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A normative crisis

The need to protect democratic values in Europe

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A few years ago the European Union appeared to be a democratic monolith. Today it is going through a serious values crisis. And, as J-C Juncker underlined in his State of the Union speech, values underpinning the EU democracy are not granted, they require engagement. For the first time in history the European Commission is considering triggering Article 7 of the EU Treaty against one of its Member States – Poland. The same measure is also under consideration as regards Hungary.

However, this crisis reaches beyond these two countries. In fact it is a global trend, which today's European Union is not equipped to deal with. This phenomenon should be considered as an immediate priority for the EU – on an equal footing with migration or security related challenges. One symptom is the growing popularity enjoyed by political groupings disavowing the fundamental values of liberal democracy; they were on the verge of electoral success in France, the Netherlands and Austria. It is worth noting that the strongest negative opinions regarding European values is observed among the union's younger citizens¹. This does not bode well for the future.

**42% of Poles and French people
and 45% of Italians aged 16-26 do not believe
that democracy is the best form of government.**

The values crisis calls into question all the elements of European integration. The example of Poland and Hungary prove that a country which undermines European values loses its ability to communicate with the rest of the union, not only in normative issues but also in other areas of cooperation. **This is why it is necessary to treat the problem of shared values very seriously and to take appropriate measures as quickly as possible.**

¹ Source: <https://www.tui-stiftung.de/en/media/young-europe-2017-the-youth-study-of-tui-foundation/>

The values policy

The EU's values policy has for years been – and this remains the case – focused on *exporting* European norms. Little attention has been paid to strengthening and firmly rooting these values *within* the Union itself. An active policy based on firm conditionality which promotes EU values ends, in principle, the moment a country joins the Union.

In this area the EU has at its disposal only Article 7 of the TEU. Following a complicated procedure requiring, at a certain stage, consensus from the Member States, this allows sanctions to be imposed. As part of the work on the new financial framework, there has also been discussion on the distribution of European funds being linked to the status of the rule of law in individual Member States. If these solutions are finally implemented, they will serve a repressive, and preventive function. They will not, however, be helpful in the promotion of fundamental values, as experience has made clear, that “forced democracy” is rather ineffective. In this regard it is much more effective to lay the emphasis on positive measures. These, however, can only be implemented **in a top-down manner – if social anchoring is to be authentic, it needs to engage the union's citizens.**

Current financial engagement by the EU

It cannot be assumed that citizens will increasingly identify with EU values and actively propagate them on a purely voluntary basis. All social attitudes and values require well organised promotion, which is in turn associated with large financial outlays. The EU's external opponents and the internal opponents of democracy are fully aware of this and are investing very large sums in promoting their message. In the case of Hungary and Poland it is no accident that the governments' violations of the rule of law go hand-in-hand with cuts in public funding for civic initiatives which share EU values and stand guard over the rule of law.

The EU financial mechanisms aimed at supporting pro-democratic civic initiatives which currently exist are almost exclusively geared towards third countries. Funds for activity within the EU are much smaller and deal with values issues and the rule of law selectively and indirectly. In consequence of this we are faced with the absurd situation that it is much more difficult for pro-democratic organisations to gain EU budget funding to defend European values in their own countries than to promote those same values in Tunisia, Belarus or Ukraine.

Support for values in third countries, 2014-2020:

European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights – €1.3bn

Support for values in the EU, 2014-2020:

Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme – €439mn

Europe for Citizens – €185.5mn

New financial instruments

As part of work on its new budget, the EU should seriously consider the creation of new financial mechanisms to support civic initiatives aimed at promoting and strengthening European, democratic values in Member States. This would call for the reform and better coordination of existing instruments and/or the creation of new, tailor-made ones, for example a European Values Instrument.

Regardless of the form they would eventually take, the financial aspect of a European values policy should have certain features:

1. Funds aimed at promoting European values should be disbursed independently of governments and be granted above all to civic organisations in individual countries, rather than to transnational organisation networks.
2. The substantive priorities of the instrument should be the subject of consultation. However, it is already possible to outline the main areas of intervention:
 - mobilising EU citizens to observe human rights and the principles of the rule of law;
 - the promotion of dialogue over (political, world view, religious etc.) divisions;
 - respecting minority rights, countering discrimination;
 - countering extremism and radicalism;
 - increasing the access EU citizens have to reliable information which has not been politically and commercially manipulated;
 - countering abuse of power, in particular by supporting watchdogs.

The creation of new European financial instruments or the strengthening of those already in place would enable citizens to act effectively in their own countries to promote and defend the values laid out in Article 2 of the TEU. It would be a clear and positive signal that the union and its structures feel solidarity for the societies of member states and are determined to support citizens who share the basic common European values. It would help to work "on the ground" to tame the spill-over effect of the anti-democratic developments and be complementary to the sanctions mechanism based on Article 7 of the TEU.

Background analysis "A normative empire in crisis – time for a politics of values" is available [here](#).