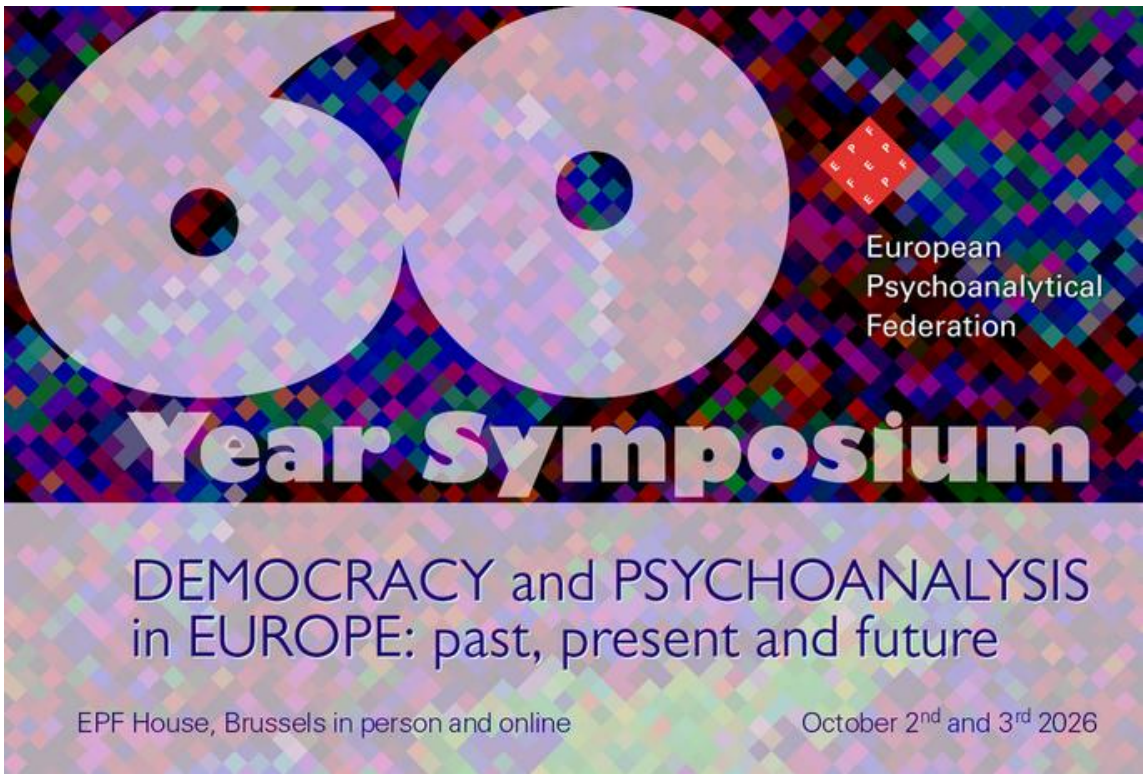

The European Psychoanalytical Federation - 60 Years Symposium

DEMOCRACY and PSYCHOANALYSIS in EUROPE: past, present and future

On October 2nd 2026 the European Psychoanalytical Federation (EPF/FEP) will mark the 60th anniversary of its inauguration 60 years ago (October 2nd 1966). To celebrate this auspicious achievement a Symposium will be held in the EPF House in Brussels. The Symposium will also be open to online participants, across the world.

The 60th EPF Anniversary Symposium aims to facilitate reflections on the historical roots of the EPF as well as to explore its present work and psychoanalysis in Europe today. From the past and present perspectives we will also look to the future for psychoanalysis in the context of the EPF and its strong links with international psychoanalysis and the IPA. Each participant is invited to respond to the main theme of **Democracy and Psychoanalysis** as presented in the argument.

Argument

The European Psychoanalytical Federation has become a significant psychoanalytic scientific organisation whose 60-year history reflects the challenges and successes of psychoanalysis across a diverse and politically turbulent continent. The birth of the EPF-FEP arose after 1945, out of the ashes of a decimated European continent, in which the majority of psychoanalytic Societies in Europe had been obliterated, including Sigmund Freud's own Vienna Psychoanalytical Society, in which, by 1945, only one member was left.

