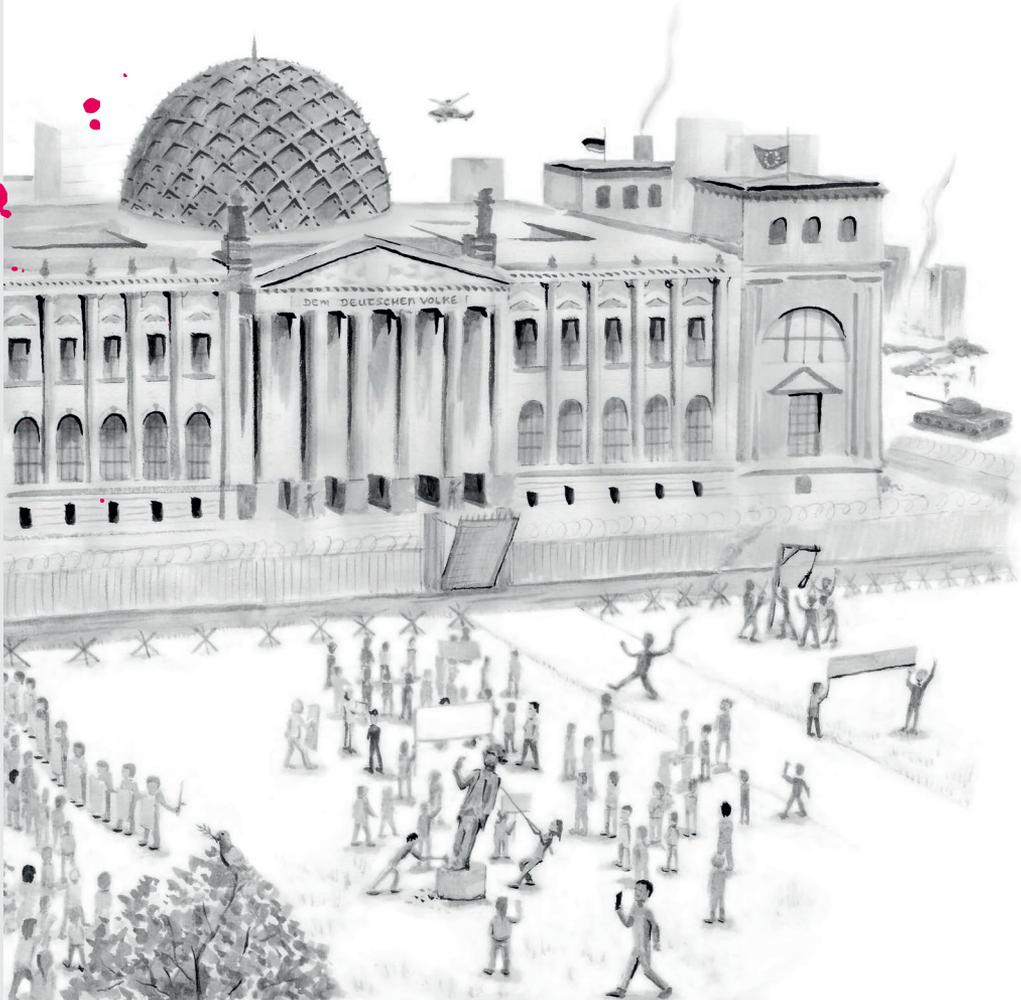


# The (More) Defensive Democracy

Russia and Ten Other Threats  
to Our Freedom





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# Foreword

On 24 February 2022, work on this volume of essays was already virtually complete. *The (More) Defensive Democracy. Ten Threats to Our Freedom and How to Counter Them*; was to be the title. Then came Russia's attack on Ukraine – and overnight the main issue had become the defensive capability of democracy.

Apart from having proven that our topic of focus had evidently been the perfect choice, 24 February posed several additional challenges to work on this volume of essays. The ten texts, which were almost complete at this point, were ultimately dedicated to the supposed “softer” threats to democracy, at least not in the traditional sense of military threats, while suddenly tanks and missiles moved into the foreground again.

Therefore, the publication not only had a gaping hole regarding the military threat situation in Europe, but specific articles became obsolete from one day to the next. For instance, because they took a critical look at German security and defence policy and called for a radical change of policy – a shift that had now taken place overnight as it were.

Since this historical turning point, defensibility is not only discussed more often, but also with a clearly different connotation. It is therefore worth shedding light on the term “defensive” or even “fortified democracy”, which requires explanation especially in the German context. This is also done by Nael Semaan and Steven Bickel in their essay on the threat posed by “Radicalisation and Extremism” (chapter 2): a field in which the term has its origins insofar as it was traditionally directed against those seeking to oppose democratic order from within.

In addition to central provisions of the Basic Law – where the term itself does not appear at all, however – essential for the term of defensive democracy is also the ruling by the German Constitutional Court prohibiting the KPD from 1956. There it states: an “aggressive stance towards the existing order”, with the aim of “seeking to eradicate this order itself” is anti-constitutional.<sup>1</sup>

Taking the appropriate provisions to ensure that advantage is not taken of democratic freedoms to fight democracy as such, in other words, to prevent democracy from abolishing itself, is no less relevant today than it was 70 years ago. *How Democracies Die – and What We Can Do About It* is the German title of the bestseller published in 2018 and authored by the two Harvard political scientists, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. Here, they present how democratic institutions are gradually being eroded and democratic processes are invariably being further undermined. Although the United States of America and Donald Trump's presidency lie at the focus of their analysis, many of their insights can also be readily transferred to other liberal democracies, and some to the German context. This includes the insight that democracies do not always go out with a bang. In many cases, they die “with a whimper”, they languish for years on end; and that the patient is already irredeemably lost, only dawns on those affected when it is far too late.

That is just one of many threats facing democracy, which we intend to react to with this volume. Here, we devote just as much attention to dangers lurking within, be it extremism or polarisation, as to developments that impact on our society from the outside, whether that be nationalist trends in Europe or authoritarian influence. Yet, overall, a distinction between internal and external only plays a minor role, since both levels have long been one and indivisible. What is more, it is often precisely the interaction of dangers from within, and their reinforcement by influences from outside, that gives rise to a completely new quality of threat. Against this background, we no longer use the term defensive democracy in the traditional German sense of fighting extremist endeavours from the inside, but instead refer to democracies' capacity to respond to the entire spectrum of dangers adequately and effectively from both within and without.

The following essays are therefore not content with merely illustrating the threats facing democracies today, and thus, tempting fate as it were. Rather, they are also committed to the model of a defensive democracy insofar as they assume that democracies are indeed able to counter all the dangers illustrated here, and ultimately to deal with them, too.

The tireless commitment of all colleagues involved ensured that this publication, too, was eventually completed despite all above-mentioned adversities. This starts with the foundation's own working group, where initial ideas for the project were discussed and then all texts were critically examined. While also applying to the authors who patiently endured one set of corrections after another, only then to have to rethink many things shortly before the end that had been finished a long time ago. Authors, by the way, who represent the entire spectrum of varied expertise that the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung unites under one roof: from work abroad to KAS scholarship programmes, and political consultation right through to contemporary history.

In this context, we will only refer to the colleagues Nils Wörmer and Philipp Dienstbier by name, who, as security experts, scarcely had a free minute following 24 February, and were still prepared to swiftly close this gap in the publication with an excellent article on Russia's war of aggression and its repercussions (chapter 1). They deserve special thanks just like Nina Appenzeller, who supported the project intensively over a year, and Corrado Chirico, who, in the end, brought us across the finishing line. All those involved in the project have made this publication what it is: a plea for the defensive capability of democracy, a plea for freedom.



**Sebastian Enskat**  
Berlin, 22 July 2022

1 Federal Constitutional Court, Ruling from 17/08/1956 – 1 BvB 2/51, Recital 264.

Armed Conflict and War

# Russia's Attack and the End of the European Peace Order

**Nils Wörmer  
and Philipp Dienstbier**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has once again made it clear that only military strength can ensure the stability and defensive capability of a democracy. By now it must surely be clear to everyone that operational and well-equipped armed forces with strong public backing are by no means a relic of the past; rather, they are necessary for responding to the challenges of our time and protecting an open society.



Bearing Europe's recent history in mind, for over three decades German society and its elected political representatives have lived in an exceptional situation from a historic point of view, characterised by peace, freedom, and prosperity. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the existential threat of military confrontation had initially disappeared for Germany and its EU and NATO allies. The often used word "peace dividend" made the headlines, and many Germans were convinced of the fact that the Federal Republic was surrounded only by friends.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, in breach of international law, destroyed this illusion. With the open and de facto unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has brought war as a means of interstate conflict back to Europe. However, this is particularly why 24 February 2022 marks a turning point in security policy since the Russian attack is ultimately aimed at democracy and its international rules-based order.

Not since the end of the Cold War have the political West and the values of a free and democratic Europe been so fundamentally under threat as is now the case with Russia's unprecedented aggression against Ukraine. Although the war is being decided on Ukrainian soil, Putin's attack is ultimately directed at the entire democratic community. Therefore, whether it wants this or not, Germany is already a party to the conflict.

Berlin can no longer fail to recognise the military dimension of international politics and must finally address the consequences for its own security and defence policy. Rather than policy fragmentation, what it needs now is a major step forward in order to restore the German Armed Forces' lost capacity for wholesale territorial and alliance defence as quickly as possible.

## The Fundamental Rejection of a Rules-Based Global Order

Since the 1990s, it seemed as though war had lost its relevance as a fundamental threat to democracy in Europe. Armed conflict was a phenomenon that supposedly occurred far away on the fringes of the European periphery, or, in the case of the Balkan wars, took place in Europe, but at no point did it represent a threat to Germany and its allies. For the German public, armed conflicts seemed, at most, to be *conflicts of choice*: stabilisation, training, advisory missions as well as, if necessary, counterinsurgency in which Berlin only reluctantly participated. A war of aggression in Europe aimed at the territorial integrity of one or more allies and in which Germany could also be implicated – *a war of necessity* – seemed entirely inconceivable, however.

Yet the Russian war against Georgia in 2008 and, certainly no later than Russia's covert military invasion of Ukraine from 2014, were wake-up calls that the threat posed by armed conflict has lost none of its relevance. Violence as political means had long since returned to Europe. In Germany, by contrast, politics and society clung to the mantra that they must not and cannot be any military solutions in international politics. Politicians in Berlin completely failed to recognise this new reality even when the Bergkarabach war newly erupted in 2020 – despite precisely this armed conflict having created facts on the ground and having brought about military solutions. It is therefore hardly surprising that, even during the Russian troop build-up around Ukraine since autumn 2021, the uncomfortable reality that Putin was preparing for a war in Europe right from the start, had been entirely suppressed.

What for a long time seemed inconceivable, must now finally find its way back into the collective consciousness with the Russian attack on Ukraine. Today, war is (once again) a relevant, and perhaps even the greatest threat to democracy in Europe. This is also because Russia's war is an attack by an authoritarian regime on a democratic state, which takes place precisely because the Kremlin has never failed to perceive Ukraine's democratic nature as an existential threat. That the invasion of Ukraine evidently pursued the goal of instigating regime change to end the country's democratic path and to prevent its permanent alignment with the political West, is more than a mere violation against the rules-based global order. Russia's war is nothing less than an attack on democracy as a form of government and social model in itself. It fundamentally calls into question the international order established in the aftermath of 1990 and supported by the community of democracies. With Russia's war of aggression in breach of international law having clearly overstepped the threshold of system competition to system conflict, it is challenging the community of democratic states and the central institutions of a rules-based world order like at no other time since the end of the Cold War.

# The Explosive Power of a War in Europe

For decades, even experts classified the risk potential of a territorial war in Europe as being low. This was less since the serious and far-reaching consequences of a war were underestimated. Quite the opposite: while democracy in times of peace is subject to a myriad of serious challenges, only a few have such grave repercussions as an armed conflict. Still, it was invariably assumed that the probability of such a scenario was rather low. Since a war would certainly have a serious impact, but the probability of this impact taking effect was considered rather unlikely, expert groups always classified the risk potential of a war as moderate to low. However, recent experience calls for a fundamental rethink of this assessment. The probability of a war spreading across the whole of Europe is greater today than at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – and therefore war’s potential threat to democracy has markedly increased.

This potential danger is further intensified by the fact that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could trigger a series of spill-over effects. Especially during the initial stage of the invasion, the question that emerged in this context was whether Moscow, in the event of swift military success in Ukraine, could target other former Soviet republics, and, despite their NATO membership, even the Baltic states. Given that, for various reasons, the first weeks of the Russian campaign did not achieve the military impact planned by the Kremlin, the scenario of Russia attacking other states beyond Ukraine has now become far less likely – albeit it cannot be ruled out altogether.

Yet there is still a danger of the Kremlin attempting to connect the war in Ukraine with the situation in other security policy arenas. This already became apparent in March 2022 with Russia’s conduct during renegotiations of the nuclear agreement with Iran. Furthermore, Putin could exploit the aggravated situation in Africa as well as the Near and Middle East owing to increased food prices in order to fuel conflict and tensions. For instance, Russia might exert pressure on Ukraine’s Southern European allies located on Europe’s southern flank through crises, terrorism, and migration, thus undermining cohesion in the EU and NATO.

The attack on Ukraine, which, to some extent, has been militarily unsuccessful, poses an existential threat to Putin and the Russian leadership – failure would have repercussions on the continued survival of Putin’s system that are difficult to assess and must therefore be prevented by the Russian president at all costs. The use of a weapon of mass destruction, from biological and chemical warfare through to a tactical nuclear strike by Putin who finds himself backed into a corner, does not therefore appear entirely implausible. Such an escalation on the European continent would be unprecedented in recent history. In addition to immeasurable suffering in Ukraine, it would also bring about another turning point in

the European post-war order – and essentially call into question the mantra that NATO must not intervene in the war.

Another question that emerges is whether China could take advantage of the current situation and militarily force Taiwan's return to the People's Republic while the US is busy dealing with a war in Europe. This scenario would have far-reaching implications, especially if Russia were to attack a NATO ally and Washington would therefore be obliged to provide military assistance.

If we look at developments over recent years and increasing tensions between Beijing and Washington, the further intensification of competition between China and the political West seems to be a fait accompli. Nevertheless, an escalation of the communist leadership's (in the People's Republic) already aggressive policy toward neighbouring states, above all Taiwan, and, ultimately, its military intervention in the region according to the Russian "model", needs to be prevented at all costs. This will depend on the West maintaining its unified front against Moscow. The entire world needs to realise that anyone who so recklessly relies on military force, paves the way toward economic ruin and political isolation. The fate of Putin due to his breach of international law must be such that every potentate around the world, and especially in Beijing, thinks: I don't want to end that way!

## The Incomplete Return to Territorial and Alliance Defence

Russia's attack on Ukraine now ought to have made it clear to everyone that an unconditional appeasement policy, a reliance on economic interdependence under the motto "transformation through trade", and hopes of being able to integrate Russia and China into the rules-based global order in this way (that they might violate it, but not seek to entirely destroy it), has failed. The community of liberal democracies must once again focus more strongly on deterrence and defence within the framework of the EU, NATO and beyond, so as to decisively counter the changed threat situation.

For Germany, this means restoring all forces, capabilities, and measures needed for deterrence and defence to protect Europe and hold their own in a potential conflict with Russia. Only this will ensure that a war between NATO and Russia never actually has to be waged. It mainly rests on Germany's shoulders – other larger European states such as Great Britain or France have positioned their armed forces differently due to their strategic priorities and are thus no longer able to provide the necessary ground forces needed to defend the European Eastern flank. So far, the United States have compensated for this with their presence of more than 100,000 soldiers in Europe together with their ability to swiftly re-deploy additional major forces across the Atlantic in the event of

crisis. With an eye to the future, however, Washington will have to scale back its engagement in Europe to concentrate limited resources more strongly on the Indo-Pacific region, where the US needs to counterbalance a militarily growing China. The gap that will be left by an American (partial) withdrawal from Europe, perhaps already after a new US administration takes up office in 2025, will primarily have to be filled by Germany.

This alone is why the German Bundestag has increased the defence budget within ten years from slightly less than 30 billion to more than 50 billion Euro. What is more, the 2016 White Paper had defined territorial and alliance defence as a mission of equal importance to international crisis management for the Bundeswehr. Since then, defence of this nature has shaped every political debate on the capability profile of the German Armed Forces and their scope, structure, equipment, and weaponry. With trend reversals regarding material and personnel ushered in during January and May 2016, the essential conditions were to be created for restoring the Bundeswehr's defence capability. Having said that, both initiatives fell far short of the hoped-for results over recent years.

Once the Bundeswehr had defined the medium-term target personnel size for 2027 at 203,300 service posts, the number of staff settled down between 183,000 and 185,000 men and women over the last few years. Regarding the demographic situation, it has not yet been possible to satisfy the resulting increased personnel requirements of almost 20,000 soldiers and to build up a reserve with 120,000 posts following a suspension of compulsory military service without comprehensive preparation of alternative personnel recruitment mechanisms. In the cyber and information space alone, just half of all posts in some units are filled by urgently needed, highly trained specialists.

In the procurement and material readiness sector, too, only partial progress has been made over the past few years. In 2021, the material readiness of the Bundeswehr's 71 major weapon and equipment systems was officially 76 per cent. However, as this is based on available stocks as opposed to book stocks, this figure conceals the fact that the actual material situation is far more dramatic, and combat readiness is significantly lower – at around 30 per cent. Hence, the Bundeswehr often has to muster material and equipment from all other major Army units to provide a medium-weight combat brigade for the NATO spearhead and would be unable to deploy a second brigade at the same time.

Compared with the consistently high operational readiness of the old Bundeswehr during the Cold War decades, this is a completely unacceptable state. After all, it would have serious consequences in the event of an actual war – namely a rapid defeat at least during initial operations. The extent to which the special fund of 100 billion Euro announced by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz can provide redress here, remains to be seen. More money alone does not resolve the strategic question of where investments need to be made, and how the Bundeswehr should be positioned in future to fulfil its core mission of territorial and alliance defence once again.

# Overdue Adjustments in All Dimensions

German defence policy needs to return to what the German Armed Forces have excelled at for many decades and align itself with what future warfare – besides the US and Russia, China sets the standards here – demands both technologically and in terms of doctrine. The ability to lead high-intensity combat in all dimensions of warfare must be the core mission, structure-determining parameter, and essential criterion for the Bundeswehr's ability to perform. To best position the Bundeswehr for the coming two decades in light of a fundamentally changed threat situation and rapid advances in weapons technology, long-overdue, ground-breaking decisions need to be taken and then also implemented in all dimensions of warfare – land, maritime, air, as well as cyber and information space.

In the German Army, the largest German military branch, the main objective is to provide the three fully staffed and materially equipped divisions with eight to ten combat brigades as promised to NATO by 2023 – a total size of 50,000 to 60,000 soldiers. To this end, investments in spare parts, ammunition, and personal equipment announced by the Federal Government are urgently needed. There are, however, also major challenges in the procurement of modern, in other words, digitised weapons and guidance systems and those suitable for *joint multinational domain operations*; above all the successor to the "Leopard 2" main battle tank in the framework of the Main Ground Combat System planned with France and the re-establishment of an Army air defence capability as part of an integrated air defence against a wide spectrum of threats, from the drone to tactical ballistic missiles.

Structural and doctrinal challenges urgently need to be addressed, too. The Army needs to undertake a radical doctrinal U-turn back to its historic task and once again be able to conduct defence, delay and (counter) attack operations in the North European Plain. To do this, the recently neglected command capability must be restored at brigade and division level, and an adequate digitalisation of ground forces ensured. Moreover, in light of an escalating crisis with Russia, Germany will have to act as a hub for the timely redeployment of allied reinforcement units across central Europe on the Eastern flank. In particular, the necessary structures and processes need to be better rehearsed and practised, all civilian and military actors have to be made familiar with them and deficiencies must be eliminated. Here it is also about retaining full control of all essential parts of Europe's civilian critical infrastructure: *Command, Control, Communications* for safeguarding our own command capability; *Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance* for maintaining our own overview of the situation and *Military Mobility* for ensuring timely redeployment of formations from the ports in Western Europe via rail and road systems to the East.

The return to alliance defence on land will also only work if the Army is adequately supported from the air according to the joint-multi-domain approach. In the event of crisis, Germany has pledged to NATO that it will provide some ten per cent of combat missions and will make four mixed task forces available to this end. This would be deployed to create air superiority in the rear of Central Europe, frontline operational areas, and the enemy air space, and would also have to fly air operations to support NATO land and naval forces. The air force's operational readiness and capability needs to be significantly increased in order to guarantee this. Similar to the situation in the Army, the key is to finally return the stockpiles of ammunition, high-quality weaponry, and spare parts necessary for longer endurance back to an adequate level again. Costs have been cut here for too long.

What is more, procurement plans in the air force, some of which have been outstanding for years, need to be swiftly got off the ground. Now that the long overdue decisions to procure armed drones and, with the F-35, a new fighter aircraft for nuclear sharing have been taken, the next step must be to ensure tactical air transport through the procurement of heavy transport helicopters. With a look to the future, there is also an urgent need to modernise drastically scaled-down ground-based air defence to protect against the markedly increased threat posed by missiles and aircraft.

In the maritime dimension, too, the Bundeswehr needs to be better equipped to balance out Russia within the framework of NATO. Germany is a leading nation in the Baltic Sea, has to also make a substantial contribution to the Alliance's presence in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean and has pledged to NATO that it will provide at least 25 ocean-going surface units and eight submarines over the long-term. When it comes to such pledges and future expenditure, the German Navy primarily has a lack of powerful over water units for symmetrical battle scenarios. For the next "F126" frigate type, of which four units will be procured by 2027, the existing non-binding option for two more ships should therefore be drawn. To make a real step forward and to enable Germany to adequately fulfil its maritime duties and commitments, the procurement of six units of the next air defence frigate, "F127", planned for 2023, would also have to be considerably brought forward. The procurement of a successor model to the six submarines, which the Navy currently has in its inventory, should also be secured on schedule in cooperation with the Netherlands and be actively supported politically.

**In all dimensions and for the Bundeswehr as a whole, in addition to material procurement and organisational reforms, personnel requirements pose an urgent problem.**

In all dimensions and for the Bundeswehr as a whole, in addition to material procurement and organisational reforms, personnel requirements pose an urgent problem. Even the financial pledges made by the Federal Chancellor cannot solve the glaring personnel shortage in the armed forces. Instead, discussions need to be held on a modern form of military service that also contributes toward better anchoring the Bundeswehr in society and guarantees a more resilient German society beyond the field of defence.

In this context, German politicians and the public also need to have an honest discussion about how it wants to shape the image of German soldiers in the future. If war is to be waged in Europe again, if the Bundeswehr is to be rebuilt as one of the most powerful armed forces in Europe, and if fellow citizens in uniform are to defend the free democratic basic order with their lives, where necessary, then it needs to be clear that we also need a change in mindset. The image of the “aid worker in uniform” characterised by deployments abroad, is no longer in keeping with the times. That is why we also need to discuss society’s relationship with its armed forces. The Bundeswehr itself cannot initiate this debate – it is the responsibility of politicians.

