"Media Pluralism and Democracy"
Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights
Brussels, November 17,2016
By
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Thanks for the opportunity to talk to you about 'media pluralism and democracy'.

Defending pluralism is what my institution, the CEU, is all about.

We are a liberal university working **in an environment where illiberal democracy is promoted**, an open society institution in **a country that closed its borders to refugees** and **where the space for pluralistic public debate is diminishing**.

Yet, CEU manages to thrive: with 1600 masters and doctoral students from 116 countries, faculty from 30 countries, a global hybrid with our degrees recognized in the US and Hungary alike, and 14000 alumni spreading the values of open society around the world.

We are thriving because we take teaching and research seriously and do not let our university become a political party or an opposition platform. We stick to our job: which is to teach people, including ourselves, how to think. The Hungarian

government, I hope and believe, understands this and accepts that a global institution is good for Budapest.

Pluralism is about learning to build political communities of trust and common action with people from different origins, races, cultures and languages.

When you think about promoting pluralism in Europe, include universities in your plans. We make a vital contribution where it counts most: inside the heads of the next generation of young European leaders.

You've asked me to identify the major challenges to media pluralism and democracy in contemporary Europe.

I see one overwhelming issue-- whether in Britain post Brexit, France with the rise of Marine Le Pen, Germany with the rise of Pegida, the US with President Trump and contemporary Hungary: the issue is the malign interaction between populist politics and the new social media.

We are all aware that we are living a Gutenberg moment. Just as the printing press helped create a new politics in 16th century Europe—Luther's Reformation—and with it popular empowerment of those who could read printed Bibles and sermons, so today digital technologies are disempowering established authority: from newspaper editors to political parties, while conferring raw power into the hands of ordinary people equipped with smartphones. When new technologies

strip power away and vest information in the hands of ordinary people, a chaotic struggle of old elites to hold onto power and new elites to seize it, is bound to take place.

This is occurring everywhere, nowhere more dramatically than in the United States. Donald Trump is the Luther of the Internet revolution. Trump has triggered fury at the friars and abbots of our day, the lobbyists, think tankers and professors of the liberal elite. Just like Luther, however, so President Trump may find himself swept away by a peasants' revolt.

The advent of digital media changes how we should think about maintaining media pluralism in Europe.

The old debate in Europe used to be about how to use state regulation to create an agora—a pluralistic public square. Media and press councils were set up, in post-Communist societies, to make sure the existing state broadcaster was not controlled by the ruling party and to guarantee that the private media were not swallowed up by media conglomerates.

Recent studies commissioned by the European Parliament show that in Poland and Hungary, media councils have been taken over by ruling parties, private media companies have surrendered editorial independence and state broadcasters have been muzzled. The European Union has been unable to stop these developments. Member states will not give Europe the mandate to intervene and Europe's failure to protect media

pluralism has weakened the faith of progressive Europeans in their own institutions.

It's a mistake to think the pressure on pluralism is only occurring in Eastern Europe.

New digital technologies are transforming the possibilities for pluralism throughout Europe as a whole.

An insurgent digital media stream is flooding into Europe. Start-up costs for new web-sites are low and new entrants are bound to drain readers away from existing media, and as they do so, they will inevitably fight for power with governments trying to control the agora. In this coming digital battle, ruling parties have huge advantages-- state resources, backed by police powers—and they underestimate the agility, persistence and technical sophistication of a disaffected younger generation at their peril.

So the media politics pursued by progressives since 1991—using state authority to protect *the agora* of public debate—looks out of date. The old media—newspapers, radio and television-- are 'burning platforms' losing readers and viewers; while the state authorities trying to limit pluralism are using methods of control more suitable to the Communist past than the digital future.

So far so optimistic: digital technologies are disruptive. They offer young people sick of the stagnation and corruption of elites a cheap and effective way to voice their frustrations.

But here's the problem. Digital technologies also fragment the agora.

We are no longer in a shared deliberative space but rather locked inside 'filter bubbles'—digital news feeds whose algorithms select what we see according to our ongoing stream of preferences. Since the algorithms are preference driven, they have our tacit consent. We give consent to our own isolation from our own societies.

Liberal progressives around the world woke up on the morning after both Brexit and the American election feeling 'homeless', as Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* put it, unable to recognize their own country.

