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DEMOCRACY

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THE END OF DEMOCRACY? HOW DEMOCRACIES NAVIGATE CHANGE

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In recent decades, democratic societies have faced both internal and external threats that have caused them to struggle. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's interference in the Brexit vote and the U.S. elections. The world is not only entering a phase of conflicts and wars, but it is additionally on the verge of a new ideological confrontation. The non-democratic regimes are also capable of building strong and resilient economies and military potential mechanisms and institutions. The role of values and institutions we build today is critical. During times of war and crises such as pandemics, how can democratic values and principles be adapted? How should national governments and the international community navigate through these threats and changes? This article aims to address these important questions.

Introduction

Since Francis Fukuyama's *End of History*¹, the most fundamental question on the international agenda is whether democracy is cracking up, and whether it can face the challenges it appears to be unable to address properly. But there is nothing more consistent than something unstable. Thus, the discussions on the crisis of democracy are among the hottest debates noticeable today. In recent decades, the world has faced numerous crises, such as armed conflicts, financial instability and pandemics, so it is important to evaluate how democratic states deal with such challenges.

Once the Cold War was over, there was a common belief that the world was leaning towards globalisation and mutual cooperation, with benefits to all sides being more important than territorial disputes and spheres of influence. International organisations and alliances seemed to become valuable instruments in building stronger communities and responding to emerging threats.

However, the new era has brought new challenges that the liberal democracies have been unable to successfully address. The UK announced its withdrawal from the EU, which became a huge challenge to the

1 *The End of History and the Last Man* is largely popular book written by Francis Fukuyama, where he states that with the end of the Cold War, the liberal democracy of the Western example is the most universal system which makes future ideological wars impossible.

core idea of European unity. The question of whether EU membership is really that beneficial for a country created a great deal of confusion among the other EU member states, and first of all, the 'first-speed states'.² After the results of the voting over Brexit, the world discovered that Russia's troll factories had targeted the UK citizens to vote in favour of Brexit.³ The likelihood of EU disunity has never been more real.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has once again opened the door to populists who seized the moment to destabilise those governments which found themselves in a situation that had never happened before. Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 shocked the whole world with unprecedented atrocities, and at the same time has once again brought up the question of democratic unity and stability in the world. Authoritarian regimes like Russia, China, and Iran started forming covert coalitions, terrorist organisations like Hamas are being openly backed by Russia and Iran, and the current geopolitical order as we know it is likely coming to an end.

All of the above-mentioned events significantly contributed to destabilising the existing geopolitical system, and massively influenced the rule of law. It has become clear that values and principles should be



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inseparable from actions. At the same time, one should have the capability to protect values and principles already declared. Therefore, if modern democracies want to remain in power and continue flourishing and developing, there are three main pillars on which governments should rely: strong institutions, military power, and multilateralism.

Institutions and Democracy

Even the most sustainable democracies might become subject to internal and external threats. Russia's interference in the US elections and the UK vote on Brexit⁴ demonstrated how easily the moods in societies can swing, based on targeted ads on social media. Mark Zuckerberg's⁵ and Shou Zi Chew's⁶ testimonies before the U.S. Congress are illustrative examples of how important data is today, and governments

- 2 By mentioning the "first-speed state", the author means the concept of multi-speed Europe which was widely discussed in the past decades, and which points out that some EU member states develop faster than others, hence, some EU member states enjoy more benefits rather than creating such benefits for the others. M. de La Baume, *Multispeech Europe: the EU's 'Loch Ness Monster'*, POLITICO, 10.03.2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/multispeed-europe-the-eus-loch-ness-monster-future/>
- 3 C. Mortimer, *If you saw these tweets, you were targeted by Russian Brexit propaganda*, The Independent, 12.11.2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/brexit-russia-troll-factory-propaganda-fake-news-twitter-facebook-a8050866.html>
- 4 D. Ruy, *Did Russia Influence Brexit?* Center for Strategic and International Studies, 21.07.2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/brexit-bits-bobs-and-blogs/did-russia-influence-brexit>
- 5 C. Watson, *The Key Moments from Mark Zuckerberg's testimony to Congress*, The Guardian, 11.04.2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/11/mark-zuckerbergs-testimony-to-congress-the-key-moments>
- 6 K. Paul, J. Bhutan, *Key Takeaways from TikTok hearing in Congress – and the uncertain road ahead*, The Guardian, 23.03.2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/mar/23/key-takeaways-tiktok-hearing-congress-shou-zi-chew>

