

POLICY REPORT FROM THE DISCUSSION TITLED “TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY: IS IT A MATCH”

Is it a match?



Technology



Democracy



in cooperation with



British Embassy
Prague

The debate was held on February 16, 2021 in cooperation with the British Embassy in Prague.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on a debate titled “Technology and democracy: is it a match?”, focusing on the current strategic competition between democracy and authoritarianism in the realm of technologies. The debate explored the positive and negative aspects of technology in the context of democracy, public participation, technology and pro-democratic movements. The main problems discussed were violations of privacy, digital rights and fake news disseminated by the authoritarian governments. Panelists suggested solutions to ensure more opportunities for civil society to engage them in digital rights discussions and to invest in educational programs of digital awareness.

2. DISCUSSION SUMMARY

2.1. BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY

2.1.1. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND TECHNOLOGY

One of the main topics of the discussion were the positive and negative effects of the interaction between democracy and technology. Sascha Hannig argued that in the current world, social media and technology have the power to enhance democratic values but also democratic participation. This could result in better relations within societies. The example of Estonia was offered, where the communication between technology and citizenship was essential to connect government directly to citizens.

MODERATOR



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PANELISTS



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2.1.2. TECHNOLOGY IN PRO-DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENTS

Vitaliy Moroz pointed out that “despite all misuse of technologies by the governments –pro-democratic movements demonstrate that activists use technology much more effectively”. Vitaliy gave an example of Belarus, where there was a shutdown of the internet during the protests in 2020-2021.

2.1.3. BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY

The panel also discussed that in the world of cybersecurity, privacy is crucial. Over a short period, we have witnessed a growth of privacy awareness among individuals and on the market, which brought many opportunities for new tools. As **Petra Moravcová** mentioned, “business

“business is a kind of glue between governments and civil society”



Petra Moravcová

“despite all misuse of technologies by the governments, the pro-democratic movements demonstrate that activists use technology much more effectively”



Vitaliy Moroz

is a kind of glue between governments and civil society”. During the debate, the COVID-19’s influence on the digital market was highlighted. The pandemics ultimately forced a lot of institutions to go fully digital, which is a good thing.

2.2. NEGATIVES OF TECHNOLOGY

2.2.1. AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNMENTS AND CONTROL

Sascha Hannig raised the problems which arose “in countries like China, which is today the major authoritarian government that uses technologies to control the population”. Therefore, China decided to limit the access to information or even fully make it unavailable to citizens and extended the impact to some countries in Latin America like Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile. Furthermore, in the case of Belarus, **Vitaliy Moroz** raised an issue of the authoritarian government that had shut down the internet during the pro-democratic protests in 2020-2021 and used Huawei equipment for these needs.

2.2.2. PRIVACY AND DIGITAL RIGHTS PROBLEMS

With the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments use technologies against their citizens. The main challenge currently arose with distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic governments. The discussion pointed out that with the democratic government we can see issues of privacy and digital rights. However, during the COVID-19, a few governments tried to collect information about citizens through self-isolation applications like in Norway. In Russia, the government invests a lot of money to collect data from its citizens.

2.2.3 MISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

One of the challenges discussed was the proliferation of misinformation campaigns and fake news in social media. As Sascha Hannig mentioned, polarization influences Latin American countries and democracies. In the Venezuelan case, Russians and the Chinese were investing in the country and importing surveillance technologies. Misinformation and interference from foreign governments (such as Russia and China) took advantage of local political instability in Latin America and tried to politicize the population.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing the positions of speakers, technology can enhance democracy as it strengthens the relationships between various stakeholders. At the multinational level, it pushes governments to cooperate. It is an opportunity for privatization, investing in cybersecurity and digital infrastructure to develop markets and innovations on the state level. Despite the misuse of technology by authoritarian regimes, innovations can help pro-democratic movements to survive, as it happened in Belarus. Authoritarian governments did

an excellent job hiding the pandemic information; democracies, on the other hand, are accountable to their citizens. On balance, as democracy depends on citizens' participation, it has to comply with more rules in the technological arena. The final point is that the countries that emphasize the use of technology will be the leaders and pro-actively export that technology to other countries. As Vitaly Moroz remarked "we should not be scared of technologies; we should be scared of those who misuse it."

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

1. Ensuring more opportunities for civil society to engage in discussions regarding digital rights and policies and to work with the government and private sector to be more transparent with the data they collect and use.
2. Investing in educational programs for professionals who can distinguish and analyze how the technologies are used to report any misuse. Those professionals could prepare public reports pointing out the digital rights violations.
3. Investing in educational programs of digital awareness for children and adults.
4. Enhancing the critical thinking of citizens through educational campaigns and programs.
5. Taking urgent action to secure technical infrastructure in democratic countries.

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