



*Interjection*

Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?

# Down with Defeatism!

On the Crisis of the Liberal World Order

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The crisis of the liberal world order is a crisis of self-confidence above all else. Despite all our self-criticism, we must not fall prey to defeatism, but should instead reflect on our own strengths and continue the success story of the last 70 years.

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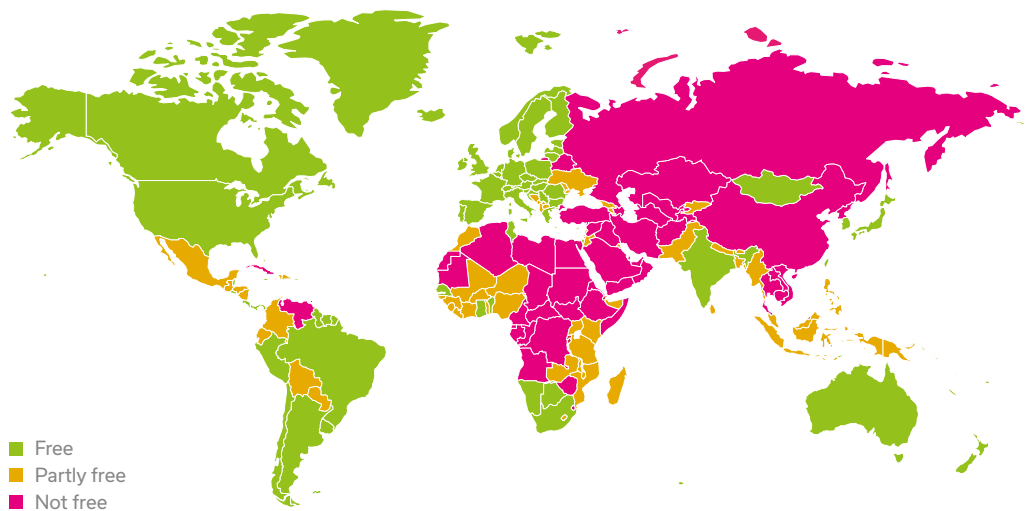
There are perhaps more original ways of starting an article on the crisis of the liberal world order than to quote an author mockingly referred to as “the most-quoted but least-read American intellectual of our time”.<sup>1</sup> We are talking about Francis Fukuyama and his now famous prophecy regarding the “end of history”. Back in 1989, Fukuyama wrote: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>2</sup>

The sense of optimism about the future of the liberal world order could hardly be more pronounced than in these words. What is more, it is equally clear that very little remains of this

optimism. It suffices to take a quick glance at the titles of a few of the books that were all published over the past year: “Suicide of the West”, “How Democracies Die”, “Democracy and Its Crisis”, “The Road to Unfreedom”, “Why Liberalism Failed”, “The Retreat of Western Liberalism”. The list seems to be never-ending, and demonstrates how drastically the mood has changed: moving from almost limitless euphoria to an apocalyptic mood, from the end of history to the end of the liberal world order.

Generally speaking, and especially when examining such complex topics, now is not the time to rely solely on moods, and certainly not on a few sensationalist book titles. It is, therefore, worthwhile to take a sober look at what has actually changed in the last 30 years.

**Fig. 1: Freedom and Democracy Worldwide (2018)**



Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

## Aspect 1: The Crisis in Figures

We know that trying to measure democracy or freedom is no trivial matter, but quite a few institutions are trying to do just that. Foremost among these is *Freedom House*, which has been publishing its *Freedom in the World Ranking* every year since 1973. If we look at the ranking for 2018, it quickly becomes clear that freedom and democracy around the world are not in *such* bad shape. After all, almost half countries are regarded as free, about one third as partially free and “only” one fourth as not free (see fig. 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup>

So why are we all lamenting the decline of the liberal world order? As is so often the case with statistics, so much depends on perspective or, more specifically, the data selected. If we look at the global distribution of freedom broken down by population number rather than by country, the result is somewhat less positive: more than one third of the world’s population is not free, and only approximately the same number of people live in freedom (see fig. 2).<sup>4</sup>

If we only look at the trend over the past twelve years, we are confronted with an even bleaker picture. It then becomes clear that we are experiencing an alarming negative trend, particularly when bearing in mind that Europe and the USA are now also contributing to this trend (see fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

But the overall picture also requires us to consider the last twelve years in a broader context and, for example, look at the trend over the last 30 years – since the publication of Fukuyama’s “End of History”. Only then does it become apparent that the overall long-term trend is still extremely

positive, even if there has been a slight decline over the last few years (see fig. 4).<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the key question will be whether this decline is in fact a reversal of the trend or whether, in retrospect, the last few years will be seen as merely a slight hiccup in a generally upward trend.