around the world are either trying to find ways to protect it or to are using it for their own benefit. Various spyware technologies, such as Pegasus⁷ or even TikTok⁸ are used to destabilise democratic foundations from the inside.



When a country lacks strong institutions, it seeks charismatic personalities

Criminal investigations, two impeachment inquiries and the January 6th Capitol attack – Donald Trump’s presidency definitely was a stress test for U.S. democracy. Nevertheless, the country that introduced the system of checks and balances to the world passed the test successfully. Checks and balances is not only a good political science theory, it is a working mechanism where the separation of powers ensures that the country works as a single organism. When one of the branches fails, it eventually leads to the abuse of power and corruption in the state. If ultimately Donald Trump wins the presidential elections in 2024 again, will the American democratic system pass the test again? Only history will tell.

Institutions, not personalities, guarantee that a country functions properly, addresses the challenges it faces, and gets the support it needs. In 2022, Ukraine surprised the world and surprised itself: not only did the country not fall to Russia in the first 24, 48 or 72 hours, but it continued to fight in the

following days and months, the banking system continued to work, and the mobile phone network did not crash. People laid aside all their complaints and arguments with the state, the gap between the coalition and the opposition disappeared, and was replaced by a united parliament and a united country instead.

One of the main reasons why the U.S. and the EU are helping Ukraine is because the country is still functioning even under the existential threat from the largest nuclear armed country in the world. Would Ukraine have been supported that strongly if its government had left the country and fled abroad? Most likely, the current situation would look much like the support given to the modern governments in exile like those of the Belarus opposition and The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. This would be enough just for occasional reminders of the nation’s struggle at international conferences, but not to win the war.

When a country lacks strong institutions, it seeks charismatic personalities. On October 30th, TIME magazine published an article underlining the key role of Ukraine’s president in this war.⁹ The article itself seems to be rather critical (which is no surprise given the author’s articles on Ukraine back in 2014¹⁰) and full of false narratives. But at the same time, it raises questions about the corruption, possible reforms and struggles which followed Zelenskyy’s latest visit to the USA. The foreign partners are constantly reminding us about the necessity to carry out substantial reforms to maintain the country’s well-being, and to ensure the

7 *Pegasus and similar spyware and secret state surveillance.* PACE resolution 2513, Assembly debate 11.10.2023, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33116/html>

8 B.Fung, *Lawmakers say TikTok is a national security threat, but evidence remains unclear*, CNN Business, 21.03.2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/21/tech/tiktok-national-security-concerns/index.html>

9 S. Shuster, *'Nobody Believes in Our Victory Like I Do.' Inside Volodymyr Zelensky's Struggle to Keep Ukraine in the Fight*, TIME, 30.10.2023, <https://time.com/6329188/ukraine-volodymyr-zelensky-interview/>

10 S. Shuster, TIME <https://world.time.com/author/simonshuster/>

recovery of its economy in the future.¹¹ The message is very clear: statehood and strong institutions are the things that have to be developed further.

Can personal leadership be useful? Of course it can. When it comes to giving a clear and simple signal to foreign audiences, this is truly a beneficial and effective tool. This is what happened when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started: the president of Ukraine became the war leader and was even compared to Winston Churchill,¹² who led his country through the horrors of war to ultimate victory. This is a catchy and easy to comprehend message for those countries that are far away from Ukraine: this one is the good guy and that one is the bad guy.



