

**THE CURRENT CRISIS OF EUROPEAN GOVERNANCE AND CHALLENGES TO  
DEMOCRACY**

<b>Abstract:</b>	<i>The events of recent years have generated discussions and controversies at national and European levels on the path on which society is going, from optimistic to pessimistic perspectives, democracy seems to be under siege, and defining models of good practices becomes impossible, although necessary for the permanent effort/dynamics of democratization. In this context of uncertainty, the relationship between the quality of democracy and governance becomes a vital link, the alteration, or crises of one generating effects on the other. Thus, several legitimate questions arise about the causality in generating these governance and democracy crises and how they influence each other positively or negatively.</i>
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### Introduction

Officially, the European construction presents itself as a cultural, and political space, of lessons learned and crises transformed into resources and new development opportunities. Looking closely at Europe's post-war history and the institutional developments of European construction, we can say without fear of error that indeed the new Europe was born against the background of the crisis generated by the consequences of the Second World War<sup>159</sup>. Thus, the reconstruction effort of post-war Europe was structurally conceived in an indissoluble link with democracy, which is why the democratic character expressed through the assumed landmark values represents the compass of the European Union of yesterday and today.

The overlapping crises we are going through should not worry us, because history has proven in the last half century the resilience capacity of a united Europe, however, the dynamics of the contemporary world and the magnitude of the unprecedented challenges posed by globalization, new technologies and the re-emergence of classic war hotbeds on European soil, compel us despite optimism, to a critical analysis of the crises of mechanisms within the European construction. On the other hand, Europe is part of a world that is constantly changing, Europe is not an island and is not isolated, so global transformations have a direct impact on it and permanently force it to assume a role, not only about the internal environment, but also about the external environment. To find its place in the new international architecture, the European Union must understand the world in which it lives and learn the ever-changing mechanisms of the international system. Immanuel Wallerstein, director of the Fernand Braudel Center He suggestively captures through his work the effort to understand the world and analyze world systems<sup>160</sup>. The last decade gives the impression of researchers in the social sciences and humanities, with more pessimistic, or more optimistic notes, of a

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<sup>159</sup>European Parliament, *Fact Sheets on the European Union*, 2018, p. 14

<sup>160</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *To understand the world, an introduction to world-systems analysis*, Idea Desing&Print, Cluj Napoca, 2013, p. 13

historical change, not within the current system, and a change of the system itself, or at least a radical change of the world we live in and our current way of life. The drivers of this change are multiple and varied, from migration to terrorism, to fear of pandemics, climate change, energy crises, and the threat of war.

A simple glance at the bookstore shelf is enough to identify multiple interesting and worrying perspectives even, for tomorrow, but especially for the future of European construction. Thus, the refugee crisis from 2014 onwards generated concerns and studies that raised fundamental issues, such as Douglas Murray's work "The strange suicide of Europe - immigration, identity, Islam"<sup>161</sup> a work that, although harshly criticized initially by declaring death of European multiculturalism, multiculturalism perceived as an expression of European values, subsequent developments in the European space tend to confirm the fears of the controversial author.

Demographic pressure and identity change generated by demographic change over time become serious themes of reflection if we consider the future and what it will look like. "We will never find in history anything but what we brought first"<sup>162</sup>, said philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, quoted by Thierry Wolton in the work that sounds like a warning. called "The New Roads of Our Serfdom"<sup>163</sup>. Thus, uninspired political decisions or their unintended effects on the national policy of EU Member States overlapped with the great transformations at the global level, begin to generate concern through primarily political effects that manifest themselves more and more visibly. Illiberalism, populism, ultra-nationalism, isolationism, and demagoguery of some political leaders are beginning to manifest, not only isolated in the European landscape, but to become a background image.

All these increasingly visible aspects raise real concerns about how European nations and Europe relate to its fundamental values of freedom and democracy. In this worrying context, as early as 2017, James Kirchick presented a picture of apocalyptic and worrying Europe in his work "The End of Europe, Demagogue Dictators and the New Dark Ages"<sup>164</sup> and Francesco Guida in his historical work "The Other Half of Europe – from the First World War to the Present Day"<sup>165</sup> asks somewhat rhetorically, "Another Europe again?"<sup>166</sup>.

