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*Democracy and electoral systems
Some reflections on strengths and challenges*

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- I. We meet to celebrate 25 years of democratic evolution in Central and Eastern Europe, and, at the same time, acknowledge the MEN AND WOMEN WHOSE VISION ENCOURAGED THE CREATION of ACEEEO in 1991.

As we celebrate the victory of freedom over authoritarianism and oppression, we remember that ACEEEO has been taking action over this first 25 years to advance the strengthening and enlargement of liberties, not only within its 24 member countries, but among other international associations and fora beyond Europe.

The nature of the governments around the world experienced, and the ideologies behind them, have changed radically during the last third of the past century.

We have gone from authoritarian to democratic regimes. By the second half of the past century, almost 60 countries out of 120 all over the world were living as democracies. In the 1970s, Greece, Portugal and Spain began a profound transformation towards democracy in the world. As a result, we have had a change to favour freedom and equality.

Like never before in the history of humankind, blocs have been broken and countries have been set free. Nowadays, we have 218 countries and territories throughout the planet, of which 200 have electoral laws.

Approximately 150 countries are considered "free" for having democratic elections according to international standards. Most of the 24 countries that are part of

ACEEEO embrace democratic principles and practices for the organisation of elections.

The Association has, at the same time, witnessed and accompanied the efforts displayed by each of the electoral management bodies to improve the democratic practices in the organisation of elections.

II. Keeping in mind that democratic principles were established according to the cultural and political background of each country in this region of Europe, let us make a brief review of some of its most important achievements.

1. Organisation of elections

During these 25 years of democracy, the members of ACEEEO have celebrated a total of 406 elections: 116 have been presidential; 176, parliamentary; and, 114 have been referenda.

2. Electoral management bodies

In relation with the institutional design to define who organises the elections, the majority of the European countries of ACEEEO, 22 of them, decided the electoral management body would be independent of the political parties and the public powers.

Two of them, Hungary and Slovakia, adopted a mixed model, where the government is involved in some parts of the electoral process, while specific commissions act independently for the organisation of elections.

Independent electoral commissions are characterised by their organic and budgetary autonomy. The members of their governing bodies are elected, fundamentally, by the parliament, taking into account their own professional and political autonomy profiles.

Elections in this European region, with a few differences, comply with the democratic principles of being free, transparent and fair.

3. Political party systems

The countries of the European region which are members of ACEEEO have been able to set up multi-party systems that cover a wide range of political and ideological aspects. Their electoral framework establish different requirements to maintain the political parties' legal registration, as well as a variety of financing formulas for the political organisations.

In all, within the 24 countries of this region we find 262 political parties with parliamentary representation. In Serbia alone, they are as many as 27, followed by Hungary and Kazakhstan, each one with 23.

In contrast, the political parties with no parliamentary representation in this region add up to 591. The countries with the smaller amount of political parties not represented in parliament are Lithuania with 7, followed by Albania, with 11, and Belarus, with 12.

It is the citizens, with their votes, who elect those in government, their political representatives. The legitimacy of the public power comes from the citizens casting their votes freely and transparently.

However, despite the democratic achievements in the region, it is the nature of any democracy that guarantees liberties to also produce new claims and demands. In Democracy, new challenges and problems come along with Freedom. Nowadays, the claim is for quality democracy, and we are walking towards that.

III. Let us review some challenges and new problems in democracy:

1. Decay of the public, of the authority

We live in an age where the greatest public good is DEMOCRACY.

The American National Election Studies recorded that in the decade of the 1960s, 75% of the citizens trusted the government and considered its actions as proper.

Today, the approval levels range between 20 and 35%.¹ Even if democratic governments originally achieve an important legitimacy at the elections, they are going through a problem of performance legitimacy.

Social demands by a greater number of free citizens, bigger migratory flows, more young people who have increasing access to technology and innovative mechanisms for social interaction, as well as more NGOs and micro powers hindering government's actions, make democratic governance more complicated.

These days we witness the fragmentation of power. There is not a unique centre of political power, but many of them. This hinders or paralyzes decision-making and deteriorates the quality of public policies and the government's capacity to meet the voter's expectations, resulting in a legitimacy gap.

Obstruction and paralysis due to the lack of agreements are more often in the democracies of Europe and of the rest of the world.

Democratically elected powers face more difficulties to win authority every time.