We allow our preferences and the algorithms they generate to wall us off from the challenges and opportunities of pluralism itself.

Our technologies empower bias selection. With their aid, we are busily reducing our exposure to discord and disagreement. Brexit and the American election have jolted us all awake to the fact that we no longer share the same agora, the same democratic space, with those who vote differently from us.

Algorithmic segregation is a threat to the agora on which a pluralistic democracy depends. Without an agora, we do not confront the often radical difference of our fellow citizens' perspectives, values and lived experience. We face no check on our anger, our righteous self-belief, our complacency. We are not forced to admit we might be wrong. Without an agora, politics becomes all passionate intensity.

The difference between politics conducted face to face, among real people, and politics conducted in cyberspace is fundamental.

I know about this first-hand. I've told the story in **Fire and Ashes.**

Over six years as a Member of Parliament in Canada, I must have shaken roughly 30,000 hands. I can count on the finger of one hand the number of times my encounter with citizens was disagreeable or hostile. Face to face with my fellow citizens, civility ruled. The Internet was another story. As they say, on the Internet nobody knows you're a dog. Anonymity encourages disinhibition. Our politics has become ferocious, personal, driven by **digital disinhibition**.

Digital disinhibition in turn turbo-charges the social hostilities that populism seeks to harness and unleash. Following Jan Werner Muller's definition, populism is a vision of democracy as majority rule alone, in which only some of the people deserve to be sovereign.

Central to populism is the belief that politics is not a battle between adversaries, but a struggle against enemies. These enemies may be corrupted and entitled liberal elites; they may be foreigners and migrants; they may be people of different races. Whatever they are, they are enemies, and populist politics exists to protect the 'true' people of a country.

Populism explicitly disdains pluralism as a value. The aim of populist politics is to defeat your enemies, not to maintain a shared political space for deliberation and disagreement. Checks and balances—an independent judiciary or an impartial media council-- are a pesky interference with popular sovereignty. The British judges who insisted that Parliament would have to rule on Brexit were attacked, in the British *Daily Mail*, as 'enemies of the people'.

Digital disinhibition feeds upon and in turn exacerbates a politics of enemies. A politics of enemies in turn legitimizes constitutional gerrymandering, constitutional amendments designed to render ruling party dominance permanent by weakening the institutions that check executive power.

The interaction between a ***politics of enemies***, ***algorithmic segregation*** and ***digital disinhibition*** is the chief threat to pluralistic democracy in Europe and around the world.

So what can we do about it? We need to reclaim the agora, the real one: take to the streets, engage our fellow citizens in

debate, mobilize new constituencies, rekindle faith in popular politics from the grassroots.

We need some regulation of these new algorithmic powers in our lives. The European Commission persuaded—Facebook and Google—to take down hate speech on their sites, and in the wake of the US election, both are taking down posts and sites that deliberately promote false news.

The European Commission has taken on these digital giants for limiting competition. Anti-competition policy is an essential part of a pan European policy to promote political pluralism.

But there are emergent threats to pluralism on the horizon. Re-nationalization of the Internet and social media is underway. In Syria, the Assad regime has cut the cables that link Syria to the Internet. In Turkey, President Erdogan has cut internet access to Kurdish regions of the country. China, as we know, keeps its citizens behind a great fire-wall, and we should have learned enough to know that this might not be unthinkable in Europe.

These new technologies that are upending liberal elites today may upend authoritarian elites tomorrow. Equally, the authoritarian populists may master the new technologies and use them to restrict pluralism further. We don't know how this story ends. History, Alexander Herzen famously said, has no libretto.

The crux of the problem, in defending media pluralism, is political: devising a strategy, country by country, election by election, to win the battle of ideas with the populists. Europe can help, but the battle will be won or lost in each country. For it is populism—not media ownership dominance, not **_digital disinhibition_** or **_algorithmic segregation_** themselves—that are the key problem here. The problem is **_the politics of enemies_** that threatens the very possibility of **_a shared agora_** at the heart of our democracy.

For myself, as Rector of a European university, I know what my job in defending pluralism has to be: teaching tolerance, inclusion, respect for knowledge, civility in argument and respect for those with whom we disagree, the values on which a democratic politics must depend. In a disorienting time, these are the lights that must guide our steps.

Thank you.