Despite this, psychoanalysis, deeply concerned with the individual's freedom from hysterical misery, as Freud originally suggested, flourished post-1945, and became intrinsically linked to the societal conditions provided by the establishment of democracy as a political structure. Let us reflect on an interweaving of democracy and psychoanalysis that continues to evolve in the world today. The political context in which Sigmund Freud's initiation of psychoanalysis in the late 19th century is significant, but how? Can psychoanalysis, as we understand it in Europe today, thrive in totalitarian regimes, or does it require a democratic political environment in order to sustain itself and proliferate?

The massive and violent reemergence of deep contempt for every kind of human right during World War II, which also aimed at the elimination of psychoanalytic thought, confirmed the deep roots of authoritarianism, not only in the human psyche but also in the history of humanity. As if a repetition compulsion of a traumatic, violent imposition was an inevitable necessity, always waiting to reemerge each time as a seductive model of power with the deep purpose of confirming a primitive, malignant narcissism of absolute dominance and annihilation of the other.

In his later texts, in which he questioned human sociability, Freud, who had lived through World War I and the build up to World War II, in which everything that could be claimed as a democratic principle was violently pushed aside, emphatically recognised that the deep nature of man is anything but democratic. Indicatively, he writes that "the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man", and that "homo homini lupus" ["Man is a wolf to man"]. According to Freud, "men are tempted to satisfy their aggressiveness by exploiting their neighbours, by humiliating them, by causing them pain, by torturing and killing them" (1930). Today, this view is once more, 82 years after the conclusion of World War II, confirmed by the terrors Europe is being drawn into.

From another perspective, Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic definition of democracy described a 'society well-adjusted to its healthy individual members, and fundamentally rooted in **individual and societal maturity'**. Written in 1950, in the wake of World War II, his perspective offers a striking lens through which to examine the development of psychoanalysis as a social phenomenon as well as a therapeutic treatment distinct from other psychological methodologies.

Winnicott's democratic ideal was founded on his particular concept of maturity. A democratic society is thus characterised by its 'maturity', a quality allied to the individual maturity of its healthy members. For this ideal to be possible it requires an 'innate democratic tendency' in a sufficient proportion of individuals. For Winnicott, there was no such thing as an innate tendency without the facilitating [psychic] environment, i.e. the ordinary devoted mother. The 'innate democratic factor' therefore, is created primarily in the 'ordinary good home,' through the mother's primary maternal preoccupation, which lays down the foundations for emotional maturity and eventual social responsibility. Interference at this early stage can lessen and/or distort self-democratic potential.

Threats to democracy and to the evolution of a mature way of being emanate from antisocial individuals. While any society must know what proportion of antisocial individuals it must contain, it must also be in a position to understand the roots of the antisocial tendencies related to the not-good-enough home environment. The hidden antisocial desires power over the Other out of insecurity, and this often leads to immature individuals becoming leaders. Immature leadership, by individuals who are 'sociologically immature,' will reinforce anti-democratic tendencies.

Democracy at war is a complex and often contradictory concept, as war disrupts democratic ideals and may threaten the maturity of individuals who may change their democratic principles in order to stay alive and survive – at least physically. But at what psychic cost?

In 1945, Europe was faced with almost total destruction. However, paradoxically, in occupied countries like France and Holland, psychoanalysis gained vitality by continuing 'underground', acting as centres for 'freedom of ideas and confidence in the future' (Groen-Prakken, 1986). These psychoanalytic resistance movements were early attempts at reunion and there were post-war conferences in Amsterdam (1947) and Vienna (1958). Unfortunately, due to lack of resources and travel difficulties these attempts bore little fruit. But they were important attempts.

The founding of the European Psychoanalytic Federation was established after significant debate that overcame initial reluctance from Societies anxious about international interference in their training programmes. While there were several key figures involved, it was the Swiss analyst Raymond de Saussure who was instrumental – despite language barriers and national identities – in accomplishing the EPF's birth in 1966. Initially, the EPF struggled to establish its own European identity, and set up the Bulletin: Psychoanalysis in Europe for communication and organising conferences on training and clinical topics to demonstrate its value despite its initial difficulties.

