

## How liberal democracy can be saved



*Across the world, liberal democracy is rumoured to be under threat from the rise of autocratic regimes and populist politics. But if this is the case, how can it be saved? [Takis S. Pappas](#) argues that the root cause of the current crisis is today's democratic leaders lack assertiveness in defending the principles that underpin liberal democracy: to reaffirm and defend those principles will require steadfast leadership.*

Democracy is undergoing a deep crisis. A number of nominal democracies have slid towards autocracy, most notably Russia, Turkey and Venezuela. Maverick politicians, like Hungary's Viktor Orbán or Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, disdain liberal institutional norms and are actively seeking to overthrow them. In the United States, Donald Trump's presidency is playing havoc with erstwhile sacrosanct traditions and rules of state administration.

Meanwhile, as populism eats into democracy's liberal institutions and nativism unsettles multicultural societies, monocratic regimes, like that in China, are emerging as attractive alternatives to pluralist democracy. No wonder, given this situation, that many believe democracy has not only [lost](#) its historic momentum, but may also be entering into a spiral of [recession](#).



**Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin during a press conference in September 2018, Credit: [kremlin.ru](#)**

What can be done about this situation? Current recommendations, valuable as they may be, tend to be more academic than practical. They are often built on little more than wishful thinking, rather than realistic assessments of their viability. Take, for instance, a recent [study](#) by Yascha Mounk, a Harvard lecturer, who argues that, to save democracy, we must unite citizens around a common conception of their nation, give them hope for their economic future, and make them more resistant to fake news. Well, yes, but the real question remains: who is going to carry out this set of daunting tasks and how can they do so in practice?

Similarly, can traditional political norms still make democracy work by themselves? This is the position of two other Harvard professors, who [suggest](#) that it should be sufficient to reinstitute political forbearance – which they describe as the art of tolerance, patient self-control, and restraint – for democracy to be able to survive in good shape. If only it were that easy!

Perhaps, it might be more sensible to publicly engage the foes of liberal democracy with proper arguments and evidence, as Jan Werner-Müller, a Princeton professor, has [urged](#). This idea is interesting but impractical. Look at the recent rumpus caused by *The Economist* inviting Steve Bannon, a former White House strategist and outspoken populist, to one of its conferences. Following a strong public reaction to giving Bannon a platform, with some even [dubbing](#) the event the “normalisation of bigotry”, other invitees rescinded their invitations and *The Economist* was forced to issue an apologetic [statement](#).

When policy prescriptions are impractical, the yearning for liberal renewal is in vain, and given the potential pitfalls of publicly engaging with democracy’s enemies, all we are left with is a sense of fatalism. You can find plenty of it, for instance, in a recent book-length [essay](#) by Ivan Krastev, one of Europe’s most brilliant thinkers. Written with a feeling of impending doom, the book’s central point is that, as liberal democracy is now crumbling, its greatest achievements, including the European Union, are likely to disintegrate without anyone being able to prevent the destruction.

Is there still hope? Ironically, perhaps, a solution lurks in the closing paragraphs of Krastev’s essay, where he recounts a dimly-remembered [incident](#) involving a failed military coup in early post-Franco Spain. On 23 February 1981, just as Spain was engulfed in a vicious cycle of political instability and rising unemployment, Colonel Antonio Tejero, heading a band of about two hundred soldiers, burst into the Spanish parliament, which at that moment was in session to elect a new prime minister, and began firing shots.

The coup could have succeeded had three members of Congress not found the courage to stand in their seats to defend democracy even with bullets flying around them. Those were outgoing prime minister Adolfo Suarez, a former Francoist cadre who had helped consolidate the new Spanish democracy, former army general Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado, a conservative democrat, and Santiago Carrillo, the head of the recently legalised Spanish Communist Party. Before Tejero’s coup, as Krastev correctly remarks, “no one would have predicted that these three would face down the putschists and thereby ensure the survival of democracy in Spain. But it happened.”

Krastev, however, rather than pushing ahead with explaining *why* that happened, chooses instead, and perhaps a bit awkwardly, to end his book. The explanation is a simple and straightforward one. After dictator Franco’s death in 1975, the Spaniards undertook the task of building a modern liberal democratic regime enshrined in a new constitutional charter. At the time, all major political forces, including the Communists, consented to the proposed draft constitution, which, after its public approval by referendum in 1978, became – and still is – Spain’s supreme law. And so, when Tejero and his armed soldiers rushed into the parliament intent on abolishing democracy, our three men, their ideological and political differences notwithstanding, knew perfectly well what to do: defend the democratic constitution until the coup failed.

And here comes the moral of the story. While there is no doubt that today’s dismal state of democracy has many causes, the most important of them is that democratic leaders are not assertive enough in defending the principles that underpin it. To reaffirm and defend those principles requires steadfast leadership. Where such leadership exists, liberal democracy stands a good chance of being saved. Look, for instance, at Angela Merkel’s principled [decision](#) in the summer of 2015 for an open-door refugee policy, the cases of [Emmanuel Macron](#) and [Albert Rivera](#), who reversed the populist tides in France and Spain respectively, or of the late [John McCain](#), one of the very few Republicans who was vocal in his opposition to President Trump and his illiberal style of politics, and you get the idea. A dash of hope, too.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



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