

Ece Temelkuran, The Future of Democracy

In conversation with Andrew Kelly, Festival of Ideas

Andrew Kelly - Good afternoon everybody and welcome to Festival of Ideas Online. I'm Andrew Kelly and I'm Director of the Festival of Ideas. We're honoured to have again with us novelist, commentator and writer Ece Temelkuran live to discuss the future of democracy. This is the first part in a series of events we're running into this autumn on the future of democracy, and more events are listed in the chat and on our website. Ece was in Bristol last year for the publication of her essential book *How To Lose A Country: The Seven Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship*. She was also writer in residence for our Festival of the Future City last November. Thank you very much, Ece, for joining us.

Ece Temelkuran - Thank you, Andrew, for having me. It's so nice to be with you. I don't see you right now, maybe it's me, but just know that I don't see you. I can hear you but I don't see you.

AK - OK. We'll let one of the team sort that out. But as long as you can hear me and I can pose questions to you, that's good. For the audience, if you wish to put questions for this event... there is a question... you can see the 'ask a question' box at the bottom of the screen. Please put in all the questions you can and we'll weave those into the discussion as we go through. We'll also put this recording online when it's finished, and we'll publish a transcript in about a week's time. Ece, today is a reminder that the march of the populist continues, with what's happened in Poland. What's your immediate reaction to this? And we're still finding out what's going on, of course.

ET - Well, Duda seems to be winning. I think the election results are official, or not yet, I'm not sure, but it was obvious that he's winning. Poland has been in deep trouble since, you know, 2011, 10, or something. Around that time. I was there in 2016 for the publication of *Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy* and people were already very alarmed and they were terrified, and I think it all came true. They are now in the last phase of losing their democracy, it seems.

AK - Let's talk a little bit about the book, and we'll come back to Poland later.. You talked about the seven steps from dictatorship to democracy. Could you just take us through those steps because I think that would be helpful for the discussion we're going to have.

ET - Exactly. *How To Lose A Country: The Seven Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship* starts with the introduction, and I think this is important because the introduction tells the story of why I wrote the book. In 2016 I was in London giving a speech about my previous book, *Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy*, and people were listening to me as if they were listening to an irrelevant story. And I was saying to them that these things will happen to them as well, it is coming towards Europe, this right-wing populism, or rising authoritarianism. And I wasn't taken very seriously, I don't think, by them. So there was this woman in the audience – it was in the Frontline Club in London – after I told them about Turkey she brought her hands together in a very emotional tone, she asked me, 'So what can we do for you?' And I answered back, 'No, no, what can I do for you? Because you are in the beginning of this process, whereas we almost completed the process in Turkey. So actually I have the experience and you're just starting – you're just a novice in this frightening populism which is going to hit you very hard very soon.' So the introduction... that's why the introduction is called 'What can I do for you?' And then there are the seven steps from democracy to dictatorship.

The first step is a creative moment. And maybe it's better to say that I wrote the book as a manual to a dictator – for a beginner dictator, it's a manual for how to build a dictatorship. So it is the first step he has to take is to create a movement. As we all know, representative democracy is going through a crisis and this has started already in 1980s, evolved in 1990s and now we're in the 21st century and representative democracy is not holding water anymore. We hear the creaking sounds of a sinking ship, so to speak, not only in terms of national democracies but also in terms of global organisations like the United Nations or the European Union, or NATO even. So in this particular environment where the old is almost dead but the new is not born yet, the idea of creating a movement sounds really promising – as opposed to party, a static concept, movement promises action and also a change in the

system. And that is why it is very appealing to people, but mostly to the people in the provinces. And these movements in every country start from the provinces and they rise to be visible in the big cities. This is the first step, creating a movement. But also while creating a movement, by their political energy, rising right-wing populism creates the illusion of giving meaning to people's lives. Greater ideals, part of a greater entity, and so on. So creating a movement and creating a meaning is the first step – creating a cause, is the first step of right-wing populism.

The second step is quite annoying and entertaining at the same time. We all feel that we cannot have a proper discussion, a proper conversation, with the supporters of right-wing populist leaders. And I wanted to reveal the logical reason why we cannot have that conversation in the second step: disrupt rationale and terrorise the language. Right-wing populism uses a certain narrative and a certain schizophrenic logic to terrorise the communication sphere. They are doing this in physical life and they are mostly doing it on social media. So if anyone listening to this event is asking themselves 'Why can I not pass my message through to these people?', I think they have to read the chapter to see that even Aristotle would fail to communicate with these guys, with the basic rules of Aristotelian logic.

