

FREEDOM

Alfred F. Praus - Vienna, 26 October 2024

We live in increasingly turbulent times and in a fragile geopolitical environment: wars in Europe and at its gates, right-wing extremist and fascist forces that are constantly gaining strength; and this not only in Europe: see Donald Trump, who called on traditional non-voters to go and vote this time; next time it would no longer be necessary (whatever that means), or who threatened his political opponents with criminal prosecution. The AfD and the Wagenknecht list in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France, the Dutchman Wilders, Meloni in Italy, Orban in Hungary or Fico in Slovakia with their programmatic, sometimes freedom-restricting outbursts are all well known to us.

Where does all this come from and where will this lead to?

Of course, this is also fundamental issue against the establishment. But that is only part of the explanation.

I think that since World War II we have simply become accustomed to peace with its democratic order and our freedom - be it freedom of speech and freedom of the media, the four freedoms of the EU or generally the freedom of choice in our lives, and that in the context of the prosperity that has grown continuously for more than 70 years - we simply take that all for granted and have become accustomed and comfortable with it and have lost the necessary vigilance. From the media informs we learn about autocratic and totalitarian developments and excesses in many parts of the world, but we watch that as if from the audience box as far away and not affecting us and irrelevant because these injustices "don't come to us anyway". In my opinion, this also applies to the view of (too) many Austrians regarding neutrality in the sense that we don't have to do anything ourselves because our neighbours protect us anyway and our neutral status prevents us from taking a stand including corresponding actions, such as in the case of Ukraine.

However, this is by no means the case – it DOES concern us: our democratic order and our freedom have been under attack for many years, as is documented by the continuous growth of autocratic and totalitarian regimes at the expense of democratic countries. Otto von Habsburg had warned in the European Parliament already more than 20 (!) years ago that we in Europe should not be lulled into a false sense of security regarding our freedom and democratic order, and should not allow ourselves to be lulled by the masters in the Kremlin, who, in his opinion, have an agenda that is diametrically opposed to ours.

But Central and Western Europe was and still is comfortable, complacent and deaf because Europe was doing well until recently. The signals were ignored. As Macron recently said: cheap energy from Russia and high-tech from China allowed us to live well and the USA would take care of our security anyway. Russia's increasing undermining of democratic orders in Western Europe, concentrated disinformation campaigns, the many

Russian troll factories for the purpose of "influencing" with fake news in social media and Trojan horses such as North Stream 1 and 2 (No. 2 by Merkel, for whatever reason, long "sold" as a purely economic deal), a cheap Russian loan to Hungary (10 billion euros) for a Russian nuclear power plant, many presumably well-bought Western politicians, cyber-attacks and much more actions have been clear signals of the threat to our democracy and freedom for years. Putin is also apparently trying with increasing success to split the EU (see Hungary, Slovakia) and is causing unrest in the Balkans (see Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina), not to mention Africa.

When war-monger Russia invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014 and usurped Crimea after its wars in Chechnya and Georgia, Western governments were, as always, "deeply concerned" about these activities; Regardless, Putin was received as a state guest in Europe and also in Austria shortly afterwards. Business as usual.

In view of the Ukrainian resilience against his full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022, which was completely unexpected for Putin, and against the backdrop of the swiftly started support of Ukraine by the alliance formed in the West, Putin soon forged his own alliance with the rogue states of North Korea and Iran, which are now also increasingly supporting Russia militarily; China increasingly seems to do so as well. This development has significant geopolitical consequences and is probably bringing us closer to World War III.

Why does all this affect us so much: our democratic order and thus our freedom and prosperity, i.e. what our fathers and grandfathers had built with endless effort, is increasingly imperilled. We are in a battle between totalitarianism and democracy and Ukraine is one of the decisive Western bulwarks in this respect. If the blatant violations of international law and the many proven war crimes committed by Russia are not punished and a Russian victory in Ukraine is not prevented, what will happen then? The answer can be found in several of Putin's documents and speeches, such as the restoration of the Soviet Union with the usurpation of the Baltic states, at least unrest in Scandinavia and Poland, the re-establishment of Comecon and perhaps a new iron curtain. Whether Trump will prevent this via NATO, among others if he will be re-elected remains to be seen. Not to mention the virulent danger on the Vietnamese peninsula and the impending attack by China on Taiwan with serious economic consequences (keyword: semiconductors).

The EU could collapse, defence spending across Europe would have to increase exponentially, and all of this, exacerbated by migration, will certainly cost a lot of prosperity, potentially linked to social unrest, and may drive us at least into illiberal democratic orders, more likely even into authoritarian regimes. And then much of our freedom will be gone.

That is why we must actively defend our freedom and also the freedom of Ukraine.