

5 BIG IDEAS AT THE 21ST FORUM 2000 CONFERENCE

Fear and uncertainty, resulting from diverse effects of globalization, economic transformation, and technological progress, undermine liberal democracy.

Prince Albert II of Monaco addressed the fact that, in the face of alarming global issues such as growing inequalities, security threats, scarcity of natural resources, intensity of weather disasters, and the rise in migration, it is easy for “political tools to seem powerless.”

According to David Clark, numerous socioeconomic issues, such as low living standards, economic instability, and unemployment, were largely ignored by the political elite on the right and the left. Given no other avenue to air their grievances, voters that felt left behind by globalization used the elections and referendums to make their voices heard.

The rise of populist movements, the election of Donald Trump, and the Brexit referendum thus represent defensive tendencies against some side effects of globalization, which fell short of many expectations. Consequently, these political events in the U.K. and U.S.A.—the long-term anchors of liberal order in international politics—created further uncertainties in liberal democracies around the globe.

According to Xiao Qiang, modern technology and social media represent other serious challenges. They have the ability to empower democracy and to polarize the public sphere, as well. “They can be used by activists to spread discussion in authoritarian regimes but also by authoritarian regimes to spy on its people.” Furthermore, Russian propaganda on social networks and TV news represents a big challenge for liberal democratic societies, particularly in Europe, against which it is hard to fight back.

Another aspect was mentioned by Marc-Olivier Padis, who sees a notable link between democracy and demography. In countries that are rapidly losing their population, there is an existential fear that serves as food for populism. Coupled with the migration wave, this fear gives rise to social and cultural insecurity, certainly making it easier for these nations to fall into the hands of populism. “There is great deal of fear in the European and American societies. This fear opens the space for extremism, which has a potential to destroy freedom and democracy,” confirmed Paul Zulehner.



Among a variety of current threats to democracy, populism seems to be most serious one.

Carl Gershman identified two types of threats to democracy: external and internal. External threats come from authoritarian countries, like Russia and China, along with non-state actors. Internal threats come from the formidable rise of populism and nationalism. Globalization contributes to the rise of populism through creation of new social and economic divides. A small, globalized elite does not speak the language of the majority society, which feels left behind in this process.

Hugo Drochon argued that people are too used to thinking of “left versus right,” when they should be thinking “center versus extremist.” The rise of populism, he believes, is because certain groups feel “left out” by traditional left and



right politics. The nations facing populism must be able to discern how to combine and utilize center-right and center-left forces.

Marc-Olivier Padis described populism as not only a criticism of the establishment but also a monopolization of a representation of the people. He used Italy as a specific example of a rich breeding ground for populism, where the principles of representative democracy are being questioned.

Populism is a sign of the times and must be reflected. “We must take the concerns of the people seriously,” said Karl-Heinz Paqué. Since populism is rooted in distrust of government institutions, politicians must regain control of their governments. Governments and politicians must find ways to integrate the feelings of control and stability into mainstream politics. In addition, the liberal establishment must be self-critical, so it is positioned to counter populism in the future.

There is no alternative to the liberal democracy.

There is an expansion of power and influence of authoritarian regimes, like China and Russia, as well as the weakening of democratic systems from within, like Turkey or Hungary. Furthermore, terrorist violence, migration, and social insecurity have created a climate of fear that is used by many despots and demagogues to justify authoritarian power and restrictions on freedoms. Faith in democratic institutions has been declining, as governments seem unable to cope with the complex new challenges of globalization.

Xiao Qiang pointed out that “China is a success in many ways, but it’s not a success in democracy. It’s a threat to democracy.”

Juan Pablo Cardenal added, “We need to get used to the idea that China is not going to become a democracy.” He explained that the Chinese leadership does not believe that the Western system is best for China. As China expands its economic and political influence, Szu-Chien Hsu implores the world to refrain from treating China’s Communist regime as an ordinary trade partner because, in doing so, we are “harming the interest of global solidarity for democracy and human rights.”

