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Pedro Sánchez Herráez

The 21st century: a return of autocratic (emperors)?

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Abstract:

On a planet that is clearly undergoing a major geopolitical realignment, the goal is not merely to reshape geographical spaces; rather, this realignment encompasses all spheres, from the rules that have governed the world –with varying degrees of success– to social values and issues.

Faced with the sheer scale and depth of these changes, the societies of today, often described as “liquid societies” precisely due to a lack of “solid” points of reference for growth in the medium and long term, are increasingly falling prey to a powerful sense of anxiety and fear in the face of uncertainty.

And much like other times in history, when faced with this sense of vulnerability, there emerge quasi-messianic leaders who win the support of large sections of society with their methodical approach that includes simplistic slogans, grand displays of power and promises of a bright future, all the while dismantling and reshaping power structures to suit their own ends, ultimately becoming autocrats free from any form of countervailing power.

A brief analysis of this issue and a concluding reflection make up this Document.

Keywords: Geopolitical realignment, liquid society, emperors, autocrats, modernity, values.

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Introduction: Geopolitical conflict!... And a new world order?

It has become a recurring theme to point out that the planet is facing a new geopolitical realignment, a new struggle between old and new powers in an environment that raises doubts as to whether humanity is headed for a new world war or a revival of the Cold War¹. These powers are increasingly adopting demeanours and actions that, at least on the surface, are more akin to empires than to nation-states in the Westphalian sense of the term², in a new “turn of the screw” in the world order, a new process of escalating global tensions, with consequences for all nations and inhabitants of the planet.

But it seems that the fractures afflicting this “world order”, this “rules-based” world with which humanity in at least part of the planet felt that it had overcome a tortuous 20th century and was moving towards a better world, with difficulties and minor setbacks certainly, but definitely progressing towards an “ideal” global society, do not end here although, perhaps (and it is certainly easy to speak from a certain perspective) it was overly idealised.

One such fracture appears to be or may be linked to the leadership style of many heads of state and governments of different countries, which seems to be moving ever closer to the concept of an “emperor” or an autocrat, even in democratic nations, and not necessarily the major powers.

While the current geopolitical landscape does not, apparently, imply a return to the eras of dynastic empires, it does increasingly mark a trend towards leadership styles with autocratic and expansionist traits, where the use of force, the concentration of power, the end of multilateralism and the pursuit of spheres of influence constitute the cornerstones of their actions.

Therefore, if this new geopolitical era has certain neo-imperial characteristics, are we also witnessing the return of emperors and autocrats?

¹ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. The New Power Struggle: World War 3.0 or Cold War 2.0? Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Document 28/2023, 19 April 2023. Available at https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA28_2023_PEDSAN_Potencias.pdf NOTE: All internet links in this Document are active as of 16 August 2026.

² SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. The 21st century: The Return of Empires? Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Document 29/2025, 23 April 2025. Available at https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/siglo_xxi_el_retorno_de_los_imperios-1

Fluid... and ambiguous societies!

In various works spanning almost two decades, from “Liquid Modernity” in 2000 to “Liquid Evil” in 2016, and including “Liquid Love” and “Liquid Fear”, amongst others, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman³ has created the concept of a liquid society, in which, using the physical simile of a fluid, he highlights how everything is changeable and volatile, from personal to social relationships, to structures, institutions and even identities and values. And this “liquid” state contrasts with the “solid” state of earlier social periods, where institutions, values, structures and norms were more “solid” and, therefore, more enduring over time.

This “liquid modernity” has a significant influence on various aspects of society and the individual; it gives rise to deep-seated individualism, a “self-centredness” that takes precedence over the social sphere and ultimately generates a powerful sense of isolation, uncertainty and helplessness as a side effect.

