

INTERNATIONAL DAY of DEMOCRACY

- DEMOCRACY IN A CHANGING WORLD -

Wednesday, 27 September 2017



INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY 2017 | Democracy In A Changing World

27 September 2017, European Parliament

EVENT REPORT

For the second year in a row, the European Parliament hosted a conference in celebration of the International Day of Democracy, teaming up with the European External Action Service, the European Commission and four democracy support organisations: European Endowment for Democracy (EED), European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP), European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), and Office of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) to the EU.

During the conference, high-level politicians, EU officials, academics, journalists, grassroots activists and practitioners debated current democratic trends and challenges, and analysed the needs and possibilities for reconnecting citizens with democratic institutions and politicians. Over 120 participants attended the event, which included three panel discussions on the following themes:

- 1. State of democracy today - trends and challenges*
- 2. How to bring the demos back into democracy? Different forms of democratic engagement and political participation beyond elections*
- 3. Democracy and media – the value of free speech*

Opening remarks

Stefano Manservigi, Director General of European Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), opened the conference. He remarked that democracy faces many challenges both internally, in the European Union, and externally in the developing world. Globalisation has increased socio-economic inequalities, and declining social mobility has eroded our societies from the inside. Resulting divisions put even more pressure on our democratic institutions.

Nevertheless, he stressed that democracy is essential to ensure long-term peace and sustainable development. Democracy is also a key for aid effectiveness, because democratic countries provide better services to their citizens, and strong institutions mean increased accountability and a lower level of corruption. The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are at the heart of both democracy and development.

Democracy is not, and never was the only form of government. It faces challenges from alternative models; however, the core values of democracy cannot be compromised. In his conclusion Mr Manservisi underlined that the EU should avoid "preaching and teaching lessons" to its development aid partners. Instead, we need to share our experiences, conduct a sincere dialogue about the challenges and offer our knowledge as well as assistance to our partners.

In his opening remarks, Deputy Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS), **Christian Leffler**, highlighted the disconnection between the electorate and political leaders and institutions as a major challenge for democracy today. He confirmed the commitment of the EU to support democracy, but emphasised that there is no standard model and that democracy cannot be imposed from outside. On the contrary, it needs to develop from within and EU support has to be tailored to the conditions and aspirations of the partner countries.

He mentioned election observation as an example of a successful EU tool to support electoral and other democratic reforms. Mr. Leffler further underlined that democracy is not a linear process: "If there is something we have learned throughout the years and what we should always remember is that democracy is never finished and no progress on democracy is irreversible." He recalled that Europe also has its weaknesses. Nevertheless, through acknowledging our problems and talking about them openly we can turn them into our advantage and even strengthen our credibility towards our partners.

PANEL I: State of democracy today – trends and challenges

Democracy is under pressure in many countries worldwide. Times are however more optimistic than last year, as democracy has shown resilience, and some first responses are being formulated. The universal aspiration stands, and whenever common democratic values are disrespected people still take to the streets, and to the internet, to defend democratic rights.

Santiago Fisas, Member of the European Parliament, outlined the efforts of the EP in supporting democratic systems worldwide. According to him, regional parliaments could benefit from more regular dialogue to exchange good practices. Democracy is much more than allowing people to vote on elections day.

Since last year, many things have happened. **Joan Hoey**, Regional Director for Europe and Editor of The Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit, expressed the need to acknowledge challenges if democracy is to be preserved for the future. A number of leading "democrats" destroying the western liberal democratic order is a major challenge. More than ever, elected politicians have become elitist, closer to the state and to 'Brussels' than to their electorate. They need to engage with an increased determination to counter this image. Leaders should consult their bases before taking important decisions, if they want to avoid the resentment of the people, and their support for parties and movements that give them the feeling of "being heard".

