**INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY:**

**Democracy Today and Tomorrow**

**28 SEPTEMBER 2016**

*Conference Report*

Opening remarks were delivered by **Alexander Graf Lambsdorff**, Vice-President of the European Parliament (EP). Regarding democracy support, the EP is implementing its Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach, targeting the entire electoral cycle by combining inter-parliamentary support with electoral observation and mediation support in a number of countries in different continents. Coordination among EU institutions, member states, donors and NGOs is fundamental to enhance an effective democracy support. This is particularly important nowadays, democratic values being rather challenged.

**Barbara Pesce-Monteiro**, UN-Secretary-General’s representative in Brussels, referred to the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the importance they give to governance, which is paramount to democracy. In recent years, democracy has suffered serious setbacks in Europe with concerns over shrinking space for participation and decline of confidence in public institutions. The full participation and support of the international community, national bodies, civil society and individuals are necessary, since democracy is as much a process as a goal.

**Session I – DEMOCRACY TODAY**

The values of freedom, respect of human rights and the principle of holding periodic and genuine elections by universal suffrage are essential elements of democracy. However, human rights, democracy and the rule of law are tested and challenged in the world today. After presenting the panel members, **Shada Islam**, Director of Policy at Friends of Europe, went straight to the crux of the matter. Is representative democracy outdated? Is it just a feeling? What is the essence of democracy? And why are populists becoming so popular today?

**Joan Hoey**, Regional manager Europe and Editor of The Democracy Index at The Economist Intelligence Unit, mentioned a number of statistics to illustrate what is called “a mild democratic recession” since 2006. Out of 167 democracies, 79 registered a decline in their overall democratic scores, and there has been an erosion of civil liberties in recent years. This “mild democratic recession” also affects western democracies: only 45% of people born in the EU during the eighties say it is essential to live in a democracy, while the level of political participation is declining.

The economic recession and the lack of capacity of governments to represent the interests of the people further undermine political legitimacy. As a result, the political class moves away from the electorate, and citizens give up on politics. Populist politicians step into this gap, and they at least manage to mobilise people to participate in politics. In this sense, populists are the consequence and not the cause of the decline in democracy. The answer to this can only be found in pursuing *more* democracy, Joan Hoey concluded.

**Alexander Graf Lambsdorff** argued that the de-legitimisation of democratic leaders in Europe cannot only be pinned down on the economic crisis. Another important cause of the democratic crisis is the culture among politicians of over-promising while ignoring economic realities, in order to get elected. To counter this current standard feature of all democracies, the social contract should be reviewed. Increased transparency and juridical instruments to challenge government decisions can help to bridge the trust gap between political leaders and the public. However, on the other side of the coin, the opening-up of decision-making to the people might clash with the overall efficiency of the political work: a growing number of public projects remain incomplete due to countless veto powers given to external actors.

Questioned on the role of the Internet in democracy, Joan Hoey pointed out that there is a general confusion. Instead of connecting people, the Internet often disconnects politicians from people, and it tends to create bubbles in which citizens reinforce their own vision, instead of opening up to other perspectives. She said that the Internet is not going to resolve the basic challenges of democracy. Furthermore, it will not resolve the Western lack of confidence in democratic values, or the lack of strong individuals in leadership positions.

**Martin Schulz**, President of the EP, delivered a keynote speech through a video message. Democracy in the world appears more contested than ever. In many countries extreme and anti-systemic parties questioning the foundations of democracy have emerged, prompted by a loss of belief in representative democracy. At the same time, people’s belief in democracy remains very strong. Citizens are increasingly torn between the perceived quickness and effectiveness of authoritarian systems on one hand, and polarised and compromised electorates in democracies on the other. Democracies are by default more legitimate than authoritarian systems, but their ineffectiveness can weigh on them. As a consequence, the EU cannot only be democratic, but it must also be effective, in order to meet people’s expectations and stay resilient.

**Session II - REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

**Rosa Balfour**, Acting Director of the Europe Programme at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, started the panel by referring to the challenges that democracy is facing, e.g. a crisis of representation and a gap between elected political leaders and citizens. To face these demanding tasks, advanced European democracies should turn to non-European experiences for new approaches.