As governments of European countries became more democratic during the 1970s and 1980s, psychoanalysis began to evolve in Eastern Europe when the 'fall of the Iron Curtain' created 'new horizons' across Europe, fundamentally changing the political and cultural landscape. The establishment of democracy thus directly facilitated the return and growth of psychoanalysis in countries like, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Portugal, Spain, and Greece. Psychoanalysis was seen as a 'potent symbol of mental freedom' (Groen-Prakken, 1997)

The EPF was proactive, through direct visits to psychoanalytic groups in Eastern Europe (Belgrade, Lithuania, East Germany, Warsaw, Prague) in order to understand their circumstances and offer support. Seminars and summer schools were initiated and clinical East-European seminars started in Budapest in 1989. Later, summer schools were further established to provide systematic teaching and clinical discussion. These fostered a 'feeling of co-operation' and provided crucial exposure to different techniques.

The IPA, while distinct from the EPF, also worked to recognise and support new groups and individual members in Eastern Europe, even creating an 'in locus qualification' for IPA membership under special circumstances. The need for cooperation between EPF and IPA was acknowledged, with an ongoing need for the EPF to stay scientific while nevertheless being involved in discussing issues of psychoanalytical training.

There were challenges of language in a pan-European psychoanalytic community and still, by the time of the 30 years celebration of the EPF, the problem of language continued, with over 24 languages spoken among EPF members. This sometimes led to difficulties in communication and nationalistic feelings. Presently, there are three official languages of the EPF, but now it is the English language that dominates in many of the scientific events and all EPF Council meetings.

There were and continue to be economic and cultural disparities, with some significant economic differences between East and West. This affects participation and necessitates financial support. But EPF has been and continues to be generous in supporting residents of countries that are economically challenged.

There have been internal tensions related to new psychoanalytic groups trying to establish their autonomy. The inherent difficulties of psychoanalysis as an international institution and the plethora of different models that have emerged out of Freud's classical paradigm contribute to institutional complexities. In some countries there have been governmental and societal pressures and psychoanalysis continues to face challenges from government interference, national health insurance, and the proliferation of shorter psychotherapies. These pressures challenge the classical open-ended ideal of a psychoanalytic treatment.

The EPF's scientific activities, integrating a high-level of scientific meetings, seminars, educational conferences, annual conferences, the Bulletin and the important scientific committees carrying out consistent clinical study, fosters the emotional maturity and professional development necessary for a healthy psychoanalytic community, mirroring Winnicott's concept of an 'innate democratic factor'.

The principle of non-interference with individual Societies' policies, echoing Winnicott's 'noninterference with the ordinary good home,' is crucial for maintaining the EPF's effectiveness. This goes alongside the continued need for 'eternal vigilance' to protect 'mental freedom' and 'freedom of opinion' central to psychoanalysis and democracy, especially against financial dependence on third parties. The requirement of all EPF Societies to be IPA members, in many significant ways, liberates EPF to focus on scientific matters.

Between the 30th EPF anniversary in 1996 and the 50th anniversary in 2016, the future of psychoanalysis in Eastern Europe was still a pressing requirement to integrate its unique perspectives to broaden a European psychoanalytic culture. The EPF's role will remain as providing platforms for scientific exchange, discussion of training issues, and the critical evaluation of psychoanalytic concepts and practices. The EPF must also remain adaptive, offering diverse activities (seminars, summer schools, conferences, publications) that meet the evolving needs of its members across Europe.

The history of psychoanalysis in Europe, especially through the lens of the EPF, vividly illustrates Winnicott's assertion that a healthy society, precisely like a healthy individual, strives for maturity, expressed through democratic principles and intellectual freedom. The destruction and revival after World War II, followed by the expansion into post-Iron Curtain Europe, does indeed highlight psychoanalysis as a 'potent symbol of mental freedom' as Han Groen-Prakken, who was EPF President (1987-1991), wrote in her 1986 history of the EPF.