The populist offers quick solutions to difficult issues, and true democracy offers hard-fought and long-term solutions with long-term results

However, in the long run, the country needs a clear vision, a long-lasting strategy, and a working system. Personalities come and go; they leave their trace on the pages of history books. Politicians have to invest in the institutions rather than in their political image. This is what ensures that the country can work, and this is what would be their greatest political achievement.

Dynamic personalities can also easily be found among populists, who offer quick and easy solutions to difficult issues. When Donald Trump promises to end the war in Ukraine in one day with one phone call if he's elected again¹³, the average American taxpayer finds it a great outcome. They do not want to get into much detail about the reasons for and consequences of such a decision; they need an easy solution to a complex problem.

The populist offers quick solutions to difficult issues, and true democracy offers hard-fought and long-term solutions with long-term results. You can either lose weight by taking a magic pill in two weeks, or do regular sport and follow the steps to good nutrition, and find a steady way to a solution. Obviously, everyone would want the former, without having to think of the consequences, but the latter definitely works better.

Military and Democracy

“Democracy needs to be backed up militarily”; this is what Latvia's Foreign Minister Krišjānis Karins said at the PACE session in October 2023.¹⁴ Once the Cold War was over, the world believed that the era of globalisation and interconnectivity had begun, and would remain the same for years to come. Such a state of things led to the belief that the majority of the world was seeking democracy, however, this is a common misperception. According to the V-Dem study in 2022, “dictatorships are on the rise and harbour 70% of the world

11 *Statement on Proposed List of Priority Reforms*, U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 25.09.2023, <https://ua.usembassy.gov/statement-on-proposed-list-of-priority-reforms/>

12 A. Marr, *Zelensky Doesn't Know the End of His Story. Churchill Didn't Either*, The New York Times, 23.03.2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/opinion/zelensky-churchill.html>

13 Watch: Trump Says as President He'd Settle Ukraine War Within 24 Hours, Wall Street Journal, 11.05.2023, <https://www.wsj.com/video/watch-trump-says-as-president-hed-settle-ukraine-war-within-24-hours/>

14 Latvian Foreign Minister calls for support to Ukraine, continued dialogue on current issues, PACE News, 11.10.2023, <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9241/latvian-foreign-minister-calls-for-support-to-ukraine-continued-dialogue-on-current-issues>

population – 5.4 billion people.”¹⁵ This makes democracy only one of the options which a country can voluntarily choose as the model for its development.

The constant striving of democratic states to seek negotiations and express their ‘concerns’ is only perceived by dictators as weakness, and permission to move further. The world was so inspired by the promises of the new Russian government which appeared to be seeking the democratic development of the country, that it ignored the Chechen wars. It later ignored Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, being unsure about whether Georgia had provoked the war or not. Once again, the world ‘condemned’ and ‘shared its concerns’ but rejected any military response to the unlawful actions, for the sake of not escalating the conflict further.¹⁶ It took eight years and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine for the world to start realising that the Russian Federation is not interested in becoming a democratic European state. In fact, it seeks to conquer, and destabilise the democratic world as much as possible.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, it faced sanctions from the EU and the US. In 2022, it became the most sanctioned country in the world,¹⁷ overcoming the previous leader, Iran. It has become almost as isolated as North Korea, and the Council of Europe became the only organisation that managed to suspend Russia’s membership, as it was not upholding its principles.

Has this helped Ukraine to liberate the occupied territories, or to make the Russian

army leave Ukraine? Not that we are aware of. What definitely helped Ukraine to perform important and magnificent military operations was ammunition, tanks, fighter jets and a professional army. This is the power that stops an enemy at the border and protects democratic values.

From the outset of the full-scale invasion of Russia against Ukraine, the NATO allies realised that it was not only compromise and negotiations but tanks and missiles that were necessary for their countries’ well-being. The states that are closest to the borders of Russia and Belarus are among those which are most actively pushing the alliance for higher defence spending.¹⁸ It is an irony of fate, but Russia’s intentions to destroy democracy in Europe, and not to have NATO at its borders has ended up making the European continent more militarised and more united than ever before.