Similarly, given that each person “constructs” themselves and is free to choose even all aspects of their identity, the implication is that their successes and failures are also entirely their own and they are solely responsible for them, which generates great anxiety and pressure in individuals. Combined with the fact that space is perceived as relative due to the speed and immediacy of physical and telecommunications, and time as something ephemeral, this means that immediacy replaces the short, medium or long term time horizon, thereby encouraging people not to think or act with tomorrow in mind, even though it is clear that tomorrow always comes.

Employment relationships are temporary and changeable; there are no stable jobs, not even permanent positions. Consequently, it becomes essential to market oneself appropriately for this complicated labour market, where the worker becomes, to a large extent, a commodity rather than a person connected to and committed to a specific working environment. The same may be stated of personal relationships, which are far

³Polish-British sociologist (1925–2017), he pursued a prolific academic and research career resulting in a large number of widely read works, notably those focusing on “liquid modernity”. In 2010, he was awarded the Prince of Asturias Award for Communication and Humanities. A summary of his life may be found at <https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/b/bauman.htm>

more volatile, almost fleeting, with a powerful and novel virtual component, and where the primary aim is, essentially, immediate gratification.

Both professional and emotional stability are therefore greatly disrupted by the development of fleeting relationships of all kinds, which in many cases merely seek immediate gratification but lack the desire to build something “solid” in the medium and long term, including the construction of one’s own identity with an adequate degree of coherence and stability⁴.

There is a very direct link between a “liquid society” and economic inequality, an inequality that has been growing and which is the root cause of many social ills⁵; as having largely lost the sense of community which in turn has been replaced by extreme individualism, and the collapse of “traditional” values, an extreme form of competition arises in which people are nothing more than commodities, resources for the benefit of others. This, combined with extreme consumerism and the direct linking of happiness to levels of consumption, leads to a vast array of problems resulting from said inequality.

Perceived inequality, the poor management of institutions and infrastructure, which are elements typically associated with maintaining medium and long term stability, economic stagnation and youth unemployment, a lack of identification with traditional political parties, increasing levels of unhappiness and growing despair about the future, amongst other factors, are shaking a large proportion of the world’s population to its core, especially members of the “Generation Z”, who are protesting about these issues across the globe, questioning the current model, but without knowing exactly what the alternative should be⁶. And as has always been the case, when one does not know where to go, someone else tells them where they should go.

⁴ BRAVO DE MEDINA, Ricardo. ¿Qué es la sociedad líquida?, 25 August 2024. Available at <https://bravodemedina.com/que-es-la-sociedad-liquida/>

⁵ Sociedad líquida y desigualdad económica, Fundación Rafael del Pino, 18 September 2019. Available at <https://frdelpino.es/actualidad/sociedad-liquida-y-desigualdad-economica/>

⁶ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. The 21st century: is a new revolutionary era at the gates? Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Document 28/2026, 08 April 2026. Available at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3738281/ieee-2026-siglo-XXI-era-revolucionaria-puertas-analisis28.pdf/160fe3fd-187d-241e-58e1-83a8a45f1c74?t=1775547385148>

That is why the concept of “liquid fear”⁷ is so powerful; just when it was believed that development and technical and social progress would guarantee a life free from the fears of the past, an exciting present, and an almost idyllic future; a multitude of fears are emerging with great force: terrorist attacks, climate change, economic crises, pandemics, etc. These fears are constant and growing, and may reach high levels of impact and intensity at any moment, generating a powerful sense of uncertainty and a constant feeling of dread in the face of the vast array of existing threats, coupled with doubts about what can be done to tackle them in this postmodern society.

And when the institutions and organisations responsible for tackling these issues (largely nation states, as that is their *raison d'être*) that hold the legitimate monopoly on the use of force and provide security in the broadest sense, lose much of their capacity in the face of numerous external actors present in a globalised society, this leads many people to lose faith in them. These institutions, organisations and structures that have been painstakingly and tenaciously built up precisely to provide these basic and essential services to society, and which, faced with the growing needs—whether real or imagined— of an increasingly demanding population, are the targets of criticism for failing to meet all the requests made, and, consequently, suffer a loss of trust in the entire state apparatus, from the State itself to its institutions and organisations, the government, political parties, etc., everything becoming tainted by disrepute.

