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Summary of the joint hearing on “Strengthening mechanisms for early warning on challenges to democratic security” with the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) and the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, held in Strasbourg on 25 June 2024

With **Ms Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica** and **Mr George Papandreou** in the chair, and with the participation of:

- Ambassador Svetlana Geleva, Permanent Representative of North Macedonia, Chairperson of the Rapporteur Group on Democracy of the Committee of Ministers (GR-DEM)
- Dr Seema Shah, Head of Democracy Analysis team, International IDEA (online)

The Chair welcomed the participants.

Ambassador Svetlana Geleva stressed the importance to maintain regular dialogue between the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers on issues at the heart of the Council of Europe work. Mr Papandreou took part in an exchange with the Council of Ministers on the pitfalls threatening the democracies today. Democracy is based on rules, such as the Reykjavik Principles, but these rules need to adapt constantly. Participative and deliberative forms of democracy should be given consideration.

The Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine showed how the lack of proper and timely reaction to signs of democratic backsliding could endanger all achievements of the Council of Europe. Extreme polarisation of the political environment, threats and pressures on the judiciary, infringements on the separation of powers and attacks on independent media should raise alarm.

To identify ways to strengthen democratic resilience, GR-DEM has prepared the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy. PACE was decisive in the drafting process. The Committee of ministers has established a Steering Committee on Democracy (CDDEM) to propose ways to translate the Reykjavik principles into concrete actions and support member states in their implementation. The CDDEM also works on the ways to enhance meaningful participation in democratic life of all members of society, including the youth, women and vulnerable groups. The CDDEM supports the work on the youth perspective in the Council of Europe. In carrying out its tasks, it would be keen to receive additional contributions from the Assembly.

The Assembly role would continue to be of crucial significance to identify democratic backsliding, as it did in the past by facilitating numerous positive changes in many countries.

Dr Seema Shah presented the “Democracy tracker”, an interactive monthly analysis of developments affecting democracy in 173 countries. The Democracy Tracker provides qualitative data on key events affecting the state of democracy and human rights.

One of the most important value added of the tool is the identification of specific aspects of democracy. Several datasets already measure democracy annually, using a range of quantitative indicators, but they are slow to produce and become outdated relatively quickly.

¹ Document declassified by the Monitoring Committee on 30 September 2024.

The Democracy tracker consists of three main features. The first is the background information, which includes a brief narrative background including the history and cleavages that drive politics today, the annual quantitative data, which helps put the monthly reports in context and basic facts on political institutions and the ratification status of core human rights treaties.

The second – and defining – feature is the monthly event reports about particular events and their potential impact on democracy and human rights in a particular country. They consist of a description of the events, and an indication of what aspects of democracy are affected.

The third feature are the Factors of Democracy Performance which enable to see change over time, since 1975, in various aspects of democracy.

Mr Claude Kern, former Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Conflicts concerning Council of Europe Member States of the Monitoring Committee, shared his assessment of the Sub-committee's activities. It was limited in its actions as it could not do much to solve ongoing conflicts in which the parties did not communicate with one another. As a result, the Committee decided not to reconstitute the Sub-Committee, and instead considered establishing a Sub-Committee which could intervene before a conflict occurred. Its role would be to detect potential areas where conflicts could arise, both inside of a country or, as a consequence of internal conflict, between countries, and work to prevent them.

Mr George Papandreou, General Rapporteur on Democracy of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, stressed the need for synergy between the two Committees: the Monitoring Committee worked at country-specific basis whereas the Political Committee looked at global trends. He called for a better use of existing Assembly reports and resolutions, as well as of other Council of Europe documents including the decisions of the Court, to identify prevailing trends and prevent negative developments. It was also important to reach out to other actors, such as international organisations and NGOs working in similar areas as the Council of Europe, to jointly counter the backsliding of democracy. Finally, he asked whether IDEA International took into account socio-economic parameters when assessing the situation in various countries.

Mr Piero Fassino raised the issue of adopting new tools to manage democracy, and stated that current tools were outdated. Referring to possible early warning tools, he made a distinction between conflicts within a given country and those involving different countries. The former had to be dealt with at the Monitoring Committee, whereas the latter were in the competency of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy. Ad hoc arrangements were needed to address and prevent this second type of conflict in good time.

Ms Laura Castel spoke in favour of establishing, in the Monitoring Committee, a Sub-Committee on early warnings which would be able to quickly deploy tools of parliamentary diplomacy and prevent conflicts. The existing Assembly machinery was far too slow.

Mr George Loucaides stressed the importance of taking into account existing inequalities in a country under scrutiny. The gradual fading of the middle class and the dismantling of social rights were dangerous trends for democracies and contributed to the rise of the extreme right political forces. The Council of Europe should be consistent and carefully condemn the human rights abuses in all cases, without double standards.

Mr Sorin-Titus Muncaciu recalled the importance of national States in protecting democracy and the rule of law based on constitutions, and warned that this order was under attack from the internationally-minded left-wing political forces. He also mentioned the conflict between national legal systems based on constitutions and the supra-national EU legislation.

Dr Seema Shah agreed that inequality and exclusion were important factors of instability. IDEA International measured both social welfare and social group inequality in its studies. The timing of activating the early warning tool was an important issue.

Ambassador Svetlana Geleva recognised the need to regroup all relevant Council of Europe documents in one place with a view to providing quick access to all relevant information and helping member States to address arising problems and return on the right track. The monitoring mechanisms of the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers should work in complementarity.