



Central and Eastern Europe Civil Society Forum

Bucharest, 25 November 2016

Main conclusions and recommendations

The Central and Eastern Europe Civil Society Forum aims to contribute to continuing and renewing a tradition of cooperation and joint action of civil society organizations in Central and Eastern Europe and to bring fresh ideas and energy from the region to the wider Europe, to mobilize civil society in the European Union and in the European Economic Area towards common advocacy objectives.

The previous edition of the Forum took place in November 2014 in Bucharest, Romania. Over 250 participants from 18 countries attended the sessions of the two-day event, including a high number of civil society leaders together with representatives of the EU institutions, the FRA and the Council of Europe. The 2016 edition of the Central and Eastern Europe Civil Society Forum focused on exploring the role of civil society in the new European political landscape dominated by the refugee crisis, the rise of populism, spreading democratic backsliding and erosion of the liberal democracy and support for the European project. The Forum has discussed various challenges, it has explored trends and it has looked at how civil society could take greater responsibility and play a more significant role in the current context. Over 200 participants attended the event (civil society activists, government officials, politicians, scholars and journalists). The guest speakers of the 2016 edition of the Forum have been Mr. Dacian Ciolos, prime-minister of Romania, Mr. Yves Leterme, Secretary-General of International IDEA and former prime minister of Belgium, Mr. Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee, Mrs. Violeta Alexandru, Minister of Public Consultation and Civic Dialogue of Romania, H.E. Astrid E. Helle, Permanent Representative of Norway to the Council of Europe and Mrs. Ulrike Lunacek, Vice-President of the European Parliament (via video message).

The Forum's discussions were organized in the form of 8 workshops covering the following topics: citizen participation in decision making process, citizen dialogues on democracy, new trends in political representation and participation, the role of media literacy and fact checking in countering populism, the role of the European Union's, of civil society organisations and of donors in supporting democracy at national level, models of Europe-wide campaigning on similar topics, opportunities provided by the EU Presidencies for joint civil society actions in the period 2017-2020.

The main function of the 2016 edition of the Forum has been to consult with like-minded civil society organisations on a set of ideas of coordinated actions to support democracy in Europe. The participants to the Forum have reflected on a series of lines of action converging on the idea of a trans-European civil society organisations' (CSO) campaign to support democracy across the European Union (EU). As a result, a general consensus has been achieved during the Forum on the necessity to start working together on the following lines of actions:

1. an **overarching framework and a common banner for a concerted CSO campaign on democracy during the period 2017-19**. Such a campaign would embrace existing, planned and new activities on democracy support, in as many EU Member states as possible.
2. a **series of 'citizen democracy dialogues' at local and national level**, in as many EU Member states as possible, involving a wide range of stakeholders, to open up sensitive issues and debate problems with the state of democracy. This can be followed up, if relevant, with a selection of priority issues with a view to launching broad-based campaigns, at local and/or national level to achieve corrective action.
3. **concerted advocacy at EU level** in part to support effective democracy monitoring and robust use of the 'rule of law' instrument, but also to gain support for national and local level citizen initiatives and dialogue-oriented approaches more suitable to combat populism and nationalism.
4. joint planning primarily on democracy issues with relevant CSOs with a view to preparing **cooperation with governments due to assume EU Presidencies in 2017-20**.

Anti-democratic populism, particularly its right-wing expression which is currently the most powerful and potentially the most destructive force menacing democracy across the globe represents a concern in most of the countries participating to the Central and Eastern Europe Civil Society Forum. Several countries in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g.. Hungary and Poland) have experienced directly the disruptive impact of illiberal Governments on democratic values, institutions and fundamental rights: an increasing control over mass media, attempts to roll back

women and minority rights' achievements, brutal pressure on civil society organisations, attacks on the democratic checks and balances, promotion of xenophobic state policies etc.

