

EVENT REPORT

Anti EU-rhetoric versus national interests?

Nationalistic populism and its reception in Central Europe

-Roundtable Discussion-

19 March, 2018, Central European University, Monument Building, 'Popper Room'

In his opening remarks, **Professor Péter Balázs**, Director of CENS and former Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, warned the nowadays we can see an insurgence of nationalistic politics. He described contemporary criticisms that the European Union has been overstretched and that there are too many 'actors and sectors' and also argued that it is easy to blame the European Union, since it has become a very complex entity with many competencies. The Professor finished his speech optimistically, emphasizing that there are many solutions out there to reform the EU and wished a fruitful discussion for all after giving the floor to Péter Krekó, the keynote speaker of the event.

Péter Krekó, the Executive Director of Political Capital and lecturer at ELTE discussed Ten statements on populism. He began the presentation by claiming the discussion about populism is becoming emptier, as there is not much more to say about it. Although, Krekó was not sure whether this is a good thing or not. He continued his talk by arguing that populism is not a theory anymore, but it has become a reality. The presentation given by him focused on Post-communist countries of the region and he made use of Cas Mudde's definition of populism:

- *"a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people."*

Krekó highlighted three features of the populist-radical right which are their crucial building elements: Populism, Nativism, Authoritarianism. He noted that this set of ideological components are on the rise in the West and not only in our part of the world. Then he continued by saying that populism is an inherent element of the political process and that populism is not the evil. Krekó argued that certain types of populism create the problem, but not the ideology in itself. He provided the analogy of the chameleon, which adapts to its surroundings and "inhales" the discontent of the masses (Taggart, 2000). Similarly, populism can also be combined with very different ideological elements and still have its common features. Krekó provided the examples of Central European politicians who represent different parties in the European parliament while exhibiting populist features.

Subsequently, Krekó claimed that populism is the new Zeitgeist; therefore, we have to live with it. Modern populism is more about the circus than the bread. In this new paradigm politicians talk less about social transfers and the poor people. Accordingly, modern right-wing populism has the art of targeting the poor individuals in society and the wealthier citizens at the same time. These parties have different narratives for them. There is much more talk about the evil Brussels and

threatening progressive values but they don't discuss social cases. Krekó referred to an article called, "It's not the economy, stupid!" written by Jacek Kucharczyk who discusses this topic in depth. Krekó discredited the common belief that populism in central Europe is like a dog who only barks and does not bite. He believes that populism did have real effects lately. Krekó argued that populism in the region became more and more similar to populism in Latin America. The fear of being in the periphery, diverting negative feelings against international actors instead of the domestic governments are two points of strong similarities. Finally, he warned that weak democracies with fragile institutional settings are more prone to the dangers posed by populism.

Daniel Bartha, the Director of the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy moderated the panel discussion. He first introduced the panelists and described the structure of the talk. He also talked about some of the questions that were considered: Does EU bashing go against the national interest? How is national populism perceived in different countries? What differences are there in the states in the way how anti-EU rhetoric is perceived? He called the project a comparative analysis with recommendations as an end result.

Paul Schmidt, Secretary General of ÖGfE – Austrian Society for European Politics, Vienna, Austria, discussed the findings from the survey conducted in Austria. Initially, he noted that he agrees with Péter Krekó that populism is not bad, however he is worried about the way how it gets used in political rhetoric. Schmidt started introducing the results by noting that in a regional comparison there is a very positive view about the European Union in Austria, 70 percent of the respondents want to stay in the union despite the existence of some criticism. Austrians believe that they have strong contributions in solidarity and sees Austria as a protector of fundamental values of democracy and human rights. The European Union is used as a scapegoat according to the people but this is the lowest score in the region. Austrians see more advantages in their EU membership and they believe that it also helps the country to have a say in what happens. Migration and asylum were signaled as important questions for Austrians. Then Schmidt continued by claiming that integration happens in the cities and urban citizens have different concerns than people living in the countryside. People in rural areas hear about the problems but they don't have first-hand experience and there is a threat of this turning into fear. In sum, it was proven that Austrians prefer stability and don't like big changes.