According to Adam Michnik’s pessimistic view, even Poland is now, step by step, “Putinizing” governance and destroying the justice system. Public media has become Kaczynski’s media, the country is invaded by national religious ideology, and independent cultural institutions are being attacked. He describes the current state of affairs as “proto-fascism,” as it was in the 1930s. This is not a uniquely Polish problem.

Nevertheless, authoritarian regimes in countries like Russia and Turkey have begun to expose weaknesses. Structural challenges make them fragile in the long run. Mark Galeotti noted that authoritarian regimes decay and erode until they collapse from within. Despite all of its problems, liberal democracy is the preferred system of governance in the global political sphere and has no alternative.

If European nations return to the social values of tolerance (the basis of citizenship and human rights), trust (the basis of social cohesion), and solidarity (the basis of social inclusion), the institution of liberal democracy can potentially be reawakened, concluded Iveta Radičová.



To maintain democracy, citizens, especially young people, need to engage in politics and civic life.

In many countries—even long-established democracies—support for liberal democracy has eroded in recent years, especially among younger people who have no memory of the struggles against totalitarianism. Karel Schwarzenberg urged young people to engage in different civic activities, including entering political parties. “You have to get into the mainstream of politics. If the fight for the future of our planet is to be successful, it has to take place on many levels—international, national, municipal—but also on the part of the citizens.”

Prince Albert II of Monaco added: “In the fight against climate change, states must join forces with NGOs, as it is a characteristic of this era, that citizens mistrust the actions of nation states alone. This goes in accordance with Vaclav Havel's idea many years ago, that citizens should join civil societies and organizations in order to gain stronger voice for their causes and create the so-called civil society.”

According to Richard Youngs, even the vote for Brexit represents expression for a greater feel of democratic control and accountability over decisions that affect people's lives. To avoid this in the future, Youngs suggests greater engagement of its citizens, especially young people. Since they don't see adequate fairness and redistribution of wealth, they are becoming increasingly critical about global capitalism. It is perceived that “democracy is about emancipation of human beings, and capitalism is about domination of human beings,” as stated by Ramin Jahanbegloo. He thinks, however, that “democracy needs young people and young people need democracy.”

Christopher Dawns stressed the lack of civic education is a huge problem in America, and Zuzana Vuová suggested a renewed focus on “discussion-based civic and political education in order to increase engagement.”



There is a need for active and coordinated defense of democracy!

There is a need to identify key problems threatening liberal democracy both from without and within and to join in an active defense of fundamental democratic principles. Democracy's supporters must unite to halt its retreat and to organize a new coalition for its moral, intellectual, and political renewal. As stated by Adam Michnik, “the defenders of democracy are a minority but a brave minority,” and they must not stay isolated. For them it is incredibly important to be a part of an international effort to preserve democracy and to “feel it.” This is the purpose of [the Coalition for Democratic Renewal](#).

The starting point of a new campaign for democracy is a reaffirmation of the essential democratic principles, which are rooted in a belief in human dignity and which comprise the fundamental human rights, free elections, vibrant civil society, rule of law, checks, and balances in constitutional systems and a market-economy free of corruption. The defense of democratic values is also a precondition for inclusive societies, the framework for social and economic progress, and the foundation for the preservation of international peace and security.

Although democracy is often considered a Western idea, its most fervent defenders today are the people in non-Western societies whose struggles affirm the universality of the democratic ideal. In this regard, Stéphane Dion reiterated that democracy must come from the inside. It is impossible to impose it from the outside.

Karl-Heinz Paqué pointed out that the relationship between the United States and the liberal democracies of Europe has been one of the most impactful in history. In response to the narrowing American agenda, Europe needs to be firm about liberal principles now and stand in defense of them.

Heinz Fischer reaffirmed the current responsibility of European liberal societies and stressed the unique role of the European Union in creating the space for cooperation and solidarity.

In a conclusion, Yascha Mounk encouraged action: “We live in an extraordinary time in which it takes courage to stand up... The decisions we now make will either save or doom liberal democracy.”