The sense of growing vulnerability is exacerbated by the aforementioned feeling of individual isolation, as many of the structures and groups that have traditionally provided people with a sense of protection and identity, such as partners, family, the parish, break down: Many of these have been subsumed, either intentionally or not, into that self-centredness and exacerbated individualism which is often cloaked in the guise of freedom and which can lead to isolation⁸, at times to pathological levels.

This greater freedom, whether real or apparent, such as being able to choose one's very physical identity, gives rise to a complex consequence: almost constant uncertainty, given that everything changes and nothing remains the same. This forces

⁷ BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *Miedo Líquido. La sociedad contemporánea y sus temores*, Paidós Ibérica S.A., Barcelona, 2007.

⁸ Acimut, Individualismo ¿libertad o aislamiento?, 9 December 2025. Available at <https://acimutpsicologia.com/blog/2296/individualismo/>

the individual to constantly reinvent themselves and to resolve issues and problems independently, matters which were previously dealt with, wholly or in part, or at least where one could turn to stable groups of people or institutions for help, which ultimately generates intense anxiety and extreme difficulty in devising an actual life plan. Even the concept of ownership, of having something material to hold on to, something “solid” in short, is gradually being replaced by temporary access to goods and services. In many cases, these are simply virtual, instead of owning a book, one can read it in cyberspace; one hires a car rather than owning it; or even money itself, which has transformed from something material and tangible to a digital object, in a sort of “subscription economy” where fees are paid to obtain such goods and services, thus turning citizens into a “permanent tenant”⁹ rather than the “owner” of their own life?

Faced with this situation, this fear of uncertainty, this lack of trust in institutions, this sense of isolation and vulnerability, the solution is the usual one: to turn to mantras, slogans, catchphrases and powerful, almost messianic leaders (“new emperors”) who replace uncertainty with certainty, threats with security, isolation with a sense of community and identity, and who chart a course. And that is why they succeed.

One need only look, for example, at the Russians, who on several occasions in their history have faced what they call “turbulent times”; the chaos that follows the collapse of a system, of an established order and its institutions, as was the case after the fall of the Russian Empire in the early 20th century, or that of the Soviet Union in the late 20th century. Faced with the combination of these fears and weak governments incapable of controlling an immense country, the largest in the world, covering one-sixth of the planet’s landmass, the majority of the people prefer a “tsar”, a strong leader who imposes order and provides a sense of purpose and a vision for the future in the face of the chaos of those tumultuous times¹⁰. Amongst other reasons, this explains the emergence of Putin in 2000 as Russia’s leader, as the new “emperor”.

⁹ HIGUERAS, Juan Carlos. Pagar por respirar: bienvenido a la sociedad donde ya no tendrás nada pero todo tendrá una cuota, La Razón, 13 July 2026. Available at https://www.larazon.es/economia/pagar-respirar-bienvenido-sociedad-donde-tendras-nada-pero-todo-tendra-cuota_202607136a543dbcc48a78681b85780a.html

¹⁰ A brief overview of Russia and the main milestones of order and disorder may be found in SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. Marco geopolítico de Rusia: constantes históricas, dinámica y visión en el siglo XXI, in “Rusia bajo el liderazgo de Putin. La nueva estrategia rusa a la búsqueda del liderazgo regional y el reforzamiento como actor global”, Cuaderno de Estrategia 178, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Madrid, 2015, pp.15-77. Available at

In the name of ‘imperial certainty’, these “emperors” employ a unified, clear and concrete message, one that is simple and rooted in historical milestones, whether real or mythical, as well as narratives of greatness, a carefully crafted iconography of power and occasionally even claim to be the bearers of the “divine mandate” - the image of legitimacy derived from having received the “divine commission” to act as a sort of new messiah liberating the people¹¹, amongst other things.

And how do they do it?

A new wave of autocratic “emperors”?

