration as a source of illnesses and danger.

Global challengers of every form of democracy, I think here of regimes like Russia and China, defenders of civilizational diversity, they took the floor explaining to their citizens that ideals of liberal democracy were culturally incompatible with their cultural tradition and national interest.

The good news is that gradually it is becoming clear that populists when in power cannot deliver on promises. Citizens need some time to grasp it fully because of electoral cycles. But sooner or later the disappointment comes. In particular when people begin to see that populism brings corruption and self-interest of those in power.

So as somebody said we can already see a citizens revolt against the populist revolt. It comes mostly from urban educated middle class. They are the first to see that both left and right populist policies destroy growth and do not aim at a better future for all. In particular, the new middle class feels abandoned. As the populist alternative is not working as promised, there is a chance that the populist autocratic regimes will be gradually losing their legitimacy. In Poland people are rising up to protect political and social freedoms. To protect constitution.

Contemporary revolts do not have political leaders and agenda. That is why they attract populist politicians. But once populism fails, the question emerges whether we can move forward toward a better world without a new political agenda, without a new social deal, without a clear identification of new drivers for job creation.

There is a need for new social contract open to both sides, those who made the first revolt that ended up with populism and those that were not populists' supporters. We know, after the lessons learnt, that democratic freedoms must be protected. We also know that we have to live in ethnically diverse pluralistic societies. But we also have to instill in people awareness of populists danger.

It is clear that we have to continue to be strong on rules and procedures. Both have been under threat from populists. European Union is a community of reason, of understanding and of values. The rule of law is our basic currency. And also the core of EU philosophical design as a multinational democracy. Shared trust in the legal system of all member states is vital for the functioning of the whole of EU. Our long-term sustainability depends on formal laws and treaties and institutions. But let me say that the time has come to make the Union a community of hearts.

I think that there is not much understanding in Europe of the role of what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “sentiments”. In our European imagination sentiments refer immediately to sentimentality, to something kitschy, overboard. But liberal democracy can only thrive on the soil of broad attachment to it among the large swaths of population who see a friend in a fellow citizen.

As de Tocqueville wrote: “Feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal influence of men upon one another.” Europe would hugely benefit from the idea of friendly reciprocity and the ability to think about the enlarged common interest as our interest as well.

The future of liberal democracy, in the long-run, depends on the success of instilling these pro-European sentiments in the citizens. Institutions and procedures can only be means to achieve our common goals.

Let me move now to respond to your question about Poland. I must admit that you are not alone in asking the question “what happened to Poland, once a leader of democracy, a champion of human rights, a role model for many”. We, in Poland spend a lot of time on reflecting on what, on earth, has happened to us over the last thirty years. I spent some time on reflecting on the world change because I believe one cannot separate Polish case from the global tendencies. They are a meaningful backdrop if we try to understand Poland but it is legitimate to move beyond the global shift to populism when trying to understand the shift in Poland.

I believe that after the grand democratic change in 1989 we spent some time in what I would call a democratic complacency. We assumed we have the democracy forever. It is done. We can take it for granted. That is the end of history. No matter what democracy will last. And the only democracy available was the western liberal democracy. I continue to think this is “the democracy”. And we saw democratic election as the entrance point to democracy. As society we did not bother much about the other elements of the package I mentioned above. They have become a natural landscape, a political system, in which we lived. As citizens we simply enjoyed what the new political system provided and we have not been asking the question of how deep our democratic culture was.

When we woke up from this democratic complacency we saw that democratic leaders in power did not deliver what we expected and there are those who did not benefit either from the democratic transition or from membership in the European

Union. Anti-democratic populists immediately saw in these initial doubts, grievances and unhappiness their chance to take over political control. Their march across Polish society started with using what they thought would work in Poland, which is nationalism. Polish history but also membership in the European Union was a perfect environment to embark on this narrative.

The populist march started with taking over the public media. With this it became possible to destroy political culture and public discourse. Without doubt an exceptionally strong role was played by the church, by definition authoritarian, in spite of the second Vatican Council, liaising with radical far right, nationalistic, xenophobic, racist organizations and movements and shamelessly politicizing its own role in society. Thirdly, I would point to what happened in education. Its programmatic content has shifted to the historical memory while reducing the knowledge of the modern world. The latter ceased to matter. The history was open to distortions and adapted to the needs of politics of historical memory. Objective historical thinking about Poland's past has disappeared quite quickly from the public space. Real history of Poland has been discarded and its new meaning, purely nationalistic introduced. New generation of historians took it over. That has become possible because democratic elites did not care about creating our own mythology of freedom. We allowed anti-democratic forces to destroy real history, to kill images of real heroes and replace with their own heroes. They created their own mythology and put their own heroes on the pedestals.

A large part of the space of culture has been taken over. Theaters, museums, modern art. But let me say that, unlike in Hungary, the anti-democratic political elites did not succeed in taking over all institutions. We still have independent judges, artists and writers. Some get Nobel Prize. There is an organized civil society. There is a civic unrest in response to anti-democratic damaging populism.

So do not give up on Poland.

Make Europe great again sounds silly, does not fit the timbre of European voice. But we have to develop capability to show how great we are. And this is when the issue of values and rule of law hits. The real question in this is our unsuccessful so far effort to make rule of law be respected. It implies the need to think about whether we want to turn the nascent liberal democracies where rule of law is not respected back into functioning ones as members of the EU in good standing or we want let them go.

Europe's soul is in its discursivity. Europe by its very nature is open to dialogue, willing and obliged to deliberate, to listen and talk, it has legal instruments to at least try to convince those unwilling to identify common interest. Of course dialogue cannot be a facade only.

When we are faced with the challenge of populism, based on anti-democratic, nationalistic ideologies we should approach it with cool heads, creative minds and sophisticated analysis.

History of the European integration is the one of change, disputes, capacities to solve them and be together.

This time the challenge is about foundation and values.

We know that if we lose them we will be lost. So it is more serious than disagreements on single market or reform of euro zone. Treaties, agreed by unanimity and ratified by all national parliaments, where governance is based on cooperation, where principle of sincere and loyal cooperation is of essence, those Treaties are not respected in regard to fundamentals. We have reached out already to all available instruments. Punishment to which we plan to move now through the budgetary instruments is an option. But in the end it will be us, citizens who will pay. Therefore, I would rather say that our long-range problem and solution is how to reengage the backsliders for our cause, not how to find the best tools to punish them for their misdeeds.