

'If something isn't done we've hit democracy's high water mark. That's billions of people and their life chances' – Brian Klaas

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the world is becoming less democratic. In **The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding and Abetting the Decline of Democracy**, the LSE's **Brian Klaas** argues the West is helping to prop up dictators and hybrid regimes. He talks to Democratic Audit editor **Ros Taylor** about populism, Donald Trump, Theresa May and Russia, and argues that a trade bloc open only to democracies and democratising regimes would offer an incentive for change.*



A protester at Euromaidan in Kiev, December 2013. Photo: [Ivan Bandura](#) via a [CC-BY 2.0 licence](#)

You've written about many different parts of the world where you feel the West is abetting the decline of democracy. What's your biggest concern at the moment?

I'm very worried that people have given up on democracy, and I think that that is manifesting itself in several ways. One is that western governments no longer have the stomach to promote democracy. They're too worried about the risks.

If you look at the Arab Spring or Ukraine's involuntary transition, or any of those places where a real push for democratisation has created instability, it's caused a ripple effect. People in those regions don't consider democracy to be a primary goal. And they've started to make the mistake of believing that the dictatorial devil we know is better than the democratic devil we don't. I think that's a huge error. I think the reinterpretation of things like Syria – where people say, 'Oh, if only we'd let Assad stay in power or if we'd back him, all this would go away' – is completely misunderstanding despotism. The reason all these problems exist is people in these societies didn't have a safety valve or an outlet for their opinions or their aspiration. Authoritarian stability is a mirage that breaks apart catastrophically eventually.

'It's not a choice between Trump and perfect governance'

My argument is that we need to be on the right side of that – because otherwise you have a soured relationship, where countries collapse and where the West is what's supporting a brutal and horrible regime. When people look at Donald Trump, or Brexit, or rising populism in France, these are touted as reasons why democracy doesn't work or is a bad system. I think the exact opposite. It's not a choice between Donald Trump and perfect governance. That doesn't exist anywhere. It's a choice between – does somebody like Donald Trump have a chance to rise to power in a democratic way, or in a non-democratic way?

Imagine we're in 2017 and Trump has come to power in a coup, or in an election. Which one would you prefer, right? People are going to make governance mistakes no matter what. For me the strength of democracy is that if you do make a mistake, there's measures that can counteract it. If the person breaks the law, they can be removed from office, they can be voted out or you can block them legislatively. None of those attributes exist in an authoritarian system.

So to me the big challenge is for establishment, mainstream politicians to take seriously the viewpoints of people who are attracted to dangerous populism, and articulate change that's different – that's productive change, not xenophobic, inward-turning change, but 'Look, we hear you, we understand it's not working, but actually we have a plan.' The populists will get their feet burnt at the ballot box if they can do that, but no one's done it yet effectively.

Theresa May has described Brexit as a silent revolution. She is clearly trying to appeal to those people. Is she doing it in the right way?

No, I don't think so. One of the things she has begun embracing is this xenophobic rhetoric that is like the uglier side of populism. Something that Theresa May should say, in my view, is 'Look, we understand that we have messed up by neglecting the fact that globalisation hasn't been a benefit to everyone.' Look at globalisation – people around the world have really benefited from it, but if you're in the rustbelt in America and you're a Trump supporter, or you're in Sunderland in the UK, I can understand why you might not really go for the status quo. The problem is those people are looking for somebody to blame. Real leaders need to say: 'Xenophobic, anti-foreigner sentiment is not the thing to blame. We've looked at the problem and this is actually not what's causing it.' But they have to say what is causing it, and how they're going to fix it because until you have that second part the first part sounds really good.

The subtext that's been lost in all this is that as democracy falters in the West, despots in other countries – Africa, south-east Asia etcetera – are saying 'We don't want that model,' and it gives them cover to roll back democracy in a terrible way. I spoke to a general in Thailand. He was in the junta. He said: 'If Donald Trump's democracy, we don't want democracy.' The problem is that that is becoming a much harder thing to laugh off. It used to be: 'I don't want to be lectured by you, you don't have the perfect system' – but now it's 'Yeah, this a real concern.' So we do need to fix democracy in the West, but I also think we can't abandon it elsewhere.

There's also Russia. It was a democracy briefly – now clearly it's not, in any meaningful sense. How can the west act in a case like Russia, where military intervention is clearly inconceivable?

You don't want to end up in a huge conflict with Russia directly, but Russia and China both provide serious, serious problems for democratisation efforts – China because it has a viable authoritarian model that's seductive to people. It's not replicable in most places, it's showing its cracks and there are many, many reasons why China's model's flawed, but it's something that a despot in Africa can point to now as a reason why they're embracing authoritarian development. China is much more active in undermining democracy elsewhere.

