

INVIGORATING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

On the 5th of March 2018 in Lisbon, The Jacques Delors Institute, in partnership with the Gulbenkian Foundation, organised a debate about the European Union tools to face the threats which European democracy and rule of law are undergoing. Frans Timmermans delivered a key-note speech transposed here.



■ **FRANS TIMMERMANS**

First Vice-President of the European Commission

I want to thank the Gulbenkian Foundation, and the Jacques Delors Institute for giving me this opportunity to talk about democracy this morning.

Actually, we shouldn't be talking about it, but we need to talk about it. It should be something like the air, or the water, but sadly it isn't, so there are many reasons for us to discuss this.

Last night I arrived here quite late, but Prime Minister António Costa still found the time to have a talk with me and we discussed many, many things. Obviously, him wanting to give messages to the Commission, that I can bring back to Brussels, but we also had a discussion among friends, about the history of this country, about the transition to democracy – you know, he and I were born in the same year, 1961. He looks a lot younger than I do, but of course I have got city miles, and he has got an easier life.

Joking aside, we were talking about how we were brought up, in what different societies, and I do have like many Europeans, in my generation, this memory of Portugal making this transition to democracy.

I do remember these horrible colonial wars this country was dragged into by its undemocratic regime. And if you look back, it's not that long ago, 1974, and yes, we've had a couple of serious crises, Portuguese people have suffered terribly in the sovereign debt crisis. Portuguese people have suffered terribly, because of these horrible wild fires that have been going on, but at the same time, a miracle happened in this country since 1974. And democracy was very much part of this. The European Union, I think, was very much part of this. I want to talk about these and other things today.

Many a story about the birth of nations is heroic, beautiful. I come from a nation that was born out of resistance against Spanish occupation, not entirely unfamiliar in this country. In the middle of the 15th and early 16th century, a nation was built, with something completely new that was unheard of before, citizens saying very clearly, you know, you might be our sovereign, but that does not only come with rights for you, it also has obligations for you and if you don't treat your people well, you lose the right to govern the people. This was a novelty in the Dutch Republic's birth in

those days, which was later picked up also in the French Revolution, with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which was also part of the American Declaration of Independence, which later on led to democracy coming about more and more.

So where was Europe born?

Jorge Semprún said “Europe, the European Union, European integration, was born in Buchenwald.” So the reason for us to change some of the fundamental assumptions, in relations between nations in Europe, the reason to change that fundamentally came after two suicidal wars, the second war accompanied with the most horrible genocide humanity has ever seen.

And the assumption that changed is this. We would say from that moment on: We tried to create prosperity and strength, stability for our citizens, by dominating our neighbor. We tried by being strong, by making our neighbor weak, and every time it ended in conflict, in strife, in war. So let’s try something else, let’s try this novel idea of win-win. If my neighbour is strong, I will be alright, if my neighbor is doing well, I will be doing well, as well.

This has been the presumption, the assumption on European cooperation from day one. This is very much also part of the thinking of Jacques Delors. This is now being challenged for the first time in my living memory. This is being challenged on the outside, obviously, we have seen that for a long time. Just look at the way President Putin governs Russia, that is very much still on the premise “Russia will be strong, if its neighbours are weak.” Russia will be stronger if others will be weaker.

So the premise of ‘win-win’ is challenged by him. It just can’t happen. It has to be a zero-sum game. “If I win, you must lose, if you’re successful, then apparently I’m not.” That’s one of the fundamental ideas, in Russian foreign policy at least. So this is also becoming more common in the Western world.

There is a well-known anecdote of Winston Churchill, who took a group of visitors into the House of Commons and he was explaining ‘we’re on this side of the aisle and on the other

side of the aisle are the Labour Party’ and one of the visitors said “Aha! So that’s where the enemy is!” And so Winston said “No, those are my opponents” (and he added “The enemy is right back here” (ie behind him)).

But this very idea of seeing your political rivals as your opponents and not your enemies is also being challenged in the Western world. I will be talking about rules of democracy, I will be talking about many of those things. But democracy it’s just not only about rules, it’s not just about the Constitution.

Democracy is also a culture, and the culture of democracy presupposes that if you win an election, you show respect for those who’ve lost the election. In a democracy, the minority, the opposition, is as essential for the functioning of that democracy, as the majority or the ruling party. And you see that this is being challenged in the United States, and in an increasing numbers of European states as well.

So if this is being challenged then the very concept of liberal democracy in an open society is being challenged; it’s winner-takes-all democracy. One could say it becomes then a form of *Demokratatur*, I think they say in German.

Can our nation states survive that? Yes, for the time being, because they’ve known how to operate like that all through the 19th century, and the beginning of the 20th century.

