Interview - Timothy Garton Ash

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Timothy Garton Ash is a British historian, author and commentator. He is a Professor of European Studies, Isaiah Berlin Professorial Fellow, and Honorary Chair of the European Studies Centre at St. Antony's College at Oxford University and a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. He has written extensively about the recent history and politics of Europe, and his weekly column in *The Guardian* offers incisive, forward-leaning analysis of European politics as well as free speech issues around the world. He is also a frequent contributor to*The New York Review of Books*. His current research interests include the future of free speech in a multicultural and interconnected world – on which he is writing a book – and the relationship between an enlarged European Union, the United States and the China.

Garton Ash studied at Exeter College, University of Oxford, at Oxford's St. Antony's College for post-graduate study, and then, in the still divided Berlin, the Free University in West Berlin and the Humboldt University in East Berlin. He has subsequently written about the Communist dictatorships of Central and Eastern Europe, their experience with the secret police, the Revolutions of 1989, and the transformation of the former Eastern Bloc states into European Union members. His book *The File: A Personal History* is a memoir of returning to Berlin to open the file that the Stasi kept on him and to confront those who informed against him to the secret police. Recent books include*Facts Are Subversive* and *Free World.*

Timothy Garton Ash answers your questions about the Euro crisis, EU integration, the UK royal charter on the press, and more.

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Where do you see the most exciting developments and debates happening in contemporary world politics?

I think China. I find Chinese debates about their political system domestically, but also about China's claims in the international system, to be among the most original and surprising and exciting of our time. The starting point is a system that none of us had anticipated, which I call Leninist capitalism, but also obviously because it is the most important emerging power. The question of China's relations with the United States in particular, and the rest of the world in general, is the question of war and peace in the 21st century.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I'm a historian by training and by conviction. And so the thing that has throughout informed my thinking about international relations is history. I think, for example, the reason that I was perhaps able to see sooner than some others that the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe was decaying- if not disintegrating -was that I came to it through history and through Germany, rather than through Sovietology and through Moscow. And therefore the starting point was that no empire in history has lasted forever, and this one won't either. I saw it from central Europe, from the periphery of the empire rather than from the center, and from the bottom-up rather than the top-down. So that was clearly a formative experience shaped by an understanding of history.

I think that many of us in the 1990s, in the historical optimism that followed the incredible non-violent dissolution of the nuclear armed Soviet empire, and the emergence of a new model of revolution in 1989, fell prey to a certain historical optimism. We cherished at least the *hope* that liberal international order would be spreading with liberal democracy, and that perhaps the European Union as a model of international governance had at least elements of the shape of things to come- although I never thought of it as strictly a model for the rest of the world. And so clearly, the last decade or more has been very sobering, starting with 9/11 and the return of war and the terrorist threat and Islamism. But as important, arguably more important, is the rise of non-Western powers, and the sense that international order in the next 20 years is going to be shaped as much by their interests, priorities, and values as by those of the traditional West. I think that has most shaped and informed my thinking over the last 10 years, because one of its implications is- and I wrote in my book *Free World* about the West and relations between Europe and the United States- is that we have to go beyond a so to speak purely Western-based universalism, and try to shape our universalism, as the basis for liberal international order, in more genuinely universal terms, engaging much more deeply with perspectives from other cultures, be they Islamic or Chinese or Russian or Indian- and that's something I have spent quite a lot of time doing myself in recent years.

Could you tell us a little bit about your own current work on global free speech, and why you feel this is particularly important at the moment?

My answer to that follows on directly from my last. It will not do either normatively or in terms of *realpolitik*, of power relations, simply to say- and I parody here for clarity- that a bunch of white, Anglo-Saxon or European men, somewhere between 1600 and 2000, basically worked it all out. And there's this package that we call, somewhat misleadingly, the Enlightenment, and what you've got to do is to go to IKEA and buy the Enlightenment kit. If you can follow the instructions, then you will come up with the right answer. We have both normatively, because other cultures and intellectual traditions have profound insights, sometimes earlier than our own, but also in terms of *realpolitik*, because they will be determining world order as much as we will, to engage with them. Nowhere more so than on the subject of free speech, which is what I'm writing about currently- my new book is on that subject- because the terms of global free speech are the terms on which we conduct all other debates. This is the debate which makes all other debates possible.

