



## World Forum for Democracy

### Is Populism a problem?

8-10 November 2017, Strasbourg

CONCEPT PAPER

01/03/2017

Representative democracy became the dominant democracy model during the industrial age. After WW2 party pluralism was enshrined in democratic constitutions as the vehicle for political pluralism and a barrier against authoritarian regimes in Europe. Political parties represented mostly class interests, built political capital within their membership base, and communicated via like-minded media. Public service broadcasters were entrusted with ensuring multiple perspectives in political information and debate and the overall independence and diversity of media were seen as a guarantee of a free and pluralist debate. However, something is happening with political parties and with the media.

A growing disconnect between citizens and political elites and dramatic changes in the media ecosystem are a challenge for democracy as we know it. At the same time, new political and media actors and practices are emerging, offering new opportunities for members of the public to participate in political life. Legacy media and political parties are both threatened by these new developments but can also learn from them in order to adapt their own models and functioning to new realities.

The objective of the World Forum for Democracy 2017 is to review novel initiatives and approaches which can enhance democratic practices and help parties and media, but also other political actors, to re-connect to citizens, make informed choices and function optimally in 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy.

#### a) From democracy of parties to democracy of citizens?

Traditional political parties are losing their popular base, legitimacy and membership. The boundary between “left” and “right” in the political spectrum is being blurred. Populist parties/leaders emerge to occupy the vacuum, exploiting the fear of globalisation and the increased insecurity perceived by many people. Traditional parties are criticised for their lack of long-term vision and responsibility, the inability to engage younger generations, as well as the failure of offering convincing alternatives beyond mainstream paradigms. Opinion polls also show that political institutions are largely perceived as lacking integrity. However, they remain a key player in representative democracy, bringing structure and continuity to political debate. Many are trying to reinvent themselves, reconnect with citizens and regain their trust.

New social movements also emerge, but most do not develop a comprehensive political vision and die quickly. Some call for more direct, liquid democracy – they have a loose structure, have not yet proven themselves in governing positions, and are vulnerable to voter disaffection as they have not established a solid, loyal base. Others become hybrids between movements and parties. But are these movements opening new democratic opportunities for those who feel excluded from politics? How can we make sure that they have a transformative effect on political parties and do not destroy democratic pluralism? How can democratic elites be diversified – do we need them or can we do without elites altogether? Are there public spaces in which genuine citizen deliberation beyond party politics is possible?

#### b) Media - friend or foe of democracy?

In modern societies, the functioning of democratic politics is linked to the role of the media in the creation and dissemination of information and ideas. Citizens depend upon, and hence trust, media to inform and educate them about a broad range of issues. A plurality of views is critical for the health of a democracy, free media should provide quality information and promote vigorous debate on issues of common concern.

Media concentration and restrictions of media freedom are a concern in Europe and worldwide. Moreover, austerity measures weaken public service broadcasters and therefore limit the scope of independent reporting.

The internet further challenges legacy media’s business models and compels them to resort to populist content to attract users & advertising revenue. In the world of social media high-speed, media outlets provide citizens with fewer in-depth reports and analyses. Online media and social media escape regulation, conventional media ethics, and through direct access to users create a totally new game. Social media are about speaking up, not about speaking with. Anonymity online encourages political extremism and hate speech. As a result, democracy is struggling to create a real debate, a long-term vision, and stability. At the same time, online and social media increasingly benefit from user-generated content, increasing the opportunity for citizens’ democratic expression. Can democracy and media be reconciled in the 21st century?

What media formats and spaces can ensure quality information and debate in the democratic arena?

### Key questions

In this period of transition from representative to post-representative democracy, the World Forum for Democracy will explore ideas and initiatives which address questions such as:

- Given the complexity of political agendas and the vacuum of convincing answers, how to express protest or accede to power without populism?
- How to nourish political culture which embraces a long-term perspective and resists populism? Are there social structures that can replace political parties in building social capital and providing frameworks for grassroots political debate participation and decision making? Is there a danger of such social structures (e.g. faith groups) becoming more politicised?
- Should stronger intra-party democracy be encouraged or would internal leadership debate only lead to more personification of politics and weaker parties?
- How to make sure that online media and communities foster pluralism and deliberation rather than extremism and polarisation?
- Can we support the emerging online media with user-based rather than advertisement-based business models which have a strong ethos of pluralism and user participation?
- Should there be changes in the voting systems (issue-based voting in addition to or instead of party-based voting, limitations of mandates, non-partisan legislatures, popular recall etc.)?
- Should we support further decentralisation of governance in order to bring power closer to the people and counter populism?