DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 17.04.2023 | Jan Zielonka

Welcome to high-speed democracy!

For several years now, Europe has been governed in a rush. This acceleration presents a challenge for democracy

We tend to say that time is our greatest treasure and we cannot afford to waste it. Our politicians seem to concur: they never stand still. In fact, they operate ever more rapidly.

For several years now, Europe has been governed in a rush, largely by decree, with little public deliberation and parliamentary oversight. We call this 'crisis management', as we have indeed moved from the financial crisis to the migratory one and the pandemic. When the European Parliament asked the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to reveal the records of her negotiations with Big Pharma over Covid-19 vaccines, it appeared these were usually conducted on WhatsApp, with messages customarily deleted.

Now we have a spine-chilling war on our borders which also requires fast and firm actions. We not only rush to supply arms to Ukraine, impose sanctions on Russia and accommodate refugees but also contemplate the 'fast-track' admission of Ukraine to the European Union.

A new banking crisis knocking on our doors also demands speedy solutions. The intervention of the Swiss Federal Department of Finance, the Swiss National Bank and the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority wrought merger of the country's two largest banks practically over a weekend.

Governing in a rush

Welcome to high-speed democracy! In his book on 'governing by emergency' in the EU, Jonathan White contends: 'The idea of extreme circumstances that need to be overcome and that give licence for unconventional measures of last resort has become central to how decisions are made.'

Successive crises are only one of many factors that make our democratic

governments run so quickly. Our economic and social world has visibly accelerated. Edward Luttwak talks about unchecked 'turbo-capitalism' dominated by digital giants. Compare, for instance, the speed of financial transactions in the era of the telegraph and that of the internet.

Present-day acceleration and time compression pervert democratic procedures and lead to government by fiat by a small group of ruling-party politicians in charge of the executive branch.

Hartmut Rosa argues that there is an acceleration not only in technology but also of social change and the pace of life. If you go online, you will find an endless supply of advice on how to act more quickly in the modern world. If you are slow, the insidious undertone is 'expect to be left behind', so we pursue speed-reading or speed-learning courses.

We are also adjusting to instantaneous communication and work around the clock with our devices always to hand to respond quickly to breaking news and recommendations from friends or orders from bosses. Governments cannot but follow the same path, trying to catch up with fast-moving people, goods, services and money.

Acceleration is a mixed blessing for citizens, but slowing down is not a viable option in most private and public circumstances. A sluggish response to a pandemic or to climate change would even amount to a crime.

Democracy takes time

Yet, acceleration presents a challenge for democracy. The nature of democracy is to slow down decision-making, to allow for public deliberation, citizen participation, parliamentary oversight and judicial control. Utilising all these democratic devices takes time – time which is in short supply in a high-speed economy and society.

As William Scheuerman rightly argues, the liberal democracy of the past several decades was 'reasoned, deliberative and reflective and thus dependent on slow rather than fast passage of time'. Present-day acceleration and time compression by contrast pervert democratic procedures and lead to government by fiat by a small group of ruling-party politicians in charge of the executive branch. Parliaments and courts are increasingly marginalised because they slow down the decision-making process and 'obstruct' governments from addressing challenges in an 'efficient' manner.

Incessant time pressure leaves little room for research and evidence, negotiation and compromise.

Effectiveness is, however, not just a function of timing but also of the solutions applied. The wrong medicine dispensed in a hurry does not cure the patient. Incessant time pressure leaves little room for research and evidence, negotiation and compromise. In a high-speed society, politics conforms to the ideological schemas of those in charge and dissent can be labelled betrayal of the 'national interest', bordering on subversion.

This is how populism is born: 'post-truth' rhetoric is quickly disseminated via social media while experts are labelled 'enemies of the people'. As Ming-Sung Kuo puts it boldly, 'populism is a child of "a pathology of instantaneous democracy".'

A new balance

Not surprisingly, therefore, we hear that democracy should stand its ground and resist the acceleration. The advocacy of slowing down economic and social processes is also gaining strength. 'Slow down. Wise up' is the message.

I fear this is easier said than done. That is not necessarily because democracy has lost control over turbo-capitalism or because citizens want quicker rather than slower governmental action. It is because the internet, one of the most powerful accelerators, has become an indispensable part of our lives. Today it is easier to imagine a world without democracy than one without the internet.

So, democracy needs to adjust to high-speed or it will die. To do so requires, in essence, a new balance between rationality, efficiency and citizens' participation.

Although the system of parliamentary representation is not working well, states are reluctant to entertain democratic experiments.

In practical terms, we first need to differentiate between decisions that require slow and wise input and those that can be handled in an accelerated manner. Right now, we tend to rely on improvisation. Sometimes, constitutional changes are introduced by stealth under the pressure of successive emergencies. At other times, challenges requiring immediate responses are bogged down in partisan parliamentary or judicial squabbles.

Secondly, we need to take e-democracy seriously. Although the system of parliamentary representation is not working well, states are reluctant to entertain democratic experiments. This is because political parties prefer to rely on opinion polls that do not tie their hands to direct citizens' participation with the help of the internet.

Thirdly, we need to involve networks willing and able to contribute to the delivery of public goods in democratic decision-making. I have in mind urban networks, trade unions and business associations as well as different kinds of non-governmental organisations. Studies have shown that networks operate in a high-speed society more effectively than centralised, bureaucratic states. Yet, they are excluded from formal democratic arrangements. This seems unwise, although we will have to find ways of making networks more accessible, transparent and accountable.

In short, we need to make instantaneous democracy work for the benefit of citizens — and there is no time to waste!

This is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal.



Jan Zielonka
Oxford

Jan Zielonka is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the Universities of Venice and Oxford. His latest book is *The Lost Future and How to Reclaim It* (Yale University Press, 2023).