Jean Monnet Project: Liberal Democracy in Action (LiDiA)

The nature of, and challenges to, liberal democracy

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Introduction

As a matter of current and future global importance, this paper examines the nature of, and contemporary challenges to, liberal democracy as part of the Jean Monnet Project 'Liberal Democracy in Action'.

The issues examined in this paper are presented within their broad geostrategic, political, and social environments together with their historic context and the relevant characteristics and values of democracy. Many different factors as well as state and non-state actors can influence variables of liberal democracy and may change at any time as part of an open interrelated system. Consequently, the strategic challenges to liberal democracy and the rules-based order identified in this paper such as the changing balance of global power, rising illiberalism in the form of increasing authoritarianism, populism, nationalism, sovereign border challenges, irregular population migration and climate change are examined in a holistic way.

Accordingly, the paper sets out a contextual framework to consider ways in which liberal democracy can be enhanced through domestic, foreign and security policies, and in international fora and through associated conventions to enrich future democracies, global stability, security and wellbeing.

The paper presents some contemporary challenges to liberal democracy and the rules-based international order in Europe and globally and argues that these challenges need to be considered as part of a holistic integrated global system rather than a fragmented one where issues are considered in isolation of other critical factors. These issues are examined as part of an inter-linked complex open system - one that continuously interacts with its environment and is influenced by a range of variable. In this way this paper the contributes to the debate about those challenges and their effect on the future of liberal democracy.

Development of Democracy

Understanding of current and future challenges is enhanced through the recognition of the iterative nature of liberal democracy and that its development as part of a systemic continuum that has progressed over time. Indeed, the concept has faced challenges since its inception, leading to changes and development over the centuries while retaining many of the fundamental defining principles and values. Such iterations and developments contribute to the conceptual credentials of democracy.

Since the times of the early Athenians and Romans, and the subsequent development of different forms of democracy in later centuries, democracy has meant different things to different people across history. In the 18th century, direct democracy as espoused in ancient Athens gave way to representative democracy and it became a global idea influencing people around the world. The French revolution of 1789, for example, resulted in democratic constitutions in some other European countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, and some German States (Johnston, 2008). Across the Atlantic, the American revolution against the British ruling regime in 1765 resulted in independence from the British Crown and led to the establishment of the United States of America with a form of modern constitutional liberal democracy.

Since the end of the Cold War until recently, liberal democracy has been almost unchallenged as the hegemonic political idea of our age. The changing nature of democracy reflects the differences among democratic nations in their historical and cultural experiences, ethnic and religious compositions, geographic location, and demographic and geographic size. There is no single universally accepted form of liberal democracy, and this in itself is a demonstration of democracy in action.

Countries have embraced different constitutional forms including participatory, pluralistic, elite, and presidential. Democratic sovereign states also operate as a unitary or federal system of governance. The unitary system is based on a central government that commonly delegates authority to subnational units and channels policy decisions to them for implementation. Although a majority of nation states are unitary systems, they vary greatly. For example, the UK centralises power in practice though not in constitutional principle. Such unitary systems contrast distinctly with federal systems in which authority is constitutionally divided between the central government and governments of relatively autonomous subnational entities.

Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Canada, the US and Australia are examples of democratic countries that have adopted federal systems. Some democratic models incorporate distinctive features. In Italy, for example, the Parliament includes representation given to Italian citizens permanently living abroad. These citizens are divided into four distinct foreign constituencies each of which elect twelve deputies and six senators of the total 630 Deputies and the 315 Senators in the Italian parliament. Those members of Parliament were elected for the first time in April 2006, and they have the same rights as members elected in Italy (Lagurre, 2013).

While the spread of liberal democracy in its different forms can be argued to reflect the differences of and within nation states, it can also, in part, be attributed to the failure of non-democratic systems. Most such systems suffered political, economic, diplomatic, and military failures that greatly lessened their appeal. For example, the roles, power, and effectiveness of monarchies diminished over the centuries, and to some extent their declining power was most evident following the first and second World Wars of the twentieth century.

