



SAVE THE DATE: CONFERENCE (2027)

The Institute for Law and Governance, the Institute for Spatial and Social-Ecological Transformations (ISSET) and the International Karl Polanyi Society (IKPS) at WU Vienna University of Economics and Business cordially invite you to the interdisciplinary conference on:

Democracy Under Pressure: Lessons from past authoritarian crises

WU Vienna, 24 May to 26 May 2027

Overview

The 2020s have witnessed a troubling erosion of democratic institutions across the globe. In the US, MAGA questions electoral legitimacy and undermines state administrations and fundamental rights. In general, “illiberal democracies” and “electoral autocracies” challenge constitutional courts and related checks and balances. Consequently, contemporary societies in established democracies face multiple threats to democratic resilience, including the return of fascism.

This interdisciplinary conference addresses this urgent challenge through a specific lens: It seeks to explore how intellectual debates from a past period of democratic crisis—the 1920s and 1930s—can provide insights into current dilemmas.

While history does not repeat itself, it is often said to rhyme. The conference will connect historical debates on markets, law, and authority to analyses of contemporary challenges to liberal democracies posed, inter alia, by digital surveillance, gendered anti-feminism, inequality, climate crisis, and imperialism. To shed light on today’s authoritarian turn, we will explore competing diagnoses from four pivotal thinkers—Friedrich von Hayek (“state interventionism leads to fascism”), Karl Polanyi (“fascism defends capitalism while sacrificing democracy”), Hans Kelsen (“democracy is based on pluralist compromise”), and Carl Schmitt (“sovereignty means the power to decide on the state of exception”).

Vienna—a city whose history embodies both the promise and fragility of democratic experimentation—offers the ideal setting for this urgent conversation.

The Department of Socioeconomics at WU, our academic home base, is an interdisciplinary faculty, uniting economists, social scientists, and legal scholars—a unique institution in the German-speaking context.

Keynote Speakers (confirmed)

Katharina Pistor (Columbia Law)

Quinn Slobodian (Boston University)



Core Questions

Rather than contemplating ready-made answers, the conference will investigate burning issues related to contested democracies past and present: Are economic liberalism and political authoritarianism related and if so, how do they intersect? What can the 1920s-30s teach us about socioeconomic causes of constitutional fragility and political collapse? How do current technological and politico-economic developments impact contemporary forms of authoritarianism? And how can we move from “what went wrong then” to “what and how to transform today?”.

Methodological Approach

The conference employs three complementary methods.

- *Textual Reconstruction*: Close reading of primary sources to understand each thinker’s arguments in their strongest form, avoiding caricature while identifying genuine tensions and contradictions by connecting texts to their context.
- *Comparative Historical Analysis*: Examining case studies of democratic resilience and collapse in the interwar period (Austria 1933-34, Germany 1930-33) and contemporary cases (Hungary, Poland, Spain's Catalan crisis, US, Brazil for example) to identify patterns and divergences.
- *Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue*: Structured panels pairing legal scholars with economists, and historians with political theorists, to explore how different disciplinary perspectives illuminate—or obscure—connections between economic processes and political-legal outcomes.

Format

Three days of keynotes, cross-disciplinary panels, and round table discussions to examine the intersections of socioeconomics and law. Sessions will be organized around substantive problems rather than individual thinkers, ensuring genuine dialogue across perspectives.

Our call is aimed at scholars from various disciplines, including economics, economic sociology, law and political economy, constitutional theory, political science, and history.

Expected Outcomes

The conference seeks to foster scholarly networks capable of sustained interdisciplinary engagement with democracy’s present crisis. Rather than providing predetermined conclusions, it seeks to clarify what historic debates can—and cannot—teach us about contemporary challenges to democratic institutions and socioeconomic development. It aims to achieve a better understanding of the underlying politico-economic and socio-cultural conditions of the current authoritarian turn, thereby contributing to a new research programme at the intersection of socioeconomics and law.

Full call and registration details coming soon.