

Thoughts on the Future of European Democracy

Post-conference publication

Introduction

Currently, the future of the European Union is at stake due to many disintegrative developments: rising populist tendencies or persisting political disaffection. Meanwhile, sustainable solutions can only be achieved with the support of a strong and well-connected European civil society.

Addressing this issue, Das Progressive Zentrum launched a project called “DIALOGUE ON EUROPE – Rebuilding trust and redefining Europe in tough times” in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office: a two-year transnational dialogue process with promising thinkers and activists from around Europe. Seven Town Hall Meetings were subsequently held in Athens, Lisbon, Rome, Marseilles, Madrid, Warsaw, and London.

Inspired by these events, Das Progressive Zentrum together with its Polish partner, Ferdinand Lassalle Centre for Social Thought, hosted the second Polish-German #EuropeanTownHall Meeting in Warsaw, on 12 February 2018. The event focused on the state of democracy today: dealing with populism and developing democratic innovations. Academics, the media, and civil society actors from Germany and Poland joined thematic workshops to discuss these issues.

In this publication, you will find the major conclusions collected by the main speakers: Laura Krause, Maciej Gdula, Paul Mason and the special guest, Manuel Sarrazin, MP.

Innovations for Democracy: How to Develop Approaches Which Can Respond to the Democracy's Crisis?

Laura-Kristine Krause
Head of the Program “Future of Democracy“, Das Progressive Zentrum

Western democracies seem in a phase of crisis. Democratic systems are far less stable and in a state of normality than they were perceived just a few years ago. In regard to the challenges democracies face – such as populism, social division of societies or reduced trust in institutions – many are looking for answers to the question of how to make democracies more resilient and how to explore what the next steps towards a new form of democracy could be.

Within European countries many people have set out to find answers to these questions and challenges and have started to work on democratic innovations. These are innovative puzzle pieces that have the capacity to make democracy more resilient, responsive and effective in improving people's lives.

Democratic innovations can be both a systemic as well as a more incremental perspective on the future of democracy. From citizens' assemblies to digital tools for deliberation and participation, there is an abundance of ideas and tools that could help update democratic systems. At the same time, democratic innovation also means to reflect on why democracy is needed, which ends it serves, and how its structures can be rebuilt within the boundaries of the ecosystem.

In order to strive for both the systemic and a more incremental perspective on the future of democracy, democratic innovations can be thought in three pillars:

1. Mental models: What is our attitude towards democracy? E.g. which role do concepts like “trust”, “representativeness” and “elites” play in our understanding of democracy?

2. Structure: How can democracies and their institutions be organised in a digitalised and globalised world (structure innovation)?

3. Process: How can we rethink and adjust the democratic process? E.g. how do democracies re-engage citizens who are alienated from the democratic system? How can political processes become more transparent?

All the pillars can be applied to different aspects of democratic systems, such as governments, parliaments, civil society or political parties, and can help structure concepts and debates around democratic innovation. To think of democratic innovation in these pillars can help to come up with innovative pieces and to think them in a larger context. The Democracy Lab of Das Progressive Zentrum strives to connect democratic innovators from all over Europe and opens up space for people that think about similar challenges to collaborate and share ideas.

Neo-Authoritarianism as a Political Challenge

Dr hab. Maciej Gdula,
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The reasons behind the success of Jarosław Kaczyński and his party are a recurring puzzle in Polish public debate. There are those who claim that Poles have recently revealed their true identity, one that is marred with nationalism. The Left points at economic deficiency as the driving force responsible for the success of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, while some commentators argue that it is the 500 PLN benefit for every newborn child that brought many Poles over to their side.

All these arguments seemed insufficient to us when we began to plan a study on the subject of PiS support in small towns. How could it be possible that during the last 10 years Polish citizens had at multiple occasions opted for the centre-right Platforma Obywatelska, and not the right-wing, nationalist PiS? Why did they choose to vote for Kaczyński's party after a decade of dynamic economic growth, 50% increase in real wages and decreasing unemployment? Is Polish democracy truly so weak that it is available for purchase for 500 PLN?

The research conducted by our team in a town by the fictitious name of Miastko in the Mazowsze region of central Poland confirmed these doubts to be justified. We have discovered a world of PiS voters that is far removed from the one envisioned by the media.

It would be difficult to consider Kaczyński's supporters as the losing party in the economic struggle. In the biographical interviews constituting the first part of the research representatives from both the folk class and the middle class described their lives in terms of a successful project. Workers would often bring up financial difficulties, yet these mostly resulted from the situation from some years back, i.e. the financial crisis as experienced in Poland or the deindustrialisation of the 90s. Today workers admit to doing well and even reaching the goals they have set before them. The narration provided by middle class representatives is nothing short of a success story. Only one out of the dozen or more biographical interviews conducted with PiS supporters was dominated by themes of suffering and losing control over one's life.

If economic marginalisation is not enough to explain the popularity of PiS, what is the secret behind its charm? We have tackled the issue by conducting in-depth interviews regarding politics with all the participants of the study.

The national community model offered by Kaczyński is a key factor behind the mobilisation of his electorate. On the one hand it revolves around criticising and excluding the elites. For people from the folk class the elites have forgotten about the common man and have misused their power to pursue wealth. For those from the middle class they have embarrassed themselves through corruption and have lost their moral mandate to rule. The first type of criticism is an attempt to once again become noticed (as the "common man"), while the second one has to do with self-empowerment (the "moral middle class" vs the "immoral elites").

The second foundation of the national community involves the rigid setting of boundaries between Polish citizens and refugees. This allows to clearly identify the latter as a threat to the nation and to define the borders of moral obligation. Refugees, according to workers from the research sample are most importantly a burden for the budget, people who will fail to make their own living.

