

Democracies in Europe under threat

Conference proceedings

Introduction

On 21 November 2014 the Open Society Foundations and ERSTE Stiftung convened 80 policy analysts, academics, pollsters, investigative journalists, and activists from across Europe in Vienna to discuss the many stresses on democracy in Europe today. The event aimed to diagnose the deeper changes in European societies that are driving the rise of protest politics, populism, and extremism. Participants looked in depth at some of the most worrying trends in democracy in specific countries in Europe and considered what influences the outlook and decisions of voters in the “squeezed middle”. This short report highlights the most thought-provoking parts of the conference presentations, panel discussions, and the Q&A sessions. As all discussions took place under Chatham House rule the comments in this summary have been anonymized.

1. What are the deeper trends that are driving protest politics in Europe?

Presentations

The first panelist highlighted four major trends which have transformed how people think about and engage with politics and which may explain why people voted in the European elections as they did.

First, **a transformation in how media is produced and consumed:** people lean more towards online participation than voting. People under 30 are especially active online. Journalists need to go about their business in a completely different way than before: they need to keep up with stories by others (citizen journalists); their work has become much more about curating. These trends have created a direct line between the population and its leaders – as has been seen in the case of Beppe Grillo in Italy – rather than a mediated discussion via traditional media.

Second, **the transformation in media production and consumption changed how people form opinions:** high levels of trust in the internet, as compared to the radio or traditional news is a sign. The internet allows people to form specific interest groups, across geographies. The danger is that people are creating closed spaces: affirming biases and prejudices that people have, impervious to outside criticism or ideas. This creates new ways of expressing public opinion: rather than traditional surveys or focus groups, there is a whole new set of tools to measure public opinion. The question is how much value should be placed on an e-petition of X amount of signatures, or a Facebook group page with X amount of likes. How does one transform this into something meaningful?

Third, **people prefer to create and join social and political movements, rather than sign up to traditional political parties.** The UK, France, and Italy lost over a million of their party members; but it is very difficult for them to place value on these movements. The movements lower the barriers for participation in politics: it is quicker and easier, and it does not require the costs and infrastructure that traditional parties need.

Fourth, **politics has changed at the top**: there are new important political players within the parties that were not there ten years ago. Nick Griffin once said: “Ten years ago I’d go to the party office to organize a demonstration; now I go to the social media officer”. Social media has the power to get many people out on the streets, but parties have no clue about what they will be doing or saying online; there is less control over the message. Membership too, is ephemeral: parties cannot control their membership in the same way as they used to. Is this helping anti-establishment parties? Yes, but on both the left and the right.

It was stressed that all these changes are subject to rapid structural changes themselves: there is an increase in the infrastructure of internet, which may lead to more distributive systems, there is increasingly more data being shared by us and about us, and the internet changes our payment systems, etc. All these changes will continue to shape how people think about and engage with politics.

The second panelist argued that, while politics might be moving in one direction, demographics are moving the opposite way. **Three key demographic figures** were highlighted: 1) there are 505 million people living in the EU since Croatia’s accession - this figure is estimated to increase by one million every year due to immigration; 2) there are 32 million third country nationals in the EU; and 3) there are 17 million EU citizens who live and work in another member state than where they hold nationality (intra-EU mobility).

Looking at future projections for these figures, the panelist stated that democratic trends indicate that the portion of natives will become smaller, and the portion of third country nationals is likely to increase – figures for intra-EU mobility are unclear. By 2060, Europe will have a large share of retired people and an ever shrinking workforce. **The obvious ‘answer’ for Europe would be to attract and integrate migrants.** If everything else would be frozen, Europe would need to integrate 63 million immigrants in next 35 years to accommodate for 60 million less Europeans by 2060. It is highly unfortunate that European voters and politicians are going in the exact opposite direction. In the European Parliament elections, three anti-immigration parties came first: UKIP, Front National (FN), and the Danish People’s Party. These parties offer a mixed bag of anti-Europeanism and anti-migration points: they start talking about the Eurozone, but end-up talking about immigration. From these corners, and others, there are strong voices advocating for restrictive migration policy, including barriers to make it less attractive to move around within the EU. Nonetheless, Europe should be realistic about current challenges: there are more people at Europe’s borders who are entitled to protection than European countries would ever be able and willing to accommodate. The reality of consequences of operations like Mare Nostrum is that more people will come, because it means that these routes are being made safer.

