



Democracy Under Pressure: Conditions of the Authoritarian Turn Yesterday and Today

Call for Papers

The Conference at a Glance

The conference "Democracy Under Pressure: Conditions of the Authoritarian Turn Yesterday and Today" (WU Vienna, 24–26 May 2027) brings law and socioeconomics into an interdisciplinary conversation to examine the current rise of authoritarian tendencies around the world. It explores key threats to democratic governance and analyzes which socioeconomic, legal and institutional responses could strengthen democratic resilience. The conference addresses these issues in dialogue with four pivotal thinkers – Friedrich Hayek, Karl Polanyi, Hans Kelsen, and Carl Schmitt – whose influential yet antagonistic accounts of the proper economic and constitutional order still provide a highly relevant analytical framework for today's challenges.

We welcome individual abstracts and complete panel proposals from scholars in law, socioeconomics, political economy, constitutional theory, political science, economic sociology, history and related research fields — at all career stages, and from all regions, including the Global South.

Keynotes by Katharina Pistor (Columbia University) and Quinn Slobodian (Boston University).

Abstract submission deadline: ~~15 October~~ **New extended deadline → 29 October 2026.**

This conference is free of charge. Please note that we cannot provide funding for participants.

The Challenge: Linking the Crisis of Democracy with the Prevalent Legal and Economic Order

Around the world, the rise of authoritarian tendencies is putting democracy under increasing pressure. This authoritarian turn often goes hand-in-hand with nationalist populist politics and frequently entails the erosion of basic democratic norms, practices, and institutions "from within". Even in long-established democracies, voters turn towards authoritarian parties, and elected leaders seek to concentrate and cement their power by undermining key pillars of democratic governance. This includes questioning electoral legitimacy, weakening checks and balances — including the judiciary — and challenging fundamental rights protection.

The interdisciplinary conference "Democracy Under Pressure: Conditions of the Authoritarian Turn Yesterday and Today" aims at developing a better understanding of the conditions of this authoritarian turn. The developments that endanger democracy do not occur in a vacuum; they arise within specific

legal systems and economic orders. Bringing together the disciplines of law and socioeconomics is therefore crucial for analyzing the current conjuncture and the threats to democratic governance and resilience that many societies face today.

The conference explores which legal, institutional, and socioeconomic responses might strengthen democratic resilience at a moment marked by the resurgence of movements articulating supremacist ideologies. Such movements challenge, sometimes even oppose, the principles of freedom and equality — principles that are key to pluralist constitutional and socioeconomic orders and whose foundations, prerequisites, and limits the conference also seeks to interrogate.

Historical Parallels and Departures

The conference addresses these challenges through a specific historical and context-sensitive lens: it explores how intellectual debates starting from the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s — a previous moment of democratic crisis — can provide insights into today's authoritarian turn. More specifically, the conference seeks to reflect on current challenges in light of diagnoses from four pivotal thinkers shaped by the interwar crisis — Friedrich Hayek, Karl Polanyi, Hans Kelsen, and Carl Schmitt. Their competing analyses of the proper socioeconomic and constitutional order — and the ways in which their work linked freedom with equality and capitalism with democracy — provide a rich historical and intellectual foundation for examining today's challenges.

While history does not repeat itself, it is often said to rhyme. The conference aims to bring together participants interested in engaging with the relevance of the ideas of one or more of the four thinkers for understanding today's authoritarian turn. It seeks to link historical debates on markets, law, and authority to analyses of contemporary challenges to liberal democracies posed by, *inter alia*, digital surveillance, gendered anti-feminism, inequality, climate crisis, and imperialism.

The four thinkers offer an analytical framework allowing contributors from different disciplines and methodological traditions to address the conditions of democratic fragility. While rooted in European traditions, the questions they raise are highly relevant for today's challenges for democracies all over the globe. Therefore, the conference explicitly welcomes contributions that bring non-Western political and legal traditions into dialogue with the four thinkers — by extension or productive friction.

Conference Themes

Rather than searching for ready-made answers, the conference seeks to investigate burning issues related to the fundamental threats facing contemporary democracies. We invite scholars from various disciplines, including socioeconomics, law, political economy, constitutional theory, political science, economic sociology, and history to submit papers relating to the following four themes:

How current legal and socioeconomic conditions shape the authoritarian turn

Contributions could address questions such as:

- How do current economic developments and narratives impact contemporary forms of authoritarianism?