Christian Kvorning Lassen, Research Fellow at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in Prague, introduced the findings of the Czech Republic, the most Eurosceptic country in the region. He said that unfortunately he brings bad news, but there are some bright spots. Kvorning Lassen claimed that the Czechs are by far the most pessimistic about the European Union based on the results. Although, he found it important to mention that the survey was conducted just before the presidential election campaigns whereby migration has been the number one topic and it has been heavily politicized dominated the discourse. He further explained that since 2003, Euroscepticism has been strongly present in the country thanks to Vaclav Klaus and it has slowly taken roots in the population. Young people are more supportive of the EU whereas people aged between 36-65-year are more prone to Euroscepticism. Generally, the political system and institutions are the least trusted in the EU. He hypothesized that low trust in national institutions might have spilled over into institutions of the European Union. Czech respondents of the survey said that they are overwhelmingly treated negatively by the European Union and they felt that they don't have an

influence on EU policies. The Czech Republic greatly benefit from its EU membership; however, this is the area where they are the most sceptic. Czechs are generally dissatisfied with their politicians and their impact on these issues.

Kvorning Lassen later added that negativity towards the EU is overwhelming. He again emphasized that his might have also been influenced by the recent elections that took place at the time of the production of the survey. Solidarity is understood by Czechs as keeping migrants outside the EU and Czechs think that human rights are the most important issue to themselves. Nonetheless, this seems quite paradoxical, since solidarity does not apply to migrants according to their perceptions. The European Union has also been used as a scapegoat like in the case of Austria. Again, the speaker stressed the point that dissatisfaction with their domestic politicians might be the cause behind negative attitudes toward the EU. Democracy and human rights matter a lot to the respondents and an independent judiciary and civil society also have big importance for the people. The speaker noted that this is strange considering that civil society has experienced serious infringements by Andrej Babis. Kvorning Lassen raised the legitimate question during his talk: “How can people want independent media and judiciary while voting for a politician who represents itself as anti-establishment?” He further described this case and added that 62 percent of the Czechs voted for anti-establishment parties (by adding up votes for the Pirate party, ANO and the communist party). He also emphasized that the society is increasingly polarized and there is a lack of leadership which makes it much easier for populism to take roots. Leadership is required but no one is willing to take up the torch. Also noted that rural areas exhibited somewhat higher levels of populism but it still permeates the whole country. Kvorning Lassen gave a pessimistic final assessment and he does not see the way out of populism at the moment.

András Szalai, Research Fellow of the Center for European Neighborhood Studies at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary continued the discussion by focusing on the findings of the Hungarian case. He presented the preliminary findings that were based on a representative sample of 500 people. Szalai first provided an introduction about the Hungarian case and called the country as a laboratory case of right-wing populism and emphasized that elections are soon coming up. Szalai gave a concise and informative introduction about the current situation of the Hungarian political environment whereby he explained that the Hungarian government is conducting a single-issue campaign and other policy issues are pushed away by this. Thanks to this phenomenon migration is mostly seen as a cultural threat and local brand of Euroscepticism. Accordingly, a non-existing homogenous idea is promoted by the Hungarian Fidesz-KDNP government and the country stands out in its total rejection of immigration.

Szalai continued by explaining that Hungarians are the most Pro-European among the observed countries. Voters of Fidesz and Jobbik are also among these, but in lesser numbers. The European Union is mostly seen as a source of economic benefits and not as a set of values. Opposition voters see the EU in a more positive light, while voters of the current government are more divided on the case. Szalai emphasized that perceptions about the EU are divided among party lines. He also noted that interestingly Hungarians support the idea of a free media, which seems paradoxical given the recent changes in Hungary concerning the state of the media. In sum, the European Union is regarded positively by citizens of the country and it is also seen as respectful and beneficial mostly in economic terms. The EU plays a positive role except the topic of migration. This can be easily