Firstly, the US and the West generally need to be really aggressive in not just rolling over in these places. I spoke with a bunch of western ambassadors in Belarus. This is the last dictatorship in Europe. It's a place where politics is super dangerous. I was being trailed by KGB agents the entire time I was meeting with presidential candidates. It's an awful place to be a dissident or an opposition leader. They are jailed and tortured. But the prevailing view has become 'Well, Lukashenko – the dictator – at least he's not going to allow a Ukraine' – and the problem is the more that you think that, the more Russia becomes strong, because they're able to really play that game against the

West. And it's something that gets totally lost in geopolitics. If you look at Russia's economy, it's roughly the same size as Mexico's. So the idea that Russia is not under serious stress right now and it can't be pushed more is wrong. The low oil prices and the geostrategic adventures abroad are stretching the government thin. And it's when you have to really stand up to a despot. At some points it's akin to appeasement, when you say you're going to let Syria bleed because we don't want to go to war. But there's other ways to do it. I think it's a false choice to say we either go to war on Russia or we give up on democracy.

'A trade bloc that's only open to democracies'

One of the concrete proposals I have in the book is creating a trade bloc that's only open to democracies, and creating tiers of preferential access to it based on countries that are striving towards democracy – to give some countries like Tunisia something to aim for, where they actually get the benefit of democracy. Because we have a lot of sticks but no carrots. There's sanctions, loss of aid but you're only going to invoke those in extreme conditions and there's no economic reward.

Some people hate the Trans-Pacific Partnership, some people love it, but that's beside the point to me because the real point of that trade deal is it shows you don't need to have a common border to have a trade bloc. And that means you could have a trade bloc that's based on an idea. If you had independent criteria for what democracy and democratic reform was for membership, you'd have a built-in incentive. It'd be six or seven out of every ten dollars in the global economy. All of a sudden, Russia and China would be shut out and they'd start to feel the economic bite of authoritarianism. That's super important to me, because right now if you try to lecture a country on democracy they might say 'We're going to lose power and our economy's probably not going to grow for ten years' – and they might be right. So that's a hard sell. You have to come up with new ways to actually put it in people's self-interest to democratise. No-one's come up with anything yet, so that's why that proposal – which will almost certainly never happen – is a good idea.

The paradox of democracy promotion

So we've been spooked by the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan and that has made us disengage. What is there domestically that we can do to encourage people to engage abroad, when the instinct now everywhere is to turn inwards?

This is one of the paradoxes of democracy promotion. You often have electorates in the west that care about things other than democracy abroad, and that forces their governments to do the same thing. One of the examples I use in the book is how US foreign and Western foreign policy changed toward Pakistan between 1999 and 2001. In 1999 President Musharraf carries out a coup, he becomes this pariah. And then by 2001, after the September 11 attacks changed the calculus of voters in the west to actually care about Pakistan – because it's important to get Osama bin Laden – he ends up on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart eating a Twinkie. In some ways you can't blame Western politicians for doing that, because their people want them to do it. So the paradox of democracy promotion is sometimes you actually have to disregard your own electorates to stay with the long term commitment to the principle.

In terms of fixing democracy in the West itself, there's a lot of things that could be done better. Take Brexit. I think there's real concerns with the European Union, but there's a very big messaging problem. The amount of allegations levelled about how the EU is undemocratic versus the reality is not correct. But that's not people's fault necessarily, it's that nobody has explained to them how this system operates. That's a really big problem because you can't have democratic consent to something that people don't understand, and that's really badly packaged and constantly bashed by every Western politician. It's really easy to blame the EU if something goes wrong, but you never give them credit if they build a road in your community.

In the US we have really big problems with money and politics that need to be reformed, and things like

gerrymandering where districts are built to make them as uncompetitive as possible, which polarises opinion. Because of the menu of media people have, they self-select into their own opinion, and you have things that are simply untrue that are believed by wide segments of the population. That's really bad for democracy, because it only functions insofar as informed consent works – where people agree with the government, but they also understand what the government's doing. We've missed that informed part to an extent with really polarised – and occasionally really irresponsible – journalism.

All those things fit together to create a sort of perfect storm in the West, and also against democracy abroad. That's why the starting premise of the book is that the world's become less democratic every year since 2006. That's a startling thing to me, because if something isn't done we've hit democracy's high water mark. That's not some abstract, intellectual ivory tower point. That's billions of people and their life chances. The biggest problem – that very few people are talking about – is democracy outside the West, and how Western problems with democracy undermine it.

Brian Klaas is LSE Fellow in Comparative Politics. [The Despot's Accomplice](#) is published on 13 October 2016 in the UK and spring 2017 in the US.