

NECE WORKSHOP

“Fragility and Resilience of Democracies in Europe. Where now for Citizenship Education and Civil Societies?”

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“Is there a Crisis of Democracy?”

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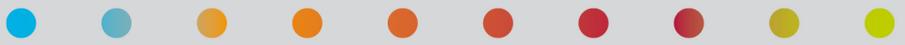
Democracy seems to be inextricably linked to crisis. This has been true since the ancient writings of Plato and Aristotle. During the twentieth century, the literature and talk on crisis peaked in the 1920s and 1930s and again in the early 1970s. The left was talking about the “crisis of legitimacy” (Habermas; Offe; O’Connor) while the conservatives were writing about “overload” and criticizing an oversized and overburdened “big government”. More recently, the debate over the crisis of democracy goes on under the heading of “post-democracy” (Crouch *inter alia*).

However, the term “crisis of democracy” is only vaguely defined. Nevertheless, one can distinguish between “acute” and “latent” crisis. But even then, democratic theory has not been able to conceptualize “latent crisis of democracy”. The analytical question remains: when does a specific democracy enter the crisis space and when does it leave it again?

I will address the question of whether the crisis of democracy is an invention of theoretically sophisticated but empirically ignorant theorists who adhere to an excessively normative ideal of democracy, on three levels (Merkel):

- first, on the level of quality of democracy indices developed by experts;
- second, on the basis of the survey reports on the opinion of the demos;
- third, on a deeper analysis of crucial spheres of democracy.
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The results hint in different directions. According to expert indices and polls, the message is that there is no general crisis of democracy. However, the partial analyses on participation, representation, and effective power to govern reveal unresolved democratic challenges, such as an increasing level of exclusion of the lower third of the demos from participation, an inferior representation of their interests, and a loss of democratic sovereignty in policy making.



In addition, we are witnessing the rise of right-wing populism in Eastern and Western Europe. But the question emerges: is right wing populism a threat to democracy or a cure against a supposedly excessive liberalism in present democracy? Does it make a difference for the resilience and quality of democracy whether right-wing populists are in opposition or in government, whether they are a junior or dominant partner in governing coalitions, or whether they act in stable well-consolidated or unconsolidated democracies?

What appears to be obvious is that we are witnessing changing axes of democratic legitimacy. It is not clear yet whether this will autocratize or democratize our democracies.

