

EVENT REPORT

BÖLL Lunch debates Reconnecting Europe IV

What's the Matter with Central Eastern Europe?¹

The results of the Hungarian election are alarming news for the state and future of democracy not only in Hungary, but in the European Union. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán most probably achieved a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the third time in a row, improving his 2014 score by approximately four percentage points and gaining more than 90 of the 106 direct mandates. The extreme right Jobbik Party became the second strongest party (20%). The sobering defeat of the centre-left oppositional parties (together approximately 25%) gives little ground for hope that the authoritarian rule of the Fidesz-government can be stopped in the near future. But Hungary is not the only Central Eastern European 'problem child' of the European Union.

Poland is currently under EU scrutiny (art.7), because of its contentious reform of the judicial sector; but also other policies concerning abortion rights, the 'de-concentration' of the media (a drastic limitation of foreign ownership) and crucial changes in the educational system have risen concern and led to protests all over the country.

In Slovakia the tentacles of the Italian mafia seem to reach into politics. The killing of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner has caused a political crisis and huge protests in Slovakia. In the Czech Republic the controversial businessman Andrej Babiš governs the country without the confidence of the parliament which lifted his immunity leaving him open to prosecution over accusations that he fraudulently received European Union subsidies. President Miloš Zeman was (re-)elected on an anti-migration ticket.

What are the reasons behind the worrying developments and what are the main differences and similarities between political trends in Central Eastern and Western Europe?

The West as a post-communist mirage

For Central Eastern European countries, the key word of the two last decades was 'normalisation'. After the failure of the Soviet system, normalisation was understood as replication of the model of Western democracies. The transition process was twofold: toward a market economy and toward a liberal democracy.

From a macroeconomic perspective the post-communist transition succeeded – especially in Poland and Hungary where growth rates are high – but what did the people get out of it? Firstly, there is the perception of increasing inequalities and the feeling that they are drowning in the globalisation process; then there is the reality of a less protective state, of cuts in social policies...

¹ The event took place on the 25 April 2018; The panelists were: **Jakub Eberle**, Institute for International relations, Prague; **Edit Zgut**, Policy analyst at Political Capital Institute, Budapest ; **Lukasz Pawlowski**, Editorialist, Kultura Liberalna, Warsaw ; **Olga Gyarfasova**, Comenius University, Bratislava. The debate was moderated by **Eva van de Rakt**, Director Prague Office Heinrich- Böll- Stiftung.

The transition brought both prosperity and disillusion, without succeeding in putting an end to corruption and political mismanagement. In other words, the Western model does no longer seem as magnificent as it appeared two decades ago.

That is where the right-wing populists came in, using a different rhetoric than the mainstream parties but promising what they could not deliver: decency and an efficient state. The most successful of them are in Poland the Law and Justice party (*PiS*) and in Hungary *Fidesz* both holding foreign elements – from Brussels to Soros, refugees – responsible for any problem the country might face. In addition to these ‘foreign agents’, the nationalist rhetoric also targets the enemies from inside: basically everyone who disagrees with the government. The quest for an efficient State brought illiberalism; whether it is through the reform of the judiciary in Poland or the deconstruction of the media sector in Hungary. Yet, what needs to be understood in the West is that Orban has proceeded on a legal basis, which cannot be said about some of the measures of the Polish government.

Regarding refugees, it needs to be pointed out that despite the absence of a tradition of immigration in Central Eastern Europe, Polish polls e.g. showed in early 2015 that a majority of the population was in favour of the reception of refugees. Populist rhetoric and the dissemination of fear (based on the terrorist attacks in Western Europe) among the population succeeded in shifting public opinion.

The struggle for stable party systems

The ‘illiberalism’ of the ruling parties was made possible by the disarray of opposition parties. Following a pan-European trend, the left-wing parties are declining, while populists and far right parties are gaining ground. Approximately one third of the Slovak youth, for example, votes for a radical right party. However, what seems to be specific to Central Eastern Europe is the weakness of the parties as institutionalised structures. Voters are not attached to a party; a significant part of them are voting for the alternative and populist parties by default. Also, the party system is extremely fragmented; in this regard the most apparent example is Slovakia. Since the last European election eight parties are represented in the 13-seats strong Slovak delegation in the European Parliament; whereas the Czech Republic’s three centre-right parties are all affiliated to the European People’s Party (EPP), each one of them counting for 5 or 6 % of the polls.

In parallel with the inconsistency of the opposition, what is destroying liberal democracies in Central Eastern Europe is corruption. The recent murder of a Slovak journalist investigating this phenomenon showed how rotten the situation is in this country; in the Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babis is accused of misuse of EU funds. In Poland, the liberal Civic Platform – the main opposition party – was crippled by corruption scandals. Nonetheless it is very difficult to define specific Central Eastern European corruption; political corruption has the same features as everywhere else and the region is not much more corrupted than some other EU countries.

But political opposition is not just about parties; it is also related to civic participation. In this regard we see a strong contestation in these countries. In recent months huge demonstrations took place in Poland against the backsliding of democracy. In Slovakia also, many citizens stepped up for transparency and justice after the murder of Ján Kuciak – the journalist who had investigated on connections between Slovak politics and the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta’ in the country – and his partner. Misappropriation of EU farm subsidies and arm-trafficking were also on the agenda. These demonstrations led to the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico, who was also suspected of murky links with the Mafia.

From Brussels with love

What Western Europe often sees as an East-West divide could also be understood as a 'reconsideration' of the Western model. And it is nothing specific to Central Eastern Europe: Trump has become US president and the UK is negotiating its retreat from the EU. Yet, Poland and Hungary cannot be considered representative for the whole region - it is unlikely for the Czech Republic and Slovakia to follow the same path. There are many political and economic divergences among the Visegrád group, which is much less united than it appears to be from a Western perspective. Visegrád has become a political brand in Europe, in the Council, but it is not a homogeneous bloc in terms of ideologies, economics and long-term objectives. For instance, Slovakia is part of the euro area; it is therefore unlikely that it shares the same ideas about the eurozone or about European integration as its neighbours.

The ties which exist between the Central European governments and European parties must not be forgotten: those governments are supported at European level. The EPP – currently heading the three main EU Institutions – also shelters Orbán's Fidesz. This is a well-run game where Orbán just has to respect some red lines. Connections are even more intense when it comes to the Merkel's sister party CSU and Bavarian business. The Czech Republic's ruling party belongs to ALDE (Liberals), whereas the Slovakian belongs to the socialist S&D and *PiS* is part of the ECR.

To conclude, Central Eastern European countries have fewer common features than people in the West tend to think; their histories and cultures, their relations with the West differ. The problems they face are in fact not much different from those in other European countries. By putting all of them in the same bag, the EU will end up with a real East-West political divide. Very conservative electoral choices and corruption as such do not cause an unreconcilable gap. Democracy is a process which takes time; as long as the former communist practices are still in place it will be difficult to move forward.