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The Changing Borders of Democratic Political Space – Past and Future

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Abstract: People often tend to equate liberalism as a political ideology with liberal democracy as a system of government. It is true that liberal democracy emerges from the general framework of liberal ideas and values of the Enlightenment. In the process of its development, liberal democracy takes shape as a mechanism of integrating diverse political ideas and mindsets into a pluralist system of government, regulated by a minimal number of common rules. It is an inclusive system, transforming long-term rivals or even enemies into partners. In the early 19th-century, the equilibrium between conservative and liberal movements into a system of limited representative democracy was established. In the late 19th –early 20th century, the workers’ movement developed a strong moderate wing and joined the system of liberal democracy—making the introduction of universal suffrage possible. We live in a transitional epoch of rivalry and political polarization that endangers the very existence of liberal democratic government—for the first time after the collapse of major totalitarian systems of the 20th century. Are there opportunities and instruments to safeguard liberal democracy by reframing it and redefining it in the new circumstances?

Liberal democracy is in crisis. Three decades after the victorious accomplishments of the “velvet revolutions” in Central and Eastern Europe, half a century after the democratization of Southern Europe – Spain, Portugal, and Greece, 80 years after the beginning of the powerful wave of democratization in the aftermath of World War II, liberal democracy is facing its strongest challenge since the 1920s, when totalitarian temptations of the ultra-right and the ultra-left sunk Europe into dictatorship and blood-shed. Liberal democracy is questioned from two different perspectives. The first perspective comes from the process of globalization, which reduces the potential of nation states that have served as nests of democratic political regimes in the age of modern capitalism. Global capitalism is based on market fundamentalism, which considers the markets as the sole legitimate mechanism of societal reproduction. Political institutions – liberal democracy included – are treated as an additional instrument to take care of law and order at the national level, even if market exchange takes place at the global level. For market neo-liberalism, the state – the liberal democratic state included – ranks even lower than the “night guardian” of Adam Smith. The hegemony of neo-liberal market fundamentalism decreased the value of different political ideologies and movements of liberal democracy that served as wings of political pluralism in the balanced democratic systems of the West after the World War II. Liberals and Conservatives, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats have been reduced to almost nominal differences, serving neo-liberal strategies of globalization.

Neo-liberalism served as a rightwing ideology of globalization, and antinationalist multiculturalism developed as a leftwing doctrine, aimed at building a new global community of brotherhood. Citizens’ democracy was upgraded with the notion of numerous cultures and communal groups that need to co-exist in a project of an emerging global human community. Nationalism, traditional values, and religious and cultural divisions are considered to be impediments in constructing a global multicultural community – therefore, their existence and manifestation has at best decreasing legitimacy. Neo-liberalism and multiculturalism claim a direct relationship to political democracy as parts of one and the same societal system, yet practicing both those wings of globalization brings significant de-institutionalization of economic and inter-communal relations. De-institutionalization weakens the potential of liberal democracy functioning as a nation based system of government. Globalization creates an immense new level of wealth around the world – both in the developed and the Third world. It reduces the gap between the haves and the have-nots globally, but increases the gap between wealth and poverty inside each society. The market polarizes society. This is why mature

industrial capitalism of the 20th century developed the welfare state as an instrument of social cohesion through the redistribution of wealth. Globalization reduced welfare state and increased social polarization.

The last decades of the 20th century were victorious for globalization in terms of expanding economic success and democratic development. “The End of History” was an intellectual platform to celebrate successful the marriage between market globalization and liberal democracy as two sides of one and the same coin. Anti-globalization movements were primitive – they stoned the buildings where global elites resided and burned McDonald’s restaurants – much in the same way their predecessors, the Luddites, destroyed machines in the early industrial age. Alter-globalist movements and perspectives started to shape up in trying to offer alternatives to mainstream values and practices of globalization, yet they developed mostly on the basis of the globalist meta-paradigm itself. In the late 1990s and the early 21st century, new social and political movements grew up and developed as alternatives to both to globalization and liberal democracy. This second perspective of opposition to liberal democracy emerged from the revival of nativist–traditionalist attitudes of resistance against the combined economic and cultural wave of globalization.

