

ESEE FANEL NETWORK INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The Other Europe? Resilience and Assertiveness in Our Region

– Roundtable –

How can women experts from Eastern, South-Eastern and Central Europe counter illiberal trends?

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Following the opening session of the online international [“The Other Europe? Resilience and Assertiveness in Our Region”](#), the roundtable on “How can women experts from Eastern, South-Eastern and Central Europe counter illiberal trends?” brought together varied points of view on opposing the current illiberal tendencies that we are witnessing in Europe, and proposed solutions regarding how the civil society can fight against them, alongside with experts and decision-makers.

Keynote speakers – ESEE Fanel Network Members:

- **Mrs. Alina INAYEH**, director of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation of the German Marshall Fund of the United States;
- **Senator Anca DRAGU**, Romanian Senate, Former President of the Romanian Senate Member in the European Affairs Committee;
- **Prof. Dr. Habil. Andrea PETŐ**, Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, Vienna, Austria, a Research Affiliate of the CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest, and a Doctor of Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Moderator: Prof. Liliana POPESCU, President of the ESEE-Fanel Network Board.

Factors facilitating illiberal trends and possible solutions

Mrs. Alina INAYEH acknowledges that **both men and women experts from Eastern, South-Eastern and Central Europe, together with civil society, decision-makers, and media have a very difficult task in countering illiberalism**. However, specialists cannot do much on their own. Aside from calculating and evaluating the circumstances, they must avoid falling into the trap of opposing left or/and right extremism, and dividing the conversation. They should be provided with a platform for moderation and toleration in their discourses, such as ESEE Fanel Network’s webinars and roundtables.

She sees a silver lining in the current situation, where **even though the illiberal trends have heavily penetrated European politics and societies with attitudes, discourses, and sentiments, undermining the fabric of democracy, the processes are not irreversibly democratic**. Except for Poland and Hungary, the processes are not yet undemocratic, even

though we witness drawbacks, but the illiberalism didn't reach the point where Eastern Europe is not democratic.

Despite Europe being on a downward slope of illiberalism with worrisome political tendencies in debates and discourses of anti-global trends, xenophobia, fascism, hate speech, and restrictions of freedoms, there is a pro-European sentiment in countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, where people still believe that liberal and democratic values are the greatest options.

According to preliminary results of projects implemented by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, monitoring public sentiments of illiberal trends, **persons aged 18 to 39 are more susceptible to non-democratic values in Romania, which is particularly concerning, given that this age group should be the one with more liberal and democratic ideals.**

Senator Anca DRAGU clarified that illiberal leaders gain control of the government by capturing autonomous institutions and subduing the independent civil society, NGOs and media, creating a gradual suppression of democratic rights. **Weak institutions, inadequate and dispersed democratic norms, a soft civil society, low living standards, and a lack of economic performance are all prerequisites for the installation of an illiberal regime.**

In terms of institutional strength, which distinguishes the poor from affluent nations, Romania is very susceptible, particularly to corruption. Thus, it is critical to guarantee that its institutions are strong and transparent, to establish long-term policies that will ensure the growth of the Romanian society. As we have already witnessed, the frail Romanian institutions allowed from time to time for our democratic values to be shaken, as it happened at the events of 10th of August 2018 when police clashed with tens of thousands of anti-government demonstrators who took to the streets, asking for the governing administration to quit and for early elections.

The firmness of the rule of law in a state will also influence the tendency towards illiberalism. **If the Constitution and all the laws are at the basis of all connections in the state or the economy, and they are correctly functioning and applied, the rule of law is strong enough to protect countries from illiberal slippages.** Although the EU has a complex toolbox, including the preventive tool of the European Rule of Law Mechanism, former communist countries are more vulnerable to slip away from the rule of law. When the efforts of the EU to promote and protect its founding values are not met by member states derailing from the Rule of Law, the EU enforces dialogue to ensure that countries return to democratic rules and principles. As a last resort to resolve a crisis, such as a clear danger of a severe infringement of European democratic values in a country (for example, the establishment of an illiberal regime), Article 7 of the EU Treaty allows the EU to apply sanctions for violation, such as the suspension of voting rights in the Council.

Another important factor that can prevent an illiberal regime is the strong presence of democratic values within a society. **There is a strong relationship between illiberalism and populism that is linked in Western Europe with migration, and in Central and Eastern Europe with anti-**

globalism, where former communist countries are more prone to lack principles of democracy.

A strong civil society can also hinder an illiberal government from gaining control. Despite its long post-communist struggle, the Romanian civil society is young and independent. The vitality of the Romanian civil society needs to play an important role in ensuring that rules and meritocracy are being enforced in institutions and political parties.