Influences on forms of liberal democracy

Liberal democracy has continued to be influenced by different factors in the 21st century. The international order has been fractured by economic instability, prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic commonly referred to as the Covid-19 pandemic, increased political and economic global influence by China, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These influencing events have occurred against a global background of the effects of changing climate on vulnerable regions, increased food and water insecurity, moves away from multilateralism by nation states towards increasing isolationism and protectionism, and great emphasis on sovereignty, nationalism and self-reliance. In many instances, these influencing factors have exacerbated the same effects.

Forms of the liberal democratic constitutional model are being challenged around the globe. Many nation states are facing existential external and internal challenges to the integrity of the foundations and fundamental values of liberal democracy. They are increasingly under pressure from illiberal and authoritarian regimes, as well as from internal political extremism that seek to undermine the principles and values of democracy. Some have noted a decline in adherence to social norms and mutual respect that underpin the very principles and values of

liberal democracy (Molineaux, 2021). Whiles such influencing factors often occur at the local level they can have wider implications and impact as demonstrated in the following sub-sections.

Influences on elections and rights

A critical aspect of free and open elections as part of the liberal democratic process is that the outcome of elections is accepted by voters and representatives. This is underpinned by the understanding that at the next election, voters will again have the opportunity to select those to represent them. This fundamental aspect of free and open elections was challenged and undermined during the US 2020 election by then President Donald Trump who repeatedly claimed the election outcome which saw him defeated, was flawed. The claim was repeatedly proved to be false including in various US courts. Nonetheless, his actions incited violence and fragmented civil society and fractured liberal democracy in the US. Linked to free and open elections is the concept of political freedom as a defining characteristic and central concept of democracy (Arndt, 1993). It is also referred to as political autonomy or political agency. Political freedom is closely connected with the concepts of civil liberties and human rights, which in democratic societies are usually afforded legal protection by the state. This is often in stark contrast to authoritarian leaders and regimes that show little respect for individuals, and human rights and civil liberties.

Contemporary models of democracy emphasise the protection of rights and freedoms of individuals. Part of realising those rights and freedoms are the constraints placed on leaders and on the extent to which the will of the majority can be exercised against the rights of minorities. Groups of like-minded states have been influential in shaping and achieving reform and consistent rules for the development of more effective human rights and freedoms. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is one such example. The Covenant is a multilateral treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1966 and it was a major milestone in progressing human rights to reflect contemporary norms. The Covenant and subsequent human rights instruments covering group rights (indigenous peoples, minorities, persons with disabilities), are equally essential for democracy as they ensure an equitable distribution of wealth, equality, and equity in respect of access to civil and political rights.

Influences on rules base order

While the international rules-based order remains a work in progress, it is also high on the contemporary global political agenda in an era of aggressive protectionist policies and trade wars. In March 2018 the Atlantic Council, in coordination with the Centre for International Governance Innovation, launched an initiative to revitalise, adapt, and defend a rules-based order that aimed to articulate the fundamental values of a rules-based order, namely, democracy, free and open markets, alliances, and the rule of law. This was followed by the G20 meeting in late 2018 in Buenos Aires where leaders adopted a joint Communiqué reaffirming their commitment to a rules-based international order as an important symbolic statement. The fifth point in the thirty-one points of the G20 Communiqué states, 'We renew our commitment to work together to improve a rules-based international order that is capable of effectively responding to a rapidly changing world' (G20, 2018).

Since the establishment of the global rules-based order, states have generally complied with the rules although there have been instances where states have not been willing to abide by established conventions, or rulings from international courts that are not in their interests. Great powers are more militarily and economically able to accept the international costs of transgressing global rules than are middle and small powers.

In 2016, China rejected the decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration regarding China's maritime claims in the South China Sea of sovereignty over waters within a 'nine-dash line' that appears on official Chinese maps (Parker, 2020). The Republic of the Philippines had instituted arbitral proceedings against the People's Republic of China under Annex VII to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in January 2013 (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

In a further example noted by Rowswell, 'the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was clearly illegal – the Administration of George W. Bush did not secure a mandate from the Security Council for the use of force – but the U.S. invaded anyway' (Rowswell, 2018). When such non-compliances occur, it creates instability within an institutional rules-based international order by diminishing the capacity of international organisations to influence effectively the behaviours of states. In turn, this reduces the effectiveness for the resolution of disputes without the use of force, and to provide a framework for states to interact with each other in a fair and just manner. Nonetheless, the system of the rules-based international order is an

important part of liberal democratic models and it continues to evolve although it often seems fragile. The above examples demonstrate the way different factors and global actors influence key principles and values of liberal democracy.

