

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

Thematic Group Meeting
“Challenges to liberal democracy in Europe”
6 November 2014
Synopsis¹

The moderator, **Jack HANNING**, Secretary General of the European Association of Schools of Political Studies, presented the main problems that constitute systemic challenges to liberal democracy today. Worrying signs have been observed for many years in Europe such as low turnout in elections, but it is nowadays only that we can see this as just one of the many facets of the more complex problem facing liberal democracy. At the moment, “majoritarianism” is destroying compromise which is a backbone of democracy and the subsequent frustration and radicalisation of people leads to growing support for populist solutions. In a number of countries in Europe the authorities hamper freedom of media and restrict individual freedoms. So-called ‘illiberal’ or ‘guided democracy’ models deter basic concepts of democracy and human rights.

The speaker, **Hakan ALTINAY**, Director of the European School of Politics in Istanbul and President of the Global Civics Academy, examined the controversial statement of the Hungarian PM about ‘illiberal democracy’. Nowadays there are more than 120 democracies in the world. But it is not the name or declaration that determines which countries are really democratic. The real functioning of a state is decisive. According to the speaker, a **democratic culture of dialogue** is the most significant factor, even more than formal institutional settings or an independent judiciary. He underlined that in a democracy trust is crucial and it cannot be only delivered by law. Being a democratic state means allowing robust debate (for example in USA), but even then the quality of public debate can fluctuate. According to the speaker the forms of checks and balances in democracies should preferably not be fixed, as this may lead to impasses. Often checks and balances need to be recalibrated.

According to participants, the **countries in the Balkans** that have not consolidated their democracies are at serious risk of democratic backsliding. The lack of concrete measures by key European institutions can be frustrating in the region, especially given that the idea of a united Europe appeared already in the 1990s. Some participants felt that in 20 years Western countries have not shared sufficiently the responsibility for democratisation of those countries. Many of the participants from Western Balkans emphasized that **citizens need to first learn about liberal democracy**. In this context the speaker referred to Fareed Rafiq Zakaria who wrote about problems of ‘premature’ societies. He also argued that Europe should search for better guarantees for individual rights. At the same time the speaker noted that it is not only illiberal regimes that seek to avoid scrutiny, even many advanced democracies refuse to be subject to peer reviews.

New generations of Europeans take for granted the success of Europe such as peace, rights and liberties, whilst at the same time expressing very strong expectations from liberal democracy. The participants highlighted the **links between the economic crises and rise in movements looking to change power distribution and democratic models**, including the rise in popularity of the ‘illiberal’ model. Some of the participants suggested that European countries today lack great leaders. Hence, the ‘illiberal’ alternative strives to attract the public

¹ Notes taken by Bogumila Warchalewska-Muller, DPP

with strong leaders, nationalist rhetoric and seemingly attractive easy outcomes for the ruling majority. Thereby ignoring that one bad side of the 'illiberal' model is that the strong power and privileges of office can lead to corruption. Nonetheless, it can be seen that some countries without liberal democracy can also produce prosperity. In democracy the leadership needs to be put to the vote periodically. **Illiberal democracies** tend to produce a system that maintains the leader in power.

According to the speaker, every democracy is different but to speak about national variants is risky (like talking about 'Asian values'). **European standards** have been developed, for example the Swedes invented ombudsmen and this idea has spread to other countries, and should be cherished. However, some lines still need to be defined, for example the fine line between freedom of speech and hate speech which can be slightly different in every society.