

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
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Opening speech

Illiberal Democracies and their impact on Europe

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Dear friends and colleagues,

Let me first of all express my gratitude to our Hungarian partners for the initiative to organise today and tomorrow this seminar on “Illiberal Democracies and their impact on Europe”.

FEPS as the progressive European think tank is proud to be part of such initiatives. We all are aware here in this room that there is growing concern on the state of democracy in Europe and especially in the Central and Eastern European region.

We face a situation where democracy is becoming a façade and European values are not respected any more or have never been respected. Since 1945, and the end of the cruelties of the Second World War states in the Western hemisphere here, for the most part embodied both democracy and constitutional liberalism. Then Europe was proud to overcome 1989 the iron curtain and to bring democracy and constitutional liberalism to most of the former Soviet bloc. Many of the Eastern and Central European countries moved very quickly and very successfully from the communist system to the European system of democracy and values of freedom, justice and solidarity.

Let me be very clear:

Democracy and the European values demand one essential attribute: The constitution of a democratic state is central to the authority of the respective government. Constitutional liberalism is distinct from the liberalism or neo-liberalism we discuss in our political debates. A Constitution is about the limitation of power and the regulation of exercising power. It becomes dangerous when a

government believes it has absolute power or sovereignty or it can centralise its authority and hence its power.

If elected governments claim that they are representing the people and encroach steadily on the rights of the society we have to speak of usurpation. The worst existing government on the European continent is probably in Belarus with the Lukashenko regime. We cannot say that this is a democratic regime. Such systems produce leaders, who think that they are “strong” and they believe that they are “speaking for the people”. Such regimes tend to “go to the nation” in bypassing democratic procedures especially when their views are in conflict with those agreed in the constitution and in the legislature.

Dear friends,

as a German citizen and a convinced European I have to say that the greatest threats to humanity, liberty and freedom has been caused in the last century not by a disorder of our societies but by brutally strong and highly centralised states like the Nazi Germany or the Stalinist regime of the Soviet Union.

The lessons taken from this horrible history, which brought us war and millions of deaths established the beginning of the European project. One of the guiding principles behind the path taken in the fifties of the last century by the founding fathers of Europe was that there is the proved correlation between democracy and peace: *Never in history have two modern democracies gone to war with each other!*

In democracies, decisions are taken with the participation of the citizen and hence they are by default much more cautious. They are more pacific and closer to the fact



that peace is the only way that holds freedom and individual liberties. Democracies develop a mutual respect for rights of each citizen. That means a system of checks and balances and assuring that no single leader can take a decision alone, and for example to declare war to another country.

We should be very clear that the danger to an individual's life, liberty and well being always comes from absolutism of monarchies, the terror of dictatorships and the dogma of religions. Governing in the 21st century at least in our part of the world will hopefully no longer be conducted by this but will be more and more a problem within our democracies and a problem of tendencies of legitimacy of our governments and the democratic representativity of the political leaders.

This makes it so necessary to discuss these issues. Let me be blunt: The Hungarian government is pretending to have the legitimacy of the Hungarian citizens and therefore is pretending that they are democratic and respecting the Rule of law. This is happening in the context what can be described with frequent retroactive legislation and targeted taxes, as well as lack of protection of private property, discrimination on the state level towards certain minorities and weakening the constitutional court which results in insufficient protection of civil rights.

This is the biggest threat for us the convinced democrats: The danger is that such illiberal democracies discredit the liberal democracy and bring a shadow over democratic governance and freedom of law. Democracy without respect of the Rule of law is simply dangerous and leads to abuse of power, to erosion of liberty and also to ethnic divisions.

As convinced European and progressives we don't want such tendencies. We don't want a rejection of a liberal democracy. We want a real division of powers on all levels of our societies, starting from the municipal level to the regional, the national, the European and the international level. Europe has for example defined very well the so so-called Copenhagen criteria, which gave finally open accession to the Central and Eastern Europe. In respecting these criteria, I believe that nowadays Hungary under the current government could not have become a member of the European Union.

But this does not just concern Hungary. It is also a threat what we face in the rise of populism and anti-democratic mentalities in many parts of Europe. That is why we have to stay strong and fight against such tendencies. Peace has no price and democracy is not a simple regime choice it is a choice of conviction for the freedom, the liberty and the individual well-being.

I would like to conclude in demanding all of us here in this room that we discuss such essential principles and that we renew our willingness and our engagement to contribute as progressives to strengthen our democracies, to be very cautious about nationalist populism emerging in many countries in Europe and of disrespect for human rights manifesting itself in discrimination and exclusion. These tendencies resemble more and more "fake democracies" which we need to address in Europe. I hope this seminar today will provide a solid basis of discussion on this crucial matter.

Thank you very much for your attention!