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***“On risks to democracy”***

**Grassroots for Europe UK Round Table**

**“Poland and Hungary: Democracy vs. Autocracy in Central Europe and beyond”**

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Across the world, we see struggling between authoritarian and democratic forces at all levels of political governance. Walls seem to grow, undermining or even bringing demolition of democratic institutions and strengthening mechanism of political polarisation. As a consequence, in western democracies the principles of open and pluralistic society come under threat. This is very dangerous, in my view more than risks to institutions.

What we also witness is that moving away from democracy seems easier that towards democracy. There are vulnerable democracies that can overnight become soft authoritarian regimes. In some democracies extremist parties represent many voters.

In principle, there is a consensus that democracy begins with free, fair, democratic elections. The ballot paper, however, is not enough. Today it is clear that elections are neither a guarantee nor the sole determinant of democracy. Voters have woken up looking for authoritarian leaders. Nostalgia for what was once orderly, predictable, also patriarchal. Behind most cases of democratic collapses are democratically elected governments. Often the erosion of democracy comes unnoticed.

The authors of the idea of a dying democracy blame the traditional mainstream parties, which fail to recognise the danger in time, fail to engage in a political struggle against potential autocrats guided by 'fear, opportunism or bad political calculation'.

The European Union has been relatively resilient to the threats to democracy. A full-blooded authoritarianism exists in only one country of the Union - Hungary, where democracy has died. It stopped to be practiced or talked.

If you look at the history of recent de-democratization in Hungary and Poland, the biggest risk to modern democracies there came not from gradual departure from European values but from deliberate attack on democratic institutions, on public discourse and on the way democratic parties function.

In Poland, over the eight years this damaging political assault of the ruling party have led to a deep polarisation of societies and politics. Killing of democracy began with the judiciary and the takeover of the public media. The conflict in the area of rule of law took on the dimension of a religious dispute. Laws were adopted at night, without public consultations, signed in the morning by the president, then sent to the corrupted Constitutional Tribunal.

There was still Ombudsman, there were local governments uniting in defence of democracy, there was a rise of civil society, women under black umbrellas, pro climate young activists. A kind of network democracy has been developed, based on solidarity of different groups that became a canvass and harbinger of a new practise of democracy in Poland. I think it was Jacques Derrida who has said that democracy cannot be static. Democracy makes sense if it serves to defend other values. Poles in the streets of Poland defended judges, women's rights, victims at the Belarusian border. When Ukrainian refugees came to our border, Polish civil society was full-fledged, organized civil movement to take care of them. I trust that now civil society of Poland is fit to play a creative role in national politics.

The good news is that in Poland a total break up of liberal democracy was not reached. But the destruction lasted long enough to damage the democratic space in the political system. Centrist parties, which tend to be a stabilising factor, have been deeply affected during the eight years of the authoritarian assault on the Polish political system.

Before the election of 15 October, it was not at all clear whether fundamental values such as human rights and democracy were still shared by the overwhelming majority in our society. But democracy is a broad space and can accommodate a lot of views.

And before the election, a two-year eye-opening political campaign was not only a campaign for democracy as a value. Democracy was used in this campaign also as a political method to ensure the realisation of basic values. The electoral victory of

democracy has given many a hope that an authoritarian regime can be terminated through elections. Like the US President Joe Biden, also Donald Tusk had a very clear message to Europe - Poland is back.

Of course, the domestic political reality in Poland is difficult. The President is in a primitive way the PiS loyalist with a lot of institutional space to use his hard and soft veto powers. And so is the so-called Constitutional Tribunal of Poland. There are two parallel judicial systems, starting with the Supreme Court. We are far from paradise yet. But the breathing space is gradually expanding.

The main question is about the choice of the political path toward all that must be done: rebuilding in a systemic way democratic Poland, its damaged justice system and rule of law, public media, bringing back human rights, gradually discovering the legacy of all the wrongdoing of the previous autocratic forces in power, participating in laying the grounds for the European reforms and geostrategic enlargement, putting Warsaw back on the path back toward Europe to make it stronger, united and globally engaged and protecting human rights in Poland. Rebooting the liberal democracy is not going to be a walk in the park. And there are two more crucial elections this year, the local ones in April and the European in June.

The democratic recovery has two work streams. First, bringing back the democratic institutions, structures across the state and legal system and here the question popping up everyday is whether the PiS methods would be acceptable in a situation when democratization is blocked by the President and the loyalty of some public institutions to the former regime.

