

## **Democracy in Central Europe and Building Mutual Trust within Society**

### **Conference Report compiled by Mario Nicolini**

The international conference on “Democracy in Central Europe and Building Mutual Trust within Society,” held in Piešťany, Slovakia, on November 7-8, 2024, convened experts, policymakers, and civil society representatives to underscore the pressing need to tackle the grave threats to democracy. These threats include the erosion of societal trust, the spread of disinformation, and the surge of populism and extremism.

Europe must recognize the root causes of these problems, such as technological advancements, political polarization, economic inequality, educational deficiencies, and foreign authoritarian interference. By implementing the recommendations listed at the end of the report, democratic actors across Europe and the world can work towards a future where democratic values and the international rules-based order are protected.

The event was organized by the Institute of European Democrats (IED) in partnership with the Slovak-Indian Friendship Society, the European Institute Renaissance (Prague), the Spa Piešťany, the Slovak Spa Association, and financially supported by the European Parliament. Preceded by a warm meeting with the Lord Mayor of Piešťany, the gathering provided the first opportunity to introduce the IED in Slovakia.

### **The Growing Threat of Disinformation**

Recent statistics show a significant rise in exposure to misinformation in Central Europe, with countries like Slovakia and the Czech Republic particularly affected. Participants emphasized the increasing sophistication of disinformation tactics, particularly the use of AI-generated content and deepfakes. These techniques, coupled with the amplification effects of social media algorithms, can erode trust in institutions, polarize societies, and undermine democratic processes. As Arnaud de Vibraye emphasized, the “industrialization of fakes” has made it easier than ever to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion.

The factors that contribute to disinformation range from technological advancements, political polarization, economic inequality, to foreign interference. Social media platforms and algorithms can create echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and amplifying mis-/disinformation. Increasing political polarization makes individuals more susceptible to disinformation that aligns with their existing beliefs. Economic disparities can exacerbate social divisions, making individuals more vulnerable to manipulation. Foreign actors, particularly the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China, have used disinformation to interfere in domestic politics and undermine democratic institutions as they seek narrative dominance across the globe.

Modern technology like AI should not be feared but leveraged to make a positive difference. As anti-democratic actors peddle lies, sow doubt, and create confusion, democracy’s online defenders should use AI to maintain and create debate in society, opined Alice Bernard, because “Doubt kills the truth.”

The fight against disinformation should concentrate on improving our democratic institutions to prevent anyone from gaining power through populist lies. Speakers suggested reducing the size of electoral districts, allowing politicians to be closer to the people, or imposing stricter controls and enforcement of election funding. “In the fight for freedom and democracy, we should focus on what’s possible and feasible – and that’s taking away the chance for tricksters to gain power by inventing and spreading lies,” Petr Jantač argued.

The erosion of democratic principles in small nations is exacerbated by centralized national budgets and control over EU funding, which allow ruling parties to dominate and manipulate society. To counter this, Radimir Čačić argued, democrats should push for fiscal decentralization, and the EU should adopt stricter enforcement mechanisms rather than merely offering incentives. Additionally, implementing a mandatory European public prosecution system would provide a robust framework to combat corruption and uphold the rule of law across member states.

## **Challenges to European Institutions**

IED Director Mikel Burzako warned that the newly elected European Parliament, with its increased extremes, is now weaker and more difficult to steer. The challenge of European alignment is even greater as the continent faces an incoming Trump administration, making it crucial for EU members to support each other.

Values like dignity, freedom, justice, and solidarity are at the core of Europe. “Democracy without values is a mess,” warned Ján Figel’, Slovakia’s first European Commissioner. If inner freedom, that of religion and belief, is not respected, the external freedoms of speech and association are even less.

Participants agreed that democracy must be resolutely defended against populism, which thrives on creating fear. According to Ivo Kaplán, “fear is a bad advisor; the good advisor is love. We need to communicate from the depth of our hearts,” and thereby restore trust between individuals within societies.

Speakers agreed that Europeans need more reflection and stronger self-confidence: “Europe should find inspiration from remembering the good times it had – and start realizing them,” emphasized Ivo Kaplán.

Strong support was expressed for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. “Ukraine has made a historic decision to become part of the Western civilization. It’s their sovereign right to make a sovereign decision, and we would never deny that right to ourselves,” said the conference host, Mário Nicolini. The participants condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine, highlighting the human cost and the threat it poses to European security. International support for Ukraine must continue, including military aid, humanitarian assistance, and economic support. This support is crucial to enable Ukraine to defend itself and rebuild its country. “Russia will see every negotiation as a sign of weakness,” warned Martin Poliačik. While recognizing the challenges, several participants stressed the importance of pursuing diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. However, any solution must respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

People in Western Europe should deepen their understanding of their Central and Eastern European counterparts. There are many lessons to be learned and sources of inspiration. Some in Western Europe continue to embrace radical leftist ideologies, overlooking the bloody and tragic legacy of Communism in the East. In Central Europe itself, post-Communist nostalgia persists, fueled by disillusionment with democratic capitalism and Russia’s toxic interference.