The situation of constant uncertainty generated by this so-called “liquid life” – which constitutes one of the defining features of contemporary societies, marks a profound difference from other periods in history. Cultures and various forms of social organisation have provided the individuals that make up these societies with a clear frame of reference, and institutions on which to rely in order to combat the existential uncertainty inherent to the very fact of life and survival.

Culture provides patterns that serve as points of reference and identity markers, offering both individuals and society as a whole a personal and collective frame of reference and a guide for the future; but “modernity” breaks this pattern with its model of constant change, and generates a fear of stagnation, of not being part of a dynamic of constant change, a change for the sake of change, rather than the fear of change found in more traditional societies, of “moving very fast without knowing where we’re going”, as many songs from the 1980s¹² have put it. And this also implies that the past is demonised or rewritten, being portrayed, in many cases, as something dark and full of errors. It is thus argued that the past is discarded for failing to conform to the patterns of the present, in

<https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/rusia-bajo-el-liderazgo-de-putin-la-nueva-estrategia-rusa-a-la-busqueda-de-su-liderazgo-regional-y-el-reforzamiento-como-actor-global-n-178.html>

¹¹ RTVE, El fervor religioso en torno a Trump: “¡Qué honor orar por el presidente en el despacho oval!, 7 March 2026. Available at <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20260307/fervor-religioso-torno-trump-honor-orar-presidente-despacho-oval/16967936.shtml>

¹² Nowhere fast, The Smiths. Available at <https://www.musixmatch.com/es/letras/The-Smiths/Nowhere-Fast/traduccion/espanol>; or in the film “Streets of Fire”; a Spanish translation is available at <https://www.musica.com/letras.asp?letra=872157>

a sort of “dictatorship of the present” or “the age of the eternal present”¹³ where only today and the here and now matter, and this leads to a lack of reference points.

And for this reason it is essential to provide them; slogans thus become a powerful weapon¹⁴ that captivates the masses. Trump makes systematic use of the acronym MAGA¹⁵ – Make America Great Again – emphasising the restoration of the United States’ greatness, wealth and global power by reviving traditional values, renewing industrial strength, expanding borders and spheres of influence. This is very similar, albeit with nuances stemming from different cultures, to that outlined by Xi Jinping with his “Chinese Dream”¹⁶ or by Putin, who, ever since winning the 2000 elections with the “United Russia” party, has consistently used slogans along these lines¹⁷ – “we do not abandon our own”, “a strong President, a strong Russia”, or the historic motto “Russia was, is and always will be”.

To this end, and given that, at least in democracies, power is derived from the people and the separation of powers is an essential principle¹⁸, thereby preventing any single person or group from concentrating too much power and potentially abusing it to destroy democracy –or the process of progressing towards it– those “aspiring emperors” who seek to concentrate power and become the centre of absolute power, must constantly undermine and erode the power of the institutions established over decades or centuries for this very purpose, and create new ones to bolster their own power¹⁹.

¹³ FUSARO, Diego. Posmodernia. Sin pasado y sin futuro; la época del eterno presente, 26 February 2026. Available at <https://posmodernia.com/sin-pasado-y-sin-futuro-la-epoca-del-eterno-presente/>

¹⁴ WILBUR, Douglas. Words as weapons: the strategic power of Chinese slogans in media propaganda, 23 June 2025. Available at <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/06/23/words-as-weapons-the-strategic-power-of-chinese-slogans-in-modern-propaganda/>

¹⁵ VACCA, Paul. Trump mas allá del espectáculo: descifrar MAGA, Le Grand Continent, 19 July 2025. Available at <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/07/19/trump-mas-alla-del-espectaculo-descifrar-maga/>

¹⁶ MINGFU, Liu. The Chinese Dream to Overtake America, The Atlantic, 4 June 2015. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/china-dream-liu-mingfu-power/394748/>

¹⁷ KOLESNIKOV, Andrei. Putin’s theater: signs and slogans for the Russian elite, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 December 2015. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2015/12/putins-theater-signs-and-slogans-for-the-russian-elite>

