Milena Horvath

How to (re)connect European citizens with the European project?

1. INTRO

As stated by Neil Fligstein (2008) those nations that have not been directly involved in the European integration cannot relate to it to the same extent as the founder states. For this reason they are not able to place federal interests above their national ones and are determined to protect their own state both from political as well as from neoliberal organizations. Moreover, they evaluate the EU as a federation which undermines the nation.

Only those nations can overcome their national identities which have a strong, stable economic background, where democracy has more hundreds years long roots in history and where the fundamental freedoms are respected. Nations for example Germany which were able to process and overcome their past, place the federal (European in this case) interests above their own while not letting national feelings to influence society in a negative way. On the contrary, Central and Eastern European countries did not manage to develop such a democratic system, as they were under Russian (Soviet at that time) control until the 1989 change of regime.

As a consequence of this strong opposition, European collective identity has to face with two obstacles. Firstly, with the political elites of nation states who are against of the idea of decreasing their sovereignty for a common European identity. Secondly, with the citizens of nation states who might view the role of the Union in a different way, evaluating it on the level of their public lives. Taking into account these (human) factors, it becomes clear that the attitudes of European people towards a shared identity have and will have a crucial role in the future formation of Europe (Neil Fligstein, 2008).

The big Eastern European Enlargement in 2004 divided the EU even more. The 10 newly joint former communist countries were not ready to join the Union, not economically, politically neither socially.

2. Hungary – How did it drift away from the EU?/Signs?

Clearly, it is their interest to leave behind their past and develop, which can be achieved only through being the member of the European Union. However, as no strong democracy has been established in this area - or if there has been it is constantly being weakened - the ruling power can cover its dictatorial actions with national identities, aiming to isolate Central and Eastern European countries from the European Union and its democratic values. The case of Hungary; recent restrictions of academic freedom, freedom of speech, competition or the increasing governmental

monopolization of media and propaganda against Brussels (the centre of the European Union) demonstrates this policy well.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban has made it clear in his speeches that he does not intend to follow the policy of Western countries anymore. Instead he seeks to create an illiberal democratic state just like Russia or Turkey. In order to provide evidence that the bond between the EU and its member states is getting weaker, a few of the sings of Hungary's drift away is going to be discussed.

- **2010 – Constitutional Changes**

After winning the elections with the majority of votes in 2010, Fidesz, the government party introduced a number of constitutional changes which has enabled to centralise its power.

The new constitution allowed the implementation of laws with only a two-thirds majority, which made it possible to place supporters of Fidesz in different institutions/positions intending to get legal cover/support for the policies they want to conduct. (Therefore Fidesz got the right to elect for instance the Hungarian President, the Supreme Court chief justices, Constitutional Court jurists and ombudsmen.)

- **Restrictions of media and free speech**

Since 2010 government control over public news and fines for private broadcasters are permitted too, which means a serious threat to the freedom of speech.

- **Campaign/battle against Brussels**

Additionally, in order to make Hungarian citizens believe that the EU membership is not beneficial for them and it is responsible for all the internal issues the country has, the 'Let's stop Brussels' national consultation has been launched in 2017. By turning citizens against the Union, the Hungarian government had the chance to look stronger and more powerful in its country.

- **Laws against NGOs/Law on transparency of NGOs**

NGOs (Non governmental organizations) that are funded with more than 24 000euros/year by a foreign donor will be forced to register as "foreign-funded organizations".

According to Prime Minister Orban the implementation of such law would fight against money laundering and international terrorism. In contrast NGOs believe this action might strengthen the belief that their funding endangers the national security and sovereignty of Hungary. Organizations that deal with promoting and protecting the rights of refugees, migrants or other groups of people who otherwise might not be eligible for state funded social and legal services might have to cope with fines or the suspension of the right to operate. The Russian 'Foreign agents law' -

implemented in 2012 - has led to similar consequences as at least 30 organizations have closed since its adoption.

This law would clearly violate the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, which belong to the core values of the EU.

- **CEU – Restriction of academic freedom and Battle against Soros**

The Central European University has been the symbol or European identity, European values and independence in Hungary. CEU, funded by the Hungarian born US businessman George Soros in 1991, is the only university in the area which gives fully accredited degrees not only in Hungary but in the United States too. Despite of its world-known academic achievements and success in the rankings, by changing one of the passages of the Education Bill, the Hungarian government intended to shut down the university; taking away the opportunity to study at a European standard university from thousands of Central, Eastern European and international students too. Although the legislation was formulated in general terms, it was clearly directed at the Central European University.

