

“We are reinventing all the time what democracy is”

Take-aways of the first #FlorenceLive conversation about a post-corona world

#FlorenceLive 1 on Democracy, 18 May

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The new STG webcast series kicked-off with a discussion on how the Covid-19 crisis will impact on democracy. In an hour-long, livestreamed panel-debate Anne Marie Slaughter (CEO New America), Kalypso Nicolaidis (Professor at the STG and the University of Oxford), Ivan Krastev (Professor and chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia) engaged by moderator Alexander Stubb (STG Director) addressed the following questions:

- How do the crisis and national responses around the world, including the limiting of civic freedoms and measures of surveillance, affect our understanding of democracy?
- Will technology and big data facilitate the demise of democracy as we know it?
- Is democracy losing to authoritarianism in a global competition to master the crisis?
- What role can the EU and Europeans play in protecting democracy in the long-term and what answers can the EU find to a shifting global power balance?

12 key take-aways:

Analysis

1. **Democracy under pressure:** Given the rise of populism, deepening rifts within many societies accompanied by increasingly polarized political debate, democracy was diagnosed “a patient with pre-existing conditions” even before Covid-19 hit, according to Ivan Krastev. He added: “We are reinventing all the time what democracy is”.
2. **Europe:** Europe is currently undergoing experiment in democratic resilience. On the one hand, in growing proportions, young people think that authoritarian regimes are better prepared to cope with crises like the spread of a virus or climate change. On the other, an increasing number of actors identifies sitting at the “European table” as effective means to pursue and defend the interests of their national and local democracies. The transnational interaction of different circles of democracy throughout Europe, no matter how slow or cumbersome, may bear the seeds for “Democracy”, a union of peoples (Kalypso Nicolaidis).

3. **The United States:** Political discourse under the current administration is not geared towards balancing economic, health and other interests. “Democracy is sorely tested at the national level, but there are bright spots of democracy’s resilience on the local level”, Anne Marie Slaughter stated referring to governors, city mayors, county health officials engaged with their communities in a common fight against the Covid-19 crisis.
4. **Parliaments and body politic:** Many parliaments have been quickly shut down in the context of national containment measures, their relevance in modern democracies seems to be fading. By contrast, the ability to go on the street and protest remains an important instrument for people to mark interest in and the intensity of sentiments on a given issue. Under the conditions of social distancing, the retreat into virtual space cannot not substitute this physical expression of democratic engagement. In fact, recent political protests on Rabin Square in Tel Aviv have visibly demonstrated how street politics is still possible and practiced.
5. **Role of civil society:** In coming to terms with the new digital reality, an active role of civil society was needed. Civil society institutions could develop alternative modes of tracing in order to reduce dependence on big tech companies. Also, responsibility and societal mindfulness should be guiding principles. If society “collectively appropriated ‘R₀’ [the basic reproduction ratio of a virus] and brought it down by acting responsibly” this would equally be an act of democratic empowerment, said Nicolaidis.
6. **Role of the Local:** Under the limitation of movement we understand better than ever that democracy is a democracy of everyday live and that it is about how we interact with people around us, in crowds or in our neighbourhoods. Moreover, Europe can rely on a strong network of actors on the local and regional level, including cities and provinces, universities, business, and civil society groups. They are deeply interlinked with each other as much as with partners around the world which makes Europe as a whole a strong player with global reach.

Recommendations

7. **Technology I:** The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the further digitization of the economy, everyday life and the democratic practices. For example, educational systems and health care are moving online and the growth e-commerce is fueling the decline of the retail sector and causing ramifications on the labour market. For democracy to survive, universal access to internet will be necessary, enabling participation in education, public services, and economic activity.
8. **Technology II:** As for example the debate about tracing apps shows, the balance between freedom and control in the digital world has yet to be found. People hesitate to hand personal data to the private sector and demand “firewalls” to prevent access of state and criminal

authorities. There is a need to develop the same norms and civil liberties online that exist offline.

9. **Expect hybridization of democracy:** With an increased share of social life and possibly new forms of democratic interaction taking place in the digital sphere, we can expect hybrid forms of democracy to evolve. The importance of and desire for street politics, however, will remain vivid.
10. **Look at the domestic front:** Given the graspable tensions Western democracies are experiencing, both Europe and the U.S. have to pay closer attention to developments within their societies and address deficits and criticism on the current state of their democracies.
11. **Protect democracy in the long-term:** In Europe, different regional outcomes of the crisis will strengthen confidence in democracy and its ability to manage crisis in some regions while in others it will decrease. Understood as a continued and long-term task, the EU needs to provide a framework for democracy to prevail. This includes remaining vigilant against any encroachment on democracy or the rule of law in Europe.
12. **Europe's role as global mediator:** In seeking global partners for the future, the EU continues to find most overlap in values and interests with its transatlantic partner, the U.S. As power may shift from the Atlantic to the Asia Pacific region, however, ties especially with China will deepen and partnerships be cultivated. "In an intensifying competition between the U.S. and China," Alexander Stubb concluded, "Europe would be well placed to play a mediating role".

Online reactions: On Facebook, a global audience followed the livestream with viewers tuning in from across Europe, from Armenia, the U.S., Brazil, Ethiopia to name but a few. Over 80 comments were posted before, during or after the event, including several dozen questions addressed to the panel. In total, the video has been viewed 5900 times so far (as of 25 May).

(Re)watch the conversation at stg.eui.eu/events/FlorenceLive