¹⁸ Tirant lo Blanch, La Separación de Poderes: ¿Qué es?, 14 July 2025. Available at <https://tirant.com/curiosidades-mundo-juridico/noticia-la-separacion-de-poderes-que-es/>

¹⁹ MENTESOGLU TARDIVO, Zeynep. Political institutions in authoritarian regimes may look democratic, but they reinforce the rulers’ power base, The Loop. Available at <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/political-institutions-in-authoritarian-regimes-may-look-democratic-but-they-reinforce-the-rulers-power-base/>

Putin is therefore carrying out purges within the Federal Security Service²⁰ and the Armed Forces in the wake of the Wagner Group's rebellion²¹, or in a bid to achieve greater effectiveness on the battlefield against Ukraine²². These purges are linked to the sacked Defence Minister and his clan, who are apparently connected to the military-industrial complex²³. As part of a so-called reorganisation, Trump is implementing dismissals across all state institutions, from the Armed Forces²⁴ to the Director of the National Security Agency²⁵ and the US Attorney General²⁶. It has even been claimed²⁷ that he is using banking regulations as a weapon against his opponents, fully emulating the practices of authoritarian leaders. And the Chinese premier is also purging state institutions, seeking iron-fisted and absolute control²⁸ to the extent that there is talk of Xi Jinping's "perpetual purge"²⁹. This, like many others or indeed, almost all of them, is justified on the grounds of the fight against corruption³⁰ or inefficiency, but what it really seeks is to eliminate any alternative source of power or dissent.

Obviously, potential rivals must be eliminated, for no one is better suited to remain at the helm of their nations than the emperors themselves. To this end, when necessary, constitutional or legal restrictions are also amended to ensure they remain in power.

²⁰ Vozpopuli, Putin inicia purgas en el servicio de inteligencia por la campaña fallida en Ucrania, 11 March 2022. Available at <https://www.vozpopuli.com/internacional/putin-inicia-purgas-servicio-inteligencia.html>

²¹ Euronews, Vladimir Putin inicia una purga dentro del ejército ruso tras la reciente rebelión del grupo Wagner, 29 June 2023. Available at <https://es.euronews.com/2023/06/29/vladimir-putin-inicia-una-purga-dentro-del-ejercito-ruso-tras-la-reciente-rebelion-del-gru>

²² KOMIN, Mikhail. Kremlin seeks greater battlefield effectiveness with military purge, Carnegie, 6 June 2024. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2024/06/russia-defense-ministry-repressions>

²³ COOK, Ellie. Putin's military purge "unnerved" Russian elites: report, Newsweek, 17 January 2025. Available at <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-military-purge-sergei-shoigu-vladimir-putin-2016561>

²⁴ La promesa de Trump de purgar a los generales "woke" del Pentágono por sus feroces críticas al nuevo presidente, 11 November 2024. Available at <https://www.abc.es/internacional/presidencia-trump-purga-generales-woke-feroces-criticas-20241111100824-nt.html>

²⁵ DW, Trump purga altos cargos de seguridad nacional, 4 April 2025. Available at <https://www.dw.com/es/trump-purga-altos-cargos-de-seguridad-nacional/a-72134648>

²⁶ PARKER, Ashely and FITZPATRICK, Sarah. Trump's purge maybe just beginning, 2 April 2026, The Atlantic,. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/2026/04/pam-bondi-trump-attorney-general/686673/>

²⁷ FAROOP, Umar. Debanking Dissidents, Foreign Policy, 11 August 2026. Available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/08/11/debanking-dissidents-russia-trump-sanctions-terrorism-authoritarianism/?tpcc=editors_picks&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Editors%27%20Picks%20-%2008112026&utm_term=editors_picks

²⁸ LÓPEZ, Ivan. Nadie está a salvo. las purgas militares de Xi Jinping sacuden China, 14 June 2026. Available at <https://thepoliticalroom.com/blog/las-purgas-militares-de-xi-jinping-que-sacuden-china>

