

Authoritarian leaders in the 21st century

Distinguished guests and members of

the Inter-allied Confederation of Reserve Officers and

the Interallied Confederation of Medical Reserve Officers and

representatives of the Inter-allied Confederation of Reserve Non-Commissioned Officers

Firstly, I would like to thank you for honoring me by giving me this great opportunity to address the symposium held during your 2022 summer congress.

In this respect, I would like to thank the Greek Reserve Officers, represented by the “Supreme Panhellenic Federation of Reserve Officers”, and especially Dr Philippos Kostaras, the President of the Federation.

Dear Guests,

The interwar period is known as the era which coincided with the rise of communism at the end of WWI and ended with the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy.

Nevertheless, apart from these three countries, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union, the era is characterized with the great number of dictatorships that came to power.

Just before the beginning of the WWII 16 states in Europe were dictatorships

(Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey and Yugoslavia)

This the way that today’s historian describes the interwar period. The historian of the future will probably describe the first quarter of the 21st century as the era of authoritarian leaders. We do not speak any more about tyrants. We rely on a strong ruler to keep the state functioning.

What is very important is that the model of authoritarian leaderships in the 21st century is not based on the total abolition of democratic processes. For example, we still have elections.

What matters now is not the election per se but who controls and directs its outcome. As a notorious dictator, Stalin, put it one century ago

"I consider it completely unimportant who ... will vote, or how; but what is extraordinarily important is this—who will count the votes, and how"

Thus, 21st century authoritarian leader is “elected”.

Nevertheless, his regime is characterized by a total lack of checks and balances to avoid the excesses that eventually undermined democracies. The authoritarian leader is the source of all power. What actually does, is that he concentrates all the power in his hands and passionately preserves his rights.

The authoritarian leader starts with a strong executive power.

- Then, he proceeds to the control of the parliament.
- When their regime he establishes feels quite strong, he controls the judiciary.
- The control of justice is exercised either through control of the development and rise of judicial officers or through legislation that predetermines court decisions.

In any case, through legislation, the authoritarian leader of the 21st century manages to remain in power overcoming any legal or constitutional obstacles.

the power of the authoritarian leader emanates both from his position and from his ability to reward or punish those under him.

Any reaction or questioning of his authority is understood as an attack on his right to command and react accordingly.

He alone decides and determines the policy to be followed as well as the procedures for achieving the objectives he sets.

His subordinates must simply obey his orders, without having the right to ask for clarifications or explanations.

It is in this context that he also controls the media. Initially, he divides them into friendly and hostile, with the former enjoying a multitude of privileges and having access to state money, while the latter are under persecution, of all kinds, very often with the help of controlled justice, while the physical extermination of publishers and journalists is not uncommon either through illegal imprisonment or through murders.

The authoritarian leader of the 21st century despises the international system and international organizations, just as the authoritarian leaders of the 20th century despised the League of Nations. Therefore, he is in no way affected by a negative decision by the Council of Europe, for example, on the status of human rights in his country or by a report by Amnesty International. It is also clear that human rights within his territory are not respected since they are always subject to the condition of not questioning his authority. After all, both by controlling the judiciary and the media, the authoritarian leader denies or calls into question basic human rights such as fair trials or the right to free access to information.

Furthermore, the authoritarian leader of the 21st century, like the one of the 20th, is governed by a spirit of megalomania and nostalgia for a heroic and imperial past. Just as Hitler sought to reconstitute the German Reich or Mussolini of the Roman Empire, today the respective authoritarian leaders are nostalgic for example of the past of lost Empires or strong military states.

This is why the political discourse of the authoritarian leader is often interspersed with historical – ahistorical, most of the time – references to the past, through which he seeks to raise issues in the present and predetermine developments in the future.

The authoritarian leader express his opposition or even his hostility to the Western model of pluralist parliamentary democracy, as he perceives elements of it such as

- representation,
- the separation and control of powers,
- respect for individual rights,
- the freedom of trade unionization as well as
- the freedom of the press,

as signs of weakness and decline which are not in line with the dynamism that he consider to express both as individual and as a model of governance and management of power. More generally, the adoration the authoritarian leader develops towards power, makes him intolerant of any citizen, institution or body that wishes or can limit it.

It is interesting to note that the countries in which the authoritarian leaders of the 21st century have appeared have no significant democratic tradition or any particular experience in representative democratic institutions and political pluralism. As a result, the authoritarian leader of today identifies in the collective political unconscious either with the "charismatic" and often equally authoritarian leader of the closer or distant past.

The citizens of these countries have moved from one regime to another without experiencing any significant period of pluralistic, representative and unfettered parliamentary democracy. The lack of any living memory of such a democracy, makes it particularly easy for an authoritarian leader to consolidate and exercise his power in an arbitrary manner.