## Authors

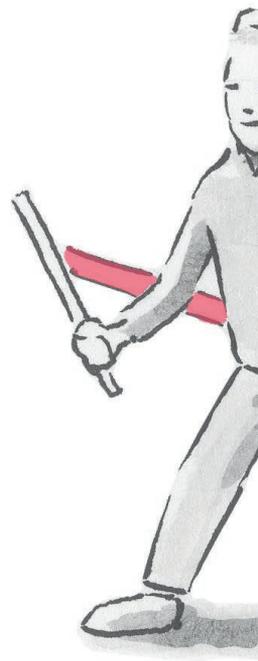
**Nils Wörmer** was Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s Department for “International Politics and Security” until May 2022. **Philipp Dienstbier** was Desk Officer for “Transatlantic Relations” at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

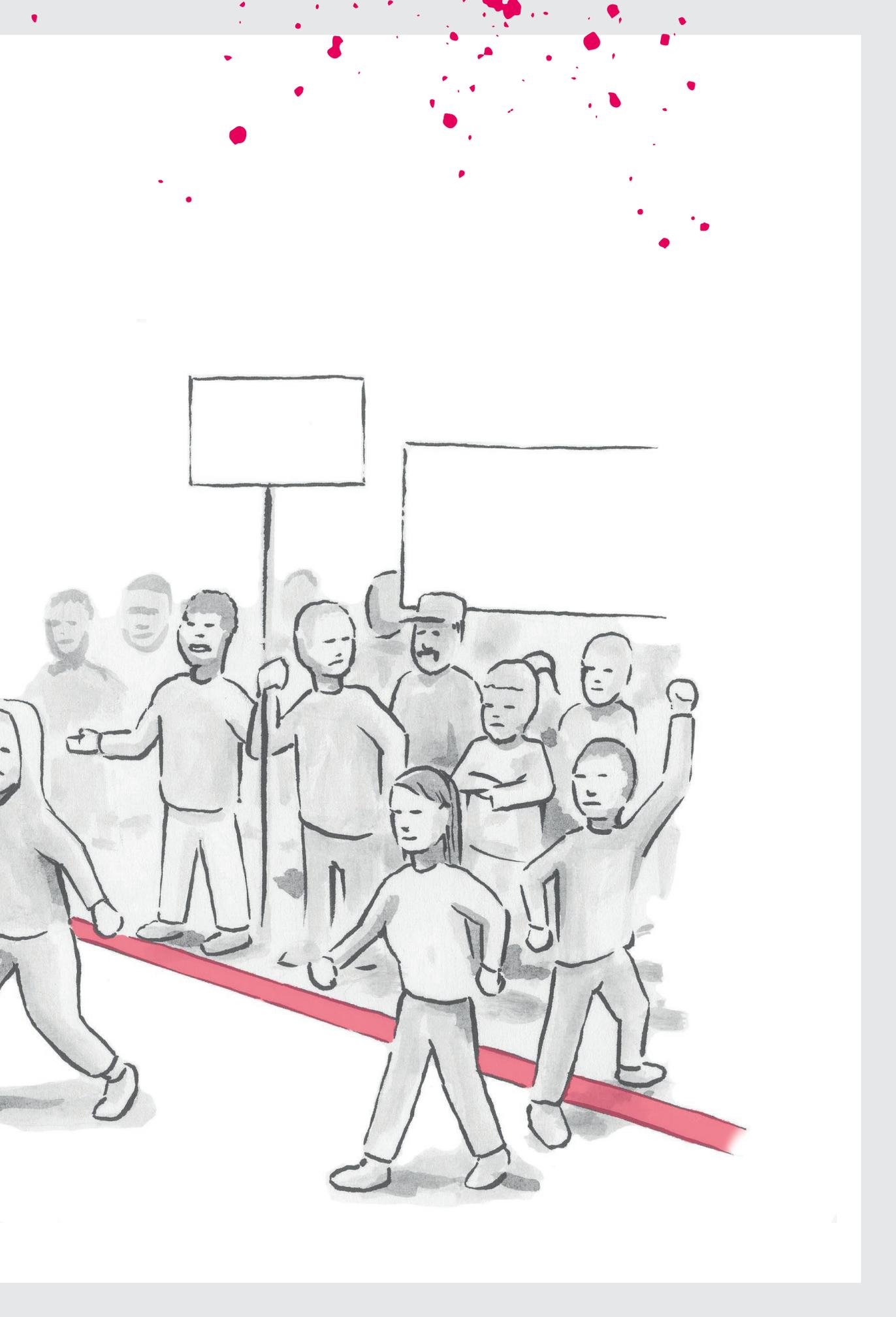
## Radicalisation and Extremism

# On the Difficulty of Dealing with Red Lines

**Steven Bickel  
and Nael Semaan**

Political and religious extremism confronts democratic states with enormous challenges. That's why calls for an "iron hand" may seem appealing at times. Combating such phenomena cannot be limited to the repressive component, however. Democratic systems thrive on the conviction and commitment of their citizens. Democracy will only be able to assert itself in the long run if extremist ideologies are banished from the mainstream of society.





Few images in recent years so strongly expressed democratic insecurity as the black, white, and red flags on the steps of the Reichstag building in Berlin after extremist forces broke through barriers, or those of the storming of the US Capitol in Washington DC by an incited throng of people. For many, they are symbolic of an increasingly aggressive division of democratic societies in the political West. They are an expression of social changes which posed a challenge to democracies even before the Corona pandemic and its socio-political repercussions.

For a long time, the initial situation looked good: in the early 1990s, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist dictatorships, the theory on the end of history by the American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, pointed to a golden future of liberal democracies.<sup>2</sup> It has now become clear that the liberal values are very difficult to enforce worldwide – and strong symptoms of decline are becoming apparent within liberal democracies. Extremists hailing from the right-wing spectrum through to right-wing terrorism, left-wing extremist forces, Islamists, and Islamist terrorism, as well as new extremisms based on various conspiracy theories that cannot be easily classified into existing spectra, are presenting democratic states and their domestic security with a growing number of challenges.

To start with – given that the concepts of extremism and radicalism are subject to constant criticism – a short definitional classification is in order. Radicalism, irrespective of how much it is used in political and social debates, is a controversial and ambiguous concept. In principle, it describes attitudes which intend to address (supposed or actually identified) problems at their source (lat. *radix*). Hence, radicalism “in some countries [...] even has a positive connotation”<sup>3</sup>. Especially in France, radicalism is often seen in a positive light in connection with the achievements of the French Revolution. Various authors attempt to differentiate the concept of radicalism from extremism and terrorism and point out that radicalisation does not necessarily have to describe a process that invariably leads to the use of force.<sup>4</sup> Owing to the versatility of the concept of radicalism, security authorities in particular have largely avoided it since the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Several political scientists give preference to the concept of extremism as only this term “takes account of the relationship toward democracy [and] thus has a unique, and, above all, central distinguishing feature as well as possessing an exclusively pejorative conceptual understanding [...]”<sup>6</sup>.

That cannot obscure the fact that extremism, too, has neither a nationally nor internationally uniform, recognised and undisputed definition. However, use of the concept does appear – especially against the background of its comprehensive classification, substantiation, and critical analysis – to be indispensable for the debate.<sup>7</sup> The main differences are between a positive definition, primarily shaped and used academically, and a normative one, which is commonly used by security authorities.

In this sense, extremism is conceived to be anti-constitutional; in other words, it resides outside the democratically defined political boundaries. The political scientists Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse proposed the following definition specifically for the German debate on political extremism: “The concept [...] should serve as a collective term for different convictions and aspirations, which agree on

a rejection of the democratic constitutional state and its fundamental values and rules of the game.”<sup>8</sup>

Terrorism is described as the “most aggressive and most militant form of extremism”<sup>9</sup>, which seeks to use violence and other criminal acts to achieve its political, extremist goals. The German Criminal Code defines these acts as encompassing offences to support terrorist activities (such as propaganda, financing) as well as their implementation (for example acts of violence such as murder or crimes against personal freedom). Here, legislation is directed against terrorist groups – colloquially known as terrorist organisations – as well as against individual persons. This is especially important in light of a structural change that has been witnessed in terrorist activities over recent years. Perpetrators are increasingly operating as individual persons as opposed to “classically” as members of a terrorist organisation.

## The Growing Danger

Democratic states are coming under pressure from extremists of the most diverse backgrounds with astonishing simultaneity; interactions and mutually reinforcing effects can be seen here. Extremism and tendencies toward radicalisation harbour a growing potential for danger in all liberal societies. Whenever a government’s possibility of being voted out of office, a division of powers, human rights, pluralism, rule of law, secularism, and popular sovereignty are called into question or attacked as “the substantive foundation for a vibrant democracy [...]”<sup>10</sup>, the basis of modern democracies is shaken.

It looks as though no pluralistic state can evade these kinds of developments. Even the United States of America, the most enduring democratic system in the political West, is apparently no longer able to contain extremist developments in a democratic discourse which threaten the security of the state. Images of the storming of the Capitol in Washington DC following Donald Trump’s electoral defeat in January 2021 shot around the world. This move was intended to undermine the confirmation of Joe Biden’s electoral victory by the Senate and Congress – and thus an integral part of the democratic rules of play (the possibility of being voted out of office).

Similar images emerged in Germany as early as August 2020, when right-wing extremists as well as conspiracy followers broke through barriers in front of the Reichstag building in Berlin during protests against Corona measures; the police only succeeded in holding them back after they had reached the entrance to parliament.

Both events exemplify developments which indicate that extremist structures are forming in all liberal democracies, challenging society and the state, and in the worst case, with fatal consequences or increasing destabilisation. Debates over recent decades have therefore been shaped by a (further) strengthening of extremist tendencies.

The attacks of 11 September 2001, those in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005 together with the second wave of jihadist attacks (Paris 2015, Brussels, Nice, and Berlin 2016) and the large number of European foreign fighters who left the country bound for Syria: all this shook the democratic community of values and led to a focus on the phenomenon of Islamism as well as a major adjustment of security architecture and legislation. At the same time, other extremist phenomena did not simply disappear: In our present day, a number of European security authorities estimate the threat from right-wing extremist-motivated violence to be “extremely high”<sup>11</sup>. The former Federal Minister of the Interior Horst Seehofer and his successor Nancy Faeser, even describe right-wing extremism as the greatest danger to the security of Germany.<sup>12</sup> For instance, “the number of right-wing terrorist incidents [...] in democratic constitutional states around the world (particularly the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, EU Member States) tripled between 2013 and 2018.”<sup>13</sup> As a whole, the number of right-wing extremist-motivated attacks in Europe and the US exceeds the number of Islamist ones<sup>14</sup>. In Germany, information on acts committed by the National Socialist Underground (NSU), the murder of the President of the Regional Government of Kassel, Walter Lübcke, and the attacks in Halle and Hanau gave rise to a new understanding on the serious danger posed by right-wing extremism.

Added to this is the fact that right- and left-wing phenomena are becoming more and more globally interconnected and interdependent. Whereas Islamists have been exploiting their international network for decades, extremists of all backgrounds are now able to exchange on both ideology and logistics at international level. These analogue and virtual networks and the global transfer of extremist ideologies present security authorities with the challenge of countering the radicalisation of individuals outside a fixed terrorist organisation unit. Individual perpetrators are often able to elude observation.



## All liberal democracies are characterised by strengthened extremist tendencies.

Even more dolorous is the fact that a demarcation from extremist conduct and attitudes is evidently being increasingly undermined. Extremist forces attempt to specifically impact upon mainstream society, selecting issues with a strong connection to people. For instance, right-wing extremists on relevant internet platforms deliberately give the impression that their extremist stance can, at first sight, be mistaken for “harmless patriotism”. Similar developments are manifesting themselves in the left-wing extremist and Islamist spectrum or in the actions taken by those with non-conformist ideas. The goal of extremist actors is to exploit legitimate, social views for their own extremist intentions.

If we attempt to examine the concurrence and reciprocity of different extremist tendencies, two main threat scenarios become clear: on the one hand, we can assume that an increase in extremist tendencies signals a growing danger for the lives of our fellow citizens. Terrorist violence plays a particularly important role here. While there is a danger of democratic systems being destabilised if extremist attitudes spread to mainstream society or broad support for democratic states erodes, on the other.

## Protection Mechanisms and Defensive Action

The realisation that radicalisation tendencies and extremism challenge democratic societies and their state order is not new. However, liberal societies have developed highly divergent answers to the question on how to deal with radicalism and extremism. Guiding principles for dealing with forces that oppose democracy itself are democratic theory and constitutional law considerations as well as historic experience.

Therefore, at first glance, presenting measures against radicalisation and extremism appears to be simpler than it is. Simply adopting Germany's system of defensive democracy would fall short of the mark, since it only represents one possibility; therefore, it is by no means the most prevalent way of dealing with enemies of democratically organised states.

All modern liberal democracies possess in their very principles protective mechanisms, to immunise themselves against the political danger of extremism. In other words, against the dangers to the democratic system. Based on the conviction of freedom of the individual and the existence of inviolable basic and human rights, democracy has to limit itself. A lengthy development and learning process gave rise to basic rights as defensive rights of the individual against the state, the principle of rule of law, a higher-ranking constitutional law, and, in many liberal democracies, a constitutional jurisdiction.<sup>15</sup> At institutional level, the division of powers affords fundamental protection against a takeover by extremist, radical powers.

While the US in particular has undergone continual democratic development since its founding, democratic systems in continental Europe have unravelled as a result of radical tendencies. This does not mean that there were no extremist developments in the US, but rather they had never influenced to such an extent that they put the democratic system itself in danger. The US fights against extremist and radical activities at a relatively late stage, repressive measures only take place when extremists violate (criminal) laws.

By way of contrast, Germany, with its constitution protection authorities, has a comprehensive system that aims to contain extremist aspirations before they pose a danger to the state. The de-

tailed constitutional fixation emanates from “German legal positivist customs”<sup>16</sup>. Rudolf van Hüllen and Thomas Grumke succinctly summarise this dichotomy: “In democracies rooted in tradition, [...] a profound and self-evident trust in liberal and democratic values suffices. In France, these are the inviolable republican fundamental values. In Great Britain, any effort to abolish the parliamentary system is automatically unworthy. In both cases, this clearly does not need to be enshrined by a specific legal framework.”<sup>17</sup>

The architects of the Basic Law in the Parliamentary Council, however, had to draw conclusions from the failure of the Weimar Republic; for, “besides errors in the constitutional construction, above all, the ease with which the National Socialists had pseudo-legally delegitimised and ultimately defeated the unpopular Republic, remained in their memory”<sup>18</sup>. Accordingly, the Basic Law was and had to create an order, which was able to protect itself against its defeat by legal means. Based on the theories propounded by Karl Loewenstein and Karl Mannheim on fortified democracy, the Basic Law contains an extensive system of protection mechanisms. Fortified or defensive democracy therefore rests on three pillars: an adherence to values, readiness for defence and a forward-looking protection of democracy.<sup>19</sup>

The adherence to values finds expression in the protection of the inviolability of human dignity (Art. 1 Basic Law) and the structural principles of state order in Article 20 of the Basic Law, which are safeguarded against any changes resulting from a majority decision by the so-called eternity clause (Art. 79 para. 3). In its rulings to ban the Socialist Reich Party (SRP) in 1952 and in proceedings to ban the NPD in 2017, the Federal Constitutional Court defined the guidelines of the Basic Law in terms of the core elements of the free democratic basic order: human dignity, the principle of democracy and rule of law.<sup>20</sup>

Repressive measures banning the party (Art. 21 para. 2 Basic Law), the ban on associations (Art. 9 para. 2 Basic Law) and the forfeit of fundamental rights (Art. 18 Basic Law) can be subsumed under the readiness for defence. Except the ban on anti-constitutional associations, these measures have only rarely been or – in the case of forfeiture of basic rights – never applied. This category also includes public service employees’ loyalty to the constitution.<sup>21</sup>

**Liberal societies have developed highly divergent strategies for dealing with radicalism and extremism.**

The fact that the state does not wait until extremist actors violate against (criminal) laws before it reacts, pertains to a forward-looking protection of democracy. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the relevant State Offices play a vital role in protecting the democratic constitutional state against efforts to counter the free democratic basic order. The Annual Reports on the Protection of the Constitution provide the public with insights into anti-constitutional endeavours and thus make an important contribution to clarifying facts.

Civic education is crucial for the protection against radicalisation and extremism, too. Firstly, it helps to identify extremist aspirations; secondly, it strengthens recognition of social processes of negotiation and resilience to extremism by imparting knowledge about the political system and democratic education.

Experience with an internationally active and networked Islam has now led to cooperation having been reinforced at both international and European level. The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) and the “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism” (2016) are important steps at UN level, while the “Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism” (2009) is an important milestone at EU level.

For all the focus on state measures, however, it is necessary to emphasise that the most effective protection against extremism and radicalisation stems from the respective societies themselves. Liberal democracies can only function if they have broad support in society, and extremist tendencies are rejected by a majority. Accordingly important is therefore the role of civil society actors who oppose various forms of extremism. Here, there is also a growing realisation about the need for close cooperation between civil society initiatives and security authorities at national and international level.

# Defensive – But How?

The potential for danger is identified, dealing with extremism is presented in its differences, contrasts, and historic conditions. This all makes it clear that: if they want to protect themselves against extremist aspirations over the long-term, liberal democracies must take a society-wide approach. Here, it is not enough to call for state measures or intend to simply transfer the German model of defensive democracy.

Liberal democracies can only be effectively protected if a vast majority of the population is united against any form of extremist aspirations. This includes a willingness to defend the fundamental values of democracy openly and with the necessary determination. Fundamental values of liberal democratic states must be embedded in the minds of and lived by the majority population. A “quiet” mainstream society against “loud” extremists will endanger democracy. Extremist actors need to be aware that they are distancing themselves from an irrefutable set of standards and crossing over “red lines”.

The state must do everything in its power to preserve and strengthen high levels of trust in the institutions of (representative) democracy. The often incorrectly depicted Böckenförde dilemma (which actually relates to the liberal secular state) hits upon an issue in the often cited interpretation that the democratic state lives on conditions, which it itself cannot guarantee: democratic states cannot turn their citizens into staunch democrats through legal coercion and rules. Still, this does not mean that democracies cannot create or preserve their own democratic ethos by means of civic education and measures for promoting democracy. However, this can only succeed if civic education also reaches those people who need it most. Democracy must be lived but also learnt across society and all its different layers. A fundamental understanding of the complexity of democratic negotiation processes and the fostering of democratic skills, such as acceptance of plurality, empathy, and a willingness to compromise, are important starting points for immunising people against extremist aspirations. To achieve this goal, democratic education needs to be started and assimilated at an early stage (during childhood and adolescence).

An essential question emerges in this sense: How should democratic societies deal with people who start to adopt an extremist mindset? An exclusion from discourse and the social environment rarely leads to a reversal, but rather to further radicalisation (owing to the friend-foe thinking that strongly characterises extremism). Therefore, democratic societies need to draw “red lines” while also remaining willing to communicate at the same time. Views that violate human dignity can never be tolerated by democrats and democrats cannot be indifferent toward the expression of such views. The goal must always be to engage people with such views in open discourse. That may be difficult, and at times impossible, especially for adherents of conspiracy theories or closed extremist world views; whereas with sympathisers, this could afford an opportunity to win them back in favour of the democratic liberal value system.

It is also important to ensure that the concept of extremism is not used in an inflationary way and misused to discredit legitimate, albeit unpopular positions. Although extremist forces need to be clearly designated, state intervention and approaches must adhere to transparent guidelines. Annual Reports on the Protection of the Constitution, which identify extremist positions and individuals based on clear criteria, are important in this context. The often instinctive use of the concept of extremism in the public debate can be counter-productive, however.

It is also important to offer those who follow extremist structures and ideologies a potential way out and to enable opportunities for deradicalisation. This requires close and effective cooperation between civil society actors and security authorities. Only through targeted knowledge transfer between prevention and deradicalisation institutions as well as the police and the Office for the Protection of the Constitution can extremist criminal or violent acts be prevented. The problem here is that potential offenders' lack of trust in security authorities makes direct prevention or deradicalisation work virtually impossible. For some time, however, German offices for protection of the constitution have sought to directly address (potentially) radicalised people on a case-by-case basis, in order to convince them to leave or to participate in deradicalisation programmes.

To combat extremism, the capacities of security authorities – especially the intelligence services that serve as a “warning system” – need to be cleverly exploited and deployed in a targeted manner. Hence, a threat increase in one area of phenomenon must not result in personnel capacities and skills being expanded to the detriment of threats previously treated as a priority. Therefore, in addition to the operational focus, the political focus on combating all extremisms is fundamental above all – even before a high-profile act of violence takes place. In the aftermath of the right-wing extremist attacks in Halle and Hanau, increasing criticism has been levelled against security authorities and politicians for having lost sight of a rise in right-wing extremism in their fight against Islamism. With the growing awareness of right-wing extremism, we can observe how authorities sometimes shift personnel from departments for combating Islamism to those combating right-wing extremism.

It is also crucial that the relationship between freedom and security is re-examined time and again. Rather than being opposites, freedom and security are mutually dependent on one another. Democratic states need to be willing and able to respond to new threats from extremist actors with their security legislation. In a world that is becoming ever-more digitalised, security authorities must fulfil their duties and effectively protect society and the state against extremisms. Moreover, extremism research needs to take on a more international focus and identify international connections. The international transfer of ideology, expedited by the internet and social media, as well as existing and emerging networks, need to be examined transparently and made available to the public. Here, it is important to reach joint and universally valid definitions in state and academic analysis. This would also facilitate cooperation between international security services that invariably face bureaucratic obstacles, such as the adjustment of international statistics owing to a paucity of definitions or data protection restrictions.



## Authors

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## Populism and Contempt for Elites

# Listening as an Approach

**Stefan Hofmann**

Political apathy and a contempt for elites have long ceased to be marginal phenomena. The relationship between the state and its citizens has undergone radical change and therefore needs new forms of legitimacy. Representative democracy is more dependent on fruitful interaction between politicians and citizens than ever before. Those claiming that citizens alone are responsible for the current grievances, fail to recognise the responsibility of politics.





War as a binding agent? In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting closing of ranks between many democratic states, there are some who foster the hope that Europe could put many divisive quarrels behind it. This hope may, however, be premature given that populism and a contempt for elites have taken hold not only in Germany, but also in a plethora of established democracies around the world in recent decades; very slowly at first, and then with increasing vehemence.

Political apathy, angry citizens, those with non-conformist ideas – in many facets we experience how a growing number of population groups are distancing themselves from representative patterns of decision-making and their representatives. The Corona crisis fans the flames of conflict that has erupted over the legitimacy of decision-making processes and patterns of discourse. This conflict is being instrumentalised by those for whom the liberal, democratic constitutional state was already a thorn in their side. We experience moments of escalation right through to physical threats and violence. Breaching taboos, insults, coercion in the Bundestag, riots, death threats, and unfortunately more: today's political culture is coming under noticeable pressure.

## Two Risks for Democracy

Two risks are emerging for our democracy. On the one hand, there is increasing irreconcilability between the respective camps – whether that be dealing with refugees, compulsory vaccinations and even intra-party when deciding between candidates for political office. The “non-controversial sector”<sup>22</sup>, perceived by the political scientist Ernst Fraenkel as vital regarding the legitimacy of decision-making and the escalation threshold of political discourse, is on the retreat. Political and social cohesion are in decline, and representative decision-making processes are being gradually delegitimised.

While, on the other hand, active political involvement is becoming less attractive for many. Almost every politician faces harsh hostility. When thinking about becoming politically involved, many ask themselves: “Do I want to subject myself to that?” This could set a negative spiral in motion. To put it bluntly: Only the “hard-nosed”, who deal well with conflict, but are not necessarily good at moderating them, will still aspire – according to the hypothesis – to a career in politics over the long term. As a result, political dialogue between the political elite and citizens could (continue to) lose empathy. Another avoidance strategy for escalating conflicts is an escape from personal exposure through substantive and public positioning in a form of (supposed) purely fact-based expert policy. This has potentially problematic consequences, too, since politics is inevitably a trade-off between competing values and options. These dilemmas can only be explained, and seldom resolved. In the end, this means adopting a position and hence vulnerability.

# Four Factors for Estrangement and Distancing

The causes of this at least partial distancing and estrangement between citizens and their elected representatives are diffuse. Four factors seem to be relevant:

## Factor 1: Agoraphobia and Claustrophobia

The phenomena of pluralisation of lifestyles and individualisation following a phase of breathing a sigh of relief in the 1980s, in which more and more people threw off the yoke of prescribed ways of life, seems for some to culminate in a kind of agoraphobia: a fear of the disorientation of the vast space. The agony of choosing their own way of life is linked to the anxiety of not exploiting their lives to the full. This anxiety looks for a trigger, a reason, a cause, and the feeling of helplessness often gives way to anger. An anger that often erupts onto randomly selected scapegoats: refugees, “foreigners”, religious and sexual minorities.

Pluralisation did not culminate in a fear of the expanse for everyone. Another section of the population shifted their own boundaries of social convention to an ever greater extent, having developed an understanding of freedom and individuality that does not like to be constrained by any authority. This would explain the growing number of attacks on members of organisations that stand for public welfare and its stable framework: police, fire brigade, rescue workers, and, of course, politicians. Authority, once an expression of the governed and ordered, is generally viewed with doubt. As an extreme, and perhaps a hybrid form in the above-cited categories, are the self-proclaimed Reich citizens, who evidently would like to see the return of a supposedly more ordered world, which, however, no longer exists – and probably never did.

