Back to Democracy - but which?

Foreigners often wonder what is happening in Hungary and in some respects they are right to. In addition to the migrant crisis, it seems the Hungarian government wants to solve the crisis of Europe as well. Naturally, European governments are also dealing with the crisis but the Hungarian right wing government coalition – reacting to the slowness of European decision-making – wishes not only to accelerate the process, but to change the whole process of the crisis management.

The Hungarian governing coalition, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at its head, is taking advantage of the “democracy deficit” currently surfacing in the European Union. Namely of the fact, that the preservation of liberal fundaments was attained at the expense of democratic values. This idea has been present in Western European media for a long time already but there hasn’t been any substantial progress concerning it.

If we take a look behind the scenes it becomes obvious that the Hungarian government is reacting to this particular tipping point. This is one of the greatest challenges of the last 25 years, since these two ideas seemed inseparable in the 1990s. The mid-2000s though brought a slight loosening between the two and, although in theory liberal democracies are strong, it is becoming more and more of a challenge that the liberal element thrives on the back of the weakening democratic element.

Placing the continuously strengthening, so called populist parties in the category of the far right no longer seems to be a plausible explanation of the phenomenon. In reality, these parties point at the aforementioned contradiction, declaring themselves devotees of “pure” democracy. And just the way populist parties don’t know how to deal with liberalism (therefore they proclaim a sort of democracy without liberalism) democracy is quickly becoming the insurmountable challenge of liberals. They are gradually becoming advocates of liberalism without democracy.

Viktor Orbán has been one of the strongest advocates of the “Return to Democracy” notion. However, he envisions the implementation with the excessive restriction of liberal values and the introduction of a new Europeanism. In his statements he speaks of protecting the
European and Christian values but he does all this in face of liberal values. It is easy to see that his negative perception of Europe is because his frame of mind is not integrative but in fact the opposite: he wishes to disintegrate the organic set of values that have evolved in Europe in the past decades.

Even though it might seem excessive to compare the two politicians, there is a resemblance between Viktor Orbán and Margaret Thatcher in this case. In the late 1970s the disintegration of the post-1945 welfare consensus was at the center of the entirely new concept of the British Conservatives. Thatcher’s aims were matched by offensive politics that was not at all open to consensus. Orbán has a similar way of thinking. In the past 5 years, he has managed to disrupt the consensus of the past two and a half decades, and now he believes that he has a say in European politics as well (since it seems that unlike Margaret Thatcher, today no Western politician wants to or is capable of doing away with the “neoliberal consensus.”) Just as Thatcher was not celebrated by the mainstream elite of her time, Orbán experiences similar notoriety.

Nevertheless, the question remains open: Is Europe capable of further development while carefully preserving the frameworks it has taken decades to build? Or is there a need for grandiose innovation of the system and following the half-measures taken after the 2008 crisis, for complex and progressive changes to happen?

In any case, for now and possibly in the future as well, the migrant crisis distracts us from the crisis between the two elements of democracy. If we are willing to open our eyes however, we can see that we are dealing with an equally substantial challenge, and it is crucial to find a solution to this as well. With or without Orbán, liberal democracy has to be reinvented, as superseding either the liberal or the democratic element is not a viable option. The integration of European values is necessary!