Club of Three lunch discussion:

Political participation and protest in the social media age: changing modern democracies for the better?

Berlin, 13 May 2016

Robert Bosch Stiftung
Französische Straße 32, 10117 Berlin

(Picture: Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Lampenraum)

INTRODUCTION

The Club of Three organised a lunch event in Berlin on 13 May to discuss with a small group of senior media representatives, academics and business people the opportunities and challenges posed by social networks for modern democracies.

The aim was to focus on a topic of high societal relevance and to explore in greater detail the drivers behind some of the major themes that had emerged during recent Club of Three meetings. These included the growing distrust towards the political class and rise of new forms of civic engagement across Europe. Social networks in particular had been instrumental in

changing the way protests emerge and evolve, as shown by the Arab Spring, Euromaidan demonstrations in Kiev and, more recently, the 'Nuit debout' movement in Paris.

In addition to the usual mix of participants from France, the UK and Germany, a number of Russian nationals were also invited to take part as the Club of Three's geographical focus outside Europe this year was Russia. The topic – social networks and politics – was introduced to participants by Rowan Barnett, Director Market Development and Media at Twitter D/A/CH, Benelux and Russia, who had played a key part in the organisation of this meeting. The discussion itself was chaired by Jochen Wegner (Editor-in-Chief of Zeit.de) and led by three speakers: Pavel Lokshin (Moscow-based journalist), Philippe-Moreau Chevrolet (President of MCBG Conseil) and Sergey Lagodinski (Head of EU/North America Department at the Heinrich Böll Foundation).

The speakers gave contrasting accounts of how governments in Europe and Russia were dealing with the rapid changes brought by the digital revolution in terms of how the younger generation communicates and engages with politics. They also highlighted the difficulty for official channels in democratic societies to act as a credible voice against propaganda and online extremism.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS:

The first speaker described the restrictions imposed on social media activities in Russia, which he characterised as a veiled attempt to curb free speech through anti-extremism legislation. This was a far cry from the seemingly uncontrollable flow of information in Western democracies. Authoritarian regimes did not necessarily have to employ heavy-handed tactics such as bans on Twitter or Facebook as was the case with China or Iran in order to keep a lid on the internet. There were multiple examples over the past few years of Russian individuals being prosecuted for allegedly propagating extremist views online. Sanctions could range from a fine to community sentences or even prison. Bank accounts and social benefits could also be frozen. According to an NGO report, 221 cases of criminal persecutions relating to online speeches or posts were recorded in 2015 alone. Because the Russian legislation was using vague language to define extremism, it could be interpreted very broadly. The risk of facing charges for anything that could be deemed threatening by the authorities was enough to instil a sense of self-censorship in most people. One of the participants noted that repression was not the only way of controlling the internet. Authoritarian regimes were also very skilled at manipulating online communities, through fake posts or trolls, under the disguise of a democratic debate.

The second speaker painted a very different picture of how the government in France was handling social networks. The elite in power appeared out of step with the kind of direct democracy that had flourished online, as shown in March by the clumsy attempt by President Hollande's communications team to broadcast a live debate with the employees of a French start-up via the video streaming app Periscope. The broadcast was eventually shut down after followers posted extremely negative comments and insults. It was felt however that this sort of experiment was a necessary part of the learning curve for politicians wishing to engage with new audiences. Social networks were platforms for sending out their messages but they were not one-way channels and politicians had to enter a conversation and get used to criticism and harsh

reactions. This was a normal part of life online. Although it could be uncomfortable for political heavyweights used to top-down communication, it represented a way of reaching out to voters who would not normally engage with traditional parties.

Politicians could be quite successful at communicating their messages via social networks. This was the case with François Hollande during his presidential campaign, which had attracted hundreds of thousands of followers. The key challenge was to continue to engage with these groups while in government. French Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron and his recently launched political movement "En Marche" was another example of how social networks could help provide a loyal fan base for rising political figures. But their ability to propel new brands into the public sphere very quickly and efficiently, combined with a strong appetite for new leaders among voters, was also playing into the hands of far-right parties such as the Front National. The spread of lies and false rumours of a racist nature, such as the fake story about the wife of the new London Mayor wearing a hijab, was a particular worry. The lack of trust in public authorities meant that official channels had little credibility online and therefore it was difficult for them to fight back with counter-narratives.

One of the participants noted that these threats to democratic societies could also easily cross physical borders in cyberspace. The outrage caused among Russian communities in Germany, and accusations of a cover-up by the Kremlin following the alleged rape of a 13-year old German-Russian girl by a migrant in Berlin, had shown the destabilising power of misinformation spread online. It also demonstrated the ability of foreign countries to galvanise entire communities remotely through social networks. However, online counter-extremism campaigns against Daesh propaganda in France, which had been quite effective, proved that modern democracies were equipped to address these risks.

The third speaker highlighted the positive aspects of the digital revolution, which he likened to an Arab Spring for an entire generation of young people. It had opened up a space in which they could voice their opinions and be heard by very large audiences worldwide. The political debate was no longer the preserve of media commentators and politicians and, as a result, the West was experiencing a more democratic distribution of power. But at the same time the digital space was fragmenting into a myriad of online communities which could sometimes generate a closed mental environment. These communities were quickly finding answers to their own questions outside of the mainstream debate. The challenge for the political class now was to bind all these various points of views together into a coherent narrative.

One of the participants expressed concern that social networks were a major springboard for those who shouted the loudest. In her company, the hundreds of workers who represented the silence majority did not have time to send Twitter or Facebook messages during the day. Their views on major issues such as Britain's membership of the EU were therefore not being heard. If online activists were increasingly becoming the dominant voice, was democracy under threat? In response, another participant said that, in her experience, the majority of social media users quickly learned to filter out unwanted comments in order to focus on what mattered to them.

<u>CONCLUSION</u>:

The meeting at the Robert Bosch Stiftung in Berlin showed how important it was for politicians to engage with social networks in order to be part of a conversation that would otherwise take place without them. This was particularly challenging for modern democracies in which, unlike authoritative regime, governments were struggling to get their message across.

There was debate about how fundamental the changes brought by social networks really were. In many ways there was little difference with the impact that radio and TV had had during the last century. Like any new technology, social networks had their advantages and disadvantages. If democratic life sometimes seemed under threat with the proliferation of extremist views online, the internet could not simply be seen as a land of one-dimensional exchanges were politicians would automatically fail. Their messaging required an overhaul but it was clear that complex arguments could be debated and that it was possible to establish a loyal political base online.

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List of participants

Rowan	BARNETT	Director Market Development and Media, Twitter D/A/CH, Netherlands and Russia; Member of the Steering Group, Club of Three
Hannah	BOLEY	Science and Innovation Officer, British Embassy in Berlin
Ann	CORMACK	Director International, Rolls-Royce
Jacob	DÜRINGER	Program Officer, International Relations Europe and its Neighbors, Robert Bosch Stiftung
Alexander	GÖRLACH	Founder, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, The European
Martin	HELLER	Head of Video, WELTN24 GmbH
Jacqueline	HÉNARD	Managing Director, CNC Communications
Helge	HOFFMEISTER	Partner, Gauly| Dittrich | van de Weyer
Claudia K.	HUBER	Senior Manager Programs and Strategy, Alfred Herrhausen Society
Nikolai	KLIMENIOUK	Journalist and Writer, FAZ and openDemocracy
Sergey	LAGODINSKI	Head of the EU/North America Department of the Heinrich Böll Foundation; Non-resident fellow with the Global Public Policy Institute