

## **“We are not alarmed enough.”**

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SPIEGEL: In Germany, hundreds of thousands of people are currently taking to the streets because they perceive democracy to be in danger, threatened by the extreme right. Is democracy in danger?

Capoccia: As the erosion of liberal-democratic checks and balances in several countries shows, it is seriously threatened. The fact that a party like the AfD is polling over 20 percent is a shock, especially in Germany. This hasn't been seen for a long time. It is also strong in the West and the South, in affluent regions. This concerns and mobilizes people to take to the streets.

SPIEGEL: One of the demands is that politics should do more to protect democracy. Can a democracy defend itself?

Capoccia: Yes, a democracy can defend itself, and it has a range of options. The way politics acts makes a difference. It may not always be successful, but there are examples of democracies successfully fending off threats from extremist parties under great pressure.

SPIEGEL: You have studied the interwar period in Europe. Many democracies collapsed during that time. While in Italy and Germany, fascists took over, others survived. What did they do right?

Capoccia: Firstly, they did not commit suicide out of fear of death. There were several states where right-authoritarian dictatorships were established to fend off the fascists...

SPIEGEL: ... like in Austria, but also in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, or Portugal.

Capoccia: Other countries did not have an influential extremist party, such as Sweden, Switzerland, or the United

Kingdom. Democracy was not fundamentally challenged from within. However, there were also countries that successfully resisted, even though extreme parties were strong. The Czechoslovakia, Finland, and Belgium stand out in particular.

SPIEGEL: How did these democracies manage to survive?

Capoccia: I have identified three crucial factors. The most important is the behavior of those parties that are ideologically closest to the extreme party and therefore most challenged. I call them border parties. The question is: Do they uphold the democratic consensus or align themselves with the extremists? Secondly, the head of state can have surprisingly significant influence when taking an active role. Thirdly, defensive measures were also employed: bans, restrictions, laws against propaganda. None of these are sufficient alone, but they are often necessary.

SPIEGEL: In Germany, the president is considered powerless. What can a head of state do to stabilize democracy?

Capoccia: It can ensure that the democratic coalition holds together, mediate compromises, or exert influence in coalition negotiations. A head of state can address the public. But it can also intervene urgently. Then and now. In Italy, for example, the president refused to swear in a minister from the coalition of Cinque Stelle and Lega Nord. It was more about the concern that his opposition to the euro could destabilize the economy, not about democracy itself. But you can see: heads of state can have an impact.

SPIEGEL: It is fascinating to read that the debates in the border parties back then were very similar to today. Some politicians hoped to better achieve their goals by forming an alliance with the extremists. Others wanted to win back voters by approaching the extremists. There were internal faction conflicts.

Capoccia: It is indeed very familiar. The basic mechanisms of party competition still work today as they did back then. When a more radical party appears and a mainstream party loses many votes to it, it naturally wonders if it can react. If it can win back voters. And if coalition options shift, it is unsettling.

SPIEGEL: Nowadays, the danger comes from extreme right parties, so conservative or Christian democratic parties are in focus as guardians of democracy. Sometimes, they feel as if they are being distrusted, or as if the responsibility is being pushed onto them.

Capoccia: Conservatives are in focus because the threat comes from the extreme right. If there were strong far-left parties, suddenly the Social Democrats would face the same questions. This was the case in Finland in the twenties when the Communists were strong. The Social Democrats kept their distance. They were helped in doing so by the widespread societal fear of Communist Soviet Russia.

SPIEGEL: Is there a case where the border party cooperated with the extremists, and it turned out well?

Capoccia: No. The democratic consensus must hold, the center must stand together. This alone is not sufficient, but it is a necessary condition for democracies to survive.

SPIEGEL: What does that mean for today?

Capoccia: Conservative parties must not cooperate with the extreme right.

SPIEGEL: Do you believe these parties will remain steadfast?

Capoccia: Many conservative parties are leaning further to the right, and in some cases, they have taken distinctly illiberal positions. I think of the US Republicans, Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and Likud in Israel. In some countries like Spain, which has always had two large parties in

competition with each other, something like a Grand Coalition is at the moment inconceivable. The current inclination for the moderate right is to ally with the extreme right as a pathway to power.

SPIEGEL: In the fall, a new state parliament will be elected in Thuringia and Saxony. It could happen that all democratic parties have to unite to prevent the AfD from influencing the government, from the Left to the CDU. Should they do that?

