

“3rd Waseda Brussels Conference, Democracy at the Crossroads:
Populism and its Consequences on Political Trust” (17 Dec 2019)
Organised by Waseda University, jointly with the Université Libre de
Bruxelles (ULB)

Opening Address by Ambassador Kazuo Kodama,
Ambassador of Japan to the European Union

Prof. GEMMA Masahiko, Vice President, Waseda
University

Prof. Judith LE MAIRE, Vice Rector, Université Libre de
Bruxelles

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning to you all,

(Introduction: “Quo Vadis Europa”)

Thank you very much for inviting me to the 3rd Waseda
Brussels Conference titled “ Democracy at the
Crossroads: Populism and its Consequences on Political
Trust”. Almost two years ago, I was struck by the headline
of the 2017 New Year edition of New Europe: “Quo

Vadis Europa”. This caption reflected the prevailing sentiment of anxiety about the security of Europe and the sense of uncertainty about the bloc’s future, which was widely held by citizens across Europe at that time.

(Three events which shaped the anxieties of the people in Europe)

In my view, such a sentiment was, to a great degree, influenced or reinforced by the following three major political incidents/events which occurred between 2014 and 2016.

The first was the enormous influx of migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean from the Middle East and Africa which amounted to over 1.4 million people throughout 2015 and 2016. This man-made crisis was triggered by the worsening of conditions in Syria and Iraq due to the emergence of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

The second was a series of so-called “Islamic jihadist” indiscriminate terrorist attacks within the EU, including the Ile-de-France attacks, the Charlie Hebdo shooting on 7–9 January, 2015(17+3 deaths), Paris and Saint-Denis attacks on 13–14 November, 2015(130+7), Brussels and Zaventem bombings on 22 March, 2016(32+3), the Nice attack on July 14, 2016(86+1) and the Berlin attack on 19 December, 2016(12), to name but a few.

The third was the outcome of the UK’s referendum on BREXIT in which the majority of UK voters chose to leave the EU.

Indeed, over the period between June 2015 and June 2019, a Eurobarometer survey has constantly shown that European citizens’ top two greatest concerns have been the need to address the challenges posed by immigration and terrorism.

(The EU has weathered those crises in the end.)

As we come to the close of 2019, let us consider how such a sense of anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty for the future of Europe, held by European citizens, has translated into their voting behaviors in both the general elections of the EU member states as well as in the most recent European Parliamentary election.

I, for one, contend that, despite the above mentioned crises, the European Union has weathered all of these challenges and has managed to stem the rising tide of anti-immigrant and anti-EU populist political parties, who have never received above 20% support in most of the general elections held between 2017 and 2019.

The spring 2019 Eurobarometer shows a strong increase in citizens' positive perception of the European Union, across the board. For the citizens of Europe, the EU embodies, first and foremost, democracy and individual freedoms, the rule of law and human rights protection. Trust in the EU is at its highest level (44%)

since 2014 and remains higher than trust in national governments (34%) or parliaments (34%).

As for the future of Europe, a majority of Europeans are optimistic about it, 61%, which remains the highest level since 2010. You may be surprised to hear the following result about the question concerning the way democracy works in the EU.

55% of Europeans say that they are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU. The highest score since autumn 2004, while the number of those “not satisfied” has decreased by five percentage points, to 36%

Now, with respect to the outcome of the 2019 EP election, I would like to point out that the voter turn-out was 50.99% and for the first time in the history of the EP election, the number increased from the immediately preceding election. Second, the two major political groups, namely, the EPP and the S&D lost their combined majority share from 53.7% to 44.74%. On the other hand, both the Liberal group (Renew

Europe) and the Greens/EFA gained their shares, respectively, from 9.1% to 14.38% for the Liberals and from 6.9% to 9.85% for the Greens. While we can comment that on one hand, the outcome signals the further fragmentation among political groups in the European Parliament, these 4 political groups are all pro-Europe. Their combined share of their seats is 68.97%, more than the two thirds majority. In a nutshell, democracy in Europe is functioning well.

Let us remember that democracy, by definition, embraces what I call “an organized chaos” or “organized disorderliness” causing changes in government through general elections. After all, BREXIT is the direct consequence of a referendum by the sovereign British voters and Mr. Trump was democratically elected by the sovereign US voters. We have to live with and through the consequences of these sovereign decisions.

(My answer to challenges posed to democracies by the populism)

Ladies and gentlemen,

My answer to the challenges facing democracy is: let us look to a lodestar, to remind us of our central aims, to guide us in the right direction and to ensure we maintain a strong sense of purpose. I believe that the essential action to draw from this is to improve the quality of our democracies. That is to say that we must augment our “democracy” with further fundamental principles and values: The rule of law, fundamental human rights and the independence of the judiciary and of the press. In this respect, I always think of the following insightful admonition by Reinhold Niebuhr who wrote in 1944 that Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary. His message to humanity is more relevant to us now than it ever was in 1944. The most important point is that we must be aware of the truth that democracy is necessary but not sufficient in order to fight against injustice, including widening inequalities and the erosion of human dignity. I strongly believe in the many benefits of free trade, which has lifted billions across the globe

out of poverty, but we must acknowledge that globalization produces losers as well as winners. If we are to learn from the events over the last ten years, we must respond to the concerns of the economically left-behind in our democracies in a way that goes beyond “throwing money at the problem.” I said earlier “democracy needs to be augmented”. Here I must be more specific. We are often reminded that every individual is born free and equal. Yet we know that inequalities among people never disappear. But I say let us not despair. During my days at the UN and at the OECD, I came to the conclusion that the concept of “human security” can augment our democracy to meaningfully enrich our conventional concept of equal opportunities. In essence, human security means the protection and empowerment of an individual whose lifetime career trajectory is full of potential at the beginning. Promoting empowerment can and should help inherently disadvantaged individuals to attain equal access to opportunities. I do believe empowerment should be a key feature of any policy to enhance

or guarantee both freedom and equality among people, more than anything else, including social safety nets.

(Conclusion)

I would like to conclude my remarks by saying that our liberal democracies will no doubt be tested in 2020. Their resilience will be tested. Being a democracy is not enough. Democracy must be actionable with the help of our commitment to the fundamental and universal values of freedom and civil rights, and more focused attention to the policy measures which empower people to cope with the rough waves of globalization. Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude by wishing this conference every success in achieving a closer research partnership between Europe and Japan.

Thank you very much for your attention. (End)