



**Amb. Adriano Benedetti Vice President AESI**

## **Challenges to European democracy**

Many of you may recall that in the wake of enthusiasm and great expectations raised by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent crumbling of the Soviet Union, at the time an unknown US politologue came out with a path-breaking essay, titled "The end of history and the last man". It was based on the assumption that the multifaceted and intimately contradictory development of human events was coming to a conclusion because Western democracy (and capitalism) had gained such a definitive upper hand that the following course of history would witness only a slow, but irresistible, overflowing of democratic institutions all over the world. As a matter of fact, the last decade of the XXth century saw an increasing number of countries leaning towards democratic institutions, politically and economically.

Now, after three decades have elapsed since those eventful days occurring in the heart of Europe, the international scenario has dramatically changed. Three fundamental shocks have in the meantime shaken the world: the Twin Towers attack, the economic and financial crisis of 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic, accompanied in the last few years by the erratic policies of Trump's America. The final result of all this is a disheartening decrease in the number of democracies in the world and a parallel, equally worrying, strengthening in the international status of autocracies and dictatorships.

This is the present state of affairs: the virus crisis, which the world is struggling against, has the potential of inducing even more countries to adopt anti-democratic and anti-liberal practices and procedures. Public opinion polls being taken in Western countries reveal decreasing rates of support for democratic institutions, particularly among the young generation. This is a situation which, far from allowing for a sense of complacent indifference, requires reactions of alert and alarm. The optimistic and utopian vision of "The end of history" has been replaced by a sentiment of pessimistic decline.

The European Union finds itself in the midst of a global environment in which veiled onslaughts on its democratic structures may come from without and from within. As the external encroachments are self-evident, the internal predicament is no less

intrusive and destructive. On one hand, there are the attempts coming from some Eastern European countries to shift their democratic model towards forms of authoritarianism; on the other, the difficult and perhaps inadequate responses to a widespread request for financial solidarity stemming from the virus hardest hit countries risk generating a sort of backlash in terms of ever deeper waves of skepticism towards the Union.

At the same time, the up to now inconclusive, bungled and timid answer to the migration problem has the capacity most likely of hardening the divisions within northern and southern members. The post-covid climate may, moreover, accelerate the tendencies in favor of expanding in many countries the powers of the executive branch, damaging substantially the prerogatives of parliament and the judiciary. We have to bear in mind that European democracy can only solidify itself collectively, otherwise its preservation individually may become much more uncertain and unpredictable.

My description of the present situation is not a declaration of failure: it is only a call for attention, prudence and positive involvement. Particularly on the part of the younger generation, that is the one which is attending the current AESI seminars. The historical period, we are going through, is a transformative one, and its future traits are for all of us to contribute to define. The most important effort, though, would be on your shoulders.

20/05/20