## Fundamental Questions

Yes, indeed, Europe is changing, democracy as we projected and perceived it until now is changing, the recent elections in the Netherlands and the statements of the new Prime Minister show this fully. Deutsche Welle wondered after the Dutch elections, "How will he get over the shock of Wilders' success?"<sup>167</sup>.

However, this question can be extended to the whole of Europe because populist manifestations and their electoral victories tend to become a rule and a constant in the European political landscape, not an exception. *The fooling of democracy*<sup>168</sup> seems to be a fulfillment of Tocqueville's fears because, analyzing the dynamics of American society at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he observed two forces, two opposing tendencies, namely one of all praise that had an upward meaning and one that had a downward meaning, if the former urged people to imitate the best and surpass the best, The other was the desire to lower the best to a lower level and equalize him down, his conclusion then, still valid today, was that democracy must be educated. This challenge of educating democracy on the one hand and analyzing its stupidity is masterfully presented in a press article by Alin Fumurescu in "Dilema Veche"<sup>169</sup>.

Economic analyses are no more optimistic, and renowned economists such as Hans Werner Sinn<sup>170</sup> warn of a major danger for Europe on the verge of bankruptcy. Massively affected economically by the

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<sup>161</sup> Douglas Murray, *The Strange Suicide of Europe – Immigration, Identity, Islam*, Corint, București, 2019, pp. 5-6

<sup>162</sup> Thierry Wolton, *The New Roads of Our Servitude*, Humanitas, București, 2023, p. 111

<sup>163</sup> *Idem*

<sup>164</sup> James Kirchick, *The End of Europe, Demagogue Dictators and the New Dark Ages*, Polirom, Iași 2018, pp. 13-24

<sup>165</sup> Francesco Guida, *The Other Half of Europe – From World War I to the Present Day*, Humanitas, București, 2023, p. 10

<sup>166</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 365

<sup>167</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ro/olanda-%C3%AEI-va-tempera-victoria-electoral%C4%83-pe-geert-wilders/a-67543012> (30.11.2023)

<sup>168</sup> Alin Fumurescu, *The stupidity of democracy, the democratization of stupidity*, "Dilema Veche", Year XX, No. 1023, November 16-22, 2023, p. 4

<sup>169</sup> *Idem*

<sup>170</sup> Hans Werner Sinn, *Europe on the verge of bankruptcy*, "Dilema Veche", Year XX, No. 992, April 13-19, 2023, p. 5

COVID-19 pandemic, the European economy has found itself in a spiral of inflation that is particularly dangerous for the economy and, implicitly, for democracy. The issuance of long-term EU bonds is harshly criticized by economists as dangerous to European stability and the euro<sup>171</sup>. All these elements seem to be the ingredients of a perfect storm that has descended on Europe. Together with analysts and political commentators from the European space, or<sup>172</sup> national level, we observe new worrying situations or the aggravation of older situations, but beyond the findings, we will have to ask ourselves at least two things, namely: How did it get here? What went wrong? And what can we do so that the transformation, the adaptation of contemporary society follows the growth force described by Tocqueville and not the negative one?

Given the worrying data on people's trust in their governments, but also in the institutions of the European Union which, according to the 2023 Eurobarometer, 47% of Europeans tend to trust EU and 32% tend to trust national governments. 45% of Europeans have a positive image of the EU, 36% a neutral image, and 18% a negative image. Finally, 62% say they are optimistic about the future of the EU (-3 pp compared to summer 2022 but like the level recorded in February 2022)<sup>173</sup>.

We are facing a systemic crisis, which requires structural reforms and new approaches to the functioning of both the European Union and the<sup>174</sup> democracies in the Member States. And in this situation, it becomes very interesting and useful to understand the relationship between democracy and governance, more precisely to establish the relationship between the two from the point of view of the interdependencies that exist, or that are generated. It becomes relevant to observe which is the cause of the other's crisis, in other words, to what extent do governance crises generate crises of democracy, or, conversely, do crises of democracy generate crises of governance?

