



## World Forum for Democracy

### Is Populism a problem?

8-10 November 2017

Council of Europe, Strasbourg

## Conclusions

---

The sixth edition of the World Forum for Democracy gathered more than 2000 participants from over 80 countries. Politicians and international leaders provided their views on the question of populism and its impact on traditional party and media structures as well as on multilateralism. Civil society actors, politicians, experts, journalists and youth leaders reviewed in laboratories innovative initiatives to counter populist trends and to safeguard pluralistic and open democracies.

### *Some basic facts*

Populism is now Europe's third political force behind conservatism and social democracy, with 19% of European voters choosing populist parties. Left and right-wing anti-establishment parties are here to stay, pursuing a three-decade long trend which has reduced extremism to a fringe phenomenon. To what extent their authoritarian and illiberal ideas will be adopted by mainstream parties remains an open question<sup>1</sup>.

Across a number of countries polled world-wide, half consider representative democracy a very or somewhat good way to govern their country. Yet, in all countries, pro-democracy attitudes coexist, to varying degrees, with openness to nondemocratic forms of governance, including rule by experts, a strong leader or the military. Countries with more democratic systems and greater wealth show more widespread commitment to representative democracy.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, majorities in nearly all nations also embrace another form of democracy that places less emphasis on elected representatives. A global median of 66% say direct democracy – in which citizens, rather than elected officials, give a binding vote on major issues – would be a good way to govern. This idea is especially popular among Western European populists.

### *Dealing with "disruptions": clear vision, enhanced citizens' role*

Major disruptions, from rapid climate to technological changes - which in turn question the limits of capitalism as a viable and sustainable economic model - were considered genuinely difficult to deal with and required articulate answers from mainstream political parties, failing this, populist parties would continue providing their own answers.

Indeed, anxieties related to globalization, migrations, terrorism, income inequalities lead to people's perceived lack of control on their lives. To such fears, politicians tended to respond through the prism of the "nation state" notion as the only available. This led to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Timbro Authoritarian Populist Index 2017

<sup>2</sup> PEW Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy, October 2017

scapegoating of communities, with rhetoric against migrants, refugees, LGBTI, Roma and other minorities.

In order to deal with the major disruptions of our time political parties needed to devise convincing responses, but also to support the citizens in going through such disruptions by not leaving it only to market forces. Populism thrives in the absence of convincing visions of a future which offers justice and opportunities to everyone.

Voters questioned that established parties and parliaments adequately represent them. Representative democracy was harmed by public officials' and politicians' illegal practices, such as corruption and tax evasion. Therefore, besides a clear vision, a stronger involvement of citizens was called for. A number of alternative participatory democracy practices/initiatives were reviewed at the WFD.

The wide-spread use of technology facilitated democratic participation and a sense of empowerment, as witnessed by the emergence of civic movements experimenting with both direct citizen participation type initiatives and those based on new forms of representation and deliberative processes. However questions as to the exact nature of such initiatives (private vs. public), their sponsorship, transparency and relative inability to deliver on substantial issues were raised. The risk of disappointing citizens further through such initiatives was also assessed.

#### *Social media : from leveler to amplifier*

Technological innovations allowed politicians to engage directly with a broader set of constituents. Availability of broadband across continents was initially seen as a major democratic enabler and leveler of playing fields, a true democratic promise. Internet and social media have indeed enabled unseen levels of information, global communication and mobilisation of social movements.

Today, however, technological inventions such as online platforms and big data were exploited for hate crimes and disinformation. Furthermore, social media could serve as amplifier of authoritarian populism through simplified narrations. The demise of gatekeepers such as legacy media which obey common standards of decency, respect of opponents and fact-based debate was worrying. Unlike legacy media, technology operators were not held accountable for the negative impacts on a pluralistic, fact-based political debate.

Different views were expressed on how to deal with social media in the current landscape. Some believed that they should no longer be seen as platforms but as publishers and therefore be subject to regulations, others that they should stick to the "rules of the road": separation between news and views, take all sides of the story, therefore only using traditional media type answers and refrain from legal measures. Overall, keeping contradictory debate was seen as a superior way at countering populism than creating an "editorial line".

Strong calls were made to safeguard the integrity of journalists and their ability to expose the "lies of politicians". Their struggle for freedom of speech remained crucial.

#### *Multilateralism questioned*

Domestic challenges to mainstream parties were paralleled with the increasing questioning of multilateralism and of the functioning of organisations that have shaped international relations since the end of WWII both at regional and global level. Such trend was seen as worrying notably in conjunction with the emergence of non-democratic world powers seen as possible alternative models to. Whilst it was considered that so far multilateral institutions had served

well in their preventive and conflict-resolution role, calls were made to strengthen a delivery culture and the capacity of the UN to implement its resolutions and notably to ensure that the excellent work realized through the SDGs format would yield concrete results.

## Recommendations

---

### To political parties

- Develop convincing and bold visions –away from single issue platforms- to tackle the current “disruptions” (climate, migratory, technological, etc) coupled with clear step for step roadmaps.
- Make more use of technology for democracy, through broader participation in party debates and decision-making via face to face digital means. E-platforms have to be clear, transparent and accessible to all citizens.
- Ensure that electoral lists more broadly represent the societies in which parties operate.
- Reinforce and apply codes of ethical conduct, through use of sanctioning mechanisms.

### To media and social media<sup>3</sup>

- Continue to support investigative media to expose party funding, corruption, inequalities etc..
- Join international fact-checking partnerships based on: alliance of media outlets of across spectrum of views, transparency and monitoring of impact on readers
- Ensure that business model guarantees independence through, inter alia: crowd-funding, citizen journalism, solution journalism.
- Be more self-critical, responsibility for keeping democracy on line is a shared one.
- Apply more self-regulation and/or better interfacing with ombudsman type institutions to counter hate speech.
- Provide whistleblowers with secure communication channels and legal support.

### To national authorities

- Improve electoral systems to increase participation.
- Encourage citizen participation through citizen assemblies and other mechanisms.

---

<sup>3</sup> See also :“ Information Disorder : toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making”. Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09

- Reinforce the editorial independence and the financial sustainability of public service media broadcasters and strengthen vigilance on respect of the related standards, especially the protection of journalists.
- Dedicate specific public buildings and spaces to citizen participation.
- Enhance integration policies.
- Review systems for large-scale political education building upon the strengths of the model of political foundations. A main focus should be on increasing media literacy.

### To local and regional authorities

- Launch participatory democracy initiatives (participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies etc.).
- Explore alternative voting rules (e.g. evaluative voting, etc.) in local and regional elections, together with impact analysis to assess their effective impact on voter turnout.

### To civil society

- Co-operate with media and justice institutions to counter political corruption.

### To Council of Europe and other international organisations

- Explore evaluation and monitoring standards for the democratic quality of participatory democracy practices.
- Establish and monitor standards for the use of big data for political campaigning. Ensure that standards are enforceable and enforced.
- Effectively address migration and integration challenges, through a better division of competences among the concerned international organisations
  - UN to deal with migration flows
  - CoE to contribute to better integration policies based on HR and RoL standards and acceptance of diversity
- Enhance the governance of multilateral institutions to incorporate more direct input from, and accountability to civil society organisations, academia and other forms of citizens fora on the model of the SDGs.