

2021 ESPAS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

DAY TWO

Friday, 19 November 2021

Global Trends to 2040: Europe's strategic choices in a more disputed world

Democracy and authoritarianism: How to reverse the drift to Caesarism?

Moderator

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Panel session

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Heather Grabbe, Director, Open Society European Policy Institute

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Summary of the session

“Speak up for democracy.” That was one of the conclusions of a wide ranging discussion on threats to democracy at the 2021 ESPAS conference. Insecurity about rapid changes has undermined trust, and inequalities - also across generations - have been further accelerated by the pandemic. Remedies discussed include stronger civic education, efforts to reinforce the social contract and improve social cohesion, and measures to protect the integrity of elections. There were also calls to strengthen the democratic acquis of the European Union, in which the European Parliament has a central role..

Strains on democracy

Several factors have created strain on democracy. Rapid change had created uncertainty about the future, and some speak of the panic of decline, a concept that goes back to Oswald Spengler. In some quarters there is a backlash against increasing social diversity and progress towards gender equality. Movements offering simple slogans - as distinct from genuine solutions - have gained support. It is important to recognise that democracies have enemies within, and that there are actors that no longer accept fundamental democratic norms; according to one panellist, these include a recent US President. Successful management of the impact of coming transitions will be crucial for ensuring political stability.

Civic education

A survey of online participants in the event agreed with a plea to strengthen civic education; it was the most popular choice among several suggestions about ways to rebuild trust. The the next most popular options were stronger measures against disinformation, more participatory democracy and more inclusiveness in policy-making. These three approaches overlap; deliberative forums help to make the complexities involved in policy choices clear. Accurate information and compelling arguments can spread awareness that we cannot have it all. It is better to be honest about the need to make choices, and about the choices to be made. For example, strong social services depend on funding, which in turn depends on taxation.

The media has an important role in this regard, and there were calls for more reporting on the European context and on the potential of misinformation to damage democracy. It remains the case that fact-checking often has no impact; rules and criteria need to be developed to encourage democratic debates to be conducted honestly and on the basis of facts.

Democracy and sustainable transition

Europe an attractive place to live because of its combination of social protection and political freedom, core elements of democracy. A strong social contract and a strong welfare state should be connected to the coming transitions, and this requires resources to be mobilised. A more active social state will be needed, to deliver sustainable outcomes which cater for the needs of different cohorts.

Political stability is important for the green and digital transitions, because they need long-term planning and continuity of implementation. Polarisation on the other hand can mean that any given election can bring a major change of course. One way to tackle the potential risk of embracing short-term approaches and deferring attempts to address long-run challenges is to develop the capacity within democracies to develop long-term strategic perspectives.

The integrity of elections

The panel heard the view was that a long era of a Christian dominated world was coming to an end, and that Enlightenment ideals, including as Montesquieu's conception of the tripartite division of power, were losing traction. A contrary view was that checks and balances remained an essential part of democratic systems. It was urgent to prevent these being hollowed out. An example within the EU was the takeover of independent media, which was then turned over to oligarchs linked to governing parties.

Globally, subversion of election monitoring bodies is an early warning sign of the erosion of democracy. Such bodies need to be safeguarded and reinforced.

The resilience of democratic systems was underlined. This is sometimes underestimated, and contrasts with the inherent weaknesses of authoritarian systems build on oppression. As more information circulates, the weakness of authoritarian systems becomes more apparent.

EU and democracy

The EU rulebook has relatively little about democracy; historically, this was to a large extent left to the European Court of Human Rights. Accordingly, it was argued that the Venice Commission should now be invited to examine the state of democracy within the EU. There is a case for it to develop its democratic acquis, for instance by setting out stronger rules on what constitutes independent judiciary. Judicial independence is essential for the proper functioning of the single market. The European Parliament has a role to play in transforming democracy as the EU level. The Conference on the Future of Europe is a good opportunity to focus on ways to strengthen democracy

Conclusion

The discussion featured strong endorsement of democracy as a system of governance. It makes a difference, whether one lives in a democracy or not. We must not take this for granted. The rights of the individual still matter. Democracy has a bright future, but it needs constant vigilance.

A contrarian view was also expressed, that the EU should prioritize accommodation with China over defense of the liberal international order.

There are grounds for confidence, in view of the many challenges that the EU has successfully negotiated. Democracy was contested in many parts of Europe, and had to be fought for. It has served Europe well.

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Further reading

EPRS, [Advancing democracy in the world: EU-US explainer](#), July 2021

EPRS, [Mapping threats to peace and democracy worldwide: Normandy Index 2021](#)

EPRS, [What future for democracy](#), December 2020

ESPAS, [Global trends to 2030: Mid-term Update](#), November 2021

European Commission, [European Democracy Action Plan](#), December 2020