The **European Union** faces several limitations in its efforts to support internal democracy in the EU, as compared with its work with accession states and third countries. First, it is much more strictly bound by the Treaty in terms of its 'competence' to support or protect democracy and secondly it is the Council that is placed in the driving seat for any sanctioning of Member States in response to backsliding (unlike classic Treaty infringement proceedings).

The **European Parliament** has regularly sought a more activist approach by the EU institutions in monitoring democracy in Member states and combatting backsliding. Through its resolution on the Establishment of an EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights¹ from October 2016, the European Parliament has now picked up the challenge and is pressing to establish a new 'mechanism' on democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights with a regular democracy scoreboard for member states that could trigger EU action if and when 'risks' or violations occurred. One general conclusion of the discussions of the Forum has been that the **EU rule of law mechanisms** in place are not efficient at protecting democracy at the moment, mainly because they are not consistent, they have a too high threshold which make them hard to trigger and they do not have teeth. As it has been emphasised in the working paper produced ahead of the Forum, while civil society may wish to welcome or support this initiative, it has undeniable weaknesses, leaving the Commission in charge of the process, thus assuming it can remain strictly neutral. It continues to focus on signs of government backsliding on rule of law, rather than on broader socio-political trends which indicate trouble upstream. It omits entirely any consideration of action at national or local level where citizen dialogues could examine and respond to the EU's democracy reports before they are debated at EU level. Indeed, civil society is mentioned only in passing in the lengthy EP Resolution. One could have expected a much stronger acknowledgement of the value of local/national citizen-led initiatives and dialogue-oriented approaches more suitable to combat the possible temptations of populist and nationalist views of the world.

In this respect, there is a general concern that **top-down intervention from Brussels** is not enough and that it can even prove counterproductive by strengthening nationalistic rhetoric in targeted countries and the overall electoral standing of illiberal political parties. While very important, the pressure from the EU and peer member states cannot work alone unless it is reinforced by a parallel approach which will allow for citizens, civil society organisations in the wider sense and other national stakeholders to be part of the process, to generate local impetus and pressure on national Governments. Increasing citizens' understanding and support for democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law is key.

¹ The resolution was initiated by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and it follows other positions of the Parliament in respect to the situations in Hungary and Poland
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2015/2254\(INL\)&l=en](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2015/2254(INL)&l=en)

“Rule of law and democracy might be too abstract for most citizens, but we need to rebuild public support and trust. We must explain to people what is democracy, how it affects them and why it is an added value for them. We must emphasise that democracy goes beyond the majority rule, that it requires checks and balances and minority rights. We need to engage people and to not treat them with a “we know better” attitude.”

This requires more investment (both political and financial) in **citizen participation** and in **civic education** at national level. A greater attention should be given to the place of civic education in the formal education system.

The **European Union, national governments and private donors** should invest more in actions aiming to rebuild popular trust in democracy. Civic education and media literacy should become top priorities. Local and nationwide actions which create space for genuine dialogue among citizens and stakeholders with different opinions and concerns should be supported in order to rebuild trust in democracy and to ideally reach a societal consensus on a core set of values and institutions which should be shielding our societies from the destructive forces currently at work.

There is a mounting expectation for the **European Union** to change the way it provides funding to CSOs working on democracy and human rights and to make substantially more resources available at national level. For example, the “Europe for Citizens” programme should become a key instrument for the EU in the new context. In order to show that EU is really interested in saving democracy across Europe, the programme’s budget should be increased and it should focus more on actions at national level. EU and its member countries have an extensive experience in democracy support in third countries, including in assisting democratic transition in its newer member states. Human resources and know-how from the European External Action Service should be shifted to deal with problems within EU member states.

The situation of civic organisations in Central and Eastern Europe is particularly upsetting, as they are more dependent on foreign funding than their peers in Western Europe which can rely more on other resources (membership fees, local private funding, governmental support). For historical and cultural reasons, civic organisations in CEE do not have as stronger constituencies as it is often the case in older democracies. They are also increasingly targeted by national Governments which regards them as enemies and sometimes unleash their mediatic and financial power against them.