And the second stream is about including Polish citizens in rebuilding democracy. How fast we can move on building consensus through a deliberative process by society itself. There are expectations and dreams. And the question is how long people can wait, keeping the window opened for political action.

PiS legislated mainly by passing government projects to their majority in the parliament, in order to avoid public consultation. The way we legislate must go back to normal.

Many NGOs deeply entered party politics. PiS, in fact, created its own alternative world of NGOs and so-called "institutes" to legitimize its policies. It was a political

depravity. And rejecting those practices is an obvious thing. We need a restoration of dignity of civil society and its representation.

The current unprecedented public interest in the proceedings of the Sejm, provides an opportunity for people to refresh their desire to participate in politics not only as passive observers. Civil society had shown its political strength in elections on Oct.15, when an unprecedented mobilization took place, seen in particular at night in the final hours of the voting.

It was this mobilization that gave the democratic coalition its victory. And after that triumph of civil society, it cannot be put back in some niche, to be activated only at times of extreme danger.

Activating participatory, deliberative democracy to fortify representative democracy is a way to go. It is necessary to support people in their desire to move away from the attitude of an observer, to offer mechanisms for dialogue, leading to decisions about the vital issues for them.

There is a lot going on in this regard, the continuation of the process set in motion by Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) is taking place, organised by the Commission. There is also a growing civic awareness of the common interest, of public goods, including at the European level. CoFE was an attempt to combine representative and deliberative democracy. It worked.

There was a big survey regarding attitudes of young Poles to democracy. They understood recently that not voting puts them in a danger of being subject for another decade, to authoritarian and populist forces they despised. And, expressing their desire for change and renewal, almost 69% of under-30s turned out to cast their ballot. What comes out of the survey is that democracy is not just about elections. It is, above all, a way of living and functioning together in society, and a guarantee of freedom of speech and of life choices.

Politics for young people is a matter of common, networked reaction. Here, a big unknown is to what extent different political parties in the ruling coalition will adapt to new forms of socio-political communication. But I think as a society we have realised that democracy will not defend itself. Procedures can be thrown out of the window overnight, institutional fuses dismantled. Democracy can die.

So, what we learnt in Poland is that democracy will only defend itself if it becomes the lifeblood of a civil society. These streetwalkers, who in recent years have been singing the Polish and European anthem in the streets, listening in silence every Sunday for years to the preamble to our Constitution, have created a new political body.

And this democracy, based on a strong identification with values but also on horizontal ties between different segments of society. It cannot be as easily subverted as procedural democracy. It is a type of network democracy in which all meshes mutually reinforce each other.

Another open question whether we need to fight ideological wars. Shouldn't the democratic coalition take up a pragmatic, solution-oriented approach, one that is less ideologically charged. Many assume that this is what most voters are looking for.

Elections won by democracy in Poland took place in times when a wave of hard right populism is haunting Europe. This year the hard right anti-European, populist parties could gain in the European elections. Marine le Pen can win the presidential in 2027 in France. Italy is already run by a hard right. All that presents a challenge to Europe, can block European reforms and the geostrategic enlargement. And here comes another question. Should the democrats try to exclude the non-democratic segments of society from public debate and government or rather engage with them.

There are those who believe that becoming part of government and taking responsibility for governing can moderate them. And there is some evidence. There is also evidence that issues triggering xenophobia and Euroscepticism change over time. Migration comes and goes since 2015, anti-European or anti euro issues have become less prominent in the new wave of hard right, new hostilities are built on climate policy costs, nationalism, Ukraine war, abolition of unanimity in decision-making - there is a whole variety of options exploited by the hard right.

The EU has been traditionally building its majorities among the centrist parties. The EP provides a lot of evidence on it. Some mainstream parties today, EPP in particular, have developed a tendency to reach out to the far right parties. There are risks there, that this will provide a trampoline for the far right and push aside the

centrist parties. That is why I think politicians have to be very cautious in bringing the radicals into the political power at any level expecting their attitudes to be softened.

The contrary can happen. Such alliances can soften the rule of law commitment. The efficient check and balances system can be watered down. Of course, the hard right does not need to join ruling coalitions to affect policy making. But what matters is that on many issues, also globally, there are trends in people's attitudes which work towards democracy.