The third step is, which I find most important in the book, is remove the shame – immorality is hot in the post-truth world. In this third step, shamelessness and ruthlessness become political tools, very effective political tools. Also a badge of honour for these politicians and for supporters of these politicians. As we know, we do not only live by written laws – we live by traditions, common values, basic consensuses and so on. These leaders and their supporters are attacking these basic consensuses, human realms and traditions, so ruthlessly that they leave their audiences, their opposition, almost paralysed in shock. And they start using shamelessness as a cultural identity, and then a political identity. So they become kind of prideful of their shamelessness. This would sound familiar for British people at the moment after Cummings did what he did, or it would sound equally familiar to people in the United States after having lived with Trump all these years. So I do think that shamelessness and post-truth have a connection because all these lies could not have been produced and could not have been told to the masses unless shame was still there. When I speak of shame, I do not speak of shame in terms of an oppressive tool on people's individual lives, but as a form of shame that makes us humble and more humane. But these political leaders and their supporters do not recognise this basic human value. And this makes them... this enables them to tell all the lies that they need to tell. So post-truth and shame, the idea of shame, or lack of shame rather, has a deep and strong connection. And it all goes back to the 1980s. It's very much in detail in the book so I'm not getting into detail here. But this is also related to our changing understanding of human beings and how neoliberalism defines human beings, and how that definition enables human beings to be shameless today after decades of hardcore capitalism.

I am going on to the fourth step, which is very important for today's Poland – it is dismantle the judicial and political mechanisms. Every right-wing populist leader does this. Trump did it, Boris Johnson did it, any leader you can think of today as those who we see as the symbols of right-wing capitalism, they did the same thing. They did not only fill the judicial and political positions with their own people, with their own supporters, but also they played with the institutions, the state institutions, the societal institutions – they became like, they started to look like paper tigers. I don't know if you remember but Trump, as soon as he came to power, he started to meddle with the FBI and CIA. And it was as if the rest of the world was watching it thinking, 'Oh, we thought these guys were really strong but now we can see that Trump can play with these guys'. So actually it is... what they do is create a sense of superfluosity for the audience. They create this image of superfluosity state – meaningless, weak and inconsequential state. So after doing that it becomes so easy to invade the rest of the institutions for them.

And the fifth step is to design your own citizen. When a country comes to this step, it is almost already too late. The regime, now it's established – it's invaded all the political and judicial mechanisms and so on – now it starts to mould its own ideal citizen. And those who are not resembling this ideal citizen are not citizens anymore, they are second class citizens and they might be subjected to wartime rules, so they are pitted as the enemy. And in terms of designing the citizens, the ideal citizen, women take the most important part in this process, because somehow all the right-wing populist leaders think that women are like a material that can be re-moulded overnight. So when a regime starts to meddle with women, people have to be alert because it is the ultimate sign that facism is very close to that country.

And the sixth one, this one is quite important for Britain, I think, and also for the United States. The sixth step is let them laugh at the horror. As we know, when it comes to right-wing populist leaders we use, as opposition, we use political humour to bring them down to, damage their image, to weaken their political strength and so on. But then this political humour, by time, becomes an addiction, sort of, and it becomes ... people are too sheltered to go out and face the reality. And then also it creates the illusion that while we are talking about these leaders or their supporters, we are feeling as if we are, you know, doing something political. We think that expressing our anger or mocking them is a political action, which it is not, it is completely inconsequential. So laughing is something that we have to be careful about. We have to be careful about where we laugh, how we laugh, to whom we laugh, and what it means to them is less important actually than what it means to us. So... yeah, this is the sixth step.

The seventh step, and this is the last one, is build your own country. It is the phase where love it or leave it, comes to seem. And you don't have to lose a country, well, you don't have to be forced to leave a country to lose a country. You can live in your country and still feel like a refugee, still feel like you have to hide from something, and then you are not feeling at home anymore in your own country. And that is the phase, the seventh step, where you really feel like you lose your country. You've lost your country. So these are the steps, I don't know if it's not depressing enough, I can go on actually.