## Factor 2: Fear of Loss of Control

Connected to this is a fear of loss of control, the cause of which is virtually impossible to define, that may creep up on many people. These are changes that occur in a concealed, gradual way and thus often – as aptly formulated by the sociologist Ulrich Beck – “beneath the attention threshold”<sup>23</sup>. For instance, the following, with their accompanying fear of a loss of belonging, to name only the most visible elements, exhibit overtones of threat and uncontrollability: technological revolutions, climate change; changing roles and images of family, economic issues,<sup>24</sup> the end of the myth of sovereignty in a multilateral and competitive world, cultural transformation, and the open question on national, sexual, religious, and cultural identity. In our society, two groups are at risk of distancing themselves from one another: that group which (also) perceives transformation as a threat, and that which welcomes it as progress and an expression of freedom.

Here is a modern example: the dichotomy of *somewheres* and *anywheres* as a way of life.<sup>25</sup> For the *somewheres*, belonging to a religion, to a cultural group, even to a dialect or food tradition, seems essential for assuring themselves of their own identity. For the *anywheres*, the traditional affiliations, to put it simply, are nothing but chains that need to be cast off. They fulfil their wish for belonging, which seems to be inherent in humans as a *zoon politikon* (political animal), by building connections to a broad portfolio of potential identities.

**In our society, two groups are at risk of distancing themselves from one another: that group which (also) perceives transformation as a threat, and that which welcomes it as progress and an expression of freedom.**

### Factor 3: The Pitfall of Rationality

It is precisely politics that seeks to adopt a rational approach toward the unpredictable and the rivalry between competing values. The usually invisible weighing up, balancing and justification of uncomfortable facts without complementary, empathic communication, promotes distance between the governed and the governing classes. The dilemma in which political decision-making often finds itself, cannot find expression and therefore remains obscure. This probably occurs because empathy could be (mis)construed as a weakness of leadership.

Especially during Corona times, it became clear how fatal this approach can be. The virus, with its unpredictability, unsettled many people here in Germany. Masks, lock down, school closures, compulsory vaccination – sometimes it is good when politicians show resolve to contain fears. However, if advancements in scientific knowledge lead to clear announcements (“vaccinating protects against infection”) becoming meaningless overnight (“only with vaccination boosters can we reduce the potential danger of an infection that is still possible”), trust in political decision-makers declines. Those who, from the outset, articulate that, in light of the situation, a cautious approach needs to be taken, face much less risk of damaging the delicate trust between the governed and the governing classes.

There are three strategies which, without accompanying communication, could all result in confusion: act, dismiss, ignore.

Act: if politicians respond with actions – more police, greater number of deportations – its protagonists are often surprised that the mollifying effect fails to materialise. A well-known phenomenon in private life: two people meet, one of whom reports on their worries and the other immediately responds with proposed solutions. We all know from our private lives: this usually goes wrong. Having said that, action can be the right strategy when it comes to demonstrating an ability to act in crises. Yet, action, using the example of a “car-scrap bonus” during the financial and economic crisis, is then more of a psychological tool than a coherent economic measure.

Dismiss: in the constituencies, citizens regularly confront their representatives with their own worries, concerns, or suggestions. Their worries are often dismissed as unjustified, their concerns as minor, and their suggestions as unrealistic. From an objective standpoint, this can be right at times, but it intensifies the feeling of helplessness and a loss of control of oneself; this, as described above, is fuelled by many sources. An appreciation of those who show initiative, communicate, and place trust in their representatives is an important emotional anchor in the dialogue, in addition to purely fact-based communication. Ultimately, the election of a representative body is not only a temporary transfer of sovereignty, but is also closely linked to a trust in this power being wielded responsibly.

Ignore: at the same time, we experienced attempts at appeasement through communicative, and at times inactive, ignoring of upcoming processes of change (energy revolution, structural change especially in the automotive industry, diversity of lifestyles). Worse still: if the changing reality does not match their own view of the world, politics is denounced as having “shifted to the left” when it reacts to societal change. Would it not be much better to identify

outstanding issues, problems, and conflicting goals, even if there is no solution yet? During the refugee crisis in 2015, an effective approach would have been: to address, from the outset, that Germany and Europe have to provide humanitarian aid, but at the same time, traumatised, brutalised, or badly educated people will enter the country, who are not easy to integrate. Instead, also due to concerns about latent xenophobia among parts of the population, the communicative focus was on the demographic benefits for Germany as a business location. The pendulum then swung at the latest following the night of New Year's Eve in Cologne. "Dosed reality" arouses mistrust. As a rule, appeasement only succeeds over the short-term; the impact of subsequent disappointment is all the greater.

Not all the above strategies are wrong per se. Yet, they seldom work without addressing the fears and feelings that exist among the population.

#### **Factor 4: Changes to the Media Landscape**

Ultimately, changes in communicative cultures in the variety of media also contribute towards problematic emotionalisation at times; this finds no counterpart in the classic communication forms adopted by rationally aligned politics. These changes include the elimination of the *gatekeeper* function, which journalism once carried out in a clear range of press products, owing to the open nature of the internet in the diversity of so-called social media. Anyone can write and publish anything; in addition to serious, critical information, filter bubbles are created whose reach grows due to fuelling emotions and radicalising contents. Media data that used to be relevant for the level of advertising rates according to circulation range, circulation area and audience share, were at least temporarily replaced by click rates. As a result of changes in business models in the 2010s away from more subscription-based, linear media in favour of an ad-financed online medium, profitability required the corresponding traffic. The technical term: *Clickbaiting*. Emotions attract more of the sought-after clicks than is the case with sober facts. The motto "only bad news is good news" still applies, but has been immensely accelerated on the trans rapid route of the internet without a *gatekeeper* and engine driver. This is a tendency that even private and public quality media can scarcely avoid. Even those who produce or consume this media in a reflective manner cannot escape the polarisation of their environment. What is more, our brain is geared toward prioritising information that could pose a risk. In a sense, the sabre-toothed tiger warning system lives on in us.

In short: the interplay between advertising-based business models, social media, and algorithm technology has initiated a polarising spiral of escalation, the scope of which, despite our reflection on this, is only slowly being taken into account in political communication and has not been countered as yet. Do we perhaps need a form of communicative disarmament when it comes to triggering suspicion and mistrust of politics, even on the part of quality media?

# One Attempted Solution and Two Problems

Many people recall the attempts to counter these phenomena, which mainly manifested themselves in the formation of a right-wing populist party in Germany, by adopting their themes and sometimes also their forms of communication: a “clear edge”, harsh rhetoric in migration policy, even from parts of the political centre, an emphasis on a (often also really necessary) “strong state”. The CDU and CSU Union parties were not the only ones to attempt to contain potential protest among voters, who had radically distanced themselves from established parties, by addressing “proposed solutions” from the AfD party; a party which was riding on this emotional wave.

This has given rise to two problems, according to the theory provided for discussion here.

**Problem 1:** Those affected are not genuinely looking for a solution to (often exaggerated) specific concerns. Rather, it is about recognising perfectly justified, but not necessarily in toto resolvable fears and worries, as understandable and legitimate in the first place, naming them, and reducing their threat by dealing with them in public and political discourse.

**Problem 2:** By reacting to a protest, in other words, acknowledging a supposedly objectively justified cause-effect relationship, a category of emotions is triggered that is very difficult to capture again. In short, you could say: interested groups make an elephant out of a molehill. Politicians react as if there were in fact an elephant. Once people are in a state of outrage and polarisation, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach them through communication and argumentation.

# Lived Authenticity, Mindfulness and Empathy

Emotions play a bigger role in our lives as humans than we sometimes realise. The iceberg model derives from Sigmund Freud and others, which points to the predominant share of non-rational (but therefore not anti-rational) determinants in communicative situations, which are overlooked in the reason-fixated discourse. This has been taken up by various politicians. The Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg, Winfried Kretschmann, called this the “policy of being heard”. While the Minister-President of Saxony Michael Kretschmar also owes

his position to his reputation as a responsive communicator if nothing else. This is important: postulating authenticity, mindfulness, and empathy is not what counts – they want to be lived (out).

This gives rise to three tasks with structural, personal, and inclusive elements. They are united by the motto “one of us rather those at the top”.

Task 1: Organisations’ ability to empathise grows with their own personnel heterogeneity. The more diverse an organisation is from the inside, the more points of contact it will find with its social environment. At the same time, they incorporate social differentiation into their internal decision-making processes. People’s parties need to recognise that their internal recruitment mechanisms do not always tend to focus on contemporary social models even in spite of change. For instance, do women or migrants find their way on to district committees or electoral lists? How great are the chances for those with potential, but who have not yet made their way up in the district association? When nominating candidates, do parties focus more on local and internally justified proportional representation than on reflecting social diversity? Do they “reach out” when approaching religious groups, associations, populations groups, and social organisations? Are they prepared to allow outsiders to jump from the outside onto their own lists? Only those who succeed in making a versatile and compatible offer will be able to position themselves for the future over the long term. Otherwise, the pond in which bait is thrown, will become foreseeably smaller.

Task 2: Even the best specialist politician cannot get by in the long run without genuine, empathetic encounters with his or her electorate. That means not only listening as a ritual, but also as an approach, devoting oneself to all kinds of different people and their concerns with a willingness to address their perspective – no matter how crude it may appear – and reacting to this viewpoint in a communicative way. Demarcation is also possible here. Extremist theories should and must not be tolerated by anyone. But a discussion on the question on what drives people into the arms of evidently mean-spirited demagogues is a useful compass and helps prevent against the flight into a morality that serves as a weapon as opposed to creating a sense of solidarity.

Task 3: Ambition, assertiveness and sometimes an elbow mentality could be necessary qualities for surviving in the political business. Even more important selection criteria for top personnel, however, are the ability to empathise, approachability, authenticity, and credibility. Only these qualities will close the emotional gap between the governing and the governing classes. Purely specialist competence and skills in management and project monitoring are important. They are expected, too. Yet, political representatives who lack the above cited soft skills and the ability to work in a team will face increasing problems. It could therefore be worthwhile to draw up target profiles and compare them with the actual profiles in order to enhance recruiters’ intuition – for example at an election party conference – by means of a reflective instrument.

Summary: Not everyone is able to authentically communicate with the whole spectrum of population groups. This can only be achieved by those who see diversity as a strength and have the courage, in the face of all resistance from the media, to admit their own shortcomings and mistakes.

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## Polarisation and New Cultural Wars

# The Guerrilla War of Wokeness

Matthias Oppermann

Those who think cultural wars are from another era, are wrong. Current debates on identity politics have also long ceased to objectively exchange on arguments, and instead focus on ostracising unpopular perspectives from political discourse. Still, the dangers that these emerging dynamics pose to democratic cohesion are systematically underestimated and played down.





Nobody can say that Nicolas Sarkozy has damaged the cohesion of French society. Yet, of course, it has been and continues to be claimed. He polarised society by exaggerating problems, it is said. Or he inflamed the mood with rhetoric hyperbole. Indeed, especially in the 2007 and 2012 presidential election campaigns, he did not hold back when it came to addressing undesirable developments. It is a well-rehearsed tactic of the political left to cry “fire-starter” when someone points out that the house is on fire. Sarkozy, when running for President of the French Republic in 2007, simply addressed issues that affected *France profonde* and against which no French politician can govern. He contested the presidential election campaign with two major topics: the promise of liberal reforms that intended to get France’s economy back on its feet again, and a commitment to defending national identity.

Sarkozy pitted France’s republican model against the disintegration of society into clearly demarcated “identities”. In his speech dated 30 March 2007 he said: “I want each individual’s identity to be respected. I don’t want anyone to forget their origins, history, culture, because I believe that differences enrich us. However, I do want immigration policy to be connected to integration policy. After all, what is successful integration if people don’t feel French through and through? [...] On 22 April and 6 May, the French will have to choose between the unity of France, based on the principle of equality, and communitarianism. [...] I reject communitarianism, which opens the way to tribal law and violence.”<sup>26</sup>

In France, “communitarianism” does not mean the current of political philosophy that emphasises the community bond of the individual, but instead the disintegration of national community into parallel societies following their own rules. Sarkozy’s stance against this “communitarianism” aimed to put an end to lasting conflict between the French majority society and representatives of a radical Islam. Sarkozy did not want a cultural battle between the Republic and political Islam.

## A New “Communitarianism”

Today, a new “communitarianism” not only threatens France, but also the entire liberal West. Only, the representatives of new “communitarianism” do not preach in mosques, but at universities and in the media. Here we are referring to the fight of left-wing identity politics, imported from the United States to other Western countries, the woke culture, against pluralistic societies deemed to be structurally “oppressive”, “racist”, and “sexist”.

For some years now, the concept of *identity politics* has been common in Europe, too. The concept was shown to have first been used among black lesbian women in the US, but has its origins in the *New Left* of the 1960s. Here it is about being sensitive toward actual perceived disadvantages faced by women or ethnic or gender minorities. This sensibility – wokeness – then engenders certain political demands.

# The Nature of Left-Wing Identity Politics

Calls for a transformation of social relations derive from the creation of identity based on a collective experience of discrimination. Social relations are described using the concepts of power and impotence; belonging to a gender or an ethnicity is considered crucial for the status of each member of a certain group in society.

The majority society, in other words, the section of society that is supposedly privileged due to certain characteristics, should become aware of their position of power and advocate for eliminating differences. From the perspective of identity policy representatives, the privileged person cannot freely develop a real awareness of the situation facing minorities, since they themselves would have to belong to this group in question in each case. Means of eliminating disadvantages include support programmes, quotas and scholarships for members of certain ethnic groups, but also the avoidance of actions and expressions that some minorities could perceive as discriminatory.

Critics of identity politics reproach its representatives for aspiring to entirely transform society by erasing a past from the collective memory that they perceive as a country's history of oppression. This is manifested by calls to remove monuments or to rename streets, for example. Another large-scale attack on freedom of opinion takes the form of scientists being prevented from expressing their views at universities or in other contexts, which deviate from what representatives of wokeness consider to be correct and acceptable. This is why critics speak of a cancel culture.

## Threat to Liberal Democracy

It is the paradox of identity politics that its advocates, based on a wilful interpretation of political liberalism, strive for the greatest possible freedom of the individual, while also tying this individual to a collective identity characteristic that is more important than the promise of individuality. In this context, Armin Nassehi refers to how the formation of individual "collectivities"<sup>27</sup> within the political community harbours the potential for polarisation, which could culminate in a kind of cultural war.

Traditionally, the concept of "identity" is not only occupied by the radical right in Germany, but also across Europe and especially in France. This primarily applies to the various groups summarised under the collective concept of identarian movement. The

identarian movement pursues the goal of an ethnically homogeneous society that excludes all population groups perceived as “foreign”. Even though the identity politics of the woke movement certainly cannot be equated with the identarian movement, they share one

## The concept of “identity” is not only traditionally occupied by the radical right in Germany, but also across Europe and especially in France.

common feature: namely, the attempt to define people according to a single clear-cut identity, while also depriving all those who do not fulfil this identity criterion of their right to even understand this characteristic of identity.

On the one side, there is the absolutism of an exclusive imagined ethnic community, and a kind of tribalism according to which society falls into differing groups, each with their own rights, on the other. Both are incommensurate with the promise of freedom underpinning liberal democracy. The antagonism of both movements also increases the risk of a cultural war that passes mainstream society by, but also significantly impedes it.

## Where Do We Stand?

Having said that, this conflict does not pit two firmly entrenched monolithic blocs against each other. The “silent majority” invoked by Richard Nixon, which really exists, does not express itself. And why should it? Wokeness and identity politics are an issue taken up by militant activists. In the US, the backdrop for their activities are primarily the elite universities and media, which became a domain of the left a long time ago. Representatives of woke culture operate in protected locations where they can exert direct influence and ensure conformity for their benefit through a climate of intimidation. In this way, they have influenced the country’s left-wing liberal elite such that they now even subject the business community to their established rules. Not out of conviction, but to avoid losing any customers.

In this regard, the left-wing identarian activists are like a kind of warrior in a guerrilla war for the supposedly good cause of wokeness – extremely successful guerrillas, it has to be said. Owing to this success – the media presence and influence on businesses – and the fact that the conflict has now reached schools, too, it involves the

whole of society. Commensurate with the democratic character of society, the American cultural war is an extensive phenomenon.

Nobody should take comfort from the fact that woke-ness revolutionaries in Europe have not yet achieved the same success. Importing the conflict has already led to similar cultural and social phenomena to those in the US: the clash of an awakened avantgarde in science, media, and politics that wants to redefine human nature and the defenders of traditional “values”. Lists of unpopular people, whose names are to disappear from street signs, are circulating in city councils. Just like in the US, importance is placed neither on the presumption of innocence nor on truly factual arguments. In Munich-Schwabing, even Erich Kästner made it onto such a list.<sup>28</sup> Contemporary iconoclasts resent him for having emigrated within Germany as opposed to going into exile during the era of National Socialist tyranny.

Whereas the impact of a cancel culture in academia and media are bemoaned – not always entirely accurately – or the gender star is fought against with verve. The latter can now be found in company statements as well as in the Berlin State Administration, at many schools, universities or even announcements at general practitioners. It may not be possible to presume that people invariably understand what ideological concept underlies the star. What is more, its advocates cannot rule out that it is used ironically at times, which does in fact happen. Here, therefore, composure would be better than a posse of culture warriors. With Edmund Burke, we could say: “The individual is foolish; the multitude, for the moment, is foolish, when they act without deliberation; but the species is wise, and, when time is given to it, as a species it always acts right.”<sup>29</sup> There is hope in this regard that the gender star will in time be superseded by a more meaningful, non-ideological way of spelling.

## The Mission of the Political Centre

Representatives of the liberal-democratic centre would thus be well advised to not let themselves get drawn into a battle between left- and right-wing extremists, but to intervene in areas where they can make a difference. The fact that the centre still knows how to defend itself in some pluralistic countries or, following a period of paralysis, is slowly regaining its defensibility, can be observed in Great Britain, for instance. After the United States, Great Britain has perhaps been most affected by the impact of woke culture. Whoever believes that there is a cancel culture at German universities, should look across the channel. The state of affairs has reached such an alarming level that the Conservative government has now intervened. On 12 May 2021, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson introduced the “Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill” into the House of Commons.<sup>30</sup> The draft bill has already been subject to two readings, but still has a long way to go. Once it is passed, all academics and students who face disadvantages at British universities for hav-

ing expressed “controversial” views, will be entitled to compensation. Universities and student associations that violate or do not guarantee freedom of opinion, will be fined.

In France, too, the right-wing liberal government countered demands made by left-wing activists some time ago: when Prime Minister, now Mayor of Le Havre, Édouard Philippe, decreed back in November 2017 that the French equivalent of the gender star, the point milieu, must not be used in administrative texts. The circular letter determined the validity of the generic masculine, while also calling for the more frequent use of masculine and feminine forms together.<sup>31</sup>

Both examples illustrate how it can be useful when centrist governments counter the demands of woke culture with reasonable regulations. In light of external threats, particularly from Russia, China, and Islamist terrorism, the liberal West cannot afford any “communitarianism” in the French sense of the word. The Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 also demonstrated to those, who for a long time refused to believe it, that the world is still an unstable place. Liberal democrats in general, and especially in the West, will survive in this century only if they are both willing and able to defend themselves and their interests. By driving a wedge between different social groups, woke culture emboldens tyrants such as Vladimir Putin in their belief that liberal democracies are weak. In this way, woke culture undermines the only model of civilisation that recognises and protects minorities of all kinds. We cannot expect the new Jacobins to identify this contradiction, which is why the political centre is tasked with making them understand this. If it fails to do so, we will find ourselves on a path toward an entirely different tribalism to that which Nicolas Sarkozy warned against in 2007. The West would have to pay a high price.

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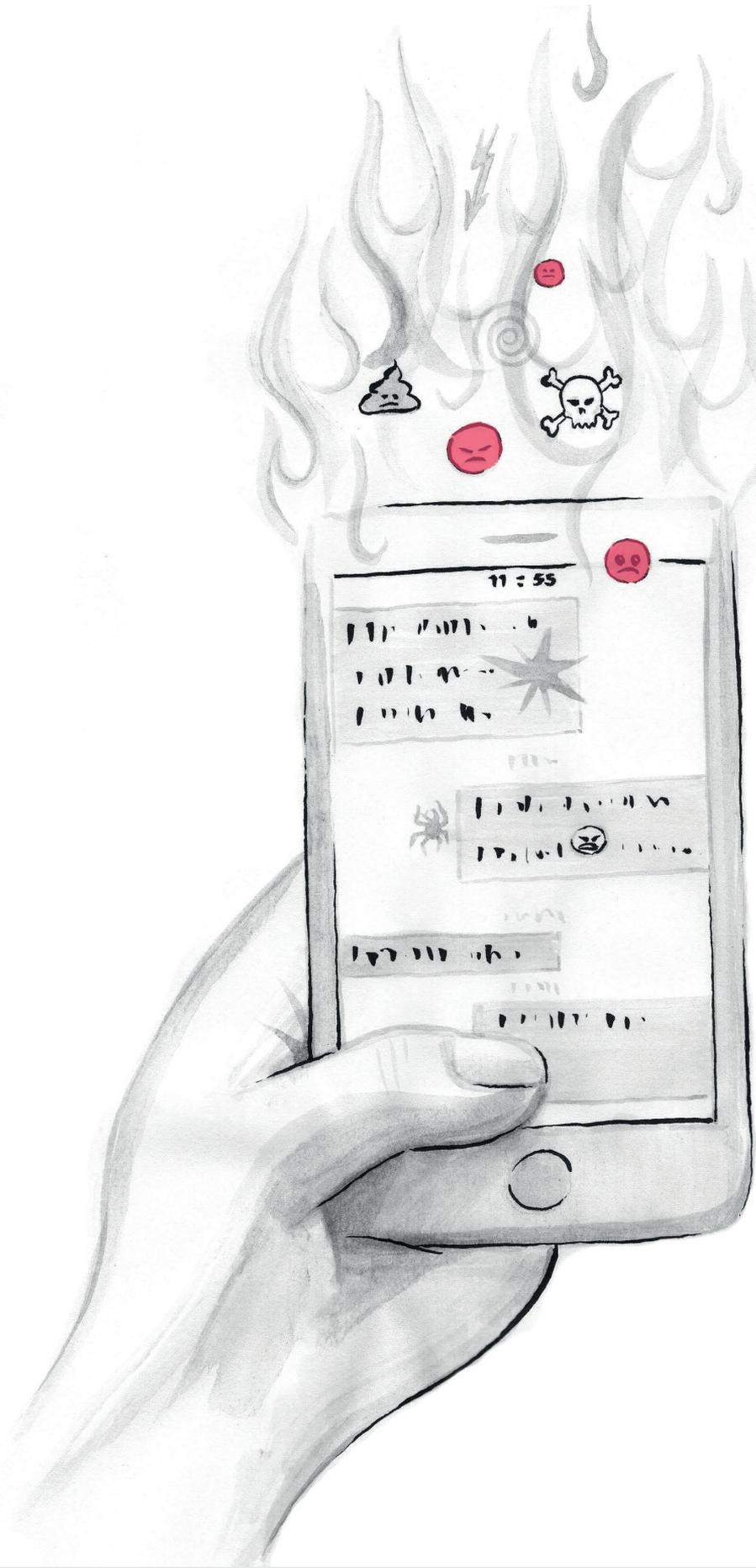
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Disinformation and Hate Speech

# The Ugly Face of Free Speech

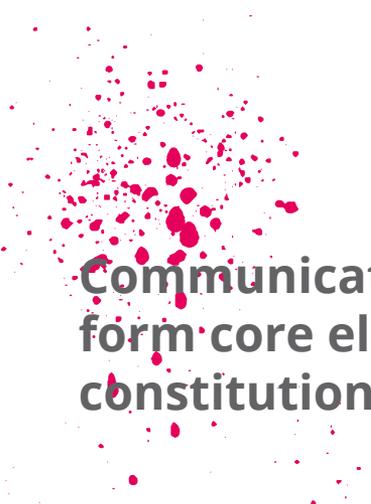
**Daphne Wolter**

Communication and information represent the cornerstones of our democracy. Even more dangerous is the abuse of free speech, however. In the era of the internet, hate speech and disinformation have reached new dimensions and are now endangering social cohesion. How can we effectively combat these phenomena without compromising free speech itself?