Moreover, because of mass migration and the internet- the internet understood in the broader sense, because increasingly it's a mobile internet, carried on mobile phones- we can no longer say as we used to in the past, 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'- if you're in the United States, it's the First Amendment, if you're in England, it's the common law, if you're in Germany, it's the continental, post-Napoleonic code, when in China, do as the Chinese do. Much as many would-be sovereign states would like that still to be the case- witness China's attempt to control the internet -the fact is that the movement of people physically, and of ideas and images and words virtually, is transforming all that. And so willy-nilly, in the world of Google and Facebook and Twitter, you do have to have a global conversation, a trans-cultural conversation, about what should be the terms of free speech, particularly on the media, particularly online. And that's also the subject of a big research project we have here in Oxford which has a website that I'd like to commend to all your readers: freespeechdebate.com. It presents arguments from many different perspectives, and case studies in 13 languages, precisely to stimulate that debate. Those 13 languages at the moment cover about 80% of fixed users on the internet.

What will be the impact of the proposed Royal Charter on the press in the UK, will it help to ensure a free and fair media or limit press freedoms? And will it ultimately lead to a better, more well-informed democracy, in your opinion?

Liberty is not simply everyone saying whatever they like, whatever comes into their head. All of the big debates about free speech, and indeed about media freedom, are precisely about what the legitimate and necessary limits are to that vital freedom. No one who has watched the behaviour of the tabloid press in Britain over the last 30 years could doubt that they've overstepped those limits. Hacking the phones of the Deputy Prime Minister, actually thousands of prominent people and also people who just chanced into the limelight- is truly shocking, and there are few sights more nauseating than the sight of tabloid editors and proprietors, including Rupert Murdoch, wrapping themselves in the robes of John Stuart Mill and John Locke to justify gutter, sensationalist journalism. So we needed

a better structure of regulation. The Royal Charter is a peculiarly English, and altogether peculiar design, but I think that the basic structure which is emerging is quite a good one, because it's a structure where you don't have government directly regulating or licensing the press. It's not that, but you do have a strong structure of incentives for better behaviour, for example in respect to privacy, by the press. And things like an obligation to publish a reply in certain circumstances, which by the way has been working extremely well in Germany for decades, can only improve the British press. So on balance, I think this is good for the freedom of the press in Britain, although of course the devil will be in the detail.

In the EU more broadly, assuming that integration continues to deepen without the introduction of more elements of democracy, what would be the consequences of a system where free speech exists as the cornerstone of political legitimacy, yet citizens' ability to influence decision-making by exercising free speech decreases?

That's a very good question, and it's a question, in a way, about the non-existent European public sphere. The fact that while we have a European market, European laws, European institutions, we have 27, soon to be 28, going on 50, different national media conducting their debates in national languages, and this applies even to the business of the EU itself. I always like to say that when you have an EU summit, there's not *one* EU summit, but 28 different EU summits. There are the 27 different versions you get of it in each of the national media, briefed heavily by their national politicians, who often spin it their own way, often against another national or two. And there's this sort of eirenic, synthetic, bureaucratic version put out by the actual institutional leaders of the EU which few people take any notice of. That is a big problem, so that actually the problem is *not* the lack of democratic institutions, because, number one, we have a directly elected European parliament, which actually has quite a lot of power now, and, number two, the key decisions are taken by democratically elected national leaders. The problem is that there is no public sphere in which those politics are conducted. So that I think it's right to identify the problem more precisely as the lack of a Europe-wide, *deliberative* democracy. One of the key problems here is that the thing that was meant to fill that gap, namely the directly elected European parliament, does not do that. It just does not do the job. It's a problem of what I call 'mis-development:' I mean, if you go to somewhere like Egypt, what you see is not just underdevelopment, you see mis-development- whole vast estates and industrial complexes that actually should never have been built at all. And in a way that's the problem of Europe's democratic institutions.

