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Speech of Markku Mollari, Chair ad interim of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance

Introduction

I welcome the Georgian Presidency's initiative to hold this international forum, and its perseverance in the face of the current health crisis. Indeed, civil participation plays an important role in strengthening Europe's representative democracies at a time when both governments and civil society may need to re-evaluate their approaches to good governance. These times are challenging, but we can also find in them possibility for cultivating new viewpoints on democracy, to enrich traditional cultures.

Civil participation is crucial because it ensures that individuals and NGOs can engage in the decision-making processes of public authorities, and therefore, make the voices of all segments of society heard. There is a huge potential to make things better and more efficient by widening participation.

In the words of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, it is the "lifeblood of any democratic system." (CM/Rec(2018)4) This analogy makes sense, as civil participation holds democracy's own fundamental values and assurances alive even in between its most visible and representative action: elections.

European Committee on Democracy and Governance

As a part of the panel on the international approaches to this topic, I am happy to provide a perspective from the Council of Europe, and specifically, the European Committee on Democracy and Governance.

This Committee is the Council of Europe's intergovernmental forum on democratic governance in Europe. It works to strengthen democratic institutions, public administration reform, decentralisation, good governance, citizens' participation and public ethics, at all levels of government. Made up of high-level civil servants representing the governments of member States, the Committee on Democracy and Governance conducts preparatory work for, and advises, the Committee of Ministers in the above areas of competence.

One of the themes we most closely follow is exactly that of civil participation in decision-making.

Past work of the Committee on civil participation

Since the founding of the Council of Europe in 1949, its member States have been devoted to the principles which form the basis of democracy. In recent decades, as societies transformed and technology advanced, it became increasingly important to outline specific standards and principles related to civil participation – a practical demonstration of how democracy is applied on the ground across Europe.

To this end, following a study of best practices for meaningful civil participation in Council of Europe member States, in 2017 the Committee on Democracy and Governance prepared a set of guidelines for civil participation in political decision-making, which outlined conditions and key principles for establishing dialogue, consultation and co-operation between civil society and authorities at all levels of government.

As the awareness of civil participation as a cornerstone of democracy grew, so did the realization that the ways in which citizens were engaging, as well as public expectations related to participation, were constantly evolving. This trend has continued and will continue.

In 2018, European governments took note of a simple, yet important, reality. Despite efforts over many decades, there continued to be a need for local public institutions to re-engage with and respond to citizens in new ways in order to maintain the legitimacy of decision-making processes. This was particularly true given the rise of populism and the decline in citizens' trust in their elected institutions.

Therefore, the Committee on Democracy and Governance developed a new set of recommendations to serve as a helpful guide for local and national authorities committed to improving the opportunities for participation of citizens in the life of their local community. These were endorsed by the Committee of Ministers in 2018.

Current work of the Committee on civil participation

One cannot discuss civil participation in the present day – no less during our current health emergency – without referring to another theme closely followed by the European community: e-democracy.

Digital tools and technologies can, and should, support democratic processes by providing increased access to political decision-making and enabling citizens to participate in the public debate in new ways.

The good cooperation between new tools and traditional tools of participation is the key to building better trust in administration and between different levels of government and the wider civil society.

Reflecting the centrality of this topic for the present and future of democratic practice, the Committee on Democracy and Governance is currently finalizing specific guidelines on e-democracy and a companion toolkit. The documents include specific case studies, policies and mechanisms related to e-participation, e-petitions and e-referendums.

Centre of Expertise for Good Governance

The Committee on Democracy and Governance's work on standards and guidelines is important in itself, leading to common aspirations and blueprints for member States.

However, the development of practical tools is also needed to help local authorities in every part of Europe to strengthen civil participation. To this end, the Centre of Expertise for Good Governance of the Council of Europe developed specific tools on civil participation which have been used, and are currently being used, by authorities in numerous countries in the context of cooperation activities:

- CLEAR: a self-assessment instrument on civil participation to develop effective policy responses;
- Civil participation in decision-making: an integrated framework that guides local authorities in the design and implementation of context-based strategies to increase a community's civil participation.

Cooperation activities in this field are rooted in the 12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance, endorsed by Council of Europe member States. The first, "Fair conduct of elections, representation and participation" stipulates, inter alia, that "citizens are at the centre of public activity and they are involved in clearly defined ways in public life at local level."

Conclusion and current context

In conclusion, let us apply these notions in the current context. How can member States strengthen civil participation during restrictive and isolated times such as today's health emergency?

It is clear that focusing on participation in decision-making processes is not enough. Are there good possibilities to participate and build trust also after decisions have been made? How should we define participatory implementation with wider groups of participants, in order to build better trust?

A particular passage from the 2018 Committee of Ministers recommendations rings as pertinent as ever: "member States should provide for a wide range of participation instruments, and the possibility of combining them and adapting the way they are used, depending on the circumstances" (Appendix to Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)4).

What role can each of us play in ensuring the continuity of active civil participation in such extraordinary times?

The Committee on Democracy and Governance will continue to examine trends and provide any necessary advice on this important topic to the Committee of Ministers, with the goal of ensuring that civil participation remains a bedrock of democratic practice throughout Europe.