Can the European Union survive that? Not at all, no, because it takes away the very fundamental element of how the European Union works, namely always on a win-win basis. And always based on the rule of law. One of the elements of a winner-takes-all democracy is that democracy trumps everything,

The idea that we’ve developed since the Second World War is that the functioning of open liberal democracies is based on a tripod: democracy, the Rule of Law, respect for human rights. You cannot use one against the other. If you say that I’ve won the election, so I can determine on my own what the rule of law is, I don’t need to respect the law, the law doesn’t apply to me because I won the election. If you take that attitude, then you no longer have the rule of law, you rule by law, which is some-

thing completely different. That is what happened in the eastern bloc before 1989. They were all fine Constitutions, the laws were all there, and they ruled by those laws. Not respecting democracy, not respecting human rights. So that is what we thought up, as a basis for European cooperation.

I think that nations can operate, can survive for the time being, also in a different situation, when they are ruled by law, for a bit. But the EU cannot. And if the EU and forms of political destiny-sharing like it cannot survive, then at the end of the day our nations will also suffer, given the nature of the challenges we face.

So politics in the Western world sometimes now is also moving from win-win to zero-sum. The Helsinki Final Act, the international system, the global trading system, the EU itself, they are all based on win-win. Confrontation, nationalism, tribalism, extremism are all based on zero-sum; I win, you lose.

I think that the most valuable experience we've had in the last century is that this doesn't work. I think that now that this concept is being challenged, we need to speak out for it. We see it everywhere, winner-takes-all, temptation of the strong man, you see that in most radical right parties in Europe, their biggest hero is Vladimir Putin.

You see that those who attack us for being in favour of an open society - a concept as you know that was developed by Popper - now say that we are being agents of Communism, whereas Popper came up with the idea, in fact, to combat Communism with an open society.

And the Helsinki Final Act and its consequences demonstrate so clearly that it worked. Nobody believed that the US Senate almost refused to ratify the Final Act, because it had many words on human rights and dialogue, and they thought that would not have the force to change societies. It created Solidarność, it created Charta 77, which put an end to the regimes in Eastern Europe. So it is important to defend this.

But why are we here? Why if this concept of liberal democracy sounds so good and is so good for our societies, why is it then being challenged?

I think there are a couple of challenges. The first is identity. We are as you know in the fourth industrial revolution. One of the elements of this industrial revolution is that it creates a lot of migratory flows, all over the world. Societies are changing, quite literally also in colour, and the systems we know, the social contracts we built up over the years, were always based, in Europe at least, on



the nation state. So we now are in a different situation, with identity changing and this is threatening to many people.

It is threatening to many people because it is also linked with another element, and that is the economy. If you look back, I think that between 1930 and 1960, for most middle-class people their wealth doubled. And I think that for most middle-class people, between 1960 and let's say 1985, it doubled once again. But since then, wealth accumulation has been happening in the hands of fewer people. And certainly not so much in the middle class, who have not seen a proportionate increase of their wealth over that period of time.

So the assumption then becomes that the system is not delivering for me and then the social contract upon which every society is based is being challenged, and then if memories fade of mistakes made in the past then challenging democracy itself becomes something you can do. If it's not working for me in the economy, if I have to worry about my future job, if I don't know whether my children will be able to develop wealth in the future, then I might challenge the very system upon which this society is built that doesn't deliver for me.

And the third element I want to mention is innovation, leading to a completely different public debate. I think social media and their influence on the way we have a public debate is still not completely charted and we still don't know exactly what is happening. We do know that it has a democratising effect in the sense that more people participate, but it also has an effect of challenging the very concept of facts and truth.

And if institutions are becoming something that doesn't deliver for us, then the media will be seen as one of those institutions being part of the establishment, and so they are lying, because they are not looking after me.

I think this is a conglomerate of elements that lead to the challenging of liberal democracy.

I think we need to take a good and hard look at our societies and we need to understand that they are now in most part post-ideolog-

ical and post-paternalistic. But because we are human beings, we are full of contradictions. I also believe there is a craving for more idealism, and there is also a craving for more parenthood in parts of the society. So go figure! Those are the contradictions any society has to work with.

We have to acknowledge the first, that we are in a post-ideological and a post-paternalistic society and we have to embrace the second, that there is a craving for idealism and a craving for a form of societal parenthood or citizenship or civil courage or whatever you want to call it in whatever language.

What do we do?

One of the concepts of the winner takes all model is to say: we are right, they are wrong. They have no right to speak out, they should disappear, they should become invisible. So the first way to challenge that is to be visible. I think the best way is to be vocal, to come out with your ideas, to go to the streets if you need to, but especially to be active where people can see you.

I think the biggest support, the biggest help illiberal democrats or people who advocate a closed society have, is the silence of the majority that don't agree with them but don't speak up to say that. Because then they can maintain this point that they speak for the people. You know the reasoning. They say 'we know what the people think, when we speak we speak for the people' and anybody who speaks, who says anything different apparently is an enemy of the people because they haven't understood it. 'We' speak for the people. And the only way we could challenge that logic is to show that there's not one idea, one mind of the people, that we are diverse societies with different opinions and that the difference in opinion gives the richness of our society and is not a sign of weakness. But then you have to hear it, through the media, through participation, etc.

