

KOLPING INTERNATIONAL

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DECLARATION OF KOLPING INTERNATIONAL ON CONTRIBUTION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE TO STRENGTHENING OF DEMOCRACY AND MEETING CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR DEMOCRACY

A. The Council of Europe and commitment to democracy

1. Pluralistic democracy is one of the guiding principles upon which the European unification process has been founded since 1945. Both the Statute of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE (1949) and the Treaties of the European Union beginning with the Single European Act (1986) explicitly refer to the issues of democracy.
2. One must regretfully admit in regard to the COUNCIL OF EUROPE that both the Statute and supplementary legislative texts do not make clear what the essential components of democracy are, although the aim of the founding fathers of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE and of the European Movement in particular was to determine criteria to be met by a state in order to be rightfully called democracy. However, thanks to the urgent appeal of the Parliamentary Assembly of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE the first Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights contains a provision obliging the member states to conduct free and anonymous elections at appropriate intervals.
3. Unfortunately, attempts of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE to approve a new declaration on democracy at government level between 1991 and 1995 were of no success. On the other hand, as early as in 1983 the Parliamentary Assembly of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE succeeded in adopting the so-called Strasbourg Consent at its first Strasbourg Conference on parliamentary democracy. It contains basic principles to be respected by any state worthy to be called a democracy.
4. Nevertheless, the Parliamentary Assembly of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE has always been acting as an advocate and promoter of democracy. It has always been a forum for discussion and consideration of fundamental issues of democracy as well as for dealing with crises posing a danger for democracy in European countries.
Besides, the Assembly has regularly treated specific issues of democracy (such as regulations on voting age, instruments of civic engagement etc.).
5. The attention devoted by the COUNCIL OF EUROPE to issues of democracy has considerably increased and expanded to complex approach after the turning point endured by Europe in 1989/90. For the COUNCIL OF EUROPE as the first accession structure for growing or new democracies in big Europe it was of crucial importance to strengthen democratic development and stabilization trends in the countries which applied for accession to the COUNCIL OF EUROPE and became members of the organization afterwards. In order to deal with arising issues more efficiently new committees were founded, improved work methods were introduced and the emphasis was put on practical aspects of democracy.

B. Current challenges faced by democracy

1. National elections not conforming to European standards and ability of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE and civil society to contribute to transparency in elections.

Despite of indisputable progress the point where elections conforming to European standard are held in all European countries is not yet reached. In case of revealing of irregular practices by election monitoring the COUNCIL OF EUROPE provides instruments for correction of the faults such as submission of a report thereon by the Assembly to be publicly discussed at a respective plenary session. Major faults at national elections are regularly reported by media. In case if election result is affected by violations against regulations a by-election in an electoral district where mistakes occurred can be demanded. If such violations result from election laws not conforming to European regulations they can be amended with assistance of the European Commission for Democracy through Law of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE. And finally, grave election faults can be surveyed under sanction imposing monitoring procedure of the Assembly or submitted for consideration to the Committee of Ministers of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE.

KOLPING INTERNATIONAL requests the Assembly of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE to make full use of these instruments in cooperation with the European Parliament and the OSCE in order to achieve the medium-term goal of making all Europe a zone free of electoral law violations.

2. Complexity of issues under consideration makes it difficult to convey them to citizens with the result frequently being enraged citizens.

Infrastructure projects and education issues became recently a matter of special concern and anxiety for citizens of countries like Germany. The big project Stuttgart 21 demonstrated convincingly that citizens who had objections to the project were entitled to express their protest only with no alternatives to be offered under formerly acting law. The decision makers are frequently paying insufficient attention to acceptance problems when developing big projects. "Communication disorder" between decision-making politicians and citizens is a common diagnosis in most cases. The necessity and a chosen form of big projects are far too seldom given reasons for and explained by the politicians. In case of other disputed projects the civic will resulted in a civic vote. Along with that becomes clear that direct democracy forms are no universal remedy. Civic movements are often geographically limited which means that the total number of individuals taking part in voting is higher than the number of citizens expressing their will through direct democracy instruments.

THE INTERNATIONAL KOLPING SOCIETY suggests that before starting important major projects more options for communication and dialog between involved parties are created in order to achieve acceptance within a reasonable term as well as to find new legal forms of civic will expression instead of putting up so-called opposition.

3. Financial and economic crisis has undermined democratic bodies in many countries. Expert crisis management has subsequently taken over governmental affairs without democratic legitimation

Concern of the Parliamentary Assembly of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE about restrictions imposed on decisive powers of democratically legitimated bodies by problems on the financial market as well as by attempts to find their solutions resulted in presentation of a respective memorandum; however, the Assembly is not yet engaged in implementation of suggestions made therein such as international financial market regulations, conditional taxation of financial transactions, county-wide debt relief with simultaneous economic growth etc.

KOLPING INTERNATIONAL urges the COUNCIL OF EUROPE insistently to focus special attention of its committees on these events and to make this subject the thematic priority of the "World Forum for Democracy" to be held in October 2012 in Strasbourg. Further weakening of powers of democratically legitimated parliaments and committees is to be counteracted or alternatively new democratically legitimated committees to take over advising and decision-making functions are to be designated.

