



## SAFEGUARDING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: WHAT ROLE FOR EUROPE?

Summary of the dinner debate of Wednesday 27 November 2019

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama's influential essay 'The End of History?' announced the imminent global triumph of liberal democracy: according to his analysis, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, liberal democracy would have developed into a global form of governance. Thirty years later, this prophecy is yet to be fulfilled: democracy has now to face new enemies, within and outside European borders.

In Europe, in particular, different populist parties and movements are threatening the individual freedoms guaranteed by a system of check and balances, which has so far curtailed the rule of the majority and protected minority rights.

- ? **Is there something that European institutions can do to effectively counter threats to European values?**
- ? **How to intervene when the rule of law is being actively and systematically undermined by democratically elected parliaments and governments?**
- ? **How can the European Parliament and the Council of Europe cooperate in this field?**
- ? **What is the future of liberal democracy?**

We tried to answer these questions with the help of **five guest speakers**:

**Danuta Hübner**, MEP and former European Commissioner;

**Bernard Guetta**, MEP and former journalist;

**Roland Freudenstein**, Deputy Director and Head of Research at Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies;

**Thierry Chopin**, Professor of Political Science at the Catholic University of Lille and special adviser at the Jacques-Delors Institute;

**Claudia Luciani**, Director of human dignity, equality and governance at the Council of Europe.





All speakers agreed that the rise of populism and right-wing nationalism is a global phenomenon. “Extreme right parties are financially and intellectually supported by Vladimir Putin’s Russia, Xi Jinping’s China and Donald Trump’s United States”, argued **Bernard Guetta**.

**Roland Freudenstein** shed light in particular on the role of China, “Beijing’s digital authoritarianism is the biggest threat in the 21st century to liberal democracy because it fosters the idea that there can be prosperity without democracy. This denies the basic principle of 1989, which says that political and economic freedoms not only go hand in hand but also are mutually dependent upon each other”.

The enemies of liberal democracy constantly play on the ground of semantic confusion. “Liberal democracy clearly makes reference to a system of ideas called ‘liberalism’, which has a lot to do with individual rights and the limits to state power and has not to be confused with today’s liberal policies”, said **Roland Freudenstein**.

In Freudenstein’s view, “Also the concept of ‘Christian democracy is victim of this voluntary misunderstanding: In Hungary the term ‘illiberal state’ has been replaced by ‘Christian democracy’. Government elites say they do not want a liberal democracy, because they prefer to have a Christian democracy. In this way they abuse of the term Christian democracy, because it refers to a set of ideas on the society and not to a form of government”.

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So, is it possible to be a democrat without being a liberal? The answer is no. As **Thierry Chopin** affirmed, “You cannot separate the democratic component from the liberal one, as you cannot separate popular sovereignty from those mechanisms that limit it and that make sure that fundamental individual rights, especially in the case of minorities, are respected. Illiberal democracy is just an oxymoron behind which majoritarian authoritarianism is hiding”.

However, democracy is much more than a system of formal rules that limit state power to protect minority rights. Talking about the situation in Poland, Danuta Hübner recalled how, when communism ended, the major novelty in her country was the introduction of free elections. “After 1989 we started to think that democracy is forever. Unfortunately, elections are not enough by themselves. A whole package of measures with regard to the respect of the rule of law and to minority rights must follow. In Poland this package was not embraced by the people and this allowed a bunch of non-democratic leaders to take advantage of the situation and sell the lie that liberal democracy is a democracy for the few, a democracy for the elite only”, explained the former European Commissioner.

Why did some European countries embrace this authoritarian turn? “Nobody’s born a democrat”, tried to explain Claudia Luciani, “Education and culture play a fundamental role”.

So, in the light of these reflections, is the rise of right-wing nationalism the by-product of a deficit of democratic culture?

According to **Bernard Guetta**, “Europe is torn by a double nostalgia. On the one side, in Western Europe there is a nostalgia for the “Glorious Thirty” (the years from 1945 to 1975), a period in which people benefitted from a continuous improvement in economic and social conditions. On the other side, Eastern Europe is missing the “quietude”, the tranquillity of the Communist era, when there was no competition and, consequently, people had no reason to be afraid of losing their job because their firm had to shut down”.



All this led to a growing anxiety, which is accompanied by the return of political passions. “Political passions like anger, resentment and a sense of being disregarded are back and move large segments of the population. There is a link between the return of these political passions and the crisis of liberal democracy, because liberalism is an ideology that always tried to put interests before passions”, said **Thierry Chopin**.

Now the problem is that liberal democracy is badly equipped to deal with the comeback of emotions in politics.



**We need to re-engage backsliding states instead of looking for the best rules to punish them.**



Punishing or reengaging those who put themselves deliberately at the margins of a community: this is the dilemma! “We need a mechanism capable of effectively punishing those countries that do not respect European fundamental values. Currently the most debated proposal is the idea of a linkage between budget support and respect of the rule of law. Nonetheless, also sanctions within political families have proved to work, like in the case of European People’s Party’s suspension of Fidesz”, that is the point of view of **Roland Freudenstein**.

**Danuta Hübner** holds a different view, “We need to re-engage backsliding states instead of looking for the best rules to punish them. This means also to have the capacity to inspire pro-European sentiments in the population”. In this regard, the former Commissioner made reference to the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, that she describes as “an important opportunity to re-engage citizens with the European project”.

Democracy and participation go hand in hand. This is also the opinion of **Claudia Luciani**, who affirms that, “Representative democracy can be reinforced by increasing other forms of democracy and, more in general, by responding to a rising global demand for participation. Take the example of Ireland: it has increased the ways in which people can participate besides voting and now it has no extreme right or political turmoil. This goes along with the enhancement of critical thinking, because, even if we the world population has never been so educated, too many people are still victim of propaganda. Critical thinking has to enlighten the democratic choices of the future”.

If we want to uphold the principles of liberalism, a little self-criticism is probably not a bad thing. As Thierry Chopin put it, “Even if liberalism is a philosophy of openness, politics must seriously try to strike a balance between freedom and social cohesion, between freedom and security-related demands, between freedom and the demands of those who are longing for community belonging and protection of their cultural identity”.

A new alliance between liberal forces, in the broad sense of the term, is necessary to complete this task. As Bernard Guetta recalls, “During the Cold War, left-wing and right-wing democrats had the wisdom to adopt adequate social policies to impede the most needy in our societies from turning towards communism. Today the danger is no longer communism but the return of the extreme right. To counter it, we need to create the same social alliance that we deployed against communism”.



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