

**Schools of Political Studies**  
**Thematic meetings during the World Forum of Democracy (3-7 November)**

**Professional Group Meeting**  
**“Winning elections and keeping promises: mission impossible for political leaders?”**  
**6 November 2014**  
**Synopsis<sup>1</sup>**

The meeting was open to all Schools’ participants and was divided into small group sessions on specific topics.

The moderator, **Jason WORLLEDGE**, Executive Director of the Visegrád School of Political Studies and the speaker, **Vera KOBALIA**, Georgian politician and former Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development in Georgia, introduced together the meeting. Referring to the results of the mid-term parliamentary elections on 5 November 2014 in the United States of America, Jason WORLLEDGE noted that populism is gaining a more important role in elections and is putting politicians under pressure. On the other hand, promises from politicians are not always kept afterwards. Furthermore, voter turnout, not only in the US but also in a number of other countries, is low at around 40%, depending on election regulations and the nature of elections.

Are promises kept by politicians after the elections?

Some commentators have argued that **politicians are the product of the society** in which they operate; each society carries a historic burden which reflects in a country-specific politico-societal culture, often accompanied by a system of paybacks, in which politicians operate. The absence of (political) education, training and the lack of feedback intensifies a feeling of impunity, resulting in a sense of non-accountability and lack of responsibility towards voters.

The **role of media** and especially social media has increased in recent years in most countries. It offers a platform to politically interested people – including politicians – offering a possibility to explain political opinions and demonstrate transparency. Unfortunately, this coincides sometimes with a lack of dialogue between politicians and voters. Nowadays, politicians are increasingly confronted with opposing opinions to which they have to respond. In this case, politicians surround themselves more and more with highly competent specialists from different sectors, often influenced by lobbyist organisations. However, this does not necessarily enhance two-way communication.

Low voter turnout

**Political awareness** is rising in some countries, but stagnating and even decreasing in others. In the first case, people are increasingly aware of the power citizens can hold on the political scene by participating actively in political debates. In the second case public interest in politics is declining and this results in decreasing voter turnout in many – including Western – countries.

Many reasons can be put forward for this **decline**, for example a growing number of promises not kept, mass media manipulations, sustained distance between voters and politicians by the latter, or just a lack of interest in politics by the population. In some political systems, candidates are often chosen by their political parties, preventing active participation from the population to designate competent politicians; this ‘**particracy**’ is often considered as an obstacle for democracy. Moreover, politico-legal systems increasingly favour

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<sup>1</sup> Notes taken by Günter de Schepper, DPP

politicians in terms of (additional) salary and other advantages, reflecting a socially (non)-accepted culture of greed.

#### Lack of accountability and trust?

Some participants argued that **political unaccountability and impunity** go together; in some countries there is a lack of a proper and adapted control system to oblige politicians to be accountable for their political activities and decisions; in some cases, the judicial system is composed of politically elected judges who could block the fine-tuning of a decent legal system as the foundation of political accountability.

In conclusion, **keeping election promises varies from one country to another** and the robustness of its democracy impacts on the trust or mistrust in politicians and the political system. Secondly, young potential politicians lack political experience which weakens political craft, while talented potential leaders may not wish to start a political career. Finally, political education is extremely important in order to bring the political scene to the highest level and to foster trust towards politicians.