

When the Manipulation of Fear Begins to Win

On the occasion of the International Day of Democracy, 15th of September

By Tamara Tripić, Chair of the Board of the Democratic Dialogue Network and Secretary General of CEE Gender Network

There are moments in history when political reality seems to accelerate. Events that until yesterday appeared to be warnings become facts. What once belonged to the political margins enters institutions. Statements that were once considered unacceptable become part of everyday political discourse, while what began as dissatisfaction with the system turns into deep distrust in democracy itself. We are living through one such moment today.

In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) achieved a historic result in the state elections in Saxony-Anhalt in early September 2026, winning around 44% of the vote and emerging as the strongest political force. At the same time, just one day later in Belgrade, Ratko Mladić — convicted of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity — was buried with military honours and in the presence of senior state officials.

Two events, two countries, two very different political contexts. And yet there is one deeply uncomfortable point they have in common. What happens when democracy, using its own freedoms, begins to produce political forces that challenge those very freedoms? And perhaps even more importantly: what happens when politicians learn that fear is more effective than hope, division easier than dialogue, and an enemy more politically useful than an opponent?

This is where our story of contemporary populism begins, because democracy does not disappear overnight. History teaches us that authoritarianism does not always have to come from outside in order to undermine democracy. Sometimes it grows from within.

Adolf Hitler did not come to power by first abolishing elections. The Nazis used elections, parliamentary institutions, political coalitions, propaganda, mass rallies and a deep crisis of trust in the democratic system. Only after taking power did they begin systematically dismantling the institutions that had helped bring them to power. This does not mean that today's Europe or Serbia should be compared with Germany in the 1930s. Such comparisons can be historically inaccurate and politically irresponsible. But there is one lesson we must not forget: democracy cannot assume that everyone who wins an election will automatically become a democrat. That is why it is important to understand the mechanisms, not just the ideologies.

One of the most powerful political mechanisms of authoritarian populism is the construction of an enemy. Once, that enemy was Jews and communists. Today, depending on the country and political context, it may be migrants, refugees, Muslims, “globalists,” Brussels, elites, NGOs, political opponents, the media, liberals, LGBT people or simply — “them.” The problem is not that democracy must avoid serious debates about migration, security, borders, national identity or economic inequality. Of course it should have those debates. The problem begins when complex social problems are reduced to a single group of people to blame.

When citizens are told that their economic insecurity, fear of the future or sense of losing control was not produced by a complex combination of economic and political circumstances, but by another human being — a foreigner, a refugee, a “traitor,” a political

opponent or an “internal enemy” — something fundamental happens to political language. The opponent ceases to be an opponent and becomes a threat. And once an opponent becomes a threat, there is no longer any need to persuade them. The only thing left is to defeat them.

Perhaps this is the greatest transformation in contemporary European populism. The new European right no longer necessarily resembles the political stereotype of the last century. It can be modern, media-savvy, educated, institutional and perfectly capable of using the language of contemporary society. It can speak about women's rights, family, security, protecting citizens and freedom, while simultaneously using those same values to exclude others. Giorgia Meloni and Alice Weidel, each in her own way, demonstrate that contemporary populist conservatism no longer needs to reject the language of emancipation. It can appropriate it and reshape it.

This is particularly important when we talk about gender equality. We can speak about protecting women from violence while simultaneously portraying migrants as a collective threat. We can speak about women's freedom while using freedom as an argument for closing society off from others. We can speak about the family while defining family in a way that makes some families less legitimate than others. That is why the democratic struggle for gender equality today is not only a struggle against overt discrimination against women. It is also a struggle against the political instrumentalisation of women's rights. Because when identity becomes a political weapon, we all lose the ability to be citizens before we become members of a particular group.

And what is happening in Serbia?

This brings us to our own reality, because the mechanisms of political mobilisation are becoming increasingly similar: **fear, division, identity, the enemy, distrust, control of the narrative, the delegitimisation of institutions and, ultimately, the belief that only one political option truly represents “the people.”**

The burial of Ratko Mladić in Belgrade raises precisely one of these questions: what political function does the way a society talks about its past serve? If a war criminal becomes a symbol of national pride, if the judgment of an international court is presented as an injustice against “us,” if victims are once again divided according to their nationality, then something more serious than historical disagreement is taking place. We are dismantling the shared minimum of facts on which democracy must rest.

Democracy does not require us all to agree. But it does require us to be able to agree that a crime is a crime, that an electoral defeat is an electoral defeat, that an opponent is a political opponent rather than an enemy, and that a minority is made up of citizens with equal rights. It also requires us to accept that no nation has the right to turn its historical suffering into a licence to deny the suffering of others.

