

Essay

Democracy from the Bottom Up

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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.

At the twenty-fifth Forum 2000 Conference, Jan Zielonka stated that “Democracy is very simple: it’s about convincing voters that you have better solutions than your opponent.” In a world where authoritarian powers like China and Russia offer an alternative to democracy, those interested in preventing democratic backsliding must convince the populations of the world that democracy is the most sustainable and just form of governance. As Jana Kobzova explains, “External actors can at best help to support those on the ground who are pursuing the same democratic agenda.”¹ This essay will first outline the importance of civil society to democracy, and then consider how democracy can be shown to be a viable alternative to authoritarianism through education and through learning from current democratising initiatives.

We have known since Alexis de Tocqueville’s seminal work *Democracy in America* that a flourishing civil society is essential to a well-functioning democracy. Civil society organisations act as schools of democracy and platforms to hold the government to account. Václav Havel also wrote extensively on the central role of civil society in democratisation. For him, “the power of the powerless” resides in society’s capacity to mobilise itself against abusive government.² Many speakers at this year’s Forum 2000 Conference agreed that the importance of democracy needs to be made clear to civil society in order to create the necessary conditions for democratisation. Ultimately, it is the masses who form the frontline of the fight for democracy. Paradoxically, the protests in Belarus are a silver lining in Europe, a sign that citizens are willing to fight for democracy and are aware of its alternative. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya therefore argued that the best way for democratic societies to help Belarus is to support civil society. This stands true worldwide.

However, we need to support civil society in the right way. First, we need to show that democracy is a viable alternative to authoritarianism. Many argue that democracy is a luxury we simply cannot afford; it is too inefficient to compete with industrial powerhouses like China or to fight climate change. Many smaller states in Asia are tempted by the Chinese model as it appears to offer immediate solutions to their problems. Western powers need to have closer links to countries in China’s sphere of influence to show these countries that they have options. Hideo Suzuki argues that Japan has done a lot to promote democracy in the region; the European Union should cooperate with Japan on this. One possible solution proposed by Yamini Aiyar is education programmes to inform citizens of the benefits of democracy. Many practical arguments can be employed to show society that democracy is more sustainable than the Chinese model. The V-Dem Institute has found that, compared to authoritarian regimes, democracies offer more efficient policies to fight climate change, stimulate economic growth and are less likely to experience civil or international conflicts.³

Equally, democratic societies need to learn from their previous attempts to promote democracy. Consider the European Eastern Partnership (EaP). Attempts to support civil society so far have not taken country-specific context into consideration. We must remember that Western countries did not develop uniformly, so we cannot expect the rest of the world to do so.

Moreover, funding must be targeted. Most EaP funds currently end up in government budgets, not in the hands of civil society organisations.⁴ This is problematic as these states are not democratic and therefore have no interest in spending this money on democratisation. Civil society receives between only two to six per cent of the funding.⁵ It should also be easier for grassroots

¹ Kobzová, Jana. “Can the EU Support Democracy in the Eastern Partnership?” *European View*, vol. 13, no. 1, June 2014, pp. 109–114, doi:10.1007/s12290-014-0310-x.

² Havel, Václav. *The Power of The Powerless: Citizens Against The State In Central-Eastern Europe*. Routledge, 2009.

³ Lindberg, Staffan et al. “The Case For Democracy | V-Dem”. *V-Dem.Net*, 2021, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/our-work/research-projects/case-democracy/>.

⁴ Kobzová, Jana. “Can the EU Support Democracy in the Eastern Partnership?” *European View*, vol. 13, no. 1, June 2014, pp. 109–114, doi:10.1007/s12290-014-0310-x.

⁵ Aliyev, Huseyn. “Assessing The European Union’S Assistance To Civil Society In Its Eastern Neighbourhood: Lessons From The South Caucasus”. *Journal Of Contemporary European Studies*, vol 24, no. 1, 2015, pp. 42- 60. *Informa UK Limited*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2015.1056112>.

organisations to receive aid. Currently, aid applications must be made in English, which is an unnecessary impediment to receiving support, especially for grassroots organisations. It is therefore unsurprising that the civil society participation ratings of EaP beneficiaries have broadly remained static since the formation of the EaP.⁶ Democratic states must learn from these lessons in order to better support civil society worldwide.

To conclude, at the heart of the fight for democracy is support for civil society. As Eva Zamrazilova explained, democracy is hard to export and must grow from the bottom up. Democratic states must work together to support civil society worldwide through education and targeted support.

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⁶ World Bank. "Govdata360: Civil Society Participation". *Govdata360*, 2021, https://govdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hab8090ea?country=UKR&indicator=28738&countries=BLR,MD A&viz=line_chart&years=2014,2020.

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