

Populist movements in the OSCE Region: A challenge to democracy

The Charter of Paris observes that, “democracy has as its foundation respect for the human person and the rule of law. Democracy is the best safeguard of freedom of expression, tolerance of all groups of society, and equality of opportunity for each person.”¹

Yet over recent years across the OSCE region – including in Moldova, Russia, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and the USA - we have witnessed a marked increase in populist movements (of differing degrees), that whilst brought in by democratic means originally threaten to unpick these core foundations.

Many of these populist movements at their core are rooted in demagoguery, where power is gained by the exploitation of prejudice, fear and ignorance, the whipping up the passions and shutting down of reasoned deliberation.

Their tendency toward post-fact, anti-expert, simplistic and intolerant standpoints serve only to nurture an anti-universalist tyranny of the majority which inevitably undermines human rights of minorities, allows for extremism, and threatens the very democratic system which gave them a voice in the first place.

Research has revealed a trend showing that populists in power undermine democracy in a number of specific ways, including (i) the erosion of checks and balances on the executive branch; (ii) less media freedom; (iii) civil liberties being diminished; (iv) and the quality of elections declining.² This has been borne out in Turkey, Russia, and Hungary since populist movements came to power.

As the previous High Commissioner on National Minorities noted, “extreme populism – both East and West of Vienna - plays on human insecurity. It rouses passions by saying that “outsiders” [...] intrude on our values. It claims that “aliens” are stealing our jobs, abusing social security and reducing opportunities. It appeals to nationalism and highlights the inaction of mainstream parties on the new issues.”³

In order for democracy to stand robust and flourish, OSCE participating states need to better engage with the fear and frustration of so many of their citizens; they need to do more to acknowledge and respond to the voters' feeling of dejection, being failed by the state and mainstream parties and better heed their concerns.

Significantly, this needs to be done in a climate of open debate and education, evidence-based political action, and of unwavering respect for human rights universally applied. If a democratic system loses sight of these foundations just to appease the populist agenda, that system will inevitably eventually crumble.

¹ <https://www.oscepa.org/documents/all-documents/documents-1/673-1990-charter-of-paris-for-a-new-europe/file>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/08/18/populists-undermine-democracy-in-these-4-ways-would-president-trump/?utm_term=.f524728cdd1e

³ <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/35604?download=true>