The EPF's journey from a hesitant beginning to a vital, expanding organization at 60, demonstrates the resilience and necessity of international collaboration in fostering psychoanalytic thought and practice, continually striving for an identity that is both unified and respectful of diversity.

The future of psychoanalysis in Europe, and indeed the world, depends on its ability to uphold the values of individual and societal maturity, emotional freedom, and respectful partnership, continuously embodying the democratic values that allow it to evolve and flourish across continents of diverse cultures and languages.

We look forward to welcoming EPF members and friends to join us in the elaboration of the argument for this EPF 60th Anniversary Symposium on psychoanalysis and democracy: past, present and future.

The EPF Board of Directors

Jan Abram, President
Udo Hock, Vice-President
Renate M. Kohlheimer, Vice-President

Christos Zervis, Treasurer
Nergis Güleç, General Secretary
Claire-Marine François-Poncet, General Editor

March 2026

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PROGRAMME

The EPF 60 years Symposium: Democracy and Psychoanalysis: past, present and future

Thursday 1st October 2026

From 19.00 – Welcome cocktail in the EPF House for all invitees

Friday 2nd October 2026

8.45 – 11.00 - Presidents Panel – **EPF - democracy and leadership matters**

Jan Abram (2024 – 2028), Alain Gibeault (1995 – 1999), David Tuckett (2000 – 2004) Evelyne Séchaud (2004 – 2008), Serge Frisch (2012 – 2016)

Jan Abram: **Opening**

Alain Gibeault: **From Representation to Dialogue: Democracy and Leadership in the EPF**

David Tuckett: **What really matters and the future of psychoanalysis**

Evelyne Séchaud: **Freedoms**

Serge Frisch: **Strengthening institutional democracy and freedom by developing the EPF structures**

Jan Abram: **The Democratic Self: on democratic object relations in the EPF leadership role**

11.00 – 11.30 Coffee

11.30 – 13.00 – 2nd Panel – **Believing in democracy**

Claire-Marine François-Poncet (EPF General Editor) with Sotiris Manolopoulous (Hellenic Society)

13.00 – 14.30 Lunch Park Hotel

14.30 – 16.00 – 3rd Panel – **Psychoanalysis and democracy; from infancy onwards**

Nergis Güleç (EPF General Secretary) with Eckehard Pioch (German Society DPG)

16.00 – 16.30 Tea

16.30 – 18.00 – 4th Panel – **Conflict and creativity in psychoanalytic organisations: catalyst or danger?**

Renate Kohlheimer (EPF Vice President [Educational Conferences]) with Bernard Reith (Swiss Society)

19.30 Celebratory Anniversary Dinner in Brussels – Coaches

Saturday 3rd October 2026

9.00 – 10.30 – 5th Panel – **Psychoanalysis and democracy in times of war and peace**

Udo Hock (EPF Vice President [Annual Conferences]) with Elda Abrevaya (Istanbul Association)

10.30 – 11.00 Coffee

11.00 – 12.30 – 6th Panel - **Between Psychoanalysis and Democracy: Why Make a Place for Living Work (« Travail Vivant »)?**

Panel Christos Zervis (EPF Treasurer) with Christophe Dejours (APF)

12.30 – 13.15 Lunch boxes EPF House

13.15 – 14.45 - 7th Panel - **The EPF House, EPCUS and the Archives**

Joëlle Picard (Chair EPF House Committee), Jasminka Šuljagić (Chair Archives Committee), Charlotta Björklind (EPCUS) Chair: Christos Zervis

Charlotta Björklind: **EPCUS: Past, Present, and Future — Bridging the Gap Between Psychoanalysis and the University**

Joëlle Picard: **A House, a Place, and its Dynamics - Notes from the EPF House committee**

Jasminka Šuljagić: **Formation, working through and democracy**

15.00 – 15.30 Plenary – EPF Board of Directors

15.30 Farewell Drinks

The registration information and form for **online attendance** are located at the end of the **EPF Symposium web page**.