
HUNGARY VOTE EXPOSES EU RIFT ON POPULISM

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The European Parliament (EP) will vote next week on whether to trigger a sanctions procedure against Hungary's government, with the issue having grown into a crucial debate on whether the EU can defend its values and if the EU's largest party will shift to the right.

MEPs will cast their votes next Wednesday (12 September) on a report urging EU member states to investigate, under the Article 7 procedure of the Lisbon Treaty, if Hungary breached core EU values.

The draft report, put together by Dutch Green MEP Judith Sargentini, lists over a dozen concerns from freedom of expression to rights of minorities.

It states that the "facts and trends" in Hungary "taken together represent a systemic threat to the values" of the EU and "constitute a clear risk of a serious breach".

Triggering Article 7 would be an unprecedented move for the parliament and requires that two-thirds of MEPs back the move.

If the EP calls for triggering the procedure, it will be up to member states to decide how to proceed next.

Sargentini said she thinks the vote could go either way, but will be very narrow.

"I know that the majority of MEPs are worried about the what's happening in Hungary," she said this week, but she was not sure if that will be enough.

The report needs the support of the largest political group of the EP, the European People's Party, an ally of Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban, to pass.

The centre-right party is divided over the nationalist PM and his curbing of free media, courts, academia, and civil society since he came to power in 2010.

The Hungarian government's hate campaigns against migrants, false statements on the EU in a so-called national consultation and continued attacks on Orban's critics have increasingly members of the EPP.

The EPP has sheltered Orban's Fidesz party for years, which has led to a rift among more liberal-minded members from mainly Nordic and Benelux countries, who want Fidesz booted out or reprimanded, and more conservative members from Spain, Italy, Croatia.

But as the campaign ahead of next May's European elections kicks off, the EPP is faced with the same dilemma as many centre-right, Christian democratic parties at national level: whether to stick to the shrinking centre, or move to the right, where populist, anti-establishment, and anti-immigration parties across Europe are making gains at the polls at the expense of mainstream parties, including Christian democrats.

"This vote [on Orban] after the state of the union speech is a vote that speaks about the future of Europe," Sargentini told journalists on Tuesday (4 September).

EU commission president Jean-Claude Juncker will take stock of the EU at a speech next Wednesday - the day of the vote and half a day after the debate on the report on which Orban is expected to be given seven minutes to speak.

Sargentini said she had been telling MEPs that they should stand up to defend the rule of law even if it is not threatened in their own country. She is also urging her EPP colleagues not to abstain from the vote, which essentially would count as a "no" vote.

"The EPP is struggling, it has to do with the future of Christian democracy in Europe * It is about what kind of Europe do they want," Sargentini said.

Orban, in a speech this summer, rebranded his illiberal democracy, modelled after Russia, Turkey, and Singapore, as "Christian democracy".

He recently urged the EPP to abandon the political centre with leftist and liberal allies and take his right-wing route instead.

Sargentini said if the report does not go through, it could send an alarming message to those counting on the EU to protect democratic values.

"If I were an activist fighting for minority rights or religious freedom in a country, I would feel left out [after the vote]," she said.

'Help us'

The EPP will hold an internal debate on the issue next Monday and Tuesday. Officials close to the group say there is a majority in favour of the report.

According to an official, the EPP group leader, Manfred Weber, who, on Wednesday, announced his bid to succeed Juncker as the head of the EU executive, told Orban on the phone on Tuesday to tone down his bellicose rhetoric next week ahead of the vote in order not to alienate more EPP deputies.

"The message was very clear. He told Orban, we will not help you if you don't help us," the contact said.

"I don't know how the group will vote, I will vote with the group," German centre-right MEP Elmar Brok joked on Wednesday, adding that a lot will depend on what Orban will say in parliament.

"I don't have a problem with certain attitudes on migration. I have a problem with his principle position on democracy, the rule of law and liberal democracy. That is the decisive point for me," Brok said.

The Article 7 procedure calls for member states to examine the state of Hungary's democracy.

If they find that the government is systematically threatening EU values, they can unanimously agree on sanctions, but this is unlikely to happen due to divisions among member states.

Member states have no time limit on when to discuss the issue if the EP report goes through.

Green light?

Orban's government has been scrutinised for eight years by the European Commission and the European Parliament over the independence of the courts, the media, anti-migrant legislation, and academic freedom.

The UN and other international organisations have also expressed concern over developments in Hungary.

While the commission has launched an Article 7 procedure against Poland, it has not done so against Hungary.

The Orban government has made cosmetic changes to laws to satisfy EU commission probes, but has managed to cement its power by dismantling checks and balances.