“Donors should increase their allocations for democracy and human rights initiatives, make them more flexible and provide core funding, including to watchdog organisations.”

The lack of genuine dialogue and response to people's concerns is widespread across political decision makers across Europe and it has led to a mounting frustration among European citizens who are increasingly signalling their disenchantment with the current state of affairs by lending their votes to anti-democratic populist parties. Civil society organisations, national government, European institutions and political parties should do substantially more to reach out to citizens who feel left behind. The methods of engaging different stakeholders must be inclusive and better adapted to the diversity of people's concerns, opinions and ways of communication. During the Forum, participants from various countries, both civil society and Government introduced a series of effective ways to engage citizens (e.g.. Estonia, Iceland, Netherlands). These initiatives are based on the use of either online or offline tools, or both combined. What is needed is to transform these experiences from isolated cases to a concerted and generalized current across European countries. Already tools and methods developed in some countries have been adapting in others (e.g. Iceland has been an inspiration for several CEE countries, with a particularly significant example in Estonia). As a general condition, it was emphasised the necessity for all concerned actors to focus more on reaching out to a broader range of citizens and to better adapt and strengthen their communication tools, capacities and messages.

One lesson that has been learnt by civil society organisations is that **citizen mobilisation** works on concrete problems. People do participate when they understand or when they are directly affected. It should be clear for everyone that transparency and citizen participation should be seen as an effective tool for rebuilding people's trust in democratic institutions, far more than a ritualized formal façade. As it has been proved repeatedly, purely decorative processes have an adverse result: people become disappointed and frustrated if their proposals are not reflected in the decision-making process. At the same time, the recent developments have proved that in times of crisis and in the new world of social media more than ever before, emotions are key to mobilising people. Anti-democratic populists are well aware of that and are exploiting negative emotions (frustration, fear, hatred) to gain electoral capital and to dismantle the democratic institutions and fundamental freedoms. Responsible civil society organisations, governments, political parties and other stakeholders should join forces to promote a positive agenda for Europe. In order to offer a credible alternative to the simplistic appeal of anti-democratic populists, they have to change themselves, to become more open and whole heartedly reaching out to citizens who feel left behind. Civil society organisations should move beyond just informing and educating people, to listening and to persuading, helping build bridges between people and recreate communities. They must shift their focus from educating citizen on values and principles to finding ways to address citizens' immediate concerns (lack of jobs, poverty, safety and uncertainty). They should do more work at political level and they should find better ways to engage with media.

One of the proposals discussed at the Forum was to organise in as many EU Member states as possible a series of '*citizen democracy dialogues*' at local and national level, involving a wide range of stakeholders, to open up sensitive issues and debate problems with the state of democracy. This can be followed up, if relevant, with a selection of priority issues with a view to launching broad-

based campaigns, at local and/or national level to achieve corrective action. Given the nature of rising populism, often based on anxieties about social change, the impact of immigration, unaccountable elites etc. it can be important to encourage people to voice their fears and debate policy options in a dispassionate environment. Public citizen dialogues can provide an important means not just to reiterate basic democratic principles but also to diffuse tensions, dismiss simplistic solutions and demonstrate the need for social consensus.