On the one hand, liberal democracy is associated with global markets pressing upon national economies and subordinating the communal interests of national societies to international corporate and policy establishments. On the other hand, liberal democracy is perceived as an instrument of expanding universalistic popular culture, as a strategy of replacing traditions of local culture, religion, and legacy with a culture of unified global liberalism. In certain parts of the world, liberal democracy is an external challenge to local traditionalism, embodied in patrimonial social hierarchies and in authoritarian forms of governance. Liberal universalism is a threat not simply to traditional values and life styles, but primarily to conservative social and political hierarchies of power. Polyarchy represents a societal system of mature modern society where individuals enjoy their autonomy and the freedom to live together with their equals as citizens. A traditional society employs monarchy as a principle of social power – in the state, in the family, in all hierarchies of societal interactions. When modern liberal and conservative traditional societies live in parallel with selective and limited relationships among them, their diversity is not a prerequisite for clashes or conflicts. That was the case throughout the 19th and the most of 20th century. Even when modernization took place in many traditional societies – for example, after decolonization – diverse strategies of modernizing societies provided instruments for selective development

towards the modern world. Transitional–developmental political regimes combined economic modernization with tolerance, if not support, for traditional societies, preserving their social hierarchies and traditional value systems.

Globalization has changed the relationship between liberal modernity and conservative traditionalism. The universal popular culture of “hedonistic individualism” originated from the West – mostly from America, yet the global economy, IT revolutions, and expanding technologies of more and more dynamic communications contributed to its mass proliferation around the world. Liberal pop culture proved particularly attractive to the younger generations throughout the world, thereby endangering classical traditional social hierarchies and value systems. Growing anger and repudiation on behalf of traditional societies were the response to liberal pop culture and its effects in everyday life, in social interactions, and on traditional political systems. Western style globalization received different forms and levels of acceptance and resistance throughout the non-Western world. As a product of the West, globalization was based on three basic pillars of modern liberal order: market competition in the economy, citizens’ equality in public life, and politics and individualism as a dominant culture. Successful globalization in East Asia has transformed those three pillars. Competition was accepted in the form of a collectivist hierarchical coordination of corporate life. Citizens’ equality was interpreted as a powerful nation state – authoritarian or liberal democratic – empowered to intervene in markets and society on a larger scale than presumed by classical liberalism. And dominant culture remained hierarchical and collectivist.

In the Islamic world, globalization has been cautiously accepted in three different formats. Certain strategies of modernization – of secular regimes in the Middle East, Malaysia, and West Asia – tried to partly embrace modernization of culture together with technological and economic transformation while preserving tough authoritarian regimes of political rule. Most of those regimes have faced a growing religious-fundamentalist and conservative backlash in the rejection of their policies of culture modernization.¹ The “Arab Spring” was the last attempt to impose Islamist political systems upon countries governed for decades by secular dictatorships with a mixed record of modernization. Other conservative regimes in the Islamic world accept globalization as an economic infrastructure of dynamic development – the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, etc. – without providing access to liberal pop culture and

¹ There is an obvious contrast in the photos of secular women in the streets of Tehran, Baghdad, and Kabul in the 1960s and the 1970s compared to women observing the harsh dress codes and rules of behavior in present day Iran, Iraq, or Afghanistan.

individualist lifestyles; they preserve the traditional structure of their conservative social institutions and family hierarchies. Last but not least, there are Islamist political regimes blocking most economic and social manifestations of globalization and utilizing only certain technological artifacts of global development – the Taliban in Afghanistan, ISIS territorial enclaves, etc. In the 1990s, Taliban authorities even banned TV programs and CD music for religious fundamentalist reasons.

