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The challenges to representative democracy in volatile times

Background document

“We consider democracy as the only means to ensure that everyone can live in a peaceful, prosperous and free society. We will meet our obligations under international law. We will prevent and resist democratic backsliding on our continent, including in situations of emergency, crisis and armed conflicts, and we will stand firm against authoritarian tendencies by enhancing our shared commitments as member States of the Council of Europe”.

**Reykjavik Principles for Democracy,
4th Summit of Council of Europe Heads of State and Government**

Introduction

The concept of representative democracy is the cornerstone of modern governance. It provides a framework for citizen participation, political decision-making and accountability. In the face of increasing volatility and rapid societal transformation, however, representative democracy is encountering complex, multifaceted and interacting challenges.

What can be done to protect the tenets of representative democracy in the face of challenges while ensuring that it keeps up with the change?

Technology and societal change

One of the primary challenges arises from the evolving dynamics of public opinion and citizens' expectations. The development of modern communication technologies has changed beyond recognition the diffusion of information. While digital platforms have empowered individuals to express their views more easily, they have led to a fragmentation of public discourse.

At the same time, the rise of social media platforms has amplified the spread of misinformation and contributed to the polarisation of societies. A growing individualisation of preferences and the long-term trend of the unmooring of ideological anchors among populations is reflected in the general decrease in voter turnout and declining political party membership. Disillusionment and a disconnect between citizens and their representative institutions have compounded these trends further.

Political parties are trying to adapt, looking for new ways to engage with citizens. And yet, online political microtargeting, political advertising and crowdfunding give rise to a number of questions as regards data-protection, transparency and the way to do politics in the digital age.

In response to the evolution of digital technologies and their pervasiveness in our societies, democracies need to be equipped to minimise risks and harness opportunities. Ensuring free and fair elections, guaranteeing meaningful political discourse, and regulating political campaigning are key priorities with a view to protecting the foundations of representative democracy.

Foreign interference

The inherent challenges faced by our societies are exacerbated by external factors. Foreign interference is the deliberate and covert activity undertaken by a foreign State to influence national democratic and political processes. While foreign interference can take different forms, it often targets the population at large and relies on social media to spread disinformation, foment divisions and accentuate tensions present in societies.

In recent times, numerous examples of foreign interference in the context of electoral campaigns have been documented, with obvious risks as regards the integrity of the electoral process and the legitimacy of the subsequent results.

Developing societal resilience and promoting greater awareness and digital education among populations are part of the toolbox for combatting this threat. At the same time, any legislation introduced to counter foreign interference must be consistent with fundamental values, and upholds the protection of human rights.

Elections, trust and security

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of representative democracy. Addressing falling electoral turn-out, ensuring that the electorate can freely form their opinion without manipulation, protecting the integrity of the electoral process, and guaranteeing full compliance with international standards and best practice are crucial preconditions for the legitimacy of elected bodies.

Ensuring the legitimacy and trustworthiness of public institutions is essential for citizens' trust in the political system. For this reason, it is all the more crucial to enhance and protect the democratic character of elections and thus reinforce the link between the expression of the people and the actual outcome of the vote.

Citizens' trust, however, does not depend only on how parliaments and officials are elected but also on how they work and behave. Representative institutions should be exemplary in embodying democratic cultures and values. They should respect each other's role, remit and prerogatives while adhering to the highest ethical standards.

In a growing phenomenon which raises deep concern, members of parliament have been increasingly targeted by hate speech, threats to their safety and outright violence. Some of them have been murdered. Hate speech against women in politics is particularly rife. As mentioned in the Conclusions of the 2021 Conference of Presidents of Parliament, which took place a few days after the murder of Sir David Amess, member of parliament of the United Kingdom, parliamentarians should be kept safe and continue to exercise their duties, serve the citizens and engage with their constituents without giving in to fear: "We cannot let attacks stand in the way of democracy".

Innovative ways for citizens' engagement

While free and fair elections are the constituent element by which citizens engage in representative democracy, in recent years innovative approaches to political participation have been explored.

By embracing technology using digital tools and platforms, for instance, public institutions can enhance transparency, foster dialogue, and bridge the gap between citizens and elected representatives.

Creating channels for online participation can also lead to greater active engagement by the youth, which is important to enable representative institutions to design policies which mainstream the youth perspective and take into account long-term sustainability.

In addition, engaging citizens in decision-making processes through deliberative and participative forms of democracy can complement representative democracy and enhance the quality and ownership of public-decision making.

Civil society can play an essential role not only in public deliberation and policy design but also in contributing to the accountability of representative institutions. A vibrant and strong representative democracy, therefore, requires a safe and enabling environment in which civil society can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence.

Economic uncertainty

Economic uncertainties have resulted in rising income inequality, job insecurity, and uneven distribution of resources. These socioeconomic disparities can widen the divide between elected representatives and the people they serve, exacerbating regional disparities within the continent.

When a significant portion of the population feels left behind, marginalised, or economically disadvantaged, it can lead to social unrest and a loss of faith in the ability of representative democracy to address its concerns effectively.

Accountability and responsiveness to these economic uncertainties are ever more complex as a result of globalisation. They have been further strained by the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the wide-ranging economic consequences of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies

Democracy has been backsliding worldwide and Europe is not immune to this phenomenon. In recent years, the erosion of democratic safeguards - a weakening of checks and balances, of the role of the opposition and of the respect of the rule of law, coupled with undue limitations to the exercise of civil and political rights and freedoms - has progressed in parallel with citizens' decreasing trust in democratic institutions.

Populist, nationalistic, ethno-centric and authoritarian tendencies have developed on the fertile ground created by societal anxieties and are reflected in electoral results in a number of Council of Europe member States.

At the Reykjavik Summit, Heads of State and Government have taken a strong stance against democratic backsliding, including in situations of emergency, crisis and armed conflicts, and vowed to stand firm against authoritarian tendencies by enhancing their shared commitments as members of the Council of Europe.

Questions for discussion

- What are the challenges and opportunities associated with the rise of social media platforms?
- Against a background of social and technological change, what can national parliaments do to better respond to citizens' expectations?
- In the face of growing socioeconomic disparities and economic uncertainties how can democracies remain representative and inclusive?
- What can parliaments do to enhance citizens' trust?
- What is the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic on the functioning of representative institutions?
- How can parliaments effectively respond to democratic backsliding tendencies and protect democratic values?
- How do national parliaments safeguard their own practices against foreign or malign interference?
- What can be done to tackle the phenomenon of hate speech and hate crime against elected representatives? How can their safety be ensured?
- What roles can parliaments play in fostering citizen engagement and political participation? How can these efforts facilitate greater youth engagement?
- What specific mechanisms, quotas, or other measures could parliaments introduce or have introduced to ensure youth representation?

Appendix: Key reference documents

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

[Resolution 2444 \(2022\)](#), Recent challenges to security in Europe: what role for the Council of Europe?

[Resolution 2437 \(2022\)](#), Safeguarding and promoting genuine democracy in Europe.

[Resolution 2341 \(2020\)](#), Need for democratic governance of artificial intelligence.

[Resolution 2326 \(2020\)](#), Democracy hacked? How to respond?

Council of Europe

4th Council of Europe Summit, [United around our values – Reykjavík Declaration](#), 2023.

Secretary General of the Council of Europe, [Report on the state of democracy, human rights and the rule of law](#), “An Invitation to Recommit to the Values and Standards of the Council of Europe”, 2023.

Secretary General of the Council of Europe, [Annual Report](#), “Moving Forward”, 2022.