



Puente Democrático

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Conclusions of the 17th Forum 2000 Conference¹

Every annual Forum 2000 Conference has a particular theme, and this year's – Societies in Transition – could hardly be better in playing to this Forum's traditions and strengths. It enables us to analyze, compare and contrast the transition from authoritarianism and democracy, here in the Czech Republic and in the former Soviet world, with the transitions that are occurring – or struggling to occur – in the Arab World, elsewhere in Africa, in Latin America and in Asia. A constantly recurring theme in our discussions has been the extent to which a country's, or group of countries', distinctive history and culture impacts on what can be done and how quickly it can be done when it comes to both initiating and sustaining transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, and in particular whether revolutions are likely to consolidate or collapse.

By Gareth Evans

¹ Adapted from the speech to the Closing Panel of the 17th Forum 2000 Conference.



To try to draw together and summarize, as succinctly as possible, the major themes to have emerged from the Conference is an extraordinarily difficult task given the richness and variety of the discussions. Two general points for a start: the importance of Václav Havel and of Forum 2000.

The Importance of Václav Havel

Václav Havel was surrounded and supported by brave, passionate and inspirational civil society leaders, but he was the bravest, most passionate and most inspirational of them all, both during the course of the Velvet Revolution and in the transition period which followed.

What not only Czechs but the whole world remembers about the 14 years of his presidency – as described in moving testimony from **His Holiness the Dalai Lama** and **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi** among many others at the Conference – was the enduring moral seriousness and commitment he brought to the role, above all in his support for those trying to bring human rights and democracy to authoritarian regimes. We benefited immensely from his ideas and inspiration all those years when he was a living presence among us at these Forums, and now that he is no longer with us we benefit immensely still from his towering intellectual and moral legacy.

The Importance of Forum 2000

We have been reminded again this week of just how wonderful a vehicle this has been over the years for giving shape and direction to the Havel legacy.

- There is the extraordinary cast of senior figures it brings together – from the worlds of politics and diplomacy, government and civil society, arts and culture, journalism and literature, religion and business.
- There is the extraordinary array of issues we have addressed, all variations on the theme of our common commitment to human rights, democracy and the achievement of sustainable peace.
- And there is the process, not designed to produce negotiated outcomes or decisions, but simply to bring together people together from different continents, cultures and disciplines, to wrestle with big problems and ideas, in an atmosphere of calm and constructive discussion, and to come away with new ideas and perspectives which will hopefully lead to better solutions.

Every annual Forum 2000 Conference has a particular theme, and this year's – Societies in Transition – could hardly be better in playing to this Forum's traditions and strengths. It enables us to analyze, compare and contrast the transition from authoritarianism and democracy, here in the Czech Republic and in the former Soviet world, with the transitions that are occurring – or struggling to occur – in the Arab World, elsewhere in Africa, in Latin America and in Asia.

So what have we learned, or been reminded of, about this great theme of Societies in Transition, in our discussions. I think six big things, about each of which I will say just a few words – the importance of history and culture; of patience; of action; of institutions; of leadership; and of ideas.

The Importance of History and Culture

A constantly recurring theme in our discussions has been the extent to which a country's, or group of countries', distinctive history and culture impacts on what can be done and how quickly it can be done when it comes to both initiating and sustaining transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, and in particular whether revolutions are likely to consolidate or collapse.

Shlomo Avineri put it very clearly when he said in one panel session that countries which had "*democratic memories*" or "*past democratic traditions*," such as the Czech Republic and the other Visegrad Four countries, were likely to find the transition to democracy relatively smooth – certainly as compared, for example, with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa – because so many of the building blocks for it are already in place. It's not a matter of effective transitions being impossible for countries without any real tradition or memory of democracy, but it will certainly make the task harder, and longer.

The Importance of Patience

There are really no quick fixes available in managing fundamental governance transitions. Ralph Dahrendorf was quoted many times for his observation that political systems can be fixed in 6 months, but economic systems will take 6 years or more, while fixing societal mindsets sufficiently to make democracy sustainable may take several generations.

But even Mr. Dahrendorf may have been too ambitious, or optimistic, when it comes to fixing broken or utterly undeveloped political systems. The point was made on many Conference panel that in a post-revolutionary situation, you may well be able to hold elections within 6 months, and maybe rather sooner, that may not produce genuinely sustainable democratic results, because you may well – in the absence of an existing civil society mindset, or the time to develop genuine new civil society-based alternatives – simply be entrenching existing strong forces in place, giving democratic legitimacy to existing inherently undemocratic power structures. The classic recent example has been Egypt, where the only real choice presented to the electors were two manifestly non-democratic and non diversity-respecting alternatives – the army and the Muslim Brotherhood – and the results, so far anyway, have been tragic.