In April, Orban's party won a third consecutive term with a two-thirds majority in parliament.

The EP adopted a resolution on Hungary's declining democracy in 2013, which the Hungarian government dismissed as a partisan attack.

Hungary's government is now again accusing its political opponents of orchestrating "witch hunt".

"The Sargentini report is misleading and riddled with factual errors," Zoltan Kovacs, the Hungarian government spokesperson tweeted Wednesday.

"Based on liberal fundamentalism and tactical naming-and-shaming, it betrays a shallow, misjudged approach and ignores the will of the Hungarian electorate," he added.

The report has been supported by four committees in the EP, on women's rights - constitutional affairs, budgetary control, civil liberties, and culture and education, signalling a broad support for its findings.

Aron Demeter of Amnesty International Hungary said the vote will be a dividing line.

"It will be a historic date not only for Hungary, but for the whole EU, because they have to come to a decision whether party politics is more important or upholding the common values of the EU," he

said.

"It is not only important from a Hungarian perspective, but for the whole EU project, because as Orbán is experimenting with this illiberalism, or as now he calls it old-fashioned Christian democracy, it could spread," Demeter added.

"The vote is about whether the EP gives a green light to the systemic violation of EU core values [in Hungary]," Stefania Kapronczai, executive director of the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, warned.

Both NGOs have been affected by recent legislation in Hungary, targeting groups that get funding from abroad or deal with migration issues.

As the EU struggles to rein in some member states that are backsliding on democratic standards, a critical vote in the European Parliament next week could be a decisive moment.

The threat is real. Radical populist leaders promoting policies to dismantle human rights safeguards have recently joined governing coalitions in Austria and Italy.

The Freedom Party and Lega Nord are using their positions to promote policies based on hate and intolerance. But in both countries, at least for now, complex governing coalitions make it hard for them to undo democratic institutions.

In Hungary and Poland, however, radical populist parties are in power alone. Fidesz and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) have seized the opportunity to undermine the rule of law and other democratic checks on their power.

In Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS is in the process of speeding up its purge of the country's judiciary, the last barrier against abuse by those in power, in defiance of ongoing proceedings in Brussels and Luxembourg and the outrage of many of their own citizens.

People's rights to peacefully speak out and protest have been increasingly restricted.

In Hungary, prime minister Viktor Orbán's ruling party has been pressing "reforms" to strip people of rights and freedoms that enable them to band together and make their voices heard.

For example, over the past two years the government has targeted the country's vibrant civil society and academic community, introducing a version of Russia's infamous "foreign agents" law to stigmatise human rights groups that receive funding from abroad and criminalising legitimate migration-related activities.

The government has also limited the ability of the country's constitutional court to hold the government to account.

Officials in Poland and Hungary justify these measures by citing their parties' electoral victories, but winning an election does not give any government a blank cheque to undermine human rights protections.

EU response

European governments and institutions have begun to stand up to these disturbing trends in Poland.

The European Commission triggered the EU treaty's Article 7 mechanism, which is designed to safeguard the EU's founding values.

It is now up to EU governments to ensure that the assault on Poland's court system leads to serious consequences.

However, the European response to Hungary's unabashed authoritarianism has been woefully weak.

For years, EU governments and institutions have accommodated, coaxed and warned the government of Hungary, all to no avail. Now, Orban is trying to spread his "illiberal democracy" beyond his borders.

A big test of the EU's commitment to human rights and the rule of law in Hungary will happen on 12 September.

Unlike with Poland, the European Commission has not triggered Article 7 for Hungary, so responsibility falls to members of the European Parliament. A two-thirds majority is required for action.

Sadly, many Christian Democratic parties are sitting on the fence, more concerned with preserving their dominant political position in the parliament than defending the EU's core democratic values.

Their political grouping, known as the European People's Party (EPP), is the largest in the parliament.

EPP tested

With new parliamentary elections due next year, EPP members may worry that they need Hungary's Fidesz votes to maintain their majority.

But it would be profoundly wrong for EPP parliamentarians to prioritise their grasp on power over their duty to uphold the EU's rights-based order.

Several centre right parliament members, including Austrian and Dutch Christian Democrats and Ireland's Fine Gael, have supported triggering Article 7 for Hungary.

Unfortunately, many others remain worryingly ambiguous, including members of Europe's largest centre-right parties within the EPP: Germany's 29-member Christian Democratic Union delegation, France's 20 Republicanins, and Spain's 17 Partido Popular members.

It is time for Christian Democratic leaders to show where they stand. At stake is not only democracy in Hungary, but also the founding principles of the Europe Union.

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