To explain the psychology behind anti-migration politics and sentiment, the panelist argued it is important to remember that **net immigration is a very recent phenomenon in European history.** The continent has only experienced thirty years of net immigration since 1980, after 400 years of net emigration. The fact that for such a long period of time more people were leaving than coming has shaped Europe’s thinking, its institutions, and marked its mentalities. It created an asymmetry in perception: Brits should be able to live in Spain, but ‘they’ should not be able to come to ‘us’.

The third panelist looked at the implications of (structural) changes in Europe’s economy as Europe is moving out of the crisis. It was argued that, although structural changes will be more visible after the crisis than now while we are still in it, there **are a few systemic changes unravelling that all indicate a move away from national systems.**

First, continental Europe will emerge with a much more integrated financial system than before. National **financial systems** were the last bastion of national economies: they were perceived as self-contained and somewhat autonomous systems. This notion of national economic systems becomes essentially irrelevant; there already is strong analytical evidence that continental Europe no longer has independent national financial systems. **How that will affect Europe’s democratic systems is a big question.**

Second, transformations are likely to be seen in other areas too. The **energy system** could move towards an EU energy union, which would rather be the result of geo-political changes than of the

economic crisis per se. Another area for reform would be European **welfare systems**, for which concerns over their unsustainability pre-date the crisis, especially in Southern Europe. If the definition of the welfare system remains 'ever more leisure time' and a 'younger retiring age' that model is clearly unsustainable. The national (exclusionary) elements in welfare systems will also become problematic in an increasingly globalized European space.

The tendency to move away from national systems as Europe is moving out of the crisis has strengthened the **public perception that national elites do not protect their nationals or their national interests**; and a crisis is perceived as the time in which national elites should protect their national population. The consequence is that political elites are seen as a caste – which could be observed in Italy and Spain first, and might be seen next in France. The crisis itself did not necessarily create a dramatic increase in (new) support for populism. People tend to think that in a crisis people turn to right-wing populism, but it is not that simple. It is not just Wilders, Le Pen, and Farage, but also Tsipras and Grillo. The 1990s to the early 2000s were the golden age for mainstream parties, but perhaps that was the exception, not the rule.

Debate

The discussion featured questions and consideration over the role of national elites in a globalized European space, the relations between migration and democracy, and the role of social media in politics.

As for the **role of national elites in a globalized European space**, questions were asked as to whether it would actually be possible to 're-empower' national elites to protect their national populations. It was considered more likely that de facto national elites would lose prominence as protective powers. However, doubts existed over the possibilities to replace the roles of national elites with European elites or a global elite community.

In terms of the **relation between migration and democracy**, (implicit) hierarchies between 'those who came first' and 'those who arrived after' were considered a problem in many European democracies. In Europe's cultural mindset – shaped through 400 years of emigration – it is still more important where you came from, than where you live and contribute. There is an increasing gap between the people that have a say in a society and those that pay taxes. Where do the mobile citizens 'who arrived after' pay taxes, where do they have the right to vote? It is easier to criticize and scapegoat those that have no political say. The answer to these questions might make little difference when the percentage of mobile citizens in a country is very low, but if it gets to 15% their vote will have a big impact: look at the influence of mobile citizens in the recent Romanian presidential elections. European Union should improve the options facilitating intra-EU mobility, including the recognition of acquired skills across borders, ensuring non-discrimination between workers (same pay for non-natives), and the portability of rights.

Finally, on the **role of social media in politics**, it was noted that those who use social media smartly have not just done this as an 'add-on', but have considered it as an integral part of their work. Anti-establishment parties, both left and right, have been better at this than traditional parties. The most successful parties talk about themselves as movements. What's new? It was argued that perhaps what social media does to politics is more of a reversion to before the last thirty years; to before the post-war structured party system and the shaping of public opinion through conglomerations of media. The public sphere is much messier, but party politics fails to adapt to these changes. The speed and scale at which people live their professional and private lives have changed considerably due to the ability to communicate in real-time, anywhere, with anyone – and party politics is still done in the same way.

