

Essay

Women Rights and Democratic Backsliding

As the world is approaching the post-Covid era, how should the global democratic community reverse this democratic backsliding? How best to address the above-mentioned challenges? Can and should the democratic countries around the world work together? And how? What should their focus and their priorities be?

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Students of the Václav Havel Joint Master Programme - European Politics and Society created essays dedicated to the crucial topics of the 25th Forum 2000 Conference titled What Now? Building Back Democratically. Evaluation Committee selected 5 best essays out of 46. All topics are focused on building back democratically after COVID-19, addressing the challenges that democracies are facing today.

The 25th edition of the Forum 2000 conference sought to answer the question, how can we build back democratically in the post-Covid era? In light of Vaclav Havel's legacy, the discussions sought to find new solutions to the challenges that democracies are facing, and which have now been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. Within this short paper, I shall highlight the importance of widening the scope of cooperation in order to promote democracy more effectively and from a less Western-centric perspective. Furthermore, I shall outline an aspect of democratic backsliding which was perhaps overlooked within the scope of this conference, namely, the importance of prioritising women's democratic rights, which are increasingly coming under threat.

Participants of the Forum 2000 conference touched upon the importance of widening the debate if we are to combat democratic backsliding. Democratic countries around the world must work together, however, civil society, NGOs, and grassroots activism will also be important to the cause; it should not be a solely nation-based approach. Cooperation from tech companies will also be essential if we are to be successful in addressing the proliferation of misinformation in the digital space. Furthermore, as Nicolas Tenzer pointed out within the panel discussion 'Democracy Dialogues: Can Democracies commit suicide', democracy should not be considered as a Western concept to be exported. To combat the new challenges to democracy, it is more important than ever to consider multiple perspectives. He pointed out for example, that 'freedom fighters in Afghanistan [...] have been able to discover the democratic values within their own tradition. [...] intellectuals, have also to learn from these freedom fighters and give them a voice.'

What, then, should these advocates of democracy be working towards? A priority for proponents of democracy must be to address the implications of democratic backsliding for women's rights. A UN report in 2020 pointed out that, 'while significant attention has been devoted to democratic backsliding, there is a striking lack of research into its gendered aspects and implications.'¹ Previous hard-won progress for gender equality is now under threat, particularly in younger democracies. For example, since the election of the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) in Poland in 2015, we have seen numerous attacks on reproductive and sexual rights. This has raised concerns in the European Commission as to the legality and legitimacy of these rulings, as the ruling party had evicted the previous judges in the Constitutional Tribunal and replaced them with judges who are more favourable to the party's agenda. In 2016 the PiS government made access to emergency contraception more difficult,² and more recently, a near-total ban on abortion has come into effect.³ Similarly, across the Atlantic, an abortion ban has been enforced in Texas which has also been condemned as an affront to democracy.⁴ As Nyaradzo Mashayamombe pointed out in the panel discussion 'Women and Democratic (E)quality', if we want democracy to thrive, we must consider that half of the population consists of women and girls, whose democratic rights must be defended. The progress that has been made for women's rights thus far, must not be lost. This was the only panel discussion within the conference addressed women's rights and how they have been impacted by the pandemic. However, it did not address specifically how women have been affected by democratic backsliding. This is, however, an issue that merits more attention, discussion, and, most importantly, solutions.

¹ Conny Roggeband and Andrea Krizsan, *Democratic Backsliding and The Backlash Against Women's Rights: Understanding The Current Challenges For Feminist Politics* (UN Women, 2020).

² "Poland: Emergency Contraception Restrictions Catastrophic For Women And Girls", *Amnesty International* 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2017/06/poland-emergency-contraception-restrictions-catastrophic-for-women-and-girls/>.

³ "Poland Enforces Controversial Near-Total Abortion Ban", *BBC News*, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55838210>.

⁴ Maura Healey, "The Texas Abortion Ban Is An Affront To Democracy", *Boston Globe*, 2021, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/09/16/opinion/texas-abortion-ban-is-an-affront-democracy/>.

It is also important to mention that there are many other groups and minorities who are suffering significantly as a result of democratic backsliding. LGBTQ+ rights are also coming under threat, as can be seen in Hungary, where laws have been introduced to restrict education and media coverage of LGBTQ+ issues, because of Prime Minister Victor Orbán taking steps to undermine the independence of the state judiciary.⁵ It is vital that institutions such as the EU (European Union) take more decisive action in response to such attacks on democracy.

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⁵ Johnny Luk, "Could Hungary Break The EU?", *Aljazeera*, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/7/15/could-hungary-break-the-eu>.

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