Democracy Retreat Highlights

"Innovating Democracy: the nexus between national and European democracy"

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Abbreviations

COFE   Conference on the Future of Europe

COSAC   Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union

EU   European Union

Democracy Retreat Highlights

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On 26 March 2024, on the sidelines of the 71st Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) Plenary, TEPSA and Egmont convened a lunch discussion at their inaugural Democracy Retreat on "Innovating Democracy: the nexus between parliaments and European democracy", within the framework of Nets4Dem.

This lunch-dialogue is the **blueprint of a series of Democracy Retreats** which will be co-organised by TEPSA and Egmont over the next couple of years. 2024 is nevertheless a cornerstone, not only because of the 2019-2024 European Union (EU) term ending, but due to the global electoral character of the year. In the EU alone, aside from EU elections allowing all European citizens to cast their vote for the next European Parliament, national elections are taking place in eight member states. Democracy, in essence, is multilayered, but this retreat was **an attempt to disentangle whether multilevel cooperation is functioning and whether citizens can find their way through this maze**. The discussions'

main takeaways are detailed in this commentary, grouped in the following way: multilayered governance and democracy within the EU, the way forward for democratic innovations and key remaining questions.

Multilayered governance and democracy within the EU

While it is hard to define European democracy, it is important to acknowledge the work that has been done by the EU over the past term in that regard, as well as what it is the EU can and cannot do.

From mechanisms and legislations such as the 2021 Rule of Law conditionality regulation [1] to the 2022 European Media Freedom Act or the Artificial Intelligence Act [2], many EU initiatives have sought to strengthen democracy [3]. Recently, in addition to providing another layer of protection from the threat of foreign interference in democratic processes, the Defence of Democracy Package also encouraged civic engagement and citizen participation through a series of recommendations [4].

In this regard, it is particularly important to highlight that the EU has been given, just as much as it has taken on its own initiative, the position as some policing body of democracy, particularly for what concerns the rule of law across the EU27. This might not be a tenable position in the long run as it can lead to potential backlash, as testified in Poland under the Law and Justice government; the EU becomes a scapegoat ('put the blame on Brussels') rather than being appreciated for its genuine efforts in promoting and defending European democracy together with its members [5].

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As such, the inherent limitations on what the EU can influence in matters of democracy across the continent must be acknowledged: national elections and election cooperation networks between countries seem to be beyond its reach.

The neglected relationship and synergies between national and European parliaments — with a lack of research and untapped potential for cooperation in this area — can contribute to Euroscepticism.

Recent experiences, however, show the complexity of fostering this multilevel partnership, and the difference in cooperation from one experience to another, for instance between the Convention on the Future of Europe and the Conference on the Future of Europe (COFE) [6]. **The COFE was a perfect test for interparliamentary cooperation, but coordination was better functioning during the Convention**: The Conference was criticised for being structured with the EU as the 'host' and receiving national parliaments as its 'guests'. Although it is still rightfully being hailed for its innovativeness and impact beyond its lifetime, the Conference was a lost opportunity to create a genuine interface between the citizens and institutions on both the national and European levels.

The lack of trust between these institutions remains a significant hurdle, despite efforts at integration, including from successive Council Presidencies. For successful integration, national parliaments cannot be bypassed: together with the EU, they are constructive players that should play a central role. Only a joint effort between national parliaments and the European parliament that looks outward to citizens and future generations and in which both levels constructively engage with each other will lead to collaborative democracy strengthening in this context.

This requires democratic innovation and bold action which will not only go beyond restoring democracy but also strengthen it.

Evolving societies desperately require institutions to evolve at the same pace, and this goes for democracy as well.

While the yellow and orange card [i] mechanisms available to Member States during the EU legislative process highlight some of the already existing mechanisms available at national levels which could trigger more coordination between national parliaments and the EU, thinking out of the box by using innovative tools might spark further cooperation.

The initiatives undertaken during the Belgian Presidency testify to the role Belgium has played as a laboratory for democratic innovation [8]. One example is the first-of-its-kind citizen panel, which brought life to a recent recommendation to actively involve citizens with the rotating presidency.

The path forward: experimenting with democracy

Despite the inevitability of occasional failures when practising democratic innovations, it is essential to continue experimenting and learning. This entails better connecting among existing networks rather than merely creating new ones, emphasising the role of projects such as Nets4Dem in providing a space for connection, information sharing and fostering a shared sense of purpose. Overall, there is an existing need for a paradigm shift in how democracy is perceived and

practised, recognising its deep roots in technology and the necessity of embracing innovative approaches to democratic governance. It is necessary to shift the focus of democratic discussions from solely examining European actions to engaging with global perspectives. The democratic gaze can and should be reversed by consulting people worldwide about their challenges, solutions, and best practices.

This approach for a citizen-powered Europe aims to foster a conversation about restructuring democratic processes and embarking on a transformative democratic journey.

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The need for democratic innovation beyond traditional voting methods is essential and can be achieved through initiatives such as transnational and permanent citizen assemblies to augment "citizen power" in Europe. Indeed, the initiative advocates for a new dimension of citizens' power that relies on a comprehensive system of democratic innovation.

