



Illiberalism is on the rise

Globalization and its effects are shaking traditional identities. Rising insecurities and fear open doors to identity politics, political nationalism, and other forms of illiberalism. According to Ralf Fücks, anti-liberal trends in certain parts of the world are not a unique phenomenon, but a response to accelerated modernization. The success of illiberalism can be attributed to the feelings of insecurity that many have experienced in the face of this rapid transformation. Stéphane Dion added that economic inequality is not the only challenge of globalization. While globalized markets are flourishing, the globalization of democracy is still missing. He also insisted on addressing cultural fears about race and religion.

In his remarks on Poland's situation, Adam Michnik recalled thinking in the early 1990s that "the biggest threat was not the return



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of Communism, but the return of national chauvinism." He contended that the return of nationalism is the result of a gradual process, not a recent, unpredictable wave. Its causes are rooted in identity crises and changes to traditional political cleavages brought on by globalization.

The gap between the „winners“ and „losers“ is deepening. Many people are less optimistic about the prospects of globalization, and as a result, the divisive rhetoric populists use against elites and the liberal order resonate with them. As indicated by Elisabeth von Hammerstein, populists use negative emotions and images to create a perception of crisis. "Politicians must listen to the fears of people and show compassion, they must address those fears," she implored, adding that "politicians should preemptively address political issues before populists can create negative images in the minds of the electorate."

The discourse surrounding liberal democratic ideals often neglects the importance of the nation-state in the globalizing world. As a result, liberal democrats have ceded the issue of nationalism to illiberal, malignant nationalists. Proponents of democracy need to reiterate that patriotism can be positive, inclusive, and liberal.

China and other authoritarian powers disrupt the liberal democratic order

The democratic world hoped that as China's economy opened up, its stance towards liberal democratic ideas would do the same. Theresa Fallon noted this was wishful thinking—the West now views China as a competitor that seeks to extend its influence abroad through foreign investment, co-opting elites, and one-sided trade deals. China's influence across the world grows rapidly, while that of the United States wanes under President Donald Trump.



Using “sharp power,” China attempts to become the new guarantor of international order. Russia's authoritarian regime also undermines democratic governance through tools like hybrid warfare, disinformation, and economic co-optation. In this context many other illiberal governments—in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, for example—subvert liberal democracy and weaken democratic systems of checks and balances.

This becomes more troubling, Konstantin von Eggert points out, as Russia and China grow increasingly closer ties: a shift towards China is a major post-Crimea sentiment in Russian foreign and security policy.

Lobsang Sangay warned that China is using tactics similar to those it used in Tibet half a century ago to gain influence in other parts of the world as well. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China hopes to create more opportunities to exert pressure via “debt-trap diplomacy” while expanding the potential reach of its hard power capacities. Sangay argued that the West must act quickly against the threat China poses to economies and democratic ideals outside its borders. Unilateral stances against China will fail; a multilateral approach must be adopted, and existing international forums used, to combat China's influence. “You either transform China,” he warned, “or China transforms you.”

The media is in crisis in a new, post-truth information sphere

The contemporary globalized world of information has become a new battlefield. Global news media are facing a serious crisis – a crisis of trust and the erosion of evidence-based underpinning of facts. We also face cases of manipulation of public opinion, the creation of “alternative facts,” and the use of social media in an “information war.” The respect for truth forms part of the very foundation of liberal democracy. Its erosion in the public space jeopardizes the quality of democracy, and possibly its very existence.

According to Vivian Schiller, the media sector faces crises of both sustainability and trust. She held that instability in just one of these areas should be considered a crisis. Both in concert could be catastrophic. On the other hand, the immense financial and political pressure on traditional media invigorates journalists, giving them a new sense of purpose in defending independent media against these attacks.

Sofi Oksanen argued that the rise of social media presents a threat to democracy, as it creates social bubbles and a platform for fake news and propaganda. Jonathan Ledgard and Suzanne Nossel emphasized that large tech companies' business models favor the profit imperative over democratic ideals, and that they must take responsibility for the ill effects their practices have on the public discourse.