- How can public and private law be transformed to counter democratic erosion? What role can public law play in democratically governing economic power? How does private law shape the distribution of economic power, and what would its democratic transformation require?
- How do current economic processes and legal systems interact in producing democratic resilience or crises?
- On what grounds can we defend the rule of law, constitutionalism, and the protection of minority rights in the context of democratic backsliding — and how do these defenses relate to universalist and dignity-based commitments?
- What institutional, legal, and socioeconomic conditions are necessary for democratic resilience today, and what can the interwar thinkers contribute to answering this question?
- How do authoritarian tendencies or dynamics in the Global South (post-colonial, non-Western contexts) illuminate or contest dominant western framings of the authoritarian turn? How do legacies of colonial rule, and unequal integration into the global economy shape contemporary trajectories of democratic backsliding?

Exploring the current crises of democracy by integrating law and socioeconomics

Contributions could address topics such as:

- The relationship between capitalism and democracy; the relationship between political rights, civic, property, and economic rights; the concept and structure of property rights in light of different socio-political objectives
- The relationship of liberal democracies to competing conceptions of equality and to supremacist counter-projects
- The relationship of liberal democracy to other forms of democracy and other forms of liberalism
- How are freedom and equality institutionalized — or undermined — by contemporary legal and economic orders?
- How are political and economic rights related? Do market economies require limits on political democracy; does political democracy require socioeconomic democratization?
- Are economic liberalism and limits on the scope of democracy related, and if so, how?
- How does the concentration of economic and political power impact democratic resilience and the substantive equality of citizens?

What the diverging worldviews of the four thinkers reveal about democratic crisis

Contributions could address questions such as:

- What were, according to the four thinkers, the necessary conditions for democratic resilience, and where do they converge or conflict?
- How did the four thinkers conceive — or reject — universalism, human dignity, and equality as foundations of political and economic order?
- How did the four thinkers diagnose fascism, and how far do their diagnoses converge or conflict?
- What causes democratic collapse: state intervention undermining free markets (Hayek) or the unconstrained market destroying democratic legitimacy (Polanyi)?

- What does the Kelsen-Schmitt debate on the guardian of the constitution reveal about structural tensions in liberal constitutionalism — and what are its stakes today, as constitutional courts in several democracies face capture or restructuring?
- Can a legal system grounded in the procedural pluralism Kelsen described — his so-called "moral relativism" — generate sufficient political will and substantive normative resources to resist authoritarianism and to defend the equal dignity of persons?
- How does research by Hayekian, Polanyian, Kelsenian, and Schmittian scholars interpret the conditions of the authoritarian turn yesterday and today?
- How do the four interwar thinkers travel — or fail to travel — when read alongside scholars and traditions from the Global South, from development studies, and decolonial research? Where do these traditions extend or contest the diagnostic categories of Hayek, Polanyi, Kelsen, and Schmitt?

Key learnings from interwar debates for the understanding of current developments

Contributions could address questions such as:

- What can the 1920s and 1930s teach about socioeconomic causes of constitutional fragility and political collapse today?
- Are current reactionary, far-right, and authoritarian movements new forms of fascism, and/or how do they differ from fascism in the 20th century? In how far are anti-universalist, anti-egalitarian, and supremacist tendencies inherent elements of the authoritarian turn?
- How can we move from historical diagnosis to concrete pathways towards transformation and democratic resilience?
- Where do the historical analogies reach their limits? What features of the contemporary authoritarian turn go beyond what the interwar debates could account for?

Ideational Background: Competing Diagnoses of Hayek, Polanyi, Kelsen, and Schmitt

Hayek, Polanyi, Kelsen, and Schmitt offer fundamentally different analyses of democracy's fragility in the 20th century. The conference *"Democracy Under Pressure: Conditions of the Authoritarian Turn Yesterday and Today"* aims to explore commonalities and conflicts, genuine dilemmas and productive tensions, in order to gain insights into democracy's fragility in the 21st century — while also discussing the limits of the historical analogy between today's authoritarian turn and the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s.

Friedrich Hayek

For Friedrich Hayek, state interventionism leads to fascism. He understood the economy as one big market and economics as chrematistic, as the study of wealth. For him, markets are not only the most efficient allocation mechanism but constitutive for freedom. However, markets need "morals" — traditional institutions, selected in an evolutionary process — to sustain them. Besides the family, which sustains a private, protected sphere, a strong but small state is necessary to create the conditions for functioning markets and, if necessary, to establish new markets, e.g. for emission trading. Economic rights are more important than political rights, as an excess of democracy can undermine economic freedom. In case of clashes between economic and political freedom, Hayek prioritized economic liberalism over majoritarian democracy. Within this framework, equality is conceived in strictly formal

terms — as equality before the law and equal freedom to participate in market exchange — while substantive equality, redistributive claims, and universalist conceptions of human dignity beyond the protection of property and contract are treated with deep suspicion — a reading the conference invites participants to engage with.

