

"Popular or Populist Democracy in Central Europe?"

Thursday, 27th February 2014, from 10:00 till 15:30

Venue: The Great Hall, Czernin Palace,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague

Cooperation: FES Prague and the Institute of International Relations Prague

Keynote speeches

Petr Drulák, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

Ernst Hillebrand, Head of the Department for International Policy Analysis, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin

Discussion moderated by **Mirko Hempel**, Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office in Prague for the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Petr Drulák

Mr. Petr Drulák, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, had prepared a collection of remarks. Just a few months away from the European elections, there is clearly a rise of populist parties, which take the European Union as their target. This is a very disturbing development. Mr. Drulák defines populism as political leaders trying to offer simple and false solutions to complex problems. However, when we deal with politics and the society, there are no simple solutions. The essence of politics consists of the fact that we deal with dilemmas and it can always be argued that a given choice is right or wrong. Political choices need to take into account all sorts of conflicting norms, therefore political choices can always be criticised.

When this political reality is put into contrast with the rhetoric of populism, the image of the world becomes over-simplified. In this black and white world, populist leaders need an enemy and they picture themselves as white knights fighting against this dark enemy. There are many options for the role of the enemy or scapegoat: the enemy can be the poor people who consume, are lazy and eat from the common cake, but who do not contribute (right-wing argument); the enemy can be the rich people who won't share and if we get rid of them, the world will suddenly become a paradise (left-wing argument). Very often the enemy is represented by a minority group. In the Czech Republic it is the Roma people and in Western Europe the Muslims, who are seen as the source of social evils. Usually vulnerable groups are easy targets of populist campaigns, used to score more points amongst the voters.

In the recent years bureaucrats have increasingly become scapegoats although bureaucracy is actually necessary. However, this complaint is popular when referring to the EU and complaining about the European bureaucracy is an argument that few dare to challenge. This is misleading

because European bureaucracy, despite being quite big and rigid, is usually more efficient than national bureaucracies. Mr. Drulák is shocked by the extent to which the EU is blamed for all sorts of problems and deficiencies nowadays. Obviously the EU is not perfect, certain aspects do not work efficiently enough and there are good reasons to be critical about it. Nevertheless, to the most essential problems faced today, the EU is usually part of the solution, although he admits that it can sometimes also be part of the problem at the same time. European institutions are quite weak and for solving problems one should not think of ways to get rid of the institutions, but of how to make them stronger.

Today the biggest issues are the social problems linked with the fact that we have highly integrated markets in goods, in capital and in services, but no highly integrated regulations. One cannot have civilised markets without regulations; the market is important, but it has to be embedded in strong political institutions, otherwise it usually leads to a disaster. This was the mistake made by many Central European countries, to simply let the market forces free, but it does not work without political authority. As long as the economic activity takes place within the nation state, national institutions are enough, but when the economic activity is globalised and internationalised, bigger international institutions such as the EU become necessary. If the EU cannot fulfil this role it is because its institutions are weak: nations try to keep key competencies at their level and mainstream politicians do not allow the EU to develop by refusing to use the institutional tools. In this respect Mr. Drulák does not see populism as the main threat but as a consequence of an illness found in mainstream politics.

Ernst Hillebrand

Mr. Ernst Hillebrand, Head of the Department for International Policy Analysis of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, looked at the topic from a centre-left perspective. In his work he has seen how centre-left parties in the UK and in France are deeply preoccupied by what is happening in the fringes of the political party system. The rise of populism is a signal for a real and deep unease in our societies. The populist signal has to be understood correctly in order to find the right remedy. The rise of populism does not represent a full shift to the right as many would argue.

The rise of Western populism has to be correctly defined and put into the right context, a context of extremely liberal societies. According to Mr. Hillebrand, we have never lived in more liberal and tolerant societies, marked by the values and cultural norms of hedonistic and permissive societies. The voters of the populists come from the midst of this same environment and share most of these liberal values and norms. One good example of how the rise of right-wing populism is embedded in liberal societies is the rise of the Dutch right-wing populism. The late politician Pim Fortuyn was openly homosexual and campaigned at national level after a series of incidents, where gay couples were attacked by Muslim youth. His campaign slogan read: “We want our old Netherlands back”. This meant that he was protecting the core values of the liberal and tolerant Dutch society. At the time the left failed to react to the violence against the gay population: in the name of multiculturalism, it didn’t dare to speak against this sexual discrimination. This failure opened the space for Fortuyn’s populism.

