

International Student Conference

Democracy at a Turning Point? Current Issues and Potential Alternatives

Democracy, seen as a political system, has inherent problems with finding balance between human rights and democratic ways of making decisions. This can often be seen either in the lack of democracy – e.g. overly liberal systems in which some political matters are transferred to court authorities or supranational bodies – or in the other way around – the rise of populism – as citizens wish to have more influence in the decision-making processes. To tackle these topics, the international student conference Democracy at a Turning Point? Current Issues and Potential Alternatives was held on June 12-14, 2017 at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. It was organized in cooperation with the Students' Union of the Faculty of Political Science and the editorial board of Little Leviathan with the goal of addressing various issues of contemporary democracy – from populism to human rights – and looking for empirical and theoretical papers that cover these broad topics.

Along the 30 participants from 13 different countries with various backgrounds in academia who gave their presentations, two professors gave keynote lectures during the conference: Professor Tamara Čapeta from the Faculty of Law and Professor Zoran Kurelić from the Faculty of Political Science, both from the University of Zagreb. The conference was opened on June 12 by Students' Union President Željko Poljak who briefly presented research activities undertaken at the Faculty of Political Science, while Vice Dean Davor Boban gave a warm welcoming speech on behalf of the entire Faculty. After the opening ceremony, several panels on theoretical accounts of democracy were held.

The second day of the conference began with a keynote lecture given by Professor Čapeta that sparked a lively discussion on handling more identities and the presence of European identity in the European society. Panels on the decline of democracy with a special focus on countries like Turkey followed suit. On the third day of the conference, Professor Kurelić gave a keynote lecture

on the topic of Euro-Atlantic integration of Croatia followed by a discussion on liberalization. A series of panels on topics such as populism and problems of democracy in South-East Europe took place after the lecture.

The format of the conference included keynote lectures and panels that encompassed three presentations with breaks between the sessions, free time after all of the sessions and social activities at the end of the each day of the conference. Some of the presentation included topics such as illiberal democracies, rise of populism, human rights awareness, democratic participation and alternatives to democratic governments. All presentations sparked discussions that in some cases resulted with other participants correcting their own papers with new insights. The social part of the day proved to be useful in befriending participants and in continuing discussions on the papers, which is reflected in the results of the evaluation report given to the participants at the end of the conference. Along with a chance for networking, a city tour and a social event at the end of the last day were organized. Evaluation report showed that most of the participants not only praised the social aspect of the conference, but they also identified the accessibility of the organizing committee as a key feature and all agreed that the chosen presentations were informational and in accordance to the theme of the conference.

The purpose of this conference was to gather students from the fields of social sciences to discuss the current problems democracy faces and what is its role in the future. Hopefully, the conference will engage them to continue researching these topics and guide them to further develop their arguments using the feedback received from the other participants. However, I believe discussions would have been even more fruitful if there had been some participants with strong opposing opinions on democracy. The lack of such a stance is understandable considering the benefits of democracy compared to the alternatives.

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