AK - I was going to depress us a bit more, to be honest, because this was published in February 2019, in the UK anyway – it's been translated into around 10 other languages I think so far, so it's obviously having quite an impact. And when I was preparing today I wrote a list out of some of the things that have happened since. Now, of course we're all aware of what's happened since, but when you put it in a list like that it does become quite depressing, you know, so you've had: Bolsonaro in Brazil; Poland we've talked about; you had the general election victory with the really huge Conservative majority; Putin extending his rule to 2036; Netanyahu clinging on to power; Chinese presidency term limits extended to 2035; what's happening right now in Hong Kong with the Chinese; Orbán's power grab and what's happened in Turkey. And then the biggest fear of all, which seems to be coming forward now, is the November elections in the United States, and ideas, you know, whether the election might be stolen in some form. Or indeed whether President Trump, if he's not elected, will refuse to leave the White House. All of this really demonstrates individual steps that you've talked about in terms of that work. Give us a little bit about your thoughts on, for example, the way that these populist leaders are really embedding themselves through legislative and judicial processes, like Putin and like the Chinese premier.

ET - I wrote the book in 2018, it was published in 2019, and I did my first book event in February, and I remember people still thinking that Brexit wouldn't happen, and that when I told them, 'You will have Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, get ready for that', they were laughing. I am not a prophet, I am not an astrologist or something, it's just that I see the pattern and after seeing the pattern it is almost impossible not to predict what's to come. And it's not a pattern that I invented, so to speak, I just observed it. But then by observing it... of course I had an ideological perspective, I have a political science perspective and so on. And I know that it is not all of a sudden in every country individual leaders deciding to act as they act today. There is a logic behind this and it all goes back to what we have done since the 1980s. If we see this, I don't like this word, as a big picture, we can see that there is a mechanism behind it. And the mechanism is about a very fundamental contradiction. The contradiction is the contract of democracy is not compatible with the contract of capitalism, or the current, you know, the current situation of capitalism. So this contradiction creates a danger. Either this entire system will fall down, or some people will come together and try to save it. And I see all these guys, all these leaders that you have been talking about, as the last mercenaries of a failing system. They are trying to defend the system – they are not interested in democracy at all. They are interested in the economic system working properly and they are trying to protect the privileged. I see it as something like, you remember, it was a monumental, symbolic film in 1980s, Rocky Balboa and Ivan Drago on the other side as the Soviet Union boxer. Now there is another ring – that ring is over. Now there is another ring and in this ring – on one side there are these last mercenaries, strong leaders of right-wing populism that are there to defend the last holding castle of capitalism. And on the other side, we the people, this is how it is actually. And it became quite clear during the time of corona I think, that

they do not care about people, but they care about the privileged and the economic cycle, the economic mechanism, which is not just at all. In terms of the United States, and in terms of other countries, there is a pattern in how these leaders behave. There is also a pattern for opposition as well, and in *How To Lose A Country* I try to explain that, in order to actually warn the United States and other European countries. The established opposition in each country does the same thing and it's so desperate. They find themselves in a contradictory position. They both have to protect the establishment, the political establishment, but they also have to do the opposition duties. And this is, you know, this is a mismatch, it cannot go together, that is why they are so confused. And today in United States we see that this is happening – thanks to corona and thanks to Black Lives Matter and thanks to Trump being so odious a clown, Joe Biden's job is so easy. But then in general, in fundamental logic, what they are doing cannot work, because you cannot protect the establishment as it is, the political establishment as it is, and meanwhile be the opposition. And in terms of right-wing populism and in terms of the anxiety that it creates, there are two fundamental reactions. There are people like me who think that, 'OK, there is something wrong with capitalism, that is why we're having this, because if there was social justice there could have been better democracy but if we cannot establish social justice, we cannot have democracy'. And there are the other people who think that we'll be straight back to normal if we get rid of these leaders only. If we get rid of Trump, if we get rid of Boris Johnson, everything will be back to normal. No, it won't be back to normal. One, there are millions of people who are religiously devoted to these leaders. Second, there is a systemic problem that we have to handle. And when I look at opposition, very much in general, I see them split into two. There is the established opposition, conventional progressive parties that are trying to keep the establishment together, meanwhile they are aware that there is a real danger of fascism. And there are the new progressive politics swarming around the establishment. They do not want to be part of this establishment. So it's like the effort to make the world better is split into two. One is in the establishment, and one outside of it. And our job now is to find a way to bring them together to be more, to give a more [UNCLEAR 24:34]. Our job in the United States is to find a way how Black Lives Matter movement comes together, integrates its political energy to democratic party, for instance, to give an example.