Challenges and Causes

This section addresses some of the unprecedented political, economic, social, and cultural challenges to liberal democracy, indeed it has been argued that, 'democracy and pluralism are under assault' (Repucci, 2020).

Set against the historical and social context of the development of liberal democracy and the changing geopolitical environment of the 21st century, the interrelationship of the challenges to liberal democracy is highlighted as part of a complex system. As noted by the United Nations High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in 2004, 'Today, more than ever before, a threat to one is a threat to all. The mutual vulnerability of weak and strong has never been clearer' (UN, 2004).

An interrelated complex systems approach, which uses a world society perspective as its basic frame of reference, helps position challenges to liberal democracy in their broader context and their relationship with other issues such as societal discontent. This broad analytical contextual approach highlights the cross-sectoral links of issues that are often part of a continuum. For example, the availability of, and access to, food is affected by population growth, demographic trends, economic development, government policies, income levels, health, nutrition, gender, environmental degradation, natural disasters, refugees, migration, disease, concentrated resource ownership and conflict. In turn, affected communities and populations often resort to unregulated migration resulting in pressure on receiving communities and nation states. Such pressures can subsequently lead to discontent that is subsequently exploited by populist leaders who frame refugees and migrants as a threat to civil society, its norms, and way of life.

From a strategic perspective, there are several pressing global challenges facing liberal democracies. These include the changing balance of global power, redistribution of wealth associated with globalisation, political extremism and illiberalism, the role of non-state actors, and sovereign border challenges such as irregular population migration. The critical

issue of climate change transcends all sovereign borders and forms of governance, and is associated with each of the preceding challenges.

Examination of these strategic issues below provides an indication of the way forms and levels of discontent manifest at a community level within civil societies. As shown in the following sub-sections many of these issues are interrelated and not isolated from other political, cultural, economic, or climatic events and circumstances.

Changing balance of global power

A frequently noted concept in international relations is the balance of power. The concept implies that a sustainable balance of power must be established among states to maintain peace and order within the international system (Oğuzlu, 2020). The liberal international order is based on the three-fold principle of sovereignty, non-intervention, and a comprehensive prohibition on the use of force to alter borders. Yet these same principles are being challenges through a change in the balance of global power.

The power balance has been subject to a range of variables and different actors across the globe as a result of different influences. Accordingly, it has changed since the uni-polar system at the end of the Cold War to become multi-polar again as evidenced by the rise of the European Union, China, Russia, and India. A growing number of other countries are also asserting an independent and increasingly influential role in regional areas and global affairs. As the world proceeds towards the middle of the 21st century, there is a greater recognition of the importance of maintaining stable relationships across the globe yet, while some alliances may enable the resilience of liberal democracy, others may inhibit those same democratic values in the future. States traditionally pursue a policy of balance of power either by increasing their own power, or by adding to their own power that of other states. This can occur when embarking upon a policy of alliances where the complexity of the situation is further compounded by other factors.

As noted earlier, non-traditional influences such as actions by non-state actors, the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, climate change, fuel supply and demand, and irregular population migration also affect the balance of global power as well as more traditional political, economic and financial factors. A Pew Research survey across fourteen counties in 2020 found that a median of 59% across the surveyed countries believed the impact of the

COVID-19 outbreak could have been mitigated in their country with more international cooperation (Poushter, 2020).

Actions by state actors

The rules based international order places importance on the role of the international institutions and associated rules, judgements, conventions, and protocols but if these are not respected, then the very concept of liberal democracy is severely challenges and undermined not only by the actions of state actors but also by state-sponsored non-state actors.

2016 was a noteworthy year of influences affecting the balance of global power through the way power transferred from the traditional key actor in world politics - the state - to influential individuals and non-state actors. This was demonstrated through different political events, for example the decision (known as Brexit) by the UK to leave the EU after 47 years membership, Trump's presidential success in the US, and the establishment of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Each such example directly and indirectly affected the global balance of power.

