Online AIWS Roundtable:
Digital Technologies, Elections and Democracy in times of COVID-19

13TH August, 2020

<table>
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<th>Description:</th>
<th>The World Leadership Alliance-Club de Madrid (WLA-CdM) in partnership with the Boston Global Forum (BGF) is organizing a Policy Lab on Transatlantic Approaches to Digital Governance: A New Social Contract in the Age of Artificial Intelligence that will take place on 16-18 September 2020 in a virtual format. In preparation for the Policy Lab, WLA-CdM and BGF will be organizing a series of preliminary online roundtables that seek to fuel and enrich deliberations within the Policy Lab. The first of these roundtables took place on 12 May, 2020, and focused on the deployment of digital technologies in response to COVID-19 pandemic, and their implications on privacy rights. A second online roundtable on Digital Technologies, Elections and Democracy in times of the COVID-19 pandemic will be held on 13th August 2020 and analyse how digital technologies can contribute to protecting democracies and guaranteeing free, fair and transparent elections in times of global emergencies. In the present COVID-19 context and from a democratic perspective, the development of a new Social Contract on Digital Governance and Artificial Intelligence acquires renewed relevance as the imperative of improving preparedness and government responses to global crises becomes ever more evident. These policy discussions are part of the Multilateralism and Global Cooperation track of WLA-CdM’s 2020-2022 Programmatic Strategy. They will serve to bring the digital transformation angle into WLA-CdM’s 2020 Policy Dialogue on ‘Multilateralism that delivers’ and, through the latter, to our contribution to the UN75 process and global discussions on the much needed reinvigoration of the multilateral system.</th>
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<td>Objectives</td>
<td>• To contribute to the global discussions on how digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence can promote stable democracies in times of global crises. • To collect ideas for a Social Contract in the Age of AI version 1.0 launched on May 2020.</td>
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<td>Expected results</td>
<td>A set of preliminary, actionable, policy recommendations aimed at feeding the September Policy Lab’s Session on Trust and Public Debate in the Disinformation Age: Elections and Democracy in the Digital Era.</td>
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<td>Background</td>
<td>The magnitude and relevance of the COVID-19 pandemic has, naturally,upended original plans for Policy Lab on Transatlantic Approaches to Digital Governance: A New Social Contract in the Age of Artificial Intelligence which</td>
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was originally designed to take place in the Spring of 2020. However, this initiative is now more important than ever as we seek to engage in multi-stakeholder discussions on the interaction between artificial intelligence/emerging technologies and measures/policies adopted by governments, international organizations, companies and society in times of global crises such as the one spawned by COVID 19.

The spread and penetration of digital technologies has been transforming society, the way in which we work, communicate and participate in different public and private spaces for some time now. The COVID-19 outbreak and ensuing global health crisis has significantly accelerated this process, imposing rapid and widespread digitalization even in the political sphere.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen online party meetings and even parliamentary sessions conducted via videoconference. We have also been able to verify the complexity of adapting certain governance interaction to a virtual format due to internal public administration rules and regulations. Likewise, we have seen an increased interest in moving even voting online with a clear consciousness and concern over the opportunities and risks that this would entail in the context of elections.

COVID-19 has evidenced that current legislation does not yet adequately contemplate the phenomenon of digitalization. In Spain, for example, a Royal Decree had to be approved in March to allow certain online procedures for government action (Royal Decree 7/2020, of March 12, 2020). By the same token, the pandemic has also shown that while laws and public policies do not normally advance at the same speed as digital technologies, preparedness and rapid response is not only needed, it is possible.

Democracy has never been so digital but digitalization is no panacea. It too has its limitations. The pandemic has dealt a blow to the social, economic and political system and elections are no exception. Electoral authorities have been forced to tighten controls and take extraordinary measures. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) has observed that between 21 February and 1st July 2020 “at least 67 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone national and subnational elections due to COVID-19”\(^1\). In other cases, elections have been held under complex and challenging circumstances, often demanding altered election timelines and voting procedures while working to ensure they continue to be held freely, fairly and transparently.

The Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age of the Kofi Annan Foundation has highlighted that “in order to protect electoral integrity in the digital age, we will need to strengthen the capacities of the defenders of electoral integrity, and build shared norms around the acceptable use of

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digital technologies in elections”. The Commission’s set of recommendations have become even more relevant in the past months when, as mentioned above, society has suffered an imposed digitalization due to the pandemic.

This crisis has confronted us with the need to modernize and professionalize electoral governance, requiring us to guarantee both the health and safety of electors and election workers and civic participation in what is one of the pillars of representative democracy. We must rethink how to streamline processes using electoral technology without affecting political and electoral rights.

Liberal democracies today coexist with many daunting challenges, inside and outside their borders. These are heightened by the impact of digital technologies and collateral developments such as disinformation, poorly regulated online political advertising, manipulation of electoral process itself with serious risk to electoral integrity. In spite of the possibility of using remote voting technologies instead of physical voting, in countries with poor digital infrastructure, Internet voting could be particularly vulnerable to hacking as well as to violations of the principle of secret voting.

But the advantages of digitalizing democratic life can and must be translated into the prevention of pandemics such as COVID-19, and into the improvement of systems of government and political participation.

In this uncertain scenario, the pandemic leads us to ponder about the future of democracy. Are we getting closer to digital democracy? Are we prepared for this change in our democratic system, even if only progressively? What risks does this transition entail? What are the advantages? What rules or mechanisms exist to preserve the freedom of voters and guarantee fairness during both campaigns and elections? Can voters’ digital and privacy rights be adequately taken into account?

Participants

Facilitator:
- Milburn Line, Senior Advisor WLA-CdM

WLA-CdM Members:
- Joyce Banda, WLA-CdM Member, President of Malawi (2012-2014)
- Hanna Suchocka, WLA-CdM Member, Prime Minister of Poland (1992-1993)

Boston Global Forum Experts:
- Thomas E. Patterson, Research Director of The Michael Dukakis Institute for Leadership and Innovation, Professor of Government and the Press of Harvard Kennedy School
- Marc Rotenberg, Director of Center for AI and Digital Policy (CAIDP) of Michael Dukakis Institute, President and Executive Director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC)

The Kofi Annan Foundation:
- Alan Doss, Special Advisor
| **WLA-CdM** | **World Leadership Alliance-Club de Madrid (WLA-CdM)** is the largest assembly of democratic, former Presidents and Prime Ministers working to strengthen democratic values, good governance and the well-being of citizens across the globe. As a non-profit, non-partisan, independent, its network includes more than 100 democratic former Presidents and Prime Ministers from over 70 countries, together with a body of advisors and expert practitioners, who offer their voice and agency on a pro bono basis, to political, civil society leaders and policymakers tackling today’s governance and achieving democracy that delivers, building bridges, and fostering dialogue for the design of better policies for all. This alliance, providing the experience, convening power and access of its Members, represents an independent effort towards sustainable development, inclusion, and peace, not bound by the interest or pressures of institutions and governments. |
| **Boston Global Forum (BGF)** | **Boston Global Forum (BGF)**, based in Boston, Massachusetts, was founded to bring together thought leaders and experts from around the globe to participate in open public forums to discuss and illuminate the most critical issues affecting the world at large. BGF’s principal mission is to provide an interactive and collaborative world forum for identifying and developing action-based solutions to our most profound problems. BGF’s method is to host gatherings of thought leaders and experts to identify and dissect the most pressing societal concerns, and then to propose creative and practical solutions. |