The Role of Parliaments in Front of the Internet Challenges in the 21st Century

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Everybody presents themselves to elections. At school, at the university, for an elected body or simply for attracting someone's interest – we constantly face competitions. And elections are about communication. We first identify the potential supporters, make sure that these that have already decided in our favor are not lost meanwhile and then focus mainly on the so called swing voters – these who make up their mind for each separate vote. This is done through the communications channels. Actually this is where new technologies have the most visible impact. In the last years the new technologies changed dramatically the communication channels and hence – the way candidates and elected representatives connect with the citizens. Internet based technologies became a powerful engine of change in the media environment. Traditional politicians are faced with a reform or dye dilemma.

For 22 active years in politics, I presented myself 8 times to general elections – for national and European parliaments and for president. I have been working as elected representative and member of government and I have lived through the enormous change in the way to make politics. New realities happen so rapidly, that most of the people even do not realize the span of the change. But when you look back, the enormous shift happening within few years in the way to make politics is obvious. Back in 1994 the political rallies were a norm. People wanted to see the candidates and the elected representatives, to ask them questions, to criticize them. Citizens were feeling part of a community, they were participating in politics. Now, 25 years later, political rallies are replaced by the social media. Of course there still are people who would prefer to physically attend a political event. But most of the younger ones communicate through the social media. In fact media and social media in particular increased their weight as intermediaries. Digital media are not just another communication channel. They practically influence the content and the perception of the information. **Digital media become an important player in political communication.**

Digital media change both **the form and the content** of making politics. The changes in **the form** are easier to see. Nowadays election campaigns are heavily relying on digital media. But they have their particularities. They reach much more people but the access to a large amount of information makes the users very selective. To be noticed, a political message needs to be **simple, short and bold**. Political parties still campaign on the basis of complex election platforms. But who reads that? An efficient campaign targets the potential voters according to **the individual recipient's interests**. Hence, the efficiency of a campaign is dependent on the technique used to match each potential voter with the most appropriate message. This makes the success of political campaigns not based on commitments but rather a function of the efficiency of the techniques, software and other instruments used in it. Instead of meeting voters and confronting platforms, the campaigns now turn to be a competition of digital media experts and tools.

A second major change in the form of making politics is the fact that digital media as a rule are rich media. They allow a **two way communication**. The traditional media are informative and they transfer the messages from the politicians to the voters while the digital ones provide the possibility to receive a reaction to the message and even to enter in a dialogue. That is a tremendous change. The very possibility that a citizen could send a message that would be seen by the politician, makes people feel closer to the decision makers. That change of distance alters the entire paradigm of relations between voters and elected representatives. In general the decrease of the distance and the possibility to be aggressive anonymously to politicians undermine the institutional respect.

A third difference in the form of making politics is that the elected representatives have a much better possibility to **interact with the citizens between the elections**. Maintaining profiles in different social media enables them to inform the public about their positions on current issues. This is a great opportunity if used properly and a challenge if politicians just try to please the public all the time and avoid arguing for unpopular decisions.

A fourth change digital media bring in politics is the **increased transparency.** Or the possibility for transparency. If used, that can be a very strong tool in politics. A good example is the practice of the European Parliament. All plenary sessions and committee meetings are streamlined. Anyone interested could find all the necessary information related to a particular file. Of course, there is a room to go even further – disclosing all the documents for the trialogues or the famous four column document as well as shedding more light on the meetings with lobbyists. But still, the European Parliament is far ahead compared to many national parliaments. More transparency as a constant goal is healthy. It cancels the TV effect that I have seen many times in the national parliament. When TV is broadcasting, members strangely change – they deliver long and emotional speeches, fight, attack the opponents. The moment when cameras are switched off – they just loose interest in the debate. This wouldn't happen if cameras are always on.

Some researchers like Griffin argue that new media do not differ much from the traditional ones as people make rational choices. They are still a channel for communications. This is correct. But as we see, the use of internet and the other new technologies make the media

an important player in the political process to the extent that **they are able to change the entire mechanism of making politics.**

There is another very important characteristic of the new media – their **atomization**. Today an individual profile in a social platform or a blog are media per se – they produce news and participate in shaping the public opinion. That is a game changer in the communications world. Now media are much more accessible, far reaching and much less subject to regulation or even to the observation of some elementary journalistic standards. The effect of atomization of media on politics is that the latter become much more reactive, the door for fake news and disinformation is widely open and the information environment tends to become chaotic.

