

European Democracy Action Plan: A “democratic vaccine” against disinformation and hate speech



□□□ A thematic debate on the Conference on the Future of Europe also took place during the CIVEX meeting, where members stressed that the current EU institutional framework does not properly reflect the sub-national representative bodies like regional parliaments

□□ Populism, nationalism, disinformation, hate speech and conspiracy theories are widespread in the European public and political sphere, which is leading to polarisation and intolerance. The deterioration of fundamental rights in one Member State has a negative impact across the EU. Therefore, in the 8th meeting of the CIVEX Commission, members welcomed the European Commission’s initiative on the [European Democracy Action Plan \(EDAP\)](#) and adopted an opinion that puts forward a set of proposals for tackling disinformation and hate speech, as well as for promoting media literacy and critical thinking, including the setting up of a European agency linked with the CoR. The members also pointed out that local and regional leaders can play an important role in strengthening citizenship, as they are the closest authorities to citizens and the ones that are most trusted, according to the [EU annual regional and local barometer published in October 2020](#) .

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[Aleksandra Dulkiewicz](#) (PL/EPP), Mayor of Gdańsk and rapporteur of the draft opinion on the European Democracy Action Plan, stated: “Democracy is one of the most valuable resources of the European Union and that it needs to be constantly updated and defended at all levels – regional, local, national and European. Local and regional representatives serve as an important pillar to fight disinformation and sustain democratic political debate with citizens. They can be instrumental to promote digital media literacy, critical thinking and transparency in political campaigning.”

The EDAP should pave the way for relations with non-EU partners who violate fundamental human rights, and should be a tool to encourage members of the European community to apply the principles of a democratic state and the rule of law. Likewise, the EDAP needs to be an instrument to support democratic movements among neighbours. The draft opinion also reminds that attacking freedom of expression narrows the public debate and warns against attempts by some governments to limit the independence of research activities. It condemns the use of SLAPPs (Strategic lawsuits against public participation) against the independent media, and calls on the Commission to put forward a proposal to protect journalists.

The opinion on the European Democracy Action Plan is scheduled to be adopted by the CoR’s plenary during its next session from 30 June to 2 July.

□□A thematic debate on the Conference on the Future of Europe also took place during the 8th CIVEX commission meeting, where members stressed that the current dual EU institutional framework (the supranational European Parliament, and national parliaments) does not properly reflect the sub-national representative bodies like regional parliaments. The Conference on the Future of Europe is a fundamental opportunity for the EU to consult and engage with citizens and the role of regional parliaments should be taken into account, considering that local and regional administrations are the closest authorities to citizens and that they implement 70% of all EU legislation.

Prof. Dr. **Gabriele Abels**, Jean Monnet Professor for Comparative Politics & European Integration of the University of Tübingen, opened the debate and stressed: “Regional parliaments are an important layer in the EU multi-level parliamentary systems. This is especially (yet not exclusively) the case for those regional parliaments which are endowed with legislative competences and which have their own democratic legitimacy via regional elections. Yet, they are often not fully recognized. With regard to the Conference on the Future of Europe regional parliaments can be very important. They can actually conduct and facilitate citizens’ deliberations in their region as well as across regions: by themselves, with governments or with civil society organization. Hence, they are instrumental in securing the inclusive and participatory nature of the Conference and, to do so, they could benefit from capacity-building actions, networking and exchange of best practices. The Committee of the Regions can be a partner for them by offering a forum for exchange and capacity-building.”

[Mark Speich](#) (DE/EPP), Secretary of State for Federal, European and International Affairs of North Rhine-Westphalia, said: “The regions and the CoR have the potential and the resources to anchor Europe closer to the citizens. It is our task as representatives of the regions of Europe to bring about change within the framework of the Conference, on the basis of this conviction.”

[Piero Mauro Zanin](#) (IT/EPP), President of Regional Council of Friuli-Venezia Giulia Autonomous Region and vice – president of the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), said: “The Conference on the Future of Europe must be an opportunity to rethink democracy taking into account the needs of Europeans and must promote a dialogue involving LRAs, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, strongly reaffirmed in the treaties.”

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