Citizen democracy dialogues could draw on the experience of “National Dialogues”, used in a several countries as a tool of political transformation, bringing protagonists to work together to resolve their conflicts. Such citizen dialogues could also draw on the experience of national dialogues supported by International IDEA, using the ‘State of Democracy’ methodology starting from a set of common indicators in the form of open-ended questions.² This allows civil society and other local stakeholders in each country (e.g. with business and professional associations, academic and media bodies etc.) to take ownership of the debate on democracy, to shape the debate and make a diagnosis according to their priorities, to seek consensus across a broad spectrum of opinion and thus build a coalition for change. The approach is non-adversarial and non-judgemental. It can probe, challenge, debate, seek consensus, and mobilise action on key priority concerns. Democracy audits of this sort have been carried out in widely differing circumstances, in all continents, in new and old democracies. Experience from the *Netherlands* in 2005-6 could be instructive. The International IDEA methodology could be adapted to current democratic challenges in Europe, with more in-depth investigation for instance into questions of cultural identity, solidarity and equality, and the issue of political representation and responsiveness. Drawing on the experience of Estonia and Iceland (*workshop 5*), citizen dialogues should certainly make best use of new technologies and social networks for stimulating debate and crowdsourcing ideas.

The dialogue approach is also echoed in the ‘Space of Freedom’ project launched in *Poland* by the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD)³ involving a series of debates with ordinary citizens to discuss the legal, political, economic and social foundations of democratic state of law. (In recognition of its impressive efforts and initiatives, which include a think tank and a media platform and a huge capacity for citizen mobilisation, the KOD was awarded the European Citizen’s Prize by the European Parliament in 2016).

Political parties, old and new, remain the key actors in the European democratic societies. Anti-democratic populists find easy targets in mainstream political parties, often the least trusted of public bodies. Politicians are at best seen as ineffective careerists, at worst as deeply corrupt and unscrupulous, escaping justice by relying on parliamentary immunity. It becomes difficult to accept that they are a vital constituent part of parliamentary democracy. Yet they are essential and irreplaceable, providing the main channel for recruiting, selecting and training candidates for election to public office and the sole means for forming governments and opposition. In Parliament, they own the legislative process; they control the tools of scrutiny; they are entrusted with national

² www.idea.int/sod-assessments/approach/sod/.

³ www.kod.ngo/kod-who-is-who/aboutkod/#

sovereignty. They are expected to set out their core ideas on government, mobilise citizens into expressing specific needs and demands, and transforming these into viable policy options. Electoral competition is supposed to make them effective and responsive. Instead it too often produces a self-serving elite, which protects itself from competition, not least by setting high obstacles to party formation.

Mainstream political parties should reform if they want to remain relevant. Lessons are to be learnt from emerging political movements which in many countries are emerging as a democratic alternative to the extreme right parties. Often these movements have strong civil society roots, they have genuine participatory internal structures and they run on a strong anti-corruption (in its wider sense) political platform and showing a particular concern for the social-economic causes and effects of the current global crises. Currently mainstream political parties, in their quest to remain electorally relevant, seem more inclined to let themselves infected with extreme right populists' ideas rather than reforming their organisation and political programmes to respond to concerns from citizens and civil society organisations (e.g. more transparency and integrity in the party organisation, financing and selection of candidates, more responsiveness towards citizens' grievances as opposed to catering only to the interests of big business, safeguard of fundamental freedoms).

Civil society organisations struggle to work with such parties without being accused of partisanship and often seek to bypass them, dealing only with the executive. In theory, mainstream political parties consider civil society organisations as a bulwark against extremism. However, in practice, throughout Central and Eastern Europe mainstream parties treat CSOs as enemies (particularly in countries with weak challenge from democratic opposition parties) and they label them as foreign agents. The shrinking space for civil society action has become a major concern and it has led to increased coordination and sense of common purpose for more and more civil society organisations. However, we should all be more aware that shrinking space for civil society is only one effect of the overall deterioration of democracy across Europe. More civil society coordination is needed to respond to its causes.

As part of the proposed **concerted advocacy at EU level**, civil society organisations should work with the European Parliament, the European Commission, with the Council, with the European Economic and Social Committee and with other relevant European institutions to ensure that such attacks on civil society and limitations on civil society action become unacceptable in all EU member states. EU pays a significantly larger attention to the state of civil society in accession and third countries than in its own member states. It has been following developments related to civil society as part of its ongoing progress reports on third countries and it has developed instruments to support civil society in those countries implicitly recognising that the state of civil society is a criterion to assess the state of democracy there. The experience of EEAS and of other EC structures working with third countries should be used when creating instruments to support civil society within the EU.

