

Agenda

Stronger now or eroding at its foundations?

Democracy in Europe one year after Trump

A One Day Forum by Democracy Reporting International and the Mercator Foundation

On 28 November in Projektzentrum Mercator, Berlin

Programme

9:30 – 10:45

- Welcome & Scene-setter (presentation of major assumptions: Is there a democracy crisis? What are its features?), Kirsten Hommelhoff, Mercator Foundation; Michael Meyer-Resende, Democracy Reporting International
- Discussant: Ilke Toygür, Ilcano Institute
- Discussion moderated by Dr Finn Heinrich (DRI, former TI)

11:00 – 13:00

- Regional variations or how to disentangle the ‘populist challenge’? (Is the US comparable with continental Europe? Is the UK challenge closer to the US? Is there an East/West split in Europe?), Kick-off and chairing by Ivan Krastev, Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia and ECFR trustee
- Short contributions from different countries to set of questions
- Debate.

Lunch break

14:30 – 16:00

Working Groups

- WG 1: Has the **democratic space** changed due to social media and what to do about it? Kick-off and chairing by Rasto Kuzel, MEMO 98, Slovakia
- WG 2: How democratic and effective has been the **response** to the challenge by established parties, the media and opinion leaders? Chair Sorina Soare, University of Florence

16:30 – 17:00

- Presentation of recommendations from working groups and discussions.
- Overall conclusions.

Background

When Donald Trump was elected as the new President of the United States on 9 November 2016, most European analysts responded with gloom. After the Brexit shock of 2016, opinion polls were proven wrong once more and a nationalist, protectionist President was elected; some of his key advisors were openly anti-EU. With a string of European elections ahead (Austria, Netherlands, France and Germany) many imagined that the 'populist' wave was now unstoppable and feared that the end of the EU and democracy was near.

It has turned out differently. Extreme right-wing parties did not make significant gains in these elections. The UK snap elections in June reversed months of the Tory party riding high in opinion polls. Was 2016 an exception then? Is continental Europe saved from an authoritarian fury? Can we relax now?

Probably not. President Macron and his party won the French elections based on many of the symptoms that analysts associate with 'populism' (disenchantment with established parties and elites; declining economic prospects for part of the middle class, etc.). The established party system imploded. Every third voter opted for Marine Le Pen in the second-round Presidential elections. In Austria, Norbert Hofer, a candidate of the extreme right, gained 46% of the vote. In Germany the Alternative für Deutschland became the third biggest party in the federal parliament. In Poland the governing Law and Justice Party has paralysed the Constitutional Court. In Hungary NGOs are under pressure as well as the Central European University.

In short, 2017 has not been catastrophic, but the challenge to democracy continues. Hostile forces continue to work at undermining essential features of democracy based on a separation and balance of power. Parties that question the democratic consensus, gain footholds in the body politic of countries across Europe.

In our one-day discussion forum we want to review the fears of November 2016 and assess them against what we know now. Has public opinion been manic depressive? Announcing the end of the world in November 2016 while declaring the triumph of a liberal counter-offensive in summer 2017. Is the 'populism' label useful to explain and describe the challenge? Is populism the same as authoritarianism? Is it useful to interpret developments in many different countries as one common trend or are there marked differences?

Looking at the current public debate on these issues, we see three problematic tendencies, which we would like to address in the discussion forum:

(1) Populist ≠ Right-wing ≠ Autocratic: The debate often mixes right-wing, traditional, populist, illiberal, and authoritarian positions in a melange of stances which are "against the liberal mainstream". This blunt approach in turn feeds the narrative of challenger parties which portray themselves as challengers to a 'closed system'. However, while ideologically traditional or right-wing positions do not have to threaten the democratic rules of the game (and might even enhance the democratic discourse in a country when they have no voice), there are violations of the democratic rule-book by political forces in words and deeds, which are clearly dangerous for the state of our democracies, but often get lost in the shuffle of general outrage over other transgressions of these forces.

(2) Electoral defeat ≠ end of populism. The public debate often only uses the indicator of election outcomes and electoral polling to judge the rise and fall of these forces while, with less focus on anti-democratic trends in the public sphere, in public attitudes and, in some cases, also in the area of legal and policy changes occur. What parameters should a finer analysis include?

(3) Fighting 'populism' ≠ strengthening democracy. In many countries, established parties and their allies have, in their fight against these new forces employed means and tactics, which raise questions about democratic governance, such as exclusion from debate on state TV. Are democratic parties in risk of undermining foundations of democracy?

For this debate we gather some of the top analysts from across Europe to review the outlook and try to agree on the biggest challenges. We aim at correlating what we know about the causes of the challenge to democracy to responses in the democratic system. We also invite opinion-makers who differ with classical liberal opinions to avoid too much group think. The debate will not be about Brexit, the future of Europe or the United States but focuses on the challenge to democratic institutions in European nation-states and how to meet them.