## Aspect 2: Of Threats New and Old

Not just for Fukuyama, but for the majority of people engaged in international politics at the end of the 20th century, the end of the East-West conflict was *the* point of reference in all

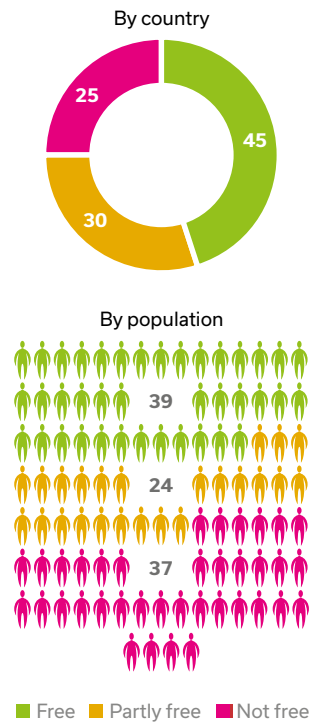
matters revolving around the world order. This remained the case until the second major turning point in recent decades: 9/11.

This said, global terrorism did not appear overnight on 9/11, even though this is the impression that has taken hold in the public consciousness for obvious reasons. However, since September 11, global, almost exclusively Islamist, terrorism has ranked top of the list of threats facing the West<sup>7</sup> – and this sense of threat does not seem entirely unjustified, at least in as much as Islamist terrorism is indeed about attacking the West and what it stands for and, if possible, destroying it.

However, the fact that this is the declared aim and that many people perceive it as a major threat does not mean that global terrorism does

in fact pose an existential threat to the liberal world order. The subjective feeling that terrorist attacks are increasing in the West is belied by the facts – for example, in Western Europe many more people died in terrorist attacks in the 1970s

**Fig. 2: Freedom and Democracy Worldwide 2018 (in Per Cent)**



Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

and 1980s than have been killed since 9/11.<sup>5</sup> Without trying to make light of the situation, it can be said that when it comes to terrorism the perceived threat is much greater than the actual threat.

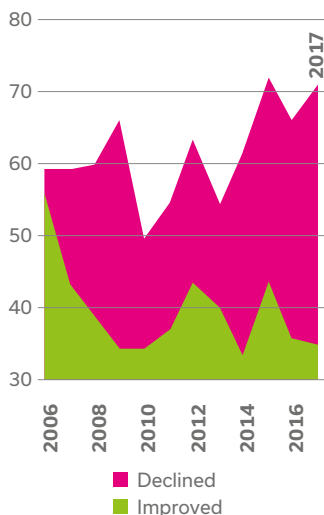
Paradoxically, the exact opposite can be said of a second threat, which should not go unmentioned here – Vladimir Putin’s Russia. While current polls show that an overwhelming majority of Germans (83 per cent) still do not perceive Russia as a threat,<sup>6</sup> there are good reasons to argue that Moscow’s aggressive and destructive foreign policy is doing much more damage to the liberal world order than Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State put together.

This is by no means intended to insinuate that a Russian military attack on NATO territory is likely to happen any time soon. Rather, it is merely to point out that conflicts surrounding the world order are not only fought using tanks and fighter jets. They also manifest themselves in the form of “little green men”, proxy wars in the Middle East, destructive action in international forums, cyber-attacks and secret service operations, meddling in elections and all that which was referred to as propaganda in the past, and that today mainly plays out on social media.

The alarming realisation is that our opponents, above all Russia, have become much better at attacking us by non-military means and are therefore meticulously targeting our

**Fig. 3: Twelve Years of Decline**

Number of countries that declined and improved in aggregate score (2006 – 2017)

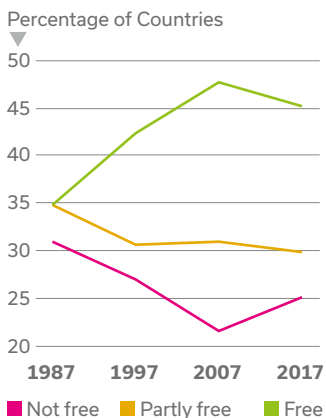


Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

that has given the West decades of prosperity and peace. Furthermore, looking beyond the West, the situation is often much better than the latest prophets of doom and the widespread sense of defeatism, would have us believe.

**Fig. 4: Freedom in the Balance**

After years of major gains, the share of Free countries has declined over the past decade, while the share of Not Free countries has risen.



Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

weaknesses. Of course, this does not mean we should helplessly submit to these attacks. But: We need to take the threat they pose very seriously.

