

CHAPTER 6

DEEPENING DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Twenty years after the transition from military dictatorship to the rule of law, democracy is in crisis in Latin America. This crisis is also raising questions and forcing a reappraisal of the role played by civil society in strengthening democracy in the region. The manifestations and causes of this crisis, as well as how to deepen democracy in order to safeguard it, are the focus of this chapter.

Challenges and threats to democracy in Latin America

From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, Latin American countries led the so-called second wave of democratisation, following Southern Europe in the mid-1970s and preceding Eastern Europe, East Asia and parts of Africa in the late 1980s and 1990s. For two decades the peaceful transition from authoritarian to democratic rule after decades of repressive military dictatorship and, in Central America, outright civil war, was deemed a success story. The only exception in the region to this democratic trend was Cuba.

This is no longer the case. Over the last five years democracy has been put to severe test. Since the turn of the century, more than a third of Latin American countries – Paraguay (in 2000), Peru (2000), Argentina (2001), Venezuela (2002), Bolivia (2003 and 2005), Ecuador (2000 and 2006) – have experienced situations of acute political risk. In several cases, widespread public protest led to the downfall of elected presidents. Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Fernando de la Rúa in Argentina, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and Carlos Mesa in Bolivia, and Jamil Mahuad and Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador were removed from office by a combination of social protest in the streets and political action by parliaments. In Paraguay the military played a key role in the impeachment of President Raul Cubas Grau. In Venezuela, a farcical coup d'état, promoted by military and civil sectors with US support, led to the temporary overthrow of President Hugo Chávez, who was soon reinstated, with the full support of democratic leaders and public opinion throughout the region. To this list

might be added situations of extreme tension in the political system that did not reach breaking point: Nicaragua in 2004 and 2005, when President Enrique Bolaños was threatened with impeachment; Honduras in 2005 when authorities delayed announcing the winner of the presidential elections; Brazil in 2005 when the government of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was undermined by a wave of political scandals; and Mexico in 2006 when the opposition candidate, López Obrador, aggressively contested in the streets the legitimacy of Felipe Calderon's election to the presidency.

The recurrence and intensity of these political crises and risky situations indicate the fragility of Latin American democracies. Latin America has entered a new historical phase of crisis, inflection and political change. Democracy is again at the centre of the public agenda. It will be safeguarded – and this will be my main contention in this chapter – only if it is strengthened and deepened.

With the exceptions of Chile, Uruguay and, surprisingly, Colombia, despite the permanent threat to political and civil liberties posed by the drug cartels and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC) guerrillas, there is throughout the region a deep and widening public disaffection vis-à-vis political institutions. All opinion polls corroborate the deficit of trust and the pervasive sense of fatigue affecting political parties, parliaments and governments.¹ Democracy, therefore, must be made to work or apathy, cynicism and disenchantment will facilitate the resurgence of authoritarianism under old or new disguises.

In Chapter 2 of this volume, Mary Kaldor argues for a concept of substantive democracy as something deeper or 'thicker' than formal democracy:

By substantive democracy, I mean a process, which has to be continually reproduced, for maximising the

¹ A region-wide opinion poll conducted in 2006 by Latinobarometro indicates that although 54 per cent of Latin Americans believe there can be no democracy without political parties, only 19 per cent have any trust in political parties.

opportunities for all individuals to shape their own lives and to participate in and influence debates about public decisions that affect them. (Kaldor 2008)

Democracy, to be sure, requires the respect for basic political rights and civil liberties, such as a multiparty political system, free and fair elections, freedom of expression and organisation. But this is what we might call a thin, or minimalist concept of democracy as opposed to a thick, or wider definition (Kekic 2007). Democracy is more than the sum of its institutions and procedures. In a substantive sense, democracy is embedded in society, nurtured and enhanced by a vibrant civil society and a civic culture of participation, responsibility and debate. That is why democracy is always a work in progress, an unfinished journey, a process rooted in the history of any given society. That is also why it cannot be imposed from the outside and is never achieved once and for all.