All these changes brought by the digital media impact profoundly the form of making politics. They also create a very **favorable soil for new players and processes** in the political life. To summarize – within two decades the digital media provide the reach to a much wider audience, the successful political messages become short and catchy, the large public without any particular reason feels more competent to directly make politics, politicians have to be 24/7 available, no matter the time of campaigns, the increased influence of the social media goes together with lowering the standards for media content. All these provide an excellent opportunity for newcomers in politics. In fact they gain strength by the fact that people see the current politics too elementary and the new players can make an impressive appearance by competing not with political ideas but with technologies and techniques for using the digital environment. The result is very obvious – in a number of European countries we see newcomers or much strengthened formerly marginalized parties on the political stage. Many of them are populist and nationalist. And they keep gaining ground. Why? To me the answer lies **in three pillars**: the **feeling of insecurity** among the large public, created by the inability of the mainstream parties to face the economic crises and later – the crisis with migrants, the very simple, even **simplistic messages** by the populists, usually blaming someone outside for the national problems and the **chaotic digital media environment** where expert analysis and pragmatism leave way to disinformation and catchy worrying titles. No matter whether their messages lead to real solutions. Closing national borders doesn't solve the migration problem, especially for the Southern EU members. Increasing the national capacity for fiscal policy is incompatible with the single currency. But these sound easy and natural solutions, mobilizing the society against the external threat. That weakens the EU and subsequently weakens its member states. I wouldn't duel further into the perspectives of nationalism here but history shows that it either is tamed by the political mainstream or leads to wars.

As we witness, the rapid expansion of digital technologies is deeply affecting not only the form and the procedures of politics but **also their content**. Political messages get down to short title-like texts. The expert analysis is a point of reference to much less people. The revolt against current inabilities of these in power spreads much faster and supports mostly destructive initiatives. The traditional political parties and institutions are losing ground vis-à-vis simplistic and sometimes aggressive politicians. The public is more sensitive and less compromising to political mistakes or mismanagement. In the quest for survival traditional,

mainstream political parties tend to drift to more extreme positions, abandoning a centrist and consensus based behavior. This is clearly seen not only in countries like Poland, Hungary, Austria, Italy, where the ruling parties already demonstrate this trend but also practically in all EU member states where such ideas can be increasingly seen in internal politics and it is a matter of time to be adopted as political stands of the governments and parliamentary majorities. The external pressure coming from the reviving strength of Russia and the aggressive US President's policy towards the EU is another factor for possible tectonic changes in Europe.

It would be exaggerated to argue that the new technologies are the ones provoking these changes, but at the same time it would be short sighted not to see that they undermine the traditional way of making politics and open the way for more populism and lower solidarity in the society. Ironically **the easy access to a large amount of information puts the individuals into a situation of a higher uncertainty, doubt and lack of trust.** We witness that external centers of power make use of this effect to promote controlled results from elections. The story with the personal data leaks from Facebook and their use by the defunct Cambridge Analytica to model election results is just an example of what we can expect.

Is it possible to retain politics in the EU away from the risky waters of populism and nationalism? My answer is affirmative. I will not speak here about the need to reconsider the way mainstream politics are carried out. The raise of populism should shake the current political establishment. It needs to realize that mismanagement and excessive self confidence that were demonstrated in the first phases of the migrants' crisis, and earlier – the economic crisis have a price. And this price stands due even after the peak of the crisis and when the Union started looking for better solutions, aligning the interests. I would rather focus on **two proposals how to use the digital media to improve the way politics are made and perceived**.

