

THE COURAGE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY
20TH ANNUAL FORUM 2000 CONFERENCE

OCTOBER 16–19, 2016, PRAGUE AND OTHER CENTRAL EUROPEAN CITIES

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5 BIG IDEAS AT THE 20TH FORUM 2000 CONFERENCE

Democracy is undergoing a period of great stress and democratic leadership is in crisis.

Political leadership in contemporary democratic societies contends with a lack of vision, responsibility, and courage to lead. Democratic institutions are weakened by political interference and/or diminishing public trust and, in some countries, have been abused for non-democratic purposes. The delicate balance of constitutional checks and balances has come under pressure. According to Philip Zimbardo, "democracy is under a greater threat now than it has ever been since the 1940s." Oleksandra Drik, young activist from Ukraine,



feels that there is an urgent need for a revival in civil society, which is crucial for the emergence of new democratic leaders. Others argued that new, vigorous, and appealing leadership can only emerge from new generations and many stressed the importance of education in this regard.

Populist and extremist rhetoric is increasing.

The declining trust in public institutions and the democratically elected leadership often takes the form of a popular revolt against the establishment and traditional elites. Jan Techau, a renowned German security and political analyst, argued that since the driving forces behind these trends are usually anger and fear, the current popular uprisings are hardly constructive. In fact, some mainstream leaders, unable to exert true leadership and to actively shape the public debate, are sliding to populism in an attempt to remain relevant. Franz Karl Prüller from Austria warned against underestimating populists and the unfounded belief that their rhetoric can be countered by rational arguments.

The overall tone of the public discourse is changing. Mainstream media are losing audiences and information is increasingly channeled through non-traditional, fringe media outlets or via social networks that often foment populist or even extremist views. The backlash against the excessive political correctness has also played a role, as it suddenly seems popular to be politically "incorrect", sometimes to the extent of spreading fear and hatred. The increased influence of alternative information channels has also given space to manipulation of facts or spreading outright lies. We seem to live in an age of "post-truth".

While liberal democracies are weakening, authoritarian regimes are on the rise. These two trends are reinforcing each other.

Freedom and democracy were on the rise after the dramatic changes of 1989 and the early 1990s in Eastern Europe, post-Soviet Russia, and former authoritarian regimes in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. A democratic future seemed almost inevitable for all. Today, however, systematic ideological competition is back in full force, and the authoritarian form of government is entrenching itself in direct opposition to the liberal democratic one.

Ralf Fücks of the Heinrich Boll Stiftung does not see Russia and China as countries in transition to democracy. They have their own types of regimes and are in fact in direct opposition to liberal

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democracy. According to Suat Kiniklioglu, Russia and Turkey are unhappy with their place in the international order and are actively seeking to change it.

Some of the authoritarian governments are intensively using the “post-truth” media environment to further their interests and undermine the western liberal regimes. The operation of internet trolls, subversive information servers financed from dubious sources, spreading of distorted facts or outright lies, leads to heightened tensions, radicalization of the political discourse and of the society in general, to the impression that existing democratic leadership is ineffective, and to the rise of extremist political forces.



Economy and social wellbeing also play an important part. There is a palpable sense of insecurity and of a looming threat, caused by the consequences of the global financial crisis, rapid

technological developments, shifts in the global economy, and other factors. Democratic governments generally fail to explain these developments well and to offer inspiring and rational ways forward.

Liberal democracy must restore self-confidence.

The liberal democratic world needs to remain united and firm, refocus on a positive agenda, and even show commitment to support the struggling civil society in non-democratic countries. Jerzy Pomianowski of the European Endowment for Democracy asserts that the West needs to be honest and passionate about its values and democracy as much as the authoritarian regimes are about theirs. NED’s Carl Gershman asks that if the West is in such a terrible state, why do so many people still want to come and live in it.

The West needs to reinterpret democratic principles for the new times, as well as to learn to promote them better.

Václav Havel’s values remain alive but his legacy needs defending.

In the age of post-truth politics, of a boom of conspiracy theories and state propaganda, Havel’s concept of living in truth becomes extremely relevant and appealing again. Sticking to the basic values of freedom, tolerance, and respect for the rule of law can provide the necessary compass to steer us through the stormy weather. Havel, as well as Mahatma Gandhi, used the path of non-violence, but always had a very clear objective and followed it with a firm determination. This should be an inspiration for us today.

