

EPF_2022_Confronting the authoritarian challenge

Dear Audience, I have not only the honour of being a Speaker in this 30th Edition of the Estoril Political Forum. I`m even the last one.

To you, dear students, I would like to express my appreciation for your perseverance over the past days! You have almost made it! A very short time separates you from the start of the eagerly awaited party.

At the end of these three days you hopefully draw the conclusion that your efforts of listening, taking notes and discussing were worth it. You have received important impulses on one of the most relevant topics of our time. Speakers and panelists from all over the world presented enlightening analyses. The interdisciplinarity and diversity of perspectives //visible at this congress //are unique. We need a profound analysis and reflection of what is actually happening.

Konrad Adenauer, the first chancellor of the German Republic and namesake of the foundation I represent, would have enormously appreciated this conference. The confrontation between freedom, democracy and authoritarianism was his lifelong concern.

We owe it to Prof. Espada and his wonderful, professional team that this conference is taking place at all. Dear Prof. Espada, I want to express my deep respect for the endurance of having organised the last 29 EPF-Conferences and for your foresight in putting the authoritarian challenge on the agenda of the thirtieth EPF. The fact that you set the topic long before the aggressive invasion of Ukraine by the Russians // proves //that there were already disturbing evidence of the decline of democracy in our world before this terrible war.

In the past few days, our experts have worked out impressively, that the ideologies and processes behind the emergence of authoritarian regimes are very divers. And they have looked at different regions from Russia to China to Africa. I can very well build on this preliminary work this evening, opening up another perspective. Let`s focus on the

verb in the title of this conference. How can we confront the authoritarian challenge? How do we move from analysis to action? How can we prevent democracies from becoming authoritarian regimes?

Concerning established authoritarian regimes, our options for action are, at first glance, few. We can hardly change political systems from the outside. Every society must find its own way.

That's why we should focus on our existing democracies in Europe.

Neither of us in this room wants to even imagine a life in an authoritarian nor dictatorial regime. In our countries, we have historically gone through painful, bloody processes in the transformations from dictatorships to democracies. For us in Europe, the main goal/aspiration is "never again" war or dictatorship. We appreciate the ability of our democracies to have created a historically unique balance between the political, economical and social order, despite all the weaknesses which might exist. We value too highly the freedom to shape our lives according to our individual preferences.

But: one of the most consequential mistakes we could make would be to take democracies for granted. The chairman of the Adenauer Foundation, former parliamentary president Prof. Norbert Lammert, is very concerned about this phenomenon and often refers to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's book: "How democracies die". Their core message is, that Democracies die less through revolutions and war, but because of their inner erosion.

In many societies in the middle of Europe, Germany included, we see too many signals of a minor acceptance concerning the institutions of the parliamentary democracies. There are many reasons for this, let me only list some of them.

Danger for democracies is imminent, when

- Elected politicians don't perform adequately,
- when economic inequalities become too big,
- when fundamental values are no longer shared,

- when compromises are denigrated as something bad, even weak,
- when intolerance towards dissenting opinions increases,
- when institutions are discredited or
- when media drift from critical journalism to scandalisation.

I guess, each of you could add to this list. Therefore we observe a loss of confidence in politics and its institutions.

People are feeling powerless or – even worse - become indifferent. In wealthy, saturated European Democracies a too high proportion of people even don't vote anymore.

But democracy does not work without a minimum of commitment. This is the crucial difference: Democracy demands commitment while dictatorships punish citizens' commitment.

Dear audience:

With these preliminary considerations, the key question becomes a little clearer: Why can populists and extremists achieve any success in our democratically socialised societies? What can we do concretely?

Here are my three proposals:

First, we should improve our ability to recognise early signals of problematic developments. Authoritarian or even dictatorial regimes do not emerge overnight and certainly not by surprise. By the way, serious future analysts can prove that more than 90% of what is happening was predictable. The negative consequences arise because we are not able to realise the signals, because we don't weigh them correctly and because we are unwilling or too hesitant to draw the right conclusions.

Secondly, we need a little more self-criticism on the part of the responsible actors. By this I'm explicitly not only looking at the active politicians. I am addressing all responsible leaders in companies, trade unions, ngos, universities or newspaper editorial offices and other multipliers, who have a role model function in our democracies. All of them share responsibility for our democracy. They simply have to do a good

job. If they do not, authoritarian regimes appear as a serious, better alternative in the eyes of many people. Because they can supposedly act faster and more consistently.

One complementary thought: I am furthermore convinced that we need a reform of our parliamentary democracies. I will mention only one issue. Many of our political processes date back to the period after the Second World War. I doubt if these processes can cope with the necessities of our fully digitalised world today. A world with a changing way of generating and consuming relevant political information, a changing political socialisation and a new way of forming political will. Adaption and reforms are necessary.

My third proposal, possibly the most important: To fight populism we need a massive expansion of political education in our countries to increase our democratic resilience!

As I already mentioned before, social discontent is an ideal humus for authoritarian leaders. I would even venture the thesis that authoritarian leaders and dictators are not at the beginning of developments that endanger democracy, but rather reinforce existing trends. They address real problems in a populist way. Authoritarian leaders and dictators of our time are rarely genuine political thinkers. They mix eclectically circulating, mostly extremist positions. They pose as the real voice of the people. They plant fake news. They denigrate institutions and parliamentary processes as slow and inefficient. Their simplistic messages are finding more and more adherents and - this is essential - more and more supporters among academically educated elites. And they have realised earlier than democratic leaders the possibilities of the internet for their political work, or rather for their political manipulation.

That's why we urgently need more political education in our societies. After all, democracy is a form of government in which a few lead but many should participate voluntarily and, as an ideal, all citizens should

understand what is happening politically. Democracy is the result of concrete action and behavior by many.

This means that political education can only succeed as a joint effort between the state institutions, the academia and the civil society with its numerous organisations.

Ladies and gentleman, let me emphasize, that we need political education

- that does not manipulate and that does not ideologically overwhelm young people.
- that provides quality-assured political facts on a scientific basis.
- that organises debates on values on the basis of respect and deference and thus contributes to orientation in the flood of opinions and assessments.
- that encourages people to engage in politics and strengthens their ability to make political judgements.
- And a political education that qualifies those who are voluntary politically engaged. Democracies cannot have enough of them.

To sum up: We have many opportunities for action to make our democracies resilient and thus confront the authoritarian challenge: Foresight, Reforms and political education are essential. Like the tipping points in climate, there are also tipping points in the transition phases from democracies to authoritarian regimes, where developments can no longer be reversed.

So let us resist the beginnings. Let us be alert! It is worth it. Democracy is about the best of all political orders developed so far. Conferences like the Estoril Political Forum are indispensable. And the fact that you, dear students, have participated for three days at this conference gives me hope. You are our future! It's your future!

With this in mind, I wish you a bright future and for now an unforgettable party.