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AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE EU AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM: THE MEP' PERSPECTIVES.

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INTRODUCTION

The globalised nature of the world today, where people, goods, information, beliefs and ideas can traverse great distances with little effort, has influenced greatly relationships between the world powers, which are now much more interconnected than ever before.

Globalization opened many “channels” between countries not available to them in the past. This new interaction is sometimes in the form of spontaneous influence linked to a state’s soft power but other times has a more purposeful character. Foreign investments in businesses, education, infrastructure, financing and promotion of affiliated cultural institutions, as well as cultivation of relations with like-minded politicians, are just some components encompassed in a wide toolkit of instruments that world powers can employ in order to influence other countries.

Currently, the EU and its member states are the subject of the latter type of influence. Numerous studies¹ have described influence-related activities of foreign actors in the European space, coming mainly from China and Russia -- two world powers with authoritarian governments and different ideological values than the countries in Europe. How and why are they doing it? Can this influence have a harmful impact on the states of the European Union? How, if at all, should they react to it?

In order to answer these questions, we have conducted interviews with two Czech Members of the European Parliament, Markéta Gregorová and Alexandr Vondra. Although both members of the same institutions, there are only a few things that they have in common. Mrs. Gregorová is a 28-year-old member of the Greens/European Free Alliance, while Mr. Vondra is a 59-year-old member of the European Conservatives and Reformists. Hence, they not only find themselves on the different sides of the ideological spectrum, but also in a different generation. What they have in common, however, is their stern attitude towards authoritarian regimes, which is why we wanted them to share with us their opinions and unique perspective on the issue.

These interviews, as well as the blog, were conceived in the framework of the “[Authoritarian Shadows in the European Union](#)” project, led by Hungarian think tank [Political Capital](#). For the past two years the project was monitoring voting patterns of all the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in regards to their voting in cases linked to authoritarian regimes, such as resolutions or amendments to legislation

1 For example those published by [AMO](#) or [Carnegie Institute](#)

concerning those states. The project also has a special focus on delegates from Central and Southeastern European countries, as it seeks to assess the vulnerability of those states towards this influence.

THE AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE EU

Authoritarian states (mainly China and Russia) project their influence in the EU countries -- a point on which both of our respondents agreed. When asked about how exactly this influence is conducted, they outlined several examples. For Ms. Gregorová, the instruments of authoritarian influence in the EU encompassed disinformation campaigns, support of actors that enable such campaigns, acquisition, or financing of media in EU countries, sponsoring of educational centers, namely universities and, of course, espionage. Both Ms. Gregorová and Mr. Vondra agreed about the significance of cyberattacks in the overall effort of authoritarian states to pressure and influence countries in the EU. Vondra specifically underlined that due to the difficulty with attribution of cyber activities or attacks, they are popular with the authoritarian states.

When it comes to the motivations of China and Russia for their influence activities in the EU countries, each respondent answered somewhat differently. Mr. Vondra framed this influence in a wider context of traditional relationships between the world powers. In his opinion, these states feel the weaknesses of not only the EU countries, but the “West” in general, and seek to either exploit or even magnify them. Vondra likened this process to a sports match, when one’s opponent always capitalizes on any mistake that the other makes. Ms. Gregorová, on the contrary, perceives the motivations of authoritarian states as based on their effort to divide the European Union. That way, they would never have to deal with a unified power in the European continent, but rather a group of smaller divided actors, easier to further influence. She added that ideology might also be in play, as the authoritarian states could perceive our values as wrong, or even as something that should be actively fought against. Ms. Gregorová and Mr. Vondra described the motivations of authoritarian states differently, although they agreed that authoritarian influence is driven by the desire to gain a better standing vis-à-vis the EU member states as well as globally.

COUNTERMEASURES TO FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN THE EU

Ms. Gregorová and Mr. Vondra both perceived authoritarian influence as a potential danger to the EU countries. Then what can be done to prevent or mitigate these harmful activities?

Both Ms. Gregorová and Mr. Vondra agreed that any reaction to the harmful influence of authoritarian states should be proportional to its context, as every case will probably be unique, hence in need of different kinds of responses. Vondra used an example of two cases of Chinese influence – its financing of Prague’s Slavia football club, and its effort to supply Czech Republic with 5G infrastructure. The first is done in the bounds of the free market and in itself poses no real danger to the Czech Republic, hence no direct response is, according to him, required. The latter, however, would give China a great leverage over Czech policy decision-makers, as 5G infrastructure will be critical for the functioning of the country in the near future. This is, of course, dangerous for the country’s sovereignty and the Czech Republic should not, under any circumstances, allow China in its strategic infrastructure.

Mr. Vondra believes that the best way of facing authoritarian, or any kind of harmful foreign influence, is to prepare options for effective responses. Again, framing this issue in the broader context of great-power competition, or a sports match, Mr. Vondra suggested that the EU states should take stock of their

weaknesses, insulate them against harmful influence and be prepared to push back against anybody who would try to exploit them. By accepting the “rules of the game” and having both defensive and offensive measures prepared, the EU states would be in an overall better position to play it. Ms. Gregorová stated, that with regards to the harmful influence that the EU faces, the Union as an institution should be ready to stand up for any of its member states who comes under pressure from any authoritarian regime. As an example, she named the recent situation when the Czech Republic came under diplomatic pressure from the People’s Republic of China because of a visit of its President of the Senate in Taiwan. The EU supported the Czech Republic against China, sending a clear message that its member states are not to be threatened by foreign powers. Mr. Vondra was more cautious about the EU’s involvement, however. He claims that the reaction towards the authoritarian influence demands decisiveness and swiftness, which is often hard to achieve in the EU.

In conclusion, both of our respondents believe that the authoritarian influence in the EU states warrants a response, but they differed concerning what kind of response. While both respondents agreed that we need flexible responses that would address the overall context of the particular situations, they did not agree on what exactly those options could look like, how expansive they should be and whether the EU should play a major role.

CONCLUSION

Ms Gregorová and Mr. Vondra’s views on the issue of the influence of authoritarian states on the EU differ significantly in certain aspects but also converge in others. Although they perceived the motivations of the authoritarian states’ influence differently -- Ms. Gregorová as a mix of malicious intent and ideological differences, while Mr. Vondra as almost a natural part of international relations -- they agreed that it is harmful to the EU member states, as its purpose is to ultimately weaken them. They also agreed that this influence should not remain without a proper response based on the nature of the influence. However, there was no consensus between them on the nature of the response, its extent, or whether the EU member states should respond individually or collectively with the assistance of the EU.

How Members of the European Parliament perceive the issue of authoritarian influence in the EU is an important research topic. The project entitled “Authoritarian Shadows in the EU” will, in a few months, produce a comprehensive report on the MEPs voting patterns with regards to the issues linked to authoritarian regimes, which will deal with the topic much more comprehensively. This will hopefully inform a constructive approach to this critical issue in Europe.

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