

Ellen Ueberschär's Keynote at the Budapest Forum on Building Sustainable Democracies

From 15-17 September 2021, the Budapest Forum brought together local decision-makers from Europe and beyond to discuss how to strengthen sustainable democracies. Combatting the climate crisis while including the participation of civil society will be key to sustaining democratic liberties for future generations, said Dr Ellen Ueberschär in her keynote on the panel 'People Power vs Climate Crisis'.

The need for an ambitious climate agenda is happening in a time of crises.

We find ourselves amidst a climate crisis that is already showing what devastating, immediate consequences it has on our lives and the environment. The floods in Western Europe, or the devastating fires in Southern Europe, appear to be more than the proverbial writing on the wall. Amidst this climate crisis, governments, societies and the European Union are trying to get a grip on the Covid crisis. Our societies are being weakened by the economic downturn due to the pandemic, exacerbating social inequalities. We also observe the continuous backsliding of democracies in Europe, and not just here. What lesson are we learning from this accumulation of the climate crisis, the crisis in democracy and the crisis in public health?

One major lesson we have learnt from the pandemic: Crises do not exist in a vacuum, and we need to map their linkages. The deadliness and the spread of Covid-19 were both increased by a degree of **air pollution** that has already caused health vulnerabilities. What's more, climate change has exacerbated inequalities for marginalised groups who have already faced sexism, racism or other forms of social injustice. In many cases, it is the vulnerable groups in our societies who bear the brunt of the changing climate.

Authoritarian governments have taken advantage of this opportunity to further infringe democratic rights and the rights of institutions like parliaments in the course of tackling the pandemic. Right-wing populist groups have captured the issue of climate change in order to counter both science and the international community with their isolationist, nationalist responses.

Crises can be used as momentum for real change, though. I'm not talking about a revolution here, but about the fact that crises can spark structural transformation and make our societies more resilient. Civil society and people who care play a major role here.

However, the prerequisite for a democratic, resilient society is a democracy that is liberal, not an illiberal one that undermines fundamental rights and human dignity while pretending to combat the pandemic or the climate crisis.

Soon after Covid occurred, a debate evolved as to whether tough measures and bans could be a role model for tackling the climate crisis. To be absolutely clear, we will never succeed in overcoming any global crisis through authoritarian measures or dictatorship. Freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom of science are the prerequisites for a sustainable solution to the climate crisis and to any other crisis.

Here I would add that we certainly need to build strong, democratic, progressive alliances at the administrative and political levels, especially among communities and at the local level, where the immediate process of change, of environmental and social transformation, takes place. At the same time, we have to convince the majorities in our European societies of the correctness of this course of action, make them part of the solution, show them respect and recognition. This is the only way to prevent citizens from following authoritarian, right-wing ideas, falling prey to conspiracy theories, or emigrating in frustration. Democracy needs strong, committed citizens!

I would like to bring three major theses to the discussion:

First: Climate protection for all generations is both a democratic and a social matter!

The fact that **preserving the livelihood of citizens is a democratic issue**, and that protecting the climate is necessary to protecting the civil liberties and rights guaranteed by law was recently highlighted by a judgment from the Constitutional Court of Germany in April 2021. That judgment followed a verdict of the Dutch Supreme Court which also stated that climate protection is a human right!

Both the environmental and the economic transformation have to go hand in hand with a social transformation **that takes all people into account equally, regardless of their age, their origin, or their social position.** The younger generations have called for an immediate reaction to the climate crisis in order to protect future generations. **This also makes it clear that climate protection is an intergenerational project.**

If we seek to guarantee liberty to our children and future generations, it is imperative **not only to stabilise living conditions for citizens and future generations, but to improve them** – whether in rural or urban areas, for workers in trade, industry and agriculture, and for the elderly and school-aged youngsters alike.

Such transformation can only lead to **success stories about the necessary political backbone of a society** that has its own take on authentic environmental and social transformation, that has its own interest in bringing such transformation forward.

Second: Participative, green, equitable renewal is key to preserving the liberty and dignity of people and societies.

What does liberty mean in the context of environmental renewal? Protecting and strengthening freedom in Europe is about making sure that **all citizens have the means and opportunities to decide for themselves freely in the future. None of us wants to see governmental bodies exploiting emergency laws to determine who gets access to water, or to clean air, or to limit mobility options permanently.**

Governmental regulations on environmental protection, whether regulations on CO₂ emissions, on traffic, or on consumption, are often regarded as restrictive measures on liberty today. The main question, however, is: **What if today's liberty to consume freely results in severe restrictions on the liberties of the next generations in terms of their living conditions and living space?** That means preserving the livelihood of our societies is crucial to protecting the dignity of all citizens.

To exploit moments of crises in order to achieve real change, it is necessary to assume responsibility now and to lay the groundwork for an ambitious recovery

from the pandemic. The European Green Deal and the EU recovery programme is a great start – and it needs **consistent, strategic orientation of its investments, based on environmental and social criteria.**

By the way, municipalities need direct access to European Structural Funding. It is the municipal level that is decisive for economic and social cohesion, for environmental protection, for integration and for inclusion.

Third: Citizens and civil society have to be involved in shaping the Green Deal.

Communities, local initiatives and civil society are exactly located where transformation happens and therefore are **important drivers of environmental, social and economic renewal.**

The European Green Deal will become a success story only if it is established together with a **broad alliance of those involved in civil society, in the economy, in science and in trade unions who have their say** in how to shape a green renewal that is sustainable. Responsive city councils and mayors are needed, trustworthy decision-makers who are beyond corruption and who govern instead with a vision of a fair, just municipality.

There are already many local success stories happening all over Europe and beyond that can serve as a great basis for creating synergies, learning from each other, and fostering both environmental and political partnerships. Involving community stakeholders, activists for climate preservation, or establishing citizens' councils are just a few examples of how governments have systematically engaged civil society in the political process. In the end, shaping this transformation together with the people will enrich and strengthen our democracies as well.

I would like to end here – and I am looking forward to your perspectives and to a fruitful discussion!