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## **European democracy in a time of confusion** **Herman van Rompuy**

The state of our democracies is the reflection of the state of society or civilisation. We must first define what the problems of our time are.

The main feature of the last decades is uncertainty and fear among many. Where does that come from?

From an historical point of view, there are objective reasons to think that it could be just the opposite? Never did we have a period of peace in Western Europe that lasted seventy years. Hardly anyone here is nostalgic for the empires of the past and certainly not willing to fight and die for them. Never was prosperity so high for many. Never was social protection so well organised. I know, of course, that problems of poverty remain and that incomes and wealth are unequally distributed but much less than before 1945 and much less than in other Western countries. We are living longer, even almost fifteen years longer than in the early 1950s. We do so with more comfort than we did then. We fight epidemics much more effectively than we did against Spanish flu a hundred years ago. We are, on average, much better housed and we travel easily and cheaply to other regions, countries and continents. We are better and faster informed in all domains. Girls and boys are both better educated. We work half the time compared to a hundred years ago. Minorities of all kinds are better protected and discriminations are combated. People are much freer to live according to their orientation. The list of positive developments is long.

However, there is a lot of discontent. Why? Because we are always comparing ourselves with others. The source of unhappiness is thinking that there is always someone more successful, more prosperous and more handsome than yourself. Everything is relative. We also relativize much less because we are much preoccupied with ourselves. Inequalities naturally fuel that frustration. These have increased in recent years and again now, as inflation affects some more than others. Still, income disparities are much smaller than in Anglo-Saxon countries.

We are in the same storm but not necessarily in the same boat. Changes are of all times. In many areas they are faster than "used to be" whatever that last word means. But not everyone is equally well armed to deal with these shocks. On the contrary. But why do we react with more fear even though we now have a better basis for coping with them?

Many people also wonder whether in a fast and rapidly changing world we will keep our material achievements. People live in the "here and now" but at the same time we look ahead. The future is always uncertain but sometimes it is more uncertain than otherwise. In recent years we have seen institutions in which we had full confidence, such as banks and our currency, threatened with collapse. Covid turned our way of life upside down for two years and the virus is still around. Terrorism further increased the already existing feeling of insecurity. It added something else: won't our country one day fall into the hands of radicals who will take away our identity? Some of us are having a hard time getting used to a multicultural society. Living with differences is not simple for everyone. Climate change and climate disasters are getting closer. Extreme heat and flooding follow one



another. We know that it will only get worse, without us being willing to change our way of life enough, which is at the root of the problem. Some of our fellow European citizens have lost their jobs due to competition from emerging countries and digitalisation. Others are wondering if it will happen to them. The war in Ukraine and the images about the Russian atrocities there were a shock in Western Europe. It was as if yesterday's world was returning. Moreover, the Russians said they did not rule out the use of nuclear weapons. Because war was now possible after all, many people believe that nuclear war is also a possibility. But as mentioned, even before the start of the multiple crisis in 2008 (banks), there was also a malaise, what Freud once called, an "uneasiness in culture.

None of these anxieties is without consequence. The number of 'diseases of civilisation' has been increasing for decades. I mean: depressions and mental problems, burn-outs, family instability, criminality, addictions of all kinds. Governments and civil society are helping these people, although the source of many problems is not being removed. On the contrary. We run until we fall. We know what is wrong but we do not act accordingly. We say we are rational but often act irrationally i.e. not in accordance with the goal we have set ourselves.

These uncertainties and fears translate i.a. into a fear for the lives of future generations, into a demographic implosion in Europe, that is causing the population to age and decline. By 2100, Italy f.i. would lose one third of its inhabitants. But many are averse to strong immigration and do not realise that in order to maintain and let grow our level of prosperity and social protection, we need more people. I am not even talking about jobs that natives are less and less willing to do even though there is a high need for them, such as in the healthcare sector. Choices will therefore have to be made. There is untenable triangle of eco-anxiety, migration phobia and fear of losing its prosperity.

May I allow myself a digression on demographics here. I would add that in Russia, China and Japan the situation is similar to Europe. Unfortunately, population numbers are exploding in Africa, Europe's closest neighbour, (doubling by 2050, perhaps quadrupling by 2100) with all that this entails for potential mass irregular immigration.

I already said that individualisation has grown strongly. It is accompanied by greater freedom, autonomy and emancipation. Certainly women in Western Europe have a completely different position in our society than the mothers and grandmothers of other generations. And yet there is still much to do. That movement toward a stronger consciousness of the individual has been going on for several centuries and has even become specific to European civilisation. After 1945, by the way, the nation is no longer the highest value (nationalism) but the individual himself. Not the collective Ego but the individual Ego. It has been a "reversal of all values".

Individualisation also has to do with urbanisation which increases namelessness and where communities of living disappear or become more difficult to establish.