Xiao Qiang warned that technology is not only empowering people, but ruling elites as well. Antidemocratic forces at home and abroad (i.e. China, Russia) have been able to exploit the changes in the technological sphere. Proponents of democracy have largely failed to do so. Flavia Kleiner stressed that “we have five words and one picture” to capture people's attention. Proponents of democracy need to refocus their efforts away from criticizing the information landscape they find themselves in: they must instead adapt to it.

Activists across the globe are fighting back

Václav Havel held that “genuine civil society is the truest fundamental of democracy.” Civic activism is necessary for the well-being of liberal democracy and active citizens are an essential component of healthy democracy. They contribute to the development of their communities and provide their elected representatives with feedback on their performance. When times get tough, active citizens are crucial for the defense and restoration of democratic governance.



Nyaradzo Mashayamombe highlighted the importance of peaceful protest. Recalling the protests leading up to ex-president Robert Mugabe's resignation in her home country of Zimbabwe, she commented that "protests are good if they are done responsibly." Haykuhi Harutyunyan echoed this sentiment, stating that "the powerless have the power to change their country and take ownership of their future." She cited the positive example of Armenia, where mass demonstrations culminated with the resignation of the prime minister. Harutyunyan sees the civil society as an active watchdog of democratization.



We see grassroots movements advocating for democratic ideals in many countries around the world—both democratic and authoritarian. In this context, Zsuzsanna Szélényi mentioned the growing influence of young people among activists in Hungary, organizing protests and movements. She posited that "Europe is now a continent where changes are the burden of the young people." Juraj Šeliga stressed that we need to be inspired by the legacies of Václav Havel and democratic reformers who were "leaders, not rulers."

These activists exhibit bravery in face of seemingly insurmountable difficulty. Venezuelan student activist Rafaela Requesens explained that "for me, democracy represents the opportunity to give life to those who are dying today, to give freedom to those who are behind bars"—including her brother, former Forum 2000 delegate and a deputy of the Venezuelan National Assembly Juan Requesens. Nada Dhaif's and Tania Bruguera's speeches detailed that despite harassment and imprisonment by the governments of Bahrain and Cuba, respectively, they remained resolute in pursuit of their ideals.

The testimonies of brave activists from around the world demonstrated that while we focus on questions about "how our democracy is in decline and how to improve it," we cannot forget there are many countries where even our "imperfect democracy" is a distant dream—one worth fighting for!

Democracy - although in trouble - is the future

"Democratic societies are in crisis, but democratic ideals are not losing their appeal," Tomáš Petříček asserted. "Democracy does not need to be replaced, but cultivated." Vesna Pusić added that democracy is about content, not just form: it is a means for governments to gain legitimacy, not a final objective. The goal is good governance.

Ramin Jahanbegloo pointed out that great leaders in the past were "moral leaders." In today's world, there are no more moral leaders—we need a revival of moral leadership and value-based politics. Irwin Cotler added that we must find a convergence between interests and values. The increasing discourse of new realism in foreign policy, centered only around state interest, cannot offer a solution to current challenges. An active cooperation of democratic countries is necessary to defend liberal democratic values around the globe. Michael Abramowitz expressed hope that "the cause of global democracy will advance as the US returns to being a really strong proponent, and lives out liberal democratic values."

Changes in society and political culture will be possible as the younger generation comes to power, Joerg Forbrig attested. However, democracy will flourish only with education that allows for civic engagement, fosters media literacy and critical thinking, and encourages people to listen to and engage with others.

Democracy is in a crisis unprecedented since the Cold War. Liberal democratic forces suffer from a lack of moral leadership, a lack of vision, and declining trust in democratic institutions. Yet democracy remains the only system that guarantees life in freedom, the rule of law, global peace, and prosperity. Democracy has faced seemingly insurmountable challenges in the past, and survived. If maintained and updated, it will do so again.

