

Democratic Backsliding: A conversation with Dr. Antoaneta Dimitrova

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A conversation with Dr. Antoaneta Dimitrova, Professor of Comparative Governance at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University.

During a live interview moderated by Alperen Çelik, Professor Dimitrova shared comprehensive reflections on her lifelong academic devotion to European integration, the modern structural threats posed by digital disinformation, and the urgent necessity for direct youth civic participation to defend democratic institutions.

Reflecting on her intellectual trajectory, Professor Dimitrova traced the origins of her political interest back to the momentous geopolitical shifts of 1989 in Bulgaria. The collapse of the communist regime served as a

foundational catalyst, sparking a deep fascination with the mechanics of democratic governance and the broader vision of European integration. For CEE nations navigating post-totalitarian transitions, the European Union represented far more than a simple economic framework; it stood as a normative model for peaceful inter-state cooperation, institutional stability, and long-term societal well-being.

Examining Bulgaria's specific historical trajectory, Professor Dimitrova underscored unique societal dynamics that distinguished its post-communist transition from other Eastern European nations. She highlighted the peaceful integration of the Bulgarian Turkish community in the aftermath of the brutal, forced assimilation policies enforced by the pre-1989 communist state. While post-communist transitions across the region often ignited intense ethnic polarization or institutional paralysis, Bulgaria managed to navigate this delicate reconciliation process peacefully, offering critical historical lessons on social cohesion and minority integration within democratic frameworks.

Shifting to modern geopolitical threats, Professor Dimitrova delivered a detailed analysis of how digital information warfare poses an existential challenge to contemporary European democracies. She observed that state actors, foreign adversaries, and populist movements no longer rely solely on overt propaganda. Instead, modern disinformation campaigns operate through subtle, highly fragmented, and emotionally charged narratives designed to exploit existing societal fractures. By weaponizing historical grievances, traditional cultural values, and institutional mistrust across social media platforms, malign actors systematically weaken civic consensus and subvert democratic dialogue. Combatting this strategy requires more than top-down political declarations; it demands a resilient public equipped with critical media literacy, deep institutional awareness, and formal educational initiatives starting at the high school and university levels.

On the topic of European Union enlargement, Professor Dimitrova addressed the ongoing accession prospects for candidate nations, including Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans. She argued firmly against shortcut solutions or secondary, partial partnerships that compromise the core principles of the single market and judicial oversight. Sustainable integration requires candidate countries to implement deep, verifiable structural reforms—particularly regarding the rule of law, anti-corruption frameworks, and human rights protections. At the same time to ensure long-term stability, the European Union must carefully balance expansion with the preservation of its own internal institutional cohesion and geopolitical readiness.

Addressing regulatory governance in the digital age, Professor Dimitrova evaluated key European legislative frameworks, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA). She highlighted the ongoing challenge of holding massive online platforms and search engines accountable for algorithmic manipulation, targeted political micro-targeting, and unchecked anonymity, while simul-

taneously safeguarding fundamental rights to freedom of speech and open expression.

Concluding her remarks, Professor Dimitrova issued a direct call to action to younger generations facing democratic backsliding and rising political apathy. She cautioned against confining political expression to passive commentary, likes, and algorithmic trends on platforms like TikTok or Instagram. Real, enduring democratic change requires direct institutional engagement—whether through joining political parties, participating in civic organizations, leading student diplomacy initiatives, or voting. Protecting European democracy, she emphasized, depends entirely on the active, structured, and informed participation of its youth within the physical architecture of democratic governance.

About the Interviewed: Professor Dimitrova is an expert academic and researcher specializing in European integration, post-communist democratic transitions, and institutional governance. With decades of experience studying Eastern European political developments, her work focuses on counteracting digital disinformation, analyzing EU enlargement dynamics, and fostering youth civic engagement within democratic frameworks.