To be able to answer these highly complex questions, even partially, some conceptual clarifications are needed, and then to identify and analyze some of the relevant or at least determining factors of these crises.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Clarifying concepts is always a necessary and useful action, even if definitions are never or in a few cases unanimously accepted and interpretations agreed. Even less so when it comes to defining the concept of governance, democracy, or political culture. The difficulty of defining these concepts is natural given that they are dynamic concepts that aim to capture in real time a world in constant motion. Therefore, the lines below will rather present the perspective in which these concepts were approached in the present study, without claiming exhaustive definitions.

Democracy has received over time a multitude of definitions ranging from the most idealistic to critical definitions, as former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill would have said "Democracy is a bad political system – the best that mankind has invented so far". Simplistically, democracy is etymologically defined as the power of the people, but the problem of definition arises when we ask ourselves how this power manifests and applies concretely and practically in society.

In a brochure addressed to children for the formation of education for democratic citizenship, edited with the support of the Council of Europe, we find a simple but comprehensive definition, namely "Democracy is one of the possible ways to organize a group of people. It is a form of government of a country or even of a small village or class of students."<sup>175</sup> If we look at the global level, we notice that although democracy is a desideratum generally affirmed and accepted by people, the implementation of the essential elements of democracy that presuppose the legitimacy of political power, freedom of actions and opinions, transparency of decisions and accountability before the law, leaves quite a lot to be desired. Major media outlets conduct annual analyses of the standards of democracies globally, and the 2022 report published by the well-known

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<sup>171</sup> *Idem*

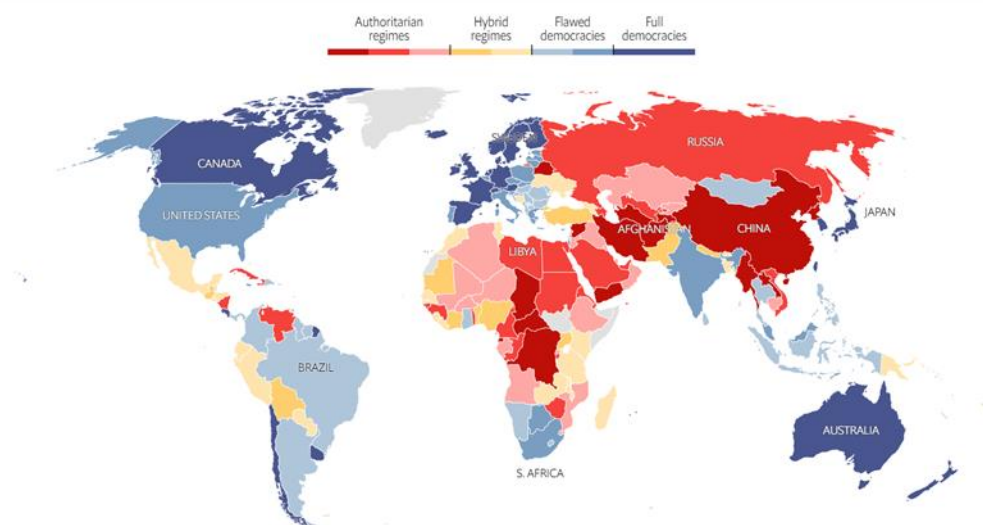
<sup>172</sup> *Civil Society State of the Union 2023*, <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSE-State-of-the-Union-DIGITAL-accessible-in-progress.pdf> (30.11.2023)

<sup>173</sup> <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872> (30.11.2023)

<sup>174</sup> *Civil Society State of the Union 2023*, <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSE-State-of-the-Union-DIGITAL-accessible-in-progress.pdf>, p. 6, (30.11.2023)

<sup>175</sup> *Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education*, <https://rm.coe.int/democratia-si-drepturi-omului-brosura-ro/16809508f1> (01.12.2023)

magazine The Economist looked at five indicators of democracy deemed relevant: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, democratic political culture, and civil liberties<sup>176</sup>.