The internet has become part of *the* global information infrastructure and enables exchange of information anywhere at any time. Social networks provide structures in which each user can simultaneously send and receive contents (so-called *user generated content*). In this way, information and comments from social networks infiltrate the classical media formats of professional content providers and can thus flow into corporate decisions or political events. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has dramatically illustrated the socio-political role of the media and the importance of freedom of the press. Many reports on Russian attacks rely on images and videos recorded by people on-site with their mobile devices and spread across social media.

Communication and information form the core elements of our democratic constitutional order, encompassing basic communication services but also the protection of free speech. The abuse of free speech is even more thorny and dangerous: verbal aggression and provocations, disinformation, fake news and the manipulation of opinion, which shake fundamental consensus within society, have reached new dimensions in the age of digital communication. Although insults or misinformation are not new phenomena, the internet has exacerbated the problem: the sheer volume of hate speech and disinformation has considerably increased – and the rise is dramatic during times of crisis or war.



## Communication and information form core elements of our democratic constitutional order.

This development raises new questions on the tension between free speech, freedom of information, and the protection of personality: will our democracy be strengthened by the great diversity and freedom online considering increased opportunities for participating in political discourse? Or do current phenomena such as fake news or hate speech pose a danger to free speech and ultimately even impair the diversity of opinion? There are scarcely any technical barriers to participating in public communication, however, a number of causes of a potentially limited diversity of offerings have become clear:<sup>32</sup> In view of the abundance of content on offer, we can only take advantage of a fraction of content, often the same search aids (so-called Googleisation of journalism)<sup>33</sup> and sources are used for research and there are the peculiarities of selection and findability on the net. After all, while in traditional mass media reach is created through direct contact with an offering without a feedback channel, contents are diffused on the internet (such as by sharing or commenting, through likes or retweets).

To put it succinctly: Whoever controls the distribution and forwarding of content on the internet, has the power!

# Reliable Information Is Essential For Opinion Formation

This has also become a fact: Political opinion formation increasingly takes place via the internet and preferably on social media. On an average day, more than 46 per cent of people 14 years or older in Germany obtain information by using media intermediaries not only as contact providers, but also by accessing information directly on the services. The use of information directly via platforms such as Facebook and YouTube has dramatically increased and turned them into coordinators of information flows.<sup>34</sup> In some cases, they have even taken over functions traditionally performed by the media: their algorithms carry out the selection and weighting of topics. Unfortunately, this transformation has taken place outside the standards of professionalism and ethics of journalism. Thus, the danger is that an article's worthiness for publication is no longer determined by its social relevance, but rather the greatest possible attention it can attract (details can also be found in the chapter on "Populism and Contempt for Elites").

Reliable sources of information that can be trusted and on whose reporting opinion formation can be based, are vital for democracy. During the Corona crisis, the German population placed more trust in classical media again<sup>35</sup> and its need for orientation and information went hand in hand with growing trust in the media.<sup>36</sup> Whether this is a sustainable increase in trust remains to be seen, however.

Added to that, younger people are less well-informed about media and journalism compared to older people. This is the finding of a study by Saxony's State Office for Political Education. A lack of knowledge gives way to mistrust toward the media.<sup>37</sup>

Disinformation campaigns are being carried out by various "offender groups" and with differing motives; while there are certain triggers and causes of hate speech, too. Increased visibility of and public accessibility to debates have provided fertile ground for hate speech and disinformation and this breeding ground looks the same everywhere:

- social media are becoming more important as a source of news
- the polarisation of the political landscape is on the rise
- mistrust toward media tends to be high

To identify and combat hate speech and disinformation, we need to learn how to better understand the relationship between human behaviour and attempts at manipulation and their origins.

The internet provides complete freedom – at least hypothetically – over all information. Yet there are limits to this:

1. cognitive receptivity (so-called logic of rationality<sup>38</sup>) is, as already mentioned, finite. Hence, the fundamental belief in freedom of expression and collective intelligence (“the world will automatically be better when everyone can freely express themselves and exchange their information and ideas”) is susceptible to fake news and hate speech. Technical filters against this do not yet exist.
2. Facebook and co. are interested in attracting users to their platforms – and thus the obstacles to create a user account are very low. And once we are on a platform, the intention is that we stay on it for as long as possible. The reasons are advertising revenues, analysis of user behaviour and the sale of user data. We need to be aware that the business model of Facebook and Twitter essentially undermines a rational culture of debate. For, here, research shows how more extreme messages are followed for longer and attract greater attention. The algorithms of Facebook or Twitter promote more of a black-white, friend-foe model than a balanced discussion. The more emotional or loud an article is, the more people see it on their timeline. Such polarisation effects can even be spread by directing the attention of traditional media.<sup>39</sup> The vulnerability to social bots and trolls (both of which can fuel hate speech and disinformation campaigns) is very high in this context and reinforces the effect.
3. What is more: Platforms are – to date – virtually unregulated. This enabled their strong development and growth into the giants we know today. However, they are still relatively passive when it comes to combating fake news, social bots, and hate speech. Self-regulation imposed by the companies themselves is not as effective as hoped.

In addition to this, from a user’s perspective there are also financial motives for spreading hate speech or disinformation: these campaigns aim at generating as much data traffic as possible. The goal is to achieve greater numbers of clicks for the corresponding advertisements by manipulating content. Here, politically emotional topics are often used as a hook. Of course, “entertainment” (in the negative sense) and attention might also be motives and causes for an increased occurrence of disinformation and hate speech. Deliberate provocations intended to anger and challenge us have unfortunately long been a hallmark of the so-called online culture. Pent-up emotions that people want to release are often reflected in communicative behaviour. At times, it is simply sadism, psychopathy or cheap thrills and the fun of annoying others.

# Manipulation Poses a Threat to the Diversity of Opinion and Credibility of Information

We must not underestimate the corrosive impact that large-scale disinformation campaigns can have: By shaking trust in information in general, such campaigns have the capacity to compromise the credibility of sources of information that should in fact be trustworthy. By doing so, disinformation can undermine journalists' mission to ensure reliability and transparency in society.

Disinformation and hate speech with a political background are especially prevalent in the context of elections. During the Bundestag elections in 2021, there was a sharp increase in hate speech against the candidates for chancellorship.<sup>40</sup> Within one month, more than 35,000 posts with hate-filled speech were directed against the three leading candidates alone – and that was only on Twitter. Whether that be with photos torn out of context or invented political demands. Even if such disinformation together with hate speech is publicly uncovered afterwards, doubt and mistrust are often left behind; since the truth attracts far less publicity than the lie that was spread beforehand. But even during times of crisis and war, like during the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, disinformation is specifically used as a weapon. Images and videos can be crucial for disinformation or information of the population on the part of the attacker, and for the morale of the those being attacked. Many disseminated images and footage can be verified; however, especially on the Russian side, manipulated footage often appears.

The goal of these kinds of activities is invariably to manipulate discussions about a certain political leader or institution, or to directly defame someone. The significant financial investments enable multifaceted campaigns. In countries without stable democratic conditions, for instance, contents can even be disseminated, and thus amplified, by the state-controlled media. Foreign powers, especially from authoritarian states like China or Russia, control campaigns to exert political influence, to undermine the democratic debate, to exacerbate social polarisation or even to win (information) wars. Especially in our digital era, the power of images and facts is an instrument in the arsenal of modern warfare. The propaganda broadcaster Russia Today (RT), with offshoots in four European countries that are supported from Russia, was created for precisely these reasons. With the aim of cracking down on this kind of disinformation and in the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its planned media war with its online and satellite broadcaster, RT, the Council of the European Union<sup>41</sup> published a Regulation in March 2022 prohibiting any dissemination of RT's and Sputnik's broadcasts and content. According to the EU, media regu-

# It is a fine line between censorship and the protection against disinformation.

lators of the individual EU states are to implement these measures. According to a survey, a large majority supports the broadcasting ban on RT imposed by the EU.<sup>42</sup> However, from the perspective of media and press freedom, these state interventions – even though they are morally completely justified – are perceived as problematic and need to be well-founded. After all, a broadcasting ban against RT is easy to declare and is understandable in light of the dramatic situation in Ukraine, but always need to be rooted in the rule of law. However, it is a fine line between censorship and the protection against disinformation when other media do not focus on pure disinformation but on other opinions.

Two phenomena in particular play a role in disinformation campaigns: fake news and deep fakes. Both forms of manipulation have one thing in common: Emotionally provocative subjects in particular harbour the potential to go viral.

Fake news is purely fictional or true information or the true core is manipulated such that an intentionally false story is created.

Disinformation campaigns often adopt a conceptual approach: Various rumours and false reports are provided with fake “evidence” and combined into one news item. Corresponding contributions from other users flow into the “chain of evidence” of fake news, thus creating entire fake plots. In many cases, different narrative styles are used for different target groups. There is one storyline for the political left spectrum, and one for the right – and there are even storylines that fit both political spectrums.

Politically prominent, for example, was the “Lisa case” in Germany: Extensive reporting was conducted on the alleged rape of a German-Russian girl by a refugee; diplomatically, it reached such a level that Russia’s foreign minister was involved and there were demonstrations by the Russian-German community outside the chancellery. A country’s use of manipulative politics or political communication can massively influence, and in the worst case, undermine the political system of a target country.

Deep fakes are a sub-category of fake news, which use the persuasive power of audio-visual media to achieve a manipulative effect. These are electronically modified moving images or photos that alter or simulate people and events. There are different technical methods that create deep fakes, which are difficult to recognise with the naked eye, but primarily using artificial intelligence. In this way, journalists can be “designed” to report false “truths” on invented news services – this is how corresponding information attacks are carried out by Russia against Ukraine, to name just one. Compared with other forms of disinformation, deep fakes are particularly dangerous for society because they seriously distort reality due to their visual effect and media consumers find it difficult to differentiate between genuine and falsified content.

The occurrence of hate speech, on the other hand, has a specific impact on social coexistence as well as on freedom and diversity of opinion: even if you are not personally affected (as a victim),

your view of content commented on through hate speech, changes. For example, some scientific studies have determined that hate speech under an editorial article undermines trust in journalistic content.<sup>43</sup>

Particularly hateful comments distort the relevance of a topic for the readership or call the credibility of the media into question. Hate speech creates a more negative assessment of a situation and influences our own communicative behaviour.

The most dramatic effect is a withdrawal from discourse, mostly by those personally affected. The communication scientist Dr Diana Rieger (LMU Munich) has researched that victims of hate speech react in a similar way to a traumatic experience with fear, anger, and sometimes even hate against the perpetrator. Representatives from politics and journalism, women, or various social minorities are particularly affected by this.<sup>44</sup>

These curtailments of diversity of opinion cannot be accepted. Although the conditions for those affected have improved in criminal law, they still need to be improved in the area of civil law, especially the enforcement of rights.

## New Rules for Greater Responsibility and Transparency

In principle, we need a new legal order for the media and information system. The important thing here is: The framework conditions for a convergent media order must be flexible enough to adapt to future developments in the digital media sector.

In Germany, there are already corresponding regulatory approaches such as the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG)<sup>45</sup> and the Interstate Media Treaty (MStV)<sup>46</sup>. These regulations oblige platform providers to assume more responsibility for illegal content on their platforms and to be more transparent with regards to the visibility and findability of content.

# The Interstate Media Treaty

Search engines and social networks have become *gatekeepers* and have more control over media content. As already explained, providers such as Facebook and Google are used as primary and sometimes sole sources of information. That means they are of great importance for the formation of opinion. Companies like Google and Facebook do not create news content themselves, but they make it accessible. Thus, according to the new regulations, they fall within the scope of application of the MStV (Interstate Media Treaty) and thus receive requirements for the first time.

The federally adopted regulatory framework obliges platform providers to disclose the logic of their selection, sorting, and aggregation under transparency requirements. The MStV thus replaces the Interstate Broadcasting Agreement, and for the first time, creates a uniform legal framework for all news media; in other words, traditional print and broadcast media as well as purely internet media.

The responsible state media authorities have implemented the MStV and issued corresponding statutes<sup>47</sup> The Interstate Media Treaty is effectively regulatory “unchartered territory” in this part. This is because the providers of the large platforms could run into difficulties if they have to specifically downgrade or upgrade certain news sources in the news feed. It therefore should be soon evaluated whether the rules are working as they should.

# The Network Enforcement Act

The law aims to combat hate crime, criminal fake news, or other punishable content more effectively on social networking sites. This includes insults, defamation, slander, public incitement to commit crimes, sedition, the depiction of violence, and threats. The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) has already been evaluated and reformed with the Act Amending the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDGÄndG).<sup>48</sup> It may be necessary to further refine the law so that messenger services also fall within the scope of application regarding their open communication functions and so that action can be taken against criminal content there, too. The introduction of the NetzDG was highly controversial, and there is still criticism today.

The success of the obligation to report certain punishable net contents according to the NetzDG depends on the voluntary cooperation of the social networks. Unfortunately, the practical impact of the NetzDG in Germany has been observed abroad. For instance, states such as Russia, Belarus, or Turkey are invoking the NetzDG to justify questionable deletion practices.

Law enforcement authorities have also recognised the issue of hate speech. To date, however, they have lacked the tools to take effective action – and the newly introduced obligation on social networks to report hate and incitement on their platforms will once again lead to an increase in criminal proceedings. It is thus even more important that the Justice Ministers’ Conference in mid-2021 advocated for the continuation and intensification of the rule of law pact.

## The Digital Services Act

The Digital Services Act<sup>49</sup> is the first comprehensive regulation of all intermediaries at European level – a uniform European market for media content is thus made possible.

In detail, the EU Regulation published in 2022 still contains some open questions – for example, the design of supervision – which will probably only be resolved following implementation in the member states.

In principle, the platforms should fulfil more requirements in terms of responsibility and transparency; at the same time, though, freedom of press must not fall into the hands of platform providers.

Germany and the EU Member States are obliged to protect their open democracies from influence and interference. Implementing regulations to directly oppose disinformation or hate speech is a fine line: A law that is explicitly drawn up against disinformation or against hate speech as a protection for free speech can, at least in authoritarian states, be “re-functioned” to suppress and restrict free speech by exploiting interpretative sovereignty over true facts and manipulative fake news. In this respect, liberal democracies should also formulate future regulatory approaches in a transparent and unambiguous way to ensure that they cannot be interpreted differently by foreign authoritarian powers or even in the event of the most unfavourable changes to the political balance of power, which would then greatly impair the diversity of opinion and media.

Irrespective of the emerging legislation, the EU has several projects against disinformation, such as the EU Action Plan against Disinformation<sup>50</sup> that has been in place since 2018 and has four strategic pillars: a better identification and investigation of disinformation, more coordinated responses to it, the prevention of commercialisation, and fundamentally enhanced information. Having developed in the context of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when vast amounts of false information and so-called trolls flooded the internet, the scope has now been broadened.

Whereas other state-controlled powers, for example from China, conduct targeted disinformation, too. During the Corona pandemic, there was quite literally an “infodemic”<sup>51</sup>, with many attempts to unsettle people through misinformation.

It was in this context that the European Action Plan for Democracy was launched in 2020.<sup>52</sup> It aims to empower citizens to

take responsible action and contribute toward building more crisis-resistant democracies across the EU. Specifically, this means: promoting free and fair elections, expanding freedom of the media, and combating disinformation.

## A Defensive Culture of Debate to Protect Democracy

Digital disinformation is an ongoing threat. It will also evolve with the digital transformation. Artificial intelligence (AI) may become a key technology here: economically, politically, and militarily. Machines capable of learning promise a boost in productivity, technologies (based on big data, smart data, AI, and quantum technology) will lead to a power shift.<sup>53</sup> This century will be shaped by the struggle between digital liberal democracy and digital authoritarianism.

However, in the fight against disinformation and hate speech we also need coalitions within the existing society: We must learn to understand the relationship between human behaviour and attempts at manipulation. It is important to develop news, media, and information literacy for as many age groups of the population as possible. That could range from an adapted education policy whose aim is to make information literacy an integral part of all school subjects, through to training programmes run by extra-curricular educational organisations for the general public. Moreover, systematic education would enable state institutions, authorities, and, journalists in particular, to contribute toward pointing out the phenomena of disinformation and hate speech in their reporting. After all, only those who understand how messaging works on the platforms, for instance, can better identify and protect themselves against such disruptive factors. This could make society more able to defend itself so that everyone can take greater responsibility against the spread of hate speech and disinformation. At the end of the day, it is also partly up to us users to strengthen democracy. In social media, we decide how we write, comment, and share. And we also decide how we deal with hate speech (if “only” we perceive it).

And, of course, the much-cited quality journalism could be a lever to work toward a less polarised, agitated, and insecure society. Here, newspapers and broadcasters are afforded a great opportunity to provide reliable information visibly on the internet. Of course, the legal possibilities regarding findability and visibility would have to be implemented accordingly. What gives us hope: quality journalism is a product that is also in demand on the internet as the journalism of the future. We urgently need a social discourse on how to also guarantee basic communication services in the digital future. This lies in the hands of the providers themselves, but also the legislator. These platforms are not just simply technical service providers for transmitting and providing content, they also

use algorithms to determine how we obtain information and form an opinion.

The idea that the internet and especially social media could become a kind of sanctuary for discourse free of domination – entirely without any disinformation and hate speech – is most likely infeasible. Just as the analogue world is home to unfriendliness, unpleasant communication, and deliberately disseminated false information, these phenomena will also continue to be an unattractive feature of the digital world. That is why we need a functioning defensive culture of debate and a meaningful platform regulation to minimise the dangers to democracy.

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## Complacency and Exhaustion

# Freedom Instead of Fish – or Which Debates We Now Need to Have

**Sebastian Enskat,  
Magdalena Jetschgo-Morcillo  
and Miriam Siemes**

Many democracies today primarily live on the glory of bygone days. Zest for action and the power of innovation have given way to general exhaustion. Nevertheless, autocratic regimes' attractiveness is notoriously overestimated while their resilience is underestimated. That is particularly problematic because it is precisely democracies that live on the promise of being able to satisfy the needs of their citizens to a far greater extent than autocratic regimes.





If you compare the euphoria of the early 1990s with today, you might feel like Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle. After having fallen into an enchanted sleep for 20 years, he did not awaken as a subject of the English crown, but as a citizen of the United States of America. His world and the global order were turned upside down. A comparable period of time lies between the frequently invoked triumph of democracy following the fall of the Iron Curtain and today, when not only the number of democratic states around the world is in decline, but the struggle between democracy and autocracy is once again being waged by force of arms even in Europe.<sup>54</sup>

One reason for this development could be that liberal democracies are often too slow and hesitant to act or to respond in the face of new challenges in an increasingly fast-paced, globalised, and competitive world. This supposed weakness becomes particularly visible when compared with autocratic regimes, where decisions are usually not only made quickly and without complicated negotiation processes, but also against the background of a medium- to long-term strategy. For instance, within only four years China will have built the second largest airport in the world and has for a long time been securing access to raw materials on the African continent; whereas Germany needs 14 years as opposed to the planned five years for a distinctly smaller airport and when it comes to Africa, it still primarily focuses on development aid.

Not only Germany, but many of the former flagship democracies worldwide now ride more on the glory of former days and less on the promises of an even brighter future. A thirst for action and innovative strength have given way to paralysing implementation problems, internal disputes, and an ever more pervasive general exhaustion. Having become accustomed to a life of freedom and relative prosperity, we enjoy the benefits of democracy, but are less and less willing to actively participate in democratic processes; for example, joining a political party, let alone fighting for the preservation and defence of democracy and freedom in the narrower sense.

The fact that the latter could also become necessary in Europe again has been made drastically clear to us by Russia's scrupulous attack on Ukraine and the desperate struggle of the people there. More problematic than the symptom of exhaustion itself is therefore the lack of insight into the serious nature of the situation. This not only applies to security policy, for which the war in Ukraine probably came as a salutary shock, but also to other serious problems: be it high national debt, fossilised administrative structures, or pension and social systems that will be virtually impossible to finance – here, too, there are scarcely any solutions in sight. And that is not all: Far-reaching structural problems are often not debated in the first place, and if so, then not with the necessary urgency. We evidently believe that we can rest upon the laurels of the past and survive in systemic competition in the long run, just because democracy, freedom, and rule of law have so far proven to be favourable framework conditions for a flourishing economy and its associated prosperity.

Speaking of framework conditions: There is much to suggest that democracy and freedom are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for economic success. But even those clinging to the conviction that sustainable social peace and the associated prosperity can only be secured in the long run under liberal democratic condi-

# Everything Is Nothing Without Economic Success

tions have a cause for concern, as complacency and exhaustion have taken hold also regarding the foundations of liberal democracy.

“It’s the economy, stupid” – was the slogan that secured the victory of the Democratic presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, in the 1992 presidential campaign and his entry into the White House. It could, however, also be a motto for the success of liberal democracy in the second half of the 20th Century. After all, a country’s economic strength not only forms the basis of its geostrategic influence on the outside world, but also guarantees domestic social cohesion. Complacency and fatigue are so dangerous in this context because prosperity is not self-perpetuating; in fact, it needs to be created time and again. Yesterday’s successes are soon forgotten and the foundations of *hard* and *soft power* crumble faster than some would like to believe.

The relationship between democracy and the market economy has often been perceived as symbiotic, and the interdependency of political liberalisation and economic progress as almost automatic. This probably contributed toward the naivety that is now becoming a problem. Ultimately, Western democracies, and Germany above all, have been instrumental in the rapid rise of China and thus, to some extent, created their own biggest systemic competitor. For its part, China has impressively demonstrated that even non-democratic regimes can produce “economic miracles”. What is more, the once bitterly poor Middle Kingdom has debunked the myth that more economic growth invariably means more democracy, having instead upheld “authoritarian capitalism” as a model for success.

It cannot be denied that liberal democracies of the West have long benefited greatly from the rise of China and still do. However, too little account is taken of the repercussions of opening the door to an increasingly powerful systemic competitor such as China, at the latest with its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), without giving sufficient thought to the medium- and long-term consequences.<sup>55</sup>

While the threat from the Soviet Union during the Cold War was of a primarily military nature, the challenge posed by China mainly results from its economic clout. This is what confronts the entire world with enormous challenges and is already endangering cohesion within the democratic family. Although average growth in democracies continues to be higher than in autocracies,<sup>56</sup> this trend gives us cause for concern: The world economy is increasingly shifting from the West to the East, and thus away from established democracies toward autocracies and populist rulers.<sup>57</sup> Whether in the future they will still be prepared to play by rules established back in the heyday of the liberal world order, will crucially depend on whether the democratic bloc succeeds in preserving its relative economic power.

# Apathy Kills Democracy

Complacency sets in when democracies underestimate their own appeal and underestimate the resilience of autocratic regimes. To adequately react to the interests and sensitivities of its citizens, the necessary processes of communication in society as a whole and an exchange between the governed and the governing classes must function properly. The extent to which that is still the case should be consistently scrutinised and debated in all democracies.

A certain inertia is clear to see, especially in Germany, when it comes to addressing the challenges of tomorrow and debating the necessary steps for overcoming these challenges. Here, where for decades people have become accustomed to sitting back and not getting involved, the danger of an increasingly pervasive apathy is particularly great. However, democracies cannot afford to permit this under any circumstances. More than any other political order, democracy is a project that needs to be renewed time and again, and which draws new strength from committed debates and productive disputes on the domestic front, as well as confrontation with its opponents from the outside. The defensive advocacy of democratic values not only serves as an intellectual self-assurance, but also contributes toward that emotional bond without which the democratic project cannot survive.<sup>58</sup>

Parties, in particular, play a key role in the functioning of democracy and an exchange between the governed and the governing classes. They are the transmission belt that bundles social interests and feeds them into the political process, i.e., legislation. In this context, democracy therefore always means party democracy. That parties around the world increasingly struggle to continue to fulfil their inherent, central role, and ever fewer people are willing to commit to and become involved in parties is not only a problem for the parties themselves, but for democracy itself.