Mass enlargement in the 2000s was seen as a win-win for Europe- a chance for consolidating the Western European model of politics and human rights. However, it seems to have led to a more fractured and economically unstable EU. Do you agree with this perspective, particularly with regards to the Euro crisis?

No. I think these are two entirely separate things, and it would be perverse to blame the crisis of the eurozone on EU enlargement. Actually I argued consistently through the 1990's that we had the wrong priority in pushing for a rapid monetary union at the end of the 20th century, and that we should have prioritized the things we've just been talking about and enlargement, and creating a European foreign security policy. I still believe those would have been better priorities- witness the crisis of the eurozone. So I think it would be perverse to blame the one on the other.

There's no question that the crisis of the eurozone, which is a kind of special sub-chapter of the crisis of western capitalism all together, has taken a lot of the shine off the European model. I recently spent a month in south and southeast Asia, and last year in China. If you talk to people in Asia, it's quite clear that the prestige of Europe, and therefore the attraction of the European model, is at a low ebb. The other thing that has happened, and this we didn't foresee and is extremely worrying, is the way in which countries like Hungary in particular have fallen away, slipped back from, the kinds of European standards and values that they achieved at the moment of joining the EU. And it turns out that this famous normative power of the EU is nothing like what we thought it was, that actually the leverage of the EU in terms of values and human rights and democratic standards, and indeed media pluralism, is at its height at the moment before a country gets into the EU. So Croatia today has to be a model European country. Once you're inside, it's a different story. Once you're inside, you can, colloquially speaking, "get away with murder," as Silvio Berlusconi did in Italy. I mean, if Berlusconi's Italy had been a candidate for membership in the EU, it would never have been admitted. If Hungary as it is today was a candidate, it wouldn't be admitted. And that's something

extremely worrying for people like me who believe in the European project as one that marches for freedom and democracy and human rights as it did in the 1980's and 1990's- and we have to do something about it.

With regards to the ongoing crisis in Cyprus, what might be its long-term impacts on the EU and the eurozone, and what is the role of Russia?

Although I can see the connection, I think those are two separate questions. On the first, every fix that is found for the euro zone seems to create a new crisis of the eurozone some months or years down the road. And that is of course the case with Cyprus, because the fix which compelled holders of Greek government bonds to take a 50% haircut, sometimes even more than 50%, tipped the Cyprus banks over the edge. So now the indication is that the crisis is not yet solved, that it is growing, that there are more such crises to come. I think the fundamental question is whether south European economies, and societies, and polities, can take the pain that the essentially German-led policies of competitive austerity and fiscal rigour without stimulus for growth, are imposing on them. So far, the political radicalization has been remarkably limited, with the exception of the Golden Dawn party in Greece. But if the pain goes on for another one, two, three years, who knows what will happen in the politics of southern Europe. So I think that's the biggest thing to worry about, and the people who could do something about that are of course the Germans, and to a lesser extent other north Europeans, because they have quite simply not got the economics right. It's nothing to do with virtue, it's nothing to do with ill will, it's simply the economics. They have to stimulate their domestic demand so that there can be an adjustment across the whole of the eurozone. And, if we have one collective priority for the eurozone, it should be that a German government emerges this year, after the elections this September, which recognizes that and has the political will and imagination to do that.

On Russia: a separate question, though I see the connection. The two competing empires, the post-modern empire of the EU and I want to say pre-modern empire of Vladimir Putin, and I think that it connects to an earlier conversation: we must never forget that what Russia did in 1989 to 1992 was quite incredible. It could have held on to its empire for decades more. It had nuclear arms- no one was going to threaten it militarily- it gave that empire up with virtually not a shot fired in anger. Many Russians have regretted that and it's taken a lot of time to get over it. Dean Acheson said of Britain that it had lost an empire but not yet found a role. That's true of Russia too: it has lost an empire and not yet found a role. And I think that we in Europe in particular, but also the United States, have to be in a constructive waiting posture. We have to say, we are absolutely prepared for and interested in a strategic partnership with Russia, but only when Russia itself has worked out what kind of role it wants to play in the society of states, and only if Russia abides by certain minimal standards. So the answer to the Russian question has to lie in the first place with Russia itself.