Liberal democracy is often perceived as an integral part of the globalization process for at least two reasons. First, the “End of History” concept connects successful the wave of expanding democratic governance to both economic global development and globalizing liberal pop-culture. Second, traditional conservatism views liberal democracy as an ultimate instrument of disseminating not only global corporate power, but also the liberal and post-liberal values of cultural and communal permissivism. The case of some countries in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe is an appropriate illustration of a growing suspicion towards an international system of liberal democracy as a tool of undermining national community and its cultural backgrounds. That is the case of revived national populism. Countries of Eastern Europe have been among the most enthusiastic supporters of liberal democracy as a globalizing system. The emancipation from Soviet colonialism took place through powerful national democratic revolutions – “velvet revolutions” – aimed at a deserved return to the European mainstream after half a century of hostile communist rule. The reintegration of liberal democratic rule into united Europe has been both a dream of and a goal to achieve for Eastern European nations after 1989. Membership in NATO and the EU has been claimed firmly as institutional guarantees for the irreversibility of democratic emancipation.

When reintegration was completed, Eastern Europeans started to comprehend that the Europe of their dreams was left back in the movies and the TV magazines of the Iron Curtain age, when life behind the Wall was viewed as a fairy tale coming from “another planet.” Europe of the 21st century has proved post-national, open to mass immigration, multicultural, and embracing a whole new agenda of post-liberal values, transforming traditional concepts of sex and gender, of family and of national culture and unity. This remarkable transformation of European culture and identity had taken place in the decades of Soviet colonization of Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20th century. The contemporary European West proved strange and alien to the Europeans of the East. They had just achieved their national emancipation from Soviet rule, and many nations of Eastern Europe had created their own independent nation

states for the first time after long centuries of imperial rule – Russian, Habsburg, Ottoman, or German. After the collapse of communism, Eastern European nations had just entered the zenith of their Westphalian national dream. The insistence of Brussels institutions that the East to comply with post liberal values and agendas of multiculturalism, intense immigration, and enforced diversity was irritating for a growing number of Eastern Europeans. The economic hardships of post-communism, social polarization, and failed expectations for large groups of Eastern societies have brought disappointment and populist sentiments, which is reflected on the political scene. Liberal globalization was viewed as a savior from poverty and isolation after 1989. Two decades later, it was transformed into an image of a threat directed against national independence and the cultural identity of Eastern Europeans. The European East entered into the age of an expanding national populism, fueled by disappointment and by hybrid war propaganda, focused against liberal democracy and the integration of the global West. One of the key political operators of anti-liberal populist politics – the Hungarian strong man Victor Orbán – has named the problem: “We disagree with liberal democracy,” he said. “We need illiberal democracy.” He did not specify what he meant by “illiberal democracy.”

The negative identification of liberal democracy with the general project of globalization has revived dictatorial temptations of insurgent traditionalism. Under the reign of Vladimir Putin, Russia has departed from the claim of being a democratic country, giving way to harsher and harsher versions of neo-imperial authoritarianism and open dictatorship. China disappointed all expectations for political reform following its spectacular success of economic development within the system of globalization. The theory of unavoidable twinning between market development and political democratization has proven obsolete – at least in the case of China. The strong man of Beijing – president Xi Jinping – canceled the rule of a maximum of two presidential mandates and restored the system of unlimited personal governance with a “strong hand” at the top. A shift towards “mild” authoritarianism was visible in Indian politics, where conservative PM N. Modi was making a smooth turn to a more conservative traditionalist course of government. In the 1990s, the expansion of liberal democracy as a system of national government was paralleled by the expansion of liberal democracy as an international system of hegemony of the liberal West. One of the key instruments to allow such a twinning between national and international systems of liberal democracy was neo-liberal globalization. The exhaustion of the globalization wave – with the crisis of 2008–2010 in particular – stimulated rising demands for a “multi-polar world,” initiated more specifically by the expanding autocracies in Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran. The weakening of Western

hegemony in shaping the international system of “Liberal consensus” allowed for the restoration of a system of global geopolitical competition, leading to the formation of two rival coalitions in international politics.

