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Europe's values won't defend themselves

The EU needs to pour more money into defending human rights, democracy and the rule of law

Read this article in German

Just like hackers hired to identify weak spots in a company's secured networks, Poland is exposing the EU's vulnerabilities. The bloc's future will depend on the extent to which citizens continue to believe in its fundamental values, including democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law.

Poland – an EU member state – is intent on attacking these fundamental European values. Its government has begun to dismantle judicial independence, limit media freedom and stifle NGOs, limiting the EU's credibility when it comes to conducting values-based foreign policy with third countries.

Democracy will only work if we strive for it.

When one member state starts attacking democracy, the EU will have a hard time persuading neighbours to strengthen it. Moreover, when member states refuse to respect rulings of the European Court of Justice, as Poland recently did, policies common to all member states become worthless, since they are no longer independently enforceable.

First among equals

If other European member states chose to pursue a nationalist course à la Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of Poland's ruling Law and Justice party, the entire European project could go to the dogs. A policy of 'Germany First' or 'France First' is antithetical to closer integration. And we know from history that the alternative to rule of law is the rule of political strongmen.

Poland's recent capitulation to authoritarian values reveals the fragility of liberal-democratic institutions. But identifying weaknesses is also the first step in discussing solutions. In this vein, we propose a two-fold approach to promoting European values: one is corrective, one preventative.

The corrective approach already exists, in the form of Article 7 of EU Treaty which suspends voting rights of a member breaching the aforementioned European values, and a rule of law framework introducing dialogue before such a penalty is triggered. But Article 7 is a 'nuclear option': once triggered, there are no further means of persuasion.

That's why some favour punishing Poland by limiting its access to EU funds. But while such an approach may erode the Polish government's popularity at home, it will surely also hurt ordinary Poles whose EU-friendly sentiments are fuelled in part by the structural and agricultural funds the country receives through the EU budget.

As we've seen, once a country starts to violate EU norms, it's hard to bring it back on track. The EU must therefore invest more in preventing these violations from happening in the first place.

Putting the EU's money where its mouth is

Watchdogs, campaigns, the independent media and think tanks in Poland are all involved in promoting liberal, European values. In July, for instance, NGOs held protests in some 250 cities, forcing the president to veto parts of a controversial judicial reform.

But NGOs are increasingly fighting for survival. The government has slashed their funding, launched a 'National Centre for the Development of Civil Society' to centralise public subsidies, and conducted anti-NGO campaigns in state media.

This is where the EU comes in. To counterbalance the huge budget cuts many Polish NGOs are facing, the bloc should institute a special fund to support European NGOs that support its values, i.e. the rule of law, democracy and human rights. Indeed, a similar instrument worth €1.3bn already exists for non-EU countries.

The fund would bring with it a number of benefits. It would help promote integration, by highlighting the duty of all member states to promote European values, and would strengthen the immune system of European democracies.

Democracy will only work if we strive for it. Or, as Germany's first democratically elected president Friedrich Ebert put it, democracy needs democrats.

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