**Figure 1. The World's Most, and Least Democratic Countries in 2022<sup>177</sup>**

The data presented in the report quite clearly delineates consolidated democracies from fragile democracies, unfortunately, Eastern Europe is still positioned in fragile democracies. If we consider the fact that the report analyzes the systemic political realities of 2022, and the subsequent developments that were not captured in this report, especially in the European space, we can expect without being surprised a trend of increasing fragility of European democracies.

The essential element that we find like a red thread in all definitions of democracy is represented by participation, by the idea of involvement. The bigger, more active the quality of the democratic system is, the greater the quality, the only condition for the situation to be really like this is the degree of freedom. Freedom and democracy condition each other and together generate socio-political mechanisms adaptable to the concrete situations in which they find themselves. Thus, free political participation in a small community is relatively easy to implement, but contemporary society is characterized primarily by complexity, which requires the search for innovative political and social mechanisms capable of maintaining dynamic democracy. The disappearance of dynamism in a democracy is like the loss of peripheral circulation of an organism, which translates into a serious decline in health.

It was in this context that the concept of governance emerged in the mid-80<sup>s</sup> in the modern sense of the term<sup>178</sup>. A revolutionary concept meant to change the way we relate to authority and political power, primarily by changing the Weberian model of government and public administration. The classical hierarchical model in the context of almost exponential population growth became increasingly incapable and inefficient, so the concept of governance was no longer satisfactory, the vertical relationship proving too cumbersome to be effective, especially in the face of growing risks and threats. Specifically, the revolution proposed by the governance was a lifeline valve for the democratic organization model in the face of a crisis or, better said, an inability to govern efficiently and translated into the expansion of relevant actors in the decision-making process and horizontally.

In other words, governance has generated a kind of dilution of government power by the fact that decisions are no longer just the result of political actors delegated by voting but have generated horizontal networks with various interested actors from civil society. The three most relevant definitions of governance

<sup>176</sup><https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/02/01/the-worlds-most-and-least-democratic-countries-in-2022?fsrc=core-app-economist&fbclid=IwAR1tgwLa2MfKrr6LLYCemM4mBd-gVZf23JHbsnm1504ZJxuO8UGx3seLktj4> (01.12.2023)

<sup>177</sup> *Idem*

<sup>178</sup> Anne Mette Kjaer, *Governanța*, CA Publishing, Cluj Napoca, 2010, p. 3

can be found in Rhodes, Rosenau and Hayden<sup>179</sup>. The 3 authors define the concept of governance by focusing on the role of political networks, but each of them points out different dimensions.

Thus, Rob Rhodes defines governance as a self-organizing and inter-organizational network characterized by interdependence, exchange of resources, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state, an approach aimed specifically at public sector reform. While Rosenau approaches governance from a global perspective, which includes leadership systems at all levels of human activity and thus targets global problems and global solutions. In his turn, Goran Hyden proposes a definition of governance from a perspective of the political rules of the game, formal and informal, referring to measures that involve establishing rules, both in the exercise of power and especially in resolving conflicts with the help of those rules, in this case focusing on the emergence between governance – development and democracy<sup>180</sup>.

The latter definition is, so to speak, the one that best suits developments from the perspective of governance of the European context. The European Union has at least tried to guide itself in its policies within the margins of this definition. The rules for the functioning of European mechanisms were primarily based on the formation of networks and the establishment through legitimate mechanisms of common rules assumed by all members, so that possible disputes arising in the dynamic evolution of society can be solved as quickly and democratically as possible. This *modo vivendi* of European mechanisms seems today to be paralyzed or at least slowed down by a series of visible problems.

On the other hand, European policy in the face of global transformations has also entered an existential dilemma regarding the role it must assume globally. Thus, EU policies have gradually placed increasing emphasis on the projection of the union at the global level, as a relevant actor, and have neglected somewhat the internal aspects, which have become increasingly bureaucratized through super regulation<sup>181</sup>. This super regulation seems, at first glance, a serious reason to block the proper functioning of governance networks and, implicitly, the accumulation of tension and dissatisfaction. However, to be able to ascertain in a reasoned manner what are the real causes of the crisis of European governance, we must look carefully at a series of structural indicators that act as multiple and determining factors in the dynamics of the current crises.

