D10.6 - Report of Pre-Presidency Conference Panel

Panel at TEPSA's Belgian Pre-Presidency Conference "Building Democratic Resilience in Europe", Brussels 23 November 2023

RECLAIM Work Package 10 (Lead: TEPSA)
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Building Democratic Resilience in Europe

On 23 November 2023, in the framework of the Horizon Europe project RECLAIM, TEPSA organised in Brussels the panel "Building democratic resilience in Europe". The panel was part of the Pre-Presidency Conference (PPC), TEPSA's biannual flagship event that gathers academics, think tank experts, and policy-makers to engage in discussions about the incoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU).

The aim of the panel was to delve into some of the topics investigated by the RECLAIM project and more specifically on regulating disinformation and the role of civil education in addressing misinformation and disinformation in the lead up the Belgian Presidency. The panel was attended in person by 111 participants (approximately 48% men and 52% women).

The panel featured the distinguished RECLAIM researcher, Elena García Guitián (Full Professor of Political Science at the Autonomous University of Madrid), Colin Scicluna (Head of Cabinet of Vice-President Šuica, European Commission), and Hendrik Van de Velde (Coordinator for the Belgian EU Presidency 2024, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) represented perspectives of the EU institutions and the coming Belgian Presidency. Maximilian Conrad, Professor at the University of Iceland and RECLAIM Coordinator, moderated the panel.

First, the moderator, **Maximilian Conrad**, gave a brief introductory overview of the work of the RECLAIM project, including the main topics addressed and the multifaceted approaches that were used by the researchers involved to examine the intricacies of post-truth politics. Conrad elaborated on the **concept of post-truth politics, its main features, and the challenges this phenomenon poses to liberal democracies**. He described the epistemic crisis of democracy in our societies, where commitment to

factual standards seems to have eroded, the authority of truth diminished, and many individuals support politicians even when their statements are factually incorrect. He continued that the project intends to move beyond just describing the phenomena of post-truth politics to provide recommendations for how to combat and prepare for this trend. As such, he introduced the idea that the panel would primarily look at **building democratic resilience in a broader sense in Europe**, with the Defence of Democracy Package at the centre of the discussion.

The floor was then given to Professor **Elena García Guitián**. She began her remarks by emphasising the necessity of discussions such as this one, which are a key space to bring people together with policy-makers from different fields alongside activists and citizens. All of this, she concluded, creates positivity in debate, which is essential for a resilient democracy. García Guitián continued that the exclusion of opinions or thoughts from debates will only backfire extremisms and lead to more polarization. The question to begin with is **"What are we doing and what should we do to protect and advance democracy?"** García Guitián highlighted that, as demonstrated in the previous panels during the PPC, many citizens are tired of the unending debate about the legitimacy of democracy and are more interested in its concrete performance, which is a natural evolution in democracy. However, she asserted that the **development of new digital technologies have generated structural changes (socio-economic and political) that are leading us to a post-truth environment that is having a great impact in our of democracies**. Furthermore, she believes that one of the key issues (analysed in the RECLAIM project) is how the changes on the production of information are altering the functional role of the democratic public sphere. They do so through a disruption of the common space for debate where the plurality of opinions is generated, which can erode the common belief that the democratic process offers good solutions and practices in the general interest.

Contrary to some views that stress the role of populisms as the accelerators of the post-truth context, García Guitián pointed to its deeper roots. She thinks that the critical debates on democracy generated by these movements are an inherent sign of democratic health. The problem comes when this critique becomes a strategy to dismantle its basic institutions, **the institutional checks and balances, but also alters its complex connections with the debates generated in the public sphere.** This is what seems to be happening now in some democratic countries.

Concerning the EU, she noted that criticisms of lacking democratic elements are not new, dating back to its onset, but they have been evolving through time. This is due to the changes experienced in its composition and nature, but also on the revision of the normative standards to assess its democratic quality. This permanent judgement is inherent to democracies, leading to a debate about what constitutes democracy and whether illiberal democracies qualify. In this sense, **Europe must concentrate on holding on to basic values within pluralistic forms of democracy, while also introducing changes to achieve a better legitimacy and to adapt to the new scenarios**. To do so, she believes, we need to approach these changes from a systemic perspective that allows us to assess how they affect the equilibriums between institutions and the public space, but also how one level (EU, national, regional) is affecting the other.

Professor García Guitián continued her remarks by discussing what the EU has been doing to answer these questions. She stated that the new policies have been closely developed with academia for years and that a good instrument to understand the underlying narrative is found in the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP). In looking forward, García believes that the EU must look at the short-term goals but also have a wider vision. Its approach is based on three pillars: **1) human rights, 2) rule of law, and 3) democracy**, that are the principles inspiring the new developments intended to act in response to the new menaces that correspond to the new post truth context. The strategy, first, tries to reinforce electoral

integrity. Not just by supporting the standard electoral practices, but by combatting the use of malign influence on citizens decisions, preventing them from reflecting freely on who they would prefer to vote for. Second, to promote democratic participation, not just trying to involve citizens through vote and helping them to freely form their opinions, but favouring other forms of citizen participation (i.e. citizen panels and consultations). Third, to have free and independent media that can fulfil their duty in a democratic system by enabling open and informed debate. She concluded that democracy has to be founded on a basic consensus that allows addressing moral and political pluralism, debating their principles and causes, but also to accept the final outcomes as conceived in the general interest. As such, she concluded that **RECLAIM is analysing the normative values that should guide these policies in a post truth environment to guarantee a public debate based on the best arguments and information available, while enhancing a wide citizen participation on it**.

