



**European Committee
of the Regions**

The State of Democracy in East-Central Europe: Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall

Concept note

Background

The 9th of November 2019 will mark 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the start of Europe's largest wave of democratisation since the end of World War II. In the 30 years that followed, countries in Central and Eastern Europe have gone through rapid democratization, and profound economic reforms, while the rest of Europe has also seen its democracies deepen further and European unity strengthened. Since 1975, Europe has seen increases on almost all aspects of democracy, including key attributes, such as Checks on Government and Fundamental Rights, which are measured by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices. These successes have been achieved, inter alia, by promoting effective multi-level governance, based on greater involvement of citizens and ensuring that decision making powers lie at the level closest to the people.

The past decade has, however, also seen several European Union Member States show declines on attributes such as Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government and Impartial Administration. East-Central Europe¹ has been most affected by these declines, particularly in the sub-attributes of Civil Liberties, Freedom of Expression, and Media Integrity. Such declines have been registered primarily in Hungary, Poland, Romania. Among the EU candidate countries, Serbia has shown notable declines. In other countries, including a number of Western European Member States and beyond Europe, pressing challenges to democracy relate to the falsification of true democratic debate by the spread of fake news or populist speech. These challenges do not belong to Europe only, but the almost simultaneous trends find common causes in the immigration, financial, economic and other crises that the EU has faced in the past 10 years. In the face of these threats, these democracies need to be strengthened by reinvigorating public participation into decision making processes, including at the sub-national level, protecting and promoting the rule of law, increasing the accountability of elected officials across all levels of government and ultimately safeguarding the equality of citizens to shape and influence the quality of their governments.

Event objective

This conference, *The State of Democracy in East-Central Europe: Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall* commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the aim to contribute to building consensus among policymakers, politicians and thought leaders on the course of democratization in East-Central Europe over the past three decades. In so doing, it aims to form the basis for more open debate regarding scenarios to improve the state of democracy in these and other EU Member States.

¹ East-Central Europe denotes a European sub-region composed of the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia; Source: *Global State of Democracy Indices, International IDEA 2019*
<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/#/indices/>

Event description

This one-day conference will gather former heads of state and government from East-Central Europe, leading representatives of state institutions and the civil society organisations, high-level decision-makers from the European Union institutions, and representatives of inter-governmental organizations.

Panellists will be invited to explore the evolution of and the current situation regarding key democratic attributes. International IDEA's GSoD defines these attributes as representative government, the provision and protection of fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration and participatory engagement. The panel debates will reflect on the GSoD findings, as well as on the seminal works by thinkers that strongly influenced the third wave of democratization in East-Central Europe in the early 1990s.

Date and Location

The conference will take place on Wednesday, 20 November 2019 at the building of the Committee of the Regions, at Bâtiment Jacques Delors, on Rue Belliard 99-101 in Brussels.

Partnership

The conference is co-organized by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR).

International IDEA is an inter-governmental organization, with 32 Member States from across the globe. The Institute works to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and an enabler of sustainable development, through support to the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. The Institute works to achieve these objectives through consolidating and disseminating comparative knowledge on democracy, convening and facilitating dialogues at country, regional and global levels and providing policy advice to actors across the political and institutional spectrum.

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) works to bring EU citizens closer to the EU. By involving regional and local representatives who are in daily contact with their electorate's concerns, but also by inviting citizens to participate in various events and debates, the CoR contributes to reducing the gap between the EU institutions' work and EU citizens. is the voice of regions and cities in the European Union (EU). The CoR represents local and regional authorities across the European Union and advises on new laws that have an impact on regions and cities. The Committee is a political assembly composed of 350 members and 350 alternates from all EU countries who have been elected at local or regional level.

This partnership is both, strategic and symbolic: The fall of the Berlin Wall set off the era of major democratic transformations in Europe, and united Germany and its various regions; furthermore, democratic gains made in the region over the past decades were enabled by a significant devolution of powers with the emergence of vibrant institutions of representative and participatory democracy at regional and local levels. However, the work of the CoR is key to addressing the commonly cited underlying reasons for growing citizen discontent in the performance of democracy: persistent socio-economic disparities between regions and the rural-urban divides. Other Brussels-based partner organisations working on deepening democracy in Europe will be closely involved as speakers, participants and contributors.



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The State of Democracy in East-Central Europe: Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall

20 November 2019
Brussels, Belgium
Draft Agenda

08:30 – 09:00 REGISTRATION

Please bring photo identification

09:00 – 09:15 OPENING SESSION

Welcoming Remarks

Mr. Kevin Casas Zamora, Secretary-General of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Mr. Karl-Heinz Lambertz, President of the European Committee of the Regions

09:15 – 09:30 KEYNOTE SPEECH

Ms. Heidi Hautala, Vice-President of the European Parliament

09:30 – 11:30 SESSION 1: POPULAR ASPIRATIONS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

Part I - Presentation of International IDEA's 2019 Global State of Democracy Report and Indices

International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) [report](#) provides evidence-based data and analysis on the global and regional state of democracy. It contributes to public debate on democracy, informs policy interventions and identifies possible solutions to trends affecting the quality of democracy. GSoD is based on two key principles: popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control. The indices produce data for 155 countries and are updated annually. The database is publicly available at www.idea.int/gsod-indices

At the outset of this session, the most recent trends identified in the 2019 GSoD report and indices will be presented for the East-Central European region, and will be contrasted with developments across other regions.

- ***Mr. Sam van der Staak***, Head of Regional Europe Programme, International IDEA

Part 2 - Panel Discussion: Popular aspirations, achievements and current challenges

Over the past 30 years, countries in East-Central Europe have experienced rapid democratization, profound economic reforms and accession to the European Union. With functioning democratic institutions in place, integrated market economies, and strong public support for democracy, the achievements in the first decade the transition looked both impressive and irreversible.

However, countries that were once referred to as success stories of democratic transition now find their democratic records weakened. Some democratically elected leaders in the region have come to question the legitimacy of core principles of liberal democracy. Democratic reversals have been marked by consolidating power into the executive, increasing the role of money in elections, weakening the judiciary and damaging the independence of the media. These developments have affected the checks and balances that are vital for democracies to flourish. This session will provide a forum for those who pushed the levers of change thirty years ago to analyse initial successes and comment on the causes of current challenges. Examples of questions to be addressed include: What are the greatest achievements of the democratisation processes in the region and what factors determined their success? What early signs of discontent with transition reforms were overlooked? What are the key current challenges for democracies in the region and what responses are needed to build more resilient democratic systems?

Panellists:

- **Mr. Jan Fischer**, *Former Prime Minister of the Czech Republic (2009 - 2010)*
- **Ms. Heidi Hautala**, *Vice-President of the European Parliament*
- **Mr. Raul Mälik**, *Former Foreign Minister of Estonia (1998-1999)*
- **Mr. Petre Roman**, *Former Prime Minister of Romania (1989 - 1991)*

Moderator: Mr. Rikard Jozwiak, Brussels Correspondent, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

11:30 – 12:00 BREAK

12:00 – 13:30 SESSION 2: ADDRESSING THREATS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING – STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL CHECKS AND BALANCES

Panellists will explore public sentiments towards the functioning of political systems in the region and will review key issues that underpin the current concerns over the quality of democracies in these countries. As is often articulated by analysts, these include: weakening of democratic checks and balances, undermining the independence of judicial institutions, consolidation of power in the hands of executive branches of government, and curbing freedom of the media and expression. Panellists will be invited to review and revisit some of the key strategies that have been tried to date to address these trends and propose their vision for renewed actions at various levels.

Panellists:

- **Mr. Richard Wike**, *Director of Global Attitudes Research, Pew Research Center*
- **Ms. Zsuzsanna Szélényi**, *former MP, Hungary (1990-1994; and 2014-2018)*
- **Mr. Adam Bodnar**, *Polish Commissioner for Human Rights*
- **Mr. Jan Macháček**, *Chair of the Board of Trustees, Institute for Politics and Society (Czechia)*
- **Ms. Jessica Fortin-Rittberger**, *Prof. of Comparative Politics, University of Salzburg*

Moderator: Ms. Magda Jakubowska, Res Publica Foundation (media outlet), Poland

13:30 – 14:30 LUNCH

14:30 – 16:00 SESSION 3: LEVERAGING MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

The panel will serve to outline key achievements in promoting multi-level governance in the region and its contribution to democratic governance and public participation in decision making over the past three decades. Furthermore, the discussion will serve to outline what opportunities multi-level governance offers for strengthening democratic resilience and protections against democratic backsliding, including in the areas of accountability, rule of law, anti-corruption and citizen engagement.

Panellists:

- **Ms. Kata Tuttö**, Representative of Local Government of District 12 of Budapest
- **Ms. Randel Länts**, CoR Rapporteur on the Action Plan against disinformation, Member of Viljandi City Council, Estonia
- **Mr. Vytautas Grubliauskas**, Mayor of Klaipėda, Lithuania

Moderated: **Laurent Thieule**, Director of Directorate for Legislative Works I, European Committee of the Regions

16:00 – 16:15 BREAK

16:00- 17:00 CLOSING SESSION: LEARNING FROM THE PAST, LOOKING FORWARD

Representatives of the European Union and leading inter-governmental organizations that help shape and promote the implementation of democratic commitments across Europe, such as the Council of Europe and OSCE/ODIHR, will be invited to provide concluding reflections. The discussion will focus on what approaches could be used to strengthen the resilience of democracies in the region.

Address on behalf of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union

- **H.E. Ms. Hanna Lehtinen**, Ambassador of Finland to the Political and Security Committee of the EU

Reflections from the panellists:

- **Dr. Marcin Walecki**, Head of Democratization Department, OSCE/ODIHR
- **Dr. Ruslana Vovk**, Democracy Reporting International
- **Mr. Daniel Mitov**, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria
- **Mr. Sam van der Staak**, Head of Regional Europe Programme, International IDEA

Moderator: Massimo Tommasoli, Permanent Observer for International IDEA to the United Nations

Closing key-note speech:

- **Ms. Věra Jourová**, EC Vice- President designate for Values and Transparency