²⁹ CURUNCHO, Daniel R. La purga perpetua de Xi Jinping, La Vanguardia, 8 February 2026. Available at <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20260208/11460045/purga-perpetua-xi-jinping.html>

³⁰ TAN, Yvette and MCDONNELL, Stephen. China's Xi Jinping makes rare reference to recent military purge, BBC, 12 February 2026. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg5n7064p9eo>

Thus, Putin has been at the helm of Russia since 2000; apart from a period (2008–2012) when Dmitry Medvedev was President of Russia and appointed Putin as Prime Minister for that period, and as Putin, once he became President again, appointed him as Prime Minister until 2020, when Medvedev resigned so that Putin could amend the Constitution and remain in power indefinitely. Xi Jinping has been China's leader since 2013, following the removal of term limits in 2018³¹, and Donald Trump jokes (or maybe not) about abolishing the constitutional term limit to serve three terms, "I'll do it again in 2028", he says³².

The significance of the iconography of power, of the visual impact of images, actions and events, is paramount, for, as has been pointed out: "To change its nature, a regime must, first and foremost, change its visual language"³³; the construction of a ballroom in the Capitol, modelled on the grand hall of an "imperial" palace of yore; Xi Jinping's "New Silk Road"³⁴; or the Kerch Bridge linking Crimea to the mainland across the strait of the same name, built at enormous cost four years after Moscow's annexation of the peninsula, and which was crossed by a convoy of lorries, one flying a Russian flag and driven by Putin himself, at its ostentatious and televised opening³⁵. These, amongst many others, constitute irrefutable evidence of this reality.

In fact, there are constant references to the existence of a third wave of autocracy across the globe³⁶: the first occurred after the First World War, with the rise of Nazism, fascism and communism; the second during the Cold War, from the 1960s to the mid-

³¹ RTVE, China elimina el límite de dos mandatos presidenciales, lo que permitirá a Xi Jinping perpetuarse en el poder, 11 March 2018. Available at <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20180311/china-elimina-limite-dos-mandatos-presidenciales-permitira-a-xi-jinping-perpetuarse-poder/1693620.shtml>

³² FOX17, 'I'm going to do it again': Trump jokes he will run for president in 2028, 25 July 2026. Available at: <https://fox17.com/news/nation-world/im-going-to-do-it-again-trump-jokes-he-will-run-for-president-in-2028-presidential-election-politics-third-term-limits-campaign-white-house-correspondents-dinner-speech-journalists-reporters-media-maga-red-hat-joe-biden-president-donald-trump>

³³ BATOUT, Jérôme. ¿Sueña Donald Trump con ser un presidente francés?, Le Grand Continent, 14 July 2026. Available at <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2026/07/14/donald-trump-reve-t-il-detre-un-president-francais/>

³⁴ CHELLANEY, Brahma. China's imperial overreach, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 25 May 2017. Available at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-imperial-overreach/>

³⁵ MYCAK, Sonia. The symbolic significance of the Crimea bridge attack, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 13 October 2022. Available at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-symbolic-significance-of-the-crimea-bridge-attack/>

³⁶ LUHRMANN Anna and LINDBERG, Staffan I. A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?, Routledge, Democratization, vol. 26, 7, pp.1095–1113, 2019. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029?needAccess=true>

1970s, which took the form of a numerous coups d'état in developing countries, the repeated backsliding of democracy³⁷ or even suggestions that it is coming to an end³⁸.

Faced with this ongoing geopolitical realignment, increasing problems and a sense of unease and increasing polarisation, it may be necessary to seek a new path, a solution, but what might that be?

The solution...! Autocratic (emperors)?