The prospect of EU enlargement is currently off the table, making it crucial for the Visegrad Four (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary) and other Central European countries (like Austria) to not only defend their democracies at home but continue pushing for EU enlargement. This is essential to maintain interest in Euro-Atlantic integration in the Balkans, as the region is facing

stagnation, and a new wave of balkanization. Miodrag Vlahović argued that “Democratic actors in the Visegrad Four should reorganize to remain a positive example for the Balkans.”

The world’s democracies are interdependent and should support each other. Indian Ambassador Apoorva Srivastava stressed that Europe has India’s steadfast support on every effort concerning democracy. This is a two-way street, however, as without the EU, the world’s richest economy, powers like India, who aims to become the world’s second largest economy by 2047, cannot achieve their ambitious plans.

## **Declining Trust and Resilience**

Participants emphasized the importance of individual resilience in the face of disillusionment and disinformation. “One must believe in ideals. Society will become as we have dreamed it,” said the Lord Mayor of Piešťany Peter Jančovič. Lifelong learning programs should incorporate critical thinking, communication skills, and argumentation theory to equip individuals with the tools to navigate complex information environments. “The battle for brains will continue to be fought at school – but not the battle we know. Therefore, the school system needs to adapt,” said Alice Bernard.

Individual initiative was equally stressed. Referring to the symbol of Piešťany, a man who breaks his crutches after being healed by the local spas, Peter Jančovič reminded participants that efforts aiming to break prejudice and misunderstanding must start with personal initiatives in local communities. Democracy must not be taken for granted: “Democracy is not static; it needs constant work.” This self-empowering sentiment was echoed by others. It is crucial to remember, as Petr Jantač stated, that “truth is not self-evident, it needs good reasoning, good stories, and an army of protectors – individuals and institutions.” Anna Galovičová agreed: “Let’s not wait for politicians. We are the agents of change.”

Participants urged democrats to fight the growth of apathy. As Arnaud de Vibraye put it, “We need to re-politicise the citizens to overcome the atomisation of society and the fragmentation in individual-mass.” Fostering a culture of open dialogue and debate, where diverse perspectives can be shared and discussed respectfully, is crucial for societal resilience. As Svetozár Krno stated, “We can enlarge our contexts and non-violently enter the contexts of others. ‘Tribes’ can get to know each other.”

In conclusion, the Slovak organizers articulated their vision to continue collaborating with the IED networks on subsequent initiatives. They also aim to involve health experts, the Slovak Spa Association, and the local community of Piešťany in establishing a Center for Human Development. This center would particularly support young democrats in the EU by enhancing their physical and mental well-being, thereby fostering the strength, resilience, and courage needed to seize opportunities and tackle the challenges of Europe's future. As Father Peter Gombita wisely remarked, “We should find joy in ourselves.”

## **Recommendations**

- **Prioritize Media Literacy Education, Digital Literacy, and Online Engagement:** Invest in comprehensive media literacy programs at all levels of education. Equip citizens, particularly the youth and seniors, with the skills to critically evaluate information. Inspire and equip online communities to stand up for democratic values.
- **Support Independent Journalism:** Fund quality journalism and fact-checking initiatives.
- **Engage Civil Society and Promote Networking:** Empower civil society organizations to monitor and debunk disinformation. Help NGOs working across different sectors to connect the “islands of positive deviation” to strengthen trust within society, social cohesion, and resilience to manipulation of any kind.

... technology to curb cyber threats, be used to maintain and create democratic debate in the digital space.

- **Regulate Social Media Platforms:** Enact stricter regulations to curb the spread of mis-/disinformation and hold platforms accountable for the content they host. Enforce transparency to reveal the sources of advertising and political content.
- **Be Confident and Proactive in Strategic Communications:** Promote our own story using actions, words, and images to shape the attitudes and behaviors of key audiences at home and abroad.
- **Raise Awareness and Target Disinformation Networks:** Increase awareness and actively degrade actors and networks using disinformation and hostile propaganda.
- **Decentralize National Budgets and Control over EU Funding:** Advocate for the decentralization of national budgets to empower regional and local governments, enhance democratic governance, and prevent state capture.
- **Enforce EU Oversight:** The EU should adopt a more stringent approach, using enforcement mechanisms (“stick”) rather than merely incentives (“carrots”) to ensure compliance.
- **Foster International Cooperation:** Collaborate with other countries to promote democratic values and address transnational disinformation threats. This should include global partners like India, Japan, or Korea, and democratic actors in civil society within less democratic nations.
- **Counter Russian and Chinese Malign Influence:** Address malign influence both within European societies and across the Multi-aligned Community (Latin America, Africa, Middle East, and Asia).
- **Support EU Enlargement:** CEE nations should keep EU enlargement alive and support the accession of Ukraine and the Western Balkans.
- **Connect Democratic Actors:** Foster connections between democratic actors across the V4 (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary) and the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and other Eastern Partners.

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