

## Trust: A lost asset? | The underestimated value for stability

by Jochen Ressel



Democracy refers to a system in which the people participate in the exercise of power in the state through free elections. This is how the Oxford Dictionary defines it. The word itself is derived from the Greek words "demos" (= "people") and "kratos" (= "rule"). It follows: Without the people, without the active participation of the people whom rule directly affects, no democracy. No democracy, however, means autocracy or anarchy - and thus dictatorship, totalitarianism and thus paving the way to chaos. And nothing less is at stake today: politics is losing the interest of people who turn away from it in disgust and contempt. Ethically oriented people cannot allow their trained conscience to enter this swamp of power hunger, discrediting, insinuations, corruption and rotten compromises, which defines the moral orientation of the political class: without accepting these values, one has no place in the political scheme of things. Either you play by these rules or you have no place in the political establishment.

The media play an essential role in the convoluted game of opinion-making and quite a few are under direct political influence, as current events in Austria have once again proved. Therefore, citizens – those who must form the centre of democracy in order to give it its lasting legitimacy – are also withdrawing their trust from the media and becoming opinion-leaders themselves by becoming journalistic advocates of their own opinions and this is the only basis for the global triumph of social media: the feeling of being able to make up one's own mind, of being able to inform oneself from within a social community of common interest – often without realising that digital algorithms specifically control the type and amount of information with which we are provided.

Nevertheless, it is the combination of all these factors that creates a climate of political pressure: The impression of being lied to and deceived, essentially determined by the media coverage of political events in traditional as well as social media. The result: a massive loss of confidence and trust in the political concept of democracy itself. This was aptly expressed in social media puns on the resignation of Liz Truss: "Mistrust has not resigned, only Miss Truss."

### **Mistrust is not a national peculiarity.**

However, mistrust in the political system is not a national phenomenon - it has international dimensions that affect almost all democratic institutions. There is mistrust not only of local political decision-makers but also, for example, of the European Union and of its competence to solve current crises in a far-sighted and future-orientated way for the good of its citizens.

In fairness we cannot be angry with citizens for feeling this way if we take into account all the events of the past few years, from the Crimean crisis, the refugee crisis, to the measures taken in times of the Covid pandemic, to the current energy and cost-of-living crisis, which is directly related to the political Russia-Ukraine crisis. In all of this, political institutions and decision-makers – whether acting nationally or internationally – have by no means deserved any credit, but have behaved in a short-sighted, uncoordinated and in a manner perceived by the public as simply stupid.

The effects of this overall impression are already evident in many countries, where a post-election orientation towards advocates of radical approaches is clearly visible. Even party leaders with clearly autocratic tendencies sit firmly in the saddle and enjoy the support of a broad national public – even if – or perhaps even because – these politicians are cast in a bad light internationally and publicly attacked by politicians from other countries.

### **Fine words are not enough.**

In the light of events, even political figures who feel they have a duty to the state repeatedly find it necessary to address the public to express how appalled they are at the various political events that have come to light. The Austrian Federal President spoke out again just last week when the disturbing events surrounding the chancellorship of Sebastian Kurz became known through the testimony of one of his closest former confidants, Thomas Schmid.

Without denying the sincerity of such statements, it must be clearly stated that fine words alone will not be enough to save democracy. Those who have the competence to preserve and protect the democracies and the constitutions of their countries must become active and take responsibility. Hiding behind old concepts of past centuries, which have only had the effect of elegantly evading political responsibility so far, endanger democracy instead of actively strengthening it.

What is needed are sincere advocates of the democratic concept who take decisive action with open eyes against confidence-destroying forces – not with fine words but with concrete deeds. This is the only way to make it clear to citizens that democracy is a good worth defending. What is a concept worth if no one from the top-leading political class stands up to defend it actively? This is why the highest ranked public leaders have a personal responsibility to restore confidence in democracy – a task that no one has taken seriously and credibly for far too long.

**More than ever, the Austro-British Society is looking forward to your views and comments!**

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#### *About the author*

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