**Tamás Meszerics**, Coordinator in the Foreign Affairs Committee for the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance, highlighted the difficulty that MEPs often face: they do not only represent their country and constituency, but also their national and European party. This means that they are accountable to many different people through many different channels. Nevertheless, citizens are disenchanted with politics because they do not see the direct impact between their vote and the policy outcome. This is why regular feedback from the electorate is crucial. The EP tries hard to overcome the perceived gap between the electorate and the elected by making itself more transparent. Still, more could be done to engage citizens, such as expanding written questions that can be addressed to the EP and the European Citizens’ Initiative.

**Ismail Ilsouk**, Executive Director of *SimSim-Participation Citoyenne*, presented his project Nouabook – an EED-funded Internet platform that strives to stimulate citizens’ participation in Moroccan political life. In Morocco, politicians generally feel more accountable to their parties than to their voters. Ismail Ilsouk’s organisation wants to change this situation via various innovative communication channels through which Members of Parliament and citizens can communicate. That is why SimSim’s independence and the fact that it is not tied to a specific party is crucial.

The project has showed a two-fold effect: on the one hand, it engages politicians more and tries to hold them accountable, and on the other it educates participating citizens and makes them more knowledgeable about political affairs. As democracy is a continuous process, there is a need to educate people about politics in order to better serve their interests. In this regard, Ismail Ilsouk stressed the importance of the Internet in reaching out to young Moroccans (half of whom are on Facebook) and also to people living in rural areas.

**Beauty Katebe**, Chair of Zambia’s National Women’s Lobby, presented the case of her country, where only 16% of national parliamentarians are women. In Zambia, most politicians still think that they are better than ordinary citizens, mainly because politics is largely governed by money. This leads to a disconnection between citizens and politicians. That is why Zambian citizens need to be made more aware of how politics works. Despite this, the general trend is a positive one: voter turnout in 2016 was much higher than in 2015. Nevertheless, Beauty Katebe also stressed that many obstacles to democracy in her country remain: high poverty rate, no laws that hold elected politicians accountable, and no effective control of government bodies.

**Session III - Education on Democracy and Democracy Literacy**

**Andreas Gross**, Honorary Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE), moderated this panel focused on the link between education and democracy, which will be the subject of the CoE’s World Forum for Democracy in November 2016. Civic and political education has a particular role to play as means to bridge social divide and promote sustainable democratic participation.

**Claudia Luciani,** Director for Democratic Governance at the CoE, highlighted the importance of quality education for more informed political choices and better participation in democratic political processes. Indeed, the lack of education makes people more susceptible to populist and demagogical messages, i.e. to more extreme political affiliations.

Furthermore, schools, local authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) are major civic education actors, as they have the task of ensuring critical thinking among people. Claudia Luciani concluded by saying that education is an enabler for democracy and vice versa - democracy enables quality education.

**Siamak Ahmadi,** founder of the “*Dialog macht Schule*” project, presented this innovative learning tool aimed at working with refugee children in Germany. The teaching approach used by the project opposes traditional learning, and targets continuous exchange between students and teachers. The method starts with casual every-day topics and seeks joint solutions to ambiguous daily-life situations. Through this process, students build up trust and gradually start building up an integrated concept of identity, gender equality, multiculturalism, democracy, and political participation. The “*Dialog macht Schule*” project’s positive results open up possibilities for broadening its outreach and its target groups.

It is important for schools to introduce more civic and political education trainings that would create more social competences, rather than technical skills. Likewise, the creation of similar civic education programmes would facilitate integration processes, since European societies are more and more becoming “migration societies”.

**Emine Bozkurt,** Member of the Board of Advisors of International IDEA and former MEP, started by saying that education is not the answer to all democratic participation problems. However, it constitutes a significant factor in helping critical thinking.

Emine Bozkurt referred to recent developments in the Netherlands linked to young Dutch citizens of Turkish origin identifying themselves with authoritarian values rather than democratic ones. These developments can be described as a reaction to a feeling of social and political exclusion of certain parts of society. The lack of civic education, mixed with certain political rhetoric and media manipulation, can create the perception of a distorted reality, and thus negative feelings within the society. Emine Bozkurt appealed for investing in “democratic self-resilience” and creating leadership that re-connects the generation gap.