2. Hotspots in European politics: What will it be like to live in Hungary, Greece, and France in 2019?

In three parallel breakout groups, participants discussed potential routes for re-engagement of disillusioned and apathetic voters. Each group started with two or three initial brief presentations of current trends, followed by an open discussion. In each of the groups, the moderators asked the discussants to also present their vision about the specific country in 2019, the year of the next European Parliament elections.

Hungary

Hungary is the first country in Europe whose leader has openly declared his desire to go against European values and become an “illiberal democracy”, leading the first panelist to argue that one should not underestimate the significance of this step. **Democratic values are now subordinate to national interests.** The OSCE declared elections in Hungary free but unfair, while Transparency International has cited Hungary with regard to state capture issues since 2011.

One of the panelists shared the wide-spread view that the democratic transition in Hungary was an economic project. There was an implicit promise that change would bring Western, European standards (like in Austria), but these were false promises. By early 2000, Hungarians were disillusioned with capitalism; the democratic transition was not a success. **Orban is building on this political context.** In 2019, one should not expect a dramatic improvement in Hungary, as the brain drain caused by emigration is likely to exacerbate issues. It is notable that almost half the children in Hungary live under the poverty line and yet there were no protests when the family allowance was removed.

It was pointed out by another panelist that Victor Orban, an exceptionally gifted politician, is more charismatic than any other leader in the region. Therefore, strong checks and balances are needed as a counterweight to a charismatic leader. At the same time, **one should be cognizant of the value system of the Hungarian population.** One third is pro EU and have pro EU values but nearly 50% is more conservative, something which has not changed over the last 25 years.

It was mentioned that in 1956 the revolution happened because people could not leave the country, saying there was no other option. **Now people have an option, which dilutes the resistance.** During the Internet tax demonstrations that took place in November 2014 there was no sign of any solidarity with the other Hungary – rural etc. This is problematic.

Some participants referred to **potential withdrawal of EU cohesion funds**, which are desperately needed by Orban, as **the only tool the EU has.** Yet it is difficult for the EU to currently criticize someone within the club. The EU has also failed to set stipulations on how its money is spent and there is a lack of any monitoring of the basic values that were a condition of entering the EU. The European Popular Party (EPP) is privately critical but will not step out of line, whereas the US has taken a much stronger line and Norway is also showing that it is possible to resist.

There is a strong heritage of resistance to Russia in Hungary, millennia of resistance; and yet a strong populist government has dislodged this historic tradition and Hungary is now allying with Russia on certain matters. This is evidence of the influence Orban has exercised in Hungary. Also, the constitution in Hungary has been amended 15 times in two years. It was noted, however, that **what is happening in Hungary is not unique; there are similarities across the region.**

Greece

From the break-out session on Greece it became clear that the crisis in Greece is not just an economic one, but also a political, democratic, and moral one. It is a very complex, multi-phenomenal issue, which needs to be thought through carefully.

The first panelist stressed the **importance of distinguishing between root causes and triggers** of the far right threat to democracy in Greece by posing the questions "Why in Greece?" and "Why now?". Describing the situation in Greece by referring to a tree, with roots (root causes) and branches (effects), it was stressed how different elements of Greece's past, including the dictatorship and civil war, have had an important influence. It was stressed that nationalist ideology, racism, and sexism exist within many political parties, not just at the far-right spectrum, as well as that other crisis-hit countries, like Spain and Portugal, have not seen a surge in the far right like Greece has. It was also laid out that Greece has problems with the crisis and management of the crisis, as well as with migration and the management of migration. The latter can only be improved by 2019 when there is political will, it was argued.

