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Is the Crisis of Democracy an Invention?

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Is there a crisis of democracy in the West? If one looks at the political literature on the subject, there is certainly a great deal of alarmism. In fact, since the 1980s, political analysts have warned of an existential crisis of democracy in several European countries. Dr. Wolfgang Merkel of Humboldt University and WZB Social Science Center in Berlin argues liberal democracy in Europe and the U.S. is experiencing an erosion – not a fatal crisis as some of these experts have claimed.

In his presentation to the Bologna Institute for Policy Research (BIPR), Dr. Merkel offers two meanings for crisis in the context of modern democracies. The first is *acute* crisis, a question of life or death for a democracy in a manner similar to the collapses of Italy in 1922, Germany in 1933 and Spain in 1936/9. The other concept is a *latent* crisis, characterized by declining electoral participation, increasing polarization, low trust in representative institutions and the frequent collapse of political party systems, among other factors.

Dr. Merkel lists the factors that have contributed to this erosion, which began in 2010 at the meso and macro levels. Chief among the macro indicators is the march towards denationalization that has accompanied the rise of globalization. A perceived decline in the importance of the nation-state has exposed deep fault lines between the cosmopolitan (urban, elite and educated middle classes) and communitarian (non-college-educated lower middle classes) parts of Western societies. This rift will only widen, Dr. Merkel says, hampering our efforts to solve pressing issues such as social inequality, societal cohesiveness, and climate change.

Given the timing of the beginning of the decline, it would be convenient to blame the global financial crisis for causing the latent crises in many democracies. However, Dr. Merkel says this factor alone does not have sufficient explanatory power. He also notes that it does not necessarily hold in some situations. Poland's democratic backsliding, for instance, has occurred at a time of continued economic boom. At least the year 2015 marked another incisive event, when the EU and its member states failed to solve the migrant crisis in a spirit of solidarity.

There is evidence for a moderate decline in voter turnout (in Western Europe) since the 1970s (barring a small increase in 2019 when strong populist parties drove high numbers from both sides to the ballot box). The most dramatic decrease is in Eastern Europe where turnout typically averages 52 percent at present. Poland, arguably the most important Eastern European country, is normally below this average. Social selectivity plays an important role in voter turnout. For every 1 percent drop in voter

turnout, roughly 0.8 of that 1 percent is due to the refusal to vote by the lower socioeconomic classes. Dr. Merkel says this self-exclusion by the non-elites also prompts questions about the equality in liberal democracies.

Trust in political institutions is also on the decline in Europe. Interestingly, Europeans have more trust in non-elected institutions (like military, judiciary, bureaucracy, and police) than those that are elected (like political parties, parliaments, government). Dr. Merkel calls this preference for non-elected institutions the hour of “supranational technocratic or semi-authoritarian governments.” Hence we see more people have accepted the forfeiture of national sovereignty to supranational regimes such as the European Union (EU) or illiberal governments in Eastern Europe.

In the European Union (EU), only 22 percent of people trust political parties and so-called “catch-all” parties have lost their once strong support. Dr. Merkel argues the weakening of catch-all parties, which offer programs that cater to various social classes and socio-moral milieus and excel at integrating people in heterogenous societies, is a disturbing trend in Europe. This is compounded by the fact that many who would have in the past supported such parties have shifted their allegiance to strong right-wing populist parties.

Paradoxically, while there has been a general decline among the indicators of liberal democracy in Europe, overall citizen satisfaction within Europe’s democracies has been stable. What is disturbing that people have higher trust in illeral regimes such in Poland and Hungary compared to the citizens trust in liberal democratic regime like the Netherlands, France or Germany. Dr. Merkel considers this trend dangerous because it opens avenues for greater “authoritarianization” of democracy across Europe. Experts use the term authoritarianization to describe the process by which democratically elected leaders use their mandate as a pretense to systematically dismantle liberal norms of democracy. The success of right-wing populists in Central and Eastern Europe, namely Hungary’s Victor Orban, illustrates the trend. A softer example can be found in the U.S., where a drastic shift is underway from consensus-driven to majoritarian democracy. The Trump presidency is the ultimate expression of this “winner takes it all-style” of governing, according to Dr. Merkel.

Though the latest trends do not bode well, resilience is also a feature of liberal democracies. Despite being in a more vulnerable position today, Dr. Merkel says, liberal democracies have grown more liberal in other key areas. For instance, liberal democracies continue to make progress in issues, such as gender, gay and minority rights. Furthermore, no OECD country has witnessed its democracy collapse since 1967 (when a military junta overthrew Greece’s democratically elected government).

In a final word of caution, Dr. Merkel warns against the recent move in Europe towards “eco-authoritarianism,” a recent phenomenon in which hardline climate activists have argued that representative democracy is too slow of a system to respond to the impending disaster of climate change. Activists advocate for government by enlightened technocrats rather than elected representatives, who would be capable of taking non-democratic measures to protect life on Earth. Dr. Merkel cautions his audience against entertaining the false assumption that liberal democracy is not capable of confronting climate change.