We are entering (or have already entered) a phase of all-out wars and political conflicts. Whether we like it or not, the geopolitical system we are used to is falling apart. A complete reconstruction is needed as soon as possible. World War III will not be the same as the previous two, as it is likely to be decentralised, with numerous hot spots around the globe that will be connected between each other.

Hamas’ unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023 has already been named as the biggest failure in the history of the Israeli Mossad, their intelligence services. Hamas has a long-lasting history of relations

15 V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, *Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature?* https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf, p.6

16 B. Smith, *U.S. pondered military use in Georgia*, POLITICO, 02.03.2010, <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/02/us-pondered-military-use-in-georgia-032487>

17 F. Zandt, *The World’s Most-Sanctioned Countries*, Statista, 22.02.2023, <https://www.statista.com/chart/27015/number-of-currently-active-sanctions-by-target-country/>

18 A. von Nahmen, *More NATO Members Pushing for Higher Defence Spending*, Deutsche Welle, 16.01.2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/more-nato-members-pushing-for-higher-defense-spending/a-64402123>

with Iran¹⁹ and Russia,²⁰ and this proves the following. Even though the Russia-Ukraine war and the Arab-Israeli conflict are of a totally different nature, today they are both connected by the involvement of those authoritarian regimes that are seeking to destabilise the existent geopolitical order.


The militarisation of democracies should be smart; democratic states should think outside the box to be able to protect themselves, and to remain in their positions in the changing geopolitical world; just as the British came up with the idea of the tank during The First World War,²¹ which drastically changed the course of that war.

Dictators perceive seeking compromise and negotiations as a weakness. Power is the only thing they can understand. Therefore, modern democracies have to invest in armies and the military sector, and not be fooled by those countries that want us to believe that they are capable of changing without providing any evidence of it.

Multilateralism and Democracy

The members of the United Nations Human Rights Council²² are surely chosen based on a geographical basis and are elected by secret ballot, yet a number of those announced recently are known to have big problems safeguarding human rights within their countries. The General Assembly adopted a resolution on upholding

humanitarian obligations in Palestine²³, yet it has no mention at all of Hamas, which caused the recent escalation in the conflict. And the work of the UN Security Council is being paralysed because of the aggressor state, Russia, which holds a permanent membership seat, having acquired it in a way which has been described as 'illegal'.²⁴ All the above-mentioned examples sound surreal, but this is one of the by-products of the multilateralism of the past.



The militarisation of democracies should be smart; democratic states should think outside the box to be able to protect themselves, and to remain in their positions in the changing geopolitical world

The diplomatic clichés of 'being concerned' and 'condemning unlawful actions' have become the bases of memes and jokes. Organisations such as the UN are considered to only exist to express their concerns and to condemn something unacceptable. In fact, international organisations have become so bureaucratic that they have forgotten the main reason why they were founded.

The paralysis of the UN gives a sense of déjà vu from the time of its predecessor

19 H. Esfandiari. *Hamas and Israel: Iran's Role*, Wilson Center, 10.10.2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/hamas-and-israel-irans-role>

20 Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Head of Hamas Politburo Khaled Meshaal, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 3.08.2015, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1512358/

21 *How Britain Invented the Tank in The First World War*, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-britain-invented-the-tank-in-the-first-world-war>

22 *General Assembly Elects 15 Members to Human Rights Council*, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Release, 10.10.2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12543.doc.htm>

23 *General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling for Immediate, Sustained Humanitarian Truce Leading to Cessation of Hostilities between Israel, Hamas, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Release*, 27.10.2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12548.doc.htm>

24 S. Sydorenko, *Russia Has Illegally Gained UN Security Council Seat. It Should Be Fixed*, European Pravda, 8.02.2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/02/8/7133682/>

the League of Nations. The initial idea of creating an international organisation which would ensure long-lasting peace through communication and dialogue seemed to be perfect. However, the lack of mechanisms to carry these out and the subjectivity of its members caused its failure. The environment of mutual cooperation and understanding has led to false attempts to try to understand the reasoning behind aggression instead of finding ways to punish and prevent it in the future. It is time to recognise the mistakes of the past and to right the wrongs before it is too late.