### Indicators and Challenges

The initial temptation in a discussion on European governance indicators and the challenges of managing them is to focus on visible indicators such as:

1. Migration with its effect of changing the societal political pattern.
2. Terrorism is a phenomenon, unfortunately increasingly common on the European continent and which generates concern in public opinion through the loss of public safety.
3. The COVID-19 crisis, which, through the measures taken by governments and the way the EU manages, some of the measures and decisions being controversial, has increased the level of anxiety and mistrust among the population.
4. Political populism, an increasingly common phenomenon that is good and increased in the public space precisely against the background of errors in the governance system but also in the governance system.
5. The energy crisis arising from multiple sources in a complicated context, both internal and external of the European space, brought to the meeting between the ambitious plans of the European Green Deal and the emergence of the war in Ukraine, A not so happy meeting for consumers and living standards to which Europeans were accustomed.
6. The war in Ukraine, in turn, has tested the cohesion of states in applying sanctions and responding to different types of sectoral crises caused by this war be the grain crisis or humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine; The list of states with separate opinions seems to be growing after Hungary and Poland, following internal elections, joined the Czech Republic and the Netherlands.

These are all real challenges to European policy, but they are rather the effects of much deeper causes that structurally erode democracy and the proper functioning of governance networks. Thus, looking at

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<sup>179</sup> *Idem*

<sup>180</sup> Anne Mette Kjaer, *Op. cit.*, p. 4

<sup>181</sup> Alexandru Lazescu, *The risks of centralization of power in Brussels*, "Revista 22", <https://revista22.ro/opinii/alexandru-lazescu/riscurile-centralizarii-puterii-la-bruxelles> (01.12.2023)

governance networks and the issues blocking their proper functioning, we see other key indicators, which rather resemble deep roots of European and Western problems in general.

The first indicator is demographics<sup>182</sup>. European and Western demographics in general are in a paradoxical situation with consequences that are still difficult to assess, because on the one hand, the demographic structure of the West is changing, or at least feels threatened by the immigration flow, but on the other hand, European society, as well as the American one, is facing an unprecedented<sup>183</sup> aging process. This problem does not refer only to a generalized aging of the workforce and additional pressure on social systems but is reflected in an aging of elites, which over time can generate, in metaphorical language, a kind of petrification of political power and implicitly a loss of flexibility. The emergence of gerontocrats turns out to be a risk in at least two respects<sup>184</sup>. The first would be the emergence of the sense of exceptionality of leaders who enjoy power for a very long time, then the risk of older leaders no longer understanding the world they lead and the temptation to compare the past in which they were young with the present and the desire to preserve that past, which deprives them of visions for the future.

This situation is a dangerous one that accumulates frustrations among civil society, especially among the younger generations, generations that no longer feel represented by the political class and political life in general, adopt a passivism regarding political participation, a situation generating silent and dangerous majorities, especially in contexts of hybrid and informational confrontations such as the current times.

The second fundamental indicator is education<sup>185</sup>. The crisis of contemporary education is not only a reality of the Romanian space, although in our country it is in its most visible form, this crisis can be found throughout the Western world. The impact of new technologies, the increase in the percentage of functionally illiterate, as well as the high figures of school and university dropouts arguably worry anyone concerned about the future<sup>186</sup>.

But the most dangerous and least visible effect of this unpleasant situation in which education finds itself is the impact that these vulnerabilities of the education system will have and already have on the idea of democracy, on the way tomorrow's generations will understand the democratic mechanisms, will respect, and maintain them. The threat is very real, because the younger generation, according to various polls, is increasingly attracted to radical political views and willing to accept the increasing involvement of the state in their lives, at the level of 2016 "a Harvard/Harris poll reveals that the majority of millennials in America, in a ratio of 51% to 42%, are against capitalism and for increasing state involvement in their lives"<sup>187</sup>.

