

The Interdependence of Democracy and Social Cohesion:

Strengthening representation and democratic participation
through public dialogue and civic engagement

7th Forum for the Future of Democracy
(Limassol, 13-14 October 2011)

Why, what, how, and Then ?

Why?

Twenty years on from the end of the Cold War, the Council of Europe bears witness to unprecedented pan-European unity based on the common values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. However, the Organisation and its members are fully cognizant of the continued challenges to democracy in Europe. The Forum for the Future of Democracy has been set up to engage our societies in a collective and cross-sectoral analysis of the state of democracy in Europe in order to maintain and further develop effective democratic institutions, processes and practice capable of addressing contemporary challenges.

Governments with democratic legitimacy are required to deliver on both the rights and needs of people or they risk losing legitimacy and public support. This means guaranteeing fundamental freedoms whilst fostering sustainable economic development and sustainable communities, social cohesion and education. In order to achieve this, Governments need to respect, promote and practice democratic governance. Basing democratic governance on a series of clear and solid principles is a key building block to creating and sustaining the "soft security" that facilitates enduring domestic and international peace and social and economic progress.

What?

The Cyprus Forum will focus on the interdependence of democracy and social cohesion, addressing the issues from a political point of view. It will examine the main trends in, and challenges to, stronger linkages between democracy and social

cohesion.

The Council of Europe defines social cohesion as “a society’s capacity to ensure the well-being of all its members by minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation” Moreover, “social cohesion is a dynamic process and is essential for achieving social justice, democratic security and sustainable development. Divided and unequal societies are not only unjust, they also cannot guarantee stability in the long term”¹.

The Council of Europe considers social cohesion to be essential for the fulfilment of the Organisation’s three core values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Globalisation and other developments are putting under pressure and weaken the human bonds of solidarity and shared responsibility. The emerging pattern of a fragmented society, with rising inequalities and an increasing number of people reduced to living on the margins of society, poses one of the greatest challenges to social cohesion in Europe.

Solutions to these trends lie in strengthening stakeholder responsibility and empowering people to actively engage in democratic participatory processes. Such approaches provide an opportunity to broaden the reach of democracy as well as help (re)-legitimise the mandate of elected representatives.

How?

The transversal approach to the topics undertaken in the Forum means that many issues central to social cohesion are mainstreamed across the plenary and working sessions. These include: intercultural dialogue and the integration of migrants, the specific challenges facing Europe’s young people, intergenerational issues and life cycle approaches, and new concepts of governance through partnership and dialogue. Examples of good practice will be presented and deliberative democracy polls during the Forum event are being considered.

The Forum’s reflections will also draw on the findings of the recent Report of the Group of Eminent Persons of the Council of Europe on ‘Living together: Combining diversity and freedom in 21st-century Europe’² which assesses the seriousness of the risks to society, identifies their sources and makes a series of proposals for “living together” in open European societies.

The discussions at the Forum on the interdependence between democracy and social cohesion will be broken down into two sub-themes, each examined during two separate working sessions on the afternoon of day 1 and the morning of day 2 :

¹ New Strategy and Council of Europe Action Plan for Social Cohesion approved by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 7 July 2010

² The Group was headed by the former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer:
<http://book.coe.int/ftp/3667.pdf>.

Subtheme 1 : Empowerment and participation: key elements for democracy and social cohesion

Working session 1A. Promoting and enabling broad democratic engagement by empowering all members of society

Working session 1B. Enhancing civic dialogue and social solidarity for the well-being of all

Subtheme 2: *Democratic institutions, active citizenship and social cohesion*

Working session 2A. Creating and improving processes for participation by all members of society

Working session. 2B Creating and improving structures for sustainable and cohesive democratic societies

and Then?

The Cyprus Forum outputs are expected to contribute to the 2012 Forum session and recommendations for further action by the Council of Europe and other stakeholders in the fields of democracy and social cohesion