Individualisation also has technological causes. Social capital in the form of local association life has taken a hit with the introduction of television into living rooms. The internet society has given each person even more opportunities to make their own choices and to communicate with whomever they want, wherever they are in the world. Physical contact is no longer necessary. That is a huge advantage to overcome geographical



distances and to get to know new people. Imagine the two years of the pandemic without the digital tool. The loneliness would have been enormous. I am not even talking about the teleworking that saved our economy. On the other hand, in "normal" times the virtual separates us from each other and alienates us. We each live more and more in our own little world and have less need to live together with non like-minded people or any others whatsoever. However, true solidarity concerns not only the "neighbour" but the "foreigner". I refer to the Good Samaritan. Solidarity within one's own community or small circle requires no effort. It is self-evident. But true solidarity has not disappeared. Think of the volunteers in the vaccination centres and in the floods in Wallonia.

The fading away of social capital is also a consequence of the fiercely declining role of religious organisations. At the same time, organised Christianity is also a victim of this trend toward individualisation.

I would add that all ideologies are in crisis. What is left of socialism or liberalism? Both ideologies had evolved into liberal socialism or social liberalism in many countries. However, tribalism is threatening to prevail. But many realise that a complete "exit" from the EU and the rest of the world is also not an answer to the questions of our time. The covid era has taught us that a country alone cannot handle a major crisis. This is even more true of the climate. We cannot tame inflation at national level.

The organization of our economy is based on competition, on the 'struggle for life'. Companies must produce cheaply and innovatively. Globalisation has opened markets to all and thus made competition even stronger. Competition leads to individualisation. However, we have long ceased to live in wild capitalism. Regulation has been highly developed in so many areas to make a human, social and environmental correction to the market economy. On its own, capitalism does not combat climate or produce social security. This is not an ideological position but a fact of life. The tax burden, on average in the Eurozone, is almost as high as half of GDP. However, capitalism remains more than ever a competition-based economy.

Another system where the government plans everything is not only less performing but also more a-social. The late Soviet Union proved that. Moreover, economic coercion goes hand in hand with political coercion. So a completely different economic system is not the solution. Moreover, it implies a closed economy. Besides, there is no societal support here for that at all.

On the other hand, people need to be better empowered to live more humanely in our form of corrected market economy. Empowerment is not only a matter of skills but also of moral and spiritual resilience.

An isolated individual is more likely to feel alone, lonely and abandoned. One who lives by himself and for herself, also distrusts others more easily, sometimes all others. He or she distrusts anonymous institutions and "strangers" all the more. This impasse is also well felt politically. Voters have the impression that they are not being listened to in our democracies, that an individual counts for too little or not at all. Note the paradox: in an individualised society, the individual feels abandoned!

That feeling of abandonment and of distrust can be abused by charlatans and manipulators who blame others. Distrustful people paradoxically trust some leaders who lie and cheat! The reason is that the frustration of some is so great that people believe



leaders as long as they feed the distrust of their followers and tell them what they want to hear. Values have no importance anymore. Often only one's own interests or "beliefs" matter. The rational world is full of irrational and even immoral behaviour. The storming of the Capitol is only the most graphic wake-up call for all democrats worldwide.

The result of alienation of citizens is that one fifth of citizens no longer 'believe' in democracy, especially among young people. In France, 70% of younger voters stayed home in the latest parliamentary elections. A few years ago there was still a 70% participation rate! One fifth of the electorate, and sometimes even more, vote for populist parties. The characteristic of those parties is that they blame all the problems on others - foreigners, foreign countries, Europe - and do not challenge the natives and always prove them right. After all, a populist wants to be popular. That is why he proposes nothing unpopular or courageous. Where populists come to power it usually does not last long, especially when there are economic headwinds. The rise of populism has weakened traditional parties. The uncertain electorate is also switching parties more frequently. All parties have become small. This volatility also means that in 'normal' times major reforms preparing the future are not carried out. Governing becomes more difficult in a fragmented political landscape. The electoral risk for smaller parties becomes too important for taking unpopular measures. None of this is to say that our hyper-individualised society would accept a dictatorship. Again, there is a lot of inconsistent behaviour. People want to be democratically opposed to democracy!

One must also look at what is happening within the European Union not only on belief in democracy but also on violating the very basis of democratic institutions. Two countries do not respect those values. They are not even implementing ECJ decisions. That is why the other member states are taking away their European funding. Action is finally being taken. An absolute majority in a national parliament does not entitle one to absolute power. Law and ethics are above power.

We need to work on stronger ties, linkages between people that will counterbalance individualisation. This is a task that goes beyond reforms of our democratic system. Nevertheless we must move to new forms of democracy that are more bottom-up and that must respond to the democratic deficit without falling into a leadership deficit. After all, governing means making difficult choices. A colossal task.

Each time, it is about trying to build something together. Much scepticism and prejudice will have to be overcome. However, when 70% of young people drop out of elections, we do not have much choice! The 'business as usual' is no longer 'usual'. It does not work any more. Something has to change, if we do not want to go further towards broken or blocked societies.