Many democracies are still positioned well in international comparison, but also Germany is already in danger of falling behind in important areas. That is not least since democracies around the globe have for too long relied on the input legitimacy of democratic order, as opposed to directing far more attention to its output legitimacy, or as Daniel Dettling sums up this point in his study on the need for state reform: "The normative persuasive power of democracy alone is no longer enough to guarantee legitimacy in the future. Citizens perceive the specific outcomes of state action to be at least as important."<sup>59</sup>

# So, What Is to Be Done?

It is difficult to say how a Rip Van Winkel would fare if he were to fall asleep in Hudson Valley today and wake up again 20 years later. Surely, he would also rub his eyes in astonishment since change is known to be the only constant. The state in which he would find the democracies of this world crucially depends on whether they succeed in somewhat countering the creeping poison of complacency and exhaustion. This poison eventually leads to democracies starting to neglect the needs of their citizens, and thus losing both appeal and legitimacy. After all, democracies live on the promise of being able to fulfil these needs far better than autocratic regimes.

To deliver on the promise of prosperity, which is closely tied to the rise of liberal democracies, the latter must above all remain innovative, not only deal with technological change, but also shape it, and generally deal more with the question about how the economic success of the past can be continued in the future. It is common knowledge that innovation is promoted through investments in education, infrastructure, and research, reductions in administrative obstacles and reforms to tax systems<sup>60</sup> – all areas in which Germany has a serious amount of catching up to do.<sup>61</sup> The same applies to investments in future technologies such as artificial intelligence, the expansion of digital infrastructure, the removal of bureaucratic barriers, the digitalisation of administration and much more.

It is important to breathe life into the loud announcement of a “turn of an era”, and finally close the glaring gap between ambition and reality that has characterised German security and defence policy for decades. This can be done by making the necessary investments, not only in the short term, but also in the medium- to long-term to meet the requirement of a well-equipped operational army that is also capable of national defence. But it can also be done by downgrading the virtually impossible demands, to which the Bundeswehr has been subject for two decades now, to a realistic level, by learning lessons from the failed mission in Afghanistan, and shifting priorities toward national and alliance defence.

The damage that threatens representative democracy due to the loss of importance of political parties urgently needs to be countered as well. This starts with the parties themselves, which still struggle to appropriately react to rapidly advancing social change and increasing digitalisation and to implement reforms that have become necessary as a result, but it does not end there. It is the citizens themselves who bear the greatest responsibility for the functioning of the community in a democracy. Democracy now calls for a willingness to overcome complacency and exhaustion, to be committed to one's own interests and the common good, tolerate different opinions and contribute toward progress in the struggle for the best solutions. That also includes focusing on what is important again and bringing democratic basic values to the fore. Democratic societies that instead fight with each other on the side lines, lose sight of what they have in common due to that which supposedly divides them, or become wrapped up in the daily trivialities of democratic negotiation processes, will find it hard to compete with the ever more aggres-

sive autocracies of this world. It is therefore more than just a witty remark when the British politician Tom Tugend says in retrospect of a meeting of the G7, by now something like the club of influential democracies: "The West, however you define it, is still by far the most dominant economic bloc in the world, but we are now more interested in fighting over fish than freedom."<sup>62</sup>

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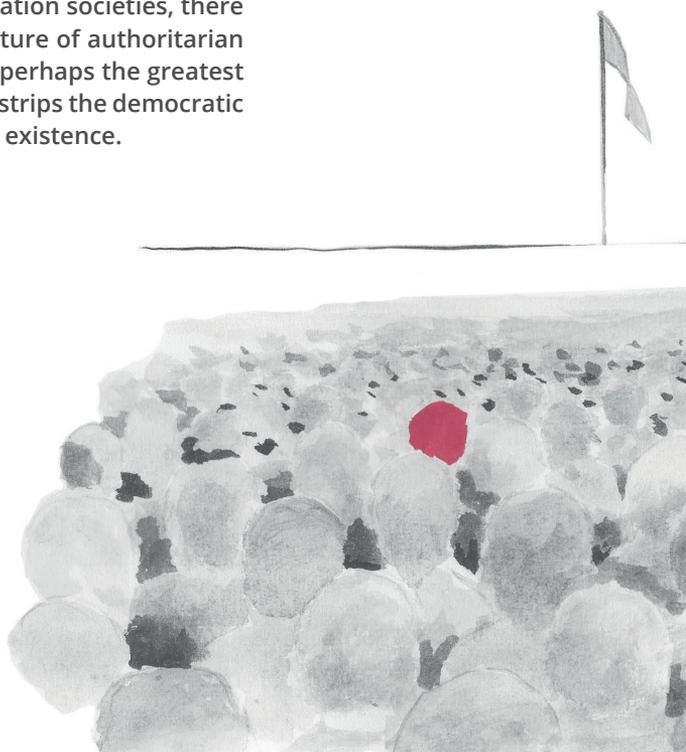
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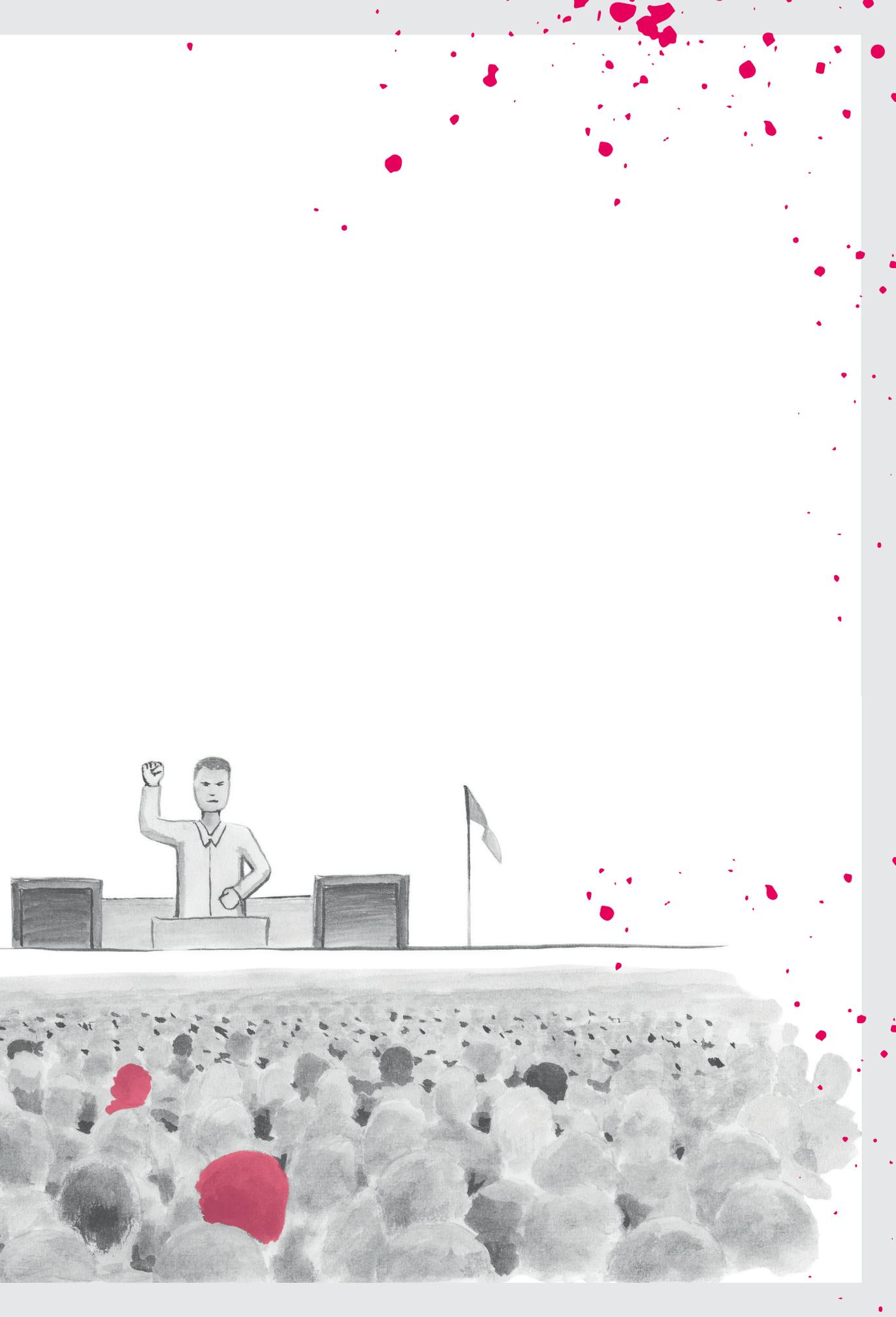
# Self-Doubt and Authoritarian Temptations

## The Longing for the Strong Man

● **Simon Backovsky**

● Even here in Germany, there are often flirtations with authoritarian practices and the supposed merits of so-called strong men. Especially in democracies with their “open” information societies, there should be no doubt whatsoever about the nature of authoritarian regimes. In this respect, political ignorance is perhaps the greatest threat to our liberal democratic basic order. It strips the democratic community of its vitality and thus its basis for existence.





In hindsight, the Le Pens, Salvinis, and Orbans, who, up until Russia's attack on Ukraine had found any excuse to curry favour with Vladimir Putin and stylise him as the prototype "strong man" that Europe so urgently needed, have wanted to entirely distance themselves from their former admiration. In any case, the atrocities instigated by Putin in Ukraine shine a glaring light on the disconcerting flirtation with supposedly strong leaders, not only in right-wing populist leadership circles, but also in mainstream liberal societies.<sup>63</sup> This should leave us in no doubt whatsoever about the nature of authoritarian regimes, especially in democracies and their open information societies. Here, the contemptuous nature of authoritarian rule has been meticulously documented and analysed in countless lessons, newspaper articles, scientific papers, and talk shows. The fact that the reality of life in the 57 countries currently listed by the Democracy Index as "authoritarian regimes" is shaped by corruption, legal arbitrariness as well as political, social, and cultural atavism, is certainly unlikely to be a secret – unlike in authoritarian regimes themselves, where the often astonishingly high public acceptance for the respective political leadership can at least in part be explained by the state's monopoly on opinion and information. So why do liberal democracies repeatedly flirt with authoritarian tendencies? Where does the longing for a "strong leader" come from? Why do forces aspiring to transform society toward authoritarian or even totalitarian forms of rule find support here as well?

## Escape From Freedom

In the 20th Century, the question on the appeal of authoritarianism moved into the focus of research in light of a rise in modern party dictatorships as well as the traumatic experience of two world wars and the Shoah. The classic works of Erich Fromm, Hannah Arendt, or Theodor W. Adorno primarily attributed public support for fascist and totalitarian dictatorships to individual psychological factors in the context of the emergence of industrialised capitalist mass societies. According to this, people uprooted by modernisation and war and who were disoriented in view of the uncertainties of their time, embarked upon an "escape from freedom" (Erich Fromm) and sought their salvation, among others, in charismatic leaders and their eschatological narratives of strength, order, and community. What is more, the contemporary punitive education style of the "strong fathers" fostered the spread of a character type characterised by inferiority complexes, rigid adherence to norms and conventions, intolerance, power orientation, and cynicism. While from the point of view of early authoritarianism research the mass of insecure individuals became a breeding ground for modern dictators, the sadomasochistically inclined "authoritarian character"<sup>64</sup> (Fromm, Adorno) was its supporting actor.

# Fear of Change

The explanatory approach of authoritarian personality based on the Freudian psychoanalytical figures is considered obsolete. However, current research confirms that the causes of authoritarianism are to be found in the nexus of individual traits and social conditions: Authoritarian attitudes in the form of xenophobia, sexism, or anti-Semitism are by no means the symptom of a rarely encountered personality disorder, but rather innate personality traits or those acquired through social learning, which are empirically proven in around 20 to 30 per cent of the population. These attitudes initially lie dormant in every democracy. They are only activated by economic, political, and cultural crises, which (especially through framing by populism and the media) are perceived by the public as collective experiences of social decay as well as a loss of control and/or status.

The prevailing view in the latest research is that it is not so much economic imbalances that are decisive for activating authoritarian potential, as perceptions of socio-cultural danger. Accordingly, the need for homogeneity and uniformity – and its “flip side” cultural, political, and social intolerance – form the true core of authoritarian attitudes. Since the rejection of diversity is a hallmark of the authoritarian, it is particularly those developments and crises that put social cohesion and the existing social order under pressure that become catalysts of antidemocratic protests. Authoritarianism therefore predominantly appears to be a reflex to the perceived loss of importance of one’s own nation in global competition, to the threat to traditions and morals of one’s own living environment through immigration, multiculturalism or “gender mania” – generally to the growing diversity, complexity, and acceleration of the digitalised globalised world.

# Authoritarian Elites

Of course, the material causes of authoritarian attitudes must not be overlooked: Experiences of economic disadvantage or physical threat connected to distributive justice or poor performance of democratic institutions,<sup>65</sup> serve as important heuristics that can result in a rejection of the democratic system per se. In this context, a low level of education and a lack of ability to think in a differentiated way reinforce the danger of adopting populism’s black and white portrayals of reality.

However, the limits of popular economic explanations, which merely portray authoritarianism as a defensive reaction to the worse-off and less educated “losers” of globalisation, become clear in view of the democracy-sceptic attitude of part of the better-earning, highly educated citizens. The question on the causes of the hostility

toward democracy of a section of the social “winners” is of crucial importance, insofar as autocrats depend on these groups of people in the media, the legal system, civil society, or education and research for the formulation, legitimisation, and propagation of their messages as well as for the organisation and mobilisation of their electoral support. With her observation of the cases of Hungary, Poland, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the historian Anne Applebaum provides a widely acclaimed explanation of the phenomenon: From Applebaum’s perspective, the authoritarian temptation of intellectual elites across borders is grounded in a variety of already well-researched facts, which can, however, be summarised by three interrelated tendencies:

Firstly: Opportunism. Some people believe that the injustices and hypocrisy of the current system are primarily to blame for a lack of recognition of their life’s work. This induces them to adopt a cynical stance, according to which the surrender of liberal democratic values and an exchange of loyalty for status, financial reward, and power gains are perceived as legitimate practices of social progress. Secondly: Cultural pessimism. In light of the crises and challenges of the past decades, a section of the elite harbour deep scepticism toward the status quo of democracy, liberalism, capitalism, and social coexistence. The above described grievances are seen as symptoms of the nation’s or the “Western world’s” civilisational demise, which can only be halted by a radical, revolutionary step toward a system change. Thirdly: Ideology. Part of the intellectual elite never belonged to the ardent democrats and defined its political identity mostly through alternative interpretative frameworks: Nationalism, monarchism, religion, race, and anti-communism. The consent to liberal democracy was therefore never conditional. With the seemingly mediocre output-efficiency and inability to assert itself in global competition, this group’s sympathies for illiberal and authoritarian alternatives is also on the increase.<sup>66</sup>

## Political Ignorance

To synthesise the above causes, a central explanatory approach can – with all due caution against generalisation – be identified for the seductive power of authoritarianism. Attitudes hostile toward the system adopted by both the social “losers” and the “winners” appear mainly to lie in multifaceted shades of the negative emotions: dissatisfaction and insecurity. Authoritarian politicians are particularly skilled in turning these feelings into political capital through a communication campaign of emotional agitation and reassurance. This strategy takes place in three well-known steps: As a first step, social imbalances and threats are constructed and/or represented in an exaggerated way. As a second step, citizens are exonerated as the “victims” of social disintegration, and the “true guilty parties” are named: national and supranational elites, foreign powers, minorities, and foreigners. As a last step, a simple way is

presented as a way out of the crisis: the aspiring authoritarian ruler alone possesses the competence, assertiveness, and will to rid “guilty parties” of their influence, and put “his own people” back on the “right path” again. He, alone, should therefore be vested with the most far-reaching political mandate.

The populist leader faces the Herculean task of deploying his complexity-reducing and ad hominem messages to address a highly diverse electorate that spans social classes, cultural milieus, age groups, and educational levels. To resolve this paradox, he seems to possess a magician’s hat from which he can pull tailored solutions to the worries inflicting all the insecure and disappointed people: for those who are uneasy about the complexity of pluralistic society, he promises a state identity policy in which cultural unity and moral order are to be restored. For those who feel economically isolated or disadvantaged, an industrial and trade policy will be developed in line with the idea of nation first, and tax relief, as well as the roll-out of welfare state benefits will be announced. Critics of democracy, who deplore politicians’ lack of accountability and the inefficiency of institutions, are courted with the strengthening of plebiscitary elements. A law-and-order system is to be established for those who feel that their physical safety is under threat. A programme of conservative revolution is formulated for cultural pessimists, aiming to bring back the conditions of an idealised past. While the opportunists are offered a perversion of the meritocratic principle, according to which unconditional loyalty, as opposed to one’s own abilities, is rewarded with positions, power, and money.

The manifold and often contradictory messages, which, in and of themselves depict social pluralism and resort to the absurd with Manichean views of the world and simplified solutions, ultimately form part of an overriding pact offer that authoritarian populism presents to everyone: voluntary disempowerment by surrendering part of one’s civil liberties and rights in exchange for the promise of emotional relief through prosperity, security, and order. Hence, in conclusion, apart from the diversity of cited context- and case-dependent causes, the quintessence of authoritarian temptation can be best determined as a metaphor: The enticing offer of a return to the childhood state of a well-protected self-centred happiness with no responsibility and a lack of freedom. This profoundly human longing in light of the complexities, dangers, and injustices of the world has already been aptly described by Fjodor Dotojewski in his famous Grand Inquisitor parable:

*“(They) will (...) be convinced, too, that they can never be free, for they are weak, vicious, worthless, and rebellious. (...) It is the pride of a child and a schoolboy (...). We shall persuade them that they will only become free when they renounce their freedom to us and submit to us. (...) They will be convinced that we are right; for they will remember the horrors of slavery and confusion to which Thy freedom brought them.”<sup>67</sup>*

The contract between the governed and the governing classes is grounded in an opposing logic in autocracies and in liberal democracies: in authoritarian states, the population is intended to relinquish public concerns to the state elite. Passivity, conformism,

and uncritical support for the regime are rewarded with the promise of material and physical security. In a democratic polity, citizens ensure their own well-being by actively participating in opinion-formation and decision-making, by monitoring those responsible, and by complying with democratic rules. Thus, this text ends by referring to what now poses the greatest danger to the liberal democratic basic order: political ignorance. Rather than a critical stance, the disinterest of (a section of) citizens toward the affairs of the res publica, strips the democratic polity of its vitality, and indeed its basis of existence. The alternative to active civic engagement? Franklin D. Roosevelt had already clearly named this during the fateful year of 1938:

*“When (...) democracy ceases to move forward as a living force, seeking day and night by peaceful means to better the lot of our citizens, then fascism will grow in strength in our land.”<sup>68</sup>*

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- 63 In 2016, as much as 31 per cent of Germans agreed with this statement: “We need someone again to tell us which way to go.” (Pokorny, Sabine 2016: what defines us. What unites us. Integration and the voting behaviour of Germans with and without a migrant background and foreigners living in Germany, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Berlin).
- 64 The genesis and characterises of the “authoritarian personality” were aptly caricatured by Heinrich Mann’s literary figure Diederich Heßling (Der Untertan, The Subject, 1918): owing to the draconian upbringing by the “strong father”, Heßling internalised the militaristic and obedient culture of the late Wilhelminian Empire.
- 65 For instance: Corona assistance that does not arrive or comes too late, crime in problem neighbourhoods with a high share of people with a migrant background, experience of discrimination in schools with a high number of migrants.
- 66 This frame of mind is likely to be particularly pronounced in the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. In the Visegrád states, the strategy of uncritically imitating liberalism has long been considered a failure. For the supporters of the Polish and Hungarian ruling parties, the open societies of the “West” even represent the negative model against which they outline their own ideas of a national-conservative social order (Holmes, Seven/Krastev, Ivan 2019: Das Licht, das erlosch. Eine Abrechnung, Berlin).
- 67 Dostojewski, Fjodor 1880: Der Großinquisitor, in: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38336/38336-h/38336-h.htm> [29/06/2022].
- 68 quoted from: Eco, Umberto 2020: Der ewige Faschismus, Munich, p. 40.

## Nationalism and Revisionism

# Looking Back to the Future?

**David Gregosz  
and Thomas Behrens**

Russia's attack against Ukraine has shown us the destructive force of nationalist and revisionist politics with frightening clarity. At the same time, the past years have illustrated that even supposedly proven democratic traditions are still far from providing complete protection against nationalist temptations. Developments in Poland and successes of nationalist parties in the heart of Europe therefore give us cause for concern. This cannot be dealt with by demonisation and exclusion, however.



The West is under attack. Since Spring 2022, it is in this context that the phenomena of nationalism and revisionism as a threat to democracy have – to an even greater extent than before – been at the forefront of public attention. The cause of this is Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022. It constitutes the most radical seismic shift in security policy since the end of the Cold War 1989/90 and a turning point in international relations.<sup>69</sup>

The aggression unleashed by President Vladimir Putin against its sovereign “sister state” signifies a (repeated) violation of international law by Russia. It affects the citizens of Ukraine, who, over the past years have (in a broad majority and increasingly) sought alignment with Europe’s democratic structures and economic prosperity. While also being directed against the whole of the West, which advocates democracy – understood as a guarantee of freedom and rule of law.

The invasion of Ukraine is justified by falling back on the history of its own nation: Putin refers to the first Eastern Slavic state formation, the Kievan Rus, as well as to Lenin’s historic mistakes, denying his neighbour their own sovereignty and declaring Ukraine “an inseparable part” of Russian history. As already presented in July 2021 in the form of an essay,<sup>70</sup> Putin sees Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians as one people (in the sense of the concept of the so-called Eastern Slavic “Trinity”). It is therefore necessary, from the perspective of Moscow, to militarily intervene for the protection of Russians living outside the Russian Federation, to “denazify” and “de-militarise” Ukraine. What is more, he states that it is the declared goal of Russian politics under his leadership to correct the historic geopolitical catastrophe of the collapse of the Soviet Union and break Western supremacy.<sup>71</sup>

# Nationalism as a Scientific Concept and the Case of Russia

In fact, reporting on the war in Ukraine is indiscriminate when it comes to talking about “Russian nationalism”, “nationalist revisionism”, and Putin as the “nationalist”.<sup>72</sup> But what does nationalism mean? And can Russia’s current aggression be subsumed as a case of nationalism?

Nations, according to the often quoted interpretation of the British sociologist Benedict Anderson from the 1980s, are “imagined communities”<sup>73</sup>, social constructs that people believe in and align themselves with. Often questioned as a merely “empty formula”, this interpretation becomes less elusive when the concept of nation is more specifically defined as “a political category, which is able to mobilise<sup>74</sup> solidarity and mutual cooperation like scarcely any other”, encompassing aspects such as cultural affiliation, social ties, empathy, and public spirit. The potent political resource arising from this social phenomenon and referring to the sovereign state as the only true foundation of the political order and symbol of freedom, is called nationalism. Without comprehensive theoretical justification, this postulates that each person belongs to a nation and his/her nationality is therefore an integral part of his/her individual identity.

A certain attractiveness of the nationalism phenomenon derives from its enormous integrating power and the fact that it gives the individual the belief, in the midst of an anonymous mass society, of being an equal member of a community and of possessing dignity despite political and socio-economic differences. Interpreted in positive terms, this finds expression in constitutional patriotism or liberal nationalism.

Yet, history just like the political present, actually testify to something different: nationalism is primarily about demarcation, aggression, and violence. When idealising national views, placing them above social rules, institutions as well as the peaceful coexistence of all, it comes into conflict with liberal pluralism of expression and the diversity of cultures. That is why nationalism often culminates in the corrosion of democracy and rule of law. And nationalism is usually followed by revisionism: attempts to call a state of affairs (sometimes under international law) or a (political) programme into question or to bring about its change.

The Russian war in Ukraine needs to be classified as a case of revisionism. Putin deliberately and repeatedly disregards the borders and sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. However, these are considered to be inviolable under international law within the European security order based on the Helsinki Final Act (1975), the Charter of Paris (1990) and the NATO-Russia-Founding Act – confirmed by all contracting parties, including Russia.<sup>75</sup> Putin thus strives to unilaterally revise Europe's agreed security architecture and annex Ukraine to Russia.