Both globalization and the international system of “liberal consensus” originated from the economic leadership, the political hegemony, and the “soft power” of the liberal pop-culture of the West. The revival of traditional culture and conservative anti-liberalism was aimed at reducing the effects of globalist strategies perceived as expansionist strategies of the West. The narrative “the West against the rest” has always been a comfortable simplification to explain the deepening clash between global neo-liberalism and the alliance of traditional conservatism, national populism, and revived religious fundamentalism. It is true that the initial stages of developing anti-globalist traditional conservatism have happened beyond the realms of the West. Yet at a certain point we’ve seen a powerful boomerang effect of anti-globalism returning back to the cradle of neo-liberal globalization and of the liberal democratic system – to Western Europe and the US. In fact, talking about “anti-globalism,” we need to dig deeper into this metaphor of dynamic societal transformation that affects the realities of all present societies – both in the West and in the East, the South and the North... Globalization polarized societies in the distribution of wealth, but also created polar divisions in all other aspects of life. Having started as a process of economic and technological transformation, globalization turned to be a universal process of deep social change, embracing all main aspects of life and society. The communications revolution has shortened the distance between people and cultures and has deepened the division lines between groups with different cultures and life styles.²

The economic aspects of global social change polarization reached the West in the last decades of 20th century, but the political effects of those divisions appeared on the surface several decades later. American industries moved many major production sites from North America to the East, contributing significantly to the development of the Chinese industrial revolution (and that of other countries of the East). Old industrial areas in the US were subjected to de-industrialization and turned into the “Rust Belt,” with significant negative effects upon employment and regional development. Sizable communities of blue collar workers left their political allegiances to the US Democratic party for its shift into the role of a

² If the cartoons of prophet Mohammed in Danish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* were published in early 19th century, they would have reached a small number of readers in Copenhagen. In the early 20th century, the entire Islamic world was informed about the publication, and mass-scale protests turned this local event into an international crisis.

main globalization agent in American politics and joined political movements of conservative populism – in particular, the MAGA movement of President Donald Trump. Rapid social change of the global era has also caused cultural polarization and bitter culture wars in North America, as well as in other parts of the West, including Europe. Leftwing cultural radicalism – multiculturalism, the second sexual revolution, and their effects on immigration, racial, and interethnic relations – has entered into a deepening conflict with all basic conservative value systems and cultural orientations, producing furious political struggle. In politics, culture clashes have burned out the center ground of democratic political discourse and given way to antagonizing visions of politics and of democratic governance in particular.

Liberal democracy flourished in the second half of the 20th century in most political systems of the West because of the system of a flexible political consensus on key societal issues among all mainstream political parties and movements. Mixed economies, welfare states, inclusive models of culture diversity integration, constructivist relationships among democratic countries in the field of international relations – those are only the key assets of political consensus, reigning in Western systems of government. The guarantees for pluralism and polyarchy of economic interest, of political ideologies and of the key strategies of governance have resulted in an “open society” where dialogue and understanding reigned over political conflict and radicalism. Consensus was based on affluence, and social polarization was avoided through the instruments of welfare redistribution, serving as a stimulus of national economic development. Those were the key prerequisites of a functioning liberal democracy as a powerful mechanism of inclusion in society. Globalization started with a political ideology – and a political strategy for the revival of the “free market.” In order to enforce the true internationalization of economy, the walls of the national welfare state had to be removed. Neo-liberalism (a primary product of the neoconservative revolution of the late 1970s) developed as a market fundamentalist ideology, serving two purposes. First, neo-liberalism had to delegitimize governmental intervention into the national economy and to open national borders to international free market operations. (Markets had to replace government regulations in order to restore “the ethics of capitalism.”³) Secondly, neo-liberalism had to affirm the market monopoly as a model of societal reproduction against any claims of regulative institutionalization of the globalization process.

³ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 1976

Affirming neo-liberalism as a hegemonic orthodoxy of economic life under globalization sharply reduced open political competition on economic and welfare issues. Conservatives and liberals, social democrats and libertarians had to develop their own ideological versions of worshipping the universal hegemony of the “free market.” Step by step, limitations on political pluralism were extended beyond the issues of economy and welfare to the problems of nationality, communal life, and culture. The left wing of the globalization ideology, multiculturalism, obtained a specific monopoly as an expression of “the liberal democratic view” of the world. Equality of cultures, diversity as the highest ranking value, intense immigration from the Third to the Western world, an extended perception of human rights as rights to choose everything – culture, gender etc. – and as the right to freely change your choices in time... This more or less radical expression of endorsing social change was not simply introduced as the dominant value system of liberal democratic governments, but was installed as the exhaustive definition of the liberal democratic mindset. All positions of disapproval of multicultural post-liberalism have been defined as “populist” or “retrograde,” and therefore undemocratic. Concepts of “political correctness” and “cancel culture” depict the rigid limits between the “democratic–progressive” mindset and “conservative–retrograde” values and beliefs as boundaries between democratic and non-democratic political spectrums. The response to this hegemonic position of leftwing post-liberalism has emerged as anti-systemic movements of the populist right, aiming at the restoration of “traditional values and lifestyles” as well as at guarding national identity from intrusive the diversity-worshipping globalist culture.

The clash of those two polarized political cultures – globalist and traditionalist – in the US took the classical shape of division between the urban progressive liberalism of the East and West coast, on the one hand, and the deep countryside of the Midwest and the South of the country on other other. Protestant fundamentalism was a key nucleus of the conservative coalition shaping up, but many other sources of traditionalist mindset and value systems were added in time. The emergence of Donald Trump’s MAGA movement proved a mature phase of this nationalist-conservative movement against the effects of globalization, both economic and cultural. At the level of MAGA emergence it was already easy to detect the clash of US elites shaping up. The progressive liberal union around the Democratic party was headed by globalist elites in leading sectors of corporate global high-tech, based on American soil, yet benefiting from the borderless global economy of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The conservative political union was structured by national-American corporate elites, mostly from

traditional business and traditional energy companies claiming urgent repair of US national economics, of the physical and institutional infrastructure, neglected for decades by “treacherous” global elites.⁴ The split and polarization of both political camps have been powerfully amplified by the culture wars that intensified in America in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the latest racial riots, and the radicalization of leftwing claims of re-writing American history and inter-communal relations.

The political polarization of Europe contains much less economic substance, considering that European economic policies have never reached the levels of market fundamentalism practiced on the other side of the Atlantic and in many other parts of the globalizing world. The EU has always had mechanisms of mitigating economic hardships and supporting the economic development of less affluent nations and regions. Yet issues of national sovereignty, immigration, and culture clashes have created levels of political polarization comparable to those in the US. European integration was initially mostly meant to heal the wounds of both world wars – nightmares that took place on European soil in the first half of the 20th century. United Europe proved a spectacular success both in securing lasting peace on the Old Continent and in crafting a remarkable model of modernization and development which pulled Southern and Eastern Europe from poverty between 1980s and 2020s. The founding fathers of European integration were Christian Democrats, but the political spectrum of united Europe developed as centered to the left. In the first place, European integration was initiated as a tool to overcome the aggressive nationalism of the earlier 20th century. The European Community developed as a post-national community – initially in terms of economic cooperation, and later on, as the EU – as a holistic project of political, (multi-) cultural, and inter-communal integration, aimed at representing a sample, a prototype of the future “global village” of diversity and cooperation. This particular background of developing European integration has created an emphasis towards internationalist, liberal-progressive, constructivist policies of inclusion and tolerance of all types of diversity. Even the center-right politicians of united Europe – CDU-CSU, British Conservatives, and French Republicans had to identify with this hegemonic value system and meta-strategy of liberal-internationalist politics of the EU. Everything to the right of them was and still is considered anti-systemic populism, endangering European unity. Rightwing policies

⁴ It is only lately that some vanguard technological tycoons such as Elon Musk have joined the conservative union around Donald Trump in his last presidential campaign.

of nationalism, traditionalism (a suspicious source of nationalism), and Euro-skepticism have been pushed to the shadow corners of the national political systems of the member states.