2. The power of elections and its limitations

According to Prof. Matt Golder, of Pennsylvania State University, between 1946 and 2000, 867 elections took place in 199 countries, that is, almost 2 elections per month. In the European region, the members of ACEEEO have had 406 elections in 25 years, approximately 16 per year and a little over an election per month. This is unprecedented *vis a vis* the region before 1991.

However, there are two tendencies in the region which make governance difficult for the power legitimated at the polls. Electoral victories by political majorities are fewer every time. The power is a lot more fragmented, which increases the presence of small parties. In this region of Europe, of the 853 existing parties, 262

¹ Naím, Moisés. *El fin del poder: Empresas que se hunden, militares derrotados, papas que renuncian, y gobiernos impotentes: cómo el poder ya no es lo que era [The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be]*. (Spain: Debate, 2013 [U.S.A.: Basic Books, 2013]) p. 109.

are already represented and 591 are waiting to have access to it. It is the decline of the majorities and the rise of the minorities. Governance heavily relies on the formation of political coalitions, because they can tip the scales for, or against, the bigger parties.

The other tendency is towards the decrease of the incumbent to continue in office. It is more complicated to get re-elected because of the broken promises, the corruption and the natural wearing down from being in power. In the 1950s, 35 incumbents were re-elected; while 37 lost the elections. By the 1990s, only 11 were re-elected, and there was a change in power in 46.²

Building majorities and continuing in power is less frequent every day. That makes governance difficult, which also makes it tough to take decisions and can bring political paralysis.

In conclusion, there are more liberties, more elections, less continuity in power and greater difficulty in the efficient exercise of political power for political leaders.

3. Party systems in transformation

In a study by the European Council of Foreign Relations about political parties, the outstanding changes they are experiencing in Europe are highlighted.

- European power elite is being insistently questioned by 45 new, small anti-establishment parties that are winning some positions in the parliaments and are strong advocates of direct democracy, in the form of referendum.
- These new parties are of both the political left and right; they prefer closed borders, minimum migration and economic protectionism. They challenge the elites in the name of the people. They are focused on domestic affairs and

² *Ibidem.* p.141

usually lack guidelines for foreign policies. It is through coalitions that they become government.³ They amount to 1,329 deputies in 25 countries.

These new parties are radically changing the big, traditional parties. They are changing the selection of candidates by prioritising internal elections where leaderships are quite ephemeral, temporary, and have access to power through the digital world using technology to disseminate messages and influence the results. They use social networks to mobilise and coordinate great demonstrations *via* NGOs and outside traditional political associations.

The aforementioned is a menace to democracy's effectiveness and quite often affects its reputation and that of politics.

4. Education for democracy

The greatest issue for democracy is possibly to accompany the legal and institutional building of the morals and ethics that support democracy. We have been very focused in making laws to rule the democratic life. At the same time, we have paid attention to building institutions to enforce the laws. Electoral management bodies are a modern version of the democratisation process. These is all well, and necessary, but is not enough.

Democratic consolidation has lacked permanent and consistent programmes on civic education and citizenry ethics. The pedagogical work of democracy must be permanent on issues like inclusion, tolerance, respect to differences, abidance to the laws, education for peace, non-discrimination, non-violence, transparency, and accountability, among others.

It will be very difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate violence if exclusion, inequity and injustice prevail. Resources are meant to deal with the pressing issues.

³ Susi Dennison y Dina Pardijs. [Los partidos insurgentes europeos bajo la lupa](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/07/15/actualidad/1468583000_779890.html). en *Suplemento Ideas*. El País, Spain – July 17, 2016. http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/07/15/actualidad/1468583000_779890.html

Democracy is a system that has an added ethical value by protecting and securing human dignity. It protects the individual rights for humans to exist within a framework of freedom, equality and justice. At the same time, it strives for social cohesion to act in favour of the common good through building consensus and agreements.

These are the strengths and challenges of democracy, not only in the European region, but also in other regions of the world where they still prevail, even if with variations.

Let the challenges of democracy encourage us to continue to perfect it. Democracy is a perfectible, and not perfect, framework for governments, whose foundations are freedom and equality. The government of the free is never perfect.

In democracy, every time a problem is settled another one arises immediately, and it must be solved in freedom and with democratic ethics that uphold human dignity.

Congratulations ACEEEO!!!