



CONFERENCE REPORT

Promoting EU leadership for democracy: Celebration of the International Day of Democracy 2018

On 18 September 2018, the European Parliament hosted a conference in celebration of the International Day of Democracy entitled, "Leadership for Democracy". The event was co-organised by 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, with the support of the European External Action Service and the European Commission. Approximately 200 people participated in the conference.

During the conference, politicians, EU officials, academics, journalists, grassroots activists and practitioners debated the role of the EU as a leader for democracy worldwide and the possibilities for advancing democracy through inclusion. The panel discussions were followed by four workshops aiming to further examine technology and democracy, leadership for engagement, female leadership, and the state and future of democracy. The International Day of Democracy conference offered an opportunity to discuss how leadership can improve democracy, and to promote cooperation among democracy support actors.

Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, reaffirmed in a pre-recorded video message that the EU will continue to support democratic voices in its neighbourhood and across the world. She declared that "our democracies are not perfect, and in recent years our societies have become less equal. The only way to make our societies more equal and more just is to invest in stronger democracies."

Pietro Ducci, Acting Director General for External Policies and Director for Democracy Support at the European Parliament, opened the conference and welcomed participants. He outlined the work being done by the European Parliament within the fields of election observation, democracy support, mediation and human rights actions within the framework of the Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach (CDSA).

Stavros Lambrinidis, European Union Special Representative for Human Rights, delivered the keynote speech. He underlined that transparent, inclusive and competitive elections are a fundamental element of democracy. He highlighted EU election observation missions as a unique inter-institutional instrument and stressed the importance of including all citizens in the process, especially underrepresented groups such as youth and women. He stressed that a true democracy does not end at the ballot box but begins there. For a vibrant democratic society to flourish there must be a constant flow of communication and dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives, as well as an active civil society, free media, and an independent judiciary. There needs to be a system of checks and balances, with citizens able to hold those in power to account at any time. In a democracy, minorities are protected, and the protection of the most vulnerable makes democracy even stronger. He named the fight against corruption as another important

Organised by Democracy and Elections Actions Unit, DG EXPO





2

CONFERENCE REPORT

means of building democracy and strong institutions. “Illiberal democracy does not exist - if a government silences civil society or limits the independence of courts, it is not a democracy anymore”, he said. Nowadays the world is witnessing some negative consequences of new technologies, when they aroused to divide our societies by spreading hate speech. Lambrinidis announced that, at the UN General Assembly 2018 in New York, the EU together with 40 countries will launch the “good human rights stories” initiative, which aims at sharing experience on how security, social stability and economic development can be promoted via support to human rights. He concluded by confirming that the EU stays truly committed to building societal resilience through protecting all human rights, supporting democratic institutions and ensuring access to justice.

Session I: EU leadership for democracy – internal and external dimensions

The first plenary session examined how the EU could become a world leader in democracy, taking into account the democratic deficits within its own borders. The session was moderated by **Andrea Bonanni, Correspondent of La Repubblica** who opened the session by noting the threat from those “who were democratically elected but were not democratic”.

Edward McMillan Scott, former Vice-President of the European Parliament, underlined that the EU stands for the best human values – including democracy - and that the EU is right that it supports other democracies and countries striving for those same values. He reminded participants of the importance of EU funds such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, which started with a budget of 5 million in the 1990s, and is now the largest democracy support mechanism of its kind worldwide. But the EU is faced with many challenges to democracy in an increasingly complex world. McMillan Scott deplored today’s ‘disease’ of nationalism and populism, which also existed within the EU: the vilification of the “other” were fascist tactics with a modern twist. “The EU needs to become a global player and not only to be a global payer”, he concluded.

Veronika Móra, Director of Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation, described the ongoing conflict between civil society organisations and the Hungarian government: there is no direct oppression, but the government uses more subtle ways of obstructing their work, such as the Media Law of 2012. Móra welcomed the recommendation of the European Parliament to trigger Article 7 as an important signal, but stressed that it was ultimately the Hungarian population that needed to act. The EU for its part could help by clarifying a) the minimum democratic standards in an EU Member state and b) what constitutes free media, and of course by further investing in democracy champions in Hungary and the wider region.

Salam Kawakibi, Director of Arab Center for research and policy studies, regretted that the dominant discourse in relation to the Arab world nowadays is one of economy, security and migration, no longer taking into consideration the war in Syria and the lack of democratic reforms in countries such as Morocco. However, the reality in the southern neighbourhood is that support for genuine local human rights organisations has been cut down while foreign NGOs, some of which have dubious sources, are still funded by the European Union.