The earlier 2008 war between Georgia, Russia and the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and again by the 2014 Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine are further 21st century examples of where the rules-based order was tested. William Hague, the UK Foreign Secretary at the time, condemned the annexation and stated, 'This action is a potentially grave threat to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Ukraine. We condemn any act of aggression against Ukraine' (Hague, 2014). The United States and the European Union threatened and later enacted some sanctions against Russia for its role in the crisis and urged Russia to withdraw, but without success. In March 2014, the G7 members cancelled the planned G8 summit that was to be held in June of that year in the Russian city of Sochi and suspended Russia's membership with the group. Such non-neighbourly actions by Russia towards Ukraine increased tensions among other former Soviet states such as the Baltic nations of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia each of which maintain enclaves of ethnic Russians, albeit minority groups. This resulted in the strengthened presence of NATO forces in those NATO-member states. It was reported that in 2015 two Russian parliamentary deputies asked Moscow's prosecutor-general to review the legality of all three Baltic

countries' independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 (O'Grady, 2015) which raised the spectre of possible action by Russia to reassert its former authority over those states.

But while there was some international condemnation in 2014, it proved to be insufficient deterrence for the authoritarian Russian leader, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. The subsequent decision by Russia in February 2022 to 'recognise the independence' of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, known as the Donbas in Ukraine, and the subsequent invasion of all Ukraine, is a corollary to the actions by Pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014 which followed Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. At the time, the Pro-Russian separatists took over government buildings and proclaimed the regions as independent 'people's republics'. But until the action by Russia in 2022, no country had recognised their claimed independence. Such actions and political uncertainty not only affect relationships between the sovereign states directly involved, but also impact other states and civil societies as people seek secure places to live.

Within the first 24-hours of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine it was reported that over 100,000 people fled the country. The exceptional circumstances of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine saw Hungary and Poland allow large numbers of people fleeing the conflict to enter, together with other nearby countries such as Moldova, Slovakia and Romania that reacted immediately to accept Ukrainians escaping the conflict. Within days of the invasion, EU nations took the unprecedented decision of unanimously agreeing to accept Ukrainian refugees for 3 years without going through the asylum process (Ardrey, 2021). The Russian invasion resulted in Finland and Sweden acting to change their neutral status and both countries have sought membership of NATO. The invasion has also significantly altered the global balance of power, impacted the supply energy supply chains into Europe, and negatively affected global food supply and security.

Political extremism and non state actors

Turning once more to the ancient Greeks, the idea of the political extreme is founded in the ancient Greek ethics of moderation. In every action situation there is a midpoint (mesotes) between the too-great (hyperbole) and the too-little (elleipsis), a distinction between the excessive and the moderate (Backes 2004). The concept and practice of political extremism has continued through the centuries and the broad umbrella of political extremism includes illiberalism, authoritarianism, populism, and nationalism. All of which are not new

to contemporary nation states. Over time, the term 'extremism' has been used as a stigma word. Koselleck refers to this as an 'asymmetric' language situation where the labelled cannot accept the label they are addressed with, distance themselves from the borrowed term, doubt the load bearing capacity of its content, stress its denunciatory character and deny its scientific causality (Koselleck, 1979). For example, the French Front National (FN) of the national populist Jean-Marie Le Pen brought a lawsuit against its classification by the press as 'extreme right', since the expression suggests violence (Canu, 1997).

The role of non-state actors was catapulted into the public mind in the 21st century with the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, also called 9/11 attacks. The series of airline hijackings and suicide attacks were committed by 19 militants associated with the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda against targets in the United States. This was the deadliest terrorist attacks on American soil in the nation's history. In addition to the thousands killed and injured in the immediate aftermath, many other thousands of people throughout the US and elsewhere were stranded as US airspace was closed for commercial aviation for two day, and global stock markets were affected with record losses. Following the attacks, countries allied with the US rallied to its support. The French newspaper *Le Monde*'s headline read , 'We are all Americans now' (Colombani, 2001). For the first time in its history, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invoked Article 5, allowing its members to respond collectively in self-defence, and on 7 October 2001 the US and allied military forces launched an attack against Afghanistan which became the longest war of US involvement. In a further corollary, though there was no evidence that Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq had collaborated with al-Qaeda in the 911 attacks, the US prepared for conflict against Iraq in its broadly defined global war against terror.

