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## **THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES: ITS CAUSES AND WHAT THE WEST MUST DO TO RESOLVE IT**

**14-16 September, 2018**

Freedom House reported earlier this year that democracy is facing “its most serious crisis in decades”. Challenges to freedom of the press and to the sanctity of elections and attacks both on minority rights and the rule of law abound. “Seventy-one countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties”, Freedom House reported, making this past year “the 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of decline in global freedom”.

The influential American journal *Foreign Affairs* followed in its latest edition: “Is Democracy Dying?” Such pessimism may surprise many in the democratic world who take for granted the solidity of our free institutions and their longevity. But, is it reasonable to ask if the long reign of the West, of the liberal democratic world that has dominated global politics for seven decades, is coming to an end?

There is arguably evidence on both sides of the Atlantic of the rise of anti-democratic populists, including increasingly oppressive governments in Poland, Hungary and other countries. China, as a great authoritarian power, is making an assertive case that its model of governance is better fitted to the future than the democracies of Western Europe and North America. At home, the President of the United States is questioning the legitimacy of the major institutions of the press, justice, law enforcement, intelligence and diplomacy. The fundamental tenets of democracy, and especially the separation of powers between executive and judiciary and thus the rule of law, are being challenged today more seriously than in decades, and both from within as well as abroad.

Democracy has always been a struggle both to create and to maintain. Benjamin Franklin described it as “two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch”. Winston Churchill famously described it as the “worst form of government except for all the others”. There are echoes too in Isaiah Berlin’s political philosophy where liberty is an active process rather than a state to be achieved. Even in ancient Athens, the highly constrained democracy of “free men” (women and slaves had no rights) had to move to a system of payment to persuade citizens to exercise their civic duties in democratic assemblies. Democracy can even be viewed as an insurance policy against human nature, the corruption of power and the perils of authoritarian rule without the checks and balances of free institutions and the rule of law. Is what we are witnessing a crisis of democracy, or the proof of the value of its institutions, that will see its eventual renewal and triumph?

This conference, convened at the Greentree estate on Long Island in September by American Ditchley and the Ditchley Foundation, will bring together a broad cross section of political and union leaders, foreign policy experts, journalists and tech and business people to examine these worrisome trends and to devise responses for government, business and society to protect and preserve democratic freedoms in the years ahead.

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We will seek to address three fundamental questions:

- How can we make democracy work better for our citizens at the local, regional/state and national levels?
- How can we protect democracies from the resurgent challenge from authoritarian powers, including Russia's persistent efforts to undermine western democracies through cyber aggression?
- How can we combat the challenge from within – anti-democratic populists, attacks on the press and free institutions, the crisis of inequality and those left behind by globalisation and the crisis of trust in many of our societies?

The first challenge is both immediate and crucial to the crisis of trust that permeates our democratic societies. Citizens rightly expect their governments to provide modern, efficient and reliable services. They also want to feel consulted and listened to by Westminster, Brussels and Washington. Flourishing democracies, it is often said, need flourishing institutions at all levels – local, city, regional, national and indeed international. How can governments at all levels deliver more effective and innovative services to their constituents in the emerging digital age? How do leaders re-establish trust with voters in the age of social media where government actions and inactions are exposed for all to see? Are we, collectively, holding political leaders to impossible standards? How can we reset the conversation between those who rule and the ruled?

An important second challenge is to defend the West from attacks by the increasingly assertive and self-confident authoritarian powers – the rise of China, the spoiling tactics of Russia and, even from within NATO, an increasingly authoritarian Turkey. Putin is leveraging a new version of asymmetric warfare, using information campaigns and cyber-attacks to delegitimise elections and confuse voters. How can we organise the West to work collectively to raise our defences against such attacks in the American mid-term elections of November 2018 and all the elections that follow in the Atlantic region for the years to come? And going further, how should democracies go on the offensive to blunt this attack at its source? What is the future role of multilateral institutions like NATO, the European Union and other transatlantic organisations that have been so crucial since the close of World War Two?

Finally, we must look within our democracies and economies to analyse our shortcomings. What are the major reforms that must be made in our social welfare systems, in taxation and in social policies, in order to redress the inequality that lies at the root of the alienation that many feel when they judge their governmental institutions and leaders? How should we interpret the difficult phenomenon that while all major global economies are in positive growth for the first time in decades, many citizens feel they are worse off? Is globalisation the reason for the collapse of the middle class in some western societies? Or, is it the unfair and unequal tax and other regulatory systems that are driving inequality and the emergence of a plutocratic class? Why are so many of our citizens struggling to adapt to social and cultural change? Why are so many rejecting immigration and the multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies that dominate Western Europe, Canada and the U.S.?

We will seek to answer these questions and more in what we plan to be one of the most important Ditchley conferences in years. How do we safeguard and, ultimately, save the West?