Parliamentary Assembly
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Resolution 2552 (2024)[1]

Strengthening democracy through participatory and deliberative processes

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly believes that participatory and deliberative democracy processes can contribute to revitalising and strengthening democracy by harnessing citizens' collective wisdom and giving them the capacity to directly influence decisions that affect their lives.

2. Democracy is intrinsically interdependent with human rights and the rule of law. It is thus the only political model compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5). Regrettably however, democracy is backsliding in Europe and worldwide. This erosion of democratic standards manifests itself in the weakening of the separation and balance of powers, with parliaments being sidelined and the independence of the judiciary decreasing, in favour of a greater role for the executive. Civic space is shrinking due to restrictions on the freedoms of assembly and association, and freedom of the media is declining.

3. Democratic backsliding, in turn, fuels the mistrust of citizens towards public authorities and their disillusion with traditional political parties, thus contributing to the downward trend in electoral turnouts that is becoming a common feature among European countries, undermining the foundations of representative democracy. Against this background, political discourse has become populist, divisive and aggressive, paving the way for the rise of extremist parties and in some instances leading to hate speech and physical violence. Malignant actors interfere with democratic processes to increase polarisation and provoke destabilisation.

4. At the same time, European societies are facing unprecedented challenges of global magnitude. Geopolitical rifts, frozen and armed conflicts, financial and economic shocks, widening inequalities, issues related to immigration and national identity, the environmental and climate crises, the digital revolution and the rise of artificial intelligence are all contributing to an increased and widespread sense of uncertainty among Europeans.

5. Innovative methods need to be explored in order to safeguard democracy and ensure that democratic backsliding is countered and reversed. Participatory and deliberative democracy processes can contribute to rekindling citizens' trust in public authorities and strengthening their political engagement, including their participation in decision-making processes, in complementarity with representative institutions. Citizens should be given an active role in the political debate, beyond and more frequently than in the context of elections, and all segments of society should be involved, including those who are all too often underrepresented.

6. The Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe have confirmed, in their Reykjavik Declaration "United around our values", the resolve of member States to counter democratic backsliding, by adopting the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy and committing to their implementation. The very first principle indicates that member States will "actively enable and encourage democratic participation at national, regional and local levels through free and fair elections. As appropriate, forms of participatory democracy, including deliberative democracy, may be encouraged".

7. Different levels of citizens' engagement can be envisioned, from simple information sessions and consultations to focus groups, participatory platforms and ultimately the establishment of deliberative bodies, such as citizens' assemblies. These processes are not mutually exclusive and can be adopted in combination

1. *Assembly debate* on 25 June 2024 (17th sitting) (see Doc. 16001, report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, rapporteur: Mr George Papandreou). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 25 June 2024 (17th sitting).

with one another. They allow citizens to express their needs, submit their ideas and even co-participate in the decision- and policy-making process. Social media, artificial intelligence and digital tools, if used properly and transparently, can further boost the potential of participatory and deliberative democracy.

8. The Assembly has already called for the adoption of participatory and deliberative democracy processes by Council of Europe member States, through Resolution 1746 (2010) "Democracy in Europe: crisis and perspectives", Resolution 2397 (2021) and Recommendation 2212 (2021) "More participatory democracy to tackle climate change", and Resolution 2437 (2022) "Safeguarding and promoting genuine democracy in Europe", and it reiterates the considerations and recommendations contained therein.

9. Furthermore, the Assembly recalls that the Council of Europe is actively contributing to the development of standards related to participatory and deliberative democracy, and to their promotion through technical co-operation activities at national, regional and local levels. In particular, the Committee of Ministers adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)6 on deliberative democracy, the first international standard in this field, which invites member States to consider deliberative processes and suggests the principles of deliberative democracy that should be applied when implementing them. Welcoming these efforts, the Assembly calls on member and observer States of the Council of Europe to:

9.1. adopt participatory and deliberative democracy processes at national, regional and local levels, in accordance with Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)6, and ensure respect for the following principles in their design and implementation:

9.1.1. "availability of a legal framework,

9.1.2. clarity of mandate and design,

9.1.3. fair representation,

9.1.4. enabled and informed participation,

9.1.5. competent facilitation,

9.1.6. accountability,

9.1.7. oversight and good governance,

9.1.8. evaluation and learning";

9.2. participate actively in the work of the Steering Committee on Democracy, including the development of parameters to facilitate the application and implementation of the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy and the drafting of an implementation review report on Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)6 and/or a handbook presenting a collection of best practices;

9.3. take advantage of the expertise of the Council of Europe in the area of the relevant technical co-operation for the practical implementation of participatory and deliberative democracy processes, stepping up with financial resources if needed.

10. In addition, the Assembly invites the member and observer States of the Council of Europe, as well as States whose parliaments enjoy observer or partner for democracy status or hold another status with the Assembly, to consider the following measures:

10.1. promoting the use of participatory and deliberative democracy processes at all levels by creating an enabling environment, in particular by ensuring that adequate financial and human resources are available, and that sufficient time is foreseen for their proper design, implementation, follow-up and evaluation;

10.2. encouraging experimentation with innovative participatory and deliberative methodologies within the framework of relevant legislation, regulations and budget allocations, including the necessary mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and development of lessons learned;

10.3. ensuring that social media, digital platforms and artificial intelligence tools used to facilitate participatory and deliberative democracy processes are employed in a manner that is respectful of the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and is inclusive, transparent and safe from unwanted interference and cyberattacks; and that they are not manipulated through algorithms or biased by misinformation and disinformation that could affect the final results, also taking into account the provisions contained in the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law;

10.4. foreseeing the establishment of permanent multilevel “schools” on participatory democracy, inspired by the ones already created by the Council of Europe, to ensure that civil servants and facilitators involved in participatory and deliberative democracy processes can access specialised training opportunities and are provided with a platform for the exchange of best practices and lessons learned;

10.5. ensuring that the opinions or recommendations resulting from participatory and deliberative democracy processes are duly taken into account by the decision makers, that they are openly debated and that clear explanations are provided in cases where they are not followed;

10.6. institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy processes at all levels, adopting the necessary legislation or regulations and allocating the appropriate financial and human resources, in order to create permanent and fully legitimate citizens’ bodies that can operate side by side with executive and legislative bodies;

10.7. exploring the possibility of collaborating at a transnational level in order to pilot and implement multicountry or cross-border participatory and deliberative democracy exercises.

11. Citizens should be properly equipped and prepared to be actively engaged through participatory and deliberative democracy processes. The Assembly therefore invites member and observer States to design and include elements of education for democratic citizenship and human rights education in the curricula for formal education at pre-primary, primary and secondary school levels, as well as in general and vocational education and higher education, to ensure that all Europeans are aware of their rights and duties as citizens, and to strengthen participatory culture among them, in line with the provisions of the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7) and following the guidance of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.