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„Illiberal turn needs to be stopped, not managed”

**Panel: Going forwards or being held back? Can the EU manage both solidarity and the turn towards illiberalism?
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I think that there can be two schools of thinking on the sources of illiberal turn in Europe: one, that see it in deficiencies of the EU as a vehicle for representing the interests of the people, and the second one, that perceives this illiberal phenomenon as a designed product manufactured for the political uses of certain politicians.

I also believe that we too quickly accepted the notion of illiberalism as a legitimate description of something that really exists as a self-sustaining reality – but it is, in fact, an ideological notion per se. Adapting it in all seriousness for scholarly disputes gives too much undeserved respect for Mr. Orban, who popularized this notion beyond the scope of its real adaptability. It should be rather unmasked as for what it is; a political tool to create reality, not to describe it. As such, it is straight from Karl Marx – perhaps we should somehow remind Mr. Orban of this affinity.

Illiberalism, as a manufactured idea, is a passing phenomenon. It is applicable at describing a fleeting moment between rejecting democracy and adopting a partial or full scale authoritarianism. For there is nothing that could be called "illiberal democracy", it is just a technical term used by dictators or para-dictators to keep their corrupted regimes in power.

As was rightly noted by Steven Levitzky, the term implies that some regimes are at their heart democracies that have gone wrong. Thus it has an exculpatory sounding, mixed with hope that those regimes would get back to democracy at some point. But they would not. They have to be overturned by ballot boxes. And we should aim for that, not for "managing them", especially on the home front, in the EU.

From the way the question is formulated in the panel title, I sense a certain pessimistic view that the turn toward illiberalism is something that is going to advance in Europe and we can only manage it.

This is a self defeating proposition. I can understand that we should manage, for there is no other way, the EU relations with countries like China, Turkey, Russia, etc. By the way, it should also be done in a firm manner – so that there are no events like the recent "sofa gate".

But within the EU, we are not supposed to manage it, but to stop it. Thus, we should ask rather: how to stop the illiberal turn by using the solidarity instruments at our disposal?

We of course have the traditional instruments of the solidarity in the EU. And we are just in the process of adding new ones, within the NGEU framework.

The problem is that some semi-authoritarian beneficiaries intercept those solidarity funds for the distribution among their minions for political or even purely partisan goals. I think that we do not exercise all our control over this like we properly should. We should have more control mechanisms to stop that illicit political bartering of our common money for particularistic, anti-democratic and anti-European ends.

I remember how tough it was for the European Commission 15 years ago to consider and indeed considering suspending funds to one member state in need after finding irregularities in the way the authorities were managing European funding. And it was at the end about slow response to calls for the implementation of a more effective scheme to monitor public works. But the member state in question did not threaten us with abandoning fundamental values like democracy and rule of law.

Now, I feel that our attitude in the EU became much more lax with the member states that threaten us exactly with that. Sometimes tough love is necessary and it is the treaty based responsibility of the European institutions

There are existing tools available to penalize, punish, suspend, cut off the assistance. There are also procedures when the EU reaches out to discursive approach which - unfortunately, in some member states where you see arrogance and disrespect toward our common institutions, weakened judiciary system, defenestration of the public sphere - does not work. Dialogue goes on and the situation gets aggravated.

Theoretically, and in the spirit of the European integration, we should reengage the backsliders instead of looking for better punitive instruments to punish them for the misdeeds. And it does not work either.

As these are mostly citizens who at the end pay the costs of such political arrogance, they should get engage more effectively than so far in controlling the political forces in power when it comes to European solidarity instruments.

There is a growing evidence of this, and again the way the NGEU funds would work there is a hope for more democratization and decentralization of the system, based on ownership principle. The EU must be smarter on the conditionality mechanisms as well.

We also failed so far explaining to the European citizens that rule of law when not respected by governments deprives the citizens of their rights and guarantees they are granted by the European law. Not to mention, of course, the solidarity with other member states. When one or more member states deny this basic value of the Union, it bring chaos to the whole European space based on laws.

Probably in the hope of "managing illiberalism", the Commission and the Council have slowed their proceedings within the Framework of Article 7. But this is a disservice to the fundamentals and solidarity in the EU.

On this score, yes, the EU is in a defensive, and it is being held back. Hesitating to apply the "Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation" in the context of serious damages to the rule of law by governments in Budapest and Warsaw is a bad move and it does not make any easier this effort at illusory "managing" of illiberal authoritarians.

There is already a great expectation in Budapest especially, but also in Warsaw that this will be a pot of gold that could be used for extending the regimes' longevity in power. It should be said very clearly to them that the strict conditionality will be applied when it comes to all European funding.

The Commission should insist on decentralization of the funds' distribution toward local self-governments in Poland – where this is a big point of contention. And in Hungary there should be a control of spending on every stage and strict review under the anti-corruption standards. If we want to go forward, we must not accept the lowering of the veil of silence on authoritarian practices in our midst.