The second panelist spoke of interviews conducted with people of minority backgrounds, in which they had been asked how they think their lives will be in 2019. Most people indicated that they have more problems now than they had in the past and, looking to the future, many said they wanted to leave Greece. The people interviewed do not expect to receive any 'gifts' from the government; rather they feel the need to fight for their rights. Equally remarkable was that **the fears and hopes for 2019 of people from a minority background were not much different from that of the average Greek.**

The third panelist focused on the way journalism is challenged in Greece, with a very small group of people, who have a lot of money and connections to public officials and business magnates, which controls the media. Consequently, mainstream journalism only shows one side of reality and anything that challenges the mainstream discourse on austerity or corruption is faced with opposition. Many journalists have been laid off, and those who were able to keep their jobs are working under very challenging conditions – with intimidation and break-ins in office occurring much more than what one would expect in an EU member state. While there have been some attempts of alternative journalism online, its effect is limited, as these initiatives often lack the money or the power to really make things public. **The outlook for 2019 is grim, as nobody can challenge austerity or other government policies.**

There was a general agreement in the room that **migration should not be associated with the economic crisis** and people were reminded that Greece was by definition an emigrating country. Attention was also paid to good examples in other countries. It was mentioned, for example, that in Spain social movements like 15M or the anti-eviction movement PAH have been able to incorporate migrants in their campaigns in the same way as non-migrants.

The discussion also turned to Syriza, asking if it could provide a real alternative. It was said that, while it is likely Syriza will win the upcoming elections and push through reforms, it will not be easy for them to negotiate with the troika because of their lack of technical experience. It was also pointed out **that a culture of self-censorship exists within Syriza too**, for example in relation to the issue of Cyprus, and that there are no TV channels, and few other media, which are favorable to them. Nonetheless, it was argued that Syriza should be given the benefit of the doubt, saying that the situation in Greece simply cannot continue like this and that risks are needed to improve the situation.

The discussion also briefly touched upon more general issues, such as the problematic nature of the left in Europe, as well as on different levels of solidarity, including the global, EU, national and class levels.

France

The discussion in this break-out session started by suggesting that the inclusion of France in a discussion on “hotspots in European politics” alongside Greece and Hungary said much about the “l’état de la France” versus “l’état de les français”.

The first panelist started by contrasting the country’s image outside of France with the realities of the French attitudes and institutions. When you talk to people outside of France, France is racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Roma. The country does not do very well in terms of its own image, and that is not entirely without reason: France has Le Pen, but also a real history of right-wing thinking. But in actual numbers, the statistics show that the situation is not as bad as it seems: 82% of French people are in favor of same sex marriage, versus 84% in the UK, and 92% in the Netherlands, and 72% of French people hold positive views of Muslims, versus 24% in Italy and 64% in the UK, and all this while the Muslim population in France is three times the size of that in the UK. For anti-Semitism the picture is roughly the same. The one big exception is the attitude towards the Roma, who are only considered favorably by 33% in France - but that rate is extremely low across the board, with 38% in the UK and 10% in Italy. So France does not bear quite as badly as one might expect. France has a big problem, but it is not to do with the attitudes of the French population, but with a **mismatch between the attitudes of the French population and the French institutions.**

There is a **paradox between the power of the President and the weak ability of the parties to produce candidates that are capable of leading.** The logic of presidentialization does not favor (the representation of) civil society groups, and the Fifth Republic offers very little incentives for civil society groups to organize.

The current strength of the FN might just be the last flourish. There is evidence that racism is falling and tolerance is rising among the French population. The kind of populism we are seeing in France now is not new. It has little to do with identity as typically conceived (‘us versus them’), but more about what it means to be a citizen (anti-elitist, anti-caste). **The support for the FN is a response to the global crisis of the nation state to protect and deliver for ‘the nation’ and the crisis of the Fifth Republic.** There is only roughly 40% of the FN vote that le Pen can count on. If you take the other 60% of reluctant supporters, most will cite the fact that they are dissatisfied with mainstream alternatives. Of the 40% of core voters, half also say that they are dissatisfied with the system. There is a small portion of hard-core supporters with concerns about minorities, but mostly with immigration. Attitudes toward immigration do fuel the vote for the FN, but attitudes towards migration are complex, and they fit the FN’s narrative that the French elite is out of touch with the concerns of the people, who are experiencing a sense of betrayal, of no longer being protected by the elites.

