

“Multilevel sustainable democracy in Europe”

Civil Society Days 2021

Workshop 1

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Report

We must ensure a sustainable democracy on all levels in Europe! All participants of this workshop agreed on this goal. But how can we get there? During this event, different ways and priorities were discussed by experts in the field, bringing in their diverse backgrounds. ECAS, ALDA and R.E.D. implemented this workshop on 01 March in the scope of the 2021 Civil Society Days (organized by the European Economic and Social Committee Liaison Group). Flavio Grazian (ECAS) facilitated the event.

The different interpretations of “democracy” were highlighted by M. **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, the President of the FRRL Group of the European Economic and Social Committee. He explained the difficulties to have a discussion on democratic structures without knowing if people refer to liberal or illiberal democracy models. According to Mr Pîrvulescu, unliberal democrats claim to be the *only* representatives of society.

Another relevant aspect in this regard is participation. However, as Mr Pîrvulescu pointed out, this does not only include electoral participation. Civil society also plays an important role. Besides, democratic societies must be aware of the possible manipulation of the electorate. Therefore, Mr Pîrvulescu called for more educational opportunities that allow to transform people into citizens.

Ms. **Antonella Valmorbida**, Secretary-General of the European Association for Local Democracy, explained the impact of the COVID19 on the work of the civil society organization and highlighted the need to support local communities and empower civic initiatives. The COVID19 shows the need to unlock resources and address emergencies more effectively and efficiently. She reminded us what is local democracy at its core which is the work of local governments together with citizens and civil society. Even at the local level, we have to keep in mind the importance of the representation, inclusiveness and to keep working to find new ways to empower citizen participation by going beyond the established ways. COVID19 is an opportunity to recognize the work done at the local level by the local authorities and communities. This crisis is a chance to rethink and redefine what democracy is at the local level. She addressed the point of the rapid digital transformation. Indeed the COVID19 has immensely pushed digitalization to the extreme at all levels. Digitization means empowering the material, computer, wifi, etc which need to be efficient and effective. To make sure that these instruments are used in the right way, access to digital education is important for all ages. Nevertheless, this rapid digital transformation can be put in question and issues are raised as inequalities (digital divide), the security of data or have access to information in order to make a conscious choice and be in a real democratic process.

M. **Ken Godfrey**, Executive director of the European Partnership for Democracy, focused his intervention on the national and European level to analyze on one side this digital era, the implication of new tech policies and the impact on democracy and civic participation. The analysis started by understanding the various challenges that the decision makers have taken and will take regarding the wish to protect the population, to save their economy and all

these issues linked to political challenges. Then at the institutions level, there is a hollowing out of intermediary bodies between the street and the government, such as parties, trade unions, and CSOs. Weaker than they used to be and likely to face significant challenges, these organizations needed to be included in the process to make sure to have a greater participation. Regarding the issue of digitalization, he emphasised the importance to ensure that all of the new policy initiatives incorporate democracy as a consideration. Democracy is, unfortunately, smaller in the big debate on tech regulation and there is the need to put democratic dimension as a key element to take into consideration. Added to this point, there is a lack in the analysis of the impact of the digital on democracy and civic participation. Digitalization is offering a lot of opportunities but challenges regarding discussion and dialogue will come along which will have big implications in our democracies.

Ms **Esther Nass**, the Director EU Affairs of Civocracy, pointed out that creating a valuable connection between citizens and governments is very challenging. This counts even more for the EU level. The challenge for civil society today is to contribute to that connection and to make it stronger.

According to Ms Nass, more constructive conversations will help to reach this goal. She explained that this is what Civocracy is aiming to create. However, such initiatives require not only commitment from organisations, but also a substantive investment in technology that enable and facilitate those (online) conversations. Ms Nass drew from the experiences of the diverse types of organisations and governments that her organisation has worked with. Civocracy is active on the local level.

How deliberation adds elements to *by* the people and *for* the people was explained by M. **Yves Dejaeghere**, Executive Director of the Federation for Innovation in Democracy Europe (FIDE). He pointed out that often, democracy was seen as a zero-sum game. To illustrate this, Mr Dejaeghere pointed at elections: if one party wins, another will lose. According to Dejaeghere, this way of approaching democracy is not constructive. He highlighted the importance of representativeness for sustainable multilevel democracy. Looking at today's parliaments, it is obvious that there is no representation of the *entire* society, he claimed.

This is why, according to Mr Dejaeghere, non-electoral participation is a promising approach. Here, deliberative democracy can help to ensure more representativeness. However, one has to be mindful about the challenges: often, those citizens who join voluntarily are not representative for the whole society neither. On top of this, town hall meetings often create biased impressions: people being present on these occasions tend to be particularly angry with administrations.

Dejaeghere explained that the phases within electoral cycles also have an impact on the willingness of policy makers to act. This counts in particular for important topics that might not be popular. According to Dejaeghere, the further away from elections policies are made, the more policy makers are inclined to take bold decisions.

After the panel discussion and exchange with the participants key recommendations were made and shared with the audience via the interactive platform slido. The audience was invited to answer this following question "In your view, what are the most important elements to ensure a sustainable multi-democracy in Europe?" and then vote for the most relevant recommendations. 3 recommendations came out from this vote. There are the followings ones:

- It is necessary to strengthen the role of intermediary organisations between citizens and governments (civil society organisations, parties, trade unions, etc.) as this will create positive synergies for the society.
- Governments and administrations should boost effective civic and digital education at all levels to foster citizen participation. It is also critical that administrations provide a fair

and affordable digital access for all citizens in order for them to be able to actively participate in democratic processes.

- Administrations should be bolder in creating more deliberative bodies that reinforce democratic societies and representativeness at various levels.