AK - That's one of the optimistic sides, and there's been a specific question about that that I want to come back to. But just, I just want to bring in a couple of audience questions while we're on this area. One of them is about the position in Poland, but also Romania and Hungary and Turkey, about the attacks on LGBTIQ rights, and women's rights. How significant are these in terms of rising populism and rising authoritarianism?

ET - Misogyny is the wingman of fascism, period. So, if we see misogyny, we should expect fascism very soon. By the way, I wrote the book in 2018, published in 2019, now we are 2020. Now I am reconsidering which concept to use: right-wing populism, or are we already in that phase that we can freely use fascism? Because when I published the book, especially in Germany, it was an issue, whether to call it fascism or not. But I think it is now time we call it by its name, it's fascism. LGBTQ people, that minority is very fragile and vulnerable. Women are also like that. Everybody has to know that this is only the beginning. If they get those people, women and the transgender minority, gay / lesbian minority, they will get to the others as well. It is almost like a joke to me now to say this, it sounds like a joke, but it is actually not: I remember the first three people who were sacked from newspapers in Turkey, from mainstream media, were women. One of them was me, in Turkey. But when it comes to women, I think everybody's a little bit relaxed when they are victimised. It's as if the old status quo is trying to make a deal with the new status quo, and in order to do it they are giving away a few [UNCLEAR 27:44], which is fine for them as well, but then it is always too late when they realise they shouldn't have given the [UNCLEAR 27:55] in the first place, because that is oppression – that violence comes to their doors as well, as long as they are not religious devotees of the regime. So if in Poland today people do not protect these minorities and women, they can be sure that it's going to come to them even though they will pretend that they are following the rules of the regime.

AK - I slightly lost you then [in the transmission] but let's move on to another question, because one thing that... one of the differences in the reaction to the pandemic, for example, by leaders, it seems to be that women leaders are performing far better than male leaders, and perhaps that's a lesson for us as well, really.

ET - Yeah. We are, I am kind of proud of it. Well, I am like, this is a bit risky to talk about but as a system breaks down, there is a crisis of male-hood as well. This goes for today, this goes for any other system that cracked down in the past. So whenever there is crises of male-hood, there is a vacuum in history, and that vacuum is always filled by women. The most recent example would be Second World War Europe: women were all over the place because the system was breaking down. Before, the First World War as well, that was the case. So there is a political vacuum and women are filling it now. Hopefully they are, this time... they will be there this time so stay. I am really hoping that.

AK - One thing that's also come up as a question, one question I wanted to ask you was how... we tend to lump everything together in these kinds of things and it's easy to do in half an hour's discussion and so on. But at least in the position in Britain where you've got Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, you know there will be a general election and he could be voted out. Compared to say China and Russia – it's often difficult to vote those leaders out. How easy is it to draw those transferable lessons across each, or do we have to look at each case on its own?

ET - Of course, I cannot know Britain as a British journalist or commentator or political analyst could. But then I didn't write this book to moan about my country, to complain about my home situation, actually I really wrote it to help the other people and also I believe that there should be a global solidarity in order to overcome this crisis of democracy. I do not think that we can beat fascism in one country. It cannot be beaten in one country and then we can forget the other countries, it's not like that. And we have to re-think fascism again globally, and we have to ask ourselves, 'Did we really beat fascism in the Second World War? Or did we just beat Hitler and then we carried on with business as usual?' So I think this is a good time to think about that question. I really do believe that beating fascism cannot be shouldered... it's too heavy to be shouldered by citizens of one country. It is so maddening, so devastating and so exhausting that once it takes over, fascism, people are already dead tired. So we cannot expect from citizens of a country to beat fascism on their own. We have to help each other. And it would be really kind of naive not to. We see that all these guys, actually, are quite... buddies, they are in close touch with each other, they are cooperating – although they look like they're fighting sometimes, they are actually very well collaborating with each other. So why don't we do that as the opposition?

AK - I've been reminded in the chat that your book is also very optimistic in certain areas and that there are certain ways we can move forward. I mean, what sources of optimism... I say this in the context that this is a theme we're running right through the autumn in how do we rescue and strengthen democracy. And one of our speakers recently, Margaret Heffernan, talked about cathedral projects and the need to plan things in the very long term. And one of those, she said, was about the recovery of democracy. So what hopeful signs do you see? And also you're part of a new movement, aren't you, which is on the left across Europe?