Second point: I think we need to strengthen and also re-establish links between seemingly contradictory interests, because we are pigeon-holing our society. We have the ten-

gency as modern Europeans to only sit together, perhaps even today, with people who already agree with us. We need to look for people and have a dialogue with people who disagree with us. We are losing the noble art of disagreeing well in European society so we avoid confrontation with people with whom we disagree.

Don't misunderstand the people who vote for extremist parties, they very often do not share their ideology, the only thing they share is their attack on the establishment.

And don't underestimate the misunderstandings we create when we defend our values but by many of our electorate are seen as defending the establishment. These misunderstandings need to be addressed and they can only be addressed in a dialogue. And how do you create dialogue? By bringing people with seemingly contradictory interests together. And I would start with the inter-generational challenge. Willy Brandt once said that the best way of creating positive change in a society is an alliance between grandparents and grandchildren.

Well, why don't we start there? Why don't we understand that the pension gap is a huge threat for our society? Why don't we understand that looking for sustainability in how we finance education, healthcare, etc, is one of the biggest challenges in society? Why don't we bring together grandparents and grandchildren to understand how to bring these interests to a common ground? Other contradictory interests can be brought in but I think this generational issue, if we can mobilise young people to ally with their grandparents... you know, the thing is, young people aren't the establishment yet, and their grandparents usually aren't the establishment anymore, so together they can challenge the establishment to do better.

Third point: We absolutely need to match the scale of our action with the scale of globalisation. Because of our traditions we tend to think that the scale of action is the nation state. That's where the social contracts were made since the middle of the 19th century. But as in every industrial revolution, the scale

changes. You know, it took the Americans and the Europeans years to find ways for the public interest to solidify anti-trust legislation in the 19th century, and oil barons and railway tycoons had been robbing society blind for decades before the legislation came in to create a more equitable society. We don't have the luxury of taking that long, we need to act now and we need to convince our people that the only way we can act successfully is to act on a continental scale.

So that is where the concept of European sovereignty comes in that was developed by President Macron; a concept with which I fully agree.

The only way you can reinvigorate national sovereignty is by pooling it at the European level - if you want to do something about taxing the tech giants, if you want to avoid that you are in a competition so that the ones who earn the most money in your society pay zero Euros in taxes and the small shops on the corner pay taxes. That is generating so much inequality and anger in society. We need to act. And we can only act at a Continental level.

This is how I would defend working together in Europe, this is the only way you can reformulate a social contract that the average European can adhere to and see himself or herself represented in. If we don't do this then there's no possibility to rewrite the social contract. A small group in our society will increase their wealth - which is already enormous - and large groups of society will be disenchanted and will be tempted to look for support in xenophobic parties and nationalist parties which will give temporary comfort but which at the end of the day will lead to disillusion.

You know, nostalgia is being developed as the new opium of the people. You see it everywhere in Europe. You re-create a past that never was as a sort of a prospect for the future that of course will never be, on the basis of that past.

I think we need to reinvent the hunger for the future instead of the craving for the past that will bring us nothing. Nothing but stagnation. So we need our young generation to bring their idealism to the table and take the older

generations by the hand and see: this future doesn't need to be bad, it can be good.

Then, my final point of terms of the things that I would like to see happen to reinvigorate democracy: the points I just mentioned can only happen if there is at least a basis for a consensus in society that democracy is actually under threat. If we do not get that understanding accepted broadly in society, if something isn't threatened you're not mobilised to defend it, if something is perceived as unbreakable or old-fashioned, you'll drop it.

If something is seen as fragile but beautiful, you'll fight for it.

And here is my point, that we have neglected as societies, over decades perhaps now, civic education. We have treated increasingly our citizens as customers, as consumers. If you are a customer, you want politics to deliver and if you're unhappy you go look for another shop but if you are a citizen you have a stake yourself and a responsibility in what happens in society and we need to reinvent the noble art of civil courage, of civil courage to do something to better your society, not because it benefits you personally in the short term but because it is for the common good.

We can only get a generally shared understanding of the common good if we first understand what it is, if we first understand that we need to educate our children, and sadly not just our children, in understanding what it means to be a citizen. Because we all have a stake in liberal democracy.

Again, there are so many reasons why Portugal came out of that dictatorship and also many reasons why it happened so peacefully and why it became so strong. As I said, I talked at great length with António Costa about that last night. Yes, wise leaders were certainly part of it. Yes, good friends abroad as well. But above all it was done thanks to the civil courage of the Portuguese people who understood that this was a transition they needed to go through. That future looked scary but also it was an interesting proposition to embrace.

It's always the alignment of civil courage and common sense that will bring our society forward. If we bring this alliance together, there is nothing Europe cannot achieve.

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