CONFERENCE REPORT



Session II: Advancing democracy through inclusion

The second plenary session examined challenges to effective representation of citizens both within Europe and externally. The session was moderated by **Shada Islam, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe**, who introduced the topic and invited the panelists to present practical examples of advancing democracy through inclusion and participation: “Democracy is under threat”, said Ms. Islam. “We face many challenges, one of them being that young people do not feel represented. So how can democracy be more inclusive? The hope comes from all of us, united in the values of democracy and the rule of law.”

Former Belgian Member of the European Parliament, Veronique de Keyser, referred to the importance of including civil society in order to develop truly representative policies and in order to reflect all voices. She emphasized that citizens’ engagement is fundamental for democracy. Promoting this at the European level implies investing in young people to build knowledge of European history and institutional frameworks.

Mehdi Yehya, Founder of Peace of Art NGO from Lebanon, presented the work and impact of the organisation’s peacebuilding project. “There is a state of fear in Lebanon. Citizens feel marginalised by the government, which foments division,” explained Yehya. He described the [impact of the project](#), which has been very positive, bringing together young people from different backgrounds and breaking down barriers through arts and music. “We see virtual borders between small villages and children growing up with fear towards each other. We are working to combat this. EED support has meant so much to us, contributing to building a generation that accepts the ‘other’ and believes in dialogue to resolve conflict.”

Finally, **Apolmida Haruna Tsammani, Founder of Haly Hope Foundation and disability and human rights advocate**, talked of her difficulties in taking part in society as a person with disabilities in Nigeria, and in particular as a woman. The main challenge, according to Tsammani, is the perception of people with disabilities. “It is very difficult to take part in society. We are not taken seriously. But I went out to fight for what I believe in - in fact, I am fighting against a society that does not believe in me.” “Promoting political participation is a crucial step in our empowerment process,” she concluded.

Workshop 1: Technology and the changing public sphere

Whilst social media was seen as a liberation technology in its early years, today the discussion about social media’s effects on democracy are tainted by disinformation, hate speech, online violence against female politicians and threats to electoral integrity. Sean Evins, Government and Politics Outreach Manager at Facebook, discussed these challenges and possible solutions with Matt Stempeck, former Director of Civic Technology at Microsoft and Digital Mobilization Team Leader at the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign 2016.

First, Evins highlighted five ‘buckets’ of unique challenges to electoral integrity that Facebook is dealing with: foreign interference in elections, taking down fake accounts, transparency in advertisement, reducing false news and supporting an informed electorate. They do this proactively through machine learning and identifying bad actors’ patterns, and reactively by letting people flag fake pages.

In reaction to Evins’ highlighting of some Facebook’s efforts since 2016 to address these challenges, Stempeck criticized Facebook’s late response to the coordinated attack against elections since 2016. He listed five possible



4

CONFERENCE REPORT

measures to diminish the negative effects of social media on democracy: taking a value-based stance, hiring local staff, recognising disingenuous attempts to say stories are two sided, breaking up the monopoly of social media giants and stopping the practice of embedding Facebook staff with political campaigns. Stempeck argued that there is a culture of providing technological solutions to social problems at Facebook, as if these are engineering problems as opposed to human problems.

The debate then moved to the desirability of private companies like Facebook conducting election monitoring. Evins affirmed that Facebook is engaging with civil society as well as electoral authorities in this effort. To break filter bubbles, Facebook changed its algorithm to reduce the power of clickbait and make online conversation more equitable. Likewise Facebook has invested in civic education efforts to teach people how to spot false news. The discussion showed that the 2016 US elections have moved social media's role in elections high up on the agenda, but more discussion is needed on the role of social media in democracy more generally.

Workshop 2: Political leadership for engagement

The second workshop, moderated by **Véronique Arnault, former Director of Human Rights and Democracy at EEAS and Ambassador at DUO for a Job**, aimed at identifying ideas and tools to improve the political engagement of citizens, especially young people, and the engagement of politicians with citizens in order to restore trust in politics and in democracy.

Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet Professor of EU law, HEC Paris and Director of The Good Lobby, spoke about ways to increase citizens' participation in, and impact on, decision-making. When public interest in politics is growing, and especially online, participation in conventional politics has decreased. Alemanno proposed citizen lobbying as a way to fix democracy and get people's voices heard: "The time has come to rethink the relation between the electorate and the elected", he said. "This can be done by any citizen. People need to change from spectators to actors." He presented the highlights and conclusions of his book "Lobbying for change", in which he provides coaching techniques and tools for political lobbying by citizens, as an avenue for participation and representation. To democratize lobbying, authorities should invest in resources to support citizens, e.g. via an EU Lobbying Aid Fund to finance policy research to inform European Citizens' Initiatives (ECI). The ECI can be made more user-friendly and efficient; e.g. by creating a mandatory public hearing in ECI petitions.

Remarks and questions from the audience related to new forms of democracy by random selection of citizens for parliamentary activity, and the priorities for leadership to connect with citizens.

Workshop 3: Advancing democracy through female leadership

Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment at the highest levels of EU decision-making and in business is crucial to end gender inequality. **Virginia García Beaudoux, Professor of Political Communication and Public Opinion at Buenos Aires University**, presented the findings of her study *Dancing Backwards in High Heels*, which offers a unique glimpse into what it can mean to be an ambitious woman in an environment still dominated by males. It shows that, even in countries that have made great progress towards gender equality, there is still a long way to go. One of the main reasons for this is that gender stereotypes persist in society: we all believe that leadership is largely male. Statistics show that while women make up 52% of political party members there are less than 15% female party leaders. Media and social media reinforce this

CONFERENCE REPORT



stereotype: a deodorant for women is called “sensitive&pure” while the same deodorant for men is called “power”. Another good example is the biased media coverage of female politicians: the suitability of Hillary Clinton as president was called into question simply because she became a grandmother.

Moderator Corinna Hörst, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, GMF Brussels Office and co-author of the book *Women leading the way in Brussels*, together with speaker and audience explored what can be done to promote greater female leadership and came up with an action plan:

1. Create favourable conditions through recruitment and training;
2. Work on political parties, via programmes and training for female and male party members;
3. Create more awareness in media and train journalists;
4. Build up alliances and inter-party platforms;
5. Build up mentorship programs;
6. Change parliamentary practices to balanced committees and favorable working conditions
7. Pass favourable public policies;
8. Invest in gender-friendly education;
9. Involve men as gender allies.

García Beaudoux concluded the session by advising female candidates to claim an office, instead of waiting for others to offer it and to support other women.

Workshop 4: State and Future of Democracy

Referring to Fukuyama’s optimistic theory of the universalization of the Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government, **Anna Lührmann, Deputy Head of V-Dem Institute in Gothenburg** argued that a worldwide decline of democratic values has been observed for the first time since the end of WWII. Elections became less meaningful, the gap between policy makers and the civil society widened and the lack of respect shown in public debates made it difficult to reconnect society. Moreover, the unequal distribution of power further deepened, false information has multiplied and populism has dramatically changed the public climate. The prevailing “third wave of autocratization” affects one third of the world’s population and therefore represents the key challenge of the 21st century.

One of the major challenges will be to regain the citizens’ trust in politics and to provide new avenues for meaningful political participation. To reach this objective, political engagement has to be supported and marginalized or alienated groups such as immigrants, women and young persons have to be included in society and be further empowered to express themselves politically. Young women in particular face social barriers which place barriers to their path to political participation or leadership. The empowerment of those less-favoured, the inclusion of minorities and the education of all citizens is crucial in order to ensure political participation. This process, however, demands structural changes on a policy level, as well as a transforming mentality of society and its social norms. With respect to the distribution of power, the workshop moderator, **Sarantis Michalopoulos from Euractiv**, outlined that the reasons why certain people dispose of more power



6

CONFERENCE REPORT

than others have changed and within the last 45 years the wealthy elite has gained more access to power in countries that are home to 25% of the world population. Furthermore, violations within the sphere of freedom of expression and alternative sources of information have played a greater role in destabilizing democracies during the last 10 years.

The challenges the EU faces are broad, both within and outside its border. Bridges have to be rebuilt in order to reconnect society, the trust-worthiness of the media has to be improved, checks and balances have to be maintained and more innovative forms of democratic participation have to be developed. Despite those major obstacles, the majority of countries are still democracies and democratic values still advance in some regions such as in Africa.

During the final Session, youth rapporteurs of the workshops presented an overview of conclusions, providing at the same time youth perspectives on leadership for democracy.