Karl Polanyi

For Karl Polanyi, fascism was a political response that sacrificed democracy to guarantee the survival of capitalism by winning the support of parts of the masses. For him, there is a structural tension between capitalism and democracy. While democracy is based on political rights and governed by majorities, capitalism is based on economic rights and organized by the cash nexus, private property, and contracts. This generates a clash between movements to expand markets into ever more societal domains and countermovements to protect society from the perils of this expansionary and exploitative logic. In the 1920s and the 2010s alike, economic policymaking was dominated by austerity policies and the concentration of wealth, often obstructing reforms involving planning, regulation, or public control. For the conference, Polanyi thus offers both a diagnosis of how unconstrained market expansion generates the social dislocations that authoritarian movements mobilize, and a productive starting point to explore what institutional, legal, and socioeconomic reforms might today sustain the foundations of democratic life.

Hans Kelsen

Hans Kelsen conceived democracy not as the realization of a unified popular will, but as a continuous process of establishing compromise among competing interests. For Kelsen, the essence and value of democracy lay precisely in its capacity to offer procedural mechanisms for peaceful change. Democracy, in this view, is the political order best suited to pluralist societies: it minimizes coercion, enables individual freedom, and rests on compromises among social groups, acknowledging that no single group possesses — or can possess — knowledge of any absolute truth. His legal positivism and his advocacy for constitutional courts as guardians of the rules of the game represented an attempt to protect openness with respect to the organization of society and economy. For Kelsen, accordingly, liberal democracy is compatible with a range of socioeconomic orders, including a mixed economy, capitalism, and socialism. For the conference, Kelsen offers both a framework for thinking about democratic resilience under conditions of value pluralism and a productive provocation: can a procedural conception of democracy, committed to the formal equality of persons and the protection of minorities, generate or sustain the substantive commitments to freedom and equality on which its own survival may depend?

Carl Schmitt

For Carl Schmitt, the crisis of Weimar revealed what he took to be the structural weaknesses of liberal parliamentary democracy: its proceduralism, its pluralism, and its inability to decide. His critique of parliamentary deliberation as evasive "endless conversation" articulated widespread skepticism about democratic institutions in the 1920s and 1930s — a skepticism once again taken up today. Schmitt identified a genuine tension in liberal constitutionalism: can legal procedures constrain power when the exception becomes the rule? His answer pointed away from parliamentary pluralism and toward a series of concepts that have shaped authoritarian political and legal thought ever since. Politics, for Schmitt, is characterized by the *friend–enemy distinction*; sovereignty belongs to "he who decides on

the exception"; and democracy is understood not as the institutional safeguarding of equal individual rights, but as the substantive identity between rulers and ruled — an identity that presupposes a homogeneous people whose unity is asserted against internal and external enemies. While Schmitt was only seldom explicit about the relationship between capitalism and democracy, his insistence on the necessity of strong executive leadership in both politics and the economy lent intellectual legitimacy to authoritarian tendencies in the interwar period and culminated in his open alignment with the National Socialist regime. The reception of Schmitt's thought today is correspondingly ambivalent across the political spectrum and around the globe. For the conference, these diverse receptions make Schmitt topical: his thinking serves both as a diagnostic resource whose categories continue to clarify the structural pressures liberal democracies face and as a counter-position against which the principles of freedom and equality must be defended.

Practical Information

We welcome the submission of **individual abstracts** as well as proposals for **complete panels** from scholars in law, socioeconomics, political economy, constitutional theory, political science, economic sociology, history and related research fields — at all career stages, and from all regions, including the Global South.

Individual abstracts should have up to 400 words. Panel proposals should consist of a short description of the overall idea and theme of the panel (up to 400 words) as well as the abstracts of each submission that is part of the panel (up to 200 words each).

Please submit your abstract/panel proposal as one PDF file via our [conference website](#). Contributions will be selected based on a **double-blind peer review**.

The deadline for the submission of abstracts and panel proposals is **29 October 2026** (extended from 15 October 2026). Confirmation of acceptance will be shared by 30 November 2026. If your proposal is accepted, you will then need to register for the conference in order to confirm your participation. The relevant details and deadline for doing so will be included in the acceptance email.

This conference is free of charge. Please note that we cannot provide funding for participants.

Conference Chairs

Verena Madner (Head of the Institute for Law and Governance, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, and Vice-President of the Austrian Constitutional Court)

Stefan Mayr (Deputy Head of the Institute for Law and Governance, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business)

Andreas Novy (Head of the Institute for Spatial and Social-Ecological Transformations, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, and President of the International Karl Polanyi Society)

Organizing Committee

Verena Madner, Stefan Mayr, Andreas Novy, Kirsten Hillbrand, Charlotte Lejeune, Jana Schulte Hürmann, and Sterre de Vries