

Text of the video intervention of Petr Mucha to the participants of the Youth Academy
Current State of European Democracy and its Future Prospects

Dear friends, dear democrats,

I greet you warmly from the historic city of Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. I am Petr Mucha, currently a university professor. More than 30 years ago I was a student and one of the young leaders in the so-called Velvet Revolution in 1989, which brought down communism in Czechoslovakia. During the revolution, I had the privilege to be close to Vaclav Havel, a dissident, great humanist and democrat, who served later as a president. I had a chance to work with him on his project of global dialogue called Forum 2000. It is a joy for me to talk to you, young democrats, who represent the future of European democracy. I would like to offer some thoughts for your further reflection, consideration and encouragement.

When I recall the events of 1989, when the Soviet totalitarian empire collapsed, mixed feelings come to my mind. On the one hand, I have memories of great excitement about the freedom we gained and the feeling of liberation from the prison of communism. The memory of euphoria throughout Eastern Europe, as well as the optimism in the Western world at the triumph of democracy. In the words of Francis Fukuyama, we were all looking toward the end of history and towards the final triumph of democracy. But that's not the only feeling I get when I think about it.

At the same time, I am deeply disturbed by the erosion of democratic values that has been evident in the last decade. Not only in the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, especially Hungary and Poland. We can also see populist and anti-democratic trends in a number of Western democracies, which have been models of democracy for our part of the world for decades. I am thinking in particular of the election of Donald Trump as the US President, the populist Brexit campaign, or the growing far-right political forces in Western European countries. When we add to this the massive renaissance of authoritarianism in countries beyond Europe's borders, from Russia to Egypt, one could become skeptical about the future of democracy in the world.

But we must not fall into the illusion that democracy is a declining system that has nothing more to offer, as authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in Russia and China try to claim. I believe that it is otherwise. What we are currently experiencing is not a crisis of democracy as such, but rather a crisis of a certain state of democracy that developed in a past social context and is now in need of an update. With increasing globalization and with growing challenges, such as the digital revolution, the advent of artificial intelligence and biotechnologies, as well as climate change, the existing form of democracy is reaching its limits. Its turmoil and internal tensions can be seen as the birth pains of a new level of democracy, a democracy for the 21st century. It will be more globalised, but at the same time, it will also be more local. And it will be carried by greater civic responsibility and participation.

As democrats, let's be confident. Democracy is far from perfect, but there is no alternative to democracy, it is the best political system that has been invented so far. At the same time, let us be critical and open to new ideas, democracy needs to grow and we must give it the space. In response to some challenges, many are now turning away from democracy, but this is a step back. Also, the renaissance of authoritarianism is a false solution, there is no way back. Democracy must go further and needs to evolve. And we need to ask in which particular areas it should be developed so that people do not need to turn away to populism, nationalism and authoritarianism.

I am convinced that European Union represents a historically unique model of a globalizing democracy, a democracy for the future. Despite all the predictions of its collapse during the recent few crises: financial, pandemic, or the current war in Ukraine, European Union has proved its credibility. Moreover, it is proving to be an effective tool for tackling global challenges. Her balance between globality and locality is a prophetic model for the future. However, much work is still needed. For your consideration and discussion, I am offering the following five points that emerged from our global debates at the Forum 2000 conferences.

1. Need for greater assistance to countries in political transition towards democracy

The erosion of democratic mechanisms, that we see in many post-communist countries, especially in Hungary and Poland, results from an undeveloped democratic culture that has been devastated by a previous totalitarian regime. Russia's failure to embrace democracy confirms this even more. In the future, therefore, we need to do more to help countries in their transition from totalitarianism to democracy. However, it is not enough just to build democratic institutions, the development of certain democratic mindsets is even more important.

2. Promoting civic participation and social justice

The growth of populism in the developed Western democracies is evidence of long-unresolved social problems and inequalities that need to be addressed. German minister Anna Lührmann argued that “a lot of people think that it is discontent with democracy that fuels populism. It is not discontent with the system as such, but discontent with the current outcomes in the realm of equality and social justice.” Therefore, social justice must be better implemented in the democratic system and participatory citizenship, civil society, and civic education must be enhanced.

3. Democracy is also a moral imperative

American philosopher Michael Novak said that “healthy democracy needs a certain moral biosphere, skilled people with certain virtues.” And Vaclav Havel made it clear right from the beginning of the democratic revolution when he said “what we need is not only a political transformation, but the moral one as well.” A struggle for democracy means a struggle for values on which it is based. “Democracy is a process, not a destination, it requires consistent effort and dedication,” said Maia Sandu, current president of Moldova. In our countries, we need to improve moral atmosphere and trust in democratic values such as human rights, mutual respect, solidarity and dialog. Democrats must never sacrifice these values in the name of political and business interests. Democratic societies must strengthen their legitimacy by placing common ideals, values and virtues above personal interests and profits.

4. Respect for truth

Václav Havel summarized his pro-democracy quest in a simple principle: truth and love must prevail over lie and hatred. Respect for truth belongs to the preconditions of a functioning democracy. The spread of lies, disinformation and conspiracy theories, on the contrary, breed hatred and erode the social contract on which democracy is based. And postmodern skepticism about objective truth creates a fertile ground for this. That is why today's authoritarian regimes, especially the one in Russia, have made disinformation such a powerful weapon in their hybrid war against democracies. But even for populist politicians in democratic countries, there is no such thing as truth. There is only a power interest and objective reality must be subordinated to it. The task of the media, according to them, is not to seek the truth, but to control the public through manipulated information. I'm convinced, that the best protection against this danger is to strengthen the immune system of a democratic society through the cultivation of the civic virtue of respect for truth. And we need to strengthen critical thinking skills through quality civic education. Democracies must also jointly determine global rules and standards of digital technologies which serve as platforms for the spread of disinformation.

5. European vision

I have already mentioned that European Union represents historically unique model of a globalizing democracy, a democracy for the future which balances globality with the locality. However, we need to foster European cohesion by strengthening a common European identity, a common European narrative. According to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, the original source of European identity went from religion, through the Enlightenment, to the fragmented concept of nationalism, which brought the continent nearly to self-destruction in the 20th century. Therefore, there is a need for a more inclusive post-national identity that will serve as a new narrative for Europe. The vision of European integration driven merely by economic benefits and social welfare appears to be weak and insufficient any longer. European Union must strengthen her emphasis on those values that bind her together, such as human rights, individual freedoms, rule of law, responsibility and solidarity. And it must not be possible for certain member states to enjoy the economic benefits of European integration without respecting the jointly created values and rules. European Union is not just a single market or a monetary union, it is above all a community of values that must be actively developed.

In addition to this, it should be noted that there is no contradiction between European identity and national identities. Václav Havel speaks of different layers of identities, from a family and community, through regional and national identities, to the European level of identity. These identities are complementary and relate to each other. European nations are indeed a family, where the national identity is like a first name and the European identity is like a surname.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that for these values Ukraine is now fighting and bleeding. This war is not a clash between two countries, but a clash between two political visions: the European democratic vision for the future, and Russian violent post-colonial vision of the past. Ukraine is fighting for a European future, and we must therefore stand firmly behind her, even if this requires sacrifices in the form of cutting profitable economic ties with the Russian aggressor.

Dear friends in European democracy, I wish you a successful meeting and fruitful discussions. Slava Ukraini, slava to Europe!
Thank you.

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