We need democracies where people are more involved (input legitimacy) but we also need output-oriented policies that better protect people against what many feel are threats such as unemployment, insecure jobs, loss of purchasing power, climate change, criminality, irregular migration, large income disparities, poverty, military threats, terrorism and others. It is about protecting but also about empowering people so that they get the right education, opportunities to develop, integrate and participate.



I know myself how difficult governing is, especially in a world where national politicians in a global and interdependent world no longer have full control over the facts. On a broader European level one can have more grip, e.g. through the EU. I must immediately add that people feel they have no or not enough grip on European policy! But on that European level one sometimes has to react rather than act. Think of the crises that were external to the Union: the banks, the refugees, covid, energy prices, the war. As I said, the European policy level is geographically further away from citizens. The proximity is smaller and thus the likelihood of alienation. The EU is necessary to achieve results in policy -output- but is not so loved regarding involvement, input. Another paradox.

I made it clear that the strengthening of European democracy is an important task. But the problem is broader: democracy itself is under pressure. Strengthening European democracy cannot be done without strengthening democracy in general.

Democracy cannot exist without values, without real conversation at all levels of society and government. A real conversation implies respect for the opponent and treating each other as equals. A real dialogue implies a respect for the fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. The explosion of the social media are a game changer in the life of our democracies. They promote too much voicing emotions rather than thinking and rational dialogue. Democracy is not a one-way street like the shouting on Twitter. A minimum of trust is necessary for social cohesion and the proper functioning of a democracy. Today there is too much mistrust.

Values get more chances in a more harmonious society but are also a matter of education to the common interest, a matter of ethics and spirituality focused on other centeredness rather than ego centeredness.

Of course, that conversation is easiest to organise at the local level. But it always starts with a dialogue. There are now experiments with citizen democracy, in which they are consulted directly. In this way, representative democracy is complemented by deliberative democracy. It prevents elected representatives from alienating themselves from their voters. But representative democracy remains at the heart of our political system.

This strengthening of forms of participatory or deliberative democracy must take place at all levels of governance. In this stronger participation of citizens, civil society has to play an important role as well as individuals. People become stronger when they work together inside associations. We need to learn to converse again. The techniques used in the Conference on the Future of Europe (citizens' panels, digital platforms) can also be used elsewhere. The digital tool should be used much more by the positive forces in society - still a silent majority. The social media can finally become social and create on-line communities of acquaintances instead of battlefields of strangers!

Multilevel governance also contributes to this sense of belonging. Of course the EU respects the internal constitutional organisation of countries, but it can itself set an example of better cooperation with national and other parliaments and councils. In this



way, the EU can better assess the impact of certain measures in order to achieve better results.

The question today is how to get democracies that deliver better. They will have better results if they function better. Better functioning means better involvement and leadership. Every political level performs better when it feels the pressure from below. Better functioning also means the capacity to pass the right, sometimes unpopular decisions. Good results create trust and 'output legitimacy'.

I come back to the European democracy.

The EU is a *sui generis*, a very specific institution. So is European democracy. Today there is already a double democratic legitimacy: a European one through a directly elected European Parliament and a national one through the Council of Ministers who are nationally elected. Both constitute the two branches of the legislative power. Formally there is no 'democratic deficit'.

A better 'input legitimacy' can be done through a direct dialogue with the citizens and with the elected representatives of the people, especially the mandatories at local, provincial and regional level. The local elected representatives alone number almost one million.

The political mandatories beyond those of the European Parliament must be permanently engaged. The procedures provided for in the Lisbon Treaty for the participation of national parliaments on legislative initiatives are formal and bureaucratic, but they exist. They must be exploited and they can be extended in a specific way to elected regional parliaments. Another idea could be the annual organisation of a gathering with the national, regional, provincial and local elected representatives so that they can have the opportunity to express their views on the priorities of citizens and on the strategic agenda of the institutions, on the State of the Union.

All this would address the risk that the preferences of many citizens and of European and other leaders would grow apart. This would address a bureaucratisation of policies that can easily occur. A dialogue implies that the concerns of others are listened to but also that policy makers are given the opportunity to explain their position.

How can we make Europe stronger in order to tackle the problems of our time? But how can the Union be strong if the member states are politically weak?

The EU is the sum of 27 member states. Divisions are built in. That fact does not impress me. The discussions among member states can be followed online. In authoritarian regimes, discussions and tensions are kept secret and those who speak out pay with their lives or freedom. Let us not forget that the Soviet Union, a monument of autocratic power, suddenly imploded partly because of internal contradictions that were hardly ever visible.



What seemed strong was in fact weak. History often repeats itself, though not in the same way.

Those who until recently argued that autocracy worked better than democracy must now look embarrassed at Russia. Another autocratic regime such as Turkey has an 80% inflation rate among other problems.

Democracy is never an achievement. Its problems can be found at all levels of governance, including at the level of the EU as such. Its survival and flourishing depends on strong institutions but equally on a societal context and a sense of values. An unequal and fragmented society, where there is uncertainty and fear, where too many people are unhappy undermine democracy. This is what we must work on. Much is at stake.