4. General resentment of citizens about actions of the 'political class' and as a result thereof indifference and decreasing voter turnout. Encouraging of civic participation in order to make the citizens competent partners of political decision makers.

Political experts identify different causes of civic indifference and decrease of voter turnout. Some insist it is the approximation of election programs of big parties. On the other hand, the fact that international, European and financial limitations restrict initiatives of decision makers of any political inclination plays its part too. More than a few citizens believe that one governs over their heads even if they demonstrate for a cause. Generally speaking, it's all about more justice and fairness in everyday life. The experts emphasize that in order to confront the current tendency one has to make policy, parliament and parties open as well as to secure new communication options. The deputies and politicians have to concern themselves with the issue of how to respond to civic protests. There is often an unsatisfied demand for clarifications on political decisions to be made. It must be tried to coordinate contradictory interests and to promote compromises.

The INTERNATIONAL KOLPING SOCIETY believes that one has to prove to the citizens that their opinion is taken into account, that the policy depends on them and that attempts to enter into dialogue and to make communication with them become a general practice. By making available more information and clarifications on projects and important issues as well as by 'renaissance' of civic education and last but not least Internet researches a better dialogue competency shall be provided to the citizens.

C. Conclusion

The new activity focus on the issue of democracy made the COUNCIL OF EUROPE a leading pan-European organization in this constantly changing area. The COUNCIL OF EUROPE justifiably claims to be the House of Democracy. Owing to new initiatives (contribution to support of the Arab Spring, World Forum for Democracy) it is headed in the right direction to becoming a 'Davos of Democracy'. The INTERNATIONAL KOLPING SOCIETY greatly appreciates this tendency and is eager to support the COUNCIL OF EUROPE in accomplishing this major objective especially through its educational activities in Europe as an INGO.

Ratified by the Continental Assembly of Kolping Europe in Bolzano, Italy, on September 16th 2012.

For the Kolping Society Europe:

Anton Salesny Representat. f. European Issues International Kolping Society	Msgr. Ottmar Dillenburger European Praeses Kolping Society Europe	Barbara Breher Chairperson Kolping Society Europe	Markus Demele General Secretary International Kolping Society
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Note:

The above declaration - also referred to as '**the Bolzano Declaration**' - is **the 35th Declaration** of KOLPING INTERNATIONAL on the COUNCIL OF EUROPE which has been made every year by the Continental Assembly of the Kolping Society Europe since **1978** as a document of self-commitment and as an appeal to politically responsible persons in authority of the COUNCIL OF EUROPE in the context of participatory status (NGO) with the COUNCIL OF EUROPE.



KOLPING INTERNATIONAL

In 1849 the Catholic priest **Adolph Kolping** founded an association in Cologne for single journeymen in order to give them some help in solving their problems caused by the industrial revolution and being summarized with the term „**social question**“.

At the beginning it was a small association, but meanwhile it has developed to a world-wide society that counts today about 7,000 regional groups and 450,000 members in **61 countries**. In spite of the enormous growth and the changed situation in society the Kolping Society has remained true to its original task and is still working towards the solution of the social question. However, this work is not only limited to the national level, it also includes the international level.

The Kolping Society sees itself as a **Catholic social organization**. It supports its members in a special way in developing their personal talents, it offers help to its members and society as a whole and it promotes the common good in the Christian sense with the activities of its members and groups.

The work of the Kolping Society is aimed at the integral individual, who is not only offered help and stimulation in all aspects of life, but also provided with an opportunity to share his problems and also his knowledge and skills. It is the close interconnection and interrelation of the individual spheres of life, which is the starting-point and the ground for the comprehensive work of the Kolping Society and its service towards the integral development of the individual.

According to this approach the work of the Kolping Society concentrates on the following aspects: **work and profession, marriage and family, society and state, culture and leisure time**.

The Kolping Society is a democratically structured organization, and therefore it feels responsible for the promotion of democracy, too. It also fights for the special human dignity in any phase of life and for the inalienable and inviolable human rights.

The Kolping Society in Europe feels in a special way obliged to the European idea – owing to its historical development and its programme – and co-operates intensively with the **Council of Europe** and the **European Union** or the **European Parliament**. Since 1974 it has held the „**Consultative Status at the Council of Europe**“ in Strasbourg as NGO (Non-Governmental Organization).

A special sign of this intensive co-operation are the European seminars realized annually for 30 years (1979) in Strasbourg (Palais de l'Europe).

Owing to its world-wide commitment it has furthermore the „**Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations**“ and was admitted to the „**Special List of Non-Governmental International Organizations of the International Labour Office (ILO)**“.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in **1989** the International Kolping Society saw an important task in contributing to **develop a civil society** in the formerly communist states, and it did so by building up independent National Organizations. Meanwhile active organizational structures have developed in many Central and East European countries, like for example Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Albania etc.. These Kolping Societies have picked up important fields of activity like youth and family work, general and professional training, promotion of small enterprises and social work, but also socio-political education and they have also undertaken urgent social tasks in self-responsibility.

Although the Kolping Society was founded in Europe and has still kept its international head-quarters in Cologne, it has extended its fields of activity all over the whole world in the meantime. The **promotion of the international co-operation** and solidarity is a central and important task, and the International Kolping Society contributes with its work to solve the international social question.

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