In terms of the scenarios for 2019, the faith of the current system of representation and institutions is the first question that people would need to ask themselves. What kind of shock could bring the system to an end? Will Marine le Pen come first or second, or gain so much support that she would be able to bring it down? No, that is unlikely. But **the current system is weak enough to crumble itself:** there is a danger of high abstention rates and deep fragmentation on the left and right, which will undermine the government’s capacity to govern. What one might see is a change by default in terms of more positive attitudes towards minorities. In conclusion, the first panelist said to be relatively optimistic about the French, but a lot less optimistic about the system of the Fifth Republic.

The second panelist said that one of the key questions for minorities in France relates to political representation. Ethnic minorities (from African and Arab origin) represent 12% of French population, but only 6% in municipal councils, and 2% in Parliament. Why? Political parties, especially on the left, are on the defensive: they are not willing to take the initiative to increase participation.

What might explain the decrease in political participation? There has been a general decline in turnout in elections; political parties are bad at organizing effective campaigns. Trust in politicians and party membership has drastically declined: in a 2013 survey, 85% in France answered negative when asked whether people felt understood by politicians. Numbers for party membership have also dropped. One of the reasons is that party membership has become amazingly boring and self-centered. Members of the

Socialist Party spend most of their time debating with other party Socialists; nobody communicates with ordinary citizens. No surprise that people look for alternative ways to express their political preferences or participate in the political process, it was argued.

But there is hope: the 2012 Presidential campaign saw a 3.1 percentage point higher turn-out in areas where the Socialists ran a **door-to-door campaign**. Most of the votes there were taken from people who considered voting for Marine Le Pen. People who thought that they would cast a protest vote this time reconsidered their vote after a five minute conversation at the door, and voted for Hollande instead. Direct contact is a very powerful way of changing people's attitudes and behavior. It is clear one can change people's minds on abortion or gay marriage by going and talking to them. Of course, if you have that conversation on Election Day and then have no engagement for five years, you should not expect that to happen again in 2017. The French Socialists had the first-move advantage, and are still very far ahead compared to the UMP and FN, but the FN is catching up. There is a lot to improve for door-to-door campaigns: all parties say they do field work or door-to-door campaigning, but 80% of campaign budgets are spent on TV adds. There is a discrepancy between what parties say and do. Operationally, door-to-door campaigning is also a massive operation, and there is a lot to improve about what is done with the data collected and the concerns expressed, as well as with the continuation of contact after Election Day.

There are a few other trends that are changing political realities: **new technology makes it easier to organize large-scale free campaigns, as well as to coordinate**. There is a lot of international exchange happening on the practical use of these tools and techniques: everyone went to the US to see how they ran their campaigns.

The discussion suggested that France has an issue with managing its own reputation, and its own symbolic representation – both inside and outside the country. However, it was also questioned to which extent the negative image of France is not just a very Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. The perspective is completely different in the Netherlands, Germany, etc.

There was consensus that a new political offer needs to be at the heart of change in France. That offer needs to include a narrative around the issue of work: there is unease between the status of work and the kind of work that is on offer in France now. In discourse analysis, the word 'souffrance' comes up in relation to work. How can politics develop a narrative that convinces people to make the right sacrifices for the right decisions?

3. Beyond protest: How could the disappointed democrats and reluctant radicals get interested in politics again?

The final plenary panel focused on how politics is changing and how many voters are disengaging from politics, having lost trust in democratic institutions and the process of politics. As put by the moderator, who referred to Machiavelli's saying that politics cannot be disjointed from civil virtue, one could ask if politicians are disjointed from civil virtue or if they are aware of where the citizens in this day and age are. Additionally, one can wonder where the civic in this is and whether people have a voice in it.

