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THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD
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PLENARY SESSION 2: THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Speech by Mr André GATTOLIN

Senator of the French Republic

Honourable parliamentarians, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a **great honour** for me to participate in this international conference on democracy and **also a pleasure** to reunite with several parliamentary friends of long standing.

To evoke the future of democracy, as we are invited to do by the title of this round table, **presupposes** first **establishing an honest and unvarnished observation** of the current state of democracy, particularly in Europe.

Democracy in Europe, and particularly in the countries that make up its western façade, **is** today **in a situation of weakness**. In France, as in the United Kingdom and in many other countries, **there is even talk of a deep crisis of democracy**.

If, faced with such situation, **we do not find** concrete and lasting **solutions** to the multiple and often concurrent crises that affect us, **our future** as a democracy is threatened.

The central question here is **to draw up a relevant state of the multiple threats** that influence today and to prioritize them in terms of risks for our future.

In France, the debate about the crisis of democracy is not recent, it even dates back several decades.

However, **the terms** in which we put it **are hardly relevant**: they are terribly **reductive and self-centred**, to the point of distracting us from other threats of primary importance.

This debate is self-centred because it focuses almost exclusively on **the immediate and national manifestations** of this evil. We worry about **the rise of populism**, the decline of **citizen participation** in elections, the growing **political fragmentation**, the **chronic political instability** ballot after ballot. Without being able to remedy this with effective measures, we continue to persuade ourselves that **the future of democracy takes place** exclusively **in a vacuum**, without global or external inferences.

In France, the idea that democracy, that our democracy, can be threatened, even brought down, **from the outside barely touches our political thinking**. Thus, when in **September 2021**, I published in the Senate **a very detailed report on foreign interference**, particularly Chinese, in French universities and research, it caused a lot of noise and was **unanimously welcomed**. Today however, and **almost 2 years later**, **none of the 26 concrete recommendations** I formulated **have officially been implemented!**

For more than 2 centuries, the successive **leaders** of France – all political affiliations combined – always **seem to be more concerned** about **the risk of revolution**, the overthrow of power by its people, than **the risk of war**, that carried out in a more or less conventional way by an external power.

Strange paradox for a country like France, which has certainly experienced many revolutionary episodes, but which has also experienced many wars, **4 years of occupation** of its territory during the Second World War, but also which, unlike most its European neighbours, has retained **a significant military capacity** and which has not ceased since the post-war period to be militarily involved in external theaters of operation, particularly in Africa!

The explanation of the situation that has prevailed in France for more than 50 years comes from what I call the **“dormant democracy syndrome”**; a kind of insensitivity that has set in over time, **a sense of harmlessness to outside threat and interference** that has set in after decades of a state of peace and prosperity that suggests that this peace which has made us rich will last and that it will even inevitably have contagious effects well beyond European borders.

Our original mistake in building post-war Europe – and France has a great responsibility in this matter – was to **abandon** the project to create a **European Defence Community** in 1954.

Our second major collective for the whole of Western Europe mistake and which especially produced the state of lethargy which struck us until the launching last year of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – and which I fear has not completely evaporated since – **dates back to the turn of the 80s and 90s**, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR. We wanted to believe **in the end of History**, in the emergence of **a world without enemies**, in the predominance of soft structures (like Europe) over hard structures (with a culture of strong internal cohesion). In France, we have de facto stopped thinking about the future. We are invaded by a hypertrophy of the present and immediacy. No political campaign dares to propose a vision of the future. The last presidential election is a sad illustration of this.

Politics is now under the diktat of the short term, of reactivity to events, rather than offering our fellow citizens a horizon, a real project in which they can project themselves. **This intentional disappearance of the future** in our political discourse is, I believe, one of the **vastly underestimated explanations of the democratic crisis** that is currently affecting our societies.

After the Fall of the Wall, we chose to **unify Europe through the market**, without agreeing to rethink ourselves politically, to think about our common future and our common defence, that is to say our ability to assert ourselves and protect us.