The 1990s and early 21st century proved the zenith of EU success as a new type of community of nations. The international system of “liberal consensus,” headed by the “benign hegemony” of Washington, provided the EU with the exceptional role of a key agent to integrate former Soviet block countries into the European mainstream and to provide a role model for a community of democracy and modern development to a vast range of nations – even beyond the geographical and cultural boundaries of the Old Continent. In the mid 1990s, Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash answered the question, “Where does Europe end?” “Europe does not end,” he replied, “it just withers away...” Withering away, Europe radiates its example of a role model for all nations that attempt to depart from their grim legacy of imperial dependence, totalitarian dictatorship, poverty, and inter-communal conflict. Yet in the late 2010s the geopolitical forecasts reported more and more often about dark grey clouds of a rising storm. The hegemony of the Western “liberal consensus” of the 1990s started to disintegrate with 9/11 and the Iraq war that followed. America’s sinking into the bloodshed of the Iraqi civil war opened vast spaces for the geopolitical expansion of Russia, China, and Iran, with their leaders taking advantage of the US being trapped in a war in the Middle East. The international system restructured into a process of revived geopolitical rivalry between the West and the coalition of autocracies that shaped up between Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran. The war in Georgia (2008), the Kremlin’s aggression against Ukraine in the Crimea and Donbas region (2014), the full-blown aggressive war of Putin against Kiev (2022), and the Hamas assault on Israel from Gaza (2023) proved consecutive episodes of a new “Iron Curtain” raised by authoritarian forces against the West. The re-structuring of the world system into camps of geopolitical rivalry impaired Europe’s ability to successfully exercise its “soft power” appeal as a role model of international cooperation and integration. The immigrant crisis of 2015 proved an example of Europe’s helplessness to cope with external strategies of hostility. European security emerged as a pending issue in an environment of revived geopolitical hostilities and threats. Internally, the political environment in the EU countries moved towards polarization and a rivalry heating up between the mainstream political parties and policies, on the one hand, and the growing wave of populist nationalism and anti-systemic challenges to the status quo on the other.

All major tendencies described above had considerable implications for the liberal democratic system of government in inflicting significant pressures and division lines upon its

functioning in diverse societal environments. Dynamic social change and its effects of polarization have caused the shrinking of the center ground of more or less consensual politics. In the last 200 years, liberal democracy has functioned as a system of integration and inclusion of diverse values, visions, and group interests, and it has always been put to crisis in environments of radical clashing between antagonized communities. Today, we're witnessing a consecutive cycle of political polarization that endangers the functioning of the liberal democratic system. For the mainstream political parties and movements, the wave of anti-systemic populism is a primary danger for democracy, with its calls to revise the value system and ideological visions that serve as a nucleus of liberal democratic governance. For the national populists, nativist conservatives, and traditionalists, the very system of liberal democracy is an obstacle to the implementation of their political aims – therefore, they might well agree with Hungarian strong man Victor Orbán's call to replace it with "illiberal democracy." If we take a look at the historical path of liberal democracy from the early modern age until the present, we could rightfully observe that liberal democratic governance is not the cause of political crisis – it may well prove the only reasonable and justifiable cure of the current political polarization and conflict.

