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‘Germany’s far right is currently the most radical of all’

Former President of the EU Parliament Martin Schulz on defending democracy, the importance of honest communication and dealing with the far right

The *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung’s* recently published *Mitte* (‘centre’) survey contains some good news: a large majority of Germans still support democracy, with 76 per cent explicitly rejecting far-right beliefs. But is that reason enough for us to be positive about the future?

> Yes and no. While 76 per cent is a solid foundation, it also means that almost a quarter of Germans are, at the very least, indifferent in this regard — and that’s too big a number. Which is why the three-quarters of society who are pro-democracy need to win over the remainder. There is, however, an inherent risk here. That majority consists of a wide range of political tendencies, from neoliberal to socialist. If the only thing they can agree on is a limited anti-far-right consensus, then it risks becoming too amorphous. We need to learn how to fight for democracy together, while still clearly expressing our different core beliefs and political ideas. If we’re able to do that, then our democracy will be resilient.

Among the survey’s less positive findings is that there is a growing mistrust in democracy and its institutions. How do you explain this phenomenon, and what part is played by the federal government and the parties ostensibly representing the democratic centre ground?

> Even for professional politicians, following the news day in, day out has become hard to bear — but for ordinary citizens who aren’t constantly thinking about politics, the news has become positively overwhelming. A lot of people used to say, ‘It doesn’t make any difference to me what they do in Berlin.’ That’s changed. Today, people think, ‘This is going to affect me.’ At the same time, they feel they can’t influence it. And their next thought is, ‘That’s what politicians are for, but they aren’t managing to change things

either.' This perception gives rise to an anxiety-driven mistrust that democratic parties in the Western world have so far been unable to address, thereby leaving space for extremists and their radical anti-democratic agenda.

Two things are key: firstly, we have to communicate in a different way, to openly say, 'Yes, the situation is unstable, and there are no quick fixes, but we're working on it.' You can only build trust if you describe reality as it is, rather than trying to sugar-coat it. Secondly, there are many everyday pressures that the state definitely can help to ease, but at the moment, a lot of people feel that it isn't doing so. Steffen Mau summed it up well when he said that if the trains are always late, people's faith in democracy suffers. If there's no functioning local public transport but you've got three kids and lack the means to employ four chauffeurs, democracy suffers. If schools are run-down, there's not enough care, and nurseries can't get staff — all that negatively impacts democracy because it undermines people's faith in the state's ability to deliver for its citizens. Many people believe that politicians no longer know what it's like to do a normal job while abiding by the rules and bringing up kids. Restoring faith in democracy requires politicians to openly admit that change requires time — and to make it clear that they take people's everyday problems seriously.

The *Mitte* survey also reveals that polarisation is increasing. As a society, how should we respond to this — and above all, how can we prevent people from increasingly turning away from the centre ground, towards right-wing populism, for instance?

Those who opportunistically trade in fear don't want dialogue. Their opinions are apodictic, and anyone with a dissenting view is an enemy. There's no room for compromise. This is fatal for democratic culture. Dialogue is essential to democracy. This is where the much-discussed civil society comes into play. Neither the federal nor regional parliaments can solve this problem on their own; every democratic civil society actor has to play its part — the unions, the churches, NGOs, local and municipal authorities and mayors. All these are inherently suited to providing platforms for dialogue, as are universities, schools, sports clubs, nursing homes, youth centres and cultural heritage groups. In all parts of the public domain and wherever people come together, there needs to be a renewed effort to create additional spaces for dialogue.

Based on my experience in local politics, this can be most effectively achieved at a local level. This is where people live their everyday lives and where it's easiest to build trust — you bump into them at the

baker's, or in the park, you can speak to them directly and learn what their immediate concerns are. That's why better financial support for local and municipal councils is crucial — both in order to quickly fix minor problems such as a lack of pedestrian crossings and to alleviate everyday risks. It would allow spaces for dialogue to be created at a local level; these would help to combat polarisation.

In recent weeks, conversations about the 'firewall' towards the far right have created a major stir, especially within the Christian democratic and conservative CDU. How should progressives approach this debate?

Our view is clear: we're opponents of the far right — and they see us as their opponent. The AfD is an anti-progressive, anti-diversity, anti-social-democratic and anti-green party. To them, we are the enemy. The CDU, on the other hand, is not just their enemy but also their quarry. If the AfD were a bird of prey, you'd say it is circling its quarry. It wants to divide and weaken the CDU and its sister party, the CSU. That's why the 'firewall' debate is primarily a debate for the CDU and CSU. We as progressives don't need to discuss it — we are the firewall.

I would advise CDU and CSU to take seriously the survey published by their own *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*. It shows that whenever moderate conservatives have made a deal with far-right parties, they have been annihilated by them. They can never be as radical as the extremists want. We need to remind all the 'sorcerer's apprentices' in the CDU/CSU's parliamentary group that once the genie's out of the bottle, you can't put it back. Look at France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Finland — whenever moderates have collaborated with the far right, their support has collapsed.

The counterargument is that working with the far right would force them to dial things down and thus help to take the shine off their radical policies — as in Sweden, where the conservative minority government is effectively propped up by the far-right Sweden Democrats.

Looking at Sweden, the moderates may be in government, but they're pretty much losing voters by the day — both to the Social Democrats and to the Sweden Democrats. The situation is similar in Finland. In Spain, the conservative Partido Popular is currently trying to forge a middle way. It's very much aiming to win over VOX voters, but while attempting to differentiate itself more clearly from Spain's far-right party. It remains to be seen how that will play out. But from experience, we can say that parties such as the Sweden Democrats, the

True Finns and VOX in Spain don't want to dial things down. Also, compared with its international equivalents, Germany's far right is currently the most radical of all. That's why the firewall debate is different in Germany. Here, it shouldn't be viewed in terms of potential strategic options, but first and foremost in terms of defending and strengthening democratic principles.

This interview was conducted by Philipp Kauppert.



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Martin Schulz is President of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. He is a former member of the German *Bundestag* and the European Parliament, which he chaired as President from 2012 to 2017. He was Federal Chairman of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) from 2017 to 2018.