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## **'SUSPENDING' PARTIES NOT ENOUGH TO SAVE EU RULE OF LAW**

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From Bucharest to Valetta, to Budapest and Warsaw, the very threads of the values that bind the fabric of our European Union together are being torn apart.

In Poland, judges were forced to occupy courthouses to fight against the government's attempts to control the judiciary.

Polish ruling party chief Jaroslaw Kaczynski has forced judges to occupy court houses (Photo: pis.org.pl)

In Malta, the most prominent journalist in the country Daphne Caruana Galizia was assassinated for her work.

In Hungary, prime minister Viktor Orban's assault on democracy has seen a prominent university forced from the country and almost every major news outlet fall under the control of his cabal.

Last summer, ordinary citizens protesting rampant corruption in Romania were met with batons and tear gas.

The threat to our common values across the continent is an existential threat for the EU itself, which is why we need urgent and bold action to preserve our democracies.

There are options on the table that could go a long way to defend the rule of law.

The European Parliament voted in favour on a concrete proposal already back in 2016 that was based on Greens/EFA ideas.

But, none of these has yet to translate into the kind of coherent and effective action needed to restore the rule of law in certain countries.

At present, the only tools the EU has in its arsenal are ordinary infringement procedures, which are too limited, or the Article 7 procedure, which see the gradual sanctioning of a member state and could lead to the suspension of their voting rights in the Council.

This Article 7 measure comes far too late to stop dangerous developments in the Member States.

**What needs to be done?**

We need a regular assessment of the rule of law situation in all EU member states, done by independent experts. Right now, far too often, politicians are ducking away from defending democracy in Europe.

The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) are happy to make noise about the socialist government in Romania while ignoring the authoritarian flare of Fidesz, an EPP member party, in Hungary for far too long.

Likewise, the centre-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D) are keen to scream about Hungary and Poland, but turn a blind eye to the trespass of their member parties in Bucharest and Valetta.

The liberals seem to let things slide when it comes to corruption scandals with their parties in power in Czech Republic and (again) Romania.

Both the EPP and S&D have made moves to "suspend" the irksome Fidesz and Romania's Social Democratic Party (PSD), respectively - but symbolic party gestures just ahead of the elections simply are not enough to save the rule of law in Europe.

That is why we need to take the rule of law away from the grip of party politics.

A panel of independent experts could monitor the situation in each member state and provide recommendations.

These experts should be free from political interference and should have the ability to propose sanctions.

With the reports of these experts, the European Commission would be able to decide on launching infringement procedures earlier, in a more coherent manner, and on a solid base of evidence.

In addition to this independent panel, we need the commission to strictly monitor the use of EU funds, to ensure that spending is in line with European values, rather than, say, used to build a football pitch in an autocrat's backyard, a la Orban.

If a government does not respect rule of law, EU funds should be directly managed by the commission, in close cooperation with regional and local authorities.

This would help to prevent governments from breaking with the fundamental values of the Union while allowing the commission to ensure that EU money reaches those they it is supposed to support.

That will be voted in a report this week, the European Union can now also support human rights defenders in the EU and give money directly to NGOs or other organisations that work on advancing rights, European values, democracy and the rule of law.

Just before the end of the mandate of this commission, we need more than warm words and empty gestures if we are to supply the next one with the tools to stand up for democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law.

We need to change Europe to ensure that the EU protects its citizens and preserves their rights.

We will be at the forefront of the fight to preserve all rights, fight for our democracies and

strengthen the rule of law.

*Ska Keller and Philippe Lamberts are presidents of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament*

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