So far, no Latin American country has relapsed into dictatorship. However, the proliferation of corruption scandals and the rising levels of criminal violence combined with the persistence of poverty and inequality are at the root of a profound sense of disconnection between people's aspirations and the capacity of political institutions to respond to the demands of society. The root causes of this growing political instability are to be found in the deep political, economic and social changes undertaken by Latin America over the last two decades. Every country in the region, with the exception, again, of Cuba, underwent not one, but two, radical transformations: the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and the opening up of closed and stagnant economies. Democracy authorised the full expression of long repressed demands for social change. For most countries, however, the restoration of political and civil liberties went hand-in-hand with times of economic and social hardship. The oil crises and huge debts of the 1980s drove national economies to the verge of bankruptcy. The combination of rampant inflation and economic stagnation threatened the very fabric of social life.

The crisis of the Latin American developmentalist model of the 1960s and 1970s, based on internal markets and import substitution, coincided with the sweeping changes brought about by globalisation. A state-centred vision of national development, deeply ingrained in Latin American political culture and



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Supporters of Mexico's opposition candidate López Obrador took to the streets in 2006

institutions, came into sharp conflict with the demands of global competitive capitalism. Internal needs and external pressure led to a second drastic process of change: the reform of the state and the opening up of closed national economies to global trade, privatisation and fiscal adjustment. Globalisation, however, is not only an economic or technological process. It is also a political, social and cultural phenomenon. It is not only about financial flows and goods being exchanged in the global market arena. Globalisation is also about information, values, symbols and ideas. The modernisation of the economy and the emergence of open, democratic societies thus represented a profound historical change, both in the patterns of development and in the social dynamics of Latin American countries.

To be sure, in most countries, growth resumed after the lost decade of the 1980s. Wealth, however, remained unevenly shared. Inequality and high levels of poverty persisted. Many young people live in despair, with no sense of future. This frustration, combined with the incapacity of the political democracy to improve, quickly and significantly, people's standards of living is certainly one of the root causes of the prevailing widespread sense of hopelessness. The legitimacy crisis affecting political institutions has been dramatically compounded by the proliferation of corruption scandals and the rising levels of criminal violence and incivility, especially in the region's large cities. Human security is at risk in Latin America, anywhere and at any time.



The democratic transition in Latin America created the rules and institutions of democracy, but in most countries respect for due process and rule of law is in danger, at best. Mistrust of politicians, political parties, parliaments and the judiciary is paving the way for the resurgence in several countries of forms of authoritarian populism that were thought to be relegated to the past. Nothing is more expressive of this all-encompassing rejection of the political establishment than the call – *que se vayan todos* (they all must go) – that punctuated the street demonstrations in Argentina, leading to the overthrow of three successive presidents in a few days. In some countries, such as Venezuela, the traditional political system literally fell apart. In others, the crisis of legitimacy gave rise to new actors and demands for radical change.

The resurgence of authoritarian populism

The notion of populism has been used to characterise the policies of countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and even Argentina. Many interpret the recent string of electoral victories by charismatic leaders as a historical turn to the Left in Latin American politics. A core component of Latin American neo-populism is the reaffirmation of the central role of the state. Its leaders vocalise a strident

anti-imperialist and anti-globalisation message but abstain from defining the utopian way towards the new society. President Chávez has resorted to the old Cuban rallying cry of *Patria o muerte, venceremos* (Fatherland or death, we shall overcome!) to promote his Bolivarian Revolution. In his inaugural speech in January 2007, President Rafael Correa of Ecuador made a distinction between *una época de cambios* (an epoch of change) and *un cambio de época* (a change of epoch) to underline his radicalism. President Evo Morales' *indigenismo* appeals to the ethnic and cultural identities of Bolivia's indigenous population as the foundation of his concept of a new society based on non-Western values.

However, in their call for radical political, economic and social change, today's populist leaders differ significantly from Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Perón in Argentina, whose populist regimes shaped Latin American history in the mid-twentieth century. These charismatic leaders appealed directly to the urban masses, ensuring their political allegiance through an extension of labour legislation. They despised representative democracy, promoting the redistribution of resources but not seeking to change the prevailing social and economic order. Perón was strongly anti-American, unlike Vargas, but neither ever entertained an anti-market stance. Their reliance on an authoritarian state was more pragmatic than ideological.