[i] The yellow and orange cards are mechanisms used by national parliaments in the EU to avoid concerns about proposed EU legislation. See further information on: European Commission, 'Subsidiarity control mechanism', webpage, nd.

Within the dynamic nature of democracy, there is an ongoing call for the evolution of democratic institutions to better serve citizens. In the run-up to elections, citizen engagement is crucial for bringing together diverse stakeholders and ensuring a robust democratic process. As democracy is a continuous process: politicians must also better manage their time in between elections to foster mutual trust between them and citizens.

Citizens also have a role to play in bridging with the European Parliament beyond elections. For instance, national parliaments could invite EU representatives and randomly selected citizens to their capitals as a means to foster connections and create polycentric politics in Europe. The EU has the potential to be a laboratory of politics which undergoes ongoing experimentation. This could for instance lead to the establishment of a standing citizens assembly for Europe, such as The Democracy Odyssey [ii], to facilitate a more permanent and visible dialogue.

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One element largely came out of the discussions: the importance of trust in

[ii] To learn more about The Democratic Odyssey and their aim to 'institutionalise a permanent People's Assembly for Europe', visit their webpage, **here**.

institutions and the need for them to be closer to citizens. In that regard, it is essential to pay close attention to the language used, making sure it facilitates sincere conversations and reveals true intentions. Overall, innovative approaches focused on building trust, transparency, and meaningful connections between citizens and institutions are needed to give rise to successful dialogue and engagement.

Even if Member States seem to be at varying stages of readiness regarding citizens' participation**, a paradigm shift away from institutionalised democracy towards embracing technological advancements and inclusive practices is necessary.**

In that regard, social media constitutes a significant platform influencing political discourse, but it is currently mainly being used by extreme political parties and politicians to promote their ideologies. Hence, strategies to counter disinformation and engage citizens effectively through social media are required. This could, for instance, be informed assemblies that leverage digital platforms.

Key questions remain

In conclusion, in the defence of European democracy, the EU and its Member States must be faithful partners in this journey. Arguably, rather than suffering from a democratic deficit, the EU

suffers from a democratic surplus, with an abundance of democratic institutions and processes in which (not only) citizens can get lost, and it is both the task of the EU as its Member States to reflect on how democracy can be strengthened through renewal.

With power centres colliding in its capital during this semester, Belgium – reputed as a laboratory for democratic innovation – has made strong efforts to break out European conversations from its usual spheres both in location and participation, by more directly involving citizens in its Council Presidency.

Can national parliaments and the EU come together to continue this habit of innovation after the European elections? If the EU is really in excess of democracy, and after itself experimenting with democratic innovation through initiatives such as the COFE and European Citizen's Panels, can it be inspired by the Belgian example to tap into the unexploited potential of cooperation between the EU and the EU27 to create an EU-wide laboratory of politics in the defence of democracy? Exploring further cooperation is not merely important for the democratic legitimacy of the EU, as it serves an equal purpose for its (current and future) Member States as, among others, a platform of exchange for best practices.

In late March 2024, about a few months before the European elections, these questions have found an answer in

the priorities identified shortly, and initiatives by the next Presidencies. **As democracy is lived continuously, recent experiences deserve further experimentation** which will allow us to improve knowledge and connections across the board. This is where Nets4Dem can lend a hand in building those.

Nets4Dem is a Horizon Europe project coordinated by Democracy Reporting International that endeavours to reshape the landscape of democracy initiatives. Nets4Dem brings together more than 200 cities, over 50 think tanks and universities, and dozens of democracy-focused non-governmental organisations, covering 38 European countries. Nets4Dem aims to enhance and transform the current landscape of democracy initiatives by creating a unique European network. This network is designed to facilitate high degrees of connectedness among policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers, by providing improved access to cross-cutting work on democratic innovations. It further aims to weave networks spanning various sectors, geographies and levels of governance, thereby redistributing power and resources to those who stand to gain the most from initiatives to engage citizens in civic renewal.

Stay in touch

Check out Nets4Dem on TEPSA here.

Check out the Nets4Dem website here.

Endnotes

[1] European Commission, 'Rule of law conditionality regulation', 2021.

[2] European Commission, 'AI Act', 2023.

[3] European Commission, 'European Media Freedom Act: Commission proposes rules to protect media pluralism and independence in the EU', Press Release, IP/22/5504, 16 September 2022.

[4] European Commission, 'Defence of Democracy – Commission proposes to shed light on covert foreign influence', Press Release, IP/23/6453, 12 December 2023.

[5] S. Fella, 'Poland: The Law and Justice Government and relations with the EU, 2015-2023', 13 February 2024.

[6] European Commission, 'Conference on the Future of Europe',

[7] K. Nicolaïdis, N. von Ondarza and S. Russiak, The Radicality of Sunlight, CEPS, 19 October 2023.

[8] Belgian presidency, 'Launch of citizens' panel on Artificial Intelligence', Press Release, 27 February 2024.

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