Making democratic choices on the basis of anti-democratic reflexes is a new reality and the proliferation of fake news another one. Hoey pointed out that European populists do not have more answers to problems than politicians from traditional political parties, but they have at least the merit of being prepared to initiate the debate. The more traditional political parties resist confronting problems and

difficult debates, the more votes will go to populists. These votes are expressions of a deep popular dissatisfaction, and a desire for change. More positive, however, is an increased popular engagement: citizens' movements and new parties are mobilizing people on single issues. But it also captures a contradiction of contemporary democracy: whereas representative democracies were previously channelled into massive parties, we now witness an increasing fragmentation of parties across Europe; but we do not see any political renewal, or re-alignment of traditional parties! Parties should be responsive to the will of the people, and open the debate – perhaps it is not guaranteed that they will win their argument, but at least they have a new chance to win, according to Hoey.

Šimon Pánek, Co-founder and Director of People in Need, referred to the key role of NGOs to voice problems in society, to listen and to be heard. People in Need's daily work shows the effect that working for people in need has on young people. These young people engage more easily in society and politics, but many others remain indifferent, considering the limited outreach of NGOs. However, even if only 20 per cent of youth are getting involved, one should not forget that these are allies when it comes to reaching out to others.

Integrating elements on active citizenship in school curricula could support their efforts, and promote a more positive take on politics. Central European governments traditionally do not invest enough in citizenship education. Talking about political disconnection, Pánek argued that technocrats are too technical, and political leaders are too cynical to convince young people. They care more about values, emotions and consistent behaviour. In this light, the political correctness issue should be discussed. It has the merit of promoting inclusiveness, but we are losing too many ordinary people in distrust. It is a tricky field to navigate. Lastly, Panek expressed some criticism with regard to new types and methods of democracy. Twitter democracy does not leave enough time and space for balanced opinions, and let emotions rule. Slowing down the democratic debate is necessary.

Santiago Fisas regretted the inability of the media to explain EU legislation, as they prefer to report on political battles in their respective home countries. Conference participants underlined the need for the EU to uphold its values, and the importance of strengthening civil society and encouraging ordinary people to get involved in politics. Another participant defended the legitimate space for democratic discussion and criticised the use of the word "populism".

In response to some of the questions related to the role of the media and the need for a better dissemination of EU's political information, Joan Hoey had some advice for the European Parliament. It should seek ways to improve its public image, especially the persistent charge that MEPs are being paid too much for too little work. It should endeavour to be seen as an institution close to citizens, and to which citizens can make useful inputs. This includes making it more central to EU decision making in the future. It should enhance its accountability, including in the national frameworks. She also advised the media to become more independent and truthful, and to go back to basics. In a democracy, people need to have access to objective information.

Keynote speech by Mairead McGuinness, First Vice-President of European Parliament

Mairead McGuinness delivered a keynote speech about “reawakening democracy” and the importance of empowering people at the grassroots level. The European Parliament understands and greatly values democracy yet it is also facing some challenges. People are not coming out to vote in great numbers at the European Parliament elections. Therefore, MEPs should be more present in the Member States as nothing can be more effective than direct interaction with people themselves. To make democracy work, people should be given more political power, both individually and collectively. She also underlined that it is crucial to show that different voices matter in democracy too – there is no such a thing as “winner takes all”. It is a “collective voice” that needs to be reflected and respected.

PANEL II: How to bring the demos back into democracy? Different forms of democratic engagement and political participation beyond elections

How to bring the demos back into democracy – that was the thought-provoking question posed in the second panel, to which speakers from different backgrounds answered with many inspiring examples of initiatives engaging people at the grassroots level in political processes.

The Mayor of Gdansk, **Paweł Adamowicz**, for instance, explained how he organises civic panels to guide decision-making and allows the city’s residents to vote on the city budget allocation, directly involving them in major decisions.

Technology has great potential in this regard as well, as illustrated by Mr **Fabio Massimo Castaldo**, Member of the European Parliament for the Italian 5 Star Movement, who spoke of his party’s online Platform Rousseau, where citizens can post their candidatures for elections and propose legislation.

