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# Is the world getting out of control?

## The EU won't regain its sex appeal through patronising speeches and paternalistic funds. The best way to promote democracy is to act by example

In a recent interview for the *New Statesman*, a former head of Israel's internal-security service, Ami Ayalon, disarmingly confessed: 'We have to assume we shall have a war with Hezbollah not because we want it or they want it but because we are losing control.' And this feeling of helplessness is not confined to Lebanon or the Israel-Palestine conflict.

We did not want to have a war with Russia, but we lost any grip over the predatory behaviour of its president, Vladimir Putin. We know that uncontrolled markets may crash again, causing enormous social damage, but we lack the instruments that could bring global markets into line. We comprehend the horrendous implications of climate change, but we repeatedly break environmental pledges under pressure from firms, farmers and fans of diesel cars. We lament the rapid if not wild development of artificial intelligence, but we elect to wait and see what happens. We expect another health alert caused by new viruses or antibiotic-resistant pathogens, but the erosion of public health services proceeds unabated.

The feeling of helplessness requires social-psychological rather than political therapy. Doomsayers do not believe in a better future, no matter what. Yet even famous pessimists such as Thomas Hobbes believed that the government could and should make a difference: only in a 'state of nature' without a Leviathan, was life 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short', a war of 'all against all'. Sadly, today only a few believe governments can secure the future.

***The financial and migratory crises are contained but their roots are not addressed satisfactorily, so they may***

I used to be considered a naïve optimist in the 1980s, when arguing that workers' strikes in Poland or human chains lighting candles in the Baltic states could bring down the Soviet Union and tear down the Berlin wall. I still believe rich and educated Europe can overcome the 'polycrisis' of today. We were able to prevent

*return with a vengeance.*

Russia taking over the entirety of Ukraine, the 2009-10 European debt crisis was contained, new medicines are constantly being invented and the recent EU AI Act offers citizens some protection from new, intrusive technologies.

That said, I cannot deny that the European Green Deal is being rolled back in front of our eyes with devasting implications, especially in the medium to long term. The arms race has accelerated and confidence-building measures are being dismantled, which increases the prospect of war by default or design. The financial and migratory crises are contained but their roots are not addressed satisfactorily, so they may return with a vengeance.

Moreover, all these individual challenges are feeding into each other. We can argue about the gravity of this or that threat and question the prophets proclaiming the apocalypse. But it is hard to deny an accumulation of fundamental problems which will not go away without adequate responses. How have we got into this mess?

## Misguiding assumptions

Incompetent if not malicious politicians are usually blamed for the sorry state of our governance. The problem is that we are blaming different politicians, depending on our ideological stances. Those who vote for liberals from the centre-right-and-left parties blame populists for nationalism if not xenophobia, 'post-truth' if not open lies and authoritarian tendencies dismantling democracy. Those who vote for populists blame liberals for ignoring ordinary people and transferring ever more powers to markets and non-majoritarian institutions such as the European Commission, central banks or constitutional courts. They also accuse liberals of opening borders to 'illegal' migrants, 'subsidised' Chinese products and 'alien' cultures.

This emotionally laden polarisation makes it difficult to design policies enjoying overwhelming popular support, without which it is difficult to tackle the congeries of challenges in a firm, coherent, durable and cross-partisan manner. Unfortunately, problems persist even when populists and liberals join hands, which suggests that polarisation is only one of the many factors explaining our weak grip over this jumbled environment.

For instance, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine brought together such strange political bedfellows as the social-democratic German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and the far-right Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, among the European opposition. And yet this joint approach

failed to arrest Russia's aggression, with detrimental implications not only for Ukraine but also for the European Union as such.

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I am not proposing that we should have sent European troops to Ukraine or, alternatively, should push Ukraine under the bus. Rather, well-intentioned policies were based on several misguided assumptions. For example, we believed that Ukraine could defend itself without attacking mainland Russia. Providing Ukraine offensive rather than merely defensive weapons was rightly considered escalatory, but this implied that the costs to Russia of waging war were bearable. These costs proved also limited due to the modest effectiveness of our sanctions — economic sanctions represent a plausible alternative to direct military engagement but no predator can be contained by them alone.