Colin Scicluna began his statement in agreement with Elena García, saying that it is better to not look at the crisis in democracy but how democracy can address the crisis. He asserted that taking the first step to acknowledge the failures in the system is essential to understand what steps can be taken to improve it. This is especially relevant at the level of the Union, which reveals how democratic challenges impact all Europeans. The EU also encompasses all other levels of society and governance, potentially allowing for a more efficient and coordinated action. He asserted that the title of the RECLAIM project exposes a major problem: in using an adjective to describe democracy, "liberal", Scicluna argued that the title presupposes that there is diversity in how democracy is seen. He stated instead that democracy should not need qualifying adjectives, as these distract from the reality that democracies are being eroded. He put forth three sets of necessary measures: **legislation, communication, and participation**. First, in discussing legislation, he again pointed to the EDAP. He added that although the EDAP advances democratic resilience, it is not the last word. He further added that legislation is not just about where elections themselves take place but also includes the media. He elaborated that democracy is never a finished product and must react to changing realities and be ongoing. In regard to communication, he presented elections as a good opportunity to discuss more broadly with the population what are the electoral stakes, effects, and consequences on democracy - nationally and beyond borders. Moreover, he believes **it is important to discuss election standards at the EU and national levels**. Communication includes education as well, and requires that debate and discussion take place in every venue possible. These must get around echo chambers that are currently in many of the conversations. Pertaining to participation, Scicluna stated that the European Commission has been one the key actors in promoting citizen panels to increase participation. He stated that they are the first executive body anywhere to incorporate these tactics and that citizens need a space beyond elections to contribute to the process of democracy. Within that, he does think it is important to recognise that the vast majority may be less active in democracy, and therefore random selection is an important method which could be used to encourage all people to participate.

Hendrik van de Velde began his contribution by suggesting that the discussion be framed from a wider perspective and advocating that democracy be examined from all levels. In observing upcoming national and local-level elections in Europe, he asserts that **media regulation** is an issue. He continues that the Belgian Presidency intends to make the issue of democracy a priority in terms of the narrative of how it is presented. **Democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights will be one of the main pillars of their priorities**. He continued that doing so is a matter of values and the foundation of the Union, as well as the cornerstones of law and economy. That is the narrative he believes should be put forward and how to explain it in real terms.

In approaching the formalisation of elements of the legislative agenda, the EDAP and the Defence of Democracy Package are necessary, but another important piece is the ways in which EU institutions ensure trust. Van de Velde said that is the first concrete way to promote that agenda. He continued that

they will follow up on the **internal rule of law mechanisms** that they have and the budgeting of the Commission and the Council. Thirdly, he stated that the rotating presidency can act on its priorities to initiate events, put things on the agenda, and make them happen, and will have a debate on the next enlargement and what can be done for respect of the rule of law and democracy. The fourth way that he suggested the Presidency can promote democracy during the next six months is to engage the public. They will do this through citizen engagement and citizen panels. He linked this to what the Commission is doing, adding that Belgium has engaged enthusiastically in these processes in the past by holding a citizen panel. This, he says, is only the beginning, as they already have plans to work in conjunction with the Commission on another national Belgian panel that will include three weekends in February, March, and April, likely in collaboration with the leading Egmont Institute, with 65 citizens, that can produce recommendations which can guide some elements of the legislative agenda. He concluded that they will also have a crucial process of engaging with civil society and social partners, as there is an important increase in interest in these new forms of democracy. Nonetheless, he noted that such initiatives should not come as a detriment to the classical elements of democracy. The last element he put forth as an agenda of the Presidency to engage the public is through sponsoring or having events held under the Presidency related to the European agenda.

The Q&A included questions about the role of universities in countering disinformation, how Denmark can prepare for its Council presidency in 2025, how to address the democratic inclusion of citizens who vote for autocratic leaders, and how democracy can be promoted both internally and externally in the context of enlargement, to name a few. Elena García responded with the importance of universities and scholars analysing the consequences of declining democracies and how enlargement must include a clarification on the meaning of democracy internally and externally. Colin Scicluna added that universities are privileged places where these needed debates can happen and that elections have to be both free and fair. While he said elections are free, they are often not fair in that parties manipulate media messaging. Hendrik Van de Velde concluded that recent history has proven that democracies look messier and more fragile than they are, that they deliver in the long term, and that they are much stronger than autocratic regimes. He added that youth, democracy, and education are key to explaining the legislative processes and that political decision-making should be taught in school, starting very young.

Pictures from the event