



Civil society, parties and elections – Opportunities for cooperation

Polish and Hungarian examples

Panel discussion organised by the European Liberal Forum in cooperation with Republikon Institute at the 2018 Freedom Games

Conference report

On 10 November 2018, a panel discussion organised by the European Liberal Forum in cooperation with Republikon Institute at the 2018 Freedom Games in Łódź explored the relationship between and cooperation opportunities for civil society and politics in Poland and Hungary. Speakers were Paweł Kasprzak (Polish columnist, leader of the Citizens of Poland (Obywatele RP) movement), Andrea Virág (Hungarian researcher and analyst at Republikon Institute), Balázs Gulyás (Hungarian sociologist, activist, university lecturer at ELTE), Kamila Gasiuk-Pihowicz (Polish politician, lawyer, Nowoczesna MP), and Borys Budka (Deputy Chairman of Civic Platform, Polish lawyer, doctor of economic sciences, university lecturer, former Minister of Justice). The discussion was moderated by Piotr Beniuszys from *Liberté!*, who asked the speakers to talk about the history and the future of civil society, NGOs, and civil movements in their respective countries.

The session was opened with a presentation by Andrea Virág, introducing the relationship between civil society and politics in Hungary. After describing various civil movements that ended up – whether intentionally or not – directly influencing (party) politics and outlining the government narrative about NGOs, she discussed the results of various opinion polls conducted by Republikon on civil society and politics. Her conclusions were that Hungarians want NGOs to keep their distance from political parties, but do greatly support NGOs doing charity work. Although government narratives about NGOs enjoy slightly more support than counter-narratives, civic movements can still be successful.

Kamila Gasiuk-Pihowicz presented the Polish situation and the outcomes of the local elections. She began by emphasising the significance of both the local elections last month and the coming elections to the European Parliament next spring. She underlined the significance of the latter by asserting that stability in Poland can only be achieved through being a member of the European Union.

Evaluating the performance and the promise of the Civic Coalition, she was optimistic. Furthermore, she stated that voting for any other force than the Civic Coalition would only mean more power and victory for current governing party PiS. She saw developing a coherent and non-populist vision of Poland to convince voters as the key requirement ahead of the election. The Polish opposition is united by the conviction that Poland belongs in a united Europe, which Gasiuk-Pihowicz saw as a crucial point at a time when 'Polexit' (Poland leaving the EU) ceased to

be fiction and increasingly looks like a political reality. She repeatedly addressed the urgency of the need to act, arguing it is a 'now or never' situation for the country; she warned that once PiS wins, they will never give power back.

Paweł Kasprzak disagreed with Gasiuk-Pihowicz on several points. He argued against a united opposition, claiming that it would lead to the erosion of the right to vote. In contrast, he saw a lack of trust in politics and politicians as the main hindrance to overcoming PiS, and subsequently urged finding answers to this phenomenon.

Borys Budka was the next one to enumerate his views. He proposed a paradigm change in regard to the cooperation between politics and NGOs; when he outlined his conviction in greater detail, he shared some of the sentiments of Kasprzak. One such point of agreement was the significance of the sense of crisis, manifest as previously unprecedented levels of mistrust in politicians.

Budka then proceeded to analyse the role of civil society in Poland. He stated that opposition parties bear great responsibility with regard to the relationship between NGOs and the state. He said that whilst they are often perceived as threats, NGOs are in fact an important element of society, but stressed that their job is not to support political parties. Looking back, he identified losing touch with the average voter as his party's greatest sin and suggested that this needs to be rectified.

Balázs Gulyás organised one of the biggest protests in Hungary against the internet tax proposed by Fidesz; the demonstration was successful against a government with a two-thirds supermajority and led to the elimination of the tax reform. Although he claimed that it is rather difficult to organise successful protests like that, as there are always several factors to the outcome, he also pointed out that his example shows that it is absolutely possible to resist governments. He described Hungary as a 'hybrid regime' where, behind the facade of the democracy, new authoritarians capture the state. Consequently, he emphasised the importance of defending democratic institutions as a lesson for Poland.

When the floor was opened to questions from the audience, two more discussions were prompted.

The two Hungarian speakers were asked whether there are any chances for Hungary to become a liberal democracy again. Virág answered in the affirmative, and pointed out that the two coming elections (the local elections next autumn and the elections to the European Parliament next spring) will provide a great opportunity for the Hungarian opposition parties to mobilise their voters. Gulyás was similarly hopeful, arguing that all the bad economic decisions of the Hungarian government will eventually fall back on them, and an economic crisis could mean the end of Fidesz's rule.

Another member of the audience further probed into the relationship between politics and civil society in Poland; consequently, a lively debate began among the Polish participants. Gasiuk-Pihowicz described her experiences working as a lawyer that made her enter politics. Kasprzak suggested that communication strategies of NGOs in Poland be improved. Budka repeated his wish that a new mechanism be developed that guide and shape interactions between civil society and what he called 'high politics'. He repeated his explanation that people's mistrust in politics stems from the fact that they do not identify as decision-makers – a result of politicians behaving as if they were an elite group, separate from the rest of society. He warned that as long as political

parties continue to view civil society and the people as a competition, there will be no strong civil society in Poland.