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**Synopsis of the thematic session organised for
the participants of the Schools of Political Studies
at the World Forum for Democracy 2015**

The future of liberal democracy and civil society activism in Europe

(18 November)¹

Moderator: Jack Hanning, Secretary General of the Association of Schools of Political Studies

Panellists: Hakan Altınay, Director of the European School of Politics in Istanbul, Senior fellow at Brookings Institution; Anna Rurka, President, Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe; Steven Wagenseil, Acting President of the Council for a Community of Democracies, USA

Hakan Altınay introduced his presentation by saying that twenty years ago, advocating liberal democracy was easy as it was thought that, although mistakes are being made, such a regime was able to identify errors and make readjustments. Successful societies were open societies. But in 2003 the US, an open society, engaged illegally in a war and in 2008 a deep financial crisis emerged in that country that came to have a crushing impact on the global economy. What followed demonstrated that open societies had real limits.

During these two decades, non-liberal democracies (such as China) did not make many mistakes, economically. An increasing number of commentators argue that liberal democracies presented no advantage in the race between nations, that the link between economic success and liberal democracy no longer exists. Additionally, elites have become increasingly richer in recent years and more careless about their societies.

As convergence was replaced by divergence and a large part of society feels disenfranchised, populist entrepreneurs insist in closing the gap with simplistic remedies which would be dangerous to implement. Against that illiberal narrative, current leaders have promoted policies to which they claimed "There Is No Alternative (TINA)". Against this background, genuine curiosity and true civic engagement might well be the best way forward.

According to Anna Rurka, liberal democracies have contributed to individual freedoms. In transition societies, however, rights are conceived collectively and seen differently depending on who owns them. It is widely assumed that participation will not bring about real change, that policy is preconceived. Civil society tries to oversee the ongoing political process, although some NGOs are misused by politicians. The Council of Europe's Conference of INGOs was created to help states to implement policies in conformity with human rights. Yet human rights

¹ Reporting by Alberto Maynar-Aguilar, DPP

have been insufficiently implemented and poverty is increasing; here too civil society has an important role to play in that respect.

Steven Wagenseil pointed out that the Community of Democracies was founded in 2000 in Warsaw². Its activities brought together governments all around the world. In order to increase civil society's role in this body, the Council for a Community of Democracies was founded in 2001. After a long process towards recognition, the lesson learned is that it is important that civil society action is well structured. What happened with the *Indignados* or the Occupy Wall Street movement is a good example of such a requirement. The *Indignados* movement raised many expectations and has now become a political party.

There are many fields in which NGOs can advocate changes. Challenges such as global migration or political participation in elections are fields in which civil society can have a prominent role. In the ensuing debate, the following issues were addressed:

It is not possible to determine when democracy became split into liberal and illiberal democracy, as there have been no general turning points in the evolution of democracy; things are evolving gradually and with individual trajectories. Liberal democracy is harder to organise than just carrying on voting: India, for example, is not a liberal democracy, although it is a democracy. Liberal democracy's 'magic' is not simply about the relationship between the ruler and the ruled but about the manifold links between the people and between different sources of power.

Liberal democracy can provide answers to two crucial issues: inclusiveness and innovation. Seen from a social policy point of view, economic development, inclusiveness and democracy are not contradictory, Sweden being a case in point: social inequalities are addressed from early school age. Although prosperity has been spreading overall, economic inequalities have grown, perhaps because the level of well-being of the Western middle-class is not sustainable in a globalised world.

In addition to individual liberty, innovation also requires specific conditions that are not commonly met. The availability of capital is important for innovation to take place and this works rather well in the US. At the same time, however, the political process in the US is corrupted by money; money is weakening the power of the voters, and it is controlling the increasingly concentrated media corporations. Such a development goes against the interest of the people, who have to take a more active role to change this. If an active and free civil society is wanted, civic participation has to increase. It is essential to recognise that civil society is part of the society. This is an important problem in Russia nowadays. Societies have to include the man in the government as well as the man on the street.

There is always a tension between a liberal democracy and religion. France is a good example of such strains. Both sides need re-adjustments in order to avoid conflict. In order to draw the line between religion and democracy, it is useful to refer to the *acquis* of the Council of Europe in this field.

² Founded by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Bronislaw Geremek.