As shown in the above example, changes to the balance of power have been affected by the increasing influence and role of non-state actors in world politics outside the traditional classification of international intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and transnational or international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Global events since 2001 underscore the influence of non-state actors and individuals and the shifting alliances of states including some in support of actions by non-state actors that seek to undermine liberal democracies, such as Russia's support of separatists in parts of Ukraine.

Populist and illiberal movements

The end of the Cold War brought the triumph of Western liberalism over the alternative communist model. As noted earlier, the concept of liberal democracy spread around the globe yet, today, liberal democracy is under substantial threat. It is threatened from both within and outside civil societies. Several nation states are at risk of a populist tide overwhelming the critical democratic values that are the foundations of Europe and elsewhere today. Illiberal political movements have become empowered, and populist political movements have gained traction. This situation is reflected globally where democracy is at a tipping point and its ability to endure is being threatened, and this potentially bodes ill for the future. Recent decades have seen growing political, economic, and social challenges to liberal democracy and the rules-base international order through the growth of populism on the right and left of politics, rising authoritarianism, and anti-immigrant forces in Europe. This sense of discontent is reflected in the way the political class, populist leaders, and some sectors of the community have sought to frame some social, cultural and security issues.

The confluence of unresolved conflicts, unprecedented numbers of refugees, growing numbers of terrorist groups, and attacks on civilian targets have contributed to the rise of populism, increased protectionism, and nationalist views that have been building across Europe and elsewhere. This has resulted in acts of political extremism in response to the challenges noted earlier that do not recognise sovereign borders such as terroris.

The way authoritarian regimes seek to undermine the principles of liberal democracy have become apparent, but a less obvious trend and challenge has emerged in recent years. That is, the emergence of autocratic regimes that give the impression of democracies and appear in the form of 'dominant party authoritarian regimes'. The capitalist systems in such countries have some of the characteristics of liberal democracies but they use capitalism to further their authoritarian rule. These regimes maintain power through centralised control over information and resources. Political opposition is either forbidden or strongly curtailed and individual freedom is limited by the state (Carney, 2019).

While most such autocratic regimes are located in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, they are also present in Eastern Europe and in the Americas. It can be argued that Turkey, Malaysia, and Venezuela are such examples (Carney, 2019), as is Russia particularly following its aggressive invasion of Ukraine noted earlier. Turkey, once keen to join the EU, has shown

itself to be a repressive regime under Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Following the failed coup against him in July 2016, the regime arrested or suspended more than 110,000 officials, including judges, teachers, police, and civil servants (Gumrukcu and Solaker, 2016).

Collectively populist and illiberal political movements, and rising authoritarianism not only impact public policy but also domestic, foreign and security policies, human rights, and international conventions. In effect they challenge the very characteristics of liberal democracy identified earlier, with ongoing implications for future stability.

Climate Change

Climate change is a defining issue of the 21st century which has severe impacts on livelihoods and societal stability and wellbeing. It also exacerbates pre-existing and deeply embedded inequalities which act to challenge liberal democracies. The United Nations noted that 'since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas. It further noted that, 'Because the Earth is a system, where everything is connected, changes in one area can influence changes in all others' (United Nations 2022). There has been growing attention and pressure to take action to counter the effects of climate change. Calls for action have increased at community and societal levels as well at national and institutional levels. A common theme has been the pressing imperative for action - 'to decisively begin the journey to decarbonise our economy, thereby reducing the risks' posed by climate change' (Climate Commission 2011).

International institutions have responded with positive action to address the challenges of climate change and there is a growing coalition of countries committing to net zero emissions by 2050. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement are three broad categories of action for cutting emissions, adapting to climate impacts, and financing required adjustments.

Yet, while the Paris Agreement attempts to change behaviour through norm-building and consensus, no country is currently on track to reach its commitments under the Paris Agreement (Julien, 2021). The consequences of climate change now include, among others, intense droughts, food and water scarcity, severe fires, rising sea levels, flooding, melting polar ice, catastrophic storms, and declining biodiversity. 2019 was the second warmest year on record and the end of the warmest decade (2010-2019) ever recorded. Carbon dioxide

(CO2) levels and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere rose to new records in 2019 (United Nations 2022a), and democratic nations are responsible for over half of the emissions globally, with 15 democracies amongst the top 20 CO2 emitters (Casas-Zamora, 2021).

