



BILL GATES ON PEOPLE’S DISTRUST OF AUTHORITIES: A REAL PROBLEM, BUT WHY?

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While making forecasts for 2022 in his end-of-year blog post, quoted by CNBC, billionaire Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates highlighted people's distrust of governments as one of the issues he is most worried about heading into 2022. The problem has become particularly evident since the pandemic hit, spreading across the world, but especially pronounced in Western countries. Russia has not been spared either, so we can say Russia is on trend with regard to covid dissidents.

It is equally difficult to disagree with him that governments need to be major players in addressing emerging problems, which is another lesson of the pandemic. Accordingly, if they do not regain popular trust, people will be unlikely to support their major new initiatives.

What we cannot agree with is that we are dealing with something new here. The problem has been out there; the pandemic just made it more obvious because in such unprecedented conditions, people's trust suddenly became a permanent factor in government policy – as opposed to election campaigns.

The erosion of public trust began during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. At that time, many began to doubt that the elites – notably, middle ground elites, ideologically, because the Cold War and any struggle of ideas had ended – actually knew what they were doing. Reaganomics and Thatcherism reigned supreme, financialising economic processes and paving the way for “the perfect storm,” which was quick to hit.

The overuse of political campaign tools led to a negative impact – citizens felt used and manipulated. At the same time, they found they were no longer given a political choice because all leading parties seemed to be offering the same policy, and no alternatives. Social media got added to the mix, undermining the monopoly of traditional media, which had served those in power.

Brexit and Trump became symbols of this phenomenon, which was quickly attributed to populism. This term does not relieve the problem, only driving the disease deeper inside. As a result, large groups of dissatisfied citizens, practically deprived of representation in power, also have themselves to blame because there is something they do not understand. Then the question is, how is this a democracy? It is no surprise that direct democracy has come into focus – since the representative form does not work.



According to Pew Research Centre surveys, even in 2019, in pre-Covid times, 75% of Americans believed their fellow citizens' trust in the federal government was decreasing, while 64% of respondents thought Americans were becoming more distrustful of each other as well. What can be done about this, especially when it comes to vaccination?

The Russian government believes there is no alternative to persuasion. People cannot be forced to get vaccinated. This is something out of a completely different book, a totalitarian trend from the first half of the 20th century. Governments must earn people's trust and do it on an ongoing basis. There should be a continuous dialogue between the authorities and citizens. Availability of information and communication is of the essence.

Over the past 30 years of trouble-free life, politicians and bureaucracies have forgotten how to explain and raise awareness, and diplomacy is no exception. Therefore, it is difficult to offer any other solution to the problem raised by Gates. One good thing is that he admits he does not yet have any ideas on how to fix the problem. I am sure that a solution can only be found through a dialogue between the authorities and members of the public. Actually, the same applies to international relations, and the latest developments between Russia and the West have confirmed this. There can be no alternative to a direct conversation even during the pandemic.

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