It is not clear, however, whether the Russian aggression can be classified as nationalism. The latter is based on the sovereign nation state. Yet Putin's policy does not draw on the Russian concept *rossijskij*, which refers to the official state name of the Russian Federation, and designates everything that makes up the state (*Rossija*). Instead, the President of Russia has long sought to coin the concept *Russkij mir* (*Russian world*), alluding to the concept *russkij*, which refers to Russian culture and the Russian language. Beyond statehood, this is underpinned by the idea of Russia as a (non-Western) civilisation. In fact, the Russian Federation is a relatively fragile entity that Putin attempts to authoritatively stabilise and expand against the threat of collapse by invoking different characteristics such as religion, culture, language, and historical territory. Today, Russia is trying to establish what most states in Europe already created long ago or are even rebuilding. The Russian Federation is not a Russian nation state. It is a remnant of the Russian and Soviet empire, held together by authoritarian power – democracy is merely simulated. Putin's invasion of Ukraine is thus not based on nationalism but, properly understood, is a case of Great Russian imperialism.<sup>76</sup>

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imperialism.**

In contrast, what can certainly be classified as nationalism are the cases of right-wing populist parties and movements which, until the threat to the West posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, owed their success to questioning democratic principles. The list of these political forces in Europe alone is long: from the French Rassemblement National (National Front until 2018) to the Freedom Party of Austria through to UKIP in United Kingdom, from the Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands to the Flemish Vlaams Belang, the Italian Lega, and Chrysi Avgi in Greece, Fidesz in Hungary, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (in short, PiS) in Poland, and to the Alternative for Germany (AfD). It may be true that these actors have now lost political clout in some places in light of the war and a united response of the West. But they still pose a threat to democracy.

That is why it is important to understand what enabled their potential to become so great in the political debate and whether and in what way they endanger democracy.

## What Makes Politics Successful Under the Banner of Nationalism?

At least three lines of argument can be identified, which illustrate why nationalist parties are successful: a material, a cultural-identarian, and an explanatory approach based on media-political representation dynamics.<sup>77</sup>

The material approach takes account of citizens' cost-benefit considerations. Growing disparity in income and wealth in various regions and the different implications of free competition on the industry and labour force are resulting in criticism against the liberal transnational economic order. Deep resentment and a fear of globalisation trends and even stronger competition are channelled into support for populist parties, which, in turn, promise to improve the local social situation. Their populist-protectionist political agenda, which in particular takes up calls for more redistribution in the welfare state, is mainly advocated by economically disadvantaged population groups and members of the middle class at risk of social decline.

The cultural-identarian approach, on the other hand, addresses the importance of intersubjectively perceived values and identities. National populist politicians focus on publicly perceived changes and threats to traditionally existing, socially rooted values, as well as on growing cultural and ethnic heterogeneity. Decisive emphasis is placed on the fears and anxieties that psychologically portray the national community in the face of cultural dynamics.

Finally, a third approach is based on the importance of representation and focuses on the conduct of opinion-forming polit-

ical, media, and cultural elites. According to this interpretation, large swathes of the population no longer feel adequately represented by an elite perceived to be irresponsible. This often results in support for new, critical movements and parties or the abandonment of established political parties.

Interpretative patterns such as the three outlined above cannot conclusively explain the great popularity of national populist parties, as determined at least until recently. Yet even the analysis of current conditions in a nation or region based on the above criteria should illustrate to what extent democracy today can be endangered by nationalist and revisionist thinking.

## Is Democracy in Danger?

Analyses over recent years of post-communist regions in Europe have shown that such potential danger generally exists within the EU.<sup>78</sup> Developments of a so-called *democratic backsliding*, a democratic decline, have been identified. It remains unclear whether these processes are to be interpreted as a progressive erosion of democracy or merely as a temporary phenomenon. The former is supported by Yascha Mounk's theory, according to which democracies worldwide are dying, and also that by Robert Dahl on the transformation of democracy: extending from a democratic city state to a representative mass democracy right through to the potential dominance of illiberal democracies in which populist nationalism supplants the rule of law, for example.<sup>79</sup> The latter is supported by the hypothesis of the V-Dem Institute, which states that, until recently, a kind of "democratic recession" could be observed, whereby democracies have a less liberal character, but there is no global trend of a drift toward authoritarianism.<sup>80</sup> Since the start of the war in Ukraine – in light of the strong uniform reaction of the West – there have been renewed talks of a "revitalisation of democracy", and explicitly by the US President Joe Biden in his speech at Warsaw's Royal Castle in March 2022.<sup>81</sup> Yet, how sustainable this will be, remains to be seen.

To nevertheless illustrate how democracies can be specifically endangered by nationalism and revisionism, we will look at the situation in Poland as it presented itself until February 2022. This seems appropriate given that the governing coalition of the so-called United Right under the leadership of PiS in Warsaw had pursued a clear demarcation policy vis-à-vis the EU as a union of states even up until the outbreak of war in Ukraine. It is true that Poland's government no longer adopts this approach in light of a fundamentally changed security situation and the enormous political and social challenges. However, essential points of criticism and motives will not be eliminated overnight and should be subject to further observation.

# Poland's Endangered Democracy – a Textbook Example

The dramatic situation in Poland, as we have witnessed until now, specifically becomes clear when looking at the conclusion of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's (BTI) Transformation Index of 2020: "Political instrumentalisation of the judiciary, public media and public administration by the ruling party (Law and Justice) has undermined the quality of democracy and contributed towards an even deeper division within Polish society.<sup>82</sup> Poland's economic performance is good and there are positive forecasts for the future. The government's tax and debt policy generally promotes macroeconomic stability. However, social spending has risen and populist promises can be heard time and again. Legislation is often dominated by badly prepared draft laws that are hastily adopted, meaning there are limited opportunities for other actors to have their say."<sup>83</sup> Added to this, democracy research considers Poland today as a case of *party state capture*: a state monopolised by one party, which controls important state institutions, including the courts and businesses.<sup>84</sup>

The years following the Fall of Communism and the political turnaround in 1989 have shaped Central Eastern Europe in general and Poland in particular. This had serious repercussions for many citizens: the transformation resulted in great social sacrifices, material exclusion, strong pressure to adapt owing to the conditions imposed and, in some cases, the loss of former relative economic and social prosperity. Viewed together with the above measures, this led to a fatal discrepancy for a large section of the Polish population: recognising the economic exclusion of many as the price of reform was inconsistent with the political inclusion of privileged parties, including former communists – while also being the outcome of institutionalised hegemony of elites over the democratic process.

According to the material approach outlined above, the PiS continues to address prevailing social inequalities within society like no other established party in Poland. This is helped by the fact that Poland as a business location has generated virtually uninterrupted high growth since 1990; still, there has been no reduction in the level of perceived social injustices in the East-West and urban-rural divide. Social benefits such as the "500Plus" programme from 2016 or the now attempted "Polish New Order" (*PolSKI Nowy Ład*)<sup>85</sup>, which the government hopes will attract voters despite the necessary subsequent corrections, constitute the heart of their party programme.

Until recently, the PiS successfully pursued the nationalist populist idea of mobilising solidarity through the postulate of a strong, sovereign, and protectionist state. In line with the second approach, the PiS invoked Polish cultural identity – for instance, in the anti-solidarity stance of the Polish government during the European migration crisis in 2015, in repeatedly fomenting anti-German and anti-European resentment in electoral campaigns and in sealing-off

the Polish external border by means of nationalistically effective, but controversial, government measures from a humanitarian perspective as well as under European and international law in the border conflict with Belarus in 2021.

In line with the third above-mentioned approach which accuses the establishment of being ruthless, it was impossible to overlook the fact that, until only recently, the PiS continued to emphasise their own national identity through the alleged contradiction of “Poland” vs. “Europe”. Grievances in the country have been attributed to the irresponsible actions of the political elite in Brussels, referred to as a hegemon, the ruthless transnational finance sector as well as the liberal Civic Platform under the leadership of Donald Tusk, the main rival in the Polish party spectrum. Right until the end, the underlying dialogue made it clear that the democratic model of European liberalism (the guardian of which was the EU), did not deserve any trust and the “West” endangered natural culture when it comes to questions of cultural identity (see the progressive secularisation in Western Europe together with its support for minorities such as LGBTQ and the deeply Catholic Poland as antipodes).

What successfully caught on with voters owing to a painful transformational injustice was the nationally and socially underpinned narrative of the PiS; this stated that Poland is not being treated as an equal partner by its European counterparts. Rather, relations with Brussels were considered asymmetrical and unjust because of membership conditions previously adopted under political pressure. Europe, according to this, was not in fact interested in improving the status quo. On the contrary, it is believed that the EU regards Poland’s postulate for genuine transformational justice as a disruptive factor. That is why those responsible in Warsaw only saw one option well into 2022, namely, to revise current EU processes so that Poland – be it within or outside European integration – could make a

## How Trust in Liberal Politics Can Be Restored

real leap in development.

These developments outlined in Poland<sup>86</sup> illustrate that, until very recently, a large proportion of the population had since 1990 been following promises of the right-wing populist PiS in the face of material worries, insecurity regarding culture and identity and a disappointment about the perceived irresponsibility of elites. In light of the existential threat posed by Russia’s aggression in the East since the Spring of 2022, the leadership in Warsaw may have distanced itself from its nationalist postulate of a “Europe of Fatherlands” (as opposed to the EU as a supranational entity). After all, the PiS has also recognised that NATO and bilateral security relations with the US as a global

power alone will not suffice for Poland, but it also needs the community of the West to fight against Putin's despotism as an imperial leader of the nuclear power Russia. However, this certainly does not mean the government in Warsaw will accept all rules underpinning democracy from now on. Not least because the EU will henceforth attempt to adopt a cautious approach to confrontations with Poland as a key state for security and migration policy on the EU's external border with Ukraine. And whether the PiS will continue to use nationalist propaganda to instrumentalise social discontent for preserving their own

## Despite the prevailing democratic unity in Europe, caution is still called for in view of the long-term developments not only in Poland.

authoritarian structures of power, remains to be seen.

Despite the prevailing democratic unity in Europe, caution is still called for in view of the long-term developments not only in Poland. Anti-democratic phenomena are – as the list of right-wing populist parties indicates at the start – not only limited to Central Eastern Europe. For instance, in Germany, the same transformation-related opposition between “East” and “West”, revealed how the democratic stability of the political system is being put to the test in some regions here, too. Historic influences, economic inequalities and different political and social orientations among the population fuelled insecurities in the new federal states as well, which, in recent years, parties such as the AfD have been able to seize on by means of nationalist ideology. Also noted was a strongly polarised society, and in some places, a clear disregard for democratically legitimised elected representatives or, at times, even overt escalation of violence and contempt for the constitutional state – for example by the so-called citizens of the Reich, a group which not only openly rejects democracy, but also engages in revisionism.

The vast majority of Germans support democracy as a liberal state governed by rule of law. Yet, studies show that a significant proportion of the population also adopts an anti-plural standpoint, which, at the very least, bears testimony to an illiberal understanding of democracy and ideas of the inequality of diverse population groups. A sizeable minority even represents anti-democratic through to extremist positions.<sup>87</sup> In Germany, it also seemed as though (at least until recently), a section of the political centre was losing its democratic compass. Evidence of this were, for instance, the illegal gatherings in Saxony, on which right-wing radicals and Corona deniers came together in open rejection of the state. This loud minority was not only radicalised but represented a real danger to open society.

In light of the political turning point on account of

Russia's inhumane aggression in violation of international law, it now seems quite conceivable that the principles underpinning democracy – such as freedom and rule of law, the separation of powers as well as the protection of minorities and opposition – will be able to assert themselves against nationalist and revisionist tendencies once again. The united and firm response of the international community for peace and democracy could be perceived as an important indication.

However, final certainty of a trend reversal toward a sustainably resilient, revitalised democracy in the face of external threat will fail to materialise. New challenges with the potential to undermine democracy already cast their shadows before us: rampant inflation together with horrendous price increases; burdens on the economy owing to comprehensive and necessary sanctions against Russia; rising energy costs in light of a reorganisation of the European energy market; significantly higher financial expenditure in defence; (and not least) unforeseeable pressure on both welfare systems and society as a whole due to the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War.

To decisively prevent threats to democracy, it therefore seems advisable in the long-term – regardless of current prospects – to reinforce trust in liberal politics through transparent processes and concrete political outcomes. It is necessary to underline the importance of institutions based on rule of law as well as to communicate the significance of democratic principles and consensus-oriented social structures far removed from demarcation and aggression. What is more, it is precisely during times of international conflict management that Europe as a democratic and supranational entity must prove itself to be strong, united, and effective; and especially among the young generation, which is confronted with war in this dimension for the first time. With a view to regions still suffering from the ramifications of transformation, it is more important, in what is an even more difficult economic time, to draw up a genuine prospect for advancement within open, democratic processes. Such a prospect needs to seriously take account of the concerns of people everywhere, but especially in parts of Europe most affected by hardships in Ukraine, align social living conditions and to be implemented in direct dialogue – if possible, with the active involvement of citizens in local political decision-making processes.

That this is difficult, but not without hope, is proven by the millions of people who, in recent weeks, took to the streets across Europe and worldwide against the war in Ukraine and to advocate for democracy.

In the short term, what Anne Applebaum describes in her book *Die Verlockung des Autoritären*<sup>88</sup> (The Temptation of Authoritarianism) should apply: "Liberal democracies have always demanded something from their citizens: participation, discussion, commitment and debate." If this necessity is applied to post-communist regions of Europe, for instance, then the words of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the anniversary of the German unification in 2021 can be seamlessly integrated: "People, open the doors and see what's behind them. Be ready to meet, be curious about one another, tell each other your stories and tolerate differences. That is the lesson learnt from 31 years of German unity. We need respect for the respective biographies and experiences and also for democracy."<sup>89</sup>

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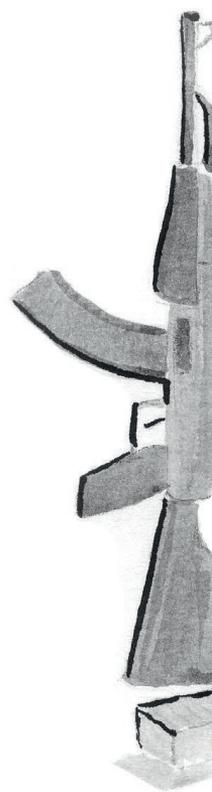
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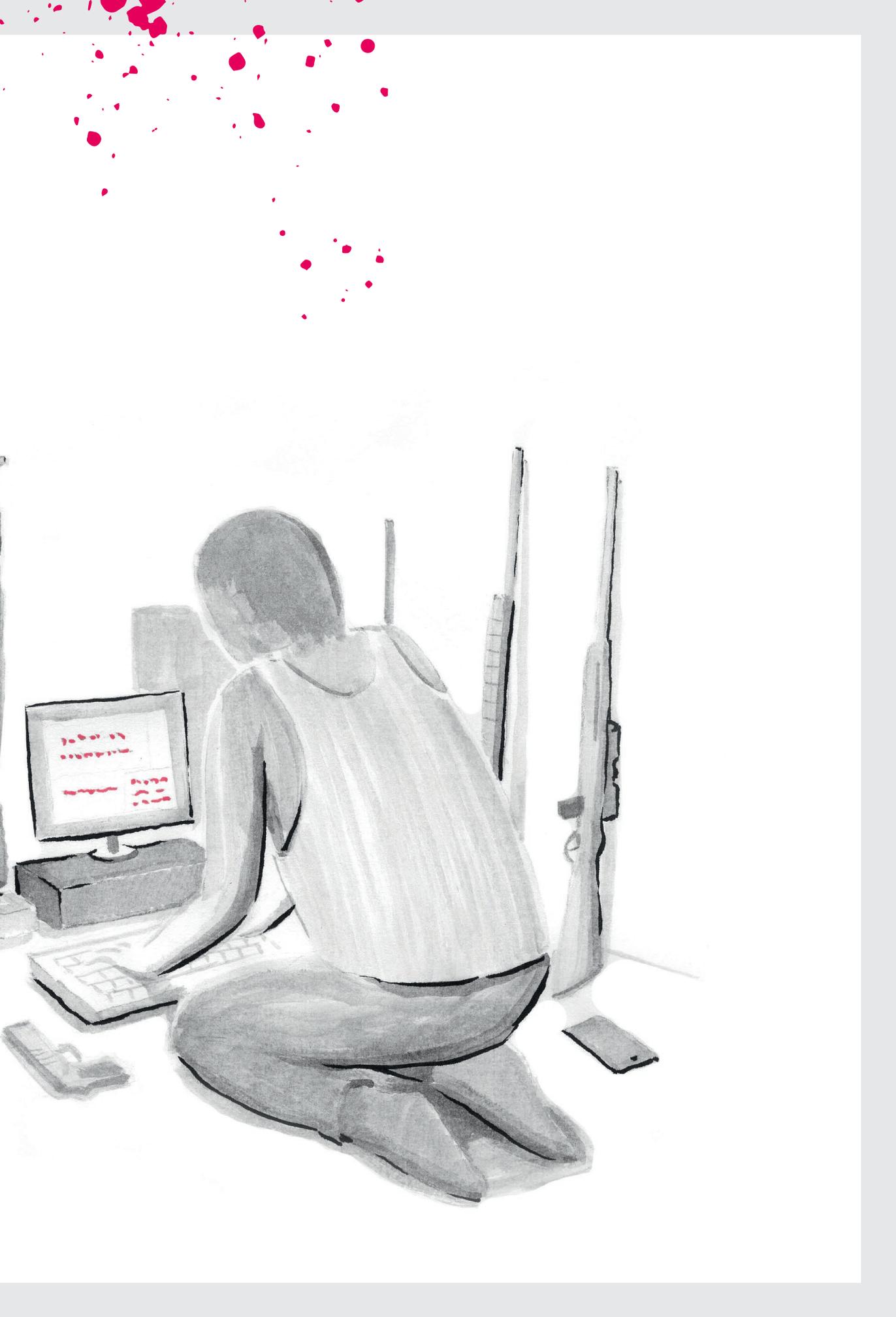
## Cyber Attacks and Troll Armies

# From Computer Worm to the Threat to Democracy

●  
**Maximilian L. Knoll**

● Threats facing democracy have long ceased to be merely analogue in nature. Challenges in the digital space now also threaten the functioning of the democratic order and are considered particularly difficult to contain because of legal grey areas and the largely unresolved matter of who is responsible. In many areas, the state is too poorly equipped to counter these dangers. Only a shrewd balancing act between resolute action and the ability to adapt can lead to success over the long-term.





When, in 1988, Robert M. Morris developed the first media-effective computer worm at his university and then put it into circulation, what was to become increasingly common from the late noughties may have seemed to him like a side effect of futuristic dystopia. We are not only talking about the various resources of cyber and information space that would be used for hostile intentions to influence presidential elections of robust democracies in the US and France, or to physically damage gas pipelines and centrifuges of nuclear reactors (without making physical impact). While Morris at least served a suspended sentence, it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine who is behind infantile and euphemistic sounding troll armies or espionage and blackmail that go by the names of *CozyBear*, *Sandworm* or *WannaCry*. Relative to their rather invisible initiation, the scope of these attacks has so far been destructive, and in any case, costly, which often serves as an occasion to transfer all catastrophe scenarios from the analogue to the digital world by expanding the word “cyber” to include attributes such as 9/11, Pearl Harbour, or Chernobyl. Based on experience, government institutions in Germany are somewhat more sober when it comes to apocalyptic connotations and more differentiated regarding the impact.

There can be no doubt that attacks from cyber and information space have both social and economic implications; be it in the form of “pinpricks” by making various private or government services (temporarily) unavailable, or by encrypting systems whose further use is made dependent on ransom payments. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its resistance take place in the cyber and information space, too. This is not likely to come as a surprise in the form of the usual war propaganda, the staging of one’s own troops, territorial gains, and losses. Rather, what becomes striking during this conflict is not only the decentralisation of those operating in digital arenas and coming together for this occasion, but also their effectiveness relative to a country like Russia, which, until now, has been considered particularly skilled in the field of hybrid (in the sense of an interaction of analogue and digital) warfare.

# Is the Democratic State's Ability to Function at Risk?

Without wanting to support the aforementioned hyperbole, the potentially far-reaching impact of influence from the cyber and information space gives rise to the question: Could this also endanger democracy as one of the cornerstones of our state organisation? The degree of abstraction could scarcely be higher and the translation "rule of the people" only helps to a certain extent: Is governance exerted by casting the vote or is there more to it? Even if the vote is cast without any complications and ultimately becomes part of the overall result, in other words, the counting and success value corresponds: What role does trust play in the individual (electoral) process, but also in the functioning of the state as the foundation for acceptance – and can it be counteracted? Has the way here already been paved? How and by whom can this be remedied?

If we imagine the individual elements of democracy as concentric circles, then at the centre are the actual election or ballot, the election principles, political parties (as the transmission belt of participatory politics) as well as majority voting and the protection of minorities. While the principle of a democratically organised state is constitutionally safeguarded by the so-called eternity clause, elections not only have to take place regularly, but also be recognised by a majority as having been properly conducted. The formula for the former is, first and foremost, the election principles (in particular, the equality of counting values and success values of the votes cast), the formula for the latter is acceptance, which, in turn, requires trust and is much more difficult to ensure. Hence, trust, to take the metaphor further, represents the outer circle which is essential for preventing elections from losing their purpose and degenerating into a purely bureaucratic event. The fact that this is less an academic discourse than a practical reality, could be observed at the latest since the 2020 US presidential election. Although 64 out of 65 attempts to contest the election results before court at various levels failed, up to two-thirds of US Republicans believe that the election was carried out unlawfully and led to the defeat of their candidate.<sup>90</sup>

# Direct and Indirect Influence

How might the use of the cyber and information space now impact on the narrower and broader network of relationships within a democratic process? The abstract definition of a cyber attack is vital: In essence, what all approaches have in common is that they use information technology systems to impact on legally protected goods. Information technology systems, on the other hand, can be limited to the fact that some form of data processing takes place with the use of binary codes (consisting of zero and one).

An attempt at synthesis based on the presented elements results in the following: The danger of counteracting an election in its postulated, general, direct, free, equal, and secret manner can be formally controlled insofar as it can be decoupled from information technology systems. However, as soon as a form of data transfer takes place, such as on a server or in a cloud, even possibly via the internet, this would also lead to an intrusion point – at least according to the theory – which could enable successful influence in connection with the “human factor”. Irrespective of gaps in system architectures, it would almost certainly be possible to protect against most common cyber attacks if people were more careful, especially when opening email attachments. It is precisely because it requires human cooperation that protection is often a matter of individual care. Being successful in digitally influencing a local, state, or federal election seems to be rather unlikely in view of their currently analogue process – this is an initially reassuring interim finding.

Along the aforementioned circle – we come to trust as a basis for creating acceptance of the democratic decision-making process. To begin with, let's stay with the electoral process: How can trust in the equality of counting and success values, as the core underpinning the proper conduct of elections, be thwarted? It is helpful to think about how people are usually informed about election results. This is likely to be carried out predominantly through public and private media institutions. Imagine that the projections of a Bundestag (federal) election would have to be repeatedly corrected beyond typical fluctuations on the eve of election, because, for example, the result of the data transmission had been interfered with. Or official access to city or district administrations is blocked as part of so-called ransom ware attacks: this is what happened in July 2021 when the Anhalt-Bitterfeld district administration, with just under 900 employees, was rendered virtually incapable of acting overnight.<sup>91</sup>

At the same time, doubt can already be cast on the outcome of a vote from the outset by skilfully spreading false information. The starting point could, for instance, be votes of the postal voters by pretending that they will not be included in the main outcome for whatever reason, or that they have already been counted, combined with fictitious “advance” projections; both enriched by powerful images and videos on social networks. Algorithms of the relevant networks serve as an effective vehicle for this. Algorithms designed to maximise the time users spend on a site, react particularly to sensational presentations. “Trends” arising from this ensure that the messages become known to an ever broader public. A counter statement by public broadcasters could logically persuade those who are open to them. Such events are definitely capable of undermining trust, which is usually more difficult to win back than it is to initially disrupt.

Beyond influencing the election result, another level must not be neglected, which is less focused on the democratic process in the narrower sense, but rather the process of opinion formation in the run-up to elections. For example, electoral behaviour can be directly impacted if campaign teams are compromised by internal communication (such as emails) being accessed and published (in line with their own agenda). That this is not just made up out of thin air is proven by looking back at 2017, when, during the “Macron hack”, one day before the run-off vote during the French presidential elections, more than 20,000 stolen emails from the campaign team of one of the candidates were published;<sup>92</sup> this, mind you, at a time when election advertising was no longer permitted by law and so the contents were out in the open without comment.

