

How can liberal democracies succeed in authoritarian times?

By Atle Midttun and Nina Witoszek

In a chillingly clairvoyant book *False Dawn*, published first in 1998, the British political historian, John Gray, argued that the 21st century would be the age of nationalism, despotic populism, economic chaos, and growing international anarchy. Neoliberal globalization and 'The Washington consensus' - which had ignored differences between cultures and political regimes as of marginal importance - would be undermined by the *culturally embedded* forms of capitalism which waged war against each other.

Gray's critical analysis points to a paradox. With the adoption of global capitalism by communist, autocratic, and theocratic states, we witnessed anything but an emulation of Western styles and values. On the contrary, liberal democracies have been confronted with tyrannical regimes' emphasis on their own cultural legacies, their economic power, and their growing confidence in their ability to challenge the liberal world.

Against these unexpected illiberal modes of capitalism in the North, South, East and West, three questions arise. 1) Are western societies able to stand up to seemingly productive and increasingly muscular autocracies, some of them with imperial outreach and resources? 2) Are illiberal democracies immune to what Gray's calls "hallucinatory World (dis)order"? (Hallucinatory, because it mixes truth and fiction as much as it uses sophisticated forms of social control and surveillance); 3) How can Western democracies effectively redesign their transactions with illiberal and dictatorial leaders without losing, or betraying, their own unique cultural heritage? Are they equipped to defend liberal values such as human rights, personal autonomy self-realization, tolerance, equality and fairness?

An update of Gray's analysis needs both nuancing and a dose of upgrading. In 2023, it may seem that, having embraced capitalism, emerging economies with authoritarian heavyweights like China and Russia - now clustered in the E7 group - have dethroned the industrial and liberal G7 as the global economic powerhouse. The E7 are rapidly building financial institutions and trading systems like the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Chinese Belt and Road initiative: a challenge to the Western dominated IMF and the World Bank. Leaders of developing countries in Latin America and Africa now have a choice when it comes to finance and trade: they can either join the authoritarians, or become part of the liberal world, or navigate between the two, like India and Turkey. The authoritarian embrace of market capitalism appears to work. But the liberal credo that capitalist growth must go hand in hand with democratic freedom has proven to be wishful thinking.

Equally flawed is the previous faith in the necessary democratizing effect of the digital media. While the liberal world has supported a free, rule-based cyberspace with limited state intervention, authoritarian China has used the internet to pursue a massive state control of

its citizens. Russia (or Belarus for that matter) requires all internet operators to install special equipment using deep packet inspection (DPI) technology. With such information control, and a massive propaganda apparatus to incite imperial nationalism, authoritarian and theocratic regimes use new and old media to retain oppressive control. The asymmetrical approach to cyberspace management between authoritarian and democratic regimes resembles a game of poker where the democratic party plays with open cards, while autocracies and theocracies hold all the cards closely to their chest – or simply cheat in the game.

The general openness and transparency which characterizes Western information processing and political deliberations is both a virtue and a point of vulnerability. This vulnerability has been captured by the Oxford philosopher Leszek Kolakowski in an essay "The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society" (1990). Kolakowski talks about liberal democracy's built-in self-destructive impulse. The cultivation of dialogue and compromise often leads to a 'henhouse effect' ie. bickering and prolonged negotiations, especially among the EU members. An openness and tolerance of the Other, which allows for plurality of perspectives and interests, may also invite extremist excesses. The advocacy of unrestrained diversity is commendable, but it also destroys national cohesiveness and a sense of belonging. "Whether, and in what sense, the open society becomes its own enemy," says Kolakowski, "is a disturbing conundrum that lies behind much of today's political confusion". In today's context much of this confusion springs from home-grown populist or imported informational manipulation.

How can liberal democracies, and more specifically European countries, create antibodies against authoritarian threats?

At the economic level, a sensible strategic move would be to prioritize full open trade, mainly with democratic partners, and in this way consolidate free market dynamics within the liberal world. The second move, already in progress, is to balance trade relations with the authoritarians, or - bluntly put - applying a tit-for-tat rule when there are mutual interests in pursuing trade relations. To take but one example: The Chinese have demanded partnership, and technology transfer, with Chinese state-controlled companies as a precondition for commercial engagement in China. This policy should be reciprocated by the European Union: European state companies should dictate the conditions for China's rules of trade with the West

Thirdly, Europe and the liberal world need to consolidate control of strategic resources, technologies, and industrial capabilities to prevent becoming a victim of another possible Russian energy blockade.

Fourthly, it is high time for the EU and the liberal West to redefine corporate responsibility. The liberal world cannot continue unilaterally demanding respect for human and

environmental rights from its companies without imposing similar demands on imports from authoritarian regimes.

If one thinks it is going too far, well, the Chinese and the Russians have gone much too far - and got away with it.

At the political and sociocultural level, Europe (and the liberal world) would need to consolidate its resolve to maintain and defend its liberal ethos. With respect to media outlets, the monitoring and deconstruction of authoritarian fake news has already begun. Stepping up this process is vital to note not become prey to rigged elections, or political surveillance and populist manipulation steered from the outside. More importantly, challenging various pro-authoritarian narratives about 'legitimate spheres of influence' and 'historical rights' etc. as stepping-stones for a potential invasion, involves the creation of counter-narratives of *European, legitimate spheres of interest*. Such spheres are based on international law and the rights of nations to territorial integrity and self-determination.

Another important part of the European democracy project must be to secure free and fair elections that are shielded against authoritarian intrusion such as cyberattacks. The West cannot afford any Russian trolls' friendly help in continuing to push Trump over the electoral threshold. Nor can Europe tolerate further Russian meddling with European right-wing and left-wing politics.

Finally, the buildup of Europe's democratic ethos is fundamentally an educational project. A liberal 'priming' in European education is vital as a basis for fostering the continent's democratic cohesion and the will to defend its liberal values. Without such priming, social mobilization, including the will to engage in a territorial defense - will be a mere wishful thinking.

The European economy and polity remain a major force to be reckoned with - but only if the "henhouse syndrome" - bickering, petty quarrels and sectarianism - are overcome and the continent stands as one. Europe is not an empire - but it needs the scale and format of a powerful alliance that both matches and transcends imperial constraints.

Time and again, historical experience shows that liberal values - such as freedom, fairness and right to self-determination - are not just Eurocentric; they are sought after all over the world. In the face of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, European liberal civilization is at stake. If it is to survive and succeed, it needs the will to defend its patrimony and add decisive security measures to face authoritarian threats. NATO as a proverbial guardian angel is not enough to tackle modern hybrid forms of warfare. It is time for Europe to rise to the task of being the guardian of its own identity and borders. But also, it is time for European countries to get their own house in order. They still hold their soft power - as an antidote to the doubtful joys of the authoritarian world. In order to avoid Gray's grim scenario, forging a strong, culturally

confident liberal West – with less inequality and more cooperative ethos – is the only way to prevent the return to the “New Middle Ages.”