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## **On the Periphery of Empires: a buffer zone of the EU?**

Today the European Union is faced with conflicts it has never encountered before either within or beyond its borders. In 2004, when several Eastern European countries were admitted to the EU in the wake of the *Drang nach Osten*, the democracy deficit of the new member states was considered no more than a children's disease which—given proper treatment—they would surely outgrow. However, as the post-communist mafia state took shape in Hungary between 2010 and 2014, this assumption proved utterly mistaken. Outside its borders—as in Ukraine for example—the hope that societies will necessarily come nearer to European "civilized" norms turned out to be an illusion.

### **Within the Borders of the EU**

Hungary was once a pioneer of the region in expending efforts to dynamically modernize and democratize the country. Although the "central field" policy was described by Viktor Orbán well before 2010, it has been implemented since he came to power. The main aim of this policy is to prevent any change in the political setup and establish an autocratic regime, while stressing that stabilizing liberal democracy is just one alternative in our region. Eastern European post-communist societies today are under the threat of becoming autocratic regimes, thus stabilizing themselves. It is a moot point whether the EU has the clout to put these countries back on the trajectory of liberal democracy or—failing that—excommunicate them from the EU.

The system of sanctions against democracy deficit as legitimized by Brussels is based on two premises. The first one posits that integration implies a system of values whose effectiveness is dependent on the coherence and homogeneity of these values. According to the second premise the fundamental principle of the policy followed by the member states is underpinned by the shared values of liberal democracies, and deviations from this policy should not be regarded as intentional only as occasional slips. The system of sanctions works only if both

of these premises are accepted because—short of the second one—exclusion from the community would automatically come into force as a last resort. In other words, unless the shared values of the member states fail to be harmonized due to the reluctance of certain countries to eliminate those deviances, the community is bound to reject those countries in self-defence, lest for other reasons.

Since the perception of public opinion in Hungary denying the value system of the EU is not incidental but systematic, it is often assumed that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's long-term goal is to lead Hungary out of the EU.

*Challenging this view, we assert that neither the exclusion of Hungary nor a government attempt to quit the EU is a likely scenario.*

## **Beyond the Borders of the EU**

The recent brutal events in Ukraine reveals an increasingly fierce geopolitical competition between the European Union and the "Euro-Asian Union" being formed and led by Russia. This competition is rendered particularly intense owing to the fact that the battle of the great spheres of interest is reinforced in two more dimensions. On the one hand it can be interpreted as a fight between quasi-democratic and quasi-autocratic forces while on the other as a Russian-Ukrainian conflict tinged with a more and more obvious ethnic character. The latter problem also has some cultural undercurrents: after World War II the territory of Ukraine grew, extending its borders from the onion domes of Orthodoxy into the world of Gothic churches of Catholicism.

The lofty goals of fighting for a better value system are mixed with the down-to-earth goals of expanding the empire. This war is not waged with weapons though. Just the opposite, the big powers are trying to win the voters' sympathy with offering "bonuses". The Russians dangle the carrot of supplying cheap energy and opening an administratively controlled market in the former Soviet regions whereas the EU is giving the associated countries financial support and access to EU markets operating on a competitive basis. The imperialistic nature of this battle is revealed by attempts at mutually ruling out the possibility to avail of both channels of "bonus".

*If the requirements of homogeneity in value systems were imposed in strict terms, Ukraine would not at all stand a chance of joining the EU. At the same time however the geopolitical aims of the West seem to move towards a policy of increasingly close cooperation with Ukraine.*

### **Value system versus geopolitics**

The rationality of common values as declared by the EU on the one hand and the rationality of geopolitics with its pressure of circumstances on the other are mutually exclusive concepts, impossible to realize simultaneously. A move to admit or lure the former communist countries from the Balkans and Eastern Europe which are still outside the EU would lead to a catastrophic inflation of the system of common values. However, a flat rejection of these countries, let alone an expulsion of the quasi-autocratic regimes within the walls of the EU, would give the Russian Empire in the process of reincarnation the opportunity to expand towards the West. An EU decision to draw its geographical borders according to the system of common values would surely result in a reincarnation of Yalta, with the implication that the validity of political community would be overruled by the historical self-movement of value systems. Whereas the post-war Yalta agreement cut Europe into two along the North-South axis largely leaving out of consideration issues of cultural value systems, the axis now seems to move diagonally, from North-East to South-West. Such a move is supposed to irrevocably embed the Baltic states, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and possibly Slovakia into the EU but renders the place of Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria in this community ambiguous.

Even though Brussels declines to consider this option, it looks as if the contradiction between the dream of common values and the reality of geopolitics can be solved only by means of a two-speed EU, introduced under political duress. The euro-zone, a "westernized" form of multi-speed Europe has already been realized. The post-communist member states well entrenched in the EU either belong to the euro-zone already or are intent, irrespective of their ideological commitments on joining the euro-zone within a few years. Others however, including Hungary produce a national ideology to justify their resolve to stay permanently outside. The claim for preserving our autonomy hidden in the rhetoric of "national war of independence" is in fact the euphemistic demand

that we be exempted from the norms of liberal democracy. Let there be no mistake: what these countries mean by "the Europe of nations" is an obvious claim to establish or maintain their quasi-autocratic regimes. No one but their own citizens can resist such demands effectively. If there is no resistance or if the resistance turns out to be unsuccessful, the stabilization attempts of "national autocracies" are sure to succeed. Whereas the geopolitical considerations of the EU should not allow the Russian Empire to reach out again as far as the River Leitha on the Western border of Hungary. The Western-European political elite—while giving up its romantic belief and original mission following the collapse of the Berlin Wall—is considering Eastern-Europe falling behind not as a companion in a cultural sense but only as an era to be influenced economically. In fact today's Eastern-European elite --instead of trying to civilize-- only wishes to strengthen its eastern scale of values with the help of national and social populism—in order to build up and preserve their autocratic power.

For some members of the EU to stop this process might seem all the more hopeless since to create a stable democracy is utterly impossible without an autonomous citizenship and a wide middle class. What's more, the financial crisis of 2008 even cast light upon the fact how vulnerable EU member South-European societies may be in this respect.

### **EU buffer zone – the playing field of autocrats**

It follows from the above that we are moving towards a buffer zone, an area permanently outside the euro-zone, where unprincipled concessions in EU norms may be made. The new imperial logic defends itself not with the tactic of "scorched earth" but with a policy of giving support in well-proportioned doses while acquiescing in democracy deficits—in the past such behaviour was tolerated only exceptionally.

Why on earth would autocrats like Orbán wish to leave the EU once they can live in this buffer zone by "milking two empires": regular support arrives through structural and cohesion funds from the EU whereas cheap energy through agreements with the Russian empire? While the former is made to pay for a semblance of showing good manners in politics and espousing the ideals of freedom, the latter for our submission into an Eastern system of dependency.

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