Apart from the described possibilities for interfering with state institutions and processes with cyber attacks, another aspect must not be overlooked. This includes the previous aspects and is indirectly related to the democratic process: the functioning of the state and trust in it. In this context, the attack on the network of the German Bundestag in 2015 is likely to have been particularly effective.

However, the state’s monopoly on the use of force is of central relevance here. In terms of content, it means that the state with its institutions is authorised and sometimes obliged in the context of law to exercise essential protective functions vis-à-vis the citizens themselves. While this applies generally and not specifically to dangers emanating from cyberspace, the state faces particular challenges here.

# The State Is Losing its “Air Sovereignty”

While attackers from cyberspace gain in strength and feel increasingly secure, the state is confronted with institutional and organisational challenges. A look at media coverage shows that events such as *Stuxnet*, attacks leading to extensive power supply outages and other events with an apocalyptic tone, have so far – fortunately – only played a minor role in relation to what is understood as cybercrime. Cybercriminals mainly target part of the so-called public services (such as hospitals) as well as, to a rapidly increasing extent, private sector institutions, medium-sized enterprises, and industrial companies.<sup>93</sup> The attack is usually manifested such that a zero-day vulnerability<sup>94</sup> disguised as an email attachment or link encrypts access to the respective operating network and restoring access is made dependent on the payment of a ransom in cryptocurrency (which is why it is called ransom ware attack). This procedure is usually accompanied by the publication of company secrets, confidential data or (allegedly) compromising material about company representatives, which lends weight to the demand for money. Only a minority of those affected receive all their data back following payment. These events are growing fast worldwide, with a rise of 485 per cent having been recorded between 2019 and 2020 alone.<sup>95</sup>

In cases of the aforementioned ransom ware attacks, a particular disparity becomes apparent. Attacks are conducted by groups and gangs from various professional backgrounds organised on a global scale and with a division of labour. The linchpin are platforms on which those involved come together on an ad hoc “project-by-project” basis. There is virtually no need for terrestrial infrastructure and is limited to a maximum of one radio mast in the wider area; if this is available, only power is needed for operating their own terminals. The place of residence and jurisdiction are irrelevant. On the dark net, IP addresses are not logged, and even if so: Decentralisation makes it possible (despite successful tracing) to disguise one’s own location, unless this is in different states in any case and the success of prosecution is seriously limited as a result.

Another essential institutional aspect is the organisation at state level. Apart from a few exceptions, the German federal government is only active in a coordinating capacity in domestic (law enforcement) policy and intelligence services. This reveals another difficulty: while the effects are undoubtedly and visibly domestic, it is often unclear where the initiators are located. The difficulty of attributing a cyber attack on the one hand results from the institutionalised decentralisation of cyberspace, and from the resulting possibility of anonymity and concealment, on the other. The result is a technically insufficient and sometimes impossible *back-tracing*. This poses a challenge to a state organised along the dividing line between “inside” and “outside”. Even the Bundeswehr and its Cyber and Information Command (CIR) established in 2017 cannot change this, as the armed forces only operate along the legal model assigned to them and are not allowed to develop it further on their own.

## What Is Being Done Against Cyber Attacks – and What Needs to Be Done

The state’s monopoly on the use of force cannot be used to derive a claim obliging the state to go beyond the protection of its own facilities to protect against any blackout or to hold all commercial enterprises harmless, nor to provide unilateral prevention. The analogous comparison, in which personal responsibility is an essential feature and ultimately the flip side of general freedom of action, does not stand up to this. When it comes to structural organisational services, however, these are not the responsibility of those concerned, but rather typically the task of the state.

The central points here are the equipment and organisation of the authorities. Here, equipment means personnel and material and they are both mutually dependent. Insufficiently qualified personnel cannot make informed decisions about material equipment, let alone adapt the organisation. This leads to a well-known consequence: Dependence on consultancies and other service providers who value the state as a starry-eyed customer. Symbolic in this context is the so-called Corona Warning App, which has already devoured a high three-digit million Euro amount.<sup>96</sup> When it comes to personnel, qualified heads come at a price. Relevant IT specialists, or quite specifically hackers, to stay on this subject, are regularly paid wages by GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft) that far exceed the level of official salaries. While market price this to be accepted in the first instance, remuneration can be adjusted in line with competition. However, this requires the realisation that competence and ability are the decisive criteria, not necessarily the

respective level in the hierarchy, or even the duration of membership in an administrative unit. Why should a qualified person not cost more than others on his or her hierarchical level, when otherwise external expertise would have to be bought in, and exposing the cost/benefit ratio to the aforementioned danger? This is aggravated by the fact that a transfer from the private sector to public administration and back is not generally provided for in Germany. But how is protection that is aligned with the times to be developed and, above all, continuously adapted if personnel interaction with the (especially financially strong) professional economy is not possible? All this can be changed, what is crucial is that the need for action is identified.

The problem of attributing cyber attacks has a direct impact on state organisation: this starts with the competences (who is responsible for what?) and ends with the organisation of the administrative unit. Here, too, the correlation with staffing is clear to see. Since the appropriate staff are in short supply, it is unwise to maintain all structures for each state and the federal government (in other words 16 and 17 times respectively). In terms of responsibility, the basic assumption for the distribution of competences also needs to be rethought: Since attacks often cannot be differentiated according to external or internal initiators, it makes little sense to organise authorities along this dividing line. It would be more effective to perceive this area holistically, to decouple it from other security tasks and organise it along scenarios or different degrees of impairment. Such a modification could take state and federal authorities, police, and intelligence services, but also the armed forces into account. The existing National Cyber Defence Centre and the Central Office for Information Technology in the security sector are no substitute since they are only inter-agency and cross-institutional platforms that attempt to mitigate deficits in the status quo. Fundamentally, their existence is proof of the need for action described above. The focus needs to be on skills as opposed to authority names. Thus, the armed forces with their CIR command should not be classified at the top end from the start just because they have the most effective capabilities in the kinetic field. Quite the opposite: To evade the debate on military domestic deployment, it would perhaps even be useful to organise cyber defence entirely separately from the armed forces. These skills include identifying, isolating, and repairing affected IT structures and, if possible and necessary, counterattack.

# The focus needs to be on skills as opposed to authority names.

In the area of resilience and prevention, on the other hand, burden-sharing has already begun. Thus, European legal acts on cyber security and the National IT Security Act 2.0 are already imposing ever stricter security measures on companies, especially those with *critical infrastructure*. The state is unable to provide this broad protection itself, and increasingly involves the private sector. Both are suitable for modifying the distribution of responsibilities between citizens and the state, inherent in the monopoly on the use of force, toward a cooperative relationship. This can also have consequences. If the individual is held more accountable, this can arouse desires. The superordinate/subordinate relationship between state and citizens might change. In the medium term, this is likely to most strongly manifest itself where the state avails itself of (foreign) private entities to guarantee its own IT security; new and historically unusual dependencies are emerging. Even if some of the aforementioned structural measures are taken, it will probably not be possible to completely decouple from the private side: The need for the state to catch up in the above-cited areas are too great, as are the other (social) state obligations, which should not be overlooked either.

The essential assets of our state are twofold. Firstly, there is its regulatory sovereignty, which is continuously renewed in the democratic process. It needs to use this skilfully to protect its “air sovereignty” against third party influences. That this should be approached organisationally on the greatest possible scale and thus European, where possible also transatlantic, is clear from the nature of the (borderless) issue itself as well as the fact that open, liberal democracies typically exhibit similar vulnerabilities. Smart steps have been taken here in the form of a European legal act on cyber security and the establishment of an EU-wide framework for the certification of IT security products. From a substantive perspective, however, regulatory sovereignty also includes using instruments suitable for one’s own well-being and continually reviewing their effectiveness. The effectiveness needs to be examined and, if necessary, adapted, especially where (extraterritorial) opponents appear who attempt to exploit open – due to being system-immanent – flanks of liberal democracies. Specifically, this means: if the cyber and information space is used as an instrument of power to disrupt democratic and opinion-forming processes, the use of comparable means should not be ruled out as a means of deterrence.<sup>97</sup> The fact that states generally need to catch up here can also be seen in the Ukraine war: When the Ukrainian Vice-President calls on the global Hacker community to place Russia’s state websites and digital infrastructure in the firing line,<sup>98</sup> this not only further testifies to the existence of the aforementioned ad-hoc forces, but also to their importance as a critical resource, precisely because the state is in short supply, for averting danger or even national defence.

The second key issue is a unique characteristic: Only the state can claim – by virtue of the democratic decision-making process – to be committed to the common good. This fact is of crucial importance at a time when private forces are gaining power and influence and, as demonstrated, are capable of partially challenging the monopoly on the use of force traditionally claimed by the state. In contrast to the state, private actors are not committed to the common good. This is the salient difference, which should be suitable for ensuring legitimacy and acceptance.

## Author

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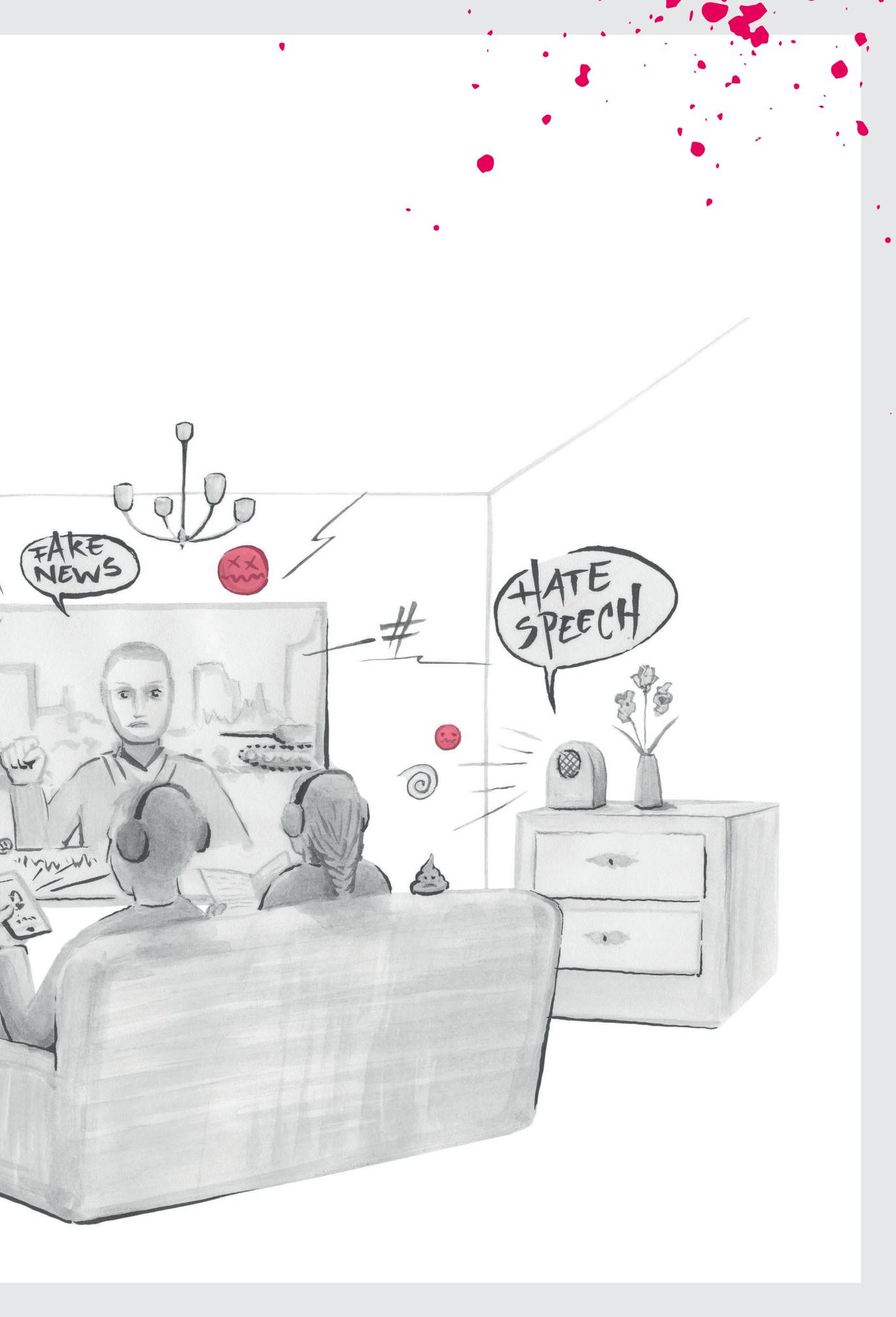
## Authoritarian Propaganda and Influence

# Remaining Credible, Strengthening Resilience

**Frank Priess**

Propaganda and influence by authoritarian states threaten to undermine social cohesion in democratic systems. In light of the increasingly aggressive attempts of countries such as China and Russia to penetrate into the heart of liberal democracies and weaken them from within, strengthening democratic resilience is more important than ever. In an age shaped by relativism and hybrid challenges, democracy will only survive if the indispensability of responsible and independent information is recognised and consistently defended.





FAKE NEWS

HATE SPEECH

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Writing about propaganda and influence gains a whole new dimension with the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. The entire repertoire of a scrupulous government is magnified for everyone to see; the impact and intentions of which are perceived very differently by local and international audiences. In closed information spaces where many people – especially and almost exclusively the elderly – “inform themselves” by means of censored television which has fed them corresponding narratives over the years, it is hardly surprising that strong support for Putin’s aggression continues to this day. Elsewhere, however, Russia is now not only losing the war of images and discourse, as its condemnation by 141 member states of the United Nations has shown: only four loyal supporters remained on Moscow’s side. A disaster. Many abstentions – in addition to the weighing of interests on the ground – also show it is an enduring struggle for the truth and public opinion – in authoritarian states themselves, where ultimate freedoms are reduced to internet and messenger services, in “mixed” systems and not least in democracies themselves, which must not betray their own values and yet must remain defensive. Even they show disturbing susceptibility to Kremlin propaganda, as not only pro-Russian car parades in German cities make painfully clear.

It was not particularly missed during the 2021 Bundestag election: The external manipulation attempts that some expected to influence the election result for one’s own ends; whatever that would have been in the case of Russia or China, for example, the most frequently mentioned usual suspects. Or was the influence so subtle that it went unnoticed? That is precisely what has characterised this form of intervention over the years, ever since it achieved legendary status in the 2016 US presidential elections and rumour has it that Donald Trump would not have made it into the White House without this kind of help. 2016 seems to be a key year of focus for these challenges. At that time, Oliver Georgi wrote the following in the FAZ: “The cyber war no longer plays out only in the covert sphere of intelligence services and state security systems, but above all as a war of opinion on social networks.”<sup>99</sup> And Stefan Heumann predicted in *Internationale Politik*: “The conflicts over the free flow of data will expand internationally.”<sup>100</sup>

Not long afterwards, the influence exerted on the Brexit campaigns in the United Kingdom were regarded as further examples; not least with the use of companies such as Cambridge Analytica and active assistance from Facebook and other platforms. Drones of so-called bots were deployed, flooding the net with disinformation generated on an almost industrial scale, and caused confusion. Since then, there have now been talks of “troll armies” (see also Chapter 9 “Cyber Attacks and Troll Armies”), some of which are specifically attributed to the Russian President Putin’s entourage and located in St. Petersburg, for example.

# War by Other Means

Propaganda was and continues to be a comparatively inexpensive form of weakening the resistance of states perceived as opponents below the level of warfare. Jill Kastner and William C. Wohlforth formulated the following in *Foreign Affairs*: "Great power competition has returned, and with it, so has great power subversion."<sup>101</sup> And further: "Subversion combines the aggression of war with the stealth of espionage [...], it is secret, active, and transgressive."<sup>102</sup> Of course, another benefit for potential attackers is that the origin of attacks cannot always be precisely tracked nor is it transparent – a fact that other countries are evidently harnessing with cyber attacks. In the public, it is therefore easy, in the face of *naming and shaming*, to discredit corresponding secret services and push them into the realm of "it was heard" and "it was said".

**Propaganda was and continues to be an inexpensive form of weakening the resistance of states perceived as opponents below the level of warfare.**

System competition within Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact is not so long ago that we can no longer remember the GDR's attempts to instrumentalise the West German peace movement for its own ends through suitable narrative and, where necessary, through tangible corruption – following the opening of the archives, some media had to face unpleasant questions. Targeted defamation with compromising material to inflict lasting damage on politicians considered to be unfriendly has a long history, too, and seems to work well to this day. On the other hand, that democratic politicians allow themselves to be "bought" by authoritarian systems in order to flood public opinion in their home countries with the desired "narratives" is also one of the sad truths. Even small authoritarian states achieve considerable success in this way, as Azerbaijan has been demonstrating for some time.

Russia and China have long since upgraded their external presentation and are addressing a foreign public for all to see: both countries have their own wide-ranging programmes. China has also vigorously invested in the purchase of media, especially in Afri-

ca, as shown by detailed analyses by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) and others. Deep pockets of the buyers and the battered condition of traditional media owing to the crisis of their advertisement funding have made them easy prey. Foreign-language programmes are successful worldwide, and often have a far greater presence than Deutsche Welle, for example. Its comparatively low financial resources are not well matched to the economic strength of the Federal Republic, which, as an export-oriented country, is particularly dependent on international approval. However, it also cannot be right that, internationally, only the English-speaking media such as BBC and CNN take notice of it. A lesson would be, if soft power is to be strengthened, to do far more here in parallel with significantly increasing the scholarship offers for journalists, students, and academics and intensifying the work of Goethe Institutes and German schools abroad.

## “Propaganda of the Act”

Parallel to this is a “propaganda of the act” as we witnessed with vaccination diplomacy. Images stick in our minds: Grateful European statesmen like the Serbian President, who acknowledge Chinese vaccination deliveries by kissing the Chinese flag. This was a massive criticism of everything the European Union fails to do. And indeed: Brussels learnt how to breathe new life into the old saying “do good and talk about it”. Strategic communication gained in importance, but is not adequately taken into account everywhere.

States like China are also successful when it comes to self-censorship. Science and journalism could tell you a thing or two about how quickly critical articles lead to the refusal to grant visas. The famous Wolf Warriors in the Chinese Foreign Service with their well-organised “united front department” at the Communist Party of China (CPC) ensure that even the foreign community plays a role in “keeping an eye” on dissenting compatriots – a good portrayal can be found in Peter Martins *China’s Civilian Army – The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*. By the same token, those who know to how to respect “red lines” are rewarded with lucrative advertising business. The same applies to influence on foreign think tanks that have to finance themselves privately, or universities, which, despite all problems for free research and teaching, refuse to let go of Confucius Institutes. China is also generous with scholarships in the field of journalism – the extent to which media professionals from Africa are afforded the opportunity to get to know the Middle Kingdom is astonishing, and even for longer stays.

# Troll Culture and Cancel Culture

Conspiracy theories and creating confusion are particularly popular means of unsettling the public in democratic countries, at least over the long run, and undermining the systems. The Corona crisis shows what happens when nobody trusts anyone anymore and everyone thinks everything is possible. Surveys now already clearly prove that trust in institutions of democratic states has weakened across the world – for various reasons.

The so-called social media are almost always named as one of the triggers. Former US President Barack Obama is absolutely right when he states: “If we are no longer able to distinguish between true and false, then something is fundamentally wrong with our democracy.”<sup>103</sup> The fact that Jonathan Rauch, who quotes him in a *Spiegel* article, blames this not only on the troll culture but also on a rather local cancel culture, shows that democracy can also be eroded from the inside and that it by no means always takes external actors to do this. Nevertheless, influence from outside and its underlying interests must not be underestimated, as Rauch makes clear with a quote from Peter Pomerantsev in the direction of the Kremlin: “In communism, they wanted to convince people that a great socialist future lay ahead of them. The new propaganda focused on causing confusion and spreading conspiracy theories.”<sup>104</sup>

## Underestimated Threats

The resilience of democratic societies is much less pronounced today: In the past, trust was placed in the *gatekeeper* function of well-resourced media newsrooms, whereas today their function has been shaken. It used to be said that the ARD Tagesschau (daily news) could still rely on viewer ratings even in Latin and in candlelight. An anchor-man like Karl-Heinz Köpcke was at risk of being mistaken for the government spokesperson who announces the ultimate truths. Today the public broadcasters are accused of being a “lying press”. Those with non-conformist ideas are no longer prepared to accept established scientific standards. Too much emphasis is being placed on minority views. The corrective of regional newspapers is under massive pressure because traditional advertising categories have migrated to the internet. For young people, subscribing to a local newspaper is an exception rather than the rule. At the same time, digital paid services continue to struggle, even though everyone knows that good journalism and good research cost money, but without them effective control of the powerful is scarcely possible. Uncritical reporting, or that which is susceptible to dishonest promotional offers, is on the increase.

The absence of almost any sense of threat, especially in German society, certainly does not help create more resilience and critical attention to attempts to exert influence from the outside. Many people still feel as though they are “surrounded by friends”, whereas a different era was heralded in long ago. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung security expert Nils Wörmer talks about a “threat situation like we haven’t seen since the height of the Cold War”<sup>105</sup>, after Chrystia Freeland had come to the same conclusion: “The truth is that authoritarianism is on the march – and it is time for liberal democracy to fight back.”<sup>106</sup> This is difficult for a “sheep among wolves”<sup>107</sup> as the Austrian economist Gabriel Felbermayr sees the EU, or the proverbial “vegetarians among carnivores”<sup>108</sup>, as formulated by the former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel. “We are”, according to Gabriel “mentally and politically badly prepared for a world changing at breakneck speed and that will get even rougher. While we like talking about values, the world is being increasingly shaped by hard-nosed interest politics.”<sup>109</sup>

Particularly problematic here is that democratically legitimised politicians are playing a huge role in undermining trust, above all Donald Trump. The fact that today almost half of the Republican electorate in the US believe the most recent election was stolen and rigged, is a case in point. The way in which an incited mob stormed the Capitol in January 2021 is being investigated, but investigations show a very limited interest especially from the Republican Party. Contempt for media representatives at press conferences was taken to a whole new level by Trump, and fake news has lasting consequences, as we can see. At the same time, many no longer leave their own digital news bubble. As soon as dissonant content is shared, there is a risk of being “unfriended” on Facebook, for example. Studies on the platform for the US prove that supporters of Republicans and Democrats now take notice of completely different news, with scarcely any overlap. The fact that scrupulous media companies and entrepreneurs – here, too, the US and Great Britain are particularly cautionary examples – play a major role in all these tendencies, is also part of the panorama.

This kind of self-harm in democracies strengthens the position of authoritarian narratives. Not least China succeeds in casting doubt on the leadership selection of democratic states and linking it to presumptions of competence in their own country, while also continually reinforcing the decadence of liberal states. Stefan Meister from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) never tires of denouncing Western assistance in Russian influence, and especially the lack of international financial control, which makes the funds for large-scale disinformation and corruption abroad possible in the first place. This openness is by no means popular, however: the current climate of opinion poses the danger of those with such criticism being perceived as incorrigible Cold War warriors and being silenced, a policy of détente and dialogue are of course much nicer. The diplomatic memoirs of the former German ambassador to Moscow, Rüdiger von Fritsch, bear witness to the great extent of his experience: “Those who only accept everything in silence will not be taken seriously.”<sup>110</sup> Of course: Double standards are to be avoided, in which criticism is countered in the best whataboutism and are unfortunately numerous; as Alexander Rahr notes in his most recent Russia book, in which he articulates concerns about a green hyper-morality.<sup>111</sup>

# Unequal Competition

Democracies find themselves in a problematic competition: they and their media are prevented from providing people in authoritarian systems with independent information, also due to ever more effective firewalls. At the same time, their own pluralistic approach dictates that media from abroad should not be excluded and takeovers of domestic media should not be prevented from the outset. However, current measures taken by the EU against state Russian propaganda broadcasters reveal that a defensive democracy can also, if necessary, rely on “exclusion” and supplement national regulation when media services become too far removed from journalism and the freedom of expression. A free internet is also part of the identity of any democracy. Anything that seems to be an attempt at restriction is met with the fiercest protests from the user community. That this asymmetry is more likely to grow becomes clear from the current Chinese policy of tightening controls on the internet: gaming for more than three hours per week is to be prohibited for people under the age of 18.

