

Long report for the "Roundtable Ralf Dahrendorf - Turning the tide: populism and political extremism in changing democracies"

On the 24 of November, the European Liberal Forum and the Movimento Liberal Social offered, to an international audience, several talks and a roundtable debate on populism and political extremism, and how to prevent, and fight, those phenomena's. Political extremism is an on-going problem, but lately some worrying signs have been prevalent: populist parties gaining political power, increased polarization of political stands both on-line and in the press, an increased risk of radicalization and terrorist activities.

The purpose of the event was to share knowledge, and to contribute to the political discussion regarding populism and political extremism. There is a need for a continuous discussion of these problems, and what are the solutions, due to modifications of the regional, and global, environment where that extremism grows and spreads. The main objectives were to include interested parties on this topic to the Roundtable Ralf Dahrendorf. The event was destined to political representatives, NGO's, public servants, policy makers, academics and university professors, students, media outlets, and representatives of the three liberal projects that are constituted as political parties, or in the process. In addition, we had as an objective to generate quality content to be spread online, counting on both the expertise from the speakers and the debate part of the roundtable.

The most relevant speakers were Máté Szalai, from Corvinus University of Budapest and Slawomir Sierakowski, Founder of Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique) and director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Warsaw.

Máté have the experience to have already worked with ELF and Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom on a previous event about Populism (which resulted in the production of booklet called "A toolkit against populism"). Slawomir is the founder of the think tank Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique) in Poland, with branches in Ukraine, Germany and Russia. Slawomir also contributes to the website Project Syndicate and the New York Times.

Both speakers have a profound, and first-hand account of populism, and how that affects their societies, both in Hungary and Poland, and how it extrapolates abroad, mainly to the interior of the European Union, and its institutions. Moreover, they were able to elaborate on their knowledge about the mechanisms for the development of populism and political extremism, regarding causes, effects, and "symptoms" at societal and political level.

The Roundtable debate was particularly good. With the moderation of Sárka Prát, from the Institute for Politics and Society from the Czech Republic, the debate, namely between Máté and Slawomir, was educational, sometimes even passionate, due to a healthy difference of opinions. Those differences were mainly on what are the roots of populism and ways to deal with it, being the central point: is populism the basis for the growth of anti-liberal movements, parties and policies, or is a disgruntlement with liberal policies that create populist movements.

Ricardo Silvestre, from Movimento Liberal Social, presented a slightly different topic on his talk, about political polarization online, but that connected nicely to the topic of populism. Political polarization online can cause political extremism, and in some cases a connection can be observed, where populist movements

created disruption and amplification of their ideas online, with, at least with one example, Brexit, having disastrous results.

Unfortunately, we did not had the presence of Professor Susana Salgado, from the Institute for Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon. Dr Susana was supposed to present a talk on “The impact of populism on political communication”. However, she took seriously sick, to the point that she had to cancel her appearance (sms text bellow).

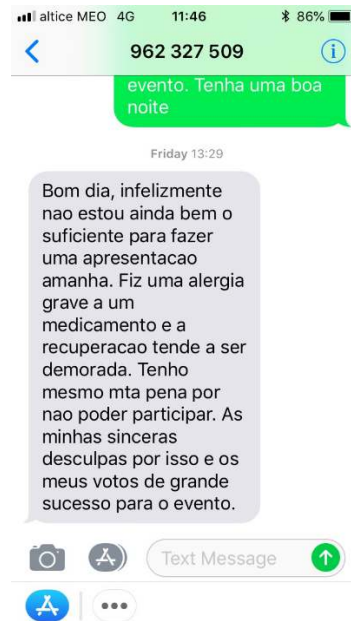
The outcomes were primarily to create a forum for talks and discussion on a topic that is not a target for a more comprehensive approach from Portuguese media and political organizations. Because of that, is crucially important to understand these phenomena and know how to prevent. We believe that we achieved those desired outcomes, since the transmission of contents, and the debate between different approaches to understand and to fight populism, were valuable at the same time conveying the importance, and the urgency of the matter. From the debate we could see that differences in points of view and methodologies shown that there are still a lot of work to be done regarding having a common front, especially one that uses liberal values and policies to diagnose the condition and propose solutions. The other desired result of the event was the creation of audiovisual contents to be posted online for a wider reach, and to enlarge the discussion and hopefully increase awareness and participation.

Our conclusion was that the event was successful, even with the absence of Dr Salgado. However, the number of people attending was unsatisfactory. We had a total of 16 people, where the objective was to have, at least, 40. The representatives of the Portuguese political parties, or movements, in the liberal area did not reply to our repeated invitations, despite our insistence. We did an extensive promotion of the event on social networks, posters and flyers on universities, and with invitations to multiple institutions with a liberal and European interest (57 institutions in total).

Regarding policy recommendations, apart from the well known proposals, spreading liberal values, inclusion of civil society in decision making, equality of opportunities, and economic fairness, it looked to us, from our event, that there is a need for further study the causality for populist movement, and regional differences, and if there are overlaps that can help create policies that are efficient at the European level, and with adjustments to local needs.

Annex:

SMS text from Dr. Susana Salgado



"Good morning, unfortunately I am not well enough to make my presentation tomorrow. I developed a serious allergy to a medication and the recovery tends to be a long one. I am very sorry to not be able to participate. My sincere apologies and vows of much success to the event"