The new populists have in common with their predecessors a strong reliance on mobilising the masses against internal and external enemies, as well as on policies of income redistribution through social programmes. However, they do not hide their hostility towards the markets and political pluralism. Populist leaders speak to people's hearts and mobilise powerful symbols and emotions in response to real or imaginary grievances. They build on the climate of frustration and disillusionment that makes people think that the way to the future is a return to the past – even though it is a romanticised past that, in fact, has never existed.

This direct association of a charismatic leader with 'the people' and 'the nation' undermines the foundations of democracy. It brings with it an inevitable propensity to impose, always for the greater good of the people and the nation, controls by the state over society. This is what is happening in Venezuela, where civil society and the mass media are



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Enraptured by the revolutionary myth: a Venezuelan supporter of Hugo Chavez dressed as Che Guevara

already subjected to restrictions and interference. In Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, mechanisms of direct democracy are being used to grant unlimited power to the presidency, by-passing parliament and undermining representative democracy.

Populism is, however, more than just a risk to representative democracy. It is also and foremost a risk to substantive democracy. The imposition of increasing controls by the state over society directly contradicts the gradual building and strengthening of open societies in Latin America. It also exercises a strong fascination over large sectors of Latin American civil society that are still enraptured by the revolutionary myth. It is important to remember that the dream of a radical transformation of the established order remains alive throughout the region in social movements ranging from the neo-Zapatistas of Subcomandante Marcos in Mexico to the Landless Peasant Movement in Brazil, not to mention the narco-guerrilleros of Colombia who still see themselves as revolutionaries. The triumphal reception accorded to President Chávez at the fifth World Social Forum at Porto Alegre in 2005 is an eloquent example of the incantatory power for non-governmental organisations and social movements of the rhetoric of anti-Americanism and anti-globalisation.²

The forces of renewal: the rise of informed and empowered citizens

Latin America is at the threshold of a new historical cycle in which the fault-lines will be defined by the contrast between old models and new ideas, authoritarian regression and the deepening of democracy. This is a situation fraught with risks but also with challenges and opportunities. Widespread disaffection towards the political system coexists with the emergence of new forms of citizen participation and civic culture that may well prove to be the best antidote to the resurgence of populism. Latin American societies have changed drastically in the last few decades. These changes have deeply affected the relationship between civil society, the state and democracy. NGOs and social movements were at the forefront of the struggle for democracy in the 1970s and 1980s. With the traditional channels of participation – political parties, unions – having been blocked by the dictatorship, the only available alternative was the creation of small circles of

² *It is hard to equate the resurgence of populism with the strengthening of the Left in Latin America. Presidents Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet of Chile, or Tabaré Vázquez of Uruguay, by virtue of their personal history and political philosophy, stand much further to the Left than Hugo Chávez, and they clearly reject his anti-American and anti-globalisation rhetoric.*

freedom at the community level. This kind of grassroots work represented a break with the Latin American tradition of looking to the state and at labour relations as the strategic reference point for political and social action. With their backs turned to the state, social activists have promoted an immense variety of local initiatives that combine the struggle for civic rights and freedom with concrete projects to improve people's daily quality of life. This flexible, bottom-up approach was profoundly democratic, insofar as civil society organisations grasped emerging demands, gave a voice to new actors, empowered communities, tested innovative solutions and pressured governments.

This is less true today, for a number of reasons that it is very important to underline. It is citizen action that gives life to civil society, and citizen initiatives are as diverse as the public issues at stake and the energy of those who mobilise around them. Civil society is not homogeneous. It is not a realm of the good, guided by pure and noble values, contrasting with the evils of the state and the market. Civil society has no controlling or regulatory body to set action agendas or a consensus about what to do. Citizens do not ask for permission to act nor do they conform to any pre-established hierarchy of priorities. They create their own, constantly evolving, agenda.

And yet, some activists see in the plurality of initiatives, actors and causes intrinsic to civil society a risk of fragmentation and dispersion of energies. For an important segment of organised Latin American civil society, the way to restore unity of vision and purpose lies in a closer alignment with leaders such as Chávez, Morales or Correa, who are seen as standard bearers of a Latin American socialism for the twenty-first century.