ET - It is New Progressive International. I am in the advisory board with another 50 members all around the world, and if everything goes right we are going to have our first meeting in Iceland, actually, in September. So I'm looking forward to that as well, it's going to be an exciting time for the global left I think. You know, we see a lot of things that would have been incredible one week prior to... one week before they happened, they would sound fantastical, like Black Lives Matter, you know, made the Minneapolis city government disband the police force. This could have been a crazy idea one week before that. But now we are living in the age of the incredible, so to speak. The most hopeful, like, a new possibility... where I see new possibility is the local governments, because we have seen during corona that in certain cities – like New York, London, Istanbul – they have become unprecedentedly rebellious against the power which has been seized by right-wing populism. And people, citizens of that city, gathered around these local governments and they owned these governments, owned these local political powers, like they have never done before. So I think new politics... the new dynamics of politics in the coming decade will be established upon this tension between local governments and central governments that have been seized by right-wing populism. And it's going to be very exciting. I was in Porto Alegre in 2002 for the World Social Forum – the entire global opposition was there, it was a carnival-esque, giant meeting. And the reason it was held in Porto Alegre was that the city was trying a new experiment, a new model: a citizen assembly together with municipality institution. At the time, I think the opposition was quite confident. It was 2002, it was only

one year to taste our biggest defeat that was Stop The War coalition which couldn't stop the war in Iraq. Since then, I think, one, the global opposition gathered experience, it matured, and also, now in the dusk of authoritarianism, they feel the need to incorporate their political energy to the existing political establishment somehow to beat the rising danger of fascism. And this could only be done through, it seems to me, through local politics. And finally, local politics are looking sexy enough to attract the new opposition, I think.

AK - We're almost out of time. I just want to ask you two specific questions which have come up in the discussion. First of all, *How To Lose A Country* still isn't published in Turkish, is that right?

ET - No, it is not. You know, for obvious reasons. But then all these things are the things that I have been writing for at least the last ten years in Turkey. I had a column before I was fired and these are the things that I have been talking about, some of them at least. It is not a nice thing to say that the book is not published in my mother tongue, it is a little bit painful, but in order to publish a book you have to put a lot of people in trouble and I don't want to do that.

AK - The final question is... you say you're not a prophet but you've been remarkably successful at some of the things you've prophesised, and there's been one question particularly about where do you think the UK might be in ten years' time, say. That's perhaps an unfair question in the sense it's difficult to... we can't forecast what the economy's going to be like next week at the moment, let alone where we'll be in ten years' time. But in terms of... Are you optimistic that we can turn this around and really make change happen?

ET - I am not either optimistic or pessimistic, but what I see is that... things will be happening. Interesting times are not good for normal people but they are amazing times for storytellers like me. So I am kind of excited when I see that a new politics is shaping and it is becoming quite efficient, and it is becoming more visible, relevant and realistic as well. In ten years' time, Britain, I cannot answer that question. But then I should say something for Britain. Don't think that Britain is... don't think that all those centuries' old pillars will hold anything – the institutions are people and people can be carried away by the zeitgeist. They can devote themselves to power. So don't trust your centuries' old institutions, that's what I would say to British people at this point.

AK - That's good advice, thank you very much for that. We're out of time I'm afraid – I'm sorry we couldn't get to all the questions but this debate will go on. We have a number of events coming up, as I mentioned, on the future of democracy. This includes from our own Bristol MPs where this will be one of the issues, as well as later on this month with Anne Applebaum and with Masha Gessen, and you can see details of these online, on our website, and they're also in the chat, so do sign up for those as well. Our next event is next Monday with Jenny Kleeman, the broadcaster, on her new book about sex robots and vegan meat, so slightly different subjects from what we've been talking about today. Thank you very much for joining us. Most of all, though, if you'd like to read Ece's book you can get it from our partners at Waterstones, please do that. And you can actually go into a physical bookshop now as well in this country at least, but don't forget to wear your mask. Thank you very much for participating, but thank you most of all to Ece Temelkuran. Thank you very much, Ece.

ET - Thank you for having me.

How to Lose a Country by Ece Temelkuran is published by 4th Estate. It's available to buy from our friends at [Waterstones](https://www.waterstones.com).

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This interview has been lightly edited.