

The EU & Central Europe: The New Right Wing Triangle in the Trump-Orbán-Netanyahu Era

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On 8 July, 2020 a videoconference was broadcast by Viktor Orbán, Janez Janša and Aleksandar Vučić, respectively the heads of government of Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia. The moderator, François-Xavier Bellamy, was the leader in the European Parliament (EP) of the French right-wing party Les Républicains (LR), which, like the parties of the Hungarian and Slovenian leaders, is a member of the European People's Party (EPP) . They defended a Europe “without censorship” which protects itself from “foreigners” (and LGBT people).

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In the context of a deep crisis of socialist alternatives, membership of the European Union (EU) seen from the East has often appeared to peoples as being associated with rights and preferable to an absolute external peripherization: it is in Poland or Hungary that we still find the highest rates (over 70%) of popular support for EU membership today. At the same time, the social degradation and corruption associated with opaque privatization quickly backfired against the parties which had organized it in the first decade of “post-Communist transition”.

That is why, ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1999 - at the end of a NATO intervention (on the question of Kosovo) which also proved to be very destabilizing in the region, the European Union (EU) decided to try to stabilize the situation by offering the “liberal” parties the acceleration of a “return to (“civilized”) Europe”: it was a political choice aimed at opposing both the Communist past and the various nationalisms identified as “pro-Russian” in the Putin decade. The first wave of enlargement to the east of the EU for the CEECs (Central and Eastern European Countries) therefore materialized in 2004, notably for Hungary and Slovenia. From 1999, this opening was accompanied by a “stabilization plan” for the Western Balkan countries declared “potential candidates” with the aim of tying them to the EU - which notably included post-Milosevic Serbia. All of this led in the early 2000s to surge in growth through indebtedness (with the opening of subsidiaries of Western banks in the East), and a take-off in FDI (foreign direct investment) attracted by “social and fiscal dumping”.

The 2008-2009 crisis and the opening of a new phase of opaque polarizations

The 2008 banking and financial crisis followed by the EU recession hit Eastern Europe hard. It put

an end to the “catch-up” discourse which was now replaced by one of austerity. This new phase was and remains marked by multiple social explosions. But the illusions about a “real” capitalism (opposing corruption and opaque privatizations) was combined with the difficulty of outlining credible progressive alternatives.

The success of new right-wing “populisms” expressed the rejection of the forces identified as “left” and/or “liberal” who had carried out the privatizations which were a condition of EU membership. It was rejected by the new conservatives as a “decadent civilization” tolerating abortion and homosexuality at the same time as being (for some) dominated by Jews or (for others) invaded by Muslims. Orbán’s Hungary (and his party, Fidesz) would set the precedent.

The so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015 radicalized and largely unified discourse with a dominant Islamophobic axis compatible with anti-Semitism: wasn’t the wealthy Jew Soros, stigmatized in Hungary, financing the NGOs supporting Muslim immigrants? Unlikely encounters grew between Orbán and Netanyahu in the era of Trump and the ethnicization of “neoliberal” policies with anti-foreigner sentiment. But doubts about the future of NATO, the difficulties of Brexit, and the rise of right-wing currents within the EU changed the orientations: with or without the euro, it was the conservative societal and anti-migrant axis which would emerge, with an authoritarian dimension. At the same time, Hungarian diplomacy turned in favour of Putin’s Russia, hit by European sanctions after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, which, in turn, encouraged rapprochement with Serbia, dominated by Aleksandar Vučić: we have here all the ingredients of the triangular press conference.

A new balance of power in the EU?

Aleksandar Vučić and his party, initially anchored in the so-called “pro-Russian” Serbian nationalist far right, has become the new strongman of a country now negotiating EU membership like all the other “Western Balkan” countries. But that didn’t stop him from opposing sanctions against Russia. He is now playing on all fronts (including Trump, advocating an ethnic division in Kosovo). In the midst of a resurgence of the pandemic, he is accused by his opposition of exploiting this to muzzle it more and more.

The three leaders complain of stigmatisation - when they vaunt the support they have received from China (quicker than the EU) in relation to the pandemic, or when they are only expressing, they say, “how to live”. The Slovenian leader says: “The main threat to our continent is cultural Marxism” which seeks to dismantle the nation and the family. [1]] But like the Hungarian leader, he advocates enlarging the Union to include the Eastern Partnership states.

For its part, the EU is juggling with regional “stabilocratic” logics which push it to support the Aleksandar Vučić regime, despite the social mobilizations that have opposed it for months: it is playing the card of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, on the one hand, and that of migrant control at the gates of the EU on the “Balkan route”.

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P.S.

• International Viewpoint. Thursday 13 August 2020:

Footnotes

- [1] See available on ESSF (article 54376), [Slovenia: The struggle against authoritarian liberalism is more urgent than ever](#).