The crisis of the American spirit. As universities betrayed democracy and impoverished the souls of students written by Allan Bloom<sup>188</sup> in the 60s unfortunately applies perfectly in our time, the argument for such a statement lies in the generalized reaction of major European and American universities to the war in Gaza that began in October this year.

The loss of the prestige of education and its quality through the loss of freedom or its deformation in the ideological sense has a societal effect, beyond the individual effect on each citizen, the loss of a geopolitical advantage of the West which, through its academic and scientific preponderance, has so far grounded its position in contemporary history. "One result of the degradation of the American academic environment is the steep decline in public confidence in higher education. In 2015, it was 57%, dropped to 48% in 2018 and just 36% in 2023, according to a Gallup poll"<sup>189</sup>. A direct effect of the above is the

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<sup>182</sup> Constantin Rudnitchi, *Europe faces the most difficult topic: demography*, <https://www.rfi.ro/economie-155410-europa-dificila-tema-demografia> (01.12.2023)

<sup>183</sup>[https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/impact-demographic-change-europe\\_ro](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/impact-demographic-change-europe_ro) and [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ro/ip\\_21\\_191](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ro/ip_21_191) (01.12.2023)

<sup>184</sup> Andrei Cornea, *Gerontocrats*, "Dilema Veche", Year XX, no.1023,16-22 November 2023, p. 3

<sup>185</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/ro/publication-detail/-/publication/8599033b-57d9-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1> (02.12.2023)

<sup>186</sup><https://www.zf.ro/eveniment/romania-primul-loc-uniunea-europeana-dupa-rata-abandonului-scolar-21896985> (02.12.2023)

<sup>187</sup><https://revista22.ro/opinii/alexandru-lazescu/cum-a-ajuns-libertatea-academica-sa-devina-problematica-in-occident> (12.12.2023)

<sup>188</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Crisis of the American Spirit. How universities betrayed democracy and impoverished students' souls*, Humanitas, București, 2017

<sup>189</sup><https://revista22.ro/opinii/alexandru-lazescu/cum-a-ajuns-libertatea-academica-sa-devina-problematica-in-occident> (12.12.2023)

impairment of another relevant indicator, namely security culture. A discussion about security culture in a context of social and political apathy, with an educational system in crisis, almost does not make sense, because this discussion becomes strictly theoretical and hypothetical, lacking concrete consistency in everyday reality. However, like political culture, security culture exists in all societies, but its level differs significantly from the level of survival given by man's instinct to the level of a network security culture capable of managing and balancing the centers of power in a community or international system, in other words, the highest form of a society's security culture is represented by security governance. Both security and network governance are *sines qua non* elements and conditions in the current geopolitical context for the proper functioning of democracy generating good governance.

## Conclusions

The old bureaucratic model of managing state affairs proposed by Max Weber with a clear and bureaucratic hierarchy was replaced by a new model of public management in the 80s, with the assumed purpose of coping with the structural changes generated by globalization, contemporary transformations, however, force us again to rethink a suitable system that can cope on the one hand with increasingly complex threats. and, on the other hand, to meet the demands of participatory democracy. The analysis of European governance problems linked to political crises, even of democratic nature in the Member States, makes it almost impossible to announce relevant conclusions after briefly presenting only a few of the factors identified as determinants. However, considering the above, we can see that we live in an era like a test of democracy, that is, we would test the capacity to open freedom, without ideological interpretations, to listen and identify the real problems at the level of society and the majority of the population, so as not to remain stuck in an ideological agenda of their own, hardened. The crisis of the current system can be attributed to an increase in population, both in number and lifespan, which, however, was not properly reflected in power networks or the initial approach to participatory governance, this fact is currently generating tensions and leaves the feeling of a systemic crisis aggravated by new media technologies that have given voice to everyone and practically fragmented society to atomization.

A single day of monitoring the news flow in the public space, at local, national, and European levels, is enough to become aware of the rather high and credible danger of the breakdown of the existing social order and the slide towards a kind of anarchy<sup>190</sup>. The only force that can set things up and transform them in a positive sense remains education through security culture and implicitly by assuming democratic values.

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