

Estoril Political Forum 2022

The Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture:

“Ukraine’s Resistance and the Future of Democracy”

Comment of Wilhelm Hofmeister

(Former Director for Spain and Portugal, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Madrid)

1) The war in Ukraine and the future of European democracy

That the brave Ukrainians in their resistance to the Russian invasion are defending not only their own country but also what we understand to be the values of liberal democracy is a widespread conviction - shared, however, primarily only in Europe, North America (USA and Canada) as well as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand. Therefore, Europeans and North Americans have supported the Ukrainians in their resistance politically and, above all, by strengthening their capacities of military defence. There is no doubt that first and foremost the US under President Biden are leading this support from the beginning with its clear stance and have thereby returned to their former role as the leading power in the promotion and defence of democracy, which has suffered greatly in the eyes of world public opinion in recent years through the form of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and other politically and militarily dubious operations. Some European countries - and this unfortunately includes my own country, Germany - took a moment longer to realise that the previous attitude of appeasement and containment towards Russia was guided by false assessments and expectations. Germany, which in this case means above all the German Federal Government, even took much longer than most of its European neighbours and partners to recognise the dimension of the war in Ukraine and the resulting consequences and necessary reactions. German President Steinmeier has admitted this years-long misjudgment in an interview on 5 April when he said:

We have failed in our efforts to build a common European house - Gorbachev's great vision - we have failed in our efforts to integrate Russia into a European security architecture, we have failed in our efforts under the Charter of Paris to take Russia along with us on the path towards democracy and human rights. This is a bitter balance sheet that we are facing, and this bitter balance sheet also includes the misjudgement that we - and I - thought that even a Putin of 2022 would not ultimately accept the total political, economic and moral ruin of the country for his imperial dreams or his imperial delusions.

Finally, after the joint visit of Chancellor Scholz together with French President Macron, Italian Prime Minister Draghi and Romanian President Johannis to Kiev on 16 June, the Europeans had agreed on a significant common political response to the invasion of Ukraine and have apparently also pledged further military support to strengthen that country's defence capability. These four heads of government had sent an important political signal with their pledge to work for Ukraine and also Moldova to be granted the status of a candidate country to the European Union. This has been confirmed by all EU member countries during the session of the European Council on June 23-24. They now share the same status like Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. Even if it is to be expected that the EU will possibly conduct the accession negotiations

somewhat faster and more decisively in the case of Ukraine and Moldova, the reference to the example of the other accession candidates shows that admission to the EU will by no means be a quick process. All candidates must fulfil the so-called "Copenhagen criteria" (free democracy, market economy, adoption of the *acquis Communautaire*, the common rules of the EU).

The war in Ukraine is thus permanently changing the political map of the EU. This will have far-reaching consequences for all member countries of the community, because the processes of negotiating and admitting new members will not be possible without far-reaching reforms within the European Union. The war in Ukraine may thereby become the decisive catalyst of reforms for which the political will has so far been lacking.

The war and the reaction to it also have recalled a central founding motive of European integration: the first objective of community building was to ensure the freedom and security of its members and to guarantee stability to Europe. Economic cooperation has supported this goal, and social achievements have further stabilised the community. But the defence of freedom and democracy are the essential founding motives that must now reorient all efforts to expand the Union.

2) The consequences of the war in Ukraine for the development of democracy worldwide

The North Americans' and Europeans' view that the Ukrainians are defending the values of Western democracy is by no means shared by most countries of the world, or even by the democratically organised countries. This is shown by the voting behaviour of democratic countries in the United Nations and also by the attitude towards the sanctions imposed on Russia. The growing global supply crisis as a result of the war not only provides authoritarian rulers with a welcome excuse to defend their power, but also feeds doubts in many countries with a democratic order about the willingness of Western democracies to assist them in dealing with the crisis. In addition, the Europeans themselves are now noticeably more "flexible" in dealing with authoritarian regimes than was the case just a few months ago. Referring again to the example of Germany, only a few months ago the now governing party "The Greens" called for a boycott of the World Cup in Qatar because of the human rights violations of the regime there. Now the Minister for Economic Affairs from the same party, Mr Habeck, travelled to Qatar to conclude new supply contracts for gas and oil in order to be able to further cut off supplies from Russia. This is largely unanimously shared by all parties in Germany, but it is undoubtedly also a problematic signal to all those who expect a more critical attitude towards authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes probably will be treated even more "gently" in the future if democratic countries pursue their own economic advantages or the supply of important goods in dealing with them.

Also worthy of consideration in this context is the attitude of important countries considered to be democracies (even if increasing doubts about the attitude of their governments to the defence of the principles of liberal democracy have recently become justified). This applies above all to the "big" democracies India, Indonesia, South Africa, Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico. We are witnessing an indifference to the war in Ukraine that is surprising and worrying - at least from the perspective of defending democratic values. We know that the governments of some of these countries are not very conscientious about the institutions and principles of democracy. Attention will now have to be paid to whether, in the slipstream, so to speak, of the war in Ukraine, there is a flamboyant treatment of democratic principles and institutions

there. This applies above all to the handling of a basic element of democracy, free, equal and secret elections.

3) Tasks and perspectives of democracy promotion

Today we are living in a situation where, for the first time in this century, there are more non-democracies than democracies among countries with more than one million inhabitants. The causes and manifestations of this situation cannot be discussed here, but can be read about in the relevant publications (e.g. Journal of Democracy and others).

Despite all setbacks, however, one thing is certain: democracy continues to be the model of government preferred by a majority of people. Even if they are harshly critical of their governments and vote for populist and anti-democratic candidates and parties out of disappointment or despair over their government's lack of performance and mismanagement, most people want one thing above all: better democracies. Even many autocrats recognise this desire of citizens for democracy by maintaining, at least formally, some democratic procedures; this applies especially to elections (even if they manipulate their conduct and distort their results).

For democracy to work, it requires a variety of elements. These include not only its five "cornerstones": free and fair elections, responsible government, equal political participation of all citizens, respect for political and civil liberties, rule of law and independence of the judiciary, but also respect for the spirit of democracy by the relevant groups and actors of a country, not least its political, social and economic elites. Populists and authoritarian leaders rarely come to power without the support of at least part of the social elites. In addition, the functioning of the mediating institutions between state and society is important. On the one hand, this refers to the media, whereby the critical media today, in the context of the cacophony of social media, have considerably lost their ability to structure and orientate public debate. On the other hand, it relates to the role of political parties, which have considerable difficulties in effectively exercising their role of representing societal interests all over the country, which has undoubtedly become more complicated in the face of more fragmented societies. However, this does not absolve the parties from efforts to play their role for democracy more effectively.

The promotion of future social elites who defend not only the institutions but also the spirit of democracy, as well as the strengthening of critical media and functioning parties are and remain crucial tasks of democracy promotion. In this context, the Estoril Political Forum fulfils an important function, because it prepares future decision-makers for their role and responsibility in preserving democracy.