Presentations

The first panelist pointed out how often **attention is only paid to minority groups which are perceived to cause trouble**, while those who keep quiet, like the Chinese, do not generate much concern. Focusing on Muslims particularly, the panelist explained how in Europe they had learned to

operate the political system, often fully participating in it, until at a certain moment people were 'discovering' they were Muslims. The example was given of how, when the Iranian revolution happened in 1989, Muslims in the UK, who participated in trade unions and formed part of the Labour Party, were no longer seen as worker representatives, but as Muslims. This is when Muslim identity started to rise up and the discussion turned to Muslims. Similarly, in Germany Turks became Muslims, even if there was hardly any difference on the ground.

So how do we deal with Muslim minority issues if being Muslim is not the real issue? Rather than it being about Muslims, it was argued, it is related to the feeling of losing control, of decisions no longer being taken at local level, of 'Brussels' being perceived as the great Satan, and of the decline of national control over banking. In other words, **the real issues are globalization and supranationalization**. The panelist predicted that alienation from power will only grow; pointing out that raising those fears tends to target Muslims, as well as Roma, but especially Muslims. But why Europeans are so hung up on Muslims? As pointed out by the panelist, **many examples of good practice can be found at the local level**, including cooperation with imams, but often these do not make it to the national level. At the same time, every few years there are major moral burps over Muslim issues in countries like Denmark, which help populists gain votes. In the words of the panelist, it is 'political noise on a different planet', as there is a 'mismatch between the noisy fluff and reality on the ground'.

So how does one get around this? One is pessimistically led to conclude that one cannot do much about it, but if one looks closer one will see opportunities. Immigrant children are often left out of the political system, but politicians have to take note of them. **The more immigrants and children can be integrated, the more likely it is that things will change**. We hear with disappointing regularity that immigrants are not interested in politics but over half of Muslims vote; not as much as natives do, but they do when they have the vote. Another key issue highlighted by the panelist was 'recognition', noting we are way behind in relation to giving **full recognition (in addition to legal recognition) of being part of society**. This is where the emphasis should be on during the next 20 years.

The second panelist focused on populism in Europe, stressing it is a very diverse phenomenon. There is no such thing as a pure popular movement, as the pluralism of populism is part of the nature of populism itself. Moreover, populism is nothing new, we have seen it since the 1980s albeit with different scales, but we **need to diversify solutions because of its plurality**. Clusters are formed, it was argued, around the following four issues: 1) anti-immigration / anti-Islam; 2) distrust towards the European integration project; 3) strong regional identities; and 4) corruption and institutional malaise. **Populist parties pick and choose from this 'menu of discontent', making their programs diverse, so it is dangerous to put them in the same basket**. The panelist therefore stressed the need to talk about the issues that are raised by populists, as well as the failures of mainstream politics. It was suggested that we have to be open about how we deal with these issues and actors, as well as inclusive, and that we need to celebrate the fact that politics is often complex and reject using the 'them against us' approach. In other words, we need to start **understanding politics**, which is about winners and losers and about trying to get settlements and living with those. While politics is too often portrayed as a one shot deal, it is constant. Raising doubts about increased participation being the answer, the panelist argued that some people just do not want to be involved and that getting everybody engaged is not always the best solution. In addition to the need to be realistic about the diverse forms of populism, it is important to keep in mind that different contexts matter. Solutions therefore relate to the need to be imaginative in how we present politics, it was argued.

The third panelist, turning to potential routes for the re-engagement of disillusioned and apathetic voters, suggested that rather than discussing 'Democracies in Europe under threat', the emphasis should be on 'Democracies in Europe under construction', as there are alternative channels outside the traditional channels. Attention was paid to a specific example of deliberative democracy: the GI000, a big deliberative citizen's summit, with randomly selected citizens from across Belgium. The purpose of this deliberative action was threefold: 1) to move beyond the language of 'minorities and majorities' and 'winners and losers'; 2) to address the problem that political parties are distrusted; and 3) to try to move beyond elections themselves, focusing on the 'in-between-democracy'. One needs to think about what can be done to move democracy forward, beyond traditional channels. **Deliberative democracy** is one

option. It is not a new phenomenon, but it **can bring people together at a national level to discuss complicated policy issues**, such as migration, wealth distribution, and social security reforms.

