

Welcome Remarks

6th International Conference

COVID-19 IN ASIA:

Communication • Nationalism • Technology

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation is a liberal organization from Germany. Together with our partners, we promote Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights in more than 60 countries.

No question - The pandemic was a great challenge for freedom, and all those who stand up for it.

Sometimes we have to give up freedoms for the greater good of the society: contact restrictions, the closure of shops, factories and schools - these measures are negotiable for liberals. In times of crisis, massive encroachments on individual liberties may be justifiable. But they must be decided in a fair and open discourse and decision-making process.

During the pandemic, this was not always the case - and still isn't: Social media is full of false news. Some governments reacted with excessive censorship - they silenced critics and used the pandemic for their own political power games. The huge social media companies lost credibility, too: Just look at Facebook that had to reverse its ban on posts claiming Covid-19 came from a Chinese lab.

How do we prevent the spread of fake news on social media? How do we ensure that people have the most accurate information available? But also: How do we prevent governments from censoring, and how do we regulate the huge tech companies?

The pandemic has made these questions even more pressing. Good answers, liberal answers, are not easy to find in every case - but I'm sure that they exist. And conferences like this help to find them and make them more popular.

All in all, I'm convinced that all the new communication technologies do more good than harm. They clearly made it easier for mankind to get through the Pandemic: Online learning made the closure of schools bearable. The now common use of video calls eliminates unnecessary, unsustainable business travel. Even some kinds of digital parliaments established themselves – challenging dictatorships. Thanks to zoom, even during lockdowns, we weren't isolated.

Conferences like this help us to reduce the negative effects of the crises and, instead, see them as opportunities from which we can learn. I would therefore like to thank all participants and, of course, Asia Center for the very good preparation and organization of this important event.