At the same time as the absence of a democratic tradition in these countries dominates, nostalgia for an almost mythical imperial past prevails alongside a feeling of humiliation, in the sense that it is considered that the international community

- does not treat this country with due respect,
- does not show understanding for its aspirations and desires

In particular, the West, is stigmatized as the main guilty for these countries losing their imperial greatness and power. By saying this, I must clarify that in the past there werw many cases where the big western powers humiliated weak or defeated states. The case of Germany after the WWI is typical. I believe it would have been extremely difficult for a Hitler to come to

power if the Treaty of Versailles had included more dignified terms for defeated Germany. But what I described is not an excuse for rising to power of authoritarian leaders.

The only link between an authoritarian leader and the West is that he is trying to take advantage of the internal demon of all democratic regimes: populism. The authoritarian leader offers naïve but easy solutions to complicated problems. He appeals to the people who are left behind in western democracies due to the increase of inequality in our societies. Actually, the authoritarian leader appeals both to his people and to parts of the western societies by sharing a feeling of “left behind” or even worse of humiliation. In this respect we have to be extremely careful with the social gap that exists and widens in many western societies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the Cold War ended, we believed that we finally found the path to peace.

We believed that the fall of the Berlin Wall was marking the end of an ideological conflict and the unchallenged establishment of a world of peace and co-operation.

We even discussed about the end of history, meaning that western liberal democracy was the final ideological stage of human evolution

We naively believed that Europe, which had started two World Wars, had made the war an issue of the past.

We also believed that international cooperation and diplomacy will prevail the war.

We believed that the magnificent experiment of the European Union, would make war on our Continent unthinkable.

We strongly believed that given the tragic experiences of the twentieth century no one in our continent, will ever try again to alter state borders by force.

We even ignore the warning signs when authoritarian leaders clearly expressed their ambitions for territorial expansions..

We know now that we were wrong and we did not count the authoritarian leaders.

Dear participants and friends,

I grew up in a country where I learned to take many things for granted.

Democracy is a given.

Protecting the rights of the weak should be one of the main goals of the state.

Submission to the will of the majority, as expressed through free elections, is a given.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the last decade my country went through a huge economic crisis. The economic crisis quickly turned into a political and social one. Twelve years later we

know that the consequences of the crisis for the standard of living of the Greeks were equivalent to the consequences of a war.

During these 12 years I learned not to take anything for granted. It was doubtful whether pressing the switch would turn on the light in the room or whether the faucet would run water.

We are in Athens. Acropolis and its most beautiful monument on it, Parthenon, were constructed in the most glorious moment of a thriving democracy. Thirty years later, democracy in Athens has collapsed.

Thus, nothing is certain. We have to fight for it in order to preserve it.

And we have to stand firm every time that there is a direct threat to our common values and principles based in freedom and democracy.

Let us take the example of Russia.

at this point I must clarify that I have a strong sympathy for the Russian people and Russia. Greeks and Russians we share a common Orthodox Christian faith. Russia is part of the European civilization and culture. I cannot imagine Europe without Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin or Tchaikovsky.

I also hear some voices saying that NATO should have been more careful with Russia. They say that NATO had to consult in advance about some of his strategic moves that touched the perimeter of Russia.

This argument may be true, it may be not. I do not like to comment at this stage, what exactly happened after 1990 with Russia.

The day i got married a close friend gave me and my wife a piece of advice. "Whatever happens between you, don't ever think of hitting each other. No one will say he or she waw right to hit the other. Everyone will say that he attacked and hit. If you hit the other person, you will lose all your rights.

This is the case with Russia. From the moment Putin decided to attack Ukraine, back in 2014 and not in February this year. Russia lost any legitimacy. What is most important for me is that Russia is an aggressor of international law. Europe responded to the Russian attack with an economic war. It is a war, but within a peaceful context. In international law they are called retortive measures. They characterize a hostile but legal act which does not violate international obligations and does not constitute an act of aggression.

It is obvious that the economic war will have consequences for both sides. It's a double-edged sword. Europe is going to suffer in the winter months. Because of this, there are many voices who say that Ukraine should be pressured to find a solution that Russia can accept. This is a

totally unacceptable proposal. The message for Putin and other authoritarian leaders will be that whenever they threaten with a war and they use their military power, the weak side will have to compromise with them and bow to their will.

Dear friends,

This idea of compromise, in fact of submission of the weak to the strong authoritarian leader will not succeed. It must not succeed.

It is not only for the sake of Ukraine. We have to send a clear message to all authoritarian leaders that we do not tolerate acts of aggression that violate basic principles of international law. We do not tolerate historical revisionism and imperial nostalgia. We do not tolerate the violent change of state borders. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, (as Shakespeare said in "Henry V") we the community of democratic states, we have to show to the world that we stand united against violations of international law, we support democracy over authoritarianism and freedom over tyranny. Very simply we do not tolerate authoritarian leaders. The language of resentment, revisionism and shall not prevail.