This subordination of the diversity of citizen action to the political imperatives of a uniform, state-centred strategy of radical social transformation challenges civil society's constituent freedom and autonomy. Citizen participation is multiple, fluid, diverse and, in a way, it is precisely in its lack of organisation – a reflection of the growing complexity and fragmentation of contemporary societies – that its strength resides. Civil society is not, nor can it be, a political party. Its goal is not to achieve or exercise state power. Nobody speaks for civil society, nor has the power or capacity to define who is part of it or who is excluded from it. It is, by its very nature, a contested political space, an

arena of debate and innovation, criss-crossed by the conflicts and controversies present in society. It cannot be appropriated by any single political project. Its most visible face is made from organisations and movements. However, today, this organised dimension, no longer accounts for the range and diversity of citizen action. This classical notion of civil society has to be reframed and enlarged to take into account emerging actors, processes and spaces.

The decline in the role played by organised civil society as a driver of democratic change and the concomitant rise of informed and empowered individuals and networks is a significant trend that calls for further scrutiny. It has to do with the emergence of open and complex societies as well as with the opportunities for participation and dialogue that have been opened up by the new information technologies. Today, ordinary people tend to be more intelligent, rebellious and creative than in the past, in so far as they are constantly called upon to make value judgments and life choices, where previously there was only conformity to a pre-established destiny. This enhanced capacity for individuals to think, deliberate and decide is a consequence of the decline in the forms of authority based on religion or tradition. Each of us is daily confronted in our private life with choices that are no longer dictated by a supreme authority nor regulated by law.

The experience of our bodies and sexuality, the decision to get married or not, to maintain the marriage or opt for separation, to have children or not to have them, to interrupt an undesired pregnancy or not to do so, to exercise the right to die with dignity – all these questions are now open to choice. Even the preservation of a loving relationship requires constant care of the other partner, who is also endowed with desires, aspirations and the capacity to make choices of his or her own. In the past, tradition and religion determined identities that were destinies. Today, identity is the end-result of our choices. Each individual tries to be or to become what he or she really is. But, in contemporary society, to quote the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, 'each one is many'. Identities are as multiple and fluid as our own repertoire of experiences and belongings.

Alain Touraine observes that 'the public space is emptying at the top and filling up at the bottom' (Touraine and Khosrokhavar 2000: 31). This formulation keenly grasps the double phenomenon of the withering away of



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Citizens are increasingly expressing their identities: left, Quechua women march for equal rights in Peru and right, transsexuals demonstrate in Mexico City

institutional politics and the dominance of everyday concerns in people's lives. These profound changes that shape contemporary societies are increasingly visible and relevant in Latin American. What is missing is the analysis of the significance for democracy of this emergence of a critical mass of informed and empowered citizens. Anthony Giddens uses the concept of 'active trust' to define the ethos of participation and responsibility at the core of the democratisation of everyday life:

In almost all spheres of life we have moved from passive to active trust as the main bond of social cohesion. Active trust is trust that has to be won from the other and others; where there is two-way negotiation rather than dependence; and where that trust has to be consistently renewed in a deliberate way. (Giddens 2007: 116)

Today, citizens tend to have multiple, overlapping identities and interests. Ethnic origin, age group, religious creed, sexual orientation, and consumption patterns have become a more powerful source of identity than social status. We all become what we desire to be by resisting whatever negates our freedom, and in the incessant search to give our own life meaning. This process opens up new linkages between personal life and public debate, individual freedom and collective responsibility. The process of self-construction is inseparable from the dynamic of social transformation. Citizens capable of making up their minds, deliberating

and taking stands, are at the root of a second phenomenon of great significance for the strengthening of substantive democracy: the rising power of public opinion to shape and influence public debate.