For the populists on the right, liberal democracy is now an inadequate system of government just because it is an expression of liberal ideology and – in particular – an expression of its most radical wing, global neo-liberalism and post-liberal leftist multiculturalism. The status quo establishment strengthens those populist perceptions by interpreting its political positions as the only liberal democratic identity. We could doubt it, though... Liberal democracy is not about liberals. It is not meant to serve a particular party or political ideology – liberalism included. Liberal democracy originated in the early modern age based on certain values and visions of classical liberalism. Representative democracy was based on the will of free citizens to alienate part of their natural rights in order to allow for the construction of a limited and responsible state system to govern a conscious citizens' community called "a nation." This is what liberal democracy owes to the liberal ideology of the classical modern age. The historical journey of liberal democracy, however, does not end at the springs of classical liberalism – it just departs from them. The most valuable part of the liberal democratic identity is its nature to tolerate diversity and include diverse visions and interests into a process of searching for points of intersection, a middle ground, a center space where different positions and claims meet and could reach a certain consensus – a least common denominator of joint agreement and common action. Liberal democracy has survived

numerous vicissitudes of history and established itself as the most successful system of government throughout the modern era. Liberal democracy was constituted in agrarian societies of North-West Europe in the early modern age and survived more than two centuries of industrial and post-industrial capitalism, stretching all through history to the global age and its current crisis. What are the secrets of this success?

The first major achievement of liberal democracy as an instrument of political inclusion has been the integration of political conservatism into the system of representative government. Bourgeois revolutions represented the most dramatic political conflicts between the “*ancienne regime*” traditional hierarchies and the movements of liberal modernity. Streams of blood have sealed the fundamental enmity between the two sides of the barricade. Yet the late 18th and early 19th centuries have seen the first steps of integrating nobility and conservatism into flexible formats of representative government. That was the first major victory of liberal democracy as a system of communal and political inclusion through representation, compromise, and institutionalized peaceful competition. The 19th century saw the development of industrial capitalism, with two major protagonists emerging on the scene – the industrial bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Karl Marx was right to define their relationship as a merciless class struggle which would bring the capitalist system to an end. Yet later stages of industrial development have brought opportunities to partially resolve some of those burning issues of class struggle. Newly created trade unions agreed to negotiate and reach significant improvements in the status of their members – industrial proletarians. Entrepreneurs were also willing to compromise in order to reach an institutionalized compromise of “class cooperation” in favor of industry’s long term interest. The next step was labor movements reaching the level of political representation that created the opportunity for expanded suffrage and – finally – universal suffrage in early 20th century. The class struggle of industrial capitalism that endangered society with a new round of bloody revolutions has been transformed into a system of polycentric corporate capitalism, governed through sophisticated institutional systems of government mediation among the major communal interests of industrial society.

At all different levels of social change, liberal democracy faced the challenges of including and integrating hostile anti-systemic interests into the political mainstream of representative governance. Extended representation was the key instrument of inclusion. The agreement to pursue one’s claims and interests – even the most radical ones – through peaceful institutional means and actions was almost the only significant precondition for including a former hostile interest and a community into the system. When integration/inclusion proved

successful, the system of liberal democracy continued its functioning at a new level of sophistication, stability, and the widest possible representation in favor of the broadest possible range of communal interests in society. When integration/inclusion failed, modern industrial societies were shaken up by deep crises, very often bringing dramatic, or even tragic, consequences. Fascism, Nazism, and Bolshevism are the names of the most tragic catastrophes following historical failures of liberal democracy. Here we come to the dilemmas of our present day, where a new wave of anti-systemic political movements tries to dismantle the present day system of liberal democracy and to replace it with “illiberal democracy” – which very likely may prove an ordinary system of authoritarian rule. The crisis of social change and polarization in our global age is questioning again the capacity of liberal democracy and liberal democrats to cope with the decay of major social consensuses of our time.

