UNHACK DEMOCRACY CONFERENCE 2022
Summary of conclusions and recommendations

Over the course of two days representatives of pro-democracy groups from over 20 countries across central and eastern Europe, the Black Sea region, Balkans, Belarus and Russia joined activists, journalists, academics, politicians, diplomats and policy makers to discuss the most pressing problems and potential solutions to counter democratic rollback and safeguard electoral integrity.

Bringing in the key takeaways and crossovers from the closed-door workshops, the following report is an overview of the main conclusions and recommendations from each thematic session. Together they set out the challenges and opportunities for civil society in today's democratic space.

Keynote: Olga Aivazovska (OPORA)

DEMOCRACY AS SECURITY: *'Democracy is something that did not exist in Russia, but also why Ukrainians can influence their government and president. I believe that free and fair elections are part of national security. And I believe that we have to think about that on a global level, not just about procedures and processes and not just about disinformation or cybersecurity, because it is all a puzzle that fits into one big picture. Electoral democracy and free and fair elections are about security.'*

AUTHORITARIAN MODEL*: 'If we don't continue to fight on a global level for Ukraine to survive as an electoral democracy, in the end this battle will be the best example for authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in other continents or other potential regimes in Europe that democratic takeover is possible. Just to destroy everything because you have more weapons. I am going to ask you don't be tired of fighting for electoral democracy and don't be tired to keep watching what is going on in Ukraine.'*

Hybrid regimes: Countering state capture and interference in democratic institutions

CONCLUSIONS

Freedom House **Nations in Transit**

DOMINANT FORM: Hybrid-regimes are the predominant form of governance in the region. At the start of the democratic decline 18 years ago there were only 4 of 29 countries that we identified as hybrid-regimes, now there are 11. The number has tripled in less than two decades.

EXITING THE GREYZONE: It is increasingly difficult to exit the greyzone and there has been no country that managed to graduate to a democracy from the hybrid regime. However, those that moved away from full autocracies have not fallen back. There are **2 directions these countries are heading: i.** autocracy **ii.** stagnating as hybrid regimes.

CHARACTERISTICS: Hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions are present but are marred by authoritarian practices: I/ Obsessed with centralisation, tilting the level of playing field and clientelistic structures. II/ Private property is not protected anymore. The independent media is captured. III/ Dividing society into homogenous groups.

QUESTIONS REMAIN: How do you manage to clean the system if you are able to get rid of the ruling regime? What do you do with the deep state or the privatisation of state architecture?

EU COMMISSION: Hybrid-regimes are destroying the EU, undermining trust in institutions. Problem is that the EU does not use existing toolkits and does not stop unconditional funding, when it could. The EU Commission enters into dirty compromises.

ELECTIONS: Election campaigns (tilting the level of playing field) start the day *after* the elections.

LOSERS IN HYBRID REGIMES: Environmentalists and the poor. (People in pressure groups that worked together have managed to get their voices heard.)

European Platform of Democratic Elections (EPDE) report on political financing:
https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/New-EPDE-publication-Puzzling-rules-equal-game.html

RECOMMENDATIONS
- Although there are few good examples, **elections are the way out of hybrid-regimes**. All other solutions, such as regime change or revolutions, are costly with lots of chaos and unintended consequences.
- We need to **protect democracy every day** and not only during the election campaign period.
- **Local governance is a driver for change**, when local reformists come to power they can address real issues.
- **Bottom up initiatives by local opposition and civil society** could give a real political voice to the poor who are not included in decision-making and help foster a more inclusive process.

- We need to be bold enough to talk about **reforming the EU**.
- We should **have a vision in the NGO community and be bold enough to think politically** because documenting rule of law violations and election irregularities, for example, is not enough. We should **openly say that democracy is the coolest thing** and sell-up democracy.
- There should be **more bottom-up awareness raising and advocacy** because the EU Commission is not using the existing toolkits and is hesitant to stop funds flowing into hybrid-regimes.
- The **EU Commission should focus on candidate countries**, where the (democratic) situation is not as bad as it is in Hungary and Poland for example, where it might be already late to change. Focus on the implementation of reforms of EU law instead of focussing on ticking the box mentality.
- The **EU Commission and the Council should use existing toolkits and withhold EU funds**, focus on prevention and immediate legal actions and improve the rule of law report scoreboard.
- **The EU should not appease autocrats and enter into dirty compromises that kill democracy in the end.**

Defining and defending democracy in the digital age

CONCLUSIONS

CHANGING THE RULE BOOK: Non-democratic actors have learned how to use each platform in a way to target their audience, creating non-existent problems that polarize society and detract from real issues. Domestic political actors are finding that the game of manipulating the information environment is now the rulebook you have to playby to compete in politics. **What are the tools for malign and non-democratic actors to influence public attitudes?** Messages, language, tone, manipulation of history, capitalising on public sentiments and transforming them for political purposes.