We believed that the victory over Soviet totalitarianism and Russian imperialism is **natural and definitive**.

Shortly before the great European enlargement of the mid-2000s, we **proclaimed ourselves a**

Union, even though we did **not even know how to constitute a real community** among ourselves and we did **not know how to build a real common house**.

Believing that we could build a new Europe house, an enlarged house **without a roof, without walls, without reinforced foundations** was the great illusion from the 1990s to today.

Thus, the debate on the construction of a real defence of Europe has not taken place.

The sensitive question of whether we should rather build a defence **specific to Europe** or a strong defence based on the **reinforcement of NATO** has not even been asked: we have **ruled out the first** while drastically reducing our investments in second one.

We have chosen **to reap the dividends of peace, to accelerate the opening** of our markets **at the same time as our dependencies**, both in the field of raw materials and in the organization of the value chain, with regard to authoritarian countries and command economies. All the countries of the Union, without distinction and including France, have **slashed their national defence spending**.

Since the current war in Ukraine, in Paris as well as in Brussels and Berlin, **we speak today of naivety, sometimes of blindness, to justify the astonishing benevolence that we have shown towards the Russia of Vladimir Putin and Kremlin leaders.**

We remain, on this subject, **extremely benevolent with regard to ourselves!** Because in reality **it is indeed denial**, denial of reality, **of which we should speak!**

Not seeing in itself is a serious thing. Not wanting to see is complicity in crime; a crime of non-assistance, a crime against the principles supposed to animate us, **a crime against our future** and the future that we still dare to call humanity.

For 20 years, we have refused to see that the Russian Federation was sliding from a very flawed democracy to an aggressive and fundamentally totalitarian regime. **The wars waged** in Chechnya, Ossetia, Syria, Crimea and the Donbass **have not opened our eyes.**

No, **we benignly allowed Russian influence and interference to develop** in our country.

We have, while speaking of sovereignty, allowed Nord Stream 2 to be built and increased our dependence on Russian oil and gas.

We have authorized **the propagandist channel RT News** to throw its disinformation and its destructive narrative on our territory. We let the Kremlin networks quietly infest our parliament. So I am of course **satisfied that, on my initiative, the French Senate**, then the National Assembly, **voted unanimously last month** for resolutions vigorously denouncing **the massive deportation of Ukrainian children** by Russia. Of course, I am happy to announce that **last Monday the National Assembly voted**, once again unanimously, **a resolution asking for the inclusion of the Wagner group on the list of terrorist organizations** drawn up by the European Union.

This is a very good thing, **but** I must say that I am waiting **to see whether my country**, the most directly confronted with Wagner's attacks in Africa, **will do everything** to ensure that this resolution is transformed into an effective decision, because the modalities of such a European inscription is much more complex than it seems...

These small political victories do not fail **to leave me with a bitter taste**, when I recall the comments of many of my colleagues a few weeks before February 24, 2022 who considered the French government to be too little understanding of Vladimir Putin!

I have never been one of those who believe **that democracy is acquired** and that it is **the natural and obvious way** of organizing any society. I naturally believe in the achievements of democracy, on the other hand **I do not believe that democracy is acquired forever**.

The ancient and recent history of France too often testifies **to the cynicism it can show** in terms of international relations and the support given to excessively authoritarian regimes.

I have the same concern about the European Union and its too weak capacity to resist internal divisions and the immediate and particular interests of the main nations that make it up.

If there is a positive indirect effect for Europe **of the terrible conflict** which is ravaging Ukraine today, it is perhaps that **the political centre of gravity of our continent has shifted towards the East**, that our common identity can finally evolve from a league of not always scrupulous merchants towards **an authentic community ready to fight for freedom**.

Freedom is not an option, freedom is and must remain **the meaning of our fight**. And **there can be no future for democracy** without this permanent fight for freedom.

A video of the speech:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44R04EOoevY&list=PLafTseM15bmGXfMyNS2B41zIF24U8cX6h&index=13>