And then we come to another problem: elections in themselves are not democracy. Democracy exists only if elections can genuinely change who holds power. On 9 September, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić dissolved the National Assembly and called parliamentary elections for 25th October. The election campaign is no longer a possibility

being discussed. It has begun. And the real question now is what kind of political contest we are actually going to have.

We have already seen what a campaign looks like when the playing field is not level: the misuse of public resources, campaigning by public officials, unequal access to the media, pressure on voters, and various forms of clientelism and political mobilisation through state and party structures. We have already seen scenes of organised voter transfers from Bosnia and Herzegovina. And we can expect what may be the most cynical political tactic of all: an attempt to turn opposition lists against one another, divide opposition voters and convince them that their vote is meaningless. Because abstention itself can become a political weapon.

If you tell a citizen often enough that “they are all the same,” that “nothing can change,” that “they will steal the election anyway,” or that voting for one opposition list is actually a vote against another, you do not have to take away their right to vote. It is enough to take away their belief that their vote matters. And this is precisely where global and domestic problems converge. The manipulation of fear, identity and distrust is not merely a problem of political communication. It becomes a problem for democracy when it is used to make citizens stop trusting one another, their institutions and their own ability to change something.

That is why the upcoming elections are not simply a question of who will win more votes. They are a test of whether Serbia can move beyond a model in which elections are transformed into a confirmation of existing political power. Elections should be a celebration of democracy. Yet for too long we have turned them into a dirty battlefield where not only ideas and programmes compete, but also money, institutional power, media dominance, party infrastructure and the ability to convince citizens that a different political choice is dangerous, pointless or impossible.

And that is why these elections must be the last elections held under such conditions. Not because anyone should know their outcome in advance. Quite the opposite. Because democracy is inconceivable without uncertainty about the outcome. If one political option has such an overwhelming institutional, financial, media and organisational advantage that the others cannot even come close to competing with it, then we are no longer talking about democratic competition in the full sense of the word. There is no democracy without the possibility of a change of government.

One of the great mistakes of liberal democracies has been to reduce democracy too often to procedures: we have elections, we have a parliament, we have multiple parties, we have freedom of speech. Therefore, we have democracy. But democracy is much more than that. Free elections are not simply the opportunity to cast a vote. They require citizens to have access to diverse information, the opposition to be able to organise, institutions to be able to hold those in power accountable, and the outcome of elections to be capable of genuinely changing who governs. Freedom of speech is not merely the right to say what we think. It also requires a space in which others have an equal right to respond. Democracy is not only the right of the majority to decide. It is also the obligation of the majority not to destroy the rights of minorities. That is the difference between democracy and simple majority rule.

And this is precisely where I do not want us to end with a story about fear. If populism succeeds because it offers simple answers to people's real fears, then the democratic response cannot be to tell people that they have no reason to be afraid. We have to offer them something better than fear. We have to offer citizens the possibility of believing again that

they can influence their own lives and the society in which they live. That means institutions they can trust, media they can trust, elections whose results can genuinely change who holds power, and politics that does not need to invent an enemy every time it lacks an answer.

For that, we need a democratic minimum that must be more important than any party's maximum. We can disagree about taxes, the economy, Kosovo, the European Union, migration, energy or any other political issue. But there must be common red lines: **no political violence, no undermining of electoral processes, no dehumanisation of political opponents, no relativisation of war crimes, no abuse of institutions for party interests.** Because citizens must feel that their vote makes sense.

Democracy is not a finished product and that is why 15th of September is more important than it may appear. The International Day of Democracy is not simply a day to celebrate what we have already achieved. It is a day to ask how resilient our democracy really is. Democracy is not a freedom won once and possessed forever. It is a system that must be defended every day — through institutions, rules, accountability, civic participation and a willingness to accept political difference.

Perhaps the greatest danger to democracy is not the politician who openly says they do not believe in democracy. At least such a politician is clear. Much more dangerous is the politician who says: **“I am only doing what the people want.”** And then begins explaining who actually belongs to “the people.”

Because democracy does not die when a political option we dislike wins an election. Democracy dies when winning is no longer enough for the winner — when they want to make sure that no one else can ever win after them. That is why our responsibility extends beyond a single electoral cycle. The alternative to populism is not silence. The alternative to fear is not naïve optimism. **The alternative to fear is trust.** Trust that institutions can work, trust that elections can change governments, trust that our vote matters.

So, on this International Day of Democracy, we should not only ask what threatens democracy. We should also ask what we are prepared to do to protect it. Because democracy may be wounded, but it is not defeated as long as citizens believe that their vote matters, and as long as there are people willing to defend institutions, freedom and equality. Fear may be able to mobilise, but only hope can build a democratic society. And so the question is not whether democracy can survive this moment. The question is whether we will be brave enough to save it.