IPS

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'They are strong because we as liberals are weak'

Jan Zielonka on whether the outbreak of the coronavirus could help illiberal, populist and nationalist forces

Your latest book "Counter Revolution, Liberal Europe in Retreat" refers to the period after 1989 until now. What has happened in this timeframe and why are you so critical about these developments?

After the fall of the Berlin Wall we had a great chance to have a totally different Europe. It looked like the future will be bright. However, even before this pandemic, we realised that things go wrong to the extent that people who always voted for either centre-left or centre-right liberal politicians started to change their mind and support people who are openly illiberal. When I talk about liberals, I mean all centre-left, centre-right politicians who believe in human rights, constitutional democracy, European integration and multilateral diplomacy.

This has happened in countries I know very well, like Britain (where I worked) with the Brexit vote, like Poland where I grew up, or like Italy where I speak from. In all these countries politicians who basically pride themselves of being illiberal are doing very well. Even in Germany this has happened, maybe not to the same extent, but then Germany is a state which is doing better than others in Europe for various reasons, so you would expect it much less than in countries torn by the economic crisis. Of course, after this pandemic, things will be even more complicated.

According to you, the post 1989 generation of politicians and intellectuals have betrayed the liberal idea. In which way?

In various ways. These were not populists in power when inequalities reached levels unknown for many decades in Europe. These were not populists in power when we conducted international policies against certain liberal principles. If you look at our record of migration policies, what have we done? We basically cut development aid to North Africa and the Middle East. We basically abandoned

democrats there when there was the Arab Spring and sided with a lot of dictators before the Arab Spring, and I'm afraid also after, in the hope that they will keep those migrants away from Mediterranean shores. We bombed some of those countries without a UN mandate and then abandoned them to local warlords, and then we were surprised that in 2015 people flee those countries. These were not populists in power over all these years.

When we started to lose elections, we as liberals, immediately cried foul and blamed populist politicians and xenophobic voters. However, many voters just didn't trust policies which are totally ineffective, immoral, and in particular betray the proclaimed liberal standards. We've made a lot of mistakes. We were saying one thing and doing something else, and we have paid a very high price for this. These are all facts, but we somehow do not recognise them. If you watch German television, people don't talk in those terms.

So are these counterrevolutionaries right in some regard?

Well, in some things they are right. If they say that we presided over the greatest inequalities, that we basically conducted totally unviable migratory policies, and that we basically created an oligarchic democracy in which we can choose government but we can't change the policies, well, they are to a large extent right.

The problem is that they don't have any viable solutions how to sort out those problems. They haven't sorted out the inequalities. Even in Poland or in Hungary, they introduced some social policies, but they haven't abolished neoliberal economics. It's basically still neoliberalism but with a national flag.

When Matteo Salvini was minister of interior in Italy, what migration policies did he have? Zero. It was all public relations policy. He didn't create any sensible migratory policies, he only was blocking refugee ships coming to Italian shores, even acting against the law in some cases. All this electoral change has happened not because those populists are so strong. I don't see any genius leaders with a vision among them. They are strong because we as liberals are weak.

Those populists were always there. Jean-Marie Le Pen, was elected to parliament in the 50s already. I remember Pim Fortuyn in Holland and Jörg Haider in Austria. We always had those people, but they were never winning elections to the degree they are now.

You heavily criticise neoliberalism in the book. To what extent does our current economic system prepare the ground for counterrevolutionaries to be successful?

The neoliberal system was based on privatisation and deregulation. The private sector had priority over the public sector. For years there was no money for any public hospital or public school. But when the financial crisis came, who was asked to cover the cost of this totally irresponsible and sometimes illegal behaviour of the financial sector? The ordinary taxpayer. This was particularly painful for Greek citizens although the crisis came from New York not from Athens. Yes, the government in Athens has made some wrong things, and the original Eurozone arrangement was faulty, but you can hardly blame ordinary Greeks for the global financial crisis.

You have exactly the same story today with the pandemic. Where do we go for help? To public hospitals. Our life is dependent on these underpaid, very often zero contract hour nurses, and not private consultants.

You are also highly critical of the European Union. In your words, "the EU cannot be consolidated, it should be reinvented." Why are you so pessimistic about maintaining the EU in its current form?

The major problem is that the EU is totally controlled by nation states and we have seen how selfishly they responded to the financial crisis and now again. What have the nation states done immediately when the virus started to kill people *en masse*? They just raised the national borders, they started to do things on their own, and they were unable to agree on anything, except that they should renew the deal with Erdogan on the Greek border and basically gave a tacit agreement on treating those desperate people with an iron fist.