The first proposal is to dramatically enhance the use of digital technologies to make politics more understandable, transparent and closer to the citizens. I have already mentioned the IT related initiatives of the European Parliament. They are a good example for many national parliaments but they just show the direction. The more disclosure, the more systemized information, the most interactive IT tools, the more you create a community of engaged citizens. I would give a positive example from my own experience. Working on the pension reform as a member of government, I had two options – to try to impose in parliament and explain the reform that was obvious for the experts. That would provoke massive discontent as usually happens with this type of reforms but even worse – a sense of insecurity that could be further magnified by the diversity of opinions in the internet. I choose the other option - I started a public debate about the existing pension system and parameters. People didn't like it – for various reasons, often specific for every particular groups. But this discussion allowed to open the door to discuss the reform. I made the proposals, prepared by the experts but declared them a needed martyr text – just a basis for discussion. Then we had an extensive period of debates with the social partners and the other stakeholders and with the public – online. Finally we got a kind of agreement and the changes were voted in parliament. So, we promoted a better understanding of the effects of the reform and

avoided the public opposition and discontent. The key to me here was the very open and transparent approach, attracting a community of stakeholders to be part of the process. Later the Ministry's PR and media department received a high award by the media community for successful political communication.

Indeed, it is very difficult to squeeze politics into simple messages. Still this is possible. For example when saying that the EU budget costs one coffee a day to the citizens, or Jeffrey Sach'es comparison saying that extinguishing malaria costs a cup of Starbucks coffee for the citizens, or the fact that the EU administration is twice smaller that the one of Bulgaria for example and costs much less than the one in any member state – these are messages easy to understand and retain. This can be done. But the policy makers need to understand that changing the way politics are done is also a pertinent task. There is no genius that can decently explain why the obscure procedure for the adoption of the EU multiannual budget in the European Council is still maintained. Hence, the proper use of the digital media cannot compensate the need to rethink the content and the procedures of making politics and to make them more efficient, just and understandable.

My second proposal is much more forward reaching. I believe we should **reconsider the political systems in the democratic societies**. And this can be made in a way to ripe the fruits of the digital advancement for further imposing and boosting democracy.

To better explain this proposal, I would make reference to the view of Yuval Hariri, expressed in his recent book Homo Deus. He argues that with the development of technologies, the real infrastructure would go digital, the artificial intelligence would take better and more efficient decisions and the humans could be compared to biological algorithms using data for further perfection. That is a clearly utopic vision for the future. But we could see indeed some elements that can dramatically rationalize politics, further asserting their constructive role.

If we want to reverse the trend of increasing the gap between the citizens and the political elite as a result of the abundance and diversity of information, increased insecurity, decreased credibility of political figures, aggressive populism, then we need to do everything to increase the confidence and make as much as possible for citizens to be involved in a constructive and informed debate. In fact the digital technologies offer such tools.

We have to **change the political systems towards a better mix between representative and direct democracy**. This is the road to make citizens involved in a constructive debate and decision making. A way to do this is elaborated in a project on **enhancing political contracts and mandates**, carried out by the young Bulgarian futurologist Dr Mariana Todorova. Internet can create communities mandating representatives to accomplish particular tasks. A member of parliament should not be elected on the basis of their or their party's election platform only. Life is much more dynamic. Elected representatives need to implement concrete assignments and mandates by their electorate. The **right to recall** a representative should be strengthened and made a real instrument, while preserving the stability of the institutions. Mandating representatives to accomplish concrete tasks could be introduced as a practice not only in elected bodies but also **for various community priorities**. This is the

direction the supporters of the so called liquid democracy would like to see developments. Political decision making should be brought closer to the citizens involving them in a meaningful debate. They have to become **part of the decision making**. If this mix between direct and representative democracy is enhanced, then referenda would not be an exceptional event, subject to external pressure and disinformation. Citizens' involvement would be part of the everyday political practice. Elected representatives will have to discuss with the citizens the political decisions and be more bound to their perceptions. Instruments as the EU Citizens' Initiative have to be strengthened and it should be much more possible for citizens **to put an issue to debate in the representative bodies**.

The digital technologies provide great possibilities to further democratize politics. Elections, referenda, public consultations and debates can be very cheap and flexible online. There is a splendid possibility that technologies are used for good purposes creating more solidarity. Indeed they pose a challenge to the political leadership as good politicians are sometimes required not to follow but to lead the public opinion. But I am confident that democratizing politics will squeeze the room for politicians – followers and give more opportunities to demonstrate leadership.

Let us hope that our societies will be able to grasp the possibilities offered by the technologies and use them to make politics more efficient, constructive and trustful.

Thank you for your attention!