The political and personal dynamics of emperors, autocrats who do not tolerate dissent, tend to create a powerfully personality-driven system, surrounded by like-minded individuals whose essential attribute is loyalty to the leader rather than managerial efficiency, given that the emperor (autocrat) makes decisions in all spheres of politics and power. And this inner circle also ages, with the exception of those who are rightly or wrongly purged, which means that the passing of the years affects not only the emperor, but the system as a whole, which watches as the institutions and structures that in other systems, theoretically allow the activity or at least the inertia of the State to be safeguarded through the separation of powers, are left behind and become outdated, in the face of the difficulties of change and even the natural generational renewal that must gradually take place in any structure to prevent stagnation, or even total disintegration.

One of the circumstances that tends to be a constant feature of authoritarian regimes, a frequent error on the part of emperors derived from the extreme concentration of power, the elimination of dissent, and surrounding themselves with “advisers” whose main attribute is loyalty to the leader, is that they lose, to some extent, the perception of reality, since they live in a sort of bubble. This leads to decisions that are increasingly detached from reality and from social requirements, with the emperor embarking on

³⁷ DE MIGUEL, Jesús M. Los tres factores del retroceso democrático: desinformación, polarización y autocratización, Agenda Pública, 22 May 2025. Available at <https://agendapublica.es/noticia/19866/nuevo-orden-mundial-retroceso-democracia-desinformacion-polarizacion-autocratizacion>

³⁸ Various Authors. Informe sobre la democracia 2026: ¿El fin de la era democrática? University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2026. Available at https://www.v-dem.net/documents/76/V-Dem_Institute_Democracy_Report_2026_Spanish_lowres.pdf

projects that may have no chance of success or be extremely costly³⁹, thus repeating mistakes, while their court of sycophants remains silent, in fear of being purged.

To avoid this situation, in times gone by kings and emperors employed jesters, individuals usually associated with entertainment, with making the ruler and the court laugh, but who, curiously (or perhaps not) had another, far more important role: to speak truth to the king, to report on what was actually happening and the mood of

society, expressed in a light-hearted and humorous manner, since advisers and members of the court feared for their positions or even their lives if they told the sovereign the truth⁴⁰. The need to avoid straying too far from reality poses a serious problem for those who cannot tolerate dissent or alternative ways of thinking. The new emperors or autocrats tend not to tolerate “jesters”, and also to censor or eliminate media outlets that do not share their views. Consequently, this loss of sight of the true reality ultimately leads them to make poor decisions⁴¹ and repeat their mistakes.

Faced with this situation, wealthy societies halt or slow their progress, and economic stagnation combined with political paralysis, demographic decline and cultural exhaustion, amongst other factors, leads to a “sustainable decadence”⁴² in which said decline is not fully acknowledged, but the possibility of catastrophe is occasionally foreshadowed, yet at the same time, nothing is done and society continues to languish. And those societies that are not wealthy and which have prospered thanks to long-term planning and decisive measures (with potentially devastating long-term effects (such as China’s one-child policy) but with brilliant results in the medium term, have enabled them to prosper, and forget since they are not reminded by those at the top, that economic growth cannot be uninterrupted, and that everything they have sacrificed in

³⁹ GURIEV, Sergei. El tiempo ya no juega a favor de Putin, Política Exterior, 8 July 2026. Available at <https://www.politicaexterior.com/el-tiempo-ya-no-juega-a-favor-de-putin/>

⁴⁰ URIBARRI, Fátima. Bufones, ni locos ni payasos. El privilegio de decirle la verdad al poder, El Correo XL, 10 October 2025. Available to <https://www.elcorreo.com/xlsemanal/historia/bufones-ni-locos-ni-payasos.html>

⁴¹ FRIEDMAN, Thomas L., Tres líderes mundiales distintos. Tres decisiones increíblemente malas, The New York Times, 27 July 2027. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/es/2026/07/27/espanol/opinion/trump-netanyahu-putin-guerras.html?campaign_id=42&emc=edit_bn_20260727&instance_id=179382&nl=el-times®i_id=227510022&segment_id=223750&user_id=89d6be8e645c46802d3f62814b835549

⁴² DOUTHAT, Ross. La sociedad decadente: Cómo nos hemos convertido en víctimas de nuestro propio éxito, Editorial Ariel, 2021.

exchange for that economic growth, the “economic dilemma”⁴³ such as freedom in this case, will not be “magically” restored when the situation worsens.