To counter illiberal trends, the senator believes that women experts from Eastern, South-Eastern and Central Europe need to be more vocal, more visible and to get involved in the decision-making processes, even by adhering to a political party.

Prof. Dr. Habil. Andrea PETŐ, together with Weronika Grzebalska, has coined an analytical concept, "[the illiberal polypore state](#)", a biologising metaphor, inspired by the parasitic fungus that feeds on decaying trees and aids in their decomposition. **In the same way that the polypore fungus often targets previously damaged trees, illiberal regimes ascend to power in the setting of democratic norms undermined by financial, security, and migratory crises. To account for its effectiveness, three important elements of the illiberal polypore state's style of governance must be exploited: security narratives parallel civil society, and the family.**

The modus operandi of the illiberal polypore state is built on security threats, where the migrants, feminists, people like George Soros etc. became a threat, so that the politicians can become the heroes and saviours. **It sets up parallel institutions by copying everything that a democratic state entails, but in an illiberal manner.** For example, Poland and Hungary have been reporting to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women a flourishing NGO landscape, which is in reality dominated by government-organized non-governmental organizations – GONGOs. It also liquidates resources from the already existent secular and modernist civil society sector to secure and expand it. It uses the familism policy, focusing on the family as the centre of the society above women's rights, where women disappear and they don't have a voice anymore.

Prof. Pető considers that the root causes of the rise of illiberalism in Europe are internal, similar to the polypore fungus. The dark European legacy of colonialism and Holocaust is directly linked to uprising illiberal tendencies. **There is also an identifiable connection between illiberalism's presence in Europe and the new phase of neoliberalism, especially in Eastern Europe, where the failures of neoliberalist modernization have produced so much defeat and disappointment.** According to Prof. Pető, women who strongly believed in the ideals of liberty and fraternity promised by EU enlargement are beginning to recognize that they have received EU's technocratic language and have no support from their states to the neoliberalization dismantling the functioning states, and they can only rely on their families and family networks.

Illiberal states, if not adequately recognized, can have major ramifications for the rights of women and minorities. When the state seizes previously existing democratic mechanisms, it closes off avenues for resistance. Illiberalism is presenting itself once again as a viable and desirable alternative as it has been in the '20-'30, the only difference from then is that [gender](#)

[plays a role](#). To better explain this phenomenon and underline the critical role of gender politics in the present paradigm shift, Prof. Pető alongside Weronika Grzebalska and Eszter Kováts, has proposed the concept of gender as “[symbolic glue](#)”.

Prof. Pető concludes that women experts from Eastern, South-Eastern and Central Europe can counter illiberal trends by creating and organising alternative institutions so that the state-captured ones can be challenged. Prof. Pető strongly believes that women need to prioritise themselves and take care of their happiness because their well-being is also a form of resistance that allows them to better fight illiberalism.

The roundtable was followed by a Q&A session:

What is your view of the impact of the coronavirus on the return of discrimination and censorship in Europe?

According to **Prof. Dr. Habil. Andrea PETŐ**, the global pandemic has revealed the non-functionality characteristics of the neoliberal and illiberal states. If we compare Germany, a strong democracy, and Hungary in the way they handled the pandemic we can observe similarities in their incapacities, as both countries were unable to create functioning institutions and structures. The two states reacted identically by militarising their crisis response. **Prof. Peto considers that it is very important to emphasise that states resort to militarisation when they're collapsing. Therefore the coronavirus crisis has remilitarized both Europe and the US.**

Mrs. Alina INAYEH notes that Social Media and people's reliance on it are very important to illiberalism, especially since it is being exacerbated by the global pandemic. Due to the long periods of isolation during multiple lockdowns, people turned more towards Social Media as a source of information. **The segregation and seclusion of echo chambers have enhanced the polarization within societies and the rapid spread of illiberal ideas. As a result, governments censor online content regarding vaccination and coronavirus.** Unfortunately, people become wrongly compliant with censorship and they start believing that some layers of censor are healthy, including self-censorship.

Is the “young and independent” Romanian civil society strong enough to fight the illiberal trends?

Senator Anca DRAGU believes that, **although the “young and independent” Romanian civil society is strong enough to fight the illiberal trends, the strength of civil society should not be taken granted, it has to be fought for, taken care of, nurtured and involved in political decisions.** More parties should commit to becoming a partner of the Romanian society because both institutions and societies make a difference when it comes to democracy and illiberalism.