CHANGING BEHAVIOUR: Is the rise of social media disinformation campaigns a symptom or the cause of the democratic emergency we find ourselves in? Disinformation discussions are dominated by talk of fake news but it is fundamentally about changing people's attitude and behaviour, which we need to better understand in order to present a counter narrative. We need to see tackling disinformation-linked democratic decline not as a problem with an end but as a continuous process. "**Democracy is not a state of being, it is a practice of becoming. Elections are a democratic 'event' and democracy is a way of life.**" Looking at the scale of the problem, the interventions required are not a single digital solution but rather a range of approaches including engagement at a local level through decentralisation and re-building trust from the ground up.

BROKEN BUSINESS MODEL: The business model used by large tech companies turns the user into the product. **Is that business model compatible with democracy or is the business model itself part of the problem?** Are tech platforms more like democratic societies or in fact more like authoritarian governments? Can regulation shift the incentives behind tech platform's business model (see EU Digital Services Act Code of Practice)? A key issue is transparency of online campaign spending. It is important, where possible, for civil society and EMBs to try and foster good relationships with platforms (eg. ISFED in Georgia asking Facebook to turn on its ad library which has forced political parties to declare campaign spending).

REGULATION: In established democracies it is easier to fight disinformation but in newer developing democracies (like Georgia) people are more vulnerable. That makes the question of regulation not only about disinformation but a **security issue**. People are right to point to the potential pitfalls of regulation but also need to push back against the idea that regulation only equals content moderation or content decisions. Ultimately, the businesses themselves operate like authoritarian governments in how they are structured so there is growing consensus that reform is needed to improve social responsibility - be it regulation or improved cooperation with governments and CSOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Social media is emotional so tell 'truth stories'**. Platform interaction is designed to speed everything up so digital literacy must involve a process of slow learning.
- See **regulation of disinformation as a security issue**, understanding how personal data is utilised as an instrument of political influence.
- Need to move from a purely reactive and preventative approach. This includes **strengthening strategic communications units** at a government, election administration and election management level in order to support civil society in the fight against disinformation.
- Draw up a **rulebook of acceptable campaign behaviours that could be extended to the digital space**. Online advertising and campaign transparency is starting to see pockets of innovation from civil society (looking at ad transparency data and comparing it with political party spending reports), crafting regulation around detailed disclosure requirements, creating an independent database with a coalition of CSOs and EMBs. IFES launching Global Online Campaigning Transparency Community of Practice.
- Through **'social listening'** focus groups democracy defenders need to analyse and better understand the **psychological effect of disinformation and develop counter narratives** based on a clear vision. We need to form an emotional connection that taps into the hearts and minds of people.
- Pro-democracy actors need to utilise the platform business model to develop proper 360 campaigns. *"Nike is using it, Coca-Cola is using it, Putin is using it, so why can't we?"* Do not be afraid to learn from the opposition - use their tactics against them.

- Look at how government accounts are being used in the context of political campaigns and whether this constitutes a **misuse and abuse of state resources**.
- Use **social media for open source investigation** to bring to light offline abuse of state resources.
- If possible, make sure **CSOs work with independent EMBs** to be both a source of information, for example when fact checking organisations need quick access during election campaigns, or concurrently how to expand capacity when EMBs with limited resources are trying to message about voter processes and counter narratives directed against democratic institutions.

Innovation in the face of tyranny - Belarusian civil society

This session brought together leading Belarusian civil society groups and political actors to discuss how they have used innovative strategies to engage, organise and mobilise citizens against the regime. Case studies were followed by a discussion on how to safeguard civil society/political actors, the change of strategy following the war in Ukraine, and what the future holds.

