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Peace, War, Democracy: The Value of Different Perspectives

Some Reflections from the VII "Supranational Democracy Dialogue"

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EDITORIAL NOTE

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What I value more about this hybrid event that was my creature about eight years ago and that, since then, has taken a life of its own, is that I (and we all involved) never stop learning. And the learning process does not necessarily involve understanding something new, but also something we thought we knew, but we see with new eyes.

In 2025, after several months under winds of war, we decided to dedicate the VII edition of SDD to "*EU as a lab in a changing world, citizenship, values and the response to global challenges*", perfectly conscious that – crisis after crisis – the new challenge was coping with an increasingly insecure world. The topic was, in other words, to explore how our democracies under attack could cope as well as what possible democratic solutions could counter this world's shift towards the current (un)balance of powers.

The EU offers us – as Europeans - a peculiar perspective, but we are well conscious that other perspectives are needed and welcome in a conversation that, by definition, aims at overcoming borders. One third of this edition's panellists were, not surprisingly, from outside the EU – as close as from candidate countries or as far as from the other continents (all of them!). A good half of them were academicians, but not law scholars as we organizers, a significant group were representatives of civil society, and a few were international officers.

The success of this edition – with a record of answers to our call for papers – was unfortunately due, in my opinion, to the urgency and the relevance of the topic on the backdrop of the deterioration of global international relations that evokes ghosts of the past.

Those of us who remember (vividly!) the fall of the Berlin wall have witnessed very different historical phases: the phase of bipolarism before that; the one of American unipolarism, and the current scary phase of unstable multipolarism, even if different to the one between the two world wars.

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With the German reunification and the collapse of the Soviet Union we in Europe went through a confused transition period, an uneasy one, as the bloody war in Former Yugoslavia testifies, but also a period of hope. The Treaty of Maastricht and the subsequent ones were written with the idea to reunify what was previously Est and West in our continent, to overcome the idea of a mere economic integration and move towards "an ever-closer Union", able to guarantee fundamental rights, a space of justice and even a political ownership. The political significance of the European citizenship (1992), of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000) and of the EU Treaty title on democratic principles (2007) have not escaped scholars, even if most of public opinion missed it.

On the other side of the ocean, the optimism that reigned after the end of the bipolar world was well exemplified by Fukuyama's 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which expressed the concept of the final victory of liberal democracy as the culmination of history and the promise of a peaceful future. He saw global democratization as an inevitable, natural process, the result of economic development and globalization, understood as the universalization of the market economy. In such a world, the conflicts perceived were more cultural than national (see Huntington, 1996), and the main threat to security was terrorism. Yet, there was a clear legal appraisal of what was happening. We still perceived there was much to do; it was not the best of all possible worlds, but it was still (almost) peaceful and seemed to promise further progress.

Unfortunately, since the second decade of the new millennium, the deterioration has been constant. According to all indexes, democracy has dramatically regressed, the polycrisis has fuelled populism and nativism, which in turn have contributed to damage international relations and to hinder the functioning of the European Union just when it was most needed, as a barrier to internal democratic regression and as a bulwark of multilateralism.

In this current phase, we witness the growing geopolitical weight of the BRICS, with an anti-American focus and the antagonism between the United

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States and China. With the new Russian imperialism, since the first signs in 2014 to its clear assertion with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and with Trump's second term in the United States —accompanied by territorial claims and withdrawal (de facto or de jure) from numerous unilateral negotiations — the world seems to have reverted to the balance of power in which geopolitics prevails over international law. The Israelis' unpunished international crimes in Gaza are just the last drop in a scenario where international order has become an international disorder and where international law is struggling to find supporters, despite the commendable efforts of some.

This scenario, from the European perspective, is well described in the article by Ana Bojinović Fenko and Julija Brsakoska Bazerkoska, through the lens of "actorness", i.e. the combination of institutional identity, international presence, institutionalisation and capability (a new concept for me as a legal scholar). The Union's responsiveness to the new scenario is analysed in three specific areas: international trade, regulation of digital technology and international conflict resolution. While the new paradigm of strategic autonomy surfaces in all three, this conceptual frame shows very different outcomes in each of them.

From my perspective as a European lawyer, I could imagine such results, but the picture of the scenario and the reasoning by Ana and Julija is different from what mine would have been, just like the picture of the same landscape differs if taken by people in different standpoints. It makes for an interesting reading to provide excellent insights on how the institutional response evolves under duress and how liberal values conflict with the pragmatic, geopolitical approach (and risk to concede).

The article by Esra Akgemci offers another layer of understanding current international relations from a gender perspective. Ample doctrinal evidence is provided on the strict correlation between authoritarian, right-wing populism and anti-gender campaigns so that the rise of both is reflected in foreign policy too. As Esra points out,

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> authoritarian populists from Thatcher to Trump and Bolsonaro weaponize cultural anxieties, casting LGBTIQ+ people, feminists, and migrants as the enemies of 'the people' to legitimise authoritarian rule and a return to a 'secure patriarchal order'.

This idealized good old patriarchal order is, in a word, *retrotopia*, a narrative as powerful as dangerous, undermining societies as well as international peace.

The answer the author supports, both political and ethical, is in feminist foreign policies. Without countering anti-gender politics and supporting women's and LGBTIQ+ movements in policymaking, the EU, as well as the democratic countries, deny *de facto* their commitment to democracy and peace.

Lastly, the post by Luca Belgiorno-Nettis inaugurates a new editorial project aimed at hosting selected non-academic contributions, and beautifully represents the wealth of ideas that civil society can offer in a debate that, to be about democracy, must also be democratic, and therefore open. The founder of the new Democracy Foundation – an Australian not-for-profit research organisation focused on political reform – suggests a different path to peace-making that passes through deliberative democracy. In his well-argued contribution, grounded in academic literature, he offers us the suggestion of a global peace assembly, building on the idea of deliberative peace referendums. The idea that ordinary people sorted by lot may succeed where political leaders fail, because of their attachment to a non-specified national interest or just because of pride, is a fascinating one.

These three perspectives – so different among each of them and so connected in facing the current global challenges through the filter of democratic values – offer a small summary of what is a much broader debate. Accepting being challenged in academic certainties and in thinking outside

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of the (many) box(es) we are in is part of the process of listening and understanding. It is the very essence of dialogue.

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