

## **The changing role of European civil society**

Is the role of European civil society changing?

Frankly, I cannot see this.

However, changes are happening. Many profound changes.

Unfortunately, civil society is not the subject of these changes but rather their object.

I have been invited in this panel discussion to speak about democracy and civil society.

And I will try to outline what is at stake and how fundamental the role of civil society is.

I will make the point that giving civil society lots of breathing space is the most promising way of defending our democracies, our dignity and our freedom.

At the same time, civil society also must claim its rights and defend them with tooth and claw if need be.

Civil society is a very European concept. It is much older and more deeply rooted than the related but not identical term “non-governmental organisations” may suggest.

The separation between secular and religious power, the autonomy of the European cities in the high middle ages, the Magna Charta Libertatum, those and many more have been European achievements without which civil society could hardly exist.

The European Economic and Social Committee has recently voted an opinion on “resilient democracy through a strong and diverse civil society”.

Since this panel is going to discuss some of the key questions our opinion touches on, I am going to tackle this task from a different angle.

I would rather speak to you about the motivation behind this own-initiative opinion.

That brings me once more to the title of this panel which is, to my mind, somewhat misleading.

I do not believe that the role of European civil society is actually changing.

To the contrary, its role has been and will always be the same.

The questions civil society organisations deal with, their orientations, their preoccupations, they may be changing, but the actual role of civil society in our system remains unchanged.

It is crucial for our democracies.

It is indispensable for any liberal democracy.

Some key characteristics of civil society are access and participation, openness and transparency, diversity or pluralism and democratic scrutiny.

When I speak of liberal democracy, I do not mean a particular school of economic thought.

I mean the limitation of power, I mean trial and error, the beauty of imperfection.

Liberal democracy means more than just elections.

It means *inter alia* effective checks and balances, the limitation of power through constitutional guarantees and the respect for and the defence of fundamental rights.

Incidentally, endemic corruption destroys any system of checks and balances.

It concentrates power. And it always leads to misallocations, reduced innovations and low productivity.

It is toxic for the vital role of active citizenship.

And civil society is equivalent to active citizenship.

Civil society incarnates the emancipation of citizens against any sort of abusive power and the freedom of each and every individual to associate with like-minded people and pursue common goals of interest.

It means a high degree of autonomy, restricted only by the rule of law.

The pluralism, the diversity this represents is fundamentally opposed to any kind of monopolisation of power.

So, is it really European civil society's role that would be changing?

No. It's the political environment that is changing in and around Europe.

And this changing environment challenges everything civil society as we know it stands for.

In other words, both have come under attack simultaneously, liberal democracy and civil society.

And it could not be any different for they are inextricably linked.

We are threatened by new and old fascisms.

Right-wing extremists have been gaining support in almost all European member states.

This is what must preoccupy us.

This was the motivation for our opinion on democratic and civic resilience.

It is not for me to speak about populism now and how it paves the way for fascism, although it plays an important role in our opinion.

I rather want to share some thoughts with you about something that seems to have lost its meaning or become inappropriate, almost politically incorrect.

And yet I am going to pronounce the word:

Western values.

We tend to speak of our European values but what we really mean are the formerly so-called Western values.

To name them Western values has come out of fashion although it was these values that proved stronger than national-socialism and fascism and communism as well.

There may be a thin line between a culturally hegemonic attitude which I would denounce and the relativism of our values against which I would like to caution.

How come we cannot identify freedom and diversity with Western values any longer?

What happened?

I believe we have to go further back than just to the election of Donald Trump as US president.

The early 1990s seemed to mark the world-wide victory of liberal democracy, the rule of law and a free market order.

It was the end of history as the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama called it, meaning the global implementation of these very Western values.

However, globalisation in economic and technological terms does not seem to have brought about the world-wide triumph of democracy.

It rather seems to have opened the curtain for a new ideological competition and sharpened social and cultural dividing lines.

There is the struggle between a resurgent authoritarianism with fascist tendencies and liberal democracy with erring assertiveness.

There is also the incompatible parallel existence of religious fundamentalism and agnostic tolerance or materialist atheism.

And the biggest danger comes from inside our societies.

A feeling of non-belonging and of insecurity, a crisis of identity has incited a significant number of people to depreciate their freedom.