Even if the university would be able to or willing to conduct the required changes within the predetermined time period, its unique identity and autonomy would be destroyed. In spite of the fact that, the university studies and the early political movements of the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban was supported by the Geroge Soros fellowship, now the government forces CEU and therefore all the European values to leave the country. In other words, the openly illiberal democracy supporter government of Hungary has created an imaginary enemy (Brubaker, 2017); in this case George Soros and the Central European University.

It is clear that all the recent legislations and actions of the Hungarian government are against the legal, moral rules and democratic values of the EU membership.

3. Reconnection:

In order to develop a European identity, the crucial role of national group identities concerning the determination of attitudes and degree of loyalty of people must not be neglected. As suggested by Fligstein (2008) this must be done through the creation of bonds between the nations which tend to interact with each other more frequently than with others, emphasising the values they have in common, while raising attention to the dissimilarities of other countries outside their area of interest. In the final part of my presentation I aim to give some ideas on how a (re)connection could be made not only for Hungary but for all EU member states as well.

1. In general people want to have a clear picture of the future but as policy makers do not intend to share their plans and views, citizens think they have very little say in policy making. If they were involved more in European politics, they would finally not feel that decisions are being made on their behalf while

ignoring their needs. According to Frédéric Vallier this should and could be achieved from the very bottom of internal politics of all EU member states.

However, Europe has been often seen as a community that brings nations together, first of all it should focus on bringing people from a diverse background together. Mayors, local councillors mean the connection between citizens and politics. In other words, besides being in charge for their area, their responsibilities involve engaging business, industrial, cultural and academic leaders too. For this reason they are the persons who would have to lay down the grounds of a strong connection across Europe.

2. Education – Taking my own experiences into account there was not enough talk about the European Union in my home country. Although we had some classes about the history of it, the significance of its benefits and drawbacks were not discussed more in depth. As a consequence of the lack of knowledge, one can't relate to the EU. In order to re-connect citizens with the Union, a compulsory, detailed EU education would be essential. Moreover after acquiring such knowledge, the organization of debates would make it possible to have a deeper understanding of pro and contra arguments and views on the topic. This interactive way of learning would establish a strong base for the reconnection of EU citizens with not only the Union but with each other as well. In other words education would strengthen the sense of belonging, common identity and shared history to a great extent.

3. However a Communication Plan (2015-2019) has been established the EU still hasn't managed to get closer to its citizens. A shared 'European media' might not only market/advertise the benefits of the EU but would also keep European citizens up to date. Furthermore, people who were not particularly interested in the current situation and challenges of the EU might feel encouraged to be so and start to follow the news. A greater publicity for instance the broadcast of meetings and debates, the publication of a 'European paper' in every 3 months or the establishment and regular usage of a Facebook page would raise awareness to the positive aspects of European integration and therefore would bring people together. I find it important to note that this 'shared European media' as well as the education plan I just explained would be intended to target young Europeans as they are the ones who will shape and determine the future of Europe/EU.

4. The fear of losing sovereignty is one of the reasons why Eurosceptic parties and groups have had the chance to emerge in the past few years. In order to prevent or stop member states getting further away from the Union national and intergovernmental rights have to be restructured and balanced in a way which serves everyone's interest. While some countries would expect more

intervention to their internal politics (from the EU), others would prefer to have their own choices.

5. Furthermore, there is an ongoing debate about how EU money and funds have been being and should be spent. While the more developed member states (...) invest money in the Union, countries which joined later and perhaps couldn't manage to reach the same economic growth seek to get a greater financial support. In some cases these funds are not spent according to the right purpose which arises the question if these countries deserve to be supported. Of course they do need support. For this reason a compromise must be made. In order to satisfy all interests, new, stricter restrictions and requirements should be proposed. If member states in need correspond to certain requirements for example if they are able to show evidence they need financial support for a necessary project, they would get a certain amount of fund.

6. Last but not least the immigration policy and the inactivity of the EU in coping with challenges such as terrorism, migration..etc. have weakened the overall trust in the Union as well. Besides involving member states and its citizens more in the decision making process, their national opinion should be taken into account too. Forcing the will of an intergovernmental institution (of the EU in this case) on a member state raises Eurosceptism. All in all by quickly and actively responding to crisis while providing member states a greater freedom in deciding how they wish to deal with these the EU would have a greater chance to restore the respect and trust in it.

4. CONCLUSION: *Why is it important?

Of course the EU might not always operate perfectly, but all member states should and could work on this, step by step – actions by actions. The reconnection is essential not only for Hungary but for all EU member states too. We all need to belong to a community which is able to provide/ensure us protection and represents our political, economic interests on the global stage. Being a member of the European Union means having power, security and allies. Without the EU we would be a group of small, separated countries that have no chance to be heard and have no global influence in the world of superpowers such as the USA or China. We are stronger together.