

Essay

What Now? Building Back Democratically

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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 uncontrollable spread of pandemics has been followed by a sense of feebleness. It became easier to believe in the inevitability of the sequence of events and question the ability of democratic political systems to decide the future for us. Belief in inevitability is incompatible with a belief in freedom of action and the ability to defend the values on which liberal democracies are founded. Respectively, it matters the most whether the democratic community is determined enough to get the confidence back and take steps to create “improbable structures” as it seems now, or let the new normal “contrive to force life into its most probable states.”¹

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis exacerbated challenges such as the spread of disinformation, loss of trust in political leadership, social and economic inequality, inaccessibility of food and healthcare supplies. It intensified the political upheaval and accompanied the struggle for democracy from Belarus to Myanmar. The 25th Forum 2000 Conference underlined that the democracies need more bridges across which the state can approach the people and the people can approach the state. The rise of authoritarian states and exploitation of technological developments creates the necessity for the community which still retains faith in democratic values to define itself in relation to other authorities: “we need to do better in terms of spelling out what our voice is.”² As a part of the vision for democratic rebuilding process, this essay stresses the importance of active engagement at three stages: locally in democratic countries, beyond Western democracies and in the digital space.

Foremost, in contrast to authoritarian regimes, it is crucial to cultivate trust in our democratic institutions and provide the people with the tools for engagement. Pandemic demonstrated that local responsiveness is crucial for the effectiveness of democratic governance. Thus, municipalities should be empowered to productively engage with citizens and familiarize with their needs. The shortage and difficulties in the redistribution of food and medical equipment also showed the flaws of the central national management and reemphasized the significance of strategic planning on the local level. As stated during the discussion on the future of the roles of cities, it matters how quickly you respond to the service.³ This way democracy is not only an abstraction but also a part of people’s real-life needs.

Additionally, during times of social media and authoritarian “techno challenge”, lines and gaps go through each of us and Václav Havel’s warning on self-directed systems becomes truth to be told. However, digital space also creates the alternative to the traditional top-down power and opens up opportunities to democratic forces.⁴ In continuation of the legacy of the Czech dissident, the global democratic community is expected to support openness in media, protect free speech, ensure the right to access the internet on a massive scale, as well as break the monopolies in the digital domain.

What is also important for the Western democratic community is to have a universalistic perspective. Rather than forming alliances of democracies, the states should build a coalition of democracies, incorporating all of the relevant players in the world. According to Timothy Garton Ash, there is the need for a universalist perspective implying that the future of the West lies in going beyond the West.⁵ If there is a political will, democratic governments seem capable of coordinating actions to promote cooperation and compromise despite difficulties that arise because of authoritarian governments. The optimistic outlook of the Canadian politician Robert Rae that challenges such as pandemics and climate change will change attitudes in favor of multilateralism could be counted as plausible.⁶

¹ Václav Havel and Timothy Snyder, *The Power of the Powerless* (Vintage Digital, 2018).

² Thibaut Kleiner, “Can Europe Protect Its Values in the Digital Space?” (Panel Discussion, 25th Forum 2000 Conference, Prague, October 11, 2021).

³ Richard Barabas, “Building democracy bottom up: the role of cities” (Panel Discussion, 25th Forum 2000 Conference, Prague, October 11, 2021).

⁴ Francisak Viacorka, “Can Europe Protect Its Values in the Digital Space?” (Panel Discussion, 25th Forum 2000 Conference, Prague, October 11, 2021).

⁵ Timothy Garton, “Forming a Global Coalition for Democracy” (Panel Discussion, 25th Forum 2000 Conference, Prague, October 12, 2021).

⁶ Robert Rae, “Multilateralism (Still) Matters!” (Panel Discussion, 25th Forum 2000 Conference, Prague, October 12, 2021).

Thus, what will be necessary for this vision to come true is the ambition for leadership from the Western liberal democracies and their determination to support reforms locally and keep in mind that the pandemic is not over for everyone. It will also be crucial to jointly defend democratic values in the digital domain and come up with an effective strategy for the close cooperation between civil societies rather than state governments.

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