A society less organised but more connected and interactive

Manuel Castells was one of the first to underline the change represented by the transition from a public sphere anchored in political institutions to a public sphere structured around the communication system, which he understood both as media and new information technologies (Castells 1996). Individuals increasingly elaborate their opinions and choices based on the way they live and what they see. If their perception and experience bear no relation to the message of politicians, the inevitable outcome is growing disbelief and mistrust.³

The other aspect of this demand for accountability is people's capacity to see through and reject demagogical gestures, empty words and promises as false solutions to complex problems. George Papandreou, leader of the Panhellenic Socialist

³ *The global opposition to the web of lies underpinning the invasion of Iraq, and the exemplary reaction of the Spanish people, who punished the government of Jose Maria Aznar for its attempt to manipulate information about the perpetrators of the Madrid terrorist attack in March 2004, are two recent and eloquent examples of the call for truth and transparency as a paramount political value.*



An innovative safe sex campaign by the Brazilian Government

Movement (PASOK) in Greece, says people want a new relationship with power. As they experience a sense of greater freedom and autonomy in their daily lives, they also want to be respected in their ability to understand problems, to take a stand and to act (Barnett 2004). Informed citizens no longer accept the role of passive audience. They want to be actors, not spectators. They want to speak and to be heard. They want the truth to be told to them in a straightforward way, and they want to be sure their contribution will be taken into account.

Consider the case of Brazil, a country with a low level of formal education but with extended access to information through television. There are several examples in recent history of situations in which citizens showed that they are fully capable of understanding complex problems, evaluating arguments, overcoming prejudice and coming up with innovative answers. To the astonishment of many, ordinary people overwhelmingly supported President Cardoso's *Plano Real* (Real Plan) of 1994, to stabilise the currency and curb inflation, support that actively contributed to its success. The national plan to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS generated profound changes in mindsets and patterns of behaviour, thanks to information messages reaching out to all segments of the population in the clearest possible language. Faced in 2001 with the immediate risk of acute power shortages, again people reacted in a surprising way by voluntarily changing their energy consumption patterns on a much broader scale than had been requested by government policy makers.

Similar examples can be found in other countries of the region. Their common message is that when leaders acknowledge the capacity of ordinary people,

when knowledge and information are provided about what is at stake, when credible calls are made for citizen participation and involvement, the popular response tends to be extensive and vigorous. The surprising result of the October 2005 referendum in Brazil on the prohibition of the sale of arms and munitions can also be understood in the light of these new forms of participation and deliberation. Concern with urban violence and criminality is by far the top priority in all public opinion polls. Brazil comes second only to Venezuela in the number of people killed by guns. Imposing legal restrictions on the commercialisation of guns and ammunition had long been a demand of groups concerned with human rights and urban violence. Sensitive to pressure by the media and public opinion, Congress approved legislation severely restricting the gun trade with the provision that the law should be ratified by the people in a national referendum, scheduled for 2005. A couple of months before the vote, opinion polls estimated popular support of ratification to be 75 per cent of the electorate. The Yes campaign was backed by an overwhelming majority of politicians, religious and civic leaders, opinion makers and the media. The outcome seemed a foregone conclusion.

And yet the unexpected happened. The virtual consensus in favor of gun control started to be challenged in blogs and websites. A variety of arguments opened up a process of heated discussion. Opponents denounced the approved legislation as a false, simplistic solution to the complex, dramatic problem of violence, arguing that it reduced government responsibility to ensure public safety. Others spoke about risks to individual freedom and civic rights. Blogs and virtual communities were created overnight. Friends and colleagues shared emails about contrasting points of view. Ideas were confronted in an extensive conversation that spread to the workplace and many households. People who usually took stands along clear-cut ideological lines started to defend conflicting opinions. With the opening up of television prime time for both sides to argue their case and with mandatory voting, the debate expanded to the entire population.

Voters listened to the arguments and evaluated them based on their personal experience of violence and criminality. Citizens felt challenged to elaborate and sustain their views and possibly to change their mind. In a matter of weeks, there was a massive shift

in national opinion against ratification: gun control was rejected by 64 per cent of the electorate. Enlightened public opinion and political analysts were stunned. On the one hand, the broad discussion preceding the vote showed the untapped potential of the Internet in a developing country as a space for horizontal communication and public debate. On the other hand, the outcome expressed ordinary people's capacity to confront arguments with their own experience and make up their own minds about complex and emotional issues. This example also demonstrates that citizens tend to be much more creative and innovative than politicians in handling new technologies. Blogs, emails, cell phones and Internet sites are becoming enabling tools for a new type of communication: personal, participatory and interactive. Society is apparently less organised but it is more connected and participatory.

The main hurdle to overcome in the path to substantive democracy is not, therefore, disinformation or apathy on the part of the population. It is politicians' incapacity to understand, respect and trust the capacity of the citizenry – or at least, the extreme difficulty they experience in trying to do so. Latin American countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Mexico are unjust and yet vibrant societies, marked by high levels of social mobility and new forms of citizen participation. The dynamism of such societies calls for more efficient and less arrogant actions by the state, based on dialogue not monologue, partnership not imposition, argument not empty rhetoric, and autonomy not bureaucratic centralism.

New actors, processes and tools for public debate are making the interaction between citizens and political institutions much more unpredictable and complex. Democracies are evolving into a space for collective dialogue and public deliberation. What matters today is not a fluid 'will of all', but the participation of all concerned in the deliberation. The legitimacy of the decision-making process will increasingly depend on its openness and transparency. This transformation is a formidable challenge to the democratic imagination. Increasing citizen participation and deliberation calls for a radically new style of political leadership. Democracy is a long process of incremental change and it now involves many actors: media, public opinion and parliament. There is no longer space – even though the ardent expectation is always there – for a heroic



Latin Americans citizens are proving more adept than politicians in handling new communications technologies

gesture by the leader that, in a stroke, responds to the people's needs. The democratic leaders will be those open to dialogue and committed to harnessing the energy and creativity of an informed society.⁴

Citizen participation, civic culture and substantive democracy

In complex systems, order is not imposed from the top down by a centre of command and control. Neither does social change occur according to uniform and pre-established strategies. Change is an ongoing process that occurs simultaneously at multiple points. Personal freedom and technological innovation release creative social energy. Pioneering actions, innovative experiences, exemplary projects and unexpected interactions take many shapes, flow along multiple pathways and radiate at great speed. These decentralised initiatives produce an impact on the system as a whole, generating a critical mass of new ideas, messages, proposals, knowledge and experiences. Connectors and communicators amplify and re-transmit these innovations in a continuous dynamic of experimentation, learning, feedback, reorganisation and expansion. Power is moving from the centre to the periphery, from vertical command and

⁴ In his political memoirs Fernando Henrique Cardoso (2006) says that if there is one lesson he learnt in his eight years as president of Brazil, it is that, in today's world, political leadership is never gained once and for all. 'Votes in an election, even dozens of millions of them, are not enough. The day after, one has to start almost from scratch'. Trust and legitimacy must be constantly nurtured and renewed. It is no longer possible for the leader to impose without negotiating, to decide without listening, to govern without explaining and persuading.

control structures to horizontal networks and collaborative platforms. Communication is increasingly participative, interactive and collaborative.

In this rapidly evolving context, the transformation of society is a collective process of changing mindsets, practices and structures, not the result of an act of unilateral political will. The responsibility of the democratic leader is to grasp the challenges, break new ground and show the way forward. There is a growing call for truth, respect and transparency. Either the leader inspires and mobilises around a vision of the future or the loss of power is inevitable.

So far these new forms of citizen action and civic culture have not revitalised the political system. If the gap between politics and society remains unbridged, they may – paradoxically – contribute to further undermine representative democracy. To acknowledge the emergence of these new processes of social participation and communication does not imply their idealisation. Freedom and innovation go hand-in-hand with uncertainty and risk. In any one situation, the appeal of populism is as strong as the disaffection towards the political system. The risks of authoritarian regression are as real as the perspectives for strengthening democracy through citizen participation and civic culture. Much will depend on the capacity of democratic leaders and empowered citizens to interact in a constructive way, as they have done in Brazil, to create the most successful developing country programme to fight HIV and AIDS (de Oliveira 2001) or in the Colombian cities of Bogotá and Medellín to fight violence with the resources of citizen conviviality (Mockus 2002). The paramount contributions of Latin America to global civil society and to the global spread of democracy are to preserve the freedom and autonomy of civil society and to deepen democracy at the national and regional level.

The arguments presented in this chapter are an invitation to the debate and a reaffirmation of the value of democracy, understood as the exercise by citizens of their capacity to deal with the questions and influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the future of society.

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