

A social response to the weaknesses of democracy

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The first event with global resonance to kick off 2021 was an attack on democracy: the invasion of Capitol Hill in Washington, spurred by the outgoing president. Europeans were stunned by this spectacular violence, killing five people, and degrading not only one of the most prestigious symbols of parliamentary democracy in the world, but also the very authority of the US executive.

The United States is depicted as a young nation but an old democracy. The European Union comprises many old nations but some relatively young democracies, most often founded on the rubble of totalitarianism. Europe trembled as it watched the Capitol wobble for a moment because it knows that the evils on the other side of the Atlantic are partly also its own: a crisis of representation, extreme polarisation of debate, dissemination of untruths, distrust of authorities. The German Bundestag suffered an attempted intrusion by anti-mask and anti-vaccination activists in August 2020, as did the Dutch Parliament in 2019 by angry farmers.

Repairing, even healing, our vulnerable liberal democracies is a European collective duty for 2021, as well for the whole decade to come. The European Union is becoming the guardian of democracies. It keeps an eye on the proper functioning of the rule of law. The Commission draws up a regular health report for the entire democratic body to be vitalised in the member states. As an economy requires structural reforms, cleaning up a democracy requires: advanced civic education, independence of the judiciary, a plurality of media, regulation of social networks, defence against cyber-attacks, respect for public freedoms such as the freedom of expression and religious freedom, an active role of intermediary bodies, citizen participation and a fight against corruption.

The consolidation of all these elements is all the more necessary as the international context is undermined by authoritarian regimes (China, Russia, Turkey), setting themselves up as an alternative model. Around the world, liberal democracy is losing ground. And global challenges, such as the struggle for climate and biodiversity, which require radical changes in our modes of production and consumption, question our sometimes very cumbersome deliberative procedures.

But the European institutions on their own are ill-equipped to reform our national democracies. The European Article 7 procedure is exerting pressure without convincing results at this stage, as in the case of Poland. The new budgetary conditionality of respect for the rule of law will not be put into practice for at least a year, until the European Court of Justice validates the legislation. The establishment this spring of a European Public Prosecutor's Office, however, could prove to be a promising avenue in the fight against corruption.

It is first and foremost for member states to look after their democracy. The independence of the judiciary is of course structurally vital. In parliamentary systems, the most common form in the EU, the head of state too needs to play a key role. Sovereign or president, he or she stands most often as the ultimate guarantor of the democratic functioning of their country's institutions. He or she is also a guarantor of their country's European commitment, as seen when the president of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, prevented a Eurosceptic from being nominated as prime minister in 2018, during the formation of the Italian government between the League and the 5 Star Movement.

But guaranteeing democracy should never rest on a single institution. The intermediary bodies (unions, chambers of commerce, regional divisions, churches, associations, etc) play an irreplaceable role of daily mediation. They should not be allowed to grow tired, but on the contrary, need to be rejuvenated and to see their primary mission enhanced.

Among these intermediary bodies, the political parties are of course primarily responsible for the vitality of democracy – and for its crisis. Their open ear to the whole of society, the consistency of their ideas, the integrity of their members, the exemplary nature of their elected representatives and their sense of the State are necessary to gain the confidence of citizens. Simply denouncing national populism is not a programme.

Cleaning up and revitalising our democracies is not a luxury. It is a vast programme at all levels – local, national and European. But by focusing too much on the sole subject of democracy, we risk setting the wrong priority, or rather not grasping the problem at its roots. The independence of justice is fundamental, but social justice is also essential.

People's mistrust of all institutions, their silent anger against elected officials, media, experts, and other 'elites' call, above all, for a social response from the whole of Europe. This is all the more the case in 2021, when further rises in unemployment and poverty are expected. The European social summit in Porto on 7 and 8 May is therefore a welcome initiative. Globalisation has generated a cohort of left-asides in Europe; rural or peri-urban areas have their renegades, and are where the 'gilets jaunes' movement in France originated, and where Covid-19 has highlighted the 'essential work' that has until now been neglected. The social response sets itself a big agenda: redeveloping the access routes to these territories, supporting the ecological and digital transitions fairly, fighting against precariousness, facilitating professional retraining, helping dependence in old age, making 'essential work' earn more. It is also about giving social recognition: regaining self-esteem through that of society, feeling valued in one's business, included in the neighbourhood, listened to in the media, being able to take pride in the nation.

This wide social response agenda that must be linked to social recognition will not be implemented overnight, nor within one year, for as long as our liberal democracies remain fragile

and under immediate threat. All eyes will be on Germany in 2021 because this is a *Wahljahr*, an election year, in many *Länder* throughout the country as well as at the federal level, with Angela Merkel leaving office after more than 15 years. Enabling a smooth and undisputed political transition in the EU's most populated and powerful country will be crucial for the future of democracy in Europe. The other key player under scrutiny in 2021 will of course be the new Biden administration and the way it manages to heal American democracy. Its plan to hold a world summit on democracy must not end up as a gathering of more or less democratic countries, allied against China under a restored US leadership, but send a message to the world of undefeatable faith in liberal democracy for this century.