One common error is to treat populists as old-fashioned “yesterday’s people” who do not have a clue about the future. If we observe the voting statistics, right-wing populist parties do extremely well among young people and first-time voters in many Western countries. For example in France, 30 % of the members of the Front National are younger than 30 years. Populists are not authoritarian people in the classical sense, explains Mr. Hillebrand. They actually feel that the democratic elites are closed groups, which run the country and no longer respond to the demands of the people. People want to be led but also the political leaders to understand their concerns; this is the logic populism is based on. This is also why some political leaders do not present themselves as masters who lead the ignorants, but as equals who care about the citizens’ interests.

Populist movements express certain unease and a sense of alienation. People feel they are no longer adequately represented by the political system and elite. They feel let down by the mainstream parties and worry about growing income taxes and rising unemployment. Mr. Hillebrand believes that the left is at least partly responsible for creating this atmosphere, because it has encouraged mass-immigration, which in turn has added pressure to the labour market. There has also been an ideological change in the values: centre-left parties used to be workers' parties, then liberals' parties, which gradually focused more and more on societal issues and multiculturalism instead of the economy. Now working class people have almost disappeared from these parties.

These changes have created a void, which has given populist parties a chance to thrive. So what can be done? Citing the example of many European cities such as Rotterdam and London, where immigrants now form half of the population, Mr. Hillebrand reminds that greater respect should be shown to what has been achieved in terms of tolerance and acceptance in the last decades, instead of referring to restrictive immigration policies. Democracy has to be strengthened again and the left has to demand more direct participation, one of the core issues regarding the future of our political system. Culturally, the question of multiculturalism and immigration is one of the driving forces of the populist unease, therefore it has to be addressed and no longer avoided. We have to come up with politics of positive identity, which respect the need for a sense of belonging and focus on local identity.

Discussion

Mrs. Smiljana Knez, Ambassador of Slovenia:

I would like a comment from Mr. Drulák. I really appreciated the list of scapegoats, which often appear in the populist discourse. The EU was also mentioned, but my impression is that before the European election campaigns, all these scapegoats will merge into one. Anti-Roma populism will blame the EU for funding their integration; anti-immigration populists will also blame the EU for its immigration policies and so on. Do you expect that the discourse before the elections will be broader than a negative discourse simply blaming the EU?

Vladimír Handl:

I have a question for Mr. Drulák. Later we will discuss the implications of the growing influence and presence of populist parties in the European Parliament and on European policymaking. Could you speculate from your point of view what you expect the political result to be and the implications on European policymaking in the coming elections?

I would also like to ask Mr. Hillebrand whether the Alternative für Deutschland is going to attract the voters who usually prefer the left? Do you expect the Alternative to become the critical voice?

Vladimír Bilčík:

My question is based on Mr Drulák's argument that European integration is something we should see as an opportunity. How do you communicate the strategy in our region or the Czech Republic to pick up that challenge as an opportunity in public discourse and in public policy?

Petr Drulák:

When it comes to populist campaigns, there are no pan-European populist campaigns; each country has different problems and therefore also different campaigns. In the Czech Republic, I do not expect migration to be a big issue unlike in Southern Europe for example. Populists need to have something on which to base already existing prejudices. It is interesting to observe how the parties, which are critical towards the EU, will develop their campaign strategies. I will be surprised if especially in the Czech Republic there will be a strong backlash against the EU.

Mr. Handl asked what will happen if the established parties get a smaller share of the votes than some unorthodox parties. There are two strategies to adopt: democratic cooperation of the so-called responsible parties against the others or the mainstream parties should steal part of the populist agenda and offer solutions to the issues, show that they are not afraid to bring up these topics.

To answer Mr. Bilčík's question, politicians need two virtues: courage and responsibility. However, these two virtues do not always go hand in hand because once one starts with courageous changes it might also bring up unanticipated changes. Therefore in that sense it can be irresponsible, but it is necessary in order to get results.

Ernst Hillebrand:

Regarding the Alternative für Deutschland, I think it is not quite clear yet what will happen. It came as a big surprise during the last elections that so many leftist voters went on AfD's side. My personal view is that it will depend on the success of Merkel's campaign, because in the past she has successfully captured the feeling that people want to be protected. AfD will probably try to do something similar.