The Importance of Action

Being patient is not the same thing as being inactive, and it is crucial that a high level of effective practical real-world engagement is maintained by those wanting and needing change. **His Holiness the Dalai Lama** perhaps said it best (though I think some of his clerical friends found it a little disconcerting, and maybe against trade union rules) when he observed that while prayer and meditation is wonderfully restorative for individuals, when it comes to real-world impact, *“action is more important than prayer.”*

There was quite a lot of discussion about what action strategies work best, both inside authoritarian countries, and applied by **external actors**. Every case has its own different dynamic, but a common theme was how hard it all was. Our Chinese dissident colleague **Yang Jianli** put it nicely in one session when he said that the three hardest things to achieve in this world were a peace settlement in the Middle East, the democratization of China – and losing weight!

But our sustaining inspiration here, as a number of speakers pointed out, must continue to be Václav Havel himself, who in his classic 1978 essay, *The Powerful of the Powerless*, argued that whatever the odds that seem to be stacked against those unhappily living under totalitarian regimes, the refusal of just some individuals to go on living the lie – a willingness by them to break the rule of silence – can have an

extraordinary impact in cracking open the fragile facades of these systems, and ultimately bringing them down.

The Importance of Institutions

In terms of strategies for both accelerating transitions, and giving them firm, sustainable foundations, it was noted many times at the Conference that the critical ingredient is effective institutions – especially those designed to advance the rule of law, with the most common theme here being the absolute necessity, of a powerful, independent judiciary.

Building institutions is not a matter of cookie-cutter designs, and well-meaning outsiders can sometimes make very bad judgment calls – parliamentary systems will make more sense in some contexts, presidential ones in others; similarly with federal systems as compared with unitary ones. And when it comes to managing very sensitive transition issues like transitional justice, again it’s not the case that one size fits all – some societies will want full-scale punitive action, others truth-telling and apologies, others just to draw a line under the past and move on. What matters is simply that there be the right solution for the country in question, and ultimately only the people themselves can make that cutter. But what also matters – as **Grigory Yavlinsky** reminded us in the context of the Russian Constitution – is that the institutional structures and processes not just look good on paper, but actually mean something real in practice.

The Importance of Leadership

Another recurring theme in Conference discussions was the crucial importance of leadership, both in accomplishing the necessary change in governance system with a minimum of violence, and in sustaining that transition through what might be a quite protracted period. The world knows, and has honored accordingly, how totally crucial was the quality of leadership provided here by Václav Havel; in South Africa by Nelson Mandela and **F.W. de Klerk**; and is the leadership now being provided in Burma (Myanmar) by **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi** and President U Thein Sein; and how important it has been, and will continue to be, in meeting the aspirations of the people of Tibet to have both the inspiration and wisdom of **His Holiness the Dalai Lama**.

The problem that the Conference did not quite get around to answering, and will need to spend more time discussing, is what do we do when that leadership is missing from the start, or goes missing? Is it just the luck of the draw that some countries find themselves at the critical time with a de Klerk and Mandela, and others with a Milošević, or Mugabe? Are good leaders just born, or can they be made? Can we at least put in place more effective structures and processes to get rid of bad leaders, when they look like undermining rather than reinforcing a democratic transition process? All this is work in progress.

The Importance of Ideas

The remaining big theme is the importance – the power – of ideas and values in stimulating and consolidating transitions from authoritarianism to democracy. **Grigory Yavlinsky** may have put it best when he said here that “*With common values we can find common language; and with common language we can push any problem in the world in the right direction.*”

It is of critical importance to find a common language to articulate, promote and implement the values we share. This, for example, has profoundly influenced the work that I and others have done in the context of

genocide and other mass atrocity crimes: finding new language – that of “the responsibility to protect” rather than “the right of humanitarian intervention” to try to build a new international consensus out of the ashes of non-consensus and tragic inaction in those horrible 1990s cases of Rwanda, Srebrenica and Kosovo.

How well that particular idea is doing – after the triumphs of Kenya and Cote d’Ivoire and at least initially Libya, but the disastrous paralysis in Syria – is a debate for another day. The debate for *today* is **The Values We Share** – the ideas that matter – in the context of managing transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, in stimulating and sustaining them.

What *are* the crucial ideas? Our common humanity? Accommodating diversity? Freedom and dignity? Some of those particularly associated with Václav Havel himself and mentioned in the Opening Session, including by His Holiness the Dalai Lama – compassion, altruism, generosity? What are the ideas and values that matter most in this context? What the ones that can find most resonance as a new common language? What are the ones that most readily translate into actionable, operational language? What are the ones that can produce action?

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