Past political and diplomatic resistance to the notion of the environment as a foreign-policy priority issue has been overtaken in most fora by the mounting evidence that climate change is a common denominator of conflict, suffering and insecurity. From 2007 to 2010, Syria experienced the worst drought in its recorded history. The climate change-driven drought forced a mass displacement of people within Syria. That, in turn, contributed to the instability that led to the war and subsequent unprecedented levels of refugees and asylum seekers.

A critical complexity of this global issue is that while the solution requires sustained global action, decisions are taken nationally and at a local societal level. The very nature of global climate change is challenging liberal democratic models. The short-term bias inherent in the terms of office for elected democratic governments often affects democratic decision-making which can lead to policy inconsistency. Indeed the very nature of the policy-making process can be influenced by interests adverse to addressing climate change – coal and oil producers, trucking and road freight companies, for example.

Changing climatic conditions have become a 'threat multiplier' that aggravate stressors such as environmental degradation, population migration, political instability, poverty, and social tensions. Such conditions have been identified by populist leaders to undermine the foundations of democracy and the rules-based order and, such conditions have also enabled terrorist activity and other forms of violence. As such, there is a pressing imperative that climate change be considered in the broader context of its cause, and its subsequent impact. The way in which democratic systems develop and adapt policies to reduce their carbon footprint will influence future global stability. The quality of democracies' responses to the climate crisis will also be key for its future viability as a political system. Dealing with climate change will test the capacities of democracies to confront existential issues for humankind.

Population Migration

The situation for liberal democracies in the 21st century is further compounded by complex trade relationships and dependencies, energy supplies and vulnerabilities,

technologies, non-geographic threats, as well as changing population mix due to regular and irregular migration flows, infectious diseases, and the fragility of nation states. Large numbers of displaced people seek secure and safe places to live driven by conflict, climate change and natural disasters that affect food and water supplies (Parker, 2018). These factors and other influencing variables affect liberal democracy and can be manipulated by populist leaders.

While it is accepted that States have the right to control their borders, this right is qualified by an obligation to assist those outside their borders. In democratic societies, the right of immigration control must also be exercised in ways that are consistent with democratic values (Song, 2018). However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the way those democratic values have been applied has depended on whether they are relevant to people already in a country or to those trying to gain entry. This is a fundamental challenge to the rights and freedoms that form part of the liberal democratic model. Everyone has the right to seek asylum from persecution. It is not illegal for people to flee persecution in their homeland or to cross borders without documents or passports in order to seek asylum (Red Cross, 2020).

States must uphold their commitments and respect fundamental human rights, including the right to life and right to asylum. Yet, the world has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers. In 2019 there were 26 million refugees globally and half of the world's refugees are children. 85% of refugees are being hosted in developing countries (Amnesty, 2019). Every year, around one million people seek asylum (Grandi, 2022) and at the end of 2020 there were 26.4 million refugees worldwide. This was the highest number ever recorded. As noted earlier, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia exacerbated the global refugee situation with nearly 6.6 million people from Ukraine seeking refuge mostly in Europe in the period February to May 2022 (Statista, 2022). The very nature of seeking safe refuge or asylum influences the distribution of wealth and resources, leaving some states severely disadvantaged as they cope with the burden of sudden increased levels of population affecting often fragile infrastructure and resources, as well as social and political structures.

Redistribution of wealth

Generally, the development of market economies and expanding middle classes across the globe contributed to the spread of democracy and underscore the interrelationship of issues affecting the stability of liberal democracy in nation states. But, associated with the changing balance of global power within the complex system of liberal democracy is the redistribution of wealth linked to globalisation which in turn has generated challenges to forms of liberal democracy and the rules-based international order.

Widespread economic prosperity in a nation state greatly increases the chances that democracy will succeed, whereas widespread poverty increases the likelihood that it will fail. Maintaining an open, non-discriminatory world economy is one of the principles on which the liberal democratic world order is based, and it has far wider implications than economic issues. The principles of open market economies and low barriers to entry have served until recently as tools to integrate emerging countries into the Western-led liberal democratic order. Nonetheless, globalisation underscores that changes occur in an interlinked way where risks and threats can no longer be considered in isolation.