It was also an illusion to believe that European societies could cope with the costs of war without significant public assistance. The influx of refugees or even grain from Ukraine affected many social groups states neglected. Money invested in Ukraine also comes from others' pockets and little has been done to divide these costs evenly. Angry citizens have staged a rebellion which puts governments and their policies under pressure.

Our hope that the world would help Europe solve its problem on the eastern border was misguided too. In Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia there proved to be little sympathy for rich and selfish Europe. Even in North America — despite the tardy backing from the United States Congress last week for aid — there is a widespread belief that Ukraine is essentially a European problem. And it is difficult to impress Putin without a European army.

## The flaws of democracy

Our apparent helplessness to secure Europe's eastern border suggests that it is hard to regain control over crucial matters simply by providing united leadership guided by noble aims. Perhaps democracy is no longer able to fulfil citizens' expectations in the 'hybrid' environment of today. Perhaps we need to accept that China rather than Europe will run the 21st century.

Yet while autocracies such as China or Russia can do a lot of damage, my experience of living on the 'wrong side of the iron curtain' suggests they are not so powerful as they may seem. The most important source of power is knowledge, which requires freedom to think and discuss. Besides, as Prince Talleyrand, Napoleon's foreign minister, famously observed, 'You can do many things with bayonets except sit on them.' History shows that people demand freedom sooner or later — and when they do, autocracies tremble.

However, power is a relative, not absolute, concept. Autocracies may well be strong when democracies are weak. The flaws of democracy preoccupy me most because they erode our key advantage over autocracies. What can we do to improve democratic governance?

***Elections may well change governments but citizens do not sense that their vote counts.***

First, we need to overcome the polarisation that prevents any meaningful compromises leading to new social contracts. A government that is not underpinned by a social contract is weak and arbitrary. Democratic governance cannot be just *for* the people: it must also be *by* the people. Elections may well change governments but citizens do not sense that their vote counts.

This is why most of Europe's citizens are not satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. If we believe that integrated Europe should help us regain some control over this unruly environment, then we also need a genuine social contract at the European level. The current renaissance of nationalism and sovereigntism does not though bode well.

Secondly, we need to enlarge the spatial and temporal horizons of democracy. Democratic governance is still confined to the borders of nation-states, defending the short-term interests of present-day voters. No wonder democracy stumbles in an increasingly connected world running at high speed.

***If we can show that our democracy is able to generate social contracts leading to peace and prosperity, people in other parts of the world will be tempted to follow suit.***

How can a national government regulate multinational firms effectively? Successful migration policy requires long-term engagement of multiple actors in distant places addressing such roots of migration as war or poverty. Climate change will affect mostly future generations which do not have a vote in any elections and therefore are missing from political radars. The internet has transformed

the notion of time and space, yet democracy has hardly noticed — we should do something about that.

Thirdly, we must intensify, not abandon, our efforts to promote democracy abroad. This is because in the 'flat world' of today we need genuine partners in enhancing peace, social justice and sustainable development. After disastrous versions of democracy promotion in Afghanistan and Iraq some advocate a return *la géopolitique de grand-papa*, based on strategic alliances even with autocrats, while others prefer to focus on the back yard. Yet an inward-looking EU obsessed with its own problems will not recruit many supporters, while courting autocrats is not just immoral but stupid: have we forgotten the tragic history of our 'strategic alliances' with Reza Pahlavi (Iran), Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia) or Muammar Gaddafi (Libya)?

The best way to promote democracy is to act by example. If we can show that our democracy is able to generate social contracts leading to peace and prosperity, people in other parts of the world will be tempted to follow suit. Europe will not regain its sex appeal by making patronising speeches while offering paternalistic funds.

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**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).