The world is not only entering a phase of conflicts and wars, but it is additionally on the verge of a new ideological confrontation. The non-democratic regimes are also capable of building strong and resilient economies and military potentials

There is nothing more sustainable than constant change. Just as the presence of the Russian Federation as a permanent member of the UN Security Council highlights the drawbacks of the system, the behaviour of countries like Hungary shows where the European Union should be reformed. One state cannot hold the whole organisation hostage, and one man cannot hold 700 million people hostages. Therefore, Hungary's warm ties with Russia and Belarus despite the political position of the EU make it clearer for the European community as to where and how it should be reformed. It is impossible to hold onto the old geopolitical order, it is time to get to work on a new one.

The world is not only entering a phase of conflicts and wars, but it is additionally on the verge of a new ideological confrontation. The non-democratic regimes are also capable of building strong and resilient economies and military potentials. The best approach to handling the COVID situation is yet to be determined, but studies show that both democracies and autocracies were capable of efficient responses to COVID with modern technologies.²⁵ The doctrine of 'spreading democracy' does not work anymore and, in fact, it never really worked. To avoid democracy's decline, we should communicate and find common ground with the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, by developing strategies that take into account the specific features of those countries and regions. The same recommendation applies not only to the distant states and those on other continents, but also to the Balkans, Eastern Europe and others. There is no universal strategy, but there is the power of multilateralism in diversity.

It is a fact that not all countries seek democracy. It should be recognised that the world is much bigger and more diverse than just the EU, the United States and other democratic states. A sound economy is certainly an important sphere of our lives which allows governments to make their people's lives easier and ensure the well-being of the country. It is important to have something in common to be able to trade and develop each other's economies, as the world is now too interconnected to return to isolationism.

However, it is also important to bear in mind the consequences of such actions. Staying ignorant of a state's behaviour in the international arena while using its economy

²⁵ For instance, *Time* names Taiwan and Singapore as the countries with the best COVID response, when they used aggressive and immediate response using modern technologies. Ian Bremmer, The Best Global Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic, 1 Year Later, TIME, 12.06.2020, <https://time.com/5851633/best-global-responses-covid-19/>

as an excuse diminishes the effect of the mechanisms that are created for deterrence. Imposing sanctions, isolating states and using other tools to influence the behaviour of states that breach their promises to the world – this is the only way they will understand that democracies are not going to tolerate anything that threatens them.

At the same time, those nations which strive to develop democratic values and principles should be supported. This should be a consistent policy of the democracies around the world. It should be done not only through capacity-building projects, but there should be a strong political will to do so. This is the only way to win the hearts and minds of those who are still hesitant or under the influence of nefarious propaganda.

Conclusion

So how does democracy navigate change? It has to adapt, to try to address the challenges and issues at hand, but instead it mostly reacts to circumstances but not being proactive. Democratic institutions are going through major changes, but they have been doing so since their first appearance in history. Today's democracy is again threatened by authoritarian tendencies, the world is becoming more and more fragmented and we seem to have returned to Hobbes' "world of all against all." Maintaining democracy is never easy. It is always about discussions and arguments, issues and challenges. It is about constantly looking for compromise and consensus, and

there is never a correct answer immediately. But instead of focusing on their differences, the democratic states should focus on the ideas that unite them.

Democracy is not in the majority in the world. Only a handful of countries are considered full democracies, while other countries swing between democratic aspirations and the authoritarian past. However, universal principles and values are the ones that have always united many people in the world. Only once these ideas are backed with power, both economic and military, will more people perceive them as valuable and worthy. The world has to agree to the new game rules, as the old ones are already outdated and do not work anymore. Therefore, investment in institutions, military power and multilateralism are the three aspects that would ease democracy's navigation through these turbulent times.

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