### Aspect 3: The Dialectics of Globalisation

Even today, there is no doubt that globalisation, the growing international interdependence of individuals, companies, institutions and societies, is a fundamentally positive development. It also goes without saying that the now approx. 70-year-old project of a liberal world order based on values and principles such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law is a unique success story

In his book *Factfulness*, Swedish health expert Hans Rosling highlights how a change of perspective can help us to view things in a broader, more fact-based context and hence do away with supposed certainties about the state of the world. In the last 20 years alone, the proportion of the world’s population living in extreme poverty has more than halved. The last decades have been the most peaceful in human history. Moreover, even in low-income countries, 60 percent of all girls now have at least a primary education.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that everything is running like





A lost generation? "When surveys show that young people in the West say they do not believe it is essential to live in a democracy, then that is the real problem." [Source: © Simon Dawson, Reuters.](#)

clockwork, and we cannot ignore the many problems that have recently arisen because of the increasing dissolution of boundaries. For example, this includes the fact that not every region of

the world and stratum of society benefits from the achievements of the liberal world order to the same degree (keywords being over-promising and under-delivering). The dissatisfaction



of those “left behind” is becoming increasingly problematic for the entire system. This is taking place from inside, as reflected by the rise of left and right-wing populist movements and

candidates all over the world, and from outside, such as when the wealth gap – exacerbated by the consequences of climate change – contributes to an unprecedented rise in migration.

Another development that also falls under the heading “dialectics of globalisation” is the increasing success of countries that have benefited a lot from globalisation over recent years but that otherwise have little to nothing to do with the values and principles of the liberal world order. Of course, China is first and foremost among these, but it also applies in varying degrees to states such as Singapore, Malaysia, Qatar and Kazakhstan, to name just a few.

The success of such models, often referred to as “authoritarian capitalism”, calls into question the West’s long-held belief that social and political freedoms are indispensable prerequisites for economic success. In contrast, authoritarian systems such as that of China are demonstrating that they can be superior to the liberal democracies of the West in many respects, for example, when it comes to carrying through the digital transformation without fuss and quibbles, or launching mammoth projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

### **Concluding Remarks**

My previous remarks have highlighted the fact that the liberal world order is in crisis in many respects. This is borne out by the statistics, a number of serious threats, and challenges at home and abroad. Nevertheless, the following applies: the crisis of the liberal world order is a crisis of self-confidence above all else. If Fukuyama’s words at the beginning of this article reveal one thing, it is the belief in progress, which has long been part and parcel of the liberal world order project the belief that the the freedom of the individual, the freedom of societies and the freedom of exchange between societies, is ultimately to the benefit of all. Over the past 30 years, this supposedly unshakeable faith has given way to an excessive, exaggerated sense of despondency.

Admittedly, the strong upward trend since the early 1990s has faltered somewhat over recent years, the West is facing some serious threats and major challenges, the liberal world order is anything but perfect, and the euphoria that followed the end of the Cold War was certainly exaggerated in some quarters.

Yet it is an equally excessive reaction to simply fold tent at the first gust of wind, when faced with the first major crisis, and proclaim the end of the liberal world order.

So what should we do instead? Three final points:

1. We should realise that the “struggle” for the liberal world order has only just begun and that we have much to lose and therefore much to defend. When surveys show that young people in the West say they do not believe it is essential to live in a democracy, then *that* is the real problem.<sup>8</sup> When we no longer appreciate the achievements of the last decades, begin to take them for granted or relativise their value, then *that* is the real problem.

Of course, an integral part of liberal societies is to critically question one’s own actions. However, such a self-critical attitude is only meaningful if it arises from a normative, fundamental conviction that is not itself at issue.

2. We should stop focusing on the here and now or the last few years and start taking a longer-term view. Anyone who has ever had dealings with China will know that the Chinese perceive time in a different way. For them, it does not matter what happens in the next two, three or ten years. It is all about what the world will look like in fifty, one hundred or even a thousand years.

Our strategic thinking does not have to be quite so long term, but if we limit ourselves to legislative sessions and annual or semi-annual assessments, this tends to obscure our view of longer-term developments.

3. We should not allow ourselves to be panicked by our own symptoms of crisis or by the success of others. To give just one example: the history of the European Union is in many respects a history of crises that have been overcome, and in retrospect the Cold War period might seem very clearly drawn and stable, but in fact the West was under at least as much pressure as it is today.

As for the success of competing systems, there is no doubt that even authoritarian systems can have economic success in the short and medium term. But it remains to be seen whether these systems are capable of guaranteeing long-term prosperity – the kind of prosperity that leaves no one behind. It is clear that freedom is not a prerequisite for economic development, but there are countless examples that demonstrate how economic development also leads to heightened calls for freedom.

In any case we are, well advised not to fall into defeatism, but instead to reflect on our own strengths and continue the success story of the last 70 years. The end of history may be further away than Fukuyama believed in 1989, but it would be equally premature to proclaim the end of the liberal world order.

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