You have written recently in your column in *The Guardian* about growing discontent, both within Germany itself and the wider EU, about Germany's growing role in governing the EU and the euro zone. Is Germany's power in Europe outgrowing its political elite's abilities to manage it?

It's important to say that Germany never sought this role. This isn't in any way, shape, or form 1913. The German elites were not pushing for their place in the sun; quite the reverse- most Germans did not want to give up the Deutsche Mark, they didn't seek this leadership role in the eurozone, most Germans were quite happy for their country to go on being a 'greater Switzerland,' and, you know, export *meister* of the world. Let me say very clearly that this is not some sort of push for world power, or even European domination, by Germany, contrary to what some British tabloids would tell you, or what some Greeks believe. But in a way, that explains the relative weakness and confusion of German leadership over the past few years: that this is not a country and not a political class that was either ready or looking for such a leadership role that is now being thrust upon it. And I think that there is a problem with German leadership, it's rather inflexible as I mentioned a moment ago in its economic policy. Germany is rather resentful of all these south Europeans, many Germans do not recognize that the greatest single beneficiary of the eurozone is Germany itself. It is not terribly good at telling a larger story about its role in Europe, and as it were, bringing other Europeans along. And I think there is indeed a real challenge for Germany's elites to as it were, step up their game, and be adequate to the responsibilities that have been thrust upon them. I'm actually going to be writing something about this later this year, about the new German question. The historian Fritz Stern famously said after German unification that Germany has got its 'second chance.' It had a great chance a hundred years ago, it

blew that chance spectacularly, history plus the Germans own many virtues has given them a second chance, and what I want to say is, now comes the test of how they use it. Not 1991, that wasn't the test, the test is in 2013 and 2014.

Are there parallels between the recent political changes in Burma as well as the Arab Spring, and the velvet revolutions of the end of the 20th century, in your view?

Very good question. I was recently in Burma, I actually spoke to a group of politicians, NGOs, former dissidents, and so on, about lessons from the European transitions, and they were certainly interested and they drew their own conclusions. So I think a couple of things: first of all, I think it is clearly true to say that 1989 established a new default model of revolution, supplanting the violent model of 1789. That is to say, whether in Tunisia or Egypt or Burma, the default model, the first setting, is to try and do a non-violent revolution, try to do a velvet revolution. Often it goes badly wrong, it doesn't work as we have seen in many other countries of the so-called Arab Spring, most appallingly in Syria, but that's where you start. And that means a negotiated power transition. A negotiation spectacularly didn't happen in Syria, but a negotiation *is* happening in Burma.

Secondly, the way to look at the European experience, which by the way is not just 1989, the European experience is everything from Portugal's revolution of the carnations in 1974, which is arguably the first velvet revolution in Europe, all the way through to Ukraine's orange revolution and perhaps beyond, so it's a kind of 30-40 year toolkit and library of experience. And that's the way to think about it: we offer the library, we offer the toolkit, and then people in the countries themselves have to decide which tools are good for them, and which combination of tools.

The third thing to say is that, unfortunately, the regional context of all the European velvet revolutions, again from Portugal in 1974/5 all the way to Ukraine in 2004 is so important. The fact that you had just next door a club of broadly speaking liberal democracies, working together for mutual benefit, looking attractive in many ways, economically and otherwise, which you have a sporting chance of joining, had enormous importance for the success of subsequent transitions. It is no accident that one of the great slogans of 1989 was "the return to Europe." Not many people I met in Burma were talking about "the return to Asia"- that would be totally meaningless, there is no Asian Union to give that regional context and support. And there's precious little to give that context and support for the countries of the Arab spring and the European Union itself certainly isn't offering them a prospect of membership. I fear that difference in the international context is very important indeed.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is Features Editor and a director of e-IR's editorial board. She is currently studying for an MSc International Relations (Research) at the London School of Economics.