

5 Big Ideas at the 19th Forum 2000 Conference

These five points represent some of the key ideas discussed at the 19th annual Forum 2000 Conference “**Democracy and Education**”, held September 13–16, 2015. They are but a brief overview of the thoughts expressed at the conference, and are by no means exhaustive.

Isolation Is Not the Solution

The conference participants referred to the necessity of integrating a wide array of citizens from countries with ongoing problems with democratic norms into the activities of civil society. This is a form of education. **Ales Bialiatski** of the Viasna Human Rights Centre said that “*we need people to engage in civil society and begin discussion on issues like capital punishment, tolerance, and civic engagement.*” Bialiatski believes that only education can help the next generation appreciate civic and democratic values. **Šimon Pánek**, co-founder of People in Need, believes that without a proper level of education, it is difficult to mobilize the public considering they might not feel empowered enough to make informed decisions. According to some, isolation is not the solution even on the international level as it creates more space for the problems to grow. Cuban activist **Manuel Cuesta Morúa** remains optimistic on the situation in his country. “*For the first time in many years, we have moved from resistance to proper politics. We now have a unique opportunity to participate in the political process of normalization because we have the support of the international community. The next step is to create a feeling of urgency that we need to unite ourselves,*” he adds, once again emphasizing the necessity to actively engage in the widening of democratic space.

Liberal Democracies Increasingly Turn a Blind Eye to Human Rights Violations for the Sake of Economic Interests or Political Stability

There is a new wave of authoritarianism in the world today, connected to a certain extent with growing economic clout of some of the authoritarian regimes and/or their claim of maintaining stability. Good economic relations and preference for stability over conflict can and should, however, be pursued in parallel, not in exchange, for value-based positions on human rights and democracy on the part of liberal democracies. According to **Jacob Mchangama**, Founder and CEO of Justitia, “*when you reveal that your fundamental values are for sale, that does not inspire confidence.*” Mchangama believes that western governments are too timid vis-à-vis China, for example. **Alex Chow**, a student activist from Hong Kong, warns that “*[In Hong Kong] you are being systematically oppressed, so your voice can be kind of transparent. Even if you speak, your voice cannot be heard.*” Other countries were also mentioned. According to **Malek Adly**, a human rights lawyer, “*in Egypt today, only the voice of the state is to be heard. Only the story of the state is to be told.*” **Ahmed Maher**, human rights activist and a past Forum 2000 participant, remains in prison in Egypt for political reasons.

Democracy as a Western Phenomenon vs. Universality of Democratic Values

It is crucial to understand that the principles of democracy are often modified to fit a number of local indicators. To what extent is this modification necessary and to what extent are the principles universal? **Barbara Haig**, Deputy President at the National Endowment for Democracy, argues that the notion that democratic values are a Western creation is incorrect. Democracy is not a Western export but rather a replicable set of rules and values.

Unfortunately, according to **Jacob Mchangama**, democracies are increasingly unwilling and even unable to defend their basic principles. While global human rights are at an all-time high, the concept is depreciating

as the definition of human rights broadens. Economics professor **Randall K. Filer** stated that *“the ideas that we think are western... are privileged not because they are western, but because over and over again they produce results”* which is something that all cultures can value. Additionally, he noted that schools in developing countries do not consider the origin of theories, as long as they work. **Frederik Willem de Klerk**, former President of South Africa stated that *“elections have become auctions, and politicians offer more and more for less and less.”* However, in spite of all its critics, the *“democratic system is still the best system,”* as it *“offers a way for discontent people to offer something new.”* **Ralf Fücks**, President of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, emphasized the crucial task of regaining global credibility and reinvigorating democracy at home. *“Democracy is not a key to Paradise, but rather a prevention of Hell,”* says Fücks.

Authoritarians’ Influence on the Educational Sphere Is a Growing Concern

The influence of authoritarian regimes on education is a growing concern. Among the countries most known for a strong inclination towards propaganda in schools is Russia. “The main job of the teachers,” recalled **Taus Serganova**, a Russian activist, *“is to be a translator from the government to the children so that they can digest, mull over, and soon believe what the Russian government wants them to.”* The panelists came to the conclusion that the nature of educational systems in the post-soviet space is a “patriotic” one. It is centered on creating loyal citizens above all else. **Alyona Marchkova** of Moldova claimed that education is completely based on “military-patriotism,” whether it is in formal schooling, after school programs, or extracurricular activities. In contrast, **Max Kugler**, a student of a progressive high school in Copenhagen, Denmark, mentioned that he feels a strong spirit of critical thinking among his peers, an aspect which he believes to be crucial in forming a clear and independent opinion.

Changes Must Be Made to How We Teach Democracy in Schools.

The topic of the necessity of transforming education was explored throughout a number of panels. According to **Jaroslav Anděl** of the DOX Center for Contemporary Art, it is next to impossible to teach about and towards democracy in a classroom which is managed in an authoritative manner. *“In order to improve [education] we must think more long term,”* he stated. **Filip Jelínek** of the Czech Union of High Schools observed that *“liberal democracy cannot work alone. It needs people who understand how society works... to make it better for the future.”* He added that students need to be engaged in decision-making, thus creating active citizens who can help democracy to be successful.

Sister **Cyril Mooney** offers a practical approach: *“...our young people are given everything they need. Europe has lost God because we are so comfortable.”* According to Mooney it might be a good idea to introduce controlled hardship into education. *“I fear for our young generation, where everything is easy on a material level, but very, very difficult on a spiritual level.”* **Šimon Pánek** added that a trap exists for democratic countries – being raised in a democracy has made its citizens already very comfortable in their lives. As a result, there is a risk of raising passive citizens, and with that come weak leaders. Therefore, it is extremely important we invest in education to teach about democracy, continue the debates and increase of self-confidence.