

Introductory remarks by Miklós Haraszti¹

There are two schools competing about interpretation of the subject that you will be discussing today: the direction into which new democracies have been evolving in the last 25 years.

The universalist school

According to it, democracy is liberal and constitutional, or it is not democracy in fact. In terms of values and goals, its inspiration comes from "organic" or "original" or "Western" democratizations. Unavoidably, the observers belonging to this school live today in a state of constant disappointment with what befell to the third and fourth wave of democratization, 1989 and the Arab spring.

Freedom House's numbers every year underline the downwards slipping, or "sliding back". They try to measure how a seemingly democratically legitimized majoritarian populism constantly sweeps all branches of power and independent institutions under the jurisdiction of the executive, eliminating freedoms, separation of powers, media rights, and other guarantees of accountable and deliberative governance. And all this descends towards personal autocratic power and corruption.

Nearer to your subject, at another *Frontiers of Democracy* meeting, Professor Béla Greskovits added the notion of "fading of democracy", or the mentality factor, or that of political culture. Less "measurable" by its nature, voters' alienation from the institutions and values of democracy is nevertheless the social backdrop to the "sliding back" in the new democracies.

The relativist school

And there is another, growing school explaining democracy's downturn, which does not see it a downturn at all. The relativist school holds that the western models and even the underlying liberal values and constitutional checks and balances are obsolete. Populism and illiberalism (yes, this is a new "ism") must not be curses anymore; pushing back civil society, media, minority rights and individual freedoms are symptoms of a real democracy once the people have spoken in an election.

Let me illustrate the resoluteness of this type of thinking with an excerpt of a fresh speech by Hungary's Prime Minister:

Excerpt from PM Viktor Orbán's speech at the Hungarian Diaspora Council, December 2, 2015

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STZCp8jTEvo&feature=youtu.be&t=10m15s>

-- 10:15 to 11:33

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There is a political discourse that treats the world on the basis of the philosophy of human rights. And anything and everything we are thinking about must be accounted for in the framework of this kind of thinking. And whoever is stepping out of the canon of this kind of thinking is committing treason against the wonderful values of the world.

I mean this era is approaching its end.

During last year it became clear that world politics based on the export of Western democracy is bankrupted. At the places which were the targets for democracy export we have not found buyers for that commodity; where we somehow did find buyers, it turned out they form a minority in the nation; and practically everywhere we caused bigger troubles in the world with democracy than the ones we intended to cure with it.

This is sad but this is the truth.

Additionally, the very discourse that attempts to explain the whole world on the basis of freedoms and human rights, and tries to picture these as the norm to be followed, well this also has a dwindling demand, and it is time to return to realities, and to Realpolitik.

To sum up, we are in the endgame of the course that is based on export of democracy and human rights.

The dilemma of democratization in would-be EU members states

It is the spectrum between universalism and relativism where this research and your discussion will operate. Ukraine and Moldova wishes to join a Europe that officially still belongs to the old school. At the same time, several previous newcomers are already officially at odds with it, and build illiberal democracies. And to the east, several nations are governed by outright autocracies.

The researchers in the project face many dilemmas stemming from this dire situation. What methods should be proposed, what institutions transported, what local developments assisted? How can a fading and a slide-back of new "designer democracies" be avoided?

The practical analyses that you provide today about both recent members and future hopeful newcomers are crucial for a more profound dilemma: where should the weight of outside assistance be concentrated, around the institutions, or the mentality of democracy?

Let me illustrate the severity of this dilemma with a reflection by Francis Fukuyama who commented on PM Viktor Orbán's widely cited "illiberal" speech in 2014. The author who in 1989 famously held that liberal democracy's institutional order will prevail, now contemplates that institutions are after all not that important, and mentality rules:

Do Institutions Really Matter? By Francis Fukuyama

<http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/fukuyama/2012/01/23/do-institutions-really-matter/>

"In terms of the formal powers the new constitution grants the Hungarian executive, they are not greater than those traditionally possessed by a British prime minister.

So the real difference between Hungary under Orbán and classic British governments does not lie in the formal allocation of powers in the political system. The problem lies entirely in how those powers are used: nobody trusts Viktor Orbán and Fidesz to use their powers responsibly...

By contrast, the "democratic dictatorship" constituted by the Westminster system has worked in English history because of the underlying moderation of English politics.

The new Hungarian constitution is bad not so much for what it is, but what it reveals about the long-term proclivities of its authors.

I wonder about the ultimate utility of tinkering with institutional rules that either add or subtract checks and balances to existing democratic systems. If the political will exists to do something even in a system with a lot of veto players, it will happen; conversely, bad actors can undo even the best-designed institutions. Maybe institutions don't matter, after all."

Finally, in the name of the Center for EU Enlargement Studies, I would like to thank the [International Visegrad Fund](#) for sponsoring the research project and the event, which is part of the Central European University's ["Frontiers of Democracy"](#) initiative.