For the middle class, refugees are seen as cowards who turn their backs on their country on the one hand and dangerous aliens who fail to adapt to the culture of the country they end up in on the other.

The community model does not, however, exhaust the pool of reasons behind the popularity of Kaczyński and his party. He also offers a certain drama based on the process of reclaiming power from the former elites. This process is presented as the realisation of the democratic mandate. By rejecting refugees Kaczyński makes it clear that he is the only significant Polish politician ready to stand up to the challenge of the crisis within the European Union. Others would opt for a return to the old state of things, but the Brexit, the war in Ukraine or the refugee crisis have changed the face of Europe and Kaczyński is one who at least attempts at doing something about it by strengthening the national state.

The allure behind Kaczyński's rule is based on providing others with a feeling of power. On the one hand this feeling has to do with supporting his decisions, which are never subject to negotiation. When Kaczyński makes a decision he shows no regard for the opinions of others, following his will to the letter. He is also ready to share this type of power with his supporters, as in the case of the act which allowed plot-owners to cut down trees on their land with no restrictions and no need for any permits.

I propose to refer to the entirety of the phenomena playing out between Kaczyński and his supporters as neo-authoritarianism. This involves the process of gathering various actors into a national community based on animosity towards the elites and refugees, turning the process of reclaiming power and facing historical challenges into a sort of drama, as well as charming others with a model of governance unbridled by negotiation. In this way, the leader and the audience enter into a deep relationship. In the study this was expressed through a complete lack of criticism by Kaczyński's supporters towards any of his decisions and through granting priority to political drama over personal experience.

The dominance of PiS cannot, however, be considered a return to past authoritarianism. PiS supporters and Kaczyński himself make strong use of democratic au-

thorisation and do not attack parliamentarism itself. PiS voters also assume that it is acceptable to criticise the government and that plurality of opinion is an essential feature within the public sphere. This is also prominent in their preferred method of using the media, which is characterised by syncretism and the use of many different information channels.

This interpretation of Kaczyński's rule requires his opponents to re-think their political strategy. Scaring others with the notion of an all-powerful Kaczyński fits into his governance model and strengthens the notion of him actually having control over the situation. Attempts at outdoing Kaczyński using social issues often made by non-parliamentary groups also seem unattractive, as the PiS leader "has a lot to offer", apart from having real power and following up on his promises.

Today's alternative is based on mobilising the demobilised, i.e. those who are against Kaczyński, but at the same time do not wish to support the current opposition. In Poland this applies to a large group of voters, with a strong representation in Miastko. These people may be mobilised by topics considered controversial, such as women's rights or the refugee crisis, as well as ones that have been abandoned, such as issues related to Europe. Rallying people around ethically challenging issues instead of simply discouraging them towards PiS, may prove essential discouraging them towards PiS, may prove essential.

What Future for Democracy?

Paul Mason
Journalist and Author of "Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions" (2012), "PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future" (2015)

As authoritarian nationalism sweeps Europe, the key to resistance lies – as George Orwell once put it – "in the power to grasp what kind of world we are living in". It doesn't give you a crystal ball but it does allow you to

understand what kind of crises are on the way, and how the various social forces will react to them.

We need to understand, first, that the neoliberal model is broken. The same factors that fuelled its success until the mid 2000s are now fuelling its instability and dysfunction.

But the second problem is: why did the collapse of neoliberalism lead to this right-wing populist wave fuelling xenophobia, racism, antisemitism and numerous other prejudices?

The answer is: neoliberalism was held together by a story. It said: if you ruthlessly compete with each other, allow all communities, traditions and existing institutions to be ripped up; if you think of yourself only as an economic agent – not as a three-dimensional human being with a religion, ethnicity and sexuality – you will prosper.

When it worked, it encouraged something inside business and politics that I call performative neoliberalism. Everyone performs, as in a play: so long as your department meets its quota for hiring black people or women, nobody cares what is in your head. You can actually believe, as large numbers of young American men do, that sexually liberated women are participating in the exploitation of men, or that "race science" proves black people are subhuman.

The failure of the economic system suddenly makes the performance meaningless and suddenly the reactionary ideas, which were never challenged in the open democracy of the trade union organised workplace, such as existed in the 1970s, burst into the open.

Erich Fromm, the German psychiatrist who studied the rise of fascism in real time, said the two things that enabled it were (a) the general tiredness and isolation people feel in modern life, combined with (b) the failure of their left-wing leaders to come up with answers and (c) the rise of the unthinking and unquestioning small scale bureaucrat who always follows orders and does not think about other people as human beings.

Well all three conditions are now being created. Mass precarious work and constant social upheaval and in-

security forces people back into the realm of personal and private life, leaving politics to the elites, manipulators and organised corruption. The left and liberalism simply clings to the old model. While the bureaucrat is everywhere – and on command they move from ticking the boxes of anti-racist and anti-sexist hiring practices to ticking the deportation forms of migrants.

We need to create radical hope in a progressive solution – in a short term deliverable turn-around in people's wages, the quality and availability of public services, high waged jobs and free education for their kids.

Briefly on the Future of Polish-German Relations

Manuel Sarrazin
Member of the German Parliament

Warsaw is obviously the most important partner for Germany after Washington and Paris in an insecure world. This development is impressive against the background of the common history. However, the prerequisite was a close agreement between the two partners in the strategic guidelines, above all the European policy. Today, on the one hand, it is important to preserve and expand common interests; on the other hand, to prevent differences from harming the strategic foundations and thus national interests of both partners. These include new confidence, compromise and a new willingness to live in a healthy degree with differences.”

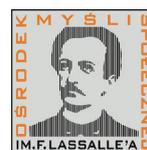
Disclaimer

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