At international level and in its organisations, an “authoritarian international” is now attempting to gain influence by setting standards and embedding the sovereignty of national states in the virtual space over the long term (for more information see Chapter 11 “Economic and Technological Dependency”). Regarding a possible “interference in domestic affairs”, media providers are to be kept away from unwelcome content. Even major US American platforms, through fear of being excluded from the Chinese market, have already bowed to pressure and blocked anything that might not be accepted there. This regulatory matter often flies below the radar of attention in democratic states, and in many cases majorities in the United Nations and its sub-organisations are just as they are at present. Even the composition of the UN Human Rights Council speaks volumes – the office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Geneva regularly documents the corresponding voting behaviour and imbalances in the assessments. Authoritarian states also mutually support each other and coordinate their actions far better than representatives of the democratic world. The exclusion of Russia from the Human Rights Council – with 93 votes in favour and a two-thirds majority of the UN General Assembly – shows, however, that there are limits to such “solidarity”; namely, where such states would evidently place themselves on the side of war criminals even in front of their own public at home. Only the hard-nosed countries such as North Korea, Eritrea, and Syria or dependent satellites like Belarus do not care.

At international level and in its international organisations, an “authoritarian international” is now attempting to gain influence by setting standards.

The most effective remedy thus continues to be the search for allies for democratic standards. The formation of an alliance of multilateralists to support a liberal, rules-based international order is on the right path, but is no substitute for individual responsibility and a robust commitment to one's own values. This is the only way to generate respect and for doubting governments to realise that democracies are also serious, draw consequences and do not go back to business as usual after compulsory rhetorical exercises.

## What Is to Be Done?

These discussions, however, also make it clear that a certain technological sovereignty is needed to act effectively. Operating in cyberspace requires appropriate skills. Europe in particular does not appear to be a pioneer when compared with progress elsewhere. In addition to the struggle for narratives and *soft power* influence, this also directly affects issues of critical infrastructure protection. Hacking on behalf of the state as well as hacking from criminal networks often have similar approaches and wreak similar damage. Being the world's market leader in this field with the Basic Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is certainly commendable, however, there has long been a discussion on whether an absolute implementation stymies urgently needed technological innovations and impairs competitiveness. Emblematic of this is the Chinese acclamation in times of pandemic: “You protect data, we protect lives!”

Work on legal framework conditions remains important and is also particularly delicate if democracies' own claims are not to be damaged. What needs clearer, more justiciable regulations, what can and must remain the responsibility of platform providers? What is the impact of platforms gaining monopolistic influence, and preventing competition and access of new providers? Where do civil and criminal law suffice, where are specific media laws needed? How far should anonymity on the net go? These are all questions that play a role in the relationship with external actors as well as the internal relationship of democratic states. Daphne Wolter, for example, addresses these questions in Chapter 5 “Disinformation and Hate Speech”.

What is certainly needed are major investments in media competence, media education, and the strengthening of individual responsibility – and this not only applies to young people. Only those who understand the mechanisms and modes of action of today's media landscape, especially in the virtual space, can be sufficiently attentive to the attempts at manipulation they may face. Still, it is not possible to fully understand many things without technical assistance; the detection of deep fakes has now become a real challenge. The use of electronic image and video processing systems is, as can be observed on many channels, a lot of fun on the one hand, but increasingly blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, on the other. And especially in the public and political sphere this is by no means trivial.

In addition to the aforementioned aspects, strengthening civil societies across the world, supporting their actors, establishing a critical independent discourse and, not least, sustainably promoting an independent journalism, are essential means to defend against manipulative whispers and propaganda. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize 2021 to the Russian journalist Dmitrij Muratow from *Novaya Gazeta* and the Filipino journalist Maria Ressa is an important signal, and the work of organisations like Reporters Without Borders deserves every support. Denouncing attacks on journalists also needs to remain a matter of concern. Here, we can see that this profession is not only a very dangerous undertaking in authoritarian systems – the number of murdered media workers in Mexico is an alarm signal, but by no means relativises the criticism of censorship and threats in authoritarian states. Nevertheless, those who denounce the propaganda and influence of external actors must remain credible at home and ensure that the corrective forces of power are strong. In addition to an independent judiciary, this naturally also includes a pluralistic media system. If governments of democratic states in the European Union give the impression here that they, too, buy influence and manipulate reporting for their own interests, then they do a disservice to democracy and its resilience.

Author

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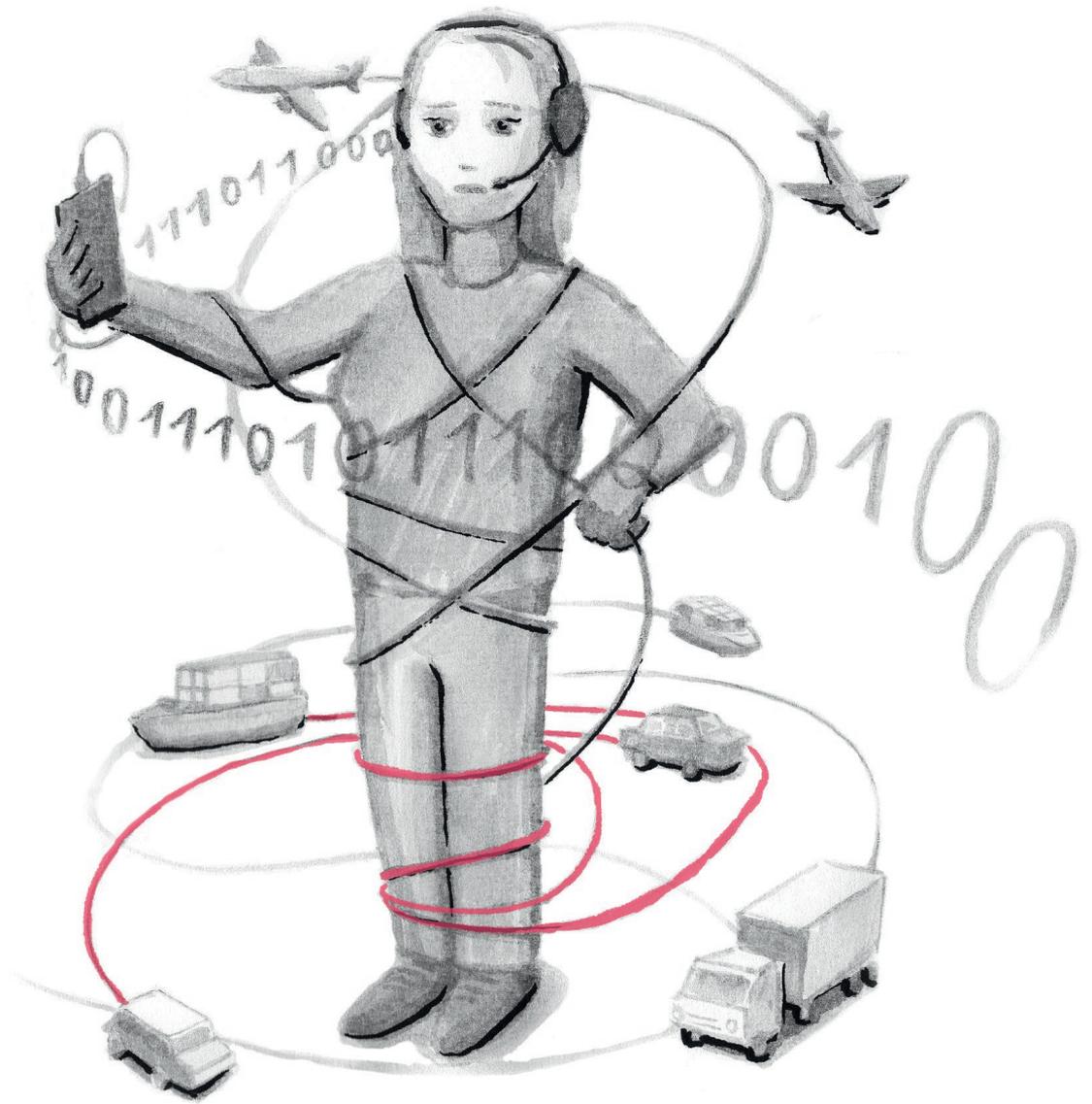


# Economic and Technological Dependency

## Dark Sides of Globalisation

Sebastian Weise

What was long considered a catalyst for peace and democracy, has now become an expression of state vulnerability. Dependencies and close ties around the globe have proven to be a double-edged sword since the rise of China and Russia's brutal war of aggression on Ukraine, at the latest. From now on, economic and technological interdependencies need to be subject to greater scrutiny, as this is the only way to safeguard state sovereignty and security in the long run.



Interdependence was long believed to be a driver of prosperity, democracy, and human rights. For a few years, however, that which is supposed to connect and unite the world has increasingly become a setting for political conflict and a driver of developments harmful to democracy.<sup>112</sup> This article addresses what this means for democracies and the risks ensuing from it.

## The End of the Cold War Hailed the Dawn of a New World

The world was divided up until the turning point of 1989/90. Deep media, economic, and cultural rifts separated the Western and Eastern Blocs. The incipient disintegration of the Soviet Union led to more than just the collapse of a superpower. It was a turning point in history in which interdependence and ties were to overcome these rifts. Although the early days were certainly marked by turbulence, unlike during the Cold War era, the global community was now willing to address new challenges with the help of strong multilateral organisations, international cooperation, and the spread of democracy and market economy. Global interdependence played a pivotal role here; after all, the prevailing belief was that areas in which societies connect closely beyond national borders and reinforce mutual dependencies give rise to more than just economic growth and prosperity. Interdependence was also deemed to be a political tool to open up authoritarian societies and drive their transformation toward democracies.<sup>113</sup> By the same token, in an interconnected and democratic world, interstate wars were to become a thing of the past.

Many hoped that globalisation and digitalisation would bring about a fundamental transformation of political life. The emergence of a global and cosmopolitan public sphere seemed possible in a world where people are connected beyond borders – on the basis of which a new “global domestic politics without a global government” could immediately develop.<sup>114</sup> In the course of such global domestic politics, people around the world were to establish new forms of political organisation operating beyond the state and its categories of hierarchically structured power, territoriality, and national identity. Specifically, this meant that the political sphere – based on the early internet – was to shift toward decentralised networks where people could come together in harmony depending on their needs, skills, and interests and establish new political communities.<sup>115</sup> The engines behind this transformation were new technical possibilities on the one hand, but also the enormous challenges that global interdependence and a dissolution of borders posed to territorially bound states’ capacity to govern, on the other. The internet pioneer John Barlow described these states as outdated giants of steel and coal.<sup>116</sup> Even in Western capitals, the prevailing opinion at that time

was that states could only adequately shape interdependencies to a very limited extent, and thus digitalisation and globalisation were long promoted primarily in light of their positive potential.<sup>117</sup> The political shaping of negative effects received just as little attention as authoritarian efforts to subjugate interdependencies. In the words of Bill Clinton, efforts seemed to be as promising as the attempt to nail pudding to the wall.<sup>118</sup>

## The Reality of Global Interdependence in an Age of System Competition

Three decades after the end of the Cold War, optimism about interdependence has shifted to a pessimism about interdependence. We have witnessed how interdependence is a powerful force for change, yet the results of this transformation are far more ambivalent than was originally thought.

An example here is the public's digital structural transformation during which people now have the opportunity to connect across borders much more easily, to articulate themselves in the public space, and organise themselves politically. The potential this has for promoting democracy could be observed in the onset of the Arab Spring, for instance. After all, was it not social media in particular that opened up the digital space in which citizens' rebellion on the social, political, and economic grievances in their countries was able to gather, concentrate, and organise itself?<sup>119</sup>

At the same time, digitalisation is also a vehicle for a transnational anti-democratic countermovement, a kind of "noisy counter-revolution"<sup>120</sup>. A glance at current populist right-wing movements, for example, quickly shows the outstanding role that the digital space plays for this transnational movement: to network across borders, to radicalise and mobilise people, to spread "alternative information offers", or to construct counter-publics.<sup>121</sup> Still, the history of digitally networking the public space is not shaped by the simultaneity of democratic emancipation and populist countermovement alone. It is also a story of unilateral dependencies; and indeed, the digital public space now lies in the hands of a few platform companies.

In the wake of this, companies such as Meta (Facebook), Twitter and recently TikTok control the essential discourse infrastructure of our digital age. These companies define the rules on how information and opinions are disseminated and how statements are rated. Ultimately, they can even decide who takes part in discourse in the digital space – as the much-discussed exclusion of Donald Trump from Twitter in January 2021 clearly illustrated.

# Companies such as Meta (Facebook), Twitter and recently TikTok control the essential discourse infrastructure of our digital age.

The formation of a new digital public has thus not only led to a dependency on platform companies, which enabled surveillance capitalism – analysed in detail by Shoshana Zuboff – to develop. A framework of discourse has opened in the digital space in which the economic interests of globally operating companies have replaced democratic requirements of discourse and journalistic quality criteria.<sup>122</sup> As a result, the substantiated argument, typically inherent in the liberal bourgeois public since the 18th century, has no value in the digital space. What counts is the louder, more radical, and more conformist discourse in echo chambers. After all, it is about what captures people's attention and hence fuels the business model of dominant social platforms. Of course, social media and their *free-service-for-your-data business* model are not the only cause of misinformation, hate speech, polarisation, or echo chambers. Their algorithmic regulations geared toward maximising profits in lieu of strengthening democracy and their omnipresence in all areas of life, seem to magnify undesirable social developments, however. Therefore, they bundle and reinforce these developments to such an extent that they erode the social foundations of democracies in the analogue space, too; be it social cohesion, the ability to achieve consensus or the culture of debate.<sup>123</sup>

While for social media the effects are more of a side effect, in the case of China, they are the outcome of decades-long strategic efforts.<sup>124</sup> China has not only succeeded in becoming a central challenger to democracies and the liberal order and in triggering a new system competition. The country has also demonstrated that economic and technological interdependence can strengthen authoritarianism and be used by these structures as an instrument of power. A key element of this is China's digital authoritarianism, which is nothing less than a comprehensive technological-social model of order for the 21st century.<sup>125</sup>

On the domestic front, digital authoritarianism implies the use of state-of-the-art information and communication technology to monitor and control Chinese society. This encompasses the widespread deployment of surveillance cameras, use of the latest AI systems to evaluate surveillance data, or the creation of the so-called Great Firewall; thus, authorities in China are now able to establish a digital space that is both monitored and monitoring.<sup>126</sup> What is more, China has set up a social credit system that covers all areas of life, awarding citizens as well as companies for their good behaviour, while sanctioning behaviour that is undesirable.<sup>127</sup> A state-supported business and innovation ecosystem in the high-tech sector also forms part of this digital authoritarianism. Not only does this directly provide surveillance technology, but also creates a high-tech environment that supports China's transformation into a leading innovation

and economic power. This transformation is vital, as it consolidates China's rise to become a major political power.

This rise is further promoted by exporting this model and its associated technology to other authoritarian states. Moreover, China advocates for a pro-autocracy order in international bodies. That entails a commitment to a state-centred governance model for the internet on the one hand and attempts to advance certain standards that would change architecture underpinning the digital space over the long-term (new IP), on the other. But it goes further than that. On the external front, China's model of order also includes the use of cyber attacks, the digital surveillance of dissidents abroad, e-espionage, and the power-political instrumentalisation of economic-technological interdependence. In Europe, this is manifested not only in south-eastern and southern European countries such as Greece, which was long considered the dragon's head of the Chinese Silk Road,<sup>128</sup> it was reflected in the German 5G debate, too.<sup>129</sup>

The threat of imposing tariffs on German exports to China certainly springs to mind here; a threat whose potency was based on the fact that many large companies in Germany are greatly dependent on China as a sales market. That Germany was also reluctant to exclude Chinese manufacturers because they are already strongly embedded in mobile radio structures, is often overlooked. Since the 5G network in Germany is being built on these structures, an exclusion would have entailed converting infrastructure to a large extent. What is more, Chinese companies like Huawei or ZTE can – thanks to state support – provide high quantities of products at favourable conditions. Thus, from the perspective of many network operators, they were also a central component for a fast and nationwide 5G expansion in Germany. This, in turn, is vital, as quickly and cheaply available 5G networks represent an *enabler* for important future industries and applications and therefore also for the future viability of the German economy. When interdependence is unilateral, it not only creates a direct gateway for third-party influence, but also path dependencies that severely curtail democracies' room for manoeuvre compared to autocracies.

When it comes to the risks of interdependence, we cannot avoid looking at Russia's gas exports – this bears testimony to how critical dependencies can be instrumentalised. As early as January 2021, the Russian company Gazprom had started to reduce its sales of natural gas to Germany via its own trading platform. Three months later, Gazprom discontinued additional gas sales beyond long-term supply contracts; this resulted in prices for natural gas on the global market having tripled by September 2021 alone. One month later – at the start of the heating period and despite rising prices – Gazprom not only temporarily reduced gas supplies to Germany via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, although it could have supplied additional reserves, but no more gas at all flowed through the Jamal gas pipeline running through Poland. In parallel to the systematic reduction of gas supplies, Gazprom had also increasingly transferred gas from its German storage facilities to fulfil long-term supply contracts (these facilities constitute some 25 per cent of total German gas storage capacity). As a result, Germany's largest gas storage facility in Rehden, which has been in the hands of a Gazprom subsidiary since 2015, was only 4.3 per cent full in January 2022 – this further intensified Germany's dependence on Russian gas supplies.

It was long assumed that this was political pressure from Russia to enforce the approval of the highly controversial Nord Stream 2 project; yet the turning point of 23 March 2022 revealed the real strategic calculation. Because of Gazprom's measures – contrary to a company's purely economically oriented way of acting – a situation has emerged in which Europe transfers 660 million Euro each day which, in turn, finances Russia's war in Ukraine. At the same time, Germany, as a leading European power, has even fewer gas reserves and thus less room for manoeuvre to escape its two-decades-long dependence on Russian natural gas – a raw material that is far more difficult to substitute than oil and coal.

## Politics in Light of the Ambivalence of Global Interdependence

An increase in global interdependence for democracies in the context of system competition has brought with it new challenges. These start with the erosion of the social foundations underpinning democracies and range from the curtailment of political scope for manoeuvre vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes through to strategic vulnerabilities.

At the same time, political decision-makers and experts have become increasingly aware of the dark side of global interdependence. As a result, there is now a plethora of initiatives, especially in the European context, which aim at making economic and technological interdependencies more strategic.

In view of the dominance of a few platform companies, there are several far-reaching legislative proposals and state initiatives for strengthening economic competition in an era of platform economy (see Digital Markets Act, Data Act) and for containing the detrimental effects that digitalisation of the public space has on democracy (see Digital Services Act). What is more, efforts are made to oppose the strong concentration of digital infrastructure and central services in the digital age (see Gaia-X), to reduce problematic dependencies by establishing our own capacities (see EU Chips Act), and to bolster the competitiveness and innovative strength of the European economy in the field of key technologies and future industries.

When looking at China, too, great strides are being taken to create a *level playing field* as well as to thwart the influence of digital authoritarianism. Whether it be through strengthening networks among partners that share the same values in international organisations and standardisation bodies, greater investment controls for preventing the outflow of cutting-edge technology to China, or stronger cooperation with the US in the technology and digital sector; the founding of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council has at least seized the opportunity for this. Added to that are the targeted measures taken to reduce problematic (!) dependencies on China in certain areas (see for

example the EU initiatives on rare earths and 6G). Here, both Germany and Europe are embarking on a path which does not fundamentally entail a break away from the second largest trading partner, however, they are increasingly addressing problematic dependencies.

The picture is different when it comes to Germany's strong dependence on Russia in the energy sector, where a fundamental decoupling is actively being sought. Similarly intense are efforts for greater diversification of energy imports and suppliers, the expansion of renewable energy sources, or the discussion on extending the lifetime of nuclear power plants. Furthermore, discussions are taking place on the possibilities of reducing energy consumption as well as ways to mitigate the impact of rising energy prices for the economy and the public. Still, gas, perceived as a technology to bridge the gap, faces particularly large obstacles when it comes to reducing dependencies.

A kind of alternative to the optimism about interdependence of the 1990s is coming to the fore, focusing less on ambivalence toward and more on the risks and dangers of globalisation and digitalisation. As a result, calls for deglobalisation and unbundling are gaining ground in the political arena, as are strong state-centric approaches to reduce dependencies. The problem with the first tendency is that the enormous economic benefits and prosperity effects of interdependence are receding into the background as well as the power-political potential for democracies; after all, they can also strategically harness these interdependencies. Whereas the problem with state-centred approaches is that state over-control – especially in the field of technology and innovation – implies a high risk of inefficiency, mismanagement, or even ineffectiveness.

## Starting Points for Strategically Dealing with Global Interdependence

Strategically shaping global interdependence is a task that encompassing virtually every policy field and requires very specific solutions in these fields. At the same time, however, individual solutions need to be embedded into a larger strategic framework.

Global interdependence is a defining feature of our present day. For democracies, it harbours enormous economic, social, and political potential as well as great challenges. If interdependence is to be politically shaped in an adequate way, it is crucial to resist the supposedly simple reflexes of unbundling and deglobalisation. Instead, their ambivalence should be addressed with the goal of strategically shaping them in line with our own interests and ideas of order. This means it is not enough to pursue a defensive orientation alone, which aims to cleverly minimise the possibilities of third-party influence on Europe and Germany via dependencies and interdependencies. We also need to determine how interdependence can be used offensively to assert our own interests and ideas of order and to strengthen Europe's

and Germany's competitiveness and innovative strength over the long term. Owing to their openness, global interconnectedness, innovative power, and economic strength, democracies have a myriad of opportunities to exert influence; these have only been partly exploited to date.

To ensure that democracies can shape interdependencies in line with their own interests and ideas of order, it will be crucial to cooperate more closely as value partners. One possible step would be to establish a Technology Council of Democracies that represents democracies from Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This could address central technology, economic, research, and digital policy issues and explore potential for cooperation in the field of key technologies and future industries. Such a council could be based on the structure of the EU-US Trade and Technology Councils with its working groups and involvement of various stakeholders. Alternatively, these issues could also be incorporated into existing formats, such as the newly founded Summit for Democracy – this would have to take place on a permanent basis, however. Stronger cooperation not only enables democracies to better harness their formative power and synergies in the field of innovation. Ultimately in the context of system competition, it is necessary to prove that democracies produce better results when it comes to innovation, prosperity, freedom, and sustainability. In addition to institutional innovations, it will also be vital for democracies to coordinate more closely in existing international organisations and forums, which are important for shaping economic and technological interdependencies. Existing informal and formal networks need to be expanded further. By the same token, it is time to once again use free trade agreements increasingly between liberal societies as a strategic tool in systemic competition.

Institutions must be created that can achieve this. The strategic design of interdependencies is a cross-cutting task, the breadth and depth of which need to be assumed in equal measure. Against this background, it seems sensible to forge ahead with the creation of a Federal Security Council in Germany. A Federal Security Council would be a strategic analysis, coordination, and decision-making body that can make an essential contribution to strategically designing interdependence. In conjunction with representatives from all relevant ministries, this should be supplemented by an element of strategic foresight as well as an advisory board comprising experts from science and business. This would make it possible to mobilise the expertise of other stakeholders and to align analyses and decisions with the future. In this position, a Federal Security Council could also launch a debate on market-based instruments to design interdependence not only within the meaning, but also the spirit, of liberal regulatory ideas using market resources, fair competition, and smart state frameworks.

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Russia's attack on Ukraine has catapulted the question of the defensive potential of democracy to the foreground of public interest. However, we must not forget that tanks and missiles are not the only threat to our free society. This volume of essays is therefore devoted not only to the security threat situation in Europe, but also to several "softer" threats, at least not in the classical sense of military threats to democracy. These include internal dangers, whether extremism or polarisation, as well as developments that tend to impact our society from the outside, be it nationalist currents in Europe or attempts to exert authoritarian influence. Having said that, the individual articles do not content themselves with highlighting the dangers that democracies face today and thus simply painting a gloomy picture to some extent. Rather, they are committed to the guiding principle of a defensive democracy insofar as they assume that democracies are indeed able to counter all the dangers illustrated here – and ultimately to deal with them, too.

