

## **Let's arm Europe against authoritarian excesses**

Europe, the cradle of human rights, freedom and democracy, has always promoted its values far beyond its borders. The European Parliament, the Council of Europe and states all defend these universal principles and call on the countries of the world to respect them.

But today, our continent worries.

### **The true face of populists**

Political leaders are now taking advantage of an unprecedented health situation to take disproportionate and unlimited powers to themselves.

In Poland, the leader of the ultra-conservative majority PiS has attempted a coup in parliament to keep the presidential elections in May by proposing to generalise postal voting. This proposal was finally rejected after several weeks of ongoing protest from opposition parties and civil society. Outgoing president Andrzej Duda, who is campaigning for re-election, is taking advantage of the epidemic to be the only candidate to get full media coverage.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has passed an incredible emergency law, giving him full powers for an indefinite period. The high point is that it is up to the executive, Orban himself, to decide when these extraordinary powers will cease. No executive needs such a concentration of powers.

In recent years, populist regimes have come to power in our cities, our regions, and right up to the top of the state, with great promises. We observe, unsurprisingly and bitterly, that it is now these regimes that are flouting the fundamental principles of our society: freedoms, democracy, the rule of law.

Nothing, not even the current health crisis, justifies such authoritarian manoeuvres. The rights of citizens are not protected by silencing all forms of opposition.

### **Framing emergency laws, punishing when necessary**

To face this crisis, Europe needs strong executives. The adoption of emergency laws in the face of the Covid-19 crisis is legitimate and necessary. Our governments must be able to take decisions with the necessary responsiveness and efficiency.

It is therefore time to arm Europe with effective tools to protect our fundamental values.

We propose that core principles should be laid down at European level to provide a framework for exceptional laws in times of crisis. These principles should be proposed for signature to the member states and subsequently incorporated into the European treaties.

We suggest that each emergency law should be accompanied by a "self-destruction" clause stipulating that it should cease to apply automatically at a predetermined time (e.g. one year) and that its provisions of an exceptional nature should all be cancelled at the same time.

As established case law and democratic practice have prescribed, exceptional measures may be cancelled before the end of the term by a parliamentary vote, if the end of the crisis so permits. They must be proportionate and limited to what is strictly necessary. They also must be adopted by the national parliaments.

The latter must be able to exercise their duty of scrutiny of the executive on a regular, independent and public basis. This counterweight is one of the indispensable attributes of any democracy, along with the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media and the civil society. These are essential components of democratic life and a parliamentary majority is not enough to protect it. In Europe's past, there have been majorities that have abused

their power and led their citizens to dictatorship. Its history should educate it and make it react strongly.

Therefore, we call on the European Commission and the Council to use all the tools of European law to take actions against Member States that deviate from democratic practices and to apply to them the sanctions provided for in the Treaties.

It is by defending these fundamental values that we hold dear that we will together be able to emerge from this crisis from the top and strengthen the European project.

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