**Session IV – DEVELOPING EU EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY SUPPORT**

**Todd Landman**, Professor at the University of Nottingham, inaugurated the panel by introducing the factors that have contributed to the internationalisation of democracy: the “contagion effect” from one country to another; the diffusion of democratic core values through technology; the “coercion effect”; and the support provided by stabilised democracies to originating ones. The EU’s role as “Civil Power” vis-à-vis third countries can be framed within this latter point.

**Linda McAvan**, Co-Chair of the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG), highlighted that the EP, being the sole directly elected body in the EU institutional framework, has a key role to play in the EU democracy support. The EP does so by encouraging comprehensive long-term partnerships vis-à-vis its six priority countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Tunisia, Morocco, Tanzania, Myanmar), where it enforces dialogue with national parliaments.

Besides, the EU democracy support comes together with several financial instruments and is strongly connected to the Agenda 2030 SDGs. From this solid starting point, a new strategy to implement the SDGs is being negotiated, alongside with a new Consensus on development; also, a follow-up to the Cotonou Agreement with ACP countries will be achieved in the coming years.

**Christian Leffler**, Deputy Secretary General for economic and global issues of the EEAS, asserted that there is no standard formula for democracy, since this never-ending form of governance needs to be owned locally. As a consequence, when it comes to democracy support, the EU should avoid imposing its model. The EU Action Plan for Democracy and Human Rights does not only consist in high-profile Election Observation Missions (EOMs) but considers also the post-election moment, i.e. the accountability of local institutions, the encouragement of partisan pluralism, the encouragement of political participation.

Therefore, the EU should prioritise an integrated approach, which already proved effective in Myanmar – with the STEP Democracy programme implemented by International IDEA – and Tunisia – with the support provided to the constitution-drafting process. Budgetary support is particularly important, since it empowers local authorities and contributes to make them more accountable. Another key-element is long-term work with parliamentary representatives, since it fosters democratic principles of political representation and national balance of powers – as in the Moroccan, Ukrainian, and Bosnian examples.

**U Hla Thein**, Chair of the Union Election Commission (UEC) of Myanmar, set several goals for the holding of the 2015 general elections, which were the first in over 50 years: to hold the elections peacefully, and to ensure for the elections to be free and fair. Electoral observers concluded that these objectives had been reached: thanks to the transparency measures implemented by the UEC with external donor support - in particular the EU since 2013 – Myanmar was able to build on lessons learned in similar transition contexts, and benefited from high-level expertise. For example, the EU-funded STEP Democracy Programme provided multi-phase support to the electoral process in Myanmar through direct assistance to the UEC but also to CSOs, observers groups and political parties.

In the coming 2020 general elections, Myanmar is expected to do even better. In order to do so, Myanmar can rely on the recommendations given by the EU EOM report, e.g. further capacity building and modernisation of Myanmar’s electoral system, and parliamentary reform of the elections’ legal framework.

**Imed Abdeljaoued**, Director of the*Programme d’Appui à la Société Civile* - PASC-Tunisie, stated that Tunisia has laid the foundations of a democratic regime since 2011. However, democracy in Tunisia is still facing major challenges. The representative democracy in Tunis and the developing local participatory democracy are getting more estranged from each other. There is a gap between conservative central public authorities and progressive local authorities. The divide between Tunis-based CSOs - holding the monopoly of initiating actions - and regional CSOs - feeling marginalised and excluded - is persistent.

In this context, the EU-funded PASC-Tunisie has managed to create a climate of trust between local authorities and civil society in the regions. While doing so, PASC-Tunisie has become an established partner for the Tunisian government due to its reliable expertise in the regions. Based on the experience from PASC and having worked with the EU for a number of years, Imed Abdeljaoued argued that EU assistance in Tunisia would benefit from a more transversal approach rather than the sectorial one that is practiced at present.

The day’s discussions were concluded by **Zlatko Lagumdzija**, Club de Madrid Member and Former Prime Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with this observation: it is easier to get rid of totalitarian systems than to build up a well-functioning democracy. It is particularly true in the current environment where democracies are under the pressure of violent extremism. Nevertheless, initiatives are underway to help build a new generation democracy that will enable a new progressive partnership between people, production, and the planet.