

Essay

What now? Building Back Democratically After COVID-19. A Response to the Forum 2000 Conference

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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.

The need for global cooperation on the protection and promotion of democracy has become imperative in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. A report by Freedom House identified that since the outbreak began, the condition of democracy has worsened in 80 countries.¹ Global democracy had already been facing internal challenges, including the growth of extremist groups and low civic participation, and external challenges from authoritarian states such as Russia and China. These existing challenges to democracy have only been further exacerbated by the pandemic. Governments have been able to use the pandemic as a justification and a smoke screen for extending and abusing their power. This abuse of power has disproportionately affected vulnerable groups in society.² There has also been a decrease in transparency in many states, creating fertile ground for corruption.³ Finally, states have used the pandemic as an opportunity to impose restrictions on the media and criticism of government. This paper will first identify what the priorities of democracies should be and then analyse what global cooperation should look like, drawing on the panels at the 25th Forum 2000 Conference.

There are five key priorities that democracies must focus on. Firstly, combatting disinformation. Lavengood holds that democracies must establish legal frameworks to hold those who intentionally spread disinformation accountable.⁴ Disinformation is not just an external threat to democracy; rather democratic states must also acknowledge how they 'are already denying fundamental rights in the initial implementation of technologies in their governing structures'.⁵ This leads to the second priority: promoting democracy at home. Democracies must acknowledge and analyse their own weaknesses to be able to cooperate on a global level. It is encouraging that this appears to be a core focus at the Summit for Democracy.⁶ Democracies must thirdly focus on the protection of minority groups, both through sanctions on governments abusing human rights and through a close analysis of the position of minorities in their own state. For example, news outlets reported that during lockdown black people and people of Asian descent in the UK were detained under stop and search laws at higher rates than white people.⁷ This highlights the fourth priority for democratic states, namely the promotion of a free press that can criticise abuses of power and increase levels of transparency. Finally, states must focus on 'the active promotion of democracy'⁸ which means promoting civic activism.⁹ This became clear in Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's address on the importance of civic activism in Belarus, in which she called on institutions to provide flexible and rapid ground level support.¹⁰

Effective global cooperation stands at the core of preventing further democratic backsliding. Global cooperation will be most effective if it is inclusive. Timothy Garton Ash advocates for the establishment of 'a global coalition for democracy and not simply an alliance of democracies'.¹¹ Forming an exclusive, fixed alliance of democracies is detrimental to cooperation since it excludes key allies and partners that are not liberal democracies. For example, India is a non-democratic state but a crucial player

¹ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, 'Democracy under Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom', *Freedom House* (October 2020): 1, accessed October 11 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/COVID-19_Special_Report_Final_.pdf.

² Repucci and Slipowitz, 'Democracy under Lockdown', 5.

³ Repucci and Slipowitz, 'Democracy under Lockdown', 3.

⁴ Zachary Lavengood, 'Discussion Paper: Towards a Global Cooperation for Democracy', *Forum 2000 Foundation* (October 2021): 3, accessed October 26 2021, <https://www.forum2000.cz/files/towards-a-global-cooperation-for-democracy-discussion-paper-01-10.pdf>.

⁵ Trisha Ray and Jan Hornat, 'Policy Paper: Global Cooperation of Democracies in the Digital Realm', *Forum 2000 Foundation* (October 2021): 9, accessed October 23 2021, <https://www.forum2000.cz/files/policy-paper-global-cooperation-of-democracies-in-the-digital-realm.pdf>.

⁶ The Summit for Democracy has stated that it intends to 'showcase one of democracy's unique strengths: the ability to acknowledge its weaknesses and imperfections and confront them openly and transparently': <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/#Summit>

⁷ Sarah Marsh, 'Met police increased use of section 60 stop and search during lockdown', *The Guardian*, July 27 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/27/met-police-increased-use-of-section-60-stop-and-search-during-lockdown>.

⁸ Lavengood, 'Towards a Global Cooperation for Democracy', 5.

⁹ The importance of this was emphasised at Forum 2000 in the 'Civic Activism in 2021' panel.

¹⁰ Leader of Democratic Belarus, 'Forming a Global Coalition for Democracy' Forum 2000 panel.

¹¹ Professor of European Studies at Oxford University, 'Forming a Global Coalition for Democracy' Forum 2000 panel.

in countering the rise of China. Furthermore, exclusivity can come at a high cost as was the case when Turkey's exclusion from the EU only led to more democratic backsliding.¹² Garton Ash further elaborates that a coalition for democracy cannot just be a Western one: 'in ceasing to be just the West it actually becomes more truly the West because it is more true to the universalist aspiration of the West.'¹³ Finally, in this establishment of a global coalition for democracy we must search for the largest possible coalition. In recent years there has been a trend towards exclusive minilateralism with alliances such as QUAD (USA, India, Japan, Australia) and AUKUS (Australia, UK, USA). Minilateralist alliances like these are not inherently bad, but to promote inclusivity we must look to form multiple, larger coalitions. The Summit for Democracy should not be treated as the formation of a fixed alliance of democracies, but rather as the beginning of the process of establishing a coalition for democracy.

'To prevent further democratic backsliding, states must focus on preventing disinformation **and** protecting minorities, promoting free media, democracy at home, and civic activism. An inclusive coalition for democracy stands at the core of successful global cooperation on these issues.

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¹² Kemal Kirisci and Amanda Sloat, 'The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West', *Brookings* (February 2019), accessed October 28 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190226_turkey_kirisci_sloat.pdf.

¹³ Timothy Garton Ash, 'Forming a Global Coalition for Democracy' Forum 2000 panel.