Civil society organisations expect that the **European political groups** play a stronger role in applying a positive influence on their national affiliates. As it has been proven in the European Parliament, European party families tend to protect their national affiliates even in cases where they clearly breach democratic values. This has become obvious as a weakness of the EP resolution on the Establishment of an EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights adopted in October 2016. The resolution remains silent regarding the role of partisanship among the EP political groups when using its own soft power to criticise backsliding.

There is also an expectation that **political foundations** could play a role in building a cross-partisan agreement on the necessity to defend democracy, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law in Europe. Active in East and Central Europe (mainly before accession) and across the world in promoting their sister parties, helping them to play a useful role in emerging democracies, they have singularly neglected the state of political parties in Europe in recent times. While their focus has been on working with their ideologically close political parties, political party foundations have often developed only ad-hoc cooperation with other civil society organisations.

One of the proposals discussed at the Forum is the creation of an overarching framework and a common banner for a **concerted CSO campaign on democracy** during the period 2017-19. Such a campaign would embrace existing, planned and new activities on democracy support, in as many EU Member states as possible. It is for European CSOs to work together to develop and coordinate a more strategic and coherent set of activities in support of democracy at national and local level. One idea is to mount a truly transnational campaign across the EU using a common banner or logo to achieve greatest visibility and impact. The campaign could embrace existing, planned and new activities by CSOs relating to various aspects of democracy promotion, with particular emphasis on public debate, awareness raising and citizen participation. Depending on the local situation, the campaign could also focus on the media, on hate speech, on corruption etc. More significantly, the campaign should also be broad enough to include most other sectors of civil society activity, whether in social, environmental, educational spheres or even in purely recreational and sporting sectors.

Some valuable experience already exists about campaigning across borders. The “No Hate” campaign provided a loose framework for a wide range of initiatives. The campaign provides important lessons learnt in terms of mobilisation of various stakeholders across various countries, coordination, visibility, common messages and slogan, media involvement or political support.

The **rotating Council Presidency** can in theory provide a privileged point of contact for civil society with the upper reaches of EU decision-making. The Presidency has the possibility, working in a trio of Presidencies, to prepare specific initiatives and host some symbolic events. The current trio of the Netherlands, Slovakia and Malta, will be succeeded in July 2017 by the next trio Estonia, Bulgaria and Austria, then in January 2019 by Romania, Finland and Croatia. The more national CSOs can work equally in a trio formation, the more influence they should be able to exert with their

respective presidencies, influence about thematic priorities, influence too about highlighting civil society dimensions of existing EU priorities.

National civil societies should use the opportunity of the **Council Presidencies** to push for the promotion of European values (above all), making sure that the EU stands for much more than the growing current populist and isolationist trends. The Forum has allowed for civil society organisations in countries holding the Council Presidencies to establish first contacts. Further coordination and cooperation will follow.

In the coming weeks, the Forum's priorities are to *operationalise the proposals and conclusions* made in Bucharest, this November.

The first step is the creation of a coordination structure for a concerted CSO campaign on democracy during the period 2017-19 as well as for concerted advocacy at EU level. The structure will include a **steering group** which will be based on national liaison points in each interested country, Brussels based organisation and a **light support secretariat**.

The steering group will further work to develop a strategy, **common slogan and an action plan** for a concerted CSO campaign on democracy during the period 2017-19.

The steering group will develop a **task force for advocacy** at EU level which will prepare and carry out advocacy work in Brussels.

At the same time, with support from International IDEA, adapted methodologies for **pilot citizen dialogues on democracy** will be prepared and ready to be implemented by interested organisations. Further coordination will take place in the framework of EU Presidencies 2017-20.