At the EU decision table are only states. Other public actors, like large cities or regions who actually do make enormous contributions to our efforts to fight this pandemic don't have a voice. This idea that the states are running the show boosts the national egoism because those politicians are responsible for their own electorates, so they just run away from any collective effort.

If nation states have too much power, what do you think about proposals of strengthening the European parliament?

I have nothing against the European parliament. But, I frankly believe that the way to strengthen European integration is to divide powers and decentralise authority, because I don't believe that the European Union should resemble a state. The reason why we have this crisis in European integration is that for all these years when we integrated, we were creating common rules and recently some mechanism of policing those rules, but we never transferred much of the government to the centre because the very moment we would transfer this governance to

the centre, the states will become local governments. This is why we have a European currency without a common financial government because the states don't want to delegate those powers.

But not only the states, this would have to be national banks, this would have to be constitutional courts. They would have to delegate power to a European state. I don't think they will do this, and I even don't think it would be a good thing to have a European state. But I believe that we should abolish the monopoly of states and have integration more according to the functional logic rather than territorial. In other words, we should give more power and resources to these 40 plus functional agencies we have in Europe which are spread all over the continent and reduce the centre in Brussels.

One of the steps to break the monopoly of states may be the creation of a second chamber of European parliament with cities, with regions, with maybe NGOs and representatives of entrepreneurs. I prefer that they have a seat and voice in the European parliament rather than lobby in Brussels secretly. And why should Estonia or Cyprus have a seat at the decision-making table and Berlin, Hamburg or Paris not? These cities have a more meaningful economy and diplomacy, e.g. in fields like migratory policies, than small states.

Does the current situation with the corona crisis help or hurt counterrevolutionary forces?

Well, it's too early to say. Those illiberal politicians who are governing try to grab more powers. You can see it in Hungary and in Poland. In Poland, they don't have many cases of Covid-19, but they are handling all of this pretty poorly, both on the health front and on the economic front. So being in power might be rather a mixed blessing.

At the same time in countries where liberals are in power, like in Italy or Spain, where it is not going well, especially if there is no solidarity from Northern European countries, people like Salvini or the Vox party in Spain are only waiting to take things over.

If it is true that nationalism is going to be the answer of a post-pandemic world, then it will help those illiberal forces because they are against European integration. But I, frankly, do not see this as the only possible scenario. I don't believe that the nation state is coming out of this as the only viable actor. I see a lot of local actors reasserting themselves for good or for bad. In Italy you have now a big conflict between government in Rome and the various regional leaders, and those leaders also fight with each other at various territorial levels.

At the same time, I also believe that to do most of the things those governments want to do, they need Europe for it. Because without

Europe, particularly these poorer countries, how are they going to make true what they promise?

What do liberals have to do to beat counterrevolutionary forces in the long haul?

I think there are accelerations of history now because of the pandemic. People now realise that they don't want just political rhetoric on refugees, they want their government to save lives and then to save jobs. This is a chance for liberals to bounce back, but just managing this crisis is not enough, they would have to change the way of doing politics. We need an economy which works not only for the few but for the many, which doesn't work only for the pensioners, but also for the young. It means that you make a green economy because the young have much more stake in the environment.

Then you have to make also different migratory policies because to think that making a deal with one of the dictators in North Africa or the Middle East will solve the problem is just for the birds. You need to have a policy which is more liberal and more credible. In international affairs too, you have to stop selling arms to everybody at last, and to have real cooperation which is not just between states but more on a societal level.

It will not be easy. In global terms it will be even more complicated. I don't see easy global solutions with people like Trump, Bolsonaro, Xi, Putin, Mohammed bin Salman, and Modi in power, and they are all at the table of the G20. I don't have much hope in this company there, but in Europe I still have hope.

It's not enough that liberals as politicians win this or the other election. They need to change policies. There is a chance with all the emergencies now, but there is also a danger that those populists will just exploit emergency powers for their own advantage. We will live in a permanent state of emergency in some of those countries because we didn't reach an agreement between creditors and debtors, because we haven't done anything to make sure that those people from North Africa and the Middle East are not fleeing, and we haven't basically made our economy fairer.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



Jan Zielonka
Oxford

Jan Zielonka is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the Universities of Venice and Oxford. His latest book is *The Lost Future and How to Reclaim It* (Yale University Press, 2023).