CONCLUSIONS
- Before the elections in 2020 civil society emerged in its best and purest form with a series of new initiatives. Different professional and social groups and activists started grassroots communities.
- Masculinity drives society where all candidates were imprisoned. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, a female candidate (wife of Sergei), emerged a few weeks before elections.

*HONEST PEOPLE ON ELECTIONS:
- *Honest People & Golos (Belarus) & Zubr: 10,000 people became independent observers as their applications were not accepted as commission members.
- A joint platform was used to recruit and collect information and viral videos and leaflets to market it. About 1 million people sent a photo of their ballot and a parallel tabulating system was used. Honest voters received white wristbands to show their support for fair elections.
- *Honest People & Golos (Belarus) & Zubr in exile proved electoral fraud and produced a report.
- **PROBLEM WITH ELECTIONS:** They understood voting day is only a fixed point but the most important elements are the processes between elections.
    - **NEW FOCUS:** civic education initiatives to tell people about their rights via safe chat rooms, building communities (Robin Good).
    - Set up mutual emergency aid as a pay to pay platform for those who suffered from the regime.

META-BELARUS, BUILDING A NEW, DIGITAL STATE:

- **PROBLEM WITH DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS:** Impossible to build democracy inside Belarus because you either go to prison or to exile. There is no civil society.
- **REBUILDING DEMOCRACY HORIZONTALLY:** Need to rebuild the state from scratch by building a horizontal structure vs. Lukashenka's horizontal power, using digital tools, where people are in charge and not the state.
- Rebuild institutions with digital tools to strengthen them, make them democratic and responsible.
- **DEMOCRACY BY DESIGN:** Human centric innovative bold approach is needed, similar to the one the United States was founded on, inspired by philosophers such as Belarusian Vladimir Matskevich. Development of civil society and institutions.
- Rebuild branches of power with civil society vertically to rebuild trust and promote communications between different organisations. People should be in charge of their own data.

Not free or fair? Rethinking election observation in the EU

Session began with an overview by election expert Sławomir Szyszka of a working paper on citizen observation by a consortium of election observation organisations led by the EPDE.

CONCLUSIONS

METHODOLOGY: 'Free' and 'fair' are concepts which operate well for describing specific aspects of an electoral process but are not good at describing an election as a whole. There is a need to recognise that new challenges (as campaigning moves increasingly online, rise of disinformation, new voting technologies etc) require new forms of observation. Today in OSCE and EU countries most problems relate to the **pre-election period** rather than election day itself, requiring a re-think of the deployment and prioritisation of Long-Term vs Short Term Observers. Media issues are generally broader than just election related issues, and because they are continuous rather than just during an election cycle, election observation missions often struggle to go in depth or provide necessary context for election observers. **Domestic observers do not have capacity to focus on all aspects of the electoral process but there is also not the need for everyone to be doing everything**. International organisations (ODIHR), non-government election networks (ENEMO) and domestic election groups must **complement not duplicate** each other.

COMMUNICATION: Need to be better prepared as election observers when it comes to **strategic communication**, to convey to citizens what we do, who we are, what are our values, what is our methodology and what we stand for. Phenomenon of 'fake observations' and politically motivated election observation damaging credibility of elections among local audience. Enforcing the principle of **non-partisanship** in domestic observation is especially important as it provides vital credibility to improve the process in the long-term.