Increasingly, assessments about the effectiveness of democracy are related to opinions about the long-term economic future. A 2020 Pew survey across 34 countries, found that respondents who said the economy was doing poorly were more dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy (Wike, 2020). While globalisation has intensified flows of goods, finance, people, and political/cultural interactions across our planet, it has also accentuated inequalities. Access to basic needs such as shelter, land, food and clean water, sustainable livelihoods, technology, and information have become more difficult for many populations. Inequalities in each of these realms increase feelings of alienation and pose challenges to human security, and environmental sustainability, these in turn can affect the global balance of power and, ultimately, the future of the liberal democracies.

Disenchanted Publics

Notwithstanding the characteristics of liberal democracy noted earlier in this paper that have been designed to enhance nation states and individual well-being, today people in many liberal democracies have become disenchanted with the political class. When applying the strategic level challenges referred to earlier at a civil society level, it is evident that among other reasons, discontent is tied to concerns about the economy, individual rights, and the perception that elites are out of touch. A survey of over 30,000 (30, 133) people in

twenty-seven countries in 2018 found that 61% believe elected politicians do not care what ordinary people think. In Europe, the results suggest that dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working was linked to views about the European Union, opinions about whether immigrants were adopting national customs, and attitudes towards populist parties (Wike *et al*, 2019). Between 2018 and 2019, publics grew increasingly dissatisfied with democracy in five of twenty-seven countries surveyed in both years, while dissatisfaction dropped in nine.

The 2020 Pew Survey across 34 countries, showed an increase to 64% in perceptions that politicians did not care about what ordinary people think. Results also showed a median of 52% of people dissatisfied with the way their democracy was functioning, compared with 44% who were satisfied. It is perhaps no real surprise that the survey showed that in Europe discontent is often found among supporters of right-wing populist parties. Specifically, it found that in Sweden, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and France, people with a favourable view of out-of-power right-wing populist parties were more likely to say the democracy is not working well, than people who rate these parties unfavourably. This type of political and civil environment potentially weakens the resilience of democratic governance models and rules-based approach. Yet, it would be too simplistic to blame the performance of particular politicians or political institutions or the economy.

Conclusion

This paper has been written as part of the Jean Monnet 'Liberal Democracy in Action' project. It has set out the historic context and fundamental characteristics of liberal democracy in the contemporary society of the 21st century. The paper has identified some of the influences on aspects of liberal democracy including elections, rights and the rules-based order. It has also identified some of the challenges around the globe to the different forms of liberal democracy together with their causes and influencing factors. Issues such as the changing balance of power and the unprecedented challenges of climate change, the global pandemic known as COVID-19, fuel supply and demand, irregular population demand and increasing insecurity of global food supply have been shown to contribute to be significant challenges to liberal democracies across the globe in the 21st century. The actions by state actors through acts of aggression, abuse of the liberal democratic model for their own agenda,

or in collaboration with non-state actors have exacerbated the vulnerability of democracy and underscore the imperative for action to defend and uphold important principles and values.

In doing so it has highlighted the importance of considering each as part of an interrelated system rather than in isolation because it is a flawed assumption that each challenge is self-contained and unrelated to other factors. As such there is a pressing imperative to consider such issues in a holistic way recognising that many challenges overlap and are inter-related and, therefore, they have implications for more than one nation state and civil society. As shown, when several factors converge, they have a multiplier effect exacerbating discontent and contributing to instability in civil societies and among nation states. In some instances, they could negatively affect the balance of security and societal wellbeing in states that are finely poised leading to liberal democracy being undermined.

The challenges to different principles of liberal democracy have been shown within their geopolitical relevance. The importance of individual principles and values of liberal democracy has been underscored by their vulnerability to challenges if those values and principles are not defended and upheld. The liberal democratic model provides civil societies and nation states with the opportunity to determine the values and principles it prizes and to determine how it will use domestic, foreign and other policies to uphold those same prized principles and values. The way in which nation states and the broader global community through international institutions respond, will determine the future resilience of this form of governance and political system.

In setting out these issues this paper acts as a foundational document for further discourse that will contribute to strengthening the priority components of models of liberal democracy shaped by the people it serves in the future.

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