Young people are another key factor in engaging the grassroots in political decision-making, argued **Irene Wairimu Mwangi**, who also spoke of her own experience as a member of the Youth Senate of Kenya. All three speakers argued that active citizenship is quintessential for the vibrancy and sustainability of democracy.

This was echoed by **Peter Vermeersch**, Professor at KU Leuven, who advocated citizen assemblies as a way to foster such active citizenship and enrich democratic practices in ways that go beyond strategic bargaining of fixed collective ideologies, as done by parties.

Contrasting these calls for more active and direct citizen participation in decision-making, Uruguayan activist **Gabriel Delacoste** made the provocative suggestion that we do not need to put the *demos* back into democracy, but the *cratos*, arguing that referenda and citizen initiatives are too often ignored by those in power, leading to a disengagement of the people – the *demos*.

A lively discussion followed on the value and place of direct citizen engagement initiatives like referenda and citizen assemblies. At the centre of the debate was the tensions between citizen initiatives dealing with policies on the one hand, and ideology and political parties on the other hand. Both could go hand in hand, however; and many agreed in fact, that this combination is crucial for the survival of democracy. In this regard, Mr Adamowicz stressed that democracy is not “an ever-lasting gift”, but something we need to work hard for every day.

Panel III: Democracy and media– the values of free speech

Emma Goodman, Research Officer at Media Policy Project of the London School of Economics, delved into the highly topical issue of fake news. She noted that fake news is a controversial term in itself, that usually refers to knowingly fabricated stories for political or financial purposes, or a combination of both. The decreasing trust in media exacerbated by highly polarising elections has accelerated the spread of fake news. Anger with the media has become intertwined with anger with politicians as both are perceived as belonging to the elite.

Media literacy is a very attractive solution to counter the spread of fabricated stories as it does not require making difficult political decisions to restrict the operation of social media platforms. It is clear that a more critical approach to digital literacy is necessary. Individuals should be familiar with the role of algorithms and the sources of funding for ads, content and media outlets. Digital literacy initiatives, more transparency for tech organisations and effort on the part of the media to better cater for their readers would be a potent combination to address the fake news phenomenon.

Co-founder of Daraj media initiative in Lebanon, **Diana Moukalled**, underlined how currently professional and factual journalism is more in demand than ever. Talking from her own experience, she explained how media is highly polarised in the Middle East and usually under the control of those in power. While there are numerous independent media initiatives in the region, many of them are facing difficulties, and many journalists face daily threats, intimidation and the risk of imprisonment.

The ambitious initiative Daraj, spearheaded by Diana Moukalled and supported by the European Endowment for Democracy, will be launched in November. Moukalled highlighted that financial independence is indispensable for independent media that can be ensured by a combination of relevant content and viable business model. The biggest challenge for Arab journalism is also to establish what role media organisations can play in an impossibly fragmented discourse. “We need a media that does not suffer from denial and amnesia”, concluded Moukalled.

Margaryta Gontar, Founder of the StopFake initiative in Ukraine, focused on Russian propaganda. What the Kremlin did is to weaponise the media. It creates emotionally engaging and entertaining disinformation that resonates with people. The primary aim of propaganda is not to make people believe the disinformation, but rather make them confused and apathetic. Propaganda in Ukraine has changed and mutated like a virus. In the beginning, false stories were easy to refute, but now we are dealing with stories that have elements of truth whereby the context is manipulated. In these circumstances, the “truth has to be made sexy again!”.

The conference day was concluded by a cultural event at BOZAR Centre of Fine Arts. The evening started with a visionary Keynote Address on “EU and Democracy: A never ending task” delivered by Herman Van Rompuy, President Emeritus of the European Council ([attached](#)). The speech was followed by a performance from the Arab Puppet Theater, entitled: “Performance Desperately In Need of an Audience”, about human dignity, freedom and democracy in relation to migration.