EU MINDSET: ODIHR is seeing a trend in EU member countries towards more extensive observer missions, however the EU remains reluctant to engage with international and domestic election observation groups. CSOs and election observer organisations need to push the message **securing democratic elections is about security**.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Implementation and follow-up of election observation recommendations is often poor. We must be aware that implementation of international standards tends to erase local specificities and that recommendations can be abused by incumbents for political advantage or for gaining an edge in future elections (e.g. restrictive rules on campaign finance).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Shift more towards the concept of **'genuine'** elections when talking about an election as a whole, keep **'free' and 'fair'** for assessing specific aspects which almost always require more nuance.
- Political and electoral campaigns now start the day *after* election day so we need to change the paradigm and start thinking about **election observation not on a single day but as a 24/7 effort**.
- Methodology and number of Long-Term Observers (LTOs) and instances of long term observation need to be increased/reinforced, with more attention paid to issues related to misuse of administrative resources, abuse of incumbency, pressure on voters especially in state institutions, state capture etc.
- To **share capacity domestic observers need to have strategic discussions and assessments about what is actually needed** in respective countries then build a network/coalition of specialist organisations focusing on campaign finance, media monitoring etc. Also **use networks and technology to expand capacity** (e,g. The Revisor AI toolkit = use of cameras in polling stations to hack video and develop an IT tool to check voter turnout done automatically).
- Create a **"regional hub" for monitoring disinformation**, starting with the Western Balkans, as a means to support international election observation missions. (Proposed by ENEMO)
- Be mindful of local dynamics and specificities, but also offer better follow up to recommendations, possibly through **post-election observation missions**, similar to Needs Assessment Missions but after the election. This is already something which EU and OSCE missions do, but which should progressively become a standard practice for international observation missions. **Advocate for legal domestic observation in EU countries where it is not provided for**, while EU countries must support ODIHR by being more open to observation and self-reporting and inviting follow-up. EPDE would like to look at ways to work better with EMBs to implement recommendations.
- The EU must acknowledge the importance of domestic election observation groups in member states and improve capacity. International funders must provide more support to observe elections in the EU, while domestic groups must work on **promoting non-partisan agenda and strategic communications to counter fears among donors of influencing domestic politics**.

How to make democracy sexy again

CONCLUSIONS

MEASURING ATTRACTIVENESS: Need to promote an attractive system rather than an attractive candidate requires a much broader understanding about democracy than just elections. Studies show a majority of people in Europe want democracy and that it is an attractive proposition, which is a good starting point for any endeavor that is meant to strengthen democratic standards day by day in ordinary people's minds. **How can we make it attractive enough every single day?**

ABSTRACTION OF 'DEMOCRACY': Democracy is about communication but people's understanding of democracy varies. Need to move from hyper-professional knowledge and language and speak to people in a way they understand, explaining how and why democracy is important to them. Look beyond just the 'democracy' sector (elections, voting etc) to make it relevant to people on both a macro level and in relation to their daily lives. **Boost civic engagement by building cross-sector networks** (such as collaboration between ecoaction and workers rights groups in Russia). Stress the link between democratic roll-back and impact on the every-day lives of citizens ("autocracies kill the environment as well as people as the war in Ukraine is financed by fossil fuels directly"). **What is the business model of democracy and the market distortion when you don't call it a democracy?**

ONLINE VS OFFLINE: People retreat to their social media echo chamber because the current set up of politics is not able to accommodate effective decision making. Need to find a balance between online and offline interaction. Technology can be a force for good but also need to be aware of bad actors' ability to weaponise it. In-person interaction is an important element of building trust - but **beware gerontocracy in democracy** - nostalgia for politics of the past.

LOCUS OF DEMOCRACY: Information overload around multitude of issues has widened the cleavages in society. Hard to have civil discussion when the idea of 'facts' themselves are in question. There is a crisis of trust; in institutions, in interactions and in truth itself. Trust must start at a base level, with neighbours and localism. Importance of a highly functioning civil society built on the interest of people to engage to build back the DNA of democratic participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is hard to chip away at democracy if people form a **habit of democracy.** Like any other habit, be it voting at 16, participating in party primaries, going to a political rally, once you start forming a habit it becomes difficult to un-form.

- People need to have a **stake in democracy**. In Lithuania you can designate on your tax return which political party you want to donate to. Going even further you could allow people once a year to revoke their support to make politicians more accountable.
- Authoritarian regimes are better at decision making in the short term so we need to emphasise the **emotional aspects of participation and ownership** (as democratic stakeholders) that are achieved only through elections.
- **Democratic actors should learn from the autocrats' playbook, specifically around communication and framing**. The language around 'democracy' used by democratic actors is key.
- Rather than focus on macro issues highlight **small acts of defiance** to counter apathy eg. in Ukraine personal solar panels allowed people to both survive and circumvent the energy crisis brought on by the war and present energy independence as a more resilient and attractive local solution.
- Use micro/local issues as wedge into wider macro debate eg. link energy efficiency to climate crisis => energy crisis => cost of living crisis => energy security. **Content needs to be local, delivery needs to be sexy.**
- Offer cross-sector training exchanges (eg. feedback loop involving policial, environmental, social, labour groups in Russia)
- Pursue specific solutions that are win-win eg. in the move towards clean energy, insulate buildings and make them more energy efficient and everybody benefits.