The G1000 clearly functioned in Belgium, as well as across the border, as a model for inspiration. **By organizing something at country level, which was visible in the media, it became more powerful.** Another example given concerned the constitutional convention in Ireland, which brought two thirds of random citizens together with one third elected politicians, creating interesting dynamics. Nonetheless there are challenges and obstacles related to deliberative democracy: 1) the term is often misused in order to put the responsibility in the hands of citizens, claiming politicians are no longer responsible; 2) classic civil society organizations can feel threatened by the organization of instances of deliberative democracy, as the discussion between organized NGOs and ad hoc democratic initiatives is not always evident; and 3) traditional media often feel uncomfortable with the 'messy affairs' of deliberative democracy and is often not supportive, whereas social media tend to be more 'on board'.

Debate

Before opening the debate, the chairperson reiterated that **democracy is never a given**, but rather reinvented every morning, reminding everyone that politics will always be about conflicting views and that that will move us forward. Democracy was fought for on the streets in bloody urban battles in Europe and the US, and we need to keep fighting, albeit in a peaceful way, it was said.

It was pointed out that the problem is not just related to populists, but also to center parties, referred to as clans which have been in power for a long time, which take on what the populists say. So, how do we get the political discourse back to policies rather than identities? We ought to express solidarity, it was argued, and create a Europe wide debate, for example on our responsibilities towards Greece, and **move away from the 'winning power discourse' and 'favors politics'**. Other participants agreed it is time to start talking about values and real substance, while one specific person commented that the left-right spectrum does not fit any longer, with parties looking too much alike, but that there is no replacement for it yet.

There was a general agreement in the room that it is **important to think beyond elections**, as politics is too important to only make it dependent on elections. When it was asked if the G1000 could be replicated in different countries, and if so if it would make a difference, the panelist on this topic mentioned it would require further thinking, but that it is already happening quite a lot at the local level, although some of it is not very visible. There is a need for a big initiative in order to make solutions on a smaller scale, which is why politicians need to be shown this is a valuable way of doing politics, it was argued.

While it was agreed that it is important to be inclusive, there was some disagreement on the level of inclusiveness needed in debates about populism, with a question being raised about **where to draw the line**, for example when conflict spills out of the political arena or if populists propose ideas which undermine democracy or human rights. The panelist that had talked about this issue agreed this is a tricky question indeed, but argued that excluding people from the debate may not be the right thing to do. Similarly, when asked whether one should try to bridge across movements, building solidarity between those who are against populists and bring them together, it was argued that this may not be the best way forward, as one needs different approaches in different contexts. **There is no 'one size fits all' solution.** Moreover, it was added, getting all opponents in one room would be exactly what most populists want.

Attention was also paid to the **role of the nation state**, which is losing power for a variety of reasons and which does not know how to deal with the transnational elite. One of the participants warned, however, not to underestimate the power of the nation state, which especially in the European context has a more negative than positive influence, as it prevents rather than innovates new processes. Several questions also related to the fact that **some democracies in Europe are not delivering the basics**, posing the question if this is a moment to move to a minimum of democratic standards for EU member states and for presenting them with costs if they fail to live up to these standards. Specific attention was

thereby paid to the way in which European politicians address the issue of Putin's Russia, as well as Orban's Hungary.

Closing remarks

In closing, the conference organizers emphasized that this conference 'Democracies in Europe under threat', refers to democracies in plural on purpose, as there is not one European democracy. It was added that **speaking about 'the democracy' is as limited as speaking about 'the populist'**. Participants were encouraged to exercise patience when discussing these complexities and to look at different ways to approach these issues. It became clear that while many different conversations come together, the situations on the ground differ. As became clear in the panel session on Greece, there is a strong desire and critical mass for change. In France, on the contrary, the threat that the mainstream will not change is something worth exploring further. Hungary, although a political outlier, could pave the ground for anti-liberal trends that others may soon follow and thus should not be taken lightly. Participants were stimulated not to leave with a feeling of consensus, but rather with a feeling of more nuanced perspective.