Capoccia: Absolutely. In Belgium, there was a strong far-right force, the party was called Rex, and its leader was Léon Degrelle. In 1937, he ran in a by-election for a parliamentary seat that he strategically provoked. His plan was to get elected, then provoke another election, get his party to win again, and so on. He wanted to create momentum, give the impression that he was unstoppable.

SPIEGEL: How did the democratic forces react?

Capoccia: Back then, coalition formation in Belgium was already generally complicated and often took months. However, in this case, the three major democratic parties agreed to support a common candidate (the sitting Prime Minister, a technocrat) to run against Degrelle in just two days. He won with about three-quarters of the votes. That broke the momentum of the extremists.

SPIEGEL: Did Degrelle not run again?

Capoccia: The other parties legally prohibited provoking ad hoc new by-elections. They didn't rely on being able to beat him.

SPIEGEL: In Germany, there is a discussion about banning the AfD. It is often argued against, saying it would not help, it would not change attitudes or majorities.

Capoccia: One must distinguish between long-term measures and short-term measures. Of course, it requires

education, appropriate economic policies, all that, to sustain democracy in the long run. But when it comes to whether a democracy survives in the short term, one must also discuss other questions. History shows that how people act makes a difference. Whether a party ban in Germany is realistic, I have doubts about that.

SPIEGEL: What does your research say about such drastic measures?

Capoccia: There have been party bans, such as in Czechoslovakia, and there were also bans on associations or other organizations. They were used when the parties were relatively small but gaining momentum, for example, with unexpected electoral successes.

SPIEGEL: The AfD has gone far beyond this point.

Capoccia: That's true. There is no precedent for banning a party polling at 20 percent in surveys. Even the 10 percent the AfD had in the last election is quite a lot for a party ban when looking at history. So, I would be surprised if it were to happen.

SPIEGEL: So, should we just skip the debate?

Capoccia: No, absolutely not. I could imagine the government taking action against the youth organization or something happening on a local or regional level. And the debate itself can already have an impact, changing the perception of the party. It's good that it is being held.

SPIEGEL: You mentioned laws against propaganda. They were widespread back then. Did they work?

Capoccia: Back then, they worked. However, the circumstances have changed dramatically. Even 30 years ago, media could still be more easily controlled, radio, television, a few newspapers. With social media, that's over.

(SPIEGEL: Should states still try, considering history?)

Capoccia: The French have just uncovered a Russian propaganda network particularly active in Poland. It is good to prevent this kind of propaganda. The question is just how it can be done without the state having the power to intervene more deeply into people's lives.

SPIEGEL: Is there no fight against propaganda without increased censorship?

Capoccia: In the past, that was the case, and the danger still exists today. But there are ways to mitigate the risk of it turning into arbitrariness. An important step would be not shifting the responsibility to private companies that operate in an opaque and uncontrolled manner. It must be transparent and incorporate individual guarantees.)

SPIEGEL: Did governments act faster and more creatively in the interwar period?

Capoccia: In retrospect, democrats were quite creative in devising defensive responses. Today, the possibilities are being used only hesitantly, also in Germany. The government fears that it could alienate people with such actions. Demonstrations play an important role because they show politicians that they have the support of many people when it comes to saving democracy.

SPIEGEL: There is also the fear in politics of ultimately failing before the constitutional court.

Capoccia: Yes, politics is more legally bound today than before.

SPIEGEL: Today, there is hardly a country in Europe without an extreme right party. In most countries, social media is challenging to control. Are democracies more at risk today than before?

Capoccia: At least, one should not rely on the belief that nothing can happen today because democracies have existed for so long or because no Nazis are marching through the streets in polished boots. What is happening in many countries is a systematic attempt to undermine liberal-democratic principles like checks and balances. Even the oldest democracies are vulnerable to it.

SPIEGEL: Are we appropriately alarmed?

Capoccia: No, we are not alarmed enough; democracies are not doing enough for themselves. (When I started researching this 25 years ago, the analysis of structural factors dominated. People looked at socio-economic conditions, at what was considered the deeper causes of extremism: unemployment, the economy, education. But Germany, for example, has done much of what is generally recommended: established decades of democracy education, paid attention to a strong economy, kept societal inequality comparatively low. Nevertheless, an extreme right party is polling at 20 percent in surveys. It is high time to also consider short-term measures.

SPIEGEL: The debate on what resilient democracy practically means is just beginning.

Capoccia: I repeatedly find that there is little knowledge about the means and tools that resilient democracies have. There is a lack of a systematic overview, a lack of exchange, a lack of networking. No one will be able to write a manual that applies in every country and every situation, but we can learn from history and the present about how to defend democracy.)