The political spectrum of Europe and the entire West was shaping up in the context of the development of global capitalism, as we attempted to explain above. Accepting the realities of the global market and the ideological framework of multiculturalism was a prerequisite to becoming part of the liberal democratic mainstream after the 1980s. Even more – such acceptance was logical, provided the success of the “liberal consensus” political and international system of Western hegemony. The “liberal consensus” proved the most stimulating environment for the model of European integration to develop and flourish into the reality of the European Union. As a model for peaceful partnership and development that enjoys almost universal appeal, the EU has no rivals and competitors to the present day. Questioning the capacity and the perspectives of the EU was possible only from the positions of more or less peripheral or marginal populist movements at the national level. The transformation of the international system from “liberal consensus” into an environment of revived geopolitical rivalry, the return of authoritarian challenges, and war have dramatically changed the positioning of Europe and the West and have caused deepening crises in the structure of Western political systems – European politics included. Immigration, cultural diversity, environmental (green) self-awareness, post national definitions, and practices of interdependence and multilateral cooperation – all those landmarks of “liberal consensus” success have been transformed into deepening problems, causing division and conflict in Western societies, European ones in particular. Long-term peace has caused significant disarmament – which turned out to be helplessness vis-à-vis the growing dangers of military aggression from the Kremlin or elsewhere.

We do not need to exhaustively enlist all aspects of the general problem of how the long-term assets of peaceful and successful development in the age of “liberal consensus” have been transformed into present liabilities for the societies and the political systems of the West, and of Europe in particular. New division lines in society created new division lines in political representation. Nativist–traditionalist national populist political movements are no longer on the periphery of our political process. They are here to stay as parts of the mainstream. The question that is important today is not only how to challenge them, or how to fight them, but how to learn to live with them. Those movements are part of the evolving public values and interests that are here to stay. We would do better to recognize their legitimacy than to simply define certain “red lines” between the liberal democratic mainstream and the new populist challengers of the status quo. Here we meet the experience, the historical development, of liberal democracy throughout the modern age. Our basic task of today is to reunite our societies on the basis of a serious attempt to integrate populist challengers and proponents of “illiberal democracy” into a transformed definition of a liberal democratic mainstream.

We all realize that the task of integrating populism into the democratic mainstream will be a difficult and traumatic experience for the both sides of the equation. Some representatives of the populist alternative and the present post-liberal mainstream would like to not not talk to each other – they consider their positions mutually exclusive. Certain populist movements are plainly dominated by authoritarian political culture and political platforms. Certain representatives of the mainstream status quo are also rigidly firm in refusing to compromise with “nationalists,” with different types of “phobes” on the populist side. Both the liberal mainstream and the populist alternative will have to make a compromise. They will have to talk to each other. Some of them will accept the need for a dialogue. Others will remain firm in rejecting the other side. On many different occasions, in many important aspects of policy, divisions have become rivalries reaching full intolerance. This is how division lines will appear not only between the mainstream and the populist periphery but also within the mainstream and within the periphery. Take a look at the last mandate of the European parliament. We see unprecedented level of representation by populist nationalist movements in the EP. They are organized into four different party families, showing the diversity of positions and interests within the populist policy spectrum. Some of them are ready to negotiate and compromise with some of the mainstream political families of the EP. Italian PM Georgia Meloni is a good example of such a positive flexibility. Others, such as AfD and the Bulgarian “Vazrazhdane,” preserve their hostility and preferences for an authoritarian, “Putinist” type of identification

and political behavior in national and the European representative institutions. On the mainstream side we also see the first attempts at nuanced political behavior towards the populist spectrum – the EPP makes flexible steps in cooperation with the circle around Ms. Meloni, causing growing criticisms among the firm leftwing part of the EP.

The best chance to master dynamic social change in our age is to preserve the legacy and the efficiency of our liberal democratic political system. The only opportunity to do that is to integrate the different parties and groups currently moving apart into a flexible process of political representation and dialogue. A relationship always changes the relating parties. There is a real chance that authoritarian platforms will in the future jeopardize the success of such democratic integration into a transformed system of liberal democracy. Freedom always has better chances – provided it is well organized and determined to win the future.