Not only does the entire structure fall into decline, but no human being lives forever, which ultimately leads to a series of power struggles following the emperor’s demise. This always makes issues of succession very complicated, highly complicated indeed. One need only recall Tito’s Yugoslavia, which descended from a global model into a succession of atrocious internal wars of a kind no one thought could occur in the heart of Europe, following the leader’s death in 1980. The power vacuum created by the passing of a long-serving autocrat is vast, as is usually the eagerness of individuals and groups to fill all or part of it, and in many cases, once again, by employing narratives and arguments⁴⁴ centred on the welfare and benefits of the entire population.

Reflecting further on those memories, and the power of the events themselves, the impact of the Yugoslav crisis on Europe and, indeed, on the world as a whole was brutal. But above all, it was brutal, traumatic and devastating for the people of the former Yugoslavia; ranging from the loss of prestige of international organisations which proved incapable of establishing or imposing peace in a territory ravaged by war and barbarism, to the scramble by international actors to secure a slice of the once-proud country, using proxy forces and allies on the ground; not to mention that, serious disputes and active potential sources of conflict persist in the region even today (Bosnia, Kosovo, etc.), as well as unresolved grudges and feuds.

And if such a host of problems and difficulties arise following the demise of an emperor in a medium-sized country (just over half the size of Spain), what might be expected in a similar context of fragmentation in nations of the size and power of Russia, China or the United States?

⁴³ BARRÍA, Cecilia. "Podemos crecer infinitamente en un planeta finito": qué es el 'dilema del crecimiento' que plantea el influyente economista británico Daniel Susskind, BBC, 6 July 2024. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c1dd40x13z5o>

⁴⁴ In this regard, see SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. Yugoslavia y yugonostalgia: ¿Europa y euronostalgia?, in “Panorama Geopolítico de los conflictos 2019”, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Madrid, 2019, pp.107-142. Available at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2077188/Cap%C3%ADtulo+4.+Yugoslavia+y+yugonostalgia+Europanostalgia.pdf/bd41b3e9-598b-33e5-6835-0fcc17063941?t=1763986985709>

Conclusions. What then?

Humanity as a whole, albeit with differences across cultures, environments and eras, has had to struggle very hard to get ahead, to move beyond pure and simple struggle for survival to striving to achieve a standard of living and circumstances that would allow it to live as it desired.

In some cases this has apparently been achieved and not so much in others, and the struggle continues., potentially involving the use of every means at their disposal, including war, for when faced with the “it’s either you or me” dilemma, the answer is usually very clear.

History is full of such realities, and in a world as interconnected and globalised as today’s world, everything unfolds at much greater speeds and with far greater intensity. Geopolitical reconfiguration entails a restructuring across all levels and spheres, changes in the present and many uncertainties for the future. Even if one might think “this does not affect me nor will it affect me”, “it’s not my concern” and “if I do nothing, nothing will happen to me”.

At times, one might observe these situations as if they were a documentary, within developed societies here, life is becoming increasingly “virtual” and more “fluid”, as though switching off the screen means they no longer affect us. But that is not the case; certainties are crumbling, and faced with the disquiet of witnessing these growing uncertainties, the easy temptation may be to follow siren songs, to follow a new “emperor” who promises a wonderful and easy life, with almost no effort.

The answer to existential questions has never been simple or easy. Our ancestors were very, very clear about this, and they fought very hard to achieve their goals and, moreover, to leave us a fine legacy.

Are we prepared to live up to their example? Or will it depend on how we “go with the flow”?

*Pedro Sánchez Herráez**

Colonel. ET. INF. DEM
PhD in Peace and International Security
IEEE Analyst