We share a responsibility to protect our democracy

The European Union and its values need to be safeguarded. Omri Preiss outlines the steps needed to engage citizens and build up a culture of civic responsibility

I t is abundantly clear and often repeated that our social and political institutions have been disrupted. The unfolding grotesque theatrics of Brexit and Trump are a culmination of a long series of crises that have come upon our societies since the 2008 economic meltdown.

Trust in political institutions has been eroded, and democracy and human rights have been eroded with them, in Europe and around the world. Authoritarianism, economic inequalities and instability, and fake news have all been on the rise together, and bundled with accelerating climate change, they make up a heady mix of burning urgency.

It is time to invest in bringing together democratic civil society, connect up social actors across sectors for a meaningful response, tackle disinformation, and build up a model of social responsibility by each actor towards our democracy.

Despite all the urgency, so far, the overall response to these by democratic societies has been mostly muddled and dispersed. Overall, across the EU a piecemeal approach to these issues provides for buying time here and there, but not addressing fundamentals. For several years now, it has certainly been felt that the future of the Union is at stake.

Up until now, civil society organisations, NGOs and social movements have withstood the brunt of the impact of authoritarianism's rise. The phenomenon known as 'closing' or 'shrinking civil society space' entails governments putting in place barriers to the work of civic actors, slashing funds, introducing administrative burdens, as well as demonising civil society as enemies in public. As the watchdogs of democracy, the fate of these organisations is often an indicator for things to come.

What we now need is to do is accept that it is time for society as a whole to stand up in response to these threats. We need to begin to speak in terms of a common responsibility to defend and promote the values on which the

last 70 years of peace and prosperity have been founded. Democracy, the rule of law, and human rights are not just a pretty word, or a sentimental calling. They are, incidentally, also the foundations that have made economic prosperity possible, that have enabled the European Union's internal market.

And while our economic models' sustainability and excesses certainly merit re-examination, there is no doubt that any future prosperity will also depend on these very same values holding up. For them to survive, it seems, we need to put in the work.

To be able to address the fundamentals of how our society is being shaped we need an ambitious and robust all-of-society response, that is coordinated and coherent

Alliance4Europe is an organisation set up with the goal of operating as a focal point and an agile hub for civil society actors, and society at large, to coordinate and collaborate, and to activate citizens to affect change. Established in October 2018 with the goal of increasing voter turnout among pro-European democratic voters, Alliance has worked to flesh out a comprehensive all-of-society response to the threats our democracy faces, and advancing these fundamental values positively across Europe.

First of all, there is a need to address the issue of closing space and the fragmentation of civil society across Europe. Civil society has been underfunded and overstretched, in need of greater capacity. There is a strong desire among NGOs and civil society actors to coordinate more, share tools and civic tech applications, as well as create a new narrative and messaging for the kind of Europe civil society actors may want to see.

Setting up an effective online platform to share all of this was something that Alliance4Europe piloted during the European elections, and we are now working to build on that experience with a system that would bring together a wide range of allies, and would enable greater scope and more effective action for civil society organisations.

This is one concrete practical response to tackling closing civil society space, and organising actors together to push it back open. This coordination allows an amplified voice to reach the public at large.

Enabling greater civil society action, while critical, is not the full response. All parts of society need to mobilise and become invested in this. From business to the creative industries, public personalities, academics and athletes, all have a role to play.

A call to action must go out to all of these actors to do their part. Sending out a public message, taking a public stand, whether as part of a voter turnout campaign during an election, or on legislation and public affairs, are key.

The ultimate aim is to engage citizens and drive up participation. We need to invest in citizenship education across our society to make sure that we develop a vision together as a society about the functioning of a democracy. This is something that anyone with a public platform can contribute to. Education does not only happen in a classroom, it happens throughout our social sphere at all ages.

If we build up a culture of civic responsibility together, we could begin to address many of these issues. We have seen this happening on the issue of climate change, with marches and strikes across Europe. We can generate the same level of participation and activation on issues of democracy, fundamental rights, pluralism, and European cooperation, on which the fight against climate change also depends, incidentally.

In fact, the participation of new actors in the field on these issues can and should lead to greater diversity. Bringing in influential voices from the arts, sports, and fashion can activate citizens who might otherwise be silent or face barriers, for their gender or background, for example.

Whereas social media algorithms have tended to replicate exclusionary patterns of gender inequalities online, actively engaging diverse voices, and consciously putting out diverse role models can be part of the panacea. Activating demographics that tend to participate less because they feel unrepresented is a key to tipping the balance.

Tackling disinformation is a crucial prerequisite for restoring the health of democratic discourse. Tracking, monitoring and analysing disinformation and hate speech online, and coordinating the wide galaxy of actors who work on this, currently in a disparate and uncoordinated way.

What we need is to be able to preempt viral waves of disinformation before they spread, to be able to set a positive narrative ahead of negativity spreading. Fact-checking and rebuttal, and online activism can play a role in an overarching response to the issue. We need to aim at a holistic response that brings a range of actors together, coupled with specific tools that individual online users can use, with greater digital and media literacy.

Once we have been able to restore a modicum of fact-based debate to our public discourse, authoritarian leaders will no longer set the agenda. This action begins with the large online platforms, through public regulators and governments, to civil society organisations, academia, think-tanks, campaigners and individual users.

All of these amount to a common responsibility that we all share. Corporate social responsibility was framed as a concept in response to the great power that the private sector exercises on the public sphere.

In recent decades, the link between politics and the private sector have certainly been seen as one of the major eroding factors in trust in our institutions. The power of corporate lobbyists, operating behind closed doors, infusing public political decisions with narrow private interest – all this has been fiercely opposed and denounced. There is a need to apply corporate social responsibility to companies' engagement in politics and the public debate.

The overall economic interest in Europe is shaped, or ought to be shaped by the need to protect the fundamental institutions that enable the internal market and common prosperity, not to mention the urgency of combating climate change, which can only be tackled effectively at the European level.

This calls for a new concept of European social responsibility, where private sector support for civic participation is not driven by narrow interest, but in supporting an independent robust civil society and democracy.

This support can only be provided if it is honest, transparent, and vigorously protects the independence of the civil society actors who receive support from any narrow economic or interests.

However, there are many examples to show that when intentions and values align, this can be done up to a high ethical standard. It is a matter of transforming urgent need into a healthy culture of civic engagement.

To be able to address the fundamentals of how our society is being shaped we need an ambitious and robust all-of-society response, that is coordinated and coherent. This is something that an agile focal point like Alliance4Europe is working to create. ■

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