In times of crisis, many people tend to long for leaders who appear to be strong and who paint the world in black and white.

The highest principle of liberal democracy is doubt whereas illiberal democracy pretends to offer certainty.

Freedom has become a burden for too many.

However, fundamentalism of any kind, political or religious or both is incompatible with diversity and civil society.

If we witness shrinking space for civil society then that is because of the current phase of weakness of liberal democracy and its institutions in large parts of the Western world and also in our European Union.

We did not understand or could not see that 1989 was not only the miraculous year of freedom.

The astonishingly peaceful collapse of the Soviet empire, the unexpected gift of the European reunification made us blind and naïve.

The massacre of Tianamen square in the summer of 1989 clearly indicated that freedom was not the only conceivable model for the future.

The nasty pictures of this massacre were soon repressed by the pictures from the open fence in Hungary, the fall of the wall in East Berlin.

And the economic reform strategy of the Chinese Communist party seemed to open a window of opportunity for a world united in peace and prosperity based on, well, yes indeed: Western values.

Until fairly recently, we did not see that the Chinese economic model represents much more than just a competitive challenge in a free market economy.

In equal measure, it took us a long time to understand that the Russian leadership views war as a legitimate means to achieve policy goals and that Moscow is seeking old and new grandeur by weakening Western and European solidarity and unity.

Furthermore, we, that is the European Union and its Atlantic allies, for quite a long time misinterpreted religious fundamentalism as an ephemeral phenomenon whereas it has deep roots and is quite popular in large parts of the world.

Many of us initially saw the Arab spring as an opportunity for freedom and liberal democracy but we have had to understand that liberal democracy cannot function without a pluralistic, an emancipated civil society.

The rule of law cannot be guaranteed by law only.

The rule of law is the result of civic emancipation without which democracy as we understand it must fail.

People must consider themselves as emancipated citizens first.

Emancipated not only from monarchical rulers but also from imperatives of belief.

Civic emancipation and the creation of civic space is the prerequisite for the building of democracy.

Hence, shrinking civic space endangers democracy at the most.

Without citizens in the deeper sense of the word, liberal democracy cannot be achieved or maintained even if constitutional settings are tailored to establish democratic institutions.

Europe has become first too self-satisfied with its belief in the effortless victory of universal values and then too self-absorbed with the consequences of a multitude of financial, economic, social and political crises.

Today, we have to realize that a growing number of the European member states do not defend the European values anymore.

Civic space is shrinking in Europe because too many people have become afraid of freedom and doubt.

But this does not mean that the role of civil society is changing.

It has been, is, and will be indispensable for liberal democracy and the rule of law.

There is no resilient democracy without a resilient civil society.

Liberal democracy cannot be built where civil society does not exist.

Illiberal democracy, the authoritarian version of democracy is something completely different.

Authoritarian leadership seeks legitimacy in semi-free elections which are to sanction its policies and de-legitimize any criticism or opposition.

Independent civil society which is an integral part of the checks and balances that make up liberal democracy must stand in its way.

Free media must stand in its way.

The freedom of journalists and the independence of civil society organisations do go hand in hand.

Journalists have been murdered recently in several European Union member states.

They are threatened in old and new member states.

The founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, pronounced a fatwa on the writer Salman Rushdie for his lack of respect of religion.

The Austrian Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, one of Europe's right-wing populist leaders, has just unleashed his cronies on a critical journalist.

Fascism comes in various forms and disguises.

Our Western values are not to be confounded with Western dominance, a missionary attitude or cultural arrogance.

Today we are not discussing the propagation of our values to the world anymore.

We cannot even project them to European regions like the Western Balkans which have become an ideological battleground and a gateway for political powers that fear nothing more than civic emancipation.

Our values, you call them Western, European, or democratic;

With the extreme right waiting in the wings in countries like Germany or France and already in power in Austria, Hungary and Italy, we are facing a seminal attack on civil society and liberal democracy which are two sides of the same coin.

Today, we are struggling with their defence in our own countries, in the European Union itself.

Those parliaments, governments and institutions that still have the power to strengthen civil society and its organisations should not wait to do so because civil society is the first and last line of their defence.

The Committee has drafted and voted an opinion that makes some concrete suggestions for fostering civil society in the defence of liberal democracy.

Thank you.