As a politician, she listens to civil society, pays attention to its points of view and includes its opinions in her politics. As part of a party that believes in the dialogue with civil society and that

encourages constant work on basic freedoms and rights, the senator has initiated 30 legislative proposals related to democratic principles and values. The senator is highly involved with civil society when working on areas such as preventing domestic violence, human trafficking, and enhancing disability rights.

Prof. Liliana POPESCU sees the Romanian civil society as powerful because it has already demonstrated its strength in some important milestones or aspects:

- ✓ **In January 2017, the government's edict that was decriminalizing a variety of corruption offences, sparked the largest street protests in Romania since the Revolution of '89.** Thus, the Romanian civil society defended the democratic values and principles, and opposed actions that would have undermined Romania's progress in establishing the rule of law and combating corruption during the previous 10 years.
- ✓ **Romania's LGBTQ+ community has endured numerous hardships, tensions, backlashes, polarization, judgmentalism, but it has also built strength throughout the years.** Although Romania lacks politics of recognition for LGBTQ+ rights, the community is courageous and stable and still manifests civic demonstrations through the pride events, such as [Bucharest Pride](#).
- ✓ In 2020, Romanian lawmakers adopted an amendment to the National Education Law prohibiting the study of gender identity "in schools, universities, kindergartens and all spaces dedicated to education". To fight the law that would return Romanian education to the Middle Ages, the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) Bucharest with the West University of Timișoara, with the assistance of other prominent universities, scholars, and researchers from Romania and throughout the world, amassing an amazing number of 885 supporters, presented a legal point of view to the Romanian Constitutional Court by submitting an [amicus curiae](#) (friend of the court). **Their solidarity had a big impact and it resulted in the bill passed by the country's parliament being overturned by the Romanian Constitutional Court. In doing so, the academic environment protected Romania from violating its international human rights responsibilities, notably those related to the Istanbul Convention against Violence against Women and the European Convention on Human Rights.**

Mrs. Alina INAYEH, in complete agreement with Senator Dragu, regards the Romanian civil society as strong, but she believes it is not enough to fight illiberalism. **Society needs to be supported by politicians and decision-makers.** NGOs funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation of the German Marshall Fund of the United States are willingly fighting illiberalism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism in their countries despite hardships and dangers.

Prof. Dr. Habil. Andrea PETŐ states that the 1968 movements gave rise to the view that civil society has become the watchdog of democracy. **The relationship between NGOs and movements should be reconsidered, because the movements are stronger and more organised, which makes the civil society more vulnerable. It is unfit and unfair for everybody to expect NGOs to resist illiberalism alone.**

Recently, the illiberal polypore state has taken all resources from communities and classified them as "foreign agents", hence isolating them in a captured state that controls all resources. **Prof. Petó points out that the EU should be more cautious when funding non-transparent entities, such as the elites that capture states.** People should also be more circumspect regarding NGOs, as many of them use activism in the "good fight" against alarming trends and movements, but there is also a plethora of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), which are created or financed by a government to serve its political aims, and emulate civic organisations and civil society at home.

What is the connection between the crisis of neoliberal capitalist democracy and the current trends towards illiberal practices?

Mrs. Alina INAYEH contemplates **whether the crisis of neoliberal capitalism is generating illiberal tendencies or illiberal tendencies aggravate the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. It's a vicious spiral because they feed off of one other.** The illiberal trends have started to be more visible and its followers more vocal after the economic crisis of 2008, but even nowadays those who value liberal values avoid acknowledging and talking about the vulnerabilities of democracy. Regrettably, supporters of illiberalism take advantage of the liberals' silence, and utilize the rhetoric based on democracy's exposed flaws to convince people that democracy is not good in general.

Are there any creative tools or methods that we can use in fighting against illiberalism or captured states?

Prof. Dr. Habil. Andrea PETÓ thinks that **creativity, in this case, starts when we can ignore those structural pressures that thrive when we are afraid, tired and compliant. Activity and not reactivity is extremely important in countering illiberalism.** It can be achieved through any independent form of an alternative pathway towards knowledge production. The purpose of free and independent work should be living a fulfilling, intellectual and productive life.

Mrs. Alina INAYEH deems that **we should counter illiberalism with their methods, but in a reversed communication manner in order to have a fair fight. She reiterated that authoritarianism is not truly exposed for what it is, because people approach this subject with reticence.** For example, younger generations can't comprehensively relate to communism, because they haven't lived under such a regime, in a restrictive society, but in pursuance of their continuation of the freedoms of democracy, they should be encouraged to know and understand history.

The event was recorded - watch the [video](#).