understood when thinking about the completely negative image drawn in the discourse. Szalai concluded by saying that Hungarians are supportive of the EU, but perceptions about the entity are strongly manipulated by the specific interpretation of the Hungarian government. During the end of his talk, Szalai also questioned the usefulness of the current conception of populism and he suggested that there is a need for a new idea of populism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Dominika Hajdu, Project Coordinator of GLOBSEC Policy Institute in Bratislava, Slovakia was the subsequent speaker of the panel discussion who presented the findings of the Slovakian survey. She started her talk by mentioning that Slovakia is frequently seen as a pro-integration country with strong support for “Europe” and raised the question whether the findings of the survey support these assumptions. She explained that after the parliamentary elections of 2016 the first Slovak EU presidency followed which changed the narrative of the government. Nationalistic populism and migration has faded away from their discourse and the Slovakian and European interests have been put together. Public support for the European Union has risen in the past year and a half and support for EU membership is relatively high (but not as high as in Hungary). Hajdu explained that Slovaks see the largest advantages in economic terms when thinking about their own membership in the European Union and this seems logical since Slovakia is a net beneficiary of the organization. In addition, Slovaks perceive the role of their domestic government positively concerning EU activity and most Slovaks think that the EU is used as a scapegoat. She concluded her speech by arguing that the public is aware of government’s shift in rhetoric, however the original narrative is still partly resembled in people’s minds. At the end of her talk Hajdu also added that the data was analyzed as if the government was still in place (since the Slovakian government has stepped after the murder of an investigative journalist).

Dr. Jure Požgan, Research Fellow at Centre for International Relations started by noting that the political situation has changed considerably since the production of the survey and elections are coming soon in Slovenia. The contemporary leading party did not even exist when the survey was produced and the prime minister has stepped down recently. However, the speaker believes that the results of the survey have not been influenced by these political changes. In general, Slovenia is a staunch supporter of the European Union and more women support the organization while people living in the rural areas are less supportive. Based on the results of the survey, Požgan told that Slovenians see the presentation of the EU as fair and think that Slovenia is not entirely treated fairly at the same time. He thinks that negative views on treatment by the EU might be the result of more recent events concerning bilateral issues with Croatia. Generally, people thought that the EU did not intervene actively enough in the conflict about the bay of Piran. Furthermore, the global financial crisis has hit the country relatively harder than other countries in the region. People in Slovenia believe that their EU membership has brought many advantages to the country. However, the impact of Slovenia in the EU is seen as small. Young respondents are more critical towards politics of the current government and are happier with the weight of Slovenia within the EU. While, older respondents illustrate an intergenerational conflict with differing views.

Finally, Požgan introduced that independent judiciary and democracy, human rights, are all perceived as important by the respondents. Also, having a strong leader and a culturally homogenous society was present among the answers. The responses in general show a strong liberal democratic approach of the average citizen. The speaker thought that Slovenia only exhibits

a softer version of populism, and being a populist is not equal with being anti-European in Slovenia. He gave the example of the person who has the biggest chances of becoming prime minister in the parliamentary elections, who is a populist but not anti-European.

The presentations were followed by a lively questions and answers session, and the concluding remarks by Dániel Bartha, who thanked the speakers for their contribution.

Author: **Dániel Matók**

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Program

Political discourse in Central Europe is increasingly shaped and influenced by EU-skepticism and aims at national based policy solutions rather than common European strategies. Often this discourse is characterized by simplified, nationalist-populistic rhetoric. This event is part of an EU-funded 'Europe for Citizens' research project that examines why political and societal actors resort to this "anti-European" rhetoric. It aims to show if/to what extent and why people believe in this rhetoric and regard it as justified. In addition, it seeks to depict to what extent "EU bashing" and isolationist, contrarian policymaking fails to deliver on its own promises, and may even be damaging to an effective promotion of national interests. These are all very complex questions that bear significant relevance for current European politics. The project adopts a bottom-up approach, which involves the opinions of as many citizens as possible in the countries concerned (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia). The present roundtable will present the initial findings of the project based on a representative public opinion survey conducted in all five countries that asked questions relating to trust in EU institutions and policies, anti-migration attitudes, and trust in democracy.

10:00-10:05 **Opening Remarks:** Péter Balázs, *Director*, CENS

10:05-10:30 **Keynote:** Péter Krekó, *Executive Director*, Political Capital

10:30-12:00 **Roundtable Discussion**

Panelist will be representing the five partner institutions

- **Paul Schmidt** – *Secretary General*, ÖGfE – Austrian Society for European Politics, Vienna, Austria (Lead Organisation)
- **Christian Kvorning Lassen** – *Research Fellow*, EUROPEUM – Institute for European Policy, Prague, Czech Republic
- **András Szalai** – *Research Fellow*, Center for European Neighborhood Studies, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary
- **Dominika Hajdu** – *Project Coordinator*, GLOBSEC Policy Institute, Bratislava, Slovakia
- **Jure Požgan** – *Researcher*, Centre of International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Chair: **Dániel Bartha** – *Director*, Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy