Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

W. B. Yeats, The Second Coming (1919)

A proposal for a broad-based campaign to support democracy in Europe

Working document for the Central and Eastern European Civil Society Forum
Bucharest, 25 November 2016

This working document provides background material for discussions in working groups and invites reflection on several lines of action converging on the idea of a trans-European civil society organisations' (CSO) campaign to support democracy across the European Union (EU).

The proposed lines of actions are:

1. an **overarching framework and a common banner for a concerted CSO campaign on democracy during the period 2017-19**. Such a campaign would embrace existing, planned and new activities on democracy support, in as many EU Member states as possible.

2. a **series of 'citizen democracy dialogues' at local and national level**, in as many EU Member states as possible, involving a wide range of stakeholders, to open up sensitive issues and debate problems with the state of democracy. This can be followed up, if relevant, with a selection of priority issues with a view to launching broad-based campaigns, at local and/or national level to achieve corrective action.

3. **concerted advocacy at EU level** in part to support effective democracy monitoring and robust use of the 'rule of law' instrument, but also to gain support for national and local level citizen initiatives and dialogue-oriented approaches more suitable to combat populism and nationalism.

4. joint planning primarily on democracy issues with relevant CSOs with a view to preparing **cooperation with governments due to assume EU Presidencies in 2017-20**.

THE CONTEXT.

The next few years will undoubtedly see increasing political and social instability across Europe, against a background of low economic growth and continuing austerity, exacerbated by continuing conflict in the Middle East, continuing flows of economic and political refugees towards Europe, continuing provocations from the East.. Within the EU, disaffection with the EU itself as well as with established institutions and political elites at national level will continue to be exploited by nationalist political movements, often preaching or tolerating hate speech and sometimes seeking to clamp down on certain basic freedoms. The rise of populist parties in older EU member states will have a negative impact on the already worrying developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The issue of immigration is likely to dominate national debates and election campaigns in many EU countries, including the French and German elections in 2017. Right-wing populist parties[1] seem set to consolidate their position in several EU Member states, old and new. Once in power, some such parties have a poor record on respecting democratic process, the independence of judiciary, media pluralism etc. Democratic politics, human rights and the rule of law seem bound, therefore, to come under increasing pressures in coming years in most countries of the EU. The EU itself is particularly vulnerable, facing major policy challenges requiring consensus, and being a project based on pluralism, shared sovereignty, and reconciliation of differing interests.[2] Given the tendency towards protest voting and low turnout in European Parliament elections, mainstream parties are likely to lose even further ground to right-wing populist parties in the 2019 elections (during the Romanian EU Presidency). They are faced with a massive challenge to defend the benefits of European cooperation and the values of an open society.

The 2016 Central and Eastern European Civil Society Forum will consider how civil society should be responding to these challenges. Many expect CSOs to provide a bulwark against extremism, to work in defence of democracy and protection of human rights, by raising public awareness, mobilising public opinion, through training and advocacy etc. But the wave of nationalism and right-wing populism across Europe clearly presents a special focus and an added urgency for action by civil society. The Programme of the Forum provides for a set of questions and proposals in the form of workshop debates related to the challenges ahead. The Civil Society Development Foundation hopes in this way to facilitate a consensus among CSOs and its friends across Europe about how to proceed to defend democracy in the most effective way.

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[1] left-wing populism is less common and focusses more on radical economic alternatives to austerity, rather than on the right-wing agenda of immigration, sovereignty, executive power etc.
[2] http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/06/14/can-eu-survive-populism/j1vb

I DIAGNOSIS - POPULISM AND ITS DANGERS

A first question is the degree of consensus among CSOs about the diagnosis of the key risks and challenges facing civil society in Europe over the next few years. One of the phenomena which is affecting virtually all EU Member states in some degree is populism, particularly its right-wing expression which is currently the most powerful and potentially the most destructive force menacing democracy across the globe. The recent rise of populist politics, left and right, across Europe has arisen, many would argue, in response to the challenges of globalisation and rapid change, creating economic and socio-cultural insecurities and causing a growing polarisation in many societies between perceived 'winners' and 'losers'. Growing numbers of citizens channel their fears and frustration into angry protest against the establishment, often perceived as corrupt or self-serving.

Much of the success of populist movements is due to the way they can give 'voice' to those who feel abandoned and in so doing may perform a valid democratic function raising issues that may otherwise be belittled or ignored. Responding to what may be a wide range of grievances, populists tend to pit 'the people' against 'the elite' and their experts, and offer overarching simplistic explanations and solutions. Thus, populists on the right tend to demand restoration of national sovereignty vis the EU and national controls on immigration as panacea. This need not offend the democratic process as such. Mainstream politics, civil society and all other democracy stakeholder, such as Trade Unions, religious bodies, educational bodies - and the EU - need to become pro-active and face the challenges, rather than deny debate. This may mean more *civic education and media literacy*, but also more *capacity for listening*, for *citizen participation and consultation*, and more open discussion (eg of the challenges of immigration, job insecurity etc.). It may well mean responding to demands for greater *transparency and accountability of public institutions and political parties.* It can also mean a greater commitment to social justice or to investment to counter economic insecurity. Protecting democracy from populism requires both a *politically literate electorate* and a *political system that is responsive to real and perceived injustices*. *Is this is business as usual for civil society?*

The most serious problems - and concerns for democracy - arise when populist demands are accompanied by rhetoric, or maybe only insinuations, that demonise immigrants, asylum seekers, Muslims or other minorities; when populists call for limits to protection for minorities, dismiss principles of international law and question equality of rights and fundamental freedoms. This is when civil society has a clear watchdog function, which it already provides and needs to continue with great vigilance.

Once in power, populism as in Hungary and Poland tends to get more ugly[3]. Claiming to represent 'the people', populists see little need for debate, little justification for divergent opinion and may seek to stifle opposition by strengthening executive power over democratic institutions, the judiciary and the media. Backsliding on democratic commitments has been undeniable. EU pressure on Hungary in 2013 brought only marginal changes and since then government control of the media has further tightened. Threats of EU legal action and possible sanctions in the case of Poland have had little effect to date. Some fear they may prove counterproductive and believe dialogue, quiet persuasion (and new elections) more likely to bring positive change over time. The EU response to both countries continues to be much debated. Meanwhile the *shrinking space for civil society* action becomes a major concern. *Broad non-partisan coalitions of democracy stakeholders become ever more necessary for mutual protection and greater legitimacy.* Civil society allies elsewhere - and especially the relevant European political formations[4] - could play a greater role in mobilising pressure (or persuasion) from abroad and from the EU.[5] .

II   RESPONSES TO POPULISM - CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND MOBILISATION? *(Workshop 5)*

If one of the main reasons for frustration with democracy and populist tendencies is the lack of responsive government, then one of the ways of countering populism may be to *facilitate citizen participation in decision-making*. This is most easily achieved *at local level*, through various types of consultative mechanisms and local plebiscites, which complement - but may also undermine - local representative democracy. There has been much innovation over the years, in Europe as in newer democracies elsewhere. *Participatory local budgeting*, enabling ordinary people to decide how to allocate part of a municipal or public budget, initiated in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 1989, became a most outstanding and inspiring example of local people power, empowering precisely the most marginalised sections of the population. The model was followed by hundreds of local communities in many parts of the world. In Europe, there is solid experience in countries with very different cultural traditions, from Spain, Portugal and Italy to Germany, Sweden and Poland.[6] Though successful at the time in improving responsiveness and accountability, many such initiatives have died out, due perhaps to declining public interest, less political support and less scope for citizen initiatives in a period of budget austerity.

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[3] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/17/problem-populism-syriza-podemos-dark-side-europe

[4] Fidesz, the Hungarian government party is a member of the PPE (Christian Democrat group); PiS, the Polish government party is a member of the AECR (Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists).

[5] recent publications on countering populism in Europe include the EPC's "EU@60 Countering a regressive and illiberal Europe" http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_7020_countering.pdf; the CarnegieEurope article http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/06/14/can-eu-survive-populism/j1vb ; the report by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2015/12/conclusions_capacity_building.pdf;

[6] www.buergerhaushalt.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Studie_Hope_for_democracy_-_25_years_of_participatory_budgeting_worldwide.pdf

Innovations regarding citizen participation continue nevertheless in many diverse forms, Estonia and Iceland providing some of the most interesting examples. The question is what can be learned from their experience which may be applicable elsewhere.

Iceland, which has also used participatory budgeting in Reykjavik and elsewhere, launched a most ambitious process of participatory constitution drafting, after the financial crisis of 2008 which discredited most of the political elite. The Icelandic Parliament launched and initially supported what became a remarkable efficient process of drafting by a citizen assembly with crowdsourcing. Though the constitution was finally approved by referendum in 2012, politicians have sought to sabotage the process at various stages, failing to legislate to introduce the constitution. Mounting public anger is being channelled into a new (populist?) political party, focussed on adopting the constitution and now seriously challenging the government. The saga continues! [7]

Estonia has a not dissimilar experience, in the aftermath of government financial scandals, with the creation of an online platform, The People's Assembly, to mobilise citizens and crowdsource proposals for new legislative initiatives. (Estonia benefitted from the software and know how developed by the Icelandic Citizens Foundation). The experience is seen as a success[8]. Estonia has also embarked on other open government and e-democracy initiatives, ostensibly to enhance transparency and accountability. Hence the need to question their utility and relevance given the rise of a right-wing populist party EKRE (Estonian Conservative National Party) showing anti-immigrant, anti-LGBT and euro-sceptic tendencies as populist parties elsewhere in the Baltics and Scandinavia.[9]

III   RESPONSES TO POPULISM - POLITICAL AND MEDIA LITERACY *(Workshop 3)*

Now more than ever before, populist movements benefit from the development of new media and social networks as a means to build appeal and to enlarge their electoral bases. It has been shown that far from allowing for civil and constructive dialogue, new media and social networks are actually contributing to more polarisation in democratic societies. While there has always been a general tendency for people to acquire information mainly from sources to which they feel ideologically closer, new media has contributed to increased political divisions. Within the vast space of the internet there are lots of isolated bubbles where like minded people communicate only among themselves and are mutually radicalised against the diverse others. New collective

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[7] http://verfassungsblog.de/icelands-citizen-constitution-the-window-remains-wide-open /

[8] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lhoyZfRsgfhQkcSppu3L78_Uz_IugUkzMycN2xg3MPo/edit#

[9] www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/vassilis-petsinis/contentious-politics-in-baltics-new-wave-of-right-wing-populism

identities are formed and reinforced. Truth and lie are mixed together and become relative. Both Brexit and the result of the presidential elections in the United States cannot be fully explained without taking into consideration the substantial role of new and old mass media.

In the new information age, the role of the traditional media to provide objective, "true" information has been slowly vanishing, as news outlets struggle to survive and adapt. Objective reporting seems not to be interesting to a wider audience which instead is drawn by conspiracy theories and fake stories. These instead increase the appeal of populist leaders riding the wave of anti-system rhetorics. This trend has been exploited by the tabloid
 media and has spilled over into the traditional media as a way to adapt to an economicaly chalenging environment. More recently state actors outside the EU supporting anti-democratic movements have increasingly started to invest considerable resources in media to advance their geopolitical agendas.

Against this background, there is a response from civil society organisations with initiatives aiming to support critical thinking and media literacy among citizens. New media and information technology can be returned to their positive goal and should be increasingly used as a tool to promote transparency, civic scrutiny and to expose moves going against the public interest of citizens. One example of CSOs coming together in this particular area is TransparenCEE initiative (Technology for Transparency in CEE and Eurasia) a network of Central Eastern European and Euroasian organisations interested in using technology in transparency and accountability work, which promotes collaboration and sharing of good practices. The networks includes CSOs working on open data, fact checking, monitoring of public authorities etc. The initiatives in these fields are very often based on voluntary work and have not been received enough attention and support so far[10]. The most recent developments in Europe and across the ocean require a reevaluation of their priority. Very recently, the Parliament adopted a resolution aimed to counteract anti-EU campaigns, which includes the proposal to invest more in awareness raising, education, online and local media, investigative journalism and information literacy, which would empower citizens to analyse media content critically. Its scope should be broaden and these measures should aim to address more of the challenges identified in this working paper as well as providing more support for the types of civil society initiatives mentioned above.

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[10] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/20161118IPR51718/meps-sound-alarm-on-anti-eu-propaganda-from-russia-and-islamist-terrorist-groups

IV RESPONSES TO POPULIST THREATS TO DEMOCRACY - IMPROVING POLITICAL PARTIES? *(Workshop 2)*

Populists find easy targets in mainstream political parties, often the least trusted of public bodies. Politicians are at best seen as ineffective careerists, at worst as deeply corrupt and unscrupulous, escaping justice by relying on parliamentary immunity. It becomes difficult to accept that they are a vital constituent part of parliamentary democracy. Yet they are essential and irreplaceable, providing the main channel for recruiting, selecting and training candidates for election to public office, and the sole means for forming governments and opposition. In Parliament, they own the legislative process; they control the tools of scrutiny; they are entrusted with national sovereignty. They are expected to set out their core ideas on government, mobilise citizens into expressing specific needs and demands, and transforming these into viable policy options. Electoral competition is supposed to make them effective and responsive. Instead it too often produces a self-serving elite, which protects itself from competition, not least by setting high obstacles to party formation. Civil society struggles to work with such parties without being accused of partisanship and often seek to bypass them, dealing only with the executive.

Yet parties are now showing they are highly vulnerable to right-wing populists playing on fears of immigration and espousing nationalist mythology. *How far should civil society seek to "save" traditional parties and play a role in helping to reform them, to make them more transparent, more responsive, more trustworthy?* Some reforms are self-evident, such as *strict enforcement of ethical codes with zero tolerance for corruption or other crimes*; *full transparency for party finance*; **clear rules for membership rights and obligations**, *leadership elections and responsibilities, candidate nomination procedures* etc. Other reforms might be more ambitious - a commitment to *gender parity, youth and diversity quotas, primaries to select candidates, regular public hearings for MPs* to listen and report back. Some reforms might need legislation (eg phasing out closed list electoral systems - which oblige voters to choose a list without marking candidate preferences and thus tend to be anti-democratic, allowing party bosses excessive power). But most simply require political will. These may indeed be some examples of internal renovation and reform.
Can civil society acknowledge and welcome such change, without slipping into partisanship?

The *political party foundations* should probably take a major responsibility in this process. Active in East and Central Europe (mainly before accession) and across the world in promoting their sister parties, helping them to play a useful role in emerging democracies, they have singularly neglected the state of political parties in Europe in recent times. While their focus has been on working with their ideologically close political parties, political party foundations have often developed only ad-hoc

cooperation with other civil society organisations. In the new context this cooperation should become more strategic and cross-ideological, with the unifying goal of defending democratic institutions, fundamental rights and the rule of law whenever and wherever they are endangered by populist tendencies.

V   RESPONSES TO POPULISM - CITIZEN DIALOGUE AND DEBATE *(Workshop 1)*

"Citizen Dialogues" at local and national level, could form a more prominent part of civil society action in the next few years. Given the nature of rising populism, often based on anxieties about social change, the impact of immigration, unaccountable elites etc. it can be important to encourage people to voice their fears and debate policy options in a dispassionate environment. Public citizen dialogues can provide an important means not just to reiterate basic democratic principles but also to diffuse tensions, dismiss simplistic solutions and demonstrate the need for social consensus.

Citizen dialogues could draw on the experience of "National Dialogues", used in a several countries as a tool of political transformation, bringing protagonists to work together to resolve their conflicts. Most often used in part of a peace process in emerging democracies usually after a major crisis - the Tunisian National Dialogue was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize - they can also be an informal initiative, launched by civil society, to enable dialogue and encourage a more participatory peace process, as with the Basque Social Forum in 2013 constitutional and political change.[11]

Such citizen dialogues could also draw on the experience of national dialogues supported by International IDEA, using the 'State of Democracy' methodology starting from a set of common indicators in the form of open-ended questions.[12] This allows civil society and other local stakeholders in each country (eg with business and professional associations, academic and media bodies etc) to take ownership of the debate on democracy, to shape the debate and make a diagnosis according to their priorities, to seek consensus across a broad spectrum of opinion and thus build a coalition for change. The approach is non-adversarial and non-judgemental. It can probe, challenge, debate, seek consensus, and mobilise action on key priority concerns. Democracy audits of this sort have been carried out in widely differing circumstances, in all continents, in new and old democracies. Experience from the *Netherlands* in 2005-6 could be instructive. The International IDEA methodology could be adapted to current democratic challenges in Europe, with more in-depth investigation for instance into questions of cultural identity, solidarity and equality, and the issue of political representation and responsiveness. Drawing on the experience of Estonia and Iceland *(workshop 5)*, citizen

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[11] www.c-r.org/accord/legitimacy-and-peace-processes/national-dialogue-and-legitimate-change
[12] www.idea.int/sod-assessments/approach/sod/.

dialogues should certainly make best use of new technologies and social networks for stimulating debate and crowdsourcing ideas.

The dialogue approach is also echoed in the 'Space of Freedom' project launched in *Poland* by the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD)[13] involving a series of debates with ordinary citizens to discuss the legal, political, economic and social foundations of democratic state of law. (In recognition of its impressive efforts and initiatives, which include a think tank and a media platform and a huge capacity for citizen mobilisation, the KOD was awarded the European Citizen's Prize by the European Parliament in 2016).

Key to the success of these initiatives is *the capacity of civil society to form a very broad non-partisan platform, embracing CSOs in all sectors and democracy stakeholders from across different walks of life and demonstrating a willingness to dialogue with all-comers who respect democratic debate*. CSOs themselves may need to review their existing practices to achieve this new type of coalition for democratic action.

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[13] www.kod.ngo/kod-who-is-who/aboutkod/#

VI RESPONSES TO POPULISM - TRANS-EUROPEAN CAMPAIGNING (Workshop 7)

A potential line of action for the period 2017-2020, is for European CSOs to work together to develop and coordinate a more strategic and coherent set of activities in support of democracy at national and local level. One idea is to mount a truly transnational campaign across the EU using a common banner or logo to achieve greatest visibility and impact.

The campaign could embrace existing, planned and new activities by CSOs relating to various aspects of democracy promotion, with particular emphasis on public debate, awareness raising and citizen participation. Depending on the local situation, the campaign could also focus on the media, on hate speech, on corruption etc. More significantly, the campaign should also be broad enough to include most other sectors of civil society activity, whether in social, environmental, educational spheres or even in purely recreational and sporting sectors. All CSOs need an open democratic society to function freely. All can declare their interest in protecting democracy and signing up to the campaign, identifying themselves with its aims and maybe even articulating their concerns for democracy in Europe in the course of their activities.

The campaign, which would seek to engage with the public and with those in elected office and in public institutions, would need to highlight the basic principle that democracy begins with political equality, equal rights and mutual respect, that it gives every citizen a voice in governing their community, at local and national level and beyond, impacting on the very existence of the European Union. The general objective would thus be to galvanise citizens (and immigrants) across Europe into a greater understanding about their role in protecting democracy in Europe.

Some valuable experience already exists about campaigning across borders. The "No Hate" campaign provided a loose framework for a wide range of initiatives. The campaign provides important lessons learnt in terms of mobilisation of various stakeholdrs across various countries, coordination, visibility, common messages and sogan, media involvement or political support.

VII EU SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY & RESPONSES TO BACKSLIDING (Workshop 4)

The EU faces several limitations in its efforts to support internal democracy in the EU, as compared with its work with accession states and third countries. First, it is much more strictly bound by the Treaty in terms of its 'competence' to support or protect democracy

and secondly it is the Council that is placed in the driving seat for any sanctioning of Member States in response to backsliding (unlike classic Treaty infringement proceedings). The two procedures foreseen under Article 7 of the TEU aims at ensuring all EU Member States respect the common values of the EU, including the rule of law. It allows the Council, acting with a ⅘ majority of its members to issue a *warning* (using the 'preventative' mechanism) in case of "a clear risk of a serious breach" on the EU's values; it also allows the Council, acting with *unanimity*, and with the consent of the European Parliament, to determine the existence of "a serious and persistent breach" and only then use a sanctioning mechanism. After pressure from the European Parliament and civil society, and despite lack of support from the Council, the Commission invented for itself, in March 2014, a 'new Framework for addressing systemic threats to the Rule of Law', allowing the Commission to act directly, to enter into dialogue with a Member State to search for solutions, using a three stage process involving an assessment and Opinion, a Recommendation and a Follow-up (that could trigger an Article 7 procedure). The Commission triggered the process with Poland in late 2015, entering into dialogue then issuing an Opinion in June 2016 noting concerns about the constitutional tribunal and the reform of media laws. There is little sign as yet of movement by the Polish government.

The European Parliament has regularly sought a more activist approach by the EU institutions in monitoring democracy in Member states and combatting backsliding. Back in 2013, the Demos report[14], commissioned by the European Socialist group, proposed regular monitoring by the Commission together with data to be assembled by the Fundamental Rights Agency, noting that 'literature on democratic 'backsliding' has focused on post-accession compliance with formal institutional commitments, such as the focus on the enforcement of minority rights rules, the correct functioning of political parties and party systems, and the control of corruption. However, a weakening civil society, decline in civic participation, decreasing political and social capital, lower levels of voter turnout, a lack of trust in political elites, and the emergence of grassroots populist movements all point to a deeper malaise underpinning the democratic culture in both new and old democracies of the EU'. Demos proposed an EU Democracy Index, combining sophisticated indicators to encompass concepts such as social capital and better identify problems 'upstream'. Nevertheless, even Demos foresaw EU intervention only in cases of 'core transgressions' and warned about potential backlash.

The ALDE group in the European Parliament has now picked up the challenge and is pressing to establish a new 'mechanism' on democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights[15] with a regular democracy scoreboard for Member states that could trigger EU action if and when 'risks' or violations occurred. The latest version of the EP resolution

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[14] www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/sites /default/files/DEMOS_report.pdf

[15] the latest text was voted in the LIBE committee on 10/10 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A8-2016-0283+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN

is highly complex, providing for an annual report/scoreboard, an annual inter-parliamentary debate ("part of a multi-annual structured dialogue between the European Parliament, national parliaments, the Commission and the Council, and it shall also involve civil society, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the Council of Europe), and EU 'policy cycle' as well as the incorporation of existing legal instruments. The Commission may shrink from such a new responsibility, likely to be counterproductive and to fuel anti-EU sentiment. The Council is clearly divided with a group of countries now seeking more EU-level intervention, not dissimilar to the European Semester dialogue on economic governance[16].

While civil society may wish to welcome or support this initiative, it has undeniable *weaknesses*, leaving the Commission in charge of the process, thus assuming it can remain strictly neutral. It continues to focus on signs of government backsliding on rule of law, rather than on broader socio-political trends which indicate trouble upstream. *It omits entirely any consideration of action at national or local level where citizen dialogues could examine and respond to the EU's democracy reports before they are debated at EU level.* Indeed, civil society is mentioned only in passing in the lengthy EP Resolution. One could have expected a much stronger acknowledgement of the value of local/national citizen-led initiatives and dialogue-oriented approaches more suitable to combat the possible temptations of populist and nationalist views of the world. Though it may be too late to influence the EP position, some lobbying to this effect on selected EU Foreign Ministers (and relevant Presidencies cf *Workshop 8*) may be more productive.

Another weakness of the EP report and resolution is its silence regarding *the role of partisanship among the EP political groups when using its own soft power to criticise backsliding.* Some naming and shaming is overdue. The fact that the Hungarian government continues to benefit from the loyal support of its allies in in the European Parliament tends to discredit all their supporters rhetoric on democracy issues. It was an unholy coalition of PPE and Eurosceptic groups that succeeded in defeating two amendments to the resolution of 16 December 2015 (a follow-up to the resolution of June 2015 on the situation in Hungary) would have made the resolution tougher by stating that "the conditions for the activation of the rule of law framework and Article 7(1) TEU are fully met"[17]..

The prospects for mobilising effective Article 7 sanctions against serious backsliding as in Poland and Hungary still therefore seem somewhat remote. Which means soft power becomes that much more important, together with the role of civil society, addressed in more detail in Workshop 6.

[16] http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/newsroom/news/2016/didier_reynders_in_rome_to_discuss_importance_rule_of_law_in_europe

[17] http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/kfgeu/maxcap/system/files/maxcap_wp_27.pdf

VIII SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION ON DEMOCRACY (Workshop 6)

It tends to be taken for granted that civil society will provide a bulwark against extremism in EU. However, the pressures which are driving a polarisation in society and causing a flight towards populist pipe dreams are also dividing families and friends. Civil society may indeed find itself be weakened as a force for tolerance and solidarity in Europe. In countries like Hungary, CSOs have a lonely struggle to survive and protect their integrity. The refugee crisis has diverted many CSO energies and resources towards humanitarian ends. Continuing austerity in most countries has also seriously reduced grant aid and sponsorship for civil society activity.

In this context, the continuing financial support provided through Norway/EEA grants is a vital lifeline for CSOs working on democracy and human rights in Central and Eastern Europe. There are few other sources. The EU Commission does have grant aid programmes for democracy projects, though not named as such. The *Rights, Equality and Citizenship* programme (REC) can support projects contributing to the protection of human rights and rights deriving from EU citizenship. The *Europe for Citizens* programme supports civil society projects, ostensibly to foster European citizenship and improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at EU level. In practice, there are highly relevant priorities for 2016 - debating euro-scepticism, solidarity in times of crisis, combating stigmatisation of immigrants and building counter-narratives to foster intercultural dialogue etc. The difficulties for CSOs in accessing such funds have less to do with substance and more to do with procedures and requirements about involving a minimum of three countries.

The Brussels village brings together a very large community of CSOs, European civil society networks and EU umbrella organisations yet which seem to exist in a different world, focussed on dialogue with the EU institutions. Fine statements are now being made about combatting populism. 177 European and national civil society organisations and trade unions proclaimed in their joint statement, ahead of the EU27 Summit in Bratislava on 16 September that "As people search for answers, euro-scepticism and nationalism, intolerance and misinformation are winning out over cooperation, humanity and solidarity with one another. We must all – leaders, media and individuals – actively and at every opportunity speak out and act against division, marginalisation of different groups in society and those that play on fears for their own political ends".[18] Heads of State proclaimed in the Bratislava declaration itself 'We need to improve the communication with each other – among Member States, with EU institutions, but most importantly with our citizens. We should inject more clarity into our decisions. Use clear and honest language. Focus on citizens' expectations, with strong courage to challenge simplistic solutions of extreme or populist political forces".[19]

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[18] www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/Global/eu-unit/reports-briefings/2016/CSO%20statement%20-%20final%2012092016.pdf
[19] Www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/09/16-bratislava-declaration-and-roadmap /

The proposed trans-European CSO campaign to support democracy will need to call on the active support of those 177 CSOs, together with many more national CSOs. Can we mobilise those networks? Will they be willing to campaign under a common slogan using their own resources? BREXIT has served as a wake-up call, but it is not clear if there will be any follow up with civil society, any real awareness that dialogue with citizens must take place at local level, not only on Brussels websites and twitter accounts.

IX WORKING WITH EU PRESIDENCIES (Workshop 8)

The rotating EU Presidency can in theory provide a privileged point of contact for civil society with the upper reaches of EU decision-making. The Presidency has the possibility, working in a trio of Presidencies, to prepare specific initiatives and host some symbolic events. The current trio of the Netherlands, Slovakia and Malta, will be succeeded in July 2017 by the next trio Estonia, Bulgaria and Austria, then in January 2019 by Romania, Finland and Croatia. The more national CSOs can work equally in a trio formation, the more influence they should be able to exert with their respective presidencies, influence about thematic priorities, influence too about highlighting civil society dimensions of existing EU priorities.. Even greater impact might be achieved by linking two trios eg from July 2017 through to July 2020. That is the theory. And FDSC is keen to start cooperation other CSOs in this perspective. What ideas might be feasible, linked to the democracy campaign? The period in question will see the lead up to the European Parliament elections in June 2019, the attempts to Europeanise the campaign with Spitzenkandidaten for the next EU Commission presidency, nominations and hearings for new Commissioners. The populist right may or may not manage to agree on a single Spitzenkandidat, adding spice and danger to the whole campaign.

Civil society could focus on simply mobilising the vote, especially the youth vote, to achieve the highest possible turnout. It could sharpen its campaign for democracy, solidarity and an open society, and against right-wing populism. It could take a more critical stance on the state of European democracy, pressing for greater transparency and decentralisation, easier procedures for European Citizens' Initiatives, gender parity on party lists and senior positions, stricter conditions for retiring Commissioners, an increase of e-voting and crowdsourcing of policy ideas.